

‘(Bethany) beyond the Jordan’: The Significance of a Johannine Motif*

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There are three occurrences of the phrase *πέραν τοῦ Ἰορδάνου* in John (1.28; 3.26; and 10.40) at a location identified in 1.28 (problematically) as Bethany. The significance of the phrase and location is developed first by exploring Bethany as Bashan via Micah 7.14–15, Jer 50.19–20 and Ps 68, and secondly by considering the significance of ‘crossing the Jordan’ in the OT and 1QS. The gospel is shown to invert the traditional motif; for John one finds life with God *in Jesus* by crossing the Jordan *out of* Israel, to Bashan, indicating an unexplored symbol in the Fourth Gospel.

Keywords: Jordan, Bashan, Batanaea, Bethany, Bethabara

There are three references to the Jordan in John’s gospel,¹ all occurring in the identical phrase *πέραν τοῦ Ἰορδάνου* (across the Jordan) (1.28; 3.26; and 10.40). The first of these, to which the later two refer, refers to the place where John the Baptist was baptizing. Following the major textual witnesses, the location is generally taken to be a place called Bethany. This location has occasioned considerable debate as there is no known Bethany ‘across the Jordan’ (if one takes the perspective of being located in Israel), and because there are textual witnesses that identify the location as Bethabara; of the major textual witnesses \mathfrak{P}^{66} , \mathfrak{P}^{75} , \aleph^* , A, B, C*, L, W^{supp}, Δ , Θ , Ψ^* read *Βηθανία* while \aleph^2 reads *Βηθαβαβῆ* and C², T^{vid}, Ψ^c read *Βηθαβαρῶ*.² Both textual variants appear to be known by Origen, who prefers Bethabara,³ since ‘the meaning of the name Bethabara is

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1 I shall use the traditionally accepted title ‘John’s gospel’ to refer to the Fourth Gospel without wishing to make any claims regarding authorship.

2 *The Greek New Testament* (ed. B. Aland et al.; UBS 4th ed. [corrected], 1993) 315. UBS 4 reads *Βηθανία*, but only with a rating of C which indicates that ‘the Committee had difficulty in deciding which variant to place in the text’ (3).

3 Origen, *Commentary on John*, 6.221, in R. E. Heine, *Origen: Commentary on the Gospel according to John Books 1–10* (FC 80; Washington: The Catholic University of America, 1989) 228.

appropriate for the baptism of the one who prepares for the Lord a prepared table, for it is translated, “house of preparation.”⁴ Origen does, however, suggest that Bethany is also appropriate for it means ‘house of obedience’, although he notes that there is ‘no place in the vicinity of Jordan with the same name as Bethania’.⁵

Brian Byron summarizes various attempts to solve the difficulty regarding the location before offering his own solution, in which he argues that one should adopt an ‘eastern’ rather than ‘western’ perspective for interpreting the comment of being ‘across the Jordan’ in 1.28, based on the symbolism of crossing the Jordan in the OT, thus reading 1.28, “These things happened at Bethany across the Jordan—it was at the Jordan that John used to baptize”⁶ to allow Bethany here to refer to the Bethany close to Jerusalem mentioned in John 1.11. If correct, this symbolism would reflect Jesus as the new Joshua crossing into the land in a new stage of salvation history.⁷ Byron’s solution is motivated by dissatisfaction with other theories:

1. The ‘Two Bethany’ theory, which he is dissatisfied with owing to the lack of evidence for the existence of a suitable ‘second Bethany’, even though the theory has ‘virtually total support from today’s scholars’;⁸
2. Pierson Parker’s theory, based on Classical Greek usage, in which he argues that John 1.28 has the sense of ‘These things took place in Bethany, which is across from the point of the Jordan where John had been baptizing’,⁹ a reading that Byron notes has been described as ‘grammatically impossible’, and has failed to gain support;¹⁰
3. The minority textual witness to Bethabara;
4. The theory that John made a mistake;
5. Bethany understood as a corruption for another location, with Batanaea being the strongest candidate, a theory that he does not discuss in detail but rejects on the grounds that there is no manuscript evidence for it, and thus that it is a ‘gratuitous suggestion’ that ‘would hardly be acceptable’.¹¹

Byron’s hypothesis is ingenious—the gospel does not indicate what geographical perspective should be adopted—and has the merit of developing the symbolism of the OT in a text, John’s gospel, that is widely recognized as highly symbolic.

4 Origen, *Commentary on John*, 6.206, in Heine, *Origen*, 225.

5 Origen, *Commentary on John*, 6.205, in Heine, *Origen*, 225.

6 B. Byron, ‘Bethany Across the Jordan: Or Simply Across the Jordan’, *Australian Biblical Review* 46 (1998) 36–54, here 42.

7 Cf. Byron, ‘Bethany’, 46–7, and Origen, *Commentary on John*, 6.204–37, in Heine, *Origen*, 224–33.

8 See Byron, ‘Bethany’, 38–40 for discussion and bibliography.

9 P. Parker, ‘Bethany beyond Jordan’, *JBL* 74.4 (1955) 257–61, here 258.

10 See Byron, ‘Bethany’, 39–40 for discussion and bibliography.

11 Byron, ‘Bethany’, 37, 39.

But a difficulty with Byron’s hypothesis is that it does not account for John 3.26 and 10.40–42, which refer back to 1.28.

