Spiritual Birth, Living Water, and New Creation: Mapping Life-Giving Metaphors in the Fourth Gospel

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Abstract

The Gospel of John contains various memorable metaphors, drawing on the lived realities of its audience to encapsulate the depths of its Christology and central message. Seamlessly interwoven into the fabric of the gospel is the metaphor of (life-giving) water, offered by Jesus and ultimately provided by him. A related metaphor is that of new birth, signifying the changed allegiance and ethos of those who come to believe. Finally, the new creation imagery with its Edenic setting and Jesus breathing Spirit-life into his disciples illustrates something of the *effect* of an encounter with the life-giving God. Drawing on Cognitive Metaphor Theory, this paper demonstrates that imagery of birth, water, and new life can work together to create a metanarrative. The analysis follows the ramifications of this imagery in its literary context, its rhetorical function in the narrative, and the way in which the metaphors of birth, water, and life potentially work together to produce a larger picture that ministers to those who carry the realities of giving, nurturing, and sustaining life in their bodies. From the prologue and its birth-giving God, through the birth from above promised to Nicodemus, the living water promised to a Samaritan woman, and the Holy Spirit as living water flowing from the innermost being, the narrative flows seamlessly to the cross where the life-giving blood and water flow from the side of Jesus and into the resurrection dimension of a new creation.

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Bible-based. Christ-centred. Spirit-led.

1. Methodological Approach

From the traditional approach which distinguishes metaphor from the embodied/real world (see Baldick 2001, 153),[1] through Derrida's (1974) argument that even the description of the "real" world is couched in metaphorical terms, the complex philosophical and literary history of metaphors and their analysis is apparent. Taking seriously Derrida's objections against the classical definition of metaphor, Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) Cognitive Metaphor Theory (CMT) (and its various expressions and expansions) provides a popular alternative to the classical definition. This approach works from an understanding of common human experiences, like "the body as a container," and so demonstrates that metaphors are part-and-parcel of our constructed reality. While not without valid critiques (see Bal 1993; Code 1991; Landy 1993; Kövecses 2008),[2] CMT offers an integrated analysis of metaphors and their functions throughout a body of material, which has been well-used in the field of Biblical Studies (Jindo 2010; Brown 2003; Brettler 1998; Kotze 2004).

The utility of Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) methodology for the Johannine text and its rich variety of metaphors is evident. Stovell (2012, 19) laments the tendency in the study of Johannine metaphor to either totalize (force all Johannine imagery under one metaphor) or atomize (deconstruct metaphorical structures to their smallest parts). She proposes that Johannine metaphors rather be examined for how they "work as a mutually informing conceptual network." Cognitive analysts speak of conceptual domains, systems of understanding in which various metaphors are tied up into one (Lakoff 1990). An important question to ask is, *how* does a metaphor hang together with other figures of speech and themes (see Jindo 2010, 19–20)? Additionally, a cognitive approach to metaphor holds that the unit of a metaphor often exceeds its syntactical reference and immediate literary context or unit (43, 48). Such an analysis, therefore, looks beyond the explicit instance of the metaphor (whether in one word, phrase, or sentence) and seeks to map it in its entire conceptual domain.

Building on the above, we draw from CMT to analyze the metaphors of birth and water in the Fourth Gospel. Such an approach is marked by two objectives—(1) reading metaphors in terms of their wider conceptual domains, and (2) underlining the reorienting work of the metaphor in the world of its audience(s). Such a reading guards against the dangers of atomizing imagery and seeks to comment on the unfolding, holistic mosaic plotted by a variety of images (cf. Lee 2016, 160).[3] Moreover, it guards against totalizing metaphors and images by acknowledging fluidity of meanings in different contexts and highlighting the possibility of integrative meaning (see Kristeva 1987, 268; Landy 1993, 221). In this article, we approach our topic in terms of a three-act drama: namely, act one, the birth from above (John 1, 3, 16); act two, the living water (John 4, 7); act three, a fusion of birth, water, and creation centered in the cross and the resurrection narratives (John 19–20).

2. Act One—[Spiritual] Birth

The Johannine prologue introduces a life-giving God—first by referring to divine creation (with ὁ λόγος as agent) in vv. 1–4, followed by the metaphor

1 The classical definition of a metaphor (see Baldick 2001, 153) proposes a clear distinction between the real subject, also called the tenor (e.g., God), and the metaphorical vehicle (e.g., our Rock).
2 In the main, issues raised by scholars are "the deceptiveness of universality" and the introduction of "relativism" (Bal 1993, 189). Such a generic approach to human experience diminishes differences like gender and age, so creating epistemological problems (Bal 1993, 185, 189; see Code 1991).

