

ARTICLES

Nathanael, the Fig Tree, and the Retrieval of Johannine Polysemy

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Abstract

The article argues that the reference to the fig tree under which Jesus claims to have seen Nathanael (John 1.48) has not been satisfactorily discussed by previous critical interpreters. Instead, the tree should be understood against the backdrop of Second Temple and later Jewish and Christian exegetical discussions about what species the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil exactly was. After tracing these debates in ancient and early medieval sources, including iconography, the argument moves on to show the interpretative possibilities created by this proposal. The conclusion makes a case for understanding the Fourth Gospel as an inherently open work which invites the audience to actively participate in a variety of exegetical discourses, and whose author function builds its authority through polysemy.

Keywords: The Gospel of John; Nathanael; Genesis; fig tree; vine; polysemy

1. Introduction

Jesus' claim that he had seen Nathanael under a fig tree (John 1.48), made in response to his question 'Where do you know me from?', continues to perplex modern commentators most likely as much as it did Nathanael himself. The answer is couched within the second of the Johannine call stories (John 1.43–51). Having been summoned by Jesus to follow him (v. 43), Philip goes to fetch his brother, Nathanael,¹ who, after initial disbelief that Philip might have indeed seen the Messiah (vv. 45–6), decides to join him and see Jesus for himself. When the two meet, Jesus greets Nathanael as a 'true Israelite in whom there is no deceit' (ἀληθῶς Ἰσραηλῆτης ἐν ᾧ δόλος οὐκ ἔστιν; v. 47).² It is at this moment that Nathanael asks, 'Where do you know me from?' (πόθεν με γινώσκεις; v. 48a), and Jesus replies: 'Before Philip called you, I have seen you under the fig tree' (πρὸ τοῦ σε Φίλιππον φωνῆσαι ὄντα ὑπὸ τὴν συκῆν εἶδόν σε; 48b). This claim alone makes Nathanael acclaim Jesus as both the Son of God and the king of Israel (v. 49), which elicits a slight rebuke on the part of Jesus who promises that he will see things still greater than this (v. 50), including the angels descending and ascending upon the Son of Man (v. 51, alluding to Gen 28.12).

¹ C. E. Hill, 'The Identity of John's Nathanael', *JSNT* 20 (1998) 45–61; on Nathanael's relationship with Jesus' disciple called Bartholomew, mentioned in the Synoptic lists, see C. Antonelli, 'L'identificazione Bartolomeo-Natanaele: Testimonianze antiche e interpretazioni moderne', *Annali di storia dell'esegesi* 38 (2021) 19–59.

² All translations of ancient texts are by the present author, unless otherwise noted.

The mention of the fig tree is conspicuous, as it simultaneously serves as the reason for Jesus' identification of Nathanael as a sincere Israelite and for Nathanael's acclamation of Jesus as a king and divine son. Despite its rhetorical prominence in this passage, the text does not provide any further clues as to the tree or the circumstances in which Nathanael found himself beneath it. The fig tree is not spoken of again in the Fourth Gospel, while Nathanael is only mentioned briefly as a part of a larger group of disciples in 21.2 during Jesus' post-resurrection appearance near Lake Tiberias. This leaves multiple questions unanswered. Is the tree to be understood literally, as a physical object and location, or could it have added layers of significance which would be meaningful to both the author and the audience? If the latter, what significance did it have exactly?

This article will argue that John 1.48 echoes a view, attested in Second Temple and later Christian and Jewish writings, that the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil in Gen 2–3 was a fig tree. This scholarly interpretation was first advanced by Joachim Jeremias, but it will be significantly reformulated and strengthened here. It will be shown to be at least as well-grounded and satisfactory as earlier interpretative proposals, which will be surveyed in Section 2. Section 3 will outline the Second Temple, rabbinic, early Christian and medieval speculation about the species of the Tree from Gen 2–3, with a special focus on the fig tree as a viable candidate. Section 4 will return to Nathanael's story and delineate the interpretative possibilities opened up by the view advanced here. Section 5 will move beyond the competition of exegetical views and proposals and argue, employing the literary concepts of an open work, author function, polysemy, and intertextuality, that the fig tree in the Fourth Gospel and possibly other portions of its narrative are inherently and irreducibly polysemous and that this openness is significant for understanding the author function of the work.

2. History of Reception and Interpretation of John 1.48

The history of interpretation of the fig tree in John 1.48 has developed along several axes which can be traced through antiquity, the Middle Ages, early modernity and up to the present. The most literal view states that the fig tree is intended as a real object – a *realium* – beneath which Jesus perceived Nathanael through supernatural knowledge.³ This view is perhaps the simplest approach to the question, but it is unable to fully account for the rhetorical weight the fig tree has to carry in the Johannine call story. Jesus' clairvoyant perception of Nathanael's physical location cannot explain the greeting included in v. 47 – Jesus could not have known that Philip's brother was free of deceit, had he not seen him doing something specific, or had the fig tree by itself revealed his character.⁴ Consequently, even when considered a *realium*, the fig tree carries added significance which would enable Jesus to correctly identify Nathanael as one ἐν ᾧ δόλος οὐκ ἔστιν.⁵ Furthermore, Nathanael's acclamation in v. 49 does not recognise Jesus explicitly as a prophetic figure, which suggests that supernatural (in)sight is not what struck him. Consequently, the exegetical view that, paraphrasing Gertrude Stein, 'a fig tree is a fig tree is a fig tree' is, on its own, insufficient to explain the logic of John 1.47–51.

³ This view is already attested in John Chrysostom, *Hom. Jo.* 20 (PG 59.126–7); among modern commentators, it is espoused by D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 161; M. M. Thompson, *John: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2015) 53.

⁴ This difficulty can be resolved if the interpreter accepts that Jesus has insight into Nathanael's character, as does John Calvin in his commentary on the passage; see John Calvin, *In Evangelium secundum Johannem commentarius* (ed. H. Feld; 2 vols.; Ioannis Calvini Opera Exegetica XI; Genève: Librairie Droz, 1997) I.60.

⁵ Jesus' characterisation of Nathanael carries with itself an allusion to Ps 31.2 LXX: μακάριος ἀνὴρ, οὗ οὐ μὴ λογισηται κύριος ἁμαρτίαν, οὐδὲ ἔστιν ἐν τῷ στόματι αὐτοῦ δόλος, 'Blessed is the man whose since the Lord will not take into account – there is not deceit in the mouth of such one.'

