



Union with the transcendent God in Philo and John's Gospel

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This article analyses the experience of divine presence within an intimate divine-human relationship, as conceptualised in Philo's writings, and compares this experience with mystical passages in John's Gospel. The article explains their understanding of God and how the union with a transcendent God is mediated. The article investigates this union in terms of an underlying mystical pattern that existed in the 1st century CE. The pattern explains similarities of Philo's works with John's Gospel that indicates the former's mystical nature. Special attention is given to Philo's accounts because his own mystical experiences and views are relatively unknown in New Testament scholarship, whilst John's Gospel is compared to show how this pattern existed within a Jewish-Christian setting. After an introduction to the relevance of mysticism in contemporary research on Philo and John, the article, without trying to establish any genetic link between Philo and John, evaluates the understanding of mystical union in the light of Philo's own mystical experience and pronouncements. Then follows a discussion of Philo's understanding of the divine longing for union with humanity despite the divine transcendence, with attention to the direct and indirect manner in which this union is mediated. Finally, similar motifs in John's Gospel are investigated.

Introduction

Mysticism as a multifaceted¹ phenomenon has been understood in different ways.² It is, on the most abstract level, about consciously experiencing the presence of God within an intimate, divine-human relationship. The relationship is the result of the divine quest for, and desire of, God to reach out to human beings to reside in their innermost being. The presence of God permeates human existence so that a person is transformed into reflecting the divine image and living in accordance with the divine will.³

This cursory description of mysticism can be enriched by recently developed research by Waaijman (2003:57–79). His analysis, based on a phenomenological investigation of mystical experiences, lists certain characteristic elements that mystical experiences have in common. These characteristics include (1) a human longing and desire for God that (2) shifts to an awareness of a divine presence, (3) is experienced in ecstasy, (4) brings about feelings of unworthiness and nothingness, (5) is received in passivity and is encountered directly, (6) brings about unity with, (7) contemplation and (8) indwelling of the divine, (9) in a relationship of mutuality (10) that is brought to fruition in everyday practice and life. These insights provide a basic pattern with which one can compare a text in order to discuss its mystical quality.⁴

1. Mysticism has taken on many different forms because of the way in which a mystical experience is verbalised in terms of mystics' particular contexts (cf. e.g. Schäfer 2009:353; Waaijman 2007:54–62). In antiquity, there were, for example, Hellenistic, Merkavah and Gnostic forms of mysticism. On mysticism within a Platonic context, cf. Afterman (2013:179). For the mysticism of Philo, cf. Afterman (2013), Goodenough (1935), Hagner (1971) and Hillar (2005). On Johannine mysticism, cf. Kanagaraj (1998). Cf. also Bousset (1960) who, in 1901, wrote extensively about mysticism that is expressed in heavenly ascents.

2. Mysticism became one of the most controversial notions within contemporary religious discourse after it fell victim, amongst other approaches, to the cultural wars between Protestant and Roman Catholic scholars and the influence of Barthian theology in 20th-century scholarship, especially in Europe. This trend was strengthened by prejudices in contemporary scholarship against religious experience and emotions. Within Judaism, ironically, it was the early Christian appropriation of mystical thought that helped to prejudice some influential orthodox figures against mysticism. In general, even progressive scholarship regarded mysticism until quite recently with suspicion as escapism or, even worse, as a pathological obsession of the religious lunatic fringe. Part of the challenge to understand the notion of mysticism, and a cause for the controversy about its meaning, is the fact that it is an etic term for a phenomenon that was named differently in pre-modern times (cf. Deconick 2006:2). An example is apocalyptic literature which, in its concern for hidden knowledge, represents early Jewish and Christian mysticism, although it does not contain references to the term mysticism.

3. Note, for example, the remarks of Boyarin (1994:7) about groups and movements in antiquity (e.g. Platonic philosophy) whose writings reflect a 'desire for the One, which among other things produced an ideal of a universal human essence, beyond difference and hierarchy.' This desire and search for inner, universal meaning (Barclay 2011:62) in a time of 'moral mutability' is regarded as 'the mark of created being ...'. Rowland (1996:409) earlier on referred to 'a shadowy, perhaps embryonic, mysticism of the Second Temple period' with typical mystical features such as 'angelology, heavenly voices and preoccupation with the hidden.' Cf. also the description of Deconick (2006:2) of mysticism as a tradition within early Judaism and Christianity that centred on the belief that a person directly or indirectly, immediately, and before death can experience the divine, either as a rapture experience or as one solicited by a particular praxis. Deconick (2006:7) adds that authors of mystical texts appear to rebel against the idea 'that the truth about the sacred can be reached through intellectual engagement'. They suggest that the sacred is encountered first and foremost face to face, through a direct experience of God (Deconick 2006:8)

4. A vast number of publications in all theological and religious disciplines show that mysticism is being restored to the centre of scholarly research. Cf. Burrows (2006) as an example of a discussion on the way in which mysticism was relegated to the periphery of theological



The above pattern is useful as a sounding board for comparing the writings of Philo and John's Gospel in order to describe their mystical nature. This is done in the rest of this article – firstly in regard to Philo⁵ and then in terms of John's Gospel. In this analysis, the focus is on their view of the divine in the mystical experience. At stake is the issue of God's character and especially whether the mystical experience is an intellectual, rational or hermeneutical phenomenon, comprising reflection on and about scriptural mystical contents, or whether it is an unmediated, direct experience of God – and if indeed it raises the question how these two authors understand God's self-revelation, and whether they also allow for an apophatic dimension to their mystical understanding of God next to their kataphatic understanding of the divine.

