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## REFIGURING CHRIST, THE TRUE VINE: AN EXPLORATION OF AN Ἐγὼ εἶμι SAYING USING RICOEUR'S CONCEPT OF 'METAPHOR'

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### Abstract

*Paul Ricoeur's understanding of metaphorical language is of great importance in reflection of biblical hermeneutics, not the least when it comes to the parables of Jesus. This article first explores Ricoeur's conception of metaphor, and moves to apply it to the metaphor Jesus uses in the seventh Johannine "I am" saying (John 15:1-8). It is argued that the relevance of metaphor understood along the lines of Ricoeur lies therein that it draws focus to the necessity of creative and 'living' metaphor for proper speech about Christ, even though the 'thing' will always have yet another meaning. A condition for such metaphorical language is unpretentious knowledge of both the text and context of the metaphors applied to Christ in the New Testament – as well as those applied to the godhead in the Bible as a whole – and a firm understanding of the context of the contemporary reader. The aim is to sketch some lines for a metaphorical Christology that brings the Gospel close to believers today.*

**Key Words:** Paul Ricoeur; Christology; John 15; Hermeneutics; Metaphor

### Introduction

In this article the seventh Johannine "I am" saying of Jesus (John 15:1-8) is studied along the lines of the 'Ricoeurian' concept of 'metaphor.' Paul Ricoeur has been a major voice in the field of hermeneutics for the past century, and gave shape to the rediscovery of metaphorical language in the second half of that century. This hermeneutical shift is of great importance for theology as well, since it offers an approach to deal with the complexities of metaphors in the New Testament – as well as in other sacred writings. Since then much theological work has been done on the function and meaning of the parables,<sup>1</sup> not the least by Ricoeur himself – although he seldom applies his understanding of metaphors to a specific parable.

Here I will move the focus from the parables, to another interesting and fascinating metaphor found in the New Testament. As part of the so-called "I am" sayings, it is a unique kind, since here Jesus does not speak about the 'kingdom of God' but about himself. The statement regarding Jesus' identity (v.1), understood as a 'metaphor,' will be related to its direct narrative context and the cultural-linguistic context of the community where it originated, in order to gain insight into the way this christological metaphor functions. The

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<sup>1</sup> E.g. Tania Oldenhage, *Parables for Our Time: Rereading New Testament Scholarship after the Holocaust*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2002; Norman Perrin, *Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom: Symbol and Metaphor in New Testament Interpretation*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1976.

aim is to reflect on the implications of Ricoeur's description of 'metaphor' for the systematic-theological topic of Christology.

In order to give this exploration a certain direction, the following research question is formulated: What is the relevance of Ricoeur's understanding of the concept of 'metaphor,' applied to one Johannine "I am" saying, for the dogmatic locus of Christology? This question is further divided in three sub-questions, related to metaphorical language according to Ricoeur, to an exploration of the text along the lines of Ricoeur, and to possible implications for Christological speaking today. 1) How does Ricoeur describe the concept of 'metaphor'? 2) What light does an understanding of the "I am" sayings, as metaphors in the line of Ricoeur, shed on these passages? And 3), what implications can be derived from the usages of 'metaphor' in the studied passage for systematic-theological utterances regarding Christ? When an (provisional) answer is formulated for each of these sub-questions, I will return to the main question and reflect on the broader usage of the 'Ricoeurian' approach to naming God and naming Christ in the field of dogmatics.

### Rehabilitating Creative Imagination: Ricoeur on Metaphors and Christ

In this section, the concept of 'metaphor' is explored and described along the lines drawn by Paul Ricoeur, in order to gain insight later on in the way this figure of speech functions in John 15:1-8, with special attention to the first verse (Εγώ εἰμι ἡ ἀμπελος ἡ ἀληθινή καὶ ὁ πατήρ μου ὁ γεωργός ἐστίν). After the concept is described, the relationship between naming God on the one hand, and Christological utterances on the other, will be discussed since Ricoeur problematises that in several places. The aim of this section is to gain insight into the concept of 'metaphor,' to address conditions for understanding this figure of speech, and to explore whether it is possible to speak about naming Christ alongside naming God.

