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Mohr Siebeck

The Completion Concept in John 17:23
in Light of Early Imperial Philosophical Discourses
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Abstract: Diese Studie umfasst eine Analyse des johanneischen Gedankens der Vervollkommnung der Gläubigen in Joh 17,23. Die philologische Untersuchung von Joh 17,20–26 und die Rekonstruktion der einschlägigen philosophischen Diskurse führen zum Ergebnis, dass das Johannesevangelium ein innovatives τελείωσις Konzept liefert. Das weist wichtige Affinitäten und Unterschiede zu relevanten philosophischen Entwürfen auf und zeigt, dass Johannes nicht isoliert in einer Gemeinde bleibt, sondern ein breites, hellenistisch gebildetes Publikum anspricht. Das Wort Jesu ἵνα ὅσιν τετελειωμένοι εἰς ἓν unterstreicht zwar die Einheit der Gemeinde, aber fasst auch einen anderen Gedankengang zusammen, der sich durch das gesamte Johannesevangelium zieht und auch in 1.Joh 3,2 vorkommt: Das Ziel des Christusereignisses ist die Vollendung des Menschen. Der Vervollkommnungsprozess der Gläubigen in der Christuskirche beginnt mit der „Geburt von oben“ und findet ihren Höhepunkt in der transformierenden eschatologischen Schau Gottes.

Keywords: John 17, farewell speech, completion, perfection, unity, ancient philosophy

1 Methodological considerations*

This paper is a part of a larger project in progress and investigates how John’s reflections on the believer’s completion in unity can be understood in the contexts of Greco-Roman religious-philosophical discourses. This is not the only way to interpret the texts of the author (or the authors) of the Fourth Gospel and the *First Epistle of John* whom I conventionally call “John”. This paper highlights only one of the many perspectives that can be applied to these Johannine texts and focuses on their final version in the NT canon. It scrutinises the meaning of Jesus’s final prayer in the setting of John’s interaction with educated readers and peers. The goal of this survey is neither to list parallels nor to “compare” John to ancient philosophers. I do not assume that John was a Stoic, a Middle-Platonist, a “pupil” of Philo, or someone else who has read Plato’s dialogues. Instead, I identify John as an author of the early Roman empire who remains

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in discourse with other contemporaries trained in Greco-Roman *paideia*.¹ Perfection or completion² ideas belonged to a quasi-standard agenda of the educated public in this era. The importance of these concepts for the contemporary intellectuals becomes evident, e.g. by searching for the verb τελειόω in Hellenistic Jewish and Greco-Roman authors of this era. The verb occurs e.g. in Philo more than 55 times, not to mention other relevant terms deriving from the τελει* lexeme. Accordingly, this paper will focus on John 17:23 where the participle τετελειωμένοι occurs and its immediate context, i.e. 17:20–26.

2 Structure and style of Jesus’s final petitions

John 17:20–26 is the final part of a long prayer and speech. At its beginning, Jesus indicates that he adds a new group to his prayer (v. 20), while the narrator reports Jesus’s exit (18:1 cf. 14:31) after its end. The text could be divided into the following four parts:

1) In vv. 20–21, Jesus explains for whom he prays, i.e. his disciples and all potential converts³, and describes the content and the rationale of his petition. The author includes three topics that are correlated with “*ἵνα* clauses”⁴: The subject of the petition, i.e. *that all believers may be one*, and its purposes/results, i.e., *believers may also be united with the Father and the Son*, and *the world may believe in Jesus*. 2) The following unit (vv. 22–23) is only partially parallel to the first. Jesus declares that he has made his pupils partakers of God’s glory and, by applying a triptych of *ἵνα* sentences, he describes the purposes of his work: i) *that believers may be united to one another and God*; ii) *they may be brought to completion in one*, and iii) *the world may believe in the origin of Jesus from God and acknowledge God’s love for the believers*. 3) In his final request in v. 24, Jesus uses a new pair of *ἵνα* clauses to express his will, i.e., *that believers may be with him* (the content), so that they *behold his glory* (purpose/result). 4) The conclusion (vv. 25–26) contrasts the world’s ignorance to Jesus’s and his pupils’ knowledge about God. It also summarises the aim of God’s revelation in Christ in a last *ἵνα* clause, i.e. *that believers preserve love among them and union with Jesus*.

¹ From this point of view, both the *intentio auctoris* and the *intentio lectoris* play an important role in my survey. On this approach see Robyn F. Walsh, *The Origins of Early Christian Literature: Contextualizing the New Testament within Greco-Roman Literary Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

² On the differentiation between the two notions see David Rensberger, “Completed Love: 1 John 4:11-18 and the Mission of the New Testament Church,” in *Communities in Dispute: Current Scholarship on the Johannine Epistles*, ed. R. A. Culpepper and Paul N. Anderson, ECL 13 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014) 237–271. However, no sharp juxtaposition between perfection and completion is possible. See below §5.3.

³ See on the meaning of the terms conversion/converts in John, Athanasios Despotis, *Bekehrungserfahrung und Bekehrungserinnerung bei Paulus und Johannes*, BZSup 2 (Paderborn: Brill; Schönigh, 2021).

⁴ The *ἵνα* clauses have different syntactic functions. Two are content clauses (21a *ἵνα πάντες ἐν ᾧσιν*; 24b *ἵνα ὅπου εἰμι ἐγὼ κάκεινοι ᾧσιν μετ’ ἐμοῦ*) and serve as objects of the verbs ἐρωτῶ and θέλω respectively while the rest are (most likely) adverbial purpose-result clauses. Other proposals regarding the syntax are also possible. See Rodney Whitacre, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2021) §5.138, 148; Heinrich v. Siebenthal and Ernst G. Hoffmann, *Griechische Grammatik zum Neuen Testament* (Gießen: Brunnen, 2011) §272. The adverbial *ἵνα* clauses are indented more right than the content ones in the structured original Greek text.

John applies repetition, ellipsis, chiasmus, parallelism, and amplification,⁵ i.e. rhetorical elements that occur very often in his Gospel. From the perspective of style and syntax⁶, one can structure the text as follows:

²⁰ Οὐ περὶ τούτων δὲ ἐρωτῶ μόνον, ἀλλὰ καὶ περὶ τῶν πιστευόντων διὰ τοῦ λόγου αὐτῶν εἰς ἐμέ,

²¹ ἵνα πάντες ἐν ᾧσιν, καθὼς σύ^Α, πάτερ, ἐν ἐμοί^Β κἀγὼ^Β ἐν σοί^Α.
 ἵνα καὶ αὐτοὶ ἐν ἡμῖν ᾧσιν,
 ἵνα ὁ κόσμος πιστεύῃ ὅτι σύ με ἀπέστειλας.

²² κἀγὼ τὴν δόξαν ἣν δέδωκάς μοι δέδωκα αὐτοῖς,
 ἵνα ᾧσιν ἐν καθὼς ἡμεῖς ἐν.

²³ ἐγὼ ἐν αὐτοῖς καὶ σὺ ἐν ἐμοί.
 ἵνα ᾧσιν τετελειωμένοι εἰς ἐν,
 ἵνα γινώσκῃ ὁ κόσμος ὅτι σύ με ἀπέστειλας καὶ ἠγάπησας αὐτοὺς καθὼς ἐμὲ ἠγάπησας.

²⁴ Πάτερ, ὁ δέδωκάς μοι, θέλω
 ἵνα ὅπου εἰμὶ ἐγὼ κἀκεῖνοι ᾧσιν μετ' ἐμοῦ,
 ἵνα θεωρῶσιν τὴν δόξαν τὴν ἐμήν, ἣν δέδωκάς μοι ὅτι ἠγάπησάς με πρὸ καταβολῆς κόσμου.

²⁵ πάτερ δίκαιε, καὶ ὁ κόσμος σε οὐκ ἔγνω, ἐγὼ δέ σε ἔγνω, καὶ οὗτοι ἔγνωσαν ὅτι σύ με ἀπέστειλας.

²⁶ καὶ ἐγνώρισα αὐτοῖς τὸ ὄνομά σου καὶ γνωρίσω,
 ἵνα ἡ ἀγάπη ἣν ἠγάπησάς με ἐν αὐτοῖς ἢ κἀγὼ ἐν αὐτοῖς.

