

BLACK'S
NEW TESTAMENT COMMENTARIES

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO SAINT JOHN

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belief. Whether in theology or Christology (and the two are inseparable in this Gospel), it is faith that leads to understanding. The exhortation not to judge by appearances but to judge with right judgement reinforces this by inviting readers, like Jesus' hearers, to be willing to suspend usual and merely human ways of evaluation, which place Jesus within fixed and preconceived categories, and to risk seeing him as one in whom God is uniquely represented in the world and who therefore is able to transform and redefine previous structures of judgement, even those about God.

(ix) *Jesus' teaching on living water and the response*

7.37-52

(37) On the last great day of the festival Jesus stood and cried out, saying, 'If any one is thirsty, let that person come to me,¹ (38) and let the one who believes in me drink. As² the scripture said, "Out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water." ' (39) Now he said this about the Spirit which those who believed³ in him were to receive; for there was no Spirit as yet, because Jesus had not yet been glorified.

(40) Some of the crowd who heard these words said, 'This man is truly the prophet.' (41) Others said, 'This man is the Christ.' But others said, 'Surely the Christ does not come from Galilee, does he? (42) Did not the scripture say that the Christ comes from the seed of David and from Bethlehem, the village where David was?' (43) So a division arose in the crowd because of him. (44) Some of them wanted to arrest him, but no one laid hands on him.

(45) Then the guards went to the chief priests and Pharisees, and the latter said to them, 'Why did you not bring him?' (46) The guards answered, 'Never has a man spoken like this.'⁴ (47)

¹ Some early manuscripts (p⁶⁶* Ⲛⲧ* D it^{b,d,e}) omit πρὸς με, 'to me'. But it has strong and wide attestation, including p⁷⁵ and B, which read ἐμὲ, and 'come to me' is a frequently used Johannine phrase on Jesus' lips (cf. e.g. 5.40; 6.35, 44, 45, 65), so the omission may well be due to a scribal oversight.

² There are two major ways of punctuating the text and the translation above represents one of these. For discussion of the options, see the comments on these verses.

³ Some manuscripts, e.g. p⁶⁶ B, have the aorist participle, πιστεύσαντες, while others, e.g. Ⲛ D, have the present participle, πιστεύοντες. The former agrees with the aorist form of the main verb and it appears more likely that this would have been altered to the latter rather than vice versa, possibly in an attempt to relate the saying more directly to later readers.

⁴ The translation of the guards' answer represents the shortest form of the text. It is this shortest form that provides the best explanation for a number of other manuscript traditions which are all longer and spell out in various forms that the force is 'never has a man spoken in the way that this man speaks'.

Then the Pharisees answered them, 'Have you also been led astray? (48) Has any of the leaders or of the Pharisees believed in him? (49) But this crowd, which does not know the law, is accursed.' (50) Nicodemus, who had come to him earlier and was one of them, said to them, (51) 'Our law does not judge a person before first hearing from him and learning what he is doing, does it?' (52) They answered and said to him, 'You are not from Galilee too, are you? Investigate and you will see that a prophet does not arise from Galilee.'

37-8 There is disagreement among scholars whether **the last great day of the festival** refers to the seventh or the eighth day. Those who argue for the seventh day do so on the grounds that it was the greatest day in terms of the festival rituals. On this day the priests processed around the altar with the water drawn from the Pool of Siloam not just once but seven times, and on the following day the water drawing and the dancing in the light of the menorahs did not take place. The seventh day would therefore be the most dramatic occasion for Jesus' announcements about water and light. But this argument does not take seriously enough the narrator's own description of the day as last and great. The last day is most naturally taken as the final, eighth day, which was a sabbath, and 'great' fits best both the depiction of this eighth day in Lev. 23.36 as a holy convocation and solemn assembly and the narrator's own later designation in 19.31 of the sabbath of the Passover as a great day, that is, one of special solemnity. It would be no less dramatic for Jesus, after the specific rituals had all been carried out, to announce in the midst of the final great sabbath convocation that the festival's symbols find their true significance in him.

Precisely what Jesus is presented as saying about the water symbolism is one of the most disputed syntactical and exegetical issues in the whole Gospel. There are three interrelated questions that require attention. How are vv. 37b-38a to be punctuated? Are the streams of living water being said to flow from Christ or from the believer? From which source or sources is the scriptural citation drawn? The major factors relevant for a decision on these matters will be treated briefly.

