

**Post-logging the Prologue:
The Johannine Gospel and the Priority of Christ**

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To Fr. Nichifor Tănase,

*quocum mihi ... fuit id in quo omnis vis est amicitiae,
voluntatum studiorum sententiarum summa consensio* (Cicero, *De amicitia* 15)

As the title suggests, the point of this paper is primarily hermeneutical: the prologue of the *Gospel according to John* acts as the apocalyptic *conclusion* of the book.¹ I use ‘apocalyptic’ here not in any eschatological sense, but in its original sense as the unveiling of that which is veiled. This means that the prologue is not—as it has been commonly taken—a hermeneutical key to the rest of the gospel,² a sort of an epistemic setting-down of a proper dialectical framework required for unlocking the ensuing text. On the contrary, the prologue serves the purpose of de-constructing any hermeneutical method and of preventing any textualizations of the gospel. This is so, I am arguing, because the gospel presents the Christ of death and resurrection not as a reality which builds up through history (including the gospel’s own storyline), but rather as preceding all things and as the substance of all things, open to the cosmos for unveiling, recognition, and participation. In other words, the hermeneutical point of the prologue is fundamentally christological.

There is even a third dimension to my argument: for the gospel, the trip from what is perceived (the text, the body of God, the world, and one’s life) to what simply is (which is invariably divinity) is not metaphysical, chronological, or deductive, but physical, internal, and experiential. Furthermore, the most critical aspect of this progression comes down to one’s relationship to one’s own life—suffering and death.

The method of this paper goes precisely in the opposite direction than historical criticism. On the one hand, my paper proceeds from what the text means toward what the text says. Nevertheless, I hope to show

¹ In its first format this article was a presentation to the Theophaneia School of Timișoara (Romania) in June 2020, itself an outgrowth of the original Theophaneia School of Milwaukee (USA), of which I am a founding member. Here I wish to thank the convener of that online meeting, Fr. Nichifor Tănase, for the invitation to speak to his group and for his kind patience with an argument which was still very much in its nascent phase. To him I also owe my gratitude for the invitation to contribute to this volume. Therefore, it is only proper that this paper is dedicated to him. Yet, I must also express my gratitude to the two responders to this article when it was offered, in its current format, to my department at the University of Dayton—Ethan D. Smith and Zachary Spidel. Because this article was due to the press before my presentation, they kindly agreed to review it in advance of their formal responses and to share their findings with me. Their comments and suggestions have greatly improved this text. Any errors which remain are entirely mine.

² I use ‘Gospel’ for the Christian message overall, but ‘gospel’ for one of the books of the gospel genre, such as the *Gospel according to John*.

here that the historical-critical assumption that the meaning of a text is an a posteriori gain, deduced fundamentally from historical context, is deeply anachronistic when it comes to the *Gospel according to John*.³ To put it differently, my approach means to recover the gospel's own hermeneutic, it replicates the manner in which—as I will argue here—the gospel reads its own 'scriptures' and which is also the manner in which it itself wants to be read.⁴ This intriguing text is built in such a manner that what it says will make sense (particularly in its peculiarities) only once the meaning of it is already 'known'.

On the other hand, this paper removes both text and meaning—and their 'knowledge'—from the realm of epistemology. John builds a text whose meaning is not metaphysical, but physical. It is not acquired through proper arrangement of ideas and argumentations, in a sort of intellectual conquest or discovery, but through the existential crisis of the encounter of Christ in one's life, particularly in suffering and death. The finding of the meaning of the text is an ascetical experience. There is no indication in the gospel that one can encounter its meaning by any other means but through this transformation. On the contrary, there are many aspects of it which repudiate and are meant to prevent any other means of understanding. Such is the pressure on the audience of Christ in the gospel narrative itself and such is the pressure which the gospel places on its own hearers.⁵

Where historical attention overlooks reality

The questions which historical criticism sets up as the starting point of interpretation—'what is the meaning of this text?' and 'what is the method by which this meaning is acquired?'—are only a symptom (or arguably *the* symptom) of what turns out to be a hermeneutical impasse when the questions are asked of the *Gospel according to John*.⁶ The questions set up the interpretive process as the impossible task of comprehending that

³ The argument can also be made that the truer higher criticism is to itself, the more anachronistic it becomes and the more it creates its own truth, dogmatically. The more it reads the scriptures through a historical lens, the more it obscures the scripture's own intentions, and the more it cannot but turn into 'fact' that which remains unproven, namely, the distance of the text from its hearer/reader. On the contrary, once historicism is abandoned as a self-evident truth and one escapes the dogmatism of higher criticism, a deep and sincere look at the scriptural text overall will evidence un-distanced exegesis—such as the exegesis of ancient Christianity—as interpretation elicited by the text itself. The scriptural text is not informational, but participative and transformational. But this broad view far exceeds the purview of this paper.

⁴ I address the issue of how the scriptures themselves want to be read mostly in my recent articles 'Tradition: Generated by Scripture or Generating Scripture?', in Eugen Pentiu, *The Oxford Handbook of the Bible in Orthodox Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 229-243, and 'For a Hermeneutics of Referent: On the Sinai Tradition and a Reinterpretation of "Covenant"', in Andrei Orlov, *'Watering the Garden': Studies in Honor of Deirdre Dempsey* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2022), 23-46.

⁵ Arguably the gospel, even as a text, was meant to be received audibly.

⁶ Historical criticism, engendered in a particular time and place under the self-proving and anachronistic assumption that the ancient Bible reveals its meanings as a distant text (as I remarked in an earlier note), is

which the gospel *itself* finds to be ultimately beyond comprehension, or to be thoroughly experiential. This is a particularly poignant point in the gospel and, it can be argued, a central one. Through key passages, the gospel explicitly sets up all proximity to God—including exegesis—in the following framework:

1. Humans cannot know God and cannot advance toward God. ‘A human’, we are told, ‘is not able to receive anything unless it is given him from heaven’ (3:27).⁷ This paradox or double reality is the mark of the Christological substance of the world, according to the prologue. Christ is ‘the Light’ who ‘shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not grasp him’ (1:5). And again, ‘he was in the world, and the world came to be through him, but the world did not know him’ (1:10). It is also particularly striking that, when in 1:31 Christ is introduced for the first time by a human, John the Baptist, he is presented as the one whom, emphatically, the Baptist ‘does not know’ (καγὼ οὐκ ᾔδειν αὐτόν).
2. Nevertheless, God can drag people to himself: ‘no one is able (οὐδεὶς δύναται) to come to me unless the Father who sent me drags him (ἐλκύσῃ αὐτόν)’ (6:44). ‘And I, when I will be lifted up from the earth, will drag (ἐλκύσω) all people (πάντας) to myself’ (12:32).⁸ The world’s experience of God is altogether the character of Christ, the *fact* that Christ inhabits the world and drags the creation to himself.
3. This dragging is not intellective and metaphysical, but appropriative, physical-transformational. In other words, God drags people to himself by unveiling his own life in their existence through experience. Concretely this offering and receiving is at once theophany and deification. ‘from his fullness we have all

lately losing its appeal under many pressures, not least under the postmodernist questioning of objectivity, under its growing irrelevance and unstoppable methodological fragmentation. Most importantly to my current investigation is the recent evidence (produced by many studies) that the Bible was written to be incorporated into a living tradition. In other words, it is written in such ways as to be understood only once one knows what it means. This ‘outer exegesis’, if I may coin this word, this hermeneutic solicited by the Bible itself, is already reflected in its ‘inner exegesis’, that is, the manner in which its later texts read its earlier texts, as evidenced by the scholarship of Michael Fishbane (who launched the latter phrase) and others. Also particularly significant is the research produced by Jon Levison, James Kugel, and Hindy Najman (among others) on the features in which ancient interpreters found the scriptural text to solicit a hermeneutic of un-distanced participation in itself. For myself I would emphasize that these features—a sort of features of permanent contemporaneity or of open referencing of the hearer, every hearer—are truly the intentions of the text, and not just the findings of the ancient interpreters.

⁷ This and all ensuing translations from the gospel are my own, unless otherwise noted. They are based on the text in Maurice A. Robinson, William G. Pierpont, *The New Testament in the Original Greek: Byzantine Textform* (Southborough: Chilton Book Publishing, 2005), which I consulted in conjunction with Barbara Aland et al., *Novum Testamentum Graece* (28th ed.; Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2012) and Barbara Aland et al., *The Greek New Testament* (5th rev. ed.; Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, United Bible Societies, 2014).

