The Knowledge of God:
John’s Gospel and Contemporary Epistemology

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Statement

Candidate
I certify that the substance of this dissertation of 44592 words has not previously been submitted for any degree and is not currently being submitted for any other degree. I also certify that any assistance received in conducting the research embodied in the dissertation, and all sources used, have been acknowledged in the text or notes.

Signed: Murray Hogg (4 July 2011)

Supervisor
I consider that this dissertation is in a form suitable for examination and conforms to the requirements of the Australian College of Theology.

Signed: Colin Kruse (4 July 2011)
Abstract

The Gospel of John is studied in order to determine its major epistemological themes. An examination of relevant themes in contemporary epistemology suggests this account is at least initially plausible.

The Introduction provides a brief historical background to the study, emphasising two important developments in recent epistemology: the demise of epistemological foundationalism and the resurgence of socially mediated forms of knowledge. These, along with a number of other considerations basic to the thesis, are discussed.

In part one the Johannine account of the knowledge of God is explored. Several characters of John’s Gospel are considered: the religious leaders, Nicodemus, the Woman of Samaria, Nathanael, and the Twelve. Consideration is given to the pneumatology of the Gospel. Three epistemological themes are found to be of especial importance: the notion of epistemic virtue, the role of testimony in forming Christian belief, and the action of the Holy Spirit as epistemic agent.

In part two an exploration is made of relevant themes in contemporary epistemology with the aim of determining whether the account of knowledge uncovered in part one is at least initially plausible. This is prefaced by a few remarks on the relation between the Johannine concept of belief and that put forward in contemporary epistemology. It is found that the treatment of epistemic virtue and testimony in the literature is such to suggest that the Johannine account has at least initial plausibility with respects to these two themes.

Greater consideration is given to the action of the Holy Spirit as epistemic agent due to the more problematic nature of such an idea. The discussion occurs in two main stages. First, contemporary analytic epistemology is considered to demonstrate that in failing to recognise an ontological realm of “spirit,” epistemology cannot account for the idea of the Holy Spirit as epistemic agent. The primary issue is thus seen as ontological. The second stage of the discussion examines the work of several significant 20th century thinkers to demonstrate that there are at least initially plausible responses to such difficulties.

The thesis concludes that the account of the knowledge of God in John’s Gospel is at least initially plausible when considered against relevant themes in contemporary epistemology.
Dedication

For my parents

Archie and Margaret Hogg

who taught me to love reading.
Acknowledgements

They say it takes a village to raise a child. I have discovered something similar is true of projects such as this.

I owe inestimable gratitude to my supervisor, Rev. Dr. Colin Kruse. In earlier days he was my lecturer in John’s Gospel at the Bible College of Victoria (BCV), now the Melbourne School of Theology (MST). The wisdom, learning, and Christian character which he demonstrated in that capacity was instrumental in my choice of subject for this thesis. His subsequent advice and support serve only to deepen my admiration and appreciation.

The Very Rev. Dr. Shane Mackinlay of Catholic Theological College, East Melbourne offered sage advice on the philosophical aspects of this project. His emphasis upon the need for conceptual clarity has greatly helped me to understand the difference between defining and defending a thesis, and merely having a few related ideas. Nobody reading the final result could imagine the extent of his contribution.

The administrative staff of MST have always been amongst the friendliest and most helpful of people. Rev. Dr. Jeffrey Pugh, Dean of the Nash Institute for Advanced Studies in Theology and Culture, has offered countless snippets of helpful advice, theological and otherwise. Ms. Kathryn Simon, the administrator at the Nash Institute, is the salt of the earth who has saved me from more administrative difficulties (usually of my own making) than any
person has a right to expect. That she has done so with a smile on her face says it all. Ms. Kathy Caddy, the MST librarian, has not only been a delight in her capacity as librarian, but her great enthusiasm for the current project has been an inspiration.

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Throughout the course of the project there have been a litany of people who have affirmed the value of this piece of research. Some have been quite eminent, others less so, and I cannot possibly name them all. To even try would be to commit the sin of omission. The shifting membership of the Nash Institute Post-Graduate seminars does, however, deserve special mention. As for the others, I must content myself with acknowledging that much in the thesis was hammered out in a myriad of engagements. Those who have, at any time, done me the kindness of listening whilst I have held forth on the contents of this thesis, you have my most sincere gratitude.

Murray Hogg

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The task is this: How can theology make the primacy of God and his revelation in Jesus Christ intelligible, and validate its truth claim, in an age when all talk about God is reduced to subjectivity, as may be seen from the social history of the time and the modern fate of the proofs of God and philosophical theology?¹

How indeed? If we begin with the primacy of God and his revelation we are at risk of falling into an uncritical dogmatism. If we begin by trying to validate Christianity’s truth claim through appeal to some universal [i.e. non-Christian] epistemic principle we are at risk of betraying the very faith we seek to defend.² If we choose some principle for no other reason than that it is agreeable to Christian faith, we are at risk of subjectivity. The need is for an epistemic principle consistent with Christian faith, yet which is in no way open to a charge of subjectivity.³

This thesis seeks to respond to this need through an examination of the account of the knowledge of God given in John’s Gospel, followed by a consideration of themes from

³ Here I follow Pannenberg’s use of the word “subjectivity” to refer to an arbitrary choice of epistemic principle(s). There is, as readers of Kierkegaard would be well aware, another usage of the term in relation to the need for personal response to the claims of Christ. I touch upon such issues later in the thesis (chapter 9, section a).
contemporary epistemology which have relevance to this account. The idea here is that John’s Gospel can provide us with an authentically Christian perspective on how we might come to the knowledge of God, whilst an examination of contemporary epistemology will shed light upon the philosophical plausibility of this account. This, in turn, will clarify the process of knowing involved in Christian faith and assist us in responding to the problem Pannenberg identifies above.

Of the epistemological themes uncovered in my study of the Gospel, I consider three to be particularly significant: the notion of epistemic virtue, the role of testimony in forming Christian belief, and the action of the Holy Spirit as epistemic agent. As “spirit” is not a recognised ontological category in Western thought, the idea of a spiritual epistemic agent is given more consideration than either virtue epistemology or testimony. Yet I offer no comprehensive treatment of any of these themes. The issues involved are significant and my goal here is a modest one: to identify such epistemological themes as merit further consideration beyond this thesis. This points to the fact that I regard this thesis as only part of a larger inquiry into the question of the Christian knowledge of God. The scope of that inquiry, and the place of this thesis within it, can be best expressed through a brief overview of some historical developments in Protestant Theology, followed by some remarks on what this thesis does, and does not, seek to achieve.

a. Protestant Theology From the Reformation to the Present

The issues which set the context for the present thesis are a consequence of the development of Protestant thought over some 500 years. It is not here necessary to narrate that history in detail as treatments in the literature are common. Even the various epistemic issues have been well documented elsewhere. So I will here simply draw attention to the points of particular

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Where I make reference to “the Gospel” it is the canonical Gospel of John which is in mind. Other written Gospels, canonical or otherwise, are referenced by their full title. The term “Gospel” is not used in reference to the message of the early Christian movement (cf. Rom. 1:1), the term kerygma being adopted instead.

relevance.

I follow Stout in identifying authority as the primary epistemological issue in modern thought.6 This has great relevance for Christian theology within which authority has always played an important role. This was especially true in the pre-Modern era but things began to change in the 16th century when the Reformers asserted the authority of Scripture over that of the Church.7 The “flight from authority” had begun, and it was not long until the authority of Scripture itself was subject to question.8 In epistemology, authority would be increasingly supplanted by reason and sense experience (empiricism) as the most highly regarded sources of knowledge. These, however, did not account for all that people wished to say about knowledge and an ever increasing appeal was made to personal experience. The common thread here was the elevation of the individual to a position of prominence. In opposition to deference to authorities, emphasis was increasingly laid upon the autonomous individual knower.

The trend toward autonomous thought had its influence upon Protestant Christian theology which found neither rationalism nor empiricism to be particularly helpful bases for theological reflection. Thus, attention turned to religious experience, and this would become a central consideration in the two major Protestant approaches of the modern period, Liberalism and Evangelicalism. Liberalism found its genesis in the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) who was seeking a way to make Christian faith relevant to its “cultured despisers.” To this end he appealed to religious experience, offering theological explanation of experience in terms of the then prevalent Romantic philosophy. Evangelicalism also emphasised religious experience but, in contrast to Liberalism, resisted sceptical critiques of Christian faith. Thus arose the two major streams of modern Protestant thought, both firmly

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8 McGrath, *Historical Theology*, 221-22.
grounded in religious experience, but differing in the credibility they assigned to traditional sources of theological authority, Scripture in particular.

The mid to late 20th century saw the rise of Post-Modernism, the key feature of which Lyotard famously described as “rejection of meta-narratives.”9 As such, it may be regarded as the ultimate assertion of the Modernist ideal of personal autonomy, leading Oden to suggest that we ought rather to speak instead of Hyper-Modernism.10 However, Post-modernism also involves rejection of the Modernist meta-narrative, particularly its idealisation of reason and the ideal of absolute knowledge. Dockery thus speaks of Post-Modernism as;

a dislocating human condition [which] tends to throw people out of world-views they have traditionally held [and] tends to view human experience as incoherent, lacking absolutes in the area of truth and meaning.11

Such trends have their impact on Christian thought and Christian authors have spoken of “the crisis of revealed truth”12 and the “fragmentation of intellectual discourse”13 which affects secular and Christian thought at all levels.14 What is arising is a renewed awareness of the social aspects of knowledge along with a move from foundationalism to holism15 in epistemology.16

The demise of Modernism could hardly fail to impact upon those forms of Christian faith

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14 Other than those specifically referenced here, there are many other book length treatments of this theme. Others consulted include: Donald A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and Its Implications* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005); Stanley J. Grenz, *Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996); Stanley J. Grenz, *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000).
15 Epistemological foundationalism involves a foundation of indubitable beliefs lending justification to other beliefs which lie “above” them in the structure of knowledge. This justification cannot flow “down” the structure. Epistemological holism thinks in terms of a “web” of beliefs which lend each other mutual justification. In holism there are no “foundational” beliefs.
which arose under its influence. Liberal theology had attempted to translate Christian faith into the language of reigning philosophical paradigms. But this had the undesirable effect of allowing alien epistemologies hegemony over theological formulation.17 This alone was bad enough, but with the advent of post-modernism and the rejection of meta-narrative, identifying a “reigning philosophical paradigm” became increasingly difficult. Eventually Liberal theology would fracture into multiple approaches depending upon one’s philosophical commitments: Liberation Theology (in engagement with Marxism), Feminist Theology, Eco-Theology, Gay Theology, and so on. A most important analysis of this state of affairs is given by Lindbeck.18 He suggests that the translations of liberal theology have “become more strained, complex, and obscure” as society moves away from its religious roots, leading to an increasing relativism and loss of persuasiveness.19 He announces the failure of Liberal theology, but his alternate proposal has not won wide acceptance and it is questionable whether it will do so.20

The other form of Modern Protestant expression, Evangelicalism, has its own problems. It has so strongly relied upon an infallible Bible as the foundation upon which one may build a superstructure of impeachable dogmatic claims that it can scarcely come to terms with recent moves away from epistemological foundationalism. The Evangelical tradition has seen

17 Griffiths, “How Epistemology Matters.”
19 Ibid., 129. Cf. Moltmann:
   Under the pressure to give a public demonstration of the relevance of theology to the problems of society and of individuals in it, and to manifest in a new form its relationship to a changed world, a long series of theological structures of great integrity were created. All of them provided Christian theology with the characteristics of a relationship to the surrounding world which was to make it relevant. There was existentialist theology, hermeneutic, ontological, cultural, social, indigenous, religious and political theology, and also the theology of secularization, of revolution, of liberation, etc. Because the relevance of Christian theology had become uncertain, there was and is an attempt to supply Christian theology with new categories of fundamental theology in the spirit and the circumstances of the present day. It is clear that theology can no longer find a permanent basis in the general thinking, feeling and action of contemporary society. The reason for this lies less in theology than in the fact that in a pluralist society, what concerns everyone absolutely, and what society must absolutely desire, is more difficult to identify than in earlier and more homogeneous societies. (Moltmann, Crucified God, 4)
a flurry of works dealing with the challenges of post-modernism, with the nature and role of Scripture being a particularly prevalent theme.\textsuperscript{21} I personally find revealing the fact that although Evangelicals often cite the dangers of relativism as a reason for eschewing post-modernism, there is nevertheless significant doctrinal disagreement amongst Evangelicals themselves. Clearly, even a high view of Scripture does not guarantee unity of theological formulation. This, in and of itself, suggests that Biblical foundationalism does not provide the certain basis for theological reflection that many Evangelicals seek. Yet it hardly seems correct to suggest that Scripture should play other than a central role in Christian theology. What is required is a reappraisal of the epistemological assumptions underlying the theological task such that the centrality of Scripture can be affirmed without adopting a foundationalist epistemology.

\textbf{b. The Response in This Thesis}

Protestant theology thus finds itself at an interesting historical juncture. Its traditional approaches, relying on Modernist assumptions, are clearly not adequate for current challenges. In this thesis I seek to outline an epistemology which addresses these challenges from a theologically, scripturally, and philosophically informed perspective. Before proceeding, several introductory remarks are in order.

\textbf{i. Epistemological Assumptions}

With the demise of epistemological foundationalism, it is no longer necessary, or even desirable, to argue one’s case from a foundation of (supposedly) certain propositions. Thus,

although this is primarily a thesis in Biblical Studies, it does not follow that I regard theological or philosophical formulations as dependent upon the Scriptural witness. Rather, I consciously adopt an epistemological holism in which I seek to bring together mutually supporting concepts from scripture, theology, and philosophy.

One primary concern of the thesis is to address the problem of the knowledge of spiritual realities. In short, the problem is this: Christian scripture and Christian theology affirm that a knowledge of God becomes possible through the work of the Holy Spirit. Yet contemporary epistemology does not acknowledge an ontological category of “spirit.” Following the maxim “ontology determines epistemology” it follows that contemporary epistemology does not allow us to affirm knowledge of any “spiritual” person or object. We must conclude that either the scriptural/theological claim about knowledge of God is mistaken, or contemporary epistemology is mistaken or inadequate.

The thesis sets out to show that the best resolution of this problem is to make some modification in the understandings of contemporary epistemology rather than to reject the scriptural/theological affirmations regarding knowledge of God. This is not because scriptural/theological claims are regarded as foundational, but because (1) there are good grounds for acknowledging an ontological (and therefore epistemological) category of “spirit”; and (2) adjusting our understanding of epistemology by including an ontological/epistemological category of “spirit” seems to me less severe, and hence more reasonable, than to deny the scriptural or theological affirmations regarding the action of the Holy Spirit as an epistemic agent.

This approach demonstrates epistemological holism in action, for it regards our various sources of knowledge—scripture, theology, and philosophy—as critically important, each in their own way, and asks: what is the least severe “tweak” required to bring them into coherent

22 My approach here is very much informed by Tillich’s notion of faith as an act of the total personality. Here the idea is that faith is not a function of one element of the human psyche, but involves all the aspects of the person. See Paul Tillich, Dynamics of Faith (New York: Perennial, 2001), 4-5.
relationship? An approach informed by epistemological foundationalism would ask instead which of these should be given precedence and modify or reject any other claim which stands in logical contradiction—an approach I purposefully seek to avoid.

ii. Some Guiding Principles

The following principles have informed the approach taken;

1. Scripture should be read “theologically.” The dangers of reading according to a theological agenda are acknowledged but as there can be no neutral reading of Scripture it is unavoidable.

2. To avoid adopting epistemological assumptions alien to the Christian faith.

3. To re-appropriate the resources of historical Christian theology. These are extraordinarily rich and considerably more robust than Modernist theology often allowed and their use is warranted and desirable.

4. To give more adequate regard to pneumatology. This subject was sadly neglected during the Modernist period despite Christian tradition regarding the Holy Spirit as “the special agent of revelation” by which God in Christ is made known. Basil of Caesarea had offered what I regard as the classical formulation: “the way of the

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24 The most scathing denunciation of theologically motivated biblical studies from an informed perspective of which I am aware is to be found in Hector Avalos, The End of Biblical Studies (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2007). The dangers Avalos warns of are very real, but in my view he overstates the problem. One should not, in any case, overlook the fact that Avalos has his own agenda, conditioned by his own point-of-view.

25 See the discussion above and, particularly, the cited article by Griffiths, “How Epistemology Matters.”


knowledge of God lies from One Spirit through the One Son to the One Father.”\textsuperscript{29} In that spirit, any epistemology which seeks to be regarded as consistent with Christian tradition must give central consideration to pneumatology.

5. Whilst researching the Woman of Samaria (Chapter 4) great benefit was obtained from a reading of Watson on feminist theology,\textsuperscript{30} and this has considerably influenced my approach to the Biblical text throughout the thesis. Two considerations in particular were significant: that there is (contrary Elisabeth Cady Stanton) no such thing as “universal” woman’s experience,\textsuperscript{31} and that there is a need to uncover women’s absences as well as presences in history.\textsuperscript{32} It struck me that these have implications for the tendency to focus upon questions of the sitz-im-leben of John 4:1-42,\textsuperscript{33} in particular I have chosen to regard the Woman of Samaria as a particular, historic individual\textsuperscript{34} rather than as an ahistorical representative of some universal religious principle(s). This may risk a naïve historicising of the text, but equally we should consider that to read the account as if a narrative of an actual historical encounter could hardly serve to misrepresent it given that it is presented in precisely such terms.

iii. Narrative Strategy and Christological Claim

Toward the end of John’s Gospel we find the following statement;

And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name. (Jn. 20:30-31)

I make frequent reference to this statement in the thesis and have adopted the following terms for convenience.

Narrative Strategy: refers to the means the Gospel deploys to bring the reader to believe

\textsuperscript{29} De Spiritu Sancto 18.47. For a further discussion see p.83 in this thesis.
\textsuperscript{30} Natalie K. Watson, Feminist Theology, Guides to Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003).
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 9.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 5.
\textsuperscript{33} Here emphasis is often laid upon a (purported) Samaritan mission by the early church. See Raymond Edward Brown, The Community of the Beloved Disciple (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 34-40.
\textsuperscript{34} Hence I treat “Woman of Samaria” as a proper noun.
that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, viz: the use of a narrative which recounts a select group of Jesus’ signs.

**Christological Claim:** is the affirmation “Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.”

c. **The Thesis in Outline**

The thesis is comprised of two major sections; (1) an exegetical treatment of John’s Gospel; and (2) a discussion of relevant epistemological themes with particular reference to the ontological category of “spirit.”

John’s Gospel was selected for three reasons: as a canonical Gospel it can without reservation be regarded as representative of Christian tradition; it treats knowledge/belief as a major theme; and it contains significant material on pneumatology, particularly the role of the Holy Spirit as epistemic agent. It therefore has a significant contribution to make to the development of a Christian epistemology.

The Gospel features extensive discourse material as well as several cameos in which individuals interact with Jesus. These latter are a significant aspect of the narrative strategy and the thesis makes them its primary focus. The discourse material is introduced where appropriate. Particular consideration is given to the Gospel’s references to the Holy Spirit/Paraclete. As themes are often repeated, I make frequent use of cross-references. A thematic summary (Chapter 8) helps to bring out the thematic unity of the Gospel in a most helpful manner and greatly simplifies the task of comparing the scriptural/theological material of part one with the philosophical material of part two.

The second part of the thesis involves: (1) An overview of significant epistemological themes relevant to John’s Gospel; (2) An overview of the relationship between ontology and epistemology; (3) An exploration of recent views on “spiritual perception” to show that inclusion of an ontological category of “spirit” is within the bounds of philosophical

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credibility.

Note that in part two I am seeking merely to identify relevant philosophical themes, not to defend or critique them. I avoid any radical or innovative claims in favour of citing the published work of recognised scholars in epistemology and philosophy of religion. Thus, the treatment is largely unoriginal except, perhaps, in the way it brings together various strands in recent philosophy. This is, I think, sufficient for my overall purposes: to demonstrate that Johannine epistemology is not glaringly implausible, and to clarify matters for further consideration.

Finally, the scriptural and philosophical considerations are brought together in the conclusion.

d. Some Further Remarks

i. On Limitations in the Thesis

I am aware of a number of limitations in the thesis. Although these do not, I think, impact the modest goal I have set myself, it will still be helpful to acknowledge such additions as might improve the overall thrust of the thesis;

1. A more detailed account of the history of ideas thus clarifying the intellectual context of the thesis and the issues it seeks to address.

2. A broader engagement with Scripture particularly the remaining Johannine materials and the Pauline literature.

3. An engagement with the writings of the Church Fathers, with Basil of Caesarea’s *De Spiritu Sancto* being of particular interest.

4. Greater consideration of metaphysics, particularly on the subject of ontology.

5. A greater engagement with the theological literature on pneumatology and its relation to Christian knowledge.

6. Engagement with Christian theologians who have given particular consideration to
epistemology. The works of John Calvin, Nancey Murphy, Wolfhart Pannenberg, and Bernard Lonergan are particularly in mind.

7. Greater treatment of the themes of epistemology of testimony and virtue epistemology.

ii. On Recent Literature

Due to the dearth of relevant literature the thesis contains no literature review. Indeed, the void in the literature was a primary motive for the thesis topic from the outset. The one substantial treatment of the theme is found in Bennema who notes just this problem. Bennema provides a brief bibliography mentioning that the works therein are limited in scope and neglect the crucial role of the Holy Spirit.

Particular comment is required regarding works published prior to the sea-change in Johannine studies of the early to mid-20th century. This change came about due to a remark by a distinguished Jewish scholar, Israel Abrahams: “to us Jews the Fourth Gospel is the most Jewish of the four.” Prior to this the Gospel was regarded as late, Hellenistic in thought, and historically next to worthless. Scholars focused heavily on presumed Hellenistic influence, Gnostic influence in particular, a focus which remains evident at least as late as Bultmann, but more recent works have seen serious reappraisal of this outlook.

The Gnostic influence thesis is, in any case, problematic on other grounds. There is a well-known chronological difficulty, with Gnostic sources generally post-dating the rise of Christianity so making Gnostic borrowing of Christian ideas more likely than vice versa. Furthermore, significant gains in our knowledge of first-century thought, the discovery of the Nag Hammadi library (c. 1945) in particular, has led scholars to question whether Gnosticism

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37 Ibid., 107n1.
can even be identified, much less defined, as a coherent religious movement in its own right. The implications for attempts to draw upon Gnosticism to explain Johannine thought should be evident.

Finally, earlier works assumed a Hegelian philosophy of history in which a Jewish (Petrine) form of Christianity and a Hellenistic/Gnostic (Pauline) form of Christianity provided the thesis and antithesis which resolved in an early Catholic synthesis. This entire schema has fallen into disfavour and need no longer inform one’s approach to John’s Gospel. It is, in any case, interesting to note that the very idea of a conflict between Pauline and Petrine Christianity arose amongst Protestant and Roman Catholic scholars for whom appeal to Paul or Peter respectively was a fundamental part of their polemical arsenal. It seems to me that Johannine studies have been influenced for the worse by the projection onto early Christianity of an invalid philosophy of history and an invalid pair of categories. We have since moved on.

These considerations explain why I have chosen to by-pass much of the literature prior to Bultmann and return *ad fontes*, as it were, in order to inquire what one of the earliest Christian documents, the Gospel of John, has to say regarding the knowledge of God. It is to that document that we now turn.

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Part One

The Knowledge of God in John’s Gospel
Chapter 2

The Religious Leaders

Often one’s grasp of a subject can be greatly furthered by inquiring after counter-instances, and our study of the knowledge of God in John’s Gospel will begin in precisely this way. We will look first at a prominent group of religious leaders who stand in opposition to Jesus and ask what lessons we can draw from their lack of belief. There is, as we shall see, much to learn here, and from an epistemological perspective it is fortunate that the Gospel recounts their opposition to Jesus in some detail. Doubtlessly, they consider their opposition justified, but the Gospel declares Jesus to be the Christ and their opposition must therefore be regarded as misplaced. It becomes even more problematic given they are chief amongst “his own” (1:11) who do not receive him. The religious leaders initially seem open and inquisitive, yet their attitudes gradually harden until they decide that Jesus is too great a threat “to our place and nation” (11:48). Ultimately, this is seen as a fulfilment of the prophetic word by the prophet Isaiah (12:37-41). It is not for lack of evidence that they reject Jesus. Rather their trenchant opposition is portrayed as arising out of some very deep-seated character flaws which blind them to their own short-comings. Character, it turns out, is a very important epistemological consideration.
a. The Prologue as Epistemic Framework

The Gospel prologue (1:1-18) provides an epistemic framework for understanding the person of Jesus Christ and provides the backdrop by which the various Johannine characters, the religious leaders included, may be understood.

The prologue informs us that the created order is structured along coherent, rational lines, thanks to the “Logos” who has been with God from the beginning, assisting in the creative task and providing life and light to all humanity (1:1-5, 9). This apparently promising epistemic situation is mitigated by the presence of darkness (4). As the thought-provoking Johannine double entendre has it, the darkness has never been able to “καταλαμβάνω”—to comprehend (as per NIV, NASB, etc.) or suppress (as per NLT, ESV, etc.)—the light. Yet even so, the darkness persists such that the Light was not recognised by those he created (10) and to whom he gave light (9).

Against this backdrop “the Jews” play a particularly significant part. The Prologue progressively narrows the circle of divine disclosure—from “all things” (3), to “all people” (4), to the recipients of the Mosaic law (17). They, of all people, ought to recognise the Incarnate Logos (14) yet despite their advantageous religious position, they fail to do so. The Gospel actually regards them as not Jewish enough for if, like Nathanael, they had been “Israelites lacking in guile” (47) then they too would have recognised and confessed Jesus as the Christ (49).

Thus, the prologue sets the scene for Jesus’ confrontation with “the Jews,” sounding the ominous note: “he came to his own, but his own did not receive him” (11).

b. The Identity of Jesus’ Opponents

By using the term “the Jews” the Gospel risks portraying ethnicity as the decisive factor in deciding opposition to Jesus. This is entirely the wrong conclusion to draw as the major

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issues concern not ethnicity but religious status. Yet even this requires careful treatment, for whilst the Gospel’s references to “the Jews” are broadly inclusive, the Judaism to which the Gospel refers is that of first-century Judea and Galilee, centred upon the Jerusalem temple and the Pharisaic interpretation of Torah. There is no mention of strands of Judaism which stood in tension with these, neither the Sadducees (cf. Acts 23:6) or Herodians of the Synoptics, nor the communities of Qumran, Leontopolis, Elephantine, or Araq-el-Emir. It may be significant that the Gospel includes the story of the Woman of Samaria (4:1-42) given opposition to the Jerusalem temple and the Jewish understanding of Torah were distinctive Samaritan characteristics.

The Gospel does not, in any case, critique only Judaism. It has Jesus critiquing Samaritan religious practice whilst on the way to affirming that “God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth” (4:19-24). This has clear implications for any form of worship, not just that practised at Jerusalem or Mt. Gerizim (the site of the Samaritan temple), and any exegetical tradition, not just that of the Pharisees or Samaritans. The Gospel’s critique thus centres upon questions of religious authority and tradition rather than ethnicity. Such critique may rightly be extended to any religious tradition.

I infer from this that in any historical or cultural context Jesus would challenge those in positions of authority and, potentially, draw their hostile reaction. We may find analogous instances in the Roman Catholic response to Luther and, in turn, Luther’s response to the Anabaptists. Such responses can be for entirely good reasons and, indeed, they are inevitably portrayed in just that light. Yet as the prologue of the Gospel tells us from the outset that Jesus is the Incarnate Logos, there can be, from the Gospel’s perspective, no suggestion of “good

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44 See the discussion of Samaritan religion in chapter 4.
reasons” for disbelief. “The Jews” of John’s Gospel should therefore be seen as somewhat of a caricature—a literary means of portraying power-hungry, self-aggrandising and dogmatic religious orthodoxy of a sort which has no necessary connection with Jewishness. So despite Brown’s objection (above), I will replace the Gospel’s references to “the Jews” with reference to “the religious leaders” or similar ethnically neutral terms.

Yet even this may paint with too broad a brush. No group of persons is ever monolithic and the Gospel itself allows that some of “the Jews” believed in Jesus (cf 12:42), and that some, Nicodemus in particular, were clearly sympathetic to him. We must also remind ourselves when speaking of “the Jews” that not only every faithful follower of Jesus, but Jesus of Nazareth himself, were Jewish.

c. Jesus in Confrontation with the Religious Leaders

Jesus’ confrontation with the religious leaders begins over issues of religious tradition and authority but leads eventually to a critique of the religious leaders themselves. They, after all, are entirely responsible for the form of religion which Jesus confronts as inadequate, and Jesus will not allow them to evade that responsibility. This is quite consistent with the Gospel’s emphasis upon the individual as the locus of religious reform, for it does not portray reformation in religion as a return to orthopraxis or orthodoxy, but as a matter of individual transformation. The question is ultimately a matter of the individual’s standing before God (a spiritual matter) rather than a question of correct religious belief or practice. In respects of the religious leaders, their failure as individuals is the root of the problem.

Jesus’ first interaction with the religious leaders comes at the cleansing of the temple (2:13-25). Unlike the Synoptics, the Gospel locates this account at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry (c.f. Mark 11:15–19, 27–33; Matthew 21:12–17, 23–27; and Luke 19:45–48, 20:1–8) and portrays a quite different response by the religious leaders. In the Synoptic accounts, the relationship between Jesus and the religious leaders is already extraordinarily tense and the

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46 See chapter 3, p.31ff.
cleansing of the temple serves to precipitate the final confrontation leading to Jesus’ arrest and execution. In John’s Gospel, however, there is no history of ill-will and the religious leaders’ response is considerably more reserved. Rather than hostility, there is only the night-time visit from a curious Nicodemus (3:1ff.). It is Jesus’ breach of the Sabbath (5:1-16) that precipitates hostility in John’s Gospel and the resurrection of Lazarus (11:1-53) which leads to decisive action (53).

