

Was there another Vine? Questions on John 15:1a

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Abstract: *Jesus' final words to his disciples (Jn 15:4, 12) lie at the heart of the Farewell Discourse and are situated within two models of the type of relationship these commands will produce: firstly the model drawn from nature, the vine (vv. 1, 5), and then the model of Jesus' own relationship with God (v. 9).¹ But while the language suggests intimacy, the use of the term 'true' in the emphatic position (egō eimi hē ampelos hē alēthinē) suggests a comparison be made between Jesus, the 'true' vine, and a vine that is 'not true.' Rather than intimacy was there discord within the community? Is the passage 15:1-17 engaged in a polemic with some who may be turning to 'another' vine? In this essay I will examine the image of the vine, attempting to establish its possible historical context.*

Key Words: Bible N.T. John 15; Johannine Farewell Discourse; Jesus as true vine; intertestamental vine imagery; John the Baptist; Johannine community; New Testament polemics

I AM THE TRUE VINE

Since the vine is an image in the OT that most frequently refers to Israel (c.f. Isa 5:1-7; 27:2-6; Jer 2:21; Ezek 15; 17:1-10; 19:10-14; Ps 80:8-19), the usual understanding is that the passage 15:1-17 is engaged in a polemic between the Johannine community and the Synagogue, where Jesus is now replacing Israel as the 'true' vine.² However, within vv. 1-17 there is no further suggestion of such a polemic. It is in verses 15:18-16:4a that conflict with the synagogue emerges as a major theme.

[T]he disciples stand out as disciples of Jesus in the midst of an unbelieving and extremely hostile world – a world that reacts with violence and mounting aggression against them and that is primarily represented by the Jewish synagogue.³

Verses 1-17 suggest that there is a conflict or at least tension within the community itself.⁴ Verse 2 describes what happens with those branches that do not bear fruit, and this is

¹ The imagery of the vine and branches is difficult to categorise. In his review of previous scholarship Segovia notes the following words used to classify the image: *Bildrede, mashal*, an extended metaphor, parable and allegory. Segovia favours the expression 'sustained metaphor'. See F. F. Segovia, *The Farewell of the Word: The Johannine Call to Abide* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 133-34. I use the term 'model' here as it suggests a comparison be made between two things i.e. the vine and branches and Jesus' relationship with his disciples; the term model can also include the comparison between the Father and Son, and Jesus and disciples which is found in 15:9-17. Elsewhere in this essay I will use the more general term 'image'.

² "... l'adjectif <vrai> signifie plutôt un contraste rapport qu'un accomplissement. Jésus remplace Israël qui souvent a péché et s'est écarté de son Dieu (voir en particulier Es 5,1 s.)." See R. Kieffer, *Le Monde Symbolique de Saint Jean*, *Lectio Divina* 137 (Paris: Cerf, 1989) 81; also K. Scholtissek, *In Ihm Sein und Bleiben: Die Sprache der Immanenz un den Johanneischen Schriften*, *Herder's Biblical Studies* 21 (Freiburg: Herder, 2000) 337, 338.

³ Segovia, *Farewell*, 212; also F. J. Moloney, *John*, *Sacra Pagina* 4 (Collegeville: Michael Glazier Liturgical Press, 1998), 432.

repeated in more detail in v. 6; there is the imperative statement, 'remain in me' (v. 3) taken up in the love commandment (vv. 9, 12, 17); the condition of 'remaining in me' is presented as a possibility, not as a certainty, by the use of *ean* and the subjunctive in v. 6. For these reasons, the statement "I am the true vine" needs to be understood in the context of an *intramural* conflict with the possibility that some disciples are turning from Jesus to another and looking elsewhere to another 'vine'. While other scholars have also identified this section as a reflection of an inner-community conflict,⁵ no-one has yet suggested what this conflict could be about, or, in terms of the image, who is 'the other vine' being contrasted with Jesus the 'true vine'. It is to this issue that I now turn.

The Vine as a Messianic Image

One of the difficulties in interpreting this image is that in the OT it is used to refer to a group, the house of Israel, rather than an individual. Porsch offers a recent insight into the application of this image to Jesus.⁶ While it is true that the word vine is never applied to an individual person in the OT, nonetheless there are points at which the process begins (Ezek 15; 17; 19; Ps 80:9-17; Sir 14:17).

