Verifying Biblical Allusions in John 1:51:
A Methodological Framework for Genesis Reception Studies

Tomasz Tułodziecki
Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń
thomast@umk.pl
 https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7650-8543

ABSTRACT: Current methodologies for identifying biblical allusions in the Fourth Gospel, while extensive, often struggle with texts that operate through imagery and metaphor. This study applies a tripartite framework – textual flow analysis, image analysis, and intertextual verification – to demonstrate that John 1:51 constitutes a deliberate allusion to Jacob's dream (Gen 28:12). The methodology reveals that the allusion operates through recontextualization: the Son of Man replaces both Jacob's ladder and the divine figure, creating a new christological revelation theology. While multiple intertextual connections may be present (including Dan 7), the Genesis reception proves central to the text's mystagogical function. The applied verification shows semantic, structural, and functional correspondences between the texts, confirming systematic Genesis reception in the Johannine narrative. This synchronic approach, though it yields specific insights into the text's faith-formational purpose, represents one methodological option among others. The framework contributes to ongoing discussions about allusion verification in biblical texts, particularly for passages where imagery carries the primary allusive weight. The results demonstrate that authentic allusions function not through simple borrowing, but through deliberate theological recontextualisation that preserves original narrative function while establishing new meaning paradigms.

KEYWORDS: Biblical allusions, intertextuality, Johannine Christology, Genesis reception, verification methodology

What constitutes an allusion remains a contested question in biblical scholarship. When we encounter a potential allusion, how do we verify its presence? And, if present, can we truly call it self-evident? Recent decades of exegetical work have begun to provide answers, developing methodologies to define and identify allusions in New Testament reception of the Old Testament.[1]

Richard Hays' influential work on Pauline echoes has proposed various criteria for identifying scriptural allusions – though applying these to Johannine imagery presents

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1   D.-A. Koch, *Die Schrift als Zeuge des Evangeliums. Untersuchungen zur Verwendung und zum Verständnis der Schrift bei Paulus* (BHTh 69; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 1986) 17; G. Häfner, *„Nützlich zur Belehrung (2 Tim 3,16)". Die Rolle der Schrift in den Pastoralbriefen im Rahmen der Paulusrezeption* (HBS 25; Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder 2000) 50–51; R. Zimmermann, "Jesus im Bild Gottes. Anspielung auf das Alte Testament im Johannesevangelium am Beispiel der Hirtenbildfelder in Joh 10," *Kontexte des Johannesevangeliums: Das vierte Evangelium in religions- und traditionsgeschichtlicher Perspektive* (eds. J. Frey – U. Schnelle) (WUNT 175; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2004) 81–116 (particularly 87–89).

particular challenges. The Fourth Gospel's distinctive use of visual and metaphorical language requires us to ask not merely whether an allusion exists, but how it functions within John's narrative strategy.[2]

John 1:51 holds a unique place among the Gospel passages linked to Genesis. Nearly all exegetes recognise Jesus' words – 'Amen, amen, I say to you: You will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man' – as what appears to be a clear allusion to Jacob's dream in Gen 28:12.[3] While this connection has been widely recognised in scholarship, the precise mechanisms by which this allusion operates and generates meaning merit closer examination. To be clear, this study does not seek to prove an allusion that scholarship has already established. Rather, it aims to demonstrate systematically how this acknowledged allusion functions within John's narrative strategy to generate theological meaning. Many scholars interpret this passage through the lens of Jewish traditions,[4] making it an ideal case for re-examination. This invites us to examine John 1:51 once more from this perspective.

Scholarship has also begun to recognise the rich imagery of Johannine language,[5] a perspective that merits attention here. Like the previous approaches, narrative exegesis emerged from literary and linguistic studies. This method investigates both the author's narrative techniques to uncover his intentions and the text's pragmatic dimensions.[6] Together with John's recently recognised mystagogical character, this approach has shifted scholarly focus from diachronic to synchronic reading[7] – the method adopted in this study.

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2   See R.B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press 1989), whose criteria have been widely discussed, though their application to Johannine texts remains debated. For further methodological discussions, see also R.B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press 2016); G.K. Beale, *John's Use of the Old Testament in Revelation* (JSNTSup 166; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press 1998); S. Moyise, *Evoking Scripture: Seeing the Old Testament in the New* (London: Clark 2008); M.A. Daise, *Feasts in John* (WUNT 2/229; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2007). The present study seeks to adapt and refine these approaches specifically for the imagery-rich discourse of the Fourth Gospel.

3   G. Reim employs the concept of evident allusion (*Jochanan. Erweiterte Studien zum alttestamentlichen Hintergrund des Johannesevangeliums* [Erlangen: Evangelisch-Lutherischen Mission 1995] 97–98). Only W. Michaelis denies any reference to Gen 28:12 ("Joh 1,51, Gen 28,12 und das Menschensohn-Problem," *TLZ* 85/8 [1960] 561–578 [particularly 576]). Unfortunately, it is not possible to engage with this argumentation in detail within the scope of this study.

4   Thus, inter alia, Reim, *Jochanan*, 101–104; F.J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John* (SP 4; Collegeville, MI: Liturgical Press 1998) 57; J.E. Fossum, "The Son of Man's Alter Ego. John 1:51, Targumic Tradition and Jewish Mysticism," *The Image of the Invisible God: Essays on the Influence of Jewish Mysticism on Early Christology* (NTOA 30; Göttingen – Freiburg: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht – Universitätverlag 1995) 135–151; K. Wengst, *Das Johannesevangelium*. I. *Kapitel 1–10* (ThKNT 4/1; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 2000) 95–96.

