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Peer Review JBAS Volume 2, Number 1

① Peer Review Period

The call for paper submissions for JBAS Volume 2, Number 1 was open from Jan. 1, 2026, to Jun. 30, 2026. The deadline for paper submissions was Jun. 12, and the review period took place from Jun. 13 to Jun. 29.

② Review Status

A total of 8 research papers were submitted during this period. Of these two paper was rejected, and seven were accepted for publication, including one rejected paper invited to be published as a special contribution instead.

③ Peer Reviewers

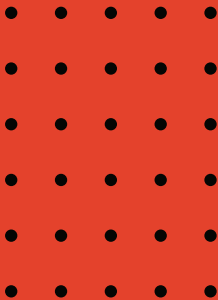
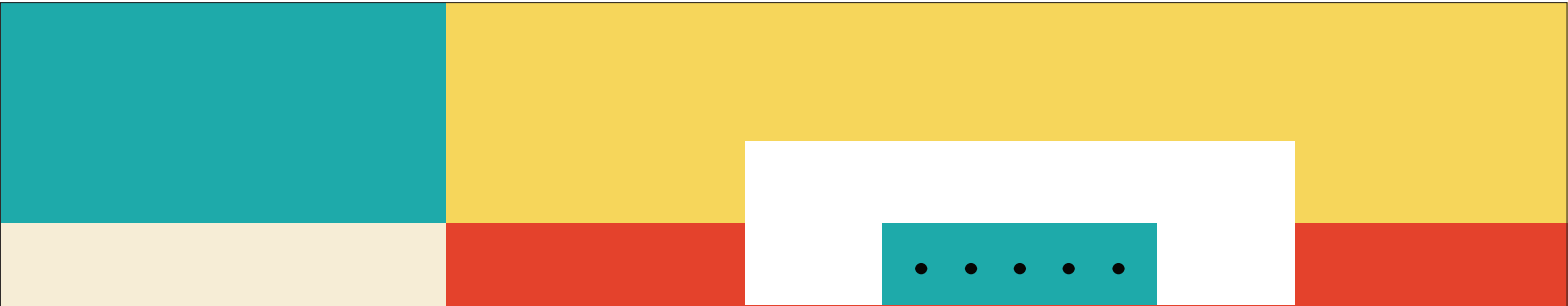
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Special Theme Articles

War and Peace

– Rereading the narratives of
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▪ **Choi, Yi Sak.**

Same Canon, Different Resonance: Musical
Reception of Biblical Texts of War and
Peace after Total War.



Same Canon, Different Resonance: Musical Reception of Biblical Texts of War and Peace after Total War

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Abstract

This article surveys how the war-and-peace texts of Scripture have been received in Western art music, with particular attention to the transformation of that reception after the two World Wars. It proposes the working category of acoustic commentary — reserved not for every musical setting of biblical material but for cases in which sound organization, temporal design, and listening position actively reframe the theological or political force of a text beyond simple quotation or illustration. After sketching a prehistory in which biblical war, prayers for peace, and public order could still coexist within relatively stable frameworks (from the L'homme armé Mass tradition through Handel to the first fractures in Haydn), the article traces four dominant acoustic grammars by which these texts are reorganized after total war: (1) direct quotation, whose self-evidence collapses (Schmidt, Pärt); (2) collision, in which liturgical peace-language is put on trial by the reality of war and, in Bernstein, by the polyphony already within the canon (Vaughan Williams, Britten, Bernstein); (3) nonverbal apocalyptic temporality, in which Revelation is received through time-design rather than citation (Messiaen, Martin); and (4) testimony and memorialization, where biblical language is re-summoned from within the experience of violence (Verdi, Schoenberg, Penderecki). Taking Revelation 1:3 — which blesses both the one who reads aloud and those who hear — as paradigmatic, the article argues that musical reception, approached through the axis of sound, constitutes not a decorative afterlife but a deepened mode of commentary on how the canonical text has lived again within history.