He also notes that in the intertestamental writing 2 Baruch, the vine image is being used to describe the task of the Messiah (2 Bar 36). Rainer Borig's research adds support to Porsch's statement.⁷ In his analysis of John 15:1-17, Borig discusses the above passages from the OT and then examines the apocryphal writings and sees in 2 Baruch the clearest statement where the 'vine' image is applied to an individual person, the Messiah.

36:1 I fell asleep at that place and saw a vision in the night. 2. And behold there was a forest with trees that was planted on the plain and surrounded by high mountains and rugged rocks. 3. And behold over against it a vine arose, and from under it a fountain ran peacefully. 4. And the fountain came to the forest and changed into great waves. [The vision describes the destruction of the forest leaving only one great cedar] 6. Then that vine arrived with the fountain in peace and in great tranquillity... 7. that vine opened its mouth and spoke and said to the cedar... [the vine passes judgement on the cedar and condemns it to ashes].

In chapter 39, the vision is explained to Baruch.

39:5 After that a fourth kingdom arises whose power is harsher and more evil than those which were before it. 7. And it will happen when the time of its fulfilment is approaching in which it will fall, that at that time the dominion of my Anointed One, which is like the fountain and the vine, will be revealed.... 40: 1. The last ruler who is left alive at that time will be bound... and they will carry him on Mount Zion and my Anointed One will convict him of all his wicked deeds.

Borig situates this text around the same time as the Fourth Gospel, 'if not before.'⁸ Even if the text of 2 Baruch, as we have it, was not available to the fourth evangelist, the Jewish

⁴ Segovia argues this position in greater detail; see F. F. Segovia, *Love Relationships in the Johannine Tradition*, SBL Dissertation Series 58 (Chico: Scholars Press, 1982), 101-103.

⁵ Segovia, *Love Relationships*, 102; J. Becker, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes: Kapitel 11-21*, Ökumenischer Taschenbuchkommentar zum Neuen Testament 4/2 (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlaghaus Mohn; Würzburg: Echter, 1981) 11-21, 479-81.

⁶ F. Porsch, "ampelos," EDNT 1 (1990). 72. See also A. Dettwiler, *Die Gegenwart des Erhöhten: Eine exegetische Studie zu den johanneischen Abschiedsreden (Joh 13,31-16,33) unter besonderer Berücksichtigung ihres Relecture-Charakters* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995), 88.

⁷ R. Borig, *Das wahre Weinstock: Untersuchungen zu Jo 15,1-10*, Studien zum Alten und Neuen Testament 16 (Munich: Kösel, 1967) 94-107, 112-128.

⁸ Borig, *Der Wahre Weinstock*, 118. Klijn dates 2 Baruch more cautiously as around the first or second decade in the second century although he also notes that it draws on earlier sources; see A. F. J. Klijn, "2 Baruch,"

first-century traditions that led to 2 Baruch may have been known and been part of a common pool of imagery available to both the writer of 2 Baruch and the evangelist. The text of 2 Baruch suggests further comparison with the Fourth Gospel when it describes the outpouring of manna from heaven as one of the signs of the Messianic age.

And it will happen that when all that which should come to pass in these parts has been accomplished, the Anointed One will begin to be revealed...And it will happen at that time that the treasury of manna will come down again from on high, and they will eat of it in those years because these are they who have arrived at the consummation of time (2 Baruch 29:3, 8).

2 Baruch associates the Messianic times with a vine and an outpouring of manna. Both images are taken up in the Gospel of John. The bread miracle in John 6 is met by the crowd's affirmation, "this is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world" (6:14). In response Jesus is forced to withdraw, "perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king" (6:15). These verses from John 6 bring together two expressions of messianic hopes, that of a prophet-like-Moses, and that of a Davidic King. In a religious milieu anticipating the arrival of God's Messiah, and where these times are associated with 'bread from heaven' and a Messianic 'vine' the Gospel makes the strong affirmations, again placing the word 'true' in the emphatic position.

My Father gives you the true bread from heaven (*ho patēr mou didōsin humin ton arton ek tou ouranou ton alēthinon*). For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. I am the bread of life... I have come down from heaven (John 6:33b, 35b, 38).

Then in John 15:1a "I am the true vine (*egō eimi hē ampelos hē alēthinē*)."

