Prolegomena to a Johannine theology: Sources, method and status of a narratological model

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ABSTRACT
The possibilities of a narratological theology of John are discussed in this paper. Some of the hermeneutical presuppositions which constitute such an approach are analysed. The narrative mode cannot be separated from its theological claims, since such a narrative does not merely mediate revelation, but is revelation as such. The locus of revelation in a gospel narrative is taken as lying in the written narration of the gospel text with its own narrated world, and not in the deeds, content, dogmas, encounters which as possible referents of the narration lie outside the narrative. Narratological theology is a mode of self-involvement. The reader/theologian becomes committed to the text world and meaning-giving symbolic world which the Johannine text reveals.

To the extent that God is loved, he is known.... My teachers are the apostles. They did not teach me to read Plato, or to decipher the ingeniousnesses of Aristotle, but they have taught me how to live (like Christ had lived, suffered and triumphed). (Bernard of Clairvaux, 1090-1153)

1 INTRODUCTION
The perception that tends to survive and oftentimes dominates as a model for theology is the classical locus-structure for a theology. When it is built into a theology, this perspective appears to be properly systematic, competently well-organised, and validly scientific. Indeed, many theologians were not only educated by, but also taught by designing great ‘canons’ of systematised dogma, assuming that the Scriptures unquestionably teach us in such a clear-cut way, so that theology proper can only exist in such doctrines.

Of the great theologians Rudolf Bultmann occupies a transitional position, since his model for theology is constituted by an anthropological perspective in the sense that it addresses questions of how and with what effect every and all religious (rather than ‘theological’) issues affect human beings existentially. Hence, Bultmann’s theology of the New Testament is not at all cast into the strict formal categories of the locus-approach. Although he talks about ‘theology of Paul’, ‘theology of John’, he also spells out ‘the message

This Bultmann-model for theology leans heavily on the insights of, amongst others and especially, William Wrede (1897) and before him J P Gabler who initiated a whole new approach in 1787 when his work was published under the illuminating title: *Oratio de iusto discrimine theologiae biblicae et dogmaticae regundisque recte utriusque finibus* (‘A discourse on the proper distinction between biblical and dogmatic theology and the correct delimitation of their boundaries’). Here ‘biblical theology’ is a historic discipline, whereas ‘dogmatic theology’ has a dialectic and rationalistic character.

The line of continual development from Gabler, through Wrede to Bultmann (see Morgan 1973:12) is to be contemplated within the scenario of the current nineteenth century ‘liberal German theology’. Wrede pursued *Religionsgeschichte* and entered into discussions with his predecessors, namely, the more conservative Weiss (1890) and the more liberal Holtzmann (1896-97). Weiss’s assistant in a campaign for orthodoxy was Wrede’s contemporary, Adolf Schlatter.

At that point in the history of New Testament theology Gabler, Wrede and Bultmann argued for the consistent recognition in the field of New Testament theology of the intellectual revolution of nineteenth century liberal theology in which the old dogmatic method of deduction from revealed data had been replaced by historical induction from human experience. In other words, the old dogmatic theology was thought to have been replaced by the history of religion and by biblical theology. The fundamental claim was made that the core of the subject-matter of New Testament theology is not *theology*, but rather *religion* (in the sense of ‘description of ethical code of conduct’).

However, a conventional, pre- or contra-Bultmannian perception is still the pedigree blood that pulsates in the veins of many a theologian; this is the ‘royal’ blood which is pumped through many a mental system by our reformed, Lutheran, Anglican, Catholic, and all types of hearts; this is what energises and vindicates our academic standing and what provides everything and anything needed for our inputs as professional and professing theologians.

A survey of literature in this field displays and establishes that since times immemorial, ultimately the structure and contents of theologies have boiled down to this concept of theology. This entails that the modifications one detects are, as it were, only cosmetic in so far as their jargon and overtones differ from previous models, while the basic undertones remain almost intact.

To substantiate this point, I refer the reader to the most recent series of
theologies contained in publications in New Testament studies, with the title *New Testament theology*, edited by J D G Dunn. Put into their own words,

> the aim (of this series) (is) to remedy the deficiency of available published material, which has tended to concentrate on historical, textual, grammatical and literary issues at the expense of the theology [my italics] or to lose distinctive emphases of individual writings in systematised studies of “theology of Paul”, and the like (Lieu 1991:iv).¹

The point now under discussion is, however, only one side of the coin. There are also hints and traces of real modifications and changes in approach, perspective and methodology. This is clear when one scrutinises the book by Räisänen entitled, *Beyond New Testament theology: A story and a program* (1989). Even before him, although not in such a nuanced way, Robinson published his book, *Faith's framework: The structure of New Testament theology* (1985). This breathes the spirit of Vincent Taylor (1960) who approaches his New Testament theology with motifs such as forgiveness of sins/transgressions and reconciliation, while Pokorny (1987) embarked from the vantage point of the genesis of Christology. In the same vein Neill (1976) and Marshall (1990) took various perspectives on Jesus as their focal points. A variation on this theme is Hoskyns (1981) with the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus as the *scopus* for New Testament theology.

