

Imagery in the Gospel of John

Terms, Forms, Themes, and Theology of
Johannine Figurative Language

Edited by

Jörg Frey, Jan G. van der Watt,
and Ruben Zimmermann

In Collaboration with Gabi Kern

Mohr Siebeck

The Cubist Principle in Johannine Imagery:

John and the Reading of Images in Contemporary Platonism

Harold W. Attridge

Much has been written on the symbolism and imagery of the Fourth Gospel, and I shall not attempt to review that literature here.¹ I would like to reflect on certain qualities of the imagery of the gospel, in comparison with some other symbolic systems from the more or less contemporary Greco-Roman world. My thesis is that the use of Johannine imagery reflects certain tendencies in the symbolic interpretation of sacred traditions that we find in the late Hellenistic and early imperial periods. These tendencies are (1) to overdetermine the significance of recognized images, in part by viewing them from different angles of vision, all of which seems to increase the complexity of the symbolic system, but (2) to focus thereby on the referents of the symbolic system, thereby striving to penetrate to the 'essence' of what is symbolized.² I describe this tendency as 'cubist,' on a loose analogy with tendencies in early 20th century European art. Finally (3), the ultimate aim of such focusing is to provide an experience, mediated by images, of divine reality. Johannine use of images, in other words, replicates a practice, grounded in a theoretical framework, at work in certain forms of religious discourse of the period.

Examples of the phenomenon

Let me take four cases in the Gospel in which I think the phenomenon is apparent, one involves a simple traditional image, the second involves a title that conveys an image and is reinterpreted through the use of other

¹ For a useful review, see C. Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community* (Minneapolis 1995; 2nd ed. 2003). See also R. Zimmermann, *Christologie der Bilder im Johannesevangelium: Die Christopoetik des vierten Evangeliums unter besonderer Berücksichtigung von Joh 10* (WUNT 171; Tübingen 2004).

² Much of contemporary critical analytical discourse is wary of the language of 'essences,' seeing in it problematic political attempts to ignore the variety and diversity of human experience. My use of the term is emic, not etic. That is, I am not offering a criticism of such contemporary positions, but trying to capture the rationale of an ancient literary symbolic practice by analogy with a twentieth-century aesthetic.

images, the third consists of one part of a larger set of images which runs through the gospel, and the last is as an element of the basic gospel story which becomes the focal image, owing to the symbolic interpretation that it receives from its connection with other images in the gospel.

The first image is the familiar one of the good, or "noble" shepherd in John 10.³ The initial vignette in the shepherd discourse (προφήτια v. 6)⁴ introduces the terms at play: the gate of the sheepfold, the thief, the shepherd, his knowing and known sheep. The explication that follows variously exploits the potential of these images, leading to what many commentators have found to be a very unsatisfactory discourse. In comparison with other shepherd images, either from the scriptural tradition⁵ or from the synoptic gospels,⁶ the imagery is quite complex and, indeed, tensive. The initial interpretation (10:7) focuses on the "gate," with which Jesus identifies himself, an entryway that the "thief" does not use. The interpretive focus then

3 A. J. Simonis, *Die Hirtenrede im Johannes-Evangelium: Versuch einer Analyse von Johannes 10,1-18 nach Entstehung, Hintergrund und Inhalt* (AnBib 29; Rome 1967); J. Whitaker, "A Hellenistic Context for John 10,29," VC 24 (1970): 241-244; J. D. M. Derrett, "The Good Shepherd: St. John's Use of Jewish Halakah and Haggadah," ST 27 (1973): 25-50; P.-R. Tragan, *La parabole du "Pasteur" et ses explications: Jean 10,1-18. La genèse, les milieux littéraires* (StAns 67; Rome 1980); R. Kysar, "Johannine Metaphor - Meaning and Function: A Literary Case Study of John 10:1-18," *Semeia* 53 (1991): 81-111; K. E. Bailey, "The Shepherd Poems of John 10: Their Culture and Style," NCTR 14,1 (1993): 3-21; J. P. Heil, "Ezekiel 34 and the Narrative Strategy of the Shepherd and Sheep Metaphor in Matthew," CBQ 55 (1993): 698-708; R. Zimmermann, "Jesus im Bild Gottes: Anspielungen auf das Alte Testament im Johannesevangelium am Beispiel der Hirtenbildfelder in Joh. 10," in *Kontexte des Johannesevangeliums: Das vierte Evangelium in religions- und traditionsgeschichtlicher Perspektive* (eds. J. Frey and U. Schnelle; WUNT 175; Tübingen 2004), 81-116.

