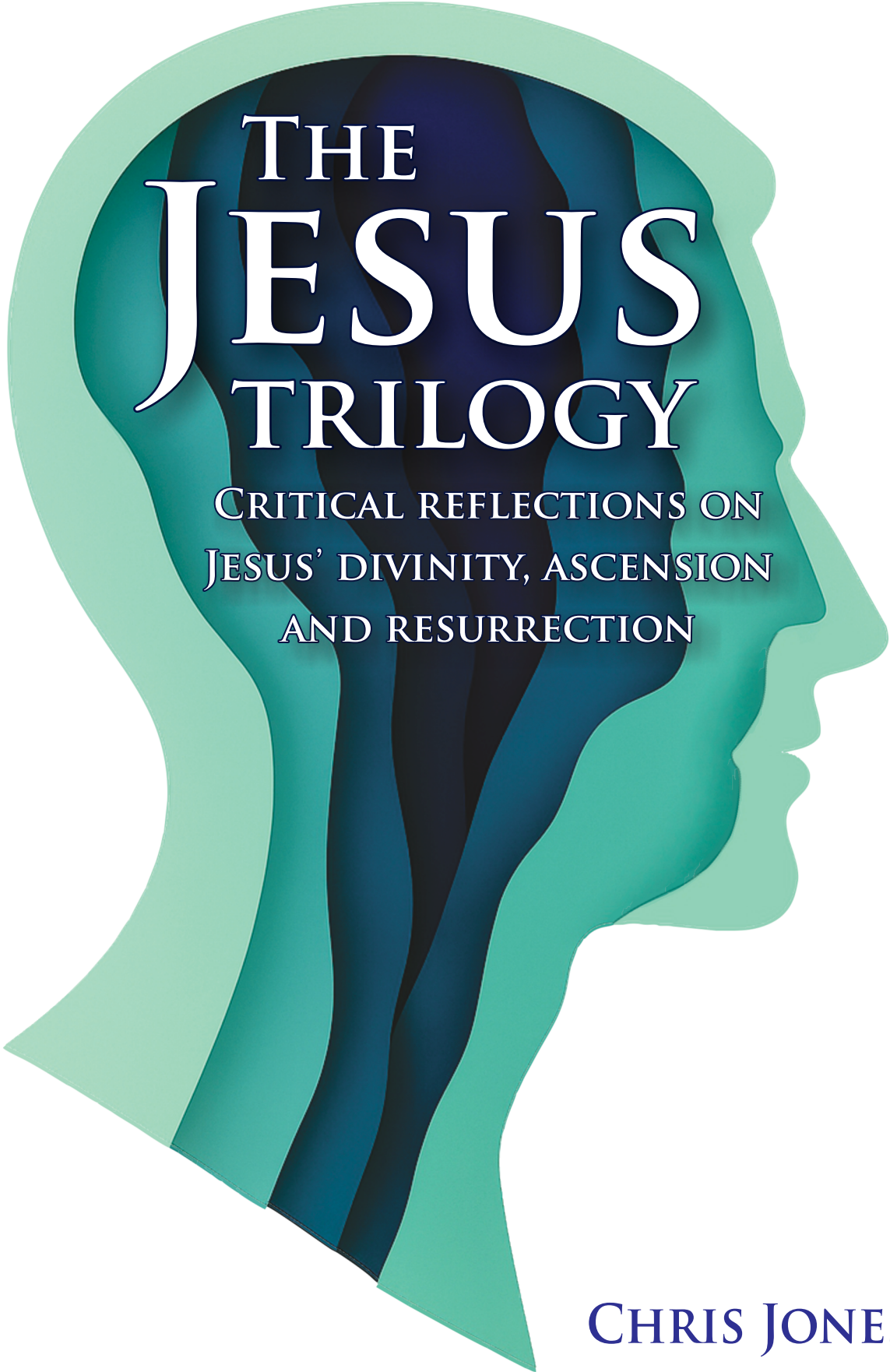


The background of the cover is a stylized profile of a human head facing right. The head is composed of several overlapping, wavy layers of color in various shades of teal, green, and blue, creating a sense of depth and movement. The title text is centered within the head's silhouette.

THE JESUS TRILOGY

CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON
JESUS' DIVINITY, ASCENSION
AND RESURRECTION

CHRIS JONES

Contents

Front Cover	1
Contents	7
Foreword	9
Part 1: Jesus' divinity	13
Essay 1 Reflections on Peter Nagel's article: 'Problematising the Divinity of Jesus: Why Jesu.	14
Part 2: Jesus' ascension	33
Essay 2 Ascension of Jesus – drawing from the thoughts of Andries van Aarde	34
Part 3: Jesus' resurrection	55
Essay 3 Metaphorical understanding of Jesus' resurrection	56

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KROTOA

Contents

Foreword

vii

Part 1: Jesus' divinity

Essay 1: Reflections on Peter Nagel's article: 'Problematising the Divinity of Jesus: Why Jesus is not <i>θεός</i>' – including a short history of the doctrine of the Trinity	2
Abstract	2
Introduction	3
Response to the article	4
Drawing from the thoughts of Andries van Aarde	9
Doctrine of the Trinity: A short history	14
Concluding remarks	16
References	17

Part 2: Jesus' ascension

Essay 2: Ascension of Jesus – drawing from the thoughts of Andries van Aarde	22
Abstract	22
Introduction	23
Prelude	24
Crucifixion and ascension: Death and omnipresence	26
Ascension and a three-tier worldview	27
Metaphor and confession	30
Before and after Nicaea	31
Paul: The first theologian who confessed the ascension of Jesus Christ and his followers	33
Contemporary confession	35
Acknowledgements	39
Competing interests	39
Author's contribution	39

Ethical considerations	39
Data availability	39
Disclaimer	39
References	39

Part 3: Jesus' resurrection

Essay 3: Metaphorical understanding of Jesus' resurrection	44
Abstract	44
Introduction	45
Historical context	46
Resurrection in the New Testament Gospels and Paul	46
Jewish beliefs about resurrection	54
Ancient Near Eastern parallels	55
Graeco-Roman perspectives	56
Transformation	57
Personal	57
Community change	57
Artistic, literary and popular cultural expressions	58
Conclusion	59
Acknowledgements	59
Competing interests	59
Author's contribution	59
Ethical considerations	59
Data availability	60
Disclaimer	60
References	60

Foreword

Chris Jones

Department of Systematic Theology and Ecclesiology,
Faculty of Theology,
Stellenbosch University,
Stellenbosch, South Africa
ROR: <https://ror.org/05bk57929>
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9483-5337>
Email: chrisjones@sun.ac.za

This trilogy originated as the result of a situation in which a colleague of mine, Dr Peter Nagel,¹ found himself when he was (temporarily) suspended as a proponent of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) by an investigative body of the church. The suspension arose, among other reasons, from the article 'Problematisming the Divinity of Jesus: Why Jesus is not *θεός*' (Nagel 2019), published in *Neotestamentica*, in which his beliefs regarding the divinity of Jesus are founded. I wrote a letter to this investigative body in defence of Peter, and later, the first essay (then article) in this trilogy followed, which is a theological extension of this motivation.

While I wrote this essay, I was in constant conversation with Professor Andries van Aarde, a renowned South African New Testament scholar, about Peter, who is also one of his former students. He agreed with Peter's views and empathised with him regarding his suspension. In these conversations, Andries and I talked a lot about the ascension of Jesus, especially about Andries' views on this event. Because my perspectives on this matter are so close to his, I decided to write the second essay in this trilogy, namely: 'Ascension of Jesus: Drawing from the thoughts of Andries van Aarde'. Fortunately, Andries was able to read this essay shortly before his passing in November 2024.

In our discussions about the ascension of Jesus, Andries and I also started talking about the resurrection of Jesus. If Jesus did not literally ascend to heaven, how should we understand his resurrection? In the final essay of this trilogy, which I dedicate to Andries, I explore a metaphorical understanding of Jesus' resurrection.

1. Senior lecturer: New Testament, Faculty of Theology, Stellenbosch University, South Africa. His suspension was lifted after a year.

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Considering this, I refer extensively to his work throughout all three essays (as well as in this foreword).

Why the need to put these specific three essays together in book format? In short, these three elements are often considered central to understanding Jesus' nature and role on earth (as 'Son of God' and 'Saviour'). Hopefully, the thoughts in this trilogy, no matter how small, can contribute to the ongoing theological conversation about who the historical Jesus was.

Van Aarde (2020a) reasons that the doctrine of Jesus' 'two natures' is:

[4] post-New Testament dogma, of which only traces can be found in the New Testament itself [...] Both from a biblical-theological and creedal-orthodox perspective, Christian ethics should not be seen as an abstract ideology, but rather as concrete matter based on the humanness and humaneness of Jesus of Nazareth. (p. 86)

According to Johannes Weiss ([1892] 1971), German Protestant theologian, 'the kingdom of God was not founded by Jesus' (in Van Aarde 2020a, p. 87), and I concur with Van Aarde and German Lutheran theologian, Ernst Käsemann, when they say that 'the historical Jesus did not see himself as the apocalyptic "son of man"' (Van Aarde 2020a, p. 189).

Van Aarde (2020b) further states that the:

[U]se of the metaphor 'son of God', even in equating Jesus with God [...] is *functional* rather than *ontological*. In the New Testament, the focus is on what Jesus and the Jesus-followers did. It is about the *proclaimer* who became the *proclaimed*. It is about Jesus, who called the God of Israel, 'father' and Jesus-followers who called Jesus the 'son of God'. After the New Testament, these 'events' developed into dogma. A functional metaphor, 'son of God' became an ontological metaphor. Functional Christology changed into Christology. Whatever had reference to the 'natural life' now became a 'supernatural' matter [...]. (p. 277)

This led to fundamental orthodoxy *emphasising* Jesus' divinity and *relativising* his humanity.

Van Aarde (2020b) posited:

Divinity and humanness also came together in the 'son of god' saviour figures in the mystery religions. They suffered the human fate of death but triumphed in resurrection. Worshippers partook in this victory through mystery rites. (p. 293)

The message of Jesus – his mercy, justice and wisdom (kingdom ethics) – ought to be the core of Christianity, without the urge and conviction to elevate Jesus to God at all costs; which he is not (linguistically) according to the New Testament, as argued by Nagel in his relevant article.

This kingdom ethics comes from Stoic philosophy and became the popular ethos of the people. Jesus' 'message originated in the common

wisdom of his day, also articulated by Plutarch,² among others' (Van Aarde 2020a, p. 363). However, it was articulated differently by Jesus, Paul and Matthew. Be that as it may, the extent to which we (can) imitate Jesus' teachings, we reflect something of the divine, just like Jesus.

Jesus' followers, even of the next generation(s), can share the God-consciousness as Jesus.

In this process, we all become sons and daughters of God (spiritually) with Jesus. Friedrich Nietzsche ([1918] 2010, p. 54), a German philosopher, reasons that Christianity is a 'way of life' rather than a redemptive religion.

Van Aarde (2020a) argues that the historical Jesus':

[T]eachings and deeds point the way to deepening our spiritual life and living in the right relationship with God and others in a spirit of radical inclusivity. This is what can render life and death existentially meaningful in our transient human condition. (p. 13)

By utilising philosophical categories^{3,4,5} Van Aarde illustrates 'that the gospels are not historical reports but rather ideological discourses that draw readers into the story that becomes representational of [*transcendental*] values [...] within earthly realities' – in other words, 'transcendence in everydayness' or absorbing 'the divine into human existence' (2020b, pp. 197, 198, 307).

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2. Greek philosopher and historian.

3. For 'representational space' see Lefebvre ([1974] 1991) and Harvey ([1973] 2009).

4. For 'decentering' see Derrida in Plotnitsky (2005).

5. For 'metaphor space' see Foucault in Sudradjat (2012).

Foreword

Weiss, J [1892] 1971, 'Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God', in GW Dawes (ed.), *The historical Jesus quest: Landmarks in the search for the Jesus of history*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, pp. 173–184. [Reprinted from *Proclamation of the kingdom of God*, Fortress Press, copyright 1971; original German 1892, *Die Predigt Jesu vom Reiche Gottes*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen.]

PART 1

Jesus' divinity

Reflections on Peter Nagel's article: 'ProblematISING the Divinity of Jesus: Why Jesus is not *θεός*' – including a short history of the doctrine of the Trinity¹

■ Abstract

This is a response to an article written by South African New Testament scholar Peter Nagel. This essay draws on the thoughts of another South African New Testament scholar, Andries van Aarde, and of German theologian Bernhard Lohse, on the history of the doctrine of the Trinity. Concluding observations include inquiring as to how the church will effectively address this type of study in its deliberations and decisions.

Keywords: Athanasius; Augustine; Divinity; Doctrine; *Iesous*; Irenaeus; Lohse; Nagel; Nicaea; Origen; *Theos*; Trinity; Van Aarde.

1. Jones, C 2024, 'Reflections on Peter Nagel's article: ProblematISING the Divinity of Jesus: Why Jesus is not *θεός*' – including a short history of the doctrine of the Trinity', *Stellenbosch Theological Journal*, vol. 10, no. 1. <https://doi.org/10.17570/stj.2024.v10n1.1>. Republished under a Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) International License, of which a copy is available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

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■ Introduction

On 01 September 2022, a colleague in the Faculty of Theology at Stellenbosch University, South Africa, Dr Peter Nagel, received a letter informing him that he was temporarily suspended as a proponent of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC). This followed an investigation of which Nagel was aware and in which he was questioned.

I am also a DRC member and an ordained minister (although an emeritus). On 09 December 2022, I sent an email in support of Nagel and the content of his relevant article, 'Problematism of the Divinity of Jesus: Why Jesus is not *θεός*'² to the Chairperson of the investigative body that suspended him on behalf of the DRC Curatorium.

The Chairperson³ responded promptly and indicated that Nagel's 'competence (status) as a proponent was not temporarily suspended based on his article in the first place, but because of his personal confession about the deity of Christ'. He explained:

His article only came up when he presented it as [*an*] explanation/motivation for his personal position/confession. His personal confession and how he handled it [*is*] contrary to his legitimation oath. He did not communicate his changed position in the prescribed ecclesiastical way (as he undertook in his legitimation oath).

After reading the Chairperson's response, I decided not to engage in further discussion with the church's investigative body. My essay, therefore, is not a response to their finding in any way. However, upon reading the article and conversations with Nagel and other colleagues about it, I was interested anew (as an ethicist and systematic theologian) in how Jesus should be understood according to the New Testament. This inspired this response. Nagel merely refers to some of the church's creeds in his article, but I decided to add a summary of the latter in this response to indicate how long it took the early church to find the language and to recognise Jesus' divinity (and the doctrine of the Trinity).

The abovementioned Chairperson also stated in his email that a 'legitimized academic not only moves in the domain of the academy, but also in the church domain' and that church leaders 'are well aware of the complicated relationship between church confession and academic theology'. Because I was a church minister for 20 years, and busy with theological-ethical reflection and research for the previous 16 years, this

2. Published in *Neotestamentica*, vol. 53, no. 3, 2019, pp. 557–584.

3. I may refer to the content of this correspondence because Nagel's suspension was also explained in this manner in the public domain. The Chairperson indicated that he could not make the content of the letter of suspension available to me, but Nagel could do so, which I did not ask him to do. Nagel's suspension was lifted after a year.

comment by the Chairperson further motivated me to investigate whether dedicated members and leaders of the church could possibly relate, in a responsible manner, to the content of Nagel's article. This brings me to a brief discussion of the content of Nagel's article.⁴

■ Response to the article

The doctrine of the Trinity was only clarified and finalised dogmatically 'well into the fourth century' (Lohse 1985, p. 37). Having said that, we must admit we have not achieved clarity about the beginnings of this specific doctrine, although churches often communicate it as such. The New Testament is not focused on the doctrine of the Trinity. It is set to proclaim the kingdom of God,⁵ especially as it emerged in the historical Jesus, and was experienced, told and written down by early believers, with the latter referring to the 'Jesus of faith'.