Keywords: reception history, the Bible and music, Revelation, apocalyptic literature, war and peace, acoustic commentary

1. Introduction*, **

“Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, ‘The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign forever and ever’” (Rev 11:15).¹ This verse marks the climactic turn of the Apocalypse, where the seventh trumpet announces that sovereignty over “the kingdom of the world” has passed to God and to his Messiah — a transfer of dominion whose force is at once doxological and political, proclaiming the end of every rival rule. Its declaration that worldly dominion has become God’s carries an anti-imperial edge, in tension with Roman claims of enduring sovereignty — a dimension the author has examined elsewhere and to which this article returns in closing. It is precisely this charged declaration that later musical settings would receive in such divergent registers. In the oratorio culture of eighteenth-century London, a text like this could ring out as victory and sovereignty made audible, carried on the brilliance of trumpets and timpani. Yet two centuries later another composer — Olivier Messiaen (1908–1992) — placed apocalyptic tradition within an entirely different temporality — in the barracks of a POW (prisoner-of-war) camp.² The canon had not changed; its resonance had. What this article pursues, then, is goes beyond how the Bible has been “used” in music to ask how one and the same canonical text can sound so utterly different from one historical moment to another.

This article surveys the reception of biblical texts of war and peace in Western art music, with particular attention to the transformation of that reception after the two World Wars. Its central proposal is a working category: *acoustic commentary*. This category designates not every musical setting of biblical material or the mere affective embellishment of a scriptural text, but specifically those cases in which sound organization, temporal design, and listening position actively reframe the theological or political force of a biblical text beyond simple

* This article was prepared as a review paper for the Executive Editorial Committee of the *JBAS* vol 2, no. 1. The author currently serves as the Editorial Officer for *JBAS*. To ensure the strict integrity of the double-blind peer-review process, the author was entirely excluded from all editorial duties, reviewer selection, and decision-making regarding this manuscript.

** The author used a generative AI assistant (Claude Opus 4.8, Anthropic; released May 28, 2026) to translate an initial Korean draft into English and to refine the English prose. All scholarly content — the argument, its structure, the selection of cases, and the interpretation — originates with the author, who verified all factual claims, citations, and sources against the original texts.

¹ Scripture translations follow the NRSVue unless otherwise noted; renderings of the Greek and Hebrew are the author’s.

² Messiaen states in his preface to the score that his rhythmic language — replacing conventional meter with nonretrogradable rhythms and extended durations — serves to “banish the temporal.” Olivier Messiaen, preface to *Quatuor pour la fin du temps* (Paris: Durand, 1942); On Messiaen’s notable rejection of “no more delay” for Rev 10:6 in favor of “no more Time,” and on the 1941 premiere at Stalag VIII-A, see Rebecca Rischin, *For the End of Time: The Story of the Messiaen Quartet* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 51–54, 61–70.

quotation or illustration. Music, in this sense, does not replace verbal exegesis; it discloses another level at which scripture is interpreted, contested, and made present within history.

Such an approach presses reception-historical discussion within biblical studies beyond the analysis of literary or visual afterlives alone. Biblical texts are not only written texts to be decoded; they are also events that are recited and heard. This is especially true of apocalyptic literature, prophetic proclamation, and the Psalms, all of which presuppose forms of communal listening. Revelation 1:3 is paradigmatic in this respect, pronouncing blessing both upon the one who reads aloud and upon those who hear the words of the prophecy. Musical reception therefore belongs not to a merely secondary sphere outside the text, but to an interpretive field in which the text becomes newly present as sound under historically altered conditions.

The argument proceeds by tracing four dominant acoustic grammars through which biblical war-and-peace texts are reorganized after total war. These grammars are best understood not as a closed taxonomy but as heuristic categories—analytical tools for organizing a field of reception that would otherwise resist description. They are not claimed to be exhaustive, nor are they mutually exclusive: a single work may operate in more than one grammar at once, and the boundaries between them are deliberately porous. Britten's *War Requiem*, for instance, belongs primarily to the grammar of collision, yet its closing movement also participates in memorialization; Messiaen's quartet organizes apocalyptic temporality while also, in its citation of Revelation 10, engaging direct quotation; and Bernstein's *Chichester Psalms* enacts collision while disclosing a polyphony already internal to the canon. The four are offered here because they name the dominant acoustic operation at work in each case — the principal way in which sound reframes the text—rather than because they partition the repertoire into discrete classes. Their value is diagnostic: they make audible distinctions that a purely chronological or composer-centered survey would miss. These four grammars are: (1) direct quotation, in which the text is sung with little alteration but under transformed conditions of hearing; (2) collision, in which liturgical texts are set against the reality of war and thereby put under pressure; (3) nonverbal apocalyptic temporality, in which scripture is received through time-structure and acoustic design rather than through explicit citation; and (4) testimony and memorialization, in which biblical language is re-summoned from within the experience of violence. To fully grasp the force of these twentieth-century ruptures, one must first sketch the prehistory against which they become audible. In many premodern settings, biblical war texts, prayers for peace, and public or political order could still coexist within relatively stable frameworks of reception. After total war, that relative stability no longer held. The same canon could still be quoted, prayed, or remembered — but no longer under the same acoustic conditions.