Another interpretation of the Johannine fig tree is based on the widespread rabbinic motif which identifies this specific kind of plant as a place for the study of the Law. Midrash *Qoheleth Rabbah* 5.11.2 on Eccles 5.11 transmits a story, attributed to R. Nehemiah, about R. Ḥiyya (or, in other versions, R. Akiba or R. Simeon b. Ḥalafta) and his disciples choosing a spot beneath a fig tree for their Torah study. The owner of the fig tree considers it a *mitzvah* to have them there, but one day he does not get up before sunrise to gather the figs which are consequently destroyed by worms.⁶ According to the key to the interpretation of dreams about plants, provided by R. Ḥiyya b. Abba (b. *Ber.* 57a), dreams about a fig tree are a sign of Torah observance. This interpretation is based on Prov 27.18: 'Anyone who tends a fig tree will eat its fruit' (NRSV), which is used to the same exegetical end in *Bamidbar Rabbah* 21.16 on Num 27.6, with a parallel in Midrash *Tanhuma*, *Pinchas* 11.1. The rabbinic *comparanda* have been accepted as the most promising way of illuminating v. 48 by several modern commentators.⁷

Here, one should also note a related Patristic interpretative intuition that the fig tree is to be understood as representing the Jewish Law wholesale. This view is attested already in Tatian's *Diatessaron* which, if Ephrem's commentary is to be followed, had Jesus say that Nathanael is 'a true Israelite scribe'.⁸ While commenting on Cant 6.9c–d, Gregory of Nyssa digresses about the Johannine passage: διὸ καταλιπὼν ὁ Ναθαναὴλ τὴν τοῦ νόμου συκῆν, ἣς ἡ σκιὰ πρὸς τὴν μετουσίαν τοῦ φωτὸς διεκώλυε, καταλαμβάνει τὸν τὰ φύλλα τῆς συκῆς διὰ τὴν τῶν ἀγαθῶν ἀκαρπία ἀποξηραίνοντα, 'Therefore Nathanael leaves behind the fig tree of the law, whose shade was preventing his participation in the light, and lays hold on the One who withers the leaves of the fig tree because they fail to produce good fruit' (*In Cant.* 15).⁹ This is also the view of Ambrose, *Exp. Luc.* 8.90 on Luke 18.43, who, while comparing Nathanael to Zacchaeus, claims that the former sat under the fig tree and thus was under the Law, while the latter got on top of it and so was above and beyond the Torah.¹⁰ A cognate exegetical view might be transmitted by Augustine, *Tract. Ev. Io.* 7.17, where he states that Nathanael was educated in the Law: *intelligere enim debemus ipsum Nathanaelem eruditum et peritum legis fuisse*, 'we ought to understand this Nathanael to have been learned and skilful in the Law' (but cf. 7.21 where, interestingly, the fig tree is said to represent sinfulness, based on Gen 3.7).

However, the symbolic equivalence between the fig tree and the study of the Torah cannot be taken for granted. R. Ḥiyya and his disciples do not treat the fig tree simply as a natural place for Torah study, but instead are placed there because it serves the story – just as figs have to be collected in their proper time, so God appoints each person's death at

⁶ Compare two other versions of the same story in *Bereshit Rabbah* 62.2 on Gen 25.8 and y. *Ber.* 2.8.5, 20a where, however, the figs ultimately do not become infested by worms.

⁷ F. Hahn, 'Die Jüngerberufung Joh 1,35–51', *Neues Testament und Kirche: Für Rudolf Schnackenburg* (ed. J. Gnllka; Freiburg/Basel/Wien: Herder, 1974) 172–90; S. Pancaro, *The Law in the Fourth Gospel: The Torah and the Gospel, Moses and Jesus, Judaism and Christianity According to John* (NovTSup 42; Leiden: Brill, 1975) 304; W. Fenske, 'Unter dem Feigenbaum sah ich dich (Joh 1,48): Die Bedeutung der Nathanaelperikope für die Gesamtrezeption des Johannesevangeliums', *ThZ* 54 (1998) 210–27; U. Wilckens, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes* (NTD 4; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000¹⁸) 51. Without full acceptance, this exegetical possibility is also singled out by M.-É. Boismard, *Du baptême à Cana (Jean 1, 19 - 2, 11)* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1956) 103 and R. Bultmann, *Das Evangelium des Johannes* (KEK; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986²¹) 73 n. 8.

⁸ See Éphrem de Nisibe, *Commentaire sur l'Évangile concordant ou Diatessaron, traduit du syriaque et de l'arménien* (ed. L. Leloir; SC 121; Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1966) 104–5.

⁹ The Greek text and translation are taken from Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on the Song of Songs* (trans. R. A. Norris, Jr.; WGRW 13; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012) 460–1.

¹⁰ Ambrose makes a similar claim in *Isaac* 8.73 where he claims that Nathanael was not a soul betrothed to Christ (evoking Cant 8.5) since 'he was afraid of the Jews'. On the other hand, Ambrose offers a different reading of the scene in *Exp. Ps.* 118 3.19 where he identifies the fig tree's shade as the shadow of God's words as opposed to 'examples and shadows' followed by the Jews.

the correct time. Strack adduces alternative types of trees as study spots in rabbinic literature. According to *b. Hag.* 14b, R. Johanan b. Zakkai offered an exposition of Ezekiel's Merkabah vision to another rabbi under an olive tree. *Shir HaShirim Rabbah* 4.4.9 conveys R. Aḥa's comment on Cant 4.3, stating the Torah can be studied under a variety of trees, with no clear preference for the fig tree.¹¹ Furthermore, the oft-cited rabbinic passages about studying the Torah in the shade of a fig tree are scantier than many commentators take them to be. More importantly, the midrashic and Talmudic evidence referenced above does not allow one to claim that the association of a fig tree with Torah study emerged already in the Second Temple period. The conclusion here must be that it is possible but not really likely that the Johannine audience, when hearing about Nathanael under a fig tree, would immediately think of him as devoted to the study of the Law.

Another attempt at solving the apparent mystery of the Johannine fig tree was made by Moule in his short note on the passage.¹² He takes the cue from Daniel's cross-examination of the two elders accusing Susanna of having sex with a man; when asked to point to a place where it happened, one mentions a mastic tree (Sus 54), the other an evergreen oak (Sus 58). Moule argues that Daniel's question ὑπὸ τί δένδρον; 'under what tree?' was a typical question to verify one's credibility, citing an apparent parallel in *m. Sanh.* 5.2; *b. Sanh.* 41a where, during an interrogation, R. Johanan ben Zakkai inquired as to the exact kind of fig tree. The problem with this reading is that it relies on very little evidence connected to a specific forensic context (fig tree as part of a crime scene), which is not relevant to the exchange between Nathanael and Jesus in John 1.47–51 where, most importantly, the question 'under what tree?' is not asked.

An ingenious exegetical proposal as to the significance of the Johannine fig tree has been put forward by Koester.¹³ He connects John 1.48 to a constellation of biblical passages which proclaim that the season of rest – past or future – will take place under vines and fig trees (1 Kings 5.5 MT/4.25 English; Mic 4.4; Zech 3.10; 1 Macc 14.12). Of special relevance is Zech 3.10: בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא נֹאֲמַם יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת תִּקְרְאוּ אִישׁ לְרֵעֵהוּ אֵל-תַּחַת גִּפְנוֹ וְאֵל-תַּחַת תְּאֵנָה, "On that day," says the Lord of Hosts, "everyone will call their neighbour under the vine and under the fig tree."¹⁴ Koester argues that Nathanael being found by Philip under a fig tree evokes the eschatological rest prophesied in Zech 3.10 as well as its co-text, namely the messianic promise of God's servant, 'the Branch' (3.8), thus confirming Jesus' identity and status. While Koester is right to point to a web of Zecharianic intertext in the Fourth Gospel, the claim about John 1.48 evoking Zech 3.8, 10 seems, while not impossible, then rather weak. John does not call Jesus 'the Branch of David'; indeed, the Davidic origin of the Messiah (not of Jesus in particular) is brought up only in John 7.42. It is by no means certain that John internalises and uses Zechariah's Messianic terminology and that he could have had Zech 3.10 in mind when describing Jesus' encounter with Nathanael. Moreover, in Zechariah, the vine and the fig tree represent end-time rest – would this imply that Nathanael enjoyed the eschatological respite *before* he received Jesus' call? Another problem with Koester's reading is that it requires the mention of the fig tree to function as a synecdoche for the whole idiomatic

¹¹ For other passages see Str-B II.371.