However, it is, perhaps, surprising that there have been few attempts to consider or to develop a symbolic account of the phrase *πέραν τοῦ Ἰορδάνου* in John’s gospel, and of the location referred to in 1.28. One exception is the commentary of Raymond Brown, where in a reading not unlike Origen’s, he suggests,

If Bethabara, “the place of crossing over”, is the correct reading...then John may be calling attention to the Joshua–Jesus parallelism. Just as Joshua led the people *across* the Jordan into the promised land, so Jesus is to *cross over* into the promised land at the head of the new people... Perhaps, however, this very plausible symbolism makes the poorly attested name Bethabara all the more suspect.¹²

While Brown raises the right sorts of issues, I think that there is a better solution available.

1. The Location of John 1.28 as Batanaea, or Bashan

While Byron, and previously Brown, helpfully raise the possible significance of the symbolism in 1.28, I think that there is a different solution available that is deeply and perhaps disturbingly symbolic, based partly on the suggestion that the location in John 1.28 is in fact Batanaea, outside the land of Israel, as argued in detail by William Brownlee and by Rainer Riesner, a suggestion followed by A. Köstenberger, and D. A. Carson.¹³ C. K. Barrett rejects Brownlee’s case for Batanaea as unconvincing, but suggests that ‘11.1, 18 seem carefully worded so as to distinguish Bethany near Jerusalem from the other Bethany’.¹⁴ Indeed, the majority of recent commentators, both in English and German scholarship, appear to favour (sometimes cautiously) the view that the Bethany referred to in 1.28 is an unknown location that is to be differentiated from the Bethany of 11.1 without further discussion,¹⁵ although Siegfried Schulz suggests

12 R. E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John I–XII* (AB 29; New York: Doubleday, 1966) 44.

13 W. H. Brownlee, ‘Whence the Gospel according to John?’, *John and Qumran* (ed. J. H. Charlesworth; London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1972) 166–94; R. Riesner, ‘Bethany beyond the Jordan (John 1:28): Topography, Theology and History in the Fourth Gospel’, *Tyndale Bulletin* 38 (1987) 29–63; A. Köstenberger, *John* (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004) 65–6; D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John* (PNTC; Leicester: Apollos, 1991) 146–7.

14 C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text* (London: SPCK, 2nd ed. 1978) 175.

15 E.g. J. Becker, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes, Kapitel 1–10* (Ökumenischer Taschenbuchkommentar zum Neuen Testament 4/1; Würzburg: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1979) 92; Brown, *John*, 44–5; A. T. Lincoln, *The Gospel according to Saint John*

that 'An diesen Versen wird deutlich, wie problematisch das Verhältnis von Verkündigung und Historie bei Johannes ist'.¹⁶ But while Brownlee considers the symbolic nature of Batanaea in detail, he does not consider the significance of being 'across the Jordan' in John, although he does consider the significance of crossing the Jordan in 1QS in another essay.¹⁷

Crucially, however, Brownlee observes that 'Batanaea is a Hellenized form of the Aramaic equivalent of the Hebrew name Bashan'.¹⁸ Indeed, Marcus Jastrow lists בְּתַנְיָא, בּוֹתְנַן, בּוֹתְנִין, בּוֹתְנִים and בּוֹתְנִי as various Aramaic equivalents of בְּשָׁן,¹⁹ and A. Schalit lists Βαταναία and Βατανέα as equivalents to LXX Βασσαν and OT בְּשָׁן in Josephus.²⁰ Furthermore, Brownlee notes that the region of Batanaea is known in Arabic as *el-Betheneyeh*, which 'comes the nearest to the Evangelist's *Bethania*',²¹ and suggests that while the original names of Bethany and Batanaea 'were probably etymologically different...they were still close enough to each other in orthography for the Evangelist to assimilate them one to the other in his spelling'.²²

Riesner develops his argument that Bethany (John 1.28) is Batanaea by considering topography and timing in the narrative, and concludes that the apparent equation of the two places named Bethany in John (1.28 and 11.1) has 'deep theological significance' since what 'began in the region specially marked out by the Jewish messianic hope (Batanaea) through the proclamation of John the Baptist...finds its completion through the cross and resurrection of Jesus in

(Black's New Testament Commentaries; London: Continuum, 2005) 112–13; R. Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St. John* (3 vols.; London: Burns and Oates, ET 1968) 1.295–6; H. Thyen, *Das Johannesevangelium* (HNT 6; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005) 117–18, 505; U. Wilckens, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes* (NTD 4; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998) 39.

16 S. Schulz, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes* (NTD; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978) 38.

17 W. H. Brownlee, 'The Ceremony of Crossing the Jordan in the Annual Covenanting at Qumran', *Von Kanaan bis Kerala: Festschrift für Prof. Mag. Dr. J. P. M. van der Ploeg O. P. zur Vollendung des siebenzigsten Lebensjahres am 4. Juli 1979* (ed. W. C. Delsman et al.; Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker, 1982) 295–302.

18 Brownlee, 'John', 169.

19 M. Jastrow, 'בְּתַנְיָא, בּוֹתְנַן, בּוֹתְנִין, בּוֹתְנִים, בּוֹתְנִי', *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Bavli, the Talmud Yerushlami and the Midrashic Literature* (London: Shapiro, Vallentine & Co., 1926) 151. (See for example the use of בְּתַנְיָא for בְּשָׁן in the Jerusalem Targum of Deut 32.14.)

20 A. Schalit, 'βαταναία', *A Complete Concordance to Flavius Josephus* (Suppl. 1; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1968) 25. (See for example Josephus *Ant.* 9.159 [Βαταναία] and 12.136 [Βατανέα].)

