

# Otherworldly Word or Overcoming the World Order?

Review of the book “The Word in the World.  
The Cosmological Tale in the Fourth Gospel” by Adele Reinhartz

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Reinhartz’ reading of John’s Gospel corresponds to its Gentile Christian, otherworldly understanding, common since the 2nd century. But was not John firmly rooted in the Scriptures of the Jews and proclaiming a Messiah who overcomes the Roman world order through solidarity?

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## 0 Introduction

Dear Ms. Reinhartz, in your book *The Word in the World. The Cosmological Tale in the Fourth Gospel*, Atlanta/Georgia 1992,<sup>1</sup> you unfold a Johannine “cosmology,” on the basis of which, in the course of the decades, you must finally be done with the Gospel of John as incurably anti-Semitic writing.

But how should the Gospel of John be classified and judged if its “cosmology” were not to be understood in an otherworldly but in a worldly way, not spiritualized but political? Such a liberation theological reading is advocated by Ton Veerkamp in his interpretation of John’s Gospel under the title “Solidarity against the World Order. A Political Reading of the Gospel of John about Jesus Messiah of all Israel.”<sup>2</sup>

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1 All page numbers given in *round* brackets (. . .) in the following text without further reference refer to the respective following quotations. Where I refer to page numbers of quoted works by other authors I put them in *square* brackets [. . .]. Ancient Greek and Hebrew letters and original Greek letters in your quoted text are rendered with their English equivalents (as I did in another book, see [Transliteration](#)).

2 So far, Ton Veerkamp’s book in English language (Gießen, Germany, 2021) is available only

What I will attempt to do in the following, then, is to contrast these two types of “cosmology,” coupled in each case with the question as to which of the two a Jewish Messianic John of the 1st century CE might more likely have had in mind.

### 0.1 Greek Gentile Christian and Hebrew Jewish Glasses

However, I must say in advance that neither Ton Veerkamp is an academic teacher nor am I. We cannot even begin to claim to survey the entire literature on the Gospel of John. But Veerkamp, as a representative of the “[Amsterdam School](#),” has for decades been intensively engaged in a Biblical Theology of the Holy Scriptures of Israel (the Old Testament) and what he calls the “Messianic writings” (the New Testament) in their socio-political context. Therefore, he may be ahead of some exegetes who are not aware of these contexts.

I myself at first have been shaped by a reading of John’s Gospel such as you advocate it. As an evangelical Christian, I grew up with a faith in Jesus aside from which there was no alternative to be saved from eternal death, and John’s Gospel, in particular, seemed to massively substantiate this claim to absoluteness of the Christian faith (John 14:6, “No one comes to the Father except through me!”). After I was able to overcome bottlenecks of my faith on long paths of life experience and faith insight, I came across Veerkamp’s interpretation of John in the early 2000s, which, however, had no resonance in the German academic world. As far as I can see, no one tried to at least consider or refute it as an alternative reading.

Therefore, it is not surprising that you could not have envisaged a reading of the Gospel of John that assumes such an intensive Jewish rootedness of its author as Veerkamp does. Instead, it is significant that at the origin of your preoccupation with the Gospel of John, which led to your book “The Word in the World,” stood the attempt (x)

to investigate...whether the gatekeeper in John 10:3 was an allusion to the mythical keeper of the gates of Hades. What began as a limited history-of-religions quest (now relegated to the appendix of this book) gradually took on a life of its own as an exploration of the different levels, or tales, within the Johannine narrative as a whole.

Thus, from the outset, you seem to have worn glasses shaped by Greek mythology and to have viewed through them a Gospel already interpreted more and more Greek-philosophically by the Gentile Christian Church since the 2nd century.

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online at <https://bibelwelt.de/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Veerkamp-John.pdf> (URN: <urn:nbn:de:101:1-2509010942173.046991639862>) and <https://bibelwelt.de/veerkamp-john>). In this review quotations from his book are cited with the abbreviation **Veerkamp 2021** and the page number of the PDF version. I also add the link to the corresponding section of the online version with the number of the respective paragraph.

Ton Veerkamp's concern is instead to take off these Gentile Christian glasses and to take seriously the Hebrew-Jewish background of the "Messianists" who proclaimed Jesus ben Joseph from Nazareth, Galilee, as the Messiah of Israel.

So the basic question is: Are there really massive traces of Greek philosophical mythology and cosmology in the Gospel according to John from the very beginning? Or does its proclamation grow fundamentally out of the presuppositions of the Jewish Holy Scriptures?

## 0.2 Cosmology of World Negation

You start from the premise that in the interpretation of John's Gospel it is common to distinguish a narrative on the historical time level of Jesus from a narrative that refers to the time of John's community. From these two narratives, in turn, you distinguish (5) a "cosmological tale, which provides the overarching temporal, geographical, theological, and narrative framework for the other two tales." (4)

This tale has the cosmos as its setting and eternity as its time frame. Its hero is the pre-existent Word who becomes flesh, having been sent by God his Father into the world to bring salvation. The villain is the "ruler of this world" (14:30), "the evil one" (17:15), Satan (13:27), or the devil (8:44; 13:2). ...

Because of its cosmic setting, this sequence of events may be said to constitute a cosmological tale, in no sense less "true" than the historical and ecclesiological tales.

The shortest possible version of this cosmological tale I find in your book on page 19,

The Word moves from a location outside of the world, into the world, and then out again.

In doing so, neither the place outside of the world nor the God from whom Jesus proceeds as the Word is described in detail. Apparently, you presuppose a generally known conception of one single God who dwells in heaven beyond this world. From there Jesus comes down for a stay of about three years into this world, which is to be understood in an absolutely evil contrast to heaven, because "his own people" living there, i.e. the Jews, who are ruled by their father, the devil, do not accept him, even cause his death on the cross. However, this death is not a reason for mourning, because Jesus returns to God into heaven through this death and there he will also give eternal life to all people who believe in Jesus as their Savior, while those who do not believe in him will be damned for eternity.

Within the framework of this cosmology, therefore, the cosmos is a sphere of evil from which one can save oneself only into the sphere of heaven if one believes in Jesus as the Son of God. The world as being a positive living space for humans does not come into consideration at any point in this cosmology. One could say pointedly that this cosmology of yours is actually a non-cosmology or anti-cosmology, a doctrine of world negation or escapism.

### 0.3 Cosmology of World Affirmation

It is surprising to some extent that in the context of a cosmology the term “cosmos” is connoted only negatively. Originally the term means “decoration, ornament (see *cosmetics*), order,” and signifies the well-ordered global human world, which was built up in Hellenism and brought to perfection in the Pax Romana. Within such a this-worldly cosmology of world affirmation, the world as it is would be worth living in for at least some people.

Of course, I do not claim that such a cosmology would be advocated in John’s Gospel. It is merely the ideology of the Roman Empire, for life in it was truly enjoyable only for a happy, privileged elite. Such a “peace” lasted only when it was secured by the Roman military and imposed on subjugated nations.

However, are we not to consider precisely this Roman Hellenistic concept of the cosmos as the background of the preoccupation with the cosmos in John's Gospel?

In any case, this is supported by the fact that John was an Aramaic/Hebrew thinking Jewish man who was very well versed in the Jewish Bible of Torah, Prophets, and Writings (= Tanakh, which we usually call the Old Testament), and these Scriptures cannot be said to be escapist. Nowhere they paint otherworldly heaven as a place of hope where people go after their death, at best some individuals like Enoch or Elijah are caught up to God. Instead, hopes in the Tanakh are everywhere directed to an age to come, in a near or distant future in this world on this earth. Not even the hoped-for resurrection in the book of Ezekiel or Daniel will take place in an otherworldly setting; the (Daniel 12:13) “end of days” merely marks the last day of this age ruled by the powers of death to be followed by new days of a glorious future on this earth under the heaven of God.

So it would have to be reasoned very well how the Jewish-influenced author of John’s gospel should come up with the idea to represent a world-vanishing cosmological hope for the hereafter.

### 0.4 Cosmology of Liberation Struggle Against the World Order

In order to explain what kind of cosmology John may have actually represented, I need to elaborate a bit.

In doing so, I draw on a group of theologians around the aforementioned Ton Veerkamp, who founded the Lehrhaus e. V. association in 1978 and from then on published the exegetical journal “Texte & Kontexte.” They assume that at the center of the Jewish Scriptures is a “Grand Narrative” that deals with Israel’s hope for a liberated life given by God in justice and peace on this earth.<sup>3</sup> Where the God of Israel

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3 See Ton Veerkamp, *Die Welt anders. Politische Geschichte der Großen Erzählung* © Institut

reveals himself to Moses, he makes himself known by a name that contains a program of liberation: *Egō eimi*, “I will be who I will be,” or “I will be there,” I lead Israel out of the house of slavery.<sup>4</sup> After the first liberation from Egypt, Israel receives the Torah at Sinai as a discipline of freedom, as a basic social order of autonomy and egalitarianism, which was to entail both freedom from external oppression and exploitation and equal rights for all members of the people. National catastrophes such as the conquest of the northern state of Israel by the Assyrians and of the southern state of Judah by the Babylonians are understood as punishment for abandoning this Torah, and the new beginning in the Persian period is described in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah as a self-commitment of the people to want to live under the political constitution of the Torah.

Neither with Hellenism that began under Alexander nor in the Roman Empire do such this-worldly hopes for self-government, justice and peace become irrelevant; apocalyptic, messianic, Zealot movements continue to expect an overcoming of the Roman world order in a Jewish this-worldly way. In this context, Ton Veerkamp and his allies do not yet understand the New Testament writings of the 1st century as attempts to save oneself from this bleak world into a blissful eternal life. In their original intention, they also do not understand them as founding documents of a new religion, but as Jewish Messianic writings that are telling the “Grand Narrative” of the Jewish Holy Scriptures completely anew in a completely new situation.

According to Gerhard Jankowski,<sup>5</sup> it is Paul who considers all attempts to achieve liberation for a righteous life in peace by following the Torah to have ended after the Messiah Jesus was executed on the cross of the Romans, jointly indebted to Rome and the leadership of his own people of the Jews who collaborated with Rome. In a worldwide system of oppression, it is simply no longer possible in his eyes to fulfill the Torah in a niche of that system. Only in the body of the Messiah Jesus, i.e. in the solidary Messianic community—trusting in Jesus—of Jews and goyim (i.e. non-Jewish people from the nations), there is a starting point to overcome the Roman order of oppression, with Paul hoping for the soon return of the Messiah and the final establishment of his kingdom of peace.

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für Kritische Theologie Berlin e. V. nach der in Berlin erschienenen Ausgabe © Argument Verlag 2013. An introduction to this book in English can be found here: [Ton Veerkamp: „The World Different“](https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:101:1-2508311411197.821199674460) (URN: [urn:nbn:de:101:1-2508311411197.821199674460](https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:101:1-2508311411197.821199674460)).

4 Since this liberating name, which was designated in the Scriptures with the tetragram YHWH, was considered inaccessible and unpronounceable, words like *Adonai* = “Lord” or *Ha-Shem* = “the Name” were used in its place. In this book review, I refer to the name of the God of Israel with the word “NAME” in all capitals.

5 See the [overview](#) in [Paul: People and Nations—Torah Impracticable](#) and, for example, the book of Gerhard Jankowski, *Die große Hoffnung. Paul to the Romans. Eine Auslegung*, Berlin 1998.

From the critical review of all the Gospels on the discipleship of Jesus, we can conclude that among the followers of Jesus there were Zealotically thinking Messianists who, even after the death of Jesus on the cross, hope for a victory of Israel over the Roman tyranny under the leadership of the returning Son of Man Jesus to be achieved by military means. All followers of Jesus assume that his death does not mean his final failure.

When the Zealot freedom efforts are brutally defeated by the Romans in the Jewish War and find their end in the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in the year 70, also Jesus' followers are faced not only with the ruins of Jerusalem, so too are their hopes for the victorious return of the Messiah. According to Ton Veerkamp and Andreas Bedenbender,<sup>6</sup> this leads to the emergence of a completely new genre of literature, namely the Gospels. Mark is the first who, under the immediate impression of the catastrophe, in his Gospel tries to see together the cross of Jesus and the mass crucifixions of his days and to cope with them in this way. For Paul, in his near expectation of the return of the Messiah, the Messiah "according to the flesh" was no longer of interest; the evangelists, on the other hand, turn again to precisely this Jesus "according to the flesh," since only in this way can they also trace the suffering of the Jewish people in its history of suffering. The Synoptics follow the path of the Romans, who from Galilee put down the Jewish uprising all the way to Jerusalem, while John, a generation later, draws the liberating action of the Messiah Jesus into the sequence of Jewish festivals and thereby "Messianically" reinterprets these festivals because only through the Messiah and his overcoming of the new "Egypt," namely the Roman world order, can there be a new true "Passover" of Israel's liberation. In this context, all the Gospels criticize both Rabbinic Judaism—which in their eyes tries to come to terms with the Roman Empire, if not to collaborate in a shameful way—and military Zealot adventures that led to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Jewish temple.

John's Gospel regards the only chance of overcoming the Roman world order in trusting the God of Israel and his inspiration of fidelity, which the Messiah Jesus hands over at his death on the cross to those who trust in him and which they are to practice by *agapē*, that is, fellow human solidarity. In doing so, John presupposes that the Roman world order will remain in power for a long time and that this solidarity will have to be practiced largely behind closed doors or underground, as later in the catacombs.

This means: John's Gospel is indeed about sharp disputes, namely about how to deal with the situation of oppression under the Roman world order and how to over-

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6 See the [overview](#) in [Mark](#). Summarized, Bedenbender's research on the Gospel of Mark can be found in the following books: Andreas Bedenbender, *Frohe Botschaft am Abgrund. Das Markusevangelium und der Jüdische Krieg*, Leipzig 2013, and Andreas Bedenbender, *Der gescheiterte Messias*, Leipzig 2019.

come it. It is also to be said that not all of John's judgments about Rabbinic Judaism are fair and justified.

Thus, John's Gospel is about Jews who have opposing views on the question of who the Messiah is and who accuse each other of blasphemy or idolatry and thus of leaving the common ground of the Jewish faith. However, it is not yet about the foundation of a new religion, which is accompanied by the disinheritance of Judaism. Nor does this dispute originally take place within a world-escape cosmology, accompanied by otherworldly condemnation judgments, but within a "cosmology" of resistance against the Roman world order about the shaping of which there are disputes in the sharpest form.

### 0.5 Prerequisites for Understanding the Gospel of John

What kind of cosmology is actually at stake in the Gospel of John, I would like to argue with you in detail, dear Ms. Reinhartz, by going into the argumentation in your book, starting with some presuppositions for the interpretation of the Gospel.

We agree that the Gospel of John (6) is "a work of fiction," that is, as Mary Ann Tolbert<sup>7</sup> originally said about the Gospel of Mark, a "self-consciously crafted narrative ... resulting from literary imagination."

I also like to engage with your assumption, (7) "that this text contains three literary constructs accessible to the real reader." That is, it is not *a priori* clear that a disciple of Jesus named John wants to tell the story of Jesus to all people in order to bring them to faith in this Jesus, rather one has to ask what image various real readers of the Gospel form not only of the "implied author" and the "implied reader" of the text but also of "the narrative content or story."

The story has an independent existence apart from the narrative only in the mind of the reader, and may be constructed by different real readers in different ways.<sup>8</sup>

This is exactly what seems to be the case when the cosmological tale in John's Gospel is interpreted in contrary ways.

Now you briefly summarize your approach as follows (8):

The present study will therefore examine the ways in which one construct of the Fourth Gospel, namely, the implied reader, would derive a second construct, the story or stories embodied in the Johannine narrative, in order to discern the intentions of the third construct, the implied author. Its focus will

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7 See Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel: Mark's World in Literary-Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989) 30.

8 For this you refer to Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974).

therefore be on the activity of the implied reader. But who is this implied reader and what does he/she do?

To answer this question, you start at John 20:30-31 and ask yourself “whether the addressees envisaged there are already Christians whom the implied author wishes to edify and strengthen in their faith, or non-Christians whom the implied author aims to persuade.” In doing so, however, you fail to ask the fundamental question of whether we are originally dealing here with “Christians” at all—as is well known, this word does not appear in John's Gospel—or with (quasi-sectarian) Jews who trust in the Messiah Jesus.

You are certainly right in your assumption that the Gospel of John not only here (9) suggests

an open definition of the implied readers as those who see themselves as being personally addressed by the verbs in 20:30-31 which are in the second person plural: “you may believe” [πιστευητε], “you may have life” [ζωην εχητε] “in his name.” Such a general definition creates an opening for the real reader to identify with the implied reader.

And likewise, it must be assumed that every “reader will strive to come up with a harmonious or coherent interpretation or reading of the text.” In doing so, they (10) resort to “two sets of data”:

They use data intrinsic to the text, following the clues of the text in order to fill in the gaps between words, sentences, paragraphs, chapters, and ideas within the text. They also bring extrinsic data to the text, including cultural, linguistic, biographical, and other information from outside the world of the text.

In this respect, the question suggests itself to me whether it may be that the Gospel of John, as a Jewish influenced text with its backgrounds deeply rooted in the Tanakh, was soon no longer understood by Gentile Christian readers and had to be reinterpreted in an otherworldly cosmological view, precisely because these

extrinsic data contribute to the “horizon of expectations” which the implied reader (as well as the real reader) will bring to the text.

You add:

Although the horizon of expectations is not controlled by the implied author, that author, through the narrative itself, can manipulate, frustrate, or modify it in order to create an effect on the reader.

But is it enough to ask only for an implied author, if the real author—or members of a community who worked together or successively on this text—who may be inferable as to views and intentions, can differ quite clearly from the image of an author implied by real readers? In plain language: A Jewish thinking author who proclaims Jesus as the Messiah of Israel may have wanted to influence the horizon of expecta-

tion of his addressees in a certain way, but this intention must undoubtedly come to nothing if a meanwhile majority of Gentile Christian readers classify Judaism as a foreign religion and condemn Jews wholesale as the murderers of Christ. In your text, I find statements that basically confirm this, even if you do not share my assumption that John originally argued Jewishly: (10-11)

Although both real and implied readers apply intrinsic and extrinsic data to their readings, a real reader will not read the text in the same way that the implied reader is expected to do. On the contrary, a given real reader's reading, while using the same intrinsic data as are available to the implied reader and perhaps even identifying with the implied reader, will depend to some degree on the purpose for which he or she is reading the text, as well as on the specific extrinsic data which he or she brings to bear on a reading of the text. For example, many Christian readers of the gospels are interested in deriving some guidance for their lives in the present. On the other hand, Jewish readers may be interested in learning about the symbols and images used by their Christian friends, or in investigating the issue of anti-Judaism in the gospels.

You are further correct in pointing out (11) the “gap, perhaps more appropriately, this gulf,” that stands in the way of modern New Testament exegetes' attempt “to determine the ‘meaning’ of the text for its original audience.” In my view, it is precisely this “very real distance in time, space, and cultural milieu, which exists between the exegete and the implied reader inscribed in the gospel narratives” that should lead to the inclusion of considerations such as those of Ton Veerkamp—beyond many “norms, assumptions, and language of scholarship”—in the exegesis of John's Gospel. In his eyes<sup>9</sup>

John was a Greek-writing child of Israel with Aramaic as mother tongue, grown up and thinking in the linguistic body of the Tanakh. At the same time, we must keep in mind that the author of John's Gospel was a scholar, but not a Rabbinic scholar, and certainly not a late ancient scholar. We will see very often that the Gospel of John vehemently and principally sets itself apart from Rabbinical Judaism. The Gospel of John is indeed an *Israelite* text, but it is certainly not a *Jewish* text—and all the less a *Christian* text. It has only become a text of Christianity and thus a Christian text through the Christian reception since the 2nd century.

Crucial for the understanding of the Gospel of John is, as you emphasize, (12) that “the gospels are intended by their implied authors to be read and reread many times” and are “open for a holistic reading.”<sup>10</sup>

9 Veerkamp 2021, 14 ([On the Translation of John](#), par. 12).

10 By the way, gospel texts originally were not intended for individual silent reading but reading aloud in community, as Veerkamp 2021, 12, says ([On the Translation of John](#)):

Unlike you, however, I think that for such a holistic view of the gospels it is not sufficient, as you do in your “present study of the Gospel of John,” to rely “primarily on intrinsic data, that is, on the clues provided within the gospel itself.” For it is one of the particularly important intrinsic “clues” of the gospels that Jesus in his true Messiahship can only be grasped on the basis of the Scriptures—which you (13, n. 56) yourself point at in your sideways glance at Luke 24:44-45. Can we have any success, then, to understand a gospel in its depth if we do not also search the Scriptures for clues to the meaning of keywords in the gospel? Therefore, (14) your reading of John’s Gospel may well help “to read this most enigmatic of gospels in a meaningful way.” But whether this meaning corresponds to the original author’s intention will have to be examined.

## 1 The Cosmological Tale

### 1.1 The Cosmological Tale in the Prologue of John’s Gospel

In the first chapter of your book, you first consider the cosmological tale as outlined in the prologue of John’s Gospel.

You emphasize first (17) the existence of “the Word” in a first phase before, during, and after completion of creation “in that non-worldly realm which God also inhabits.” Such a realm, however, isn’t explicitly described in detail in any word in the Gospel. Thinking of John 5:17, it can even be doubted that according to John “the world’s creation is complete” at all, for in his eyes the God of Israel has not finished yet the creative work of liberation, as long as Israel is still paralyzed, hungry, blind, even dead.

However, you don’t think about the God and about his word which is spoken about here, anyway. Yet already the first words *en archē* refer to the beginning of the Tanakh and thus to the creating work of the God of Israel, which—through his “words,” Hebrew *devarim*, “deed actions, word deeds”—is directed to the liberation and creation of justice for Israel amidst the nations. To you, the God referred to here seems to be a commodity God whose name, as it is preserved in the Scriptures, does not matter.

John 1:18 you interpret in a double way, namely as a reference

to the general purpose of the Word’s activity in the world, which is to make the Father known to the world. It also implies the Word’s departure from the

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Our texts are not for reading, but for reading aloud, for “calling out.” The Jews call the corpus of their basic texts—what we call the “Hebrew Bible” or even the “Old Testament”—*miqra*?, what is “to be called out, to be recited.” The word has as its root *qara*?. Islam calls its scripture “Qur’an”, which also goes back to that common Semitic root *qara*?

world, by referring to the Son in the present tense as being close to (New RSV) or in the bosom of (RSV) the Father (εις τον κολπον του πατρος).

Again, you do not inquire as to what the latter expression might mean according to the Scriptures. Nor do you even ask whether it is important that the Father whom “the Word” seeks to make known to the world is precisely the God of Israel. Instead, the only thing that matters to you is that the Word has ultimately returned to God.

But does the phrase in 1:18 of the Son in the bosom of the Father really aim to prove Jesus’ present sojourn in heaven? Ton Veerkamp reveals a deeper insight into the meaning of John 1:18 by referring to the scriptures:<sup>11</sup>

The key probably lies in the baffling expression “*who is in the bosom of the FATHER.*” Let us hear Numbers 11. The people in the wilderness remembered the beautiful days in the house of slavery where there was fish to eat at no cost (*chinnam*), and “cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, garlic,” at that! Moses was fed up with leading this people. He complains to the God of Israel about this task. Then the word is, Numbers 11:11-12,

And Moses said to the NAME:  
 “Why do you treat your servant so badly?  
 Why have I not found favor in your eyes,  
 that you lay the burden of all this people on me?  
 Was I pregnant with all this people,  
 did I give them birth,  
 that you should say to me,  
 carry them in your bosom  
 as a nurse carries an infant. . .?”

An infant is absolutely dependent on its caregiver. The same is true for the relationship between Moses and the people that he has to lead and that is dependent on him. Moses says to his God, “They are not my people, but yours. Carry them in your bosom!” Actually, this only-begotten *divine*, uniquely determined by God, can be called “the one in the bosom.” He is the exemplary concentration of Israel, he is “in the bosom of the NAME/FATHER,” completely and utterly determined by God, just *divine*. The God of Moses answered Moses’ voice. Like an infant in his bosom, he carried this beaten and murdered Messiah as the representative for the beaten and desperate people of the Jews.

Far away from such an Israel-centered interpretation is your formal, generalized, temporally-spatially linear conception of history. Does it do more justice to the Gospel of John than the one of Ton Veerkamp? Can it really (18) “be said that this

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11 Veerkamp 2021, 42-43 ([A Postscript](#), par. 16-18).

tale describes the movement of its central character, Jesus, through time and space”? Would not heaven and Jesus’ journey through various cosmic spheres have to be described in detail if your view that ‘the spatial and temporal elements are prominent’ in the fourth Gospel were true?

Just the original Hebrew term “in the beginning” does not stand for a “temporal element” in the linear sense, but for what happens or should happen in the sense of the Scriptures primordially, in principle, according to the will of God.

And a word like “εσκηνωσεν (1:14)” does not refer generally as a “spatial element” to the temporary abode of the Word, but very specifically calls up the tent of meeting from the time of the wilderness wanderings of the people of Israel that with the presence of the Messiah is now pitched in the midst of the *kosmos*.

Thus, isn’t John’s prologue rather about YHWH’s Word, understood in Hebrew, taking flesh in his Messiah Jesus to bring about on earth the coming world age of liberation, justice, and peace?

## 1.2 The Cosmological Tale in the Gospel Narrative

Further, (19) you try to trace the cosmological tale, as you understand it, through the entire Gospel of John using two keys:

The first key is the temporal relationships among the various phases of the cosmological tale. For example, references to Jesus’ pre-existence, ... to Jesus’ departure from the world and his return to the Father ...

The second key is the use throughout the gospel of spatial language... [S]patial references...include the contrast between above and below (3:31; 8:23), heaven and earth (3:12-13, 31), ascent and descent (3:13).

In this context, you formulate the cosmological tale once again in the greatest possible generalization:

The Word moves from a location outside of the world, into the world, and then out again.

And again I ask the question: Where is such a place outside the world described in the Gospel of John by a single word? What is happening there? Can there even be a place outside the world for a Jewish-Hebrew thinking person? Let us have a closer look: Nowhere in the Gospel of John is a place named as the origin and goal of the Word but always “the God” or “the Father.” So the Word comes from the Father or is “onto the Father,” namely the God of Israel, and John as a Jew should not be interested in cosmological speculations like the Greek philosophers or Gnostics.

You are right, of course, in pointing out that (20) the “Fourth Gospel abounds in references to Jesus’ relationship to the ‘world.’” So let’s have a look at these passages together to see what kind of cosmology John may actually have had in mind.

