

## 10 John. Jesus' Beloved Disciple Subverts Literalism

The first explicit testimony concerning John's Gospel is that of St. Irenaeus, around 180 AD: "Then John, the Lord's disciple, the same who rested on his breast, also published the Gospel during his stay in Ephesus." If not put in final form by the Beloved Disciple himself, as the majority of experts now conclude, the Gospel may well reflect the Apostle's teachings, written by a disciple after his death (ca. 90 AD). The identification of the Beloved Disciple with John the son of Zebedee is often questioned in modern scholarship, but remains the preferable hypothesis regarding the authoritative source behind the Fourth Gospel.<sup>1</sup>

1. Life Abundant for the Poor, the Weak, and the Physically Challenged. Even more so than John's letters, the Gospel would appear to be singularly deficient in terms of a specific "ethical" content. Jesus only reveals that he is the revealer (Rudolf Bultman), and he demands a love that obeys his commandment: "love one another" (another apparent tautology). In this Gospel Jesus only commands love to the brothers/sisters of the new community, not the general love of neighbor and much less of an enemy (cf. Matthew 5, Luke 6 and Romans 12). In addition to the seven signs and the crucifixion, the most concrete illustration of this love that is given in this Gospel is the washing of the feet (13:1-20).

The four references to the "always present" poor-beggars (Greek ptochós; John 12:5-6, 8; 13:29) hardly appears to demonstrate great concern for them. Consequently, the first-world Johannine researchers concentrated their efforts in other areas and generally ignored the significant points contributed by José P. Miranda, Frederick Herzog, Hugo Zorilla, the feminist/womanist and African-American studies.<sup>2</sup> However, a growing minority of theologians interpret the Johannine writings as representative of a unique and radical perspective. On

opposing the traditional “feudalization” of God’s Kingdom in the Synoptic Gospels, they also reject the “Platonization” of eternal and abundant life in the Johannine writings.

In the prologue of his Gospel, John states that the Word became “flesh” (1:14), that is “humanity” in the generic sense, not explicitly “male.” Furthermore, if John 1:14 is not an explicit designation of the option for a humanity that is intrinsically poor, at least it aims to characterize human weakness (“the flesh is weak”, 6:63), whose major expression is weakness in the economic sphere, that is, poverty. The abandonment and marginalization of the incarnated Word (“his own people did not accept him,” 1:11; cf. 1:46; a lack of hospitality; see Sodom) is another Johannine topic that expresses the painful dimension of poverty. It is now common to place emphasis on persecution and excommunication as dominant formative experiences in the history of the Johannine communities. However, many seem not to take into account the mortal economic deprivations and the violence that commonly accompany such persecution.

As in the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus’ miraculous healings generally are directed toward the poor and physically challenged (blind and “beggar,” 9:8; paralytic, 5:1-13) and the weak (“son,” 4:43-54). John 5:3 mentions not only paralyzed but also weak/sick, blind, and lame. The same is true in the miracles of provision (2:1-12, wine; 6:1-15, bread). In John the early placement of the purification of the temple (at the beginning, 2:13-22, following the provision of wine for an obviously poor family) demonstrates the prominence of John’s criticism of the oppressive Jewish oligarchy: “It is precisely in the temple where Jesus opts for the marginalized: the sick, the poor, the tax collectors, women, children, foreigners....”<sup>3</sup> While the Synoptics refer to the Kingdom of God, John prefers to speak of (eternal) life. This change should be understood above all as a dialectical and political mode<sup>4</sup> in a context of excommunication, persecution and violence. The traditional (Platonizing) interpretations of John radically distort its original meaning and try to elude the sharpness of its polemics. The “abundant life” offered in John

(10:10) invalidates the extremes of “prosperity theology” (Pentecostal-charismatic, not dialectical), but neither is it limited to a platonically spiritualized, or immaterial, sphere (cf. 3 John 2). Miranda may have been mistaken when he gave in to the elimination of a futuristic eschatology (following Rudolf Bultmann).<sup>5</sup> But he was not mistaken when he delineated the radical character of the Johannine perspective concerning the poor, justice, injustice/oppression (ἀδικία, 7:18; cf. 1 John 1:9; 5:17), sacrificial love (solidarity), and life.