In the Greek text καὶ πινέτω, 'and let [that person] drink', follows **let that person come to me** and precedes **the one who believes**, which is then followed by **as the scripture said**. The main punctuation options are to place a full stop after 'let drink', which directly connects it with coming to Jesus and makes 'the one who believes' the antecedent for the scripture citation, or to place the full stop after 'the one who believes', which makes this clause the subject of 'let drink' and allows the scripture quotation to refer to the source of the believer's drink, namely, Christ. In other words, these two options are represented in translation as (i) 'let

that person come to me and drink. The one who believes in me, as the scripture said, "Out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water." and (ii) 'let that person come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture said, "Out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water."' The grammatical and syntactical arguments for each are inconclusive. The first results in a suspended subject which is only picked up awkwardly by the genitive 'his' in the actual quotation, but this is not an impossible construction and 'the one who believes in me' is frequently found in John as the beginning of a sentence, though not in this type of construction. The second produces a balanced parallelism – 'If anyone is thirsty, let that person come to me; and let that person drink, who believes in me.' Being thirsty and drinking match each other (cf. also 4.13–14a), and coming to Jesus and believing in him are synonymous elsewhere in John (cf. e.g. 6.35; 6.37, 40; 6.44–7). On the other hand, the few other scriptural citation formulae in John which are introduced by *καθώς*, 'as', come after the subject to which they most directly refer. Similarly, the evidence is divided in regard to how early readers deciphered the text. Some early manuscripts with punctuation follow the first option with its primary reference to the believer, as do Origen and Athanasius, while Justin, Hippolytus, Tertullian and Irenaeus read it as referring to Jesus, as in the second option.

This second option has been preferred in the translation offered here, because it is judged that considerations of context and of the likely sources of the citation favour the view that the streams of living water are presented as flowing from Jesus rather than from the believer. As has been noted, the focus of the narrative of John 7 up to this point has been on Jesus and his identity and origins. One would therefore expect that this focus would be maintained in these verses rather than shifting to the believer. If the water and light symbolism of Tabernacles is kept to the fore, then the fact that Jesus applies the light imagery directly to himself in 8.12 makes it likely that he does the same with the water imagery. Some, however, point to the earlier water imagery in 4.14 as a precedent for the reference to the believer. It is true that there it is applied to the believer, but the imagery is not quite the same. In 4.14 Jesus is clearly the source of the water ('the water that I give') and the spring of water gushing up to eternal life is within the believer, while here the streams of living water flow out from the person's belly as a source of life for others. In addition, if, as v. 39 makes clear, this living water is a reference to the Spirit which believers receive, then elsewhere in John Jesus is the source or origin of the Spirit for others (cf. 1.33; 15.26; 16.7, 14; 20.21) and this would lead us to expect that the one from whose belly the water of the Spirit flows out is most definitely Jesus rather than the believer. Water flowing from Jesus' belly is also in line with the crucifixion account in this Gospel, where blood and water flow from Jesus' side (cf. 19.34).

There is no known source in the Jewish Scriptures which has the wording or even the combination of ideas of the quotation. It is, therefore,

generally agreed that this is one of the evangelist's composite citations and in it various types of scriptural material about living water have been combined. One type of material is the exodus motif of the water flowing from the rock struck by Moses in the wilderness in order to be drunk by the people. John 6 had taken up the manna in the wilderness from Exod. 16 (cf. also Ps. 78.24) and now John 7 takes up Exod. 17.6, and the rehearsal of this incident in Ps. 78.16,20 (Ps. 77.16, 20 LXX) employs two of the same terms as here, 'rivers' (ποταμοί) and 'flow' (ρέω), in its description of the emerging water. In Deutero-Isaiah this exodus motif is used to depict future salvation. In this way the new thing God will do, according to Isa. 43.20, will include giving 'water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people', and in Isa. 44.3 the pouring out of water is linked with the pouring out of God's Spirit. Another type of eschatological material that speaks of the provision of water in the future has the Jerusalem temple as the water's source. In Ezek. 47.1–12 water flows out from below the threshold of the temple, becomes a river, and gives life. Most interesting, however, is Zech. 14, which also uses Feast of Tabernacles imagery for the eschaton (cf. esp. 14.16–19), takes up light and water symbolism (cf. 14.7–8) and, in developing the latter, like John 7.38, describes the water as 'living' – 'on that day living water shall flow out from Jerusalem'. It looks, then, as though the Fourth Gospel here in its water imagery may well be associating the flow of water out of the rock from Exod. 17 and Ps. 78 with the flow of water out of the Jerusalem temple from Zech. 14, which had already been linked with the Festival of Tabernacles. In support of this hypothesis is the fact that some later Jewish traditions, including some connected with the Festival of Tabernacles (e.g. *t. Sukk.* 3.3–18), associate the wilderness rock with the rock at the foundation of the Jerusalem temple. If this is the background of the water imagery, then its most natural application is to Jesus rather than the believer. The exodus motif also lies behind the reference to blood and water flowing from Jesus' side (see comment on 19.34) and elsewhere in early Christian thinking Christ is identified with the rock from which the people drank (1 Cor. 10.4), while earlier in this Gospel's narrative Jesus has already been depicted as the replacement of the Jerusalem temple (cf. 2.19–21; 4.21–6).

