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Jeanene Reese
jreese@acu.edu

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John 21 as Epilogue: An End and Beginning

JEANENE REESE

The question of the place and purpose of John 21 in relation to the rest of the Gospel has been a topic of discussion for many years. Those who favor it as a later addition (whether by the same author, an *amanuensis*, or by a completely different hand) cite the stylistic differences found in the narrative and the anticlimactic nature of the writing that follows the conclusion of 20.30-31. I believe that the stylistic changes are not as significant as some have suggested.¹ On the other hand, the anticlimactic nature of chapter 21 is not so easily dismissed. Carson notes that the scholars who support chapter 20 as the conclusion of the Fourth Gospel see it not just as suitable but as *triumphant*. “Jesus has risen, he has appeared, his ascension has been dealt with, the Spirit he promised has been bequeathed and his great commission solemnly uttered. What more is there to say? Everything else is necessarily anticlimactic.”² Reading chapter 20 in this way seems to naturally lead to a dismissal of the contributions of chapter 21; others, of course, see it differently.

Kenner suggests that while 20.30-31 forms an excellent conclusion for the Gospel, the ecclesial focus of chapter 21 is a useful supplement for the church that exists after the completion of the Gospel. He also notes that the repetition of 20.30-31 with 21.24-25 could actually be an *inclusio* that “constitutes the mark of original literary composition as easily as one of redaction (cf. 1.1, 18; 20.28; Matt 5.3, 10; Luke 15.24, 32).”³ Carson makes an even stronger case for the significance of John 21 as part of the Fourth Gospel.⁴ He notes that there is no evidence that the Gospel ever circulated without all twenty-one chapters. He further suggests that even if the last chapter were added, whether at the time of composition or at some later point, it would most likely have been by the same Evangelist and must have been because that person thought it a necessary improvement.⁵

For the purposes of this paper, John 21 will be considered as an integral part of the Fourth Gospel and will be treated as an epilogue, a term favored by numerous scholars. Brown, for example, suggests “[h]aving an epilogue at the end of the Gospel gives balance to the presence of a prologue at the beginning.”⁶ Additionally, there are two highly compelling reasons for considering chapter 21 a significant part of the Gospel of John. First is the evocative nature of human life portrayed in the incidents found in the chapter:

It speaks of the most basic elements of life—going to work, companionship, fishing, dark emptiness, hunger, dawn, a stranger, surprise, the sharing of insight, the plunge into the sea, the boat journey towards welcome land, morning on the shore, the sight of fire and food,

1. Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, vol. II (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003) 1219.
2. D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991) 666.
3. Keener, 1220.
4. Carson, 667.
5. *Ibid.*, 667-8.
6. Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John (xiii-xxi): Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, The Anchor Bible Commentary (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970) 1079.

someone waiting, the domesticity of breakfast (no need to dress up), the rich silence; then the talk, breaking through shades of past failures to speak of life—of love, work, sadness, youth, old age and death. And finally, surprisingly, the sight of someone following and the recollection of someone resting in love. At the end, the failure of talk (the breakdown of language and grammar) and the need, with a vision of love in mind, to keep on.⁷

Second, certain themes found in the Fourth Gospel that culminate in the epilogue present a challenge to Christians across the ages.

POSSIBILITIES IN THE PRESENCE OF JESUS

The opening scene of the final chapter of the Fourth Gospel signifies that Jesus will again show himself to the disciples. Verse 14 indicates that this meeting marks the third appearance—the other two are described in 20.19-24, 26-29. Seven disciples are identified as part of the group: Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathaniel of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others (21.2). That this company is gathered in Galilee instead of Jerusalem is not particularly unusual in the context of the Fourth Gospel: Since Jesus had warned them that they would be scattered to their own homes (16.32), the Beloved Disciple had already taken Jesus' mother into his home (19.27), and the Beloved Disciple and Peter return to their homes after seeing the empty tomb (20.10). Also, Nathaniel is identified as being from Cana in Galilee (21.2), while Peter was identified as a Galilean in 1.44 (for Thomas and the sons of Zebedee, cf. Mark 1.19; 3.17-18).⁸

