

JESUS, THE ARK, AND THE DAY OF ATONEMENT: INTERTEXTUAL ECHOES IN JOHN 19:38–20:18

NICHOLAS P. LUNN*

Many biblical commentators and preachers have seen in John 20:12 an allusion to the ark of the covenant. The text tells us that on the morning of the resurrection Mary Magdalene stood weeping outside the empty tomb and upon stooping down to look inside: “She saw two angels in white sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and one at the feet.” On the position of the angels described here Lenski comments that it “has well been compared with the position of the cherubim at either end of the mercy seat or lid on the ark of the covenant.”¹ Lenski does not cite any specific sources, but others who make this comparison, both old and new, are not difficult to find.²

It is, of course, a legitimate hermeneutical question to ask whether these scholars and preachers are making too much of a coincidental detail—the superficial resemblance of the angels at either end of the burial slab and the cherubim on the ark—or whether the Gospel writer himself made such an association that he wished his readers to detect? To ascertain whether there is a deliberate reference to the ark or not, confirmation needs to be sought through the presence of other similar allusions in the surrounding context. This article first establishes that a number of related allusions are in fact to be found and the details are described. Second, the matter of the theological implications of such allusions is explored. Third, in the light of the findings of the foregoing sections, the question of the enigmatic words of Jesus concerning his ascension to the Father (John 20:17) is reviewed.

* Nicholas P. Lunn is translation consultant with Wycliffe Bible Translators and resides at Alfriston, Rectory Lane, Wallington, Surrey, England SM6 8DX.

¹ R. C. H. Lenski, *Commentary on the New Testament: The Interpretation of St. John's Gospel* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2001) 1351.

² For example, John Lightfoot, *A Commentary on the New Testament from the Talmud and Hebraica*, Vol. 3 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1859) 443–44; Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, Vol. 5: *Matthew to John* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991) 979; B. F. Westcott, *The Gospel According to St. John* (London: John Murray, 1892) 291; Geerhardus Vos, *Grace and Glory* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1994) 73. More recently the same comparison has been made by Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John, XIII–XXI* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 1966) 989; Rowan Williams, in an essay entitled, “Between the Cherubim: The Empty Tomb and the Empty Throne,” in his volume *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000) 183–96, esp. 186–87; Johannine scholar Mark Stibbe in his popular work *The Resurrection Code: Mary Magdalene and the Easter Enigma* (Milton Keynes: Authentic Media, 2008) 61, 71; also Jim Cassidy, “The Mercy Seat” (a sermon preached August 2008) at <http://www.calvary-amwell.org/sermons/John20b.mp3>.

Since John 20:12 relates to both the burial and resurrection of Christ, we will take the whole of 19:38–20:18 as the basis of our investigation.

I. ECHOES FROM THE TORAH

Within the Mosaic law, there are several passages in which the ark of the covenant is prominent, either by its frequency of mention, or by the role it plays. Principal of these are those which concern the construction of the ark (Exod 25:10–22; 37:1–9), its placement in the tabernacle along with the other sacred furniture (Exod 40:1–38), the chapter concerning the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16), and the regulations describing the manner in which the ark was to be prepared for transportation (Num 4:1–20).

It is within the first of the above texts that a putative connection between the ark and the scene within the tomb has been perceived. There God instructed Moses (Exod 25:18–19): “You shall make two cherubim of gold, make them of hammered work at the two ends of the mercy seat. Make one cherub at one end and one cherub at the other end; you shall make the cherubim of one piece with the mercy seat at its two ends.”

Though there are no direct verbal links between this and John 20:12, an association is made between the cherubim in one text and angels in the other, and their position at either end of a flat object. This in itself is not a strong connection. Standing alone it could be easily dismissed as purely coincidental. However, the other Torah passages concerning the ark and related items provide a significant number of further links, both verbal³ and conceptual, with the Johannine burial and resurrection narratives. We observe the following:

1. There is a spatial relation between the location of the ark of the covenant and the entombed body. The ark was placed in the innermost chamber of the tabernacle, which was separated by means of a veil (Exod 40:3, 21). The body of Jesus was placed in a burial chamber, which was then sealed with a rock (John 20:1).⁴

2. The verb “take/carry” (αἶρω) is used regarding the transportation of the ark and other sacred objects: “you shall put the poles into the rings on the sides of the ark to carry the ark [αἶρειν τὴν κιβωτὸν] by them” (Exod 25:14); “the sons of Kohath shall come to carry [αἶρειν] them . . . These are the things in the tabernacle of meeting which the sons of Kohath are to carry [ἀρῶσιν]” (Num 4:15; cf. 10:21). In John, this same verb is used with respect to the body of Jesus. This is so when it is removed from the cross, for example, “So

³ Since both are written in Greek verbal links are more readily identifiable between the LXX and the NT. We therefore refer to the OT text in the Greek version.

⁴ It is interesting to note that in the Gospels it is not only the removal of the rock, but also of the veil which is associated with the idea of resurrection, see Matt 27:51–52, “And behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; and the earth shook and the rocks were split. The tombs were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised.” We further observe that both the tearing apart of the veil and the removal of the rock from the opening of Christ’s tomb (Matt 28:2) occur in connection with an earthquake.

he [Joseph of Arimathea] came and took away [ἔρπεν] his body” (19:38, twice), and also when the body is thought to have been removed from the tomb, such as, “They have taken [ἔρπεν] the Lord from the tomb” (20:2; cf. vv. 13 and 15). In contrast to these five occurrences in John, the parallel accounts in the Synoptic Gospels do not employ this particular verb at all.⁵

3. The verb “put/place/lay” (τίθημι) is prominent in both Torah and Gospel contexts. In Exodus 40, this word is used repeatedly in different forms for the original placing of the ark and other holy vessels into the tabernacle; for example, “Set up the tabernacle . . . and put [θήσεις] the ark of the testimony in it” (vv. 2–3; also vv. 5, 6, 22, 24, 26, 29; cf. 2 Chr 35:3). In John’s burial and resurrection narrative, the same word occurs several times, referring to the deposition of the body; for example, “because the tomb was nearby, they laid [ἔθηκον] Jesus there” (John 19:42; also 19:41; 20:2, 13, 15). This verb is prominent in the Johannine account, occurring more frequently, five times in total, than in the other Gospels.⁶

4. Each context speaks of a covering of cloth. The ark was covered before transportation (Num 4:5); the body of Jesus was wrapped in cloth for burial (John 19:40).