Placing the word 'true' in the emphatic position indicates that Jesus' assertions about being the true bread and the true vine are made to counter alternative claims.⁹ According to Schürer the time after the destruction of Jerusalem gave rise to heightened longings and expectations that God would send the Messiah. He cites as evidence the two Apocalypses of Baruch and Ezra and also the revisions made to the daily prayers of the Jews towards the end of the first century.¹⁰ In the prayer called the Eighteen Benedictions,

nos. 10-17 pray for the reunion of the dispersed, the restoration of national supremacy, the destruction of the godless, the reward of the just, the rebuilding of Jerusalem, the sending of the Messiah, the hearing of prayer and the reinstatement of sacrificial worship.¹¹

These considerations lead to an initial hypothesis that the passage John 15:1-17 was written to offer assurance to community members that the messianic times have come in the person of Jesus. It is possible that some within the community were losing heart by the long 'delay' between the resurrection and parousia. Some, those whom Brown calls 'crypto-Christians' who remain in contact with the synagogue, may even be doubting that Jesus really was the Messiah and may be turning back to Judaism whose writings and

in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. C. James (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1985) 1: 617. Charlesworth dates it "[a]pproximately 30 to 50 years after the destruction of the temple by the Roman soldiers in 70 C.E. ... using old traditions, many of which antedate 70"; J. H. Charlesworth, "2 Baruch," *ABD* 1:617.

⁹ Cf. 1:9 where there is the comparison between John who bears witness to the light and Jesus, who is the true light, and where this same emphatic structure is used (*ên to phōs to alēthinon*). These are the only three places (1:9; 6:33; 15:1) in the Gospel using the word 'true' in this emphatic position highlighting the polemical nature of these statements.

¹⁰ E. Schürer, ed., *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 B.C.-A.D.135)*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1973-87), 2:509-513.

¹¹ Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People*, 2:459.

prayers still look to a future salvific time.¹² In the aftermath of 70 C.E., in a situation of increased tension and hostility from the Synagogue and Rome, it could be easier to believe in something still to come, than to believe that the Messiah has come and that what we have now 'is as good as it gets'.

The above arguments posit that John 15:1-17 emerged to confront the undermining influence of Jewish Messianic hopes at the end of the first century. Given the language and imagery of this passage there is also another possibility closer to Christian circles, namely the re-emergence of claims about John the Baptizer by disciples of his in the diaspora.¹³

JESUS AND JOHN

There are three reasons why I raise the possibility that 15:1-17 may be concerned with a John-Jesus tension:

- (1) Disciples of John were active outside Palestine and later texts indicate these disciples considered John, not Jesus, to be the Messiah.¹⁴ It is possible that these disciples were continuing their ministry in the same location as the Johannine community in its later stages.
- (2) The text 15:1-17 makes use of a number of words and phrases used earlier in the Gospel in association with the John: *katharizō* (15:3; 3:25), *menō* (15:4; 1:32, 38, 39), *chara* (15:11, 3:29) *plēroō* (15:11; 3:29), *philos* 15:14; 3:29).
- (3) John 15:1-17 makes use of imagery similar to that which is found in the preaching of the John the Baptist in the Synoptics (Matt 3:6-10; par Luke 3:8-9).

In the discussion that follows I will examine each of these points.

i. Disciples of John and Jesus

In his work on the history of the Johannine community, Raymond Brown proposed that some of the first disciples of Jesus had originally been disciples of John as depicted in the Fourth Gospel (1:35-42).¹⁵ Even after John's death his movement continued and it is possible that later participants in the Baptist movement joined the Johannine community without ever having had personal experience of either Jesus or John.¹⁶ The Synoptic gospels present a very positive portrait of John and it is only the Fourth Gospel where there appears to be any tension or rivalry between the figures of John and Jesus (John 1:8; 3:25-26; 4:1; 10:40-42).¹⁷ Only the Fourth Gospel stresses the subordinate position of John, which Brown sees as an indicator that disciples of the Baptist had joined the

¹² On these "crypto-Christians" see R. E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist, 1979) 71-73; R. E. Brown, *An Introduction to the Gospel of John*. Edited, updated and introduced by F. J. Moloney, Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 172-175.

¹³ In the Fourth Gospel, John is never named 'John the Baptist', this is a title found only in the Synoptic tradition (Matt 3:1; 11:11, 12; 14:2, 8; 16:14; 17:13; Mark 6:25; 8:28; Luke 7:20, 33; 9:19).

¹⁴ These texts will be discussed further below.