Regarding the significance of the distinction between the 'historical Jesus' and the 'Jesus of faith' for trinitarian theology, New Testament scholars Marcus Borg and NT Wright, in conversation with each other in their book entitled *The meaning of Jesus: Two visions* (1999), express their mutual consent. Borg says (1999):

Do I think Jesus thought of himself as divine[?] No. Do I think he had the mind of God – that is, did he know more than his contemporaries (and anybody who has ever lived) because, in addition to having a human mind, he had a divine mind? No. Do I think he had the power of God? That he could, for example, have called down twelve legions of angels to protect himself, as Matthew 26:53 reports he said? No. But if we make the distinction between the pre-Easter Jesus and the post-Easter Jesus,⁶ then my answer would be, 'Yes, the post-Easter Jesus is a divine reality – is indeed one with God'. And about the pre-Easter Jesus, I would say, 'He is the embodiment or incarnation of God'. (pp. 145–146)

Wright notes (1999, pp. 160–161) that, to think about Jesus in the same vein as the 'one God' and in terms of 'Trinity', 'is certainly not true of the

4. To better understand his reasoning and arguments in this regard, read, among others, his two articles on the complexity of a Hebrew deity: <https://peter-nagel.africa/download/problematising-the-divinity-of-jesus-why-jesus-is-not-%ce%b8%ce%b5%cf%8c%cf%82/> and <https://peter-nagel.africa/download/the-new-testament-%ce%ba%cf%8d%cf%81%ce%b9%ce%bf%cf%82-problem-and-how-the-old-testament-can-help-solve-it/>. His book (2023) *Paul's concept of a Hebrew Deity in relation to Jesus – Insights from the Kyrios and Theos citations*, further demonstrates the complexity of this matter.

5. 'The phrase "kingdom of God" (and similar reverential phrases as "kingdom of heaven") denoted, not a place where God ruled, but rather the fact that God ruled – or, rather, that he soon would rule, because he certainly was not doing so at present in the way he intended to do. Other lords had usurped his unique role as the sovereign of Israel' (Borg & Wright 1999, p. 33).

6. It is crucial to make this distinction. 'When we don't, we risk losing both [...] When we do make the distinction, we get both [...] History [...] prevents faith becoming fantasy. Faith prevents history [from] becoming mere antiquarianism' (Borg & Wright 1999, pp. 7–8, 26).

New Testament'. Years before the philosophy of the early church fathers was invoked to describe the 'inner being of the one God (and the relation of this God to Jesus and to the Spirit)', Jewish tradition (for example, in the Old Testament) used imagery (that is metaphors⁷) such as Spirit, Word (*Logos*), Law (*Torah*), Glory (Presence), Wisdom (*Sofia*) and Love to express the relationship between the Jesus of Nazareth and the Spirit.

Wright (1999, p. 166), self-acknowledged 'church theologian', further says: 'I do not think Jesus "knew he was God" in the same sense that one [ontologically] knows one is tired or happy, male or female.' However, according to Wright (1999, p. 166), he (Jesus of Nazareth, that is the historical Jesus) 'had to do and be, for Israel and the world, that which, according to scripture, only YHWH himself could do and be' (Wright 1996). The use of trinitarian language to think about God refers to the 'commitment of faith, love, trust and obedience' by Jesus followers; from the time of earliest creedal Christianity up to the present (Wright 1999, p. 168). This is the 'language of self-involving'.

In his book *Surprised by hope: Rethinking heaven, the resurrection, and the mission of the church*, NT Wright (2008) says:

Love is not our duty; it is our destiny. It is the language [the historical] Jesus [and the Jesus followers who produced the New Testament] spoke, and we [who are living in the present] are called to speak it so that we can converse with him [...] Conversely, people who are living by this rule of love will be people who are learning more deeply how to hope. (p. 288)

The language of self-involvement is the language of participation. New Testament scholar Ferdinand Hahn in his collected work *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, in the passage sub-titled 'Jesus als "Gott"', refers to John 1:1c where the undetermined/unarticulated (without the preposition 'the') God (*θεός*) is equalled with the imagery/metaphor *Logos* (*λόγος*) and says that this equality represents 'language of participation' with the 'godliness of God' (*der Gottheit Gottes*) (Hahn 2005, p. 636). However, Hahn emphasises that participation does *not* mean that Jesus/*Logos* is 'identical with God' (*mit Gott selbst identisch*). The concept of participation represents confessional language. The confession that 'Jesus is God' (*Jesus als Gott*) ought to be understood in relationship with the 'unity of the Son with the Father' (*Einheit des Sohnes mit der Vater*). This relationship does not refer to the 'earthly Jesus' (historical Jesus; *irdischen Jesus*), but '*Partizipation an der himmlische Wirklichkeit Gottes*', that is, the Jesus of faith and its unity with the Godhead (Hahn 2005, p. 636).

7. The essential meaning of a metaphor is 'to see as' [...] Very early on, we metaphorized our history, and since then we have often historicized our metaphors. When we literalize metaphors, we get nonsense. We also lose the metaphors, with their rich resonances of meaning' (Borg & Wright 1999, pp. 150, 153).

Werner Kümmel, a late professor of New Testament at Marburg University, in his book (English title) *The theology of the New Testament according to its major witnesses: Jesus – Paul – John*, notes that the non-identity between Jesus and the Godhead is also witnessed in John 17:17 (1973, p. 298). In this verse, the evangelist metaphorically refers to Jesus as the Truth, meaning that Jesus 'belongs to God' and that God acts in and through Jesus, however, without ontologically identifying Jesus with God. Kümmel's colleague Reinhold Bernhardt, professor in Systematic Theology at the University of Basel in Switzerland, in an article 'Jesus Christ as "*vere Deus*" as a challenge for interreligious dialogue', likewise does not see the Chalcedonian *vere Deus* as 'an ontological attribute but as the denotation of a profound relationship with God'. According to Bernhardt (2011, p. 41), the concept relationship 'means unity and difference in one'. That unity-in-difference between Christ and God is mirrored by the unity-in-difference between the divine context of the Christ-revelation and the historical Christ-event (the historical Jesus as the proclaimer who became the proclaimed). The substance of this revelation and this event portrays 'God's universal unconditional love which Jesus preached and presented' (Bernhardt 2011, p. 41).

New Testament scholar Dennis Duling (student of the late Norman Perrin, influential professor at Chicago Divinity School), is convinced that (Duling & Perrin 1994):

As far as we can tell, Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom of God [...] but made no explicit claims for himself [...] The precise historical details of the movement from the Jesus who proclaimed the kingdom of God to the New Testament and its various proclamations of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, are probably forever lost to us. What we have is the New Testament itself, its proclamation and its paraenesis, its myth and its history. (p. 547)

Van Aarde (2020b), former New Testament professor at the University of Pretoria (and one of Peter Nagel's lecturers), explores this 'movement from Jesus to the writings of the New Testament' and beyond the New Testament, expanding the movement from Jesus up to creedal Christianity by applying the hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur and Eberhardt Jüngel. Ricoeur and Jüngel (1974) are co-editors of the work in which the nature of the historical development of religious language is investigated, namely *Metaphor: Zur Hermeneutik religiöser Sprache*. In his contribution, 'Philosophische und theologische Hermeneutik', Ricoeur (1974, pp. 24–44) describes the 'development of dogma' as a 'movement' or 'trajectory' consisting of four stages: From an (individual or communal) (1) fundamental religious experience; to (2) use of language; to (3) confessional formulae; to (4) dogma (see Van Aarde 2020b, p. 273).

Metaphorical language expresses a religious experience as a historical event when the relevance and significance of a particular experience is

shared by others in a timespan beyond the historical event. When the metaphor develops into liturgical language such as song, prayer, or communal confession, the historical event becomes a 'confessional formula'. When the formulae are sustained beyond time, space and culture, the historical experience becomes a dogma. Dogmatic language may represent either a deepening or an alienating interpretation of the historical experience. When dogma becomes an instrument to excommunicate so-called heretics, it clearly does not represent in a positive and constructive way the deepening of a historical religious experience.

According to Van Aarde, 'trinitarian dogma' of creedal Christianity, although not the language of the New Testament, represents a trajectory of 'signals' and metaphors witnessed by Jesus' followers in the New Testament which have their roots in the religious experience of the historical Jesus. Jesus called the Godhead 'father', and his followers called Jesus 'son of God'. Inspired by God's Spirit, the historical Jesus acted as healer of marginalised outcasts and proclaimed God's fatherhood to those who also participated in God's mercy and as such became 'sons' (children) of 'God the Father of Jesus'. This historical trajectory was described by the early patristic theologians as theosis (θέωσις) (see Kärkkäinen 2004).⁸ During the development of the trajectory, an identity between the Godhead, Jesus, and the church is evident in Jesus' followers' participation in mercy, love and righteousness. An ontological identity between son and father was never the intent of either Jesus or his followers, as interpreted by the aforementioned scholars.

We should not lose sight of the wider historical context within which this conversation about the doctrine of the Trinity took place, namely, the massive transition from a monotheistic concept of God to a multifaceted or complex concept of God. Parallel to this was the broadening of the faith community, which no longer only included Jews but also Gentiles. This process began with Paul (Abraham, the father of *all* believers, etc.). Here too was the line between Christianity, Judaism and Islam, which remained strictly monotheistic.

According to Bernard Lategan,⁹ former South African professor of New Testament and Biblical Studies, the conversation in the first centuries CE

8. New Testament scholar from Helsinki Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen (2004, pp. 37–60) argues that Luther's emphasis on 'faith based on justification' does not exclude the *θέωσις* theology of the early patristic theologians (also see Van Aarde 2020b, pp. 263–283).

9. He studied ancient languages, linguistics, literature and theology at the Universities of the Free State and Stellenbosch from 1956 to 1963 and completed his doctoral studies in the Netherlands in 1967. He was a professor of New Testament at the University of the Western Cape before moving to Stellenbosch University as Head of Biblical Studies in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. He has read the essay and is satisfied with how he is quoted.

was consequently dominated by efforts to bring about this broadening of the community of faith and the multifacetedness of not only a two-in-one (Father and Son), but even a triune concept of God. Arius, Athanasius and others (see later) struggled with this problem and finally reached the 'and-and' formulations of, among others, Nicaea and Athanasius, who not only tried to put into words the full humanity and full divinity of Christ, but also sought to maintain the equal status of the three persons of the Trinity. This process demonstrates the historicity and contextuality of the concept of God. This was already visible in the formulation 'the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob' which indicates both time and space. Put otherwise: the concept of God is time-bound but at the same time dynamic in nature. Traditionally, this has been explained, among others, by the promise and fulfilment scheme or by the ongoing revelation' (B Lategan, personal communication, 08 January 2023).

However, the person of Jesus remains an enigmatic figure who can hardly be captured in words or descriptions. According to the texts and sources available to us, he is, on the one hand, real and fully human, but, on the other hand, mysterious and heroic. No wonder that he has been compared to all kinds of historical figure-types through the centuries of research and numerous methodological investigation methods. But he still eludes a precise description. In his famous inquiry into the *Leben-Jesu-Forschung*, Albert Schweitzer (1913) describes how the investigators of his time, armed with the newly developed tools of historical criticism, diligently chiselled away the fossilised Jesus figure trapped by centuries of tradition. As they progressed, they noticed with excitement that the figure began to move and loosen. When he was finally freed, he walked towards them but then moved past them – back to the century he came from and without them getting to know who he really was. His *Selbstbewusstsein*¹⁰ remains a mystery (B Lategan, personal communication, 08 January 2023).

In these circumstances, it is understandable that the young faith community continued to look for ways to formulate the identity of Jesus (according to Athanasius, closely linked to his work). They considered him to be the Messiah in the light of his 'son of man' or 'son of God' statements in the Gospels, as well as his special relationship with his 'Father'. However, this confirmation happened *post-factum* or retrospectively and reached back to prophetic and other Old Testament statements (B Lategan, personal communication, 08 January 2023).

10. In no bible text does Jesus refer to his *Selbstbewusstsein*.

■ Drawing from the thoughts of Andries van Aarde¹¹

The name Jesus and the concept God are complicated, as we know. In the Reformed tradition it has long been recognised that it is not possible to define and capture the mystery of the essence of God (The Confession of Faith or Belgic Confession, 9).

According to Van Aarde,¹² the post-New Testament church up to and including the composition of the ecumenical creeds¹³ decided: Jesus' divinity and his humanity are unmixed (*non confusum*) and undivided (*conjunctum*). Unmixed means they are independent entities. Undivided means they cannot be separated. But how exactly should we understand this?

Research in New Testament studies and systematic theology since the beginning of the 20th century regarding the relationship between the name Jesus and the concept God states: God (*Theos*) in the New Testament refers to YHWH and EL (a primordial entity). God is always transcendental (beyond creation) but also immanent (interacting with creation). The transcendental refers to the creator of everything and the immanent to the interaction with creation using metaphors such as Spirit (*Pneuma*), Wisdom, Word (*Logos*), Presence/Glory (*Doksa*) and Love. Where the transcendent *Theos* manifests immanently, (these) metaphors have been used to illustrate the words and deeds of *Theos*. If God makes Godself known in the Old Testament, it is mostly through prophets and angels.

For Jesus' followers (in the New Testament), Son and Christ replaced the prophets and the angels. Jesus' followers saw the Son and the Messiah as visible embodiments of *Theos*. In the Graeco-Roman context, the word

11. He served as Professor in New Testament Studies at the Faculty of Theology and Religion of the University of Pretoria. Subsequently, he was Honorary Professor from 2009 to 2015 and Senior Research Fellow in the Unit for the Advancement of Scholarship of Deputy Vice-Chancellor of Research at the same university until his passing in 2024. He held an MA in Semitic Languages, a DD, PhD and DLitt degrees. He was Editor-in-Chief of the journal *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* from 1985 to 2023 and is a rated scholar of the South African National Research Foundation. He has received three awards for academic achievements from the South African Academy of Science and Arts and authored the ground-breaking book *Fatherless in Galilee: Jesus Child of God* (2001). He was also awarded the prestigious Andrew Murray-Desmond Tutu-prize for his two volumes: *Jesus, Paul and Matthew, Volume One: Discontinuity in content, continuity in substance* and *Jesus, Paul and Matthew, Volume Two: To and from Jerusalem*.

12. The following paragraphs mainly come from personal email communications with him: A van Aarde, personal communication, 06 December 2022. He approved these quotes.

13. The Nicene Creed (like the New Testament) was originally written in Greek, and although Athanasius wrote in Greek, the Creed of Athanasius was originally written in Latin. I, therefore, refer alternatively to Greek and Latin terms.

god was also used where miracles/benefits were involved. Julius Caesar and the emperors were, therefore, considered to be divine. Philosophers could also be seen as divine.

Kyrios (Lord) refers to YHWH in some places. However, the term was also used for the 'divine' rulers, emperors and philosophers. In the New Testament, *Theos* is the father of Jesus Christ, and the Son is the image of *Theos*. This *Theos* was monotheistic for Judaic-Hellenistic Christians. In his life, Jesus did not identify himself as *Theos*; whether Jesus is God was not an issue for him. The language about the Trinity was, therefore, not the language of Jesus or the New Testament. The latter is confirmed by Lohse (1985) when he reasons: 'As far as the New Testament is concerned, one does not find in it an actual doctrine of the Trinity' (p. 38).

Lohse (1985) further reasons that the:

New Testament is not satisfied, however, with these sometimes rather far-reaching assertions about God the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. Some passages present triadic formulas. They are called 'triadic', and not 'trinitarian', because they name Father, Son, and Spirit alongside one another without reflecting upon the oneness of God and, hence, do not yet contain a doctrine of the Trinity. (p. 40)¹⁴

According to Van Aarde, although the New Testament does not contain an elaborate theology of the Trinity, there are indeed 'footprints' or signals thereof that do not go back to the historical Jesus, but to the post-Easter Jesus (Van Aarde 2020b, pp. 272–278).

