

The Garden as a New Creation in John

Mary L. Coloe, PBVM

Setting

If an artist wanted to paint the crucifixion according to John's gospel, she or he has been given a very clear description of how John wants this scene depicted. The artist would begin with a background of a garden, since John situates the passion and resurrection within a garden.

After Jesus had spoken these words, he went out with his disciples across the Kidron valley to a place where there was a garden, which he and his disciples entered. (John 18:1)

Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. (19:41)

The placement of the passion within a garden is one of many unique features in the Johannine presentation of the passion.

In the foreground the artist would need to place the cross in the middle of the canvas, since we read:

There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, with Jesus *in the middle*. (19:18)

I emphasize the phrase *in the middle* because often this is translated as *with Jesus between them* [so NRSV]. While the meaning is the same, the choice of the words *in the middle* more accurately reflects the Greek and echoes a phrase found in the description of the Garden of Eden:

Jesus with an Orb in a Garden, illumination by Willem Vrelant, Flemish, ca. 1460.
The J. Paul Getty Museum.

Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also *in the middle* of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. (Gen 2:9)

At the foot of the cross the artist would need to paint a man (the Beloved Disciple) and a woman (the mother of Jesus). Once again the painter would note that John is drawing on Genesis symbolism, for in this gospel Jesus' mother is never given her personal name but is only referred to as "woman" (John 2:4; 19:26) and "mother" (2:1; 19:25). These are the two names given to the woman in the Garden of Eden. When the woman is first created, the man proclaims:

This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
this one shall be called Woman,
for out of Man this one was taken. (Gen 2:23)

Later, following the account of their disobedience, the man renames her "mother of all the living"—which is the meaning of the name Eve: "The man named his wife Eve, because she was the mother of all living" (Gen 3:20).

The artist now has a basic outline for the Johannine passion, linking this event to the creation narrative in Genesis and depicting the cross as a tree of life. An ancient depiction of this scene can be found on the apse of the Church of San Clemente in Rome.

Stepping back from the artist's canvas, I now ask: "What does this iconography reveal about John's theology of the passion?" What is being created here?

The Creation Theme in John's Prologue (1:1-18)

The theme of creation was announced at the start of this gospel, which begins by quoting the creation account of Genesis 1. "*In the beginning* was the Word . . ." (John 1:1; Gen 1:1). The Prologue then follows the outline of Genesis 1 and suggests a conflict between "light" and "darkness": "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" (John 1:5).

Where Genesis describes the creation of humans, "male and female," in the image of God (Gen 1:27), John announces that believers will be given the power to become "children of God."

He came to his own (*eis ta idia*), and his own did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God. (1:11-12)

The Greek phrase I have highlighted is repeated at the cross, and when biblical authors use this technique of repetition readers are meant to link the two passages.

While there are many suggestions about the structure of the prologue in John, the one that I suggest is modeled on the structure of Genesis 1.

Genesis		Johannine Prologue	
Introduction (1-2)		Introduction (1)	
A (3-5) light/darkness; sun, stars	A' (14-19)	A (3-5) light /darkness glory seen	A' (14)
B (6-8) heaven/earth; birds, fish	B' (20-23)	B (6-8) John John	B' (15)
C (9-13) land/waters; animals, humans	C' (24-31)	C (9-13) 2 responses 2 gifts	C' (16-17)
Climax: The Sabbath (2:1-3)		Conclusion (18)	
Conclusion (2:4a)			

One difference between Genesis and John is that there is no seventh-day Sabbath rest in John because John's theology is that God did not finish the work of creation in the beginning, but is still working. "My father is still working and so am I" (5:17).

Creation in John's Passion

As stated above, the evangelist depicts the crucifixion with the iconography of Genesis 2: there is a garden, and in the middle of the garden is the cross, the tree of life, and at the foot of the cross stand a man and a woman.