John applies three similar formulations with the ἵνα–καθὼς structure in ch. 17 to stress Jesus's petition for the believers' unity according to the union between the Father and the Son: ἵνα ᾧσιν ἐν καθὼς ἡμεῖς (17:11); ἵνα πάντες ἐν ᾧσιν καθὼς σύ, πάτερ, ἐν ἐμοί κἀγὼ ἐν σοί (17:21); ἵνα ᾧσιν ἐν καθὼς ἡμεῖς ἐν (17:22). The Johannine style, with its many repetitions, gives the impression that the author circles around the same issue. However, by deeper investigation, one detects that he makes crucial additions. Thus, John 17:23 opens another subject besides the point of unity. V. 23 has a different structure and syntax because the author omits the comparison with καθὼς by using an elliptical sentence [ἐγὼ <εἰμί> ἐν αὐτοῖς καὶ σὺ <εἶ> ἐν ἐμοί⁷]. He also expands the ἵνα sentence by including the participle τετελειωμένοι and the preposition εἰς and changes the order (marked by italicisation and underlined text).⁸ While a καθὼς sentence follows the ἵνα clauses in the first three occasions, the ἵνα clause in v. 23 follows a statement regarding Jesus's immanence in the believers and the Father's immanence in Jesus.

This prayer is unique and has no common background with Jesus's prayers in the Synoptic gospels. Most authors support the integrity of 17:20–26. Still, Becker and Schnackenburg omitted vv. 20f. as later additions, while von Wahlde observes almost the entire prayer as a work of

⁵ See in detail: E. R. Wendland, "Rhetoric of the Word: An Interactional Discourse Analysis of the Lord's Prayer of John 17 and Its Communicative Implications," *Neot* 26 (1992) 59–88.

⁶ See above n. 3.

⁷ My reconstruction applies verbs and not participles because the author uses the expression ἐν αὐτοῖς with verb in v. 26. Furthermore John never uses the formulation ἐγὼ ὢν with reference to Jesus. Contra Randy Leedy, *Bible Works New Testament Greek Sentence Diagrams* (2006).

⁸ See Klaus Scholtissek, *In ihm sein und bleiben: Die Sprache der Immanenz in den johannischen Schriften*, HBS 21 (Freiburg: Herder, 2000), 334.

a “second” or a “third” author.⁹ In Becker’s¹⁰ view, these verses do not cohere with the “genre elements” of the rest of the prayer, i.e. review of Jesus’s work, introduction to prayer, petitions and rationale of petitions. Allegedly, v. 20 draws on a repetition of v. 9, while v. 21 is a doublet to vv. 22b–23a. According to this hypothesis, these verses brake the text flow that, in its final part, portrays an eschatological vision about the glory (not of potential converts but) of the already existing believers. However, neither stylistic reasons nor manuscript evidence ratify this omission. On the contrary, vv. 20f. echo the missionary dynamics that flow through the entire Gospel.

3 Genre

The text under discussion is the last part of a farewell speech where both consolation (see, e.g. 16:33) and exhortation (see, e.g. 15:12.16)¹¹ play a dominant role. Scholars¹² have compared Jesus’s speech to Hellenistic and Jewish “farewell speeches” and/or “testaments”¹³ (one can distinguish between the two genres¹⁴), but the evangelist does not follow any genre slavishly.¹⁵ Farewell speeches aim to provide a narrative transition between founders and future generations¹⁶ and exhort successors towards unity. The father’s or teacher’s concern for the love and unity of his followers at his farewell often appears as a common topos in Hellenistic Jewish and Greco-Roman literature (e.g. T.Jos. 17,2f). Therefore, Jesus’s request for unity of his followers is an “expected” theme here.

According to Bultmann, John 17 belongs to the source of the “revelation speeches” that were structured with parallelisms. Supposedly, the last part of this speech delivers the prayer of the perfect Gnostic revealer. Nonetheless, the designation “revelation speech” is anachronistic, for it assumes that the Fourth Gospel applies elements of the later “Gnostic” revelatory literature.¹⁷ In Bultmann’s view, Jesus’s final prayer initially had its place at the beginning, i.e. in ch. 13, before the farewell discourses that are a commentary on Jesus’s relevant prayer.¹⁸

⁹ Urban C. von Wahlde, *Commentary on the Gospel of John Vol 2*, ECC; (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 734–741.

¹⁰ Jürgen Becker, “Aufbau, Schichtung und theologieggeschichtliche Stellung des Gebetes in Johannes 17,” *ZNW* 60 (1969): 56–83.

¹¹ Troels Engberg-Pedersen, *John and Philosophy: A New Reading of the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 272.

¹² See research overview in John Stube, *A Graeco-Roman Rhetorical Reading of the Farewell Discourse*, LNTS 309 (London: T & T Clark, 2006), 53–82.

¹³ Jörg Frey, “On the Origins of the Genre of the “Literary Testament”: Farewell Discourses in the Qumran Library and Their Relevance for the History of the Genre,” in *Aramaica Qumranica: Proceedings of the Conference on the Aramaic Texts from Qumran at Aix-En-Provence (June 30-July 2, 2008)*, ed. Katell Berthelot and Daniel Stökl Ben Ezra, *Studies on the Texts of the Desert of Judah* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 345–375.

¹⁴ Urban v. Wahlde, “Farewell Speeches,” in *EBR* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), 878–880.

¹⁵ Ernst Bammel, “Die Abschiedsrede des Johannesevangeliums und ihr jüdischer Hintergrund,” *Neot* 26 (1992): 1–12.

¹⁶ Stube, *Graeco-Roman*, 60.

¹⁷ Hans Becker, *Die Reden des Johannesevangeliums und der Stil der gnostischen Offenbarungsrede*, FRLANT 68 NF 50 (Göttingen, 1956), 121.

¹⁸ Rudolph Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Philadelphia PA: Westminster Press, 1971), Translated by G. R. Beasley-Murray, 460.

However, John 17:20–26 combines elements from different genres: prayer, farewell speech and testament. Besides, it is set in a dramatic “exit scene” (18:1 cf. 14:31) and embedded into a biography (a genre that typically does not include long speeches). In this genre mosaic, the Johannine Jesus is portrayed as a “new Moses” who pleads before God to show mercy towards his people.¹⁹ In contemporary literature, Pseudo-Philo (*LAB* 19.8–9) delivers a prayer where he draws on traditions regarding the death of Moses and includes Moses’s “last prayer”. Moses pleads for God’s mercy to the chosen nation of Israel, “because God loves it beyond all others” (ibid. cf. Deut. 10:15).

However, the Johannine Jesus transcends the portrayals of Moses in contemporary literature due to his union with the Father and his interest in the world’s salvation.²⁰ He includes in his petition potential converts without Jewish ethnic identity, e.g. the “Hellenes” in ch. 12.²¹ It is not a coincidence that the author links 17:1 to 12:23f. on behalf of the expression ἐλήλυθεν ἡ ὥρα and the notion of δόξα. The turning point of the ages has arrived and signals the inclusion of the Gentiles into God’s chosen people. Accordingly, the Johannine Jesus of the farewell discourses is a “hybrid” figure having a vision of potential universalism. His farewell is embedded in a context with features from Socratic and Platonic traditions, such as the literary symposium setting.²² George Parsenius²³ and David Stube²⁴ have already highlighted these Greco-Roman elements. In my view,²⁵ the Johannine Jesus is described not only as a “new”, i.e. “higher Moses”, but also as a “new”, i.e. “higher Socrates”. Socrates’s “testament” in *Phaedo* has been the “model farewell text” for early Roman imperial authors. However, the examination of generic associations with testaments and farewell speeches must consider that the author of the Fourth Gospel stresses not only Jesus’s departure but also his *abiding presence*. From this paradoxical perspective, the “testament” genre is bent.²⁶ The author transforms the genre elements for the special needs of his narrative synthesis to which we must turn now.

4 The Johannine context

The question of completion in unity is addressed in a very striking way in Jesus’s last words to the circle of the twelve whom Jesus has completely loved. The expression εἰς τέλος in 13:1 can have the meanings “at the end of (Jesus’s) life”, “to the uppermost”²⁷ but also “to the completion

¹⁹ Klaus Berger, *Formen und Gattungen im Neuen Testament*, UTB Theologie 2532 (Tübingen: Francke, 2005), 629.

²⁰ Fergus King, *Epicureanism and the Gospel of John*, WUNT II 537 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020), 160.

²¹ See in detail Jörg Frey, “Heiden – Griechen – Gotteskinder: Zu Gestalt und Funktion der Rede von den Heiden im vierten Evangelium,” in *Frey, Jörg. Die Herrlichkeit des Gekreuzigten: Studien zu den Johanneischen Schriften I*, ed. Juliane Schlegel, WUNT (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 297–338.

²² von Wahlde, “Farewell”, 879.

²³ George L. Parsenius, *Departure and Consolation. The Johannine Farewell Discourses in Light of Greco-Roman Literature*, NovTSup 117 (Leiden: Brill, 2005).

²⁴ J. Stube, *A Graeco-Roman Rhetorical Reading of the Farewell Discourse* (LNTS 309, London: T & T Clark, 2006).

²⁵ See also Athanasios Despotis, “Jesus als neuer Sokrates in Joh 1-12,” in *Greek and Byzantine Philosophical Exegesis*, ed. Athanasios Despotis and James B. Wallace, ECI 5 (Paderborn: Schöningh; Brill, 2022), 22–59.

