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Picturing the Son: The Cognitive and Affective Dimensions of Biblical Imagery

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Editors' Note: *Michael Travers*[1] *was, above all else, a humble and committed Christian. He labored for decades in the world of Christian higher education with zeal and faithfulness as a teacher, scholar, and administrator. He devoted much of his scholarship to understanding how the literary artistry of the Bible contributes to its truthfulness and beauty. Most notably, he published a book entitled* Encountering God in the Psalms *in which he helps readers see how the literary qualities of the Psalms enhance their devotional power. Soon after Michael's death in 2017, his colleague and friend Andrew Spencer came across a paper Michael had delivered at the 2016 meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in Providence, Rhode Island, under the title "'A Lamb Standing as Though It Had Been Slain': Poetic Images of God the Son in the Bible." As Spencer told me in a recent email exchange,*

> *I found the previously unpublished essay while sorting through Michael's personal papers as I prepared a biographical chapter for his Gedenkschrift,* The Christian Mind of C. S. Lewis: Essays in Honor of Michael Travers *(Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2019). This paper reflected Michael's longtime interest in studying both theology and the Bible as literature. It reflected his commitment to the truthfulness of Scripture and the spiritual benefit of the beauty of Scripture. Like his book* Encountering God in the Psalms, *this essay was a study in how to grow in Christ by loving the Bible as a work of literature.*

When he found out that Adrianne Miles and I planned to assemble a special issue of Southeastern Theological Review *on the topic of Literature and the Bible, Spencer reached out and asked if we would be interested in including the conference paper in the issue. As a former student, colleague, and friend of Michael's, I jumped at the chance. In consultation with STR's senior editor, Ben Merkle, and with the blessing of Michael's widow, Barbara Travers, Adrianne and I decided the paper would be a perfect fit for the issue. However, because it was written for an oral presentation, the paper was not heavily researched or structured as a journal article. To get it in shape would require significant revision. Once again with Barbara's blessing, I set out to situate Michael's central argument and exegeses in a broader scholarly conversation. The result is the essay you will find below: "Picturing the Son: The Cognitive and Affective Dimensions of Biblical Imagery." The key terms "cognitive" and "affective" come from Michael's original conclusion. The organization of the essay into two major subsections was Michael's plan as well, with the first part focused on images that picture the role of Jesus and the second on images that picture the relation of Jesus to his people. Thus, the spirit of the argument and the substance of the readings remain Michael's. The framing of that argument in the introduction and conclusion and the secondary research that now informs it throughout come from my efforts to situate Michael's paper at the intersection of two conversations, one on New Testament uses of the Old Testament and the other on the hermeneutical significance of poetic language in the Bible. Though I couldn't give an exact breakdown of how many words are his and how many are mine, for anyone who knew Michael or has read his work, there are moments when his voice is nearly audible. Though this was among the most challenging projects on which I have ever worked, I was blessed to learn from Michael yet again. I pray you will be as well.* (Matthew Mullins, Fall 2021)

[1] See https://betweenthetimes.sebts.edu/?s=travers.

Abstract: *Scholars have devoted significant attention to how New Testament writers utilize the Hebrew Bible and, specifically, to how they reuse poetic language to make historical and theological cases for the deity of Jesus Christ and his status as the promised Messiah of the Old Testament. Scholars have also made extensive and compelling arguments for the distinctiveness of poetic language in forming and conveying meaning. This essay asks how the distinctively poetic nature of images drawn from the Old Testament and employed in the New Testament contributes to the historical and theological claims surrounding the representation of Jesus Christ as the Son of God and promised Messiah. We argue that imagery expands the cognitive claims of theology and history through its appeals to the affections, calling readers both to acknowledge and to know Christ.*

Key Words: *imagery, meaning, Messiah, New Testament, poetic language, Son of God*

In the New Testament, Jesus's name and various titles point to his divine role as the one sent to bring salvation. Christopher Wright notes that the name "Jehoshua (Joshua, Jeshua—or in its Greek form, Jesus)" literally means "*Jahweh is salvation*."[2] The monikers "the Christ" and "Messiah" designate an anointed or sent one. Beyond names and titles, the writers of Scripture also use a range of images to create a picture of God the Son as an anointed one sent to live, die, and conquer death on behalf of humankind. How can the most common images used to represent Jesus help readers develop a more robust understanding of the second person of the Trinity? Poetic imagery is essential to helping readers imagine

[2] Christopher J. H. Wright, *Salvation Belongs to Our God: Celebrating the Bible's Central Story* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2007), 50.

and relate to the triune God because rather than simply telling us about God as Father, Son, and Spirit, these images provide us with pictures that appeal to the imagination. There are thus both cognitive and affective dimensions to the imagery of the Son of God in Scripture. The cognitive dimensions develop literary and historical connections between Jesus and the promised Messiah spoken of in the Hebrew Bible, while the affective dimensions cultivate readers' affections for Jesus as the Messiah so that we might call on him for salvation. The literary nature of these images facilitates an understanding of who Christ is and what he has done, even as it seeks to move readers to faith as a result.

