

Soteriology in the Gospel of John

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Abstract: Salvation plays a central role in the Gospel of John, although the author never develops an abstract theory of salvation. Rather, by various narrative techniques, and ultimately by his overall dramatic narrative, John suggests diverse soteriological concepts. He introduces rebirth bringing about children of God, depicts Jesus drawing people by being lifted up and dying on behalf of others, claims victory over the devil, and demonstrates healing. Underlying and unifying all these themes is the fundamental thesis that salvation brings life, both qualitatively and quantitatively. This study investigates his medley of soteriological concepts, explores their relation to Old Testament themes, and inquires how they connect with the fact of Jesus's death and its necessity.

The climax of the Gospel of John is Jesus's trial, crucifixion, and resurrection, as evidenced by the texts anticipating and the material devoted to recording these events.¹ Since John purposes to bring about belief in Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God, and thereby enable eternal life (20:30–31), one might ask how these events enable eternal life. As William Loader notes, it is “a vexed question what role Jesus' death plays in Johannine soteriology.”² What is it, as the Samaritans proclaimed, to be “the savior of the world” (4:42)?

Rather than “precise dogmatic formulations,”³ multiple soteriological themes emerge from John's extended drama about Jesus. Salvation motifs are “taught implicitly through allusion, ... expressed with more subtlety.”⁴ By considering John's narrative features,⁵ we uncover the significant, multifaceted

¹ One might add his departure, though this is alluded to rather than described.

² William Loader, *Jesus in John's Gospel: Structure and Issues in Johannine Christology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 194.

³ Ruben Zimmermann, “Jesus—the Lamb of God (John 1:29 and 1:36),” in *The Opening of John's Narrative (John 1:19–2:22)*, eds. R. Alan Culpepper and Jörg Frey, WUNT 385 (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2017), 95.

⁴ Charles A. Gieschen, “The Death of Jesus in the Gospel of John,” *Covenant Theological Quarterly* 72 (2008): 245.

⁵ “The Fourth Gospel is not so much interested in precise dogmatic formulations, but rather Christology is made by means of literary devices like metaphors and narration,” according to Zimmermann (“Jesus—the Lamb of God,” 95), though, we might add, rooted in traditions.

soteriological clues scattered throughout the Gospel and consider how the fact and necessity of Jesus's death on the cross and resurrection fit into the picture. Some commentators suggest that the author of the Fourth Gospel had significant familiarity with Greek drama and that this familiarity influenced the writing style of his Gospel.⁶ Its dialogues, they note, are shaped, consciously or unconsciously, in the fashion of Greek drama. If we take this as a clue, we can understand John's soteriology as arising from not only literary devices and individual dramas or dialogues, but from the entire Gospel as a drama of the cross. We are thereby presented not with an abstract, dogmatic account but with dramas of salvation.⁷

1. Re-socialization

In his treatment of John's soteriology, Jan van der Watt views salvation as indigenous to John, not in the sense of "a comprehensive, a-historical, all-inclusive soteriology, for the sake of describing a soteriology, but a soteriology modelled on questions at stake in the conflict, namely, 'with whom is God and where can he be found (seen/heard)?'"⁸ He interprets the Gospel as a conflict between two groups, the disciples of Moses and the disciples of Jesus. Both claim to worship the same God and be members of God's family. Van der Watt argues that Jesus aims to re-socialize his audience to become children of God (John 1:12–13). To achieve this, they must take the specific path of believing in Jesus (5:29; 20:31). Rejection of Jesus is their sin (1:10–11; 8:24), which puts them in ignorance of (9:40–41) and separates them from the Father (8:34–36). "If the question were asked, 'From what must a person be saved according to John?', the answer would be, 'From a lack of spiritual knowledge and blindness in order to be able to see and know the Father in the Son.'"⁹

How does re-socialization link with the cross and resurrection? In quasi-Bultmannian fashion, van der Watt emphasizes the revelatory nature of Jesus's death on the cross; "the salvific power of the cross lies in its revelatory power."¹⁰ Part of accrediting Jesus's own witness to his identity comes through his power, manifested in his signs and ultimately in his rising from the dead. His death and resurrection not only show that the Father confirms Jesus's revelatory witness but, since Jesus himself is active in these, also demonstrate his power (10:17–18).

Van der Watt admits that other cross events relate to salvation but claims that John does not focus on them. Glorification occurs when Jesus is identified as the revealer of the Father. The reference to the Lamb in 1:29 does not tell us anything about *how* the lamb removes sin. He notes that although at least one Johannine passage can be interpreted as substitution (11:50–52), this is at best an insinuation and

⁶ J. Louis Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*, 3rd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003); Jo-Ann A. Brant, *Dialogue and Drama: Elements of Greek Tragedy in the Fourth Gospel* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004); W. R. Domeris, "The Johannine Drama," *JTSA* 42 (1983): 29–35.

⁷ "Johannine theology is, in some radical sense, far more *theo-logical* and more *theo-dramatic*.... Secondly, it is more *theo-dramatic*. The *Theos* is revealed in a divinely-authored drama of love," according to Anthony J. Kelly and Francis J. Moloney, *Experiencing God in the Gospel of John* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2003), 83–84.

⁸ Jan G. van der Watt, "Salvation in the Gospel according to John," in *Salvation in the New Testament: Perspectives on Soteriology*, ed. Jan G. van der Watt, NovTSup 121 (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 102.

⁹ van der Watt, "Salvation in the Gospel according to John," 107.

¹⁰ van der Watt, "Salvation in the Gospel according to John," 113.

not John's main point.¹¹ Similarly, the three references to being lifted up do not decide the case between the cross being sacrifice or revelation. In short, according to van der Watt, John focuses on salvation as being re-socialized into the family of God. The cross reveals Jesus identity and thereby his authority to be God's revealer.

However, there is more to John's soteriology than revelation and to the cross as establishing Jesus's identity and power and resocialization. Van der Watt has downplayed other, significant contributions of John's soteriology found in his extended narrative. We will consider these themes, noting how the fundamental thesis that salvation brings life (3:16), both qualitatively and quantitatively, underlies and unifies them.

2. *Birth from Above*

The Gospel of John is a book about parentage. The narrative reveals Jesus's identity as found in his relationship with the Father. He comes from (is sent by) and goes to the Father, is testified to by the Father (8:18), does his Father's work (10:37), is taught by the Father (15:15), is loved by and obeys the Father (15:9–10), glorifies and is glorified by the Father (17:1), and is one with the Father (10:30). The Gospel's mission is to bring us to proper parentage, to "become children of God, children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God" (1:12–13). John thus initiates in the Prologue discussion of salvation through the metaphor of birth.

For the evangelist, who we are depends on our origin. Jesus's heritage preoccupies the Jews (1:46; 6:42; 7:27–29, 41, 52; 8:48), and Jesus responds (6:33, 50; 7:28–29; 8:23, 29, 42). Jesus's contemporaries affirm their earthly identity based on natural descent from Abraham (8:33), and, John adds, human decision (1:13). However, being born of faithful human lineage does not guarantee right believing and action (8:39–40). Through sin we easily can slip into having parentage of the devil (8:44). To be born of God we must rely not on human activity but on the work of God (1:13; 6:44), and to do the work of God is to believe in Jesus (6:29). Through believing and receiving Jesus (1:12–13), we become children of God through the Father's drawing grace facilitated through Jesus (1:16–17; 6:65).

