The theology of the Johannine passion narrative: John 19:16b-30

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ABSTRACT

John's theology of the death of Jesus is constructed principally by the narrative of Jesus' death. A close reading of the four scenes at the cross: the inscription (19:19-22), the seamless tunic (19:23-24), Jesus' mother and the Beloved Disciple (19:25-27), and Jesus' last words (19:28-30). These scenes develop themes and motifs that connect them with earlier passages and show that John interprets the death of Jesus with concern for its ecclesiological significance.

1 INTRODUCTION

The topic, 'The Theology of the Johannine Passion Narrative,' mixes theology, the passion narrative, and narrative criticism—more than could possibly be treated in a single article. I hope to show that the passion narrative is really the heart of the Gospel of John, and that any careful interpretation of the passion narrative must necessarily read it as part of the whole Gospel narrative, and read it paying particular attention to its theology.

Perhaps we should remind ourselves first of just how different John's account of Jesus' death is from the synoptics. Central elements of the synoptic accounts do not appear in John at all. There is (1) no mockery of Jesus at the cross; (2) no penitent thief; (3) no darkness, even though John often plays with the symbolism of light and darkness; (4) no counting of the hours (except for the comment in 19:14 that it was the sixth hour), though John has spoken repeatedly of the coming of Jesus' hour; (5) no rending of the veil, though John tells of the cleansing of the Temple at the beginning of Jesus' ministry; (6) no cry of dereliction; (7) no earthquake; (8) no opening of the tombs, though John has spoken earlier of the opening of the tombs and records the raising of Lazarus; and (9) no confession of the centurion, though John places particular emphasis throughout the Gospel on the recognition of Jesus as 'the Son of God.'

In spite of the absence of so many features of the synoptic accounts, John combines traditional elements that appear in the other gospels with distinctively Johannine developments in an intriguing and vitally important way. As in the synoptic gospels, Jesus carries his own cross to the place called 'the Skull Place' (19:17). They crucify Jesus with two others, and place over him...
the inscription, 'King of the Jews.' The soldiers divide his garments, Mary Magdalene and other women stand by, the soldiers offer Jesus vinegar or sour wine, and Jesus' last words are recorded. Witnesses confirm Jesus' death, and the body is then taken down and buried by Joseph of Arimathea. This is obviously only a selection of elements from the synoptic passion narratives, and each of the other accounts offers its own distinctive portrayal of the death of Jesus, but the sheer number of parallels between John and the other gospels at this point—especially given John's independence from the synoptic tradition elsewhere—shows that John knows of and follows a well-defined tradition of Jesus' death.

In view of the differences from the synoptics that we have noted, it is clear that John has selected only certain key elements of the tradition and developed these in his own way to underscore significant aspects of the meaning of Jesus' death. So, let us see how John has developed his account of Jesus' death by using these selected elements from the tradition and tying them to important themes in his Gospel.

John's account of the death of Jesus falls naturally into seven sections, counting the burial as a conclusion: (1) Introduction, the crucifixion (vv 16b-18); (2) the inscription (vv 19-22); (3) the seamless tunic (vv 23-24); (4) Jesus' mother and the Beloved Disciple (vv 25-27); (5) Jesus' last words (vv 28-30); (6) the piercing of Jesus' side (vv 31-37); and (7) the burial (vv 38-42). For our present purposes, I will focus on the four scenes leading up to Jesus' death (vv 19-30).

2 THE INSCRIPTION (vv 19-22)

All of the gospels record the inscription written over Jesus, but only John moves this scene to first place so that it follows immediately after the report of the crucifixion. John's wording of the inscription is also distinctive: only John reports that the inscription was written in three languages, and only John has the continuation of Pilate's debate with the Jewish authorities, culminating in Pilate's imperial declaration, 'What I have written, I have written.' John also greatly expands this scene: what takes no more than 17 words in any of the other gospels is given 75 words in John. Clearly, John makes particular use of this traditional element for his own theological purposes. An exploration of the way the inscription develops significant themes in the Johannine narrative will help to explain its function here.

Each of the gospels has a slightly different wording of the inscription, though each features the title, 'the King of the Jews.' John's wording is the most regal and therefore became the basis for the traditional abbreviation of the Latin form of the inscription in Christian art: INRI (Iesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum). The declaration has a special meaning in John that it does not
have in any of the other gospels because of the way in which it develops motifs from the earlier parts of the Gospel: the cross as exaltation, Jesus' kingship, Jesus as king of 'the Jews,' Jesus' relation to 'the world,' and the significance of the inscription as Pilate's final word regarding Jesus. We may consider each of these briefly.

