

The Passion of Jesus in John's Gospel

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Preface

When asked to prepare an input for this conference on I opted for a relatively simple paper, without footnotes or the customary apparatus required in a scholarly journal. My purpose is to highlight elements within the text of that are specific to the fourth Gospel, so as remind myself (and you) of both the richness and strangeness of this inspired account of how Jesus was taken from this earth, to return to the Father. To help focus my thoughts on John's specific theology I've re-read some authors I used to consult while I was still teaching New Testament to students in Dublin. The main works consulted for this paper are these:

- Brown, Raymond: *The Death of the Messiah* (Anchor Bible, 1998)
- Collins, Raymond: *Studies in the Fourth Gospel* (Louvain, 1990)
- Culpepper, Alan: *The theology of the Johannine passion narrative* (Neotestamentica, 1997)
- Dodd, Charles H.: *The interpretation of the 4th Gospel* (Cambridge 1953; online 2003)
- Fortna, Robert, *Jesus in the Johannine Tradition* (Louisville, 2001)
- Just, Felix: *The Passion and Death of Jesus* (online, 2015)
- Senior, Don: *The Passion of Jesus in the Gospel of John* (Collegeville, 1991)

What I have to say will follow these three headings:

1. The Paschal Mystery (of suffering followed by glory) as John's principal message
2. Elements of John's style and concern, in the Passion story (Jn 18-19)
3. The historicity question: Is John's account literally true? If not, what is it?

First, perhaps, we should remind ourselves that all four of our Gospels are impressionistic, literary works of art, inspired theological interpretations of the impact made on his followers by the life and teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, whom they revered as their mediator with the living God. Just as impressionist painters moved away from literal, photographic representations of what they could see on the surface, and tried to express what impressions and emotions they held in their hearts, so each Evangelist views the story of Jesus through the lens of a distinctive authorial style and set of interests. This is especially clear in the Passion Narratives. While all four Gospels agree on a few essential facts, such as the arrest and trial of Jesus, his being mocked, abused and crucified, their differences in detail is quite startling. And just as John differs notably from the three Synoptic Evangelists in his telling the story of Christ's ministry, so he continues to do in his narrating of the Lord's passion.

1. The Paschal Mystery in the Fourth Gospel

From even a cursory reading of the Fourth Gospel we immediately see that the author has a clear theological message to convey. Although he sometimes makes a strong claim for the truth of his account, he is not primarily concerned with an external narrative of facts and events, a Life of Jesus that would qualify as biography in the modern sense. His purpose is to convey a deeper, higher truth than could be perceived on the surface of things. Towards the end of his text he candidly admits that his writing has a religious purpose: “These things were written that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and believing have life in his name” (Jn 20:31). He conveys a message about how we are blessed, and how God wants us to live our lives under that blessing.

This faith-perspective is also crystal-clear in the celebrated Prologue to John’s Gospel. Where Mark begins abruptly with the preaching of John the Baptist, and Luke and Matthew have stories from Jesus’ infancy, John opens with a soaring theological hymn, to tell us the inner truth of things. He adumbrates the whole story of Jesus as a sending of God’s Word into our world, to bring us life and light, grace and truth; ultimately, to make us all children of God. Jesus himself is the “only-begotten son of God”, the Word-made-flesh, the light who shines in our darkness, the one who lets us see his glory.

Even in the Prologue, John shares his vision of Jesus’ life as a paschal journey, intended to pass through a bitter testing in this world, before returning in triumph to his Father who sent him. Although he came into a world that owed its being to him, the world did not recognise him (1:10). He came to his own people, but they did not receive him (1:11). As in an orchestral overture, these discordant notes prepare for the themes of incomprehension and rejection of the Messiah that will recur in John’s telling of Jesus’ ministry, and in particular his suffering and death. But always there is light at the end of the tunnel. The paschal journey ends in the Promised Land. In the end, despite the darkness fighting against the light brought by the Incarnate word, it is unable to dominate or master it (1:5).

The high-point of the Prologue is surely that “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (1:14). At least two things should be noted about this term “dwell.” First, it translates “eskenosen,” literally he “pitched his tent” among us. Tent-dwelling suggests the nomadic life of the early Israelites on their journey to the Promised Land. Secondly, it is phrased in past tense, suggesting already that Jesus has returned to where he fully belongs, in the bosom of the Father (1:18). This presages how John will later describe the meaning of the Passion story as Jesus returning home. At the time of the Passover festival, he “knew that his hour had come and that he must leave the world and go to the Father” (13:1). It’s no exaggeration to say that the whole thrust of John’s Gospel is about the journey of Jesus back to the Father, opening the way for all his followers to make that paschal journey with him. In this sense we can also apply to John’s account the description that German theologian Martin Kähler once used for the Gospel of Mark; it is “a passion narrative with a long introduction.”