After the Prologue, the evangelist returns to and expands on the birth motif in Jesus's dialogue with Nicodemus.¹² In the first scene of an extended three-act play (3:1–15; 7:45–52; 20:38–42—see the previous comment about dramatic structures in John's narrative), the theme of origins sets the narrative: Nicodemus comes *from* the Pharisees, acknowledging that Jesus comes *from* God. Jesus builds on origins. To be saved, to take on a new identity, to enter the kingdom of God (salvation), which is Jesus's kingdom from which he came (18:36), one must have a different origin; one must be born again or from above (3:3; i.e., from heaven or God, 3:31). The phrase γεννάω ἄνωθεν is inherently ambiguous, a riddle to be solved,¹³ and Nicodemus does not solve it because he fails to pick up on the double

¹¹ van der Watt, "Salvation in the Gospel according to John," 116. See also Martinus C. de Boer, *Johannine Perspectives on the Death of Jesus* (Kampen, the Netherlands: Pharos, 1996), 280.

¹² For a nuanced treatment of Nicodemus, see Craig Koester, "Theological Complexity and the Characterization of Nicodemus in John's Gospel," in *Characters and Characterization in the Gospel of John*, ed. Christopher W. Skinner, LNTS 461 (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 163–79.

¹³ Tom Thatcher, *The Riddles of Jesus in John: A Study in Tradition and Folklore*, SBLMS 53 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000), 184.

meaning of γεννάω ἄνωθεν, meaning either physical rebirth or spiritual birth from above.¹⁴ From an earthly perspective, we cannot reenter our mother's womb and be reborn; rebirth cannot be brought about by our own effort or self-improvement. However, from the heavenly perspective we can be reborn when God gives us new parentage and identity. "God must become Father to those who would 'see the kingdom of God.'"¹⁵

Jesus proceeds to explain to Nicodemus his riddle, or better, to extend it. He supplements the double meanings on which the riddle rests with two other riddles. To be born from above is to be "born of water and wind" (3:5). Both "water" and "wind" have double meanings here. On the earthly level, "water" (ὕδωρ) here might mean water involved in diverse aspects of physical conception and birth.¹⁶ However, "water" understood from the heavenly or divine perspective connects to purification.¹⁷ Similarly, πνεῦμα can mean either "wind" or "spirit." Jesus trades on this ambiguity, such that Nicodemus, from the earthly perspective, likely takes it as "wind," whereas Jesus, from the heavenly perspective, means it as "spirit." The proverb in 3:8,¹⁸ which likewise trades on this ambiguity, further muddies the riddle. The obvious earthly meaning of the proverb is that we feel the wind but can neither trace its origin nor track where it goes. Similarly, from the heavenly or divine perspective, those born from above know that something has occurred but cannot explain how it came about. Using these double meanings, Jesus contrasts the earthly perspective (flesh, σὰρξ) with the heavenly perspective (spirit, πνεῦμα) (3:6). Physically, we experience life in the waters of maternal birth. Spiritually, our rebirth is from above, such that purification or salvation is ultimately of the Spirit, from God (1:33). In short, salvation or the new birth, which gives us our new identity, comes from God, at his initiative, not ours. Yet, we acquire this changed identity, this new parentage and new life, through our believing (3:15).

¹⁴ Michael Whenton argues that Nicodemus understands what Jesus says but, because he fails to grasp who Jesus is and thus believe, assumes the role of a dissembler, lavishing praise on Jesus and putting himself down. Jesus, he claims, recognizes this and instead of addressing Nicodemus's misunderstanding of the metaphor, turns to the matter of his unbelief. To make this stick, Whenton must claim that in the later portraits of Nicodemus, when his belief seems to emerge, he is no longer a dissembler. "The Dissembler of John 3: A Cognitive and Rhetorical Approach to the Characterization of Nicodemus," *JBL* 135 (2016): 141–58. This interpretation of Nicodemus's misunderstanding does not comport well with the numerous other instances of misunderstanding in John. Others suggest that given his religious position, Nicodemus should have understood the play on words. "Because Jewish teachers spoke of gentile converts to Judaism as starting life anew like 'newborn children,' Nicodemus should have understood that Jesus meant conversion. Yet it never occurs to him that someone Jewish would need to convert to the true faith of Israel," according to Craig S. Keener, *John*, Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary 2A (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019), 28.

¹⁵ J. Ramsey Michaels, *The Gospel of John*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 180. See Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, trans. G. R. Beasley-Murray, Rupert W. N. Hoare, and John K. Riches (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971), 137–38.

¹⁶ Thatcher, *The Riddles of Jesus in John*, 270; Richard Bauckham, *Gospel of Glory: Major Themes in Johannine Christology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 89–90.

¹⁷ Whether in this text water also indicates baptism is much disputed. For diverse views see Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John I–XII*, AB 29 (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 141–42; Frances Taylor Gench, *Encounters with Jesus: Studies in the Gospel of John* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 21; and Bauckham, *Gospel of Glory*, 82–93.

¹⁸ Raymond F. Collins, *These Things Have Been Written: Studies on the Fourth Gospel* (Leuven: Peeters, 1990), 139.

As birth brings life, so does rebirth. It brings *qualitative life* here and now. That life is to know the Father (17:3). In this sense, the Jews, though Moses's disciples and Abraham's children, are ignorant of the Father, for they do not know Jesus and will die in their sin of unbelief (8:19, 21, 24). They fail to see the Father in Jesus who was sent to reveal him (14:9). New birth gives us new sight, insight into the Father through Jesus, so that we are no longer blind (9:7, 41). New birth also gives us *quantitative, eternal life*, for knowing and experiencing Jesus, who is the resurrection and the life, saves us from ultimate death. We will be raised up at the last day (6:40).

But how does rebirth or salvation take place? Jesus suggests that, like determining the coming and going of the wind, its "how" is fundamentally inexplicable (3:8). Yet like our understanding of the wind, we know that rebirth occurs and has its effects. We can experience it. The point of the dialogue with Nicodemus is to establish not the precise mechanism of rebirth but rather the fact that by changing our origin we acquire a new identity: we become new persons, children of God through the Spirit. Rebirth makes entry into the kingdom possible. In his post-resurrection message, Jesus proclaims that God is our Father and we are his children (20:17).¹⁹ But *how* does his death facilitate our new identity? The Nicodemus drama goes on to affirm that salvation comes to earth in the person of the Son of Man who came from heaven, and what happens to Jesus—being lifted up—in some way facilitates our rebirth and eternal life (3:13–14). John shifts the discussion of rebirth to another motif.

3. The Lifted-up One

For the evangelist, Jesus came into the world to save it (3:17; 4:42; 12:47). This salvation becomes effective through believing in Jesus or believing in his name (which is the same thing) (3:16, 18; 12:46–47). John's double meanings appear again. To believe in Jesus is both believing *that* he is the Word of God, that what he says and claims is true, and also *receiving* him, an existential event (1:12).²⁰ All of this comes about because God loves the world, the world he created and that still rejects him. He does not give up on it but sends his unique (μονογενής) Son to it to save it.

How is this world-saving brought about? The evangelist analogizes the drama that will unfold of Jesus crucifixion with that of Moses lifting up the bronze serpent in the wilderness (John 3:14; Num 21:8–9). In the Moses story, the Israelites wandering through the Sinai grumble about their traveling experience. In complaining not only against Moses but against God, they sin against God. God punishes them with a plague of venomous snakes, and they, confessing their sin, plead with Moses to intercede with God to remove their punishment. In response, the LORD instructs Moses to erect a bronze snake and place it on a pole, so that whoever looks on it will be healed. The bronze snake, in some mystical and ironic fashion, brings about their healing.²¹ An icon of deceit, temptation, and death becomes their

¹⁹ Contrary to Bultmann (*The Gospel of John*, 688), Jesus's death—his being lifted up (3:14)—not his departure (ascension) makes the relationship possible. Departure facilitates the coming of the Spirit (15:26; 16:7).

²⁰ "To 'believe' is the same as to 'come' (5:40; 6:35, 37, 44, 65; 7:37), to 'follow' (8:12), to 'enter' (10:9), to 'drink' of the water Jesus provides (4:13; cf. 6:35; 7:37), to 'accept' (1:12; 5:43)," according to George Allen Turner, "Soteriology in the Gospel of John," *JETS* 19 (1976): 272.