Mysticism in Philo and his time

Philo, the Hellenistic Jewish author from Alexandria in the 1st century CE,⁶ shares with mystical authors of antiquity an awareness of a hidden world that lies beyond their perception of reality. They were convinced that it is possible to transcend one's transitory, contingent context to attain knowledge of a reality that is not accessible to sense perception or to reason (Chadwick 1966:306; Hillar 2005). Philo belongs to those authors whose works represent attempts to revert to God as closely as possible, 'to experience the living and loving God, despite the desolate situation on earth with all its shortcomings and catastrophes' (Schäfer 2009:353). Philo reveals how union with God means that one experiences a sense of closeness to God – a deity who exists beyond humanity's experience of the present world, time and space⁷ (e.g. Ebr. 4; Som. 1.192; Spec. Leg. 1.263–263; Chadwick 1966:293).⁸

A practising mystic

Philo's perspective on mysticism is especially interesting because of his own exposure to extraordinary experiences of

(Footnote 4 continues ...)

discourse and its resurgence in recent times. A number of factors contributed to the renewed study of mysticism, such as the reappraisal of apocalypses and the Dead Sea scrolls which revealed the mystical content and leanings of Second Temple Judaism, notable the Qumran community. Cf. Alexander (2006); Schäfer (2009:348–349). Influential in the rediscovery of Jewish mysticism were the towering figures of Scholem and Gruenwald. Research on Merkavah and Jewish mysticism by scholars such as Segal (1990), DeConick (2001, 2006), Tabor (2012) and their collaborators reiterated the importance of mysticism in understanding the Judeo-Christian traditions. Cf. also De Villiers (2009).

5. This article is written from the assumption that Philo's writings offer diverse perspectives that are not always coherent. Afterman (2013:180) rightly draws attention to the need to be careful to extrapolate insights based on certain passages to his oeuvre as a whole. Some inconsistencies, however, should not keep one from pointing out prominent themes that reveal logical cohesion and structure.

6. Philo has been regarded as exceptionally important as a contemporary author of New Testament writers, and his works have been investigated extensively for the light that they shed on the Bible. Chadwick (1966:287) draws attention to the fact that the New Testament, written in Greek, is oriented to a non-Palestinian world. 'It would be very strange if its principal theologians did not disclose substantial parallels with the writings of Philo, Josephus and the author of the Wisdom of Solomon.' For an overview of the massive number of publications on this matter, cf. Radice and Runia (1988).

7. The origins of Philo's mysticism cannot be traced in this article, but there is, for example, an unmistakable influence of Plato's elevation and contemplation of the ideas on Philo's mysticism (*De Opif.* 69–71, cited by Afterman 2013:180).

8. Faith is for Philo analogous to the passion to reach out beyond the known. He compares it with the risk taken by merchants who sail the sea for trade (cf. Chadwick 1966:299).

the divine. He did not write about mystical union with God as a matter of theoretical knowledge or interest. A passage such as *De Migr.* Abr. 7 (34–35) reveals (unashamedly, as he states) the 'many times' during a dry period of frustration with his philosophical writing, that he had an immediate, direct and ecstatic experience which he describes as 'a divine inspiration' that greatly excited him.⁹ Accounts such as these offer valuable insights into his understanding of the divine, and deserve attention first.

In the following description, one recognises the elements of a mystical experience: (1) the desire and longing for hidden knowledge, (2) frustration at the dryness of one's own life and insights, (3) an awareness that the core of one's experience is shifting away from oneself, and (4) consciousness of a presence larger than one's own, bringing about a transformation. The experience involves a sense of purification and, as this Philonic text indicates, an understanding of the vanity and emptiness of one's own insights.

Typical also of a mystical vision is the consciousness of a shift away from one's own nothingness and emptiness, to experiencing the action of God 'from on high' in one's own life. The experience of the moment of transition is unexpected and happens to Philo as a surprise. It is a powerful moment, expressed in this case as amazement at 'the power of the living God.' Philo writes about the burst of illumination that he experienced. He 'suddenly' became full. In true ecstatic nature, he became 'absolutely' ignorant of his surroundings, of those present, of himself, of what was said and of what was written.