This dual nature of imagery—what we might call its informational and formational nature—is at the heart of our argument. The Scriptures are intended not only to tell us information about God but also to form our love of God, and a literary approach is especially well suited to grasping both dimensions. A literary approach to the Scriptures is, in the most basic sense, one that sees form as integral to content. As Adele Berlin says of parallelism, so we would say of literary style more broadly and of imagery in particular: imagery "itself does not have meaning; but it structures the meaning of the signs of which it is composed."[3] Attending to literary style is thus integral to understanding the meaning of a given text. Such an approach assumes that if a poetic image is used to communicate something about the Son of God, for instance, then there must be something important about that particular image and not only whatever abstract proposition it may communicate *about* the Son of God. While some with a high view of Scripture may object that a literary approach threatens to draw readers away from the historicity and facticity of the Bible and to flatten differences between the Bible and any other work of literature, David Beldman maintains that "one of the marvels of our God is that we hear his voice as it is mediated through human writers, using the conventions of literary composition at their disposal. Thus, as we read the Bible *as any other book* we will recognize it as *unlike any other book*."[4] To attend to the figurative nature of some of the language found in Scripture is thus not to emphasize the role of human authorship to the exclusion of divine authorship but to grapple with the significance of what Kenton Sparks

[3] Adele Berlin, *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 138.

[4] David J. H. Beldman, "Literary Approaches and Old Testament Interpretation," in *Hearing the Old Testament: Listening for God's Address*, ed. Craig G. Bartholomew and David J. H. Beldman (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 71 (emphasis original).

calls "God's word in human words."[5]

Our primary contribution concerns the images from the Hebrew Bible used to characterize the Son of God in the New Testament. In his *Handbook on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, G. K. Beale offers twelve main purposes for which the New Testament writers make use of the Old Testament:

1. To indicate direct fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy
2. To indicate indirect fulfillment of Old Testament typological prophecy
3. To indicate affirmation that a not-yet-fulfilled Old Testament prophecy will assuredly be fulfilled in the future
4. To indicate an analogical or illustrative use of the Old Testament
5. To indicate the symbolic use of the Old Testament
6. To indicate an abiding authority carried over from the Old Testament
7. To indicate a proverbial use of the Old Testament
8. To indicate a rhetorical use of the Old Testament
9. To indicate the use of an Old Testament segment as a blueprint or prototype for a New Testament segment
10. To indicate an alternate textual use of the Old Testament
11. To indicate an assimilated use of the Old Testament
12. To indicate an ironic or inverted use of the Old Testament[6]

By examining the literary function of poetic images drawn from the Old Testament and employed in the New Testament, we hope to add to this list an additional use: to help readers come "to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and the participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead" (Phil 3:10–11).[7] That is, we hope to emphasize the affective and formational power of these literary devices. New Testament writers utilized a range of Old Testament images to describe the incarnated and ascended Son of God both to establish a clear connection between the long-awaited Messiah and Jesus of Nazareth and to characterize

[5] Kenton Sparks, *God's Word in Human Words: An Evangelical Appropriation of Critical Biblical Scholarship* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008).

[6] G. K. Beale, *Handbook on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament: Exegesis and Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 55–93.

[7] All biblical citations come from the *New International Version*.

him as a source of reassurance, comfort, boldness, authority, love, and—ultimately—salvation.

In the analyses that follow, we explore six images used to characterize the Son of God in the New Testament. The first four—bread of life, shepherd, lamb, temple—focus on the role of the Son, who he is in history and in the divine order of things. The last two images—vine and bridegroom—emphasize the relation of the Son to the people of God. In each case, we briefly examine connections between the Old Testament and New Testament uses of the image in question in some of the traditional ways cataloged by Beale before offering an interpretation of the image as a literary appeal to the imagination and an affective invitation to know Christ.