These footprints, in a particular sense, extend to a religious experience of the pre-Easter Jesus who called God 'father'. However, the life of this post-Easter Jesus is a Spirit-filled life. It is about a religious experience concerning not only words or teaching, but also actions. Biblical scholar Marcus Borg refers in this regard to a 'spirit-filled mystic' (Borg 2015, p. 110; cf. Van Aarde 2020a, p. 9). These experiences of Jesus form the above mentioned traces, and it is these traces or signals that are included in the early church confessions. In this respect, there is a continuity between the New Testament and the orthodox confessions. Van Aarde (2020b, pp. 273–274) substantiates his thinking on the hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur (1974, pp. 24–44) and Ricoeur's understanding of the 'historical development of religious language' (as referred to earlier).

According to Van Aarde, the concepts 'true God' and 'true man' only emerged in the second century CE (A van Aarde, personal communication, 06 December 2022). The concepts developed and culminated in the

14. For such a formula see 2 Corinthians 13:13: 'The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.'

Creed of Athanasius (29–32): that Jesus is equal to the Father only with regards to his divinity (*aequalis Patri*), but regarding his humanity, he is not equal to the Father (*minor Patre*). For Athanasius, equal to the Father means that God, who names people through metaphors, interacts with creation. Van Aarde summarises this with three concepts: wisdom, justice and love. Jesus shares these qualities with *Theos*. In this respect, the Son is *aequalis Patri*. In other ways, the Son is *minor Patre*. For example, he is not the Creator like the Father. The early church opposed the overemphasis of Jesus' deity (among others Sabellius, 198–217 CE). The deity of Jesus was not confessed independently of his humanity. The two natures of Christ Jesus were seen as unmixed (*non confusum*) and undivided (*conjunctum*) and indeed in one person (*in una persona*). Just as Jesus does not share all the attributes of the Father and the Holy Spirit, the post-Easter Jesus, according to the earliest Christians, does not share all the attributes of humankind either.

In explaining the unity between Jesus and *Theos*, Van Aarde in *Jesus, Paul and Matthew, Volume One*, writes about 'transcendence in everydayness – in other words, a divinely inspired spirituality' (2020a, p. 233). He then refers to Schleiermacher ([1821–1822, 1830–1831] 1999, p. 397) who reasons that such a spirituality is a "“God-consciousness amidst humanness” and indicates this aspect through the descriptive strategy of the “supernatural-becoming-natural” (*Naturwerden des Übernatürlichen*) (Vander Schel 2013, p. 11). In this regard, Schleiermacher sees Jesus as both *Urbild* and a *Vorbild* (cf. Resch 2012, p. 27). Van Aarde (2020b, pp. 297–298) points out that:

For Schleiermacher (1999, p. 397), the two natures of Jesus manifest in a God-consciousness in his humanness. Similarly, “God is present in all other human beings”, though “to a far greater degree” in Jesus (Schleiermacher 1999, p. 364). This is why Schleiermacher speaks of Jesus as both an *Urbild* and a *Vorbild*. According to Resch (2012, p. 26), this means that Jesus had the ability to impart God-consciousness to others. Christ-followers can participate in this God-consciousness. (Clements 1987, p. 57)

Van Aarde writes in volume two of this book (2020b, p. 307) that (as referred to above) in 'creedal Christianity these three attributes, wisdom, justice and mercy, are the substance shared by Jesus and the Godhead, as well as by Jesus-followers'. Therefore, he finds:

[...] the dispute unfortunate among exegetes (e.g. Kennedy 2018, pp. 137–139) *for*, or (e.g. Frederiksen 2017, p. 165) *against* the 'belief' that 'Jesus is God', mostly based on Pauline texts such as Philippians 2:5–11 and Romans 1:3–4. The concept *θέωσις* is about the *continuity in substance* between Jesus and creedal Christianity, that is, the shared substance between divinity and humanness. A life that embodies wisdom, justice and mercy signifies the absorption of the divine into human existence. It is this identity, individual and communal, that creedal Christianity wants to express. (2020b, p. 307)

Theosis is a central aspect in Van Aarde's historical Jesus studies. While his argument is connected to the traditional trinitarian theology and aligned with the orthodox understanding of the Triune God, Van Aarde does not view theosis solely as a preserved dogma confined to the Eastern Orthodox Church. To substantiate Van Aarde's argument, reference to just two research articles is enough, namely, Gannon Murphy (2008) and Goran Medved (2019).

According to Murphy (2008), the concept of theosis, which indeed is primarily advocated in Greek patristic and Byzantine theology, has found resonance not only in historical and modern Eastern Orthodox thinking but is also ingrained in the traditional Reformed doctrine of 'Christ in us' (*Christus in nobis*). The compatibility of theosis with classical Reformed theology underscores its adherence to the biblical soteriology reflected in Reformed theology, but also establishes that it is appropriate in Reformed theological and ecclesiastical settings.

According to Medved (2019), the concept of theosis extends beyond Eastern theologians and is represented by certain mainstream theologians and in movements in the Western sector of the church. Theosis should be acknowledged as a fundamental historical doctrine of the church due to its grounding in both biblical principles and historical significance.

According to Van Aarde, this concept, as articulated in the Athanasian trinitarian expression '*assumptio humanitatis in Deum*', pertains to Jesus being simultaneously distinct from and equal to God. In its original Latin form, it is '*non conversione divinitatis in carnem, sed assumptione humanitatis in Deum*' (not by the transformation of the divine nature into flesh but by the assumption of humanity into God). The notion of theosis emphasises that Jesus is both divine and human, existing as the 'perfect God' and 'perfect man', with a rational soul and human flesh (based on Plato's insights). Jesus is equal to the Father in divinity but subordinate in humanity. Theosis extends beyond Jesus' humanity and encompasses human beings actively participating in the salvific act initiated by Jesus.

The concept of believers assuming God within themselves is associated with Luther's interpretation, where he employs the concept of *renovatio* to illustrate the connection between a believer's attributes and actions and Jesus as the source of life and gifts. Luther suggests a progression from Jesus' imputation, initiating ethical behaviour, to the follower's participation and continuity, mirroring Paul's union with Christ (Luther [1531] 1911, [1538] 1955).

Friedrich Schleiermacher aligns with Athanasius, endorsing the idea that through Jesus' God-consciousness (*assumptio humanitas in Deum*), he becomes the archetype for believers assuming God within themselves. This God-consciousness, according to Schleiermacher, constitutes the core of Christ's salvific act. Jesus's salvific act is rooted in the belief that humanity can attain the same perfect religious self-consciousness (Oseka 2015; Pearson 2003; Schleiermacher [1821-1822] [1830-1831] 1999).

Nagel (2019, pp. 557-584), as briefly noted, conducted a linguistic investigation of the identification of *Iesous* and *Theos* in the New Testament. Statements from the post-New Testament confessions were not part of this investigation. However, he does refer to the developments that took place from the second century. Alongside numerous other recognised exegetes (see among others: Brown 1965; Bultmann 1955; Ehrman 2014; Taylor 1962), he concludes that identity between *Theos* and Jesus does not appear in the New Testament. The name *Iesous* was a proper name like many other names. Only in Matthew 1:21 does it gain a specific meaning (see Van Aarde 2020a, p. 335) when the angel said to Joseph: '[...] and you shall give him the name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins'. However, the angel clearly did not mean that Joseph should call Jesus 'God'. As Nagel rightly points out, there is no identity link between *Iesous* and *Theos* in the New Testament (see above the views of New Testament scholars Tom Wright and Marcus Borg).

As discussed, according to the New Testament, the divinity of Jesus relates to his words and deeds which are in accordance with the wisdom, justice and love of God. Nagel's article, in a way also his statement that 'Jesus is not *θεός*', is directly opposed to what the church decided at Nicaea 325 CE. However, it does not deviate from the important orthodox view (or principle) of *minor Patre* and *aequalis Patri* (as explained above). In this he shares the beliefs of most recognised biblical scholars in South Africa and abroad, as his extensive list of sources demonstrates.

This brings me to a brief history of the doctrine of the Trinity, as described by preeminent German historian Bernhard Lohse,¹⁵ to indicate that the divinity of Jesus and the doctrine of the Trinity were not self-evident in the New Testament era.

15. Lohse was professor of Church History and Historical Theology at Hamburg University in Germany and is the author of *A short history of Christian doctrine* (1985) and *Martin Luther* (1986).

■ Doctrine of the Trinity¹⁶: A short history

According to Lohse (1985, p. 252), Irenaeus of Lyon¹⁷ and Tertullian of Carthage¹⁸ (end of the second and beginning of the third centuries) were 'the first to outline an actual doctrine of the Trinity which does not simply set the three persons side by side' but express 'clearly the unity of the persons as well as the differences between them'. However, 'the Son was subordinated to the Father, and the Holy Spirit to the Son'.

In the year 200, 'two streams of Monarchianism' sought to:

[...] retain the affirmation that God is only one person. For the dynamistic Monarchians,¹⁹ Christ was a man who was filled with the impersonal power of God, and who was adopted as Son of God.

For the modalistic Monarchians,²⁰ mainly represented by Sabellius (beginning of the third century), 'God was active in various modes, namely, as Father, as Son, and as Holy Spirit' (Lohse 1985, p. 252). These two streams were excluded from the church at the beginning of the third century, whilst Tertullian's doctrine of the Trinity exercised 'a decisive influence in the West'. In the East, Origen²¹ (d. 254) developed 'his highly speculative doctrine of the Trinity', which already employed 'the concept of *homoousia* (unity of being)', though it emphatically retained 'the numerical distinctness of the persons' and conceived 'the Godhead to be centered entirely in God the Father' (Lohse 1985). Origen designated:

[...] the Son as a creature created by the Father. Origen's doctrine of the Trinity was such that it could be developed in various ways, in the direction of Arianism or in the direction of later Orthodoxy. (p. 252)

In 319, Arius (presbyter of Alexandria) was excommunicated by the Synod of Alexandria on the grounds that he designated 'the Son of God as a creature which was not from eternity and whose being therefore does not possess divinity' (Lohse 1985, p. 252). In 325, the Council of Nicaea²² condemned 'the doctrine of Arius and in its confession' affirmed 'that the

16. For further reading see: Rubenstein (2000); Burn (1925); Fortman (1972); Gwatkin (1978); Hefele (1871-1896); Kelly (1981); Lössl (2010); McGiffert (1925); Moltmann (1981); Rahner (1970); and Rusch (1980).

17. See *Proof of the Apostolic preaching*, Chapter 47.

18. See *Against Praxeas*, Chapter 2 and Chapter 12.

19. Mainly represented by Theodotus the Tanner and Theodotus the Money Changer and Paul of Samosata (Lohse 1985, p. 252).

20. As mentioned, Sabellius, who lived at the beginning of the third century, a bit later than Theodotus the Tanner and Theodotus the Money Changer, who both lived towards the end of the second century, represented this stream.

21. See *Origen on prayer*, Chapters XV, and 1-XVI, pp. 2-48.

22. See J Kelly, *Early Christian creeds*, and his *Early Christian doctrine*.

Son is one with the Father in his being – he is “very God of very God” (Lohse 1985, p. 252).

During 325–361, the ‘major phase of the Arian controversy’,²³ the ‘eastern theologians influenced by Origen’, as opposition, were ‘temporarily successful in substituting creeds of a more or less Arian formulation for the confession of Nicaea’ (Lohse 1985, p. 253). The emperors’ policy aided the eastern majority in this endeavour. Yet, Athanasius and his friends, together with the majority of the Latin West, held fast to the Nicene confession.²⁴

The distinction between *ousia* (the common substance of the persons of the Trinity) and *hypostasis* (person), which derived from the theology of the Cappadocians, marked the final phase of the Arian controversy from 361 to 381. This avoided a modalistic misunderstanding of the *homoousia* of the Son with the Father. This phase of the debate was also distinguished by the focus on the position of the Holy Spirit in the Trinity, to which Athanasius²⁵ and the Cappadocians responded in a manner similar to the Nicene statements regarding the relationship of the Father and the Son.

In 381, the Council of Constantinople confessed the *homoousia* of the Son and of the Holy Spirit with God the Father, putting an end to the Arian controversy.

Lohse notes that at the beginning of the fifth century, Augustine²⁶ was particularly focused on emphasising the unity of God. Although he favoured ‘relation’ to ‘person’, he insisted on the distinction of the persons. As a result, Augustine’s ideas became the norm for the Western doctrine of the Trinity, which consequently emphasised the unity of the persons while Eastern theology generally developed ‘its doctrine of the Trinity by beginning with the divinity of the Father’, although it, too, maintained ‘the *homoousia* of the Son and of the Holy Spirit with the Father’ (Lohse 1985, p. 253). Lohse continues: ‘The difference between the Greek and Latin doctrine of the Trinity’ was ‘neatly expressed in their divergent formulation

23. See Socrates: *The Ecclesiastical history of Socrates Scholasticus*, Book 1, Chapter 23, in which he refers to the Arian controversy as a battle in the dark.

24. ‘We believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of all things visible and invisible; And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten from the Father, only-begotten, that is, from the substance of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father, through Whom all things came into being, things in heaven and things on earth, Who because of us men and because of our salvation came down and became incarnate, becoming man, suffered and rose again on the third day, ascended to the heavens, and will come to judge the living and the dead; and in the Holy Spirit.’ (Lohse 1985, pp. 52–53).

25. See Athanasius: *Four discourses against the Arians*, Discourse III, Chapter 6, and his: *The Incarnation of the Word of God*, Chapter 1.

26. See Augustine, *On the Trinity*, Book II, Chapter 5, Book V, Chapter 2, Chapter 9, Chapter 14, and Book XV, Chapter 28, and his *Enchiridion*, Chapter 38.

of the procession of the Holy Spirit'. The Latins asserted 'that the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son, while, according to the Greeks, the Holy Spirit proceeds only from the Father, though he does so through the Son' (Lohse 1985, p. 253).

■ Concluding remarks

In my opinion, Peter Nagel wrote a good and balanced article based on outstanding exegesis. As a New Testament scholar, he conducted a linguistic investigation of the identification of *Iesous* and *Theos* in the New Testament, and not on the later church creeds. The latter is the field of another theological discipline. However, his findings correspond with what is stated in the creeds (A van Aarde personal communication, 06 December 2022) and how the doctrine of the Trinity developed until the beginning of the fifth century. With his research, he shares the beliefs of most recognised biblical scholars in South Africa and abroad.

Furthermore, his article appears in the right forum, namely a scientific journal which, in the first place, asks for a scholarly discussion and assessment by specialists in this field to critically test, refute or accept its arguments and findings. His article is not intended as a letter of objection against any church dogma or confession. The focus is exclusively on the text (or rather, some text passages) of the New Testament and not on a discussion and interpretation in later periods of church and dogma history.

However, confusion can (easily) arise between a critical analysis of the language and terminology of certain biblical passages and a dogmatic statement (or confession). Viewed critically, it must be added that the title of Nagel's article can contribute to such possible confusion. With the second part of the title 'Why Jesus is not *θεός*' he obviously means linguistically speaking, but this can be misunderstood as an ontological or dogmatological statement. In fact, Nagel realises this and notes that a claim like this has 'potential ontological implications, although it is primarily a linguistic and conceptual claim' (Nagel 2019, pp. 557–558). He explains that such a claim:

[...] can imply that Jesus is not *the* 'God' in as far as the term *θεός* calls to mind a deity of the OT, who is in turn interpreted by Judaism and Christianity as the one and only 'God'. Another implication is that Jesus is not a 'god' in the transcendent sense. A third inference is that Jesus is not divine. (p. 558)

Although he is aware of this possible misunderstanding, he chose to keep the second part of the title and, indeed, in the negative. He explains as follows:

This statement is a *negativa* in the sense that it is not asking who Jesus might be, nor stating who Jesus is, but rather who Jesus is *not*. It is a close-ended statement, as opposed to an open-ended question. (Nagel 2019, p. 557)

The teasing question, however, remains: How will the church (and more specifically the DRC) account for this kind of research in a credible way in discussions and decisions within the church as an institution? So, certain traditional views regarding the deity of Jesus and the doctrine of the Trinity do not automatically lead to less convincing arguments and decisions in the light of the latest research. And which consequently could later become a complaint against the church?

The problem is often that exegetes are not (always) given the freedom to critically examine the New Testament and other texts and to publish their findings, which are subject to equally strict peer review evaluation. If scholars in the academy and church are not allowed to do this kind of research, they are typically controlled by an institution (and what it believes to be true/is convinced of), which would not reflect a healthy situation.

