

## THE WORD MADE FLESH AS MYSTERY INCARNATE: REVEALING AND CONCEALING DRAMATIZED BY JESUS AS PORTRAYED IN JOHN'S GOSPEL

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**Abstract:** *D. A. Carson has lamented that no one has followed up on his engaging essay to explore the phenomena concerning “how the first disciples came to ‘read’ Scripture in a different way, a Christian way. For on the one hand, the evangelist insists that the crucial events in Jesus’s life and passion and resurrection fulfill Scripture, and on the other hand he acknowledges—indeed, insists—that the disciples themselves did not read Scripture this way until after the events.” Like Carson, I have also found within John’s Gospel a theme “analogous to the dominant notion of μυστήριον in the Pauline corpus: the gospel is simultaneously said to be hidden in times past but now disclosed, and prophesied in times past and now fulfilled.” My essay contends that without using μυστήριον, John’s Gospel expresses the concept. Thus, throughout the evangelist’s narrative he unfolds in literary form how Jesus replicates the pattern of the OT Scriptures wherein the mystery of the gospel for long ages lay hidden and is now brought to light by those same Scriptures. Likewise, the incarnate Word reveals and conceals his glory in his signs, teachings, and prophetic acts, even actually hiding himself, dramatizing divine judgment by concealment (12:36). Yet, now the light of his resurrection discloses the revelation he concealed in his words and actions.*

**Key words:** *disclose, conceal, misunderstanding motif, mystery, reveal, revelation, riddle, sign*

### I. INTRODUCTION

Three decades ago D. A. Carson explored the role of misunderstandings in John’s Gospel.<sup>1</sup> His essay features sixteen occasions when Jesus’s disciples failed to understand about him prior to the cross and resurrection and their coming to un-

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<sup>1</sup> D. A. Carson responds to Herbert Leroy’s full-length monograph, *Rätsel und Missverständnis: Ein Beitrag zur Formgeschichte des Johannesevangeliums* (Bonn: Hanstein, 1966). Leroy identifies and defines eleven misunderstandings, all within John 2–8, by way of form-critical analysis. He traces the riddles to material that the Johannine Christian community used in its preaching and catechesis. Thus, while Jesus is an “insider” who speaks these riddles, according to Leroy, the Jesus of John’s Gospel represents John’s community. So, Leroy attempts to reconstruct this community and identifies it as a gnosticizing group. His work suffers from imposing too rigid a textual form upon John’s Gospel. Cf. Raymond Brown’s review in *Bib* 51 (1970): 152–54; and R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 153–54. Worthy of note, however, on the following page Culpepper concedes, “Whether the misunderstandings are described as a ‘motif,’ ‘technique,’ or ‘device’ is probably of little consequences as long as their frequency, variability, and effects are recognized” (p. 155). Cf. David W. Wead, *The Literary Devices in John’s Gospel* (Basel: Friedrich Reinhardt, 1970), 69–70.

derstand after his resurrection.<sup>2</sup> Consider a few examples. John insists that Jesus's disciples did not understand until after the resurrection that by saying, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up" (2:19), he was speaking of his body (2:21–22). Only then, John explains, "the disciples believed the Scriptures and the saying that Jesus spoke" (2:22). Thus, early in his Gospel, John makes the case that the disciples' understanding of Jesus's temple riddle dawns upon them only when redemptive history climaxes with the crucified Messiah's resurrection.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, only after Jesus's death and resurrection do the disciples come to understand Jesus's symbolic ride upon the donkey into Jerusalem as fulfilling Zechariah's prophecy (John 12:14–16). One more example must suffice. As Jesus approaches the Passover on which he would offer himself as the last Passover lamb, he announces, "If I be lifted up from the earth, I will draw all humans to myself" (ἐὰν ὑψωθῶ ἐκ τῆς γῆς, 12:32). John preserves the riddle-like saying that features Jesus's double entendre use of ὑψόω (cf. 3:18; 8:28) situated with δοξάζω (12:28), alluding to Isa 52:13 where the two occur together.<sup>4</sup> Jesus's saying puzzles those who hear him. Their response—"We understood from the Law that the Messiah remains forever, and how do you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of Man?" (12:34)—betrays inadequate knowledge of Scripture. They apprehend only one sense of ὑψόω, so they are puzzled how Messiah remains forever but also dies. John's post-resurrection aside—"He said this to signify by what kind of death he was going to die" (12:33)—guides readers to understand the Jews' misunderstanding.<sup>5</sup>

Since the publication of Carson's essay several have addressed the misunderstanding motif in John's Gospel. Culpepper observes that John's misunderstanding motif is "supple and variable" and adds, "misunderstandings arise from his concept of revelation: inevitably those who did not accept Jesus misunderstood him."<sup>6</sup> Yet,

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<sup>2</sup> D. A. Carson, "Understanding Misunderstandings in the Fourth Gospel," *TynBul* 33 (1982): 59–89. Culpepper, whose *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel* Carson read in draft form (n. 20), commends Carson's critique of Leroy's form-critical fixation but criticizes Carson for dismissing "misunderstanding as a literary device by demanding an artificially high degree of formal uniformity and consistency" (*Anatomy*, 154 n. 11).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. John Painter, *John: Witness and Theologian* (3rd ed.; Victoria, Australia: Beacon Hill, 1986), 12–13. Against Carson and Painter, Edwin E. Reynolds contends that "there were in fact some who were willing and able to understand Jesus' claims and did believe in Him, though their early understanding was not necessarily complete" ("Misunderstanding in the Fourth Gospel," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 9 [1998]: 158). Reynolds's equivocation concedes the point that Carson and Painter argue.

<sup>4</sup> Isa 52:13, ὑψωθήσεται καὶ δοξασθήσεται σφόδρα concerning the Servant of the Lord. Cf. C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John* (London: SPCK, 1955), 356.

