Suppose a person ponders the light emitted from the lamp on her/his desk. Two aspects of this emission of energy may be considered. On the one hand, one may consider the source of the energy and its transmission through the electrical grid to the home and then to the lamp. On the other hand, one may wonder about the nature and effect of the energy emitted by the bulb, which is related to but not the same as the excitement of electrons found in the electrical grid. The excited electrons generated at the electrical plant are not the same light particles/wave that flows from the bulb, although the two phenomena are linked through cause and effect and are thus inseparable when it comes to the reality of the light itself.

Since “light” plays a significant role in amplifying the nature and mission of the Logos in the Prologue of John’s gospel (1:4), let us, taking more liberties with the imagery than is found in the gospel itself, consider its metaphorical and paradigmatic usefulness – while recognizing its limitations and inadequacies – for orienting our study of John 3:14-15. On the one hand, we might consider the generation of the tradition and the lines of transmission through historical, source, form, and redaction critical studies. This approach comprehends the sources available and the influences on the composition

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of the gospel even if a consensus is not reached on all details.  

2 On the other hand, discovering the origins of the tradition and sketching the main lines of its transmission affecting the composition of the gospel is not the same as accounting for the nature and effect of John’s narrative itself and herein lies the difference and yet connection between the diachronic and synchronic approaches to the text. The origin and transmission of the incident of Moses placing the serpent on a standard to bring life to those bitten by the serpents are ably identified, as our study in the paragraphs below will touch upon from time to time. Briefly put, the tradition passes through both wisdom and rabbinic schools and through the synagogue.  

3 Yet these sources, their form, and their Sitz im Leben address only the lines of influence upon the composition of the gospel.  

4 As far as John is concerned, Yahweh is the source of the event and of the serpent image that Moses made and displayed just as Jesus is sent by the Father into the world. Yahweh commanded its making and made it provide life to those bitten by the serpents just as the Father has given to Jesus what he is to do and say. The various lines of transmission through which this story is received were no doubt known to the composer(s) and redactors within the Johannine community, however, these insights, essential as they may be, do not describe the light emitted by the gospel itself. What is the nature and insight of this light? Our study is situated in the parameters suggested by this question. Therefore, while some account of the diachronic process will be taken into consideration, the focus of our study is synchronic.  

Specifically, our study takes a two-pronged focus. First, our study is taxonomic. How shall we classify Jesus’ saying in 3:14-15? Although few interpreters disagree about the gist of what John means by these verses, particularly v. 14, there is wide disagreement regarding how to classify the appropriation of the biblical tradition. Are we dealing with an analogy or comparison, a prophetic fulfillment, or a typology?  

Second, flowing from the first aim of our study, what is John’s unique insight to the Word and Son in this verse that distinguishes his use of the tradition from the tradition itself? Before we take up these points, however, it will serve us well to rehearse the attributes of the text in John.  

I. John 3:1-21  

The saying evoking the serpent in the wilderness event is deployed within the context of Jesus’ encounter with Nicodemus, who comes to Jesus clandestinely by night (cf. 19:39). It is not clear what Nicodemus expects to receive from Jesus. Apparently he

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2 Keener, John, 1:3-330.  


4 Consider, for example, Keener’s (John, 1:76-9) bracketing of the “question of transmission” when examining the features of Johannine discourse.
intends to affirm Jesus’ status as one “come from God as a teacher” and this view is justified by the observation that Jesus performs signs, which show that “God is with him” (v. 2). In the verses that follow, Jesus offers increasingly longer and mysterious speeches as replies to Nicodemus’s repeated and simple question, “How can this be?” In Jesus’ final reply to Nicodemus, he compares the serpent raised by Moses in the wilderness (Num 21:8-9) to his own future raising up: “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life” (3:14-15).5 To begin, we shall consider the surrounding context of John 3:1-21 and then its narrative structure. This will be done mainly with a view to the situation of 3:14-15.

A. Literary Context

Jesus’ encounter with Nicodemus does not end as previous stories do up to this point in the narrative, that is, with a clear expression of faith. At the conclusion of the baptismal scene, the two disciples followed Jesus and stayed with him (1:38-39). One of these disciples, Andrew, retrieves his brother Simon, announcing, “We have found the Messiah” (1:41). To this early number are added Philip and Nathanael, the latter of whom Jesus promises will see “the heavens opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man” (1:51), language that will reappear in the context of our story (3:13, 15). Hence, Jesus’ initial appearance is met with actions denoting faith and Jesus offers a foretaste of what his disciples may expect to comprehend, a foretaste that interestingly corresponds to what he tells Nicodemus in themes of descending and ascending.

In the story of the wedding at Cana, the conclusion is marked by the disciples’ belief in Jesus (2:11). Similarly, despite the controversy aroused by his actions cleansing the temple, there is once more a statement regarding the faith of the disciples. They believe Jesus’ words about the destruction and rebuilding of the temple, his own body, and they believe the scriptures with respect to Jesus’ death and resurrection (2:22).

In 2:23-25, a narrative summary and bridge that we shall discuss momentarily, the narrator attests to those who “believed in his name” because of the signs that he performed. In short, Jesus is met with belief and acts of discipleship up to this point in the narrative. It is only Nicodemus, the one who professes to know that Jesus is a teacher sent by God (v. 2), who appears to be ambivalent about overtly professing belief in Jesus, as Jesus himself points out in v. 12, “How will you believe?” Nicodemus’s imperfect faith, if not unbelief, despite his profession in v. 2, only adds to the sense of tension and at times contradiction presented by the narrative.6 Tension surrounding belief and

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5 Unless stated otherwise, all translations come from the NRSV.

6 Wayne Meeks (“The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism,” JBL 91 [1972] 44-72, esp. p. 54) interprets Nicodemus’ actions as an imperfect expression of faith, but an expression minimally acceptable to the Johannine community. On the other hand, Schnackenburg (The Gospel according to John. Volume One: Introduction and Commentary on Chapters 1 – 4 [New York: Herder and Herder; London: Burns & Oates, 1968] 364) interprets his actions as unbelief yet thinks he does not typify the unbelieving Jew. See also Keener, John, 1:533-36. The motif of conflict is particularly signaled by the mention of Moses in 3:14. Throughout John’s gospel, Moses is mentioned 13 times and most of these
unbelief comes to a high point in 3:18-21. Jesus proclaims in language redolent of the Prologue (1:7-9) that there are those who are already judged and condemned because they have not believed in him and because, their deeds being evil, they hate the light and love the darkness.

When Nicodemus appears later in the narrative (7:50-51), the same problem of ambivalence with respect to faith in Jesus is associated with him. In 7:37-53 Jesus is once more in Jerusalem, this time attending the Feast of Tabernacles. He presses home the issue of faith, promising to those who believe in him living water (7:38). Moreover, questions about Jesus’ identity are bandied about. Is he the Prophet (7:40)? The Christ (7:41)? The Pharisees hear the peoples’ talk about Jesus and send officers to fetch him (7:33). Upon the envoy’s empty handed return to the chief priests and Pharisees because they were awestruck at the manner in which Jesus spoke (7:45), the religious leaders retort, “No one of the rulers or Pharisees has believed in him, has he?” (7:48). At this point, Nicodemus can only muster a measure of legal defense for Jesus before his peers, noting that the Law does not judge those who have not been granted a hearing (7:50-51). The story concludes with the chief priests and Pharisees asking Nicodemus, “You are not also from Galilee, are you?” (7:52). In other words, “Is Nicodemus a disciple of Jesus?” To which Nicodemus is silent as in our passage also.

The narrative connection between the Nicodemus story (3:1-21) and the accounts of the events that precede it is accomplished by 2:23-25, a narrative summary and bridge. These verses link the stories in chapters two and three by repeating some of the important vocabulary from the previous stories in chapter 2 that will appear again in the story about Nicodemus and by introducing a literary foil to Nicodemus’s coming.

First, the setting is Jerusalem during the Passover (2:23, cf. v. 13), which provides the backdrop for Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews who comes to Jesus (3:1). Second, the πιστεύων vocabulary is stated twice in 2:23-25. During the feast many “believed in his name” (ἐπίστευσαν εἰς τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ) echoing similar language in the scenes at the wedding feast at Cana and the temple cleansing during the Passover feast at Jerusalem (2:11,22). The vocabulary reappears in the last of Jesus’ discourses in the Nicodemus story.

[Y]et you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe (οὐ πιστεύετε) how can you believe (πιστεύετε) if I tell you about heavenly things? (3:11-12)

[T]hat whoever believes (ὁ πιστεύων) in him may have eternal life. (3:15)

Those who believe (ὁ πιστεύων) in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe (ὁ δὲ μὴ πιστεύων) are condemned already, because they appear in a context in which Jesus and his words and deeds are challenged or set in relief by the practices or views of others. See especially, 5:45-46; 6:32; 7:19, 22-23; 8:5; 9:28-29.

7 Meeks, “Man from Heaven,” 54-55.

8 Nicodemus does not remain so ambivalent. He appears at the cross before the dead Jesus to remove his body from the cross and prepare it for burial (19:39).

have not believed (πεπίστευκεν) in the name of the only Son of God.
(3:18)

The πιστεύειν vocabulary is significant for the interpretation of all of Jesus’ sayings to Nicodemus, but particularly those in the last discourse in which the vocabulary is concentrated as we see above. The vocabulary, so emphasized here, may be the hermeneutical point of reference for the interpretation of Jesus’ use of the tradition about the serpent lifted up in the wilderness. It would appear that faith in Jesus opens the door to the understanding of his appropriation of the wilderness event that anticipates and explains his own death and exaltation.

Third, the σημεῖον vocabulary is used in the narrative summary and bridge. During the Passover, the multitude believes in Jesus’ name because they beheld his “signs” (τὰ σημεῖα; 2:23). This vocabulary links the Nicodemus account with two previous stories, the wedding at Cana, where the first of Jesus’ signs was performed and the occasion for the disciples’ inaugural faith in Jesus (2:11), and the cleansing of the temple at Jerusalem, whereupon the Jews ask for signs to authenticate Jesus’ authority (2:18), a request that is not fulfilled. In the three discourses with Nicodemus, the vocabulary disappears. In its place, Jesus proclaims himself to be the ultimate sign. He is the Son of Man who has descended and will ascend. His death and exaltation is the parallel to the symbol of the serpent lifted up in the wilderness. As the verses containing the πιστεύειν vocabulary quoted in the paragraph above indicate, the object of faith is Jesus, even as this faith is assisted by the signs he performs.