John’s Gospel indicates causes for poverty when it points out the persecution, oppression and violence suffered by the communities. 1 John explicitly points to the commonly resulting poverty (3:17, “need”; cf. 3 John 5-8) and the appropriate response of agape-love in the context of the Christian communities characterized by sharing koinonía. Love in John is for the dispossessed, the poor, the needy.<sup>6</sup> Thus, as in Matthew (27:57-60), the rich Joseph of Arimathea (together with Nicodemus) is presented at the end of the Gospel as a paradigm of the “poor in spirit” who express solidarity with the oppressed and persecuted (John 19:38-42).

Like our earliest traditions of Jesus’ teaching (--> Mark and Q; see also Paul, --> 1 Thessalonians), justice (dik-) terms are remarkably rare in John (six times total). “Justice” (dikaíosune) occurs but twice in one context (16:8, 10), where some conclude that the sense is ironic (see Mark 2:17, “I have not come to call the [self-]righteous, but sinners”). Probably, however, Jesus’ vindication (God’s liberating justice manifest in the resurrection and ascension) is meant, in contrast to the world’s sin and violence. Oppression (ἀδικία) is used but once (7:18, with reference to Jesus’ innocence of fraud or dishonesty; cf. 1 John 1:9; 5:19 --> Revelation). Jesus exhorts the crowd to “Stop judging by mere appearances but express liberating justice [for the oppressed] in your judgments” (John 7:24, dikaían krísan, just judgments). He insists that his judgments exemplify such justice (5:30). And in his prayer Jesus addresses his Father as

characterized by liberating justice (17:25), in contrast to the world that does not “know” God (to know God is to practice liberating justice, Jeremiah 22:16).

The sparsity of references to oppression and liberating justice in John, compared to --> Revelation, may be due to the latter’s apocalyptic genre rather than to different authors or widely varying dates. In the context of an excommunicated, persecuted community, John’s Gospel focuses more on threats of marginalization, persecution and violence, rather than on economic poverty as such. His theology, rooted in the Exodus paradigm of the Hebrew Bible, develops more the abundant life offered and experienced in the new inclusive community of Jesus’ disciples and friends (--> 3 John; cf. “kingdom of God” in the Synoptic Gospels).

2. For Women and Sexual Minorities: A Community of Friends. Also oppressed, persecuted and marginalized, sexual minorities and marginalized women are treated with concern and special honor in John. He portrays five women: Jesus’ widowed mother Mary, the Samaritan, the sisters Mary and Martha, and Mary Magdalene, each representing some type of sexual minority. Mary, the wife of Clopas (19:25), is listed as present at the cross but otherwise unknown (cf. Pilate’s wife in Matthew 27:19 and Jairus and his wife in Mark 5:40; on the adulteress in 7:53--8:11, see section 5 and outline below). Mark’s “Messianic secret” is detonated quite early in this Gospel when Jesus reveals himself fully and explicitly as Messiah to the Samaritan woman who has had multiple husbands and sexual companions (4:1-42). Jesus then repeatedly declares “I am....” (6:35; see outline below).

The place of sexual minorities in John’s theology and the structure of his book is impressive. In John 2 we have the wedding at Cana with the Gospel’s first miracle (sign), the water made wine, followed surprisingly by the purification of the temple, an event the Synoptic Gospels place in the last week (passion), as the occasion of Jesus’ crucifixion. Specialists in John remain perplexed concerning the radical change in order. However, if we understand the

situation and attitude of the Beloved Disciple (unmarried), we can understand how this order is key to understanding his theology.

For John the wedding at Cana (2:1-12) does not constitute a motive to celebrate the continuity of the traditional patriarchal family but a point of departure with the counterculture network of Jesus' disciples (2:11-12). In John 1 we have the formation of the new community of Jesus' disciples (1:35-51), and in John 2 a presentation of the two traditional institutions that will be replaced by this new community: the traditional patriarchal household (2:1-12) and the temple and feasts in Jerusalem (2:13-22). The Eucharistic wine that the disciples enjoy in the new community is superior to the wine (depleted) of the traditional patriarchal household, just as the new community of disciples (primarily unmarried) that surround Jesus also is superior to that institution.

