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# Topography and Theology in the Gospel of John

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Throughout his distinguished career as a writer and an editor, David Noel Freedman has persistently stressed the importance of the land and cultures of Palestine for the interpretation of biblical texts. Taking this emphasis as my point of departure, I find that attention to the physical context of Jesus' ministry offers a valuable perspective on the Fourth Gospel. The prologue begins with references to the transcendent Word of God, but when relating at greater length how the Word became flesh and came to his own home, the text carefully follows the contours of the land of Palestine. Comparison of the Johannine topographical notices with information from other sources has shown that the Gospel writer generally has a high level of familiarity with places he describes.<sup>1</sup> Although some interpreters regard the topographical notices mainly as remnants of early tradition, others have explored possible connections with the evangelist's broader theological interests.<sup>2</sup> Ways in which topography may help to communicate theologically with the Gospel's readers will be our focus.

At a basic level, topographical information can enhance the credibility of the author in the eyes of the readers. For example, John Chrysostom said that references to the places where events in Jesus' ministry occurred served

1. See, e.g., William F. Albright, "Recent Discoveries in Palestine and the Gospel of John," in *The Background of the New Testament and Its Eschatology: Studies in Honor of C. H. Dodd* (ed. W. D. Davies and D. Daube; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1956) 153-71; Benedikt Schwank, "Ortskenntnisse im Vierten Evangelium?" *Erbe und Auftrag* 57 (1981) 427-42.

2. For a survey of approaches to Johannine topography see Charles H. Scobie, "Johannine Geography," *SR* 11 (1982) 77-84.

to validate the evangelist's message.<sup>3</sup> His point is that if the evangelist can be trusted in minor details he can also be trusted in weightier issues. Yet the Gospel's comments about Judea, Jacob's well, and other places suggest that remarks about specific places may do more than lend credibility to the narrative, and that topographical notices may play a larger theological role. The audience of the final form of John's Gospel was probably mixed: some readers may have been familiar with the places mentioned in the Gospel, others would have known only what the evangelist presented.<sup>4</sup> For topographical information to function effectively, its significance would have to be plausible to those familiar with the various sites mentioned, yet accessible to those without such information.

### I. The Regions

The Gospel's treatment of regions is a useful point at which to begin, since their theological significance is well developed in the text.<sup>5</sup> The opening chapters of the Gospel show that positive responses to Jesus were typical of encounters in places outside Judea, and that negative or fickle responses were typical of Judea itself. The first disciples of Jesus began following him in Transjordan (1:28, 35-51), and their initial faith was confirmed by the sign Jesus performed at Cana in Galilee (2:1, 11). By way of contrast, some in Jerusalem responded skeptically to Jesus' remarks in the temple and others exhibited an unreliable form of miracle-faith (2:18-20, 23-25). The next pair of episodes contrasts the incredulity of Nicodemus, who was a Jewish leader in Jerusalem (3:1, 11-12), with the more positive response of the Samaritan woman, who brought her townspeople to a believing encounter with Jesus (4:29, 39). Similarly, the royal official in Galilee was willing to believe Jesus' word that his dying son would live (4:50, 53), but the invalid by the pool of Bethzatha in Jerusalem exhibited no faith before or after he was healed and even reported to the authorities, who persecuted Jesus for a Sabbath violation (5:15).

3. *Homilies on the Gospel of St. John* 16.1. Cf. Carl Bjerklund, *Tauta Egeneto: Die Präzisierungssätze im Johannesevangelium* (WUNT 40; Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1987) 149.

4. On the reading audience see R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) 224-25.

5. On the regions see esp. Julette M. Bassler, "The Galileans: A Neglected Factor in Johannine Community Research," *CBQ* 43 (1981) 243-57. Cf. Robert T. Fortna, *The Fourth Gospel and Its Predecessor: From Narrative Source to Present Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) 294-314; Wayne A. Meeks, "Breaking Away: Three New Testament Pictures of Christianity's Separation from the Jewish Communities," in "To See Ourselves as Others See Us": *Christians, Jews, "Others" in Late Antiquity* (ed. J. Neusner and E. S. Frerichs; Chico, CA: Scholars, 1985) 93-115, esp. 94-104.

