

Narrative Criticism of John 11:1-45

Written in the third-person perspective by an omniscient narrator from the Johannine community for first century Christians, John 11:1-45 explores the necessity of temporal death as the prerequisite for eternal life. In support of this claim, my examination of the text itself will utilize narrative gaps interspersed with foreshadowing. At the end of the paper, I will also include an R.C.I.A. application, indicating how lessons learned from the pericope can prayerfully inform core Catholic identity.

Immediately, the narrator indicates that Lazarus is ill, and explains to his audience that he is from Bethany, where Mary and her sister Martha are also from (Jn 11:1). By informing us that Mary anointed Jesus and dried his feet with her hair (Jn 11:2), her mention foreshadows an anointing for Lazarus her brother, seemingly in preparation for death. The sisters sent word of his illness to Jesus (Jn 11:3), who provides the reader with four pieces of information: 1) the illness will not end in death, 2) God will be glorified through it (Jn 11:4), 3) Jesus loved all three of them (Jn 11:5), and 4) because of this love he decided to delay visiting them for two days (Jn 11:6).

The apparent contradiction between the first three and the fourth points involve a narrative gap. If Jesus loved them so much, why not immediately depart to help instead of taking his time? We are left to our own conclusions at this stage in the story, presumably to take Jesus at his word that a deathly illness will not actually result in death. There may be more to it than that, however, for after announcing that he would return to Judea (Jn 11:7) where Bethany is, the disciples seriously questioned his desire to go there in light of an attempted stoning of Jesus (Jn 11:8). Was he concerned for his own and/or his disciples' safety, placing the two-day

delay in a new light? Two days may have been the soonest and most realistic opportunity to travel to Lazarus in his time of great need.

In terms of Jesus' intentions the author is mute on this point, though Jesus is depicted throughout John's Gospel as omniscient and clever enough to evade mortal harm if he wants to. The evident conclusion we are to draw is that Jesus is freely choosing to let his friend's illness progress. Seemingly in order that his motives be understood, Jesus speaks aphoristically: "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them" (Jn 11:9-10). By this he seems to mean that his disciples are "walking during the day" because they are with him, the "light of this world." Others might misunderstand the delay, or even the fact that they were going to Judea in the first place, but his disciples are to trust and walk at his pace, lest they "stumble" by disobeying him.

Verses 11 and 14 provide another narrative gap. In verse 11 Jesus claims that Lazarus has fallen asleep and that he will awaken him, and when the disciples misunderstood in verses 12-13 that "sleep" equals death and waking up Lazarus meant restoring him to life, Jesus spells it out for them in verse 14: "Lazarus is dead." Why does he know this? Did he receive a separate set of messages updating the status of his friend's health that the author does not mention? The reader is led to simply accept that Jesus is again displaying omniscience – he knows what he knows because he is who he is. Jesus' divine identity as someone to believe in is then affirmed in verse 15: "For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him."

With Thomas "who was called the Twin," saying "Let us also go, that we may die with him" (Jn 11:16), the disciples follow Jesus to Judea. This passage, too, shows a narrative gap.

What is the point of mentioning Thomas as “the Twin?” It would be senselessly random to mention that he was someone’s literal twin brother and leave it at that, so are left to draw our own conclusions. The idea of Thomas as “Twin” who is willing to go into harm’s way with Jesus to the point of death indicates a staunch desire to remain with him. In this sense, “Twin” is used metonymically. Thomas may not be Jesus’ actual twin or indeed anyone else’s, but he will be as close to Jesus as if they were not only of the same blood, but simultaneously of the same womb. His explicitly stated intent to die with Jesus also reveals a nascent awakening of the understanding that temporal death is a necessity to face toward eternal life. This is because Thomas and the disciples are in the presence of a divine being who displays total confidence in his ability to restore a friend to life. They may not yet be fully aware of Jesus’ divinity or how revivifying Lazarus foreshadows eternal life, but they do at least know that Jesus is incredible and unique, and will place their own lives on the line in order to bear witness to what happens next.