"Who do you say I am?": Images That Picture the Role of Jesus

Bread of Life

When Jesus asks his disciples the pointed question "who do you say I am?" in Matt 16:13–20, Peter famously answers, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (v. 16). Peter's answer was direct, making use of the formal name for the promised savior. But Christ often spoke of himself using figurative language during his earthly ministry. Some of the images that come immediately to mind are the famous "I am" statements that Jesus may well have offered in answer to his own question—important because they declare him to be Yahweh, or God incarnate, the covenant-keeping One. Christ's New Testament "I am" statements are typically followed by predicate nominatives: for instance, "I am the living water," "I am the good shepherd," "I am the bread of life." This last proclamation, made in John 6:35, is a declaration of deity, an identification with Yahweh in the Old Testament, and a foreshadowing of the coming substitutionary sacrifice of his body on behalf of sinners. He makes this claim about himself following the feeding of the five thousand and, in his conversation with the people, alludes to himself as the Old Testament manna on which the Hebrews subsisted in the wilderness: "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world" (John 6:51). Here, in the image of the bread, Jesus announces himself as the ultimate fulfillment of Yahweh's provision for his people in the Old Testament.

The image of the bread of life represents a historical and theological claim, especially in John's Gospel. Jesus overtly declares that he is the very "bread that came down from heaven" (6:41) and that he is superior to the

Old Testament manna: "Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, yet they died. But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which anyone may eat and not die" (6:49–50). Bolstering the arguments of scholars who read John 6:51c–58 christologically, Meredith Warren situates the images in this passage in the historical and literary context of the Greco-Roman age: "Other heroes in the classical world become associated with gods and goddesses through ritual sacrifice."[8] And so, when Jesus claims, shockingly, that he is the bread of life and that those who wish to live must eat his flesh, Warren argues that the passage is using "the sacrificial language of consuming flesh and drinking blood in order to make claims about Jesus' divine identity."[9] Jesus is God, John's Gospel insists.

But the image of the bread is also an invitation to know Christ intimately. Just as the Hebrews relied on the manna for daily sustenance, Jesus's use of the bread of life imagery suggests that those who would follow him must partake of his very essence. At their final meal together in Luke's account, Jesus holds up literal bread as a figurative representation of himself: "And he took the bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me'" (Luke 22:19). As the manna once sustained the Hebrews, so the body of Christ would be given for the world. The bread in the hands of Jesus is at once both literal and figurative, a thing and an image. By enjoining the disciples to partake of the bread "in remembrance" of himself, Jesus makes the meal into a memorial that can be rehearsed again and again in other times and at other places. The bread—which is consumed so that our bodies may be nourished and so that we may live—invites readers of the Gospel and those gathered around tables anywhere to imagine Christ's sacrifice whenever we eat. Theological truth is thus brought to life as it must have been for those around that table whenever they broke bread after that night. To hold the bread thereafter must have invoked mixed feelings of sorrow and gratitude. Modern readers, through prayer and reading, may come to know Christ so intimately that we too might experience such mixed emotions whenever we gather at the table.

Shepherd

Where Christ's representation of himself as the bread of life recalls the historical manna from heaven in Exodus, the New Testament images of Jesus as good shepherd place him squarely in line with imagery used to picture Yahweh in the Old Testament. Kenneth Bailey has pointed out

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[8] Meredith J. C. Warren, *My Flesh Is Meat Indeed: A Nonsacramental Reading of John 6:51–58* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 20.

[9] Warren, *My Flesh Is Meat Indeed*, 22.

that any study of the good shepherd image "invites its readers on a thousand-year journey" and can be traced from Psalm 23 to 1 Peter 5.[10] In each case, the figure of the shepherd is used to help the audience understand and relate to God as protector, leader, host, and redeemer, reminding us that such complexity makes poetic language rich. This complexity is especially important in understanding the image of the shepherd, as Timothy Laniak observes, because "shepherding has a figurative meaning in certain contemporary religious settings where it has been 'applied' in reductionist ways. … Such associations have their relative merits, but they are not anchored in or controlled by the cultural realities and texts of the biblical world."[11] We examine two New Testament uses of the shepherd imagery, one from John's Gospel and one from Peter's first epistle, in a way that honors the inextricability of those "cultural realities" and the literary artistry of the biblical texts.

The good shepherd imagery in the Gospel of John can be read as an allusion both to well-known literary tropes like that found in Psalm 23 as well as to the temple sacrifices used to expiate sin since the figure of the shepherd also recalls that of the lamb. The shepherd imagery in 1 Peter 5:4 represents Christ as "Chief Shepherd" of the church and looks forward to his eschatological return. Jesus is thus both the once and future shepherd in the New Testament. The image of the shepherd, then, not only compresses multiple important theological ideas into one figure but also provides comfort for believers that he will take care of his own and one day return to gather them all together under his final protection.

