

JOHN AS WITNESS AND FRIEND

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The Fourth Gospel is the most historical of all the Gospels. While it has been entitled “the spiritual Gospel,” its depth of spiritual insight does not in any way detract from its focus on the actual life and death of Jesus of Nazareth.¹ In fact, 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 the only begotten” (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, at the same time, transcends the historical. If this Gospel dispenses with history, it loses its christological credibility, for then the Word remains ephemeral, inchoate. Thus my reading of the Fourth Gospel begins with a presumption of its being deeply grounded in the remembered words and deeds of Jesus of Nazareth.³

Where this Gospel stands apart from the Synoptic Gospels is in its way of recounting the tradition that 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. The story of Jesus is from the beginning, the hi-story of the Word-made-flesh. In this essay I shall demonstrate this juxtaposing of his-

1. The designation “the spiritual Gospel” was first given by Clement of Alexandria (ca. 200 c.e.); Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 6.14.7.

2. This principle for the uniquely Johannine way of recounting the tradition of Jesus was termed the “Sacramental Principle” by Sandra Schneiders (1977, 221–35), in an essay that remains one of the clearest expositions of the symbolic character of the Fourth Gospel.

3. On the trustworthiness of the Fourth Gospel regarding historical, social, and geographic details, see Brown 1966–70, 1:xliv–xliii; 2003, 90–111.

tory and symbol using the figure of John the Baptist,⁴ to illustrate the way the Fourth Evangelist uses the narrative, drawing on traditional material, to tell the story of the Word, in the story of Jesus. The narrated word will reveal the incarnate Word.

JOHN IN THE TRADITION

In the Christian liturgical year, Advent focuses on John the Baptist. This placement of John before Christmas reflects the traditional interpretation of John presented in the Synoptics, that John is the herald, the precursor. He is the one who comes before “to prepare the way of the Lord.” So strong is this tradition of John’s role as the forerunner that it is regularly taken to reflect the historical and sequential reality: first John baptized Jesus, then John was arrested, then Jesus began his ministry of preaching in Galilee. This is the sequence we find in the Synoptics. The single dissenting voice 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, as I noted above, history and symbol are not mutually exclusive.

THE PROLOGUE

John is described as “a man sent from God” (1:6), and his role is “for testimony, to bear witness to the light, that all might believe through him” (1:7). This verse clearly names who John is, not John the Baptizer but simply John, the witness. Still within the Prologue, John witnesses directly and says, “this was he of whom I said, ‘he who comes after me ranks before me, for he was before me’” (1:15). This brief verse raises a number of critical issues: (1) To whom is John referring by this expression? What is meant by the expression “comes after me”? Does it mean discipleship? (2) In the context of the Christian proclamation of Jesus and of the Fourth Gospel’s theology of the preexistent Word, the verse as it now stands is a reference to the divine Word, who ranks higher than John and whose existence has already been situated “in the beginning.”⁵ But the statement is more complex

4. I shall not attempt a reconstruction of the historical Baptist. For those wanting historical assessment of what evidence we have, I recommend Meier 1994, chs. 12 and 13, esp. 101–5. More recently, Catherine Murphy’s work (2003) provides a helpful introduction to redaction criticism in its evaluation of Baptist material. There is also a short study of the Baptist material from a historical perspective in Moloney 2000, 42–58. My interest is to take up two images from the early tradition and to see how the Fourth Evangelist has used this traditional material for his christological purposes.

5. Brown (1966–70, 1:56, 63–65) discusses the understanding of this expression in a temporal sense, referring to the preexistent *logos*.

than this. This verse is one of very few in the Fourth Gospel that has a close parallel in the Synoptics, as the following table shows.

John 1:15, 27	Mark 1:7	Matthew 3:11	Luke 3:16
15 (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'")	He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals."	"I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire."	"I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."
27 "... the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal."			

