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Suppressed, Adopted and Invented Memories

The Death of Jesus in the Gospel of John

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The Gospel of John reflects several layers of social memory and theological creativity concerning Jesus's death. In the early material, there seems to be a suppressed awareness of Jesus's fate and an unwillingness to unfold it in narrative form – something that recalls the hypothetical sayings gospel Q and the *Gospel of Thomas*. There is also a search for alternative, figurative ways to visualize the endpoint of Jesus's earthly life. Eventually, the narrative memory of Jesus's passion, as told in Mark and Matthew, was adopted with some modifications. Among the modifications of the passion storyline is the narrativization of the image of Jesus as a Paschal Lamb, an image already known to Paul. The most remarkable innovation, however, was the figure of the "Beloved Disciple" as an eyewitness to Jesus's passion and death.

Introduction

Memory is the new, yet old, watchword among those who study the historical Jesus and the gospels (Havukainen 2020). Unfortunately the term is highly ambiguous and, if unqualified, of limited theoretical use. For some scholars, memory stands for a reliable chain of tradition from Jesus to the gospels (already Gerhardsson 1964), or for the testimony of eyewitnesses (Bauckham 2006). Others make virtue out of necessity and develop a kind of theological hermeneutic based on the fact that the only Jesus we can reach is the *remembered* Jesus (already Kähler 1892; Dunn 2003). Still others think in terms of social memory and look for the relevance of the tradition for its bearers (e.g. Le Donne 2011; Kirk 2018). This is the main perspective in recent memory studies on the gospels, and the present paper shares the same interests. At the same time there is reason to stress the creative contribution of the gospel writers in shaping that memory, and this holds true not least for the Gospel of John (Frey 2018).

Passion and non-passion Gospels

In tracing the early memories of Jesus's death, the natural point of departure might seem to be the passion story found in all four canonical gospels; an early retelling is also found in the non-canonical *Gospel of Peter*. However, a unified story with several interconnected scenes and a coherent ideological point of view is more likely the end point rather than the beginning of a memory process. Numerous attempts have been made to uncover a rudimentary passion storyline behind the existing gospels, but the fact is that the Gospel of Mark, probably written in the 70s CE, is the earliest text to contain the full *story* of Jesus's last supper, arrest, trial, crucifixion and burial. Most scholars agree that the final form of John's Gospel was produced

towards or around the end of the first century CE, and that the Johannine community or communities by that time already had a long history. In his influential book *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (1979), Raymond Brown reconstructed the community life in several phases, beginning in the 50s CE or about thirty or forty years before the Gospel. During that time, the community's shared memory of Jesus may have altered or developed considerably.

Martinus de Boer has analysed the Johannine conceptions of Jesus's death in light of Brown's model and argued that in the earliest phase Jesus's death was regarded as an embarrassment and in the next phase still subordinate to other themes such as Jesus's exaltation and departure (de Boer 1996, 93–94, 139–44). In my book, *Becoming John: The Making of a Passion Gospel* (Syreeni 2019), I took a further step. My hypothesis is that there was an earlier Johannine work which did not narrate Jesus's death. The redactor provided the passion-resurrection story and edited the former material to suit the new story. The hypothesis is unusual but not unprecedented. Several scholars assume that before the present Gospel, there was an early collection of miracle stories and a separate passion source. This basic hypothesis comes from Rudolf Bultmann (1971) and was developed by Robert Tomson Fortna, who, however, was inclined to assume that the two documents were joined together before the evangelist (Fortna 1989, 118).