4 Whether the word, which appears outside of John only at 2 Pet 2:22, has any special technical sense is unclear. Its use as a synonym of προφήτης in Sir 47:17 tells against that in general, although later in this gospel (16:25, 29) it is used in contrast to the open speech of the post-resurrection period. For discussion see A. Reinhartz, *The Word in the World: The Cosmological Tale in the Fourth Gospel* (SBLMS 45; Atlanta 1992), 50-70, and F. J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John* (SP 4; Collegeville, Minn. 1998), 309. Moloney aptly cites Klaus Berger's definition of the word as an "image field (Bildfeld)," although what he captures is not so much the fixed meaning of the word as the literary technique employed in this chapter. See K. Berger, *Formgeschichte des Neuen Testaments* (Heidelberg 1984), 38-40. See also H. Thyen, *Das Johannesevangelium* (HNT 6; Tübingen 2005), 477, who treats "Das metaphorische Feld" of the chapter.

5 Note the contrast between the shepherds who do not care for the flock with God who does in Ezek 34. The image of God as the divine good shepherd in Ezek 34:11-16 is particularly relevant to the portrait in the Fourth Gospel. Cf. also Isa 40:11; Zech 13:7.

6 Matt 18:12-14; Luke 15:3-7. On the relationship to the synoptics in general, see M. Sabbe, "John 10 and Its Relationship to the Synoptic Gospels," in *The Shepherd Discourse in John 10 and Its Context* (eds. J. Beutler and R. Fortna; SNTSMS 67; Cambridge 1991), 75-93, 156-161.

shifts to the figure of the shepherd, who gives his life for his sheep (v. 11), as opposed to a hired man, who does not (vv. 12-13). The reason for the shepherd's "goodness" or "nobility,"⁷ is reinforced with further reflection on his knowledge of and self-giving love for the sheep, both those in the fold currently, as well as "others" yet to be brought to the fold (vv. 14-18). The studied complexity of the image is transparent.

Such complexity may be explained diachronically, as a result of re-reading or rewriting of a traditional image, but whatever the process of its generation, and whatever the tensions between the levels of reworking, the result does have a unified focus, which lies in the ultimate referent of all of the levels of imagery, Jesus, the one who gives his life for his sheep. As such, he is the "gate" who provides access to the divine fold. As such, he is the one who contrasts with predators, human and otherwise. As such, he is the one who knows and, more importantly, is known. As such, he is, at least potentially, the unifying principle of the one flock. Amidst the diversity, the unity of focus is remarkable.

What, then does the diversity achieve? Like the facets of a gem, or the multiple angles of view in a cubist painting, the complex image refracts attention and establishes connections with several other important images and themes within the Gospel. As the "gate," Jesus is the indispensable point of entry to the community of love, the entrance that is, as John 14:6 puts it, also the "way." The opposition to the cowardly hiring reflects the various oppositions of Jesus to his opponents, Pharisees (1:24; 3:1; 7:32; 9:13), his own "Judeans" (1:19; 8:48, *passim*), and "the world" (15:18). The mutual recognition of shepherd and sheep anticipates the dramatic recognition scenes of John 20 and 21, the paradigmatic encounters with the resurrected one that at once console, challenge, and empower. Complexity overdetermines, interconnects by anticipation, and yet at the same time focuses.

The second image is of a rather different kind, and its complexity works in different, but analogous ways. The image is that of the "Son of Man," which appears at strategic points throughout the first half of the gospel.⁸ Much ink has been spilled on this phrase,⁹ which I cannot recapitulate here. I do want to think about the way in which the title functions in conjunction with scripturally derived images.

The first two sayings are particularly important. John 1:51, which culminates the long list of Christological titles applied to Jesus in the first

7 See J. Neyrey, S. J., "The 'Noble Shepherd' in John 10: Cultural and Rhetorical Background," *JBL* 120 (2001): 267-291.

8 John 1:51; 3:13-14; 5:27; 6:27; 6:62; 8:28; 9:35; 12:23, 32, 34; 13:31.

9 See esp. F. J. Moloney, *The Johannine Son of Man* (2nd ed.; BSRel 14; Rome 1978); D. Burkett, *The Son of Man in the Gospel of John* (JSNTSup 56; Sheffield 1991).

chapter, involves a juxtaposition of the title with imagery from Gen 28:12. The juxtaposition offers a symbolic reinterpretation of the significance of the title. As Son of Man, Jesus is, like Jacob's ladder, the way between heaven and earth. This juxtaposition might be a reinterpretation of a traditional Son of Man saying, evocative of Dan 7:13, that spoke of the "coming" of the Son of Man with his angels, in the style of Mark 13:26; 14:62. This complex intertextual play thus evokes both Biblical and early Christian elements in a tensive way that parallels the tension between "gate" and "shepherd" in John 10. The tension resides in part in the equation Son of Man (or Human Being) and, from Genesis, the "Ladder." The experienced reader might know how the two are to be held together; yet at an initial encounter there is something jarring about the connection. In a traditional, Danielic understanding of the coming of the Son of Man, angels should not be climbing all over him? What does that mean? Is there a denial or critique of the Parousia? The Gospel at this point does not say. What disturbs also tantalizes. The imagistic treatment of the title Son of Man displays an almost playful quality, which will reappear in subsequent appearances of title.

