

Ecology in the Fourth Gospel: The Use of Creation Images in John

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INTRODUCTION

It has generally been recognized that the Johannine language is special when compared with the rest of the New Testament. The peculiar nature of language in the Johannine writings is understood in terms of the use of signs, metaphors, symbols, discourses and the apocalyptic language. Efforts have been made to interpret John in relation to them. However, it seems that there is another feature of Johannine language which has not received adequate attention. This has to do with John's use of concepts and images which have reference to nature. While one may be able to identify several descriptions that may have reference to nature¹, the imageries that we wish to consider in this paper are limited to that of water, light, wind, grain, harvest and vine & branches.

A. Water

The image of water appears very frequently in John and with the most varied of associations than any of John's symbols.² There are conversations about water, water pots, rivers, wells, springs, the sea, pools, basins, thirst and drink. Context and discourse provide clues to the symbolic value of water in the various passages. While water is a dominant motif and expanding core symbol, it is less unified and more variable than, say light or bread.³ Water images in scripture relate to us stories of creation, conflict, deliverance, repentance, rejection, invitation, healing and praise.⁴

A universal symbol shared by all religious traditions, water is vital for the growth and preservation of life. With a majority of the living organisms have their home in water people from ancient times see water as sign and symbol of life itself. Yet water can also be a threat to life as in the case of thunder storms and floods.⁵ In the biblical tradition creation emerges from the waters of chaos (Gen. 1:2) and in the exodus experience water serves both as an agent of deliverance and destruction. Although the Noachic flood was a means of destruction the resultant covenant promised in the rainbow was to be a sign of life to all. In the wilderness wanderings, water became a cause of conflict.

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Waters in the biblical accounts describe the relationship between God, nature and humankind. At least half the 21 chapters of John's Gospel deal with water images.⁶ They refer to water in one of the two ways: symbolizing the blessings of the new age or that of the Holy Spirit in particular (4:10, 14). John's reference to water include: water of recognition (1: 26, 31, 33; 21:1ff) water of renewal (3:5, 23; 19:34; 1 Jn. 5:6-8), water of joy (2:1-11), water of life (4:14; 7:37-39), water of healing (5:1-15; 9:5, 7) and violent water (6:16-21).

1. Water of Recognition

In the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist (1: 26, 31, 33) water represents the old dispensation in contrast to what Jesus now offers. The baptism of John in water is contrasted with the Spirit baptism. John uses water as symbol of the Spirit or in contrast to the Spirit.⁷ It is in the water where John baptized him that Jesus made his first public appearance. As soon as Jesus was baptized by John, the Holy Spirit descended and remained on him. This made it possible for John to recognize that Jesus was the Messiah of God. Thus the water serves a double purpose in contrasting the water baptism of John with the Spirit baptism of Jesus and to reveal his identity.⁸

Without narrating the journey of the disciples from Jerusalem to Galilee after the resurrection of Jesus, the scene in Jn. 21: 1-14 presents seven disciples including Peter by the Sea of Galilee engaged in the act of fishing, their former profession. In spite of a whole night's labour they were unable to catch anything. At the day break, they have landed on the shore disappointed. Suddenly some one appears and asks them fish for a meal. But they expressed their failure in catching any fish. However on the command of the stranger they lowered the net on the right side of the boat, they had a large catch making it even difficult to draw the net into the boat (21: 6). The water in which the disciples have laboured without any success has suddenly become, on the words of the stranger, a place of plentitude of fish (cf. Lk. 5: 1-11). The incident turns out to be the occasion when the disciples were awakened to the fact that it was the risen Jesus who performed the miracles for them.⁹

2. Water of Renewal

In the conversation Jesus had with Nicodemus (3: 1-10), Jesus speaks of birth by water and Spirit as the means for entry to the kingdom of God. This rebirth through the Spirit has been promised for the end time and the Spirit is symbolized by water.¹⁰ But Nicodemus failed to understand Jesus. He then explained that the earthly experiences like being born and hearing the wind, point beyond themselves to the Creator God.¹¹ God makes "new creatures" when he heals men and women of their infirmities even in non-eschatological contexts. To be born of water and Spirit then is "to be begotten from above." While some consider "water" as a later addition in the light of Jesus' commission and the Christian practice of baptism¹² others consider water as denoting the baptism of John preparing for Christ Jesus¹³ and could either symbolize the spirit or even baptism.¹⁴