If we consider early Christianity at large, a "passion-less" memory of Jesus is not unique. The hypothetical sayings gospel Q (as reconstructed through Matthew and Luke), written probably about the same time as Mark, does not contain a passion story. Here Jesus stands in the continuum of prophets sent to Israel but killed by an unrepenting people (Q/Luke 11:49–51). The Q group's memory of Jesus does not focus on his death but on carrying his vision on further. Another early document without a passion story is the *Gospel of Thomas*. In its final form *Thomas* is a second-century composition, but its traditions are older. The Gospel envisions Jesus's departure (*GThom* 12) but nowhere implies his passion or death. The *incipit* (*GThom* 1) speaks of the *living* Jesus, and this epithet recurs several times (*GThom* 52, 59, 111). Jesus is also the son of the *living* Father (*GThom* 37), and the purpose of the whole sayings collection is to guide the hearers towards immortality: "Whoever finds the interpretation of these sayings will not experience death" (*GThom* 2).

In some further Nag Hammadi documents, such as the *Apocalypse of Peter* (NHC VII,3), as well as some later traditions including the Quran, Jesus's death is more or less directly denied.[1] The secondary and rationalizing traits in these traditions – the effort to offer alternative explanations to a well-known story – are often unmistakable. A special case of denial is the idea that Jesus was rescued and taken to heaven right from the cross. The *Gospel of Peter*, of which the remaining fragments

1 The *locus classicus* in Quran 4:157 is not quite clear but is traditionally interpreted as meaning that someone else was crucified in the place of Jesus, an idea entertained in some gnostic and Manichaean traditions. Heikki Räisänen (1971, 65–76) shows that 4:157 denies Jesus's death on the cross, although Quranic texts imply that Jesus died later in some way or another. Räisänen's pioneering methodology of reading the Quran with the Quran (see Lindstedt 2022: 289–91) is still valid. Recent interpretations of the Qumranic passage to the effect that Jesus died on the cross (e.g. Cole 2021) are not convincing. Räisänen's verdict on similar earlier readings was clear: artificial (*gekünstelt*, p. 71).

contain most of the passion and resurrection story, has Jesus cry out on the cross, "My power, the power, you have forsaken me", and after these words, he was "taken up" (v. 19). It is possible to see here a kind of assumption (of the soul) or a reminiscence of the Johannine image of the crucifixion as "lifting up" (Bockmuehl 2017: 139), but another possibility is that the verb simply means "he died" (Head 1992: 214–15).

Story, scene and image as forms of memory

To get a glimpse at the Johannine Christians' memories in the decades before the final Gospel and the passion story, I suggest we look into smaller elements of the story, namely, *scenes* and *images*. The most immediate eyewitness accounts are usually sensory images and individual scenes, for obvious reasons. An eyewitness is bound to a particular time and location, whereas a complete story, such as the Markan passion story, has the convenience of an omniscient and moveable narrator. However, once the story is fixed, its scenes lend themselves to separate memorization, reuse and development. Similarly, an image may well originate from a scene or the whole story.

By way of example, we may consider Paul's letters, written some fifteen or twenty years before Mark. In his first letter to the Corinthian community, Paul occasionally refers to Jesus as the sacrificed "Passover Lamb" (1 Cor 5:7) , which may indicate that Paul was aware of the time of Jesus's death around the Passover festival. This *image* does not presuppose a whole passion narrative. Paul's most frequent image for Jesus's death was the cross. Both the "Passover Lamb" and the cross are images that are found and developed further in John.

In 1 Corinthians, Paul also refers to some passion *scenes*. The most extensive reference is to the last supper (1 Cor 11:23–25):

> For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me."[2]

The ritual nature of the eucharist scene makes it memorable on its own right, although the reference to the betrayal or handing over[3] does connect it to the fate of Jesus. Paul also reminds his recipients of Jesus's death, burial and resurrection (1 Cor 15:3–7), and of course he knew that Jesus was crucified (1 Cor 2:8). A passion *story* might be put together from the scenes mentioned by Paul, but it is uncertain if Paul learned the scenes from such a continuous narrative.