The mystical moment is an experience of the divine within an intellectual context (the dryness of one's philosophical writing) that temporarily suspends intellectual activity, yet inspires new intellectual power. Philo describes the outworking of the experience in mystical language. The experience transformed him so that when he came to himself, he 'had a richness of interpretation, an enjoyment of light, a most penetrating vision, a most distinct view of the subjects treated.'¹⁰ The manifestation of the mystical experience comprises a better understanding of the divine. The mystic is granted special and profound insights.

This transformative encounter with God is, however, also more than merely intellectual, insofar as it is described by Philo as the highest form of human existence and joy. In *De Opif.* 70–71 offers a similar version of a mystical experience:

9. The translation of Yonge reads, 'I am not ashamed to relate what has happened to me myself, which I know from having experienced it ten thousand times. Sometimes, when I have desired to come to my usual employment of writing on the doctrines of philosophy, though I have known accurately what it was proper to set down, I have found my mind barren and unproductive, and have been completely unsuccessful in my object, being indignant at my mind for the uncertainty and vanity of its then existent opinions, and filled with amazement at the power of the living God, by whom the womb of the soul is at times opened and at times closed up; and sometimes when I have come to my work empty I have suddenly become full, ideas being, in an invisible manner, showered upon me, and implanted in me from on high; so that, through the influence of divine inspiration, I have become greatly excited, and have known neither the place in which I was nor those who were present, nor myself, nor what I was saying, nor what I was writing; for then I have been conscious of a richness of interpretation, an enjoyment of light, a most penetrating sight, a most manifest energy in all that was to be done, having such an effect on my mind as the clearest ocular demonstration would have on the eyes.'

10. In *De Cher.* 9 (cf. 14), he writes that his insight into the nature of God with its three powers came to him during an ecstatic experience (Angus 1929:35; Cohen 2004:187).



Philo writes how the mind moves beyond external realities to perceive the original models and ideas of those things intelligible by the external senses. His language becomes ecstatic and mystical when he writes how the mind 'becomes seized with a sort of sober intoxication like the zealots engaged in the Corybantian festivals.' Here, too, he points out the 'desire, and a more excellent longing' by which the mind is conducted onwards to the very summit of such things as are perceptible only to the intellect. At this point, Philo describes the *visio Dei* and focuses on the mystical presence of the divine. The mind 'appears to be reaching the great King himself.'¹¹ And, Philo continues, while the mind is eagerly longing to behold the King pure and unmingled, rays of divine light pour forth upon it like a torrent, so as to bewilder the eyes of its intelligence by their splendour.¹²

These remarks reveal the key role and place of the mystical experience in Philo's life and work. He ascribes his creative insights to divine inspiration that granted him knowledge, previously hidden, that overcame and surpassed his own mundane thoughts and gave him access to the divine realm. The mystical nature of this extraordinary experience is confirmed by the language he uses: the language approaches that of apocalypses, especially Merkabah mysticism, which speaks of the ascent of a visionary to the heavenly sphere where the mystic encounters the divine presence and where previously hidden knowledge is revealed. The mysticism of Philo is about an experiential reality, embedded in the heart of his life as a philosopher. The mystical experience, including its ecstatic dimension, is a way to unparalleled union and deep, hidden knowledge. The relationship with the divine is not merely about human understanding but also comprises faith and, as faith, is different from credulity. Faith includes utmost concentration (Angus 1929:34); it is also a union with a God that is experienced as a person. God is not metaphysical or abstract.

Having established his authenticity as a mystic and the nature of his mystical experiences, the question to be answered is how Philo views the place and role of God in the mystical experience – which warrants further discussion at this point.

The transcendent God

Philo's mysticism is characterised by his awareness that God is transcendent, completely different in nature from the physical and visible world. Following biblical traditions and in line with his mystical inclination, Philo reiterates, apophatically, and in a consistent mystical manner, that the *nature* of God lies beyond the grasp of human intellect and understanding.¹³ God can be known, therefore, only in God's existence (not essence)

11. Giulea (2011:24) states that this account reflects an ascent 'similar to those of the apocalyptic literature where the visionary journeys in the heights beyond the confines of the visible world. It is there that the apocalyptic seer contemplates the heavenly king on his throne and enjoys the vision of the divine glory and of the countless hosts of angelic beings glorifying and serving God.' This type of *visio Dei* is especially found in Merkabah mysticism.

12. Cf. also *De Cher.* 14. Angus (1929:36).

13. Cf. Chadwick (1966:304), who refers to *Post.C* 15; *Mut.Nom.* 7; *Immut.* 62; but cf. *Spec.Leg.* 1.20 which follows Plato, *Phaedr.* 247 C. He points out how the Sophia myth in Valentinianism also reflects this hiatus. (Irenaeus, *adv. Haer.* 2.18.1).

because of the acts of creation (*Virt.* 215; *Cher.* 77; *Det.* 160; cf. Hillar 2005; Mackie 2012:148).¹⁴ This statement implies that God does not relate to the world in the sense of being interconnected with or immanent in it. It also implies that there are dimensions of the divine that are not revealed to humanity.