²¹ Keener notes that "ancient Egyptians used images of snakes as magical protection against snakebites, which also cursed the snakes" (*John*, 30).

healer and life-giver.²² Jesus too will be raised on a pole so that sinners can believe in (look on) him and have eternal life (be healed) (John 3:15). The Gospel story does not parallel every element of the Mosaic story (for example, those who crucify Jesus are not like Moses), but John draws on the story's healing or life-giving essence.²³ In both dramas, the source of the healing is raised above them. By looking on (believing in) Jesus lifted up, one moves from perishing to being given life.

For the evangelist, multiple meanings again play a role, here with "being lifted up." On the one hand, to be lifted up (ὕψωθῆναι) is to be honored or glorified, exalted and set above—as done to a king (12:13). On the other hand, the evangelist tells us that it refers to the cruel means by which Jesus will die, a stark, ironic contrast with the first meaning of glorification (12:32–33). In both cases, Jesus's death is in view. But how being lifted up brings about salvation or becoming children of God through rebirth Jesus (or the evangelist) does not tell us. What is affirmed is that belief in Jesus (3:15–18) and living by the truth (3:19–21) are necessary and sufficient for eternal life. Interestingly, John does not speak of repentance or confession here or elsewhere in the Gospel.²⁴ Rather, he presents a gospel of unambiguous choice. If one continues in doing evil out of love for darkness, one will both fear and miss the Light and the eternal life that the Light makes possible. Only by changing so that one lives by truth (understood both propositionally and as a person) can one enter the Light and have eternal life (3:19–21). The criteria for judgment are based on acceptance of Jesus and the discipleship deeds that follow therefrom. However, John here does not directly discuss how being lifted up facilitates our rebirth or healing.

What purpose lies behind being lifted up? In a later dialogue, the second of three passages or scenes concerned with being lifted up, Jesus explains that by being lifted up the Jewish leaders will know his identity ("that I am") and that he has a special relationship to the Father (8:27–29). He was sent from and experiences the presence of the Father, who never abandons him (16:32). He does and speaks what his Father tells him to do and say, which pleases the Father (8:28). That he was sent from the Father, emphasized in the first part of the Gospel, cannot be separated from his returning to the Father, emphasized in the second part and part of his exaltation.²⁵ However, being lifted up in chapter eight has nothing *directly* to do with salvation. In fact, it has nothing directly to do with anything Jesus *does* to bring about our reconciliation with God. Rather, it functions to affirm Jesus's self-testimony of identity.²⁶ He is the I am; his identity derives from the one he came from and on whose behalf he speaks and acts. When he is lifted up, people will see that his claims about his close relation to his Father are

²² Second Temple authors were understandably uncomfortable with the irony of a healing serpent, particularly since Hezekiah destroyed the allegedly preserved bronze serpent (2 Kgs 18:4) because the people named and worshiped it as a graven image (prohibited in Exod 20:4–6). The author of the Wisdom of Solomon (16:5–12) attributed the healing to God, not the serpent.

²³ "The serpent's bite was deadly, the Lord's death is life-giving. A serpent is gazed on that the serpent may have no power. What is this? A death is gazed on, that death may have no power. But whose death? The death of life.... Is not Christ the life? And yet Christ hung on the cross.... But in Christ's death, death died. Dead life slew death.... Just as they who looked on that serpent perished not by the serpent's bites, so they who look in faith on Christ's death are healed from the bites of sin," according to Augustine, *Homilies on the Gospel of St. John* 12.11, (NPNF¹7:85).

²⁴ Perhaps the closest the evangelist comes to repentance is in his quote from Isaiah 6:10, where he speaks of a turning (ἐπιστράφωσιν) or change that those who heard Jesus could not do (12:40). Jesus does not ask Simon Peter to repent, only to love him (21:15–19).

²⁵ Loader, *Jesus in John's Gospel*, 247–48.

²⁶ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, revised ed., NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 401.

true. Any connection with salvation comes through establishing Jesus's connection with the Father and thus his power and authority to bring about our salvation. At the same time, John indicates that Jesus's identity is critical to his saving act by noting that his affirmation of his identity leads many to "put their faith in him" (8:30), and in this way connects with the next lifted-up passage that emphasizes drawing people to him.²⁷

The third discussion of being "lifted up" occurs at the end of Jesus's public ministry (12:32–33), this time with the crowd. Here again John employs double meanings. On the one hand, the narrator informs us by an aside that "being lifted up" signifies the kind of death—crucifixion—Jesus will die. On the other hand, being lifted up is to be exalted. For Jesus, it is his promised glorification. "When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all men to myself" (12:32).²⁸ This drawing, too, is ambiguous. On the one hand, by his death he will "produce many seeds" (12:24), for many will be drawn to him. Jesus draws on an agricultural analogy, already mentioned (4:34–38). As grains of wheat must first die before they produce a great crop, so he too must die before he produces a great crop of believing disciples (4:36). His death is necessary for his program of bringing about children of God to fruition. Once he dies, his bounty will be part of his glorification. "All I have is yours, and all you have is mine. And glory has come to me through them" (17:10). Jesus's glorification thus has two sources: from the Father (17:1, 5, 24) and from those given to him by the Father who believe and accept him (17:10). On the other hand, the drawing of people's attention will occur when those who see him lifted high above them and look up to him recognize and are attracted, even if in horror, to the one hanging on the cross. Attached to that cross is also his identification: "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews" (19:19). The kingship noted by Nathanael, in whom there is complete integrity, is confirmed by Pilate, who has no concern for the truth but unwittingly affirms the truth in vengeance against the Jewish leaders. Being lifted up on the cross points beyond the horrific, tragic event to his kingship. As Augustine might have said, paralleling his statement about the fall: "For [God] judged it better to bring good out of evil than not to permit any evil to exist."²⁹

However, what lifting up has to do with atonement, salvation, and becoming people of a new origin and why this particular method is necessary to accomplish this, is ambiguous. A possible hint, however, exists in Jesus's use of "being lifted up" (ὑψόω) and "glorified" (δοξάζω). These two words are used in Isaiah 52:13 LXX, where the prophet says that "my servant shall prosper; he shall be exalted and lifted up and shall be very high."³⁰ This leads to describing the servant as being "despised and rejected," physically marred and suffering. The cup the Father gives Jesus (John 18:11), which is likely the cup of suffering, echoes Isaiah 53:3–4. The Isaiah passage continues with several salvation motifs. A healing view is described, where this servant takes up human infirmities in his death and heals us by his wounds (53:4–5). Isaiah also presents a vicarious atonement, where in his death the servant takes on our sins and endures punishment to bring us peace (53:5–12).³¹ There is reason to believe a linkage exists between

²⁷ George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 2nd ed., WBC 36 (Dallas: Word, 2002), 1:131–32.

²⁸ A third interpretation of "drawing all men to him" is that this refers to the general resurrection (6:44). Michaels, *Gospel of John*, 697–700.

²⁹ Augustine, *The Enchiridion* 27 (NPNF¹ 3:246).

³⁰ Beasley-Murray, *John*, 50; Brown, *The Gospel According to John I–XII*, 145.

³¹ "Sacrificial language pervades the text: 'sprinkle' (Is 52:15), 'carried' (Is 53:4), 'lamb that is led to the slaughter' (Is 53:7), 'offering for sin' (Is 53:10), 'bear' (Is 53:11,12) [See Lev. 16]. The sacrificial character of the text is particularly evident with the reference to the guilt offering in Isaiah 53:10," according to Thomas R. Schreiner, "Pe-

Jesus's use of these terms and Isaiah 53, since in John the third lifted up/glorification passage is followed immediately by quotations from Isaiah, including 53:1.³² If the evangelist is linking Jesus's use of these words to the Isaiah passage, he is at least intimating though not developing soteriological dimensions of substitution and healing, to which we turn shortly.