Counter-images as means of suppressing the memory of Jesus's death

Although the passion storyline pervades the whole Gospel of John, some images still suggest another outcome for the story. At 7:33–34, Jesus says that he is about to go away: "I am with you for only a short time, and then I am going to the one who sent me. You will look for me, but you will not find me; and where I am, you cannot come." At 8:14.21 Jesus again says that he is going away. The same image permeates the

2 The biblical quotations are from the New International Version (NIV).

3 The verb "hand over" (*paradidonai*) may but need not refer to betrayal. In Romans 8:32 Paul uses the verb to indicate that God himself handed Jesus over (to die for people's sins, cf. Romans 4:25).

farewell section (13:3, 33, 36; 14:4, 28; 16:5, 10, 17), where Jesus also says that even the disciples will "seek" him (13:33). It is customary to dismiss this figure of speech as just a veiled hint of death, but the notion of seeking and not finding should warrant caution. The same notion appears in the *Gospel of Thomas* (*GThom* 38), where it does not imply Jesus's death. Rather, the imagery recalls a topic from Jewish Wisdom traditions.

The Wisdom traits are clear when Jesus in his person takes the role of God's wisdom. He comes from God and is sent by God (8:42). He is, like Wisdom, preexistent (8:28). He is the Light of the world (8:12), as stated in the prologue (1:4–9). To this role belongs furthermore the notion of seeking and not finding. Wisdom is calling, but if not heard or accepted, she withdraws. When hard times come, "they will call to me but I will not answer; they will look for me but will not find me" (Proverbs 1:28). The motif of seeking and not finding pervades the whole Tabernacles discourse in John 7 and 8, and as Catherine Cory observes, the opponents' failed attempts to seize Jesus and their final attempt to stone him (8:59) are "a concrete manifestation of their seeking and not finding" (Cory 1997, 101). In Q/Luke 13:34–35 there is an interesting saying that can be compared with John:

> Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing. Look, your house is left to you desolate. I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord."

Here Jesus, in the style of a Wisdom oracle, rebukes unrepenting Jerusalemites and prophesies the destruction of the town and its temple. Jesus is rejected, but the fate of Jerusalem proves him right and he is vindicated in his glorious return. The people's "not seeing" Jesus before his vindication does not necessarily imply his death, although Q does not deny it. Dieter Zeller (1985) has argued that the Q saying in fact implies Jesus's *assumption* or *removal* to heaven, which could take place after death, but also before death as with the prophet Elijah, who disappeared so his successor Elisha "no longer saw him" (2 Kings 2:12).

At the end of John 12 Jesus hides himself (v. 35b). The story originally envisaged in the prologue (1:1,18) comes to an end (Syreeni 2019, 56–71). Now in 12:35–50 Jesus sums up his proclamation and "returns into the obscurity out of which he emerged" (Barrett 1978, 429). Jesus had promised to be there just a little while (12:35), and "he now hides himself as though 'after a little while' had already become reality" (Haenchen 1984, 101).

Yet the story continues, or rather, a new story begins. Jesus and his disciples are having a supper, and Jesus washes his disciples' feet (13:1–17). The supper scene also signals the beginning of the passion story, as the reader is made aware from the outset (13:2). However, the supper is not a eucharist, although it inaugurates the same chain of events as the last supper in Mark and Matthew. At the same time, it is a last supper because Jesus is going away. The foot-washing is his final command to his disciples (13:15–16): "I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him." Jesus's example and words recall *commissioning*, which is a typical element in farewell scenes. The ensuing

farewell discourses in John 14–17 prepare the disciples for the time after Jesus's departure. But is this "the testament of a dying man", as Ernst Käsemann's provocative essay (1968, 1) called it? Certainly in the final Gospel of John; but without the passion storyline it is something else. In his final prayer Jesus declares that he has finished the work he was sent to do (17:4), so dying on the cross was not part of his mission. In fact, Jesus says he is no longer in the world (17:11). The implicit image is assumption, ascension or exaltation – the exact sense cannot be known because it is never revealed.