5. Spices are involved in connection with both the ark and Christ’s body. In the case of the ark this was anointed with holy oil as an act of consecration: “you shall anoint the tabernacle of meeting and the ark of the testimony” (Exod 30:26). The chief ingredient of this anointing oil was myrrh (Exod 30:23, σμύρνης). As preparation for burial the body of Christ was anointed with spices (cf. John 12:3), the first-mentioned of which was myrrh (John 19:39, σμύρνης).⁷

6. Both the sanctuary in which the ark was located and the tomb in which the body of Christ was laid have a garden connection. In the former case, though the garden association lies implicitly in the symbolism, that garden connotations do in actual fact exist has been widely recognized by biblical scholars. The tabernacle symbolism points specifically to the Garden of Eden. This is seen from the references to trees and fruit (Exod 25:31–36;⁸ cf. Gen 2:9; 3:2), the presence of cherubim (Exod 25:18; cf. Gen 3:24), the “serving and keeping” of the ministers (Num 3:7–8; 8:25–26; cf. Gen 2:15), the reference to gold and precious stones (Exod 25:3, 7; cf. Gen 2:12), the position of the entrance on the east side (Exod 27:13–15; cf. Gen. 3:24), besides other details.⁹ Regarding the tomb, the garden aspect is totally explicit. The tomb

⁵ For removing the body from the cross Mark (15:46) and Luke (23:53) use *καθελών*, “having taken down,” while Matthew (27:59) has *λαβών*, “having taken.”

⁶ It is found three times in Mark (15:46, 47; 16:6), twice in Luke (23:53, 55), and just once in Matthew (27:60).

⁷ The total number of measures in each context is both in multiples of ten, 1,000 and 100 respectively.

⁸ From the references to branches, buds, blossoms, and almonds, the lampstand in the sanctuary was clearly a tree-like object. See also the palm tree decorations in Solomon’s temple (1 Kgs 6:29).

⁹ See, for example, G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God* (Leicester: Apollos, 2004) 66–75; T. Desmond Alexander, *From Eden to the New Jerusalem: Exploring God’s Plan for Life on Earth* (Nottingham: InterVarsity, 2008) 21–23.

was situated within a garden (John 19:41), and the risen Jesus was mistaken for the gardener (20:15).

7. Closer verbal links are to be detected in the directions given to the clan of Kohath, the Levites assigned the task of carrying the ark. With respect to the sanctuary, they are expressly forbidden to “go in [οὐ μὴ εισέλθωσιν] to see [ἰδεῖν] the holy things” (Num 4:20) on pain of death. Related to this, when the two disciples, arrived at the tomb on Easter morning, first Peter “went in [εἰσῆλθεν]” and saw the grave clothes (John 20:6–7), followed by John, who also “went in [εἰσῆλθεν] and saw [εἶδεν]” and believed (v. 8).

8. In the same commands to the Kohathites there is also the prohibition that “they are not to touch [οὐχ ἅψονται] the holy things or they will die” (Num 4:15). When Mary encountered the risen Lord, he said to her, “Do not touch [μὴ ἅπτου] me” (John 20:17).

9. The time of Mary’s visit to the tomb is given as *πρωὶ* (John 20:1), meaning early morning. This was the time of the morning service in the tabernacle when the morning sacrifice was offered, incense was burnt,¹⁰ and the lamps trimmed (Exod 29:39; 30:7; τὸ πρωὶ). Of itself this might seem merely coincidental, yet John’s next section, in which the Lord appears to a gathering of his disciples, is set “in the evening” (20:19, *ὀψίας*). This was the time of the evening ceremonies in the tabernacle (Exod 30:8, *ὀψέ*).

10. There is a conceptual relationship between the ark and the resurrected Christ in that both express the idea of glory. With respect to the former, the theophanic glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle (Exod 40:34–35) and appeared to Moses between the cherubim on the ark (25:22; 29:43).¹¹ For John, the resurrection of Jesus is one aspect of his glorification. This is evident from 12:16.¹²

Treated individually, no single one of the above carries any great weight of itself, though some connections are stronger than others.¹³ Their cumulative weight, however, makes a strong case for accepting these as cases of deliberate allusion, linking the events described in the Gospel to certain passages of the OT. In each case, the reference is either to the ark itself or to the tabernacle in which the ark was situated, that is, there exists a thematic relationship in the various allusions, reinforcing the suggestion of purposeful design.

¹⁰ According to Mark (16:1) and Luke (24:1), Mary was coming to the tomb, accompanied by other women, bringing spices. Spices, we observe, were the main ingredient of the sacred incense (Exod 30:34–35).

¹¹ Cf. also 1 Sam 4:21–22, where “The glory has departed from Israel” has reference to the loss of the ark. The writer to the Hebrews, it is to be noted, describes the cherubic figures as “the cherubim of glory” (Heb 9:5).

¹² In John 12:16, the clause “when Jesus was glorified” runs parallel with “when he was raised from the dead” in 2:22, both being followed by the remembrance of his disciples. See Herman Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John: A Theological Commentary* (trans. John Vriend; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 424. Other NT writers also bring together the ideas of resurrection and glory: Rom 6:4; 1 Cor 15:43; 1 Pet 1:21.

