


Pauline and Johannine *Theosis*

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This article looks at Colossians 2–3:17 and John 17:13–26 as the base texts to see the commonalities between Johannine and Pauline conceptions of *Theosis*. First, the article looks at indwelling and participation as the methods of *Theosis* in the two traditions. Second, the role of mimesis is seen to be integral in these texts' concepts of *Theosis*. Third, the article looks at hope and glory that believers have and look forward to as indicative of their deification. The study begins by defining the term *Theosis* and its cognate terms – deification and divinisation – properly, within an Orthodox Christian context.

Contribution: The goal is to see and detail the concept of *Theosis* in Pauline and Johannine literature, looking at Colossians 2–3:17 and John 17:13–26 specifically. As such, the present study will broaden the discussion the doctrine of *Theosis* as it appears in the Christian scriptures.

Keywords: *Theosis*; Gospel of John; Paul; John; deification; glory; mimesis; participation.

Theosis defined

Historically, *Theosis*¹ has been associated with the Eastern Orthodox² Church, and the doctrine is considered by them to be the 'essence' of Christianity, it is what believers are destined for and called to (Clendenin 2003:120–121). The incarnation – God becoming a man – is the foundation in which humans can become like God (Payton 2007:143). Because God became a man, humans can become like God (Athanasius 318:54:3; Collins 2010:55, 62). Therefore, the Incarnation gives way to and cannot be separated from believers becoming sons of God (Byers 2017:60–61). In John's Gospel, believers are born from above – they are born of God – and undergo an ontological change as sons of God (Byers 2017:159, 177, 206). Believers, however, are not 'sons' in the same way Jesus (The Son) is. This is evidenced by the fact that the sons of God are τέκνα (child/children) and not υἱός, Jesus is the only unique Son (τὸν υἱὸν τὸν μονογενῆ) and is never referred to as a τέκνα, in John (Byers 2017:59, 182). They, by grace, participate in what the Son, by nature, shares with the Father (Gorman 2016:23). Moreover, even though believers become 'divine' they never lose the essence of their humanity, as such the creature–creator distinction remains, excluding pantheistic implications in the doctrine of *Theosis* (Blackwell 2014:104, 119–122; Clendenin 2003:130; Payton 2007:138). It is proper to say that *Theosis* – deification and divinisation – is the perfection and completion of salvation, the full realisation of being made in the image of God: being conformed to the image of Christ and the transformation into immortality and incorruptibility (Blackwell 2014:104; Clendenin 2003:132; Stavropoulos 1976:24–25, 80–86).

Indwelling and participation

There is an obvious wordplay in Colossians 2:9–10 between the noun πλήρωμα and the participle πεπληρωμεοι (see Box 1), with each word coming after and linked to the prepositional phrase ἐν αὐτῷ (Blackwell 2014:103, 111; O'Brien 1982:103).

Earlier in Colossians, the term πλήρωμα is used (1:19) and in both contexts, the term means the fullness of deity (Col 1:19; cf. 2:9) (Barth & Blanke 1994:212–213, 315, 362; Blackwell 2014:107; Bruce 1968:206–207, 233; O'Brien 1982:53, 111–113). Proceeding Colossians 1:19, Christ is said to be the head of the body (the Church), and the two are viewed 'as a living unit', a life which Christ shares with his people, which includes their participation in him (Bruce 1968:201, 205).³ In Colossians 2:9–10, we see that the fullness of deity that dwells in Christ is what is filling believers

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1. For a discussion on the authorship of Colossians see Dunn (1996:35–39). Dunn argued that someone other than the Apostle Paul most likely wrote Colossians, nevertheless, Dunn thought that the work is still 'Pauline' for it is within the Pauline tradition.

2. The use of 'Orthodox' here has two meanings. First it refers to the Eastern Orthodox tradition which has held, historically, to the doctrine of *Theosis*. Second, it refers to a proper understanding of *Theosis* that is orthodox and can be held by gospel-centred and bible-believing Christians.