It is evident that two distinct storylines are interwoven in the farewell section: a supper with foot-washing, commissioning, farewell and a final prayer, and a Markan or Matthean type of eucharist leading to betrayal, arrest and crucifixion. Precisely how Jesus's departure was understood in the former story remains conjectural because it is not a story at all, but a last-supper *scene* and an *image* of the departing Jesus. Both aspects make sense in a cultic setting: a *commemorative meal* in the perceived presence of the exalted Jesus (Syreeni 2019, 190–94). Scholars have often taken the command to wash each other's feet as symbolic, but Jerome Neyrey (2007, 231) rightly concludes that this ritual "has become a regular part of the Johannine group's worship" and John Christopher Thomas (2014, 125–50) has gathered convincing evidence for this view. Thomas argues further (pp. 150–91) that the practice was meant as a purification of sins committed after baptism. However, this was hardly the original meaning, which was expressed in John 13:12–17. The idea of purification comes from the new episode introduced by the redactor: those who have bathed (i.e. are baptized) only need to have their feet washed (13:6–10). This new understanding of the ritual meal also meant that the meal became the commemoration of Jesus's death: the sins were purified by Jesus's *blood* (cf. 1 John 1:7).

These early images of Jesus's departure do not imply that the community was unaware of Jesus's death, but neither are they mere euphemisms. Rather, they show the community's unwillingness to memorize a painful story; for how could the giver of life die? To be sure, Johannine theology would find several solutions, one such being the image of lifting up.

Partial acceptance: lifting up as an image of crucifixion

The image of Jesus's exaltation or ascension, which was opaquely suggested in the early tradition, was never developed into a narrative. However, it survived in the community's social memory in an altered form, which also made possible the adoption of the core scene of the passion story: the crucifixion. Crucifixion and ascension, though seemingly incompatible, share one imagological feature: *lifting up*. By imaging crucifixion as an upward movement like ascension or exaltation, Jesus's death on the cross could be seen in a positive light as his glorious return to God. In John 12, just before his hiding from the people, Jesus proclaims:

> Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself. (John 12:31–32)

The ensuing comment (12:33) makes clear that the reference is to crucifixion: "He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die." As de Boer (1996, 170) remarks, here "language appropriate to resurrection-ascension is being intentionally *transferred* to the crucifixion". The

"lifting up" imagery was introduced in John 3:14–15:

> Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.

According to Numbers 21:9, "Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, they lived." Clearly the pole stands for the cross in John's comparison. It is customary to interpret the idea of "lifting up" as a gradual movement, or as Brown (1966, 146) put it, "one continuous action of ascent": first up on the cross, then raised from the dead, and finally up to heaven. This is perhaps how the image was meant to work. In reality, however, the movement is not continuously upward; after crucifixion the dead body was taken down and buried. Moreover, the bronze snake comparison rather suggests that Jesus should remain on the cross as a token of salvation. Either way, the *image* of lifting up does not translate into a continuous *narrative*.

While the "lifting up" imagery seems to accept the fact of the crucifixion, it removes the pain and shame of Jesus's actual death much like the earlier tradition did with the image of "going away" (cf. Ashton 2007, 468). The witty image is not just an intellectual ploy. It reflects an enhanced awareness of Jesus's death but also an attempt to merge it with the idea of exaltation.

Adopting and embracing Jesus's death: images of sacrifice and love

The redactor has willingly employed the images mentioned above, although they were not fully compatible with the detailed passion story. However, the ripest theological reflections on Jesus's death in John are seen in those images that comply with the whole story and its brutal factuality. One such image is "the Lamb of God" that is programmatically introduced at the beginning of Jesus's ministry. When Jesus first appears in the Gospel, John the Baptist points to him as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world", and a little later he again calls Jesus "the Lamb of God" (1:29, 36). At this point the image seems out of place – an indication that the redactor has inserted it into an older story – but the crucifixion scene will show its importance. It will also appear that the whole passion story is composed with an eye for this designation.