5   On the development, see R. Zimmermann, "Imagery in John: Opening up Paths Into the Tangled Thicket of John's Figurative World," *Imagery in the Gospel of John: Terms, Forms, Themes and Theology of Johannine Figurative Language* (eds. J. Frey – J.G. van der Watt – R. Zimmermann) (WUNT 200; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2006) 1–43 (particularly 2–9).

6   A highly significant contribution to the rediscovery of the Gospel of John as a narrative text was made by R.A. Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress 1983).

7   A. Meyer, *Kommt und seht: Mystagogie im Johannesevangelium ausgehend von Joh 1,35–51* (FB 103; Würzburg: Echter 2005) 15. A much stronger position in favour of synchronic reading of the Gospel of John from a hermeneutical perspective is advocated by: D.F. Gniesmer, "Kommt und Seht. Hermeneutische Erwägungen

This synchronic approach particularly illuminates the text's faith-formational function. It represents one methodological option, among several. A diachronic analysis might yield different insights regarding sources and redaction history. Our chosen approach specifically highlights how the final form guides readers toward faith formation.

This leads to the following methodology: first, we examine the verse, particularly its textual flow. Next, we verify the intertextuality to determine whether a Genesis allusion exists and how it functions, with Johannine imagery playing a crucial role. Finally, we explore the interpretative consequences if Genesis reception is confirmed. This approach naturally emphasises the text's effect on readers and its faith-formational purpose.

We acknowledge that different methodological approaches would yield different insights. A historical-critical investigation of the Son of Man tradition or a redaction-critical analysis of the text's compositional layers would emphasise other aspects of the text. Our conclusions about mystagogical function are, in part, a product of our synchronic lens. Most importantly, we shall demonstrate how Genesis reception operates in John 1:51, thereby enabling its verification.

1. Textual Flow

John 1:19–51 displays a clear four-part structure: (a) 1:19–28; (b) 1:29–34; (c) 1:35–42; (d) 1:43–51. The first scene opens with John's μαρτυρία, announced in the prologue (καὶ αὕτη ἐστὶν ἡ μαρτυρία τοῦ Ἰωάννου), whilst the temporal marker τῇ ἐπαύριον introduces each subsequent scene.[8]

1.1. First Scene

In the first scene (1:19–28), John the Baptist testifies before the Jerusalem delegation. He speaks first about himself (designated in 1:20 as ὡμολόγησεν), then, after considerable hesitation, about another in 1:26 (μέσος ὑμῶν ἔστηκεν). The scene gradually reveals John's identity and role, along with his relationship to the coming one – to Jesus. Though the prologue has already named Jesus (1:17), his name goes unmentioned here. The Messiah's identity remains veiled. Instead, John announces a mysterious figure, whose name stays hidden. A metaphor establishes John's relationship to this figure (οὗ ἐγὼ οὐκ εἰμὶ ἄξιος ἵνα λύσω αὐτοῦ τὸν ἱμάντα τοῦ ὑποδήματος – 1:27), sparking the hearers' interest. The narrative thus redirects the readers' attention toward this new figure. A precise geographical reference closes the scene, leaving one question: who is this mysterious figure?

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zur johanneischen Sehweise," *Der bezwingende Vorsprung des Guten. Exegetische und theologische Werkstattberichte. Festschrift für Wolfgang Harnisch* (eds. U. Schoenborn – S.H. Pfürtner) (Münster – Hamburg: Lit 1994) 139.

8   A hidden background is often sought in Johannine day-counting. A highly interesting example of this is offered by the interpretation in Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, 50–51.

1.2. Second Scene

The second scene (1:29–34) marks Jesus' first personal appearance, as he gradually merges with the mysterious figure. The identification begins through the metaphorical designation ὁ ἀμνὸς τοῦ θεοῦ (1:29). To confirm we are still discussing the same mysterious figure, John explicitly recalls his earlier words: οὗτός ἐστιν ὑπὲρ οὗ ἐγὼ εἶπον (1:30a). This figure – whom John the Baptist calls the Lamb of God and the narrator identifies as Jesus – gains increasingly distinct, yet still enigmatic, characteristics: ὀπίσω μου ἔρχεται ἀνὴρ ὃς ἔμπροσθέν μου γέγονεν, ὅτι πρῶτός μου ἦν (1:30b,c).

The narrative now clarifies John's relationship to Jesus: κἀγὼ οὐκ ᾔδειν αὐτόν (1:31a), along with his own mission: ἀλλ᾽ ἵνα φανερωθῇ τῷ Ἰσραήλ, διὰ τοῦτο ἦλθον ἐγὼ ἐν τῷ ὕδατι βαπτίζων (1:31b). The theme of knowing Jesus emerges here. This description of the mysterious figure – now identified with Jesus – likely aims to create uncertainty in the hearers about Jesus' true identity.

The Baptist's repeated declaration, κἀγὼ οὐκ ᾔδειν αὐτόν (1:31, 33a), reinforces this uncertainty, yet also offers its resolution through a new image. This image appears twice: first as prophecy, then as witnessed reality. It depicts the Spirit descending like a dove, serving as the key to identification: οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ βαπτίζων ἐν πνεύματι ἁγίῳ (1:33). This visual identification leads to confession: κἀγὼ ἑώρακα καὶ μεμαρτύρηκα ὅτι οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ (1:34) – a declaration that surprisingly transcends the image itself. Thus, John 1:29–34 establishes a crucial sequence for understanding the text's flow: prediction–seeing–confessing.[9]

These opening scenes create dual effects in the hearers. They generate uncertainty about Jesus' true identity – this enigmatic figure who takes away the world's sin, baptises with the Holy Spirit, and is proclaimed Son of God. Yet, they simultaneously kindle desire for personal acquaintance with him. Such knowledge can come only through direct encounter.