<sup>5</sup> John's post-resurrection explanatory aside first indicates that Jesus would be crucified, not stoned to death (cf. John 21:19), but also it hints at the double entendre, that Jesus's death is his glorification. Cf. D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John* (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 444. William Pyle explains, "The reader is given the clue that although the disciples did not share this inside information with the narrator at the time of the event, by the time of the writing of the story the disciples have been included in the circle of correct interpreters. The credibility both of Jesus' words and of the interpretation by the narrator is enhanced by the events which substantiated them" ("Understanding the Misunderstanding Sequences in the Gospel of John," *Faith and Mission* 11/2 [1994]: 36).

<sup>6</sup> Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, 154.

he does not develop this. So, in a more recent essay, Carson rightly laments that no one has followed up to explore how John insists throughout his Gospel “that the crucial events in Jesus’ life and passion and resurrection fulfill Scripture” but also that “the disciples themselves did not read Scripture this way until after” Messiah’s resurrection.<sup>7</sup> He explains that the misunderstandings that he had isolated find resolution only with the passage of time, by way of insight acquired only after Messiah is raised from the dead. John was able to differentiate between what he and the other disciples understood during Jesus’s ministry in the flesh and what he and they came to understand after his resurrection, a distinction of understanding upon which the evangelist insists. Of particular concern for Carson is how these phenomena have not been adequately explored concerning what they say about John’s understanding of how he and the other apostles came to read the OT as Christian Scripture. Carson summarizes the challenge that he laments has not been taken up by another: “Thus we come by another route to something analogous to the dominant notion of *μυστήριον* in the Pauline corpus: the gospel is simultaneously said to be hidden in times past but now disclosed, and prophesied in times past and now fulfilled.”<sup>8</sup>

So, Carson’s challenge succinctly avows an integral element of my thesis, “that John’s Gospel treats the mystery theme as tellingly as any New Testament writer, without using the word ‘mystery.’”<sup>9</sup> Though in a few prior essays I have touched upon this theme within John’s Gospel as correlating with Paul’s concept of *μυστήριον*, this essay is fully devoted to suggesting that John’s Gospel literarily unfolds how the incarnate Word fulfills Scripture by replicating Scripture. The deity who reveals himself anthropomorphically in Scripture, John’s Gospel tells us, is the Word become flesh. Deity, who revealed his glory in days of old by way of anthropomorphic form and anthropomorphic imagery throughout the OT, emerged from the cloud that shrouded Mount Sinai and veiled divine glory from Moses to become the in-fleshed anthropomorphic Word. Veiled in flesh, this One and Only God, who is in intimate relationship with the Father, makes known the Father who cannot be seen (John 1:14, 18). Thus, the incarnate Word replicates Scripture by shrouding revelation of his glory through his signs, riddles, teachings, and prophetic acts, even hiding himself as he imitates the hiddenness of God to dramatize divine judgment by concealment (John 12:36). While Carson’s proposal focuses on the disciples’ *reception* of Christ’s revelation, my thesis accents Christ’s revelatory *impartment*.

Andreas Köstenberger rightly observes that misunderstandings, clarified by John from his post-resurrection vantage point, are “inextricably linked to the concept of revelation,” because this theme tracks with those who misunderstand Je-

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<sup>7</sup> D. A. Carson, “Reflections upon a Johannine Pilgrimage,” in *What We Have Heard from the Beginning: The Past, Present, and Future of Johannine Studies* (ed. Tom Thatcher; Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007), 91.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 91–92.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

sus's words and actions, including his signs.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, it seems necessary to approach the misunderstanding motif with more robust attention to the Word's self-disclosure through veiled revelation. So, throughout this essay the misunderstanding motif will be treated as narrating the reasonable but culpable unbelieving response to the incarnate Word's shrouded revelation which comes by teaching, through enigmatic speech (especially double entendre), and by way of dramatized parables that consist of either symbolic-prophetic actions or sign miracles. Each of these simultaneously reveals and conceals the Word's divine glory just as the Word at once unveils himself in plain sight while embodied in the veil of human flesh. So, what Culpepper hints at without unpacking—misunderstandings are indivisibly joined with revelation—this essay develops.

## II. CONCEALED REVELATION IN JESUS'S NUPTIAL SIGN—ACTED PARABLE

Jesus inaugurates his public ministry by unpretentiously performing a sign at a wedding after enigmatically admonishing his mother by saying, "My hour is not yet come" (οὐπω ἔχει ἡ ὥρα μου, 2:4), which readers of the Gospel come to realize is a reference that entails his exaltation by crucifixion (7:30; 8:20; 12:23, 27; 13:1; 17:1). John recounts Jesus's first sign from the vantage point of one present, but he does not alleviate tension by deciphering the sign's symbolism from his post-resurrection insight. Instead, in a straightforward manner in 2:1–12, John narrates Jesus's turning water into wine as an acted parable invested with symbolic meaning as indicated by the details told.<sup>11</sup> John's plainly but unpretentiously expressed account of the first sign mimics Jesus's veiled revelatory act done in the presence of servants who, after they had filled the pots with water did as Jesus directed: "Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet." Though they filled the pots to the brim with water, they drew out wine.

Though John narrates the sign without explanatory adornment, it is apparent that it is an acted parable that entails symbolic representation because Jesus's act evokes worthy response, which John reports: "Jesus did this first of the signs in

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<sup>10</sup> Andreas J. Köstenberger, *A Theology of John's Gospel and Letters* (BTNT; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 142.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Carson, who also takes Jesus's first miraculous sign as an "acted parable" (*John*, 172). What I mean and what Carson means by "acted parable" is not what Herman Ridderbos rejects when he states, "Miracle is neither parabolic story nor symbolic action" (*The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary* [trans. John Vriend; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997], 100). Ridderbos's immediately preceding sentence is instructive, for he states, "Any suggestion that in the Fourth Gospel one can separate 'flesh' and 'glory,' history and revelation, violates the most specific aspect of that Gospel's character." That Ridderbos does not object to acknowledging that Jesus's miracles were "acted parables" is apparent when he observes that "a distinctive of the Fourth Gospel is its repeated linking of miracles with lengthy conversations focused on the *meaning* of the miracles in the framework of Jesus' self-revelation as the Christ, the Son of God (so chs. 5, 6, 9, and 11). If one fails to see that connection and hence also the deeper spiritual significance of the miracles, then one has not 'seen' the signs (6:26), and faith that rests solely on miracle 'as such' has fundamentally forfeited its claim to that name (cf., e.g., 2:23ff; 3:2 with 3:11f; 4:48)" (pp. 100–101).