The Fourth Gospel shares with Mark and Matthew a statement put on the lips of John about "one coming after me" (this sequence is implied in Luke); a statement of unworthiness to untie his sandals (in all Synoptics); and a comparison made indicating that the coming one is more deserving of honor.⁶ In assessing the evidence, on the grounds of multiple attestation, John Meier concludes "we have good reason to accept this as substantially the Baptist's own teaching" (1994, 33; see also Murphy 2003, 57). But what would John have meant by this in its original setting? Again, drawing on Meier's work, this statement probably indicates John's expectation of the dawn of the eschatological age and John's awareness that there was one coming that would have a greater role in bringing this about (1994, 35). According to the prophet Malachi, Elijah was to return before the day of the Lord: "Behold I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes" (Mal 4:6). It is possible that John, during his ministry, considered that such an Elijah figure was soon to come and that his own ministry was in preparation for that day.⁷ Read in this light, his statement in John 1:15 would

6. A similar statement is found also in Acts 13:25.

7. There has been considerable debate about whether the expectation of Elijah was part of Second Temple Judaism or owes its origin to early Christian teaching. A brief summary of this debate is in Taylor 1997, 281–88. Taylor draws the following conclusion based on evidence

have had a temporal sense: “The one who comes after me (Elijah *redivivus*) is more important than me, for he was before me.”⁸ On their own, the words “who comes after me,” as spoken by John, do not suggest discipleship but rather a statement about the temporal order: John first, then the coming one. Meier uses other material, particularly Jesus’ baptism by John, to propose that there was a time when Jesus followed John in the sense that he shared John’s view that Israel’s end-time was approaching (Meier 1994, 106–9).⁹ The question of whether Jesus stayed within John’s circle of disciples meets with varying responses. Only the Fourth Gospel depicts Jesus carrying out a ministry of baptizing (3:22), and while there is no corroborating evidence, the principle of embarrassment argues for the historicity of this information.¹⁰ But this activity alone does not indicate that Jesus was one of John’s disciples in a formal sense. He may well have begun a ministry of preaching and baptizing independently of John. Weighing the evidence, I think there is a strong possibility that Jesus was a disciple of John for some period, but I speak of this as a possibility rather than probability.

DAY 1: JOHN AND THE JEWISH DELEGATION

When the Gospel narrative begins, John appears in dispute with the Jerusalemites regarding his own identity. John does not identify the “one coming after” him explicitly as Elijah or the Son of Man but leaves this identity vague. What is clear, however, is that John, along with other Jews, is still expecting another figure to come, so he is not seeing himself in the role of Elijah *redivivus*. In fact, in the Fourth Gospel he explicitly denies this title. When asked by the delegation from Jerusalem, “Are you Elijah?” John replies, “I am not” (1:21). Given such a clear and resounding οὐκ εἶμι, why has the Christian tradition so strongly identified John as the forerunner, the prophet Elijah?

The association of John with Elijah comes as part of the post-Easter proclamation of Jesus as the Christ. In looking back at these two figures and attempting to clarify their roles and relationships, if Jesus was the Christ, then John must

from Qumran and other intertestamental writings: “The main point to be derived from this brief survey of texts is that Elijah was expected by some Jews to come before the end, but how one imagined the end depended on many factors. There was no one, fully supported scenario among Jews of this time” (285).

8. The same temporal sense would apply to any apocalyptic figure: Elijah, Moses, Son of Man. None of these figures would have been considered by John to be his disciple (Meier 1994, 118).

9. Moloney (2000, 48–49) goes further in suggesting that Jesus was a follower of John in a serious sense without John being aware of his identity as “the one coming after me”

10. Meier 1994, 122. That Jesus’ baptizing activity was embarrassing can be seen in the later correction of this information: “Although Jesus himself did not baptize, but only his disciples” (John 4:2).

have been the Elijah promised by Malachi.¹¹ So we must distinguish between the historical John, as far as can be ascertained, and John as a character created in the Synoptic texts. From the above discussion of the phrase about “the mightier one” coming after John, which we have argued was part of John’s own teaching, it is clear that the historical John did not consider himself to be the Elijah figure; in fact, in Mark’s Gospel Jesus is the one who is first considered to be Elijah (Mark 6:15; 8:28).¹²

It is likely that an early form of Mark introduced John simply as “the voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths’” (Mark 1:2).¹³ This is almost identical to the way John is introduced in the Fourth Gospel. At a later stage, the lines from Malachi were added: “Behold I send my messenger before thy face, who shall prepare thy way” (Mal 3:1). This verse, which does not directly follow its introduction, “As it is written in Isaiah the prophet,” expresses the post-Easter association of John with the apocalyptic messenger of Malachi. The presentation of John simply as the voice in the wilderness preparing for another greater one still to come, which is found in the pre-Markan tradition and in the Fourth Gospel, is therefore more likely to be historical than the later, clearly Christian, association of John and Elijah. As Barrett (1978, 144) states, “John sharply contradicts the earlier, and apparently growing, tradition, returning perhaps to a pre-Synoptic stage of Christian belief, before apocalyptic necessity called for the discovery of Elijah in some forerunner of Christ.”¹⁴