Philo's image of God, particularly the divine essence, is, therefore, apophatic in nature. The intellect is able to ascend to heaven and explore heavenly mysteries (i.e. divine manifestations), but the divine in its essence remains impenetrable and inaccessible for noetic perception (Giulea 2011:41; cf. Barnard 2012:122), as is clear from *De posteritate Caini* 18–19. Philo emphatically states here that the mind 'comes short of the apprehension of the First Cause by an immeasurable distance.'

Philo's own experience is, therefore, to some extent different from prophetic ecstasy where the mind is eliminated and the visionary is the passive recipient of a divine revelation. And yet, even though the mind is at work, there is some passivity in the sense that the mystical experience leads one beyond wisdom. Mystics do not speak their own words. They are given revelation (Meeks 1967:129). It is a mysticism with an ecstatic quality that involves experiencing God directly. The result is an altered state of consciousness in which one is aware of a closeness to God that transcends the worldly sphere, purifies one from human occupations and blockages, and transforms one to a state of extreme clarity, understanding, knowledge and dedication to God.

The closeness of God is also a cause of joy and celebration. This union with God brings 'constant and continuous and unbroken... concord and union' and is permeated with positive emotions of joy, love, harmony and full rest in God (Chadwick 1966:305; Hillar 1998:52–53). Schäfer (2009:345, 353) also stresses that, unlike Scholem's writing, the mystic experiences God's continuous love and care for Israel. This union is not about comprehending the divine essence – which Philo denies. It is a 'theistic' union that is a union with the biblical God who 'in spite of his transcendence is capable of loving and maintaining personal friendships' (Afterman 2013:190).

All the time and despite the intimate, close relationship, though, the divine remains incomprehensible and inaccessible to the human intellect (Afterman 2013:179). Philo holds on to the image of God who is never fully known – as is the case with John's Gospel – and who, in the divine essence, exists beyond a relationship with humanity. All this will become clearer when one considers Philo's view of the Logos and its mediation of the divine presence.¹⁵

14. Cf. *LA* 3.206, 'Who can venture to affirm that ... he is a body, or that he is incorporeal, or that he has such and such distinctive qualities, or that he has no such qualities? ... But he alone can utter a positive assertion respecting himself, since he alone has an accurate knowledge of his own nature.'

15. The Logos-motif is one of the much discussed and central motifs in Philo's writings. In this article, the origins of Philo's understanding of the Logos is not under discussion. There are clear similarities of his works with other Hellenistic and Jewish texts, but one finds parallels also with Jewish wisdom speculation and Jewish exegesis of Genesis 1's remark on 'and God said' (Runia 1986:451). This



Mediated union with God

The well-known Logos motif reveals a most intimate dimension of the divine-human relationship. The Logos functions on more than one level: in a synthesis of Jewish monotheism and Platonic thought, Philo portrays well-known human beings as receiving a *visio Dei*, realising their own mortality, overcoming their bodily and worldly existence, and ascending to heaven which is the 'place of God' (*Abr.* 164; *Sacr.* 8) to unite with God, attain immortality and become angels (*Rer. Div. Her.* 35–36; 78–79). The best example is Moses¹⁶ who entered the darkness where God was present, saw God,¹⁷ and was made God with all earthly things subjected to him.¹⁸ Moses then acted as God's agent who revealed deeply symbolic secrets about the means by which the true mystic can learn to control passions (Meeks 1967:120). These examples illustrate how Judaism in the time of the Second Temple accepted the deification of human beings who then also mediate between God and humanity. These are pronouncements that show how porous the boundaries between the divine and human were in antiquity, despite the distance that was upheld between the divine essence and creation.

On another level, the first and foremost intermediary between God and humanity is the divine Logos who manifests the reality of the hidden divine existence (*Somn.* 1.239; *Conf.* 147–148). Though the Logos is placed in closest proximity to God 'without any partition or distance between them' (*Fug.* 101), it remains an 'image' of God and is therefore also different from God.¹⁹ The Logos is effective as mediator because it is part of the divine, and also because it is present in the world.²⁰ It is, however, not completely part of the world since it is neither uncreated as God, nor created as humanity (*LA* 3.207). Although Philo states that it would be easier for God to become a person than for a person to become God (*Leg. ad Gaium* 118; Chadwick 1966:301), and though he regarded both as impossibilities, he could also write that the Logos draws the perfect person to God to become God. Through the Logos, which a person shares with God and resides as a fragment in people, a person can perceive and contemplate the divine existence (e.g. *LA* 1.37; *Op.* 65–69).²¹ Other than in

(Footnote 15 continues ...)

article focuses on Philo's own understanding of the Logos.

16. Cf. also Segal (1990:44). Others are Adam (*Test. Abr.* 11 *Rec. A*; 2 *En.* 30:8–11), Jacob (original commentary on *Jn* 2:31) and Enoch (*Philo*, *L.A.* 1.28.158; *Test. Moses* 1:14; 4Q374 & 4Q377: Moses Apocryphon A&C). On the unique role of Moses as mediator in Philo, cf. Meeks (1967:120).

