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Jesus the Gardener: A Revised Perspective of a Favourite New Testament Scene

- by Jim Cregan

**A paper presented to the 5th Annual “Sharing Theological Passions” Colloquium
at the University of Notre Dame, Fremantle, Western Australia, on 26th November 2012.**

Mary Magdalene’s encounter with the risen Christ in the garden in which he was entombed, described in John 20:14-15, is one of the most poignant in the entire Bible. If we are to accept the interpretation of some commentaries, Mary, when she finds the tomb empty, in her grief induced confusion¹ fails to recognise Jesus when he appears to her, supposing him to be the gardener. Her fear is that the same people who have killed him have removed his body. It is only when Jesus calls to her by name that there ensues what has been described as “the greatest recognition scene in all literature”², one expressed in only two words: “Mary!”, “Rabboni!” It is implicit in Jesus’ response to her, i.e. “Do not hold onto me”, that she has moved to embrace him. The emotion is palpable.

Not surprisingly, this scene, in its entirety, has received a great deal of critical and artistic attention. After all, as Paul recognised early in the narrative of the Christian church, if we do not accept the risen Christ, then our faith is in vain (1 Corinthians 15:14). But much (I would argue *most*) of the critical and interpretative action in response to this has fallen on what happens either side of what I will call ‘the gardener moment’. Indeed, most commentators have little, or nothing, to say on the matter of Jesus the gardener, are dismissive of those who do hint towards something profound in this particular piece of text or, according to Wyatt,

¹ See, for example, Judith Schubert, *The Gospel of John – Question by Question* (Mahwah NJ: Paulist Press, 2008), 236e.

² Nicolas Wyatt, citing MacGregor, in “‘Supposing Him to Be the Gardener’ (John 20, 15. A Study of the Paradise Motif in John” in *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der Älteren Kirche*, Vol 81, Issue 1-2(1990), 38.

“make the most banal observations”.³ Conversely, we can get a sense of where the emphasis in this scene *has* fallen over the years by the name by which it has become known, *Noli me tangere*, i.e. *don't touch me*. The emphasis is very much on the moment *after* the initial meeting.

Now, on the one hand, this apparent privileging of the textual content either side of the ‘gardener moment’ is understandable. There *is* much to be explored in the *Noli me tangere* scene especially when contrasted, for example, with Jesus’ later invitation to Thomas (John 20:27), where Jesus asks him to place his hand inside Jesus’ wound to confirm that the resurrected Christ really is present to the disciples. Analysis of the inherent emotional tension in the scene explored through inter-textual comparisons with for example, chapter 3 of the Song of Songs (Song 3:2), which raise questions as to the exact nature of Mary Magdalene’s relationship with Jesus, has also been undertaken.⁴ Similarly, the question of what it means to see with the ‘eyes of faith’⁵ is also served well by this passage.

However, recent developments in Biblical scholarship suggest that this displacement of critical attention away from the ‘gardener moment’ in John’s gospel is a significant oversight.⁶ Indeed, according to Joachin Schaper, it is precisely in the image of ‘Jesus the Gardener’

³ See, for example, C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text, 2nd Edn* (London: SPCK, 1996), 564; Raymond E. Brown (Introduction, translation and Notes), *The Anchor Bible – The Gospel According to John (xiii-xxi)* (New York: Doubleday, 1970), 1009; Rudolph Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, translated by G.R. Beasley Murray, R.W.N. Hoare, and J.K. Riches (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1971), 686; Earnest Haenchen, *John 2*, trans. by Robert W. Funk (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 209; Francis J. Maloney, S.D.B., *Sacra Pagina Series, Vol 4: The Gospel of John* (Collegeville: Michael Glazier, 1998), 525; Rudolph Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St John: Volume 3 – Commentary on Chapters 13-21* (New York: Crossroads, 1990), 317. Etc.

⁴ See, for example, Bobby Dykema Katsanis, “Meeting in the Garden: Intertextuality with the Song of Songs in Holbein’s *Noli me tangere*” in *Interpretation*, October (2007), 412. For a more informed treatment of the relationship between the themes of Eden as found in Genesis 2-3 and the Song of Songs see Francis Landy, “The Song of Songs and the Garden of Eden” | *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 98, No. 4 (Dec., 1979), 513-528.

