




RESEARCH ARTICLE

Visualising the super-temporal vulnerability of God: Balthasar’s theological use of John’s biblical image of ‘the Lamb slain’

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(Received 25 August 2023; revised 19 November 2023; accepted 30 November 2023)

Abstract

Hans Urs von Balthasar’s kenotic trinitarianism and theodramatic Christology is designed to dramatise the triune God’s kenotic engagement with the world without introducing a change in God. It continues to be disputed whether Balthasar ends up divinising suffering and making God into a tragic deity or succeeds in redefining and complexifying divine immutability. To engage with this question, this article critically examines Balthasar’s theological use of the image of ‘the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world’, which plays a pivotal role in his kenotic and theodramatic soteriology. I will argue that his kenosis-driven understanding of John’s Gospel is untenable, and his rich theological use of Revelation’s image of the Lamb slain, intensified by his questionable exegesis of the Fourth Gospel, renders super-temporal suffering and death real in the life of God.

Keywords: Book of Revelation; Gospel of John; Hans Urs von Balthasar; kenosis; Lamb slain; vulnerability

Hans Urs von Balthasar presents an idea of the immanent Trinity who is eternally open to, and in advance of, the sin and evil of the world in order both to bypass a mythological idea of God and a philosophical idea of God. He believes that this concept avoids introducing any ontological change in God and successfully steers between a God mired in the world (as in Jürgen Moltmann) and a God sublimely hovering over the world (as in Karl Rahner).

The image that most vividly encapsulates Balthasar’s idea of an eternally vulnerable triune God that avoids ontological change is ‘the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world’. This christological–soteriological image of an eternal sacrificial Lamb resonates with, corresponds to and is expressed by the earthly sacrificial death in Christ. As Michele Schumacher clearly states, by the image of the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world, Balthasar intends to show that ‘the kenotic or self-emptying love of God is logically prior to sin, God having already reckoned with misdirected created freedom in his plan of redemption before the creation of the world’.¹ The Lamb of God is

¹Michele M. Schumacher, ‘The Concept of Representation in the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar’, *Theological Studies* 60/1 (1999), p. 56.

slain before the foundation of the world, before the beginning of finitude and temporality; and because Christ is crucified in eternity, there is no before and after in the vulnerability, suffering and death of Christ. In other words, Christ's historical suffering transpires eternally, before the beginning of the world and within the absolute distance between the Father and the Son in the intra-divine life. Divine woundedness or vulnerability is not a temporal event in the aftermath of Jesus's historical crucifixion, but eternally intrinsic to God.

The image of the Lamb slain in timelessness is never peripheral but is rather a regulating image in Balthasar's thought. It is a crucial image to 'provide a vantage point from which to survey the form and content of the theodramatic action' in Balthasar's theology.² Here the image of the glorified Lamb slain represents a profound depth of God's theodramatic relation to the world. Indeed, for Balthasar, 'the Lamb is God's mode of involvement in, and commitment to, the world'.³ The theodramatic relation of God to the world which is limned by the image of the Lamb slain is, for him, as Jennifer Martin summarises, 'a relation of beautiful, gracious, perfectly sacrificial love' for the world.⁴ In deploying the image in this way, Balthasar incorporates 'Bulgakov's apocalyptic and kenotic theology of the Lamb as though slain' as 'shorthand for the kenotic Trinitarianism at the heart of their shared dramatic soteriology'.⁵ The image profoundly represents what the trinitarian kenotic love for the world really is in a way that is markedly different from the image of a static, immutable, impassible, unaffected (and thereby undramatic) God, without mooring God in temporal process. In this regard, the image of the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world is a symbol on which Balthasar's theological project of a *via media* between a theology dominated by sublime philosophical concepts and a theology permeated with mythological images very much depends.⁶

Exegetical issues

According to Balthasar, the theological combination of the Lamb in the Gospel of John and the Revelation of John, namely, 'the Johannine theology of the "Lamb of God" (John 1:29, 36): the Lamb, "slain before the foundation of the world" (Rev. 13:8)', indicates that 'the Cross of Christ is inscribed in the creation of the world from the beginning'.⁷ On this basis, he seeks to develop a theological understanding of a *unified* Johannine vision of suffering as glorification in relation to crucifixion in the Gospel

²Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Action*, vol. 4 of *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory* [hereafter *TD*], trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1994), p. 45.

³*TD* 4, p. 52. See also Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Last Act*, vol. 5 of *TD*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1998), pp. 151, 246.

⁴Jennifer Newsome Martin, *Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Critical Appropriation of Russian Religious Thought* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015), p. 179.

⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 100, 207. Sergius Bulgakov prefigures Balthasar's trinitarianism of the Lamb slain in his *The Lamb of God*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2008), pp. 129, 338. Jürgen Moltmann and Karl Barth also offer similar theological exegeses to Balthasar of the Lamb slain. See Jürgen Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM, 1981), p. 83; Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/2, trans. G. W. Bromiley et al. (London: T&T Clark, 1957), p. 123.

⁶Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale: The Mystery of Easter* [hereafter *MP*], trans. Aidan Nichols (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1990), p. 34.