Final clarification is required at the outset. I have argued elsewhere that Revelation 11:15 carries anti-imperial force in tension with Roman claims of enduring sovereignty.³ That claim is not reargued here. The concern of the present article is different: to show how such texts, once carried into musical reception, are reorganized into distinct acoustic grammars that illuminate changing historical conditions of reading and hearing.

³ Yi Sak CHOI, "Imperium Sine Fine Reversed - Epic Metre and Hebrew Kingship in Revelation 11:15." *Journal of Biblical and Ancient Studies* vol. 1, no. 2 (Dec. 2025): 135-162.

2. State of Research

Research on the Bible in music has grown substantially over the last two decades. Three achievements are especially clear. First, foundational reference infrastructure has been established. *The Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception* has normalized the inclusion of musical afterlives within reception-historical inquiry, while *The Oxford Handbook of the Reception History of the Bible* has helped consolidate the broader field.⁴ Second, specialized resources have emerged that make the terrain of musical reception more legible. Particularly significant is *The Bible in Music*, a pioneering reference work that fills a noticeable gap in reception studies by providing the first comprehensive dictionary devoted specifically to biblical reception across a vast range of musical genres, from classical oratorios to popular culture.⁵ Third, text-specific reception studies have shown that individual biblical passages can sustain dense musical afterlives that illuminate new, thought-provoking perspectives. S. Dowling Long's study of the King Saul narrative (1Sam 9–31) is exemplary in this respect; it offers an important precedent for examining how musical interpretations can shed light on a text's nuances and ambiguities, recovering a sympathetic reading of Saul that recasts the king as a tragic figure rather than the merely jealous and irrational villain of much traditional commentary.⁶

A methodological line of particular relevance is H. Leneman's proposal to read biblical retellings in opera and oratorio as forms of "musical midrash."⁷ The present article stands in

⁴ Dale C. Allison et al., eds., *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009 –); Michael Lieb, Emma Mason, and Jonathan Roberts, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of the Reception History of the Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁵ Siobhán Dowling Long and John F. A. Sawyer, *The Bible in Music: A Dictionary of Songs, Works, and More* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015). The publisher and series editors describe it as the first reference work to treat the Bible in Western music, the Bible in music having previously lagged behind comparable reference works on the Bible in literature, art, and film.

⁶ Siobhán Dowling Long, "The Madness of King Saul: An Interpretation of I Samuel 9–31 in Music," in *Reading the Sacred Scriptures: From Oral Tradition to Written Documents and their Reception*, ed. Fiachra Long and Siobhán Dowling Long (London: Routledge, 2017), ch. 18, esp. 263–64. Surveying operas, oratorios, and songs from the seventeenth to the early twentieth century, Dowling Long argues that musical settings "shed light on the biblical texts' nuances and ambiguities," often placing a different emphasis from traditional interpretation: against commentators who cast Saul as "insanely jealous, murderous in intent and irrational," the musical afterlife is "largely sympathetic of Saul," recovering a perspective "oftentimes neglected or glossed over by biblical commentators." She further notes that listeners who return to the text after hearing it performed do so "with heightened awareness of its details, and sometimes, with more searching questions" — a listening-oriented claim directly germane to the present article's wager on sound.

