

## A Time to Scatter, a Time to Gather\*

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Catherine Playoust

**Abstract:** The beginning of the academic year (the occasion when this paper was delivered at the United Faculty of Theology) is not only a time to gather but also a time when people and ideas are scattered in various ways for the sake of theological education. Several biblical and early Christian texts deal with the themes of scattering and gathering, particularly in three interlocking contexts: the sowing of seed to produce a harvest that will be gathered in; the dispersal of a multitude and its subsequent restoration to its own land; and the assembly of a group followed by its sending forth to various places with the group's goals in mind. Scattering comes with high risk, and often grief and sorrow, but bears the potential for joy at the attainment of the harvest or other goals. The Gospel of John is notable for portraying the crucifixion as both a time of scattering and grief (followed by regathering and joy at the resurrection) and a time of gathering and triumph.

IT IS A TIME TO GATHER. This evening, we gather as the community of the United Faculty of Theology. We gather for this Commencement Lecture, an event whose ritual character is marked by the robes and the speeches. In turn this lecture marks our coming together for the new academic year, as we gather our books and our computers, our timetables and our thoughts, for the study of theology. For those of you who are new students at the UFT, this is also the culmination of Welcome Day, which has brought you together to meet each other and find out more about this community that you are joining. For those of you who are not current students or staff of the UFT, but come here as friends and associates, your presence and support show that you too are part of the wider UFT community that is convened here tonight.

But it is also a time of scattering, of planting seeds and encouraging them to grow. You who are teachers are about to start scattering ideas in the hope that they will blossom and bear fruit in the students. Those

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ideas are not only the words that drop from your lips, but the whole educational context that you provide, including the research and conversations that you foster and the respect you give to what the students bring to their studies. It wouldn't really be theological education, though, if it were only the ideas that grew: you students yourselves should be changed by what you learn, like plants ever growing higher and delving deeper, and the harvest of your education will be not only a diploma but also the increased ability to live out the good news and share God's love with those you encounter. You will take that harvest and scatter its seeds wherever you are sent forth – in parishes, hospitals, families, workplaces, even in theological colleges!

Furthermore, for many of us it is a time of being scattered – not just scatter-brained as we pull our minds together from the end of the summer, but scattered far from our home or our culture. If we gather here, it is because we've been gathered from somewhere else, and many of us belong to a kind of diaspora, dispersed from our original homes, whether they be Vietnam, Sudan, or the Netherlands. Even if it is a temporary diaspora for work or study, there can nonetheless be pain in that sense of being scattered. A wider group of us may find that being at the UFT induces a cultural diaspora, in which we separate from a world that cannot see why anyone would pay any attention to religious questions, and we come to one where people think it crucially important to do so. Lastly, of course, as we scatter from here at the end of this evening, it is a foretaste of that occasion when we leave the UFT for the last time.

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Tonight I want to share with you some biblical and early Christian texts that deal with gathering and scattering. I'll begin with several brief examples and then proceed to a lengthier discussion of the Gospel of John, where quite a few of the concepts in the shorter examples appear again in new form. In deciding what to include, I didn't go in search of particular Greek or Hebrew words, but looked for places in which these ideas came up. They emerged in three main contexts, often interlocking: the sowing of seed to produce a harvest that will be gathered in; the dispersal of a multitude and its subsequent restoration to its own land; and the assembly of a group for a particular occasion, after which the members of the assembly are sent out to various places with the group's goals in mind.

By and large, these contexts come with characteristic emotional freight. Seedtime and all the period of growth is a time of hope because of the crop's potential, but also of fear because of all the things that can go wrong before the harvest is brought in. A dispersed multitude is often grief-struck, exiled from its home and lacking a leader, while the

moment of restoration is a time of great joy. The occasion of an assembly is a peak moment for the group, providing it with the communal identity that will give the members the courage to be sent out afterward into risky situations and the perseverance to sustain them throughout the mission. I've already been alluding to these three contexts in my remarks about our current situation, and you may wish to keep thinking about where your own position is within each of the texts that I'll examine.