Simon Peter, a fisherman by trade, initiated the activity, and the others simply followed. Many have debated the reasons for going fishing. Were they abandoning their role as disciples and returning to their former lives? Were they bored with the inactivity of recent days and looking for something to do? Did they need to supply themselves and perhaps others with food to eat? Whatever the reason, none of them had any cause to expect that the day would be anything but ordinary and at first it seems that it was—they fished all night and caught nothing. Michaels acknowledges that “The Gospel of John does not preserve the tradition found, for example, in Mark 1.16-20 that Jesus called several of his disciples from the occupation of fishing to the task of being ‘fishers of men’ (Mark 1.17). Yet the resurrection appearance described in verses 1-14 builds on that very tradition.”⁹ He further suggests that the element of fishing serves in two ways: as a literal description of an event and as a metaphor for the Gospel narrator.¹⁰

Returning early in the morning from their night of fruitless efforts, the disciples see a stranger on the shore. The stranger addresses them as children, asking about their catch, and when they tell him they have caught nothing, he instructs them to cast the net on the right side of the boat. When they do as instructed, their nets are so full that they cannot bring them to shore. Immediately, the Beloved Disciple recognizes Jesus and turns to Peter stating simply, “It is the Lord!” Just as the Beloved Disciple had entered the tomb and believed (20.8), he now sees the risen Lord and proclaims his presence—he acts in keeping with his nature. Peter in turn upon hearing that it is the Lord, puts on his clothing since he was naked and jumps into the sea. He, too, acts in keeping with his character. Peter's actions also reflect images from a previous encounter with Jesus in chapter 13. On that occasion, Jesus took off his outer garments and wrapped himself in a towel and then proceeded to wash the disciples' feet. When he approached Peter, the disciple refused to have the Lord wash his feet. Jesus responded, “Unless I wash you, you have no share with me” (13.8). Peter in turn said, “Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!” Jesus reminded Peter that he had already bathed and then instructed his disciples on how they were to wash the feet of others. In chapter 21,

7. Thomas L. Brodie, *The Gospel According to John* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) 581.

8. J. Ramsey Michaels, *John, New International Commentary*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1989) 353.

9. *Ibid.*, 352.

10. *Ibid.*

Peter's actions reflect not only his desire to see Jesus on the shore, but also symbolize his need for the restoration of their relationship, which will take place very soon.

Two final considerations must be made about the fishing incident in John 21. Many have speculated first about the meaning of the 153 large fish, and second about the significance of the unbroken nets.¹¹ More than a few individuals have suggested that the large catch symbolizes the considerable reach of the Gospel or, more specifically, its universality. And the unbroken nets stand in stark contrast to the tearing of the nets (Luke 5.6) when Jesus first called his disciples and told them he would make them "fishers of men." The unbroken nets in the epilogue of John represent both the unity of the believers and the power of the risen Lord. The fishing story, therefore, may very well indicate that not only has Jesus given his disciples work to do but he ensures that they can do it—just as stated in 15.5 in the discourse on the vine and the branches, "apart from me you can do nothing." This verse and this story teach again that great possibilities exist in the presence of Jesus.

PROVISION FOR THE DISCIPLES' BASIC NEEDS

Overlapping with the fishing scene in the epilogue is the offering of a meal on the beach. Upon arrival the disciples, those on the boat and Peter who swam, saw a "charcoal fire" (v. 9) that must have brought back painful memories, at least for Peter. Although Jesus is cooking breakfast for them, a sign of care and concern, the fire is reminiscent of Peter's first and second denials. Both of these took place while he warmed himself by a "charcoal fire" in the high priest's courtyard (18.18, 25). Even though Peter's relationship with Jesus will soon be restored and the meal itself may represent an offering of renewed fellowship with the disciples present, there is still an obvious tentativeness, perhaps even shyness in relationship to the Lord. "Now none of the disciples dared ask him, 'Who are you?' because they knew it was the Lord" (21.12b). How could they know with certainty something (or someone) they were afraid to ask about? The dilemma presented here is representative of those faced by Christians on numerous occasions then and now.

