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Feed My Sheep: The Pastoral and Ecclesial Conclusion to John's Gospel¹

Mark A. Matson

The twenty-first chapter of the Gospel of John has been, and remains, controversial. For perhaps the majority of scholars, chapter 21 is seen as an appendix—either a secondary addition by the author or, more likely for most scholars, a later addition by a subsequent editor.² As an appendix, it is often treated with implicit quotation marks, suggesting also a secondary importance of its contents. But there is an increasing willingness to consider the unity of the entire gospel, and thus an openness to explore the role that chapter 21 plays in the larger proclamation of the “good news” of the fourth gospel. In this paper, I propose that chapter 21—in particular, Jesus’s “feed my sheep” exchange with Peter (21.15–19)—is integrally connected to a number of Johannine themes, especially those developed in the Farewell Discourse section of chapters 13–17. With the dialogue in chapter 21, the evangelist emphasizes a crucial part of Jesus’s ministry that is introduced but left somewhat hanging at the conclusion of the Farewell Discourse, namely, the formation of a durable community of believers—the church.

John 21 as Epilogue: The Integrity of the Gospel

The difficulty with considering John 21 as an addition to the gospel is that, aside from the problem of a subsequent narrative following the “closing statement” in 20.30–31, there is no clear textual evidence for a

1. For those of us who claim the church as the very living “body of Christ,” questions about how the church aligns with Scripture are critical. Much depends on the vital leadership exhibited by ministers of the Word, elders, and deacons. Perhaps no other single expression of Jesus better captures the need for vital leadership than the command given to Simon Peter in John 21: “Feed my sheep.” Here the role of pastor/elder and minister of the Word are combined with grace and urgency. Paul Watson, along with Kay, has in my experience lived out this command on behalf of his Lord. He has, effectively and sensitively, fed the sheep in his care: as preacher, as elder, as spiritual mentor, as professor, and especially as friend. It is with the deepest respect, and indeed with both *philia* and *agape*, that this essay on John 21 is offered for those who might feed the sheep in the church of Christ like Paul has.

2. Almost all commentaries address this in one form or another. Here let me note at least some major voices in the discussion. Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971) still has a major influence on Johannine interpretation. Bultmann argued for a variety of sources and levels of editing, attributing the final chapter to a later church redactor not connected to the evangelist. Although somewhat dated, Raymond Brown remains a major voice in Johannine studies. In his Anchor Bible commentary, *The Gospel According to John*, 2 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1970), as well as his book *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1979), Brown argued for a later formation of the gospel within a community. For Brown, chapter 21 is to be attributed to a redactor, but one well connected with Johannine thought. Michael Labahn, “Peter’s Rehabilitation (John 21:15–19) and the Adoption of Sinners: Remembering Jesus and Relecturing John,” in *John, Jesus, and History*, vol. 2, ed. Paul Anderson, Felix Just, S.J., and Tom Thatcher (Atlanta: SBL, 2009) argues that chapter 21 is definitely later and secondary but represents what he calls a “relecture,” a rereading of John 1–20, with themes developed based on those chapters. On the other hand, Craig Keener, *The Gospel of John* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003) sees chapter 21 as part of the original Gospel of John. Continuing the trend of some recent work, Andrew T. Lincoln, in a new version of the Black’s commentary series, *The Gospel According to St. John* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005), also sees chapter 21 as part of the original gospel.

distinction between chapter 21 and the rest of the gospel. Put in more positive terms, all ancient documents of the gospel include chapter 21, and analyses of vocabulary and style have consistently shown that chapter 21 is remarkably “Johannine.” Those who believe that the chapter is a later addition are thus left speculating about possible ways this “secondary” material might have come to be part of the gospel. Suggestions have ranged from Rudolf Bultmann’s proposal that chapter 21 was added by the final “ecclesiastical” redactor of the gospel to bring it in line with later church ideology, to Raymond Brown’s opinion that it was added at a late period in the community’s life by the same editor as the gospel narrative, and even to proposals that leftover traditions of a “Johannine community” were accumulated and attached to the gospel subsequent to its initial publication.

Stylistic analysis of the gospel presents a significant argument against the secondary nature of chapter 21. The research of Eugen Ruckstuhl and Eduard Schweizer showed a fairly consistent style in all segments of the gospel, including chapter 21.³ In addition, the chapter’s vocabulary is predominantly Johannine. There are, to be sure, a number of words in the fish-catch narrative (21.1–14) that are not found elsewhere in John, but most of these can be attributed simply to the distinctive subject matter of the narrative. Yet even in this story, there are signs of “standard” Johannine vocabulary usage: Thomas is referenced and called “the twin”; Nathanael is linked to Cana; the Sea of Galilee is called the Sea of Tiberius. If John 21 is a later addition, it has been thoroughly crafted to align with the larger gospel.

