

Life' in the fourth Gospel and its resonances with Genesis 1–3

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The fourth Gospel is notably different from the Synoptics in its apparent lack of explicit fulfilment motif. Indeed the fourth Gospel is quite different in some ways because of its high Christology. Notable in this regard is its take on 'realised' eschatology. Scholars have found little in the Hebrew Scriptures as the Gospel's take-off point for this understanding. This article argues that the fourth Gospel's understanding of 'realised' eschatology is informed by its understanding of the concept of life as found in the early chapters of Genesis.

'Lewe' in die vierde Evangelie en die weerklank daarvan Genesis 1–3. Die vierde Evangelie verskil aansienlik van die Sinoptiese Evangelies in die opsig dat 'n ekplisiete vervullingsmotief ooglopend daarin ontbreek. Trouens, daar word dikwels gesê dat die vierde Evangelie radikaal van die basiese leringe van die Bybel afwyk, in besonder vanweë die prominente Christologie daarvan. Wat veral in die verband merkwaardig is, is die opvatting van 'n 'gerealiseerde' eskatologie in die Evangelie. Tot dusver het geleerdes weinig in die Hebreeuse Bybel gekry om hierdie opvatting as die uitgangspunt van die Evangelie te regverdig. Hierdie artikel voer aan dat die verstaan van 'n 'gerealiseerde' eskatologie in die vierde Evangelie gebou is op die verstaan van die konsep van lewe soos in die eerste hoofstukke van Genesis gevind word.

Introduction

This article is a literary reading of the fourth Gospel with a focus on intertextuality. It notes the rhetoric regarding the concept of life in the Gospel and explores how it weaves its view of life using the basic paradigm that is evident in the first few chapters of Genesis. In this article it is being argued that the new creation theme of the Gospel parallels in many ways the story of creation as in Genesis and therefore foregrounds related concepts such as 'realised' eschatology in the Hebrew Bible.

Problem statement

The study of the concept of 'life' in the fourth Gospel has often revolved around the discussion of its relationship with eternal life and, invariably, its link with 'realised' eschatology. In many introductory sections of commentaries it is often discussed under the rubric of eschatology (Brown 1966:cxv–cxxi; Barrett 1955:56–58; Ashton 1997:17). Even for scholars that give some attention to the topic, their discussions are often overshadowed by related topics such as the resurrection (Ashton 1991:214–220). Perhaps Dodd has gone far beyond many scholars in this regard. He discusses the concept of 'eternal life', which he takes as synonymous with 'life', and notes the different nuances of meaning it has in the fourth Gospel. He grounds the fourth Gospel's use of 'life' to Jewish roots as depicting the Life of the Age to Come. The text he uses to make this assertion is 4 Ezra 7:12–13 and 8:52–54 (Dodd 1968:145). However, for the 'realised' eschatology observed in the Gospel, Dodd (1968:149) could only note resonances of such in some Hermetic writings and could not link it with any particular Jewish antecedent. This is the contribution this article is making, for it posits that reading the concept of life in light of Genesis creation-fall narrative grounds 'life' in the fourth Gospel in canonical Jewish scriptures.

Theoretical considerations in the interpretation of 'life' in the fourth Gospel

The dependence of the fourth Gospel on the Hebrew Scriptures is well-noted by scholars, especially since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Although it is known to have fewer Old Testament explicit quotations than Matthew and Luke, it is known to be well-steeped in Jewish thought and ideas. Even for Dodd (1968:144–150), who generally posits the background of Philo and Hermetica for reading the Gospel, he affirms a Jewish background for the notion of 'life' in the fourth Gospel. He does this by noting that the compound term *eternal life* in the Gospel depicts the Life of the Age to Come, which commences in the present.

Zumstein (2008:121) builds on Dodd's insight, albeit by means of a literary analysis. Citing Kristeva and Barthes, he posits the dependence of texts on other texts. For this reason, he notes that texts, and especially the fourth Gospel, are inter-texts. The original text referred to, is known as the hypo text or reference text, whilst the user text is known as the hypertext or reception text. Hypo texts could be used explicitly as quotations or references. A quotation is a 'literal reproduction of text A in text B', whilst reference 'is also an explicit form of intertextuality'. However, text B refers to text A without presenting it in extensor – the reader is confronted with a relationship in 'absentia'. In contrast, allusions are not explicit or a literal reproduction, 'rather, a word or turn of phrase is used to call some other well-known text to mind' (Zumstein 2008:133). The use of texts by another, he observes, has serious implications for the task of interpretation. This is because there is a dialectical relationship between the hypo- and the hypertexts. The hypo-text is not just a 'legitimizing strategy; it is productive in a way that shapes the entire hypertext' (Zumstein 2008:134). Therefore, taking Genesis 1–3 as the hypo text, this article will explore how its reading has shaped the concept of life in the fourth Gospel.