¹³ The allusions to the Kohathites neither touching nor going in to see the holy things is particularly definite, since both occur within the space of just a few verses in Numbers 4 (vv. 15–20), and since these are the only two such prohibitions imposed upon them.

It is further to be noted that such a use of the OT is entirely in keeping with what is found elsewhere in John's Gospel. In the opening chapters John had referred to Jesus as the bearer of divine glory who "tabernacled" amongst us (1:14) and to his body as a "temple" (2:21).¹⁴ These same symbols reemerge in the Apocalypse, widely accepted as coming from the same hand as the Gospel. There John wrote of a heavenly sanctuary, termed both "tabernacle" and "temple" (e.g. Rev 13:6; 14:15; 15:5; 16:1), in which the ark of the covenant was seen (11:19).¹⁵ Many other related OT images appear in the Johannine writings, such as the Passover lamb, the manna, and so forth. The common theme linking these is that the reality to which such OT symbols and ceremonies pointed to has now come in Jesus Christ. This is true also of the allusions we have identified in the burial and resurrection passages, as I will attempt to show in the following section.

II. THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Through the OT echoes described above, the writer of John's Gospel appears to be pointing his readers to a certain web of ideas centering on the ark of the covenant. We will now consider the import of such intertextual links under two separate headings. First, what did John through these allusions intend to communicate about the person and work of Christ? And second, what do they convey about the disciples in their relationship to their newly risen Lord?

Before considering the first of these questions, we need to briefly remind ourselves of the significance of the ark in the OT. Foremost is the idea that this was the place where God met with his people. It was here that God appeared and gave revelations to Moses (Exod 25:22; 30:6; Num 17:4). The ark was so much associated with the divine presence that God could be termed the one "who dwells between the cherubim" (cf. 1 Sam 4:4; 2 Sam 6:2; 2 Kgs 19:15; Ps 80:1; 99:1).

Besides this fundamental theophanic significance, a crucial role was given to the ark in the sacrificial ritual of the old covenant. The ark, or more precisely the golden lid upon it, was one of the major foci of the annual atonement

¹⁴ On Johannine symbolism in general, see Craig R. Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995) 2–15. More specifically on the tabernacle and temple, see D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 127, 182.

¹⁵ This being one of only two explicit references to the ark of the covenant in the entire NT, the other being Heb 9:4. It would seem that the reference to the ark in Rev 11:19 is not purely arbitrary, but relates the seventh apocalyptic trumpet concerning the fall of the kingdoms of the world to the fall of Jericho at the blowing of the trumpet on the seventh day (Joshua 6), an event in which the ark plays a prominent role; see G. K. Beale, *John's Use of the Old Testament in Revelation* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998) 210. In addition, although not so named, John clearly refers to cherubic figures in Rev 4:6–8; cf. Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 123–24. Such definite references to the ark and cherubim in Revelation lend support to the existence of deliberate allusion to these items in the Gospel, which, if not from the hand of the same author, at least originates within the same circle.

ceremony. According to the instructions of Leviticus 16, “he [the high priest] shall slaughter the goat of the sin offering that is for the people and bring its blood inside the veil . . . and sprinkle it upon the mercy seat and before the mercy seat. And he shall make atonement for the sanctuary, because of the impurities of the sons of Israel, and because of their transgressions, for all their sins” (vv. 15–16). The term traditionally translated as “mercy seat” (כַּפֶּרֶת) was rendered in the LXX as ἱλαστήριον, a cognate noun of the verb “to atone/propitiate,” which also occurs in this context (v. 16, וכפר, και ἐξιλάσεται, “and he shall make atonement”). Hence that special day in the religious calendar was designated “the day of atonement” (Lev 25:9, הַיּוֹם הַכַּפֵּרִים, ἡ ἡμέρα τοῦ ἱλασμοῦ).

1. *Implications regarding Christ.* Regarding the Gospel of John, the context there in which the intertextual echoes occur relates more, though perhaps not exclusively, to the latter group of associations, that is, to the idea of atoning sacrifice. Though once questioned, it has now been firmly established that the concept of atonement is firmly present in the fourth Gospel.¹⁶ The presence of atonement terminology in John’s first letter supports such a view. There we find the noun ἱλασμός used twice: “he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 John 2:2); “he [God] loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 John 4:10).¹⁷ A similar idea is represented through the imagery of the slain Lamb in the book of Revelation (5:6; cf. vv. 9 and 12).¹⁸

Through allusive reference to OT passages relating to the ark and elements of the tabernacle service, John is building up a picture of Jesus in terms of Mosaic categories readily appreciated by a Jewish audience. More specifically, he is pointing us to the Day of Atonement ceremony, the primary expiatory ritual of ancient Israel. Uniquely on that day of the Jewish calendar the mercy seat, or “atonement cover” (NIV), of the ark featured in the elaborate ceremony described in Leviticus 16 where it served to receive the blood of the sin-offering. Corresponding to this the Gospel writer portrays a symbolic ark which received the bleeding body of Christ. The significance of such an image, though implicit, is unmistakable—of Jesus, not as the typological, but as the actual means whereby atonement is attained.

¹⁶ See, for example, George Carey, “The Lamb of God and Atonement Theories,” *TynBul* 32 (1981) 97–122; Bruce H. Grisby, “The Cross as an Expiatory Sacrifice in the Fourth Gospel,” *JSNT* 15 (1982) 51–80.

¹⁷ NIV and NRSV have “atoning sacrifice,” while ESV and NASB prefer “propitiation.”

¹⁸ It is noteworthy that the apocalyptic Lamb is described as being “the Lamb in the midst [ἀνά μέσων] of the throne” (Rev 7:17). This seems to be a further Johannine echo of the ark. This prepositional phrase is used specifically with reference to the space between the cherubim: “There I will meet with you; and from above the mercy seat, from between [ἀνά μέσων] the two cherubim which are upon the ark of the testimony, I will speak to you” (Exod 25:22); “he heard the voice speaking to him from above the mercy seat that was on the ark of the testimony, from between [ἀνά μέσων] the two cherubim” (Num 7:89). The obvious tabernacle imagery found in this section of Revelation makes the allusion probable at least.

