

Jesus's Secret Journey in John 7: A Symbol of the Ascension

Hugo Méndez

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; hmendez@email.unc.edu

■ Abstract

In John 7:8–9, Jesus tells his brothers he will not “go up” to Jerusalem, but in the very next scene, he makes the ascent in secret. This essay interprets Jesus’s unusual, and seemingly deceptive, behavior in the episode as a symbolic action akin to others structuring the first half of the Gospel. The episode immediately precedes a dialogue in which Jesus predicts his imminent departure from the world. Jesus insists that he will soon “go” to God so that unbelievers “will seek” him “but . . . not find” him (7:33–34; cf. 20:17). Foreshadowing this future, Jesus “goes up” to Judea but in such a way that leaves unbelievers unaware of his whereabouts, leaving them to ask, “Where is he?” (7:10–11). The article highlights half-truth as an important speech device in the episode and dialogue that follows. It also concludes that the episode is key to interpreting other scenes sharing a motif of misdirection, delay, and secret reversal.

■ Keywords

Gospel, literary criticism, symbolism, narrative, ethics, lie, deception, departure

■ Introduction

In John 7, Jesus acts in a secretive—and, it would appear, deceptive—manner. As the episode begins, Jesus’s brothers press him to go to a well-attended public festival in Jerusalem and make an open show of his miracles before the crowds:¹

¹ Many commentators speculate that the specific feast—Tabernacles/Sukkot—carries symbolic and thematic freight (see, e.g., Mary L. Coloe, *God Dwells with Us: Temple Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel* [Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001] 115–43).



Now the Jews' feast of Tabernacles was at hand. So his brothers said to him, "Depart from here and go to Judea, that your disciples may see the works you are doing. For no one works in secret who seeks to be known openly. If you do these things, show yourself to the world." For even his brothers did not believe in him. (7:2–5)²

In the verses that follow, Jesus rebuffs their request, insisting he "is not going up" to the celebration:

Jesus said to them, "My time has not yet come, but your time is always here. The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify of it that its works are evil. Go to the feast yourselves; I am not³ going up to this feast, for my time has not yet fully come." So saying, he remained in Galilee. (7:6–9).

After a short delay, however, Jesus does precisely what he claimed he would not do. "But after his brothers had gone up to the feast," the narrator continues, "then he also went up, not publicly but in secret" (7:10).

For centuries, interpreters have indexed Jesus's unusual behavior in the scene as an ethical problem, and with good reason.⁴ At least at first glance, it would appear that "Jesus has lied to his brothers."⁵ The problem is magnified when one

² Translations are my own, conforming as far as possible to the RSV.

³ The NA28 reading, "I am not going up" (ἐγὼ οὐκ ἀναβαίνω), is supported on the principle of *lectio difficilior potior* and by its presence in a diverse set of witnesses (ⲛ D K 1241 sy^{s,c} lat bo arm eth). Other early witnesses show the reading, "I am not yet going up" (ἐγὼ οὐπω ἀναβαίνω; so P⁶⁶ P⁷⁵ B L T W X Γ Δ Θ Ψ)—an early scribal emendation designed "to alleviate the inconsistency between ver. 8 and ver. 10" (Bruce Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* [2nd ed.; London; New York: United Bible Societies, 1994] 185).

⁴ The 3rd-cent. writer Porphyry accused Jesus of "inconstancia ac mutatio" on the basis of 7:8 (attested in Jerome, *Dialogus Contra Pelagianos* 2.17), and 3rd-cent. Christian discomfort with the text is also evident in the presence of the variant reading, "not yet" (οὐπω) in P⁶⁶ and P⁷⁵. (See, however, arguments for a 4th-cent. dating for these texts in Brent Nongbri, "The Limits of Palaeographic Dating of Literary Papyri: Some Observations on the Date and Provenance of P. Bodmer II [P66]," *Museum Helveticum* 71 [2014] 1–35; and idem, "Reconsidering the Place of Papyrus Bodmer XIV–XV (P75) in the Textual Criticism of the New Testament," *JBL* 135 [2016] 405–37).

⁵ So Adele Reinhartz, who considers Jesus's words a blatant lie ("The Lyin' King? Deception and Christology in the Gospel of John," in *Johannine Ethics: The Moral World of the Gospel and Epistles of John* [ed. Sherri Brown and Christopher W. Skinner; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017] 156). Other solutions to this ethical problem exist. Klaus Wengst, shying away from characterizing Jesus's response as "lying," insists that the episode reflects Jewish notions of the permissibility of certain otherwise forbidden acts under duress, so that the scene depicts Jesus taking "legitimate camouflage" (Klaus Wengst, *Das Johannesevangelium* [2 vols.; ThKNT 4/1; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2004] 1:285–86). Other interpreters insist that Jesus's words are not false, since he does not go to the city in the open manner presumed and understood by his brothers, but secretly (Rudolf Bultmann, *Das Evangelium des Johannes* [KEK 2; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1941] 221; Udo Schnelle, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes* [4th ed.; ThKNT 4; Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2009] 158–59; Johannes Beutler, *A Commentary on the Gospel of John* [trans. Michael Tait; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017] 211; Harold W. Attridge, "Thematic Development and Source Elaboration in John 7:1–36," in *Essays on John and Hebrews* [WUNT 264; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010] 105–14, at 107–8, esp. n. 7). Another segment of commentators claim that Jesus's words are not false when understood on a different plane of meaning (e.g., Edwyn Clement Hoskyns, *The*

recognizes that the episode immediately precedes a dialogue in which Jesus insists that he tells “the truth” (8:45) and that he has “no falsehood” in him (7:18). In the same dialogue, Jesus condemns his hearers for having come from “the father of lies” (8:44).

The ethical problem is real, and it deserves a solution. In this article, I will propose that Jesus behavior is ethical from the perspective of the text’s author. Jesus’s statement to his brothers is not a lie, but a half-truth.⁶ Strictly speaking, Jesus does not tell his brothers anything false. But Jesus withholds parts of the truth—that is, critical information—from his brothers, leaving them (and the reader) with a false impression of his intentions.⁷

My focus in this paper, however, is not so much the *what* of Jesus’s behavior as the *why*. *Why* does Jesus withhold his plans to go to Jerusalem from his brothers? Why does he tarry in Galilee while they leave? And why, when he ultimately *changes course*, does Jesus make the ascent to Jerusalem “in secret?” In my view, the fixation on the ethical dimensions of this passage has distracted scholars from probing the more important issues at stake in the episode—namely, why the episode’s embarrassing features exist at all, and what function they play in the broader narrative.

Fourth Gospel [2nd ed.; London: Faber & Faber, 1956] 312–13; Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John I–XII: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [AB 29; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966] 308), including Tyler Smith, who sees deception in this ambiguity (Tyler Smith, “Deception in the Speech Profile of the Johannine Jesus [John 7.1–10],” *JSNT* 40 [2017] 169–91). Still others interpret Jesus’s response to his brothers as a rebuff that asserts or secures his independence of action, without necessarily excluding a subsequent change of intention or action (e.g., C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text* [2nd ed.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978] 311; Josef Blank, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes* [3 vols.; Geistliche Schriftlesung; Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1981] 1b:83–84; D. Moody Smith, *John* [ANTC; Nashville: Abingdon, 1984] 7; Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of John’s Gospel: Issues and Commentary* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002] 132; Michael Theobald, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes* [2 vols.; RNT; Regensburg: Pustet, 2009] 511–12). Last, a few writers attempt to eliminate this “unsolvable problem” by insisting that the reading “not yet” is preferable—if not in the original Greek text of John (Chris C. Caragounis, “Jesus, His Brothers and the Journey to the Feast [John 7:8–10],” *SEÅ* 63 (1988) 177–87, at 181), then in a supposed Aramaic original (Charles Cutler Torrey, *Our Translated Gospels: Some of the Evidence* [London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1936] 135, 137–38) or as the implicit sense of “οὐκ” (Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to John* [3 vols.; New York: Crossroad, 1982] 2:141).

