A Textual Problem and a Gospel’s Purpose: A Reflection on Current Johannine Studies

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Abstract: The first ending of the Fourth Gospel (John 20:31) presents an apparently small textual problem that reveals a larger set of issues about the aim of the gospel. This article reviews contemporary scholarship on the gospel and argues that the ambiguity of the ending reflected in the textual tradition reflects the gospel’s general technique to add layers of significance to inherited material.

Keywords: ambiguity, Fourth Gospel, recent scholarship, rereading, text criticism

The Gospel according to John continues to be a source of endless fascination to believers and scholars alike. The gospel displays highly symbolic narrative; an allusive use of scriptural quotations, themes, and motifs; narrative techniques that evoke courtroom drama and epic recognition scenes; “riddling” conceptual chains that touch on difficult issues of philosophy, theology, and ethics; characters, sometimes ambiguous, sometimes of intriguing complexity; and much more. All of this serves a goal clearly articulated at what appears to be an end of the narrative. At John 20:31, the narrator proclaims, “These things [referring to the “signs” mentioned in the previous verse] have been written so that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God and that believing you might have life in his name.” This seems to be a fitting conclusion to the gospel, although the text continues for another chapter, famously ending on a note that the world is too small to contain the records of all that Jesus did (21:25). The postscript that is chapter 21, whether an original part of the gospel or a secondary addition, does not alter the claim made at the end of chapter 20.

The claim seems to be clear enough, but it contains a textual problem that has intrigued text critics while raising questions about what the claim really means. In the Nestlé-Aland critical edition, the verb in the purpose clause is printed πιστεύ[σ]ητε, with square brackets around the sigma that makes the verb an aorist subjunctive rather than a present subjunctive. The square brackets indicate that the editors are uncertain about what is likely to be the more original reading. Both readings are widely attested, though the aorist subjunctive is somewhat more in evidence than the present subjunctive, which, however, has important early witnesses. The hesitancy of the editors is certainly understandable. A simple question that this article addresses is whether we can really decide which of these readings is likely to be the more original.

The aspectual difference between two verbal forms may be read as pointers to two different statements of purpose. The aorist would focus on the moment of coming to belief, implying that the gospel was written as a missionary tract, inviting people to accept the claim that Jesus is, as Thomas has just declared, “my Lord and my God”
(John 20:28). The present would point instead to the process by which those who have already accepted that claim continue to profess it, remain faithful to it, and perhaps grow within it. Either statement of purpose may be defended from the evidence of the gospel itself. Whichever reading was more original, it is understandable that scribes might have changed it to the alternative reading.

One explanation for the textual variants discussed in modern scholarship is to see the variants as the results of a compositional process. An early version or edition of the gospel, or perhaps a source underlying it, was originally designed as the kind of missionary tract that the aorist form of the verb in 20:31 suggests. The “signs” that Jesus performed then were tokens of his Messianic status. All of them, culminating in the recognition by Thomas of the reality of the resurrected one, should elicit acceptance of Jesus. The basic tract was developed over time as a resource for shepherding the Good Shepherd’s flock. Hence, in a later edition, the tense was changed to recognize the ways in which the text worked on the hearts and minds of its readers, a continuing process for which the present tense was more appropriate.

That there are layers in the gospel, which probably grew and developed over time, is highly probable, although scholars continue to debate what belongs to what stage of development and how the layers relate. One of the things that fuels that debate is a feature of the gospel’s text in its final “canonical” form, a multiplicity or surplus of meaning built into narrative and dialogue. This feature of the gospel is difficult to attribute simply to a process of reworking a source text. Finding new depth of meaning is rather part of the rhetorical strategy built into the fabric of the gospel in ways that cannot be neatly classified stratigraphically. The challenge to think more deeply about many things is a constant feature of the text.

The challenge appears in the many cases of misunderstanding by characters with whom Jesus is in conversation: the failure of Nicodemus to understand what ἄνωθεν means; the bafflement of the Samaritan woman about what “living water” might be; the inability of the Galileans to “see” a sign; the focus of Martha on the future hope of resurrection; the admitted ignorance of Thomas about the “way.” In many of these cases, the implied readers/hearers of the story understand something of what is lacking in the characters of the text and can laugh at or perhaps pity them, perfect cases of dramatic irony. Readers can also be amused and perhaps comforted by the deeper meanings of things that characters say unawares, such as the principle articulated by a cynical Caiaphas that it is beneficial for one to die rather than the whole nation be destroyed, or the proclamation by the crowds in Jerusalem that they have no king but Caesar. Dramatic irony runs through the gospel and trumpets the deeper meaning of many a saying.

Yet not all irony is so simple. A debate about where Jesus is from introduces the principle that the origins of the Messiah will be unknown. The Jerusalemites who articulate that principle are clearly in ignorance of where Jesus is from in a physical sense, and they totally miss the deeper sense that he is “from the Father.” But are those characters in the text alone in their failure to perceive? The text alludes to two contradictory claims—that Jesus is from Galilee and that he is from Bethlehem—claims that are found in stories about the earthly origin of Jesus. The reader/hearer of the gospel is thereby placed in the same position as the characters in the story, reminded of what he or she may “know” about the origins of Jesus, but at the same time challenged about the value of that knowledge.
The reader/hearer of the gospel is also challenged in many other ways by seeming contradictions within the text: Jesus does not judge, but he does bring judgment; or origins determine outcomes, but then again, people can choose where they are “from”; Jesus and the Father are one, but the Father is greater than Jesus. Ancient educators recognized the stimulating value of riddling discourse, and so too does the fourth evangelist. Provoking the readers to probe more deeply into what they think they know is central to the strategy of the gospel. The gospel in effect frames itself as the current embodiment of the Word that had become incarnate in Jesus. That Word repeatedly encountered human beings and brought them to a point of recognizing some truth, sometimes dramatically, sometimes slowly. The gospel aims to work in a similar way, fostering a transformative encounter with its reader/hearer that will produce a deeper commitment to and understanding of who Jesus is and what he means for them.

