The Body of Christ On and Off the Cross

(John 19:31-42)

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INTRODUCTION

ORIENTATION AND CONTEXT

Significance of the Text

The story in John 19:31-42 is the account of what happened to Jesus’ body from his death on the Cross to his placement in the grave. The Jewish leaders approached Pilate to have the legs of the three men who were crucified that day broken and the bodies taken down from their crosses prior to sundown. Sundown marked the end of Preparation Day and the beginning of a special Sabbath in the Jewish nation. Soldiers broke the legs of two men, but when they came to Jesus, they did not break his legs because Jesus was already dead. A brief interlude interrupted the narration of events. A witness had a few things to say about what he saw and how he interpreted what he saw. The narrative resumed with a second request being made to Pilate regarding Jesus’ body. Two disciples of Jesus were granted permission to take the body whereupon they treated Jesus’ body with spices and laid him in a tomb. The story ends as Preparation Day comes a close and the High Passover Sabbath begins.

On initial examination, the theme seems to promote Jesus as the one whom Scripture prophetically expected to come as Savior. It seems to be exhorting readers to believe that this man Jesus, whose body was on a cross, was the perfect, prophetically expected, Passover sacrifice. An evangelistic appeal attends the eyewitness interlude. The witness urges the reader to believe that his testimony was true. Jesus really died, as the prophets said the coming one would, without a bone being broken and with his body having been pierced.

A few questions arise from the examination of the passage. Why did the soldiers risk punishment for insubordination by defying their orders to break Jesus’ legs? What is the meaning of blood and water spilling from Jesus’ side? What day of the week was Preparation Day? Why does a witness make commentary in middle of the death scene? Why was such a large amount of spice used on Jesus’ body? This paper will attempt to answer these and other questions.

Historical and Social Setting

John’s Gospel is a book “with a complex history, whose origins are not entirely clear to us” (Rensberger 2012). While Rensberger is correct that the origin and author of John’s Gospel cannot categorically be proven to be the Apostle John, the evidence is weighted toward the Apostle John. Early evidentiary witnesses point directly to the Apostle John. Irenaeus, for example, wrote, “Most scholars recognize that this ‘John’, [is] certainly a reference to John the apostle, the son of Zebedee” (Carson loc. 221). Tracing a direct line from Irenaeus to Polycarp to John, the tradition of the Apostle John’s authorship goes back to the second century and has perdured from then until the twentieth century, John’s authorship being defended “as recently as the sixties by such renowned Johannine scholars as R. Schnackenburg and R.E. Brown” (Ellis 2).

John’s Gospel also seems to connect the identity of the disciple whom Jesus loved in 19:26 with the witness who asks the reader to believe his testimony is true in 19:35. Then, together, these both connect to the disciple whom Jesus loved in 21:20, which strongly indicates that the writer of John’s Gospel was a close companion of Peter, intimate enough with both Peter and Jesus to be allowed inside the circle of hearing when Jesus tenderly reinstated Peter. This intimate connection with both Peter and Jesus makes it believable that the Apostle John wrote John’s Gospel.

In recent years the historicity of John’s Gospel has been questioned, with some scholars leaning away from equating the Apostle John with the Beloved Disciple, giving rise to many theories of authorship ranging from the Apostle John as the sole author, to John writing with another author or later editor, to a community of authors, all suggested by various scholars, leading Anderson to comment that although the “traditional view of John’s authorship has been questioned extensively, no other single view has taken its place critically” (1). Although it seems most reasonable to think the Apostle John wrote the Gospel, it must be admitted that “whoever the Beloved Disciple was, it is evident from John’s Gospel that he (or they) wanted to remain anonymous” (Ellis 2).

“Internal evidence suggests that the Gospel was written after 85 C.E.” and external evidence “points to a date not later than 110 C.E” (Ellis 1). Many scholars today hold that the Gospel of John was written toward the end of the first century to strengthen a church—what church we do not know—with what Carson calls an “evangelistic confrontation” (loc. 447).