The conjunction of water and Spirit, deeply rooted in the eschatological hope of Jewish consciousness (Ezek. 36:25-27; Jub.1:23), is taken by the Fourth Gospel and expressed in terms of its metaphorical contrast between above and below. God is seen as the begetter of this new relationship.¹⁵ Water imagery recurs as symbolic of the salvation that Jesus brings (4:7-42; 7:37-39; 13:1-11). While it may refer to baptism, yet it connotes more than a liturgical practice as it points to the satisfaction of a fundamental human need as well as a symbol for the cleansing. As Moody Smith comments, "Probably it would be correct to say that the water imagery of the Fourth Gospel alludes to baptism without referring to it. It evolves the liturgical act without being exhausted by it."¹⁶

The flow of water and blood from the body of Jesus on being pierced by a spear upon his death (19:34) and Jesus as having come by water and blood and with the testimony of the Spirit (1 John 5:6-7), have both a reality of the physical death of Jesus as against the docetists¹⁷ and a secondary reference to the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper.¹⁸ Dodd viewed the flowing of blood and water from the side of Jesus as a "sign of the life that flows from the crucified and risen Christ."¹⁹ In 1 John 5:6 "water and blood" as reference to baptism and crucifixion and v. 7 "water and blood" as reference to sacrament of baptism and Lord's Supper. Both witness out of the power of the Spirit.²⁰ Jesus' acted parable in John include: riding into Jerusalem on an ass, cleansing the temple, double parable of bread and wine and foot-washing (Jn. 13: 1-15)²¹ which, even Jewish slaves were not required to do because of its menial nature.²² It was performed by Gentile slaves, wives and children.²³ The action of Jesus thus underscores the humiliation of his action (cf. Gen. 21:14), a pointer to his death and a call to humble service in gratitude to what Jesus had done. Because of the cleansing effected by Jesus through his death on the cross, a fuller cleansing is now possible.²⁴

3. Water of Joy

The three nature related signs recorded in John are: Changing Water into Wine, Feeding of the Multitude and Jesus' Walking on the Sea. Water was used for purification in the old order but wine is given by Jesus, the one who establishes the new order. Dodd assumes that the incident is from a parable of Jesus which had the setting of a wedding feast. It could have begun, "A certain man made a wedding feast" and ended "you have kept the good wine till now."²⁵ The mode of meeting the need of wine in the most embarrassing situation of a family wedding in Cana (2:1-11) is very significant in the Jewish setting. Jars of water intended for ritual cleansing of people about to eat became in the hands of Jesus vessels of wine for celebrating the miracle of God (cf. Is. 25: 6-9)²⁶ thereby the ordinary water becoming the water of joy. While it symbolizes the purification and life Jesus brings, yet also signifies an intentional allusion to the wine of sacrament that is said in the synoptics.²⁷ Changing water into wine is bound up with the cleansing of the temple and connected with the Nicodemus incident in chapter 3 and the temple of the Lord in chapter 4. The connecting of the two in chapter 2 provides a programme-key to understand the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus and the revelation of the glory of God (2: 11).

4. Water of Life

In an important speech of Jesus with the Samaritan woman on living water (4: 10, 13f; 7: 37-39), she is led to acknowledge Jesus as the Saviour of the world (4:27-42).²⁸ The dialogue starts with Jesus asking the Samaritan woman for water and ends with the revelation of Jesus identity as Christ. Living water is a particularly appropriate term for what the evangelist sees to be true source of life, "a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (4: 14). Bread and water are the staple necessity of life and are natural symbols of the supernatural life.²⁹ Water is something which the living beings continually require. Yet, the feeling of need for water and food, at the same time also point towards the human desire to live.³⁰ While in the Old Testament "living water" was a metaphor for the quickening energies of God (Ezek. 47:9; Zech. 14:8; Jer. 2:13), in the Rabbinic Literature it is used for the Torah and for the Holy Spirit. "Water and living water" as metaphors refer to the Spirit (Gen R. 70:8) and interprets the water drawing of Tabernacles as a drawing of the Spirit (7:38). The "living water" is the gift of the Holy Spirit which brings people into life-giving contact with Christ³¹ who alone gives the living water that never exhausts like a spring.

