

John's gospel is very much an 'open' gospel in the sense of containing many ambiguities, many double meanings and much irony. Our perennial temptation is to diffuse or dispel such ambiguity by favouring or stressing one meaning over another so, for example, when faced with the cross as an instrument of torture or an image of resurrection we often, as Christians, favour the latter – hence the many crucifixes without a suffering body present or with a figure already in glory; hence, also, our puzzlement over the depiction here of a staff with a serpent on it as a sign of healing. How can it be both a symbol of evil and a symbol of good? Hence, also, some scholars' puzzlement as to why, at the centre of Paul's hymn, in the letter to the Philippians, is the line 'death on a cross' which is seen by some as an unnecessary intrusion as it breaks the narrative or poetic flow. But others are aware that Paul is very much in charge of his material and the line is there precisely to highlight the cross as the turning point in the life of Christ – and our life, too: a death that cannot be evaded if glory is to come. Similarly, with John's comparisons here between the lifting up of the Son of Man and the lifting up by Moses of a serpent in the desert. When Christ is raised/lifted up on the Cross – the very raising up which will kill him; the latter phrase already points to its ambiguity and the choice we have between accepting this ambiguity – yes, I believe there will be life after death because of Christ's death on the cross – or choosing death's finality, both for Christ and ourselves. So, like all open texts, it's an ambiguity that gives life only if we look at it as the people looked on the serpent raised on a staff by Moses in the desert. Death on a cross both for Christ and for sin.

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