²⁶ Harold W. Attridge, “Genre Bending in the Fourth Gospel,” *JBL* 121 (2002): 3–21.

²⁷ Cf. representatively Ps 78:5LXX ὀργισθήσῃ εἰς τέλος.

of the goal”²⁸ for which Jesus was sent in the world²⁹. At the beginning of his prayer, Jesus refers to the work he has accomplished (τελειώσας 17:4). It is intriguing that the Johannine Jesus applies the verb τελειόω in two other relevant occasions.³⁰ First, the verb is used in the context of ch. 4 concerning Jesus’s mission to communicate the truth beyond national and gender boundaries (4:34 τελειώσω) in Samaria. Second, the same verb occurs in Jesus’s long speech regarding the eschatological accomplishment of God’s creation in 5:36. The latter text refers to the eschatological restoration and accomplishment of the “entire human being” on Sabbath (5:36: τελειώσω; cf. 7:23 ὅλον ἄνθρωπον). From this point of view, the passive perfect participle of the verb τελειόω in John 17:23 has the sense of being brought to completion or an intended goal.³¹

There are also several other connections of Jesus’s final petitions to the rest of John’s Gospel. The farewell prayer is coordinated with the Prologue (1:1–18). The ideas of the Logos’s pre-existence, his divine identity, his active role in the creation, his initial relationship to all humans (ἴδιοι), his unique access to the Father and his mission as revealer are “high” Christological statements that are in correspondence with ideas of the final prayer. Furthermore, Jesus’s reflections on God’s love and the sending of his Son to the world construct an inclusion between the first and last Jesus’s long speeches (John 3:13–21; 17:20–26)

Similarly, the idea of transformation by beholding the Son’s divine glory is embedded in the Prologue (1,13f). At the same time, the final prayer describes it as a non-yet achieved goal (17:24). The final prayer in its Johannine context delivers a dynamic idea of the human relationship to Logos and God. Though the pupils already have an origin from God (1:12; 17:16), they have not yet seen God (1:18; 1 John 4:12). They still need to be sanctified in order to be accomplished by attaining vision of God and perfect knowledge (17:26). There is a link between these ideas that is elaborated in 1 John 2:28–3:3.³²

Furthermore, the motif of the oneness between the Father and the Son (10:30; 17:11, 20–23), the commandment of love, which is depicted as the new commandment in 13:33–35; 15:12; the one flock-one shepherd motif in 10:16 and the idea of the re-union of the scattered children of God in 11:52, 55 are in particular correspondence with the prayer for the unity of the believers in ch. 17.

Jesus prays for the unity of the “vine” (ch. 15), the other-worldly group established by him,³³ that faces the danger of apostasy (17:14–15). The Johannine Jesus does not reflect on equality, plurality or diversity. Instead, he seeks to preserve his community from the hatred of the evil and the world, so that no one will be lost (17:12). In view of the impending afflictions, i.e.

²⁸ Plato, *Resp.* 613C.

²⁹ Rensberger, “Completed Love”, 246.

³⁰ The narrator also applies the verb in John 19:24 to stress the fulfillment of the Scripture.

³¹ Rensberger, *ibid.*

³² Theo Heckel, *Die Briefe des Jakobus, Petrus, Johannes und Judas*, NTD 10 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2019), 209. Regarding the affinities and differences between 1 John 3 and John 17 see Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John: Volume Two* (Burns & Oates, 1982), Transl. by Cecily Hastings, Francis McDonagh, and David Smith & Richard Foley, SJ., 195.

³³ Engberg-Pedersen, *John*, 269.

exclusions and persecutions (16:2), which the Christ-group has to suffer in its Jewish and Roman environments, Jesus proclaims love and unity as the only way for the believers to escape the danger of damnation (ἀπώλεια 17:14). Jesus formulates his requests in John 17 in anticipation of his coming passion and combines the concept of unity with the idea of the believers' completion. Modern scholars often overlook John's completion concept. Therefore, this study will focus on it. In the following paragraphs, I will combine reflections on the state of research with thoughts about the ancient philosophical discourses and their importance for the text under discussion.

5 Graeco-Roman philosophical discourses and the state of research

Du Plessis³⁴ delivered the first well-studied monograph on the τέλειος idea in the NT in the 1950s, but he did not focus on the text under discussion. In his view, uncritically adopted also by new studies,³⁵ the participle τετελειωμένοι has the meaning of totality, but this interpretation is not accurate. This reading neither considers the rest mentions of the verb τελειόω in John nor links it to the sanctification and theoria concepts that occur in the direct context of John 17:23. Earlier shorter studies have also shed some light on the perfection concept in Early Christianity and its environment. Delling's *ThWNT* article³⁶ deserves special mention because it focuses on philosophical perfection. Yet, in Delling's study, Hellenism and philosophy remain something "external" to John, and the perfect idea does not play any crucial role in John. Scholars mostly give attention to the relevant ideas of Philo and the *Letter to Hebrews*.³⁷

5.1 The "Philonic Paradigm"

This is the case with Dey's dissertation³⁸, which concludes that the perfection concept of the *Letter to Hebrews* has its closest analogies in Philo. The Alexandrian exegete links the idea of τελείωσις to the notion of a direct union with God, beyond intermediaries. According to Day, Philo does not speculate about eschatological dualism and has no particular concerns for racial and cultic purity when he discusses perfection (as is the case with Qumran's texts on perfection).

Indeed, Philo delivers crucial reflections on τελείωσις by vision of God. In one of his texts, where he elaborates on the meaning of the name Israel, he associates completion with a miraculous bestowing of spiritual eyes. Philo is the first author to use the Greek verb ἐνομματώω, in order to explain how the Jewish nation becomes able to step on the path of completion.³⁹ According to the Alexandrian exegete, God bestowed Jacob with eyes to reach the highest goal of

³⁴ Paul Du Plessis, *Τέλειος: The Idea of Perfection in the New Testament* (Kampen: Kok, 1959).

³⁵ E. g. Seth Simisi, *Perfection: Significance of the Perfection Motif in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2016), 74.

³⁶ Gerhard Delling, "τέλος κτλ.," *ThWNT* 8 (1969): 50–88.

³⁷ E. g. Timothy L. Marquis, "Perfection Perfected: The Stoic "Self-Eluding Sage" and Moral Progress in Hebrews," *NovT* 57 (2015): 187–205.

³⁸ Lala K. K. Dey, *The Intermediary World and Patterns of Perfection in Philo and Hebrews* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1975), 52.

³⁹ Gerhard Delling, "The One Who Sees God in Philo," in *Nourished with Peace: Studies in Hellenistic Judaism in Memory of Samuel Sandmel*, ed. Frederick E. Greenspahn (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1984), 27–41.

human life through vision of God. John also focuses on transformation through vision of the divine glory and portrays the healed blind man in ch. 9 as a human being that received new eyes. John interprets turning to *pisteuein*⁴⁰ as turning to the “true light”.⁴¹ It is not a coincidence that the idea of completion in John 17 occurs in the context of reflections on an eschatological vision of God. John adapts earlier religious-philosophical exegesis of Jewish biblical ideas to new Christological contexts. But Philo explicitly draws on Plato to interpret *τελείωσις* in the biblical narratives philosophically. Therefore, one shall investigate the main tendencies in the ancient philosophical discourses.

5.2 Light from Plato

George van Kooten has already linked John’s farewell discourses to the Platonic *Symposium*:⁴² Jesus’s prayer allegedly combines “symptotic intimacy”⁴³ with Eulesinian symbolism. Jesus’s will in 17:23 refers to completion through initiation into the divine mysteries⁴⁴. The motive of “symptotic intimacy” can be detected in the strong emphasis on the ideas of union, love and vision (17:24) that occur in the context of a supper. In van Kooten’s view, the mystic symbolism is obvious in Jesus’s prayer to God that his pupils, too, “may be brought to completion into one (ἵνα ὧσιν τετελειωμένοι εἰς ἓν)” (17:23).⁴⁵ “This is understandable as a prayer for their initiation into the divine mysteries, so that they too come to share in the divine unity by being taken up in the dynamics of God and the divine Son.”⁴⁶ This interpretation is based on the assumption that John uses the verb *τελείωω* with many allusions that result from a wordplay with the cognates *τέλος* (13:1) and *τελέω* (19:28–30). In my view, there is a plausible blend of the notions of finishing, perfection, and initiation in the interpretation of the participle *τετελειωμένοι*. However, a crucial question remains unsolved. John applies the verb *τελείωω* and not *τελέω* (*τετελειωμένοι* not *τετελεσμένοι*) in 17:23, like Plato. The latter applies the verb *τελέω* that has cultic connotations and identifies the true philosophers with the *κεκαθαρμένοι* and *τετελεσμένοι* in the “farewell dialogue” *Phaedo*, 69C-D: ὁ δὲ κεκαθαρμένος τε καὶ τετελεσμένος ἐκεῖσε ἀφικόμενος μετὰ θεῶν οἰκήσει (the one who is purified and initiated will arrive there and dwell with the gods). Nonetheless, the affinities of the farewell contexts between these Platonic and Johannine texts are quite intriguing. Accordingly, one cannot easily overcome van Kooten’s thesis. The latter also associates Jesus’s final prayer to the will of Greeks to “see” in 12:21, or to have a “*theoria*” (cf. 12:45) like the *theōroi* of the Eleusinian mysteries who were initiated into the mysteries by “seeing” the rites, and “sharing” in the life of Gods. Though mystery cults

⁴⁰ I leave the term *πιστεύειν* without translation to avoid a superficial identification of *πίστις* with propositional faith.