Presages of the Passion, in the Book of Signs

Alerted to John's propensity to foreshadow the Passion of Jesus, we can find many instances of it throughout the Book of Signs (John 2-12). For those whose hearts were open to mystery, these *semeia* (signs) were pointers to Jesus's inner divinity, to the intimate union of the Son with the Father. Within the first of his miraculous signs, the transformation of water into wine at Cana in Galilee, John indicates an initial reluctance in Jesus to resolve the young couple's social crisis. At first he resists his mother's wish for him to intervene and provide some extra wine, by saying "my hour has not yet come!" (1:4). "The hour" In the gospel of John is a foreshadowing reference to Jesus' crucifixion and ultimately his hour of glory that will bring about a new era for mankind. It is linked to another saying, when Jesus tells the woman at the well in Samaria that "the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth" (4:23).

After describing the driving of the merchants from the Temple precincts (2:12-22; the second sign), John has Jesus utter this mysterious challenge to the authorities: "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it again." The evangelist explains those enigmatic words as follows: "He he was speaking of the temple of his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken." (2:22). So the temple-cleansing is also a foretaste of the Passion, not just because of the hostility it generated among the religious authorities, but as a prophetic declaration that the central sanctuary in the coming new age will be the person of Christ himself, first crucified and then glorified.

One of John's recurring themes is the Lord's total awareness of what goes on around him and what is about to happen. In his opening to the chapters about the Last Supper, John tells us explicitly that Jesus "knew that his hour had come to leave this world and go to the Father" (13:1). But already at the end of chapter 2, when Jesus was in Jerusalem for the Passover, he would not entrust himself to the crowd's enthusiasm, "because he himself knew what was in everyone" (2:25). The inner vision that allowed Jesus to immediately recognise the potential of Simon, whom he called Cephas or Peter (1:42), and to see into the hearts of Nathaniel (1:47), Nicodemus (3:1-3) and the Samaritan woman (4:17-18) also made him acutely aware of the potential delusions and dangerous hatreds that he provoked among sections of his own people. After feeding the five thousand (6:1-13), Jesus realizes that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, so he withdraws to the mountain by himself (6:15). Later in that chapter when he sees many of his erstwhile followers deserting him ("This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" 6:60), he refuses to change his teaching, declaring that "no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father." The Evangelist comments that "Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him" (6:64). The deed of Judas is already foreseen. In the chapter following, when some temple police were sent to arrest him, Jesus says, "I will be with you a little while longer, and then I am going to him who sent me. You will search for me, but you will not find me; and where I am, you cannot come." (7:33-34). Clearly this refers to his coming transition from this world to the Father.

The foreshadowing of the Passion becomes more explicit still in the final three chapters of the Book of Signs. In chapter 10, calling himself the Good Shepherd who totally cares for his sheep (Jn 10), Jesus becomes explicit about his coming self-sacrifice. He declares that "the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (10:11) and that "I lay down my life for the sheep" (10:15); then he states

confidently, “I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord” (10:17-18). Again John notes how the Jews were divided about him. “Many of them were saying, ‘He has a demon and is out of his mind. Why listen to him?’ but others were saying, ‘These are not the words of one who has a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?’” (10:20-21). The controversy led to another attempt on his life “Then they tried to arrest him again, but he escaped from their hands. He went away again across the Jordan ... and he remained there” (10:39-40).

The story of the raising of Lazarus is told in such a way as to foretell the Lord’s own passion and death. Jesus is far away when he hears that his friend Lazarus is severely ill. At the proposal that he go to visit his friend, some of the disciples object, “Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?” (11:8) Then, when Jesus says, “let us go to him.” the skeptical Thomas said to his fellow disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him” (11:16). There’s surely a passion prediction in Jesus’ words, “Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may have faith” (11:15). His raising of Lazarus from the dead will prepare his disciples to believe that Jesus, too, will be raised from the dead. It is within this context that Jesus makes the memorable prophecy to Martha, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die” (11:25-26).