### 1.2.1 Pre-Existence

You suppose the two Johannine passages 8:58 and 17:5 prove the pre-existence of Jesus. But this they do at most incidentally. Detailed information about Jesus' stay outside of this world can be taken from these two passages just as little as from the prologue. Is it not more likely, therefore, that this subject was not the author's focus at all? More interesting is the question of why John claims from Abraham that he saw the day of the Messiah and rejoiced. Ton Veerkamp understands this reference to Abraham as a midrash about the book of Genesis:<sup>12</sup>

Jesus' political program in John is the restoration of Israel as the firstborn among the nations, 10:16 in connection with 11:52. Abraham was the beginning, Jesus is the completion of Abraham's life. Therefore, Jesus Messiah is given the title *monogenēs*, "only begotten"; it is the honorary title of Isaac, the Only One (*yachid*, *monogenēs*) of Abraham, Genesis 22:2. The Only-Begotten was the joy of Abraham. He sees that what his God began through him is completed through Yeshua, the begettings of Israel, *tholedoth yisra'el*. It is about the becoming of Israel (Genesis), and only about that. The NAME is there, always, before the genesis of Israel, after the completion of Israel; before Abraham, your, our father, was born, *is* the NAME.

And the mention of the *kosmos* in 17:5 is connected by Veerkamp with 17:24. He interprets the *katabolē* of the *kosmos* in the context of the narrative of the Flood; not again shall the whole of mankind perish together with the world order for which it is responsible:<sup>13</sup>

12 Veerkamp 2021, 212 ([Stones Instead of Arguments](#), par. 11).

13 Veerkamp 2021, 343 ([The Prayer of the Messiah](#), par. 38-39).

On the translation of *pro katabolēs kosmou* as "before the rejection of the world order," Ton Veerkamp (2021, 335-36, [note 497](#)) explains:

1. *Katabolē* occurs 11 times in the Messianic writings. Of these, the phrase *apo katabolēs kosmou* accounts for six to seven occurrences (depending on whether one counts Matthew 13:35 or not); three times we find *pro katabolēs kosmou* here (namely, in addition to John 17:24, in Ephesians 1:4 and in 1 Peter 1:20). In Hebrews 11:11, *katabolē* has the special meaning of "outflow of the sperm [Abraham's into Sarah]." In the LXX, *katabolē* is encountered only in 2 Maccabees 2:29 (without a preposition). There it means "downfall."
2. The underlying verb *kataballein* occurs 44 times in the LXX; all passages have a background of violence. The nine Hebrew verbs translated *kataballein* are verbs of violence except for *laqach* (once). And even *laqach* can mean "to kill," namely, "to take the soul" (Ezekiel 33:4). Therefore, it must be asked whether the 11 *katabolē* passages in the Messianic writings should not all be translated in such a way that the dark coloring of *katabolē* becomes clear.
3. Oriented to 2 Corinthians 4:9 and Hebrews 6:1-2, where *kataballein* means "to subdue" or "to reject," one can work with the meaning "subjection, rejection" in *katabolē*.
4. *Apo katabolēs kosmou* then means "since the subjugation of *thohu wa-bohu*, the

As the hope of humankind is based on the fact that the future is not annihilation, but that through the Messiah all God-born who have been driven apart will become partakers of God's solidarity, this sentence 17:24 is the main sentence of the doctrine of liberation (*soteriology*). The solidarity with the humans is valid despite the ruling world order; the subjugation of the world order is not the annihilation of the world, according to the oath of God in Genesis 8,21b.

“Never again will I curse the face of the earth for the sake of humankind, because the heart of humankind was an image of evil from its youth, never again will I continue to strike all life that I had made.”

We can argue about such interpretations; as mere evidence for a pre-existence of the word, the two passages seem rather meaningless.

### 1.2.2 Jesus in the World

In great detail you describe Jesus' coming into the world. He comes from the Father who sent him into the world and regards himself exclusively as the executor of the will of this Father.

But to what end does he come into the world? He is (21) “taking away the sins of the world” (1:29), “saving the world (3:17).” As the light of the world, he overcomes darkness and gives “life” to the world, “to be understood as ‘eternal life.’”

Three terms used here, however, need more definition: *Hamartia*, “sin,” is usually understood as individual moral transgression, but in the context of the Grand Narrative of Israel it means to abandon the liberating and right-creating will of the God of Israel. *Sōteria*, “salvation,” can be understood as the redemption of the human soul from eternal damnation, but in the Scriptures has the meaning of liberation from oppression, degradation, poverty, misery. And *zōē aiōnios* is commonly understood as life after death in the otherworldly heaven, but in the Scriptures means the world of peace in the age to come. You do not even ask which of these meanings might be meant in John's Gospel but take the former for granted in each case.

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world order of war and ruin”; see Jeremiah 4:23 ff. *Pro tēs katabolēs kosmou* has a similar tendency. Thus, for John 17:24, the meaning is: Even before the human order—*kosmos*—was rejected, God is in solidarity with the *bar enosh*, with the Human, see Genesis 6-9!

I largely agree with Ton Veerkamp, except for his view of the passages Maccabees 2:29—which has more to do with laying the foundations of a house than with a downfall—and Hebrews 6:1-2—which, after all, is more about going beyond the basics of instruction to advanced instruction. John can be thought to have intended the word, in fact, not simply to refer neutrally to the “foundation” of the world; in other places, however, the word may yet have been “abraded” in meaning, even if it originally referred to the overcoming of the *thohu wa-bohu* of Genesis 1 and Jeremiah 4.

As another goal of Jesus' activity in the world, you name the judgment, *krisis*, "though exactly what is meant by this is not clear." On the one hand, (22) according to 9:39, there is "a thematic connection between judgment and light: to bring judgment is also in some sense to bring light into the world, and to judge people according to whether they see the light or not." On the other hand, according to 12:47b, Jesus came "'not to judge the world, but to save the world.' In this latter verse, the term judgment seems to be equivalent to condemnation and expresses the wish that the world as a whole might be saved."

But not every opposition of light and darkness has to be interpreted in such an otherworldly sense as Ton Veerkamp shows by hinting at Bertolt Brecht's song of *The Threepenny Opera*:

For some are in the darkness  
And the others are in the light  
And you see those in the light  
You can't see those in the dark.

In a scholion about "The antagonistic scheme in the Gospel of John," Ton Veerkamp says,<sup>14</sup>

No one would think of accusing Bertolt Brecht of dualism or Gnosticism. ...

It is clear that some people agree more with the darkness than with the light; after all, the *Threepenny Opera* is about them. They do business that should remain in darkness for their own well-understood interests. Following the prejudice of seeing Gnosticism in all dualism, you could also call the scheme of antagonistic classes—which Brecht is dealing with here and which comes from Marx—Gnosticism. ...

Completely different world order and the traditional Jewish society, faithful to the Torah, have been irreconcilably opposed to each other since the Maccabean wars at the latest. According to John, the traditionalism of Torah loyalty is no longer enough, and Moses cannot be repeated or updated today. That is the new thing about him. But Israel finds itself still faced with a choice: either life and good or death and evil, either the NAME (autonomy of farming families) or the *ba'al* (world order of large-scale landholding), Messiah or Rome. This is not a Gnosis, this is the staying power of the traditional revolution, which stretches from the Maccabean uprising to the Jewish wars of the 1st and 2nd century CE.

The essential thing about Gnosis is the liberation of (the souls of) people from the material world. ... In John, the world itself is liberated, since the liberation

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14 Veerkamp 2021, 93-95 ([Scholion 2: The Antagonistic Scheme in the Gospel of John?](#), par. 1-3, 10-11).

of a single country is no solution; the tyranny of a king has given way to the tyranny of Caesar, i.e. to the Roman order. Where is Gnosis here? Gnosis turns real earthly and antagonistic opposites into two supernatural, metaphysical, and cosmic primal principles. However, Gnosis must be explained from the real contradictions in the inner-Jewish conflicts and not vice versa these conflicts, for instance in the Gospel of John, from Gnosis.

Whether we should call Gnostic what you identify in John's gospel as a cosmological tale, I leave undecided. Veerkamp, in any case, refers to a juxtaposition of the absolutely evil dark world and the supramundane light, which he, in contrast to you, does not find in John. Therefore, the judgment in John's gospel does not have to amount to an absolute condemnation of the world as such.

It might become clearer what is meant by "judgment" if a passage like 5:22-30 were interpreted against the background of Daniel 7:<sup>15</sup>

Jesus is nothing but the executor, "As I hear, so I judge." This makes his judgment reliable, as the one who sends him, is the *tzaddiq, dikaios*, the reliable or truthful one. No, here there is no arbitrariness ("only those I want"), but the lawful will of the God of Israel, the one who sends him. The work "to make the dead alive in their graves" is the work of the law and the righteous judge. This work is yet to come, the judgment is not yet completed, neither to the living nor to the dead. Only when the righteous judge powerfully asserts himself and his right, will the God of Israel "solemnly rest from all the works that he has done." Only then is Shabbat.

John 5:29 is based on Daniel 12:1-2,

At this time Michael, the Grand Prince, stands by your people.  
This time will be a time of distress,  
as it has never happened since there was a nation on earth.  
At that time your people will escape,  
all those that are written down in the book.  
All those who sleep in the dust of the ground are awakened,  
these to the life of the age to come,  
those to the deterrent punishment of the age to come.

It is about the people that the NAME has written down in his book. In the scene of the Golden Calf, the NAME says to Moses, "Whoever has sinned against me, I will wipe him out of my book" (Exodus 32:25). All Israel is awakened, the very Israel from the time of the Maccabean wars, where some remained faithful to the Torah, others surrendered to Hellenism. Strangely enough, in John, the criterion is not pointed to the trust in the Messiah, but

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15 Veerkamp 2021, 142-43 ([Interpretation of the Parable: "And this is now"](#), par. 10-13).

we have a similar thought as in the great judgment scene in Matthew, 25:31 ff. “Doing the good” is the criterion, in the negative form “the foolish practice” (*ta phaula praxantes*). This is not Pauline, but it is evangelical! [And see 2 Corinthians 5:10, too.]

Back to your book. (22) After all, the implicit, most important goal of Jesus in the world is,

to gather followers. These followers by definition are those who believe in Jesus (1:43), see the light, are saved, and are destined to be raised to eternal life.

However, John’s Gospel contains at the same time an “element of conflict.” From the beginning, it is clear, “that there is resistance on the part of the ‘world’ to Jesus’ message, and indeed to his very presence in the world.” Ruled is this world by “an antagonist whom the gospel describes as ‘the ruler of this world’ or the evil one.” This is (23) usually equated with Satan or the devil (cf. 8:44). From Jesus’ answer to Pilate, (18:36) “My kingship is not from this world,” (18:36) you conclude, “that he is the ruler that is not of this world, who has vanquished the ruler of this world.”

Obviously, you here assume a prince of this world understood as supramundane, who like a kind of (anti-)divine figure is fighting with Jesus for the rule of the world—and loses this fight.

Quite differently we would have to interpret John’s Gospel if we understand by *kosmos*, on the one hand, the living world of humankind, but on the other hand, the world order of the Roman Empire, which is diametrically opposed to the kingdom of the God of Israel. Then the ruler of the world order is identical with the emperor of Rome, and the term *diabolos* is to be understood in the Scriptures’ sense of *satan* as a political adversary, (1 Kings 11:14.23) whom King Solomon, for example, had to fight off. Again you do not consider such a definition of “prince of this world” or *diabolos* with one word.

### 1.2.3 Jesus’ Departure from the World

Concerning Jesus’ return to the Father, you formulate very nicely (23) that

Verse 20:17 catches Jesus in that moment between resurrection and ascension, in which Jesus tells Mary Magdalene, “Do not hold onto me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’”

But is this really about a moment when Mary catches Jesus just before he has disappeared into the otherworldly heaven? What if John had the idea that Jesus’ ascension to the Father has not yet been accomplished before the age to come is realized on this earth, that is, before his solidarity has not transformed this world into a world of freedom, justice and peace?

You write (24):

The ascension passages indicate that this departure from the world is a return to the situation that Jesus enjoyed before entering into the world.

In this context, isn't the expression "enjoyed" a trivialization of the suffering of the Messiah? Aren't you thinking docetically? That is: Actually, everything is not so bad because Jesus, in the end, is a heavenly being to whom the world can do no harm, so his "being flesh" is "fake." But if John's thoughts were Jewish-Hebrew and not Greek-cosmological, then it is to be taken more seriously, which fight the one "like a human" and the one "like God" (*bar enosh* and *ben elohim*) is leading here against a brutally merciless world order—not in a Zealot way but with the means of *agapē*, solidarity.

Now, although you presuppose that the ascent of Jesus to heaven "completes the circle of activity that began with his pre-existent creation," you also see "several hints, however, that the circle is not completely closed: the cosmological tale is not entirely completed by Jesus' departure." First, Jesus' disciples are sent out into the world in the same way that he is sent out by the Father. Second, Jesus' departure is the precondition for the vicarious coming of the Paraclete into the world. Third, Jesus' followers have been given a reservation of place in the Father's house in 14:2-3, which you connect (25) "with Jesus' return—the *parousia*—and the resurrection of his followers."

In the meantime, the paraclete acts as Jesus' representative in the world, while Jesus' disciples, in continuing his work, are his agents.

However, the *parousia* plays a minor role in John's Gospel only very marginally (in the 21st chapter), and it is not settled that the *monē* mentioned in 14:2-3 really refers to an otherworldly place in heaven or not rather to the Messianic community as a placeholder for the whole of Israel brought together by the Paraclete (= the inspiration of holiness, 14:26). The interpretation depends on whether John, the Jew, can indeed already be credited with such an un-Jewish, un-Hebrew, otherworldly conception of the age to come as it later became widespread in the Gentile Christian reading of John.

### 1.3 The Cosmological Tale is in Fact a Narrative

In conclusion, you ask yourself in the first chapter: (26) "is the narrative sequence that we have outlined a 'tale'?" In other words, (27) is there a recognizable plot that is carried out by acting characters? You answer this question in the affirmative:

The main character is Jesus, variously known and described as the Son of God, the Son of Man, the Christ, the Word, the light, and the life. Other characters are God the Father, who sent the Son into the world; the ruler of this world,

against whom Jesus struggles; and the human beings who respond to Jesus by either accepting or rejecting his message.

But is there also a plot to which the following “four essential features” would have to belong: “sequence, causality, unity, and affective power”? You also affirm this question, and you are undoubtedly right that what you elaborate as a cosmological narrative in John’s Gospel corresponds to these formal prerequisites.

The sequence of elements of the cosmological tale you highlight with Jesus’ existence with God, coming into the world, returning to God, and returning to the world to bring His own to God is consistent with Aristotle’s structure of a plot that “must have a beginning, a middle, and an end.”

Causality can easily be glimpsed in the purposeful sending of Jesus by the Father into the world, a goal which, according to your interpretation, will be achieved with the salvation of those who trust in Jesus. There is also “the presence of conflict” and its overcoming as a necessary condition for an exciting plot, which moreover (28) can be satisfactorily perceived as unified, coherent, and closed.

The “affective power” of the cosmological tale is, according to you, its most salient feature; it is practically “implied or even dictated” by the Johannine Jesus that the readers of the Gospel react with joy to what they hear. Your second chapter will discuss the ways in which the implied author attempts to achieve “a radical change in the christology as well as the self-understanding of the implied reader.”

## **2 The Cosmological Tale and the Implied Readers**

You are certainly right (29) in your assumption that the implied author’s intention with his gospel is

to have an impact on the reader’s thinking regarding Jesus, his activities, and his identity on the one hand, and regarding the reader’s own place in the world on the other.

Likewise, in view of 20:30-31, you rightly note that “these two aspects are intertwined,” namely, the identity of Jesus and the hope of life for those who hear the gospel message. In your formulation in this regard, however, there is again a one-sided interpretation of John’s Gospel that I have already mentioned:

the intellectual knowledge of Jesus’ christological identity cannot be separated from faith in Jesus as the Christ and Son of God, which in turn is a necessary precondition for the experience of eternal life.

Is in fact the Gospel of John already about an intellectual knowledge of the Christological identity of Jesus, as it was established in the councils that took place centuries later? Or was Jesus recognized as the one who uniquely embodies the Word of the God of Israel, that is, the liberating word deeds and deed words of the NAME?

Is it not crucial that, for example, in the words *egō eimi*, this NAME is coming up again and again? Thus, trusting in the Messiah, the Son of Man from Daniel 7, the firstborn Son of God and at the same time the second Isaac as the embodiment of Israel, could mean a hope for life in the age to come in *this* world.

You now claim of the cosmological tale that

it is a meta-text which serves three specific functions for the reader: first, it provides the context for the other major christological expressions in the gospel; second, it supplies the framework within which the implied reader is to situate himself or herself; third, it serves as the interpretive key for the “correct,” that is, the implied author’s, understanding of the signs narratives and indeed the entire historical tale of this gospel.

Whether this is true must now be examined.

## 2.1 Christology: Who Is Jesus in John’s Gospel?

That (30) “Christology is the central theme of this gospel,” I assume as much as you do. But is this concept of Jesus’ messiahship really “ultimately rooted in the cosmological tale,” as you understand it? I do not deny that it is possible to accommodate all of Jesus’ Christological titles in your cosmological tale. However, in such a purely formal approach, you consistently undercut the background of all the Messianic titles in the Jewish scriptures and thus run the risk of completely misunderstanding Messianity.

### 2.1.1 Word

If the *logos* title goes back to the Hebrew word *davar*, “word deed, deed word” of the God of Israel, then it is not about a formal pre-existence conception or about participation in the creation of an ultimately completed world, but about the liberating action of God in the service of creating justice for Israel.

### 2.1.2 Lamb of God

If *amnos theou* in 1:29 and 1:36 invokes the memory of the ewe, *rahel*, of Isaiah 53:7, then it must be asked for the *hamartia* that this Messiah takes away from the *kosmos*. Is it individual moral transgressions or the unbelief of individual human beings in a world that predominantly does not believe in Jesus, or is it the world order in itself that is completely aberrant from the will of the NAME?

### 2.1.3 Messiah and Savior

What a central role the title of Messiah played for Jewish hopes of liberation under Hellenistic and Roman conditions you do not hint at in a syllable. Nor do you consider what role the term *sōtēr tou kosmou* (Savior of the world or Liberator of the

world order?) played in the propaganda of the Roman empire as an honorary title of the emperors and that *sōtēria* in Jewish writings aims at the liberation of Israel from oppression and exploitation.

#### 2.1.4 King

Nathanael uses the title of King for Jesus (1:49) in what you regard as “some undefined relationship to the title ‘Son of God.’” A single look at Psalm 2:6-7 would suffice to make a possible connection from the Scriptures. Actually, only the God of Israel is the King over Israel, but when he appoints a man as King, that King can at the same time take the title “Son of God” by being fully appointed to be “one like God,” to carry out the will of God. Jesus’ viewing Nathanael under the fig tree confirms this reference to the role of the King in Israel whose job it was to ensure (1 Kings 5:4-5) that “Judah and Israel dwell in safety, everyone under his vine and under his fig tree.”

In view of (30) Jesus’ conversation with Pilate and his statement “that his kingship is not of this world,” you do not take into account that this sentence is to be interpreted in the context of the Scriptures’ criticism of the desire of the people of Israel to have (1 Samuel 8:5) “a king like all nations have, *ke-kol ha-goyim*.” It is not (31) about escapism but about liberation from a global world order of injustice, which, however, is not attainable by Zealot-military means, but only by the Messiah’s departure and the handing over of the NAME’s inspiration of fidelity to those who are trusting in the Messiah. Only *agapē*, solidarity, of an underground community can overcome the Roman world order.

#### 2.1.5 Prophet

Not even with regard to the title of prophet, which is attached to Jesus for instance in 6:14, you refer to the Scriptures in any way. Ton Veerkamp writes about Jesus being a prophet like Elisha giving food to the starving Israel:<sup>16</sup>

People see what is happening here. Not magic, but a sign. They interpret the sign correctly: this one is “the prophet who comes *into* (perhaps better *against!*) the world order.” So they say more than what the woman at Jacob’s well said, “I observe, you are a prophet!” (4:19) But they say less than Martha, “YOU ARE—the *One-like-GOD*, coming in (against) the world order,” 11:27. Jesus is the prophet, really, like Elisha, like the prophet the people of Samaria are expecting, like the prophet Israel is expecting, like that Elijah whom the NAME will send, Malachi 3:23. A prophet who will give the people “bread” that will finally satiate, the Messiah.

16 Veerkamp 2021, 154 ([The Sign of the Nourishment of Israel. A Misunderstanding](#), par. 11).

### 2.1.6 Son of God

You spend a considerable amount of space (31) explaining the “most important christological titles in this gospel,” namely “Son of Man” and “Son of God,” or simply “Son.” However, you do not say a word about what could be meant by these titles from the Scriptures, but limit yourself to the formal relationship to “God” or “Father,” who sent the Son into the world, but whom you nowhere define more precisely. But it is obvious that this God is the God of Israel and that “Father” is John’s way of referring to the NAME of this God. Is it completely irrelevant to the content that Jesus is the Son of this very God? If (32) “Jesus has come in the Father’s name (5:43), in order to do the Father’s works, which testify that he was sent by the Father (5:17, 36),” then we should ask for what exactly is the name of this Father, what are the works that he has to do.

You quote 6:38-39 where Jesus says, “this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day.” However, the question of whom or what exactly the Messiah is not to lose, whether it is Christians who believe in Jesus or the children of Israel in Judea, Samaria, and the Diaspora, might be answered differently if John were to refer deliberately to the will of the Father attested to in the Scriptures.

Also, what it means to know or see the Father (1:18 and 14:7) by seeing the Son, we can understand only from the Scriptures.

At first glance, what Ton Veerkamp has to say about John 1:18 may seem far-fetched, but it is worth considering whether the connections he makes can contribute something to the proper interpretation of the Scriptures and, from them, of the Gospel of John:<sup>17</sup>

“No one has ever seen God”, is stated in 1 John 4:12 as well. This sentence summarizes the fundamental concern of the Scriptures. Moses’ request to see the face of God is sharply rebuffed by the NAME: “man shall not see me and live,” Exodus 33:20. Only “from behind” Moses can see, namely what came to pass afterward: what happened is manifesting as real liberation, Exodus 34:6,

. . .

the NAME, the NAME,  
 God compassionate, gracious,  
 slow to anger,  
 abounding in solidary faithfulness (*rav chessed we-’emeth*) . . .

Let us translate “to see God” into the political prose of the 21st century. If “God” is the deepest point of convergence of every social loyalty, the densest conglomeration of order in a given social system, then “to see God” means: to

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17 Veerkamp 2021, 41-42 ([A Postscript](#), par. 11-14).

lay one's hands onto the social order of liberated slaves, to pull one's own imaginings over the social order as such. By doing that, the king or the state presses an absolute claim, enslaving the humans: "false gods into my face," Exodus 20:3. "No one has ever seen God" is no empirical statement, but the statement that the opposite would be nothing but a lie. The sentence means: Experience of God is something utterly illegitimate. He who is politically implementing this unintermediateness of God raises the claim to personally and absolutely embodying the innermost order of the society. Communists called that "cult of personality," describing correctly what under Stalin happened to the communist party and to the people of the Soviet Union.

The Messiah did not see "God" as well. No one has *seen*. But the Messiah did "declare, explain," *exēgēsato*, what is meant here by the vocable "God." The Messiah is not a visionary, he is an *exegete*, he explains the Scriptures: Scriptures that, in his opinion, the disciples never had understood. And, in the way he lives according to the Scriptures, he is setting an example. For *exēgēsato*, we now write "is performing," because the "exegesis" by the Messiah is his conduct of life (*halakha*), such conduct of life that led him into an ultimately irreconcilable opposition to the elites of his people and the Roman occupational force.

Seeing God according to John 14:7 means experiencing and participating in the liberating acts of the NAME; here the disciples may understand the Messiah as the one who, in the solidary commitment of his life, is fulfilling the will of the God of Israel and whom they follow in their own practice of solidarity. In this sense, Ton Veerkamp interprets 14:8-15 as a necessary clarification of what is meant in 14:7,<sup>18</sup>

He who sees the Messiah sees God, he who trusts the Messiah trusts in God. No other and no legitimate experience of God ("seeing") is possible than seeing the Messiah, this Messiah, this failed Messiah! This seeing and recognizing is a practice. The practice of the disciples, if they see, recognize, trust, is that of the Messiah, and this practice will be more convincing than that of the Messiah himself ("greater works"). This Messianic practice is the honor of God, it and only it.

If you pray for it, it will be given, because praying for this practice requires seeing, recognizing, and trusting. The practice that arises from solidarity with the Messiah is the keeping of the Messiah's commandments. In 15:12, it is again made clear what was demonstrated in Chapter 13: Solidarity with the Messiah = solidarity with one another = serving as slaves of one to the other disciple, of the other to the one disciple.

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18 Veerkamp 2021, 299 ([The Second Objection: "Show us the FATHER, and it is enough,"](#) par. 5-6).

Such connections, however, do not play the slightest role in your approach to John's Gospel. Instead, you relate its "language of sending" in a formal sense to a "movement of the one who is sent from one realm to another," that is, the movement from outside the world into the world and back again: (33)

It is the language, concepts, and pattern of movement implied in the cosmological tale that provide the content for the title.

If the title "Son of God" is understood in such a formal sense, of course, the Gospel of John can ultimately become only an anemic, otherworldly, completely un-Jewish, and anti-Jewish Gospel. An understanding of John's Gospel filled with the concerns of the Jewish Scriptures in terms of content would be possible if you would ask yourself what it means in the Scriptures to act on behalf of God or sent by him.

### 2.1.7 Son of Man

Likewise, you interpret the "Son of Man" title formally and without reference to the Scriptures. You neither expound 1:51 in the context of passages such as Ezekiel 1:1, Genesis 28:12, and Daniel 7:13 nor 3:13 with reference to the exaltation of the serpent in Numbers 21:4-9. Instead, you connect the "vertical spatial movement" of the Son of Man with "a hierarchy and dualism of heaven and earth, according to which heaven has positive connotations while earth has negative ones." Such a simple dualism, however, need not yet underlie the original intent of John's Gospel, for to the Scriptures<sup>19</sup>

[t]here is a clear *difference* between heaven and earth, but no *opposition*. *Earth* is not a synonym for *world order*. Psalm 115:16 says, "The heavens are the heavens of the NAME, the earth he gave to the children of men."

The earth is judged negatively only insofar as it—as so-called *kosmos*, "world order"—has been brought into disorder by human beings in a way that radically contradicts the liberating will of the God of Israel. According to Daniel 7, it is the Son of Man who comes to pass judgment on the world order.

In the end, your assumption of cosmological dualism leads (34) Jesus to revile and condemn the Jews as devil's children because of their belonging to the world, "You are from below [ἐκ τῶν κατω], I am from above [ἐκ τῶν ἄνω]; you are of this world, I am not of this world" (8:23), or even more pointedly in 8:44, "You are from your father the Devil, and you choose to do your Father's desires."

But what if it was about the political controversy between the Johannine Messianists and the Rabbinic Jews about how to behave toward the world order dominated by the Romans and their "ruler"? This dispute would still be sharp enough. It may remain open whether John is right against Rabbinism, but at least it would not be

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19 Veerkamp 2021, 102 ([Heaven and Earth; Trust and Distrust](#), par. 3).

about anti-Judaism or even anti-Semitism in principle but about a quarrel between different Jewish currents that is comprehensible on the basis of the Scriptures.

