New Wine in Old Wineskins: Bursting Traditional Interpretations in John’s Gospel (Part 1)

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The following article, which will be continued in the next issue of BBR, offers disparate exegetical notes on six passages in the Fourth Gospel. Part 1 argues (1) for the menorah as at least partial background for the portrayal of the Word as light and life in John 1:4; (2) for the angels in John 1:51 as representing Christ in his function as a message-bearer going up and down Jacob’s ladder between heaven and earth; and (3) for the profuse passing of water in consequence of drinking it in John 7:37–39 as a symbol of the superabundance of life given believers by the Holy Spirit.

Key Words: menorah, tree, life, light, lamp(stand), tabernacle, angels, ladder, ascending, descending, communication, living water, drinking water, belly, rivers, passing water, urination

To replace inadequate if not erroneous traditional interpretations, the following exegetical notes propose nontraditional interpretations of three passages in John’s Gospel.

THE WORD AS THE MENORAH, A TREE OF LIFE AND LIGHT (JOHN 1:4)

According to John 1:4, “life was in him [‘the Word’], and the life was the light of human beings” (compare John 8:12, where Jesus, who is the Word, says, “The person who follows me . . . will have the light of life”). Generally recognized echoes of Gen 1 in John’s prologue (“In the beginning” and references to creation) make us think that John borrows light at least in part from God’s creating light on the first day of creation, though in John’s prologue the light is the uncreated Word, God’s agent in the creation of light along with all else. Jesus will call himself “the light of the world” (8:12, 9:5; similarly 12:46) and by so doing will associate himself with the sun, as in 11:9: “There are twelve hours of day, aren’t there? If anyone walks about

1. The question of division between John 1:3 and 1:4 does not affect the present argument appreciably.
during the day, he/she doesn’t stumble, because he/she sees the light of this world.” For John 8:12, the lighting of four huge lamps to illuminate Jerusalem during the Festival of Tabernacles provides additional background, as is regularly noted, inasmuch as Jesus is in Jerusalem for that festival (John 7:2).\(^2\) The illumination recalled the pillar of fire that hovered over Yahweh’s tabernacle and guided Israel by night during their journey through the wilderness, when they were living in their own tabernacles (Exod 13:21; 40:34–38; Neh 9:15–23, 19; Ps 78:14; 105:39).

But whence the association of life with light? Broadly speaking, we might appeal to some cultural background. Before the invention of matches, light bulbs, and the like, people had to keep a lamp burning if they wished to avoid borrowing fire from a neighbor or laboriously rekindling a fire by friction or percussion every time darkness fell. When a living human being was not present to keep the lamp burning, however, it went out, so that the going out of a lamp came to represent death, as in Job 18:5–6: “Indeed, the light of the wicked goes out, and the flame of his fire gives no light. The light in his tent is darkened, and his lamp goes out above him.” On the other hand, life meant that the light of a lamp was kept burning. Hence “the light of life” in Job 33:30, Ps 56:14[13], 1QS 3:7, and other conjunctions of light and life in Job 10:22 lxx Syr.; 33:28; Ps 27:1, 36:10[9].\(^3\) But there may be more specifically scriptural background for the association of life with light.

John’s prologue echoes the OT tabernacle of Yahweh as well as the account of creation in Gen 1: “The Word became flesh and tabernacled \(\epsilon\lambda\sigma\kappa\iota\omega\sigma\sigma\nu\) among us” (1:14). As one of its items of furniture, Yahweh’s tabernacle featured the menorah (Exod 25:31–39; 27:20–21; 37:17–24 [LXX: 38:13–17]; 40:4, 24–25; Lev 24:2–4; Num 8:2–3). The very term menorah transliterates the Hebrew חנרי, meaning “lampstand,” cognate to \(\tau\), “lamp,” and derived along with \(\tau\) from a root that means “to give light, shine, flame” (BDB, s.v. \(\tau\nu\)). As a lampstand, the menorah supported lamps that were kept burning to give light.

The menorah had a central trunk and six branches. It represented a tree, in other words. This representation is confirmed by the menorah’s lampbowls. They were hammered in the shape of almond blossoms, each with a calyx and petals. Specifically, then, the menorah together with its lamps represented an almond tree.\(^4\)

According to Num 17:23[8], Aaron’s lifeless wooden staff “put forth buds, produced blossoms, and bore ripe almonds” (see the whole of Num 17:16–26[1–11]). That is to say, the blossoming exhibited an awakening to life. An almond tree’s blossoming puts special emphasis on the exhibition,
in fact, for this tree was the first to awaken from the vegetational “death” of winter. Pliny (Nat. 16.42) puts the awakening in January. *Ahiqar* 2:7 Syr. A also mentions this early blossoming, \(^5\) while Eccl 12:5 and Jer 1:11–12 mention the almond tree’s blossoming as such, doubtless because of its doing so before other trees.

