



Inverting Eden: The Reversal of Genesis 1–3 in John’s Passion¹

NICHOLAS J. SCHASER

At the start of the Fourth Gospel, John’s reference to the divine Word “in the beginning” (ἐν ἀρχῇ; John 1:1) recalls Genesis 1:1 LXX: “In the beginning (ἐν ἀρχῇ) God made the heavens and the earth.”² While nearly all New Testament readers have seen this initial allusion to Israel’s Scriptures, few have identified echoes of Genesis near the end of this Gospel. In what follows, I will show how John draws on Genesis 1–3 to present Jesus’s judgment and crucifixion as a reversal of humanity’s disobedience in the Garden of Eden. Specifically, John 19–20 inverts the structure of Genesis 1–3 LXX by using the Septuagint’s language in reverse order; the Passion narrative begins with echoes of Adam’s transgression in Genesis 3 and ends with a recollection of Genesis 1 prior to Jesus’s resurrection. In this way, the Fourth Gospel asserts that the Messiah’s sacrificial death unravels the adverse effects of human sin and ushers in the eternal life that God offers in Eden.

¹ It is my great pleasure to contribute this article in honor of Mark Throntveit. Dr. Throntveit’s teaching and mentorship were formative to my understanding of the Old Testament and biblical Hebrew. I have fond memories of Mark’s insight and humor in our Elijah/Elisha class, and his approach to teaching continues to inspire my own calling as a teacher of Scripture.

² All biblical translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

The Genesis creation narrative describes the fall into sin not only of humans but of creation itself. The New Testament witnesses to the coming to earth of God in Christ Jesus to reverse the damage of sin and death. John’s Gospel shows this reversal by echoing Genesis in the Passion narrative.

A century ago, Sir Edwyn Hoskyns proposed a series of connections between Genesis 1–3 and John’s Gospel.³ More recent scholarship has both reaffirmed Hoskyns’s findings and highlighted further parallels between Adam and John’s Jesus.⁴ Yet, these analyses of the Gospel identify only a few isolated references to Genesis that depend more on thematic resonance than on verbal equivalence. Several other linguistic points of contact, which have gone unnoticed, show that the intertextual project of John 19–20 constitutes a comprehensive structural inversion of Genesis 1–3 LXX. After attending to previous interpretations of John vis-à-vis Genesis 1–3, I will follow the order of events in John’s Passion and link them with their counterparts in Genesis 3–1 to highlight how Jesus’s death dismantles the problem of primordial transgression and inaugurates a new creation.

SCHOLARSHIP ON GENESIS 1–3 AND JOHN 19–20

In 1920, Edwyn Hoskyns argued for multiple allusions to Genesis 1–3 in John’s Gospel. His most convincing argument focuses on the blood and water that flows from Jesus’s side in John 19:34. Based on John’s earlier mention of Jesus’s “living water” (ὕδατος ζῶντος; 4:10–11; 7:38) and “blood” for “eternal life” (αἷμα ἔχει ζωὴν αἰώνιον; 6:54), Hoskyns shows that both fluids symbolize life in the Gospel.⁵ He couples this point with the long-observed link between the “side” (πλευρά) of Jesus and of Adam: just as Jesus’s pierced side emits life-giving liquids (John 19:34), so Eve—the “mother of all living” (Gen 3:20 LXX)—emerges from Adam’s side (Gen 2:21–22 LXX).⁶ In light of these connections to Eden, Hoskyns concludes, “The idea of re-creation and new birth therefore underlies St John’s account of the death

³ Edwyn C. Hoskyns, “Genesis I–III and St. John’s Gospel,” *The Journal of Theological Studies* 21 (1920): 210–18.

⁴ M. David Litwa, “Behold Adam: A Reading of John 19:5,” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 32 (2010): 129–43; Edward W. Klink III, *John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 733, 778–87, 815–22; Brandon D. Crowe, *The Last Adam: A Theology of the Obedient Life of Jesus in the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 135–37, 195.