You assume without any reference to Scriptural references that “the Son of Man title, in its connection with the language of ascent and descent, evokes the opposition that Jesus, as the Word of God, faced in the world, which is the central conflict of the cosmological tale as told in the prologue and throughout the gospel narrative.” In this, the fact that the Son of Man is the apocalyptic figure of the Book of Daniel, who is to replace a whole series of bestial world rulers by a finally human rule, after the previous world empires have been judged on the basis of the guidelines of the Torah, remains completely out of your consideration. It is all the more impossible for you to see that this Son of Man, according to the Gospel of John, is to be scandalously put to death by the execution of Jesus on the Roman cross but thereby actually experiences the “exaltation” intended by God as constituting his victory over the world order.

### **2.1.8 *Egō eimi***

You rightly emphasize that the “vehicles for Johannine christology” include “the  $\epsilon\gamma\omega \epsilon\iota\mu\iota$  formulation, which Jesus uses either absolutely, as in 8:58, or with a completion, as in 14:6.” And in your discussion (35) of 14:6 you mention “that one of the principal purposes of Jesus’ activity in the world is to make the Father known and to provide a means through which the believer can have some knowledge of, and access to, the Father.”

But with not a single word you address the fact that this is about the God of Israel. This is all the more surprising since the words *egō eimi* refer back to the central passage of the self-revelation of the liberating NAME of the God of Israel, namely Exodus 3:14. Does it not matter at all in your eyes that Jesus in his person thus programmatically embodies the liberating work of YHWH and that his mission is to bring it to completion?

### **2.1.9 Flattening of the Meaning of the Christological Titles**

Your concluding remark on the connection “between various christological formulations and the cosmological tale” is instructive:

Not only do these formulations all include some direct reference to the plot and vocabulary of the cosmological tale, but their meaning and significance for the reader are most easily understood within the context of that tale. This suggests that the cosmological tale does indeed function as a primary vehicle for conveying the christological understanding of the implied author to the implied reader.

It is true: If someone reads the Gospel of John without taking into account the background of the Jewish Scriptures—perhaps due to simple ignorance—then such a

cosmological tale makes sense that amounts to the salvation of the soul up out of the world into eternal life in the hereafter.

But shouldn't we ask instead of such an implied author for a real author who knew it better? He could be our trainer in the Messianic House of Study by telling us exciting and enlightening stories from the Tanakh about each of the titles of the Messiah Jesus.

## 2.2 The Self-Image of the Implied Reader

Further, you describe very precisely the demands of the cosmological tale on the implied hearer, as I believed them to be absolutely binding as a teenage Pietist Christian: to have to believe in Jesus in a very specific way and to be eternally lost and damned if I am believing in Jesus too little or not in the right way.

But today I doubt whether such a faith was the original aim of John's gospel. This already begins with the correct meaning of the word *pistis, pisteuein*. Is it about a religious faith that Jesus washes my soul clean and takes me up to heaven when I die, or is it—also at least—about a trust in the Messiah of the God of Israel that the liberating NAME of this God is stronger than all the unjust regimes of this world—an encouraging trust to dare a life of solidarity in the face of the death powers of the world order?

Your estimation may be correct that the Gospel of John was not only addressed to a temporally and spatially limited audience as a historical and ecclesiological tale: (38)

In conclusion, the cosmological tale...encourages real readers to locate themselves within its temporal and spatial framework, just as the characters of the historical tale and the implied readers within the ecclesiological tale do. It is therefore by universalizing the specific temporal and spatial boundaries of the historical and ecclesiological tales that the cosmological tale allows and encourages readers to situate themselves within the gospel and to see themselves as its addressees. In reading themselves into the time and place of the cosmological tale, readers must confront the Johannine understanding of the "world" into which Jesus came, in which the readers also find themselves. It is in the process of such confrontation that the implied readers are given the opportunity to rethink their self-understanding and their stance towards both the Word and the world.

However, as I said before, the question is whether the Johannine term *kosmos* must or may actually be understood in terms of your cosmological tale.

## 2.3 How Does the Gospel of John Understand the "World"?

If the world in John's Gospel is to be understood not "merely as a spatial term" but "is also used metaphorically to refer to the human inhabitants of the world," then we have to ask who is meant by these people. You assume that the world, which

does not recognize or acknowledge Jesus in 1:10, (39) is narrowed in meaning by the following verse, 1:11, to the effect that “his own people,” that is, the Jews, do not accept him. However, the correct conclusion that “the Jews” in their majority, i.e. Rabbinical Judaism, do not recognize Jesus as Messiah does not automatically prove that everywhere the *kosmos* is mentioned, the Jews are also meant. In my eyes, there is every indication that *kosmos* in most places refers to the Roman world order and that John complains about Rabbinical Judaism trying to come to terms with this world order and the Jerusalem priesthood even deliberately submitting to the ruler of this world order, i.e. the *diabolos* or *satan* (19:15, “we have no king but Caesar”). The continuous identification of a world that is also consistently judged as “evil” with “the” Jews, who are also consistently and uniformly judged as “evil,” would of course completely discredit John’s Gospel as an anti-Jewish or even anti-Semitic writing.

Also “the images of light and darkness” are not clear in their meaning from the outset. According to the Gospel of John, it is correct that without

Jesus as the light of the world...the world is in darkness. For example, in 3:19 the reader is told that “the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.”

But this contrast between light and darkness can as well be understood in a Gnostic supernatural way as it can refer to social class antagonisms (cf. the *Threepenny Opera*), i.e. to deeds of darkness that have to shun the light of publicity. As stated above, the same applies to (40) “the association of the world and sin.”

Again and again, everything depends on the definition of *kosmos*. If you do not take seriously that with *kosmos* as a negative term fundamentally is meant the Roman world order, you must come up with conclusions like the following:

These passages set up an antithetical relationship between being in the world (a negative condition) and not being in the world (a positive condition.) This is expressed explicitly in 8:23, in which Jesus tells the Jews, “You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world.” That the world, the realm of physical life, is antithetical to spiritual life, is indicated in 12:25: “Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” Furthermore, the world cannot receive the spirit of truth (14:17); it hates Jesus and his disciples because they are not of the world (7:7; 17:14).

If the issue, instead, is the unjustly ordered world, then the first case is about collaborating with the political enemy, the second case is about leading a life conformed or non-conformed to the unjust system, and the third case is about the world order not being able to do anything with the inspiration of fidelity of the God of Israel because the politics of the common world order are based on lies and deceit only.

Problematic is the “basic assumption of the cosmological tale” that John’s Gospel should be about condemning wholesale the world as the living world of people. True, “it is necessary for believers to leave behind the darkness and sin of this world in order to be saved.” But it looks quite different if this darkness and sin consist in the failure of the unjust world order, which provokes God’s holy wrath, or if you designate a life without faith in Jesus in general as dark and sinful:

Since being saved is described as having “life in his name” (20:31) and as passing from death to life (5:24), it would appear that not believing, not following Jesus, is a condition akin to death. Those remaining in the darkness of the world as it was before Jesus’ entry, and as it remains now apart from faith in him, suffer condemnation, the wrath of God, and ultimately, “eternal death.” As Jesus tells the Jews in 8:21, 24: “I am going away, and you will search for me, but you will die in your sin. Where I am going, you cannot come....I told you that you would die in your sins, for you will die in your sins unless you believe that I am he.” Conversely, “whoever keeps my word will never see death” (8:51).

In fact, you assume that the “cosmological tale” redefines both life and death:

Death is not only the physical condition which awaits all human beings at the end of their lives, but also, and more importantly, it characterizes the spiritual condition of humankind apart from Christ’s saving power. Those who are spiritually dead have no hope of escaping eternal condemnation, while those who are spiritually alive in the present, having acknowledged Christ as savior, will not be affected by their physical deaths, but will enjoy the resurrection of life.

This is the traditional Christian spiritualized view of what John says about life and death.

Yet is it possible for a 1st-century Jewish author, whose faith is rooted in the Scriptures, to have such a spiritualized understanding of life and death? Is such a concept of (41) “living dead,” who are spiritually dead because they do not believe in Jesus, meant in 5:24 ff? Rather, is it not closer that verses 5:22-30 are about the judgment that will be carried out by the Son of Man announced in Daniel 7, which will be given to Jesus by the Father? You yourself quote the decisive verses 28-29, in which the standard for judgment is not mere trust in Jesus, but there will come

those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.

You see here a muddying of the notion of living people who are spiritually dead because of Jesus’ absence and actually dead people awaiting resurrection in their graves, and a concomitant blurring of “boundaries between realized and future eschatology.” But what if it is not at all about a distinction between spiritual and physical death within a cosmological tale, but about liberated, righteous life in peace that

the God of Israel promises to bring about, in contrast to the powers of death represented by the later deified emperor of this world order, here well biblically called *diabolos* or *satan*? In any case, the vision of the Son of Man in Daniel 7 does not presuppose spiritualized processes, but the end of bestial kingdoms on this earth.

Unfortunately, such correlations are without any interest for you. Therefore you come to the conclusion that

by defining the *κοσμος* into which Jesus came as the world of sin, darkness, and death, the cosmological tale is a powerful tool for conveying the perspective of the implied author. Ideally the implied reader, and the real reader as well, in the reading of the gospel will come to see life apart from Jesus as death in the most profound spiritual sense, thereby adopting the point of view of the implied author.

And I must admit that a non-Scriptural reading of John's Gospel probably cannot help but interpret the view of its implied author in this way.

## 2.4 The Cosmological Tale as an Interpretive Key

Now, finally, you try to use (42) the cosmological tale as the key to the "correct, that is, the implied author's, interpretation of the historical tale."

### 2.4.1 Narratives

Regarding the narratives of Jesus' signs, you mention that the wedding at Cana was about "the manifestation of his glory (2:11)" and the other sign at Cana, "the healing of the centurion's son," was about "an example of people who believe without themselves seeing the full result of Jesus' activity." However, you do not address the fact that the wedding could be the Messianic wedding of the God of Israel to his people Israel, nor do you address the question of signs and acts of God's power connected with trust in God in the Scriptures.

You see the healing of the lame man used by Jesus to illustrate his "identity as the Son of God" but leave out the mention of the Son of Man and its reference to Daniel 7. The miracle of bread, in your eyes, is meant to highlight him as the bread of eternal life that comes spiritually from heaven instead of remembering the prophet Elisha who literally nourished the starving people of Israel. In the healing of the blind man, it remains open in which way Jesus reveals himself as the light of the world. The "raising of Lazarus" you see as a demonstration of "Jesus' life-giving powers," which, however, additionally glorify the Father from whom he has these powers. But again you leave unsaid that it is the honor of the God of Israel not to abandon his people Israel, as Ton Veerkamp says,<sup>20</sup>

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20 Veerkamp 2021, 243 ([Lazarus](#), par. 9 and 11).

Lazarus is Israel, Israel in a state of death. The Messiah remains closely linked to Israel in life and death. In John, the Messiah is not a universal savior but remains the Messiah of Israel also for us, non-Jews. In the farewell speeches and the stories about the suffering, death, and resurrection of the Messiah, the disciple emerges *to whom the Messiah was related like a friend*. Thus the mystery surrounding this anonymous disciple is not solved, but both play the role of *exemplary concentration*, Lazarus as the exemplary concentration of the people of Israel in the state of death, that disciple as the exemplary concentration of the Messianic community. ...

Lazarus, the friend of the Messiah, is chosen to demonstrate in his body—well, in his corpse—that his illness does not lead to death. He is chosen to the honor of God, “that the *bar enosh*, Human, may be honored.” The honor of God is living Israel. To the Messiah, the friend is the suffering, the terminally ill, even decaying Israel of his days.

Correctly you see (42 f) that

the crucifixion of Jesus, is also not what it seems to be—the ignominious death of a troublemaking hero—but an essential element of Jesus’ glorification (17:1), by which he will draw all people to himself (12:32), and after which he will ascend to where he had come from (20:17).

Again, however, the question is of what Jesus’ glory consists, namely to gather all of Israel—Judea, Samaria, Diaspora, God-fearers from the *goyim*—into a Messianic community, and what exactly is meant by the process of ascending to the Father.

#### 2.4.2 Discourses

What Jesus (43) communicates in his speeches you sometimes find “elusive” or “contradictory” but it seems also to fit well into your cosmological tale such as the heavenly things Jesus talks about to Nicodemus—though you leave out that he refers to Jacob’s ladder to heaven and Moses’ elevated serpent. Regarding the bread of life, you mention once “the background of the Exodus event during which God provided manna to ensure the Israelites’ survival” but without making this reference fruitful in terms of content.

Jesus’ heated dispute with the Judaeans in chapters 7 and 8, in turn, focuses on “Jesus’ origins and ultimate destination” and, according to you, ends “by referring to his own pre-existence, a statement for which the Jews attempt to stone him.” However, the real impetus for the stoning of Jesus may be Jesus’ claim to represent the NAME of the God of Israel by saying *egō eimi*.

All in all, of course, you can easily classify all discourses of Jesus into the cosmological tale because indeed Jesus’ work goes back to the sending into the world (order) by the Father and he overcomes this world order by his ascending to the Father and

the handing over of the inspiration of fidelity, the Paraclete, to his followers. Decisive is again, about which kind of cosmology it is about here at all.

## 2.5 Irony as a Clou for the Reader to Know Better than Jesus' Contemporaries?

Now it is interesting that you consider (44) “the extensive use of irony” in John’s Gospel “as one way in which the implied reader is to use the cosmological tale to understand what the characters in the gospel cannot.” In doing so, you presuppose that the implied readers have a better “understanding of the cosmological tale” than even Jesus’ disciples who witnessed all of his miracles. (45)

This special knowledge to which the reader but not the characters are privy is essential to irony as communication between implied author and implied reader. If the cosmological tale is the interpretive key to Johannine narrative and theology, and if it is fully known to the characters only at the conclusion of the gospel (if then), it may be seen as part of the special knowledge which the implied author conveys to the implied readers in order that they might understand the ironic passages within the gospel.

As an example, you draw on “the series of ironic dialogues in chapter 7” where the crowd ponders whether Jesus meets the criteria of a Messiah. In 7:27, when they doubt this because they know where he is from and who his parents are, Jesus responds “with an allusion to his origins as described in the cosmological tale”:

You know me, and you know where I come from. I have not come on my own. But the one who sent me is true, and you do not know him. I know him, because I am from him, and he sent me. (7:28)

The question is, however, whether John does not presuppose that the listeners as Jews, which they were, should actually know of whom he speaks, namely the God of Israel, from whom alone liberation is to be expected. Then it is not about disparaging irony based on a knowledge that they cannot have at all but of a shock when realizing that the Jews of all people, whom the Messiah wants to gather in a Messianic Israel, reject him as the Messiah.

When Jesus in 7:33-34 mentions for the first time the little time he will still spend with humans before returning to the Father, where no one can follow him—neither the Jews at this point nor the disciples in 13:33—you think it is clear that in

making sense of this statement, the reader is able to rely on what he or she knows from earlier readings of the gospel, namely that Jesus will shortly depart and return to the Father to complete this phase of the cosmological tale.

But is it really that simple? Could not the little time of the Messiah also be contrasted with the long time (*polyn chronon*) in which Israel was paralyzed (cf. 5:6)? If so, John would challenge his implied addressees not only to read his Gospel over and

over again but to relate his words to what the Scriptures have to say about Israel's liberation.

Here, too, we should be careful before we, as readers, too quickly think that we know everything better than the people of that time. Even we modern people are not immune to misunderstandings when reading the Gospel of John.

How the stylistic device used by John can also be seen, is shown by a quotation from Ton Veerkamp:<sup>21</sup>

The Messiah is going away to the one who sent him, that is, to a place where they cannot get to. The Messiah enters the hiddenness of God. There every seeking will be in vain. Jesus expresses himself in a cryptic way, the misunderstanding is intended, as in chapter 6. The crowd continues to discuss and puzzle about what is meant, whether Yeshua—after his failure in Judea—wants to go abroad, into the diaspora, to try his luck in teaching the Greeks—the Greek-speaking Jewish diaspora—or, as we will hear in 8:22, to kill himself. To John, misunderstanding is a literary means of breaking off a discussion that can lead to nothing. It remains hidden from the people who Jesus really is as long as they do not trust.

In the question of some Jews whether Jesus wanted to go to the Diaspora and teach “the Greeks” there, you see (46)

the occasion for a further irony which is not spelled out. By going to the Father, Jesus allows the continuation of his mission by means of the paraclete and the disciples whom he has sent into the world. As the readers, whether members of the Johannine community or not, know, this continuation resulted in the preaching of the message to the Greeks in the dispersion. This development would have been apparent to the implied reader not only from hints in the gospel (10:16; 12:24), but also from first-hand knowledge of the inclusion of Gentiles in the Christian community after the death of Jesus.

Such an irony may indeed have been interpreted into this remark by the Gentile Christian church. In John's Gospel, however, the mission to the nations by no means plays the same role as in Matthew or Luke; at most in the margins (12:20 ff) there is a reserved mention of Greeks who want to see Jesus, but whether they follow him is nowhere mentioned. And with the sheep from the other courtyard in 10:16, in the context of chapter 4, it is more likely that the lost ten tribes behind the Samaritans are meant, whom Jesus wants to gather together with the Diaspora Jews.

A third example of irony you find in 7:41-42, where Jesus' Messiahship is doubted because he comes from Galilee and not from Bethlehem, the city of David. Again, you suppose the irony to be that the readers already know full well that Jesus comes

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21 Veerkamp 2021, 189 ([About the Messiah](#), par. 19).

from heaven and not from any place on this earth. This is countered by the fact that in John's Gospel Jesus' earthly origin in Galilee does play a role insofar as his messiahship is described as a completely unexpected event breaking into Israel's history of liberation; Nathanael must first see for himself what good can come from Nazareth (1:45-49), and the Pharisees deny in 7:52 that a prophet could arise from Galilee. Conversely, the mention of Bethlehem and David only in this single passage can be seen as an implicit criticism of Davidic-Zealot notions of a Messiah; John did not want to place Jesus in a line with Zealots like Simon bar Giora or John of Giscala.

## 2.6 The Cosmological Tale Put to the Test: Analyzing John 10:1-5

Since you assume that many "ironic passages" and "other examples of misunderstanding between Jesus and various individuals and groups" are just as "easy to decipher" on the background of the cosmological tale as "in chapter 7," you consider

the interesting methodological possibility that the cosmological tale might prove helpful in deciphering other, more obscure, cases of misunderstanding.

Therefore you want to exemplarily "test out this possibility" in analyzing the comparison, parable, allegory, metaphor, or whatever is to be called what John refers to as "the *paroimia* of the shepherd and the sheep in John 10:1-5." (46-47)

After looking at how New Testament exegetes have risen to this challenge, we will examine carefully how the cosmological tale might act as the interpretive key which the readers, unlike the characters within the narrative, can use to unlock its meaning.

## 3 Scholarly Discussion of the *paroimia* John 10:1-5

In your discussion (48) of 10:1-5, it is first noticeable that the translation to which you refer translates *aulē* as "sheepfold" instead of "courtyard" and *ekballein* as "to bring out" instead of "to throw out." The (49) two contrasts "between shepherd and thief/bandit regarding entry into the fold (10:1-2)" and "between shepherd and stranger regarding leading the sheep out of the fold (10:4-5)" you interpret without further reasoning as "that functionally, the thief and the stranger play the same role in the *paroimia*."

Verse 10:6 expresses the lack of understanding of those listening to Jesus at the time, which is, in your eyes, a challenge by the implied author to the implied readers "to succeed where Jesus' audience has failed." This may even be true, the question, however, is by what means this can be accomplished.

The presuppositions for the interpretation, which this verse indicates in your eyes, are to be agreed upon. 1. the verses 1-5 are expressly called *paroimia* and are therefore in need of interpretation, 2. verses 7-18 are (50) not themselves part of the *paroimia*, but are "in some sense an explication or extension thereof," 3. a connec-

tion is made with the previous chapter, that is, “no new narrative setting or audience is specified,” as before we are in the “temple at the Feast of Tabernacles,” and Jesus is still facing the Pharisees as an audience.

### 3.1 On the Genre of 10:1-5

As to the genre of the *paroimia*, you assume (51) that in John 16

speaking in *εν παροιμιας* is specifically contrasted to speaking *παρησια*, i.e., plainly. This implies that the *paroimia* is a way of saying figuratively what could also be expressed plainly.

In doing so, you disregard the fact that the contradiction could also have a political background, i.e. the concealment of the statement due to the necessity of acting underground, in secret, against the world order and its collaborators.

However, we may well agree on a general definition of *paroimia* like that of James Martin,<sup>22</sup> namely, “a symbolic saying which requires interpretation.” But it is debatable whether 10:1-5 “is a parable, an allegory, both, or neither.”

#### 3.1.1 Frederic Godet

Extensively you trace (52) F. Godet’s<sup>23</sup> “allegorical interpretation,” who draws on “allegorical, pastoral, and biblical elements” to interpret (52-53)

the *paroimia* as a passage depicting Jesus as the Messiah, announced by the Baptist, who has come into the Jewish theocracy in order to save his Jewish-Christian followers from the control of those evil usurpers of authority, the Pharisees.

#### 3.1.2 Adrianus Johannes Simonis

Far more exciting to me is (53) a “more recent example of allegorical interpretation” of John 10 by A. J. Simonis.<sup>24</sup>

Whereas Godet’s interpretation remained largely within the confines of events narrated within the gospel itself, Simonis attempts a complex, far-ranging allegorical analysis which draws on material from the Hebrew Bible, Josephus, the rest of the New Testament, the Apocrypha, and other literature. His is a strongly historical interpretation, which argues that the *paroimia* draws its terms and structure from the political realities and events of Jesus’

22 James P. Martin, “John 10:1-10,” in *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* (1978) 171-75. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/002096437803200205>

23 F. Godet, *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John*. Vol. 2. 3rd ed. Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1892.

24 A. J. Simonis, *Die Hirtenrede im Johannes-Evangelium. Versuch einer Analyse von Johannes 10,1-18 nach Entstehung, Hintergrund und Inhalt*, Rom: Päpstliches Bibelinstitut, 1967.

day. Hence he sees 10:1-5 as a genuine saying of Jesus, though conveyed by the narrator, who has added the interpretation in verses 7-18 [192-93].

Decades before Ton Veerkamp, Simonis already considers the biblical and political background of 10:1-5, but it is problematic that he sticks to the search for a historical location in Jesus' time.

Simonis argues that the passage is an allusion to a failed attempt by the Zealots (the thieves and robbers) [127-42] to enter into the temple (the sheepfold) [120-27] by force ("another way" [142-53]). This is deplored by Jesus, who asserts that only he (the shepherd) [144] can free the sheep (the Jews, Israel) [125] from the narrow theocracy represented by the temple. [125] Jesus is allowed to enter by the gatekeeper of the temple, who was probably a high priest, [158] and perhaps Caiaphas himself. [157] The rest of the chapter (vv. 7-18) also refers to this same situation [194-318].

Veerkamp, too, views the Zealots in the thieves and terrorists (as he translates *lēstēs*), but identifies them as the Zealots of the Judean War, whom John, in retrospect, holds partly responsible for the fall of Jerusalem and the temple, and does not connect them with any event at the time of Jesus. The difference in the political goals of the Zealots and the Pharisees, however, is accurately summed up by Simonis [133]:<sup>25</sup>

Whereas the Zealots wanted to fight for the establishment of God's exclusive rule immediately by force, driven by an unconditional readiness for martyrdom and holy struggle, the Pharisees opposed this and wanted to see national freedom accomplished only later in the days of the Messiah. As they believed that the Romans could only be fought through the Messiah, they never incited the people to revolt, and on the contrary, sought to suppress any attempt at revolt.

At first, Simonis' assumption that a high priest, for example, Caiaphas, as the doorkeeper of the temple could allow the Messiah Jesus to enter seemed completely absurd to me, especially since he identifies the Jewish theocracy as the opponent of Jesus, whereas in Veerkamp's eyes, not the Jewish theocracy as such is the opponent of the Messiah, but only in so far as it has given up the God of Israel as the only legitimate king of Israel in favor of the Roman emperor. However, when I read more closely in Simonis' book in which sense he identifies Caiaphas with the doorkeeper of the *paroimia*, I was able to get something out from his argumentation, since John in 11:51 portrays this very Caiaphas as a prophet who unintentionally, by deciding to kill the Messiah, promotes his goal of gathering all Israel out of the paganized and meanwhile destroyed temple of Jerusalem into the Messianic community [158]:

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25 This and the next quotation—highlighted green—are translated by myself from A. J. Simonis, op. cit.

The word of Caiaphas...according to God's plan, opens the way for Jesus to die for the salvation of the people, well, of people in general. In this way, the old high priest opens the door for the new high priest.

Among (53) the multiple contextual references Simonis cites "in biblical and post-biblical Jewish literature" for interpreting the *paroimia*, you address "1 Enoch 88-90,"

in which, he argues, pastoral language is connected with the temple. He also draws on Isa 6:9-10, whose use of the images of sight and blindness, hearing and understanding, is mirrored in the themes of chapters 9 and 10 in the Fourth Gospel and, in Simonis' view, may even be the source of their juxtaposition in this text [198].

But although Simonis takes different paths from yours in locating the historical Jesus politically and literarily in Jewish contexts, his interpretation amounts in the end to a similar spiritualization of Israel's hopes for liberation in a new religion of Christianity as you advocate.

### 3.1.3 Louis Martyn

Louis Martyn,<sup>26</sup> on the other hand (54), understands 10:1-5 as a set of parables that, together with 10:7-30, must be interpreted allegorically

in the context of the ecclesiological tale, identifying the sheep as the Johannine community; the strangers/thieves/ robbers/wolf as the Jewish authorities who kill, destroy, snatch away, and scatter the Johannine community; the hireling as the secretly believing "rulers" who abandon the Johannine community when it is endangered; and the Good Shepherd as "Jesus, as he is active through Johannine evangelists who are prepared to face martyrdom for the community...."

### 3.1.4 John Painter

Finally, you refer to John Painter<sup>27</sup> who reads "the passage within the contexts of both the historical and the ecclesiological tales." Within the former, he relates the shepherd to Jesus [57], the doorkeeper to John the Baptist [58], within the latter "the shepherd may in fact represent the leaders of the community, while the doorkeeper represents Jesus, who admits the church leaders into their positions of leadership within the community." [60] The thieves and robbers are equated with (54 f) "the Jewish leaders who rejected not only the blind man of the gospel, but also Jesus as well as the Johannine community as a whole," [58] and the "Wolf of John

26 Louis Martyn, *The Gospel of John in Christian History* (New York: Paulist, 1978) 116-17.

27 John Painter, "Tradition, History and Interpretation in John 10," *Shepherd Discourse* (ed. Johannes Beutler and R. T. Fortna; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 53-74.