The next saying about the "lifting up" of the Son of Man in John 3:14, possibly a remnant of a traditional Son of Man saying predicting the passion of Jesus, as in Mark 8:31, is interpreted by juxtaposition with an allusion to Num 21:8. The Son of Man, who had been a ladder, now becomes a serpent, who heals by being seen with the eyes of faith. How should we understand the shift in symbolism between chapters 1 and 3? Framed in that way, that movement might evoke the magical power of Moses before Pharaoh in Exod 4:3. Such an allusion may be far-fetched and there may be no justification for drawing a specific relationship between the two images. The two passages may be another example of a 'cubist' aesthetic, seeing one thing from different symbolic angles. But what is that 'one thing' on which the reader's vision is bioptically focused through the two Biblically derived images of ladder and serpent? What is common to the two passages is clearly the reference to "seeing" the Son of Man and, here in chapter 3, the precise point at which this vision occurs is now a bit more clear, the point where the Son of Man is "lifted up." That language, as we know, has its own complexity, but the referent of the first two Son of Man passages is obvious, and, interestingly enough, it is the same referent as that of the 'cubist' imagery of chapter 10, the cross. That is the focal point where revelatory vision occurs.

We could follow the path of the other "Son of Man" sayings, but it is the pairing of the first two that sets the tone for the rest, culminating in the array of sayings at the culmination of the Book of Signs (12:23, 32, 34) and the beginning of the Farewell discourse (13:31), all of which focus on

the "glorification" (language that appears in 12:23; 13:31) at the "lifting up" (language that appears 12:32, 34) of the Son of Man.

The third example of a Johannine image brings us into a new arena. We have thus far looked at a set of images in the form of a pastoral vignette, embedded in a discourse providing an interpretation of elements of the vignette in the form of "I-am" sayings. We have also looked at an expression, Son of Man, which has imagistic force because of its intertextual evocations, the intertextis being Daniel and something like the Synoptic Gospels. That expression was reinterpreted through its equation with images derived from other specific textual sources. Each of these two examples displays the fundamental characteristics of Johannine symbolism, what I have labeled the 'cubist' principle of disorienting complexification deployed in the interest of ultimate focus. For the next example involves a set of images that pervades the gospel.

Much of the symbolic world of the Fourth Gospel derives from the world of the Temple and its cultic cycle. The outlines of this symbolic play are widely recognized.¹⁰ The tabernacle is invoked in the prologue when the Word is said to dwell (ἐοικέν) among us. The divine is present in the flesh of Jesus as it was in the Tent and the Temple. In case the point was lost, the gospel returns to it in the episode of the cleansing of the Temple, where the equation of body and temple is explicit (John 2:21). With that connection firmly established,¹¹ the Gospel goes on to ring changes on the equation. The festival cycle that comes into prominence in the first half of the Gospel, explicitly noting Sabbath (5:9), Passover (6:4), Booths (7:2), Channukah (10:22), provides the framework for the use of the cultic symbols of water (7:38, though already introduced in chap. 4), and light (8:12, already introduced in the prologue), which will continue their symbolic path through the gospel (for light, see 12:46, by contrast 13:30).

The thread of symbolic usage of the two critical symbols of water and light deserves further attention. Either would demonstrate some of the same principles that we have been exploring. The image of water will serve to illustrate the point. Use of the symbol features prominently in John 3 and 4, with two different values, connected with two different images. The first use (3:5) is intimately involved with the general imagery of

¹⁰ See U. Busse, "Die Tempelmetaphorik als ein Beispiel von implizitem Returs auf die biblische Tradition im Johannesevangelium," in *The Scriptures in the Gospels* (ed. Chr. M. Tuckett; BETL 131; Leuven 1997), 395-428; M. Coloe, *God Dwells with Us: Temple Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel* (Collegeville, Minn. 2001).

¹¹ See A. Kerr, *Temple of Jesus' Body: The Temple Theme in the Gospel of John* (JSNTSup 220; London and New York 2002). The significance of the Temple also looms large in the analysis of Johannine symbolism by Koester, *Symbolism* (n. 1).

birth that dominates the Nicodemus discourse: water and spirit are somehow connected as the instruments of birth "from above." Nicodemus famously misconstrues the image, which may be transparent to the faithful reader as a symbol of baptism, but the puzzlement of Nicodemus signals some opacity. The image of water here has something of the same symbolic value as the initial image of the Son of Man/ladder, an opaque teaser that entices the reader/hearer to further reflection.