Echoes of Genesis 1–3 in the fourth Gospel

In addition to the echo *in the beginning*, some scholars have noted other allusions and echoes to Genesis in the fourth Gospel. John Painter infers the incompleteness of creation from Jesus' statement: 'my father is working until now and I am working' that occurs within the context of his non-observance of the Sabbath and the healing of the invalid (Painter 2008:41). Painter therefore reads the healings in chapters 5 and 9 as instances of completing an otherwise incomplete creation. With regard to the healing of the man born blind he (Painter 2008:42) is more categorical: 'what is more, the description of the act of healing echoes the creation of the human in Genesis 2:7, where God created the human from the dust of the earth'.

Barrett (1955:479), whilst commenting on John 20:22 where Jesus breathed on his disciples, notes the significance of the word *ἐνεφύσησεν* in the verse, for it corresponds with Genesis 2:7. He concludes 'that John intended to depict an event of significance parallel to that of the first creation of man cannot be doubted; this was the beginning of the new creation'. For Wright (2003:440), the resurrection of Jesus took place on the first day of the week and this resonates with God's creative work. He therefore interprets the resurrection as the 'start of god's new creation'. Furthermore, the prominence of the Sabbath controversy in the fourth Gospel (chapter 5 and later in 9:16) and its link to Jesus' self-description as a son who imitates his father, is an allusion to the Genesis or creation narrative. This is particularly significant, for it is in the ensuing monologue that Jesus declares himself as one who has life just as his father has.

Creation

Preparatory to the creation of living things is the creation of light on the first day – darkness apparently has been in existence. According to Hamilton (1990:55), the three-fold problem identified in Genesis 1:2, is darkness, watery abyss and a formless earth. Creation from the first day to the last was meant to address these problems. With the creation of light, day (light) was separated from night (darkness). The relationship between light and life in the fourth Gospel (Jn 1:4; 8:12) has been well-discussed by several scholars (Dodd 1968:307; Van der Watt 2000:235–239).

In the creation of living things, according to Genesis 1:20 and 24, it is notable that animals, fishes and birds are referred to as *נֶפֶשׁ שָׁמַיִם* or *ψυχῶν ζωσῶν* living souls. This same phrase is applied to Adam, but not to botanical creation. In addition, there is a distinguishing difference in the creation of humans and other created entities, that is the breath of life (*πνοή ζωής*) God breathed (*ἐνεφύσησεν*) into the moulded clay. This distinguishing factor is critical in understanding the concept of life in the fourth Gospel, for the creation of all other created entities is sufficiently carried out by God's utterance, by his 'word'.

Therefore, by creation God brought order and fullness to what he had made. The fact that God created by means of speaking, presupposes an inherent ability of God's word to give life.

The Fall

In Genesis 3 there is an account of the fall of Adam and Eve. When the Lord queried Eve with regard to her participation in the eating of the forbidden fruit, Eve mentioned in her defence that she was deceived by the serpent. However, the success of the deception was due to her own desire for the knowledge of good and evil that would enable her to be like God. In addition to this is her faith in the serpent's emphatic statement: *לֹא-מוֹת תָּמָת* ('you shall certainly not die'). An important question to ask is when it dawned on her that she was deceived and with regard to what was she deceived. Did she feel deceived because the knowledge she sought for had not made her to be like God? Or was she deceived that she would not die?

Indeed a *prima facie* case can be made that the serpent was right, for they did not die the day they ate the fruit. However, for Eve to state that she was deceived, suggests that she knew that she did die then – though physically existing. She also knew that she did not become like God. Death for her was, perhaps, more than physical in nature. Another way to state this is to say that from the day Adam and Eve ate the fruit, death was already at work in them; the physical death they experienced later was then only symptomatic. In other words, if death was already at work in them even when physically living, then it is not far-fetched for the author of the fourth Gospel to adduce that the Life of the Age to Come could commence in this present evil age.