John 7: 37-39 set in the context of the feast of the Tabernacles assumes the rite of water-drawing that took place on each of the seven days of the festival proper. It is stated in *Sukk.* 5: 1 "He who does not see the joy of the water-drawing has not seen joy in his whole life time" (cf. Is. 12:3 "with joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation"). Offering of water to God is made in connection with the daily drink offering (of wine).³² Special prayers were made for the sending of rain since the festival was bound up with the agricultural year (cf. Zech. 14:16-17). Occurrence of rain during the festival was considered as a sign of the plentiful rains to be received during the forthcoming agricultural year. Water-drawing also served as a reminder of the miraculous provision of water during the wilderness journey (Ex. 17:1-6) and in anticipation of the abundant gift of living water flowing from Jerusalem when the kingdom of God comes (Is. 12:3 cf. Ezek. 47:1-12 and Zech. 14: 8) thus combining the past, present and the future.³³ In the Old Testament the spring water symbolized the life that God gave (cf. Rev. 7: 17; 22: 17). Rivers of water that flows from the one who drinks of Christ points towards the flow of the Spirit from Christ who is glorified.³⁴ The vitality of God overflows into the world which creates life and fellowship (1 Jn. 3: 14). Its divine quality is the creative nature-life that is continually creative, continually spending yet never diminishing—the kind of life that neither age does not wear nor do years condemn.³⁵ Now the living water is available through the redeemer to all who believes and drinks. For the living water represents the Spirit which Jesus was to send when glorified.

5. Water of Healing

The healing properties of the pool of Bethsatha was famous since people from all over gathered there awaiting the stirring of the water when they could enter the water and be healed. But a paralytic who was ill for 38 years was there for long (5:2-9). He could not yet be healed as he failed to make it to the pool before the rest when

the pool was stirred. The healing was in actuality from God and water was made use as an agent in the process. The helpless man is raised to new life (v. 9) through the action of Jesus. In the Old Testament there is the story of Naaman who was stuck with leprosy, but was healed as a result of bathing in river Jordan (2 Kings. 5: 10-14).

The occasion of the episode of restoring sight to the blind (Jn. 9: 1-12) is shortly after the feast of the Tabernacles, in the vicinity of the Temple before Jesus' return to Galilee. The Johannine context appears to be the decision by an authoritative Jewish body on the issue of expulsion from Synagogue (at Jamnia).³⁶ The man who was blind from birth and was begging at the temple gates desired for sight. Jesus who spat on the ground and made mud mixing with the saliva applied it on the eyes of the man who was blind and directs him to wash in the pool of Silaom. He obeyed what Jesus said and came back seeing (9: 7). Natural element of mud and water became agents of healing on the direction of Jesus, the creator of them.

6. Rough Water

After that great event of the feeding of the 5000, the disciples were on their way to the other side of the sea. The Fourth Gospel clearly mentions the reason of Jesus' sending away the disciples. They had similar messianic longing as of the Jews. On the way they were caught in a storm (6:16-21) and the sea became rough as they struggled to row to the safety of the shore. As it seemed all hope lost to the disciples, there appears Jesus walking on the water rescuing the disciples and calming the sea. The incident reminds us of the exodus event when the people of Israel were delivered through the Red Sea (cf. Ps. 77:16, 19). The miracle demonstrates the power of Jesus over death and the ability to grant life. Similar to the Spirit of God moving across the water in the darkness and the wind (Gen. 1:2) for the purpose of creating life, Jesus identified himself as the person through who God is recreating this world. (6: 18-21).³⁷

B. Light

In the creation narratives the conflict between wind and water was followed by the light of the new day of creation.³⁸ Non-solar (divine) light used to introduce Sabbath frame-work – and on the fourth day sun and moon were created to separate light from darkness and day from night.³⁹ The OT makes a distinction between the light and the sun. There is no stress that the brightness of the days comes from the sun. Light existed prior to the sun and other nocturnal luminaries. Light of the day or the morning was understood independent of the sun.⁴⁰ In the creation narratives of Genesis 1 light is explicitly called the light of the day (v. 5). It already exists before the lights of heaven are formed (vv. 14ff.). So it is with darkness and the alternate of day and night (cf. Jer. 3:15; Ps. 136: 7-9). The entire OT is governed by this thought pattern.⁴¹