My first three examples are parables where Jesus talks about seeds. In the parable of the Sower in Mark's Gospel (Mark 4:3-9, 14-20), the sower goes out and scatters some seed widely. The story then concentrates on the fate of the seed. The seed is categorised into groups that last for differing amounts of time, despite the seeds themselves apparently being indistinguishable. The seed on the path is eaten by the birds within hours; the seed on the rocky ground grows but then withers in a matter of days; the seed among thorns lasts for weeks until the thorns choke it; and only the plants that grow in the good soil bring forth grain. This is quite a deterministic view of agriculture, as if every detail is fixed by the initial conditions of the soil. The farmer's skills in nurturing the young plants would seem to count for nothing; there is no shielding from the sun and no weeding out of the thorns. What the story does is to focus our attention on the soil's receptiveness. In keeping with this, the interpretation offered later in the chapter personifies the soil as individuals into whom the word is sown. Receiving the word is to hear it, and the individuals subtly shift from being the soil to being the young plants growing in that soil – young plants that can be beset by persecution in the form of scorching sun, or by worldly desires in the form of thorns, or that never even get started because the seeds were gobbled up by Satan in the form of birds. The good soil hears the word and accepts it, but we are not told in this passage what this proper receptivity is, just that the final result is a multifold yield of grain. The challenge is to win through despite the dangers, and all the story's colour resides in the narration of these traps, as if in a botanical *Pilgrim's Progress*. One learns how to bring forth fruit by mirror-reading the fatal mistakes that the other groups of seeds made: hear and accept the word, hold it fast, have a firm foundation, and be constant in growth despite one's surrounds.

In another parable, that of the Weeds and Wheat in Matthew's Gospel (Matt 13:24-30), we see again some hands-off farming, but this time the narrative tells us why. Good seed is sown in a field, but then an enemy sows weeds among the wheat. The householder tells the slaves not to uproot the weeds, since they would uproot the good plants too. Instead, the field of mixed plants should be left alone to grow until the harvest, when it will become obvious which plants are weeds to be burned and which are wheat to be gathered into the barn.

This is a parable of the reign of God, and the emphasis on “good seed” and the plants of the “enemy” invites us to interpret it as a story about human life on this earth, with good people and bad people intermingled. God, the householder, is not complacent in refusing to have the plants separated out before the end, but cautious and patient until the day of judgement. For this story, the implied audience would see itself as wheat, not weeds, since the botanical image provides no means of switching species from weed to wheat and thus no possibility of reform. Although they are good and they are cared for by God, they are told that they cannot expect God to make their lives free of challenges, for their opponents will be living alongside them until the endtime comes. The time between seedtime and harvest will be difficult, but they can trust that they will finally be harvested as God intended from the beginning.

My last example of a seed parable is from the *Apocryphon of James*, a Christian text from the late second century that was found at Nag Hammadi.<sup>1</sup> This text takes great interest in successful teaching, and presents a memory of Jesus as one who taught using parables. In the narrative world of the *Apocryphon of James*, the ascension of Jesus has been delayed because he has not yet succeeded in explaining the meaning of his parables to Peter and James, who should be key figures in spreading the good news.<sup>2</sup> Among the stories Jesus tells is a seed parable that is not found in the New Testament Gospels:

For the word is like a grain of wheat; when someone had sown it, he had faith in it; and when it had sprouted, he loved it because he had seen many grains in place of one. And when he had worked, he was saved because he had prepared it for food, (and) again he left (some) to sow. (*Ap. Jas.* 8.16-23)

I might note that since this farmer only starts with one grain, I may be pressing the point to call the seedtime “scattering”, but the idea of taking a venture and letting the seed go still applies. What I find striking about this parable is that the harvest is not the end of the story, unlike in the two parables we’ve already considered. To be sure, some of the harvest is used for food, but some of it is set aside as seed for the new season. This emphasis fits well with the theme of teaching in the *Apocryphon of James*. By the end of the text, Jesus has succeeded in