3 Lee (2016, 153) notes that a specific image can become "a network, shifting in unexpected ways." Using the metaphor of water as an example, she argues that it is used in various ways throughout the gospel, including to quench thirst (4:13–14; 7:37–38), ceremonially cleanse (2:6), and wash (13:5–10), to name a few.

of divine birthing in vv. 12–13. Verse 12 clearly creates the connection between language of belief (ὅσοι ἔλαβον αὐτόν; τοῖς πιστεύουσιν) and language of birth.[4] All who receive ὁ λόγος and believe in his name, have been given ἐξουσίαν to become τέκνα θεοῦ (v. 12). The Fourth Gospel's offer of kinship is curious. Unlike Paul's familiar language, where believers become sons (υἱοὶ) through the process of adoption by God as father, the evangelist implies that believers will become part of God's family through a *birth* with God as maternal figure (ἐκ θεοῦ ἐγεννήθησαν—1:13). The nature of this birth is expounded in three parallel phrases that are antithetical to ἐκ θεοῦ: ἐξ αἱμάτων (from/out of bloods), ἐκ θελήματος σαρκὸς (from/out of the will of [the] flesh), and ἐκ θελήματος ἀνδρὸς (from/out of [a] man).

Of significance is that the evangelist refers to αἷμα (blood) in the plural (αἱμάτων—v. 13). Weissenrieder (2014, 78) identifies this use as reminiscent of typical embryotic language as the bloods in the plural could refer to the embryo which is nourished by "different forms of maternal blood." Greek thought commonly assumed that the embryo was a product of the seed of the father and the blood of the mother (Aristotle De Partibus Animalium, 11 2.649620-65082; 11 9.65462-11). ἐκ θελήματος σαρκὸς brings to mind two realities: one is the ancient understanding that children were conceived "in parental passion" (Keener 2010, 761), and the other, the backdrop of Israel being God's children according to the flesh (cf. Deut 32:6, 18). Finally, ἐκ θελήματος ἀνδρὸς (masculine singular) probably evokes the shared understanding of the role of the father in the birthing process. Whilst women gave birth in the first-century Mediterranean world, the father ultimately decided whether the child would be raised or abandoned (Keener 2010, 761; see Malina et al. 1995, 7; Wordelman, 1998, 486–487).

4 Furthermore, the fact that vv. 12–13 appear as one sentence in the Greek highlights the connection between belief and the type of birth described in v. 13.

We can thus refer to the distinction between giving birth and giving life, as these are part of one process with the mother and father both serving a distinct role (Nortje-Meyer 2009, 131). Whilst v. 12 hints at the fatherly life-giving role (God giving the believers ἐξουσία to become his children), v. 13 introduces God as the one to give birth (γεννάω)—an image not unique to the Fourth Gospel (see, e.g., Isa 42:14; Titus 3:5; 1 Pet 1:3, 23; 1 John 2:29; 3:9;[5] 4:7; 5:1, 4, 18). The Johannine prologue thus introduces God metaphorically as fulfilling both a life-giving paternal and a birth-giving maternal role to those who believe.

In terms of the prologue's literary layout, the location of this phraseology speaks volumes about the importance of the metaphor. Culpepper (1981, 14) convincingly argues that 1:12b emerges as the pivot of the chiastic prologue and that ἔδωκεν αὐτοῖς ἐξουσίαν τέκνα θεοῦ γενέσθαι thus serves as the point of the most heightened emphasis—the "bottom line" of the prologue (15), flagging τέκνα θεοῦ as one of the salient themes of the Fourth Gospel (31). Additionally, the absence of a physical birth narrative for Jesus underscores his divine sonship—an essential truth for the implied audience (see 20:31).[6] Jesus, the one at the bosom (κόλπος) of the Father (1:18), will be the one to demonstrate divine kinship and lineage throughout the Fourth Gospel.[7]

5 The coupling of σπέρμα and γεννάω is curious here. To remedy this, the NET opts to translate the latter as "fathered" in the first Johannine letter. Whilst the attempt to reconcile the paternal and maternal can be commended, this translation dissolves the maternal into the paternal and potentially mutes the Johannine emphasis on birth.

6 Jesus loosening himself from his earthly mother in John 19:26–27 further strengthens this point.

7 The lexical evidence indicates that the use of κόλπος here cannot be reduced to meaning "womb" (Arndt et al. 2000, 556; contra Kitzberger 2003, 206 and Nortje-Meyer 2009, 132). However, the intimacy of the Son and Father is highlighted in this verse. We hear echoes of this language of kinship and lineage throughout the FG (e.g., 12:36; 14:18; 21:5).

The theme of birth recurs in chapter three in the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. In response to Nicodemus's honorable affirmation of Jesus's divine mission, Jesus asserts that unless someone (*τις*) is born (*γεννάω*) from above (or, "again"; *ἄνωθεν*), they will not be able to see the Kingdom of God.[8] To the implied audience, familiar with the prologue, Jesus's comment connects seamlessly with 1:12–13. As Jesus is the "from above" son of God, those born of God will also be birthed from above—in other words, they will be birthed (or begotten, see Carson 1991, 194) by God.[9] The agency of God in this process is yet again stressed by the combination of a passive action (*γεννηθῇ*) and Jesus's assertion that spirit gives birth to spirit (3:6; cf. 6:63). OT references to God as the one placing his Spirit inside his people (Ezek 36:26; 37:5, 14) portray this notion of God (who is spirit; 4:24) birthing his Spirit inside of those who believe (Köstenberger 2004, 124). Nicodemus will not re-enter the womb of his mother, but will, in continuity with the metaphorical language of the prologue, be conceived in the womb "from above" and given new life and lineage as a child of God.[10] As with the prologue, birth language and language of belief bleed into one another (3:12, 15, 16, 18, 36). Additionally, in similar fashion to the prologue, reproductive undertones can be identified in Jesus's use of *γεννηθῇ ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος*—language typically used to describe physical birth in ancient medical treatises, which included both *πνεῦμα*—that which nourishes and solidifies the embryo—and *ὕδωρ*—the amniotic fluid in which the child leaves the mother's womb (see Weissenreider 2014, 77).[11]