While the famous dictum in 3:16 speaks generally of God's love for the world, it is particularly Jesus's love for his "own" – his disciples and friends – that motivates his death (Bauckham 2015, 64–72). The passion redactor connects Jesus's love and death forcefully in the story about Lazarus (John 11). Lazarus is described as one whom Jesus loves (11:3), and Jesus travels to raise him from the dead at the expense of his own security. Lazarus's life turns out to be Jesus's death (Syreeni 2019, 101–21). The beginning of the farewell declares: "Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end" (13:1).

In the farewell prayer Jesus declares that he has protected his own and kept them safe (17:12), and at his arrest he cares for the security of his disciples (18:12). The most powerful image of Jesus as protector is the Good Shepherd. The passion redactor has employed the image to stress the Shepherd's readiness to lay down his life for the sheep (10:11, 15, 17–18). This is one of the contexts where the *hyper* formula – (to die) *for* – appears in John. Another context is the Bread of Life discourse, where Jesus says he will give his "flesh" for the life of the world (6:51). In the farewell speech,

Jesus tells his disciples: "Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends" (15:13). The scene following the raising of Lazarus is particularly interesting. The Pharisees and chief priests were alarmed by Jesus's popularity and feared that it would cause disturbances and provoke the Romans to act against the Jewish nation. In their meeting,

> one of them, named Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, spoke up, "You know nothing at all! You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish." He did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, and not only for the nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one. (John 11:49–52)[4]

In typical Johannine irony, the chief priest articulates what in his mind is pragmatic "realpolitik" concerning the Jewish nation but, unconsciously, speaks a prophetic truth. The redactor's comment makes clear that Jesus indeed died for the "nation" of true Israelites (cf. John 1:47) – and even for Gentile believers, bringing them all together (cf. John 17:20).

A persistent debate among Johannine scholars concerns the Gospel's appreciation of Jesus's death, the dividing line being whether it is a vicarious, atoning event. Those who deny it – notably Rudolf Bultmann and Ernst Käsemann – thought that the central idea is Jesus's mission as a revealer; death was just the end of that mission. In his research-historical survey, John Dennis (2006) argues that the deniers fail to give the *hyper* texts due weight. Several features in the overall design of John corroborate the importance of the idea that Jesus's death was an act of love, protection or unification. All these interpretations come from the passion redaction, according to my thesis, and they all boil down to one core belief: Jesus's death was beneficial for the community. In the farewell speech, Jesus assures his followers that "it is for your good that I am going away" (16:7).

Wikimedia Commons (public domain)

Memory written down. P52 dates probably from the second century CE and is often considered the oldest surviving manuscript of the New Testament. It is a tiny fragment containing a few verses from John 18 (Jesus before Pilate). Incidentally, among the handful of second- or third-century New Testament papyrus fragments there is also another one (P90) which contains some lines from the Johannine passion story.

4 I have altered the NIV translation, which has "the Jewish nation" and "that nation" in the narrator's comment. The Greek text has both times just "the nation". I follow here Brown (1966, 438) who also interprets the parenthetical comment as pertaining to the true Israel, that is, the Christ-believers (p. 442).

There is also the wisdom of the seed (John 12:24): "Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds." Although Jesus is not really a martyr in Johannine thought, here the image is obviously of him as a martyr-like figure whose death will produce a worldwide community (Lincoln 2005, 349). At the same time, Jesus provides a model for Johannine believers who may face persecution (16:1–4) and are expected to "bear fruit" (15:2).

It is instructive that the acceptance and theological appreciation of Jesus's death coincides with a keen focus on the community's life setting. Faced with hostility and rejection, many in the Johannine community may have felt that the memory of Jesus's passion addressed their situation well. Not all members of the community thought so, however. John 6:60–71 describes a division among Jesus's disciples, a division which seems to reflect a schism in the Johannine community about Jesus's death (Syreeni 2021: 166–70). In the Johannine letters (1–3 John), a division within the community is also evident, and the stress on Jesus's *blood* (1 John 1:7) points to the issue at stake.