#### *Living Metaphors and Sense in the Making*

In the second half of the twentieth century a massive shift occurred regarding the acceptability of the usage of metaphors in intellectual debates. Ricoeur being one of the most significant voices pleading in favour of this figure of speech, developed a theory of metaphor over against the traditional understanding of metaphor as an act of predication, linking the object with the predicate ("this *is* that").<sup>2</sup> Rather, the use of a metaphor causes a clash between the literal meaning and the new meaning: "We are forced to give a new meaning to the word, an extension of meaning which allows it to *make* sense where a literal interpretation does not make sense. So metaphor appears as an answer to a certain inconsistency of the statement interpreted literally."<sup>3</sup> This phenomenon is named 'semantic impertinence' by Ricoeur. The act of predication ("this *is* that") is replaced by a threefold dynamic: 'is, is not, and is like.'<sup>4</sup> Besides this tension between the meanings of two words, metaphorical language also results in activating all the possible meanings of a certain word (polysemy), but always *plus one*;<sup>5</sup> thus, opening up the possibility of creative imagination, always in need of both affirmation and denial.

<sup>2</sup> Aristotle, *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*, trans. George A Kennedy. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002:218. Book 3, Chapter 9.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Ricoeur, "Biblical Hermeneutics." *Semeia* 4, 1975:27-138:78.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 88; Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: The Creation of Meaning in Language*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977:7.

<sup>5</sup> Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 151ff.

Relating these insights to the field of theology, Ricoeur states that the same metaphorical process is at work in the naming of God, as found in biblical narratives: “[i]n joining metaphor and limit-expression, it furnishes the matrix for theological language inasmuch as this language conjoins analogy and negation in the way of eminence: ‘God like ..., God is not...’”<sup>6</sup> In that sense, a metaphor always results in a surplus of meaning, liberating God from literal predicates, truly becoming the Other in the ambiguity inherent to metaphorical language, and enabling the believers to make sense where a literal interpretation would make no sense at all.

One more important aspect in Ricoeur's dealing with metaphorical language must be examined. Although lost in translation, the French title of his book on metaphors hints at a central category in his thinking: *La Métaphore vive*. A metaphor truly comes alive when it causes a clash between the meanings of two words, when by contradiction it enforces a certain kind of self-destruction of the literal meaning of a word, when it innovates, and calls into presence the sum of all possible meanings, when it provokes a new understanding of ‘the thing of the text.’<sup>7</sup> Or, with Stiver, “[i]t may be, moreover, that we cannot reach the new apart from the semantic innovation of metaphorical language.”<sup>8</sup> A so-called ‘dead’ metaphor is without that appeal and therefore loses its potential to project a new reality. Thus, the ‘liveliness’ of a metaphor is determined by its capability to renew one's understanding of the object concerned. This is the sole condition for understanding a metaphor. This condition is strongly rooted in the cultural-linguistic practices of a certain community: it depends largely on the meanings ascribed by a certain group of people, and the ongoing usage of a metaphor, for it to meet the condition of being a ‘living’ metaphor.<sup>9</sup> Thus, this complicates a metaphorical approach to ancient texts, written in another context and within another cultural-linguistic framework than contemporary readers. In order to come to a proper understanding of imaginative power and creative meaning of the metaphors used in John 15:1-8, the background of the image must be explored carefully. What did it mean that Jesus *is* the true vine, *is not* the true vine, and *is like* the true vine?

Within the category of ‘living metaphors’ resides a special kind of metaphor: the so-called ‘root’ metaphor. According to Ricoeur, “[r]oot metaphors assemble and scatter. They assemble subordinate images together, and they scatter concepts at a higher level.”<sup>10</sup> ‘Father’ can be seen as one of these ‘root’ metaphors, since it has the potential to “frame an entire discourse.”<sup>11</sup> This needs to be mentioned, since the predicate ‘father’ is present in the text of John 15, even though it functions as an object that is further denoted as a farmer/gardener (ὁ πατήρ μου ὁ γεωργός ἐστίν). The question is: will a complete network of metaphors back the presence of that ‘root’ metaphor?

### *Naming God and Naming Christ*

Before I move to the usage of metaphors in the text at hand, one more step needs to be taken in order to answer all necessary preliminary questions. So far metaphorical language

<sup>6</sup> Ricoeur, “Naming God,” in *idem. Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995:217-235:230.

<sup>7</sup> Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 344.