⁴¹ *Ebr.* 82; *Prem.* 36.

⁴² George van Kooten, “John’s Counter-Symposium: ‘The Continuation of Dialogue’ in Christianity-A Contrapuntal Reading of John’s Gospel and Plato’s Symposium,” in *Intolerance, Polemics, and Debate in Antiquity: Political, Philosophical, and Religious Forms of Critical Conversation*, ed. George van Kooten and Jacques van Ruiten, TBN 25 (2019), 282–357.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 329.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 313.

⁴⁵ George van Kooten, “Bildung, Religion, and Politics in the Gospel of John: The Erastic, Philhellenic, Anti-Maccabean, and Anti-Roman Tendencies of the Gospel of ‘the Beloved Pupil’,” in *Scriptural Interpretation at the Interface between Education and Religion*, ed. Florian Wilk, TBN 22 (Brill, 2019), 165.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

were widespread in the early Roman Empire, our knowledge is still uncertain and therefore, such associations are speculative.

Plato's thoughts on completion and the association between philosophy and initiation deserve much attention because Plato is the first philosopher who discusses human τελείωσις in detail. Plato draws on Orphics to portray God both as the beginning and the telos of human existence (*Leg.* 715E–716A). He also identifies human life as a path to moral perfection (*Gorg.* 499E). Plato's τέλειος ἄνθρωπος is related to the well-educated (*Leg.* 653A), the “truly good”, the virtuous man (*Leg.* 950C), and the one who combines wisdom with social life (*Hipp. maj.* 281D). But this concept also has a mystical perspective, for the perfect man is initiated into heavenly mysteries τελέους ἀεὶ τελετὰς τελούμενος (*Phaedr.* 249C), The philosopher's soul becomes perfect by journeying in heaven and beholding the good or God. This Platonic motive has been developed by Philo of Alexandria and other contemporaries of John. Perhaps, this is the reason why John challenges the idea of the soul's ascent to heaven⁴⁷ in John 3:13.

Last but not least, Plato's *Parmenides* is relevant for our discussion. In this dialogue, Plato delivers the aspects of the Eleatic school on the idea of τέλειον, i.e. wholeness and totality. Parmenides adopts a monistic understanding of the being and the perfect denying that a part might be part of many rather than of something one⁴⁸ (ὁ καλοῦμεν ὅλον, ἐξ πάντων ἐν τέλειον γεγονός 157E). This idea is crucial for the interpretation of Jesus's petitions referring to the unity of the church.

5.3 Aristoteles' τελεία φιλία

It is evident that the lexeme τελειο* can have an extensive semantic range⁴⁹ in ancient philosophy that involves the notions of τέλος, ὅλον, πλήρης, and τελετή. Thus, Aristotle (*Metaph.* 1021B) tried to systematise the reflections of philosophers on the τέλειον concept by referring to four meanings: completeness, excellence, goodness, and finality. The Stageirite is aware that these categorisations are conventional. These notions can blend in many cases, e.g. moral perfection can have the sense of a goal, too⁵⁰ (*Eth. nic.* 1097B). This is also the case with the Aristotelian idea of a ζωὴ τελεία or βίος τέλειος. It is not easy to differentiate between a perfect way of life and a complete lifespan accomplished at the moment of death. Thus the four different notions mentioned above are not mutually exclusive⁵¹. Accordingly, though this study prefers the meaning of completion for interpreting John 17:23 it does not juxtapose it with the idea of perfection.

Another crucial insight from Aristotle's reflections comes from his friendship ethics in the renowned VII book of his *Nicomachean Ethics*. The Stageirite stresses that τελεία φιλία, is based

⁴⁷ See Gregory E. Sterling, “Dancing with the Stars: The Ascent of the Mind in Philo of Alexandria,” in *Apocalypticism and Mysticism in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity*, ed. Adela Yarbro Collins, John Collins and Pieter Villiers, Ekstasis 7 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 155–66.

⁴⁸ Verity Harte, *Plato on Parts and Wholes: The Metaphysics of Structure* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 139.

⁴⁹ See F. M. J. Waanders, *The History of τέλος and τελεω in Ancient Greek* (Amsterdam: Grüner, 1983).

⁵⁰ Terence H. Irwin, “Conceptions of Happiness in the Nicomachean Ethics,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Aristotle*, ed. Christopher Shields (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 496–528.

⁵¹ Hilde Vinje, “Complete Life in the Eudemean Ethics,” *Apeiron* (2022): 1–25.

upon goodness, i.e. likeness in moral excellence. For like is similar to like (1165B). It is the best friendship because it is an attachment between noble men who are equal in virtue (Τελεία δ' ἔστιν ἡ τῶν ἀγαθῶν φιλία καὶ κατ' ἀρετὴν ὁμοίων, 1156B). Friendship becomes τελεία not because it simply has a higher goal (τέλος) but also due to the goodness of friends. Τελεία, also refers to wholeness because it combines all attributes that friends must possess (πάνθ' ὅσα τοῖς φίλοις δεῖ ὑπάρχειν, *ibid*) and is permanent. Furthermore, it includes living close together, for φιλία also is affection (φίλησις, 1106B), mutual support in virtue and sharing wisdom (συζῆν καὶ κοινωνεῖν λόγων καὶ διανοίας, 1170B). A human being could not be good only in him/herself. Also the ὁμόνοια, which is a political friendship πολιτικὴ φιλία⁵² (1167B) exists only between gentle people (ὁμόνοια ἐν τοῖς ἐπιεικέσιν). Only the latter are steadfast in wishing the good and just for themselves and their friends, while the evil cannot remain in concord for long.⁵³ There is a correspondence between intrinsic and relational properties in Aristotle.⁵⁴ However, one cannot describe Aristotle's thoughts as developments of Platonic insights. The cognitivist approach of the Stagirite follows disbelief against any theory of transcendent forms. In Aristotle, the good is not identified with a single real nature to which human souls have access through heavenly journeys.⁵⁵

5.4 The Stoic τέλειος and the spirit

Stoics identified the τέλειον ἄνδρα with the sage who possesses all virtues⁵⁶ (according to Aristotele's theory) and follows an ascetic way of life similar to that of some Cynics⁵⁷. Though the Stoic sage was an almost unachievable ideal, and Platonists criticised Stoics that they adopted an idealistic sage notion and an extreme spontaneous conversion concept, Roman Stoics seemed to accept a gradual process to perfection.⁵⁸ Epictetus claims that a Stoic philosopher is like a statue in perfection progress. As soon as a sculpture is accomplished or finished (τελειωθῆ) and polished (στιλπνωθῆ), it shows its full beauty. Similarly, in Seneca's view, there are three classes of *proficientes*⁵⁹, persons making progress in virtue, before attaining the status of *summus*⁶⁰, who enjoys total freedom (*absoluta libertas*).⁶¹

Epictetus again argues that one achieves the τέλειον, when one purifies one's moral intention, develops an ὀρθὸς λόγος and a rational control over one's impressions: ἐλθεῖν ἐπὶ τὸ τέλειον δεῖ καὶ τὴν αὐτοῦ προαίρεσιν ἐκκαθᾶραι καὶ τὴν δύναμιν τὴν χρηστικὴν τῶν φαντασιῶν ὀρθὴν

⁵² See further, Paul Ludwig, *Rediscovering Political Friendship: Aristotle's Theory and Modern Identity, Community, and Equality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

⁵³ Lorraine S. Pangle, *Aristotle and the Philosophy of Friendship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

⁵⁴ A. W. Price, *Love and Friendship in Plato and Aristotle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 109.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 212.

⁵⁶ Plutarch, *Stoic. rep.* 1046B: πάσας ἔχοντα τὰς ἀρετάς.

⁵⁷ On the complicated relationship between Stoics and Cynics see Marie-Odile Goulet-Cazé, *Cynicism and Christianity in Antiquity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2019), 95–107.

⁵⁸ See further Geert Roskam, *On the Path to Virtue: The Stoic Doctrine of Moral Progress and Its Reception in (Middle-)Platonism*, AMPS 33 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2005).