In the first chapter of Genesis, God's final work on Day 6 is the creation of humankind in God's image, and this is Jesus' final act as well. When he speaks to his mother and the disciple he changes their relationships. The disciple becomes "son" to the mother of Jesus and so is now in a new fraternal relationship with Jesus. The disciple is reborn as sibling to Jesus since they both have the same "mother." Because the disciple has become "brother" to Jesus, he/she is now incorporated into Jesus' relationship with God. Through Jesus' words the disciple is "born anew" as child of God, as the Prologue had promised (John 1:12).

The narrator then states that the disciple "took her as his own—*eis ta idia*." This phrase repeats the words of the Prologue describing Jesus coming to his own, *eis ta idia* (1:11) and the reader is meant to link these two verses. The phrase "as his own" looks back to the promise given in the Prologue and now marks its fulfillment at the cross. Disciples are now re-created as children of God.

Once again translations often miss this link and simply read this scene as if Jesus is asking the disciple to take care of his mother. Often they add the word "home," which is not present in the Greek text, to make it read "and

from that hour the disciple took her to his own home," which is incorrect. This misreading is far too simplistic and misses the high point of John's gospel, where believers become children of God.

The risen Jesus confirms this change in relationship when he says to Mary Magdalene: "Go to my **brothers and sisters** and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and **your Father**, to my God and your God'" (20:17).

After the scene in which Jesus alters the relationship between his mother and disciple to one of mother and son, the narrator states that Jesus knew "that all was now finished." Then, after receiving the vinegar, Jesus says:

"It is finished" (19:30). This expression reiterates God's judgment at the completion of the six days' creative work— "thus the heavens and the earth were *finished*. . . . And on the seventh day God *finished* the work" (Gen 2:1-2). According to John's theology, God's work begun in creation is brought to its completion at the cross

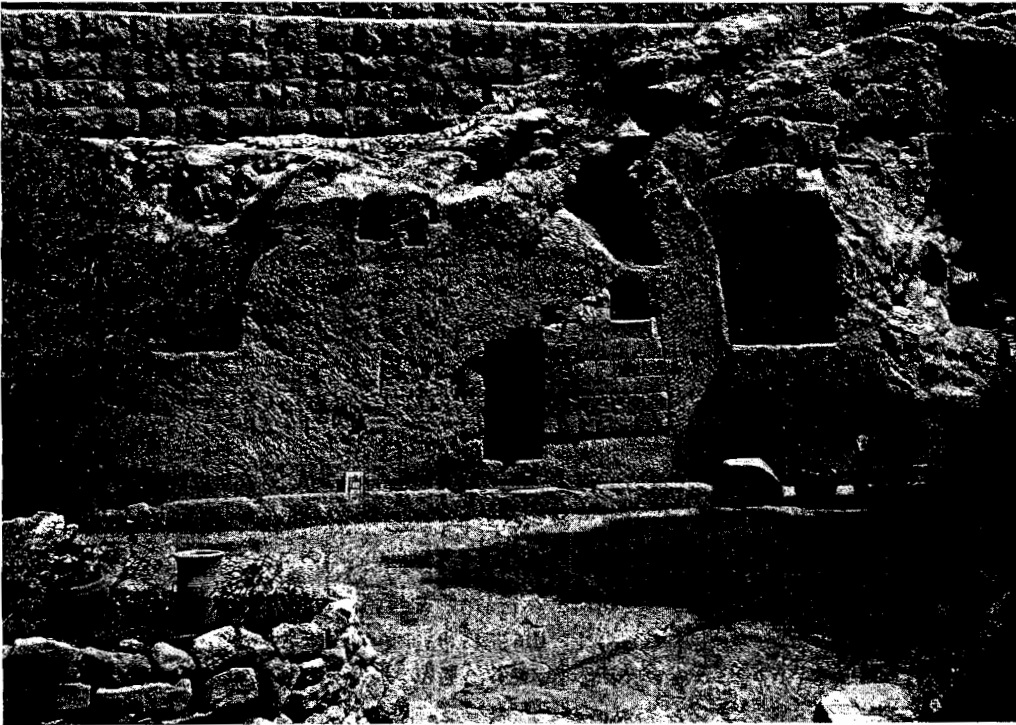
as Jesus dies and breathes down the Spirit to the couple standing beneath the cross. In the next verse we are told that it was the day of preparation before the Passover and the eve of the Sabbath, and the narrator notes: "that Sabbath was a great Sabbath" (19:31).