1.3. Third Scene

The third scene (1:35–42) delivers this encounter. Jesus again appears under the Lamb of God metaphor. Now the Baptist's disciples enter the narrative, though not through direct address – they simply stand beside their teacher. Hearing his words, they follow Jesus, the one presented as God's Lamb. Direct encounter comes only when Jesus asks them: τί ζητεῖτε. The hospitality metaphor that follows creates a space where genuine acquaintance can develop.[10]

The text leaves Jesus' dwelling undescribed, though the disciples accept his invitation and see it. This narrative vacuum invites the hearers' imagination. The process of knowing the Messiah now extends outward – no longer through John the Baptist, but through his

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9   That what is seen in the context of faith culminates in confession has already been demonstrated by
     C. Hergenröder (*Wir schauten seine Herrlichkeit: Das johanneische Sprechen vom Sehen im Horizont
     von Selbsterschließung Jesu und Antwort des Menschen* [FB 80; Würzburg: Echter 1996] 3).

10   The metaphor of hospitality can already be discerned in the prologue from the words: εἰς τὰ ἴδια ἦλθεν, καὶ οἱ
     ἴδιοι αὐτὸν οὐ παρέλαβον (John 1:11). At the corresponding passage (1:39), we are dealing with a possible inver-
     sion: it is the Logos who first grants hospitality.

former disciples, who introduce others to Jesus. The pattern of prediction–seeing–confessing continues implicitly.

The two disciples receive an invitation-prediction: ἔρχεσθε καὶ ὄψεσθε. They come and see. The expected confession emerges only in the next encounter, when Andrew declares to his brother (perhaps speaking also for his companion): εὑρήκαμεν τὸν Μεσσίαν (1:41). When Jesus meets Simon, Andrew's brother, the text's mystagogical features recede. No image or metaphor appears.

The prediction–seeing–confessing pattern barely surfaces here. Attention shifts briefly from Jesus to Simon, who receives the new name Cephas, yet speaks not a word. Jesus now commands the narrative of these opening events, whilst John the Baptist – last mentioned in 1:40 – exits the stage. The chain of calling that began with the Baptist seems to reach its end.

1.4. Fourth Scene

The fourth scene (1:43–51) bridges to the next narrative unit (2:1–12) by indicating Jesus' intended destination.[11] Only then does the encounter-calling theme resurface through Philip's calling, which now comes directly from Jesus. This introduces the scene's true focus: the encounter with Nathanael, whom Jesus calls 'a true Israelite'. Jesus' identity returns to centre stage, as this scene contains more titles for him than any other: 'the one [...] about whom Moses in the Law and also the Prophets wrote,' 'Jesus from Nazareth, the son of Joseph,'[12] 'Rabbi', 'the Son of God', 'King of Israel', and finally, 'the Son of Man'.[13]

Yet, Nathanael's confessional titles seem insufficient to capture Jesus' identity. Jesus therefore introduces a new designation, a new title embedded within an image. The image of the Son of Man with angels ascending and descending upon him appears to offer the definitive designation, revealing Jesus' true identity. However, the future tense of ὁράω defers this discovery.

The subsequent Cana narrative, set in the location announced in John 1:43, does reveal Jesus' δόξα and reports the disciples' belief. Yet, this revelation lacks its proper culmination – confession. We may conclude that John 1:51's image awaits future unveiling, when

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11   Verse 43 is classified by Kuhn, similarly to v. 51, as a later redactional addition. See H.-J. Kuhn, *Christologie und Wunder: Johannesuntersuchungen zu Joh 1, 35–51* (BU 18; Regensburg: Pustet 1988) 130.

12   Here the name Jesus is, interestingly, spoken for the first time by one of the actors and not by the narrator.

13   An exact list of the titles, names and images that designate Jesus has been compiled by R. Zimmermann, *Christologie der Bilder im Johannesevangelium. Die Christopoetik des vierten Evangeliums unter besonderer Berücksichtigung von Joh 10* (WUNT 171; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2004) 97–98. It should be noted that in John 1:19–51 two designations are missing which play an important role in the Gospel of John: *Lord* (in John 1:23 only as an Old Testament quotation) and *God* (in John 1 only in the prologue: John 1:1, 18). One would have to ask whether the distribution of Jesus' designations is merely coincidental or represents a development that culminates in the confession of Jesus' divinity.

it will bear fruit in confession. This accords with the pericope's mystagogical character, evident in the shift from singular 'you' to plural 'you will see.'[14]

This final scene contains a peculiar feature: two or three allusions proper. Philip provides the first, describing a figure: 'we have found the one about whom Moses [...] wrote.' Though this figure is identified as Jesus from Nazareth, the text never specifies whom Moses and the Prophets described.[15] The conversation's flow suggests Nathanael grasps the allusion – his dismissive, doubting response presupposes understanding. For readers, this allusion becomes clear only through the encounter scenes' context and the passage's theme in John 1:19–42: the Messiah's identity.

Jesus provides the second allusion, addressing Nathanael: 'Before Philip called you, I saw you under the fig tree' (John 1:48). This image-allusion evokes a memory of a situation known only to Nathanael. The revelation that another – Jesus – knows this private moment provokes Nathanael's amazement and confession of faith. Readers can deduce that Nathanael understood the allusion, though its actual content remains impenetrable to them. This opacity may trigger readers' own associations, leading them to recall private situations and realise that Jesus knows these, too.

The angels and Son of Man image forms a potential third allusion. Whether this image truly functions as an allusion requires further investigation.