⁷ Helen Leneman, *The Performed Bible: The Story of Ruth in Opera and Oratorio* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2007); Helen Leneman and Barry Dov Walfish, eds., *The Bible Retold by Jewish Artists, Writers, Composers and Filmmakers* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2015).

continuity with that proposal, but shifts the center of gravity. My concern is not primarily with narrative retelling, paraphrase, or librettistic transformation, but with how sound itself reorganizes a text's force through duration, layering, intrusion, suspension, and the framing of communal hearing. Likewise, reception-history commentaries such as Kovacs and Rowland's volume on Revelation show that musical reception may legitimately belong within commentary practice, not merely as cultural appendix but as interpretive evidence.⁸

Nevertheless, a critical methodological gap remains unfilled. Musicological scholarship on the individual works treated here is undeniably rich; however, its governing questions tend to remain centered on composer, work-history, and internal formal analysis. By contrast, scholars in biblical studies have treated musical reception only intermittently and rarely through listening-oriented categories. What remains less fully developed is a typology that asks how biblical war-and-peace texts are acoustically reorganized after total war — not simply retold, but made to sound under newly fractured ethical, political, and temporal conditions. Within biblical studies, moreover, a growing body of work has begun to take seriously the aural and performative dimension of apocalyptic literature itself. Kayle de Waal's aural-performance analysis of Revelation 1 and 11, for instance, reconstructs how the Apocalypse would have been *heard* by its first-century audience — developing “sound maps” and an aural-performance commentary that attend to aural markers, communal reception, and collective memory.⁹ The present article extends this turn in a different direction: where de Waal asks how Revelation sounded to its original hearers, it asks how the same text has been made to sound again, centuries later, within the catastrophes of modern history. Acoustic commentary is thus not an importation of musicology into biblical studies, but a continuation of biblical scholarship's own attention to the hearing of the text.

The scope of the article is limited primarily to Western art music. Though popular music, film scores, and political mass-musical appropriations constitute vital areas of inquiry, they remain beyond the present survey. The aim here is more modest and more specific: to offer a preliminary but analytically ordered account of how biblical war-and-peace texts are redistributed across four dominant acoustic grammars in the wake of the twentieth century's catastrophes.

3. Before the Rupture: Relative Coexistence and Emerging Fracture

Prior to the twentieth century, at least in the major traditions of liturgical music and oratorio, biblical texts of war and prayers for peace could often coexist without the radical ethical rupture later imposed by total war. This does not mean that premodern reception was free of tension.

⁸ Judith Kovacs and Christopher Rowland, *Revelation: The Apocalypse of Jesus Christ*, Blackwell Bible Commentaries (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004); on musical reception within the commentary, see the introductory survey “The Reception of the Apocalypse” (14ff.) and the comment on Rev 11 (122ff.).

⁹ Kayle B. de Waal, *An Aural-Performance Analysis of Revelation 1 and 11*, Studies in Biblical Literature 163 (New York: Peter Lang, 2015).

It means, rather, that war symbolism, liturgical prayer, divine sovereignty, and public order could still be joined within relatively stable interpretive frameworks. Reception was governed less by suspicion toward the text itself than by the assumption that scripture could underwrite, sanctify, or magnify in sound the political order of the present.¹⁰

An early and revealing example is the *L'homme armé* Mass tradition. From a modern perspective, the incorporation of a secular war-song melody into the structure of Mass Ordinary may appear paradoxical. Yet within the symbolic world of the late medieval and Renaissance church, the sign of armed conflict and the prayer of the altar could still inhabit the same liturgical horizon. The language of warfare did not necessarily negate the language of peace; both could be drawn into a single sacramental and political imagination.¹¹

A more public and political form of this relative stability appears in the English oratorio tradition, especially in George Frideric Handel (1685–1759). Works such as *Israel in Egypt* (1739; premiered London, 4 Apr. 1739) and *Judas Maccabaeus* (1746; premiered London, 1 Apr. 1747), and subsequent reception histories of *Messiah* (1741; premiered Dublin, 13 Apr. 1742), show that biblical victory texts could resonate within narratives of national preservation, providential governance, and public memory. In such settings, scriptural war and apocalypse were not yet typically heard as texts under ethical suspicion. They could still function as musical resources through which a polity heard its victories echoed back to it in biblical form.¹²

By the late eighteenth century, however, signs of fracture begin to emerge. Joseph Haydn (1732–1809)'s *Missa in tempore belli* (1796; premiered Vienna, 26 Dec. 1796) is especially important here. The mass does not yet collapse under the pressure of the Napoleonic wars, but military sonorities — specifically, threatening timpani motifs and harsh trumpet fanfares — intrude upon the liturgical pleas for peace (Agnus Dei) in ways that suggest a new instability. War no longer remains comfortably outside the liturgical sphere; its acoustic traces begin to enter the space of prayer itself. What later twentieth-century works would radicalize, Haydn already prefigures, leaving an imprint that reaches as far as the Agnus Dei of L. v. Beethoven's *Missa solemnis* (1819–23; premiered St. Petersburg, 1824): the point at which the language of worship can no longer ignore the sounds of violence.¹³

¹⁰ Craig Wright, *The Maze and the Warrior: Symbols in Architecture, Theology, and Music* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), esp. ch. 7, “Sounds and Symbols of an Armed Man” (175ff.), on the Christ-warrior symbolism and the *L'homme armé* Mass tradition; cf. ch. 4, “The Warrior, the Lamb, and Astrology” (101ff.).