Cana of Galilee and disclosed his glory, and his disciples believed in him” (2:11).<sup>12</sup> So, John’s evocative and allusive telling of the miracle, recounted to evoke hearers and readers to believe, entails more concerning what is symbolized than he discloses.<sup>13</sup> The miracle reveals Jesus’s glory. But how? Mystery envelops the sign even in the telling of it, for as a riddle conveys hints of its explanation, both the sign’s performance and its narration brim with clues suggestive of rich import without spilling its symbolic meaning.<sup>14</sup>

Two uses of ἐκεῖ, the adverb of place, are literary markers that divide the episode into two units, the first emphasizing “the idea of time” (2:1) and the second featuring “the idea of a secret or mystery” (2:6).<sup>15</sup> Thomas Brodie explains,

These two ideas, the time and the secrecy, are not peripheral to the basic drama. Rather, they are important aspects of what that drama is all about—the process of revelation. Revelation, the unveiling of the secret, must await a particular time. By dividing the text in two, just when the mother has said ‘Whatever he tells you, . . .’ there is created a sense of waiting and of expectation, a sense of pregnant time. And that sense, far from being alien to the drama, corresponds to some of its most basic elements.<sup>16</sup>

C. H. Dodd correctly observes the evident mystery: “The story, then, is not to be taken at its face value. Its true meaning lies deeper. We are given no direct clue to this deeper meaning, as we are for some other σημεῖα.”<sup>17</sup> Signs signify; they bear symbolic function, but their meanings do not rest on the surface. John refrains from offering any post-resurrection explanatory aside for hearers. Consequently, while initial hearing or reading of John’s narration of Jesus’s first miracle may prompt amazement, even belief, it also evokes curiosity concerning its meaning. To what is Jesus’s sign pointing? John’s narration of Jesus’s signs in chapters 5, 6, 9, and 11, all bearing symbolic representation and given explanation hinted at in Je-

<sup>12</sup> The disciples’ believing follows Jesus’s earlier question of Nathanael, “Because I told you, ‘I saw you under the fig tree,’ do you believe? You will see greater things than these. . . . Truly, truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man” (1:50–51).

<sup>13</sup> “The servants saw the sign, but not the glory; the disciples by faith perceived Jesus’ glory behind the sign, and they *put their faith in him*” (Carson, *Gospel according to John*, 175).

<sup>14</sup> On Jesus’s use of spoken riddles, see Tom Thatcher, *Jesus the Riddler: The Power of Ambiguity in the Gospels* (Louisville/London: Westminster John Knox, 2006).

<sup>15</sup> See Thomas L. Brodie who makes the case that because ἐκεῖ first occurs in 2:1 and repeats in 2:6 that it serves as a literary divider: (1) 2:1–5; and (2) 2:6–10 (*The Gospel according to John: A Literary and Theological Commentary* [Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1993], 171). Brodie’s identification of ἐκεῖ as a literary marker seems correct, though it is curious that he does not observe that ἐκεῖ occurs a third time, in 2:12: “After this he [Jesus] went down into Capernaum; even his mother and brothers and disciples also remained *there* [ἐκεῖ] not many days.” Thus, if the adverb is a literary break indicator, it seems more plausible to see three units: (1) 2:1–5; (2) 2:6–11; and (3) 2:12. Brodie challenges the notion that the changing roles of characters (the mother and Jesus, Jesus and the servants, and the steward and the bridegroom) marks the episode’s divisions. He offers his proposal against the divisions suggested by Schnackenburg, *St. John*, 1:334.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

<sup>17</sup> C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), 297.

sus's discourses in which they are wrapped, are instructive concerning the first miracle. The sign's allusive significance begins to emerge as the Gospel's narrative unfolds throughout the subsequent paragraphs, but especially in 3:22–30 where verbal and literary links with 2:1–12 abound.<sup>18</sup> The chief verbal link is *καθαρισμός*, the only other two uses of it within the Gospel, which correlates with the “six stone water pots designed for Jewish purification rites” (λίθιναι ὑδρίαί ἐξ κατὰ τὸν καθαρισμὸν τῶν Ἰουδαίων, 2:6). Though the Gospel indicates that both Jesus and John were baptizing (3:22–23), it is noteworthy that the mentioned dispute arose *περὶ καθαρισμοῦ* not *περὶ βαπτισμοῦ*, despite no fewer than four cognate verbs within the immediate context.<sup>19</sup> Thus, that this passage provides significant clues for understanding Jesus's sign at Cana seems inescapable. Jesus's provision of stone jars brimming with abundant nuptial wine symbolizes (1) the lavish messianic banquet in the age about to dawn when his hour arrives; and (2) the ending of the era punctuated with ceremonial purification climaxed in John's baptism. The passing of the old and the inauguration of the new becomes evident when John is informed about the dispute concerning *καθαρισμός* and he testifies, “You yourselves bear witness that I declared, ‘I am not the Messiah,’ but ‘I was sent before that one.’ The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. But the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices with joy because of the voice of the bridegroom. Therefore, this joy of mine is made complete. That one must increase, but I must

<sup>18</sup> See A. B. Caneday, “John in the Middle: Jews, Purification, and Jesus (John 2:1–11 & 3:22–30),” Johannine Literature Program Unit, annual international meeting of Society of Biblical Literature, University of St. Andrews, Scotland, July 7–11, 2013.

