

4. The Acts of John

Among the early apostolic Acts, only the *Acts of John* and the *Acts of Thomas* narrate the commission of their heroes¹. In the *Acts of John* we find three commission stories of the apostle: chapter 18 relates his sending from Miletus to Ephesus, chapters 88–9 the call of John and James, and finally chapter 113 tells about John's call and celibacy. This threefold narration resembles the threefold report of Paul's conversion in the Lucan *Acts*, containing one biographical (third person) and two autobiographical (first person) narratives². The relation of the plots of the respective texts to each other is, however, different in the two books: whereas Paul's conversion stories are re-readings of the same plot, centred around the encounter with Jesus on the Damascus road, in the *Acts of John* there is little coincidence between the events narrated in the individual passages. From the reader's point of view, however, the process is similar: we gradually receive information about John's commission, and build up our story adding new ele-

1. There seems to be a scholarly consensus that five 'earlier Acts' date to the second and third centuries: the *Acts of John*, *Acts of Peter*, *Acts of Paul*, *Acts of Andrew*, and the *Acts of Thomas*. Recent opinions about the date and provenance of the *Acts of John* largely differ. Junod and Kaestli, *Acta Iohannis*, 692–4 and *Histoire*, 4, suggest the second half of the second century in Egypt; Schäferdiek, 'Acts of John', 166–7, the first half of the third century in East Syria; Lalleman, *Acts of John*, 244–70, the second quarter of the second century in Asia Minor. Recently Bremmer, 'Apocryphal Acts', 158–9, confirms Asia Minor as a place of origin and suggests *c.* 150 as the date of writing (pp. 153–4). Chapters 94–102 and 109 probably were added later, cf. Junod and Kaestli, *Acta Iohannis*, 700–2 and *Histoire*, 4; Lalleman, *Acts of John*, 59–66 and 266–8; Luttikhuisen, 'Gnostic Reading'. Unless otherwise indicated, I rely on the text edited by Junod and Kaestli, *Acta Iohannis*, vol 1, and adapt the translation by Elliott, *Apocryphal New Testament*, 310–38.

2. The third person narratives are *Acts* 9 and *Acts of John* 18–9; the first person narratives are *Acts* 22 and 26, *Acts of John* 88–9 and 113.

ments and modifying our previous reading. In this respect, the book bears an interesting retrospective structure, with the call story developing toward the end of the narrative, where John's farewell speech sheds new light on it.

Acts of John 18

The *Acts of John* in its recent form is a modern reconstruction from a fragmentary textual tradition³. In the manuscripts, its episodes usually accompany the later and more widespread *Pseudo-Prochorus*⁴. The first commission episode in chapter 18 stands at the head of the reconstructed text of the *Acts of John*. Scholars seem to agree that the original beginning of the book is lost, and we have different suggestions as to what stood originally before this episode⁵. Nevertheless, the passage logically introduces the Ephesian activity of the apostle, and is likely to have stood near the beginning of the original text. It is confirmed by the fact that none of the earlier apocryphal Acts have an extant formal prologue similar to the canonical *Acts* (something that Schäferdiek proposes)⁶, while the apostle's departure to a new scene

3. Junod and Kaestli, *Acts Iohannis*, 1; Lalleman, *Acts of John*, 5–6.

4. According to Lalleman, *Acts of John*, 6, 'the division of the episodes belonging to the AJ and those belonging to the *Acts of John by Prochorus* is beyond dispute'.

5. Junod and Kaestli, *Acts Iohannis*, 81–5, suggest that the lost beginning contained either the division of the missionary fields among the apostles or an expanded version of the autobiographical narrative in the present chapter 113 (cf. Cartlidge, 'Evangelist'). Lalleman, *Acts of John*, 14–7, suggests an account of the end of John's exile on Patmos. Schäferdiek, 'Acts of John', 172, proposes a prologue by the narrator speaking in 'we' style. Bonnet's chapters 1–17 relate John's ministry in Rome, his exile to Patmos, and his teaching in Miletus and Ephesus. Eusebius, *Church History* 3.1 reports that John received Asia as his allotted land. If this information comes from the *Acts of John* (through Origen, cf. p. 118, note 100 below), it suggests that the division of lands (cf. pp. 219–224 below) stood earlier at the beginning of the text.

6. Schäferdiek, 'Acts of John', 172. Such prologues characterise the later Acts, cf. our discussion of the *Acts of Barnabas* (Chapter 8) and the *Acts of Titus* (Chapter 9).

is a typical beginning in the extant narratives⁷. This is chapter 18 of the *Acts of John*⁸:

John hastened to Ephesus, prompted by a vision. For this reason Damonius⁹ and his relative Aristodemus and the very rich Cleobius and the wife of Marcellus persuaded him with some difficulty to remain a day at Miletus and they rested with him. When they had left early in the morning and had covered about four miles, a voice from heaven was heard, ‘John, you are to procure for your Lord at Ephesus the glory which you know, you and all your brethren with you, and some of those there who shall believe through you’. And John rejoiced, realizing what it might be that was to happen to him at Ephesus, and said, ‘Lord, behold I go in accordance with your will. Your will be done’.

The narrative reports two subsequent visions of John, the first of which serves to launch the story, and the second contains the actual commissioning words. We can see a similar structure in many commission narratives¹⁰. However simple the plot seems to be, the episode contains several minor details that are not easy to interpret¹¹. First, one may ask whether John received the first revelation in Miletus or whether Miletus was already a stop on his journey after the revelation. The second question is whether his companions were with him from the beginning, or joined him only in Miletus. Further, one may inquire whether the persons called by name are identical with the travelling companions involved in the second scene. Finally, one has to explain the sudden appearance of first person plural in the revelation episode. We hope to solve these problems in our interpretation of the passage.

We suggest that chapter 18 enables the reconstruction of two different plots. According to the first plot, John received a revelation in

7. In the *Acts of Peter*, Paul leaves Rome; in the *Acts of Thomas*, the apostle departs for India; Philip in his *Acts* leaves Galilee.

8. Text in Junod and Kaestli, *Acta Iohannis*, 161.

9. The name appears as Δαμόνικος or Δαιμόνικος, cf. Bonnet, *Acta apostolorum*, vol 2/1, 160.

10. Cf. pp. 228ff.

11. Although one can explain away most problems by referring to the hypothetical contents of the lost beginning, we try to answer the questions in the framework of the given text.

Miletus to depart for Ephesus, wanted to leave immediately, but members of the church in Miletus (Damonius and other people called by name) convinced him to leave only a day later. John and others departed early in the morning. Among the companions, we may find the aforementioned people from Miletus¹², but also others—for example, the first person narrator. After a while, they heard a voice speaking with John, who became excited about the adventures awaiting him in Ephesus.

According to the second plot, John was rushing down the road from an unknown place to Ephesus, accompanied by a group of Christians, including the first person narrator. As they came near to Miletus, four members of the group convinced the apostle to spend a day in the city. Early in the morning, they (possibly accompanied by people from Miletus) set out for Ephesus, and then heard the heavenly voice on the road.

Both reconstructions have implications for the interpretation of the whole book. In the first case, the narrative takes a special interest in Miletus. John seems to have spent a longer period there, and he leaves only because a vision instructs him to go to Ephesus. The reader is supposed to know by name at least two persons from the city, Damonius and Marcellus. This suggests that in a more complete version of the *Acts of John*, a longer cycle about the apostle's Milesian activity preceded chapter 18, where also Damonius and Marcellus played a role.

Two mentions of Miletus in the *Acts of John* may support this scenario. First, in chapter 19 we read that 'someone' assured Lycomedes in a vision that he sent 'a man from Miletus named John', who would raise his wife¹³. Another mentioning of Miletus occurs in chapter 37, where 'brothers from Miletus' urge John to proceed to Smyrna. Andronicus, however, rebukes them, and the apostle decides to stay and visit the famous Artemision. We do not find these refer-

12. Cleobius, Aristodemus, and Damonius appear in Ephesus with John (chs. 19, 25, 59).

13. Lalleman, *Acts of John*, 88–90 (following Wikenhauser, 'Doppelträume', 107–8) interprets chapters 18–9 as a 'double dream' narrative. We find the structure here somewhat different, because in John's visions there is no reference to the healing of Lycomedes' wife.

ences forcing us to adopt the first plot, because they make sense also if John spent only one night in that city. As for ‘the brothers from Miletus’, they are mentioned only here and never explicitly identified with the names of chapter 18.

