A Step Too Far: A Critique of Francis Moloney’s Understanding of ‘the Scripture’ in John 20:9

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Abstract
In a series of studies Francis Moloney has argued, along narrative critical lines, that the phrase ‘the Scripture’ in John 20:9 should be understood as a reference to the Fourth Gospel itself, which presents itself to later believers as ‘Scripture’ in continuity with the Scriptures of Israel. This interpretation, while resolving the long-noted tension between v. 8 and v. 9 towards the end of the passage, is not tenable on the grounds that such a reinterpretation of υφαίστ places too great a demand upon the reader in view of the use of the term up to this point. The transition across vv. 8–9 is better explained as a reference to ‘Scripture’ in a global sense as providing the divinely appointed ‘script’ for the paradoxical messianic mission of the Son.

Keywords

The Fourth Gospel’s account (20:3–10) of the visit of Peter and ‘the other disciple’ (the Beloved Disciple [see v. 2]) to the tomb of Jesus ends on a puzzling note. In v. 8a we are told that the Disciple, who had arrived first at the tomb but allowed Peter to enter it first, himself entered the tomb and saw there what Peter had already seen: the graveclothes (ὁθόνια) and also the cloth (σουδάριον) that had been
over Jesus’ head lying rolled up in a separate place by itself. In contrast to Peter, concerning whose state of belief nothing is said, the sight of the graveclothes arranged in this way led the Disciple to believe that Jesus had been raised: ‘he saw and he believed’ (v. 8b). The narrative then goes on to offer an explanation: ‘For they had not as yet understood the Scripture (τὸν γραφὴν) that he must rise from the dead’ (v. 9). The explanation is curious. Following the singling out of the Disciple’s coming to faith, the reversion to the plural (‘they’) seems to lump him along with Peter in a common lack of understanding that sits awkwardly with the distinction in regard to faith that has just been made.¹

In a recent article in this journal² Francis Moloney has, at least implicitly, resolved the problem by arguing that John 20:9 is part of a larger narrative and theological strategy whereby ‘the Scripture’ (τὸν γραφήν) in this verse refers not to the Jewish scriptures in whole or part but to the Gospel of John itself, which for later readers of the Gospel functions as ‘Scripture.’ As themselves players in the story, the


² Francis J. Moloney, “‘For As Yet They Did Not Know the Scripture” (John 20:9): A Study in Narrative Time,’ Irish Theological Quarterly 79/2 (2014): 97–111.
disciples do ‘not yet know the Scripture’ in this sense. But later readers, who, like the Beloved Disciple, believe without having seen (the risen Jesus) and so come under the ‘blessing’ later pronounced by Jesus (20:29), have a further advantage: they have access to a ‘Scripture’ (the written Gospel) through believing in which they may continue to have life (20:30–31).³

The bold thesis that the Fourth Gospel saw itself as ‘Scripture’ had already been mooted by Andreas Overmann in a dissertation published in 1996⁴—a work to which Moloney acknowledges considerable debt.⁵ Whereas Obermann, however, remains content with asserting that the Gospel approaches the status of Scripture,⁶ Moloney goes the full distance to identification.


⁴ Die christologische Erfüllung der Schrift im Johannesevangelium (WUNT 2.83; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996).


⁶ ‘… rückt auch das Joh von seiner Anlage und seinem Anspruch her selbst in die Nähe der als heilig anerkannten Schriften. … Das Wort Jesu und die Aufzeichnung des Apostels über ihn wird “Schrift”. Diese Nähe zum Kreis der als heilig anerkannten Schriften wird
Whether the Fourth Gospel understood itself to be Scripture or whether in the more modest—and to my mind, more reasonable—sense it is to be seen, with Obermann, as *approaching* that status is not the main point with which I wish to engage here. The question is whether, as Moloney maintains, the reference to τὴν γραφήν in 20:9 is to be so understood, that is, as a reference to the Fourth Gospel understood as ‘Scripture’ in this extended sense, or whether, on the contrary, this is indeed going a step too far. Needless to say, a reversion to the more common view that sees the phrase referring to a particular scriptural passage or to the witness of Scripture as whole needs to account for the tension noted between v. 8 and v. 9 of the passage in question, a tension that, as explained above, Moloney’s view relieved.

