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Navigating the Living Waters of the Gospel of John: On Wading With Children and Swimming With Elephants

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THE FOURTH GOSPEL HAS BEEN CALLED “a stream in which a child can wade and an elephant can swim.” John has long been used as a primer for newcomers to faith, and it continues to be a favorite devotional reading for young and old alike. On the other hand, John continues to be an ongoing storm center among the finest of Bible scholars and theologians. John’s content, complete with its theological tensions, evoked three centuries of debate in the early church, and it continues to produce great torrents of diverse scholarly opinion on a great number of issues into the twenty-first century. The question I want to explore is *Why*? What is it that renders John so reader friendly on one hand, and so theologically puzzling on the other? Put otherwise, how does one navigate the “living waters” of the Gospel of John?

The Gospel of John is filled with crosscurrents, and we might think of these as tensions between polarities. This gospel leads the reader to a wondrous feeling of certainty, and yet it also confronts one with an awesome sense of mystery. In John you find the greatest biblical source of Christian universalism, and likewise particularity. The repetition of themes and the multiple associations between motifs produce an ever-growing sense of the document’s circularity; but at the same time, the story’s progress is linear. The narrative’s inclusive tone draws the believing reader warmly, and yet John’s antipathy to the world appears exclusionary. The text reads like narrative history, but its spiritualizing comments along the way make one wonder what sort of writing it really is. But don’t take my word for it, try reading the Gospel of John for yourself—either again or for the first time—and see how you regard its features that both captivate the novice and baffle the expert.

ON SWIMMING WITH ELEPHANTS

One of the first things to strike the reader is John's *theological tensions*. In relating to God as Father, Jesus declares: "I and the Father are one" (10:29-30, 33, 38; 14:8-11); and yet, he also declares that "The Father is greater than I" (5:19, 30; 8:16, 28; 14:28). Even if one wants to "believe the Bible" on the Father/Son relationship in John, one is hard pressed to know how to do so given such apparent contradictions. The same difficulty has confronted early-church leaders, and most interpreters since. Oddly enough, within the classic theological debates and beyond, John has been used by *both sides* of many arguments! ¹

Consider also the humanity and divinity of Jesus. On one hand the "flesh" (incarnation) of Jesus is emphasized (1:14a; 6:51, 53-56, 63); but then again, so are his "glory" (1:14c; 11:4; 14:13; 17:1) and "glorification" (1:51; 3:14; 6:62; 8:28; 12:23, 34; 13:1-3). Jesus is referred to as "God" (1:1, 18; 20:28) and the great "I AM" of Exodus 3:14 (8:58); and yet, out of his side flow real blood and water (19:34), and Thomas is allowed to touch physically the flesh wounds of the risen Jesus (20:27). Likewise, the divine certainty (knowing) of Jesus is mentioned (1:47-51; 2:24-25; 4:17-19; 5:41-42; 6:64; 13:1-3); but, he still weeps (11:35), his heart is deeply troubled (11:33; 12:27; 13:21), he groans (11:33, 38), on the cross he thirsts (19:28), and he loves his own (11:3, 5, 36; 13:1, 23, 34; 14:21; 15:9, 10, 12; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7, 20). John's Jesus comes across as both Stoic and pathetic. In John we have the most human presentation of Jesus anywhere in the Bible, and also the most divine.

John's theological tensions, however, extend beyond christology. They include questions regarding miracles, salvation, and the ambivalent presentation of "the Jews." On *miracles*, Jesus' signs lead people to believe in him (2:11; 4:53;

6:2, 14; 11:15, 45, 48; 12:11, 18-19); but dependence on signs is rebuked, and belief without signs is considered “blessed” (4:48; 20:29). Jesus’ salvation is presented as a here-and-now reality (3:18a; 4:21-24; 5:24; 10:10; 15:3; 16:32); but those who believe will have to wait till the last day for their final reward (5:25; 6:39, 40, 44, 54). You can see why even experts struggle with this material.

On *universalism and particularity*, the true Light that enlightens everyone coming into the world is Jesus (1:9) suggesting universal access to God’s saving work. And yet, Jesus is “the way, the truth and the life,” through whom all who come to the Father do so (14:6-7). There’s also the issue of *determinism and free will* in John. On one hand, no one who comes to the Father does so without being drawn by God (6:44); and yet, as many as believe in Jesus are given the right to become the children of God (1:12). And, while Jesus says salvation is “of *the Jews*” (4:22), the *Ioudaioi* are portrayed as wanting to kill Jesus (7:1). The fact that John is the most Jewish of the gospels must have contributed to the acuteness of these tensions, as struggles are often most intense within family groups. Overall, though, we might wonder whether John is self-contradictory or ambivalent on its most important issues, or we might explore explanations for these perplexing issues.

Another set of tensions revolves around *aspects of history and composition*. John attracts a great deal of attention because of its considerable *differences from the other gospels*. On one hand, John presents the Temple cleansing at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, whereas it occurs at the end of his ministry in the Synoptic gospels. A primary feature of Jesus’ teachings in John is the great “I-Am” sayings, but these are not found in the Synoptics. And, Jesus’ teaching in the form of parables, so prevalent in the Synoptics, is completely missing in John. Five of John’s eight

miracles are not found in the Synoptics, so this raises questions as to why, especially when some of them, such as turning the water into wine (2:1-11) and the raising of Lazarus (11:1-44), are among the most memorable. Jesus performs no exorcisms in John, whereas they are the most common form of miracle in the Synoptics; and rather than miracles hinging on people's faith as in the Synoptics, signs are performed in John to lead people to faith. How could John be so different from the Synoptics if it were indeed written by an eyewitness (21:24)?

