

Malchus: Cutting Up in the Garden

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Setting the Stage

Modern readers of the canonical gospels are well acquainted with the character identified in the Fourth Gospel as Malchus.¹ Known simply as the poor fellow who loses his ear to the sword of Peter, Malchus is for many, a narrative indicator of the tension that mounts just prior to Jesus' arrest in the garden. Though Malchus appears briefly and only in this pericope, several elements of his characterization stand out as important for what follows in the Johannine Passion. In this brief study we will employ a narrative-critical approach to examine the role Malchus plays in the story, with specific emphasis on how his presentation contributes to the developing plot and the presentation of other characters.

In his only scene, Malchus plays the role of an agent (or actant) – generally described as a character with little or no development that functions essentially to advance the plot.² He arrives on the scene as part of a nameless, faceless mob, remains silent, and as far as the reader knows, remains motionless. Yet the narrator has made it a point to include his name and his encounter with Peter and Jesus. Often in narrative literature anonymous characters serve as agents whose primary function is to advance the action of the story. Conversely, characters with names are generally the more important players. This trend is reversed in the Fourth Gospel; greater models of faith are left nameless while named characters continually reflect an improper response to Jesus.³ Malchus fits the latter description. He appears briefly, stands in opposition to Jesus, and exists almost solely to advance the action of the narrative. Keeping

¹ A version of this story appears with minor variations in all four canonical Gospels: Mark 14:47–50; Matt 26:51–56; Luke 22:49–53; and John 18:1–11.

² For more on this, see Fred W. Burnett, "Characterization and Reader Construction of Characters in the Gospels," *Semeia* 63 (1993): 3–28, here 18–20. See also, Cornelis Bennema, "A Theory of Character in the Fourth Gospel with Reference to Ancient and Modern Literature," *BibInt* 17 (2009): 375–421.

³ On this topic, see David Beck, *The Discipleship Paradigm: Readers and Anonymous Characters in the Fourth Gospel* (BIS 27; Leiden: Brill, 1997); and also idem, "The Narrative Function of Anonymity in the Fourth Gospel," *Semeia* 63 (1993): 143–58.

these things in mind, we proceed to a consideration of Malchus in the context of John 18:1–11.

John 18:1–11

At the beginning of John 18, Jesus and his disciples are departing across the Kidron valley for an unnamed olive grove. Once there, Jesus will be taken captive and transported first to the high priest and then to Pilate. The so-called “Farewell Discourse” (13:1–17:26) has just concluded and 18:1 opens with the words ταῦτα εἰπὼν Ἰησοῦς ἐξῆλθεν (“After he had spoken these things, Jesus departed”). Resuming the story *in medias res*, the reader finds this phrase to be a helpful reminder of the high priestly prayer of chapter 17, where Jesus prayed for himself (vss. 1–5), his disciples (vss. 6–19), and all future believers (vss. 20–26). The events of 18:1–11 set in motion the Johannine Passion and begin to fulfill the first part of Jesus’ prayer (17:1–5) – that the Father would “glorify the Son.” The Johannine agenda can only be accomplished by way of the cross, the ultimate means by which the Son will be glorified.

Along with Jesus and the disciples (v. 1), Judas Iscariot (v. 2), a Roman cohort (τὴν σπεῖραν = 600 soldiers), and a detachment of police from the Jewish leaders (v. 3) appear on the narrative stage of John 18. Malchus, our subject here, is a member of the Jewish delegation. Jesus now faces opposition from one of his own (Judas), the Jewish leaders, and new enemies in the form of Roman officials. This historically unlikely combination is a Johannine symbol for the powers of darkness arraying to oppose Jesus (cf. 1:5). In an ironic twist, the group comes under the cover of night, with lanterns (φανάων) and torches (λαμπάδων), bringing their own illumination to take the light of humanity into their custody.⁴

Aware of what is about to happen, Jesus takes immediate control of the situation by identifying himself to his would-be captors (vss. 4–8a) and by securing release for his disciples (v. 8b). If Jesus is going to return to the Father, he must first be taken into custody by this delegation. In the process he does not intend to lose any of those whom the Father has entrusted to him (v. 9, cf. 6:39; 17:12). Instead of departing, however, Peter pulls his sword and strikes Malchus, the servant of the high priest, cutting off his right ear (v. 10). Jesus rebukes Peter for his impetuous action by commanding him to put his sword away and by making it clear that he intends to fulfill the will of the Father (v. 11).