What the gospel in effect does is build upon what were no doubt traditional expressions of “believing” in Jesus, confessions or acknowledgements of him as Messiah, as Son of God, as one sent from God. Like all the layering that takes place in the gospel, the foundational layer is not dismissed or critiqued. Instead, it is extended and enhanced in multiple ways.

Faith or belief is not a simple matter, either in the gospel’s environment or in the gospel itself. Belief has a cognitive dimension, achieving an understanding of what it means to affirm Jesus as God’s chosen instrument, and an understanding of how it is that he “exegetes” God (John 1:18). The engagement with philosophical issues noted earlier and the gospel’s proclamations about knowing and proclaiming “Truth” confirm the concern.

Belief has a relational dimension, expressed most fully in the theme of mutual indwelling, a central component of the Farewell Discourse. The one who believes in Jesus abides in him as he and the Father abide in the believer. They are “made one,” in a relationship named as the goal of Jesus mission in his final prayer (John 17:21). That relationship finds symbolic expression in familial imagery and in the image of mutual embrace that marks both the prologue and the depiction of the disciples at the Last Supper. In the former, Jesus is in the bosom of the Father from eternity, and in the latter, the beloved disciple, who, among other things, symbolizes the ideal disciple, reclines in the bosom of Jesus. That relationship is made possible for disciples after the departure of Jesus by the presence of the Spirit, exhaled out on the cross and infused into the disciples on Easter.

Finally, the belief that encompasses knowledge and relationship expresses itself in action. The point is expressed at a pivotal moment during the Last Supper, when Jesus, having washed the disciples’ feet, an act of personal intimacy, articulates the first of two beatitudes in the gospel: “If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them” (John 13:17). The beatitude, with its implicit admonition to follow the example, the ὑπὸδειγμα of Jesus (John 13:15), will soon be reinforced by the “new commandment” to love (John 13:34), which in turn will be reinforced by a well-known proverb about the love one has for friends (John 15:13). The repeated insistence on the implications for life of believing in Jesus constitute the “glory” that Jesus celebrates as he approaches his final hour (John 12:28), glory finally seen when Jesus is “lifted up” on the cross. The simple statement of the gospel’s purpose thus encapsulates a world of meaning that has developed in the finely interwoven texture of this complex gospel.
appreciation of that fact enable a decision about the text-critical issue? The complexity of the understanding of what constitutes “belief” might support the present tense, πιστεύετε. That complexity at least helps one to understand why scribes might have been tempted to use the present tense. But does the present tense really do justice to what the gospel is working to achieve? The aorist, with the inceptive connotation that it has in 20:29, is likely to be the more original reading. As the whole gospel demonstrates, all who encounter the Word, incarnate and inscribed,40 have the opportunity to experience that moment of belief time and again. Confronted with the profound reality of that Word, they newly enact their belief whenever they follow his example.

Notes
This article, celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the Toronto Journal of Theology, combines elements of my own research and references to a range of significant Johannine scholarship from the last two decades. For further reviews, see Tom Thatcher, ed., What We Have Heard from the Beginning: The Past, Present and Future of Johannine Studies (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007); Tom Thatcher and Catrin H. Williams, Engaging with C.H. Dodd: Sixty Years of Tradition and Interpretation (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); and Judith M. Lieu and Martinus C. De Boer, eds., The Oxford Handbook of Johannine Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).


On courtroom drama, see Andrew Lincoln, Truth on Trial: The Lawsuit Motif in the Fourth Gospel (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000); George Parsenios, Rhetoric and Drama in the Johannine Lawsuit Motif, WUNT 1.258 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010).


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25. Cf. John 8:15: “I judge no one”—although the next verse entertains the hypothetical that Jesus may judge, and in 5:30, Jesus affirms, “I judge and my judgment is just,” presenting one of the gospel's “riddles.”


27. The contrast of John 10:30, on unity, and 14:28, on difference, fuelled ancient Christological debates. See T.E. Pollard, *Johannine Christology and the Early Church*, SNTSMS 13 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970); and, more recently, Klaus Scholtissek, “‘Ich und der Vater, wir sind eins’ (Joh 10,30): Zum theologischen Potential und zur hermeneutischen


35. The second appears near the gospel’s end: “Blessed are those who have not seen but who have come to believe” (John 20:29). Here, the participle translated by “come to believe” is in the aorist (πιστεύσαντες).


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39. The Son of Man being “lifted up” (John 3:14) plays on Num 21, as well as Isa 52:13, which combines “glorification” (δοξασθήσεται) and “lifting up” (δοξασθήσεται). See Daniel A. Brendsel, “Isaiah Saw His Glory”: The Use of Isaiah 52–53 in John 12, BZNW 208 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014). The thematic connection is most explicit at John 12:23.

40. For an argument that the incarnation is to be construed as a timeless reality, see John Behr, John the Theologian and His Paschal Gospel: A Prelude to Theology (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), reviewed by Daniel G. Opperwall in the Toronto Journal of Theology 35 (2019): 112–113.