⁵ Hoskyns, “Genesis,” 213; D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 624; Donald Senior, *The Passion of Jesus in the Gospel of John* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1991), 124–26; Craig Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 200–203; Andrew T. Lincoln, *The Gospel according to Saint John* (London: Continuum, 2005), 479; Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 1124–25; Karoline M. Lewis, *John* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014), 231; Marianne Meye Thompson, *John: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2015), 403–4.

⁶ Hoskyns [213–14] cites Tertullian’s link between the sides of Adam and Jesus in *De Anima* 43; cf. Ephrem, *Comm. Diat.* 21.10; Augustine, *John*, 120.2.434–35. More recent scholars have made similar observations; e.g., Klink, *John*, 815; Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave: A Commentary on the Passion Narratives in the Four Gospels*, 2 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 2:1178–80; Deborah Sawyer, “John 19.34: From Crucifixion to Birth, or Creation?” in Amy-Jill Levine, ed., *Feminist Companion to John, Volume 2* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2003), 131.

on the cross.”⁷ The interplay that Hoskyns identifies between the life-giving sides of Jesus and Adam offers a compelling case of Adamic Christology in John’s Passion.⁸

Hoskyns also attempts to connect the gardens of Jesus’s arrest and burial (John 18:1; 19:41) with the Garden of Eden. While Hoskyns is aware that the authors of John and Genesis LXX use different Greek words for “garden”—κῆπος in John and παράδεισος in Genesis—he notes that the Septuagint uses the words synonymously (e.g., Eccl 2:5 LXX), Ben Sira includes John’s term amidst allusions to Eden (see Sir 24:23–34), and the Greek translations of both Aquila and Theodotion use κῆπος in Genesis 2–3 (Cf. Gen 2:8 [Aquila only]; 3:2).⁹ More, Hoskyns cites Mary Magdalene’s belief that the resurrected Jesus is the “gardener” (κηπουρός) as support for a Johannine nod to Eden (John 20:15). According to Hoskyns, this horticultural reference equates Jesus with God—the first Gardener—which shows that “the original fall [is] here reversed, and once again the Garden of Eden is open.”¹⁰ While Hoskyns’s theological conclusions based on John’s garden imagery are likely correct, and others have followed his lead, identifying a more robust intertextual schema before Jesus’s appearance to Mary will help to undergird the Johannine garden as an Edenic allusion.¹¹

Beyond the links Hoskyns proposed between John and Genesis, others have found Adamic echoes in Pilate’s declaration “Behold the man” (ἰδοὺ ὁ ἄνθρωπος; John 19:5). In his commentary on this statement, Alan Richardson notes that Adam, the first man, was meant to rule over God’s creation. Thus, Richardson concludes, John uses Pilate’s statement to highlight Jesus’s royalty: “In Christ, the Son of Man, God’s original intention in the creation is fulfilled. He is the new Adam, the Messianic King.”¹² While Richardson is not wrong to see “new Adam” imagery in John 19:5, most scholars do not share his view, and have offered several intertextual alternatives.¹³

⁷ Hoskyns, “Genesis,” 213. Sawyer [“John,” 130] is right to note that since Eve is not “born” from Adam’s side, (re)creation language is more appropriate than that of “new birth.”

⁸ Craig Keener also notes Hoskyns’s proposal but finds it less convincing, and concludes that “one would hope for clearer clues than this if John intended such an allusion.” Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, 2 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 2:1154. Below, I will offer further intertextual clues throughout John’s Passion that strengthen the likelihood of the allusion above.

⁹ Hoskyns, “Genesis,” 214.

¹⁰ Hoskyns, “Genesis,” 215.