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PART 2

Jesus' ascension

Essay 2

Ascension of Jesus – drawing from the thoughts of Andries van Aarde¹

■ Abstract

This essay stems from the author's dialogue with New Testament scholar Andries van Aarde about the divinity of Jesus, during which the topic of Jesus' ascension also arose. The author aims to focus on Van Aarde's thinking about the ascension of Jesus. The essay does not intend to provide a reflection on the exegetical and hermeneutical analysis of the biblical texts alluding to the ascension of Jesus Christ. Instead, it argues that these texts existentially emphasise a believer's new life, theologically expressed as 'personal ascension', implying participation with God. In the New Testament, language expressing Jesus' ascension was borrowed particularly from royal psalms in the Old Testament. The concept of 'ascent to heaven' to access the divine presence is central not only to Jewish Christian apocalyptic symbolism, but it also became part of the church's liturgy. Van Aarde contends that the modern church should preserve the reference to Jesus' ascension in ecclesial confessional language, despite no longer

1. Jones, C 2024, 'Ascension of Jesus: Drawing from the thoughts of Andries van Aarde', *Verbum et Ecclesia*, vol. 45, no. 1, a3257. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v45i1.3257>. Republished under a Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) International License, of which a copy is available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

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affirming a three-tiered universe or adhering to the mythical language of ‘descended into hell’ and ‘ascended to heaven’.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This essay makes the case that Jesus Christ’s ascension serves as a liturgical celebration of victory over trauma. It demonstrates the need for a metaphorical interpretation of the ancient references to ascension. These mythological descriptions become anachronistic in our time if they are interpreted in a realistic, historical and literal sense. However, rich and meaningful victory poetry can still be communicated if the ‘ascension’ is interpreted metaphorically.

Keywords: ascension; Andries van Aarde; Ecclesial liturgy; Jesus Christ; metaphorical language; Reformational Creeds.

■ Introduction

This essay is the result of a recent essay in which I supportively responded to a New Testament colleague, in the Faculty of Theology at Stellenbosch University, South Africa, Peter Nagel’s article: ‘Problematising the Divinity of Jesus: Why Jesus is not *θεός*’ (*Stellenbosch Theological Journal* [STJ]). This specific article drew, among others, on the thoughts of Andries van Aarde (1951–2024) and Bernhard Lohse (1928–1997),² on Jesus’ degree of divinity and the history of the doctrine of the Trinity, respectively (Jones 2024). From my conversations with Van Aarde about how we should understand the divinity of Jesus, the ascension of Jesus also came up. Hence, the decision to reflect on the latter as it emerged over the years in Van Aarde’s thinking and work.

The essay aims to affirm Van Aarde’s view that the statements in the Reformational creeds regarding Jesus’ ascension do not correspond to actual historical facts. Instead, the proposition about the ascension of Jesus Christ in the Nicene Creed (325 CE) represents an evolutionary historical development, from the Apostles’ Creed to the Nicene Creed to the First Council of Constantinople (381 CE), coinciding with the resurrection of Jesus to the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (interpreted as one event – see later) and obtains an existential significance for Christians today. The essay does not intend to provide a reflection on the exegetical and hermeneutical analysis of all biblical texts alluding to the ascension of Jesus Christ, as numerous studies have already conducted this historical-critical analysis.

2. Professor of Church History and Historical Theology at Hamburg University in Germany and is the author of *A short history of Christian doctrine* [*Epochen der Dogmengeschichte*], translated by F. Ernest Stoeffler, [1963] (1978). Fortress Press, Philadelphia (see also Lohse [1955] 2011, [1981] 1986).

The essay demythologises the emphasis and existential meaning of the confessional remark in the Epistle of Barnabas 15 (see Paget 2007, pp. 72–80), which asserts that both the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ are believed to have occurred on a Sunday. This day symbolises life, referred to as the ‘day of the resurrection’ (cf. Argyle 1955, p. 240). Justin Martyr is more explicit and considers ‘resurrection’ and ‘ascension’ as one event (Enslin 1928, p. 69). Although other patristic theologians (e.g. Clement of Rome, Polycarp, unknown authors of *Hermas* and *Didache*) ignore (or rejected) the ascension, seemingly because they rejected any tradition that is separated from the resurrection (Schmiedel 1903, col. 4061; cf. Enslin 1928, p. 69). Present-day influential theologians, such as Karl Barth, are much more in compliance with Justin Martyr.

In his book *Karl Barth and the resurrection of the flesh: The loss of the body in participatory eschatology*, Nathan Hitchcock (2013, p. 24) argues that the dialectic of resurrection and ascension aligns with Karl Barth’s dogmatics, where a believer participates in both Jesus Christ’s resurrection and ascension. Hitchcock (2013, p. 24) articulates it as follows: ‘New life in Christ is fundamentally an ascension beyond fleshly identity’. Barth describes Jesus’ life, now risen and ascended, as omnipresent, with access to all times (Hitchcock 2013, p. 88). Hitchcock (2013, p. 91) concludes, ‘Accordingly, if I may state assertively, Barth has given us a doctrine of personal ascension, not bodily resurrection’.

Van Aarde’s view on the ascension of Jesus Christ also emphasises that, although resurrection–ascension are not actual historical facts, they existentially emphasise the believer’s new life, theologically expressed as ‘personal ascension’.

■ Prelude

In May 2012, Van Aarde wrote an article in *Die Hervormer*, the official newspaper of the Netherdutch Reformed Church (NRC) of Africa, titled: ‘The ascension of Jesus and his royal crown’.³

He begins this article by referencing the following sections of the Apostles’ Creed, known as the ‘Twelve Articles of Faith’ (*Symbolum Apostolicum* [c. 2 cE] 2005), and incorporating the corresponding biblical *loci classici*:

I believe in [...] Jesus Christ (Luke 2:11; John 20:28) [...] Suffered under Pontius Pilate (Luke 23:24); was crucified (John 19:20; Acts 4:10), killed (1 Cor. 15:3) and buried (1 Cor. 15:4). He descended into hell (Acts 2:24, i.e. the grave) [...]

3. In Afrikaans, ‘Die hemelvaart van Jesus en sy koningskroon’ (‘The ascension of Jesus and his royal crown’), *Die Hervormer*, May 2012, Die Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika.

The third day he rose again from the dead (1 Cor. 15:4) [...] He ascended into heaven (Luke 24:51; Acts 1:11) and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. (Mark 16:19; Heb 1:3; 10:12)

In one of its hymns (*Liedboek #388* 2001a), the Netherdutch Reformed Church (NRC) of Africa, to which Van Aarde belonged, sings about the message of Jesus' birth and his humiliation in a tone that reflects wrestling and questioning: 'Who would have expected him like this, without a royal crown?'.⁴ The final words of the last verse of this song provide guidance on how to answer the question (*Liedboek #388.3* 2001a⁵): 'We bow in thanks, O Lord, even though we cannot understand that Jesus wanted to go on such a path for sinners'.⁶ Another church song echoes this answer to the wrestling question with a hallelujah (*Liedboek #417.2* 2001b): 'Jesus, we honour you, risen Lord, Prince of Life and King, you have triumphed. Because you have overcome, we will triumph'.⁷ Indeed, this is what is affirmed in the fourth and fifth confessions of the Symbolum Apostolicum ([c. 2 CE] 2005): 'We believe in Jesus Christ [...] who ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God, the Almighty Father'.

Jesus' birth, suffering, crucifixion, death, burial, resurrection, ascension and return ('second coming') are not presented in the Symbolum Apostolicum (Apostles' Creed) as sequential episodes (events) in a literal biography of Jesus of Nazareth. This second-century confessional writing is not a biography. These confessions of faith about Jesus Christ testify to the one saving act of God, which grants people faith and participation with the divine, with Jesus as the forerunner of faith. God's redeeming act shows how much God loves the world and vulnerable human beings. In weakness lies strength. In humiliation lies exaltation. In the oldest Gospel, that of Mark, Jesus says on the way from Galilee to Jerusalem where the cross awaits: '[...] and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it' (Matt 16:25⁸). Believing such a contradictory message as the Gospel, as good news, is possible only through grace. Following Jesus on

4. *Liedboek #388* 'Wie sou hom só verwag het, só sonder koningskroon?' ('Who would have expected him like this, without a king's crown?' [my translation]).

5. *Liedboek #388.3* 'Die Woord het deur die eeue', in *Liedboek van die Kerk vir gebruik by die erediens en ander byeenkomste* 2001, NG Kerk-Uitgewers, Cape Town (Original text: Van der Merwe 1978).

6. *Liedboek #388.3* 'Ons buig in dank, o Here, al kan ons nie verstaan dat Jesus vir die sondaars op só 'n pad wou gaan' ('We bow in gratitude, oh Lord, even though we cannot understand that Jesus wanted to walk such a path for sinners' [my translation]).

7. *Liedboek #417*, 'Jesus, ons eer u, opgestane Heer, Lewensvors en Koning, u het triomfeer. Omdat U oorwin het, sal ons triomfeer' ('Jesus, we honour you, risen Lord, Prince of Life and King, You have triumphed. Because you have overcome, we shall triumph' [my translation]).

8. The Holy Bible – Revised Standard Version [1946] [1952] 1971 (the included Apocrypha is copyrighted 1957, 1977), The Division of Christian Education, National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA.

the *via dolorosa* entails a compassionate willingness to remain connected to Jesus' path and his Gospel.

■ Crucifixion and ascension: Death and omnipresence

The first reformers (e.g. Martin Luther and Calvin) wanted to know if it would not have been enough for the church to end the testimony about Jesus' suffering with his 'being buried'. The fact that there was not an honourable family burial for Jesus – is this not the climax of humiliation? Seen in this way, the confession that Jesus was buried concludes the proclamation about the way of suffering or *via dolorosa*. The dying body becomes the decomposing body. What might be left of respectability languishes in the grave. A funeral is the last opportunity to pay one's last respects to somebody. Could it not be satisfactory for our faith in and imitation of Jesus Christ to suffice with the confession about Jesus' burial? No, if 'dying with Christ' is not supplemented with 'living with Christ', existential belief will be quite inadequate. If we end our confession regarding the significance of Christ's person and work with the death of Jesus, we end at most with the atonement and miss the omnipresence of Christ. Furthermore, because Christ was raised to the Father's right hand, he could not be physically present elsewhere. Luther replied that Christ's resurrection and ascension do not imply a physical presence at the right hand of God (Arnold 2014). According to Luther, ascension represents authentic communication of the 'perfect act of redemption once for all accomplished in Christ's previous existence and glory' (Anthony 2010, p. 251).

Although resurrection and ascension imply a physical reality (Luther), Christian belief needs the confession of both resurrection and ascension to emphasise divine omnipresence and the believer's present living with God and participation in Christ, who sits on the right hand of God. After all, to drink the cup of suffering as Jesus did and to be baptised with the baptism with which Jesus was baptised (Mark 10:38–39) was the martyr's fate of the disciple James, one of the two sons of Zebedee. In his own way, Paul says that Christ's followers are expected to be 'baptized into the death of Jesus' and to be 'buried with Jesus' (Rom 6:3–4), but also to be 'resurrected with Jesus' (Rom 6:4).⁹ Therefore, our confessions about Jesus Christ proclaim the one redemptive act of God from different perspectives and facets, like a reflecting diamond. For Calvin (1541, p. 297), much like Martin Luther's view on the existential significance of the believer's 'personal ascension'

9. ἵνα ὡςπερ ἠγέρθη Χριστὸς ἐκ νεκρῶν διὰ τῆς δόξης τοῦ Πατρὸς, οὕτως καὶ ἡμεῖς ἐν καινότητι ζωῆς περιπατήσωμεν (Rom 6:4) = 'just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life' (*The New International Version* [NIV], edited by Kenneth L. Barker ([1973] [1991] 2011)).

(see Neil Anthony on Luther and Hitchcock on Karl Barth), it was important that the confession of Jesus being buried was expanded to include ‘descended into hell’ and ‘ascended to heaven’. Descending is the lowest, the deepest, recognition that God redeems us in and through Jesus Christ, even when we experience our lostness as a finality in despair. Even in despair, God’s saving hand remains stretched out to us. Calvin helps us understand our confession that there is nothing that can be such a hell that we will not be able to be picked up by God, the Almighty Father.

The assurance of Christ’s perpetual presence, vouched until the world’s end, found realisation in his ascension. As his body soared above celestial realms, his authority surged beyond earthly confines. In tandem with his ascension, he assumed his *rightful place at the Father’s right hand* [...] This *metaphor* mirrors the practice of monarchs appointing deputies to govern on their behalf. Christ, elevated to a position of authority, operates as the Father’s partner in overseeing creation. This term illuminates his ordination as Lord over heaven and earth, formalising his sovereignty and dominion. (Paraphrase of John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian religion* 1541 French edition, p. 297; my italics.)

Our confession about Jesus’ ascension, according to Van Aarde, therefore, does not want to focus our attention on a geographical constellation of hell below and heaven above the earth. It is rather a confession of a believing sinner who accepts our exaltation by God from the deepest misery, and who believes that God saves. That is why Luther (see Anthony 2010; Arnold 2014) and Calvin (1541, p. 297) say that the descent is the first phase of our exaltation to be with Christ. No longer without a royal crown, but with one.

■ Ascension and a three-tier worldview

Religious systems with a geocentric worldview, envisioning a three-tier universe with hell below and heaven above, use specific terminology to describe incarnation (‘movement from heaven to earth’) and ascension (‘movement from earth to heaven’) (Jones 2021, p. 156). This language employs mythological terms to convey symbolic meanings (cf. Perry 1959, p. 41). Segal (1980, p. 1350) supports this perspective by citing examples from the ‘Old Kingdom’ of ancient Egypt and the foundation legends of ancient Rome. The Pyramid Texts (c. 2348–2205 BCE), inscribed on the walls of five royal pyramids at Saqqara in Egypt, are considered the oldest extensive written material in the world (Van den Dungen ([2005] 2019). These texts include dramas, hymns, litanies, glorifications, magical texts, offering rituals, prayers, charms, divine offerings, the ascension of Pharaoh, the arrival of Pharaoh in heaven and Pharaoh’s settlement in heaven (Van Dungen 2019). The Pyramid Texts are considered the oldest body of theology in the world.

Within this three-tier religious system, ascension was integral to Egyptian spirituality for more than three millennia, influencing every culture it encountered (Van Dungen 2019). According to Jan Assmann (2002, p. 134), the ‘ascension myth, which is highly prominent in the Pyramid Texts, has its counterpart in the descensus myth’. Regarding the ascension myth in ancient Egyptian spiritual beliefs, Assmann highlights the ‘father-son constellation’, a concept deeply rooted in their culture. He explains that this relationship, with the father in the afterlife and the son in the living world, is central to their funerary practices. The belief holds that only a son can connect with his deceased father, creating a mutually supportive and life-giving bond that transcends death. This concept is encapsulated in the Egyptian word ‘*akh*’, illustrated by the common saying: ‘*Akh* is a father for his son, *akh* is a son for his father’ (Assmann 2002, p. 130). One pyramid scene portrays the Pharaoh, depicted as the divine king, ascending on the smoke of incense: ‘they made a ladder for N[un] that he might ascend to heaven on it’ (Mercer [1952] 2020). The Pharaoh is shown flying like a bird and landing as a beetle (Van Dungen 2019, p. 313). This symbolic imagery and metaphors were used to describe the divine king’s ascent to his divine father, the sole creator-god (Van Dungen 2019, p. 365; cf. Jones 2021, p. 156). Elaine Jones (2021, pp. 156–157) also refers to Utnapishtim in *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (the equivalent of the biblical Noah) and the corresponding Babylonian myth regarding Xisuthros, ‘who was not subjected to death but was assumed to heaven’. Another example from the Old Testament is Enoch (Gn 5:24), whose account is based on the legend of Emmeduranki, found in a ‘ritual tablet discovered in the library of Ashurbanipal’ (Jones 2021, p. 157). According to Segal (1980, p. 1359), there are ‘similarities between this Mesopotamian myth and the ascension of Jesus’. This leads us into the Graeco-Roman era.

