THEOLOGICAL METAPHORICS AND THE
METAPHORS OF JOHN’S GOSPEL

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ABSTRACT
Metaphors cannot be studied in abstracto. The use of metaphors is part of the communication process of John’s Gospel. Therefore this study starts with a consideration of the Gospel as a communicative act. This means that the author(s) employ(s) various means to alter the listeners’/readers’ world view. Perhaps the most important way of achieving this is through the use of metaphors. Metaphors are created by way of unexpected predication through a deliberate category mistake. In this way the possibility is opened to innovative perception (seeing what was not there to see before) as well as to a redescrip-tion of reality. By relating the metaphors used in John’s Gospel (e.g. true light, good shepherd, true vine, etc) to their possible communication situation, one can gain insight into the role metaphors play in identifying the Jesus of John.

1 BEGINNING WITH THE TEXT
Metaphors never function in abstracto. The use of metaphors are embedded in everyday speech or writing, their use being part of human communication. In my opinion the metaphors in John’s Gospel represent one of the more important elements in the totality of the communication process of the text.

It is impossible not to communicate. This holds true for all speech or writing, even fictional narratives. If we listen carefully we may hear other kinds of dialogue apart from those included in quotation marks. Just as there are speech acts, so there exist narrative acts or text acts. Something is done in writing by writing it. The clues to these ‘other kinds of dialogues’ are provided in the text by the author through the way in which he engages in a conversation with the characters or the events narrated in the narrative, through the selection of narrated perspectives or through the amplification of the narrated story through

1 The role of metaphors in the formation of scientific models or concepts falls outside of that in which I am interested here. Much of what will be said about the working of metaphors will, however, also be applicable to the formation of scientific models. See M E Botha’s article listed in the bibliography.

2 A reference to M Bakhtin in Martin (1986:152). For this explication of John’s Gospel as a communicative text I was influenced by Martin’s use of the communication model in narrative theory, as well as the study by Watzlawick et al (1967) on the pragmatics of communication. I am also much indebted to the article by Sjeř van Tilborg (1989).
comment-sentences which are meant to clarify the meaning of narrated events. This is the hallmark of communication: it contains both report and command aspects, both information and information about this information (that is, what sort of message it should be perceived to convey, what is to be done with it, and the relationship it brings into being, establishes or changes between the communicants). This information about information need not only be explicit. Codes, characterisation, irony, parody, style, and et cetera, are examples of implicit commands.

I regard the Gospel of John as such an instrument of communication. Through the narrative the producer(s) of the communicative act interact(s) with the recipients thereof, although the exact nature of the relation between producer, communicative act and recipient is difficult to determine. Taking the Gospel narrative as a communicative text means that the textual signs are not regarded as standing only in relation to other (intratextual) signs. Because the whole of 'reality' has a textual structure, textual signs do not only refer to other textual signs, but also to extratextual signs. Texts are in dialogue with social codes, historical constructions and meaningful actions.

A pragmatic text such as John's Gospel signals a complex communication process of intention, interaction with the flow of history, goal, recipients of the communicative act, relationships that are formed or amended, changed behaviour, feedback. What is left of this process is its medium or instrument. We are left with the way reality is rearranged by an author(s) through the selected, narrated perspectives on what happened which are presented to the readers. This I call the ideological intervention of the author. Through the presented perspectives the author voices a vision of God and world and the place human beings occupy within that world. What is at stake is a re-orientation of world views. The base sentence of this communicative act I construe to be the following:

I believe you need to be told/reminded(?) that...

To my mind, the clearest formulation of this base sentence is to be found in what is traditionally seen as the expression of the goal of the Gospel: John 20:30-31.

I believe you need to be told/reminded(?) that...this man, Jesus of Nazareth, is the Christ/Son of God...

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4 Witness the variety of figures that can be inserted to the left or the right of the message: writer, implied author, dramatised author, dramatised narrator, (= addressee); and narratee, model reader, authorial reader, real reader, (= addressee).
This base sentence is further amplified by what amounts to the intended effect of the communicative act:

...that you may have life...