Consider also several *odd progressions* in John. Chapters 5 and 7 are set in Jerusalem (discussing the same miracle), while chapters 4 and 6 are in Galilee (developing water-of-life and bread-of-life themes). Is this material really in the right order? And, after Jesus says: "let us leave" in 14:31, it takes three chapters for them to arrive at the Garden in 18:1. Should we think of John 15-17 as "the Sermon in the Alley," or should we look for other explanations? The Prologue (1:1-18) is quite different from the material following it, and John 20:31 seems to have been a first ending of the gospel describing why "these things have been written," only to be followed by chapter 21 and a second ending in John 21:24-25.

Scholars attempt various ways of accounting for these perplexities, and they usually involve a theory of composition. My own view on John's composition is that it involved at least two major editions. The first appears to have been drawn together a decade or so after Mark's gospel (around 80 CE), and I believe it was written as something of an augmentation of and complement to Mark. Later material was added to the finalized edition of John after the death of the Beloved Disciple (including at least 1:1-18 and chs. 6, 15-17 and 21) around the turn of the century. It also is likely that the final editor of the Gospel was the author of the Epistles of John, and that these were written in the

80s-90s between the two editions of the Gospel's composition. These are but a few of the theological, historical, and literary reasons for debates surrounding the Gospel of John,² but why do readers become attached to it for personal reasons of faith?

ON WADING WITH CHILDREN

So much for swimming with the elephants; how do we wade with the children when it comes to reading meaningfully the Gospel of John? One of the things the reader is promised is an intimate relationship with God. Not a bad prospect in the mind of many a reader! The one who responds to God's saving/revealing work in faith is born from above (or born anew, 3:3), and out of one's innermost being shall flow rivers of living water (7:37-38). Knowing God and the one sent by God is the source of life itself (17:3), and Jesus came that people might experience everlasting life in its abundance (10:10). What water and bread are for our physical bodies Jesus is for our souls (chs. 4 and 6), and light and life come from the one who cured the blind man and raised the dead (chs. 9 and 11). Jesus also promises to send the Holy Spirit, who will be in and with his disciples (chs. 14-16), and the invitation is extended to the reader to receive the Love of God by saying "Yes" to God's YES to the world in Jesus. Even the simplest of readings can evoke a response of faith to God, and this is what makes John such a powerful piece spiritually.

John also captivates us personally because the reader comes to feel like an insider to the faith as one accepts its message. To believe in Jesus is to become a child of God (1:12), to abide in the truth (15:1-8), and to receive eternal life (3:16; 20:31). John's Gospel indeed becomes "good news" to those who receive its message, and this has been the experience of millions of readers over the centuries. Readers become a part of a new

community—a community of faith extending over time and space, but also reinforced by companions along the way. Indeed, love for one another becomes the trademark of the new community of faith (13:35), and to know and do the workings of Jesus is to become his “friends” (15 :14-15).

On the other hand, John may be experienced as “bad news” if one has problems with its message or if its readers feel dissatisfied with others’ commitments or perspectives on things. Any and all are invited to accept “the truth,” but from this gospel’s perspective, not all do so. Why is this? On one hand, no one has seen God (1:18), and humans cannot come to God except they be drawn and enabled by God (6:44, 65). Then again, Jesus came unto his own, and they received him not (1:11). Likewise, despite seeing Jesus’ signs some did not believe (12:37). The evangelist explains these sorts of disappointments by citing Isaiah 53:1 and 6:10 (John 12:38-41; their eyes are blinded and their hearts are deadened) and by speculating that either they loved the darkness rather than light, or they were not rooted in God to begin with (3:18-21). Now this may seem unfriendly to the unconvinced reader, but it probably reflects the pain of a community seeking to deal with its own disappointments in the light of its convictions about whom Jesus was and what he came to do. Sorting these issues out reminds us once again that wherever we start wading into the Fourth Gospel we eventually must start swimming, and vice versa. Eventually, we must find ways to navigate the “living waters” of this provocative text.

NAVIGATING THE “LIVING WATERS” OF THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

The best way to enter into the world sketched by this gospel is to explore *what* it says in the light of *how* it says it. John is not

simply a narrative about Jesus, nor is John primarily a theological treatise. John was first written as a religious apology seeking to convince the reader that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah and the life-giving hope for the world.³ John's origin and first audiences were Jewish, but its readership came to include Gentiles and other Christians as well. In that sense, John's composition addresses several concerns: first, it seeks to preserve stories about and sayings of Jesus for later generations. Many of these are parallel to those preserved in the Synoptic Gospels, but by and large John's material is distinctive and independent. Second, John is written as an evangelistic appeal to convince the reader that Jesus was indeed sent by God, to be received through faith. The appeal to believe is thus central to John's apologetic thrust. Third, reasons why people do not believe are also commented upon, and these and other reflections take us beyond the time of Jesus to later developments in the tradition. When we read about people doing it right or doing it wrong (in any narrative, but especially in John) later readers are thereby given examples to follow or reject, accordingly. A fourth aspect of John's purpose is to reflect theologically on what it means for Jesus to be the Messiah / Christ. All of this comes together in the exhortation to believe, which is the explicit purpose for the writing of John as described in John 20:30-31 :

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book, but these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

This verse is the clearest purpose statement of any book of the Bible, and it provides the best place to start when sorting out *how* John says *what* it says. Notice that vs. 30 mentions other signs

having been done by Jesus which are not included in John's first edition. When you set aside chs. 6 and 21 as part of the final edition, sure enough! None of the other five miracles in John is recorded in Mark, and this comment may be an acknowledgment of such a fact. This is why I believe that John was written as a complement to the first written gospel, Mark. Most important about this passage, however, is what the evangelist declares regarding what he is trying to do in writing a gospel, which leads us to several questions: What are these signs and how are they constructed to evoke belief? What does it mean to believe? And, what does it mean to receive life in his name?