The second appearance of the water motif in John 4 functions in a way similar to the second imagistic reinterpretation of the Son of Man motif in John 3. The dramatic dialogue between Jesus and the Samaritan woman in John 4, with its graphic imagery of thirst forever quenched by "living water" (4:10), recalls the well established trope of water as a symbol of wise teaching. As in much of the first half of the gospel, the content of Jesus's teaching remains frustratingly formal, an affirmation that he is the teacher. The point is expressed in this episode by the ultimate outcome of the encounter at the well, the evangelization of Samaria (4:41). How it is that Jesus gives the gift of living water (4:13-14) remains obscure, although the flowing water may echo the possible baptismal allusion of chapter 3.¹²

Water imagery reappears in 7:38, in the context of the festival cycle, when Jesus says that "as for the one who believes in me, as scripture says, rivers of living water will flow from his belly." The "living water" of the verse echoes the last major occurrence of the water motif in chapter 4, but here the flowing of the "water" and, presumably its metaphorical equivalent, is the reverse of chapter 4. There, Jesus promised to provide thirst-quenching "living water;" here such water apparently flows from the believer.

Or does it? It is possible to construe the Scriptural saying as a comment on the "me," i.e., Jesus, not the "believer." Such a construal could yield a fairly sensible and perhaps expected meaning, reflecting important elements of Johannine theology.¹³ Yet the context is stubbornly ambiguous. On the punctuation provided by the Alexandrian tradition, the most immediate grammatical referent of the personal pronoun $\alpha\upsilon\tau\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$ would seem to be the topicalized nominative "the believer" ($\delta\varsigma\ \pi\iota\sigma\tau\epsilon\upsilon\omicron\upsilon\varsigma\ \epsilon\iota\varsigma\ \epsilon\mu\acute{\epsilon}$). If that punctuation is rejected and "the believer" is associated with the imperative

¹² Cf. the insistence in Did. 7:2 that baptism be administered with "living/flowing" water, on which see K. Niederwimmer, *The Didache: A Commentary* (ed. H. W. Attridge; trans. L. M. Maloney; Hermeneia; Minneapolis 1998), 127-129.

¹³ For a defense of this reading see D. M. Smith, *John* (ANTC; Nashville 1999), 174. His argument is that "Given the theology of John, the most natural reading of the sentence would then be: 'Out of his (Jesus') heart...'" For the long history of the interpretation of the verse, see Thyen, *Johannesevangelium* (n. 4), 401-402, who notes that both a Christological interpretation and one pointing to the experience of the believer have ample precedents among traditional readers.

$\pi\iota\upsilon\epsilon\tau\omega$ in the previous verse,¹⁴ a Christological reading is possible, but hardly required. The most immediate referent of the pronoun remains "the believer." If the function of the image was simply to highlight Jesus as the source of "living water," the evangelist has chosen a rather obscure way to express the notion.

There are other oddities about the deployment of the image in this context. The identity of the "scripture" cited here is unclear. The most likely candidate is no doubt Ezek 47 and its reference to "flowing water," which would, of course, be highly appropriate in this context of the chapter and its temple imagery. If Ezekiel is the intertext, then we may see at work an interpretive strategy similar to what emerged in the two Son of Man sayings already examined. As in those cases the scriptural images of ladder and serpent reinterpreted a traditional saying; here the juxtaposition of the image of the Temple/Fountain from Ezekiel recontextualizes the sapiential image of the "living water." Had the image been straightforwardly applied to Jesus, the Gospel would have offered a relatively coherent set of images with a relatively simple allegorical significance: The water of rebirth is the gift of faith in-him that flows from the New Temple that is Jesus. That would be a complex enough image, but fairly logical nonetheless.

Yet the grammatical structure of the sentence suggests further complexity. The scriptural intertext would thus be reinterpreted in the process of its application. No longer is it the Temple made by hands from which living waters flow, but the temple that is the heart of the believer. The urge to make symbolism increasingly complex, one of the fundamental thrusts of Johannine imagery, seems to be at work again. The complexity has, as in the other cases, a kind of riddling quality. On the assumption that the "belly" from which flows the living water is that of the believer, is the believer thereby symbolically equated with Jesus? How can it be, the attentive, reflective reader might ask, that Jesus, the New Temple and source of the life-giving water of faith, is now to be displaced? The text will eventually answer the riddle in its affirmations of the mutual indwelling or "abiding" of Jesus and believer (John 14:23). If Jesus is the locus of the reality of divine presence on earth and the believer dwells with him, then, the symbolic equation of believer and Temple is a logical next step.¹⁵

¹⁴ For that reading, and a review of other attempts to wrestle with the verse, see G. R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (2nd ed.; WBC 36; Nashville 1999), 114-117.