<sup>8</sup> Dan R Stiver, *Theology after Ricoeur: New Directions in Hermeneutical Theology*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001:108

<sup>9</sup> Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 101.

<sup>10</sup> Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*. Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976:64.

<sup>11</sup> Stiver, *Theology after Ricoeur*, 108.

was related to either God as the first person of the Trinity, or to concepts like the ‘Kingdom of God’ as contents of Jesus’ preaching – especially considering ‘root’ metaphors. The problem arises how to speak about Christ along the lines of Ricoeur’s understanding of metaphorical language. Or stated differently: how to apply the concept of metaphor to Christological utterances, moving beyond the patrological nature of the ‘root’ metaphor?<sup>12</sup> Ricoeur seemed to have been aware of this question. He firmly states that the language of both the Old Testament and the New Testament originates from the same narrative; the Exodus and the resurrection leaning on the life of God as the one who liberates.<sup>13</sup> This unifying principle is of the highest importance for Ricoeur, due to both the desire to do justice to the biblical narrative and the wish to stay away from something he calls ‘Christian atheism:’

But I do not want to elude the objection that holds that the poem of Christ has replaced the poem of God, following the formula of Christian atheism that God is dead in Jesus Christ, with the consequence that the referent ‘God’ recedes to the rank of a simple cultural given that needs to be neutralised. I do not want to avoid this objection because it calls into question the very hypothesis of this meditation, namely, that the New Testament *continues* to name God. I will not hesitate to say that I resist with all my strength the displacement of the accent from God to Jesus Christ, which would be the equivalent of substituting one naming for another.<sup>14</sup>

The statement that the object of the theological writings we call the New Testament does not differ from the object of the narratives found in the Old Testament, is a widely acknowledged one. Emphasising that might be, according to Ricoeur, an important task of Christology, seeking to keep together to two tendencies of dominant motives (i.e. a ‘celebration of total power’ in the Old Testament and a ‘confession of total weakness’ in the New Testament) with one field of meaning and language.<sup>15</sup> A proposal to fulfill that task is to follow Wolfhart Pannenberg in including the whole of history in the quest of naming God, as the point of intersection between a Christology ‘from above’ and a Christology ‘from below.’ At that “point of intersection ... Jesus is signified and understood by the confessing community as ‘the man whose existence is determined by the God he proclaimed’ (Pannenberg).”<sup>16</sup> To be sure, although a new protagonist entered the stage in the New Testament, the ‘thing’ of the texts remains the same: naming God. For Ricoeur, it does not make any sense to speak about Christ apart from the God of his proclamation. But that does not mean that the content of the naming God is unchanged. As noted earlier, Ricoeur rightly points out a difference in tendencies between both testaments; a difference that needs to be ‘dialectically articulated.’<sup>17</sup> It seems to me that the only way to

<sup>12</sup> The adjective ‘patrological’ is derived from Robert Jenson and aims to provide clarity in the possible confusion of ‘theology’ in the general sense and statements about the first person of the Trinity in the stricter sense. I am aware that in the thought of Jenson it functions as the basis to move the ‘source of the deity’ from the Father to the Spirit. A move to which I do not adhere, but the language helps me to focus on the problem at hand: how to speak about Christ using a concept linked to the first person of the Trinity. Cf. Robert W Jenson, *Systematic Theology Vol. 1*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997:115-124.

<sup>13</sup> Ricoeur, “Naming God,” 227.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 230. Italics: Ricoeur.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 231.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 231. Ricoeur seems to refer to Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematische Theologie Band II*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015:37 f.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 232. This emphasis on differences in the biblical texts (here between the Old Testament and the New Testament) reminds of Ricoeur’s dealing with the “Biblical polyphony” of the genres found in the Bible, sharing a “common goal (i.e. to name God), which escapes each of them.” Ricoeur, “Naming God,” 223-228.

do that properly is to consider the naming of Christ as related to the God named in, for example, the Exodus narrative – given my presupposition that the ‘naming of Christ’ is the central concern of the gospels as theological documents. Or, to say with the Early Church: “οὕτως δεῖ ἡμᾶς φρονεῖν περὶ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, ὡς περὶ θεοῦ.”<sup>18</sup> We must think about Christ as we think about God, if we want to meet Ricoeur’s wish to ‘dialectically articulate’ the differences, and understand the metaphorical language of John 15:1-8 within the framework of biblical polyphony as another dimension to the ‘is ... is not ... is like.’

