

Eden and Jesus as the Wisdom of God in the Gospel of John

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ABSTRACT

The theology of Jesus as the Wisdom of God – God’s “extension of self” to human beings – which draws heavily on the imagery of the Garden of Eden, was clearly present in the early Christian Church. Indeed, it is argued that the recognition of Jesus as Wisdom, and hence the unsurpassed manifestation of Edenic blessing, provided the theological bridge between the Old and New Testaments. This association can be found in the synoptic gospels where, for example, Jesus, through Matthew, declares that “...wisdom is vindicated by her deeds” (Mt 11:19). Luke, significantly, changes the word “deeds” to “children” (Lk 7:35) so that Jesus becomes identified with Wisdom not just through his words and actions, but also through the presence of those whose transformed hearts bear witness to Christ. Such imagery, then, informs not only a nascent theology of the Incarnation, but understandings of the kingdom of God as well. Nevertheless, the identification of Jesus as Wisdom is only of partial concern in these texts - it is in John’s gospel where the perfect identification of Jesus with Wisdom is most fully developed. In particular, John’s story of Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well of Jacob (Jn 4:4-42) effectively demonstrates how images of Eden in Old Testament representations of Wisdom - used to analogise God’s loving predisposition towards the world, and the blessings of that bounteous love - were appropriated by New Testament authors to reveal Jesus as the source and perfect sign of the new Creation.

For the early Christian Church the person of Jesus is immediately associated not only with the God who created the universe, but also the One who sustains and nourishes that created world.¹ The liturgical fragments that reveal these understandings speak of the acceptance of the co-equivalence, or something like equivalence, between Jesus and God among early believers prior to the idea’s subsequent appearance in the canonical texts.²

It was this recognition that consolidated the belief that Jesus of Nazareth, whom God had raised up, was precisely the pre-existent Wisdom, or Word of God; it also serves to link Jesus, through the action of Wisdom in the world, to the blessings of the kingdom of God inaugurated in Christ. Indeed, these early expressions of belief form a bridge between those understandings and the broader theology of the Incarnation.³

¹ This recognition can be identified implicitly in pre-existent hymns or parts of hymns sung in liturgical assemblies that can be found scattered through the Pauline letters. E.g. Phil 2:6-11; Col 1:15-20; Eph 2:14-16. See also 1 Tim 3:16; 1 Pet 3:18-22; Heb 1:3; Jn 1:1-18.

² Denis Edwards, *Jesus the Wisdom of God: An Ecological Theology* (Homebush: St. Pauls, 1995) 33.

³ Cf. 1 Cor 1:22-24, 30-31.

It is clear that those passages in the Gospels where the association between Jesus and Wisdom is most pronounced drew heavily on the rich and extant meanings of that context.⁴ These associations can be found in the writing of Matthew through the voice of Jesus who declares that, "...wisdom is vindicated by her deeds" (Mt 11:19). Luke, significantly, changes the word "deeds" to "children" (Lk 7:35), so that Jesus becomes perfectly identified with Wisdom not just through his words and actions but also through the lives of those who, delivered from sin, come alive in Christ. Thus we find Wisdom motifs, such as the banquet of life, expressed notably in Matthew in the miracle of the feeding of the four thousand (Mt 15:38), and in Luke (15:11-32) in the celebratory feast that the merciful father prepares for his prodigal son. (It is worth reflecting on the Last Supper, the sacramental feast heralding of the New Creation, in this context.) From this the reader can extrapolate that Wisdom, God's "extension of self"⁵ to human beings, finds her equivalence not just in the presence of Jesus, but also in those transformative dimensions of the Christ event that more broadly express the conception and manifestation of the kingdom of God.⁶ The preaching of the kingdom of God can thus be understood as both the core of Jesus' ministry, on the one hand, and the culmination of the action of Wisdom in the world on the other.

Now, explicit concerns with Wisdom are only partial aspects of Matthew and Luke's gospels, although, as already suggested, their dominant themes certainly draw on Wisdom Christology.⁷ In comparison, John's Gospel fully identifies and articulates the existence of Jesus as the pre-existent *Logos* or Word of God with Wisdom. This is sketched out in John's prologue, and then expanded upon through what C.F.D. Moule has referred to as the "verities of John",⁸ those themes John returns to in numerous forms and manifestations.