3. Also, see Litwa (2012:169–171) for implications concerning participation and sharing Christ's nature and pneumatic body.

on account of both their participation and being *in* him (Barth & Blanke 1994:315, 362; Blackwell 2014:111). Bruce (1968:233), commenting on this passage, stated, 'If the fullness of deity resided in Him, His fullness was imparted to them'. Moreover, Collins (2010:42–45) observed that Pauline 'in Christ', and 'Christ in us' language informs the metaphor of deification in the New Testament and the concept of adoption (as sons) and that participation and union are indicative of the Pauline conceptual framework for it. The language of indwelling in the Pauline tradition is said not to be symmetrical concerning mutual and reciprocal indwelling, being more hesitant to say that Christ was in believers (contra. Col 1:27; cf. Eph 3:16–17) (Moule 1977:56–58, 61). However, the present context (Col 2:9–10) taken together with Colossians 1:18–19, would appear to indicate that the texts imply a mutual indwelling, for the church is Christ's body and He – in his fullness – fills the body of believers (Col 2:9–10, cf. Col 1:27) (Litwa 2012:169–171; O'Brien 1982:50, 133). Furthermore, showing the superiority of the person of Christ and personal benefit derived from knowing Him versus the emptiness of the Colossian heresy (Col 2:16–23).

John's language, however, is explicitly both mutual and reciprocal: the Father is in the Son, the Son is in believers, believers are in the Father and the Son and they are in them (Jn 17:21; cf. Jn 14:23; 1 Jn 1:24) (Gorman 2016:124; Moule 1977:65). In addition, by this mutual and reciprocal indwelling – partaking in both the Father and the Son – believers are united and have 'oneness' (Jn 17:21–23) (Beasley-Murray 2000:302).⁴ This reciprocity, as argued by Andrews Byers, *should be understood as the filial assimilation intrinsic to Johannine theosis* (Byers 2017:204) (italics his). This 'filial assimilation' is seen in John 17:14 where believers are not of this world (ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου) just as (καθὼς) Jesus is not of this world, this is because believers, like Jesus, are now 'of God' as sons of God (Jn 1:12–13; cf. Jn 3:3–8). Being tantamount to 'an ontological re-origination' (Byers 2017:159), believers participate not only in divinity but in the filial bond between the Father and the Son (Byers 2017:159–177). Moreover, the use of the term 'just as' (καθὼς) in John 17:14 and throughout the chapter, indicates manner and substance (Gorman 2016:117–118). Although divinity in John is inclusive, allowing for humans to partake and become family members of God (sons of God), this does not mean that humans lose their individual personalities (Byers 2017:169, 181–182; Morris 1995:649). The use of ἐν (neuter) instead of εἰς (masculine) form of one – conceptually, 'oneness' – indicates unity and diversity (Byers 2017:121–123). To say Jesus is one (ἐν) with the Father means they are two persons and yet one God (Byers 2017:121–123). As such, for believers, to have a mutual and reciprocal indwelling relationship with God and to be one with Him means, being divinised, they retain their distinctions preventing confusion between the Godhead and redeemed humanity (Byers 2017:121–123; see also, Clendenin 2003:130; Blackwell 2014:104, 119–122; Payton 2007:138). Such a union is necessary for believers in the Gospel of John, if they are to endure the affliction and persecution of the world (Jn 16:32–33, cf. Jn 15:18–24).

4. For a contrary opinion against a merely 'mystical' union see, Brown (1970:766).

The language between the Pauline and Johannine traditions may be different, nevertheless, their concepts and themes of indwelling and participation are similar and include both sonship and the indwelling of believers, which are indicative of *Theosis* (Collins 2010:46–48).

Mimesis and *Theosis*

Erich Auerbach, in *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, stated that Paul and the Church Fathers 'reinterpreted the entire Jewish tradition as a succession of figures prognosticating the appearance of Christ' (Auerbach 1953:16), and that each figure character – and what they represented – in the Old Testament, Christ and his Incarnation were the fulfilment (Auerbach 1953:195). Paul and John envision the New Testament believers (and subsequently all Christians) as 'post-gnosticating' Jesus through mimesis, which in turn produces the effect of deification, namely *Theosis*.

Between the Pauline and Johannine traditions, despite there being differences in presentation, there is ample evidence to support that they both have models of mimesis that reflect the models of Graeco-Roman antiquity (Bennema 2020a:173). There are five universal aspects to Graeco-Roman mimesis (see Table 1). Bennema (2020a:180–187) argued that Paul's model of mimesis follows this 5-step model, whereas John's model has steps 2–5 and step 1 (Selection and Association) was performed on the disciples' behalf by Jesus's selection of them.