21 Brownlee, 'John', 169.

22 Brownlee, 'John', 169. Riesner ('Bethany', 53–4) develops a similar argument, and adds, 'the variation between τ and θ is no difficulty', being attested elsewhere (53).

Jerusalem, which events are already typified in the raising of Lazarus (at Bethany)'.²³

However, Brownlee pursues a different sort of argument, considering the symbolic significance of Batanaea as Bashan in relation to three OT texts and their resonances with John 1. First, he discusses the significance of the imagery of shepherding in Micah 7.14–15,

Shepherd your people with your staff, the flock that belongs to you, which lives alone in a forest in the midst of a garden land; let them feed in Bashan and Gilead as in the days of old. As in the days when you came out of the land of Egypt, show us marvelous things.²⁴

and seeks to associate this concept with 'shepherd terminology as the disciples "follow" Jesus (1:36, 43)'.²⁵ Secondly, he considers Jer 50.19–20,

I will restore Israel to its pasture, and it shall feed on Carmel and in Bashan, and on the hills of Ephraim and in Gilead its hunger shall be satisfied. In those days and at that time, says the LORD, the iniquity of Israel shall be sought, and there shall be none; and the sins of Judah, and none shall be found; for I will pardon the remnant that I have spared.

linking the idea of the removal of sin here with the work of the 'Lamb of God' in John 1.29. Finally he notes that Ps 68.15–16 (Eng.),

O mighty mountain, mountain of Bashan; O many-peaked mountain, mountain of Bashan! Why do you look with envy, O many-peaked mountain, at the mount that God desired for his abode, where the LORD will reside forever?

is 'suggestive',²⁶ but does not develop this further. He concludes that

23 Riesner, 'Bethany', 63. Thus Brownlee's and Riesner's analyses support the location of John 1.28 as Batanaea = Bashan, but with the original text of John 1.28 reading Βηθανία understood as OT Bashan. Thus no emendation is required. I do not, however, wish to make quite so strong a claim regarding the original reading of John 1.28 given the many variants in spelling, and since the move to assimilate the locations of John 1.28 and 11.1 could easily have occurred at an early stage in the transmission of the text, possibly for the sort of theological reasons that Riesner outlines. The point that I wish to develop is that the location of 1.28 is to be understood as Batanaea = OT Bashan, even if there is no good reason to doubt the original reading as Βηθανία.

24 Unless stated otherwise all translations are from the NRSV.

25 Brownlee, 'John', 171. He also refers to John 1.15 here. I am not sure that the associations that he seeks to make here with John 1 are convincing, but in the wider context of the gospel the idea of Jesus as shepherd is clear (e.g. John 10.14), suggesting a resonance with Micah 7.14–15.

26 Brownlee, 'John', 171–2.

the Evangelist draws upon the semantic development of Bashan > Batanaea > Bethany. The place where Jesus called his first disciples was given a pre-eminent place because the scriptures encouraged the Evangelist to believe that Messianic hopes were centred there; and by assimilating the name of Batanaea to that of the village of Bethany, he linked the north shore of the Sea of Galilee with the redemptive events at Jerusalem.²⁷

However, while pointing us in the right direction, I think that there is more that lies behind the significance of Batanaea (Bashan), and indeed of ‘crossing the Jordan’ in John. I would like to develop their significance in several stages. First, I would like to reflect further on the symbolic significance of Bashan in the OT. Secondly, I shall consider the significance of crossing the Jordan in the OT and in the Dead Sea Scrolls. Thirdly, I shall consider the significance of the references to crossing (or being across) the Jordan in John in their narrative contexts before finally tying the various threads together to develop the significance of the symbolism of *πέραν τοῦ Ἰορδάνου* and Bethany = Bashan in John, with the symbolism indeed suggesting that the location of 1.28 is OT Bashan.

2. The Symbolic Significance of Bashan Developed

It might be possible to go further than Brownlee regarding the significance of Bashan, even if there are some difficulties with the three OT texts that he cites, as we shall see. D. J. Simundson notes on Micah 7.14–15 that,

These verses address God as the shepherd...urging God to let the people again feed in Bashan and Gilead. These areas were noted for their excellent pasture land (Num 32:1; Jer 50:19). They had been lost to Israel since the eighth century BCE. This is another expression of the people’s hope for return to the land that had been promised to them from ancient times but had fallen under foreign domination.²⁸

Likewise, D. R. Hillers notes that Bashan and Gilead have symbolic significance, with Bashan understood as ‘traditionally luxuriant’.²⁹

However, the reference to Bashan in the second colon of Jer 50.19 is awkward, being absent in the LXX—a capricious abridgement perhaps.³⁰ But W. L. Holladay

27 Brownlee, ‘John’, 172. Thus the conclusion that Riesner and Brownlee reach is similar—that John assimilates the two locations for symbolic theological reasons.