“ . . . BUT THESE THINGS ARE WRITTEN. . . ”

When you consider how the material in John has been organized to lead the reader to respond in faith to God's saving/revealing action in Jesus three kinds of material come to mind. First, the witness motif attests to Jesus' having been sent from God, and several “witnesses” come to play important roles in the story. Second, the miracles of Jesus become signposts, pointing to his redemptive work and what he came to reveal about the character and love of God. Third, the fulfilled word confirms the authenticity of Jesus and his mission, and for both Jewish and Gentile audiences alike, these themes are meant to lead to the reader's conviction.

The Witness Motif. The word witness (*marturia*) occurs at least 77 times in Christian Scripture, and 33 times it is used in John. Add to this the fact that other Greek words for unveiling and disclosure are seldom used in John, and here you have an example of a particularly Johannine theme. *Marturia* is associated with the word “martyr,” although in John the term is

not limited to those who gave their lives or suffered for their faith. Rather, John develops the witness motif as a means of pointing to the authenticity of the Son's witness to the Father who sent him.

John the Baptist is the primary witness about Jesus in John. The evangelist clarifies in the Prologue that there was a man sent from God whose name was John, who while not being "the Light" himself, was nonetheless a witness to the Light that all might believe through him (1:6-8, 15). John's testimony builds to a bold declaration: "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (1:29), and he even claims that pointing Jesus out was his primary mission (1:31-34). The baptizer also exemplifies ultimate servanthood by emphasizing that the reason for his mission was for Jesus to increase and for himself to decrease (3:30). Indeed, the negative "It is *not* I" on the lips of John the Baptist is almost as prolific as the positive "I am" of the Johannine Jesus, and the evangelist wants to be sure readers associate the Messianic Prophet and Elijah with Jesus rather than with John the Baptist (1:19-23). The great water baptizer here points centrally to Jesus, who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.

Others witness to Jesus as well, including the Samaritan woman (4:39) and those for whom Jesus performed miracles. The woman at the well attests to Jesus' Messiahship because she experienced herself to be known by Jesus. "He told me everything I'd ever done" may have overstated it a bit, but the point is that she felt there was something qualitatively different in her brief encounter with Jesus. Like Nathanael, a true Israelite indeed, who felt himself known by Jesus from afar (1:47-50), these people's lives become testimonies to spiritual experiences associated with encountering something of God in the presence of Jesus. Likewise, the walking paralytic (ch. 5) and the seeing

blind man (ch. 9) become witnesses to the authenticity of Jesus as the one sent from God. The crowd beholding the raising of Lazarus become witnesses to the climactic miracle (12:17), and this witness appears to have threatened the religious leaders even further, even to the point that they plotted to kill Lazarus as well as Jesus (12:10).

The Scriptures, of course, witness to Jesus (5:39), as does Moses (5:46). Also, Jesus' followers will become his witnesses in the world as the Holy Spirit comes upon them (15:27), and they are to point to Jesus' revelational witness concerning the will of the Father. Specifically, "the eyewitness" testifies to what he has seen (19:35) in order that others may believe, and the gospel writer testifies climactically to what the final editor claims he had witnessed (21 :24), and the affirmation, "we know his testimony is true," represents corporate convictions about the authority of his testimony.

Finally, Jesus' signs, words, and works testify that he is sent from the Father. Jesus witnesses to what he has seen and heard from the Father (3:11, 32), and Jesus testifies to the Truth and that God is true (18:37; 3:33). In this sense, Jesus reveals the words of the Father and speaks not on his own behalf, but on behalf of the one who sent him (Deuteronomy 18:15-22). This sort of testimony, however, is portrayed as stirring up adverse reactions from Jewish leaders. They question Jesus about his speaking presumptuously (Deuteronomy 18:20) and accuse him of speaking only about himself, raising charges of the insufficiency of the single witness to convince (Deuteronomy 17:6; 19:15). While granting that self-witness is insufficient (5:31), Jesus clarifies that the Father (5:32; 8:18) also testifies on his behalf, as does the Holy Spirit (15:26). Jesus points to the authenticity of his mission from God by citing the works he has done in the name of the Father (10:25) and by testifying

that he has been sent from God (5 :36). The emphasis upon the multiplicity of testimonies, of course, confirms the other witnesses about Jesus (8:17).