The creation of light (Gen. 1:3) is nothing more than making the first day bright. The light of the heavenly bodies give light to all people (Dt. 4:19) and measures time (Gen. 1: 14; Ps. 104:19-23). They allow in their regular course the regulation of life

and they are made to serve the creator.⁴² Only in the light of creation can one have life. "To see light" means "to live" (Job 33: 28). The dead do not see light (Job 33:16; Ps. 49: 20). Light and Life are clubbed together (cf. Ps. 56: 14).⁴³ In the OT theophanies light in all its various aspects is a manifestation of God himself (Ex. 24:20; Hab. 3:3-4) and darkness a state where people are cut off from his presence (Ps. 88: 6-13).⁴⁴ In a sense Law serves as light to the people in the OT (Ps. 105, 110; Prov. 6:23). In the Rabbinic literature while the Jewish development continues Law as a light is further developed. Light is used for the time of salvation and for the Messiah. When the Messiah manifests himself, God will cause the light of the king, the Messiah and Israel to shine and all the peoples of the world are in darkness and obscurity. Then they will all come to the light of the Messiah and Israel.⁴⁵

The War of the sons of light against the sons of darkness of Qumran presents the universe under the dominion of two opposing principles. In the liturgical tradition of Judaism, the light of the day retains its independence from the sun as in the Old Testament (1 QS 10: 1-3, 10; 1 QH 14:13f.). Yet sun is considered to be the regulatory principle of the world (1 QM 17:6f.), which represents something new in comparison to the Old Testament. The Qumran literature also speaks of the ethical division of light and darkness.⁴⁶ J. H. Charlesworth points out that light versus darkness is the most conspicuous characteristic of the Qumran dualism.⁴⁷ On the opposite side is the "Spirit of truth" and the "spirit of perversity." Light and darkness characterize two mutually exclusive groups of people. In the inter-testament literature the dualism attains an ethical dimension.

The synoptics use "light" as the source of luminosity (Mt. 17: 5; 6: 23), as symbolic for the person and teaching of the Messiah (Mt. 5: 14, 16; Lk. 2: 32) and in the transferred sense to "openness" (Mt. 10: 27). Paul uses it in the eschatological context essentially within the bond of common Jewish sense, "children of light" and "new creation" (1 Thess. 5: 5; 2 Cor. 5: 17).⁴⁸

Out of the 73 usages of "light" in the New Testament, John has it 33 times and "darkness" 12 out of the total 17. John sees darkness as the antithesis of light which is an uncreated entity unlike the Qumran's created light. The light is avoided by the wicked. The manifestation of light therefore results in judgment. It calls for faith (John 3: 19).⁴⁹ John presents God as light is the Son coming into the world and light is that activity of God through which God does well to humankind overcoming darkness and sin. John the Baptist is presented as a testifier concerning the light. Therefore, he is only a lamp which points people to Jesus whereas Jesus himself is the light.

1. Jesus as the Light coming into the world

The Logos is presented as the real light (1:9) as against John the Baptist who is only a lamp. The verse could however be translated "the light was coming into the world" or "everyone coming into the world." In the Old Testament light is pictured as coming into the world to enlighten people. This has a messianic connotation (Is. 9:2; 42:6; 40:1-2). The prophetic proclamation of the coming of light is associated to Jesus in

the Fourth Gospel when the Baptist's witness is combined with the Isaiahic voice in the wilderness.⁵⁰ The life of the Logos which was the light of men (v. 4) is here called the very light, the authentic light which has appeared in history and concerning whom the Baptist bear witness. It is in the revealed Logos alone that people can find the true light. He shines in darkness giving light to humanity.⁵¹

2. Jesus as the Light of the World

In the last days God as light came into the world in his Son (1: 9; 12: 46). Whereas Law was the light of the world in the Old Testament, in the New Testament love became the light of the world (1 Jn. 4: 9-10). John 8: 12 were uttered in the context of the feast of the Tabernacles when the illumination in the temple was symbolizing both the divine presence and the light of the Law.

