

Reading John's Gospel from an Ecological Perspective:

Part 1

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Reading the Scriptures from an Ecological Perspective

Purposefully making the ecological crisis a situation in which to listen to the Scriptures

"The Johannine story . . . aims at developing a certain model reader who is able to draw the right moral conclusions from the narrative on her/his own. . . . The narrative encourages an ethical creativeness driven by a distinctive relationship to Jesus Christ." (From Michael Labahn, "It's Only Love—Is that All? Limits and Potentials of Johannine 'Ethics'" p. 42-43)

John sets the story of Jesus within a cosmic framework

All things came into being through him and without him not one thing came into being (John 1:3)

This reflects a Jewish world view as seen in Rom 1:20

Ever since the creation of the world, God's eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things God has made.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us (John 1:14)

For God so loved the world that he sent his only Son... (John 3:16)

The Johannine Garden

- ... he went out with his disciples across the Kidron valley to a place where there was a garden ... (18:1; Gk, *kēpos*)
- Judas ... knew the place, because Jesus often met there with his disciples (18:2).
- "Did I not see you in the garden with him?" (18:26)
- Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid... (19:41)
- Supposing him to be the gardener...(20:15; Gk, *kēpourous*)

The paradise/'garden motif elsewhere in the Johannine writings

- To everyone who conquers, I will give permission to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God. (Rev 2:7)
- Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they will have the right to the tree of life (Rev 22:14)

The Johannine garden is Eden/Paradise and also possibly the garden of the Song of Songs

For now the winter is past
the rain is over and gone
The flowers appear on the earth
the time of singing has come...Song of Songs 2:11-12

- The Johannine emphasis on Passover
- Now the Passover of the Jews was near, and many went up from the country to Jerusalem before the Passover to purify themselves. (11:55)
- Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. (12;1)
- Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come . . . (13:1)
- They themselves did not enter the headquarters, so as to avoid ritual defilement and to be able to eat the Passover. (18:28)
- [Pilate said to the people], 'But you have a custom that I release someone for you at the Passover.' (18:39)
- Now it was the day of Preparation for the Passover; and it was about noon. [Pilate] said to the Jews, "Here is your King!" (19:14)
- And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there. (19:42)

A Royal Gardener speaks:

I dug out a canal from the Upper Zab, cutting through a mountain peak . . . I watered the meadows of the Tigris and planted orchards with all kinds of fruit trees in the vicinity. I planted seeds and plants that I had found in the countries through which I had marched and in the highlands which I had crossed: pines of different kinds, cypresses and junipers of different kinds, almonds, dates, ebony, rosewood, olive, oak, tamarisk, walnut, terebinth and ash, fir, pomegranate, pear, quince, fig, grapevine . . . The canal water gushes from above into the garden; fragrance pervades the walkways, streams of water as numerous as the stars of heaven flow in the pleasure garden. . . Like a squirrel I pick fruit in the garden of delights. (King Ashurnasirpal II of Assyria 9th cent. BCE)

On the hanging gardens of Babylon, see S. Dalley, *The Mystery of the Hanging Garden of Babylon: An Elusive World Wonder Traced* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 48.

See also images of The 6th cent. BCE Garden of Cyrus the Great of Persia, UNESCO World Heritage Site in Pasargadae, Iran

'Our remote ancestors were creatures of the forest. Our spirit is tuned to its sounds, its sights, its scents. It weaves itself around our very genetic makeup . . . we are all made psychologically and indeed spiritually, in and by and for that kind of landscape' (John Feehan)

Readmission to the Garden of Eden as a metaphor for restoration

For the LORD will comfort Zion;
 he will comfort all her waste places,
 and will make her wilderness like Eden,
 her desert like the garden of the LORD;
 joy and gladness will be found in her,

thanksgiving and the voice of song. Isa 51:3

Do not fear, O soil;
be glad and rejoice,
for the LORD has done great things!
Do not fear, you animals of the field,
for the pastures of the wilderness are green again. (Joel 2: 22)

God's Sabbath Work: John 5: 16-18

Therefore the Jews started persecuting Jesus, because he was doing such things on the sabbath. But Jesus answered them, "My Father is still working, and I also am working."

How is the Father constantly at work?

Giving life / creating / 'a performance art'

Jesus does the Father's work --- 'And I am working' (Jn 5:17)

'I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly' (John 10:10)

Jesus sends us to do that work. 'As the Father sent me, so I send you' (20:21)

Gardening: the primary human work, a sharing in the life-giving ways of God

- My Father is the *gēorgos* (Jn 15.1)
from the Greek: *gē* (earth) + *ergon* (work)

Gardening work ... enables us to think, feel, and act in the world with greater awareness for life's complexity and depth.

Gardens are the concentrated and focused places where people discover and learn about life's creativity and interdependence.

Insofar as we are good gardeners we will commit to working with God's creativity in ways that strengthen human and nonhuman life together.

When we garden poorly or recklessly, we will inevitably lay waste the world.