We also have to consider two philological problems. As for the translation of ἠπεύγετο εἰς τὴν Ἔφεσον, we can see two solutions. The first possibility is ‘long for’, and this would fit into the first plot: ‘John was longing for Ephesus’ (while still in Miletus). This would normally require, however, either a different preposition (περὶ) or a subsequent infinitive¹⁴. The attested usage of ἐπιέγομαι εἰς is ‘hasten’ or ‘run’ to somewhere¹⁵, as all the modern translations render the passage, but this fits better into the second plot than into the first one. The other difficulty is συναναπαυόμενοι αὐτῷ, which makes better sense if the four people called by name were underway with John. Then the clause means that they either were already taking a rest in Miletus, or convinced John that they would do so¹⁶.

The second plot implies that there is no need for a Miletus cycle preceding chapter 18. After perhaps a short prologue¹⁷, the story begins with John’s travelling to Ephesus, the place of his miraculous acts. The people in the opening chapter may be known figures of the church where the tradition originated, possibly delegates of the church of Ephesus¹⁸. We will opt for this second scenario, because it gives a smoother reading of the text, especially with regard to ἠπεύγετο and

14. Liddell and Scott, *Lexicon*, 614a, lines 4–9. The verb occurs with an infinitive in the Greek Vatican Codex 654 (Bonnet, *Acta apostolorum*, 159, line 30), in a passage that we discuss below: ‘John sought to run straight (εὐθυδρομεῖν ἠπεύγετο) to the shore near the city of the Milesians’.

15. For example, ἐπιέγομενος εἰς Ῥώμην (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 14.79.3).

16. Koine Greek uses the present participle (συναναπαυόμενοι) also in final clauses (instead of the future participle), cf. Blass – Debrunner – Rehkopf, *Grammatik*, 347, §418.4. Otherwise, one can also translate ‘keep him back for one day when they were taking a rest with him in Miletus’. In the first plot, συναναπαυόμενος αὐτοῖς would make some sense: ‘that he would rest with them for one more day’.

17. Lalleman, *Acts of John*, 17 agrees that ‘nothing forces us to suppose that the missing beginning of the AJ was very long’.

18. A rather confusing passage in chapter 59 seems to identify Cleobius as an Ephesian. In the same chapter, we read about envoys from Smyrna.

συναναπαυόμενοι, and it does not require us to hypothesise a longer Miletus cycle, which is otherwise unknown.

Finally, there is a passage in the folios 145–6 of the Greek Vatican Codex 654, which Bonnet edited as chapters 14–7 of the *Acts of John*, and which supports my solution¹⁹. When ‘the king of the Romans’ dies, John (in the company of Prochorus) leaves the island of Patmos clinging to a cork oak. He navigates his vessel to the shore near Miletus, and finding a small village there, sits on a stone and teaches the people. ‘Then he got up from there and travelled to the city of the Ephesians. During his journey he went into the city of the Milesians’. In Miletus, the apostle ‘accomplished many miracles’, ‘made many disciples of Christ at that place into heavenly citizens’²⁰, and survived an attempt of the evildoers to poison him. Then we learn that the inhabitants of the small village venerated the stone on which the apostle sat while teaching them. The next sentence already goes, ‘when we arrived in Ephesus, all the people came out to greet the apostle’.

This passage conforms to our preferred scenario in three respects. First, the only concrete event that it connects to Miletus is the poisoning story, which imitates the *Acts of John in Rome*²¹. Even the local legend of an unnamed nearby village receives more attention. In Miletus, there are no persons mentioned by name either. Second, the text describes precisely the same situation that we reconstructed: John is travelling to Ephesus and makes a short stop in Miletus. After his visit there, he continues his journey ‘rejoicing’, as in chapter 18. Third, the Miletus episode is told in the third person, while the first person

19. Bonnet, *Acta apostolorum*, vol 2/1, 159–60. The codex is dated to the 12th or 13th century, cf. *ibidem*, xxvii.

20. Bonnet, *Acta apostolorum*, vol 2/1, 160, lines 20–2. The text contains the expression οὐρανοπολίτης, a word attributed to Plato by the anonymous *Prolegomena to Plato's Philosophy X*, οἱ δὲ καθαροὶ καὶ ὑπὸ αὐτοῦ ἀλλαχοῦ οὐρανοπολιταὶ λεγόμενοι (cf. Liddell and Scott, *Lexicon*, 1273a). Its use is documented from the late fourth century AD onward; Lampe, *Lexicon*, 978; Sophocles, *Lexicon*, 824; cf. the electronic *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*.

21. Bonnet, *Acta apostolorum*, vol 2/1, 156–7 (as chs. 9–10 of the *Acts of John*); Junod and Kaestli, *Acta Iohannis*, 873–7.

narrator reappears after Miletus²², as in chapter 18. This suggests that we have to do with two different versions of the same tradition.

Consequently, our reading of chapter 18 has an analogy in the rich tradition of the *Acts of John*, while a longer stay in Miletus with a local narrative cycle and distinguished disciples is unattested. We can hypothesise that the ‘lost beginning’ of the book was simply a statement that John was released from his exile on Patmos after the death of Domitian²³. Finally, we can regard the present chapter 18 as a commission story that formed the introduction to the original *Acts of John*.

Acts of John 88–9

The next commission story appears in chapters 88–9, in the context of John’s preaching (chs. 87–105). We will not engage in the debate about the latter’s position within the *Acts of John*²⁴, because it does not affect the order of the three commission narratives. Another peculiarity of this section, the ‘polymorphic’ appearance of Christ, will be

22. Much of the *Acts of John by Prochorus* is told in the first person.

23. From different premises, Lalleman, *Acts of John*, 16, reaches a similar conclusion: ‘the AJ began with a scene describing the end of John’s exile on the isle of Patmos’.

24. Schäferdiek’s arguments, ‘Johannesakten’, 132–4 and ‘Acts of John’, 178–9, are convincing for the postulation of some lost episodes (including the imprisonment of Drusiana and John in a tomb). The question is whether we have to add John’s preaching (chs. 87–105) to this hypothetical complex, and place it before chapters 37–86. Schäferdiek claims that both the reference in chapter 87 to Drusiana’s account (‘because Drusiana said, “The Lord appeared to me in the tomb etc.”’) and John’s depiction of God in chapter 103 (‘he hears us all, as now also myself and Drusiana, because he is the God of the imprisoned’) must immediately follow the lost episodes. Lalleman, *Acts of John*, 30, note 18, answers that the perfect εἰρηκυσίας in chapter 87 ‘does not suggest that Drusiana had recently given her account’. However, we have to notice that the same refers to immediate antecedents at the end of the gospel section (ταῦτα εἰρηκότος πρὸς με in chapter 102, ‘after he said these things to me’) and in chapter 113 (Junod and Kaestli, *Acta Iohannis*, 311, line 6). Lalleman does not deal with Schäferdiek’s argument concerning chapter 103. Consequently, one still has to consider seriously Schäferdiek’s reconstruction, which is also followed by Junod and Kaestli and the majority of translations.

important for the interpretation of the commission passage. This is the text²⁵:

For when he had chosen Peter and Andrew, who were brothers, he came to me and to my brother James, saying, 'I have need of you, come unto me'. And my brother said, 'John, this child on the shore who called to us, what does he want?' And I said, 'What child?' He replied, 'The one who is beckoning to us'. And I answered, 'Because of our long watch that we kept at sea you are not seeing straight, brother James: but do you not see the man who stands there, fair and comely and of a cheerful countenance?' But he said to me, 'Him I do not see, brother; but let us go and we shall see what it means'. So we steered the boat in silence²⁶, and we saw him helping us to beach the ship. And when we left the place, wishing to follow him again²⁷, he again appeared to me, bald-headed but with a thick and flowing beard; but to James he appeared as a youth whose beard was just starting. We were perplexed, both of us, as to the meaning of what we had seen.