⁶ In the nomenclature adopted here, “half-truths” are not statements containing both truth and falsehood, but strictly “true statements . . . that selectively emphasize facts that tend to support a particular interpretation or assessment of an issue and selectively ignore or minimize other relevant facts that tend to support contrary assessments” (Thomas L. Carson, *Lying and Deception* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010] 57–58). Half-truths, though deceptive, are not actually lies: “lying differs from deception in two important respects. First, in order to lie, one must make a false statement. Deception does not require that one make a false statement or make any statement at all. True statements can be deceptive and some forms of deception do not involve making statements” (*ibid.*, 55).

⁷ “To withhold information is to fail to offer information that would help someone acquire true beliefs and/or correct false beliefs” (Carson, *Lying and Deception*, 56).

In this article, I will argue that Jesus's bizarre behavior is, at its core, symbolic. As Craig Koester observes, "the Johannine account of Jesus's ministry is structured around a series of 'symbolic actions' that stage, anticipate, and signify crucial themes in the discourses that follow them."⁸ "Although the [miraculous] signs have a privileged place," Koester writes, "several nonmiraculous actions also contribute" to the same pattern.⁹ Consider, for example, the three chapters preceding this episode. In chapter 4, Jesus's request for a drink at a well precipitates a discussion in which Jesus promises to give the Spirit as a "spring of water welling up to eternal life" (4:14). In the next segment of the text (4:43–5:47), a pair of healings—one in which Jesus ensures that an official's son "will live" (4:50) and a second in which he tells a paralyzed man to "rise" (5:8)—introduces a discourse in which Jesus proclaims his power to "raise" the dead and make them "live" (5:21, 25). And in chapter 6, the account of Jesus multiplying loaves of bread for over 5,000 individuals prompts a dialogue in which Jesus reveals himself to be "the bread" that "gives life to the world" (6:33).

My contention here is that Jesus's secret ascent to Jerusalem should be understood in a similar light—that is, as a symbolic action that anticipates the dialogues that follow it (7:11–8:59).¹⁰ The episode is not a mere plot transition—connecting tissue in the narrative—as it is so often read.¹¹ Rather, it is a subtle and complex representation of Jesus's departure from the world and invisible, spiritual coming to his own through his ascension.¹²

⁸ Craig R. Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995) 74. Other literary critics of John have developed similar categories, encompassing some of the same episodes Koester calls "symbolic actions." Dorothy Lee, for one, applies the term "symbolic narratives" to a narrower set of six episodes incorporating additional elements, including misunderstandings, confessions of faith, and/or statements of rejection (3:1–36; 4:1–42; 5:1–47; 6:1–71; 9:1–41; 11:1–12:11) (Dorothy Lee, *The Symbolic Narratives of the Fourth Gospel: The Interplay of Form and Meaning* [JSNTSup 95; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1994]). John Painter, in turn, applies the term "narrative symbol" to Jn 9:1–41 (John Painter, "John 9 and the Interpretation of the Gospel," *JSNT* 28 [1986] 31–61, at 42). One should not insist too strongly on a clear distinction between episode and discourse. On the contrary, many symbolic actions unfold through a succession of scenes or multistage dialogue (e.g., 4:1–42; 6:1–41; 9:1–41; 11:1–59).

⁹ Koester, *Symbolism*, 74.

¹⁰ John 7:11–8:59 has a notoriously fragmented and complex structure, even setting to one side the insertion of the *Pericope Adulterae* (7:53–8:11). Nevertheless, a compelling case for the coherence of this passage within a larger cycle of Sukkot stories (Jn 7:1–10:40) appears in Ludger Schenke, "Joh 7–10: Eine dramatische Szene," *ZNW* 80 (1989) 172–92.

¹¹ As Harold Attridge notes, "most commentators prefer to treat 7:1–13 as simply introductory material setting the external stage for the dialogues to follow" (Attridge, "Thematic Development," 107). Andrew Lincoln, for one, begins engaging the episode as "transitional material linking the past action both in Jerusalem and Galilee with the imminent future action back in Jerusalem" (Andrew Lincoln, *The Gospel according to Saint John* [BNTC; London: Continuum, 2005] 243).

¹² More precisely, "in Johannine thought . . . the passion, death, resurrection, and ascension constitute the one, indissoluble salvific action of return to the Father" (Brown, *John*, 399), though the departure does not appear to be complete until the ascension (20:17). Martinus de Boer speculates that the departure came to encompass all these final events of Jesus's life through a secondary "transfer of resurrection/ascension language to Jesus' death by crucifixion" (Martinus de Boer,

■ The Departure Theme

To understand the rich and complex symbolism of this episode, one must first understand the basic contours of the Gospel's departure theme. That theme incorporates two basic propositions—namely, (a) that Jesus will leave the world to return to the Father, and (b) that through this departure, Jesus will be hidden from the world. I will outline each of these points in turn.

A. Return to the Father

From the beginning, the Fourth Gospel presents Jesus as one who has “come down” “from God” to enter into the world (3:19; 6:14, 33; 12:46; 18:37). The Gospel's departure theme represents the next stage and reverse of this movement. After Jesus completes his mission on earth (19:30), he leaves the world and returns to God: “I came from the Father and have come into the world; again, I am leaving [ἀφίημι] the world and going to the Father” (16:28).¹³ The idea that Jesus will at last take leave of this world and return to the Father is repeated in other texts of the Gospel as well, through other, related verbs (μεταβαίνω, ὑπάγω, πορεύομαι):

Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart [μεταβῆ] out of this world to the Father. . . . he had come from God and was going [ὑπάγει] to God. (13:1, 3)

I am going [ὑπάγω] to the one who sent me. (7:33; 16:5)

I am going [πορεύομαι] to the Father. (14:12, 28)

Another text, utilizing a fifth verb (ἀναβαίνω), clarifies the timing of this event. After rising from the dead, Jesus encounters Mary Magdalene. At that point in the narrative, he explains to Mary: “I am going up [ἀναβαίνω] to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God” (20:17). Evidently, the departure Jesus anticipates throughout the text is not fully realized until the time of his ascension into heaven.

B. Hiddenness from the World

The Gospel's departure theme also includes a second major thesis—namely, that after his departure, Jesus will no longer be accessible to the world. The Gospel consistently claims that human beings cannot see or access the Father:

No one has ever seen God. (1:18)

Not that anyone has seen the Father except him who is from God. (6:46)

Accordingly, by departing to the Father, Jesus moves beyond human sight: “I am going [ὑπάγω] to the Father, and you will see me no longer” (16:10). Jesus also moves beyond human access. The world is also unable to come to him, even though

“Jesus' Departure to the Father in John: Death or Resurrection?” in *Theology and Christology in the Fourth Gospel* [ed. Gilbert Van Belle, Jan D. van der Watt, and Petrus J. Mauritz; Leuven: Peeters, 2005] 1–20, at 19.