2.1 The cross as exaltation

The three lifting up sayings in John (3:14; 8:28; 12:32) prepare us to understand Jesus' death as an exaltation, a lifting up. It has often been noted that John does not treat the crucifixion of Jesus as a humiliation that is followed by an exaltation but as the first step in Jesus' exaltation and glorification. The resurrection is compressed into the crucifixion so that the two are stages in one upward motion. The death is itself an integral part of Jesus' exaltation and glorification—which of course is completed in the resurrection. In John 12:34 the crowd asks Jesus how he can say that it is necessary for the Son of man to be lifted up. In fact, what Jesus said (in John 12:23) was that the hour had come for the Son of man to be glorified (Ashton 1991:495). The thought here is a Johannine version of the climax of the Christological hymn in Philippians 2:5–11, which ends affirming that 'every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.' Jesus will be glorified as the Son of man by drawing all people to himself through his death, and in this Jesus the Son glorifies the Father. The death of Jesus, then—more than ascribing praise and honor to God—is a performative revelation of God's nature. It effects the salvation that it reveals and declares (cf Smith 1995:121, 'The description of Jesus' death as exaltation and glorification is a way of underscoring its revelatory character').

2.2 Jesus' kingship

Although the term, 'the kingdom of God,' appears only in John 3:3 and 5, the confession of Jesus as 'King' becomes increasingly significant in the latter part of the Gospel. The theme is announced in the first chapter when Nathanael, a true Israelite, confesses that Jesus is the 'King of Israel' (1:49). After the feeding of the 5000, the crowd perceives that Jesus is 'the prophet who is to come into the world,' and tries to make him 'king' on their terms (6:15). In John 12, Jesus is anointed by Mary of Bethany and rides into Jerusalem on a donkey amid palm branches and shouts of 'Hosanna!' The narrator quotes Zechariah 9:9 to interpret the scene: 'Do not fear, Daughter Zion. Behold, your king is coming, seated on a donkey's colt' (12:15). At the trial, Pilate questions Jesus about his kingship and presents Jesus to the crowd with the declaration, 'Behold your king!' (19:14). These references blend with
allusions to Jesus’ glorification and exaltation, preparing the reader to grasp the portrayal of Jesus’ crucifixion as the first step in his enthronement.

2.3 Jesus as king of ‘the Jews’

The inscription does not just declare Jesus ‘king.’ It declares that he is ‘The King of the Jews,’ bringing the theme of the Jews’ opposition to Jesus to a climax at the cross. The prologue tells us that the Logos came to ‘his own, and his own did not receive him’ (1:11). From chapter 5 on, the opposition of the Ioudaioi—who frequently appear to be the religious authorities—grows. In their desire to kill Jesus, they attempt to arrest him, they take up stones against him, and eventually convene the Sanhedrin to plot against him. Jesus’ first conversation with Pilate revolves around the issue of his identity as king of the Jews. Pilate asks, ‘Are you the king of the Jews?’ (18:33). Jesus, characteristically, does not give a direct response but turns the question back on Pilate. Pilate retorts in derision, ‘Am I a Jew?’ (18:35), and Jesus declares that his kingdom is not of this world (18:36).

When Pilate writes that Jesus is indeed ‘The King of the Jews,’ he announces Jesus’ vindication. The Jews of the Gospel may reject Jesus’ sovereignty, and declare that they have no king but Caesar (19:15), but they cannot depose their king. Ironically, even as they force Pilate to heed their calls to crucify Jesus, Pilate certifies Jesus’ sovereignty over them.

2.4 Jesus’ relation to ‘the world’

What is the significance of having the inscription written in three languages? Interpreters have generally noted that the three languages—Hebrew, Latin, and Greek—represent the three cultures meeting in Judea: Hebrew, the language of the Scriptures; Latin, the language of the Empire; and Greek, the language of Hellenistic culture—the languages of religion, the state, and culture. Historical critics have wondered whether soldiers about the business of execution would have had either the learning or the inclination to take the time to write the charge in three languages. The significance of this detail, which is unique to John, lies instead in its relationship to John’s interpretation of Jesus’ death.