⁷Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theology: The New Covenant*, vol. 7 of *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics* [hereafter *GL*], trans. Brian McNeil (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1989), p. 214.

of John as well as to the Lamb slain in the Apocalypse. As Martin accurately articulates, Balthasar intends to 'privilege textually the Gospel of John and the Apocalypse' in his theological enterprise.⁸ 'An attraction to the Johannine—characterized broadly as that which is visionary, mystical, Trinitarian, and paschal' – permeates Balthasar's trinitarian–christological theology.⁹ The definitively Johannine image of the Lamb slain 'provides an iconic shorthand of the enduring gift of love that is at the same time a freely kenotic gifting of the Father and a freely kenotic being given by the Son, a being given that is pure self-abandonment, the hypostatic figuration of kenosis itself'.¹⁰

At this point, I should give a preliminary comment about authorship: Balthasar assumes both the Fourth Gospel and Revelation were written by the same John. And he thinks that the Johannine corpus consolidates a vision of glorified death (in the Gospel) and an image of the Lamb slain (in Revelation) which positions the suffering of Christ's love as the centre of Johannine mission Christology. He believes that the two Johannine texts bear strong witness to his own Christian commitment to a kenotic paradox of simultaneity of suffering and glory – humiliation as glorification, powerlessness as power, poverty as fullness. But although the image of Jesus as the paschal Lamb is clearly common John's Gospel and Revelation, this parallel not enough to prove identity of authorship, at least not according to the basic consensus of contemporary biblical scholarship on the difference between John the Evangelist and John the Divine. As 'already recognized in the third century CE, Revelation does not share the same distinctive style, vocabulary, and theological outlook as the Gospel and Letters [of John]', but rather shows 'a very different understanding of the end of time and the role of Jesus Christ than the Gospel and Letters of John'.¹¹ Revelation is 'thus usually regarded as coming from a different author and situation and is interpreted as something quite distinct from the Gospel and Letters'.¹² From these recent commentaries, Balthasar's interpretation of a composite Johannine image of the Lamb slain should be called into question.

A second preliminary issue relates to the translation of Revelation 13:8. The phrasing, 'the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world', is accepted by some biblical scholars and is theologically unimpeachable insofar as it is understood to mean that the cross 'was no afterthought, but was predetermined before all ages in the comprehensive and loving purpose of God, and that same Lamb who was slain has invaded and conquered history'.¹³ Yet in appealing to this verse Balthasar seeks to say much more than simply that the redemptive purpose of God as realised through the cross is eternally present in God. He goes as far as to envisage the reality of the super-historical wound, suffering and death 'on God's throne', and thus at the heart of the intra-divine life.¹⁴ Thus, the translation as 'the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world' plays a profoundly theological role in his christological–trinitarian theology.

⁸Martin, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, p. 162.

⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 179. See also *GL* 7, pp. 208, 226, 511.

¹¹Judith M. Lieu and Martinus C. de Boer, 'Introduction', in Judith M. Lieu and Martinus C. de Boer (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Johannine Studies* (Oxford: OUP, 2018), p. 2.

¹²Sherri Brown and Francis J. Moloney, *Interpreting the Gospel and the Letters of John: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2017), p. 3.

¹³Norman Hillyer, "'The Lamb' in the Apocalypse", *Evangelical Quarterly* 39 (1967), pp. 230–31. See also George R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation* (Greenwood, SC: Attic, 1974), p. 214; Ian Boxall, *The Revelation of Saint John* (London: Continuum, 2006), p. 191.

¹⁴Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Dramatis Personae: Persons in Christ*, vol. 3 of *TD*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1992), p. 513.

Against this background, it should be noted that more recent biblical scholars and translations do not speak of ‘the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world’. The NRSV is indicative: ‘And all the inhabitants of the earth will worship it [the beast], everyone whose name has not been written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb that was slaughtered.’¹⁵ The debate turns on which word the prepositional phrase ἀπὸ καταβολῆς κόσμου (‘from the foundation of the world’) should modify. At first glance, it seems natural to link it with τοῦ Ἀρνίου ἐσφαγμένου (‘the Lamb slain’), which it immediately follows in the Greek text. This results in the translation that Balthasar prefers. However, it is also grammatically valid to connect the prepositional phrase with γέγραπται (‘written’), as in the NRSV translation cited above. This interpretation arguably tallies better with the historical particularity of Jesus’ crucifixion ‘at a particular time and place’, as well as with the exegetically similar Revelation 17:8, which ‘speaks of names written in the book of life from the foundation of the world without any suggestion that the Lamb was slaughtered at that time’.¹⁶ In an extensive commentary on Rev 13:8, David Aune avers that ‘it is logically and theologically impossible to make sense of the statement that the Lamb “was slaughtered *before* the creation of the world”’.¹⁷ Seen in this light, one of the most significant symbols in Balthasar’s theodramatics is built upon a disputed and fragile exegetical foundation.

The kenotic paradox of mission Christology in the Gospel of John

Bearing in mind both the dubious identification of the authors of the two Johannine texts and the questionable translation of Revelation 13:8, I would like to pay critical attention to the kenotic paradox that Balthasar draws from the mission Christology of the Fourth Gospel, that is, the paradox of suffering as glorification. This will lead us into deeper understanding of Balthasar’s eternal woundedness of the Lamb slain in the final section of this article.