In John's account, Jesus offers an extended metaphor representing himself as the shepherd. In the opening verses, the shepherd is contrasted with the thief: "anyone who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep" (John 10:1b–2). The shepherd is also contrasted with the "stranger": "When [the shepherd] has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice" (10:4–5). Bailey distinguishes between the thief and the stranger: "the 'stranger' is not a 'thief.' The thief gives the sheep no choice. He steals the sheep by force. The 'stranger' represent [sic] voices that call out every morning offering other options to the sheep."[12] Jesus represents

[10] Kenneth E. Bailey, *The Good Shepherd: A Thousand-Year Journey from Psalm 23 to the New Testament* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2014), 22.

[11] Timothy S. Laniak, *Shepherds After My Own Heart: Pastoral Traditions and Leadership in the Bible*, NSBT 20 (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006), 21.

[12] Bailey, *The Good Shepherd*, 219.

himself as the shepherd who protects his flock from both thieves and strangers, that is, from those who would steal them away as well as those who would lure them away. The primary means by which he does this is his voice, which the sheep know anywhere. Twice more in this passage he goes on to claim that "I am the good shepherd" (10:11, 14), and four times he insists that he lays down his life for the sheep (10:15, 17, 18 [2x]). Jesus is at once the shepherd and the sacrifice. The image would have been ubiquitous to Jesus's audience and to the Gospel's original audience as well. Jesus is protector and leader to those who know him. And so, when Peter exhorts the elders among the church to "Be shepherds of God's flock" (1 Pet 5:2a), he is encouraging them both to protect and lead their people and to imitate Jesus. This connection is clear in Peter's reference to Jesus as the Chief Shepherd: "when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away" (5:4). Jesus is the shepherd the psalmist once wrote about and the one who is returning at the coming of the kingdom.

When Jesus uses the shepherd as a "figure of speech" in John 10, we are told that "the Pharisees did not understand what he was telling them" (10:6). This detail suggests that the Pharisees are sheep who do not recognize the voice of the shepherd; they are not among the flock that daily goes in and out the gate at the call of the shepherd's voice. In poetic fashion, the image of the shepherd also has aural implications. It calls to mind both the sights and sounds of shepherds leading their flocks through the gates. To know the voice of the shepherd requires the daily habituation of hearing that voice until it becomes distinct from all others at the slightest call. As in Psalm 23, though the terrain and time may vary widely, the sheep know the shepherd's voice because they follow it daily. In this way, John 10 and 1 Peter 5 employ the image of the shepherd as both a theological claim to know who Jesus is and a spiritual invitation to know him as the sheep know their shepherd. Like all poetic figures of speech, this image employs a familiar figure to make an abstract and unfamiliar figure visible, legible, knowable. We can relate to and know Jesus as we relate to and know other shepherd-like figures in our lives. The difference is that Jesus is the once and future Good Shepherd.

Lamb

Of all the images for Jesus, the lamb is perhaps most clearly a picture of salvation drawn from the Hebrew Bible. The lamb is the primary sacrifice from Exodus on, and the book of Isaiah famously speaks of the suffering servant "led like a lamb to the slaughter" (53:7). In this passage, the prophet writes of the promised one who will lay down his life as the unblemished sacrifice for God's people: "as a sheep before its shearers is

silent, so he did not open his mouth" (53:7).[13] John the Baptist uses the same image when Christ comes walking toward him after overcoming the wilderness temptations: "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29 and again in 1:36). When Philip encounters the Ethiopian official by the side of the road from Jerusalem to Gaza, this is the passage the man is reading, and Philip uses it to tell "him the good news about Jesus" (Acts 8:35). Both New Testament accounts present Christ as the Son of God and savior by identifying him with the Old Testament sacrificial lamb. The New Testament writers use this Old Testament image to indicate Jesus as the Son of God.

The fact that the New Testament writers make these well-known symbols from the Hebrew Bible (lamb, shepherd, bread, etc.) into images in their own writing about Jesus is possible because images allow for multiple levels of meaning; they are irreducible. Literary critics after John Keats refer to the multiplicity of meanings in aesthetic forms as "negative capability": a capability of "being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason."[14] As both a property of works of art and as a capacity of viewers, negative capability refers to the irreducible complexity of art. The New Testament writers rely on this irreducibility to repurpose Old Testament images with existing historical significance toward new ends in the person of Jesus Christ. In her study of paschal lamb imagery in the Gospel of John, Dorothy Lee synthesizes a range of scholarship on biblical imagery and hermeneutics by claiming that "symbolism is not easily located in singular meaning but opens itself, by definition, to a 'surplus of meaning' that exceeds intentionality or design."[15] This "opening up" does not mean that interpretation is impossible or that meaning is relativistic in a facile sense. "On the contrary," Lee continues, "core symbols possess cognitive content, and have a religious rationale that can in one sense be translated, albeit inadequately."[16] Thus, New Testament writers can reuse images from the Hebrew Bible, drawing on their traditional meaning and extending that meaning to account for the coming of the Messiah. In the image of the lamb, the need for sacrifice

[13] We should note that not all scholars agree that the lamb imagery in Isaiah alludes to that found in the Pentateuch. The arguments for and against this connection are summarized in Jeremy Schipper, "Interpreting the Lamb Imagery in Isaiah 53," *JBL* 132.2 (2013): 315–17.

