Witness and Friend:

Symbolism associated with John the Baptiser[1]

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The Gospel narrative opens with the person of John. On this point, the Fourth Gospel is in agreement with the Synoptics, but thereafter the similarities end. In the Synoptic Gospels, John is the herald, the precursor. He is the one who comes before, 'to prepare the way of the Lord', where 'the Lord' is Jesus of Nazareth. So strong is this tradition of John's role as the forerunner, that it is regularly taken to reflect the historical and sequential reality that John baptized Jesus, then John was arrested, then Jesus began his ministry of preaching in Galilee. This is the sequence we find in the first chapter of Mark that has its parallel in Matthew and Luke. The single dissenting voice to this picture is that of the Fourth Gospel, which in the past has been too readily dismissed as 'unhistorical' and 'spiritual' because of its symbolic language. However, in this Gospel, history and symbol are not mutually exclusive realities, for this Gospel proclaims that history is now the locus of the divine presence. In the flesh of Jesus, we have the eternal Word of God. For this reason, history is now radiant with the glory of God. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of a Father's only son" (1:14). The event of the incarnation undergirds the principle that will govern the telling of this Gospel's story.[2] Words and deeds, places and times, will be both mundane, in that they refer to things of this world, and symbolic, in that they, at the same time, look to the transcendent to find their fuller meaning. There is a reality in the Gospel narrative that is both fully historical, and that, at the same time, transcends the historical. Where this Gospel stands apart from the

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[1] This chapter is part of a larger project on the imagery of the Household in the Fourth Gospel that will be published under the title, *Dwelling in the Household of God: The Spirituality and Ecclesiology of the Fourth Gospel*. I am grateful to the Australian Research Council for a grant enabling me to pursue further research on the Fourth Gospel.

[2] This principle for the uniquely Johannine way of recounting the tradition of Jesus was termed the "Sacramental Principle" by Sandra Schneiders and her article remains one of the clearest expositions of the symbolic character of the Fourth Gospel; see S. M. Schneiders, "Symbolism and the sacramental principle in the Fourth Gospel," in *Segni E Sacramenti Nel Vangelo Di Giovanni* (ed. P.-R. Tragan; SA 67; Rome 1977), 221–235.

synoptic Gospels, is in its way of recounting the tradition it has received. Whereas the Synoptics invite the reader into a symbolic world in the many parables of Jesus recounted as part of the narrative, the Fourth Gospel uses the narrative itself to invite the reader into its symbolizing dynamic.[3] Sandra Schneiders writes, "Symbolism in John is not an element in the Gospel but a dimension of the Gospel as a whole, namely, its characteristic revelatory mode."[4] The story of Jesus is from the beginning, the history of the Word-made-flesh. No-where is this more evident than in the portrayal of John where history and symbol are juxtaposed.

This chapter will not attempt a reconstruction of the historical Baptist; for those wanting an historical assessment of what evidence we have, I recommend the excellent study by John Meier in his second volume of *Jesus a Marginal Jew*.[5] There is also a short study of the Baptist material from a historical perspective in an article by Frank Moloney, "The Fourth Gospel and the Jesus of History."[6] My interest is to take up one image from the early tradition and see how the fourth evangelist has used this traditional material for his Christological and ecclesial purposes.

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3 R. E. Brown (*Introduction to the Gospel of John: Edited updated, introduced and concluded by F. J. Moloney* [ABRL; New York 2003], 289) compares Johannine symbolism to the synoptic parables.

4 S. M. Schneiders, "History and Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel," in *L'Évangile de Jean: Sources, rédaction, théologie* (ed. M. de Jonge; BETL 44; Louvain 1977), 376.

5 J. P. Meier, *Mentor, Message, and Miracles* (vol. 2 of idem, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*; 3 vols. [1991–2001]; ABRL; New York 1994), chs. 12 and 13, esp. 101–105. This chapter will not repeat the details of Meier's arguments but will draw upon many of his conclusions. More recently Catherine Murphy's work provides a helpful introduction to redaction criticism in its evaluation of Baptist material; see C. M. Murphy, *John the Baptist: Prophet of Purity for a New Age* (ed. B. Green; Interfaces; Collegeville, Minn. 2003).