It is commonly acknowledged that the *missio*, or being sent of the Son, characterises John’s Christology: ‘In the Gospel of John, the Father’s act of sending is a distinct mark of Jesus’ Sonship; he is not just the Son—he is the *sent* Son. The Johannine notion of believing means *believing in Jesus as uniquely sent by God*.’¹⁸ And, as Martin rightly observes, ‘There is indeed an operative Johannine hermeneutic across the board’ in Balthasar’s theology.¹⁹ He is a truly ‘Johannine theologian’,²⁰ charged with a ‘deeply Johannine disposition—especially with respect to the *missio* Christology of the Son’s “coming-from-God” as *One Sent* by the Father’.²¹ For Balthasar, moreover, the idea

¹⁵Cf. the New Jerusalem Bible: ‘And all people of the world will worship it [the beast], that is, everybody whose name has not been written down since the foundation of the world in the sacrificial Lamb’s book of life.’

¹⁶Peter S. Williamson, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), p. 229. See also, among many, Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), pp. 503–4; Craig R. Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things*, 2nd edn (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2018), p. 129; I. T. Beckwith, *The Apocalypse of John* (New York: Macmillan, 1919), p. 638.

¹⁷David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, vol. 52B of *Word Biblical Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998), pp. 746–7.

¹⁸Adesola Akala, *The Son–Father Relationship and Christological Symbolism in the Gospel of John* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014), p. 182.

¹⁹Martin, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, p. 162.

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 149.

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 23.

of mission is not only ‘most definitely present’ in John, but also stands ‘at the center of John’s Christology and expresses both the trinitarian and the soteriological dimensions of the mind of Jesus’.²² As Karen Kilby observes, this mission Christology is ‘something Balthasar takes to stand out particularly clearly in the Gospel of John, but also to be attested in the synoptic gospels and indeed throughout the New Testament’.²³

Most of all, mission Christology constitutes the centre of Balthasar’s christological reflections in that ‘it alone can illuminate the paradox of Jesus’ simultaneous sublimity and lowliness’,²⁴ a truly Johannine paradox of ‘the simultaneity of poverty and glory’.²⁵ ‘The pairing in the Gospel of John of suffering with exaltation, death with resurrection’ thus emerges as a fulcrum of Balthasar’s mission Christology.²⁶ Balthasar notes that the simultaneity of humiliation and glorification that underlies Johannine Christology is expressive of the mutual love between the Father and the Son, both pre-existent and incarnate. This intra-trinitarian love is defined as self-gift, but Balthasar goes so far as to highlight that the love of self-gift should be understood as always a self-giving *up* or *away*, that is, a self-renouncing and self-negating obedience, which is dramatically embodied in the absolute obedience of Jesus’s crucifixion.²⁷ Christ’s embodiment of the trinitarian love of self-gift is a christological and, indeed, trinitarian paradox of powerlessness and power: ‘the proclamation of the absolute power of God in the absolute powerlessness of the crucified’.²⁸ The truly kenotic paradox that demonstrates ‘the embodiment and summing up of the entire lifework of Jesus’²⁹ is constituted by ‘the unity of omnipotence and powerlessness: omnipotence, since he can give all; powerlessness, since nothing is as truly powerful as the gift’.³⁰ And we, in turn, are called to participate in the christological paradox of kenotic obedience through practising the ‘incomparable self-abandonment’ of the cross, namely, ‘the full significance of the requirements Jesus makes of *hatred of self*, or *denial of self*, of the abandoning of all things, of the daily bearing of the cross, and of *the losing of one’s soul in order to gain it*’.³¹ The ‘absolute self-giving is beyond “power” and “powerlessness”: its ability to “let be” embraces both... . In this way it is quite possible to reconcile God’s unchangeability and God’s involvement in history’.³² In other words, the simultaneity of omnipotence and impotence for Balthasar plays a decisive role in proving the tenability of his theological project of a *via media*.

Such a Christology characterised by the paradox of loss and gain, powerlessness and omnipotence, is one of the most profound themes that penetrates Balthasar’s christological hermeneutic of the *whole* New Testament. For Balthasar, what is ‘common to

²²TD 3, p. 151.

²³Karen E. Kilby, *Balthasar: A (Very) Critical Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2012), p. 95. See also Donald MacKinnon, ‘Some Reflections on Hans Urs von Balthasar’s Christology with Special Reference to *Theodramatik* II/2 and III’, in John Riches (ed.), *The Analogy of Beauty: The Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986), p. 168; Mark McIntosh, *Christology from Within: Spirituality and the Incarnation in Hans Urs Von Balthasar* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), pp. 44–54.

²⁴TD 3, p. 515.

²⁵Martin, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, p. 23.

²⁶Ibid., p. 131.

²⁷Kilby, *Balthasar*, p. 99 (emphasis added).

²⁸GL 7, p. 306.

²⁹GL 7, p. 149.

³⁰TD 4, pp. 325–6.

³¹GL 7, p. 150 (emphasis added).