It is no accident that immediately after the Lazarus miracle which was our Lord’s ultimate sign of divine, life-giving power, John puts his report about the leaders’ plan to do away with Jesus. The urgency is clearly underlined. “The chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the council, and said, ‘What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation’” (11:47-48). John then has Caiaphas the high priest declare it better to have one man die for the people than for the whole nation to be destroyed (v.50), and adds that these words prophesied “that Jesus was about to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God” (11:51-52) – an interpretation surely far from the mind of Caiaphas, but dear to that of the Evangelist.

Religiously, politically and socially, the scene was set for destroying Jesus. His enemies had both the motive and the determination to do it. But then in chapter Twelve, John makes clear that Jesus understood and pre-accepted his coming death, as something necessary to achieve a higher, universal purpose. Several elements in this final chapter of the Book of Signs give it a distinctively proleptic quality, looking forward to what must be achieved. It is like the immediate prologue to the Passion narrative.

First we have the anointing of Jesus’ feet by Mary of Bethany, whose scented ointment filled the whole house with fragrance. To Judas’ objection that this was a foolish waste Jesus says, “Leave her alone. She has kept it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.” (12:7-8). The day of his burial is so imminent that the pouring of the ointment is fully justified, and is accepted as a significant act of loving veneration. Second, when some foreigners come looking to meet Jesus, and Philip and Andrew tell him of this, he makes some statements heavy with prophetic significance. Clearly he knows that his fateful time is now. “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” (12:24) He declares that “Those who love their

life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” This is followed by something very unusual in John’s Gospel, the admission that Jesus was distressed by the prospect of his coming Passion. The passage is referred to the Little Agony in John: Jesus says “Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say - ‘ Father, save me from this hour’? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.” (12:27-28). He recovers his composure and declares that the sinful rule of the Prince of this world is over, and that he himself, Jesus, is bringing in a new age of hope and life. “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” To avoid any ambiguity John adds that “He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.” (12:32-33)

Thirdly, John now fills out more sharply the image he had projected at the start, that Jesus came like light into darkness, and that those who love the dark rejected him. He hid for a time, because “Although he had performed so many signs in their presence, they did not believe in him. This was to fulfill the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah: “Lord, who has believed our message, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?” And so they could not believe, because the prophet had also said, “He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart, so that they might not look with their eyes, and understand with their heart and turn - and I would heal them.” (12:36-41). The miraculous signs had failed to move the majority of the people to faith. It now remained for Jesus to return from this world to the Father, and open wide the way to all who would follow him there.

The Passion in John’s Last-Supper narrative

We need hardly examine the Last Supper narrative (Jn 13-17) in any detail, since it is so well known to you all. From its richly-textured opening verse onward, it is clearly cast as a set-piece of farewell, as Jesus prepares to leave this world and opens his heart and mind to his friends, about what he treasures and about the reasons for his going. The New English Bible offers a nice translation of John 13:1. “It was before the Passover festival. Jesus knew that his hour had come and he must leave this world and go to the Father. He had always loved his own who were in the world, and now he was to show the full extent of his love.”

We note the time-reference, which links the supper - and all that would follow it - with the Passover, the major Jewish festival, celebrating their liberation from slavery and their journey to the promised land. The “hour” that Jesus had long anticipated is now arrived; but while suffering and death are implied in his leaving this world, his mind is set on returning to the Father who sent him. And then Jesus, who has shown such love (agapé) to “his own” (tous idious) during his lifetime, will prove this love to the utmost in the events to follow. The phrase *eis to telos* means that he will love them either “to the end” or “to the fullest extent.” According to John, the full extent of Jesus’ love for his friends would be shown not only by humbly serving them in the foot-washing during the supper (13:3-15) but in the Passion that he will endure the following day. The evangelist might again have used about loving them “*eis to telos*” the same interpretive phrase as earlier, “He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.”

The supper narrative is punctuated with references to his imminent departure, but equally with words of encouragement; after he has gone they will have the help they need, to hold on to all he has given them and to love one another as their most basic value. Whatever anguish they might feel during his

coming struggle, or in the future struggles that await them as Christians when Jesus has returned to the Father, they must not let their hearts be troubled (14:27), let themselves be guided by the Spirit, the Paraclete (14:26; 15:26-27), and ultimately be glad about their master's Passion, since it is the means of his return to the realm of God. "If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father." (14:28)

The same sense of welcoming his own departure from this world runs through the solemn "High Priestly Prayer" spoken by Jesus in chapter 17. In that hour, when he prays the Father to glorify his Son, he shows utter confidence in the indestructible Father/Son bond, which will not be dissolved by death. "And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me." (17:11). So certain is of the resurrection beyond the cross he that he asks the Father, "I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world." (17:24).