⁸ Ἐλκύω is a powerful verb. It does not mean ‘to draw’, as most translations would have it, but ‘to drag’. There is a particular force to this verb. As if we resist coming to Christ, or rather are incapable of even stepping toward him, so the Father drags us, like corpses, to his Son.

received, and grace upon grace' (1:16). 'No one has ever seen God; the single-begotten God, he who is in the bosom of the Father, that one has shown him out' (1:18). See also 1:31, 33, 14:8-9.

The convergence of these three central points of the gospel comes into clearer focus only once the question 'How can one know if one does not already know?' makes sense. The process of johannine theology is transformation, not dialectic, and its understanding is experiential, not epistemological. Formulated differently, the question asks, 'How can one understand if one has not yet experienced?' It should be said that the question itself—which, in the gospel, illuminates the fundamentally apocalyptic character of all things—is possible because, as I have recently argued elsewhere, early Judaism had a sense of God which was recognitional and physical and not definitional and metaphysical.⁹

In this framework, the gospel unravels in an artistic and symbolic fashion rather than philosophically and logically. The points of the gospel relate to each other (and to its received tradition) as brushstrokes constitute paintings and as paintings relate to each other, rather than as different logical elements construct an argument. An analogy which Gregory of Nyssa builds in relation to the *Song of songs* works perfectly in relation to the *Gospel according to John*:

In the art of portraiture, there is a piece of wood that, when touched with different colors, presents an imitation of a living thing, but the person who looks at the image that art has created with colors does not dwell upon the sight contrived by dyes painted on the tablet. Rather, he looks solely upon the form that the artist has used colors to indicate. In the same way, where the writing now before us [Song of songs] is concerned, the right thing is not to attend to the material stuff of the 'colors' contained in the words but rather to discern in them as it were the image of the King traced by pure thoughts.¹⁰

The king is Christ, as Gregory explains. Furthermore, the king is of such nature that the proper gazing at his image is transformation into him.¹¹ Rather, these are not two processes, but one and the same: the king forms within the one who perceives him, and vice-versa. If there is any perceptible diachronicity between the two aspects of the scriptures—reading and transforming—the primacy belongs to transformation: only the one who has become the king will recognize the king. The scriptures are written to the one who already knows the one who is their ubiquitous subject.

⁹ Silviu N. Bunta, *Lord God of Gods. Divinity and Deification in Early Judaism* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2021), esp. 25, 194, 281-282.

¹⁰ Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on the Song of Songs* (trans. Richard A. Norris; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2012), 31.

¹¹ See also *Homilies on the Song of Songs* 3 (GNO 6.91); *On Perfection* (GNO 8/1.194-196).

The point must be made that this apocalyptic-experiential character of the gospel better attends to the passages read toward the oft-repeated conclusion that the gospel of John is anti-visionary or anti-mystical.¹² The gospel's fundamentally apocalyptic character, which undergirds even its 'faith' and 'Bread-of-life' texts, suggests that the gospel rather emphasizes the internal dimension of the encounter with God, as the unveiling and the experience of an inside which is already Christ, and that it places this encounter entirely at the power and discretion of God. Yet, the gospel does so not to the exclusion of an encounter, nor of its external dimensions, nor of an authentic engagement of the human being in it.

John 10:34-36: A text in need of experience

John 10:34-36 is a text which both supports this argument for the visionary and mystical character of the gospel, and serves as an entry into the christological-hermeneutical points of the prologue. As I argued elsewhere, the fact that John, the author of the eponymous gospel, did not expect the incarnation to be a problem for 'the Jews' is obscured today by the common misunderstanding of the blasphemy accusation against Jesus as a denial of the possibility that a human can be also divine.¹³ The gospel itself does not support this common presupposition. 'The Jews' of John express a blasphemy accusation twice, in 5:18 and 10:33, and both times in very similar words: Jesus is 'making himself equal to God' (ἴσον ἑαυτὸν ποιῶν τῷ θεῷ) and respectively 'being human, you [Jesus] are making yourself god' (σὺ ἄνθρωπος ὢν ποιεῖς σεαυτὸν Θεόν). These words are very precise and the objection is *not* to Jesus being YHWH incarnate, but rather to a perceived claim of *self*-deification.

For a few decades now the study of early Judaism has re-evaluated its subject free from the clasp of historical criticism driven by Protestant theology, and the research has rightly found early Judaism not to have been monotheistic in the manner in which monotheism has been largely conceived, as the exclusive possession of divinity by one being.¹⁴ In a recent publication I have proposed that, in sharp contrast to the antiquated and

¹² For example, April DeConick, *Voices of the Mystics: Early Christian Discourse in the Gospel of John and Thomas and Other Ancient Christian Literature* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), and Elaine Pagels, 'Exegesis of Genesis 1 in the Gospels of Thomas and John', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 118:3 (1999) 477-496.

¹³ See, among the more recent and prominent comments, J. Ramsey Michaels, *The Gospel of John* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 2010), 274; James F. McGrath, *The Only True God: Early Christian Monotheism in its Jewish Context* (Urbana/Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 58-61; Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (2 vols., Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2003), 1:647.

¹⁴ Peter Hayman, 'Monotheism-A Misused Word in Jewish Studies?', *Journal of Jewish Studies* 42 (1991) 1-15. See also the pertinent questions in Mark S. Smith, *God in Translation: Deities in Cross-Cultural Discourse in the Biblical World* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010). A corresponding perception of early Jewish monotheism has existed on the Jewish side of research. Yet, it has been shown that the reimagination of early Judaism as monotheistic is primarily the work of Maimonides. His definition of God as simplicity and

anachronistic lens of ‘monotheism’, it is more accurate to think of early Judaism by and large as having a theology of deification, in which

we have a radical YHWH-only divine fluidity. What I mean by this is first and foremost that in the biblical world and in early Judaism overall there is only one divine selfhood, YHWH’s. Second, this means that YHWH shares his divine selfhood with other beings who are thus deified in him. Third, this means that, even within this sharing, YHWH remains unshared in the absolute manner in which he possesses his divinity: YHWH uniquely possesses divinity in and of himself, while the deified possess his divinity at his discretion and to varying degrees, in an absolute dependence on him. Therefore, we can speak of YHWH as both shared and unshared at once. He is in a class of his own while sharing his divinity with other beings... YHWH makes and unmakes gods... Their divinity is not their own, but it is only a participation—to varying degrees—in YHWH’s own divine selfhood.¹⁵

Against this background, in John 5:18 and 10:33 the opposition of ‘the Jews’ is rather to Jesus’ self-deification and arguably—given the conciseness of the accusation—even to the very *possibility* of self-deification, that one can make oneself into a god. Support for this conclusion comes from Philo’s explanation of the Jewish refusal of the apotheosis of Roman emperors. The Jewish opposition, he says, is neither to the existence of a God-human, nor, indeed, to the incarnation of God (!), but rather to the impossible claim that a human can become God on his/her own, independently of God (*Leg. ad Gaium* 114-118). The following is one of the the most important paragraphs in Philo’s explanation:

But the change [of apotheosis] was not small, but the greatest of all, namely that the created and perishable nature of the human being divinely forms, as it seems, into the uncreated and imperishable nature of God, change which it [the Jewish nation] judged to be the most grievous of impieties—for rather God would change into a human being than a human being into God—and, besides this, to also manifest the other supreme evils—unbelief and ingratitude toward the one who works the good toward the entire world, who through his power bestows an unreserved abundance of good things upon all the parts of the whole [universe]. (*Leg. ad Gaium* 118)¹⁶

singularity—in which any complexity, multiplicity, or shareability are utterly impossible—was even in his own time a radical innovation in rabbinic Judaism. On this see Warren Zev Harvey, ‘God’s Incorporeality in Maimonides, Abraham of Posquieres, Crescas, and Spinoza’, in Sarah Heller-Wilensky and Moshe Idel, *Studies in Jewish Thought* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1989), 63-78 [in Hebrew].

¹⁵ Bunta, *Lord God of Gods*, 68.

¹⁶ My translation of the Greek from *Philonis Alexandrini Legatio ad Gaium* (edited and translated E. Mary Smallwood; Leiden: Brill, 1961), 83.