Fourth, the Nicodemus story is linked to the preceding accounts by the narrative summary and bridge through the deployment of the noun ἄνθρωπος. In this section, the noun is employed generically, echoing its generic and collective meaning in the Cana story (2:10). The noun is redeployed in the Nicodemus story with the same generic sense in the introduction of Nicodemus in 3:1, in Nicodemus’s query in 3:4, and in the last of Jesus’ discourses when referring to the many “people”10 (οἱ ἄνθρωποι) who have not believed the only begotten Son of God (3:19). The noun is used with a specialized sense in Jesus’ two-fold reference to himself as the Son of Man (3:13-14; ἄνθρωπος).

Finally, the puzzling statement in 2:24-25 that Jesus did not trust himself (οὐκ ἐπίστευεν αὐτὸν) to others acts as a foil to the πιστεύειν vocabulary and to the enigmatic yet personal disclosures that Jesus makes to Nicodemus during his night-time visit. Although Jesus’ initial response to Nicodemus appears to brush off his overtures of apparent belief, the subsequent exchange shows Jesus challenging Nicodemus directly and personally. Jesus’ reticence to entrust himself to the people during the feast, even those who believed in his name, forms an inclusio with statements in 3:19-20 about human evil and those who do not believe Jesus and are thus condemned.11 The narrative structure of the encounter between Nicodemus and Jesus showcases many of these points.

10 This is one of the instances in which the avoidance of gender specific language, although honoring the sensitivities of some readers, actually obstructs the full measure of the evangelist’s message. For an example of the same in Paul’s writings, see Gregory Vall, “Inclusive Language and the Equal Dignities of Women and Men in Christ,” The Thomist 67 (2003) 579-606.

11 Brodie, John, 200.
B. The Narrative Structure of John 3:1-21

The story of Nicodemus begins with an introduction and preamble (vv. 1-2) followed by a tri-fold pattern of discourses hinged together by Nicodemus’s two queries. The exchange between Nicodemus and Jesus is formulaic, as the vocabulary in the following outline indicates:

v. 1 Introduction: ἦν δὲ ἀνθρώπος ἐκ τῶν Φαρισαίων…

v. 2 Preamble: The seemingly polite overture is ironic: Nicodemus comes privately at night to profess affirmation of Jesus based on his signs, which are open, public displays, as one sent from God.

v. 3 Jesus’ first response is formulaic:

A reply seemingly unrelated to Nicodemus’s overture.

v. 4 Nicodemus’s first question (formulaically): πῶς δύναται…

v. 5-8 Jesus’ second response is formulaic:

Jesus sidesteps Nicodemus’s question, offering a telescopic expansion of the teaching in v. 3 that one must be born of water and the spirit.

v. 9 Nicodemus’s second question (formulaically): πῶς δύναται…

v. 10-21 Jesus’ third and final response divides into two parts:

a. vv. 10-15: Jesus side-steps Nicodemus’s query by answering his question with a question:

Then Jesus launches into additional teaching with the usual formula: ἀμὴν ἀμὴν λέγω σοι, ἐάν μὴ τίς…

b. vv. 16-21: More teaching, evocative of the Prologue, that develops the division between belief and unbelief that appears in vv. 1-12.

The fabric of the story is unified by repeated vocabulary supplied by the narrative summary and bridge (2:23-25) and by new vocabulary introducing Jesus as not just a performer of signs but as a teacher. Nicodemus refers to Jesus as “Rabbi” and “teacher” (διδάσκαλος), both of which mean the same thing in Nicodemus’s case. At the beginning of the last scene of the exchange, Jesus challenges Nicodemus, questioning his status as “teacher of Israel” (3:10). In v. 2 Nicodemus pronounces “we know” (οἴδαμεν), signaling a motif carried over from the bridge verses (2:24-25) and repeated by Jesus in v. 11 (cf. 3:25). In the first instance, Nicodemus appears to be speaking either for himself (a plural

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12 The opening formula (ἤν δὲ) probably indicates a free floating piece of tradition that is placed here for effect. Perhaps the event’s occurrence in Jerusalem attracted the story to this position in the gospel.
of politeness) or for the whole Jewish religious establishment in Jerusalem, or at least the Pharisees (v. 1).

Jesus’ use of the plural, however, may signal several levels of meaning. He may be using the plural deliberatively to express what he knows and thus speaks. On the level of composition and redaction, the plural of deliberation may signal the debate between Johannine believers and the synagogue. Jesus may also be speaking on behalf of the “children of God” who “received and believed” in him (1:11-12). Since the connection between John and Wisdom is obvious in our passage, these children may also be known as those “through whom the imperishable light of the law was to be given to the world” (Wis 18:4; cf. 18:1). Jesus and those who believe in him and his works constitute the true children of God, the true Israel.

Each vision is quite different. On the one hand, what Nicodemus and perhaps some of his peers know is what he addresses to Jesus, that Jesus is sent from God and is a teacher based on the signs he does. On the other hand, what Jesus knows and proclaims is confirmation of that perception but in a fashion that goes well beyond what Nicodemus has surmised about Jesus and that is based on the one sign, perhaps the ultimate sign, of Jesus being lifted up as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness. Nicodemus’s statement that “no one” (οὐδεὶς) is able to do such signs (v. 2) is echoed by Jesus’ assertion that “no one” (οὐδεὶς) ascends to heaven except the one who comes down from heaven, the Son of Man (v. 13).

The imagery of both the serpent and the Son of Man being lifted up (ὕψωσεν, ὑψωθήμαι) is colored by the narrative in two ways. First, it obtains cosmic significance from the references to the earthly (τὰ ἐπίγεια) and heavenly (τὰ ἐπουράνια) things, a distinction between human and divine knowledge, in Jesus’ query to Nicodemus in v. 12. Moreover, the imagery is colored with spiritual and cosmic significance by the references to ascending to (ἀναβήκεν εἰς) and descending from (ἐκ … καταβάς) heaven in v. 13.13

The cosmic dimension is also emphasized by the assertion in v. 16 that God loved the world (τὸν κόσμον).14

Our focus so far has been on the placement and meaning of key vocabulary. One should not overlook, however, the key concepts shaped by the dialogue between Nicodemus and Jesus. To begin, Nicodemus’s overture appears to affirm Jesus in terms that indicate nothing really new. Jesus is addressed as “Rabbi”, which is a common, polite and somewhat technical term ascribed because of Jesus’ activity attracting disciples and imparting wisdom as a learned sage.15 In synonymous fashion, Nicodemus also calls him a “teacher” (διδάσκολος), another seemingly pedestrian attribution despite the respect and social rank that it bears. The additional remarks that Nicodemus makes about Jesus, that he is “come from God” (ἀπὸ θεοῦ ἐλήλυθας) or that “God is with him” (ὁ θεὸς μετ’ αὐτοῦ), mark out Jesus as nothing other than what might be commonly expected within the Jewish tradition.16 These same remarks could have been applied to John the Baptist or any number of the OT prophets. Therefore, as we have noted in the

paragraphs above, Nicodemus’s overture hardly stands out as an affirmation of faith in the Johannine sense. Jesus will eventually affirm Nicodemus’s belief that Jesus is “come from God” but in terms evocative of the Prologue (1:7-9), since he refers to himself as the “light [that] came into the world” (τὸ φῶς ἐλήλυθεν…; 3:19).

In contrast to the pedestrian overture made by Nicodemus, Jesus oddly enough speaks about topics far from the ordinary, if not enigmatic. One is to be “born again” (or from above; vv. 3, 7), “born of water and spirit” (v. 5), to “enter into the kingdom of God” (v. 3, 5). One “born of the spirit” is like the wind that blows mysteriously (v. 8). Nicodemus can only wonder “How is it possible…?” (Πώς δύναται; vv. 4, 9). The scope of Jesus’ vision is so far beyond that of Nicodemus’s that Jesus remarks on it both indirectly and directly. The inadequacy of Nicodemus’s thought is challenged indirectly in v. 7, “Do not be amazed…” Two verses later (v. 9) Jesus strikes upon it directly: “Are you a teacher…and you do not know these things?” The inconsistency between the two perspectives of Jesus and Nicodemus is also connoted by the reference in v. 12 to the earthly and the heavenly dichotomy of knowledge. In other words, Jesus and Nicodemus are worlds apart in what they perceive and what they profess. Nicodemus appears to want to place Jesus safely in the well-known categories of his tradition, whereas Jesus introduces a new vision, new categories, and entirely new obligations. The reference to the lifting up of Jesus, compared with that of the serpent in the wilderness, marks the mid-way point of the final and longest discourse, indicating perhaps the answer to Nicodemus’s questions (“How is it possible…?”). It will be made possible by the lifting up of the Son of Man, the one who has bridged the gulf between heaven and earth by descending and ascending. It also suggests the link between the tradition from which Nicodemus draws and the new vision introduced by Jesus.

Our overview of the literary context and narrative shape of the story indicates a tight narrative integrity through the repetition of key vocabulary and motifs and a telescopic expansion of Jesus’ key theme, new life through faith in the Son of Man. The contrast between Nicodemus and Jesus with respect to vision and expectation colors the manner in which one is to view the comparison between the lifting up of the serpent in the wilderness and the lifting up of Jesus. While the two may be compared, the setting leads to the expectation that some dissonance and dissimilarity may be meaningful as well. We will return to these points below. Our next task is taxonomic. How is 3:14 to be classified: analogy, prophecy, or typology?

