

THE CHARACTER OF JOHN IN THE FOURTH GOSPEL

CORNELIS BENNEMA*

The first human character that appears in the Fourth Gospel is John (1:6). Although he is never called “Baptist” or “Baptizer” in this gospel, the references to his baptizing activities in 1:25–33 and 3:23 assure us that it is the same person we find in the Synoptics. Virtually all scholars agree on the characterization of John in the Fourth Gospel: he is a witness. The author has stripped John of almost all details regarding his identity and activities, reducing him to the single role of a witness to Jesus. John is a flat character, and hence there is nothing more to him.¹ This may explain why John has received so little attention from scholarship.²

I will argue that this characterization is an oversimplification. Though John’s main representation in the Fourth Gospel is that of a witness, it is not straightforward. Rather, John’s characterization as a witness is complex and multifaceted—his single trait is not a simple trait. This becomes evident when we examine his other roles as a baptizer, herald-forerunner, teacher, best man, and a “lamp.” Most scholars do not adequately explain how John’s other roles relate to his principal role. In fact, I will argue that it is misleading to speak of primary and secondary, major and minor roles. John *never* operates as a witness apart from his other roles; rather, he is a witness *in*

* Cornelis Bennema is associate professor of New Testament and head of the New Testament department at the South Asia Institute of Advanced Christian Studies, P.O. Box 7747, Kothanur, Bangalore-56007, India.

¹ Cf. Walter Wink, *John the Baptist in the Gospel Tradition* (SNTSMS 7; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968) 89, 105; Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971) 50; Raymond F. Collins, “Representative Figures,” in *These Things Have Been Written: Studies on the Fourth Gospel* (Louvain/Grand Rapids: Peeters/Eerdmans, 1990) 1–45, esp. pp. 10–11; idem, “From John to the Beloved Disciples: An Essay on Johannine characters,” *Int* 49 (1995) 359–69, esp. pp. 361–62; R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) 132–33; Robert L. Webb, *John the Baptizer and Prophet: A Socio-Historical Study* (JSNTS 62; Sheffield: SAP, 1991) 75; Margaret Davies, *Rhetoric and Reference in the Fourth Gospel* (JSNTS 69; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992) 316; John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*. Vol. 2: *Mentor, Message, and Miracles* (New York: Doubleday, 1994) 119; Norman C. Theiss, “John 1:6–8, 19–28,” *Int* 50 (1996) 402–5, esp. pp. 404–5; Joan E. Taylor, *The Immerser: John the Baptist within Second Temple Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 2, 195; Stephen Smalley, *John: Evangelist and Interpreter* (2d ed.; Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998) 24; Colleen M. Conway, “Speaking through Ambiguity: Minor Characters in the Fourth Gospel,” *BibInt* 10 (2002) 324–41, esp. 330; David J. MacLeod, “The Witness of John the Baptist to the Word: John 1:6–9,” *BSac* 160 (2003) 305–20, esp. 309.

² Of the scholars mentioned in n. 1, only Wink has spent (forty years ago) more than a few pages on John in the Fourth Gospel (*John* 87–106).

these roles.³ I will attempt to elucidate John's lesser-known roles and demonstrate that they *define* his role as a witness. This will provide a more comprehensive portrait of John in the Fourth Gospel.

I. JOHN THE WITNESS

The Prologue introduces John as "a man sent from God" (1:6), indicating that God is the authority behind his mission. John's mission is mentioned in the following verse, "he came as a witness to testify regarding the light" (1:7). This light is the divine, life-giving Logos who became a human being—Jesus (1:1–4, 14, 17). To prevent misunderstanding, the author stresses that John himself is not the light but the one who testifies about the light (1:8). John is thus a God-appointed witness to Jesus.⁴

The concept of witness in the Fourth Gospel has a forensic dimension in that the author narrates his story of Jesus within the framework of a cosmic trial or lawsuit.⁵ In this trial, "the Jews" prosecute Jesus for his divine claims to provide eternal life, to work on God's behalf, and to have a unique relationship with him (e.g. 5:16–18, 40; 9:16; 10:30–39; 19:7).⁶ As in any trial, it is crucial to have credible witnesses and to sustain their testimony lest the case be lost. In this context, Jesus calls up various witnesses, including John (5:31–38). The Fourth Gospel gives special attention to *eyewitnesses*—those who have seen and heard Jesus and can give a first-hand testimony. John is one such eyewitness but there are others: the Samaritan woman testifies to her kinfolk (4:28–29); the man born blind testifies before the hostile Jewish authorities (9:13–17, 24–34); Mary Magdalene, the first eyewitness to Jesus' resurrection, testifies to the disciples (20:11–18); the disciples are appointed to testify before the hostile world because they have been eyewitnesses from the beginning (15:18–27); finally, the Fourth Gospel is commended to the reader as a trustworthy account of Jesus' life since it is based on the eyewitness testimony of the beloved disciple (19:35; 21:24).

It is important that a witness testifies about Jesus and does not remain silent. The Fourth Gospel mentions the "fear of the Jews" as a major factor that prevents people from testifying (7:13; 9:22; 12:42; 19:38; 20:19). How

³ I am indebted to my colleague Nigel Ajay Kumar for pointing me in this direction.

⁴ The verb "to testify" and the noun "testimony" are used frequently with reference to John (1:7 [2x], 8, 15, 19, 32, 34; 3:26; 5:33). John first testifies in 1:15, but Sjeff van Tilborg suggests that 1:16–18 are also his words, so that the Jerusalem delegation in 1:19 reacts to John's testimony in 1:15–18 (*Imaginative Love in John* [BIS 2; Leiden: Brill, 1993] 62–68). However, the phrase "and this is the testimony of John" in 1:19 probably looks forward to 1:20–27 rather than backward to 1:15–18, otherwise the ὅτε ("when") in 1:19 makes little sense.