The story evokes the call of John and James in the synoptic tradition²⁸. A closer look, however, will reveal that it has little in common with those texts. The *Acts of John* does not discuss the 'choosing' of Peter and Andrew in any detail, and it contains almost nothing of the information about John and James that is found in the synoptic text: that they were the sons of Zebedee²⁹, had hired workers, and were repairing the nets on the shore. They omit the point of the story, that 'they immediately left the boat and their father, and followed Jesus'. What remains is the general setting: at the side of the sea, Jesus calls John and James, brothers and fishermen, after he has 'chosen' Peter

25. *Acts of John* 88–89, based on the text of Bonnet, *Acta apostolorum*, vol 2/1, 194, lines 8–20. This section is contained in a single manuscript, the Vienna codex *historicus graecus* 63, written in 1319 or 1324 (cf. Junod and Kaestli, *Acta Iohannis*, 26 and Bonnet, *Acta apostolorum*, vol 2/1, xxx).

26. James, *Apocrypha anecdota*, 4, lines 8–9, suggests εἰς γῆν for σγῆ, which is accepted by Junod and Kaestli, *Acta Iohannis*, vol 1, 193.

27. ὄψεσθαι seems to be a confusion of ἔπομαι and ὀπάζω.

28. *Mark* 1.16–20 and *Matthew* 4.18–22.

29. The *Acts of John* never calls John the son of Zebedee. The name appears with all of the Synoptics, and in *John* 21, a post-Easter appearance of Jesus at the Sea of Galilee, which Junod and Kaestli, *Acta Iohannis*, 480–1 and Lalleman, *Acts of John*, 112–3 bring into relation with our text.

and Andrew, who were also brothers³⁰. Everything else is different from the Synoptics: the brothers are at sea (we do not know which one) rather than on the shore, we read Jesus' words to them, and he helps them bring the boat on the shore.

The main peculiarity of the story is that the brothers see Jesus in different forms, a feature that has attracted the attention of scholars. However, we have to notice that apart from Jesus' different forms, the whole story tells a divine epiphany rather than a synoptic gospel narrative. John's words at the beginning of chapter 89 especially emphasise this when he says, 'he appeared to me (ὤφθη ἐμοί) again'³¹. We can say that all John's autobiographical accounts about Jesus have an epiphanic character³², and there is no significant difference between Jesus' appearances before and after the cross. This corresponds to the fact that the *Acts of John* does not mention the death and resurrection of Jesus³³.

Among the commission stories in the apostolic Acts, only the *Acts of John* refers back to the call of the disciples in the gospels, while all others talk about commission stories as related to the mission of the early Church. However, the narrative in chapter 88 of the *Acts of John* transforms the synoptic 'call story' pattern into an epiphany. The commission of Thomas at the beginning of his Acts provides another interesting example: Jesus initially appears in a vision, but then he acts as a flesh and blood person³⁴. None of these texts presupposes a radical change in the relation between Jesus and the apostles during time, a change that we find in the canonical writings between the pre-Easter gospel narratives, the post-resurrection narratives, and

30. Cf. Junod and Kaestli, *Acta Iohannis*, 479 and Lalleman, *Acts of John*, 125.

31. In the New Testament, ὤφθη always (except in *Acts* 7.26) describes divine revelation, cf. esp. *Luke* 24.34, and *1 Corinthians* 15.5–8. For the apocrypha, see *Acts of Paul* 7.33, *Hermas, Pastor* 18.3 and 18.7 (*Visions* 3.10), 19.2 (*Visions* 3.11). For the Septuagint, see Michaelis, 'ὄραω κτλ.', 353.

32. These are found in chapters 88–101 and 112–3.

33. Lalleman, *Acts of John*, 162–3. Lalleman (p. 35) found that there is no mention of the incarnation either. He describes (p. 208) the *Acts of John* as 'dotic' in the sense that 'the text presents only a divine Christ and emphatically denies his humanity'.

34. *Acts of Thomas* 2–3; cf. Chapter 5 below.

the canonical *Acts*³⁵. Consequently, the three commission narratives of the *Acts of John*—although one of them echoes the theme of ‘the call of the disciples’—talk about a continuous apostolic commission. Chapter 113, which we will discuss later, affirms this continuity when it relates Jesus’ words to John on chastity at his different ages, without presupposing any change in John’s apostolic status and the way Jesus communicated with him³⁶.

Scholars have paid attention to the ‘polymorphic’ appearances of Jesus in the *Acts of John*, although they use the term in different ways³⁷. The strictest sense of the term is ‘a metamorphosis of such a kind that the person or deity can be seen differently by different people *at the same time*’³⁸. Indeed, our text relates that John and James saw Jesus in different forms at the same time, and this recurs in chapter 89. However, in the preaching of John we can see no distinction between this sort of (synchronic) polymorphy and the (diachronic) metamorphosis, the subsequent appearance in various forms³⁹. Immediately after the second parallel vision of John and James, John relates that Jesus’ body was sometimes soft, but sometimes hard as stone. In the same section (ch. 89), he remembers that Jesus’ eyes were always open, and that he often saw him as a small figure looking upwards to the sky. We can see no reason to separate these remarks about Jesus’ appearance from each other, and pick out only those where he appears in different forms simultaneously. Rather they form together the theme of the ‘polymorphous Jesus’⁴⁰. The

35. One should compare, for example, *Matthew* 4.18–22, 10.1–42, and 28.16–20, or *Luke* 5.1–11, 9.1–6, 10.1–20, 24.36–53, and *Acts* 1.4–8.

36. In other words, the *Acts of John* does not have a sense of the ‘middle of time’ which Conzelmann, *Die Mitte der Zeit*, 139–41, attributed to Luke-Acts. The ‘time of Jesus’ and the ‘time of the Church’ are not clearly distinct. In other words, the christology of the apocryphal Acts implies a particular ecclesiology.

37. Junod, ‘Polymorphie’; Junod and Kaestli, *Acta Iohannis*, 466–93; Schneider, *Mystery*, 57–66, 98–113; Lalleman, ‘Polymorphy’; Garcia, ‘Polymorphie’.

38. Lalleman, ‘Polymorphy’, 99.

39. Recently Garcia, ‘Polymorphie’, 31, proposes a broad definition: ‘La polymorphie peut être ainsi globalement définie comme un thème religieux et littéraire, où est souvent mise en scène l’apparition d’une divinité sous une ou plusieurs formes autres que la sienne propre’.

40. Junod and Kaestli, *Acta Iohannis*, 466–93, analyze chapters 87–93 and 104–5 as a rhetorical unit, and speak about John’s ‘twelve testimonies’ of Jesus’

discussion of polymorphy in chapters 87–93 provides the immediate context of the commission narrative, whereas the ritual dance and the ‘mystery of the cross’ in chapters 94–101 (which also elaborate on polymorphy) provide a broader frame.

In the parallel visions of John and James, Jesus assumes the following forms: a child (παιδίον), a handsome man, a bald man with long beard, and a youngster (νεανίσκος). It is apparent that these images depict a man at his different ages. We may add John’s observation that immediately follows about a small and distorted man⁴¹, and understand it as a description of an old man. With the exception of James’ second vision (a youngster), the images appear in a sequence from childhood to old age. One cannot avoid the conclusion that Jesus somehow grows older in the eyes of the brothers. We can also discern that both brothers see an older figure for the second time than they did at first. Does this symbolise some form of spiritual progress?⁴² It is difficult to find literary parallels for such an interpretation⁴³. It is easier to demonstrate the idea that Jesus revealed himself according to the abilities of people⁴⁴. The *Acts of Thomas* speaks about the ‘polymorphous Jesus’ who appears ‘according to the measure of our manhood’⁴⁵. Origen repeatedly states this in connection with the synoptic transfiguration narrative⁴⁶. In the *Gospel of Philip* we read: ‘He (Je-

polymorphy. We find the formal rhetorical analysis somewhat artificial, but agree with them insofar as they do not reduce the theme of polymorphy to the simultaneous appearances.

41. Junod and Kaestli, *Acta Iohannis*, 193, lines 9–10, μικρὸς ἄνθρωπος [...] δύσμορφος.

42. Schneider, *Mystery*, 62, writes, ‘with James and John seeing progressively older manifestations of the Lord, the spirituality of both groups of Christians should be seen as maturing’.

43. Schneider, *Mystery*, 62, cites Origen, *Against Celsus* 4.15–6, but we cannot conclude from that passage that ‘the Logos’ polymorphism also includes one’s growing maturity in the faith’.