28 D. J. Simundson, ‘The Book of Micah’, *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996) 7.533–89, here 588.

29 D. R. Hillers, *Micah* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 90.

30 Cf. W. McKane, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Jeremiah*. Vol. 2. XXVI–LII (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1996) 1270. LXX (Rahlfs) reads *καὶ ἀποκαταστήσω τὸν Ἰσραὴλ εἰς τὴν νομὴν αὐτοῦ καὶ νεμήσειται ἐν τῷ Καρμήλω καὶ ἐν ὄρει Εφραὶμ καὶ ἐν τῷ Γαλααδ καὶ πλησθήσειται ἡ ψυχὴ αὐτοῦ* (Jer 27.19 LXX).

argues that its omission from the LXX should be the preferred witness to the original text since the observation that 'the fourth colon of the verse has two words suggests that only two words are original here'.³¹ But questions relating to the 'authenticity' and to the history of the text here are notoriously difficult.³² However, the reference to Bashan may well be absent in the earliest form of the poem, a poem which may or may not have been authentic to Jeremiah the prophet, but added at a sufficiently early stage in the development of the text to have been known to John.³³ *Targum Jeremiah*, although notoriously difficult to date, but having early roots,³⁴ reads מתנן for בשן, which Jastrow takes as an Aramaic equivalent name.³⁵ However, Robert Hayward renders מתנן as 'fatness', understanding the text to be drawing on the metaphoric connotations of Bashan.³⁶ But however מתנן is to be construed, it indicates the existence of a reading associated with Bashan. Jeremiah 50.19 is not extant at Qumran, although Emmanuel Tov notes that in the extant witnesses to Jeremiah at Qumran, some are close to the LXX while others are close to the MT.³⁷

Thus it is difficult, and probably impossible, to determine what version of Jer 50.19 was available to John, or at least whether the sort of significance that Bashan had in the MT here was circulating in the context of the composition of the gospel. But given Micah 7.14–15 and the Targumic reading, it is quite possible that the MT reading of Jer 50.19, if not original, was established by the time the gospel was composed. But even if the reading 'Bashan' was not known to John, the addition of Bashan to the text itself witnesses to the developing significance of the site, and thus the plausibility of John's development of it. I shall assume that the reading with 'Bashan' was known to John.

31 W. L. Holladay, *Jeremiah 2: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah Chapters 26–52* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989) 393.

32 Cf. Holladay, *Jeremiah*, 411. See also G. L. Keown, P. J. Scalise and T. G. Smothers, *Jeremiah 26–52* (WBC 27; Dallas: Word, 1995) 357–64 for a sympathetic critique of Holladay and a survey of other approaches to 'authenticity' and to the development of the text.

33 There is little discussion of the specific textual problem of Bashan in the commentaries (e.g. Keown, *Jeremiah 26–52*, 344–67; W. Rudolph, *Jeremia* [HAT 1/12; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1968] 301–2).

34 Robert Hayward, after discussing the difficulty of dating, argues that the foundations of Targum Jeremiah 'were laid already by the early second century A.D.' (*The Targum of Jeremiah Translated, with a Critical Introduction, Apparatus, and Notes* [The Aramaic Bible 12; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1987] 38).

35 Jastrow, "מִתְנָן, מִתְנָן, מִתְנָן", 864.

36 He understands the reference to Carmel in similar terms, thus reading 'they [Israel] shall be provided for in a fruitful and fat land', since Carmel signifies fruitfulness and Bashan fatness (Hayward, *Targum*, 181).

37 E. Tov, 'Jeremiah', *Qumran Cave 4 X: The Prophets* (ed. E. Ulrich et al.; DJD 15; Oxford: Clarendon, 1997) 145–207, esp. 172, 184.

Bashan appears to develop an eschatological significance within the prophetic literature, being the place where Israel will live in abundance with their hunger satisfied and their sin pardoned (Jer 50.19–20), and the place where God will shepherd his people, accompanied by wonders (נפלאות) as when he led Israel out of Egypt (Micah 7.14–15). These themes all find development in John, even if they also find some qualification—Jesus ‘feeds’ his followers, but primarily with his body (6.53–56), bringing abundant life as the good shepherd (10.10) who takes away sin (1.29), and performs miraculous signs (σημεία), the importance of which finds development or reinterpretation and qualification (e.g. 2.18–24; 6.26).³⁸ Even if the MT reading of Jer 50.19 was not known to John, most of these aspects of the Bashan symbolism were available at the time of the composition of the gospel via Micah 7.14–15, with the possible exception of the forgiveness of sin that is made explicit in Jer 50.19–20.

Turning to Psalm 68, Ps 68.21–4 (Heb.) reads,

Our God is a God of salvation, and to GOD, the Lord, belongs escape from death. But God will shatter the heads of his enemies, the hairy crown of those who walk in their guilty ways. The Lord said, “I will bring them back from Bashan, I will bring them back from the depths of the sea, so that you may bathe your feet in blood, so that the tongues of your dogs may have their share from the foe”.

However, there is a problem with v. 23 (Heb.), which the MT reads,

אמר אדני מבשן אשיב אשיב ממצלות ים

and the LXX reads,

εἶπεν κύριος ἐκ Βασιαν ἐπιστρέψω ἐπιστρέψω ἐν βυθοῖς θαλάσσης

in that there is no object for the verb. Is it Israel that will be brought back or the enemies of YHWH? Moreover, as James Charlesworth has argued recently, it is probable that originally בשן referred to a ‘dragon-snake’ rather than the place Bashan, with the text now being defective.³⁹ But the issue here is again of course how John, and his contemporaries, might have read and used the

38 In addition to these prophetic texts it is possible that there is an intertextual resonance between Amos 4.1 and John 4 with regard to Bashan, although it is difficult to know whether this is intentional.