10:12 stands for the false teachers who have created a schism in the Johannine community [63]. Finally, the hireling refers to Peter, or rather, ‘a more formal institutional authority, such as Peter represents.’” [64]

Whereas “Painter and Martyn read the ecclesiological level as the primary locus of meaning of the *paroimia*, ... Simonis and Godet” try “to develop a historical reading of the passage.”

### 3.1.5 Hugo Odeberg and Karl Martin Fischer

Quite differently, (55) Hugo Odeberg<sup>28</sup> and Karl Martin Fischer tend to emphasize aspects related to what you have called the cosmological tale. Odeberg

identifies the sheepfold with “the Divine-Spiritual World into which Jesus seeks to lead men through his coming into the ‘world’” [313] ... The thief is the devil and his kin, and the gatekeeper, the Father. [328]

Similarly, Karl Martin Fischer<sup>29</sup> presents “the *paroimia* in the context of early Christian gnosticism.” (56)

According to Fischer, the elements of the *paroimia* are not to be identified with characters in the Johannine narrative or concepts in Johannine theology per se, but with metaphors and ideas of early gnostic redeemer myths.

### 3.1.6 John 10:1-5 as an Allegory or a Parable

In summary, you write about the interpretation of the *paroimia* as an allegory:

Despite differences in interpretation, the allegorical approaches share the methodological assumption that the elements of the *paroimia*, and the inter-relationships among them, correspond to some structure outside the *paroimia* itself, either within the historical tale of the gospel, or outside it, in the political or theological background of first-century Judaism and Christianity.

The majority of commentators, however, reject the allegorical interpretation, preferring the description of the *paroimia* “as one, or even more than one, parable.” This may, so you think, “be attributed to a great degree to Adolf Jülicher’s influential analysis of the parables of Jesus”<sup>30</sup> to which we will come later.

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28 Hugo Odeberg, *The Fourth Gospel* (Uppsala, 1929; reprinted: Amsterdam: B.R. Grüner, 1968) 313.

29 Karl Martin Fischer, “Der johanneische Christus und der gnostische Erlöser.” In *Gnosis und Neues Testament*, ed. Karl-Wolfgang Troeger, 235-66. Berlin: Gerd Mohn, 1973, 356-57.

30 Adolf Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*, vol. 2. (Tübingen, 1910; reprinted: Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1969).

An understandable reason for preferring the “parabolic option may have been the artificiality of some of the attempts at allegorical explanations.” The danger of arbitrariness and capriciousness is obvious.

The same danger, however, is by no means excluded in the interpretation of the *paroimia* as a parable. Namely, whoever does this (57) must 1. presuppose that the pictorial material comes “from the everyday situation which it describes,” may 2. consider “only one or two main points of comparison” as important, whereas 3. remaining details “are thought to have been included only for the purposes of ornamentation.” Arbitrariness can enter where we have to decide which points of comparison refer to the supposedly presupposed everyday situation, which are to be purely ornamental, and which are to carry the decisive meaning of the parable.

### 3.1.7 Johannes Quasten and Rudolf Bultmann

Johannes Quasten,<sup>31</sup> for example, assumes that the *paroimia* correctly reflects the “Palestinian background” of the everyday life of sheep herding. Even at that (58), however, circular reasoning cannot be ruled out, as you point out:

Though the nature of pastoral practices in ancient Palestine cannot be determined with any accuracy, it is clear that Quasten assumes that they are reflected in this passage. Quasten and other exegetes make an *a priori* assumption that this *paroimia* and indeed the entire discourse convey the genuine words of the historical Jesus [165-69]. Since the historical Jesus could only have spoken in parables, this passage must be a parable. Since parables were rooted in everyday experience, and since Jesus always spoke truthfully, this passage must surely be an accurate reflection of shepherding practices in ancient Palestine. This conclusion completes the exegetical circle.

Quasten now chooses as

two essential characteristics: the entrance by the door and the confidential relation between shepherd and flock. [153] ... Therefore the term of comparison is the behavior of the sheep: they follow the shepherd; they do not follow the thief.

... The shepherd is clearly Jesus, the sheep are those who follow him, like the blind man of chapter 9. The thieves and robbers are therefore the Pharisees... [153]

Bultmann<sup>32</sup> is one of the few who do not share this interpretation, although he also “agrees that the *paroimia* is a parable.”

31 Johannes Quasten, “The Parable of the Good Shepherd: Jn. 10:1-21.” *CBQ* 10 (1948) 1-12, 151-69.

32 Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971.

For Bultmann, the shepherd is the evangelist's version of the Gnostic Revealer, who has come into the world (the fold) to save those who will obey him [373]. He is contrasted with the thief/robber, who is not to be identified with a specific entity but rather stands for "anyone who unlawfully claims to have control over the flock, i.e., ... every corrupter of the faithful." Hence, he argues, Odeberg's suggestion that the thief is the devil is wrong [371, n.3]. Bultmann, like Quasten, believes that it is inappropriate to identify the gatekeeper or the door, who are mentioned merely to give greater vividness to the scene [372, n.2].

### 3.1.8 Is It Important to Distinguish between Parable and Allegory in John 10?

You consider the "parabolic interpretation of the *paroimia*" to be problematic for two reasons:

First, although indeed "the intended readers of this gospel were familiar with sheep, shepherds, and sheepfolds, as well as with the routines and hazards of pastoral life," it is more crucially that the language of the *paroimia* "is thoroughly Johannine." True, (60) Palestinian shepherds may give pet names to their sheep, but even apart from that "the 'name' is an important Johannine theological concept. Not only the sheep within chapter 10 but also the disciples (e.g., 1:42) and Mary Magdalene (20:16) are called by name. The acts of hearing and heeding Jesus' voice, and of following him, are not limited to the sheep in 10:1-5 but are also characteristic of those who believe in Jesus throughout the gospel (cf. 5:24-25; 1:37, 38, 43; 8:12; 12:26; 21:19, 22)." You are right about that, but you fail to point out that knowing the names of his sheep has as its background Isaiah 43:1, where it is YHWH as the NAME of the God of Israel who calls Israel by name.

Second, for many exegetes it is an *a priori* presupposition, going back to Jülicher, that Jesus as "a Galilean carpenter" could have spoken only in parables and not in allegories. In this regard, Simonis<sup>33</sup> points out that in the LXX the two words *paroimia* and *parabolē* are "used without distinction in their basic meaning 'saying, proverb, or riddle'" and that the word *parabolē* can mean "oracle, mocking song, and (dark) parable." This argues rather against a flawless use of the parable according to Jülicher's definition by the Galilean Jesus or the Jewish Messianist John, because the parables of the Scriptures undoubtedly also contain any amount of allegory. Incidentally, Jülicher in particular did not consider our Johannine *paroimia* to be a parable.

33 A. J. Simonis, op. cit., 80. See there also note 54: E.g., oracle: Numbers 23:7; 24:3, 15. mocking song: 2 Samuel 23:3; Tobit 3:4; Psalm 44(43):14. "parable": Ezekiel 17:2 (as well as in Sirach 8:8 *hîdâ*): the allegory of the two eagles; 24:3 (*māšal*): the allegory of the pot.

Meanwhile, there are many scholars who (60) question “the rigid distinctions Jülicher drew between parable and allegory in Jesus’ preaching.” Thus you cite Dan O. Via,<sup>34</sup> for whom “parable and allegory share many features.” Other scholars (61)

see no opposition between allegory and parable. Bernard Brendan Scott, for example, suggests that parables as a genre can be allegorical, metaphorical, or mixed.<sup>35</sup> G. B. Caird argues that parable and allegory, far from representing distinct genres, are in fact partial synonyms.<sup>36</sup>

... Rudolf Schnackenburg,<sup>37</sup> following his student Odo Kiefer, argues that in fact the passage is neither a parable nor an allegory, but rather a puzzle or a riddle, constituting a genre all its own.<sup>38</sup> On the basis of a detailed literary analysis, Kiefer concludes that 10:1-18 as a whole is in the discourse style of the evangelist, ... and that it belongs to a literary genre characteristic of this evangelist, namely the *Bildrede*, in which the image or picture is completely subordinate to the point to which it refers.

All in all, you (62) consider it questionable whether it is at all important to distinguish between parable or allegory, that is, whether

the implied reader would have drawn on these categories as an aid in interpreting the passage. Whereas modern scholars see the labelling of the passage as a *paroimia* as a signal to compare the passage with examples of figurative modes of speech from outside the gospel, it may be that the implied reader would look for comparison within the Fourth Gospel itself. This possibility and its methodological implications will be explored in our own analysis in the following chapter.

### 3.2 Context of 10:1-5

About the immediate context of the *paroimia* 10:1-5, you first point out the difficulty that in subsequent verses 10:7-18 “Jesus is identified as both the shepherd (10:11) and the gate or door (10:7, 9),” which is not a problem in view of the multitude of “images used for Jesus in this gospel,” but it is in view of the interpretation of the *paroimia* itself.

34 Dan Otto Via Jr. *The Parables: Their Literary and Existential Dimension* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967) 2, 17.

35 Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hear Then the Parable: A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989) 44.

36 G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible*. London: Duckworth, 1980, 167.

37 Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John*. 3 vols. New York: Crossroad, 1980-82, 2.284-85.

38 Odo Kiefer, *Die Hirtenrede*. Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1967, 14-15.

But for the purposes of interpreting 10:1-5, it is awkward to have Jesus as both shepherd and door.

Also, new characters appear in the shepherd setting:

The “thief and bandit” of 10:1 is displaced in 10:13 from the role of antagonist by the hireling and the wolf, whose activities threaten the herd out at pasture (10:12-13).

You do not adopt the usual way (63) of Rudolf Bultmann [375] to deal with such difficulties, “which is by appealing to dislocation theory.” Instead, you quote Brown’s<sup>39</sup> sharp criticism of Bultmann “for violating the deliberate plan which informs John 10 as a whole.” [1.390] Brown himself interprets

vv. 7ff. as a series of three allegorical explanations of 10:1-5, some of which may represent later expansions of Jesus’ own remarks. These explanations are centered on the door or gate (vv. 7-10), the shepherd (vv. 11-18), and the sheep (vv. 26-30), all of which are important terms in the *paroimia* [1391].

Similarly, Johannes Quasten

regards 10:7-10 and 10:11-18 as genuine discourses uttered by Jesus. Each of these represents a different interpretation of the *paroimia* [167]. They are not, however, rigorous, methodical interpretations [154]. Though they explain the *paroimia* and link up with its main elements [156], they do not remain within the bounds of the *paroimia* but develop its themes independently. They therefore shed light on the *paroimia* from two different perspectives [156].

This view of the relationship between 10:1-5 and 10:7-18 (64)

is shared by numerous other scholars. Hence in most discussions it is assumed that vv. 7-18 may be used selectively in interpreting vv. 1-5.

The connection with the preceding chapter 9 seems problematic “because of the abrupt change of topic and imagery between these two chapters.” Only 10:21 takes up the theme of the healing of the blind man. Julius Wellhausen<sup>40</sup> had therefore denied in principle a connection between the two chapters; exegetes like Hugo Odeberg “simply disregard chapter 9 in their analyses.” [313] And Rudolf Bultmann [ix] again is rearranging.

Most scholars, however, “find both narrative and thematic connections between these two chapters” and agree on “the continuity of setting and audience between chapters 9 and 10.” (64-65)

39 R. E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John*. 2 vols. The Anchor Bible, 29-29A. New York: Doubleday, 1966-70.

40 Julius Wellhausen, *Das Evangelium Johannis* (Berlin: Georg Reimer, 1908) 47.

C. H. Dodd ... sees the theme of judgment in each of the chapters."<sup>41</sup> Many exegetes find more specific thematic correspondences: ... The shepherd is Jesus, the sheep are exemplified by the man born blind who has heard Jesus' voice and followed him, and the thief, bandit, stranger, of 10:1, 5 is a collective metaphor for the Pharisees and other Jewish leaders who in chapter 9 stand in opposition to Jesus and to those who believe in him.

### 3.3 Summary of the Scientific Results

On the context and genre of the *paroimia*, you summarize:

1. Almost all interpretations selectively interpret 10:7-18. Only a few identify Jesus with the door in the *paroimia*, in which case "the shepherd is a collective image for the disciples who enter the fold by means of Jesus." For the others, Jesus is the shepherd.
2. Most exegetes (66) see the *paroimia* as a parable, but this "does not for the most part affect their results significantly."
3. The majority of scholars "try to identify the four major elements of the passage." The greatest disagreement is over "whether or not to assign a meaning to the door and/or the gatekeeper" whose meanings are again not independent of each other and also depend on the "understanding of the 'sheepfold'."
4. All agree "that the implied author is drawing on, and presumably assuming on the part of his audience, information and knowledge of events, concepts, and literature from outside the gospel itself."

As to the "Readings and Meanings of John 10:1-5," you distinguish "three trends of thought." The prevailing trend regards "the contrast between the shepherd and the thief in the *paroimia* ... as parallel to that between Jesus and the Pharisees in chapter 9, which mirrors that in the gospel narrative as a whole." In this context, (67)

the sheepfold, the locus of activity of the shepherd, thief, and sheep, must be the temple, the Jewish community, or the Jewish theocracy.

In this way, the *paroimia* is seen "in the context of the relationships and sequence of events which comprise the historical tale of the gospel."

A second trend is to interpret the *paroimia* ecclesiologicaly, that is, within the structure and concerns of the ecclesiological tale.

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41 C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953, 358.

These two trends can certainly be linked. The exegete (68) E. C. Hoskyns,<sup>42</sup> for example “expands the horizons of the *paroimia* not only to the original Johannine community but to the Christian experience throughout the ages.”

A third type of interpretation—a different ecclesiastical one—is outlined by James Martin.

He suggests that the passage must be read in the context of the situation of Judaism and Christianity in the period after the destruction of the temple in 70 C.E. In this period, he suggests, the Jews’ loss of nationhood led the rabbis at Jamnia to redefine the community along rigid lines, that is, as a closed community. In contrast, Jesus functioned as an open door, around whom a community open to both Jews and Gentiles was created [172-73].

With Ton Veerkamp, Martin shares a view of the situation after the destruction of the Temple. There is, however, an anti-Jewish tinge in Martin’s characterization of Rabbinic Judaism as “a closed community.” Veerkamp feels more sympathetic to the attitude of the Rabbis who consider the fence around the Torah indispensable in order to preserve Jewish identity in separation from the nations, even under the rule of the Roman world order. Whether the Johannine community, on the other hand, proclaimed Jesus “as an open door ... open to both Jews and Gentiles” is questionable; the gospel itself more likely indicates the program of bringing together all Israel, including Samaria, and the Jews of the Diaspora with individual God-fearers from the ranks of the *goyim*.

### 3.4 Introduction to a Cosmological Interpretation of 10:1-5

From your analysis of the exegetical drafts, you conclude that an implied reader’s response to the text cannot be exhausted “by its parallels to the historical and ecclesiological tales of the gospel narrative.” This has to do with the purpose of the gospel in general. In your eyes, it wants to “lead its readers to view the cosmological tale, which is the locus and context of Johannine soteriology and christology, in and through the narrative.” Therefore, you want to include into “the cosmological tale as their frame of reference” (69) as well “more oblique metaphors with which the Johannine Jesus peppers his discourses.”

In particular, most interpretations have “paid insufficient attention to the fourth major element of the *paroimia*, namely the sheepfold.” Those who emphasize the historical narrative see the sheepfold “variously as the temple, Jewish community, or the Jewish theocracy.” Within the ecclesiastical interpretation, such an identification of the sheepfold is missing. But also in view of the historical interpretation, you ask yourself, “in what sense can it be said that the Pharisees have entered through stealth?”

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42 E. C. Hogkyns and F. N. Davey, *The Fourth Gospel* (London: Faber and Faber, 1947) 368.

Here Ton Veerkamp would argue that you pay too little attention to the fact that John has very different groups of Jews or Judeans in mind. By thieves and robbers he does not mean the Pharisees, but the Zealots (as Simonis also indicates).

Moreover, you assume quite naturally that the word *aulē* means “sheepfold,” but this does not stand up to inner-biblical scrutiny. The courtyard or outer court of the temple is meant, and this has to be taken into account in any attempt at interpretation.

Further, you ask the question:

Are the readers led to see Jesus’ divinely given task as entering into, and leading the disciples out of, the Jewish community? While it is true that according to 9:22 following Jesus resulted in expulsion from the synagogue, other passages such as 11:1-44 make it clear that such was not the case for all, since Mary and Martha, public followers of Jesus, are comforted by many Jews in their mourning of Lazarus. More important, this limited definition of Jesus’ mission does not correspond with other more explicit statements concerning Jesus’ mission, which, as we have seen, is generally described in the universal terms of the cosmological tale and not narrowly in terms of leading followers out of Judaism, the temple, or other related entities.

This question has to be answered with yes and with no.

No: John was not concerned with leading his disciples out of the Jewish community, but just the opposite, to unite all Israel under the Messiah in the name of the God of Israel. This explains the ease that Jesus and his disciples take in celebrating the Jewish festivals and in which also followers of Jesus, such as Martha and Mary, move within the Jewish community.

Yes: Since Rabbinical Judaism did not tolerate those who proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah in their ranks in the course of time (for understandable reasons), the Johannine Jesus, for his part, leads those trusting in him out of the temple that had become pagan and into the sanctuary of the body of the Messianic community, the new Israel, that is emerging on the basis of his ascending to the Father. In this way, he responds to the expulsion of this community from the synagogue—which after the destruction of the temple took its place—by leading his disciples out of this synagogue, even throwing them out.

The crucial question will therefore be whether such a view actually represents an inadmissible narrowing of the original goal of John’s Gospel, or whether your cosmological tale of soul salvation represents an inadmissible generalization, spiritualization, and elimination of an originally Jewish, political, and this-worldly narrative of liberation, justice, and peace.

It is significant that, in support of your cosmological view, you find the interpretations “by Fischer and Odeberg, and, to a lesser extent, by Bultmann,” which place

John's Gospel near Gnosis, most congenial, since they give (70) "pride of place to the sheepfold" and take seriously the image of the door. However, in your eyes, they pay too little attention to "its narrative context" referred to in 10:6:

In this case, one suspects that the readings suggested by Odeberg, Fischer, and Bultmann derive more from their general theories concerning gnostic influences on the Fourth Gospel than from specific clues in the narrative itself.

You now want to consider the reference in 10:6 that "points its readers to both the genre and the context of 10:1-5" and

has led most scholars to use the historical and/or ecclesiological tale as the frame of reference or interpretive key. Yet it is these two considerations themselves which are the basis for questioning not so much the accuracy of such an interpretation but rather its adequacy. While the historical and ecclesiological interpretations of the *paroimia* do make sense of certain features of the passage, they do not tell the whole, or final story. Rather, John 10:1-5, as well as its historical and ecclesiological interpretations, can and indeed must, like the rest of the gospel narrative, be situated in the context of the cosmological tale. It is to this task that we now turn.

#### 4 John 10:1-5 and the Cosmological Tale

As to the question (71) of the genre of 10:1-5, you recapitulate:

If the passage is an allegory, then it is the task of the interpreter to find a correspondence between all the elements of the passage on the one hand, and some narrative or theological structure outside the passage—or even outside the gospel—on the other hand. If the passage is a parable, then the interpreter must make a judgment as to which elements contribute to its meaning and which are incidental or ornamental. The former are then interpreted in the context of some structure external to the passage itself.

In contrast, you assume

that the implied reader may have looked to the gospel itself for clues as to how to understand a *paroimia*.

Again, you disregard the conditions at the time of the writing of the Gospel. If the real author of John's Gospel was familiar with the Jewish Scriptures and presupposed such knowledge also in the majority of his implied first readers or hearers of his writing, they might have sought and found such keys to the understanding also in the Tanakh.

You rightly point out (72) that although

the term *paroimia* is applied explicitly only to 10:1-5, the gospel is replete with figurative discourse, symbol, and metaphor. In fact, the disciples' grateful

comment in 16:29, “Yes, now you are speaking plainly, not in any figure of speech!” suggests that they, and the implied readers with them, have been engaged in many struggles to decipher the plain meaning of Jesus’ words.

Now you wish to interpret both the theme of rebirth from “Jesus’ discussion with Nicodemus” and the “living water” from “his encounter with the Samaritan woman,” both the bread from heaven “of the feeding of the multitudes” and “the figure of the vine and the vinedresser” within the framework “of the cosmological tale ... as the key to understanding the true significance—or plain meaning—of a particular figurative exchange.” The vine is spoken of in connection with the prince of this world, the rebirth in connection with the descent and ascent of the Son of Man from and to heaven, in Samaria it is about Jesus as the Savior of the world. This allows the assumption,

that the implied readers will have been led to place other examples of figurative discourse (as well as narrative) not only in the context of the historical tale but in that of the cosmological tale as well.

However, this is only true for implied readers of an implied author, who actually would have wanted to design a gnosticizing cosmology in this un-Jewish, spiritualized way. And for real readers, who either don’t know or deliberately ignore the background of the Jewish Scriptures for all these figurative remarks of John. All the examples you give make a completely different sense when read in the context of the Scriptures. The conversation with Nicodemus is about the replacement of bestial rule by the figure of Daniel 7:13, 18 who will rule “like a human” as the embodiment of Israel. The Samaritans proclaim Jesus as the liberator of the world from its unjust world order. In the case of the bread from heaven, the question in the background is in what way the hunger of an exploited and impoverished people can be sustainably satisfied according to the specifications of the Torah. And with the vine, the vineyard parable of Isaiah 5 is to be consulted as an aid to interpretation, in order to understand that the question here is how, through trust in the Messiah, the unfruitful vineyard of Israel can finally bear fruit.

In verses 10:7-18 you also find “allusions to the cosmological tale.”

These verses speak explicitly of the abundant, eternal life which the shepherd provides for his sheep (10:10), of the mutual knowledge of Father and Son (10:15), of the Son’s power to lay down his life and take it up again (10:17).

Again, however, these three points of view are not put into the context of the Scriptures, which 1. do not speak of eternal life in the hereafter, but of living in the age to come on this earth, in the context of which 2. the Father of Jesus is to be presupposed as the liberating NAME of the people of Israel and on the basis of which 3. Jesus does not simply give away his life and take it up again, as if his resurrection was a simple undoing of his death; rather the “taking of life,” *lambanein autēn*, is to be understood as intensifying the commitment of his soul, *tithēmi tēn psychēn*.

The same objection regarding the meaning of *zōēn aiōnion* I assert to your interpretation of “10:22-30, in which Jesus accuses the Jews of not belonging to his sheep.” Yes, this is a harsh, perhaps unjust accusation. However, it is not necessarily to be understood in the context of a spiritualized cosmology but makes sense in the context of an argument between Rabbinic and Messianic Jews about what to expect after the year 70 from a Messiah who was crucified as were so many Jews in the course of the Judean War. I take the liberty here of quoting very extensively from Ton Veerkamp’s interpretation in order to make clear the alternative that a liberation-political reading of John’s Gospel is offering:<sup>43</sup>

Jesus or the Messianic community have always claimed that Jesus is the Messiah, but the Judeans do not trust him. They cannot see that trusting in this Messiah changes anything about the dismal situation. “The works that I am doing in the name of my FATHER testify about me,” Jesus replies. On the narrative level, refusal to trust Jesus seems dishonest. But on the level of the narrator, is it worthy of trust to point to works done long ago that no one can verify and that have demonstrably changed nothing in the situation of the people? We do not want to give up our role as an impartial interpreter. One can understand the skepticism of John’s Jewish opponents. After all, John is that realistic: Those who do not belong to his community can neither understand nor believe, and certainly not trust.

The arguments are not new, we know them from the great speeches and discussions of the previous chapters. They are now brought into the context of the parable about the flock of sheep. “Life of the world to come” means in this connection, “No one will rob them out of the hand of my FATHER. In the Messianic community they are safe from the rapacity of Rome. They are safe “in the hand of the FATHER.”

Reason: “I and my FATHER, ONE we are,” 10:30. “To be” here is a Semitic “to be,” an event, not a statement of identity. The sentence means: The actions of the creator of heaven and earth, the liberator and the covenant partner of Israel, and the actions of the Messiah have one direction, one goal: the unity of Israel. The unity of flock and shepherd derives only from this uniform action of God and his Messiah. From the Scriptures, John cannot be interpreted differently.

You only briefly address the context (73) of the previous chapter 9 by noting that

it places the healing of the blind man, a “historical” event, in the context of the cosmological tale, by seeing it as a manifestation of Jesus’ works as “the light of the world” (9:5) who came into this world for judgment (9:39).

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43 Veerkamp 2021, 235 ([The Messiah and God](#), par. 8-10).

This is said to have encouraged “the implied readers”

to look beyond the parallels between the *paroimia* and the historical tale to the parallels between 10:1-5 and the cosmological tale.

A strategy for finding such parallels

is hinted at in 10:7, 9, and 11, in which the Johannine Jesus declares “I am the gate” (10:7, 9) and “I am the good shepherd” (10:11). ... this dual identification ... does direct the reader to assign at least one of the central elements of the *paroimia*—the shepherd—to a character outside it, that is, Jesus. This suggests that we are to strive to identify the other elements with characters outside the *paroimia* but within the gospel as well. ... Our investigation will therefore begin by looking at each of the elements and the structure of the relationships among them, in the context of the cosmological tale. ... We will then look at the cosmological interpretation of the *paroimia* as a whole and consider its place in its immediate context between chapters 9 and 11, as well as in the context of the gospel as a whole.

#### 4.1 The Elements of the *paroimia* about the Shepherd

To begin dealing with individual elements of the *paroimia*, you first note that it is the shepherd who connects all these elements. And (74) you point to “a relatively rare occurrence” of unanimity “in Johannine studies”:

There is unanimous agreement among scholars that it is Jesus to whom the figure of the shepherd points.

You too regard “all details of the shepherd’s portrayal in chapter 10” as “consistent with the characterization of Jesus throughout the gospel, particularly in the cosmological tale.” In your eyes, it is consistent with Jesus giving eternal life to his own and laying down his own life for that purpose, with the shepherd knowing his sheep as the Father and Jesus know each other.

As we will see later, however, we are not left with such an unproblematic estimation of Jesus’ pastoral function. But before this, you consider in detail other elements of the *paroimia*.

##### 4.1.1 Are the Sheep the Jews or Humankind?

I’m surprised, though, that you think the “identification of the sheep is also clear,” just because the shepherd calls them out of “the fold,” and “his own (τα ἰδία) follow him out of the fold (10:3, 4) but do not heed, recognize, or follow the thief (10:5, 8)”:

The sheep therefore symbolize humankind, often referred to metaphorically as the “world” in this gospel.