44. Origen, *Against Celsus* 2.64; cf. Lalleman, ‘Polymorphy’, 98 and 102; Schneider, *Mystery*, 61.

45. *Acts of Thomas* 153, δόξα σοι πολύμορφε Ἰησοῦ, σοὶ δόξα ὁ φαινόμενος κατὰ τὴν μετρίαν ἡμῶν ἀνθρωπότητα.

46. To the passages mentioned in notes 43 and 44 above, add Origen, *Commentary on Matthew* 12.37, ‘in the same way you can say Jesus was capable to transfigure [with this transfiguration] before some people, but before others he did not transfigure at the same time’. This is also an example of Lalleman’s ‘poly-

sus) did not appear as he was, but in the manner in which they would be able to see him (ἵθεε εἰστούντω δὲ βδομ ἵνα γ). [...] He appeared to the great as great. He appeared to the small as small. He appeared to the angels as an angel, and to men as men⁴⁷. Indeed, in the *Acts of John* 90, John alone can see a second transfiguration after the one he saw together with James and Peter⁴⁸. There is also a distinction between the brothers, inasmuch as in the parallel visions John sees mature men whereas James only young boys⁴⁹.

Nevertheless, it would be mistaken to regard these chapters as a chain of purely symbolic statements about Christ's polymorphy, and overlook the unfolding narrative plot. The structure of chapters 87–105 is that of a gospel narrative⁵⁰. It begins with a prologue and the call of the disciples at the sea, relates Jesus' transfiguration (in two versions), a visit in the house of a Pharisee⁵¹, and the multiplication of bread⁵². There are episodes that do not readily evoke any of the canonical gospel narratives: John watches Jesus on several occasions, Jesus never blinks his eyes, leaves no footprints on the ground, and once pulls John's beard. The ritual dance replaces the last supper, and a peculiar crucifixion scene, concluding directly with the ascension, closes the section. In sum, we find a 'miniature gospel' inserted into the *Acts of John*, which the apostle relates in the first person singular.

morphy proper' (note 38 above). Cf. Origen, *Fragments on the Gospel of John* 119.1–8, 'Not all of the disciples enjoyed the transfiguration on the mountain, and not everyone participated in the sight of the resurrection'.

47. *Gospel of Philip* 57.29–58.2, trans. W.W. Isenberg in Robinson (ed), *Nag Hammadi Library*. I thank G.P. Luttikhuizen for calling my attention to this parallel.

48. *Acts of John* 90, where Jesus is shining, and his head reaches the sky. In the resurrection scene of the *Gospel of Peter* 38–41, the angels' heads reach the sky, and Jesus' even surpasses them.

49. Schneider, *Mystery*, 64, explains that 'James' visions of the Lord are not incorrect, but only younger than those seen by John. This suggests that our author and his community are not opposed to the Christians personified by James, although they probably claimed to have a higher understanding of the Lord'.

50. Several scholars labeled this section a gospel, cf. Lalleman, *Acts of John*, 42, note 72.

51. Cf. *Luke* 7.36–50, 11.37–54.

52. *Mark* 6.35–44. This is the only miracle that we find in all the four canonical Gospels. The *Acts of John* inserts it into the frame of the dinner at the Pharisee's house.

There is only one miracle in this gospel, and no healings, because these are ‘unspeakable’⁵³. Among the episodes that we can identify with the canonical gospels, the synoptic stories are in the majority⁵⁴. However, the narrative as a whole focuses on the characteristically Johannine theme of Jesus’ self-revelation before his disciples⁵⁵. The prologue states that John relates these things in order that the listeners ‘might see the glory about Jesus’—clearly echoing the prologue of the *Gospel of John*⁵⁶. Concerning its overall structure, ‘John’s miniature gospel’ evidently talks about a gradually unfolding self-revelation of Jesus, beginning with the child whom James saw on the shore and concluding with the cosmic vision of the cross of light. We would not go as far as talking about the ‘maturing spirituality of Christian groups’⁵⁷, but the disciples as well as the readers evidently receive an increasingly elaborate view of Jesus.

However, John cannot share everything with the listeners even at the end of the ‘gospel’: ‘When he had spoken to me these things, and others which I know not how to say as he would have me, he was taken up’ (102). John concludes the first part of the gospel section (the ministry of Jesus) with the following words: ‘For we must at the present keep silent about his mighty and wonderful works, inasmuch as they are mysteries (ἄρρητα) and doubtless cannot be uttered or heard’ (93). This formulation is close to the epilogue of the *Gospel of John*:

53. *Acts of John* 93, ἄρρητα (Junod and Kaestli, *Acta Iohannis*, 199, line 16). For the idea of the ‘unspeakable’ see pp. 114f below.

54. We tend to identify the synoptic stories as Lucan. The invitation to dine in the Pharisee’s house (εἰ δὲ ὑπὸ τινός ποτε τῶν φαρισαίων κληθείς) clearly echoes the beginning of a Lucan story. In both *Luke* 7.36 (ἔρωτᾷ αὐτὸν φαρισαῖος) and 11.37 (ἠρώτα δὲ τις αὐτὸν τῶν φαρισαίων), we read that a Pharisee (called Simon in *Luke* 7.41) invited Jesus. In contrast, *Mark* 14.3 (ὄντος αὐτοῦ ἐν Βηθανίᾳ ἐν τῇ οἰκίᾳ Σίμωνος τοῦ λεπροῦ) and *Matthew* 26.6 (τοῦ δὲ Ἰησοῦ γενομένου ἐν Βηθανίᾳ κτλ.) state that Jesus was in Bethany in the house of ‘the leprous Simon’.

55. As does the second half of the *Gospel of John*. To *John* 13–20 Bultmann, *Johannes*, 348, gave the title ‘Die Offenbarung der δόξα vor der Gemeinde’: ‘Der neue Teil des Ev[angelium]s ist durch die erste Szene deutlich charakterisiert: er handelt von dem Verhältnis Jesu zu seinen Jüngern, von seiner ἀγάπη zu den ἴδιοι’.

56. *John* 1.14, ‘we beheld his glory’. Cf. *Acts of John* 90, ‘I will tell you another glory’ (ἑτέραν δὲ ὑμῖν δόξαν ἐρῶ).

57. Cf. note 42 above.

‘But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written’⁵⁸. John spoke similarly also in the prologue of the gospel section: ‘I, indeed, am able neither to set forth to you nor to write the things which I saw and heard’ (88)⁵⁹. At Jesus’ transfiguration, the disciples see ‘such a light on him that it is not possible for a man who uses mortal speech to describe what it was like’ (90). We can see that as the gospel narrative unfolds, John repeatedly talks about more and more unspeakable things that remain hidden. The apostles, and especially John, received much ‘unspeakable revelation’ that they cannot share with others.

Therefore, there is a tendency that proceeds in parallel with the unfolding revelation, and that is the growth of secrecy and intimacy of the revelation. Above we discussed the possibility that John’s figures in the parallel visions are superior to James’ ones. After the brothers’ second vision (bald man and young lad), ‘both were at a loss what their vision wanted to be’, and when they followed him, ‘both became gradually more perplexed’. The next sentence apparently contrasts John’s observation with the brothers’ common experience: ‘Yet to me there appeared a still more wonderful (παραδοξότερον) sight’. The comparative degree adds further emphasis to the exclusivity of the observation. After the transfiguration scene, John alone approaches Jesus. At a later occasion, all the disciples of Jesus (ἡμῶν πάντων τῶν μαθητῶν αὐτοῦ) were sleeping in a house at (the lake of?) Genesaret, but John alone (ἐγὼ μόνος) was watching what Jesus was doing. Two echoes from the *Gospel of John* that we did not mention yet, emphasise intimacy in a particularly sensible manner. On the mount of transfiguration, first James, Peter, and John together saw Jesus’ shining light, but then John alone approached Jesus ‘because he [Jesus] loved him’. Then he alone observed Jesus’ fantastic polymorphous appearance, and talked to him. This is the only reference in the

58. *John* 21.25, NRSV. Cf. the use χωρεῖν in the *Acts of John* 88, quoted below, and in *Acts of Thomas* 1 (p. 119, note 4 below). The beginning and end of the *Acts of John* and the *Gospel of John* together with the parallel in *Acts of John* 93, are lexically and semantically closely related formulations of the ‘unspeakable revelation’. Cf. Lalleman, *Acts of John*, 114–5.

59. The text echoes the prologue of John’s gospel especially when it talks about seeing Jesus’ ‘glory’.

Acts of John that John was the ‘beloved disciple’, and our text explicitly connects it with John’s exclusive experiences about Jesus⁶⁰.