In the third of the lifting up sayings (12:32) Jesus declares that if he is lifted up he will draw all people to himself. Now, at his crucifixion, his true Messianic identity is proclaimed to all in the three languages of the area. The parallel with the Pentecost experience in Acts may be noted—each heard in his own language. Jesus is the King of the Jews, but his death is significant for all people. It is the means by which he draws all persons to himself.
This raises the question of whether by his death Jesus triumphs over ‘the world’ that is opposed to him. In fact, a 'Christus victor' theme is present in John, even if it is only indirectly evoked here. The verse preceding the lifting up saying in John 12:32 says, ‘Now is the judgment of this world. Now the ruler of this world will be cast out’ (12:31; cf 14:30; 16:11). The exaltation of Jesus, the declaration of his kingship, and the writing of the inscription in three languages demonstrate, therefore, that through his death Jesus vanquishes ‘the ruler of this world’ and establishes a new sovereignty. All people should now acknowledge him as their king. The natural implication of the coronation of a new king is that the new lordship creates a new community, and we shall see this depicted in later scenes.

2.5 The inscription as Pilate's final word regarding Jesus

The character of Pilate is also developed in more detail in John than in any of the other gospels. In the artfully constructed trial in seven scenes, Pilate moves back and forth between Jesus inside and the Jewish authorities outside, who with great irony will not enter the Praetorium lest they be rendered unclean—even as they demand the death of an innocent man. Pilate asks Jesus if he is the king of the Jews, pronounces him innocent three times, scourges him, offers to release a prisoner, and questions Jesus about his authority. Is Pilate a strong figure who controls the entire proceedings, or a weak figure who is vulnerable to both Jesus and the Jews? I think the latter—a weak figure. Arguments for a strong Pilate based on Josephus' references to Pilate or intrinsic historical probability should carry no more weight when interpreting John's characterisation of Pilate than arguments regarding the historical Jesus or the historical John when we interpret John's characterisation of Jesus or the Beloved Disciple. Pilate's weakness is evident in that the Jews force Pilate to come out to them, and although he pronounces Jesus innocent three times, in the end Pilate hands him over.

As in other dialogues in the Gospel, Jesus' singular concern is with Pilate's response to him: 'Do you say this of your own accord, or because others said this to you concerning me?' (18:34). Pilate responds to what he hears from others. The authorities demand that Jesus should die because by claiming to be the Son of God he has committed blasphemy according to their law. In an intriguing reference in John 19:8, the narrator reports that when Pilate heard this word he was the more afraid. Typically, the verse is ambiguous. Is Pilate the more afraid because he realises that the authorities will be satisfied with nothing less than Jesus' death, or is he the more afraid because after questioning Jesus he fears that Jesus' claims may be true? He would therefore be executing not merely an innocent man but the Son of God!
Like others in the Gospel, especially the Samaritan woman and the blind man, Pilate seems to come step by step to make at least a partial confession. In 19:5 Pilate says to the crowd, ‘Behold, the man.’ After Pilate hears in verse 8 that Jesus claimed to be the Son of God, he asks Jesus the vital Johannine question of his origin: ‘Where are you from?’ (v 9). Pilate’s final declaration, which may or may not be laced with sarcasm, is ‘Behold your king!’ (v 14). At a minimum, John conscripts Pilate’s tongue to make a true confession. On the other hand, we may just as easily infer that Pilate, having declared Jesus innocent, suspects that Jesus’ claims are true and voices his true verdict in the written decree, ‘Jesus, the Nazorean, the King of the Jews.’

John’s report of the inscription affixed to the cross proves to be rich in overtones that interpret Jesus’ death in the Johannine context. The inscription declares Jesus’ coronation as king, his messianic identity as king of the Jews, his defeat of ‘the ruler of this world,’ and the fulfillment of his promise to draw all people to himself. John has taken an element from the tradition and filled it with new meaning.

3 THE SEAMLESS TUNIC (vv 23-24)

The casting of lots is another traditional element of the crucifixion scene that is reported in all three of the synoptic gospels (Mark 15:24 par.). John places this scene after the report of the inscription, and expands it from the six to twelve words given to the dividing of the garments in the synoptics to 67 words.

3.1 The quotation

In this expanded scene, John reports that the soldiers divided Jesus’ garments into four parts, one for each soldier. Because Jesus’ tunic was seamless, the soldiers cast lots for the tunic rather than for all his garments. John’s story of the garments thereby more precisely fulfills Psalm 22:19, which John quotes in its Septuagintal form (Ps 21:19 LXX) following a formula of fulfillment. The separation of the tunic from the rest of Jesus’ garments, and the note that it was seamless and that the soldiers did not want to rend it into pieces, invites the interpreter to probe more deeply into the significance of the seamless tunic in the Johannine context.

