Jesus the gardener: the atonement in the Fourth Gospel as re-creation

John Suggit

ABSTRACT
The two-fold aim of this paper is (i) to determine whether the description of Jesus as the gardener is symbolic; and (ii) to show that the atonement in the Fourth Gospel is seen in terms of renewal and transformation. Starting with some of Origen's comments, it is then argued that re-creation is a consistent theme of John. This is borne out by a brief look at some early interpretations of John's theology, with special reference to Athanasius, after which consideration is given to the meaning of Jesus as the gardener, and the legitimacy of new interpretations.

1 INTRODUCTION.
Origen's comment that 'no-one can understand the meaning of [the gospel according to John] unless he has reclined on the breast of Jesus and has received from Jesus Mary as his own mother' (CommJob 1:4:23) exhibits the problems of plumbing what Origen called 'the depths of the gospel's meaning' (ta bathē tou evangelikon nou, CommJob 1:8:46). The meaning of the gospel is disclosed only to those who have committed themselves in faith to Jesus as the revelation of God, and thereby have become united with him (Jn 17:26). The words of Jesus 'Come and you will see' (Jn 1:39) form a theme running through the gospel, corresponding, as Boismard notes (1956:78-80), to the invitation in the Old Testament addressed to human beings by Wisdom, as in Proverbs 1:20-23 and 8:1-12. This 'coming to Jesus' entails a life devoted to him, so that prayer and theology necessarily belong together. 'If anyone wishes to do God's will, he will know whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak from myself' (Jn 7:17). This emphasis specially endeared the Fourth Gospel to the Eastern Orthodox tradition, as expressed by Evagrius of Pontus in the fourth century—'If you are a theologian, you will pray in truth; and if you pray in truth, you are a theologian' (Ware 1978:186).

The connection between devotion and theological reflection is enhanced by the gospel's symbolism. Religious symbols are always pluri-significant (Perrin 1976:29), since believers necessarily interpret them from the context of their own commitment and experience, and are not bound by the meaning intended by the original author. The symbolism used in the Fourth Gospel derives very largely from the Old Testament, with which readers are assumed to be familiar. This is shown from the start not only in the prologue, but very vividly in the account of the meeting between Jesus and Nathanael ('the gift of God'), where the allusion to the true Israelite (1:47) cannot fail to recall Jacob at Bethel, where his name was changed to Israel (1:51; Gn
28:12). But not all allusions are so easily discerned. Is Mary Magdalene’s impression that Jesus was the gardener (20:15) an ironically symbolic statement containing ‘a mystical meaning enshrined in the words’, which Origen believed must be sought out (Comm Joh 1:15:89), or is it mentioned simply for dramatic effect? Before attempting an answer, we shall consider John’s understanding of the work of Christ. Why does John (alone of the evangelists) consider Jesus to be ‘the saviour of the world’ (4:42)?

2 ATONEMENT IN THE FOURTH GOSPEL

There is no doubt that for John Jesus is especially the revealer of God. The end of the prologue (1:18) in good Hebrew fashion asserts that ‘no-one has ever yet seen God; the only God [or only son] who is closest to the Father, he has made him known’. For the present purpose the establishment of the correct text of this verse is not important. The assertion is that God will be declared, or expounded, by Jesus the Logos of God. The aorist ενημερώσατο draws attention to the completed act by which the revelation was effected. It is this which the gospel describes. Jesus revealed God not just by being who he is, but by what he did, with its culmination on the cross. In 1:18 we have (though somewhat concealed—οὐδέσποτε) the first of the ‘not yet’ (οὐπόθ) which occur elsewhere in connection with Jesus’ destiny (2:4; 7:6,8,30,39; 8:20). Although Jesus’ hour is first mentioned at 2:4, it is only at the start of the passion narrative that the hour, which is the hour of glory, finally arrives (12:23; 13:1; 17:1). There is still another ‘not yet’ at 20:17, as though the revelation is completed only when the risen Jesus has appeared to, and is recognized by, the disciples. The climax is reached with Thomas’ acclamation ‘My Lord and my God’ (20:28). John carefully translates Thomas into Greek (Didiwnoi) (20:24; 11:16; 21:2), to remind disciples that Thomas is their twin. Thomas, the twin, the representative of every disciple, was prepared to accompany Jesus to share in his death (11:16), while still unaware of Jesus’ and his own destiny: ‘We do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?’ (14:5). In his reply (vv6-11) Jesus claimed to be the revealer of the Father, a claim which Thomas the twin finally accepted. The promise made in 1:18 finds its fulfilment in 20:28. Thomas stands for the disciple who has come to Jesus and seen the truth in him.