John's account of the wedding at Cana (2:1-12) is consistently misinterpreted because of idolatrous family ideologies. Fundamental to proper interpretation of this passage, much abused in weddings, is the preceding context, where Jesus contacts a "network of marginalized acquaintances" to form a fictive kinship, countercultural "antisociety."<sup>7</sup> Then at Cana with his presence and first miraculous sign, Jesus (now 30+ but still single) first blesses the patriarchal wedding, but then proceeds to deconstruct patriarchy by insisting on his freedom from family demands--from the widowed Mary, who in this narrative evidences all the nervous symptoms of a new PFLAG mother. Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh point out that "In 'straight' society, as opposed to antisociety, [such] in-group persons all deserve and receive immediate compliance.... Perhaps John uses this pattern to inform members of his group about how to deal with their relatives and other natural in-group persons."<sup>8</sup> With his newly formed (John 1:35-51) nucleus of disciples (also almost all unmarried), Jesus demonstrates that his new counterculture community exemplifies authentic freedom and enjoys a lifestyle superior to that of the traditional

patriarchal family represented by the wedding. The shortage of wine signals a lack of friends. Afterwards “Jesus’ biological and fictive families are...portrayed as traveling together,”<sup>9</sup> but John’s succeeding narrative makes clear that the new network of “friends” (15:9-15), not the patriarchal household, is fundamental and normative for society in God’s new order.<sup>10</sup>

John’s early placement of Jesus’ temple cleansing also may reflect the repressed anger of the unmarried John faced with two oppressive institutions --the patriarchal family (2:1-12) and the temple (2:13-22). Jesus called John and his brother James--irate youths--“sons of thunder” (Mark 3:17; see “thunder” in the Johannine Revelation 4:5 + 9 times). John’s anger, then, is directed not only against religious leaders and the temple, but also focuses on the patriarchal institution of the heterosexual, procreative household (the wedding at Cana). Such anger (commonly unconscious and repressed), has been characteristic of sexual minorities, who commonly have had to spend their lives repressing and hiding their true feelings of love. Both the wedding at Cana and the Jerusalem temple represent targets for John’s anger, and the entire book carries out a deconstruction of the oppressive institutions of the patriarchal household and patriarchal religion. Jesus’ new community of disciples replaces both the patriarchal household and patriarchal religion and thus manifests the truth that liberates from oppression (John 8:32).

The displacement of the patriarchal household by the new community of disciples is seen immediately in the following dialogue with Nicodemus (2:23--3:36). Jesus with his teaching replaces “the Teacher” of Israel, and people (mainly marginalized) enter into the new community by a new spiritual birth instead of inheriting such a status through natural birth. The Johannine process of displacement continues in the account concerning the Samaritan woman (4:1-42), where a non-Israelite, moreover a sexual minority, a woman of bad repute, receives the first explicit revelation concerning the Messianic identity of Jesus and then shares it, as an evangelist, with her village. In the dialogue Jesus emphasizes that worship of God in Spirit and truth (the

practice of the Johannine communities excluded by the synagogues) replaces whatever temple as the center of divine revelation and source of life.

In the second sign, which follows (John 4:43-52), John transforms the Q account (Luke 7:1-11 // Matthew 8:5-13) concerning the centurion and his beloved slave who was healed (or perhaps John follows an independent tradition). Remarkably, John appears to “clean up” both portrayals of sexual minorities described in Luke 7. First, although in Luke 7:1-10 Jesus heals the Roman centurion’s slave, in John 4:43-54 the much beloved slave becomes a “son” (adopted slave?). Second, in Luke 7:36-50 a prostitute (“sinner” par excellence) anoints Jesus’ feet, but in John 12:1-11 it is the pious Mary, who had sat at Jesus’ feet to listen to his teachings, who anoints Jesus’ feet. Matthew and Mark describe the anointing in Bethany as taking place in the house of Simon “the leper” (perhaps Mary, Martha and Lazarus had separated from their father and owner of the house, since he would be “unclean” according to Moses’ Law; Mark 14:3-9; Matthew 26:6-19).

In John 5:1-47, Jesus goes up again to Jerusalem during a Jewish feast, but instead of going to the temple for the feast, he goes straight to the “hospital” for the marginalized sick and physically challenged, the pool of Bethesda, where he heals a paralyzed man. A sharp conflict results with the religious authorities concerning the sabbath and the law. Jesus causes even greater opposition when he insists that he--not the temple with its feasts--represents the new center for God’s liberating, life-giving work.