Literary Connections of Two Nuptial Episodes			
John 2:1–12		John 3:22–30	
2:1, 11	ἐν Κανὰ τῆς Γαλιλαίας	3:22	εἰς τὴν Ἰουδαίαν γῆν
2:1	ἐκεῖ	3:22	ἐκεῖ
2:2, 12	ὁ Ἰησοῦς καὶ οἱ μαθηταὶ αὐτοῦ	3:22	ὁ Ἰησοῦς καὶ οἱ μαθηταὶ αὐτοῦ
2:6, 11	ἐκεῖ	3:23	ἐκεῖ
2:6	κατὰ τὸν καθαρισμὸν	3:25	περὶ καθαρισμοῦ
2:6	τῶν Ἰουδαίων	3:25	μετὰ Ἰουδαίου/Ἰουδαίων
2:7, 9, 10	τὰς ὑδρίας ὕδατος, τὸ ὕδωρ, τὸ ὕδωρ	3:23	ὕδατα πολλὰ
2:11	τὸν νυμφίον	3:29	νυμφίος, τοῦ νυμφίου
2:11	φωνεῖ τὸν νυμφίον	3:29	διὰ τὴν φωνὴν τοῦ νυμφίου

<sup>19</sup> Given the many verbal cognates within the context (ἐβάπτισεν, v. 22; βαπτίζω, ἐβαπτίζοντο, v. 23; βαπτίζει, v. 26; βαπτίζει, 4:1 ἐβάπτισεν, 4:2), use of *βαπτισμός* would have been a clever pun. It would have been too clever, however, first at the expense of losing a featured verbal link with the previous mention of the stone water pots accordingly used for ceremonial cleansing (κατὰ καθαρισμὸν τῶν Ἰουδαίων, 2:6) but also at the expense of shifting the focus from Christology to baptisms. Rudolf Bultmann rightly observes, “The most striking thing about the verse is that the discussion is *περὶ καθαρισμοῦ*” (*The Gospel of John: A Commentary* [trans. G. R. Beasley-Murray; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971], 168).

decrease” (3:28–30). The triple occurrence of *νυμφίος* in 3:29 also confirms linkage of 3:22–30 with 2:1–12, identifying Jesus as the messianic bridegroom. Thus, Jesus performed his sign at Cana as a veiled revelation of his role as the messianic bridegroom whose superabundance of wine at his own nuptial banquet will never become depleted, but his hour has not yet come.<sup>20</sup>

It is apparent that 2:1–4:54 form a thematic unit bounded with narratives of the first and second signs—2:1–12 and 4:43–54—that form an *inclusio* distinctively bounded by *Κανὰ τῆς Γαλιλαίας* (2:1; 4:46). Thus, each of the thematic unit’s paragraphs present Jesus as the fulfillment of Jewish foreshadows, as John hints with details such as Jesus appropriating “six stone water pots in conformity with Jewish purification rites” which “were lying there” (2:6), and which the servants filled with fresh water “to the brim” (vs. 7), water that became exquisite wine drawn from the pots (vv. 8–10).<sup>21</sup>

Though the evangelist presents the first sign in the manner the disciples witnessed it as a symbolic act without explanation that evoked their belief, in subsequent episodes accumulation of Jesus’s symbolic imagery and emblematic actions begin to pull back the veil of the mystery concealed in his acted parable of turning water into wine. Thus, relying upon these subsequent episodes, commentators regularly suggest that with his miraculous making of abundant wine Jesus completes, supersedes, and renders Jewish water purification rites, representative of the entire system of ceremonial observance, old, obsolete, and ready to pass away.<sup>22</sup>

Jesus’s appropriation of the stone water pots to signal the end of the old order and his miraculous filling of them with extraordinary wine to symbolize the dawn of God’s saving rule, becomes clearer in Jesus’s clearing of the temple. There, Jesus commandeers mastery of the temple from the authorities when he banishes merchants and money-changers by ordering them, “Remove these things from here; do not make my Father’s house a house of commerce” (2:16) and then telling his riddle—“Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (2:18)—to signify the passing of the Jewish temple, for with his body he fulfills everything it represented, his body which he will raise from the tomb.

### III. CONCEALED REVELATION IN JESUS’S TEMPLE ACT AND RIDDLE—ACTED AND SPOKEN PARABLES

The evangelist affirms that Jesus’s first sign “disclosed his glory, and his disciples believed in him.” Theirs was a response of belief, not the mere astonishment at

<sup>20</sup> Cf. J. Duncan M. Derrett, “Intoxication, Joy, and Wrath: 1 Cor 11:21 and Jn 2:10,” *FN* 2 (1989): 50.

<sup>21</sup> Double use of *ἀντλήω*, referring to drawing water from a well (*ἀντλήσατε*, 2:8; *ἠντληκότες*, 2:9), surely anticipates and connects with the double use of the verb again in the narration of Jesus’s dialogue with the woman at the well in Samaria when the Christ presents himself as the well of living water (*ἀντλήσαι*, 4:7; *ἀντλεῖν*, 4:15). See B. F. Westcott, *The Gospel according to St. John: The Greek Text with Introduction and Notes* (London: John Murray, 1908), 37–38; Barrett, *John*, 160; and E. C. Hoskyns, *The Fourth Gospel* (ed. F. N. Davey; London: Faber & Faber, 1954), 197.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Dodd, *Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, 299; Barrett, *John*, 158; Carson, *John*, 173.

his miraculous power that others in Jerusalem exhibit (cf. 2:23–25). Yes, the disciples believe, but do they perceive the significance of Jesus's symbolic action? It seems that John's statement—"His disciples believed in him"—indicates credulity that lacks understanding. This becomes apparent when they fail to understand both Jesus's symbolic act of ridding the temple of merchants and his enigmatic reply when the temple authorities question him, "What sign do you show us for doing these things?" (2:18). John's use of *σημεῖον* most often refers to miracles, so some claim it means "miraculous sign."<sup>23</sup> To assume that the authorities demanded a miraculous sign is to misunderstand.<sup>24</sup>