This awareness of new avenues in search of New Testament theology and actual movements into this direction in at least some circles are already manifestly clear in the model of Funk (1966), entitled, *Language, hermeneutic, and the word of God: The problem of language in the New Testament and contemporary theology*. In this important work Funk postulates that understanding as such of the communication by a literatur/author is the fundamental component and the *sine qua non* for theology. The result of this approach is, that, in consequence of the movement of ‘new hermeneutics’ from Bultmann, through to Ebeling, and Fuchs, theology has become entangled with and subservient to hermeneutics. The history of this development can be linked to Fuller (1963) who investigated the presuppositions of New Testament theology by looking into the issue of Jesus’ mission and his achievements. This study was followed by the contribution of Morgan (1973) in which he posed the question about the nature of New Testament theology by scrutinising anew the contributions made by two world-famous theologians of a century and more years ago, namely William Wrede and Adolf Schlatter.

Another development took place, namely contextualisation of Bible reading, of theology, and of the phenomenon of religion. As early as 1971, for

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¹ Other contributions in this series are: Hebrews (Lindars 1991), Galatians (Dunn 1993), the Later Pauline Letters (Lincoln 1993) and Revelation (Bauckham 1993).

During the sixties the great spirits of Western theology, namely the German scholars who worked with some form of historical criticism, made their contributions in the field of theology. Prominent names in this respect are those of Schnackenburg (1963 and 1966), Goppelt (1964), Conzelmann (1969) and Kümmel (1972). Because of their significance for the history of theology all these works were translated and published in English.

The new perspective brought to the scene with the contribution of Theissen in 1992 is quite important. His work, *Social reality and early Christians: Theology, ethics, and the world of the New Testament*, is a follow-up on his earlier works. Another work in the same vein is by Gottwald (1993), entitled, *Social class as an analytical and hermeneutical category in Biblical studies*. In all studies of this nature the life, religion and theology of early-Christendom, from which the New Testament documents originated, have been looked at from a proper sociological and historical perspective. The next step obviously is to understand, read and interpret the texts of early-Christendom from a social-scientific perspective and to pay thoroughgoing attention to the aspects of socio-linguistics and cultural anthropology. This approach, which actually started in the early-eighties, represents the most advanced, most extensive and most penetrating application of the rule of thumb in semantics and any linguistic and literary approach, namely, that of understanding and reading a text in its context, as context generates meaning.

Together with, even running parallel to it, the movement that was actually inaugurated by Räisänen (see above), gained momentum well into the nineties. This enterprise turned out to be designated as narratological theology. The prolegomena to this, which pre-date Räisänen’s work are those of Navone (1977), *Towards a theology of story* (in which the authority and authenticity of narratives contained by religious texts are spelled out) and of O’Day (1986), *Revelation in the fourth Gospel* (in which the locus of revelation is put in the narrative as such and the world and the symbolic world the narrator creates within the text). In the same vein another work, edited by McConnell (1986) was published, entitled, *The Bible and narrative tradition*, which contains six articles in this field of study by well-known scholars such as Frei, Kermode, Robinson and others.
Although this survey might appear to be elaborate, it was necessary to substantiate the assumption that reflective thinking on theology and actual making thereof is a dynamic and complicated enterprise. This enterprise continually revisits itself and never ceases responding to new paradigms of understanding (hermeneutics), new understandings of metaphysics, world view, et cetera. By necessity and logically all related critical epistemic questions would and should also be taken seriously as being basic components inherent in this enterprise. Once this is the case, the most fundamental issue at stake here is obviously the question of the epistemological status which lies inherent in the contents of the texts which all theologians utilise as sources for their diversity of theologies (see, inter alia, Le Roux 1994:5).

Having stated the basic case and problems pertaining to New Testament theology, it now brings us to the point when issues such as sources for Johannine theology, method, and status of a narratological model of Johannine theology should be dealt with.

2 SOURCES FOR JOHANNINE THEOLOGY

The sources one opts for are determined and established by one’s particular concept of a list of books that carries adequate status and valid credibility for being scrutinised in search of theology—supposing that theology (in some or other sense of the word) is contained by these documents.

One’s decision on which documents are at stake and useful here as sources is pre-determined by the comprehensive context, that is, the make-up of the theologian. This encompasses the theologian’s symbolic world, the thought world of his/her frame of mind which is put into operation as a set of axiomatic presuppositions. These pre-determinates are, inter alia, a certain epistemological set-up, a particular metaphysical world view, some religious inclination (including a-/anti-religious feelings), a general pose to be a non-conformist personality, emotions, experiences et cetera.