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1. Francis E. Williams, “The Apocryphon of James”, in *Nag Hammadi Codex I (The Jung Codex): Introductions, Texts, Translations, Notes* (ed. Harold W. Attridge; 2 vols.; NHS 22-23; Leiden: Brill, 1985) 1:13-53 and 2:7-37; NHS 22-23 have been reprinted in one volume with page numbers unaltered as *The Coptic Gnostic Library: A Complete Edition of the Nag Hammadi Codices*, vol. 1 (gen. ed. James M. Robinson; Leiden: Brill, 2000). The translation quoted here is by Williams.

2. For details, see the *Apocryphon of James* chapter in Catherine Anne Playoust, “Lifted Up From the Earth: The Ascension of Jesus and the Heavenly Ascents of Early Christians” (Th.D. diss., Harvard Divinity School, 2006).

teaching Peter and James, and he ascends into heaven. Peter and James try to follow him upward, but they are called back by the other disciples, and this makes sense because these two former students have now become teachers in their own right. The cycle of seedtime to harvest has looped back to seedtime once more.

Another text that emphasises the potential of even a single seed is 1 Corinthians 15, the chapter on resurrection. Paul is answering a question about the kinds of bodies that people will have when they are raised from the dead. He tells them that the resurrected body will be in continuity with the person's body prior to death, but all the more extraordinary. To explain this, he reaches for an image that sounds odd from the perspective of modern biology but would have worked well in the ancient world:

What you sow does not give life unless it dies. And as for what you sow, you do not sow the body that will come into being, but a bare grain, perhaps of wheat or one of the other kinds. But God gives it a body as he has wished, and to each of the seeds he gives its own body. (1 Cor 15:36-38)<sup>3</sup>

So for Paul, there cannot be a resurrected body unless the person dies first. The risk has to be taken, the loss has to be suffered, just as a seed will not yield a harvest unless the farmer relinquishes hold of it and lets it fall to the ground. It is just a bare grain, and if it stays that way it isn't much use, but if it "dies", so to speak, it produces a body that corresponds to the seed but is far more impressive. As Paul goes on to say, "It is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power." (1 Cor 15:43)

Let us turn now to an example of seeds that are not metaphors but symbols – grain that actually exists as grain, while also representing something else. In the *Didache*, a Christian text from the early second century, an early Christian community receives instructions about how to live rightly. Among the instructions are some eucharistic passages that play with the idea of scattering and gathering on several levels. On the Lord's day, the community is to gather to break bread and give thanks, that is, to celebrate Eucharist. This ritual is portrayed as a meal and as a sacrifice (*Did.* 14.1), involving wine and bread (*Did.* 9-10). The bread is broken into fragments so that it can be eaten by many and perhaps also because that was the tradition for Jewish grain-offerings.<sup>4</sup> Among the words to be spoken about the fragment are the following:

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3. Biblical translations in this article are my adaptations of the New Revised Standard Version.

4. See, for example, Lev 2:6 and 6:14 LXX, which use *κλάσματα* ("fragments") in reference to such offerings.

Just as this fragment was scattered upon the mountains and became gathered as one, so may your church be gathered from the ends of the earth into your reign. (*Did.* 9.4)<sup>5</sup>

This passage takes us back to how the bread was made, starting with the seeds that were scattered on the mountains. The seeds grew and yielded grain, which was gathered. The next stage is elided, but we can imagine the collected grain being ground into flour and the dough being baked into a single loaf of bread. The unity is then broken up again as the bread is fragmented for consumption by the assembly, but the assembly hopes that through its prayers and actions, the whole church throughout the world will be gathered into God's reign (*Did.* 10.5). Contemplating the history of this fragmented bread, scattered and gathered more than once, the community sees itself as a unified body<sup>6</sup> that gathers and scatters each Lord's day but will be conclusively gathered in the endtime.