John treats being lifted up not merely as a description of fact but the expression of necessity: the Son of Man *must* be lifted up (ὁ υἱοῦ θῆναι δεῖ).³³ It echoes 3:3–7: one *must* be born again. But why the necessity? The answer is unclear. The analogy with Moses's serpent does not answer this question, for it was not necessary that healing be accomplished by creating and erecting a bronze serpent. No reason is given why God chose and commanded this specific ironic method.

If we maintain the soteriological significance of Jesus's death, to explain crucifixion as the *necessary* method for salvation, one must understand the matter of God's will. It is necessary that Jesus die in this fashion because that is what the Father willed. The necessity is what Michaels refers to as "divine necessity." "The impersonal verb *dei*, 'it is necessary,' points to a divine necessity (in John's Gospel alone, see 3:14, 30; 4:4, 24; 9:4; 10:16; 12:34; 20:9). Yet the necessity is not an inevitability.... Rather, what 'is necessary' is what God has decreed *as the means* by which a person sees or enters the kingdom of God."³⁴ Similarly, the claim that Jesus *must* be lifted up or crucified means that God has decreed, without explanation, this as the means by which salvation is achieved.

4. The Lamb of God

C. H. Dodd writes, "In the Fourth Gospel the death of Christ is first and foremost that by which Christ is 'glorified' or 'exalted' (xii. 23, 32–33, xiii. 31), and by virtue of which He 'draws' all men into the sphere of eternal life (xii. 32, xi. 52).... It is not a sacrifice for the expiation of sin."³⁵ Similarly, Bultmann "viewed atonement as 'a foreign element' in this Gospel and dismissed allusions to atonement as being from a non-Johannine source, even a later accretion."³⁶ He viewed John's central theme as Jesus's incarnation to reveal God; his crucifixion as glorification merely brings his mission to a close. However, as Dennis suggests, the reasoning behind this, aided by excluding from John's text passages that run contrary to the thesis, appears question-begging.³⁷

nal Substitution View," in *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views*, eds. James Beilby and Paul R. Eddy (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 86.

³² Gieschen, "The Death of Jesus in the Gospel of John," 247–48.

³³ Jesus asserts this necessity in John 3:14; the crowd who hears him raises it in a question in 12:34.

³⁴ Michaels, *Gospel of John*, 186.

³⁵ C. H. Dodd, "The First Epistle of John and the Fourth Gospel," *Biblical Journal of Religious Literature* 21 (1937), 144–45. For a detailed assessment of Dodd's argument, see Jintai Kim, "The Concept of Atonement in the Gospel of John," *JGRChJ* 6 (2009): 9–27.

³⁶ Gieschen, "The Death of Jesus in the Gospel of John," 244. From Bultmann, *John*, 54–55. "The thought of Jesus' death as an atonement for sin has no place in John" (Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. Kendrick Grobel (New York: Scribner, 1955), 2:54). For Ernst Käsemann, Jesus's death primarily points to his departure. *The Testament of Jesus: A Study of the Gospel of John in the Light of Chapter 17*, trans. Gerhard Krodel (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1968), 17–20.

³⁷ John Dennis, "Jesus' Death in John's Gospel: A Survey of Research from Bultmann to the Present with Special Reference to the Johannine Hyper-Texts," *CurBR* 4 (2006): 334.

The evangelist uses the symbol or metaphor of a lamb to point to the atoning work of Jesus.³⁸ As Craig Koester suggests, for John “[a] symbol is an image, an action, or a person that is understood to have transcendent significance.”³⁹ A symbol has a double meaning; it begins from our common experience and generally refers to something that we experience by our senses: an object or action. At the same time, it goes beyond the sensible to have a deeper meaning, often pointing to something intangible.

In the Gospel’s opening drama, the Baptizer twice identifies Jesus in this way: “Look, the Lamb of God” (1:29, 36). The first time, the exclamation is followed by a statement of Jesus’s mission or function: as God’s Lamb, he is the world’s sin-remover, both universally (κόσμος understood broadly) and individually (3:16–18; 4:42). In the second instance the identification leads to discipleship: once Jesus is identified, two of the Baptizer’s disciples turn and follow Jesus.⁴⁰ The appellation “lamb” (ἀρνός) not only appears to be equivalent to the other titles given to Jesus in John 1 (Messiah, Prophet, Son of God, King of Israel, Son of Man), it gives Jesus’s both identity and function.

The lamb was a common sacrificial animal in the Old Testament.⁴¹ Not only were lambs offered regularly, but they were offered to atone for sin. According to Leviticus, the community member who sinned, whether intentionally or unintentionally, was to bring a lamb to the priest to make atonement for the offerer’s sin, and “he will be forgiven” (Lev 4:32–35; 1:4; 5:6). Likewise, a diseased community member was to bring two lambs to be slain, one as a guilt or sin offering (Lev 14:10–20).

Because of the evangelist’s knowledge of the Old Testament, it is difficult not to interpret the lamb symbol in light of dramatic passages like Genesis 22:8, 13; Exodus 12:3–11; or Isaiah 53:7. In Genesis, Abraham receives God’s command to travel to Moriah to sacrifice his son Isaac. Abraham obeys willingly but expresses his confidence to Isaac that God will provide a lamb in place of his son. God provides a ram (not a lamb), which Abraham sacrifices as a substitute for Isaac. Jesus becomes the ram figure exemplifying the substitutionary sacrifice of one life for another.

In Exodus, the drama involves a lamb that is slain for the protection of the Israelites from the destroying LORD who passes through the land (Exod 12:1–13). Seeing the blood, a sign that the inhabitants of the house are protected, the LORD passes over them. Where there is no sign, he brings death. The blood obtained by the death of the lamb and painted on the doorpost with hyssop (Exod 12:22) protects the inhabitants from death and thereby gives life: “for the life of a creature is in the

³⁸ Zimmermann, “Jesus—the Lamb of God,” 81–82. It is the “root metaphor and orientation point for all John’s other Christological imagery,” according to M. Eugene Boring, *Hearing John’s Voice: Insights for Teaching and Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019), 211.

³⁹ Craig R. Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, and Community*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014), 4.

⁴⁰ Although “no such title is attested in the Hebrew Bible or early Judaism” (Michaels, *Gospel of John*, 109), the motif was familiar within the Johannine community. “Lamb” (though a different word, ἀρνίον, is used, both with and without the definite article) appears twenty-eight times in the book of Revelation.

⁴¹ Redemption of the firstborn (Exod 13:11–13); regular offerings (Exod 29:39–41); peace offering (Lev 3:7). For other regular offerings, see Numbers 28–29. ἀρνός is used 90% of the time in the OT to refer to a sacrificial lamb, according to Stanley E. Porter, *John, His Gospel, and Jesus: In Pursuit of the Johannine Voice* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 207–9. It is found only twice outside of John, in Acts 8:32 quoting Isaiah 53:7 and 1 Peter 1:19, where it refers to Jesus’s atoning work. “The evangelist has chosen the term ‘lamb’ to present Jesus as the one who removes sin by means of his violent death,” writes Maarten J. J. Menken, “‘The Lamb of God’ (John 1,29) in the Light of 1 John 3,4–7,” in *The Death of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel*, ed. Gilbert Van Belle, BETL 200 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2007), 590.

blood” (Lev 17:11). The Passover, where an animal was to be slain (Deut 16:2; 2 Chr 30:15), was to be celebrated annually to remember salvation from death. “The Passover lamb was the cultic and liturgical symbol of Israel’s deliverance. In Judaism, the Passover lamb was not viewed as a sacrifice for sin, but the early church quickly reinterpreted Passover symbolism in light of the eucharist (e.g., 1 Cor 5:7–8).”⁴² The centrality of the exodus in Jewish thought makes the slain Passover lamb an appropriate messianic symbol for John.⁴³