¹¹ Wright, *The Maze and the Warrior*, ch. 7.

¹² Ruth Smith, *Handel's Oratorios and Eighteenth-Century Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), esp. Part II, “The Patriot libretto from the Excise Bill to the Jew Bill: Israelite oratorios and English politics” (171ff.), and ch. 12, “In time of war” (288ff.). Ch. 5, “The survival of epic” (127ff.), also resonates with the author's argument on epic metre. For the textual arrangement of Rev 11:15 in *Messiah*, see also Laurie Schulman, “Program Notes | Handel's *Messiah*,” New Jersey Symphony, accessed June 16, 2026, <https://www.njsymphony.org>.

¹³ Georg Feder and James Webster, “Haydn, (Franz) Joseph,” *Grove Music Online* (2001; rev. 2024), sec. 8,

The significance of this prehistory lies in contrast. What binds these otherwise different premodern examples together is the relative intelligibility of joining sacred text, political order, and public sound without the severe fracture later imposed by total war. After the twentieth century, that relative stability can no longer be assumed.

4. Four Dominant Acoustic Grammars after Total War

4.1. Direct Quotation: From Public Victory to Minimal Petition

Direct quotation often masquerades as the most faithful and transparent form of biblical reception; nevertheless, it is never interpretation-free. Its very apparent transparency raises the sharper question: which text is sung as-is, under what historical conditions, and for what kind of communal hearing? Direct quotation is therefore not a stage prior to interpretation; it is already a historically situated reading.

In earlier periods this mode could align rather naturally with public confidence. In Handelian reception, direct quotation often reinforced the sense that biblical victory and public order could still be heard in continuity.¹⁴ After the two World Wars, however, such directness no longer carried the same self-evidence.

Franz Schmidt (1874-1939)'s *Das Buch mit sieben Siegeln* (1935-37, premiered Vienna, 15 Jun. 1938) illustrates the ambivalence of direct quotation under altered conditions. Formally, the work stands among the clearest large-scale examples of scriptural fidelity: Revelation is brought forward as text, not merely as thematic allusion. Yet the circumstances of its Viennese reception in 1938 render such fidelity historically unstable. The work's apocalyptic grandeur cannot be heard apart from the political environment of Austria after the Anschluss. Direct quotation here preserves the authority of the biblical text while simultaneously exposing the uneasy possibility that such authority may be made to resonate within a compromised public order.¹⁵

Arvo Pärt (b. 1935)'s *Da pacem Domine* (2004, premiered Madrid, 1 Jul. 2004) represents the same grammar in a nearly opposite mode. The work sets a ninth-century Gregorian antiphon whose text itself derives from biblical prayers for peace (2 Kings 20:19; 2 Chronicles 20:12,

“Sacred vocal music.” Feder and Webster note that the *Agnus Dei* of the *Missa in tempore belli* features threatening timpani motifs and harsh trumpet fanfares, while the *Benedictus* of the *Missa in angustiiis* (the 1798 “Nelson Mass”) culminates in another harsh fanfare passage “out of context”; both invoke the travails of the Napoleonic wars and influenced the *Agnus Dei* of Beethoven's *Missa solemnis*.

¹⁴ Smith, Handel's Oratorios and Eighteenth-Century Thought, 288–90.

¹⁵ Elisabeth Birnbaum, “Bibelrezeption im Jahr 1938: Franz Schmidts „Buch mit sieben Siegeln“,” *feinschwarz.net*, 31 Jul. 2020; For factual detail (premiere, scoring), see Peter Franklin, “The Book of the Seven Seals,” American Symphony Orchestra, accessed 16 Jun 2026, <https://americansymphony.org>.