The Roman Empire during the days of John’s writing was a socially and culturally complex time in the life of the early Christian church. “Irenaeus writes that John lived until the reign of Emperor Trajan” (MacDonald 1417). Emperor worship was in full swing in those days, nowhere more so than in Ephesus, a city “dominated by pagan temples, [and] emperor worship”. If John was written in Ephesus, “as Irenaeus and Eusebius affirm”, his experience of living in that city “for over fifty years would have had a deep impact on” the way the Gospel was communicated (Card 18). Trajan was not hostile toward Christianity, but to some historians he was a megalomaniac who was frustrated militarily” Hammond).

Rensberger asserts that the original audience was likely the “Jewish Christian community” who were experiencing intense conflict with the synagogue authorities. After the 80’s C.E., Jewish Christians “were being expelled from synagogues” for their belief in Jesus Christ (2011). Carson agrees, stating bluntly that John’s readers “were primarily Jews and proselytes in the diaspora” adding that “the Evangelist had a biblically-illiterate readership in mind” and that “if the work is evangelistic, and intended for those who enjoy some competence in what we today call the Old Testament, diaspora Jews and proselytes to Judaism constitute the only possibility” (loc. 7959; loc.1594). Anderson characterizes the original audience more

Hellenistically, writing, “the translation of Aramaic words into Greek connects the original language of the Lord with later Hellenistic audiences” (Anderson 34).

Literary Context

“The author is explicit about his purpose: the work is a gospel” (Shepherd 707). Marshall agrees, but describes its structure as “a historical work” meant to be “an evangelistic document” (597). Although John’s Gospel begins in the prologue prior to Jesus’ birth and ends after his resurrection from the dead, the structure of the Gospel, while historical, is not strictly chronological. The narrative progresses through a series of signs stories containing extensive discourses by Jesus (John 2:1-11:44), then turns a corner to the crucifixion narrative in chapters 11-12, ending with a post-resurrection epilog narrative. This historical outline is the vehicle of a theological presentation of Jesus” (Marshall 598). The pericope at issue in this paper, John 19:31-42, falls into the crucifixion narrative, with a brief evangelistic thrust bisecting the narrative of Jesus on and off the Cross.

Jesus, having been sentenced to death by Pilate in the earlier portion of John 19, has been nailed to the Cross, has delivered his final instructions from the Cross, and has bowed his head and died. The pericope takes the story forward from his death on the Cross, traces the events of his body’s removal from the Cross, and ends with Jesus being laid in a tomb, which ends the chapter of John 19. The Resurrection immediately follows the pericope as John 20 opens.

The pericope is bound on both ends with the phrase “it was the day of Preparation” (19:31;42 NIV). It is organized around the physical body of Christ as he hung dead on the Cross. Four verses describe what was done to Christ’s body immediately following the death. Three verses are an eyewitness interlude. Five verses describe what was done with Christ’s body after removal from the Cross. The pericope is the culmination of the larger crucifixion narrative that begins with the lavishly applied, perfumed anointing of Christ’s body for death by Mary in 12:3 and ends with the lavishly applied packing of Christ’s body with spices before his body’s placement in the tomb by Joseph and Nicodemus in 12:39-42.

PRESENTATION OF TEXT

Scripture Passage

John 19:31-42

**31**Since it was the day of Preparation, in order to prevent the bodies from remaining on the cross on the sabbath (for that sabbath was a high day), the Jews asked Pilate that their legs might be broken, and that they might be taken away. **32**So the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first, and of the other who had been crucified with him; **33**but when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. **34**But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water. **35**He who saw it has borne witness—his testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth—that you also may believe. **36**For these things took place that the scripture might be fulfilled, “Not a bone of him shall be broken.” **37**And again another scripture says, “They shall look on him whom they have pierced.”