Adopted means of legitimizing the passion story: the scripture

The Johannine passion narrative is adapted from Mark and Matthew, obviously in part through secondary orality, i.e. through oral transmission of these texts (Syreeni 2019, 43–50). The impact of oral transmission makes probable that the story, or individual scenes thereof, were familiar to at least part of the community and were debated.[5] In view of the schism in the community, there was a strong need to *legitimize* the new story. Mark and Matthew had already provided means of legitimizing the passion story, which the Johannine passion redactor could adapt and refine. One such device was the use of Scripture to show that Jesus's death and vindication were foreseen in the sacred texts and were in line with God's plan. Another means, also used by Mark and Matthew, was letting Jesus himself predict his fate. A further means, which is particularly typical of John, is the notion that the disciples "remembered" things about the passion only afterwards – which conveniently explained the silence of the community's earlier tradition.

All three kinds of legitimization are used in the narrative of Jesus's action in the temple (John 2:17–22). In John the temple incident is placed at the beginning of Jesus's public career, while in the other canonical gospels it launches the passion story. Scholars generally assume that the temple incident was the imminent cause for Jesus's arrest and trial (Sanders 1985, 61–75, 301–03). This makes its appearance in the passion context historically plausible, and even John connects the incident to Jesus's death. The incident takes place just before the Passover (2:13). There is a scriptural citation from Psalm 69:9, but the verb tense is changed to a future: "Zeal for your house will consume me" (2:17). The temple action in John is narrated with such urgency and intensity (Fortna 1989, 121) that the "consuming zeal" aptly characterizes Jesus's action, but the citation also casts the shadow of the cross over Jesus. In the

5 The reaction in John 12:27 to Mark 14:36 and Matthew 26:39 might well be such a case. Any disagreement between Jesus and his Father was unthinkable in Johannine thought. In refuting – and simultaneously referring to – the Markan/Matthean tradition, the passion redactor let a voice from heaven confirm that Jesus's passion was in accordance with the divine plan.

attached dialogue where Jesus is asked to give a sign of his authority (vv. 18–22), the connection to Jesus's death is finally spelled out. Both the scriptural citation and Jesus's answer concerning the sign are "remembered" by the disciples:

> His disciples remembered that it is written: "Zeal for your house will consume me."
>
> The Jews then responded to him, "What sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." They replied, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?" But the temple he had spoken of was his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken. (John 2:17–22)

The saying about destroying the temple appears in various forms in other gospels, too. In Mark (14:58) it is presented as a false accusation against Jesus in the trial, and Matthew follows Mark with a slight modification. Another form of the saying is uttered by mocking passers-by at the crucifixion (Mark 15:29–30; 22:40). Even the *Gospel of Thomas* (71) has a variant of the saying, and a reminiscence is found in Acts 6:14. Like the temple action, the saying is very likely an authentic memory. It was so embarrassing – hence memorable – that the evangelists hesitated to admit that Jesus had really said it.[6] The Johannine passion redactor was able to put it on Jesus's lips in an altered form as a prediction of his resurrection. At the same time, the image of the "consuming zeal" was modified. Jesus's death was not a tragic event but something that he was fully prepared for; he was the master of his destiny (cf. John 10:17–18).