This comprehensive symbolic world then, consisting in mental/rational, and emotional considerations, somehow influences the theologian’s decision on the sources for his/her theology. It does the same with respect to the choice of a paradigm of understanding and a method of exposition; it also does the same with respect to one’s assigning of the epistemic status and value of theology. We shall return to these aspects later in this paper.

In this section of the present paper about prolegomena on sources for a narratological model of Johannine theology we will consider five New Testament documents which traditionally stand under the authorship of a certain John: the fourth Gospel, three general Letters and the Apocalypse of John.

Of these texts only the proper narrative sections of this corpus are relevant to our purpose. No discussion of the relationship between this Johan-
nine corpus and the rest of the New Testament is offered here, since we are dealing with Johannean theology exclusively. Methodologically spoken, attention to other parts of the New Testament can be vindicated only if on firm grounds these parts could legitimately be taken as part and parcel of the Johannean inter-text. The reader is referred to an arsenal of works on this topic, for example Becker (1986).

3 HERMENEUTICS AND METHOD FOR A JOHANNINE THEOLOGY, WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO JOHN’S GOSPEL

The hermeneutical assumption is made here that a narrative such as John’s Gospel presents revelation. This assumption is justified because the narrator creates in his narration a distinctive and own world which is authentic and bears legitimacy and credibility. These qualifications assign and vindicate the status of authority to the gospels’ contents by virtue of, amongst other things, two fundamental factors which are of paramount importance. Firstly, there is the inextricable relatedness of the Gospel narrative with the Jesus-event and with Jesus as the Revealer and as revelation. Secondly, there is the phenomenon of the special position the Gospel writers as narrators of the Jesus-event occupies in the history of the Christian faith and doctrinal truths.

In anticipation of what will be dealt with under the paragraph on status of narratological theology a hermeneutical scheme is formulated to substantiate the choice of a narratological paradigm for hermeneutics and theology: part and parcel of the inner mechanics of this methodology is that it utilises the phenomenon of analogy and its logical implications. This can be depicted in a diagram as follows:

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Jesus/Hero -------- narrated in -------- text:
as: Revealer

Johannine narrative

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interlocutors = characterise = ancient/modern
(Such as Jews, Samaritan woman, disciples, etc)
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In this paradigm the text of John’s narration about Jesus claims and obtains in principle the same authority and status as the words and deeds of the protagonist/main character, which is Jesus. The interlocutors were directly addressed by Jesus and their roles were characterised solely by the nature of their relationship with Jesus and by their response to Jesus. Consequently then, in terms of the logistics of an analogy the interlocutors set the example for a response of ancient readers which appears to be obviously appropriate for them in their identified roles. An appeal is then made on the reader to, either, dissociate from, or, identify with the response of the respective characters as antagonists and as helpers of Jesus respectively (see Petersen 1993:2ff). This aspect of self-involvement is of fundamental importance in this approach to theology.

We observe here that the text world represents in a valid way various characters in their respective roles in relation to Jesus as the Protagonist and to his announcements/statements, all of which originally occurred in a world or context of religion, revelation and theology. We say a valid way, because this text world is indeed linked up with and does refer to a real historical world of events, encounters, deeds, pronouncements (dogmas) outside the text of Johannine narration.

But in narrative theology the locus of the revelation and theology of the gospel narrative is not these entities which lie somewhere outside the narration; it rather lies in the written narration contained by the text of the gospel of John and the own world created by it and in it.

This obviously entails that a narratological paradigm for exegesis and theology opts for the narration and text world as the primary source for analysis, as an appropriate locus for revelation, and as a valid model for theology. This choice is made, may be made, and must be made, because the bruta facta and the verba ipsissima about and during the original/authentic Jesus-event can by no means be constructed, let alone be re-constructed.

This consequently brings one to a further step which constitutes an essential facet of reflection on Johannine theology, namely, what a narratological approach precisely generates for theology. By means of exemplifying the narratological paradigm we should now subject this model for theology to the critical test of its first fruits. The most appropriate field for this exercise is John’s narration about Jesus who is the protagonist of the narrative and, as it were, the main character in the plot of the Jesus-event. Other salient motifs which occur in the Johannine interpretative narration about Jesus should be dealt with in a similar procedure if a comprehensive Johannine narratological theology is to be constructed.

We shall not be dealing with Jesus in the terms of traditional terminology of systematic theology as ‘high’ or ‘low’ Christology, soteriology, realised or
futuristic eschatology, et cetera. Rather, we would listen to the authoritative narrator who tells us about and reports to us on Jesus' revealing pronouncements/utterances. As a matter of fact, within the contours of the gospel narrative he is the Revealer and the revelation of the story. Let us then listen to the Johannine narrator's version of the Jesus story, or at least to a few examples of it which epitomise some aspects of Johannine narratological theology.