17. Cf. Afterman (2013:180), but especially his footnote 15 on God as place, with the reference to *De Somn.* 1:63.

18. Philo often draws this inference through exegesis of Exodus 7:1 where it is stated that Moses was made a god to Pharaoh. Cf. Meeks (1967:130) on this passage. He pointed out how Moses, 'the prototypical mystic' was the guide for those of Philo's disciples who, like Philo himself, long to participate in the true Exodus, an escape from the Egypt of the senses and passions. He regards this mystical interpretation of Moses as a traditional motif in Philo's writings. Meeks (1967:123) does point out that, although the *visio Dei* was virtually unattainable, Moses' ascent was a deification.

19. The Logos is 'the archetypal model, the idea of ideas' (*Op.* 25).

20. Cf. for this the figure of Wisdom (*Job* 28:12, *Pr* 8:2–3 and *Wisdom of Solomon* 7:22).

21. For a discussion of the divine as person, cf. Barnard (2012:122) who argues that the personal language of Philo for the Logos is determined by and also overridden by his understanding of the Logos as an abstract concept.

Hellenistic texts, however, humanity is not absorbed in the divine. The human and divine are distinctly different.

Unmediated encounters with the divine

Humanity can encounter God also directly and immediately without any mediation. Knowing God through the Logos is for Philo not the highest form of knowledge. The highest form is knowledge of infinite reality through unmediated, ecstatic intuition of the divinity.²² This reflects and confirms some of the remarks made previously about Philo's own experiences. His encounters take place when, unexpectedly and through an act of God, the purified mind, recognising its own nothingness, transcends the senses and perceives the uncreated One through a *visio Dei*.²³ In *De Sacr.* 8–10, for example, Philo interprets Deuteronomy 5:31 to mean that Moses received the capacity of his mind to soar above and beyond all reality to reach God at God's *place* and stand there (Afterman 2013:186–187). The soul, transcending corporeality and ascending beyond the created universe, encounters the transcendent God directly and in the divine setting.

In summary, then, Philo, himself a mystic, portrays the mystical experience as a divine touch of the transcendent God that transforms the visionary beyond the world of the sensory. This experience is mediated by the Logos or, in a higher form, is given directly and immediately. The result of the encounter is joy, peace, rest and harmony, but especially a clear vision of the divine existence. For Philo, the mystical experience brings close, intimate union with God, but without absorbing the human being in the divine and without questioning in any way the divine transcendence.

Mysticism in John's Gospel

Before discussing similarities between John's Gospel and Philo's writings, some remarks about research on the mystical nature of John's Gospel need to be made.²⁴ More and more, scholars acknowledge the mystical nature of John's Gospel. A compelling argument for its mystical nature was made in the dissertation of Kanagaraj (1998), who continued a long-standing research trajectory that was convincingly brought to fruition in important works of his teacher, Dunn, and scholars such as Meeks (1967, 1972).²⁵

There are clear indications in John's Gospel that it is a mystical text. Hengel (1994:384) has described John's Gospel as the most mysterious writing of the New Testament. Such a pronouncement is confirmed at the formal level by its elusive language and contents, loaded with signs, riddles

22. Cohen (2004:179) confirms that, for Philo, the highest form of knowledge of God happens without the agency of created beings.

23. Cf., for example, *Abr.* 79–80; *Det.* 86–87; *Praem.* 28–30, 40–66; *Her.* 69–71; *Plant.* 64; *Conf.* 95; *Ebr.* 152; Mackie (2012:150–152).

24. The clear differences between the two should not be downplayed. Cf. Meeks (1967:129), but he also acknowledges the similarities between the two, especially in so far as they share Jewish traditions. This is also the case here.

25. Cf. the short overview by De Villiers (2009) and the extensive discussion in Kanagaraj (1998). Meeks (1972:68–69), in his sociological analysis, drew attention to the 'private', mysterious language of the Johannine group to argue that they were a sectarian community that sought religious legitimacy through such language.



and parables (Neyrey 2009:402; Meeks 1972:70). The mystical nature of this language is a calculated part of the author's rhetorical strategy (Hamid-Khani 2000), as is evident in John 16:25 where the character of Jesus reveals that he has been speaking figuratively.²⁶ The material content of the Gospel confirm this, with its constant references to Jesus' revelation of hidden things.²⁷ The Gospel thus functions to reveal these hidden things.

The mystical nature of John's Gospel is further borne out by the mystical pattern also found in Philo's writings – as indicated below. There are constant references to important mystical elements such as mystical longing, union with God, mutuality, indwelling and heavenly ascents. Most of all, the basic depiction of the Logos as divine missionary that reveals hidden knowledge to humanity, is the same.