It is easy, then, to connect the almond blossom shape of the menorah’s lampbowls with life, so that the seven-branched menorah represents not just a tree but a tree of life as well as a tree of light. This representation pervaded the ancient Near East:

Furthermore, the divinity revealed in the tree [de-divinized in Israelite religion, though symbolism remained] is also the source of the hoped-for life without death . . . . Thus the theophany motif of the sacred tree becomes blended inextricably with the concept of life eternal. The tree of life becomes an inseparable aspect of the regenerative principle contained within plant life. \(^6\)

This specific association of themes of fertility and light must be seen . . . as an expression of the awareness of the dependence of nourishing organic life upon the light of the sun as well as upon the water of life absorbed by the roots of the tree. \(^7\)

The biblical combination of tree form with actual lamps, i.e. the tabernacle menorah, must be seen against this background of continued association of plant life and celestial light. \(^8\)

[T]he “tree of life” in later biblical and post-biblical times remained a vivid image as is evident from its preservation in Jewish and Christian eschatology and wisdom. \(^9\)

Thus the menorah as the tree of life and light takes us back to Gen 1–3, where the LORD God caused “the tree of life” to grow in the Garden of Eden (2:9) and after the fall placed cherubim “to guard the way to the tree of life” (3:24). It thus appears that the tabernacle’s menorah stands behind the designation of Jesus the Word as the “light of life.”

Insofar as the Fourth Gospel and the book of Revelation share a number of theological and especially Christological themes (see, for example, the designation of Jesus as “the Word of God” in Rev 19:13), the book of Revelation confirms this allusion to the menorah as the Edenic tree of life that gives light. \(^10\) There, as in John 1:14, we find multiple allusions to the OT tabernacle:

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7. Ibid., 101.
8. Ibid., 121. Compare the burning bush in Exod 3:1–6.
9. Ibid., 138 (for full discussion, see pp. 95–164, 172–81). Here are the references, which Meyers does not cite: Prov 3:18; Rev 2:7; 21:3; 22:1–2, 14, 19; 1 En. 24:1–25:7; 4 Ezra 8:52). Discussed below are the passages in Revelation.
• The one sitting on the throne will tabernacle over them (Rev 7:15).
• And he [the beast] opened his mouth . . . to blaspheme his [God's] tabernacle (Rev 13:6).
• And the temple (ναός) of the tabernacle of the testimony in heaven was opened (Rev 15:5).
• Behold, the tabernacle of God [is] with human beings, and he will tabernacle with them (Rev 21:3).

Moreover light, such as the menorah gives, characterizes this tabernacle-temple:

• And I did not see a temple in it [the new Jerusalem]; for the Lord God Almighty is its temple (ναός), and the Lamb [is its temple]. And the city has need neither of the sun nor of the moon to illuminate it; for the glory of God enlightens it, and its lamp [is] the Lamb. And the nations will walk about through its light. . . . And its gates will never be shut by day, for there will be no night there (Rev 21:22–25).
• And night will be no more, and they will have no need of [the] light of a lamp and of sunlight, because the Lord God will shine as light over them (Rev 22:5).

Notable are the two references to a lamp (λυχνὸς), associated as it is with the menorah, which was a lampstand with lamps (λυχνία and λυχνοί in the LXX of the passages in Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers referenced above). God and the Lamb are the light-giving menorah-tabernacle-temple. And because “the temple of the tabernacle of the testimony in heaven was opened” (Rev 15:5; similarly 11:19), the light of the menorah is no longer confined to the Holy Place. Now it shines all over the new Jerusalem.

Just as the menorah represents the tree of life in the garden (παράδεισος, “paradise,” in the LXX) of Eden, so in Rev 2:7 Jesus promises to ‘give to him/her [‘the one who overcomes’] to eat from the tree of life which is in the paradise of God.’ And on either side of the river of life flowing from the throne of God and the Lamb through the middle of the street of the new Jerusalem are specimens of “the tree of life producing twelve fruits, yielding fruit each month by each month; and the leaves of the tree [are] for the healing of the nations” (Rev 22:1–2). As a result, “death will be no more” (Rev 21:3) and “blessed [are] the ones who wash their robes, so that they will have authority (ἐξουσία) over the tree of life and enter the city by its gates” (Rev 22:14). We are reminded of the statement in John 1:12 that “as many as received him [the Word who is the light of life]—he has given them authority (ἐξουσίαν) to become children of God,” in contrast with God’s taking away “the portion of the tree of life” from anyone who takes away from the book of Revelation (Rev 22:19).

The eternality of this life, much emphasized in John’s Gospel and implied in Revelation by the addition of “temple” (a permanent building) to

“tabernacle” (ordinarily impermanent), harks back to Gen 3:22–24, where God takes action against the possibility that humankind “might take [fruit] from the tree of life and eat [it] and live forever” (εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα, as in John 4:14; 6:51, 58; 8:51, 52; 10:28; 11:26; 1 John 2:17; cf. John 8:35, 12:34; 2 John 2—not to list John's many uses of αἰώνιος, “eternal,” to describe the life that believers have). And the placement of cherubim to guard “the way (τὴν δόξαν in the LXX) of the tree of life” (Gen 3:24) finds its counterpart in Jesus' claim, “I am the way (ἡ δόξα) and the truth and the life (ἡ ζωή)” (John 14:6). Not only do the terms δόξα and ζωή echo Gen 3:24 LXX. Also, Jesus as the truth contrasts with “the ancient serpent, the one called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver” (Rev 12:9; also 20:2), whom Jesus describes in John 8:44 as “a murderer from the beginning” who “does not stand in the truth, because truth is not in him,” so that “whenever he speaks the lie (τὸ ψεύδος, an allusion to his lie in Eden, repeated since then over and over again), he speaks out of his own things because he is a liar and the father of it [that is, ‘the lie,’ the term ‘father’ clearly alluding to what he said in Eden].”