Ascension legends of heroic figures, emperors and godlike humans (οἱ θεάνθρωποι¹⁰) are common in Graeco-Roman literature. Examples include, among others, Hercules, Julius Caesar, Augustus, Claudius¹¹ – and Jesus of Nazareth. In his book, *The rise of Rome: The making of the world’s greatest empire*, Anthony Everitt (2012) highlights a remarkable completion of a circle between Romulus and Julius Caesar, from the inception of Rome as a ‘polis-state’ leading to a Republic, to the beginning of the Roman Empire: ‘Like Romulus, he (Julius Caesar) has ascended into heaven and joined the

10. The Greek word ‘*theánthropos*’ (Latin: ‘*deus homo*’) denotes the idea of the incarnation and the hypostatic union of Jesus Christ. The hypostatic union, coming from the Greek term *ὑπόστασις*, which means ‘person’ or ‘subsistence’, is an essential concept in mainstream Christology. It explains the merging of Christ’s human and divine natures into one individual person (one hypostasis) (see Jones 2024, pp. 1–23).

11. In Greek mythology, the five principal male gods are generally regarded as Zeus, Poseidon, Hades, Apollo and Hermes. The five foremost female goddesses are identified as Hera, Athena, Artemis, Demeter and Aphrodite. These deities hold central roles in Greek myths and legends.

company of the gods. In Rome's (Republic) end was its (Empire) beginning' (Everitt 2012, p. 25). In the monumental work *Ab urbe condita* ('From the founding of the city'), Livy (59 BCE–17 CE), a Roman historian, documented Rome's history from its legendary origins before the traditional founding in 753 BCE, to the era of Augustus, covering Livy's contemporary times. Regarding Romulus (772 BCE), Livy in his *Ab urbe condita*¹² (1.16), notes that the inhabitants of Rome 'joyfully declared Romulus, the king and father of the city of Rome, to be a god, the son of a god' (Jones 2021, p. 156). According to legend, Romulus, the first king and founder of Rome, ascended to heavens and is thus celebrated and deified.

The concept of 'ascent to heaven' to access the divine presence is central to the terminology of 'Jewish Christian apocalyptic symbolism' (Jones 2021, p. 157). An example is *The Ascension of Isaiah* 7:1–2, dated to the late first-century CE (Rowland 1982 [2008], p. 386). Another example is the ascension of Jesus in Lukan theology, narrated in Luke (24:51) and Acts (1:2, 9–11, 22) (see *inter alia* McCabe 2014, pp. 79–100; O'Toole 1979, pp. 106–114; Rosen 2016, pp. 179–206).

The confession that we believe in Jesus Christ, who ascended to heaven, is not based on modern-day natural science. Its origin in antiquity comes from poetry, and it has especially become part of the liturgy of the church. The latter added part 'and sits at the right hand of God the Almighty Father' was understood by influential early church fathers as figurative language. Other church fathers also did not want to understand this confession literally, but spiritually. Nevertheless, metaphorically and/or spiritually, the hymn of praise about Jesus' ascension has ancient roots, particularly borrowed from royal psalms such as Psalm (110:1), Psalm (146:10) and Psalm (8:7), as well as from Old Testament passages such as 1 Chronicles (28:5) and Daniel (7:9–14) (Van Aarde 2012, pp. 2–3; cf. Van Aarde 2013, p. 6 of 8, note 28). These texts express divine presence in 'heaven' and royal intercession and protection for subordinates living on 'earth'.

These hymns about the exaltation and crowning of the messianic king are applied to Jesus as the Christ and Lord in several places in the New Testament. One of the oldest and most famous of these we find in Romans (8:31–39 [NIV 2011]). The climax of this passage perfectly and poetically confesses:

What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died – more than that, who was raised to life – *is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for*

12. Titus Livius (59 BCE – 17 CE), *Ab urbe condita* ('From the Founding of the City', in Jane Chaplin 2000, *Livy's Exemplary History*; cf. Daniel Smith (2006, p. 56).

us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written:

“For your sake, we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.”

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor death, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The matter of Jesus’ ascension in our confession is our consolation that we belong to Jesus Christ in life and in death. In imagery, we are convinced that Christ pleads our case with God on our behalf. Therefore, defamation and evil will not make us deviate from following in Christ’s footsteps. Statements in the Nicene Creed appear in the form of propositions, as explained by Van Aarde (2012). A proposition is a statement that is valid for a large group of people. However, dogmatic propositions do not necessarily express something that individual believers personally experience as their own individual conviction. People can read it in church liturgical manuals, hear liturgists pronounce it in worship services, or even sing it as part of the church hymn without experiencing the *matter* expressed by the proposition, as their own faith, intrinsically and existentially. Confessing together with the church and like the church requires an appropriation of the *matter* expressed in the confession. However, we would like to accept that, far back in the history of the formation of the dogma, the *matter* that is expressed in the confession of the dogma did arise because of religious experiences of believers in interaction with each other.

■ Metaphor and confession

Dogmas are therefore confessions of faith expressed in statements. Faith is about the relationship between people and God. Because dogmas express the nature of the relationship between God and people, metaphors are used in confessions. No human being can articulate anything about God’s relationship with human beings without using images from the world of human beings. Metaphors are, therefore, imagery that makes sense to people because it comes from a shared historical context and is an expression of those people’s experience of reality (see Jones 2024, pp. 1–23). We who recite the Nicene Creed today, however, live in a different time than the fourth century when the assembled bishops agreed on specific religious imagery. This imagery was confirmed by later councils, and it reflects points of contact with other creeds that were drawn up

earlier, while some metaphors were taken from the Bible. Historically, it is a question of whether the metaphors have always been understood in the same way because the historical contexts from which they have been taken have changed over several 100 years.

A believer could agree with the exact wording of a dogmatic proposition if the metaphors contained in it still have the same meaning for the confessor, who now lives in a different time and context, as when the confession originated (see Ricoeur 1974, pp. 24–44; Van Aarde 2020b, p. 273). There are metaphors that retain their function over long periods of time and in different cultural contexts. Others' function is lost, modified, or may be preserved, but become socially unacceptable because the cultural context has changed. It is also possible that exegesis can show that the 'doctrine' expressed in the confession does not concur with the Gospel. If it affects the core of the church's creed, especially as far as the Protestant church is concerned, the church expects the exegete to inform the church about this in a prescribed manner. When the function of metaphors in dogmas decays, modifies or becomes unacceptable, it does not necessarily mean that the *issue* the dogma articulates necessarily decays or becomes unacceptable. In confessional interpretation, therefore, the baby should not be thrown out with the bathwater. The exegesis of dogmas can help to find out how the classic confessions can still be experienced meaningfully. Sometimes it will be necessary to use contemporary metaphors.

■ Before and after Nicaea

The natural sciences teach us about the evolution from ancient cosmology to the modern heliocentric worldview. Today's believers live in a world where 'heaven' and 'journeys to heaven' no longer have the same meaning as for people in the world of either the Bible or the fourth century CE when the Nicene Creed was written. Our current knowledge of the planetary systems means that we can no longer think about an 'ascension' in the same way as Paul, Luke, or Seneca in the first century CE did. Seneca (*Apocolocyntosis* 13.2, in Van Aarde 2020b, pp. 27–28; cf. Eden 1984, p. 139), a famous writer living at the same time as Paul, tells us of the Roman emperor Claudius who, after his death, ascended to heaven above (that is the 'sky'), from where he was pulled back to instead go to 'hell' below (that is Hades). Luke, the Greek author of the 'Gospel of Luke' and the 'Acts of the Apostles', in many ways strongly influenced by Paul, describes how Jesus was taken up in a cloud before the eyes of his disciples and that two men in white clothes (angels?) tell them that Jesus will return to them just as they saw him go to heaven. Paul writes in the letter to the Romans: It is Christ Jesus who died, yes, who was raised from the dead, *who is at the right hand of God*, who indeed 'intercedes for us' (Rom 8:34;

my own emphasis). It is this type of religious imagery and metaphoric language that echoes in the church's confession about Jesus' ascension.

The proposition about the ascension of Jesus in the Nicene Creed consists of three statements: Jesus ascended to heaven; Jesus sits at the right hand of the Father; Jesus intercedes for us. The last two connect directly with Paul's statement in Romans (8:34). The first one, the ascension to heaven, also occurs in Paul, although in different words. In Romans (1:3-4), Paul writes that Jesus was crowned Son of God because of his resurrection from the dead. In a sense, it is 'ascension language'. Similarly, we find 'ascension language' in Philippians (2:9-11) where Paul creatively quotes a song and says that after the shameful death on the cross God raised Jesus to the highest honour and that all in heaven and on earth acknowledge Jesus as Lord to the glory of God the Father.

Other religious writers were also influenced by Paul, such as the authors of 1 Peter (3:22), Acts (2:32-36; 5:3; 7:55-56) and the Letter to the Colossians who also testify of Jesus who is seated at the right hand of God (Col 3:1). The writer of Ephesians 1, who was not only influenced by Paul, but also used the Letter to the Colossians as a basis, says:

[W]hich he [God] accomplished in Christ when he raised him from the dead and made him sit at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion. (v. 20)

Similar 'ascension language' occurs in Matthew (28:18) (cf. Cavins & Christmyer 2009; Enslin 1928, pp. 67-68), Revelation (among others 1:5; 5:13) and Hebrews (5:5-10; 7:25). It is especially Acts (2:32-36) that reflects the Pauline influence, although the way in which Luke refers to the role of the Holy Spirit in this passage is particularly typical of his own theological thinking.

Romans 8:34 seems, historically speaking, our earliest testimony in the Christian Bible on which the bishops of Nicaea could have based their imagery of Jesus' ascension. This especially relates to the typical language pattern of Jesus, who is first sent as a Son by God, descends into death and is then resurrected by God, *exalted to the right hand of the Father*. Romans (8:34) also has the reference to Jesus' interceding (pleading) for the believers from the exalted position at the right hand of God the Father; however, the Nicene Creed did not take over this aspect. We do find it in the Heidelberg Catechism (Sunday 18) and by implication in the Belgic Creed (Article 26). The latter links the 'pleading' of Jesus for believers (*intercessio*) to the 'ascension language' found in the letter to the Hebrews (see Moore 2020, pp. 521-541). One could argue that the subsequent proposition in the Nicene Creed (just like that in the Athanasian Creed) about the second coming and the judgement, includes the *intercessio*. The Heidelberg Catechism, however, does make this direct connection.

Van Aarde (2012) believes that we should not separate the Pauline metaphor of Jesus' exaltation from his sitting down at the Father's right hand, especially not if we ask about the meaning of this religious imagery in the Nicene Creed. The 318 bishops who made up the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE did not initially add the metaphor of the Lord's 'sitting down at the Father's right hand' to the formula about the ascension. In 381 AD 150 bishops gathered in Constantinople to finalise the Nicene Creed, and it was reaffirmed at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD. In the later form, the metaphor 'sit down at the right hand of the Father' was added. The other modifications are mainly related to the differences about the essential nature of the relationship between the Son and the Father.

Henry Bettenson, an English classical scholar, noted in his 1967 collection of early church documents that the decisions made at the Council of Nicaea were primarily the work of a minority and were misunderstood and disliked by many who were not followers of Arius. In particular, the terms '*ek tes ousias*' (meaning [from the essence] of the Father) and *homoousios* (meaning [of the same essence] as the Father) aroused opposition. Critics argued that these terms were unscriptural, novel, tended towards Sabellianism (interpreting *ousia* as particular reality rather than spiritual being) and were metaphysically erroneous. Under the leadership of Athanasius, ninety bishops gathered in Antioch and held a council, proposing the 'Creed of the Dedication' as a substitute for the Nicene Creed, despite, or perhaps because of, a letter from Pope Julius urging Athanasius' restoration after he had been twice exiled (Bettenson 1967, p. 41). It seems to Van Aarde (2012) that the specific Pauline addition was taken from the 'catechetical notes' of Cyril of Jerusalem (313 CE–386 CE). Probably the addition was intended to support the orthodox Nicene doctrine of the two natures of Jesus regarding the understanding of the expression *homousios* (see Hellemo 1989, p. 194).

■ Paul: The first theologian who confessed the ascension of Jesus Christ and his followers

There is a time difference of more than 300 years between the (first) Council of Constantinople (381 CE) and Paul's writing to the congregation in Rome (late 56/early 57 CE). In Romans 8:33–34 (NIV), we read:

Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died – more than that, who was raised to life – *is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.*

It seems to Van Aarde (2012) that Paul was interested in what it means for believers to have Jesus Christ as Saviour. According to Paul, the finitude of man and creation as well as sin and death is the reality within which people

live – and this includes trauma of all kinds. But infinity is actually the essence of existence. The longing for salvation is the search for infinity.¹³

To be redeemed assumes a life that is not controlled by what is human or part of creation, but by God's Spirit. Such a life amounts to a meaningful existence before God (that is, in loving service to God and each other) amid trauma and despite death – in life before death and after death. Paul asks (Rom 7:24–25): 'Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!' Believers are destined to be 'conformed to the image of God's Son'. Paul says: 'You are one with Christ Jesus' (Rom 6:11¹⁴) and in another place: 'The same mind must be present in you as was in Christ Jesus' (Phil 2:5¹⁵).

For Paul, announcing the death of Jesus Christ, his resurrection, his exaltation, his sitting at the right hand of the Father and his plea for believers is an expression of his thanks to God that God through Jesus Christ our Lord has redeemed believers from their mortal existence. The Old Testament provided Paul with the background in terms of which he used his imagery in his version of the 'ascension story'. Psalm 110 speaks of a *messianic king who will sit at God's right hand* to demonstrate the subjugation of hostile forces. Daniel 7 speaks of a figure such as a person who appears on the clouds and controls everything with divine authority in order to offer victory to the suffering people of God. We have seen that Paul's version of 'personal ascension' shares the imagery found in literature and artwork in the Eastern Mediterranean. In Egypt, we find replicas from the Pharaoh's world where statues of the Pharaoh and his son (or wife) are depicted on his right hand (cf. Van Aarde 2020a, p. 47). This position of honour shows that the son (or queen) received the highest honour. In the Graeco-Roman world, we read in tragedies or satires of the exaltation or descent of dead emperors (Van Aarde 2020b, pp. 27–28).

For Paul, Christ Jesus is the Saviour who after his death was raised with divine authority and placed with dominion over all hostile powers. These forces are called our 'mortality', our 'sin', our 'death'. In metaphorical language, it is described how Jesus Christ overcame these powers, now intercedes for us, and pleads with God on behalf of believers.

13. Van Aarde (& Pieter GR De Villiers) formulates his view as follows: 'This continuous longing helps to make sense of a life that is trapped in temporality and spatiality; a life where joy and happiness is dulled by hurt and each trauma is a dark patch of the unavoidable death that life finally terminates in, without a hereafter' (Van Aarde 2023, p. 3 of 13).

14. Translated from Afrikaans: *Die Bybel – Nuwe Vertaling: Die Bybel 2020-vertaling met Deuterokanonieke Boeke*, Bybelgenootskap van Suid-Afrika, Bellville.

15. Translated from Afrikaans: *Die Bybel – Nuwe Vertaling*.

The essence of Van Aarde's (2023) religiosity is the:

[E]xperience that the divine eternity [*pneuma*], in German *Unendlichkeit*, is intertwined with the reality of entrapment in the finite [*sarks*], in German *Endlichkeit* und *Zeitlichkeit*. The everlasting love of God is infused into a dying existence in which loyalties to religion and future expectations are constantly changing and finally fading (cf. 1 Cor 13:13). (p. 6)

Our life can be compared to a situation in which we are placed in the dock, where not we, but God keeps us standing amid tribulation so that everything works for our good. This 'accusation' can consist of people who harm us, circumstances that hurt us, places that scare us, and things such as suffering and death that wear our bodies down.