Not only does the life-giving and reproductive metaphor used here hearken back to the prologue, but it echoes into the rest of the Fourth Gospel. For example, the connection between John 3 and John 8 is evident (Culpepper 1981, 28–29; Sandnes 2005, 168). In both events, the lineage of Jesus's interlocutors is deemed insufficient—Nicodemus must be born from above (or, as he understands it, "again") and in John 8, the Judeans are called illegitimate children (8:41).[12] Language of life and reproduction takes on a different dimension in 16:21–22 as the sorrow and joy of the disciples are described by it. This imagery is nothing new. It is found in the OT (Isa 26:17–21; 66:7–14; Jer 13:21; Mic 4:9–10) and Mark 13:8 to describe the sufferings and subsequent deliverance of God's people. Whilst

8 While ἄνωθεν can mean "from above" or "again," the implied audience (contra to Nicodemus) would probably understand it to mean the former, considering the evangelist's other uses of the word (3:31; 19:11; cf. 8:23). Nevertheless, as double entendre is part of the evangelist's literary style (see, e.g., ὑψωθῆναι in 3:14) the latter is not ruled out. The metaphor of being born again was used in Rabbinic Judaism to refer to conversion (proselytism) (Brant 2011, 75; Keener 2003, 542–543; Malina and Rohrbaugh 1998, 82). While it could not be said with certainty that this metaphor had gained any traction in Second Temple Judaism, perhaps this is the tradition that Nicodemus draws on when hearing the metaphor.

9 It was not uncommon for both Greeks and Jews to speak of God as the one from above (Keener 2010, 957), meaning that being born from above is nothing other than being birthed by God as in 1:13—a process that transforms the believer into a child with heavenly origin, just like Jesus (Sandnes 2005, 156).

10 While water is only mentioned once in this discussion (3:5), Koester (2003, 183) holds that it is assumed in the ensuing discussion but not mentioned because the emphasis falls on the Spirit—the new dimension that Jesus introduces.

11 Witherington (1989, 155–160), in a similar vein, has demonstrated a connection between John 3:5 and 1 John 5:6–8, arguing that τὸ πνεῦμα, τὸ ὕδωρ, and τὸ αἷμα refer to a physical birth. Weissenrieder (2014, 77) identifies γεννηθῇ ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος as a hendiadys, evoking the image of a physical birth. Others, like Keener (2010, 969) and Carson (1991, 191–192) have called this interpretation into question, arguing that "from blood" would have been a far clearer way of speaking of natural birth (cf. 1:12; Keener 2010, 970). Keener, however, concedes that this could be "because midwives were women and rabbis were men." O'Day (1988, 59) argues that the conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus brings to the fore the encounter between YHWH and Sarah (Gen 18:12), who laughs at the idea of giving birth because of her age and barrenness. Similarly, Nicodemus asks the question, "How is it possible?" O'Day therefore equates the offer of new life made out of barrenness to Abraham and Sarah to the one made to Nicodemus.

12 In both of these instances, the interchangeability of language of birth and belief ought to be kept in mind. Both Nicodemus and the Judeans are essentially criticized for unbelief.

the reference seems to focus on the disciples' progress through grief to joy, the same progression is visible in Jesus's death and resurrection, as well as his departure and return (Lee 2016, 165). This imagery not only acknowledges the pain ahead for both Jesus and his community of followers, but hints at new life found beyond emblems of pain (the cross, departure, persecution), essentially, according to Lee, reshaping pain and distress into something that holds the promise of life at the other end—a metaphor uniquely displayed in and by the female body (ἡ γυνὴ).[13]

3. Act Two—Living Water

Three times in the Gospel of John (4:10, 11; 7:38),[14] we encounter the phrase "living water" ([τὸ] ὕδωρ [τὸ] ζῶν).[15] The first time this metaphor is used is in Jesus's conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well (4:1–41). The detour on the way to Jerusalem for a festival provides the occasion for the recounting of an extended conversation—one of the longest in the gospel. Jesus initiates the conversation by asking the woman for a drink (v. 7). The writer fills this *tête-à-tête* with the most delicate of nuances, remarkable and complex irony, and not least robust debate.

Ashton (2020, 191) laments that most interpreters miss the double entendre at play in the expression ὕδωρ ζῶν. Whilst the woman could have heard "living water," chances are that she interpreted Jesus's offer in v. 10 as "running water," which explains her response in v. 11.[16] The Latin term, *aqua viva*, was a Roman expression for water flowing from a stream, as opposed to still-standing water in a well or cistern (Aune 2017, 479; Beasley-Murray 1999; Koester 2003, 188), which was metaphorically associated with "divine powers and the Muses who inspired art, music, and poetry" (Koester 2003, 199) as well as the spirit of prophecy. The well in question would have been regarded as one containing such living or running water, as its source was an underground spring below Samaria (Brant 2011, 84). The woman thus sees the quenching utility in Jesus's offer (v. 12, 15), which he affirms (v. 14).