The section on “The World” (38-41), to which you refer in a note in this connection, contains a general description of the world as a place of sin and darkness. But there, (39) precisely with the expression “εις τα ιδία” also used in 1:11, you reason that “the referent for ‘world’ here can be identified as the Jews.” At the very least, you would have to explain why *ta idia* there should stand for the Jews and be identical with the world, and here (75) *ta idia* should be people trusting in Jesus who are called out of the world in general.

Your identification of the sheep in the *aulē* of 10:1 with humankind is also clearly contradicted by your assumption that the “other sheep ‘not of this fold’ (10:16),” who are later to complete the shepherd’s flock, are “usually identified as Gentile believers in Christ.” Surely that would presuppose that the sheep of the first flock would be exclusively Jews.

#### 4.1.2 Does *aulē*, Taken as “Sheepfold,” Mean the Evil World?

Further, based on your construction of the cosmological tale, you identify the sheepfold with the world because if

the “sheep” correspond to the metaphorical use of *κοσμος* as humankind in the Fourth Gospel, the fold parallels the spatial dimension of this term.

However, this is opposed by the same objections just formulated, especially that 10:16 would speak of at least one more sheepfold. Are there, thus, several worlds in your cosmology, a world of the Jews, a world of the Gentiles?

Basically, of course, we have to add the problem of whether it is correct at all to translate *aulē* as “sheepfold.” Considering the background of the Scriptures, this is certainly not the case. 125 times *aulē* refers to the forecourts of the temple, over 30 times a guard yard or the courtyard of a palace is meant, a few times a homestead or dwelling, but nowhere a sheepfold.

To you (76), the shepherd’s relationship to the sheepfold parallels very simply Jesus’ relationship with the world.

In looking at the relationship between the shepherd and the sheepfold, we may therefore discern a three-step pattern of movement: the shepherd begins outside the fold, enters into the fold and engages in some activity pertaining to the sheep, and exits from the fold, returning to his starting position outside it.

But even in this sketch, you do not take into account that the image in 10:9 is extended insofar as it speaks of the sheep’s going in, going out, and finding pasture, which can hardly be brought into agreement with your cosmology of the hereafter. From the Scriptures, on the other hand, this can be explained well, namely with reference to the liberating action of the first *Iesous* = Joshua in Numbers 27:17.

In this respect, your transfer of the shepherd-sheepfold relationship to the Jesus-cosmos relationship is anything but convincing:

The three-step pattern of movement of the shepherd calls to mind the general structure of the cosmological tale. In this tale, Jesus is portrayed as originating from the Father—temporally and spatially outside the realm of the created world—becoming flesh and “tabernacling” (cf. 1:14: εσκηνωσεν) in the world, and then, upon completion of his mission, departing out of the world again. It is this parallel pattern which suggests that it is the world as a spatial entity or enclosure in which human beings (sheep) find themselves, which is represented by the sheepfold.

You assume that unprejudiced readers should be able to deduce this parallel quite intuitively from the overall context of John’s Gospel. To me, such a context seems to be very artificial. Isn’t the area outside the sheepfold, where the shepherd comes from and where the sheep are led to, first of all simply an inner-worldly place? Doesn’t the shepherd usually call the sheep out of the sheepfold to lead them to the pasture, as it is described in 10:9? Even in my most Pietist times, I would have never regarded the area outside the sheepfold as an otherworldly place, especially since, if your cosmological tale is correct, the sheep may go into the otherworldly realm of God only after their earthly death or at the return of the Messiah.

Certainly, we may see the “calling his own sheep by name and leading them out of the sheepfold (10:3)” in a parallel with (77) Jesus’ “gathering together of his own,” by calling his disciples by name. But surely this is not about a leading out of this world because we have to think of the God of Israel here, who, according to Isaiah 43:1, calls his own people by name to gather it and lead it into freedom.

Incidentally, what you point out (77, n. 7) about the disciples knowing Jesus’ name reminds me of something like a “righteousness by belief” familiar to me from my youth, that is, the delusion that Jesus cares if I believe in him in a very particular way, address him by a certain title, and use certain rites to please him:

It is also important that the believers know Jesus’ name, a knowledge manifested through the appropriate use of christological titles (cf. 11:27; 20:28).

But such a belief is based on a momentous misunderstanding. Actually, in the Gospel of John, recognizing the name of Jesus is decisive and joyful because Jesus, as the Messiah of the God of Israel, fully embodies the liberating NAME of this God. And those who trust in him understand this liberation in different facets:

- Nicodemus is in trouble with him as the Son of Man, but at least appreciates him as a teacher from God,
- the Samaritans recognize him as the liberator of the world,
- the formerly blind man views him as the Son of Man who is judging the wheelings and dealings of the world order,

- Martha recognizes him as the Son of God who awakens to new life,
- and Thomas names him with the title that the emperors of Rome arrogated to themselves, Lord and God, when it dawns on him that Jesus, maltreated and crucified by Rome, has overcome precisely this world order.

Back to John 10, you are aware that the sheepfold “is not explicitly described in negative terms” but

the shepherd’s leading his sheep out implies that leaving the fold is a positive act, leading to the sustenance of the sheep, just as leaving the world is essential for the salvation and eternal life of the believers.

However, this is only implied if we already presuppose such a spiritualized and otherworldly conception of salvation from a thoroughly evil world in John’s Gospel. If we disregard that *sōzein* in 10:9—due to Numbers 27:17—must be translated as “to liberate” and—by translating “to save souls”—spiritualize the life of the age to come, we confirm to ourselves a prejudice gained before.

In my eyes, it causes particular difficulties to parallel “the shepherd’s departure from the fold” (78) “within the cosmological tale with Jesus’ departure from the world.” Because in the *paroimia*, he does not leave the sheepfold alone but together with the sheep, which you are also aware of:

In the *paroimia*, as in the cosmological tale, the departure of the shepherd from the fold is a prelude to the departure of his sheep. As we have seen, the shepherd departs from the fold at the head of his flock, who follow him out (10:4). Similarly, Jesus’ departure from the world, which also marks his return to the Father, is, or perhaps will be, followed by the departure of those who believe in him.

Of course, you are right in pointing out that the “act of following” need not necessarily be understood literally, for it “has both spatial and temporal dimensions and can be understood in both a literal and figurative sense.” But this contradicts your former emphasis on the spatio-temporal dimensions of the cosmological tale. Therefore, we do not have a clear parallel just here.

From the two passages 12:26-28 and 8:12 you rightly conclude (78 f): “Therefore following Jesus, like believing in him, results in eternal life.” But insofar *pisteuein* and *zōē aiōnios* are to be understood from the Scriptures as a trust in the life of the age to come on this earth, this context does not necessarily provide confirmation of your cosmological tale. And even if we assume eternal life in the hereafter, admittedly, the sentence is true: (79)

In the latter two references, the spatial aspect of the act of following gives way to the temporal aspect: by definition, the followers arrive at their goal some time after their leader does.

However, this process does not correspond to the image of the shepherd who leaves the sheepfold together with his sheep:

In 10:4, the emphasis is not on the delay between the return of Jesus and the departure of the “sheep” from the fold but on Jesus’ leadership—he blazes the trail, as it were; where he goes, his sheep will follow.

In addition, your references to other passages in John’s Gospel, which are supposed to support your argument, do not have to be interpreted as clearly as you presuppose.

Thus, 13:36 needn’t mean eternal life in otherworldly heaven, but that Peter, like Jesus, must suffer a violent death. And in trying to support your interpretation of this verse by recourse to 14:2-3, you neglect that *monē*, as it is mentioned there, is interpreted more closely in verse 14:23 to mean no matter of going over to God in the hereafter but that the Father and Jesus together will make for themselves “a place of permanence” in the Messianic community, similar to the Shechina of God dwelling in Israel according to Jewish notions.

I like to agree with you in that trusting in Jesus means following Jesus “not only literally, by walking with or behind him, or figuratively, by obeying him and being his disciples, but also, if one may say so, soteriologically.” Contrary to your assumption, however, the original author of John’s Gospel must not yet have had in mind a soteriology of soul salvation to an otherworldly heaven “by being resurrected from the dead and ascending to the Father,” but rather a soteriology of liberation from an oppressive and inhumane world order.

At the end of this section, you try to justify again why

one should identify the sheepfold not primarily with the Jewish theocracy, as it must be within the historical tale, but with the ‘world’ as understood within the cosmological tale. Although, as we have already noted, the word *κοσμος* can sometimes refer generally to humankind, or specifically to those people who reject the Word, that is, the Jews (cf. 1:10), this does not appear to be the dominant sense in the *paroimia*. The main reason for this is that the Jews are parallel not to the fold from which Jesus’ own must depart, but to those sheep who are not his own, since in 10:26 Jesus chastises them for not belonging to his sheep. Instead, the sheepfold in the *paroimia* is to be identified with the *κοσμος* as a negative spatial entity associated with death and darkness, from which the sheep—human beings—must depart in order to gain salvation. While unbelieving Jews inhabit this negative spatial entity and by failing to believe are unable to leave it behind, the *κοσμος* here is not itself associated with Judaism, the Jewish theocracy, or specific Jewish institutions.

I quote in such detail to sum up again the inconsistencies of your argument.

1. If *aulē* really means the *kosmos* here, what other *kosmos* does verse 16 mean?
2. If in 1:10, according to you, *kosmos* can refer to the Jews, why not here as well?
3. If in 1:11 *ta idia* refers to the Jews, why should Jesus' own sheep not be Jews in 10:3-4 of all places (especially since you yourself assume that Gentiles are not added to Jesus' flock until 10:16)? Surely 10:26 rather means that not all Jews belonging to *ta idia* of 1:11 or 10:3-4 listen to the voice of their shepherd, but that the *aulē* undoubtedly means the temple courtyard of the Jews.
4. The identification of the sheepfold with a *kosmos* that is nothing but a place of death and darkness contradicts the idea of 10:9, where sheep leave the sheepfold to find pasture but also enter again.

Finally, you add a sentence comparing the attitude of John's Gospel with Paul's: (79 f)

Unlike Paul's letters to the Romans and the Galatians, the Fourth Gospel does not explicitly see Jewish institutions and practices as hindrances to faith in Christ.

In note 11, you add:

This is the case despite the presence of the theme that Jesus replaces the institutions of Judaism, a theme which has often been noted, for example, in 2:1-11, 13-22, in 4:21, 23 and elsewhere in the gospel. But in these passages, the Johannine Jesus is not leading his followers away from these institutions, but rather making a christological declaration that the purpose of these institutions will henceforth be fulfilled in him.

Apart from the fact that Paul does not reject Jewish practice for Jews, but as a compulsory requirement for *goyim* who want to trust in Jesus as Messiah, your observation that the Johannine Jesus does not want to lead his followers away from Jewish institutions is indeed correct. But neither does he want to turn them into institutions of another, the Christian religion, as happened later, but he is concerned with the Messianic fulfillment of the Torah and the Jewish festivals. Only by trusting in the Messiah crucified by Rome and the spirit that he handed over to his followers, the Roman world order can be overcome, no longer by insisting on the separation from the nations according to the Torah which was the aim of Rabbinic Judaism.

That is, if we take seriously the use of the word *exballein* in 2:15, 9:34-35, and 10:4, for example, then the leading out or casting out of the sheep from the *aulē* would correspond, on the one hand, to the casting out of the healed blind man from the synagogue, and, on the other hand, to Jesus' failed attempt to cast out of the sanctuary of Israel those who make of it a pagan temple and a house of trade. From such a temple, Jesus leads out Israelites trusting in him, and he leads them into the sanc-

tuary of his body, namely the Messianic community. This community is not yet to be understood as a new religion but as a renewed Israel.

#### 4.1.3 Is Jesus the Gate between the Evil World and Heaven?

Greater effort you make (80) to interpret the gate of the sheepfold as “the threshold between the sheepfold and the area outside it.” That it is identified with Jesus in 10:7, 9 underscores its significance but presents the difficulty that Jesus also calls himself the Good Shepherd in 10:11, 14. However, might this not be an indication that the author was not concerned with a flawlessly consistent *paroimia*, but with portraying various facets of the Messiah Jesus? After all, you also see “the image of Jesus as gate” as

consistent with other christological formulations within the gospel narrative which depict Jesus as the sole point through which the believers can gain access to God and hence to salvation (cf. 1:14-18). The image is reminiscent of 14:6, in which Jesus tells his disciples, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

Of course, it has to be considered again in which setting Jesus is assigned the role of this *thyra*. Will it be slammed in the face of those who do not believe in Jesus as their personal Savior? Or is it to be open only to the Messiah who, unlike Zealot plunderers of the people and terrorists, actually has in mind Israel’s liberation and equity—going in and going out and finding pasture?

Within the *paroimia* 10:1-5 itself (81), you assign two functions to the gate:

First, it is the way through which the legitimate shepherd gains entry to the sheepfold and thereby also access to the sheep. It is also the means through which the shepherd, as well as the sheep, leave the sheepfold. In the *paroimia* the gate is therefore integrally related to the process of salvation: those who enter lead others to salvation, and the sheep who exit will be saved.

You mention only briefly that exegetes see here an allusion to Psalm 118:19-20, without drawing consequences from it concerning the contents. In any case, there, it is about the temple of YHWH, not about the leaving of the evil world into the hereafter.

In the following paragraph, you once again summarize your cosmological tale in a nutshell:

If we see the *paroimia* as a symbolic reference to the cosmological tale, in which the sheepfold is the world, then it would appear that it is the incarnation by which Jesus enters the world, and it is the Passion, including the crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension, by which he leaves it. These events there-

fore are the means by which Jesus crosses the threshold between this world and the realm of the Father.

It is significant that you work here with Christian-dogmatic terms but ignore their Jewish-Scriptural background. Here, no God in general incarnates who would not have had a history with his people Israel. Instead in Jesus, the liberating NAME adopts the flesh—that is, the special life fate—of this particular Jew with his unique life task, who is at the same time a second Isaac, representative of the firstborn son of God, namely Israel. His resurrection and ascension to the Father can't be a simple passing over to otherworldly heaven because such a realm does not exist anywhere in the Scriptures as a place of abode for human beings. Rather, it denotes the process of handing over the inspiration of fidelity to the Messianic community, who in their practice of *agapē* bring into effect the overcoming of the world order that Jesus, by giving his life on the cross of the Romans, has already set in motion once and for all.

Apart from such an interpretation, you regard Jesus' return to heaven, from which he had come, as an event "which provides a model for and reassurance of the eternal life of the believers."

They have experienced now, and/or will experience in the future, the resurrection and eternal life, as Jesus has. Similarly, Jesus' followers enter the "sheepfold" at birth. They leave figuratively or spiritually by following or believing in Jesus, with the result that they are in the world but not of the world (15:19). They then literally or physically leave the world at his return.

There is a fallacy in this parallelization, however. If it were true, all people would have come with their birth from the realm of God. But this corresponds neither to your cosmological tale nor to the Scriptures. Within the framework of John's Gospel, the Messiah's descent from the Father means being sent to fulfill a unique task, namely embodying both the liberating NAME of the God of Israel and the firstborn son of this Father, namely Israel. All this does not apply to any other human. Therefore, everybody is born on the earth and does not come from a place called heaven—including even the Messiah, for he, biologically, is the son of Joseph of Nazareth, Galilee. According to Psalm 115:16, heaven is reserved to God alone, denoting his inaccessibility.

Now you also notice what I had already objected to your identification of the *aulē* with the "evil world," namely that 10:9 does not coincide with it. All of a sudden "in 10:9 it is the space outside the fold which is the locus of condemnation." Such a reversal of the meaning of the image makes no sense at all in my eyes. It does not even make sense to consider *thyra* as "the threshold which marks the boundary between condemnation and salvation," since (82) the sheep that have experienced *sōteria* subsequently "will come in and go out and find pasture." Why, to put it in your image, should they go back and forth between the place of salvation and damna-

tion? The difficulty you face in interpreting this passage is due to your refusal to interpret it in terms of the Scriptures. To implied Jewish readers of the Gospel who had the Torah—Numbers 27:17—in mind, it should have become clear enough that Jesus here, as the second Joshua (both are called *Iēsous* in Greek), sets in motion the liberation of Israel so that Israel is no longer like the sheep without a shepherd.

Now you may want to heed the warning of the exegete Schnackenburg that “we should not press the image too closely. ... The only thing that matters is the end in view: to reach the pasture of life,” but just in this formulation it remains open again at first what the image of the “pasture of life” actually stands for. And how do you implement the non-pressing-of-the-picture? You insist

that the pattern of movement attributed to the saved sheep in 10:9 is the same as that associated with the shepherd in 10:1-5: they enter by the gate, and then they exit in order to enjoy the necessities of life, that is, pasture.

Isn't it thus quite arbitrary what the images mean? On the one hand, within the sheepfold is the evil world and outside is the good heaven; the sheep, however, will not follow the shepherd going out immediately but only at their own death or even when the shepherd returns. On the other hand, Jesus is the door to heaven, into which they enter but then come out again to find pasture in this world, to live their lives?

Whereas according to Schnackenburg, going in and out “may simply imply freedom of movement,” though he too seems to ignore the reference to Numbers 27:17, you then do attempt to press the picture considerably, “to understand this pattern of movement according to the cosmological tale.” For you further paint your already indicated thoughts on 10:9 as follows:

The entry of the sheep through the gate may be understood as their birth from above (3:7). This spiritual rebirth marks their entry into the Kingdom of God as expressed in the world, namely, the community of believers. [Note 16: Or the Johannine community, in the ecclesiological tale.] Their sojourn within the fold, which, though unmentioned in 10:9 is implied as the location into which the gate provides entry and from which the sheep leave for pasture, is their earthly life within this community. Their departure for pasture is their physical death and their enjoyment of eternal life. Such an interpretation, though somewhat speculative, would be compatible with the thread of realized eschatology which runs through the gospel narrative.

You yourself call these thoughts speculative, and they are especially so with regard to the identification of the places beyond and on this side of the door through which the sheep are led in and out. What I find confusing is that the place beyond the door that Jesus represents is supposed to be the earthly community of believers in Jesus, and the place on this side of the door that they come out of is the pasture of eternal

life. Where would be the evil world in this image? Is it also beyond the door where the church lives *in* the world but not *from* the world?

My irritation is growing when I read in the following note 17 that you are quite familiar with the Scriptural passage Numbers 27:17, but merely remark on it that there the order of leading out and leading in is reversed, which in your eyes “may support the cosmological interpretation we have suggested.” Do you mean that—if there is any reference at all—John is cosmologically reinterpreting the passage, that is, opposing it to Scripture? But you don’t explain this contradiction and as well don’t think about the question of whether John could refer to accomplishing the liberation of the people by a second *lēsous*.

#### 4.1.4 The Gatekeeper: John the Baptist, Caiaphas? Does It Matter?

Your identification of the gatekeeper (83) with John the Baptist seems at first glance to fit better into the context of your cosmological tale than your attempts to correctly place the sheepfold in a cosmological context of the imagery of John 10. If the sheepfold indeed symbolizes the world, John the Baptist can be seen as the one who (84)

was sent by God ... for the express purpose of testifying or bearing witness to the light who was coming into the world (1:7), thereby revealing his presence to Israel. Hence John was present in the world before Jesus, just as the gatekeeper is present in, or at the entrance to, the fold before the shepherd comes.

However, the Baptist naturally is (84 f)

not directly responsible for the shepherd’s entry into the fold, that is, Jesus’ incarnation. He does serve, however, both to “open the door” to the shepherd, by making known his presence in the world, and to turn the care of the sheep over to him. This he does by being witness to the christological identity of Jesus and verifying his central role in the cosmological tale.

However, by continuing to mention (84) that according to 1:35-39 “it is the Baptist who gives Jesus his first two ‘sheep’” and the “Baptist’s ‘flock’ diminishes even as that of Jesus increases,” about which (3:29-30) the Baptist rejoices himself as the friend of the bridegroom who hears his voice, the image is limping again, for now, the Baptist seems to be a competing shepherd rather than the gatekeeper of the sheepfold.

If we take seriously that the word *aulē* actually does not mean “sheepfold” but the “courtyard” of the temple, Simonis’ interpretation of the gatekeeper would be closest to the high priest Caiaphas, who by decreeing death for Jesus opens the door for him to fulfill his mission of gathering Israel in a sanctuary being different from the Jerusalem temple that has become pagan, which he confirms—without being aware

of it—by his prophetic words 11:49-52. For through his death and ascension to the Father, Jesus establishes the new sanctuary of his body of the Messianic community. If we keep these connections in mind, it is no longer surprising that in 10:9 there is no explicit mention of the *aulē* in which the sheep go in and out. Whereas 10:1-5 is about the door to the Jerusalem temple court and the high priesthood as its guardian, 10:9 describes the entrance to the new sanctuary that is established by the death and ascension of the Messiah to the Father. This sanctuary is Jesus himself (his body, as Paul said 1 Corinthians 12:27), and at the same time, he is its door.

Perhaps the reversal of the word order of Numbers 27:17 is also explained by imagining that the Messiah's sheep both enter and leave the assembly of his community to "find pasture in their life on this earth," that is, to live their lives *under* the world order according to the commandment of *agapē* in the active expectation of *overcoming* this world order.

#### 4.1.5 The Shepherd Jesus as an Otherworldly or This-Worldly King?

That Jesus is identified with both the door and the shepherd should not be surprising if, according to Numbers 27:17, Jesus is to continue Joshua's mission of liberating Israel, or if he embodies the name of the God of Israel who, according to Ezekiel 34:11 ff, will himself seek and reunite his flock as the shepherd of Israel.

At this point I look ahead to the appendix of your book that is actually about the descent of Jesus into the underworld and in which you try to identify the gatekeeper of the *paroimia* with the guardian of Hades. There (107 ff) you insert a section in which you deal at length with biblical parallels to the theme of the shepherd,<sup>44</sup> for (108) the "shepherd,' 'flock,' and other pastoral images appear frequently in the Hebrew Bible." You also explicitly address the fact that in "the Psalms and prophetic writings, the shepherd and related pastoral images are used to express the relationship of the rulers to the ruled, namely the people of Israel" (109):

The passages cited most frequently in discussion of the biblical background of the *paroimia* are Ezekiel 34 and Zechariah 11. In the former, the prophet speaks against the "shepherds of Israel" who have been feeding and caring only for themselves instead of the sheep (34:2-4). As a result, the sheep have been scattered (34:5) and become prey to wild beasts (34:8). The shepherds are therefore removed from their posts (34:10) and the Lord himself will seek out the sheep, gather them, and tend them (34:11-16). Zechariah 11 contains a similar critique of the shepherds' poor care of their sheep (11:15-16).

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44 In my eyes, this section contributes nothing to the clarification of the question examined there. When beginning to examine extra-biblical sources on the descent into the underworld, you contrast the preoccupation with "the image of the 'shepherd' [that] leads us to the theme of kingship, the pinnacle of power," with the "elusive gatekeeper . . . who leads us in the opposite direction."

In this context, does it not stand to reason that the Johannine Jesus, as the embodiment of the God of Israel in John 10, takes on precisely this role vis-à-vis “the bad shepherds as parallel to the thieves, robbers, and hirelings of 10:1-18”?

There is a dispute among scholars as to exactly what biblical parallels the image of the shepherd in John 10 might allude to, especially since (108) the “*paroimia* makes no explicit reference to the kingship motif.” However, in the “scholarly discussions of the biblical and post-biblical background of John 10,” there are voices that “recognize the royal connotation of the biblical image of the shepherd.”<sup>45</sup>

Of interest to me is your observation that (109) most “scholars perceive a Davidic background to this motif, but emphasize the messianic, eschatological connotations, downplaying or ignoring the element of kingship altogether.” After all, aren’t messianic hopes often directed toward the restoration of David’s kingship, with the motifs of messianism, eschatology, and kingship closely intertwined? Do you make a distinction here because to you every eschatology is by definition an afterlife hope and cannot mean the establishment of a kingship in this world?

Nevertheless, you conclude that (110)

the close connection in the extra-Johannine literature between the notions of shepherd and king compels us to consider whether and to what degree the element of kingship is operative in Johannine christology as expressed in this *paroimia*.

Such a connection is suggested especially by the use of the verb “ποιμαινω (to tend as shepherd)” in the sense of “rule or govern in Rev 2:27, 12:5, and 19:15.”

Especially striking is Rev 7:17, which states that “the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd,” providing a direct connection between kingship and the shepherd image.

Now you ask yourself:

Is the implied reader of the Fourth Gospel led to associate the “shepherd” image of 10:1-5 with kingship?

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45 Bultmann finds “no traces of the royal figure” in John 10, (109, n. 15) because he “sees its origins in the Gnostic figure of the Revealer or Redeemer.” More worthy of consideration (110) are considerations by Wayne Meeks, *The Prophet-King: Moses Traditions and the Johannine Christology* (Leiden: Brill, 1967), 213, who “does not focus on the figure of David as the shepherd and prototype of the messianic king, but rather on Moses as he is portrayed in biblical and post-biblical literature. ... He points to the many biblical and post-biblical references to Moses as ‘the shepherd of Israel’ or ‘the faithful shepherd,’ a metaphor which ‘is connected with characteristics which have several points of similarity with the Johannine discourse.’”

To answer this question, you address the passages in the Gospel where the “title ‘king’ is applied to Jesus,” albeit in an ambivalent way. The crucial question here is what this ambivalence consists of. Your ultimate point is (111) that Jesus is “portrayed in this gospel as the true ruler over this world, in a cosmic sense,” this cosmic sense being understood in a supra-worldly sense.

As Nathanael in 1:49 “confesses Jesus to be Son of God and King of Israel...Jesus does not deny this, but promises greater revelations than those Nathanael has already experienced (1:50-51).” According to Ton Veerkamp<sup>46</sup>

Jesus suspects Nathanael’s misunderstanding that with him—Jesus—the great old days of Israel would come back.

And he unfolds in an analysis of the Scriptural passages Ezekiel 1:1, Genesis 28:12, and Daniel 7:12, as to how the Son of Man will finally establish the law, according to the Torah, in other words, how the bestial rule of the previous world order will be disempowered and replaced by the power of humanity:

What is greater than peace for Israel? A world order of peace.

When (111) Jesus is hailed as King of Israel in 12:13-15 by “a great crowd in Jerusalem at the feast of the Passover,” he again seems to accept that title

by his action of riding on a young donkey, in fulfillment of the prophecy in Zech 9:9: “Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey’s colt!”

Where is the problem here? According to Veerkamp, the desire of the people, who were satiated in John 6, for a king, who is to usurp the rule with Zealot-military actions, is repeated:<sup>47</sup>

Cheered by the crowd was the one who awakened Lazarus and therefore should be king. This reaction is none other than the one after feeding the five thousand, 6:15. In fact, the crowd is cheering the Messianic King, but not a Zealot king, which is what they actually want.

In order to reason appropriately here, (111) it is important to interpret 18:33-37 correctly. In what way is Jesus a king if his “kingdom is not from this world”? In what way does he fight and win “though he has no earthly army, ... in a struggle with the ruler of this world”?