Older commentators, in historical critical mode explained away the tension by observing that v. 9 is a statement from the source underlying the tradition in 20:1–10 which the evangelist did not thoroughly integrate into the the narrative that resulted after his incorporation of the (thoroughly Johannine) v. 8. Interpretation along the synchronic lines more favoured today will attempt to make sense of the text as it stands in the final redaction of the Gospel. Here I propose to indicate some grounds...

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weiterhin belegt durch das betonte γέγραπται’ (Obermann, *Die christologische Erfüllung*, 420; see also p. 430). Note the reiterated reference to ‘Nähe.’

7 It is in fact likely that the author of the unauthentic (post-Pauline) doxology appended to Romans (16:25–27) included the writings of Paul and specifically Romans itself amongst ‘the prophetic writings’ and so approximating the status of Scripture in which God’s design for the world is revealed; see Brendan Byrne, *Romans* (SP 6; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996), 462–63.

for rejecting Moloney’s understanding of τῇ γραφῇ in v. 9 as a reference to the
Fourth Gospel and then to argue that sense can be made of the transition across vv. 8–
9 without this understanding.

The Meaning of γραφή in John 20:9
As Obermann points out, the significance of the term γραφή for the fourth evangelist
is shown by the fact that it appears twelve times in his work, precisely the same
number of times as it appears in the remaining three Gospels taken together. The
reference in 20:9 is the very last of the twelve occurrences. It would seem to place an
extraordinary claim on the imagination of readers to ask them to understand that
γραφή here has a qualitatively different sense from that built up during the preceding
story in which all eleven occurrences refer to ‘Scripture’ in the regular sense of a text
from the Jewish scriptures—even if the particular reference is (to us) unrecognizable
in one case (7:38) or simply alluded to (7:42) or if the reference is to ‘Scripture’ in a
more general sense (2:22; 12:16). Even if one were to grant, as Moloney holds, that
the fourth evangelist considered his work to be ‘Scripture’ in continuity with the
earlier texts, for readers to recognize that the narrative they are reading or hearing is
γραφή in this sense requires a qualitative leap in understanding for which no prior
hint has been provided.10

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9 Die christologische Erfüllung, 38.
10 Moloney does make much of the formulation in 2:22 where the disciples are said ‘to
believe in the γραφή and (καὶ) in the word which Jesus had said,’ understanding the καὶ
in an epexegetical sense that makes γραφή and Jesus’ word coalesce and so pave the way
for understanding the record of Jesus’ words in the Gospel as γραφή, especially in the
light of the Gospel’s initial designation of Jesus as ‘the Word’ (1:1, 14); see ‘Gospel of
Moloney has argued that γραφῆ does undergo a significant shift in meaning within the Gospel in that in six instances immediately prior to 20:9, that is, 13:18; 17:12; 19:24, 19:28, 36, 37, it is always associated with a verb of ‘fulfilment’: in all cases the aorist subjunctive passive of πληρῶ, save in one case (19:28) the same form of τελείω. This explicit association with ‘fulfilment’, lacking in the first five instances (2:22; 5:39; 7:38, 42; 10:35), is not, however, so unexpected when one considers that all the later instances occur in the latter half of the Gospel when Jesus’ ‘hour’ is directly in view. The events of the hour ‘fulfil’ Scripture not simply in a general kind of way but in the sense of bringing to completion, adding the final element that makes something complete, which is most basic sense of πληρῶ and,  

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11 See ‘The Gospel of John as Scripture,’ 456–60; ‘For As Yet They Did Not Know,’ 104–05.
even more so, of τελειόω. This is perhaps the reason that in the climactic instance of ἡ γραφή just before Jesus dies, 19:28, no particular text is cited. Jesus says, ‘I thirst,’ to indicate the draining to the dregs of the scriptural ‘cup’ that the Father has set before him (see his rebuke to Peter at the arrest in the Garden: 18:11b). It is difficult, then, to maintain that this association with ‘fulfilment’ in the latter instances of γραφή can effectively signal to the reader that in 20:9 the term is being used in a wholly new sense—as a reference to the written Gospel itself—rather than in its usual sense of ‘Scripture.’

Of course, the identification of which particular passage of ‘Scripture’ might be being referred to in v. 9 has long exercised interpreters. It is not necessary, however, as Moloney maintains, that, if the reference were to Scripture in the ordinary sense, the definite article should indicate a particular passage. As Obermann points out, the sense of ἡ γραφή in 2:22 and 10:35 is both to a particular scriptural text (LXX Ps 68:10 in 2:22 and LXX Ps 81:6a in 10:35) and to ‘Scripture’ as a whole. While then, as many interpreters have suggested, an allusion to a particular text such as Ps 16:10 may be in view in 20:9, the reference is likely to include

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14 ‘For As Yet They Did Not Know,’ 103–04.