The religious leaders’ response to the cleansing of the temple is illuminating. Clearly of the view that signs render legitimate the claims of the one who performs them, they request a sign from Jesus (18). This is curious given that signs are cited as the reason many believed in him (23) and constitute part of the rationale for Nicodemus’ visit (3:2). Clearly signs do not necessarily lead to adequate faith and Jesus “did not commit himself to them” (2:24). Later, during the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus will receive a similar request (6:30)—this time from a crowd who have proclaimed him “the Prophet who is to come into the world” precisely because of his miracles (6:10-14). Despite seeing his signs people are evidently unable to grasp the significance of Jesus’ actions. Consequently, they cannot grasp the significance of his person.

The issue of the significance of the foregoing point is helpfully illustrated by Bultmann’s “Dass”/“Was” distinction. Here the idea is that “John…in his Gospel presents only the fact (das Dass) of the Revelation without describing its content (ihr Was) [thus] Jesus as the Revealer of God reveals nothing but that he is the Revealer.”47 Given the extensive discourse material in the Gospel, it seems to me that Bultmann’s Dass/Was distinction may go too far. Yet it is certainly correct that the person of Jesus is central to the idea of revelation in the Gospel and he himself displaces those institutions, Temple and Torah, which had hitherto been regarded as central to Israel’s relationship with God.48 Thus Jesus refers to “the temple of his

47 Bultmann, Theology, 2:66.
48 Andreas J. Köstenberger, A Theology of John’s Gospel and Letters (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 403-35.
body” (2:21) and his priority over the written word (5:39-40). So, too, he takes to himself titles laden with Christological significance such as the seven “I am” sayings (6:35,48; 8:12; 10:7,11,14; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1). His allusion to Jacob’s Ladder (1:51 cf. Gen. 28:10-22) announces that he is now the focal-point of divine disclosure.⁴⁹ This hardly exhausts the Gospel’s treatment of this theme but it is enough to show that Jesus’ challenge to the religious leaders lies in an attempt not to reform temple worship or the reading of Torah, but to supplant them with his own person as the locus of divine revelation. Thus, Kruse;

As Jesus superseded Moses (1:17: ‘the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ’) and the blessings of the kingdom supersede the ceremonial washings of the old covenant (as exemplified in the miracle at Cana), so now the temple of Jerusalem as the dwelling place of God is superseded by Christ himself. His body is the new temple, the place where God was now making himself present.⁵⁰

It is thus one’s relationship to Jesus, rather than to religious institutions, which is in the Johannine view determinative.

Coming to terms with Jesus’ person is therefore the central challenge for the religious leaders, and the Gospel tells the story of their failure to do so. Their difficulties start with a healing on the Sabbath at the Pool of Bethesda (5:1-15). Jesus’ appeal to “my Father” (17) seems decisive if we allow that such healing can only occur at divine behest (cf. Jesus’ further remarks in 19-23), yet it serves merely to inflame matters. The religious leaders “sought all the more to kill Him, because He not only broke the Sabbath, but also said that God was His Father, making Himself equal with God” (18). Jesus responds with a discourse defending his Sonship (5:19-47), the last few lines being of primary interest here. Affirming that he has been sent by the Father, Jesus declares that the religious leaders have failed properly to read the evidence which bears witness to this fact. Most damning is their failure properly to apprehend the witness of Scripture (29) as this implies that they do not believe the writings of Moses (46-47). Later, Jesus questions their faithfulness to the Mosaic law (7:19), and, coming

⁴⁹ See p.59.
back to initial point of dispute, their understanding of Sabbath observance (7:22-23). Later we find Jesus’ remarks have fallen on deaf ears when, responding to the healing of a man born blind—which we might take to be incontrovertible evidence of Jesus’ divine origin and messianic status—the religious leaders “revile” (9:28) the healed man: “You are His disciple, but we are Moses’ disciples. We know that God spoke to Moses; as for this fellow, we do not know where He is from” (28-29).

Through this same section of the Gospel, Jesus questions another of the religious leader’s vaunted self-identifications. In response to their claim that “we are Abraham’s descendants, and have never been in bondage to anyone” (8:33) Jesus declares that those who commit sin are thereby its slaves (34), so denying their claim of Abrahamic sonship (35). Although acknowledging their physical descent from Abraham (37), Jesus points out that their actions belie the claim: “If you were Abraham’s children, you would do the works of Abraham. But now you seek to kill Me, a Man who has told you the truth which I heard from God. Abraham did not do this. You do the deeds of your father” (8:39-41a).

The issue of fatherhood is a sensitive one. The religious leaders attempt to defend their Abrahamic ancestry by declaring that “we were not born of fornication; we have one Father—God” (41b) so making the very claim which, on Jesus’ lips, had been regarded by them as grounds for condemnation (5:18). In the heat of the moment, they seek to end dispute by appealing neither to Moses nor to Abraham, but to God himself. The religious leaders’ response in 8:41b seems to demonstrate that they knew full well what Jesus was implying by talk of a “father” besides Abraham in v.41a. But now Jesus makes it explicit when he says “you are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do” (44). The acrimony of the religious leaders becomes ever more apparent as they retort that Jesus is a Samaritan and has a demon (48).

The religious leaders’ failure to believe renders them culpable given Jesus has, by his
signs and teaching, given them good reason to reconsider their position. Had they only witnessed the signs they might be forgiven for not knowing what to make of them. Had they only heard Jesus’ teaching they might be forgiven for dismissing it as mere trumpery. But they know of both and are therefore culpable. This logic is articulated in Jesus’ appeal: “If I do not do the works of My Father, do not believe Me; but if I do, though you do not believe Me, believe the works, that you may know and believe that the Father is in Me, and I in Him.” (10:37-38). One might think such an appeal holds promise but the religious leaders maintain their hostility: “they sought again to seize Him, but He escaped out of their hand” (39). Finally comes the story of Lazarus (11:1-53) whose resurrection proves the climax of Jesus’ public ministry in a quite counter-intuitive way. Rather than sweep aside all doubt, and with it all resistance to Jesus’ messianic claims, it galvanises the opposition of the religious leaders. “From that day on,” the Gospel tells us, “they plotted to put him to death” (53).

We see, then, that the relationship between Jesus and the religious leaders is one which deteriorates from initially curious to ultimately hostile in the extreme. The level of hostility reflects the fact that Jesus’ own challenge is not merely conceptual. He does not come as a reformer who seeks to purify accepted religious practices or institutions, but as one who seeks to abolish them and replace them with himself. The rejection of Jesus is thus fundamentally personal inasmuch as those to whom he came failed to recognise his true identity as “the Christ, the Son of God” and then compounded this failure by putting him to death. In Bultmannian terms, they rejected the revelation by rejecting the person of the revealer himself.

d. Signs and Faith in John’s Gospel

It is worth digressing here to point out that Jesus’ signs in the Gospel have no obvious relationship to faith. This is curious given the Gospel’s narrative strategy: one might think that
a document which narrates Jesus’ signs in order that the reader might believe (20:30-31) might draw a definitive connection between signs and faith. Yet no such connection is apparent. Bultmann discusses the matter and concludes that Gospel portrays both Jesus’ signs and words as ambiguous and open to misunderstanding.51 This is certainly true. The religious leaders see Jesus’ signs and are thereby led to reject him. Nicodemus sees Jesus’ signs but seems not to know what to make of them. The Woman of Samaria and Nathanael see no signs, but believe in Jesus regardless. The crowd by the Sea of Galilee follow him because of his signs (6:2), speculate that he is “the” prophet on that basis (14), yet continue to request signs as a condition of belief (30) with many ultimately rejecting him (66). Throughout the thesis I will have more to say on this curious relationship between signs and faith—or perhaps we might better say non-relationship. Clearly something more than a logically necessary inference from signs is involved in a person coming to accept the Gospel’s Christological claim.

e. The Nature of the Religious Leaders’ Unbelief

The religious leaders’ failure to believe has two related aspects, cognitive and affective.52 The first is an inability to grasp, and the second an unwillingness to accept, the point of Jesus’ words and deeds. These are not separate, but intimately related. The religious leaders cannot see because they will not see and both aspects are drawn out in the Gospel.

While the religious leaders’ unwillingness to accept Jesus’ words and signs emerges only gradually, their inability is introduced very early when their delegates approach John the Baptist53 in order to ascertain his identity (1:19-28). Not only are they unable to identify the Messiah who already stands in their midst (26), they are equally unable to recognise that the Baptist is not the Messiah. They direct a litany of questions at the Baptist (19-21) and determine that he is neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet, and this leaves them

51 Bultmann, Theology, 2:59-60.
52 For more on these terms, see the discussion on p.135.
53 Hereafter, simply “the Baptist.”
altogether confused as to the entire point of his baptising ministry (25). It is not clear, however, that the religious leaders’ lack of discernment is a matter for criticism at this early stage. Even the Baptist, despite being Jesus’ near kinsman, acknowledges that “I did not know him” (1:31) and it required an act of divine revelation to disclose to him Jesus’ messianic identity (32-33). Only later in the Gospel will the religious leaders’ lack of spiritual insight become a matter of explicit comment.

Here it is important to note the enigmatic nature of the Gospel’s portrayal of the Baptist. He rates highly enough for the religious leaders to inquire after his significance, but in the end they do not find his testimony to Christ compelling (5:33-35). Yet even among his disciples, some did not become followers of Jesus (3:22-25) despite his clear testimony (1:35-37; 3:27-30). We can only wonder that some should regard the Baptist highly enough to be his disciples, yet not follow Jesus in consequence of his testimony. In consequence, it seems unwarranted to draw any strong conclusions from the religious leader’s (non-)response to the Baptist’s testimony.

As the Gospel narrative proceeds it becomes increasingly apparent that the religious leaders suffer from a lack of spiritual insight. Theirs is “that constitution of existence in which it does not understand itself, is lost, does not know its way (12.35), is blind (Chap. 9) and dead.” This is most clearly shown, with no small irony, in the healing of the man born blind (9:1-41), and the subsequent “Good Shepherd” discourse (10:1-21). In response to the former the religious leaders raise obduracy to the level of an art-form. That they have no intention of accepting the healed man’s version of events is clear, but it is difficult to see what they otherwise hope to achieve. There appears to be some conspiracy against Jesus at play and their antagonism toward him is clearly stated: Jesus is “not from God, because he does not keep the Sabbath” (16) and is regarded as “a sinner” (24). Should anybody confess him as the

Christ they would be “put out of the synagogue” (22) and this is the healed man’s eventual fate (34). In all of this the religious leaders act with a degree of wanton arrogance which is well captured in their parting remark: “You were completely born in sins, and are you teaching us” (34 cf. 3).

We find in 9:40-41 what amounts to commentary on this episode when Jesus is found in discussion with some “ἐκ τῶν Φαρισαίων οἱ μετ’ αὐτοῦ ὄντες” (“of the Pharisees who were with him”—40). The Greek “does not imply any kind of alliance” so we must not regard them as torn between loyalty to their religious peers on the one hand, and Jesus on the other. Rather, they are adherents, and so representatives, of that party which stands in opposition to Jesus, entrenched in unbelief. The metaphor of blindness thus extends to all Jesus’ opponents and we may therefore see such opposition as evidence of a spiritual condition akin to physical blindness. Yet, in stark contrast to the physically blind man who is aware of his infirmity and the fact that only God can cure him (30-32), Jesus’ opponents, wilfully ignorant of their infirmity and full of baseless self-assurance, feel no need to seek divine aid.

The good shepherd sayings which follow (10:1-18) change the imagery from “seeing” to “hearing.” Just as the blind cannot see, so only the one who hears the voice of the shepherd will come when the shepherd calls (10:4). The sheep know the shepherd and he knows his sheep (14): a relational knowledge analogous to that between the Father and the Son (15). Earlier commentators had suggested this concept was shared by Oriental-Hellenistic

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55 That the policy of expulsion did not arise until a later period can be acknowledged without rejecting the fundamental point of the narrative: the man born blind is the innocent victim in an escalating conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders, a conflict in which he is forced to declare sides. To express this in terms expulsion from the Synagogue is anachronistic, but perhaps the best way of helping the initial readers of the Gospel enter into the significance of the story.


57 See *ibid.*, 312. Several popular translations render these verses along the same lines as the NIV; “I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep.” Compare also the NLT, ESV, and NASB.
mysticism\textsuperscript{58} and although the Gospel’s relation to such thought is now less certain\textsuperscript{59} the observation about the mystical nature of the imagery remains relevant. As Kruse puts it; “When Jesus spoke about the Father ‘knowing’ him, he did not mean that he knew about him, or was acquainted with him, but that he enjoyed an intimate personal relationship.”\textsuperscript{60} Cyril of Alexandria expands on the point:

When Jesus says, “I know my own and my own know me, as the Father knows me and I know the Father,” it is equivalent to saying, I shall enter into a close relationship with my sheep, and my sheep shall be brought into a close relationship with me, according to the manner in which the Father is intimate with me, and again I also am intimate with the Father. For God the Father knows his own Son and the fruit of his [i.e., the Father’s] substance because he is truly his parent. And again, the Son knows the Father, beholding him as God in truth, since he is begotten of him. In the same way, we also, being brought into a close relationship with God the Father, are called his family and are spoken of as children, according to what he himself said: “Behold, I and the children whom God has given me.” Truly, we are called the family of the Son, and in fact we are part of his family. Through our relationship to the Son, we are related to God the Father, because the Only Begotten, who is God of God, was made man, and though separate from all sin, he assumed our human nature.\textsuperscript{61}

The religious leaders, then, do not merely lack an intellectual grasp of Jesus’ identity, they suffer a deeper deficiency: an inability even to “see” or “hear” Jesus regardless of his signs or teaching and so they refuse relationship with him. Countryman sums it up well:

The juxtaposition of metaphors in this speech [10:6-18] does not so much clarify as deepen the imagery. Jesus is the gate—the only legitimate point of access; he is the good shepherd—the only true ruler; the sheep are really his—he is agent of creation; he and they know one another as intimately as he and his father; the sheep will listen to no one else…The language is deliberately mysterious. There is no intention to clarify matters. Indeed, for the enlightened, there is now no need. Jesus is, in the last analysis, all there is for human beings. The believer relies on him for food and light and life—not the cosmic daily emblems of these things so much as the things themselves. The unenlightened, however, can make no sense of it all. Jesus’ audience goes on fighting among themselves, and his opponents are still trying to find some external mode of verification that will settle for them who he is.\textsuperscript{62}

There is, therefore, something more than metaphor in this talk of seeing and hearing. The religious leaders were unable to assess Jesus’ messianic credentials, and their failure to

\textsuperscript{58} Eduard Norden, \textit{Agnostos Theos; Untersuchungen Zur Formengeschichte Religiöser Rede} (Leipzig: B.G. Teubner, 1923), 287.

\textsuperscript{59} See p.12.

\textsuperscript{60} Kruse, \textit{John}, 236.


recognise this inability, to appreciate that they suffered a spiritual blindness no less debilitating than blindness of the physical sort, delivered them captive to its debilitating epistemic effect.

f. The Ethical Aspect of Unbelief

Related to the the religious leader’s inability to “see” (a cognitive incapacity) was an unwillingness to believe (an affective incapacity), and this can be traced to their moral or ethical condition:

Knowledge...though in itself an intellectual activity, is only possible on certain ethical conditions....The mind is enlightened to discern the true nature of the revelation in Christ by a habit of moral obedience...the chief hindrance which prevented the [religious leaders] from responding to the message of Jesus was an ethical one.63

Scott was here in the process of constructing a detailed account of the Johannine understanding of the relationship between belief, knowledge, obedience and religious experience.64 Like much from that period there are certain assumptions which we would no longer accept and this renders Scott’s overall project highly questionable.65 He is surely correct, however, to suggest that the Gospel draws a connection between belief and “ethical conditions” and so to suggest that the “chief hindrance” to belief among the religious leaders was ethical. This ethical aspect of belief is intimated at in the Prologue which speaks of the world (9,10) and of darkness (5). The idea is not, as in radical Gnosticism, that the world is an inherently evil place but, rather, that the world lies in the darkness of sin by virtue of humanity making itself independent of God.66 The connection between unbelief and sin thereafter reoccurs through the Gospel.

64 See chapter 8, “The Communication of Life,” in *ibid.*, 265-95.
65 Particularly questionable is the distinction Scott draws between Hebraic and Greek accounts of knowledge and with it the view that John’s Gospel should be seen as subsumed under Greek, particularly Gnostic, categories of thought. Here Scott contrasts John’s “speculative” (*ibid.*, 268) categories with those of the Synoptics and Paul in which “the condition on which the new life is imparted is a simple religious one” (*ibid.*, 267). He argues that “John himself appears to set out with the thesis that Jesus was the incarnate Logos, and to deduce from this assumption the whole story of his life and work...[John’s Gospel] gave expression, under the forms of the current philosophy, to an estimate of the Saviour’s Person which in substance and origin was purely religious” (*ibid.*, 268). Few if any contemporary scholars would concur.
It is not just that sinful behaviour is the consequence of unbelief—although the Gospel certainly carries that message (5:24; 8:21-24; 11:25)—it is that unbelief is entrenched by one’s attachment to sinful behaviour. Those who do not believe “loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil” (3:19). By avoiding the light they seek to suppress exposure of their evil deeds (20). By contrast, those “who do the truth” display no such reticence (21). If those who accept Jesus’ testimony have certified that God is true (3:33) then, conversely, those who do not have called God a liar. These themes are woven throughout the Gospel and are especially prominent in Jesus’ discussion with the religious leaders (chapters 5-8 and 12 in particular). Those who earnestly desire (Gk: θέλω) to do God’s will can discern the truth of Jesus’ teaching (7:17) while lack of such desire prevents people from coming to him to obtain life (5:40). One is motivated either by love for God (and therefore receives the one who comes in his name—5:42-43; 8:42) or by self-interest (12:25). Those who lack love for God will be lost (12:25). Even Moses, in whom the religious leaders trust, will accuse them for their failure to love God and accept the one who comes in his name (5:42-45), not least because this indicates a failure to believe the words either of Moses (5:46-47) or of God (8:47). If one does not believe the words of God, then one is not of God (8:47). This does not entail neutrality. Jesus charges the religious leaders that they are children of the devil whose desire is to do their father’s will (8:44). He “was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him” (44). It is because the religious leaders are of the devil rather than God that they cannot discern in Jesus’ teaching the words of God (8:47). When, following the resurrection of Lazarus, they decide to do away with Jesus lest “everyone…believe in him, and the Romans…come and take away both our place and nation.” (48) they betray the self-interest which motivates them and affirm the truth of Jesus’ earlier claim (cf. 8:44).

Thus, in their claims to be true disciples of Moses, the true heirs of Abraham, and
children of God, the religious leaders make nothing so clear as their blindness to truth. Their arrogance is illustrated in their response to those sent to apprehend Jesus: “Are you also deceived? Have any of the rulers or the Pharisees believed in Him? But this crowd that does not know the law is accursed” (7:47-49). So self-assured are they that their own disbelief is now adduced as evidence against Jesus. And in their contemptuous dismissal of the crowd “that does not know the law” it does not occur to them that this betrays their own failure. As those tasked with shepherding Israel, they should have ensured that God’s sheep had been more adequately fed. They hate Jesus for pointing out such shortcomings (7:7; 10:1-16) but they would rather take his life than acknowledge the truth of his words and remedy their own defects. This is not simply an epistemic failure, but a moral one. Were it simply a matter of blindness, their sin could be overlooked. But they insist that no blindness whatever afflicts them, and so their sin remains (9:41). Their entire position is grounded in self-deception and a lie. They are afflicted by serious moral failures which issue in negative epistemic consequences.

**g. Summary**

Despite references to “the Jews,” we have seen that unbelief amongst the religious rulers issues from intensely personal roots, having nothing to do with ethnicity. Such unbelief is “personal” in two respects: first, in that it involves the rejection of a person; second, in that it stems from deep individual cognitive and affective deficiencies. We may say that faith, in Johannine terms, involves commitment of persons to a person, but as the religious leaders are unable to apprehend Jesus’ true identity and are unwilling to apprehend or seek remedy for their own shortcomings, such commitment they cannot and will not make. This is compounded by the fact that Jesus is the Incarnation of the divine Logos and so, in rejecting Jesus, the religious leaders reject the very God in whom they claim to believe. Their rejection is not simply passive, but issues in murderous hostility—so demonstrating the extent of their
ethical deficiencies. Yet failure to believe in Jesus and opposition to him do not necessarily go hand-in-hand. We see this as we turn to a study of Nicodemus, whose epistemic status, despite his evident sympathy for Jesus, remains ambiguous in the extreme.
Although the Gospel generally portrays the religious leaders in very poor light, that treatment is not monolithic. At points, there is evident hesitation on their part to act even when Jesus directs forthright, public criticism in their direction (7:21-26). We also find followers of Jesus, albeit secretly, amongst their number (12:42). Whatever general remarks we might then make, it seems that at least some of the religious leaders struggled to come to terms with Jesus, unable to decide whether to oppose or to support him.

No character in John’s Gospel illustrates this more clearly than Nicodemus. A religious leader (3:1) and “the” teacher of Israel (10), he appears three times in the Gospel (3:1-21; 7:45-52; 19:38-42) yet with no clear statement as to whether he chooses to accept or reject the Christological claim. He “makes a series of appearances that seem to be fraught with significance, but the nature of that significance remains elusive. He appears in the narrative often enough to evoke curiosity, but not, it seems, often enough to satisfy it.”67 Yet this ambiguity may, in and of itself, tell us much about the Johannine concept of faith. Certainly, it renders Nicodemus a highly interesting subject for reflection.

a. Nicodemus in History and Tradition

It is quite remarkable that the Gospel gives Nicodemus such prominence without giving any clear indication as to his status as a follower of Jesus. It is not unreasonable to suppose that he is mentioned by name because he was known to the Johannine community. Yet after Jesus’ burial Nicodemus entirely disappears from the annals of history and modern scholarship has failed to locate any trace of the “Nicodemus of History.” He makes an appearance in the apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus, a reworking of the earlier Acts of Pilate, and is venerated in the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions as a saint. Yet such prominence is most likely owed to Nicodemus’s appearance in John’s Gospel and has little, if any, true historical value. We might suppose that an educated religious leader such as Nicodemus, had he come to believe in Jesus, would have ranked alongside Paul as a leading light in the early Christian movement. Indeed, having encountered Jesus personally, we may suppose Nicodemus’ reputation would exceed that of Paul. That he remains unknown to history thus suggests that Nicodemus did not, in fact, come to believe. We have nothing but speculation.

We are thus left to make what we can of Nicodemus’ three appearances in the Gospel. The first, when Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night (3:1-21), clearly indicates some inadequacy in his grasp of Jesus’ person. The other two, involving Nicodemus’ defence of Jesus before the Sanhedrin (7:45-52), and his assisting Joseph of Arimathea in burying Jesus (19:38-42), are narrative episodes open to various interpretations. Authors are divided as to whether these episodes evidence a commitment to Jesus. My own view is that the account is ambiguous precisely because Nicodemus himself is undecided. He must be aware of Jesus’ Galilean origins (7:41, 52), a major issue for his colleagues in the Sanhedrin (52), yet this is clearly not decisive for Nicodemus. His involvement in Jesus’ burial can hardly be a legal formality given the inordinately extravagant contribution of spices he contributes (19:39).69

68 Some have identified him as Nakdimon ben Gorion but for various reasons most scholars reject this association. See Keener, John, 1:535.
69 Keener, John, 2:1163-64.

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The amount is too great for one concerned only with formalities, but also too great for one who properly understands that Jesus’ burial will be a short-lived affair. Here we come full circle to Nicodemus’ night-time encounter with Jesus following the cleansing of the temple (2:13-21). It seems likely that Nicodemus, along with Jesus’ disciples, had not then understood Jesus’ saying: “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (19). That he now brings such an abundance of spices implies that he does not understand it even now, for he clearly expects the Rabbi from Nazareth to remain in the grave.

Perhaps we can best summarise Nicodemus’ final state by pointing out what should be obvious: the ambiguity is something which Nicodemus himself quite deliberately creates. Whilst he is not hostile to Jesus, he has his own reasons for eschewing an overt declaration of faith. Like the other religious leaders, Nicodemus has one eye to his religious status and although he will not oppose Jesus, neither, for self-interest, will he oppose him. If we feel that Nicodemus does nothing to clarify his position, then we ought to stop and consider that this is precisely as Nicodemus himself intended it to be.

b. Nicodemus in Engagement with Jesus (John 3:1-21)

The Gospel’s first reference to Nicodemus is the most significant given that only here do we find any comment on the nature of belief. Much in the narrative, however, remains opaque. Nicodemus was motivated to come to Jesus by virtue of his signs (3:2. cf. 2:23) but it does not follow that he “believed” in Jesus at this time. At times the religious leaders employed official and unofficial representatives (1:19, 5:15; 7:32; 11:46) and Nicodemus use of “we” (3:2) may suggest he comes in that capacity.\(^70\) That he came “by night” (3:2) may be laden with significance.\(^71\) That he came at all suggests he holds Jesus in some regard, as does use of the title “Rabbi” (2). Such a title is, strictly speaking, inadequate by the canons of Johannine Christology, but Jesus’ disciples frequent use of that term shows it does not exclude a deeper


\(^71\) For a helpful discussion of the symbolism involved see Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 90-92.

Once Nicodemus enters into discussion with Jesus, however, things become much clearer. At some point, commentators are disagreed on precisely where, there is a transition from the speech of Jesus to commentary by the narrator. But the very difficulty of locating the transition suggests that taking the passage as a unity is not mistaken. There are three significant elements in the narrative; Jesus’ “inappropriate” response to Nicodemus in v.3; the epistemic implications of John’s vertical dualism; and the ethical or moral aspects of belief. The second and third are discussed elsewhere, which leaves us only the first to consider here.

c. The “Inappropriate Responses” of Jesus and Johannine Discontinuities

When Nicodemus greets Jesus, he appears to anticipate a discussion between religious equals. But Jesus’ response quite derails that expectation: “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again (γεννηθῇ ἄνωθεν), he cannot see the kingdom of God” (3). The use of ἄνωθεν leads to a well-known word play between “born again” or “born from above.” That word-play works well in the Greek where the subsequent discussion will pick up on both ideas. It does not, however, work in Aramaic thus giving rise to a significant question: precisely how much does the Gospel owe to the theological creativity of early Christianity? Even if Jesus and Nicodemus did converse in Greek, and even if the expression “γεννηθῇ ἄνωθεν” represents, as many regard as unlikely, the ipsissima vox of Jesus, there is still clear evidence of theological development in the Gospel and this is a critical epistemic issue to be considered.

For the moment, however, I wish to consider the significance of this “inappropriate response.” Were this the only incidence of such a phenomenon in the Gospel, it might be placed aside as an interesting quirk. The Gospel, however, is peppered with such discontinuities. Besides other instances where Jesus’ responses seem inappropriate (cf. 1:49-

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72 Consideration of which I leave until later. See p.88ff.
73 See p.27ff.
74 See p.86ff.
75 The expression is taken from Countryman (Mystical Way, 6) and refers to the lack of obvious relevance to Nicodemus’ preceding remark.
50; 4:9-10; 14:22-23), the presence of *aporias* and other discontinuities are a well-attested feature of the Gospel. Many scholars feel such discontinuities can be resolved—suggesting that the Gospel was constructed from sources and that the various discontinuities survive as evidence of this fact. Yet while this may explain discontinuities *between* passages in the Gospel, it does little to resolve those, such as Jesus’ inappropriate response to Nicodemus, which occur *within* passages.

The possibility thus exists that the various discontinuities in the Gospel are deliberate and “not mere clumsiness on the part of the author or editor.” Carter observes:

…some scholars have pointed out that features such as contradictions and awkward sequences may suggest the opposite conclusion. In the world from which John’s gospel originates, such mysteries can be signs of great skill employed to give appropriate presentation to the gospel’s profound content.

Countryman suggests that “for the reader committed to fathoming the Gospel…they have the effect of slowing one’s pace, making one less self-confident, and compelling reflection.” Countryman adopts an approach which “sees the Gospel as focused on progress toward mystical union in the person of Jesus.” He compares this with the approach taken by Socrates in Plato’s *Dialogues* and that of the author of *On Rebirth*, a tractate from the *Corpus Hermeticum*. To this we might add the Zen Buddhist *kōan*, a paradoxical riddle that yields its insights only when one abandons usual thought patterns and adopts broader, more contemplative approaches. Ultimately the aim of all such literary forms is to create “liminal space [which] induces a type of inner crisis to help us make a needed transition.”

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80 Ibid., 1.


wish to argue that the Gospel’s notion of the “needed transition” matches that sought for in Zen Buddhism, the Corpus Hermeticum, or Platonism, but this does not affect the substantial point—that the discontinuities found in the Gospel may be seen as a literary strategy employed to force the reader to reconsider his or her perception of Jesus of Nazareth.