6 F. J. Moloney, "The Fourth Gospel and the Jesus of History," *NTS* 46 (2000): 42–58.

1. Friend of the bridegroom[7]

John is the first person named in the Fourth Gospel, and he is introduced as a witness (1:7). When John speaks for himself, he rejects a number of titles that the Jerusalem delegates propose and instead names himself as 'the voice' (1:23). This title further emphasizes the way John has been introduced in the Prologue as a witness. Then, in John's final words in the narrative, he identifies himself as the "friend of the bridegroom" (3:29). The imagery of the bridegroom's friend has not been given sufficient attention in understanding John's role in the narrative and the significance of the narrative frame created by the person of John across the opening chapters from 1:19–3:30 [36].[8] Too often, the image is reduced to one aspect of this role, namely, his attesting to the virginity of the bride.[9] However, the friend of the bridegroom had a much wider role than this, covering the entire process of the nuptial arrangements. Before examining the social context of this image, I first explore its possible historical context in the ministry of Jesus and John.

All four Gospels have sayings applying the image of the bridegroom to Jesus within a context of a comparison being made between Jesus and John. In the Synoptics, the question is asked of Jesus why John's disciples fast while his disciples do not. In the Fourth Gospel, the discussion begins with the issue of purification, and John's disciples ask him about Jesus' baptising ministry which seems to be more effective than John's.

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7 In discussing marriage customs at the time of Jesus, it must be recognized that there are few, if any, texts from this period providing conclusive evidence of the social customs. What follows draws on scholarship based on references to marriage found in the biblical literature over a range of centuries, and what was codified in the Mishnah in the post-biblical era. A law code from Sumerian times indicates that the role of the bridegroom's friend was a very ancient custom that extended beyond Israel and included other Middle Eastern nations. I am presuming here that some of the customs described were preserved during the period of the Second Temple. See A. Van Selms, "The Best Man and Bride: From Sumer to St. John," *JNES* 9 (1950): 65–75.

8 Although John's voice finishes with v. 30, the following verses (31–36) continue the theme of John's witness as the one sent by God (1:6; 3:32) and also the distinction between John 'who is of the earth' and Jesus 'who comes from above' (3:31).

9 Mirjam and Ruben Zimmermann argue correctly, in my opinion, that the role of the bridegroom's friend must not be limited to this specific role of witnessing to the consummation of the marriage and the bride's virginity. See M. and R. Zimmermann, "Der Freund des Bräutigams (Joh 3,29): Deflorations- oder Christuszeuge?," *ZNW* 90 (1999): 123–130.

Mark	Matthew	Luke	John
2:18 Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; and people came and said to him, "Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?" 2:19 Jesus said to them, "The wedding guests cannot fast while the *bridegroom* is with them, can they? As long as they have the *bridegroom* with them, they cannot fast. 2:20 The days will come when the *bridegroom* is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day."	9:14 Then the disciples of John came to him, saying, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?" 9:15 And Jesus said to them, "The wedding guests cannot mourn as long as the *bridegroom* is with them, can they? The days will come when the *bridegroom* is taken away from them, and then they will fast."	5:33 Then they [the Pharisees and their scribes] said to him, "John's disciples, like the disciples of the Pharisees, frequently fast and pray, but your disciples eat and drink." 5:34 Jesus said to them, "You cannot make wedding guests fast while the *bridegroom* is with them, can you? 5:35 The days will come when the *bridegroom* will be taken away from them, and then they will fast in those days."	3:25 Now a discussion about purification arose between John's disciples and a Jew. 3:26 They came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, the one who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you testified, here he is baptizing, and all are going to him." 3:27 John answered, "No one can receive anything except what has been given from heaven. 3:28 You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, 'I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him.' 3:29 He who has the bride is the *bridegroom*. The friend of the *bridegroom*, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled. 3:30 He must increase, but I must decrease."