**38**After this Joseph of Arimathe′a, who was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly, for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus, and Pilate gave him leave. So, he came and took away his body. **39**Nicode′mus also, who had at first come to him by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds’ weight. **40**They took the body of Jesus, and bound it in linen cloths with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews. **41**Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb where no one had ever been laid. **42**So because of the Jewish day of Preparation, as the tomb was close at hand, they laid Jesus there. (RSV)

Text Critical Notes

There are technically no text critical issues in the pericope, there are two interesting text variants and one calendar oddity worth mentioning. Concerning the calendar oddity, the passage opens and closes with the writer’s insistence that it was the “day of Preparation” (vss. 31 and 42). Shepherd explains, “All four gospels agree that the Last Supper was held on Thursday evening and that the Crucifixion took place on Friday. But John is explicit that Friday was not the Passover feast day but the day of Preparation” (722). Shepherd goes on to explain that fixed calendars were used everywhere except in Palestine. If the synoptic gospels relied on fixed calendars, they would have identified Crucifixion Day as Passover Day. On the ground, however, in Palestine the hour to begin the celebration of Passover was not given until an official physically observed the full moon. As such, weather conditions might have delayed Passover for a full day in Palestine while the fixed calendars remained fixed everywhere else, which would explain the chronology discrepancy.

The first variant is in 19:35, where it says, “that you also may believe”, this phrase also could be translated “so that you also may keep believing” which is how the New Living Translation has rendered it. In John 19:39, where it says, “came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes”, this phrase also could be translated, “came bringing a package of myrrh and aloes”, which is how the Revised Standard Version renders it. In both cases, a point of spelling changes the possibility of meaning. In the first, “may believe” and “may keep believing” is the change of one letter to conjugate the verb in either the aorist or the present subjunctive case. As to the difference between a “mixture’ or a “package” of spices in 19:39, the spelling is “similar in Greek (the difference is between an "M" and "EL"). Since the "L" in Greek is written like half of an "M," it is easy to see how copyists might have mistaken "EL" for "M" or "M" for "EL." Since the reading "mixture" is found in several kinds of ancient text, it is probably original” (Terry).

Outline of Passage

1. Christ’s Body on the Cross (19:31-34)
2. The Jews Ask Pilate’s Permission to Break Legs so Body can be Taken Away
3. The Soldiers Break no Bones
4. Interlude (19:35-37)
5. A Soldier Pierces Jesus’ Side
6. A Witness Explains its Prophetic Significance
7. Christ’s Body off the Cross (19:38-42)
8. A Disciple Asks Pilate’s Permission to Take Away Christ’s Body
9. A Second Disciple Comes to Help Bury Christ’s Body

CHRIST’S BODY ON THE CROSS

Jesus died one verse before the pericope starts. Pilate was an impotent ruler. Anderson sees impotency in Pilate’s interaction with the Jews, both in his compliance with the demands of the Jewish leadership who wanted the crucified men dead before sundown, and in his acquiescence to Joseph of Arimathea’s request to bury Jesus (Anderson 51). John’s use of the word “ask” ἐρωτάω (erōtaō) in verse 31 supports Anderson’s premise. Erōtaō “suggests that the petitioner is on a footing of equality or familiarity with the person whom he requests. It is used of a king in making request form another king”. A similar dynamic is its usage in Luke 14:32 when the Pharisee “desired” that Christ eat with him, which Vine sees as an indication of the inferior conception the Pharisee had of Christ” (Vine 40). By using erōtaō to ask Pilate to have the men killed and their bodies removed, they were not asking Pilate’s favor but demanding his cooperation from their position of authority.