If the discontinuities do have deliberate purpose, it may well be that attempts to expunge them serve only to stymie that purpose. O’Brien writes about the Gospel serving to recreate for the reader the experience of Jesus’ original hearers, and we may say that if the Gospel faithfully models Jesus’ mode of approach then discontinuities in the text will challenge the reader in the same way as Jesus challenged his contemporaries. We may also imagine that the sort of misunderstandings, and even resistance, Jesus encountered will be mirrored by readers of the Gospel. This needs to be taken with the utmost seriousness by modern readers of the Gospel. Richard Rohr speaks of the attempt to avoid the pain of transformation by avoiding experiences which invoke transformation, and we may ask whether modern attempts to eliminate discontinuities and “recover” the original form of the Gospel may not have a negative epistemic impact. If one recalls my earlier remarks about Jesus’ religious opponents being merely one particular historical instance of those shortcomings which manifest in all religious traditions at various times, then one can see that the point has significant contemporary relevance.

d. Summary

While Nicodemus’ ultimate epistemic status is uncertain, his portrayal in the Gospel still offers us at least two significant insights. The first is that true faith has no necessary connection with Jesus’ signs or teaching—Nicodemus has had at least some exposure to both and yet does not come to confess Jesus as the Christ. The second is that the Holy Spirit plays a critical role as epistemic agent, although unless one is willing and able to reappraise one’s

84 Rohr, Everything Belongs, 47-52.
outlook on things, even the Holy Spirit has little effect. Jesus’ “inappropriate response” regarding being born “ὕπωθεν” can be seen as an attempt to jar Nicodemus out of the commonplace line of thinking which informs his initial approach. Yet, ultimately, even the sympathetic Nicodemus makes no affirmation of faith in Jesus. He, along with the other religious leaders, proves a startling contrast to our next subject: a person who makes perhaps the most remarkable profession of faith in the entire Gospel—the anonymous Woman of Samaria.
Chapter 4

The Woman of Samaria

Few characters could provide greater contrast to Nicodemus than does the Woman of Samaria. By any measure—ethnicity, gender, social status, and education—Nicodemus has every advantage. But just as their respective situations could not be more dissimilar, so too the outcomes of their respective encounters with Jesus. Whereas Nicodemus’ engagement with Jesus is long, lingering, and indecisive that of the Woman of Samaria is entirely the opposite. It is a remarkable encounter given that, by all the standards of their day, she and Jesus had no business engaging in conversation of any sort. Yet their exchange touches upon subjects of such significance, and is narrated in so winsome a fashion, that it proves perennial in its fascination.

Although the woman’s social context is hugely disadvantageous, it is her spiritual condition which constitutes her primary problem. She needs thirst-quenching spiritual water (4:10, 13-14) and will receive it as a consequence of her encounter with Jesus. Against this, where one worships God is quite secondary and it transpires that Jesus seeks to radically transcend, rather than to transform, those religious categories with which the woman is familiar.

Of major interest is the manner in which Jesus engages with her, suggesting that the
concept of “point of contact” is a significant one. So too the idea of relationship, and the account evidences a growing trust between the woman and Jesus in stark contrast to the relational dynamic between Jesus and the religious leaders. Because of that trust, the woman is prepared to reconsider her previous religious certainties and accept Jesus as the Messiah.

a. The Unfavourable Situation of the Woman of Samaria

John’s Gospel is well-known for its use of irony and the account of the Woman of Samaria is a prime instance. The account is spiced with narrative elements which bring out the unfavourable nature of her situation and render the outcome of the story so contrary to the assumed socio-religious script that it proves utterly remarkable.

The two most significant issues, her ethnicity (9, 7) and her gender (27), are specifically mentioned, but there are other significant issues not immediately obvious to one unfamiliar with her social context. For instance, it was highly unlikely that a woman of such social standing would have much in the way of education, and in this she can be contrasted with Jewish males in general and the religious leaders in particular. Further, it was considered inappropriate for a Rabbi to address women in public—a Jewish woman could even be divorced for such unseemly behaviour—and this surely explains the disciples’ wonder that Jesus spoke with a woman (4:27). There are even more subtle textual clues to patriarchy. What to us is an innocent request for a drink of water, is scandalous in the context, and so the text offers what the original readers would regard as an important explanatory aside (“because his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food”—8). Greeks and Samaritans were hardly less strict, and similar attitudes continue in the Middle East to this day. Overall, we may simply say that the contemporary Western reader is very likely to underestimate the problematic nature of this encounter, the degree of contrast between the Samaritan woman

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85 A particularly helpful overview is provided in chapters 14 and 15 of Kenneth E. Bailey, Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008).
86 Everett Ferguson, Backgrounds of Early Christianity, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 100-103.
87 Barrett, John, 200.
88 Keener, John, 1:597.
89 Ibid., 1:596-97.
and the Jewish religious leaders, and the extraordinary irony which therefore arises in light of her eventual confession of Jesus as the Christ.

b. Spiritual Nature of the Woman’s Problem

Despite the above mentioned difficulties, the primary issue confronting the woman is spiritual. Jesus’ concern is, as always, with that which is “from above” not that which is “of the earth,” and this is seen early in the account. He initiates conversation by asking for a drink of water (4:7) but immediately moves to the woman’s need for “living water” (10). This term (and the earlier “gift of God”) was used within Judaism to describe the Torah, and it may be that such usage was mirrored in Samaritan circles. So Jesus may be here presenting himself as the replacement for the Torah in which the Samaritans believed. Yet he goes on to say “whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life” (13). Identical language is later used to make unambiguous reference to the Holy Spirit (7:37-39), so it seems correct to interpret “living water” as a reference to the Holy Spirit in the present context.

The spiritual dimension is again emphasised when the woman inquires about the Samaritan cultus over against the Jewish. Jesus affirms neither but asserts that;

…the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth. (23-24)

Jesus called Jews to transcend their religious traditions and he now challenges the Woman of Samaria to do the same. He is no religious reformer seeking to purify the religious cultus. Rather, he calls people to understand that he himself is the one who offers the gift of God by which worship “in spirit and truth” is made possible, so transcending all religious tradition.

c. Relationship as the Ground of Faith

Just as Jesus’ encounter with the religious leaders focuses upon deeply personal issues, so too
his engagement with the Woman of Samaria. The deeply relational method of his approach is shown when Jesus and his retinue stay as guests of the Samaritans for two days (4:40). This is significant given that, contrary to the high stock generally placed on hospitality in the Mediterranean world of the first century, it is hardly likely that Jews would be so received by Samaritans (or vice versa). Jesus’ status as a Rabbi makes the situation even more problematic as “one should not show hospitality to false teachers, such as Jewish and Samaritan teachers would regard each other to be.”

Yet Jesus does more than merely surmount mistrust:

the Samaritans receive Jesus with more than hospitality here; the pattern of going to meet him (4:40a), inviting him to the town (4:40b), and calling him Saviour (4:42b) fits with the way peoples embraced rulers, particularly the emperor.

It is a stark contrast to Jesus’ reception in Judea (cf. 4:1-3).

Such hospitality obviously says something about the Samaritan’s attitude to Jesus. But it also says something about Jesus’ attitude to the Samaritans. That he was comfortable accepting their hospitality illustrates that Christian discipleship involves not just the believer’s acceptance of Jesus, but also Jesus’ acceptance of the believer. This is seen throughout the Gospel, from Jesus’ extension of hospitality to those who first follow him (1:39) through to his declaration that he regards his disciples as friends (15:11-17).

In the course of a substantial discussion of friendship in the ancient world Keener provides many relevant insights:

Friends were…recipients of one’s confidence and intimacy.…One difference between servant-master relationships and those between friends is that servants withhold secrets from the master but friends do not withhold them from each other.

Further:

Under Jewish law, a slave could not inherit, no matter how many goods were left to him, unless the will freed the slave or granted him “all” his master’s goods (including himself; m. Pe’ah 3:8). There would be no point in Jesus promising to share his words or goods with the

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91 Keener, John, 1:627.
92 Ibid.
93 See also the previous remarks concerning the Good Shepherd sayings (10:1-18). p.25.
94 Keener, John, 2:1006-11.
95 Ibid., 2.1010.
disciples unless they were friends not slaves.96

As a true friend, Jesus is willing not only to share intimately with his disciples, but even to lay down his life for their sakes (15:13). But friendship does not mean an end to Jesus’ lordship, for his authority is in no way inconsistent with humble service and self-sacrifice. Thus, he can set an example for the disciples by washing their feet (13:1-17) even whilst affirming his status as Teacher and Lord (13).97 Thus, “friendship means not freedom to disobey but an intimate relationship that continues to recognise distinctions in authority.” 98 Indeed, it seems to me that it is precisely the disciples’ status as friends which means that they are prepared to recognise his lordship: it is the one who loves Jesus who will obey him (14:15-24) and such obedience is a measure of one’s friendship (15:14).

It is not, however, just the twelve who enjoy this status as friends of God.99 Ambrose would later write:

God himself made us friends instead of servants…He gave us a pattern of friendship to follow. We are to fulfill the wish of a friend, to unfold to him our secrets that we hold in our own hearts and are not to disregard his confidences. Let us show him our heart, and he will open his to us….A friend, then, if he is a true one, hides nothing. He pours forth his soul as the Lord Jesus poured forth the mysteries of his Father.100

Here recall that God’s love is the motivational ground for the incarnation (3:16) and we should not overlook the critical point that John’s Gospel portrays the divine-human encounter as running both ways: “…the sort of intimate union Jesus promises the disciples is not merely

96 Ibid., 2:1013.
97 Jesus willingness to wash the disciples’ feet is significant. Footwashing was “the most menial task” (Christopher Thomas, Footwashing in John 13 and the Johannine Community (Sheffield, Eng.: ISOT Press, 1991), 115) normally performed by a servant or dependent (Keener, John, 2:904). In the latter instance, wives might wash the feet of their husband, children those of their father, or disciples those of their master as “an act of extreme devotion” (Kruse, John, 280). Generally, “disciples would do for their teachers almost anything a slave would do except deal with their feet, which was considered too demeaning for a free person” (Keener, John, 2:911). In later Jewish tradition the task would be assigned to a slave, and a Gentile rather than Jewish slave at that (Kruse, John, 280). Thus, washing the disciples’ feet was a singularly inappropriate task for Jesus to perform, with Thomas describing Jesus’ action as “unrivalled in antiquity” (Thomas, Footwashing in John, 115). See also the discussion in Keener, John, 2:901-10.
98 Ibid., 2:1015.
a mystical experience but a relational encounter, for he gives it content with the term ‘love’.\textsuperscript{101}

People’s response to Jesus’ testimony is thus enormously significant in that a failure to believe his words indicates lack of trust in his person and refusal of the friendship and love that he offers. Here consider how Abraham’s willingness to believe God resulted in him being declared “the friend of God” (James 2:23). Alongside Paul’s discussion of Abraham in Romans 4:9-22 we can see that Abraham’s act of faith involved a willingness to exercise trust in God’s promise despite the difficulties of his situation and this, ultimately, meant an affirmation of God’s integrity. We should be careful not to confuse the Johannine concept of faith with that put forward by other authors, and I adduce the example of Abraham merely to illustrate a point; in seeking to bring people to eternal life through affirmation of the Christological claim, the Gospel is calling people to affirm the veracity of Jesus’ testimony and so the integrity of his person. The epistemic is thus intimately associated with the relational. To confess Jesus as the Christ is to evidence trust in his word, and so in him.\textsuperscript{102}

Given all of this, that the Samaritans are willing to extend hospitality to Jesus and that they confess him as Messiah may be taken together as demonstrating that they have come to trust his person and his word.

d. Willingness to Reconsider Religious Certainties

In his engagement with the Woman of Samaria, Jesus again uses “inappropriate responses” to help her advance in her understanding.\textsuperscript{103} Two instances can be seen: when she voices her perception that Jesus is a prophet (19); and when she introduces the concept of Messiah into the conversation (25).

i. “I perceive you are a prophet”

Jesus’ offer of living water (10-15) clearly intends to elevate the woman’s thoughts above

\textsuperscript{101} Keener, John, 2:1003.
\textsuperscript{102} Bultmann, Theology, 2:71.
\textsuperscript{103} Cf. p.34.
mundane matters but the spiritual implications initially elude her. Jesus responds with an “inappropriate response”\textsuperscript{104} about her relational history (18) which strikes the woman as prophetic (19). Some suggest that mention of “five husbands” alludes to five Assyrian gods by which Samaritan religion was compromised.\textsuperscript{105} But the suggestion arises in light of Jewish polemic against Samaritans and does not fairly represent Samaritan religion.\textsuperscript{106} Samaritans took “samaritan” to mean “keeper,” as in “faithful keeper of the true faith,”\textsuperscript{107} and themselves regarded the Jews to be the “schismatics” and religious compromisers. In the Samaritan view of things, the Jews had abandoned Gerizim at Eli’s instigation, moving the tabernacle to Shiloh, and falsifying the Pentateuch to justify their actions. Whatever the merits of such claims, we can affirm that Samaritans were starkly monotheistic and just as committed to Torah as were Jews. Talk of five Assyrian gods is thus quite irrelevant to the Samaritan woman’s situation even if such an interpretation were not questionable on other grounds.\textsuperscript{108}

Another suggestion is that Jesus was simply being unusually perceptive, but this too I regard as improbable. One might infer, from her solitary trip to the well in the middle of the day, that the woman was \textit{persona non-grata} to her neighbours.\textsuperscript{109} One might even be able to infer why this might be. But how could any casual observer infer the number of her previous relationships? I agree with Kruse\textsuperscript{110} that we have here a case of super-human insight of the

\textsuperscript{104} Inappropriate in respect of the flow of conversation. One might also consider it inappropriate in other respects, but I do not intend to invoke that meaning here.

\textsuperscript{105} Bultmann, \textit{John}, 188n3.


\textsuperscript{107} On such a view the schism would date to around one thousand years BC. Modern scholarship, by contrast, generally places the schism in the second century BC. Almost everything said by early Jewish or Samaritan sources is therefore questionable in the extreme, particularly as it pertains to distinctions between the two groups.

\textsuperscript{108} Here the second century BC dating of the Jewish/Samaritan schism is highly relevant for if the schism occurred at such a date then the Samaritans of the first-century could be no more influenced by Assyrian religion than were Jews of the same period. For a discussion of other difficulties see Keener, \textit{John}, 1:606. Should the number of the woman’s husbands beggar belief, consider Jerome’s report of a woman who had married no fewer than twenty-two times! (Letter XCCIII to Ageruchia, in \textit{Jerome: Letters and Select Works}, A Select Library of the Christian Church: Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Second Series. 6 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 233)

\textsuperscript{109} Western readers are apt to miss the significance of the point. It is not simply that her solitary trip infers she has transgressed social norms. Rather, to appear \textit{alone} in public, in a location where travellers are known to congregate, is a transgression of social norms in itself. Bailey, \textit{Middle Eastern Eyes}, 202.

\textsuperscript{110} Kruse, \textit{John}, 132.
sort attributed to Jesus in 2:24-25: “Jesus…knew all men. He did not need anybody to testify what is in men, for he knew all men.” Certainly the woman herself considers that something of this sort is going on and she voices her perception that Jesus is a prophet (4:19).

Taking Jesus to be a prophet she then raises the central religious issue in the Samaritan-Jewish conflict: “Our fathers worshipped on this mountain, and you Jews say that in Jerusalem is the place where one ought to worship” (20). Contra Brown, I do not see this as an attempt to deflect the moral question which arises in light of her questionable past. It might be added that appeal to religious authority was, in Jesus’ day, a chief means of settling matters of religious dispute. Jesus was routinely approached as an authority on religious questions (cf. Mt. 17:10; Mk. 9:28; Jn. 9:2) and once the woman identifies him as a prophet, there is nothing particularly remarkable about the question she then puts to him.

ii. An Authoritative Pronouncement

Jesus’ response, however, is most certainly remarkable. Indeed, I consider its significance has been overlooked as it seems to explain why the woman introduces Messianic speculations into the discussion (4:25), and why she so readily accepts Jesus’ subsequent Messianic claim (26). Remaining with verses 21 to 24 for the moment we see that Jesus makes three basic affirmations: he critiques both Samaritan and Jewish understandings of sacred space (21); he affirms the legitimacy of the Jewish as opposed to the Samaritan cultus (22); and he affirms the spiritual nature of true worship (24) so reintroducing the earlier theme which had twice

111 Brown, John, 1:177. It is worth here noting that this claim of a questionable past is itself influenced not a little by one’s own theological and moral viewpoint. Consider, for instance, how Jerome’s paraphrase of John 4:18 arises from his own particular view of sexual morality (Letter XCCII to Ageruchia in Jerome: Letters and Select Works, 233.. See also the discussion in Craig S. Farmer, “Changing Images of the Samaritan Woman in Early Reformed Commentaries on John,” Church History 63, no. 3 (1996): 365-75.

failed to rouse the woman to the appropriate response (10, 13-14).

That a Jew would side with Jewish over against Samaritan approaches to worship is to be expected and Jesus’ assertion that “we know what we worship” (22) is here unremarkable. What is remarkable is “neither in this mountain, nor in Jerusalem” (21) for this renders void the very idea of sacred space altogether. This conflicts with the fundamental importance of the concept in Jewish and Samaritan thought. Indeed, the vehemence of their disagreement over the location of the temple was due precisely to the enormous importance of the idea. The woman thus presumes the notion of sacred space to be a given and wants to know whether Jerusalem or Gerizim is the place ordained by God. That the entire concept of sacred space might be secondary to the spiritual dimension of worship does not occur to her.

The great significance of this becomes evident only when we recall that the Samaritan-Jewish disagreement was grounded in appeal to God’s disclosure to Moses as recorded in the Pentateuch. Both groups, it must be understood, traced their religious traditions back to God’s disclosure to Moses and both groups took the Pentateuch to be the bed-rock of their religious understanding. Importantly, however, the Samaritan version of the Pentateuch varied from the Jewish in one key aspect—the prescribed location of the divinely ordained sacred space. That such a variation could occur in such an important document that is otherwise identical raised an obvious question: who was it that introduced the variation? This question cuts to the heart of Jewish-Samaritan dispute. It was not that they disagreed over the interpretation of an identical text, but that their respective texts were unambiguously different at the critical point. Somebody had tampered with the text, distorting God’s disclosure to his prophet Moses, and the resulting strength of disagreement indicates how seriously this was taken. Thus, when Jesus questions the very notion of sacred space he is, in effect, over-ruling both Jewish and Samaritan declensions of the Pentateuch, so abrogating the Law given by Moses. He is, by implication, donning the mantle of “the prophet greater than Moses” (Deut. 18:15-20) and I
doubt the impact this would have on the Samaritan woman can be overstated. It would be at least as remarkable to her as was the cleansing of the temple in Jerusalem to the religious leaders there.

iii. Taheb: Messianic expectations in Samaritan Tradition

The implications of Jesus’ rejection of sacred space can be understood only if one has a grasp of the particular Samaritan understanding of prophet-hood and the Messiah. At the outset we should note that “messiah” was not a term used by the Samaritans but appears to have been introduced by John in preference to the Samaritan term Taheb. The Taheb was to stand in almost identical relation to the Samaritan community as had Moses with respect to Israel. Essentially he would be Moses redivivus and would wield the same authority as Moses over all matters of religious law and ceremony. Significantly, the Samaritans rejected the concept of prophet-hood except as it applied to the Taheb. In large part, this was because the prophets of Jewish tradition, in direct violation of the teaching of Moses as the Samaritans understood it, affirmed the legitimacy of the Jerusalem temple. For the Samaritans there could only be one prophet:

What sources from Samaritan tradition remain extant suggest that Samaritans denied prophets after Moses, until the final prophet like Moses would arise (Deut 18:18). Thus “the prophet” would be the Taheb, the restorer, a sort of messianic figure. … If John and his audience know this Samaritan teaching on prophets, calling Jesus “a prophet” may have been tantamount to calling him the supreme revealer after Moses.

Barrett toys with this idea, but considers it “not likely” in view of the woman’s apparently hesitant remark in v.25. Certainly, the most natural reading is that the difficult issues Jesus raises will have to await Messianic clarification and that the woman does not, therefore,

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113 The following discussion requires a most significant caveat due to the distance between the events in the narrative and our earliest sources discussing the Taeb from the 4th century C.E. On this point see Moloney, John, 133. Moloney is accordingly cautious: “It is often asserted that the Samaritan figure of the Ta ‘eb stands behind the woman’s use of the terms ‘Messiah’ and ‘Christ,’ … one cannot discount that this Samaritan background may be in mind, but it is fraught with difficulties.” (ibid., 129). Such objections are weighty, but it does seem to me unlikely that an inherently conservative group like the Samaritans, with a deep antipathy toward Jewish “corruptions” of their ancestral religion, would import wholesale the particularly Jewish notion of a Messianic figure into their religion without at least some basis in their tradition.

114 Williamson and Evans, “Samaritans,” 1060.

115 Keener, John, 1:610.

116 Barrett, John, 197.
regard Jesus as Messiah/Taheb. This is the view of Barrett, and it is shared by others.\footnote{Cf. George Raymond Beasley-Murray, *John*, 2nd ed., Word Biblical Commentary 36 (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1999), 62; Bultmann, *John*, 192; Kruse, *John*, 135.} Brown, by contrast, takes v.25 as evidence that the woman already regards Jesus as the Messiah.\footnote{Brown, *John*, 1:177.} Neither option seems to me to make satisfactory sense of the woman’s remark when considered in the context of the narrative as a whole.

The first thing to be accounted for is her apparent hesitation. This is particularly problematic for John’s Gospel where claims about Jesus are couched in quite definitive terms: “You are the Son of God, you are the King of Israel” (1:49), “We know you are a teacher come from God” (3:2), “This is truly the prophet who is to come into the world” (6:14); “Do we not rightly say that you are a Samaritan and have a demon” (8:48), and so on. As a matter of narrative strategy, when characters in the Gospel make assertions regarding Jesus’ identity we find that they are often in error, but never in doubt. So, contra Brown, I see the woman’s remark here as simply too hesitant to be a Messianic confession (or denial) of suitably Johannine form.

The second observation is that the narrative is converging upon the identification of Jesus as Messiah by the woman and her fellow villagers (42). In this respect I consider that Brown correctly identifies the trajectory of the conversation but disagree that v.25 indicates the decisive moment has come. But precisely because the narrative moves in this direction and because it reaches its culmination with Jesus’ response to this very remark, I find it unsatisfactory to suggest that v.25 represents an abandonment in the progression of thought. Surely some inkling of Jesus’ messianic identity is beginning to pervade the woman’s consciousness and she is approaching a kind of cognitive tipping-point after which there will be a downhill rush to the inevitable conclusion.\footnote{Moloney writes most appropriately of the woman’s “burgeoning Messianic confession” (*John*, 129).} We have seen Jesus rise in the woman’s estimation from being a stranger of no account, to a protagonist in religious controversy, to a...
prophet worthy of some respect. To suggest that, at the moment when the dawn of understanding is so soon to break, the woman might abandon this line of thought, seems to me quite unlikely. Just as the Gospel does not abandon the inexorable movement of the story to its conclusion, I suggest that neither should we. The woman’s comment about the coming one may well suggest some level of uncertainty, but I submit that in terms of plot it would be strange to see the abandonment of a line of reasoning which stands in such close harmony with the Gospel’s stated purpose, particularly given that line of reasoning comes to culmination in the very next verse.

My suggestion is that the woman is engaging in what is colloquially referred to as “a fishing expedition.” Here let us pause and consider what we know so far. The woman has had reason to identify Jesus as “a” prophet when, as near as we can tell, she would have equated the idea of “a” prophet with “the” prophet or Taheb. Jesus has dismissed the concept of sacred space, so effectively abrogating the teaching of Torah in either its Jewish or Samaritan declensions. In so doing he has elevated himself above Moses, the exemplar of prophet-hood in Samaritan understanding. This must, in her mind, raise a fundamental question in regards of Jesus’ identity. Is he a (the) prophet, or a fraud? With this in mind, it seems to me appropriate to read the woman’s comment as an implied question: “I know Messiah is coming and when he does he will tell us about all this. Are you the Messiah?”

Later in the Gospel we find a similar line of thinking by people who are specifically said to believe in him: “When the Christ comes, will He do more signs than these which this Man has done?” (7:31). Thus I take the woman’s remark in 4:25 to have dynamic equivalence with the question “are you the Messiah?” This is supported by the fact that the very next step in the narrative constitutes a direct answer to this very question.

If we take it that the woman already suspects that Jesus might well be the Messiah, we

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120 Moloney takes a similar view: “She has addressed Jesus as ‘a Jew’ (v.9), ‘Sir’ (vv.11, 15, 19a), ‘a prophet’ (v.19b), and now she suggests that he might be ‘a Messiah-Christ’ (v.25)” (ibid., 129-30).
have a ready explanation for another curious aspect of the narrative—her willingness to accept Jesus’ Messianic claim so readily when it is offered (26). With this understanding Jesus’ remark can be seen as a confirmation rather than a revelation, its ready reception illustrating that the woman is already largely convinced of Jesus’ Messianic status. Both the trajectory of the narrative prior to verse 25, and its rapid move to a conclusion immediately afterwards, suggest that v.25 should be seen as evidencing a strong suspicion on the woman’s part that Jesus is the Taheb. Over the course of her engagement with Jesus, the Woman of Samaria moves from a person who lacks an apprehension of spiritual things to accepting the testimony of the one who affirms that “I who speak to you am he.”

iv. The Woman of Samaria and Her Social Context(s)

On the basis of the tentative nature of the woman’s comment in v.25 I have questioned Brown’s view that we here have a confession of faith. But by the same criterion how can the equally tentative question in v.29 be taken as evidencing faith? It is true that most commentators place the decisive moment of Messianic identification between the two verses, with the abandoning of her water jar in v.26.121 This seems quite reasonable given the flow of the narrative, yet it does not serve to answer the question just posed. For that we need to give some consideration to the woman’s social context.

Critical, however, is that there are actually two social contexts in this passage. The first is obvious: the matrix of first-century Samaritan society—a matter already considered.122 What I wish now to point out is that although the first-century Samaritan context informs the woman’s interaction with her fellow villagers, it is hardly certain that it informs her interaction with Jesus. Contemporary behavioural psychology informs us that context can critically influence behaviour.123 I suggest that the context of the woman’s engagement with

122 See p.39.
Jesus was so different from her ordinary day-to-day experience that we cannot assume that it would proceed under the same rules which inform her interaction with her fellow Samaritans. Let us consider this suggestion in more detail.

Although the Woman of Samaria may well have been regarded as, and forced to play the role of, social inferior amongst her Samaritan compatriots, it is far from obvious that she would have felt herself a social inferior to Jesus. It seems to me quite likely that she would have regarded Jesus with that contempt which customarily existed between Jews and Samaritans and that her being alone would be just the thing to deliver her from any psychological pressure to maintain social conformity. Further, Jesus himself has already transgressed the boundaries of social convention, acting in an entirely inappropriate manner.\(^{124}\) The suggestion is borne out by her response. Not only does she chose to respond to Jesus when she might well have maintained stony silence, but her attitude seems downright feisty and she simply doesn’t play the role of social inferior:

In contrast to common ideals of antiquity, the woman speaks boldly and forthrightly with Jesus; in view of the expectation generated by the woman-at-the-well-type scene (esp Gen 24:18), her lack of deference would strike much of John’s audience as rude.\(^{125}\)

So my reconstruction in respects of verses 25 to 29 is this: The woman offers only a tentative remark in v.25 because she has not yet come to faith. Yet she makes mention of Messiah because Jesus—given his authoritative, prophetic insight—seems to her to fulfil the requisite criteria. Jesus’ remark in v.26 then comes as an affirmation of her intuition. With that confirmation, she accepts Jesus as Messiah, abandons her waterpot, and returns to the village. But she now finds herself in an awkward position. She has news of enormous importance but is in no position to make anything like an authoritative pronouncement regarding it. This suggestion finds some support in her compatriots’ later reference to her news as λαλια (42) or “common talk”—a turn of phrase which stands in rather stark contrast with the Johannine

\(^{124}\) Bailey, *Middle Eastern Eyes*, 202-03.

author’s description of her words as μαρτυρία or “testimony” (39). It seems that social pressure, not any sense of uncertainty, causes her to confess Jesus as Messiah in a contextually appropriate manner: a brief declaration of Jesus’ prophetic credentials followed by a rhetorical question: “Could he be the Christ?”

Two considerations suggest that v.29 is not to be taken as tentative in any case. First is the reaction of the Samaritan villagers. Whatever we might think, the villagers were moved en masse to see this man of whom the woman spoke so highly. Later they would suggest that her remarks had provided some initial grounds for belief (39). Second, we must recall that the woman’s question articulates her understanding of Jesus. This being the case, we might ask what the woman might have said if she viewed Jesus as less than the Messiah/Taheb. Surely if she thought him to be merely a prophet she would have asked “Could he be a prophet?” And if she thought him less than a prophet, why even mention him at all? Simply articulating the form her question might then take serves to illustrate the point; “Could he be a particularly perceptive Jewish pilgrim?” would border on the nonsensical. Indeed, only because she perceives Jesus to be someone of extraordinary significance would she risk acknowledging publicly what would otherwise be regarded as a scandalous dalliance. It was the difficult nature of her situation rather than any doubt on her part that led the woman to bear witness to Jesus in what seems to us, if not her contemporaries, a quite circumlocutory manner.

e. Summary

In almost every respect the Woman of Samaria stands in stark contrast with the religious leaders who so stridently oppose Jesus. Sharing none of their advantages and, by virtue of the deep antipathy which existed between Jews and Samaritans, having even more reason than they to reject Jesus, the woman nevertheless comes to trust Jesus and accept his claim to be the Messiah. That she is willing to engage with Jesus and follow the conversation to its proper conclusion shows that she suffers neither the cognitive nor the affective disabilities of the

126 Thiessen, “Jesus and Women in the Gospel of John,” 56.
religious leaders. The account thus demonstrates that the various contextual issues which confront the woman—education, gender, ethnicity, social status, and so on—are secondary to the primary issue, her need for “living water.” And although Jesus’ can be seen to play the part of (the) prophet according to what we know of Samaritan belief, yet ultimately the woman simply “sees” that his claim to be Messiah is credible and accepts it on that basis. She is not the only character in the Gospel to come to such a conclusion on the basis of a personal encounter with Jesus. Nathanael’s experience of encounter with Jesus, and its outcome, proves to be uncannily similar as our examination in the next chapter will show.

127 See p.23.
Whilst Nathanael’s story forms only a tiny part of the Johannine narrative, it nevertheless has immense importance for our study of the Johannine account of Christian faith. It presages and affirms much of the subsequent narrative, but also serves to raise thorny questions about certain aspects of the same.