In the passion story, too, one interpretative device is to show how the various scenes fulfilled prophecies from the Hebrew Bible. While also Mark and Matthew cite such prophecies along the way, John conspicuously annotates the crucifixion scene with several explicit quotations. When Mark (15:24) and Matthew (27:35) relate that the soldiers who crucified Jesus divided up his clothes by casting lots, they probably knew that this narrative detail was based on Psalm 22:19 although they did not cite it. John, however, not only has the explicit biblical reference but explains how the division and tossing took place:

> When the soldiers crucified Jesus, they took his clothes, dividing them into four shares, one for each of them, with the undergarment remaining. This garment was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom. "Let's not tear it," they said to one another. "Let's decide by lot who will get it." This happened that the scripture might be fulfilled that said, "They divided my

6 Embarrassment as a criterion of authenticity is debatable (Rodríguez 2012), but it can be part of a plausible and coherent overall picture of the Jesus tradition and help understand the emergence and ramification of various interpretations, which is the case here. Rodríguez argues that not everything that seems embarrassing to scholars may have been so to early Christ-believers; for Paul the humiliating crucifixion was the core of his gospel (p. 147). True, but Paul recognized it was a scandal that made all human wisdom obsolete (1 Corinthians 1:18–25). In Johannine memory, the scandal was overcome along a different path.

> clothes among them and cast lots for my garment." So this is what the soldiers did. (John 19:23–24)

The meticulous description does not indicate that we are dealing with actual events; the expansion just makes a better fit between the narrative event and the quotation. It would seem that Jesus himself wished to produce such a fit in 19:28, when he says "I am thirsty" in order to fulfil a biblical passage – the passage is not quoted but clearly Psalm 69 is meant (Barrett 1978, 553).

The invented eye witness: the beloved disciple

The scriptural testimony and the disciples' recovered memory were a useful justification for telling a new story. In addition, some characters from the earlier Johannine narrative reappear in the passion story. The unnamed woman who anointed Jesus for his burial (Mark 14:3) becomes Mary of Bethany (John 11; 12:3), and Nicodemus whom the readers of the old story knew from a nightly conversation with Jesus (John 3) now accompanies Joseph of Arimathea (from Mark's passion story) to the tomb (John 19:38–42). In this manner, the familiar characters become passion witnesses. As the crucial events are set in motion a still more powerful means of legitimization is introduced: the disciple whom Jesus loved. He is an eyewitness who saw it all happen, from the betrayal to the cross and the empty tomb. In the last lines of the Gospel (21:24), he is even named as the author of the whole story.

The identity of the Beloved Disciple has always intrigued scholars. Many names have been dropped: John the son of Zebedee, Lazarus, Mary Magdalene, John Mark, Paul, even Judas. Yet the anonymity of the character is not accidental. By not naming the disciple, the redactor stresses his function and agenda. Another reason is that the character is for the most part fictive, and the redactor avoids pushing his fiction too far. The fictionality is evident in the way the character is added to the Markan and Matthean scenes without altering the plot. The technique is in principle similar to how Forrest Gump in the movie of that name (1994) is made to participate in iconic moments of recent American history.

The Beloved Disciple makes his first appearance at the last meal. He is reclining next to Jesus, literally in the "bosom" of Jesus (13:23). The prologue to the earlier gospel described Jesus in the "bosom" of God and "interpreting" God (1:18). Now, in the new story, the Beloved Disciple is the trustworthy guide to understanding Jesus's mission. The Beloved Disciple also stands at the cross together with Jesus's mother, and Jesus makes him an adopted son: "Woman, here is your son", "Here is your mother" (19:26–27). The adoption designates him as a kind of successor to Jesus, an image already suggested when he was introduced in 13:23, but he also represents all those who can now be children of God (cf. 1:12). In this way, the wisdom of the seed (12:24) comes true: the death of Jesus would produce many seeds for God.

A comparison with Mark and Matthew shows that the Beloved Disciple does not change anything in the story but is simply added; for example, Mark and Matthew have Jesus's mother and other women at the cross but no disciple. In other passion scenes the Beloved Disciple is in the company of Peter, and he is always better off: he tells Peter who the betrayer is (13:24–26), helps him into the high priest's courtyard (18:16), runs ahead to the empty tomb and understands before Peter that Jesus has risen (20:1–19). The scenes seem symbolic

of a leadership dispute. Although Peter is presented in less favourable terms, the final scene confirms his role as the Shepard of the church (21:15–19). The Beloved Disciple has another role of honour: the spiritual leader of the Johannine community. If his fictional character has borrowed anything from a real person, it must be sought here.