⁵⁹ *Ep.* 75.9.

⁶⁰ *Ep.* 72.11.

⁶¹ *Ep.* 75.18.

κατασκευάσαι.⁶² The τέλος, i.e. the goal of human life is to observe and follow nature, fate or God⁶³ and thus attain freedom (ἐλευθερία).⁶⁴ Human freedom is identified with the acceptance of God's will, who governs the entire world.⁶⁵ This is because the material divine spirit, the logos, permeates all parts of the perfect cosmic body⁶⁶ but in different tension. Human beings who possess more spirit by their construction have as τέλος the theoria, i.e. contemplation and imitation of nature: θεωρίαν καὶ παρακολούθησιν καὶ σύμφωνον διεξαγωγήν τῇ φύσει.⁶⁷ Accordingly, the perfect philosopher is the one who follows the Stoic doctrines not only in theory but also in every-day life.⁶⁸ This also applies to choosing friends, for true friendship is possible only when people are alike in virtue.⁶⁹ Though Stoics stress self-control and believe that the sage can hardly be found, their concept is not individualistic. According to the Stoics, the entire cosmos is a unified organism. Everything is interwoven and interdependent. This means that each human being is created for "communion" so that one may benefit the other. Therefore, one must merely learn to use the material spirit, the logos, to understand the world as an organism and to submit to that organism.

Troels Engberg-Pedersen, who has investigated a lot of efforts in interpreting the Fourth Gospel from a Stoic point of view, reads Jesus's final prayer in John 17 as the fulfilment of his promise in 14:16 to ask the Father to send the Paraclete, i.e. the Spirit. Accordingly, believers will be accomplished by having the Paraclete in them, i.e. an entity with the characteristics of the Stoic Pneuma. The 'Paraclete' is pneuma with the features from Stoicism.⁷⁰ But in Engberg-Pedersen's view, Jesus and the Paraclete are the same figure. For Jesus is "an amalgam (κράσις) of two entities: Jesus of Nazareth and the pneuma he received in the baptism scene."⁷¹ "This figure will be present on earth again in a different form as pneuma."⁷² Although similar readings occurred already in ancient Christianity (e.g. in Modalism), Engberg-Pedersen's theory is neither from a Stoic nor from a Johannine point plausible.

On the one hand, Stoics link the material spirit to the entire cosmic body and not to a particular community of believers. On the other hand, John never identifies Jesus or the Logos with the Spirit in the sense of a single entity or amalgam. Though Stoicism has been the most influential ideology in John's time, Hellenistic Jewish authors like Philo of Alexandria show a particular interest in the revival of Pythagoreanism and the interpretation of Plato in an integrative way, i.e. by adapting Stoic concepts, esp. the logos. Thus we must turn to Middle-Platonists.

⁶² *Diss.* 2.23.40.

⁶³ *Diss.* 1.20.15.

⁶⁴ *Diss.* 1.12.1–35.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Plutarch, *Stoic. rep.* 1056C.

⁶⁷ *Diss.* 1.6.21.

⁶⁸ *Diss.* 3.7.17.

⁶⁹ *SVF* III 63: λέγουσι δὲ καὶ τὴν φιλίαν ἐν μόνοις τοῖς σπουδαίοις εἶναι διὰ τὴν ὁμοίτητα. φασὶ δὲ αὐτὴν κοινωνίαν τινὰ εἶναι τῶν κατὰ τὸν βίον, χρωμένων ἡμῶν τοῖς φίλοις ὡς ἑαυτοῖς. δι' αὐτόν τε αἰρετόν τὸν φίλον ἀποφαίνονται καὶ τὴν πολυφιλίαν ἀγαθόν. ἐν τε τοῖς φαύλοις μὴ εἶναι φιλίαν μηδένα τε τῶν φαύλων φίλον ἔχειν.

⁷⁰ Engberg-Pedersen, *John*, 276.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 277.

⁷² *Ibid.*

5.5 Middle Platonism: returning to the transcendent light

Middle Platonists⁷³ broke with the Academic scepticism and believed that human souls have their origin from the heavenly world of ideas. Thus, humans must acquire again access to “another life”, i.e. the eternal realities of the world from above, through anamnesis. That is why they grasp the liberation from matter and the ascent to the spiritual “true” world of ideas as the goal of philosophy. This τέλος is identified with the concepts of assimilation to God [(ἐξ)ὁμοίωσις Θεῷ] and the vision of God (θέα τῆς νοητῆς καὶ ἀδίδου φύσεως ... τέλος ἐστὶ φιλοσοφίας⁷⁴).

With these concepts, Platonists responded to the revival of Pythagoreanism but also the debates of the Stoics about life’s goal, i.e. life in accordance to nature. Platonists understood the telos of philosophical life as assimilation to a transcendent God. This idea comes from Plato's *Theaetetus* (176B–C). Plato uses the same concept in other texts (Cf. *Phedr.* 248A, *Resp.* 613A–B, *Phaed.* 82BC, *Tim.* 90B–D, *Leg.* 716D) but not always in the same sense, for the ὁμοίωσις may refer to a moral, functional, or ontic assimilation to God. Eudorus of Alexandria and Philo are the first known Platonists to emphasise the concept of (ἐξ)ὁμοίωσις Θεῷ. Their views draw on a vertical scheme: i.e., the visible cosmos (the earthly/lower world) can be explained only by reference to eternal, incorporeal first principles (the upper/heavenly sphere) that exist above the cosmos. Accordingly, humans (albeit mortal ones) already have an immaterial element, a celestial immortal part in their nature on earth. However, this divine element must escape from the earthly-material cosmos to become assimilated to God by beholding the good in heaven. This process of deification is interpreted according to Plato’s initial concept as full initiation into the divine mysteries.⁷⁵

Human life resembles to perfect initiation in the mysteries (τὸν βίον μύησιν ὄντα καὶ τελετὴν τελειοτάτην, Plutarch, *Tranq. an.* 477D). For souls enter the material world to observe the harmony of the nature and imitate the order of the divine in the world. According to Plutarch, humans can experience a *post-mortem* perfection and assimilation to God by an ontic change (μεταβολή);⁷⁶ that is, an alteration in their being and potential, a return to eternal life and the divine light. Therefore, the bodily death can be a perfect good for it leads to life eternal.⁷⁷

In Platonists, one detects a similar pattern to that of Philo who stresses transformation through the vision of the divine. In Philo, the ἐξομοίωσις (*Abr.* 144) also refers to assimilation to the

⁷³ §5.5 and 6 draw on my previous publication, “The Relation between Anthropology and Love Ethics in John against the Backdrop of Plutarchan and Philonic Ideas,” in *Plutarch and the New Testament in Their Religio-Philosophical Contexts: Bridging Discourses in the World of the Early Roman Empire*, ed. Rainer-Hirsch Luipold, BPS 9 (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 141–161.

⁷⁴ Plutarch, *Quaest. conv.* 718D. See Paolo Torri, “Homoiōsis Theōi: A Study of the Telos in Middle Platonism” (Dissertation, KU Leuven and Università degli Studi di Milano, 2017).

⁷⁵ Plutarch, *Rom.* 28.10: ἐκ μὲν ἀνθρώπων εἰς ἡρώας, ἐκ δ’ ἡρώων εἰς δαίμονας, ἐκ δὲ δαιμόνων, ἂν τέλειον ὡσπερ ἐν τελετῇ καθαρῶσι καὶ ὀσιωθῶσιν, ἅπαν ἀποφυγοῦσαι τὸ θνητόν.

⁷⁶ *De def. or.* 415C. Cf. *De genio Socr.* 593D–F; *De facie* 944D–E.

⁷⁷ *Suav. viv.* 1105D: εὐσταλῆ καὶ ἐλαφρὰν ποιοῦσι τὴν ψυχὴν ἀπὸ τῶν θνητῶν, τῷ φιλοσοφεῖν μελέτη χρώμενοι τοῦ ἀποθνήσκειν. οὕτως μέγα τι καὶ τέλειον ὄντως ἀγαθὸν ἡγοῦνται τὴν τελευτήν, ὡς βίον ἀληθῆ βιωσομένην ἐκεῖ τὴν ψυχὴν, cf. Plato, *Phaed.* 64 A, 67 D, E, 80E–81A.

image of God, i.e., the Logos (*QE* 2.62; *Leg.* 3.207) and his philanthropy (*Virt.* 168). Given that souls are according to the image of the Logos, they are akin to God⁷⁸ (συγγένεια), can conduct a philosophical way of life and become divine, as it has been the case with Moses.⁷⁹

In Philo's view (*Opif.* 144), humans have a dynamic kinship with God; they share the potential to become partakers of the above realm.⁸⁰ But only the seeker of knowledge (φιλομαθής cf. Plato, *Phaed.* 82B–C) turns to God and, by fleeing to the divine realm, receives or restores the divine seeds that grow and become perfect in him.⁸¹ Philo speaks about a noetic, godlike seed that arises from the union of the soul with the Logos and which leads humans to moral perfection without needing instruction by someone else.⁸²

Last but not least, it is an oversimplification to assume that Platonists represent an individualistic approach to perfection, while early Christianity links completion to unity and love. Though Platonists envisioned a perfection of the self into a harmonious whole,⁸³ cf. Plutarch's, *De profectibus in virtute*, the perfect virtue remains the political virtue.⁸⁴ Similarly, the study of philosophy has as its aim not only the individual perfection but also the ἀρμονία of the society, according to Maximus of Tyre.⁸⁵ After this description of the philosophical discourses in the early Imperial era, we turn to John.