¹¹ For recent agreement with Hoskyns’s assessment, see Mary L. Coloe, “The Garden as New Creation in John,” *The Bible Today* 53 (2015): 159–64; Hartwig Thyen, *Das Johannesevangelium* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 762; Crowe, *Last Adam*, 137, 195; Klink, *John*, 732–39, 819; Lewis, *John*, 240. The relationship between the gardens in Genesis and the Gospel predates the modern period; see Aquinas, *John*, 3.199. Keener [John, 2:1164] is skeptical of this connection, stating, “Some read the garden symbolically, as a reversal of humanity’s expulsion from God’s garden . . . find[ing] a new Adam motif in the context. If this were the case, however, it would be surprising that John’s term for garden . . . differs from the common LXX rendering for the Genesis garden.”

¹² Alan Richardson, *The Gospel according to Saint John: Introduction and Commentary* (London: SCM, 1959), 197.

¹³ The most popular intertextual candidates include the charge in Zech 6:12 LXX to “behold the man” (ἰδοὺ ἀνὴρ) whose name is “Branch,” Isaiah’s description of the Lord’s servant as a beaten and disfigured “man” (ἄνθρωπος; Isa 53:3 LXX), and God’s instructions for Samuel to “behold the man” (ἰδοὺ ὁ ἄνθρωπος) before installing Saul as king (1 Sam 9:17). While these references are all possible, they each suffer from issues of imprecision vis-à-vis John: Zechariah’s term for “man” is ἀνὴρ, rather than John’s ἄνθρωπος, and “Branch”—rather

M. David Litwa has renewed the plausibility of Richardson's observation by aligning John 19:5 with God's declaration after Adam eats from the forbidden tree: "Behold, the man (ⲙⲏⲧⲏⲛ ⲛⲓ) has become like one of us, knowing good and evil" (Gen 3:22 MT). Litwa also highlights the similar declaration in the Latin *Life of Adam and Eve*—not as a divine response to Adam's transgression, but as God's unveiling of humanity before the angels: "Behold Adam (*Ecce Adam*). I have made you in our image and likeness" (*Vita* 13:3).¹⁴ The pseudepigraphal context of a divine presentation parallels Pilate's presentation of Jesus, but the Latin *Life of Adam and Eve* follows the Greek Septuagint in using the proper name—LXX: "Behold Adam" (ἰδοὺ Ἀδάμ)—rather than "Behold the man" (ἰδοὺ ὁ ἄνθρωπος), as in John. Still, Litwa identifies an "intertextual echo" between Adam and John's Jesus even if "the 'volume' [may] be low."¹⁵ Taken in isolation from the rest of the Passion narrative, the resonance between John 19:5 and Gen 3:22 may be minimal, but the comparative "volume" increases once the listener identifies all the intertextual notes from Genesis 1–3 that John plays throughout the Passion.

Taken in isolation from the rest of the Passion narrative, the resonance between John 19:5 and Gen 3:22 may be minimal, but the comparative "volume" increases once the listener identifies all the intertextual notes from Genesis 1–3 that John plays throughout the Passion.

THE REVERSAL OF GENESIS 1–3 IN JOHN 19–20

At the outset of John 19, Jesus's experience in Roman custody recalls the consequence of Adam's folly. When Roman soldiers place a crown of "thorns" (ἀκανθῶν) on Jesus's head at the beginning of the chapter (19:2), this derisive act mirrors the agricultural curse near the end of Genesis 3; namely, that the land will produce "thorns" (ἀκανθῶν) for Adam outside of Eden (Gen 3:18 LXX). Quite literally, Jesus takes the agricultural curse upon his own head, and the Messiah's

than "man"—is the messianic title. More, Isaiah's single use of "man" is too weak a linguistic connection, and a Johannine association between Jesus and the failed king Saul seems dubious. For a summary of these proposals and their respective problems, see Litwa, "Behold," 130–35; cf. Bruner, *John*, 1088; Senior, *Passion*, 86–89. Others see in John 19:5 an intra-Johannine reference to Jesus as the "Son of Man" throughout the Gospel; e.g., John Paul Heil, *Blood and Water: The Death and Resurrection of Jesus in John 18–21* (Washington: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1995), 64–65. Still others follow Rudolf Bultmann (*Das Evangelium des Johannes*, 11th ed. [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1950], 510) in reading Pilate's declaration as an expression of Christ's pitifulness, rather than as an Old Testament allusion; cf. Rudolf Schnackenberg, *The Gospel according to St. John*, 3 vols. (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 3:256–57. For a variant on this reading that highlights the Roman ridicule of Christ, see Keener, *John*, 2:1123–24; Raymond Brown, *The Gospel according to John*, 2 vols. (Garden City: Doubleday, 1970), 890.