I begin by drawing attention to the context of the Nathanael story. So early in the narrative is it, that we (and therefore we must presume Nathanael) have seen nothing of Jesus’ signs nor heard anything of his teaching. Moreover, there is no reason to think that Nathanael is familiar with the Baptist’s testimony in regard to Jesus in 1:19-34. That he knows nothing of those insights the reader has gained from the prologue hardly needs mentioning. Yet Nathanael is moved to confess that Jesus is “the son of God…the king of Israel” after Jesus has spoken only a few words. Such is the narrative in cursory outline. So brief is it, however, that it is easy to pass over the interesting issues it raises. For convenience sake we may consider these under three broad headings: the basis upon which Nathanael makes his confession, what precisely his confession reveals about his understanding of Jesus, and the light the passage throws upon the notions of faith and unbelief in John’s Gospel.
a. The Basis of Nathanael's Confession

The basis upon which Nathanael makes his confession is, even on a careful reading of the text, quite unclear. All indications are that Nathanael first learns about Jesus through the testimony of Philip (1:45) so his confession (49) must arise from what transpires in the few intervening verses. But we find there little obvious basis for his confession. That Philip sought Nathanael out with the news about Jesus implies some close familiarity between the two as well as some expectation on Philip’s part that Nathanael would find such news interesting, perhaps even compelling. Despite this, however, Nathanael’s response is negative; “can anything good come out of Nazareth?” (46)

Throughout the Gospel Jesus’ origin is a matter of ignorance and confusion for his contemporaries. The Prologue makes his heavenly origin clear, but only the reader of the Gospel enjoys this insight. For the characters of the Gospel things are more complicated. Jesus’ signs signal divine approval and Messianic status (3:2, 7:31). This contributes to the idea that Jesus is “a teacher come from God” (3:2) and this makes difficult any outright rejection. Yet, in line with Nathanael’s objection in 1:46 we find a fixation upon the question of Jesus’ earthly origin (6:42). More often than not this leads to Jesus’ rejection.

The assumption that “we know where this man is from” (7:27) is the real problem here, for the fact is that his contemporaries are entirely ignorant on the matter—they know nothing about either his earthly origin (which knowledge would answer their scriptural/theological objections) nor, more importantly, his heavenly origin. Curiously, however, Jesus will charge his hearers with the remark “you both know me and know where I am from” (7:28). It is a

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128 That the Johannine account is an abridged version of a longer encounter is, of course, an obvious objection to raise here. However, that very objection gives answer to itself for the simple reason that an abridgement of any value should encapsulate the points of major significance. The Gospel author has told us all that he believes we need to know such that, from the perspective of Johannine theology at least, any omitted aspects of Nathanael’s calling must be regarded as superfluous. They are certainly not recoverable and can play no part in any sober analysis of the narrative.

129 Compare the ethnic and cultural hostility which underlies the account of the Samaritan woman – we can imagine her thinking “can anything good come out of Judaism?”

130 The same consideration must, given Samaritan views of the messiah, play on the mind of the Samaritan woman even though any such reservation is not made explicit in the text.
claim which conflicts with treatment of the theme elsewhere in the Gospel, as well as with Jesus’ later claim that “you do not know where I come from and where I am going” (8:14). It has, accordingly, attracted a diverse range of interpretations.\footnote{Brown translates 7:28 as a question (“So you think you know where I am from…?”—John, 1:311) and so too Moloney (“…you know where I come from?”—John, 246). Beasley-Murray regards it as an admission proceeding a qualification (“Yes, you’re quite right that I’m from Nazareth, but…”—John, 111). The proper interpretation of the verse is hardly obvious.} If we allow that there might be a spiritual perception of Jesus’ Messianic identity that people refuse to affirm, then the explanation may prove relatively straightforward. They would “know” in one sense that Jesus is more than merely human, but in failing to believe they would not “know” the full significance of their own intuitions. It would be a case of people refusing to acknowledge Jesus’ Messianic identity not because they cannot apprehend it, but because they choose to stifle that apprehension. They would be in a state of denial, failing to be entirely honest even with themselves.

In Nathanael’s case, however, the objection does not prove fatal, for Nathanael is prepared to put his reservations on hold and accept Philip’s invitation to “come and see.” (46)\footnote{Cf. the “come, see…” of the Samaritan woman in 4:29.} It is apparent that Nathanael is not at this juncture to be regarded as a believer but this will change in startling fashion when Nathanael encounters Jesus. Two aspects of that encounter are remarkable. First, the speed with which Nathanael is lead to confess that Jesus is “the Son of God…the King of Israel” (1:49). Second, the extraordinarily opaque nature of the reasoning which lies behind that transformation. As the Gospel portrays it, only two remarks by Jesus are necessary in order to move Nathanael from a curious observer willing to “come and see” to a proclaiming believer.

This is a radical transformation on Nathanael’s part, and we would expect that it occurs because of some radical occurrence, yet it is not at all clear precisely what that occurrence may be. Clearly Nathanael is responding to Jesus’ comments in v.47 (“Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no deceit!”) and v.48 (“Before Philip called you, when you were under the
fig tree, I saw you.”) and it will require careful treatment to determine by what logic Nathanael was inspired to a confession of Jesus’ Messianic identity.

Jesus’ remark in v.47 clearly stands in some relation to his ability to “read” people (cf. 2:25; “…he knew what was in man”) and this point seems to me critical. I will discuss below Chrysostom’s suggestion that Nathanael’s initial objection, appealing as it does to prophetic tradition, is cause for approval rather than criticism. For now, I note simply that Nathanael obtains no answer to his objection regarding Jesus’ origins even though it would have been easy enough to obtain: “I was born in Bethlehem,” is all Jesus need say. What we see instead is a two-part response. First, Jesus affirms Nathanael as “an Israelite in whom is no guile” (47). This might be taken as nothing more than servile flattery if not for the second part of the response, an enigmatic “Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.” (48). That Philip called Nathanael might have been nothing more than inference from the fact that Philip brought Nathanael to Jesus. But the subsequent reference to the fig tree has greatly puzzled commentators. Amongst other explanations have been suggestions that it is a metaphorical allusion to study of the Law, to the shadow of sin, or to worldly temptation. Yet these, I suggest, are rather too mundane to account for Nathanael’s response. Indeed, it is his response which I regard as the key to the narrative, for it is explicable only if Jesus’ remark about the fig tree, so very obscure to us, is sufficient to overwhelm Nathanael’s initial reservations. So significant is Jesus’ remark in v.48 that Nathanael acknowledges Jesus’ Messianic identity despite his reservations regarding Jesus’ origins going unanswered.

I can think of no other explanation than to affirm the utter obscurity of Jesus’ remark. Were it amenable to commonplace interpretation, Nathanael’s dramatic response is surely rendered entirely inexplicable. But if we regard it as grounded in the same sort of supernatural

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133 Keener, John, 1:486.
134 Augustine, Sermon 174.4 cited in Elowsky, John 1-10, 85.
135 Ambrose, Concerning Virgins 1.1.3-4 cited in ibid.
insight which we see in places such as 4:17-18, thus a remark the deep significance of which only Nathanael could possibly grasp, then we can make some sense of Nathanael’s abrupt transition from doubter to believer. His relationship with Philip has given Nathanael some knowledge of Philip’s character, and so some prima facie justification for accepting his testimony. So when Philip claims he has found the one “of whom Moses in the law, and also the prophets wrote” then Nathanael does have something like evidence for believing Jesus to be the Messiah. Nathanael has questioned this claim on the basis of a quite legitimate objection, grounded in Jewish Scripture, regarding Jesus’ origins. But Jesus’ prophetic word confronts Nathanael with a situation so remarkable that it overcomes his otherwise unanswered objections and leads him to affirm Philip’s claim by proclaiming Jesus to be the Son of God and the King of Israel (49).

b. Nathanael’s Understanding of Jesus as “the Christ, the King of Israel”

It is helpful to consider precisely what Nathanael’s confession reveals about his understanding of Jesus. Obviously a developed Christology is far beyond the horizon of Nathanael’s thought-world and the point of Jesus’ “do you believe?” (50) must then be that Nathanael’s faith is inadequate even in terms of Johannine Christology. Yet recognition of Jesus as the Christ and Son of God is the Gospel’s raison d’être (20:31) and this means we must inquire why the Gospel portrays a confession such a Nathanael’s in a negative light. An important clue is found later in the Gospel where many disciples turn away (6:60-71), leading Jesus to question the commitment even of the Twelve (67). In that episode the crowd, having identified Jesus as “the Prophet who is to come into the world” (6:14), purpose to take him by force and make him king (15). Jesus’ refusal to take to himself such a dubious honour, and his highly contentious living bread teaching (6:22-59), indicates that the crowd have radically misconstrued the nature of his ministry despite their earlier confession being technically correct. Clearly it is one thing to ascribe to Jesus the title of “the Prophet” or “the Christ” or,
as Nathanael does, “the King of Israel.” It is another thing altogether to grasp that title’s true significance and to respond appropriately. Moloney correctly suggests that such confessions are bound by culture, religion, and history, and this has inevitable implications for understanding. Many of Jesus’ contemporaries clearly used the right terms, but due to cultural, religious, and historical factors, endued them with a host of misunderstandings.

Because of this risk of misunderstanding, the Gospel not only affirms Jesus’ Messianic identity but also seeks to clarify what that identity entails. For Jesus’ contemporaries “Messiah” was one who would physically reign as king over a re-established Jewish state. For the Johannine author (writing from a post-resurrection perspective) Messiah would be the Lamb of God who would give his life for the sins of the world. In that context we should not miss the potentially disastrous misunderstanding latent in Nathanael’s confession, particularly the second part: “You are the King of Israel!” His confession was certainly laudable as far as it goes, but it may well have been too ridden with misconceptions to pass without scrutiny. A parallel case exists with claims that Jesus was “from God” (3:1; 9:33). Many Messianic pretenders made just that claim, but this meant no more than to have been chosen by God in order to deliver Israel from its enemies. Those making such a claim could easily gather a large following quite willing to resort to violent action in pursuit of a political agenda. However, Jesus’ claim to be “from God” was of a vastly different order. He does not claim to be an ordinary human chosen for political and military leadership, and although he will certainly shake the foundations of the established order, he will not do so by force of arms. Rather, he proclaims himself to be the “Son of God,” standing in unique relationship with the Father and decisive for all humanity. It is hardly surprising that Jesus’ contemporaries, perceiving the magnitude of his claim but unable to comprehend his identity or purpose, therefore dismissed him as seditious, blasphemous, or both.

It is important that we not be too negative in our appraisal of Nathanael, however, for

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136 Moloney, John, 56.
although Jesus questions Nathanael’s confession he adds an extraordinarily positive remark: “You will see greater things than these…you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.” (50-51) Clearly Nathanael is going on to bigger and better things, and, indeed, he will be found to be with Jesus at the end (21:1). It is important, however, that we stop to consider the allusion which Jesus is making to Jacob’s dream at Bethel (Gen. 28:10-22). There, awakening from a dream in which he sees angels ascending and descending between heaven and earth, Jacob declares “Surely the Lord is in the place, and I did not know it.…This is the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven!” (16,17) Here we have another appropriation of Old Testament imagery of the sort common in the Gospel (cf. 2:19-21, 6:35, 15:1 et passim). Such imagery suggests that Jesus is to be understood as the locus of God’s revelatory activity fulfilling (and therefore superseding) the various institutions which were the core expression of Judaism. Of critical importance for present purposes is Jacob’s awestruck “I did not know it” together with the mundane ordinariness of the location. Prior to his dream Jacob had no notion that “the Lord is in this place,” nor would it be apparent to later passers-by who would see only a nondescript stone pillar. Jesus, too, is singularly inconspicuous: “There stands among you one you do not know” (1:26) and the majority pass by oblivious to his divine origin or messianic identity. There are, however, those to whom God’s revelation will come and these will share Jacob’s amazement in encountering the living God in an unexpected quarter. Nathanael is one such, the Woman of Samaria another. No ordinary epistemological account will prove adequate to explain that insight into reality which can only be given from above.

c. Faith and Unbelief in John’s Gospel

Nathanael’s story throws no small light on the notions of faith and unbelief in the Gospel. That faith is spiritual in nature, grounded in some sort of spiritual perception, would explain the lack of any obvious basis for Nathanael’s confession in v.49. The absence of any sign of
the sort narrated elsewhere in the Gospel is significant given that such absence does not rest at all easily with the narrative strategy. I discuss this elsewhere\textsuperscript{137} and all that need be said here is that Nathanael’s story comprises part of that sustained critique which the Gospel offers against the idea that the relationship between signs and faith is a simple one.

The Gospel also suggests an interesting relationship between scripture and faith. Here we should not overlook the fact that Nathanael’s objection concerning Jesus’ origin is grounded in scripture and, to that extent, comprises grounds for praise rather than criticism. Chrysostom suggests that Jesus praises Nathanael (“an Israelite without guile”) precisely because he was prepared to submit Philip’s claim to have found the Messiah to the test of scripture:

…Nathanael had considered the writings of the prophets more than Philip. For he had heard from the Scriptures that Christ must come from Bethlehem, and from the village in which David was…so when he heard that Jesus was “from Nazareth,” he was confounded and doubted, not finding the announcement of Philip to agree with the prediction of the prophet.\textsuperscript{138}

Thus, although Philip appeals to the writings of Moses and the prophets (45), it is Nathanael who evidences the clearer grasp of their message. Moreover, Nathanael is hardly the only person who will voice such an objection and we find that the question of Jesus’ origin reoccurs time and again. The objection is clearly an important one, and it is therefore instructive to inquire as to how the Gospel addresses it.

We may in the first instance helpfully contrast the approach taken to the question of Jesus’ origins in John’s Gospel with that taken in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. These both recount the curious circumstances of Jesus’ birth and infancy, thus making clear from the outset that those who reject Jesus because of his earthly origins do so because of a misconception. John’s Gospel, however, takes a quite different approach. Here Jesus’ earthly origins remain shrouded in mystery such that the reader to some extent shares the problem which confronts Jesus’ contemporaries: how can Jesus of Nazareth be Messiah when Moses

\textsuperscript{137} See p.22.

\textsuperscript{138} Chrysostom, Homilies on the Gospel of John 20.1 cited in Elowsky, John 1-10, 84.
and the prophets seem to deny the possibility? The Gospel resolves this problem through a sustained focus on Jesus’ heavenly origin. This is most starkly seen in the Prologue’s account of the pre-existent Logos, but this is bolstered by reoccurring references to Jesus’ heavenly origin throughout the Gospel. By making Jesus’ heavenly origin clear from the outset, the Prologue establishes the irony for which the Gospel is renowned. Aware of Jesus’ heavenly origin the reader is permitted a wry smile at the objection which Nathanael raises in 1:46, and a groan of despair at the more hostile objections which come later.

Yet we should not too quickly pass over the fact that the expectations of Jesus’ contemporaries were held on the basis of what “Moses in the law, and also the prophets, wrote.” Given the significance of the issue, it was entirely appropriate for them to ask to what extent any individual, Jesus included, fulfilled the requisite scriptural criteria. The prima facie legitimacy of their objection, however, survives only as long as it takes for us to observe that all appeals to scripture in support of whatever position are exegetically conditioned. All too often there is an inability to recognise that one’s reading of scripture might be in error—a point the Gospel itself makes (5:39-40). There is, it turns out, the possibility that exegetical tradition can obscure rather than clarify the message of Scripture. We might here return to Chrysostom: “These sayings were not on the surface or out in the open but hidden very deep like some treasure. Anyone who searches for hidden things, unless they are careful and diligent, will never find the object of their search.”139 It was lack of care and diligence which, according to Chrysostom, was precisely the problem facing Jesus’ contemporaries who “did not actually listen to what the Scripture had to say but merely prided themselves on the bare reading.”140

Here it is interesting to note that the issue of Messiah’s origin is not so clear-cut as those influenced by Christian tradition might suppose. In that tradition there exists the perception

139 Chrysostom, Homilies on the Gospel of John 41.1, cited in ibid., 205.
140 Ibid.
that the Jewish scriptures very strongly and very clearly locate the birth of messiah in Bethlehem. The Synoptic infancy narratives, especially the citation of Micah 5:2 in Matthew 2:4-6, have played no small part in forming this perception. One may well be surprised, then, when one turns to the Jewish scriptures and finds that not only does Micah 5:2 stand alone in connecting the birth of messiah to Bethlehem, but that it does so in rather ambiguous fashion. That ambiguity is seen in Jewish tradition where messiah’s origin is a matter of much conjecture. It is an ambiguity well portrayed in the treatment of the theme in the canonical gospels. Here we have the Bethlehem tradition recorded in the Synoptics, but also the characters of John’s Gospel voicing a range of opinions. Some seem to have a clear expectation regarding messiah’s origin (1:46; 7:52) whilst others claim that “when the Christ comes, no one knows where He is from” (7:27). Amongst Christians such questions were settled by the historical fact of Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem\footnote{Here I take it that the belief that Jesus was born in Bethlehem preceded the early Christian appropriation of Micah 5:2 as Messianic proof-text. In so doing, I am consciously rejecting the claim that the Gospel birth narratives were tailored in order to follow Jewish messianic expectations—those expectations, as I argue in the text, being hardly so definitive as to make such an accommodation necessary, or even possible, in any case. Thus, I affirm the principle expounded by Boussett: “Das Verhältnis ist vielmehr umzukehren: unmittelbar im Kult sich äußernde Frömmigkeit ist das erste, dann kommt die Schriftgelehrsamkeit hinzu” which Thyssen paraphrases as “The doctrine comes first. The learned scriptural demonstration comes afterwards.” (cited in Henrik Pontoppidan Thyssen, “Philosophical Christology in the New Testament,” Numen: International Review for the History of Religions 53, no. 2 (April 2006): 136).} but for a first-century Jew the question was, or should have been, a live one. And it is this “should have been” which is the rub, for given the lack of clear scriptural proclamation on the matter, and given the resultant exegetical uncertainty, it should be clear that the only way in which any of Jesus’ contemporaries could reject Jesus on the basis of his purported birthplace was to give undue credence to exegetical tradition. Thus Jesus’ critique of those who “search the scriptures…but are not willing to come to me” (5:39-40). Add to this the fact that Jesus was not, in fact, “of Nazareth” or “from Galilee” and we have a dangerous mix of dogmatism and ignorance: dogmatism regarding the interpretation of scripture and ignorance regarding Jesus’ true origin.

Against this background we now see how Nathanael’s encounter with Jesus provides a
micro-study in the internal logic of the Gospel as a whole and thereby its importance in the narrative. The objections which arose in respect of Jesus’ origins should be seen as grounded in an exegetical tradition which has ossified to such a point that certain legitimate options are no longer open for consideration. Such objections entail a certain blindness to alternative readings which is itself evidence of an inability or an unwillingness to reappraise exegetical traditions in the light of experience. It is precisely the willingness to put aside his preconceptions and to allow his encounter with Jesus to shape his understanding which marks Nathanael out as “an Israelite in whom is no guile” (1:47). What we have here, in narrative terms, is a declaration early in the Gospel which condemns as illegitimate the sort of objections which we find in 1:46, 7:27, and 7:52, thus making clear that the exegetical tradition regarding Messiah’s origin is insufficient reason to reject Jesus as Messiah. Those who cling to tradition are here doubly blind for not only can they not “see” Jesus as he truly is, they can not, because of their own self-important posturing, see the shortcomings of their own position—substantially the same point made in passages such as the story of the man born blind (cf. 9:41 in particular), and the Woman of Samaria (4:1-21).

d. Summary

While Nathanael, by virtue of his gender and Jewishness, enjoys a number of advantages over the Woman of Samaria, the account gives us no reason to conclude that these play any significant part in his identification of Jesus as the Christ. Indeed, like the Woman of Samaria, Jesus initially confounds Nathanael’s religious expectations and we may take it that his willingness to reconsider his previous religious certainties is precisely what leads Jesus to proclaim him “a true Israelite, in whom is no deceit.” Further parallels to the Woman of Samaria are seen in absence of signs from the narrative, and Jesus’ deeply personal and prophetic insight by which Jesus transcends ordinary categories of thought and wins acknowledgement of his Messianic status. Unlike the later account of the Woman of Samaria,
however, we find no allusion to the Holy Spirit here. We do, however, find a most curious critique of Nathanael’s confession which, considered against the Old Testament background, suggests that Nathanael will come to “see” Jesus with spiritual eyes. Nathanael must go beyond the understanding of Jesus expressed in his initial confession, and this points to a major theme in the Gospel—that of discipleship. This is, roughly, the idea that the *sine qua non* of Christian faith is relationship with Jesus and that such relationship can be had even whilst one remains to some extent uncertain, perhaps even mistaken, regarding Jesus’ teachings and person. The point will be amply illustrated in our next study where we consider those men who, together with Nathanael, were the closest of Jesus’ companions.
Chapter 6
The Twelve

We turn now to that core group of Jesus’ disciples referred to as “the Twelve.” These men are notable because of their intimacy with Jesus and their prominence in the early Christian movement, and we might expect that these first and, ostensibly, most committed of Jesus’ followers would be the model of Christian discipleship. Yet whilst their commitment to Jesus is largely beyond question, their grasp of his teaching and person is often woefully deficient. From first to last one of their most notable characteristics is their obtuseness. I will argue that the Twelve are, in fact, to be taken as “model disciples” but only when we rightly grasp what their story tell us about the essential nature of Christian discipleship.

a. The Calling of the Twelve (John 1:35-2:12)

Of Jesus’ twelve disciples, only four besides Nathanael find particular mention in the first chapter of the Gospel: Andrew and an unnamed disciple (35-40), Andrew’s brother Simon Peter (41-42), and Philip (43-44). I take their experiences as representative, however, and will speak of “the calling of the Twelve” despite the obvious numerical shortfall. The text locates their respective encounters with Jesus in “Bethabara beyond Jordan, where [the Baptist] was baptising” (28, cf. 43). Although very cursory, the accounts are of no small significance. The signs of Jesus are prominent by their absence and this, as I remarked in the case of Nathanael,
serves to subvert the Gospel’s declared narrative strategy.¹⁴²

In many respects, Jesus’ relationship with the Twelve was quite normal:

John portrays the relationship between Jesus and his closest followers in terms of the customary teacher-disciple relationship in first-century Judaism. This entails Jesus’ assuming the role of teacher by instructing his disciples through word and action, protecting them from harm, and providing for their needs; and the disciples’ assuming the role of faithful followers, including the performance of menial tasks and the perpetuation of their Master’s teaching.¹⁴³

Thus we see that the Twelve are routinely found in Jesus’ company: at the wedding in Cana (2:2, 12); in Samaria (4:27); by the sea of Galilee (6:3); and at the raising of Lazarus (11:7,16,54). Although not a prominent theme in the Gospel, we do find evidence that the Twelve participated in Jesus’ ministry (4:1-2, 38). Whatever their faults, they are with Christ “from the beginning” and will bear witness to him at the end as the backbone of the early Christian movement (15:27).

Yet there is one significant difference. In contrast to the normal practice of first-century Jewish Rabbis who took for their disciples those who approached them, Jesus chooses his disciples for himself.¹⁴⁴ This is, in part, a consequence of his self-understanding. He “relied on his consciousness of having been sent by God and his resultant spiritual authority rather than on rabbinic training.”¹⁴⁵ It is clear that Jesus, like other Rabbis, seeks to attract a following, yet he is willing to reject (2:24) and offend (6:22-71) those who would be his followers. Here his ability to read a person’s character and circumstances is important. Such an ability lies behind his choosing of the Twelve (6:70-71; 15:19. cf. 1:47-48; 2:23-25; 4:17-18). There are some remarks which concern the Twelve in particular: they were given to Jesus by the Father (17:6); they are “not of the world” (15:19; 17:14,16) just as Jesus was “not of the world” (17:6); and for this reason he chose them out of the world (15:19). I take these to be a particular application to the Twelve of the Gospel’s general remarks regarding those who

¹⁴² See pp. 22 and 60.
become followers of Christ.

The later prominence of the Twelve, therefore, is not simply a matter of mere historical circumstance. Jesus’ choice of the Twelve is decisive, but this choice is intimately related to his ability to read people. Jesus calls these particular men to be his most intimate disciples precisely because he sees what he can expect of them: faithfulness from beginning to end. This alone marks the Twelve out from all others. Certainly they are not chosen for their profound grasp of who Jesus is, and what he has come to do. Clearly the Twelve also make a choice to follow Jesus, but it is moot to argue where the prerogative lies. The Gospel lays emphasis upon the one who “gives light to every person” (1:9), and so the faithfulness of the Twelve is expressed as a matter of the Father’s gift, Jesus’ power and Scriptural fulfilment: “Those whom You gave Me I have kept; and none of them is lost except the son of perdition, that the Scripture might be fulfilled” (17:12).

b. Personal Relationship, Trust, and the Call to Follow Jesus

The pre-existing personal relationships amongst the Twelve are of no small importance in that they provide a network along which news of Jesus the Messiah can spread. Philip’s witness to Nathanael (45) merely implies some such pre-existing relationship, but otherwise the point is brought out quite explicitly. Andrew and his unnamed companion are fellow disciples of John the Baptist (35) while Andrew and Simon Peter are brothers. Philip, who responds to Jesus’ rather curt “follow me” (43), is from the home town of Andrew and Simon Peter (44). Not every person who becomes a follower of Jesus does so within such a relational context, of course. One thinks in particular of the the Woman of Samaria (4:1-42) who is separated from Jesus by virtue of gender, ethnicity, religion, and social standing and yet comes to confess him as the Christ. Yet even here establishment of trust is an important matter.146 At an even higher level, we should not overlook the fact that John’s Gospel is itself testimony in written form which the reader is urged to accept as a credible account of the person and work of Jesus

146 See p.40.
Christ. Even the very nature of the narrative is such as to solicit the reader’s trust.\footnote{Culpepper, Anatomy, 48–49.} Further, once a decision to follow Jesus is made, the person then becomes part of a community in which Jesus’ Messianic identity is confessed and further revealed. Overall, we may say that there is a good case for the view that the knowledge of Jesus’ Messianic status is a socially mediated form of knowledge, and that testimony is a prime epistemological category in the Gospel account. As testimony is an essentially relational concept, trust is a prerequisite to its acceptance. It is unremarkable, then, that the theme of relationship should find prominent place in a Gospel which so emphasises testimony.

c. Titles ascribed to Jesus at the Outset of the Gospel

The account of the calling of the twelve contains a number of titles/descriptions of Christological significance: “Lamb of God!” (1:35), “Rabbi” (38), “Messiah” (41), “Him of whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote” (45), and “Rabbi…Son of God…King of Israel!” (49). These are not all of equal significance in the Gospel. The first, “Lamb of God,” does not appear again in the Gospel and we can make little of it. Indeed, its meaning is unclear even to modern scholarship.\footnote{A brief discussion of the issues can be found in I. Howard Marshall, “Lamb of God,” in Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels, ed. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 432–34.} “Rabbi” is a common honorific title which has no necessary connection to messianic concepts (cf. 3:26) and is found on the lips of those such as Nicodemus whose understanding of Jesus is clearly regarded as inadequate (3:2). The remaining three titles are overtly messianic yet, as Jesus retort to Nathanael implies, their use need not indicate a deep understanding of their significance. Indeed, the passage in which these titles occur is bracketed by narrative elements which suggest that the full import of the titles was not fully appreciated at the first. Andrew and his unnamed companion (35–40) were surely privy to the events narrated in vv.19–27, yet it hardly seems likely that they were any more perceptive than either the religious leaders who failed to identify the Messiah (26) or

\footnote{See p.58.}
their own master who acknowledged that “I did not know him” (31). Likewise, the account of
the wedding in Cana (2:1-11) is significant inasmuch as it is only here, after the first of Jesus’
signs, that the disciples are said to believe (11). The implication of this is that the disciple’s
initial confessions are not indicative of full understanding, from which it follows that faith is
progressive in nature.\textsuperscript{150} Not surprisingly, then, Gospel portrays an increasing grasp of Jesus’
person and significance as intrinsic to Christian discipleship.

Brown has suggested that these early confessions are actually a retrojection of post-
resurrection understandings of Jesus’ identity, using the occasion of the disciple’s call to
summarise discipleship in its whole development.\textsuperscript{151} I regard this as plausible, but it should
not lead us to conclude that Jesus’ followers could not have used such titles from the first
albeit in some limited sense. This begs the significant question as to how Jesus’ followers
initially understood him. It seems to me obvious that they must have had some grasp of his
person and significance, for they would not have been his followers otherwise. It also seems
obvious that this understanding would expand and deepen as they lived in relationship with
Jesus, seeing his signs, hearing his teaching, and, most important, gaining insight into his
character. There seems to me no difficulty in placing such confessions in the mouths of the
first disciples, only we may not, as Brown correctly implies, imagine that they meant by them
to express a fully-developed, post-resurrection Christology. Here my remarks regarding
Nathanael’s confession apply and I reiterate the earlier suggestion: that the Gospel both
asserts Jesus’ Messianic identity and expounds what the concept of Messiah entails.\textsuperscript{152} Indeed,
at least one author argues that guiding the reader in just such progressive illumination is the
entire point of the Gospel.\textsuperscript{153}

I conclude that even though those mentioned in 1:35-42 certainly follow Jesus because

\textsuperscript{150} Brown, John, 1:105.
\textsuperscript{151} Ibid., 1:78.
\textsuperscript{152} See p.58.
\textsuperscript{153} Countryman, Mystical Way.
they regard him as “the Lamb of God,” “Rabbi,” “Messiah,” and so on, the use of these titles is no certain indicator that those using them have any profound insight into their significance. Such a perception is reinforced as we follow the portrayal of the Twelve in the remainder of the Gospel. It is, in my view, best to regard 1:35-51 as serving a similar purpose to the Prologue: providing the reader with insights which may inform the reading of the text even though I certainly consider it so likely as to be nearly certain that the disciples would have made reference to Jesus using these very titles.

d. The Failure to Comprehend

i. Significant Omissions in the Feeding of the Multitude

Whilst the Gospel’s portrayal of the Twelve is anything but idealised it is nevertheless not as negative as it might be. We see this in the Johannine account of the feeding of the multitude (6:1-71) which omits a number of negative elements found in the Synoptics. The Gospel includes mention of Jesus walking on the sea (15-20) noting that the twelve were afraid at the sight (19). In the Markan account of a similar episode (Mk. 6:45-52) the disciple’s response is attributed to their misunderstanding of the miracle of the loaves and fishes (52). The different order of events in John’s Gospel makes inclusion of such a comment impossible, but we should not miss that the fundamental point of the Markan aside is to point to the disciple’s limited grasp of Jesus’ messianic identity—which point surely applies in the Johannine passage yet passes without comment. All four Gospels conclude the feeding of the multitude with the Petrine confession (Jn. 6:66-69. cf. Mt. 16:13-20; Mk. 8:27-30; Lk. 9:18-21) although John’s Gospel replaces Jesus’ stinging rebuke of Peter (“Get behind me, Satan!” - Mt. 16:23; Mk. 8:33) with the ambiguous: “Did I not choose you, the twelve, and one of you is a devil?” (6:70). A parenthetical remark informs us that this is a reference to Judas (71). Finally, only John’s Gospel mentions a failed attempt by the crowd to make Jesus king by force (6:15) which failure ends in many turning away (66). The Twelve, unphased by this turn
of events, remain faithful to Jesus. Thus, the Johannine account lays emphasis upon their faithfulness in a way the Synoptic accounts do not.