6 John on the human relationship to the true light and the path to perfection

John begins his narrative by reflecting about the Christ event in the context of cosmological, anthropological and epistemological speculations. As mentioned above, the introductory reflections refer to topics that are recapitulated in Jesus's final prayer.⁸⁶ In his Prologue, John adapts Hellenistic Jewish philosophical interpretations of the Genesis story to a Christocentric frame. This is mostly the case with the term λόγος. John delivers a new concept: the Logos incarnate, who derives from *a relationship of love* with the Father, explains (ἐξηγήσατο) God to the world,

⁷⁸ *Opif.* 146. On the popular-philosophical idea of kinship to God see Johan Thom, "God the Savior in Greco-Roman Popular Philosophy," in *Sōtēria: Festschrift in Honour of Cilliers Breytenbach on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday*, ed. David Du Toit, Christine Gerber and Christiane Zimmermann, NovTSup 175 (Boston: Brill, 2019), 86–96.

⁷⁹ *Sacr.* 8. See on the perfection of Moses and Abraham, Hindy Najman, "The Quest for Perfection in Ancient Judaism," in *Past Renewals*, ed. Hindy Najman, SJSJ 53 (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 219–34.

⁸⁰ *Fug.* 62–63.

⁸¹ *QG* 3.12.

⁸² *Her.* 63–67. The Philonic seed notion belongs to a popular vocabulary used by both Stoics and Platonists. See earlier use regarding anthropogony in Plato, *Tim.* 41C and moral transformation in Arist. *Eth. Nic.* 1179B.

⁸³ Jackson P. Hershbell, "De Virtute Morali," in *Plutarch's Ethical Writings and Early Christian Literature*, ed. Hans D. Betz, trans. Hans D. Betz, SCHNT 4 (Leiden: Brill, 1978), 136.

⁸⁴ *Comp. Arist. Cat.* 3.1 Ὅτι μὲν δὴ τῆς πολιτικῆς ἀνθρώπος ἀρετῆς οὐ κτᾶται τελειότεραν, ὁμολογούμενόν ἐστι. *Diss.* 16.3.

⁸⁶ John F. O'Grady, "The Prologue and Chapter 17 of the Gospel of John," in *What We Have Heard from the Beginning*, ed. Tom Thatcher (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007), 215–28.

and transmits his love to the believers. Furthermore, John tries to solve acute problems regarding epistemology⁸⁷ and physics. He describes why and how a transcendent, supreme principle can relate to the material universe, how knowledge about God can be valid and what is the root of the truth. John's solution is summarised in the idea of incarnation (1:14).⁸⁸ The λόγος bridges the transcendent and the material realms (spirit and flesh) in a challenging way: He *becomes* an embodied physical entity due to his Father's *love for the world*. The Logos is not an intermediate principle that steers the material world to the God above.⁸⁹ The Logos becomes flesh, 'explains' the invisible God in the created reality, restores and accomplishes the divine kinship of human beings.

A crucial term, i.e., the "true light" (John 1:9 cf. Plato, *Phaed.* 109E) that enlightens all human beings, must be discussed here. The Johannine "true light" refers to the Logos prior to and after his descent from heaven. Aristoboulos⁹⁰ and Philo⁹¹ had already connected the Platonic notion of light with the Logos and understood the human soul as the image of the Logos in the sense that souls are both akin to the divine Logos⁹² and able to assimilate to the Logos. John stresses that all humans have been created by the Logos (1:3) and in their initial status shared in the light or life (1:4). John is cautious in his formulations about the relationship between humans, the Logos, and the light because the relevant verbs are put in the imperfect tense and thus related to the time of creation. Thus, all humans are characterised by John as being the Logos' "own" people (ἴδιοι 1:11), for all have been created by him and share an initial relationship with the light, according to v. 4. This is also the case with v. 9, which is formulated again in the imperfect tense, denoting continuity: "Ἦν τὸ φῶς τὸ ἀληθινόν ὃ φωτίζει πάντα ἄνθρωπον ἐρχόμενον εἰς τὸν κόσμον."⁹³ Most exegetes link the participle ἐρχόμενον to φῶς, interpret the participle as neutral and put the reference to universal enlightenment in brackets. However, according to the normal flow of the text,⁹⁴ the participle ἐρχόμενον is masculine because it is an attribute of πάντα ἄνθρωπον entering the world by his birth (cf. 16:21).⁹⁵ Accordingly, John indifferently describes the Logos as the "light" of all men in v. 4. However, humans have damaged this relationship due to sin (ἁμαρτία 1:29; 3:19).

⁸⁷ Daniel Boyarin, "By Way of Apology: Dawson, Edwards, Origen," *SPhiloA* 16 (2004): 188–217; R. Hirsch-Lupold, "ὕλη θεολογίας. Religious Lore as Inter'text' in Plutarch's *Moralia*," in T. Schmidt et al. (eds.), *The Dynamics of Intertextuality in Plutarch* (Leiden: Brill 2020), 457f.

⁸⁸ Ronald R. Cox, *By the Same Word: Creation and Salvation in Hellenistic Judaism and Early Christianity*, BZNW 145 (Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2007), 24.

⁸⁹ Numenius, *Fr.* 18.

⁹⁰ *Fr.* 5a.

⁹¹ *Fug.* 31–36; *Somn.* 1.75. George van Kooten, "The 'True Light Which Enlightens Everyone' (John 1:9): John, Genesis, the Platonic Notion of the 'True, Noetic Light,' and the Allegory of the Cave in Plato's Republic," in *The Creation of Heaven and Earth: Re-Interpretations of Genesis 1 in the Context of Judaism, Ancient Philosophy, Christianity, and Modern Physics*, ed. George van Kooten, TBN 8 (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 149–194.

⁹² *Praem.* 161.

⁹³ Cf. Fabien Nobilio, "The Implied Definition of the Prophet and Its Middle-Platonic Trajectory in the Gospel of John," *Neot* 41 (2007): 131–56; Jonathan Draper, "Not by Human Seed but Born from Above to Become Children of God: Johannine Metaphor of Family or Ancient Science?," *In die Skriflig* 51 (2017), 9.

⁹⁴ See further philological analysis in Despotis, "Love Ethics", 148n.39.

⁹⁵ According to Hellenistic-Jewish speculation, all men possess the 'image' of God, i.e., the intellect (Philo, *Opif.* 69–71).

This relationship can be re-established and brought to perfection in Christ. Baptised believers receive the power to become “children of God” (1:12–13), immortals (8:52), and “sons of light” (12:36). Those early Christian exegetes who were aware of the ancient discourse about assimilation to God as the ultimate goal of philosophical life⁹⁶ have linked (yet not identified) the Johannine concept of “becoming children of God” to the Platonic idea of ὁμοίωσις Θεῷ.⁹⁷ Clement of Alexandria claims that those who are called to become “sons of God” experience assimilation to God by following the path to perfection according to the gospel.⁹⁸ From this point of view, 1 John 3:2 is illuminating. John claims that believers are already granted the status of being children of God, but complete assimilation to God or his Son⁹⁹ by beholding him will occur at the eschaton. It is noteworthy that Philo delivers a similar yet not identical insight: humans who conduct a virtuous life are children of the “image of God,” but becoming “sons of God” is a process only for the perfect ones, the divinised philosophers like Moses (*Conf.* 146–147; *Sacr.* 8–9). If we read the Gospel’s Prologue against the background of *1 John* and contemporary philosophers, it is evident that John offers a new concept of human completion and assimilation to God. Believers are in the process of dynamic assimilation to God or his Son by beholding God’s glory in Christ. By stressing the transformative vision of God’s glory, John develops Hellenistic Jewish speculations about Moses’s transformation in *Exod* 33–34. According to Philo, Moses, by his second ascent on Mount Sinai, experienced a second birth, where he received the holiest nature of the *Hebdomad*, i.e., the number seven that is a symbol of divine completion.¹⁰⁰ Moses allegedly participated in the perfect genus (τελεώτατον γένος)¹⁰¹ and became divine.¹⁰² John transforms this tradition by interpreting turning to faith and baptism¹⁰³ as “being born from above” or, according to the narrative in John 9, as receiving sight on the Sabbath, i.e., the seventh day, to behold the perfect divine nature incarnate in Christ. Accordingly, one shall read Jesus’s petition ἵνα ὧσιν τετελειωμένοι εἰς ἓν not only as a prayer for the unity of the community but also the completion of the believers.