Indeed, there is a thoroughgoing identification and correlation between Wisdom and Jesus as the incarnation of God that permeates John's Gospel from beginning to end, structuring the narrative (the movement from concealment to disclosure) and, according to Ashton, "already projecting, implicitly at least, a story."⁹ It is this embedded correspondence in John's gospel between Jesus and Wisdom¹⁰ that permits the detailed examination of the

⁴ Edwards, *Jesus the Wisdom of God*, 37.

⁵ Roland Murphy, *The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 147.

⁶ Mt 4:17 cf. 11:4-5; 12:28, etc.

⁷ Edwards cites Meier who cautions against "over exaggerating the place of Wisdom Christology in Matthew," but who nevertheless concedes that in the combination of apocalyptic and sapiential themes Jesus is "not just the preacher of God's Wisdom: he *is* that Wisdom revealed to the elect." Edwards, *Jesus the Wisdom of God*, 37.

⁸ C.F.D. Moule, "The Individualism of the Fourth Gospel," *Novum Testamentum* 5, fasc. 2/3 (July 1962), 175.

⁹ John Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 367.

¹⁰ For example, "As Wisdom speaks in the first person... (Prv 8:3-36; Sir. 24) so Jesus addresses his hearers... As Wisdom descended to dwell among us (Prv 8:31; Sir 24:8; Bar 3:37; Wis 9:10), so Jesus... has descended from heaven to live among us (Jn 1:14; 3:31; 4:38; 16:28). As Wisdom roams the streets, crying out her message, inviting all to hear... (Prv 1:20-21, 8:1-4; Wis 6:16) so Jesus walks the streets searching out women and men and crying out his invitation in public places 1:36-38, 43; 5:14; 7:28, 37; 9:35; 12:44). As Wisdom instructs disciples who are her children (Wis 6:17-19; Prv 8:32-33; Sir 4:11; 6:18), so Jesus give instructions to his disciples who are called his children (Jn 13:33). As Wisdom forms her disciples (Sir 6:20-26) and they come to love her (Prv 8:17; Sir. 4:12; Wis.

relationship between the imagery of Eden as it is manifest in various Wisdom texts, and its presence in serving to illuminate John's adoption of the belief in Jesus as the revelation of God. We will look at a specific example from John's gospel of that relationship shortly.

To begin with, this relationship between Edenic imagery and the presence of Wisdom in the world, appropriated by John to represent the correspondence between Jesus as *Logos*, and Wisdom, can be identified in a number of examples in the Wisdom literature where it is clearly expressed that Wisdom can, and should be, equated with *Torah*,¹¹ the regime of positive law revealed to Israel by God as a precondition of realising and maintaining God's covenantal promise to Abraham.¹²

The specific link between *Torah* and the imagery of Eden lies predominantly in the application of that imagery in the Old Testament (henceforth OT) to emphasise the blessings of adherence to *Torah* – depending on context, instances of this symbolism can be perceived in terms of the presence of images of light, of life-giving water, of fertility, of fruitfulness, of abundance, of solidarity, of joy, of healing, and of peace. That is to say, the blessing of adherence to *Torah* are frequently revealed in the OT through the imagery of Eden. In a summative passage in Deuteronomy 8:6-9, for example, God, through Moses, reminds the Israelites as they prepare to enter the Promised Land that it is only by virtue of the “word of the LORD,” *Torah*, that the covenantal blessings that they are about to enjoy, are made available. Later (Deut 30:6-10), and consistent with God's obligations to the covenantal relationship God shares with Israel, God promises to restore Israel by purifying the Israelites' hearts, so that they may partake once more of the blessings of Eden. Here, the people of Israel are urged to choose the substance of Eden, life and blessings, over death and curses. By loving God, walking in God's ways, and observing God's commandments, decrees, and ordinances, the Land of Milk and Honey, a notion itself consistent with Eden, will remain their permanent possession. Attention can subsequently be drawn to a number of related passages that amplify this understanding.

For example, in a scene from the book of Joshua (3:14 - 5:15), that at once echoes and completes the narrative of the parting of the Red Sea, which permitted the Israelite slaves to escape from Egypt (Ex 14:15-30), the manner by which the people of Israel must enter into Canaan by passing through the swollen Jordan River is described. Here, the Jordan's flow is stopped by the priests bearing the Ark of the Covenant putting their feet into the water (Josh

6:17-18), so Jesus forms his disciples (Jn 15:3; 17:17) and calls them his beloved friends (Jn 15:15; 16:27). As some accept and others reject Wisdom (Prv 1:24-25; 8:17; Sir 6:27; Wis. 6:12), so some receive the message of Jesus while others reject him (Jn 7:34; 8:21; 13:33).” Edwards, *Jesus the Wisdom of God*, 42.