In Philo's estimation the theological impasse for Judaism is self-deification.¹⁷ Such claims, in Philo's own words, are inherently self-loving and godless (φίλαυτος καὶ ἄθεος, *Leg.* 1.49). It is therefore particularly significant that in the *Gospel according to John* Jesus counters the two accusations of blasphemy with an immediate insistence that he has received everything from the Father (John 5:19-44, 10:37-38), insistence which is also scattered—and, I suspect, for the same polemical purpose—throughout the gospel (e.g., 3:35, 5:26, 12:48-50).

Jesus' response to the second blasphemy accusation (John 10:34-36), a text which is at once christological and hermeneutic, comes into clearer focus when read against this background. The Greek text must be looked at directly since it carries certain difficulties lost in most translations and yet essential to my argument:

[34] ἀπεκρίθη αὐτοῖς ὁ Ἰησοῦς· οὐκ ἔστιν γεγραμμένον ἐν τῷ νόμῳ ὑμῶν, ἐγὼ εἶπα· θεοὶ ἐστε;
[35] εἰ ἐκείνους εἶπεν θεοὺς πρὸς οὓς ὁ λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ ἐγένετο, καὶ οὐ δύναται λυθῆναι ἡ γραφή, [36] ὃν ὁ πατὴρ ἡγίασεν καὶ ἀπέστειλεν εἰς τὸν κόσμον, ὑμεῖς λέγετε ὅτι βλασφημεῖς, ὅτι εἶπον· υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ εἰμι;

Here is the translation in RSV:

[34] Jesus answered them, 'Is it not written in your Law, "I said, you are gods" (Psalm 81:6)¹⁸?
[35] If he called them gods to whom the word of God came (and scripture cannot be broken),
[36] do you say of him whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world, "You are blaspheming," because I said, "I am the Son of God"?'

One of the two most irritating asperities of the pericope is the seemingly referent-less verb 'called' (εἶπεν) of verse 35, because 'the word of God' (ὁ λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ) comes after it. Nevertheless, most translations, like the above RSV, solve the difficulty by assuming that the subject implicit in 'called'—simply 'he' in RSV, ESV, KJV, NASB, NIV, ISV, etc.—is someone distinct from the λόγος. Who this 'he' is, without antecedent nevertheless, they do not say. The second asperity is the relative pronoun 'whom' (ὃν) of verse 36. Most translations assume that the relative pronoun does not have an antecedent, and therefore, in order to produce a

¹⁷ Possibly as a prevention of such misunderstandings, when naming the destiny of the holy person to share in divinity, some early Christian writers (e.g., Athanasios of Alexandria) prefer the clearer term θεοποίησις 'god-making' to θεώσις 'god-becoming'. With the former the sense is clearer that humans are made gods by God and are not making themselves gods.

¹⁸ I am referencing the psalms 'verses' (more properly, lines) neither according to the scholarly Septuagint, nor according to the Hebrew texts, but rather according to dominant ecclesial traditions. For such a dominant tradition, its numbering, and more detailed points on its syllabification, see *The Orthodox Psalter with Explanatory Notes* (intr., trans., and notes Silviu N. Bunta; McAllen: Cherubim Press, 2022), especially pages ix and 261.

fluent English translation, they supply it either with a personal pronoun ('him whom'—RSV, ESV, KJV, NASB) or an indefinite pronoun ('[the] one whom'—NIV, ISV). These readings are possible, but they are highly problematic, first and foremost because they provide the verb and the pronoun referents without antecedents.¹⁹ Therefore, in the larger context these readings into the text—arguably in order to provide intelligibility—still make no sense. One is left to wonder who the implicit 'he' of the verb is (God?). The λόγος is, as this intrusion into the text goes, the scriptural text through whom 'he' speaks.

Against these translation practices, it must be pointed out that anticipated subjects are possible in Greek (and, indeed, are not rare). Thus, the verb 'called' of verse 35 does have a logical antecedent and the only grammatically sensical one—the anticipated 'word' (λόγος). This is also the most logical referent of the relative pronoun of verse 36. Therefore, the sense of the Greek is as follows:

[34] Jesus answered them, Is it not written in your law that, I said, you are gods? [35] If those to whom the word (λόγος) of God came to be, he called (εἶπεν) gods—and the scripture is incapable of being loosened—[36] you tell the word whom (ὃν) the Father sanctified and sent into the world, You blaspheme, because I said, I am son of God?

This close look at the Greek shows that Christ's words are even more complex: 'the word' has two movements in this paragraph—once, in 35a, he 'comes to be' (ἐγένετο) to call the people gods and the second time, in 36, he 'is sent' by the Father (ἀπέστειλεν). At first glance, it may seem that the 'word' refers at once to a person—Jesus, and a text—the psalm 81. Yet, at closer inspection this does not seem to be the case at all. What is particularly noteworthy is the use of the verb γίνομαι for the noun in v. 35. The word λόγος appears as a clear title of Christ only four times in the entire gospel—three times in 1:1, and once in 1:14. It is used many other times in reference to the scriptures or to Christ's speech, but it is accompanied by the verb γίνομαι only in 1:14 ('the Word came to be flesh') and in our text, in v. 35. Moreover, the verb itself carries an incarnational tone in the gospel, as I will detail below.²⁰ Therefore, it is difficult if not absolutely improper to take the 'word' of v. 35 as a reference to a text. At most it could be said that it is a concept with two simultaneous dimensions, but both christological: Christ and the speech of Christ.

Furthermore, in v. 34 this polyvalence of the 'word' is enlarged to include a third entendre: the word not only comes as source of scripture, but also comes as the voice *in* the scriptures, the one who speaks within the psalm and says 'you are gods'. The sense is that Jesus is the one who speaks to the Jews in the pericope,

¹⁹ See an admission to this problem in Robert H. Gundry, *Jesus the Word According to John the Sectarian* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 33–35. Yet, Gundry's own solution is to assume an unstated antecedent—the law, the psalmist, or God.

²⁰ To this conclusion see also the insightful observations in Michaels, *The Gospel of John*, 65 (esp. footnote 9) and 418–419.

who speaks the psalm, and who speaks in the psalm. This is also intimated in Christ's own words; he introduces the two indirect speeches—of obvious symmetry—in the same way, with 'I said'. In other words, he is quoting himself twice. Moreover, it must be pointed out that, both in Christ's live words to the people and in the evangelist's audible words to his hearers, it remains unclear at which point Christ begins to quote the psalm. To clarify the point with the help of modern punctuation, Christ can be saying both 'Is it not written in your law that, "I have said, you are gods"?' and 'Is it not written in your law that I have said, "you are gods"?' One may be tempted to solve this ambiguity, but I would argue that it is precisely the ambiguity which carries more meaning and it is intended by the evangelist. This is an added support for the argument I have advanced elsewhere that the scriptures should be translated without quotation marks, a practice which I am also adopting in this paper.²¹

This closer attention to the Greek ultimately leads to the conclusion that Jesus, God incarnate, the 'Word', the voice whom the Jews are hearing in the gospel moment, is also at once both the author-giver of the psalm *and* the voice in the psalm. This conclusion is required by an essential aspect of the text: it is precisely this identification of Jesus which provides the symmetry required by the obvious reverse parallelism at the heart of his response to the accusation of self-deification: *the Word* called *you* gods, *you* call *me* blasphemer. And indeed, through this reverse parallelism, the point of the entire passage hangs on the sharp contrast between Jesus and 'the Jews': I, the divine Word, call you humans 'gods' and 'sons of God', and yet you humans call me, the divine Word, 'blasphemer'. (The quoting of the first half of the divine words in the psalm verse is supposed to bring to mind the second half, in which people are called 'sons of the Most High'.) Or to put it in different words: I have made you sons of God, but you will not allow me to call myself 'son of God'. The issue of proper vocabulary (what Jesus can be called) is paired with an issue of transformation (what Jesus makes the people).

The scholarship on the pericope has largely missed these connections and has been driven by an essential but misdirected question: who is the subject of the psalm line 'you are gods'? The question is misdirected the moment it is asked as historical, outside of the chronology-defying web of meanings in the johannine pericope. And indeed, the question has been asked as a historical question, which is to be expected of historical criticism and of any theology rooted in Augustine's innovative christology, with Christ removed from the Old Testament.²² In other words, the question is asked as an exclusively Old Testament question, or

²¹ *The Orthodox Psalter*, 261-262.

