

The Voice of the Bridegroom, the Record of John? Some Thoughts on John 3:29

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Introduction

The difference in emphasis between the Johannine Baptist and the John of the Synoptics is well-known: whereas the latter is portrayed as an eschatological prophet preaching repentance, the focus of the former is almost exclusively on his role as a witness to Jesus.¹ Related to this basic contrast, two other differences in detail are worth noticing. Only in the Fourth Gospel does John describe himself as the Voice in the Wilderness (1:23),² and only there does he describe Jesus as the Bridegroom.³ It is the aim of this study to show that these Johannine peculiarities are related to each other, and that this sheds light on a difficulty that has been detected from time to time in Jn 3:29.

The difficulty in question is the reference to the *voice* of the Bridegroom. It will be recalled that after his disciples have raised the question of his relationship to Jesus,⁴ the Baptist repeats his previous denial that he is the Christ⁵ and the statement that he has been sent before him (3:28).⁶ He goes on to clarify their mutual situation in the following verse:

¹ Cf., for example, M. Goguel, *Au seuil de l'Évangile Jean Baptiste* (BH; Paris: Payot, 1928), p. 85; C.H. Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: CUP, 1963), p. 248; J. P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew; Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 1994), p. 119.

² Cf. Dodd, *Tradition*, p. 252. We can go further and say that only in the Fourth Gospel is John *himself* described as the Voice in the Wilderness as befits his role as witness. In Mark and Luke, the quotation from Is 40:3 is applied rather to his preaching *activity* in the desert (Mk 1:3; Lk 3:40). In Matthew, this is still to the fore (Mt 3:1), though the quotation is formally introduced by 'This is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah...' (Mt 3:3).

³ This is the only occasion in the gospels when a third party describes Jesus thus.

⁴ Not necessarily in a hostile or competitive way. C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John* (2nd edn; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978), p. 221, points out that there is nothing to indicate resentment on the part of John's disciples. If they had understood John correctly, they could have been thrilled with what they knew of Jesus. Their dispute was not with him but with a Jew or the Jews (Jn 3:25). But cf. Goguel, *Jean Baptiste*, pp. 89-92, for the suggestion that the original dispute was with Jesus, or even between John and Jesus.

⁵ Cf. Jn 1:20.

⁶ This is the Baptist's only explicit declaration of Jesus' Messiahship in any of the gospels.

He who has the bride is the bridegroom; the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice (διὰ τὴν φωνήν τοῦ νυμφίου); therefore this joy of mine is now full (Jn 3:29).

There is no problem with the basic imagery here. The nuptial metaphor is used for Jesus throughout the New Testament at all levels of the text.⁷ The problem is specifically with this detail of the Bridegroom's *voice*. It is not essential after all: the Baptist could have said 'rejoices greatly in/over the Bridegroom', 'rejoices greatly in the Bridegroom's arrival/presence' or even 'at his marriage'. Why his *voice*?

Almost half a century ago, C. H. Dodd gave voice (!) to this difficulty when he said: 'It is not quite obvious why the bridesman's friend should take special pleasure in hearing the bridegroom speak'.⁸ More recently, Jocelyn McWhirter has seen it as a 'dissonance' and, therefore, an indication that there may be an intertextual allusion.⁹ Unlike Dodd, who saw the problem only within the metaphor,¹⁰ she detects this dissonance on two levels: in the metaphor certainly, but also in the narrative itself. She clearly finds this narrative difficulty perplexing because she mentions it on two occasions: 'Why does John mention "the bridegroom's voice" when the passage never indicates that Jesus is speaking?'¹¹ and, a few pages, later: 'Jn 3:22-30 never mentions that Jesus is speaking or that John the Baptist is listening to him'.¹²

She could have added that in the Fourth Gospel, unlike Matthew, Jesus *never* speaks in the Baptist's presence. However, this is surely to take too literal and historicised a view. The evangelist is not concerned here with

⁷ Pace Meier, *Marginal Jew*, p. 943, who says 'the vast majority of passages where Jesus is explicitly said to be a bridegroom or is placed at a wedding come from the second Christian generation'. This is simply not the case. The *topos* of Christ as Bridegroom is represented in virtually every strand of Christian tradition, oral and written from the earliest stratum to the latest. The only exception would appear to be the Double Tradition (Q?), unless the parable of the (Wedding) Feast appeared there in its Matthean form. Cf. M.B. Tait, *Jesus, The Divine Bridegroom, in Mark 2:18-22: Mark's Christology Upgraded* (AnBib 185; Rome: Gregorian and Biblical Press, 2010), chapter 6 ('The Bridegroom/Husband in the New Testament').