The re-orientation of the life of the readers is motivated through its exclusive character. They will have the life...in his name. He is the only way to the Father. He is the true light, He is the giver of living water, He is the good shepherd and the true vine, the life-giving bread and the true way. He alone knows the Father and has the right and the ability to reveal the Father’s world. On the level of the narrated story Jesus alone holds the position of truth in the conflict between truth and error. On the level of the communicative interaction it becomes clear that the story told is not the only communication process in the text. The readers are ‘lifted up’ as it were and placed on Jesus’ position of truth. This is the function of the comment-sentences, the ‘other kinds of dialogues’, in the Gospel text. Through the comment-sentences, the asides, the additional information added to the story, the commentary and interpretation woven into it the readers are brought up to the level of the communication. In doing so, the author confronts them with his value system. They must believe and in doing so receive life from this Jesus of Nazareth alone. This constitutes the author’s ideological point of view. The values which he wishes to inculcate have to do with life or death. It is according to this perspective that the readers must establish or rectify their own orientation towards Jesus. The ‘other kinds of dialogues’ permit the author to obtain a hold on the communication process, changing the indirect communication of the narrated story to direct communication. The readers are made aware that this particular story also concerns them, they who live in a time and place far removed from the one presupposed in the text. And thus a text, so firmly rooted in Palestinian soil becomes an Ephesian one. Why Ephesus? There are some very strong pointers indicating Asia Minor as the environment in which the text originated (that is, in its present form as gospel). We not only have Irenaeus (who himself hailed from Smyrna in Asia Minor) and Polycarp pointing to Ephesus, but Johannine chronology and theology also surface in Tatian’s Diatessaron, Apollinaris of Hierapolis, in the paschal disputes with the Quartodecimanians and in the theological disputes with the Montanists. Apocryphal material like the Acts of John (possibly to be dated to the middle of the second century) also situates ‘John’ and his Gospel in Ephesus (see Hengel 1989). I still believe one should take the ancient Christian traditions seriously. However, even if one does not accept Ephesus as the ‘place’ where the Gospel should be read, one still has to construct and imagine a communication situation in which the text communicated. For the reasons I gave above, I prefer to read the Gospel of John as an Ephesian text.
But let me digress. One needs to ask in which way Ephesian readers would have been involved in this story. At no point is the totality of the intended communicative interaction revealed in the text. It has to be deciphered and recovered as it is presented in bits and pieces as the story proceeds connotatively from episode to episode, from theme to theme, from clue to clue. Since the narrative is constructed from a selection of images and episodes, the question of denotation cannot be avoided if the significance of this particular selection of presented perspectives has to be grasped.

There is another point that needs to be raised here. Ever since the advent of literary critical approaches to John's Gospel, heavy emphasis has been laid on narrative elements such as authorship and readership (in all their possible configurations), narrative point of view, plot, action and characters, ideologies, etc. to the almost total exclusion of what is perhaps the most conspicuous feature of the text: its symbolism, or as I would like to put it, the centrality of its use of metaphors. Right from the very start the narrative overflows with imagery and metaphors. Jesus is the word, the light, the lamb, the bridegroom, the giver of living water and spirit, the life-giving bread, the light that lights up the world, the good shepherd, the door, the resurrection, the true way to life, the vine. He comes from above and returns to above. He is lifted up; his body must be eaten and his blood drunk. He prepares dwelling-places for his own, they must remain in Him as He dwells in them, they must bear fruit. There is not a single discourse reported in the text in which the use of metaphors does not play a central role. It is exactly through the use of metaphors that the significance of the narrated events is made clear to the readers. The text is thoroughly metaphorical and its metaphorical nature forces one to consider the role metaphors play in this communicative process.