Table 1: *Bridegroom – Gospel Comparison*

Meier argues for the authenticity of the bridegroom image within a saying of Jesus in response to questions about fasting. "The sharp antithetical metaphors of fasting and a wedding, compressed into a single rhetorical question, are typical of the forceful rhetoric and parabolic speech of Jesus."[10] Without going into the possible meaning this image may have had for Jesus as an oblique reference to his own identity and mission, I wish to

[10] Meier, *Mentor* (n. 5), 448. While arguing for the authenticity of an original core saying, Meier also shows how later tradition has made use of this saying for apologetic reasons.

focus on the way the image was developed in the post-Easter communities, particularly the community behind the Fourth Gospel.

The image of Jesus as the bridegroom has its background in the spousal imagery used in the Old Testament to describe the relationship between God and Israel (Hos 1–2; Jer 2:2; Isa 61:10). In the post-Easter preaching this image was one of many such images transferred by the Christian communities to describe the relationship between Jesus and the *ekklesia* (2 Cor 11:2; Eph 5:27). The Ephesian imagery draws on the marriage custom where the young woman prepares for her wedding by bathing before being led in procession and presented to her husband.[11]

> Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, so as to present the church to himself in splendor, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind – yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish. (Eph 5:25–27).

The washing "of water with the word" is a reference to baptism, indicating that this community at Ephesus linked baptism with the bridal bath and drew on the marital imagery so loved by the prophets of Israel to speak of Christ's love for his church. When turning to the bridegroom imagery in the Fourth Gospel, we find a similar baptismal context.[12] John's disciples are comparing Jesus and John and, if we can read a spoken tone into the printed word, they seem disgruntled that Jesus is attracting more people than their own master. A similar air of disgruntledness seems to be voiced by John's disciples in Matthew's account above, "Why do we fast ... but your disciples do not" (Matt 9:14)? There appears to be a genuine memory behind this episode. It recalls some rivalry between the disciples of these two men, who, at least for some period, were involved in similar baptizing ministries and yet have different practices.[13] The Fourth Gospel takes up the image of the bridegroom, which the evidence suggests was originally a saying of Jesus, but places this on the lips of John. Now it is John who

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[11] M.-E. Boismard, "L'ami de l'Époux (Joh 3,29)," in *À la recontre de Dieu: Mémorial Albert Gelin* (ed. A. Barucq; BFCTL 8; Le Puy 1961), 292.

[12] My study of the Baptist material is leading me towards accepting Ephesus as the most likely place for the final stages of this Gospel's production. According to Acts 19:1–7 disciples of John were baptising in Ephesus before Paul arrived there some time in the early fifties. Ephesus could therefore provide a location where a community needed to clarify the respective roles of John and Jesus. Since the bridal imagery was part of this community's understanding of Baptism, this could have been influential in the Johannine development of the image of Jesus as the bridegroom in his narrative, particularly in relation to John.

[13] Something similar might lie behind the request by Jesus' disciples for Jesus to teach them to pray, 'as John taught his disciples' (Luke 11:1).

makes the comparison between himself and Jesus, with Jesus as the bridegroom while he has the role of the bridegroom's friend.

1.1. The Role of the 'Friend' in Betrothal and Marriage customs

Marriage in biblical time was purely a social institution with no religious ceremonies since there is nothing in the Torah stipulating how marriages were to be celebrated.[14] It was an arrangement entered into by two families. While each village no doubt had its own local variations, the following description provides a general pattern for this arrangement.

Marriage involved firstly a formal betrothal with the wedding following after a period of at least a year. Arrangements for the betrothal were made with the heads of the families of the young man and the young woman (Gen 24:1–4; Judg 14:1–3); if the father was absent, the arrangements became the duty of the mother or the elder brother (Gen 21:14–21).[15] In these negotiations the two fathers did not deal directly with each other but through deputies, probably to avoid any loss of honor if the negotiations broke down.[16] This was one of the tasks of the bridegroom's friend.[17] The deputy would be informed of the dowry and how much of that would be paid at the time of betrothal and how much at the actual wedding. The father of the groom and this friend/deputy formally went to the house of the intended bride to begin discussions about the appropriate dowry, which the bridegroom would pay, and which would revert to the wife in case of divorce.[18] When the purpose of the visit was explained, the bride's father would send for a deputy to speak for him. When the two deputies were present, the negotiations began until there was consent about the marriage and the dowry. While the arrangements were made between the parents, the young couple seem to have had some choice in these affairs; Rebekah and Michal, daughter of Saul, were consulted to see if they agreed to go