[14] John Keats, "A Letter to George and Thomas Keats," in *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*, ed. David H. Richter (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), 320.

[15] Dorothy Lee, "Paschal Imagery in the Gospel of John: A Narrative and Symbolic Reading," *Pacifica* 24 (February 2011): 14.

[16] Lee, "Paschal Imagery in the Gospel of John," 14.

is maintained from Old to New Testament, but the figurative language resists singular meaning and creates space for the image to be reused and reimagined across space and time for a broad range of audiences.

Imagery is thus integral not only to recognizing Jesus as the Son of God and savior of the world but also to calling on him and communing with him. "In a religious context," Lee argues, "it brings meaning into being, becoming the bridge between divine and human."[17] Just as the paschal lamb is both literal and symbolic, so too does Jesus's death function both literally and symbolically. And it is the irreducibility of the image of the lamb that the New Testament writers use to make this connection. Images—regardless of whether they function symbolically in a given instance—are not mere decoration for ideas. Historical, political, literary, cultural, and religious significance is wrapped up in the image of the lamb that cannot be disentangled from that image and that cannot quite be articulated so concisely and precisely in explanatory writing. Jesus is not merely the new sacrifice; he is not simply the object of cultural memory; he *is* the lamb. He takes on himself the weight of the community, the sins that separate us from God. What separates Jesus-as-lamb from the sacrificial lambs of the Hebrew Bible is that, as Schipper observes in his interpretation of Isaiah 53, "the servant is 'acquainted with' sickness (v. 3), he 'bears' the sickness of others (v. 4), and is 'crushed with' sickness (v. 10)."[18] In Schipper's argument, this language is important because it suggests that the image of the lamb in Isaiah is distinct from that found in the Pentateuch. Only spotless lambs could be used as sacrifices, but the lamb in Isaiah is not spotless. The implication is not that Jesus was imperfect but that he was "acquainted" with the pain and suffering that attends human imperfection. Simultaneously, this observation affirms the irreducibility of poetic imagery *and* reveals how Jesus-as-lamb is renewing the very reality of sacrifice. Jesus can relate to us because he not only "bears" our sickness but also is "acquainted with" it himself. He is not merely the promised one, the Son of God, the Savior; we can cast our cares on him because he knows what it means to care for us.

Temple

In the Old Testament economy, the temple is the place where God meets with his people, where he demonstrates his presence among them. In the New Testament, when Christ cleansed the Jerusalem temple of the money changers, he was asked for a sign to demonstrate his authority. He replied, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days" (John 2:19). The temple, in Christ's usage, is at once a literal and historical entity

[17] Lee, "Paschal Imagery in the Gospel of John," 14.

[18] Schipper, "Interpreting the Lamb Imagery in Isaiah 53," 323.

and an image of his body and coming sacrifice. John's Gospel goes on to say that after Christ was raised from the dead on the third day, his disciples remembered and believed. Jesus's representation of himself as the temple is thus an image of salvation. Wright cites Peter's sermon in the temple in Acts 4 to bolster his claim that "in Acts, in the courts of the temple itself, Peter declared that salvation is now to be found exclusively in Jesus. Jesus has become the new temple—the locus of all salvation."[19] Or, as Peter explains with another image, Jesus is "the stone that was rejected … which has become the cornerstone" (Acts 4:11). In his life and resurrection, Christ is associated with the temple, even superseding the temple by embodying salvation in himself. The image of the temple, then, is an instance in which, as Tremper Longman contends, "images … serve to bring our attention to old truths in new ways."[20] The old truth of the temple as the meeting place between God and God's people is reimagined in the person of the Son of God.