The Signs. Unlike the other gospels where Jesus' works are called wonders, miracles, and acts of power, John uses the word *semeia*, or "signs," to describe Jesus' works. Right away we notice that someone has been thinking not only of these reported wonders, but more pointedly, what they mean for later audiences. Rather than pointing to themselves, John's signs are crafted in such a way as to highlight the saving/revealing mission of Jesus. They become bases from which to develop Jesus' discourses, and each of the other signs in John also carries with it the capacity to lead the reader to faith

The "first sign" performed at Cana of Galilee was the turning of water into wine at the wedding party (2: 1-11). Note the impressive irony. Purification jars are here used, not to make the party sober and reflective, but to make the party festive and celebrative. Also, the words of the steward are significant (2: 10): Jesus saves the best for last! On behalf of this "sign" and the manifestation of his "glory" the disciples believe in Jesus (2: 11), and this event serves as the launching of Jesus' ministry. This gateway into the public ministry of Jesus also alerts the reader to two sorts of climaxes yet to come: the raising of Lazarus at the end of Jesus' public ministry will be the greatest of the signs, and his own death and resurrection will be a final saving of the best for last, leading to the post-resurrection experience of the church. Interestingly, Jesus' cleansing the Temple (2:12-25) appears to be recalled also as a demonstrative work by Galileans who "had seen all that he had done in Jerusalem at the festival" (4:45), and this sets the stage for their receptivity to Jesus in Galilee.

The healing of the royal official's son, the second sign performed in Cana of Galilee, highlights several things. First, as a contrast to the rejection of Jesus in his hometown of Nazareth and his reception in Galilee, Jesus receives a warmer welcome from the royal official in Capernaum. This event points to the ironic reception of Jesus by the unlikely, and it serves to unmask the unwitting religious authorities who miss the very activity of the Spirit they claim to seek. A second point is that to the degree the official believes, the miracle is effected. Faith accompanies miracles in John, but it is not said to produce them as in the Synoptics. Third, Jesus' healing word, even spoken from afar, is experienced as a demonstration of his authenticity (Deut. 18:22), as the true prophet's words always come true. Thus, the official and his household believed (4:53).

The healing of the paralytic demonstrates Jesus' concern for the infirm, but we see again the participatory character of human faith in the effecting of the miracle (5 :15). Paraphrasing the dialogue, Jesus puts to the paralytic the existential question: "Do you want to be whole?" Notice the "lame" excuses the man produces: "I have no one to help me." "Someone always beats me into the water so I lose out on the miraculous stirring of the Spirit." Implicitly, "It's not my fault!" he declares, disowning his responsibility. Jesus' question, however, remains: "Do you *want* to be whole?" Here the reader gets drawn into the story, engaging in an imaginary dialogue with Jesus. What about my infirmities? Have they and life's excuses become more secure and desired than the transformative workings of God? The root problem here is exposed as not being the man's hopeless condition—but his condition of hopelessness—and this is the need Jesus addresses directly: "Do you want to be whole?" In response to Jesus' command to take up his mat and to walk, the man obeys, and that obedience enacts a faithful response to Jesus

(5 :8-9). This sign also provokes a response, but it is one of unbelief and questioning by the religious leaders. They object to his performing a healing on the Sabbath, and in the rest of chapter 5 the first of the major Johannine controversies follows.

John 6 presents the reader with one or two signs, both of which are also included in the Synoptics. The feeding of the 5,000 is the only miracle of Jesus included in all four gospels, although Matthew and Mark include also a feeding of the 4,000, and they also include two sea-rescue narratives. As well as representing an independent narration of the events, the theological slant of John's narrative here is also distinctive. Jesus is portrayed as knowing full well what he would do; and yet, he asks Philip where they should buy bread for the crowd to eat (6:5-6). He proceeds with instructing the disciples to have the people sit down and to distribute the barley loaves, and just like the Elisha miracle (see II Kings 4:42- 44) they had more than enough to eat. The crowd exclaims Jesus must be "the Prophet who is come into the world" (Deut. 18:15-18) and they wish to rush him off for a forcible coronation (6:14-15). Jesus, however, flees their designs on his future and escapes into the hills by himself. The meaning of the feeding is extensively developed throughout the rest of the chapter (6:22-66), and here we have the fullest development of any of the Johannine signs. The testing motif continues, and readers are exhorted to choose the life-producing food which Jesus gives and is as opposed to lesser alternatives (6:27).

The sea-crossing narrative is more terse and undeveloped than it is in Mark and its Synoptic parallels. Does this mean it is more primitive than even the Marcan tradition? Possibly, although not necessarily. Rather than identifying the figure of Jesus as a ghost seeming to pass by the boat (as in Mark 6:45-52), the Johannine reference interprets the ambiguous appearance and Jesus' words

as a Theophany, an appearance of God, as in the tradition of Moses before the burning bush (Ex. 3: 14). Jesus' words, "I Am! Fear not." are the same in Mark's Greek rendering as they are in John (*Ego eimi!! Me phobeisthe!*), but the meaning can be taken several ways. With Mark's additional phrase just before, it seems to mean "Do not worry (it is not a ghost); it is I, Jesus! Fear not." In John, however, Jesus' appearance is interpreted as a divine encounter, and the disciples appropriately receive him into the boat. In the Synoptics Jesus calms the storm, but in John Jesus calms the disciples. Perhaps the sea-crossing Theophany in John 6 even becomes instrumental in the development of John's striking "I Am" sayings, making a difference in the evangelist's distinctive presentation of Jesus' teaching ministry.