Quite important for the success of the deceit was the notion of belief or unbelief: belief in the words of the serpent 'you shall certainly not die' and unbelief in the words of God 'the day you eat of the fruit, you shall die'. The notion of belief or unbelief, as we shall note, is quite crucial in the fourth Gospel.

Another notion that gained prominence in the fourth Gospel that seems to emanate from the story of the fall, is 'knowledge'. Eve desired the knowledge of good and evil with the expectation that such knowledge would enable her to be like God, but it rather led to death. It is pertinent to note that in the Genesis account, according to the serpent, knowing good and evil is not an end, it is a means to an end – 'to be like God', whilst in the fourth Gospel, the knowledge of God is presented as an end, for it ensures life. The Hebrew verb *yada*, used in the Genesis narrative, has a range of meaning: 'to know by learning', 'to perceive', 'to distinguish', 'to know by experience', 'to be acquainted with', and 'to be skilful' amongst others. The interpretation that 'knowing good and evil represents the ability to make judgements and decisions about what is right, appropriate, and pleasing for one's life and what is not ...' (Van Seters 1992:126) is not convincing, for Eve was already doing this, as she contemplates eating the fruit: 'when the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it ...' (Gn 3:6; [bold – author's own]). Secondly, it is not necessarily an attribute that makes one be like God. One can therefore agree with Botterweck and Ringgren (1986:465) in the possibility of understanding the phrase 'knowing good and evil' as depicting 'polar totality' with the nuance of knowing everything and thereby suggesting a quest for omniscience. The fourth Gospel in an apparent move to serve as a corrective to this quest states that life, in contrast to death, comes through the knowledge of God and Jesus Christ, in contrast to knowledge of good and evil, 'this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent' (Jn 17:3). This way the fourth Gospel grounds true knowledge in a personal relationship and not just in the mental acquisition of facts or a mental assent to a state of affairs (Bultmann 1964a:711).

The concept of life ζῶν in the fourth Gospel

The prevalence of the concept of life in the fourth Gospel

The concept of life pervades the fourth Gospel and it is the linchpin of it. It links the purpose of the writing of the Gospel ('but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ and by believing you may have life in his name'; Jn 20:31) with the purpose of the Gospel's protagonist: 'I have come that they might have life ...' (Jn 10:10). The concept of life is found in each of the constituent parts of the fourth Gospel with the exception of the epilogue (Jn 2:1–25), which is often seen as an addition after the whole work had been written:

- In the prologue (Jn 1:1–18), – 'in him was life and the life was the light of humans' (1:4).

- In the public ministry of Jesus (Jn 1:19–12), the healing of the boy in Capernaum ('your son lives'; 4:50); the offer of water of life (4:10) and bread of life (6:35); the farewell discourse (Jn 13–17), 'I am the way, the truth and the life' (14:6); the raising of Lazarus (11:25).
- In the passion and resurrection narrative (Jn 18–20:31), Jesus' resurrection is the ultimate sign of life; 'and these have been written in order that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah ... and by believing you may have life in his name' (20:31).
- The epilogue (Jn 21:1–25) is the only exception that has no explicit mention of 'life', but even then, Peter's charge to feed the sheep bears resonance to sustaining the life of the sheep.

Whilst the Synoptics narrate the parables of Jesus concerning the kingdom, the fourth Gospel narrates discussions of Jesus with people, or it sometimes records monologues of Jesus, most of the time with ζῶν 'life' as a central focus. The discussion with the woman at the well leads to Jesus' offering her the living water (τὸ ὕδωρ τὸ ζῶν) (Jn 4:11); the monologue in chapter 5 is all about the locale of 'life': 'for as the father has life in himself so he has granted the son to have life in himself' (5:26); and those eligible to obtain life are 'the one who hear my word and believe him who sent me has eternal life' (Jn 5:24). The prevalent use of 'life' in the fourth Gospel has been compared by scholars (Barrett 1955:215; Dodd 1935:43; Ashton 1991:215) with the Synoptics' prevalent use of the concept of the Kingdom of God or heaven. The consensus is that the concepts are related. However, whilst the Synoptics almost always use the concept of the Kingdom of God with a future reference in view, the fourth Gospel more frequently uses 'life' as a present reality. This has made many scholars (Dodd 1968:7; Aune 1972; Brown 1966:cxvi) identify 'realised' eschatology in the Gospel. 'Realised' eschatology means that the blessings of salvation or restoration has already commenced in the present by virtue of Christ's coming into the world.