Our confession about Jesus' ascension and intercession for us is depicted in a touching way in liturgical metaphors (according to Schille 1966, pp. 183-199, a *Kultätologie* of the earliest Jerusalem church). These cultic images are liturgically expressed in Revelation (5:3-6, 8-14). We also find something of this in the letter to the Hebrews (4:14; 9:24). Just as in the 'deutero-Pauline' letter to the Ephesians (4:10-13) and with Paul (Rom 8:33-34). The confession in Revelation appears in the form of a song. This confession is, as is the custom in certain cultures¹⁶ (perhaps Ps 110 is also an example of it), a praise of people who honour the king when he comes to power – a king who, following patronage expectations, provides solutions to the needs of his 'clients' as their 'patron' (see Wallace-Hadrill 2024).

■ Contemporary confession

If the dogma about the ascension in the Nicene Creed wants to say something about the inseparable connection between Father and Son, despite the distinction between them, the 'doctrine' contained in it, according to Van Aarde (2012), is not in conflict with the Gospel. The connection of the 'unscriptural' words *ek tes ousias* and *homousios* to this specific proposition need not hinder either. The most important aspect of this confession is the experience of faith, expressed as an ode to Jesus Christ, who was not only killed to rescue his followers from sin and death but is also currently interceding for them as a saviour-king enthroned in heaven. In our modern scientific understanding of space and time, where

16. There are many cross-cultural examples, for instance, the choir which performs an ode at the Union Buildings during Nelson Mandela's inauguration as the first black elected president in democratic South Africa on 10 May 1994. Another recent example is 'Welby enthroned as Archbishop', *itvNEWS*, 21 March 2013: Dancers sing an African hymn '*Gbeh Kpa Kpa Ba*' – or 'A New Beginning' – celebrating the installation of Rt Rev Justin Welby as the 105th Archbishop of Canterbury. The former Bishop of Durham Justin Welby has been enthroned as the 105th Archbishop of Canterbury. The then Prime Minister of the United Kingdom David Cameron, the Prince of Wales and the Duchess of Cornwall attended the ceremony. Viewed 25 July 2024, <<https://www.itv.com/news/update/2013-03-21/african-hymn-a-new-beginning-sung-for-welby/>>.

the metaphor of ‘heaven’ as a specific place has lost its functionality, the question arises: Is our confession about Jesus’ ascension truly a heartfelt praise, evidenced by our concrete embodiment of its biblical content?

The essence of our consolation in life and death lies in our belonging to Jesus Christ. Each generation of believers can choose the functional imagery they use to confess that God accomplishes this through Jesus Christ our Lord. One of the most crucial aspects of the church’s teaching about ‘ascended to heaven and sits at the right hand of God, the heavenly Father’ is that it should not be seen as a chronological sequence of events following crucifixion and resurrection. Instead, ascension encapsulates Christ’s final suffering, summarising everything that happened during his suffering and death. From this point, leading to Pentecost and a new life, the ascension acts as the pivotal moment. The crown of thorns is removed, and a golden crown is placed on his head. However, the ascension does not assert, ‘there is Jesus with a golden crown’; rather, it signifies the transition from ‘the old’ to ‘the new’, the process of God’s justification of the sinner. In mythical language, this is expressed as descending into hell and ascending to heaven.

The liturgical transition from Easter (including ‘Good Friday’) to Pentecost and Ascension, encompassing the kerygma that brings and gives life, signifies a new cycle in the church year. In the New Testament, the Gospel of John uniquely describes the totality of Jesus’ life, suffering and heavenly patronage as one continuous event. In contrast, the other Gospels focus more on episodic narratives. This is well illustrated by Van Gogh’s ‘Starry Night’: night and light, suffering and victory, the crown of thorns and the crown of gold. It portrays a real human being and heralds a golden era for humanity – a divine era.

Unlike the other Gospels, John discusses the resurrection, ascension and second coming of Jesus in a single, consolidated episode. For instance, on Jesus’ way to the cross, John describes Jesus’ hour of suffering as both a time of crisis and a moment of glory (*doxa*). In John (12:23–50) (my translation), Jesus speaks of his death, referring to it as being ‘glorified’ and ‘lifted up’. Additionally, in John 14:2, Jesus says, ‘I am going to the Father to prepare room for you’. He further explains in John (14:23) that the Spirit has already come and made a spiritual home for those who belong to God (Oliver & Van Aarde 1991, pp. 393–394). For John, the ascension signifies that Jesus intercedes for people through the Spirit of God, which has already been given to us. Paul emphasises this concept as well, stating that while we do not know how to pray, the Spirit living in our hearts intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words (Rom 8:26). Thus, the Spirit has already entered our lives. The ascension portrays Jesus as the advocate (*Παράκλητος*), sitting at the right hand of God, and at the same time, it is the Spirit who intercedes for us. In essence, the ascension illustrates that God intercedes for us through Jesus.

From the perspective of ‘spiritual ascension’ and ‘personal ascension’, John’s idiom expresses the belief that we as followers of Jesus are united with Jesus in his crucifixion. We hang on the cross as he does; he is crucified, and therefore are we. His victory is our victory, offering us consolation and advocacy. In John (19:28–37), which quotes Zechariah (12:10–14), this idea culminates as we see ‘the one we pierced’. We share in his suffering and are complicit in his crucifixion, participating in a profound offence as part of a world that needed a Messiah but did not recognise or accept him. According to John’s prologue (John 1:9–11), we often fail to see our salvation. When John emphasises the ‘seeing’ of the kerygma (*καὶ ὁ ἑώρακὼς μεμαρτύρηκεν*) in the concluding phrase (John 19:35–37) of the Gospel of John, before the narratives of the burial, empty tomb and the last Chapter 21 were added by author(s) of the Gospel of John (see Van Aarde 1985, pp. 45–62), the authors employ vivid imagery. It can be paraphrased as standing before God, feeling immense guilt for the suffering God endures for us. We feel guilty, yet simultaneously understand that this painful experience is actually our victory. John quotes Zechariah (12:10–14), stating that we will see the one we have pierced.¹⁷

The source of Zechariah comes from ancient Mesopotamian literature (Rofé 2008, p. 299). A king can only be king when he has suffered, been humiliated and insulted. Only then can he be king with love and grace. The ‘wounded healer’ by Henri Nouwen (1994) serves as a good example in this respect. One can only be truly merciful if one is aware of one’s own wounds. Zechariah lives in the post-exile period. He communicates with people who are back after exile and are supposed to have a new life (in New Testament perspective: after the cross and resurrection, now supposed to be ‘new’), but who do not have enough strength or energy to live the new life. The picture for Zechariah is the temple that was demolished and must be rebuilt. But they do not have enough strength and energy to start the new life. There are just too many obstacles. To enable these people to embrace the ‘new life’, Zechariah (John) (cf. Bruce 1961, p. 350) tells them about the king who was humiliated by the people at Hadad-Rimmon, pierced and rejected by them (see May 1938, pp. 173–184).

Why does John tell this story? In John (19:28), it is reported that Jesus is thirsty, he takes his last breath; his life was accomplished. The soldiers broke the bones of the crucified to make sure that they were really dead. With Jesus, they did not break his bones, but pierced his side with a spear

17. *καὶ ἐπιβλέψονται πρὸς με ὃν ὥν κατωργήσαντο καὶ κόψονται ἐπ’ αὐτὸν κοπετὸν ὡς ἐπ’ ἀγαπήτον καὶ ὀδυνηθήσονται ὀδύνῃν ὡς ἐπὶ πρωτοτόκῳ* (Zach LXX 12:10) = ‘They will look to me whom they have pierced; and they shall mourn for him as one mourns for his only son, and will grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for his firstborn’ (NIV, Zach LXX 12:10).

(John tells it differently than the synoptic Gospels), and then water and blood came out. John wants the readers to see the sacramental symbolism in this. This Johannine story says: water is life; blood is life. From death comes life! John reminds his readers of the references to the notion ‘pierce’ in Zechariah. He refers to Hadad-Rimmon,¹⁸ the ‘mountain of Megiddo’ (i.e. Armageddon), where the old Canaanite fertility religion was practised. *Hadad* and *Rimmon* were two Syrian divinities (Niehr 2024). The motif of Armageddon is that it is the greatest battle, but also the greatest victory (Oluikpe 2010, pp. 1–9). In 2 Kings (23:28–30) and Jeremiah (22:10), we find the same motif: it is the story of King Josiah, still young. He made a mistake in the war against the Assyrians. He tried to stop the Pharaoh, who was on his way to attack Assyria, with his small army. Josiah stands in the way of the mighty Pharaoh. The Egyptians destroy his army and kill Josiah. This story is about a pierced king who was killed, but people celebrate a festival of new life. Destruction becomes the great victory, not the end. New life emerges from humiliation. People must look at the pierced king and realise that they are worthless, small and cannot win the wars of the world. But therein lies the victory.

Zechariah says to the small, discouraged people who cannot rebuild the temple, who are too tired and discouraged: remember Hadad-Rimmon – you will see him who was pierced by you, and God will pour out God’s Spirit of love and repentance on you. The greatest destruction is the greatest victory. This is John’s story of ascension. When Jesus gave up his spirit, they pierced him, and blood and water came out, and this became his ascension. Where the crown of thorns becomes the crown of gold, where a defeated man becomes the victorious man, this pierced king becomes your advocate. The one that helps you.

With the ascension, a great tribulation occurred, but God prevailed. God’s Spirit has been poured out, providing strength and people are beginning to live and build anew. The new season has arrived, and with it, the time of suffering has ended. The book is closed. The battle is over because we have seen the one we pierced. That is the victory. This is the closest John comes to describing an ascension. Luke says the ascended Jesus will return. His Spirit returns repeatedly – existentially, every time, not chronologically. The divine Spirit returns every moment of every day – this is what ‘personal ascension’, according to John’s Gospel, signifies.

At the heart of this essay (for Van Aarde and for me) is the idea that the ‘ascension of Christ’ serves as a liturgical celebration of victory over

18. A place where Josiah was fatally wounded (2 Kings 23:29–30), and where, later, there was a memorable mourning for him (Zech 12:11).

trauma, acknowledging that the ancient narratives about and references to 'ascension' were written in mythical language. Interpreting these descriptions in a realistic, historical and literal sense is anachronistic in our time. However, if the 'ascension' is understood metaphorically, it can still be communicated as rich and meaningful victory poetry.

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The views and opinions expressed in this essay are those of the author and are the product of professional research. The essay does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency or that of the publisher. The author is responsible for this essay's results, findings and content.

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PART 3

Jesus' resurrection

Metaphorical understanding of Jesus' resurrection¹

■ Abstract

In addition to being a central tenet of Christianity, Jesus Christ's resurrection is a powerful metaphor that relates to the human experience of change, hope and renewal. Although this event is frequently regarded literally, it can also be understood metaphorically to explore themes such as personal and collective transformation. This essay seeks to explore some of these multifaceted meanings by considering the historical contexts of relevant biblical texts (mainly the four Gospels and Paul) and literary, artistic and cultural expressions, culminating in the ongoing relevance of the resurrection narrative.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: The essay illustrates the need for interpreting the ancient references to the resurrection of Jesus metaphorically. Interpreting these mythological descriptions in a realistic, historical and literal sense renders them anachronistic in our time. Resurrection, viewed metaphorically, can, however, still convey rich and meaningful perspectives. It can still be a core element of one's existential belief.

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■ Introduction

Over the years, many people have begun to read more widely and search more broadly for answers. People noticed, among other things, the mythical features and similarities between the Bible and other literature and began to ask questions. This led to the belief that the biblical text should be read within the context in which it originated. No religion arises in a vacuum, and no religion emerges with a completely new message. Just like cultures, religions expand and enrich each other. And no text exists in isolation.

The problem came when we started reading myths as history. The Bible is full of mythological stories, and they are not meaningless; rather, they are meant to strengthen our spiritual lives. They are meant to help us find answers to life's questions and crises, but it remains just a paradigm. Of course, there are other paradigms as well. However, if you feel comfortable within the Christian paradigm, as you know it, you can stay there.

The narratives of the Christian religion are not in all respects historical facts. The Bible writers themselves did not intend them to be taken as history. And they knew it. It was a form of ancient scholarly practice. It was not wrong to reuse stories, change their content, add to or remove content to make a point or create a theology with them. That is just how it has been done throughout the centuries. However, today we no longer live with a mythological worldview. Our pursuit of science and theology looks different. Our way of writing history is worlds removed from what we read in ancient texts (Schutte 2010, pp. 146–166).

For me, the resurrection story, with all the research information we have available today, is about endings and new beginnings. It is a metaphor² that wants to teach one that one can only grow in one's humanity if one can 'die'. If one can change, renew, deepen and improve. Every time this happens, I experience something of the death of the old and the resurrection of the new. That is precisely why I still believe in resurrections, and I still consider myself a Christian.

2. According to the *Oxford South African Pocket Dictionary* (2015), a metaphor is the 'application of a name or description to something to which it is not literally applicable'. 'Metaphors are [...] imagery that makes sense to people because it comes from a shared historical context and is an expression of those people's experience of reality' (Jones 2024a, p. 5; also see Jones 2024b, pp. 1–23). Space limitations prevent me from going into more detail regarding metaphor theory.

The goal (and contribution) of this essay is not to present a balance between the more traditional (literal) understanding of the resurrection and the metaphorical understanding of Jesus' resurrection. Nor to criticise either of them (directly). Rather, I want to use some of the strongest classical arguments (there is more than what I am referring to) I could find to explain why I hold to a metaphorical understanding of Christ's resurrection.

We now turn to a brief historical context that tries to explain this approach regarding the resurrection of Jesus.

■ Historical context

■ Resurrection in the New Testament Gospels and Paul

According to New Testament scholar Marcus Borg (1999, p. 267), the two major categories of the Easter stories are 'tomb stories and appearance stories'. All four Gospels provide information, with some variation of detail, on the story of the empty tomb. 'Appearance stories in which the risen Christ appears to his followers are found in three of the Gospels (not Mark) and the book of Acts and are referred to by Paul.'

Providing distinct accounts of Jesus' resurrection, the Gospels each reflect the theological and societal contexts of the authors. This will be looked at briefly.

By portraying Mary Magdalene and the other Mary as the first witnesses, Matthew,³ in Matthew 28:1-10, highlights the significance of women in the resurrection story; the so-called 'women tradition'. This was presented in such a way in Luke 24:22-24, that the men were upset because, according to the 'Peter tradition', Peter was the first to experience the risen Christ. The latter was also believed by Paul. However, this reference (Matt 28:1-10) emphasises the value of female voices in the early church, thereby challenging conventional gender norms.

Furthermore, within a context characterised by the struggle between good and evil, the righteous and the wicked and martyrship and being reborn, there is (already) in the late New Testament writings, such as Matthew 27:45-46, reference to a 'suppressed ecclesia'. This group of people has been 'empowered by virtue of the crucifixion events in Jerusalem' (Van Aarde 2020b, p. 173), as referred to earlier in (the co-text in) Matthew 19:28 – with God's people already sharing in the rebirth (palingenesis – see the next page).

3. Considered a third-generation 'messianist'.

Apocalyptic⁴ or millennialist language was also used, and it expressed how tombs broke open and 'holy people who had been dead' entered Jerusalem (see Matt 27:51-53; Hengel 1995, p. 181 and 2020b, p. 173; Van Aarde 2020b:173). There was a desire among human beings 'to be congenial with the gods' and an:

[...] eschatological longing for the return to a primordial situation [end times (*Endzeit*)] in which gods and mythical forefathers and foremothers are present. This longing manifests itself in cultic activity. For this reason, creation and paradise myths are often repeated in myths about a new heaven and earth.⁵

In other words, recreation myths. It is Van Aarde's (2020b, p. 165) contention 'that the cultic activity of formative Christianity originated in a "tomb cult"' – 'a tradition of ritual observances by Christians at the tomb of Jesus' (Smith 2014, p. 3). The Gospel of Matthew, in line with this view, 'represents a storyline consisting of a circular movement between "genesis" (Matt 1:1) and "palingenesia" (Matt 19:28)⁶, where the word "palingenesia" denotes the meaning "regeneration" rather than "resurrection"' (Van Aarde 2011, p. 1). According to Van Aarde (2020b, p. 191), this 'motif sets in motion the narratives of Jesus' death and resurrection'.

