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Plato's Symposium in the Acts of John?*

1. Introduction

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 silence¹, and we saw him helping us to beach the ship. And when we left the place, wishing to follow him again², 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. (*Acts of John* 88–9)

This passage is quoted from the *Acts of John*, one of the 'major' apocryphal Acts, which scholars variously date from the first half of the second century to the middle of the third century CE. As for its provenience, Syria, Asia Minor, and Alexandria have equally been argued

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1. James, *Apocrypha anecdota*, 4, lines 8–9, suggests εἰς γῆν for σιγῆ, which is accepted by Junod and Kaestli, *Acta Iohannis*, vol 1, 193. 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. ὄψεσθαι seems to be a confusion of ἔπομαι and ὀπάζω.

for³. We have only an incomplete text of the book, the beginning of which seems to be lost altogether. In the manuscripts, its episodes usually accompany the later and more widespread *Acts of John by Pseudo-Prochorus*⁴. There are differing opinions as for the proper order of the extant passages, which mainly report the miracles and speeches of the apostle John in Ephesus and Asia Minor. Unlike in most other apocryphal Acts, the hero dies a peaceful death at the end of the narrative. This paper focuses on two of John's speeches, in which the hero talks about his divine call to apostleship. The texts are found in chapters 88–93 and 113, respectively⁵.

2. Jesus and John in Acts of John 88–93

The mysterious encounter of the brothers John and James, which I quoted earlier, is only the beginning of a series of their bewildering confrontations with Jesus.

Yet to me there then appeared a still more wonderful thing; for I tried to see him as he was, and I never at any time saw his eyes closing but only open. And sometimes he appeared to me as a small man and an unattractive, and then again as one reaching to heaven. Also there was in him another marvel; 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

3. 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; Luttkhuizen, 'Gnostic Reading'.

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. Chapter 18, which now stands at the beginning of the book, can also be interpreted as an occasion of divine call. The former two texts, however, reflect on the beginnings of John's relation to Jesus, which is not the interest of chapter 18. It is precisely the peculiar relation of master and disciple that we will examine more detail below. Cf. Czachesz, *Apostolic Commission*, 91–6.

tender, and sometimes hard, like stone, so that I was perplexed in myself and said: 'What does this mean?'

Later the synoptic transfiguration scene is briefly reported. At another time Jesus takes his closest disciples with him to the mountain: 'Now I,' John recalls, 'because he loved me, went to him quietly as though he should not see, and stood looking upon his back'. John sees Jesus naked and radiating, his head reaching to heaven. When he cries from fear, Jesus turns around and becomes a small man. On another occasion, Jesus and the disciples sleep at a house at (the lake of?) Gennesaret. John, after wrapping himself in his cloak, watches Jesus secretly. John pretends that he is asleep, and hears Jesus talking to another man like him.

The gospel narrative reports that Jesus is capable of rapidly changing his appearance. He can even appear in different forms to different persons at the same time. This phenomenon, called the 'polymorphy' of Christ, provoked much discussion among scholars⁶. 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 narrative⁷. 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 Pharisee⁸, and the multiplication of bread⁹. 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. A ritual dance replaces the last supper, and a peculiar crucifixion scene, concluding directly with the ascension, closes the section. The gospel section evidently talks about a gradually unfolding self-

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

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

8. Cf. *Luke* 7.36–50, 11.37–54.

9. *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.

revelation of Jesus, beginning with the child whom James saw on the shore and concluding with the cosmic vision of the cross of light.

John witnesses more of this unfolding revelation than the rest of the disciples. After the brothers perplexing parallel visions John continues: 'Yet to me there appeared a still more wonderful (παρὰδοξότερον) sight'. After the transfiguration scene, John alone approaches Jesus. At (the lake of?) Gennesaret, John alone (ἐγὼ μόνος) watches Jesus secretly. The theme of the beloved disciple particularly emphasizes the intimacy between Jesus and John. On the mount John approaches Jesus 'because he [Jesus] loved him'. This is the only reference in the *Acts of John* that John was the 'beloved disciple', and it is explicitly connected with John's exclusive experiences about Jesus¹⁰. 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'¹¹. The *Acts of John* detaches this episode from the last supper, and presents it as a habitual manner of Jesus and John's 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 (ὕλωσης, lit. 'woody') and solid (πάχους, 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'. In the *Acts of John*, physical touch and closeness is a corollary of the intimate spiritual relation between master and disciple.