¹¹ For a comprehensive treatment of the relationship between Wisdom and *Torah* in Second Temple Judaism see Bernd Schipper and D. Andrew Teeter, eds., *The Reception of 'Torah' in the Wisdom Literature of the Second Temple Period* (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

¹² Pierre Grelot, “The law,” in Xavier Léon-Dufour, ed., *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 2nd ed. (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1973/1982), 302b.

3:8-17), as God, through Joshua, had instructed them. In doing so the integral relationship between the blessings of Eden, present in the synecdoche of the Land of Milk and Honey, promised to the ancestors of Joshua and their descendants, and *Torah* is made explicit to the reader.

The reader of the OT is also told how, in the first book of Kings, Solomon, who was gifted through his father David with the responsibility of building a home for God on earth, and wherein the religious precepts of *Torah* are to be expressed (1 Kings 6:11-13) so that God would “dwell among the children of Israel” in perpetuity, decorates the Temple with images of Eden. Most notable among these is the palm tree, a symbol of eternal life and, in some traditions, itself the Tree of Life at the heart of Eden (1 Kings 6:29-35).¹³

A related but more succinct, and certainly more dramatic, account of the relationship between Eden and *Torah* can also be found in the second book of Kings (2 Kings 2:19-22) where Elisha, having inherited the mantle of Elijah as the prophet of the Lord, is asked to bring life back to barren land outside of the city of Jericho. Given the city’s reputation as a place of palm trees and copious water (Deut 34:3; Josh 16:1) this is an extraordinary situation. Nevertheless, it is only by Elisha’s intervention, which brings *Torah* to the land, in the form of the metaphor of the purification practices of the Temple,¹⁴ is fertility restored. These themes are continued in the Psalms and in the writings of the prophets. Indeed, the presence and potency of this imagery can be identified in the writings of the OT authors to the point where it may be considered conventional.

It is reasonable to assume that most people listening to, or reading, the Wisdom literature would have some familiarity, then, with the relationship between *Torah* and its positive representation through Edenic imagery. This familiarity is carried into the Wisdom literature itself. In Sirach 24:7, for example, the reader is told that Wisdom, seeking a place to rest, is commanded by God, “to make your dwelling in Jacob, and in Israel receive your inheritance” (24: 8). Having served, or “ministered” before God in “the holy tent” (24:10), Wisdom was accordingly justified to find a home “in the beloved city” (24:11) of Jerusalem, where she “took root in an honoured people” (24:12). From here, appropriating symbolism evocative of passages in Isaiah and Ezekiel¹⁵ that acclaim God’s creativity and righteousness through Edenic imagery, Wisdom “grew tall like a cedar of Lebanon” (v. 13), “gave forth perfume” (v. 15), “spread out my branches” (v. 16), budding forth delights “like the vine ... and my blossoms become glorious and abundant fruit” (v.17). Thus established, Wisdom sends out an invitation to a divine banquet:

¹³ Cf Ps 43:3, 50:2, 63:2, 80:1-3, 84:10-11, and 132:1-13. See also 1 Chr 28:2, and Isa. 2:2-4, 66: 1; Mic 1:1-4.

¹⁴ Dom Hubert Van Zeller, *Ezekiel: Man of Signs* (London: Sands & Company, 1944), 125, 126. See also Joseph Martos, *Doors to the Sacred: A Historical Introduction to Sacraments in the Catholic Church* (Liguori: Triumph Books, 1991), 148.

¹⁵ Cf. Isa 31:1-2; 41:19; 51:3; Ezek 31:1-9.

¹⁹Come to me you who desire me,
and eat your fill of my fruits.
²⁰For the memory of me is sweeter than honey,
and the possession of me sweeter than the honeycomb.
²¹Those who eat of me will hunger for more,
and those who drink of me will thirst for more.

Sirach 24:19-21.