The Passover plays a central role in John.⁴⁴ John indirectly refers to the pascal lamb by reference to Jesus’s legs not being broken at crucifixion as fulfilling a pascal scripture (John 19:32, 36; Exod 12:46)⁴⁵ and by the lifting the hyssop plant to Jesus’s lips (19:29), the hyssop being used to sprinkle blood in an atoning ritual (Exod 12:22; Lev 14:4–7; 52–56). Although John does not elsewhere directly refer to a pascal lamb, salvation from death or perishing is a Johannine theme (3:16; 8:51–52; 10:28). Furthermore, John mentions the Passover in three occasions as a festival in connection with Jesus (2:13, 23; 6:4; 11:55; 12:1; 13:1). In one instance, Jesus tells his audience to eat his flesh, for “whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life” (6:53). The statement echoes Moses’s command to kill the lamb “roasted over the fire, along with bitter herbs, and bread made without yeast” (Exod 12:8).⁴⁶ Jesus ties them together in himself to be eaten in his proto-Eucharistic discourse;⁴⁷ the bread must die (be consumed) in order to give life.⁴⁸

In Isaiah 53, the servant is “led like a lamb [ἀμνός, LXX] to the slaughter... He is cut off from the land of the living; for the sins of my people he was stricken” (Isa 53:7–8). However, death is not his end; though he is crushed, bruised, and made to suffer, and though our sins are laid on him so that “his life is a guilt offering,” yet “he will see the light and be satisfied,” for by his action he “will justify many” (53:10–11). By bearing “the sin of many, he is made intercessor for the sinners” (53:12). It is true that the lamb features specifically in maintaining silence, while the other features apply to the servant, such as bearing away sin.⁴⁹ Yet it is easy to see John through the Baptizer making a broader analogical linkage between the lamb and the sin-bearing servant. John was well aware of Isaiah, here sandwiching the Lamb of God identification between John 1:23 (Isa 40:3, where by extension in v. 5 all will see the glory of the LORD) and 1:34 (Isa 42:1, where all will experience his justice). Elsewhere he quotes Isaiah 53:1, though with a different focus (John 12:38).

⁴² Gail O’Day, *The Gospel of John: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections*, NIB 9 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 528.

⁴³ Friedbert Ninow, *Indicators of Typology within the Old Testament: The Exodus Motif*, Friedensauer Schriftreihe 4 (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2001), 98.

⁴⁴ Loader, *Jesus in John’s Gospel*, 159.

⁴⁵ C. H. Dodd argues that the prophetic fulfilling text, “Not one of his bones will be broken,” while possibly coming from Exodus 12:46, most likely comes from Psalm 34:20, to match other fulfillment quotes from the Psalms. *Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), 233–34.

⁴⁶ The connection of Christ with the Passover lamb was known already in the church (1 Cor 5:7).

⁴⁷ Beasley-Murray, *John*, 95; Brown, *The Gospel According to John I–XII*, 281–94; Dodd, *Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, 338; Kim, “The Concept of Atonement in the Gospel of John,” 22–25.

⁴⁸ Taken as a whole, this evidence runs contrary to Loader’s claim that 1:29 is “not as a reference exclusively or even primarily to his death, nor to his death as a Passover lamb” (*Jesus in John’s Gospel*, 159–60).

⁴⁹ Zimmermann, “Jesus—the Lamb of God,” 85.

The crucifixion scene contains several allusions to Isaiah 52–53. Jesus is raised up (John 19:18; Isa 52:13); is crucified with others (John 19:17; Isa 53:12); speaks briefly only three times but not in protest (John 19:26–27, 28, 30; Isa 53:7); is pierced (John 19:34; Isa 53:5); and voluntarily gives up his life (John 19:30; presaged in 10:11, 15, 17; Isa 53:12).

Zimmermann speculates that the evangelist deliberately uses metaphorical language because, as ambiguous, it allows for diverse and rich ways of understanding what he wants to communicate.⁵⁰ Although other rich associations are present, yet one common theme that pervades all the reference texts is that in the lamb motif we have a vicarious view of salvation from death (Genesis and Exodus) and sin (Isaiah).⁵¹ It is not a mere accident that Jesus is killed on Passover, at the very time that the Passover lamb was slain (19:14). He is the unblemished sheep (John 8:46; Lev 1:10; 4:32) who, as Caiaphas prophesied, “dies for (ὐπὲρ) the people” (11:49–50).⁵² By moving from Caiaphas’s statement to the Passover (11:55), “John has fused the picture of the bleeding Passover Lamb with that of the Suffering Servant ... and conceived of the significance of the cross in the light of this synthesis.”⁵³ An important difference between traditional sacrifice and Jesus’s sacrifice is that in the former the sin-remover was passive; in Jesus’s case he is actively and willingly engaged in sin-removal.⁵⁴ Cross and salvation are linked, not only here but elsewhere. “The notion of Jesus’ death as like a sacrifice for sins ... is present in other literature considered to be the product of the Johannine community.”⁵⁵

John does not tell us how substitutionary atonement works in terms of “taking away” or removing (αἴρων) sin.⁵⁶ Is sin to be understood in a generic sense or as the composite of all individual sins? Given John’s frequent movement between singular and plural, likely both are in view.⁵⁷ Van der Watt sees this lack of account and specificity as reducing the importance of the substitutionary view. “How sin is to be taken away is also not explained in these verses.... This remark by John the Baptist is made at a prominent place in the Gospel, but without sufficient clarity as to the meaning, relationship and functioning of the elements mentioned.”⁵⁸ At the same time, neither does the Old Testament develop the mechanism of atonement as removing sin except in symbolic drama. Both the cross and the cultic sacrifice are dramas of significance, enactments of salvation, not mechanical processes.

⁵⁰ Zimmermann, “Jesus—the Lamb of God,” 90.

⁵¹ “Lamb” is “an old [cultic] symbol being used in a new way,” as noted by Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, SP 4 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical: 1998), 59 n. 29.

⁵² “By this period, Passover lambs seem to be viewed as sacrificial (cf. Josephus, *Ant.* 3.248, 294; 11.110; *J.W.* 6.423)” (Keener, *John*, 16).

⁵³ Ethelbert Stauffer, *New Testament Theology*, trans. John Marsh (London: SCM, 1955), 132. Andreas J. Köstenberger, *A Theology of John’s Gospel and Letters* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 417.

⁵⁴ J. Ramsey Michaels, “Atonement in John’s Gospel and Epistles,” in *The Glory of the Atonement*, eds. Charles E. Hill and Frank A. James III (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 107.

⁵⁵ Loader, *Jesus in John’s Gospel*, 164.

⁵⁶ Some suggest forgiveness (αφίημι), but it is found only once in John (20:23), where Jesus gives his agents power to forgive sins, or better, in line with 1 John 1:9, to dispense God’s forgiveness. The conditional of 1 John is absent here, though it may be implied by John’s contention that sin is unbelief. See Rudolph Bultmann, “αφίημι, etc.” *TDNT* 1:509–12.

⁵⁷ Loader, *Jesus in John’s Gospel*, 152.

⁵⁸ van der Watt, “Salvation in the Gospel according to John,” 117–18.