⁵ See esp. Anthony Ernest Harvey, *Jesus on Trial: A Study in the Fourth Gospel* (London: SPCK, 1976); Allison A. Trites, *The New Testament Concept of Witness* (SNTSMS 31; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977) 78–127; Andrew T. Lincoln, *Truth on Trial: The Lawsuit Motif in the Fourth Gospel* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000).

⁶ "The Jews" in the Fourth Gospel refers to a religious group—the Torah- and temple-loyalists, found mainly but not exclusively in Judea, whose leaders are the chief priests and Pharisees (Cornelis Bennema, "The Identity and Composition of οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι in the Gospel of John," *TynBul* 60 [forthcoming 2009]).

does John fare? John 1:19–28 contains John’s testimony before the religious authorities. We read that “the Jews”/Pharisees from Jerusalem sent a delegation to John to find out who he was (1:19–24). Behind their questions were the suspicions: Was he going to be a threat to them? Was he going to start a revolutionary movement?⁷ As a true witness, John testifies openly, denying that he is an important end-time figure like the Messiah, Elijah (cf. Mal 4:5), or the Prophet-like-Moses (1:20–21; cf. Deut 18:15–18). When the delegation pushes him, John describes himself as a herald but this does not satisfy them and they want to know why, and by what authority, John is baptizing if he is not a major eschatological figure (1:22–25). Instead of answering their question (1:33 shows that John is well aware of his authority—*God* had sent him to baptize), John points to the importance of Jesus (1:26–27). Thus, even when John is not asked to testify about Jesus, he essentially does.

We make two further observations. First, John’s role as a witness has a cosmic scope. Besides his participation in Jesus’ cosmic trial, John’s testimony before the Judean religious authorities also has cosmic dimensions since “the Jews” are the primary representatives of the hostile world.⁸ Second, John’s role of a witness occurs in the context of his baptizing activity (1:28), implying that John is not a witness *apart* from his role as baptizer but precisely *as* baptizer.

The purpose of John’s testimony is to elicit belief (1:7)—a life-giving belief in Jesus as the immediate and wider context indicates (1:12; 3:36; 20:31). Two passages demonstrate that John’s testimony indeed causes people to believe in Jesus. First, John directs his own disciples to Jesus, with the result that they leave their master, start to follow Jesus (1:35–39), and soon express their belief in him (2:11). Second, when Jesus comes to John’s former baptismal site to escape from “the Jews,” many people believe in him as a result of John’s earlier testimony (10:40–42). This salvific intention of testimony—testimony regarding Jesus aims at evoking a saving belief in him—is an important Johannine theme: based on the Samaritan woman’s

⁷ John shows the characteristics of a non-violent “revolutionary prophet.” Such prophets and their followers anticipated God’s imminent eschatological liberation in the wilderness (cf. the Teacher of Righteousness and the Qumran community). See Richard A. Horsley, *Bandits, Prophets, and Messiahs: Popular Movements in the Time of Jesus* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 1999) 161–71. According to the Jewish historian Josephus, king Herod thought John capable of causing a rebellion and hence planned a pre-emptive strike (*Ant.* 18:116–119). John P. Meier, however, argues that John’s program was a religious one without an activist political agenda (“John the Baptist in Josephus: Philology and Exegesis,” *JBL* 111 [1992] 225–37). Nevertheless, the questions in 1:19–27 seem to indicate that the Jerusalem authorities suspected John’s ministry of having religious-political implications. Although Taylor admits that there is a political dimension to John’s activity, she argues that he was not perceived as a potential revolutionary and that his relationship with the Jerusalem Jews was positive because 1:19–28 does not mention anything negative (*Immerser* 192–98, 213–19). However, this is an argument from silence; in fact, John’s replies in 1:20–21 are curt and become increasingly more brief. Nevertheless, 5:33, 35 may indicate that John managed to satisfy “the Jews” for a while, and perhaps only Herod saw a potential for revolt.

⁸ See esp. Bultmann, *Gospel* 86–87. Cf. Lars Kierspel, *The Jews and the World in the Fourth Gospel: Parallelism, Function, and Context* (WUNT 2/220; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006) chaps. 3–4.

testimony, many fellow-villagers believe in Jesus (4:28–29, 39); the disciples' future testimony is expected to elicit belief (17:20); and indeed the entire gospel (as a written testimony) intends to produce a life-giving belief among its readers (19:35; 20:31). We shall now examine John's other roles and elucidate that these roles characterize him as a witness.

II. JOHN THE BAPTIZER

In contrast to the Synoptics, John is never called "Baptist" or "Baptizer" because the author has redefined John's role from that of a baptizer to that of a witness—from proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (Mark 1:4 and parallels) to proclaiming the identity of Israel's Messiah (1:31). Nevertheless, the Fourth Gospel has not ignored John's baptizing ministry, as 1:25–33; 3:23; 10:40 indicate. These passages raise various questions: Where did John baptize? How are John and Jesus related with regard to baptism? What was the purpose of John's baptism?