John. 7: 37-38 had immediate reference to the water-drawing ceremony of the festival, and Jesus as fulfilling all that is signified of Israel's experience and hope for the salvation of God. The immediate context here is the joyous celebrations in each night in the light of the lamps. Four huge lamps of light in the court of the women lit in the golden bowls the top of which were reached by ladders (Mishnah Sukkah 5: 2-4). The lamps when lit, reflected the whole city of Jerusalem. Jesus here proclaims himself as the light not only of Jerusalem but the whole world. Being light, in God there is no darkness at all (1 Jn. 1:5). This life and light has come into the world in Jesus, to dispel darkness. Driving away darkness this light gives humanity knowledge of the purpose and meaning of life.⁵²

As with the water drawing ceremony, the celebration in the light of the lamps will have been associated with recollection of the nation's experience at the Exodus and the hope for a new Exodus. The shekinah cloud—pillar of cloud during the day and the pillar of fire by night—manifested the presence of God in the wilderness wanderings. This signified God in action, his saving activity.⁵³ Zechariah 14: 5b-7 combines the continual lighting that flow from Jerusalem. Jesus as the creative Word of God, through whom all things were made (Jn. 1:3), and as the first word God spoke when he said, "let there be light" (Gen. 1: 3), he is the source of light. In the words of Bultmann, "without revelation the world is in darkness."⁵⁴ The entry of the light into the world, says Ashton, "must at least partially dispel the darkness."⁵⁵ In the healing of the blind man, Jesus once again presents himself as the light of the world (9:5). As light he is able to give sight to the blind man. Without light we are completely blind, disoriented and are unable to find our way. As the light of the world, Jesus illustrates how to live a full and obedient human life. He who follows him will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life (cf. Job 29:3; Wis. 18: 4; Sir. 50: 19). The Pharisees who were blind opposed Jesus and sought to put him to death.⁵⁶

Jesus is sovereign over the forces of evil. He shines in darkness and which the darkness can not overcome (Jn. 1:5). Those who follow him in personal relationship and trust will not walk in darkness but will become sons of light (12:36). The NT consistently emphasize that Jesus Christ has brought light and eternal life to all people

(Acts 26: 23; 2 Tim. 1:10).⁵⁷ The author of 1 John also stresses the fact that God is light (Jn. 1: 5), and that in him is no darkness at all. God's nature as light is stressed in transferred sense. Fellowship with God is presented as evidence of walking in the light, in truth and in love. This will result in relationship with one another. While "light" earlier emphasized human conduct now the stress is laid on relation to God.⁵⁸

The Johannine concept of light is very similar to that of the OT concept and is continually associated with God and his word, with salvation, with goodness, with truth, and with life. In applying it to Jesus, John shows that the OT expectations are fulfilled in him.⁵⁹ When Jesus is referred to as the light, it means that he is this original light in creation, given by the word of God (Ps. 119: 105), gives life and salvation (Micah 7: 8; Is. 9: 2). Light is synonym with the gift of life (Ps. 36:9). Those who come to God is in light as God is in light. Light is given to the faithful by God while for the unfaithful there is only darkness and gloom.⁶⁰

C. Wind

A. M. Hunter lists the Night Wind (3: 8) among the parables of St. John's Gospel.⁶¹ The Greek word *pneuma* means wind, whether gentle breeze (3: 8) or violent blast (6: 18); air breathed in and out by living beings both, humans and animals as well as the breath of life, the basic principle of life.⁶²

In the OT the word *rua'h* means wind or breath. It signifies the wind as created and controlled by God, yet invisible, referring to the mysterious nature of the wind, as well as any mysterious and unpredictable power like wind. It also refers to supernatural power acting upon people, principle of existence and vitality and denotes aspects or impulses within the physical life of man. The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha emphasize the LXX meaning "breath" and "breath of life". The Spirit of God is equated with the word of God in the act of creation and associated with wisdom, but the special reference is to human beings after death.⁶³ Philo denotes wind as one of the elements along with earth, heaven and water. It's the air that we breathe and is life-giving. It's the breath of God in creation also used with reference to reason or mind. While the Rabbinic Literature is concerned with it in material terms, Qumran uses it in a variety of ways: breath of animals, winds-emptiness, vanity and vapor, psychological and eschatological sense.⁶⁴