10. 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.

11. *John* 13.23, ἧν ἀνακείμενος εἶς 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'.

3. *Intimacy in the Symposium*

How did the subject of fondness and intimacy between master and disciple become such a central motif in the above-mentioned speech of the *Acts of John*? 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 arrives for the dinner, Agathon expresses his wish that Socrates would recline next to him¹². Socrates complies with his wish, reclines next to him and answers: 'My dear Agathon, I only wish that wisdom were the kind of thing one 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).

The company, as we know, 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 Love¹³. The speech consists of two parts, the first one describing the nature of Eros, the second describing its effect on people¹⁴. 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

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

13. Plato, *Symposium* 201d–212b.

14. 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.

love of what is beautiful (ἔρωσ περι τὸ καλόν), and wisdom is one of the most beautiful things (204a–b)¹⁵.

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 children¹⁶.

Then Diotima comes to 'the final revelation' (τὰ τέλεα καὶ ἐποπτικά, 210a1). She differentiates between a lower and a higher sort of knowledge, and claims that not everyone is capable of acquiring the latter¹⁷. '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'¹⁸. 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

15. 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.

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

17. 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.

18. Diotima speaks about three persons. (1) The initiate is called 'lover' (ἔραστής), 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.

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.

Diotima gives a description of the beauty that the lover-initiate-philosopher contemplates (210e6–211b5), and finally she recapitulates the whole journey (211b6–d1)¹⁹:

And so, when his correct boy-loving (παιδεραστειν) 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 sug-

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

gested, '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 revelling band enters and spoils the order of the banquet.

4. *The Acts of John and the Symposium*

If we determine Socrates' role according to the Diotima speech, we have to conclude that Socrates is the lover-philosopher. The philosopher proceeds toward the vision of the beauty, and 'procreates beautiful words' while conversing with his students (209c2–7, 210a7–8). The student is not immediately destined to see the ultimate beauty, but one has to assume that he will become himself a 'lover' one day. If we apply this scheme to the *Acts of John*, the role of the 'lover' is taken by Jesus. 'But to you I am speaking,' Jesus says, '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). 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). However, we come to a dead end if we further analyze the roles. In the *Acts of John*, Jesus reveals himself to his disciples. Jesus himself is the beauty whom John longs to behold. In turn, it is impossible to claim that Jesus is heading toward the vision of the absolute beauty—as the philosopher does in the Diotima speech.

This contradiction will be solved if we look at the narrative parts of the Symposium, where the roles are cast quite differently from the Diotima speech. Socrates is characterized as 'superhuman'²⁰, depicted by his students in the same words that he used to describe the absolute beauty²¹. Consequently, it is always his pupils who admire 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). The roles of the lover and the beloved are reversed²².

This description of the roles already can be applied to the relation of Jesus and John. In the *Acts of John* it is Jesus who appears as beautiful, whose company John eagerly seeks. 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 meals, finally lets them participate in the ritual dance²³. 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'²⁴.

Finally, an 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

20. 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'.

21. *Symposium* 211d1–2 and 221c4–d6. Cf. Edmonds, 'Socrates the Beautiful', 274, note 31.

22. Cf. Edmonds, 'Socrates the Beautiful', passim.

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

24. *Acts of John* 97.

includes miracles and ethical teaching, and the second level contains the final revelation as described on the foregoing pages²⁵.

Inevitably, there is some difference between the symbolisms of the two books. The *Symposium* uses a plainly erotic vocabulary (ἔρως, παιδεραστήω), while the *Acts of John* designates the relation of John and Jesus with more general terms of 'fondness' (ἀγαπάω, φιλέω)²⁶. 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).