As to where John was baptizing, the text provides three clues. First, John places himself in the wilderness (1:23), which is indicative of the significance of his baptism. Quoting from Isa 40:3, John locates himself not only literally but also symbolically or theologically in the wilderness. The wilderness was often a place of preparation and testing, and John may have interpreted his baptizing ministry as preparatory.⁹ Particularly, Israel was led out of Egypt into the wilderness where she was established as YHWH's people at Mount Sinai (Exodus 19, 24). Consequently, a return to the wilderness would evoke the idea of a new exodus and the expected messianic age (Isa 35:1–2; 40:3–5; Hos 2:14–23; Ezek 20:33–44; 1QS 8:12–16).¹⁰ Isaiah 40:3 is placed in the context of Israel's future restoration and since baptism naturally evokes the idea of cleansing or purification, John may have understood himself as the prophetic herald of Israel's coming restoration. The baptism served in some way as preparation for this event.¹¹ John's renewal movement began in the wilderness.¹²

⁹ E.g. Moses and David spent time in the wilderness in preparation for their respective ministries (Acts 7:23–35; 1 Samuel 23–26); Israel was tested in the wilderness (Deut 8:2); the Qumran community prepared themselves in the wilderness for God's eschatological salvation.

¹⁰ Cf. Dale C. Allison, "Mountain and Wilderness," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (ed. J. B. Green, S. McKnight, and I. H. Marshall; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992) 563–66, esp. 564.

¹¹ See further section III. There are various reasons to assume that John's baptism had a cleansing dimension. First, the verb βαπτίζω naturally evokes the idea of cleansing (cf. the dispute about purification in 3:25). Second, water is a prominent symbol for cleansing throughout the Fourth Gospel (2:6; 3:5; 4:10–14; 13:5–10). Third, Josephus understood John's baptism to be purificatory—though merely as a bodily purification for those who had already been purified inwardly (*Ant.* 18:117). For an understanding of John's baptism in the Synoptics, see Webb, *John, passim*; James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* (vol. 1 of *Christianity in the Making*; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003) 355–62.

¹² Although the Qumran community was also located in the wilderness and also knew of purificatory water rites, most scholars today deny an association between them and John (Taylor, *Immerser* 15–48; Hartmut Stegemann, *The Library of Qumran: On the Essenes, Qumran, John the Baptist, and Jesus* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998] 221–25; James I. H. McDonald, "What Did You Go Out to See? John the Baptist, the Scrolls and Late Second Temple Judaism," in *The Dead*

The two other clues about John's location are found in 1:28 and 3:23. John 1:28 mentions Bethany across the Jordan as the place where John was active (cf. 3:26; 10:40), and 3:23 refers to Aenon near Salim as another site where John was baptizing. Stegemann argues that John operated only in one place, east of the Jordan, along an old trade route that stretches from Jerusalem through Jericho into the region east of the river. According to him, Bethany or "Boathouse" refers to the ferry crossing there, and the region on the east bank of this ferry route was called Aenon (which the author erroneously regarded as Aenon near Salim). John chose this place, Stegemann argues, because this was the same point where Joshua led Israel across the Jordan into the Promised Land, thereby placing Israel at the point of transition into the future time of salvation.¹³ Stegemann's argument is persuasive, but he may be too rigid in asserting that John operated in one place. This in turn, leads him to conclude that the author was wrong about Aenon near Salim as another site for John's baptism.¹⁴ The theological significance of John's location of baptism—in the wilderness as preparatory for Israel's future salvation—does not necessitate a single place. In fact, 10:40 mentions Bethany as the place John baptized *at first* (πρῶτον), suggesting that he had baptized elsewhere. Therefore, John could have moved freely in the wilderness along the Jordan valley, between Bethany in Peraea on the east bank of the Jordan, and Aenon in Samaria on the west bank of the river.¹⁵

Next, we must determine how John's baptism relates to that of Jesus. The first difficulty is in determining with which baptism of Jesus we must compare John's baptism, since the author mentions *two* kind of baptisms that Jesus administers—one with/in the Spirit (1:33) and another with/in water (3:22, 26; 4:1). Only the Fourth Gospel mentions that Jesus also baptized with water. Though the author or, more likely, a later editor is quick to refute such a notion (4:2), Jesus would surely have known of, and sanctioned, his disciples' practice.¹⁶ I suggest that for some time the ministries

Sea Scrolls in Their Historical Context [ed. T. H. Lim et al.; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000] 53–64; John C. Hutchison, "Was John the Baptist an Essene from Qumran?," *BSac* 159 [2002] 187–200). Nevertheless, John may have been part of, or had contact with, the Qumran community as a youth but separated from them later to start his distinct ministry (cf. James C. VanderKam, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Today* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994] 170; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and Christian Origins* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000] 18–21; C. Marvin Pate, *Communities of the Last Days: The Dead Sea Scrolls, the New Testament & the Story of Israel* [Leicester: Apollos, 2000] 81).

¹³ Stegemann, *Qumran* 212–14. Cf. Taylor, *Immerser* 45, 47.

¹⁴ The author seems quite reliable in other topographical details (1:28; 4:5–6; 5:2; 11:18; 18:1). Cf. Paul N. Anderson, "Aspects of Historicity in the Gospel of John: Implications for Investigations of Jesus and Archaeology," in *Jesus and Archaeology* (ed. J. H. Charlesworth; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006) 587–618.

¹⁵ Cf. Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003) 576; Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004) 65, 135–36 (although Köstenberger argues that "Bethany" refers to the region of Batanea in the northeast).