In this brief scene the reader learns several things about Malchus. Since direct character description is rarely employed in the Fourth Gospel, most

⁴ Cf. 1:4–9; 3:19–21; 9:5; 12:35–44.

characters are presented by the indirect means of speech or action. There is little narrative space within this scene for any character to be developed substantially. Consequently, Malchus becomes one of a small group of Fourth Gospel characters to receive a direct description. Three specific elements of his presentation by the narrator deserve further treatment.

1. *His name is Malchus.* Numerous suggestions have been set forth regarding the significance of the name Malchus.⁵ Barrett suggests that the name derives from the Hebrew מֶלֶךְ (“king”), but he fails to comment on how this is significant for the present scene.⁶ Guilding sees a reference to Zech 11:6 that was read as part of a Passover lectionary (“I will deliver each into the hand of his king,” מֶלֶכִּי).⁷ However, this explanation does not sufficiently account for what occurs in the scene, unless Peter’s actions are regarded as a reversal of expectations raised by the intertextual reference.

The name itself probably has no specific meaning or outward significance. Rather, the presence of a named character (Malchus) face to face with another named character (Peter) is part of the Johannine presentation of character interaction. Also, named characters in the Fourth Gospel are associated with an improper understanding of or response to Jesus. That his name is given is a signal to the reader that Malchus represents spiritual incomprehension.⁸ His association with the arresting party reinforces this interpretation.

2. *He serves the high priest.* Malchus is also described as τὸν τοῦ ἀρχιερέως δούλον, “the servant of the high priest” (v. 10). This detail connects Malchus to οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι, the Johannine opponents of Jesus who have by now become a fixture in the story.⁹ Malchus’ association with the Jewish leadership explicitly sets him in opposition to Jesus. His vocation as servant to the high priest also anticipates what will happen in the forthcoming interaction between Jesus and Annas (18:19–24).¹⁰ As we approach the climax of the story, references to the Jewish leadership are intended to heighten the reader’s sense of Jewish animos-

⁵ Malchus was not an uncommon name during this period. Brown notes that, “Malchus’ is found five times in Josephus and is known from Palmyrene and Nabatean inscriptions (whence the suggestion that Malchus was an Arab).” See Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John* (xiii–xxi) (AB 29A; New York: Doubleday, 1970), 812.

⁶ C. Kingsley Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John* (2d ed.; London: SPCK, 1978), 522.

⁷ Aileen Guilding, *The Fourth Gospel and Jewish Worship: A Study of the Relation of St. John’s Gospel to the Ancient Jewish Lectionary System* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1960), 278–80.

⁸ See my own treatment of Fourth Gospel characters where I suggest that misunderstanding is the primary category by which Johannine characters should be evaluated. Christopher W. Skinner, *John and Thomas – Gospels in Conflict? Johannine Characterization and the Thomas Question* (PTMS 115; Eugene, Oreg.: Pickwick, 2009).

⁹ Here I have employed the Greek οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι rather than a translational equivalent (e. g., “the Jews”) in an effort to avoid any potentially anti-Jewish sentiment.

¹⁰ Caiaphas, the high priest, is also mentioned in this section (18:24, 28) but there is no scene where he and Jesus share a face to face encounter.

ity toward Jesus. Malchus thus represents opposition to Jesus, rejection of his message, and zeal for his demise.

This scene also provides the foundation for a contrast between Jesus, the “good shepherd” (cf. 10:11–18) and the high priest, the shepherd of Israel (cf. Jer 22:22–23:8). After Malchus is struck, Jesus admonishes Peter and corrects him with an explanation of his mission (τὸ ποτήριον ὃ δέδωκέν μοι ὁ πατήρ οὐ μὴ πῖω αὐτό; v. 11c). In 18:19–24 Jesus is struck by a minion of Annas. Not only does Annas not intervene but he sends Jesus bound to Caiaphas. By Johannine standards, neither Annas nor Caiaphas will qualify for the title of “good shepherd,” since neither steps into to curb the violence or the sham prosecution.