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[14] J. J. Collins, "Marriage, Divorce and Family in Second Temple Judaism," in *Families in Ancient Israel* (eds. L. G. Perdue et al.; The family, religion, and culture; Louisville, Ky. 1997), 107; E. Stapfer, *Palestine in the Time of Christ* (trans. A. H. Holmden; 3rd ed.; New York 1885), 159, 165.

[15] H. C. Trumbull, *Studies in Oriental Social Life and Gleams from the East on the Sacred Page* (Philadelphia 1894), 12. Trumbull describes customs among Arabs in the Middle East in the 19th Century C.E. His description seems to accord with customs found in the biblical literature.

[16] "Few events held more potential for the transfer of honor than marriage. Conversely, for a father, especially of the bride, few events would have been as laden with anxiety as marriage … every juncture presented a possibility for shame and social disaster. In such an environment it is a miracle that anyone would want to enter the process of negotiating a marriage." See F. P. Satlow, *Jewish Marriage in Antiquity* (Princeton 2001), 104.

[17] F. H. Wight, *Manners and Customs of Bible Lands* (Chicago 1953), 127.

[18] Collins, "Marriage, Divorce and Family" (n. 14), 109.

with Isaac and David respectively (Gen 24:53–58; 1 Sam 18:20). When consent was reached, then the deputies and the fathers drank together as a sign of the covenant now agreed upon. At this point, the couple was considered engaged until a more formal betrothal ceremony could take place. In earlier times the betrothal was a spoken pledge before witnesses (Ezek 16:8; Mal 2:14) but after the Exile a written document was drawn up in the presence of the families of the bride and the groom, and of other witnesses. According to Trumbull,[19] it was the deputies who drew up the formal contract which was signed by the two fathers and this was then "committed into the trusty hands of the best man."[20] During this ceremony, the young man would give the young woman a ring, or some other wealthy article, or a written promise of marriage as an initial sign of commitment; part of the dowry could also be given at this stage with the promise of the rest at the time of the wedding. [21] At this time a pledge would be spoken.[22] A typical pledge was, "She is my wife and I am her husband." The betrothal was a very formal and binding agreement that could only be broken by divorce or death. From this description, it is clear that the bridegroom's friend has a very significant role in the proceedings even prior to the wedding.[23] As friend, he is the one who deals directly with the family of the young woman. His negotiations play a crucial part in the father granting consent. It is for this reason that there were ancient laws forbidding the father, should he refuse the request of the intended bridegroom, to give his daughter to the bridegroom's friend.

> If a son-in-law [intended] has entered the house of his [intended] father-in-law and has performed the betrothal gift, and afterwards they have made him go out and have given his wife to his companion – they shall present to him the betrothal gift which he has brought and that wife may not marry his companion.[24]

The term companion in this passage refers to the formal role called today in western cultures, 'the best man', or in the Fourth Gospel, the friend of the bridegroom (3:29). By virtue of the friend's role in the pre-betrothal ar-

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19 Trumbull, *Oriental Social Life* (n. 15), 20.

20 J. Jeremias, "νύμφη, νυμφίος," *TDNT* 4:1099–1106, see 1101 n. 20.

21 The account of the betrothal of Isaac and Rebecca is similar to this description. Abraham's servant acts as the go-between and gives Rebecca a golden ring and bracelets. When her father has agreed to the betrothal, the servant produces more jewels of silver and gold as gifts to Rebecca and to her family (Gen 24).

22 Samples of written pledges from the 5th century B.C.E. have been found in Egypt; see E. M. Yamauchi, "Cultural Aspects of Marriage in the Ancient World," *BSac* 135 (1978): 246. Collins ("Marriage, Divorce and Family" [n. 14], 111–112) also describes contracts from the early second century C.E.