### Jesus is, is not, and is like the True Vine

In this paragraph I will focus on an analysis of the text of John 15:1-8. As said, with all the limitations this paper has, the aim is to read it along the lines sketched by Ricoeur. For a provisional dealing – in terms of answering the sub-question – with the text, two steps must be taken here. First of all, a structuralistic approach to the text; although Ricoeur’s hermeneutical project can be described as a reaction to structuralism as an ideology, he rightly considers a structuralistic analysis of the text a necessary first step.<sup>19</sup> Following those steps, I will briefly draw attention to several levels of structures: the pericope itself, the direct narrative context, and the larger scheme of the gospel according to John. Secondly, the background and the *Sitz im Leben* of the imagery of the vine will be explored. In that section the question is whether it fits the criterion Ricoeur formulated for a metaphor to be considered a ‘living’ metaphor: did it have the potential to create a new reality? What kind of biblical narratives are called into the mind of the reader?

### A Structure of the End Drawing Near

The pericope at hand stands within the larger framework of the so-called ‘Farewell Discourses’ of John 13:1-17:26, consisting of three smaller units marked as the first-, second, and third discourse, and is ended with a ‘farewell prayer’ – although the result of a process of compilation, the continual reworking resulted in a unified narrative, both in style and in content.<sup>20</sup> According to Moloney, strongly drawing from the work of Fernando Segovia, the central issue in the first twelve chapters is that Jesus *is* God’s great intervention in history.<sup>21</sup> This claim needs an exposition of how this could possibly be the case; a proleptic account of the immediate future of Jesus and of the disciples is necessary. The first because it reveals something about the means by which God will intervene through Jesus, and the latter since the future of the disciples is at stake with the anticipated return of their Master. The group of disciples seems to have an important function in the rhetoric of the Johannine gospel, since they serve as protagonists for the implied reader and therefore for both the Johannine community and other believers.<sup>22</sup> As an overall structure of

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Cf. Ricoeur, “Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation,” in *idem.*, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, trans. and ed. Lewis S Mudge. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1980:47-77.

<sup>18</sup> 2 Clement 1:1; *LCL* 24:164.

<sup>19</sup> Ricoeur, “Philosophical and Biblical Hermeneutics” in *idem.*, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007:89-101:90; *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974:77; Derived from: Arie Zwiep, *Tussen tekst en lezer: Een historische inleiding in de bijbelse hermeneutiek – Deel II: Van moderniteit naar postmoderniteit*. Amsterdam: VU University Press, 2013:302.

<sup>20</sup> Francis J Moloney, *The Gospel of John: Text and Context*. Biblical Interpretation Series 72; Boston, Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2005:260 f.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 262.

<sup>22</sup> James L Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism of the New Testament: An Introduction*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005:138-141.

the Farewell Discourses – as a textual unit trying to address questions raised in the first twelve chapters – Painter correctly sets out the following:

- a. Setting (13:1-10)
- b. First discourse (13:31-14:31)
- c. Second discourse (15:1-16:4a)
- d. Third discourse (16:4b-33)
- e. Farewell prayer (17:1-26)<sup>23</sup>

An essential part of the Farewell Discourses regarding the future of the community of believers gathered around Jesus is the promise of ‘another Paraclete.’ So far, the reader only knew of Jesus as the means of God’s intervention, but in the Paraclete a new character enters the stage. While Jesus is about the return to the Father, this new character will be with the disciples εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα.<sup>24</sup> With the introduction of this second character, just as Jesus is sent by the Father, the direct narrative context has to be understood in a new perspective. It is this motive, the future of the disciples, related to both the Father and Jesus through the Spirit (cryptically introduced just after the promise of the other Paraclete in v.20), that sets the stage for the metaphor of Jesus as the true vine, as the beginning of the second discourse (15:1-16:4a). But at the same time, it paves the way for what could be considered as the core of the Farewell Discourses: Jesus’s command for the disciples to love as he loved.<sup>25</sup> And, as Jesus continues, the consequence of acting so is hatred, rejection and expulsion (15:8-16:4) – here a polemic tendency becomes manifest. The Discourses end with the vision of Jesus being victor of the cosmos, and comes to an end with the so-called High Priestly prayer, with all its cryptic descriptions of the relationship between the Father and Jesus.