15; Psalm 72:6–7); Pärt places this chant melody in the alto as a *cantus firmus* and surrounds it with three voices in his *tintinnabuli* style, so that the prayer is heard not as proclamation but as sustained, contemplative utterance. Here direct quotation no longer serves public triumph, nor even liturgical confidence in any straightforward sense. The brief prayer for peace is reduced to a minimal verbal unit, repeated with extraordinary restraint. That Pärt began the work two days after the 2004 Madrid train bombings, as a memorial to the victims, underscores the point: the effect is not one of abundance but of compression — direct quotation survives as the smallest scriptural prayer that can still be uttered after devastation.¹⁶

4.2. Collision: The Language of Peace Put on Trial

A distinct grammar of collision arises when texts long imbued with liturgical authority are forced into deliberate confrontation with the reality of war. In these works the inherited language of peace no longer inhabits a self-contained liturgical sphere. It is displaced into a setting where it must confront the historical conditions that seem to deny it.

Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872–1958)’s *Dona Nobis Pacem* (1936; premiered Huddersfield, 2 Oct. 1936) establishes an early, potent precedent for this acoustic displacement. The recurring liturgical plea of the Agnus Dei is placed alongside Whitman’s war poetry, John Bright’s political speech, Jeremiah’s lament, and prophetic visions of peace from Isaiah and Micah.¹⁷ The result is not a simple sequence of texts but a listening situation in which peace-language passes through war-language and returns changed. Prophetic peace no longer sounds as a remote guarantee; it is heard as a petition that has already traversed historical violence.¹⁸

Benjamin Britten (1913–1976)’s *War Requiem* (1961–62; premiered Coventry, 30 May 1962) radicalizes this collision. The Latin Requiem Mass is interwoven with Wilfred Owen’s poetry, yet the force of the work lies not simply in juxtaposition but in acoustic segregation. Chorus

¹⁶ “*Da pacem Domine*,” Arvo Pärt Centre, accessed 16 Jun 2026, <https://www.arvopart.ee>. Jordi Savall commission; composed shortly after the March 2004 Madrid bombings; medieval antiphon source.

¹⁷ On the text assembly of *Dona Nobis Pacem* (1936) — the Agnus Dei refrain set among Whitman’s *Drum-Taps* poems (including the pre–World War I setting of “Dirge for Two Veterans”), John Bright’s 1855 speech, Jeremiah, and a closing montage from Micah, Isaiah, and the Psalms — and on its influence on Britten’s *War Requiem*, see Hugh Ottaway, rev. Alain Frogley, “Vaughan Williams, Ralph,” sec. 6, *Grove Music Online* (Oxford University Press, 2001), <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.42507>: the idea of combining Latin liturgical material with biblical texts and modern vernacular poetry “surely influenced Britten’s more famous War Requiem.”

¹⁸ For the work’s premiere (Huddersfield, 1936) and its place in the festival-cantata tradition, see Malcolm Boyd, “Cantata since 1800,” *Grove Music Online* (Oxford University Press, 2001), <https://doi.org/10.1093/omo/9781561592630.013.90000382030>. On the interwar context (composed amid the Abyssinia crisis, on the eve of renewed war), see “*Dona Nobis Pacem*,” program notes (Rochester: Eastman Philharmonia; Eastman-Rochester Chorus; Eastman Chorale, May 3, 2024), 4–5.

and full orchestra embody the ritual and public dimension of inherited liturgy; tenor and baritone with chamber ensemble carry the historically particularized voice of trench warfare; boys' choir and organ create a distant and fragile sound elsewhere. These layers do not easily coalesce. Instead, the work continually destabilizes liturgical consolation and denies easy resolution. Peace-language is not discarded, but neither is it allowed to stand unchallenged. History itself puts this language on trial.¹⁹ Yet collision is not the whole of the work: its closing movement turns from confrontation toward commemoration, drawing even the enemy dead into the same requiem frame. The *War Requiem* thus inhabits two grammars at once — collision giving way, at the last, to memorialization.

Leonard Bernstein (1918–1990)'s *Chichester Psalms* (1965; premiered New York, 15 Jul. 1965) adds an important complication. In the second movement, Psalm 23 in Hebrew is disrupted by the violent irruption of Psalm 2:1–4: “Why do the nations rage?” The significance of this moment is that the collision is not imported from outside the canon; it is staged between two scriptural voices already coexisting within the Psalter.²⁰ The music renders audible the unresolved polyphony already present within scripture itself.