²² Indeed, scholars have decided against such a reading of the johannine pericope because, in their view, Jesus is not on the scene of the Old Testament. See, for example, the literature referenced in Gundry, *Jesus the Word*, 34. On Augustine's innovative Christology, see Michel René Barnes, 'The Visible Christ and the Invisible Trinity: Mt. 5:8 in Augustine's Trinitarian Theology of 400', *Modern Theology* 19/3 (2003) 329-355; Bogdan

more specifically as a psalm 81 question. John Ashton points out that the answers have come under three major proposals: 1. unjust judges; 2. Israel or portions of Israel; 3. angels.²³ In sharp contrast to this line of questioning, the johannine pericope, with its pre-Augustinian christology, would itself direct the question somewhere else. Two further observations on the use of the psalm in verse 35 will place the johannine answer to the question in the sharpest focus.

First, my reading of the use of psalm 81 places the words of the accusation from verse 33 in the clearest focus: ‘being human, you [Jesus] are *making yourself* god’ (σὺ ἄνθρωπος ὧν ποιεῖς σεαυτὸν Θεόν). As I anticipated above, the point is not that humanity and divinity are discrete realities demarcated by sharp divisions or boundaries, but rather that any human advancement into the divine cannot be accomplished on one’s own powers. Moreover, this is precisely the manner in which the human and the divine are introduced in the prologue, as non-discrete. As I have already mentioned, this theology is not innovative, nor specifically or exclusively Christian. The following conclusion of Ashton is gravely mistaken about Judaism:

there seems little doubt that we have here [in John 10:34-36] further proof of the existence of a world of religious discourse a long way from the strict monotheism of the Jews who are Jesus’ adversaries in the Fourth Gospel.²⁴

The case is precisely the opposite: Christ’s response to the accusation of self-deification makes sense *only if* his adversaries do *not* have a monotheistic theology, if they accept that humans can be and are deified. This acceptance is the very premise or base of Christ’s reproach to them: the reproach that the Jews do not accept Christ’s divinity draws its strength from the fact that they do accept their own deification. And, Christ adds, they do so from him himself.

Second, once the use of the psalm is brought into this focus, the pericope betrays a penetrating and devastating irony: in this context the phrase ‘your law’ (ὁ νόμος ὑμῶν)—that is, of the audience—is supposed to ring to the Jews as untrue in a certain sense and to place them again in contrast with the Word who at once speaks the psalm as scripture, who speaks *in* the psalm, and who speaks to the Jews in the gospel moment. Any claim they may make over the law would contrast sharply with Jesus’ veiling of his identity as the giver of the law and as its ultimate author and substance. The ironic connections are deep and complex throughout,

G. Bucur, ‘Theophanies and Vision of God in Augustine’s *De Trinitate*: An Eastern Orthodox Perspective’, *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 52/1 (2008) 67-93.

²³ John Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* (new edition; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 92-94.

²⁴ Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel*, 94. Furthermore, Ashton also makes the following problematic assertion: ‘The Qumran fragments and the Gospel testify to a boldly speculative alternative theology [that is, less monotheistic—my note] that orthodox Judaism could not absorb—or even acknowledge’ (*Understanding the Fourth Gospel*, 94).

leading to the following message: when I say that you are gods, you believe me, but when I say I am son of God (the lack of a definite article reveals its significance now!), you call me a blasphemer. Nevertheless, this irony also only works because it is founded, in a certain sense, on a truth, as secondary as it may be: the law, indeed in a secondary sense, does belong to ‘the Jews’ to whom Christ is speaking.

In these aspects of Jesus’ use of psalm 81 lies a fundamental hermeneutical point about the psalm, to which I promised to return with more clarity, and indeed a point about the entire scriptures: the scriptures are holy first and foremost for not being read as a historical or distant text, but rather as one which is perpetually actual. There is already a growing body of scholarship illuminating this hermeneutical approach in both Jewish and Christian antiquity. Even more importantly, together with a few other voices I have been advancing the thesis that the scriptures themselves are written in such a way as to solicit this ongoing or perpetual actuality, to the point that each generation is expected to claim them—in their entirety and down to the smallest detail—as the description of its own experience, or even as *its own* descriptions of its experiences.²⁵ In light of this, in John 10 the complexity of the carefully woven confrontation between God and humanity has the Jews to whom Christ is speaking not simply as affective or participating hearers of the psalm itself, or its *re-actualizers*, but rather as its actuality. To revisit the question, ‘to whom is the Word in psalm 81 saying “you are gods”?’’, the direction John 10 gives it would be clearer if we altered it slightly: ‘*when* is the Word saying “you are gods”?’ To put it bluntly, in the complex imagery of John 10, the psalm saying and the gospel conversation become simultaneous, in a moment of God–versus–humanity. The psalm saying receives its actual *Sitz im Leben* *in* Christ’s argument against his interlocutors. This simultaneity is further strengthened by the peculiarity of 35b, which I tried to retain in my translation above: *in οὐ δύναται λυθῆναι ἡ γραφή, οὐ δύναται* is not impersonal and it is in the present tense. For an impersonal and historical sense ἡ γραφή should have been in the accusative and the subject of λυθῆναι. Instead, ἡ γραφή is the subject of δύναται. The statement has an overarching ahistoricity: the scripture cannot be loosened.²⁶

Therefore, the manner in which Christ references the psalm amounts to a collapse of any difference and distance between the voice *in* the psalm and the voice *to* the Jews. The inevitable conclusion is that the psalm is not pre-existing the gospel moment at all. Rather, it will be written in the past as merely the memory, or rather immortalization—since this is a matter of death and life—of the current gospel moment, which, as simultaneous with all time, undergirds eternity. Indeed, this could be said of all Christ moments: they are the substance of eternity.

²⁵ On this point see, among others, my article ‘For a Hermeneutics of Referent’, 23-46.

²⁶ The English ‘the scripture cannot be ...’ (as in RSV) is not sufficient for de-objectifying or de-textualizing ἡ γραφή as clearly as the Greek does. It can still be understood impersonally, as ‘it cannot be that the scripture is ...’.

Furthermore, this particular eternal moment in John 10 extends to the hearers of the gospel itself, as an unveiling of Christ in all time. As John words and frames the text, the existential confrontation with divinity ultimately belongs to humanity overall. After all, the only way in which the words of the gospel-psalm moment will ‘ring true’ and will reveal ever deeper meanings of their complexity, as the gospel itself wishes, is if its own hearers become participants in this moment which undergirds all time.

There is another point to be made here. The gospel-psalm moment is tantamount to an existential crisis and its meanings can be arrived at only through surrender and loss. To put it differently, the entry point into the words is the Word crucified and resurrected. His hearers within the gospel and through the gospel will not ‘get’ what Christ is saying precisely to the extent to which they are not crushed by his winning, or rather by his obliterating presence.

This final point comes into clearer focus through the final conversation between Jesus and ‘the Jews’²⁷ in the gospel, in 11:33-35, which is—not insignificantly—the next encounter between them after the one in chapter 10. Here it is in my translation:

[33] Therefore Jesus, as he saw her [Mary] weeping aloud (κλαίουσαν) and the Jews who came with her weeping aloud (κλαίοντας), he was moved with indignation (ἐνεβριμήσατο) in spirit and stirred himself; [34] and he said, ‘Where have you laid him?’ They said to him, ‘Lord, come and see’. [35] Jesus teared up.