The healing of the blind man in John 9 represents the most symbolic development of a Johannine sign. The narrative begins with the disciples asking whose sin caused the blindness of the man born blind. Jesus responds by saying that it was neither this man's sin nor his parents' sin that lay at the root of his blindness, but that God might be glorified (9: 1-3). Ironically, the man's sight is given to him, but people are incredulous. Some question whether it was really the same person, and when brought to the Pharisees they are divided. Some ask how a healing could have been performed on the Sabbath. "Breaking" the law of God cannot produce a miracle from God, some argue, while others ask how someone who was not sent from God could do such mighty works of God (9:16). The irony is heightened for the reader when we learn that the pool in which the blind man was commanded to wash was called "Siloam" meaning "sent" (9:7). Again, his obedience marked his faithful response. The blind man then becomes a central witness to Jesus' Messiahship. Climactic in the narrative is verse 38, where the man declares: "Lord, I believe." He then worships Jesus.

As well as positive significance, this story also conveys judgment. Climactically, Jesus declares at the end of the chapter: "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind" (9:39). The religious leaders ironically demand that the formerly blind man give glory to God for the healing, and yet this is precisely what the man is presented as doing. The evidence is in the healing itself. All the man knows is that once he was blind, but now he sees. In response to their questions about Jesus, the healed man asks if they wish to become Jesus' disciples too. At this they hurl insults at him and declare themselves to be disciples of Moses. This story also exposes Johannine Christianity's religious context. Even back then (cites the narrator) the Jewish leaders had decided that "anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue" (9:22). This detail, as well as passages similar to it (12:42; 16:2), suggests that members of John's audience who expressed faith in Jesus openly were being expelled from local Synagogues.⁴ This background also accounts for the presentation of conflicts between Jesus and the Jewish leadership in John, especially in chapters 5-9. The community itself was experiencing religious hardship for their beliefs, and John's Gospel provided assurance that their faith was sound and that they would be rewarded for abiding in the truth. Further, the critique of the Jewish leadership in John 9 also extends to other members of the audience who might have felt secure in their belief systems. Says Jesus: "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains" (9:41).

The raising of Lazarus in John 11 provides the culmination of Jesus' works. As a "sign" the main point of the miracle is not that Lazarus will never die. His being raised from the dead sounds a far more weighty note: death itself is transcended by God's

saving /redeeming action in Christ Jesus. Jesus declares climactically (11:25-26), "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." The recognition of the steward at the wedding feast in John 2 has indeed been fulfilled. Jesus saves the best for last, and his miracles signify the overcoming of the ultimate foe: death itself.

In these and other ways the signs in John lead the reader beyond the events narrated to the spiritual truths they represent. They signify what Jesus came to do, and they reveal something of God's character and love which he came to demonstrate incarnationally. They also confirm his having been sent from God as the Jewish Messiah, and they come to function as existential crises for the reader. Response to the prophetic signs of Jesus exposes humanity's foundations and inclinations. For those who have fished all night and caught nothing in their nets (21: 1-14) Jesus points the way forward, leading to the greatest catch of all. As with the earthly ministry of Jesus, the resurrected Lord leads effectively if disciples are attentive and responsive. This is the message of the final sign.

The Fulfilled Word. A third body of material designed to convince the reader that Jesus is sent from God is the fulfilled word. The fulfilled word operates in several ways in John, but it basically confirms the Jewish belief that the authentic prophet is confirmed as the prophetic word comes true (Deut. 18: 15-22). Nonetheless, its relevance extends to such other measures as the fulfillment of Scripture, the proleptic words of Jesus, and the unwitting prophecy of the High Priest.

Note the prevalence of fulfilled Scripture in John. John the Baptist clarifies his mission, saying that he is neither the Messiah, nor the Prophet nor Elijah, but the voice of one crying

in the wilderness "Make straight the way of the Lord," (1:20-23) as declared by Isaiah 40:3. Then the narrator points out eight times that events or sayings were explicit fulfillments of the Scriptures or the Prophets. Jesus' cleansing of the Temple reminds the disciples of the Psalmist's words, "Zeal for your house will consume me" (2:17; Ps. 69:9). The crowd celebrates Jesus' entry to Jerusalem shouting: "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—the King of Israel!" (12: 13; Ps. 118:26). The narrator then interprets Jesus' riding upon a donkey as a fulfillment of Zechariah 9:9 (12: 14). As was true in the event of the Temple-cleansing, the evangelist comments that Jesus' disciples did not understand the action at the time but came to see them differently later as aspects of the fulfilled word. This secondary reflection documents a community developing in its belief regarding the ministry of Jesus as scriptural associations and connections emerged.

The prophecy of Isaiah 53:1 is drawn into play to explain the unimaginable fact that many who saw Jesus' signs still did not believe: "Lord, who has believed our message, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?" (12:38). Likewise, Isaiah 6:10 declares the blindness of those who look but do not see, and the deafness of those who listen but do not hear (12:40). At the crucifixion the Scripture-fulfillment connections emerge again. The soldiers' casting lots for Jesus' seamless robe bears a striking connection with Psalm 22:18 (19:24), and the piercing of Jesus' side rather than the breaking of his legs brings to mind a set of scriptural passages about bones not being broken (Ex. 12:46; Num. 9:12; Ps. 34:20). Likewise the Zechariah 12:10 passage: "They will look on the one whom they have pierced" (19:36-37). In these direct ways the fulfilled word of Scripture attests to divinely ordained events in Jesus' ministry.

At least six times Jesus himself is presented as declaring a prophecy to be fulfilled in the events surrounding his ministry. Regarding his teaching and ongoing instruction through the Holy Spirit, the words of Isaiah 54:13 are fulfilled: "And they shall all be taught by God" (6:45). At the Jerusalem feast Jesus declares in a full voice:

Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, "Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water." (7:37-38).