The image of the temple employed in John's Gospel and in Acts accomplishes a number of the uses of the Old Testament as outlined by Beale in its clear references to the earthly temples envisioned, planned, and built/rebuilt in the Hebrew Bible. But Joseph Greene argues that the "Fourth Gospel presents Jesus as the fulfillment of the temple by closely associating Jesus with the *heavenly* temple more than the earthly temple. Jesus embodies the heavenly (proto?) antitype to which all previous Jewish worship centers pointed."[21] As a picture of the earthly or heavenly temple, temple imagery represents Jesus as the embodiment of the meeting place between God and God's people. "By presenting Jesus as embodying the heavenly temple," Greene suggests, "the Fourth Evangelist offers his readers more than simply a replacement to the earthly temple. Through the *glorified* Jesus, believers continue to have access to the true, heavenly temple and the eschatological blessings that flow from it."[22] The significance of the temple as an image of the Son of God is thus irreducible to a specific site when seen through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, and this new understanding enlivens the "old truth" of God's presence with his people.

The temple in the time of Jesus was not only a place of worship; it was also an enduring sign of the return from exile and the hope of the people. It was a temple rebuilt against great odds: "The Books of Ezra-Nehemiah

[19] Wright, *Salvation Belongs to Our God*, 179.

[20] Tremper Longman, *Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 132.

[21] Joseph R. Greene, "Jesus as the Heavenly Temple in the Fourth Gospel," *BBR* 28.3 (2018): 426.

[22] Greene, "Jesus as the Heavenly Temple in the Fourth Gospel," 446.

reveal that the community that attempted to rebuild the temple experienced numerous difficulties and frustrations."[23] The emotions expressed at the laying of the foundation are complex:

> And all the people gave a great shout of praise to the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid. But many of the older priests and Levites and family heads, who had seen the former temple, wept aloud when they saw the foundation of this temple being laid, while many others shouted for joy. No one could distinguish the sound of the shouts of joy from the sound of weeping, because the people made so much noise. And the sound was heard far away. (Ezra 3:11b–13)

It was this temple that stood at the center of the Jewish community which found itself under the thumb of yet another empire. Jesus's suggestion that he could rebuild the temple in three days, let alone that it could be destroyed, is an inflammatory claim to say the least. For him to paint a picture of himself *as* the temple is for him not only to relocate the site of meeting with God to himself but also to identify himself as the hope of the people. The affective dimension of this image becomes clear when considered in these terms. All that the Jewish community would have felt for the temple as a sign of who they were and of any hope they may have had for the future is now to be placed in Jesus. When the temple was destroyed by the Romans, perhaps those who remembered what he had said about the temple not only believed but retained their hope. As we reflect on this image today, Jesus-as-temple is an invitation to place our hope and our very identity in the Son of God.

"I am the vine; you are the branches": Images That Picture the Relation of Jesus to the People of God

Vine

The organic relation in the image of the vine and the branches in John's Gospel immediately suggests Jesus as a source and sustainer of life: "If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). This image pictures the relation between Jesus and the people of God. In representing himself as the "true vine" (15:1), Jesus recalls and modifies the image of the vine found in Jeremiah, which represents the people of Israel as a vine planted by the Lord:

[23] Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, *A History of Sukkot in the Second Temple and Rabbinic Periods* (Providence: Brown Judaic Studies, 2020), 33.

I had planted you like a choice vine
of sound and reliable stock.
How then did you turn against me
into a corrupt, wild vine? (Jer 2:21)

The Lord God remains the divine gardener in the Johannine Gospel account, but Jesus has replaced the people of Israel as the vine. If they become the "corrupt, wild" vine, then Jesus is the "true vine" and the people are now "branches." Jesus is the one who will not turn away, who will not be corrupted, and so he becomes the sole source of hope for the life and salvation of the people: "Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me" (John 15:4). The modification of the vine image is powerful: the Lord faithfully planted Israel as a pure vine, but Israel proved faithless again and again, as noted throughout the Hebrew Bible. The image of the vine in John's Gospel brings this whole history into focus.

When Jesus alludes to and alters the image of the vine, he associates himself in the most intimate terms with his people, representing himself (and not the people of Israel) as the vine tended by the Lord. By incorporating the people into himself, Jesus reconciles them salvifically to the Lord, as the uncorrupted vine planted in Jeremiah 2, and saves them much like the Lord had done in the exodus as imagined in Ps 80:8–11:

You transplanted a vine from Egypt;
You drove out the nations and planted it.
You cleared the ground for it,
And it took root and filled the land.
The mountains were covered with its shade,
The mighty cedars with its branches.
Its branches reached as far as the Sea,
Its shoots as far as the River.

God has saved his people before, and, in the person of Jesus, he has done it again. The image of the vine is also be adopted by Paul to demonstrate that salvation in Jesus is reserved not only for Israel but also for all people. In his letter to the church at Rome, Paul refers to the Gentiles as "a wild shoot" that has "been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root" (Rom 11:17). In calling himself the "true vine" in John 15, Jesus declares himself the source of salvation for all who will be grafted.