¹² C. F. D. Moule, 'A Note on "Under the Fig Tree" in John I. 48, 50', *JTS* 5 (1954) 210–11.

¹³ C. R. Koester, 'Messianic Exegesis and the Call of Nathanael (John 1.45–51)', *JSNT* 39 (1990) 23–34; C. S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012) 486; S. A. Hunt, 'Nathanael: Under the Fig Tree on the Fourth Day', *Character Studies in the Fourth Gospel: Narrative Approaches to Seventy Figures in John* (ed. S. A. Hunt, D. F. Tolmie and R. Zimmermann; WUNT 314; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013) 189–201; A. Kubiś, 'Drzewo figowe, osioł i woda żywa. Rola Księgi Zachariasza w Ewangelii Janowej', *Resovia Sacra* 22 (2015) 211–37.

¹⁴ As noted by Hunt, 'Nathanael', 201, Zech 3.10 LXX ends with ὑποκάτω συκῆς which might explain the single Johannine use of this proposition in 1.50.

phrase ‘under the vine and the fig tree’. It is unlikely that John would have unpicked the locution and left only its second part.¹⁵

The difficulties of the interpretations just discussed led several commentators to plead ignorance in this case which is a reasonable though not exactly satisfactory position.¹⁶ The argument of this article is that an alternative exegetical path is available. It has been first pointed to in passing by Joachim Jeremias in his discussion of Nathanael’s calling.¹⁷ He notes the interpretation of the fig tree as suggesting Torah study but rejects it, claiming that a study hall would be the usual place for such an activity. Instead, he adduces several apocryphal and rabbinic sources, as well as examples from early Christian art, which suggest that the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil in Gen 2–3 was seen by later ancient interpreters as a fig tree. The next section will develop this line of thinking and support it with additional evidence.

3. The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil as a Fig Tree

The species of the tree first mentioned in Gen 2.9 was a matter of interpretative debate in the Second Temple period and later. The full contours of the debate are only visible from several passages in rabbinic literature which note several relevant dendrological identifications.

B. Ber. 40a lists the following opinions on the issue:

אילן שאכל ממנו אדם הראשון רבי מאיר אומר גפן היה שאין לך דבר שמביא יללה על האדם אלא יין שנאמר וישת מן היין וישכר רבי נחמיה אומר תאנה היתה שבדבר שנתקלקלו בו נתקנו שנאמר ויתפרו עלה תאנה ר"י אומר חטה היתה שאין התינוק יודע לקרות אבא ואמא עד שיטעום טעם דגן

The tree from which Adam, the first [human], ate, Rabbi Meir says: It was a vine, as nothing brings wailing upon a human man [like] wine, for it is said: ‘And he drank of the wine and got drunk’ [Gen 9.21]. Rabbi Neḥemya says: It was a fig tree, as with the object with which they were disgraced, in it they were mended, for it is said: ‘And they sewed together fig leaves’ [Gen 3.7]. Rabbi Yehuda says: It was wheat, since the child does not know how to call ‘Dad!’ or ‘Mum!’ until he tastes the taste of grain.

An almost identical discussion is also found in *b. Sanh.* 70a–b.¹⁸ Of the three options, wheat is justified through a reference to human upbringing, whereas vine and fig tree are apparently borne out by the biblical text itself. R. Neḥemya derives his proposal from noticing that the fig tree is the only named plant in the narrative of the encounter of Adam and Eve with the serpent, making it an educated guess.

¹⁵ For the sake of completeness, one should make reference to the interesting, but ultimately rather fanciful argument, hazarded by J. A. Draper, ‘Temple, Tabernacle and Mystical Experience in John’, *Neot* 31 (1997) 263–88, at 279–80, that οὐκ ἔστιν in 1.47 is a deformation of the Hebrew סִכָּה, *sukkah* beneath which Nathanael was supposedly sitting. This view assumes a mistake in the Gospel text which would be missing the standard Johannine formula introducing Greek rendering of Semitic words (see 1.41, 42; 9.7).

¹⁶ Boismard, *Du baptême à Cana*, 103; R. E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John I–XII* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1966) 87; C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text* (London: SPCK, 1978²) 185; T. Nicklas, ‘“Unter dem Feigenbaum”’: Die Rolle des Lesers im Dialog zwischen Jesus und Nathanael (Joh 1.45–50)’, *NTS* 46 (2000) 193–203; J. F. McHugh, *John 1–4: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary* (ed. Graham N. Stanton; ICC; London/New York: T&T Clark, 2009) 161–2.

¹⁷ J. Jeremias, ‘Die Berufung des Nathanael (Jo 1,45–51)’, *Angelos* 3 (1928) 2–5.

¹⁸ It is noteworthy that Rashi excerpts R. Neḥemya’s claim from the larger discussion and cites in his commentary on Gen 3.7.

A more extensive discussion comes from the commentary on Gen 2.9 in *Bereshit Rabbah* 15.7, with very close parallels in *Pesikta Rabbati* 42.1–2 and *Pesikta de Rab-Kahana* 20.6. In this version, R. Meir is said to have proposed wheat, suggesting it is associated with knowledge and that it used to grow as tall as cedars. R. Yehuda b. Ilai, taking his cue from Deut 32.32, identifies the tree as vine due to the sorrow and bitterness it brought into the world. R. Abba of Acco sees it as etrog whose wood he considers edible, in harmony with a literal reading of Gen 3.6: טוֹב הָעֵץ לְמַאֲכָל, ‘the tree was good for food’. It is R. Yose who puts forward the fig tree as the correct answer, and supports his claim with the reference to Gen 3.7 and the tunics of fig leaves. Finally, R. Azariah and Yehuda b. Simon, quoting the opinion of R. Yehoshua b. Levi, claim that God would never reveal what species the Tree of Knowledge was in order not to perpetually shame humankind by having it see such a tree in daily life. The discussion of the Tree from Gen 2–3 found in *Bereshit Rabbah* is more extensive than the one in the Bavli, but the two share the exegetical explanation for identifying it as a fig tree. Both R. Neḥemya and R. Yose think that the story already contains all of the information necessary – the Tree must have been a fig tree because this would explain why Adam and Eve’s tunics are made specifically from fig leaves. In a different way, the text of the story inspires R. Eleazar who transmits R. Yose b. Zimra’s opinion on the matter in *Qoheleth Rabbah* 5.10.1. He thinks that it is only the fig tree that fulfils all of the criteria posited in Gen 3.6 – the tree must be good for food, pleasant to the eyes, and what one needs to desire to become wise.

In general, the rabbis see two kinds of plants as the most serious contenders for the honour of being the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, i.e., the vine and the fig tree. The latter, emerging in Gen 3 itself, is proposed by the authorities quoted above, whereas the former, characterised by bitterness and intoxicating qualities, is mentioned in this role also in later medieval midrashim. *Vayikrah Rabbah* 12.1 and *Esther Rabbah* 5.1 both transmit the saying of R. Yehuda b. Ilai known from *Bereshit Rabbah*, while *Bamidbar Rabbah* 10.2 includes a warning to the gentiles not to oppress Israel, symbolised by a vine (based on Prov 23.30; Isa 27.2), since they would be punished just like Eve who ate from the vine.