In the first five chapters, the evangelist associates particular types of faith responses with regions; but beginning in chap. 6, he extends the regional identification to anyone exhibiting the faith response typical of that region. When the crowd at Capernaum in Galilee manifested the same kind of animosity that Jesus had encountered in Judea, the evangelist identified them as *Ioudaioi*, a term that could mean “Jews” in a religious and ethnic sense, and “Judeans” in a geographic sense (6:41, 52). Similarly, Nicodemus was initially identified with the dubious responses of people in Jerusalem, but when he later expressed more openness to Jesus, the authorities wondered if he might actually be from Galilee (7:51-52). Pilate was a Roman, but when interrogating Jesus he asked, “Am I a *Ioudaios*?” (18:35), a question that could be answered affirmatively because of his collaboration with the Jewish authorities during Jesus’ trial and execution. People like the man born blind, Martha, and Mary, all of whom lived in the vicinity of Jerusalem and voiced traditional Jewish beliefs, are never called *Ioudaioi*. The term is not applied indiscriminately to all the inhabitants of a region but identifies those who manifest either negative or unreliable responses to Jesus (11:36-37, 45-46; 12:9, 17, 34).

The regional traits depicted in the Gospel and their extension to persons who did not necessarily live in those regions would have been congruent with what many readers knew from other sources. Historically, opposition to Jesus climaxed in Judea where he was crucified; but through their own clashes with the synagogue, Johannine Christians found that conflicts with *Ioudaioi* transcended that particular locale, while collaboration between rabbinic and Roman authorities in the period after 70 C.E. showed that opposition was not confined to one ethnic group.<sup>6</sup> Historically, Jesus’ earliest disciples were from Galilee, and the term “Galilean” came to connote a follower of Jesus (cf. Mark 14:70). The postresurrection missionary activity of early Christians also met with some positive results among the Samaritans (cf. John 4:38-39) and among others who lived outside Judea and were not of Jewish background (7:35; 11:51-52; 12:20).

The regions in the Gospel are not significant in themselves. Rather, the negative responses associated with Judea and the positive responses associated with other places help to communicate theologically with readers by characterizing people in their relationship to Jesus. Specific sites within each region also help disclose something about the people mentioned in the story. Since I cannot treat all the places mentioned by the evangelist, I will select one from each region and consider how traits associated with that place contribute theologically to the Gospel.

6. John 21:19 apparently alludes to Peter’s death by crucifixion, which was a Roman form of execution (cf. 18:32). On the significance of collaboration between Jewish and Roman leaders after 70 C.E. for John’s Gospel, see David Rensberger, *Johannine Faith and Liberating Community* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988) 87-90; and my “The Savior of the World’ (John 4:42),” *JBL* 109 (1990) 678.

## II. Jacob's Well in Samaria

I turn first to Jacob's well in Samaria, since the accuracy of the topographical details in John 4 is widely accepted. The text says that when Jesus journeyed to Samaria, he halted near the town of Sychar beside Jacob's well, which was in the field he had given to his son Joseph (4:5-6). The conversation with the Samaritan woman discloses that the well is deep (4:11) and that it can be called either a "spring" (*pēgē*, 4:6) or a "well" (*phrear*, 4:11). It was located within eyesight of "this mountain," Mount Gerizim, where the Samaritans worshiped (4:20), and was near fields suitable for growing grain (4:35). Readers familiar with the area would have found the topographical details accurate. A deep ancient well called *Bir Ya'aqub* is in the vicinity of Mount Gerizim, and since it is an artesian water source rather than a cistern, it can conceivably be called a "well" or a "spring." The fertile plain that extends to the east of the well was known for its grain production in ancient times. It is uncertain whether Sychar should be identified with the village of Askar or with Shechem, but it is clear that in the first century there was a village not far from the well.<sup>7</sup>

The first topographical detail taken up in the chapter is Jacob's well. Although located at a particular place in Samaria, the encounter beside this well acquires a typical or representative quality through its similarities to biblical courtship scenes. The Scriptures relate how several of the woman's ancestors — including Jacob (4:4, 12) — met their future wives beside wells.<sup>8</sup> The pattern in these stories is that a man traveling in a foreign land meets a young woman beside a well. After water is given, the woman tells her family about the visitor, the man is invited to stay, and a betrothal is arranged. Earlier in the Gospel, Jesus assumed the role of the bridegroom by providing wine for the wedding at Cana (2:1-11), and John the Baptist identified Jesus as the bridegroom who had come to claim the bride (3:29). In John 4, Jesus was traveling through Samaria, which was foreign territory, and met one of Jacob's descendants, a woman who had come to the well at midday as Rachel had (Gen 29:7; John 4:6). These typical traits rightly suggest that the Samaritan woman, like Rachel, would be receptive to the one she met.