Norman Wirzba, *Food and Faith*, p. 37

Part 2

Water and Fragrance: Features of Eden / the Paradise Garden

Out of the ground the LORD God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. ¹⁰ A river flows out of Eden to water the garden, and from there it divides and becomes four branches. (Genesis 2: 9-10)

- Paradise as described in 1 Enoch 30-32
- A watered valley with beautiful trees
- Their fragrance like that of mastic
- Fragrant cinnamon trees
- Aloe trees
- When one picks the fruit it gives the most pleasant odours
- seven mountains full of nard
- The beautiful tree of wisdom (from which Adam and Eve ate) its fragrance spreading and reaching afar

Water in an ancient Near Eastern royal paradise/garden

- Run-off provided mountain spring water for drinking
- Irrigated nearby kitchen gardens and orchards
- Symbolized bestowal of life and warding-off of death
- created the contrast between the irrigated garden and the typical ANE dry terrain
- Validated a royal gardener's claim to godlike status

WATER

A silver thread running through the Fourth Gospel

The Samaritan Woman

- She goes to the well at midday
- She engages in a lively debate with Jesus
- She leaves her water jar behind (as the apostles left their boats behind in the synoptics)
- She brings her whole village to faith in Jesus
- In the Eastern church she has been given the name, Photina – Enlightened One

Betrothal Scenes at wells

- Abraham's servant encountering Rebekah at a well, a wife for Isaac (Gen 24:10-61)
- Jacob meets Rachel at a well (Gen 29:1-20)
- Moses meets Zipporah at a well (Exod 2:16-22)

The five 'husbands'—See 2 Kings 17:29-34

Jesus the bridegroom: wooing Samaria back into full belonging

He who has the bride is the bridegroom; the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice; therefore this joy of mine is now full. (John 3:29)

Living Water

Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life."

Jesus at the feast of Tabernacles (John 7:37-38)

If anyone thirsts, let them come to me and drink

As the Scripture says, 'From within him / out of his *koilia* (the belly, the womb) will flow rivers of living water.

Not clear exactly what Scripture passage is Jesus quoting

[God] made streams come out of the rock,
and caused waters to flow down like rivers. . .

[yet they spoke against God saying,]

Even though he struck the rock so that water gushed out and torrents overflowed,
can he also give bread, or provide meat for his people?" (Ps. 78.16.20)

[God] turns the rock into a pool of water,
the flint into a spring of water. (Ps. 114.8)

From Justin (ca 150 CE)

- Jesus is 'the spring of living water which gushed forth from God' (*Dial.* 69; see also *Dial.* 120).
- Christians see Jesus as 'the good Rock, which causes living water to burst forth for the hearts of those who by him have loved the Father of all, and which gives those who are willing to drink of it the water of life' (*Dial.* 114).
- Christians have been 'quarried from the bowels (*koilia*) of Christ' (1 *Apol.* 135).

Water: Symbol of the Spirit

- God's gift of the Spirit is not measured out (Jn 3.34).
- The outpouring of the divine Spirit is like 'water on the thirsty land' (Isa. 44.3),
- a blessing not restricted to human beings, but poured out 'on all flesh' (Joel 2.28),
- bringing that sense of renewal, refreshment and cleansing that rain showers bring to everything that lives—plant, animal and human—in a dry, hot and dusty environment (See Ezek. 36.25-26).

A sudden flow of water (19:34). At once blood and water came out / gushed out

Is this to verify Jesus' death?

Is there symbolism in the blood and water?

Variants in manuscripts:

- blood and water
- water and blood
- water (only)

Two other indications of textual disagreement

Matt 27:49 And another took a spear and pierced his side, and out came water and blood. Found in two 4th century Mss

1 John 5:6. This is he who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ, not with the water only, but with the water and blood.

Ezekiel's vision of water flowing from the Temple: a vision for the whole creation

- ... water was flowing ... down from below the south end of the threshold of the temple ...
- Ankle deep, then knee deep, then up to his waist, then 'a river deep enough to swim in'
- Ezekiel 47:9 Wherever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will live, and there will be very many fish, once these waters reach there. It will become fresh; and everything will live where the river goes.
- Ezekiel 47:12 On the banks, on both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing.

Royal burial

- In the royal garden
- Aromatic spices
- Linen cloths

Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. (John 19:39)

In the ancient world, ownership of vast quantities of these luxury items was the prerogative of kings. In fact, spices and fragrant oils were as important a part of a royal treasury as gold and silver (2 Kgs 20.13). The honour due to the body of a king included laying it on a bier 'filled with various kinds of spices prepared by the perfumer's art' (2 Chron. 16.14). Josephus records, for example, that five hundred servants carried the burial spices when Herod the Great died (*Ant.* 17.198-99).

A pound of costly perfume

Pistikē = genuine, true, so costly--- probably a trade name for myrrh (*smyrna*)

Myrrh (Greek: *Smyrna*) was held in high regard as a domestic perfume and as an aromatic deodorant, especially for use in embalming the dead.

pistis: faith,

pistos: faithful or believing,

pisteuo: I believe