3.2 The tunic is seamless, woven ‘from above’

One of the first clues the reader is given is that the tunic was woven from the top (ἐκ τῶν ἁρωμένων, v 23). The word ἁρωμένων appears in three other contexts in
John. Nicodemus is told that he must be born ἑννωθεὶν, which he mistakenly takes to be a reference to another physical birth, whereas Jesus is challenging him to a new birth from above, a birth of the Spirit (3:3, 7). Shortly later, Jesus or the Johannine narrator affirms that ‘the one who has come from above is above all’ (3:31), and restates that same affirmation at the end of the verse saying, ‘the one who has come from heaven is above all.’ In Jesus’ conversation with Pilate, he rebuffs the Procurator’s warning by responding that Pilate has no authority except that which is given to him ‘from above’ (19:11). Commentators have noted the double entendre here: Pilate’s authority was given to him by the Roman emperor, but in a further sense he can send Jesus to his death only because it is given to him by God to do so. The further twist here is that Jesus and the Father are one (10:30), and Jesus lays down his life in John (10:18). Pilate could not have sentenced Jesus to die had not Jesus in his obedience to the Father already resolved to lay down his life for ‘his own.’

Now, at the cross, these significant words, ἐκ τῶν ἑννωθεὶν, occur again in the narrator’s description of the seamless tunic. It was created in this way, woven from the top through the whole garment. John often uses references to physical details in dramatic ways. The Samaritan woman left her jar at the well (4:28), the loaves used to feed the multitude were made of barley (6:9), when Judas went out it was night (13:30), when the disciples looked into the empty tomb they saw the grave wrappings lying there (20:6–7), and later we will be told that even after the great catch of fish the net was untorn (21:11), and the fire on the shore was a charcoal fire, just like the fire in the courtyard when Peter denied Jesus (18:18; 21:9). The seamless design of the tunic that Jesus leaves behind is ‘from above.’ It may not be too much of a stretch, therefore, to say that what is happening at the cross is all a part of the tapestry of God’s redemptive design.

3.3 The tunic is untorn

That the tunic is all of one piece, and that the soldiers decide not to rend it (μὴ σχίσωμεν αὐτὸν), suggests that the seamless tunic is related to John’s repeated emphasis on the unity of the church. Jesus declared that there would be one flock, one shepherd (10:16), and that when he was lifted up he would gather all people to himself (12:32). The Johannine narrator takes up the theme in 11:52, commenting that Jesus was about to die in order that he might gather into one the children of God who had been scattered. Jesus and the Father are one (10:30), and Jesus prayed that his disciples might be one, just as he and the Father were one (17:11, 21, 22, 23). As we have noted, the net containing the great catch of fish, which may be symbolic of the evangelistic mission of the church, is also untorn (οὐκ ἐσχίσοθη).
Metaphorically, through the description of the seamless tunic, John ties the death of Jesus to the theme of unity. When he draws all people to himself, he draws them into one body, one community. The unity of the church, therefore, is grounded in God's design. What God weaves, God weaves whole, from above. The unity of the church is based in its common origin, at the cross. Ultimately, however, John insists that the unity of believers is rooted in Jesus' oneness with the Father, so that just as Jesus was one with the Father, 'his own' will find their unity through their unity with him. There is but one vine, one net, one flock, one shepherd, one Son, one seamless tunic woven from the top.

Again, John has taken a traditional element of the crucifixion scene and developed it in his own way so that in the larger context of the Gospel it takes on added meaning and serves to interpret further the significance of Jesus' death on the cross.

4 JESUS' MOTHER AND THE BELOVED DISCIPLE (vv 25-27)

Each of the other gospels names women who stood by as Jesus hung on the cross. In the other gospels, the presence of the women as witnesses to Jesus' death is recognised after his death is reported. John moves the scene forward and is the only gospel to record Jesus' exchange with his mother and the Beloved Disciple. John, of course, is also the only gospel to record the presence of any of the disciples at the cross. Among the women at the cross, Matthew and Mark name 'Mary, the mother of James and Joseph,' but John is the only one who records her presence as Jesus' mother. John seems to list four women at the cross: Jesus' mother, her sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene.

4.1 A symbolic scene

Jesus sees his mother and the Beloved Disciple, and says to his mother, 'Woman, behold your son,' and to the Beloved Disciple, 'Behold, your mother,' and the narrator reports that 'from that hour' the disciple took her to his home. Through the centuries interpreters have suspected that this scene has a symbolic significance, a suspicion that is supported in part by the observation that neither Jesus' mother nor the Beloved Disciple are named. It has been suggested that the mother and the Beloved Disciple represent a new Adam and Eve, Israel and the Church, or Jewish Christianity and Gentile Christianity.