The motif of the beloved disciple first occurs in the *Gospel of John* in the narration of the last supper: ‘One of his disciples, whom Jesus loved, was leaning on his bosom’⁶¹. The *Acts of John* detaches this episode from the last supper, and presents it as a habitual manner of John reclining at the table: ‘When I sat at table he would take me upon his breast and I held him; and sometimes his breast felt to me to be smooth and tender, and sometimes hard, like stone’ (89). The motif of physical touch occurs once more: ‘Sometimes when I meant to touch him, I met a material (ὕλωδης, lit. ‘woody’) and solid (πάχυσ, lit. ‘thick’) body; and at other times when I felt him, the substance was immaterial and bodiless and as if it were not existing at all’. The theme of physical touch, we suggest, is not only a vehicle for the subject of polymorphy. Physical closeness is a peculiar aspect of commission in the *Acts of John*, a synonym for the intimate spiritual relation between master and disciple.

Why did the gospel section of the *Acts of John* emphasise the subject of fondness and intimacy between master and disciple? Was it due to an interest in anecdotal details, or did it have a deeper-lying theoretical reason? This matter has precedents in classical literature. In Plato’s *Symposium*, when Socrates after some delay arrives for the dinner, Agathon expresses his wish that Socrates would recline next to him⁶²: ‘Here you are, Socrates. Come and recline next to me; I want to share this great thought that has just struck you in the porch next door’ (175c8–d2). Socrates namely had been waiting outside, deeply immersed in his thoughts. He complies with Agathon’s wish, reclines next to him and answers: “‘My dear Agathon”, Socrates replied as he took his seat beside him, “I only wish that wisdom were

60. In the *Gospel of John*, all five occurrences of the expression are in the second half of the book (from chapter 13 on). This indicates that also the canonical Johannine gospel tradition associates the phrase with the revelation of Jesus before his disciples.

61. *John* 13.23, ἦν ἀνακείμενος εἰς ἐκ τῶν μαθητῶν αὐτοῦ ἐν τῷ κόλπῳ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ, ὃν ἠγάπα ὁ Ἰησοῦς. *John* 21.20 as well connects the two motifs: ‘the disciple whom Jesus loved [...], who also leaned on his breast at the supper’.

62. Trans. M. Joyce in Hamilton and Cairns (eds), *Plato*, adapted. I follow K. Dover’s commentary at many points.

the kind of thing once could share by sitting next to someone—if it flowed, for instance, from the one that was full to the one that was empty, like the water in two cups finding its level through a piece of worsted” (175d4–7). Then the company decides to spend the night by each of them delivering an encomium about Eros.

In his speech, Socrates reports what the wise Diotima had taught him about Love⁶³. The speech consists of two parts, the first one describing the nature of Eros, the second describing its effect on people⁶⁴. Eros, she said, is ‘a very powerful spirit (δαίμων μέγας), and spirits (πᾶν τὸ δαιμόνιον) are half way between god and man’ (202d14–e1). ‘They (spirits) are the envoys and interpreters of men’s things to gods, and of gods’ things to men (202e3–4). Born of Resource (Πόρος) and Need (Πενία), Eros is barefoot and homeless, but also a schemer (ἐπίβουλος) after the beautiful and good (203b–d). The gods and the wise do not seek wisdom, because wisdom is already theirs. Neither do the ignorant, because they are satisfied with what they are. Eros is between them, a philosopher, because Eros is the love of what is beautiful (ἔρωσ περι τὸ καλόν), and wisdom is one of the most beautiful things (204a–b)⁶⁵.

Speaking of the effect of Eros, Diotima differentiates two groups of people. Most people are ‘fertile in body’ (ἐγκύμονες κατὰ τὰ σώματα). They turn to women and raise a family, in the hope that they secure immortality, a memory of themselves, and happiness (208e2–6). Those, in contrast, who are ‘fertile in soul’ (οἱ δὲ κατὰ τὴν ψυχὴν), conceive and bear the things of the spirit: ‘Wisdom and all her sister virtues’. They look for beautiful souls, educate them, and procreate more beautiful and immortal children⁶⁶.

63. Plato, *Symposium* 201d–212b.

64. Plato, *Symposium* 201d–212b. The nature (*das Wesen*) of Eros: 201e8–204c6; the effect (*das Wirken*) of Eros: 204c7–212c3. Cf. Stier, *Rede der Diotima*; Hupperts, *Eros dikaios*, vol 2, 170–1.

65. Eros is thus intermediate between (1) wise and ignorant, (2) beautiful and ugly, (3) mortal and immortal; cf. Chen, *Acquiring Knowledge*, 38. These are three types of striving, and therefore, three possibilities of ascent, attested also in the *Phaedo*; *ibidem*, note 4.

66. Plato, *Symposium* 208e–209e. ‘Who would not prefer such fatherhood to merely human propagation, if he stopped to think of Homer, and Hesiod, and all the greatest of our poets? Who would not envy them their immortal progeny, their

Then Diotima comes to ‘the final revelation’ (τὰ τέλεια καὶ ἐποπτικά, 210a1). She differentiates between a lower and a higher sort of knowledge, and claims that not everyone is capable of acquiring the latter⁶⁷. ‘The candidate for this initiation cannot, if his efforts are to be rewarded, begin too early to devote himself to the beauties of the body. First of all, if his preceptor instructs him as he should, he will fall in love with the beauty of one individual body, so that his passion may give life to noble discourse’⁶⁸. Then one becomes the lover of the beauty which is manifested in all beautiful bodies; thereafter of the beauty of laws and institutions. ‘And next, his attention should be diverted from institutions to the sciences, so that he may know the beauty of every kind of knowledge [...] until he will come upon one single form of knowledge, the knowledge of the beauty I am about to speak of’ (210c7–d9). Diotima then describes the highest phase (210e1–6):

Whoever has been initiated so far in the mysteries of Love (τὰ ἐρωτικά) and has viewed all these aspects of the beautiful in due succession, is at last drawing near the final revelation. And now, Socrates, there bursts upon him that wondrous vision which is the very soul of the beauty he has toiled so long for.

At this point, Diotima gives a description of the beauty that the lover-initiate-philosopher contemplates⁶⁹. Finally, Diotima recapitulates the whole journey (211b6–d1)⁷⁰:

claim upon the admiration of posterity?’ (209d1–5). Cf. *Gospel of Philip* 58.17–59.6.

67. Diotima uses the language of the Eleusinian mysteries, differentiating between the ‘Lesser Mysteries’ at Agrae, and the ‘Greater’ ones at Eleusis; cf. Rowe, *Symposium*, 193–4 and Hupperts, *Eros dikaios*, vol 2, 201–2.

68. Diotima speaks about three persons. (1) The initiate is called ‘lover’ (ἐραστής), a name used for the philosophers also in *Phaedo* 66e2. (2) The object of his love is a ‘beautiful body’, in whom he procreates ‘beautiful words’. (3) The third figure is ‘the leader’, who can be identified as the μυσταγωγός of the mysteries. This is the role of Diotima beside Socrates. The initiate, however, may accomplish his journey also without a leader (210b9–c1). Cf. Hupperts, *Eros dikaios*, vol 2, 203.

69. 210e6–211b5. I highlight only the main points: beauty is eternal (ἀεὶ ὄν), it neither comes into being nor perishes (οὔτε γινόμενον οὔτε ἀπολλύμενον), neither increases nor diminishes (οὔτε αὐξάνομενον οὔτε φθίνον), is always itself

And so, when his correct boy-loving (παιδεραστεῖν) has carried our candidate so far that he begins to catch sight of that beauty, he is almost within reach of the final revelation. And this is the way, the only way, he must approach, or be led toward the matters of love (τὰ ἐρωτικά). Starting from individual beauties, the quest for the universal beauty must find him ever moving upwards, stepping from rung to rung—that is, from one to two, and from two to *every* lovely body, from bodily beauty to the beauty of institutions, from institutions to learning, and from learning in general to the special lore that pertains to nothing but the beautiful itself—until at last he comes to know what beauty is.