Otherwise, however, the Gospel makes clear the Twelve’s failure to comprehend Jesus’ full significance. In the account of the Woman of Samaria (4:27-38) they fail to grasp the missional nature of Jesus’ ministry. That Jesus regards a woman as worthy of consideration amazes them (27), a fact connected to their inability to grasp the widespread human need which lies all around them (35) and which drives Jesus’ actions (32). The same lack of comprehension is shown at the raising of Lazarus (11:1-44). This event is of great importance in the Gospel154 serving to illustrate that the Father has granted Jesus full power over death (5:21, 25, 28-29; 6:40; 10:17-18). Yet none of the characters display any appreciation that Jesus is “the resurrection and the life” (11:25). Neither do Jesus’ opponents grasp this. For them the raising of Lazarus is the last straw, leading them to take what would have been decisive action against any other than the Lord of Life himself (45-54). The Lazarus pericope merely implies what the Gospel elsewhere makes explicit, namely that the time when the Twelve will properly grasp Jesus’ identity lies in the future. Not in the resurrection of Lazarus will the disciples apprehend Jesus to be Lord of Life, but the fulfilment of his claim to be able to lay down his own life and take it up again (10:17-18). Until then, there is much that the Twelve will be incapable of understanding (2:20-22; 12:16; 20:9).

ii. Uncertainty At the Final Supper

The Twelve’s lack of comprehension continues to be seen during, and beyond, their last hours with Jesus. In Jesus’ symbolic washing of the disciple’s feet (13:1-17) they “do not understand” (7) an act which is representative of Jesus’ entire concept of leadership (16) and which carries implications for the disciple’s own behaviour (17). The Farewell Discourse (13:31-17:26) contains several instances of misunderstanding. When Philip states “show us the Father and it is sufficient for us” (14:8), Jesus responds by asking “Have I been with you

so long, and yet you have not known Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; so how can you say, ‘Show us the Father’?” (9). Contrary to Peter’s protests that he is willing to die for Jesus’ sake (13:37), Jesus predicts his three-fold denial (38). Peter’s misplaced self-confidence and eventual failure is representative of the Twelve as a whole (15:31-33 cf. 11:16). This failure may be traced to an inadequate faith which cannot withstand the hour of trial (16:30b-31). That the trial has been predicted beforehand (15:32) and words of encouragement spoken (14:27-31) ought to issue in belief (14:29; 16:1-4 cf. 11:42). In the event, this only serves to make failure of belief all the more poignant when it occurs. There is an interesting moment in this discussion when Jesus acknowledges that “I have spoken to you in figurative language; but the time is coming when … I will tell you plainly about the Father.” (16:25). Momentarily, the disciples respond positively (29-30) but Jesus again questions their understanding (31-32). As the narrative continues, we see Peter, lacking an appreciation of what Christ must do, lash out at those who come to arrest him (18:10-11). The scattering of the Twelve following Jesus’ arrest is not mentioned, but later we find them in hiding for fear of the religious leaders (20:19).

Even after the resurrection, the portrayal of the Twelve is reserved. The first witness to the resurrection is not one of the Twelve, but Mary Magdalene (20:11-18) who is the first to visit the tomb (20:1) and reports the resurrection to Simon Peter and “the other disciple, whom Jesus loved” (2). Both come to the tomb and one believes (8) even though “they did not know the Scripture, that He must rise again from the dead” (9). The two return home (10) leaving Mary Magdalene behind to become the first witness of the risen Christ (11-17). This she reports to the disciples (18). That such an honour goes to a woman is remarkable given first-century attitudes on gender issues. In the Markan account the disciples disbelieve Mary’s report (Mk. 16:11) but, as in the account of the feeding of the multitude, John’s Gospel omits any such negative comment. Yet the theme of misunderstanding continues. The familiar story
of “doubting Thomas” (20:24-29) contains a the demand for hard evidence which is a matter of frequent comment. Yet we should not overlook the fact that the Twelve, who were gathered in secret for fear of the Jews (19), only became “glad when they saw the Lord” after they themselves received exactly this same evidence (20). The final post-resurrection appearance by the sea of Galilee continues to imply a lack of full apprehension (21:1-14). A failure to recognise Jesus when he appears (4) suggests to me that mention of a return to previous occupations is significant: it appears that, despite Jesus’ teaching in the farewell discourse, the disciples had yet to grasp God’s future intentions and the part they would play in bringing them about. It seems they had not grasped the significance of Jesus’ earlier talk of an ongoing ministry of the Spirit.

e. Summary

Although the Twelve are convinced of Jesus’ Messianic status, and their personal loyalty to him is largely beyond question, they still evidence a remarkable inability to grasp even the most significant aspects of his person or ministry. In this regard, their portrayal in the Gospel serves to expand upon Jesus’ interaction with Nathanael. There Jesus had affirmed Nathanael’s personal integrity, and substantially confirmed the genuineness of his confession, yet had questioned the adequacy of his understanding. The Gospel’s account of the Twelve offers us an explanation of this, for the important matter is clearly not that one fully apprehend all that Jesus says and does, but that one sees him as decisive for one’s religious understanding. With such a mindset, one is prepared to put aside reservations and uncertainties and commit to following Jesus. Either one trusts him and all he claims, or one does not. Such trust comes not by way of inference but through the enlivening and enlightening agency of the Holy Spirit. On that subject, John’s Gospel has much to say.
Chapter 7

The Holy Spirit/Paraclete

Our final “character” is one of the Gospel’s most important. The Holy Spirit has been at work throughout the Gospel, yet without claiming centre-stage. We have seen his effects as many come to faith in Jesus, yet we have seen neither from whence he comes, nor to where he goes (3:8). In Jesus’ final teaching to his disciples (13:1-17:26) we find it is after Jesus’ departure that the work of the Holy Spirit (or “Paraclete” from the Greek παράκλητος) will come to prominence (16:17).

To identify the the Paraclete as the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, is not uncontroversial but the arguments are well known and I will not retrace them here. Suffice to say that I assume that identification in the following. This question of identity is, in any case, not so very important given my interest lies in the epistemic role of the Paraclete/Holy Spirit as presented in the Gospel. Over and above the explicit comments made on this point, I also consider the implied epistemology of the Gospel. The Gospel is, after all, a post-resurrection account of the earthly activities of Jesus of Nazareth and as such owes not a little to the Spirit’s influence. We must consider what is involved in the suggestion that people can come to faith, not as a consequence of meeting in person the historical Jesus of Nazareth, but as a consequence of reading about him in the Gospel or in hearing the kerygma of the church.
proclaimed. I will argue that the Holy Spirit plays a critical role as epistemic agent in this process.

a. The Paraclete Sayings of the Farewell Discourse

The Farewell Discourse (13:1-17:26) contains within it four references to “the Paraclete” (Greek: παράκλητος: 14:15-17; 14:26; 15:26; 16:1-11) and one to the Holy Spirit (16:12-15). There is some debate as to the meaning of the term παράκλητος and as to the identity and nature of the Paraclete. A particular question is whether our understanding should be cast in personal or impersonal terms.155 Here I will take the Paraclete to be a person156 identical with the Holy Spirit (14:16-17).157 The term “Paraclete” I take to be a functional description rather than a proper name158 such that the terms “Paraclete” and “Holy Spirit” stand in an analogous relation to “Saviour” and “Jesus.” To speak of the Holy Spirit as Paraclete is to speak of one particular aspect of the work which he comes into the world to perform. In what follows the terms Spirit/Holy Spirit and Paraclete may be taken as synonymous.

i. John 14:15-17

The gift of the Paraclete is dependent upon love for Jesus and obedience to his commands (15). Yet Jesus’ disciples often lacked spiritual insight and even abandoned Jesus in his hour of need and “it was to disciples like these that Jesus promised the Counsellor.”159 Thus, we cannot think that perfect love or perfect obedience is required.160 It is because Jesus asks the Father (16) that the Paraclete will come, not because of the disciples’ own piety. That

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156 Guthrie argues for the personhood of the Paraclete on the following grounds; (1) the functions of the Paraclete are those of a personal agent; (2) Jesus description (another Paraclete - 14:16) shows him to be as personal as Jesus himself; and (3) use of the masculine (rather than neuter) pronoun ekeinos in 16:13. He concludes; “By no stretch of the imagination can the teaching in these Paraclete sayings be made to refer to impersonal force.” Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Leicester, Eng.: Inter-Varsity Press, 1981), 531.
157 Note that it is only if one makes the identification of the Paraclete with the Holy Spirit that 16:12-15 may be included among the Paraclete sayings of the Farewell Discourse.
158 That “Paraclete” is a function and not a proper name may to some extent explain why references to the Paraclete do not more strongly imply personhood of the Paraclete.
159 Kruse, *John*, 305.
160 Cf. the discussion of the Twelve in the previous chapter.
the Father would send the Paraclete at the Son’s request, speaks to us of the intimacy of relationship between the Father and the Son. By indwelling the disciples (17) they will share this intimacy: “On that day you will realise that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you.” (20).

Jesus’ departure does not, therefore, end his relationship with his disciples. Indeed, it actually serves to advance that relationship, for “the coming of the Holy Spirit was not merely to supply the absence of the Son but to complete His presence.”[161] For this reason the Paraclete is called another Paraclete (16) who, amongst other functions, will be the indwelling presence of the Father and the Son in the lives of the disciples.

Throughout the Gospel it is seen that the knowledge of Jesus as the Christ is spiritual and as such not open to humans in their “natural” state. They must, rather, be “born again” (3:3, 5-8) if they are to grasp spiritual realities. The idea that the world will neither see nor know the Paraclete (17) resonates with this idea and we may say that although believers will know the Paraclete, we see that the basis of this knowledge will be no more tangible after Jesus’ departure than before.

ii. John 14:26

The second Paraclete saying consists, strictly speaking, only of verse twenty-six, but it is helpful to note Judas’ question which introduces it. Those who do not love Jesus will not obey him (14:24) and for this reason Jesus will not disclose himself to them (22—cf. 2:24,25; 8:42-47). There is nothing new in all of this (25) and Judas should thus have known the answer to his own question. That he does not is further evidence that the disciples even now do not grasp the point of Jesus’ teaching (cf. 14:5, 8; 16:17-18; 29-31). Yet their ignorance and misunderstanding will be dispelled through the Paraclete teaching and reminding them of what Jesus had said (26). Subsequent development of Christian tradition (including the

Gospel itself) was a Paraclete-inspired presentation of Jesus’ life and teaching. There is also an important implication not to be overlooked: that the Spirit will come to the disciples shows that whatever other shortcomings afflict the Twelve, their love for Jesus is sincere.

iii. John 15:26

Although the world will never see or know the Paraclete (14:17), he will nevertheless testify to Jesus (26. cf. 3:8). This implies an “agency” through whom this testimony can occur and this agency is, of course, the testimony of the disciples who will proclaim what they have heard and seen (cf. 1 Jn. 1:1-3). Thus, most authors conjoin the testimony of the Spirit and the disciples:

> The witness of the Spirit, conjoined with that of the disciples, is to bring to light the truth of the revelation of Jesus in his word and deed, and death and resurrection; it takes place with and through the witness of the disciples to Jesus in the Gospel.

Throughout my treatment in this thesis, I have argued that Jesus’ words and deeds lead to faith only through the illuminating work of the Spirit. The same will apply to the testimony of the disciples. Their testimony in the physical plane, including the written testimony of the Gospel itself, obtains effect through being conjoined with the testimony of the Paraclete in the spiritual plane.

iv. John 16:7-11

Cloud and Townsend point out the irony that it is precisely by leaving us, that Jesus enables us to become what God wants us to be. This is a result of the “teaching” and “reminding” ministry (14:26) of the indwelling Paraclete (14:17) who only comes after Jesus departs (7). And so Jesus’ departure ultimately proves to be to the disciples’ advantage.

The subsequent comments (8-11) are amongst the most difficult of the entire Gospel. The problem centres around how sin relates to belief in verse nine; how righteousness relates to

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163 Beasley-Murray, John, 277.
164 Henry Cloud and John Sims Townsend, How People Grow: What the Bible Reveals About Personal Growth (Sydney, NSW, Aust.: Strand, 2001), 94-95.
Christ’s departure in verse ten; and how judgement relates to the judgement of the evil one in
verse eleven. Carson offers a helpful summary of approaches and problems but his “valiant
attempt” to bring consistency to the passage seems to ask too much of the original
language.

We may, however, sidestep the controversy by inquiring whether it is necessary to
determine so precisely the meaning of these verses, for regardless of what “convict the world
of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgement” (8) may entail, it is clearly the Paraclete who
brings about that conviction and this, in epistemological terms, is the pertinent point. Just as it
is the Paraclete who brings the disciples to understand Jesus’ teaching and makes their
testimony to him effective, so only the Paraclete can bring the world to a true appreciation of
spiritual issues such as sin, righteousness and judgement. In short, we can say that the
Paraclete, and he alone, can convict those who reject Jesus as to the error of their ways (9).

v. John 16:12-15

The term “Paraclete” is not specifically used in this passage, but there is clear continuation
from the previous Paraclete saying as well as parallels with the others (cf. particularly “Spirit
of truth” in 14:15-17). Commentators therefore include this passage among the Paraclete
sayings. Here, two aspects of the Paraclete’s ministry are restated: the Paraclete’s teaching
ministry—encountered already in 14:26—is seen as he guides the disciples “into all truth”
(13). Further, we see that the Paraclete’s role is not independent: “he will not speak on his
own” (13) but will take what is Christ’s and make it known to the disciples (14, 15). However,
Jesus affirms that “all that belongs to the Father is mine” (15. cf. 5:30; 7:17; 8:28; et passim)
and so we see the Spirit acting to create intimate connection between the Father, the Son and
the disciples (cf. comment on 14:15-17, above). In all of this it is important to note how the
Paraclete’s ministry is Christ-focused. He will bring glory to Christ by taking that which is

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Christ’s and making it known (14).

Another aspect of the Paraclete’s ministry is to reveal that which the disciples were not initially able to bear (12). In part, this restates what we have already seen: that the disciples could not properly understand Jesus’ teachings until the indwelling Paraclete provided the requisite spiritual insight. But the Paraclete’s teaching will encompass more than just what Jesus had already taught, for Jesus had “much more to say…” (12) and this lack will be made up by the Paraclete who will “tell you what is yet to come” (13). I have previously made mention of the process of theological development which underlies the Gospel and we now come to see that this is actually predicted by Jesus and therefore intrinsic to his teaching. It goes without saying that this theological development begins with the life and teaching of Jesus, so it has a clear historical ground, but at the same time it involves “much more.” Under this rubric we may classify much which is found in the New Testament: the relationship of the law of Moses to Christian faith, the relation between the Church and the pagan world, the union of Jew and Gentile on terms of equality in Christ’s Church, the abrogation of the Temple and its sacrificial system, and so on.167 While such themes are in no way contrary to the teaching of Christ, and in part some are strongly foreshadowed within it, they must still be regarded as Spirit-inspired developments not found explicitly in the teaching of Jesus. We can imagine, then, that such are the sort of teachings the Paraclete delivered to the disciples.168

vi. Conclusion

Although the above discussion has been quite cursory, we can see that there are a number of themes which describe the function of the Paraclete. He will: (1) abide with the disciples as the personal representative of the Father and the Son (14:15-17); (2) teach them and remind them of Jesus’ teaching (14:26); (3) testify to Jesus (15:26); (4) convict those who reject Jesus

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168 Paul’s comment in Galatians comes to mind; “the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ” (Galatians 1:11,12).
as to the error of their ways (15:26); and (5) glorify Christ by taking that which is Christ’s and making it known (16:12-15).

b. The Holy Spirit in John’s Gospel

To the Paraclete-sayings of the Farewell Discourse, we may add the several other references to the Holy Spirit which occur through the Gospel. Very early we find that Jesus is the one upon whom the Spirit descends, showing him to be the one who will baptise with the Holy Spirit (1:33). We may see this as a fulfilment of Isaiah 11:2 and thus further evidence of Jesus’ Messianic status. Significantly the Gospel demonstrates this fulfilment when Jesus breathes on the disciples and announces “receive the Holy Spirit” (20:22). Obviously this does not concord with the chronology of the Synoptics and Acts, but once we accept that there was a process of Spirit-inspired theological creativity behind the formation of the Gospel, then such reordering of events in order to make a theological point (cf. the cleansing of the temple) need not cause us undue difficulty. The point of including the giving of the Spirit should not be taken as a theological, rather than historical, claim. With Jesus’ glorification the new age of the Spirit has come and all that was said in the Last Discourse is now a living reality. Certainly, it is correct to observe the chronological discrepancy, but we should also observe that by the time John’s Gospel was written, this chronological issue would lack relevance for the Johannine community. What would matter is the theological significance which arises in light of the claim that Christ is the one who gives the Spirit.

Amongst the most important treatments of the Spirit, in epistemic terms, is that found in Jesus’ engagement with Nicodemus (3:1-21). I have considered that passage in detail and all that needs to be said here is that this passage clearly ties a correct grasp of Jesus’ Messianic identity with the work of the Spirit. To know Jesus as Messiah is to be born again, and it is the Spirit which brings about this new birth. Similar concepts underlie Jesus’ interaction with the

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169 See ch.3, pp.31ff.
Woman of Samaria (4:1-42)\textsuperscript{170} where Jesus’ mention of “living water” clearly alludes to the Holy Spirit, and his talk of worshipping God in spirit and truth (23-24) is a clear call to transcend the categories of traditional Samaritan (and Jewish) worship (21). Later in the Gospel, that the new life is the work of the Spirit is affirmed, so too the distinction between the Spirit and the flesh (6:63). In the same place, Jesus claims that his words are spiritual, and that none can accept them unless granted by the Father (65). Again we see that apprehension of spiritual truths is something which exceeds native human abilities.

The next significant remark on the Holy Spirit is found at 7:37-39:

37 On the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. 38 He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.” 39 But this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

Very likely the symbolism here is tied to the rite of water-drawing which occurred at this festival.\textsuperscript{171} Interestingly, the result is a dispute amongst the crowd with some asking if he could be “the prophet,” others declaring him to be the Christ, and yet others denying that possibility (40-43). For our present purposes, what matters is that we find that the coming of the Holy Spirit is to succeed the glorification of Christ. Again, the emphasis lies upon the dawning of a new age and with it new possibilities for our understanding of God. Whereas before even Jesus’ closest followers often missed the significance of his words and deeds, afterward the Spirit would lead them into “all truth” (16:13). Here, however, the emphasis is upon the new life which the Spirit will confer. Elsewhere, the gift of new life is tied to one’s understanding of Jesus’ Messianic identity (20:31) and so we see that the work of the Spirit is related to that cluster of concepts which pervades John’s Gospel: life, spirit, light, goodness, and so on.\textsuperscript{172}

From here on there is no further mention of the Spirit until we reach the Paraclete-sayings

\textsuperscript{170} See ch.4, pp.38ff.
\textsuperscript{171} Beasley-Murray, \textit{John}, 113-14.
\textsuperscript{172} See p.88ff.
c. The Implied Epistemology of John’s Gospel

No analysis of the epistemology of John’s Gospel would be complete without comment upon the implications of the fact that the author of the Gospel clearly felt that a written document of such a form could lead people to identify Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God (20:31). Thus, whereas hitherto I have focused upon the content of the Gospel, it is important also to reflect upon the fact, and the form, of its existence.

The early Christian community did not invest very much effort in what we would regard as systematic theological reflection. So although critics regularly speak of the developed theology of the Gospel this does not entail anything quite so sophisticated as that which arose in later centuries. Yet it is not at all improper to point to those later developments as offering a well-developed articulation of the themes of the Gospel. Here I have particularly in mind the more developed reflection on the Holy Spirit found in Basil of Caesarea’s *de Spiritu Sancto* (*On the Holy Spirit*, c.375). Not surprisingly this treatise makes extensive reference to John’s Gospel, but it is the way in which Basil advances a particularly Trinitarian knowledge of God which interests me here. In seeking to argue that it is proper to include mention of the Holy Spirit alongside mention of the Father and the Son in the doxology (1:3), Basil argues for the indispensability of the Spirit in our knowledge of God;

> I testify to every man who is confessing Christ and denying God, that Christ will profit him nothing; to every man that calls upon God but rejects the Son, that his faith is vain; to every man that sets aside the Spirit, that his faith in the Father and the Son will be useless, for he cannot even hold it without the presence of the Spirit…it is impossible to worship the Son, save by the Holy Ghost; impossible to call upon the Father, save by the Spirit of adoption. (ch. 11.27)

He later provides a concise summary of his view; “the way of the knowledge of God lies from One Spirit through the One Son to the One Father” (ch. 18.47). Both the Son and the Spirit thus play a necessary, albeit distinct, epistemic role.

It may be helpful here to think of our knowledge of God arising in an almost
“sacramental” manner.\textsuperscript{173} The term \textit{sacrament} has been defined as an “outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace”\textsuperscript{174} and is properly used in reference to such rituals as baptism and the Lord’s Supper. It is not strictly proper to use it in reference to our knowledge of God. Yet drawing an analogy between our knowledge of God and the sacraments is useful in as much as it helps clarify the idea that God, who is spiritual, becomes known to us through non-spiritual means. Such an idea is intrinsic to the concept of “the Means of Grace” in Protestant tradition. These are variously defined, but the general idea is that there are “means” by which God is known. Scripture is regarded as central amongst these means, whilst preaching, teaching, Christian fellowship, and the sacraments obtain prominent mention.\textsuperscript{175} Yet I consider that there has been too great a tendency towards rigorous definition. For instance, the second article of the Belgic Confession of 1618-19 affirms that we know God through the created order, and Scripture.\textsuperscript{176} Such a concise definition implies exclusion of all other means and so seems to me not only to give insufficient account for the variety of Christian experience but also to risk a denial of the freedom of the Spirit who “blows where he wills” (3:8). Yet without some objective touchstone by which religious experience can be appraised, religion risks becoming merely a matter of subjective internal states\textsuperscript{177} and we risk loosing any basis upon which we might meaningfully talk of \textit{Christian} religious experience.

John’s Gospel seems to me to speak to this situation in three respects. First, it demonstrates

\textsuperscript{173} Cf. Lee:

The Gospel of John uses a number of images to express its understanding of what it means to believe in Jesus and to belong to the community of faith. These images, drawn from the material world, are used as symbols or vehicles of the divine world. Indeed, faith cannot appear and develop without such imagery, so foundational is it to the world of the fourth evangelist. (Dorothy Ann Lee, “The Gospel of John and the Five Senses,” \textit{Journal of Biblical Literature} 129, no. 1 (2010): 115).


\textsuperscript{176} Reformed Church in the United States, \textit{The Three Forms of Unity: Heidelberg Catechism, Belgic Confession of Faith, Canons of Dort} (South Holland, IL: The Evangelism Committee: Protestant Reformed Church, 1983), 19.

\textsuperscript{177} On this point see the discussion of Rudolf Otto (p.124ff.). I am here affirming his insight that whilst the non-rational (numinous) element in religion is primary, the rational element is a necessary concomitant.
that affirmation of the Christological Confession can be made without a developed Christological understanding. Second, both the affirmation of the Gospel’s Christological Claim and the subsequent (post-resurrection) developed Christological understanding of the church arise under the influence of the Spirit. The developed Christology of John’s Gospel is itself to be regarded as the outcome of the Holy Spirit’s epistemic agency. Third, the Gospel affirms the incarnate Logos as the authoritative frame of reference for our knowledge of God. In this respect, the Protestant tradition is quite correct to affirm Scripture as a central means by which God is made known to us.

The central importance of the Incarnation as a historical event speaks of the need to maintain some witness to it. At first this was achieved by way of oral tradition, but eventually a more permanent record was required and the various Gospels were the result. Just like the historical event of the Incarnation, the subsequent written witness is a “sacramental” means by which God can be made known. Just as those who encountered Jesus did not attain to a knowledge of God by inference from his words or deeds, so those who read the Gospel do not attain to a knowledge of God by inference from the written record. Rather, the Holy Spirit enlightens the understanding such that one can “see” that Jesus is “the Christ, the Son of God.” This shows the significance of a previously cited remark of O’Brien’s:

…the Fourth Gospel is not simply a report of others’ experience, but it provides the possibility of a substitute experience for the reader. The narrative strategies of the Gospel show, rather than merely tell, the reader what believing is, creating an experience for the reader that is certainly not the same as being there but can be significant nonetheless.

In narrating significant aspects of Jesus’ life and teaching the Gospel seeks as far as is possible to place the reader in a position identical to that of Jesus’ contemporaries. In recounting the circumstances through which others were able to identify Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, so the Gospel makes such an identification possible for its readers.

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178 Cf. the earlier discussion of Nathanael, p.58ff.
For this reason it should not be thought that the written Gospel is in any sense inferior to an encounter with the incarnate Logos in the historical person of Jesus of Nazareth. There is, of course, the well known comment of Papias who famously remarked that “I did not imagine that things out of books would help me as much as the utterances of a living and abiding voice.”\(^{180}\) It is apparent that a similar idea underlies O’Brien (above) when she says that reading the Gospel “is certainly not the same as being there.” Yet the entire point of the Paraclete-sayings of the Farewell Discourse (John 13:1-17:26) is to illustrate that such concerns are unfounded, for “it is to your advantage if I go away; for if I do not go away, the Paraclete will not come to you.” (16:7) Here we should not miss the obvious; it is Jesus himself, sitting in the presence of his disciples, who says that the presence of the indwelling Spirit will be of greater advantage.

The written Gospel provides a further advantage over encounter with the historical Jesus in that it can draw attention to the significance of Jesus’ words and deeds in two significant ways. At the literary level, the Johannine author was able to shape the narrative so as to sharpen the significance of particular events. Thus we find such features as narrative discontinuities and extended discourses employed in telling the story of Jesus of Nazareth. There are many other literary devices at play in the Gospel all of which serve to convince the reader that the Gospel provides a reliable insight into the person and words of Jesus of Nazareth, so compelling the reader to adopt the author’s theological perspective.\(^{181}\)

The use of literary devices implies that the Gospel does not seek to provide dispassionate reportage of Jesus’ words and deeds but, rather, to draw out the significance of the same from a standpoint of faith. As such, the Gospel has incorporated significant post-resurrection reflection upon the significance of Jesus’ words and deeds. Here we see that the theological reflection which pervades the Gospel may be taken as a positive feature of the work. It is

\(^{180}\) The saying is preserved by Eusebius in *Historia Ecclesiastica* III.39.3.

actually very helpful to have a theologically conditioned account written by one who already grasps the significance of Jesus’ words and deeds which can draw out that significance for others. Again, this is entirely consistent with the Paraclete sayings of the Farewell Discourse, for it is the Holy Spirit, who comes after Jesus’ departure, who provides the disciples with a developed understanding of Jesus’ person. Their post-resurrection perspective recorded in the Gospel provides us with insights into the person and teaching of Jesus which are available from no other perspective:

The disciples did not understand Jesus or his words during his ministry (12:16; 13:7). Only later did they understand. So any account, whether written or oral, from an apostle or a prophet, which was not informed by the retrospective ideological point of view of this gospel could not present Jesus or his words in their true light.182

It is important to note that the Gospel is not to be regarded as expressing the voice of a lone individual. The traditions it records are those of the community of faith and consist of historical remembrances shaped by communal reflection under the influence of the Spirit. Here we see two factors which serve to prevent a slide into relativism—the connection of the tradition to historical events, and its preservation as the shared tradition of a community. This reminds us that Christian tradition has always linked together the themes of ecclesiology and pneumatology.183 Although John’s Gospel affirms the critical role of the Spirit in knowing, it gives no justification whatever for ignoring the historical event of the Incarnation, nor any aid to a radical individualism which would seek to engage in theological reflection in isolation from the community of faith.

Finally, we might note that the Gospel itself advances a form of holism. This is seen particularly in Jesus’ appeal to the fourfold witness of the Baptist, his signs, the Father, and the Scriptures (5:31-47). None of these can be regarded as dependent upon the others. Rather,

182 Ibid., 48-49.
183 This is shown in the Apostle’s Creed where “I believe in the Holy Spirit” is conjoined with “I believe in one holy catholic apostolic church.” This is appropriate given that the outpouring of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost constitutes the founding of the church. See Karl Barth, Credo, trans. J. Strathearn McNab (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1964), 139-42.; Wolfhart Pannenberg, Systematic Theology, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 12-20.
they are to be regarded as independent and show that Jesus’ claims for himself (31) are supported by multiple, converging lines of evidence. This suggests that we need not try to look for a single epistemological principle when inquiring after the Gospel’s defence of the claim that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.

d. The Epistemic Implications of Johannine Dualism

That John’s Gospel presents a dualistic outlook is well-known. Such dualism is demonstrated in the Gospel’s use of such contrasting terms as life/death, light/darkness, good/evil, truth/falsehood, belief/unbelief, and so on. Such dualism pervades the entire Gospel and it has no small epistemological significance. At one time it was common to see Johannine dualism as derived from Gnosticism but it is now seen as varying substantially from the Gnostic. Most importantly, the struggle between good and evil, light and darkness is, in Johannine thought, ethical rather than physical, and the victory of good, and of God, are regarded as certain. This outlook is well expressed by the Gospel’s use of spatial language with heaven being “above” the world (3:13, 31; 5:4 et passim) for such language expresses both separation and supremacy. Johannine dualism may therefore be referred to as vertical dualism.