Both Jews and Samaritans would also recognize living water as something to be used in purification from the uncleanness brought about by skin disease and bodily discharge (Lev 14:5–6, 50–52; Num 19:17).[17] As some Jews regarded Samaritans, and especially Samaritan women, to be in a continual state of uncleanness (cf. v. 9; Carson 1991, 218), Jesus's breaking of ethnic and religious boundaries (vv. 21–24) affirms the cleansing function of this living water.[18] The discourse manipulates the normally

13 In her discussion of Jesus's mother as Eve or the new Eve in the FG, Nortje-Meyer (2009, 128, 134), in what appears to be a stretch of the imagination, identifies the woman mentioned in John 16:21 with Jesus's mother as both are described by the use of γυνή (cf. 2:4), arguing that the imagery of ἡ ὥρα connects the woman in the parable to Jesus, and the use of ἄνθρωπος reminds of other instances in the FG where Jesus is labelled as such (e.g., 18:37). Such an interpretation merits some critique. γυνή is used multiple times for other women in the FG (4:7, 9, 11, 15, 17, 19, 25, 27, 28, 39, 42; 8:3, 4, 9, 10; 20:13, 15). Additionally, Nortje-Meyer's argument disregards the genre of the parable and its clear referent as explained by Jesus in 16:22.

14 Also alluded to in 4:13, 14, 15.

15 Living water is also found in Song 4:15, Jer 2:13, 17:13, Zech 14:8, and Rev 7:17. In Revelation, we find the genitive noun, ζωῆς, as opposed to the adjectival participle as used in John. It can therefore be translated as "living water," "water of life" (with ζωῆς as a descriptive genitive), or "water, namely life" (ζωῆς as appositional genitive).

16 Ashton (2020, 221) thus labels "living water" as a Johannine riddle.

17 The Samaritans, whose descendants continue to live in Samaria, were probably a strict Jewish group, like the Pharisees and Essenes at least from the Hasmonean period onwards (Bourgel 2019; Pummer 2010). Assertions about their racial and religious purity have not been substantiated by a critical reading of the prevailing sources (see Hjelm 2000, who argues on the basis of existing documentation that the theory of the questionable ethnicity and religious purity of the Samaritans should be abandoned). The name the Samaritans (Heb. *Shamerim*) embodies the meaning of those who keep (the Jewish Law), hence, The Keepers (Anderson 1992).

18 The living waters offered to the woman of Samaria could be both the revelation of Jesus as the Messiah and the Holy Spirit. Water imagery is commonly used in the OT to illustrate an outpouring of the Spirit on Israel. Moreover, the Spirit is often referred to as the gift from God, language

straightforward notions of insider-outsider, allowing Jesus to cross the boundaries of gender and race, until the woman is admitted to the status of an insider (Malina and Rohrbaugh 1998, 100).

On the surface, both drinking and washing are thus appropriate interpretive frameworks for the metaphor here. However, the possibility of "life-giving water" also requires some consideration.[19] When the effects of this woman's evangelism are considered, the interpretive frame of life-giving and reproductive language becomes a probability. Jesus promises (v. 14) that the ingested living water will become a spring or well (πηγὴ), leaping up (ἁλλομένου) to eternal life. As the townspeople believe in Jesus, they become born from above, as Jesus's exhortation to Nicodemus describes it. Moreover, the water in this pericope removes ethnic divides between people (Mligo 2014, 45). It does not function to merely *cleanse* the Samaritan woman, but it serves to *re-identify* her—to birth her anew into a family who worships one Father, neither here nor there. The correlation to 1:13 is clear here. The living water transforms those who believe into children of the divine, not on the basis of natural descent. Whilst not explicit, a dimension of Jesus's interaction with the Samaritan woman thus ties into the conceptual domain of birth and new life.

used here by Jesus (v. 10). The welling up of water to eternal life is emblematic of OT language expressing the Spirit's outpouring on a person (Judg 14:6, 19; 15:14; 1 Sam 10:10; cf. Acts 2:38; 8:20; 10:45; 11:17; Heb 6:4; Koester 2003, 191). Aune (2017, 480) notes that the term was used metaphorically by the early church to refer to "prophetic inspiration (Ignatius Rom. 7:2), baptism (Justin *Dial*. 14.1), Christ (Justin *Dial*. 69.6), the teaching of Christ (Clement of Alex. *Strom*. 7.16), and the Holy Spirit (Didymus *Trin*. 2.22; PGL, 1425)."

19 Barrett (1978, 233) speaks in terms of living water as fresh flowing water but also of water creating and maintaining life (cf. Jer 2:13; Zech 14:8). Noteworthy is that the discussion of living water is broader in commentaries on the Book of Revelation—the possible reason being that studies on John 4 are guided by the setting of the well, which drives the interpretive frame for the metaphor and disqualifies alternative interpretational possibilities.