In preliminary remarks above attention was devoted to John's use of language, his style, et cetera, which means that his narrative mode of communication was concisely addressed. At stake here is the mode which contains the views expressed or focalised by the narrator in his narration. This mode cannot and may not be separated from John's theology, since it is assumed here the mode and the content of the narration are revelation.

Having made this observation and stipulation, one must identify John's mode. One can go along with Petersen (1993:3ff) who illuminates John's use of language. He maintains that John as narrator uses everyday language, but makes it to signify and mean special language in the sense that semantically it functions and effects as anti-language. This simply means that special meanings are encoded in the wording (phraseology) of everyday language (Petersen 1993:133).

When and where relevant one must also reckon with the technique that the narrator creates synonyms out of non-synonymous terminology, and his synonyms usually blur the referents of his language. The result is that enigmas are generated and misunderstandings occur. This is typical of John's mode.

All this forms part and parcel of the comprehensive context of John's narration about Jesus, which comprises literary, linguistic, and social dimensions. Basically all these facets are embedded in the scenario of a religious community and the doing of theology by a narrator within the perimeters of his symbolic world, which was initiated by Jesus and carries his stamp.

Regarding the socio-religious dimension it is observed here that the anti-language phenomenon in John's phraseology emerges from opposing sides, (such as Jews/unbelievers versus the Johannine community, Jesus-followers/helpers versus Jesus antagonists, et cetera). This results in a contrastive style of thinking and expressing oneself and manifests in the narrator's frequent use of semantic opposites and grammatical negations such as occur in John (see Petersen 1993:5; also Duke 1985:142-47; Malina 1985:15ff, passim; Meeks 1972:44ff; O'Day 1986:11ff, 33ff; Onuki 1984:26ff).

Hence, basically the core of John's narration is religion and it has to do with the relationship with and response to the protagonist of the narration, whilst it directly relates and pertains to pronouncements of the nature of a
revelation theology. This applies in the first instance to text world created by the narrator in the form of a Johannine religious text. In view of this perspective from linguistics, socio-linguistics and narratology one is equipped for reading, understanding and interpreting John's narration on Jesus.

Utilising these skills and perspectives, one can now postulate that the Johannine narrator uses various identifiers in his characterisation of the protagonist of his narration. This characterisation encompasses his words and works (mission on earth). The narrator tells us that the Revealer Jesus declares himself by means of certain identifiers which function in some conceptional systems, such as glorification, descent and ascent, light and darkness, bread (of life), self-revealing pronouncements, et cetera.

The most fundamental ones of these almost thirty identifiers are the systems of:

- word/logos—σοφία/wisdom
- Father/son—σοφία/wisdom
- God
- son of man; son of God
- light of the world; life
- I am pronouncements
- Old Testament images/figures (such as Abraham and Moses).
- only son—μονογενής

The systems which operate here are those of:

- * the many sons of wisdom/sophia, and the only son of the Father
- * from Moses through sophia to Jesus
- * sophia and John's characterisation of Jesus
- * John's anti-structural use of the image of sophia.

These identifiers are actually models/descriptions which the characters, including Jesus and the narrator, used according to the unfolding narration about Jesus. In the connotation of the special language (i.e., special meaning of everyday language as used by the narrator, Jesus and his disciples) the concepts (morphemes) as symbols carry different meanings than those in everyday language usage. This difference in meaning with its significance is brought about by, especially, the phenomenon that the referents of synonyms are being blurred from their normal meaning. This is the case, for example, with the concepts 'God', 'word/logos', 'son', 'life', 'light', 'wisdom', 'king/king of the Jews', et cetera.

The heuristic dynamics of the present approach of anti-language as special language in Johannine phraseology is clearly demonstrated in John's dealing with the image of Moses. In characterising Jesus this patriarch is contrasted to Jesus with a view to depicting and narrating Jesus in terms of an anti-structural response. This somehow works like an antithetical parallelism.
Thus we have at least three statements in John’s narration which make this point. These are:

(1) John 1:18: *No one has ever seen God*; the only son of God, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known.

(2) John 6:46: *Not that anyone has seen the Father*, except he who is from God, he has seen the Father (see further 6:29-32).

(3) John 3:13: *No one has ascended into heaven*, but he who descended from heaven, the son of man (see further 3:13-15, 31-36).

As being anti-language these statements as identifiers of Jesus contain both negative formulations and positive affirmations. The inversion of direction of ascent and descent with respect to Moses and Jesus is a direct and critical point of the narrator’s characterisation of Jesus. Jesus is fundamentally distinguished from Moses in that he comes from heaven; he, first and foremost, descended and only then he ascended whilst Moses did the opposite (see Exodus 19 together with John 3:13).