There is some confusion as regards terminology here. What is often referred to as symbols or the symbolism of John's Gospel, should be understood as nothing more than metaphors. When viewed from the perspective of language theories it is clear that what used to be called symbolic expressions are actually metaphorical statements. In structure and function they exhibit the characteristics of metaphors. I will therefore use the terms metaphor/metaphorical to indicate everything that is included anywhere under the rubric of John's symbolism. Note however Culpepper's section on symbolism (1987:180-198). I would argue even more strongly than he does for the centrality of the metaphors to the narrative. There is another point in which I differ from other discussions regarding John's symbols or metaphors, including that of Culpepper. Almost unfailingly all these discussions concentrate on the symbol as a word, for example, on 'bread', 'light', etc. I believe this misses the point. What should be studied is the way these symbols function as metaphorical expressions, that is, as speech acts or narrative acts. It is true that the literature on John's symbolism run into many pages, but as far as I know, no one has yet approached them from the point of view of a theory of metaphor, and that located within narrative theory.
2 WHAT METAPHORS DO

For the greatest part of the history of the metaphor it was understood as a figure of speech, a trope, that is as saying in an esthetically more attractive way something which might also be expressed differently. According to this tradition, the metaphor was correctly described in terms of deviance, but this deviance was mistakenly ascribed to denomination only. In Aristotle's terminology, it means that instead of giving a thing its usual common name, one designates it by means of a borrowed name, a foreign name. The rationale behind this transfer of name was understood as the objective similarity between the things themselves or the subjective similarity between the attitudes linked to the grasping of these things. The goal of the transfer was to fill up a lexical lacuna, and therefore to serve the principle of economy which rules the endeavour of giving appropriate names to new things, new ideas, or new experiences, or to decorate discourse, and therefore to serve the main purpose of rhetorical discourse, which is to persuade and to please.

What transpires from modern theories of metaphor is the fact that the bearer of metaphoric meaning is not the word but the sentence and even the text as a whole. The interaction process does not merely consist of substituting words for words or names for names (which strictly speaking would only define metonymy), but of an interaction between a logical subject and a predicate. If metaphor consists in some deviance, this deviance concerns the predicative structure itself. Metaphoric meaning is created through a deliberate category mistake in the juxtaposition of a predicate to a subject, or, to follow Weinrich, the metaphor is a contradictive predication. It is the tension between the epiphoric and diaphoric aspects of this predication which creates the semantic space for interpretation: the tension between the 'is' and the 'is not'. For example:

Jesus of Nazareth (S) is the true light (P)

No human being is also a beam of light waves, or a bread that could be eaten, or a vine, etcetera. What could therefore be the meaning of these metaphors? What distinguishes metaphor from symbol is that it cannot be interpreted literally. This necessitates hypothesising about its possible meaning. The logical process thus brought into action is called abduction. The whole encyclopedia of form, action, matter, and purpose is enactivated - the so-called Porphyrean tree - to decipher the reference of the metaphor. Metaphors do refer: they create their own refer-

6 It is the absurdity of the predication which gets the interpretation process going. I have here aligned myself with the so-called interaction theory of metaphor. Metaphors function by virtue of the dialectic of lexical unit and semantic unit (Ricoeur), the tension between tenor and vehicle (Richards), subject and modifier (Beardsley), focus and frame (Black), metaphorising term and metaphorised term (Eco). Metaphors function on the level of text semantics and semiotics.
ence, they include a denotative or referential dimension, that is, the power to redefine reality, to create new reality or to render things visible which were not visible before. Metaphors first establish their correspondences and analogies — analogies and correspondences which were not there before. And so they allow us to speak about the invisible, in particular to bring the world of God alive through language. Novel experiences are introduced by the language of the metaphor. The ultimate importance of metaphor is its impact on the reader's world view, or life-orientation. A live metaphor can alter the world. What is at stake in any communication process, and in particular here in a text which so centrally employs metaphors, is the reader's being-in-the-world, the reader's existential situatedness.

What is referred to above, is called micro-metaphorics, the predication of a single predicate to a logical subject. It does not require unique wisdom to realise that unlike text-book examples, metaphors do not exist in isolation from wider, encompassing discourses. It is to a large extent the context that will help decide which textual elements must be regarded as metaphors, and which meanings must be ascribed to the metaphors employed in the text. In the case of the Gospel of John this is not quite so easy. The metaphors in John are all embedded in contexts made up of other metaphorical expressions: descent/ascent, living in you/you in Me, partaking of Me as food, walking in the light, etcetera. It means that the connoted micro-metaphors must be understood macro-metaphorically. The connoted micro-metaphors reciprocally support each other by being organised

7 Ricoeur in many instances argues for the narrativity of existence. Readers' identities and world views are shaped by the traditions and culture which are textually mediated. In this case one should understand 'text' not only in the sense of written texts, but as including all fixed meaning, that is, oral stories or traditions, meaningful actions, pictographic and epigraphic material, etc. Ricoeur calls this the narrative function, or in another context, the function of fiction in shaping reality.