The connections between the last two conversations between Christ and ‘the Jews’—10:22-39 and 11:33-35—become obvious once the two scenes are understood to be set up in reverse parallelism. The greatest contrast is between the storylines themselves: in the first confrontation ‘the Jews’ are indignant and wish to put Christ to death (10:31, 39), while in the second Christ is indignant with the reaction of ‘the Jews’ to the death which is in their midst. Also, in the first conversation Jesus has to slip away out of the grasp of the Jews (10:39), but in the second they lead him to the corpse of their dead one, where he asks them to unbind and set him free (11:44). In brief, the situations are dramatically reversed, toward at least two effects. First, this reverse parallelism has death as the ultimate locus in which the dynamic humanity–God plays itself out and is heightened. People truly find their humanity, their finitude and insignificance and their absolute dependence on God, only in death. Thus, the one truly human in this scene is the one already dead, Lazarus, the one who obeys without resistance and who recognizes Jesus as his God in the deepest and simplest way. Yet, even ‘the Jews’, existentially collapsed in front of death, become true encounterers of God, as opposed to his

²⁷ Through this note I do not wish to suggest that ‘the Jews’ of the gospel are always the same people, but rather that in the gospel the (mis)nomer ‘the Jews’ always stands for the same identity, which—my argument suggests—is not so much ethnic as it is existential, a way of being, or more precisely the way of being human which struggles with Christ.

executioners. Second, this reverse parallelism—and the evident anticipation of Christ’s own imminent death in this scene also supports this conclusion—only highlights what the gospel has set up all along as the inevitable outcome of the confrontation between Christ and humanity: either the human self or God will have to die.²⁸ This outcome places one’s relationship to death at the center of the struggle and drama of humanity. The human self represented by ‘the Jews’, as it gazes on death, stands in opposition to it, in refusal to be Lazarus, and weeps aloud. It could not be further from offering itself to death, from having a proper relationship to its death.²⁹ In contrast, God dies a willing and silent death which he only sees as his glory, according to the gospel. But ultimately the human self has no other means to draw close to God but through the collapse of its self, through its own death (cf. also 12:24-25). This—our reverse parallelism makes clear—is not only the ascetical dying which gains the proper relationship with the physical death, but ultimately it is the latter. And this is a central aspect of the entire gospel: Christ is ultimately unveiled in one’s death. The only way to witness, to show forth Christ, is martyrdom.³⁰

Such language of death—ascetical and physical—comes through, more or less overtly, in other places in the gospel. The words of John the Baptist in 3:30 are emblematic of this critical moment: ‘[Christ] is to increase, but I am to decrease’ (ἐκεῖνον δεῖ αὐξάνειν, ἐμὲ δὲ ἐλαττοῦσθαι). The death-facing dimension of the phrase is only heightened by the fact that every speech of John in the gospel bears testimony to the fact that he is *not* the Christ (1:15-28, 3:23-30). And this is the substance of the prologue’s introduction of John as ‘he was not the light, but came to bear witness to the Light’. (1:8). When in 5:35 Christ speaks about John, ‘[John] was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to be gladdened for a time (πρὸς ὄραν) in his light’, he tells the hearers of the gospel something which they have already learned in 1:8 and which defines John as an encounter with Christ himself: John *was* a lamp, but the light which he put forth was not he himself, but it was rather Christ. John is shining, but it is the Word who is the Light and who makes shine (1:8-9). The opening up of the prophet as a human being reveals Christ’s presence in him. Then reversely, this very revelation of John is also his diminishment, his undoing, his conquest by Christ. ‘For a time’ carries much significance in this context, in contrast to Christ’s permanence.

In light of its parallelism with 11:33-35, it can now be safely concluded that the speech of the Word in 10:33-35 is ultimately neither historical nor metaphysical; it is not about the past or the status of Israel, nor

²⁸ This confrontation is the substance of John 12:24-25.

²⁹ In the terms of our contemporary culture, this is a relationship to life based on expectation of reward and on imagination.

³⁰ In the gospel the word carries a sense of martyrdom, as indeed Christian life—John emphasizes—is death (cf. 12:24-26). In Revelation the evangelist will point out again that witnessing is essentially martyrdom (e.g., Rev 6:9). It is this which allows him to call Christ himself a ‘witness/martyr’ (1:5; 3:14).

about an idea. Rather, the speech is fundamentally ascetical and physical, existential and critical; it speaks to the dynamic humanity-divinity as a matter of experience, or rather it speaks to human experiences of the self as different locations in the divine-human reality, and particularly to how this reality comes to a critical head in front of death and to its conclusion only in death.

The two points I made so far—namely that the invisible and eternal is within the visible and transitory, and that its unveiling happens through the opening of the flesh—merge into a sort of meta-interpretation of all reality quite ubiquitous in the earliest Christianian literature.³¹ In the gospel, too, it is expressed in a language found in many other first century Christian texts: ‘you [humans] discern according to the flesh’ (8:15).

All of this, I would venture to say, is the conclusion of the book, but this conclusion is set up in the prologue, precisely because the acquiring of the meaning of the gospel is not deductive but theophanic, it is not a prerequisite to epistemic knowledge, but the substance of experiential understanding. Short of this apocalyptic moment, the hearers of Christ within the gospel and out of the gospel are left only with unsolvable puzzles, unsolvable because they have not pierced through their own flesh.

I am now, finally, turning to the prologue. The connection of John 10:34-36 to the prologue is even linguistic and has been noted before. The two passages share the phrase ὁ λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ and the description of Christ as sent εἰς τὸν κόσμον. Yet, the prologue is the encounter with the already resurrected Christ, the experience the disciples had of him as the resurrected YHWH, a sort of conclusion which can only be placed at the beginning.

The prologue as an unveiling of the Logos

My intuition of the value and function of the prologue requires a new translation, which I provide here with some linguistic and philological footnotes:

³¹ On this meta-hermeneutics in relation to Pauline texts, see my ‘For a Hermeneutics of Death. Dying and Exegeting in 2 Cor 3-6’, in Nichifor Tănase and Constantin Jinga, *Simpozionul de Educație și Spiritualitate Ortodoxă ‘Polis & Paideia’* (București: Editura Academiei Române, 2021), 39-49 [in Romanian]. For example, one can think here of 2 Cor. 5:16–17: ‘From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh [κατὰ σάρκα]; even though we once knew Christ according to the flesh [κατὰ σάρκα], we no longer know him that way. So, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation: the old has passed away, behold, the new has come’. Or the point made in Heb 10:20: ‘[the entrance into the holy place in the blood of Jesus], a way for slaying and a living way which he initiated for us through the veil, that is, his flesh (διὰ τοῦ καταπετάσματος, τοῦτ’ ἔστι τῆς σαρκὸς αὐτοῦ)’. All sensorial reality, all ‘flesh’, including history, is only a veil over the one location, which is the spirit of Christ. To human experience itself, ‘in Christ’ time is neither prospective, nor retrospective. In Christ history itself is only the surface of a dimension which is experiential or vertical. The peeling away of history reveals Christ as the one who is never old.

[1] In the source [of everything]³² was the Word, and the Word was toward God³³, and the Word was God. [2] This one (οὗτος) was in the source [of everything] toward God. [3] All have come to be through him, and without him not one thing which has come to be, has come to be. [4] In him was life, and the Life³⁴ was the Light of humans. [5] And the Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not grasp him.

[6] A human came to be, sent by God, his name was John. [7] This one came for witness, to witness to the Light, so that all believe through him.³⁵ [8] That one was not the Light, but [came to be] only to witness to the Light.

[9] He was the true Light, Who makes every human shine,³⁶ Who comes³⁷ into the world. [10] He was in the world, and the world came to be through him, but the world did not know him. [11] He came to his own and his own did not receive³⁸ him. [12] As many as received him, He gave them who believe in his Name authority³⁹ to become children of God,

³² Ἀρχή is not a chronological concept, as in ‘beginning of time’, but one of derivation, as in ‘place from which the rest comes’. This is why the one who does ἀρχή—the ἀρχηγός (Christ is so called in Heb 2:10 and 12:2)—is not ‘one who is first’, but ‘one who originates’. John uses ἀρχή itself as a title for Christ in Rev 3:14. Therefore here ἀρχή means more like ‘source’, the ultimate source, of everything, as it is implied, including time.

³³ The preposition πρὸς is dynamic, it implies both orientation and movement, or rather a moving orientation, very much like the English ‘toward’. John seems to use it in this sense consistently. Elsewhere we are told that the disciples of Christ are oriented and drawn ‘toward’ him (14:3 etc.), and he is oriented and drawn ‘toward’ the Father (13:1, 3; 14:12, 28 etc.). Also, ‘no one comes toward the Father if not through’ Christ (14:6).

³⁴ There is a play here on ‘life’: the first time is without a definite article, the second time, with article. The progression is: life was in him and he is the Life. This means there is no other life. There is only one life, and he is it. The world has no life in itself, no light in itself, no good in itself. Christ is everything.

³⁵ All English translations of which I am aware take the referent of ‘through him’ (δι’ αὐτοῦ) to be John the Baptist. But the Baptist is not the closest possible referent, and therefore the most probable; rather the closest is ‘the Light’. The Baptist did not witness so that all believe through himself, but through Christ. In the sense that Christ is the believing, he is the only Believer, ‘the source’ of everyone’s faith, as Heb 2:10 and 12:2 say.

³⁶ The meaning of φωτίζω is not simply to illumine or to shine, but to make shine. For the former sense there are other verbs in koini: λάμπω (when it is not used transitively), φαίνω, στράπτω, καταστράπτω, etc. In 1:5 the Light shines (φαίνω) in the darkness. In 5:35 the Baptist is said to ‘shine’ (φαίνω).