Comments about the water in the well, however, show that Jesus is someone "greater than Jacob" (4:12). The well Jacob provided was bound to a place and quenched thirst only for a time; Jesus promised water that would spring up within a person and issue into eternal life (4:13-14). The language recalls traditions about the water given to Israel in the time of Moses — a figure whom Samaritans

7. On the location see Zdravko Stefanovic, "Jacob's Well," *ABD* 3.608-9. On the grain fields see Str-B 2.431; Clemens Kopp, *The Holy Places of the Gospels* (New York: Herder, 1963) 165n.42.

8. The similarities to biblical courtship scenes have often been noted. See the summary in Paul D. Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1985) 101-3.

deemed greater than Jacob. On several occasions Moses had wondrously provided water for Israel in the desert, and tradition held that the water that had sprung up at different times and places actually came from a single miraculous well.<sup>9</sup> In addition to water, Moses had brought the people the Law, which was the "gift of God" and a source of life (cf. John 4:10, 14). Water was a common image for the Law in both Jewish and Samaritan tradition.<sup>10</sup> Jesus contrasted his true "living water" with the water in the well, indicating that it was of another order, something more like the revelation delivered through Moses than the water provided by Jacob. When Jesus displayed his knowledge of the woman's life, she recognized that he was indeed a prophet (4:19).

The second topographical detail is Mount Gerizim. As the scope of the conversation broadens from the woman's personal life to matters of national concern, the discussion of topography also shifts from Jacob's well to the Samaritan holy place. The woman said, "Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, and you say that in Jerusalem is the place where it is necessary to worship" (4:20). By speaking of national concerns in the first person plural, the woman acts as a spokesperson for her people. Jesus responds in the plural by saying, "You people worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews" (4:22). His comment recalls the common Jewish accusation that worship in Samaria had been idolatrous ever since Jacob had buried Rachel's stolen household gods there (Gen 35:4). Idolatry meant worshipping what one did not know (cf. Isa 44:9, 18; Wis 13:1-2). Such ignorance characterized those who worshiped at "this mountain," but from a Johannine perspective was also typical of "the world" generally (John 1:10).<sup>11</sup>

After referring to the holy mountain, the woman spoke about "the Messiah" who was expected to tell her people "all things" (4:25). The passage conveys Samaritan expectations through a Jewish expression. Samaritans in the first century apparently did not use the term "messiah," which was often associated with the heir of David, a Jewish king, but looked for the prophet like Moses foretold in Deut 18:15-18. A Moses-like figure did gain a following among the Samaritans in the mid-first century, promising to reveal on Mount Gerizim the sacred vessels used in the Mosaic tabernacle (Josephus, *Ant.* 18.4.1 §§85-88).<sup>12</sup>

9. On Moses traditions and the well see Birger Olsson, *Structure and Meaning in the Fourth Gospel: A Text-Linguistic Analysis of John 2:1-11 and 4:1-42* (ConBNT 6; Lund: Gleerup, 1974) 162-73; Germain Bienaimé, *Moïse et le don de l'eau dans la tradition juive ancienne: targum et midrash* (AnBib 98; Rome: Biblical Institute, 1984). Cf. the Samaritan *Memar Marqah* 4.4; 4.8; 5.3; 6.3.

10. See, e.g., CD 6.2-5; 3.12-17a; 19.32-35; *Memar Marqah* 2.1; 6.3; cf. Philo, *Drunkenness* 112-13; *Dreams* 2.271.

11. On this section see my "Savior of the World," 672-74.

12. See my discussion in *The Dwelling of God: The Tabernacle in the Old Testament, Intertestamental Jewish Literature, and the New Testament* (CBQMS 22; Washington, D.C.: Catholic Biblical Association, 1989) 55-58.