John makes no direct mention of the sin offering. Yet, although John does not link sin and death as overtly as Paul (Rom 6:21–23), disobedience and death are linked (John 8:51). “It is characteristic of this Gospel, however, that the emphasis in the passage [6:51–54] falls not on Christ’s death *for sin* but on his death *for life*.”⁵⁹ The Gospel is about life, which is in the blood (Lev 17:11), and in the shedding of blood atonement is made and life given. John reiterates this link between blood and life. To drink Jesus’s blood is to have eternal life (6:53–56).⁶⁰ It creates a new identity, a shared life, for the participants are united with Jesus and Jesus with them. Participation in the death of Jesus on the cross, in which he gives his life for (ὑπέρ) the life of the world (6:51), brings life.⁶¹ As in the Levitical offerings, the death of one being, there an animal, here Jesus, substitutes its life for another. Yet, for life to be given, sin and death must be dealt with, which is what in the drama the Lamb vicariously does (1:29; 5:24; 8:51). Believing replaces the sin of unbelief, leading to life overcoming death (8:21–24).⁶²

In short, John symbolically tells us that Jesus engages in substitutionary atonement, repeated by the author of 1 John (3:16), and although John does not provide the detailed mechanism by which this act accomplishes salvation,⁶³ his emphasis falls on the underlying feature that ironically death brings life.⁶⁴ As Turner notes, the Baptizer in “1:29–34 is the *first witness* to Jesus, and so, like the prologue, the one, above all, *through which the rest of John is inevitably read*.”⁶⁵

5. The Shepherd

The sheep motif returns in conjunction with an emphasis on the shepherd of the sheep. Jesus’s death again comes into view in his discourses about the good (ὁ καλός) shepherd (10:11–18). He invests in his sheep, whether in his pen or outside, so that they know him and his voice and willingly follow him (10:3–4, 14). Contrary to the hired hand who tends but does not own the sheep, the good Shepherd looks to benefit and voluntarily risks his life for *his* sheep: “No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord” (10:17). It is not a matter of necessity, but a free act of obedience that becomes a reason why the Father loves him. It is not that the Father would not have loved the Son had he not

⁵⁹ Beasley-Murray, *John*, 94.

⁶⁰ Even if this only refers to the Eucharist (Loader, *Jesus in John’s Gospel*, 169), the Eucharist is the symbolic presentation of the bodily death of Jesus on the cross, tying present celebration with past event.

⁶¹ “The beneficial quality (ὑπέρ) of the death of someone, even in the categories of Jewish martyr theology, can be understood only against the background of the sacrificial concepts of the OT. Exclusively an act of self-sacrifice, the negative fact of death can become a positive event which may produce fruitful results for others,” according to Harald Riesenfeld, “ὑπέρ,” *TDNT* 8:511.

⁶² Sacrifice for sin is not only found in 1:29, it is also specifically reaffirmed in the Johannine literature; see, for example, 1 John 2:2 (αὐτὸς ἱλασμός ἐστιν περὶ τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν ἡμῶν); 4:10 (ἀπέστειλεν τὸν υἱὸν αὐτοῦ ἱλασμὸν περὶ τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν ἡμῶν).

⁶³ “John’s Gospel never articulates a real *doctrine* of atonement. In very general terms, we find recorded here the ‘benefits of his passion,’ but without specifying *how* Jesus’ death ‘gives life to the world’ or *on what basis* he ‘takes away sin’” (Michaels, “Atonement in John’s Gospel and Epistles,” 109). Yet “the atonement theme ... is part of the warp and woof of John’s gospel” (Köstenberger, *A Theology of John’s Gospel and Letters*, 415).

⁶⁴ Dennis, “Jesus’ Death in John’s Gospel,” 341; “John may not emphasize this explanation [about expiation and propitiation for us], but he can barely have failed to realize his readers were likely to assume it” (Max Turner, “Atonement and the Death of Jesus in John—Some Questions to Bultmann and Forestell,” *EvQ* 62 (1990): 122).

⁶⁵ Turner, “Atonement and the Death of Jesus in John,” 121.

willingly died. “John does not mean that the Father loved Christ because the crucifixion took place. However, the love of the Father for the Son is a love that is eternally linked with and mutually dependent upon the Son’s complete alignment with the Father’s will and his obedience even unto death.”⁶⁶ Jesus does not seek to escape his death but willingly absorbs it as part of his mission (12:27–28).

How does the Shepherd’s voluntary death benefit his sheep? On the one hand, his death would not be beneficial, for then they become sheep without shepherd, wanderers (John 16:32; Zech 10:2; Mark 14:27). Jesus is aware of this, for after laying down his life he takes it up again (10:9–10) and eventually returns to take them to the place (metaphor of rooms rather than pastures) he prepared for them (14:3). On the other hand, Jesus’s death benefits as being the means to life. Jesus illustrates this through two analogies. First, in a bread analogy, Jesus came down from heaven and vicariously gives himself (flesh, σάρξ) so that those who eat it will live and not die (6:48–51). The eucharistic nature of the discourse ties Jesus’s death to the cross and eternal life (6:58).⁶⁷ In the second analogy, also tied to the crucifixion, Jesus likens himself to a wheat kernel that, unless it dies, produces nothing. The vicarious death of the kernel makes possible eternal life (12:23–25). The benefit of the Shepherd’s death is the provision of eternal life.

Vicarious death is a central theme of the Gospel; Jesus dies for his friends out of love (15:13),⁶⁸ for the nation (11:50; 18:14),⁶⁹ for those present and scattered (11:49–51), and for the world (3:16–17; 6:51).⁷⁰ John makes other suggestions of vicariousness: in the garden Jesus offers himself for the freedom of his disciples (18:8–9); his life is exchanged for that of Barabbas (18:39–40).⁷¹ Pilate is even rescued from his persistent antagonists by giving up “the man” (19:5). Although the reason in each case may vary, the overall point of these substitutions is that Jesus dies to benefit others, not himself. These statements “form a semantic network, so that the individual statements must be understood not in isolation but only in their consonance in the whole Gospel,” including 1:29.⁷²

Although 10:11–18 contains no explicit statement of an atoning death for sin on behalf of (ὕπερ) others, can vicariousness here be understood as atonement? Van der Watt contends that at best we get insinuation of substitutionary atonement in John; it does not “come into focus at all,” but is “secondary to the revelatory function of the cross events.”⁷³ However, we must see the shepherd motif in light of the entire Gospel presentation, where death results from the sin of unbelief (5:24; 8:51) while becoming children of God and having eternal life grows from belief (1:12; 6:27–29, 40; 3:16; 10:27–28) and where

⁶⁶ Charles K. Barrett, *Essays on John* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982), 377.

⁶⁷ As Bauckham points out, in John, as in the Synoptics, “the ‘eucharistic’ acts are there to interpret the ongoing narrative, giving its sacrificial significance.... [John provides a] very concrete picture of Jesus dying for those who are having supper with him” (*Gospel of Glory*, 67).

⁶⁸ Bauckham, *Gospel of Glory*, 64–71.

⁶⁹ Whether the vicariousness here involves atonement is debated, though in light of John’s multiplicity of meanings, reasonable. Loader, *Jesus in John’s Gospel*, 174–75.

⁷⁰ John intentionally has Greeks coming to worship in Jerusalem immediately after the statement of the Pharisees about belief in 12:19.

⁷¹ Jörg Frey, *The Glory of the Crucified One: Christology and Theology in the Gospel of John*, trans. Wayne Coppins and Christoph Heilig (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2018), 192.

⁷² Frey, *The Glory of the Crucified One*, 188.