¹⁴ Litwa, "Behold," 135–39.

¹⁵ Litwa, "Behold," 141. For agreement with Litwa's reading, see Klink, *John*, 778–79; Crowe, *Last Adam*,

toil begins where Adam's bliss ends.¹⁶ Jesus comes to Pilate "wearing the crown of thorns," and the governor states, "Behold, the man" (John 19:5). John's references to thorns before Pilate's statement strengthen Litwa's claim that John 19:5 recalls Gen 3:22. As the Gospel moves forward, it pulls Genesis 3 backward: first, Jesus experiences the primordial curse, and then he hears Pilate repeat God's reaction to Adam's offense.

After Pilate's declaration, his response to Jesus's divine Sonship continues to reverse the events of Eden. When the Roman governor tells the chief priests to crucify Jesus themselves (John 19:6), he hears that Jesus "ought to die because he has made himself the Son of God" (19:7). The assessment that Jesus should "die" (ἀποθανεῖν) recalls the divine warnings that Adam and Eve will "die" if they eat the arboreal fruit (ἀποθνήσκω; Gen 2:7; 3:3–4 LXX). Yet, the stronger reference to Genesis appears in Pilate's reaction to the charge: "When Pilate heard (ἤκουσεν) this word, he was very afraid (ἐφοβήθη)" (19:8). In both language and sequence, Pilate's response echoes Adam's rationale for hiding from God: "I heard (ἤκουσα) the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid (ἐφοβήθη)" (Gen 3:10 LXX). Just as the sound of God elicits Adam's fear in Eden, Pilate fears the description of Jesus as "Son of God."¹⁷ More precisely, whereas Adam hears God's "sound" (φωνή), Pilate hears a "word" (λόγος) about Jesus's divinity; the embodied deity who startled Adam now stands as the incarnate Word of God before Pilate. Once Pilate hears about Jesus's relationship with his Father, he questions Christ's identity and recapitulates God's call to a frightened Adam. According to Genesis, "The Lord God called to Adam, and said to him, 'Adam, where are you (ποῦ εἶ)?" (3:9 LXX). Similarly, Pilate asks Jesus, "Where are you from (πόθεν εἶ σύ)?" (John 19:9). These related questions position Jesus as a second Adam and continue to invert the structure of Genesis 1–3.

Jesus's response to Pilate both underscores divine supervision during the Passion and prepares readers for John's reference to Genesis during Christ's crucifixion. When Pilate's question gets no answer, the governor reminds Jesus of his authority to either release or crucify him (John 19:10). Jesus replies, "You would have no authority over me unless it had been given you from above" (John 19:11). The reminder of God's ultimate authority "from above" (ἄνωθεν) resurfaces at the cross alongside imagery from Eden. Roman soldiers take the crucified Christ's clothing, including his "garment" (χιτῶν), which most English translations describe as being woven seamlessly "from the top" (ἐκ τῶν ἄνωθεν; 19:23).¹⁸ Many commentators understand this apparent reference to cohesive tailoring as either John's symbol for church unity or, based on Josephus's similar description

¹⁶ John Suggit ("John 19:5: 'Behold the man,'" *Expository Times* 94 [1983]: 333–34) suggests that Jesus's purple robe recalls the original regality of Adam prior to his expulsion from Eden—despite no mention of a "robe" (ἱμάτιον) for Adam in Genesis LXX—but he makes no recourse to the use of ἀκανθῶν ("thorns") in both narratives.