In support of the above, other probable references to the Day of Atonement are to be noticed elsewhere in John's writings. Twice we read of Jesus having to die "for the people" (John 11:50; 18:14), echoing a similar phrase from Leviticus 16 (vv. 15, 24 [twice]).¹⁹ It is also possible that 1 John 2:2 is a deliberate allusion to the atonement ritual, especially to Lev 16:15. Some have seen the emergence of seven angels from the heavenly sanctuary in Revelation 15 bearing seven bowls to pour out upon the earth as employing imagery drawn from the Day of Atonement.²⁰

In the light of the manner in which John uses OT symbolism elsewhere in his Gospel, the fact that the crucifixion and death of Christ should have overtones of the principal Mosaic ritual dealing with sin should occasion no surprise. John has already treated other significant Gospel events against the backdrop of Jewish feasts, a widely recognized feature of John's Gospel.²¹ The bread of life discourse, for example, relating the giving of Christ's flesh for the life of the world (John 6:51), is linked to the Passover (6:4), and the saying regarding the giving of the living water of the Spirit (7:37–38) is uttered at Tabernacles (7:2, 14, 37) in which the drawing and pouring of water played a major part. Nor should it be the cause of surprise that Christ's death is depicted at one and the same time in terms of both Passover and Day of Atonement. The former is definitely referred to in connection with the crucifixion in 19:36, with several other probable allusions in the same context.²² John often mixes the figures by which Christ is represented. He is both tabernacle and temple, both lamb and shepherd, both bread and water, and now both Passover and sacrifice of atonement. All these and other images are blended together by John to bring out the many facets to Christ's fulfilment of all that the OT Scriptures prefigure regarding the One to come.

Besides the connotation of atonement, it is conceivable that John also intends his readers to see a theophanic significance in the vision seen by Mary at the tomb.²³ It was between the cherubim on the ark that God met with Moses, the representative of Israel. With the arrival of the new order, God now makes himself known in his Son. He is the one who reveals the glory of the Father (1:14, 18). To see Jesus is to see the Father (14:9).

¹⁹ The phrase "for the people" is also prominent in the discussion of atonement found in Hebrews (5:3; 7:27; 9:7).

²⁰ Cf. J. Massyngberde Ford, *Revelation: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 1995) 265. More allusions to the Day of Atonement are identified, though not all equally convincing, in J. and G. Ben-Daniel, *The Apocalypse in the Light of the Temple: A New Approach to the Book of Revelation* (Jerusalem: Beit Yochanan, 2003).

²¹ Cf. Michael A. Daise, *Feasts in John: Jewish Festivals and Jesus' "Hour" in the Fourth Gospel* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007).

²² See Grisby, "The Cross as an Expiatory Sacrifice in the Fourth Gospel" 53–59.

²³ If the twofold occurrence of "turned" (20:14, 16) is pressed literally, then its second instance would mean that Jesus had moved and would make Mary look back into the tomb to see him now framed against the background of the two angels and the burial slab, making the theophanic import of what Mary saw all the more apparent.

Significantly, the place of the atonement is also the paramount place of divine manifestation.²⁴

2. Implications regarding the disciples. We next give some consideration to the implications of the textual allusions for the relationship of the disciples to their risen Lord. The language that John uses, especially regarding the carrying of Jesus' body, the entering, seeing, and touching all have verbal associations with passages in the Torah relating to the work of the Levites in connection with the ark and other sacred vessels. Is the evangelist pointing to the disciples as in some way being the new covenant counterpart to the Levitical ministers of the old? This does seem to be a reasonable conclusion to draw, not merely from these few allusions in the death and burial accounts, but also, as shall be shown, from earlier material in the Gospel.

Chapter 17 contains what is commonly labeled the "high-priestly prayer" of Christ, largely due no doubt to its explicit intercessory nature.²⁵ But there is much more that is high-priestly in character about it. Though overlooked by the commentaries, there is language in the prayer that depicts Jesus' relationship to his disciples in terms of the high priest's relationship to the Levites.²⁶ Significantly, the allusions are especially to the early portion of Numbers, the same context as two of the intertextual echoes listed earlier. There it is stressed several times, first, that the Levites belong to God: "They are mine [ἐμοὶ ἔσσονται]," he says (Num 3:13; cf. 12, 45; 8:14). The reasons for this particular divine claim to Levi lies in the substitution of this tribe for the firstborn of Israel (cf. 3:12–13; 8:16–17), who were protected through the blood of the Passover lamb in Egypt. Having claimed ownership of the Levites, it is equally stressed that God was then giving them to Aaron and his male descendants:

- You shall give [δώσεις] the Levites to Aaron and his sons; they are given entirely [δόμα δεδομένοι] to him from among the children of Israel. (Num 3:9)
- I have given [ἔπεδωκα] the Levites as a gift [ἀπόδομα δεδομένου] to Aaron and to his sons from among the sons of Israel. (Num 8:19)
- Behold, I myself have taken your fellow Levites from among the sons of Israel; they are a gift [δόμα δεδομένον] to you. (Num 18:6)

²⁴ In this connection, the proposal of Stibbe is very relevant that the development of the plot in John's Gospel is reminiscent of the way taken by the priests into the tabernacle. The latter begins with the offering upon the bronze altar, then moves to the laver of water, the bread of the presence, the lampstand, and the incense altar, where intercessory prayer was offered. The final stage into the most holy place was only taken on the day of the atonement by the high priest. Stibbe argues that each of these stages has its parallels, in order, in the fourth Gospel (*The Resurrection Code* 81–91).