Once the tradition made the John/Elijah association, in order to affirm its identification of Jesus as the Christ, this colored its presentation of both John and Jesus and their respective ministries. John/Elijah is the forerunner who prepares the way and then withdraws, which is essentially the picture of John presented in the Synoptics. But this sequence (first John, then Jesus, with John as the precursor) must be seen as a Synoptic interpretation and not taken uncritically to represent historical events.

11. On the association of Elijah and John in the early Christian community, see Hahn 1969, 365–72.

12. There are passages in the Synoptics where Jesus identifies John and Elijah (Mark 9:11–13; Matt 11:9–10; Luke 7:24–27) but Meier (1994, 141–42) argues that these sayings are “probably a Christian reflection added to an authentic logion of Jesus concerning the Baptist (Matt 11:7–9 par.)” For more details on the Markan redaction, see Ernst 1989, 30–34.

13. The quotation from Malachi is an awkward insertion, suggesting a later revision. Because the form of the quotation is identical to what is found in Matt 11:10//Luke 7:27, Mark may have relied on a source such as Q. In their introduction of John the Baptist, Matthew and Luke omit the lines from Malachi, since they do not follow Mark’s introductory phrase, and a later copyist corrected the introduction to read, “As it is written in the prophets” (MSS A, K, P, W); see Robinson 1957–58, 267 n. 1; Metzger 1994, 62. For a further discussion of these verses with the suggestion that the Malachi citation is editorial, see Ernst 1989, 11–12.

14. See also Brown 1965, 139: “JBap seems to have conceived of his role only in terms of the Isaiah voice in the desert (a text associated with him in all four Gospels).”

After denying the titles that the Jerusalemites presented to him (John 1:20–21), John describes himself with the quotation from Isaiah referred to above, but with a significant change.

Isaiah 40:3 (LXX)	Mark 1:2–3	Matthew 3:3// Luke 3:4	John 1:23
φωνῆ βοῶντος ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ ἔτοιμάσατε τὴν ὁδὸν κυρίου, εὐθείας ποιεῖτε τὰς τρίβους τοῦ θεοῦ ἡμῶν,	As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,’”	This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.” ... as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight ...”	He said, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’” as the prophet Isaiah said. ἔφη ἐγὼ φωνῆ βοῶντος ἐν τῇ ῥήμῳ· εὐθύνατε τὴν ὁδὸν κυρίου, καθὼς εἶπεν Ἡσαΐας ὁ προφήτης.

The Fourth Gospel follows the LXX reading, as indicated by the use of the verb βοᾶν here, while this Gospel usually uses κράζειν (1:15; 7:28, 37; 12:44) or κραυγάζειν (11:43; 12:13; 18:40; 19:6, 12, 15). It does not use the verb prepare (ἔτοιμάσατε) but instead conflates the two clauses found in Isaiah to read, “make straight [εὐθύνατε] the paths of the Lord.” In discussing this change, Menken (1996, 26–28) notes that the verb “to prepare” is used to describe the task of someone preparing something for another who is absent, and only when it has been accomplished does the other arrive. With the task of preparation finished, the one doing the preparation can depart. While this describes the role of a forerunner, which is how the Synoptics present John, it is not an appropriate description of John’s role as described in the Fourth Gospel. John is to bear witness, which means he must know the one about whom he testifies. So in the Fourth Gospel, John cannot depart the scene as soon as Jesus appears. Instead, there are a series

of encounters between Jesus and John (1:29–34, 35–37; 3:23, 27–30), and it is implied that there was a previous encounter when Jesus was baptized (1:32–34). The ministry of John and the early ministry of Jesus are contemporaneous. Menken concludes, “John the Baptist is not so much Jesus’ precursor as a witness who appears next to Jesus” (1996, 31).