John 6 includes the narrative of Jesus feeding 5,000 poor followers (as in the Synoptics), but he then declares “I am the bread of life” (6:35), displacing Moses (see the manna of the Exodus) as the father of the patriarchal household. In John 7 the conflict with the Jewish authorities becomes more serious, and the last day of the feast of Tabernacles/Booths Jesus presents himself as the water of life, again displacing the temple (see Ezekiel 47).

In John 8 Jesus declares himself the light of the world that liberates the new community of his followers from two oppressive institutions: the patriarchal household (descendants of Abraham) and the temple authorities (8:32, 36). This subversive teaching is followed by the narrative of the healing of a man blind from birth (9:1-41), a single man dependent on his parents who, after being driven out of the synagogue, became a part of Jesus' new community. John 10 includes Jesus' proclamation, "I am the good shepherd," the leader who replaces oppressive temple authorities and whose "sheep" (disciples) replace the oppressive patriarchal household. During the feast of Dedication in Jerusalem (10:22-42) the conflict with authorities increases again and they resort to violence and try to stone Jesus.

With Lazarus' resurrection (11:1-54) John's purpose and theology are clearly revealed. Jesus had participated in the traditional patriarchal wedding in Cana under pressure from his mother. However, John clearly demonstrates that Jesus' favorite home was not that of his own mother and brothers, nor that of a traditional married couple, but that of Mary, Martha and their brother Lazarus, all unmarried. Just as Mark points out that Jesus loved the rich young man, John emphasizes the special love that Jesus had for Lazarus, Mary and Martha (11:3, 5, 11). And just as Paul greets primarily households of sexual minorities in Romans 16, John makes it clear that the place where Jesus felt most "at home" was a household of sexual minorities, persons who broke with the patriarchal expectation of marriage and having children. According to John, this is the Mary who anointed Jesus' feet with perfume in Bethany (12:1-11).

Lazarus' resurrection makes clear that God's power in Jesus now operates outside the environment of the temple and the religious authorities and also outside the control of the traditional patriarchal families. The conclusion of the first half of John continues demonstrating how the non-traditional home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus displaces the traditional patriarchal household and the temple as the center of divine action. John 12 culminates the Book of Signs

by announcing the arrival of some Greeks (“other sheep”) who seek to join the new community of Jesus’ followers (displacing the incredulous Jews; 11:55--12:50).

In the second part of the Gospel (13--21), John first gives us Jesus’ teaching which seeks to empower the disciples and prepare them for the crucifixion. In John 13--17 Jesus speaks of the presence of God’s Spirit with his new community (not in the temple). With his radical perspective, John focuses on the simple command of mutual love in the new community (13:34-35) instead of the multiple legal codes of the Pentateuch (see Paul with his similar advocacy of the freedom from the law (Galatians, Romans). As John insists in his prologue: “The law indeed was given through Moses; but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (1:17). John’s radical elimination of the multiple marginalizations prescribed in the Pentateuch codes with reference to sexual minorities (see especially “eunuchs,” Deuteronomy 23:1-2, Leviticus 21:18-20) makes the Gospel of the Beloved Disciple quite explicitly “Good News” for sexual minorities. As spiritual birth (John 3) is distinct, so also the “fruit” of the new community is not natural children but the multiplication of disciples (John 15:1-17).

In his narrative of Jesus’ death, John stresses the conflict with the temple’s religious leaders. Shortly before dying on the cross, Jesus entrusts his widowed mother, not to Peter with his traditional “straight” family, but to the unmarried Beloved Disciple, who in this way formed another non-traditional home (19:26-27). It is this Beloved Disciple who had “leaned on Jesus’ chest” during the Last Supper (13:23, 25; modern translations create more space than that indicated by the Greek words) and was, according to tradition, the author of the Gospel (see 1:35-40; 18:15-16; 19:26-27; 20:1-10; 21:7, 20-24). As an example of literary inclusion, Mary appears in John only in the narrative of the wedding at Cana (2:1-12) and then at the end when Jesus sends her to form part of the new community in connection with his unmarried Beloved Disciple (19:26-27).