8 See Joy (1990:74). A live metaphor or 'bold' metaphor is one where the tension between metaphorising and metaphorised term (or sender and receiver of the metaphor picture, or tenor and vehicle, etc.) is recognisable by the recipient. Where the tension is unlikely to be noticed, we speak of a 'distant' or 'dead' metaphor. Of course, once the Gospel of John started on its long history of reception and rereading, the metaphors started to function in quite a different way. Over-familiarisation with the metaphors employed in John's Gospel would cause them to become dead metaphors. As such they become the language and 'pass words' (the sociolect) for defining the in-group, or the orthodox as opposed to the hererodox.

9 This raises the issue of the counterdetermining context of the metaphors. Where does the context of the metaphors exist? I have tried to argue in this paper that the gospel of John is a communicative text. This means that the metaphors employed in that communication can not be abstracted from the communication situation. The counterdetermining context of the metaphors exists in the mind of the reader (see the discussion about the 'script' or 'frame' theories below). The situation of the listener or reader decides whether the contradiction within the predication is recognised, or decides in which way the tension is alleviated through the ascribing of meaning to the metaphors.
around yet another metaphor, the root metaphor of John's Gospel, the concept of life (itself a metaphorical term, as it is clear that something more than heart-beat, brain waves and pulse-rate is at issue). I have stated earlier that the aim of the author is to cause readers to have life and this intervention is given a profile through a whole range of related metaphorical expressions.

You must have life ...

through the life that was the light of mankind
...by walking in the light
...by drinking living water
...by eating and drinking Him
...by belonging to his flock
...by being raised up by Him
...by being in Him like a branch to a tree

This has taken us from micro-metaphorics, by way of context- or macro-metaphorics to the metaphorics of the text. The text-in-function, the communicative text, is the scene of the metaphorical process. Viewed from the aspect of communication the use of metaphors comes to be regarded in a different light. What is involved here is nothing less than the text becoming a metaphor itself, and this in a twofold way. The first perspective is quite an obvious one: the compound metaphor of Jesus of Nazareth (this man) — (the metaphorised term) — who is the Christ/Son of God, the giver of life — the world of God, everything that pertains to God — (the metaphorising term). In the end all the metaphors in John (that is all the juxtapositions of predicates to the subject, this man, Jesus of Nazareth) relate the subject of the narrated story to the world of God. It becomes a story about God, or to put it in ecclesiastical parlance, a story about an incarnated God. That the metaphors fulfil this function has to do with the second perspective: the denotation of the metaphors. These specific predications have been selected with particular recipients in mind — and, as suggested earlier, I take them to be Ephesians. The author interacted with his intended audience through a narrated story which is thoroughly metaphorical in nature. The intended interaction is aided by the redescription or re-arrangement of reality brought about by this metaphorical narrative. In this way the story about Jesus, narrated by John, becomes a commentary on the world lived in and experienced by the readers. This a world in which the metaphorising terms employed by John relate to gods and rituals, religious festivals, practices and symbols. It always intrigues me to see how interpreters of these metaphors think it sufficient to enumerate quotations from the Old Testament, or Qumran, or from Philo, the Corpus Hermeticum, or Mandaean literature, or whatever, in the belief that the question
of the meaning of the metaphors in John’s Gospel has thereby been solved. If we take John’s aim of communicating through a narrative which is essentially metaphorical seriously, we shall have to ask how the metaphors employed by John brought into action the store of cultural knowledge in the long term memory of the readers, and thus in which way this text which is so steeped in metaphor, can be said to re-orient the readers with regard to their life-world. To do so amounts to reading John’s Gospel in the light of the full wealth of epigraphical evidence and extant religious art which allows us to construct the communication situation obtaining in first century Ephesus.