Apart from knowing Jesus Christ, the image insists, there is no other relationship that can save, not even belonging to God's chosen people. The image of the "true vine" takes the claim about Jesus in John's Gospel well beyond the scope of history or even theology. As William Barclay

notes,

> It is as if Jesus said: "You think that because you belong to the nation of Israel you are a branch of the true vine of God. But the nation it is, a degenerate vine, as all your prophets saw. It is I who am the true vine. The fact that you are a Jew will not save you. The only thing that can save you is to have an intimate living fellowship with me, for I am the vine of God and you must be branches joined to me."[24]

As with so many of the Old Testament images utilized in the New Testament, there is a boldness inherent in the "true vine" image, a quality that must have seemed exceedingly presumptuous to the contemporaneous audience. But it is this very sense of shock that makes the figurative language and its entanglements so compelling. "Smashing into the psyche like a blunt instrument," Rita Felski exclaims, shock "can wreak havoc on our usual ways of ordering and understanding the world."[25] While many Bible scholars and lay readers today will be familiar with the exclusivity of Jesus's claims, the image of the vine offers a textual moment of shock that might be as effective for modern readers as it would have been for Jesus's audience and the first readers of John's Gospel. When Jesus represents himself as the "true vine," John's Gospel is certainly making historical and theological claims, but the image also shocks us; it jolts us with the truth that we will die apart from Christ. The work of the image is not merely to convey a truth about the nature of our relation to Jesus Christ but also to shock us, to stun us with the life-or-death implications of being cut off from the vine and thrown in the fire.

Bridegroom

The image of God's people as bride and God as bridegroom recurs throughout the Bible. Where the organic relation between vine and branch represents Jesus as the very source of life for the people, the social relation between bride and groom represents Jesus's love for his church in the New Testament as sacrificial in what Ephesians 5 calls "a profound mystery" (Eph 5:32). In this letter, Paul uses Christ's sacrifice for the church as an image (specifically a simile) to picture a husband's love for his wife: "Husbands, love your wives, just *as* Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant

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[24] William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, vol. 2, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956), 173.

[25] Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature* (Malden: Blackwell, 2008), 113.

church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless" (5:25–27, emphasis added). Husbands are exhorted to sacrifice themselves for their wives; Christ actually *did* sacrifice himself for the church. Citing Gen 2:24, Paul goes on to describe the marriage union as the bride and groom's becoming one flesh in v. 31. To account for the bewildering nature of this metaphor, he comes straight out and says, "This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church" (Eph 5:32). Almost as an afterthought, then, he wraps up the discussion: "However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband" (Eph 5:33). In the image of the bridegroom, then Jesus's sacrifice is a self-sacrifice to be emulated.

Prior to Christ's incarnation, God is sometimes represented as the husband of his people, as in Isa 54:1–17, where he redeems Zion from shame. In vv. 4–5, the author recounts the litany of Zion's shame which is wiped out by her union with the Lord Almighty:

> Do not be afraid; you will not be put to shame.
> Do not fear disgrace; you will not be humiliated.
> You will forget the shame of your youth
> And remember no more the reproach of your widowhood.
> For your Maker is your husband—
> The Lord Almighty is his name—
> The Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer;
> He is called the God of all the earth.

The people of Israel are represented here and throughout the passage with what Katie Heffelfinger describes as "a veritable tour-de-force of biblical images for female humiliation."[26] But in verse 5, "the poetic pattern of this line draws attention to this figure who causes Zion to forget her shame. The woman's husband is now explicitly named: 'Yhwh of the armies is his name.' … She has been deserted, but will be deserted no more. Now she is to become 'husbanded' as the poem goes on to detail."[27] The people are redeemed by the Lord Almighty as a shamed woman is redeemed by a husband.

When Jesus assumes the role of bridegroom, he redeems the people by sacrificing himself for them, as Paul says a husband should sacrifice himself for his bride. Similar to the adaptation of the image of the lamb from the Pentateuch through Isaiah to the New Testament, Jesus does not redeem from a distance; he is acquainted with our grief just as marriage renders the concerns of each spouse into concerns for both. He does

[26] Katie M. Heffelfinger, *I Am Large, I Contain Multitudes: Lyric Cohesion and Conflict in Second Isaiah* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 260.