Colossians 2–3:17 seamlessly interweaves the five aspects of mimesis in this section of exhortation to the Colossian church. Christ is the model and it is assumed that the Colossians have associated themselves with Him (Col 2:6, 3:2–3, 12, cf. 1:2–8). This serves as the basis for the imperatives in Colossians 2–3 to observe, discern and interpret and emulate (2:11–17, 20–23, 3:1–17) Christ for moral – and perhaps even ontic – transformation (Col 3:10–

BOX 1: Indwelling and participation in Christ.

Colossians 2:9–10

⁹because in him all the fullness of deity dwells bodily,¹⁰ and you are filled in him, who is the head over every ruler and authority (eds. Harris et al. 2012; Col 2:9–10).

⁹ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ κατοικεῖ πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα τῆς θεότητος σωματικῶς

¹⁰καὶ ἐστὲ ἐν αὐτῷ πεπληρωμένοι, ὅς ἐστιν ἡ κεφαλὴ πάσης ἀρχῆς καὶ ἐξουσίας.

TABLE 1: The five universal characteristics of Graeco-Roman mimesis.

Selection and Association	The one wanting to imitate finds a person or a model worthy of association and imitation.
Observation	The one wanting to imitate studies their model to imitate them.
Discernment and Interpretation	Next, they discern what aspects, virtues and traits of their model they wish to imitate.
Imitation and Emulation	Then they begin to act in mimetic form. This is more about emulating than being a clone.
Transformation	Finally, they achieve their goal of moral development, which is the result of imitating virtuous figures to progress in moral development

Source: This table is adapted from Bennema's (2020a:179) summary of the five characteristics (aspects and stages as he calls them) of Graeco-Roman mimesis. Bennema, C., 2020a, 'A shared (Graeco-Roman) model of mimesis in John and Paul?', *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 43(2), 173–193. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0142064X20961252>

11; cf. Rm 8:29–30; 1 Cor 15:49; Phlp 3:20–21) (Blackwell 2014:117). However, in both chapters, the indicatives and imperatives are rooted on the basis that believers have been filled and participate in Christ's fullness, life and death. This allows them to imitate Christ, having been dead, buried and raised to life (Col 2:11–12, 3:1, 3; cf. Gl 2:19–20) (Blackwell 2014:112–119). This participation and recapitulation of Christ's death is a form of deification; assimilation to Christ, which allows for people to truly act and be like God (Litwa 2012:10–13).

In addition, this concept of union, elsewhere in the Pauline tradition, is one of kinship and genetic relationship that believers have with Christ, both being 'sons of God' (Litwa 2012:12). Moreover, in Colossians 3:5–17, the 'putting off' of the malicious character traits implies – in negative terms – an attempt for the believers to live out who they are in Christ (the new self), and 'putting on' implies similar phenomena, in positive terms (Bruce 1968:269–272). These acts of putting on and off indicate that believers are 'being renewed in accordance with his Creator's image', and that it is 'the life and power of Christ within that is thus being constantly renewed, as the Spirit of God reproduces more and more of the Christ-likeness in the believer's life' (Bruce 1968:272; O'Brien 1982:191). As believers become more like Christ and renewed in His image, they continue to imitate Christ's character and undergo noetic and moral transformation (cf. Phlp 3:17–21) (Blackwell 2014:116). As such, both imitation and participation, here and elsewhere in the Pauline tradition, are modelled and rooted in Christ's image and the death and resurrection, respectively, and are characteristic of the language of deification and *Theosis* (Collins 2010:43–45).

John 13 only presents a complete 4-stage model of mimesis because the first step is assumed and performed by Jesus for the disciples' behalf (Bennema 2020a:180–182). The role of mimesis in Johannine literature is overlooked in Johannine studies because of the lack of the lexeme μιμεῖσθαι, which only occurs in 3 John 11 (Bennema 2020a:180). John, however, uses the term καθὼς – a comparative conjunction – to indicate imitation (Bennema 2020a:181, 2020b:6). In John 17, John uses this καθὼς formula to describe three kinds of actions believers are to imitate Jesus. First, believers are to imitate Jesus in terms of unity; they are to imitate the unity that the Father and Son within their mutual indwelling with God (Jn 17:11, 21–22) (Bennema 2020b:6). Second, believers imitate Jesus's existence because having been born of God they are not of the world 'just as' Jesus is not of the world (Jn 17:14, 16) (Bennema 2020b:6). Third, believers passively imitate Jesus's mission because they are sent into the world 'just as' the Father sent the Son into the world (Jn 17:18, cf. 20:21) (Bennema 2020b:6; Gorman 2016:117–119). In addition, Johannine mimesis is ethical because believers have Christ as their ethical model, which guides their actions now as being members of God's family ('sons of God') (Bennema 2020b:6–9; Byers 2017:206; Gorman 2016:186–189). As such, mimesis helps believers to live out their calling and mission that Jesus gives to them (Jn 17:18, cf. 20:21).