¹⁶ In fact, this insertion virtually vouchsafes for the historicity of Jesus' water-baptism (Meier, *Marginal Jew*, 121–23; J. Ramsey Michaels, "Baptism and Conversion in John: A Particular Baptist Reading," in *Baptism, the New Testament and the Church: Historical and Contemporary Studies in Honour of R. E. O. White* [ed. S. E. Porter and A. R. Cross; JSNTS 171; Sheffield: SAP, 1999] 136–56, esp. pp. 136–37; Dunn, *Jesus* 351).

of John and Jesus overlapped. Jesus, or his disciples, may have continued John's water-baptism in Judea on the west bank of the Jordan (cf. 3:22) for about nine months until John was thrown into prison by Herod Antipas and Jesus left for Galilee (cf. 3:24; 4:1–3).¹⁷ Jesus probably knew how the Pharisees caused trouble for John over the issue of baptism (1:24–25). So when he learned that the Pharisees knew about his water-baptism, Jesus left Judea and headed back to the more receptive Galilee (4:1, 3, 45). Hence, with John's arrest and his leaving Judea because of potential trouble, Jesus also probably discontinued baptizing people with water.¹⁸

In comparing John's water-baptism with that of Jesus, it appears Jesus was more successful (3:26; 4:1), albeit John also had a large following (3:23). However, I suggest that the author's intended contrast is between John's *water*-baptism and Jesus' *Spirit*-baptism (cf. 1:26 and 1:33).¹⁹ I have argued elsewhere that Jesus' baptizing people with the Holy Spirit is programmatic for Jesus' entire ministry of cleansing and saving people through his revelatory word *by means of* the Spirit.²⁰ Consequently, while John's water-baptism was *preparatory* for salvation and probably had an aspect of cleans-

¹⁷ The time between the Passover in March/April of Jesus' first year of ministry (2:13/23) and Jesus' leaving his baptismal site in 4:1–3 covers about ten months because 4:35 tells us that the harvest in May/June of Jesus' second year of ministry is four months away. The time between 3:22 and 4:1–3 may thus have been about nine months.

¹⁸ Cf. Dunn, *Jesus*, 351–52, 606; Daniel S. Dapaah, *The Relationship between John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth: A Critical Study* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2005) 97–98. Contra others, who argue that Jesus continued John's water-baptism *throughout* his ministry, and this was continued by the early church (R. T. France, "Jesus the Baptist?," in *Jesus of Nazareth: Lord and Christ. Essays on the Historical Jesus and New Testament Christology* [ed. J. B. Green and M. Turner; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994] 94–111, esp. pp. 105–7; Meier, *Marginal Jew* 126–29; Taylor, *Immerser*, 294–99; cf. Keener, *Gospel* 578). We also oppose the view that the author's account of John and Jesus baptizing simultaneously and in harmony is invented and illogical (so Taylor, *Immerser* 295–96). Our explanation coheres with the Synoptics, where, following John's arrest, Jesus starts his ministry in Galilee, including the calling of his first disciples (Matt 4:12ff.; Mark 1:14ff.; Luke 4:14ff.). The Fourth Gospel records Jesus' ministry in Galilee in 1:43–4:54, including the gathering of disciples (1:43–51), but in between (2:13–4:42) the author records Jesus' ministry in Judea and Samaria—including his baptizing with water. Thus, while the Synoptics start recording Jesus' ministry in Galilee *after* the arrest of John, the Fourth Gospel provides more details of Jesus' earliest ministry, including his baptizing with water in tandem with John *before* John was arrested. Cf. Richard Bauckham, "John for Readers of Mark," in *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences* (ed. Richard Bauckham; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 147–71, esp. pp. 152–55; Köstenberger, *John* 136. The issue of why Jesus or his disciples practised water-baptism and how this practice differed from that of the early church remains open.

¹⁹ This is the point that Taylor misses. She only sees the continuity between John and Jesus, arguing that Jesus (and later the early church) simply continued John's teaching and baptism (*Immerser* 297–99, 314–16). For the early church, however, John's baptism was different from Christian baptism. For example, Acts 18:24–26 mentions that Apollos only knew John's baptism and needed more instruction; Acts 19:1–7 records that twelve disciples needed to be *re-baptized* in the name of Jesus because they had only received John's baptism—something which would have been unnecessary in Taylor's framework. Her explanation of these passages—that we do not need to interpret John's baptism as Paul did—is inadequate (*Immerser* 72–76).

²⁰ Cornelis Bennema, "Spirit-Baptism in the Fourth Gospel: A Messianic Reading of John 1,33," *Bib* 84 (2003) 35–60. Contra Michaels, who contends that Jesus never baptized with the Holy Spirit during his ministry but only in the manner of John ("Baptism" 136, 140–41; cf. Wink, *John* 95).

ing), Jesus' Spirit-baptism provided a greater cleansing—the taking away of sin—*effecting* salvation (1:29; 13:10; 15:3).

We are now in a position to address the specific purpose of John's baptism. Although we argued that John's baptism was preparatory for Israel's expected restoration and the coming Messiah, this purpose is related but secondary to the main purpose of John's baptism, which we find in his testimony before Israel in 1:29–34. Here John presents Jesus to his audience in an unmatched string of christological statements: the Lamb of God (1:29); the one who is "first" (1:30); the Spirit-endowed Messiah (1:32); the Spirit-Baptizer (1:33); and the Son or Chosen One of God (1:34). How could John reveal Jesus as such when, in fact, 1:31 indicates that John himself did not know the identity of this messianic figure? Apparently, God, who had authorized John's baptism, had revealed to John how he would identify the person about whom he was to testify: it would be the one on whom the Spirit descended and remained (1:33). John would then be able to reveal this messianic figure to Israel—and this was the primary purpose of John's baptizing ministry as 1:31 asserts. Thus, the author has implicitly preserved the traditional understanding of John's baptism, but he redefines its purpose in agreement with his characterization of John as a witness. John's baptism served to identify Jesus as the Messiah and to reveal him as such before Israel. As we observed regarding 1:19–28, it is precisely *as baptizer* that John is a witness for Jesus.