³²TD 5, pp. 74–5.

the whole New Testament' is that 'the "majesty" and "ruling authority" of the Father takes effect in the "lowliness" of the obedient and serving Son'.³³ What is disclosed in the Synoptic Gospels and the letters of Paul is that Christ 'manifests the glory of divine power in lowliness, defencelessness and a self-surrender that goes to the lengths of the eucharistic Cross'.³⁴ The upshot is a *kenotic* movement or pattern *through* death to resurrection, *through* powerlessness to powerfulness, *through* humiliation to glorification and *through* dereliction to vindication, that is, 'the dynamic transition whereby the former makes way for the latter'.³⁵ For Balthasar, it is the liturgical hymn of kenosis, described in Philippians 2:6 as the surrender of the 'form of God', that encapsulates the kenotic paradox of suffering and glory.³⁶ He regularly underscores that the kenotic paradox of impotence and omnipotence, the paradox of the Son's 'humiliation, but also already the glorious exaltation which followed this', is constitutive of the New Testament 'as a whole'.³⁷ What should be noted is that he emphasises that the Gospel of John narrates how the Pauline kenotic love of the Son for the Father is unfolded through the humiliation and glorification of the Son sent by the Father. The Pauline Christology of kenosis, for Balthasar, seamlessly accords with and is even 'further developed' in the Gospel of John.³⁸

This paradox of kenotic transition thus gains its narrative fulfilment in the Fourth Gospel, where the timeline of suffering and glory is wholly collapsed into a unified event of crucifixion: 'in John the raising up upon the Cross and the raising up into glory are one single event, just as for Paul no one is raised up apart from the one who was crucified'.³⁹ Balthasar is intent on claiming that John is 'indeed materially identical with the "kenosis" mentioned in the Philippians hymn',⁴⁰ and that it is in the 'specifically Johannine' passion narrative that 'the kenosis has reached its fulfilment'.⁴¹ Balthasar maintains (in his final volume on the *glory* of the Lord) that 'the final interpretation of *doxa* [δόξα; glory] in the New Testament' is given in the Gospel of John.⁴² In other words, 'the *kabod*-momentum of the Cross of Jesus', namely, '*kabod*-glory, the entire horizon of the meaning of the cipher δόξα in the New Testament',⁴³ is fulfilled in 'the Johannine interpretation of the entire event of the Incarnation as the trinitarian δόξα that surpasses and rounds off all splendour'.⁴⁴ For Balthasar, as Martin accurately summarises, 'the kenoticism of the cross opens up upon and is itself a kind of glory; this union of suffering and exaltation is, of course, deeply Johannine'.⁴⁵ His own version of Johannine theology is thus kenotic at its heart. 'The Johannine principle that suffering and glory are of a piece, forming a single reality',⁴⁶ brings to perfection the passion narratives of 'the kenotic self-sacrifice of the death of Christ'.⁴⁷ 'This Johannine register

³³ *GL* 7, p. 246.

³⁴ *TD* 4, p. 450.

³⁵ *GL* 7, p. 493.

³⁶ *TD* 5, p. 214.

³⁷ *TD* 5, p. 294.

³⁸ *GL* 7, p. 298.

³⁹ *GL* 7, p. 228.

⁴⁰ *GL* 7, p. 249, n. 5.

⁴¹ *GL* 7, p. 226.

⁴² *GL* 7, p. 244.

⁴³ *GL* 7, p. 260.

⁴⁴ *GL* 7, p. 318.

⁴⁵ Martin, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, p. 195.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

undergirds all of Balthasar's theology, including its cosmic scope',⁴⁸ and the kenotic pattern of suffering as glorification 'provides the ballast for this Johannine theologian'.⁴⁹

One of the governing tenets of Balthasar's theology is thus a kenotic paradox of unity through abandonment, intimacy through alienation, joy through pain, delight through sorrow, life through death, glorification through humiliation, love through suffering, illumination through darkness, power through powerlessness and so on. For Balthasar, Jesus is paradoxically glorified and exalted through the descent into the moment of death as humiliation and lowliness. *The kenotically paradoxical chronology of suffering and glory* reaches its culmination in the Gospel of John, in that it is 'the Passion that John sees simultaneously as the glorification'.⁵⁰ Balthasar is consistent in contending that 'it is precisely the "powerfulness" in the *doxa* of God that shines forth from the complete powerlessness'.⁵¹ As Martin reminds her readers, 'the Johannine character of the synonymy of poverty and glory',⁵² of seeing suffering and glory as 'a single reality',⁵³ plays an overarching role in formulating Balthasar's Christology and trinitarianism, and thereby his conception of the Christian life. Balthasar is convinced that the Johannine expression of the cross as glorification achieves the highest formulation of the kenotic paradox of suffering and glory: Jesus is paradoxically glorified and exalted through his kenotic descent into the moment of death as humiliation and lowliness within the framework of the kenotic paradox of gain, vindication, affirmation, recovery, possession and power in and through loss, denial, emptying, negation, abasement, dispossession, relinquishment, diminishment and powerlessness. Balthasar regularly draws upon a kenotic paradox of omnipotence and impotence, which he interprets as a manifestation of genuine power and joy in and through the voluntary lowliness of absolute powerlessness and agony.