Jesus disclosed that he was the Messiah, and indeed told the woman "all things" about herself (John 4:25-26, 29, 39). The arrival of the Messiah rightly presaged the establishment of true worship, but contrary to Samaritan expectations it would not be bound to a location: the hour had come when people would worship God "neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem" but "in Spirit and in truth" (4:21-24).

The third topographical element is the grainfields to the east of the well. As the woman exits, the disciples appear on the scene and encourage Jesus to eat. Jesus replies that he has food, explaining that "food" is a metaphor for doing the will of God. Then he directs their attention to the fields nearby, transforming them into a metaphor for missionary activity (4:31-38). At the ordinary agricultural level, there was a four-month interval between the sowing and harvesting of a crop; but Jesus says that the time of harvest has already come and that the sower and reaper can rejoice together, recalling biblical promises concerning God's future blessings (Lev 26:5; Amos 9:13). The harvest itself — like the water promised to the woman — would be for eternal life (John 4:36). The disciples had just returned with some food purchased in Sychar, near Joseph's field (*chōrion*, 4:5), but were participating in a missionary harvest of the fields (*chōrai*, 4:35) for which they had not labored, as a throng of villagers came to Jesus in response to the Samaritan woman's testimony (4:29-30, 38-39).

The final topographical element is Sychar. This episode began with a personal conversation between Jesus and a woman, but it expanded to deal with issues of national differences and the Christian mission, and concludes when Jesus is acclaimed "the Savior of the world" (4:42), a title that connotes world-wide dominion. Similarly, the evangelist initially located Sychar in relation to Jacob's well and Joseph's field, but suggests that Jesus was welcomed there in a manner suitable for a Greco-Roman city (*polis*, 4:5, 39). When figures like Vespasian and Titus approached a city, people would stream out to the roadsides to greet them, escort them into their town, and acclaim them "savior and benefactor." By going out to meet Jesus on the road, inviting him into their town, and hailing him as "the Savior of the world," the people of Sychar bore witness to the universal scope of his power.<sup>13</sup> Each topographical element in the story contributes to a disclosure of Jesus' identity and what it means to receive him.

### III. The Pool of Bethzatha

I noted earlier that the evangelist initially connected Judea with unfavorable and unreliable responses to Jesus, but eventually applied the term *Ioudaioi* to

13. On the reception at Sychar see my "Savior of the World," 665-68.

people of other locations and backgrounds who exhibited the same kinds of responses. In a similar way, the response of the invalid in John 5:1-16 was appropriate for the place known as Bethzatha, but readers could discern in him something of more far-reaching significance. The description of Bethzatha is detailed, and despite several textual problems it is corroborated by other literary sources and archaeological excavations. The site, which was located north of the Temple Mount, included two large reservoirs with smaller bathing pools nearby.<sup>14</sup> The five porticoes described by the evangelist sheltered the sick.

Although located in Jerusalem, this cult of healing was not a typical Jewish institution. Invalids were resident there, sometimes for extended periods of time (5:6), seeking help for various ailments. The expectation was that when the water in the pool was mysteriously disturbed, someone who entered immediately would be healed and that latecomers would not be helped (5:7). These practices are not well attested in Jewish sources, which commonly associated healing with prayer to a God who did not reserve his favor for those best able to help themselves. Later legend ascribed the moving of the water to an angel of the Lord (5:4), but the best manuscripts do not include this verse and most translations rightly omit it.

The Bethzatha cult resembles the healing shrines of Asclepius and Serapis, which were found throughout the eastern Mediterranean. Like the pool described in John 5, these sanctuaries were normally built beside bubbling springs, where people might remain for some time seeking aid. Vitruvius Pollio, a leading builder of the Augustan age, said that "the healthiest regions and suitable springs of water therein" are chosen "for all temples and particularly for Asclepius" and other gods of healing. For when the sick "are treated with water from wholesome fountains they recover more quickly."<sup>15</sup> The small bathing pools discovered at Bethzatha were similar to those used at such shrines, where people hoped to be among those who were healed of blindness, foot problems, and other infirmities by means of the water.<sup>16</sup> The second-century votive offerings to the god Serapis that were found at Bethzatha indicate how readily the shrine could be adapted for pagan use. It is not clear that Greco-Roman deities were actually invoked at the pool prior to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E., but Antoine Duprez observed that in the time of Jesus Bethzatha was located outside the city walls and near the Antonia fortress, the largest Roman military installation in the city, making it potentially useful for the pagans stationed there.<sup>17</sup>