In John 7 the evangelist tells of Jesus's attendance of the feast of Tabernacles, in which he uses two significant metaphors, namely light and water. In 7:38 Jesus speaks of streams of living water (ὕδατος ζῶντος) that will flow ἐκ τῆς κοιλίας αὐτοῦ (7:38). John's Gospel uses the term κοιλία twice—in the Nicodemian discourse and here. While translators and interpreters have no difficulty rendering Nicodemus's use of the word as womb (3:4), such agreement is not found in John 7:38, with translations ranging from heart, to belly, to innermost being (see Carson 1991, 324). This reluctance departs from standard exegetical practice of exploring a word's other uses in the same text. Nicodemus does not ask whether a grown man can enter a second time into his mother's heart, belly, or innermost being. One possible reason for the reluctance to opt for womb is the use of the masculine pronoun αὐτοῦ, since clearly men do not have wombs. However, it needs to be stressed that such logical confines do not apply to metaphor. The birthing God in 1:12 has no physical womb either (nor does the presence of a maternal metaphor suddenly re-identify God as "she"). Accordingly, we suggest that John 7:38 can serve as a double entendre, containing—but not limited to—the meaning, "Out of his womb will flow streams of living water."

The pronoun αὐτοῦ is particularly curious. It can be seen to point back to the antecedent, ὁ πιστεύων (the one who believes) with Jesus promising that streams of living water (ποταμοὶ … ὕδατος ζῶντος) will flow from the womb of such a person (cf. 4:14). Yet, the evangelist identifies the Spirit as living water, to be received upon Jesus's glorification in v. 39. From the witness of the Fourth Gospel, it is clear that the giver of the Spirit is Jesus (e.g., 4:10; 15:26; 20:22). If read this way, the connection to the prologue is yet again seamless, as Jesus, the "born-from-above" Son is pre-empting the coming of the "born-from-above" Spirit, again affirming God as the one who gives life. While the weight of the imagery could be said to fall primarily

on Jesus as the source of the living water (Brant 2011, 140), both Jesus and the believer can be in view here (see Koester 2003, 14).[20]

When the context of the feast of Tabernacles is taken into consideration, Jesus's divine agency is further reinforced.[21] During the festival, pilgrims came to Jerusalem for seven days of celebration and prayer. The timing of the festival would be at the completion of the harvest: a time when rain would be important for the preparation of fruitful soil and the water rites associated with the festival were symbolic of provision and fruitfulness brought about by rain (Carson 1991, 324). The pilgrims would thus pray for "life-nurturing water" (Malina and Rohrbaugh 1998, 154). Jesus's proclamation comes to fulfil the prophetic visions which describe the time of God's abundance (Zech 14:8; Ezek 47:1–11).[22] The fallen world is

20 Although some (Carson 1991, 326–328; Sandnes 2005, 165) would contest this view and argue that Jesus solely speaks of the believer here, our approach holds that metaphor is multi-dimensional. Similar to the symbol of bread, where Jesus is both the bread and its giver (6:51), the bringing together of the bread and water in 6:35 places water symbolism in a similar category. The living water can stream both from Jesus and the believer.

21 The notion of life-giving water resonates with the calendar setting of the Feast of Tabernacles. The feast was a week-long memorial of Israel's forty years in the wilderness (see Lev 23:42–43). Living in temporary shelters for a week, those who celebrated this festival did it in memory of their forefathers' temporary shelters in the desert. Just like Moses, who provided water for the Israelites, Jesus comes and offers water to the crowd and fulfils God's promise to send another prophet like Moses (Deut 18:15–18). Davidic undertones are also present here. Jesus's claim alludes to Zech 14:8, a passage promising living waters which would flow out of Jerusalem. When water and blood flow from Jesus's side (John 19:34), the evangelist recalls Zech 12:10. Lodged between these two allusions is Zech 13:1, a related passage speaking of a fountain to be opened for the house of David. The image of flowing water could have, therefore, brought connections to the Davidic messiah to the fore (see Koester 2003, 196).

22 On each day of the festival, the priest would fill a golden pitcher with water from the pool of Siloam and pour the water into a smaller vessel which caused it to drain into the altar (Carson 1991, 321–322; Koester 2003, 197). This was done to proclaim that, as God had provided water in the past, he will be faithful in sending rain in the approaching year. Jesus's invitation is made on the last day of the feast, which would include a special tradition of water pouring and a ceremony of lights (*m. Sukkah* 4.1, 9-10). Not only was the last day the climax of the festival, but Jesus is essentially communicating that he is the fulfilment of Israel's hope as expressed throughout the

metaphorically barren and cursed—a reality that Jesus comes to reverse as he inaugurates the eschatological new age (Menn 2013, 440). The "living waters," therefore, represent not only a quenching and cleansing, but also a life-giving fruitfulness.

This imagery points both backward and forward. It takes the reader back to the transformation and mission of the Samaritan woman (cf. 4:14) and to the Nicodemian discourse as the narrator's note in v. 39 evokes the image of spirit giving birth to spirit (3:6). Finally, the imagery points forward to the crucifixion, particularly the flowing of water and blood from Jesus's side.