In accordance with the Gospel’s vertical dualism, the coming of the Logos into the world may be expressed using the language of descent: he comes down from the heavenly realm to make God (who is “above”) known in the world (“below”). This knowledge of God is associated with concepts on one side of the dualism (light, life, love, truth, good, etc.) whilst the world is associated with their antitheses. Indeed, the language of descent points to the fact that the distinction between “heaven” and “earth/world” is itself part of the Johannine dualism. The knowledge of heavenly things is thus outside human experience (3:31-32), so the Logos, who has been with God since the beginning, “comes down” in human form and

184 Bultmann, Theology, 2:17, 21.
185 Here note my earlier remarks in the introduction (p.12). A helpful overview of issues is found in Keener, John, 1:161-69.
186 Smalley, John, 35.
dwells amongst us, so revealing the glory of the Father (1:14). He brings with him the
knowledge of heavenly truths unknown to any who live on the earth (3:31) and “what he has
seen and heard, that he testifies” (32). To accept this testimony of the one who comes “from
above” is to share God’s view of things and so to “certify that God is true” (33). This
acceptance of the heavenly perspective is akin to the blind receiving sight (9:1-41, esp. v.41;
cf. 12:40) and is dramatically expressed in the language of the new birth—to be born “again”
is to be born “from above” (3:3).187

We see, then, that the Johannine vertical dualism has definite epistemic implications. By
being born “from above” one begins to see things from the heavenly side of the
“heaven/earth” dualism and becomes able to know those heavenly things which are otherwise
unknowable. On this matter two critical and related points must be made. First, the dualistic
outlook of the Gospel gives rise to a “cluster” of concepts which stand in indissoluble
relationship and may be used to say much the same thing in different ways. Belief in Jesus is
associated with knowing God, light, life, goodness, faithfulness, seeing, hearing, and so on.
To use any of these terms in connection with an individual is to assert that they have moved
from the worldly to the heavenly side of the Johannine dualism. They have been “born again
from above.” Here it is inconceivable that one might grasp the fact that Jesus is Messiah yet
not stand in believing relationship with him, and vice versa. To believe is also to have light,
life, love, goodness, and so on—the terms are interchangeable. Second, although the one who
believes in Jesus has transcended the earthly view of things, this does not necessarily entail a
full grasp of all aspects of the Johannine dualism. Indeed, it does not necessarily entail a full
grasp of the significance of Jesus’ person. This is intimated in the various confessions of
Jesus’ first followers where not only are various titles used to give voice to their respective
confessions, but the subsequent narrative illustrates how deficient were their initial

187 As mentioned on p.34, the Greek γεννηθῇ ἄνωθεν comprises a word-play in which “ἄνωθεν” is susceptible
to translation as either “again” or “from above.”
understandings. From these two observations a significant fact follows: although John’s Gospel sets forward a clear vertical dualism, and although the concepts on one side (light, love, life, good, belief, etc.) stand in clear contra-distinction to those on the other (darkness, hate, death, evil, unbelief, etc.) it is not necessary that one have perfect understanding of all of this in order to ascend to the heavenly side of things. What matters, substantially, is that one recognise that Jesus is decisive for one’s knowledge of God. That recognition, however, is merely the starting-point for such knowledge—the experience of the Twelve, whose knowledge of God deepens as they spend time following Jesus, is the paradigm example.

Finally, what has been said regarding the Johannine dualism illustrates why it is that a grasp of Jesus’ Messianic identity is critical and explains the basic logic of the Gospel’s Purpose Statement. As the knowledge that Jesus is the Christ is indissolubly connected with the other concepts on the heavenly side of the Johannine dualism, having such knowledge indicates that one has transcended darkness, death, hatred, and evil—in short, all that is associated with the earthly realm “below.” Taking Nicodemus as an example, we may say that his failure to grasp the significance of Jesus’ person means that he fails to grasp a number of other concepts of Christological significance; the veracity of Jesus’ testimony (3:10), the heavenly origin of both Jesus (13,16,17) and his teaching (12), Jesus’ soteriological centrality (14,16,17,18), and the Johannine duality between light/darkness, good/evil, life/death, belief/unbelief, and so on. Moreover, there is good reason to suspect that his failure to grasp the significance of Jesus’ person is precisely the reason why he remains such an enigmatic figure in the Gospel. To return to Bultmann’s terminology, in failing to properly apprehend the person of the revealer, Nicodemus denies himself any access to the revelation. His failure to grow in knowledge thus contrasts starkly with the experience of the Twelve.

We may conclude by once again affirming the critical role of the Holy Spirit. One takes

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188 See p.69ff.
189 See p.19.
one’s place on the heavenly side of the Johannine dualism by being born “from above” by the Holy Spirit. Such rebirth corresponds to coming to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God for it is by such belief that one has life (20:31). Again, we see that the “cluster” of concepts which express the Johannine dualism may be used almost interchangeably and it therefore follows that these concepts apply to an individual either all together or not at all. Thus, if any of these can be attributed to the Spirit, they all may. By the Spirit one is born again and believes that Jesus is the Christ, and by the Spirit one stands in positive relationship to light, life, love, goodness, and so on. Further, the one who has life is said to know God (17:3). As far as our knowledge of God is concerned, the Holy Spirit can be seen to be the primary epistemic agent.

e. Summary

The Gospel contains a wealth of explicit and implicit comment upon the critical epistemic role of the Holy Spirit. The working of the Spirit is, like the wind, seen solely in its effects (3:8) and the Gospel does not clarify the mechanisms by which faith arises. Yet it is clear that the Spirit uses means to achieve his epistemic ends—signs, teaching, the kerygma of the church, the written Gospel itself, and so on. That the Gospel provides a post-resurrection perspective is critical, for it means a Johannine epistemology is, in the end analysis, a post-resurrection epistemology. It does not abandon history, however, but reinterprets it from the standpoint of faith. Accordingly, the Gospel evidences an interplay between historical awareness and Spirit inspired theological creativity. For Jesus’ first followers, and for those who came after, the Spirit plays the crucial epistemic role.

Our treatment so far whilst not exhaustive is nevertheless quite adequate to draw out the most significant issues in the Gospel’s account of the knowledge of God. We will thus now make a summary of our findings so that we may have a convenient basis upon which to identify the relevant themes which may be found in contemporary epistemology.
I shall seek to summarise the epistemology of John’s Gospel by regarding the Gospel as a story of individuals who, in encounter with Jesus, are able to apprehend his messianic status and respond by way of a personal commitment to follow him. At the human level, such response involves willingness to hear Jesus’ message. At the spiritual level, it involves an ability to “see” that Jesus is the Christ. There are thus three important factors: the willingness of the individual to respond, the words and deeds of Jesus through which his message is conveyed, and the mysterious working of the Spirit by which one’s “eyes” are opened. Thus we see the three significant epistemological themes of the Gospel: the notion of epistemic virtue, the role of testimony in forming Christian belief, and the action of the Holy Spirit as epistemic agent. Let us consider these in turn.
a. Epistemic Virtue

During our study of the religious leaders (Ch. 2), we looked at the way in which the Gospel affirms that there is an ethical aspect to unbelief (p.27ff.). Even when a person has sufficient evidence, and every social and religious advantage, belief is no certainty when self-interest is involved. Even Nicodemus (Ch. 3), who shows great sympathy for Jesus, is sufficiently concerned for his own social standing that it renders his final position in regard to Jesus quite uncertain.

This contrasts starkly with those other characters we considered. The Woman of Samaria (Ch. 4) is not only willing to go against her own religious tradition in order to embrace Jesus as Messiah, but to declare this publicly. Nathanael (Ch. 5) is declared to be “an Israelite, indeed, in whom is no guile” (1:47) who, along with the rest of the Twelve (Ch. 6), is prepared to make a public profession of faith. This is not without risk. As we see in the story of the man born blind (9:1-41), and in the case of the hapless Lazarus (11:1-45. Cf. 12:2), the religious leaders are quite willing to turn their hostility toward Jesus upon his followers.

Belief, and with it knowledge (Sec. 7.d), therefore involves a willingness to follow Jesus despite personal cost and this speaks to us of the ethical aspects of (un)belief. I have used the term “affective disability” (p.23) to describe those who are unwilling, for whatever reason, to affirm the Gospel’s Christological Claim.

b. The Role of Testimony in Forming Christian Belief

Testimony as a source of knowledge is central to the Gospel’s account of knowledge. This is inevitable given the basic premise: Jesus is the Incarnate Logos (1:1-14) who comes to make known those things which only he has seen and heard (1:18, cf. 3:32). At one point Jesus speaks of the several “witnesses” which testify to his identity (5:31-47) thus all the evidence which discloses Jesus’ messianic identity may be regarded as a form of “testimony.” We considered how the post-resurrection perspective of the Gospel maintains this emphasis, albeit
in altered form (Sec. 7.c). In the post-resurrection period we no longer “witness” Jesus signs and words, but rely upon the written record of those who have (p.110n223). Both in its explicit comments on the matter, and in the very fact of its existence, we see that the Gospel regards testimony to be a crucial source of knowledge.

c. The Holy Spirit as Epistemic Agent

The function of the Holy Spirit (or Paraclete) as an epistemic agent is a pervasive theme in the Gospel. Not only are there repeated references to the work of the Spirit (Sec. 7.b) but the Paraclete sayings of the Farewell Discourse provide a clear statement of the Spirit’s epistemic role (Sec. 7.a). The Gospel gives no account of the mechanism by which the Spirit works, but it is clear that such working is “sacramental” in that it involves working through means (p.83). Much is explained by this simple fact: the God of John’s Gospel makes himself known through the Incarnation, but the Incarnation alone does not guarantee that people will comprehend the divine disclosure. So there are those who witness at first-hand Jesus’ signs and teaching, but who nevertheless neither “see” nor “hear” what God seeks to say. Thus we see that the signs and faith stand in an uncertain relationship in the Gospel (Sec. 2.d) due to a “cognitive disability” akin to the physical disabilities of blindness or deafness (Sec. 2.e).

That the role of the Holy Spirit is fundamental, yet with no clear statement as to the means by which the Spirit works, suggests why the basis upon which people decide to follow Jesus is often opaque. In the case of the Woman of Samaria, Nathanael, and the Twelve, we saw that their decisions are not logically explicable from the text. All these characters came to believe through a process of individual encounter with Jesus, but in no instance do we see this decision tied with the working of signs, nor with anything like logical argument. Ultimately, it seems that they simply come to “see” that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, rather than infer it from anything he says or does.

Most importantly in our day, however, is that the above may be extended to encompass
even the post-resurrection kerygma of the church (oral or written), including the Gospel itself. Were Christian faith dependent upon first-hand encounter with Jesus, those in the post-resurrection era would be at a decisive disadvantage, but the Gospel proclaims that Jesus’ departure is epistemically advantageous precisely because it inaugurates the era of the Spirit (16:7-15, cf. 20:29). This gives rise to a nexus between the historical and the theological, with the Gospel affirming the importance of the historical event of the Incarnation whilst, at the same time, offering a Spirit-inspired interpretation of that history from the post-resurrection perspective. Even for contemporary readers, it is a question not of logical inference, but of whether one can “see” the point of the Gospel’s account of Jesus of Nazareth. As with Jesus’ contemporaries, this amounts to whether one is prepared to acknowledge one’s own cognitive disabilities and seek God’s help in over-coming them (p.25).

d. Epistemological Holism

Finally, it is worth reiterating that none of the above are foundational to the others. To believe in Jesus requires that one be epistemically virtuous (i.e. lack affective disability, p.23) and that one encounter the kerygma in oral or written form and that one “see” by the Spirit that Jesus is the Christ (i.e. lack cognitive disability, *ibid*). These are not reducible to one single epistemic principle even if affective and cognitive disability are in some sense connected.
e. Summary

Although John’s Gospel has much to say about the knowledge of God, three themes just discussed are, in my estimation, primary. What remains, then, is to ask whether this is in any sense a credible account of knowledge, which question we can answer only by turning to contemporary epistemology. Here we will see that the treatment of epistemic virtue and testimony in the literature is such to suggest that the Johannine account has at least initial plausibility with respects to these two themes. It is the third—the action of the Holy Spirit as epistemic agent—which we will find to be the most problematic although, as we shall see, it too is hardly beyond the bounds of credibility.
Part Two

Ontology and the Sources of Knowledge

in Epistemology
The foregoing discussion has uncovered a number of important themes in the Johannine treatment of the knowledge of God. These cannot be collapsed into one single epistemological principle and as such the Gospel presents a form of epistemological holism in which multiple independent lines of thought converge to support the claim that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. Because we are not contemporaries of the historical Jesus, however, some of the “witnesses” to Jesus, his signs and teaching in particular, are available to us only through the testimony of the Gospel. Thus the question of testimony takes on renewed importance. Two other major themes are the ethical aspects of belief, and the role of the Holy Spirit in knowing. This latter is of such significance as to merit separate treatment in much greater detail in the following chapters. Before I turn to a discussion of testimony and the ethical aspects of belief, I wish to give some consideration to the fact that the Johannine notion of belief varies in a significant way from the notion of belief in epistemology.

a. Belief, Knowledge and Faith

In contemporary epistemology the terms “belief” and “knowledge” do not carry the deeply relational connotations attached to them in John’s Gospel. In the Gospel, belief involves a personal commitment to Jesus as the Christ and, by virtue of the Johannine dualism, it is so

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190 See the discussion in the introduction, p.1ff.
intimately related to knowledge as to be inseparable. In the Johannine view, to “know” that Jesus is the Christ is to “believe” in Jesus as the Christ and vice versa. Contemporary epistemology, however, carefully distinguishes “belief” from “knowledge.” It is helpful, then, to consider these two understandings of “belief.”

To begin, let us consider a philosophical account of knowledge. Here it is common to define knowledge as “Justified True Belief” (JTB). On this account a proposition $p$ must meet three criteria in order to be regarded as an instance of knowledge.

**Belief:** A person believes $p$ simply by affirming it. It does not matter if $p$ is true, nor whether there are good grounds to believe $p$. It is only necessary that $p$ be affirmed.

**Justification:** $p$ has justification (and our belief that $p$ is justified) when we have good reasons to believe $p$. Much discussion in epistemology centres upon what constitutes “good reasons.” The basic idea is that when asked “why do you believe $p$?” a person can give some reason(s) for their belief.

**Truth:** A person cannot be said to know $p$ unless $p$ is, in fact, true. This is, essentially, a definitional criterion. One is not expected to be able to offer an argument as to why $p$ is true, as this would conflate the truth and justification conditions. I must, according to the justification condition, be able to justify my belief in $p$, but it does not follow that I must be able to demonstrate the truth of $p$.

It is tempting to think that belief in a false claim could never be justified. But this would be to wrongly conflate the justification and truth conditions. I can be justified in believing a false claim—as when I believe that I have cancer following an incorrect diagnosis by my doctor. I can be unjustified in believing a true claim—as when I take my medical advice from a fortune-teller who correctly pronounces that I am in perfect health. Whether a belief is true,

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191 See also the treatment of this theme in Bennema, “Johannine Epistemology,” 122-24.
and whether it is justified are thus two different issues. A belief must be both true and justified if it is to meet the requirements for knowledge set down by the JTB account.

As an important aside, the above instances presume certain standards of justification and so risk obscuring that questions as to what counts as justification are of major importance in epistemology. This thesis reflects this importance in as much as it is a study in justificatory criteria. It seeks to argue that it can reasonably be argued that John’s Gospel justifies the belief that “Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.” Should it be the case that this belief happens to be true, then one who believes that “Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God” on a basis of a reading of the Gospel holds a justified true belief and, so, has knowledge according to the JTB account of knowledge.

In order to examine this further, it helps to observe that it is the idea behind a proposition rather than its wording which is of most significance. It does not matter if one affirms “Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God” or “Ἰησοῦς ἐστιν ὁ χριστὸς ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ” (the Greek original) as what matters is that one affirms the content rather than the form of the proposition. This is so according to the tenets of both contemporary philosophy and Johannine thought. However, propositional belief (call this “P-Belief”) does not carry the deeply relational connotations inherent in the Johannine understanding of belief (call this “J-Belief”). How would we then relate J-Belief and P-Belief? The resolution here, I believe, arises from what has been said earlier in regard to J-Belief involving one’s taking the heavenly “side” of the Johannine vertical dualism. On that view it is not possible to affirm that Jesus is the Christ except from the standpoint of faith. Or, to put it another way, the Johannine understanding is that the one who affirms that “Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God” from a standpoint other

193 A proposition may be “expressed by any two sentences, from the same or different languages, that are synonymous, or correctly intertranslatable.” “Proposition” in Simon Blackburn, ed., Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 307.
194 Consider, for instance, the case of Nathanael p.58ff.
195 See p.88.
than that of faith has no idea what it is they are affirming. They may be said to be voicing the proposition, but they most certainly do not affirm it. It follows, then, that although the concept of P-Belief may be distinguished from the concept of J-Belief, when it comes to the particular proposition “Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God” the one entails the other. We may, then, treat the P-Belief “Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God” simply as an instance of P-Belief yet with the understanding that it carries with it the implication of J-Belief. Possibly this might be extended to cover all P-Beliefs which have necessary existential implications. For now, however, I will take it that this is a particular consequence of the Johannine view of faith. On that view to affirm that “Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God” is to do so propositionally and existentially (as a P-Belief necessarily entailing J-Belief).

b. Testimony

In the introduction to this thesis it was stated that one of the key philosophical moves in the Modern period was a rejection of notions of authority. One specific consequence of this was a suspicion of anything which the individual could not prove or confirm for themselves and this had inevitable impact upon the perceived value of testimony as a source of knowledge. Due to this devaluing, there was little philosophical engagement with the theme until very recently. The resurgence of interest can be dated to the publication of C.A.J. (Tony) Coady's landmark study *Testimony: A Philosophical Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992). since which time the issue has attracted significant attention.

Historically, Christian scripture did not fare well during the Modern period. In part this was due to the general suspicion of authority. But there was a more specific reservation which arose in respects of the Bible’s portrayal of miracles. Indeed, David Hume’s famous argument against miracles is actually an argument regarding reliability of testimony:

no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind, that its falsehood would be more miraculous, than the fact, which it endeavors to establish.

196 See p.2ff.
197 David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Antony Flew, Paul Carus Student Editions
Hume famously defines miracles as a violation of the laws of nature and the above claim is predicated upon that definition. Such a definition is, however, problematic and Hume’s argument on this particular point is considerably, if not fatally, weakened by its rejection. For our present purposes, however, the important point is that his argument is not simply an argument about miracles, it is also an argument about testimony. Hume’s claim in part two of “Of Miracles,” that testimony to the occurrence of miracles can never serve to establish the truth of a system of religion, has particular application to John’s Gospel which depends upon just such testimony (20:30-31).

Given the great complexity of testimony as a subject in contemporary epistemology, and given the limited scope of this thesis I cannot hope to demonstrate that the testimony of the Gospel is reliable nor to do any justice to contemporary epistemology of testimony. I shall, accordingly, restrict myself to making what I consider are the three most significant points regarding the question of testimony in connection with the Gospel.

One of the most basic distinctions in epistemology of testimony is between reductionist and non-reductionist approaches. Reductionists in respect of testimony argue that one is not justified in believing testimony unless one has good positive reasons for doing so. Non-reductionists, by contrast, argue that one can be justified in believing testimony in the absence of such reasons, provided that one has no defeaters: reasons which count against the testimony in question. Significantly, Hume is counted as a reductionist with respect to testimony and is contrasted with his contemporary, Thomas Reid, who is notable for a tremendous emphasis upon the importance of our social context as knowers. A Humean and a Reidian approach would vary precisely in whether one needs to justify accepting the testimony of the Gospel, with Hume arguing ‘yes’ and Reid ‘no’—only Reid would insist that

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1 (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 2001), 149.
198 Ibid., 148.
199 Hume assaults the credibility of apostolic testimony from the very outset of his essay. Ibid., 141.
200 Ibid., 163.
201 Here I follow the treatment in Jennifer Lackey and Ernest Sosa, eds., The Epistemology of Testimony (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), 4-6.
we should have no defeaters which might count against that testimony. One might think that the one who accepts the testimony of the Gospel is overly naïve and in breach of their epistemic obligations. But that is the standard reductionist objection to non-reductionist approaches to testimony and begs the standard non-reductionist counter-charge: are not those who reject the testimony of the Gospel being overly sceptical and is it not, therefore, they who are in breach of epistemic propriety? Why reject that testimony in the absence of good reasons for doing so? And what might comprise “good reasons” in any case? Such questions are not easily answered. We might think the impossibility of miracles is just one such “good reason,” but it is interesting to note that Reid does not seem to share Hume’s opinion that miracles are impossible, thus he would not seem to share the view that the presence of miraculous elements renders the Gospel accounts questionable.²⁰² I cannot hope to resolve this tremendously complex issue here. What I can point out is that the Humean approach is not the only option available, and so the Gospel, taken as an instance of written testimony, need not automatically fall under the severe burden of proof which is demanded by reductionist approaches to testimony.

Of fundamental importance to this entire issue is the question of social aspects of knowledge. It is notable that Reid gave this considerable thought in developing his concept of “the social aspects of mind.”²⁰³ The theme is picked up by commentators on testimony and rightly so because testimony is “very important in the formation of much that we regard as reasonable belief and that our reliance upon it is extensive.”²⁰⁴ Ultimately, this extensive dependence relies upon trust and here we see how the two basic approaches to testimony get off the ground. Reductionists say that trust in others is often sufficiently misplaced for testimony to be an inherently unreliable source of knowledge. Non-reductionists do not

necessarily argue against this, rather they point out that our reliance upon testimony is so extensive that we do, in fact, start with a presumption of trust, such is our nature as social beings.\footnote{This is essentially Reid’s position: Coady, “Social Operations.”} Here it is interesting to note that the renewed interest in testimony as a source of knowledge corresponds to the “renewed sense of the importance and irreducibility of community”\footnote{Murphy, \textit{Theology}, 201.} in contemporary thought. Even in the natural sciences, often portrayed as the epitome of Modernist rationalism, the importance and irreducibility of community has been observed.\footnote{See particularly the treatment of “Conviviality” in Michael Polanyi, \textit{Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy} (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 203-45.} That John’s Gospel seeks to establish trust is therefore critical. We saw this in Jesus’ interaction with individuals\footnote{See p.68.} but it is, more importantly, intrinsic to the Gospel as literature for “the gospel makes use of virtually all of the devices available for heightening the credibility and authority of a narrative.”\footnote{Culpepper, \textit{Anatomy}, 48.} On the basis of such considerations it is not immediately obvious that the testimony of the Gospel ought to carry an undue burden of suspicion.

It is helpful to make one brief final point on testimony in connection with the Gospel. It was earlier pointed out that the Gospel implies a form of holism when Jesus speaks of the fourfold testimony to his person (5:31-47). It is entirely consistent with this approach to suggest that the testimony of the Gospel and the testimony of the Holy Spirit go hand in hand to justify Christian belief. Like Jesus, we may speak of the convergence of multiple lines of thought rejecting the Foundationalist assumption that one of these ought to take primacy over the other. If we include other considerations, such as philosophical arguments for the existence of God, we may say that Christian faith owes its justification not to just one \textit{Universal Epistemic Principle}\footnote{Griffiths, “How Epistemology Matters.”} but to a range of mutually supporting considerations.

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{205} This is essentially Reid’s position: Coady, “Social Operations.”
\bibitem{206} Murphy, \textit{Theology}, 201.
\bibitem{208} See p.68.
\bibitem{209} Culpepper, \textit{Anatomy}, 48.
\bibitem{210} Griffiths, “How Epistemology Matters.”
\end{thebibliography}
c. Virtue Epistemology

The emphasis John’s Gospel lays upon the ethical aspects of belief finds its counterpart in an approach to knowledge known as Virtue Epistemology. This is not surprising given that “this approach of knowing was once the staple of Judeo-Christian as well as ancient Greek ways of thinking.”\(^2\) In this approach “intellectual agents and communities are the primary source of epistemic value and the primary focus of epistemic evaluation.”\(^3\) As with epistemology of testimony, the field boasts an extensive literature to which I can hardly do justice here. I therefore restrict myself to demonstrating that the emphasis that the Johannine account places upon individuals and community is a philosophically credible approach to adopt.

The early 20th century saw the rise of Logical Positivism which emphasised the idea of verification—no claim could be taken as meaningful unless it was subject to verification.\(^4\) This approach privileged scientific approaches to knowledge and regarded as meaningless claims, particularly metaphysical and religious claims, which could not be verified. For several reasons this account fell into disfavour, but what is most remarkable is that it utterly failed to understand the epistemic practices of working scientists, neglecting the role of both the individual scientist and the community in which s/he worked.\(^5\) With widespread recognition that the sciences involve socially mediated knowledge, there is no great difficulty in defending just that aspect of Christian theology.\(^6\) The return of virtue approaches thus corresponds to the demise of positivism and it is particularly appropriate to emphasise that the burden to verify religious truth claims, including those of John’s Gospel, according to the dictates of positivism is hardly so onerous as it once was.

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\(^5\) A point argued with particular strength in Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*.

\(^6\) See particularly Murphy, *Theology*. 

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Virtue epistemology focuses upon the intellectual (or doxastic) virtues, “wisdom, prudence, foresight, understanding, discernment, truthfulness and studiousness, among others.”¹²¹⁶ The opposing vices include “folly, obtuseness, gullibility, dishonesty, willful naiveté and vicious curiosity to name a few.”²¹⁷ Wood goes on to state:

the pursuit of intellectual virtue, while presently unfashionable, was the dominant way of casting epistemological concerns in the writings of Aristotle, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas and other philosophers of the ancient and medieval tradition. Your intellectual life is important, according to these thinkers, for the simple reason that your very character, the kind of person you are and are becoming, is at stake.²¹⁸

There are here more connections to Johannine thought than may be immediately apparent. I have discussed the fact that the religious leaders allow their vested self-interest to stand in the way of an acceptance of Jesus as the Christ²¹⁹ and this speaks to the focus in virtue epistemology upon individual agents. But what of the communal aspect of knowing? First, it is as a community that the religious leaders evaluate Jesus’ messianic claims and they do so according to the shared values of that community. It is therefore not surprising that their decisive act against Jesus is as a community, in order to preserve the community (11:45-52). Conversely, it is telling that those who come to faith in Jesus do so by re-evaluating the traditions of their religious communities. Faith is thus to be valued not least because it includes a willingness to reappraise one’s current beliefs and to demonstrate the courage to stand in opposition to one’s community if necessary. Here the discovery of truth is more easily explained in terms of epistemic virtues rather than in terms of the pursuit of adequate justificatory criteria.

There is connection between virtue epistemology and the Johannine emphasis on discipleship. The decision to follow Jesus does not entail complete awareness of his person or mission, but rather a recognition that he is decisive for one’s standing before God. Acceptance of that fact alone is initially sufficient, but to live with Jesus in relationship demands that one

²¹⁶ Wood, Epistemology, 16.
²¹⁷ Ibid.
²¹⁸ Ibid., 16-17.
²¹⁹ See p.27.
is prepared to accept the epistemic consequences. It was precisely because they were not prepared to do this that many turned away from Jesus after he spoke of eating his flesh and drinking his blood (6:51-66). By contrast, Jesus’ most committed followers were prepared to review their initial perceptions of Jesus.

It is in the post-resurrection period that we see the above themes rise to prominence. In my discussion of Johannine pneumatology\(^\text{220}\) I made reference to the theological development which occurred in the early Christian community under the influence of the Holy Spirit. I regard it as telling that although the early Christian movement took the Incarnation as decisive, they did not regard their initial understanding of the Incarnation as adequate. Thus they, as a community, proceeded to inquire after the significance of the historical event of the Incarnation in light of the presence of the Holy Spirit in their midst. Thus the themes of discipleship, ecclesiology, and pneumatology are brought together with that of virtue epistemology, the early Christians regarding the pursuit of truth as arising out of their shared commitment to Christ.

This leaves us with the greatest challenge to the Johannine account of knowledge, viz: is it credible to assert that there is some super-natural (non-physical) agent who can actually serve as a source of knowledge? Let us consider this most interesting question.

\(^{220}\) See pp.75ff and 83ff.
Chapter 10
Ontology and its Relation to Epistemology

That the role of the Holy Spirit is central to Johannine claims regarding knowledge and belief has significant ontological implications. In particular, there must be a “spiritual realm” if we are to make sense of the idea that the Holy Spirit acts as an epistemic agent by which we can have knowledge of spiritual entities (God in particular). In this chapter I wish to explore this issue against the framework of contemporary analytic epistemology. I begin by looking at the sources of knowledge in contemporary analytical epistemology to demonstrate that they do not allow us to obtain a knowledge of God after the manner of the Johannine account. The particular problem is that the idea of unmediated knowledge of God is excluded by definition. I argue that the reason for this is a failure to acknowledge an ontological category of “spirit.” I suggest a way in which an argument might be made for the existence of such a category, and argument which I will outline in the following chapter.

a. The Sources of Knowledge in Contemporary Analytic Epistemology

To a very great extent epistemology may be seen as an ongoing debate over the relative merits of the different sources of knowledge. I shall follow Audi’s five-fold classification of the sources of knowledge, hereafter called “the standard view”. 221

221 See part one of Robert Audi, Epistemology: A Contemporary Introduction to the Theory of Knowledge, Routledge Contemporary Introductions to Philosophy 2 (London: Routledge, 1998), 11-148. For a similar analysis, wherein the term “the standard view” is employed, see Richard Feldman, Epistemology, ed. Tom L.
• Perception – the senses (sight, hearing, touch, taste, smell) by which we know the sensible world.
• Reason – by which we know abstract entities and their inter-relationships.
• Introspection – by which we know our own inner lives.
• Memory – by which we recall that which we have learned in the past.
• Testimony – by which we have access to knowledge originally acquired by others.