All in all, then, John’s portrayal of Jesus as the light of life draws not only on the light that shone the first day of creation and on the pillar of fire that hovered over the tabernacle and lighted Israel's nighttime journeys through the wilderness but also on the tree of life in the Garden of Eden and on the combination of that tree and light in the tabernacle menorah with its lamps.

THE SON OF MAN AS AN ANGELIC LADDER (JOHN 1:51)

In John 1:51, Jesus says to Nathaniel, “Amen, amen, I say to you [plural], you [again plural] will see the heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.” “The Son of Man” and “heaven” recollect ‘one like a son of man’—that is, a human figure in contrast to the preceding beasts—whom Daniel saw coming “with the clouds of heaven,” emblematic of a theophany (Dan 7:13). The ascending and descending of angels on the Son of Man, however, borrows phraseology from Gen 28:12, where in a dream Jacob, to whom John 1:47 has recently alluded, saw “a ladder . . . set on the earth with its top reaching to heaven; and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.” It appears, then,
that Jesus portrays himself as the Son of Man, that is, a divine-human being identical with the Word who was God and became flesh (John 1:1, 14) and who like Jacob’s ladder connects heaven and earth.

But in a recently published article, J. C. O’Neill quickly dismissed this common understanding that the Johannine Jesus substitutes the Son of Man for Jacob’s ladder. O’Neill argued instead for the Son of Man “as the place on earth **from** which the angels ascend and to **which** they descend”:

This [common understanding] is unlikely because the preposition **εἰς** is used in John with the accusative and the LXX used the genitive. In the context of Gen. 28:12, the angels are using the ladder to ascend to heaven and to descend from heaven, and **εἰς** with the genitive is appropriate. If the transcriber or translator of John 1:51 into Greek had wanted to suggest that the Son of Man was now the ladder, he would have naturally used a genitive. Instead, we have an accusative. The verb **καταβαίνω** with **εἰς** and the accusative can mean “unto” (John 6:16).15

Against the objection that John 1:51 says nothing about angels’ ascending **from** the Son of Man, O’Neill appeals to the observation of Christopher Rowland that, just as in John 14:28 “to you” modifies “I am coming” but not the preceding “I am going away,” so in John 1:51, “to the Son of Man” needs to modify only “descending.”16 Thus the angels do not ascend from the Son of Man on earth. They only descend to him from heaven.17

It is true that Gen 28:12 LXX uses **εἰς** with the genitive for the ascending and descending of angels on Jacob’s ladder. It is also true that in John 6:16 the disciples of Jesus descended **εἰς** τὴν ὥμοιασάν. But in view of their “having embarked into a boat” (John 6:17), **εἰς** + the accusative probably combines motion **to** with contact **on**—thus, they descended “onto the sea.” And it is untrue that John would “naturally” have used a genitive instead of an accusative if he had wanted to portray the Son of Man as Jacob’s ladder on whom the angels of God ascended and descended. For not only can **εἰς** + the accusative be used for motion “from one point to another **across, over,**”18 and not only does John never use **εἰς** + the genitive for motion

17. John 6:62 speaks of the Son of Man’s ascending to where he was “before,” and John 17:1, 4, 11, 13 contrast Jesus’ being “on the earth” and “in the world” with his “going to the Father” in “heaven.” As the Son of Man, therefore, Jesus cannot be located on earth and in heaven at the same time so as to be the object of concurrent ascending and descending. Delbert Burkett notes that after his glorification Jesus will reside both in heaven with his Father and on earth in believers (as will the Father, it should be added—14:18–20, 23; *The Son of Man in the Gospel of John* [JSNTSup 56; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991], 118–19). But the residence in believers may take place through the Holy Spirit. Burkett and others view Jacob’s “Bethel” as “God’s household” on earth. But where in John 1:51 is any hint of such a view?
18. BDAG, s.v. **εἰς** 4b4, with numerous references (italics original).
across or over, as would have been the case in 1:51 if he had written ἐπὶ + the genitive for the angels’ vertical motions across or over the Son of Man. He also uses ἐπὶ + the accusative in the sense of ‘on’ slightly more often than he uses ἐπὶ + the genitive in that sense. And John had good reason to depart from the septuagintal ἐπὶ + the genitive in Gen 28:12; for he had recently written ἐπὶ + the accusative in connection with heaven and descending (as in 1:51) and had done so twice: ‘And John [the Baptist] testified by saying, ‘I have seen the Spirit descending (καταβαίνων) as a dove out of heaven, and it abode on him (ἐμείνειν ἐπὶ αὐτῶν). And I did not know him; but the one who sent me to baptize in water—that one had said to me, “On whomever you see the Spirit descending and abiding on him (καταβαίνων καὶ μένειν ἐπὶ αὐτῶν) . . .”’” (1:32–33).