¹⁵ One might even see all of this symbolism as no more than an extended version of the temple imagery attested in Paul (individual: 1 Cor 6:19; collective: 1 Cor 3:9). The trope of the "true temple of the heart" was known outside the Biblical tradition. See Seneca, *Ep.* 41.1. On temple imagery in general see C. Koester, *Dwelling of God: The tabernacle in the Old Testament, intertestamental Jewish literature, and the New Testament* (CBQMS 22; Washington 1989).

The evangelist has not finished ringing the changes on the image of water, and it appears one last time in the Gospel as a major symbol, pouring from the side of the crucified (John 19:34), mixed there with the blood of the lamb who takes away the sins of the world. Whatever the account's physiological basis,¹⁶ the water that appears here, and is no doubt echoed in 1 John 5:6, works as an image in conjunction with the other images in the "water" sequence. It is highly probable that this final deployment unites and focuses the others. The water that works with the spirit to give new birth flows finally from the cross. The wisdom that Christ teaches, and that reveals who he is, flows from the cross. The new life that vivifies the believer and that in turn can vivify others through the believer, flows ultimately from the example of self-giving love on the cross. The place where God most manifestly dwells in Christ, the locus of the new temple and its worship in spirit and truth, is, for the Fourth Gospel, the cross.¹⁷

A fourth and final image merits our consideration. It has been with us all along, and has appeared at crucial points in the development of each of the other images that we have discussed. I refer, of course, to the cross, the place where the noble shepherd lays down his life for his sheep, where the Son of Man is revealed as the ladder to heaven and the healing serpent, the sacred source from which the font of living water, mixed with blood, flows. The gospel makes of the cross, for the reader with the eyes to see, an epiphanic image that discloses, transforms, invites, and inspires.

The cross lurks in and around many, if not all, of the images in the gospel. It is what other things in the gospel failingly aim to be, a σημειῶν or sign, pointing in a powerfully effective way to the reality that it signifies. Its power and effectiveness arise in large measure because of the complexity of the world of images that surround it, interlock with it, offer new angles of vision on it, and focus disjointed or jaded attention on it. I would suggest that the gospel as a whole might be construed as one large cubist image, refracting the cross through other images, of light, water, shepherds, ladders, snakes.

How does this world of interlocking, overloaded, multi-faceted, yet curiously focused images compare with the work of other imagists in the early imperial period? Two cases will here serve to exemplify a larger phenomenon.

One obvious potential parallel is in the work of the Jewish philosopher and exegete, Philo, much of whose work is relevant. I would like to focus, however, on a point of comparison with the Johannine image of the

Temple, which illustrates larger themes. One of the most interesting passages in Philo's allegorical reading of the cult is found in his treatise *De cherubim*.¹⁸ Ostensibly the text is an interpretation of Gen 3:24: "And he case forth Adam and set him over against the Garden of Pleasure and posted the Cherubim and the sword of flame which turns every way, to guard the way of the Tree of Life." So, one might argue, we have not moved beyond the realm of textual symbolization. We instead have moved from the historically oriented (Palestinian) world of historical symbols (later known as typology) into the philosophically oriented (Alexandrian) world of allegory, but it is the text that is interpreted symbolically. Whatever the merits of the typology/allegory dichotomy, this characterization misses an important element of the symbolic process that we see in Philo, (and perhaps in John?). Consider how Philo's discourse works:

After offering an interpretation of the words of the verse ("cast forth" 1-10; "over against" 11-20), Philo moves on to the Cherubim, and what is "hinted at" (αὐτινιτῶν) by them (21-39). Their "underlying concept" (δὲ ὑπονοῦν) is initially (21-24) cosmic, "the movements assigned to the heavenly spheres" one the sphere of fixed stars, and the other the rest of the cosmic spheres. A second (25-26) alternative meaning (ἀλλήγορεῖται) has to do with the two hemispheres of the earth, with the sword representing the sun. As he moves into this stage of the allegory, Philo clearly has in mind not the text of Genesis, but the statuary in the Holy of Holies. His source of knowledge of the sculpture is Exod 25:19, but it is the physical position of the two winged creatures that has symbolic significance.