Whereas the eucharistic assembly for the *Didache's* community was a regular event, the book of the prophet Joel, from some centuries beforehand, narrates an occasion when an extraordinary gathering needed to take place. The book opens with the Jews in trauma because they are under attack. Successive plagues of locusts have devastated the land. The crops, always vulnerable until the harvest has been brought in, have suffered enormously, and the people's hopes are devastated, their joy withered away like the vegetation (Joel 1:1-12). Joel interweaves this language of agricultural disaster with descriptions of a great human army coming to invade the land, on YHWH's great and terrible day. Like the locusts, they are said to devour the land, turning gardens into wilderness. In Joel's eyes, the people are being punished by God, and their proper response is to repent of their sins and ask for God's mercy. YHWH tells them through Joel, "Return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning" (Joel 2:12), since he is merciful and may relent from punishing if they come back to him (Joel 2:13-14). Not only are they to return to God, to group themselves together with God once more, but they are also to gather in solemn assembly. Everyone in the

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5. My translation of the Greek text of the *Didache* in Bart D. Ehrman (ed. and trans.), *The Apostolic Fathers* (2 vols.; LCL 24-25; Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2003) 1:430. The term *κλάσμα* ("fragment") in *Did.* 9 has sometimes been thought to be a secondary development from *ἄρτος* ("loaf"), especially since a parallel passage in the *Apostolic Constitutions* uses *ἄρτος*, but in the present discussion I am using the text of the *Didache* as we have it. For contrasting views, see Kurt Niederwimmer, *The Didache: A Commentary* (trans. Linda M. Maloney; ed. Harold W. Attridge; Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998) 148 and Aaron Milavec, *The Didache: Faith, Hope, and Life of the Earliest Christian Communities, 50-70 C.E.* (New York/Mahwah NJ: The Newman Press, 2003) 371-72.

6. Compare 1 Cor 10:17, although I am making no claim that all of Paul's eucharistic theology is operative in the *Didache*.

community should attend, even newlyweds and infants, for the whole people must gather to implore God to spare them. Many of us will have heard this reading for Ash Wednesday yesterday, as we came together to acknowledge our sins and reorient ourselves, both as individuals and as a church centred upon God. Joel goes on to say that YHWH does relent, and the sign of his mercy is the bounty he pours out on the land after removing the army:

The threshing floors shall be full of grain,  
 the vats shall overflow with new wine and fresh oil.  
 I will repay you for the years that the swarming locust has eaten,  
 the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter,  
 my great army, which I sent against you.  
 You shall eat abundantly and be satisfied,  
 and praise the name of YHWH your God,  
 who has dealt wondrously with you.  
 And my people shall never be ashamed.  
 You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel,  
 and that I am YHWH your God and there is no other. (Joel 2:24-27)

This time, the seed that is sown will yield much grain, and the vines and trees will bear much fruit. The joy that was lost when the old crops were destroyed will revive once more. As for the people, what they learned from turning back to God and gathering in assembly must not be lost: they shall know that YHWH, their only God, is in their midst.

The devastation and restoration that Joel depicts is a pattern that recurs throughout the prophetic books when the people of Israel are in danger of having their land invaded and their rulers deposed. It becomes even more extreme when it changes from being a mere threat to the painful experience of exile from the land and rule by foreign overlords. In such cases, the desolation of the people is frequently expressed in terms of being scattered. They can be said to be dispersed like seeds, which is where we get the word "Diaspora" and indeed the word "dispersed" too. Alternatively, if there is an emphasis on the loss of leadership, the prophets frequently reach for the metaphor of sheep without a shepherd. Kings are often called shepherds in the Scriptures, and once the people have lost their king – or have had a neglectful king – they are like leaderless sheep scattered in the hills.

