

# PROVERBIAL SAYINGS IN ST. JOHN'S GOSPEL

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For some time now, scholars have been in virtually unanimous agreement that the Gospel of John once ended at 20:31 and that the entire twenty-first chapter of John represents an epilogue to the original work. Indeed John 20:30–31 has such a concluding character that one would not expect the Johannine narrative to continue beyond the twentieth chapter except for the fact that there is a twenty-first chapter not only in our modern translations of the New Testament but also in the ancient Greek manuscripts and the ancient versions. In fact, there is no external textual evidence whatsoever that the Gospel of John ever circulated without the presence of John 21.<sup>(1)</sup>

Nonetheless the text of the Fourth Gospel that circulated within the church, at least from the beginning of the second century, and the text that was received as the canonical text by various orthodox Christian churches at the end of the fourth century<sup>(2)</sup> is a text which has had a rather complicated history. Conclusions that do not really conclude<sup>(3)</sup> are but one of the puzzling features of the Gospel of John as it is presently constituted. There are others and they are many. A quick comparison of John 16:5 with John 13:36 reveals but one of the many inconsistencies<sup>(4)</sup> encountered by the discerning reader of the Fourth Gospel.

During the course of this century scholars have advanced a variety of theories<sup>(5)</sup> in an attempt to place these inconsistencies within a meaningful

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1. That is to say that, so far as the manuscript evidence is concerned, the Gospel of John began to circulate only after chapter twenty-one had been appended to it.

2. See further "The Formation of the New Testament" in my *Introduction to the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1983) pp. 1–40, esp. pp. 31–32.

3. See not only John 20:30–31 but also 14:31.

4. See also John 7:8, 10.

5. For an overview of the matter, see Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John I–XII*. Anchor Bible, 29 (Garden City: Doubleday, 1966) pp. xxv–xxxiv.

frame of reference. Some scholars have suggested that the author of the Fourth Gospel made use of various documentary sources which have been only imperfectly incorporated into the present text.<sup>(6)</sup> Others have considered that the present text of the Fourth Gospel results from a re-ordering of the original Johannine schema.<sup>(7)</sup> Still others have held that the extant twenty-one chapter work is the product of a long history, in which we must consider various stages in the oral tradition and successive redactions of the written text.<sup>(8)</sup> All three of these approaches towards an explanation of the inconsistencies in the Fourth Gospel are to be found in recent monographs and the best of the recent commentaries on the Gospel.

Increasingly, however, scholars are of the mind that the Fourth Gospel was produced within a "school"<sup>(9)</sup> and that the text of the Gospel was re-edited at different moments in response to various situations within the Johannine community.<sup>(10)</sup> The break of the Johannine Jewish Christians from the synagogue would have been a major event in the life of the community<sup>(11)</sup> while the Christological debate within the community itself would represent another significant situation in its history. Detailed analysis of this history would take us far beyond the thrust of the present essay, but it is necessary for us to recall that the Johannine community was a community very much alive at the time that the collection of Johannine writings was composed, that this dynamic community lived through certain pressures from without and certain tensions from within, that the community's theology developed<sup>(12)</sup> because of these pressures and tensions,

6. The classic proponent of this approach is Rudolf Bultmann who identified a signs source, a revelation discourse source, and an underlying passion narrative. See R. Bultmann, *The Gospel of John. A Commentary* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971), the original German text of which appeared in 1940. The history of the possible use of a signs source by the evangelist has been chronicled by Howard M. Teeple in *The Literary Origin of the Gospel of John* (Evanston: Religion and Ethics Institute, 1964) and Gilbert van Belle in *De Semeia-Bron in het Vierde Evangelie. Onstaan en groei van een Hypothese* (Louvain: University Press, 1975).

7. See Bultmann's *The Gospel of John*, the order of which is laid out according to Bultmann's theorizing in this regard.

8. Among the recent major commentaries on John this approach has been adopted by Raymond E. Brown in *The Gospel According to John I-XII; XIII-XXI*. Anchor Bible 29, 29A (Garden City: Doubleday, 1966, 1970) and Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John*, Vol. 1, *Introduction and Commentary on Chapters 1-4* (New York: Seabury, 1980); Vol. 2, *Commentary on Chapters 5-12* (New York: Seabury, 1980); Vol. 3, *Commentary on Chapters 13-21* (New York: Crossroad, 1982). In the German original the volumes were respectively published in 1965, 1971, and 1975.

9. See R. Alan Culpepper, *The Johannine School. An Evaluation of the Johannine-School Hypothesis Based on an Investigation of the Nature of Ancient Schools*. Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series, 26 (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1975).

10. See especially Raymond E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York-Ramsey: Paulist, 1979) and J. Louis Martyn, *The Gospel of John in Christian History. Essays for Interpreters* (New York-Ramsey: Paulist, 1978).

11. In addition to the works cited in note 10, see also J.L. Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (2nd. rev. ed.: Nashville: Abingdon, 1979).

12. Perhaps it may be more correct to say that it occasionally jumped forward in quantum-like leaps.

and that the pressures and tensions, along with the responsorial theology which they evoked, are reflected in the community's literature. The present, somewhat confused state of the Gospel of John, reflects the development, under pressure, of the Johannine community. The Fourth Gospel was amended as the community which produced it evolved.

An examination of John 21 reveals that the entire chapter focuses on Simon Peter but that the figure of him which emerges from John 21 is somewhat different from the Simon Peter discovered by the reader of John 1 – 20. This difference of characterization is but one of the many inconsistencies that exist between John 21 and the rest of the Gospel of John.<sup>(13)</sup> One could also note that the phrase with which the chapter begins, "After this" (*meta tauta*), is a classic example of a loose connective;<sup>(14)</sup> but it hardly fits after the definite conclusion found in John 20:30 – 31. Moreover, verses 1 and 14 frame John 21:1 – 14 in such a manner that one must consider the miraculous catch of fish and the breakfast by the sea to constitute but a single story in the present Johannine account.<sup>(15)</sup> Verse 14 indicates that the narrative describes the third manifestation of the Risen Lord to his disciples, in apparent oblivion of Jesus' appearance to Mary Magdalen.<sup>(16)</sup> In addition to these various inconsistencies, there is the salient fact that the Gospel has been brought to a clear and classic conclusion in 20:30 – 31 and that the story has been reopened as chapter twenty-one begins.