14. On the textual problems of John 5:2 and other pertinent information see James F. Strange, "Beth-zatha," *ABD* 1.700-701. The most important discussion of the site is by Antoine Duprez, *Jésus et les dieux guérisseurs, à propos de Jean V* (CahRB 12; Paris: Gabalda, 1970). See also W. D. Davies, *The Gospel and the Land: Early Christianity and Jewish Territorial Doctrine* (Berkeley: University of California, 1974) 302-13.

15. On *Architecture* 1.2.7.

16. On the power of water to cure such ailments see Aelius Aristides, *Orations* 39.6 and 15; Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 4.31.4; 5.5.11; 6.22.7; 8.19.2.

17. Duprez, *Jésus et les dieux guérisseurs*, 96-97.

The invalid was Jewish, but his perspective on healing reflected a religious attitude that was common throughout the Greco-Roman world. The man was preoccupied with the mysterious power of the water in the pool, assuming that a well-timed entry would virtually guarantee results. Jesus healed the man without using water from the pool, but when the man was later faulted for carrying his mat on the Sabbath, he tried to shift the blame to his healer (5:11). Later, his readiness to report Jesus to the authorities suggests that he perceived healing as something that magically had happened to him, requiring no further commitment on his part. The deities typically associated with Greco-Roman healing shrines did not demand exclusive allegiance from worshipers, who could move from one cult to another with relative ease. Yet this text shows that those who assumed that loyalty to Jesus was optional remained in sin and under the threat of judgment (5:14).

#### IV. Tiberias in Galilee

In the wake of conflicts in Jerusalem over the healing at Bethzatha, "Jesus went across the Sea of Galilee of Tiberias" (6:1). This seemingly redundant designation connects the lake not only with the region of Galilee but with the city of Tiberias, which was the major urban center on its shores. Although the evidence is complex, there are good reasons to think that the Fourth Evangelist locates the feeding of the five thousand in proximity to the city of Tiberias, as Raymond Brown has suggested. The transition from Jerusalem in chap. 5 to Galilee in chap. 6 is abrupt, but the basic movement in the narrative is from south to north, and a number of manuscripts actually say that "Jesus went across the Sea of Galilee to the region [*eis ta merē*] of Tiberias." This movement is more plausible than assuming that Jesus crossed to the eastern shore.<sup>18</sup>

Tiberias is mentioned a second time in the transitional scene that traces the crowd's journey from the site of the feeding to Capernaum. The day after the miracle, the crowd wanted to find Jesus but discovered that his disciples had taken the only boat. Then "boats came from Tiberias, (which was) near the place where they ate the bread after the Lord had given thanks," and took them to Capernaum (6:23-24). The word "near" (*engys*) could be taken to mean that boats from Tiberias came "near to the place" where Jesus fed the multitude;<sup>19</sup> but word order indicates that "near" should be taken with Tiberias, and given the use of "near" (*engys*) with place-names elsewhere in the Gospel, it is best

18. Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (2 vols.; AB 29-29A; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966-70) 1.232, 257-58.

19. In 6:19 "near" (*engys*) describes the movement of Jesus, who was coming "near to the boat." In 6:23 it identifies Tiberias in relation to the place of the feeding.

to say that boats came from Tiberias, "which was near the place where they ate the bread."<sup>20</sup> Moreover, if the evangelist set the feeding in the vicinity of Tiberias, the appearance of boats from that city is not hard to explain. It is more difficult to imagine why boats from a city on the western shore would travel to an unknown spot on the eastern side, then embark for yet a third location on the northwestern shore. When the crowd went "across the sea" (6:25), one can best picture them following a common navigational route from a site near Tiberias to Capernaum. The evangelist's language is similar to that of Josephus, who said that when people traveled from Tiberias to Taricheae — a town on the western side that was closer to Tiberias than Capernaum was — they "crossed over" the sea (*Life* 59 §304). The intervening description of Jesus walking on the sea is congruent with this scenario.<sup>21</sup>

