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**4 – Everlasting Life in John and the Permanence of
Salvation: The Life Metaphor in John’s Gospel**

Dr. Jan Gabriël van der Watt, Head of New Testament Studies
University of Pretoria, South Africa¹

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A. Occurrences of the Terminology for Eternal Life

The words *zaō* (to live), *zoē* (life), (or *zōē aiōnios*, eternal life) and *zōopoieō* (make alive) occur not only frequently in the Gospel, but in many different contexts, spread across the whole Gospel. In 20:31 it is said that getting eternal life is part of the reason why the Gospel was written. A brief (descriptive) survey is therefore necessary before continuing with the analysis.

A table of the 63 occurrences of the words *zaō* (to live), *zoē* (life), and *zōopoieō* (make alive) reveal an interesting pattern.

¹ Author of *The Irrevocable call of God: An Inquiry into Paul’s Theology of Israel* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005; 550p), *No One Seeks for God: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Romans 1.18-3.20* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998; 359p), and *Provoked to Jealousy: the Origin and Purpose of the Jealousy Motif in Romans 9-11* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr and Paul Siebeck, 1994; 471p).

Chart 1. Occurrences of Words for “Live”

Ch 1	Ch 3	Ch 4	Ch 5	Ch 6	Ch 7	Ch 8
4	15, 16, 36	10, 11, 14, 36, 50, 51, 53	21, 24, 25, 26, 29, 39, 40	27, 33, 35, 40, 47, 48, 51, 53, 54, 57, 58, 63, 68	38	12

Ch 10	Ch 11	Ch 12	Ch 14	Ch 17	Ch 20
10, 28	25, 26	25, 50	6, 19	2, 3	31

The usages of the terms are spread through the whole Gospel. The main concentration point is found in chapters 4-6. In virtually all the cases apart from chapters 4-6 (except perhaps for 12:25 and 14:19) reference to life functions in central positions in their particular contexts. The idea of “life” forms a “key metaphor” which constitutes a link between the different themes and sections in the Gospel. It is woven like a thread through the Gospel to which the different themes and metaphors are knotted at central important points in the Gospel.

The frequency of the use of the terminology sharply drops in the second part of the Gospel (chapters 13-21). Focus shifts to the results of having life (as members of the family of God) and not so much on life itself. However, having life is the departure point of what is being said in chapters 13-17.

In the light of the above short survey, the metaphorical usage and relations of life should be analysed. It could be done by moving from context to context, but that might be an extremely boring and perhaps frustrating exercise (especially because of the number of occurrences as well as the measure of repetition). It is therefore preferred to start with chapters 4 to 6 where the highest frequency of the terminology is found and then move on to the other occurrences. Chapter 5 will be used as point of departure. Similarities from other contexts will be drawn into the discussion of chapter 5. Each occurrence will not be discussed individually, but a certain measure of systematisation will be introduced as the analysis progresses.

One general remark should first be made. Eternal life is a state of being which allows actions and relations associated with God. This is how John sees salvation. That is why eternal life is often equated with salvation (5:39). In most of the usages in John the term “eternal life” may be replaced by “to be/receive” a state of being which allows actions and relations associated with God (i.e. 5:40). Eternal life is of

divine quality and since death is seen as something which breaks down and indeed ends the possibility of relating to the living God, death is not a possibility in the realm of eternal life. Eternal life is therefore a religious and not biological term, since it expresses the existential possibility of man entering into a relationship with God—a relationship that cannot be severed by death.

B. Nature of Eternal Life Discussed with Chapter 5 as Basis

1. Power over Life Is Given to Jesus by the Father

The first reference to life in chapter 5 is in verse 21: “For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will.” To understand this reference attention should be given to the context.

The *familial imagery* in this context is established in 5:17 and developed strongly in verses 19-23. The Jews understand the remark of Jesus (5:17) correctly: Jesus implies a direct familial relationship with God, whom He calls his Father (5:18). A well known relationship, namely that of a father educating his son is thus activated to explain the relationship between God and Jesus.