II. Three Interpretations of John 3:14

There is no consensus among interpreters regarding how this verse is to be classified. Most interpreters, as we shall see, consider John’s use of the wilderness scene to be prophecy fulfilled, biblical typology, or both. For the sake of argumentation and clarification, I have added the rather neutral classification, analogy and comparison, with which we shall begin. The aspects of analogy and comparison in Jesus’ saying will appear as well in the prophetic and typological interpretations that will be discussed later.
A. Analogy and Comparison: Καθώς…οὐτώς

Just as the Synoptics are well known for the three-fold repetition of Jesus’ prediction of his death (Matt 16:21; 17:22; 20:17; Mark 8:31; 9:30-31; 10:32-34; Luke 9:22-27; 9:43b-45; 18:31-34), so too is John for the three-fold announcement of Jesus’ lifting up, predicting his crucifixion and exaltation. And herein lies the problem. John 3:14 is grammatically structured just like our opening sentence:

Καὶ καθώς Μοσχής ψωσεν τὸ ὅψιν ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ
Οὐτώς ψωσθεὶναι δεῖ τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου

Grammatically speaking, the combination of the comparative conjunction καθώς and the correlative οὐτώς makes an analogical and comparative statement between two events: Moses’ lifting up of the serpent in the wilderness and Jesus’ lifting up on the cross and his exaltation. Thus, the grammar invites a rather neutral interpretation of v. 14. As we shall discuss in the paragraphs below, the neutral interpretation gives way to the pressures of other points of view. On the one hand, because one event is used to anticipate and interpret the occurrence of a future event, one may be inclined to consider a prophetic interpretation. On the other hand, because the former event is recorded in scripture and is a key event in salvation history pushes the analogy toward typology. The prophetic and typological interpretations will be treated soon. Before we do that, however, it may be helpful to appreciate the analogical and comparative force of the verse.

Comparative statements appear with some frequency in the gospel of John, although with slightly different grammatical constructions than we have here in 3:14. The grammatical construction καθώς…οὐτώς appears only three times in John’s gospel, once here in 3:14 and twice more in 12:50 and 15:4. In each of the last two instances, the statements are strictly analogical or comparative. In the case of 12:50, Jesus makes the assuring claim, “Just as (καθώς) the Father has spoken to me, so (οὐτώς) I speak.” The analogy asserts in strong terms that the content and authority of the Son’s speech is the same as that of the Father (cf. 8:28). In 15:4 the grammatical construction expresses the logic typically expected of a parable20 and, in John’s case, underscores the necessity of the unity between Jesus and his disciples: “Just as (καθώς) the branch is not able to bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so too (οὐτώς) neither are you unless you abide

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18 The construction καθώς…οὐνα is found in 13:34 and the construction καθώς…καγώ is found in 6:57; 15:9; 17:18; 20:21.
19 The translation is mine and is rather inelegant, but it retains the original grammatical structure. The NRSV reverses the structure and thus destroys the original grammatical formula: “I speak just as the Father has told me.” Jesus’ statement draws on Deut 18:18-19 and God’s promise to put his words in the mouth of the prophet. See Brown, John, 1:491-92.
20 On the use of οὐς to introduce parables, particularly in Mark 13:34 and Matt 25:14, see BDF §453 (4).
in me.”21 The deployment of this particular grammatical construction in John is in line with the ways that it is found elsewhere in the NT and in the LXX.

The LXX employs this grammatical construction to describe the correlation between speech and action (LXX Gen 41:13; Esth 6:10; Dan LXX Su 1:3), to correlate the relation between human behavior and divine recompense (LXX Jud 1:7, cf. Esth 2:20 in which the language of the formula is reversed: ὁτῶς… καθώς); to express oath formulae (LXX 2 Kings 3:9; 3 Kings 1:30, 37), to provide force to the moral teaching of a proverb (LXX Sir 27:18), to compare the status of the people and priests before God (Hos 4:9), and to formulate prophetic oracles, usually having to do with judgment (LXX Hos 11:2; Zach 1:6; Jer 49:18; Ezek 22:20 cf. Jer 19:11-13 for two examples of this nature but in which the language is reversed). In all of these instances one would have to conclude that, despite the serious nature of the topics that are expressed, the comparisons are rather pedestrian. There is nothing in these that indicates a prophetic sense nor typology.

In 2 Macc 2:10 we find an occurrence of the formula καθώς…ὁτῶς that is quite similar to that of John 3:14. It involves a comparison or analogy using a biblical event. As in John, an event in the life of Moses (Lev 9:24) is employed to authenticate and interpret the work of another, in this case, Solomon (2 Chron 7:1): “Just as Moses (Καθως και Μωυσης) prayed before the Lord and fire came down from heaven and consumed the sacrifice, so also Solomon (ὁτως και Σαλωμων) prayed, and the fire came down and consumed the whole burnt offering.” In this particular instance, the point seems to be analogy and comparison. The notion of prophecy fulfilled or an antitype supplied by Solomon is not present. If this passage may be used as a model for the one we have in John, then the argument that mere analogy and comparison is meant by the so called “lifting up” statements, instead of prophecy or typology, gains some credibility.

In the NT, there are only three other passages that replicate this grammatical formula exactly as we find it in John 3:14. Paul uses this grammatical combination in 2 Cor 1:5: “Just as (καθως) Christ’s sufferings overflow, so too (ὁτως) through Christ does our encouragement overflow.”22 The formula is strictly analogical and comparative.

The other two examples come from Luke and both passages employ the formula to introduce an analogy dealing with a biblical event. Also in both instances, the phrase “Son of Man” is used in reference to Jesus as in John 3:14. In the first passage, Luke 11:30, Jesus responds to the crowd, which “asks for a sign” (11:29): “For just as (καθως) Jonah became a sign to the people of Ninevah, so (ὁτως) the Son of Man will be to this generation.”23 Interpreters react to this passage differently. A few examples will

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21 The translation is mine and is once again quite inelegant. Nevertheless, I have retained the grammatical construction, which is lost in the NRSV but essential to our investigation.
22 See also καθως και…ὁτως και in Col 3:13. Comparisons using this and similar formulae were common enough in NT usage that the ellipsis of one of the particles was not uncommon. See, for example, 1 Cor 11:2.
23 Since this saying also appears in Matt 12:40 in a fuller form, its source may have been Q (cf. Mark 8:11-12) and was abbreviated by Luke. However, some interpreters regard the longer version in Matthew to have resulted from Matthean embellishment, whereas others argue that the differences stem from two separate traditions of a single saying. For a discussion on these points, see I. Howard Marshall, The Gospel of Luke (NIGTC; Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans; Exeter: Paternoster, 1978) 482-83. In any case, the formulation of this saying in Matthew is nearly identical to the one in Luke: “For just as (ὁσπερ γαρ)
illustrate the point. I. Howard Marshall does not entertain a discussion of the possible prophetic or typological force of this saying.24 Examining the future tense ἔσται, John Nolland rejects the logical future interpretation, that Jesus is already a present sign to the “evil generation” (11:29) that he addresses, and the true future interpretations, which state the status of the Son of Man in various ways: his coming in judgment at the parousia, his victory over death at the resurrection, and his status in the remainder of the public ministry. He argues for a true future in the sense that it refers to Jesus’ public ministry as a whole, which is still in process.25 But Nolland, like Marshall, does not entertain the notion that Jonah’s predicament is a prophecy nor a type anticipating the public ministry and death of Jesus. Moreover, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, quoting Bultmann, finds irony here but not prophecy or typology: “Just as Jonah came to the Ninevites from a distant country, so will the Son of Man come to this generation from heaven; i.e. the sign asked for the preaching of Jesus is the Son of Man himself, when he comes to judgment.”26 In contrast to these interpreters, R. T. France does see a typological significance in the sign value of Jonah in this passage and its Matthean counterpart.27

The second passage in Luke applies the grammatical construction καθὼς…οὕτως to Noah and the circumstances associated with him: “Just as (καθὼς) it came about in the days of Noah, so also (οὕτως) it will be in the days of the Son of Man” (17:26; cf. v. 28).28 Marshall, drawing from Schulz, notes that this verse contains the construction of “exact comparison.”29 No mention is made of prophecy or typology; and the comparison is not that exact. Nolland contends that the phrase “in the days of the Son of Man” refers to “the time period when the revealing of the Son of Man will take place” but does not call it prophecy.30 He indicates that the verse makes a comparison and then claims that Jewish tradition already contained “typological appeal to the deluge” to reinforce the unavoidable nature of God’s judgment upon the wicked.31 In other words, this verse attracts a possible typological interpretation because the deluge story of Genesis 6 – 9 had already done so, not because Noah and the flood are a typology of Jesus and the judgment he brings. Fitzmyer is simply silent on the matter.32

The overall impression given by the LXX and NT passages that contain the grammatical construction καθὼς…οὕτως is that the formulation is neither clearly prophetic nor typological, even when the formula is employed to compare a biblical
character and event with Jesus and events happening presently or anticipated in his public ministry. A good case may be made, therefore, for the view that our passage in John is merely analogical and comparative. There are elements of dissonance in this analogy. The comparison is not exact. These shall be treated in the paragraphs below after we consider the prophetic and typological interpretations.

B. The Prophetic Interpretation

The prophetic force of John 3:14-15 is two-dimensional. On the one hand, with a view to the completion of Jesus’ mission, the saying predicts the lifting up of Jesus, which itself is two dimensional, since the image includes both his death and exaltation (cf. 12:32, 34). On the other hand, the saying is a backward glance toward an event in the wilderness tradition recorded in Num 21:9. The saying may also be a midrashic re-appropriation of the wilderness motif in the targumim, in Wis 16:5-8, and in the Suffering Servant imagery found in Isaiah 52 – 53. Since the passage from Numbers is the principle reference, we shall begin there.

1. MT Num 21:4-9

MT Num 21:4-9 marks the beginning of the trail. Leaving Mount Hor and traveling by way of the Red Sea so as to skirt Edom, the people express their impatience by murmuring against Yahweh and his prophet. They are particularly displeased with the food and absence of water, minor inconveniences in light of their recent liberation. Yahweh’s response is two-fold: the sending of “stinging serpents” and his command to Moses to make a “stinging serpent” and place it upon a standard for the healing of those bitten. The narrative supplies vocabulary that is important not only for its graphic imagery and polyvalence but also for its variety as the narrative unfolds. We shall begin with the latter.