When one considers these five sources of knowledge, paying close attention to how each is understood within contemporary epistemology, one can see that they reflect the various epistemological interests of the Modern period—rationalism (emphasising reason) and empiricism (emphasising sense perception) in particular. They are not, however, rendered obsolete by more recent moves in epistemology. For instance, we may observe that recent interest in the role of community in the process of knowing has not required that we posit any new source of knowledge, although it has given rise to major reappraisal of the nature and value of testimony—our primary social source of knowledge and justification.222

i. Implications for a Christian Knowledge of God

When one teases out the implications of the standard account of the sources of knowledge, again paying close attention to how each is understood within contemporary epistemology, one can see that certain difficulties arise for the claim that a knowledge of God is possible. Consider;

Perception, Reason, and Introspection

We may say that, within the Modernist programme, empiricism, rationalism, and romanticism emphasised perception, reason, and introspection respectively. Modernist thinkers saw the validity of these respective concerns and so gave considerable thought as to how they should be reconciled in a coherent theory of knowledge. For our present purposes what is most

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222 Audi, Epistemology, 130.
significant is that Modernity bequeathed to contemporary epistemology a quite clear understanding of what could be known and, therefore, what could not. These three sources of knowledge reflect this understanding.

What is interesting is to note just how impotent these three sources of knowledge are when it comes to formulating a Christian account of the knowledge of God. In very simple terms we may say that God, as understood in traditional Christian thought, is neither an object of sense perception, nor an abstract conceptual entity, nor an internal state or “feeling”—which three observations would seem to rule out the possibility of knowing God via sense perception, rational reflection, or introspection respectively. But what if we press this and ask whether this isn’t too hasty a conclusion based on too superficial an analysis? I suggest that even when we consider each of these three sources of knowledge in greater detail we do not escape this conclusion.

The standard view defines perception as that which is known through the senses of sight, hearing, taste, touch, and smell. Most certainly the Biblical account suggests that, at various times and in various places, God has chosen to make himself accessible by sense perception, so Christian theology will perhaps not wish to rule out \textit{a priori} the possibility that God can make himself known via sense perception. What should be clear, however, is that even on a Christian understanding such manifestations are the exception rather than the rule. Further, such manifestations were entirely outside the experience of Modernist thinkers and they therefore tended to be rather dismissive toward them in their epistemological thinking. Biblical accounts which suggested that God had manifested himself in the past fell to exactly the same logic which precluded acceptance of miracles. Here a lack of empirical

\footnote{Of course, a central claim of John’s Gospel is that the Incarnation of the Logos in the person of Jesus of Nazareth is precisely such an instance. Cf. Lee: “the remarkably cohesive presence of images relating to the five senses throughout the Johannine narrative—sight, hearing, taste, touch, and smell...is grounded in John’s central theological motif, the incarnation” (“Five Senses,” 115). Here I will only point out that the reader of the Gospel does not enjoy such sense experience, but rather must rely on the Gospel’s testimony as to the sense experience(s) of others. In terms of the sources of knowledge, then, we are here dealing with testimony to sense experience rather than with sense experience \textit{per se}. This is a quite different epistemological issue.}
evidence in one’s own experience rendered suspect claims by others to have had such experiences themselves.\textsuperscript{224} One could, of course, follow the Natural Theologians in drawing an inference from sense perception to the thesis “God exists” but Christian faith has traditionally wanted to make a far stronger claim than this.

Reason, too, proves quite unpromising as a source for the knowledge of God. It is important that we here understand that the standard view takes reason to be the means by which we come to know the relationship between concepts. If A is larger than B, and B is larger than C, then A is larger than C, is a paradigm example. God, however, is most certainly not a “relationship between concepts.” It is true that there is a venerable tradition of rational argument in support of theistic belief, but whatever the virtues of this tradition, it demonstrates at least three major limitations. First, if we turn to the Biblical narrative we find that rational argument is not merely conspicuous by its absence, it seems to be the subject of considerable suspicion—most classically in the musings of “the Preacher” in the book of Ecclesiastes. The impotence of human reason to discern the ways of God is further highlighted in the book of Job. From this, some question whether Christians ought to deal in such trade. Second, even when we turn to the philosophical tradition, we find this question of philosophical proof is a thorny one. Over against those who find the arguments for God’s existence and character compelling, we may place such eminent philosophers as J.L.Mackie who argues that none of the arguments for the existence of God work and so the “continuing hold [of theistic belief] on the minds of many reasonable people is surprising enough to count as a miracle”\textsuperscript{225}—and he means “miracle” in a pejorative sense. Even if Mackie is wrong, however, the complexity of such proofs surely reduces their general usefulness:

190. The metaphysical proofs for the existence of God are so remote from human reasoning and so involved that they make little impact, and, even if they did help some people, it would only be for the moment during which they watched the demonstration, because an

\textsuperscript{224} Hume’s argument against miracles, for instance, depended upon the non-occurrence of miracles in one’s own experience (Hume, \textit{Human Understanding}, 143-49).

hour later they would be afraid they had made a mistake.  

Finally, I reiterate the previous point regarding propositional beliefs not carrying any relational connotations. Rational argument may bring us to affirm the existence of a first mover, or a ground of being, or even that Jesus worked miracles, but something more is needed to bring us to Christian faith. We can again invoke Pascal who famously wrote of “[the] God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob—not of the philosophers and scholars.” The limits of reason as a way of knowing God have been continually affirmed by Christian thinkers and the consensus is that whilst reason is a helpful adjunct to Christian faith, that faith has been regarded as something quite different from proving, and subsequently affirming, a propositional claim.

Historically, recognition of the limitations of empirical and rationalist approaches resulted in the rise of romanticism. This movement acknowledged “feeling” as a critical element of human experience. It influenced Protestant theology, Liberal and Evangelical, by way of Pietism and continues to have influence up until the present time. According to the standard account, however, feeling or introspection provides knowledge only of one’s own internal states, not of any external reality. Otto critiqued Schleiermacher on this very point, arguing that the feeling of absolute dependence is a form of self-consciousness which leads to the fact of God only by way of inference. This being the case there could be no necessary connection between religious experience and the formulations of Liberal Theology. As society moved away from its religious roots in the 20th century, then, the programme of Liberal

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227 I here leave open the question of whether rational arguments for God’s existence fail precisely because people wish to evade the existential consequences. I already noted this possibility in the discussion on P-Belief and J-Belief. John’s Gospel makes a similar point when it suggest that one reason people do not come to the light is because their deeds are evil (3:19-21). See the discussion on p.27.
Theology began to falter and we have seen a wholesale abandonment of Christian faith by the very “cultured despisers” to whom Schleiermacher had hoped to commend it.

So far the standard view of knowledge is proving a most unpromising basis for a Christian knowledge of God. We are yet to reflect upon the remaining two sources of knowledge offered us by the standard view, memory and testimony. We shall see that they most certainly do not deliver us from our predicament.

*Memory and Testimony*

In respect of a Christian knowledge of God, perhaps the most significant thing we can say about memory and testimony is that they are not generative sources of knowledge. That is to say, whatever knowledge one acquires via memory or testimony must have its ultimate source elsewhere.

This is not to imply reductionism—the thesis that one is not justified in accepting testimony or memory unless one has supporting evidence from other sources (in which case testimony or memory reduce to other sources of knowledge). Neither is it to imply internalism—the thesis that one is justified in accepting testimony or memory only if one has some argument which supports their reliability (that is, if one has an “internal” perspective on the process of testimony or memory which would justify accepting them as reliable).

It is, rather, simply to note that I cannot remember (say) the sky’s being blue unless I have at some past time perceived the sky as blue. Similarly, I cannot bear testimony to (say) my being in love unless by introspection I had come to know this to be the case. What follows is a very simple conclusion: unless we can obtain a knowledge of God by some other means, there is no role for memory or testimony to play in the transmission of a knowledge of God. I have, of course, just argued that the standard view does not allow a knowledge of God to arise via perception, reason, or introspection. Neither memory nor testimony, therefore, have any role to play in a Christian knowledge of God as long as we accept the sources of knowledge

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as put forward in the standard view.

If this situation were not dire enough, we ought to return to the earlier observation that the Enlightenment project was especially hostile to any notion of authority. And as appeal to authority has always played an important part in Christian thought, it is inevitable that attempting to establish the truth claims of Christianity would be particularly problematic in the Modernist period. We may say that here Protestant thought was, in certain respects, hoist on its own petard. After all, in rejecting the authority of the Papacy and Councils, Luther was effectively stating that he would not simply accept their say-so on matters of religious faith and practice. Yet the same argument could easily be applied to Luther’s alternate authority, the Bible. The fundamental basis of Luther’s challenge was, after all, that the Bible is a more venerable form of “say-so” than any Papal or Conciliar decree. All that was necessary was to turn the argument back upon itself—to point out that the testimony of Scripture may be just as unreliable as the Papal and Conciliar testimony that Luther had decried.

b. Ontology and Epistemology

The foregoing discussion on the sources of knowledge in contemporary epistemology may be distilled into a simple rule, viz; the fundamental nature of the object under examination determines how that object may be known. For instance, the fundamental nature of abstract concepts is such that they are known through rational reflection. By contrast, the fundamental nature of physical objects is such that they are known through sense perception. Similarly, internal states are such that they are known through introspection, past events through memory, and the knowledge had by others through testimony. Thus, Blackburn:

We believe propositions, and when an issue arises, it is some proposition and its truth and falsity upon which our attention turns. If the issue is an historical one, then our attention will be turned to the historical period and the sources that help to establish what occurred. If it is a scientific one, our attention will be turned to whatever experiments or theories are most likely to establish a verdict. The issue determines its own epistemology.  

232 See p.2.
From this we may see the need for a suitably broad range of sources of knowledge if we are to offer an adequate account of all those things we might claim to know.

One author who has developed this point more fully is theologian Alister McGrath. In his *Scientific Theology* trilogy, McGrath draws upon the work of philosopher Roy Baskar in developing a notion of “stratified reality” in which “ontology determines epistemology.” This is to affirm the point just made, that the fundamental nature of the object (its ontology) under examination determines how that object is known (epistemology). Fundamental to this approach is the concept of critical realism which may be regarded as;

a way of describing the process of ‘knowing’ that acknowledges the reality of the thing known, as something other than the knower (hence ‘realism’), while also fully acknowledging that the only access we have to this reality lies along the spiralling path of appropriate dialogue or conversation between the knower and the thing known (hence ‘critical’). This path leads to critical reflection on the products of our enquiry into ‘reality’, so that our assertions about ‘reality’ acknowledge their own provisionality. Knowledge, in other words, although in principle concerning realities independent of the knower, is never itself independent of the knower.

Critical realism seeks to steer a middle course between naïve realism—which denies that our knowledge of reality is conditioned by the process of knowing—and post-modern anti-realism—which asserts that our knowledge of reality (if, indeed, there be such) is entirely conditioned by the process of knowing.

In McGrath’s view the advantage of this approach is that it “[makes] considerable sense, not least on account of its obvious resonance with the actual working assumptions of the natural sciences.” Such a consideration is, I think, critical given that the natural sciences

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236 McGrath, *Science of God*, 141. Foremost in McGrath’s thinking here is the basic principle “that perception gives us access to things and experimental activity access to structures which exist independently of us” (Roy Bhaskar). As a significant aside, Christian theology has far more to do with the ideas of “perception” and “experiment” than is immediately apparent. I give the former significant consideration in this thesis (see particularly the discussion of Alston’s views on the matter on pp.130ff). As respects the latter, we may say that the emphasis upon experience as a source for theological reflection brings us close to something like “experiment”: see the discussion in Alister E. McGrath, *The Foundations of Dialogue in Science and Religion* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998), 87-88. Note also Murphy: “It is possible to see the proliferation of
have proven such a hugely important chapter in the growth of human knowledge and that most scientists seem to be of the view that their theories are constrained by, and reflect a knowledge of, physical reality. This means that those who suggest the utter collapse of the Modernist project are perhaps missing the critically important point that, in respect of the natural sciences at least, there is strong reason to think that aspects of the Modernist project are extraordinarily robust. McGrath does not ignore the weaknesses of Modernism. He speaks of “the crisis of modernity” and acknowledges the “collapse of classic foundationalism” writing that “the belief that foundationalism is philosophically indefensible is now so widely accepted that its demise is the closest thing to a philosophical consensus there has been for decades.” McGrath’s advocates critical realism by way of response to the weaknesses of Modernist epistemology without the adoption of anti-realist or relativist approaches.

i. Ontology Determines Epistemology: A Critique and a Response

The idea that “ontology determines epistemology” does not go without criticism. In direct response to McGrath, Kevin Sharpe writes:

Besides its anthropomorphism (attributing agency to the thing humans attempt to know), how does McGrath know first the ontology and then the appropriate epistemology? Knowing the ontology requires either an assumption or an epistemology. This applies to all fields of knowledge.

Here I believe that Sharpe creates quite unnecessary difficulties. The charge of “anthropomorphism” seems to me to pass over the substance of McGrath’s treatment of the

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237 Whilst I consider this claim to be well justified, it does not go unchallenged. A helpful overview is found in Larry Laudan, “Explaining the Success of Science: Beyond Epistemic Realism and Relativism,” in Science and Reality: Recent Work in the Philosophy of Science: Essays in Honor of Ernan McMullin, ed. James T. Cushing, C.F. Delaney, and Gary M. Gutting (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 83-105.

238 McGrath, Reality, 56.
239 Ibid.
240 Ibid., 33.
241 Ibid., 33-35.
relationship between ontology and epistemology in favour of a semantic quibble over the choice of words in the maxim which McGrath adopts by way of summary. More substantially, Sharpe’s major objection seems to understand that McGrath is arguing for the chronological priority of ontology rather than for its logical priority. Yet McGrath does not argue that we must first know the ontology before knowing which epistemology to deploy. His claim, rather, is that we must deploy an epistemology appropriate to the nature of the object we seek to know: should we fail to do so, we cannot possibly come to a knowledge of the object in question. Sharpe has not done enough to overturn the substantial point of the maxim “ontology determines epistemology.”

ii. Transcendental Justification of Ontological Categories

Yet, even if Sharpe’s objection to McGrath's substantial point fails, I do consider it is correct to affirm that a knowledge of ontology cannot chronologically precede epistemology. How indeed could one know the ontology unless one already had an epistemology at one’s disposal? Here we must acknowledge the very important point that there is a certain circularity in any knowledge-related enquiry. On the one hand, McGrath is correct in suggesting that in order to come to a knowledge of an object, we must adopt an epistemology appropriate to it. On the other hand, Sharpe is correct to suggest that without an appropriate epistemology we cannot know anything about the object in question. This apparent conundrum is resolved by the adoption of an approach in which theses about the relationship between knowledge and its object are formulated, critiqued, and progressively refined. It is just such an approach which we witness in the history of epistemology.

This is seen, first, in the ongoing dialectic between the notions of rationalism and empiricism. Here we see that attempts to assert that all knowledge ultimately derives either from reason alone or from sense perception alone are all too easily undermined by the simple strategy of positing counter-instances in which one is confronted by an item of knowledge
which, on the one hand, we have no wish to reject as an instance of knowledge, but which, on
the other hand, can by no means be justified as knowledge under the schema in question. We
may find a paradigm instance of such a method in progress when we turn to Kant’s response
to Hume in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Crudely put, Hume had began with empiricism
leading to scepticism in respect of certain commonly accepted instances of knowledge.
Finding such scepticism unacceptable, Kant inverted this to ask: given such instances of
knowledge, how might we possibly account for them?

Such a question is central to Kant’s “transcendental method” by which one investigates
the conditions of knowledge. Such method involves positing arguments of the following form:

There is experience; the truth of some proposition \( p \) is a conceptually necessary condition of
the possibility of experience; therefore \( p \).

Such transcendental arguments are not without their difficulties, and this has lead Stroud to
propose the deployment of “modest” transcendental arguments. Here the goal is not to
demonstrate the truth of some proposition \( p \) as conceptually necessary, but merely to
demonstrate that some alternative is unintelligible. Such a modest transcendental argument
takes the following form:

There is experience; the falsity of some proposition \( p \) is a conceptually necessary condition
of the possibility of experience; therefore not-\( p \).

An example of this very thing is found in John’s Gospel when Jesus’ opponents try to dismiss
his teaching as that of one who “has a demon and is mad” (10:20). Against this, his supporters
appeal to his miracles: “can a demon open the eyes of the blind?” (21). Here a proposition
(“Jesus has a demon and is mad”) is shown unintelligible on the basis of an experience (Jesus’
signs) which all parties acknowledge.

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c. Summary

What is most critical in the above discussion is that there is precedent in philosophy for taking an experience as given and moving from there to construct an ontology and an epistemology which would account for it. Such a process has not been in the least arbitrary, but has involved an ongoing process of reflection by the philosophical community. It is not unreasonable to propose, then, that Christian religious experience might be approached in the same manner. If there is experience of the Holy Spirit, it is not unreasonable to take such an experience as a given, moving from there to construct an ontology and an epistemology to give an account of that experience.

The inclusion of an ontological category of “spirit” to which humans have some sort of direct (unmediated) access would enable us to affirm the idea, which the first section of the thesis found to be pervasive in John’s Gospel, that there exists a spiritual realm which humans can “sense” after analogy to sense perception. A category of “spirit” could be incorporated within the account of the sources of knowledge in analytical epistemology without doing any violence to that discipline.

The next chapter will demonstrate that what is now being proposed is not at all fanciful and that, in fact, most of the requisite argument has already been put forward in the literature. All that need be done is to appropriate it in the service of a Johannine account of knowledge.
Chapter 11

The Knowledge of God in 20th Century Theology

In this section of the thesis I wish to consider five 20th century thinkers who are representative of Protestant engagement with the non-rational aspects of belief. The goal is to support the contention that there are good arguments to affirm the existence of a “spiritual realm” with its own ontology and corresponding epistemology. The thinkers concerned span the 20th century from beginning to end. A chief goal is to illustrate the changing attitudes to religious experience over this period. The majority view at the turn of the 20th century was that religious experience is a psychological phenomenon with no external referent. As that century progressed, however, we find quite influential thinkers prepared to argue that religious experience involves an experience of a spiritual reality analogous to sense experience of physical reality.

a. William James (1842-1910)

William James has been ranked alongside Jonathan Edwards and Ralph Waldo Emerson as one of America’s three most original religious thinkers245 thanks in no small part to his remarkable work The Varieties of Religious Experience (1902). The Varieties is the outcome of James’s Gifford Lectureship of 1901-02 and is “recognized not only as [psychology of

religion’s] greatest classic but also as one of the most important writings on religion in the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{246}\ It is an insightful treatment of human religious experience which provides a virtual manifesto for James’s subsequent work in philosophy of religion.

Those aspects of James’s thought which I wish to consider here can all be understood against a shifting cultural landscape in which the natural sciences were coming to displace religion at the centre of things. Part of this shift saw an increasing importance placed on scientific—which is to say naturalistic—explanations of phenomena, and in this religious belief was no exception. This gave rise to what James called “medical materialism” in which religious experiences were ascribed to organic rather than spiritual causes—the suggestion that St. Paul’s Damascus Road experience (Acts 9:1-9) was actually an epileptic fit rather than a divine apparition is a classic example of the view. This perspective displaced the view that religious experiences are spiritual in nature, so bankrupting their traditional theological explanations. Against such a background three aspects of James’s life and writings are of particular significance.

First, by presenting religious experience as something to be studied scientifically, which is to say without value judgement, James proved a powerful influence against what had been a largely uncritical dismissal of religion on scientific grounds. In large part it was the totality of James’s impact which is significant here—his treatment of religious experience with both sensitivity and seriousness set the standard for all subsequent investigations and meant that religious experience would thereafter be treated with respect as an important human phenomenon in its own right. Of his arguments against medical materialism three are of particular interest here: (1) that the origin of a belief is no measure of either its truth or its value; (2) that if all beliefs (or dis-beliefs) can be ascribed to organic causes it is “quite illogical and arbitrary” to single out religious belief for particular criticism on such a

ground;\textsuperscript{247} and (3) it may well be the case that psychological “abnormality” serves to facilitate religious experience (compare here the way in which recent findings in neuroscience suggest creativity and schizophrenia have shared neurological origins\textsuperscript{248}). Actually, James had focused primarily upon what were regarded as pathological or neurotic instances of religious experience and whilst this has been a constant source of criticism\textsuperscript{249} it nevertheless leads to the irony that it was precisely in examining extreme instances of religious experience that James normalised those religious experiences which are part-and-parcel of the lives of the great majority of ordinary folk. In so doing he helped to foster the idea that experience of, and belief in, some sort of transcendent entity is thoroughly normal. Rather than something to be arbitrarily dismissed, the human religious impulse is worthy of sensitive and serious appraisal.

Two further insights from James’s work contribute significantly to the present study. First is the idea that religious experience cannot be assessed on the same sort of grounds as beliefs about physical reality. In particular, it cannot be assessed by investigation of its causes as these simply are not open to us. So James followed Jonathan Edwards in making appeal to the criterion Jesus had laid down for assessing prophets:

\begin{quote}
By their fruits ye shall know them, not by their roots. Jonathan Edwards’s \textit{Treatise on Religious Affections} is an elaborate working out of this thesis. The \textit{roots} of a man’s virtue are inaccessible to us. No appearances whatever are infallible proofs of grace. Our practice is the only sure evidence, even to ourselves, that we are genuinely Christians.\textsuperscript{250}
\end{quote}

Here James is advocating the principles of his Pragmatist philosophy. Of this school of thought I have little to say here and I wish neither to defend nor critique James’s own resolution to the problem of justifying religious belief. What is of importance is simply this: that inherent in James’s argument is the claim that religious beliefs have a different criterion of justification than do scientific beliefs. He is not alone in making such an observation.


\textsuperscript{249} For an overview of this and other common criticisms of James’s approach see Wulff, \textit{Psychology of Religion}, 499-503.

\textsuperscript{250} James, \textit{Varieties}, 20. For the teaching of Jesus being alluded to see Matthew 7:15-20.
The second important insight from James arises out of his famous essay *The Will to Believe* (1896). Here James concisely states the thesis he wishes to defend;

> Our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds; for to say, under such circumstances, “Do not decide, but leave the question open,” is itself a passional decision,—just like deciding yes or no,—and is attended with the same risk of losing the truth.\(^{251}\)

The significance of this requires that we go back to James’s *Principles of Psychology* (1890) where he had suggested the following relationship between “the bare thought of an object and belief in the object’s reality”:\(^{252}\)

> …often we first suppose and then believe; first play with a notion, frame the hypothesis, and then affirm the existence, of an object of thought. And we are quite conscious of the succession of the two mental acts. But these cases are none of them primitive cases. They only ever occur in minds long schooled to doubt by the contradictions of experience. The primitive impulse is to affirm immediately the reality of all that is conceived.\(^{253}\)

The third important point derives from James’s own religious anomie which arose through lack of the sort of religious experience he so highly valued. This might be taken as an example of how failure to embrace faith as a centred act of the entire person can be disastrous.\(^{254}\) James considered “‘experience’ against ‘philosophy’ as being the real backbone of the world’s religious life”\(^{255}\) and his letters seem to suggest that he had relied solely upon

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\(^{251}\) William James, “Will to Believe,” in *The Will to Believe, and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1897), 11.


\(^{254}\) It may be that James fell victim to the ongoing philosophical attacks against orthodox Christian belief. It was not that he had any in principle objection to approaching religion in a holistic manner, rather this seems not to have been (in his own phrase) a live option:

> We are thinking beings, and we cannot exclude the intellect from participating in any of our functions. Even in soliloquizing with ourselves, we construe our feelings intellectually. Both our personal ideals and our religious and mystical experiences must be interpreted congruously with the kind of scenery which our thinking mind inhabits. The philosophic climate of our time inevitably forces its own clothing on us. Moreover, we must exchange our feelings with one another, and in doing so we have to speak, and to use general and abstract verbal formulas. Conceptions and constructions are thus a necessary part of our religion; and as moderator amid the clash of hypotheses, and mediator among the criticisms of one man’s constructions by another, philosophy will always have much to do. It would be strange if I disputed this, when these very lectures which I am giving are (as you will see more clearly from now onwards) a laborious attempt to extract from the privacies of religious experience some general facts which can be defined in formulas upon which everybody may agree. (James, *Varieties*, 423)

spiritual experience as the ground of his own faith. He was, in addition, very dismissive of dogmatic theology and institutional religion. When the requisite spiritual experience failed, it was inevitable that James’s had no other resources upon which to rely.

b. Rudolf Otto (1869-1937)

Best known for his study of the non-rational aspects of religious belief in The Idea of the Holy (1917), Rudolf Otto had also published two other significant, although lesser known, works; Naturalism and Religion (1904) and The Philosophy of Religion: Based on Kant and Fries (1909). The former was essentially a response to attempts to reduce religious experience to evolutionary explanation, the later a response to Kant’s notion that religion could be grounded only in the moral a priori. Passing references in these works indicate that Otto was also familiar with the work of William James. This is hardly surprising given Otto’s interests and James’s influence but although Otto shared James’s interest in the experiential aspects of religious belief, their backgrounds and methodologies were otherwise quite different. A career theologian, Otto had much greater regard for confessional Christianity and rational theological reflection than did James. It is perhaps significant that his occasional references to James are somewhat negative in nature. Given that Otto is so often held up as the champion of the non-rational it would seem fitting to give some consideration to his advocacy of the rational.

One need go no further than the foreword of The Idea of the Holy in order to grasp the importance Otto gave to the rational aspect of religious belief. He derided those “too lazy to think or too ready to evade the arduous duty of clarifying their ideas and grounding their convictions on a basis of coherent thought.”256 His Naturalism and Religion and Philosophy of Religion, he pointed out, contained the results of “many years of study upon the rational aspect of that supreme Reality we call ‘God’.” Such careful work was a necessary prerequisite as “no one ought to concern himself with the ‘Numen ineffabile’ who has not already devoted

assiduous and serious study to the ‘Ratio aeterna’.”

The Idea of the Holy, then, was in no way a departure from Otto’s earlier program of rational theological reflection but was integral to it. Otto could both assert the inadequacy of rational reflection whilst affirming that the “unique clarity and abundance” of rational concepts within Christianity is “though not the sole or even the chief, yet a very real sign of its superiority over religions of other forms and at other levels. This must be asserted at the outset and with the most positive emphasis.”

Whereas James had downplayed the value of the rational, Otto saw the rational and the non-rational, the cognitive and the experiential, as coexisting in a critical symbiosis. We see here shades of Tillich’s notion of faith as an act of the total personality rather than a movement of one special aspect of it.

The entire point of The Idea of the Holy, however, was to deal at length with the non-rational aspects of religious experience. Otto was very clear that it is “a wrong and one-sided interpretation” to hold that “the essence of deity can be given completely and exhaustively in … ‘rational’ attributions.” Indeed, “so far are these ‘rational’ attributes from exhausting the idea of deity, that they in fact imply a non-rational or supra-rational Subject of which they are predicates.” Yet although this Subject “eludes the conceptual way of understanding, it must be in some way or other within our grasp, else absolutely nothing could be asserted of it.”

To refer to this “non-rational Subject” Otto coined the term ‘the Numinous’: “a special term to stand for ‘the holy’ minus its moral factor or ‘moment’, and…minus its ‘rational’ aspect altogether.” In all religions this ‘Numinous’ lives “as the real innermost core, and without it no religion would be worthy of the name.” Otto has thus equipped himself with a linguistic tool which will allow him to distinguish, without unwanted connotations, the non-rational or

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257 Ibid.
258 Ibid., 1.
259 Tillich, Dynamics of Faith, 4-5.
261 Ibid.
262 Ibid.
263 Ibid., 6.
264 Ibid.

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supra-rational Subject of religion (‘the Numinous’) from the valuable rational (or moral) attributions we may make of it.

It is important to note that Otto intends the Numinous to be understood as existing outside the self. Accordingly “the numinous is thus felt as objective and outside the self.” Here Otto owes a debt to the philosophy of Jakob Fries (1773-1843) and his concept of Ahnung—translatable as “intuitive knowledge” or “presentiment”. It is a concept which has some parallel with Schleiermacher’s “feeling of [absolute] dependence” yet Otto finds this latter inadequate in more than one respect. First, he finds Schleiermacher mistaken “in making the distinction merely that between ‘absolute’ and ‘relative’ dependence, and therefore a difference of degree and not of intrinsic quality.” That is, the response to the numinous is “far more than, and something other than, merely a feeling of dependence.” Otto thus proposes a new phrase: “creature consciousness” which is “the emotion of a creature, abased and overwhelmed by its own nothingness in contrast to that which is supreme above all creatures.” Second, Otto considers that, given Schleiermacher’s account, religious emotion would be directly and primarily a sort of self-consciousness, a feeling concerning one’s self in a special, determined relation, viz. one’s dependence. Thus, according to Schleiermacher, I can only come upon the very fact of God as the result of an inference, that is, by reasoning to a cause beyond myself to account for my ‘feeling of dependence’.