The change in the wording of the Isaiah prophecy, along with John’s explicit denial of the role of Elijah, indicates to the reader that the Fourth Gospel need not follow the temporal sequence of the Synoptics. In breaking the John/Elijah nexus, the Fourth Evangelist is free to bypass Synoptic theological interpretation of John’s role as the forerunner and can draw upon more historical memories. Of course, the Evangelist may also shape and present these memories in a way to augment his particular Christology. Further evidence will be needed to decide on the historical reliability of John’s characterization, but at least this evaluation can be freed from the assumption that the Synoptic sequence is necessarily historical, thus no longer making the Synoptics the measuring stick for historicity.

DAYS 2 AND 3: JOHN’S WITNESS

On the following day, Jesus is introduced into the narrative for the first time. At this point John witnesses to an event that had previously taken place when Jesus’ identity was revealed to him (1:32–34). The next day John is with his disciples; when he sees Jesus again, and following his identification of Jesus as “the Lamb of God,” these two disciples follow Jesus (1:35–39).¹⁵ We hear nothing further of John until he returns in John 3, in the narrative about Jesus’ early ministry. What I wish to emphasize is that John does not disappear completely from the Gospel when Jesus appears and begins his own ministry. There is no mention that John has been imprisoned. Furthermore, at some indefinite time prior to the start of the narrative, John and Jesus have already met at Jesus’ baptism. Jesus invites two of John’s disciples to follow him; then Jesus begins his own ministry while John continues his. The Fourth Gospel therefore differs from the Synoptics in two significant ways: the ministries of Jesus and John overlap; some of Jesus’ first disciples came from a group around John, a possibility that “does not strain the imagination,” as Moloney suggests (2000, 50). It was Raymond Brown (1979, 29, 32) who first proposed that some of the early members of the Johannine community may have been disciples of John, including the anonymous Beloved

15. It is beyond the scope of this essay to discuss the possible meaning of the phrase “Lamb of God.” At the 2005 Colloquium in Leuven, a consensus was forming that this must be understood as a messianic title, couched as it is between John’s denial that he is the Messiah (1:20, 25) and Andrew’s statement to Simon, “We have found the Messiah” (1:42). This suggestion fits in with one made by Brown (1965, 137) that the expression refers to an apocalyptic lamb who destroys the evil of the world such as found in T. Jos. 19:8; 1 En. 90:38; and Rev 5:9.

Disciple.¹⁶ His hypothetical reconstruction of the Johannine community offers a way of understanding the high esteem given to John in this Gospel, but also the consistent affirmation of Jesus' superiority over John: John is a burning lamp (5:35), Jesus is the light (8:12); John is the witness (1:15), Jesus is the coming one (1:30); John is the bridegroom's friend (3:29), Jesus is the bridegroom (3:29); John must decrease, while Jesus must increase (3:30).

Once we realize that the "John-then-Jesus" sequence of the Synoptics may be theologically driven to explain the relationship between the two men in terms of Elijah the forerunner, followed by the Messiah-Christ, then it is possible to weigh the evidence of the Fourth Gospel on its own merits. The chronology of all the Gospels places John before Jesus. In Mark and Matthew, John baptizes Jesus (Mark 1:9–11; Matt 3:13–17), and the criteria of embarrassment suggests that this scene is recounted because it has a basis in history. It is unlikely that an early Christian community would invent this episode (Meier 1994, 100–105; see also Murphy 2003, 59). But the Fourth Gospel depicts Jesus in the ambit of John for at least three days, then carrying out an independent ministry of baptism. How can this be evaluated?

John Meier addresses these questions by looking at the polemical nature of the Fourth Gospel's rhetoric in the description of John. He concludes that this rhetoric is necessary because the Fourth Evangelist seems to have had some opposition from some Baptist followers still claiming the superiority of John over Jesus (Meier 1994, 119).¹⁷ While John himself is presented very positively, the view that John could be greater is strongly corrected at every opportunity. It is in the Evangelist's interests, therefore, to minimize the significance of John, in contrast to Jesus. If such is his pastoral situation, it would thwart his own goals if he created a narrative suggesting that in any way Jesus was a follower of John. It would suit his christological purpose to follow the Synoptic lead and have John disappear from the scene before Jesus begins his ministry. That he does not do this, but allows the potentially embarrassing scenario of John and Jesus carrying out similar ministries at the same time, argues for the historical plausibility of the Fourth Gospel's account. The criterion of embarrassment again argues for the probable historicity of some of John's disciples becoming disciples of Jesus. "Granted the theological program of the Fourth Evangelist, it is difficult to imagine him making up the story that some of the most important disciples of Jesus had first chosen the Baptist as their master" (Meier 1994, 120).