The end of Jesus as God’s revelation *on* earth draws near, as 13:1 emphasises. In the Farewell Discourses the implied reader is initiated in both the direct future of Jesus, how that continues typical Johannine motives such as δόξα τοῦ θεοῦ, and how that affects the community of believers. It is here within the narrative structure of the Gospel of John and of the Farewell Discourses that the metaphor is introduced. In the pericope a movement back and forth can be noted from Jesus, the Father, and the believers existing in unity on the one hand, to the polemic between Jesus and the cosmos, and between the disciples (as protagonists for the reader) and the world on the other. All this should be considered when the meaning (the ‘thing’) of the metaphorical language is explored.

### *The True Vine Between Polemics and Unity*

Although NA28 does not indicate that ἐγὼ εἰμι ἡ ἄμπελος ἡ ἀληθινὴ is part of a quotation (Jer. 2:21 and Ps. 80:9-20 are marked as possible parallels in margin) “[c]ommentators most frequently point to the biblical image of Israel as vine (Ps. 80:8-16; Isa. 27:2-6; Jer. 2:21; Ezek. 15:2-6; 17:5-10; 19:10-14).”<sup>26</sup> The annexation of this image related to Israel

<sup>23</sup> John Painter, “The Johannine Literature,” in Stanley E Porter (ed.) *A Handbook to the Exegesis of the New Testament*. Boston, Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2002:555-590:574.

<sup>24</sup> Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, 267.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 283.

<sup>26</sup> Graig S Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary – Vol. 2*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003:991. E.g. Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to John. Revised Edition*, NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995:593 ff; Udo Schnelle, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes*, ThHNT; Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2009:239 f; Ulrich Wilckens, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998:236.

contains a complete redefinition; while Israel used to be the true vine, cared for by the Lord, Jesus becomes the 'true' vine with the Father as ὁ γεωργός.<sup>27</sup> The adjective may suggest the replacement of Israel by Jesus – to be sure, the church is not mentioned here as replacing Israel, but merely as rooted *in* the true vine. As Nicholas T Wright demonstrated for the parable of the vineyard (Mt. 20:1-16),<sup>28</sup> it seems safe to assume metaphorical language related to a vine and/or vineyard has a high polemic potential. Snackenburg thus writes: "Wenn Jesus der 'König Israels' ist (1:49; 12:13), liegt der Gedanke, daß er das wahre Israel repräsentiert, nicht fern."<sup>29</sup> Several scholars explain this polemic tendency in the Johannine gospel by stating that the socio-historical context of the Johannine community was one of persecution by and competition with the Jewish communities, while others argued that it reflects debates with outsiders considering conflict as in the past.<sup>30</sup> Since the first explanation faces serious critique in contemporary biblical studies, I opt for the more careful interpretation, assuming that it is the reflection of theological debates with Jewish leaders over the identity of the 'true people' of the one God.

Another important characteristic of Farewell Discourses is that their focus, besides Christological concerns, is on the disciples (as protagonists of the implied reader). Therefore, the metaphor is expanded to include them as well: ἐγώ εἰμι ἡ ἄμπελος, ὑμεῖς τὰ κλήματα (v.5). A new dimension is inserted: besides that Jesus is, is not, and is like the true vine, the disciples – and thereby the implied reader – are, are not, and are like the branches. The same can be said about the Father, who is, is not, and is like the gardener. It is exactly this multiplicity that characterises the Farewell Discourses: the 'intertwining' of the Father, the Son, and the believers, stands at its core.

Concluding, it might be said that the metaphorical language of Jesus as the true vine has several meanings, two of which are explored here: Jesus as replacing Israel, and the unity and interaction between Jesus, the Father, and the believers/disciples.