This is language which will later be found in the Christian gospels, and especially in the “I am” statements in the Gospel of John but, for Ben Sirah, it has a very concrete Jewish meaning – Wisdom is *Torah*,¹⁶ and is hence analogised to Eden. Lest the reader misses the point, Ben Sirah subsequently spells it out explicitly: “All this is the book of the covenant of the Most High God, the law that Moses commanded us as an inheritance for the congregation of Jacob” (24:23). Baruch similarly equates Wisdom, or the Word of God, with *Torah* (Bar 3:9 - 4:4): “She is the book of the commandments of God, the law that endures forever. All who hold her fast will live, and those who forsake her will die” (Bar 4:4).

The imagery of feasting and conviviality, as a sub-set of Edenic imagery, which, as I indicated earlier, is a feature of several New Testament (henceforth NT) representations of the kingdom of God, can already be seen in this passage. As in Proverbs 9, which similarly offers a warm invitation to all who are purposeless, but who otherwise might find life’s meaning in her extravagant company (Prov 9:1-6), the bounty of Wisdom’s blessings lies not in sensuous pleasure, although these are the metaphors through which her blessings are conveyed, but in reconciliation with oneself and, by inference, with God: “Whoever obeys me will not be put to shame, and those who work with me will not sin” (Sir 24: 22). As such, and reflecting Psalm 119 which so comprehensively details the benefits of adherence to *Torah*, Wisdom is presented as the source not just of nourishment, but of life itself.¹⁷

At the heart of this symbolism *Torah* is represented as God’s ecstatic and overflowing abundance of all that is life affirming and good. As I have already suggested, this frequently takes the form of the ‘living water’ which flowed out from Eden,¹⁸ and which sustained the Israelites in their flight from Egypt into the Promised Land (Ex 17:6; Num 20:8).

Not surprisingly, then, Ben Sirah also avails himself of Edenic imagery, for example, comparing *Torah* in a general sense to the beneficence of the great rivers of the ancient world (Sir 24: 25-27), and specifically to the enigmatic Pishon and Gihon rivers, a

¹⁶ Edwards, *Jesus the Wisdom of God*, 26.

¹⁷ Edwards, *Jesus the Wisdom of God*, 26.

¹⁸ Gen 2:10 cf. Ps 46:4.

relationship that places Israel in unique association with Eden.¹⁹ This association, between Israel, *Torah*, and Eden, is consolidated in Sirach by subsequent references to Wisdom as the flood which issued from Ezekiel's reprinted Temple, itself an expression of the Edenic blessings which flow into Israel initially as a trickle,²⁰ but which build to a mighty river following Israel's reconciliation with God.²¹ Representations of the kingdom of God, at the heart of Jesus' ministry, themselves draw inspiration from, and are in turn consolidated through, these relationships.

Jesus as the Water of Life: Prophetism and Promise

John's representation of Jesus as incarnate Wisdom borrows from the OT imagery that equates Wisdom with *Torah*, and vice versa, assimilating, reproducing, and augmenting key symbols and motifs as required. The reader can observe, for example, that whereas Wisdom prepares a feast such that all who eat their fill of her fruits, and drink of her, will hunger and thirst for more (Sir 24:19-21), Jesus declares that he, in himself, is "... the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty" (Jn 6:35, 51). Jesus, moreover, as a manifestation of divine Wisdom that finds equivalence in a specific, historical, individual, and human form of *The Law* (*Torah's* Greek nomenclature), represents himself to the world in John's Gospel through Edenic imagery that similarly mobilises the power of the metaphor of the 'water of life' as a dominant motif. Here, however, the unquenchable 'thirst' for knowledge of God that Wisdom engenders in the wise, is satiated through Christ.²²

By implication, it can be seen that Jesus, in John's representation of Jesus as Wisdom, equates himself to Eden as both the goal of righteousness, and the justification for that change in human orientation that leads back to Eden. This is a notion developed further in John's Gospel in the scene where the risen Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene (20:1-17) in the garden of the Resurrection.²³ It is later made explicit in the Book of Revelation, both through the development of the representation of the Church as the Bride of Christ manifest as the new Eden (Rev 22:1-5),²⁴ as well as in specific references to a relocation to Eden as

¹⁹ That is, the unique Israelite version of what might otherwise be deemed an archetypal myth¹⁹ has the four rivers of Eden named in Gen. 2:1-14 appearing to position Israel within the boundaries roughly circumscribed by their location. Where the location is indeterminate, as in the case of the Pishon and Gihon rivers (Gen 2:11-13), we find that the symbolic qualities ascribed to these locations and their associated landforms attach to Israel. Howard N. Wallace *The Eden Narrative* (Atlanta: Scholars' Press, 1985), 2, 74, 75. Cf. Richard J. Clifford, *The Cosmic Mountain in Canaan and the Old Testament* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), 101 n.5.