7 Ἴνα ὧσιν τετελειωμένοι εἰς ἓν

John’s good news for his early imperial audience is that *all* believers (cf. the emphatic πᾶς in 17:21) can experience what the contemporary philosophers desired: τελείωσις, i.e. attaining the highest purpose of human existence, assimilation to and union with God. Given that Jesus will dwell in all potential converts and the Father is one with Jesus, the community of disciples will

⁹⁶ Clemens of Alexandria, *Paed.* 2.19.100–101.

⁹⁷ Clemens of Alexandria, *Strom.* 6.14.114.6; John Chrysostom, *Hom. Jo.* 12.2 (PG 59:84): “ὁμοίους Θεῷ κατὰ δύναμιν τὴν ἡμετέραν.”

⁹⁸ Clemens of Alexandria, *Strom.* 6.14.114.6; 2.22.132.Cf. *ibid.*, 2.22.136.6.

⁹⁹ It is not clear if the pronoun αὐτῷ refers to God or his Son in 1 John 3:2.

¹⁰⁰ *Opif.* 91, 95, 102, 111; *QE* 2.46. Plutarch also is aware of this interpretation of the hebdomad; cf. *De E* 391F.

¹⁰¹ *Sacr.* 8–9.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ The wording “from water and Spirit” refers to ritual baptism and the renewal by the power of the Spirit. See in detail Athanasios Despotis, “Drawing and Transcending Boundaries in the Dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus: Fresh Perspectives from John’s Hellenistic Background and Chrysostomic Reception,” *JECH* 8 (2018): 68–87.

be entirely filled with God's being.¹⁰⁴ The communion of the Father with the Son is not only the model to which the unity of the believers must correspond. They should not be only of one will, in an analogy to Jesus's being of one will with the Father (5:21, 30; 6:38). As it is evident in the previous chapters of the Gospel, the chasm between the material and the transcendent realms has been bridged "in Christ" and "in Spirit" (14:16, 20).

Thus Jesus expresses in v. 24 his certain will, that he never parts from his followers and that believers experience the highest possible level of completion, i.e. eternal and direct vision of God.¹⁰⁵ The vision of the glory of the Son or God in John 17:24 could be identified with the sight of the Son or God "as he is"¹⁰⁶ and assimilation to him in 1 John 3:2.¹⁰⁷ Believers will be resurrected (cf. 5:29) to enjoy the divine and heavenly radiance (δόξα¹⁰⁸), the *vita communis* with and in God¹⁰⁹. In Christ, humans will achieve the original intention of their existence, the gift of perfection or completion by direct access to God, beyond any intermediaries.

As already mentioned, the formulation ἵνα ὅσιν τετελειωμένοι εἰς ἓν looks backwards, for the author applies the verb τελειῶ in previous reflections of the Johannine Jesus to portray the completion of human being and the transcending of human boundaries as the goal of his eschatological mission on earth. It also looks forward to the final completion of the believers in future.¹¹⁰ According to Jesus's farewell speech, the τέλος will be accessible at the eschaton for those who remain united in the community and conduct love.

From this point of view, the accurate translation of the expression τετελειωμένοι εἰς ἓν is "to be brought to their completion in one". The phrase εἰς ἓν also occurs in 11:52, another key text regarding the missionary perspective of the Gospel (the scattered children of God will be gathered "into one"). However, in 17:23, the phrase εἰς ἓν has both a spatial and a consecutive sense. Believers will be brought to accomplishment *in union with the* "one God" and the "one Messiah"¹¹¹ (spatial cf. v. 21 ἐν ἡμῖν¹¹²) and *so as to become one*.¹¹³ These two meanings of the prepositional phrase εἰς ἓν are not mutually exclusive, for union with God is interpreted as a conversion to oneness, a "union with the monas" in contemporary Hellenistic Judaism (Philo,

¹⁰⁴ Schnackenburg, *The Gospel*, 193.

¹⁰⁵ On the interchange between beholding δόξα and πρόσωπον see Ps 16:15.

¹⁰⁶ Seeing God does not mean understanding his nature (οἶος ἐστίν) but having immediate and full vision of his existence (καθώς ἐστίν). cf. Sir. 43:31; Philo, *Fug.* 141; *Praem.* 44. cf. W. Michaelis, "οραω κτλ.," *ThWNT* 5 (1954), 337.

¹⁰⁷ Though the lexeme ὁμοιο* does not occur in John 17 but in 1 John 3:2, one detects reciprocal parallels between the believers and the Son in John 17. Andrew Byers, *Ecclesiology and Theosis in the Gospel of John*, SNTSMS 167 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 145.

¹⁰⁸ Cf. the transformation by beholding and reflecting the divine splendor δόξα of Jesus in 2 Cor 3:18.

¹⁰⁹ Scholtissek, *In ihm sein*, 338. Cf. 12:26; 14:2.

¹¹⁰ Scott L. Adams, *Prayer in John's Farewell Discourse: An Exegetical Investigation* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2020), 192.

¹¹¹ Cf. Deut 6:4; Ezek 37:22–24. See further Byers, *Ecclesiology*, 130.

¹¹² Blass-Debrunner, §39.3 quotes John 17:23 as an example of the Hellenistic intermixture between the prepositions εἰς and ἐν.

¹¹³ See Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 369; Murray J. Harris, *John*, EGGNT (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2015), 293. Cf. 1 Cor 12:13; Eph 2:15.

Vit. Mos. 2.288; *QE* 29).¹¹⁴ According to the first part of v. 23, the completion of the believers results from the immanence of the one God in the Son and his union with the believers. Besides, early Christian philosophers-exegetes have already interpreted the εἰς ἓν in John 17:23 as a reference to union with the “divine monas”.¹¹⁵ Union does not mean absorption into God’s essence here, for God’s essence remains inaccessible and incomprehensible. The believers will have a direct vision of the divine splendour, but this vision will transform them. According to Philo, this is the crowning point of human happiness; therefore, humans must pray to stay in this condition. The Alexandrian exegete uses a greek term that occurs in the context of the farewell speeches too (14:2, 23): μονὴν εὐχέσθω.¹¹⁶

Other translation proposals, e.g. “in perfect/complete unity”, “become perfectly one” or (in German) “vollendete Einheit”, “vollkommen eins” and similar, are not accurate. Though John intentionally applies an ambiguous term with many connotations¹¹⁷ to arouse the reader's interest, he does not differentiate between perfect and non-perfect unity in ch. 17. Furthermore, in the context of the farewell speech, this translation of the verb τελειῶω seems less plausible (cf. Paul’s farewell in Acts 20:24 τελειῶσαι τὸν δρόμον μου). If the author intended to reflect only on unity, he would apply either a popular abstract term (e.g. ἐν τέλειον¹¹⁸, cf. τελεία ἀγάπη 1 John 4:18) or would modify the participle respectively (e.g. τετελειωμένον ἓν, cf. πεπληρωμένη χάρις John 17:13). Thus the translation “perfect unity” or similar proposals ignore the narrative and symbolic frame of the gospel, which from the beginning up to ch. 17 points to the ongoing transformation of the believers (e. g. 1:12; 17:17, 19).¹¹⁹ It also overlooks the expectations of contemporary educated readers who would link the following reference to seeing God’s glory in v. 24 to human completion (τελειότης ὄρασις Θεοῦ, cf. Philo, *Ebr.* 82).¹²⁰ Furthermore, it ignores the idea of sanctification or consecration in 17:17–19. Sanctification is not a synonym for completion, but it refers to a “typical” presupposition of eschatological completion and vision of God (cf. Heb 12:14). Johannine reflections on sanctification refer to consecration and purification. Still, they also include the idea of ongoing assimilation to God for there is a pairing of sanctifications (of the Son and the believers) in John 17:17–19 (cf. John 10:34–36; 1 John 3:2f.).¹²¹

Especially, regarding the symbolic and narrative context of John, Jesus’s long speech after the miraculous healing of the lame in ch. 5 draws on a philosophical reinterpretation of Genesis and Sabbath rest that occurs in Aristoboulos and Philo¹²² to highlight the *creatio continua* (5:17)

¹¹⁴ See further, Najman, “Perfection”, 225f.

¹¹⁵ Clemens of Alexandria, *Paed.* 1.8.71.2.

¹¹⁶ *Abr.* 58. See also *ibid.*, 55–59.

¹¹⁷ See above §5.3.