4.3. Nonverbal Apocalyptic Temporality

Apocalyptic literature frequently demands an entirely different acoustic operation, one that dispenses with direct citation to take shape instead through nonverbal time-organization. Such nonverbal operations hold particular weight for apocalyptic literature, whose force lies not only in imagery or content but in the experience of temporality: delay, interruption, suspension, irruption, and the pressure of the end.

That Revelation presents itself as a text to be read aloud and heard (Rev 1:3) is not merely a rhetorical frame but, as de Waal's sound-map analysis shows, a constitutive feature of how the Apocalypse organizes its meaning for a listening community.²¹ The musical receptions traced here can be read as a long afterlife of that original auralty—the apocalyptic text continuing to

¹⁹ For a detailed analysis of Britten's acoustic segregation and its destabilizing effect on the liturgy, see Mervyn Cooke, *Britten: War Requiem* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 52–53 and 55–56. Cooke notes that Owen's poetry, delivered by the male soloists and chamber ensemble, “seriously undermines the stylized religious phrases of condolence and consolation” represented by the full chorus and orchestra (52). The distant boys' choir further adds “the impassive calm of a liturgy that points beyond death” (56). These disparate layers uniquely and seamlessly merge over a common ground-bass only in the *Agnus Dei* (71–73).

²⁰ “Chichester Psalms (1965),” Leonard Bernstein Office, accessed 16 Jun 2026. Details the Psalm 23 and Psalm 2:1–4 juxtaposition in the second movement. For a detailed musical analysis of this Psalm 23–Psalm 2 collision — including Bernstein's use of parallel major and minor keys to dramatize the contrast — see Joshua Henry Fishbein, “Leonard Bernstein's Chichester Psalms: An Analysis and Companion Piece” (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2015).

²¹ de Waal, *Aural-Performance Analysis*.

seek its meaning in the act of being heard.

Olivier Messiaen's *Quatuor pour la fin du temps* (1940–41; premiered Görlitz, 15 Jan. 1941) is the quintessential example. Explicitly naming Revelation 10 in his preface, Messiaen anchors the work in a single scene: the angel of Revelation 10:5–7, who raises his hand to heaven and swears that “there will be no more time” (Rev 10:6: χρόνος οὐκέτι ἔσται). Messiaen pointedly declined the common rendering “no more delay,” reading the phrase literally as the abolition of measured time itself — the end of the succession in which future turns into past. The quartet does not “depict” this apocalyptic scene; it enacts the angel’s oath in sound. Reorganizing listening through extended durations, non-teleological pacing, and the systematic dismantling of forward drive, Messiaen lets measured succession recede until the listener is drawn into a temporality where chronological time yields to suspension. Revelation is received not by quotation but through the acoustic reconstruction of the very end of time that Revelation 10 proclaims.²²

Frank Martin (1890–1974)’s *In terra pax* (1944; premiered Geneva, 7 May 1945) offers a related but distinct case. Here biblical reception is carried less by the withdrawal of the text than by the architecture of textual arrangement. The work opens with the four horsemen of Revelation 6 and closes with the new heaven and new earth of Revelation 21, while the journey between them is mediated through Isaiah’s consolation, the Lord’s Prayer, and war-shadowed hope.²³ The significance of this structure extends beyond mere thematic contrast; the work translates the war–peace dialectic internal to apocalyptic scripture into the temporal architecture of the whole composition. Given the composer’s own remark that he held no illusions about postwar peace, the decision to close with Revelation 21 should be read not as optimism but as eschatological hope spoken from within disillusionment. Revelation is received through the large-scale organization of beginning, middle, and end, rather than through isolated quotation.

In both instances, the biblical text transcends mere verbal content, becoming audible through time-design itself. Nonverbal reception, therefore, should not be treated as a weak or secondary form of reception. In some instances it is one of the most intense forms, because it presses biblical categories — especially apocalyptic temporality — into the deepest structures of listening experience.

²² Rischin, *For the End of Time: The Story of the Messiaen Quartet*.

²³ “*In terra pax* (1944),” Frank Martin Society, accessed 16 Jun 2026, <https://frankmartin.org>. Commissioned by Radio Geneva in 1944 to be broadcast upon the announced cessation of hostilities, the oratorio was premiered in May 1945, days before the German surrender; it opens with the four horsemen of Rev 6 and closes with the new heaven and new earth of Rev 21, by way of Isaiah’s consolation and the Lord’s Prayer. On the eschatological rather than optimistic register of the ending, Martin’s own statement is decisive: he writes that he held no illusions about the peace that would follow the war, yet sought to express “the transition from deepest despair to hope for a shining future” — a peace that “can only be a hope, a determination, a faith, a bridge to an uncertain future.”