I believe that the symbolic significance of the scene is to be sought not in symbolic meanings that are anachronistic or extraneous to the Gospel, but in symbolism that is tied to themes developed in the Gospel itself. As is often
noted, the mother of Jesus appears only once elsewhere in the Gospel, at the wedding at Cana. The scene is in some respects the Johannine counterpart to the synoptic scene in which Jesus asks who are his mother and his brothers (Mark 3:32–35; Luke 8:19–21). Jesus’ sharp response to his mother is not to be glossed over in a misguided effort to rescue Jesus’ civility. By his response he distances himself from his mother. Henceforth, flesh and blood relationships will be secondary to those that are born of the spirit and sustained by faith. He tells Nicodemus in the next chapter that he must be born from above, of water and the Spirit. That which is flesh is flesh, and that which is Spirit is Spirit (3:3–8). Jesus’ flesh and blood brothers appear only once in the Gospel, at the beginning of chapter seven, and there the narrator reports that his brothers did not believe in him (7:5). Worse still, the world is not able to hate them, as it hates him (7:7). Jesus’ flesh and blood relationships are completely transcended as he fulfills the work the Father has given him to do.

4.2 The Beloved Disciple

The Beloved Disciple is introduced in John 13:23 with a simple but transparently significant characterisation. He is the disciple whom Jesus loved, and he reclined on the breast of Jesus (ἐν τῷ κόπα πι’)—just as Jesus, the only son of the Father is introduced at the end of the prologue as being ‘in the bosom of the Father’ (1:18). The Beloved Disciple appears at all the key moments of the central events of the Gospel: He is on the breast of Jesus at his last meal, he gets Peter into the courtyard during Jesus’ trial, he stands by Jesus’ mother at the foot of the cross, he runs with Peter to the empty tomb and is the first to believe in the resurrection when he sees the grave wrappings lying there, and he is the first to recognise the risen Lord at the Sea of Galilee. In the closing verses of the Gospel, the risen Lord says that the Beloved Disciple will bear a true witness, and the final editor says that the Beloved Disciple is the one who has written these things and that ‘we’ (the Johannine community) know that his testimony is true. The Beloved Disciple, I believe, functions as the representative of the Johannine community; he is their founder and their apostolic authority.

4.3 Jesus’ mother

The symbolic associations of Jesus’ mother in this scene are more difficult to determine. In both scenes in which Jesus’ mother appears, he calls her ‘woman.’ In the farewell discourse, as a part of Jesus’ interpretation of his departure, Jesus appeals to the image of the woman in travail, who when her hour comes brings forth a child and no longer remembers the travail (16:21). In Luke’s gospel Mary is told that a sword will pierce her heart (2:35). In this
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gospel Jesus' mother receives a son at the cross. A more distant, but not implausible connection may be made with the image of the woman clad with the sun in Revelation 12:1-2, who brings forth a male child who is caught up to heaven, but the beast continues to persecute the woman and 'the rest of her offspring who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus' (Rv 12:17).

4.4 Performative language

Now, at the cross, when Jesus' hour has come, Jesus employs a revelatory formula 'Behold' and performative language. Like a marriage declaration, his pronouncement actually accomplishes or effects the new relationship that it declares. By his declaration, Jesus constitutes a new family, mother and son.

4.5 The 'children of God'

From the beginning, the Gospel of John has employed the metaphor of kinship to characterise the believer's new relationship to God. Those who respond to the revelation in Jesus—those who are called, drawn, and chosen by the Father and believe in Jesus' name—are empowered to become 'children of God' (1:12). Moreover, the narrator has explained that Jesus did not die for the nation only, but to gather together all the scattered children of God (11:52).

4.6 The formation of a new family

The formation of this new family at the cross provides a nucleus for the community of believers. The Johannine community looked to the Beloved Disciple as their eyewitness, their link with Jesus. Inevitably, the community would have identified with the Beloved Disciple in this scene. Their new status began at the cross.

The new status of Jesus' followers is again signaled in the resurrection appearances that follow. Jesus tells Mary Magdalene to go and tell his 'brothers,' 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, my God and your God' (20:17), and Mary went and told his disciples that she had seen the Lord and that he had said these things. The implication is clear. The disciples have now become his brothers. The new family has been constituted.