But one part of the scripture citation still remains unaccounted for – **Out of his belly**. There appear to be no scriptural texts that have living waters flowing from a person's belly. The issue is not solved by simply stating that 'belly' is likely to be a synonym for 'heart'. Prov. 4.23 does state that from the heart flow the springs of life, but this is not a text with any clear links to the other probable sources of the citation, and the evangelist could have chosen to use 'heart' (καρδία) but instead for some reason has preferred 'belly' (κοιλία). It is also true that there are links between v. 38 and 19.34 and that the physicality of the term

'belly' prepares for the mention of Jesus' side in the latter text, but this is insufficient explanation for the choice of the term in the first place. One suggestion that does provide more links with the rest of the citation is that 'belly' is an allusion to the Jewish tradition that Jerusalem and its temple were considered to be the navel of the earth, imagery found early on in Ezek. 38.12 and *Jub.* 8.19. Another possibility remains. The term *κοιλία* is found elsewhere in John with one of its common connotations, namely, 'womb', and in a context which speaks of new life through birth by water and the Spirit (cf. 3.4-5). At first sight this observation seems unpromising. What could a reference to *his* womb mean and how could birthing imagery, appropriate enough for water and the Spirit, be connected to the notions of the wilderness or temple rock? The answers are not in fact that hard to find. In Exod. 17 God stands on the rock and becomes identified with it as Moses strikes it, and Rock becomes a name frequently used for God. The Song of Moses can in one place use the startling imagery of 'the Rock that bore you, the God who gave you birth' (Deut. 32.18). Ps. 78, which recounts that 'he made streams come out of the rock, and caused waters to flow down like rivers' (v. 16), goes on to say that 'they remembered that God was their rock' (v. 35). The link between this imagery and the Jerusalem temple is found in Isa. 30.29, where Zion is 'the mountain of the Lord . . . the rock of Israel'. Finally, these associations come together in the cluster of images in Isa. 43.14-44.8, to which reference has already been made in connection with the rest of the citation. In the depiction of the newness of future salvation God will give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, as drink for the chosen people whom God has formed in the womb (*ἐκ κοιλίας*), and will pour water, streams and the Spirit on this people, so that they will be witnesses that there is no other god, no other rock (cf. 43.19-21; 44.2-3, 8). In this light the implications of John's citation, therefore, are that Jesus is now the rock, from whose womb come the waters of new life, the waters of the Spirit, the agent of new birth (cf. 3.5-6, 8; also 1.12-13).

39 The narrator now spells out that Jesus **said this about the Spirit which those who believed in him were to receive**. 'This' refers particularly to the flow of living waters (see 3.5 and the comments there on the background of the association between water and the Spirit). The temporal perspective at this point is future; those who believed were yet to receive the Spirit from Jesus. From this vantage point, that of the experience of those who accepted Jesus during his ministry, it can even be said that **there was no Spirit as yet, because Jesus had not yet been glorified**. The statement is clearly not to be taken absolutely, since Jesus himself is depicted as experiencing the Spirit (cf. 1.33; 3.34). Only after Jesus' death and exaltation is the Spirit made available to others (cf. 19.30b, 34; 20.21). The same perspective is maintained in the farewell discourses,

where the coming or the sending of the Spirit is still future and awaits Jesus' departure. Despite this emphasis, the narrative is not consistent. Being born of the Spirit appears to be a possibility for Nicodemus in the present (3.5–6), Jesus tells the Samaritan woman that the time for worship in the Spirit is now here (4.23–4), and to accept Jesus' words is to receive the Spirit and life that they mediate (6.63). This phenomenon is part of the Gospel's combination of temporal perspectives, in which what was in fact experienced after the resurrection is retrojected into the time of Jesus and thus in the story line anticipates the post-glorification period.