Not knowing that one of the crucified men had already died, the Jews approached Pilate for permission to break their legs and remove their bodies before commencement of the “high day” Sabbath (vs. 31). This was important to Jews but would not have been as important to Romans, except in Pilate’s case because he wanted to keep the peace in Palestine, a perennial problem for him. Pilate, whose “normal headquarters was in Caesarea… made it a point to be in Jerusalem on the high feasts, to be available to quell any untoward disturbance” (Carson loc. 12529). Anderson may be correct in seeing this as the indication of weak leadership, but Card sees fear as the motivator behind all of Pilate’s actions during Jesus’ trial and execution (Card 194). Whether or not fear motivated Pilate’s response to the Jews’ request in vs. 31, the Jews’ motivation was clear. What Henry calls “their superstition” clearly motivated them to act according to their own religious understandings. If their superstition was a misunderstanding of the Law, particularly Numbers 9:12-13, then the Jews were acting on an erroneous conflation of Moses’ instruction regarding what to do with the Passover lamb’s body, (i.e. don’t leave any until morning; don’t break its bones) with the warning that a ceremonially unclean person who fails to celebrate the Passover due to uncleanness bears the consequences of his sin. The superstition of the Jews drove them to bully Pilate into action.

The Jews asked Pilate to break the crucified men’s legs to hasten their death, an act that Henry calls as an unjust, uncompassionate death in “the most exquisite pain” (Henry; John 19:31). The soldiers, however, did not comply with Pilate’s orders. They did not break Jesus’ legs to expedite his death. He was already dead when the soldiers came, having given up his Spirit the verse before (John 19:30).

Jesus died on Preparation Day. The Sabbath would commence at sunset marking the end of Preparation Day. John 19:14 tells us that Preparation Day was “the day of Preparation of the Passover”. The word preparation, in the context of Preparation Day, needs a closer examination. There are time-orientation discrepancies between the Synoptics and John’s Gospel, something that has been marked by many scholars, and for good reason. If one were to add things up in the text, it would seem that for Jesus to rise from the dead on the first day of the week (John 20:1), having been in the grave for three days (1 Cor. 15:4), Jesus’ crucifixion on Preparation Day would have had to have been on Wednesday of Passion Week. Carson, however, does not agree. Carson says John introduced this time factor as a symbolic way of saying that the true Passover lamb was none other than Jesus himself, noting that the word “preparation” in Preparation Day tells us that Jesus was crucified on Friday. Carson goes on to explain that the high Sabbath was ‘high’ “not only because it fell during the Passover Feast, but because it was the second paschal day, in this case falling on the Sabbath, devoted to the very important sheaf offering” (Lv. 23:11; Carson loc. 12892; loc. 13296).

Anderson takes a different approach. To him there was only one Sabbath during Passion Week, a high Sabbath “because the Passover and the Sabbath were on the same day” (Anderson 42).

MacDonald goes yet another direction. He sees the timing problem as the “Jewish reckoning any part of a day was counted as a day, [s]o, the fact that the Lord was in the tomb for a part of three days was still a fulfillment” of three days in the grave beginning Friday at sunset (1536). MacDonald’s idea makes sense. Sunset Thursday to sunset Friday is Preparation Day, the day Jesus died. Sunset Friday to Sunset Saturday is the High Sabbath (made high because Passover occurs on the weekly Sabbath). Jesus rose from the dead sometime between Saturday night and Sunday morning. That makes three days. The timing works and makes a creditable case for Jesus’ death on Thursday.

Jesus was grouped in a cohort with crucified thieves. To the Jews, crucifixion “was a sign of being accursed (Deut. 21:23; Gal. 3:13) and the crucified “had to be removed and buried before night came” (Torrance 246; 245). The Jews did not beg permission from Pilate to break legs out of any deference to Jesus. In fact, the text indicates he was anonymous to them in his death. He was simply one who was “crucified with” the other two thieves as indicated in John’s use of the word *sustauroō* which means his “actual crucifixion was in company with another” (Vine 138). It was the soldiers who culled Jesus from the cohort by disobeying their orders to break his legs.

This begs a question. Why risk punishment for insubordination? The soldiers could just as easily have broken his legs, whether Jesus was dead or not. “The author’s interest in the fact that Jesus’ legs were not broken, however, has possibly two allusions: (a) the Passover lamb that is sacrificed should not have a broken bone (Ex. 12:46; Num. 9:12); (b) the psalmist noted that the Lord keeps all the bones of the righteous so that “not one of them is broken” (Ps. 34:20; Shepherd 725). This suggests that the soldiers may have unknowingly been fulfilling prophecy in the same way that Caiaphas unknowingly spoke prophetically when he said it was better that one man die than the whole nation perish (John 11:50).