¹¹⁸ Cf. representatively Plato, *Parm.* 157E: ὁ καλοῦμεν ὄλον, ἐξ ἀπάντων ἐν τέλειον γεγονός; Aristotle, *Metaph.* 1021B: Τέλειον λέγεται ἐν μὲν οὐ μὴ ἔστιν ἕξω τι λαβεῖν μηδὲ ἐν μόριον; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Imit. Fr.* 31,1,1: κάκ πολλῶν μερῶν συλλογῆς ἓν τι συνέθηκεν ἢ τέχνη τέλειον [καλὸν] εἶδος.

¹¹⁹ Wilfrid Haubeck and Heinrich v. Siebenthal, *Neuer sprachlicher Schlüssel zum griechischen Neuen Testament: Matthäus bis Offenbarung*, 2nd ed. (Gießen: Brunnen, 2007), 595.

¹²⁰ Dey, *Intermediary*, 51f.

¹²¹ Byers, *Ecclesiology*, 145.

¹²² *Leg.* 1.5, 15.

concept.¹²³ Jesus is sent to accomplish the initial creation on Sabbath. Sabbath also is pictured as the day of the “perfect” spiritual creation in Hellenistic Judaism (Aristoboulos, *Fr.* 5: ἔβδομον ἡμᾶρ ἐὶν καὶ τῷ τετέλεστο ἅπαντα). Thus Jesus’s next miracle on Sabbath (ch. 9) has another crucial symbolism and reveals the new potential of the believers to attain the goal of the vision of God’s glory.

These ideas are embedded in a context where the *notion of love* dominates. The conclusion “so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them” (v. 26)¹²⁴ provides the key for interpreting the entire prayer. In contrast to his charge against the Jewish opponents (5:41–44),¹²⁵ Jesus asks that the love bidding him to the Father be practised among the Christ believers and that love may unite them to Christ and His Father. Accordingly, love is essential not only for the unity of Christ’s followers but also for their union with God. Christ believers receive the gift of union with God, but they are called to conduct love and serve the unity of the church. Completion is conceptualised both as a gift and as a path of life, a responsibility.¹²⁶ From this point of view, the study of *Aristotelian virtue ethics* can offer crucial insights. They highlight the principle that perfect unity and friendship are possible only if humans are alike in virtue and have a *vita communis*. Johannine readers are expected to work for their unity and completion by bearing fruits of love as well as abiding in the community (15:4, 8f). These are the requirements for believers to become Christ’s true disciples (15:8) and reach the goal of their existence, i.e. enjoy unity with God and other believers.

Love ethics, unity and completion ideas do not reflect a sectarian mentality in the Fourth Gospel, for the Johannine Jesus never omits the rest of the world. On the contrary, his first (ch. 3) and last (ch. 17) long speeches reflect a potential universalism, for the cosmos still can “turn” (3:16; 17:18–20). Therefore, the church should be one so that the world may believe in the Son of God. Believers should expand Jesus’s mission, i.e. to proclaim the truth and carry out a work revealing the divine relationships, that is love. It is about the love God shows to His Son, holding the church together and uniting it to Jesus. By embodying love and preserving its unity, the church is drawn into the communion of the Father with the Son, and thus the believers achieve a full and complete vision of the divine glory (17:24).

Though the constellation of the ideas of eschatological perfection, truth (ἀλήθεια 17:17, 19), vision of and being with God (17:24) could be interpreted in *Platonic terms* (e.g. θεᾶσθαι μόνον καὶ ζυνεῖναι, *Symp.* 211D–E), these concepts cannot be fully identified with the relevant ideas that one detects in contemporary Middle Platonists. John creates a new concept of vision of God that finds no direct precursors because he draws on the innovative idea of the incarnation of the Logos. Accordingly, the expected vision of the glory of the Son is neither a pure Jewish nor a Platonic “theoria” of God. John delivers a new amalgam, for he adapts earlier Hellenistic Jewish philosophical interpretations of biblical traditions (cf. Exod 33:18) to Christological

¹²³ Ruben Zimmermann and Zacharias Shoukry, “Creatio Continua in the Fourth Gospel: Motifs of Creation in John 5-6,” in *Signs and Discourses in John 5 and 6*, ed. Jörg Frey and Craig R. Koester, WUNT 463 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021), 88–115.

¹²⁴ Hartwig Thyen, *Das Johannesevangelium*, 2nd ed., HNT (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), 703.

¹²⁵ Scholtissek, *In ihm sein*, 332.

¹²⁶ Cf. Philo, *Agr.* 157.

contexts. In 17:24, the definite promise of the vision¹²⁷ of God's glory refers to the believer's future full participation in the divine glory that comes from the Father before the foundation of the world and in which the Son will dwell forever (17:1, 5, 22, 24).¹²⁸ The decisive factor for accessing the "theoria" of the "heavenly Jesus" is neither a "recollection of ideas" nor a "heavenly journey" of the soul but the "pisteuein" in the Logos incarnate and his immanence in the believers.

Furthermore, the completion (τελείωσις) of the believers, their union with God, transcends the *Stoic perfection concept*, for it is neither associated with the ideal of the Stoic sage nor with an explicit reference to (a material) Spirit in ch. 17. Instead, it is deeply linked to the unity of the Christ group and has a transcendent and eschatological horizon. The Johannine emphasis on the Logos, the unity and the divine immanence ideas would be attractive also for addressees engaged with Stoicism. Nevertheless, the very logic of the perfection concept in John 17 is not a strictly Stoic one. John envisions the perfection of the self through an increasing reliance on the ecclesia: Therefore, one cannot distinguish between believers as individuals and believers as collective in the text under discussion. The individual believer cannot be perfect if he is not incorporated into a community of mutual love.¹²⁹ Furthermore, the completion of believers in John is dynamic. It has both a present and an eschatological (post-mortem) perspective, but the author does not speculate on the different stages of progress. Presently, believers are on the path to fulfilling their original intention because they are in a salvific union with God. Due to the incarnation of the Logos and the coming of the Paraclete, believers already experience the beginning of a wholistic completion that is more than moral progress and wisdom. They are "born from above"; they already experience an ontic change, they are not still "fool" like the Stoic *proficientes*.¹³⁰ However, Jesus proclaims a definitive transformation and undisturbed union among the believers in the future. While converts live in this world, they are not in the immovable status of the perfect Stoic sage, but they are in distress (16:33) and remain in danger of losing their unity or salvation (ἀπώλεια 17:14). The fragility of their status will only be over when they reach their everlasting perfection in heaven through the expected vision of God (1 John 3:2).

Conclusions

Jesus's word ἵνα ᾧσιν τετελειωμένοι εἰς ἓν summarises a line of thought that flows throughout the entire Fourth Gospel and also is reflected in the *First Epistle of John*. The aim of the Johannine Jesus's mission on earth is the eschatological completion of human beings. This completion is dynamic, for it begins by the "birth from above" through faith and baptism and will find its climax at the eschatological vision of and union with God. The completion process also involves deepening faith in the Logos incarnate, abiding in his community and bearing fruits of love in a practical sense.

¹²⁷ The application of the verb θεωρέω has the meaning of a spiritual seeing, for it is very rarely used for sense perception. See Michaelis, "ὄραω κτλ.", 346.

¹²⁸ Udo Schnelle, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes*, 5th ed., ThHKNT 4 (Halle: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2015), 259.

¹²⁹ von Wahlde, *Commentary on the Gospel*, 736.

¹³⁰ Cf. Seneca, *Ep.* 75.8.

The main reasons for adopting this reading of the participle τετελειωμένοι are: 1) the immediate context in ch 17, where the notions of sanctification and “theoria” occur; 2) the application of the verb τελειόω by the Johannine Jesus in the rest of the Gospel; and 3) the parallel study of 1 John 3:2.

Besides, the Johannine completion concept has crucial affinities and differences to contemporary philosophical ideas, for John is not a sectarian author but interacts with diverse religious-philosophical traditions. Ancient philosophers elaborate not only on individual perfection or completion but also on social ethics. Accordingly, John stresses the completion of the believers in a context focusing on love and the unity of the ecclesia.

John also adapts earlier Hellenistic Jewish speculations about Moses’s perfection and insights on the completion of God’s creation to new Christological contexts. However, he delivers a unique concept by drawing on the counter-intuitive idea of the Logos’s incarnation. Human completion results from the redemptive work of the Logos incarnate, who has bridged the ontic chasm between flesh and spirit, dwells in the believers and provides them with the divine Spirit. The Spirit leads them to moral perfection and expansion of Jesus’s mission in the world.

Athanasios Despotis
University of Bonn (Germany)
orcid.org/0000-0002-3680-8138

From "Matthias Müller (EC)"
early-christianity@hu-berlin.de
Subject Ihr Artikel "The Completion Concept in John 17:23"
Date Do, 11.Aug 2022 08:25:41
To despotis@uni-bonn.de

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