The immediate context (5:18-23) deals directly with the imagery of *familial relations* between the Son and his loving Father that shows (teaches) him everything. It is an account of the Father educating his Son so that his Son can do what the Father does. That means that the Son will be given the ability to give life as the Father does (verse 21). In this way the Son shares in the divine prerogative to give life (and judge). The fact that Jesus can give life to whom he wants to (5:21) emphasizes the reality of the participation in the power and knowledge of the Father by Jesus (cf. also 3:34-35). In the same way Jesus judges in absolute accordance with the judgement of the Father (5:30), so much so that John can state that the Father does not judge any more (5:22). The educational process does not only exist in mediating knowledge, but power and the right to do things are also mediated. In 3:35 it is indeed said that the Father gives everything in the hand of Jesus. That is why Jesus can give life. Life is therefore a gift of the Father through Jesus to those who believe and belong to the Father. To give life is therefore a sign of his education by the Father himself. Jesus sees and hears and only acts accordingly because he does not seek to fulfill his own will, but the will of his Father, the One who has sent him.

In verse 24 another clue is given to understand the nature of this life. The believer passes from *death* to life. Before he moves from death to life, he should hear and believe. This implies that the person who is dead can hear and believe. Death here refers to spiritual death and describes a state of being away from God. It implies an inability to stand in a relation to God. Getting life means that a relationship with God is established. If death means not being in relation with God, one can indeed move from “death” to “life”, where life means being able to stand in relation to God.

2. Jesus Is the Resurrection and Life

The “I am” metaphor (*ego eimi*) in 11:25-26 sheds some further light on the relation between life and death. Two levels of existence are supposed here, i.e. the natural existence and the spiritual existence.

The metaphor: “I am the resurrection and life” may either be translated as I am the resurrection that leads to life or I am the resurrection and I am the life. In the latter case there are two metaphors, which are syntactically linked. It might mean that they should be treated independently, but nevertheless in close relation to each other.

How should these metaphors be understood? In “I am the resurrection” the resurrection is personified and Jesus gets to share qualities common to resurrection. From the immediate Lazarus context, as well as 5:28-29, it is clear that Jesus can raise people from death, both as an immediate sign (Lazarus) and as an eschatological act (5:29). He also raises himself from death (10:17-18). The discussion with Martha about the resurrection on the last day (11:24) also refers to the eschatological raising from death. However, Jesus points out that where He is, there the possibility of resurrection is present.

In this light, “I am the life” makes lot of sense. A person who is raised, must live. Jesus does not only raise a person, but in his presence that person also lives. Jesus does not only live himself, but He also gives and sustains eternal life for the believers. The only way in which a person can have this life and sustain it, is when such a person stays in close unity with Jesus (cf. 15:1-8; also read 6:53 with 6:56).

Against the background of this metaphorical expression, two short explanatory sentences follow. (1st Sentence) “He who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live.” Obviously it is not possible to live after you have died, except if the type of death does not affect the type

of life. The type of death mentioned here is physical death. Physical death however does not affect (spiritual) eternal life. (2nd Sentence) “And whoever lives and believes in me shall never die.” Do you believe this? (verse 26). Here any possibility of death is denied. The other side of the coin is that you have life that will never end. The believer might die physically, but spiritually he will never die. Jesus will not only raise him, but will also sustain his life.

The remark in 6:40 might shed some light on the final *eschatological* situation. Jesus will raise everybody on the last day, since they have eternal life. The “dead” (physical) side of man (11:24) will be raised to join the “spiritual” side who lives eternally. Jesus, the resurrection and life, will raise you when you stand in intimate relation to Him.

John 17:3 confirms this. Eternal life is defined in terms of knowledge of God. In 17:2 Jesus states that He gave eternal life to the Father’s people. The implication is that by giving them life, they got to know God and Jesus (who are identified in verse 2 with family terminology: see 17:6ff.). The correspondence between life and being put in a relation with God and Jesus is clear. The state of being alive enables the person to know and relate to God.