39 Charlesworth argues that cognates of בשן mean ‘dragon-snake’ in early western Semitic, and that owing to considerations of meter and parallelism the text should read מהר בשן, thus rendering the verse, ‘The Lord spoke: “[From the den of] the dragon-snake I will bring (them) back, I will bring (them) back from the depths of the sea’ (J. H. Charlesworth, ‘Bashan, Symbology, Haplography, and Theology in Psalm 68’, *David and Zion: Biblical Studies in Honor of J. J. M. Roberts* [ed. B. F. Batto and K. L. Roberts; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns,

psalm. Unfortunately there is little to go on from Qumran regarding the interpretation of this verse,⁴⁰ but the *Midrash on the Psalms* indicates that 68.23 was indeed read with Israel as the object of the verb:

The Lord said: "I will bring again from Bashan" (Ps. 68:23)—that is, bring those whom wild beasts devoured; "I will bring My people again from the depths of the sea" (ibid.)—that is, bring those who drowned in the depths for the hallowing of the Name. [Or, reading the end of the verse, I will bring them again from the depths of the sea, and taking the word them to refer to the enemies of Israel, the verse means that] even as the Holy One, blessed be He, requited Og, the king of Bashan, and requited Pharaoh and the Egyptians at the Red Sea, so will the Holy One, blessed be He, requite the mighty men of wicked Edom.⁴¹

Thus Ps 68.23 (Heb.) may well have been read by John as a reference to YHWH bringing *Israel* back from Bashan. In other words, it was possible to read Bashan as being the site for God's eschatological redemptive activity, the place where he will lead his people from, as may be inferred from the reception of Psalm 68, and as developed in John 1.28 and 10.40–42, as we shall see.

In summary, then, there are a number of important eschatological themes associated with Bashan symbolically in Ps 68, Micah 7.14–15 and Jer 50.19, themes that find important resonances with John. Now, to consider John's development of the symbolic significance of Bashan further, it is noteworthy that John emphasizes the location of Bashan as *πέραν τοῦ Ἰορδάνου* 'across the Jordan', being a comment that may be a clue to an extension to the significance for Bashan for John. Indeed, it is this feature of the place, that it is 'across the Jordan', that is emphasized in the two other references to 1.28 in John, namely, 3.26 and 10.40. Does this introduce a new dimension to the symbol for John, particularly as 'crossing the Jordan' was important in the OT? We shall now consider the significance of 'crossing the Jordan'.

3. Crossing the Jordan in the Old Testament

I would like to begin by considering the significance of 'crossing the Jordan' in the book of Joshua, being the paradigmatic instance of crossing the Jordan in the OT. A *Leitwort* in Joshua is the root עבר, used repeatedly (but far from

2004] 351–72, here 360). See M. E. Tate, *Psalms 51–100* (WBC 20; Dallas: Word, 1990) 182 for a defence of the traditional reading of the text as the location Bashan.

40 Charlesworth, 'Bashan', 355.

41 W. G. Braude, *The Midrash on Psalms* (Yale Judaica Series 13; 2 vols.; New Haven: Yale University, 1959) 1.546. Moreover the KJV renders the verse, 'The Lord said, I will bring again from Bashan, I will bring *my people* again from the depths of the sea'.

exclusively) with reference to crossing the Jordan,⁴² leading Daniel Hawk to observe that the 'Jordan valley not only constitutes a boundary but also a defining symbol and a point of reference. Traversing it signifies Israel's entry into the measure of life YHWH gives'.⁴³ Indeed, it is significant that elsewhere in the OT the Jordan is not presented as a barrier to crossing into the land (cf. Gen 32.11; Josh 2.7; 22.19, 24–25; Judg 3.28; 8.4; 10.9; 12.5; 2 Sam 17.22),⁴⁴ which accentuates the symbolic nature of its crossing, especially in Joshua. Indeed, Richard Nelson suggests that the miraculous Jordan crossing in Joshua is symbolic, ideological and confessional in significance (Josh 24.11; Ps 66.6; Micah 6.4–5),⁴⁵ reflecting Israel's entry into the full measure of life with YHWH. This is confirmed by Josh 22, the story of the Transjordanians and their altar, for attention is drawn to the symbolic importance of crossing the Jordan through the use of the verb עבר, or rather its surprising *lack* of use here. For example, Robert Polzin notes that when the Israelite delegation left the Transjordan to report back to the Israelites in Canaan (22.32), although the crossing of the Jordan is indicated, in no case is the verb עבר ever used; 'The reason for this is that "the crossing over" had already taken place'. The only place where עבר is used is where one might expect it in 22.19 in the speech of the Cisjordan delegation, where its use demonstrates that the delegation believes that the two and a half tribes must 'cross' into Israel.⁴⁶ In other words, the use of the crossing language refers to the crossing into or out of life in the community of Israel, understood as crossing into or out of life with YHWH.

Indeed, the significance of עבר in terms of 'crossing' into the covenant with YHWH is illustrated in Deut 29.11 (Heb.) (לעברך בברית יהוה אלהיך) and 30:18, in which crossing the Jordan into the land is juxtaposed with crossing into life.

4. Crossing the Jordan in 1QS

This 'crossing' imagery is developed in the Community Rule, 1QS, which uses עבר to describe 'crossing into' the covenant, which is identified with 'crossing' into the community. 1QS 1.16–17 reads, 'All who enter the order of the community shall cross (עבר) into the covenant in God's presence and do all that he commanded' and Brownlee observes that 1QS contains a 'liturgy' that enacts this crossing, a 'crossing ceremony' that is associated with lustration (1QS

42 The root occurs 81 times in Joshua. It occurs 22 times in the 41 verses of Josh 3–4 that narrate the crossing of the Jordan.