John does not use the word with reference to the spirit of uncleanness or disease as in the Synoptics but concentrates on the OT use. The emphasis is on the Spirit of God (1: 32f.; 3: 34; 7: 39; 14: 16-17; 20:22). The miraculous operation of the Spirit is stressed. Just as the wind is incomprehensible although one could experience it, so is it with those born of the Spirit.⁶⁵ Dodd compares the simile in v. 8 with the parable of Mark 4: 26-29 where the mystery of sprouting and growing of the seed without the knowledge of the farmer is stressed.⁶⁶ Brown comments that both the parables are based on the recognition of the "spontaneity and inscrutability of the natural process."⁶⁷ Hunter is of the view that the parable goes back to the one who "spoke of grass, and wind, and rain, and fig trees and fair weather."⁶⁸ Jesus used the imagery

of the wind which they experienced while in their conversation to drive home the reality of the powerful wind although it's a mystery.

John 6:18 is in the context of Jesus walking on the water pointing to the exodus experience of miraculous deliverance in the crossing of the Red Sea. In this second exodus, the revelation of God came to the disciples in distress (cf. Ps. 77: 16, 19). God is presented as one who makes a path on the waters in walking across the rough sea with strong wind.⁶⁹

D. Grain of Wheat

John 12: 24 mentions grain of wheat falling into the ground, dying and bearing much fruit. It is often mentioned in the scripture (Dt. 7: 13; 2 Kgs. 18 32; Neh. 5: 2; Mt. 3: 12; Mk. 4: 28). While the synoptics refer to a grain of mustard seed as something very small, a grain of wheat is not referred to as such, is used to explain the death of Jesus.⁷⁰ It is said that at least five kinds of wheat grew in Palestine, as wild or cultivated. Fresh wheaten loaf was the basic food of the Israelites. Azaria Alon writes:

The types of wheat and barley cultivated in Israel today may bear foreign names, and several of them were imported from distant lands, but stalks of the aboriginal wild varieties still wave on the hills of Galilee and Judea and they are the ancestors of wheat and barley the world over. Farmers and geneticists looking for a remedy for the diseases and pests which affect the more delicate modern varieties seek to breed from the wild plants, which have become resistant to many diseases.⁷¹

A number of scholars⁷² consider it as a genuine parable of Jesus on account of the imagery, form and vocabulary. The synoptic tradition has a parable about the grain of seed (mustard) which when sown on the ground grew and became a great plant in whose branches the birds of the air came and roosted.⁷³ Other parables dealing with wheat or grain in general are the Sower and Seed (Mk. 4:1-9) and the Grain growing by itself (Mk. 4:26-29).⁷⁴ The reference to "much fruit" common in Mk. 4:26-29 and Jn. 12:24 with Daniel 4:12 seem to indicate the background of both the parables is the same and the possibility of the Johannine parable being among the traditional parables of Jesus.⁷⁵

The emphasis of the parable (Jn. 12:24) is the necessity of death in order to have life. It was with the death of Jesus that his ministry would become greatly fruitful (Mk. 10: 45). The close resemblance between the parable and Paul's words in 1 Cor. 15: 36 have been noted by scholars. "The seed that you sow does not come to life unless it has first died." Perhaps, Paul knew about this parable of the grain of wheat as he was aware of the parable about the thief (1 Thess. 5: 22f.).⁷⁶ Gidino comments concerning the parables:

Study of early Palestinian cereal cultivation reveals the imagery of John 12: 24 to be characteristic of female roles in Ancient Near Eastern culture and religion. In the story of wheat cultivation there are the themes of death and rebirth, barrenness and fertility, individuality and corporateness, death and bounty, and as in (Jn. 12:24) resurrection and discipleship.⁷⁷

The reference to seed in 1 John 3: 9 is to the "divine seed", which signifies the divine principle of life in the believer. As the physical seed was the generator of life in the physical order (Gen. 1:11f.), so the divine seed becomes the fount and origin of life in the new order of recreated humanity.⁷⁸

E. The Harvest

The Old Testament imagery of "harvest" is used in terms of vintage and judgment while the reference in John 4:35-38 has definite parallels in the synoptic tradition of agricultural parables, especially in vocabulary like "sowing", "harvesting", "fruit", "labour" and wages."⁷⁹ This discourse is based on independent traditional sayings of Jesus sewn together. The harvest is taking place already in the ministry of Jesus (cf. Mt. 13). The proverb used here as in Mt. 16: 2-3, is based on the process of nature.⁸⁰ The interval between the agricultural seasons is done away with. The harvest is ripe on the very day of the seed being sown. The harvest is ready and the labourers are at work (cf. Mt. 9:37-38).