Jesus however is shown to be more than simply the revealer of God. By his revelation he changes the relation between God and human beings, and effects a new creation. No-one familiar with the Old Testament could fail to recognize the reference in John 1:1 to the creation story of Genesis. Whatever influence Hellenistic concepts may have had on John, the Hebrew background provides more than enough explanation for the use of Logos as a title of Jesus. In the Old Testament the word (dabur, logos) could refer to the prophetic word (Jer 1:2,4), the Torah (Dt 4:2, and throughout Ps 119), and the creative word (Gn 1:3; Ps 33:6). Although the primary reference in John seems to be to God’s creative word, an allusion to the Torah is also very likely (Suggit 1984). Psalm 119 (LXX 118) is the great encomium of the
Torah, where *torah* and *dabar* are used interchangeably with the same referent. So John 17:17 ("Thy word is truth") picks up verse 142 of the psalm (*ho nomos sou aletheia*), where codex Sinaiticus reads *logos* instead of *nomos*. Jesus has already been declared to be the truth (14:6), and his prayer in 17:17 is that the disciples may be sanctified in him, the true and new Torah. Certainly Melito in the second century asserted *ho nomos logos egeneto* (*Pas 7*), and Davies (1948:147-176) considers Paul to have regarded Jesus as the new Torah. Such an understanding in itself implies a new creation, since in Jewish thought the Torah was considered to be 'the precious instrument wherewith the world was created' (*Pirke Ab* 3:19; Charles 1913:702). For John, the *Logos* replaces the Torah: 'All things came into being through him' (1:3). The Torah was held to be the light for the world (Davies 1948:148-149), but now the *Logos* is the light and life of the world (1:4), a theme resumed in 3:19, 8:12 and 9:5.

These allusions to the Torah serve to enhance the theme of the re-creation effected by the *Logos*, as the opening words of the gospel (*en arche*), identical with the opening words of Genesis, clearly indicate. Further, just as the revelation of God is promised in 1:18 and consummated in 20:28, so the new creation intimated in 1:1 finds its fulfilment at the passion and resurrection. The piercing of Jesus' side (*pleura*) (19:34-35), which Malatesta (1977:169) sees as offering 'the most meaningful symbolism of the entire gospel', recalls the Genesis account of the creation of Eve from the side of Adam (*mian ton pleuron autou*). The church, the new people of God, results from the death of Jesus. Chrysostom is emphatic that the reference is to baptism and eucharist, the liturgical and sacramental signs of the new life brought into being through the death of Jesus (Suggit 1993:138). Similarly in 20:22 ("He breathed on them and said 'Receive Holy Spirit'"), the use of the word *enphusisen* not only recalls the first creation of Adam (Gn 1:7 LXX), but is the word used in Ezekiel 37:9 (LXX) to describe the re-creation of God's people by the spirit, or breath, of God. Though Genesis talks of the breath of life (*pnoe qnei*), and John uses *pneuma*, the words are generally interchangeable (Ezk 37:9). This giving of the Spirit through Jesus' death effects the new creation, as anticipated in Psalm 103:30 (LXX): 'You will send forth your Spirit and they will be created, and you will renew (*anakainite*) the face of the earth'.