¹⁵ Brown, *Community*, 29, 32; see also W. B. Tatum, *John the Baptist and Jesus: A report of the Jesus Seminar*, The Jesus Seminar (Sonoma, Ca.: Polebridge, 1994) 163; F. J. Moloney, "The Fourth Gospel and the Jesus of History," *New Testament Studies* 46 (2000): 42-58, 50-51, 57-58.

¹⁶ J. P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, 3 vols., Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 1994-), 117.

¹⁷ Niemand concludes that there was no rivalry between the historical Jesus and John and this is the situation reflected in the Synoptics; see C. Niemand, *Die Fusswaschungserzählung des Johannesevangeliums: Untersuchungen zu ihrer Entstehung und Überlieferung im Urchristentum*, Studia Anselmiana 114 (Rome: Pontificio Ateneo S. Anselmo, 1993), 323-333.

Johannine community and that the relationship between the two figures needed to be made very clear.¹⁸ These early chapters take pains to compare the two men and leave no doubt that John bears witness (1:7-8, 15, 23; 3:28) to one who is greater and whom he recognises as Jesus (1:30-34). John speaks of his baptism as a water baptism (1:26) while the one to come will baptise with the Spirit (1:33); John describes himself as the friend with Jesus as the bridegroom (3:29); and later Jesus speaks of John as a burning lamp (5:35), while he himself is the light of the world (8:12). At the close of Jesus' public ministry John is brought into focus again to point out that he was not a miracle worker but Jesus was (10:41). Even while making these comparisons, Brown points out that neither John, nor his non-Christian followers were directly attacked, but their over-estimation of him was corrected.¹⁹ The John-Jesus tension is evident in the earlier chapters (1 and 3). I suggest that the comparison continues with greater subtlety in 15:1-17, as an appeal for unity among all the disciples. The household of God is in danger of fragmenting.

The history of the Johannine writings is a complex and much debated study.²⁰ A consensus seems to be emerging that the community had its origins in Palestine, where the traditions were gradually shaped, but then moved into the diaspora. According to Irenaeus, the Gospel was published in Ephesus (*Adv. Haer.* 3.1.1) and while there is no corroborating archaeological evidence, it is certainly one among other Hellenistic cities, such as Alexandria or Antioch, which fits the internal evidence of the Gospel. Disciples of Jesus were not the only Jewish group active outside Palestine. The Acts of the Apostles reports that disciples of John were baptising in Ephesus before Paul arrived there some time in the early fifties (Acts 19:1-7). It is possible that John's disciples were also active in other cities where there was a strong Jewish presence, so that wherever the Johannine community developed the community may once again have had to deal with claims made by the disciples of John the Baptist.²¹

If the Messianic images found in 2 Baruch were part of a common theological milieu in first century Judaism, the image of the 'vine' may have been appropriated by disciples of John, along with their memories of his teaching and the traditions developing about him that we now find in the Synoptic texts. Such claims could provide the later context in which the evangelist needs to assert that Jesus, not John, is the true vine. After a detailed weighing of the evidence, John Meier also suggests that some of those opposing the gospel were "'Baptist sectarians', i.e., those who have continued down through the first century A.D. to revere the Baptist, rather than Jesus, as the significant religious figure (perhaps the Messiah)."²² Meier's work is supported by the research of Christopher Niemand who proposes that in the post-Easter time there was public controversy with a group who spoke of John the Baptist in 'quasi-Christological' terms.²³ While we cannot have certainty about these first century claims, the Pseudo-Clementine writings indicate that in the

¹⁸ Brown, *Community*, 69-71.

¹⁹ Brown, *Community*, 70-71.

²⁰ For a summary of various approaches to the issue of the history of the community and its location see Brown, *Introduction*, 69-78, 199-206.

²¹ Brown makes the following observations, "I think that the JBap group was still active in Johannine history when the Gospel was being written. The negations about JBap are not just in the opening chapters which reflect earliest community origins. John goes out of his way in 10:40-42 to bring JBap back at the end of the ministry... Many scholars think that the Prologue was a late addition to the Gospel; if they are right, even at that late stage care was taken against exaggerations about JBap." See *Community*, 70 n. 126.

²² Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 2:119.

²³ Niemand, *Die Fusswaschungserzählung*, 334.

second century disciples of the Baptist were asserting that John, not Jesus, was the Messiah.²⁴

Yea, some even of the disciples of John, who seemed to be great ones, have separated themselves from the people, and proclaimed their own master as the Christ (*Recognitions 1:54.8*).