This strong sense of the unique, unbreakable union of Jesus with his divine Father impregnates the Johannine Passion Narrative with its special flavour, making it both inspiring in its theology but tantalising with regard to John's historical accuracy.

2. Elements of John's style and concern, in the Passion story (Jn 18-19)

We turn now to see how John's style of faith and his concern for theology are reflected in his two chapters (18-19) about the actual passion of Jesus. Here too, as in the body of his Gospel, he differs to a notable degree from the more compatible accounts given by Mark, Matthew and Luke. It is by comparing his descriptions with those of the Synoptics, scene by scene, that John's special concerns clearly appear. Accepting the general view that this Gospel was the last to be written, probably in the 90s of the first century, it is soon clear that his main purpose was not to provide factual details of information that the others omitted, but to emphasise the greatness of Jesus, his dignity, nobility and awareness, and his utterly self-giving love. Many examples of this spring immediately from the text, when set alongside the Synoptics. While acknowledging that each of these also has special concerns, in general they do not differ from each other as much as they do from John.

The main Synoptic elements absent from John's Passion story are these: He has no mention of the institution of the Holy Eucharist, or of the agony in the garden, or of the trial of Jesus before Caiphas; or of any sense of our Lord's anguish in the fact of suffering and death. On the other hand, John adds some details not contained in the Synoptics: the majestic authority of Jesus during his arrest, and under interrogation by Annas, the ex- high priest; the eagerness of Pilate to question Jesus and his desire to release him; the dialogue with Pilate about where true authority lies; the Jews' call for Jesus to die, because of his claim to be king and the Son of God. In the crucifixion scene, only John has the formal inscription fastened to the cross: "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews." He situates Mary, the mother of Jesus, at the foot of the Cross, and has Jesus speak words to her and the beloved disciple. The other two sayings, "I thirst" and "It is accomplished" are uniquely Johannine; as is the profound statement "Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit." (20:30) In the aftermath John also tells, evocatively, about the seamless robe of Jesus that remained un-torn, and about the piercing of his side by the soldier's spear, and the flowing forth of blood and water. It is he alone who tells us that despite

Pilate's customary order the legs of Jesus were not broken, since he was already dead. A classic and significant discrepancy between John and the Synoptics is about actual date of the crucifixion. If we had the Synoptics only we should almost certainly decide that the Lord's last supper was during a traditional Jewish Paschal meal, for they speak of preparing the Passover, and within it they situate the institution of the Eucharist. But in John's version, the festival was to begin the next day, Good Friday itself. He states that the Jews would not enter the court of Pilate, fearing ritual pollution which might prevent them from eating the Paschal meal that evening (19:28). Despite the valiant efforts of some scholars to explain this discrepancy by the existence of two rival liturgical calendars, whereby Jesus would, like the Essenes of Qumran, celebrate Passover one day earlier than the general usage, it seems more likely that the Synoptics were factually correct, and that John's intention was a theological one, namely to situate the death of Jesus at about the time that the paschal lambs were being killed for the Passover meal. How well this theme of the Passover Lamb rounds out the story of Jesus, whose sacrificial destiny was recognised from the start by John the Baptist. Right at the start of this Gospel we read that as John watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" (1:36).

While it is always difficult to distinguish in the fourth Gospel what comes from the eye-witness tradition of the beloved disciple who sat near to Jesus, and what is some form of theological commentary, ensuring that we never forget the intimate bond uniting the Son with the Father, there is no doubting the literary and spiritual power of its Passion narrative. Right through it, we have a Jesus who is in full awareness of what is happening, and who has accepted its necessity as the means of his return to the Father, and as the ultimate expression of his love for his followers, his friends, the sheep of his flock - and indeed of the whole family of mankind, whom he also wishes to shepherd and care for.

Back in chapter 10, we had the assurance of Jesus that "I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd." (10:15-16). Then he states that his self-sacrifice is made freely, with total awareness. The words are crystal clear: "I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father." (10:17-18). In the same chapter Jesus declares it as his purpose to share with others the fullness of life, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." (10:10) If we may regard the combination of these intentions as our Lord's fundamental mission statement, then its spirit pervades the whole narrative of his passion, according to St John. From start to finish, it is the Lord giving himself that others may live.