⁵ Maloney, *The Gospel of John*, 527.

⁶ With a few notable exceptions, this is broadly true of the treatment of the treatment of gardens in general by Biblical scholars. See Joachin Schaper, “The messiah in the garden: John 38-41, (royal) gardens and messianic concepts”, in Markus Bockmuehl and Guy. Stroumsa (eds), *Paradise in Antiquity: Jewish and Christian Views* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 17.

where the reader is presented with “one of the most highly charged symbolic statements in the Gospel of John”.⁷ It is the nature of this symbolic statement that I want to examine today.

Towards this end I want to introduce you to a lesser known painting of Rembrandt’s that depicts the passage from John’s gospel that we are discussing.



Figure 1: The Magdalene at the Empty Tomb – Rembrandt (1638)

Rembrandt’s *The Magdalene at the Empty Tomb* (1638) is exceptional in that Rembrandt, faithful to the Vulgate text in his Bible, depicts Jesus with a gardener’s hat, a gardener’s spade, and a pruning knife. That is, the scene, rather than being a reference for Rembrandt, *becomes* the vision itself.⁸ There is an earlier representation of this moment by Albrecht Durer, *Noli Me Tangere*, that is similarly literal.

⁷ Joachin Schaper, “The messiah in the garden”, 27.

⁸ Donald Bruce, “The Age of Rembrandt at the Queen’s Gallery”, in *Contemporary Review*, Vol. 287, No. 1675 (Aug 2005), 97.



But the “humble literality”,⁹ of the scene is quickly marginalised in commentaries by subsequent allusions to, for example, Jesus as the ‘cosmic gardener’, an allegorical motif that achieved prominence in the Middle Ages but which had its origins in much earlier Christian homiletics.¹⁰ These earlier commentaries were *also* typically silent on the possibility that the notion of Jesus the gardener might have inherent value, preferring instead to see the image as, on the one hand, symptomatic of Mary’s disbelief or, on the other hand, emblematic of Christ’s compassion i.e. pertaining to Christ presenting himself to Mary in a manner that she, a simple woman, might comprehend, before he reveals himself to her in the fullness of his post-resurrection glory.¹¹

These are very durable notions. Schnackenberg, for example, reprising this interpretation of Jerome nearly 1600 years later, writes that, “Questions as to whether and how the

⁹ Donald Bruce, “The Age of Rembrandt at the Queen’s Gallery”, 97.

¹⁰ See, for example, Gregory the Great, “Forty Gospel Homilies, 25”, and Jerome, “Homily 87, On John 1(sic): 1-14”, in Joel C. Elowsky (ed), *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture – New Testament IV b: John 11-21* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 346.

¹¹ Joel C. Elowsky (ed), *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, 345.

‘gardener’ was dressed, are beside the point; the risen one assumes a form and a dress appropriate for those to whom he wants to reveal himself.”¹²

But what if Rembrandt, with the acuity of his artist’s vision, and informed by his “assiduous reading of the gospel of St John” that “seeped up into Rembrandt’s imagination like an underground stream”,¹³ was “on the money”, so to speak. What if the representation of Jesus as a gardener was *exactly* what John intended?

To put these questions into context it is worth getting an overall sense of the focus of John’s gospel and the motifs he employed to achieve his aims. Wyatt describes John’s gospel as “a complex interweaving of ancient royal and messianic themes, more a poetic meditation on the incarnation than a straightforward account of the impact Jesus made on his contemporaries.”¹⁴ Moule, in an earlier article, argues much the same thing, that John’s theology is expressed as a single indivisible unity, but one where the “great verities” of his vision are reiterated through multiple, diverse representations of the same themes.¹⁵ Now, of these ‘great verities’, Mary Coloe believes it is the transference of the meaning of Israel’s temple, from a building, to the person of Jesus, and then to the community of believers, that is at the heart of John’s narrative.¹⁶ If we accept this to be the case, and many commentaries do, we have a narrative structure based in repetition, a place – Israel’s temple, and a central figure in Christ, as the core components of John’s story. Let’s look at the last two of these features in turn, keeping in mind our attempt to unravel the notion of Jesus the gardener.