The variety of the “serpent” vocabulary has been a point of interest and intrigue. Yahweh sends מְשָׁפֶט מְשָׁפֶט פַּפַּר (“the serpents, the stinging ones”, or “the stinging serpents” v. 6), then commands Moses to make for himself a פַּפַּר (“stinging serpent”, v. 8) after the people confess their sins and request Moses’ intercession (v. 7). Complying with Yahweh’s command, yet not exactly, Moses makes a תָּעָה תָּעָה (“bronze serpent”, v. 9a) and places it on a standard so that on the occasion when תָּעָה (“the serpent”, v. 9b) bites one of the Israelites, he may look upon the תָּעָה (“the bronze serpent”, v. 9b) and live.

34 Keener, John, 1:563-66.
36 The NRSV provides “poisonous” serpents, probably because of the influence of the LXX and the targumic tradition, which we will discuss below. In this discussion of vocabulary I will depart from the NRSV and use my own translation.
If taken in relation to the cognate verb, Mypr#&h were anything that might deliver a sting, hence its application to serpents as an attributive, as it is used here.38 In v. 9 the singular Pr#& is used alone to refer to stinging serpents. The rather redundant combination of nouns Mypr#&h My#$xnh may suggest an emphasis in the announcement of the judgment and a synonymous relationship between the two terms. Hence, when in v. 9b the text contains the singular forms #$xnh and #$xn, the reader may supply the previous description ("stinging") from v. 6 without interrupting the meaning of the narrative. The serpents are the same and the instrument of divine judgment is consistent throughout even if the vocabulary is not. John also takes up the "serpent" vocabulary in a passage that resonates with an implicit judgment of Nicodemus (3:10-12) and an explicit judgment of evil doers in general (3:17-21).

There is also a verbal correlation between the serpents that Yahweh sends (Mypr#&h My#$xnh) to afflict the murmuring Israelites and the one he commands Moses to make and place upon the standard (Pr#&). In other words, the serpents of divine judgment and the serpent image of deliverance from death to life turn on the noun Pr#&. By way of distinction, the serpents of divine judgment and the serpent image that Moses makes are related verbally based on the noun #$xn and probably physically (We shall take up the meaning and imagery that the vocabulary denotes next). This slight variance in the vocabulary may have been the space needed to allow the conclusion that what Yahweh commanded was only proximately provided through signification by the bronze serpent (the LXX will make signification explicit as we shall see below). The variance in language may be amplified by Yahweh’s instruction to Moses to make the image “for yourself” (Kl). Might an instrument for Yahweh be expected? The language allows the trajectory of thought that one may expect a fulfillment of Yahweh’s command both in the sense of an anticipated later action/event and of a more faithful representation of what Yahweh requested. The appearance of a more faithful representation of the divine request may be one stimulus for the reworking of this tradition in Wisdom 16, as we shall discuss later. The anticipated action/event may lie behind John’s insistence that the lifting up of the Son of Man is necessary (δει). The meaning and signification connoted by the vocabulary opens up this trajectory of thought in a ways that John also may have found useful.

The noun Pr#& is found in Num 21:6, 8; Deut 8:15; Isa 6:2,6; 14:29; 30:6. H. Schmoldt observes that the seraphim “are to be identified with the originally Egyptian Uraeus serpents,” deities who offer protection to both gods and kings by killing their adversaries.39 Their appearance as attendants to Yahweh in Isa 6:2 is probably a composite image: “Interpreters usually combine the information from all of these occurrences and imagine the seraphim in Isa. 6 to be winged serpents (though a different view is taken, e.g., by the LXX, which has seraphin only in Isa. 6).” It is unlikely that the seraphim hovering above Yahweh were seen to have a human form since this image is not attested iconographically and such a picture would have offended religious sensitivities. Never-the-less, Schmoldt holds, “[O]ne must keep open the possibility of understanding the seraphim as having a human form.”40 This line of thinking may

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39 “Prα#&a, σ%αρα4ρα4π,” 224. The remainder of my treatment relies on Schmoldt.
40 Ibid., 225.
suggest that Yahweh commanded the making of a seraph having a human image and resonating with the status of one who attended closely to the things of God in the heavenly realm and executed his divine judgment in the earthly realm. Yet Moses fashions not a seraph (Pr#&) but an approximation, a bronze serpent (t#$xnx #$xn). The difference may be significant for John in that Yahweh’s command is finally fulfilled by Jesus, the Word and Son who in human form brings not condemnation but eternal life (3:15, 17).

The noun #$xn simply means “serpent,” but its image is associated with illness (as one would expect, especially snakebite) and healing in general. It also may denote a “healing deity.” The t#$xnx #$xn (“bronze serpent”) is rich in polyvalence. Its possible sources are many: Moses’ staff before Pharoah, Syro-Phoenician, Davidic, Egyptian, Babylonian, Canaanite – each with their own unique meanings, several of which are religious in nature. This, at least, would mean that the bronze serpent was recognized as a sacred symbol, one signifying the divine.

John 3:14 draws only minimally from the rich offering of “serpent” language. Perhaps, as we have already considered, the difference between the serpent Yahweh requests (Pr#&) and the image that Moses makes, the “bronze serpent” (t#$xnx #$xn), allows space for John to think that Jesus, at long last, is the instrument of God’s offer of life and deliverance from death. The other elements of the story line up to suggest as much. Yahweh instructs Moses to place the Pr#& on a pole or standard (sn). The standard facilitates both the display of the image, which John takes as “lifted up,” and the looking upon it by the Israelites, which John will transform into belief. These correspondences may have been enough to suggest that what happened in the desert in the days of Moses was merely provisional until the divine will and plan was fulfilled. This might suggest either a prophetic or a typological anticipation.

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41 Fabry, “#$xfnf, να4η9α4σ∴,” 367.
42 Ibid., 378-80.
44 Looking upon the bronze serpent is interpreted by Noth (Numbers, 157) as a “test of obedience” set by Yahweh. If indeed this is the case, then divine judgment upon the people’s impatience and complaint about the wilderness food, conjecturing that they may die in the wilderness (21:4-5), is balanced by a divine act that offers the Israelites the possibility of rising above the circumstances and adhering to Yahweh’s will. See also Derrett, “Bronze Serpent,” 316-22, 327. Ashley (Numbers, 402) claims that the Israelite’s complaint is an indication of being “out of touch with reality,” longing for what is no longer theirs. Might this not be what John has in mind when he uses the πιστεύω vocabulary? Faith at this juncture in the public ministry means looking beyond the common and base realities to embrace the promise of God that is signified by them.
There is dissonance also. The image of the seraph requested by God in the wilderness represents both judgment as well as healing, whereas in John’s retelling Jesus does not represent judgment (3:17) but only eternal life (3:15). Moreover, there is no commonality between the serpent imagery and the portrayal of the Word and Son in John, except for the possibility that the seraph may have connoted a human form.

2. Tg Num 21:4-9

Any consideration of the targumîm and other pertinent rabbinic literature will be inadequate in this limited study. The full analysis of these sources is provided by Hans Maneschg. For the sake of brevity, we shall restrict ourselves to J. Duncan M. Derrett’s summation of the scene retold by the targumists. I will identify only a handful of the many sources he cites and that for only the features that are pertinent to our study.

Some slanderers of YHWH, contenders with Moses, still discontented with their curious nutriment (totally depending from YHWH’s good will), oblivious of Job 5:20; Ps 33:19; 37:19, rebel for nearly the last time, prostrate now with snake-bites, look upwards (cf. Ps 123:1-2) to the height [Tg. Ps.-J. and Tg. Neof.] whence their heavenly food came, gaze at the bronze object, mentally accept that in this case their plight is logical, that the evil by which they suffered is itself overcome, lift their faces in prayer to their Father in heaven [Frg. Tg.], direct their hearts to the same [Tg. Ps.-J.] and pledge themselves to him.

It is not difficult to recognize the pieces that open a trajectory of meaning for John. The motif of judgment is emphasized. Moreover, particularly useful to John would be the Israelites’ looking at the serpent image upon the height and praying to the Father in heaven, to whom one directs both heart and pledge.

The variance in the use of the “serpent” vocabulary is also retained but not in every case, suggesting that this was an important aspect of the tradition but one not appreciated by all. For example, in Tg. Onq. Num 21:4-9 Yahweh sends the “burning serpents” (Nlq Nwwyx, v. 6) and then asks Moses to make “for yourself” (Kl) a “burning serpent” (ylq, v. 8). Moses makes an image of the “primeval/ancient serpent” (#hnd ywyx, v. 9), an allusion to the serpent in Genesis 3. When the people look on the “serpent” (ywyx) they live. However, the variance in vocabulary found in MT and Tg. Onq. is lost in Tg. Neof. Num 21:4-9. In this case Yahweh sends the “burning serpents” (htyp# hywx, v. 6) and commands the making “for yourself” (Kl) the “primeval/ancient serpent” (#xnd ywyx, v. 8), in this case referring to the primeval serpent of Genesis 3 directly since the character is introduced explicitly earlier in v. 6.

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45 See Derrett, “Bronze Serpent,” 315.
50 The emphasis Tg. Neof. places on the primeval serpent earlier in v. 6 appears to be interpretative for the addition references to the character in the subsequent verses. The sin in the wilderness by the Exodus generation is a revisiting of the sin in the primeval garden.
Moses makes precisely what Yahweh commands, fashioning an image of the primeval serpent (יְנוֹדֹ וּwyx, v. 9). Looking on the image of the “primeval/ancient serpent” (הִwywyx) brings life. In the case of Tg. Onq. the vocabulary opens space for an anticipated fulfillment, whereas with Tg. Noef. the interpretative link seems to have already been closed because of the emphasis placed on the primeval serpent of Genesis 3.

3. LXX Num 21:4-9

LXX Num 21:8-9 appears to lose the distinction that MT and Tg. Onq. make in addressing the “serpent” vocabulary. Yahweh sends “deadly serpents” (ὀψείς τῶν θανατώτατων, v. 6). Moses is commanded to make a “serpent” (ὄφιν, v. 8) and he makes a “bronze serpent” (ὄφιν χαλκοῦν, v. 9). The emphasis shifts from the space for developing an interpretative thought regarding the “serpent” vocabulary to the presentation of the serpent on a sign. This becomes evident when the language of the LXX and John are compared.