16. For a recent review of Brown's hypothesis on the historical development of the Johannine community and a survey of other reconstructions, see Brown 2003, 69–78. See also Tatum 1994, 163; Moloney 2000, 50–51, 57–58.

17. See also Brown's comments (2003, 156), "The cautions uttered against exaggerating the role of JBap and placing him on the level of Jesus may have arisen in Johannine history out of conflict with the sectarians of JBap, but in the final Gospel they are not addressed to such sectarians. They have a christological function of deepening the faith of John's Christian readers."

I am not arguing here that every aspect of the Fourth Gospel's presentation of John is historical, but that its overall schema of John and Jesus engaging in similar and contemporary baptizing ministries is quite probable, as is its description of Jesus' first disciples coming from the ambit of John.¹⁸ I think that the Fourth Gospel is correct in claiming that John did not see himself as an Elijah figure but thought there was another coming soon who would fit this role. John's task was to ready the people for this coming one by being the "voice in the wilderness," as prophesied by Isaiah. That the historical John clearly identified Jesus as this coming one is highly questionable. In Matthew and Luke, John sends disciples from his prison to ask this question; Meier argues for the historicity of this scene using the criteria of embarrassment and discontinuity with later Christian apologetic (1994, 130–37). Moloney considers that John most likely "went to his death not certain that his former follower, now exercising a ministry of his own, was *ὁ ἰσχυρότερος*" (2000, 48). It is also reasonable to suppose that if John had recognized in Jesus the one he was awaiting, then he himself would have become Jesus' disciple, rather than simply sending two of his followers.

THE BRIDEGROOM'S FRIEND¹⁹

When John's disciples follow Jesus, the narrative focus shifts away from John to the opening account of Jesus' ministry. John returns to the narrative following the Nicodemus episode when some of his disciples raise their concerns regarding Jesus' popularity. In this context John describes himself as the friend of the bridegroom who has been sent before the Christ.

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.

18. Taylor (1997, 288–99) argues otherwise and accepts the Synoptic chronology that John was imprisoned before Jesus began his baptizing ministry. While recognizing the christological agenda of the Fourth Gospel, I do not think she pays sufficient attention to the christological agenda of the Synoptics in casting John in the role of Elijah, the forerunner.

19. 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 also what was codified in the Mishnah in the postbiblical 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 Second Temple period. See van Selms 1950, 65–75. For the narrative significance of this image, see Coloe 2007, chs. 2 and 3.

Mark 2:18–20
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?" 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. ²⁰ The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day."

Matthew 9:14–15
¹⁴ Then the disciples of John came to him, saying, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?" 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."

Luke 5:30–35
³⁰ The Pharisees and their scribes were complaining to his disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" ³³ Then they said to him, "John's disciples, like the disciples of the Pharisees, frequently fast and pray, but your disciples eat and drink." ³⁴ Jesus said to them, "You cannot make wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them, can you? ³⁵ The days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast in those days."

John 3:25–30
²⁵ Now a discussion about purification arose between John's disciples and a Jew. 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." ²⁷ John answered, "No one can receive anything except what has been given from heaven. ²⁸ You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, 'I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him.' 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.³⁰ He
must increase,
but I must
decrease.”

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” (1994, 448).²⁰ Without going into the possible meaning this image may have had for Jesus, I wish to focus on the way the image was developed in the post-Easter communities, particularly the community behind the Fourth Gospel. The image of 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 biblical images transferred by the Christian communities to describe the relationship between Jesus and the *ekklēsia* (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 (Boismard 1961, 292).

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 marital imagery 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. 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 of time, were involved in similar baptizing ministries and yet had different practices. 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 makes the contrast between himself and Jesus, with Jesus as the bridegroom, while he has the role of the bridegroom’s friend.