When Jesus arrived in Bethany, which was about two miles from Jerusalem, he was informed that “Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days” (Jn 11:17-18), which left no doubt about his death. Amid the Jewish mourners who were there to console the sisters, Martha went to meet Jesus “while Mary stayed at home” (Jn 11:19-20). Evident gaps at this point include the mindset Jews in proximity to Jerusalem had toward Jesus, as well as Martha going to see Jesus by herself. Did Jesus’ omniscience stretch to the point where nearness to the temple and the presence of Jews factored into his decision to delay the trip? If so, he must have desired them to see what was coming for it was the last great sign he would perform in this life prior to his resurrection, and he wanted them to be clear about what they were accepting or rejecting. As to Martha leaving Mary at home to greet Jesus by herself, the reader is left to conclude that

Martha's message is hers alone to deliver to Mary at this stage in the pericope, while Jesus remained at the outskirts of the village. Martha was to be his preliminary recipient, while Mary waited to receive word of him in her home, foreshadowing a deepening of the message and its meaning.

Upon meeting him, Martha told Jesus that his presence would have prevented Lazarus' death: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him" (Jn 11:21-22). We are told what she said, but left to conclude the manner in which she spoke the words. They had sent word to the Teacher, so why did he delay? His assurance that Lazarus would "rise again" (Jn 11:23) was met with an arguably skeptical and purely theological response: "I know he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day" (Jn 11:24). In her grief, she was prevented from seeing the great sign in the making – namely, that her brother's temporal death would signify Jesus' authority over both life and death; for in restoring Lazarus' earthly life, Jesus was foreshadowing his own resurrection from the dead. Yet in spite of herself, she was moved by his claim and subsequent question: "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" (Jn 11:25-26). Through her reply, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world" (Jn 11:27), the reader can perceive Martha's movement from pure grief into the possibility of new hope. Going beyond a desired action such as the restoration of her brother, she had reached the point of surrender by simply identifying the one who could do all things, the Son of God.

A renewal of hope spurred her into action, causing her to privately tell her sister Mary

that Jesus was asking for her (Jn 11:28). We are told “she got up quickly and went to him” for he “had not yet come to the village,” and that the Jews who were consoling her in her home followed her because they thought they would grieve with her at the tomb (Jn 11:29-31). We are not told, however, why Martha told Mary about Jesus privately. On one hand, she may just have been quietly communicating in an appropriate manner fit for a funeral. On the other, her discretion could have been based on concern for Jesus’ safety in the presence of otherwise well-intended Jewish mourners. Jesus and his disciples had potentially placed themselves in harm’s way by returning to Bethany, and Martha may have been conscientious about their safety even in the throes of grief.

Now all was exposed, however. People from the village and the outskirts alike were all assembled, bearing witness to Mary kneeling in front of Jesus, saying: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died” (Jn 11:32). Though we have no way of actually knowing what the Jewish onlookers made of this scene, we can safely surmise that those who were sympathetic to his cause were deeply moved at his presence and Mary’s publicly proclaimed faith while she knelt in front of him. We can likewise deduce that his skeptics’ worst suspicions about Jesus were reinforced. Who was this charlatan who had fooled so many good Jews? He had serious chutzpah showing himself at this scene of mourning, and so close to Jerusalem! By transitioning from encounters with Martha to Mary, moving from the outskirts of the village to their home and then back, and all in the presence of onlookers, the narrative brings us to a crucial moment where Jesus has to act to justify himself.

The first thing Jesus does is reveal emotional vulnerability out of genuine love for his friends, for “he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved,” and wanted to see the tomb (Jn 11:33-34). Having been told to “Come and see” (Jn 11:34), the Savior who had led so many

others now allowed himself to be led, showing human solidarity with his friends by beginning “to weep” (Jn 11:35). As speculated above, the scene garnered disparate responses among onlookers. These ranged from poignancy: “See how he loved him!” (Jn 11:36) to skepticism: “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?” (Jn 11:37).