4. Act Three—From the Cross to the new creation

Only in the Fourth Gospel is the audience introduced to the account of the water and blood flowing from Jesus's pierced side (19:34). The evangelist interrupts the narrative with an aside and affirms its purpose, which is to convince the audience to become believers (v. 35a). The event is witnessed by one described as the one who has seen (ὁ ἑωρακὼς) and whose testimony is to be trusted (v. 35b). The editorial note does more than highlight the historical value of the event—it emphasizes its theological gravitas (Brown 1972, 947; see Barrett 1978, 556; Keener 2003, 1981–1984).

An interesting observation is that the evangelist finds it necessary to explicitly mention both water and blood.[23] Brown (1972, 946) aptly

festival (Koester 2003, 197). Scholars are, however, divided on whether the "last day" of the feast actually referred to the seventh day (Brown 1972, 320; Bultmann 1971, 302; Schnackenburg 1990, 2.152; Ridderbos 1997, 272; Burge 2000, 227), or to the day thereafter, where the pilgrims would assemble for joyful celebration (Carson 1991, 321; Barrett 1978, 326; Moloney 1998, 256; Morris 1995, 373).

23 While the water flowing from Jesus's side could easily be associated with *ichōr*, a clear liquid that was believed to flow "from the wounds of the blessed immortals" (Plutarch, *Mor*. 180E; see Koester 2003, 203), the addition of the blood potentially points to something far more significant.

remarked that, whatever liquid were to flow from Jesus's side, it would have been a mixed cocktail of various bodily emissions from the wound of someone who had just died. It is for this reason that it can be assumed that the evangelist purposefully singles out the two elements in his description. Both blood and water have made prior appearances in the Fourth Gospel (e.g., 4:14; 6:55; 7:38f),[24] but their coupling in this scene is curious and has plagued interpreters for centuries.

Interpretations of the water and blood include the water as baptism and the blood as eucharist (Chrysostom; see Carson 1991, 624), signs of cleansing (Grigsby 1995, 91) and the life-giving work accomplished on the cross (Dodd 1953, 428; Schnackenburg 1980, 294), emblems for Jesus's sacrificial death and cleansing of the Spirit (Osborne 2018, 390), and temple imagery (Coloe 2001, 208).[25] Whilst ritualistic interpretations hold their merit, the possibility of life-giving and reproductive imagery also needs to be considered here. Jacob of Sarug (450–520) and Augustine both recognized something of the undercurrent of maternal language in this scene (see Elowsky 2007). Other voices to explore this link include Bynum (1982, 113–135) and Witherington (1989, 156)—the latter identifying *αἷμα* as a technical term and well-known circumlocution "for matters involving procreation, child-bearing, child-bearing capacity, or the act of giving birth itself" in Ancient Near Eastern literature.

Some recent interpreters have highlighted the birthing metaphor in this passage. Lee (2002, 152–159) refers to the cosmic significance of Jesus's flesh in the Fourth Gospel. Jesus reveals God (1:18) in his ironically life-giving death (which she identifies as his "labor"), which paves the way for children of God to be born (1:12). Feribach (2003, 119–120) and Brant (2004, 212) also argue that the water and blood bring to mind the emissions from a female body in birth. Similarly, Coloe (2011, 7) has argued that Jesus gives birth to the new humanity, birthed from God, through his death as the water and blood symbolize the birthing moment—a new beginning (Jones 1997, 212)—adding to it a proleptic function.

Tying into the bittersweet metaphor of labor used in John 16:20–21, the event thus becomes a sign of both death and life. While it confirms that the crucified Jesus is, in fact, dead,[26] and while possible sacramental overtones are not to be disregarded, it also plays into the birth language employed by the evangelist (1:12–13; 3:3–8), especially Jesus's proclamation in 7:38 (see Barrett 1978, 556;[27] Jones 1997, 212; Koester 2003, 197).[28] Oddly, connecting this climatic event to the Johannine prologue and its promise of divine birth remains a fringe interpretation.[29] This is curious, as the Johannine prologue serves to function as the interpreting grid for the gospel. While it is true that cleansing waters ironically flow from the desecrated body of Jesus, it is equally profound that life-giving (i.e., birthing) waters flow from the dead (and yet soon to be glorified) body of our Lord.[30]

24 Jones (1997, 210) argues that these three references anticipate the scene in 19:34 and find partial fulfilment here.
25 Coloe (2001, 208) identifies the blood from Jesus's side as resembling the blood of the Passover lamb flowing from the temple at the time of Jesus's death, and the water as resembling the flowing of the Spirit and life from Jesus, the eschatological temple.

26 Carson (1991, 623) regards this as the main purpose of this eyewitness account.
27 Barrett (1978, 556) linked this episode back to 7:38, arguing that this scene identified Jesus as the αὐτοῦ from whom the living streams flow. This event identifies Jesus as the original source of the waters of life (Jones 1997, 216).
28 Myers (2015, 211) convincingly connects 1:12–13, 3:3–8, 7:38, and 19:34.
29 Speculations that the blood and water refer to the baptism and eucharist are more common than interpretations linking these images to the overarching theme of birth. It is curious, however, that interpreters rather opt to engage extra-biblical theories regarding the sacramental overtones of the FG (baptism and the eucharist) in their interpretation of this passage than to engage that which the text gives them (1:12). Moreover, the inclusion of ὕδωρ would be non-sensical if the text were referring to the eucharist (see Borchert 2002).