¹³ The disciples, in turn, (correctly) greet this statement as an example of Jesus finally “speaking plainly and not in any figure” (16:29).

it will seek him: “I go [ὑπάγω], and you will seek me. . . where I go [ὑπάγω], you cannot come” (8:21).

■ Allusions to the Departure

Jesus’s departure and subsequent absence from the world is a central theme in the Fourth Gospel. It is also, I would argue, a critical background for 7:1–11. Specifically, three elements of the episode seem to evoke the departure theme.

The first of these elements is linguistic. The dialogue between Jesus and his brothers is saturated with verbs elsewhere used for Jesus’s departure from the world—a point noted by ancient and modern interpreters.¹⁴ At the beginning of the scene, Jesus’s brothers urge him to “depart [μετάβηθι] . . . and go [ὑπάγε]” to Judea (7:3)—verbs juxtaposed in a later reference to the departure (13:1–3). In turn, Jesus’s reply to his brothers—the line of central concern to us—introduces yet a third evocative verb: “Go up [ἀνάβητε] yourselves to the festival; I am not going up [ἀναβαίνω]” to the feast (7:8). This verb reappears in the narration that follows as well: “after [Jesus’s] brothers had gone up [ἀνέβησαν] to the festival, then he also went up [ἀνέβη]” (7:10).

A second feature of this passage makes a link to the departure even more likely. Specifically, the exchange between Jesus and his brothers occurs immediately before the very discourse in which Jesus first introduces the idea of his departure in the Gospel (7:16–8:59). That discourse, in fact, takes up the theme of Jesus’s impending departure several times, singling it out as a focus and central concern of the exchange:

I will be with you a little longer, and then I go [ὑπάγω] to him who sent me; you will seek me and you will not find me, and where I am, you cannot come. (7:33–34)

Jesus answered, “. . . I know where I have come from and where I am going [ὑπάγω], but you do not know where I have come from or where I am going [ὑπάγω].” (8:14)

Again, he said to them, “I go [ὑπάγω], and you will seek me and die in your sin; where I go [ὑπάγω], you cannot come.” (8:21)

It is not a coincidence that a story about Jesus “departing” or “going” leads directly into a discourse exploring Jesus’s departure to the Father.

Thirdly, the later stages of the opening narrative, in which Jesus makes his unexpected journey to Jerusalem, also evoke the departure motif in their emphasis on Jesus’s “hiddenness” and “elusiveness.”¹⁵ According to the narrator, when Jesus

¹⁴ Among ancient interpreters recognizing or exploiting these similarities, see Ephrem, *Commentary on the Diatessaron* 14.28; Epiphanius, *Pan.* 51.25.4–6. Among modern interpreters, see Hoskyns, *Fourth Gospel*, 312–13; Brown, *John*, 308; Smith, “Deception,” 177–86; Thyen, *Johannesevangelium*, 387–88.

¹⁵ On the motif of “elusiveness” in John, see M. W. G. Stibbe, “The Elusive Christ: A New Reading of the Fourth Gospel,” *JSNT* 44 (1991) 19–38, at 25. A focused study of “hiddenness” in

goes up to the feast, he does so “not publicly but in secret [οὐ φανερώς ἀλλ’ (ὥς) ἐν κρυπτῷ]” (7:10). As a result, the crowds are not aware of his presence and search for him to no avail: “The Jews were looking for him at the feast, and saying, ‘Where is he?’” (7:11). The inability of the crowds to find Jesus in this scene evokes a concrete aspect of Jesus’s teaching about the departure—namely, the fact that he will remain hidden from the world, and that the world will be unable to find him.¹⁶ Not coincidentally, this discourse is also the very one where Jesus introduces the notion of his future hiddenness, saying, “you will seek me and you will not find me” (7:33–34).

Taken together, these parallels suggest a profound unity between this opening episode and the dialogues that follow it. The episode is not a mere continuation of the plot, but an episode especially suited to its context. It is, in short, a symbolic episode, completely consistent with the literary patterns of the first half of John.

■ The Departure and Concealment

Up to this point, we have seen that various elements of 7:1–11 evoke the departure theme introduced later in the same chapter. In this case, the central peculiarity of the episode—Jesus’s unusual behavior—may also be connected in some way to this departure. That is, something about the way Jesus acts in this scene—concealing his true intentions and whereabouts from unbelievers—may mirror one or more facets of the theme. I believe it does. Upon closer examination, the way Jesus speaks to his unbelieving brothers about his impending departure to Jerusalem parallels the way in which he speaks to the unbelieving crowds about his impending departure from the world. In both cases, Jesus makes statements that offer partial, but not whole, glimpses of the truth—statements that withhold vital information about his future movements and whereabouts.

As Jerome Neyrey writes, the Gospel of John is structured around a pattern of “extensive information control.”¹⁷ From the outset, the Gospel draws a clear division between outsiders and insiders (those “not in the know” versus those “in the know”).¹⁸ Jesus proclaims many teachings publicly to crowds composed largely of outsiders. These crowds often misunderstand Jesus’s teachings. But Jesus reserves certain teachings, or certain clarifications of his teachings, for insiders—that is, for select, privileged individuals.¹⁹ The departure sayings of Jesus are written across

Jn 7 appears in John Painter, *The Quest for the Messiah* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991) 245–60.

¹⁶ Painter, *Quest for the Messiah*, 248.

¹⁷ Jerome H. Neyrey, “Secrecy, Deception, and Revelation: Information Control in the Fourth Gospel,” in idem, *The Gospel of John in Cultural and Rhetorical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009) 253.

¹⁸ Ibid., 271–79.

¹⁹ This pattern continues and expands a motif visible in the Synoptics—e.g., Mk 4:11. On John’s knowledge of the Synoptics, see Harold W. Attridge, “John and Other Gospels,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Johannine Studies* (ed. Judith M. Lieu and Martinus C. de Boer; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018) 44–62.

this very divide between concealment and openness. That is, one can find glaring contrasts in how Jesus elaborates the idea of his departure to outsiders (unbelievers) and insiders (Jesus's disciples). Not coincidentally, these contrasts map onto the insider/outsider dynamics in the episode between Jesus and his brothers.

A. Concealment in the Departure Predictions

As I noted above, chapters 7–8 contain Jesus's first predictions of his impending departure. These initial predictions, however, are public ones. They are directed at crowds that consist primarily of unbelievers (7:30–31; 8:45–46), who hate and seek to kill him (8:19, 37, 40, 59). In short, they are made to consummate outsiders—individuals “not in the know.” Given this audience, it should hardly come as a surprise that these first, public predictions of Jesus's departure do not include certain details about that departure revealed later to insiders. In fact, I would press this point further. As phrased, these statements are half-truths, withholding crucial information. Consider these statements in close detail:

I will be with you a little longer, and then I go to him who sent me; you will seek me and you will not find me, and where I am, you cannot come. (7:33–34)

Again, he said to them, “I go away, and you will seek me and die in your sin; where I go, you cannot come.” (8:21)

In each of these verses, Jesus tells the crowds that he is going away or departing. As phrased, however, these statements seem to exclude the possibility of human beings following Jesus to his final destination. In them, Jesus simply insists—with no further qualification—that his hearers “cannot come” to the place he is going. But what Jesus implies here is not actually true—or at least, not the whole truth. When one continues reading the Gospel, it becomes clear that some humans will indeed be able to come to the place where Jesus goes.