According to Veerkamp, we must translate *kosmos* in 18:36 in any case as “world order.” That is, Jesus does not speak here of a supra-worldly kingship, but of a kingship to be finally expected in the Messianic world age to come in the sense of Psalm 72:1-4, which Veerkamp describes thus:<sup>48</sup>

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46 Veerkamp 2021, 65 ([The Fourth Day. The Human](#), par. 13).

47 Veerkamp 2021, 266 ([The Messianic King](#), par. 11).

48 Veerkamp 2021, 355 ([“What is fidelity, anyhow?”](#), par. 22-23).

According to this text, the core task of every king, that is, of every state, every government, is truth and justice. And that is justice for the humiliated and needy (*ʿanaw, evyon*). The measure by which one measures the king, the state, the government, is what is called in the Scriptures *tzedaka*, “truth, probation, reliability.” *Truth* in the Scriptures has justice as its *true* content. The *tzaddik* is a truthful one and so a just one. Justice is proven only by what happens to the humiliated and poor of a people.

This is *kingship*, and Jesus means this kingship. He, the Messiah, is the Son of the King for whom the psalmist prays here. Jesus as the Messianic King is different all along the line and in its essence from kingship according to this world order, *basileia tou kosmou toutou*. Jesus’ kingship is a radical alternative, but it is not something otherworldly, purely spiritual or inward. It is a radically this-worldly, earthly kingship.

In your opinion, in that (111) “Jesus is mocked, scourged and crucified” by Roman soldiers as “King of the Jews,” the “identification of Jesus as King of Israel is twisted into irony.”

Though Jesus may be king of Israel, that is, recognized as leader by “true Israelites,” he is certainly not recognized as king of the Jews, who claim to “have no king but the emperor [RSV: Caesar]” (19:15).

In the latter statement, you also see “an ironic statement, since one would assume that the ‘Jews’ should have no king but God.”

But if this is about irony, what is its point? According to Veerkamp, here, on the one hand, the representative of the Roman empire wins a power play against the priestly leadership of the Jewish people (apart from the priesthood and their helpers, no Jew is present in the scene *vis-à-vis* Jesus, neither the *ochlos*, the Jewish crowd, nor the Pharisees), because they indeed manage to get him to eliminate the Messiah pretender who opposes their goals but simultaneously confess allegiance to the emperor as their legitimate king:<sup>49</sup>

By deciding against the Messiah, they necessarily decided for Caesar as their king and for Rome as their god.

Pilate, on the other hand, officially confirms that Jesus is the rightful King of the Jews with the sentence pinned to the cross:<sup>50</sup>

Jesus from Nazareth *is* the King of the Judeans, the priests themselves have demanded his crucifixion, and now they have no other king than Caesar! They are no longer legitimate authorities because they have demanded the crucifix-

49 Veerkamp 2021, 369 ([King of the Judeans](#), par. 7).

50 Veerkamp 2021, 370 ([King of the Judeans](#), par. 13).

ion of their true king. ... Jesus is the Messianic King, and Rome is killing him at the request of the leadership of the priestly elites. Rome's authority now seems definitively established, the leadership recognizes Caesar as their only legitimate king, and Rome has won. Has it?

No, Rome has not won, that is John's firm conviction also in the interpretation of Ton Veerkamp. However, it is not as simple as you imagine that Jesus walks through his death into heaven and all is well, just like that, in that from now on every person who believes in Jesus, no matter how miserable or great his earthly life is, can hope for eternal life in the hereafter.

It would go too far here to explain Veerkamp's interpretation in detail. It boils down to the fact that Jesus, at the moment of his death (19:30), hands over his spirit—the inspiration of the fidelity of the God of Israel—to those trusting in him and that his disciples (20:22) accept this inspiration of sanctification:<sup>51</sup>

The threatened, vulnerable existence of these intimidated people, flesh, is inspired and shall be transformed into Messianic existence.

Ultimately, this Messianic existence means that any world order on this earth, which is indeed characterized by structures of injustice and violence, can be overcome by the *agapē*, the solidarity of those who trust in the God of Israel and his Messiah.

Returning (111) to your question whether “the kingship motif” can be placed in a context with the *paroimia* of the Good Shepherd, you answer this question in the affirmative mainly because of the correspondence between the “struggle between Jesus, who is ‘king not of this world,’ and the ruler of this world, in which Jesus is victorious” on the one hand, and the “contrast between the shepherd and the thieves, in which the shepherd is successful in gaining entry into the sheepfold and leading the sheep out” on the other. In conclusion, you write (112)

that the shepherd image may have connoted not only the Messiah but also the king who rules over this world, although his authority is derived from outside it.

Of course, this formulation leaves many questions open, for example, the relationship of Messiah and king (in the scriptures both are identical if this king is the one anointed on behalf of the God of Israel and is acting according to his will), or what is to be understood here by ruling and world, and finally, which authority from outside the world you have in mind.

At this point, our excursion into the appendix of your book is over and we return to chapter 4, where we were not quite finished identifying the elements that play a supporting role in the *paroimia* 10:1-5.

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51 Veerkamp 2021, 400 ([The Locked Doors](#), par. 10).

#### 4.1.6 Who Is the Thief: Jewish Leadership, Pharisees, Zealots?

In detail (85) you deal with identifying the thief in the *paroimia* but without distinguishing between “thief/bandit/stranger,” in Greek *kleptēs*, *lēstēs*, *allogrios*. Your reasoning: (n. 32)

Though these three terms are used, the figures they denote perform the same function in the *paroimia* and therefore are to be taken as a single narrative character.

Once again you disregard the Scriptural context. Regarding the keyword *allogrios*, Ton Veerkamp draws attention to a passage in the book of Isaiah:<sup>52</sup>

The sheep listen to the voice, they follow the shepherd of Israel. The *allogrios*—one who enters *allachothern*, “from elsewhere”—we know very well from Deutero-Isaiah, 43:11-12,

It is I, it is I, the NAME, no liberator but me alone,  
I report it, I liberate, I let it hear,  
No other (*tzar*, *allogrios*) (god) with you, you are my witnesses,  
announcement of the NAME: I am GOD.

They will not at all follow this other but flee, because they do not know the other voice. The shepherd, the God of Israel, has a voice—and this voice is the Messiah.

This would mean: False gods directed against the liberating will of the God of Israel are to be seen as the main opponents at issue in 10:1-5, as throughout John’s Gospel. For John, these would be both Zealot terrorists, whose struggle would ultimately mean a Hellenistic regime of the kind that emerged in Hasmoneanism after the Maccabean liberation struggles, and the world order of the Pax Romana that prevailed in his days, which, embodied in the emperor of Rome, claimed to be Kyrios and God (cf. the anti-Roman confession of Thomas 20:28) and can be referred to in John’s Gospel both (12:31; 14:30; 16:11) as *archōn tou kosmou* and (8:44) as *diabolos*.

Likewise, you do not think it necessary to consider separately the two words *kleptēs* and *lēstēs*, which occur only once each in John’s Gospel except in this chapter 10: (86, n. 41)

The fact that ληστής is used to describe Barabbas in 18:40 is not, in my view, particularly helpful in elucidating the meaning of the term in 10:1. This judgment is based upon the fact that it is difficult to connect Barabbas, about whom we are told very little in this gospel, to the shepherd’s—i.e., Jesus’—opposition, which is the role of the ληστής in the *paroimia*.

52 Veerkamp 2021, 224 ([A Comparison](#), par. 10-12).

In this context, you expressly oppose Simonis who is making precisely this attempt:

A different position is held by Simonis (131-32), for whom 18:40 is an important starting point. Simonis views ληστής as designating not robber or bandit, but rather zealot, as it does in Josephus. This is important for his allegorical interpretation of the *paroimia* against the backdrop of political events in Judea before the first Jewish revolt. It must be noted, however, that such a reading does not emerge from the intrinsic data provided by the gospel itself.

The last sentence is true, of course. But the question is whether your interpretation based solely on intrinsic data can actually do justice to John's Gospel. In view of Josephus' characterization of Zealot fighters in the Judean War (2, 20, 7), Ton Veerkamp writes about those who come in place of the Messiah Jesus according to 10:8.<sup>53</sup>

They are thieves—like Iscariot (12:6)—or terrorists—like Barabbas, who was sentenced to death because of terrorist activities (18:40). The *lēstēs* is a member of the guerilla—fighting against Rome and its collaborators. And Judas anticipates the thief John of Giscala, as Barabbas anticipates the Zealot underground fighter Simon bar Giora.

If, according to (85) the exegete Zahn,<sup>54</sup> as you write, the *kleptēs* and *lēstēs* in John 10 are to be related to “the bad priests and kings of the Hasmonean and Herodian dynasties respectively,” John could be alluding to the Maccabean liberation struggles, which in the end led to nothing but another Hellenistic reign of oppression.

Such positions, however, are minority opinions:

The majority of scholars, however, search the gospel narrative itself and identify the thief with the Jewish leadership of the time of Jesus, whose opposition to Jesus is reflected in the historical tale within the Johannine narrative.

Scholars argue about who exactly belonged to the Jewish leadership. Was it only “the high priests and Pharisees” (Haenchen) or (86) also “Sadducees along with the Pharisees” and (n. 40) “the evil rulers of the Hasmonean period” (Brown)? Most agree, as John Quasten writes, that

“the Pharisees, who regard themselves as the real leaders of the people, are branded as false leaders and as guides to error.”

There's a lot to be said for this identification, especially that Jesus addresses the same audience in chapter 10 as he did in chapter 9, and now that was “the Pharisees (9:13) or Jews (9:18),” who are there arguing with Jesus about his healing of

53 Veerkamp 2021, 226 ([The Interpretation of the Comparison](#), par. 3).

54 T. Zahn, *Das Evangelium des Johannes ausgelegt* (Leipzig: A. Deichert, 1908) 444.

the man born blind and about the subject of blindness and *hamartia* (sin, aberration) in general. But I mean, we can't say as generally as you do that

the contrast between the shepherd and thief of 10:1-5 is considered to parallel that between Jesus and the Jewish leadership as portrayed in chapter 9, and indeed throughout the gospel as a whole.

Why not? Because the Jews in John's Gospel are not a homogeneous group, but always show different facets.

There are indeed mainly the Pharisees, among whom, however, there are definitely individuals who sympathize with Jesus, even if secretly, like Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea. They are often, but not always, counted among the Jewish leadership, which at the time of the historical Jesus consisted mainly of the high priesthood. By John's time, this priestly leadership in Judaism had been replaced by the Pharisaically oriented Rabbis after the destruction of the temple, and with this Rabbinical Judaism, John's Messianic community had to fight out its contemporary conflicts.

Apart from the Pharisees, Zealotically aligned Jews appear again and again, who want to kidnap Jesus after the Feeding of the Five Thousand in order to make him king, or—even among Jesus' brothers—want to force him to openly oppose the world order even at the Succoth festival.

Finally, in the Jewish *ochlos*, in the crowd, there are always disputes about whether Jesus is the Messiah, from which divisions develop several times.

And there are people who have temporarily trusted in Jesus and who, on the occasion of words perceived as scandalous, such as chewing the flesh and drinking the blood of the Messiah, separate from him again. It is precisely these who are most harshly attacked by Jesus, indeed, reviled as collaborators of the *diabolos*, the Roman adversary, the emperor.

I assume that in the *paroimia*, Jesus, first of all, expresses anti-Zealot criticism of those whose attitude leads to the plundering and acts of terror of the Judean War and thus to the downfall of Jerusalem and the temple. Jesus, in contrast, describes himself as the true, good shepherd of Israel who legitimately enters the courtyard of the temple through the door but leads his followers out of a temple that has become a pagan house of trades or anti-Messianic synagogue.

But let us look at what you cite to support your view.

In 10:1-5, the thief is described as someone who secretly enters the sheepfold to steal the sheep but whom the sheep do not follow because he is a stranger whose voice they do not know. In contrast, Jesus, as the shepherd, has a legitimate authority that does not come from the sheep but from outside the sheepfold and is confirmed by the sheep listening to him. The thief is thus portrayed as someone, (87) "attempting to exert his influence, for some unspecified, but presumably evil purpose, over someone else's sheep."

The contradiction that 10:8—different from 10:1 and 10:10—speaks of thieves and robbers in the plural “can be resolved by reading the singular ‘thief’ of 10:1 as a collective noun and as paradigmatic for the behavior of all such threatening figures.”

Yet in 10:8a, how can there be any mention of thieves and robbers who came in the past to steal Jesus’ sheep if “strictly speaking there could have been no such flock before Jesus came and hence no believers to heed (ἠκουσάν—also aorist indicative) these interlopers” and (n. 43) Schnackenburg “cautions against considering person-ages from salvation history, such as the prophets and kings...to be the referents here...”? Is 10:8, despite the tense, “a broad and general reference to all Jewish opponents of Jesus’ time”? However, if we refer the thieves and robbers to Has-moneans and Zealots of the past, this problem you have left unresolved is vanishing.

In your interpretation of 10:10, you bring the contrast between the thief (Pharisees) and the shepherd (Jesus) to the point. The sheep being stolen, killed, and destroyed, you do not refer “primarily to physical existence, but to the eternal fate of the ‘sheep’ or humanity. Eternal life is salvation; death is condemnation (cf. 8:21).” To this end, “the thief, or the wolf, must drive the sheep away from their belief in Jesus.”

Again, there is no need to interpret this verse in such a spiritualizing way if we think of the atrocities documented by Josephus that were actually perpetrated by Zealot actors in the Judean War.

#### 4.1.7 Who Is the Thief: the Devil? But Is *diabolos* the Devil at All?

Now it gets even more complicated (88) because “to two other figures” appear, “the hireling” and “the wolf.”

What are we to make of these two figures in the context of the chapter as a whole? Are the hireling, the wolf, and the thief simply three ways of describing the same source of opposition to Jesus, or does each have a different referent?

Among the exegetes, different possibilities are considered. Thus (n. 45) E. Schwartz identifies “the thief with Herod and his dynasty, the hireling as the High Priest and the wolf as Rome,” and (n. 48) Godet “suggests that the hirelings are the priests and the Levites, while the wolf and the thieves are the Pharisees.” You yourself begin by emphasizing the commonality of purpose between the thief and the wolf:

They both aim to destroy the flock, whereas the hireling is merely uncaring. Although his actions put the flock at risk, their destruction is the consequence but not the aim of his behavior.

Further, you summarize three characteristics of the thief:

Taking into account 10:1-18 as a whole, our thief therefore has three salient characteristics: he, or perhaps they, preceded Jesus (10:8); he claims to have,

and tries to assert, power and control over the believers (10:5); and he aims to kill them (10:10), which in the Johannine context can only be accomplished by forcing them away from their faith in Jesus.

According to you, at first glance, the Jewish authorities, that is, “the Pharisees, high priests, and other figures,” seem to fit well into this scheme. They “were ‘rulers of the Jews’ (cf. 3:1) before Jesus came into the world” and “are clearly portrayed within the Johannine narrative as authority figures who attempt to control the Jews, from whose ranks Jesus’ followers have come.”

However, (89) they do so as “the legitimate political and religious authorities over their compatriots.” That is, “from the point of view of the Johannine Pharisees, it is Jesus who is the thief, stealing away the sheep that rightfully belong to them.” In addition, “what is wrong with the Jews is not so much their attempt to exert power, but their refusal to belong to his sheep.” Just “John 9, which is taken by many scholars as strong contextual proof for the identification of the thief as the Pharisees, (90) provides the clearest demonstration that they in fact parallel those sheep who refuse to belong to Jesus.”

This leads you to the question:

Is it possible that the Jewish authorities are meant to be seen both as thieves and as “failed” sheep—i.e., as people who should have been, but refused to become, part of Jesus’ flock?

That “the Johannine Jews” are “trying to scatter or kill not only Jesus but also his followers,” you do not regard as sufficient reason to identify them with the thief or the wolf:

Though the Jewish authorities are ready to kill Jesus and his followers, they do not attempt to “steal” them away from him. Where Jews are portrayed as turning away from a prior faith in Christ, the Jewish authorities are not to blame. For example, those whose departure is noted in 6:60 left Jesus because of his “hard saying”, namely that “the one who eats this bread will live forever” (6:58). Similarly, according to 8:59, other Jews who had believed in him left as a reaction to his words.

From whom, then, Jesus “can and must protect” those who trust in him and follow him?

In this regard, by examining the passages 6:39 and 17:12 (or 18:9), you find that the loss of Jesus’ sheep, namely the “son of perdition,” refers to Judas

who had belonged to the flock, indeed to its inner circle of disciples, but had been lost, or snatched away. In 13:2 and 27, the “thief” or “wolf” responsible for this act is clearly identified as the devil (13:2) or Satan (13:27).

Based on this, you answer the question, “Is it possible that Satan is our thief?”, unequivocally in the affirmative. Hugo Odeberg [327] had made this suggestion by pointing out the

parallel between the double epithets of “murderer and liar” applied to the devil in 8:44, and the reference to the “thief and bandit” in 10:1ff.

You yourself opine:

More telling is the association between the devil and death in 8:44, which parallels the description of the thief and robber in 10:1-21 whose aim is to steal, kill, and destroy the sheep.

Several passages in the Fourth Gospel allude to the devil as the great adversary of Jesus in the context of the cosmological tale.

That the *diabolos* appears as the great adversary of Jesus is undoubtedly correct. But the question is again who is meant by this figure. From the Scriptures, the Hebrew *satan* translated as *diabolos* in the Septuagint is nowhere the otherworldly demonic devil, which he became in the Christian tradition and as which he also appears in your cosmological tale. It is worthwhile to let Ton Veerkamp have his say on this subject in detail.<sup>55</sup>

We first have to explain the word *diabolos*. In modern languages, the word has been adopted untranslated: *diabolos*, *diablo*, *diable*, *diawol*, *djævel*, *devil*, *duivel*, *devil*. Everywhere the word from the so-called New Testament has penetrated into these languages. The association has been similar everywhere. With the word, a superhuman and extremely evil spirit was intimated. But the Greek word *diabolos* stands for the Hebrew word *satan*. This word also belongs to modern languages. The meaning is the same there.

In the Scriptures, the word *satan* occurs 32 times, 6 times as a verb, 26 times as a noun. It appears 14 times in the Book of Job. 7 times *satan* is clearly the political opponent (1/2 Samuel, 1 Kings). In 1 Kings 11, the Greek translators leave the word *satan* untranslated. It is Jeroboam,<sup>56</sup> who rebelled against King Solomon, later waged a secession war against his son Rehoboam and founded the Northern Kingdom of Israel.

*Satan* also appears in the story of Balak and Balaam. Balaam is supposed to curse Israel on behalf of Balak. When Balaam set out on his way, the messenger of the NAME “as satan” came into his way (Numbers 22:22). The donkey

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55 Veerkamp 2021, 207-09 ([The Diabolos is Not the Devil](#), par. 8-12.14).

56 In this regard, a small mistake occurred to Veerkamp. To be precise, Jeroboam is one of three adversaries who are raised up by God against Solomon. The word *satan* is used only in the case of Hadad (11:14) and Reson (11:23).

of Balaam was wiser than his master, he recognized the messenger of God as an adversary of Balaam's political mission.

In none of the 32 cases is it a supernatural evil spirit. Also at the heavenly court in the books of Job and Zechariah, a heavenly functionary appeared as a prosecutor and thus as an opponent in the heavenly court proceedings. Whenever a heavenly figure is involved, he is always sent or commissioned by God; nowhere is he the abysmal evil.

Here it is about a mighty adversary, who is not sent by God, thus about a mighty earthly adversary. This opponent has "desires" (*epithymiai*). They are factually identical with the desire—better: "greed"—of the world order (*epithymia tou kosmou*, 1 John 2:16-17). John 8:44 and 1 John 2:16-17 are the only passages in Johannine literature where the word for greed appears, in connection with *diabolos*.<sup>57</sup> Satan is an earthly Satan, he is the world order, he is Rome. ...

Everybody can know that this Satan, this *diabolos*, is a murderer of humans, after the massacre that the Romans carried out after the devastation of Jerusalem. In this Satan there is no fidelity, he speaks "lies and deceit" (*pseudos*), "in principle (*ap' archēs*)." Whoever pursues politics with Rome is "a deceiver (*pseustēs*) like his father."

Thus, in the Gospel of John, the ruler of the Roman Empire is clearly to be identified with this adversary, *diabolos*, *satan*. However, whether he is also to be equated with the thief in the imagery of chapter 10, I rather doubt, at best he could be recognized in the image of the wolf.

You want to identify the thief of 10:1-5 with the devil (92) because

the thief begins from a point outside the sheepfold, and must be distinguished from the sheep themselves. These characteristics are not true of the Pharisees and other Jewish leaders, but are true of the devil. Furthermore, the devil, or the ruler of this world, has indeed entered the world, the sheepfold, but not by the door, i.e., through incarnation and by being sent by the Father, but by some other, unspecified, way.

Finally, it may be noted that Satan's presence in the world preceded that of Jesus. As the ruler of this world (14:30; 16:11), it is from his reign that the world—shrouded in darkness (1:5)—requires salvation, for which purpose God has sent his Son (3:17). That the believers—except for Judas—have not heeded this thief is indicated by the fact that, though they are in the world (17:15, 18), "they do not belong to the world," just as Jesus does not (17:16).

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57 The adversary who appears in the immediate vicinity of these verses (1 John 2:18, 22) is called *antichristos*; *diabolos* is spoken of 4 times in 1 John 3:8, 10.

However, since the “language of 10:8 implies that the robber and thief is not one figure but many” and Jesus “in 8:44 describes the Jews as the children of the devil” who, “like the devil, are murderers and liars,” in your opinion, the Jews still get their place within John 10 because

for the Johannine Jesus, the Jews are the henchmen of the devil, who accomplish his work in the world. This implies that while it is Satan who coheres most closely with the figure of the thief and the wolf in the cosmological tale, it is the Jews who at least to some degree were doing his work in the first-century Palestine setting of the historical tale, just as Jesus was accomplishing the work of God (17:4).

If this reading of John’s Gospel were the only possible one, it would indeed have to be excluded from the canon of the Christian Bible as anti-Semitic.

However, apart from the fact that I wouldn’t identify the Johannine *diabolo*s with the devil but with the Roman world order, I think that the fitting of the devil into your cosmological reading of John 10 is not quite coherent. For just in verse 8, which you cite as evidence for the presence of Satan in the world before Jesus, there is no mention of the one thief, but of a plurality of thieves and robbers, which you in turn associate with the devil’s accomplices, i.e. the Jewish opponents at the time of Jesus.

#### 4.1.8 Historical, Ecclesiological, and Cosmological Reading

Summarizing (93), you present in a table that both in a historical and in an ecclesiological reading of the *paroimia* its various elements can be explained only insufficiently, but in a cosmological one comprehensively.

Historically, in the sheepfold of the Jewish theocracy, the shepherd Jesus calls out of the Jewish sheep those who believe in him; as thief/robber, he is confronted with the Jewish leadership who wants to snatch his sheep from him. Door/doorkeeper remain unexplained.

Ecclesiologically, that is, on the level of the Johannine church, Jesus respectively the church leaders as shepherds call this very church together as (their) sheep. The sheepfold remains unexplained, door and doorkeeper are possibly equated with Jesus.

In the cosmological tale, the shepherd as the “Word” in the world calls out of humankind those who believe in him, which Satan tries to prevent him from doing. The door symbolizes the birth and death of Jesus, the doorkeeper John the Baptist.

This is an allegorical interpretation of the *paroimia* into which the other two tales can also be largely fitted.

#### 4.1.9 Jewish-Messianic Liberation-Political Reading

A political reading of the Gospel of John gives a completely different picture. Then, chapter 10 is about Jesus as the **good shepherd** who makes come true what is an-

nounced in Ezekiel 34, namely that the God of Israel himself or the Messiah in his name takes over the leadership of Israel, bringing all Israel together again.

The **doorkeeper** might be regarded with Simonis as the high priest Caiaphas who by his decision to kill Jesus and by his unaware prophecy paves the way for Jesus to ascend to the Father by his death on the cross and to establish the body of his Messianic community.

The hireling or **hired shepherd** is not, of course, the owner of the sheep, because these sheep, as the people of Israel, naturally belong only to God as their proper shepherd, but he is entrusted with the leadership of the Jews. This leadership is sharply criticized in that it fails in its task and does not care for the people.

Faced with the oppression and threat of the **wolf**, the Roman world order, the Jewish leadership abandons the people, so that Jerusalem and the temple not only fall into the hands of thieves and terrorists but end up being destroyed by the Romans.

The *aulē* is not a sheepfold, but the **courtyard** of the Temple into which a thief like John of Giscala and a terrorist like Simon bar Giora could enter during the Judean War, just as Zealot **thieves** and **terrorists** have repeatedly come before in the place of the Messiah since the Maccabean revolution, causing bloodshed instead of bringing liberation.

By being the **door**, Jesus is the entrance to the new sanctuary of the body of his Messianic community in which all Israel and further people who trust in him shall be gathered to come in and go out and find pasture according to Numbers 27:17, that is, to live in peace.

#### 4.2 John 10:1-5 in Its Context

You see the connection of the 10th with the 9th chapter of John's Gospel mainly (94) in the fate of the man born blind, namely that

the man's transition from blindness to sight can be described as a passage from darkness to light, from unbelief to belief, and hence, from death to life. Furthermore, it is based on his ability to hear, and to heed, the voice of the "shepherd."

These observations suggest that the contrast between darkness and light is another way of expressing the crucial change in state from being within the sheepfold to being outside it, from condemnation to salvation and from death to life, as implied in our reading of 10:1-5.

The connection between darkness and death you prove not only (n. 60) with references to Egyptian sources, but also with two Scriptural passages, Psalm 107:10-16 and Job 10:21. But the latter definitely does not speak of a darkness that could be overcome by passing into a heavenly hereafter. Salvation from darkness and gloom

in Psalm 107, on the other hand, consists precisely in (2-3) Israel being reunited, (4-7) starving people finding a city in which to dwell, (10-14) captives being set free, (40-41) the poor being protected from destitution. That is, although you even quote the Scriptures explicitly here, it does not occur to you to determine from it what John might mean when he says of the Messiah (1:4), “In him was life, and the life was the light of all people,” or (8:12), “I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” You write (n. 61) that here “the relationship between Jesus and those who follow him,” is defined: “Jesus is the light; the light is life; those who follow Jesus, therefore ‘have’ life.” But how do you define “life”? As in Psalm 107? Or as otherworldly eternity?

Further, you find the “language of light and darkness” again in 11:9-10, before Jesus “calls Lazarus—who, like the man born blind, hears his voice—back to life (11:43-44),” and therefore regard the entire chapter 10

framed by two episodes which portray the emergence of Jesus’ followers from darkness to light, from blindness to sight in the case of the man born blind, and more dramatically, from death to life in the case of Lazarus. This emergence is the consequence of their ability to hear the voice of Jesus and to follow him. This parallels the movement of the sheep from the sheepfold to outside it, also predicated on the sheep’s hearing and heeding their shepherd’s voice.