Despite ongoing debate over whether 'a theology of the cross can be assigned also to the Gospel of John',⁵⁴ it may be acceptable to claim that the Fourth Gospel contains a theology of the cross 'as the foundation and center of a theological system, giving it its narrative and substantive shape'.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, one cannot avoid raising a significant question about Balthasar's entanglement of kenosis and Christology in John and his subsequent understanding of Johannine Christology as the culmination of a kenotic paradox of suffering and glory. The Johannine narration of the cross as glorification requires careful discernment in order to avoid falling prey to glorifying death itself. From this perspective, Balthasar's interpretations of Johannine Christology in terms of kenosis, and hence of 'crucifixion as glorification' as the most heightened form of kenotic paradox, falters to the extent that his vision of kenosis cannot account for the substance of the Johannine portrayal of Jesus' passion.

First of all, it is vital to recognise that the connection Balthasar draws between Johannine mission Christology and Pauline kenotic Christology clashes with the view

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 217, n. 80.

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 149.

⁵⁰*TD* 4, pp. 235–6.

⁵¹*GL* 7, p. 244.

⁵²Martin, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, p. 202.

⁵³Ibid., p. 179.

⁵⁴Michael Wolter, 'The Theology of the Cross and the Quest for a Doctrinal Norm', in Christopher Rowland and Christopher Tuckett (eds), *The Nature of New Testament Theology: Essays in Honour of Robert Morgan* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 270–1.

⁵⁵Udo Schnelle, 'Cross and Resurrection in the Gospel of John', in Craig R. Koester and Reimund Bieringer (eds), *The Resurrection of Jesus in the Gospel of John* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), p. 133.

of many Johannine scholars that the idea of kenosis does not have any place at all in the Fourth Gospel. For instance, according to Gordon Fee, 'In John the "kenotic" dimension of Jesus' earthly life is generally missing.'⁵⁶ Indeed, 'because John's emphasis is laid on revelation and redemption through Jesus, the Son of God, he intentionally highlights the reality of the divine in the earthly Jesus, ... the eternal Son as the one who revealed the Father most truly and perfectly.'⁵⁷ In other words, it is important to give heed to the idea that the divine light and glory underlie and undergird Jesus's incarnation, life, death, resurrection and ascension in Johannine mission Christology. 'In the Fourth Gospel', Sandra Schneiders notes, 'Jesus' death is not presented, as it is in the Synoptics, as a *kenosis*, the nadir of his earthly life, a human condemnation from which God vindicated him through resurrection.'⁵⁸ In other words, one may need a perspective that does not correspond to the notion of a kenotic paradox when contemplating the Johannine passion narrative. Seen in this light, Balthasar arguably puts a questionable kenotic spin on Johannine Christology.

This misunderstanding of the Johannine theology of cross as kenosis can be given further elaboration in light of the frequency within which prominent Johannine scholars warn against invoking kenosis. For instance, John Ashton points out that the Fourth Evangelist 'fails to exploit the notion of crucifixion in a Pauline or Marcan fashion', in which the suffering of crucifixion is narrated as a prerequisite to the resurrection and the glorification which follows from the utmost depth of suffering and abandonment.⁵⁹ In the same vein, Francis Moloney also articulates how the Johannine logic of death and glorification differs markedly from the cry of dereliction in Mark:

In the Gospel of Mark ... He is arrested, tried and hammered to a cross from which he cries out: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me' (15:34)... . It is not until after he has been ignominiously done to death that things begin to happen... . [In the Christ Hymn in the Philippians] he comes to his lowest moment... . It is as a *consequence* of this humility and humiliation that God highly exalted him... . For both Mark and Paul the experience of the Cross is the *lowest moment* in Jesus' human experience, and his exaltation is the *consequence* (διὸ καὶ ...) of this unconditional commitment to the will of God. This is not the case in the Fourth Gospel. From its earliest pages Jesus begins to speak of his oncoming death as a 'lifting up,' an exaltation.⁶⁰

Moloney likewise warns against assimilating John to Pauline kenoticism:

Unlike Philippians 2:9, where the ὑψωσις [being exalted] is *the result* (διὸ καὶ) of Jesus' death on the cross (v. 8c), for John, Jesus' ὑψωσις takes place *on the cross*... .

⁵⁶Gordon D. Fee, 'The New Testament and Kenosis Christology', in C. Stephen Evans (ed.), *Exploring Kenotic Christology: The Self-Emptying of God* (Oxford: OUP, 2006), p. 40.

⁵⁷Ibid., pp. 41–2.

⁵⁸Sandra M. Schneiders, 'Touching the Risen Jesus: Mary Magdalene and Thomas the Twin in John 20', in *The Resurrection of Jesus in the Gospel of John*, p. 155.

⁵⁹John Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel*, 2nd edn (Oxford: OUP, 2007), p. 467.

⁶⁰Francis J. Moloney, 'The Love Theme in the Gospel of John', in *Johannine Studies 1975–2017* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), pp. 126–7. See also Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012 [2002]), pp. 325–31; Francis J. Moloney, *Belief in the Word: Reading John 1–4* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1993), pp. 117–8.