15 *Die christologische Erfüllung*, 41–43.

16 See, in Pauline literature, the use of ἡ γραφή in Gal 3:8, 22.
Scripture in a holistic sense, that is, to Scripture as the revealed divine ‘script’ for the mission of the Son.¹⁷

Most interpreters, including Moloney,¹⁸ agree that the references to the disciples’ post-resurrection/glorification ‘remembering’ in 2:22 and 12:16 shed important light on 20:9. The reference in 12:16 to ‘glorification’ rather than ‘resurrection’ is significant since ‘glorification’ comprises the passion and death of Jesus, as well as his resurrection and ascension, within the one overall movement of his return to the Father. Hence the disciples’ failure to understand that ‘he must rise from the dead’ (20:9) necessarily connotes a failure to grasp also the ‘necessity’ for his death in the first place.¹⁹ In line with conventional messianic expectation, the disciples believed that Scripture had inscribed the path for the Messiah (see 1:45; 7:40–42), though not with any sense that that path might include suffering and death


¹⁸ ‘For As Yet They Did Not Know,’ 105–06.

¹⁹ Of a piece with this is the disciples’ failure (pre-Easter) to understand the meaning of Jesus’ statement ‘Destroy this temple (= his body) …’ (2:19, 21–22) and the meaning of his electing to make a humble messianic entry into Jerusalem on a colt (12:14–16); likewise, the foot-washing (13:1–11), the meaning of which (foreshadowing the passion) the protesting Peter will only understand ‘after these things’ (13:7). All these words or symbolic actions spell out the way in which Jesus will fulfil his messianic role, essential to which is his ‘giving up’ of his ‘flesh (his human life) for the life of the world’ (6:51).
(see 12:34). Post-resurrection and with the aid of the Paraclete Spirit (14:26) they came to see that the ‘career’ of Jesus, including his suffering and death, did indeed fit the scriptural pattern. They understood that the Scripture was all about Jesus, that it was his book through and through—which is why Abraham ‘rejoiced to see (his) day’ (8:56), while Isaiah ‘saw his glory’ and so ‘spoke (correctly) about him’ (12:41).\textsuperscript{20} Scripture indicated that he ‘must rise from the dead’ (20:9) because Scripture—ultimately, the Father—had set out that he had to die, as (Paschal) Lamb of God, to take away the world’s sin (1:29; see also 20:22–23) and so make available to human beings the possibility of sharing, through faith, the divine eternal life (3:16–21; 20:30–31).

In the wider context of Johannine soteriology, then, it is likely that, rather than referring to a specific text (Ps 16:10 or whatever), the reference in 20:9 to ‘τὴν γραφὴν τὴν ἀπὸ τῶν θείων ὑμῶν’ that he must rise from the dead,’ refers to this overall scriptural pattern. For the disciples, post-resurrection/glorification, it was not so much a matter of coming to see how various remembered elements of Jesus’ words and deeds fitted in with particular scriptural texts. It was rather a matter of seeing how ‘the Scripture’ as a whole had determined and been the driving force all along. In this sense they ‘believed in τὴν γραφὴν and the word which Jesus had spoken’ (2:22cd). They came to ‘know’ that Scripture had been fulfilled both on the level of the agreement between particular texts and particular sayings/actions of Jesus, \textit{and} on the wider level of consonance between Scripture as a whole and the entire sweep of Jesus’ mission from the Father. Particular texts that are cited by or alluded to by John such as Psalm 69 (John 2:17; 5:25; 19:28) and Zechariah (4:10 [?]; 7:38 [?]; 19:37), especially with

\footnote{See Obermann, \textit{Die christologische Erfüllung}, 397.}
reference to the suffering and death of Jesus, are simply places where the underlying scriptural pattern emerges in explicit form.\textsuperscript{21}

In any case, it would seem difficult for readers of the Fourth Gospel to understand the definite form τὴν γραφὴν in 20:9 as a reference to the Gospel since the evangelist has not made reference to his own work up to this point; such reference occurs only at the Gospel’s two editorial endings: 20:30–31; 21:24–25. It is far more likely that the phrase refers to Scripture in a global sense (as notably in the case of 19:28; see above), but with particular allusion to those texts that indicated the unforeseen way in which the Messiah’s path would run: that is, to a ‘glorification’ involving humility, suffering and death—and hence also resurrection—prior to its completion in ascent to the Father.