While the particular passage is in question here (see Is. 44:2-3 and Zech. 14:8), the evangelist connects this saying with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit that was yet to come.

Words are also fulfilled in John in the proleptic sayings of Jesus: those predictions that come true in the narrative thereby demonstrating Jesus' authenticity as an agent of God. Some of these are mentioned explicitly, while sometimes they are rather subtle. Many of these predictions are declared to have fulfilled the word of Jesus after the event had transpired, and they include such instances as Jesus' speaking about raising up "this temple" after three days (a veiled reference to the resurrection, 2:19-22); the lifting up of the Son of Man (a paradoxical reference to the cross, 3:14; 8:28; 12:32-33; see especially 18:31-32); Jesus' words that the royal official's son would live (4:50-53); Jesus' life given for the life of the world (6:51); the prediction of some who would not believe (6:64-66); Jesus' prediction of his departure (7:33-34; 8:21; 13:33; 16:5-7, 16, 28) and the pouring out/sending of the Holy Spirit (7:38-39; 14:18-20, 26; 15:26; 16:7); Jesus' declaration that he will lay down his life for the sheep (10:11, 15); Jesus' prediction that Lazarus's sickness will not end in death (11:4, 23); and Jesus' prediction that Peter

would deny him before the rooster had crowed thrice (13:38). On the other hand, the reader gets the impression that some of these sayings are still in the process of being fulfilled, and these include Jesus' prediction that the disciples would suffer in the world (16:20, 32); that he will gather the sheep "beyond this fold" (15:16-18); and Jesus' hope that none would be lost (6:39; 17:12; 18:9).

At the last supper Jesus declares to the disciples that the prediction of Judas's betrayal is to fulfill the Scripture (13:18-19). Jesus says, "I tell you this now before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe that I am he." Likewise in the discourse, Jesus' departure and sending of the Holy Spirit are predicted ahead of time so that when it does happen the disciples will believe (14:25-29). Tribulations to be experienced by the disciples in the world are predicted by Jesus ahead of time so that "when their hour comes you may remember that I told you about them" (16:2-4). The explicit narration of an event coming to pass so that an earlier prediction could be fulfilled includes the fulfillment of Jesus' hope that none would be lost (6:39; 17:12; 18:9) and the signification of by what means Jesus' death and paradoxical glorification would take place (3:14; 8:28; 12:32-33; 18:31-32). In all these ways Jesus' having been sent from the Father is authenticated because all the words of the true Prophet like Moses according to Deuteronomy 18:15-22 indeed come true.

Finally, the prophetic word of Caiaphas is to be taken as an unwitting double entendre (11 :47-53). When Caiaphas hears about the controversial response to Jesus' raising of Lazarus and when the concern is expressed that the Romans might react against a messianic miracle worker by taking away both "our holy place and our nation," he declared: "You know nothing at all! You do not understand that it is better for you to have one

man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.” The narrator then goes on and clarifies the meaning of the unwitting prophecy. Caiaphas thought he was saying it was better for one man to be strung up by the Romans than for them to crack down on the multitudes and destroy many lives. Because he was the High Priest, however, he became the mouthpiece of God and actually made a prophetic statement about Jesus’ atoning sacrifice: “. . . he prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God.” (11:51 f.). This prophecy comes true not only in the death and resurrection of Jesus, but the coming to Jesus of the Greeks in John 12:20-36 becomes a preliminary sign of the restoration of Diaspora Israel.

. . . SO THAT YOU MIGHT COME TO BELIEVE. . .

While the witnesses, Jesus’ signs and the fulfilled word all bolster the case that Jesus is the Jewish Messiah, the reader’s coming into a faith relationship with God is the main interest of the evangelist. To believe in Jesus is to respond in faith to the saving initiative of God. It is saying “Yes” to God’s YES to the world, and that response is always transformational. For one thing, it challenges the creaturely scaffolding we erect in our approaches to God. Not only is Jewish religion here challenged, but all religious and creaturely attempts to attain access to the divine are here challenged in the Incarnation. God did not send a pattern, a creed, a ritual, or a text to convey the essence of divine love for the world. No. God came to the world as a human being—flesh and blood like you and me—and this is the scandal of the Incarnation. As St. Augustine has said, all religious concepts in the Bible are found within other religions except for one: that God became flesh and dwelt

among us. To behold in his life the *Shekinah* Glory of God is to encounter the greatest of spiritual mysteries (1:14). It purges our loyalties to the core, leaving behind that which alone is rooted in God.

Another provocative thing about the Incarnation is that it produces a crisis for humanity. It demands a response—either positively or negatively—to the saving revelation of God availed through Christ Jesus. Not only were the religious leaders offended, but the disciples too were scandalized by the harsh words of Jesus, and some of them slid back and walked with him no longer (6:60-67). The way of the cross is that to which believers are called, and it is a path rooted in the quest for truth and lived out in authenticity. The Truth sets us free, and yet it also challenges our conventional loyalties and understandings. It is a living, dynamic reality, and those who abide in it are hated by the world. In these ways, to believe in Jesus is far more than a notional matter; it involves a complete reorientation of one's being—an abiding immersion in the present Spirit of the risen Lord. In fact, the content of John cannot even be understood apart from an inward engagement of its transforming message, and this is the ultimate scandal of this provocative gospel. To hear its message is to be already transformed by the life-producing Word of God.