²⁵ Cf. Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) 634; George R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (WBC; Waco, TX: Word, 1987) 294.

²⁶ Kerr detects a number of high-priestly overtones in this prayer, though not the one described here. See Alan Kerr, *The Temple of Jesus' Body: The Temple Theme in the Gospel of John* (JSNTSup; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002) 314–70.

Similar language appears in John 17 with respect to the disciples, meaning in context not just the Twelve, but all believers. In his prayer to the Father, Jesus acknowledges, “They are yours [σοί εἰσιν]” (v. 9; cf. v. 6). At the same time, throughout the prayer he repeatedly describes the disciples as those that had been given to himself:

- I have manifested your name to the men you gave [ἔδωκάς] me out of the world; they were yours and you gave [ἔδωκάς] them to me. (John 17:6)
- I do not pray for the world but for those you have given [δέδωκάς] me. (John 17:9)
- I desire that they also, whom you have given [δέδωκάς] me, be with me where I am, that they may see my glory. (John 17:24; cf. vv. 2 and 12)²⁷

The parallels between the gift of the Levites to Aaron and the giving of the disciples to Christ are unmistakable. If any additional confirmation were to be sought, it may be found in the terminology applied to certain reprobate Levites and Judas the reprobate disciple. Jesus refers obliquely to the latter (17:12) as “the son of perdition [τῆς ἀπωλείας]” who “perished [ἀπόλωτο].” In this choice of vocabulary, we see an echo of an incident recorded in Numbers—the rebellion of Korah, a Kohathite of the tribe of Levi (Num 16:1). This rebellion is evidently one of disgruntled Levites wanting the actual priesthood for themselves (v. 10; cf. v. 40).²⁸ In response, divine punishment falls upon them and “they perished [ἀπόλωντο] from the midst of the assembly” (v. 33). Later reference back to this incident uses the same distinct terminology, both in the Old and the New Testament: “Would that we had died when our brothers perished [ἐν τῇ ἀπωλείᾳ] before the LORD” (Num 20:3); “they perished [ἀπόλωντο] in the rebellion of Korah” (Jude 11). Appropriately, in the context of those who, like the Levites, had been given to the high priest, Christ’s description of Judas’s apostasy echoes that earlier event.

Before coming to the particular references to Levitical ordinances in the resurrection narrative of John 20, also relevant to our discussion is the fact that in this same context we find the sole instance in the fourth Gospel where Jesus uses the word “brothers” with reference to the disciples. “Go to my brothers,” he tells Mary (20:17). Such an appellation fits well with the high priest and Levite parallel. Again in Numbers God said to Aaron, “Bring with you also *your brothers*, the tribe of Levi, the tribe of your father, that they may be joined to you and serve you” (Num 18:2; cf. 2 Chr 29:34).²⁹ From this and the previously mentioned echoes of the prohibitions placed upon the Kohathites, we see that in both the prayer of chapter 17 and the resurrection

²⁷ Also note John 6:37, “All that the Father gives me [δίδοσίν μοι] will come to me.”

²⁸ Cf. v. 7: “You Levites have gone too far”; v. 8: “Listen, you Levites!”

²⁹ Also worthy of note is the fact that this verse refers to Aaron and the Levites having one and the same “father,” comparable to the shared, though distinct, relationship of Jesus and the disciples to the Father implicit in John 20:17.

account of chapter 20 there are definite Levitical connotations in John's depiction of the new covenant community.

What was the intention in these allusions? The direction in which they point does not seem to be the respective ministerial roles of the Levites and apostles. Since the verbal echoes include Mary as well as Peter and John, the application may be taken with reference, not specifically to the twelve, but to Christian disciples in general, as is also implicit in Christ's use of "those you have given me" in John 17:9. Focusing here on the echoes of Num 4:15 and 20 in John 20, the intent of the author of the Gospel would appear to be contrastive, that is, the difference of approach to the manifestation of deity between the old administration and the new. The Mosaic covenant prevented even those ministers especially appointed for the carrying of the holy vessels from becoming too familiar with the objects of their charge. To enter in the sanctuary to catch a glimpse of them or to touch them before they were properly covered issued in death. In stark opposition to this John portrays the followers of Christ doing just this. They were freely able to enter in, to see, and to touch,³⁰ with no danger of being struck down. Not only this, in the former case the Levitical attendants were only ministering to what from a NT perspective were shadows,³¹ that is, typical entities prefiguring greater things to come. The disciples, on the other hand, experienced the reality itself. Further still, the old regulations related solely to especially ordained ministers, and those wholly male, while the new order allows for both those appointed apostles and lay disciples, men and women, to approach freely.

By means of these echoes of the Torah, John implicitly draws out for the discerning reader the wonderful truths of the gospel. No longer is God concealed and unapproachable, but revealed and accessible. No longer is there any threat of death in drawing near, but rather through the incarnate Son's own atoning death there is an offer of life. In this way, John's words at the beginning of his Gospel are more fully appreciated: "the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (1:17).

III. NOT YET ASCENDED TO THE FATHER

Finally, we give some attention to the question whether this study of textual allusions sheds any light upon the explanation that Jesus offers to Mary for not wishing her to touch him?³² John 20:17 says:

Μή μου ἅπτου, οὐπω γάρ ἀναβέβηκα πρὸς τὸν πατέρα· πορεύου δὲ πρὸς τοὺς ἀδελφούς μου καὶ εἶπε αυτοῖς, ἀναβαίνω πρὸς τὸν πατέρα μου καὶ πατέρα ὑμῶν καὶ θεόν μου καὶ θεὸν ὑμῶν.

³⁰ The Greek suggests that Mary was actually touching Jesus when he said this; see Maximilian Zerwick, *Biblical Greek* (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1990) 80. Cf. Lenski, *Interpretation of St. John's Gospel* 1360: "In prohibitions the present imperative forbids an act that has already begun"; and Morris, *Gospel according to John* 742: "The present imperative with a negative means 'Stop doing something' rather than 'Do not start something.'"