⁸ Dodd, *Tradition*, p. 282. Moloney has a different difficulty. He sees the whole passage as presenting John the Baptist as an example of authentic belief, laying himself open to the word of God and then wonders why, when *λόγος* is so important to the evangelist, he uses the word *φωνή* here. Cf. F. J. Moloney, *Belief in the Word: Reading John 1-4* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), pp. 127-9, and *John* (SP; Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1998), p. 110.

⁹ J. McWhirter, *The Bridegroom Messiah and the People of God* (SNTSMS 138; Cambridge: CUP, 2006). She comes to the conclusion that the voice here is an allusion to the 'voice of the bridegroom and bride' in Jer 33:10-11. Elsewhere I have questioned her methodology and some of her conclusions, including this one. Cf. M. B. Tait, Review of McWhirter, *RRT* 14 (2007), pp. 484-6.

¹⁰ 'It is perhaps easier to see why John the Baptist (in the application of the parable) should take pleasure in hearing Jesus speak'. Cf. Dodd, *Tradition*, p. 282.

¹¹ McWhirter, *Bridegroom*, p. 50.

¹² McWhirter, *Bridegroom*, p. 55.

such details. Indeed, in the previous verse, he puts into John's mouth a self-quotation which commentators have had serious difficulty in identifying.¹³ Even on the literal level, however, the problem is more apparent than real. In view of the close relations between the Baptist and Jesus and their respective disciples in these early chapters of John, we can surely assume that, as well as seeing Jesus (Jn 1:29, 32, 35), he has also heard him speak, or, at least, which is as good for our purposes, heard of what he has said at second hand.¹⁴ John knows that Jesus is speaking and what he is speaking about, and he rejoices; he does not need to have heard him personally.¹⁵ At this level, there is really no problem. But in any case, the voice is at the level of the metaphor; Jesus is not a bridegroom either! We need be no more surprised that there is no mention of his Banns of Marriage in the previous verses!

What, then, about the metaphor? Here again, McWhirter shows concern: 'The metaphor¹⁶ delineates no role for the Bridegroom's voice'. This is far from the case. At least six possibilities have been proposed: (1) the friend of the bridegroom¹⁷ hears the bridegroom arriving at the house of the bride where he has been preparing for the festivities.¹⁸ (2) He hears the bridegroom making his 'vows'. (3) He hears the bridegroom and bride talking together at the feast.¹⁹ (4) He hears the bridegroom saying the Seven Benedictions (with their reference to the voice of bridegroom and bride) as they enter the chamber.²⁰ (5) He hears the bridegroom's triumphant shout at the consummation and or proof of virginity.²¹ (6) He hears the bridegroom's voice in the morning, indicating his survival after

¹³ Cf. R. E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John* (AB; vol. 1; New York: Doubleday, 1966), p. 152.

¹⁴ He could have been given a report from his two disciples who spent time with Jesus after which they recognise him as Messiah (Jn 1:35-9). Andrew went to tell Simon (1:41), so why not his old master, John, also?

¹⁵ Notice also that if, as some think, John is still speaking in 3:34 and is speaking about Jesus, then again he shows awareness of Jesus' words.

¹⁶ McWhirter, *Bridegroom*, p. 51.

¹⁷ Almost certainly the *shoshbin* of Jewish tradition who was the bridegroom's representative or best man responsible for the smooth operation of the wedding festivities and also sometimes the previous negotiations for the wedding. Cf. Brown, *John*, p. 152. For a fuller account, A. Büchler, 'The induction of the bride and the bridegroom into the חופה in the first and second centuries in Palestine' in Committee of the Grand Synagogue of Warsaw, ed., *Livre d'hommage à la mémoire de Dr. Samuel Poznanski* (Warsaw, 1927), vol. I, pp. 118-132.

¹⁸ E. Hoskyns and F. N. Davey, *The Fourth Gospel* (2nd rev. edn; London: Faber & Faber, 1947), p. 229.; Brown, *John*, p. 122. (This, of course, would not be the case if the custom was for the friend of the bridegroom to escort the bride to the bridegroom's house. Unfortunately, we have no clear picture of the exact practice with regard to Palestinian weddings in the first century.)

¹⁹ Brown, *John*, p. 122.