The revelation—that some will follow Jesus to the place where he goes—unfolds later in the text. It appears, critically, in a private conversation between Jesus and the disciples—precisely the context in which we might expect Jesus would disclose privileged information.²⁰ On the evening before his death, Jesus shares a final supper with his disciples (13:4, 18). By nightfall, Judas, previously called a “devil” in the text (6:70–71), breaks company with the other disciples and leaves (13:7–30). From this point on, Jesus speaks only to those disciples disposed to believe in him. In that intimate circle, Jesus takes up the theme of his departure again, significantly nuancing his earlier statements to the crowds.

²⁰ The setting is, in fact, the most privileged one in the Gospel. As Neyrey observes, “Simply in terms of the volume of very secret information shared in a most private setting, the disciples who hear Jesus's Farewell Address (John 13–17) must be classified as consummate insiders with exceptionally high status. Jesus calls them ‘friends’ (or ‘beloved ones’) precisely because ‘all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you’ (15:15)” (Neyrey, “Secrecy,” 275).

As that discourse—the so-called Farewell Discourse (13:31–17:26)—begins, Jesus reveals no more to his disciples about his departure than he had to the crowds. The opening lines of his discourse, in fact, seem to repeat those earlier statements almost word-for-word: “Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will seek me—and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you: ‘Where I am going, you cannot come’” (13:32–33).

Earlier in the text, the crowds express confusion at Jesus’s words, saying: “Where does this man intend to go that we will not find him? . . . What does he mean by saying, ‘You will search for me and you will not find me’ and ‘Where I am, you cannot come’?” (7:35–36). The disciples too are confused, but in this private, privileged setting, they are able to press Jesus for the clarifications he does not give to the crowds. Peter, speaking for the group, asks Jesus directly: “Lord, where are you going?” (13:36a).

Rather than directly answer Peter’s question, Jesus takes up a familiar device in his inventory of cryptic speech: restatement and elaboration.²¹ He replies to Peter’s statement by restating his original thought but with new modifiers—modifiers that dramatically alter the statement’s meaning. Compare the statement in its two forms, the second one given in response to Peter’s request for clarification:

Where I am going, you cannot come. (13:33)

Where I am going, you cannot follow²² me *now*; *but you will follow afterward*. (13:36b; emphasis mine).

The contrast between these two statements is significant. Jesus’s earlier words gave no impression that humans would be able to follow him to his ultimate destination—that is, the presence of the Father. As it turns out, this is not true—or, at least, not the whole truth. In the expanded form of the statement, Jesus reveals that it will, in fact, be possible for humans to follow him—not “now, but . . . afterward.”

B. An Invisible, Spiritual Coming

As the dialogue continues, Jesus clarifies how it is that the disciples “cannot come” with him to the Father “now,” but how they will be able to “afterward” (13:36b). At the outset of chapter 14, Jesus makes a second reference to his departure, revealing that although he is “going” to the Father, he is also “coming” to take them there, so that they too may be able to dwell in the “place” where he is going:

Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwellings [μνοαῖ]. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I am going and preparing a place for you, again I am

²¹ An extensive review of studies on “repetition” and “amplification” in John appears in Gilbert van Belle, “Repetitions and Variations in Johannine Research: A General Historical Survey,” in *Repetitions and Variations in the Fourth Gospel: Style, Text, Interpretation* (ed. Gilbert Van Belle, Michael Labahn, and Petrus J. Maritz; BETL 223; Leuven: Peeters, 2009) 33–85.

²² The shift in verb fits the tendency toward “variation” in Johannine restatement and elaboration (cf. Jn 3:3, 5).

coming and will receive you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also—and you know the way where I am going. (14:1–4)

It is tempting, at first glance, to read Jesus's reference to "dwellings" and the "way" in literal, spatial, and physical terms—that is, to imagine that the Father dwells in a literal, celestial house accessible by a literal path both Jesus and his followers will traverse. But, as the very next lines of dialogue reveal, Jesus is speaking metaphorically in these verses. The "dwellings" and "way" are not literal, spatial, or physical realities.²³

The first clue that Jesus does not intend for his words to be understood literally is his insistence that the disciples "know the way" he will go (14:4). If the "way" were a literal one, then one would hardly expect the disciples to be familiar with it. And indeed, Thomas, thinking in strictly literal terms, makes this very point: "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" (14:5). In response, Jesus points Thomas directly to a metaphorical understanding of his earlier words, saying: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (14:6). At this point, any attempt to interpret Jesus's words literally breaks down. How, after all, can Jesus go to the Father along some "way" and simultaneously be that "way?" The paradoxical nature of Jesus's words reveals that the "way" is not a literal, spatial, or physical reality; it is a metaphorical and spiritual one.

Unsurprisingly, Jesus's disciples remain confused by his cryptic use of metaphor. Philip, speaking from this confusion, presses Jesus with a special request: "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied" (14:7). His request doubles down on the literal interpretation of Jesus's words, insofar as it assumes a physical or

²³ This article agrees with Martinus de Boer that although "Jesus' promise to 'come again' in 14:3 seems at first glance to be a reference to the Parousia (see 21,22), or perhaps to his resurrection appearances (he 'comes' to the disciples in 21, 19, 24) . . . within the context of ch. 14 the promise is probably a reference to his 'coming' to believers (14,18,23,28) as 'the Paraclete, the holy Spirit' (14,25; cf. 14,16–17), whereby he shall take believers 'to himself', and thus into heavenly and familial fellowship with himself and the Father (cf. 14,6b)" (de Boer, "Jesus' Departure," 14; so also Jürgen Becker, "Die Abschiedsreden Jesu im Johannesevangelium," *ZNW* 61 [1970] 215–45; Alois Stimpfle, *Blinde Sehen: Die Eschatologie in traditionsgeschichtlichen Prozeß des Johannesevangeliums* [Berlin: de Gruyter, 1990] 147–216; Hans-Christian Kammler, "Jesus Christus und der Geistparaklet: Eine Studie zur johanneischen Verhältnisbestimmung von Pneumatologie und Christologie," in *Johannesstudien. Untersuchungen zur Theologie des vierten Evangeliums* [ed. Otfried Hofius and Hans-Christian Kammler; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996] 87–190, at 104 n. 68; Coloe, *God Dwells with Us*, 157–78; Gitte Buch-Hansen, "It Is the Spirit That Gives Life" [*John 6:63*]: A Stoic Understanding of Pneuma in John [BZNW 17; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2010] 394).