20. Meier 1994, 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.

THE ROLE OF THE "FRIEND" IN BETROTHAL AND MARRIAGE CUSTOMS

Marriage in biblical times was a purely social institution with no religious ceremonies, since there is nothing in the Torah stipulating how marriages were to be celebrated.²¹ 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 first a formal betrothal, with the wedding following after a period of at least a year (Stapfer 1885, 160, 162). 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; see Trumbull 1894, 12). In these negotiations the two fathers did not deal directly with each other but through deputies (Trumbull 1894, 17), probably to avoid any loss of honor if the negotiations broke down.²² This was one of the tasks of the bridegroom's friend (Wight 1953, 127). 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 that the bridegroom would pay and that would revert to the wife in case of divorce (Collins 1997, 109). When the purpose of the visit was explained, the bride's father would send for a deputy to speak for him (Trumbull 1894, 18). When the two deputies were present, the negotiations began until there was consent about the marriage and the dowry, 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 (Stapfer 1885, 161; Collins 1997, 109). According to Turnbull (1894, 20), it was the deputies who drew up the formal contract, which was signed by the two fathers and then "committed into the trusty hands of the best man" (Jeremias 1967, 1101 n. 20). During this ceremony, the young man would give the young woman a ring, some other wealthy article, or a written promise of marriage as an initial sign of commitment; part of the dowry could

21. See Trumbull 1894; Collins 1997, 107; Stapfer 1885, 159, 165. Trumbull describes customs among Arabs in the Middle East in the nineteenth century C.E., but his description seems to accord with customs found in the biblical literature.

22. "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" (Satlow 2001, 104).

also be given at this stage with the promise of the rest at the time of the wedding.²³ At this time a pledge would be spoken.²⁴ A typical pledge was, “She is my wife and I am her husband” (Collins 1997, 108). The betrothal was a formal and binding agreement that could only be broken by divorce or death (Yamauchi 1978, 244–45; Stapfer 1885, 162; Trumbull 1894, 26).

It is clear from this description that the bridegroom’s friend had a very significant role in the proceedings even prior to the wedding. As friend, he was the one who dealt directly with the family of the young woman. His negotiations played a crucial part in the father’s granting consent. It is for this reason that there were ancient laws forbidding the father, if he refused 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” (van Selms 1950, 65–70). 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 prebetrothal arrangements, he could never be the husband, even if the proposal was turned down. The bride could never be his.²⁵

The wedding ceremony itself involved a joyous procession of the young woman from her father’s house to the bridegroom’s home, which was his ancestral home, since the young man usually stayed within the house of his parents, his father’s house. She was conducted to her new home by her relatives with songs and dancing.²⁶ This procession traveled slowly, so that the entire village could see the finery and wealth of the young bride, and it would usually arrive at the bridegroom’s home late in the day for the wedding ceremony, which “was always in the evening at sunset” (Stapfer 1885, 163; Trumbull 1894, 39–44). Sometimes the groom himself would come to lead the bride, and sometimes this role would

23. 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 her family (Gen 24).

24. Samples of written pledges from the fifth century B.C.E. have been found in Egypt (see Yamauchi 1978, 246). Collins (1997, 111–12) also describes contracts from the early second century C.E.

25. This is the situation described in Judg 14, when the woman Samson claims for his wife is given instead to the best man, so that Samson considers himself blameless for his actions against the Philistines (Judg 14–15). See also van Selms 1950, 71–74.

26. Wight 1953, 131–33. Trumbull (1894, 45–58) describes a wedding procession he observed in the Arabian Desert. While this took place in the nineteenth century, the description of events parallels many biblical passages.

We typically translate non-English quotes, so please supply your translation.

again be given to the bridegroom's friend (Boismard 1961, 292).²⁷ While the procession was a public feature of the wedding, the most solemn moment came when the bride entered into the home of the bridegroom (Wight 1953, 133; Stapfer 1885, 163): "on la conduisait processionnellement chez l'époux et c'est à partir de ce moment qu' elle était considérée comme effectivement mariée" (Boismard 1961, 292). Here she 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 (Stapfer 1885, 164). Often the bridegroom would travel in his own procession, arriving at the home some hours later in the evening. He was then led into the bridal chamber by the best man, and it seems that the best man awaited the call of the bridegroom to fetch the nuptial sheet to testify to the virginity of the bride (Jeremias 1967, 1101; Satlow 2001, 175–77).