Ezekiel, writing from the experience of Babylonian exile, takes up this image in extended form in chapter 34 of his book. He first berates those past leaders of Israel who did not shepherd their sheep with love and care, healing the injured and seeking out the lost. Because they were ineffective, the people became scattered. YHWH says through Ezekiel: "My sheep wandered among all the mountains and on every high hill; on all the face of the earth my sheep were scattered, with no

one searching or seeking" (Ezek 34:6). In the midst of this desolation, YHWH promises to save them:

Like a shepherd seeking his flock on the day when he is in the midst of his scattered sheep, so I will look for my sheep. I will deliver them from all the places where they have been scattered on a day of cloud and gloom. I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the lands, and will bring them onto their own soil. (Ezek 34:12-13)

In this passage, God presents himself as the people's shepherd, a good shepherd unlike those they had before, one who gathers the dispersed. Some verses later, God promises a new political structure in which they will have a ruler who shepherds them rather than God himself as the shepherd. It will be the best kind of ruler according to Israelite tradition, a king in the line of David – so much so that he is called David in the text: "I will raise up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall shepherd them.... And I, YHWH, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them" (Ezek 34:23-24). David ruled when Israel was a unified political entity, and likewise this new David will be the one shepherd whom they share. Note also, however, that God's involvement persists: at the heart of consoling his people by bringing them back from exile is his promise that he will be with Israel, as the God of this people he calls his own (Ezek 34:30-31).

If any loss of a leader is a threat to a group's viability, the danger of dispersal is particularly high when the group is new and the leader is its charismatic founder. The speech of Gamaliel in Acts gives us a glimpse of this in the case of some popular Jewish leaders in the first century. A Jewish council is trying to decide whether to act strongly against the apostles, and the Pharisee Gamaliel looks at other examples of Jewish movements that had lost their founder. Both these examples, which are attested elsewhere too, had messianic overtones; they wanted to shake off the Romans from Israel and they claimed that their leader was the ruler of the Jews. Gamaliel says:

Before these days, Theudas rose up, saying he was somebody, and a number of men, about four hundred, joined him; but he was killed, and all who were persuaded by him dissolved and came to nothing. After him, Judas the Galilean rose up in the days of the census and drew away a people behind him; he also perished, and all who were persuaded by him were scattered. (Acts 5:36-37)

Gamaliel is pointing out that popular uprisings tend not to last long after their leader dies. Consequently, he suggests that they leave the incipient Christian group alone, for either it will falter of its own accord now that Jesus has been crucified, or else it is being protected by God. In the view of the text of Acts, of course, the apostles are

indeed under God's protection, and even for Jesus himself, his death has not been the end of his story.

The same principle shapes aspects of the passion and resurrection narrative in the Gospel of Matthew. Shortly before his arrest, Jesus tells the disciples:

You will all be made to stumble because of me this night; for it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.' But after I am raised, I will precede you into Galilee. (Matt 26:31-32)

The scriptural quotation is from Zechariah, but it evokes the prophetic trope of the shepherd as ruler and the unshepherded people as scattered sheep, as we saw earlier in the Ezekiel example. Jesus' statement predicts two stages, first negative and then positive: scattering by the disciples at Jesus' suffering and death,<sup>7</sup> but also a glimpse of reunification in Galilee after Jesus comes back to life. Although the disciples immediately assure Jesus that they are willing to die with him, it is not long before they desert him and flee (Matt 26:56) and Peter even denies him three times. This scattering is, we may surmise, what those who had Jesus killed were expecting to happen (remember Gamaliel's point) – otherwise they would have had Jesus' followers killed too. For this messianic movement, however, there is a turning point. Jesus rises from the dead, and the eleven disciples are reminded that he has preceded them into Galilee and told that they will see him there (Matt 28:7, 10). They rejoin Jesus on the mountain, gathered now as an assembly that worships Jesus. It is not a lasting gathering, however: they have been brought together in order to be sent throughout the world, making disciples, baptizing, and teaching. The Gospel closes with a solemn mission speech along these lines, but not before Jesus has assured the disciples that although they are being scattered once more, he will be with them always, to the end of the age (Matt 28:20).