Other interpreters see an "intended double meaning" in the saying (e.g., Robert Gundry, "'In my Father's House Are Many Movai' (John 14:2)," *ZNW* 58 [1967] 68–72, at 72; Wayne Meeks, "The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism," *JBL* 91 [1972] 44–72, at 65); or see the saying as holding different conceptions in a process of supplantation, reinterpretation, or correction (Brown, *John*, 646 n. 3; Christian Dietzfelbinger, *Der Abschied des Kommenden. Eine Auslegung der johanneischen Abschiedsreden* [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997] 99; Michael Theobald, *Herrenworte im Johannesevangelium* [HBS 34; Freiburg: Herder, 2002] 518).

spatial distance between the Father and the disciples. In response, Jesus insists there is no such distance, making the metaphorical force of his opening words that much clearer:

Have I been with you so long, and yet you do not know me, Philip? The one who has seen me has seen the Father; how can you say, “Show us the Father”? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells [μὲν] in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me. (14:9)

Against Philip’s attempts to read “the Father’s house” in literal terms, Jesus insists that the Father “dwells” in Jesus; he “is in” Jesus.²⁴

It is at this point that Jesus restates and elaborates his initial claim that he is “coming again,” but he does so in more concrete language, revealing the form of his return:

I am coming to you. Yet a little while, and the world will see me no more, but you will see me; because I live, you will live also. On that day, you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. The one who has my commandments and keeps them, that is the one who loves me; and the one who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love that one and manifest myself to that one. (14:18–21)

Once again, Jesus insists that he is coming again, but this time, he clarifies that he is coming in a way the world cannot see.²⁵ He will be “in” believers, manifesting himself in that covert mode.

In the same section, Jesus makes it clear that this manifestation is spiritual—that is, it is realized in or as the Spirit.²⁶ Jesus explains that the Father will send “the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him,” though those who believe “know him, for he dwells with you, and will be in you” (14:17). The tight analogy of Jesus and the Spirit here—both are unseen by the world, both will be “in” the believer—reveals that the Spirit is the mode of Jesus’s presence.²⁷

²⁴ The paradoxical idea that Jesus will go to the Father, but that he is also “in the Father” (10:38), is brought out even in the first departure prediction. There, Jesus describes the place to which he will go as the place “where I am” (7:34).

²⁵ Claims that the chapter merely pairs different, complementary understandings of Jesus’s “coming,” without a thoroughgoing program of clarification or correction, so that 14:18–21 represents a distinct conception of Jesus’s “coming” from 14:2–3 (so, e.g., Jörg Frey, *Die johanneische Eschatologie* [3 vols.; WUNT 96, 100, 117; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997–2000] 3:134–78), fail to appreciate the unity of the chapter’s argumentation and the chapter’s early moves to deconstruct literal interpretations of vv. 2–3 (as in v. 4).

²⁶ The relationship between Jesus and the Paraclete in John is a complex issue, complicated by later christological controversies. A survey of recent scholarship on this question appears in Peter C. Orr, *Exalted above the Heavens: The Risen and Ascended Christ* (New Studies in Biblical Theology 47; Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018) 54–61.

²⁷ A fuller set of parallels appears in Brown, *John*, 1135–36.

Viewed in this light, the ascension of Jesus entails not only a departure but also a coming; it is, from a certain perspective, Jesus's "simultaneous leaving and coming."²⁸ Jesus abandons a physical presence in this world but comes to his own in, through, or as the Spirit. The interrelationship of this leaving and coming is evident in the way Jesus speaks of both in the same breath and tense:²⁹

I am going away [pres. *ὑπάγω*], and I am coming [pres. *ἔρχομαι*] to you. (14:28)

And if I am going [pres. *πορευθῶ*] and preparing a place for you, again I am coming [pres. *ἔρχομαι*] and will receive you to myself. (14:3)

It is also evident in the causal link between the two actions:

It is to your advantage that I am going away, for if I do not go away, the Paraclete will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. (16:7)

As yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified. (7:39)

Through this leaving/coming, fully realized at his ascension, Jesus makes it possible for his own to see and access him again (16:20).

Jesus makes this point still more emphatically in succeeding lines. When another disciple asks, "Lord, how is it that you will manifest yourself to us, and not to the world?" (14:22), Jesus explains, "if a person loves me . . . my Father will love that one, and we will come to him and make our dwelling [*μονήν*] with that one" (14:23).³⁰ The relationship between the noun "dwelling" (*μονή*; 14:2, 23) and the verb "dwell" (*μένω*; 14:10, 17) unlocks the full meaning of Jesus's opening figure—that is, the image of the "Father's house" and its many "dwellings." These "dwellings" are spiritual dwellings—modes of relation as spirit (3:6) and in spirit (4:24). And, *mutatis mutandis*, the "way" to the Father—the new access to the Father that Jesus opens—is Spirit-mediated. By this way, Jesus's disciples are simultaneously above and below, fulfilling two seemingly tensile threads in Jesus's prayer: "my prayer is not that you take them out of the world" and "I want those you have given me to be with me where I am" (17:15, 24).

The claim "you cannot come now, but you will follow afterward," then, clarifies two distinct phases in the departure of Jesus, summed up later in the same discourse through the riddle: "a little while, and you will see me no more; again a little while, and you will see me" (16:13). In the first phase, all humans lose their access to Jesus. This phase corresponds to the time when the disciples "weep and lament"

²⁸ Borrowing the language of Buch-Hansen, *Spirit That Gives Life*, 394.

²⁹ Jesus's passage to the Father and return to his own "is not a chronological succession of separate events but two dimensions of his postpaschal life. As Jesus promised on the eve of this death, "I go away . . . and I come to you . . ." (14:28), both verbs in the present" (Sandra M. Schneiders, "The Resurrection of the Body in the Fourth Gospel: Key to Johannine Spirituality," in eadem, *Jesus Risen in Our Midst: Essays on the Resurrection of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel* [Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2013] 82).

³⁰ Jesus's response demonstrates that the "coming" envisioned does not correspond (primarily or exclusively) to the resurrection appearances but to the future indwelling of the disciples.

(16:20)—the time of Jesus’s death and burial. The second phase, in turn—the time when Jesus is “ascending” (20:17)—marks his “simultaneous leaving and coming,” by which he opens a new form of access to himself and the Father with whom he dwells. At that time, the disciples’ “sorrow will be turned to joy” (16:20).

Together, these data demonstrate the existence of an oft-overlooked technique in the speech of the Johannine Jesus: half-truth. When addressing outsiders, Jesus can intentionally omit crucial details from his statements, leaving his hearers with an incomplete—and, in that sense, misleading—impression. In the case of the departure predictions, Jesus explains that he is going to a place that his hearers “cannot come” but omits the adverbs that would help his hearers understand the complete truth of his whereabouts: the adverbs “now” and “afterward.” The crowds possess one part of the truth: Jesus will no longer be visible or accessible to the world at large. The disciples receive the whole truth: after a brief period, Jesus will move and act in the world in a secret, invisible, spiritual manner, making it possible for his disciples to be with him and the Father. The Gospel writer evidently saw nothing inherently problematic in omitting parts of a given revelation; on the contrary, the Gospel seems to cast this as a natural response to human limitations (3:5; 16:12).

C. Half-Truth in Jesus’s Dialogue with His Brothers

Understanding how half-truth works in Jesus’s departure statements is critical to interpreting Jesus’s exchange with his brothers. The reason is simple: the way Jesus speaks to unbelievers about his departure from this world mirrors how he speaks to his unbelieving brothers about his departure to Jerusalem. In that scene, Jesus also utters a half-truth.