3. Eternal Life Means to Live in God’s Family

Having eternal life means to be able to exist (act and relate) in God’s family. Without this life, a person is dead (unable to relate positively to God) and can consequently not act or relate. The following table illustrates the extent of the interrelatedness of life language and family language. (Family references in contexts where the term life is used, are reflected).

Chart 2. Interrelatedness of Life and Family Language

3:16	Father/Son language.
3:36	Son learns from Father; Father loves Son; Father gives Son everything; Father punishes those who do not believe in Son.
5:21	Father teaches and loves Son; Son obeys Father by doing what the Father requires; Father and Son does the same and receive the same honour.
5:26	Father who has life gives life to Son; Father/Son language; Father gives Son power to judge (do what the Father should do).
5:39-40	Father/Son language.
6:27	Father/Son language.
6:33	Father cares by giving food.
6:40	Father/Son language; Father gives people to the Son; Son does will of Father.
6:47	Son has seen Father and is from Father; Teaching by the Father.
6:57	Father/Son language.
8:12	The arguments in the following context is strongly based on familial conventions, i.e. Father/Son language; Obedience by child; Character of child determined at birth.
10:28	Father/Son language; Father gives to Son; Father and Son act similarly; Father and Son are one.
12:25	Father will honour follower of Son.
12:50	Father sends Son; Father gives Son commandment; Son does what he learned from the Father
14:6	Father/Son language; Son makes Father known.
14:19	Father/Son language; Unity between Father, Son and disciples; Disciples not left as orphans.
17:2-3	Father/Son language; Father gives Son power and people; Father and Son glorify each other; Knowledge of God.
20:31	Son language.

An illustration of just how well integrated family and life language is, is found in the occurrences of life terminology in chapter 14.

In 14:6 a complex metaphor is used: I am the way, and the truth, and the life. It is a question whether this metaphor should be understood as a semitism, meaning that Jesus is the way to the true life, or whether it should be understood as three individual metaphors which are related. Carson in his commentary on John sees “the way” as the principle theme with the other two nouns as subordinate. The result is that this phrase should be understood as follows: Jesus is the way because He is the truth and the life. “He so mediates God’s truth and God’s life that he is the very way to God”, according to Carson. This is also the reason why the possibility of having eternal life on

earth is founded in the love of God (3:16). God made the plan to send his Son (family language) in order to make available life to those who believe.

C. Life Metaphor Connected with References to Food, Water, and Words (chapter 6 as basis)

Notably there are several instances where life language and references to food occur together. This will be discussed with chapter 6 as basis. Chapter 6 has the highest frequency of the use of the word life in this Gospel and several variant expressions concerning life are found. The following table illustrates the variety:

Chart 3. Variant Expressions Concerning Life

6:27	Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life
6:33	For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven, and gives life to the world.
6:35,48	I am the bread of life
6:51	I am the living bread which came down from heaven
6:40,47,54	that every one who sees the Son and believes in him should have eternal life
6:53	you have no life in you
6:51	I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh.
6:51,58	if any one eats of this bread, he will live for ever
6:57	As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so he who eats me will live because of me.
6:63	It is the spirit that gives life
6:63	the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life
6:68	You have the words of eternal life

The following copulative metaphors are present and will first receive attention:

I am the bread of life (35, 48)

I am the living bread (51)

His words are Spirit and life (63)

In chapter 6 the multiplication of the bread is narrated, followed by the bread of life discourse. In 6:27 ordinary perishable food is contrasted to food with eternal quality. Here we find the typical Johannine “double vision”, where two analogous worlds are referred to in tandem (i.e., a literal and a figurative reality). The one type of food endures to eternal life, the other perishes. Therefore working for the

bread of God is something different from working for ordinary bread. It involves belief in the One who was sent by God (6:29).

In 6:35 bread is personified by the saying of Jesus: “I am the bread of life,” which is also repeated in 6:48. What is the relation between life and bread? There are two basic possibilities: Bread gives life and the bread itself lives—both these possibilities are applicable—in 6:33 the bread gives life, while the bread is described as “living” in 6:57. Both having and giving life are contextually related to bread, which is again related to Jesus. Jesus has the ability to give and sustain life. The eater of this Bread will live forever (58). Eating is another word for believing (6:47-48; see also 6:29, 35, 40, 47).