1.5. Conclusion on Textual Flow

Jesus' identity, announced in the prologue, develops throughout John 1:19–51. Each scene treats this theme distinctively. From John's testimony that he is not the Messiah, through hints at someone already present, readers journey to the Lamb of God and encounter him directly. The sequence of encounters and callings culminates in the Son of Man image, opening fresh perspectives on Jesus' identity.

Each scene employs images, metaphors, or titles to present Jesus' figure from different angles. Every image or encounter produces a confession – a sign of faith – yet each confession transcends its originating image. Only the final image lacks a confession. As this image constitutes a promise, its corresponding confession awaits fulfilment in the narrative's future.

Despite unresolved questions in this pericope, John 1:51's present form serves a specific function: illustrating something for readers, whilst propelling them into the narrative's future.[16] From a mystagogical perspective, the verse must guide readers toward faith and its confession. The entire pericope displays a strong link between perception and faith's

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14   See note 8. The mystagogical character of this passage can also be seen as confirmed from the perspective of the implied reader, who is here unobtrusively made present. Cf. R. Kieffer, "The Implied Reader in John's Gospel," *New Readings in John: Literary and Theological Perspectives. Essays from Scandinavian Conference on the Fourth Gospel in Århus 1997* (eds. J. Nissen – S. Pedersen) (JSNTSup 182; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press 1999) 52.

15   The mention of Scripture may be of significance for a further exploration of the pericope.

16   A. Meyer, *Kommt und seht*, 99.

confession. This verse completes the Gospel's introduction proper. We must now verify whether Genesis reception occurs here, how it operates, and whether it serves these identified functions.

2. Image Analysis

Verse 1:51 clearly functions as an image in two senses. First, it is a visual image: the verb ὁράω signals that readers should see what is described, and the verse depicts a concrete scene. Second, it operates as a linguistic image through its metaphorical features. The verbs ἀναβαίνω and καταβαίνω lack their normal semantic force when used with ἐπὶ τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου. Similarly, τὸν οὐρανὸν ἀνεῳγότα carries metaphorical weight. This metaphorical dimension points beyond the individual elements toward a higher meaning. Any linguistic image possesses three aspects: function, content, and meaning.

Function operates at multiple levels. Linguistically, an image illustrates its object. When metaphorical, it conveys something new – something that resists conceptual expression or deliberately avoids it. As we have discerned from context and textual flow, this image performs several narrative functions. It illustrates the 'greater things', awakens faith, elevates it to new levels, and ultimately produces confession.[17] The image serves as faith's springboard.

The image's content comprises four elements: (a) τὸν οὐρανὸν ἀνεῳγότα; (b) τοὺς ἀγγέλους τοῦ θεοῦ; (c) υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου; (d) the movement expressed through the participles ἀναβαίνοντας and καταβαίνοντας. The first element provides the background. The remaining elements occupy the foreground, with the Son of Man – mentioned last – at centre. The hearer's imagination moves upward to heaven, where God's angels appear alongside the Son of Man. The participles ἀναβαίνοντας and καταβαίνοντας draw final attention to this central figure.

The image's meaning resists direct deduction. The text explains neither the individual elements, nor their combination, and a linguistic image's meaning transcends the sum of its parts. The complete image conveys the message.[18] Yet individual elements do evoke associations – associations that require an interpretive framework. The text provides only one such framework: Scripture (John 1:45). Since the image's meaning remains opaque, it fulfils the primary condition for allusion.[19]

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17 A. Kubiś, *Jezus Oblubieniec. Metafora małżeńska w Ewangelii Janowej* (DABAR 6; Rzeszów: Bonus Liber 2023) 21.

18 R. Zimmermann has pointed to the necessity of considering linguistic images in their totality ("Du wirst noch Größeres sehen … (Joh 1,50). Zur Ästhetik der Christusbilder im Johannesevangelium – Eine Skizze," *Metaphorik und Christologie* (eds. J. Frey – J. Rohls – R. Zimmermann) (TBT 120; Berlin – New York: De Gruyter 2003) 98.

19 R. Zimmermann has already noted the occurrence of images in the context of allusions ("Imagery in John," 200).

3. Intratextuality

3.1. John 1:51 and Its Position in the Gospel of John

John 1:51 concludes Jesus' encounter with Nathanael – the final calling scene in the four-part sequence (1:35–51). In its present form, the verse illustrates the 'greater things' Nathanael was promised he would see.[20] The connection between 1:50 and 1:51 appears through the repeated future tense of ὁράω. The shift from singular ὄψῃ (1:50) to plural ὄψεσθε (1:51) signals the author's mystagogical intentions toward readers rather than indicating later addition.[21] John 1:51 marks both the first 'Amen, amen' saying in the Gospel and the inaugural use of the Son of Man title, doubly reinforcing the statement's significance for the entire Gospel.

The calling scenes form part of the larger unit, John 1:19–51, marked by day-counting (τῇ ἐπαύριον) and the location reference ('[…] where John was baptising'). A change of location separates this unit from the following text (John 2:1–11), though another temporal marker appears (τῇ ἡμέρᾳ τῇ τρίτῃ) and Galilee, the new location, was already announced in 1:43.[22]

The narrative of first events (1:19–51) displays clear structure through temporal markers and changing actors. Individual scenes link together through recurring persons and phrases. To understand verse 1:51 properly – whether as conclusion to Nathanael's encounter, as ending to the calling sequence, or as part of the larger unit including John the Baptist's testimonies (evident in the day-counting) – we must examine the entire unit, John 1:19–51, analysing both context and textual flow. This prepares our investigation of Genesis reception.

