

RIVERS OF LIVING WATER FROM JESUS' BELLY (JOHN 7:38)

The source for the “scriptural” citation in John 7:38, “Rivers of living water shall flow from his belly,” is a matter of controversy, since no OT passage exactly matches the verse that John designates as γραφή (“scripture”). The question of the scriptural source is interrelated with that of whether the belly from which the living water flows belongs to Jesus or to the Christian believer; the majority of commentators favors Jesus,¹ and this note will strengthen that predilection by arguing that at least one of the scriptures in view is the eschatological prophecy in Isa 12:3, “With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.”²

This OT passage is a particularly attractive candidate as a scriptural source for our text not only because it is eschatological in orientation but also because the Johannine Jesus makes his proclamation during the feast of Tabernacles, and Isa 12:3 is associated with Tabernacles in several talmudic passages (*b. Sukk.* 48b; 50b; *y. Sukk.* 5:1 [55a]). Indeed, it is even possible that the original *Sitz im Leben* of Isa 12:3 was the water libation that took place on the mornings of the festival.³ In this ceremony, water was drawn from the Siloam stream to the south of Jerusalem, carried up to the Temple in a joyful procession, and poured out on the altar (see *m. Sukk.* 4:9–10). So central was this rite to Tabernacles that it influenced the name of the nocturnal illumination that preceded it in the Temple courtyards, which came to be called שמחת בית השואבה, “the Joy of the Place of Water-Drawing” (see the descriptions in *m. Sukk.* 5:1–5 and *t. Sukk.* 4:1–9).⁴ The existence of such a prominent water rite at Tabernacles gives a prima facie plausibility to the thesis that a scriptural text associated with that rite might be the background to the Johannine Jesus’ proclamation about water at the same festival. The relevance of the his-

¹ On the history of interpretation, see R. E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (2 vols.; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966, 1970) 1.320–24; R. Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St John* (3 vols.; New York: Crossroad, 1968–1982) 2.153–54; G. Bienaimé, “L’annonce des fleuves d’eau vive en Jean 7,37–39,” *RTL* 21 (1990) 281–310, 417–54; M. J. J. Menken, *Old Testament Quotations in the Fourth Gospel: Studies in Textual Form* (Contributions to Biblical Exegesis & Theology 15; Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1996) 187–203.

² Schnackenburg (*John*, 2.155), drawing on the work of J. Jeremias, mentions Isa 12:3 and its interpretation in *y. Sukk.* 5:1 in his discussion of John 7:38.

³ See J. L. Rubenstein, *The History of Sukkot in the Second Temple and Rabbinic Periods* (BJS 302; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995) 148 n. 168.

⁴ On the libation and the illumination, see the excellent treatment in Rubenstein, *History*, 117–52.

tory of interpretation of Isa 12:3 to John 7:38 is increased by the fact that *y. Sukk.* 5:1 (55a) forges the connection between Tabernacles and the Isaian passage in such a way that the latter's water image becomes a symbol for the Holy Spirit: "R. Joshua ben Levi said: Why is it [the Temple courtyard] called 'the Place of Water-drawing'? Because from it they draw out the Holy Spirit, as it is said, 'With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation' [Isa 12:3]."⁵ John, too, associates the water of his "scriptural" verse with the Spirit (see John 7:39).⁶

An added attraction of Isa 12:3, and the major original contribution of this note, is the fact that it accounts for the strange circumstance that John describes the water as flowing *from Jesus' belly* (ἐκ τῆς κοιλίας αὐτοῦ). In the Hebrew of Isa 12:3, the words for "from the wells of salvation" are מְצִיטוֹת הַיְשׁוּעָה. Popular etymology linked the second word here, מְצִיטוֹת, = "salvation," with Jesus' name יֵשׁוּעַ.⁷ Moreover, the word for "well," מְצִיטוֹת, is very close consonantly to מְעֵיבָה, a word that means "internal organs, intestines, bowels, or belly,"⁸ and that the LXX translates more than twenty times with κοιλία—the word for "belly" employed in John 7:38.⁹ The unbound forms of מְעֵיבָה and of מְצִיטוֹת, indeed, may be homographs in Mishnaic Hebrew (both מְצִיטוֹת); there is thus a good possibility that the two words could be confused either inadvertently or, as probably happened in the present case, deliberately. John or his source could therefore have performed upon these two words the sort of operation that was common in ancient Jewish midrash, in which consonants were often rearranged, omitted, or replaced in order to obtain a reading that was more useful for the interpreter than the original. Such puns

⁵ See Schnackenburg, *John*, 2.155. Although the passage cited is talmudic, and R. Joshua ben Levi was a first generation Amora, the connection between water and the Spirit is already biblical (e.g., Isa 44:3; Joel 2:28–29; Ezek 36:25–26) and continues in postbiblical Judaism (e.g., *Jub.* 1:23–25; IQS 4:19–21). It could easily have been applied to Isa 12:3 at an earlier date.

⁶ The Targum on Isa 12:3, similarly, interprets that passage sapientially: "And you will accept a new teaching from the chosen ones of righteousness" (trans. B. D. Chilton, *The Isaiah Targum: Introduction, Translation, Apparatus and Notes* [Aramaic Bible 11; Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1987]). This sapiential interpretation is akin to John's emphasis on the profound impression produced by Jesus' citation of "scripture" (John 7:40).