There is also an eschatological side to the disposition of Jesus’ body on the Cross. “The hour has come,” said Jesus in John 12:23, “for the Son of Man to be glorified.” In 19:31 the hour arrived; Jesus died. With his death, the hour of his glorification began. Looking back a few verses to John 12:23, we understand that the phrase, to be glorified, means to be proclaimed God. The word for “to be glorified” in John 12:23 is *doxazō*, “describing the revelation of the character and presence of God in the Person and work of Jesus Christ” (Marshall 415). Although *doxa* is not directly used in the pericope being studied in this paper, the death event is the *doxa* Jesus was referring to when he said, “The hour has come,” in 12:23.

INTERLUDE

In between the discovery that Jesus was dead and the removing of his body from the Cross comes an interlude of commentary from an eyewitness to the events. The witness saw a soldier pierce Jesus’ side (vs. 34). The witness saw blood and water released from the wound without commingling. Neither the reason for the piercing nor the meaning of the issue of blood and water are entirely clear to some scholars. “It was strange, seeing he was dead, that blood should come out; stranger, that water also; and most strange of all, that both should come out immediately, at one time, and yet distinctly. It was pure and true water, as well as pure and true blood. The asseveration of the beholder and testifier of it, shows both the truth and greatness of the miracle and mystery” (Wesley 19:34). To Wesley, John saw the blood and water pour forth from Jesus’ pierced side, not as a parable nor as a flight of fancy but as an eyewitness fact. Following Sava, Carson agrees, writing that in “tests performed on cadavers, it has been shown that where a chest has been severely injured but without penetration, hemorrhagic fluid, up to two litres of it, gathers between the pleura lining the rib cage and the lining of the lung. This separates, the clearer serum at the top, the deep red layer at the bottom. If the chest cavity were then pierced at the bottom, both layers would flow out (Carson loc. 13315-13335).

Card also agrees, although he sees it as less of a miracle and more of a testimony of Jesus’ physical death. “To make certain Jesus is truly deceased, one of the soldiers takes his spear and thrusts it up through the body, under the ribs and into the heart” (Card 200). Anderson adds that John’s emphasis on water and blood “emphasizes the physicality of his having suffered”, which could be a response to the Docetism/Gnosticism at issue in the days John was writing his Gospel, which makes sense in light of John’s original audience at the time of his writing the Gospel (Anderson 35).

Regarding the “asseveration of the beholder and testifier of it” as Wesley put it above, it should be noted that a person’s testimony is objective, not subjective, evidence of an occurrence. Verbrugge suggests the emphatic witness testimony corroborates the fact that blood and water spilled out when Jesus’ side when pierced, adding that the death event witnesses to the coming resurrection. “The truth of Christ’s resurrection cannot be divorced from an event to whose objectivity such testimony was relevant” (Verbrugge 239). Verbrugge is speaking of the piercing that precipitated the issue of blood and water. Indeed, the use of the word pierce in vs. 34, which Carson above says is the word *enyxen* (indicating the physical nudging in of the sword to the heart), is later rendered *ekkento* in vs. 37, which is the same word for pierce used in Rev. 1:7, meaning “prick out” (Vine 471). The change of words from *enyxen* to *ekkento* indicates the witness is right to equate what happened to Jesus’ body at the hour of his death on the Cross as the fulfillment of the prophecies quoted in 19:36-37. Additionally, the use of *ekkento* in vs. 37 and Rev.1:7 is convincing evidence once again that the Apostle John was the witness in vss. 34-37, and the author of the Gospel.