²⁰ Cf. R. Infante, 'L'Amico dello Sposo, Figura del Ministerio di Giovanni Battista nel Quarto Vangelo', *RivB* 31 (1983), p. 13.

²¹ Cf. R. Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St John* (vol. 1; New York: Herder & Herder, 1968), p. 416, following Jeremias in *TDNT* IV, p. 1101

the menacing first night.²² We have listed the proposals in chronological order as they might have occurred during the wedding. Any or all of them is possible at the level of the metaphor. The fifth is perhaps the most likely in a macho society which was not squeamish about sex and which talked about it in a concrete way. It is also appropriate in a situation where the Bridegroom is described as ‘having’ the bride, an expression that envisages consummation. We are clearly beyond the time of preparations. Here, too, then, within the metaphor, there is no problem about the ‘voice of the bridegroom’.

What then is the difficulty? Surely it is the introduction of what appears to be an unnecessary, if not irrelevant, detail into what is simply a general statement about the relative positions of Jesus and the Baptist. How do we explain it? One way is to look at the use of the noun φωνή in the New Testament and the LXX to see if this can shed any light on its place here. Such an analysis renders several possible alternatives to the meaning of ‘voice’. The simplest is the meaning ‘report’ or ‘fame’ which we find in Gen 45:16, where φωνή refers to the report of the arrival of Joseph’s brothers reaching the house of Pharaoh. Such a meaning would fit very well into the context of Jn 3:29 where the Baptist has just received from his disciples a report about the activity of Jesus.²³ Thus John would be saying here: ‘the friend of the Bridegroom...rejoices *at the report (or fame) of the Bridegroom*’. Another, similar, possibility is the use of φωνή to mean ‘solemn declaration’²⁴ which would fit in with the use of the Hebrew לִקְוֹל which it usually translates in the LXX.²⁵ This usage is often located in the New Testament in 2 Pet. 1:17, 18, with reference to the ‘solemn declaration’ or ‘proclamation’ from the cloud. This is not entirely secure because the simple meaning ‘voice’ could be intended here.²⁶ However, the use of a compound form of φέρω - the φωνή was ‘borne’, in itself an unusual phrase - alerts us to the strong possibility that this is a deliberate recalling of the Septuagintal expression which translates literally the Semitic idiom ‘make the voice pass through’ used for proclamations or announcements.²⁷ Moreover, the use of φωνή to mean important declaration or message can be paralleled in secular Greek

²² Cf. Büchler, ‘Induction’, pp. 123-4, n. 2. There was a widespread tradition, a version of which appears in Tobit 6-8, that demons were on hand as a threat, often fatal, to the first night of a marriage.

²³ Jn 3:26.

²⁴ Cf. BADG, s.v., 2c.

²⁵ Cf. BDB which notes that in this usage לִקְוֹל is sometimes translated by κήρυγμα; also HALOT, s.v., 6.

²⁶ Cf. Betz *TDNT*, p. 295.

²⁷ The LXX does not usually retain the Semitism (cf. 2 Chr 30:5, 36:22) but it does so in Ezra 10:7 (cf., by contrast, Ezra 1:1). Another possible example in the New Testament is in Acts 24:21 where it is used of Paul’s confession of the resurrection before the Sanhedrin.

sources.²⁸ If that is the meaning intended in Jn 3:29, then the Baptist would be saying something like: ‘the friend of the Bridegroom rejoices *because of the declaration/proclamation of the Bridegroom*’.

The Declaration/Proclamation of the Bridegroom

What could this signify? The simplest possibility is to take it as a subjective genitive, that is, the declaration made *by the Bridegroom*. This would presumably be a reference to Jesus’ teaching. Unlike the Synoptics, in the Fourth Gospel, Jesus does not begin his ministry by preaching a solemn proclamation.²⁹ However, he has made enough portentous statements, to Nicodemus, for example, for this not to be a problem. What could be a more solemn proclamation than Jn 3:16:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life?

There is, however, another intriguing possibility. What if we have here an objective genitive so that the declaration/proclamation is not being made by Jesus but *about him*? In this case John could be saying that he is full of joy because of his own role in issuing proclamations concerning the Bridegroom. In this gospel, he has been introduced as the one whose purpose it was to bear witness,³⁰ and he has done this explicitly on two previous occasions when he has declared Jesus to be the Lamb of God.³¹ In this very passage, he testifies that Jesus is the Christ.³² He has fulfilled his role as witness and can rejoice in the fact.