In sum, the internal evidence offered by an examination of John 21 coalesces with contemporary theories about the history of the Johannine community, to lead virtually all scholars to the conclusion that John 21 represents a rather late addition to the written Gospel of John. Thematically it focuses not only on Peter but also on a number of ecclesiastical issues, especially Jesus' presence at a meal.<sup>(17)</sup> These foci suggest that John 21 was added to an earlier edition of the Gospel in order to address issues bearing upon the relationship between the Johannine community and other Christian churches. In this way John 21 functions as a reflective postscript to the body of the Gospel.<sup>(18)</sup>

John's Gospel stands out among the four canonical Gospels because it has an epilogue and a prologue which were appended to the written Gospel at a relatively late stage in its literary history. It may well be and indeed it is

13. For an overview of some of these differences, see Ernst Haenchen, *John 2. Hermeneia* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) p. 229.

14. In John it is found at 3:22; 5:1, 14; 6:1; 7:1; 19:38; and 21:1; see also the use of *meta touto* in John 2:12; 16:7, 11; 19:28.

15. The narrative framework is a classic example of *inclusio* (ring construction).

16. John 20:1, 11 – 18.

17. See R. Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John*, Vol. 3, p. 409 and PHEME PERKINS, *Resurrection: New Testament Witness and Contemporary Reflection* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1984) p. 180.

18. A clear indication that John 21 serves as a reflection on the body of the Gospel is the fact that the triple scrutiny and triple commission of Peter (John 21:15 – 17) is linked to the triple denial of Peter (John 18:17, 25, 27).

likely that John 21 was added to the Gospel at the same time as the prologue (John 1:1 – 18). Nonetheless there is a marked difference between the function and style of the prologue and the function and style of the epilogue.

Functionally, the prologue puts the Johannine Gospel and its Christ, the central focus of the Gospel narrative, in the broadest possible perspective. It serves as a broad commentary on the Gospel, enabling the reader to focus attention sharply upon the central concerns of the written work.<sup>(19)</sup>

Stylistically, the prologue consists of an interweaving of poetic and narrative elements. Its language is clearly different from the language of the Gospel itself.<sup>(20)</sup> The stylistic and linguistic differences between the prologue and the body of the Gospel have led many commentators – perhaps the majority<sup>(21)</sup> – to opine that the prologue is a reworking of an earlier *Vorlage* which was probably composed outside the Johannine community.

Functionally, the epilogue is a reflection on the traditions of the other Christian churches<sup>(22)</sup> from the perspective of the Johannine community. Stylistically, the dialogue technique and the characterization of the disciples reflects that of the body of the Gospel. Linguistically, even though there are several Johannine *hapax legomena* in the chapter,<sup>(23)</sup> John 21 echoes the vocabulary of the main part of the Gospel itself. Indeed the style and language of the epilogue is such that one must unquestionably affirm that it has been composed within the Johannine community. Moreover, the citation of seven disciples in John 21:2 serves as an indication that the traditions which have been set down in writing in the epilogue circulated within the Johannine community.

Given this situation it might be well to characterize the style and vocabulary of the epilogue as an imitative style and vocabulary. The author of this chapter has consciously aped the style and vocabulary of a previously extant twenty-chapter work with which he was quite familiar. The imitation of style and vocabulary is all the more striking in that the themes of John 21 are not themes which have appeared in the main part of the Gospel – a seaside appearance to Simon Peter and the other disciples, fishing, a meal

19. See my article, "The Oldest Commentary on the Fourth Gospel," *The Bible Today* 98 (1978) 1769 – 1775.

20. Not the least of these differences is the use of *Logos*, "the Word" in vv.1 and 14. The term does not appear as a proper noun in the body of the Gospel.

21. The tendency to interpret the prologue as a later edition of an earlier *Vorlage* is particularly pronounced in German-language scholarship. By way of example, we can cite the commentary on the prologue in the works of Haenchen (*John 1*, Philadelphia, Fortress, 1984) and Schnackenburg (see above, note 8) as well as articles on the topic written by these authors in various scholarly journals.

22. Especially the "apostolic church" associated with the Twelve.

23. In v.2, for example, we find a partitive *apo* ("from") instead of *ek* and the "sons of Zebedee" (*hoi huioi Zebedaiou*).

of bread and fish, the Petrine commission, and death. In the epilogue these non-Johannine themes are treated in a very Johannine manner.

Chapter twenty-one's technique of the dramatic sequence of successive little scenes is very Johannine.<sup>(24)</sup> It recalls not only the drama that followed upon the cure of the blind man (John 9), but also the call of the first disciples (John 1:35 – 51) and the story of water-become-wine at Cana in Galilee (John 2:1 – 12).<sup>(25)</sup> Stylistically, as has been noted, the dialogue technique is a typical ploy of the evangelist which has been imitated by the story-teller who has appended John 21 to the earlier narrative.<sup>(26)</sup> The interrogations in John 21, the questions and repeated questions found within the dialogue, recall the evangelist's predilection for interrogation as a literary device.<sup>(27)</sup>