Regarding the glory of God being bestowed on Moses and Jesus/the logos, see Exodus 33:7-11, 18-23, 34:29-30, 33-35 together with John 1:18 and 6:46.

By the power of anti-language from an anti-society (Jesus and his disciples, the Johannine community and the narrator) the contrast of the main character with Moses is formulated by the narrator. This contrast between Moses and Jesus is respectively that of being ‘of the earth’, ‘speaking of/from the earth’ over against that of ‘one who comes from above (αὐωθεν), ‘bears witness to what he has seen and heard (beyond there above)’, the ‘one whom God has sent’, and the one who ‘utters the words of God’. The key terms in these statements derive from the image of Moses and its anti-construction by the narrator. The meaning and effect of this is that it serves as the identifiers of Jesus and that it spells out an anti-structural appropriation and reorientation of the terms of the statement. Ultimately then, Moses is explicitly subordinated to Jesus (see John 3:31).

The same pattern is displayed in the narrator’s reference to Jesus’ having seen the Father (see John 6:46) and the image of the bread from heaven (mannah in Moses’ time) and the true bread from heaven (see John 6:27, 31f). This strategy of depiction culminates in Jesus’ encounter with the Jews about the quest of how Jesus compares with the prophet Moses (see John 6:29-33).

This narration about Jesus by means of anti-structural responses and Jesus’ dealings with actors in the narrative culminate in the notion expressed by Jesus over against Pilate, namely, that his kingship is not of ‘this world’ (John 18:36). He came into this world to bear witness to the (ultimate) truth of God (18:37—see 3:33). This idea of Jesus being a ‘witness’ forms the undertone of his discussions about his relationship with the Pharisees as the
disciples of Moses (see John 8:12-19, 7:14-29, 5:30-47; see Deuteronomy 17:6f, 18:18f).

In summing up, we may state that the Johannine narrator derives the key terms of his characterisation of Jesus from various facets of the image of Moses. The disciples of Moses (as the Pharisees) are branded in the narration as the antagonists of Jesus, whilst they persecute the protagonist’s helpers (disciples of Jesus, Johannine community, etc.). Socio-linguistically seen, one may even gather that the narrator uses special language which ultimately proves to be the anti-language of the Johannine community in their opposition towards Jesus’ adversaries. This Johannine community (as co-helper and co-disciples of Jesus) positions itself in the active role of an anti-society in relation to the antagonists.

Furthermore, in line with and on account of the Moses-image as an identifier of Jesus, another motif testifies to the phenomenon of anti-language, namely the motif of wisdom/sophia in the prologue to the gospel narrative. In dealing with this the Moses motif is revisited. The narrator uses the sophia motif against Moses, contests the old sophia system itself in comparison with Jesus’ role, and appropriates much of the sophia motif’s essentials in his characterisation of Jesus. In other words, close connections are drawn amongst sophia, Moses, and Jesus who uniquely is the ‘only son’ (i.e. of God, µονογενῆς) (see John 1:14, 17, 3:13-21, 31-36).

In this context of intertextuality and co-text relevant passages from the Wisdom literature have been scrutinised as probable inter-text, such as Proverbs 1:8f, 6:20f, 8:32-36; Wisdom of Solomon 9:1-5, 10:16, 11; Baruch 3:29-4:4 as compared to John 3:11-21, 31-36, and Deuteronomy 30:11-20. This comparison reveals that for Moses the sophia commandments of God are present on earth (Deut 30:11-13); for Baruch and for John no one has ascended to heaven to bring down sophia; yes, since God gave sophia from heaven to his people, namely, by the descent of the word. So wisdom came to live on earth among the people of God—such as Moses said in Deuteronomy 30:11-13. Like Moses and Baruch, John denies an ascent into heaven to bring down wisdom. But the Johannine narrator also makes an anti-Moses claim with respect to the ascent and descent of Moses as mentioned elsewhere. For the purpose of his anti-language characterisation of Jesus John, therefore, adopts the story of Moses via the role of sophia.

Hence, the relationship among the Father, his only son and those who don’t receive Jesus is anti-structurally derived from the sophia story. In turn, the sophia story seems to be perceived (via Baruch’s perspective) as an anti-structural revision of the story of Moses.

This is so because the idea that God directly gave the sophia as the law, replaces the idea that God sent Moses with the law. Moreover, the Jesus that
the Johannine narrator characterises is also anti-structurally related to the sophia, since Jesus displaces sophia as being the one who was given/descended from heaven, and as the fulfilment of the law of Moses (see Baruch 4:1; Sirach 24:23). Thus, God gives his only son, not sophia. Moreover, this gift is Jesus, not the law of Moses (John 1:17).