The Semantics of Belief. The word *pisteuo* (believe) occurs 98 times in John, and it only occurs as a verb, not a noun. Like much of John's other vocabulary (love, know, etc.), belief is something one does rather than a thing one possesses. It connotes the activity of trusting and exercising faith. To believe represents the fitting response of humanity to God's saving/revealing work. The absolute use of the term belief in John (4:42; 5:44; 9:38; 11 :15; 14:29; 16:31; 20:27, 29) is described as opening

one's life to God as a contrast to trusting in anything that is of creaturely origin. At times it is also associated with "seeing" and "hearing" verbs in John. To believe involves the acceptance of God's working in the world, and it implies one's faithful participation in that work in an ongoing way. It is to set one's sail to the wind of the Spirit and to live responsively to the divine presence and leadings of the eternal Christ.

To believe in (using the preposition *eis*, or "into") Jesus is to participate in Jesus believably (3:18; 6:29, 40; 9:35f.; 11:25, 48; 12:36f.; 14:1; 16:9; 17:20). It is like diving into a pool, or becoming immersed in God's saving/revealing initiative, Jesus, and it is associated with "abiding" and "remaining" themes. To believe in Jesus involves a relationship of intimacy and knowledge, and for John, "knowing" is akin to the Hebrew understanding (*yada*) of intimate acquaintance. Ultimately, believing in Jesus leads to partnership with his redemptive mission as one who witnesses to that which one has received.

Belief on the basis of, or because of something said or done, draws in the Greek word *dia* ("on account of"). The witnesses, signs, and fulfilled word in John provide the primary bases of belief for the reader, but also in the text there are several other associations as well (1 :7, 50; 9:36; 11:15; 14:29; 17:20; 19:35; 20:31). Oddly enough, the absence of Jesus serves the purpose of leading the sisters of Lazarus to belief (11:15), and a greater basis for belief than seeing Nathanael under a fig tree will involve seeing heaven open and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man (1 :50-51). While this is not narrated in John, it declares the eschatological aspect of Jesus' mission. Finally, people will believe on behalf of Jesus' followers (17:20), just as the eyewitness becomes a basis for future belief (19:35), and the gospel itself is written to provide such a platform (20:31).

Another aspect of belief in John relates to the content of faith, and it often involves the use of the Greek word *hoti*, meaning "believe that." On a superficial level, even believing that a miracle has or has not happened becomes an indicator of faith. To "believe that" Jesus is sent by God (8:24; 11:27; 11:42; 13:19; 16:30; 17:21) is to believe that Jesus is in the Father and that the Father is in Jesus (14: 10). Again, Jesus' Messianic mission is authenticated by evidence of his having been sent by God, and accepting this conviction is of central importance to the Johannine sending motif.

At times, however, "believing that" suggests a formulaic understanding of who Jesus was and what he came to do. In John, Peter's confession is very different from Mark's "You are the Christ" (Mk. 8:29). In John, Peter declares, "We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God" (6:69), which is the same title the demoniac uses for Jesus in Mark 1:24. For whatever reason, Jesus appears to reject this formula (6:70, just as he rejects Peter's refusal to allow the Son of Man to suffer and die in Mark 8:33), and yet the climactic confession in John is reserved for Martha, a woman, who declares, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." (11 :27). This confessional formula probably came to represent the community's belief in Jesus, and it finds its final expression at the end of the gospel, where the evangelist declares: "But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name." (20:31).

In at least 19 verses "not believing" is mentioned, either as descriptive of how people received Jesus, or within the larger discussion, and these passages are puzzling indeed. Unbelief or not believing, in John is regarded quite seriously and is even regarded as the primary description of sin. According to

John 3:18, "Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God." The issue here is neither wickedness nor depravity but the failure of humans to respond to God's ultimate gift, often because they cling to something less than ultimate. They hide from the light lest their deeds be exposed rather than coming to the light and being set free by the truth. In this sense, the sin of unbelief is parallel to Israel's grumbling in the wilderness (6:41, 60-66). Rather than trusting in God, they rebelled and rejected the human/divine partnership that trust implies. More pointedly, the work of the Holy Spirit convicts us of sin and of righteousness (16:9), and sin is described as the failure to believe.

At times, however, not believing becomes a step toward preliminary faith. If you cannot believe the basics (what I told you, what Moses wrote, what you have seen, etc.), says Jesus, how can you expect to assimilate the more advanced of truths (3:12; 5:47; 10:25-26)? This sort of inquiry leads then to conjectures about why people do not believe. The primary conjecture here is that people are not rooted in God (3:18). Neither do they have God's word abiding in them (5:38), nor are they Jesus' sheep (10:26). Then again, some refuse to believe unless they see miraculous signs or some sort of tangible evidence (4:48; 20:25), and some refuse to believe simply because Jesus is telling the truth (8:45). On the other hand, some do indeed see signs and yet refuse to believe (6:36; 10:36-37; 12:37), and the only explanation the evangelist can offer is that their unbelief has been prophesied by Isaiah (12:39). Otherwise, their unbelief would have been inexplicable.

Several times in John partial belief is alluded to. In these instances people believe in the signs or something Jesus has done, but they fail to come into full belief in him as receiving the one sent from God. Some even debate the implications of Jesus'

signs but fail to accept him as the Jewish Messiah. Nicodemus, for instance, while being impressed with Jesus' signs (for no one could do such miracles unless God were with him; 3 :2), shows himself to be "in the dark" in more ways than one. Likewise, while Jerusalem leaders are presented in believing in Jesus in John 7, others do not, or do so only partially. In John 10:38 and 14:11 Jesus invites people to believe, if not fully in him, at least on the basis of the miracles. This seems an odd way to proceed. It is as though religious expectations of how God ought to be working have themselves crowded out humanity's openness to the present workings of God. Whatever the case, partial belief at least moves people in the right direction according to the Gospel of John, even if only preliminarily.