A most striking resemblance of the Gospel with Philonic thought and, through this, with mysticism, is the figure of the Logos in the Gospel's prologue (Jn 1). Though John and Philo are, as is often stated, not mutually dependent in their portrayal of the Logos, they share certain striking elements in their portrayal of the Logos. Much research has been done on the way in which the Johannine Logos shares similarities with the Philonic Logos. Their interest in this figure who comes from heaven with hidden knowledge about God's glorious existence in order to draw believers into an intimate, close relationship with God that will come to fruition when they ascend to their dwelling with the Father in glory, belongs within the wider Hellenistic discourse. Both reflect the intense longing of people to transcend their own contingent world, to overcome its separation from the divine sphere and to experience the presence of God (cf. the remarks in the introduction above). More importantly for the purposes of this article, John's Gospel discusses the union with God in the same complicated manner as Philo, within a similar mystical pattern that describes God as transcendent, but nevertheless communicates a mediated or unmediated union with God. The Johannine Logos, like the Philonic Logos, needs to be understood within this larger framework – a subject that needs more attention at this point.

The transcendent God and the Logos

John's Logos motif is embedded in a configuration of thought that includes motifs of life, light, water and manna, and images such as Son, vision, heavenly ascent and second birth – all of which are typical of mystical descriptions and often found in mystical texts (Borgen 2014:175; Chadwick 1966:289; Kanagaraj 1998). Both Philo and John use such language, and both refer to the Logos, its intimate loving relationship with God, its mission²⁸ and other motifs, although the use of these motifs is different when John integrates them in his Christian context (Meeks 1976:335–361).

26. With the phrase: *ἐν παροιμίαις λέγαλῆκα ὑμῖν*. Cf. also John 16:29.

27. Cf. Neyrey (2009:395) on Jesus' heavenly teaching to Nicodemus in John 3:12, 14:1–6, 14:7–11 and 14:18–24.

28. The Logos as divine emissary brings light to humanity in its darkness (Jn 1:2–3; also Jn 18:37; Jn 1:6–7, 15).

John's Gospel emphasises the intimate union with God, especially as mediated by Jesus as the divine Logos (cf. also Jn 17:5). As with Philo's Logos, union with God in John's Gospel does not originate with the Logos, but originates with God who inhabits the heavenly sphere whence God sends Jesus as the Son and Logos. God is transcendent, the 'Spirit, belonging to the mysterious heavenly sphere which is beyond human control' (Jn 4:24; Elsbernd and Bieringer 2002:52). And yet, God works in Jesus as Logos, directs his life and speaks divine words through him (Jn 14:10, 23; 12:49–50) so that the gap between the divine and humanity can be bridged. God, though completely different and transcended, thus initiates and determines the divine-human relationship (Stibbe 2006:182), whilst the Logos mediates and acts as catalyst of these actions.

As in Philo, John's Gospel distinguishes carefully between the transcendent God and the Logos as divine messenger. John communicates this by portraying Jesus as a divine messenger who is not greater than the One who sent him (Jn 14:28: *ὁ πατήρ μείζων μου ἐστίν* cf. Jn 15:20). In John 10:29, the Father is described as greater than all (*πάντων μείζόν*). This well-known insight confirms the otherness and transcendence of God, who is portrayed almost passively in the Gospel, but also has implications for John's mystical understanding of God. The superiority, otherness and initiative of the Father imply 'that the revelation of God's eschatological fullness in the earthly Jesus has not revealed God exhaustively' (Elsbernd & Bieringer 2002:52). This insight, in turn, indicates God's ontological invisibility. It reminds one of Philo's distinction between knowledge of God's existence as it becomes clear in God's actions, and the impossibility of knowing God's essence.

Elsewhere, the depiction of the Johannine characters confirms how God transcends human understanding. The opponents of Jesus are delineated as experts in scriptures. Nevertheless, even if one studies scripture containing words of eternal life as they did, the voice and form of God were beyond their reach and understanding (Jn 5:38). In their case, their opposition to Christ prevented them from understanding the full meaning.

In the course of the Gospel, however, it is emphasised that even the person of Jesus provides only partial access to God. The hidden nature of God is illustrated in the one instance where God does speak, in John 12:27–30. This passage narrates how a voice came from heaven after Jesus spoke about his troubled heart and asked God to glorify God's name. It is a passage in which the troubled heart reflects the longing and desire for God to be present, especially in his hour of need. This desire is followed by the revelation of heavenly, hidden knowledge when the 'voice' from heaven said: 'I have glorified it, and will glorify it again.' The Gospel narrates how the bystanders stood perplexed before the mystery of this exclamation. Some bystanders interpreted it as thunder, others thought it was an angel speaking. If the bystanders were puzzled, even more so were the exegetes who attempted to determine its meaning. All their contrasting and even conflicting explanations bring one to agree with Stibbe (2006:184–186), who pointed out the



elusive nature of this exclamation. 'Even in self-revelation, the Father's "otherness" is not compromised.' God is part of the hidden world, is not exhaustively revealed and remains a mystery, even where Jesus reveals the Father's message. The author of the Gospel, strikingly, leaves this mystery partially untouched.