Once again, John has taken a traditional element of the passion narrative (the women at the cross) and developed it in his own way, adding the presence of the Beloved Disciple and Jesus' words to his mother and the Beloved Disciple. The constitution of the new community in this scene is Jesus' final act before the narrator reports that Jesus knew that 'all things had...
been completed' (19:28). What Jesus accomplished on the cross is characterised in this pivotal scene as the constitution of a new community of ‘his own.’ The redemptive significance of the cross in John is therefore not merely individual but corporate. More than an underlying theory of atonement, John has an underlying ecclesiology of the cross.

5 JESUS’ LAST WORDS: ‘I THIRST’ AND ‘IT IS FINISHED’ (vv 28–30)

Each of the synoptic gospels relates the offering of wine to Jesus. In Matthew and Mark it follows Jesus’ cry of dereliction. In Luke it is a part of the mockery of Jesus. In John the offering of vinegar wine is also connected with Jesus’ words, but here more naturally since Jesus says that he is thirsty. Characteristically, John takes up this element of the tradition and uses it in the service of his theology. John alone among the gospels explicitly states that the offering of the vinegar wine fulfilled the scriptures, but in contrast to the statements of fulfillment in verse 24 and verses 36 and 37 the scripture reference is not quoted.

5.1 The emphasis on fulfillment

The reader may notice first the repeated emphasis on fulfillment in these verses. The narrator reports that Jesus knew that all things were now completed. The participle ολοκληρωμένος occurs in two other contexts earlier in John. In 13:1 the narrator reports that ‘Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world to the Father,’ and in the garden the narrator reports that Jesus ‘knowing all that was to befall him,’ stepped forward to address his opponents (18:4).

5.2 The completion of Jesus’ mission

Here, having constituted the new family of ‘his own,’ and knowing that he has accomplished all that he was to do, Jesus says he thirsts. The narrator comments that Jesus said he was thirsty in order to fulfill the scriptures. The term used here is unusual; it is the same root as that in the first part of verse 28 and in Jesus’ last word in verse 30, ‘It is finished.’ Raymond Brown (1994.2:1070) observes that ‘John wants to be massively insistent on how Jesus dies only after he has terminated what he came to do.’ The prologue states that Jesus came to make known the Father (1:18), and John the Baptist points Jesus out to his disciples as ‘The lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world’ (1:29, 36). The narrator reports that Jesus gave authority to those who believed in him to become ‘children of God’ (1:12), and Jesus said
that he had come that his sheep might have life and that they might have it abundantly (10:10), and that he came in order to bear witness to the truth (18:37). Throughout his ministry Jesus moves only in response to his own sense of time. No one takes his life from him. In fulfillment of John 10:18, Jesus lays down his life—but only after he has completed the work the Father had given him to do. In the Gospel of John, therefore, Jesus’ death marks the completion of his mission to make known the Father, take away the sin of the world, bear witness to the truth, and give life abundantly to ‘his own.’

5.3 Jesus’ thirst

It is generally agreed that the most likely candidates for the scripture passage in view are Psalms 69:21 or 22:15; both are cited elsewhere in the passion narratives. Psalm 69 specifically mentions thirst and opponents giving the just one vinegar to drink. Because the scriptural reference is not quoted, however, it seems doubtful that the significance of Jesus’ thirst is to be found primarily in the nuances of the earlier text (cf Brawley 1993:427-43; Culpepper 1996:199-205). Instead, we must once again look for the meaning of Jesus’ thirst within the Gospel itself.

The connection of τελευώνη with Jesus’ work and with thirst recalls the earlier references to thirst (and hunger) in the Gospel, especially John 4 and John 7:37–39. Scripture plays an important role in both passages. The Samaritan woman recalls ‘our father Jacob,’ who dug the well to satisfy their thirst; John 7:38–39 refers to another obscure passage in scripture and forecasts the giving of the Spirit at the glorification of Jesus. Whether or not one reads John 19:28–29 as an echo of Psalm 69:21, any reader who misses the connection in John 19:28–29 with references to thirst earlier in the Gospel will miss much of the figurative, metaphorical, and ironic sense of John’s account of Jesus’ death. In John food and drink are for Jesus symbolic of a higher reality. Similarly, when Peter attempted to prevent the arrest of Jesus, Jesus responded, ‘Shall I not drink the cup which the Father has given me?’ (18:11). Now that he has completed all that he was to do, Jesus is thirsty. He is ready to drink the last swallow from the cup given to him. Only in John does Jesus actually drink the sour wine that is offered to him, and in doing so he symbolically drinks the cup of suffering as he dies. When Jesus says, ‘I thirst,’ therefore, he not only points to the fulfillment of scripture and the fulfillment of his offer of living water to those who would come to him; he also figuratively announces his own death.
5.4 The fulfillment of scripture

In several other references to the fulfillment of scripture in John, the precursor text is also left undefined (see John 2:22; 7:42; 17:12; 20:9). In each of these verses, as in John 19:28, there is an explicit reference to scripture or to the fulfillment of scripture, but the reference is not quoted. In most of these cases modern interpreters have suggested that the Gospel may have more than one text in view. In both form and effect these references differ significantly from the references to the fulfillment of scripture in which a specific text is quoted. In John 19:28-29 various elements of scripture are fulfilled: the righteous one thirsts, sour wine is given, hyssop is used, and Jesus gives up the Spirit.