A number of Biblical scholars argue that the pre-exilic Temple of ancient Israel, built by Solomon in the middle of the tenth century BCE (2 Kings 28:8-17), and the Garden of Eden were metaphorically interchangeable. Torje Stordalen, for example, cites both Walter Eichrodt

¹² Rudolph Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St John*, 317.

¹³ Donald Bruce, “The Age of Rembrandt at the Queen’s Gallery”, 97.

¹⁴ Nicolas Wyatt, “‘Supposing Him to Be the Gardener’”, 36.

¹⁵ C.D.F. Moule, “The Individualism of the Fourth Gospel”, in *Novum Testamentum*, Vol.5, Fasc. 2/3 (July 1962), 175-175.

¹⁶ Mary Coloe, “Temple Imagery in John”, in *Interpretation* 63.4 (October 2009), 368.

and Levison in support of this notion.¹⁷ Gary Anderson, who raises the very interesting possibility that Adam, as high priest, was banished from the garden of Eden for profaning it, that is, profaning the Temple, is also of this view.¹⁸ Margaret Barker, writing from what you might call a 'History of Religions' perspective, describes at length how the imagery of Eden penetrated every aspect of Temple architecture and experience. This includes in relation to the altar stone, as both the source of the dust from which Adam was made, and the place from which the heavenly waters flow; in relation to the bronze basin that stood in the temple forecourt symbolising God's control over the chaotic forces of nature; in relation to the *menora*, or great lampstand that stood beside the altar, that was recognised as a symbol of the Tree of Life, under which, so Enoch tells us God rested in Eden (2 Enoch 8:4)¹⁹; and to the veil that separated the forecourt from the *debir* or Sanctuary, that is separated earth from heaven; and so on.²⁰

We can also see through a variety of OT Scriptural references where the interrelationship between the Temple and the Garden of Eden is implicit, especially in a number of the Psalms (29:3a-3c; 33:7; 74:13; 89:9-11; 93:1-4) as well as in various passages from Isaiah where "Eden was often linked to Jerusalem as the ideal it would one day attain."²¹ e.g. Isaiah 11; 51:1-3; 65:17-25. *Explicitly*, we see the relationship between the Garden of Eden and the Temple developed at length in Ezekiel 47:1-12. It is worth noting that in Ezekiel's transfigured geography the Divine Glory, or *Kābōd*, is no longer in Jerusalem but ambiguously in a place beyond Israel's borders known simply as "YHWH is there"²² a notion which can be seen as prototypically Christian, and which the writer of Revelation appropriates to conclude his own vision of the re-primed world (Rev 22:1-5). It could also be argued that the most poetic

¹⁷ Torje Stordalen, *Echoes of Eden: Genesis 2-3 and Symbolism in the Garden of Eden in Biblical Literature* (Leeven: Peters, 2009), 308. See also pp. 366-367, 377.

¹⁸ Gary Anderson, "Celibacy or Consumation in the Garden: Reflections on Early Jewish and Christian Interpretations of the Garden of Eden" in *The Harvard Theological Review* 82:2 (April, 1989), 129.

¹⁹ As cited in Margaret Barker, *Temple Theology* (London: SPCK, 2004), 89.

²⁰ Margaret Barker, *The Gate of Heaven: THE History and Symbolism of the Temple in Jerusalem* (Sheffield: Phoenix, 2008).

²¹ Barker, *The Gate of Heaven*, 68.