In 6:63 we read: “The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life.” An equivalent expression is found in 6:68, stating that Jesus has the words of eternal life. Jesus has spoken words, he revealed, he brought a message. These words are life or are the words of eternal life and should be interpreted in the sense that the effects of hearing and accepting the words were life and that these effects are still present and effective in the believer. That is why Peter can say that Jesus has the words of eternal life. His words introduces (leads) to life and also performatively causes the lasting effects of and for life.

In John 4 Jesus becomes the supplier of true water. He “replaces” the source or well of the earthly water. Jesus talks about: “Whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst” and “The water I give him will become in him a spring of water” and “this water will be welling up to eternal life”. The woman asks for water (4:15) and Jesus introduces himself as the Messiah (4:26). Jesus can indeed give Himself as the water of life. In this spiritual relationship as her Messiah He will become in her like the spring (= source) who keeps on supplying whatever she needs spiritually. (The implication is that because of the spring the person will never thirst again). The reference to Jesus as the “spring of water” not only describes his sustaining function, but also typifies Him as the true supply of water (well or spring).

Looking at the context the *thirst* evidently refers to *spiritual need*. Jesus steers the discussion to spiritual matters of worship and the expected messiah (4:16-26) and in the end the narrative ends with

the Samaritans acknowledging Jesus as the Savior of the world (4:42). Thirst may be substituted by “spiritual need.”

Another reference to water is found in 7:38. It occurs in the context of the feast of the huts. This festival involved water which was brought from the Siloam fountain and poured out in the temple. It was believed that according to prophecy a river of living water will flow from the rock on the Zion mountain in Jerusalem. This water will fill the earth and cause life. In this light 7:38 should be understood. The streams of living water is explained in verse 39 as referring to the Spirit. Metaphorically speaking the Spirit is the “stream” causing life. Like water sustains life, the Spirit will also cause and sustain life (6:63).

D. Life and Light Related

Light is a common image. In two places in the Gospel (i.e. 1:4 and 8:12) life is directly connected to light and thus links the imagery of light to life.

It is said that life was in the Word (= Jesus), (which is also said in 5:26). The Word shares the mode of existence of the Father (5:26), as is explicitly stated in 1:18 as well as 1:14. Nobody has seen the Father, but Jesus (who is God himself, 1:18) who stands in an intimate relation to the Father (1:18). Life may be substituted by “the existence of true (divine) nature”. This does not imply that the Son is God the Father. It implies that the Son partakes in the existence which makes it possible for Him to act and relate (exist) in this divine reality. This is consistent with what is said in 5:26.

The life was the light of men, which shines in the darkness. If the substitution of life suggested above is correct, it implies that the mode of “existence of true divine nature” is identified with “light of men”. The light *of men* indicates that this light (singular) shines for the human race. Light makes it possible for people to see and act correctly. The imagery of light has strong ethical undertones. Light can be described as the revelation to people how to act (live) as a member of those who have life, in other words, who belong to God’s family. This is then an ethical expression. Seen in this way, the metaphor can be explained as follows. The *life* (the ability to act and relate within the divine reality) is (gives) the *light* (revelation how to act or live correctly). The presence of this life makes it possible for people to live this alternative life in the presence of darkness (as

contrast to light it would metaphorically translate into the lack of insight and willingness to act correctly).

In 8:12 life is linked to light in a central saying, serving as introduction to chapters 8-12. Jesus is the light of the world (cf. 1:4, light of humans). Jesus serves as the location of light. Those who stay close to Him will live in the sphere of light (and not in darkness). Jesus, as personified light, will also give life to people as “the light that produces life”.

Another possibility is of course to see the light as belonging to the life, i.e. it shines where life is. Following Jesus can mean to have light, in other words to be his disciple.² To have Jesus as light means to know how to live (act and relate) as child of God when you have eternal life. He becomes the example of how to live the life which God gives. He always does what the Father wants (8:29).