40–2 In the crowd's response the previous discussion about Jesus as the prophet and the Messiah is again taken up. The positive reaction – **This man is truly the prophet** – presumably has in view the prophet like Moses. Since Moses was instrumental in giving people water to drink in the wilderness, Jesus' claim to provide water may have convinced some that he was Moses' prophetic successor. Similarly, the other positive response, **This man is the Christ**, may have been provoked because some strands of messianic expectation associated the Messiah with springs of wisdom from which all were able to drink (cf. *1 Enoch* 48.1, 10; 49.1). An opposing view is expressed, however – **Surely the Christ does not come from Galilee, does he? Did not the scripture say that the Christ comes from the seed of David and from Bethlehem, the village where David was?** How the evangelist would expect readers to respond to this objection is disputed. Is the force that any such speculation about Jesus' place of earthly origin is beside the point, because Jesus' real place of origin is above? Or is there irony because readers know from their acquaintance with other Gospel traditions that what appears to be an objection is not, since Jesus' birthplace was in fact Bethlehem and not Galilee? The issue is difficult to decide. Elsewhere this Gospel makes it clear that Jesus' earthly place of origin is Nazareth, and at its outset this presents a scandal for Nathanael, yet he is able to make the confession that Jesus is the royal Messiah, 'the King of Israel', without that being dependent on knowledge of Jesus coming from elsewhere (cf. 1.46–9). Yet how likely is it that the evangelist would raise an objection based on a specific scripture, in this case Mic. 5.2, if he did not think that the objection could be met and that Jesus had actually fulfilled this scripture? It could be, then, that the evangelist is aware of the tradition behind Matthew and Luke or of the actual birth narratives, although having Jesus born in Bethlehem is not at all necessary for his own distinctive Christological perspective. If so, the point here may be that the objectors misunderstand what the real question about Jesus' origin is, and, even when they formulate their own inadequate question, are unaware that that question is one to which Christian believers have already given considerable reflection.

7.37-52

43-4 The division within the crowd reflected by these different opinions is then intensified, because not only are there some who raise objections to Jesus' messiahship but **some of them wanted to arrest him** (cf. v. 30).

45-6 The narrator now returns to the more official attempt to arrest Jesus, which he had introduced in v. 32. The temple guards go back to the chief priests and Pharisees, having failed to carry out their instructions. When asked for an explanation, **The guards answered, 'Never has a man spoken like this.'** They are clearly impressed by the boldness of the claim they have heard Jesus make and thus their response, which is similar to that of 'the Jews' in v. 15, serves as a witness to the power of Jesus' words.

47-9 The Pharisees take this as an indication that, like some of the crowd (v. 12), the guards **Have . . . also been led astray** by this false prophet. They contrast themselves and the religious leaders, whose knowledge of the law would never allow them to be so easily persuaded, with **this crowd, which does not know the law, and is accursed.** This reflects a common Pharisaic attitude of despising 'the peoples of the land', who were not well trained in the law and less than meticulous in observing some of its instructions. For the Pharisees such people merited the law's curse on those who failed to observe it (cf. Deut. 27.26). On their view, those who were so lax about the law's requirements were clearly in no position to assess Jesus' teaching properly. The obvious implication is that only they, the Pharisees and the chief priests, were competent to judge Jesus. The last section of the passage attempts to undermine this assumption in two ways.

50-2 First, Nicodemus is brought back onto the scene for a brief appearance in order to point out that those who claim to know the law are not in fact carrying it out in this case. There is a reminder of the previous appearance of Nicodemus and of his depiction there – he **had come to him earlier and was one of them**, i.e. a Pharisee, a leader of the Jews (cf. 3.1). Despite his sympathy for Jesus both there and here, he continues to be designated as 'one of them' and not as 'a disciple of Jesus who was also a Pharisee and Jewish leader'. His sympathy shows itself here in his fairness and concern for due process – **Our law does not judge a person before first hearing from him and learning what he is doing, does it?** His question calls into question the Pharisees' knowledge of the law by reminding them of such passages as Deut. 1.16-17, with its injunctions to give a fair hearing, to judge rightly, not to be partial, and to hear out the small and great alike.

But the Pharisees are not prepared to be corrected. They respond with further prejudice – **You are not from Galilee too, are you? Investigate and you will see that a prophet does not arise from Galilee.** They attempt to associate Nicodemus with Galilee, which they treat with contempt, just as they have done the common people. More substantially, they appeal to