²² For a fuller explication of this theme see Steven S. Tuell, "Divine Presence and Absence in Ezekiel's Prophecy" in Margaret S. Odell and John T. Strong (eds) *The Book of Ezekiel: Theological and Anthropological Perspectives* (Atlanta: Society for Biblical Literature, 2000), 97-120.

and accessible Christian vision of the expansion of God's presence beyond the temple of Jerusalem is to be found not in Revelation itself but in John's retelling of Ezekiel 47:1-12, in the story known in many instances as 'The Woman at the Well' (John 4:4-42). Here, just as in Ezekiel, it is from Jesus, as the new Temple, that the perpetually sustaining water of life will flow to those prepared to work towards perfecting themselves through the Spirit, in grace. Similarly, the blessings that flow from Ezekiel's temple are now available beyond the boundaries of Zion, beyond the ritual limitations of the Torah, amongst those who believe in their hearts, through their own experience, that Jesus is the anticipated Messiah (John 4:25-26), "the Saviour of the World".

Now, I said before, one of the key features of John's narrative structure is his repetition of 'the verities' of his vision. And, in some respects, the 'gardener moment' of John 20:14-15 can be seen to be a reprise of this earlier scene. As the site of the resurrection the garden in which Jesus is buried can be seen to be not just the foundation of the New Temple, but equally the new Eden. Mary Magdalene, in one sense i.e. as a woman, as much an outsider as the Samaritan woman at the well, similarly goes forth to tell others of the risen Jesus, that is, of the new Adam. And just as in the earlier story where the Samaritan woman is displaced by 'the people of the town' who come to believe through their own experience, Mary herself is displaced by the disciples who achieve their own confirmation through Jesus' graphic example to Thomas.

Now, whilst this is a skeletal outline of a discussion of considerable proportions what we can say is that if there *is* a direct relationship between the garden of Eden and the temple, then Jesus as, at once, the New Adam and the New Temple, is very much at home with a pair of secateurs and a sensible hat. This is one of the 'great verities' of John's gospel that I referred to earlier. Indeed, Wyatt argues that the curse of Adam results not so much in Adam being forced to till the soil, but that in his exile his punishment is to be ritually divorced from the *hortus conclusus*, the ordered world of Eden.²³ Jesus' lifting of the curse of Adam, then, places

²³ Wyatt, "Supposing Him to Be the Gardener", 36.

him firmly back into the garden - back on the tools, as it were, as Rembrandt, and John, would have it.

Be that as it may, Eden, by the very fact of its interchangeability with the Temple, with Zion, even with God, can be seen to be simultaneously an earthly and divine reality, eternal and historically specific, mobile in both time and space.²⁴ Indeed, as Wyatt points out, the location of Eden, in Hebrew *miqqedem*, 'in the east', can have spatial as well as temporal senses. The context of Genesis 2:8 suggests this would be a more appropriate rendering given that it "sets the garden of Eden in its primordial, mythical rather than geographical context".²⁵ The notion of Jesus 'the cosmic gardener', defined and articulated through allegory and metaphor, can be seen, then, to be a natural corollary of this.

However, there is a second dimension to the notion of 'Jesus the gardener' that is much more concrete and attainable, less defined by myth and symbolism. In this representation Jesus is seen as the inheritor of a messianic tradition wherein kings, throughout the Ancient Near East, were often depicted as gardeners. This developed in relation to symbolic connotations of fertility and control over the forces of nature that attached themselves to messianic kings, but equally in relation to the status obtained by having the resources to keep a garden for pleasure.

Not surprisingly then, these kings were also buried in the confines of palace gardens and this, according to Schaper, is the point that John is making both implicitly and explicitly through a combination of references. These references would have been accepted and understood by his audience,²⁶ both historically, and also religiously through their connection to the Hebrew Scriptures where, for example, the Kings' Garden features as the resting place of both

²⁴ Stroumsa refers to this characteristic as '*chronotropic*', possibly confusing the term with the original '*chronotope*' – literally time/space – from the Russian philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975). See Guy. G. Stroumsa, "Introduction: the paradise chronotope", in Bockmuehl and Stroumsa (eds), *Paradise in Antiquity*, 2.

²⁵ Wyatt, "Supposing Him to Be the Gardener", 25.

²⁶ What Torje Stordalen refers to as "communicative competence" to argue for implicit awareness by ancient audiences for what may be obscure to contemporary readers. See Stordalen, *Echoes of Eden*, 377, 390.