3 METAPHORS IN THE COMMUNICATION PROCESS OF JOHN’S GOSPEL

It is remarkable to see that almost all the metaphorical expressions contain qualifiers of some sort (e.g. true light, true vine, good shepherd, true way, etc). In the light of the agonistic character of the narrative this must be construed as a polemic of some sort. I believe the author interacts polemically with his readers’ understanding of their life-orientation.

It is impossible to include a consideration of all the metaphorical expressions in the Gospel in one broad interpretive sweep and since we are only at the beginning of this type of approach which focuses on the function of the metaphors in the whole of the narrative, a few pointers along the way will have to suffice.

If the metaphors present a polemical intervention, then the question that

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10 See Breytenbach (1990:257-258) for a discussion of ‘script’ or ‘frame’ theory. It means, in short, that the expressions forming the explicit textbase are interpreted against the background of ‘scripts’ or ‘frames’. Frames are stored in the long-term memory and are activated by the expression in the text. These frames are not explicates in the text itself, but are presupposed. They refer to the common knowledge of ancient society and are called the implicit text. In reading a text from late antiquity, such as John’s Gospel one has to consider the process taking place in the mind of the reader. The expressions forming the explicit textbase function as a window which enables exegetes to find the right frame to suit the text. To interpret the communicative intent of the text adequately means to fit the text correctly to the right frame.

11 I am all too aware of the provisional nature of this enterprise. One is forced to make use of ‘evidence’ from other parts of the Roman empire, as well as of evidence dating from later periods. Whether the data is distorted in the process, or whether the picture of Ephesus emerging in the process fits within the constraints of history I shall leave for others to judge. I can only say that I believe the fecundity of a theory or hypothesis to be its own proof. If this picture of the communication situation makes possible a better reading (but what is better?) of John’s Gospel in which more of the narrative phenomena is explained, I shall be quite satisfied.

12 In this regard I differ from all the exegetes who interpret alethinos in the sense of true, eternal reality, that is, as a theological concept referring to what pertains to God. See Louw and Nida’s Greek-English Lexicon.

needs to be answered, is this: What kind of re-orientation is at stake?¹⁴

Let us think about the concept of life so central to John’s Gospel. We know that Ephesus was the neokritos of Artemis. Her cult was central to the existence of the city. According to an old etymology (Strabo), the name Artemis means someone who makes well or healthy (artemes). She was associated with the healing shrine in Ephesus, and as a healing god she frequently appears as Artemis Soteira and the offerings and ivory models of limbs contained in the panelling of the Artemision at Ephesus attest to her suppliants’ gratitude. The concept of life also draws together other related concepts, such as life in abundance (John 10:10) which Dionysos was known to dispense (according to an inscription in Ephesus in honour of Dionysou Fleo). Questions about life and healing also concern things such as death and afterlife. Instances have been found, where even on Jewish sarcophagi Dionysos holding a vine was depicted.¹⁵ (Dionysiac themes were extremely popular on Roman sarcophagi during this period). The apparent meaning was that he would not only guarantee a full life on this side of the grave, but also a full life after death.

Partaking of the god would guarantee life and life after death. With Ephesus being not only an important city, but also a military centre, readers in Ephesus would scarcely have been able to avoid the Roman legionaries and their cult, namely that of Mithra. In various bas-reliefs and Mithraeums the scene of the bull-slaying (tauroctone) is presented connected to a picture of the communal meal. Both the bull-slaying and the ritual meal were thought to give life. On a marble statue of the bull-slaying three ears of grain spring from the wound instead of the tail, and in another bas-relief Mithra is pictured with a bunch of grapes in his right hand, an apparent reference to the wine drunk at the ritual meals. In this last relief a basket of bread is offered to the gods.¹⁶ Also included in this last relief is the sun-god, Sol, who joins Mithra for the banquet. Between the two gods is a Phrygian cap topped with the sun’s crown of seven rays. Now this is important, namely the connection between wine, vine, bread, eating the flesh which gives life, and light. The sun’s seven rays are important since they invoke an ancient (Platonic) cosmology: the sun’s seven rays, the seven spheres, the seven planets. This is why the menorah also has seven arms.