In those verses, to be sure, ἐπὶ αὐτῶν goes with ἐμείνειν and μένειν either more than or rather than with καταβαίνων. Nor would ἐπὶ αὐτῶν indicate motion across or over if it did go with καταβαίνων. But in these verses, Jesus is not a ladder or anything else across or over which descending would make sense. And the association between descending and abiding on Jesus remains extremely close. Therefore the use of ἐπὶ + the accusative in 1:51 does not rule out the Son of Man as Jacob’s ladder on which angels ascend and descend, nor does ἐπὶ + the accusative in 1:51 favor the Son of Man as the origin of ascent and the destination of descent.

To elaborate the usual understanding of the Son of Man as Jacob’s ladder, I set aside efforts to explain John 1:51 in terms of history-of-religions background and pursue instead an interpretation in Johannine terms. As is universally acknowledged, John 1:51 bears a close resemblance not only to Gen 28:12 but also to John 3:13: “And no one has ascended into heaven except him who descended out of heaven, [that is,] the Son of Man.” “The Son of Man” figures prominently in both 1:51 and 3:13. Because an open heaven allows entrance and exit, the “opened heaven” of 1:51 compares well with “into heaven” and “out of heaven” in 3:13. And ascending and descending appear in both passages. The textual order of ascending and descending in 3:13 matches that of 1:51, but 3:13 makes the descending precede ascending temporally, as the Son of Man Jesus descended before he ascended (compare 6:62: “What then if you see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?”).

19. For ἐπὶ + the accusative with the meaning “on,” see 1:32, 33; 3:36; 7:30; 44; 8:59; 9:6, 15; 12:14, 15; 13:25; 18:4; 21:4 ν.λ.; 21:20. For ἐπὶ + the genitive with the meaning “on,” see 6:2, 19, 21 (but “to” is possible, perhaps likely); 17:4; 19:13, 19, 31; 20:7.
20. As noted also by Rowland, “John 1. 51,” 504–5.
21. See O’Neill, “Son of Man,” 375 nn. 3–4, 376 n. 6, for others who take the Son of Man as origin and destination rather than ladder.
22. Brown offers a helpful survey of various interpretations but strangely does not use 3:13 as an interpretive key (John [I–XII], 83–84, 88–91).
23. Burkett (Son of Man, 86) discusses whether the descent in John 3:13 occurs after the ascent (“No one has ascended into heaven except him who [subsequently] descended out of heaven”) or whether the ascent presupposes the descent (“No one has ascended into heaven
Strikingly in 3:13, then, the Son of Man replaces the angels of 1:51 as the subject of ascending after descending. But should we really speak of a replacement? Should we not rather speak of an identification, so that the angels of 1:51 are identified with, or as, the Son of Man? After all, he and they both ascend and descend. In this case, the angels are not to be regarded as agents separate from the ladder-like Son of Man. They are one with him to indicate his function as a message-bearer. For by definition, angels are messengers. In other words, the ascending and descending angels portray Jesus the Son of Man as a ladder of communication between heaven and earth. This portrayal suits his role as “the Word” in 1:1–18 and as a speaker throughout John’s Gospel of many “words” (ῥήματα and λόγοι). The fact that the angels are “God’s” provides a link not only with Gen 28:12 but also with Jesus as the Word who was both himself God and also God’s one-and-only Son.

24. Compare Jesus’ uniting in himself the figures of a gate and a shepherd in John 10:1–18.

25. See my Jesus the Word, 1–50 = idem, The Old is Better: New Testament Essays in Support of Traditional Interpretations (WUNT 178; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 329 n. 8; also idem, A Survey of the New Testament (4th ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 266 sidebar). Mark W. G. Stibbe suggests that John’s portraying Jesus “as going down or going up to a geographical area . . . function[s] as a constant reminder of the celestial katabasis (descent) and anabasis (ascent) of Jesus” (John [Readings: A New Biblical Commentary; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993], 41).

26. As is well known, Gen 28:12 can be translated “the angels of God were ascending and descending on him [Jacob]” rather than “. . . on it [the ladder]”; and rabbis much later than the NT debated the proper translation (Gen. Rab. 68:18, 69:7; cf. Hugo Odeberg, The Fourth Gospel, Interpreted in Its Relation to Contemporaneous Religious Currents in Palestine and the Hellenistic-Oriental World [Amsterdam: Grünner, 1968], 33–42). If John 1:51 reflects “on him” in Gen 28:12, “the Son of Man” replaces Jacob instead of the ladder. But such a replacement disagrees with Jesus’ designating Nathanael, not himself, as truly an Israelite but without that patriarch’s guile and disagrees also with “you will see” as putting the disciples in place of Jacob, the seer in Gen 28:12 (see Burkett, Son of Man, 115–16). Regardless of arguments favoring “on him” in Gen 28:12 (for which see, e.g., D. A. Carson, The Gospel according to John [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991], 163–64), John’s own replacement of the ascending and descending angels (1:51) with the ascending and descending Son of Man (3:13) favors a Johannine understanding of Gen 28:12 in agreement with the LXX: ἐκ’ ἀναβασίας, “on it” [the ladder, since the Greek feminine pronoun has to reference the Greek feminine noun for a ladder, κλίμακα, rather than Jacob]. For Jacob was not ascending and descending, as would be implied if the Son of Man, who according to 3:13 ascended and descended, replaced Jacob (against—among others—Klaus Wengst, Das Johannes-Evangelium [2 vols.; Theologischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament 4/1–2; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2000–2001], 1:95–96).
In the Synoptics, heaven is opened at Jesus’ baptism for the Spirit to descend on him. He sees the Spirit descending on him and hears the Father speak to him (Mark 1:10–11, Matt 3:16–17, Luke 3:21–22, with the slight difference that in Matthew the Father speaks about him). Here in John, where his baptism goes unmentioned, Jesus himself speaks as the Word to the world throughout his earthly sojourn, and his disciples see in him the one who descended from a heaven opened for him to bring communication from above. Again in the Synoptics, the Son of Man is seated at God’s right hand and comes with the clouds of heaven and with angels as gatherers of the elect. John has the Son of Man positioned as a ladder linking the opened heaven to believers below, with angels acting as messengers.