As far as the characters who appear in the epilogue are concerned, the reader must surely note that Peter is called Simon Peter as he is throughout the Gospel. In direct address, Jesus calls him "Peter, son of John" (vv.15,16,17). The formula calls to mind the words of Jesus in John 1:42.<sup>(28)</sup> Thomas is identified as the Twin (John 21:2), just as he is in John 20:24. In the epilogue the Beloved Disciple is identified as the one who had lain on Jesus' breast at the supper (v.20). In this presentation the author of the epilogue has portrayed the Beloved Disciple by means of a salient feature,<sup>(29)</sup> just as the evangelist himself had typified Andrew as the brother of Simon Peter,<sup>(30)</sup> Nicodemus as the one who had come by night,<sup>(31)</sup> Judas as the betrayer,<sup>(32)</sup> Lazarus as the one who had been raised,<sup>(33)</sup> and Mary of Bethany as the one who had annointed and wiped Jesus' feet.<sup>(34)</sup>

### John 21:18

The fact that the author of the epilogue so consciously imitates the style of the author of the Fourth Gospel brings into sharp focus the technique employed in his story-telling at John 21:18 – 19a. The passage lies within a

24. See especially J.L. Martyn, *History and Theology*.

25. See my "Cana (Jn. 2:1 – 12) – The First of His Signs of the Key to His Signs?" *Irish Theological Quarterly* 47 (1980) 79 – 95, esp. p. 82.

26. See, for example, the dialogue with Nicodemus in John 3:1 – 11.

27. See Albert Vanhoye, Interrogation johannique et exégèse de Cana (Jn. 2,4), "*Biblica* 55 (1974) 152 – 167, esp. pp. 157 – 158.

28. There is however a difference between the two formulae. In John 1:42 we find *Simon ho huios Ioannou* (literally, Simon, the son of John), the equivalent of Matthew's Aramaic Simon Bar-Jona (Matt 16:17); whereas in John 21:15,16,17 we have an elliptical *Simon Ioannou* (literally, Simon of John).

29. See John 13:23,35.

30. See John 1:40 in comparison with John 6:8.

31. See John 7:50 and 19:39 in comparison with John 3:1.

32. See John 6:64,71 and 12:4 in comparison with John 13:31 – 30; 18:2.

33. See John 12:1,9 in comparison with John 11:43 – 44.

34. See John 11:2 in comparison with John 12:3

pericope which sets in comparative contrast the figures of Simon Peter and the Beloved Disciple. This follows the example of the evangelist himself who similarly contrasted Peter and the Beloved in John 13:22–26; 18:15–18; and 20:2–10. The pericope begins with the formulaic expression “Truly, truly I say to you” (*amen amen lego soi*, v. 18), a formula found only in John’s Gospel and used by the evangelist to indicate that he is making reference to a traditional logion of Jesus albeit in his own fashion.<sup>(35)</sup> Moreover, the reflective thought contained in v. 19a not only has the character of the Johannine note<sup>(36)</sup> but also recalls John 12:33 where Jesus is presented as indicating the death by which He himself was to die. Just as Peter succeeded Jesus in the shepherding of the flock, so he would succeed him in dying the death on the cross.<sup>(37)</sup>

The “follow me” of v. 19b has, in fact, a rather profound significance. On one level, it has a narrative function insofar as the story-teller is relating a tale of Jesus’ being followed by Simon Peter with the Beloved Disciple, as it were, chasing after them.<sup>(38)</sup> Nonetheless Jesus’ invitation to Simon Peter has yet a deeper meaning. Peter was to follow Jesus not only as the once-only conclusion to the narrated occurrence, but also in shepherding the flock and dying the martyr’s death. Thus the story-teller’s use of “follow me” in v. 19b recalls the evangelist’s double-level technique. His words often have significance on the symbolic level in addition to their significance on the narrative level.<sup>(39)</sup>

These several points make it quite clear that the story-teller is imitating the style of the evangelist as he narrates his tale in 21:18–23. The tale begins with the classic Johannine *lemma*, “Amen, amen I say to you,” and then Jesus addresses an enigmatic statement to Peter: “When you were young, you girded yourself and walked where you would; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish to go.” The utterance consists of three pairs of contrasting statements: 1) when you were young – when you are old; 2) you girded yourself – you will stretch out your hands and another will gird you; 3) you walked where you would – another will carry you where you do not

35. See Barnabas Lindars, *The Gospel of John*. New Century Bible (London: Oliphants, 1972), p. 48; and “John and the Synoptic Gospels: A Test Case” *New Testament Studies* 27 (1981) 287–294.

36. See John J. O’Rourke, “Asides in the Gospel of John,” *Novum Testamentum* 21 (1979) 210–219.

37. The tradition that Peter was crucified head downwards, found in the apocryphal Acts of Peter and referred to by Eusebius, represents a much later embellishment.

38. See v. 20.

39. J. Louis Martyn has called attention to this technique in his *History and Theology*. Important hermeneutical reflections on its significance are to be found in Xavier Léon-Dufour, “Towards a Symbolic Reading of the Fourth Gospel,” *New Testament Studies* 27 (1981) 439–456, and Sandra M. Schieders, “History and Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel,” in M. de Jonge, ed., *L’Évangile de Jean: Sources, Rédaction, Théologie*. Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium, 44 (Louvain: University Press, 1977) pp. 371–376.

wish to go. A number of authors have suggested that the story-teller has made use of an ancient proverb<sup>(40)</sup> which contrasts the vibrancy and autonomy of youth with the inertness and passivity of those who have died in old age.<sup>(41)</sup> That the youth goes where he wants while the body of a dead man is carried to the grave is the reflection of the anonymous sage. Such a statement of gnomic wisdom is a truism which the story-teller has employed as he attempts to reflect respectively on the deaths of Simon Peter and the Beloved Disciple.