It is important to note that Jesus’s statement “I am not going up to this feast” (7:8) is not at first—or not completely—false.³¹ After all, for a brief time, Jesus does not go to the feast; as the narrator is keen to remind us: “so saying, he remained in Galilee” (7:9).³² For the Gospel writer, this was an important caveat—one that protects his portrayal of Jesus as a truthful person. Jesus can still say, “I tell the truth” (8:45), and he can claim to be above any accusation of “sin” (8:46). But Jesus does not tell the whole truth. His statements obscure a more complex and nuanced reality—namely, that his words will apply for a limited period of time and in a limited sense. Jesus will not go up to Jerusalem now, but he will go up afterward. And although he will attend the feast, he will move about “not publicly but in secret” (7:8).

In short, Jesus’s apparent lie to his brothers is a half-truth analogous to the departure sayings that appear in the discourse that follows the episode. Strikingly, one can unlock the secret meaning of Jesus’s words simply by restating and

³¹ The truth of the statement is held together by the present tense: “I am not going up” (ἐγὼ οὐκ ἀναβαίνω; Morris, *John*, 399; Blomberg, *Historical Reliability*, 132).

³² “The writer wants us to understand that Jesus stood by his promise, at least for a brief time” (J. Ramsey Michaels, *The Gospel of John* [NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010] 428).

elaborating them in the very way Jesus modifies his departure sayings in the private company of his disciples:

- A Where I am going you cannot come. (13:33)
 A' Where I am going you cannot follow me *now*; but you shall afterward [secretly]. (13:36)
 B I am not going up to this feast. (7:8)
 [B'] I am not going up to this feast *now*; but I shall afterward [secretly]

The way Jesus speaks to his unbelieving brothers about his departure to Jerusalem, in short, anticipates the way he will speak to the unbelieving crowds about his departure to the Father. In both instances, Jesus conceals critical information.

■ Rereading the Scene

With these observations in place, it is time to “put the pieces together”—that is, to read the narrative again. In 7:1–11, Jesus acts in a way that anticipates and symbolizes the departure he introduces in the discourse that follows.

A. The Problem of Jesus's Absence

In chapters 1–6, the Gospel fleshes out the idea that Jesus has come from the Father into the world (1:1, 14; 3:13, 31; 6:33, 38). Beginning in chapters 7–8, however, it begins developing a new idea—namely, that at the end of his life, Jesus will again take leave of this world and return to the Father. The interconnected narratives of chapters 7–8 introduce and orbit this theme.

The chapters do more than merely introduce this concept, however; they also take pains to defend and rationalize it. Contemporary readers of John are so familiar with the concept of an absent, departed messiah that they often underestimate how problematic and embarrassing the idea was in a first- and second-century context. Conventional Jewish apocalyptic expectations did not anticipate a messiah who would disappear from the world. The author of John was so acutely aware of this problem posed by Jesus's absence in his own day that he has Jesus's opponents object to the idea in a later scene: “the crowd answered him, ‘We have heard from the law that the Christ remains forever.’ How is it that the Son of Man will be lifted up?” (12:34). In my view, chapters 7–8 play a vital role in addressing this objection. They explain why Jesus's departure is necessary—that is, why he must at last leave this world.

B. An Inversion of the Departure

The author begins grappling with these issues in the opening scene of the chapter. With “the Jews' feast of Tabernacles . . . at hand” (7:2), the brothers of Jesus pressure him to leave for Judea, an ideal location for Jesus to “show” himself “to the world”:

So his brothers said to him: “Depart and go to Judea, that your disciples may see the works you are doing. For no one works in secret if they seek to be known openly. If you do these things, show yourself to the world.” For even his brothers did not believe in him. (7:3–5)

As I have already noted, these lines are rich with linguistic connections to the departure of Jesus, including the verbs “depart” (μεταβαίνω) and “go” (ὑπάγω). But these lines also contain another important link to that theme. The insistent pleas of Jesus’s brothers that he “show” himself “to the world” (φανέρωσον σεαυτὸν τῷ κόσμῳ) evoke even the Gospel’s later claim that, after his departure, Jesus will no longer “show” himself “to the world” (ἐμφανίζεῖν σεαυτὸν καὶ οὐχὶ τῷ κόσμῳ; 14:22; cf. 14:19). They set up a foil or inversion of Jesus’s actual departure. Whereas Jesus is destined to “depart” to a realm where he will be hidden from the world, his brothers envision an alternative, climactic departure—one in which Jesus will “depart” to a place where he can be openly seen by the world. In short, the author casts the notion of a public journey to Jerusalem as an inverted symbol for Jesus’s final departure—a symbol that he will be able to manipulate later.

C. Explaining Jesus’s Hiddenness and Absence

In turn, the opening episode also reveals why Jesus must depart to an inaccessible place—that is, why he must at last abscond from the world. Jesus must leave the world because there is simply no place for him in the world. The world will never tolerate his public, visible presence. It will seek to kill him whenever he is within reach.

In the first verse of the opening scene, the narrator indicates that Jesus “would not go about in Judea, because the Jews sought to kill him” (7:1). Evidently, Jesus must choose concealment because of the persistent reality of threats against his life. The remainder of the scene extends this theme. In the dialogue between Jesus and his brothers, Jesus explains that although his brothers can move freely in the world because “the world cannot hate” them, the world “hates me because I testify of it that its works are evil” (7:7). The scenes following this initial episode, in turn, bear out the truth of Jesus’s words. Whenever and wherever he speaks publicly, Jesus is met with resistance—even violent resistance—by a world opposed to his teachings. When he reveals his presence at the feast (7:14), “the Jews” confront him. Later in the narrative, they make attempts to arrest him (7:30, 32, cf. v. 44), evidently with the intent to put him to death (7:1, 19, 25; 8:37, 40). Finally, at the climax of the scene, the murderous intentions of Jesus’s opponents are laid bare. “The Jews,” agitated by Jesus’s teachings, take up stones to kill him, forcing Jesus back into hiding (8:59).

By representing this pattern, the narrative falsifies the brothers’ naïve notion that Jesus would be well received if he shows himself to the world. It demonstrates that the world’s unbelief and hostility toward Jesus are so unrelenting, so uncompromising, as to make Jesus’s public, visible presence anywhere impossible.

But the text does not make this point merely to explain Jesus's absence from Judea. Rather, it makes this point to explain Jesus's ultimate need to depart the world. Just as the world's hostility forces Jesus out of public view at the end of the scene, it will also cause him to depart from this world at the end of his life, so that "the world will see" him "no more" (14:19; 16:10).³³ The author establishes a link between this present elusiveness and future elusiveness by making a futile attempt to arrest Jesus the occasion for Jesus's first prediction of his impending departure:

The Pharisees heard the crowd thus muttering about him, and the chief priests and Pharisees sent officers to arrest him. Jesus then said, "I shall be with you a little longer, and then I go to him who sent me; you will seek me and you will not find me; where I am you cannot come." The Jews said to one another, "Where does this man intend to go that we shall not find him? . . . What does he mean by saying, 'You will seek me and you will not find me,' and, 'Where I am you cannot come'?" (7:32–36)

D. A Symbol of the Departure

In the dialogue between Jesus and his brothers, the image of Jesus making a public journey to Jerusalem is an inverted symbol of Jesus's impending departure from the world. It follows, then, that Jesus's actual departure in the narrative is no less symbolic. Beginning in verse 8, Jesus follows through the freighted gesture of "going up" to Jerusalem, but in a different form than his brothers envisioned—a form revealing the mode of his future departure and concealment from the world.