It is a crucial part of the Gospel's theological understanding of the death of Jesus as a physical 'lifting up' that is also his 'exaltation.'⁶¹

In short, for Moloney the Johannine logic of death-as-glorification stands in stark contrast to Mark and Paul alike, lacking the evident kenotic progression from powerlessness to power, abandonment to unity, lowliness to exaltation and humiliation to glorification. The Fourth Evangelist does not follow the kenotic model, according to which glorification and exaltation are narrated as the result and consequence of obedient suffering and death.

Ernst Käsemann also makes clear that glorification is not described as a fruit of obedience in the Fourth Evangelist's Christology; rather, glory underlies obedience throughout from the outset. 'In John, the obedience of the earthly Jesus is not, as in Philippians 2.9, rewarded with his exaltation, but rather is finished and brought to a close by his return to the Father. Obedience is the form and concretion of Jesus' glory during the period of his incarnation.'⁶² As Paul Anderson encapsulates, for Käsemann there is in John 'no movement from humiliation to exaltation, as eschatology has ceded place to protology; that which was from the beginning is revealed in the cosmic mission of Jesus as the Christ'.⁶³ Käsemann concludes: 'The combination of humiliation and glory [in John] is *not paradoxical as such*.'⁶⁴ It would therefore not do justice to the christological distinctiveness of the Fourth Gospel to claim that there is a kenotic movement of glorification through humiliation, let alone that there is a culmination and fulfilment of such a kenotic paradox in John's Gospel. John lacks the kenotic 'paradox, that the power of the resurrection can be experienced only in the shadow of the cross, and that the reality of the resurrection now implies a position under the cross'.⁶⁵ Moreover, this non-kenotic understanding of the Johannine Christology of mission and cross accounts for the absence in John of Jesus's cry of dereliction. Jesus' agony and anguish at his abandonment by the Father is one of the most dominant themes undergirding the whole structure of Balthasar's theology, yet John's passion narrative leaves little or no room for the agonised, humiliated, broken cry of abandonment that for Balthasar tragically and paradoxically proves the Son's unity with the Father.

Some argue that the Johannine account of the relationship between Jesus' crucifixion and triumph is to be understood in terms of irony rather than paradox:

In the arrest, the trial, and the crucifixion itself Jesus seizes his death in kingly command over all who pretend to capture him and judge him. Rather than cry out for a God who has forsaken, the crucified Jesus in John is already on his way to the Father. Thus the scandalous irony of history is itself ironized.⁶⁶

⁶¹Francis J. Moloney, 'The Parables of Enoch and the Johannine Son of Man', in *Johannine Studies 1975–2017*, pp. 252–3.

⁶²Ernst Käsemann, *The Testament of Jesus: A Study of the Gospel of John in the Light of Chapter 17*, trans. Gerhard Krodel (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2017 [1968]), pp. 10–11.

⁶³Paul N. Anderson, 'Foreword: John 17 – The Original Intention of Jesus for the Church', in *The Testament of Jesus*, p. xxii.

⁶⁴Käsemann, *The Testament of Jesus*, p. 13 (emphasis added).

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, p. 52.

⁶⁶Paul D. Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox, 1985), pp. 113–4.

The tragic irony that Jesus is rejected and condemned to death by his own people is ironised into triumph. The *via* to humiliation of the cross is ironically subverted into the *via* to glorification.

John Ashton helps us to see how ironic subversion markedly differs from the Balthasarian notion of kenotic paradox. According to Ashton, the Fourth Evangelist teaches us that ‘the Christian believer is not expected to see the crucifixion as a kind of exaltation or glorification but to see past the physical reality of Jesus’ death to its true significance: the reascent of the Son of Man to his true home in heaven’.⁶⁷ In other words,

the true significance of his death has nothing to do with the manner of it. No doubt one could say of him that ‘nothing in his life became him like the leaving of it’, but this is only because it satisfactorily rounds off his mission, allowing him to say, for the first and only time: ‘It is accomplished.’ ... The notion of death is always present; nevertheless the pain and the shame of Jesus’ actual death have been filtered out of the term itself ...⁶⁸

The distinction between ironic subversion and kenotic paradox in understanding the Gospel of John not only accounts for why the Fourth Gospel lacks the cry of dereliction, but also prevents us from falling into Balthasar’s tendency towards seeing the Johannine vision of ‘cross as glorification’ as entailing a glorification of the cross. In an integrative analysis of Johannine studies over forty years, for instance, Williams Loader notes a tendency to read John’s Gospel in ‘the Pauline sense of the cross as the paradox of glory in suffering’, which clearly underlies Balthasar’s Christology.⁶⁹ But he avers that this is a mistake: ‘The common misinterpretation which applies exaltation and glorification to the cross’ in reading John’s passion story misleads into interpreting ‘the crucifixion itself...as a great Pauline paradox of glorification and exaltation’.⁷⁰ The consequence of such misreading is the glorification of suffering and death, in line with the critique that ‘Balthasar and those who follow him often talk as though the cross is in itself beautiful’.⁷¹ To interpret the Gospel of John in terms of the culmination of kenotic paradox is not only untenable but is also prone to intensify a propensity for sacralising and glamourising suffering.