Dodd (1935:50) found that, in continuity with the Jewish teachings of the period, Jesus' teachings on the Kingdom of God have a future dimension, and in discontinuity with Jewish teachings, present the Kingdom of God as a present reality.

This declaration that the Kingdom of God has already come necessarily dislocates the whole eschatological scheme in which its expected coming, closes the long vista of the future. The eschaton has moved from the future to the present, from the sphere of expectation into that of realised experience.

Thus, in the fourth Gospel, more often than not, eternal life is a present reality with future implications.

Major assertions about 'life' in the fourth Gospel

This section looks at the major assertions made in the fourth Gospel with regard to 'life' and traces their possible resonances with Genesis in terms of continuities and points of departure.

Locale of life

Assertions about the locale of life are found sprinkled liberally across the whole Gospel. Discernible in the Gospel from the prologue is that ο λογος is the locus of life, for through ο λογος all things were made (Jn 1:3–4). However, the argument for the possession of life by Jesus is traced to his Father, who, in Jewish thought, is known as the living God – ‘as the father has life in himself so has he given the son to have life in himself’ (Jn 5:26). The son does not just have life, but is life personified, for this reason: the words he utters, are life too. The dead can hear it and live (Jn 5:25). The boy in Capernaum, at the brink of death, lived, because Jesus had uttered the word and the boy’s father believed it (Jn 4:50). Peter, speaking for the disciples sums it up: Jesus has words that give eternal life (Jn 6:68). So in the fourth Gospel, the locale of life is God, Jesus and his word, and the means to obtain life is by reposing confidence in them.

Life as the ultimate

Possession of life – not fame or wealth – is portrayed as the ultimate in the fourth Gospel. It is the only possession that outlasts this world, because the fourth Gospel advocates that nothing must be allowed to stand in the way of its acquisition. This is brought home quite vividly in John 12:25: ‘the man who loves his life (ψυχην) will lose it, whilst the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life’ (ζωην αιωνιον). The fact that the Father was ready to give his Son, and that the Son was ready to give up his life to procure life for all, demonstrate the ultimate reality of life and depicts it as the greatest need of humans. So in the fourth Gospel the need for life is assumed and portrayed as the greatest.

Nuances of ‘life’ in the fourth Gospel

‘Life’ in the fourth Gospel is used in contrast to death, this is seen in Jesus’ statement to the man whose son was at the point of death ο υιος σου ζη [your son will live] (Jn 4:50). This aligns with Dodd’s observation that in common Jewish understanding ‘life’ is used in contrast with death. In this story is an instance of the use of the word ζωη to depict a state of well-being in earthly existence. In John 4:47 the nobleman asked Jesus to heal his son who was at the point of death. Jesus in response did not use the characteristic verb to depict healing, ιαομαι or θεραπευω. He rather says that the boy lives. The use of the verbal form of ζωη to describe a healing is quite significant for our understanding of the use of the word in the context of a tangible earthly experience.

The raising of Lazarus is also viewed in the sense of restoration to life from death. Healing accounts, though few in the fourth Gospel, could be seen in light of the Old Testament where ‘mere existence is not life’ (Bultmann 1964b:850). The act of living is meant to be enjoyed and not endured. Thus, where sickness, famine and other conditions reduce the quality of life, such is considered undesirable. To this end, ‘sickness is as bad as death’, whilst ‘healing and reviving are equivalent to life’ in this regard.

‘Life’ is also used in the fourth Gospel to depict the Life of the Age to Come as a reality in the present world and in the future:

For just as the father raises the dead and makes alive, likewise also the son makes alive whosoever he wishes ... Truly, truly, I say to you that the one who hears my word and believes in him who sent me has eternal life and shall not come into condemnation but has passed from death to life. Truly, truly, I say to you that the hour is coming and now is when the dead shall hear the voice of the son of God and the one hearing shall live. For just as the father has life in himself, likewise also has he given the son to have life in himself. ... Do not marvel at this, for the hour is coming when all who are in the tomb shall hear his voice And shall come out, the ones who do good into resurrection of life but the ones who practiced evil into the resurrection of condemnation (Jn 5:21, 24–26, 28–29).

This metaphoric use of ‘life’ is also found in Joseph’s prayer for Asenath, his wife, when he addressed God as the one who makes alive the ones that are dead.