3.2. Context of John 1:19–51

John 1:19–51 sits between the prologue and the Cana wedding pericope. The prologue announces the Gospel's major themes:[23] Jesus' identity (as Logos, light, and life), John

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20 Some authors suspect that the entire 1:51 was added to the text corpus later. Thus, for example, R. Bultmann, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes*, 10 ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1964) 68, 74; C. Dietzfelbinger, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes* (ZBK.NT 4/1-2; Zürich: TVZ 2001) 63–64. For discussion, see also F.J. Moloney, *The Johannine Son of Man*, 2 ed. (BScR 14; Roma: LAS 1978) 23–41. This position is even supported by detailed linguistic analyses, but without considering the textual flow. On this, see Kuhn, *Christologie und Wunder*, 153–159. However, this is not a text-critical problem, but possibly a literary-critical one: there are also decisive voices that argue for original belonging; S.S. Smalley, "Johannes 1,51 und die Einleitung zum vierten Evangelium," *Jesus und derMenschensohn. Festschrift für Anton Vögtle zum 65. Geburtstag* (eds. R. Pesch – R. Schnackenburg) (Freiburg in Breisgau: Herder 1975) 308.

21 Meyer, *Kommt und seht*, 134–135.

22 The determination of the direct context in which verse 1:51 should be examined and the text delimitation are in this case not self-evident – they depend on the perspective from which the text is viewed or read. S ome speak of John 1:19 – 2:12 as the relevant textual unit, such as L. Schenke, *Johannes. Kommentar* (Düsseldorf: Patmos 1998) 37.

23 On the introductory role of the prologue, see, *inter alia*, U. Schnelle, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes* (THKNT 4; Leipzig: Evangelische 2004) 36–37.

the Baptist's role (as witness), faith (accepting the Logos leading to divine sonship), and the Moses-Jesus relationship. John 1:19–51 develops these themes further, especially Jesus' identity, as we shall demonstrate.

The Cana wedding narrative (2:1–11), following the encounter scenes, culminates in Jesus' δόξα, revelation, reprising the prologue's theme (1:14). This glory reveals Jesus' identity in a way that generates faith. These twin themes – identity disclosure and resulting faith – continue from new angles in the temple cleansing pericope[24] and surface again in the Nicodemus dialogue.

4. Intertextuality

Few exegetes question that John 1:51 refers to Genesis 28:12.[25] The image's association with Jacob's dream and the precise adoption of its formulation make the connection undeniable. Yet, the passage raises questions about how we verify such references. Recent exegesis increasingly recognises John's use of linguistic images[26] and their allusive functions.

John 1:51 presents us with an image that, given its role in illustrating the 'greater things', defies self-explanation. This opacity suggests we have an allusion working through imagery. To demonstrate this, we must examine both the image itself and its allusive function. The Old Testament formulation's adoption indicates the reference point, while Nathanael's presumed scriptural knowledge enables it. Comparing with the proposed reference passage will reveal whether this image-allusion successfully unveils Jesus' true identity within John's Gospel.

4.1. Disclosing the Allusion

The essential condition for allusion – ambiguity – is clearly present. Several indicators sharpen our perception of it: the repeated introduction καὶ λέγει αὐτῷ, the solemn formula ἀμὴν ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν, the shift from singular ὄψῃ to plural ὄψεσθε, and the new designation υἱός τοῦ ἀνθρώπου. Among the image's various elements, the formulation τοὺς ἀγγέλους τοῦ θεοῦ ἀναβαίνοντας καὶ καταβαίνοντας ἐπὶ [...] creates the strongest association, if only through its distinctive length.

Since Scripture provides the only associative framework for this formulation (John 1:45), we must seek the allusion's resolution there. The formulation not only links to, but clearly

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24   B. Kowalski, "Die Tempelreinigung Jesu nach Joh 2,13–25," *MTZ* 57/3 (2006) 201.

25   See note 1.

26   Cf. Zimmermann, "Jesus im Bild Gottes," 97. For a historical overview of research see: Zimmermann, "Imagery in John," 2–9.

derives from, Genesis 28:12.[27] The image's other elements lack such unambiguous Old Testament references.

The opened heavens motif appears throughout the Old Testament (Gen 7:11; Deut 28:12; Ps 77:12; Mal 3:10; Isa 24:18; 63:19; Ezek 1:1).[28] Only some passages suggest divine appearance (Isa 24:18; 63:19), with Ezek 1:1 being unambiguous – there a human form appears in the divine vision (Ezek 1:26). However, the designation υἱός τοῦ ἀνθρώπου – Son of Man (Ezek 2:1) – refers to the prophet, not the human figure. The same designation, υἱός τοῦ ἀνθρώπου, appears in the Book of Daniel (7:13).

The heavenly settings differ – open heaven in John 1:51, clouds of heaven in Daniel – while Ezekiel and Daniel interpret the Son of Man figure differently. These factors initially seem to favour the Daniel connection.[29] Yet, the ascending and descending angels of God create such a powerful association that the balance tips strongly toward Gen 28:12.

It should be noted, however, that the 'Son of Man' title likely evokes multiple intertextual associations simultaneously. Rather than viewing Genesis and Daniel as competing references, the Johannine text may deliberately merge these scriptural traditions to create a richer theological tapestry. The Genesis connection remains primary for our analysis, particularly given the precise verbal correspondence, but this does not preclude other allusive layers operating within the same image.

We therefore have an allusion to Jacob's dream in Gen 28:12.[30] The allusion operates through adopting a specific formulation – an element from Jacob's dream: the ascending and descending angels of God. Two questions remain: which elements from Jacob's dream narrative are evoked, and why? The allusion's purpose must align with John 1:51's immediate context and the textual flow of John 1:19–51.