Not only is the style of John 21 similar to that of chapters 1–20, but there are significant thematic links between the accounts in chapter 21 and the rest of the gospel:

Portrayal of the disciples. The roles of Peter and “the disciple whom Jesus loved” in chapter 21 cohere with their depiction in the rest of the gospel. In the narratives of both the footwashing (13.1–25) and the empty tomb (20.1–10), Peter characteristically reacts with impulsive action while the beloved disciple shows insight and faith. A similar portrayal is offered in 21.7–8.

Narrative continuity. The appearance of Jesus to the disciples at the Sea of Tiberius seems deliberately calibrated with the previous appearances in chapter 20. Chapter 21 begins with a clear narrative device linking it to the previous chapter: “*After these things* Jesus showed himself *again* to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias” (21.1; italics added).⁴ “After these things” is a very common Johannine way of opening a transition from one unit to another, often with a geographical shift; moreover, the reference to Jesus’s appearance to the disciples “again” is clearly a nod to the previous appearances in chapter 20 (20.19–23, 26–29). Then, at the conclusion of the fish-catch story, the narrator in chapter 21 reports: “This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead” (21.14). This again seems to refer to the two appearances to the disciples in John 20. Such a pattern of enumeration is a further mark of John’s style.

Literary parallels. The dialogue with Peter in 21.15–19 is frequently seen as a “restoration” of Peter following his denial of Jesus in chapter 18, especially given the series of literary links to the denial prediction in chapter 13. In the fourth gospel uniquely, the prediction of Peter’s denial follows Jesus’s statement that he is going where the disciples cannot come (13.33) and his giving of a “new” commandment to love one another (13.34). In response to Jesus’s statement, Peter inquires, “LORD, where are you going?” and Jesus’s reply is directed, it would seem, to Peter alone: “Where I am going, you cannot follow me now; but you (singular) will follow afterward” (13.36). Peter asks, “LORD, why can I not follow you now?” and boldly asserts that he will lay down his life for Jesus (13.37). Jesus then predicts Peter’s threefold denial (13.38). The “feed my sheep” exchange in John 21 parallels this story. Jesus not only repeats his question, “Do you love me?” three times (a link to the threefold denial) but also predicts that Peter will indeed lay down his life

3. Eugen Ruckstuhl, *Die literarische Einheit des Johannesevangeliums; der gegenwärtige Stand der einschlägigen Forschungen* (Freiburg/Schweiz: Paulusverlag, 1951) and Eduard Schweizer, *Ego eimi: Die religions geschichtliche herkunft und ologische bedeutung der johanneischen bildreden, zugleich ein beitrag zur quellenfrage des vierten Evangeliums* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1939).

4. I use the NRSV throughout, except in specific places where I note that I rely on my own translation.

similarly to Jesus and commands Peter, “Follow me.” Moreover, since Jesus’s questions in 21.15–19 involve the issue of love, and his prediction of Peter’s denial in chapter 13 is issued immediately following the love command, there exists a pattern of significant intertextual echoes.⁵

John 21 as Ecclesial Emphasis

If John 21 is an essential part of the gospel, why is it there? I propose that the chapter is ecclesial in nature—even though the word for *church* itself is not found in the gospel—and thus adds a sense of finality and concreteness to a theme introduced earlier in John. To be more specific, I suggest that there develops in the gospel, especially in the Farewell Discourse (13.31–17.26), a very intentional view toward the time after Jesus’s physical life. The future perspective remains somewhat general, however, and lacks a specific focus in terms of leadership or cohesiveness. The narrative in chapter 21 is meant to provide that focus and thus “complete” this vital theme in the gospel.

We see a future orientation in a number of elements in the Farewell Discourse.

A new commandment: Love one another. It is hard to isolate specifically where in the fourth gospel the footwashing episode ends and the Farewell Discourse begins. But perhaps the introduction of the “new commandment” (13.31–35) marks the beginning of what is a more discursive section in the gospel. The love command is woven in various ways through the rest of the Farewell Discourse. This recurring motif, “Love one another,” implies an ecclesial context (as, for instance, can be seen in its use in 1 John 3.11–18). It is worth noting also that Jesus connects his new relationship to the disciples as “friends” (*philous*, John 15.13–15), a relationship that will be echoed in Jesus’s dialogue with Peter in John 21.15–19.