III. JOHN THE HERALD AND FORERUNNER

John saw himself in tandem with Jesus, whereby he precedes Jesus as his forerunner (1:15, 27, 30). Referring to this tandem relationship, John enigmatically states that his successor ("the one who comes after me") is actually in front because he was first (1:15, 30). The use of "first" is an example of double entendre: Jesus existed before John (1:1–2; cf. 8:58) and is superior to him (cf. 1:27).

The portrayal of John as a herald, however, is more significant. Quoting Isa 40:3, John declares, "I am a voice shouting in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord'" (1:23). Isaiah 40 marks the turning point in that book, introducing a message of consolation, hope, and the promise of Israel's eschatological restoration. In this context, Isa 40:3 speaks of preparing and making straight the way of the Lord, that is, YHWH. To prepare or make a way in the wilderness is a picture of coming salvation, echoing the exodus where YHWH led the Israelites "along the way" through the wilderness (Exod 13:21).²¹ Hence, "the way of the Lord" is the way of salvation on which YHWH will lead his people. In John's understanding, the Lord of Isa 40:3 (YHWH) now refers to Jesus as YHWH's agent of salvation for Israel.

²¹ Cf. Leland Ryken et al., eds., "Path," in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1998) 631.

Other passages in Isaiah also mention the wilderness-way-salvation nexus, which may illuminate how John understood his ministry. Isaiah 35:1–10, for instance, speaks of the wilderness blossoming and bringing forth streams of life-giving water—a picture of Israel’s future salvation—in which there is a holy way on which only YHWH’s redeemed people can walk. Isaiah 43:14–21 speaks of YHWH’s promise to restore Israel, including his making a way in the wilderness. In Isa 49:8–12, in the context of Israel’s future salvation, YHWH promises to make a new way. In Isa 62:1–12, Israel is called “wilderness” and YHWH speaks of preparing a way for her in view of the coming salvation. In short, YHWH’s transformation of the wilderness as a picture of Israel’s future restoration is a dominant Isaianic motif, in which the wilderness and the new way that YHWH constructs in it, evoke the image of the exodus and salvation.²²

John 1:23 thus evokes a complex set of Isaianic themes with elements of “restoration,” “wilderness,” and “way,” denoting Israel’s future salvation as the new exodus. In Isaiah’s time, this referred to the return from Babylonian exile as the new exodus, but John has reinterpreted it as Israel’s eschatological salvation in terms of the new age and the coming of the Messiah. Hence, John becomes the herald of Israel’s new exodus which Jesus will bring about.²³ Again, we find that it is precisely in his role *as herald* that John is a witness for Jesus. When we combine 1:23 and 1:32–33, which also has Isaianic motifs since the Spirit’s coming and remaining upon Jesus alludes to Isa 11:2, we see that John understood Jesus as YHWH’s messianic agent of the new exodus who would cleanse and restore Israel by means of the Spirit.

IV. JOHN THE TEACHER

In 3:26, John is called “Rabbi,” which means teacher (cf. 1:38).²⁴ In Judaism a rabbi had disciples, and indeed so does John (1:35; 3:25). As a teacher, John directs his disciples to Jesus. On one occasion, John testifies to two of his disciples about Jesus, and because of his testimony they leave him and join Jesus. That is, Jesus’ first disciples were former followers of John (1:35–39).²⁵ On another occasion, John’s disciples are disturbed that

²² Although Mal 3:1 also speaks of YHWH sending his messenger to prepare the way of Israel’s future restoration, the author of the Fourth Gospel probably did *not* have this text in mind since it would too easily evoke an allusion to Mal 4:5–6 and hence require an explanation of 1:21 where John denies that he is the Elijah-*redivivus* (Keener, *Gospel* 437).

²³ The author of the Fourth Gospel develops the new exodus motif further. First, from John’s notion of Jesus’ leading people on the way to salvation to the claim that Jesus himself *is* the way that leads to eternal life (14:6). Second, Jesus will lead people out of the slavery to sin and the devil (8:31–36, 41–44). Third, the Spirit will guide people on this way of salvation/truth (16:13–15).

²⁴ Nicodemus (3:10) and Jesus (e.g. 1:38; 49; 3:2; 4:31; 6:25) are also designated as teachers.

²⁵ John 1:35–36 mentions that as Jesus passes by, John looks straight at him (the verb ἐμβλέπω is an intensified form of βλέπω, denoting an attentive look or fixed gaze) and exclaims to two of his disciples, “Look, the Lamb of God!” Since John had proclaimed the same the previous day (1:29), these disciples would have remembered John saying that this Lamb will take away the sins of the world. They would, in fact, have witnessed the entire revelation of the Messiah to Israel in 1:29–34. Raymond E. Brown even contends that the first Christians in the Johannine community came out of John’s movement (*The Community of the Beloved Disciple* [London: Chapman, 1979] 29, 69).

Jesus is more successful than their teacher (3:26; cf. 4:1)—in the light of 1:35–37 it seems likely that many of John’s own disciples have also gone over to Jesus—but John appears unconcerned. In fact, his teaching in 3:27–30 shows that his entire ministry is to be a pointer to Jesus (cf. 10:40–42).