We have established that John 1:51's image interprets and illustrates the 'greater things' from 1:50. Decoding the allusion must, therefore, clarify these 'greater things'. The textual flow reveals that this intensification encompasses not only vision, but also faith and confession. The allusion must generate deeper faith content and corresponding confession. Since John 1:19–51 focuses on the identity of Jesus and the Son of Man, the allusion to Jacob's dream must serve this purpose. Comparing with Genesis will show whether and how the allusion achieves its goal.

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27   Even an adoption of the Old Testament formulation that is clearly identifiable would, according to Häfner's definition of allusion, suffice to plausibly demonstrate in this case a reference to Genesis, i.e., a reception of the Book of Genesis. For the definition of allusion, see Häfner, *"Nützlich zur Belehrung" (2Tim 3,16)*, 51. The additional details discussed here should enable the interpretation of this allusion.

28   Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, 57.

29   It is possible that John adopted the motifs from both Ezekiel and Daniel.

30   Research into allusion using metaphor as a form of linguistic image has already yielded good results in exegesis. On this, see Zimmermann, "Jesus im Bild Gottes," 81–116. See also S. Mędala, *Ewangelia według Świętego Jana. Rozdziały 1–12* (NKB.NT 4/1; Częstochowa: Edycja Świętego Pawła 2009) 338–339.

4.2. Comparison with the Reference Passage

The Book of Genesis describes Jacob's dream during his flight: a nocturnal vision of a ladder with God's angels ascending and descending. Most exegetes focus on this image when interpreting John 1:51. Yet, comparing the images yields little clarity about the 'greater things'. John 1:51 lacks the ladder; Genesis lacks the Son of Man. Since angels ascend and descend upon (ἐπὶ) both – the ladder and the Son of Man – interpreters link them, making the Son of Man the ladder, the heaven-earth connection.[31]

Does this interpretation truly illustrate the 'greater things' from John 1:50? One might question whether this new element – the heaven-earth connection – surpasses the titles in John 1:19–51. The Old Testament already presents such mediatorial functions: Moses mediates law and brings Israel's concerns before God; prophets proclaim God's word and intercede for the people; priests primarily offer the people's sacrifices to God.

We must consider Jacob's dream in its entirety. John 1:51 adopts not the dream's centre, but merely its kinetic background. Jacob's dream focuses on God's appearance – God whom Jacob sees and who speaks to him. God reveals his identity, then promises Jacob land, descendants, and divine assistance.

Identity thus forms the true theme of John 1:43–51. Comparing both images reveals a central figure in each: the Son of Man in John, God in Genesis. John treats identity implicitly; Genesis reveals it explicitly: ἐγὼ κύριος ὁ θεὸς Αβρααμ τοῦ πατρός σου καὶ ὁ θεὸς Ισαακ (Gen 28:13). Does John 1:51 therefore suggest the Son of Man's identity as God? The allusion points in this direction. Yet, allusions by nature avoid unambiguous assertions – they neither impose meaning on recipients nor commit their authors to specific claims.

Jacob's dream narrative contains more. Upon waking, Jacob offers a twofold confession. First: 'Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it.' Then, after a note about Jacob's fear: 'How awe-inspiring is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.'

Through sacrifice, Jacob accepts this God as his own, vowing to build a sanctuary and give tithes – entering a cultic relationship. He commits himself to the God who appeared to him. We must ask: does Jacob's confession parallel what John 1:43–51 expects, what the allusion targets?

Yet, the allusion cannot target this exact confession, since the images in John 1:51 and Gen 28 differ. John does not simply repeat the Old Testament scene, but presents something that appears greater. This 'greater thing' emerges through comparing Jesus' titles and the disciples' confessions, not from Jacob's dream narrative alone. What matters is the associative space Genesis 28:10–22 creates for understanding Jesus' figure.

We must finally verify whether this decoded allusion – with all its elements, tendencies, and possibilities – finds confirmation throughout John's Gospel. Since Johannine images

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31   Thus, e.g., U. Schnelle, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes*, 66–67. S. Mędala, *Ewangelia według Świętego Jana*, 338.

form an interconnected network, we must examine whether our decoded allusion fits this larger pattern.[32]

First, we note that Jacob's name – the patriarch who dreams in Genesis – appears in John's Gospel at 4:1–42. Whether this passage also references Jacob's dream requires separate investigation. Nevertheless, the name's presence in John strengthens the probability that 1:51 alludes to Jacob's dream.

The angel theme presents difficulties, appearing only in John 1:51 and 12:29. In the latter, some crowd members think an angel spoke to Jesus; others hear thunder. The narrator clarifies: God himself spoke. This minimal treatment reveals the author's limited interest in angels.[33]

This scarcity might suggest John 1:51 is secondary, disconnected from the Gospel's image network. Alternatively, it could confirm that the ascending and descending angels serve purely allusive purposes, not as content-bearers. John 12:28's 'voice from heaven' echoes Jacob's dream's associative space: heaven and God's voice. This creates another image connection, though we cannot demonstrate direct literary dependence on Jacob's dream. Image networks need not trace every connection to identical intertextual sources.

'Heaven' appears throughout John's Gospel: 1:32; 1:51; 3:13; 3:27; 3:31; 6:31, 32, 38, 41, 42, 50, 58; 12:28; 17:1. The search yields surprising results. John 6 uses οὐρανός nine times, linking it ἄρτος (bread) and καταβαίνω (descend). Significantly, ἄρτος also appears in Jacob's dream narrative. While John 6 bears no direct relationship to Genesis, the bread-heaven connection creates a shared associative space, though functioning differently.

Jacob's dream also features the ladder, upon which God's angels move. The allusion enables associating this ladder with a person. Does John's Gospel develop this? The answer appears when Jesus declares: 'I am the way, the truth and the life' and 'no one comes to the Father except through me.' Though κλίμαξ (ladder) is absent, the semantic field remains. Gen 28:12's conceptual field – temple, holy place, house of God – reappears in John connected to Jesus, notably as ὁ ναός τοῦ σώματος αὐτοῦ (John 2:21).