3. *He is victimized by Peter.* Peter’s actions with the sword contribute more to his own character development than to that of Malchus. This is probably the most important reason for Malchus’ inclusion in the story. He further highlights Peter’s reckless and impulsive behavior. In the fray Malchus loses his right ear, a detail the Johannine account shares with the Lukan version (cf. Luke 22:50).¹¹

Several fanciful suggestions have been offered to explain the significance of Malchus losing his *right* ear. It has been suggested (1) that this detail is meant to portray Peter’s attack as cowardly, (2) that damage on the right side of the body represents an indignity, or (3) that the detail confirms that Peter was left-handed.¹² These are interesting interpretive options but it seems more likely that the detail has been added to lend greater vividness to the scene. It is also interesting to note that the double diminutive ὠτάριον is used, rather than οὖς (the standard term) or ὠτίον (the simple diminutive form). It may be that ὠτάριον is intended as a reference to Malchus’ earlobe rather than his entire ear.¹³

After he is rebuked by Jesus in 18:11 and the delegation takes Jesus away, Peter will follow the arresting party into the courtyard of the high priest where he will be confronted by a relative of Malchus.¹⁴ In that moment Peter will deny ever knowing Jesus (18:26–27). Thus, in one scene Malchus is associated with Peter’s intention to fight for and even die with Jesus. In another scene

¹¹ Because of this it has not been uncommon for commentators to suggest that the evangelist had access to or knowledge of the Lukan version of this story.

¹² See Raymond E. Brown’s discussion of these interpretive options (idem, *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave: A Commentary on the Passion Narratives in the Four Gospels* [2 vols.; New York: Doubleday, 1994], 1:271–72).

¹³ BDAG (p. 1107) defines ὠτάριον as “outer ear” but points out that in later Greek this form was used interchangeably with οὖς.

¹⁴ Malchus is not mentioned by name in 18:26. The narrator refers to him as συγγενὴς ὧν οὐ ἀπέκοψεν Πέτρος τὸ ὠτίον, “a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off.”

Malchus (by name rather than presence) is associated with Peter's shameful denial and inability to follow through on his earlier proclamation that he is willing to die alongside Jesus (cf. 13:37). Even as a minor player, Malchus adds theological depth to the narrator's presentation of Peter's contradictory character as well as the picture of Jesus' commitment to his mission.

Conclusion

The reading offered here suggests that the presence of Malchus in John 18 helps advance the action of the narrative and develop the story in three important ways. First, in placing Malchus alongside Peter, the narrator further highlights Peter's impetuous nature, his failure to comprehend Jesus' mission, and his inconsistency as a disciple. The narrative curtain will ultimately fall in John 20 without Peter fully realizing the promise expected in the changing of his name (1:42).¹⁵ Only in the later material of ch. 21 is Peter restored to a place of prominence.¹⁶ Second, in the Malchus scene, the narrator finds another opportunity to emphasize Jesus' commitment to fulfill his mission from the Father (v. 11). The Johannine mission consists of completing the Father's will and glorifying the Son. For this to happen, the Son must return to the Father and the παράκλητος must be sent. Third, the victimization of Malchus and Jesus' refusal to accept Peter's actions as legitimate further develops the Christological viewpoint of the Fourth Gospel. As χριστός (messiah), Jesus will defeat the powers of darkness by submission to the Father's will, not by force. The brief appearance of Malchus in the garden scene highlights these Johannine themes and pushes the Passion narrative one step closer to its climax at the cross.

¹⁵ The changing of Peter's name from Σίμων (Hebrew, "God has heard") to Κηφᾶς (Aramaic, "rock") is an early signal to the reader of Peter's importance. It holds the promise of strength and fortitude but that expectation is not met prior to John 21.

¹⁶ Even here there is no little debate about Peter's significance in John 21. For a balanced approach to historical and literary issues, see Francis J. Moloney, "John 21 and the Johannine Story," in *Anatomies of Narrative Criticism: The Past, Present, and Futures of the Fourth Gospel as Literature* (ed. Tom Thatcher and Stephen D. Moore; SBLRBS 55; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), 237–51.