The crowd that followed Jesus is depicted in a distinctly Johannine way. After Jesus had fed them with bread and fish, they declared initially that he was "the prophet who is coming into the world" (6:14), identifying him as the prophet like Moses who was foretold in Deut 18:15-18. The prophet Elisha had also fed a multitude with a small amount of bread (2 Kgs 4:42-44), but Jesus' miraculous gift of bread during the Passover season (John 6:4) would have been especially appropriate for someone like Moses, in whose time Israel had eaten

20. *Engys* is used for a place called "Aenon (which is) near Salim" (3:23), and Jesus is said to have gone from the village of Bethany "to the region (which is) near the desert" (11:54). Other occurrences of *engys* in connection with places make the connection clear by coupling it with a form of the word "to be": Bethany "was near Jerusalem" (11:18), Golgotha "was near the city" (19:20), and the tomb "was near the place" (19:42). Significantly, the original text of Codex Sinaiticus said that "boats came from Tiberias, which was [*ousēs*] near where they ate the bread" (6:23).

21. The miraculous elements in John's account of Jesus walking on the sea are remarkably muted. The disciples had rowed for three or four miles (6:19), but John does not state that they were in the middle of the lake (cf. Matt 14:24). After meeting Jesus the evangelist notes that "immediately the boat reached the land to which they were going" (John 6:21). Some insist that the boat was miraculously whisked the remaining miles across the water (e.g., Rudolph Bultmann, *The Gospel of John* [trans. G. R. Beasley-Murray et al.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971] 216; Ernst Haenchen, *John* [trans. Robert W. Funk; 2 vols.; Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984] 1.280; Fortna, *Fourth Gospel and Its Predecessor*, 82). But it is at least as plausible to think that they had nearly reached their destination when they met Jesus. Unlike the other Gospels, John does not say that Jesus looked like a ghost, that he stilled the storm, or even that he got into the boat, only that "the disciples wanted to take him into the boat" when they reached the shore (6:21). A nonmiraculous interpretation is proposed by J. H. Bernard, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. John* (ICC; 2 vols.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1929) 1.185; J. N. Sanders, *A Commentary on the Gospel According to St. John* (completed by B. Mastin; HNTC; New York: Harper & Row, 1969) 183; Charles H. Talbert, *Reading John: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Fourth Gospel and the Johannine Epistles* (New York: Crossroad, 1992) 133. The obscure points are noted by Brown, *Gospel According to John*, 1.252; C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John* (2nd ed.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978) 280-81. By muting the miraculous elements, the evangelist focuses attention on the theophanic character of Jesus' words, "I Am" (6:20).

manna or "bread from heaven" (cf. 6:31-32). Next, the crowd tried to seize Jesus and make him king (6:15). This reaction also is plausible within the framework of Jewish eschatological expectations. In some traditions, Moses was depicted as both prophet and king (Philo, *Moses* 2.292), and other sources said that the advent of the Messiah would be accompanied by a reappearance of manna (2 *Apoc. Bar.* 29:8). The crowd's attempt to make Jesus king implies that a ruler's authority comes from popular acclaim rather than "from above" (cf. John 18:36), and Jesus fled from them. When they sought him out the next day to demand more bread, Jesus upbraided them for simply seeking to eat their fill without regard for what his signs conveyed (6:25-34).

A crowd from Tiberias would have been well suited to play the role of people preoccupied with bread and kingship. The characteristics of people from Tiberias were probably well known to some readers. Josephus called them "a promiscuous rabble" that included magistrates and poor folk "from any and all places of origin" (*Ant.* 18.2.3 §§36-38). The city itself, which bore the name of the emperor Tiberius, had been founded about 19 C.E. by Herod Antipas, a Roman vassal. The king established it as his capital with a Hellenistic constitution, but found it difficult to get Jews to settle there since he had built it on the site of a graveyard, and contact with the dead made people unclean according to Jewish law. Therefore, to find residents for his new city, Herod freed slaves and offered free land and houses to those who would settle there.<sup>22</sup> Although a synagogue was eventually established, the memory of the city's origins tainted its reputation for some time, and when Tiberias became an important center of rabbinic learning, Jewish sources recounted carefully how the city had been cleansed from its defilement.<sup>23</sup>