The ineffability and incomprehensibility of God which is suggested by these examples, do not impede on the intimacy of the mystical relationship with humanity (Stibbe 2006:184). Although the transcendence of God is underlined, there is much in the Johannine description of God that speaks of close unity and mutuality.²⁹ Other than in Platonist thought, union is not about being absorbed in an abstract power.³⁰ Especially striking in John 15:9–13 is how the Gospel describes the divine union with humanity as a mutual abiding, and then develops it in terms of love. Love is a leading motif in John (e.g. such explicit passages as John 13:1–38; 14:15; 15:12–17; 17:1–26).³¹ John 3:16 emphasises God's love for the world. In this remark, it is God who loves the world and not Jesus (Köstenberger 1998:139). Jesus emulates God in love. 'As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you.' (9). This point is further emphasised by the link of the love motif with friendship: Jesus laid down his life for them as his friends (13). Works and actions reveal the love of the divine for humanity.

Moloney (2013:3) wrote that the 'very Johannine' focus upon the love of Jesus and love of one another is to be understood in connection with the central thought that no one has ever seen God. Although this may well be the case, it is equally true that Jesus as Logos and Son, forever in union with God, reveals God (1:18). Whoever is united with Jesus in love will experience the love of God. 'John grounds his theme of love in the fact that the gift of Jesus to humankind flows from God's love for the world' (Jn 3:16). John and Philo depict God both as transcendent and as present in the world.

Mediated and unmediated union with God

There are, as in Philo, at least two forms of divine union in John's Gospel. There is, firstly, the union between God and Jesus that is unmediated in nature. What goes unnoticed too often is that Jesus, whose humanity and ministry are emphasised in the prologue, is depicted in this Gospel as having a direct relationship with and vision of God. Secondly, there is the union of believers with God through Jesus as intermediary Logos. The first form of union needs more scrutiny because its allocation of divine status to Jesus

29. Much in John's image of the Father reminds one of the patriarchal notion of fatherhood in antiquity (Elsbernd & Bieringer 2002:52, n. 25; Reinhartz 1999:83–104), although it does not detract from the intimacy of the Father's relationship with humanity.

30. Although the language in the prologue initially creates the impression that the Logos is an abstract force, it soon changes with a description of a singular connection between God, the Logos and the historical person and mission of Jesus that sets the tone for the rest of the Gospel and its exalted Christology.

31. For a full discussion, cf. Moloney (2013). He gives an extensive discussion of the state of affairs in research on the motif of love in the Gospel and the popular hypothesis that it represents a sectarian, superficial understanding of love. He offers an alternative description by linking the pronouncements on love in the Gospel with the cross as indication of Jesus' self-giving love, thus taking the Johannine narrative as a whole seriously and using it as the framework for the interpretation of love.

and his union with the ineffable and incomprehensible God stands in tension with Jewish monotheism.

Though John portrays God as initiator and as greater than Jesus, he does not hesitate to ascribe to Jesus divine status and function (Stibbe 2006:182). This is especially clear in John 14:1–11 (cf. also Jn 10:30) where Jesus calls on the disciples to believe in both God and in himself (πιστεύετε εἰς τὸν θεόν, καὶ εἰς ἐμὲ πιστεύετε). In John 14:9–11, Jesus describes the union with God by repeating the phrase 'the Father in me,' linking it with 'I in the Father,' and then combining it three times with the phrase ἐν ἐμοί. All these point towards an intimate, mystical relationship that is characterised by unity and mutuality:

οὐ πιστεύεις ὅτι ἐγὼ ἐν τῷ πατρὶ καὶ ὁ πατήρ ἐν ἐμοί ἐστίν;
τὰ ῥήματα ἃ ἐγὼ λέγω ὑμῖν ἅπ' ἑμᾶν οὐ λαλῶ:
ὁ δὲ πατήρ ἐν ἐμοί μένων ποιεῖ τὰ ἔργα αὐτοῦ. →
¹¹πιστεῦτέ μοι ὅτι ἐγὼ ἐν τῷ πατρὶ καὶ ὁ πατήρ ἐν ἐμοί:
εἰ δὲ μή, διὰ τὰ ἔργα αὐτὰ πιστεῦτε.

Later on in the chapter, John again spells out the divine nature of Jesus when he discusses the mutuality between Jesus and God. Jesus remarks that he and God act together, and speaks in the plural about this: 'We shall come to him and dwell in him (Jn 14:23). In a mystical manner, the mutuality and unity are intensified by the image of indwelling – a key term in mystical experiences. Of special relevance is the indwelling motif, which speaks of God remaining at home in Jesus and Jesus in God. This indwelling points towards the perfect unity between God and Jesus from all times and in eternity, so that they are of one mind and one purpose.

John depicts the unmediated union of Jesus as Logos with God as transcending temporal and spatial boundaries. This union is similarly described when John, like Philo, also speaks of the pre-existent union of the Logos with God in his introduction (Jn 1:1). Emphasising the Logos motif by locating it at the very beginning of his work, the author portrays the Logos as divine (Jn 1:1: 'The word was with God, and the word was God'; καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν, καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος). The rest of John's Gospel confirms this view, especially in John 10:33 which refers to the opponents of Jesus who wanted to stone him because he had made himself God. In the climactic John 17:24, the Johannine Jesus himself prays that the disciples see his glory that God has given him 'before the creation of the world.'