The angels’ use of this ladder resonates with the underestimated angelomorphic Christology found in John’s Gospel as well as in the Apocalypse of John, where Jesus is also portrayed as “the Word of God” (Rev 19:13; compare Philo’s calling “the Word” (ὁ λόγος) God’s “chief messenger” (ἀρχι-ἀγγέλος) in Her. 42 §205). Message and messenger merge.

The view of John Painter that Jesus is not Jacob’s ladder but is the Son of Man enthroned in heaven by way of a ladder-like cross (in correction of Nathanael’s notion of an earthly kingship) disagrees with the angels’ descending on the Son of Man. Painter’s argument that no angelic mediators appear in John fails to consider the angels’ coalescence with “Son-of-Man Christology,” so that the ladder and the angels ascending and descending on it are to be seen as an indivisible figure of speech referring to Jesus the Word. Apart from the angels as messengers, the allusion to Jacob’s ladder does not convey any thought of communication, for the absence of “ladder” would keep the allusion obscure and therefore God’s speaking to Jacob out

of the picture. The angels are just as Christological as is the ladder, then, so that the problem of the disciples’ never seeing a separate angelophany dissolves. Nathanael and his fellow disciples will see Jesus in communicative terms throughout Jesus’ earthly ministry.31

But what about communications from below, represented by the angels’ ascending on the Son of Man? Yes, that too comes to the fore in John’s Gospel, though admittedly in not so strong a fashion as with the communications from above. The parade example of Jesus as the angelicized, ladder-like Son of Man who communicates from below consists of his prayer in ch. 17, introduced with the statement, “Jesus spoke these things, and lifting up his eyes into heaven (εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν) he said” (v. 1; cf. 11:41b: “But Jesus raised his eyes upward [ἀνω] and said, ‘Father, . . .’”). And just as in his revelatory communications from heaven he spoke about his Father and about himself as communicating to the disciples on behalf of the Father, so in his prayerful communication from below he spoke about the disciples and about himself as communicating to the Father on their behalf.32 This communication from below contrasts sharply with Jesus’ prayers in Gethsemane according to the Synoptics, where he prays only about his own fate, not as a communicator on behalf of the disciples.

Similar to ch. 17 is 14:16–17, where Jesus tells the disciples, “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Paraclete that he may be with you forever.” He promises to communicate to the Father on the disciples’ behalf just as he has communicated to them on the Father’s behalf. Furthermore, he repeatedly tells them to pray “in [his] name.” Insofar as he is identified with his name, then, he becomes a ladder of communications ascending from heaven to the disciples. Their and his prayers unite in this upward movement.

Two-way communication exists: messages down from an open heaven and up to an open heaven. Descending angels bring the messages from heaven. Ascending angels take the messages up to heaven. And Jesus the Son of Man is both those angels and the ladder up and down which he carries the messages.

PASSING WATER AFTER DRINKING IT
(JOHN 7:37–39)

According to John 7:38b, Jesus said, ἄνεμοι ἐκ τῆς κοιλίας αὐτοῦ ἱέρασωσαιν ὕδατος ζωντας, “Rivers of living water will flow out of his [and ‘her’ if the reference is to a believer] belly.” Several things are clear in this statement:

31. Against John Painter, Reading John’s Gospel Today (Atlanta: John Knox, 1975), 56. See also Rowland, “John 1. 51,” 14, against Painter. As Painter does, Christian Dietzfelbinger notes that the disciples never see angels separately in the function ascribed to them in 1:51 and then deduces merely that “die Engel sind in V. 51 Ausdruck für die Zugehörigkeit Jesu zur himmlischen Welt und für seinen Charakter als Menschensohn” (Das Evangelium nach Johannes [2 vols.; ZBK; Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 2001], 1:61). Thus the note of communication is lost.
32. For another, very short prayer of Jesus to his Father in heaven, see 12:28.
First, the belly is a cavity for water. According to Num 5:21–22, 27, water (LXX: ὕδωρ) enters the belly (LXX: κοιλίαν). According to Matt 15:17, “everything that goes into the mouth passes into the belly (κοιλίαν).” Though κοιλία has a range of meanings, here in John 7:38b its construal with an outflow of water defines its present meaning clearly enough. We may compare the use in Latin of aqualicuslus for the belly as a vessel containing water.

Second, a river would indicate an abundance of water, but the plural “rivers” indicates a superabundance of water, as in Diodorus Siculus 5.41.3: “and many rivers irrigate much land by flowing in it [that is, in the land].”