To summarise: life is that intangible enablement that animates and allows its possessor to function in natural and beyond natural environments. Life is not inherent in humans as Von Wahlde (2004:411) argues – it is a gift by the Creator who alone has life in him. Because life is not inherent in humans, they can lose the gift of life both physically and spiritually. That is why life is to be considered precious and for once it is lost, it can only be retrieved by its giver.

Means to life in the fourth Gospel

In the fourth Gospel, ‘life’ is obtained by maintaining relationship with the sources of life identified in the Gospel. The sources are God, Jesus and his word. Although dissected this way, these are basically one relationship, for ‘no one gets to the Father except through Jesus’ (Jn 14:6). The unity between these three is perhaps best borne out by these statements ‘whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned’ (Jn 5:24); and ‘This is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent’ (Jn 17:3).

Life is personified – it is for a person to believe and accept, for those who lived when Jesus walked here on earth saw him and had the choice to believe what he said about himself. For those who have no opportunity to meet him in flesh, still have his word and have the choice to believe or reject it, just like those who saw him physically.

The interface between Genesis and the fourth Gospel

There are a lot of convergences between the Genesis account and the fourth Gospel with respect to the origin and sustenance of life. Life originates from God through his word and through his breath (Gn 2:7). The fourth Gospel has identified this word as ο λογος in the pre-existent state and as Jesus in the flesh. Whilst the Synoptics talk of the genealogy of Jesus, tracing it as far as Adam by Luke and as Abraham by Matthew, the fourth Gospel goes far beyond them to the

pre-existence of the world. By this masterstroke the fourth Gospel makes 'life' an abiding and preeminent concept. Life was conceived when a loving God decided to bring order into chaos and fullness instead of void by means of his word. Life can only be sustained by trusting in that same God and his word. When the same God was caricatured in Genesis as mean and oppressive, and his word castigated as a lie 'you shall surely not die', death was the inevitable result. The fourth Gospel takes off on this note that death is the general state of humans until they 'receive him and believe in his name' (Jn 1:12). The Gospel goes on to show in the narrative the state of those who did receive him and those who did not.

Life is the ultimate – an end and not a means to an end, for the Creator wanted people in his image and likeness for fellowship. So life is not in terms of number of years or quantity, but in a sound relationship with the creator, 'For this is eternal life that they may know you the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent' (Jn 17:3). Such a life never ends, for it is not terminated by death or sickness. It was such a life that Adam and Eve lost, that plunged them into death so that the assurance by the serpent 'you shall surely not die' now rang hollow in their hearing. How reassuring then to read Jesus' promise 'I have come that they might have life and have it abundantly' (Jn 10:10).

The notion of 'realised eschatology' in the fourth Gospel is traceable to Genesis, for death reigned in Eve and Adam once they disobeyed God's word by eating the fruit, although they only died physically later. The fourth Gospel being guided by this understanding is careful to affirm that the reverse of death, namely life, takes place once people believe in Jesus - they have crossed over from death to life.

The need to believe the word spoken by God or Jesus is common to both Genesis and the fourth Gospel, for it is the word (spoken and incarnate) that gives life. It was the failure to believe God's word that brought about death in the first place. It therefore makes perfect sense that the means to life is by believing God's word.

Conclusion

This article has shown that the story of creation as in Genesis lies behind the notion of life in the fourth Gospel. It serves as the background that shaped the Gospel's understanding of 'life'. It presupposes the human need for life as depicted in God's original design for order and fullness. In this sense, sickness (Jn 4–5 and 9), lack (lack of wine and food in Jn 2 and 6 respectively), death, evince life at different degrees of rupture. The fourth Gospel presents Jesus' attempts at arresting death in these different manifestations. However, far above these instances, the fourth Gospel presents unbelief and ignorance as great impediments to possession

of life. Having paid the ultimate price to procure life for all (Jn 10:11) – the good shepherd that lays down his life for the sheep – he urges all who will follow him to follow his footsteps:

[u]nless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. The person who loves his/her life will lose it, whilst the person who hates his/her life in this world will keep it for eternal life. (Jn 12:24–25)

This was the problem with Adam and Eve: they did not want to suffer any deprivation or limitation hence the open door to deception. Sometimes antonyms are juxtaposed in the two books in order to affirm a reality. The Genesis account of the Fall portrays death to be more than physical, whilst 'life', in the fourth Gospel, is presented as more than physical and these two ideas lend credence to the concept of the 'realised' eschatology in the fourth Gospel. For since death could commence whilst one is alive, so can the Life of the Age to Come, commence in this present evil age.

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