The third and last stage of the symbolic interpretation of the Cherubim, introduced as a personal inspiration of Philo (*Cher.* 27),¹⁹ is theological, but this too depends on the image of the divine throne suggested by the Exodus narrative. The cover of the ark now suggests to Philo an image of God and his two potencies, goodness and sovereignty (*Cher.* 28). From that last interpretation Philo moves to ethical application, the necessity for the soul to cultivate the virtues corresponding to the divine potencies, i.e., cheerful courage (φίλοφροσύνη) and reverent awe (εὐλάβεια) toward God.

Philo's reading of cultic symbols is certainly an exercise in enhancing complexity as he moves from various cosmic to metaphysical to ethical interpretations of a single symbol. Like the Fourth Gospel, some of the reinterpretation depends on appeals to scriptural texts other than the one that initially provided the image. We can see at work here an elaborate process of, what David Dawson has aptly called, cultural revisionism,

¹⁸ All quotations from the Loeb edition.

¹⁹ On this layering of interpretations and what it might mean for Philo's relationship to traditional interpretations in Alexandria, see Th. Tobin, *The Creation of Man: Philo and the History of Interpretation* (CBQMS 14; Washington 1983).

¹⁶ See R. Brown, *Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave. A commentary on the passion narratives in the four gospels* (2 vols.; ABRL; New York et al. 1994).

¹⁷ As it does in Pauline baptismal symbolism: Rom 6:3-4.

characteristic of the culture of subaltern Jews in Alexandria that carries over into the literature of early Christianity in the same locale.²⁰ Yet Philo's interpretation of a cultic symbol is much more straightforward, more linear, than the symbolism of the gospel. This is true both of the image of Gospel's explicit image of Christ as Temple and of the whole pattern of imagistic development. The Gospel does not merely layer reading upon reading, or interpretation upon interpretation, but works out associated symbolic plays in an allusive, narrative mode, interconnecting various sets of symbols while finding a single anchor for them. Something approaching the complexity of John's handling of its central symbol may be found in Philo in the overall handling of his motif of the Logos, and I have commented on that elsewhere.²¹

A more intricate web of symbolic images appears in another work of the Platonic tradition very much interested in symbols, Plutarch, the priest and philosopher of the late first-early second century. His *Isis and Osiris*²² offers a useful window into a world of religious imagery roughly contemporary with the Fourth Gospel.²³

Plutarch frames his discourse with a set of lofty ideals about what we would call theology, "the effort to arrive at the Truth," a "longing for the

²⁰ D. Dawson, *Allegorical Readers and Cultural Revision in Ancient Alexandria* (Berkeley et al. 1992).

²¹ H. W. Attridge, "Philo and John: Two Riffs on one Logos," *SPhilo* 17 (2005): 103–117. For other recent treatments of the issue, see F. Siebert, "Der Logos, 'älterer Sohn' des Schöpfers und 'zweiter Gott': Philons Logos und der Johannesprolog," in *Kontexte des Johannesevangeliums: Das vierte Evangelium in religions- und traditions-geschichtlicher Perspektive* (eds. J. Frey and U. Schelle; WUNT 175; Tübingen 2004), 277–294, and J. Leonhardt-Balzer, "Der Logos und die Schöpfung: Streiflichter bei Philo (Opif. 20–25) und im Johannesprolog (Joh 1,1–18)," in Frey and Schelle, eds., *Kontexte*, 295–319.

²² On the work in general see *Plutarch's De Iside et Osiride* (ed. with an introduction, translation and commentary by J. G. Griffiths; Cardiff 1970); *De Iside et Osiride, Plutarco: Introducción, texto crítico, traducción y comentario* (ed. M. G. Valdés; Testi e commenti 13; Pisa 1995). For Plutarch's significance for the study of early Christianity, see F. Brenk, S. J., *Relighting the Souls: Studies in Plutarch, in Greek Literature, Religion, and Philosophy, and in the New Testament Background* (Stuttgart 1997). On *Isis and Osiris*, see G. Cassadio, "La nozione di religione nel De Iside et Osiride di Plutarco e lo studio scientifico della religione," in *The Notion of "Religion" in Comparative Research: Selected Proceedings of the XVIth Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions 1990* (ed. U. Bianchi; StorRel 8; Rome 1994), 257–271.