It may seem that Jesus offers no sign of authority but instead utters an enigmatic saying.<sup>25</sup> Two observations are pertinent. First, Jesus's act itself of banishing merchants from the temple is a dramatized prophetic sign with echoes of the prophet Jeremiah's speech against the temple (Jer 26:1–15). If the Jewish authorities had eyes to see, they would realize that Jesus's clearing of the temple is itself a sign in keeping with the OT Scriptures.<sup>26</sup> Jesus's act is a portent of impending judgment upon the temple and its city. Second, Jesus's enigmatic saying is itself also a sign in riddle form; his concealed revelation renders judgment upon the authorities (Isa 29:13–14). There at the temple, Jesus offers his riddle: "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it up in three days" (John 2:19).<sup>27</sup> Though the authorities only superficially grasp Jesus's riddle by construing his mention of the temple (*ναός*) as inviting them to raze Herod's temple which had been under construction for more than four decades, it is an effective sign. His sign of veiled revelation bewilders the authorities, for they are not about to challenge Jesus to make good on his promise. Jesus purposely tells his riddle so that the proper resolution eludes both the authorities and even his own disciples. Only John's post-resurrection editorial aside—"But he was saying this concerning the temple of his body" (2:21)—unveils what

<sup>23</sup> Ridderbos claims that John's use of *σημεῖον* means "miraculous sign" (*John*, 113).

<sup>24</sup> Given the verbal exchange between Jews in the temple and Jesus (2:18–22) and other factors, it may be that Jesus's non-miraculous act of cleansing the temple should be considered one of the "signs" of the Fourth Gospel. See, e.g., Andreas J. Köstenberger, "The Seventh Johannine Sign: A Study in John's Christology," *BBR* 5 (1995): 87–103. He argues that the cleansing of the temple is worthy of being regarded as the seventh sign. Also, see Köstenberger, *Theology of John's Gospel and Letters*, 323–335, where he considers the number of signs recorded in the Fourth Gospel.

<sup>25</sup> See, e.g., C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1955; 2nd ed. 1978), 199.

<sup>26</sup> Carson observes, "Indeed, if the authorities had eyes to see, the cleansing of the temple was already a 'sign' they should have thought through and deciphered in terms of Old Testament Scripture" (*Gospel according to John*, 181).

<sup>27</sup> As to whether John's Gospel includes more than six signs, trace the argument of Köstenberger, "Seventh Johannine Sign," 87–103. Köstenberger makes a strong case that Jesus's public actions and spoken riddle in the temple meet the criteria for inclusion as one of the signs. The criteria are: (1) Is a given work performed by Jesus as part of his public ministry? (2) Is an event explicitly identified as a 'sign' in the Fourth Gospel? (3) Does the event, with its concomitant symbolism, point to God's glory displayed in Jesus, thus revealing Jesus as God's true representative? He observes, "According to John, the 'signs,' including the temple clearing, are revelatory pictures of Jesus' true identity: he is the Christ, the Son of God (cf. 20:30–31)" (p. 101).

Jesus deliberately veiled with his riddle.<sup>28</sup> Jesus's recondite revelation awaits elucidation by way of additional, unveiled revelation, namely his raising (ἐγερῶ) of the *ναός* signified in his riddle. So, John explains, "When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered what he was saying," and he adds, then "they believed the Scripture and the saying that Jesus spoke" (2:22).

For this essay's purpose, it is important to observe that Jesus tells a riddle that simultaneously reveals and conceals the authority that warrants his symbolic, forceful actions in the temple. What more appropriate season than Passover (2:13) and what more suitable place than the temple (2:14) for Jesus to disclose at this early phase of his public ministry that he will bring the temple to its divinely appointed end by giving his own body as the sacrifice that will render the temple passé with all its sacrifices because he has authority to rise from the dead? And so, with veiled words Jesus reveals his divinely appointed mission, words that require the disclosure of his resurrection and belief in him as one who bears life within himself to understand. Not only do the temple authorities misconstrue Jesus's spoken parable, his riddle eludes even the nascent credence his disciples have exercised upon seeing his first dramatized parable, his turning water to wine, until he fulfills both his revelatory riddle and Scripture by rising from the dead.

#### IV. CONCEALED REVELATION IN JESUS'S RIDDLING DIALOGUES— EARTHLY ANALOGIES OF HEAVENLY THINGS

1. "We bear witness to what we have seen"—*dialogue with Nicodemus*. Nicodemus, a Pharisee from the Jewish council of rulers, approached Jesus under the cloak of darkness.<sup>29</sup> Whether he exemplifies many Jews in Jerusalem who witnessed Jesus's numerous signs and superficially believed in him is debatable (2:23–25). More likely, Nicodemus is not particularly interested in the truth of Jesus's message but instead approaches him with a leader's curiosity to scrutinize the wonder-worker from Nazareth, as his initial incursion suggests. He is respectful; he addresses Jesus as "rabbi." He is inquisitive; Jesus's signs prompt his inquiry: "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one is able to accomplish the signs you are doing, unless God were with him" (3:2). His plural "we" betrays that he approaches Jesus in an official capacity with a touch of condescension.

Jesus's many acted parables done in Jerusalem prompt Nicodemus's inquisitive inquiry because he reasons that τὰ σημεῖα indicate that Jesus is a "teacher come from God" (3:2). Nicodemus lacks sight, the ability to see not just the signs

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<sup>28</sup> C. K. Barrett makes the case that the frequency of the misunderstanding motif in John's Gospel is not a "literary trick employed by a writer given to irony." Instead, "They represent in miniature the total reaction of Judaism to Christ; the Jews perceived only what was superficially visible in Jesus and naturally rejected the absurd suggestion that he should be the Son of God; if they had penetrated beneath the surface they would have seen its truth" (Barrett, *Gospel according to St. John*, 200).