²⁰ "Like water poured from a bottle, or jug," is Zimmerli's perception of the original. See Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 2: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel, Chapters 25-48*, transl. James D. Martin (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 505.

²¹ Sir 24:30-33, cf. Ezek 47:1-5.

²² Cf. von Balthasar, "Der antirömische Affekt," in *The von Balthasar Reader*, ed. by Medard Kehl and Werner Löser; transl. Robert J. Daly and Fred Lawrence (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1982), 216.

²³ For a detailed explication of this see my paper "Jesus the Gardener: a Revised Perspective of a Favourite New Testament Scene," presented at the 5th Annual *Sharing Theological Passions* colloquium, UNDA, Fremantle, 2013. https://researchonline.nd.edu.au/theo_conference/12/

²⁴ Cf. Ezek 47:1-12.

Jesus' reward to "everyone who conquers" (4:7), and to those who emerge justified "out of the great ordeal" (7:14-17).

Nowhere, however, is this equivalence between Jesus as 'the water of life' expressed more completely, or with such narrative confidence, than in John's description of Jesus' encounter with a Samaritan woman at the well of Jacob (Jn 4:4-42). This is an incident which not only anticipates the integration of Ezekiel's OT vision of the New Temple (Ezek 47:1-12) with the writer of Revelation's concluding NT image of the Church as the New Jerusalem (Rev 22:1-5). It also serves as an interpretive key for other critical, and sometimes misunderstood, events in John's Gospel. Significant amongst these is the foreshadowing of Jesus' sacrificial death (and the nature of that death), as the precondition for the coming of the Holy Spirit that occurs in John 7:38-39: "... let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, 'Out of the believer's heart (*κοιλίας/koilias*) shall flow rivers of living water.' Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified."²⁵

In this light, the story of Jesus' meeting with the 'The Woman at the Well' supports the elevation of the importance of the imagery of Christ as the 'water of life' above that of the merely illustrative, to a central motif around which other images of Eden in the NT constellate. This is not to suggest an explicit hierarchy of meaning in these images as they are used by John – elsewhere the imagery of Jesus as 'light,' an ancient symbol of divinity and righteousness that has multiple associations in the Ancient Near East including but not restricted to Eden,²⁶ also receives considerable attention.²⁷ Rather, the inclusion of the image of Jesus as the 'water of life,' in the context of the story of the Woman at the Well, expresses in its narrative detail a range of historical, scriptural, and spiritual associations bound together through the image of Jesus as the source of all meaning.²⁸ The multi-valent quality of the image can be observed in the way the passages concerned specifically link the

²⁵ Cf. Isa 12:3; Joel 2:28; Zech 12:10; 13:1.

²⁶ Note, for example, the relationship between the Tree of Life, at the centre of Eden, and its manifestation in Jewish cultic activity as the Tree of Light, the *menora*, or seven branched candelabra, that stood beside the altar of the ancient Temple. See, Margaret Barker, *The Gate of Heaven: The History and Symbolism of the Temple in Jerusalem* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008), 90-91; L. Yarden, *The Tree of Light: A Study of the Menora* (London: Horowitz Publishing, 1971), 35. For St Ephrem, the 'Robe of Glory,' the image through which he links all of salvation history, is a garment of light, stripped from Adam and Eve as a result of their disobedience but available again to all who, through baptism, "put on Christ" (Cf. Rom 13:14 and Gal 3:27). See Sebastian Brock, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of Saint Ephrem the Syrian* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publication, 1992), 39, 71, 91-92, 94; and St Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns on Paradise*, intro. and transl. Sebastian Brock (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1990), 66-69.

²⁷ Jn 1:4; 3:19; 8:12; 9:15; 12:35, 36, 46.

²⁸ In an interesting extension of John's description of Jesus as "the light of the world" the medieval theologian (a name she did not ascribe to herself) Hildegard of Bingen refers to God's presence in the world as "the living light," indicated by the manifestation of 'viridity,' that is, Edenic fertility and plenitude. See Constant Mews, "Religious Thinker: 'A Frail Human Being' on Fiery Life," in Barbara Newman, ed, *Voice of the Living Light: Hildegard of Bingen and Her World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 52-69. On pages 57 and 58 Mews refers explicitly to Hildegard's identification of this 'viridity' with the Garden of Eden, a notion that is extended in following pages to the attributes of Wisdom.