At the moment of his arrest in the garden, Jesus answered the police, "I told you that I am he. So if you are looking for me, let these men go." John comments that this was to fulfill the word that he had spoken, "I did not lose a single one of those whom you gave me." (18:9) A little later he reminds us of the prescient words of Caiaphas, who had advised that it was better to have one person die for the people. (18:14) Later still, in a calm dialogue with Pilate, who represented the all-powerful Roman empire, Jesus affirms his own universal mission, "For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." (18:37). When Pilate grows irritated and says "Do you refuse to speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?" Jesus gives him this dignified answer, "You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above." (19:10-11)

Of course, alternating with these words of assurance and dignity, John interweaves some details of the mockery and sufferings heaped upon Jesus, as graphically as do the Synoptics. He tells how, in the house of Annas, one of the police standing nearby struck Jesus on the face, for allegedly showing disrespect to the high priest (18:22); and how at Pilate's judgment platform, the Jews cried out against the release of Jesus; their demand was: "Not this man, but Barabbas!" (18:40). He has the bald, brutal statement, "Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged," followed by the account of his crowning with thorns, his mockery by the soldiers as "King of the Jews" and the graphic tableau of the "Ecce Homo" which is unique to John's account. "When Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe, Pilate said to them, 'Here is the man!'" When, subsequently, the chief priests declare that "We have no king but Caesar!" Pilate handed Jesus over to them to be crucified. (19:16).

If the brutal, painful, well-remembered facts of the passion are named, they are also interwoven with details and interpretations that inspire and edify the Christian reader. The inscription that Pilate had written and put on the cross ("Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews") was written in Hebrew, in Latin, and in Greek (19:21), suggesting the worldwide significance of the event that was in progress. The soldiers' agreement not to tear the seamless robe was in providential fulfillment of a prophecy, "for my clothing they cast lots." (19:24). Even the Lord's thirst, and the sponge dipped in sour wine that they gave him, was "in order to fulfill the scripture." (19:28). Even the decision not to break the legs of Jesus was taken - unknown to the soldiers themselves, of course - "in order that the scripture might be fulfilled, 'None of his bones shall be broken.' And again another passage of scripture says, 'They will look on the one whom they have pierced.'" (19:36-37).

The Johannine style is perfectly summed up in his description of Jesus' moment of death. John writes that "when Jesus had received the wine, he said, 'It is finished.' Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit." (19:30). In light of all that has gone before, this is not just death as end of all. Rather, having achieved all that the Father had sent him to do in this world, the Son of God handed over his own Spirit to guide his followers, while he himself returned to the Father's bosom, from where he came.

3. The historicity question: Is John's account factual? If not, what is it?

I don't think we can leave the Johannine Passion narrative without pondering the question to what extent it is a true and literal account of what was seen and heard? On the one hand, this Gospel does include some explicit claim to rest on eye-witness testimony. The final chapter refers to "the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true." (21:24). Earlier, about the mixture of blood and water flowing from the pierced side of Christ we are assured, "He who saw this has testified so that you also may believe. His testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth." (19:35). These texts about testimony (in Greek: *martyria*), along with four clear references to the disciple whom Jesus loved (13:23; 19:26-27; 20:2; 21:7) have led some scholars - like Rudolf Schnackenburg in his 3-volume commentary on John, and Josef Ratzinger in his book on Jesus - to regard John's Gospel as the most factual of all four, since so much of it draws upon eye-witness source material.

On the other hand, when read through non-dogmatic eyes and when compared in detail with the Synoptics, there is much in John that seems like theological interpretation of who Jesus is and what he said. We have seen various examples of how this evangelist, more insistently than the Synoptics,

asserts the superhuman awareness of Jesus about humanity and his own mission, and of all that would happen as part of his return to the Father. It can hardly be doubted that his account both of the ministry and of the passion is deeply imbued with John's over-arching conviction that Jesus was the Incarnate Word of God (1:14), who had come from God and was going to God (13:1). His whole manner of telling the story, including that of the Lord's passion, is designed to affirm the divine status of Jesus, and so opens up the possibility of transforming or even fabricating elements to make this point.

This historicity question is obviously linked to another question, who was the author of the fourth Gospel. Quite frankly neither question has so far found a definitive answer. Having gone deeply into this in his great commentary of John (1970) and elsewhere, Raymond Brown concluded that while the beloved disciple was the likely source of the Johannine "school" out of which that Gospel emerged, the actual writer of the Gospel was neither the beloved disciple nor the apostle John. When referring to "the disciple who is testifying to these things" the Gospel author added, "and we know that his testimony is true." This clearly distinguished the author from the beloved disciple, on whose memories he relies. In his 1992 book *The Secret Identity of the beloved disciple* another scholar, Joseph Grassi, proposed four possible candidates as author of our text: John of Zebedee, John Mark, John the Presbyter and Lazarus (whom Jesus loved). Alan Culpepper examines no less than ten possibilities, including Andrew, Nathanael, Matthias, and even St Paul, whose high Christology most closely resembles John's own. Or does the beloved disciple symbolise Gentile Christianity, which responded so readily to John's theology of the enfleshed Logos?