¹⁷ On Pilate's fear coming from his encounter with divinity, cf. Koester, *Symbolism*, 215; Brown, *Death*, 1:840; David K. Rensberger, *Johannine Faith and Liberating Community* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988), 74.

¹⁸ See ASV, CEB, KJV, NKJV, NRSV; "from top to bottom" in ESV, NET, NIV, RSV.

of the high priest's robe (*Antiquities* 3.161), a priestly presentation of the Messiah.¹⁹ Yet, reading the garment as ecclesial unity is problematic since the soldiers take it away, so that the unified church is separated from Christ—not a consoling prospect for John's readers (cf. Rom 8:35–39). While the priestly imagery is possible, it suffers from a lack of thematic resonance in a Passion narrative that tends to frame Jesus as a “king,” rather than a priest (John 18:33, 36, 39; 19:3, 14, 19, 21).²⁰ An alternative is to read “from above” as a *double entendre* that not only describes the method of the garment's creation but also the place of its origin—specifically, as coming “from [the] above” (ἐκ τῶν ἄνωθεν).²¹ In other words, Jesus's “garment” (χιτῶν) comes from God. This spiritualized view of John's rhetoric resounds with Genesis, in which God makes “garments” (χιτῶνας) for Adam and Eve (Gen 3:21 LXX). More, this reading reveals another inversion of Eden: whereas God clothed the first Adam with a garment, the Romans (under God's authority; 19:11) take the second Adam's garment away. Jesus's loss of the divine clothing lavished on Adam underscores the price that Christ pays to eradicate sin. In continuing to peel back the events of Genesis 3, John's Jesus endures the negative impact of Adam's experience.

*Jesus's loss of the divine clothing lavished on Adam
underscores the price that Christ pays to eradicate sin.
In continuing to peel back the events of Genesis 3, John's
Jesus endures the negative impact of Adam's experience.*

Prior to the Passion, John's use of “from above” language alongside Adamic imagery supports the reading of Jesus's garment as paralleling the heavenly clothing in Eden. Early in John 3, Jesus tells Nicodemus that one must be born “from above” (ἄνωθεν; 3:3, 7). Near the end of the chapter, John the Baptist also uses ἄνωθεν with reference to Jesus's heavenly origin and distinguishes him from other earth-dwellers: “He who comes from above (ἄνωθεν) is above all. He who is from the earth is from the earth and speaks from the earth” (3:31). In setting up a terrestrial contrast to Jesus, John's triple repetition of “from the earth” (ἐκ τῆς γῆς) provides a precise echo of the three times that the phrase appears in Genesis 2 LXX:

A spring went up from the earth (ἐκ τῆς γῆς) and watered the whole face of the earth. And God formed the human [out of] dust from the earth (ἀπὸ τῆς γῆς). . . . And God also made to spring up from the earth (ἐκ τῆς γῆς) every tree. . . . And, moreover, God formed from the earth (ἐκ τῆς γῆς) all the beasts of the field, and the birds of the sky, and he brought them to Adam. (Gen 2:6–7, 9, 19 LXX)

¹⁹ For summaries of these scholarly positions, see Brown, *Death*, 2:956–58.

²⁰ Senior, *Passion*, 106–7; J. Ramsey Michaels, *John* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1989), 326–27.

²¹ R. Alan Culpepper, *The Gospel and Letters of John* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 232.

John’s repeated reference to the one who comes “from the earth” both reiterates Genesis and positions Jesus—the one “from above” (ἄνωθεν)—as a heavenly response to the earthly Adam. This Adamic contrast, then, foreshadows the garment that comes “from above” in the Passion narrative.