When Socrates has finished his speech, Alcibiades arrives and reclines between Agathon and Socrates. A handsome young man, he relates that once he invited Socrates and offered to sleep with him (218b–219d). ‘If there is one thing I am keen on it is to make the best of myself, and I think you are more likely to help me there than anybody else’ (218d1–3). Socrates answered (218d7–219b2) that Alcibiades had to find him ‘so extraordinarily beautiful’ that his ‘own attractions (εὐμορφία) must be quite eclipsed’. Alcibiades was trying, Socrates suggested, ‘to exchange the semblance of beauty for the thing itself’. ‘We must think it over one of these days,’ Socrates concluded, ‘and do whatever seems best for the two of us’. Alcibiades thought that Socrates gave in, lay beside him, but to his disappointment, nothing happened between them. Alcibiades, who ‘seemed to be still in love with him’ (222c2–3), now goes on praising Socrates. Finally they agree that Agathon will change his place and lie between Alcibiades and Socrates. Agathon rises up to do so, but then a reveling band enters and spoils the order of the banquet.

We have seen how the *Symposium* interconnects the themes of intimacy between master and disciple, love, and the way to perfection. Socrates teaches that the intimacy between master and disciple, of which Agathon and Alcibiades think in erotic terms, must be clean and spiritual. The real Eros is a guide who leads one to the view of

by itself (αὐτὸ καθ’ αὐτό), is in its own company (μεθ’ αὐτοῦ), and is uniform (μονοειδής).

70. Beside its rhetorical function, this recapitulation gives emphasis to the correct order of the steps of cognition (*Erkenntnisschritte*; Sier, *Rede der Diotima*, 160).

beauty. The *Symposium* helps us to understand why and how the *Acts of John* could elaborate on the Johannine gospel traditions of the beloved disciple and John's leaning on Jesus' bosom.

It is important to compare the role played by Socrates in the narrative parts with the theory of cognition as laid down in the Diotima speech. If we depart from the theory of Diotima in interpreting the relation of Socrates to his pupils (Agathon and Alcibiades), we have to conclude that in them Socrates is the 'lover' or philosopher, the one who proceeds toward the vision of the beauty, and he 'procreates beautiful words' in his students. In terms of the Diotima speech, the student is not immediately destined to see the ultimate beauty. One has to assume, however, that the student will become himself a 'lover' one day. In the *Acts of John*, the role of the 'lover' is taken by Jesus. The idea that he 'procreates beautiful words' in John is especially applicable to the revelation of the cross of light: 'But to you I am speaking, and listen to what I speak. I put into your mind to come up to this mountain so that you may hear what a disciple should learn from his teacher and a man from God' (97). Further, in accordance with the Diotima speech, Jesus has need of teaching John: 'John, there must be one man to hear these things from me; for I need one who is ready to hear' (98). It is impossible, however, to claim that it is Jesus who reaches the vision of the absolute beauty in this way.

This contradiction will be solved if we look at the narrative parts of the *Symposium*, where Socrates is characterised as 'superhuman', someone who has already achieved the highest phase of contemplation⁷¹. In these passages, it is always his pupils who are admiring his beauty, and want to dine beside him or sleep with him. They either hope to share in his wisdom (Agathon) or Socrates teaches them to do that (Alcibiades). This description of the roles already can be applied to the relation of Jesus and John. Both texts use the topics of fondness, intimacy, and celebration to approach the theme of spiritual perfection. Socrates teaches the whole company at the banquet how to ascend to the realm of the absolute beauty. Jesus, after manifesting himself in different ways to his disciples, not least during common

71. In his encomium, Alcibiades praises Socrates as 'truly superhuman' (δαιμόνιος ὡς ἀληθῶς, 219c1). According to Hupperts, *Eros dikaios*, 262, 'Socrates is an example of an erastes-philosopher who is on the second level'.

meals, finally lets them participate in the ritual dance⁷². Socrates is willing to share his spiritual beauty with Alcibiades to help him to achieve excellence. Jesus reveals his polymorphic body to John, and finally shows him the cosmic vision of the cross of light so that he might hear ‘what a disciple has to learn from the master, and a human from God’⁷³.

Finally, the idea of twofold initiation is present in the *Acts of John*, as well as in the *Symposium*. In the *Symposium*, it emerges as a distinction between the ‘Lesser’ and ‘Greater Mysteries’, only the latter leading to the vision of the beauty. In the *Acts of John* the first level includes miracles and ethical teaching, and the second level contains the final revelation as described on the foregoing pages⁷⁴.

Inevitably, there is some difference between the symbolisms of the two books. The *Symposium* uses a plainly erotic vocabulary (ἔρωσ, παιδεραστέω), while the *Acts of John* designates the relation of John and Jesus with more general terms of ‘fondness’ (ἀγαπάω, φιλέω)⁷⁵. In the night, Alcibiades lies beside Socrates and puts his cloak around him, whereas John only watches Jesus from a distance, after wrapping himself in his cloak. Sensual overtones, however, are not missing from the *Acts of John* either. The intimacy of Jesus and John during meals is even more direct than that of Socrates and Agathon at the banquet. The handsome young man on the shore whom John sees is physically attractive (εὖμορφος), depicted precisely as Alcibiades (ἡ παρὰ σοὶ εὖμορφία).

With regard to our commission narrative, this literary parallel prompts us to add three important aspects to its interpretation. First, a progress in the subsequent polymorphic figures express a tendency of an unfolding revelation. Second, an unspeakable secret accumulates about the words and deeds of Jesus. Third, we can speak of developing intimacy and love (whether we interpret it as ἔρωσ or ἀγάπη) as

72. In chapter 101, he says to John that he wants the dance to be called a mystery.

73. *Acts of John* 97.

74. Cf. Lalleman, *Acts of John*, 52–3. Lalleman connects the addition of the second level to the final redaction of the text.

75. Eventually these verbs can also mean sexual love. Cf. *Acts of John* 113, ‘you established my spotless love toward you’ or ‘you rendered my love toward you spotless’. The text emphasises that this is a merely spiritual φιλία, in the same way as Socrates talks about Eros as a spiritual guide.

the vehicle of revelation, a drive to acquire knowledge from and about the master, or, as Diotima put it, the guide toward the vision of the absolute beauty.

Acts of John 113

We find the third commission narrative in the farewell speech of John. If one follows Bonnet's reconstruction of the text, this episode comes soon after the gospel section, whereas in Schäferdiek's sequence the bulk of the narrative material falls between the two passages⁷⁶. Although it contains no direct references to the previous two commission episodes, it evokes especially the topics of the second commission story. Let us quote the passage⁷⁷:

You who have preserved me also till the present hour pure to yourself, and free from intercourse with a woman; who, when I inclined in my youth to marry, appeared to me and said, 'I am in need of you, John'; who prepared for me beforehand my bodily weakness; who, on the third occasion when I wished to marry, prevented me immediately, and said to me at the third hour on the sea, 'John, if you were not mine, I would let you marry'; who for two years mutilated me (ὁ πηρώσας με)⁷⁸, so that I would mourn and entreat you, submitting myself⁷⁹; who in the third year opened up the spiritual eyes, and gave me back my visible eyes; who, when I regained my sight, disclosed to me

76. For the possible order of the sections, see p. 96, note 24 above.

77. *Acts of John* 113, Junod and Kaestli, *Acta Iohannis*, 311–13. For this section (the Metastasis or *Consummatio*), there are now more manuscripts available than Bonnet used. Junod and Kaestli also published two alternative Greek texts of the Metastasis (pp. 317–43), together with the Coptic text (pp. 383–97). John tells these words in a prayer, therefore the text originally consists of a series of participial clauses, with which he addresses the deity: 'The one who preserved me etc.'

78. In the context of this narrative, 'mutilated' can be understood as 'blinded'. However, John was also known in church tradition as a eunuch: Tertullian, *On Monogamy* 17.1, calls him *spado* (Greek σπάδων, eunuch); Jerome, *Against Jovinianus* 1.26, calls him *eunuchus*.

79. Junod and Kaestli, *Acta Iohannis*, 311, line 8, παρασχόμενος. The omission of the reflexive pronoun after this verb in this meaning is standard usage, cf. Liddell and Scott, *Lexicon*, 1338 (A.II.2). The use of middle voice in this meaning is unorthodox, but not exceptional in the Koine, cf. Blass – Debrunner – Rehkopf, *Grammatik*, 261, §316.3.

the repugnance of gazing upon a woman; who delivered me from temporary show, and guided me to the eternal one⁸⁰.