The dispute about the species of the Tree of Knowledge is attested outside of rabbinic literature, with the two dominant identifications being, again, the vine and, importantly for the present argument, the fig tree.¹⁹ In some manuscripts of the Greek *Life of Adam and Eve*, also known as the *Apocalypse of Moses*, Adam confesses to having eaten the fruit and describes his immediate reaction: λαβοῦσα δὲ φύλλα ἐξ αὐτοῦ ἐποίησα ἐμαυτῇ περιζώματα, καὶ ἐστὶν παρ’ αὐτῶν τῶν φυτῶν ἐξ ὧν ἔφαγον, ‘I took leaves from it and made myself a loincloth, and it was from these plants that I have eaten’ (20.5).²⁰ The date of composition and the provenance of this document are notoriously difficult to ascertain, but it is certainly reflective of the exegetical traditions and debates current in late Second

¹⁹ See also the helpful survey of the relevant material in B. Otzen, ‘The Paradise Trees in Jewish Apocalyptic,’ *Apocryphon Severini: Studies in Ancient Manichaeism and Gnosticism Presented to Søren Giversen* (Ed. H. K. Nielsen, J. P. Sørensen, and P. Bilde; Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1993) 140–54.

²⁰ Most of editions perceive the second clause as a gloss; see D. A. Bertrand, *La vie grecque d’Adam et Eve: Introduction, édition, traduction et commentaire* (Paris: Maisonneuve, 1987) 84; J. Tromp, *The Life of Adam and Eve in Greek: A Critical Edition* (PVTG 6; Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2005) 144–5, followed by J. R. Levison, *The Greek Life of Adam and Eve* (CEJL; Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2022) 569–71 and T. Knittel, *Das griechische Leben Adams und Evas: Studien zu einer narrativen Anthropologie im frühen Judentum* (TSAJ 88; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002) 150. However, some critical editions keep it in the main text; see J. Dochhorn, *Die Apokalypse des Mose: Text, Übersetzung, Kommentar* (TSAJ 106; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005) 350–1. Whether the clause belonged to the Urtext does not seriously affect the present argument, as it relies on the fig tree being an interpretative possibility in ancient Jewish and Christian texts, and this is demonstrated even if the clause is an addition. A *Synopsis of the Books of Adam and Eve* (ed. G. A. Anderson and M. E. Stone; EJL 17; Atlanta: Scholars Press, rev. edn 1999) 58 shows that this reading made its way into the Armenian, Georgian, and Slavonic versions.

Temple Judaism and early Christianity.²¹ The same can be claimed for another text, namely the gnostic *Testimony of Truth* (NHC IX 3).²² In the course of his homiletic instruction, the author offers a radical reinterpretation of three Pentateuchal depictions of serpents, from Gen 3, Exod 7, and Num 21. In the retelling of the first passage, Adam's meeting with God is narrated in the following way:

But [God] came at the time of [evening] walking in the midst [of] Paradise. When Adam saw him he hid himself. And he said, 'Adam, where are you?' He answered (and) said, '[I] have come under the fig tree.' And at that very moment God [knew] that he had eaten from the tree of which he had commanded him, 'Do not eat of it.'²³

The text does not offer an explicit identification of the Tree as a fig tree, but this is made all but certain by connecting Adam's confession to be under the fig tree and God realising his transgression. This view is strengthened by this link being made explicit in *On the Origin of the World* (NHC II 5 110.22), where the leaves of the Tree of Knowledge are fig-like. The *Testimony of Truth*, though likely dating from the last second or early third century, is steeped in earlier Jewish exegetical practice like perhaps no other text from the Nag Hammadi library. As such, it can be reasonably perceived as a window into the interpretative discussions contemporary with the Fourth Gospel and germane to its composition.

Two later texts also deserve mention. One Syriac recension of the *Testament of Adam*, a composite work reproducing the supposed deathbed discourse of the first man to his son Seth, puts into the latter's mouth a question about the type of fruit he consumed in the Garden of Eden, with Adam responding that it was a fig tree.²⁴ A late ancient exegetical comment, ascribed possibly to Theodore of Mopsuestia and preserved in the catena to Genesis known as the *Collectio Coisliniana* (BnF Ms Coislinianus 113), states the following in relation to Gen 3.7–8:

Ἐπειδὴ ῥάπτοντες ἔτι τὰ φύλλα ἤκουσαν τῆς φωνῆς τοῦ θεοῦ περιπατοῦντος, ὑπὸ τὸ ξύλον ἐκρύβησαν, οὐκ ἄλλο δηλονότι ἀλλ' ἢ οὐπερ ἔρραπτον τὰ φύλλα. Ἀλλὰ τοῦτο γε ἦν ἐφ' ᾧ τὴν ἐντολὴν εἰλήφεισαν, ὡς ὁ προφήτης φησὶν. Ἐκρύβησαν γάρ φησιν ἐν μέσῳ τοῦ ξύλου τοῦ παραδείσου. Ἀπ' αὐτοῦ δὲ καὶ βεβρωκότες, τὰ φύλλα ἔρραπτον διὰ τὴν γενομένην αὐτοῖς αἰσχύνῃ ἐπὶ τῇ γυμνώσει. Ταῦτα δὲ ἦν φύλλα σκῆς: ἀναντιρρήτως ἄρα σκῆ τὸ δένδρον ἦν ἐφ' ᾧ περ εἰλήφεισαν τὴν ἐντολήν. Ἀλλ' οὐ προσίενται τοῦτοτινες, δι' ἀπλῆν εὐήθειαν ἐμοὶ δοκεῖν οἰόμενοι

²¹ See the summary of the debate in Levison, *The Greek Life of Adam and Eve*, 97–134.

²² See B. A. Pearson, 'Jewish Haggadic Traditions in *The Testimony of Truth* from Nag Hammadi (CG IX, 3)', *Ex Orbe Religionum: Studia Geo Windgren* (ed. J. Bergman, K. Drynjevff and H. Ringgren; Leiden: Brill, 1972) 457–70 who suggests that the 'serpent midrash' might have been originally a separate work, providing ample parallels. Note, however, the erroneous reference to Tertullian, *Marc.* 2.2.7 contained on p. 465 n. 6 (repeated in B. A. Pearson and S. Giversen, eds., *Nag Hammadi Codices IX and X* (NHS 15; Leiden: Brill, 1981) 161). Pearson treats this as Adam blaming a fig tree which is the meaning of Holmes' translation (*Ante-Nicene Christian Library* (ed. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1868) VII.63): 'Except that Adam never said to his fig tree, Why hast thou made me thus?'. The relevant passage in all modern critical editions, including Oehler's *editio maior* from 1854, reads: *Nisi quod Adam nunquam figulo suo dixit, Non prudenter definixisti me*, 'But Adam never said to his maker, "You have not produced me with skill."' Holmes must have thought Oehler's *figulo* to be equivalent to *ficulo*, from *ficula*/-us, a rare diminutive of *figus*, 'fig tree' (*Thesaurus Linguae Latinae* 6.1.650.1–2 notes a single occurrence in Plaut. *stich.* 690), leading to the mistaken translation. Altogether, to my knowledge, no pre-Nicene Christian author speaks about the fig tree as the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.

²³ NHC IX 3 45.16–27; translation taken from Pearson and Giversen, *Nag Hammadi Codices IX and X*, 161–3.

²⁴ See M. Kmosko, 'Testamentum Patris nostri Adam', *Patrologia Syriaca* (ed. R. Graffin; Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1907) I.II.1307–60 at 1344. This portion of the text might date as far back as the third century.