43 L. D. Hawk, *Joshua* (Berit Olam; Collegeville: Liturgical, 2000) 15.

44 Cf. R. D. Nelson, *Joshua* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997) 59, and D. Jobling, "'The Jordan as a Boundary": Transjordan in Israel's Ideological Geography', *The Sense of Biblical Narrative: Structural Analyses in the Hebrew Bible II* (ISOTSS 39; Sheffield: JSOT, 1986) 88–134, here 125–6.

45 Nelson, *Joshua*, 59–60.

46 R. Polzin, *Moses and the Deuteronomist* (New York: Seabury, 1980) 138.

2.25–3.12).⁴⁷ Noting the repeated use of עבר in the liturgical section of the text,⁴⁸ he suggests that

The fact that [Deuteronomy] 29:11 indicates the intention of “crossing into the sworn covenant” and 30:18 speaks of “crossing the Jordan” may have led the people of Qumrân to equate the two uses of the verb ‘*ābar*. Symbolically one was also passing over into the land which God had promised the patriarchs by covenant. This suits the military character of the procession as depicted in the Community Rule, making of the event an annual memorial of the Conquest.⁴⁹

Moreover, he notes that the instructions for the order of the procession in the ceremony (1QS 2.19–25) evoke the instructions for the procession of Israel across the Jordan in Joshua, adding weight to the view that this ‘crossing’ ceremony in the community is, in some sense, a ‘re-enactment’ of the Jordan crossing in a new context that uses Joshua as its inspiration. These observations led Brownlee to conclude that

John’s baptisms in the Jordan may also owe something to Qumrân. He was awaiting there the coming of a messiah, one mightier than he, who would judge as with fire all moral vipers and usher in the Kingdom of God. His insistence that the rite of baptism meant nothing except as people brought forth fruits worthy of repentance agrees precisely with the emphasis of 1QS iii,3–12, which declares that apart from an inner, spiritual cleansing, one remains a moral leper, to be called “unclean, unclean”. Like the Essenes, John was “preparing the way of the Lord in the wilderness”... Crossing of the Jordan was also reminiscent of crossing the Red Sea (Josh. 4:23f.; Pss. 66:6; 114:3, 5). Hence baptism in the Jordan could suggest baptism in the Sea (I Cor. 10:2).⁵⁰

Thus the symbolic significance of the crossing of the Jordan existed in the era in which the gospel was composed. But if crossing the Jordan *into* Canaan symbolizes crossing into life with God, a symbolism reflected in baptism in the Jordan, with life *in* the land symbolizing life with God, how is it that in John (and only John), John the Baptist and Jesus are said to minister *across the Jordan*, that is, on ‘the wrong side’? I shall now consider the three references to πέραν τοῦ Ἰορδάνου in John.

5. Crossing the Jordan in John

In the first episode in which πέραν τοῦ Ἰορδάνου occurs (1.19–28) the reference concludes the account in which John the Baptist is questioned about his baptisms by the priests and Levites sent by the Jews from Jerusalem (1.19),

47 Brownlee, ‘Ceremony’, 297–8 (Brownlee’s translation).

48 Brownlee, ‘Ceremony’, 295.

49 Brownlee, ‘Ceremony’, 300.

50 Brownlee, ‘Ceremony’, 302.

an account in which the tension between ‘the Jews’ and Jesus is introduced, and an account that also serves to prepare for the introduction to Jesus’ public ministry.⁵¹ Here, the reference to Bethany/Batanaea as *πέραν τοῦ Ἰορδάνου* identifies the site of the dialogue between John the Baptist and the priests and Levites, making it explicit that John the Baptist’s ministry is taking place ‘across the Jordan’ with respect to Jerusalem, *outside* the land of Israel where YHWH dwells. People are coming to John *here* for baptism, crossing the Jordan in order to do so.

In the second episode (3.22–36) the phrase occurs in the middle of a dialogue that results from a question posed by some of John the Baptist’s disciples regarding ceremonial washing (*καθαρισμός*, 3.25), being the third of three contrasting responses to Jesus from ‘within the world of Judaism’ in 2.13–3.36, reflecting the responses of ‘the Jews’, Nicodemus and John the Baptist.⁵² Here, Jesus is said to have been with John *πέραν τοῦ Ἰορδάνου* (3.26), establishing Jesus’ ministry ‘across the Jordan’ (i.e. outside the land), even if here he is said to be ministering in the Judean countryside (3.22). As in 1.28, the phrase is used in the context of baptism.

In the third episode (10.40–42) the phrase occurs after a lengthy dispute between ‘the Jews’ and Jesus, and here Jesus is said to go back across the Jordan (i.e. outside the land) to the place where John had been baptizing (10.40), a note that is followed by the comment that many came to Jesus and believed in him *at that place* (10.42).⁵³ The reference here forms an *inclusio* with 1.28, thus marking the conclusion of a major stage of Jesus’ public ministry.⁵⁴ Here Jesus leaves the scene of violence at the temple in Jerusalem to cross the Jordan to the place where he and John had baptized, and he stays there.⁵⁵ The context from which Jesus departed is important, being the Feast of Dedication, in which the re-consecration of the temple was celebrated. But what is portrayed here is, in fact, ironically, a *desecration* of ‘the true temple’ (i.e. Jesus) for John, for 10.30 indicates that there is no need to look to the Jerusalem temple (Zion) any more since Jesus replaces the temple (cf. 1.14), yet Jesus is violently rejected by

51 F. J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John* (SP 4; Collegeville: Liturgical, 1988) 52. This account launches the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry, which, together with the third occurrence of the phrase (10.40), then forms an *inclusio* around the public ministry of Jesus in a postulated ‘original form’ of John (see Brown, *John*, 54). For the reading that I am developing it will be unnecessary to probe the history of the text that we now have.