Belief in astral immortality was widespread in late antiquity, even among

¹⁴ A note of explanation is in order here: from epigraphic evidence and the remnants of religious depictions on religious buildings or catacombs one thing becomes clear — that the boundaries between what was to be regarded as Jewish and what as pagan were quite fluid. Jews were not always reluctant to make use of ‘graven images’, even if it meant borrowing from pagan symbols. The metaphor of the lights is one such example.

¹⁵ The vine was a widespread Jewish symbol. It appears on ornamental friezes as well as in synagogal art, for example the coffered ceiling of the Dura-Europos synagogue was covered with a vine.

¹⁶ The relief found in Hedernheim, Germany, in 1826, and which is now in Wiesbaden.
Jews, and not only Jews in the Diaspora, but also those living in Palestine, as evidenced by the zodiacs on the mosaic floors of the synagogues of Beth-Alpha, Na'aran, Tiberias and Isfiya. The centre of the zodiacs is filled by the sun god driving through heaven in his quadrige.\textsuperscript{17} Included in these depictions is the menorah (not only here but also in Jewish and Christian catacombs, and on lintels of Jewish buildings). The menorah not only functioned as an indication of Jewishness, it was also a symbol of God and the divine light, but also of magical power, the tree of life, the solar system, and the temple. These are not mutually exclusive. The use of lamps as opposed to light from windows is thought to have been one of the most notable characteristics of ancient synagogues.\textsuperscript{18}

The menorah was not only a symbol of God, but also of the righteous believers. On the walls of a catacomb at Beth-She'arim a man is depicted wearing a menorah on his head — a theme later recurring in rabbinic exegesis. Even as the menorah was a symbol of God (the macrocosmos), so it could also denote the saint (the microcosmos). This would explain what it would mean to walk in the light. Being thus connected to God means to be in contact with the Giver of life. Jewish inscriptions from Rome suggest that God bathes the dead (those who are 'asleep') in divine light.

The menorah was also associated with 'seeing God'\textsuperscript{19} so that it becomes understandable why Jesus, the light who comes from above, is also the one who has seen God.

The prevalence of astral symbolism, even in Jewish circles might indicate the meaning of the metaphor: 'There is the lamb'. It is known that Jewish zodiacs retained the traditional Roman constellation signs and figures. The ram or Aries (the war god) translates on the Beth-Alpha synagogue mosaic as thale — the lamb. In the light of what could be recovered from John the Baptist's preaching, I believe this is the role he had in mind for Jesus. It is perhaps this connection which later enabled Clement of Alexandria to call the menorah the 'sign of Christ' and also enabled the artists responsible for later Christian catacombs to depict Jesus as the sun god.

Ephesus also had its own festival of lights — the lampadeia. During the lampadeia, which was a festival in honour of Isis, the celebrants carried small lamps in procession through the streets.

Apart from these symbols there were others which might also be significant. In inscriptions found at Ephesus, the earth mother, Demeter, was named karppophoros and thesmothetes — fruit-bearer and law-giver. What is significant about this is that the combination of these two concepts is found in the same

\textsuperscript{17} The use of this symbol might have been prompted by the tradition of Elijah being transported to heaven in his fiery chariot.
\textsuperscript{18} See Kant (1987); Smith (1957/58).
\textsuperscript{19} CII 696; 725 11 9-10.
order in John 15: 7-10.

Jesus was also not the only shepherd in late antiquity. The ancient shepherd Pixodaros Evangelos probably enjoyed a hero cult in Ephesus. An inscription names Dionysos poimantrios, Dionysos of the shepherds. In the pagan world gods were sometimes depicted as shepherds. The god Orpheus was depicted as a good shepherd who saved souls from death. The god Hermes was often represented as a statue of a man carrying a sheep or goat on his shoulders. It was the apparent popularity of this symbol which influenced Christian and Jewish appropriations of it. Jesus was pictured as Orpheus in some Christian catacombs as was David also pictured as Orpheus in one of the wall-paintings in the Dura-Europos synagogue.

If these were some of the images the mixed congregation of Jewish and pagan Christians in Ephesus were familiar with, then it becomes clearer in what way the Gospel became a communicative intervention in the lives of the readers. The author metaphorically juxtaposed these images on Jesus of Nazareth, turning it into a story of decision, of life and death, of nothing less than a total re-orientation of life.

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