Third, “living water” means flowing water such as characterizes rivers and fountains, as in Song 4:15, Jer 2:13, Zech 14:8, Odes Sol. 30:1; and most notably John 4:10, 11; Rev 7:17; 21:6; 22:1, 17. (The passages in Revelation have “water of life,” but the genitive ζωῆς, “of life,” is to be considered descriptive and therefore equivalent to “living” as well as theologically indicative of eternal life.) We may compare the use of John’s verb ἤρεω with Joel 3:18 LXX: οἱ βουνοὶ ρυθμοῦνται γάλα καὶ πάσαι οἱ ἄφειμες Ἰουδαία ρυθμοῦνται ὕδατα, “The hills will flow with milk and all the outlets of Judah will flow with water.”

And fourth, the rivers of living water will flow “out of the belly.” We may compare Diodorus Siculus 5.41.6: “and they use [‘the fruit of the buckthorn shrub,’ mentioned in the preceding clause] for food and drink and as a medicine for flowing bellies (πρὸς τὰς κοιλίας τὰς ἰεύοσας [a diarrheic symptom of dysentery]).”

John 4:14 quotes Jesus as saying, “But whoever drinks of the water that I will give him/her will never thirst, but the water that I will give him/her will become in him/her a fountain of water welling up with the result of [an ecbatic eἰκ.] eternal life.” The first half of that statement finds a parallel in John 7:37b: “If anyone thirsts, let him/her come to me and drink.” The second half of 4:14 finds an elaboration in 7:38, where believing in Jesus defines symbolically the drinking of water that he will give, where “his belly” specifies the meaning of “in him/her [the drinker, not Jesus]” in 4:14, and where the “fountain of water welling up with the result of eternal life” in 4:14 expands into “rivers of living water will flow out.”

The belly cannot retain the water of a fountain that wells up within, much less whole rivers of water. So the welling up within progresses naturally to a flowing out of the belly. What then does the outflow mean? If we explore the symbolism by asking first how water flows out of the belly physically, the answer seems obvious. Drinking water results in passing water. The water flows out by way of urination, or in this case—because of “rivers”—by way of profuse urination, which heightens the symbolism of abundance already present in the fountain of 4:14.

33. The verb ἤρεω takes an object in the accusative. English idiom requires the insertion of “with.”
But in view of the fact that both Greek and Hebrew have specific words for urine (οὐρὰν and נש, respectively), can “water” (ὕδωρ and מים, respectively), refer to urine? Yes. Here are some examples of this usage:

- Ezekiel 7:17 Sym: “and all knees will flow with water (ῥύσει ὕδατα);” that is, in context, fright will cause an involuntary passing of water, so that the flowing urine will become visible on the knees just below the soldiers’ skirts. The underlying Hebrew (חלה מים) corresponds.

- Ezekiel 21:12[7] Sym: “and water will flow (ῥύσει ὕδατα) through all knees”—another reference to an involuntary passing of water caused by fright, and again the underlying Hebrew (חלה מים) corresponds.

- Testament of Job 38:3: “Food goes in through the mouth, and again water (τὸ ὕδωρ) is drunk through the same mouth and sent into the same throat. But whenever the two [‘food’ and ‘water’] go down into the latrine . . . .” That is to say for the present purpose, “the water” that goes into the latrine is urine.

- 2 Kings 18:27 = Isa 36:12: “to eat their own dung and to drink the water of their own feet” (µηµυ µολῆς, so some mss and Q; K has מים, “their own urine”).

- Isaiah 25:10: “and Moab will be trodden down in his place even as straw is trodden down in the water (מים) of the dunghill.”

- 1QHodayot 4:33–34 (Sukenik’s numbering in the editio princeps): “and my knees flowed like water (יְרוֹלִיל הָנָס).” Because of parallelism with the preceding line, “My heart has melted like wax in front of the fire,” it might be questioned whether the knees’ flowing like water refers to urination. But the context of “dread and dismay” favors an involuntary passing of water onto the knees just as in Ezek 7:17, 21:12[7], OT passages that provide interpretive background. And the melting of the heart like wax parallels quite nicely the bladder’s inability to hold its water. Though the parallelism is not quite so close as here, it and the interpretive background of Ezek 7:17, 21:12[7] apply similarly to the following citation.

- 1QHodayot 8:34 (Sukenik’s numbering): “and my knees flowed like water (יְרוֹלִיל מים).”

- Sipre Deuteronomy §192: “water flows down between his knees.”

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34. LSJ, s.v. ὕδωρ, compares the Sanskrit vāri, “water.”

35. If “water” goes into the latrine as urine, it may be asked whether “food” goes into the latrine as feces. The answer is yes. Ancients knew as well as we do that feces are food processed by the body, just as urine is water processed by the body. It is an obvious deduction from observing that eating and drinking result in the elimination of feces and urine, respectively, and that not eating and not drinking result in non-elimination.

36. If “the waters of abundance” that are drained out by God’s people in Ps 73:10 consist of the words of the wicked, as many commentators think, might the psalmist be sarcastically saying that the people are drinking the urine of the wicked, so to speak?
B. Kerithot 6a: “In fact, water of the feet (ר מים) might serve this purpose, but water of the feet may not be brought within the precincts of the temple.”