52 Moloney, *John*, 107–8.

53 R. Bultmann (*The Gospel of John: A Commentary* [Oxford: Blackwell, ET 1971] 392–4) takes 10.40–42 with what follows rather than with what precedes, although this appears to be a minority view.

54 Cf. Brown, *John*, 414; Moloney, *John*, 314. Thyen develops the link between 10.40–42 and the significance of the witness of John the Baptist (*Johannesevangelium*, 505–6).

55 Moloney, *John*, 317.

'the Jews' (10.31–39), even though he has been portrayed as giving life (5.19–30) owing to his oneness with the Father, whose works he reflects here.⁵⁶ As Moloney puts it, 'the Jews' 'celebrate their allegiance to the God of Israel present in the Temple, but they are not prepared to accept that same God, visible in the works of Jesus'. But despite 'the rejection of Jesus in vv.31–39, vv.40–42 keep alive the story of a response to Jesus as many come to believe in him in a different place (v.42)'.⁵⁷

And this, it seems, is the crucial point. The *different place* is 'across the Jordan', *outside* the land, *outside* the place where God was traditionally encountered. While for John 'the Jews' reject Jesus the 'true temple' as the locus of God's presence, so for John to follow Jesus one rejects the Jerusalem temple and the land of Israel and its symbolic connotations, the sites traditionally associated with God's presence. Such rejection is symbolized by crossing the Jordan 'in the wrong direction' to the symbolic location of Bethany = Bashan. Coupled with the commonly perceived antagonism towards 'the Jews' in John,⁵⁸ what this indicates is that for John a rejection of a number of central assumptions of the construction of identity in first-century Jewish society is required to follow Jesus, and thus truly to know and worship God.⁵⁹ That society is, moreover, portrayed as corrupt, violent and blind in the world of the text, perhaps to legitimate such a shift in identity construction, something that accentuates the symbolic nature of the text perhaps.⁶⁰

56 Cf. Moloney, *John*, 315–17.

57 Moloney, *John*, 317.

58 For a number of recent perspectives on the question of John's attitudes to 'the Jews', see the collection of papers in R. Bieringer, D. Pollefeyt and F. Vandecasteele-Vanneuville, eds., *Anti-Judaism and the Fourth Gospel: Papers of the Leuven Colloquium, 2000* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 2001). For a recent, detailed analysis of the portrayal of 'the Jews' in John, and its significance, see R. Hakola, *Identity Matters: John, the Jews and Jewishness* (NovTSup 118; Leiden: Brill, 2005). Hakola argues for an ambivalence in John's portrayal of Jewishness.

59 It is interesting to note, however, that it is symbolism drawn from the OT itself that is used to subvert the traditional significance of the temple and land.

60 Indeed the rejection of 'the Jews' as portrayed in the world of the text in John seems to be associated with violence and evil deeds, rather than with Jewishness *per se*. For example, R. W. L. Moberly suggests, 'the portrayal of the Jews as "of the devil" in John 8 is entirely correlate with their murderous intent toward Jesus, as eventually realized in John 19. To abstract and essentialize this portrayal and to suppose on that basis that John is "anti-Semitic" is to commit a major error. It is "of the devil" to be murderous, not to be Jewish' ('Johannine Christology and Jewish-Christian Dialogue', *Scripture's Doctrine and Theology's Bible* [ed. M. Bockmuehl and A. Torrance; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008] 70–93, here 90). Moreover, the rejection of the temple is also associated with its corruption through 'commercialization' (2.12–25). In other words, in the world of the text Jewish society is portrayed as being pervaded by corruption and violence, and it is *this* that is to be rejected to follow Jesus, however this might or might not reflect the historical circumstances of Jesus' ministry.

The true dwelling place of God is now in Jesus on the other side of the Jordan, to whom people come crossing the Jordan but in the ‘wrong’ direction, a place where Jesus ‘remains’, with the result that many believe.⁶¹ In other words, the symbol of crossing the Jordan into the land of Canaan as symbolizing entry into life in its fullness with God is inverted by John—now, to enter into such life (cf. 10.10) one must cross ‘out of’ Israel and into new life with Jesus outside the land and Jewish society. These are shocking reinterpretations of a cherished and established motif, comparable perhaps with Paul’s reinterpretation of Gen 15.6 in Romans 4.⁶² Crossing the waters of the Jordan, and baptism, remains the symbol for entry into new life, but it is a symbol that has been inverted—one must cross ‘the other way’, to what was taken to be ‘outside’ the land.⁶³

This kind of reading, while perhaps somewhat novel, is, in fact, fairly close to Cyril of Alexandria’s, in which he commented on 10.40,

Leaving Jerusalem, the Savior seeks a refuge in a place with springs of water so that he might signify obscurely, as in a type, how he would leave Judea and go over to the church of the Gentiles, which possesses the fountains of baptism and where many approach him crossing through the Jordan. This is signified by Christ taking up his abode “beyond” the Jordan. Having crossed the Jordan by holy baptism, they are brought to God, for truly Christ went across from the synagogue of the Jews to the Gentiles and then “many came to him and believed” the words that the saints spoke concerning Christ.⁶⁴

Thus the symbolic account that I wish to develop exists, in a latent form, in traditional Christian interpretation of John.