23 So also M. and R. Zimmermann, "Der Freund des Bräutigams (Joh 3,29)" (n. 9), 125–126.

24 Van Selms, "The Best Man and Bride: From Sumer to St. John" (n. 7), 65–70.

rangements, he could never be the husband, even if the proposal was turned down. The bride could never be his.[25]

The feature of the wedding ceremony was the joyous procession of the young woman from her father's house to the home of the bridegroom, which was his ancestral home since the young man usually stayed within the house of his father. She was conducted to her new home by her relatives with songs and dancing. This ceremony traveled slowly so that the entire village could see the finery and wealth of the young bride and would usually arrive late in the day for the wedding ceremony, which "was always in the evening at sunset."[26] Sometimes the groom himself would come to lead the bride, and sometimes this role would again be given to the bridegroom's friend.[27] While the procession was a public feature of the wedding, the most solemn moment came when the bride entered into the ancestral home of the bridegroom.[28] Here she prepared herself and waited with her attendants while festivities continued outside. Throughout the procession, her face was veiled for now only her husband could see her face within his house. Often the bridegroom would also travel in his own procession, arriving at the home some hours later in the evening. The best man then led him into the bridal chamber and it would appear that the best man awaited the call of the bridegroom to fetch the nuptial sheet to testify to the virginity of the bride.[29]

2. John Witness and Friend of the Bridegroom

The above details on the customs surrounding marriage and betrothal shed light on the Fourth Gospel's presentation of John. John identifies himself using two images, "the voice" (1:23) and "the friend of the bridegroom"

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25 This is the situation described in Judg 14 when the woman Samson claims for his wife is given instead to the best man, thus Samson considers himself blameless for his actions against the Philistines (Judg 14–15). See also Van Selms, "The Best Man and Bride" (n. 7), 71–74.

26 Stapfer, *Palestine in the Time of Christ* (n. 14), 163; Trumbull, *Oriental Social Life* (n. 15), 39–44.

27 Boismard, "L'Ami" (n. 11), 292. Boismard refers also to a number of Rabbinic texts where God is considered to have had the role of the friend of the bridegroom when, following the creation of Eve, God presented her to Adam.

28 Wight, *Manners* (n. 17), 133; Stapfer, *Palestine in the Time of Christ* (n. 14), 163. Also Boismard, "L'Ami" (n. 11), 292: "on la conduisait processionnellement chez l'époux et c'est à partir de ce moment qu'elle était considérée comme effectivement mariée."

29 Jeremias, "νύμφη, νυμφίος" (n. 20), 1101; Satlow, *Jewish Marriage* (n. 16), 175–177.

(3:29) while the narrative calls him a "witness." Evidence about marriages in the Second Temple period is primarily legal in character, and within the legal formalities of the betrothal, witnesses are a necessary part of the contractual arrangements, which stipulated the dowry and inheritance rights. During the wedding, the bridegroom's friend then witnesses that the marriage has been consummated. When looking at John's role, through the lens of social customs surrounding marriage, his role as witness and friend of the bridegroom come together.

John is the first to arrive on the scene, and he has been sent by God (1:6). In initiating marriage arrangements, the deputy/friend is the one who approaches the bride's father. He is the one to speak for his friend, to reveal his identity and desires, and to conduct the negotiations, which will lead hopefully to a marriage. He is the voice of the friend in these matters and is expected to present his friend's suit in the best possible manner. He is not speaking for himself.

Jesus is first introduced into the narrative through John's voice (1:26–27; 29–30). John describes what he experienced at the baptism, and reveals Jesus as the one who outranks him. He then reveals Jesus' identity as 'the Son of God' (31–34). John's acts in this narrative in the traditional manner of a deputy or friend of the bridegroom sent by the groom's father to initiate proceedings that will lead hopefully to betrothal and marriage. He then, as friend of the groom, directs disciples to Jesus (1:35–36), as the friend would direct or lead the young bride to the bridegroom's place. We are told that the disciples saw where Jesus was and stayed with him (1:39). The time detail is given, "about the tenth hour," i.e. late afternoon, which would be the traditional time for a wedding celebration. The time detail, which seems to have no other narrative purpose, is one indicator to the reader that the evangelist may be working with symbolism, that is to say, the meaning of this detail is to be found beyond the actual narrative.[30] Once the disciples and Jesus have been brought together, John withdraws from the narrative, which now shifts its focus from John to Jesus.