The apostle speaks about the things from which Jesus released him: ‘the foul madness of the flesh’, ‘bitter death’, ‘the secret disease of the soul’ and its ‘open deed’, and ‘the one who rebelled in him’. Then he speaks of the things Jesus gave to him: ‘spotless love to him’, ‘a safe way to him’, ‘undoubting faith in him’, and ‘pure thoughts toward him’. He continues:

[W]ho have given the due reward to every deed; who have set it in my soul to have no other possession than you alone—for what can be more precious than you? Now, since I have accomplished your stewardship with which I was entrusted, make me worthy, O Lord, of your repose, and give me my end in you, which is the unspeakable and ineffable salvation.

This passage governs the discourse toward the end of the book, the peaceful death of the apostle. From this perspective, John gives a summary of his divine call, and the subject of his commission belongs organically to that theme. His task is only generally designated: ‘I am in need of you, John’. The apostle is commissioned here neither to ‘procure glory for the Lord’ (ch. 18) nor to become initiated in order to lead others (chs. 87–105). His sole task seems to be his own perfection. At first sight, the topic of encratism occupies a major position in this autobiographical summary⁸¹. It tells how Jesus thwarted three

80. Although εἰς τὴν αἰὲν μένουσαν is elliptic, it is logical to connect it with the preceding φαντασία. Elliott completes the phrase with ζωὴν, ‘guided me to eternal life’, which corresponds to the Coptic εαϣαρεϣ εροῖ ἐπιωνῆ ἐτμην εβολ (Junod and Kaestli, *Acta Iohannis*, 394, lines 15–6).

81. Lalleman, *Acts of John*, 217, affirms that ‘it is commonly assumed that the AJ and the other AAA [apocryphal Acts of the apostles] originated in a strongly ascetic environment and that they are very much characterized by their asceticism’, and supports this with an extended bibliographical survey (*ibidem*, notes 1–3). Our passage is quoted in the *Pseudo-Titus Epistle*, which was written in the fifth century, according to its subtitle, ‘on the state of chastity’ (for the relevant passage see Junod and Kaestli, *Acta Iohannis*, 139). De Santos Otero, ‘Pseudo-Titus Epistle’, 54, affirms that this writing ‘absorbed with a special enthusiasm the apocryphal Acts of the Apostles’ (which he calls ‘strictly ascetic’). Lalleman, *Acts of John*, 234–5, claims that our text teaches ‘celibacy for some’.

times John's wish to marry, and in this context, one tends to read John's various miseries in body and soul as sexual sins and desires.

How does this passage relate to the other two commission stories? As for the first passage, John's claim 'I have accomplished your stewardship with which I was entrusted' responds to the conclusion of chapter 18, 'Your will be done'. However, there seem to be no particular cross-references between the two texts. In contrast, we can find several points in common with the second commission episode. There are two points in the plot of chapter 113 that tempt the reader to match them with the call story of John and James. First, at John's first attempt to marry, Jesus' claim 'I have need of you' repeats his words on the shore in chapter 88. Second, Jesus' appearance 'on the sea' after John's third attempt also reminds one of the same episode. Neither identification seems satisfactory. If we opt for the second possibility, we have to place many events (visions and punishment) before the call story. If we chose the first solution, we arrive at the following plot: John wants to get married, but Jesus calls him (together with James) and wishes him to remain unmarried. He wants to get married for the second time, but Jesus strikes him with illness. The third time he receives revelation at sea—in that case, the Mediterranean Sea rather than the Lake of Gennesaret—and Jesus blinds him for two years⁸². Then Jesus opens his physical as well as spiritual eyes, and cleans and heals him in the way that he relates in the rest of his prayer. Thus, the first attempt to marry is connected with John's call as a disciple, while the second and third with his call as an apostle. The commission to Ephesus, with which the book begins, occurs as the last of these episodes.

It is also possible that the original readers had a substantially different perspective on the narrative, due to the existence of additional texts unknown to us, the later insertion of some parts, or a different sequence of the sections. These circumstances might have changed even several times during the early history of the text. However, there are more possibilities to establish a connection between the second and third commission episodes than the mere reconciliation of the narrative plots. Since chapter 113 evidently belongs to the conclusion

82. Paul's blindness in *Acts* 9 offers a close parallel. For illness as a motif of commission, see pp. 234–240 below.

of the book—whatever we think of the sequence of the preceding chapters—it is reasonable to read it with an eye at the whole gospel section. In that case, we will find that this concluding passage describes a similar progress of revelation as John's miniature gospel. Both begin with the claim that Jesus has need of John, and conclude with the theme of a large-scale vision. There is even a progress between the two conclusions: the cross of light is but a 'hint'⁸³, whereas at the end of chapter 113 John is already prepared for 'the end in Jesus' and the 'unspeakable salvation'. John's increasingly close relation with Jesus guides him towards the view of the final things (in chapter 104), which corresponds to salvation (in chapter 113).

Love appears as a guide to the vision of beauty in John's prayer (chs. 113–4). The text combines the metaphors of love and affection with the expressions of seeing. Jesus does not permit John to marry, and repeatedly expresses his claim on him: 'I am in need of you' and 'you are mine'. This culminates in John's blindness, when he 'submits' to Jesus. Subsequently, Jesus establishes in John a 'spotless love' and a 'safe way' toward him. He sets it in his soul to have no other possession than Jesus. John's blindness is also the starting point of the building up of a new vision in him. First, Jesus opens John's spiritual eyes and makes the sight of women hateful for his visible eyes. Then he guides John from the sight of transient things to the sight of the eternal. Finally, John reaches the end in Jesus.

This progress resembles love's way to absolute beauty as described in the *Symposium*. Let us remember what Socrates taught in the Diotima speech⁸⁴: 'Whoever has been initiated so far in the mysteries of Love and has viewed all these aspects of the beautiful in due succession, is at last drawing near the final revelation. And now, Socrates, there bursts upon him that wondrous vision which is the very soul of the beauty he has toiled so long for. [...] And this is the way, the only way, he must approach, or be led toward the matters of love. Starting from individual beauties, the quest for the universal beauty must find him ever moving upwards [...] until at last he comes to know what beauty is'. The different phases of John's life corre-

83. 'I give you a hint (αὐτίσσομαι σοι) of what they are, for I know you will understand'. *Acts of John* 101, Bonnet, *Acta apostolorum*, 201, lines 23–4.

84. Plato, *Symposium*, 210e–211d, cf. p. 106 above.

spond to this description. In his career, we may discover the elements of the ‘Lesser’ as well as of the ‘Greater Mysteries’. The more elementary stage of encratism is followed by the superior stage of the contemplation of the unspeakable beauty. Whereas the initiate lover-philosopher of the Diotima speech gained immortality, John at the climax of his ascent receives salvation. We may conclude that John’s farewell speech summarises the message of the gospel section in a theoretical discourse, describing a similar structure as the way of perfection in the *Symposium*.

The Ascent of the Soul and Apophatism

The commission narratives of John, especially the second and third stories, show theological peculiarities that have to be discussed in more detail. That the *Acts of John* relied on Platonic texts is absolutely believable. Already Schäferdiek associated the text with ‘Hellenistic cultivated classes’, who were inclined to ‘philosophical life’⁸⁵. The commission narrative of chapter 113 shows similarities with views about the ascent of the soul to absolute beauty that were held by the Alexandrian philosophers and especially by the Neo-Platonist Plotinus (c. 205–70)⁸⁶. Consider especially the following passages⁸⁷: ‘Let him who can, follow and come within, and leave outside the sight of his eyes and not turn back to the bodily splendours which he saw before. When he sees the beauty in bodies he must not run after them’ (1.6.8). ‘And what does this inner sight see?’ (1.6.9) For improving the inner sight, Plotinus describes a similar sequence of contemplation as the Diotima speech: ‘beautiful way of life’, ‘beautiful works’, ‘the souls of people who produce the beautiful works’⁸⁸. ‘This alone is the eye,’ Plotinus concludes, ‘that sees the great beauty. But anyone who comes to the sight blear-eyed with wickedness, and unpurified, or weak and by his cowardice unable to look what is very

85. Schäferdiek, ‘Acts of John’, 166f.

86. Cf. O’Meara, *Plotinus*, 100–10; Miles, *Plotinus*, 130–61. For the idea as part of a common Alexandrian heritage, see Sinnige, *Six Lectures*, 26–47.