Complete belief involves believing on behalf of the signs, witnesses, or the fulfilled words in John, and it primarily entails receiving Jesus as the one sent from God. In John's narrative people come to believe in Jesus effectively, not just in his wonders or some other signifier, and these examples become models of what future readers are to emulate. The focus thus shifts from what Jesus has done to who he is and how he speaks on behalf of the Father who sent him. In that sense, to believe fully in Jesus is to receive him as the saving/revealing agency of God, and to do so is to say "Yes" to God's YES to the world.

A further stage of faith draws in readers and others from later generations. While John emphasizes the authority of eyewitness tradition, the evangelist wants also to step away from such investments that can also make people feel excluded. Reflecting this material's having been crafted for audiences who never met Jesus, the evangelist declares a striking perspective on blessed belief. "Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have come to believe," declares the Johannine Jesus (20:29). Again, the function of such blessed faith is that it draws in all those who

have not witnessed Jesus' ministry personally, but who are captivated by the gospel witness about him. In that sense, an encounter with John's witness and the living Christ it portrays becomes the same sort of first-order experience for members of later generations as that which those who walked and talked with Jesus enjoyed. In doing so the reader too becomes a witness to the human-divine encounter, and the circle is complete.

... AND RECEIVE LIFE IN HIS NAME.

As well as the Gospel of Belief, John may well be called the Gospel of Life. Jesus not only comes to bring life to those who believe (3 :15-16, 36; 5 :24; 6:47; 11 :25), but he also is the way, the truth and the life: the means by which all who come to the Father do so (14:6-7). Thus, he is the resurrection and the life (11 :25), he gives the bread of life (6:27, 33) and the life-producing water (4:14), and not only does he give eternal life (5:21, 26; 10:28; 17:2) he is that which he offers (1:4; 5:37-38; 6:35, 48, 51; 11:25; 14:6). The Greek word for life in John is *zoe* (spiritual life versus *bios*, physical life), and it often is modified by *aionios*, which means "eternal" or "ageless." It is mediated by the Spirit (6:63) and is defined by Jesus in relational terms: "And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." (17:3). In that sense, eternal life is described not only in terms of the product—what people receive, but it is described as a relational event—who believers become in relation to God.

Jesus has the words of eternal life (6:68) and passes on what he has received from the life-giving Father (12:50). He is therefore the light of life (8: 12), the mediating agency of God's life-producing way. He is able to provide life because he gives his life for the world that God loves, and in responding to Jesus,

people respond also to one who sent him. As a contrast to others who have come before, Jesus comes that we might have life, and while abundant life is fully actualized in the afterlife (5:29; 6:40, 53-54; 10:28) it is also available in the here and now (10:10). Jesus lays down his own life for the life of the world (6:51; 10:11-12, 17; 15:13), and disciples must be willing to do the same if they expect to receive the gift of life availed through Jesus (6:51-54; 12:25; 13:37-38).

The receiving of life is associated with several other themes in John, especially “glory” (*doxa* in Greek), and this motif brings to mind the glory of God’s presence encountered with the Ark of the Covenant in the Hebrew Scripture. “We beheld his Glory,” declares the Johannine Prologue (1:14). Glory here denotes encounter with the living God (1:14; 2:11; 11:4, 40; 12:41; 17:5, 22, 24) as contrasted to the inauthentic glory of human approval (5:41, 44; 8:54; 9:24; 12:43). Therefore, to receive the life that comes from believing in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God is to encounter the glory which the Father and the Son have shared since the beginning of time, and it is into this eternal fellowship that believers are drawn.

So how does one navigate the living waters of this provocative text, complete with its crosscurrents, foibles and tensions? Noticing *how* John says *what* it says provides the best place to begin. While the evangelist sought to convince the reader of the truth about his subject, he also sought to evoke a transformative encounter with his subject—the revealer of God’s truth. In doing so, the pain and struggles of this first-century sector of Christianity come through, but so do its hopes and aspirations. But standing on the shore analyzing waders and swimmers finally does no good . . . test the waters for yourself. Become a wader or a swimmer; just jump in!

NOTES

1. More about these issues may be read in the introduction to my book (*The Christology of the Fourth Gospel*, 1997, pp.1-15) and in its first six appendices (pp.266-71). See also the suggested readings at the end of this pamphlet.
2. In my book (*The Christology of the Fourth Gospel*, 1997, pp.252-65) I identify four primary sources of these tensions: the agency motif (constructed upon Deuteronomy 18:15-22), the dialectical thinking of the evangelist, several crises within the history of Johannine Christianity, and the literary devices used by the evangelist.
3. Please see especially the works by O'Day (1986), Culpepper (1983) and Koester (1995) here. O'Day, for instance, calls John's form a narrative mode with a theological claim.
4. Please see especially the works of Martyn (1979), Brown (1979) and Rensberger (1988) on these matters.

RECOMMENDED READING ON JOHN

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- Quast, Kevin. *Reading the Gospel of John*. New York, NY: Paulist, 1991.
- Rensberger, David. *Johannine Faith and Liberating Community*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988.
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