But there is yet another possibility within this objective-genitive variation. It is well-known that there is no explicit account of Jesus’ Baptism in the Fourth Gospel. Yet many have detected an oblique reference to it in John’s remarks in 1:32:

And John bore witness, “I saw the Spirit descend as a dove from heaven, and it remained on him”.

Here the reference is to the descent of the Spirit. It is surely possible, then, that in 3:29 we have a similarly oblique reference to Jesus’ Baptism, but this time to the solemn declaration from heaven about Jesus’ divine

²⁸ Cf. the ‘statement’ of Simonides’ in Plato, Prot., 341b and the ‘message’ in P. Much., 220, 20ff, cited in Betz *TDNT*, p. 279.

²⁹ Compare Mk 1:14-15; Mt 4:17; Lk 4:21.

³⁰ Jn 1:6.

³¹ Jn 1:29, 36. He also declares him to the Son of God (1:34)

³² Infante, *Amico*, p. 5, sees witness as the key topic in Jn 3:22-4:3.

sonship.³³ The Baptist would thus be rejoicing at the heavenly declaration of Jesus' divine filiation.

But perhaps these attempts to provide another meaning for φωνή are misplaced. After all, as Dodd points out, 'the evangelist has a certain predilection for the use of the term of human speech'³⁴. The 'voice' of the Good Shepherd plays a crucial role in the discourse of that name, and there seems to be an intentional parallel in the course of the Passion Narrative in 18:37 when Jesus says to Pilate:

Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice.

Moreover, a continuing role is envisaged for this φωνή for in Jn 5:37 Jesus promises that 'the dead will hear the voice of the Son of Man'. We may well wonder whether this is a deliberate echo of the important role played by the voice of God in the Old Testament. It is the *voice* of the Lord God that Adam and Eve hear in the garden in the cool of the day.³⁵ In Deuteronomy, the theophany at Sinai is distinguished by being one not of a form but *only a voice*.³⁶ The same characteristic is emphasised when it comes to personified Wisdom. At the first mention of this divine intermediary, it is said that 'Wisdom cries aloud in the streets; in the markets she raises her *voice*'.³⁷ It is possible, then, that by referring to the 'voice' of the Bridegroom the evangelist is simply tapping into this tradition³⁸ in order to enhance Jesus' Christological status.

At this point, it is worth attending to an interesting structural parallel, first noticed by Welhasuen and Goguel but taken up more recently by Brown,³⁹ and that is the similarity between 1:19-21, 30-1 and 3:22-30. Brown lists four themes that are 'very much the same' in both passages:

- (a) i 19-21: John the Baptist is not the Messiah, Elijah or the prophet.
iii 28: John the Baptist is not the Messiah
- (b) i 30: John the Baptist is preparing for the one to come after him
iii 28: John the Baptist is sent before him
- (c) i 30: The one to come after John the Baptist ranks ahead of him
iii 30: He must increase while John the Baptist must decrease

³³ Itself referred to in Jn 1:34 after the Baptist's reference of the descent of the Spirit. The reason why the evangelist prefers to allude to the theologically important aspects of the Baptism – the descent of the Spirit and the divine declaration – is that, even more than Matthew he felt embarrassment at the idea of Jesus' being baptised by John.

³⁴ Not just human speech, it will be noted: the Father's voice is mentioned in 5:37.

³⁵ Gen 3:8.

³⁶ Deut 4:12. Cf. 4:33, 36; Exod 19:19.

³⁷ Prov 1:20 (the LXX is different); cf. 8:1 (again the LXX is different).

³⁸ For further examples, cf. Is 6:8; 40:6

³⁹ Cf. Brown, *John*, p. 154.

- (d) i 31: John the Baptist has been given the role of revealing him to Israel
iii 29: John the Baptist is the best man arranging the marriage⁴⁰

As Brown observes, these four parallels are not exact. Rather than being variants of the same scene, as Wellhausen and Goguel thought, he suggests that they may be fragments of a larger Johannine tradition about John the Baptist. But there is a further possibility: we may have here a deliberately constructed pattern.⁴¹ In both cases, the Baptist denies that he is the Christ and then goes on to identify himself (the voice in the wilderness/the friend of the Bridegroom) and the one to whom he is pointing (he who comes after me/the Bridegroom). That this similarity of construction is deliberate is all the more likely when we consider a fifth detail which Brown does not mention. In both passages, there is a reference to a voice: a voice in the wilderness (1:23) and the voice of the Bridegroom (3:29). It looks as if the evangelist is setting up an intentional contrast by means of the two voices. In that case, the use of voice in 3:29 rather than being anomalous is highly purposeful.⁴²