Finally, the references to being ‘across the Jordan’ appear to form an *inclusio* for a significant narrative in John (1.28 and 10.40),⁶⁵ but the references also demonstrate movement and progression—for only John the Baptist is present in 1.28, Jesus and John are both reported as ministering here in 3.26, yet it is Jesus alone ministering in 10.40. So the phrase also functions as a literary motif or, perhaps, structural marker that highlights the progression of Jesus’ ministry;

61 This may suggest that μένω (10.40) ought to be read in the imperfect rather than aorist form, even if it is the only occurrence of μένω in the imperfect in John, since the imperfect would emphasize Jesus’ abiding presence ‘across the Jordan’ outside the land. *Here* is where people must go to find life with God. (Cf. Brown, *John*, 413; L. Morris, *The Gospel according to John* [NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, rev. ed. 1995] 471).

62 Cf. J. D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (London: T&T Clark, 2003) 375–7.

63 Interestingly, Brown perceives land as an important theme in 1.10, which he translates with a parenthetical comment about the land thus emphasizing its importance; ‘To his own [land] he came, yet his own people did not accept him’ (*John*, 414).

64 *Commentary on the Gospel of John* 7.1 in J. C. Elowsky, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture New Testament IVa: John 1–10* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2006) 365–6.

65 Cf. Brown (*John*, 54) who regards 10.40–42 as the original ending of Jesus’ public ministry. If this is correct, then the symbolic significance of 10.40 is strengthened.

John indeed becomes lesser as Jesus becomes greater, as per 3.22–36, and as the locus of God’s action and presence is revealed.

6. The Significance of ἐν Βηθανία πέραν τοῦ Ἰορδάνου

Given the significance of Bashan that we saw earlier in Micah 7.14–15, Jer 50.19 and Ps 68.23 [Heb.], and the significance of ‘crossing the Jordan’ developed above, the location of John 1.28 as Bethany = Batanaea = Bashan makes good sense, with Jesus later ‘remaining’ across the Jordan where people come to him to find life in God (10.40–42). For it is on the luxuriant pastures of Bashan that God will shepherd his people as ‘the good shepherd’ (John 10.1–21), feeding his people—ultimately with Christ himself (6.35–59), forgiving their sin (1.29), bringing life in fullness and abundance (10.10), and it is from Bashan that God will lead his people out (10.3) and back to himself with ‘wonders’ comparable with the Exodus—through Jesus’ death and resurrection (2.18–19).⁶⁶

This symbolic significance is accentuated when John is compared with the synoptics, for there is no indication in the synoptics that Jesus and John the Baptist ministered ‘across the Jordan’. What one does find, however, is a note that Jesus *did* cross the Jordan to minister later on in his life (Matt 19.1; Mark 10.1), where the reference to Jesus crossing the Jordan introduces a debate with the Pharisees concerning divorce. What this suggests is that John’s gospel is keener to portray Jesus (and John the Baptist) as ministering across the Jordan, at a specific location outside the land. This might well be taken as an indication of the symbolic (rather than historical) significance of these references in John in the way developed above.

However, what this report of Jesus ministering across the Jordan in Matthew, Mark and John necessitates is his re-crossing of the Jordan, in the ‘correct’ direction, to go to Jerusalem for the crucifixion. Should this be taken to indicate that the traditional symbolism of the Jordan crossing is in fact adopted in the gospels? Possibly in Matthew and Mark it is. But what then of John? It seems that John is happy to exploit the full potential of the symbolic resources at his disposal, perhaps using the plenitude of the same symbol in different ways. While John’s gospel is highly symbolic and probably not a ‘historical’ witness as such, nonetheless it is still broadly constrained by actual events of Jesus’ life, and in particular his journey to Jerusalem leading to his crucifixion, resurrection and appearances to his disciples, events that were interpreted by early Christians as being the fulfilment of God’s promises to Israel, and of her hope of a saviour. But for John it seems that this desire to understand Jesus as the *fulfiller* of Israel’s history and hopes (e.g. 1.23; 6.1–59) stands in some tension with his desire to portray

⁶⁶ If John regards God as dwelling here in Bashan then an ironic inversion of Ps 68.16–17 (Heb.) is suggested comparable with the ironic inversion of the symbolism of crossing the Jordan.

certain central aspects of first-century 'Jewish' identity—here, the temple and the land—as needing to be abandoned to find life with God, legitimated via the portrayal of a systemically corrupt and violent society that rejects Jesus, at least in the world of the text. Thus perhaps, as Hakola suggests, the notion of 'Jewishness' is for John rather more ambivalent than is often suggested.⁶⁷

7. Conclusion

The phrase *πέραν τοῦ Ἰορδάνου* has a symbolic significance in John that inverts the traditional symbolism of crossing the Jordan; one must cross the Jordan in the 'wrong' direction to find life with God, indicating the rejection of cherished Jewish assumptions regarding temple and land. Life with God is now found in Jesus, the 'place' where God dwells, the true temple of God, in Bethany = Batanaea = Bashan. This location makes good sense, with its symbolic significance in John reflecting an exploration of Jer 50.19, Micah 7.14–15 and Ps 68.23 [Heb.]. While Jesus will cross the Jordan in the 'correct' direction on his way to Jerusalem, something that might reflect the traditional use of the symbol in the synoptics, in John this appears to suggest that the author relishes the possibility of juxtaposing various symbols, and even different aspects of the same symbol, to fully exploit their potential, while being broadly constrained by the actual life of Jesus as the one rejected, crucified and raised from the dead as the light and saviour of the world.

⁶⁷ Hakola, *John*. Hakola does not consider the themes developed here, however.