χρῆναι καινόν τι εἶναι τὸ ξύλον, καὶ οὐ λογιζόμενοι ὅτι μὴ τῇ ποιότητι τοῦ ξύλου μηδὲ τῇ καινότητι τῆς βρώσεως τὰ ἁμαρτήματα κρίνεται, ἀλλὰ τῇ δόσει τῆς ἐντολῆς: ἦν ἐφ' ὅτου δήποτε παραβῆναι ἴσῃν ἔχει τὴν μέμψιν.²⁵

But after they had sewn together the leaves, they heard God taking a walk, and they hid themselves under the tree – under none other than the one from which they plucked the leaves. But it was indeed the same one about which they received the commandment, just as the prophet said. For he said, ‘They hid among the trees of the Paradise.’ From the one from which they had eaten, they also plucked the leaves so that they might be a covering for their nakedness. They were fig leaves – undoubtedly, then the fig tree was the tree about which they received the commandment. But some do not agree with this, as it seems to me, due to the simple goodness of heart, as they suppose there be a need for the tree to be of another kind. They do not consider that sinfulness is adjudicated neither to the species of the tree, nor to the novelty of the food, but to what is given in the commandment, the transgression of which in whatever way incurs equal blame.

The literary picture can be completed by a much later source, namely the Syriac *Book of the Bee*, a work weaving together theological and historiographic narratives, composed ca. 1222 by Solomon of Akhlāt, the bishop of Basra. The text makes a variety of claims about the role of fig trees in biblical history. First of all, it identifies the Tree of Knowledge as a fig tree:

Adam and Eve were not stripped of the glory with which they were clothed, nor did they die the death of sin, because they desired and ate of the fruit of the fig tree – for the fruit of the fig tree was not better than the fruit of any other tree – but because of the transgression of the Law, in that they were presumptuous and wished to become gods (ch. 15).²⁶

The interpretative imagination of the author or his sources does not stop there. In ch. 30, Adam is said to have taken a branch from the fig tree, from which he and Eve had previously eaten, as a sort of memento and used it as a staff. It later served also his descendants, including Abraham, who used it to smash his household idols, and finally Moses, who witnessed it turn into a serpent during the theophany of the burning bush. In Solomon of Akhlāt’s retelling, the wood from the fateful fig tree served to make Jesus’ cross (ch. 44). Finally, he also includes the reference to Nathanael being hidden under a fig tree (this time without a stated connection to the Garden of Eden) as a child during Herod’s slaughter of the innocents (ch. 39).²⁷ The *Book of the Bee* is of course far removed from Second Temple or early Christian contexts and could not be seen as straightforwardly reflective of much earlier debates, but it manifests the possibilities of the text and develops intuitions that one sees in the earlier sources.

Moving beyond texts, the intuition that the Tree of Knowledge was a fig tree found noticeable expression in early Christian art. Jeremias references two sarcophagi with Adam

²⁵ F. Petit, ed., *Catenae graecae in Genesim et in Exodum* (2 vols; CCSG 15; Turnhout: Brepols, 1986) II.99–100. This is referred to incorrectly as Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *Quaestiones in Genesim* 28 by Bertrand, *La vie grecque d’Adam et Eve*, 125 and Dochhorn, *Die Apokalypse des Mose*, 352.

²⁶ Translation taken from Solomon of Akhlāt, *The Book of the Bee: The Syriac Text Edited from the Manuscripts in London, Oxford, and Munich* (trans. E. A. Wallis Budge; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1886) 21. Note the similarity of reasoning about the grounds for divine punishment with the passage from the *Collectio Coisliniana* quoted before.

²⁷ On this and related traditions in Eastern Christian apocrypha, see R. Stichel, *Nathanael unter dem Feigenbaum: Die Geschichte eines biblischen Erzählstoffs in Literatur und Kunst der byzantinischen Welt* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1985).

and Eve scenes, involving fig trees. The first one, noted by Garrucci in the fifth volume of his *Storia della arte cristiana*, dating the mid-fourth century and found in the Lateran, depicts the first humans flanking the Tree of Knowledge around which the serpent is coiled with a distinctly fig-shaped piece of fruit in his mouth (see Figure 1).²⁸ The second one, a much more famous Roman sarcophagus of Junius Bassus, a *prefectus urbi* who died in 359, contains a similar scene where the Tree has lobed, fig-like leaves, especially visible over Adam's head (see Figure 2).²⁹ Later art did not continue this exegetical trope with a rare, though very significant exception, namely Michelangelo's *The Fall and Expulsion from Paradise*, a fresco on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel where the leaves and the fruit unmistakably suggest that the painter wanted to depict the Tree of Knowledge as a fig tree (see Figure 3).³⁰ This visualisation of the Fall narrative stands as the apex of the pre-modern exegetical intuition, attested sparsely but diversely, which identified the Tree as a fig tree. This possibility, rooted like no other in the narrative of Genesis itself and attested already in the Second Temple period, should be taken into account when discussing the curious role of the plant mentioned in John 1.47.

To complete and balance this picture, one must note the other alternative, namely, seeing the Tree in the Garden of Eden as a vine. Apart from the rabbinic opinions from *Midrash Rabbah* and the Bavli quoted above,³¹ a few pseudepigraphic texts, with typically obscure origins and convoluted transmission histories, suggest that it was a vine that Adam and Eve ate from. *First Enoch* 32.4, likely the earliest text preserving the traces of the debate, offers a list of characteristics of the tree, among which is 'and its fruit like the clusters of the vine – very cheerful'.³² In a related fashion, *Apocalypse of Abraham* 23.6 characterises the fruit of the Tree as being similar in appearance to grapes. *Third (or Greek) Apocalypse of Baruch* 4.8 contains a dialogue between an *angelus interpres* and Baruch who asks about the species of the tree that deceived Adam, and receives a response identifying it as a vine planted by the evil Samael.³³ Just like the fig tree, vine was considered to be a viable interpretative option in the discussions about the species of the Tree of Knowledge in Eden in the Second Temple period and among some later Christians and rabbinic Jews, likely due to its intoxicating qualities.

This section mustered a range of different evidence to show that the author and early readers of the Gospel of John could have easily made the connection between the fig tree and the story of Gen 3. Such a connection was made repeatedly in apocryphal, gnostic and

²⁸ R. Garrucci, *Storia della arte cristiana nei primi otto secoli della chiesa* (5 vols.; Prato: Guasti, 1879) V.123–4 (plate 382,3). The identification as a fig tree is accepted by A. Breymann, *Adam und Eva in der Kunst des christlichen Alterthums* (Wolfenbüttel: Wollermann, 1893), 1.47; L. Troje, *ADAM und ZWH: Eine Szene der altchristlichen Kunst in ihrem religionsgeschichtlichen Zusammenhange* (SHAW Philosophisch-Historische Klasse 17; Heidelberg: Winter, 1916) 10 n. 1. J. Ficker, *Die altchristlichen Bildwerke im christlichen Museums des Laterans* (Leipzig: Seeman, 1890) 107 is surely mistaken in his view that an apple tree is depicted.

²⁹ A. de Waal, *Der Sarkophag des Junius Bassus in den Grotten von St. Peter: Eine archäologische Studie* (Rome: Gesellschaft des göttlichen Heilandes, 1900) 24 n. 2.