5. *Spotless love: Acts of John 113*

Love also appears as a guide to the vision of beauty in the autobiographical flashback of John's prayer in his farewell speech (chs. 113–4). Jesus does not permit John to marry, and repeatedly expresses his claim on him: 'I am in need of you' and 'you are mine'. John's disobedience leads to his blindness, when he finally '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

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

26. 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.

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*. 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. John's farewell speech rehearses the message of the gospel section in a theoretical discourse, describing a similar way of perfection as the *Symposium*. However, whereas sensual contact with Jesus played an important role in the previously discussed section (*Acts of John* 88ff), this idea is eliminated from the second passage (*Acts of John* 113). Here John's way to perfection is made possible by his receiving 'spiritual eyes', not mentioned in the previous story. Although the two versions can be reconciled—especially if we regard the *Symposium* as a common blueprint—the shift of emphasis from physical intimacy to ascetic contemplation remains explicit.

6. *The Platonism of the Acts of John*

If the speeches of the *Acts of John* were influenced by Plato's *Symposium*, it certainly did not occur in a historical and cultural vacuum. The developments of Platonic thought at the end of the second century CE help us to understand the ways our text utilizes the Platonic heritage.

Several of the second century fathers were familiar with Plato's ideas. Justin Martyr was in the beginning 'quite enraptured with the perception of immaterial things, and the contemplation of ideas added wings to [his] intelligence'²⁷. 'Within a short time,' Justin writes around 160 CE, 'I was hoping to have forthwith a clear vision of God. For this is the aim of

27. *Dialogue with Trypho* 2.2–7, trans. A.L. Williams.

Plato's philosophy'. After his conversion to Christianity, Justin continued to see a relative value in Platonism²⁸.

However, the Platonic tradition was most consistently integrated with Christian thought in Alexandria. The idea of the soul's return to her origin is a common Alexandrian heritage²⁹. Basilides (fl. c. 120–142) asserted the omnipresent impulse of all things to return to their origin³⁰. Valentinus (fl. c. 135–160), Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–215), and Origen (c. 185–254) were equally indebted to Plato³¹, and also represented the idea of the ascension of the soul in some form or another³².

The ascension of the soul to absolute beauty becomes a central topic in the philosophy of Plotinus (c. 205–70)³³. Whereas the writings of the aforementioned Alexandrians contain only general parallels of thought with the relevant sections of the *Acts of John*, Plotinus' *Enneads* contain actual arguments and wordings that come very close to John's speeches. Plotinus compares 'heavenly love' with the loves we experience 'here below'. Earthly loves are 'loves only of images', which have to be put away to attain true life³⁴. This program corresponds to John's claim that Jesus made earthly love hateful to him, and replaced it with 'spotless love' toward him (113). Plotinus has a wholesale theory of spiritual eyes³⁵. '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: 'beauti-

28. Cf. 2 *Apology* 13.

29. Cf. Sinnige, *Six Lectures*, chapter III.

30. Sinnige, *Six Lectures*, 29–35; Mirecki, 'Basilides'.

31. Dillon, 'Platonism'.

32. Sinnige, *Six Lectures*, 35–47.

33. 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.

34. Miles, *Plotinus*, 144.

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

ful way of life', 'beautiful works', 'the souls of people who produce the beautiful works'³⁶. '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 bright, he sees nothing, even if someone shows him what is there and possible to see' (1.6.9). These passages can be readily compared with John's prayer in chapter 113.

Another peculiarity in John's speeches that has its parallels in Alexandrian tradition is his emphasis on 'secrecy'. Whereas religious secrets of various kinds were found in Greco-Roman antiquity³⁷, John's notion of secrecy can be identified with so called apophatism. This is especially suggested by the term ἄρρητος (unspeakable) in chapter 90³⁸. 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 in Plato's *Parmenides* 142a, in Middle Platonism (1st century BC—3rd century BC), 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)³⁹. As an elaborate system, apophatism appears with Plotinus⁴⁰, and (Pseudo-)Dionysius the Areopagite⁴¹. In a characteristic passage, Plotinus claims: 'Strictly speaking, we ought not to apply any terms at all to It' (6.9.3).