³¹ Cf. Col 2:17; Heb 8:5; 10:1.

³² According to Carson, "This verse belongs to a handful of the most difficult passages in the New Testament" (*Gospel according to John* 641-42).

Jesus said to her, "Do not touch me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"³³

In these words of Jesus also we are perhaps to detect overtones of the OT Day of Atonement, though the possible intertextual links in what follows, it is openly admitted, are of a more tenuous nature than the others dealt with earlier in this article. As described in Leviticus 16, the elaborate ritual of atonement included not just the ceremony involving two goats, but other offerings besides. Once the sin offerings had been performed, there yet remained the matter of the burnt offerings. These latter are prescribed towards the beginning of the chapter (vv. 3, 5), but not actually sacrificed until much later.³⁴ Only after the slaughter of one goat (vv. 15–19) and the dismissal of the other into the wilderness (vv. 20–22) is attention then turned to the burnt offerings.³⁵ Aaron is first to remove his linen garments, put on for the occasion of the sin offerings (v. 4), and then don other clothes (v. 24a). Then the regulations state, "he shall come out and sacrifice the burnt-offering for himself and the burnt-offering for the people, to make atonement for himself and for the people" (v. 24b).

In Biblical Hebrew, the noun for "burnt-offering" is הֲלָעָה ('*olâ*). This is an obvious cognate of the verb הָלַעַ ('*âlâ*), "to go up/ascend," the causative (Hiphil) of which is that generally used for "to offer." Hence the noun is said to mean "that which ascends."³⁶ The suitability of this designation is self-evident, though its origins are uncertain. It is variously ascribed to the fact of the smoke rising up from the altar upon which the offering was burnt, to the lifting up of the whole animal on to the altar, or to the ascending of those who officiated to the altar.³⁷

Though the LXX most frequently translates הֲלָעָה by ὁλοκαύτωμα, "holocaust" (Greek "wholly burnt"), focusing on the fact that the entire carcass was consumed in the fire, to the Hebrew mind there would have been an undoubted association between the idea of burnt-offering and ascending. This latter idea is preserved in the LXX of 2 Chr 29:21, καὶ εἶπεν τοῖς υἱοῖς Ααρων τοῖς ἱερεῦσιν ἀναβαίνειν (Hebrew להעלות, "cause to ascend") ἐπὶ τὸ θυσιαστήριον κυρίου, "and he told the sons of Aaron the priests to offer [them] up on the altar of the Lord." The Greek infinitive (ἀναβαίνειν) employed here of the offering is a form of the same verb that Jesus spoke to Mary (ἀναβέβηκα, ἀναβαίνω).

³³ It should be noted that the words "ascend to the Father" are unique to this verse in John. Elsewhere it speaks of ascension spatially (1:51; 3:13; 6:62), that is, into heaven, but never personally of an ascension to God or to the Father. The Farewell Discourse (chaps. 14–16) contains "go to the Father" several times, but none of these uses the verb ἀναβαίνω.

³⁴ Cf. W. Gunther Platt, ed., *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1981) 866.

³⁵ It is generally the case in the law of Moses that, when offered in conjunction with each other, the burnt offering followed the sin offering (Lev 8:14, 18; 9:7; Num 6:16); cf. Richard E. Averbeck, "הָלַעַ", *NIDOTTE* 3.411.

³⁶ Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 1991) 172.

³⁷ Averbeck, "הָלַעַ" 405–6.

Could Jesus, then, through his use of “ascend” be making a veiled allusion to the burnt sacrifice that concluded the Day of Atonement? From a purely linguistic standpoint this is possible. It is noteworthy that in Mishnaic Hebrew, which probably reflects something of the language in use during the time of Christ, the verb נָּלַץ is found with respect to the offerings not just in the causative form, as in Biblical Hebrew, but also in the simple (Qal) intransitive. The subject of the verb in such a case is the thing being offered up.³⁸ Is this sense present in John 20:17, if not primarily, then at least as a secondary connotation?

To answer the question, we need to look beyond the verb forms and to consider again the text of the Torah to which the Gospel writer has been alluding. It has already been demonstrated that the idea of atonement forms an important component in John’s OT echoes. Comparing the various elements of the ceremony of Leviticus 16 with the death and resurrection narratives in John’s Gospel, a number of parallels may be observed. First, there is the initial change of raiment. In order to undertake his high priestly work that day Aaron had first to remove his ornate garments for much plainer linen ones (16:4).³⁹ Amongst the former was a long item, termed “the robe of the ephod,” of particular design: “There shall be an opening for his head in the middle of it; it shall have a woven (ὀφάντου) binding all around its opening . . . so that it does not tear (μὴ ῥαγῆ)” (Exod 28:32). It is apparent from the description given when the garment is actually made that the whole of it was of “woven” material: “He made the robe of the ephod of woven work (ἔργον ὀφαντῶν)” (39:22 [LXX 36:29]). There is a possible connection here with the disrobing of Jesus before the crucifixion. John tells us, “Then the soldiers, when they had crucified Jesus, took his garments and made four parts, a part to every soldier and also the tunic; now the tunic⁴⁰ was seamless, woven (ὀφαντός) in one piece. So they said to one another, ‘Let us not tear (μὴ σχίσωμεν) it . . .’” (19:23–24). Both garments are said to be “woven.” The possibility of the allusion is increased by the consideration that the adjective ὀφαντός , occurring only here in the NT, is found in the LXX (Apocrypha included) solely in Exod 26–37, that is, the chapters concerning the priestly vestments and the curtains and veil of the tabernacle, which were of similar woven fabric. The link is further strengthened by the conjoined idea in both contexts of the garment not being torn. Although the LXX uses a different verb (ῥήγνυμι) from that found in John (σχίζω), the two are contextually synony-

³⁸ See Marcus Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (New York: Judaica, 1971) 1081, where examples are given.