The joy of those reaping the harvest is emphasized (Ps. 126: 5-6). The disciples are made partners in the reaping of the harvest as a result of the mission of Christ. Because the harvest is at hand, the reaper has overtaken the sower and it is the promised age of fulfillment.⁸¹

F. Vine and Branches

The imagery of vine in John 15: 1-7 is found in the context of the farewell discourse of Jesus. The imagery is followed by a command to love one another (15: 7-17). Brown and Schnackenburg term it as a *masal* similar to the Shepherd and the sheep in John 10: 1-18.⁸² Last of the "I am" sayings of Jesus, the vine and branches imagery has also relation to the Last Supper (13: 1-30). It recalls the words of the institution where mention is made of "the fruit of the vine" (Mk. 14: 25).

In the Old Testament Israel is often depicted as the vine or the vineyard (Hos. 10: 1-2; Is. 5: 1-7; Jer. 2: 21; Ezek. 15: 1-5; 17: 1-21; 19: 10-15; Ps. 80: 8-18). The usage in most occasions, however, is a warning of the impending judgment. The tradition was continued in Judaism (Lev. Rab. 36: 133a). Jesus who is described as the true vine fulfills his calling to be fruitful to God which Israel failed to do.⁸³ Vine grew well in Palestine and its fruit was eaten dried or made it into wine. Azaria comments, "Green or black, eaten fresh, or as raisins or wine, or made into jam, the country would not be the same without them."⁸⁴ The wine was popular because of its cheapness and its effectiveness in quenching thirst (cf. Ps. 69: 29). Vineyards were surrounded by walls or hedges to protect it from animals and towers were built for security against thieves. Together with fig trees vines were signs of plenty (Zech. 3:10; Mich. 4:4). Vineyards serve as subjects in the parables of Jesus (Mt. 20:1-16; 21:28, 33-46).⁸⁵ The parable of the *Acts of Thomas* 146 is considered very close to the original parable of the vine, which is an authentic parable of Jesus.⁸⁶ Planting, watering and growth are common factors that the parable share with that of the mustard seed (Mk. 4:30-32) and the seed growing secretly.⁸⁷

Jesus calls himself the vine that fulfilled God's purpose of bearing fruit and his Father as the vine dresser. The disciples are the branches who were to bear fruit as well, though they failed initially. Constant remaining in Jesus is the only way disciples can bear fruit. Stress is thus laid on conformity to the life of Jesus.⁸⁸ Cutting off dry and withered branches and the removing of the useless growth contribute towards better fruit-bearing. The emphasis is on the utilitarian value of the vine. It is in the reciprocal relationship between the vine and branches, similar to that between the Father and the Son, that the vine is able to bear much fruit.

Conclusion

In the view of John creation finds its source in God. Apart from God creation has no existence. As a product of God, creation also bears in its image the goodness of God. Created by God and itself resembling the goodness of God, examples from nature served as the most accessible source from which Jesus freely drew in order to teach the most profound spiritual truth. The images of water, light, wind, grain, harvest, vine and branches, the most familiar of the daily experiences of an ancient agrarian people became in the hands of Jesus instruments to teach deeper truth about the divine working. The experiences of the divine rule could become meaningful to the farmers, fisher folks and labourers only in a language that was familiar for them to understand. Jesus' use of the creation imageries testifies to his close connection with the people amongst whom He ministered as well as his understanding of the integral relationship that was shared between the divine economy and the created order. It is only in relation to nature and ecology that one may truly perceive the depth of the relationship between God, humans and nature and thus also understand the reality of God and His kingdom at work amongst the human sphere.

NOTES

1. See Lucius Nereparampil, "An Eco-Theology Foreshadowed in the Gospel of John" *Bible Bhashyam* 19:3 (September 1993): 188-204.
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