<sup>29</sup> There is no reason why John's description of Nicodemus coming to Jesus "by night" (νυκτός) cannot entail his attempt to conceal his actions from fellow Jews, especially fellow council members, but also his spiritual darkness. In each instance of νύξ within John's Gospel (3:2; 9:4; 11:10; 13:30) it metaphorically refers to a spiritual darkness even when it refers to hours of darkness.

but the thing signified, namely the reign of God. Thus, to his inquisitor whom Jesus recognizes as “a teacher of Israel” (3:10), he offers a veiled revelatory or parabolic reply that confirms his blindness—“I solemnly say to you, unless one is born from above he is not able to see the kingdom of God” (3:3). Because he is not able to see (οὐ δύναται ἰδεῖν), Jesus’s use of ἀνωθεν baffles him. So, he wonders, “How is it possible for a human who is old to be born? Is it possible a second time to enter into one’s mother’s womb and to be born?” (3:4). Nicodemus’s vision is confined to earthly things (τὰ ἐπίγεια, 3:12) because he is “born of flesh” (ἐκ τῆς σαρκός) and not of the Spirit (ἐκ τοῦ πνεύματος). Thus, he misunderstands Jesus’s riddle that entails his purposefully ambiguous ἀνωθεν to mean “again” rather than “from above.”<sup>30</sup> Is it not evident that Jesus’s enigmatic saying announces both Nicodemus’s impossibility to see and how he can come to see? As de Jonge observes, “True understanding is a matter of grace, a gift to be granted by God himself, an inward change under the impulse of the Spirit.”<sup>31</sup>

Nicodemus’s misunderstanding persists as Jesus reaffirms that understanding comes by being born of the Spirit who gives birth to whom he wills (3:5–8).<sup>32</sup> He inquires, “How can these things be?” Jesus does not excuse lack of understanding; he rebukes Nicodemus: “Are you the teacher of Israel and you do not understand these things?” (3:10). When Jesus says, “If I spoke of earthly things to you and you do not believe, how would you believe if I speak of heavenly things? Also, no one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man” (3:12–13), commentaries testify that exegetes are puzzled.<sup>33</sup> It seems that verse 13 connects with 1:18; both speak of the Son as the only revealer of the Father whose dwelling is heaven.<sup>34</sup> Thus, verse 12 seems best understood as contrasting enigmatic portrayals and plain-spoken portrayals concerning the things of his Father. Indeed, to everyone, including Nicodemus and his own disciples, Jesus portrays things of the Father enigmatically (παροιμία), even cryptically, for the time to disclose plainly (παρηρησία) the things of heaven, from where Jesus descended, is

<sup>30</sup> Bultmann contends that misunderstandings in John’s Gospel never hang upon verbal ambiguity (*Gospel of John*, 135 n. 1). This is surely incorrect, as demonstrated repeatedly by many. Because all other uses of ἀνωθεν throughout the Fourth Gospel mean “from above” (3:31; 19:11, 23; cf. ἀνω, 2:7; 8:23; 11:41) it surely bears the same sense in 3:3, 7. Given Nicodemus’s misunderstanding, it may be that John intends a double meaning, “from above” and “again,” certainly at least in 3:3. To be “born from above”/“born again” bears the same sense as to “become children of God” or to be “born of God” (1:12). Cf. Carson, *Gospel of John*, 189.

<sup>31</sup> M. de Jonge, “Nicodemus and Jesus: Some Observations on Misunderstanding and Understanding in the Fourth Gospel,” *BJRL* 53 (1971): 359.

<sup>32</sup> One would be mistaken to agree with Edwin E. Reynolds who reasons, “The purpose of Jesus’ dialogue with Nicodemus was to lead him to believe. If speaking of spiritual things in terms of earthly analogies proved unable to lead him to belief, how could Jesus ever communicate with him in terms of heavenly analogies and expect him to believe?” (“Misunderstanding in the Fourth Gospel,” 152).

<sup>33</sup> See, e.g., Jan G. van der Watt, “Knowledge of Earthly Things? The Use of ἐπίγειος in John 3:12,” *Neot* 43 (2009): 289–310.

<sup>34</sup> J. Ramsey Michaels, *The Gospel of John* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 194–95. Cf. Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St. John* (New York: Crossroads, 1982), 1:393. Schnackenburg paraphrases, “No one has ascended to heaven [and brought tidings]; only one [has brought tidings]: he who descended from heaven, the Son of man.”

not yet, as he later explains to his disciples.<sup>35</sup> Yet, even plain-spoken revelation is always given analogically, by way of earthly similitudes.<sup>36</sup> It must be so, because Jesus who is the Word is the verisimilitude of God in flesh. To know the Father, one must know the Son, because to see the Son is to see the Father (14:7–11). Veiled in flesh, the One and Only God, who is in intimate relationship with the Father, makes known the Father who cannot be seen (John 1:14, 18; 14:7–10).

2. “*I who speak to you am he*”—*dialogue with the Samaritan woman*. Though it is not transparent, Jesus’s dialogue with the Samaritan, a woman of multiple marriages, shamed among her people, and alienated from the Jews, contrasts with his interaction with Nicodemus, a Pharisee who has stature, education, and responsibility for Israel’s spiritual leadership. Though both misunderstand Jesus’s earthly imagery invested with heavenly significance, the Pharisee of high status remains in the dark concerning Jesus’s analogies upon his first encounter with Jesus, but the Samaritan woman of low repute, who stumbles over Jesus’s analogies of heavenly realities, by the time she returns to her village receives the light, bears testimony concerning the Messiah, and induces others to believe in him also (4:39).

Assisted by John’s post-resurrection asides and by the cumulative effect of episodes editorially associated, Jesus’s disclosures, albeit veiled, shed greater light for John’s readers than for his characters. Mystery shrouds Jesus’s first sign as a riddle hints at its solution. The miracle’s revelatory significance, evocative and elusive, begins to emerge only as the narrative unfolds assisted by post-resurrection revelatory light. Thus, the one who descended from heaven will be exalted, as one greater than the serpent in the wilderness, to give eternal life to all who believe in him. Messiah, who “comes from above,” casts even John the Baptist, his forerunner, into the shadows, for John and his baptism with water are preparatory to the coming Christ just as John announced (1:29–34). And thus, like Jewish purification, John’s baptism is but a watery foreshadow of the spiritual cleanings Messiah administers when he baptizes ἐν πνεύματι ἁγίῳ (3:22–36; 1:33). Likewise, Jesus reveals that he provides the living water that Jacob’s well could only presage, and, as the one who replaces the temple in Jerusalem, he also ends temple-situated worship whether in Jerusalem or in Gerizim and supplants it with worship “in spirit and truth” (4:1–45).