JOHN: WITNESS AND FRIEND OF THE BRIDEGROOM

The details given above on the customs surrounding betrothal and marriage 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" (3:29), while the narrative calls him a "witness" (1:19, 32–34). 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 that stipulated the dowry and inheritance rights. During the wedding the bridegroom's friend 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). 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" (1:31–34). John 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 hopefully lead 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," that is, 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

27. 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.

of this detail is to be found beyond the actual narrative.²⁸ Once the disciples and Jesus have been brought together, John withdraws from the narrative, which now shifts its focus from John to Jesus.

Without going into details I draw the reader's 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 (2:1–11).²⁹ 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 and his brothers and his disciples; and there they stayed for a few days" (2:12). The disciples have now been drawn into the family of Jesus.

The narrative so far has followed the customs of a Middle Eastern marriage, from the initial witness of John, to disciples being directed and led to Jesus, a wedding celebration, and the inclusion of disciples in Jesus' household. 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 groom also enters the bridal chamber, and that, in some cases, is the first time the groom actually sees his new wife. The moment when the bride's veil is lifted is a key moment for their relationship.³⁰ 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. The temple that had been called "the Lord's house" 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 encounter within the Father's house

28. In an article on Johannine symbolism, Juan Leal (1960) offers four criteria that can indicate when the narrative has a symbolic as well as a literal meaning: (1) inconsequential details that seem to play no part in the narrative; (2) a discourse set within the narrative of an event such that they are mutually illuminating; (3) when the Evangelist accentuates the importance of a person who has no significant role in context; (4) when later liturgical and Christian expressions are used.

29. Jesus' role as the bridegroom is implied at Cana 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 Moloney 1998b, 68–69, 72–73.

30. Trumbull (1894, 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.'"

has been a decisive moment of revelation. The nuptial imagery does not dominate this scene as it did at Cana, but the naming of the temple as “my Father’s house,” the significant revelation of Jesus’ identity as the temple within his Father’s house, and the narrative sequence of this scene following the wedding festivities at Cana suggest to me that the narrative has not lost sight of this image, and it will in fact come to the forefront again in the next chapter.

Following these events within the temple, the marital imagery continues in Jesus’ 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 people (3:1–10),³¹ while the second part, which can be called discourse (3:13–21), introduces the theme of eternal life (3:15, 16).³² 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).³³ 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, with 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 that 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)

31. The conversational tone comes to an end after 3:10, where there is a shift from singular to plural.

32. For further discussion of the birth imagery in this scene and its relationship to baptism, see Lee 2002, 68–71, 147.

33. Yamauchi 1978, 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 2001, 178.

CONCLUSION

The Fourth Gospel has drawn upon historical memories in its characterization of John. Rather than interpret John as Elijah, this Gospel has used what is probably a pre-Synoptic designation of John as “the voice crying in the wilderness,” which probably goes back to John’s own testimony. In its interpretation of the relationship between John and Jesus, the Fourth Gospel utilizes another remembered saying from the Jesus tradition, this time a saying of Jesus using the metaphor of the bridegroom. These sayings have provided the Fourth Evangelist with two images from the tradition that he develops in an extended metaphor of Jesus as the bridegroom and John as the witnessing “voice” of the bridegroom’s friend. Using this nuptial imagery, rather than that of the Synoptic forerunner, the Fourth Evangelist is able to incorporate into his narrative further historical reminiscences that the Synoptic Gospels must omit if they are to maintain the Elijah/Christ model. The Fourth Gospel, therefore, is able to show that John and Jesus were both involved in baptizing ministries at the same time, that this was a cause of some tension between their disciples, and that some disciples of John left him to become followers of Jesus.

Far from being “unhistorical,” the Johannine narrative has drawn on historical reminiscences from the Jesus tradition, bringing together history and symbol 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 Old Testament describing God’s betrothal to and love of Israel. Within the sequence under consideration in this essay (1:1–3:36), the nuptial symbolism is explicit only in the wedding at Cana and in John’s concluding words, but its presence is felt 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 have picked up the allusion. The marital imagery makes apparent the underlying narrative logic of the events across these chapters beginning and ending with John. Ricoeur speaks of the need to link together the action kernels that constitute a narrative’s structural continuity;³⁴ 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 a second dimension. The artistry of this Fourth Evangelist offers such a stereoscopic vision, well symbolized in his traditional image: the eagle.

34. Ricoeur 1976, 85.