### ἐγώ εἰμι as an Estrangement?

In recent research, the ἐγώ εἰμι-sayings are regarded as structuring devices, used by the author(s) of the gospel of John to create a Christological framework to gain insight into the identity of this man called Jesus. Stanley Porter sets out a scheme to categorise the different usages of those devices in the Johannine gospel: absolute usage, in which the ἐγώ εἰμι-saying stands on its own; locative usage, in which the construction has adjunctive attachments, or is part of adverbial/locative structure; predicate usage, a structure with a predicate complement.<sup>31</sup> The text at hand, Jesus as the true vine, seems to fit perfect in the latter class. According to Porter, "[p]redicate constructions are used to elucidate the messianic Christology by appealing to examples (often vividly pictorial) that enlighten the notion of a messianic figure."<sup>32</sup> At the same time the diversity of images used in the predicate usage of the ἐγώ εἰμι-construction leads to something Porter describes as an

<sup>27</sup> Morris, *John*, 593.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Nicholas T Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*. London: Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge, 1996:178.

<sup>29</sup> Rudolf Schnackenburg, *Das Johannesevangelium III: Kommentar zu Kapitel 13-21*. HThK; Freiburg, Basel, Wien: Herder Theologischer Verlag, 2000:121.

<sup>30</sup> For a short overview of both interpretations, and the rise of criticism of the first explanation, cf. Raimo Hakola, *Reconsidering Johannine Christianity: A Social Identity Approach*. New York: Routledge, 2015:44 f.

<sup>31</sup> Stanley E Porter, *John, His Gospel, and Jesus: In Pursuit of the Johannine Voice*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015:128.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 128. Cf. *ibid.*, 141 f.

“expansive messianic Christology.”<sup>33</sup> Or to say it with Larsen, the ἐγώ εἶμι-sayings “are Jesus’s most explicit self-revelatory statement, but they do not pin him down to one, single title. They rather display various aspects of his identity, showing that he is not as easy to grasp as in simple, proper-name recognitions, and this diversity creates a sense of estrangement.”<sup>34</sup> In addition to what I stated above, namely that the image of the vine is multi-interpretable, the saying at hand should be understood as part of a broader set of images through which Jesus chose to reveal himself. It seems that the true vine metaphor cannot be reduced to one meaning, just as Jesus cannot be reduced to one of the seven ἐγώ εἶμι sayings.

### Contours of a Metaphorical Christology

In this section the results of the closer look at John 15:1-8, with Ricoeur’s concept of ‘metaphor’ in mind, are examined. The aim is to map out some implications for Christological utterances, based on the observations made in the previous paragraphs.

#### *Christ and Estrangement*

Metaphorical language has an intrinsic threefold dynamic: “is, is not, and is like.”<sup>35</sup> When applied to theological speech about Christ, in this case as found in the Gospel of John understood as a theological document drafted by the so-called Johannine community, that means Christ is, is not, and is like the true vine – or whatever metaphor is used in the predicate structure. All the possible meanings of the ‘true vine’ are activated by this usage, described by Ricoeur as ‘polysemy.’ But just as the different genres within the biblical polyphony,<sup>36</sup> the ‘thing’ of the metaphor escapes each of them. The mystery of Christ, as God’s ultimate revelation, cannot be grasped by a single meaning ascribed to the metaphor, just as that single metaphor cannot grasp Jesus’s identity. Therefore, a metaphorical Christology should always create a sense of estrangement, allowing Christ truly to become the Other – thus, the only language able to draw near to the mystery that is God in history.<sup>37</sup> But by doing just so, it could renew one’s understanding of Christ that cannot be reached apart from the innovation of semantics inherent to metaphorical language. It provides a living metaphor suited for the living Christ, possibly even the only way to do Christology proper.

#### *Christ, Text, Intertext and Context*

The greatest challenge for a ‘metaphorical’ Christology is not so much the application of new and ‘living’ metaphors to Christ, but to interpret those already formulated in the New Testament ‘metaphorically.’ “To interpret metaphorically is to see resemblances between texts and other texts or contexts where none were intended,”<sup>38</sup> based on the assumption that language is in its essence a metaphorical phenomenon. Thus, a metaphorical Christology,

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>34</sup> KB Larsen, *Recognizing the Stranger: Recognition Scenes in the Gospel of John*. Boston, Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2008:150. Via Porter, *John, His Gospel, and Jesus*, 148.

<sup>35</sup> Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 7.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. n.17.

<sup>37</sup> Thereby answering to theology’s primary task, that is finding ways to express in contemporary concepts how Jesus is God’s all-changing intervention. Cf. Jenson, *ST I*, 3-22.