Andrew, one of John's disciples, takes over John's role as he finds his brother Simon and leads him to Jesus (1:41–42). Then Phillip, the only disciple directly invited by Jesus, finds Nathanael and leads him to Jesus (1:45). In this scene, an initial group of disciples is being gathered, and all,

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[30] In an article on Johannine symbolism Juan Leal offers four criteria that can indicate when the narrative has a symbolic as well as a literal meaning; (i) inconsequential details that seem to play no part in the narrative, (ii) a discourse set within the narrative of an event such that discourse and event are mutually illuminating, (iii) when the evangelist accentuates the importance of a person, who has no significant role in that context, (iv) when later liturgical and Christian expressions are used. See J. Leal, "El simbolismo histórico del IV Evangelio," *EstBíb* 19 (1960): 344–346.

except Phillip, come to Jesus through the words of an intermediary. First John, then Andrew, then Phillip all act as the friend of the bridegroom to mediate a relationship between Jesus and another. The meeting with Nathanael also appears to draw on the customs of the betrothal ceremony for in this initial encounter a small sign is given, when Jesus reveals surprising knowledge of Nathanael, "an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" (1:47), and Nathanael responds with a confession of faith (1:49). This sign is followed by a promise of even greater things in the future when Nathanael will see what his ancestor Jacob/Israel once saw (Gen 28:12). Nathanael will experience Bethel, the House of God. As mentioned above, at the betrothal, a part of the dowry would be given by the groom with the promise of the rest to follow at the wedding.

Without going into details in this chapter, I draw attention to the overall movement of the narrative, beginning with John's witness and concluding with his self-identification as the bridegroom's friend. Through John, disciples are introduced to Jesus; they then participate in a wedding where Jesus acts as the bridegroom in providing the wine for the festivities.[31] The Cana pericope concludes with an affirmation of faith: "his disciples believed in him" (2:11). The following narrative comment should not be overlooked. "After this he went down to Capernaum, with his mother, his brothers and his disciples; and they remained there for a few days" (2:12). The disciples have now been drawn into the family of Jesus. Trumbull notes that a distinctive feature of family life in the East was the idea that the bride belonged to the mother of the bridegroom.[32] The bridegroom's mother was the woman in the household who had greatest authority. Seen in this light, the narrative comment in v. 12 may be more than a simple conclusion to the Cana episode, but may be continuing the nuptial theme that I am suggesting shapes these early chapters.

The narrative so far, has followed the customs of a middle-eastern marriage. It has taken us from the initial witness of John (1:19–34), to disciples being directed and led to Jesus (1:35–37), to a first meeting with a small sign offered and a promise of more to come (1:38–51), a wedding celebration (2:1–10), a confession of faith (2:11), and the inclusion of disciples in Jesus' household (2:12). These are the preparatory stages for the final solemn moment in a wedding when the bride enters the home of the bridegroom, which is his father's house. Following the festivities, the

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[31] At Cana Jesus' role as the bridegroom is implied when the head steward goes to the bridegroom to congratulate him on producing good wine late in the festivities. This would indicate that the bridegroom has the task of providing wine, and in this case, it is Jesus who has provided the good wine. See F. J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John* (SP 4; Collegeville, Minn. 1998), 68–69, 72–73.

[32] Trumbull, *Oriental Social Life* (n. 15), 33.

groom also enters the bridal chamber and that, in some cases, is the first time when the groom actually sees his new wife. The moment when the bride's veil is lifted is a key moment for their relationship.[33] He will see her face for the first time, and she will read his response to her in his face. It is a revelatory moment for them both.