The water flowing from the side of Jesus thus cleanses, quenches thirst, *and* also facilitates new life into the family of God—the birth from above. Moreover, in light of the language of 7:39 and 16:20–21, the lifeless body of Jesus is on the verge of birthing the life-giving Holy Spirit.

Finally, our analysis brings us to Jesus and Mary in the garden. Preceding this scene, the evangelist uniquely emphasizes that Jesus was arrested (18:1) and crucified (19:41) in a garden. This reference immediately suggests a connection to the most famous garden in Jewish literature, namely the Garden of Eden. Coloe (2011, 5) taps into this imagery, identifying an echo of Genesis 2:9 (*τὸ ξύλον τῆς ζωῆς ἐν μέσῳ τοῦ παραδείσου*) in John 19:18's description of Jesus being crucified in the middle (*μέσον δὲ τὸν Ἰησοῦν*) of the two others. From this and other features,[31] she posits that the Johannine passion "suggests a deliberate evocation of the primordial Garden of Eden, and a theology of creation." The interaction between Jesus and Mary Magdalene seems to further evoke Genesis imagery as Mary ironically misidentifies Jesus as the gardener (20:15; God being the original gardener—Gen 2:8).[32] In terms of the larger picture, Mary acts out her birth into faith as she becomes the first disciple to carry the message of the resurrection to her wider world.

The kinship language used by Jesus is telling. He instructs Mary, "Go to my brothers and sisters and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" (20:17). The formulaic language[33] used here indicates that the promise in the prologue (1:12–13) has been fulfilled as Mary and the other disciples have indeed been given the right to be children of God. When the risen Jesus appears to his disciples after this, he greets them with his familiar greeting of peace and assures the disciples that they need not be afraid, followed by his bestowal of the Holy Spirit in 20:22. Not only is creation imagery echoed as Jesus breathes on his disciples (cf. 2:7), but the metaphor of birthing is subtly reintroduced. The evangelist explains that Jesus "breathed [onto] them" (*ἐνεφύσησεν … αὐτοῖς*—20:22). Weissenrieder (2014) argues for birthing undertones by referring to the semantic range of the word *ἐμφυσάω*. She notes a frequent occurrence of the word in the medical sphere, specifically in the area of embryology.[34] She explains:

> *ἐμφυσάω* most often appears in embryological texts, where it encompasses the differentiation and origin of the living being, its

30 Stibbe (1992, 118–119) refers to the potential new life flowing from Jesus in this scene. Jones (1997, 211) argues that the emission of blood and water symbolizes the gift of the Holy Spirit and thus functions as the culmination or climax (see Keener 2003, 1980) of the theme of living water.

31 Coloe (2011, 5) links Jesus's assertion "it is finished" (*tetelestai*; 19:30) with the claim that the work was finished at the end of the six-day creation ("thus the heavens and the earth were finished [*sunetelesthesan*]…. And on the seventh day God finished [*sunetelesen*] the work."—Gen 2:1–2). Jesus thus brings the work of God to completion. She (2011, 5–6) comments, "Throughout the Gospel Jesus had claimed that God in fact was still working (5:17), that the creative work of God had not yet been completed, and that he has been sent to complete (*telea*) this work (4:34; 5:36; 17:4)." Only with Jesus's words of completion on the cross is the "great Sabbath" ushered in. Perhaps latching onto creation imagery is the birthing from the side of Jesus in 19:34. Just as Eve is birthed from the side of Adam in Gen 2:21, the church is birthed by Christ through the water and the blood. This is an interpretation dating back to the fourth century, which was affirmed at the Council of Vienne (1312) to counter the interpretation of the spiritualists who argued that the church only came into being in the Middle Ages (Brown 1972, 949). The unusual use of the singular τὴν πλευρὰν is probably intentional as it mimics the use of the singular in the LXX (see Brown 1972, 935).

32 The command not to touch appears in both (ἅψησθε in Gen 3:3; ἅπτου in John 20:17).

33 Bruce (1983) connects the language here to the words of Ruth 1:16.

34 By situating the discourse in the Aristotelian embryological theory of epigenesis, Reinhartz (1999, 97) argues that, as the male seed is believed to carry the life-giving πνεῦμα, Jesus's giving of πνεῦμα ἅγιον in v. 22 is birth imagery, implying that Jesus is "begetting" his disciples. While Reinhartz's position has been criticized for atomizing embryology to epigenesis and for mainly focusing on the procreational role of the male by erroneously deeming ὕδωρ as sperm (see Weissenrieder 2014, 76), the presence of birth language in this pericope ought to be acknowledged and the connection between this scene and the wider conceptual domain of birthing language should be considered.

care and feeding, and the inducing of labor with a push or puff of air.

Coloe (2011, 10) goes on to argue that this moment of giving the Spirit connects to the moment of birth on the cross (19:30). At the first, a new identity is given to the children of God, and at the second, a missional mandate is given to the gathered disciples. In this engagement with his disciples (now his brothers), the imagery of birth comes full circle, as the disciples emerge as those born from above and from the Spirit.