Atonement describes the action of God in reconciling human beings to himself, but to be effective atonement demands acceptance of the offered gift. So the new creative work of the *Logos* has to be accepted by human beings if they are truly to become new. This acceptance is what John means by faith. 'All who received him [the *Logos*], to them he gave the ability (*exousia*) to become children of God, that is, to those who believe on his name' (1:11), where Origen comments (*Comm Joh* Catena frag 7) 'they will become children when they have advanced in goodness, faith and knowledge'. The work of atonement is ongoing. Jesus is the saviour of the world, because he made atonement possible. The gospel throughout stresses the necessity of faith, by which God's gift of salvation and new life is made real. In fact, the whole
purpose of the gospel is that 'by believing you may have life in his name' (20:31). The incarnation of the Logos makes possible a new creation and new life for those who accept him. Onoma in 20:31 and in 1:11 refers to the person of the Logos: belief in him (1:11) results in true life in him (20:31). Very likely there is an allusion here to the baptismal formula (Mt 28:19; Ac 19:5). Baptism 'into the name of Jesus' is equivalent to baptism 'into Christ' (Rm 6:3; Gl 3:27), and is the liturgical expression of faith, marking the entrance into the new life. The one who does not believe has already been judged because he has not believed (pepistuken) in the name (eis onoma) of the only son of God' (Jn 3:18). The acceptance of Jesus as Lord and saviour entails following the pattern of his life of self-giving love (13:15-17).

Although there are references to the death of Jesus as being of atoning effect (1:29; 10:15; 15:13), John regards the purpose of the incarnation especially as the way by which human beings are given new life. 'I have come that they may have life and have it in abundance' (10:10). It may be that the description of Jesus as 'the atonement (hilasmos) for our sins' in 1 John 2:2 and 4:10 was meant to preserve the gospel from Gnostic speculations (Brown 1983:69-115), but the use of such traditional language does not diminish the primacy of the gospel's view of atonement as being essentially re-creation. Though Bultmann's belief (1973:23) that the sentence in 1 John is an addition by 'the ecclesiastical redactor' is far from certain, his comment recognizes its difference from the rest of Johannine theology.

The first sign in Cana (2:1-11) is the archetype of all the signs (2:11), and points to the renewal and transformation which Jesus came to bring, not only to Jewish worship but to the whole of life. The water of Jewish worship, symbolized by the six stone jars for ritual purification (2:6), is transformed by the act of Jesus into the good wine which has been kept 'until now' (2:10). Further evidence for the renewal which Jesus brings is then afforded by the claim that Jesus will raise a new temple in three days, the temple (naos) of his body (soma) (2:21). Although John does not use soma explicitly to refer to the church, the unity between Christ and believers is so close (15:1-10; 17:26) that such an understanding is almost inevitable. Soma refers to the historical person of Jesus now made manifest through those whom he sends (20:21). So although the primary reference is to his body raised from the dead, the risen Christ can no more be considered without his disciples than a vine without branches (15:1-7). The transformation and renewal effected by Jesus is developed in the following chapter (3:3-8), with its almost inevitable reference to baptism, leading to the new life (naios) resulting from faith in him (3:15). Though it is true enough that this theme is found elsewhere in the New Testament (2 Cor 4:16; 5:17; Col 3:10; Tt 3:5; 1 Pt 1:3, 23) it is predominant only in John.

3 THE THEME OF RE-CREATION IN PATRISTIC AUTHORS

The Logos theology of John, with its emphasis on re-creation, was much appreciated by eastern writers, as exemplified particularly by Athanasius, who in his De
Incarnation considered creation and redemption as inextricably linked. God created human beings differently from other irrational animals (alogos zoon) by giving them a share in his own Logos, so that they became logikoi (3:3). Though naturally mortal, since they were created out of non-existence (ex ouk ontos), they could have remained immortal if they had retained their likeness to the one who has true being (pros ton onta) (4:6). Once they had lost their share in the Logos through sin, the divine image could be renewed only by the Logos himself (13:7-9), who by his incarnation revealed the Father (14:8; 15:2). So the incarnation was the only possible way 'to transform the corruptible to incorruption' (to phthorton tis aphtharnan metabakin) and to renew the image of God in human beings (20:1). Although Athanasius is at pains to explain the representative nature of Christ's death and his victory over daimonies, the essential fact for him was that the Logos 'became a human being in order that we may be made divine' (autos enanthropoioen hina hemeis theopoiethomen) (54:3).