LXX Num 21:8-9 adumbrates some of the language employed by John, making the connection between the two passages rather self-evident. Nevertheless, differences between the two also stand out. Under Yahweh’s command Moses made a bronze serpent (καὶ ἐποίησεν Μωυσῆς ὄφιν χαλκοῦν), whereas John relates that he lifted up the serpent (Μωυσῆς ὄψωσεν τὸ ὄφιν). Although John’s signature verbs in 3:14, ὄψωσεν and ὑψώθησαν, are not matched by the passage in Numbers, Keener states, “The Hebrew Bible, often associates ‘lifting’ with a ‘standard’ or ‘ensign’ used to gather God’s people, usually translated σημεῖον (‘sign’) in the LXX.” The “sign” language from Numbers (θες αὐτῶν ἐπὶ σημεῖον in v. 8 and ἐστησεν αὐτὸν ἐπὶ σημεῖον in v. 9) also does not appear in John 3:14-15, but it does occur in John 2:11 and in the bridge section (2:22) that introduces the Nicodemus story, as we discussed earlier. In the passage from Numbers, looking on the bronze serpent results in life (ἐζή; cf. ζήσεται in v. 8), which means the prevention of death as a result of the serpent bites. This is matched by John’s spiritual promise of “eternal life” (ζωὴν αἰώνιον, 3:15). John’s appropriation of the passage from Numbers, despite the verbal similarities, indicates that the tradition has been reconfigured in his own narrative and theological context. It is not the symbolic effect of the wilderness event in itself that John appears to be after, but how this symbolism takes on new meaning in light of Jesus’ death and exaltation. The bronze serpent, later destroyed by Hezekiah for its idolatrous influence on the Israelites is, in effect, brought

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51 In either case, James G. Williams (“Serpent and the Son of Man,” *Bible Today* 39 [2001] 22-26) argues that the gesture suggests an act of “scapegoating” that delivers God’s people from rivalry and from scapegoating one another.
52 John, 1:565. In this view, he follows T. Francis Glasson (*Moses in the Fourth Gospel* [Studies in Biblical Theology; London: SCM Press, 1963] 36-38). Glasson holds this view despite the LXX’s tendency to avoid using ὄψωσε in texts that also use “ensign.” Glasson also claims that, although not stated explicitly in our passage in John, the cross is a sign. Brown (*John*, 1:132) notes the tagumic (Tg. Neof., Tg. Ps.-J.) adaptations, which replace the “standard-bearing pole” with placing the serpent on a “high place.” Keener (*John*, 1:564) rules out the possible influence of Philo on John 3:14.
53 Brown (*John*, 1:133) observes and then conjectures: “The word in both MT and LXX for ‘standard-bearing pole’ is literally the word for ‘sign.’ (Could this be one of the factors that led to the Johannine use of ‘sign’ for the miracles of Jesus?)”
back by Jesus in a new form, his own death and exaltation. Ironically, Jesus’ lifting up also signifies another apparent destruction and revivifying of the image.

Unique to John, however, is the verb δεῖ, which has been interpreted variously. Again, a few examples will illustrate. Raymond Brown relates the prediction of Jesus’ death to the Synoptic counterparts (see above). Comparing Mark 8:31 and John 3:14 specifically, he notes that both combine a reference to the Son of Man and the necessity of his death. The comparison suggests that “must”…implies the divine will.” For Craig Keener, the verb suggests a “divine necessity” and the need for Jesus’ mission to be completed. Leon Morris contends the verb rearticulates its use in 3:7, in which Jesus asserts “You must (δεῖ) be born again.” Schnackenburg claims, on the basis of the present tense of the verb, that the saying is a kerygmatic formula expressing “the divinely ordained necessity of the Cross in the history of salvation.” Robert Gundry and Russell Howell claim that the verb is of “scriptural and therefore divine necessitation,” but their explanation of what this means remains wanting.

The various interpretations of the verb δεῖ point to a problem with the prophetic interpretation of Jesus’ saying. With the exception of Gundry and Howell, who look to the necessity of scripture’s fulfillment, the verb is thought to express a forward-looking glance to the end of Jesus’ public ministry in the crucifixion and exaltation. It remains unclear how Num 21:9 is a prophecy of Jesus’ lifting up. Our examination of the passage has shown that, although there is a good deal of linguistic overlap between LXX Num 21:9 and John 3:14, nowhere does the passage from Numbers indicate that a prophecy is being declared that awaits a future fulfillment. It contains a promise for deliverance from divine wrath for the wilderness generation. John, in recasting the passage from Numbers, does not employ the phrase “Just as it has been written” (καθὼς γέγραπται) that is so familiar elsewhere in the NT, particularly in Pauline literature, to either introduce the notion that scripture is fulfilled or to introduce a quotation from scripture that is fulfilled. It is only the variance in “serpent” vocabulary in MT and Tg. Onq. textual traditions that opens a space for the speculation about an awaited fulfillment or a similar event.

55 The verb is found with some frequency in John. It is used to indicate the necessity of the crucifixion (12:33), of the resurrection (20:9), of the works of Jesus’ public ministry (4:4; 9:4; 10:16), of worship (4:20, 24), and of Jesus’ eclipse of John the Baptist (3:30). See Leon Morris, The Gospel According to John (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) 220 n. 40.
56 John, 1:146.
57 John, 1:566, 590. On the use of the verb to communicate the necessity of an eschatological event, see Walter Grundmann, “δεῖ, δέον, ἐστίν,” TDNT 2 (1964) 21-25. Morgan claims (“Le Fils de L’Homme,” 9) that the formula καθὼς…δύτωσι and the verb δεῖ are evidence of the midrashic nature of the saying, the aim of which is to show that Jesus conforms his exaltation to the divine plan.
59 John, 395. He notes the significance of the appearance of the verb in John 12:34 for the crowd’s response to the third of Jesus’ lifting up predictions in 12:32.
61 As we shall see in a few paragraphs, Brown (John, 1:146) explicitly connects the verb to a backward looking glance at Isaiah 52 – 53, which he thinks is fulfilled by Jesus’ death and exaltation.
62 See Matt 26:24; Mark 9:13; 14:21; Luke 2:23; Acts 7:4, 42; 15:15; and passages too numerous in Romans and the Corinthian correspondence to cite.
4. Wisdom 16:5-8

Wisdom 16 draws broadly from the wilderness tradition and vv. 5-8 specifically recite in a poetic and midrashic manner the event of the bronze serpent. In these verses the bronze serpent is not mentioned explicitly but descriptively and Moses does not appear in the recital at all. This shifts the focus away from Moses’ actions to those of God and their effects.

The people (“your people”; v. 5) in the wilderness, tormented by biting serpents, were given a “symbol of deliverance” (σύμβολον ἔχοντες σωτηρίας) to remind them of the commandments of God’s laws (v. 6). Linking the event with the reminder to keep the law is an important asset for John. Wisdom links the law, wisdom, and logos (esp. Wisdom 9) in a manner that assists John’s programmatic saying in 1:17: “The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” Throughout the remainder of the gospel, Moses will be remembered in a way that suggests that the law was capable of only a partial revelation of truth, preparing for and indicating the ultimate revelation through the logos (1:45; 5:45-46; 6:32; 9:28-29). In our passage, the serpent may signify the partial and provisional revelation that awaits the logos in whom alone the truth as fullness of revelation is manifest. This notion would seem to build on the variance in the “serpent” vocabulary that we noted in MT and Tg versions of the story.

Moreover, contrary to the religious outlook of the Jebusite cult from which the symbol may have arisen, the symbol itself was thought to have no power, but God alone, since “the one who turned toward it was saved (ἐσωθεῖτο), not by the thing beheld (τὸ θεωρούμενον), but by you, the Saviour (σωτήρα) of all” (v. 7). No homeopathic remedy cured the stings of the serpents. It was God’s word (λόγος, v. 12; cf. LXX Ps 106[107]:20). The sign was not performed just for the benefit of the Israelites but for Israel’s enemies, “that it is you who deliver (ὁ ῥύσιμος) from every evil” (v. 8).

63 Wisdom 16 is part of a literary unit, chapters 11 – 19, which examines the divine blessings bestowed on Israel in contrast to God’s chastisement of Egypt through numerous plagues, possibly as a religio-cultural condemnation of Egyptian society in the early first century A. D. See Frey, “Wie Mose,” 159-64; Maneschg, Die Erzählung von der ehrernen Schlange, 78-82, 101-91; Angelo Passo, “Il Serpente e la Manna. Ovvero della Parola che Salva: Esegesi di Sap 16,” Il Libro della sapienza (Rome: Città Nuova, 2004) 193-208; and David Winston, The Wisdom of Solomon (AB 43; Garden City: Doubleday, 1979) 3-12. Brown (John, 1:145) observes that there are other connections between the discourse with Nicodemus and Wisdom. Wis 9:16-18 also remarks on the unfathomable things of heaven. But allusions to other biblical traditions, such as Deuteronomy, Baruch, and Proverbs, may also be in view here as Brown notes. See also Keener, John, 1:265.

64 As we have noted above (n. 43), this passage may have indicated a corrective to the idolatrous worship of the bronze serpent in later times.

65 On these points and other differences between Wisdom 16:5-8 and our passage, see Günter Reim (Studien zum alttestamentlichen Hintergrund des Johannesevangeliums [Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1974] 197-98.

66 For this insight, as well as for a number of others regarding the relation between the law, wisdom, and logos in Wisdom and John, I am indebted to Gregory Vall. On the partial revelatory role of Moses and the law, see also Brown, John, 1:35-36.