³⁹ That it is the more ornamental high-priestly vestments as described in Exodus 28 that are to be removed is almost universally agreed upon, both by modern commentators and ancient Jewish sources. See, for example, Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16* 1016; Baruch A. Levine, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Leviticus* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1989) 101; John E. Hartley, *Leviticus* (WBC; Dallas: Word, 1992) 235; Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) 230; John D. Currid, *Leviticus* (Darlington: Evangelical Press, 2004) 215.

⁴⁰ John does indeed employ a different Greek word (χιτών) from the LXX (ποδήρης) to describe this robe. However, Josephus, a contemporary of the apostle, also uses χιτών to designate the high priest’s woven robe (*Ant.* 3.161).

mous. Both are found in the LXX to render the Hebrew verb קרע (“tear”) when speaking of tearing clothes.⁴¹ With respect to both Lev 16:4 and John 19:23–24, it is to be observed that the removal of clothes occurs *before* the sacrifice is offered.⁴²

Later on the Day of Atonement, once the various rituals involving the sacrifice of the sin offerings and the application of blood to the mercy seat had been performed, the high priest then removed the plain linen garments. These were to be left in the sanctuary (Lev 16:23), and the regular garments put back on.⁴³ Aaron then emerged from the tabernacle newly clothed to turn his attention to the matter of burnt offering (v. 24), that is, the עֹלָה, the offering that “ascends.” This sequence of events may be compared in the Gospel to the removal of the linen grave clothes, neatly left in the burial chamber (John 20:5–7), the implicit emergence of Jesus, now re clothed, and his speaking to Mary of the issue of his “ascending” (v. 17). Furthermore, there is a correspondence between the goal of the burnt offering and the ascending of Christ. The Lord specified to Mary that his ascension had a twofold aspect: “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.” The possessive pronoun “your” is not restricted to Mary, but is plural (ὑμῶν), apparently referring to Mary and those that Jesus termed “my brothers,” that is, the disciples. It does not fall within the scope of this short article to engage in a discussion of the theological distinctions signified by “my Father and your Father,” and “my God and your God.” Suffice it to say, however, that the dual aspect of this “ascending” is matched by a similar duality in the final burnt offering ritual of the Day of Atonement. The high priest was to present “the burnt-offering for himself and the burnt-offering for the people, to make atonement for himself and for the people” (Lev 16:24).⁴⁴

It may be objected that there is a difference in that upon removing one set of garments the high priest immediately dons others (Lev 16:4), whereas Jesus did not. Most probably, like other victims of crucifixion, Jesus was executed naked.⁴⁵ Obviously it was not until after he was removed from the cross

⁴¹ Compare Exod 28:30 with Isa 37:1. While this latter verse uses ἔσχισεν τὰ ἱμάτια, the parallel in 2 Kgs 19:1 has the Greek compound verb διαρρήγνυμι, in δέερρηξεν τὰ ἱμάτια, both translating the same Hebrew clause, וקרע את בגדיו (“and he tore his clothes”).

⁴² Without entering into any of the details, Brown is of the opinion that in John 19:23 “the priestly symbolism of the tunic is plausible” (*Gospel according to John XIII–XXI* 921).

⁴³ The majority of commentators interpret this to mean the ornate garments removed earlier. See, for example, Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16* 1049; Levine, *Leviticus* 108; Hartley, *Leviticus* 241; Wenham, *Book of Leviticus* 235; Currid, *Leviticus* 221.

⁴⁴ It should also be noticed that this part of Lev 16:24 and John 20:17 have a common phrase structure. Both consist of: “. . . [A¹ and B¹] and [A² and B²].” The Hebrew has the copula *waw* (“and”) three times and the Greek has the copula καὶ three times. Elements A¹ and A² in Lev 16:24 are qualified by “his” and by “my” in John 20:17, referring to the high priest and Jesus respectively. Elements B¹ and B² in Leviticus reference “the people” and “your” (the disciples) in John. Thus the roles of high priest and Jesus correspond, while the disciples correspond to the people. In view of the fact that this syntactic structure is quite particular, the similarity between the two could be construed as a further indication of deliberate echo on the part of John.

⁴⁵ See Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave, A Commentary on the Passion Narrative in the Four Gospels* (New York: Doubleday, 1998) 870.

that he was bound in grave clothes. There is nonetheless a unifying principle between the two occasions which is discernible more in the symbolic significance than in the precise details. Concerning the ritual of Leviticus 16 commentators agree that the necessary removal of the decorative clothing was representative of humility. These garments were intended “for dignity and honor” (Exod 28:2 NIV) and therefore not appropriate for the solemn ritual enacted that day, which was the sin offering and obtaining of atonement. As one commentary states: “This divestiture is more than pageantry; it is an eloquent symbol of the servant role that the high priest must assume on this day as he takes upon himself the form of an ordinary mortal.”⁴⁶ In the NT this Mosaic symbolism translates into the profound self-humiliation of the Lord Jesus Christ. First, in the state of nakedness Jesus associated himself with the sin of mankind (cf. Gen 3:7).⁴⁷ Then, shrouded in the grave clothes he was identified with the death state that is the consequence of sin.⁴⁸

To summarize the foregoing, both Leviticus 16 and John’s death and resurrection account present the same basic sequence: the initial removal of garments as an expression of humility, the main event of the sin offering, the putting off of linen clothes, the exit from the tabernacle/tomb, the reference to “that which ascends”/“ascending,” with its twofold end. The reproducing of this sequence in John, together with the other connotations of the ark and atonement previously outlined, is highly suggestive of the fact that John consciously followed the order for the Day of Atonement ritual in his narrative of the ultimate atonement made by Christ.