The text continues, portraying Jesus as “again greatly disturbed” as he approached the tomb (Jn 11:38). We are not told why Jesus’ upset has returned, though the omniscience he displays throughout the chapter should make it clear enough to the reader. In confronting Lazarus’ tomb/cave, even while ordering the nameless onlookers to “take away the stone” (Jn 11:39), he was not only seeing where his friend lay, but a foreshadowing of his own death and burial. That is, even though he knew himself as “the resurrection and the life” (Jn 11:25), he was still on this side of the mortal veil, and could not help but be moved to the core by what he would have to endure. In the meantime, raising his friend would provide a different foreshadowing, that of his own resurrection.

Now we arrive at the crux of the narrative, where temporal death is revealed as prerequisite for eternal life. As a final confirmation that Lazarus was in fact dead, Martha informed him that rolling away the stone would have consequences: “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days” (Jn 11:39). Foreshadowing her vindicated belief, Jesus boldly questioned her: “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” (Jn 11:40) So they rolled away the stone, Jesus thanked the Father for hearing him for the sake of the onlookers (Jn 11:41-42), and then loudly commanded death to become life: “Lazarus, come out!” (Jn 11:43) His friend obeyed, walking out clad in his burial garments. Jesus then

commanded the onlookers to “unbind” and “let him go,” and many of the Jewish witnesses who came with Mary from the village “believed in him” (Jn 11:44-45).

It is understood that in being raised, Lazarus was empowered to live out the rest of his earthly life, and was not by that encounter raised to a deathless state where he would live eternally as he was at the moment of revivification. However, the pericope does foreshadow that through his disciples’ belief in risking following him back to Bethany, Martha and Mary’s validated belief in him, and Jesus’ demonstrated authority over life and death flowing from his identity as “the resurrection and the life” (Jn 11:25), that death is not merely death, but the precursor to eternal life. Undoubtedly due to the implied author’s intention for his Johannine community and subsequent readers that they believe in him, Jesus is very clear on this point: “Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die” (Jn 11:25-26).

RCIA Application

“Do you believe this?” (Jn 11:26). Jesus’ question to Martha is the same question he asks all of us today. Sometimes people think that when they embrace a faith, their suffering will cease, their lives will be constantly charged with meaning, and all their questions (if they still have any), will be easily answered by a quick glance at the Catechism. We can take refuge in our faith and know a consolation that sustains us through suffering, but as shown with Martha, Mary, and Lazarus, faith does not exempt us from suffering. While we live in the fullness of meaning through Christian revelation, that does not mean we will always have perfect clarity about how God is acting in our lives. Moreover, even though Catholicism does answer the most fundamental questions about our faith lives, immediate answers are not always at our disposal.

At times we will have to simply content ourselves by trusting God and living in the question, whatever it may be.

In Christian faith, however, there is no doubt that temporal death is the prerequisite for eternal life, and in the meantime, we must live out our lives freely and fully. Encounters such as described in John 11:1-45 are exceedingly rare and even unique, and resuscitation is something almost no one will experience. Yet for us who profess faith in Christ, as we progress toward our own resurrection into eternal life, we will face many deaths, many restorations to our lives in faith. Every time we deny ourselves an easy out to a problem, and embrace a thoughtful, prayerful solution that relies on God instead, we die to self and live toward eternal life. Every time we place the needs of another over our own wants, we die a little to our negative worldly impulses, and demonstrate that faith has equipped us to face and prioritize the kingdom.

When, like Thomas, we risk following him, God risks that we will grow into a maturity of faith that validates the risk. When, like Martha, we believe that Jesus is the Son of God, he reveals himself as such through signs that are intimately constructed just for us. When, like Mary, who goes to meet the Teacher who calls for her, we can be assured that he is also waiting for us with open arms and a desire to help. Jesus walks with us, even weeps with us, and ultimately restores us to himself every time we die to ourselves. He does this because he loves us, and desires us to grow all the more into our Christian faith. Because of these things, in the final analysis, we understand that temporal death is the prerequisite for eternal life, and that only life, not death, has the final say. This is our faith, and we welcome you to embrace it in all fullness in the Catholic Church.