³⁰ J. Manca, "'His Fruit Was Sweet to My Taste': The Song of Solomon and Michelangelo's Temptation", *Source: Notes in the History of Art* 39 (2020) 162–71, at 166 suggests that the pictorial choice was due to Cant 2.13. While such influence cannot be disproven, it is more plausible to claim that Michelangelo himself made the inference based on fig leaves being mentioned in Gen 3.7 or came into contact with ancient Christian Roman artworks that depicted the paradisiac tree as a fig tree.

³¹ To this one could add *Sifre Devarim* 323 on Deut 32.32 which connects 'the vine of Sodom' with 'the disciples of the ancient serpent', thus coming tantalisingly close to the identification of the Tree with a vine.

³² G. W. E. Nickelsburg, *1 Enoch* (2 vols.; Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001) 1.320.

³³ One can also adduce Epiphanius' description of the Severians (*Pan.* 3.45.1.1–8) who considered vine to be the product of Ialdabaoth/Sabaoth's ejaculation after an intercourse with a woman and consequently abstained from it. This story, if it ever was given credence by any group, omits any reference to the Tree of Knowledge, departing significantly from the narrative of Genesis.

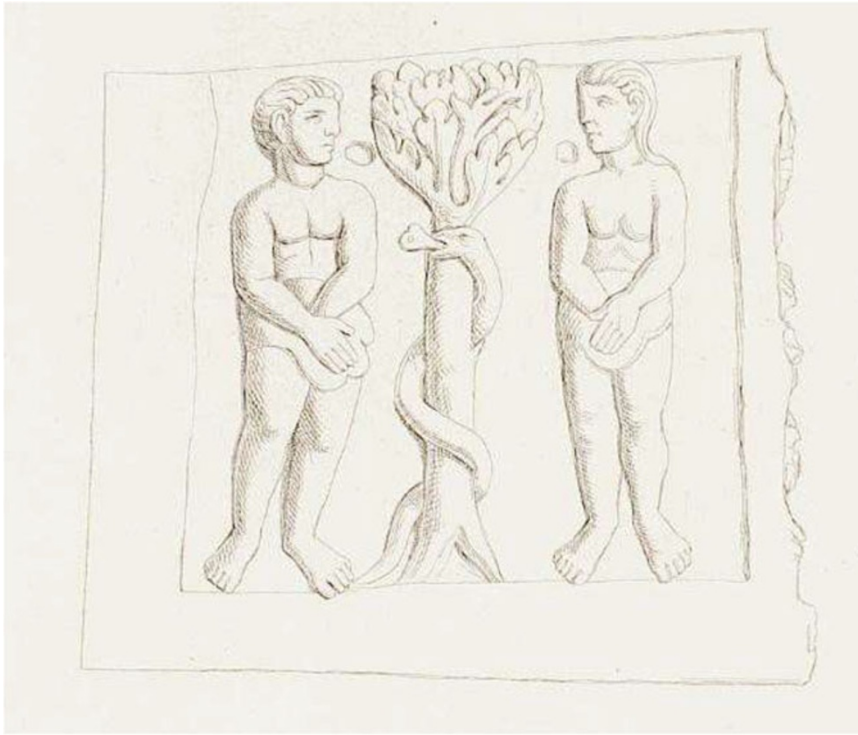


Figure 1. A panel depicting Adam and Eve from a fourth-century sarcophagus from the Lateran (R. Garrucci, *Storia della arte cristiana nei primi otto secoli della chiesa*, V.123–4 (plate 382,3)) © PDM 1.0

rabbinic sources. It was part of a larger exegetical speculation about the species of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, with multiple different trees and plants being proposed, notably the vine. The next section will show that the connection between the interpretations of Gen 3 illuminates Jesus' claim in John 1.48 and opens up new avenues of understanding of the Johannine text.

4. New Interpretative Possibilities

Assuming that the author of the Fourth Gospel was familiar with the debates surrounding the species of the Tree of Knowledge, what would be the purpose of making Jesus refer to a fig tree? To put this question slightly differently, if his first hearers and readers did indeed associate the tree with what they knew of those debates, what did they conclude?

In narrative terms, Jesus recalling having seen Nathanael under the fig tree would mirror God finding Adam near the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Nathanael would thus take the place of somebody who hides themselves due to a serious transgression. In John, the logic of God discovering Adam and Eve's transgression and punishing them for it is reversed and overturned. While Genesis characterises God as actually finding out about what the first humans did – something that the gnostic author of *The Testimony of Truth* thought incredible – the Johannine Jesus knows Nathanael beforehand, suggesting a level of prescience. In Genesis, the punitive sentence follows from the admission of guilt on Adam's part, whereas Jesus declares Nathanael to be guileless before the latter even utters a word. This pre-emptive remission of sins resonates with Jesus' mission as announced by John the Baptist



Figure 2. A panel depicting Adam and Eve from a cast copy of the sarcophagus of Junius Bassus (ca. 359 CE) © Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0



Figure 3. Michelangelo's fresco from the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican (ca. 1509–1512), depicting the Fall and the Expulsion from Paradise © Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 2.0

(1.29; John never claims that the Baptist's own activity had this purpose). Furthermore, Jesus takes up the role that the Creator God performs in Genesis, namely visiting his creation. The narrative contains a Christological trope, connecting or even identifying Jesus with God, very much in the vein of the Johannine Prologue (1.3, 11). This view is confirmed

by his response to Nathanael's acclamation of him as a rabbi, the Son of God and the king of Israel (1.49) – the promise of things still greater indicates that these titles are not exhaustive of Jesus' identity.

The oblique reference to Gen 3 in the story of Nathanael's calling contributes to the larger picture of the Johannine interaction with the early chapters of the first book of the Torah.³⁴ Commentators agree that the opening of the Gospel consciously plays with the language and ideas of Gen 1, most obviously in the repetition of the first words of Gen 1.1 LXX: 'Ἐν ἀρχῇ in John 1.1. Garden imagery, redolent of the idea of Eden, is strongly present in the Johannine Passion narrative. Unlike in the Synoptics, Gethsemani, where Jesus is arrested, is called κῆπος, 'a garden', in John 18.1, 26. Jesus' tomb – again, in a stark difference to the other canonical Gospels – is located in a garden, according to 19.41, explaining why Mary Magdalen mistakes Jesus for a gardener in 20.15. The latter reference is superficially erroneous, but contains deeper insight, suggesting that Jesus plays the role of God in his own garden.³⁵

As noted in the introduction, Jesus' exchange with Nathanael leads up to the saying about the Son of Man acting as a ladder for angels in v. 51. This verse has attracted significant attention of scholars due to its potential relationship with Jewish exegetical tradition based on Gen 28.12. Most importantly, Quispel and Rowland have posited that John might have known the early Jewish esoteric traditions about angels gazing at Jacob because his features were simultaneously represented on the divine throne.³⁶ Making Jesus take up Jacob's place is further signal of John's divine Christology and of his familiarity with Jewish exegesis and mysticism, which he puts on display in the immediate textual vicinity of the fig tree episode. Merkavah literature which, though compiled significantly later, transmits and develops mystical themes circulating already in the Second Temple period, exhibits noticeable interest in reimagining the Garden of Eden.³⁷ In John 1.47–51, neither Jesus nor Nathanael are mundane interlocutors – instead, Jesus is an exalted being connecting the heavenly and earthly realms, while his soon-to-be follower is a morally pure Israelite visionary, taking a place underneath the same tree under which Adam lost sight of God's glory but now in order to see this glory anew.