Dead people (95) who can hear the voice of the Messiah and leave their graves are also mentioned in 5:24-29. But again, you do not interpret the working of the Son of Man from Daniel 7, not in the context of the trial that this judge with a human face holds over the dark deeds of the powerful, so that perpetrators do not triumph over their victims, but every victim is raised to life in the age to come here on earth. This may seem a weak consolation to those of us accustomed to the hope of eternal life in otherworldly heaven after nearly 2000 years of church history, but for Jews from Daniel to John, this hope was so firmly tied to their trust in YHWH that they would not have abandoned it for a consolation of a cloud-cuckoo-land.

Even in calling Lazarus out of the tomb, in your view, Jesus is “portrayed as having direct access, through his words or voice, to the realm of the dead.” But you make no attempt to interpret the Lazarus story on the background of, say, Ezekiel 37 or other Scriptural passages. For Ton Veerkamp, Lazarus represents dead Israel, which the Messiah raises to life to be “loosed” and set free as it is said in Psalm 102:21 and John 11:44. Let me quote him at length from the point where he responds to a sentence of Martha’s:<sup>58</sup>

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58 Veerkamp 2021, 251-54 ([“Untie him and let him go,”](#) par. 4-15).

“Lord,” she says, “he is already stinking, it’s the fourth day.” That is, “He is dead and more than dead. He is not accomplished, but perished!” The stench of decay is more than one reason for her skepticism. One can take leave of the living, of the dead perhaps, but not of those who are stinking and are more than dead. One buries them and leaves them to the tranquility of decay. If Lazaros is Israel, and everything suggests it is, Martha says, “Everything is over and more than over.” To some, and even more so to the Messianists, the destruction of the sanctuary and city was the final end of Israel, especially as it dates back a generation if we assume a common dating of the Gospel of John around 100 CE. If this is so, the Grand Narrative of Israel will no longer help. Skepticism and confession, 11:39 and 11:27, are not mutually exclusive. “He who trusts will see the honor of God.” But how? But when? But where? Despair was nothing new in the history of this people. At a similar moment, a prophet had said the following shocking words, Isaiah 26:18-19,

Pregnant we were, writhing,  
and when we gave birth, it was wind.  
No liberation was done to the land,  
By no means the inhabitants of the world did fall.  
May my dead live,  
may my corpses rise,  
may they awake, rejoice, those who dwell in the dust.  
That dew of the lights dew you,  
the land of the ghostly falls apart.

Some in Israel never wanted to admit that it was all over. One of them was the prophet Isaiah, one of them was Jesus. He lifts up his eyes—as in 17:1. It is the attitude of the praying and hoping of Israel, “To YOU I lift up my soul” (Psalm 25:1), “to the mountains I lift up my eyes” (Psalm 121:1), etc. He gives thanks, as he thanked when he fed Israel, 6:11. In John, the word is not a technical term of the church communion but precedes the decisive signs for the erection of Israel. He says, “I thank you that you listen to me. But I know that you always listen to me.” In the psalms, Israel calls again and again, “God, listen to my voice,” Psalm 130:2 and the like. The Messiah of Israel is the praying Israel, and the praying Israel is heard:

And Elijah the prophet approached, he said,  
“YOU, God of Abraham, Isaac, Israel,  
today may be recognized,  
that you are God in Israel, and I am your servant,  
and that I do all these words according to your word.  
Answer me, *Adonai*, answer me,  
that they, this people, may recognize,

that you are the God,  
that you changed their heart back.”

This prayer of Elijah in 1 Kings 18:36-37 is related to the prayer of Jesus. In both cases, the situation was hopeless, 1 Kings 19:10,

“I have been zealous, zealous for YOU, God of hosts,  
those of Israel have left the covenant,  
they have ravaged your slaughter-site and killed your prophets with  
the sword.  
I alone am left,  
they seek to take away my soul.”

The “retransformation of the heart of Israel” is the revival of the dead Lazarus. In the case of Elijah, the people is “to recognize,” here it is “to trust.” The people shall *recognize* by the life-giving rain after three years of famine, the people shall *trust* in a new life after years of devastation. Therefore, Jesus says what is really necessary: that there is a God and his fidelity (*alētheia*) in Israel. Therefore Lazarus must live. From the Tanakh, this passage shows that there is no hocus-pocus of an incantation of the dead, but that death in Israel must not be the last word, Ezekiel 37:1 ff.,

The Hand of the NAME happened above me.  
He led me, inspired by the NAME,  
he set me down in the middle of a plain, full of bones.  
He drove me around and around them,  
there, many, very many were on the plain,  
there, withered they were, very.  
He spoke to me,  
“Human child, shall these bones live again?”  
I said, “My Lord, YOU, you know it.”

We can only understand the narrative of the revival of Lazarus if we read it from these texts. Jesus cries it out with a “great voice,” *phōnē megalē, qol gadol*. In the Synoptics, Jesus cries with this “great voice” at the moment before his death. Here his “great voice” resounds at the grave of Israel. He screams, he roars. This is not a sign of calm certainty of God, this is an angry command.

The deceased came out, but as a wrapped corpse, hands and feet bandaged, the face covered. This may no longer be a dead man, but it is far from being a living one. Hence the order, “Untie him (*lysate*) and let him go.” Not until this order is carried out, the dead will become living. We also hear the verb *lyein*, “to untie, to loosen, to make free,” in the psalm of a humiliated, despondent man who pours out his lamentation to the NAME. We hear (Psalm 102:19-23),

It is written for a later generation:  
 that a people to be created may praise the NAME,  
 that he looks down from the height, the NAME,  
 looks down from his heaven to the earth,  
 to hear the groaning of the bound,  
 to set free (*lysai*) the sons of death,  
 that they tell HIS name in Zion,  
 his praise in Jerusalem,  
 that the nations may gather together,  
 the kingdoms serve the NAME.

If you listen to the last passage of the story of Lazarus' revival together with this psalm, you know what this is all about. Rome is the entirety of the peoples who went out united to destroy Jerusalem (Gog of Magog, Ezekiel 38-39). This is their present situation. The revival of Lazarus is exactly the opposite. It is the hope of John and with him of Israel. And the mission of the Messianic community is to "untie" the no longer dead and not yet living Israel, to release it from the bond of death. The Messianic community is pointed out to humankind (Matthew 28:19) to do to it what it should do to the no longer dead and not yet living Lazarus, "to loosen" it.

Back to your interpretation. Again, you take all these passages (95-96) to confirm your cosmological tale merely in terms of their

similarity in the pattern of movement. Each passage presents an individual or group in some enclosure—the sheepfold in the case of 10:3, the tomb in 5:25-29 and 11:43-44. The hero, the shepherd Jesus, then calls the name of the ones who are in the enclosure. They hear his voice and emerge from the enclosure. These in turn bear some similarity to the structure of chapter 9, in which the man emerges from the darkness that is blindness in response to hearing Jesus' words.

You see confirmed (96) "Jesus' ability to grant eternal life, as described in 5:24-29 and 11:1-44," in his own "death and resurrection" that "are interpreted not as acts of which Jesus is the passive object but as demonstrations of his divinely-given power."

This interpretation depends primarily on the meaning of the word *lambanein* in 10:11-18, where it refers to putting in and taking his soul for the sheep. In fact, the almost uncontroversial translation for *lambanein* here amounts to Jesus, in the resurrection, being able to take back his life he has given away beforehand. But doesn't such a notion amount to a trivialization of what is happening here, to a docetism according to which a divine Jesus is dead for just three days (almost as if throwing a sickie), and then march triumphantly into heaven? Ton Veerkamp suggested regard-

ing the expression *lambanein tēn psychēn* not as a reversal of the commitment of his soul, but as an intensification of that commitment to the point of death.

True, you are right in that in 10:16 and 12:24 “the necessity of Jesus’ death for the gathering together of his flock” is emphasized. But it is far from proven, or even self-evident, that with the life mentioned in 10:10 that the sheep are to have *perisson*, abundantly, is to be eternal life in the hereafter.

I admit, however, that with your cosmological tale you very clearly summarize a traditional Christian interpretation of John’s Gospel: (96-97)

Truly, truly, I say to you, anyone who was not sent by the Father but entered the world a different way is the evil one, or Satan. The one who was sent by God and became flesh is the savior of humankind. It is to him that John the Baptist bore witness, and those who heard him believed in him. He called his own by name and led them out of the world, so that while still in the world, they were not of the world. When he had led them all out, he went ahead of them out of the world by means of his death and resurrection, back to the realm of the Father from which he came. His believers will follow him to the Father because they have heard, understood, and accepted his message. They will not follow anyone else, not even the evil one, but they will flee from him because they do not recognize the validity of his message or his power.

The fact that such a reading of John’s gospel seems to me, the longer the more, as absolutely unacceptable, must not yet speak against it.

However, isn’t it possible that this Christian hope for the hereafter, which was so closely connected with a disinheritance and condemnation of the Jews, had been taken more and more for granted since the 2nd century, but in the end represented a Greek-philosophical or Gnostic spiritualization and elimination of a Jewish-Messianic Gospel, originally related to the Jewish Scriptures and only understandable from them, with a this-worldly hope for an age of peace which is to come? I let myself be convinced of this by Ton Veerkamp, and we should at least examine his considerations thoroughly. Even then, if also in the context of his political reading it is to be asked whether the Johannine Jesus is right being that hard on Rabbinic Judaism.

#### **4.3 Is the Meaning of the *paroimia* Plain, Simple, Cosmological?**

You conclude (97) that “if the cosmological tale provides the temporal and spatial framework for the historical tale, it does so as well for the specific *paroimia* under consideration,” and see this confirmed by 16:25-33, “in which the term *paroimia* appears again.” Here Jesus confirms to his disciples that “they are beloved because of their understanding of, and belief in, Jesus as described in the cosmological tale.” And when Jesus briefly summarizes this very cosmological tale: “I came from the Father and have come into the world; again, I am leaving the world and going to the Father” (16:28), (98) his disciples answer him

by acknowledging that what he has just told them is—finally!—the plain meaning of the figurative language that he has been speaking in, not only in John 16 and in the farewell discourses, but, we would suggest, throughout the gospel as a whole: “Yes, now you are speaking plainly [εν παρησια], not in any figure of speech [παροιμιαν]! Now we know that you know all things, and do not need to have anyone question you; by this we believe that you came from God” (16:29-30).

But is the contrast to “in parables” really “plain,” that is, “simple,” or not rather “public, openly”? If you go on reading the next verses you will realize that Jesus immediately questions the trust of his disciples and their fidelity to him. Did they really understand what the Messiah’s ascending to the Father means?

The actual last word in Jesus’ speech to the disciples, according to Ton Veerkamp, is<sup>59</sup>

that *having peace with the Messiah* necessarily means *having tribulation with the world order*. *Thlipsis, tzara*, was and is the normal condition of Israel among the peoples and even more so under Rome. John assures the group that tribulation can only be endured if they see the peace of the Messiah as a real political perspective for themselves. That is why he weaves the connection to Exodus 14: John chooses the word that he avoids in his narrative about Jesus walking on the water. The Synoptics have at this point, *tharsei*, “be undaunted.” In most cases, the translators of the Scriptures of Israel, like John in 6:20, have the usual *mē phobeisthe* (*ʾal thiraʿu*), “do not fear.” In some cases, however, they choose the positive *tharsein*, “to be undaunted.” Among others at a crucial point. The people spoke to Moses, Exodus 14:12,

Was this not the speech we spoke to you in Egypt,  
“Depart from us, we will serve Egypt,  
because it is better for us to serve Egypt,  
than to die in the wilderness”?

Moses responds, Exodus 14:13,

Fear not (*ʾal-tiraʿu, tharseite*)  
line up,  
see the liberation through the NAME,  
by which he will free you today.  
For as you see Egypt today  
you will see it no further, agelong!  
The NAME will fight for you,  
so be silent!

This is exactly the word John chooses. What is Egypt in the Torah, is the *kosmos* in the Gospel, the world order, is Rome. Jesus thinks of this victory of the

59 Veerkamp 2021, 331-32 ([Conclusion of the Farewell Talk](#), par. 7-13).

NAME over Egypt when he says, “I have conquered the world order.” Because the NAME has defeated Egypt. Of course, *nenikēka ton kosmon*, “I have conquered the world order,” is a slogan of perseverance. No really serious person can get along in crises completely without slogans of perseverance. But this slogan of perseverance has a degree of reality in the memory of the liberations of Israel from the tribulation among the peoples. The perfect here is the perfect of Exodus 14:30,

The NAME freed Israel on that day (*wa-yosha<sup>c</sup> YHWH*)  
from the hand of Egypt.  
And Israel saw Egypt  
dead on the shore of the sea.

There are no idylls in the Scriptures. In the ruling world order, there are no idylls either. With this sentence, “I have conquered the world order,” the farewell talk ends. But here, Egypt is not dead; the tribulation remains. That is why no Miriam sings here as in Exodus 15, but the Messiah prays the great intercession for the Messianic community.

I quoted Veerkamp in such length to make clear again the difference between your spiritualized cosmological interpretation of John’s Gospel and an alternative reading which takes seriously its integration both into the context of the Scriptures and the history of the suffering of the Jewish people under the Roman world order.

Gentile Christian readers, however, who are no longer familiar with either context, may be genuinely prompted by the “presence of the word *paroimia* in both 10:6 and 16:25” to interpret both the whole Gospel and, in particular, the *paroimia* 10:1-5 in terms of your cosmological tale.

## 5 History, Cosmology, and the Johannine Community

In chapter 5 (99) you deal again with the relations between (100) “the implied author, the gospel stories, and the implied reader, all of which are constructs of the narrative text,” on the one hand and “the three levels of story told by the gospel narrative” on the other, namely “the historical tale, which describes the life and times of the ‘historical’ Jesus, ... the ecclesiological level” as a “sub-tale” related to the time of the evangelist, and “the cosmological tale” as “the meta-tale” that

constitutes the larger frame of reference for the temporal, spatial, and theological aspects of the other two tales and provides the interpretive key for discrete symbols and pericopes of the narrative text.

### 5.1 The Gospel of John as an “Ever-Valid” Timeless Reading?

To the text thus narrated, the implied reader can relate on two levels. First, as an individual.

On this level, the cosmological tale operates as a commentary on the historical tale, by placing it into context and providing interpretations of its component events. At many points, these interpretations serve to modify the general expectations, cultural norms, conventions, and preunderstandings which the implied reader might bring to the text.

This statement is interesting insofar as I assume that through the cosmological tale, as you have outlined it, the Scriptural and Jewish-Messianic context, which was originally the basis of John's Gospel, has been extremely changed, from a this-worldly hope for overcoming the Roman world order to the expectation of eternal life in the hereafter.

Such a cosmological tale, then, may modify certain expectations, cultural norms, conventions, and pre-understandings of the implied readership, but it cannot reveal the original intent of the Gospel. That Jesus was not just a "miracle worker" and (101) what his "signs" mean within "the relationship between Father and Son" could only be understood if it became unmistakably clear that this Father is the God of Israel whose NAME is the program of liberation for Israel amidst the nations.

You write that "a first reaction to the crucifixion event might be anger and sorrow, until the reader recognizes the positive significance of that event within the cosmological tale." In my opinion, this spiritualized view of the *kosmos* may docetically trivialize the crucifixion to banality. Could be worse, Jesus rises again from the dead. But suppose we understand the *kosmos* as the oppressive Roman world order under which Israel and the nations are suffering and which Jesus overcomes by his death on the cross. In that case his death is also interpreted positively, but not trivialized—Jesus as Messiah has to share the fate of a failed terrorist, his followers have to bid farewell to an illusory Zealotry of Messianism and receive the inspiration of fidelity to bring together—through their *agapē* (solidarity) in the Messianic community—all Israel that trusts in the Messiah. This is the sober political-theological message of John as described by Ton Veerkamp, and in my eyes, there is much to be said for such an interpretation.

You, on the other hand, assume that John's Gospel would have been conceived from the beginning as a timeless Gospel stripped of any particular historical context.

The cosmological tale, as meta-tale, in effect functions to re-direct the attention of the individual reader from a mundane and time-bound understanding of the gospel narrative as encounter with a historical individual to a broader and more universal interpretation of the gospel as the ever-valid tale of the Son of God. In effect, the cosmological tale therefore serves to de-historicize the gospel so that it is seen as ever applicable and relevant.

The real author of John's Gospel would probably have vehemently objected to such a de-historicization. He is not interested in a "more universal interpretation," but in

the restoration of all Israel amidst the nations (and certainly also including people from the nations who trust in Jesus, even though he does not have in mind a mission to the Gentiles like Paul, Luke or Matthew). However, as a child of Israel, he certainly does not want to write a timeless Gospel which ignores the concrete suffering of Israel and other nations under a global world order and put them off to eternal life in the hereafter. Although you want to set off your cosmological tale as not “mundane,” not everyday, banal, from the historical tale, precisely by dehistoricizing and thus depoliticizing of history you banalize the Gospel of John into something Karl Marx called the opium of the people which no longer contains any liberating power toward the actual dread of this world.

## 5.2 A Faith without Signs and Wonders in the Christian Church?

The second level that implied readers can relate to the narrated text of John’s Gospel is the community first of the

Johannine church, whose members lived at the time and in the community of the “real” author of this text and who therefore would have possessed the specific information and perspectives necessary to discern the ecclesiological tale.

Members of this community are made aware that they are not disadvantaged to “the disciples who were direct followers of Jesus, and therefore eyewitnesses to his acts and words.” In his prayer John 17, Jesus rather “explicitly includes those who come to faith through the activity—presumably including the preaching—of his disciples.” The “soteriological equality of post-Easter believers with those who were eyewitnesses of Jesus in his earthly ministry” is also above all (102)

indicated by the emphasis on hearing the word, which is important both in the *paroimia* in 10:1-5 and throughout the gospel narrative as a whole. It is significant that the sheep are not described as seeing the face of the shepherd and recognizing him visually, but as hearing his voice and recognizing him aurally. Hence it is through his words that people are led out of the world of darkness to the world of light.

You are right insofar as in the Gospel of John extraordinary importance is indeed attached to listening to the word of Jesus. However, this is nothing new in the Scriptures because the God of Israel does not reveal himself in images to worship but in his words, his voice only, that has to be listened to.

Now we have to listen more carefully to these very Scriptures. For the words, *devarim*, of the God of Israel consist of word deeds or deed words, which are quite visible and experienceable in the form of *sēmeia kai terata*, signs and deeds of power.

Therefore, you are wrong citing (103) the narrative of the second sign at Cana (4:46-54) to prove that “hearing the word is more important than being an eyewitness to

Jesus.” 4:48 doesn’t mean Jesus rebukes “the nobleman for requiring signs and wonders as a basis for his faith.” I quote again Ton Veerkamp’s commentary on this at length:<sup>60</sup>

Faith, in this kind of theology, is always something that cannot be seen, and always causes something that cannot be seen. The meaning of Jesus’ answer, according to these commentaries, is a reproach, in the sense that “I have always to do signs and wonders so that you may believe—when will you believe without me having to do wonders?” The reproach is absurd, it would invalidate the whole Scriptures. We hear Deuteronomy 4:34,

If ever a god had tested it  
to come, to take a people from among a people,  
with trials, with signs, with proofs of power,  
with war, with a strong hand, with an outstretched arm,  
with all these awe-inspiring great things,  
which the NAME, your God, has done for you in Egypt before your eyes?

Liberation has always to be experienced sensually in Israel, “Do not forget,” says Moses, “all the speeches you *have seen*, that they will not depart from your heart all the days of your life . . .” (Deuteronomy 4:9). So if Israel had not seen any signs and proofs of power even then, it would not have trusted and could not have trusted. It is about the double designation of what is happening; signs (*ʔothoth, sēmeia*) refer to Israel as the object of God’s action; proofs of power (*mofthim, terata*) refer to God himself as the subject. Therefore, these words often occur together, especially if God’s action is brought up in connection with the liberation from Egypt and in the wilderness. Signs and proofs of power always mean the verification of the liberation power of Israel’s God.

But doesn’t the official trust Jesus without seeing? Ton Veerkamp refers to the background of the particular situation in which John writes after the fall of the temple and Jerusalem in 70. What if there are no more “signs and proofs of power” to be seen “that are liberating and reviving,” how can one “still trust?”<sup>61</sup>

The official insists, “Run down before my infant dies!” The answer is, “Your son lives.” The man trusts this word. Without having seen anything! This seems to contradict what we just said: Signs and proofs of power cause the trust of Israel. The understatement of the commentaries is anti-Jewish. Jews “believe” when they see signs and acts of power, Christians “believe” without the like, and that is *genuine* “belief.” We express it so that nothing anti-Jewish

60 Veerkamp 2021, 129 ([The Other Sign in Cana, Galilee: “Your son lives,”](#) par. 7-9).

61 Veerkamp 2021, 130 ([The Other Sign in Cana, Galilee: “Your son lives,”](#) par. 10-13).

remains smoldering. Of course, in the days of the failure of the Messiah, of his departure, you can see nothing but the unshakable power of the world order and the ruins of Jerusalem. It is the difference between the Israel of sensually experienced and experienceable liberation and Israel in front of the ruins of its history. This Israel is required to hold on to a Messianic perspective at a moment when it seems to have lost its future. Certainly, there is a tension between *seeing* and *trusting* in this situation. There are times without *signs* and *proofs of power*, as Israel knows and sings in the bleak song: *Why, God, do you detest forever*, Psalm 74:9,

We no longer see our signs,  
Nowhere a prophet any more,  
nobody is with us, who knows until when . . .

The official has no choice but to trust. Only afterward the man will find out whether he was in the hands of a messianic charlatan. What is true and therefore trustworthy can always be determined afterward, whether in good or in evil. He must have the affirmation that his son lives. The fever has left his child, his slaves say. “When?” “In the seventh hour.” The official must be sure that it is not a spontaneous recovery, but that the word of Jesus has brought the child back to life and founded his future. The exact time is crucial. Only now it is possible to have real trust; the first trust was a trust in advance. If it is certain that something has really changed, has really turned to good, the word of Jesus becomes a sign and a proof of power. He and his whole house—wife, children, servants—they trust because all have seen that the word is *happening*.

Only at the end of his Gospel, John gives a fundamental answer to the question of the relationship between seeing and trusting in 20:24 ff, again according to Ton Veerkamp:<sup>62</sup>

The last word of Jesus—for the time being—is, “Happy those who did not see and trusted.” These words are addressed over the head of Thomas to the generation that comes after the eyewitnesses. The eyewitness was the author of the Gospel, 19:35, “He who saw—namely, the blood and the water from the chest of Jesus—bore witness . . . that you also might *trust*.” This is “the other disciple who had come first to the tomb and saw and *trusted*,” 20:8. It is the disciples and Maria from Magdala. All the others did not see.

Jesus’ words to Thomas do not imply a disqualification of those who “saw and trusted.” Thomas, too, is now among the witnesses who saw and trusted. Je-

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62 Veerkamp 2021, 403 ([To See and to Trust](#), par. 8-9).

Jesus' words apply to the generation of Messianists who saw nothing after the *Judean War* and yet trusted. Death is the last word, because without this death, this departure of the Messiah, nothing can go on. The dead, rising from death (present tense!) Messiah is *Dominus ac Deus*. Exactly this is not to be seen. *This* must be trusted.

That John is addressing later generations "over the head of Thomas" is something Veerkamp agrees with you. You rightly write, (103)

Although the readers do not hear Jesus first-hand, his words are available to them, at great length, within the gospel itself.

But if John would indeed devalue any eyewitnessing over believing without seeing, why does he emphasize so much the seeing of the one disciple in 19:35 and the experiences of all the disciples with him in 15:26? And why do verses 20:30-31, of all things, mention only the *sēmeia* wrought by Jesus as grounds for trusting in him? It seems to me that just the latter is a special signal that recalls the reference to the Scriptures of Israel. And thus it is not a question here, as you think, of "the basis of the readers' christological knowledge, faith, and eternal life" in an otherworldly sense but of the Messiah who embodies the liberating NAME of the God of Israel working in this world.

Thus, although I do not think John is in any way accusing the official or Thomas or Judaism in general of an unreasonable demand for signs and wonders, you are of course right to point out that a trust in Jesus cannot come only from direct contemporaneity with him. And also listening to his word (103 f)

can be accomplished not only by listening to Jesus himself, as eye-witnesses were able to do, or by listening to the words of his disciples, but also by reading this gospel in which the words, as transmitted by the Beloved Disciple and the other disciples with the utmost reliability, are recorded.

It is this (104) "soteriological equality between Jesus' first followers and his later followers" that according to you

would have contributed to the positive self-definition of the Johannine community in which this gospel had a special place. Despite its temporal and geographical distance from the earthly life of Jesus, the Johannine community whose story is encoded in the ecclesiological tale of the Fourth Gospel, could therefore claim spiritual authority and inclusion in the community of the saved, both because it possessed the paraclete and because through its gospel it too "heard" the words of Jesus.<sup>63</sup>

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63 According to Ton Veerkamp, John 21 describes the way in which the Johannine community, which initially pursued a particular sectarian path, then nevertheless found the connection

When John's Gospel gained recognition in the increasingly Gentile Christian-dominated church, the cosmological reading you outline will soon have become generally accepted. Looking at the readers of later centuries and the authors they implied, your conclusion is quite accurate,

that just as the cosmological tale conveys the narrator's perspective on the historical tale, so does it provide meaning for the ecclesiological tale, and therefore the soteriological experience of the Johannine community. In this way, all readers, implied or real, first-century or twentieth, are invited by the cosmological tale of the Fourth Gospel to see themselves as members of the flock of Jesus' "own," who hear the voice of the shepherd. Though not of the world, they remain in the world, protected from the evil one until their shepherd will return to lead them out of the fold to their Father's house.

Unfortunately, such a reading misses the original intention of John's Gospel. And it is time to pay adequate attention again to its Jewish-Messianic roots, which are founded in the Scriptures of Israel.

## 6 Appendix: The Descent of the Shepherd

In the appendix of your book (105), in addition to your remarks about the cosmological tale in John's Gospel, you raise another question:

The language of descent and ascent to describe the movement of the shepherd vis-a-vis the world, along with the negative description of the world as a place of spiritual death, raises a rather tantalizing suspicion in the mind of this reader. Do we have in the gospel in general, and in the *paroimia* in particular, a hint concerning the descent of Jesus into the netherworld?

Here you feel compelled to resort to sources outside the Gospel of John, since (107) the "motif of Jesus' descent into the netherworld is not made explicit in the Fourth Gospel." What I find most interesting here is how you deal here with references to the Tanakh that you avoided in the main part of your book.

The statement of faith (105) about "Christ Jesus" who "descended to hell," is not "in the Old Roman Creed," but in "the Apostles' Creed." Echoes of this notion (106) are seen by many scholars in New Testament passages such as 1 Peter 3:18-19, Ephesians 4:9, and Revelation 1:18. You yourself highlight Hebrews 13:20, where Jesus is brought up from the dead as "the great shepherd of the sheep" by the God of peace.