The attraction of this passage from Wisdom is apparent. The soteriological language fits nicely with Jesus’ speech to Nicodemus that through the lifting up of the Son of Man eternal life is offered to all (3:15). Although, as in the passage from LXX Numbers, the lifting up vocabulary is absent, the use of σύμβολον parallels John’s preference for σημείον (2:11, 23) and might substitute for the verbal expression of lifting up if the connection between the verb and the “sign” vocabulary carries over as discussed earlier.68 The attribution of healing power to the divine λόγος also fits nicely into John’s theology. Wisdom’s distinction between Israel’s enemies (in this case Egypt) and “your people” (Israel) parallels the distinction between Nicodemus, castigated by Jesus for not receiving his testimony (3:11), and all those who believe and thus receive eternal life (3:15). The Israelites receive the soteriological benefit from the symbol by looking upon it (τὸ σημείον), which parallels Jesus’ testimony (in the plural) to “what we have seen” (ἡ ειδοκαμεν; 3:11) and to the many who believe upon seeing (θεωροῦντες, 2:23) the signs Jesus performs.69

There is simply no indication that this passage from Wisdom suggests a prophetic fulfillment. Moreover, it seems difficult to attribute prophetic meaning to a genre that is easily placed among the wisdom writings but not the prophetic literature. Perhaps the only reason any passage from Wisdom might be accorded a prophetic nuance is the Christian predilection to receive the entire OT as a prophecy of the Christ event.70 But this puts us more in the realm of typology than that of a specific prophetic fulfillment of an OT promise. Even if Wisdom 16 does not portray the event as a prophetic sign, it still may have influenced and informed John’s reception of the tradition. These problems may be avoided, however, if Jesus’ saying about being lifted up is connected to the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 52 – 53.

5. Isaiah 52 – 53

The images of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 52 – 53 provide a suitable backdrop for Jesus’ anticipation of his own suffering.71 Raymond Brown is the most outspoken on

68 See n. 52.
69 Glasson (Moses, 34-35), argues that, taking into account the importance of “seeing” in John, the motif, although not specifically mentioned in 3:14, should be assumed. Glasson is followed in this view by Morris (John, 225) and more recently by Francis J. Moloney, (The Gospel of John [SacPag 4; Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier/Liturgical Press, 1998] 101) and Keener, John, 565.
70 See for example Augustine, Quaest. In Hept. 2, 73; PL 34, 623; cited in Dei Verbum §16.
this position, advancing the idea that these Isaian passages are the “chief influence on the Johannine sayings” and that, “The statement that the Son of Man must [italics his] be lifted up reflects the theme that his being lifted up was predicted in Scripture (especially Isa lii-liii) and thus was part of God’s will.”72 Nevertheless, it must be admitted that between Isa 52:13, which is singularly cited by interpreters, and John 3:14, there is only one linguistic feature that ties them together.73 The verb “to lift up” (ὑψοῦν), which was absent from the passages in Numbers and Wisdom, is used in Isa 52:13, and interestingly it also appears with the verb John employs to denote the theme of glorification. The Servant will be lifted up and exalted (ὑψώθησαται καὶ δοξασθήσαται).74 It is important to note that ὑψώθησαται seems to be used with a meaning synonymous with δοξασθήσαται.75 A synonymous relationship between the two verbs is in harmony with the gist of the whole verse, which declares the servant’s prosperity and success in both MT and LXX. In other words, the lifting up is not associated with the Servant’s suffering but announces his success. Within the Suffering Servant passages as a whole, the Servant’s...


72 Brown (John, 1:146). On the connection with Isa 52:13, see also Keener, John, 1:566 and Lindars, John, 157. Reim, (Studien zum alltestamentlichen Hintergrund, 174) contends that the verb δεί indicates the inevitable lifting up of Jesus’ by crucifixion that is predicted in Isa 52:13, whereas Derrett (“Bronze Serpent,” 325-26) claims that δεί suggest both a connection to Num 21:9 and Isa 52:13. Typology does not rate an entry in the index of Brown’s commentary on John, although the topic does find its way into his discussion. See, for example, his reference (John, 1:133) to the typological recasting of the serpent in let. Barn. 12:5-6. The indexes in both The Birth of the Messiah (Garden City, NY: Image Books/Doubleday, 1979) and The Death of the Messiah (2 Vols.; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1994) are also devoid of an entry on typology. This despite Brown’s acceptance of this more-than-literale sense in his An Introduction to the New Testament (The Anchor Bible Reference Library; New York, NY: Doubleday, 1997) 41-42. As Brown rightly points out in Introduction to the New Testament (p. 41), the problem with identifying this sense is the lack of clear criteria capable of distinguishing the divine intention from mere human invention. In his posthumously published, An Introduction to the Gospel of John, only one reference to typology occurs (p. 231), and that in reference to the symbolic presentation of the sacraments. He connects NT fulfillment of OT prophecy to typology: “Why the evangelists presented the sacraments through symbolism has been explained through this principle: the recognition that OT prophecy had a fulfillment in the NT created a Christian sensitivity to typology: therefore, it was intelligible to present Jesus’ words and actions as prophetic types of the church’s sacraments.” In addition to the problem of the lack of clear criteria, perhaps Brown’s reticence to accept a typological reading stems from the migration of this type of interpretation to the category of metaphoric and symbolic mediation in literary criticism. See Raymond E. Brown and Sandra M. Schneiders, “Hermeneutics,” NJBC, 71:48. We will return to these points in the paragraphs below.

73 Reim (Studien zum alltestamentlichen Hintergrund, 180) notes John’s employment of “Son of Man” instead of “Servant of God.”

74 In commenting on this passage Brown (John, 1:146; cf. 133) does not speculate, as he does with the Johannine use of the “sign” vocabulary, whether this language may have been the inspiration for the Johannine community’s use of the theme of glorification to express Jesus’ death and resurrection. However, he does note that the Aramaic equivalent of υψόουν is z’qap (ಟ્ર્રટ્ર્ર), which captures both “to crucify” and “to raise up.” The verb thus denotes “one continuous actions of ascent” from death to ascension. On the motif of exaltation in the literature from Qumran and its implications here, see J. C. O’Neill, “Who is Comparable to Me in My Glory?” 4Q491 Fragment 11 (4Q491C) and the New Testament,” NovT 42 (2000) 24-38. O’Neill (p. 30) restricts the meaning of the verb to the crucifixion alone.

lifting up and glorification is stated as vindication and recompense for his suffering. In John’s gospel Jesus’ lifting up carries the double meaning of suffering and exaltation. If John means to use this passage from Isaiah, perhaps the allusion is intended to indicate Jesus’ victory over death (cf. Acts 2:33).

Despite this solid but solitary verbal connection, the passage from Isaiah also has the advantage of expressing a future event, something missing from the passages from Numbers and Wisdom. John uses the saying to predict Jesus’ death and exaltation, which also compares nicely with the image of the Suffering Servant. Therefore, those interpreters who prefer the prophetic fulfillment interpretation have a solid warrant for doing so. But does Jesus’ fulfillment of the Suffering Servant oracle exhaust the reference that the saying makes? Is there room also for a typological view, especially since the two notions overlap?

C. Typological Interpretation

The survey of the prophetic interpretation shows that it is not without warrant, but it does have its problems as we have pointed out. Modern interpreters do not raise these problems as possible reasons for why a typological interpretation might be favored. Rather, the claim that we have before us typology is put forward simply on its merits. There is no reason why a typological interpretation may not be stated side-by-side with that of prophecy fulfilled, since typology, as we shall see in the next few paragraphs, does trade on the notion of fulfillment.76 The patristic thinking about the spiritual sense in terms of the fulfillment of the OT by the NT would seem necessarily to be open to both possibilities at once.77 Before we proceed with an examination of how the typological interpretation is deployed by modern interpreters, it may be helpful to begin with a brief definition of biblical typology.78

76 See Gerhard von Rad, “Typological Interpretation of the Old Testament,” in Essays on Old Testament Hermeneutics (Trans. by John Bright; ed. Claus Westermann; Richmond: John Knox Press, 1963) 17-39. Von Rad argues that OT typology is an “analogical sort of thinking” (p. 17) that is not Platonic but rooted in the ancient Oriental sensitivity to the “eschatological correspondence between beginning and end” (pp. 18-19). For von Rad, typology is intimately connected to the prophecy-fulfillment model (p. 26).
77 Ibid., 25-26, 36-37.
We shall accept the widely recognized definition: “The typical sense is the deeper meaning of the ‘things’ written about in the Bible when they are seen to have foreshadowed future ‘things’ in God’s work of salvation.”79 Although this definition employs the term “foreshadowed,” suggesting a prospective anticipation created by the type, in fact this foreshadowing is retrospective since the signification of the type is developed, so to speak, by the antitype. The “deeper meaning” that the definition refers to may denote the more-than-literal sense or the sense of the biblical text when read in the light of the Paschal mystery. The emphasis on “things” draws from the patristic and medieval focus on historical events and their relation to one another as an emerging pattern within salvation history.80 The phrase “written about in the Bible” represents the modern reshaping of the definition slightly beyond that frequently conceived by patristic writers, whose focus was the interrelation of historical events in salvation history.81 Modern interpreters focus on the literary reconfiguration of the events. Finally, “God’s work of salvation” is a presupposition of faith that brings such observations beyond the mere correlation of “historical” events and beyond literary criticism to the level of theological enquiry. However, it should be noted that these technical features, attempts to arrive at criteria for judging one text typological and another not so, may not have been the driving force of the biblical writers and later of the patristic interpreters in their use of typology. As R. T. France has noted, in the end, “It is less a hermeneutical technique than a theological conviction working itself out in practice.”82

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80 On this point, see Williamson, Catholic Principles, 173-174 and the works cited in n. 72.


82 Jesus and the Old Testament, 77. Consider also Wright (God Who Acts, 64): “Yet just as the Bible contains no system of theology, it likewise contains no self-conscious hermeneutical methodology…. Indeed, typology… is more of an attitude than a precise methodology…. It does not interpret according to a pre-determined set of rules…. It is based very simply upon the belief that God has been directing the events of Biblical time for his own name’s sake and that in Christ the whole of the former period has been brought to completion and the new age inaugurated.” For the patristic notion of biblical interpretation as a work of grace, see my “The Charismatic Renewal and the Spiritual Sense of Scripture,” Pneuma 27 (2005) 246-72.
Is John 3:14 a typology? Given the definition provided above, there seems no reason to deny it. John goes beyond the literal sense of Num 21:9. Two events in salvation history are compared. Depending on one’s position regarding the verb δεί, Jesus’ statement either explicitly or implicitly states that the event in the wilderness “foreshadows” his death and exaltation. Since we have one biblical writer taking up and interpreting another biblical book, the criteria “written about in the bible” is observed. That these two events contribute to the outworking of “God’s work of salvation” is a presupposition of faith on John’s part.