Unlike the Synoptics, the Fourth Gospel does not describe the content of John’s teaching, except that it indicates the content of his testimony. John’s teaching, then, consists of the following: (1) Jesus is more important than he (1:15, 27, 30); (2) John himself is no major eschatological figure (1:19–21; 3:28); (3) he is the prophetic voice announcing the coming Messiah and the new exodus (1:23; 3:28); (4) Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (1:29, 36);²⁶ (5) Jesus is the Spirit-anointed Messiah (1:32, alluding to Isa 11:2); (6) Jesus is the Spirit-Baptizer, whereas he “merely” baptizes with water (1:26, 33); (7) Jesus is the Son or Chosen One of God (1:34); (8) Jesus is the bridegroom, while he is the best man (3:29); (9) Jesus must increase and John must decrease (3:30).

In his teaching, John continually defines himself and his role in relation to Jesus. Jesus is more important and John’s ministry is to testify about Jesus. At the same time, his testimony indicates that he had an adequate understanding of Jesus’ identity and mission. For John, Jesus is the Spirit-empowered Messiah who will take away sin and bring about the new messianic age. The significance is that although John never directly responds to Jesus, his confessions regarding him are virtually belief-responses. Finally, we must note that, *as teacher*, John testifies about Jesus and directs his disciples towards him.

V. JOHN THE BEST MAN

At the heart of the complex pericope 3:22–30 is a controversy that arose at John’s baptismal site regarding purification. John’s disciples consequently complain to their master that Jesus is more successful than he (3:25–26; cf. 4:1).²⁷ Their (derogatory?) reference to Jesus as “the one who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you testified” recalls the encounter between John and Jesus in 1:28–34, where they were apparently present (cf. 3:28, which harks back to 1:19–27). If ever there was any doubt where John stood,

²⁶ There are three possible backgrounds for the title “Lamb of God”: (1) the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53 who makes a guilt offering for the atonement of sin; (2) the Passover Lamb of Exodus 12 as the means of escaping YHWH’s judgment; (3) the victorious Lamb of the apocalyptic traditions that will destroy the evil of the world (*I Enoch* 90:38; *T. Jos.* 19:8; Rev 5:12–13; 17:14). John 1:29 is possibly a creative fusion of all these three backgrounds. Köstenberger also considers Gen 22:8, 13 where God provides a lamb for Abraham when he was prepared to sacrifice Isaac since John 3:16 probably alludes to this scene (*John* 67).

²⁷ Whether the dispute was between John’s disciples and an unnamed Jew (so most scholars) or among John’s disciples along with a Jew (so Taylor, *Immerser* 195–96) is less important. John W. Pryor’s suggestion that the original version contained “Jesus,” which the author changed to “Jew” to avoid the idea of controversy between John’s disciples and (disciples of) Jesus, has not found much support (“John the Baptist and Jesus: Tradition and Text in John 3.25,” *JSNT* 66 [1997] 15–26).

his reply in 3:27–30 shows that he puts himself firmly on Jesus' side.²⁸ John's clarification to his disciples contains several components. First, John declares that no one can receive anything unless it is given from heaven (3:27), indicating that no one—including himself or Jesus—can attract anyone apart from those whom God gives.²⁹ Jesus later affirms this when he states that only those who are drawn or given by the Father can come to him (6:37, 44, 65; 17:2, 6, 24). Then, in 3:28, John reminds his disciples that he is not the Messiah (cf. 1:20) but merely his forerunner (cf. 1:30), thus cautioning his disciples against fixing their hopes on him.³⁰ Finally, John's succinct description of his standing in relation to Jesus, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (3:30), shows his eagerness to have more people going to Jesus than to him. John even directs his disciples to Jesus (1:35–37).

The argument in 3:29 is most significant for John's characterization because he casts himself in the new role of best man. He abruptly, it seems, brings up the imagery of a wedding, in which the one who gains the bride is the bridegroom—the most important figure—and the best man only has a supportive role (lit. "the one who stands with him"; 3:29). However, wedding imagery is a dominant motif in the so-called "from-Cana-to-Cana" section (John 2–4). Against the backdrop of a wedding, Jesus performs a miracle in Cana, signifying that the new messianic age has started.³¹ Then, Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman symbolizes the spiritual betrothal of Jesus to those who believe in him.³² Hence, the mention of Jesus as bridegroom and the then still unknown bride in 3:29 fits within the nuptial context of John 2–4 and anticipates the story of the Samaritan woman.

In Jewish tradition, the best man or *shoshbin* functioned as a witness at the wedding—a highly honored position that involved much joy (*Exod. Rab.* 20:8; 46:1; *Deut. Rab.* 3:16; cf. *Judg* 14:20).³³ We highlight four related

²⁸ The author's attempt to show nothing but harmony between John and Jesus has led some scholars to believe that the opposite was true. They suspect that there was a rivalry between John's disciples and those of Jesus (e.g. Bultmann, *John* 167–72), or between the Johannine Christians and the followers of John the Baptist in the author's own time (e.g. Brown, *Community* 29–31, 69–71; cf. Meier, *Marginal Jew* 119). For a critique, see Wink, *John* 98–105; Smalley, *John* 161–64. This is part of a bigger argument that John posed a problem for the early church because he was a significant person in his time. Josephus, for instance, wrote more about John than Jesus (*Ant.* 18:116–19). According to Taylor, the gospel writers handle John respectfully but in the light of Jesus' superiority, they deliberately reduce John's significance, subordinating him to Jesus (*Immerser* 4–5). Stegemann disagrees that the early church made John inferior to Jesus (*Qumran*, 216–18). For the veneration of John in the Eastern Orthodox Church, see Sergei Bulgakov, *The Friend of the Bridegroom: On the Orthodox Veneration of the Forerunner* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003). Although the Fourth Gospel hints at "rivalry" (3:22–26; 4:1), John approves of Jesus' success and even directs his disciples to him (1:35–37; 3:27–30).