5.5 The hyssop

The reference to hyssop, of course, signals a fulfillment of the Exodus motif in the Gospel of John. The narrator tells the reader at the beginning that whereas the law came through Moses, ‘grace and truth have come through Jesus’ (1:17). Jesus was announced to the disciples as ‘the one of whom Moses and the prophets had written (1:45). Jesus’ ‘lifting up’ would be like Moses’ lifting up of the bronze serpent in the wilderness (3:14). Moses does not condemn Jesus, but bears witness to him (5:45-46). Like Moses, Jesus feeds the multitude in the wilderness and crosses the sea, demonstrating that he himself is the true bread of life, that has come down from above. The motif of Jesus’ fulfillment of the role of Moses or the promised ‘prophet like Moses’ (Dt 18:15, 18) culminates at the cross. Jesus also dies at the hour of the slaughter of the Passover lambs; fulfilling the rule for the slaughter of the Passover lambs, his legs are not broken; and he drinks from the hyssop that is offered to him as he dies.

5.6 The irony of Jesus’ thirst

The ironies evident in this scene call for comment (cf Moore 1993:207-27; idem 1994:43-64; Witkamp 1996:489-510). The contradictions could hardly be more ironic or more powerful: the giver of living water thirsts, a lack completes, giving is malevolent, and drinking aggravates thirst. Similarly, there is a reference to the fulfillment of scripture, but the verse is not quoted. The scripture is not present but absent in its fulfillment.

Contrary to recent interpretations proposed by Werner Kelber and Stephen Moore, when Jesus says he thirsts, the reader does not imagine that the one who offered living water will not be able to provide it. On the contrary, one grasps the fundamental irony of the passion narrative: that life comes only by death, that Jesus can give living water to others only if he
himself thirsts (i.e., only if he completes his mission). The narrative context suggests fulfillment rather than frustration of Jesus’ offer of living water: (1) at his death Jesus announces the completion of his work (‘It is finished’); (2) he gives up his spirit, and the ambiguity or double entendre suggests that more is being said than simply that he died; and (3) when his side is pierced, water and blood flow from him (resonating with John 7:37-39). Beaten, bleeding, and exhausted, Jesus was unable to meet his most basic needs. By suffering this final thirst, Jesus releases the living water that will become a spring welling up to eternal life (4:14). The poet Ben Jonson’s line, ‘the thirst that from the soul doth rise doth ask a drink divine’ (*The Forest*, ix: *To Celia*), describes Jesus’ thirst as well as the thirst of those who seek living water from him.

### 5.7 Handing over the Spirit

The narrator’s report that Jesus bowed his head and ‘handed over the spirit’ (19:30) resonates with the narrator’s comment in John 7:39 that the Spirit had not yet been given because Jesus had not yet been glorified. In the farewell discourse Jesus promised his disciples that it was better for them that he depart because when he departed he would send the Paraclete to be with them (16:7). The reader has already been prepared, therefore, to understand that at the death of Jesus the Spirit would come from Jesus and the Father to guide the community of disciples after Jesus’ death. The evangelist is subtly reminding the reader of this promise by the way he narrates the death of Jesus.

Without belaboring the point, we may once again note that the Gospel of John has taken up traditional elements of the passion narrative—Jesus’ last words, the giving of vinegary wine, and the death of Jesus—and used them to fulfill significant themes that have been developed earlier in the Gospel. And once again the death of Jesus has been interpreted with emphasis on what it means for the community of believers: By his death Jesus completes the work that the Father has given him to do; he has loved his own to the end (cf 13:1); he fulfills the scriptures, especially the thirst of the just one as he dies and the use of hyssop at the Exodus; he provides living water; and he hands over the promised Holy Spirit as he dies. John’s theology of the cross, therefore, is artfully developed in the narrative mode of the Gospel. By reading John’s account of the death of Jesus, one is able to grasp its significance afresh and to appropriate subjectively what it accomplished historically.