Finally, taking leave of Nathanael, one could study more broadly the implications of the debate about the species of the Tree of Knowledge for John. As was evidenced in the previous section, the other commonly shared opinion on the topic was that the Tree was indeed

³⁴ On Genesis themes in the Fourth Gospel, see J. Suggit, 'Jesus the Gardener: The Atonement in the Fourth Gospel as Re-Creation', *Neot* 33 (1999) 161–8; J. K. Brown, 'Creation's Renewal in the Gospel of John', *CBQ* 72 (2010) 275–90; C. R. Sosa Siliézar, *Creation Imagery in the Gospel of John* (LNTS 546; London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

³⁵ N. Wyatt, "'Supposing Him to Be the Gardener'" (John 20.15): A Study of the Paradise Motif in John', *ZNW* 81 (1990) 21–38. One form of dependence, however, should be precluded. In John, the events until the wedding at Cana are structured around a sequence of six days; see Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 189–90; McHugh, *John 1–4*, 113. Some have claimed that this chronology is reflective of the six days of creation from Gen 1; see e.g. T. Barrosse, 'The Seven Days of the New Creation in St. John's Gospel', *CBQ* 21 (1959) 507–16. However, apart from the number of days (of which one is left undescribed by John), little genuine thematic overlap is found between the two stories; see the criticism in Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 496–8; Sosa Siliézar, *Creation Imagery in the Gospel of John*, 123–30. The Nathanael episode occurs on the fourth day which would have to correspond to the creation of celestial bodies in Gen 1.14–19 – not exactly a fitting narrative counterpart.

³⁶ G. Quispel, 'Nathanael und der Menschensohn (Joh 1 51)', *ZNW* 47 (1956) 281–3; C. Rowland, 'John 1.51, Jewish Apocalyptic and Targumic Tradition', *NTS* 30 (1984) 498–507. This position is criticised by J. C. O'Neill, 'Son of Man, Stone of Blood (John 1:51)', *NovT* 45 (2003) 374–81 who instead follows Jeremias, 'Die Berufung des Nathanael', in seeing Jesus as representing the stone at Bethel (Gen 28.12).

³⁷ See 3 *Enoch* 5.1; 23.18; the act of Creation in general is proscribed as a topic of study in m. Hag. 2.1 (see the famous story of four rabbis entering Pardes in b. Hag. 14b). A possible Second Temple example of esoteric meditation of the Tree(s) of Eden is contained in the *Words of Ezekiel*, 4Q385 2, lines 9–10; see the discussion in A. Jack, 'An Arboreal Sign of the End-Time (4Q385 2)', *JJS* 47 (1996) 337–44.

a vine. This plant, unlike the fig tree, has a sustained significance throughout the Fourth Gospel. Immediately after the encounter with Nathanael, Jesus and his entourage attend the wedding at Cana (from where Nathanael himself hails, see John 21.2) where he performs his first public sign, namely the turning of water into wine (2.1–11). Without entering the complex debates about the ritual and theological meaning of this event, John could be seen as transforming the significance of the vine and its products, associated with Adam's transgression as well as drunkenness, by having Jesus produce it miraculously for a marriage feast which in and of itself reflects the union of the first humans. Vine emerges again as part of Jesus' farewell discourse when he identifies himself with it: 'Εγώ εἰμι ἡ ἄμπελος ἡ ἀληθινὴ καὶ ὁ πατήρ μου ὁ γεωργὸς ἐστίν, 'I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-dresser' (John 15.1). These words in a way explain the events at Cana – Jesus' identity as the vine is logically connected to the sudden appearance of wine in place of water. While the consumption of the fruit – again, often taken by ancient interpreters to be grapes – brought death upon Adam, the consumption of the new vine, i.e., Jesus, has life-giving effects (see 6.53–6; 7.37–8). Finally, John mentions wine, albeit of the sour, vinegar-like kind (ὄξος), in relation to the crucifixion when Jesus expresses his thirst and is given sour wine, after which he cries out, 'It is finished' and dies (19.28–30). The Evangelist's play with the Genesis narrative continues, as Adam and Eve's transgression and Jesus' obedient death arise from the same fruit. Understanding the vine in the Fourth Gospel within the Second Temple exegetical interest in the Tree of Knowledge heightens its importance, and makes it all the more probable that the Johannine author did indeed engage in those debates.

5. Johannine Polysemy and Conclusions

This article showed that none of the modern interpretations of Jesus' reference to the fig tree in the call of Nathanael is completely satisfactory. Furthermore, it argued for the inherent plausibility of interpreting John 1.48 as containing an allusion to the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, understood as a fig tree. Finally, John can be seen as participating in the exegetical debate and speculation about Gen 3 also through the references to the vine and wine later in his Gospel. The purpose of this contribution is not to claim that connecting Nathanael's fig tree to the story of Adam and Eve is the only plausible way of understanding John 1.47–51. Instead, this article proposes that it is the polysemy, i.e., multiplicity of possible meanings and consequently of possible interpretations, with none of them achieving complete primacy or having a full explanatory power, that is the proper *critical* attitude towards the Fourth Gospel. Polysemy is achieved through intertextuality – the text invites its readers to connect it with other texts, corpora and traditions which variously illuminate and emphasise its features, thus opening it. This transformation in turn reflects on the author function of the Gospel, presenting the Evangelist as intellectually prolific on the one hand and, on the other, as a communicator of God's all-encompassing truth.

Let me trace this process in detail. The interpretative exercise performed in the foregoing sections consisted of setting the Johannine reference to the fig tree in the context of the Second Temple and later discussions about Gen 2–3. This context is historically and culturally close to that from which the Fourth Gospel likely originated, and hence is particularly well suited to explain how this text operates. However, the work performed earlier in this exercise was exactly that – an *exercise*, meaning that other exegetical configurations could be executed. Should a different constellation of passages be assembled, the fig tree in John 1.47–51 could stand for a place of Torah study or for eschatological peace, just as it did in the minds of pre-modern interpreters. The existence of these distinct possible configurations

enables the Johannine work to become intertextual and ambivalent in the sense spoken of by Julia Kristeva or, in terms preferred here, polysemous.³⁸ She writes:

These three dimensions or coordinates of dialogue are writing subject, addressee, and exterior texts.

The word's status is thus defined *horizontally* (the word in the text belongs to both writing subject and addressee) as well as *vertically* (the word in the text is oriented toward an anterior or synchronic literary corpus. ... Hence horizontal axis (subject-addressee) and vertical axis (text-context) coincide, bringing to light an important fact: each word (text) is an intersection of words (texts) where at least one other word (text) can be read. ... [A]ny text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another. The notion of *intertextuality* replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least *double*.³⁹

The image of a mosaic is particularly fitting here, as it requires active assembling and leaves much to the skill of the readers who act as the *musivarii*.⁴⁰