²⁹ Michaels, "Baptism" 138–39.

³⁰ *Ibid.* 138.

³¹ Cornelis Bennema, *Excavating John's Gospel: A Commentary for Today* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2005; repr. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008) 39–40.

³² Cornelis Bennema, *The Power of Saving Wisdom: An Investigation of Spirit and Wisdom in Relation to the Soteriology of the Fourth Gospel* (WUNT 2/148; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002; repr. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2007) 182, 192.

³³ Keener, *Gospel* 579–80.

aspects of John as *shoshbin* in 3:29. First, John is the bridegroom's friend (cf. *m. Sanh.* 3:5 where the best man is called the groom's friend), denoting his closeness to Jesus (cf. 15:13–15). Second, he stands by the bridegroom to give support. Third, he hears the bridegroom's voice, which elsewhere has salvific overtones (5:25; 10:3–4, 16). Fourth, John rejoices greatly on hearing the bridegroom's voice since it indicates that the bridegroom has consummated the marriage.³⁴ Besides, I have suggested elsewhere that joy in the Fourth Gospel refers to a divine emotion resulting from participating in and fulfilling God's work in this world.³⁵ Thus, John's joy is the joy of knowing that Jesus has arrived as the messianic bridegroom to bring God's salvation, pictured here as a marriage (cf. Isa 62:5; Hos 2:19–20). Jesus will symbolically consummate the marriage in his encounter with the Samaritan woman. Thus, *as the best man*, John rejoices in and testifies to the arrival of Jesus as the eschatological bridegroom to gather his bride, that is, those who believe in him.

VI. JOHN THE LAMP

Within a context of controversy—when Jesus is accused by “the Jews” of breaking the law and equating himself to God—Jesus calls forward various witnesses in his defense (5:31–40). Amongst them is John, whom Jesus characterizes as “a burning and shining lamp” (5:35a). The word “light” is not used to describe John since this is reserved exclusively for Jesus (1:4–5, 9; 3:19–21; 8:12; 9:5; 11:9–10; 12:35–36, 46). Besides, the Prologue has clarified that John was “simply” a witness to the light (1:7–8). Nevertheless, John does provide light (5:35b), so we must examine *how* John is a light-giving lamp.

Jesus' statement, “You sent messengers to John, and he testified to the truth” (5:33), harks back to the events in Bethany described in 1:19–27. Apparently, “the Jews” who attack Jesus here are the same ones who sent a delegation to question John. John had not remained silent but testified truthfully and “the Jews” had even rejoiced in his testimony for a while (5:33, 35b). Besides 5:33, the phrase “to testify to the truth” also occurs in 18:37 with reference to Jesus. Jesus' testimony to the truth is shorthand for his entire ministry during which he taught about the divine reality. In his ministry, Jesus communicated God's words, which contain truth that liberates, cleanses, and saves (3:34; 6:63; 8:31–32; 15:3; 17:17). All who belong to the truth belong to Jesus and have heard his voice and accepted his life-giving words (cf. 5:25; 10:3–4, 16). Jesus is both the embodiment and dispenser of divine saving truth (1:14, 17; 14:6). John's testimony to the truth, then, is

³⁴ David John Williams explains that on the first night the newly-weds retired to the bridal chamber to consummate their marriage, superintended by the *shoshbin*. The bridegroom's voice of 3:29 is probably his call for the best man to collect the *signum virginis tatis*—the blood-stained cloth as a sign of the woman's virginity (cf. Deut 22:13–21) (“Bride, Bridegroom,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* [ed. J. B. Green, S. McKnight, and I. H. Marshall; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992] 86–88, esp. 87).

³⁵ Bennema, *John's Gospel* 178–80.

his testimony to the divine reality in terms of Jesus' identity, mission, and relationship with God.

Although the phrase "to testify to the truth" only occurs twice in the Fourth Gospel, the concept comes up in other passages. First, in 5:32, God's testimony regarding Jesus is labeled as "true."³⁶ Second, Jesus mentions in 15:26 that "the Spirit of truth" will testify regarding him—a testimony in which the disciples will partake (15:27). In fact, the Spirit empowers and prepares the disciples' testimony by communicating to them the truth that is in Jesus' teaching (14:26; 16:13). In effect, Jesus exhorts his disciples to counter the false accusations of the world with their Spirit-empowered testimony of truth.³⁷ Third, the Fourth Gospel itself claims to be a written testimony to the truth (19:35; 21:24).

In sum, *as a lamp*, John testifies to the truth, that is, to Jesus as the embodiment and dispenser of saving truth. Besides, *as a lamp*, John provides light in that his testimony elicits belief (1:7; 1:35–37; 10:41–42). John thus functions as a model to be emulated since the believers' testimony to the truth, and the Fourth Gospel, as a written testimony to the truth, also intend to produce belief (17:20; 19:35; 20:31).