### 6 THE ECCLESIOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF JESUS’ DEATH

Throughout this running commentary on John’s account of Jesus’ death, I have been suggesting that John repeatedly develops elements of the tradition
in ways that expose the significance of Jesus’ death. At the introduction of each of these four scenes at the cross, we have noted that John has taken up an element from the tradition and developed it in his own distinctive way. Moreover, each of these scenes has significance for the formation of the Church. We may now gather up the ecclesiological motifs that we have noted along the way.

By developing these particular traditional elements, John has repeatedly highlighted the significance of Jesus’ death for the Church. The inscription proclaimed the coronation of Jesus as ‘The King of the Jews.’ The three languages in which the inscription was written signal the universality of Jesus’ lordship. Lifted up, he will draw all people to himself. His death fulfills scripture. More specifically, the design for Jesus’ redemptive mission, like that of the seamless tunic, was woven from above. It is God’s design. The fact that the tunic is not torn reflects God’s intent that the community of believers should be one.

In some respects, John’s theology of the cross has an affinity with later ‘Christus Victor’ theologies. Paradoxically, through his death Jesus triumphs over the power of evil, he is exalted as king, he completes his revelatory and redemptive work, and he establishes the new community. Here we may pause to underscore the radicality of the Johannine vision for the new community. The work of the gospel knows no national boundaries, and ultimately it confronts the same challenges everywhere. Language has always marked cultural identity, whether Greek, Latin, and Hebrew; English, Spanish, or the recently dubbed Ebionics; English and Afrikaans, or the various other languages and accents that signal our cultural heritage. John’s account of Jesus’ death speaks in the same context of three languages and one seamless, untorn tunic. A new community is constituted at the cross by Jesus’ death. It is a new family, mother and Beloved Disciple, and it is empowered by the promised Holy Spirit. The Church is to be a community that is marked by unity, love, and the Spirit, a community with a new sovereign, a crucified king. The crucified Messiah thirsts, and by his thirst he identifies with all those who thirst. Through his death he gives life. In this way, John’s interpretation of the tradition highlights elements that have ecclesiological significance, and this reinterpretation of the tradition reflects a fundamental theological insight: The Church is founded not just on the resurrection of Jesus—it has its origin at the cross. What happened at the cross, therefore, shapes for all time the nature and design of the Church.

In this paper I have sought to show that the fourth evangelist picks up significant elements from the tradition, that he develops these in the passion narrative as an integral and indeed climactic part of the whole Gospel, and that when we read these scenes within the context of the Gospel narrative we
see that John does indeed have a coherent theology of the cross, and more specifically an ecclesiology of the cross that projects a challenging design for the Church. I would offer, therefore, the following five conclusions:

1. For all its differences from the other gospels, John drew from a tradition of Jesus' death that included many of the same elements we find in the synoptic gospels. At no point in these verses, however, does it appear that John drew directly from the synoptic gospels.

2. The fourth evangelist selected and developed certain elements from the tradition in his own way and for his own purposes. John's handling of the tradition and the development of these four scenes around Johannine themes illustrates how John has constructed a narrative interpretation of the death of Jesus. The narrative now functions as both a metaphor for the meaning of Jesus' death and as the mode for drawing John's readers into that metaphor.

3. The distinctive emphases of the Johannine passion narrative stand in clear relief when we trace the development of the Johannine themes that climax in the passion narrative. Contrary to Käsemann's assertion, John's account of Jesus' death does indeed 'fit organically into his work' (1968:7)

4. John's narrative of Jesus' death highlights its significance for the Church, tracing the origin of the new community to the cross: a new kinship transcending differences in language, under the sovereignty of Jesus, undivided by schism, and sustained by 'living water' and the Spirit is constituted here.

5. John's account of Jesus' death reflects an important theological insight: that the Church has its origin at the cross (not just at the empty tomb), and therefore what happened at the cross reveals God's design for the Church and should forever define the mission and life of the Church.

In conclusion, it may not be out of place to note in passing that there can be no substitute for confessing scholars who interpret the biblical texts in the context of the Church and for the Church. The function of the biblical text is to preserve and continually repristinate the foundational stories of God's redemptive acts in history, the gospel of Jesus Christ, and the founding vision of the Church. The calling of biblical interpreters is to probe the nuances of the text and read its stories perceptively in our ever-changing contexts. The calling of the Church is to be faithful to the biblical stories, preaching their good news, and challenging the community to represent ever more fully God's redemptive purposes in our midst. So, let us encourage one another in this task.
WORKS CONSULTED


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