By the time the Gospel was completed, many of its readers would probably not have known the history of Tiberias. Yet the Gospel enables readers to see in the crowd traits that were not limited to Tiberias but were typical of the masses in various Greco-Roman cities. Roman rulers frequently placated the populace with distributions of bread or grain. Cicero recalled that the practice was agreeable to many people, since it enabled them to get adequate food without working for it, but others opposed it since it induced idleness and drained the treasury. The satirist Juvenal mocked the citizens who dutifully accompanied the Roman consul because they had received tickets for free meals, and he ridiculed the fickleness of the crowds that were willing to voice support for any ruler who mollified them with "bread and circuses." Similarly, Dio Chrysostom chided the people of Alexandria who were reputed to be a group "to whom you need only throw plenty of bread and a ticket to the hippodrome, since they have no interest in anything else."<sup>24</sup>

22. On the history of Tiberias see James F. Strange, "Tiberias," *ABD* 4.547-49.

23. *y. Sheb.* 9, 38d; *Gen. Rab.* 79:6; *Ecl. Rab.* 10:8.

24. Cicero, *Pro Sestio* 48 §103; Juvenal, *Satires* 10.44-46, 73-80; Dio Chrysostom, *Dis-*

The multitude in John 6, like the masses in various Greco-Roman cities, had no interest in anything but bread, and their eagerness to make Jesus king on the basis of a food distribution would have been familiar to a broad spectrum of the Gospel's readers. The crowd's loyalty was based on eating their fill of the loaves, and Jesus repudiated it, warning against their preoccupation with the kind of food that perishes (6:27). By noting the connection of the crowd to the city of Tiberias, the evangelist helped to convey a disposition that was congruent with the origins of the place yet representative of an attitude evident among many in the Mediterranean world.

### V. Bethany in Transjordan

The final site is "Bethany beyond the Jordan," where John was baptizing and Jesus' ministry began (1:28). Toward the close of his ministry, Jesus returned to Bethany, where he received word of Lazarus's illness (10:40; 11:1-3). By noting that Bethany was "beyond the Jordan," the evangelist directs attention to the eastern side of the river. Although some scholars have suggested that Bethany was actually the region of Batanaea,<sup>25</sup> the Gospel refers to it as "a place" (*topos*, 10:40), a term that refers consistently to particular locations like the Jerusalem sanctuary (4:20; 11:48), the shrine at Bethzatha (5:13), and other specific sites; it is not used as a regional designation.<sup>26</sup> The precise location of Bethany in Transjordan has not been determined, but the site that has enjoyed most consistent support is the Wadi el-Charrar, which is opposite Jericho.<sup>27</sup> A place in this vicinity is compatible with the movements depicted in John 1 and 11, and is especially appropriate for the conversations the evangelist locates there.<sup>28</sup>

courses 32.31. See also Juvenal, *Satires* 7.174 and 8.118; Fronto, *Correspondence* (ed. and trans. C. R. Haines; LCL; Cambridge: Harvard University; London: Heinemann, 1963) 2.17. Cf. E. Courtney, *A Commentary on the Satires of Juvenal* (London: Athlone, 1980) 104-5, 372, 472; E. G. Hardy, *The Satires of Juvenal* (2nd ed.; London: Macmillan, 1891) 198-99, 232; Paul Veyne, *Bread and Circuses: Historical Sociology and Political Pluralism* (London: Penguin, 1990) 99-100.

25. On Bethany as Batanaea see esp. Rainer Riesner, "Bethany Beyond the Jordan (John 1:28): Topography, Theology and History in the Fourth Gospel," *TynBul* 38 (1987) 29-63; idem, "Bethany Beyond the Jordan," *ABD* 1.703-5.

26. Other "places" include the garden where Jesus was arrested (18:2), the pavement where Pilate's judgment seat was located (19:13), and the site of Jesus' crucifixion (19:17, 20, 41). Cf. 6:10, 23; 11:30; 20:7, 25.