The temporal wound of Christ and the eternal wound in the Trinity

Having examined Balthasar’s reading of John, I would now like to turn to Revelation to draw attention to theological aspects of the Lamb slain which touch on the heart of Balthasar’s christological trinitarianism. As already noted, the image of the Lamb slain plays a profound role as a governing symbol that offers a ‘vantage point’ regarding Balthasar’s theodramatisation of the God–world relationship, precisely because the Lamb as slain ‘before the foundation of the world’ exhibits ‘the eternal aspect of the

⁶⁷ Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel*, p. 471.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 467–8.

⁶⁹ Williams Loader, *Jesus in John’s Gospel: Structure and Issues in Johannine Christology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2017), p. 224.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 247.

⁷¹ David Brown, ‘Glory and Beauty in the World and in God: A Critique of Hans Urs von Balthasar’, *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 19/1 (2019), p. 9.

historic and bloody sacrifice of the Cross'.⁷² Hans Küng encapsulates what Balthasar envisions from the image of the Lamb slain in eternity as follows: 'an eternalization of the historical event of the crucifixion, not only into the future, but also back into the past, to the dawn of creation and even into the eternal divine being of God, as described within the framework of trinitarian speculation'.⁷³ The historical suffering and death of Christ is exalted into the super-temporal divine realm:

He who really *was* 'dead', yet now lives 'for evermore' (Rev 1:18), takes his pierced heart with him to heaven; on God's throne he is 'the Lamb as it were slain'.... Here [John 17:17–19], just as in the image of the Lamb who, in the midst of the heavenly glory, is 'slain', we find that the aspect of the Passion's 'exaltation' is coextensive with the disciples' suffering (and hence with all world history), which can only be explained by the fact that the Passion is, in its internal dimensions, supratemporal and thereby can indwell all moments of historical time.... *Supratemporal suffering* is within the realm of him who has been taken up into the divine super-time ('all-time').⁷⁴

The temporal wound of the human Christ is transfigured into a supratemporal wound of Christ enthroned in the divine realm. The exaltation of Christ attributes eternity to Christ's suffering, and that supratemporal suffering in God receives all temporal suffering into its eternally open wound. It is 'the eternal contents of the providence that governs the world'⁷⁵ that the Lamb slain 'before the foundation of the world', and thus 'in timelessness', unveils.⁷⁶ Balthasar intends to identify 'an enduring supratemporal condition of the "Lamb" as....a condition of the Son's existence co-extensive with all creation and thus affecting, in some manner, his divine being'.⁷⁷ In other words, Balthasar's three crucial soteriological concepts – the mutually affectable or real relation of divine and human agency in theodrama, the theodramatic assertion of Christ's suffering in his divine nature and the salvific efficacy to encompass the entirety of suffering of the temporal world – are all captured in the supra-historical existence of the Lamb slain. 'The image of the Lamb who, in the midst of the heavenly glory, is slain' eternally manifests for Balthasar the kenotic paradox of suffering and death as glory and exaltation which lies at the centre of the Johannine truth of the unreserved kenotic self-surrender of Christ to open up the whole sublimity of the Father's love.⁷⁸ It is a wound in the pierced heart of the Lamb slain that lays bare the eternal truth of the Son's relational love for the world.

It is of great importance for Balthasar that this wound is eternally unhealed: it 'remains *always open*' in the inner life of the Trinity.⁷⁹ The fact that Christ's 'mortal wounds are eternally open'⁸⁰ is diametrically opposed to 'the pseudo-miracle of the healing of the beast's mortal wound'⁸¹ in Revelation 13:3. The super-suffering and

⁷²MP, p. 34.

⁷³Hans Küng, *The Incarnation of God: An Introduction to Hegel's Theological Thought as Prolegomena to a Future Christology*, trans. by J. R. Stephenson (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1987), p. 544.

⁷⁴TD 5, p. 151 (emphasis added).

⁷⁵GL 7, p. 175.

⁷⁶GL 7, p. 149; cf. p. 138.

⁷⁷MP, pp. 34–5.

⁷⁸TD 5, p. 151; cf. TD 4, p. 450.

⁷⁹TD 4, p. 451.

⁸⁰TD 4, p. 337.

⁸¹TD 4, p. 451.

super-death in the Trinity remain eternally open to receive the entirety of historical suffering and death for redemption. The eternal openness of the glorified wound of the Lamb slain offers a vivid picture of how the super-suffering in the Trinity encompasses the totality of historical wounds. The eternally open wound of the Lamb slain manifests ‘a totally unexpected picture of God’s internal, trinitarian defenselessness’,⁸² and ‘the truth of the defenseless nature of the divine, trinitarian love’.⁸³ Balthasar eloquently portrays that ‘the eternal love pours out its blood from wounds which transcend all inner worldly hurts’.⁸⁴ The suffering of Christ is eternalised so as to bear and redeem the entirety of historical suffering. Therefore, for Balthasar, the eternal suffering and death of Jesus includes an eternally open wound that accounts for the redemptive efficacy of the super-temporal suffering of the exalted Christ. Balthasar’s soteriology is thus underpinned by the translation of Christ’s suffering and death into the eternal Trinity.