⁷³ Van der Watt, “Salvation in the Gospel according to John,” 116. Loader (*Jesus in John’s Gospel*, 172–73) notes other possibilities, including facing rejection in order to reveal the Father, surrendering himself to free his followers, showing that he is good and cares for his own.

the shepherd of the sheep motif relates to the motif of the Lamb addressing sin (1:29). And as we have seen, the lamb motif there suggests a strong and primary connection with the OT cultic offerings. In short, the shepherd narratives must be seen in light of the entire Gospel characterization of Jesus's role in bringing salvation and life.⁷⁴

6. Defeater of the Enemy

The “dying on behalf of” (ὑπέρ) motif may have another interpretation.⁷⁵ Unlike hired shepherds who flee in the face of mortal danger, Jesus voluntarily dies defending the sheep (10:12–13). Interpreted this way, Jesus's death is a deadly battle with the enemy, the thieves and wolves, who threaten the flock. Vicarious death is in view in John 10, but not a death where the one killed bears away the sin of others. Rather, it is a vicarious death by one who, like soldiers, dies defending others from the enemy.⁷⁶ The passage hints at a view of soteriology where in the context of being lifted up Jesus dies battling spiritual forces. The devil comes (14:30) but will be judged, condemned (16:11), and driven out (12:31).⁷⁷

Jesus says, “Take heart! I have overcome the world [κόσμος]” (16:33).⁷⁸ The Gospel is situated amid the cosmic conflict of light and darkness (1:5; 12:35–36). The world is under the influence or hold of the devil, who is a murderer and father of lies (8:44) and who prompted Judas Iscariot to betray Jesus (13:2, 27). John sees the devil behind Jesus's death. The devil's role “will grow louder and louder as the hour of Jesus approaches, until the Passion is presented as the struggle to the death between Jesus and Satan (12:31, 14:40, 16:11, 17:15).”⁷⁹ By killing and thus eliminating Jesus, the evil one contemplated attaining victory. However, the crucifixion is not the end of the narrative; God has the last word by raising Jesus from the dead. Satan is driven out (12:31), Judas disappears unheralded from the scene, and the Shepherd continues his mission via his proxies (21:15–17). Salvation frees us from the power of the devil to adopt the truth (with its double meaning of propositional truth and truth found in a person) that sets one free from sin (8:24, 32–34). The emphasis on truth at Jesus's trial speaks to this: truth conquers lies, betrayal, murder, and death. It enables Jesus's followers to walk in the light, and by believing become children of the light (12:36).

In conquering the devil, John extends his soteriological themes to the conquest of sin. The Jews are slaves of sin (8:34) and by extension slaves to the devil, whose desire is that they sin and not believe the Truth (8:44–47). Thus, the Jews in their parentage stand in opposition to Jesus, who traces his parentage to the Father whom he seeks to obey.

⁷⁴ “The death of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel is understood as a ‘salvation-creating’ act of God, through which the removal of sin, salvation from death, and the opening of new life takes place,” writes Frey, *The Glory of the Crucified One*, 195.

⁷⁵ The application of this interpretation of ὑπέρ in 6:51; 11:50–52; and 15:13 would be strained.

⁷⁶ Michaels, “Atonement in John's Gospel and Epistles,” 110.

⁷⁷ Andrew T. Lincoln, *Truth on Trial: The Lawsuit Motif in the Fourth Gospel* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000), 258.

⁷⁸ George L. Parsenios discusses the fusion of future and past events in the narrative, which is written from a post-resurrection perspective (“‘No Longer in the World’ [John 17:11]: The Transformation of the Tragic in the Fourth Gospel,” *HTR* 98 (2005): 6–7). See R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), ch. 3.

⁷⁹ Brown, *The Gospel According to John XIII–XXI*, 354 n. 8.

But how, one might ask, do Jesus's death and resurrection win the cosmic battle and the subjugation of evil powers?⁸⁰ Part of the answer is that although Jesus died, his resurrection reveals that the devil "has no hold on" him (14:30). Jesus's death and resurrection foretold our own victory over the evil power and his works by our sharing in Jesus's victory and resurrection.⁸¹ "Because I live, you also will live.... I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you" (14:19–20). Again, salvation for John addresses the theme of giving life (11:25–26).

7. *The Healer*

From John's analogy of Jesus being lifted up with Moses raising the bronze serpent so that those who gaze on it are healed (John 3:14; Num 21:8–9), we glimpse salvation as healing, a view generally overlooked in formal treatments of salvation and atonement.⁸² Sickness and sin are connected in the OT.⁸³ The psalmist writes, "Have mercy on me, LORD; heal me, for I have sinned against you" (Ps 41:4). Sin begets suffering, though not all suffering results from sin, as the book of Job makes clear. The Levitical laws did not require a sin offering for every illness, only for those that were prolonged or possibly contagious.⁸⁴ However, this connection continues into the NT worldview (John 5:14; 9:1–2; Jas 5:13–16).

Themes from Isaiah 52–53 again are relevant. In being lifted up (John 12:32; Isa 52:13), Jesus takes on "our infirmities and carries our sorrows," to the extent that "we consider him stricken by God, smitten by him and afflicted.... By his wounds we are healed" (Isa 53:4–5; John 19:1–3, 34). Isaiah's diagnosis is that we are without well-being, for we are a sinful people (Isa 1:2–4).

Sickness describes not only our spiritual condition but our physical, economic, political, social, and environmental conditions. In his dramatic stories, John records a litany of persons lacking well-being: a wedding host, temple merchants, an ostracized woman, an official's son, an invalid, hungry listeners, terrified disciples, a blind man and blind Pharisees, Lazarus, betraying Judas, impetuously denying Peter, and doubting Thomas. The biblical view is that restoration is needed—of individuals, the people (Isa 10:21), their land (2 Chr 7:14; Joel 2:25), their institutions (Hos 6:6–7)—for their spiritual and physical health (Ps 41:3–4, 8). The sufficient condition is to turn to God who restores—"I am the LORD, your Healer" (Exod 15:26). When the LORD comes, "No one living in Zion will say, 'I am ill'; and the sins of those who dwell there will be forgiven" (Isa 33:24).

⁸⁰ "The cosmic significance of Christ's work is ontologically more fundamental than its soteriological significance," according to Gregory A. Boyd, "Christus Victor View," in *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views*, eds. James Beilby and Paul R. Eddy (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 33.

⁸¹ "In [Second Temple] Jewish texts, the defeat of Satan is part of the events of the end of the age, but for John, Satan's defeat, consistent with John's realized eschatology, comes as a result of the cross event.... Satan is 'cast down/out'; that is, his power and subterfuge over those who believe are decisively defeated in the cross," according to John Dennis, "The 'Lifting Up of the Son of Man' and the Dethroning of the 'Ruler of this World': Jesus' Death as the Defeat of the Devil in John 12:31–32," in *The Death of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel*, ed. G. Van Belle (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2007), 685.

⁸² Bruce R. Reichenbach, "Healing View," in *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views*, eds. James Beilby and Paul R. Eddy (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 129–37.

⁸³ Michael L. Brown, *Israel's Divine Healer* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).

⁸⁴ Megory Anderson and Philip Culbertson, "The Inadequacy of the Christian Doctrine of Atonement in Light of Levitical Sin Offering," *AThR* 68 (1986): 308–9.

John develops the link between sickness, healing, and salvation in four healing stories. In the drama of Jesus and the official with the dying son, Jesus proclaims, “Your son will live” (4:50). John twice repeats the phrase for a total of three (three being symbolic of completion). Here John bonds his central themes of believing, life, and salvation (3:16–17) with healing; Jesus gives life to the son through the official’s believing response to Jesus’s promise.⁸⁵

In the second healing story (5:1–15), Jesus comes to a porticoed healing pool located near the temple, where he encounters a man paralyzed for thirty-eight years. Jesus asks the invalid if he wants to be made well or whole (ὕγις), a term not ordinarily used for healing but whose double meaning manifests a typical Johannine play on words.⁸⁶ The invalid, understanding the question from the below-perspective of human experience affirms his desire to become physically well.⁸⁷ Jesus offers this and more: wholeness as salvation seen from above, for when the former paralytic returns, Jesus commands him to sin no more (5:14). Salvation as healing from sin restores to wholeness, but it requires persistent attention to prevent the sin that attacked the wholeness from returning (8:11).