Marshall sees John’s urgency to testify to the truth of what he has witnessed to be an overarching theme of his Gospel, writing that “the Gospel may be regarded as a revelation of *truth* (John 1:14, 17; Marshall 598). John’s purpose is simple: “that you also may believe” (vs. 35). “The benefits that flow from the death of the Son are appropriated by faith, and the witness of the Evangelist is given to foster such saving faith” (Carson loc. 13390). “The truth of the witness [regarding the sudden issue of mixed blood and water] does not refer to its circumstantial accuracy but to the explanation of God’s purposes implied by its narrative” (Lincoln 197). Lincoln’s assessment adds to the scholarly assessments cited above by alluding to God’s purpose for the piercing of Jesus’ side, but is a weak argument for labeling the incident as circumstantial evidence especially considering John’s eyewitness account of seeing the blood and water mixture issue from Jesus’ pierced side.

While the witness testimony is an important component of John’s interlude, there is another character in the interlude, the reader. This “ideal witness stops and explicitly addresses the readers” (Lincoln 197). He urges the reader not only to believe, but also explains the significance of Jesus’ legs remaining unbroken and his side pierced as fulfillment of prophecy (vss. 35-37). “Barrett suggests that what John wants to say is, “You”, (the readers of the gospel), “are not merely to believe that the blood and water did in fact issue from the side of the crucified, but to believe in the full Christian sense” (Ellis 277). One might also deem it possible that the witness was calling attention to the purpose of Passover blood (covering the doorposts to protect believers covered by the blood) as being like the blood/water effusion from Jesus’ wound. Jesus’ blood covers humanity’s sin the way water covers the body in baptism. Blood and water are powerful symbols within the actual fact that blood and water poured forth from Jesus’ pierced side.

CHRIST’S BODY OFF THE CROSS

When Jesus’ body was on the cross, he was seen almost anonymously by the Jews and the Romans as one individual within the cohort of crucified men that day. Taken off the Cross, however, Jesus’ body was not anonymous. His body was culled for special treatment by those who knew him. “The normal Roman practice was to leave crucified men and women on the cross until they died—and this could take days—and then leave their rotting bodies hanging there to be devoured by vultures” (Carson loc. 13293). The Jews do not leave their dead out in the open. Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate’s permission to take the body away. Joseph provided the tomb; Nicodemus provided the burial spices. Together they placed Jesus into a fresh, garden tomb.

The quantity of spices brought to the scene by Nicodemus indicates something much more substantial than a mere package of aloe and myrrh. The quantity is reminiscent of the large amount of perfume with which Mary anointed Jesus at Bethany in John 12, to get him ready for burial. The “purity, quantity and origin [of Mary’s offering] accounts for its appalling cost. When John labels it an expensive perfume, he is thinking on a scale far larger than what we might mean by the words” (Carson loc. 8946). The same might be said of the tomb and the spices. These offerings brought by Joseph and Nicodemus were on a scale far larger than what would be required for the burial of a poor man. Card sees the tomb as fit for a king in the manner of the donkey Jesus rode on his entrance into Jerusalem a week earlier (202). The quantity of spice was similarly impressive, 75 pounds of spice, equivalent to what was used for Herod the Great, whose funeral procession contained “five hundred servants bearing spices” (Carson loc. 13456).

John’s introduction of Nicodemus into the story is more than a simple, historical account of how the spices that were brought to the site. The spices could as easily have been left out of the story if mere history was John’s intention in bringing in Nicodemus. Harking again to the issue of blood and water from Jesus’ pierced side, John gives the reader a clue by spelling out Nicodemus’ role in the burial. The story echoes back to the earlier story of Nicodemus’s night visit to Jesus in John 3. Ellis sees Nicodemus as crucial to the understanding of the water and blood that issued from Jesus’ pierced side. “The extraordinary flow of blood and water” is corroboration for what had been said about baptism in 3:5, “Unless one is born of *water* and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” It also speaks to the Eucharist in 6:33, “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his *blood*, you have no life in you” (Ellis 277). This would fit with the evangelistic tone of the witness to the reader in the interlude.