Edenic image of Jesus as the 'water of life' to the theme of redemption through Christ's blood. This theme is already present in the story of the wedding at Cana (Jn 2:1-11), and reiterated later by Jesus himself outside the Temple of Jerusalem at the time of *Sukkoth*, the Festival of Booths.²⁹ The additional symbolism of John 7:37-39, which links Jesus as the 'water of life' to the ingathering of the Edenic fullness of the harvest, that *Sukkoth* celebrates, should also be noted.

John's understanding of the sacramental function of the Church, as an expression of the New Creation, developed most notably in the linking narrative of Nicodemus's night-time visit to Jesus, just prior to the incident with the Samaritan woman, wherein Jesus declares that "no-one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of the water and Spirit" (Jn 3:5) can also be identified. The implicit foregrounding of God's mercy, or, more properly God's *hesed*, or loving predisposition to the world, in the water-Spirit-blood symbolism that emerges from the piercing of Jesus' side, also deserves comment. That is, the relationship between the Greek *κοιλίας* (*koilias*) to the Hebrew *racham/recham*, translated from the Hebrew as 'womb,' implicitly links the person of Jesus to the OT representation of God as *El Shaddai*, that is, as 'breast,' or maternity itself, in God's absolute provision, nourishment and blessing.³⁰ The woman Wisdom echoes this ancient representation of God.

The presence of this complex, interrelated imagery, then, clearly supports Moule's observations regarding the 'great verities' of John, which serve John's overarching purpose of conveying his understanding of God's self-disclosure through Christ. It is not the intention of this paper to analyse the story of the "Woman at the Well" in relation to Edenic imagery beyond this – exegeses on Jesus as the *fontalis plenitudo* are available in many commentaries – other than to also draw attention to the additional relationship between the imagery of Eden, foregrounded in the symbol of the 'water of life,' and the *hieros gamos*, or 'sacred marriage' motif manifest in Jesus' meeting with the Samaritan woman that develops John's understanding of the Church through the language of that chance encounter.³¹

This matrimonial symbolism is, of course, the language that Paul appropriated in Ephesians (5-25b -27) to present his understanding of the relationship of Christ to the Church in his emergent Christian theology. But it has its roots in extant Israelite understandings of the relationship of God to Israel expressed in the story of the unfaithful bride in Ezekiel 16, and the beauty of the lovers' tale found the Song of Solomon,³² both of which describe through the imagery of Eden the blessings that a return to right relationship with God secures. That is

²⁹ Jn 2:4 cf. Jn 7:37-39.

³⁰ See Emmanuel Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, transl. Annette Aronowicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 183. Cf. Ex 33:19; Deut 13:17; 30:3; Ps 102:13; 116:5; Isa 14:1; 30:18.

³¹ Jn 4:1-6.

³² J. Paul Sampley, *"And the Two Shall Become One Flesh: A Study of Traditions in Ephesians 5:21-33"* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002), 36-37.

to say, in the comparison between the ignominy of the bride/Israel's transgressions described in Ezekiel 16 and God's confounding, unmerited mercy articulated through Edenic imagery in Ezekiel 17:22-24, and to the degree that the account of the Song of Solomon offers the possibility of a return to Eden through love,³³ the presence of matrimonial symbolism in John's gospel amplifies the role of Edenic imagery in John's representation of the Incarnation.

This encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman is rich with associations of fertility and new life drawn from the explicit marriage symbolism embedded in the narrative of the wedding at Cana that precedes it (Jn 2:1-11), the subsequent pericope concerning Nicodemus and the need for a person to be born again (3:1-21), and the additional passage describing John the Baptist's identification of Jesus as the "bridegroom" who had come to claim the "bride" (3:23-36). Combined with the well imagery, with its echoes of the stories of Rebekah and Abraham's servant (Gen 24:10-19), Jacob and Rachel (Gen 29:1-14), and Moses and Zipporah (Ex 2:15b-21), the story opens the possibility of an interpretation that the Samaritan woman is herself to be the bride referred to in the earlier passage.³⁴