Manesseh and Amon.²⁷ Extending this point, the Septuagint translation of Nehemiah 3:16, in particular, connects the King's Garden, in the Kidron Valley, next to the site of the ancient Temple, with the tomb of David, as does Acts 2:29, which simultaneously draws a connection between the presence of David's tomb among the faithful with the resurrection of Christ. John, describing the burial of Jesus (19:38b-42) implicitly references this through placing Jesus's body in a new tomb within a garden, that was also the place of Jesus's crucifixion. We should also note that the Gihon, one of the four rivers of creation issuing from Eden, which fed the gardens of the Kidron valley, through the King's Garden, was also the site of royal coronations. Thus Solomon is anointed and proclaimed king at the Gihon (1 Kings 1:33-34, 44-45); similarly Psalm 110, depending on your translation, describes the messiah, king and priest, drinking from the Gihon, either as part of a victory procession or a ritualistic aspect of a coronation rite.²⁸

Reinforcing the notion of the royal burial of Jesus, John, within this pericope, has Nicodemus providing "about 100 pounds" weight of expensive ointments for Jesus' body (John 19:39). Apparently this was the amount deemed appropriate in ancient Israel for the burial of a king. This motif is also present in Mark's gospel in the story of his anointment at Bethany (Mark 14:3-4) by a woman who traditionally is believed to be none other than Mary Magdalene. Typically she is represented as carrying her "alabaster jar" of spikenard (incidentally worth about the average annual wage of a rural worker – let's say about \$50,000 in today's value!) in the *Noli me tangere* paintings.

Now, as with the discussion about the interchangeability of the Garden of Eden and the Temple, this is a very brief summary of an extensive, and at times complicated, discourse on the theme of Jesus the gardener. Nevertheless, it can be concluded that, as suggested in my introduction, the mention of the garden in John 19 and 20 was intended to make an extremely

²⁷As Schaper notes, there is special significance of the garden mentioned in 2 Kings 21:18 and 26 in connection to the burials of Manesseh and Amon, and further references to this garden in other texts, for example, 2 Kings 25:4, Jeremiah 5:7 and 39:4, and Nehemiah 3:15. Joachin Schaper, "The messiah in the garden", 25.

²⁸Wyatt, "Supposing Him to Be the Gardener", 25.

important symbolic point. This is to argue that in locating Jesus's tomb in a garden, like that of David and other Davidic rulers, Jesus is depicted by John "as a true Davidide and King Messiah, buried in the King's Garden and demonstrating his messiahship by rising from the grave in the very same garden in which, according to tradition ...David's tomb was located."²⁹

Now before I conclude, a word of caution. Given the historical expansion of Jerusalem over the centuries, on the one hand, and its destruction at various times, on the other, there is, as Wyatt, points out, "little hope that we can pinpoint the various locations with certainty, and when we come to the use of the garden motif in John's gospel, it is not only futile but misdirected to attempt to locate it."³⁰ Nevertheless, I don't agree with Wyatt's following assertion, that "John has no actual garden in mind". Having previously argued for a shared understanding on the part of his audience of the references John is drawing on, it makes no sense to me to then argue that John's use of the garden motif is purely illustrative. Certainly, John is "drawing on the garden tradition, and taking advantage of its rich ideological and cultural overtones to make a point about the nature of Jesus."³¹ But the assumptions John makes of his audience suggest a very clear appreciation of the cultural and religious references on which he is drawing, including the architecture and topography of Jerusalem.

When you superimpose this notion onto the more broadly developed theme of Jesus as simultaneously the New Adam and the new High Priest of the revived Temple, which is also present in these passages, then the focus of the specific scene described by John in 20:14-15 very much shifts from Mary Magdalene's supposed confusion as to the identity of Jesus onto the garden itself as evidence, "sufficient to establish proof", of Jesus as Messiah and Davidic king for whom the title 'gardener' is eminently appropriate.

²⁹ Joachin Schaper, "The messiah in the garden", 26.

³⁰ Wyatt, "Supposing Him to Be the Gardener", 31.

³¹ Wyatt, "Supposing Him to Be the Gardener", 31.