John’s literary inclusion that features Jesus’s return to Cana in Galilee, where he performs his first sign by turning water into wine shines greater revelatory light for readers than for John’s characters. Fascination with earthly signs and wonders that mitigate the troubles of this life blinds eyes to the heavenly realities they signify.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Michaels, *Gospel of John*, 194. See also Carson, *Gospel according to John*, 383, 546 on *παροιμία* contrasted with *παρηγήσια*. Carson observes, “Here in John 16:25, the contrast is between what is enigmatic or cryptic during the ministry of Jesus, and what becomes plain or clear after Jesus’ death/exaltation and gift of the Spirit. It is not simply a matter of unpacking a figure of speech, of explaining a parable (as in Mk. 4:33–34)” (p. 546).

<sup>36</sup> See A. B. Caneday, “Veiled Glory: God’s Self-Revelation in Human Likeness—A Biblical Theology of God’s Anthropomorphic Self-Disclosure,” in *Beyond the Bounds: Open Theism and the Undermining of Biblical Christianity* (ed. John Piper, Justin Taylor, and Paul Kjoss Helseth; Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003), 149–99.

Apart from being born from above, Jesus's signs are ends to themselves and at most indicators that he is a "teacher come from God." In their responses to Jesus the Jews reprise their forefathers' recalcitrance; because they see only the symbol they embrace it as the thing signified. As the Lord's marvelous deeds blinded the eyes of their forefathers in the wilderness (*θαμαστά*, Exod 34:10), so Jesus's veiled revelatory signs blind eyes again, bringing judgment upon Israel, replacing her institutions, festivals, and Israel itself as the True Israel (cf. 15:1) in order that he might become the Savior of the world as Samaritan believers acknowledge (4:42). Therefore, when the official requests Jesus to go to Capernaum to heal his ailing son, John records that Jesus takes the occasion to address Galilean Jews for their sign-mongering (cf. 4:43–45), a reprimand preserved for readers who remain dull and imperceptive toward the Word's self-disclosure. So, immediately before he performs the second sign, when he heals the official's son from a distance in Cana (4:43–54), he rebukes the Galileans (noted by the plural): "Unless you see signs and wonders you do not believe" (4:48).<sup>37</sup>

#### V. CONCEALED REVELATION IN JESUS'S ESCALATING CONFLICT WITH THE JEWS—EARTHLY ANALOGIES OF HEAVENLY THINGS

With propitious timing on Sabbath days and during festivals, especially Passover and Tabernacles, Jesus performs signs paired with hidden revelatory speech to disclose his identity and to reveal his divine character, all with the knowledge that "his hour had not yet come." Jesus's recondite revelation, whether performed with signs (miraculous or dramatic), or spoken in riddles, moves some to believe in him but also provokes many to become hardened against him, especially the religious leaders who protected their domains of authority over the temple and synagogues with the religious activities these institutions represent.

As his actions and riddle in the temple amazed the Jews, so they continue to wonder, "How does this man possess learning without having been instructed?" (7:15). Jesus confounds them again after they accuse him of having a demon and of being delusional: "I did one work, and you all are amazed" (7:21). With pretentious intonation, gatekeepers of synagogues order the man to whom Jesus gave sight to betray his healer: "Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner" (9:24). With sardonic astonishment, the man responds, "Herein is an amazing thing that you do not know from where he comes, and yet he opened my eyes! ... From the beginning of time it has not been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he would not be able to do anything" (9:30–32).<sup>38</sup> This now-sighted man effectively summarizes the recalcitrant blindness of his interrogators. After the sighted man encounters Jesus again, he does "give glory to

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<sup>37</sup> Both verbs are plural (*ἴδητε, οὐ μὴ πιστεύσητε*). Cf. Dodd, *Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, 297; Barrett, *John*, 164, 183.

<sup>38</sup> Again, hear the echoes of Exod 34:10: "Before all your people I will do wonders never before done in any nation in all the world. The people you live among will see how awesome is the work that I, the LORD, will do for you."

God,” not as ordered by the Pharisees, but by believing in the Son of Man and by worshiping him (9:35–38). It is then that Jesus announces, “For judgment I came into the world, that those who do not see might see, and those who see might be made blind” (9:39). Pharisees who hear his riddle presume, “We also are not blind, are we?” (9:40). Content with their darkness, they stand condemned.

Similarly, John reports Jesus’s final sign as featuring his glory. As he does with the man born blind (9:3), John offers a prelude to explain the sign’s purpose. So, when news arrives concerning Lazarus, Jesus purposely delays going to Bethany and announces that his friend’s “illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God’s glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it” (11:4). At Lazarus’s tomb, in response to Martha’s concern over the stink of decaying flesh, Jesus reminds her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” (11:40). Just as when John reports the effects of Jesus’s first sign upon his disciples, he adds that when many mourners who accompanied Mary saw Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead, they “believed in him” (11:45).

Jesus displays his glory in “the works of God,” including giving eyes to those who do not see (9:3–5), even giving light to those who sleep in death’s darkness (11:4, 9–11, 37). Neither darkness of no sight from birth nor darkness of death escapes the penetrating light of the Word’s revealed glory, who with a word can give sight to both. Thus, Jesus’s display of glory rebukes the blindness of those Jews whose mourning of Lazarus’s death as unnecessary incites them blindly to bemoan, “Could not this one who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?” (John 11:37).