The Beloved Disciple thus has a special role as a trustworthy witness (21:24). His testimony – his reliable *memory* – must reasonably include all the passion events and even the whole story, but Brown (1966, 1127) is probably right that the reference in 21:24 is specifically to the crucifixion scene in 19:35, where the reliability of the witness is described in similar terms: "The man who saw it has given testimony, and his testimony is true. He knows that he tells the truth, and he testifies so that you also may believe." The man who saw Jesus's crucifixion and the dead body is not identified as the Beloved Disciple, but no doubt he is meant. What did he see? Two things are mentioned:

> When [the soldiers] came to Jesus and found that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. Instead, one of the soldiers pierced Jesus's side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water. (John 19:33–34)

The meaning of the unbroken legs is highlighted a little later in the scriptural quotation in 19:36, which concerns the Passover lamb (Exodus 12:46): "These things happened so that the scripture would be fulfilled: 'Not one of his bones will be broken.'" Here, at last, the reader will learn why the Baptist had twice called Jesus "the Lamb of God" (1:29–30). Now it also becomes clear why the last meal could not be a Passover meal: Jesus himself is the Passover Lamb.

The second thing observed by the Beloved Disciple was the flow of blood and water from Jesus's body. The symbolism of blood and water has been interpreted variously, but the most obvious starting point for assessing its meaning is the statement in the first letter of John:

> This is the one who came by water and blood – Jesus Christ. He did not come by water only, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth. For there are three that testify: the Spirit, the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement. (1 John 5:6–8)

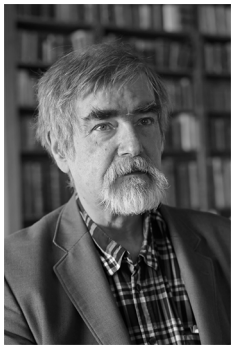
The letter stresses that water *and* blood are needed for the right confession. The Gospel confirms the letter writer's theological stance. The early Johannine recipe for life was "by water", as for example Jesus's words to Nicodemus (3:5) and the Samaritan woman (4:14) indicate. Now the Beloved Disciple sees that water *and* blood came out from Jesus's body. The recipe for life now includes faith in Jesus's salvific, sin-forgiving death. In this way, the agenda of the author of 1 John – probably the presbyter of the two other letters of John – has become part of the adapted passion story witnessed by the Beloved Disciple and a memory of the Johannine community.

Conclusion

During the decades of its existence, the Johannine community struggled with the memory of Jesus's death and developed several strategies to cope with it. We do not know how early the elements of the passion story reached the community, but initially the memory of Jesus's death was suppressed in favour of alternative images. How and why did the passion story and storyline win the day? Pressure from groups that

accepted the passion type of gospel may have been a factor (Crossan 1998: 112). At the same time, the community had to interpret Jesus's death in ways that conformed to its view of Jesus and his mission. The witty "lifting up" imagery maintained the image of Jesus's glorious return to heaven but could not sustain the harsh realism of the passion story. The most mature Johannine interpretations of Jesus's death, which also justified the adoption of and innovative reflection on the passion narrative, were in terms of sacrifice, atonement, self-giving love and birthing a new family of God.

For all its theological innovations, the Gospel of John could not entirely erase the horror that lurks beneath the historical events and the earliest written passion story. The obviously historical fact that the disciples fled when Jesus was arrested (Mark 14:50) is still a painful memory (John 16:32), which the evangelist tries to explain away (18:8). The dreadful "hour" (Mark 14:35) of Jesus's passion even pervades the whole Gospel of John (2:4; 7:30; 8:20; 12:23, 27; 16:21; 19:27). A violent death is seldom remembered as a beneficial event initially; positive interpretations emerge later. Jesus's death seems no exception. ■



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