Does it make any difference? In his book *Men in the Bible* (Paulist, 2005) John O'Grady asks "Does the identity of the beloved disciple contribute to the understanding of the Gospel, or is it just another exercise for scholars to fill up pages of periodicals?" In O'Grady's view, the personality and outlook of the beloved disciple is more important than his historicity, since we can draw some conclusions from the text that do affect what Jesus means for us. Much of the written Gospel arises from what John's community remembered of what was preached and taught by the beloved disciple. This man was a true believer, who followed Jesus even to the cross, who saw the empty tomb and who believed in the resurrection even before seeing the risen Christ, and who after the passion took personal care of Mary, the mother of Jesus. His understanding of Jesus, a mixture of memory and of theological insight from the Holy Spirit, in whose guidance he had the deepest trust, was cherished among his followers and then after his death lovingly written down by an author unknown to us.

If we can link the beloved disciple with that other disciple who was known to the high priest, and who introduced Simon Peter into the high priest's courtyard on the night of Christ's arrest (18:15), then indeed it becomes likely that for the passion narrative at least, the 4th Gospel may have sources unavailable to the Synoptics. This little caveat should offset any tendency to regard details in the Synoptic accounts, and specifically Mark, as automatically historically more accurate than those in the Johannine account. And yet I believe that in John we see, more clearly than in the other Gospels, the primacy of message over mere reportage of the facts. John's passion, no less than his highly structured and somewhat contrived story of the ministry, is written to share a vision of the life-giving work of God's Son, and not a mere series of accurately reported words and actions of Jesus.

To illustrate the primacy of message over reportage in John's Passion Narrative, we can simply list a number of instances of this, noted by C.H. Dodd and R. Brown, among others.

- detachment of Romans soldier is introduced at the arrest of Jesus in the garden (18:3). This Roman involvement is historically unlikely and probably expresses John's wish to show that the whole kosmos is ranged against Jesus.
- The agony in Gethsemane is omitted (though lightly alluded to in 12:27), probably to avoid any sense of doubt or hesitation in Jesus' going to the Father through the cross.
- While Jesus is being arrested, it is he not his captors who has the authority. They fall to the ground at his very word (18:6). This theme is repeated in his trial before Pilate (19:11)
- He ensures the safety and release of his disciples, in fulfilment of Scripture (18:8-9)
- Our Lord's dialogue with Pilate (indoors) about ultimate authority (18:33-38) may be a literary, theological invention. "It is highly unlikely that reliable information about private conversations between the prisoner and the judge ... should have reached the evangelist." (Dodd, 443).
- The Jews' refusal to enter the Roman headquarters, "so as to avoid ritual defilement and to be able to eat the Passover" (19:28) is probably an interpretive detail invented to suggest that Jesus' death coincided with the ritual slaughter of the paschal lambs.
- In the crucifixion scene, when compared to Mark's, John makes meaningful additions and omissions. Simon of Cyrene disappears and Jesus carries the cross by himself. The inscription on the cross, and the Jews' objection to it, brings out its universal significance. Rather than Jesus being totally abandoned by his friends, a group of them stands close by, including his mother and the beloved disciple. And in contrast to the cry of dereliction (Mk 15:34), Jesus dies with the affirmation of fulfilment "it is accomplished" (Greek: tetelestai), then bows his head and hands over his spirit (paredoke to pneuma 19:30).

The impact of John's passion narrative on the reader is heightened rather than diminished by those theological enhancements within the text. Following the spiritual insight so clearly announced from the start, that in Jesus we encounter God's life-giving Word-made-flesh, the Evangelist illustrates, on the basis of elements remembered from the revered beloved disciple, how the essential core of the passion lay not in the injustice heaped upon Jesus of Nazareth, but in his loving, courageous acceptance of it, as his destined way to return from this life into the bosom of the Father who had sent him to us to give us life and light. As the ultimate "Sign" and highest expression of the love that so profoundly characterises him, it was through his passion that Jesus fulfilled his central purpose in this world, thus expressed in the final verse of John's prologue: "It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart (eis kolpon tou patros), who has made him known." (1:18).