In Colossians and the Gospel of John, mimesis is a literary tool used to instruct and encourage believers to undergo a moral transformation, by imitating Christ (Bennema 2020a:188–190). Moreover, in both Colossians and the Gospel of John, mimesis is possible only because believers participate and are assimilated into Christ's life and existence. Thus, mimesis brings about moral transformation and reflects the ontic transformation, seen particularly in how believers are to act in the light of what God has done *to* and for them.

Glory and hope

Providing an exhaustive definition of glory is beyond the scope of the present study. Nevertheless, glory will be seen to be a divine prerogative in which believers get to partake in, and that this participation in glory is because of the transformation of their nature (Litwa 2012:169–171).

The LXX translated the Hebrew term כְּבוֹד as δόξα, thereby highlighting the objective nature of the glory of God (Kittel & Von Rad 1964:245). Thus, accentuating δόξα as a term in the LXX 'for this divine nature or essence either in its invisible or its perceptible form' (Kittel & Von Rad 1964:244). In addition, the authors of the New Testament used δόξα in the sense of a divine mode of being (Kittel & Von Rad 1964:247). Moreover:

[W]hen the NT refers to the eschatological participation of believers in δόξα this is simply part of the general statement of salvation history concerning the connexion and parallelism between the resurrection of Christ and the resurrection and new aeon of believers. Participation in δόξα. Whether here in hope or one day in consummation, is participation in Christ. (p. 250; original spelling retained)

This eschatological and salvific glory first appears in Colossians 1:27.

The definition of 'this mystery' is defined as 'Christ in you, the hope of glory' (Lenski 1961:78–80; O'Brien 1982:87). Elsewhere, in Pauline literature, the language of indwelling informs the metaphor of deification and is indicative of it (see Box 2) (Collins 2010:42–45). Moreover, O'Brien and Bruce see the phrase 'the hope of glory' as related to the eschatological event of 'the revealing of the sons of God' (Rm 8:19), and that Paul assures his readers in Colossians that this will be brought to completion in the future (Bruce 1968:218–219; O'Brien 1982:87).⁵ This concept is reiterated in Colossians 3:4.

The use of σὺν αὐτῷ 'with him' (see Box 3) operates similar to ἐν αὐτῷ, indicating intimate and personal union with Christ (cf. Col 3:3) (O'Brien 1982:169–171). This passage speaks of believers' heavenly life being manifest in all glory at the *Parousia* and that believers will be glorified at the end of time (Barth & Blanke 1994:397; Bruce 1968:261; O'Brien 1982:166). Barth and Blanke (1994:397), in their commentary on Colossians, observed that this verse, in all of Paul's writings,

⁵For a concise defense of the Apostle Paul as the author of this epistle, see: O'Brien (1982:xli–xlii).

BOX 2: Eschatology of being in Christ.

Colossians 1:27

to whom God wanted to make known what is the glorious wealth of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory (eds. Harris et al. 2012; Col 1:27).

Οἷς ἠθέλησεν ὁ θεός γνωρίσαι τί τὸ πλοῦτος τῆς δόξης τοῦ μυστηρίου τούτου ἐν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν, ὃ ἐστὶν Χριστὸς ἐν ὑμῖν, ἡ ἐλπίς τῆς δόξης.

BOX 3: Being revealed with Christ.

Colossians 3:4

When Christ, *who is your life*, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory (eds. Harris et al. 2012; Col 3:4).

ὅταν ὁ Χριστὸς φανερωθῆ, ἡ ζωὴ ὑμῶν, τότε καὶ ὑμεῖς σὺν αὐτῷ φανερωθήσεσθε ἐν δόξῃ.

has the closest affinities to Johannine Eschatology, citing 1 John 3:2 as evidence. Bruce (1968:262) made a similar observation regarding this passage and 1 John 3:2 and stated concerning Colossians 3:4 'to participate in the revealed glory of Christ is to attain to His likeness'. Moreover, this glory is something that the believers enjoy now because of the presence and activity of the Spirit in their lives (Bruce 1968:262–263). This 'Christ-mysticism' and the death and resurrection being re-enacted in the believers, has qualified the Colossians to be present partakers in the age to come, now possessing divine characteristics of glory, righteousness, holiness and immortality (Davies 1955:318–319).