The meal on the beach is also significant as it continues earlier themes introduced in the Fourth Gospel. Spencer notes several connections that can be made with the events found in John 21.1-14 with the Feeding of the Five Thousand in 6.1-71.¹² First, both instances take place by the Sea of Tiberias. Second, the narrator uses *elkuō* to indicate how the disciples bring in their large catch (v. 6, 11), a word also used by Jesus in chapter 6.44 (cf. also 12.32) to describe how the Father draws people to believe in the Son. Third, boats are mentioned in the Gospel only in chapters 6 and 21. Fourth, the description of Jesus handing out the bread and fish in both episodes is nearly synonymous (6.11 and 21.13). Yet the ultimate points of both stories are twofold: the providential care of God and the subsequent call to discipleship.

In the first feeding story, Jesus tests the disciples by asking them how they will feed the multitude even though he knows what he will do (6.5-7). On the seashore, Jesus is already cooking fish and has provided bread, but he also encourages them to bring some of the fish they have caught. Peter goes aboard the boat and brings in the large haul of fish. Jesus then invites them to "Come and have breakfast." In both instances he makes provision for their physical hunger and yet there is also something more. In chapter 6, it becomes apparent that Jesus is challenging them to a higher calling, that of believing in him and not just being concerned for their stomachs (6.25-40, 46-59, 60-67). He reveals himself as the "bread of life" (6.35) and makes it clear that following him means that they will "eat his flesh and drink his blood" (6.51-59). The discourse concludes: "So Jesus asked the twelve, 'Do you also wish to go away?' Simon Peter answered him, 'Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.'" (6.68-69). Peter is the spokesperson in this case for the twelve that Jesus addressed. In

11. For an excellent treatment of the possibilities of how the number 153 can be interpreted, see George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 36 (Waco: Word Books, 1987) 403-4.

12. Patrick E. Spencer, "Narrative Echoes in John 21: Intertextual Interpretation and Intratextual Connection," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 75 (1999) 59-60.

chapter 21, Jesus will first feed the disciples on the beach, have the infamous conversation with Peter that restores their relationship, and in the process instruct him to “feed my sheep” (21.15, 17b).

Two final considerations must be made about the meal in chapter 21. The first is the recognition that although Jesus’ prepares the food and invites them to eat, eating itself is not mentioned in the story. This observation is reminiscent of the interchange between Jesus and his disciples in John 4. In that context, Jesus has been in conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well and when she leaves, the disciples encourage him to eat. He replies, “I have food to eat that you do not know about” (4.31). The disciples wonder if someone else had brought him food but Jesus replies, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work” (4.34). In the larger context of chapter 21, echoes of this theme are present: The disciples have been called to do the work of Christ and are in the process of doing just that as they bring in the large catch of fish and recognize him as the risen Lord. They are in the process of becoming partakers of the food that fed Jesus, doing the will of God and completing his work.

Finally, we must ask whether the meal on the beach should be viewed as Eucharistic in any sense. Although some scholars think the meal has Eucharistic overtones,¹³ most seem to think the emphasis is more on table fellowship as practiced in the early church than on the institution of the Lord’s Supper. Michaels’ observation that in the Feeding of the Five Thousand, the bread is prominent while the fish is incidental and that in the meal on the beach the fish are prominent while the bread is secondary is especially useful for this discussion, since it shows the intended focus of both meals.¹⁴ Also, even though Jesus introduced the drinking of his blood in chapter 6, he did not do it in relation to wine as he did in the three Synoptics when he celebrated the Passover with his disciples and gave the feast new meaning (cf. Mark 14.12-25, Luke 22.7-24, Matt. 26.17-29). Rather, as Michaels suggests, “The third appearance of the risen Jesus... brings the disciples from being scattered to their homes in Galilee into full involvement in the mission to which they were called, and so back into table fellowship with Jesus and each other.”¹⁵ What Jesus has done in this meal is not only to provide a simple meal for his disciples but also to use it as a means of reconciliation—he has provided for their most basic of needs.

CONFRONTATION, RESTORATION, COMMISSIONING AND PROPHECY

The transitional phrase found in verse 15, “when they had finished breakfast” links the events of 21.15-25 with those of verses 1-14, and underscores the fact that they are both part of the same appearance of Jesus to the disciples. Verses 14-19 focus on Peter, a prominent character since the beginning of the Fourth Gospel (1.40-42; 6.66-71; 13.6-10; 24, 36-38; 18.10-11, 15-27; 20.3-10), and verses 20-24 focus on the Beloved Disciple first introduced at the farewell meal (13.21-27; 19.26-27; 20.3-10). This section concludes the stories of these two disciples by both describing the course their lives take after Jesus’ glorification and allowing them to stand as examples of Jesus’ ongoing work in the community.