³⁷ All English translations of which I am aware take the referent of ‘who comes’ (ἐρχόμενον) to be ‘every human’. But this would make little sense and it even borders on pleonasm; after all, every human being comes into the world. Rather, it is more probable that the referent is Christ. Christ, as light, comes into the world. First, ‘Christ comes into the world’ is the most logical introduction to what verse 10 says. Second, the expression occurs again in reference to Christ in 12:46.

³⁸ Παραλαμβάνω does not mean simply to receive, as in ‘to accept’. It means to appropriate, to take to oneself, to take upon oneself, physically, mentally, and in all senses. The best English word to translate this is ‘to get’: his own did not get him.

³⁹ First, ἐξουσία does not mean ‘power’ as in ‘ability’, or potentiality, capacity to do something, but exercised power, ‘authority’.

[13] who have been conceived not from bloods,⁴⁰ neither from will of the flesh, nor from will of man, but from God.

[14] And the Word has come to be flesh (σὰρξ ἐγένετο),⁴¹ and he tabernacled in us (καὶ ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν)⁴², and we have gazed (ἐθεασάμεθα) upon his Glory⁴³, Glory as the single-begotten (μονογενοῦς) from the Father, full of grace and truth.

[15] John witnessed to him and cried out (κέκραγεν) saying, This one (οὗτος) was (ἦν) He of Whom I said, He who comes after me has come to be (γέγονεν) ahead of me, for He was first ahead of me (πρῶτός μου).⁴⁴ [16] And⁴⁵ that from his fullness we have all received, and grace upon grace. [17] That the law was given (ἐδόθη) through Moses; the grace and the truth

⁴⁰ This plural is significant because it is rooted in the OT (e.g. Psalms 9:12, 15:5, 25:9, 54:24, 58:2, etc.). A search through the entire *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* canon has revealed only 33 pre-Septuagint, non-Jewish uses of the plural, out of which 20 are poetic and therefore required by prosody (9 in Aeschylus, 10 in Euripides, and 1 in Sophocles). The other occurrences have mostly medical meaning. By contrast, in the Septuagint alone the plural occurs 50 times as literal translations of the Hebrew בָּרָא. For a review of the evidence see Troy W. Martin, 'Clarifying a Curiosity: The Plural Bloods (αἱμάτων) in John 1:13', in Clare Rothschild and Trevor Thompson, *Christian Body, Christian Self. Concepts of Early Christian Personhood* (WUNT 284; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 175-185. Yet, Martin draws the conclusion that John 1:13 is a mere appeal to Hellenistic medical vocabulary.

⁴¹ This is a verb of incarnation—the Word too 'comes to be', so now He is 'world'. Just like his creature, John. Just like everything else which 'comes to be', all of creation. 'Flesh' should also be taken in this sense, being almost pleonastic after the verb 'to come to be'. This sense is already set up in 1:13, where flesh stands for what is not God. This sense is strengthened by the other uses of 'flesh': 'that which is born of flesh is flesh' (3:6), 'the Spirit is the life-creator, the flesh can do nothing (ἡ σὰρξ οὐκ ὠφελεῖ οὐδέν)' (6:63), 'you judge according to the flesh' (8:15), the Father gave the Son 'power over all flesh' (17:2). On the one hand, the use of this word in this verse only highlights the cosmic dimensions of the incarnation. Also, this places 6:48-58 in sharper focus: the flesh is now Christ and the world partakes of God through Christ's flesh. The world receives Life through the indwelling of Life.

⁴² To tabernacle in us or among us does not mean simply to dwell. This is temple language. More obviously, it means that the Glory—the Presence of God in the temple—enters the temple which humanity now is. Moreover, John insists that this making of the human being into temple is not a matter of faith, but a more ontological matter of 'flesh'. It is the human condition: to host Christ within. This language also means that human life is essentially liturgical. And even more deeply, this means that human life in him is the hollowing of oneself. To be a temple means to be an empty building, empty until the divine Presence takes residence in it.

⁴³ The verb θεάομαι means more than 'to see'. It means to gaze, to stare intently and long. This is psalm language, specifically the language of the vision of the presence of God in the Temple—the Glory.

⁴⁴ The Greek does not simply mean 'before me', as English translations generally have it. But the Greek says 'first of me'. This seems to say two things at once, chronological and ontological: Christ is antecedent to John, but also Christ is the principle of all things.

⁴⁵ It is unclear where the voice of the Baptist ceases to speak and the voice of the evangelist comes in.

came through Jesus Christ. [18] No one has ever seen God; the single-begotten God (μονογενὴς θεός), he who is in the bosom of the Father, that one has shown him out (ἐξηγήσατο).⁴⁶

Raymond Brown has already noted that the succinctness of the phrase ‘the Word was God’ (verse 1) anticipates and preempts, for its hearers, the accusation of self-deification in 5:18 and 10:33: ‘He is not a man who makes himself God; he is the Word of God who has become man’.⁴⁷ Therefore, the point of the very first verse—the point which also gives more clarity to John’s preference for the term λόγος—is threefold. As 1:18 explains, Christ is λόγος because He ‘shows out’ or ‘exegetes’ (ἐξηγήσατο) the Father. The point is as much hermeneutical as it is theological. First and foremost, Christ is the only sound of the divine silence, the visible face of divinity, as it is stated poignantly in 14:3-9. Second, the theophanies to Israel are all Christophanies. Indeed, this point resurfaces often in the gospel, as I have already mentioned. Third and relatedly, Christ is also the Word in the sense that he is the meaning of the scriptures.

This threefold imagery anticipates Christ’s answer to the self-deification accusation in John 10:34-36. Yet, it resurfaces for the first time, with added strength and as part of a carefully woven tapestry, in the context of the first self-deification accusation in John 5:36-40. In my translation:

[36] But I myself have the witness which is greater than John’s. For the works which the Father has given me to complete them, these very works (αὐτὰ τὰ ἔργα) which I make (ποιῶ), they witness about me, that the Father has sent me. [37] And the Father who sent me, that one (ἐκεῖνος) has been bearing witness about me. Neither have you heard his voice (φωνή), nor have you seen his form (εἶδος), [38] and his Word you do not have remaining in you, for the one whom that one (ἐκεῖνος) has sent, in this one (τούτῳ) you do not believe. [39] You examine (ἐραυνᾶτε) the scriptures, because you imagine that in them you have eternal life; but those (ἐκεῖναι) are the ones bearing witness about me. [40] And you are not willing to come to me so that you have life.

Verse 37 is an allusion to Sinai and it is this allusion which explains the continuation of its point with a reference to the scriptures as witnesses to Christ. As Benjamin Sommer has pointed out, the experience of Sinai is presented in Jewish memory—including in the scriptures themselves—as an interplay between seeing and non-seeing, and between hearing and not-hearing.⁴⁸ Therefore, Christ’s point seems to be that what is now

⁴⁶ Two things can be said here. First, Christ is the one who appeared all along; all theophanies are christophanies. Second, the verb used, ἐξηγέομαι, means ‘lead something out of itself’. It is also used of texts and experiences in the sense of ‘explain’.

⁴⁷ Raymond Brown, *The Gospel according to John I-XII* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, 1966), 408.

⁴⁸ See especially Benjamin Sommer, *Revelation and Authority: Sinai in Jewish Scripture and Tradition* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2015), 27-98. I, in collaboration with Matthew-Peter Butrie, have said elsewhere:

present to ‘the Jews’ is precisely what they did not see or hear at Sinai. Moreover, I would argue that in this context Christ means φωνή and εἶδος as titles of himself. In other words, the point is that ‘the Voice’ whom Israel has not heard and ‘the Form’ whom Israel has not seen is now within their hearing and sight.

It is not a coincidence that Sinai is brought up in all three texts analyzed thus far, specifically in 1:17-18, 5:37, and 10:34. Sinai is the ultimate contact between the two realities which already merge in the very first verse of the gospel—theophany and scripture. Indeed, it is at Sinai that theophany—or rather, in johannine terms, Christophany—gives the scriptures, specifically ‘the law’ (10:34). Furthermore, to say that the law was given at Sinai is tantamount to setting up the theology of Israel as fundamentally Christophanic and to putting the tabernacle/Temple and its liturgy as the foundation of the entire life and theology of Israel. In other words, with Sinai being the beginning of Israel’s theology, everything is founded in theophany and everything else flows from, and is determined by the Temple and its liturgy.