The intertextuality of the Johannine fig tree is thus a function of reader response, dependent on the audience that is able and willing to perform different possible contextualisations. Consequently, the Fourth Gospel could be understood and conceptualised using the idea of an 'open work' as originally proposed by Umberto Eco.⁴¹ The idea is not completely suited to describe any canonical Gospel or, indeed, any literary work from the Greco-Roman antiquity, since they generally intended to persuade their audience to accept the author's point of view, which in the specific case of John's work would be the acceptance of Jesus as the Son of God and Messiah. Indeed, Eco rejects pre-modern modes of interpretation as inherently rigid, even when accepting the layers of meaning, as did the scholastic theory of interpretation.⁴² However, even if one accepts that the Fourth Gospel is ultimately a 'closed' work, it might still be considered open with regard to the literary or narrative path by which its audience would arrive at its religious conclusion. The encounter between Jesus and Nathanael would constitute a step on that path which could be performed in a variety of ways – as a meeting between Messiah and a Torah scholar, between the God of Israel and a true Israelite, or between the forgiving Creator and a descendant of Adam. These possibilities are generated through seeing the reference to the fig tree in different intertextual contexts, which require knowledge, exegetical skill and participation on the part of the Johannine audience. It is not left to merely appreciate the story and nod along, but rather to actively explore and contribute to its meaning, in line with Eco's emphasis on the performer's or reader's dynamic participation in the formation of the work of art.⁴³

³⁸ J. Kristeva, 'Word, Dialogue, and Novel', *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (ed. L. S. Roudiez; trans. T. Gora, A. A. Jardine and L. S. Roudiez; European Perspectives: A Series in Social Thought and Cultural Criticism; New York: Columbia University Press, 1982) 61–90. The notion of polysemy has been fruitfully applied to the literature relevant to the present argument; see especially S. D. Fraade, 'Rabbinic Polysemy and Pluralism Revisited: Between Praxis and Thematization', *AJSR* 31 (2007) 1–40 who argues for multivocality as present already in early tannaitic corpora.

³⁹ Kristeva, 'Word, Dialogue, and Novel', 64 (italics original).

⁴⁰ One ought to note that Kristeva, following Bakhtin, would not apply the category of intertextuality to pre-modern, late alone biblical literature. She writes: 'With Bakhtin, who assimilates narrative discourse into epic discourse, narrative is a prohibition, a *monologism*, a subordination of the code to 1, to God. Hence, the epic is religious and theological; all "realist" narrative obeying 0–1 logic is dogmatic' ('Word, Dialogue, and Novel', 69; italics original).

⁴¹ U. Eco, *The Open Work* (trans. A. Cancogni; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

⁴² Eco, *The Open Work*, 5–7.

⁴³ Eco, *The Open Work*, 4: 'In primitive terms we can say that they are quite literally "unfinished": the author seems to hand them on to the performer more or less like the components of a construction kit.'

In agreement with Eco, polysemy as it is understood here is significantly different from the rabbinic and scholastic exegetical methods, such as *pardes*, allegory or the so-called four senses of Scripture, as it does not assume a hierarchy and typology of meanings. Nevertheless, an interesting pattern for the kind of interpretative behaviour proposed here is found in Thomas Aquinas' Lecture 15 on the first chapter of John's Gospel. While commenting on v. 48, he develops three meanings of the fig tree – it was at once a *realium*, because Nathanael was physically under one when Philip called him, as well as symbol of sin, serving as covers for Adam and Eve and being cursed by Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels, and of the Jewish Law, since both the fig tree and the Law provide shade (quoting Heb 10.1).⁴⁴ Without organising the meanings into a layered taxonomy, Aquinas, though unaware of much of the ancient literature discussed above, sees the episode as unfolding in multiple possible contexts. The fig tree is polysemous in that it is at the same time an actual thing, a mark of sinfulness and the temporary shelter provided by the Torah. These interpretations should naturally be viewed with suspicion from a historical-critical perspective, but they function within a larger framework of reader response which resonates with the text's author function. The fig tree from John 1, with its irreducible polyvalent symbolism reaching back to the narrative of Genesis, offers a pattern of interpretation which would allow modern readers to better reconstruct the thought world into which the Johannine text invited its readers and hearers.

The same openness could be sensed and developed with regard to other characters, objects and actions in the Johannine narrative, such as wine, water, blindness, etc. Previous sections showed that the fig tree in 1.47–51, as well as the vine later on in the text, gain additional significance in the light of Gen 3 and its reception. The Johannine text did not take sides in the debate about the species of the Tree in Eden reflected in apocryphal and rabbinic sources, but instead made his narrative embrace the two most prominent options within that discussion. Both Nathanael's fig tree and the vine referenced later in the text derive some of their meaning from the possibility of being seen as the trees from which the first humans ate. This context renders the wine drunk at Cana and Jesus' own identification with the vine even more polysemous.

The effect and performance of intertextuality and polysemy do not only affect the audience of the Gospel, but instead reflect back on the originator of the text. Too little is known with any certainty about the historical author of the Fourth Gospel to speak about their literary and theological intentionality. It is however meaningful to talk about how the text itself construes and represents its author or, in other words, about its author function.⁴⁵ An exhaustive application of this concept to the Gospel of John cannot be attempted here, but even as short a passage as the Nathanael episode bears out traces of authorial presence. The number of contexts into which the fig tree could be placed projects an author conversant in Jewish literature, able to approach readers steeped in the Second Temple scribal and exegetical culture, and, most importantly, possessing esoteric knowledge. The intertextual

⁴⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of John: Chapters 1–5* (trans. F. Larcher and J. A. Weisheipl; Washington: CUA Press, 2010) 128–9.

⁴⁵ This concept, famously introduced by Michel Foucault, 'What Is an Author?', *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology: The Essential Works of Michel Foucault, 1954–1984* (vol. 2; ed. J. D. Faubion; trans. J. V. Harari; New York: New Press, 1998) 205–22, has found its use in biblical studies. K. L. King, '“What Is an Author?” Ancient Author-Function in the Apocryphon of John and the Apocalypse of John', *Scribal Practices and Social Structures among Jesus Adherents: Essays in Honour of John S. Kloppenborg* (ed. William E. Arnal et al.; BETL 215; Leuven/Paris/Bristol: Peeters, 2016) 15–42 deployed this category to the works participating in the Johannine tradition. S. Heinen, 'Exegesis without Authorial Intention? On the Role of the “Author Construct” in Text Interpretation', *Biblical Exegesis without Authorial Intention? Interdisciplinary Approaches to Authorship and Meaning* (ed. Clarissa Breu; BibInt 172; Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2019) 7–23 offers a theoretical justification for the use of this category to the study of the Bible.

character of John 1.47–51 makes the audience face an author who is at once literarily versatile and privy to divine revelation, thus exuding authority and credibility on which he otherwise insists (see 19.35; 20.31; 21.24).

Moving beyond polysemy as an interpretative proposal for the Johannine work, this article points to further avenues for future research. The reception of the narrative of Gen 3 within the early Jesus movement appears to go beyond Paul and have its subtle reverberations in the Fourth Gospel, which are only detectable by probing cognate exegetical debates. Furthermore, the current debates about the attitude of the author of the Fourth Gospel towards Jews and Judaism should also be informed by the exegetical discourses and circles with which he might have been in contact.⁴⁶ After all, it is the rabbinic accounts that offer the fullest picture of the debates surrounding the Tree of Knowledge in which John and other texts participated only obliquely. Once the fig tree, under which Jesus claims to have first seen Nathanael, is read as part and parcel of those debates, it truly becomes one of the trees, to quote Jerome (*Epist.* 64.20), in *infinitam sensuum syluam*, ‘the infinite forest of meanings’.

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⁴⁶ On John’s anti-Judaism, see A. Reinhartz, *Cast Out of the Covenant: Jews and Anti-Judaism in the Gospel of John* (Lanham: Lexington/Fortress, 2020); M. S. Wróbel, *Anti-Judaism and the Gospel of John: A New Look at the Fourth Gospel’s Relationship with Judaism* (Lublin Theological Studies 7; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2023).

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