The traditional utterance did not specify any particular type of death;<sup>(42)</sup> it merely contrasted life and death. The story-teller, however, was interested in reflecting on Peter's death by crucifixion – a historical fact which had occurred well in the past when John 21 was set to writing. Accordingly he interpolated into the traditional proverb the middle contrast, girded – being girded. Peter's girding himself recalls his impetuous action in girding himself before jumping into the water (v.7). His being girded may well recall the death shrouds which encompass the body of one who has died and is being carried out for burial. In any case, however, the mention of Simon Peter's "stretching out his hands" (*ekteneis tas cheiras sou*) interrupts the balance of the expanded proverb. It recalls the language used by classical and Christian authors in antiquity to describe the hands that are stretched out and tied to the beam of the cross prior to one's being led out to crucifixion.<sup>(43)</sup> In short, the story-teller has adapted an ancient proverb to his own ends by inserting a third contrast in the midst of the traditional contrasts. By doing so, he has applied the proverb to the situation of Simon Peter who died by crucifixion. Thereby he prepared the way for his own explanatory note, "This he said to show by what death he was to glorify God" (v.19a).

The story-teller's use of an old proverb in this fashion is not only interesting in itself; it is also interesting because it is an indication that the

40. Bultmann has observed that "v.18 is a prophecy by parable, at the base of which clearly lies a proverb" (*op. cit.*, p. 714). His suggestion has received the warm endorsements of C.K. Barrett, Ernst Haenchen, Barnabas Lindars, and Rudolf Schnackenburg in their respective commentaries. Bultmann reconstitutes the proverb as something like "In youth a man is free to go where he will; in old age a man must let himself be taken where he does not will."

41. According to Bultmann, the proverb points to the helplessness of the old man who stretches out his hands while groping for a support or for someone to lead him. See R. Bultmann, *op. cit.*, p. 713, n. 7; p. 714, n. 1. More persuasive, in my view, is the argumentation of Haenchen who notes that "'Taking someone where he or she does not want to go' refers to the grave. The combination of old age and death is not uncommon." See E. Haenchen, *John 2*, p. 226.

42. Bultmann not only argues that the reworked proverb does not specify death by crucifixion but also that the proverb refers simply to old age. Thus "the proverb needs the explanation" of v.19a. See R. Bultmann, *op. cit.*, p. 714, n. 1.

43. Among others, Epictetus, Artemidorus, and Plautus; Josephus; *Ep. Barnabas* and Tertullian. See Barnabas Lindars, *op. cit.*, pp. 636–637, and E. Haenchen, *John 2*, pp. 226–227.

use of proverbs<sup>44</sup>) was one of the features of the Gospel which so caught the fancy of the story-teller that he was prompted to imitate it when he composed his epilogue. This is indeed striking because the evangelist's use of proverbs seems not to have particularly captivated the attention of today's scholars. There is, nonetheless, a significant number of proverbs scattered throughout the Fourth Gospel. These proverbs have been variously adapted by the evangelist to suit his own purposes. His way of dealing with ancient proverbs has been imitated by the story-teller responsible for John 21; perhaps it could also serve as a lesson for Christian story-tellers in our times.

### John 2:10

The first proverb incorporated into John's Gospel is found in John 2:10, "Every man serves the good wine first; and when men have drunk freely, then the poor wine." Although there are no clear parallels to this proverb in extra-biblical literature, the saying seems to enjoy a proverbial character.<sup>45</sup> It speaks of a common situation, generically citing "everyone" (literally, every man, *pas anthropos*) as the subject of the utterance. Strictly speaking it does not even fit easily into the Johannine narrative. In the social context to which John 2:1 – 11 refers, the statement is not particularly appropriate since wedding festivities were spread over several days. They were characterized by that coming-and-going which is still to be found in oriental gatherings. In such a situation late-comers would have been unable to compare the wine served to them with the wine

44. With Bultmann, I would describe a proverb as a "saying of popular wisdom." See R. Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), n. 38, n. 2. The proverb is characterized by its appeal to common human experience, its brevity, its use of generic utterance, and the present tense or gnomic aorist. The proverb (*stichwort*) is to be distinguished from the similitude (*bildwort*), even though a proverb may be used for comparison's sake. The latter is frequently the case in John's use of proverbs. His proverbs are often used allegorically. Thus it is often difficult to distinguish between proverbs and small parables in the Fourth Gospel. The proverbs frequently function as small parables.

45. Both Strack-Billerbeck and, following Hans Windisch, Bultmann indicate that the common practice of first century Palestine was otherwise. See H.L. Strack-P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch*, Vol. 2 (Munich: Beck, 1924) p. 409; and R. Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, p. 118, n. 4. *Econtrario*, F.F. Bruce comments that "the common practice was so well known as to be proverbial." See F.F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) p. 71.

Recognizing that v.10 represents a "detached saying" (*The Gospel of John*, p.131), Barnabas Lindars speaks of it as "a relic of an authentic parable of Jesus" (p. 319) and a parable derived from traditions of the words of Jesus (p. 32) in "Two Parables in John," *New Testament Studies* 16 (1970) 318 – 329. These different observations recall that not only are there frequently no extant extra-biblical parallels to the Johannine proverbs but also that as they are presently found in John the proverbs are worded according to a Johannine formulation. Accordingly the characterization of a Johannine logion as a proverb (or reworked proverb) must be based on an analysis of the literary form of the saying in question.



served to the first set of guests. Moreover in its specifically Johannine context the logion is not particularly appropriate since the pericope contrasts the absence of wine with the abundant quantity provided by Jesus. The miracle story from which the Johannine narrative was fashioned focused on the quantity of wine; the proverb focuses on the quality of the wine.

This doubly inappropriate character of the logion serves to indicate that the evangelist has borrowed a saying from elsewhere. Nonetheless he has deliberately introduced the proverb into his narrative because it serves his purpose. One of the major concerns of the evangelist is to contrast the old dispensation (Judaism) with the new dispensation inaugurated by Jesus. The theme is interwoven throughout the Fourth Gospel. In his reworking of the miracle story of the water-become-wine the evangelist not only indicated that Jesus is the provider of the expected messianic blessings in abundance, but also that what Jesus has come to bring contrasts sharply with that which had been suitable up to the time of Jesus' coming – the various institutions of Judaism which are ineffective in comparison with the gifts of Jesus.