The coming helper: The Paraclete. In a number of sections of the Farewell Discourse, the future coming of the Paraclete (often translated “Advocate” or “Counselor”) is emphasized. The discourse links the sending of the Paraclete, also identified as the Holy Spirit (14.26; 15.26), to the disciples’ “keeping his commandments” (14.15–16), which seems to imply the love command. The roles of the Paraclete point to Jesus’s physical absence and so also a future “ecclesial” time. The Paraclete will bring to the disciples’ memory Jesus’s sayings (14.26); bear witness to Jesus (15.26); convict the world regarding sin and justice (16.8–11); and guide the community of believers into “all truth,” including speaking prophetically regarding the future (16.13).

Abiding in Jesus. Certainly, one of the striking metaphors in the Farewell Discourse is that of the vine and the branches (15.1–11). At the core of this metaphor is the exhortation for the disciples to “abide” in Jesus. Jesus is the vine and the disciples are the branches. The branches have no life except as they are connected to (or abide in) the vine. This metaphor is, interestingly, set in the present tense, as the repeated *ego eimi* phrases make clear. And yet it is also evident that the real perspective is toward the future need to stay connected. The repeated conditional sentences, cast in the subjunctive, speak to the future orientation: “If one should not abide in me, he will be thrown away like a branch and wither; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned” (15.6; my translation). The emphasis on “abiding” points to a connectivity among a community of believers and coheres with the love command noted above.

The unity of believers. The strong relationship between the connectivity found in the love command and “abiding” is continued in the final prayer of Jesus in chapter 17. Jesus’s prayer for unity among believers is linked to a deeper unity between Jesus and God: “That they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us” (17.21). Unity among believers is a sign and token of a deeper unity between God and Jesus; Jesus in essence “abides” in God, and so also the disciples are to “abide” in Jesus—so living in unity. In this prayer, Jesus’s absence is first broached, and the need for unity is linked to Jesus’s coming departure (17.11). That the prayer for unity also extends to those who will follow in the future is made clear in 17.20–22, in the reference to “those who will believe in me through their word,” thus pointing to an ongoing ecclesial structure.

5. The “feed my sheep” dialogue in John 21 is also closely linked, I will argue later, to implicit ecclesial themes in the gospel, notably in the Farewell Discourse (John 13–17) and in the Good Shepherd parable (John 10). These provide further evidence of extensive linkages between John 21 and the rest of the gospel.

The Farewell Discourse and the church. Jesus’s “going away” (cf. 14.1–4) is clearly the underlying theme of the Farewell Discourse, and fully interwoven with it is a concern, and preparation, for believers to continue as a body after his death and resurrection. The intertwining elements of loving one another, the role of the Paraclete, abiding in Jesus, and the need for unity all suggest a common concern for the future community of believers. And yet the discourse contains no explicit mention of the church, or of any specific mechanism that might allow the church to function as a social body. The provision of that mechanism—namely, a leader who will shepherd and guide the community—awaits John 21.

John 21 as an Application of John 10

Jesus’s dialogue with Peter in 21.15–19 provides a striking “final” conclusion to the gospel. But more to the point, it provides some specific definition to the church, which has heretofore only been implied, especially in the Farewell Discourse. This exchange draws on a number of themes already broached in the gospel, and by its interplay with these themes provides a strong impetus for the formation of church leadership. What seems to be needed is a mechanism for the ongoing functioning of the church—a social structure to help guide the future community of believers. If Peter’s anticipated redemption serves as a window into such leadership, then Jesus provides this leadership model using a chastened Peter to embody his own pattern of pastoral care.

Certain aspects of Peter’s leadership potential have already emerged in the gospel. He was, after all, the disciple who declared in chapter 6 that, despite Jesus’s “difficult” words of “eat my flesh and drink my blood” (6.53–60), the twelve would still follow him as “the Holy One of God” (6.68–69). He was bold enough to remonstrate with Jesus at the footwashing (13.6–9), and even strongly argued that he would certainly follow Jesus to death (Jesus’s immediate prediction to the contrary notwithstanding; 13.37–38). And Peter’s leadership among the disciples is apparent in the fish story; they followed him to the Sea of Tiberias (21.3). It is natural, given this, that Jesus should focus on Peter in his final discourse.