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to the Messianic mainstream led by Peter. In his eyes, the Johannine community also claims the "possession" of the mother of the Messiah.

The “belief in Jesus’ descent”<sup>64</sup> therefore appeals to you particularly because it fills a gap in the Johannine narrative and the tales of Jesus to which that narrative points. This gap concerns Jesus’ whereabouts and activity during the time between his death and his resurrection/ascension to the Father. An intriguing feature of the descent motif is that the pattern of movement that it implies parallels that of the cosmological tale and the shepherd *paroimia*: Jesus’ descent into and ascent from the netherworld mirrors Jesus’ descent into and ascent from the world in the cosmological tale and the shepherd’s entrance into and departure from the sheepfold in 10:1-5. Furthermore, Jesus’ ascent from the world and the shepherd’s departure from the sheepfold, followed by the believers/sheep, is directly related in the gospel to resurrection, which may also be seen as a departure from the netherworld or the realm of the dead.

But, as I said, (107) in the Gospel of John there is not a single word about Jesus’ descent into the realm of the dead. You resort to the fact that 5:24-29 and 11:43-44 describe Jesus’ rescuing the dead from their tombs. Although in these passages Jesus does not descend bodily, it might be said that he descends vocally: it is by hearing Jesus’ voice that the dead, exemplified by Lazarus, depart from the tomb and experience resurrection.

Now you want to examine whether the *paroimia* 10:1-5 could be read by an implied reader “as a reference not only to the Word’s descent into and ascent from the world, but also to the Word’s descent into and ascent from the netherworld.”

As a touchstone, you first consider the question

whether the extrinsic data which the implied readers, or intended audience, brought to their reading of the text would have led them to find allusion to Jesus’ descent into the netherworld in John 10:1-5.

Second, you ask yourself whether it can be proven “that the *paroimia* was read as a reference to Jesus’ descent by later readers.”

To address these questions will also allow us to explore the intersection between a reader-oriented approach and two more traditional approaches to the Fourth Gospel, namely *Religionsgeschichte* and the history of interpretation.

### 6.1 The Gatekeeper of Hades in Ancient Mythology

In regard to the first question you asked, (112) you address the figure of the “gatekeeper” who plays an “elusive” role in John 10:1 and whom you identified earlier “as

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64 Mistakenly you write “ascent.”

John the Baptist, the one who introduces the shepherd to the sheep within the fold.” Indeed, his function is

familiar to readers of ancient mythology as the gatekeeper to the netherworld. This figure usually appears in the context of a descent-myth, in which a hero, heroine, god or goddess figure descends to the realm of the dead and gains entry through a gate by means of an encounter with the gatekeeper.

You offer Mesopotamian and Egyptian examples and, citing Psalm 24:7-10, assert that the “motif is not limited to the polytheistic religions but is present even in the Hebrew Bible.” In support of this, you write that

Psalm 24:7-10 was understood in the early centuries of the Common Era to refer to the guardians of the gates of Sheol and may itself be a fragment of a mythological story depicting the descent motif.

To me, the basis of this reasoning seems very thin. I ask back: What does “early centuries” mean? Before the Gentile Christian period, this motif certainly did not occur “in the literatures which belong to the religious and cultural background of the evangelist and his intended audience,” so that in any case no implied reader with a Jewish-Messianic background (113) could have understood the “gatekeeper figure” as “an allusion to the gatekeeper of the underworld.” There is no explicit reference to the underworld in the psalm itself except for the word *pylē*, which in turn does not occur even once in John’s Gospel. And the authors of the Tanakh, although they had often resorted to mythological traditions of other cultures, had always subjected them to the rules and will of the God of Israel and his liberating NAME.

Further, you deal extensively with Greek myths in which “the gatekeeper figure ... appears in pastoral contexts,” such as in some of the “twelve labors of Heracles.” Thus, after much searching, you discover (114) Seneca “in Hercules furens” describing one of these tasks “in language which has some points of contact with our *paroimia*.” In my opinion, it is not worth going into details, since (115) the only similarities between this narrative and the Gospel of John are limited to two points that have no significance whatsoever in terms of content. I quote your conclusion:

This passage refers to the descent of Heracles/Hercules into the netherworld, from whence he ascended after vanquishing the king of the netherworld. This victory served to liberate the “cattle of the fields” and ensure universal peace. The passage, like the Fourth Gospel, uses the language of light and darkness to contrast the world of the living with the realm of the dead.

But, as you yourself note, “this lengthy and complicated story” is not even about sheep as in John 10. And mere commonplace symbolism such as the juxtaposition of light and darkness and the mention of a gatekeeper does not yet allow us to establish a connection between pagan mythology and a Jewish-Messianic Gospel. The polytheistic light-darkness mythology certainly has nothing in common with the light

that the God of Israel establishes through the liberation from the death powers of oppression as they are presented in the Tanakh.

In any case, it could only have occurred to Gentile Christian readers of John's Gospel to compare Heracles with Jesus, and even they would have done that only in the knowledge that Jesus, as the Son of the One Almighty God, was naturally superior to the false gods and demigods of the polytheists. Purely formally your sentence is correct:

Heracles, like Jesus, has the ability to raise souls from the dead.

But at least the Jewish-influenced author of John's Gospel was not simply concerned with a general raising of any dead from the underworld. The calling out of the dead from the graves and especially of Lazarus stands in the context of the history of Israel's liberation, Israel is awakened to new, liberated life of the age to come, bestial oppressors shall not be able to triumph over the victims they had massacred.

It is not worthwhile to elaborate (115 f) on all the stories about Alcestis, Theseus, and—again and again—Heracles that you are mentioning because the world described there has nothing at all to do with the biblical story of liberation except the light-darkness symbolism. Rather (117)

these stories imply a world view in which Hades or the netherworld is ruled over by a king, perhaps Pluto, whom the hero conquers. The gates of Hades are guarded by some agent of the king, such as Cerberus, who must be taken by surprise or strength. The hero who does so can succeed in taking out a particular dead person and come out unharmed himself.

Where in the Bible, especially in the Gospel of John, is there even a hint of similarity to such a story?

It is significant how "Virgil's Aeneid, Book 6, ... describes Hades as the land of sleep and shades, of drowsy night, contrasted with the land of the living, in which it is light and day." In contrast, the Bible refrains from any description of the underworld as a place a hero might visit; in the Bible, what Virgil presupposes is not true: "Despite the strong contrasts between the two realms, communication between them is possible." No one in the Bible brings the dead out of the world of the dead against the will of a god or even a demonic power on the adventurous ways of a Heracles or Odysseus. Where victory over death is concerned, it is brought about exclusively by the power of God. Nowhere in the Bible are there divine powers that would have to or could be tricked by men like by the wiles of Odysseus or defeated by the strength of a Heracles. Shimshon fights against men; where gods are fought against, they are from the outset exposed as nothings in relation to the One God. And nowhere in John's Gospel are intimations that Jesus would have to wrest the dead from a Satan in the underworld by physical strength or intellectual cunning. Power over death he has as the embodiment of the life-creating power of the NAME.

The comparison of Jesus the Messiah with Hades, who “is described as a shepherd, who with his staff leads the dead like sheep,” or (118) Odysseus, who with his men succeeds in escaping a Cyclops, namely by “leaving the cave by hiding under the exiting rams and sheep,” consequently contributes nothing to the understanding of the *paroimia* John 10:1-5. You write,

Of special interest is the depiction of the cave—the place of death?—as a sheepfold, from which sheep and human beings must depart in order to survive.

But should any Jewish-Messianic reader of John’s Gospel really have made such a connection?

In summary, according to you (118 f), “these examples suggest that the descent or *καταβασις* was a well-known and common motif in this literature.” This may be so but it does not prove that it was used in the same sense in John’s Gospel or was understood so in early times. While *katabasis* is an important motif in the Gospel, it nowhere refers to the underworld, but has to do with the Messiah’s descent from the Father into this world order.<sup>65</sup>

You too are not sure (119) whether indeed “the implied reader’s knowledge of the descent motif was assumed by the implied author of the Fourth Gospel,” even though “the popularity of these stories is hard to dispute.” Significantly, you emphasize:

It is likely that Gentile readers would have been familiar with the myths and literary sources for the descent motif.

That is correct. And it supports my assumption that perhaps later Gentile Christian readers could have read John’s Gospel in your sense. An originally Jewish-thinking author and his originally Jewish-minded readership could not have done so in any case. Thus, the following considerations about the pagan stories about the descent into Hades bring very well to the point, which earliest possible implied readership could have understood the Gospel of John in the sense of your cosmological tale:

What is interesting about them for our purposes is that they contain in a narrative context certain features which are also present in John 10:1-5. These are: the use of pastoral allusions in the depiction of the inhabitants of the netherworld and those who led them in or lead them out, the reference to a gatekeeper, as well as to a ruler of the netherworld, and the plot structure, which, as in our *paroimia* as well as in the cosmological tale of the Fourth Gospel, involves a hero who enters a physical realm, engages in some activity,

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65 Andreas Bedenbender, *Frohe Botschaft am Abgrund. Das Markusevangelium und der Jüdische Krieg*, Leipzig 2013, 413 ff, also points to a going down to Capernaum as opposed to going up to Jerusalem, see <https://bibelwelt.de/veerkamp-john-2/#217>.

and then departs, taking with him some of its inhabitants. Also of interest is the presence of the language of light and darkness, which distinguish this world from the netherworld, since a similar contrast is strongly tied to the context of our passage (cf. John 9 and 11). Given these similarities of the descent stories to John 10:1-5, it is possible that Greek-speaking readers, on encountering the *paroimia*, may have supplied associations with this complex of images and patterns that would have called to mind these descent stories and the descent motif in general.

It cannot be made clearer as to how much such an understanding of John's Gospel has distanced itself from any reference to the Jewish Scriptures and the God of Israel with his liberating NAME.

## 6.2 The Motif of Descent in Early Christian Literature

Your second (120) question asked about the "descent motif" related to whether later readers could have placed the *paroimia* in such a context. For this, you go "beyond the New Testament literature to the New Testament Apocrypha and the writings of the Church Fathers." These, of course, cannot

be regarded as sources for our *paroimia*. Nevertheless, we shall see that when these texts speak of Jesus' descent, they do so using language and imagery that is familiar to us from the Gospel of John in general and our *paroimia* in particular. ...

There are several passages in the apocryphal and patristic literature in which the descent motif is combined with pastoral language.

In the 2nd century, Irenaeus describes "the purpose of Christ's descent as seeking the sheep which had perished." Ephraim "says that Christ—the 'good shepherd'—went to Hades to seek out Adam as a lost sheep." In the 4th century, St. Cyril of Jerusalem mentions "Jonah's sojourn in the whale as a type of the Descent." In the Gnostic Christian "*Acts of Thomas*" of the 3rd century, Jesus is addressed by Judas Thomas as the one (121, quoted from Edgar Hennecke and Wilhelm Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*) who

among men wast crucified for many, who didst descend into Hades with great power, the sight of whom the princes of death did not endure, and thou didst ascend with great glory, and gathering all those who took refuge in thee thou didst prepare a way, and in thy footsteps they all journeyed whom thou didst redeem, and thou didst bring them to thine own flock and unite them with thy sheep.

In "the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, an apocryphal work which has been dated to the early to mid-second century C.E."—according to Wikipedia ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gospel\\_of\\_Nicodemus](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gospel_of_Nicodemus)), however, this apocryphal

writing should be dated two centuries later—you find early references of Christian literature to “the figure of the gatekeeper, who guards the gates of Hades, at times acting as the agent of the ruler of the netherworld,” (121 f)

Hades, Lord of the underworld, cautions his gatekeepers, the demons: “Make fast well and strongly the gates of brass and the bars of iron, and hold my locks, and stand upright and watch every point.”

In some cases, Christ gains entry to the netherworld by forcing the gate to open; in others, the gatekeeper simply opens the gate to him, recognizing his divine right to entry.

Impressive (122) in this context is an account in “the *Nisibene Hymns* of Ephraem Syrus” (4th century),”

Satan came with his servants, that he might see our Lord cast into Sheol, and might rejoice with Death his Counsellor; and he saw Him sorrowful and mourning. ... Death opened the gates of Sheol, and there shone from it the splendour of the face of our Lord; and like the men of Sodom they were smitten; they groped and sought the gate of Sheol, which they had lost (*Carm. Nis.* 41.15-16; NPNF 13.205).

This quotation shows very well how, in the course of time, the figure of Satan as “the overlord of the underworld, with Death as his gatekeeper,” has taken on a meaning completely opposite to the Scriptures’ idea of *satan* as a member of God’s court or as the political adversary of the kings of Israel. That is, your interpretation of John’s Gospel from an otherworldly cosmological tale actually coincides with the ecclesiastical reading as early as the 2nd century.

But this does not exclude that it is nevertheless a blatant reinterpretation of an originally Jewish influenced Gospel of John. Certainly, John did not yet understand death as the gatekeeper of the *aulē* in 10:1-5, who “opens the gate to let Christ, the Light, come into the Netherworld,” and who, as St. Cyril of Jerusalem thought, cowardly fled at Jesus’ arrival.

Later such notions proliferated, including, for example, Athanasius in the 4th century who, referring to Job 38:17, wrote: “Nor is it lawful to say that the Lord was in terror, at whom the keepers of hell’s gates shuddered.”

That Christ opened the gates of hell, or caused them to be opened by the gatekeepers, is mentioned explicitly by several authors.

Thus (123) in “the Acts of *Judas Thomas*” or “the Odes of Solomon” Christ himself opens the door of the netherworld to the dead, while (122) Eusebius of Caesarea (around 300) wrote about him:

To Him only were the gates of Death opened, the doorkeepers of Hades saw and feared him, and he who has the power of Death, descending from his throne, spoke gently to Him with prayer and supplication.

As Athanasius had invoked Job, so Eusebius invokes Psalm 22:11 ff to support his statements; however, both of them do so in the sense of reinterpreting what was originally meant in terms of Jesus Christ, rather than attempting to interpret Jesus Christ from the Jewish Scriptures. Apparently, Eusebius cannot help but interpret Psalm 22 in an otherworldly way, because he cannot and does not want to understand the perspective of the hope for the liberation of the poor from oppression (vv.25-27) and of the dead of Israel to participate in the life of the age to come (vv.29-32).

Besides (123) “the figure of the gatekeeper, who is different from the lord of the underworld, and the gates which he keeps,” some “descent passages” also mention “the Voice of Christ” that

calls the gates to open, preaches to the dead, bursts the graves, and raises the dead, who, like the sheep of 10:1-5, hear the voice.

... That Christ preached in the netherworld is suggested in 1 Peter 3:19, and picked up by many Church Fathers.

Both Justin Martyr and “the Gospel of Nicodemus” in the 2nd century speak of this, and Clement of Alexandria (c. 200) in “the Stromata” declares that “those in Hades (outside the Law) hear the voice of the Lord. We have not seen his form but we have heard his voice.”

With the last sentence, he quotes a central passage of the Torah, namely Deuteronomy 4:12, in which the voice of the liberating God of Israel had spoken to the Israelites at the foot of Mount Horeb; so here again it becomes clear how statements from the Jewish history of liberation are used to support an otherworldly-cosmological history of salvation. This reinterpretation is facilitated by the fact that (124) Clement does not trace the biblical word he quotes back to the original passage Deuteronomy 4:12 at all, but to Job 28:22. There it is not Moses who speaks these words to the people of Israel, but it is “Abaddon and Death” who say of the divine wisdom, “We have heard a rumor about it with our ears.” But neither “his form” nor “his voice” are mentioned there. So it is Clement himself who makes the connection between the realm of the dead and death on the one hand and the voice of Christ on the other.

For clarification, it is worth taking a look at what Larry W. Hurtado<sup>66</sup> says about both Clement and a writing he cites (and that you also refer to in note 63), the “Shepherd of Hermas”:

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<sup>66</sup> Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ. Devotion to Jesus in earliest Christianity*, Grand Rapids, Michigan 2003, 633.

*Hermas* (Sim. 9.16.3-5) explains that after their own death the Christian apostles and teachers “preached to those who had previously fallen asleep,” thus providing for the posthumous redemption of those who had died before Jesus’ appearance. Clement of Alexandria cites this passage approvingly and, more specifically, portrays this proclamation by Christian apostles as directed to Gentile dead, and as complementing Jesus’ prior proclamation to righteous Jews in his own hades descent (*Strom.* 2.9; 6.6 [ANF, 2:357, 490]). Thus, in this scheme all the righteous dead, whether of Israel or of the nations, who had died before Jesus’ earthly appearance, are given the opportunity to embrace salvation through him. Obviously, from an initial concern to assert a link between the gospel and the Old Testament, we have here a wider concern that probably reflects both the dominantly Gentile constituency of Christianity in the second century and also a desire by Gentiles such as *Hermas* and Clement to engage the larger cultural and religious history. Clement in particular shows a concern to offer redemption for those Gentiles who had lived moral lives in accordance with true philosophy, as well as those of pre-Christian Israel who had lived righteously in obedience to Torah. This wider version of the hades-descent motif presents Jesus as the universal redeemer of all righteous dead, of whatever ethnic origin.

Hurtado thus confirms that primarily Gentile Christian authors placed the motif of Christ’s descent into Hades in the imaginary world of the cultural background familiar to them, with recourse to the Old Testament.

Furthermore, you discuss passages in the hymns of Ephraem Syrus, the Acts of Judas Thomas, (125) Aphrahat’s description of Resurrection, and the Odes of Solomon, in which

the voice of Christ is seen as the instrument through which he managed to enter the gates of hell, as well as to preach to and resurrect the dead.

Other passages assume that “the dead do not leave their graves peacefully, but rather appear to be ejected forcibly.” For example, the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, (126) the *Homily on the Devil and Hades*, “attributed to Eusebius of Alexandria (fifth century?),” or “the Homily on the Passion, for the Preparation Day (falsely attributed to John Chrysostom)” take the (127) word *ekballein* (used as well in John 10:4) “to refer to the way in which the dead leave their tombs in the earth.” To this, you write (126),

In these passages, the departure from the netherworld is expressed using rather violent language, as a casting forth, done by Christ himself, or by the earth in which the dead have been entombed. This idea is a striking parallel to our *paroimia*, in which the rather unusual term *ekballein*—to cast out—is used to describe the act by which Jesus takes out “his own” from the sheepfold.

However, the later recourse to this Johannine vocabulary cannot prove that John already understood the casting out of the *aulē* as bringing up the dead from the underworld. Ton Veerkamp<sup>67</sup> relates the word *exballein* to the exclusion of the Johannine Messianists from the synagogue of Rabbinic Judaism, to which John in turn responds by casting his followers out of the synagogue or temple community.

Finally, you point to “the Apostles’ Creed” and “the Acts of Thomas,” in which there is “a clear parallel to the shepherd entering the fold and leading the sheep out.”

Origen (around 300) addresses “the image of Jesus as the door (John 10:7, 9)” from “the context of the *paroimia*” in “his second homily to 1 Kings.” According to him, Jesus is the door that gives access to the tree of life to the patriarchs and prophets, especially Samuel and later Lazarus in Abraham’s bosom.

Regarding (128) “the raising of Lazarus, which is recounted in chapter 11 of the Fourth Gospel” (not to be confused with the just-mentioned Lazarus of Luke 16), the aforementioned Ephraem Syrus imagines that he was doubly mourned: “In his death there was weeping among the living; likewise in Sheol is great mourning at his resurrection.”

Once again you discuss “the darkness and light motif.” Not only “in the classical Greek literature and the Egyptian Book of the Dead,” but also “in the patristic literature and the New Testament Apocrypha, darkness is associated with death and Hades, light with life and resurrection,” for example (129) in Aphrahat. Moreover, you point in particular to formulations “in the Greek recension of the *Epistula Apostolorum*” that contain “an introductory formula reminiscent of John 10:1” and say that Jesus “may bring back those in darkness into light and those in corruptibility into incorruptibility and those in error into righteousness and those in death into life, and that those in captivity may be loosed.”

In fact, in the very last part, this text picks up a Scriptural word from Psalm 102:20, which in turn is referred to by the Johannine Jesus when commanding the bystanders at the raising of Lazarus to “Loose him, and let him go.” However, the opening words *Amēn, amēn, legō hymin* cannot prove a direct connection with John 10:1 as this phrase appears a total of 25 times in John’s Gospel.

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67 Veerkamp 2021, 223 ([A Comparison](#), par. 9):

This own [these sheep understood as “Israel” who listen to the voice of the Messiah] “he throws out completely.” This translation is required because it reflects the reaction of the shepherd to the throwing out of the blind man—in both cases, the verb *ekballein*, “to throw out,” is used—the more so as John uses the word for “to lead out” (*exagein*) in v.3. This hard transition from *exagein* to *ekballein* is intended. Jesus says to the Perushim, “You are throwing out my disciple? I also cast out my disciples, away from you, out of your court, out of your sanctuary.”

You think you can draw the conclusion

that the contrast of light and darkness, while occurring in the natural world and needing little explanation, is also used to describe the contrast between life and death, and especially the association between darkness and death, and light and eternal life. This is an association which pervades the Fourth Gospel and plays a major role in both of the chapters which frame chapter 10: chapter 9 revolves around this contrast, coupled with the contrast between sight and blindness, and chapter 11 introduces the raising of Lazarus episode using similar language.

But such a later use of the light-darkness metaphor and its reference back to the Gospel of John does not yet explain what the real author originally wanted to say with the symbolism of light and darkness. According to Ton Veerkamp<sup>68</sup>, he fundamentally referred to Genesis 1 and YHWH's fight against the dark political powers of oppression and exploitation of Israel.

I can fully agree with your following remarks:

No hard and fast conclusions should be drawn from the similarities in language and narrative structure between these post-New Testament examples of the descent motif and our *paroimia* in John 10:1-5. Their later date precludes their use by the evangelist as sources for his gospel. These similarities do, however, raise the possibility that the *paroimia* may have been read by some second-century and subsequent Christian readers as a reference to Jesus' descent, and as such may itself have influenced the specific formulations of the descent motif in the New Testament Apocrypha and patristic literature. In support of this point, we may note that direct reference to 10:7, 9 is made in some of the descent passages.

Thus, I also agree with Johannes Quasten,<sup>69</sup> who (130) demonstrated for "the first few centuries"

that the Good Shepherd was seen as offering protection from the devil and his demons for the souls of the dead on their journey to the heavenly realm [396, 412], just as the good shepherd offers protection from the wolves according to John 10 [403]. Furthermore, Quasten suggests that the opposition of the Good Shepherd to demonic forces has its roots in the Fourth Gospel (e.g., 10:28) [376] and ties in to the descent motif as it is expressed in Col 2:15 and Phil 2:10 [396].

68 See [The Life and the Light](#) (Veerkamp 2021, 24-5).

69 Johannes Quasten, "Der Gute Hirte in frühchristlicher Totenliturgie und Grabeskunst," *Miscellanea Giovanni Mercati* (vol. 1, Studi e Testi 121; Citta del Vaticano: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1946) 373-406.

It is Quasten who found evidence of this in “Justin’s *Dialogue with Trypho*”

that early Christians made an explicit connection between Heracles, who conquered wild beasts and descended to the netherworld, and the Good Shepherd.

Unless we want to assume that the Gospel of John itself was already written by a Gentile Christian, this example shows how early the Messianic writings were completely reinterpreted by Gentile Christians based on their Greek mythological, philosophical or Gnostic background. Even if John 10 was not originally meant this way, the evidence cited suggests

that at least some readers were interpreting the *paroimia* in its Johannine context as an allusion to Jesus’ descent. The pre-Christian linking of pastoral language and the *καταβασις* motif suggests that the latter may have been a part of the extrinsic data which implied readers would have brought to bear on their reading of the *paroimia*.

In your conclusion, (131) you emphasize once again that for

the Fourth Evangelist, Jesus is the divinely-sent King whose jurisdiction and power extend over the world of both the living and the dead.

However, you are careful enough to concede that “it would be hasty to conclude that John 10:1-5 was understood by the implied reader as a passage depicting Jesus’ descent to the underworld.” And “there is no hint in the gospel of a belief in his physical descent to the netherworld between the time of his death and his resurrection.”

Nevertheless, in your eyes “the description of the sheepfold as a place of death from which the dead believers—Jesus’ own sheep—are led forth by their shepherd is not inconsistent with the cosmological tale.” Because there

the “world” apart from Jesus is in the grips of darkness, sin, and death, and the inhabitants of this world are dead unless they believe in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, sent by God into the world to do God’s will. In believing, they also follow him out of the world, pass from death to life, as do the dead in their tombs in the *καταβασις* passages in early Christian literature. Hence, despite the absence of evidence regarding Johannine belief in Jesus’ physical descent, the parallels in language and structure between the *καταβασις* passages and the Johannine *paroimia*, as well as the appropriateness of the descent motif in the context of the cosmological tale, leave open the possibility of reading the *paroimia* as an allusion to the *καταβασις* of Jesus. Such a reading adds yet another level to the reader’s encounter with this passage, alongside the historical, ecclesiological, and cosmological readings discussed in the earlier chapters of this study.

I must admit: For the Gentile Christian reading of John's Gospel, which has been common since the 2nd century, the interpretive key of the cosmological tale together with the complementary idea of the descent into the underworld is quite appropriate.

### 7. Plea for a Political Reading of the Gospel of John

Nevertheless, in conclusion, I again urgently plead for asking back from this Gentile-Christian reading for the background of a Jewish-Messianic reading of John's Gospel, which can cast new light also on the development of the relationship between Christians and Jews.

If John was not a Gentile-Christian author from the beginning, who regarded the Jews as such disinherited from Christianity, but a Jewish partisan of the Messiah Jesus, who was in a hard inner-Jewish dispute with the emerging Rabbinic Judaism, then his statements about the *Ioudaioi* and the *Pharisaioi* have to be classified differently.

In my eyes, this not only better explains why an author like John refers so intensively to the Jewish Scriptures and the Jewish festival calendar but also how an inner-Jewish antagonism more and more turned into a bitter Christian-Jewish enmity.

In the meantime, the content of the Gospel of John, interpreted as a book of political liberation, appeals to me personally much more than a cosmological-otherworldly tale of the superiority of Christians over all other people and above all the Jews, who are labeled as the children of the devil. Of course, such a reading also includes criticism of some of John's judgments that are drifting into the sectarian. But I am amazed at the wealth of insights produced by Johannine references to the Jewish Scriptures, to which I was inspired by Ton Veerkamp's magnificent interpretation. Jesus according to John proclaims *agapē* as solidarity across religious and national boundaries to actively resist and await the overcoming of the still existing world order structures of injustice and oppression.

Dear Ms. Reinhartz, I wonder if you could consider Ton Veerkamp's alternative reading of John at least worthy of a review? It should not be difficult to refute it if it should be completely erroneous. Yet if not, it should be included in the scientific discussion.

With kind regards  
Helmut Schütz