### John 3:8

Another proverb used by the evangelist is to be found in John 3:8 where the words "The wind (*pneuma*) blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes" are attributed to Jesus. In its Johannine context the proverb functions metaphorically<sup>(46)</sup> insofar as *pneuma* can denote either the wind or the spirit.<sup>(47)</sup> The point of comparison would seem to be either the freedom of movement of the wind/spirit or its incomprehensibility.<sup>(48)</sup> Once again, however, the proverb does not appear to be entirely apropos in its Johannine context. On the one hand, the evangelist has retained the proverb's statement on the sound of the wind, but he has not exploited it in his use of the proverb. Moreover the application to one born anew is not entirely appropriate. Indeed the Johannine phrasing of the proverb is a bit strange in itself. After all it is possible to hear the rushing of the wind and

46. This point is made by virtually all the commentators.

47. C.K. Barrett identifies the logion as an allegory while Lindars, with reference to Chrysostom, identifies it as a parable. He explains that "we can only deduce that this is a parable from the fact that it blows and its sound can be heard." For A.M. Hunter, v.8 represents an authentic parable of Jesus. See C.K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to John* (London: S.P.C.K., 1960) p. 176; B. Lindars, *op. cit.*, p. 154; and A.M. Hunter, *The Gospel According to John*. Cambridge Bible Commentary (London: Cambridge University Press, 1965) p. 79.

48. Bultmann notes that the incomprehensibility of the wind is used more than once in the OT and in Jewish literature to provide a comparison for the incomprehensibility of God's ways. See R. Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, p. 142, n. 3, with references to Qoh 11:5; Prov 30:4; and Sir 16:21. It is to be noted that each of these references, the only biblical references cited by Bultmann, come from the wisdom tradition. Strack and Billerbeck also cite Qoh 11:5 and make reference to the Targum. See H.L. Strack-P. Billerbeck, *op. cit.*, p. 424.

even reeds shaking in the wind<sup>(49)</sup> indicate its direction. Nonetheless the internal consistency of the proverb seems not to have troubled the Johannine author. The point that he wanted to make in his presentation of Jesus' dialogue with Nicodemus, a leading figure among the Jews, was that the Spirit was as free in its operation as the wind was apparently fickle in its movement.

### John 4:35,37

Two more proverbs (John 4:35,37) appear in the Johannine narrative of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman. Each of these proverbs is placed on the lips of Jesus as a saying addressed to his disciples. The first, "There are yet four months, then comes the harvest," has a rhythmic character in Greek which allows it to be typified as a popular saying.<sup>(50)</sup> The proverb states that the harvest will come in due time. As such, the adage can serve as an exhortation to patience or as an expression of indolence.<sup>(51)</sup> In Johannine context, the popular saying ("you say") is contrasted with Jesus' own utterance ("I tell you"). Delays cannot be tolerated because the moment of Jesus' mission has arrived: The harvest is ready.

The proverb found in John 4:37, "One sows and another reaps," is formally identified as "a saying" (*ho logos*), that is, a proverb.<sup>(52)</sup> The use of a parable of this type is clearly paralleled in biblical and extra-biblical literature. In his final defence Job said: "Let me sow, and another eat".<sup>(53)</sup> "You reap an alien harvest" is a saying transmitted by Aristophanes.<sup>(54)</sup> The widely quoted proverb called attention to the wry injustice of fate, and this may have been the commonly accepted point of the proverb in first century Palestine.<sup>(55)</sup>

49. See Luke 7:24; Matt 11:7.

50. Thus, explicitly, F.F. Bruce, *op. cit.*, p. 114. C.H. Dodd observes that, in Greek, the proverb is in iambic pentameter but Raymond E. Brown suggests that this might be a felicitous accident of translation. He finds an indication that the saying is a proverb in its brevity and construction. See C.H. Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: University Press, 1965), p. 394; and R.E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John I–XII*, p. 174. See also R. Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, pp. 196, 198. Sceptically, however, C.K. Barrett remarks that "there is no evidence that such a proverb existed." See C.K. Barrett, *op. cit.*, p. 202.

51. Thus Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, p. 196.

52. Barrett notes that this meaning is often the case in Greek. See C.K. Barrett, *op. cit.*, p. 203.

53. Job 31:8.

54. *Equites* 392.

55. Bultmann states that the saying is not attested anywhere else in this precise form, but the idea itself is common enough in the Old Testament and in Greek literature. See R. Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, p. 198, n. 2. In the biblical literature the proverb is not about fate but highlights the idea as a form of punishment or misfortune. Because of this biblical usage Barrett holds that the Johannine proverb is Greek rather than Jewish. Sanders, however, has taken issue with Barrett, citing the references to the harvest in Luke 19:21 and Matt 25:24 and

In any event, the proverb, as used in the Fourth Gospel, is applied to the Johannine community's Samaritan mission. Its verisimilitude is endorsed by Jesus himself. This must be put into perspective. Among the canonical Gospels, the Fourth Gospel is distinctive by reason of its explicit concern for two generations of Jesus' disciples<sup>(56)</sup> and by its affirmation of the mission to the Samaritans.

Both of these concerns are expressed in John 4:31 – 38. Jesus' sending his disciples (v.38) clearly represents a post-resurrectional perspective. Accordingly one must affirm that the proverb of v.37 is related to the Christian mission in Samaria. What the application of the proverb implies is that the effectiveness of the mission to the Samaritans is dependent upon the work of the first generation of Jesus' disciples. Indeed the attribution of the proverb to Jesus himself would seem to suggest that the evangelist would have it that the Samaritan mission has been endorsed by Jesus himself.