Shepherd sees irony in the fact that Jesus was betrayed in a garden and then buried in a garden tomb fit for a king. One might also see irony in the fact that Jesus was betrayed by one of the Twelve in a garden and buried by a hitherto secret disciple in the garden tomb. “The fact that Jesus was betrayed in a garden (18:1), and buried in a garden may be the evangelist’s way of emphasizing that what man lost in the Garden of Eden by sin and disobedience is now recovered in a garden by obedience unto death” (Shepherd 726).

CONCLUSION

SUMMATION

The eyewitness testimony in this pericope vividly urges the reader not only to believe in the authenticity of John’s authorship (either personally or vicariously through one or more of his disciples), but also to believe that a key point of our salvation, the physical death of Jesus on the Cross, actually happened. The theological issue attending the hour of Jesus’ death, and the disposition of his body, is the revelation of his twofold identity as Son of Man and Son of God. This may explain the soldiers’ disobedience in not breaking Jesus’ legs. It may also explain the magnitude of the spices Nicodemus brought to the gravesite as being fit for a king.

If rendering a purely historical account was John’s only purpose, he could have left out the soldiers and Nicodemus without affecting its historicity. To authenticate Jesus as Savior, however, both the side-piercing and the tomb account were needed to highlight the fact that Jesus, as Son of Man died a perfectly human death. As Son of God, the soldier account reinforces the fact that when Jesus gave up his Spirit in vs. 30, he gave it up on his own authority. No man could take his life from him, which could explain why the soldiers unaccountably refused to break his legs. Moreover, prophecy was fulfilled when not a bone of his was broken. The quantity of spices brought by Nicodemus also testifies to Jesus as the Son of God, a King.

The details John gives about the body of Christ on and off the Cross seem designed to lead his original readers to believe that Jesus is the Lamb of God, the fulfillment of what was prefigured in the Passover, and is therefore the Messiah as prophesied in the Prophets. The interlude is a frank plea to John’s original readers to believe that what he has written is true.

The invitation goes beyond simply believing the facts that Jesus truly died, but prepares the reader to believe that the coming Resurrection in John 20 would be a resurrection of Jesus’ physical body, a body that had physically died and been raised back to life, contrary to the Gnostic beliefs trending at the time of John’s writing. The unmixed issue of blood and water from his pierced side witness to the fact that Jesus was a dead human, the Son of Man, but it also witnesses to the fact that his death was more than merely human. It was the fulfillment of prophecy.

Furthermore, the blood and water symbolically looked forward to Jesus’ Resurrection in three days’ time where he was revealed as Son of God.

John’s original readers would have connected the Passover lamb’s doorpost-blood, to the blood/water profusion from Jesus’ pierced side. John took what they understood already that sacrificial blood covers sin and extended their understanding to baptism. Jesus covers humanity’s sin the way water covers the body in baptism. Hence John’s emphasis of the blood and water in the pericope. The addition of Nicodemus into the story would have helped make that connection.

John’s original audience, two decades after the 71 C.E. fall of Jerusalem, would likely have been people not reared in Palestine during the days of Jesus ‘ministry. Diaspora Jews would have benefitted from the reminder of how perfectly Jesus’ body became the long-awaited, true Passover sacrifice of which the Law of Moses could only prefigure in the Passover tradition the Jews had practiced for so many centuries. In fact, to Christians of that day, Passover may have already been replaced with Easter celebrations, which might account for the repetition of the fact that it was Preparation Day. In this, John’s urging through the voice of the witness to keep believing went beyond the belief that the death of Jesus happened the way it was written down, but was an evangelistic outreach to draw readers in his day to a belief in Jesus Christ in the full Christian sense.

Believing, in the true Christian sense, meant seeing Christianity for what it really was. John did this through his comparison of how the Jews treated Jesus’ body on the Cross and how the two disciples treated Jesus’ body off the Cross, inviting his original audience to compare the ethics and characteristics of Judaism against the ethics and characteristics of Christianity, displayed as courageous love, within the realm of the Roman Empire.