27. Gustav Dalman, *Sacred Sites and Ways: Studies in the Topography of the Gospels* (trans. Paul P. Levertoff; London: SPCK, 1935) 89-92; Kopp, *Holy Places of the Gospels*, 110-29; cf. Rudolph Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John* (trans. Kevin Smyth et al.; 3 vols.; New York: Herder/Seabury/Crossroad, 1968-82) 1.295-96; Riesner, "Bethany Beyond the Jordan," *ABD* 1.704.

28. A period of three days would allow Jesus to travel from a location opposite Jericho,

After arriving at Bethany, a Jewish delegation asked about three figures: the Christ, Elijah, and the prophet like Moses (1:19-21, 25). Elijah was said to have parted the Jordan near Jericho before being swept into heaven by a whirlwind and chariot of fire on the plains across the river. His successor, Elisha, received the spirit of the prophet and parted the Jordan yet again (2 Kgs 2:6-14). The return of Elijah was an element in Jewish eschatological expectations (Mal 3:22-24 [ET 4:4-6]). Earlier, Moses was said to have addressed Israel on the plains across from Jericho (Deut 1:1), promising that in the future God would raise up for them another prophet like himself (18:15-18). Afterward, his successor, Joshua, who bore the Spirit of God as Moses had (Num 11:24-25; 27:18; Deut 34:9), led the people into the land by parting the waters of the Jordan as Moses once parted the sea (Exod 14:21; Josh 3:7-17). Moses was said to have been buried near Mount Nebo, which overlooks the area, and some expectations concerning the appearance of a Mosaic deliverer were associated with the burial site.<sup>29</sup> The vitality of these local traditions is evident in the attempt of Theudas, a self-proclaimed prophet, to claim the mantle of Moses, Elijah, and their successors by leading a group to the Jordan River, where he promised to part the water for them. The Roman cavalry interfered with his plans.<sup>30</sup>

John the Baptist denied that he was the Christ, Elijah, or the prophet like Moses; it was Jesus who would fulfill God's promises to Israel. Bethany in Transjordan was a suitable place for Jesus to appear, since the Fourth Gospel's presentation of Jesus' messiahship combines Davidic hopes with expectations for an eschatological prophet. This is especially apparent in signs like the gift of bread and raising the dead, which are reminiscent of miracles performed by Moses and Elijah (Exod 16:4-8; 1 Kgs 17:17-24). At Bethany, John testified that he "saw the Spirit descend and remain" on Jesus (John 1:32-33), which was appropriate for Jesus as God's anointed one (Isa 11:2; 61:1) as well as for a figure who stood in the line of Moses and Elijah. Like these earlier figures, Jesus bore the Spirit; but unlike them he bore it permanently. The Spirit "remained" on Jesus. Jesus would eventually give the Spirit to his followers, but that did not mean he would give it away. No other prophet or messianic figure would succeed him.

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where he met his first disciples, to Cana in Galilee (2:1). The objection that one of the days allotted for travel would have been the Sabbath (Riesner, *TynBul* 38 [1987] 45-47) relies too heavily on a possible parallel between "the third day" and Easter. In chap. 11, it would have taken a day to travel from Bethany near Jerusalem to a site across from Jericho. If Lazarus died and was buried just after the messenger departed, one can calculate a day for the messenger to reach Jesus, a delay of two more days, and one final day for Jesus to travel to Bethany near Jerusalem. In support of Batanaea, Riesner proposes that Lazarus died only after Jesus had delayed for two days, so that it took Jesus four days to reach Bethany near Jerusalem (*ibid.*, 43-45). While this alternative in itself is plausible, it does not override evidence favoring a site nearer Jericho.

29. *Lives of the Prophets* 2.14-19. See the comments by D. R. Hare in *OTP* 2.383.

30. Josephus, *Ant.* 20.5.1 §§97-98. The incident occurred ca. 44 C.E.

The Fourth Evangelist depicts the persons in the Gospel in a manner suitable for the places in which they appear. His portrayals make use of traditions associated with particular locations, but these are developed to disclose something of more far-reaching significance. Enough information is given so that readers unfamiliar with these places can interpret the scene, yet each episode is presented so that readers who do know about particular sites will find it plausible. By developing the theological significance of places in the Gospel, the evangelist maintains an integral connection with the land in which the first generation of Jesus' disciples lived and worked, and he also helps readers of subsequent generations to know who Jesus is and what it means to encounter him.