The 'end time', according to Matthew, had already begun. Against this background, Matthew 28:19 uses a '*midrash*-type of apocalyptic reference that is *verbatim* similar to Daniel 7:13-14 (LXX)' (Rahlf's [1935] 1971; Van Aarde 2020a, 2020b, p. 304). 'The messianic era', according to Matthew, 'is connected with the *end* of a period [*the destruction of the temple*] and the start of a *new one*' (Van Aarde 2020a, 2020b, p. 307). What we must keep in mind is that the natural world was not really separated from the supernatural within a 'pre-scientific' Mediterranean context.

Before moving on to Mark, it is important to note that experiencing this life-changing Easter event today does not depend on Jesus' physical resurrection (as referred to in the introduction). In Borg's (1999, p. 131) words:

Thus, as a Christian, I am very comfortable not knowing whether or not the tomb was empty. Indeed, the discovery of Jesus' skeletal remains would not be a problem. It doesn't matter, because Easter is about resurrection, not resuscitation.

4. Although early Christian thought was permeated with apocalypticism, this will not be elaborated on and explained in this essay because of limited space. These few thoughts in the text should be sufficient for the broader argument.

5. According to Roland Barthes (1957) the function of a myth is 'to empty reality' and fill the 'emptied history' with 'nature'. According to Van Aarde (2020b, p. 8) this means that the 'intention of the myth is to use an image from nature to confirm the reality of reality. This articulates the reality of human beings in their relationship with the world of the gods'.

6. This is borrowed from his *Sondergut*, that which is unique to Matthew. Philo [...] used the word [*palingenesia*] as a reference to 'restoration of human life or the regeneration of the world after the great flood' and Josephus, [... to] the reconstitution of the Jews after the exile' (Van Aarde 2020b, p. 189; also see Sim 1993, p. 4).

Another New Testament scholar, Jürgen Becker (2007, p. 27), echoes this opinion by reasoning that the 'empty tomb' does not refer to a 'historically verifiable Easter event'. It is rather a narrative that is a 'sign', referring to the ascension of Jesus.

What we must remember is that the verb 'appeared' was often used with reference to 'apparitions', meaning a specific type of vision (Borg 1999):

Like a vision, an apparition is a paranormal kind of experience, not visible to everybody who happens to be there, and not the kind of experience that could have been videotaped. (p. 231)

It is like Paul's Damascus Road experience (Acts 9; 22; 26). It was a vision, and the people who travelled with him did not have the same experience as him. According to Borg (1999, p. 133), 'visions and apparitions can be true'. However, Borg does 'not put them in the category of hallucinations. Equally important, apparitions do not involve a physical body, even though what is seen often includes seeing a person in bodily form'.

Mark (16:1-8) is usually viewed as the one who invented the 'empty tomb' narrative, seen from a 'historical-critical perspective'.

Mark constitutes the primary text and Matthew and Luke depend on Mark,⁷ while John, together with the three other texts,⁸ took the Markan tradition forward. (Van Aarde 2020b, p. 161)

However, according to New Testament theologian Daniel Smith (2010, pp. 229-230), there could be a pre-Markan source, and considering this, Mark 16:1-8 is a 'post-mortem disappearance narrative' expressing a 'belief in Jesus' vindication by God'.⁹ This means that the divine hero empowers the (other) mourners (Paul) and the ones who fear (Mark). There were essentially two options for the followers of Jesus at the time: either they persevered or they mourned, feared and stalled. The latter would keep them bound to the human condition of corruption; however, they could allow the Spirit of God to recreate them, making them 'a slave of mortal creation, yet being recreated at the same time as a slave of God (and/or Christ)' (Van Aarde 2020b, p. 177).

7. According to Marxsen (1970, p. 38), 'Matthew and Luke both knew and used Mark's account of the Passion and the Easter events when they compiled their own. But they expanded Mark, using other traditions (supplementary material)'.

8. The 'added Markan conclusion (16:9-20) [...] Peter (12:50) and the *Epistula Apostolorum* 9. According to Becker (2007, pp. 3, 17, 19), both Mark and John's passion narrations are based on a joint source' (Van Aarde 2020b, p. 161).

9. This is also found in *Sayings Source Q*. Smith's argument is as follows: 'Q 13:34-35 connects Jesus' disappearance with his future eschatological role as the "Coming One" in a manner suggestive of other Jewish materials that understand the assumption of a prophet or sage as the basis of a special eschatological function. If Q also betrays a knowledge of Jesus' death, the assumption of Jesus becomes, for Q, the mode of his post-mortem vindication' (2003, p. 123).

In Mark, fear caused 'that the kerygma about the risen Jesus' be 'not conveyed from Jerusalem and from Galilee onwards'. It was 'in anticipation of the desolation of Jerusalem [...], that Jesus as the "risen one" anticipated the calling of his disciples to go ahead into Galilee' (Van Aarde 2020b, p. 187). Matthew then narrates the following important Galilean episode: 'Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him they worshipped him; but some doubted'¹⁰ (Matt 28:16-17). According to Van Aarde (2020b, p. 187), the "doubt" refers to the inability to embrace the "gospel of the resurrection", because of the obstacle to internalise "regeneration" themselves'. Matthew refers to 'little faith', which equals 'fear' in the Gospel of Mark. So, 'little faith' does not have the ability to counter fear. Biblical scholar Jeannine Brown (2002) writes in this respect:

Their 'little faith' is evidenced by anxiety for daily needs (6:30); fear and timidity (8:26); hesitation (14:31); and inadequate understanding (16:8). They still exhibit this 'little faith' after the resurrection, when they both hesitate and worship in response to the risen Christ. (p. 119)

When we read Luke 24, we must remember that the 'tomb cult' was from early on part of Israel's collective memory (see Jeremias 1985). So, it had to do with certain ritual observances at the tomb of Jesus, by Christians and, in a sense, we are still part of this meaningful 'cult' (collectively and individually) (Van Aarde 2020b).

Just as a cult movement similar to that of the Samaritans that started around Joseph's/Jacob's tomb at Shechem, and a cult of 'Messiah followers' developed around Rachel's tomb in Bethlehem, so too did a cult develop around Jesus' tomb in Jerusalem. This is illustrated by Luke (see Prince 2007; Van Tilborg 2000) [...] Here Christ-followers are in a movement from Jerusalem to Jerusalem - from Jerusalem to Emmaus, from Emmaus to Jerusalem. They eat in a normal way with the crucified and risen Jesus. The reference to their hearts warming upon 'seeing' Jesus [...] illustrates how a normal state of consciousness can rapidly change into a state of transcendental consciousness.¹¹ (p. 174)

The interaction Mary Magdalene had with the risen Christ lies at the heart of John's¹² (20:1-18) intensely personal story. The transformational potential of individual encounters with the supernatural is emphasised by this relational aspect. Intimacy and recognition are conveyed when Jesus addresses Mary by name, encouraging readers to reflect on their own interactions with God. The instruction, 'Do not hold me' (John 20:17¹³),

10. The Holy Bible, Revised Standard Version, 1952.

11. These states of consciousness are a basic element of resurrection faith. For research regarding 'states of consciousness', see, among others, (Craffert 2011, p. 23; James [1902] 1985, p. 388).

12. 'The fourth Gospel is the latest of the New Testament Gospels and was written in the last decade of the 1st century. Its authorship is disputed' (Marxsen 1970, p. 55).

13. The Holy Bible, Revised Standard Version, 1952.

implies that accepting new realities – to be recreated among other things – and letting go of old attachments are necessary to comprehend resurrection.

Theologian John Painter (2008, p. 45) further accentuates, with reference to the Gospel of John, 'That the echo of creation should return in the resurrection narrative is not surprising'. This echo is not only present in the Gospel of John, but according to New Testament scholar Martin De Boer (1998), it is also part of the Pauline literature. There is, in other words, a 'recreation' motif in the resurrection narrative. Another New Testament scholar, Willi Marxsen (1970), says the following about the four Gospels' views on resurrection:

If one does not separate the end from the beginning – if, that is to say, one really sees each work as a whole – one can see that *all the evangelists want to show [is] that the activity of Jesus goes on*. It goes on in spite of his death on the cross; and it remains the activity of the same Jesus who was once active on earth. The conclusions of the different works are therefore designed to explain why what we have been told about the past [...] is not a thing of the past at all, but is vitally relevant to the present. In other words, the evangelists want to address their readers – but the address is to remain *the address of Jesus*. (pp. 77-78)

Marxsen (1970) continues his argument by stating that:

Because [...] Jesus is not dead but alive, what he said and did in the past determines faith [*now*]. And that is precisely what the endings of the Gospels bring out. (p. 78)

Does believing in the risen Christ need a specific understanding of the mode of the resurrection, he asks? The evangelists, according to him, provide a categorical 'No' in response to this question (Marxsen 1970, pp. 77-78). (Marxsen does not consider Jesus' resurrection to be a factual event; this is because it cannot be verified; see later.) Marxsen then makes the very interesting point: 'Jesus lived and gave a resurrection into new life even before his crucifixion. One could even say that Jesus was risen before he was crucified' (Marxsen 1970, pp. 77-78, 114, 117, 128, 184).

Marxsen writes in Thiselton (2007, pp. 557-558) that, 'The precise nature of the "experience" is unclear. The emphasis [...] is on present belief, not on a past occurrence'.

According to New Testament scholar Andries van Aarde, to whom this essay is dedicated:

Paul¹⁴ developed a theological construct of participation in the risen Christ [...] Because God turns shame into honour, resurrection faith is, according to Paul, the sign of new birth, a new start, new creation [...]

'It is my conviction', reasons Van Aarde 'that the resurrection faith of the first Jesus-followers can be explained in terms of the concept "new

14. Considered a first-generation Jesus follower.

creation” (Van Aarde 2020b, p. 159; also see De Boer 1998; Painter 2008, p. 45; Van Aarde 2018). To embrace this new creation means choosing a life beyond mourning filled with fear. For Van Aarde (2020b, pp. 159–165), the “recreation” motif in the resurrection tradition can be explained in terms of a particular model emanating from a trajectory theory’ (see Koester 1971), who provided Van Aarde (2020b, p. 164) with this ‘model for explaining the resurrection belief’ (also see Le Roux 2011). Van Aarde (2020b) states that:

In both formative Judaism and formative Christianity, the textual evidence of new creation as myth shows a historical development. The origin of the myth, the first of five links [representing five chronological phases] in the trajectory, is to be found in the metaphoric use of the motif of recreation, which originated in Israel’s memoirs of God’s creation from nothing [*re-creatio ex nihilo*]. (p. 165)

The five phases are:

- ‘The decent of a corpse [...] into the *she’ol*¹⁵ [...] beyond the boundaries of both the social human world and the symbolic-mythological divine sphere.’
- ‘The resurrection from the *she’ol*, which is expressed either by means of a metaphor referring to Israel as a ‘corporate personality’ (see Nickelsburg [1972] 2006; Schöpflin 2009; Snijders 1969) or to an individual martyr.’
- ‘The Hellenisation¹⁶ (see Grabbe 2002; Hengel 1974, 1989; Roukema [1998] 2003) (Graeco-Roman influence [– syncretic tendencies]) of the Semitic resurrection belief against the background of both the theology of *apotheosis* [*divinisation*] and ideas about immortality and reincarnation.’
- ‘The empowerment of righteous believers who will participate in the renewed life of resurrected heroes and gods.’
- ‘The [*non-closing*] fifth phase has an apocalyptic-millennialistic facet (see Crossan 1988; Hengel 1995). It pertains to the period when the resurrection belief is articulated as coping-healing narratives [...] The righteous, who are caught up in a spiral of struggle and rejection, experience the miracle of healing when they engage with the resurrection narrative. This enables them to cope. For some, it is a preteristic experience – resurrection has already occurred. Others look forward to the end of the struggle when hell will be replaced with the “end times” and God will reign.’ (Van Aarde 2020b, p. 165).

15. For more information, (see Crenshaw 2006; Harrington 2005; Human 2004; Landes 1967; Rowley 1970; Van Selms 1967). Certain views of the underworld in the Old Testament such as a fortress, a town with portals and bars come from an old Babylonian myth (Gemser 1944, p. 122).

16. To find out more about this theme in the history of Christian theology, see Gustav Aulén: *Christos Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement* (2010).

Van Aarde (2020b) states:

The empty tomb¹⁷ is one of the clearest illustrations of how [*re-*]creatio ex nihilo can recur again and again – be it in the mythical life of Herakles or Jesus or in our own. For us, Jesus is – as Paul writes in Philippians (3:9–11, 12–16) – the goal we are heading to in this trajectory. (p. 177)

Van Aarde (2020b; see Thiselton 2007, pp. 554–565) continues:

In a way, we are still part of a 'tomb cult'. The resurrection belief can still be meaningful to us – collectively seen or as an individual believer. (p. 175)

It is not about credos as such. Theologian Roy Hoover (2008) describes this spirituality (in which a person fully participates in everyday life) meaningfully:

Insofar as a resurrection faith expresses a response to the question of whether the pursuit of justice is worth the struggle, whether trying to live responsibly and with integrity is worth the trouble, the resurrection faith of ancient believers is concerned with actual human experience that is continuous with our own, not just with ideas that are dependent upon a no longer credible ancient worldview. What is true may not prevail, but only what is true can enable us to distinguish what is genuine from what is contrived. Justice may not be done, but justice is still the only basis upon which life in a truly human community is possible. Evil may defeat the good, but only the good can nourish and sustain a humane way of life. To affirm such things is to affirm what is continuous with ancient resurrection faith. A resurrection faith has always stood for the justice and moral virtue that are indispensable if human life is to have any final dignity and meaning. (p. 90)

According to Borg (1999, pp. 141–142), the New Testament accounts of Jesus' death and resurrection are interpreted in five primary ways. Every one of them makes affirmations about Jesus. The first two make it clear that Jesus is Lord and that the powers¹⁸ and the system of dominion are not. According to the third, the road of transformation is embodied in Jesus' death. The fourth emphasises that God's love for us was incarnated in Jesus' death as God's only son. According to the fifth, Jesus is the ultimate sacrifice that ends the law, which is the basis of the relationship between God and humanity.

Additionally, each makes key assertions that are crucial to the Christian life. Jesus and dominance structures are direct opposites. Our freedom from the powers that govern this world and our lives is made possible by God. The process of internal death and rebirth is the path of transformation. We are loved by God. God accepts us just as we are and is instantly accessible to us. All offer deep insights for navigating the modern Christian life.

17. See Becker's (2007, p. 27) remark in this respect earlier.

18. The Holy Bible, Revised Standard Version, 1952.

Marxsen (1970, pp. 114, 117, 128) reasons in his book, *The Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth*, that the assertion that Jesus is risen, 'In as far as it means a factual event of the past, can no longer be verified'. No one could have been asked if the event had actually occurred or if he had been present and witnessed it, even if he had lived in the first generation.