⁷ The name יֵשׁוּעַ is a contraction of יְהוֹשֻׁעַ = "Joshua," which originally meant "Yahweh helps," from the root שָׁעַ. But the name was popularly connected with מְצִיטוֹת = "salvation," from the root שָׁעַ = "to save"; see, e.g., Matt 1:21; Acts 4:12. This popular etymology is not confined to Christian sources; see Philo, *Change of Names* 12.121: "Jesus [Joshua] is interpreted salvation of the Lord, a name for the best possible state" (cited by R. E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke* [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1979] 131).

⁸ BDB, 588–89; cf. W. L. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) 205. Similarly, C. F. Burney suggests a confusion between מְצִיטוֹת, the Aramaic equivalent to מְעֵיבָה, and מְצִיטוֹת in Joel 3:18 (MT 4:18) as the origin of John 7:38 (*The Aramaic Origin of the Fourth Gospel* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1922] 109–11); L. Köhler has a more complicated theory involving the same confusion in Isa 58:11–12 (cited in R. Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971] 304). But neither of these theories involves a scriptural source that (1) is associated with Tabernacles and (2) easily yields a statement about the belly of Jesus.

⁹ Ruth 1:11; 2 Kgdms 7:12; 16:11; 20:10; 2 Chr 21:15, 18, 19; 32:21; John 30:27; Pss 21(22):14; 39(40):8; 70(71):6; Cant 5:4, 14; Jonah 2:1–2; Isa 16:11; 48:19; 49:1; Jer 4:19; Lam 1:20; Ezek 7:19; Dan 2:32. On κοιλία as a translation for מְעֵיבָה, see further Bienamé, "Fleuves," 419.

are frequent in rabbinic midrashim of the *אל תקרי* type (“read the word not as X, but as Y”),¹⁰ and P. Borgen has detected the use of this technique in John 6:31–32, where *נתן* = “he gave” is reinterpreted as *נחתן* = “he gives.”¹¹ Following this pattern, in the present instance the last two consonants of *בִּמְעֵינִי* could have been omitted and the Isaian verse could have been reread as a promise that at the eschaton Israel would joyfully draw water *מִבְּטֵן יֵשׁוּעַ* = “from the belly of Jesus.”

It is possible, then, that John or, more probably, a source that he took over, appropriated from Isa 12:3 the image of drawing water,¹² which was already associated with Tabernacles and the eschatological advent of the Spirit, and reinterpreted it in a christological manner that utilized the *אל תקרי* method or something like it:

“With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation” (Isa 12:3). Do not read, “from the wells of salvation” [*מִבְּטֵן יֵשׁוּעַ*], but “from the belly of Jesus” [*בִּמְעֵי יֵשׁוּעַ*], for rivers of living water shall flow from his belly.¹³

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¹⁰ See R. Kasher, “The Interpretation of Scripture in Rabbinic Literature,” in *Mikra: Text, Translation, Reading and Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity* (ed. M. J. Mulder; Assen/Maastricht: Van Gorcum; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) 572–73). Closer to the time of John, similar puns are frequent in the Qumran scrolls (see M. Fishbane, “Use, Authority and Interpretation of Mikra at Qumran,” in *Mikra*, 374–75).

¹¹ P. Borgen, *Bread from Heaven: An Exegetical Study of the Concept of Manna in the Gospel of John and the Writings of Philo* (NovTSup 10; Leiden: Brill, 1965) 61–67.

¹² The image of drawing water of Isa 12:3 had already migrated from the pulling of water out of the Siloam to the libation in the Temple that followed, and thence to the illumination that was associated with the libation. So it is no surprise to find it migrating still further in John, to Jesus, whom John presents elsewhere as the eschatological Temple (see John 2:19–21 and cf. B. H. Grigsby, “If Any Man Thirst . . . : Observations on the Rabbinic Background of John 7:37–39,” *Bib* 67 [1986] 101–8, esp. 106). On the migration of midrashic images, see J. L. Kugel, *In Potiphar’s House: The Interpretive Life of Biblical Texts* (Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard University Press, 1990) 255–56.

¹³ Admittedly, there is no mention of “rivers of living water” in Isa 12:3, so an important feature of John 7:38 is absent, and we may have to reckon with the influence of some such passage as Zech 14:8 as well (see Brown, *John*, 1.322–23). As we have seen, however, Isa 12:3 was associated with the drawing of water from the Siloam at Tabernacles, and the Siloam was a freshwater stream whose water was reputed to have magical properties (see, e.g., Josephus, *J.W.* 5 §410; *t. Arak.* 2:6; cf. Rubenstein, *History*, 119 n. 59)—a reputation that John himself exploits in 9:7. In line with this reputation, Josephus calls the Siloam “the sweet and abundant fountain” (*τὴν πηγὴν γλυκεῖαν τε καὶ πολλήν* [*J.W.* 5 §140]). This comes close to John’s description of “rivers of living water” (*ποταμοὶ . . . ὕδατος ζῶντος*), since ὕδωρ ζῶν, “living water,” originally meant spring water in contrast to cistern water (cf. Gen 26:19; Lev 14:5; Zech 14:8; *Did.* 7:1–2; see BAGD, 337 [4a]).