Other texts from the Wisdom literature which could be referred to in a characterisation of Jesus (such as Sirach 24, Proverbs 8, see John 6:25-51 and 3 and 1:17, furthermore, Sirach 24:8,9) spell out the pattern of thought: Jesus displaces sophia in the form and function of the descended word/logos to this world. The only son of the Father (the logos) dwells in the world and displaces the firstborn of creation (sophia).

This boils down to a typical theological contour in John’s narration about Jesus, namely: Jesus being the firstborn and only son of the Father, stands anti-structurally in contrast to Moses and light and sophia (see 1:4,10). Like Baruch and John Wisdom’s sophia is not something that can be sought for and found by oneself, for God gives and bestows it himself.

In contrast, 1 Enoch 42:1-2 reveals that sophia sought a dwelling place among the sons of man, but couldn’t find one and returned to heaven. This is indeed also anti-language against, for example, Sirach 24:7-8,23. In John’s narration the logos, like sophia in Sirach did find a dwelling place among the people of the earth, namely, in the form and person of Jesus!

One may state that in John’s narration about Jesus as the word-logos-sophia he is historicised by becoming a human being Jesus. He is also politicised by his entering into the human conflicts of the socio-political establishment. It is exactly in his involvement in these human conflicts that the logos differs widely from sophia. Hence, in his characterisation of Jesus John makes an anti-structural use of the image of sophia.

In contrast to basic perceptions in Wisdom traditions Jesus in the logos-sophia image has only a temporary dwelling on earth. He dies, and the incarnated logos returns to his place of origin in heaven. In consequence the continuation of the anti-structural contrast takes place and spells out that after his death the logos returns to heaven. But there remains a specific presence on earth in history: This is a Book of signs, known as the Gospel of John. This book functions as an equivalent to the law of Moses. This book is the narrative simulacrum of the presence of the logos and embodies revelation; as a matter of fact, belief in what it says and presents produces and generates eternal life. This stands on a par with what belief in Jesus did when he used to dwell on earth as the incarnated logos (see John 3:16, 17:20f, 19:35, 20:29-31).

For John there is no functional difference between the signs as performed by the living logos-Jesus, and those signs as narrated in John’s gospel (see Petersen 1993:130; O’Day 1986:8-10,92-94).
4 STATUS OF A NARRATOLOGICAL THEOLOGY OF JOHN

The assumption and observation are made here that the status of Johannine narratological theology relates in the last instance to the status of theology in general. This places narratological theology right in the centre of classical quests such as the relationship between reason and faith, respectively philosophy and theology, contingent truth(s) and universal truth(s), verifiability and falsifiability of truth and of propositions of logic and knowledge, et cetera. All along the history of theology and of the making of any type of scientific discipline these questions about theory of science and a valid methodology for a discipline have been asked. And rightly so, provided that critical distance is taken from the state of affairs in the past when a tyrant known as the ‘Verification Principle’ of, amongst others, the neo-positivist Wittgenstein (1922) with his idea of ‘rules of the language-game’ dominated the scene. The problem here is that this perception excludes from (scientific) language all propositions which cannot in principle be verified by sense experience (that what can be seen, heard, touched, tasted and smelt, and reasoned out by strength of the observations of these senses). This obviously excludes ethics and theology from meaningful and scientific tenable language and from its potential to produce any kind of proper proposition (see Ramsey 1967:12f).

Fact of the matter is, that in religion and theology one is dealing with a situation or domain which is empirically experienced as odd and which is about subjective things such as worship, discernment and commitment. In any proper scientific enquiry into this matter attention is to be devoted to both components involved here, namely, ‘facts’ and ‘language’ (as the verbal articulation and symbolising of the facts). For example, the conventional qualifications of God (such as eternal, omnipotency, omnisciency, etc) offer no further descriptions of God, but only qualify models (metaphors) of God with a view to the act of worshipping God (cf Ramsey 1967:164, 185).

Be that as it may, the present questioning of the nature and status of theology and biblical theology came as no surprise; it only has to be addressed pro-actively by acknowledging its validity (right of existence) in the ongoing process of academic entrepreneurship, and by thoroughly penetrating into the innerworks of its methodology and terms of reference. Furthermore, at stake here is the quest of truth-claims with respect to theology and its related activities.

These issues were addressed two centuries ago by the pioneer in the act and art of critical reflection on humankind’s rational and academic abilities and on methodological issues such as theory of science and epistemology, namely Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). In his work Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der blossen Vernunft (1793) he did not furnish a definition of religion
as such, but made out a strong case for what in his ‘religious proposal’ he
termed as ‘pure religious faith’ and described this as being the recognition of
our duties which are divine commands. He strongly recommended observa-
tion of these divine commands, on account of their universality, simplicity,
and their conduciveness to morality. This pure religious faith is the only true
religion, although the ‘faith’ is diverse and finds expression in many
cults/cultures (see Kant 1960:98ff). He maintained that this pure and true reli-
gion makes particular religious proposals. The salient ones are in the form of
fundamental assumptions:

* belief in God is essential to religion
* morality (and the urgent need for it) leads ineluctably to religion (1960:5).