More complex is the possibility of identifying the Son of Man – or Jesus himself – with God, through imagery. Exegesis has demonstrated this possibility exists in John.[34] The identification culminates in Thomas's confession: ὁ κύριός μου καὶ ὁ θεός μου (John 20:28), echoing the revelatory formula from Gen 28:13: ἐγὼ κύριος ὁ θεὸς Αβρααμ τοῦ πατρός σου καὶ ὁ θεὸς Ισαακ.

These observations yield clear results: the Gen 28:12 allusion opens an associative space realised throughout John's Gospel in various forms. Even the most challenging element – identifying the Son of Man with God – finds expression. This strengthens our conclusion that John 1:51 alludes to Jacob's dream narrative (Gen 28:12–22), specifically to reveal and confess the Son of Man's true identity.

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32   On the interconnection of linguistic images in the Gospel of John, see Zimmermann, *Imagery in the Gospel of John*, 33–36.

33   Cf. R. Schnackenburg, *Das Johannesevangelium*. I. *Einleitung und Kommentar zu Kap. 1–4* (HThKNT 4/1; Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder 1979) 318.

34   On this see Zimmermann, "Jesus im Bild Gottes," 111–113.

4.3. Genesis Reception in John 1:19–51 – History of Religions Comparison

From a tradition-historical and history-of-religions perspective, the Genesis reception in John 1:51 carries far-reaching implications. It confirms and reinforces John's use of Scripture and Old Testament narrative demonstrated elsewhere. For the Fourth Gospel's author, Scripture provides the encounter-space with the incarnate Logos.

The biblical text functions as a treasure chamber with its entire conceptual world, yielding examples that illustrate the new reality. Yet, Scripture is also transformed by this new reality – its words and images gain fresh interpretation through the story of Jesus of Nazareth. We can assert with increasing certainty that the Gospel's author knew Scripture, including Genesis, and deliberately engaged with it.

Scripture's vocabulary and imagery formed integral parts of the author's conceptual world. The addressees likewise needed scriptural knowledge, at least as narrative. They are explicitly invited to search the Scriptures (cf. John 5:39) – a necessity for decoding John's enigmatic allusions.[35] Scripture thus both shaped and addressed the addressees' conceptual world. Old Testament concepts and narratives guided believers toward deeper understanding. Scripture thus served mystagogy excellently. When hearers lacked scriptural knowledge, this provided opportunity for instruction.[36]

The author's and addressees' conceptual world extended beyond the Old Testament. They inhabited the same contemporary world as those who neither knew Jesus of Nazareth, nor belonged to Israel. They emerged from diverse cultural, religious, and educational backgrounds. This broader world also flows into John's Gospel.

John's numerous associations with rabbinic and early Jewish traditions therefore come as no surprise – Philo of Alexandria represents their most prominent example. The concept 'Logos' exemplifies this cultural influence most clearly, becoming a *terminus technicus* in John and throughout later Christianity. Yet, John's increasingly evident Old Testament background proves the author never intended to abandon Scripture. Rather, he sought to invest ancient Scripture with new meaning. By recontextualising the old divine images, he transformed Scripture into distinctly Christian Scripture. This sophisticated scriptural engagement established the Old Testament, including Genesis, as a permanent element of Christian instruction.

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[35]   It is possible that Scripture research in the strict sense was reserved only for the Scripture-learned in the Johannine community. All others, however, were certainly introduced over time to the narrative material of the Old Testament through instruction and through liturgies in which Scripture was read aloud. On the theme of familiarity with textual sources in early Christianity, see K. Backhaus, "Gott als Psalmist. Psalm 2 im Hebräerbrief," *Gottessohn und Menschensohn: Exegetische Studien zu zwei Paradigmen biblischer Intertextualität* (ed. D. Sänger) (BThSt 67; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag 2004) 198.

[36]   This applies even if the image of the exalted Son of Man that is seen in John 1:51 is possibly to be traced back to community traditions. This is the view of J. Frey, *Die johanneische Eschatologie*. III. *Die eschatologische Verkündigung in den johanneischen Texten* (WUNT 117; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2000) 34. H. Thyen sees therein 'a double play' between Mark 14:62 and Genesis 28 (*Das Johannesevangelium* [HNT 6; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck] 174).

5. Result

5.1. Assessment

Our analysis of John 1:51's image strongly suggests the presence of an allusion, meeting the essential criterion of ambiguity. Additional indicators strengthen this conclusion. We demonstrated that Scripture provides the primary key to resolving this allusion. Among various associations triggered by the image's elements, the ascending and descending angels motif proves strongest, clearly deriving from an Old Testament formulation.

Comparing with Gen 28:12 reveals that John 1:51's allusion targets not merely Jacob's dream image but the entire vision narrative. This conclusion emerges from the image's function within its microcontext and textual flow: illustrating the 'greater things' from 1:50 and consequently generating deeper faith content and stronger confession regarding Jesus' true identity.[37]

Jacob's dream narrative includes both confession and the revelation of the central figure's identity in Gen 28:13, confirming that John 1:51 receives Genesis.[38] The precise adoption of the Old Testament formulation with its distinctive sequence does more than evoke association – it strongly indicates Genesis reception.[39]

Our analysis has proceeded through three integrated dimensions – textual flow, image analysis, and intertextual verification. While the individual components draw on established exegetical practices, their systematic integration offers a way forward for addressing the particular challenges posed by John's imagery.