It is hard to find any clue in Balthasar’s theological speculations about ‘the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world’ that suggests a clear ontological difference between the historical suffering of the Lamb slain in history and the eternal wound and suffering of the Lamb slain exalted into the eternal divine life – that is, between the temporal death in the life of the economic Trinity *ad extra* and the eternal death in the life of the immanent Trinity *ad intra*. Rather, it is precisely the wound, suffering and death in eternity that are elevated, heightened, exalted, glorified and divinised out of the temporal realm. Granted that Balthasar describes the divine suffering as ‘supra-temporal’, his close correlation of temporal and eternal suffering makes his language appear to be *ontologically univocal*, rather than merely metaphorical or analogical. It seems that the temporal wound, suffering and death, eternalised into the Trinity as the divine receptivity and assumption of the entire temporal tragedy, stand at an ontological level equal to the eternal divine unity, love and life – and that this is, indeed, the necessary condition of the divine redemption of what is received and assumed.⁸⁵

This evaluation calls into question Rowan Williams’ contention that ‘for Balthasar it is the Christian doctrine of the Trinity that—by positing eternal differentiation within the divine life—allows for this “tragic” rupture to occur without entailing a kind of tragic division within God that would have somehow to be overcome, a collapse of divine integrity into contradiction and opposition’.⁸⁶ Williams presumes that for Balthasar suffering and death in God are ‘latent’ and implicit.⁸⁷ But, as I have noted, the prototype

⁸²*TD* 4, p. 450.

⁸³*TD* 4, p. 451.

⁸⁴Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Elucidations*, trans. John Riches (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1975), p. 52.

⁸⁵Kevin Duffy also maintains that ‘the darkness and suffering of Good Friday and Holy Saturday would be *coextensive* with the fully actualized divine nature in such a way that God would be reduced to the very thing von Balthasar wants to avoid, a tragic and mythological deity, described in anthropomorphic terms’. Kevin Duffy, ‘Change, Suffering, and Surprise in God: Von Balthasar’s Use of Metaphor’, *Irish Theological Quarterly* 76/4 (2011), p. 371 (emphasis added).

⁸⁶Rowan Williams, *The Tragic Imagination* (Oxford: OUP, 2016), p. 123 (emphasis added).

⁸⁷It is not that there is a heavenly sacrificial economy which can be uncovered by speculation but that the irreducibly human suffering of Christ is to be understood as the transcription in the finite order of what eternal gift means: “the economic is latent in the immanent” (191), but this is decisively different from saying that the immanent is simply a version of the economic, or that the suffering of Christ effects a change in God, or is felt in God as strictly divine suffering. Moltmann’s account of the cross and the Trinity is not at all what Balthasar intends to affirm.’ Rowan Williams, review of Jennifer Newsome Martin, *Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Critical Appropriation of Russian Religious Thought*, *Modern Theology* 33/4 (2017), p. 690.

and original image of wound and suffering in the Trinity is not merely implicit and latent. The temporal tragic wound, suffering and death are divinised and eternalised as part of the eternally blessed unity, love and life of the Trinity. The eternal event of the negation of tragedy in God thus occurs in and with the unity, love and life of God. The God of Balthasar is an eternal repetition of events that transmutes the negativity of pain into joy, suffering into love, death into life, darkness into light and tragedy into comedy. This speculative portrayal of God risks ontologising suffering and death into the absolute blessedness of the Trinity and collapsing divine integrity into the structure of 'contradiction and opposition' between death and life. Balthasar's theodramatisation envisions the triune life of God as eternally vulnerable to and wounded by death, portraying it as a heavenly theatre where death is eternally present, even though it is eternally destined to be 'overcome' by life. In this manner, for Balthasar, 'God is love...the absolute unity of...life and death.'⁸⁸

Conclusion

The image of the Lamb slain serves as a pivotal perspective to understand the theodramatic action in his theology, depicting God's profound engagement with the world. For Balthasar, the image of the glorified Lamb slain before the foundation of the world symbolises the sheer depth of God's sacrificial relationship with the world. In the exploration of his theological interpretation of the image from the Gospel of John and the Book of Revelation, questions emerge regarding Balthasar's assumption of a common authorship of these two texts, as well as with respect to the translation of Revelation 13:8 as, 'the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world'. Still more crucial, however, has been Balthasar's interpretation of the mission Christology of the Gospel of John in terms of the kenotic paradox of suffering as glorification, which underpins his theological account of the eternal vulnerability of the Lamb slain. While Balthasar presents the notion of simultaneous sublimity and lowliness in Jesus, some scholars have cautioned against misreading the Gospel of John as describing an act of kenosis. Instead, they suggest that it may be better understood as an ironic subversion rather than a kenotic paradox.

These contestable claims and emphases by Balthasar regarding the Lamb slain contribute to his ultimate dramatic depiction of God. In his theological speculation about the Lamb slain, historical, temporal suffering and death are eternalised and divinised into the triune life of God. This speculative portrayal risks ontologising suffering and death, potentially jeopardising the divine simplicity through a structure of contradiction and opposition between negativity and positivity within the life of the Trinity. While this conceptualisation of God may maintain divine immutability in a significantly revised sense, it risks mutating God into a mythological deity. This transformation stands in contrast to Moltmann's perspective, where God is immersed in the world; in Balthasar's portrayal, the world is elevated within the triune life of God.

⁸⁸TD 5, pp. 84–5.