In other words, Kant stated that pure practical reason requires us to postu-
late the existence of God. Pure religious faith is moral faith. Asked when con-
cepts and judgments had moral significance, he responded by putting the
question on a higher and deeper level, namely, ‘What type of religion should
I have?’ His answer: ‘That religion one thinks is worth living’.

Schleiermacher (1768-1834) also contributed to this movement. He aired
and explained his views in his magisterial work entitled, Reden über die Reli-
gion (translated as: On religion: Speeches to its cultured despisers, 1958). In
response to Kant he stated that piety (Frömmigkeit) is the feeling of absolute
dependence (das schlechthinige Abhängigkeitsgefühl). To his mind religion dif-
fers from ordinary science and metaphysics, and from morality. Religion has
a province of its own. God is by nature and per definition ‘that existence out-
side of us to which the consciousness of absolute dependence refers’ (1958:35).

Suffice it is to put the whole issue at stake into proper perspective of his-
tory of human reflection, especially within the context and field of the his-
tory of theology. This also helps us to understand and appreciate the move-
ment from the sixties of our century known as analytic philosophy, respec-
tively philosophy of language. Prominent exponents are Hare (1951), Austin
(1962), Ferré (1961), Braithwaite (1955), and others.

One fundamental issue which is due for dealing with is the quest of truth-
claims of proposals and propositions and furthermore, the question whether
truth-claims occur in religious literature.

This brings one to what Christian (1964) has to say in his publication, Mean-
ing and truth in religion. He states that in religious discourse proposals
are made which by their very own nature, are utterances addressed to other
human beings whereby something is put forward for acceptance (1964:10).
He contends that the various proposals made in this field (such as injunc-
tions, confessions, etc), proposals for belief are claims to truth and, con-
sequently, they call for judgment. In other words, this type of proposal expresses propositions, since it asks real and essential questions and purports to furnish answers common to all discussers. For example: On the question whether or not the Bible or the Koran or the Avesta teaches that knowledge of oneself involves apprehension of God, the answer would be non-propositional in the sense of an informative answer. If, however, the question would be: 'Does knowledge of oneself involve apprehension of God', then in answering this question a proposal of/for belief, and consequently a proposition, would have been to be made. On the level of status such a proposition is on a par with propositions within science.

What then is a truth-claim? Religious proposals make truth-claims when the judgment they contain is logically in order. This signifies in order according to certain (universal) conditions as were thought out, designed and presented by logicians on account of their particular mode and culture of thought. Christian names and explains four of these conditions for truth-claims.

The proposal must
* be capable of self-consistent formulation. This means that one should be able to formulate explicitly and consistently what one means to state.
* be liable to significant disagreement. This means that any statement has significant consequences only if it could be negated consistently. Proposals have to be disputable and discursive. This implies that tautologies are excluded here. It must be possible to state a consistent alternative, for example by adding before the wording of the proposal the statement: 'It is not the case that...(Nirvana, but God is the supreme goal of life).'
* permit a reference to its logical subject. This means that the predicate of a proposition must mean something in a certain way, so that the person addressed would understand what one is talking about and referring to. This is all about additional information in the sense of an interpretative category about the subject of the statement. For example, the proposal, 'JHWH is the lord of life', should be elaborated on by more specification about JHWH, such as: 'the one who led Israel from Egypt'. These additional facts must be independent of the proposal, so that it should be possible to accept the fact without accepting the proposal.
* permit some support for assignment of its predicate to its subject. This means that some acceptable and valid support to the predication made in the proposal should be possible. It must be possible to supply valid substantiation for saying and judging that x is P.

Ultimately, this is all about the question and condition(s) which determine when and whether a religious (and any other) proposal is entitled
to make a meaningful and valid claim on truth. In assessing this the focal point lies on the logical subject which should be referable and liable to be predicated by certain descriptions. This is exactly what Kant did by positing God as a component into the whole enclosed system for religion and theology.

Judged by these conditions, it should go without saying that expressions, statements, indicatives, imperatives, and so forth, in the Old and New Testament precisely present this type of sayings. This includes the Johannine narration about Jesus.

In line with this Evans (1963) took up the idea of the performative force of language and the concept of the logic of self-involvement in everyday language as contained and presented by the Biblical documents. He emphasises that contemporary (during the sixties) analytical philosophy and biblical theology ‘have become so settled in their divorce...that it was high time to reconsider the verdict’ (1963:13). The result was that modern biblical theology ‘emphasizes non-propositional language, both in its account of...God’s word to man and in its account of...man’s word to God’. This deals exactly with issues such as divine revelation and human religious language (:14). As alternative and solution of the impasse, he proposed the idea of the self-involving force of language.