VII. CONCLUSION

The absence of information regarding John's appearance, personal life, and family in the Fourth Gospel heightens his characterization as a witness, so that the focus is solely on the one to whom he testifies. Even though John is a flat character, his single trait of a witness is complex and multifaceted. John's characterization as a witness is seen specifically in his other roles as a baptizer, herald-forerunner, teacher, best man, and "lamp." These roles serve to *clarify* and *define* his role as witness. It is as baptizer that John reveals Jesus as the expected Messiah to Israel; as herald, he announces Israel's imminent restoration through Jesus as God's salvific agent; as teacher, he testifies about and directs his disciples to Jesus; as best man, he announces the arrival of the eschatological bridegroom; and as lamp, he testifies to the divine truth embodied in Jesus aiming to bring about belief. Thus, John's role as witness is not alongside or separate from his other roles; rather, he is a witness in or through those roles.³⁸

Although John is not shown to have made an explicit belief-response to Jesus, there are various reasons to assume that he did so. First, the author

³⁶ In the light of 5:37, "the other" who testifies about Jesus in 5:32 is most probably God.

³⁷ For a detailed treatment of the disciples' Spirit-empowered testimony, see Bennema, *Power*, chap. 5.

³⁸ Contra Wink, who asserts that "[e]very other role is sheared away" (*John*, 89). This study has not examined John's function in the plot. However, if the plot of the Fourth Gospel is the revelation of the Father and Son in terms of their identity, mission, and relationship, and people's response to this revelation (cf. 1:10–12, 18; 3:16–18; 20:31), then John significantly advances the plot by revealing important aspects of Jesus' identity and mission, and his testimony aids people to respond to Jesus in faith.

places John firmly at Jesus' side right from the beginning, and it is noteworthy that the Fourth Gospel does not record the episode in prison when John has doubts about Jesus (cf. Matt 11:2–6; Luke 7:18–23). John, too, positions himself at Jesus' side as the best man. Second, the content of John's testimony regarding Jesus implies his belief in him: John affirms that Jesus is the Messiah who will take away sin and bring about the new messianic age. Third, Jesus' command to testify is directed at his disciples (15:27), and presupposes that the witness has previously made an adequate belief-response to Jesus. Fourth, if John's testimony intends to elicit a belief-response to Jesus, it would be natural to assume that John himself has responded similarly.

Our study has various implications for the church today if we accept that John is a paradigmatic witness who functions as an example to follow.³⁹ First, John was divinely commissioned to testify about Jesus. At critical moments in his ministry John did not remain silent but testified regarding Jesus—before the potentially hostile religious authorities (1:19–28), before the nation (1:29–34), and before his disciples, who, at least once, were upset (1:35–37; 3:26–30). The aim of John's testimony was to elicit a saving belief in Jesus (1:7)—an aim that was realized at times (1:35–37; 10:41–42). Testimony is instrumental in leading people to belief and forms a key motif in the Fourth Gospel: the testimony of the Samaritan woman leads her people to believe in Jesus (4:39); the aim of the disciples' Spirit-empowered witness is belief (17:20); the author's aim is that his gospel functions as a life-giving testimony (20:30–31). Similarly, Jesus authorizes believers for their mission to testify about him in this world (15:27; 17:18; 20:21), and they must not remain silent while facing the hate and possible persecution by the world (15:18–16:4a; 17:14–15).⁴⁰ Believers are not left "orphaned" or defenseless but are empowered by the Spirit-Paraclete in their witness (14:17–18; 15:26–27; 16:7–15). The believer's Spirit-imbued testimony is also expected to evoke belief in Jesus (17:20). In short, John is the witness *par excellence*, and in this world where Jesus remains on trial we need witnesses like John.⁴¹

³⁹ We disagree with David R. Beck's conclusion that John is inappropriate for reader emulation since he has an unrepeatable role as a contemporaneous witness to Jesus (*The Discipleship Paradigm: Readers and Anonymous Characters in the Fourth Gospel* [BIS 27; Leiden: Brill, 1997] 40). John's uniqueness does not exclude his being an example—today's believers can (and should) emulate John as far as possible (cf. Wink, *John* 106).

⁴⁰ This may seem a tall order. I live in India, where, during August–September 2008, many Christians were persecuted in the state of Orissa by Hindu fundamentalists. An estimated fifty-eight Christians have been killed (sometimes hacked to death or burned alive), over fifty thousand Christians dislocated (either hiding in the jungle or living in relief camps), numerous houses, churches and Christian institutions damaged or destroyed, and many Christians forced to revert to Hinduism. Meanwhile, the state government has failed to maintain law and order, or protect the Christian minority. See further Cornelis Bennema, "Religious Violence in the Gospel of John: A Response to the Hindutva Culture in Modern India," in *Violence and Peace: Creating a Culture of Peace in the Contemporary Context of Violence* (ed. F. Fox; New Delhi: CMS/UBS/ISPCK, forthcoming 2010).

⁴¹ One only needs to read Dan Brown's controversial novel *The DaVinci Code* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), suggesting that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene, or Theodore W. Jennings Jr.,

Second, John continually understood himself and his roles as being in service to Jesus. We may reflect on how John's Christ-centered life and testimony could affect (1) our understanding of identity and vocation in a world that emphasizes the discovery and development of the self; (2) our testimonies which sometimes seem self-centered; (3) our views on the concept of "dying to the self," found for example in Mark 8:34; John 12:24–25; and Gal 2:19b–20a.

Third, we saw that all followers of Jesus are called to be his witnesses in this world. This does not mean that we can adopt the role of a witness in addition to our existing roles. Instead, it is precisely *in* our existing roles that we should be a witness to Jesus.

The Man Jesus Loved: Homoerotic Narratives from the New Testament (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim, 2003), arguing that Jesus was an active homosexual, to realize that Jesus is still in the dock. Secularism and globalization ignore or deny Jesus. Or consider today's major religions: most forms of Judaism still reject Jesus' claims; according to Islam, Jesus is only a prophet; in the diverse pantheon of Hinduism, Jesus is merely one amongst a multitude of gods.