According to Marxsen, at least no one in the primitive church that we are aware of claimed to have seen it happen. And if there had been a witness, we might be fairly certain that we would have known. As a result, something is being claimed for which no witnesses have been called and most likely cannot be called. Therefore, the only information we still have is what others said later. 'Jesus is risen' simply means that the crucified Jesus is urging us to believe today (Marxsen 1970):

If [...] a man came to believe in Jesus after Good Friday, he knew himself to be called to faith by the same Jesus who performed an earthly ministry, who called men to faith, and who died on the cross. But if this Jesus was still *able* to call men to faith [...] then it followed that he was not dead but alive. And that could be expressed by saying: "He is risen". (p. 128)

Hans Conzelmann, a renowned New Testament scholar (1973), writes that it is imperative to adhere to the assertion that the resurrection is not a historical event:

This assertion implies that theology can postulate no historical facts [*Tatsachen*] and does not need to do so, since it lives by proclamation. On the other hand, it implies that the church cannot altogether interpret historical research disinterestedly by constricting itself to a witness of faith. Otherwise, the result is the fatal consequence that this witness becomes the object of faith [...] and faith would then mean accepting a historical fact as true on the basis of someone else's faith. Faith would then have become a matter of human resolve [*Entschluss*], and thus a 'work' [...] Revelation is not 'facts laid out before a person', it emerges – today – in the word. (pp. 94–95)

Some historical-critical exegetes are of the conviction that the New Testament does not contain evidence of 'a metaphysical ontological Christology' (Bultmann 1958, p. 150; 1966, p. 283). In his book *Jesus and the Word*, the well-known theologian Rudolph Bultmann (1958) argues:

Moreover, Jesus did not speak of his death and resurrection and their redemptive significance. Some sayings of such a character are indeed attributed to him in the [G]ospels, but they originated in the faith of the church – and none of them even in the primitive church, but in Hellenistic Christianity. (p. 150)

Bultmann (1958) continues by saying:

It is then that Jesus did not speak of his death and resurrection as redemptive acts. This would not prevent others from so speaking of them, if they mean events in which they become aware of the divine forgiveness. (p. 151)

Also neither in his sayings nor in the records of the primitive church is there any mention of his metaphysical nature. The primitive community did indeed believe

him to be the Messiah, but it did not ascribe to him a particular metaphysical nature which gave his words authority. On the contrary, it was on the ground of the authority of his words, that the church confessed that God had made him Lord of the church. Greek Christianity soon represented Jesus as Son of God in the sense of ascribing a divine 'nature' to him, and thus introduced a view of his person as far removed as possible from his own. (p. 152)

■ Jewish beliefs about resurrection

The various perspectives on resurrection held by first-century Judaism must be taken into consideration to understand the meaning of Jesus' resurrection. The Pharisees, a well-known Jewish party or sect (flourishing in Palestine between 515 BCE and 70 CE), saw the resurrection as a hope the righteous could hold onto for the future. Texts like the Talmud, which describe the resurrection as the moment when the righteous will rise to eternal life, express this idea. Scriptures such as Daniel 12:2, which state that 'And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake',¹⁹ served as the foundation for the Pharisaic viewpoint.

In contrast, the Sadducees²⁰ (the party of high priests, aristocratic families and merchants – the wealthier part of the population) believed in a more immediate and material existence and rejected the idea of resurrection. Because Jesus' resurrection could be interpreted as both a radical affirmation and a transformation of Pharisaic ideas, this theological divide had an impact on early Christian thought. The resurrection was reinterpreted by early Christians as a present reality that was embodied in Jesus – and not only viewed as a future event.

This makes Jesus' resurrection a turning point that goes beyond accepted doctrine and provides a fresh perspective on life. It invites Christians to experience the power of new life right now by presenting resurrection as a present and transformative reality.

19. See Schutte (2010, pp. 149–151) and where the idea of life after death comes from.

20. The Sadducees also denied the resurrection of the dead (Acts 23:8) 'and they denied it for interesting reasons. They represented a consistent orthodoxy. The doctrine of the resurrection of the dead was not a genuine Jewish teaching found in the Old Testament; it had penetrated Judaism through outside influence. The ancient heritage had been altered by what was then a modern philosophy. The Sadducees pointed out that there was no scriptural authority for the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead. Anyone who was orthodox, who was determined to adhere to "the faith of our fathers", who did not want to relinquish the Old Testament and desired "no other gospel" (and this was all true of the Sadducees) was bound to reject this teaching of "modern theology". One did not want to fall a victim to "modernism"! Expectation of the resurrection of the dead had become general among the Jews. In the second of the "Eighteen Benedictions" of the Jewish liturgy God is praised as "Thou that quickenest (or "will resurrect") the dead". But this idea soon came under Hellenistic influence also. This is hardly surprising, for it is easy to see how Jews who brought with them a dichotomic anthropology might soon, under Hellenistic Greek influence, interpret this in a dualistic sense. The ground had already been prepared conceptually through the twofold division' (Marxsen 1970, pp. 134–135).

■ Ancient Near Eastern parallels²¹

The metaphorical notion of resurrection is enhanced by the motifs of death and rebirth in many Near Eastern stories. The tale of Osiris serves as an example of death, dismemberment and resurrection in Egyptian mythology. The cyclical nature of life, death and rebirth is symbolised by Osiris, who is killed by his brother Seth and then raised from the dead by his wife Isis. This tale resonates with Christian notions of resurrection by highlighting both the certainty of death and the possibility of rebirth and regeneration (Eliade 1987).

The Inanna myth from Sumerian culture (Mark 2011), in which the goddess descends into the underworld and later returns, further illustrates this archetype. Inanna's journey highlights the interplay between life and death, emphasising the transformative power of descent and return. Such narratives underscore the universal human experience of seeking meaning in the face of mortality, reinforcing the resurrection's role as a symbol of hope and renewal.

By examining these similarities, we can see how Jesus' resurrection fits into a larger mythological framework and exemplifies humanity's ongoing quest for transcendence and understanding. Culturally, universal motifs of death and rebirth imply that resurrection is a basic component or aspect of the human condition.

According to Bultmann (1966), many of the conceptions attributed to Jesus were not new:

They came *from old mythologies*, from ancient hopes and dreams. The *new* element was simply the fact that all these assertions were made about this specific historical man, about Jesus of Nazareth. But the conceptions were not essentially altered by this ascription to a specific person. (p. 264)

Bultmann (1966) continues by stating that:

[T]his historical figure, because of the strong impression he made on people, became the occasion for believing the old wishes and fantastic dreams to be reality. At first, it was assumed that in *one* respect these visions had been modified, enriched and deepened. Because of the historical events, because of the earthly work, the passion, the cross of Christ, the profound conception of the self-abasement of the Godhead, of the suffering redeemer and his sacrifice of himself for sinful men was incorporated into the old myth. (p. 264)

However, this notion turned out to be a delusion. Not only does pagan gnostic mythology know the figure of the dying redeemer God, but it also recognises the figure of the pre-existing divine being who, in obedience to the will of the Father, endures poverty, suffering, hatred and persecution in

21. The first paragraph under this heading was generated using the author's prompts and inputs with the assistance of generative artificial intelligence (GAI) from a large language model, ChatGPT-4.5 (OpenAI LP).

order to construct the path to heaven for himself. This is precisely how Jesus is portrayed in the Gospel of John. This interpretation holds that the New Testament's Christology is not 'specifically Christian'; rather, it merely illustrates how ancient mythology was applied to a real historical person in order to almost completely conceal his unique, individual characteristics.

■ Graeco-Roman perspectives

Van Aarde (2020b) reasons that Jesus' 'body was not laid down in a family tomb'. He makes the point that:

As with the virginal conception [...] I do not trace the empty tomb tradition back to the Jesus faction in Jerusalem, but to common Greek thinking that manifested in the stories of the deification of Herakles [...] We have seen that the myths of virginal conceptions, ascensions to heaven, and being adopted by the gods are almost recycled ideas. These stories were not only very familiar in the first-century Graeco-Roman world, but also came to mind when (non-Israelite) philosophers of that period reflected on what Christ-followers said about Jesus, 'son of God'. (p. 159)

Van Aarde (2020b) continues by saying that as:

[F]ar as the empty tomb tradition is concerned, the 'theologian' of Alexandria, Diodorus of Sicily's work *Diodori Bibliotheca Historica*, is probably of the best-known textual evidence in this regard [...] Diodorus refers to the heroic story of Herakles and his deification based on an empty tomb tradition, while Seneca satirically ridicules the deification of Caesar Claudius based on his *ascensus* into the sphere of the gods. According to Seneca, it should rather be a *descensus* into *Hades*, for Claudius did not have the virtue of the deified Caesar Augustus. (pp. 170–171)

Important to note is that Paul assimilated these narratives from the Graeco-Roman world²² together with the Hellenistic-Semitic world into his theology:

Romans 1:3–4 shows a clear similarity to the 'theology' on the Herakles tradition, as it is found with Seneca and Diodorus Siculus. On Mount Oeta Heracles faced a voluntary death. The pyre was his tomb. When no bodily remains were found, and by virtue of his ascension into the sphere of the gods, Herakles was declared son of Zeus. (Dungan & Cartlidge 1974, pp. 352–353; Van Aarde 2020b, p. 172)

Greek authors, like, among others, Hesiod (8/7 BCE) in his *Opera et dies* [...] and Josephus (1 CE) in his *De bello Judaico* and in his *Antiquitates Judaicae* [...] contributed to create the particular context of the 'theology of apotheosis' (Van Aarde 2020b, pp. 172–173).

It is against this background that Mark and Paul saw death and resurrection as two sides of the same matter. Flavius Josephus, Roman-Jewish historian and military leader, (also) refers to the fact that when one

22. According to Freyne (2004, p. 307), the effect of the Graeco-Roman world, also on the scribal roots of Matthew, cannot be disputed.

dies, there is a transmigration of the soul into a different body (revivification) (see Elledge 2006; Nickelsburg [1972] 2006; Wright 2003).

Together, these many narratives deepen our comprehension of the resurrection as a profound metaphor, inspiring readers to consider its implications on several levels in their lives. We will now more closely look at the ongoing relevance and impact of the resurrection narrative on people's personal and collective transformation through, among others, artistic, literary and popular cultural expressions.

■ Transformation²³

■ Personal

The resurrection narrative invites people to let go of their previous identities and embrace fresh beginnings, making it a powerful metaphor for personal growth. Death and rebirth are common themes in literary and mythological heroes' journeys, illustrating significant internal transformation. This narrative structure echoes the resurrection story by implying that facing one's fears, letting go of old attachments and coming out stronger are frequently necessary for meaningful transformation. For many, it offers a story of optimism and hope, implying that people can triumph over their pain and distress and emerge from them revitalised (also see DeKruyf 2008; White & Epston 2024).

■ Community change

The metaphor of resurrection has not only given communities the strength and courage to overcome hardships and persevere in the fight for, among other things, equality and justice, but also highlights opportunities for redemption and forgiveness, striking a deep chord in both individual and collective experiences. Forgiveness, whether it is towards oneself or others, can be a life-changing experience that helps people release their guilt and resentment. Forgiveness and the idea of grace are strongly related in many religious traditions. The belief that everyone has the potential to change and that no one is beyond redemption is reinforced by the concept of resurrection. One example of the effectiveness of communal forgiveness in mending historical scars is the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) role in the post-apartheid South African reconciliation process²⁴ (Tutu 1999).

23. This brief section on transformation should suffice, although I realise that much more and in-depth arguments could be made here.

24. Also see Meiring (2022). Parts of this paragraph was generated using the author's prompts and inputs with the assistance of generative artificial intelligence (GAI) from a large language model, ChatGPT-4.5 (OpenAI LP).

■ Artistic, literary and popular cultural expressions²⁵

The metaphorical meanings of resurrection have been significantly communicated through artistic representations. The resurrection was portrayed as a victorious event by Renaissance artists such as Michelangelo (c. 1532) and Raphael, who focused on themes of light, transformation and divine grace. Raphael's painting *The Resurrection of Christ* (c. 1499-1502) depicts Jesus' triumph over death as he emerges from the tomb. Viewers are invited to feel the joy and hope *connected* with resurrection through the vivid colours and dynamic poses. These artistic manifestations surpass linguistic boundaries, enabling viewers to connect viscerally with the themes of renewal and change. Furthermore, themes of resurrection are still explored by modern artists in a variety of media, such as painting, sculpture and performance art. Using abstract forms to express the spirit of resurrection and renewal, artists such as Makoto Fujimura integrate spiritual ideas into their artwork (Fujimura 2017). Resurrection themes can be effectively explored through art, which encourages introspection and a sense of connection. Through artistic expression, the idea of resurrection invites people to delve deeply into their own experiences, transcending time and cultural boundaries.

Themes of resurrection have long been explored in literature, providing insights into the complexities of human change. Characters like Sydney Carton in novelist Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) experience profound transformations that exemplify the spirit of resurrection. Carton invites readers to consider their potential for change through his ultimate sacrifice and redemption, which demonstrate the possibility of hope emerging from despair (Hughes 2016). Dickens' work's narrative arc reflects the themes of resurrection by highlighting the possibility of personal growth and the strength of redemption.

Themes of resurrection are still explored in modern literature as it examines social and personal hardships. Novels such as *Half of a Yellow Sun* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie demonstrate how resilient people and communities can be when faced with hardship, illustrating the never-ending pursuit of healing and renewal (Adichie 2006) – although not overtly labelled as resurrection, it can be seen throughout the narrative in several ways, both in terms of personal and societal renewal.

Resurrection themes are prevalent in modern popular culture and resonate with viewers through literature, music and movies. For instance, Disney's *The Lion King* (1994) illustrates the cyclical aspect of life by

25. The information under this heading was largely generated using the author's prompts and inputs with the assistance of generative artificial intelligence (GAI) from a large language model, ChatGPT-4.5 (OpenAI LP).

encapsulating themes of death, rebirth and self-discovery. The resurrection metaphor is mirrored in Simba's journey from exile to acceptance, highlighting the significance of accepting one's identity and responsibilities. Similarly, the themes of sacrifice and the enduring power of love are used in the *Harry Potter* series (Rowling 1997–2007) to explore resurrection motifs. The transforming power of friendship and love is embodied by characters like Harry and his friends, who show resilience in the face of darkness. Harry's resurrection after facing death is a powerful metaphor for hope and renewal, reaffirming that change is achievable even in the direst situations. These narratives reflect contemporary societal values and aspirations, allowing audiences to connect with the themes of resurrection on a personal level.

■ Conclusion

The metaphoric aspects of Jesus' resurrection demonstrate its timeless relevance in a variety of settings. The story of the resurrection provides deep insights into the human condition through themes of internal awakening, hope, personal transformation and collective consciousness. The resurrection is an eternal reminder that there is always hope for renewal and fresh beginnings in a world that is sometimes characterised by hopelessness. It inspires us to interact meaningfully with the world as we navigate its complexities. By doing this, we take part in the ongoing narrative of resurrection, contributing to a collective journey towards renewal and transformation.

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■ Author's contribution

Chris Jones is the sole author of this previously published research.

■ Ethical considerations

This essay followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

■ Data availability

The author declares that the data supporting this study are available in the essay and its references.

■ Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this essay are those of the author and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency or that of the publisher. The author is responsible for this essay's results, findings and content.

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The Jesus trilogy: Critical reflections on Jesus' divinity, ascension and resurrection brings together three deeply reflective theological essays that challenge and reimagine some of the most enduring assumptions about the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth. Written by Chris Jones, this scholarly, yet accessible collection invites readers into an honest, critical and compassionate pilgrimage focused on central Christian doctrines, not to undermine faith but to recover its depth, integrity and human significance.

The trilogy originated from the suspension of Dr Peter Nagel by the Dutch Reformed Church following his thought-provoking article 'Problematising the Divinity of Jesus: Why Jesus is not *θεός*' (2019). In defending Nagel, Jones began a theological exploration that developed into three interconnected essays. The first in this trilogy of essays examines the question of Jesus' divinity, tracing how a metaphorical understanding of 'Son of God' gradually evolved into an ontological dogma that risks overshadowing the humanity of Jesus. The second essay reflects on the ascension through dialogue with the late Emeritus Professor Andries Gideon van Aarde, whose critical yet faithful scholarship deeply shaped Jones's thought. The third, written in memory of Van Aarde, explores the resurrection as a metaphor for spiritual transformation and renewed human consciousness rather than a literal, physical event.

Drawing on biblical scholarship, philosophy and historical theology, *The Jesus trilogy* argues that Christian faith and ethics should be rooted not in metaphysical speculation but in the radical humanness and moral vision of Jesus. His message of mercy, justice and inclusivity remains as relevant and transformative today as it was in the first century.

By recovering Jesus' ethical and spiritual message from the layers of dogmatic tradition, Jones offers a compelling contribution to contemporary Christological discourse. This book will engage theologians, clergy and all studious readers seeking a faith that is intellectually honest, ethically grounded and spiritually alive.

Chris Jones served as a church minister in small-town Ceres for almost twenty years before moving to Stellenbosch in 2008 to establish the Unit for Moral Leadership in the Faculty of Theology at Stellenbosch University in Stellenbosch, Cape Town, South Africa. He retired at the end of 2024 and was awarded the status of Emeritus Associate Professor in Systematic Theology and Ecclesiology, where he serves as a theologically curious scholar.



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