The above discussion from a historical perspective proves nothing, but it does show the possibility that disciples of Jesus and John were active in the same city in the diaspora, with Ephesus as the strongest possibility. If this were the case then even in the later stages of the Gospel's development there was a continued need to affirm the faith of former disciples of John within the Johannine community and to assert once more that Jesus, not John, is the Messiah. These disciples, who now find themselves in a city where disciples of the Baptist are preaching, may be questioning their allegiance.

The above historical considerations raise the John-Jesus issue as a possible context for the Vine and the Branches passage. I now turn to the text to see if there are any textual links to add support to this hypothesis.

ii. Textual Links between John 15:1-17 and 3:22-29

In chapter 3 John's disciples are discussing the issue of cleansing (*peri katharismou*) (3:25).²⁵ In John 15 Jesus assures his disciples that they are cleansed (*katharoi*) already by his word (v. 3). The issue raised in chapter 3 is followed by what is clearly a polemical contrasting of John and Jesus, with John saying:

He who has the bride is the bridegroom; the *friend* of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, *rejoices* greatly at the bridegroom's voice; therefore this *joy* of mine is now *full* (3:29).

John 15 takes up a number of these same words:

This I have spoken to you that my *joy* may be in you and your *joy* may be *fulfilled* (15:11).

You are my *friends* if you do what I have commanded (15:14).

The repetition in John 15 of the cluster of words found in the Baptist passage (3:22-30) and their function in a polemical context seems more than co-incidence. Brown and Niemand situate John 3:22-29 within a controversy between the disciples of John and Jesus in a post-Easter situation.²⁶ In chapter 3, John names Jesus as the bridegroom and identifies himself as the bridegroom's friend, drawing on the OT imagery of the eschatological wedding banquet. Where John is the forerunner announcing the advent of the Lord (Jn 1:23), with the arrival of Jesus, John's preaching is brought to fulfilment. John is the prophet of the *eschaton*; Jesus is its presence. John is 'the friend' of Jesus whose joy is now fulfilled.

In echoing these words placed on the lips of John in chapter 3, John 15 appeals to the Baptist's disciples to follow their leader's example, to acknowledge the superior role of Jesus, and, like the Baptist, to be *friends* of Jesus. Rather than honour the Baptist by setting

²⁴ The Pseudo-Clementine writings are "a late third-century work drawn from earlier (probably second-century) sources" (Brown, *Introduction*, 154).

²⁵ Some scholars suggest that this discussion is with Jesus and not as the text now says, 'with a Jew'. See U. Schnelle, *Antidocetic Christology in the Gospel of John: An Investigation of the Place of the Fourth Gospel in the Johannine School*, trans. Linda Maloney (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 179; also the discussion in Niemand, *Die Fusswaschungserzählung*, 342-46.

²⁶ Brown, *Community*, 69; Niemand, *Die Fusswaschungserzählung*, 341-46.

him up as a Christ figure the Gospel exhorts them to honour John's memory by doing what he did in recognising and bearing witness to Jesus as the Christ.

iii. The Baptisers Preaching and the 'Vine' Imagery

In the Fourth Gospel there is no description of John's baptising ministry or preaching but a form of the verb *katharizō* (Jn 15:3) is found in the Synoptics associated with John the Baptist: "His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will cleanse (*diakathariei*) his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire" (Matt 3:12 // Luke 3:17). Niemand proposes that the traditional preaching of John the Baptist provides the basis for the imagery that the Fourth Gospel draws on in chapter 15:1-17.²⁷ The language of bearing fruit in v. 2 and v. 4 is also found in Matt 3:8,10 (// Luke 3: 8-9).

Produce fruit (*karpon*) that befits repentance. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not produce good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire (*kai eis pur balletai*) (Matt 3:8, 10).

He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit (*karpon*). Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit (John 15:2).

Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire (*kai eis to pur ballousin*) and burned (John 15:6).

The Baptist uses harvest images of cleansing, bearing fruit and he also warns that the unproductive tree will be cut down and thrown into the fire, which is the same fate of the unfruitful branch in 15:6. If, as I have proposed above, 15:1-17 reflects a problem about the relative status of John and Jesus, then the imagery of bearing fruit and not bearing fruit, drawing on the Baptist's own preaching, would be an effective teaching strategy for the evangelist to employ.