Moreover, from this general point comes another implicit aspect of the Sinai theophany which is often overlooked: creation itself is ‘exegeted’ to Israel at Sinai, with the giving to Moses of the book of creation—Genesis.⁴⁹ In the terms of the law itself, Sinai precedes Genesis 1 or rather it is the entrypoint of Genesis 1 into the world. The reference to ‘the works’ (τὰ ἔργα) which the Father has given the Son to complete, or the works which the Son ‘makes’ (5:36), carries distinct echoes of Gen 2:3 in the Septuagint

The central issue in the revelation on Sinai is not whether Israel has paid attention, has listened, but even more fundamentally the issue is whether Israel has heard. This comes to the foreground both in the Hebrew and Greek of Ex 19:16-20:21. According to Ex 20:18-21, the people did not hear anything at all; they only ‘saw the voice and the lights and the voice of the Trumpet and the smoking mountain’ (ὁ λαὸς ἑώρα τὴν φωνὴν καὶ τὰς λαμπάδας καὶ τὴν φωνὴν τῆς σάλπιγγος καὶ τὸ ὄρος τὸ καπνίζον). This issue central to the Sinai theophany is picked up in the classical patristic commentary on the event, namely that of St. Gregory of Nyssa (*The Life of Moses* [New York: Paulist Press, 1978], 93-94). In our opinion, the emphasis on hearing (e.g., Mt 7:26) and the play on hearing/not hearing in so many gospel passages (e.g., Mt 11:15; 13:9, 13) are drawing precisely on the nature of the Sinai theophany. That the Gospel is to be seen and heard as a matter of natural abilities (and not of intention and attention), as passages such as Mt 13:17 make clear, is also an extension of the Sinai theophany. In other words, Christ is presented as the one who takes the Sinai theophany publicly, into the hearing of all, whether they pay attention or not. This is first and foremost an issue of access: that which was initially accessible only to a few and only to a limited degree, is now opened to all. This is precisely one of the points of 2 Cor 3:18 and Heb 9-10. (Silviu N. Bunta with Matthew-Peter Butrie, *Ieratikon according to the Simonopetra Tradition, Vol. 4: Notes* [Dayton: Cherubim Press, 2019], 87-88)

⁴⁹ I wish to thank my former student and now colleague Ethan D. Smith for bringing this to my attention. Needless to say, I cannot do justice to the complexity of the insight on this scriptural tradition, but I hope that he will develop it further in a publication.

recension, which not only refers to the ‘works’ of creation, but also intimates, in contrast to the Masoretic text, that they are not completed.⁵⁰

This creation theology is again present and amplified in 1:1, 3, 5, and 10: Christ is both the source of the world *and* the substance of the world, the Light who shines out of darkness. It is particularly significant that in v. 5 the preposition ἐν—which does not have a directive aspect, like ‘into’, but rather originative, like ‘out of’—suggests the presence of the Light within the darkness. This is further evidenced by the subtle parallelism between v. 5, in its two halves, and vv. 9-10:

5.a. And the Light shines in the darkness	9. He was the true Light, Who makes every human shine...
5.b. and the darkness does not grasp him	10. He was in the world, and the world came to be through him, but the world did not know him.

In this context verse 10 is obviously not about the incarnation, but about the internality of Christ to all things; the Light who comes into the world through enfleshment is already within the world, as a matter of cosmology, as a matter of substance. In verse 5 darkness is that which is not God, but Christ is internal to it, to that which fails him and even sets itself contrary to him. The Light does not shine into the darkness but out of it, and darkness, verse 5 continues, cannot grasp it, cannot confine it.⁵¹ Christ lights up the darkness not because the darkness has a hold of him. There is nothing the darkness can do, the darkness cannot make itself shine, cannot get light, cannot acquire life, cannot make anything happen for itself, and cannot make itself happen. Even though he is internal to it, the darkness has no path toward and no access to the Light (the gospel insists on this, as seen in the second general point made at the beginning of this article). The Light not only gives life to darkness, but he does so from within it, he dwells in darkness, or rather he gives it himself as the Life.

A further point must be made here. It is a common trope that the first verse of the gospel means to echo Gen 1:1. Yet, despite this, to my knowledge no contemporary interpreter sees the correspondence between the imagery of 1:1-5 and Gen 1:1-5, which describe the ‘day one’ (ἡμέρα μία) of creation as God ‘separating through the middle of the light and through the middle of the darkness’ (διεχώρισεν ὁ θεὸς ἀνὰ μέσον τοῦ

⁵⁰ The OT has ὧν ἤρξατο ὁ θεὸς ποιῆσαι, ‘[works] which God began to make’, while the MT has אשר ברא אלהים לעשות, ‘[works] which God created in making’.

⁵¹ The verb καταλαμβάνω, as my above translation attempts to indicate, means much more than ‘overcome’—its usual translation. ‘To overcome’ is not even its primary sense. The primary sense is ‘to seize’, ‘to capture’, ‘to make something one’s own’, even if only with the mind, therefore, one secondary sense of it is ‘to comprehend’. This secondary sense is also most probably meant here (along with the others), given its parallelism with ‘to know’ (γινώσκω) in verse 10. Due to this polyvalence, I decided here for ‘to grasp’, an English verb which covers most of these meanings and connotations. Arguably the American ‘to get’ would have covered even more nuances, but its colloquial and local character would have made the sense of Greek obscure to some speakers.

φωτὸς καὶ ἀνὰ μέσον τοῦ σκοτούς; 1:4).⁵² In other words, John 1:1-5 is written as an unveiling of the christological meaning of Gen 1:1-5, as a resurrectional or an eighth-day text.⁵³ This is further indicated by the fact that the gospel references the ‘day one’ (retaining the peculiar use of the cardinal numeral of Gen 1:5) only twice and both times as the day of Christ’s resurrection (20:1 and 19). This rare use can only be entirely unexpected and remarkable since, as it has been previously noted, much of the gospel is set at festivals which begin and/or end on day one, culminate in day one, or at least cover day one: chapters 2, 6, and 12-20 take place at Passover, 7-8 (and possibly also 9-10) at the Tent festival, and 10 at Hanukkah. Yet, not one of these ‘day one’ settings makes any mention of it except for chapter 20, in reference to Christ’s piercing through the flesh.⁵⁴

In light of all this, it is not surprising that in the gospel Christ, as the source and substance of the world, only concludes creation upon his death, which, as it has been previously noted, is presented as the ultimate seventh day, the Sabbath (and this seems to be the power of 19:31 and 36). The essential text is John 19:28-31, provided here in my translation which retains its idiosyncrasies and with some relevant philological notes:

[28] After this (μετὰ τοῦτο) Jesus, seeing that now all (πάντα) is completed (τετέλεσται),⁵⁵ so that the scripture be completed, says (λέγει), I thirst. [29] A vessel lay there, full of vinegar; and they, filling a sponge with vinegar and putting it on hyssop, brought it to his mouth. [30] When, therefore, Jesus received the vinegar, he said, It is completed (τετέλεσται), and, inclining the head, he yielded the Spirit. [31] Therefore, the Jews, since it was the day of the preparation, so that the bodies would not remain on the cross on the Sabbath—for the day of that Sabbath was great—asked Pilate for their legs to be broken and for them to be lifted up.

⁵² My translation of the Greek text from Alfred Rahlfs and Robert Hanhart, *Septuagint* (2nd rev. ed.; Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2006).

⁵³ Especially insightful on the paschal value of the prologue is John Behr, *John the Theologian and His Paschal Gospel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), although Behr draws slightly different conclusions from mine.

⁵⁴ Much has been made of John’s precise chronology and festival setting. See, among the most recent studies, Richard Bauckham, *The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple: Narrative, History, and Theology in the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), esp. 100-103; Mary L. Coloe, *God Dwells with Us: Temple Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2001), esp. 115-143; Behr, *John the Theologian*, esp. 1-30. Yet, to my knowledge, no one has yet detected a post-historical point to this peculiar abundance of history, as I do. Behr comes close, but I will point out the differences between our readings in the conclusion of this study.

⁵⁵ It is particularly significant that this first τετέλεσται is in the voice of the narrator, who is thus revealed as a preeminent witness to the truth of Christ’s use of the same word (τετέλεσται) in his dying (v. 30). Moreover, it is also significant that the narrator relates Christ’s first word, ‘I thirst’, in a present tense (λέγει), a method which he uses often in the passion narrative (19:4, 5, 9, 14, etc.) toward two obvious effects: he places himself firmly at the cross, but also removes the cross from the forgetfulness of history.