The third healing story also conjoins healing with sin (9:1–3). On the one hand, the disciples initiate the discussion by asking whose sin precipitated the man’s blindness, and the Pharisees accuse the formerly blind man of being conceived in sin (9:34). On the other hand, as the story goes from scene to scene, the Pharisees and people ponder whether the healer of the blind man is the sinner, since he healed on the Sabbath (9:16, 24–25, 31). Despite Jesus rejecting the view that the man’s sin caused his blindness,⁸⁸ the relation between the two lies in the background. In the end, from the from-above perspective, believing leads to sight and worship; disbelieving to spiritual blindness (9:40–41). The drama finishes with Jesus doing God’s work, the sin of unbelieving, and the possibility and actuality of healing.

In the final healing story, the disciples inquire whether Lazarus will be healed or saved (σωθήσεται), whether from the illness or from death is unclear (11:6, 11). The double meaning of from below and from above is again evident. Jesus, who is the resurrection and the life (11:25–26), brings physical and salvific life out of death.

Two other passages may allude to salvation by healing. In 13:10 the source of purification (καθαρός) is not given; in 15:3 purification comes through Jesus’s word (λόγος). In neither case does John make clear from what we are cleansed, although he gives the purpose of bearing fruit in 15:3. This same word (καθαρίζω) is used by Matthew to refer to the healing or purification/cleansing of lepers (Matt 8:2; 10:8; 11:5), whose unclean, diseased status prevents them from participating in religious rituals. Given John’s penchant for double meaning, it is very possible that from the perspective-from-above, salvation as healing/purification/cleansing is in view in these verses.⁸⁹

⁸⁵ John Christopher Thomas, “Healing in the Atonement: A Johannine Perspective,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 14 (2005): 27.

⁸⁶ Thomas, “Healing in the Atonement,” 27.

⁸⁷ Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel*, 6. This distinction of origins—between being from above and being from this world (below)—is central to Jesus’s thought (3:31; 8:23).

⁸⁸ Rightly so, since no longer were the sins of parents to be visited on their children (Ezek 18:4, 20), and for the blind man to have sinned required him to pre-exist, which was a Greek notion.

⁸⁹ The theme of cleansing from sin and impurity is found in Zechariah 13:1, which some take as concluding the previous prophecy (Zech 12:10–14). John 19:34 is thought to echo Zechariah 12:10, where “some think the

In the OT, although sickness connected with sin, the Levitical system was not designed to provide healing for persons with infectious diseases (Lev 13–14), and the priests were not healers but rather certifiers that healing had occurred. When certified as healed, the ill were to return to the community with a burnt and a sin or guilt offering, which the priest used to atone for the sin related to their disease. The offering involved bodily washing and sprinkling with blood, which symbolically and ceremonially purified the impure person (Lev 14:7–8, 14). Thus, it is symbolic that on the cross, when Jesus was pierced, blood and water—both symbols of purification—flow from his body (19:34).

For John, sickness is not only individual, as our examples illustrate, but also cosmic, in line with the Old Testament. Jesus came to save the κόσμος (3:16), a word that John presents in the Prologue as having multiple meanings. The Word enters the cosmos which he created to bring light; but the cosmos, understood as the world inhabitants, is in sin (1:29) and does not recognize him (1:9,10); in unbelieving it chooses darkness rather than light (3:19). However, John's primary salvific emphasis is on individuals in the cosmos, for their belief in what God has done (3:21) is sufficient to save.

John does not theorize about salvation as healing. Rather, through careful construction of his four dramatic healing narratives he *shows* how Jesus's saving action brings healing, physical and spiritual. "His initiative to heal, restore, and give life dominates the narrative."⁹⁰ The healings are also signs, part of the double dimension that permeates the Gospel. They attest not only to Jesus's identity but also to his mission and thus are an intrinsic part of the drama of the first part of the Gospel.⁹¹ Ironically, in the Lazarus account, John hints by Jesus's weeping that the giver of life will himself need the Father's resurrection healing (11:35). However, although John speaks of healing in connection with the lifted-up motif, John leaves unclear how healing relates to Jesus's crucifixion. This may not be unexpected in a culture where conjunction of events was more familiar and possible than detailing a causal relation.

8. A Soteriological Dramatic Medley

As Alan Culpepper notes, it is important, in considering soteriology in the Gospel of John, that we don't import traditional or contemporary theories of salvation into the text. "Reading ancient texts faithfully, while reading with contemporary issues and sensitivities in mind, is always tricky.... The Gospel of John ... is subtle and paradoxical, presenting differing perspectives without reconciling them."⁹² Although the evangelist does not directly exposit a theory of salvation, hints of what later theologians treat as soteriological theories run through the Gospel as the drama develops from seeing the Lamb to its death. As the apostle Paul does not shy away from mixing soteriological motifs (Rom 5:9–11), so John dramatizes diverse ways of understanding salvation.

From statements about the Lamb of God, we glimpse salvation as vicarious substitution. "The animal victim is a substitute for the worshipper, makes atonement for him, and thereby restores him

pierced one is the same as the suffering servant of Isa 53," according to Ralph L. Smith, *Micah-Malachi*, WBC 32 (Dallas: Word, 1982), 278.

⁹⁰ Marianne Meye Thompson, "Christus Victor: The Salvation of God and the Cross of Christ," *Theology, News & Notes* 59.2 (2012), 10.

⁹¹ Jean Zumstein, "The Purpose of the Ministry and Death of Jesus," in *Oxford Handbook of Johannine Studies*, ed. Judith Lieu (London: Oxford University Press, 2018), 336.

⁹² R. Alan Culpepper, "Inclusivism and Exclusivism in the Fourth Gospel," in *Word, Theology, and Community in John*, eds. John Painter, R. Alan Culpepper, and Fernando F. Segovia (St. Louis: Chalice, 2002), 85.

to favour with God.”⁹³ The lamb is sacrificed on our behalf for the removal of our sins, its death for our death, giving us life. Our sins are transferred in some way to the sacrificed animal and taken away. John also sees that salvation has a conquest dimension. The world, the place of lies, darkness, and death, is overcome (16:33). Although in one sense, on the cross (being lifted up) the battle is finished (12:31–32), in another sense it has just begun. It becomes the ongoing work of the Spirit to expose that the devil is condemned (16:11). The Gospel of John portrays Jesus as a divine healer. Jesus takes on himself our sin and the sickness of the world and bears it, suffering, to the cross to bring about healing (1 Pet 2:24).

Although John does not reconcile these salvation motifs, what holds them all together is this Gospel’s central concept of life. Salvation is giving life (3:16), overcoming death (perishing) and the one who occasions death and resists the truth (8:44). Since sin is the sickness unto death, only (3:14, 12:34) by Jesus being lifted up (both crucified [12:32–33] and resurrected [10:17–18]) and by the world’s believing in him can the sickness be removed and life (both qualitative and quantitative) restored (3:14–15).

However, how this is accomplished through Jesus’s death John leaves unsaid. Thus, in the end we must move from theory and return to the dramatic narrative itself, which conveys John’s testimonial argument for his thesis about Jesus’s messianic mission. The story of the cross is the climax of Jesus’s victory over sin, sickness, and the devil. In this John gives us not so much a theology as a drama of salvation. Through symbol, metaphor, and story, he affirms that we attain a new parentage, not from earthly parents but from above. In rebirth, we do not reenter the natural order, but by our believing in and receiving Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God, we are united with Jesus in life and death, and thereby gain new parentage through a new origin from above, a new identity as children of God, abundant life, and a new mission of obedient discipleship (21:19, 22).

⁹³ Gordon J. Wenham, “The Theology of Old Testament Sacrifice,” in *Sacrifice in the Bible*, eds. Roger T. Beckwith and Martin J. Selman (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2004), 84.