²³ On Plutarch's use of imagery, see R. Hirsch-Luipold, *Plutarchs Denken in Bildern: Studien zur literarischen, philologischen und religiösen Funktion des Bildhaftigen* (STAC 14; Tübingen 2002), esp. 174–224, on *Isis and Osiris*. See also his "Aesthetics as Religious Hermeneutics in Plutarch," in *Valori letterari delle Opere di Plutarco: Studi offerti al Professore Italo Gallo dall' International Plutarch Society* (eds. A. Pérez Jiménez and F. Titchener; Malaga and Logos 2005), 207–213.

divine" (θειότρος ὁρεξίς), a work "more hallowed than any ... temple service" (2,351E). The goal of any religious service is "knowledge of Him who is the first, the Lord of all, the Ideal one" (τοῦ πρώτου καὶ κυρίου καὶ νοητοῦ γνῶσις) (2,352A). That Ideal is made accessible through the goddess Isis, since it is "near her and with her and in close communion" with her (παρ' αὐτῆ καὶ μετ' αὐτῆς ὄντα καὶ συνόντα) (ibid.).

Those comments suggest interesting structural parallels with the theology of the Fourth Gospel, but that would be the topic for another day. It is the imagery that is presently of concern. Some of this is embedded in the encyclopedia of interpretation of Egyptian religious symbols and practices that Plutarch provides before getting to the heart of his essay (3–11,352A–355D). Some of the principles of Plutarch's interpretive efforts are clear. His interpretation focuses on what conveys, in his words, "moral and practical values," things that are not without a share, as he puts it in "the refinements of history or natural science" (8,353E). These principles tell part, but not all of the story of his interpretation, since they don't quite reach to that One to whom all images point. The principles of interpretation at this stage in Plutarch parallel the levels of reading of Israel's sacred imagery found in Philo, Sacred imagery, like sacred texts, artifacts, and people, is full of hidden meanings, the most basic of which is the natural.

Plutarch's treatise, a gold mine of religious lore and interpretive practice, bears little resemblance to the narrative of a teacher and healer who dies to take away the sins of the world. Yet there are moves made throughout that parallel the ways in which the Fourth Gospel uses its imagery. The basic image in the text is the story of Isis, Osiris and Typhon, an image of conflict, destruction, and restoration (12,355D–21,359D). As an image, or complex set of images, the tale works for Plutarch by being brought into correlation with other texts and images. It is the combination of these images that usually points to a richer, deeper meaning, or rather a set of richer, deeper meanings, on physical, ethical, and eventually metaphysical registers.

Throughout Plutarch's exposition, any particular element of the story can be seen from various angles and thereby yield multiple layers of signification. Only a brief sketch of his reading is possible here. Plutarch begins with his own theory that the characters in the image of conflict refer to daemons or demi-gods (25–31,360E–363D), the significance of which will only become apparent at the end of his exposition. Underlying the rest of his interpretation lies a hermeneutical grid that closely parallels Philo's in the passage that we examined from the *De cherubim*. Fundamental is a set of physical interpretations wherein Osiris is the Nile, Isis the earth, Typhon the sea (32,363D), or Osiris the moist element, Typhon the dry and fiery (32,364A). A related line of interpretation reads the imagery as sym-

bolic of celestial phenomena (44,368A–369D). These lines of explanation are explicitly identified as Stoic (41,367C), which is hardly a surprise.

Intertextual relations aid the interpretive process along the way, as in the identification of Osiris and Dionysus via an obviously syncretistic myth of heavenly combat (36,365D). Amalgamation with another text constitutes the keystone of Plutarch's ultimate effort to interpret the Egyptian image of conflict, destruction, and restoration. The new intertext is the Persian myth of Ahura Mazda and Ahriman (46–48,369D–371A), read through a Pythagorean lens. Using their story, Plutarch moves beyond a physical reading of the Egyptian image to one that fixes on a set of Platonic philosophical categories as the ultimate significance of the image, in which Osiris is "Intelligence and Reason, the Lord of all that is good" (νοῦς καὶ λόγος ὁ τῶν ἀρίστων πάντων ἡγεμὼν καὶ κύριος) (49,371A); Typhon is that part of the soul which is "impressionable, impulsive, irrational and truculent" (49,371B), and Isis the "female principle of Nature," "receptive of every form of generation," the "nurse" of Plato's *Tim.* 49A (53,372E). The Platonic key is then used to unlock many of the details of Egyptian and Greek religion, giving in the process a defense of religion itself.²⁴

The handling of various images in and around the myth of Isis and Osiris abundantly illustrates Plutarch's quest for complexity which he shares with others of his period. Yet even more important is what Plutarch says about the focus or the ultimate significance of religious imagery. Plutarch's apology for religion in the latter chapters of the treatise includes a passionate articulation of what we might call a sacramental principle, seeing the Divine present in and imaged by living elements of the physical world (76,382A–C).²⁵ Plutarch at this point is ostensibly defending the

²⁴ E.g., 64,377. "Whatever there is in these that is immoderate and disordered by reason of excesses or defects; and if we reverè and honor what is orderly and good and beneficial as the work of Isis and as the image and reflection and reason (εἰκόνα δὲ καὶ μίμησιν καὶ λόγον) of Osiris, we shall not be wrong."