Taking these together we can see why Otto distinguished Ahnung from the “feeling of dependence.” Ahnung is “a definitely ‘numinous’ state of mind…perfectly sui generis and irreducible to any other…[an] absolutely and elementary datum.” Much of Otto’s argument in The Philosophy of Religion, Based on Kant and Fries lurks behind this statement for he surely has in mind the argument he put therein: that the human religious sentiment is not, as

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265 Ibid., 10-11.
266 Ibid., 11.
269 Ibid., 10.
270 Ibid.
271 Ibid., 7. Emphasis in original.
Kant believed, grounded in the moral *a priori* but is rather an *a priori* in its own right. Thus, “if there be any single domain of human experience that presents us with something unmistakably specific and unique, peculiar to itself, assuredly it is that of the religious life.”272 By contrast, the “feeling of dependence” is “a first subjective concomitant and effect of another feeling-element, which casts it like a shadow, but which in itself indubitably has immediate and primary reference to an object outside the self.”273

We can thus see how Otto brings together the rational and non-rational elements in religion. The objective reality, the numinous, is apprehended through *Ahnung*—a direct intuition irreducible to any other category—so giving rise to “creature consciousness” all of which may be expressed to a greater or lesser extent, but never exhaustively, in rational categories. In order to justify religious belief which arises through *Ahnung*, one need not go any further than an appeal to *Ahnung* itself. Religious belief arises from, and is justified by, the direct perception of the numinous.

c. John Baillie (1886-1960)

The next representative work on which I wish to draw is *The Sense of the Presence of God* (1962) by Scottish theologian John Baillie. Published posthumously, this book was a compilation of the notes that Baillie had prepared for what would have been the Gifford Lectures of 1961-62 and covered much of the same ground as Baillie’s earlier work *Our Knowledge of God* (1939). Baillie was, like Otto, a career theologian. His prodigious output reflects a range of interests in dogmatic and philosophical theology yet it is clear that he harboured an ongoing interest in the experiential basis and interpersonal nature of religious belief.274 I think it important that Baillie also stands in some opposition to James in that he stood squarely within the orthodox Christian tradition. Indeed, his *Diary of Private

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273 *Ibid.*, 10. Cf. Moltmann: “It is not the experiences which are important, but the one who has been experienced in them” (*Crucified God*, xviii).
Prayer (1936), widely regarded as a devotional classic, reveals him as a man of deep Christian commitment. His approach in Sense, therefore, is often regarded as a work of theology motivated by an apologetic interest rather than a rigorous work of philosophy aspiring to detached neutrality.

Often it is Baillie’s own religious experience that provides the grist for his analytical mill and just as James’s Varieties reflects much that was peculiar in James’s own experience, so too the impact of Baillie’s religious experience is evident in Sense. Elsewhere he states that “My earliest memories have a definitely religious atmosphere. They are already heavy with ‘the numinous.’”275 What then becomes interesting is the relationship Baillie draws between the awareness of the numinous and the message of the Christian Gospel;

…he is adamant that his early religious education did not produce his sense of the presence of God. Rather, he holds that his early nurture in the Christian faith influenced him because it found a resonance with his a priori intuition of God. By a priori Baillie means that his awareness of a power over and above the material world was a constant element of all his experience, but was not generated by his experience. Consequently, when Baillie heard the Gospel stories he responded, he says, because he recognized in the stories of Christ the same presence that he already intuitively knew.276

Here we find intimations of Baillie’s acceptance in Sense of the label “intuitionist” as a description of his position—although he has in mind the idea that this “intuition” is a mode of perception. Intuitionism “is in itself a suitable enough name, since intuition and perception are two Latin words which in this usage are virtually identical in meaning.”277 And by “perception” Baillie is thinking of something beyond “our experience of the corporeal world as revealed to us by our bodily senses.”278 He goes on to write:

Our lives would indeed be poor and savourless if we had no awareness, in which we could repose the least degree of trust, of anything in reality save what we can see and hear and touch and taste and smell. My contention will indeed be that we have even what can properly be called sense experience of other things than these. The human spirit, I shall say, develops certain subtler senses or sensitivities which go beyond the bodily senses…a sense of humour, a sense of honour, a sense of propriety, a sense of proportion, a sense of (literary) style; and likewise of a sense of duty, a ‘sensitive’ conscience, a sense of the holy or of the divine, a

276 Hood, Baillie, Oman, and Macmurray, 69.
278 Ibid., 52.
sense of the presence of God.279

Critically, such senses are to be understood as primary—a point Baillie is particularly concerned to argue in respects of the sense of the presence of God. “The proper name of religious experience is faith”280 and

I have been particularly concerned to argue is that faith is one such primary mode of awareness. Faith does not deduce from other realities that are present the existence of a God who is not present but absent; rather is it an awareness of the divine Presence itself, however hidden behind the veils of sense. Apart from such awareness there can be no true religion.281

Here Baillie, like Otto, follows a path well-trodden by both philosophers and mystics distinguishing the knowledge of truth (“knowledge by description”) from the knowledge of reality (“knowledge by acquaintance”).282 Yet the two are not entirely divorced for “the very moment that we are confronted with any reality, so becoming acquainted with it, our minds start to frame certain propositions regarding it.”283 We are thus led from “acquaintance” to “description.” However, “it is nevertheless the reality itself, rather than the propositions, which is the prime and direct object of our knowledge.”284

At this point, the question arises: how might we verify the truth of any proposition which arises in such a manner? Put this way, that is in terms of “verification,” the question clearly expresses the concerns of Logical Positivism. That school of thought has long been in eclipse and the question of “verification” as it confronted Baillie is no longer of much contemporary concern. But even so, we may still wonder: how does one “go outside” religious experience to test its veracity? Baillie’s answer is simply that one cannot. Religious experience, however, is hardly unique in this regard;

It would appear that the veridical nature of any primary mode of apprehension cannot be tested by reference to anything outside itself. Each must carry its own witness or must collapse. If the trust we repose in it be not self-authenticating, there is no other apparent way

279 Ibid., 52-53.
280 Ibid., 64.
281 Ibid., 88-89.
283 Ibid., 16.
284 Ibid., 16-17.
of authenticating it.\textsuperscript{285}

Such a claim concerned some of Baillie’s critics who saw it leading to an uncritical, indeed uncriticisable, dogmatism.\textsuperscript{286} And it does seem that Baillie goes too far if he means to suggest our apprehension of God is the only basis upon which we construct our theological claims. It does not seem to me, however, that Baillie intended any such thing for, as we saw in the quotation from Hood (above) “when Baillie heard the Gospel stories he responded, he says, because he recognized in the stories of Christ the same presence that he already intuitively knew.” Baillie's Christian faith, in other words, arose not simply out of a sense of divine presence. It arose also out of encounter with the Christian kerygma. It was only when that awareness found expression in the Gospel of Christ, and that through the proclamation of the community of faith, that he “recognized…the same presence that he already intuitively knew.” Baillie’s intuitive knowledge of God, then, only rises to the level of Christian faith when it is married to the content of the Christian Gospel.

\textbf{d. William P. Alston (1921-2009)}

One of the stronger criticisms raised against Baillie was that his work lacked philosophical rigour. No such criticism, however, could be urged against William P. Alston who is widely recognized as one of the most eminent of recent analytical philosophers. In \textit{Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience} (1991) Alston put an extraordinarily rigorous case for the claim that experiential awareness (“perception”) of God can provide epistemic justification for what he called ‘manifestation’ or ‘M-beliefs’ about God. Here Alston is thinking of the religious experience of ordinary believers whose experience leads them to form M-beliefs to the effect that God is doing something for or to them (strengthening, guiding, communicating a message, etc.) or that he has some property (goodness, power, lovingness, etc.)

\textsuperscript{285} Ibid., 73.

Alston takes mystical experiences to involve direct, non-sensory experiences in which something is “presented,” or “given” to the subject and which the subject identifies as God. This idea of “presentation” or “givenness” leads Alston to classify such experiences as a form of perception. Such experiences are labelled “mystical perception” (MP) in order to distinguish them from sense perception (SP). It is important to note here that of the various accounts of perception on offer Alston favours the “Theory of Appearing.” In this account one speaks of an object “appearing as such-and-such” to a subject regardless of whether the subject forms any beliefs about it and without asking whether the object actually is such-and-such. By way of example, imagine I am watching a football game. There will be a great deal going on to which I pay scant attention and about which I form no particular belief. I see the grass, for instance, it “appears to me” but I form no specific belief about its colour. Much less do I reflect upon the truth of any such belief. The theory of appearing seeks to take account of such phenomena by speaking not in the active but in the passive voice. Thus, not “I see green” but “I am being appeared to greenly.” It is not necessary that I do anything with the greenness of the grass which appears to me. I form no beliefs about it, much less inquire into whether the grass really is green. Following on from this we can say that in his account of MP Alston wants to speak of the subject being “appeared to numinously” (my phrase)—an idea which gives rise to all sorts of interesting implications.

Perhaps the most interesting question is whether beliefs which arise in consequence of being “appeared to numinously” are to be regarded as veridical. Are they, in other words, “true”? Here Alston takes great pains to argue that beliefs based on MP are no worse off than beliefs based on SP. This is at first a startling claim in regards of which Alston makes two important points. The first is that all attempts to construct a rigorous philosophical argument which would demonstrate the reliability of SP as a belief forming mechanism are ultimately
unsuccessful.\textsuperscript{287} MP is therefore no worse off than SP in this regard.\textsuperscript{288} Second, our primary reason for accepting the validity of perceptual beliefs (i.e. beliefs formed on the basis of SP) is due to the fact that SP is an accepted “doxastic practice” which we have no reason to consider unreliable and which, in fact, has considerable practical benefit.\textsuperscript{289} But the same argument can be applied to MP—at least within the scope of a particular religious tradition. In short, Alston’s contention is that such positive arguments we can put for MP as a belief forming mechanism are no weaker than those we can put for SP. Equally, such arguments as we can urge against MP also serve to bring SP into question. Thus, if it is rational to engage in SP despite the difficulties, the same must follow for MP.\textsuperscript{290}

In all of this, we must note that Alston is speaking by and large of \textit{prima facie} justification of beliefs. That is to say, his argument is essentially that for any perceptual experience (whether MP or SP) in which something appears to me as such-and-such, then I am \textit{prima facie} justified in believing it to be such-and-such unless I have good reason to think otherwise. Unless, that is, I have what is known as a \textit{defeater} for my belief. So, for example, if I have an experience which I take to be a case of MP, and in that experience I conceive God as appearing to me as (say) loving, then I am \textit{prima facie} justified in forming the belief “God is loving.” I might, however, find myself in possession of a good argument against this belief (a defeater) which over-rides this \textit{prima facie} justification.\textsuperscript{291} This seems a rather pedestrian claim until Alston points out that the criticisms commonly urged against the reliability of MP apply equally to SP; to accept such criticisms in the one case, but not the other, is arbitrarily to apply a double-standard.\textsuperscript{292}

\textsuperscript{288} \textit{Ibid.}, 6.
\textsuperscript{289} See chapter 4 of \textit{ibid.}, 146ff.
\textsuperscript{290} \textit{Ibid.}, 274. Note that here Alston makes reference to “CP,” but this appears to be an editorial oversight. Elsewhere in this work he refers to “CMP” or “Christian Mystical Perceptual Practice,” \textit{ibid.}, 193. CMP is one specific instance of MP.
\textsuperscript{291} See the discussion in Chapter 5 of \textit{ibid.}, 184ff. and particularly the conclusion of that chapter (\textit{ibid.}, 225).
\textsuperscript{292} \textit{Ibid.}, 199.
Alston rejects the idea that all beliefs arising from MP (or SP for that matter) are to be uncritically received, but how, given the above, are M-beliefs to be assessed? Here Alston stresses the function of “background beliefs” and the role they play in both MP and SP.293 To form the belief that “God is loving,” for instance, is really to connect certain experiences in a certain way. In particular, it is to connect a certain MP with previous experiences of being loved. Whilst there are enormously difficult issues involved here—how, for instance, do we learn abstract concepts such as “love” in the first place?—we can at least grasp Alston’s point that, again, whatever difficulties might arise for an account of beliefs based on MP they are no greater than in a corresponding account for SP.294 We might also note that in speaking of SP and MP as accepted doxastic practices,295 Alston is rejecting an individualistic account of belief formation.296 In a response to just such an objection from Tilley,297 Alston observes that “the community will refuse to accept a particular report of perception of God because it runs into conflict with the background belief system, whatever the individual says.”298 Religious belief, in other words, is only partially grounded in MP and overall Alston’s point is not to argue (as some have) that MP is the entire story. Rather, there is a “cumulative effects” argument for religious belief in which the total case—of which MP is only one part—is greater than any of its individual components.299

e. Alvin Plantinga (1932-present)

Alvin Plantinga is, like William P. Alston, another proponent of rigorous philosophical argumentation. Perhaps an even more eminent philosopher than Alston, Plantinga’s “Warrant Trilogy”—consisting of the works Warrant: The Current Debate (1993), Warrant and Proper Function (1993) and Warranted Christian Belief (2000)—is an extended argument for the

293 Ibid., 81-93.
294 For a convenient summary see ibid., 248-50.
295 Chapter 4 of ibid., 146ff.
296 Ibid., 163.
view that Christian belief is rationally acceptable. It is beyond the scope of the present
treatment to enter into a detailed discussion of the Warrant Trilogy, and so I will content
myself with a brief coverage of three themes which I find of particular interest followed by a
brief discussion of an interesting critique of Plantinga by Bachelard.300

The first book of the Warrant Trilogy (Warrant: The Current Debate) was written to
investigate a highly contentious issue in contemporary epistemology, namely what conditions
must a belief satisfy in order to pass muster as an instance of knowledge. Here philosophers
are seeking to rigorously specify the criteria which distinguish true instances of knowledge
from cases which are somehow substandard—being right by virtue of a lucky guess or simply
being very sure are instances of that sort. Something more than simply being right, or being
very sure is required. This “something more” typically goes by the name “justification” or
“warrant” but there is, frustratingly, little consensus on what “justification” or “warrant”
actually is. Some philosophers hold to “internalist” theories of justification which, roughly
speaking, demand that a person is immediately aware of the justificatory grounds of a belief.
By contrast, “externalist” theories of justification make no such demand insisting that a belief
is justified when a person acquires it under appropriate conditions—the grounds of
justification then being “external” to the believer. In Warrant: The Current Debate301
Plantinga argues that the main varieties of internalism and externalism fail, that nobody has
properly identified the “something more” that distinguishes actual instances of knowledge
from instances of mere true belief. In so doing he utilises the term “warrant” rather than
“justification” so as to avoid some historical connotations attached to the later by
epistemologists.

What particularly interests me here are certain aspects of the alternative account of

300 Sarah Bachelard, “‘Foolishness to the Greeks’: Plantinga and the Epistemology of Christian Belief,” Sophia
warrant which Plantinga proposes. He lays out this account in *Warrant and Proper Function* and then applies it to Christian belief in *Warranted Christian Belief*. The account he proposes is that of “proper function” and is the view, essentially, that when one’s belief-forming mechanisms operate as they should (i.e. display “proper function”) then they issue in true beliefs. This is an externalist theory of justification because one is not required to have special access to (i.e. to be aware of) reasons which justify Christian belief. It thus amounts to the idea that one may be warranted in believing in God not by being in conscious possession of any justifying arguments but by forming such a belief on the basis of properly functioning belief-forming mechanisms.

Plantinga then goes on to show how this notion of proper function resonates with Calvin’s notion that “there is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity.” This awareness of God, the “sensus divinitatis,” is for both Calvin and Plantinga a normal aspect of human experience. It is “naturally inborn in all, and is fixed deep within, as it were in the very marrow.” As Plantinga puts it:

> God has created us human beings with a belief producing process or source of belief, the *sensus divinitatis*; this source works under various conditions to produce beliefs about God, including, of course, beliefs that immediately entail his existence. Belief produced in this way…can easily meet the conditions for warrant; given that it is true (and held sufficiently strongly), it would constitute knowledge.

This, however, is only half the story for the same theological tradition (Reformed) which so strongly affirms the notion of the *sensus divinitatis* affirms in equally strong terms the “noetic effect of sin.” The idea here is that human sinfulness affects the human mind both in its cognitive and affective functions. Regarding the first, our intellect is darkened by “a sort of blindness, a sort of imperceptiveness, dullness, stupidity” such that we cannot know God.

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304 Jean Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559) 1.3.1.
305 Ibid.
306 Ibid.
Regarding the second, we find ourselves unwilling to forego our own self-interest in order to submit to the divine will; “[we] want to be autonomous, beholden to no one. Perhaps this is the deepest root of the condition of sin.”\textsuperscript{309} What follows is simply that human beings no longer enjoy “proper function” with regard to their cognitive faculties. The \textit{sensus divinitatis} is corrupted such that something over and above a mere awareness of God is required as the basis of faith. For Plantinga this “something” is the “internal instigation of the Holy Spirit”\textsuperscript{310} by which “we come to see the truth of the central Christian affirmations.”\textsuperscript{311}

Such an account of faith involves a complex interaction between the Holy Spirit and the human agent as both knower and actor. It involves the Holy Spirit restoring the human cognitive capacities such that we can both see the truth of the Gospel and are moved to respond to it in obedience. Here Plantinga speaks of a “three-tier cognitive process” involving divinely inspired scripture, the work of the Holy Spirit, and faith understood as “a firm and certain knowledge of God’s benevolence towards us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit.”\textsuperscript{312} Faith therefore involves an explicitly cognitive element.\textsuperscript{313}

Much more could be said about Plantinga’s account of Christian knowledge, but I wish now to “close the circle” by making reference to a most interesting criticism of his account by Bachelard.\textsuperscript{314} Pointing out that the Christian contemplative tradition has often involved “unknowing” as expressed by metaphors such as woundedness, darkness, silence, suffering, and desire, she suggests that Plantinga’s account is “distorted” by virtue of its emphasis on the cognitive. In essence, Bachelard accuses Plantinga of divorcing heart and mind and of holding to the view that Christian faith consists in the affirmation of propositions. Regardless of whether this criticism is valid or not (I think it is overstated) it does serve to illustrate a

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{309} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{310} Ibid., 206.
\item \textsuperscript{311} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{312} Calvin, \textit{Institutes (1559)}, 3.2.7.
\item \textsuperscript{313} Plantinga, \textit{Warranted Christian Belief}, 244.
\item \textsuperscript{314} Bachelard, “Foolishness to the Greeks.”
\end{itemize}
tension which arises again and again, a tension between religious experience and theological expression. Is there, as Bachelard’s critique of Plantinga suggests, a conflict between “knowing” and “unknowing”? Are the philosophers and theologians fated to stand in irreconcilable conflict with the mystics? Personally, I think not and believe that a reading of John’s Gospel in light of the reflections of this chapter will demonstrate the case. Interestingly, the Gospel is attributed to one who, in the thinking of the Eastern Christian tradition, is referred to as “theologian” precisely because of the depth of his mystical knowledge of God, a knowledge he expressed (so the traditional account goes) in Gospel, Epistles, and Apocalypse. In light of this I think it improper for Bachelard to represent the mystical tradition as solely concerned with “unknowing” in contra-distinction to “knowing.”

Better, I think, is Otto’s account:

Mysticism, in speaking of [deity] as τὸ ἄρρητον, the ineffable, does not really mean to imply that absolutely nothing can be asserted of the object of the religious consciousness; otherwise, Mysticism could exist only in unbroken silence, whereas what has generally been a characteristic of the mystics is their copious eloquence.  

It seems to me that Otto is here quite correct and I believe that John’s Gospel evidences the fact. Here we have written testimony to the ineffable—an oxymoronic claim which succeeds because, like Jesus’ signs, the Gospel points beyond itself to something greater. Bachelard is quite correct to point to the limitations of human language. But she is short-sighted, in my view, to overlook the fact that the Holy Spirit works “sacramentally” to breathe life into the words. We are again back to Basil: “the way of the knowledge of God lies from One Spirit through the One Son to the One Father.”

f. Summary

We have seen that there were, during the 20th century, quite notable thinkers who were prepared to give great consideration to the non-rational or supra-rational aspects of Christian faith. From William James through to Alvin Plantinga we find affirmation of the idea that

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316 See p.83.
Christian religious experience is a response to an objective and external subject identified, of course, as the God of Christian faith. The idea that God is “sensed” or “perceived” in a manner analogous to sense perception is clearly an attractive one. It is an idea that is not easily discounted given that any argument urged against it can quite easily be co-opted against the veracity of beliefs founded on sense perception. Thus to affirm the veracity of sense perception whilst rejecting the notion of direct spiritual perception raises a very real danger of selective and arbitrary use of argumentation. Otto identifies Schleiermacher’s account of religious experience as primarily a sort of self-awareness and suggests that we should speak instead of *Ahnung*—which is an awareness of an external and objective reality which then gives rise to feelings within the subject.

The relationship between the rational and the non-rational is complex and whilst our representative figures brought the two together in different ways they all refused the idea that one or the other is by itself sufficient. They all affirmed that religious experience is the primary or foundational aspect of religious belief, but not even William James—who rejected the categories of Christian orthodoxy—was prepared to reject reasoned analysis of religious experience. However, James’s own religious anomie I take as evidence of the importance of having some rational framework upon which to “hang one’s hat.” He may be interestingly contrasted with Baillie who affirmed both the primacy of spiritual perception whilst speaking of the “resonance” between this and the Christian Gospel.

A Christian account of the knowledge of God is properly a theological one. In this respect Plantinga’s account is particularly interesting in its appeal to the theological notions of the *sensus divinitatis* and the noetic effect of sin. The idea here is that a perceptual awareness of God is available to all, yet it does not issue in faith due to the corrupting effects of human sin. It is the role of the Holy Spirit to overcome this deficit. In this regard Baillie’s biographical account of the “resonance” he found between his own unformed sense of the presence of God
and the proclamation of the Christian gospel commands attention. So too James’s loss of faith against a background of rejection of Christian orthodoxy. My considered view is that this shows the wisdom of Tillich’s idea of faith as a centred act of the entire person in that a rationally coherent account of faith serves to bolster, rather than to diminish, one’s access to the non-rational. Here I can only commend Otto’s observation that whilst the non-rational is the true core of religious faith, this in no way justifies an abandonment of the rational and any such abandonment should be stridently resisted.
Chapter 12

Conclusion

Our study began with a brief overview of Modernism and its influence on the development of the two main streams of Protestant thought, Liberalism and Evangelicalism. We saw how, with the demise of Modernist assumptions, both these approaches have struggled to remain relevant, let alone substantiate the truth claims of the Christian faith (Section 1.a). Our response was to investigate the Johannine account of the knowledge of God (Part One), and to inquire after themes in contemporary epistemology which might indicate whether such an account is initially plausible (Part Two). At the outset it was noted that such an inquiry would be a limited one which would serve primarily to lay the groundwork for more detailed study (Sec. 1.d.i) but with that caveat I think we may now say that the Johannine account of the knowledge of God is at least initially plausible, as a more detailed analysis of our results will demonstrate.

Three significant epistemological themes were seen to be of importance in the Gospel: the notion of epistemic virtue (Sec. 8.a), the role of testimony in forming Christian belief (8.b), and the action of the Holy Spirit as epistemic agent (8.c). None of these are taken to be primary (or foundational), indeed, this thesis proceeded on the assumption that the most appropriate approach is that of epistemological holism rather than that of epistemological
foundationalism (Sec. 1.b.i). Not only is such an approach consistent with recent moves in philosophy (p. 4.16), it seems that now we may say holism is entirely consistent the Gospel’s own approach (p.87). An important conclusion would be that Christian faith is justified not on the basis of a single epistemic principle, but on the basis of a number of converging lines of evidence.

With respect to the theme of epistemic virtue, our inquiry into those who rejected Jesus was highly informative. One key aspect of their opposition was ignorance in respects of Jesus’ origin (p.55ff. See also sec. 5.c). This seemingly trivial issue is, for Jesus’ opponents, decisive (6:42; 7:27,41,52 et passim). It is at first an issue for Nathanael (1:46) and, we must assume, for the Woman of Samaria (p. 55n129). Objections on this point are dispelled, not by clarification regarding Jesus’ origins (only the reader of the Gospel has any insight on this point, p. 61) but by what, ultimately, appears to be a Spirit-inspired apprehension of his divine origin. What is fundamental here, however, is that both Nathanael and the woman show a willingness to reappraise their initial religious certainties (Sec. 4.d; 5.b,c), and in this they stand in stark contrast to the religious leaders. Such reappraisal is tied intimately with how one appraises Jesus at a personal level: ultimately, the call is to accept him as a person such that Johannine faith ought to be understood in relational, rather than propositional, terms (Sec. 6.b). Those unwilling to make such a reappraisal, for whatever reason, remain mired in unbelief demonstrating that one’s prior commitments have epistemic consequences (Sec. 2.f).

This finds resonance with contemporary interest in the theme of virtue epistemology (Sec. 9.c) and further investigations on this theme promise to cast great light upon the Johannine account of the knowledge of God.

One respect in which the theme of virtue epistemology could be further developed is by greater consideration of the notion of “affective disability” (p. 23, 135) and the fact that this is mainly “negative” in its impacts. That is to say this disability issues in objections to faith in
Christ. There has been much work done on the question of “defeaters” in philosophy (basically beliefs which undermine epistemic justification—p. 132) and it seems to me that development of this idea and, particularly, the way in which defeaters themselves are defeated would be a promising line of inquiry.

Part of the idea here is that, in the absence of some sort of objection, faith ought to arise as a “primitive impulse” (William James, p. 123). This resonates with Plantinga’s notion that faith arises when our faculties function as they ought (a “proper function” account of warrant —Sec. 11.e). In Johannine terms, one ought to just “see” that Jesus is the Christ, but a spiritual disability (or “cognitive disability”) akin to physical blindness prevents this from happening (p. 23). One’s response, in the first instance, ought to be to recognise this disability and seek divine aid to overcome it. Those who think they have no such disability, and therefore no such need for divine aid, will remain blind (John 9:41).

Perhaps more importantly, once one does recognise this disability, one may be healed from it such that faith arises naturally, in the absence of justificatory arguments. Recall here the distinction between internalist and externalist accounts of justification (p. 113, 134). The idea is that one may be justified in believing on the basis of religious (spiritual) experience without being able to give any justificatory account of that experience just as one may be justified in believing on the basis of sense experience without being able to give justificatory account in this instance either. True, the reliable operation of my spiritual perception would be a precondition of the (externalist) justification of this experience. But as Alston has argued the issues here are not so very different than in the case of sense perception (Sec. 11.d) . It is, at the very least, not obvious that the idea of “spiritual perception” ought to be regarded with particular cynicism. A further study of Alston, particularly the argument of Perceiving God and the literature which has risen in response to his claims in that work, would be of benefit in advancing our understanding on this point.
The question of testimony as a source of knowledge arises in two respects. First, the notion of testimony as a source of knowledge is one which the Gospel affirms both explicitly and implicitly (Sec. 8.b)—again I will not repeat the previous discussion here. What is more interesting is that the foregoing comments on internalist and externalist accounts of justification have application to epistemology of testimony. Little was made of this in the thesis other than to point out that the two Scottish Enlightenment philosophers, Thomas Reid and David Hume, were at odds on this question (p. 103). What was not discussed was the fact that the Humean account has held sway for some centuries, and only recently are philosophers becoming aware that despite Hume’s influence, Reid’s account has perhaps more to commend it—his greater sensitivity in respect of the social aspects of knowing is particularly important. We should, of course, not overlook the contributions already made, but the shifting sands of contemporary philosophy are here once more a problem. Only in the work of Bauckham do we see recent developments in epistemology of testimony, particularly the landmark work of Coady, taken into account. This seems to me an extraordinarily promising area of inquiry, particularly if it were conjoined with detailed consideration of pneumatology.

This mention of pneumatology brings us to what I regard as the most significant epistemological issue which this thesis uncovers. Our overview of 20th century developments (Chapter 11) began with William James who worked at a time when religious experience was regarded largely as a (pathological) psychological phenomenon only. We saw how this view was challenged through the work of recognised philosophers such that the idea of religious experience as experience of something external to the believer might be regarded as at least prima facie credible (p. 132). Such an idea finds rigorous development in the work of William

317 Members of the legal profession, no doubt due to their professional interest in the question of testimony, feature prominently here. The classic treatment, which spawned an entire tradition, is by an American lawyer and jurist, Simon Greenleaf, *An Examination of the Testimony of the Four Evangelists, by the Rules of Evidence Administered in Courts of Justice. With an Account of the Trial of Jesus* (Boston, MA: C. C. Little and J. Brown, 1846).

P. Alston (Sec. 11.d) and Alvin Plantinga (Sec. 11.e) although our treatment of either was too cursory for this thesis to put the claim that they have succeed. What was identified was the crucial relationship between ontology (what exists) and epistemology (Chapter 10), and the way in which we might apply Transcendental Arguments to justify the very idea of a supernatural (non-physical) epistemic agent (Sec. 10.b.ii). The entire point of the investigation of chapter 11 was not merely to show that the Johannine account of the Holy Spirit as epistemic agent is prima facie credible, but also to show how a more developed defence of that claim might be offered. The work of Alston and Plantinga would be critical to such a developed defence.

Finally, it is once again worth reiterating that none of these considerations are primary, or foundational to the others (Sec. 8.d). The epistemology of John’s Gospel is, in the end analysis, a holistic epistemology in which several epistemological themes come together, none being sufficient, all being necessary for faith. Thus, following Griffiths,\textsuperscript{319} we may affirm that it is wrong-headed to seek a single Universal Epistemic Principle for Christian theology, and we see why it is that, as far as Christian theology is concerned, the Modernist approach (Sec 1.a), with its commitment to epistemological foundationalism, could never succeed. At this point I regard the initial decision to reject epistemological foundationalism in favour of epistemological holism (p.6) to be vindicated—indeed, that epistemological holism is necessary to any properly Christian epistemology may be one of the more salutary lessons of this thesis.

Very much more could be said. Indeed, to co-opt the saying of the Johannine author, “if every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written” (John 21:25). We have here merely scratched the surface of what is a very profound account of the way in which we might come to a knowledge of God. The conclusion of our investigation is this: that fundamental to the

\textsuperscript{319} Griffiths, “How Epistemology Matters.”
Johannine account of the knowledge of God are three epistemological themes which stand in holistic relationship: the notion of epistemic virtue, the role of testimony in forming Christian belief, and the action of the Holy Spirit as epistemic agent. Such an account is, when considered from the perspective of contemporary epistemology, at least initially plausible and well worth the effort of further inquiry.
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