In 21.15–19, Jesus asks Peter a simple question three times. Each time, Peter responds with an affirmative answer, and Jesus then gives Peter a simple command. The repetition, with minor variations, has a compelling force: by the third time the question is posed and the answer given, the reader is certain that this is crucially important. Indeed, the final, culminating prediction of Peter’s fate points to its significance in anticipating Peter’s own resolve and dedication.

The question posed by Jesus is, “Simon, do you love me?” In the first two instances of the question, the word used for love is *agapaō*, the verb Jesus uses most frequently to refer to his act of love for God and his disciples. In the third instance of the question, Jesus employs the verb *phileō* instead. Peter, by contrast, responds to Jesus all three times with the verb *phileō*. So the pattern is as follows:

<i>Jesus</i>	<i>Peter</i>
Simon son of John, do you <i>agapaō</i> me?	Yes, Lord; you know that I <i>phileō</i> you.
Simon son of John, do you <i>agapaō</i> me?	Yes, Lord; you know that I <i>phileō</i> you.
Simon son of John, do you <i>phileō</i> me?	Lord, you know everything; you know that I <i>phileō</i> you.

The variation in wording is not as striking as has often been asserted. The terms *agapaō* and *phileō* often overlap in John’s usage and meaning, so a notable difference in *lexical* meaning (e.g., from “divine love” to simply “brotherly love”) is probably not intended.⁶ Indeed, John’s use of the two words shows that he can slide between meanings easily; for instance, the term “beloved disciple” uses both *agapaō* and *phileō* (19.26 and 20.2). Moreover, Jesus noted that great love is shown by a man’s laying down his life for his friends (*philoī*), and refers to those who keep his commandments as his friends (*philoī*). Such friends are called to go and bear much fruit. And yet the repetition of terms in this exchange, with Jesus and Peter agreeing in the final instance, does suggest some *rhetorical* emphasis.

6. A thoughtful recent discussion of this is found in David Shepherd, “‘Do You Love Me?’ A Narrative-Critical Reappraisal of *agapaō* and *phileō* in John 21:15–17,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 129 (2010): 777–92.

The threefold repetition certainly brings to mind Peter's threefold denial of Jesus, which was predicted by Jesus immediately following his first proclamation of the love commandment (13.34–38) and then subsequently narrated in detail (18.15–27). Thus, the threefold question, eliciting Peter's threefold affirmative response, offers a restoration of Peter in a pattern parallel to his denial.

Significantly, Jesus's restoration of Peter highlights what this "love" involves. For the reader of the gospel, Jesus's repeated questions recall the repeated references to love in the Farewell Discourse: Jesus's own love for the disciples, stated more than once (e.g., 13.1; 15.9), along with the command to love one another, which Jesus often links to his own love for them (e.g., 13.34). Jesus's threefold question to Peter, then, brings to the fore again with great force the emphasis Jesus has placed on the disciples' own need to love one another as a participation in Jesus's love for them.

Jesus follows up each of Peter's affirmative responses with a command: "Feed my sheep" or "Tend my sheep." Here again, the command is threefold, and as with the question about love, there is variation of language among the statements. Nonetheless, all still carry the same basic meaning. Peter is exhorted, variously, to feed (*boske*, #1 and #3) and to tend (*poimane*, #2) the sheep. And the sheep are, variously, lambs (*arnia*, #1) and sheep (*probata*, #2 and #3).

In using the image of the shepherd, Jesus evokes the one parable unit in the fourth gospel—the parable of the Good Shepherd in John 10.⁷ In John 10, Jesus develops an image of sheep in a sheepfold endangered by thieves and robbers. In contrast to those who would do damage to the sheep—that is, the thief and robber (10.1) or the stranger (10.5)—the shepherd enters by the door of the sheepfold, and the sheep respond to him as a protector. Jesus compares himself to this "good shepherd": he leads them out to find pasture and protects them against the dangers of "the wolf" (10.11–15). The good shepherd, Jesus declares, will even lay down his life for the sheep. The shepherd parable itself evokes a number of prophetic passages that utilize images of the shepherd as leader (Ezek 34; Zech 11; Jer 23). In these prophecies, the concern is that shepherds/leaders fulfill their function appropriately: to feed and protect the sheep, and not to take advantage of them. So in John 10, the emphasis seems to be that Jesus (as contrasted with other leaders) is that good shepherd who has concern for the flock, the people under his care.