The context supports both interpretations, although the evidence for the latter receives more support from the immediate context.

E. Life and Sheep Farming

The basic metaphor in 10:7-10 is that Jesus is the gate for the sheep. He is the only legitimate entrance to salvation (10:9). However, in 10:10 the destructive work of the thieves are contrasted with the *life giving* presence of Jesus (see 10:9). Being saved means to have eternal life (cf., also 3:16-17). As Carson puts it in his commentary: “Within the metaphorical world, *life... to the full* suggests fat, contented, flourishing sheep, not terrorized by brigands; outside the narrative world, it means that the life Jesus’ true disciples enjoy is not to be construed as more time to fill, but life at its scarcely imagined best, life to be lived”

In this imagery Jesus is described as the gate in order to explain that He is the only legitimate giver of life to his sheep. And his sheep are those who “go” through Him. The imagery of the gate is linked to life in order to indicate the only true source of life in contrast to all those who pretend to be legitimate mediators of salvation.

In 10:28 Jesus gives eternal life to his sheep, those who listen to Him and follow Him. There is strong emphasis on the relationship between Jesus and his disciples (10:28) and even between Jesus and

² Cf. 10:27, 12:26 and 1:37-43 with 21:19-22.

the Father. In this context family language is found in 10:25 and 10:29-30. Jesus acts as shepherd because He acts on behalf of the Father (10:25). The protection Jesus gives is in line with the protection the Father will give to those who belong to Jesus.

F. Life and Service

The reference to eternal life in 12:25 contextually falls in a section which refers to the death of Jesus.³ It is part of a reflection or application of the imagery of the seed (12:24). The idea of a seed which must first die to produce fruit was apparently a proverb in ancient times. The message taken from this is that there is purpose in some forms of death, suffering, and self-sacrifice.

This is applied to the loyalty of the disciples towards Jesus. They must give up or hate their own “earthly lives” (12:25) in order to get their eternal lives. The obedience in ordinary everyday life is here linked to eternal life as fruit of such obedience on earth. Giving up your life means to serve and follow Jesus (12:26) irrespective of the earthly cost, even if it is death. The fruit which a servant of Jesus will receive is described in terms of eternal life and honour by the Father.

Summary

Life should be interpreted as an integral part of the family imagery in this Gospel. Here are the images in sum:

- Life and light are linked = the existence in God’s family (life) has ethical consequences (light).
- Life and the dying seed are linked = eternal life should be understood as self-sacrifice, especially of your earthly interests. It should exist in obedient service.
- Life, bread and water are linked = Jesus supplies the spiritual needs for sustaining eternal life.
- Life, the way and the Word are linked = Life is obtained by getting knowledge of Jesus. The mission of Jesus is to bring this revelation and life to this world.
- Life and harvest are linked = Bringing believers together means to make them part of the community who lives eternally.

³ Cf. the references to Jesus death in 12:24, 27, 28, 32, 33, 34.

- Life and resurrection are linked = Life is seen as the eschatological resurrection from death which introduces a new existence.
- Life and birth are linked = Birth leads to life. Without birth there can be no life.
- Life and the gate are linked = Jesus is the only source of life.
- Life and shepherd are linked = Jesus will protect the sheep.
- Life and knowledge of the Father and Son are linked = Life exists in intimate knowledge of the members of the family.
- Life and the work of the Spirit are linked = Life begins and is continued in the presence and working of the Spirit. Described in other words: Because you *live*, you know the Father and the Son and live by the presence of the Holy Spirit ...
- You are spiritually resurrected, born anew by the only mediator of life, Jesus (*like sheep enter a gate or a new baby is born*).
- You have received the revelation from God (*Jesus is the Word*).
- You have spiritual needs which are fulfilled (*as bread and water fulfill earthly needs*).
- You must act in obedience to the commands of the family (*like somebody who walks in the light*).
- Your attitude must be that of self-sacrificing service (*like a seed which dies to produce fruit*).
- You must gather people who believe (*like a harvest*).
- You are protected (*like a sheep by his shepherd*).