The same theme was taken up in Athanasius' later arguments against the Arians. Although, like all theologians of his time, he was prepared to weave together texts taken from all parts of scripture, there is no doubt that he was specially attached to the Logos-theology of John. It would not be too much to claim that his polemic against the Arians was very largely due to his use of the Fourth Gospel with its emphasis on the recreative role of the Logos. The incarnate Logos had to be truly and fully a human being so as to enable other human beings to share in his life. But he also had to be fully God in order that human beings may be re-created to share in the nature and life of God. A few examples will show Athanasius' position, which was due primarily to his understanding of soteriology. 'If the Son were a creature (ktisma), then human beings would still be mortal, since they would not be joined to God... All of us were thus set free by the kinship of the flesh (sarx), and we too were joined thenceforth to the Logos. Now that we have been joined to God, no longer do we remain on earth, but (as he himself said) "where he is we too shall be" (Ar 2:69). 'For he took to himself a created human body, in order that as a craftsman (termiorgos) he might renew (anakoinisas) it and make it divine (theopoiesis) in himself.... And just as we would not have been set free from sin and the curse [of Adam], if the flesh which the Logos assumed had not been naturally human flesh... so too human beings would not have been made divine if the Logos who had been made flesh had not been by nature the genuine (aleshinos) and own (idos) Logos of the Father.... In that flesh he has become for us the beginning of the new creation (he archi tis kaines ktiseis) by being created as a human being (anthropos) on our behalf and by renewing (enkaainisas) the way for us' (Ar 2:70). This same stress on the renewal effected by the Logos is expressed too in an earlier chapter (Ar 2:65).

Athanasius was here in line with earlier Alexandrian theologians. Origen commented on John 1:4: "That which has come into being in him", that is the Logos, 'was life'; in order that just as God brought the universe (ta panta) into being, so also what has been created to live might be given life by sharing (metousia) in him [the
The Logos himself is life, Origen goes on to say, and gives life to all to whom he comes. Elsewhere (Comm:Job 2:16:114) he claims that only those who share in the Logos can themselves be called logikoi. So too Clement of Alexandria wrote of 'the Word of God who became a human being (anthropos) that even you may learn from a human being how a human being may somehow become God' (Protr 1), and he described the church as 'the whole Christ', in which there is neither Jew nor Greek, but 'a new human being (kainos anthropos) transformed by the Holy Spirit of God' (Protr 11).

A little earlier (c AD 160) Melito of Sardis contrasted the old dispensation with the new. After referring to sayings of Jesus clearly derived from the Fourth Gospel—'I am the lamb (amnos) slaughtered for you...I am your light, I am your saviour, I am the resurrection for you', he continued 'This is he who renewed (kainias) heaven and earth, he who in the beginning (en arche) formed (plasai) human beings' (Pas 103-104). It was Johannine theology with its description of Christ as the Logos which was largely responsible for the understanding of atonement in terms of transformation and renewal, though it must be remembered that other models, drawn from Paul and elsewhere, were also used.