Despite our ability to fit John 3:14 into the framework provided by the definition, it must be admitted that the comparative or analogical and the prophetic interpretations might do just as well since all three of these approaches share elements in common. On the one hand, the comparison and analogy inscribed in John’s grammatical presentation of the saying are also features of typology, yet within the parameters marked out by our definition. We can understand why D. Moody Smith, for one, comments on this passage as a typology that expresses both an “analogy” and a “comparison” when the wilderness event and Jesus’ prediction of his own lifting up are joined. On the other hand, typology also suggests a fulfillment of sorts since it is a foreshadowing of things to come. Yet this fulfillment and foreshadowing are significations attributed to the type under the signifying force of the antitype. In addition, as the term suggests, a “pattern” or “example” of divine action is detected, which leads to the expectation that God may act in a similar fashion once again. Overall, God’s action in history is thought to create an obvious, recognizable “pattern” that invites attention to the correlation between promised events and to the divine pedagogy that they impart. In this respect, Leonard Goppel is correct to claim that typology establishes a new revelation in a new form shaped by the notion of fulfillment. So if a comparative or a prophecy-fulfillment interpretation may do, as it has for quite a few noted interpreters, why is a typological interpretation a more accurate one? This objection seems stronger when considered in light of additional observations about John’s gospel and this passage in particular.


84 And this only generally speaking. Reim (*Studien zum alttestamentlichen Hintergrund*, 266) claims that the grammatical construction καθό...οὕτως originates from typological speech. As we discussed above, this hardly seems likely.


87 *Typos*, 229. See also his reference to Moltmann with respect to the “intentionality of events” on p. 233, nn. 84, 85.
First, John employs the noun τύπος only once, and that with the rather pedestrian sense of “imprint” or “mark” instead of the complex, derivative sense of “pattern” or “example”. In 20:25, Thomas responds to the disciples’ claim to have seen the risen Lord by asserting, “Unless I see the marks (τῶν τύπων) of the nails in his hands…and put my finger in the mark (τοῦ τύπου) of the nails…, I will not believe.” Had John intended to make a typological comparison between the wilderness event and Jesus’ lifting up, wouldn’t he say so explicitly, especially since he knows the vocabulary, as Paul does of the relationship between Adam and Christ in Rom 5:14? Nevertheless, if Luke employed both Noah and Jonah as typologies, as we considered earlier, it may be observed that he did not predicate a typological meaning on the use of the τύπος vocabulary and yet it is easily recognizable as such to some interpreters. Second, Jesus’ bold announcement to Nicodemus about the lifting up of the Son of Man (3:14) is but one of three similar sayings (8:28; 12:32; cf. 12:34) that are clearly intended as prophetic anticipations of Jesus’ death and exaltation. In other words, the force of all three of these sayings is to point forward prophetically to Jesus’ death and exaltation and not back to prefiguring events in salvation history. Only 3:14 accomplishes this by relating the future event to a previous one. And as we have noted, this backward glance might just as well be reckoned a prophecy that is fulfilled.

Finally, Maneschg offers four additional observations about 3:14-15 and its relation to Num 21:9 that argue against a typological meaning.88 First, whereas Moses, because of God’s command, placed the serpent on a standard or sign, John speaks of the elevation of the Son of Man. The only point in common between these two actions is that something is made visible for the possibility of salvation. Second, the LXX version extends God’s benefit of salvation to “all” (πᾶς), referring to the Israelites, whereas John widens the adjective to universal proportions. This is accomplished by the adjectives’ qualification of those who believe in Jesus (ὁ πιστεύων ἐν οὐτῷ) and by identifying the cosmic sphere of Jesus’ actions (3:16). Third, whereas, the Israelites are saved from earthly threats in the form of the biting serpents, Jesus offers eternal life. Fourth, the Israelites in the desert are required to look upon the bronze serpent placed upon the standard, whereas Jesus requires a faith-response that his own lifting up makes possible.

Be this as it may, two reasons for arguing in favor of a typological interpretation may be considered. First, this approach is well attested among early patristic interpreters, a line of reasoning followed by Rudolph Schnackenburg.89 The early fathers being Greek speaking, as it is sometimes argued, would have been more sensitive to the dynamic impact of the language and the idiomatic force of the NT koine. They were also influenced by the allegorizing found in both Graeco-Roman and Jewish literature. Moreover, recalling the patristic approval of the typological interpretation may locate the meaning of the text more easily within the whole stream of Christian tradition. Be this as

88 Die Erzählung von der eheren Schlange, 404-10.
it may, do these considerations satisfy the historical critical question regarding the intention of John that lies behind the saying? Perhaps not for several reasons.

To begin, in the departure from the literal or historical sense, the fathers themselves were less concerned with the original intention of the sacred writers as with the divine intention. Therefore, one may admit a typological interpretation as a later convention and not connected to the original meaning of the gospel.

Moreover, the so-called “spiritual” nature of John’s gospel is recruited to situate it effortlessly within the typological thought-world. Leonhard Goppelt writes:

> The basic orientation of this Gospel [as a “spiritual Gospel”] accounts for the fact that Jesus’ work moves exclusively on the level of creation typology. It also explains why the mediators of salvation are not related to Jesus as types. Only the redemptive gifts of the Old Covenant that give life and, therefore, announce the new creation are related to him typologically and they are related to him exclusively.90

This argument has the advantage of claiming a typological meaning on the basis of the literal sense, but it is still predicated on a later theological judgment about the character of the gospel as a whole, which is then set up as a hermeneutical presupposition on which the interpretation of the gospel turns.

In the end, it seems that a judgment about whether John intended a typology in 3:14 rests on the criteria noted in our definition in the paragraph above and on the same theological attitude deployed by both biblical writers and patristic interpreters. However, given that John 3:14 makes a typological statement, does this judgment account for the full drought of meaning made affordable by the structure of the language? Moreover, how shall we account for the dissonance and dissimilarity that 3:14 contains?

### III. Dissonance and Dissimilarity

Typological interpretations are generally exploited for the comparison they make between events or “things” written about in Scripture as we have discussed in the paragraphs above. John no doubt intends to make a comparison or even an analogy as his language καθός…ότι bears out. However, typology may also be recruited to strike contrasts as well, just as Paul does in Rom 5:12-21 in which he uses a typology to note the contrasting actions and their respective consequences between Adam and Christ. Dissonance and dissimilarity appear to be as commonly associated with typology as comparison and analogy.

Raymond Brown takes up this very point when he observes that a type may be imperfect, “a silhouette, not a portrait” of the antitype.91 Whereas the relation between

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90 Typos, 180-81. Goppelt (p. 179) also argues that John, like the Synoptics and the rest of the NT, possesses an attitude toward the OT that “presupposes a typological approach.” Be that as it may, it would seem prudent to take each individual passage on its merits instead of making a blanket application to the entire gospel. For an analysis of the “spiritual” character of John’s gospel and its acceptance by early orthodox communities, see Charles E. Hill, The Johannine Corpus in the Early Church (New York/Oxford: Oxford University, 2004).

91 JBC 71:75 and later with Sandra Schneiders, NJBC 71:47. See also E. Earle Ellis, Prophecy and Hermeneutic in Early Christianity (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 165-69; Dahl, Studies in Paul, 159-77. Eichrodt, “Typological Exegesis,” 226; and Goppelt, Typos, 16.
type and antitype may assume a measure of continuity, this is not to be exploited to the point of disregarding important elements of discontinuity. This observation may address some of the reasons Maneschg raised against a typological interpretation noted in the paragraph above. For Brown this is a matter of hermeneutical and exegetical discipline that prevents the possible blurring of the distinctions between the Testaments. For others, however, this issues in restrictions of typological signification to prevent the possible assimilation to allegory, in which the value of the event as historical is feared to dissolve and the meaning of the various elements of the image might be pushed too far.

In this respect, interpreters focus on only a few factors, such as the lifting up, the correlation between looking on the serpent (Num 21:9) and believing Jesus (John 3:15), and the similarity between the benefits of the two compared events, that one might live (and not die; Numbers) and that one might obtain eternal life (John). Beyond these points, interpreters are reticent, even uncomfortable looking for meaning beyond the obvious points of comparison. Hendrickson states the case best when he says, “[T]his does not mean, however, that we now have the right to test our ingenuity by attempting to furnish a long list of resemblances between type and antitype, as is often done.” Be this as it may, we may take up Jesus’ saying to Nicodemus again, this time with a view to the effects that dissonance and dissimilarity may have for John.