By evoking the Good Shepherd parable in Jesus's restoration of Peter, the gospel connects the important features of the shepherd (and Jesus himself) to Peter as a leader in the new community of believers. The use of shepherd imagery implies that Peter is to assume the same role with the "flock" of believers that Jesus played in the parable. He is to feed them and protect them; he may even have to lay down his life for them (cf. 10.11). This cost of pastoral care is indeed the focus of the final words of Jesus to Peter. Like Jesus, Peter will suffer a death that is to glorify God (21.18–19), similar to Jesus's own death. What seems clear here is that Jesus is calling Peter to step into Jesus's role with respect to the "flock" of believers: to lead them, to feed them, and at some point to die for them. And Peter's duty completes Jesus's prediction in the Farewell Discourse: "Simon Peter said to him, 'LORD, where are you going?' Jesus answered, 'Where I am going, you cannot follow me now; but you (singular) will follow afterward'" (13.36). Jesus's command in the "feed my sheep" exchange, "Follow me," harks back to his prediction that Peter would indeed follow him.

But while Peter's role is at the forefront (underlined by the links to previous situations in the gospel), the portrayal does not seem to be only about Peter. Rather, the narrative also serves as an example for church leadership generally. The strong interplay with Jesus's parable in chapter 10 and its own reliance on stock Old Testament images of the shepherd suggest that what is indicated here is a type, a general example. Peter, then, also illustrates a type, that of an exemplary disciple, not the head of an apostolic office within the church.⁸

Jesus's singling out of Peter should not be seen as an essential distinction or priority over the other disciples. There has been significant misinterpretation of the meaning of the first question put to Peter, "Do

7. John calls this unit a *paroimian*, which is a proverb or figure of speech. But this extended metaphor (which shifts its focus) is essentially the same as parables in the Synoptic tradition used to make a comparison to Jesus or the kingdom.

8. Here I agree with R. Alan Culpepper, "Peter as Exemplary Disciple in John 21:15–19," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 37 (2010): 165–78.

you love me *more than these* (italics added)?” Often, the phrase “more than these” is taken to be referring to the other disciples as an alternate subject, that is, “Do you love me more than these [other disciples love me]?” But no emphasis is placed on Peter here; no emphatic *you* is added to the question, and the comparison “more than these” is never extended to the subsequent questions.⁹ The focus is entirely on devotion to Jesus, and Peter responds only to this central issue: “You know that I love you.” In the context of chapter 21, it is most likely that the phrase “more than these” refers not to another subject but to an object—“more than these [things]”—to Peter’s other life avocations: to fishing, to friends and family, to Galilee. Peter serves as an example to all who would give up much to lead the church.

What I have argued, then, is that the variety of intertextual links to both the Farewell Discourse and the Good Shepherd parable in this closing exchange are particularly meaningful for John’s overall narrative. They suggest that the “feed my sheep” exchange in John 21 is the culmination of that central theme in John’s narrative that looks beyond Jesus’s death, and beyond simply coming to believe in Jesus. It points to the formation of a church, and to the need for pastoral leadership. This pastoral leadership is one based on love, on self-sacrifice, and on putting the needs of the sheep above those of the shepherd.

John 20.30–31 and John 21.24–35: Two Endings?

Why does John wait for an epilogue to engage these important matters of pastoral leadership? The question is even more acute given that so much of the Farewell Discourse is oriented toward that community of believers following Jesus’s departure. I suggest that John considers it a subsidiary issue, subordinate to the larger compelling need to encourage belief in Jesus.

The greatest emphasis of the gospel has been proving that Jesus is indeed God’s Son, and that life comes from him and through believing in him. That is, the gospel is fundamentally evangelistic. It is this larger narrative program that was anticipated in the prologue: “But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God” (1.12). This central motif reaches its culmination in the first “conclusion” of John (20.30–31): “. . . But these [signs] 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.” The gospel at its core is evangelistic, and a strong evangelistic conclusion serves this central purpose.

Yet, as we have seen in the discussion of both the Farewell Discourse and the epilogue of chapter 21, there is an important collateral theme of preparation for believers in Jesus’s absence. The treatment of that theme, which is so dominant in the Farewell Discourse, is left somewhat dangling until the epilogue. Chapter 21, then, is crucial in order to complete the forward-looking part of the gospel story. That is, belief in Jesus calls forth a life of love for one another. It is a life in community—a community in need of pastoral leadership patterned on Jesus.

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9. Ilaria Ramelli, “‘Simon Son of John, Do You Love Me?’ Some Reflections on John 21:15,” *Novum Testamentum* 50 (2008): 332–50.