[27] Heffelfinger, *I Am Large, I Contain Multitudes*, 263.

not rescue from on high; he is mysteriously joined with his bride (the church) like a groom and bride are made one flesh. He is the cosmic kinsman redeemer, yes; he is God-the-husband, yes; he is the faithful groom to a faithless bride, yes. But he also knows us intimately. He is the love that knows fully in 1 Corinthians 13. He is the ascended bridegroom whose return we eagerly await, and this picture is an invitation to know him as intimately as a wife knows her husband. As Paul declares to the Philippians, "I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining resurrection from the dead" (Phil 3:10–11). The relation of Christ to his church is of such an intimate nature that to know him is as if we had died with him. Mystery is key here once again as Paul qualifies this likeness to Christ with the word "somehow." It is through our relation to and knowledge of Christ, like a bride's union with her groom, that we know the suffering of death to sin but, somehow, attain the same resurrection from the dead that Jesus attained.

Conclusion: The Theological and Devotional Significance of Images of the Son of God

Some of the images used to describe Jesus as the incarnate Son of God are also used to describe him after his ascension and in the future as the returning King. In the book of Revelation, after the letters to the seven churches are read, John is taken in a vision to heaven where he beholds marvelous things. Early in this vision, he sees God the Father on the throne of heaven and, alongside him as the second person in the Trinity, the "Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing at the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders" (5:6a). The image of the slain Lamb points to Christ's worthiness to rule; his sacrifice on behalf of the people has seated him beside God the Father, and he has the authority to open the scrolls. The Lamb who was slain, then, is also the Lamb who reigns, the one before whom every knee will bow (Phil 2:10). Once again, Wright focuses this image soteriologically:

> Salvation also belongs not only to the Lamb who was slain, but equally to the Lamb on the throne, because he ever reigns with the Father. The sovereignty of the Lord of the universe is shared with Christ. This is visualized in the rather remarkable way John's vision of the throne of God not only sees it occupied by the Lord God, the creator (Rev. 4:11), but also by the Lamb who is "standing in

the center of the throne" (Rev. 5:6). The government that is exercised from the throne is simultaneously God's and Christ's.[28]

This government is universal and encompasses all the people of God. Whereas Satan is the notorious divider and separator, Christ unites us with God as the shepherd tends his flock, as the lamb reconciles the people to God, as the temple houses the people with God, as the vine is united to the branch, and as the groom is united to the bride.

The truths of these images are not merely theological, however. They are also deeply devotional. Or, better yet, rather than distinguishing between the theological and the devotional, the imagery of the Son of God insists on the inextricable relationship between theology and devotion when both are practiced and lived out properly. The formal work of systematizing theological material is vital to the work of knowing Jesus Christ. Jesus comes as Son of God and savior at a particular time, in a particular place, and to a particular people. As regards modern readers of the Bible, there is also the history of how this savior and those integral contexts have been understood by others over the last few millennia. Such vast expanses of knowledge require taxonomies and systems if we are to know the history of the faith to which modern believers lay claim. The use of images embraces this kind of theological work as it represents a literary and rhetorical choice on the part of writers attempting to help themselves and their audiences understand and retain complex experiences and ideas wrapped in long histories and practices. But the use of images also aids in our attempts to know the Son of God as one knows a friend or family member, a kind of knowing that cannot be taxonomized.

While scholars can make new discoveries and illuminate dimensions of historical significance, language, and archaeology that fit images more and more neatly into their textual contexts, they cannot arrive at a point of interpretation or understanding that will necessarily result in the kind of knowing that a sheep has of the shepherd. Poetic images, like songs or expert performances by actors or canvases laced with colors, are attempts to express the inexpressible elements of human experience. This poetic quality does not mean that images, or figurative language in general, is somehow beyond interpretation or without a limited range of meaning. "Poetry is constrained but unfixed," argues Patrick Miller, "terse but open."[29] The image of the shepherd, then, cannot simply be interpreted any old way. But it is also resistant to simplistic or singular interpretations.

[28] Wright, *Salvation Belongs to Our God*, 189–90.

[29] Patrick Miller, *Israelite Religion and Biblical Theology: Collected Essays* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2000), 245.

Just as the threats of the wolf, the thief, or the stranger may require different responses from the shepherd, so too is the shepherd himself irreducible to a singular kind of actor. What is important here is that, though the particulars may vary, the shepherd is always, already, and forever a protector. And though that image may evoke as many different pictures, memories, and experiences as there will ever be readers of Psalm 23 or John 10, it nonetheless (perhaps even miraculously) communicates protection. There are thus both cognitive and affective dimensions to the figures of speech about the Son of God in Scripture: we understand who he is and what he has done, and when the images are effective, we are moved to faith as a result—to know Christ in a way that defies easy explanation like a good meal elicits only a satisfied sigh. Perhaps this is why the psalmist calls us to "taste and see that the Lord is good" (Ps 34:8).