4 JESUS THE GARDENER

Following this brief look at the way in which John was interpreted in the early period, we now turn to Jesus the gardener. It is only John who mentions a garden (képos) in the passion narrative. It was in a garden that Jesus was arrested (18:1). To emphasize the location the garden is mentioned again in 18:26. This then was the scene of the great act of disloyalty, when Judas, a disciple chosen to find life in Jesus, handed over his Lord to his enemies. It was in a garden, according to the biblical narrative, that the first great act of disloyalty took place when Adam deliberately disobeyed the Lord who had brought him to life from the dust. In the Genesis narrative the Hebrew gan is rendered in the Septuagint by paradeisos (Gn 2:8), but elsewhere in the Old Testament gan is translated by lépos. In Ezekiel 36:35 gan-télen is rendered as képos truphés, and Sanders and Mastin (1968:416) note that Aquila and Theodotion-rendered gan by képos in Genesis. Since paradeisos in the New Testament signified the future state in the presence of God (Lk 23:43; 2 Cor 12:4; Rv 2:7) it was an unsatisfactory word to use to refer to an earthly garden. The act of Judas was comparable to the disobedience of Adam. But the result of Judas' act was very different from that of Adam. So another garden is mentioned in 19:41. Once again the word is repeated to emphasize its importance. This garden is to become the scene of transformation and renewal. So the tomb in which Jesus' body was laid was new (kainos) 'in which no-one had ever yet been laid'. Matthew 27:60 mentions 'his [Joseph's] new tomb' and Luke 23:53 'a rock-hewn tomb in which no-one had yet been laid'. John combines both ideas, without saying that the tomb was Joseph's. What was important was simply that the tomb was new.
It was in this garden that Mary Magdalene came to find her Lord, where she encountered two angels at the tomb (20:12). Their purpose was in marked contrast to that of the cherubim placed at the garden of Eden, whose task was to guard 'the way to the tree of life' (Gn 3:24). Mary, unlike Adam and Eve, the angels imply, had no reason to weep, for Jesus was near at hand. Mary turns and sees one whom she thinks to be the gardener (κηπουρός) (20:15). Indeed he was! Adam was put in the garden of Eden to maintain it and care for it (Gn 2:15). He failed to do so, but Jesus is the second Adam, the true human being, as 19:5 (idou bo anthropos) ought to be understood. Jesus was there clothed in the glorious (purple) robe which (according to a Targum) Adam lost through sin (Bowker 1969:121; Suggit 1983). As the gardener he opened the way to the tree of life (Rv 2:7; 22:14,19). The gospel anticipates the symbolism of Revelation. Mary does not deny her first impression, but comes to recognize her risen Lord, and goes to tell the disciples 'I have seen the Lord (κυρίος)' (20:18). 'Come and you will see' said Jesus to the first disciples (1:39). Mary came and she saw.

5 THE LEGITIMACY OF THIS INTERPRETATION

That such an allusion was in the author's mind cannot be proved. But once a poetic text (such as that of the gospels) has been consigned to writing it assumes a meaning of its own which can be discovered only from the text itself. Although the attempt to discover the author's intended meaning is a valid and important exercise, what is wrong, said Augustine, if someone should find a meaning in a text 'which you, the light of all truthful minds, show to be true, even if it differs from the author's meaning' (Conf 12:18 [27])? The text can be understood, as Origen well knew, only with a commitment to Christ as the revealer of God. Limits to the use of imagination are set by the way in which an interpretation builds up the faith of the believer and the church. For the Christian, the bible does not play the same part as the Koran does for the Moslem or the Hebrew scriptures for the Jew. Moslems and Jews are concerned with the direct inspiration of the words, in Arabic or Hebrew, as though they were written by God himself. Therefore there has to be an authorized text but no authorized translation. Christians however are concerned not with inspired words but with the witness which the text gives for the building up of the body of Christ, the church. As Hanson has put it (1983:21): 'Scripture was intended to be used by the people of God...and its use cannot therefore be restricted to the age or occasion on which it was uttered'.

The witness of the Fourth Gospel to the transformation and renewal of creation through the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus is particularly apposite for the life of the church today in a period of rapid and extensive change. The acceptance of this witness as the true basis for human life is the mark of a Christian, who is called to be continually renewed and transformed. The words of the enthroned Lord—'Behold I am making all things new' (idou, panta kaina pote Rv 21:5)—sum-
marize the gospel's meaning. The work of renewal is carried on by Jesus the Lord, the \textit{Logos} incarnate, by means of those who share in his life through their faith in him as he continues to tend his garden, the world.

\section*{WORKS CONSULTED}

The following editions of texts have been used:


Hanson, A T 1983. \textit{The living utterances of God.} London: DLT.


\textbf{Canon J N Suggit, Professor emeritus, Rhodes University; 4 The Glen, Silverglade, Fish Hoek, 7975 South Africa.}

E mail: john@suggit.dynagen.co.za