There are three noticeable points of dissonance and dissimilarity in this verse based on vocabulary, syntax, and grammar. We might note these points by juxtaposing the two clauses as follows:

\[
\begin{array}{cccccc}
\text{Καὶ καθὼς Μωϋσῆς ὄψασεν} & \text{—} & \text{τὸ ὁφυ} & \text{ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ} \\
\downarrow & \downarrow & \downarrow & \downarrow \\
\text{Οὕτως} & \text{—} & \text{ὑψωθῆσαι δὲι τοῦ νίου τοῦ ἀνθρώπου} \\
\end{array}
\]

First, although the protasis (καθὼς ...) contains an acting agent, Moses, as the subject of the verb to lift up, the grammatical subject of the impersonal verb δὲι in the apodosis (Οὕτως ...) is the infinitive passive ὑψωθῆσαι, and there is no

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92 He writes (JBC 71:75): “This limitation in typology is important because much of the criticism of any more-than-literal exegesis is centered on a failure to appreciate the limited character of the OT and on an exaggeration of the continuity between the Testaments at the expense of their real diversity.”
94 Goppelt, Typos, 183; Lindars, John, 157; Reim, Studien zum alttestamentlichen Hintergrund, 135; Schnackenburg, John, 395-96; Smith, John, 98.
95 Hendrickson, John, 138, and see his n. 79. This appears to be the sticking point with Brown (JBC 71:72-79; NJBC 71:47-48), who wants to restrict this kind of interpretation to the past instead of recognizing it as a possible approach for modern interpreters. See also Eichrodt, “Typological Exegesis,” 224-45; Goppelt, Typos, 229-33; Williamson, Catholic Principles, 195-203.
96 John’s entire gospel and individual passages such as ours may be intentionally construed in enigmatic terms. See Saeed Hamid-Khani, Revelation and concealment of Christ: a Theological Inquiry into the Elusive Language of the Fourth Gospel (WUNT 2. 120; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck] 2000) esp. 33-122; and Keener, John, 48, 69.
mention of an acting agent of the lifting up of Jesus. Might this be a divine passive, in which God is presumed to be the acting agent given the context? Perhaps, but at any rate, this leaves open the question who does the lifting up of Jesus? As we arrive at the final of these three lifting up pronouncements (12:32, 34), it is clear that Jesus is speaking about the manner of his death at the hands of the Romans (cf. 12:33; 18:32). However, as most commentators point out, John also has in view Jesus’ exaltation by the Father, whose plan is fulfilled by the action of the Roman crucifixion. It may be argued that there is a correlation in the sense that Moses acts at the divine behest in the event recorded in Numbers, whereas in John the Romans urged on by the Jewish leaders will act at the divine behest. Nevertheless, that is a gap filled in by the remainder of John’s gospel and it is not a piece of the saying in John 3:14. Moreover, whereas the Romans in league with the Jewish leaders may be cited for Jesus’ crucifixion, no human agent may be so identified for Jesus’ exaltation. John makes clear by the statement in 3:16 and many other statements like it that God is behind Jesus’ work in the world and the events that happen to him.

Second, the objects lifted up are quite different. Moses lifted an image of a serpent, whereas Jesus is referring to himself being lifted up. As we have already noted, Hendricksen is correct in warning that too much ought not be made of this. But the difference is striking and it is unlikely that the audience is meant to pass it by without remark. The serpent raised by Moses is a symbol of divine wrath – of the serpents inflicting death on the Israelites in the wilderness – and of divine deliverance from the death they bring once a person afflicted with a serpent’s bite looks upon the bronze serpent fashioned by Moses. Yet Jesus lifted up is himself the one dying, who provides eternal life to those who believe. Moreover, Jesus lifted up is not a symbol that the Johannine community is to look beyond to find a greater mystery of God’s offer of eternal life (3:15-16). He brings all looking elsewhere to an end precisely because he is what all scripture (5:39) and salvific signs point to, God’s revelation of himself and his offer of eternal life.

Third, in the protasis the setting of Moses’ action is “in the wilderness.” This indicates that the meaning of the wilderness event is both situational and rooted in God’s provision for deliverance from his own imposed wrath as punishment for the Israelites’ murmuring. In contrast, the apodosis leaves open the setting for the necessary lifting up of Jesus and the promise of eternal life offers the final solution to human misery and death on a universal scale. Looking to 3:16-17, the setting is cosmic. Moreover, Jesus’ lifting up is not a divine

98 BDF §§ 130 (1), 313, 342 (1).
99 The parallelism between vv. 15-16 particularly indicates God’s hand in the lifting up as in the sending of the Son into the world. See Gundry and Howell, “The Sense and Syntax of John 3:14-17,” 24-39; and Meeks, “Man from Heaven,” 62-3.
100 John, 138, n. 79.
101 As does, for example, Reim, *Studien zum alttestamentlichen Hintergrund*, 266.
102 Hamid-Khani (*Revelation and Concealment*, 121, 230-32) sees this as the key to John’s use of enigmatic language.
alleviation of a particular divine judgment, as is the case of Moses’ lifting up the serpent. Jesus’ lifting up is not intended for judgment (3:17). Rather, as we have seen, interpreters argue that it is necessary on a larger scale, that is, to fulfill the divine plan, to fulfill scripture, and/or to provide the ultimate sign of Jesus’ and the Father’s self revelation.\(^\text{103}\)

It is clear that the two lifting up events have their comparative limitations. The saying is not a metaphor inviting detailed and free associations.\(^\text{104}\) Nevertheless, the saying seems to work on both ends, noting comparison as well as dissimilarity and dissonance. Whether interpreted prophetically or typologically, the comparative elements show that Jesus’ signs are the final culmination of God’s plan. The wilderness event of Moses lifting up the serpent retrospectively or prospectively anticipates and interprets the final and glorious act of Jesus’ public ministry. Co-opting John’s language, just as looking on the bronze serpent was necessary to escape the death of the real serpents biting the Israelites, so faith is necessary to appropriate what Jesus’ brings in the public ministry and in his death and exaltation. However, the points of dissimilarity and dissonance also work favorably yet not intrusively here as well. Jesus’ lifting up is anticipated as a divine action, as the remainder of the narrative will show.\(^\text{105}\) Although the two liftings are comparative, the lifting up of Jesus is categorically different. Jesus is no symbol pointing to something else. His crucifixion and exaltation mean obtaining the full and final vision, the light that came into the world. The absence of correspondence between the desert setting of Moses’ action and the unstated setting of Jesus’ lifting up as exaltation leads us to consider the cosmic stage, the universal application of the eternal life that his death and exaltation provides.

III. Conclusion

Whether John intends to make a simple analogy, indicate a prophecy fulfilled, or employ typology remains, in my mind, uncertain. And this uncertainty in the mind of the reader may be John’s intention. Jesus, in the Johannine view, does not fit neatly into categories and the Nicodemus story appears to dramatize this very point. Misunderstanding on the part of the characters in the narrative as well as on the part of the readers of John is part of the way the gospel works.\(^\text{106}\) Jesus is an enigma, not only to the characters in the narrative but also to the reader. Figuring him out is part of the experience of moving out of darkness and embracing the light.

\(^{103}\) Derrett (“Bronze Serpent,” 322-23) claims that 3:16-21 explains the typology in 3:14.
\(^{104}\) Although Hamid-Khani (Revelation and Concealment, 121) contends that the saying is composed of “a metaphor, a conceptual double-meaning word, and irony in the context of an allusion to the Old Testament Scriptures.”
\(^{105}\) See Meeks, “Man from Heaven,” 68 for the necessity of the point of view of the whole gospel.
Figuring out who Jesus is in John’s gospel might also represent what Jacob Neusner has called an engagement of the teleological logic of narrative. A consideration of Neusner’s own words seems in order:

In the teleological logic of connection-making and conclusion-drawing, the logic of coherence invokes a fictive tension and its resolution. It appeals for cogency to the purpose and direction of an arrangement of facts, ordinarily in the form of narrative. Teleological or narrative logic further serves quite effectively as a mode of making connections between two facts, that is, linking two otherwise unrelated sentences, and presenting conclusions based on the linkage. In this mode of thought, we link fact to fact and also prove (ordinarily implicit) propositions by appeal to teleology, that is, the end or purpose of discussion that makes sense of all detail. The tension of narrative derives from the open-endedness of discourse. We are told a series of facts the logical, inevitable outcome do we find a resolution: that sense, that fitness of connection, which makes of the parts a cogent whole. Accordingly, a proposition (whether or not it is stated explicitly) may be set forth and demonstrated by showing through the telling of a tale (of a variety of kinds, e.g., historical, fictional, parabolic, and the like) that a sequence of events, real or imagined, shows the ineluctable truth of a given proposition. Whence the connection? The logic of connection demonstrated through narrative, rather than philosophy, is simply stated. It is connection attained and explained by invoking some mode of narrative in which a sequence of events, first this, then that, is understood to yield a proposition, first this, then that – because of this [emphasis his throughout]. That manufactured sequence both states and also establishes a proposition in a way different from the philosophical and argumentative mode of propositional discourse. … Narrative sees cogency in the purpose and direction and of course outcome, appealing for its therefore to the necessary order of events understood in a causative way. That is then a logic or intelligibility of connection attained through teleology: the claim of goal or direction or purpose, therefore cause, commonly joining facts through the fabric of a tale, presenting the telos in the garb of a story of what happened because it had to happen. Narrative logic thus makes connections and draws conclusions and conveys a proposition through the setting forth of happenings in a framework of inevitability, in a sequence that makes a point, e.g., establishes not merely the facts of what happens, but the teleology that explains those facts. Then we speak not only of events – our naked facts – but of their relationship. We claim to account for that relationship teleologically, in the purposive sequence and necessary order of happenings.

If we take Neusner’s point of view to heart, then the “facts” for John are not just the historical, temporal aspects of the wilderness event. They are more than this. The facts for John begin with the tradition, the words that transmit the event. In this sense, the varied trail of tradition from MT through the targumîm, LXX, Wisdom, and the basic kerygma communicating the Christ-event is one fact to be accounted for. Second, John’s recovery of the tradition is selective: the character Moses, the serpent, noted without descriptive detail, the wilderness setting, and the display of the serpent on a standard or sign, interpreted as a lifting up. All of these facts draw upon the context for their setting, which entails divine judgment and deliverance to life. These facts are then linked to Jesus’ self-disclosure through lifting up, which resonates twice more in the narrative.

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(8:28; 12:32-34). In a teleological logic, the meaning of these facts, their coherence, is found not among themselves as a symbol might show, but through their end, their ultimate connection to Jesus, who in his person and the events that he precipitates and lives brings meaning. This is a meaning not just about Jesus, but a meaning also of the events that are linked to him in the tale. In this sense, the teleological logic of narrative is retrospective and casts a greater claim on meaning and significance than the prospective effect of prophecy and fulfillment or of the retrospective signification by an antitype. Moreover, teleological narrative makes use of the tension created by dissimilarity and dissonance. Where coherence may not be found in the various facts linked together, coherence is found in that which joins them in a final meaning.

This manner of thinking may explain best John’s use of δεῖ. Jesus’ lifting up is necessary not on the basis of the fulfillment of scripture nor on the design of the divine plan. Rather, the necessity stems from the telos, Jesus himself. He is the one who makes necessary a lifting up that offers eternal life to all who might believe in the Son of Man.109

109 I am grateful to Stephen F. Miletic and Gregory Vall who read an earlier draft of this paper and made many helpful suggestions. Any deficiencies are of course my own.