5. A Metanarrative of Life-Giving Johannine Metaphors

The analysis employed in this article holds that metaphors serve as a mode of orientation—creating a metanarrative—not simply a mode of ornamentation (see Jindo 2010, 250; Lee 2016, 151, 161). These metaphors possess the capacity to transform the realities of the audience, reshaping what they regard as familiar into alternative, life-giving symbols (Lee 2016, 160; Brown 2002, 11–12). The aims of our cognitive approach to metaphor are to avoid the pitfalls of either absolutizing or atomizing metaphorical language, and to demonstrate how images can work together to shape meaning and move the audience.

Absolutization is avoided by acknowledging the multi-dimensionality of life-giving Johannine language. In his discussion of Johannine water imagery, Attridge (2006, 47–60) remarks its "cubist" nature, arguing that it can be viewed from various angles to reveal the referent (see also Brown 2015, 291, who identifies the Johannine water metaphor as multi-dimensional and "ever-expanding."). The same can be said of the metaphors discussed in the three acts above. A cognitive mapping of these various images illustrates that birth functions as a feasible meaning-making lens in our reading of the Fourth Gospel. This is strengthened by the fact that language of belief and birth are explicitly married twice in the gospel (1:12–13; ch. 3). In light of John's purpose statement (20:31), life-giving and procreational language is thus used to express a central theological concern of the Fourth Gospel.

Secondly, a cognitive approach to metaphor steers the reader away from an atomized view of Johannine imagery. We have demonstrated that birthing imagery runs deeper and wider than the prologue and the Nicodemian discourse. Whilst language of water, life, kinship, and creation evoke context-specific connotations and meanings that should not be muted for the sake of a metaphorical undercurrent like birth, it needs to be acknowledged that these images play into this undercurrent or metanarrative, strengthening the portrayal of a life-giving, birthing work promised to those who believe. These various images are thus woven together to create a rhetorical tapestry which seeks to move the audience from unbelief to belief.

The metaphor of birth communicates two salient realities—that of [re]creation (see du Rand 2005, 25; Witherington 2001, 121–122), and that of a new lineage and kinship. In the first-century Mediterranean world, birth functioned as the single most important factor of a person's honor status. This is from where one's ascribed honor (static honor) would be derived (Malina and Rohrbaugh 1998, 81). The promise of a new birth thus signified more than just new familial relationships. It signified a new identity, with a new ascribed honor—"a life-changing event of staggering proportions" (82). With recreation and a new lineage, also comes a new identity and a new ethos; children ought to obey (Culpepper 1981, 29) and behave like their parents (Campbell 2017, 101). These life-giving metaphors also highlight a relational dimension. The believer does not simply become a child, but also a brother and sister to a new family. The Fourth Gospel is thus incarnational at its core. As ὁ λόγος became σὰρξ, God's divine mysteries

also became incarnate in metaphor and imagery. Lee (2016, 166) asserts that, "John uses images because of the incarnation, because flesh now has the capability of imaging and imagining God." In this sense, birth becomes a carrier of divine truth, transforming the mundane into vehicles for God's glory.

The Fourth Gospel's most fundamental message, therefore, comes dressed in (although, not exclusively) life-giving language accessible to those who grasp the maternal dimension. Whilst in no way negating the primary revelation of God as Father in the Fourth Gospel, the presentation of God's redemptive acts through his Son dressed in maternal imagery affirms God's daughters as important hearers and agents of the Johannine message. This means that women and mothers can lend an interpretive hand to brothers, fathers, and sons in the interpretation of John's Gospel and its portrayal of God's live-giving works.[35] As demonstrated in the prologue, Jesus came to translate God into language accessible to humanity. Identifying a possible metanarrative of birth marks the Fourth Gospel as a text that includes its female audience in a significant way. It thereby allows mothers, sisters, and daughters to *hear* the gospel and *preach* it as mothers, sisters, and daughters.

6. Conclusion

The Gospel of John is known for its many stylistic devices, woven together to convince the audience to become those who believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God—those who experience life in his Name (20:30–31). Among these stylistic devices, metaphor emerges as a remarkable means to package heavenly truths in accessible language. Drawing on a cognitive approach to metaphor, this analysis has enabled us to avoid the pitfalls of atomization or totalization by demonstrating that an undercurrent of reproductive language emerges as a feasible conceptual domain in the reading of various Johannine metaphors. Approaching the Johannine Gospel as a three-act drama, we have mapped out this imagery across language of birth (John 1:12–13; 3:3–8; 16:21–22), [living] water (4:10, 11; 7:38), the cross (19:34), and new creation (20:17, 22), demonstrating their interconnectedness and meaning-making potential as reproductive and live-giving language functions (alongside other conceptual domains) as potential metanarrative, communicating the central message of the gospel. Identifying the possible undercurrent of birth marks the Fourth Gospel as a text that honors the lived experiences of its female audience. It calls on women to function as active interpreters and ministers of the gospel, and on our brothers to hear the gospel in a way that only a sister could tell it.

35 Likewise, men and fathers ought to come alongside the gospel's female readers as they grapple to understand the Father-Son relationship expressed by John.

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