The echoes of Genesis 1 are particularly obvious in v. 28.⁵⁶ Yet, it is the parallelism between ‘all things’ (πάντα) and ‘the scripture’ that is even more striking. The common interpretation that the scripture is completed in relation to Christ’s words ‘I thirst’—in a sort of Augustinian typology determined fundamentally by chronology and a Christ-less Old Testament—is not the most natural reading of the text.⁵⁷ If there is anything textual about the completion of scripture, in view of the things said above in relation to psalm 81, we can only assume that in saying ‘I thirst’ Christ speaks that which scripture will take down in the past. Yet rather, the word order in the original Greek and the strong parallelism between ‘scripture’ and ‘all things’ make it much more likely that the completion of scriptures is a broader or more fundamental reality, far exceeding any possible ‘quote’, as it were. This is eminently indicated by the fact that it is Christ’s death, the yielding of the Spirit⁵⁸ out of the flesh, which unveils creation (not the act, but ‘all things’!) and completes the scripture. In this context ‘completion’ means the dying of that which dies, the opening of the flesh (19:34), etc. It means the dying of death itself in order for the internal and eternal life to be revealed, the bursting of the Light out of the darkness. For the flesh, this is a capitulation, an inclining of the head. To put it differently, scripture and creation die as flesh in order to show their inner Life and to live on as Spirit.⁵⁹ The theophany which is in the cross, the slain Lamb—the one and true theophany which all other theophanies merely embody—plays itself out in the death of ‘all things’; it removes all veils off all things and off the scriptures down to the Life and the Spirit in them. It is a bearing of the Light in darkness, of Life in death, of Spirit in flesh, to echo the prologue.

It seems to me that *this is also an essential hermeneutical point which undergirds the entire gospel*. It is therefore not surprising that it, too, is revealed in the concluding prologue (in 1:16-18 explicitly, and, if I am correct, in 1:1), but it is made in the most explicit manner in 5:39, which is—in tune with the prologue—a clear denial of interpretive procedure, or rather it is the absolute relocation of the scriptures into the realm of death, theophany, and experience.

⁵⁶ Such as the sense of sequence set up from the very beginning by the phrase ‘after this’, the ‘seeing’ (Gen 1:31), πάντα (Gen 1:31), and the divine speech.

⁵⁷ In English translations the word order of the verse is usually changed and the peculiar verb in the present tense ‘says’ is moved before the reference to scripture and changed to a past tense, so that the completion of the ‘scripture’ can only refer to Jesus’ words ‘I thirst’. For example, RSV and ESV have ‘After this Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfill the scripture), “I thirst”’. Or NIV has ‘After this Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfill the scripture), “I thirst”’.

⁵⁸ It is significant that the spirit is not introduced as ‘his’, as most translations would have it, although no manuscript whatsoever seems to contain the pronominal form.

⁵⁹ Regrettably the flesh-spirit language so central to Paul’s hermeneutics is rarely seen in connection to death—Christ’s death first and foremost, and implicitly of the scripture and its hearers. For such a reading, see my article ‘For a Hermeneutics of Death. Dying and Exegeting in 2 Cor 3-6’, 39-49.

The critical depth of the threefold point of the gospel (christological-theophanic, hermeneutic, and existential-ascetical) appears in 5:36-40, to which I am returning briefly. The reference to the Father as ‘that one’ (ἐκεῖνος) contrasts sharply with the reference to Christ as ‘this one’ (οὗτος). The fact that Christ uses the pronoun ‘this one’ about himself—and the awkwardness of such self-reference is particularly piercing—drives down the reality of Christ’s presence among people to the point of bearing naked that which the visible veils, at critical depth. This comes through in at least two other uses of the same pronoun in the prologue. First, the use of ‘this one’ for Christ in the voice of the evangelist in 1:2 incorporates the hearers of his gospel in this depth. Second, John the Baptist’s use of the pronoun ‘this one’ (οὗτος) for Christ in 1:15, and in a similarly improper way, is equally poignant since the passage gives no indication that Christ is in the prophet’s proximity as a matter of flesh and history. In all these circumstances, I wish to emphasize again, the use of the demonstrative pronoun of proximity for Christ generates a hermeneutical demand: it requires the hearer of the gospel to share the recognition of Christ with its author, with John the Baptist, and ultimately with Christ himself, as the gospel itself is presented as divine self-revelation or theophany.⁶⁰

Instead of conclusions

This leads me to revisit now at the end, but with the added clarity of all of the above, a term which I have introduced at the beginning, a term also recently used in relation to the gospel by Fr. John Behr, although not precisely along the same lines,⁶¹ namely that the language of the gospel is preeminently *apocalyptic*: the storyline of the gospel is not the generation of Christ, his realization or coming into existence, as it were, but rather the unveiling of him as *the* eternal reality, the reality of everything. What is hidden is revealed, what is unseen is shown. There is not a progression of increased divine communication or dedication to the world. It

⁶⁰ On this significance of the use of demonstrative pronouns, see my article ‘For a Hermeneutics of Referent’.

⁶¹ *John the Theologian*, 1-30. Insightful as his criticism of salvation history is (and for this and many other reasons the book deserves to become a classic of Orthodox theology), even Fr. Behr misses much of Christ in the Old Testament. The fact that he does not present the theophanies as christophanies is a symptom of this shortcoming, but the problem is more fundamental: his solution to salvation history is still history, only read from Christ out. In other words, it is a history which begins with the moment of the Cross, which then permeates time both retrospectively and prospectively. The distinction between the retrospective working of Christ and his prospection comes down to the former being literary and the latter being physical. This conclusion hides under careful wording. What this leaves the prophets with is precisely the same disembodied expectation of Christ as the Augustinian typology which Fr. Behr rightly wishes to discard. Hermeneutically this means—and this would amount to a painstaking admission for such an insightful study—that only the post-resurrection hearers, the Christians, truly have the key to the Old Testament. The prophets are left in the murky waters of semantic fecundity. They have created a text *for others*, a text to whose meaning they themselves cannot (yet) have access. One can only wonder what is to be done with the authorial intent of the Old Testament authors.

could be said, more bluntly, that in johannine theology the only existence is that of eternity, of Christ. History presents itself only as the fleshly veiling of this eternity which pulls every point in history on to itself, only seemingly on, but truly down within. A sort of folding of a scroll (to use a johannine imagery) in such a way that every point touches every other point toward the revelation that the substance of all of them is nothing else but the one Present, the Beginning and the End (Rev 21:6, 22:13), the very verb to Be (Rev 1:8). And indeed often in the johannine texts history is witnessed already folded in this manner: ‘before Abraham came to be, I am’ (8:58), the slain lamb is before the foundation of the world (Rev 13:8), etc. At *any* point in history, the human being is posterior to Christ, just as is all history itself. And just the same, the human being and all perceived reality is also superficial to Christ, as it were.

The surfacing of Christ—it seems to me that this is the warning in ὁ κόσμος αὐτὸν οὐκ ἔγνω—does not translate into knowledge as an intellectual acquisition. Rather, what the gospel promises, in the first place, is a critical and self-shattering staring at God, his touch, his hearing. Yet, even this contact does not mean that one recognizes him as God. By and large, people in the gospel do not. Nevertheless, this shortcoming, as it were, flounders not in front of an explanation, but in front of death. This is the reason for which the true witness to Christ amounts to a collapse in front of him, to martyrdom (μαρτυρία).

The prologue does not simply anticipate or set up all this theology which unravels throughout the gospel and then the Book of Revelation. The prologue rather presupposes it. In other words, the reader whom the gospel expects will approach the text with recognition, not with deduction. The gospel, as I hope to have shown here, is built in such a manner that what it says—particularly its peculiarities—will make sense only once the Meaning of it is encountered ahead of the prologue, as a sort of prerequisite conclusion. The hearer the gospel wants is someone who has gained the proper relationship to his/her death. And this demand, which is already behind the placement of the conclusion at the beginning of the gospel, replicates the manner in which Christ presents himself in the gospel and the manner in which John reveals him in his own text. The prologue thus serves the purpose of de-constructing any hermeneutics, of preventing any textualizations of it, because it is an unveiling of the theophanic Christ, the Christ of all eternity.

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