Jesus’ first question to Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” has many important nuances. First, addressing Peter as the son of John—something he does with each subsequent question as well—underscores Jesus’ initial call to discipleship (1.42) and must have made Peter and the others aware of the significance of this conversation. Peter is being restored to his relationship as a full follower of Jesus. Also in this context, Jesus reminds those present that he is indeed the good shepherd who knows the names of his sheep (10.3). Second, the initial question that Jesus asks has at least three different possible references: Jesus could be asking 1) whether Peter loves him more than he loves his companions, the other disciples; 2) whether Peter loves him more than he loves his occupation and all that accompanies it—the sea, the boat, and nets; or 3) whether or not Peter has a greater love for Jesus than anyone else present. In terms of discipleship, all three possibilities are relevant since followers of Jesus are asked to give up everything to

13. Brown, 1099-1100.

14. Michaels, 355.

15. *Ibid.*, 356.

follow him (cf. Luke 14.26-33). But in the immediate context the latter reference seems most probable since it echoes Peter's conduct at the farewell meal, when he questions where Jesus is going and assures the Lord that he will go with him even to the point of death (13.36-38). This statement is a possible illusion that as a disciple, Peter does believe he has the greatest love for his master. Understood in this way, the question also triggers a memory for Peter of Jesus' prediction that the disciple will deny him three times (13.38).

Much has been made of the language used in the interchange between Jesus and Peter. "Respectively there are two different verbs for 'to love,' for 'to know,' and for 'to feed or tend,' and two or three different nouns for sheep."¹⁶ Most interpreters today place the variation of terms as part of the Evangelists' common use of synonyms throughout the Gospel.¹⁷ The threefold repetition of Jesus' question, however, is significant and serves a means of reinstating Peter after his three denials (cf. 13.38, 18.15-8, 25-27). With the third question Peter is deeply "grieved," a strong term the writer uses in 16.20 to speak of the disciples' sorrow over Jesus' death. In each of his responses, Peter affirms his love for Jesus but Jesus in turn "demands a love that is demonstrated by obedience (14.15), which Peter's recent behavior failed to demonstrate."¹⁸ Also worth noting, is the fact that in each of his responses, Peter appeals to Jesus knowledge of all things, a

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"distinctly Johannine theme" (v. 17b, cf. also, 1.48; 2.24; 6.6, 64; 13.1; 18.4, 28).¹⁹ In each instance, Jesus instructs Peter to feed or tend to his sheep. Some have tried to make this passage parallel to Jesus' dialogue with Peter in Matthew 16, thus giving some type of preeminence to Peter as Jesus' distinctive successor. But O'Day rightly argues that the passage must be interpreted in light of Jesus' commandments in the Farewell Discourse and not with any other scripture. "When Jesus translates Peter's

love for him into the charge 'feed my sheep,' he is reminding Peter of his words in 13.34-35; 'Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.'²⁰ In this case Peter is allowed to embody what is to be true of all of Jesus' disciples; he is a model of what it means to live out love for Jesus. Peter is called to love and care for the sheep just as Jesus would.

Jesus then acknowledges that Peter will fulfill his declaration of laying his life down for the Lord (13.37), also a quality of the good shepherd (10.11). The expression "Very truly I tell you" (21.18a) marks a transition in the text from Jesus' confrontation, restoration and commissioning of Peter to predictions about his discipleship and life. Peter was free to dress himself and go wherever he desired in his youth but when he is old "he will stretch out his hands" and others will fasten a belt around him and lead him about. Verse 19 clearly indicates these words were interpreted as a prediction of Peter's martyrdom. O'Day notes that this wording "is identical to the commentary on the manner of Jesus' death at 12.33 and 18.32. The link between Peter's death and Jesus' death is made even more explicit by the phrase 'by which he would glorify God.' Jesus glorified God through his death (7.39; 12.16; 13.31-32; 14.13; 17.1-5), and now Peter will share in that work."²¹ But again, Peter is not allowed an exalted position above others, but rather one that is fully surrendered to Jesus, just as all disciples should be, as indicated in Jesus' simple command, "Follow me" (21.19).