Whilst some commentators believe the link between the Samaritan woman and the bride referred to in John's earlier wedding narrative is tenuous,³⁵ other elements in the story suggest that they are being unduly conservative in holding to that view. Having previously been married five times, Jesus reveals that the Samaritan woman is now living with a sixth man (Jn 4:16-18). Jesus would therefore be her seventh 'husband,' a possibility reflected in the culturally informal tenor of their exchange, if not in reality.³⁶ As improbable as this notion is in the social milieu of the time,³⁷ the proposition is consistent with ANE numerological interpretations that connect the number seven, which signifies unity and completion, through the combination of its constituent parts (3 + 4), to the integration of heaven and earth.³⁸ What may be unpersuasive *prima facie* is given a deeper theological context through the Samaritan woman's recognition of Jesus as 'a prophet' (Jn 4:19) and the rhetorically generated identification of Jesus as 'Messiah' (Jn 4:25-26). Remembering that the Samaritans themselves recognised no canonical text beyond the *Torah*, and Moses as the

³³ Cf Song 4:12-5:1) Daniel Lys for example, declares that, "Le Cantique n'est rien d'autre qu'un commentaire de Gen. 2" ("The Canticle is nothing less than a commentary on Genesis 2." As cited in Francis Landy, "The Song of Songs and the Garden of Eden," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 98, no. 4 (Dec. 1997): 513. See also Phyllis Trible, "Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 41/1 (1973): 47, who also recognises the Song of Songs as commentary on Gen 2-3.

³⁴ J. Gerald Janzen, "How Can a Man Be Born When He Is Old? Jacob/Israel in Genesis and the Gospel of John", in *Encounter* 67 (2006): 338.

³⁵ See, for example Francis J. Maloney, *The Gospel of John* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1998), 121.

³⁶ Jn 4: 7-15 cf. 4:27.

³⁷ Craig R. Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 48.

³⁸ That is, 3 representing heaven as the numerical equivalent of the circle, or dome, and 4 representing the earth as the numerical equivalent of the square. See Clark, *The Islamic Garden*, 64-65. See also Martos, *Doors to the Sacred*, 51. Cf. Mk. 8:4-8.

only legitimate prophet of God,³⁹ these verses elucidate John's underlying eschatological themes of the Church, in the form of the bride of Christ, as the fulfilment of the divine will, and hence, as with Christ, as the embodiment of plenitude that the imagery of Eden represents.⁴⁰ Accordingly, whilst remaining nameless in the Gospel passage, the woman, as St Photinia or 'the luminous one,' is venerated in Orthodox theology as an early representative of the universal Church,⁴¹ soon to be established through Jesus' sacrificial blood and the Spirit. We should also note that whilst the Samaritan woman is displaced in the narrative by the people of her village who, in response to her testimony, "believed in him" (Jn 4: 39), so too Jesus' message radiates linguistically, insofar as what begins in the passage in first person singular, quickly evolves into plural speech.⁴² That is, the blessings of Wisdom that find equivalence in the OT in *Torah*, are now revealed in John's Gospel in the person of the Edenic Christ, the new Temple, from whom flows the water of life. Manifest in the universal Church the glory of God will then shine its light on all the Nations.

Conclusion

John's emphatic representation of Jesus as the Wisdom of God, the Law, and the new Temple, which draws heavily on Edenic imagery, points to radically new understandings in the emerging Christian communities, brought about through the Incarnation, of the relationship between God and the world. The displacement of the metaphorical Eden, from the Land of Israel into the heart of each individual Christian believer finds its clearest expression in the image of Jesus as the 'water of life' a notion that at once fulfils and explains the loving predisposition of the divine will. In the pericope of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan Woman at the Well of Jacob the spirit/ blood/ water symbolism that permeates the Gospel finds its most accessible and humane expression, to reveal Jesus as the source and perfect sign of the new Creation.

About the author

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³⁹ Hannah S. An, "The Prophet Like Moses (Deut 18:15-18) and the Woman at the Well (John 4:7-30) in Light of the Dead Sea Scrolls," in *The Expository Times* Vol 127/10 (2016): 469.

⁴⁰ An, "The Prophet Like Moses," 472-73. Cf Hosea 10:12; Joel 2:23.

⁴¹ Receiving the title *ἰσαποστόλου* (Equal to the Apostles) in Orthodox nomenclature.

⁴² Craig R. Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 48.