The Voice of the Baptist

There is a still further possibility that deserves some consideration. Although Jesus' voice is of great significance to the evangelist, other voices too, are important, as we have seen. Most obvious, apart from the voice of the Father is, of course, the voice of the Baptist himself. 'Voice', φωνή, is first used of him in the Fourth Gospel (1:23); in fact, no other voice is mentioned before 3:29. We have to wonder, therefore, if a passage that mentions both the Baptist and a voice is not intended as a link between the two. I tentatively suggest, therefore, that when the Baptist says 'because of the voice of the Bridegroom' (διὰ τὴν φωνὴν τοῦ νυμφίου)⁴³, he is making an elliptical statement equivalent to 'because I am the voice of the Bridegroom'.⁴⁴ In the first part of 3:29, he defines the Bridegroom as the one who has the bride; in the second part, he defines the friend of the Bridegroom as the latter's voice.⁴⁵ This would

⁴⁰ Table as on Brown, *John*, p. 154, slightly simplified.

⁴¹ In fact, Goguel, *Jean Baptiste*, p. 88, distinguishes between a source and the evangelist's redaction with the aim of setting the Baptist material in chapters 1 and 3 in parallel.

⁴² Perhaps we are meant to see a deeper contrast in the voice which sounds in the sterility of the desert and the voice of the fertile Bridegroom.

⁴³ English translations which say 'when he hears the Bridegroom's voice' are misleading because there is no verb corresponding to 'when he hears'.

⁴⁴ Or, retaining the third person idiom, 'because he is the voice of the Bridegroom'.

⁴⁵ In content, this comes to much the same as our earlier suggestion that φωνή could refer to John's own proclamation, the emphasis here being on the Baptist as a person whose identity is the same as that in chapter 1.

mean that John is playing the same record in his two strategic confessions of faith in Jesus which frame the first section of the Fourth Gospel.

A major objection to this proposal is that in the clause which immediately precedes this statement of the Baptist about the voice, the friend of the Bridegroom is described as the one ‘who stands and hears him’. In such a context, any reference to a voice must surely be to that of the Bridegroom. However we should not give too much emphasis to this clause. It certainly does not need to be taken literally. It is in fact a conventional phrase for the ready obedience of a servant,⁴⁶ and its principal purpose is to define the friend of the Bridegroom just mentioned. He is the one who is at the Bridegroom’s disposal. It is for this very reason that he can act as the Bridegroom’s voice. In this sense, both the relative clause and the clause following it are simply different ways of defining the friend of the Bridegroom. He is one who carries out the Bridegroom’s instructions and he acts as his spokesman.⁴⁷ This was precisely the role of Moses, traditionally understood as the paronymph or friend of Yahweh the Bridegroom when the covenant was concluded at Sinai.⁴⁸ He had to speak for God because the people could not bear to hear the divine voice.⁴⁹

Conclusion

What emerges from these considerations is that, far from being a difficulty, the reference to the voice in Jn 3:29 is pregnant with meaning. Given the author’s predilection for irony and deeper levels of meaning, it is not impossible that he intends to attach more than one significance to the ‘voice of the Bridegroom’. However, in view of the clear distinction between the respective roles which he allots to the Baptist and Jesus, it is tempting to see the primary meaning of this phrase as applying to the Baptist, for, to adapt the words of St. Augustine, for this author, Jesus was the Word, but John was the Voice.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Cf. B. F. Westcott, *The Gospel according to St. John* (London: John Murray, 1881), p. 59, and Barrett, *John*, p. 223, though the latter concedes that the hearing could be linked with the following voice.

⁴⁷ This is very clear in Black’s reconstruction of the Aramaic source which he thinks lies behind this material in Jn 3: ‘To obtain the parallelism we require to make “he that standeth and heareth him” subject of a clause with “(is) the friend of the bridegroom” as its predicate...’ This gives the rendering: ‘He that standeth and heareth him (is) the friend of the bridegroom/and rejoiceth greatly because of the voice of the bridegroom’. Cf. M. Black, *An Aramaic Approach to the Gospels and Acts* (3rd edn; Oxford: Clarendon, 1967), p. 147.

⁴⁸ Cf. J. H. Bernard, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to John* (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1928), p. 131, and S-B, I, pp. 501-2.

⁴⁹ Deut 5:24-7.

⁵⁰ Aug, *Serm* 293, 3.

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