So close is the mystical, direct relationship of God with Jesus, that John at times depicts Jesus as identical with God. As Borgen (2014:3) pointed out, the characterisation of Jesus as the agent who is sent out, would imply that he is seen as identical with his principal. The agency of Jesus in his mission to the world indicates his significance. He is not merely a legal representative of or likened to the principal in his task, but as Son he has an inherited likeness of nature or being to God (Köstenberger 1998:116, 138).

In all this, the union of God with Jesus takes on mystical dimensions and transcends human boundaries. Jesus belongs to the divine pole in the divine-human relationship

who seeks to illuminate humanity to become God-like. In the instance of Jesus, we have an example of an unmediated, direct relationship between God and humanity.

Finally, some short remarks should be made about a special motif in the Gospel that has to do with the vision of God and that sheds special light on the union with God. The Gospel contains no explicit description of a heavenly ascent, a heavenly vision or the end of the world. Though the Gospel 'offers intimations of another world, another reality,' it happens 'without the direct immediate paraphernalia of a theophany so typical of many apocalyptic visions' (Williams & Rowlands 2013:ix-x).

This position does not detract from the author's consistent portrayal of Jesus as the one who sees God directly (Thompson 2001:113). The opponents of Jesus rejects his remark in John 6:35 that he is the bread who came from heaven, because as son of Joseph he could not have come from heaven. In John 6:46, he continues with the remarks that no one has 'seen' the Father, only he who came from God saw the Father. The *visio Dei* in this case indicates the divinity of Jesus as the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father. So direct and unmediated is the relationship that Jesus is said to be in the bosom of the Father (μονογενῆς θεός ὁ ὢν εἰς τὸν κόλπον τοῦ πατρὸς). This being in the bosom of the Father, close to the divine heart, participating directly in a loving relationship and union, refers to contemplation as a central element of the mystical experience. It reminds one of the passage in *Hekhalot Zutarti* that describes how the mystic sits on the lap of God.³²

The mystic 'sees' God, that is, remains in the divine presence, in full recognition of who God is and what God wants and in clear recognition of living in love. This is further explained in John 7:34. Jesus remarks to his opponents that when he will return to the One who sent him, the Jews will seek him and not find him: 'where I am you cannot come.'

Jesus' *visio Dei* is so much more striking because the author of the Gospel is aware of the well-established biblical tradition that no human being can see God, as is evident from John 1:18: 'No one has ever seen God (θεὸν οὐδεὶς ἑώρακεν πώποτε).' It is a tradition that draws on Exodus 33:20–23 which indicates that Moses was denied a vision of God. Yet there is also an alternative biblical tradition that someone can indeed see God, as is clear from 1 Kings 22:19. Moses is said to have seen God (Ex 24:9–10). There is also, in Merkabah mysticism, a long tradition that human beings ascend to heaven where they are given a vision of God. The depiction of Jesus' *visio Dei* stands in this tradition.

Conclusion

John's Gospel emphasises, as a comparison with Philo reveals, the mediating role of Jesus in the human-divine relationship. Seeing God, entering into the presence of God, is possible

32. For the notion of the divine lap, cf. Schäfer (2009:343). The Genizah fragment refers to the mystic who is seated on Matatron's lap. There is also the David apocalypse where the mystic is invited to sit on the lap of an angel.

only through Jesus. Jesus, however, as an exceptional human being is regarded as having direct unmediated access to and union with God – as with the Logos figure in Philo and other mystical texts of antiquity. In John's Gospel, Jesus is depicted as a divine figure.

The Gospel of John retains a similarly intimate, mystical relationship between the divine and the human, as in Philo's writings. In the case of Philo, the relationship is shared by those who are purified from the sensual and illuminated by reason to experience the still highest form of divine knowledge that transcends human understanding.

In John's case, the mystical relationship is shared by those who follow Jesus, especially in his self-giving act of love on the cross. This event in the life of Jesus, given profile by his ministry, is where the manifestation of divine glory finds its climax and where the divine presence is revealed. John is driven by the life and ministry of Jesus to refrain from the ahistorical, visionary material that is typical of Jewish mysticism of his time – an example of which is Merkabah mysticism. In his Gospel, John does not claim special knowledge through mystical experiences of heavenly journeys for himself and for Jesus. He does not care for those experiences, especially because he is influenced by the suffering and cross of Jesus. Instead he uses the mystical notion of the heavenly ascent, together with mystical motifs, to retell the life and ministry of Jesus.

All in all, then, both Philo and John show that the unapproachable God is, as Schäfer (2009:336) indicated, still approachable. One can ascend to heaven and share in the divine presence. The gap between God and humanity can be bridged. For this to happen, however, one has to wait on God and remain open to the hidden revelation of the divine.

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