<sup>38</sup> Kevin J Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998:130. Although the concept of ‘authorial intention’ seems problematic to me, this way of reading biblical texts remains useful if we insert the word ‘explicit.’



needs readers with a sensitivity to the metaphorical character of the theological documents that are the Bible. Only by doing so, the sum of the metaphorical narrative is drawn into the Christological debate by a process of creative imagination and association. A condition for a reader capable of doing just so, is a community where he or she is trained in the cultural semantics necessary for reading the texts. Besides being rooted in the cultural-linguistic practices of a certain community, historical knowledge of the context in which the text originated is needed as well – what the metaphor of the ‘true vine’ could imply for the Johannine community. Or to put it differently: a metaphorical Christology needs trained readers moving back and forth from text and its context to present day, drawing on the resources and experiences of a certain community to understand metaphors used in the past – at the same time aware of ever present *plus one* character of metaphorical language – and to formulate new and living metaphors for an contemporary audience.

### *Naming Christ as Self-Differentiation*

Although I am reluctant to address this topic, it is a necessary one. As noted above, the ‘thing’ of the New Testament does not differ from the Old Testament: Naming Christ is naming God. Ricoeur sees it as an important task for Christology to keep together the different dominant motives of the Old Testament on the one hand and the New Testament on the other; a difference that needs to be ‘dialectically articulated’ in order to succeed.<sup>39</sup> A metaphorical Christology needs to relate Christological utterances to the broader scheme of theology (in line with Jenson to ‘patrology’ and pneumatology in particular), in so doing standing in the tradition of 2 Clement. Although that is truly an important task for Christology, there is also the need to differentiate Christ from the other person in the Trinity *and* emphasise the mutual interdependence within the Trinity. Therefore, it could be defended that the content of the New Testament offers a fresh perspective on the godhead of Israel – not absent in the Old Testament, but explicit and clearer in the person of Christ. The self-differentiation of the second person – a correlative and relation term – needs to be stressed in a metaphorical Christology.<sup>40</sup> The pericope at hand offers an insightful approach to this concern, developing a metaphor that includes both the Father (ὁ πατήρ μου ὁ γεωργός ἐστίν) and the Son (ἐγώ εἰμι ἡ ἄμπελος ἡ ἀληθινή), and in a way is linked to the promise of ‘another Paraclete.’ A metaphorical understanding of Christ has to be placed within a trinitarian framework. That is, it is to be understood in relation to the other persons of the Trinity, but at the same time as addressing to the same ‘thing;’ God’s dealing with the world in history.

### **Conclusion**

The three previous paragraphs were designed to develop provisional answers to the sub-questions, in order to formulate an answer to the main question of my project: What is the relevance of Ricoeur’s understanding of the concept of metaphor, tested by an application to the of ἐγώ εἰμι sayings John 15:1-8, for Christology?

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<sup>39</sup> Ricoeur, “Naming God,” 232.

<sup>40</sup> My understanding of ‘self-differentiation’ and of ‘personhood’ is derived from Pannenberg, *Systematische Theologie Band I*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015:335-346. Just as Ricoeur referred to Pannenberg, I do the same. By doing so, I am able to complete a ‘trinitarian’ reading of the pericope – although I am aware that is a dangerous approach due to its anachronistic tendencies – by stressing that the renewed corpus of believers, rooted in the vine, is the immanent third person of the Trinity. Cf. Pannenberg, *Jesus – God and Man*, trans. LL Wilkins & DA Priebe. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1968:177.

The relevance of metaphor understood along the lines of Paul Ricoeur lies therein that it focuses on the necessity of creative and ‘living’ metaphors for proper speech about Christ, even though the ‘thing’ will always have yet *another* meaning. A condition for such metaphorical language is unpretentious knowledge of both the text and context of the metaphors applied to Christ in the New Testament – as well as those applied to the godhead in the Bible as a whole – and a firm understanding of the context of the contemporary reader. Or, with Bonhoeffer: “Wer ist Jesus Christus *für uns heute*?”<sup>41</sup> In this process of moving back and forth from text to reader, theology needs to understand all metaphorical language related to Christ in a trinitarian framework, using the concept of ‘self-differentiation’ alongside the interdependence and unity of the three persons of the Trinity.

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<sup>41</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Widerstand und Ergebung* (DBW 8; Gütersloh: Kaiser Verlag, 1998:402. Letter dated on 30-04-1944.

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