#### John 4:44

Another proverb comes to Johannine expression in the introduction to the following pericope when Jesus reflects that "a prophet has no honour in his own country" (John 4:44).<sup>(57)</sup> This traditional Jesuanic logion is attested by the Synoptic tradition as well as by the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas.<sup>(58)</sup> Luke, in fact, compares the logion to another proverb (*ten parabolon*), "heal yourself" (Luke 4:23). The Gospel language reflects the wisdom of the wandering sage whose message often falls on the deaf ears of friends and acquaintances despite its being warmly received by others. Within the context of the Fourth Gospel the saying highlights the fact that Jesus was not received by his own.<sup>(59)</sup> This reality stands in contrast to the reception that his message had received among the Samaritans.

The proverb of John 4:44 is the focal point of a group of verses which serve as a transition to the narrative of the cure of the royal official's son (John 4:46 – 54). This fact requires that one recall that within the perspective of the Fourth Gospel it is Judea,<sup>(60)</sup> not Galilee, which is Jesus'

noting that "the proverb reflects the bitter truth that men are often deprived of their labors." See C.K. Barrett, *op. cit.*, p. 203, and J.N. Sanders, *A Commentary on the Gospel According to St. John*, edited by B. Mastin. Harper's New Testament Commentaries. (New York: Harper, 1969) pp. 151 – 152.

56. See John 14:12; 17:20 – 21; 20:29. See further Godfrey Nicholson, *Death as Departure: The Ascent-Descent Schema in the Gospel of John*. Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series, 63 (Chico: Scholars Press, 1983) pp. 135 – 159.

57. Lindars notes that "John has inserted a proverbial saying of Jesus which does not seem to fit." See B. Lindars, *op. cit.*, p. 200.

58. Matt 13:57; Mark 6:4; Luke 4:24; G. Thom 31 ("Jesus said: No prophet is acceptable in his village; no physician works cures on those who know him").

59. See John 1:11.

60. Thus even Origen, *In Joannem* 13,54.

“own country.” Galilee symbolizes those who receive the revelation of Jesus, whereas Judea symbolizes those who reject it.<sup>(61)</sup> In Galilee, the royal official not only welcomes Jesus (see v.45) but begs for his ministrations (v.47). In Galilee Jesus is warmly received. This situation contrasts sharply with that of Judea where Jesus is not received by the Jews even though he stands as a prophet in their midst. The proverb of John 4:44 has, therefore, a marked Christological focus.

The Johannine usage of the proverb would, however, seem to call for further reflection because of the two levels on which the Johannine account must be read. On the second level the Galileans symbolize the Johannine community which accepts Jesus as a prophetic figure and his message as God's revelation, whereas the Judeans (the “Jews”) symbolize those who have not accepted the community's message about Jesus. On this second level, the proverb suggests that the message of the Johannine community has not been accepted by those to whom they are related.

### John 5:19 – 20a

From a manifestly Christological perspective the proverb which opens up to the most profound Johannine insights may well be found in John 5:19 – 20a, “The Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing, for whatever he does the Son does likewise. For the Father loves the Son, and shows him all that he himself is doing.” Charles Dodd has described the proverb as a hidden parable whose proper locale is the culture of the village and its artisans.<sup>(62)</sup> The use of the definite article before both “father” and “son” (*ho pater, ton huion*) shows that the saying

61. See Robert T. Fortna, “Theological Use of Locale in the Fourth Gospel,” in M.H. Shepherd, Jr. and E.C. Hobbs, eds., *Gospel Studies in Honor of Sherman E. Johnson, Anglican Theological Review*, Supplementary Series, 3 (1974) 58 – 59; and Julette M. Bassler, “The Galileans: A Neglected Factor in Johannine Community Research,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 43 (1981) 243 – 257.

62. See C.H. Dodd, “A Hidden Parable in the Fourth Gospel,” in *More New Testament Studies* (Manchester: University Press, 1968) pp.30 – 40; *Historical Tradition*, p. 386, n. 2; and “The Portrait of Jesus in John and in the Synoptics,” in W.R. Farmer, C.F.D. Moule, R.R. Niebuhr, eds. *Christian History and Interpretation: Studies Presented to John Knox* (Cambridge: University Press, 1967) pp. 183 – 187, esp. pp. 185 – 187. Similarly, Paul Gächter, “Zur Form von Joh 5,19 – 30,” in J. Blinzler, O. Kuss, F. Mussner, eds., *Neutestamentliche Aufsätze: Festschrift für Prof. Josef Schmid zum 70. Geburtstag* (Regensburg: Pustet, 1963) pp. 65 – 68, esp. p. 67. Barnabas Lindars, (*op. cit.*, p. 221), Raymond E. Brown (*Gospel . . . I–XII*, p. 218), and F.F. Bruce (*op. cit.*, p. 128) concur with this opinion. Schnackenburg, however, demurs because of the use of the introductory *lemma*, “Truly, truly I say to you.” See R. Schnackenburg, *op. cit.*, vol. 2, p. 102 and p. 462, n. 33.

Dodd suggests that the structure of the saying (cf. Luke 8:16) consists of two general categorical clauses forming an antithesis, followed by an explanatory clause:

- A. (Negation) A son learning his trade can do nothing but what he sees his father doing.
- B. (Affirmation) What he sees his father doing, the son does likewise.
- C. (Explanation) What he sees his father doing, the son does likewise.

admits of universal application. Traditionally it spoke of any father and any son. The adage enunciated the wisdom of the ages in a society where trade skills are hereditary, handed down from generation to generation. The Synoptic Gospels attest not only that Jesus himself was a carpenter (Mark 6:3) but also that he was the son of a carpenter (Matt 13:35).

In a world where a son was effectively apprenticed to his father, the son learned the father's trade from observation, imitation, and, eventually, cooperation. The wise man could then observe that the son sees what the father does and does likewise (John 5:19b). The father was, however, hardly a passive participant in the handing down of the traditional trade. For a father to teach his son a trade was an integral part of his paternal love. Indeed Jewish rabbis spoke not only of the responsibility of a father to teach his son the traditions of their people but also of the responsibility of a father to teach his son a trade, lest he teach him "to become a thief."