It may also have been an encouragement to Christians on the brink of the second century to believe and keep believing that Jesus was not killed by the forces of evil, but willingly gave up his Spirit of his own authority. Neither Pilate nor ruling-class Jews nor iron-wielding soldiers could challenge his authority. Despite the pressures of their day, the first century Christians were encouraged to trust that they were as secure in Christ’s service as were Joseph and Nicodemus when asking Pilate for Jesus’ body, despite, Emperor Trajan’s megalomaniacal rulership. Neither Judaism nor Roman politics could subvert the will of Jesus. What was true of Jesus in Pilate’s day was still true of Jesus in Trajan’s day. John urged the Christians of his day to heed the facts he had presented, and to believe, not only that what he had written was true, but that Jesus Christ is truly the Savior in the fully Christian sense.

APPLICATION

The question of who wrote John’s Gospel has historically led some to devalue the Gospel’s relevance and scriptural authority. John’s message regarding the body of Christ on and off the Cross continues to resonate with Christians in the twenty-first century. Skeptics today often cite discrepancies, such as the authorship of John’s Gospel, as reason to believe the Bible is nothing more than good literature. As in the first century, Christians today are largely not biblically literate, and are therefore subject to the pressures of the world to either subvert or abandon the faith, based on discrepancies such as authorship or the strangeness of unmixed blood and water flowing from Jesus’ pierced side.

The pressure of skeptics on Christian belief in Jesus as Son of Man and Son of God leads to a diminished or confused belief in Jesus as the Savior in Christianized but unconverted people. John exhorts today’s Bible readers to believe and keep believing that the coming of Jesus as the Son of Man and Son of God was prophesied in the Old Testament, and whose physical death fulfilled those prophecies. Through the witness account in the interlude, John exhorts us to review the facts regarding the body of Christ on and off the Cross. Jesus had the power and authority to die when, where, and how God chose, against the will of Rome or ruling Jews who would have had him die according to their terms.

Power and authority identify Jesus as the Son of God. We can believe that. The physical death of his body identifies him as the Son of Man. We can believe that. In fact, the eyewitness urges us most emphatically to believe his testimony is true. The body of Jesus, dead on the Preparation Day of Passover, is the fulfillment of prophecy. We too, like John’s original audience, are far removed from the experience of an Old Testament Passover and are exhorted to believe that the Passover blood, and the blood/water profusion from Jesus’ pierced side, both depict the blood that covers humanity’s sin the way water covers the body in baptism. Believe and keep believing this.

Belief, however, goes beyond mental assent to historical facts. To believe is to act on that belief in the true Christian sense of believing. John calls us to compare the ethics and characteristics of Christianity with other systems, religious or secular, of our day and recognize the superiority of Christianity above every other system. It is superior, says John, because true Christianity displays the glory of God through our courageous love, which looks and acts like the courageous love Joseph and Nicodemus displayed in their care of the body of Christ.

This caring for the body of Christ has been expanded in the New Testament to mean that fully believing, in the Christian sense, is to care for one another as the body of Christ, his Church: “Now you are the body of Christ” (1 Corinthians 12:27). To Joseph and Nicodemus, the outworking of true belief was their outpouring of courageous love, a love that seeks not its own good but the good of another. Their extravagant gifts of tomb and spices instructs us likewise to openly act out our belief in Jesus as Savior through displays of courageous love and extravagant generosity one to another in the body of Christ.

John’s evangelistic exhortation in the interlude means the same thing for us as it did for the original readers: believe and keep believing in Jesus Christ in the full Christian sense. This means refusing to allow our faith to remain hidden from the world’s eyes. Just as Jesus was culled from the cohort of crucified men for special treatment on the cross, and was prepared for burial by two formerly hidden disciples, caring for the body of Christ in our day requires the same courageous love in which Christians have boldly culled ourselves from the shadows to identify ourselves with Christ’s concerns in the world.

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