Specifically, Jesus makes three important modifications to the journey. First, he conceals his complete intentions from his brothers, leaving them with an incomplete, even faulty, grasp of his plans (7:8). In this way, Jesus foreshadows the extent to which he will conceal his final movements from the world, not least in the similarly ambiguous predictions of his upcoming departure that follow in the chapter (7:33–34; 8:14, 21). Although he tells unbelievers he is "going" to a place they "cannot come," he obscures a more complex truth.

Second, Jesus acts in a manner consistent with his stated intentions—though only for a brief, contained period of time. "So saying," the text reads, "he remained in Galilee" (7:9). Here, Jesus foreshadows the "little while" when his departure begins to unfold, and he gradually removes himself from human sight and access (13:1; 16:16–20; 20:17). In other texts, Jesus characterizes this period as a time of inactivity—the "night" when his "works" come to an end (9:4; cf. 13:30).³⁴

Last, Jesus reverses course, but in a secretive manner: "after his brothers had gone up to the feast, then he also went up, not publicly but in private. The Jews were looking for him at the feast, and saying, 'Where is he?'" (7:9–12). This prefigures the culmination of Jesus's departure—that is, his ascension, through

³³ Jesus's final retreat in 8:59 parallels his retreat in 12:36—another symbol of the departure (Hugo Méndez, "Night and Day in John 9:4–5: A Reassessment," *NTS* 61 [2015] 468–81, at 481).

³⁴ On the concept of "night" in John, see *ibid.*, 468–81.

which Jesus fully leaves the world but also comes to his own. He remains hidden from the world at large but moves invisibly in its midst, secretly making himself accessible to those who believe (16:16; 14:19).

We can outline this set of modifications as a single, three-step sequence or pattern:

- A. *Misdirection*: Jesus conceals his complete intentions from unbelievers.
- B. *Delay*: Jesus temporarily acts as his words would superficially suggest.
- C. *Secret Reversal*: Jesus does what he seemed to rule out, but he does so secretly.

This pattern lies at the core of the opening scene between Jesus and his brothers. It also structures the Gospel's departure theme.

■ Parallel Scenes

This pattern of misdirection, delay, and secret reversal binds 7:1–11 to the text's departure theme. But the pattern is hardly limited to this one passage. On the contrary, interpreters have long recognized variant forms of the same motif in several other episodes in the text.³⁵ The fact that this motif appears in other places seals the case that the unusual features of 7:1–11 fit an intentional, literary design.

A. *Wedding at Cana*

A particularly clear example of this motif appears in the Gospel's first "sign": the story of the wedding at Cana (2:1–11).³⁶ At the outset of the episode, the mother of Jesus approaches her son with the implicit request to provide the guests with wine—effectively asking him to perform a public act. At first, Jesus hides his intention to intervene in language reminiscent of 7:8:

- O woman, what have you to do with me? My hour has not yet come. (2:4)
- Go to the feast yourselves; I am not going up to this feast, for my time has not yet fully come. (7:8)³⁷

³⁵ Barnabas Lindars recognizes the pattern of delay and reversal as "a Johannine motif," citing the wedding at Cana (2:3–9) and the raising of Lazarus (11:1–44) as other instances of the motif (Barnabas Lindars, *The Gospel of John* [NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1972] 281). Other commentators add the healing of the official's son to this list (Lincoln, *John*, 243–45; Marianne Meye Thompson, *John: A Commentary* [NLT; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2015] 61). Joel Nolette and Steven A. Hunt underscore that the pattern also seems to involve secrecy (Joel Nolette and Steven A. Hunt, "The Brothers of Jesus: All in the Family?" in *Character Studies in the Fourth Gospel: Narrative Approaches to Seventy Figures in John* [ed. Steven A. Hunt, D. Francois Tolmie, and Ruben Zimmerman; WUNT 314; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013] 238–44, at 242 n. 19).

³⁶ Parallels between this episode and the dialogue between Jesus and his brothers are noted in many sources, including Cornelis Bennema, *Encountering Jesus* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2009) 70. J. Ramsey Michaels stresses the differences between the scenes in an ultimately unconvincing attempt to downplay their similarities (Michaels, *John*, 420–21, 427).

³⁷ Attridge is probably correct that the difference between "hour" and "time" in these two verses "is not . . . particularly significant" (Attridge, "Thematic Development," 107; also Schnackenburg, *John*, 2:142). In later chapters, the author glosses Jesus's "hour" as "his hour . . . to depart out

As the episode continues, Jesus acts—at least momentarily—in a manner consistent with these words. He stands idly by while his mother instructs the enslaved persons to obey his commands (2:5). After this initial delay, however, Jesus does precisely what he seems to rule out. He intervenes but, crucially, in a secret manner; the narrator is keen to inform the reader that “the steward of the feast . . . did not know where [the wine] came from, though the enslaved persons who had drawn the water knew” (2:9). Not coincidentally, these words evoke Jesus’s words to Nicodemus in the next lengthy discourse of the text: “The *pneuma* blows where it will . . . but you do not know where it comes from. So it is with all who are born of *pneuma*.” (3:5). Jesus acts secretly to effect the transformation of water into wine, prefiguring his secret coming in or as Spirit/*pneuma* and his secret transformation of humans into spirit/*pneuma*.

B. Healing of the Official’s Son

Another apparent instance of this motif appears in Jesus’s second Galilean “sign”: the healing of the official’s son (4:46–54).³⁸ An official approaches Jesus, begging him “to come down and heal his son” (4:47). For a moment, as Marianne Meye Thompson notes, Jesus “appears to rebuff or ignore the request” (4:48).³⁹ The official pleads further (4:49). Only after this second request does Jesus intervene in the situation in a “(delayed) response” (4:50).⁴⁰ Still more strikingly, Jesus intervenes in an imperceptible manner: he heals the man’s son remotely. The man does not know his son’s fate until his health is confirmed at a later time (4:50–53). In this way, Jesus foreshadows the way he will later, secretly grant “eternal life” to some.

C. Miraculous Sea Crossing

Something similar can be said for a third miracle in the text: the miraculous sea crossing (6:16–21). After Jesus has fed the 5,000, those present press Jesus toward a visible glory, seeking “by force to make him king” (6:15, cf. 6:26–27). Their response parallels the urgings of Jesus’s brothers that he “show” himself “to the world” (7:4). Once again, Jesus responds with a misdirection. He permits his

of this world to the Father” (13:1). Like the departure, then, this “hour” unfolds through the final movements of Jesus’s life (12:23; 13:1)—that is, not only the passion and death of Jesus (*pace* Ruben Zimmerman, “Eschatology and Time in the Gospel of John,” in *Oxford Handbook of Johannine Studies* [ed. Judith M. Lieu and Martinus C. de Boer; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018] 298–305) but also and ultimately the ascension as well. In 16:32, elements of the “hour” are still in the future. And Jesus characterizes the “hour” as the time when he gives the Spirit and (eternal) “life” (4:23; 5:25; cf. 6:63)—gifts associated with the time after Jesus’s resurrection (21:22). By taking up the language of the “hour” in 2:4 and 7:8, Jesus may hint that the transformation of water into wine and the secret journey to Jerusalem are connected—at least symbolically—to the events and gifts of the Gospel’s climactic “hour.” Along the same lines, the healing of the official’s son also associates its central act—Jesus granting life—with a certain “hour” (4:52).