From Capernaum, Jesus and his disciples travel to Jerusalem and enter his 'Father's House' (2:16), the Temple of Jerusalem. Here, in his Father's House Jesus reveals his identity explicitly for the first time and confirms the testimony of John that he is "the Son of God" and that God's Spirit dwells in him (1:34). The Temple that had been called "the Lord's House"[34] can be called by Jesus, "My Father's House" because he is Son (1:14, 18). As the Son in whom the Spirit dwells, Jesus is now the locus for God's presence in history so that by the end of the pericope the meaning of the Temple shifts from a building to his own person. The reader has known from the Prologue that Jesus is the tabernacling presence of God (1:14), and a veiled reference was given to Nathanael with the allusion to Jacob's dream at Beth-el (1:51).[35] These allusions are made explicit in this scene when the disciples hear for the first time Jesus' identity as the Temple of God's presence (2:19), a new House of God.[36] The encounter within the Father's house has been a decisive moment of revelation. The nuptial imagery does not dominate this scene as it did at Cana, but in a number of ways the narrative indicates that this imagery is still operative – the Temple is named as 'my Father's House', inside this 'house' Jesus reveals his identity. The placement of the Temple incident directly after the wedding festivities at Cana reflects the usual custom of the bridegroom taking his bride to his father's house. The nuptial imagery will come to the forefront again in the next two chapters.

Following these events within the Temple, the marital imagery continues in the encounter with Nicodemus where Jesus teaches the necessity of being 'born anew' and Nicodemus ponders the impossibility of returning to the mother's womb (3:3–5). The language of birth dominates the first part of the discourse where the setting is a conversation between two peo-

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[33] Trumbull (*Oriental Social Life* [n. 15], 43, 58) notes that in many parts of the East the "specific celebration of the marriage rite is called today 'the lifting of the veil,' or 'the uncovering of the face.'"

[34] The terminology, 'Yahweh's House' is the most frequent name of the Temple in the Old Testament, occurring over two hundred times.

[35] Beth-el means 'House of God.'

[36] A detailed treatment of the Temple pericope can be found in M. L. Coloe, *God Dwells with Us: Temple Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel* (Collegeville, Minn. 2001), 65–84.

ple (3:1–10),[37] while the second part, which can be called discourse (vv. 13–21) introduces the theme of eternal life (3:15, 16). Birth and new life are the final testimony to a complex social process that began with an initial approach by the bridegroom's friend to the home of the intended bride. The birth of a child fulfills the marriage blessing that the bride would bear many children (Gen 24:60; Ruth 4:11).[38] The Gospel narrative has taken us through the stages in this process: a first meeting, initiated by John, with initial signs and the promise of greater things to come, a wedding, entry into the Father's house and finally birth. After the episode with Nicodemus John returns to the narrative for the last time and concludes his testimony by identifying himself as the friend of the bridegroom, a friend whose role is now complete; "he must increase, but I must decrease" (3:30). The narrative has moved from John as witness to John as friend, and in between, it has drawn upon nuptial imagery, which can be shown schematically as follows:

1:19–34 John (witness)
1:35–51 disciples of John/Jesus
2:1–12 wedding
2:13–25 my Father's House
3:1–21 birth
3:22–24 disciples of John/Jesus
3:25–36 John (friend of the bridegroom)

3. Conclusion

The "Sacramental Principle," as it is named by Sandra Schneiders, means that the symbolism in the Fourth Gospel is the vehicle by which the evangelist communicates his profound Christological and theological vision. In his writing, the metaphorical never degenerates to mere ornamentation, or rhetorical flourish. Metaphor and symbol are the medium for his message. In his work on imagery in the Gospel, Ruben Zimmermann proposes that the Johannine symbols operate in four dimensions: anthropological, his-

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[37] The conversational tone ends after v. 10 where there is a shift from singular to plural.