Spicq (1994:367–368), describing luminous glory in the New Testament, wrote 'This is a divine state, a condition of honor, of preeminent dignity, of splendor'. When Jesus comes in glory at the end of time, when he and his saints are revealed together in glory, they will enjoy this divine prerogative by sharing in the glory (Spicq 1994:368–371).

Furthermore, Spicq (1994:371) wrote, 'If Christ is the refulgence of God's doxa, it is because his origin is divine; he has the same nature as the Father while having his personal independence'. Moreover, John describes the glory that Jesus manifested was from the Father, and Jesus – being God – possessed it by his capacity as the only Son and his eternal filiation (Spicq 1994:373–374). In John 17:14–16, believers are not of the world 'just as' Jesus is not of the world; they are instead of/from God and are his sons, indicating a divine-human filiation (Jn 1:12–13; cf. 3:3–8; 20:17) (Byers 2017:49, 159, 177). Also, in John 17:22, Jesus states, in the perfect tense, that he gave his disciples the glory, which the Father gave to him, and in 17:24, Jesus prays that they would behold the glory, which the Father gave to him. Thus, indicating that this glory is something believers have now and will enjoy fully in the future.

Byers (2017:152) argued that the glory in John 17, which Jesus has given to his disciples and prays that they will behold, in both instances, is none other than his pre-existent divine glory. Moreover, as Spicq (1994:371, 375–376) argued, 'the greatest innovation of the new covenant is that it calls all believers to share the "eternal glory (of God) in Christ,"' which requires becoming a participant in some way or form (2 Pt 1:4; cf. 1 Pt 5:10; 2 Cor 3:18; Jn 1:12–14; 1

Jn 3:1–2). As such, in John 17, believers participate in this glory, by partaking in the fellowship between the Father and the Son, and this transforms them into bearers of Christ-like love (Beasley-Murray 2000:302–305).⁶ This then allows them to love one another for both edification and evangelism (Jn 13:34–35; 17:24–26). As Jesus manifested this glory as the Son, we participate and receive this glory, too, as sons of God (i.e. 'gods') (Byers 2017:179–181; Spicq 1994:373–374).

In both Colossians 2–3 and John 17, glory is a divine prerogative that believers can expect to participate in, eschatologically speaking. Nevertheless, this future promise is something that believers have now because of what Christ has given to them and by the Spirit's active presence in their lives. This participation includes transformation in both traditions, the nature being glorious and its effects ontic, yet never confusing the distinction between the Godhead and deified humanity. What God – Father, Son and Spirit – is by nature, we are by grace and participation.

Conclusion

First, in both Colossians and John, indwelling was a key concept in their respective doctrine of *Theosis*. In Colossians 1:19 and 2:9–10, believers are filled with the *πλήρωμα* that Christ himself possessed, and in John, believers were filled (indwelled) by God himself because of their filial assimilation. In turn, this allows for the participation of believers, being *in*, *united to*, and *filled by* him. Second, the role of mimesis provided not only the ethical example/framework for believers to imitate but was possible because of the transformation that believers have experienced now and shall experience in the future, namely the divinisation of their nature as seen in their imitation of the divine-human (Jesus). Third, the sharing, revealing and receiving of glory that believers (will) enjoy as those identified and transformed by God, shows that to partake in this divine prerogative, they must undergo a renewal worthy of and in ontic likeness of the one who is and is the source of Glory and the glorious hope.

As those who will undergo deification, believers must always remember that we do not become YHWH nor are we (con)fused with him; they retain their unique identity and human nature. Instead, they became by grace what God is by nature, they are made 'gods'. As such, divinity and godlikeness are not theirs intrinsically or inherently, it is a gift that they receive passively as God qualifies and translates them into worthy participants of his nature and kingdom. In addition, they never receive worship for being 'gods'. The state of being a 'god' is meant to give God more praise and honor than humans could render if they were only non-divinised beings. Thus, God is the primary beneficiary of *Theosis* and believers are the secondary beneficiaries of *Theosis*.

⁶Beasley-Murray, however, does not argue for or against *Theosis*. Nevertheless, the truth of his commentary is consonant with the doctrine of *Theosis*.

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R.A.R.F. is the sole author of this article.

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