87. Plotinus, *Enneads* 1.6, trans. A.H. Armstrong (LCL).

88. Cf. Plato, *Symposium* 210.

bright, he sees nothing, even if someone shows him what is there and possible to see' (1.6.9).

Another peculiarity of the text is its emphasis on 'secrecy'. Whereas religious secrets of various kinds were found in Greco-Roman antiquity, including Early Christianity⁸⁹, the notion of secrecy that the *Acts of John* uses can be identified with a specific theory called apophatism. It becomes especially clear from the term ἄρητος (unspeakable) used in chapter 90⁹⁰. Apophatism claims that human language is incapable of talking about God: mystical experience is the only way to know him. In various forms, it is represented, among others, in Plato's *Parmenides* 142a, in Middle Platonism (1st century BC–3rd century AD), in the thought of Philo of Alexandria (c. 25 BC–50 AD), Justin Martyr (died in 165), and Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–215), as well as in Gnostic texts and the Corpus Hermeticum (2–5th century AD)⁹¹. As an elaborate system, apophatism appears with Plotinus⁹², and (Pseudo-)Dionysius the Areopagite⁹³. In a characteristic passage, Plotinus claims: 'Strictly speaking, we ought not to apply any terms at all to It' (6.9.3).

In the *Acts of John*, as in later Neo-Platonic systems, apophatism logically implies the theory of the ascent of the soul. Since human language cannot encapsulate the essence of God, the soul has to be purified and transformed in order to be able to experience God in a mystical union. Whereas chapters 88–102 describe various forms of

89. Religious secrecy was often related to something that had to be concealed, as in the examples of Bremmer, 'Religious Secrets'. The same applies to the 'messianic secret' of the gospel tradition, although there the disciple's lack of understanding is also important (cf. Schweizer, *Introduction*, 125f, recently Theißen, 'Die pragmatische Bedeutung'). Cf. *2 Corinthians* 14.2, *Gospel of Thomas* 13.

90. Line 16 in Junod and Kaestli, *Acta Iohannis*, 199.

91. Farrow, 'Apophatische Theologie', 633; Widdicombe, 'Justin Martyr's Apophaticism'; cf. Mortley, *From Word to Silence*.

92. Sells, 'Apophasis in Plotinus'; Mortley, *From Word to Silence* 44–62.

93. Fifth or sixth century AD, cf. p. 201, note 17 below. However, the Neo-Platonic form of the idea was used already by Christian thinkers much earlier. Synesius of Cyrene (370–c. 414) was a student of Hypatia (370–415) in Alexandria at the end of the 4th century, and later wrote hymns in which he used apophasis to talk about God. Seng, 'Reden'; Vollenweider, *Synesios*, 13–27.

mystical experience, chapter 113 emphasises the necessity of gradual purification.

Conclusions

The three narrations of John's commission in his Acts are different from each other in many aspects. We suggested that the first account formed the beginning of the original *Acts of John*. This episode uses traditional motifs of commission, which are also known, for example, from the Lucan *Acts*: twofold vision, epiphany on the road, and travelling companions. It gives a brief statement of the task that Jesus sets before John. The final episode in turn offers a retrospective view of John's career, but it refers to a broader spectrum of biographical data than those touched upon in the rest of the *Acts of John*. This may also confirm that it comes from a different source than the Asian tradition. Moreover, it contains elements that are known from the second narrative: the narrative motif that Jesus called John on the sea, and the whole (Neo-)Platonic epistemological concept. This shows that those two speeches of John, both containing autobiographical flashbacks, are closely related.

The position of the second account is highly interesting. Since it is contained in a (single) separate manuscript, its place in the narrative sequence is hypothetical. Its position in the *narrative plot*, however, can be established with more certainty. As a part of the miniature gospel narrative, it wants to tell events that are antecedent to the plot of the *Acts of John*. It uses synoptic (Lucan?) as well as Johannine gospel motifs and elaborates them into a symbolic narrative of the intimate relation of John and Jesus.

Appendix: Date and Place of Composition of the *Acts of John*

Our findings allow some conclusions also about the historical aspects of the composition of this writing. First, chapters 88–102 and 113 present John's commission in a similar way, both sections relying on the Platonic idea of ascension to the beauty, especially as described in the *Symposium*. If the 'Gnostic chapters' (94–102) were added later to the book, they remained faithful to the concept of commission that was already present in the book. The second and third commission

stories suggest a similar Platonic influence and were probably composed in the same area at the same time⁹⁴. Our investigations point towards Alexandria, the place of origin suggested also by Junod and Kaestli⁹⁵. This was the city of Philo and Clement, and it was there at the beginning of the third century that Ammonius Saccas (died *c.* 242) initiated Neo-Platonism. Ammonius Saccas, who did not leave any writings behind, was the teacher of Plotinus as well as of Origen (184–254)⁹⁶. The *Acts of John* shows not only a general influence of Middle Platonism, but rather it uses Platonic tradition much in the same way as Plotinus, although on a less sophisticated level. We can detect contacts of the commission narratives with two great theologians of Alexandria of that time. Clement of Alexandria quotes a peculiar motif of the gospel section around 200: ‘There are traditions that when John touched that body that was outward, he extended his hand in depths, and that the solidity of the flesh in no way hindered it but rather gave way to the hand of the disciple’⁹⁷. This motif is not attested anywhere else than in Clement and the *Acts of John*, and it is closely related to the epistemological concept discussed above. Somewhat later, Origen reflects on the idea of Christ’s polymorphy⁹⁸.

If we put these clues together, we come to the conclusion that the *Acts of John* was revised in Alexandria at the beginning of the third century by educated Christians who were influenced by Neo-Platon-

94. Lalleman, *Acts of John*, 46, claims that the gospel section (belonging to his section B) is ‘more esoteric’ than the Asian narrative (his section A) to which chapter 113 belongs. If we consider the similarities of the two commission stories (belonging to Lalleman’s section A and B, respectively) this it is not necessarily the case.

95. Junod and Kaestli, *Acta Iohannis*, vol 2, 692–4. They date the text (p. 700) to 150–200.

96. Eusebius, *Church History* 6.19.6–8. Cf. Williams, ‘Origenes’, 398.

97. Clement of Alexandria, *In epistola Iohannis prima, ad 1 John 1.1: Fertur ergo in traditionibus, quoniam Iohannes ipsum corpus quod erat extrinsecus tangens, manum suam in profunda misisse et ei duritiam carnis nullo modo reluctatam esse, sed locum manui praebuisse discipuli*. (Stählin, *Clemens*, vol 3, 210, lines 12–5; trans. in *Ante-Nicene fathers*, vol 2). For the evaluation of the passage, see Junod and Kaestli, *Acta Iohannis*, vol 2, 486–7 and Lalleman, *Acts of John*, 268.

98. Cf. note 44 above. Lalleman, ‘Polymorphy’, 98 and 102 proposes that Origen took the idea from Philo. Junod and Kaestli, *Acta Iohannis*, vol 2, 692–3, also suggest contacts between the *Acts of John* and Origen.

ism just emerging in that city⁹⁹. Clement probably knew the tradition about Jesus' body before it became part of the *Acts of John*; Origen could have already known the text itself¹⁰⁰. In sum, we suggest that an earlier form of the *Acts of John*, consisting of the Asian narrative cycle¹⁰¹ arrived at Alexandria in the last quarter of the 2nd century, where the two larger speeches of John (roughly identifiable as the gospel flashback and the farewell speech) containing the second and third commission narratives, were added to it¹⁰².

99. Cf. p. 256 below.

100. Eusebius, *Church History* 3.1, quotes 'tradition' (παράδοσις) from Origen on the apostles, including a reference to John's Ephesian mission and martyrdom. Junod, 'Origène, Eusèbe', 242, concludes (contra A. Harnack) that Eusebius could actually take the passage from Origen; MacDonald, *Acts of Andrew*, 56–9, argues that Origen's information comes from the Apocryphal Acts. However, the idea that Origen knew several of the major Acts, does not especially confirm the Alexandrian links to the *Acts of John*.

101. Bremmer, 'Apocryphal Acts', 156–7, argues that the social terminology of the Asian narratives locates them to Aphrodisias and Northern Lycia.

102. This hypothesis will have to be checked in the future against the whole of the *Acts of John*, with special attention to the source-critical problems of the book.