Evans observed that the natural habitat of ordinary language of theology does not lie in other spheres of life, but exists exclusively in the Biblical documents themselves. If one intends embarking on an investigation of the meaning (semantics) of theological terms and what they precisely denote (such as God, worship, etc), then the source and direct meaning-generating context is the Bible and not all types of textbooks of linguists and of philosophers of language.

This finds expression in the following five performative forces of language usage:

* Constatives, that is, pronouncements which state, report, guess, warn, bet, estimate, et cetera.
* Commissives, that is, pronouncements of commitment which promise, pledge, threaten, covenant, undertake, et cetera.
* Exercitives, those words/concepts that exercise authority, such as order, decree, appoint, name, et cetera.
* Behavitives, those words dealing with social behaviour, such as thank, praise, apologise, blame, confess, et cetera.
* Verdictives, those pronouncements spelling out verdicts, such as judge, rate, find, grade, value, et cetera.

This clearly constitutes the pre-phase of speech act theories since the mid-eighties of our century and which form part and parcel of the present literary
critical approach in Bible understanding. Thiselton (1992:274) assesses this work of Evans as, 'seminal and seriously undervalued' (italics mine—HL). The approach in the present presentation hooks in on precisely this wavelength. This insight of a five-fold performative force of language makes sense in a narratological paradigm for Johannine theology where self-involvement and commitment is of essence at stake. This brings us to the final observation on the status of a narratological model for Johannine theology, namely, a proper endeavour to break through in the never-ending debate on dichotomies such as theology and reason.

Relevant to this is the design of Pannenberg who since 1953 has made presentations of his understanding of *Universalgeschichte* (universal history) and theology of reason (*Theologie der Vernunft*). This should be contemplated as an apologetic-oriented approach which originated in the context of the classical controversy in this field of reflection on theology (see above), as well as an answer to the dominance of reason in the human sciences since the Enlightenment. Pannenberg projects his concept of universal history and historic faith onto the Biblical motif of the kingdom of God.

According to Van Huyssteen (1970:237) Pannenberg works with two basic observations, namely,

1. God revealed and continually reveals himself in the historic reality of our existence. This revelation can be known and comprehended through our reason, albeit with respect to the authority of God's revelation, the faculty of rationality should be aware of its own limitations and temporariness.

2. The worldliness character (*Welthaftigkeit*) of God's revelation essentially consists in the historical nature thereof. This implies of necessity that God never acts beyond and outside his history with the world. This whole idea of historical faith and God's interwoveness with the history and fate of humankind precipitates in the concept of transmission history in a progressively ascending line towards the *telos* of consummation with God as Master of all history.

This perspective implies that God's sublime truth can never be grasped fully in any conceptualisation, not even in alleged invariable theological formulae. Human knowledge is and will always be preliminary. Only in a preliminary sense of the word will humankind be able to fathom the depths of the dealings and actions in history of a transcendent God.

Consequently, theology has a kind of universal task to bring across this message to all peoples and disciplines. In performing this task as a calling, theology plays a role in servitude and not one of domination (Van Huyssteen 1970:243).

In subsequent work done in this vein Van Huyssteen refined and elaborated on his views. He observes and maintains the concept 'a qualified
and weak form of critical realism (my italics—HL) as an adequate epistemological model of rationality for theology: a realism that does not attempt a strong defence of theism, but—in line with the traditional realist assumptions of the Christian faith—rather deals with the cognitive claims of religious language and theological reflection (1988a:82).

This deals, among other things, with basic issues such as explanatory success with respect to cognitive claims and the quest of ontological expressions contained by references to God. Explanatory progress, being the best inferred explanation available at any point in time, is theology's epistemic goal, which should take seriously the evolving nature of and the shaping of theological rationality in the process of history, as well as the realist assumptions and implied faith commitment of the Christian tradition (see Van Huyssteen 1988a:87-88; also 1988b).

All this entails that, on the one hand, it is possible and valid to reason out and do Biblical theology based on the history oriented religious texts of the Bible. Such a theology does make truth-claims in the form of propositions and proposals of faith.

On the other hand, theology is an inescapable commission of God who is still, as ever, active in our history. The quest of theology is determined by the theologian's personal existential beliefs, his/her basic perception of who, what, how God is(?), as well as his/her relationship (or: attitude) with/towards God.

The logic of Biblical theology as a historic-oriented discipline is the logic of existential self-involvement of the theologian with his/her theology. As Bernard of Clairvaux and Immanuel Kant so aptly and rightly said, proper theology is constituted by the theologian's self-involving commitment to and believing identification with the God and the Jesus Christ as they are revealed in the narrations of the Old and New Testament texts/documents.

**Works Consulted**


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