In discussing the Prologue and its close structural relationship with Genesis 1, I noted that it has no equivalent to the seventh day, the Sabbath, and I made the point that in this gospel God is still working. It is only with the death of Jesus that creation can hear the words "it is finished," and these words usher in the great Sabbath, marking the completion of God's creative work that has been in process since the dawn of time "in the beginning" (Gen 1:1).

Creation in John's Resurrection

The creation theme continues in John's resurrection, since the tomb is in a garden. When Mary Magdalene sees Jesus and thinks he is a gardener, she is right! In Genesis, God was the original Gardener who "planted a garden in Eden, in the east" (Gen 2:8) and, like a gardener, cultivated it (Gen 2:9) and walked in it (3:8). The Risen One has passed through death into the glory that was originally his, with God "in the beginning." He returns to Mary as the Divine Gardener walking in the garden of his creation (John 1:2).

Another way John evokes the theme of a new creation is through the two mentions of time: the first day of the week (20:1, 19) and eight days later (20:26).



Place of the Resurrection of Jesus, Jerusalem. (Thinkstock photo by Getty)

The first day is the day after the Sabbath, which commemorates the completion of God's creative activity; the first day therefore signifies the start of a new creation. In first-century C.E. Jewish and Christian writings the terminology of "first day" shifted to "eighth day" to reflect ideas about the eschatological age when God would fulfill all Israel's longings. The "eighth day" terminology is first found in Christian literature in the *Letter of Barnabas* (ca. 95–135 C.E.).

He further says to them, *Your new moons and Sabbaths I disdain*. Consider what he means: Not the Sabbaths of the present era are acceptable to me, but that which I have appointed to mark the end of the world and to usher in the eighth day, that is, the dawn of another world. This, by the way, is the reason why we joyfully celebrate the eighth day—the same day on which Jesus rose from the dead; after which He manifested himself and went up to heaven. (*Barn 15:8-9*)

While we may have forgotten this symbolism of the eighth day in our theology, the memory lives on in church architecture. You might notice that many baptismal fonts and baptisteries have eight sides to signify that in baptism we are reborn into a new creation. We are plunged beneath the

waters into the death of Jesus and rise reborn with him as children of the eighth day, the new creation—children of God.

The themes of creation and new creation thus frame the narrative of the Fourth Gospel. Jesus is announced as the Word, present with God “in the beginning,” and the crucifixion brings God’s first creation to its conclusion and ushers in the birth of a new creation: the children of God. The resurrection witnesses to the beginning of this new creation when disciples are named as brothers and sisters of Jesus and God is now called their Father.

Conclusion

In immersing the story of Jesus within the themes of creation and re-creation this gospel interprets the meaning of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection by focusing on life and its fullness. This is made explicit when Jesus says “I have come that you may have life in its fullness” (John 10:10). For many centuries Christian churches focused on salvation in terms of redemption or atonement for sin. A study of John’s gospel may provide a helpful alternative that is more attentive to the cosmological significance of the Christ-event and thus offers a more coherent theology for the twenty-first century.

Dr. Mary Coloe is associate professor at Yarra Theological Union and chair of the Biblical Department. Her area of specialization is the Gospel of John, on which she has published extensively. In 2013 she was appointed by the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity to a five-year international dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Disciples of Christ.



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God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good."

—Genesis 1:25

Covers: *The Creation*, illumination about 1190, tempera colors and gold leaf on parchment. The I. Paul Getty Museum. Los Angeles. Courtesy of Getty Open