The relationship between John the Baptist and the image of the vineyard is also proposed by Malcome Lowe in his discussion of the Parable of the Vineyard, or as it is sometime named, the Parable of the Wicked Husbandmen.²⁸ Lowe points out that this Parable occurs in Mark's Gospel immediately following Jesus' dispute with the authorities about his authority and his question to them about the Baptist's authority. The sequence is as follows:

- Entry into Jerusalem Mk 11:1-10
- Episode in the Temple Mk 11:11-26 (including the withered fig tree)
- Challenge about his authority 11:27-33
 - ["Was the baptism of John from heaven or from men?" v. 30]
- Parable of the Vineyard 12:1-11.
 - ["The stone rejected by the builders has become the head of the corner" v. 10]

He suggests that in its original, pre-Markan form, the parable and its conclusion quoting Ps 118: 22-23, may have been applied to John the Baptist, seeing in him the final one sent by God whose words were rejected. While later the evangelists saw the parable in terms of Jesus' ministry and death, in its pre-synoptic form, whether stemming from Jesus himself

²⁷ Niemand, *Die Fusswaschungserzählung*, 347-50.

²⁸ M. Lowe, "From the Parable of the Vineyard to a Pre-Synoptic Source," *New Testament Studies* 28 (1982): 257-263. David Stern reaches a similar conclusion in his study of this parable in relation to Rabbinic teaching; see D. Stern, "Jesus' Parables from the Perspective of Rabbinic Literature: The Example of the Wicked Husbandmen," in *Parable and Story in Judaism and Christianity*, ed. C. Thoma and M. Wyschogrod (New York: Paulist, 1989), 42-80, 64-65.

or from disciples of the Baptist, the vineyard image may have first been used in a Baptist context.²⁹

CONCLUSION

The image of the vine and the branches (15:1-8), situated within passages that describe the abiding within the divine household (14:1-31; 15:9-17) invites disciples into a union with Jesus which will draw them into his own abiding as Son in the household of the Father (8:35). But the emphatic tone of this passage belies the presence of such union. This essay has placed its focus on the 'world behind the text'³⁰ and sought to discover why such an emphatic statement was needed. All other "I am" statements do not add the word 'true';³¹ why was it necessary here? I have argued the case firstly for a historical milieu where the image of 'the vine' was emerging as one of the images associated with the Jewish hopes for a Messiah. In this context the statement, "I am the true" vine would make its appeal to those 'crypto-Christians' in danger of turning back to Judaism. I have also raised the possibility that one of the Jewish messianic contenders was John the Baptist, at least for members of his discipleship group. In this case the statement would make its appeal to those members of the Johannine community who were once followers of the Baptist and may still be experiencing doubt about the relative status of Jesus and John. While these verses may have been formed within a context where others were making messianic claims, the passage does not turn its attention to such claimants or their followers, but rather speaks to the members of the Johannine community, reaffirming the evangelist's faith in Jesus and the divine intimacy made possible only in and through him. If my arguments are correct they reveal a sad irony; these verses expressing the most profound intimacy between Jesus and his disciples emerge from a context where this intimacy is in danger of being destroyed.

A final caution. The focus of this essay has been extremely narrow – one phrase, "I am the true vine" – and the methodology limited to asking questions about the possible historical situation behind the text. This by no means is the end of the interpretive task. Further questions are raised: How does this image function within the last discourse and within the total Gospel narrative? What accounts for its impact on the reader, both first century and twenty-first? Why at this point in the narrative introduce a new image encompassing both Jesus and disciples? The answers to these questions require different hermeneutical approaches. Only by an engagement with the text in all its 'worlds' will we discover its revelatory power to offer 'life in his name' (20:31).

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²⁹ Lowe, "From Parable," 259-260.

³⁰ Since the late 80s, it has become common parlance to speak of 'the world behind the text', 'the world within the text' and 'the world in front of the text.' Traditional historical criticism engages with issues concerning the historical circumstances that gave rise to the text – the world behind the text. More recent criticisms such as narrative, rhetorical and social-scientific explore the narrative world created by the text, in other words 'the world within the text'; other methods such as reader-response criticism and post-colonial criticism examine the impact the text has on its readers, 'the world in front of the text.'

³¹ "I am the bread of life" (6:35, 48); "I am the living bread" (6:51); "I am the light of the world" (8:12; 9:5); "I am the door" (10:7, 9); "I am the good shepherd" (10:11, 14); "I am the resurrection" (11:25); "I am the way" (14:6); "I am the vine" (15:5).

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