The evangelist is well aware that he is handing down a traditional logion as he writes the saying contained in vv. 19 and 20 for he has prefixed his remarks with the solemn introductory formula, "Amen, amen I say to you." The *lemma* bears the Johannine trademark; it indicates that the evangelist is passing along a saying acknowledged within the Johannine community as a logion traditionally ascribed to Jesus. The saying has been incorporated into the broad Johannine context of a sabbath discussion (John 5:9b–47) which has been appended to Jesus' poolside cure of the paralytic (John 5:1–9a).

As the evangelist unfolds his discourse, he moves from a discussion of sabbath day works to a consideration of the unique relationship which exists between Jesus and the Father. The sabbath context provides opportunity for a recalling of the priestly tradition of creation in which God is present as a divine artisan constructing and refurbishing the world for human habitation prior to resting on the sabbath day (Gen 1:1–2:4a). This Jewish tradition which anthropomorphically portrayed God as an artisan provided the framework for the metaphorical application of the proverb of the apprenticed son to the relationship between Jesus and the Father. As applied by the evangelist the proverb intimates not only that Jesus is the Son of the Father but also that there exists a dynamic relationship between them: The Father loves the son; the Son does the works of His Father.

#### John 9:4

Discussion of the works of Jesus provides another opportunity for the evangelist to introduce a proverb into his Gospel at 9:4, "We must work the works of him who sent me, while it is day; night comes, when no one can work." The reference to persons in this verse is quite striking: we . . . him . . . me . . . no one.<sup>63</sup> The latter reference ("no one," *oudeis*) suggests that

63. Schnackenburg also finds the juxtaposition of the singular and plural numbers exceptional. See R. Schnackenburg, *op. cit.*, vol. 2, p. 241.

at the origin of the saying attributed to Jesus lies a saying with general applicability. "Night comes, when no one can work" expresses a prudential point of view. Dodd<sup>64</sup> has suggested that Jesus' saying reflects a rabbinic aphorism utilized, among others, by Rabbi Tarphon who was a contemporary of the evangelist. "The day is short and there is much work to be done; the workers are lazy and the reward is great and the master of the house is urgent"<sup>65</sup> was the proverbial saying. Used by Tarphon, the adage was applied to the study of the Torah. Day represented the span of a human life within which the Torah could be studied and night represented death when study of the Torah was no longer possible.

It may be that the context of the proverb's application by Tarphon is no more consistent with the original formulation than is the Johannine application. The proverb speaks generally of the day as the opportune time for work.<sup>66</sup> Its common-sense meaning is paralleled by the old Latin adage, *carpe diem*.<sup>67</sup> There was a time for the works of the Father to be done and that time was the time of the presence of Jesus. His works had a necessary and urgent quality. Such was the primary inference that the evangelist drew from his use of the proverb.

Yet there was another inference to be drawn as well, one suggested by the evangelist's interchange of "we" and "me". The use of the first person plural suggests that the evangelist believed that the proverb was likewise applicable to the disciples of Jesus. Later the evangelist would write: "He who believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I go to the Father" (John 14:12). In the absence of Jesus the disciples are to do the works of the Father, indeed works even greater than those of Jesus himself. As applied to the community of the Beloved Disciple, the proverb echoed in John 9:4 reflects that there is an appropriate time in which the disciples are to do the works of the Father. That time is the time of Jesus' absence. It was also necessary for them to work, since there will be a time when it is too late. That time is symbolized by night. Thus the use of the plural suggests the urgency with which the disciples were to do the works of the Father.

64. See C.H. Dodd, *Historical Tradition*, p. 186. For Lindars the saying is "a piece of proverbial wisdom" (*op. cit.*, p. 342). Dodd's observations have been favorably referenced by Brown (*Gospel . . . I - XII*, p. 372).

65. Mishnah, *Pirke Aboth*, 2:14-15. As further rabbinic parallels, Strack and Billerbeck cite a statement in the Babylonian Talmud attributed to Rabbi Simeon ben Eleazar (ca. 190), "Work as long as you can, while it is still possible for you and there is still strength in you." And a statement attributed to the daughter of Rabbi Chisda (d. 309) who spoke to her father to the effect that "there comes the night when no one can work." See H.L. Strack-P. Billerbeck, *op. cit.*, p. 529.

66. Compare Paul's "acceptable time" in 2 Cor 6:2, where the apostle makes use of Is 42:6 to speak of the time appropriate for his mission.

67. Horace, *Odes* I, XI, 8.

### John 11:9 – 10

The contrast between day and night is the point of yet another proverb used by the evangelist. This one is found in John 11:9 – 10: “Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. But if any one walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him.” Some authors have suggested that the evangelist has composed this section of the Lazarus story according to the model of John 9:3 – 5, using another proverb.

That the evangelist is making use of a proverb as he enters into his account of Jesus’ encounter with Lazarus is clear. The twice-repeated generalized subject, “any one” (*tis*), and the balanced contrast between the two elements of the saying are clear signs that proverbial material has been used by the evangelist.

Yet the signs are equally clear that the evangelist has indeed altered the proverb, and that he has used it to his own advantage. Appended to the first part of the proverb is the explanatory statement “because he sees the light of this world.” By and large explanations are not part of proverbial sayings. Proverbs function as axioms which need no explanation other than one’s explanations, epithymemes, belong to logical discourse; proverbs, which appeal to experience, typically belong to a hortatory or judgemental discourse.<sup>(68)</sup> Moreover, “the light of this world” reflects Johannine language which more than once speaks of Jesus as the light of the world.<sup>(69)</sup> If the addition of an explanatory statement to the first part of the proverb seems to come from a Johannine source, the explanation of the second part of the contrast also seems somewhat inappropriate for a traditional aphorism.<sup>(70)</sup>

Indeed the explanation proved to be somewhat enigmatic to some of the scribes who were charged with copying the Johannine text. According to the original transcription, the fifth century Codex Bezae Cantabrigiensis (D) read “If any one walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in it” (*en aute*). A corrector emended the manuscript to make it conformable with the vast majority of the ancient manuscripts which read “. . . because the light is not in him.” The phraseology is strange indeed. The determination of its precise significance still puzzles modern commentators.<sup>(71)</sup> Bultmann has conjectured that the original saying ran something like “Whoever walks by day does not stumble; but if anyone walks by night, he stumbles.”<sup>(72)</sup> He seems to have been on the right track.