Mark had told how the faithful women arrived first at the empty tomb, and Luke and Matthew added how the resurrected Jesus appeared first to these women, and not to the failed male apostles. John, however, insists that, even before the appearances to the women, the Beloved Disciple, having run to the tomb faster than Peter, was the first to believe in the resurrection—even without having seen Jesus. It is the unmarried Beloved Disciple, then, who serves as the fundamental paradigm for future generations who believed without seeing the resurrected Jesus. In the Gospel it is this unmarried Beloved Disciple (not a “family”) who symbolizes the Christian community.

Moreover, the first appearance of the resurrected Jesus is not to the faithful women as a group but to Mary Magdalene, traditionally identified as a prostitute (John 20:1-18; see under Luke and Matthew). Adeline Fehribach sensitively portrays Mary’s determined search for Jesus’ body, comparing her to the woman in Song of Songs and to Greek love novels where wives search for the bodies of dead husbands. Jesus is seen as the “messianic bridegroom.” Fehribach is bothered by Jesus’ refusal to reciprocate Mary’s embrace and observes that Jesus “remains aloof from the earthly concerns of others, especially the women in his life,”<sup>11</sup> but limits imposed by her heterosexist ideology keep her from detecting more radical possibilities.

John’s subsequent epilogue (21:1-25), however, stubbornly insists that the unmarried John, Jesus’ Beloved Disciple, maintains a certain priority over Peter and will outlive him (just as he outran him in the race to the tomb). Most significantly, however, both the married disciple and Jesus’ Beloved Disciple became a leadership team (see Acts 1-5) for Jesus’ new community that displaces the traditional oppressive patriarchal household and the temple with its priests.

From St. Irenaeus we have another tradition (now commonly suppressed):

“There are also those who heard from [Polycarp] that John, the disciple of the Lord, going to the baths at Ephesus, and perceiving Cerinthus within, rushed out of the bath-house without bathing, exclaiming, ‘Let us fly, lest even the bath-house fall down, because Cerinthus, the enemy of the truth, is within.’”<sup>12</sup>

Cerinthus was a Gnostic heretic (ca. 100 AD). This St. Irenaeus tradition used to be cited frequently by traditional authors eager to defend Johannine authorship--before Kinsey (1948) and Stonewall (1968) led to more public diffusion of information concerning homoerotic practices in the Greco-Roman societies. Nobody used to ask why a Jewish-Christian like John would be found frequenting the public baths, a Greco-Roman institution of bad repute among the Jews.

3. Anti-Judaism/Anti-Semitism? Although Jesus (John 4:9, 22), as well as John himself, were always Jews, of all the New Testament books, John’s Gospel appears to contain the most negative and numerous expressions (71 times) against “the Jews”: see 5:16-18, 39-40, 45-47; 9:22; 12:42; 15:18-21, 24b-25; 16:2-3; and especially 8:39b-47 (“You are from your father the devil”). However, the expression “the Jews” in John almost always appears to refer only to certain hostile leaders or their followers, and nothing in the New Testament reflects the type of racist anti-Judaism of the modern era. John’s negative rhetoric now commonly is understood to reflect the painful experiences of the Johannine communities on being excluded from the synagogues (9:22; 12:42; 16:2). These communities saw themselves as living separated from “the world” (Jewish society).

The word “covenant” never occurs in John, and Jesus’ teaching about the new love commandment and, for the new community, the Holy Spirit’s guidance (13:1-17:26) take the place of Moses’ Torah (1:17; see “your law” in 8:17 and 10:34; “their law” in 15:25; cf. Matthew

5:17-20!). According to John's theology, Jesus himself takes the place of the temple, and the new community of his disciples takes the place of the oppressive patriarchal family (see above on John 2). When the decisive breach occurred between Judaism and the followers of Jesus' "Way" (perhaps as late as 130 AD), the cause was not so much John's high Christology but differences regarding Torah. Richard B. Hays concludes that, although in the light of the original historical context we may understand John's recourse to negative rhetoric, the church today (post-Holocaust) should never imitate such rhetoric. Rather, for dialogue with the synagogue we do better to work from more positive texts such as Romans 9--11.<sup>13</sup>

4. Literalistic Hermeneutics as an Instrument of Oppression. Faced with the literalism common in the fundamentalisms of every age, John points out how Jesus corrected the literalist interpretations: not the literal temple but his body as the temple (2:19-22); not returning literally to one's mother's womb but being born of the Spirit (3:4-5); not the water from patriarch Jacob's well but the water that Jesus gives (4:11-14; 7:37-39); not Moses' manna but the bread of life that Jesus provides (6:31-35, 48-51).<sup>14</sup> Against the common literalisms of his culture, Jesus presents himself in seven transcendent metaphors ("I am..."): the definitive revelation of God the Liberator and the answer to the eternal human quest (see Outline below).