³⁸ For the parallels between the first two Galilean signs, see the chart in Thompson, *John*, 114.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 113.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

disciples to cross the Sea of Galilee on the only boat available to him, while he remains on some nearby hills (6:15–17). The crowds, seeing “that there had been only one boat there, and that Jesus had not entered the boat with his disciples, but that his disciples had gone away alone,” assume that Jesus will remain behind (6:22). Jesus does in fact remain behind, but only for a brief period of time.⁴¹ When night falls, Jesus does precisely the opposite of what the crowds expect. He miraculously traverses the sea, but secretly, under the cover of night, coming to his own and miraculously bringing them to their destination (6:19–21).⁴² The scene symbolizes Jesus secretly coming to his own to bring them to the Father’s house. The crowds at large are oblivious to these movements, however; the next morning, they are thrown into confusion and begin “seeking Jesus” (6:24–25).

D. Raising of Lazarus

Consider too the episode of the raising of Lazarus, yet another “sign” (11:47). At the beginning of the narrative, Lazarus’s sisters urgently send Jesus word that their brother is ill, effectively urging him to intervene (11:3). Jesus does not immediately act, however. He says, ambiguously—even quasi-deceptively—that “this illness is not unto death” (11:4). He then remains in Galilee for two days (11:6). Only after this period does Jesus unexpectedly depart, but, predictably, in a secretive matter. Jesus arrives in such a way that only Martha knows of his presence near Bethany (11:20). After meeting Jesus privately, Martha then informs her sister Mary of his presence, but discreetly: “she went and called her sister Mary, saying privately [λάθρᾱ], ‘The Teacher is here and is calling for you.’” (11:28). The mourners around the two sisters remain unaware of Jesus’s presence: “When the Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary rise quickly and go out, they followed her, supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there” (11:31).⁴³

E. Images of the Departure

The above episodes appear to follow a flexible but essentially consistent pattern of misdirection, delay, and secret reversal. The fact that we encounter the same basic pattern in the story of Jesus’s departure to Jerusalem confirms that the opening episode of chapter 7 is not mere connecting tissue in the narrative. It is, rather, a symbolic episode, with similar functions and resonances as these “signs” accounts.

⁴¹ Buch-Hansen correctly sees this moment as corresponding to the time when “the disciples are left alone ‘for a short time’ (16:16–19; μικρόν) and therefore are at risk of being caught by the dark (6:17, cf. 12:35)” (Buch-Hansen, *Spirit That Gives Life*, 454–55).

⁴² Buch-Hansen approaches this interpretation, writing, “The sign anticipates how, after his ascent and translation into the pneumatic Father (20:17), Jesus returns through the darkness (6:17, cf. 20:19) as God’s Spirit to the frightened disciples” (*Spirit That Gives Life*, 455).

⁴³ In an important twist, Jesus performs the miracle publicly, if even precisely to set his death in motion (11:38–46; cf. 11:53; 12:10–11); he then retreats into hiding again (11:54). Hiddenness and secrecy is not a permanent pattern until Jesus’s ascension.

In turn, the episode of Jesus's departure to Jerusalem helps us unlock the meaning of this pattern of misdirection, delay, and secret reversal in its many instantiations across John. This motif, it would seem, is not a plot device for its own sake, nor is it merely an element of the text's characterization of Jesus as "hidden" or "elusive."⁴⁴ Rather, it is a device that foreshadows and symbolizes the central idea of the text's final, climactic discourse—namely, the idea of Jesus's impending departure and his subsequent, invisible indwelling of his followers. The secret walk across the Sea of Galilee, the secret journey to Jerusalem, the secret arrival at Bethany—all of these images refract the final, secret movements of Jesus.

These connections, in turn, suggest a deep unity in John, through which narratives in the first half of the text anticipate teachings of the second half of the Gospel. John is not a mere accumulation of traditions. It is, rather, a carefully constructed narrative, with episodes selected, adapted, or invented to support its central themes.⁴⁵ The scene between Jesus and his brothers is one such episode, tailor-made to stage the discourses that follow it.⁴⁶

■ Conclusion

The first half of the Gospel of John is structured around a series of symbolic episodes—episodes including the healing of the paralyzed man, the feeding of the 5,000, and the raising of Lazarus. It is time to rank Jn 7:1–11 among these scenes. The episode is unusual to be sure. Jesus insists he will not go to Jerusalem, but soon after, we see him traveling up to the city. He attends a large, public feast, but he does so in secret. And yet, it is precisely through these unusual twists and folds of the narrative that the episode's symbolism takes shape. Through an evasiveness and secrecy that leaves unbelievers asking, "where is he?" (7:11), Jesus prefigures a day when a world that has rejected his message "will seek" him "but . . . not find" him (7:34).

In the dialogue that follows, the crowd debates whether Jesus is honest or whether "he is leading the people astray" (7:12). For the author, this debate was a meaningful one. In his lifetime, Jesus presented himself as someone who would have a vital role in the coming of the kingdom of God (Mk 13:26–27), but his life ended

⁴⁴ Stibbe cites several of these episodes to characterize John's Jesus as "elusive in his physical presence": "There is a game of hide-and-seek constantly being played out in the texture of John's narrative. People seek Jesus but, more often than not, they do not find him because he conceals himself" (Stibbe, "The Elusive Christ," 25). See also Painter's discussion of "quest stories" in *Quest for the Messiah*.

⁴⁵ One can easily appreciate how the author adapts stories to suit these themes by comparing the Johannine account of the miraculous sea crossing to its Synoptic predecessors (Mk 6:45–53; Matt 14:22–34).

⁴⁶ There are several compelling reasons for identifying 7:1–11 as a mostly, if not exclusively, invented narrative. First, the scene has no cognate in the earlier Jesus traditions of the Synoptics. Secondly, the narrative is structured by a distinctly Johannine pattern of misdirection, delay, and secret reversal. Last, the speech of Jesus and his brothers is shot through with Johannine language and ideas (7:3–4, 5–8).

shockingly, abruptly, on a Roman cross. Shattered, his followers regrouped around the conviction that Jesus was not actually dead. He had resurrected, they insisted, ascending to the clouds, where he would receive power and sovereignty (Dan 7:13; Mk 14:62). They coalesced around the hope that Jesus's visible return—and with it, the fulfillment of all his earlier predictions—was imminent (1 Thess 4:15–17). By the end of the century, however, the entire group had died. Writing near the turn of the second century, our author was one of many Christians struggling with the deepening disconfirmation of these predictions—the problem of an absent Jesus. His work, like so many others written in the same period, grapples with the question: “Where is he?”

In Jn 7–8, we see a Jesus crafted to meet these doubts—a delayed Jesus, a hidden Jesus, a secretive Jesus. The story disabuses its readers of taking Jesus's claims about the future at face value. It suggests that Jesus's intentions are not always scrutable and that his movements are not always transparent. It recasts Jesus's absence as a consistent, necessary, and permanent dimension of his relationship with the world. And it inspires its readers—“those who have not seen” (20:29)—to detect a Jesus who is spiritually present among them, communing with them in secret, glimpsed only by those who believe.