M. Jastrow states that in rabbinic literature “water of the feet” occurs for urine “frequently”; and he defines בֵּית מים, “house of water,” in rabbinic literature as a “urinary.” Striking is also the frequent combination of water with flowing, in reference to urination, just as in John 7:38. But perhaps it is not so striking after all, since we all know from personal experience that urination involves a flow of water, so that the belly as a cavity for water becomes a kind of fountain out of which the water flows. To have called this water “urine” in John 7:38 would not have comported well with having drunk the same water to slake one’s thirst, however. Hence, the urine that flows out is called “water” to equate it inoffensively with the water that was drunk.

The Festival of Tabernacles provides the setting of John 7:37b–38. This festival commemorated God’s giving the Israelites water to drink in the wilderness and included prayers for rain in the coming season and a water-drawing ceremony to secure it. It could therefore be argued that the setting of the Festival of Tabernacles calls for rain and drinkable water rather than urinary water. But despite this setting and whatever symbolism John puts on water that flows out of the belly, it is self-evident that water deriving immediately from this source does not count as drinkable or as rain. On the other hand, the water that Jesus will give for drinking satisfies whatever demand for drinkable water and rain the Festival of Tabernacles imposes on the passage. That is to say, the passage deals with two different kinds of water: water that is drunk (7:37b) and water that flows out of the belly as a result of drinking (7:38).

But what does the symbol of profuse urination in John 7:38 point to? It points to never thirsting, to having life περισσόν, “abundantly” or (because of drinking) περισαρχή, “abundantly.”

37. M. Jastrow, A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature (Brooklyn: Shalom, 1967 repr.), s.v. מים, with the citation “Meg. III,2; Y. Ber. II, 4c bot.” It might be argued that “of the feet” modifies “water” so as to indicate urine but that, when unmodified, “water” does not mean urine. Disproving such an argument is the phrase “house of water,” where “water” does the modifying rather than being modified and clearly means urine.

38. Compare the warning of Celsus (De medicina 3.21.3) concerning the danger of drinking (one’s own) urine, though Dioscorides Pedanius (De materia medica 2.81) advises doing so as a remedy against the bitings of a viper, deadly medicines, and dropsy. I have been asked whether we have any evidence in the Bible or Judaism for the use of bodily fluids as positive spiritual symbols. The use of blood for atonement certainly qualifies as such evidence even though in many passages blood carries the bad connotation of murder or other killing. Compare Jesus’ use of saliva for healing (Mark 8:23, John 9:6) and the healing power of Paul’s sweat (Acts 19:12).

39. See Exod 17:1–7; Num 20:1–13; Deut 8:15; Neh 9:15, 20; Ps 78:15–16; 81:8(7); 105:41; 114:8; Isa 48:21; 1 Cor 10:4.

the Greek word can mean “more than enough”) “superabundantly,” as Jesus promised (4:14, 6:35, 10:10). The eternality of this life makes it superabundant. In the “dry and thirsty land” that is the Near East (Ps 63:1 KJV)—and thirst plays an important role in John’s Gospel not only in chs. 4 and 7 but also in Jesus’ “I thirst” (19:28)—the passing of much water spelled a plenitude of water supply, not just bladder relief. Therefore the figure of profuse urination suits admirably the thought of eternal life through the “Spirit” represented by the water (John 7:39), the Spirit who “makes alive” (John 6:63). 41

Corresponding to this symbolism are the many references in ancient medical literature to urine as a measure of life, of recovery from illness, and of good health (see, e.g., Hippocrates, Epidemics 2.2.22: “No feces and no urine. She died”; 2.3.114: “much purging of urine in quantity” is a sign of recovery [so also Celsus, De medicina 2.8.17, and Hippocrates, Aphorisms 24]; 6.5.1: “the excretion of urine” is, among other bodily functions, “the physician in disease”; and dozens of other references). It does not take a physician, however, to know that much urine means much water drunk and that much water drunk means health and vitality, so that we should not consider a urinary allusion coarse and repulsive—certainly no more so than the eating of Jesus’ flesh and the drinking of his blood in John 6:52–58!

That John 7:38 has to do with the passing of water ties it closely, as we have seen, with the fountain inside a believer in 4:14 and disconnects it from the coming of blood and water out of Jesus’ side in 19:34, where ἐξ- ἥλθεν, “came out,” and πληράν, “side,” do not match the ηδονουσίν, “will flow,” and κοιλᾶς, “belly,” of 7:38 anyway. In particular, πληράν has to do with the ribs, not with the belly. 42 And because urinary water does not flow out of the belly to be drunk by others, 7:38 does not refer to Jesus as the source of rivers of living water to be drunk by believers. Only 7:37b refers to him as its source (“If anyone thirsts, let him/her come to me and drink”), and this verse suffices for Jesus as the source of the Spirit according to 7:39, 19:30, 20:22. The following statement in 7:38 is not needed for this point. Likewise falling away is the argument that 7:38 can hardly refer to the believer because of the lack of any contextual indication that the believer is to become a channel of living water for others. For, as already said, the profusion of urinary water symbolizes superabundance of life for the believer himself or herself, not for others.