[38] Yamauchi, "Cultural Aspects of Marriage" (n. 22), 247. By Rabbinic times the blessing, called "the groom's blessing" was a major feature of the wedding celebration and was recited several times over the days of the feasting; see Satlow, *Jewish Marriage* (n. 16), 178.

torical, theological and ecclesial.[39] The Johannine symbols arise from the everyday experience of first century Palestine, providing his initial readers/hearers with familiar and concrete examples so that they can relate to the narrative and interact with it. This is the anthropological dimension. At the same time, the symbols draw on and evoke memories of the historical person Jesus, son of Mary and Joseph of Nazareth.[40] Some of the details in this Gospel provide unique information about Jesus' ministry and practice, as well as first century Judaism, i.e. his ministry covering three Passovers (chs. 2, 6, 13–19), the pool of Siloam (ch. 9) and its significance for the festival of Tabernacles. This is the historical dimension. Through these mundane dimensions, the Gospel opens out to the transcendent or theological realm. The bread provided to a crowd at Passover, recalls the manna of Israel's history and announces the presence of divine Wisdom now feeding her children at her banquet.[41] Finally, these same symbols speak of the ongoing presence of the glorified Christ within the community through the indwelling Spirit/Paraclete.[42] The Temple functions as both an image of Jesus (2:21) and the community of believers who in the post-Easter time are to become the raised up 'Father's house/-hold' (14:2).[43] All four categories proposed by Zimmermann can be seen in the Gospel's portrait of John.

The Fourth Gospel has drawn upon *historical* memories in its characterization of John. In its interpretation of the relationship between John and Jesus, the Fourth Gospel utilizes a remembered saying of Jesus, in which he used the metaphor of the bridegroom. This saying has provided the evangelist with an image that he develops in an extended metaphor of Jesus as the bridegroom and John as the witnessing friend of the bridegroom.

History and symbol have joined in a narrative that not only tells a story about what happened, but also offers insight into the meaning of what happened. Jesus, the divine Word incarnate, enacts the prophetic words of the

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[39] R. Zimmermann, *Christologie der Bilder im Johannesevangelium: Die Christopoetik des vierten Evangeliums unter besonderer Berücksichtigung von Joh 10* (WUNT 171; Tübingen 2004), 425–446.

[40] Zimmermann (*Christologie* [n. 39], 427–431) argues that through the presence of the Spirit in the community, the historical dimension is never simply a memory of times past, but an 'anamnesis,' a 'realised memory' (vergegenwärtigende Erinnerung, 428). On this point, Zimmermann develops the groundbreaking work of Franz Mussner on the Johannine perspective (Sehweise). See F. Mussner, *The Historical Jesus in the Gospel of John* (trans. W. J. O'Hara; QD 19; New York 1967).

[41] André Feuillet develops both of these aspects of the Symbolism in John 6. See A. Feuillet, *Johannine Studies* (trans. Th. E. Crane; Staten Island 1965), chap. 3.

[42] Zimmermann's ecclesial dimension (*Christologie* [n. 39], 438–440).

[43] On this point, Zimmermann refers to my study of the Temple, Coloe, *God Dwells with Us* (n. 36).

Old Testament describing God's betrothal to and love of Israel.[44] Within the sequence under consideration (1:1–3:36) the nuptial symbolism is explicit only in the Wedding at Cana and in John's concluding words. Its presence is felt however, from the moment John is introduced as the man sent by God as witness (1:6–7), and I suggest, that a first century audience/reader, familiar with Jewish marital customs would pick up the allusion.[45] The marital imagery makes apparent the underlying narrative logic of the events across these chapters beginning and ending with John. Ricœur speaks of the need to link together the action kernels that constitute a narrative's structural continuity;[46] symbols, in a particular way hold the actions of a narrative together by providing a deeper network of associations than simple chronology. Reading a narrative, alert to its historical and symbolic potential enriches the reading experience by offering deeper perspectives.

John, as witness and friend of the bridegroom, reveals the identity of Jesus as the incarnation of God's nuptial love of Israel, a love that desires espousal and fecundity. John sets the scene for the initial betrothal and formation of God's household.[47]

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[44] Jesus incarnates Israel's divine bridegroom. This aspect of the imagery corresponds to Zimmermann's theological dimension.

[45] As I have shown above, the imagery of the bridegroom's friend draws upon the experience of first-century marriage customs in the Middle-East. This corresponds to Zimmermann's anthropological dimension.

[46] P. Ricœur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth 1976), 85.

[47] In this chapter, I have not elaborated on the 'household' or ecclesial dimension. This aspect will be extensively developed in my forthcoming book, *Dwelling in the Household of God: The Spirituality and Ecclesiology of the Fourth Gospel.*