5. John 7:53--8:11. Jesus liberates a woman accused of adultery from the death penalty. This story probably was not originally part of John's Gospel, since it does not appear at this point in the best textual evidence (older manuscripts, versions and church fathers). In a few manuscripts the story is found at the end of the John, or after Luke 21:38. Nevertheless, scholars commonly conclude that the narrative does preserve an authentic tradition about Jesus. Moreover, it is consistent with John's emphasis on Jesus' authority, which replaces patriarchal authority with its death penalty for adultery (Moses), and substitutes the requirement of love that forgives among the disciples in the new community. Some church fathers feared that the story

might motivate wives to commit adultery (Augustine); later, Calvin feared that the text might discredit the death penalty law for adultery (Leviticus 20:19; Deuteronomy 22:22-24).

Nevertheless, the text's theme is not so much "the adulteress woman" (the traditional title) but the double standard and hypocrisy of the patriarchal males whom Jesus unmasked when he liberated the woman from the death penalty (cf. 3:17).<sup>15</sup>

## Outline

Prologue: “The Word became flesh”	1:1-18
1 The Book of Signs: Empowerment for the Weak and Marginalized	1:19--12:50
1.1 Jesus’ Forerunner: John the Baptist	1:19-34
1.2 Counterculture community in formation: first disciples	1:35-51
1.3 <u>Sign #1</u> : a poor patriarchal family and Jesus’ new wine	2:1-12
1.4 A second oppressive institution: Jesus purifies the Temple	2:13-22
1.5 How to enter Jesus’ fictive kinship community: spiritual birth	2:23--3:21
1.6 “Bridegroom” Jesus’ best man: John the Baptist	3:22-36
1.7 Leadership in Jesus’ new community: a Samaritan divorcee	4:1-42
1.8 <u>Sign #2</u> : An official’s son healed (// Luke 7:1-10; Matt. 8:5-13?)	4:43-52
1.9 <u>Sign #3</u> : Healing of a paralytic marginalized for 38 years	5:1-47
1.10 <u>Sign #4</u> : Jesus feeds a poor hungry multitude	6:1-15, 22-71
(1) I AM THE BREAD OF LIFE, 6:35	
1.11 <u>Sign #5</u> : Jesus strides over the sea	6:16-21
1.12 Jesus at the Feast of Booths (1): source of “living water”	7:1-52
[Later addition: Jesus liberates an adulterous woman	7:52--8:11]
1.13 Jesus at the Feast of Booths (2):	8:12-29
(2) I AM THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD, 8:12	
1.14 <u>Sign #6</u> : Jesus gives sight to a beggar born blind	9:1-41
1.15 Jesus, a shepherd, who has “other sheep” (unclean Gentiles)	10:1-21

(3) I AM THE DOOR, 10:7, 9;	
(4) I AM THE GOOD SHEPHERD, 10:11, 14	
1.16 <u>Sign #7</u> : Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead	11:1-54
(5) I AM THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE, 11:25	
1.17 End of public ministry: a grain of wheat that dies....	11:55--12:50
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2.4 Jesus foretells how Peter (married) will deny him	13:36-38
2.5 Jesus will depart, to prepare the way to the Father	14:1-14
(6) I AM THE TRUE AND LIVING WAY, 14:6	
2.6 Jesus promises to send the Holy Spirit to empower	14:15-31
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(7) I AM THE TRUE VINE, 15:1-5	
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2.9 The Holy Spirit's work: defense attorney for the oppressed	16:4b-15
2.10 Jesus promises to return quickly after his death	16:16-33
2.11 Jesus intercedes for himself and the new community	17:1-26
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