²⁵ "If, then, the most noted of the philosophers, observing the riddle of the Divine in inanimate and incorporeal objects, have not thought it proper to treat anything with carelessness or disrespect, even more do I think that, in all likelihood, we should welcome those peculiar properties existent in natures which possess the power of perception and have a soul and feeling and character. It is not that we should honor these, but that through these we should honor the Divine, since they are the clearer mirrors of the Divine by their nature also, so that we should regard them as the instrument or device of the God who orders all things. And in general we must hold it true that nothing inanimate is superior to what is animate, and nothing without the power of perception is superior to that which has that power – no, not even if one should heap together all the gold and emeralds in the world. The Divine is not engendered in colors or in forms or in polished surfaces, but whatsoever things have no share in life, things whose nature does not allow them to share therein, have a portion of less honor than that of the dead. But the nature

much ridiculed Egyptian practice of using animals as images of the divine, but the principle obviously has a wider application. So too does a related bit of apologetics, this time for the variegated colors of the robe of Isis. Reflection on that image leads Plutarch to rehearse a classic theory of revelatory experience, the mystical encounter with something ultimate through the mediation of an image. The passage (77,382D) merits full citation:

But the robes of Isis they use many times over (scil. as opposed to the robes of Osiris); for in use those things that are perceptible and ready at hand afford many disclosures of themselves and opportunities to view them as they are changed about in various ways.²⁶ But the apprehension of the conceptual, the pure, and the simple, shining through the soul like a flash of lightning, affords an opportunity to touch and see it but once.²⁷ For this reason Plato and Aristotle call this part of philosophy the optic, or mystic part, inasmuch as those who have passed beyond these conjectural and confused matters of all sorts by means of Reason proceed by leaps and bounds to that primary, simple, and immaterial principle: and when they have somehow attained contact with the pure truth abiding about it, they think that they have the whole of philosophy completely, as it were, within their grasp.

Philo too can draw on the Platonic tradition stemming from the *Symposium* to talk about revelatory experiences,²⁸ but Plutarch's passage is particularly significant because of its close association with religious images. The cult is not simply a metaphor for philosophical enlightenment, it is the locus where it takes place. Animals in their complexity are living images of the divine in which they participate. The cultic imagery of Isis in its variety affords "disclosures." But the image of Isis is just a waystation on the path to the unitary image of Osiris, who images the "simple and immaterial principle," the "pure truth" that, as the whole of philosophy, transforms and enlightens.

What Plutarch's treatise does is to articulate a theory of the significance of imagery which is very close to what actually happens in the Fourth Gospel. The two texts both, though in different ways, have a sense that any

that lives and sees and has within itself the source of movement and a knowledge of what belongs to it and what belongs to others, has drawn to itself an efflux and portion of beauty from the Intelligence 'by which the Universe is guided,' as Heraclitus has it. Wherefore the Divine is no worse represented in these animals than in works of bronze and stone which are alike subject to destruction and disfiguration, and by their nature are void of all perception and comprehension."

²⁶ Note, by the way, the appreciation of variety in the symbol.

²⁷ Plato, *Ep.* 7.344B.

²⁸ On Philo's "mysticism" see D. Winston, *Logos and Mystical Theology in Philo of Alexandria* (Cincinnati 1985). On Philo's terminology, see recently N. G. Cohen, "The Mystery Terminology in Philo," in *Philo und das Neue Testament: Wechselseitige Wahrnehmungen* (eds. R. Deines and K.-W. Niebuhr; WUNT 172; Tübingen 2004), 173–188, although there is not attention to the possible relevance of the *Symposium*.

individual image can have a variety of significations, and Plutarch's practice involves an even more complex set of readings of its images than what the Fourth Gospel offers, but at the end of the day, they both really have only one thing signified: in Plutarch it is the Platonic structure of reality, in John it is Jesus giving in word and deed the command to love. Both agree, however, that images, especially living images, of the ultimate can serve a revelatory function; they can give one a glimpse, however fleeting, of ultimate reality. To catch that glimpse is to be transformed. That is, I submit, precisely what the Fourth Gospel does with its image of the Cross, the revelatory point on which all the other cubist images focus, the particularity moment that reveals the universal.

Conclusion

In conclusion, then: Even without attending to its possible environment we can discern fairly readily how much Johannine imagery works, as an overloaded, but interconnected system that finally focuses on one dominant image. But I submit that the Fourth Gospel is by no means unique. Platonic handling of religious imagery offers some interesting parallels to the Fourth Gospel, most especially in Plutarch's ruminations on what images are supposed to do in revealing ultimate truth.