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I come now to my final and most intricate example, the Gospel of John.<sup>8</sup> This Gospel plays games with language and tradition. It twists sayings into multiple levels of meaning, places subtext under its narrative episodes, and overlays multiple time frames on the events it narrates. It even contradicts itself, and does so to such an extent that this cannot be simply an editorial problem but must be a deliberate

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7. The grieving of the disciples is figuratively predicted in Matt 9:14-15 in terms of mourning and fasting when the bridegroom is taken away.

8. Some of the analysis and wording of this section derives from the Gospel of John chapter of my dissertation, "Lifted Up From the Earth: The Ascension of Jesus and the Heavenly Ascents of Early Christians".

tactic to push the audience further into the mystery. John's manipulation of the themes of scattering and gathering is no exception to these stratagems.

In some ways and in some places, the treatment of scattering and gathering during the passion and resurrection narratives in John is analogous to their treatment in Matthew. I speak here both of these themes in themselves and the emotional resonances that we have seen them bearing. As the time of his arrest draws near, Jesus tells the disciples, "Behold, the hour is coming, and has come, when each of you will be scattered to his own place, and you will leave me alone" (John 16:32), and indeed, the majority of the disciples become separated from Jesus at his arrest. Jesus also correctly predicts Peter's denial, another form of separation and desertion, telling him that he cannot follow him now, but will follow later (John 13:36-38). In reference to his coming hour, Jesus says, "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12:24) – we encountered something very similar before, in 1 Corinthians. The pattern of sorrow and separation at Jesus' death, followed by joy and regathering at his resurrection, is predicted during some parts of the Farewell Discourses, the extended dialogues before his arrest, when he says:

A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me.... Amen, amen, I say to you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will become joy. When a woman is in labour, she has pain, because her hour has come. But when she gives birth to the child, she no longer remembers the distress, because of the joy that a human being has been born into the world. So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you. (John 16:16, 20-22)

This is the emotional arc that we see happening on the day of the resurrection. Mary Magdalene weeps at the empty tomb, thinking that Jesus' body has been taken away to some unknown place and thus that she is even separated from his corpse (John 20:11-15). Her world turns round when she realises that Jesus is standing there before her. Similarly, when Jesus appears in the upper room that evening to be with his disciples again, they rejoice at seeing him (John 20:20). All these details, all these pairs of negative-then-positive, belong to the overall structure of a humiliating death followed by a glorious resurrection. In telling the story this way, John's Gospel is no doubt in keeping with traditional ways to talk about death and new life, both in general and in terms of how early Christians remembered Jesus' death and resurrection – as well as the synoptic gospels, think, for example,

of Phil 2:6-11, with the humbling and subsequent exaltation of Christ Jesus.

There are, however, many areas where John's Gospel uses a different template for narrating the death of Jesus. Instead of the crucifixion being the time of scattering and sorrow, to be followed by gathering and joy at the resurrection, the gathering and joy happen already at the crucifixion. The events that culminate in Jesus' death on the cross are called his "hour", specifically his hour to be glorified, whereas a more usual first-century theology would have positioned the glory at the resurrection. Three times Jesus talks about when he will be lifted up, and clearly at some level this means being lifted high on the cross, for the narrator intrudes at one point to explain that Jesus is signifying the kind of death he is to die (John 12:32-33). These three sayings about Jesus being lifted up say more, however. The first one (John 3:10-16) draws an analogy with the serpent lifted up by Moses in the desert for people to look at it and be healed, thus inviting the audience to think about what it might mean to gaze up at the crucified, glorified Jesus. The second one (John 8:25-28) says that when "the Jews" (that is, those Jews who are hostile to Jesus) lift up Jesus then they will know his identity as "I am", the divine name of God. Most notably for our topic, in the third one he says:

Now is the judgement of this world; now the ruler of this world will be cast out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself. (John 12:31-32)

Jesus' action of "drawing" appears to mean a gathering of "all" people about Jesus for the purposes of salvation. His speech, which begins by announcing that the hour of Jesus' glorification has arrived, is precipitated by the desire of some Greeks, who have come to worship at the Passover festival, to see Jesus (John 12:21). Just beforehand, the great crowd that has come to Jerusalem for the festival has hailed Jesus as King of Israel as he enters on a donkey, so that the Pharisees say the world has gone after him (John 12:14). Thus, at the beginning of the passion narrative, as Jesus' hour commences, there are two major examples of people being drawn to him.

This idea, that Jesus draws all people to himself during the hour of his passion and death, is in accord with some references elsewhere in the Gospel to gathering and the reversal of dispersion. When Caiaphas says that it is better for one person to die for the people than for the nation to perish, his political view is interpreted by the text as a prophecy "that Jesus would die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but in order that he might also gather into one the dispersed children of God" (John 11:51-52). The notion of Diaspora is hence not restricted to ethnic Jews here, but applies to all children of God (by which the text means believers in Jesus), independent of their ethnicity

(John 1:11-13). A similar thought may be expressed in a conversation earlier in the Gospel (John 7:32-36), where some hostile Jews, confused by Jesus' statement of his imminent departure, think he means that he is going to go to "the Diaspora of the Greeks" (John 7:35) and teach them. It is a misunderstanding, for Jesus means his departure in death, but misunderstandings in John's Gospel sometimes express truth on a deeper level. The message of and about Jesus will, in time, spread to "the Diaspora of the Greeks",<sup>9</sup> and hence his glorification in death will have the effect of unifying those who are scattered.

I might mention that for John's Gospel, the drawing of "all" people to Jesus may not be as universal as it first seems, although it does transcend ethnic boundaries. Jesus will gather the dispersed children of God, to be sure, but this text claims that those who do not love Jesus are not children of God (John 8:42) – the polemics can get very nasty in this Gospel. Chapter 6, with the multiplication of the loaves and the fishes and the ensuing discourse, also hovers between a universal and a restrictive idea of salvation by gathering. After working the sign, Jesus tells the disciples, "Gather the excess fragments, so that nothing may be lost" (John 6:12). In a text where "gather" and "not be lost" (or "not perish") are both such theologically loaded expressions, it is reasonable to interpret this statement as having a saving dimension, beyond its immediate sense of clearing up after a meal.<sup>10</sup> Specifically, the episode foreshadows Jesus' death, being set at Passover and making reference to his flesh and blood. However, while speaking of himself as the bread from heaven, Jesus places a restriction on who will be drawn to God, saying, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him; and I will raise him on the last day" (John 6:44). Here it is the Father, effectively, who decides who will be saved. The widespread rejection Jesus receives at this stage of the narrative illustrates that this salvation is not automatically granted to all.

If the time of Jesus' crucifixion is also the time of gathering, of salvation, then this changes its emotional character. Alongside the indications of sorrow and separation at Jesus' death, which we saw earlier, there are also some indications of joy and completion. These tend to arise in contexts where Jesus' departure is described not so much as a death (though it certainly is that) but as his return to the Father. I have argued elsewhere that the lifting up, the glorification of Jesus that occurs in his crucifixion, should also be interpreted as his ascension into heaven, when he returns to the Father from whom he

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9. So Nils Alstrup Dahl, "The Johannine Church and History", in William Klassen and Graydon F. Snyder (eds.), *Current Issues in New Testament Interpretation: Essays in Honor of Otto A. Piper* (New York: Harper, 1962) 126-27.