36. Cf. Plato, *Symposium* 210.

37. 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.

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

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

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

41. Fifth or sixth century AD. 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.

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

Finally, Plotinus uses the metaphor of dance in a passage that resembles the famous dance of Jesus and the disciples in the *Acts of John*. In the *Acts of John* 94–6, the ritual dance takes the place of the last supper in the narrative. 'So he commanded us to make a circle, holding one another's hands, and he himself stood in the middle. He said, 'Respond Amen to me.' The disciples dance and reply to him. Toward the end of the dance, Jesus says, 'Now if you respond to my dancing, see yourself in me who speak; and when you have seen what I do, keep silence about my mysteries.' Plotinus writes about the One⁴²:

We are always around it but do not always look to it; it is like a choral dance: in the order of its singing the choir keeps round the conductor but may sometimes turn away, so that he is out of their sight, but when it turns back to him it sings beautifully and is truly with him; so we too are always around him [...] but not always turned to him; but when we do look to him, then we are at our goal and at rest and do not sing out of tune as we truly dance our god-inspired dance around him.

7. *The Acts of John and Alexandria*

Let us conclude by some suggestions regarding the composition of the *Acts of John*. We found that chapters 88–102 and 113 rely on the Platonic idea of ascension to the beauty, especially as described in the *Symposium*. The passages suggest a common Platonic influence and

42. Plotinus, *Enneads* 6.9.8.

were probably composed in the same area at the same time⁴³. Our investigations point towards Alexandria, the place of origin suggested also by Junod and Kaestli⁴⁴. 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 Origen⁴⁵.

Eusebius in his *Church History* provides us with some detail about the intellectual life of Alexandrian Christians at the beginning of the third century⁴⁶. He mentions not only that Origen studied with Ammonius Saccas (6.19.6)⁴⁷, but also that he gave catechesis (in addition to his work as *grammaticus*), and these lectures were attended also by non-Christians, many of whom converted and became martyrs (6.3 and 18)⁴⁸. Eusebius (6.19.12–14) quotes a letter by Origen, where Origen himself reports that he had listeners who were versed in Greek philosophy⁴⁹. In that milieu, it is not difficult to situate the author of *Acts of John* 88–9 and 113, who could have visited the schools of Origen and Ammonius Saccas at the same time.

Alexandrian theologians were familiar with our passages from the *Acts of John*. Clement of Alexandria quotes 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'⁵⁰. This motif is

43. 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.

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

45. Eusebius, *Church History* 6.19.6–8. Cf. Williams, 'Origenes', 398.

46. We also have an important source regarding the end of the second century: Clement of Alexandria, *Instructor* 2–3, provides us with substantial information about the everyday life of the rich Christians of Alexandria; cf. Jakab, *Ecclesia alexandrina*, 257–292.

47. Cf. p. 15 above.

48. Cf. Jakab, *Ecclesia alexandrina*, 157–8; 162–9.

49. Origenes' asceticism (philosopher's life, φιλοσοφείν) provoked much admiration (6.8), not to talk about his self-castration.

50. 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*

not attested anywhere else than in Clement and the *Acts of John*, and it is closely related to the epistemological concepts discussed above. Somewhat later, Origen reflects on the idea of Christ's polymorphy⁵¹.

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-Platonism just emerging in that city. Clement probably knew the tradition about Jesus' body before it became part of the *Acts of John*; Origen could have already known the text itself⁵². In sum, we suggest that an earlier form of the *Acts of John*, consisting of the Asian narrative episodes⁵³ arrived at Alexandria in the last quarter of the 2nd century, where the two larger speeches of John were added to it⁵⁴.

nullo modo reluctatam esse, sed locum manui praeuisse 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.

51. 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.

52. 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*.

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

54. 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.

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