The Transition across 20:8–9

How, then, are we to understand the transition across 20:8–9 as it stands in the final text of the Gospel? Whereas the explanations of scriptural fulfilment in 2:22 and 12:16 look primarily to the post-Easter/glorification ‘understanding’ on the part of the disciples, the explanation given in 20:9 looks to the time of ‘not-knowing’ prior to that—though the first clause of 12:16 (‘His disciples did not understand these things at first’) also looks to that earlier time. The two disciples at the tomb, Peter and the Beloved Disciple, had both been in that pre-glorification situation of ‘ignorance’ as regards the scriptural ‘script’ that was regulating the mission of Jesus. They had presumably not anticipated his dying (see 13:36–38; 14:1–5; 16:1–6, 16–24); they had certainly not anticipated his resurrection. That is the ‘ignorance’ of the Scripture expressed in the pluperfect formulation (οὐδὲν πρὸς ἡδὲιςσαν) of v. 9. Confronted,

\textsuperscript{21} See Obermann, \textit{Die christologische Erfüllung}, 42–43.
however, not merely with the emptiness of the tomb but with the precise disposition of the graveclothes (visible following entry into the tomb as distinct from what could be seen from outside), their reactions differ. While Peter, it would seem, remains unmoved, the Beloved Disciple, with his greater sensitivity to the divine action at work in Jesus (as later, following the miraculous catch of fish [21:7]), comes to faith in the resurrection of Jesus on the basis of what he discerns in the arrangement of the grave clothes. What he sees, especially in the separately placed and folded σουδάριον, is no longer mere emptiness and certainly not evidence of grave-robery but a ‘sign’ pointing to a majestic re-assumption of life (see 10:17–18).\textsuperscript{22} He is then in a position to understand that what had happened to Jesus (his death and resurrection) had been indicated all along in the Scriptures. That is, he comes to the full understanding or ‘knowledge’ as described of other disciples (post-resurrection/glorification) in 2:22 and 12:16.

The evangelist indicates this in the curiously negative, ‘afterthought,’ and pluperfect way expressed in the explanation in v. 9: (until this moment) they (all of them, including the Disciple) had not ‘known’ the scriptural indication that the Messiah (Jesus) would ‘rise from the dead’ (that is, out of suffering and death). But now, because of his just acquired faith in the resurrection, the Disciple—and he alone at this point—does arrive at that knowledge. The latter, positive point is not stated explicitly but would seem to be implied in the negative pluperfect statement about what had prevailed as regards understanding up till then (οὐδὲν ΠΩ).\textsuperscript{23}

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\textsuperscript{23} See Dietzfelbringer, \textit{Das Evangelium nach Johannes}, 322.
As is widely recognized, the curious formulation across vv. 8–9 is all designed to highlight the superior knowledge and faith of the Disciple in contrast to Peter.\(^\text{24}\) Unlike Mary Magdalene, Thomas, and the remaining disciples, the Disciple comes to faith in the resurrection without having seen Jesus. He has seen and rightly discerned the ‘sign’ constituted by the arrangement of the grave clothes. In this sense he models the faith of later generations who come under the ‘blessing’ pronounced by Jesus at the first ending of the Gospel (20:29c).\(^\text{25}\)

This explanation solves the tension between v. 8 and v. 9 in that, as regards the past (up till this point), the Beloved Disciple is one with the other disciples in their ‘ignorance’ about the scriptural witness to Jesus’ mission (as expressed in the plural reference [‘they’] in v. 9). However, the implication is that the Disciple has at this point pulled away from the others into a qualitatively distinctive position as regards faith because of his perception that Jesus has risen from the dead (v. 8).


Conclusion

Admittedly, the evangelist has rather clumsily inserted the statement in v. 8 into the earlier tradition according to which the disciples (notably Peter; see Luke 24:12) returned from the empty tomb still not having come to faith; v. 8 is not well ‘digested’ in the overall narrative. But sense can be made of the final text as the evangelist has produced it without the need to understand τίν γραφήν in v. 9 in ways other than the far more obvious meaning: the Scripture of Israel. While the fourth evangelist may have been close to considering his work (the Gospel) as constituting ‘Scripture’ for his community or even, as Moloney maintains have already arrived at that understanding, it is neither necessary nor advantageous to see the phrase τίν γραφήν in 20:9 as a reference to the Gospel.

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