10. As Meeks observes, the Gospel's presentation of this concluding action suggests that it may point symbolically to Jesus' gathering of the dispersed ones (John 11:52). Wayne A. Meeks, *The Prophet-King: Moses Traditions and the Johannine Christology* (NovTSup 14; Leiden: Brill, 1967) 98.

came,<sup>11</sup> and these emotional signals are in accord with that interpretation. In the Farewell Discourses, Jesus tells the disciples: "If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father" (John 14:28). In this particular train of thought, his departure is not going to be followed by a return soon after. Nonetheless, he explains that they should not sorrow, for it is to their advantage that he is departing, since otherwise the Holy Spirit cannot be sent to them (John 16:6-7).

As for the movements of the disciples and others during the passion, there are several indications of gathering rather than scattering. At his arrest, Jesus in John negotiates a strategic retreat for his disciples, rather than a desperate flight, and does so to fulfil the word that he would not lose any of those whom the Father gave him (John 18:8-9). Furthermore, the Beloved Disciple remains with Jesus during at least part of his trial and at his death. The inscription on the cross, "Jesus the Nazarene, the King of the Jews", reads more like a proclamation than a charge when viewed through the lens of the Gospel. This inscription, being written in three languages so as to be understandable to any literate people likely to pass by, also symbolizes the world being drawn to Jesus;<sup>12</sup> it is said that many of "the Jews" read this inscription affixed to his cross (John 19:19-20). There is a small group of believers clustered around the cross (John 19:25-27), unlike in the synoptics. The presence of the Beloved Disciple among them and the new familial relationships that Jesus creates indicate that this little group, drawn to Jesus at his lifting up, forms the nucleus of the Johannine community.<sup>13</sup>

I have been showing how the crucifixion of Jesus in John's Gospel is a time to gather as well as a time to scatter. The scattering is what we might have expected; the gathering is this Gospel's particular contribution. I would not, however, dismiss the parts of the Gospel that speak of a scattering stage followed by a gathering stage as mere remnants of past theology, or passages that were included only out of habit. They add to the richness of the narrative and the depth of the theology. When John's Gospel insists that the crucifixion is a time of joy and triumph, at which the world is drawn to the exalted Jesus, this theological interpretation gains force by being declared in the face of the more obvious scattering and grieving.

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11. For details, see the Gospel of John chapter of my dissertation, "Lifted Up From the Earth: The Ascension of Jesus and the Heavenly Ascents of Early Christians".

12. R. Alan Culpepper, "The Theology of the Johannine Passion Narrative: John 19:16b-30", *Neotestamentica* 31 (1997) 24.

13. Culpepper, "The Theology of the Johannine Passion Narrative: John 19:16b-30", 28-31, 35. As Minear remarks, it is "not too fanciful" to see the creation of "new family bonds" at this point as analogous to Jesus' use of familial language in his speech to Mary Magdalene (John 20:17); I would add that according to my interpretation of Jesus' ascension, both occur when Jesus' ascension is on the point of happening. Paul S. Minear, "'We don't know where...'" John 20:2", *Interpretation* 30 (1976) 137.

John's Gospel offers more, however, than the juxtaposition of two seeming opposites. The unity of gathering in John is often expressed in the language of mutual abiding of the Father and the Son, which is extended to the believers. As for the high potential alongside risk and hardship that this survey has associated with scattering, within the Farewell Discourses the disciples are appointed to "go and bear fruit" (John 15:16), with a prediction that they will be hated by the world and persecuted. The two are brought together at John 15:1-11, in which Jesus presents himself as the vine and the believers as the branches, with the Father as the vinegrower. This is an agricultural image, like those with which we began. Whereas the scattered grains of wheat were left isolated, however, the branches remain connected to the vine, for the vine and the branches "abide" in one another (John 15:4). This is the way they can give of themselves and bear fruit, and it is only the fruit-bearing branches that the vinegrower keeps on the vine. Christian life, then and now, needs both the security of being gathered and the challenge of being scattered. As we go through the rhythms of scattering and gathering, at the United Faculty of Theology and throughout our lives, may we too be sustained by abiding in the vine.