The reference to profuse urination as a symbol of eternal life in oneself rather than to living water as a symbol of eternal life for others combines with 4:14 to favor the punctuation that makes the believer’s belly rather than Christ’s the source from which rivers of living water flow: “If anyone

41. Just as Jesus is both the giver of life (John 10:28) and the life itself (John 14:6), so also the Spirit is both the giver of life (John 6:63) and the life itself (represented by the water; John 7:37–39). That urinary water is “soiled” is irrelevant, because the point lies in the abundance of Spirit-given life. The reference to “rivers” stresses this abundance rather than drinkability.

42. See LSJ, s.v. πληρά and its cognates.
thirsts, let him/her come to me and drink. The one believing in me—just as the Scripture said, ‘Out of his/her belly will flow rivers of living water.’” Generally thought to make Jesus’ belly such a source is another punctuation: “If anyone thirsts, let him/her come to me; and let the one believing in me drink. Just as the Scripture said, ‘Out of his/her belly will flow rivers of living water.’” To the same effect, “the one believing in me” can be taken as the subject of “let come” as well as of “let drink.” But this punctuation does not demand, it only allows, Jesus’ belly to be the source; for the belly could belong to the one who comes and drinks as easily as to Jesus, the object of coming and believing.43

Though a urinary interpretation does not depend on an identification of the OT passage or passages that John cites, the interpretation may disfavor certain ones and favor another one or two. To take the believer’s belly as the urinary source makes 1 Cor 10:4 an unhelpful cross-reference, for this verse portrays Christ as the rock that provided Israel with drink in the desert. Therefore, although this cross-reference and its OT background (cited in n. 39) may help the interpretation of John 7:37b, where Jesus portrays himself as a water source, we cannot identify “the Scripture” that he cites in 7:38 with any of the OT passages dealing with that rock. The urinary interpretation also disfavors a citation of Ezek 47:1–12, for there a river flows out of the temple, which would link with Jesus rather than a believer’s belly. And again disfavored is a citation of Zech 14:8, for there the flowing of living waters out of Jerusalem, where “the LORD’s house” is located (Zech 14:20, 21), would also link with Jesus rather than a believer’s belly.

Favored instead is Isa 58:11: “And the LORD will continually . . . satisfy your soul in scorched places . . . . And you will be . . . like a fountain of water whose waters do not fail.” Isaiah’s statement is easily subject to a urinary interpretation by the Johannine Jesus, for a fountain spills forth water just as a belly that, so to speak, contains a fountain (John 4:14) spills forth water in the form of urine. The fact that the waters of Isaiah’s fountain do not fail helped an expansion of the fountain into “rivers of living [that is, flowing] water” and John’s subsequent identification of the water with the Spirit (John 7:39). Additional help may have come from Isa 44:3–4, where Yahweh says, “I will pour water on the thirsty [ground] and streams on the dry ground. I will pour my Spirit on your seed and my blessing on your offspring. And they will sprout up like a green tamarisk, like poplars beside channels of water.” This passage could have aided both the expansion of a fountain into “rivers of living [that is, flowing] water” and John’s subsequent identification of the water with the Spirit (John 7:39). But pouring on the ground so as to cause growth differs markedly from giving to drink so as to fill the belly. And trees sprouting up beside a stream differ from a belly out of which flow rivers. It seems probable, then, that the likening of people themselves to a fountain whose waters fail not in Isa 58:11 provides the mainspring

43. Still the best defense of the punctuation which makes the belly the believer’s is that of Juan B. Cortés, “Yet another look at Jn 7:37–38,” CBQ 29 (1967): 160–75.
(pun intended) for the outflow of living water from the believer’s belly in John 7:38—with some interpretive help from Isa 44:3–4. 44

44. Maarten J. J. Menken hypothesizes that κοιλία substitutes for πόταμος, “rock,” in Ps 77:16 LXX; that on the basis of Ps 114:8 the rock is equated with ἐγκατονταεταίρι, “spring”; that by a different vocalization this Hebrew word gets the meaning “inside” and therefore the translation κοιλία; that αὐτοῦ, “his,” is added for a reference to Jesus; and that “living” comes from Zech 14:8 (“The Origin of the Old Testament Quotation in John 7:38,” NovT 38 [1996]: 173–75). But “living water” appears also in Jer 2:13; 17:13; Song 4:15; 1QH 16:7; 16; and though not impossible, the complexity of Menken’s hypothesis does not fare well in a comparison with the simplicity of the interpretation offered above. Nor does Menken succeed in turning back the arguments of Cortés, not all of which he appears to have understood or appreciated. For a helpful survey of interpretations, see Anthony Tyrrell Hanson, The Prophetic Gospel: A Study of John and the Old Testament (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991), 99–115. Hanson himself suggests a background in Prov 18:4 LXX: “the thought (λόγος) in a man’s heart [is] deep water; and a river (ποταμός) springs up (ἀναρρέωται), also a fountain of life (ζωή).” But apart from “river,” this verse comes closer to John 4:13–14 than to 7:37–39. For a survey of patristic interpretations of John 7:37–38, see Hugo Rahner, “Flumina de ventre Christi: Die patristische Auslegung von Joh 7, 37. 38,” Bib 22 (1941): 269–302, 367–403. My thanks to Bruce Fisk, Karen Jobes, and Moisés Silva for criticisms of my treatment of John 7:37–38. Their agreement is not to be assumed.