Last of all, there is the matter of the significance of the Levitical burnt-offering in relation to the sacrificial work of Christ. If John is indeed alluding to the final offerings of the Day of Atonement, what does this tell us about that which Jesus accomplished? Here, frankly, we tread on uncertain ground. Though good reasons may exist for seeing an intertextual link with Leviticus 16, the statement of Jesus to Mary is still not fully elucidated by it. One thing is nonetheless clear, which is that the words of Jesus indicate that following his atoning death, there was something that yet remained to be done, something which possibly related to what was symbolized by the burnt offering under the Mosaic system. Several commentators define the latter in terms of acceptance,⁴⁹ others as emblematic of self-consecration.⁵⁰ While not denying that these may have some relevance to the significance of

⁴⁶ Walter C. Kaiser Jr., “Leviticus” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible: Vol. 1* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994) 1110; cf. Derek Tidball, *The Message of Leviticus* (BST; Leicester: InterVarsity, 2005) 189: “most see it as a mark of humility, a sign of one stripped of all pretence and status.”

⁴⁷ On the conceptual relation between human nakedness and the guilt of sin, cf. Henri Blocher, *In the Beginning: The Opening Chapters of Genesis* (Leicester: InterVarsity, 1984) 176.

⁴⁸ We are reminded here of the thoughts of Paul, expressed in Phil 2:7–8, “[he] emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”

⁴⁹ Cf. Allen P. Ross, *Holiness to the Lord: A Guide to the Exposition of the Book of Leviticus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002) 89, 95; Currid, *Leviticus* 30.

⁵⁰ Cf. Averbeck, “עֲלָה,” 409.

the burnt offering, the essence of its meaning seems best brought out by this observation on the nature of sacrifice in general made several decades ago by Geerhardus Vos:

For to the προσφέρειν, "offering," belongs more than the self-surrender in death; its culminating part is the self-presentation in heaven. It is not merely necessary that a sacrifice be slain; it is equally necessary that the sacrifice be brought into the immediate presence of God as He dwells in the heavenly tabernacle. The sacrifice is not completed until this is done. This is not a result of the sacrifice; it is an integral part of the sacrificial transaction itself . . . [T]he two acts of self-surrender and self-presentation . . . together constitute one God-ward movement.⁵¹

Such a distinction may be helpful in application to the work of Christ. Though forgiveness of sins was attained through his death on the cross, and the divine acceptance of that shown through his resurrection, there yet remained that act of self-presentation for the whole enactment to be completed. Perhaps it was of this that Jesus spoke to Mary.⁵²

IV. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this article has been to demonstrate how the Johannine account of the burial and resurrection of Jesus contains a significant number of intertextual echoes drawn from passages in the Mosaic law concerning the ark and most holy place, especially in connection with the day of atonement. These are not merely textual allusions for their own sake, but have theological connotations about the nature of the atoning work of Christ and about the new relationship that God's people have with their risen Lord.

No doubt these allusions would have been readily detectable to those intimately acquainted with the text of the Torah, as would have been true of most Jews at that time. Yet the fact is that the NT has numerous intertextual echoes of the kind examined in this article even in documents addressed to a largely Gentile readership, as has been well established in the classic treatment of intertextuality by Richard Hays.⁵³

⁵¹ Richard B. Gaffin Jr., ed., *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001) 142.

⁵² We here quote the comment of Roy Gane (*Leviticus, Numbers* [NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004] 69) who also sees a connection between the burnt offering and John 20:17: "The Hebrew word translated 'burnt offering' (*olah*) literally means 'ascending.' It was burnt *up*, going vertically to God in the form of smoke . . . to God's heavenly residence, linking heaven and earth. Similarly, after his death on the cross, Christ ascended to heaven (cf. Judg. 13:20). When he appeared to Mary Magdalene just after his resurrection, he said to her: 'Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father' (John 20:17, NRSV)." Yet Gane ventures further when he next adds: "This verse suggests that after appearing to Mary, Jesus ascended to heaven that day, after which he returned to earth and appeared to his other disciples for several weeks before permanently ascending (Luke 24; Acts 1)." While I obviously think the connection is a correct one, I do not necessarily agree with this last comment.

⁵³ Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

To conclude, I draw attention to the significant fact that all of Hays's proposed tests for establishing the existence of echoes in the Pauline corpus are met by those proposed in this article with respect to the Gospel of John. The seven criteria Hays lists are: availability, volume, recurrence, thematic coherence, historical plausibility, the history of interpretation, and satisfaction.⁵⁴ Availability relates to the text drawn upon, in this case the book of the law. This was certainly available to John and his audience since the Gospel refers explicitly to it and its contents elsewhere. Volume concerns the degree of overlap of words and syntactical patterns. Section 2 of this article presented the relevant details of this overlap, which is most obvious in the allusions to Numbers and the Day of Atonement. Recurrence concerns the use of the intertext by the same author elsewhere. In this context other references to the ark and the Day of Atonement were noted in the Johannine corpus. Thematic coherence considers how well the alleged echo fits in with what its new context is presenting. That the death of Jesus should be presented in terms of the atonement ritual is entirely appropriate, and is explicitly done in other parts of the NT.⁵⁵ Historical plausibility has regard to the ability of the recipients to have understood the echoes. Certainly in this case the Pentateuch of the LXX was available and would be widely read amongst John's audience. Though perhaps not immediately obvious to some, there would be those who would detect the allusions more readily and be able to explain their significance to others. The history of interpretation test inquires whether other readers have heard the same echoes. We began by referencing several commentators over the last five centuries who have perceived the allusion to the ark. Finally, satisfaction means that the proposed echo makes sense and illuminates the surrounding discourse. This is more subjective, but this article has hopefully demonstrated that this is in fact the case.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 29–32.

⁵⁵ Primarily in the letter to the Hebrews.