16. Brown, 1102.

17. Gail R. O'Day, *The Gospel of John, The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, Vol. 9 (Nashville: Abingdon: 1995) 860.

18. Keener, 1235.

19. O'Day, 861.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

Typical of Peter, the disciple seemed to need more than what he is given. As he turned and looked at the disciple whom Jesus loved, two things happened. First, the disciple's identity is made clear—he is the one who leaned on Jesus' breast at the farewell meal and asked about the betrayer. Second, Peter inquired about this disciple's fate, and Jesus responded a bit abruptly, "If it is my will that he remains until I come, what is that to you? Follow me" (21.22). The Gospel writer then addresses the fact that rumors arose that the Beloved Disciple would not die before Jesus returned and then corrects this notion. What becomes evident in this interchange is that Jesus is intent that his disciples follow him whatever their circumstances are. Carson notes,

There is not belittling of either disciple. One of them may be called to strategic pastoral ministry (v. 15-17) and a martyr's crown (v. 18-19), and the other a long life (v. 22) and to strategic historical-theological witness, in written form (v. 24). It is this that ties v. 24 so closely to the preceding verses. And if the beloved disciples' commission is not cast in terms as explicit as those of Peter, it is the historical record that constrains the Evangelist: at this point Peter needed a fresh commission, since that was part of his restoration, while the beloved disciple did not.²²

The Gospel closes with the testimony that all that has been written is true, and that Jesus did even more than was recorded—in fact the world could not contain the books that would tell all about this wonderful Savior.

IMPACT OF THE LESSONS FOUND IN THE EPILOGUE

Viewing John 21 as an epilogue, and thus a completion of the Gospel narrative, allows the author not only to tie up "loose ends" for Christians late in the first century, but also to underscore important themes from the Fourth Gospel that are invaluable to believers today. The third appearance story goes well beyond simply presenting Jesus as the Risen One – it reminds his disciples that he has given them a mission and that he will assist them in carrying it out. Although it is a story about fishing, it is considerably more. The Gospel is for everyone, as represented by the many fish, and our working with the Lord and each other will allow others to be brought into his presence, as shown by the large catch in unbroken nets. We need to hear again that all ministry is done in the presence of the Risen Lord and only by his power.

The preparation of the meal on the beach draws together images found throughout the Fourth Gospel: Jesus provides for the needs of those around him. As always, he is concerned for the physical needs of his followers, and he meets them. But here he calls them again into fellowship with him and each other in a simple meal that has profound implications. Although he has appeared to them twice before, nothing has been said or done about the rift in their relationship (although they did not deny him as Peter had, they did desert him as he faced death). Their hesitance in talking to him shows that they are just beginning to understand who he is and what has happened, but they dare not ask for more. Jesus' act of feeding them is intended to restore relationship—eating together is an act of generosity and hospitality—and reminds them that he makes every provision for their needs. On the beach he takes care of their physical hunger as well as their need for spiritual intimacy with him. We need to trust that Jesus will do the same for us and that we can, in turn, do the same for others. Providing for physical food is important; making certain that others have spiritual intimacy with Jesus is imperative.

The conversation between Peter and Jesus reminds us of the painful nature of reconciliation. Undoubtedly, Peter intended to follow Jesus faithfully, even to death, as he claimed at the farewell dinner. The idea of denying his Lord was not only repugnant to this disciple but unimaginable. Yet Peter's failure, his threefold denial, is characteristic of his nature and reminds us all that we too are capable of failure, denial and sin. The question is not whether we will fail but how we will return again to the Lord, receive his forgiveness, and find our way back to meaningful ministry. Jesus is the Good Shepherd, and he uniquely knows

22. Carson, 681.

and loves his sheep. Yet as he restored Peter, and gave him charge of his sheep, he also reminded him that he was part of Christ's flock. Likewise, we who serve the Lord today engage in ministry that does not belong to us. It is his. We too are followers of Jesus, trusting in his compassion and care. Whatever we do, whether we are martyred like Peter or serve as a witness like the Beloved Disciple, we follow Jesus whatever the cost.

JEANENE REESE IS AN ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF MINISTRY AT ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY.