It is against this Adamic backdrop that John describes the piercing of Jesus’s side, followed by his burial—both of which rerun Eden in reverse order. As noted above, scholars observe that Christ’s “side” (πλευρά) emits blood and water—symbols of “life” (ζών; see John 4:14; 6:53–54)—just as “Eve” (Ζωή; lit. “Life”) emerges from Adam’s “side” (see Gen 2:21–22; 3:20 LXX).²² Once Jesus dies, John notes that in the garden burial site there is a “new tomb in which no one had been placed (τεθειμένος)” (19:41). John’s wording recalls the moment at which God places Adam in the first garden: “God planted a garden to the east in Eden, and placed (ἔθετο) there the human whom he had formed. . . . The Lord God took the human, whom he had formed, and placed (ἔθετο) him in the garden” (Gen 2:8, 15 LXX). By having Jesus’s body “placed” in a new garden tomb, the Gospel transposes Adam’s experience: Jesus’s life ends in the way that Adam’s life begins. Gospel readers have arrived at a time before transgression, and in a place prior to expulsion. For John, Christ has taken away the sin of the world and inhabits a new Eden as he awaits resurrection.

Finally, the first verse of John 20 completes the structural reversal of Genesis 1–3. The Gospel states, “Now on the first (μῆ) of the week, Mary Magdalene came early, while it was still dark (σκοτίας), to the tomb and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb” (20:1). The timing of Mary’s arrival recalls the “first” day of creation in Genesis, and the “darkness” mirrors the state of the world prior to divine intervention: “Darkness (σκότος) was over the face of the deep . . . and God said, ‘Let there be light’ . . . and God divided between the light and between the darkness (σκότους). . . . And there was evening and there was morning, the first (μία) day” (Gen 1:2–5 LXX). Just before Jesus’s resurrection, John goes all the way back to Genesis 1:2—a single verse from “the beginning” of both Genesis and the Gospel. The end of John’s Passion proclaims that Jesus’s resurrection marks victory over death and inaugurates a new creation.²³

Just before Jesus’s resurrection, John goes all the way back to Genesis 1:2—a single verse from “the beginning” of both Genesis and the Gospel. The end of John’s Passion proclaims that Jesus’s resurrection marks victory over death and inaugurates a new creation.

²² See note 6 above.

²³ On John’s presentation of a “new creation” after Jesus’s death, see Klink, *John*, 828; John Bowman, *The Fourth Gospel and the Jews: A Study in R. Akiba, Esther and the Gospel of John* (Pittsburg: Pickwick, 1975), 314; N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 440.

CONCLUSION

John's Passion utilizes intertextual allusions to Genesis 1–3 LXX in order to reverse the structure of Scripture's first story. The narrative of Jesus's death begins with him wearing the thorns that Adam's sin produced (John 19:2, 5 // Gen 3:18) and ends with reference to the first day of creation (John 20:1 // Gen 1:2, 5). In between, John presents the Passion as the inverse of Eden: Pilate echoes God's exhortation, "Behold, the man" (John 19:5 // Gen 3:22); the governor hears and fears the declaration of Jesus's divinity just as Adam fears the sound of God in the garden (John 19:8 // Gen 3:10); Pilate's question to Jesus—"Where are you from?" (John 19:9)—recapitulates God asking Adam, "Where are you?" (Gen 3:9); when Christ loses his garment "from above," he is stripped of the divine clothing that Adam and Eve enjoyed (John 19:23 // Gen 3:21); Jesus's pierced side emits life-giving substance in the same way that Eve, the mother of all living, emerges from Adam's side (John 19:34 // Gen 2:21–22); and, finally, the Messiah is placed in a new garden tomb just as God places Adam into the Garden of Eden (John 19:41 // Gen 2:8, 15). In all of this intertextual artistry, Jesus emerges as a second Adam who overturns the initial Adamic imprudence. John's mosaic of biblical allusions to Genesis 1–3 underscores the theological import of Jesus's death as an erasure of primordial transgression, and his resurrection as a reclamation of Edenic eternal life. ⊕

NICHOLAS J. SCHASER is Visiting Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota. Among his recent publications is "Unlawful for a Jew? Acts 10:28 and the Lukan View of Jewish-Gentile Relations," Biblical Theology Bulletin 48 (2018): 188–201.