The mystery of the Word in flesh who conceals his revelation prompts belief but also incites conflict that escalates toward its apex with the raising of Lazarus, conflict that confirms the religious cabal’s blindness as they purpose to put an end to Jesus (11:48). Messiah’s signs, simultaneously concealing and revealing his glory, give sight to the blind while blinding those who claim to have sight (9:1–7, 35–41; 12:36–43). The more fully Jesus reveals himself, the more hostile opponents become, fulfilling Isaiah’s prophecy (12:39–41; cf. Isa 6:10). Opening the blind eyes of one blinds the eyes of others. Raising Lazarus from death’s pall confirms death’s grip upon those conspiring Jesus’s death. Israel’s hardness is fulfilled: “Lord, who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?” (John 12:38; cf. Rom 11:25).

By alluding to Isa 52:13, John’s Gospel unveils the mystery being at once concealed and revealed by the incarnate Word, for in his “being lifted up” to die (3:14, 8:28; 12:32, 34) he will be “glorified” (1:14; 12:41). Thus, Jesus announces, “Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out. And I, if I am lifted from the earth I will draw all people to myself.” So, Jesus concludes his public ministry in keeping with his practice of concealing revelation. Once again, with veiled words he reveals that his death entails exaltation: “And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, I will draw all men to myself” (John 12:32). In a post-resurrection aside John informs readers, “He said this to signify by what kind of death he was about to die,” a death which also reveals his glory (12:32–33; cf. Isa 52:13). Because they neither benefit from the narrator’s post-resurrection aside, nor

have ears to hear Jesus's purposeful double entendre ("lifted up"), the crowd supposes that he speaks only of his death, for they reasoned that the Law taught them that Messiah lives forever. Jesus calls the crowd to "believe in the light, in order that they may become sons of the light" (12:36a).

To punctuate his pronouncement of judgment, the incarnate Word engages another symbolic act. He departs and hides himself from the Jews a second time (12:36b). The first time he hides himself to dramatize rejection and judgment when he is in the temple during the Feast of Tabernacles (8:59). This second occasion comes at the climax of conflict when he announces, "The light is among you for a little while. Walk while you have the light lest darkness apprehend you. The one who walks in the darkness does not know where he is going. While you have the light, believe in the light in order that you may become sons of the light" (12:35–36). When he says this, Jesus exits and hides from the Jews (12:36b). The Word, who publicly discloses his glory in his signs, now hides his glory from the crowd, confirming them in their blindness.

Then, from his post-resurrection vantage point John explains that Jesus's hiding himself confirms his people's unbelief, though he performed many signs in their presence. This, John says, fulfills Isaiah's prophecy: "Lord, who believed our message? And to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed?" (Isa 53:1). John continues, "Because of this they were not able to believe, for again Isaiah said, 'He blinded their eyes and calcified their hearts, lest they see with their eyes and comprehend with their hearts, and turn about, and I heal them'" (John 12:38–40).

## VI. CONCLUSION

Many have contributed insightful commentary on the misunderstanding motif in John's Gospel. All focus upon the misapprehension of Jesus's actions and words. D. A. Carson recently proposed a challenge: scholars have not sufficiently considered John's understanding of how he and his fellow apostles came to read the OT as Christian Scripture. Succinctly stated, Carson's challenge is that he believes that the misunderstanding motif of John's Gospel, which does not use *μυστήριον*, is analogous to the mystery theme in Paul's letters, that the good news preached by Jesus is simultaneously "hidden in times past but now disclosed, and prophesied in times past and now fulfilled."<sup>39</sup>

This essay's thesis builds upon Carson's challenge but tweaks it. Whereas Carson's proposal focuses upon *reception* of Christ's revelation, my thesis accents Christ's revelatory *impartation*. I have argued that Jesus, who is the Word made flesh, fulfills Scripture by replicating the revelatory nature of Scripture. As the Word veiled in flesh, he imitates Scripture when he reveals himself as sent from the Father in fulfillment of Scripture. As the One and Only God veiled in flesh, he makes himself known with veiled signs, some miraculous and others not, and with veiled speech. Jesus purposefully reveals himself by concealed signs, which are acted par-

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<sup>39</sup> Carson, "Reflections," 91–92.

ables or riddles, and in spoken riddles (as John says) to blind eyes and to harden hearts, lest the people recognize his true identity, turn, and be spiritually healed.

Jesus came not as a preacher who would lead a great revival but to offer himself as the Lamb of God who would take away sin (John 1:29). Thus, no less than Mark's Gospel vividly presents Jesus's self-disclosure under the rubric of "mystery" with a view to accomplishing his redemptive mission, John's Gospel portrays Jesus as concealing himself even as he reveals himself in order that when his hour comes he pulls back the veil of his revelatory acts and speech. John recounts that when Jesus gives life to dead Lazarus, his concealed revelation accomplishes his purpose of provoking Jewish opposition determined to put him to death without realizing that they carry out the Father's purpose. It is then that Jesus hides himself from the Jews to dramatize divine judgment against them. In Jesus's appointed hour he reveals himself as the Passover lamb, as the Son of God exalted upon the cross, lifting the veil from his signs and riddles. Thus, God's good news concealed within the Word's signs and riddles that prophesy his hour of exaltation, is now revealed by those same signs and riddles.

Indeed, Carson's observation is correct, "that John's Gospel treats the mystery theme as tellingly as any New Testament writer, without using the word 'mystery.'"<sup>40</sup> The Word's revelation of himself with parabolic speech and sign, miraculous or not, sustains and replicates the *μυστήριον* of the OT Scriptures. For, just as the selfsame Scriptures now reveal the mystery they concealed for long ages (Rom 16:25–27), so also Jesus's enigmatic dialogues and parabolic actions simultaneously conceal and reveal the Word's identity and redemptive mission. The incarnate Word fulfills Scripture by replicating Scripture. Thus, Jesus's prophetic riddles and signs, each infused with symbolism expectantly foreshadowing Messiah's awaiting glory, now burst with revelatory significance illumined by the light of his resurrection.

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.