A saying loosely parallel to the logion of John 11:19 – 10 and likewise

68. In Greek rhetoric, *logos* describes the mode of logical discourse; *pathos*, the mode of appealing to the emotions or self-interest of the hearer(s).

69. See John 8:12 and 9:4 – 5. In John 11:9 – 10, Schnackenburg speaks of “the light of the world” as metaphorical (*op. cit.*, vol. 2, p. 325).

70. Similarly, Lindars who speaks of the “addition of the causal clauses” (*op. cit.*, p. 390).

71. A situation somewhat akin to that of John 3:8.

72. See R. Bultmann, *op. cit.*, p. 399.

developing the contrast between light and darkness is found among the secret saying of Jesus in the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas: "There is light within a man of light and it illumines the whole world; when it does not shine, there is darkness." John's development of the proverbial contrast is somewhat different. It preserves a Jewish ring in that the Jews distinguished day from night, according twelve hours to each.<sup>(73)</sup> The application of the proverb within the Johannine narrative suggests at one level that it is appropriate that Jesus perform his works while time remains, i.e., while there is still daylight. Nonetheless, the addition of the problematic "in him" (*en auto*) at the end of v.10 and the resonant "light of this world" in v.9 suggests, as Lightfoot has stated, "that the purpose of the apparently simple words in verses 9 and 10 is to teach spiritual truth."<sup>(74)</sup>

This suggestion leads us to the complex history of the Lazarus story. The complexity of the history and the length of the story (John 11:1 – 12:8) excuse us from entering into the matter in detail in an essay such as this. One can only suggest that the use of the parable, in a more or less traditional form, bespoke the appropriateness of the time of the miracle worked by Jesus.<sup>(75)</sup> The expanded proverb reflects the fact that the miracle story has been so reworked in the Johannine tradition that it has become a dramatic Christological statement, proclaiming that Jesus is the resurrection and the life.<sup>(76)</sup> The expanded proverb suggests that the one who is to be revealed as the resurrection and the life is the one who has been previously revealed as the light of the world. As one has life because of Jesus, so one sees because of him.

## Conclusion

The story-teller who compiled the epilogue of the Fourth Gospel and added it to the Gospel which was familiar to him was well aware of the significance of proverbs<sup>(77)</sup> in the teaching of the Johannine school. The use of proverbs such as these confirm that the Johannine community was composed of Jewish Christians.<sup>(78)</sup> In the Fourth Gospel it is typically Jesus

73. An "hour" was simply the twelfth part of the day, such that an hour at the summer solstice was approximately twenty minutes longer than an hour at the winter solstice. See H.L. Strack-P. Billerbeck, *op. cit.*, vol. 2, p. 543.

74. R.H. Lightfoot, *St. John's Gospel: A Commentary* (Oxford: University Press, 1960) p. 220.

75. The force of the proverb would have been similar to that of the proverb in John 9:4.

76. See John 11:24.

77. In addition to the sayings that have been examined, other common-sense logia appear in John 7:4; 12:24; and 16:21. These have the common characteristic of generic utterance, yet they do not appear to me to be so isolateable from their Johannine context as to be identifiable as traditional sayings of popular wisdom. Hence they have not been considered in the present study.

78. Note, in this regard, the parallels with various rabbinic aphorisms, and the Jewish quality of many of the proverbs.



who cites proverbs,<sup>(79)</sup> thereby reinforcing the view that he is a teacher. This estimation of Jesus was traditional in the Jewish Christian community which emerged as the community of the Beloved Disciple.

Yet, as the community's tradition developed, its Christology transcended the relatively low Christology of Jesus-rabbi.<sup>(80)</sup> Accordingly, the traditional proverbs were emended so as to bear some of the key insights of the Johannine community. Thus, as presently formulated, the proverbs in the Gospel of John speak of the unique relationship between Jesus and the Father, a relationship which is functional in that Jesus is the one who can do the Father's works. Indeed it was necessary and urgent that he do so because his hour was the time for the works of the Father to be done.

The expanded proverbs give us further insight into the community's understanding of Jesus in that they indicate that what he had come to do effected a radical relativization of the Father's previous works. Through the expanded and applied proverbs the community came to appreciate that Jesus was not only the resurrection and the life but also the light of the world, who made it possible for his disciples to see, in faith.

The nature of the proverb is such that its applicability transcends a particular set of historical circumstances. For the Johannine community which saw the story of Jesus intertwined with its own story, and vice-versa, the proverbs attributed to Jesus spoke also to its own situation. In proverbs attributed to Jesus, the community found a warrant for its own mission, specifically its mission to the Samaritans. The traditional proverbs provided occasion for reflection on the incomprehensibility of the Spirit's action and allowed the community to perceive that its own rejection was not dissimilar to the rejection of Jesus himself.

In sum, for the members of the community of the Beloved Disciple proverbs, the dicta of common-sense wisdom, were the bearers of profound truth.

79. Even the proverb of John 4:35 is placed on the lips of Jesus, as are the generic utterances found in John 12:24 and 16:21. An exception to this general state of affairs would be the attribution of the logion in John 2:10 to the chief steward of the feast.

80. See Raymond E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple*, pp. 25 – 58.