Testing whether this decoded allusion fits John's image network yields positive results, further confirming the demonstrated reception. The Genesis reception through John 1:51's allusion to Gen 28:10–22 operates not through simple adoption but through recontextualisation. The new figure – the Son of Man, namely, Jesus – enters the old image's framework, thereby investing that image with new content.

This allusion opens a full spectrum of associations confirmed throughout the Gospel.[40] Jesus becomes identifiable both as the ladder – the locus of God's sovereignty (temple motif)[41] – and as God who promises assistance and land.[42] The image's alterations (Son of

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37   W. Loader, "John 1,50–51 and the 'Greater Things' of Johannine Christology," *Anfänge der Christologie: Festschrift für Ferdinand Hahn zum 65. Geburtstag* (eds. C. Breytenbach – H. Paulsen) (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1991) 270.

38   Fossum moves in a similar direction, proceeding from comparison with Targums ("The Son of Man's alter ego," 135–151).

39   Many exegetes draw attention to the sequence. That it is, however, decisive for the reference to Genesis was shown by Dietzfelbinger, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes*, 63–64.

40   Although it would be impossible to prove that such associations have the quality of an allusion, they gain plausibility when considering the mystagogical character of the Gospel.

41   The connection between John 1:51 and the temple motif is seen by J. Rahner, *"Er aber sprach vom Tempel seines Leibes". Jesus von Nazareth als Ort der Offenbarung Gottes im vierten Evangelium* (BBB 117; Bodenheim: Philo 1998) 309.

42   It would be interesting to investigate whether heaven and pasture and stable are metaphors of paradise, of the promised land.

Man replacing God and/or ladder) recontextualise Genesis's presentation of divine revelation. Now the Son of Man stands atop the ladder that he himself embodies, revealing himself to his disciples. The allusion's future orientation, marked by ὄψῃ and ὄψεσθε, finds fulfilment as the Gospel's greater confession unfolds gradually (John 4:42; 6:14,69; 7:40–41; 8:58; 11:27), culminating in Thomas's declaration: ὁ κύριός μου καὶ ὁ θεός μου (John 20:28).

It should be noted that this methodological choice carries certain limitations. By focusing on the final form of the text and its narrative function, we necessarily set aside questions about the historical development of the Son of Man tradition, the potential layers of redaction in John 1:51, and the socio-historical context of the Johannine community. These aspects, while important, lie beyond the scope of our current investigation.

5.2. Function

John's Gospel introduces a new form of Christian instruction. The Old Testament image employed here reveals a remarkably sophisticated methodology for faith formation, properly termed mystagogy. Unlike the Synoptics, which narrate faith's contents for belief, or Paul, who expounds and argues, John's approach resembles that of the later Church Fathers.[43] Instead, John creates an encounter space, where readers, through personal participation, gradually come to know Jesus of Nazareth and discover him as God's Son. The enigmatic image in John 1:51 invites investigation without compulsion. This search rewards readers with independent discovery, inviting acceptance of self-discovered truth rather than predetermined content.

Readers can affirm: what was predicted, they have seen for themselves, enabling authentic belief and confession.[44] Genesis, with its narrative world, becomes integral to this mystagogical process. Scripture's existing authority undergoes acceptance and transformation, conferring a comprehensive faith vision – certainty spanning past, present, and future. Scripture serves not merely as a pre-existing conceptual world requiring address, but as material for constructing the reader's new conceptual world.

5.3. Theological Relevance

Genesis reception in John's Gospel carries significant theological and christological implications. Using and recontextualising ancient divine images to represent Jesus' identity produces dual consequences. First, the Old Testament God gains concrete connection with the visible world whilst maintaining absolute transcendence – remaining unchanged. John presents no different God, only new revelation of the same God.

God receives more distinct human features than in Old Testament anthropomorphisms – he gains a concrete face: the Son of Man's. Second, Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of Man, receives God's fullness (cf. John 1:16) without sacrificing humanity. Theology and

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43   Meyer, *Kommt und seht*, 2–3.
44   Mussner has already presented this approach in early Christianity; F. Mussner, *Die johanneische Sehweise und Frage nach dem historischen Jesus* (QD 28; Freiburg im Breisgau – Basel – Wien: Herder 1965) 20.

Christology converge, as Jesus the Son of Man mediates between God and humanity whilst transcending the role of mere divine envoy.[45]

John 1:51's image, like all Johannine images, serves a christological function.[46] Exegetes debate whether this Christology carries eschatological implications.[47] Yet, these images require holistic consideration within their interconnected network. Extracting individual details from context risks one-sided conclusions.[48] Throughout, we must remember these images' mystagogical function: they guide readers toward faith in Jesus Christ as Son of God and recognition of his divinity.

Translated by Rev. Dariusz Iwański

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45   This 'more', which could be expressed with the divinity of Jesus, has often become a challenge for exegesis. See, e.g., D.R. Sadananda, *The Johannine Exegesis of God: An Exploration into Johannine Understanding of God* (BZNW 121; Berlin – New York: De Gruyter 2004) 282–284.

46   See Zimmermann, "Du wirst noch Größeres sehen," 93–110.

47   U. Wilckens argues against an eschatological interpretation of John 1:51 (*Das Evangelium nach Johannes* [NTD 4; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1998] 54). An eschatological statement in the sense of the parousia is seen therein by, e.g., G. Richter, *Studien zum Johannesevangelium* (BU 13; Regensburg: Pustet 1977) 361–362.

48   From the perspective of eschatology and in comparison with the Synoptics, some see in the individual elements a still Jewish-Christian conception of the parousia. Thus, e.g., Richter, *Studien zum Johannesevangelium*, 361–362. Richter, however, leaves open the question of whether the ascending and descending of the angels points to John's own conception of the parousia.

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