4.4. Testimony and Memorialization

Finally, a grammar of testimony and memorialization takes shape as biblical texts are re-summoned as languages of testimony, memorialization, and ethically damaged remembering. Here the crucial distinction is between appropriation and witness: between the mobilization of biblical language for communal self-legitimation and its reappearance from within exposure to violence.

The afterlife of “Va, Pensiero” from Giuseppe Verdi (1813–1901)’s *Nabucco* (1842; premiered Milan, 9 March 1842) is instructive as a case of appropriation — instructive precisely because the object of analysis is not the 1842 score itself but its twentieth-century afterlife. The chorus sets the Hebrew exiles’ lament largely in unison — a single collective voice rather than individuated polyphony — and its significance lies less in any direct quotation of Psalm 137 than in the way this exilic biblical imaginary, passing through operatic form, was *retrospectively* constructed as a national symbol within the memory politics of the unified Italian state. As Parker has shown, even the celebrated rendition at Verdi’s 1901 funeral was a pre-planned official event rather than a spontaneous outpouring; the chorus’s patriotic aura was largely a later construction. Set beside the testimony of Schoenberg and Penderecki, this trajectory makes “Va, Pensiero” a revealing counter-case: here biblical language functions less as witness from the wound than as a public emblem of collective identity, and the unison voice that made the chorus so memorable is precisely what suited it to stand for a people.²⁴

Arnold Schoenberg (1874–1951)’s *A Survivor from Warsaw* (1947, premiered Albuquerque, 4 Nov. 1948) inverts this dynamic of appropriation entirely. Through the composer’s own dramatization, beginning from survivors’ accounts, the work re-presents the terror of the camp—the violence of assembly, roll call (Abzählen), and the moment just before deportation to the gas chamber. The violent collision of the narrator’s English, the German commands, and the music culminates in the sudden Hebrew singing of the *Shema* (Deut 6:4: שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה אֶחָד). In this context, the biblical confession no longer serves triumphal appropriation. It becomes the last language by which those facing death refuse erasure — a language of testimony that refuses mythologization.²⁵

Krzysztof Penderecki (1933–2020)’s *Dies Irae* (1967; premiered Oświęcim [Auschwitz], 16

²⁴ Roger Parker, “Verdi politico: a wounded cliché regroups,” *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 17, no. 4 (2012): 427–436, esp. 430–431 (the 1901 funeral rendition was itself a pre-planned official event, 431 n. 1); the patriotic-symbol status was retrospectively constructed after unification. cf. Parker, “*Arpa d’or dei fatidici vati*”: *The Verdian Patriotic Chorus in the 1840s* (Parma: Istituto nazionale di studi verdiani, 1997).

²⁵ Michael Strasser, “‘A Survivor from Warsaw’ as Personal Parable,” *Music and Letters* 76, no. 1 (1995): 52–63 (commission and compositional genesis, 52–54; the text as authorial and deliberately symbolic, 58–60; the setting is an anonymous concentration camp rather than the Warsaw ghetto, 58; the meaning of the *Shema*, 60–61); Amy Lynn Wlodarski, “‘An Idea Can Never Perish’: Memory, the Musical Idea, and Schoenberg’s *A Survivor from Warsaw* (1947),” *Journal of Musicology* 24, no. 4 (2007): 581–608 (memory and testimony, 586–89; the narrator as the work’s “internal witness and author,” 589).

Apr. 1967) expands this from individual witness to collective memorialization for the victims of Auschwitz. The oratorio assembles biblical passages, liturgy, and literary texts into a commemorative acoustic space.²⁶ What matters here is not the isolated citation of scripture. The language of Revelation and the Psalms is juxtaposed with fragments from Aeschylus's tragedy — sung in the Greek original while the contemporary poets' texts are rendered into Latin. That the work closes with the resurrection proclamation of 1 Corinthians 15:54 (κατεπόθη ὁ θάνατος εἰς νίκος), shows that this commemoration is not merely a record of despair, but a canonical form of hope spoken from within the geography of mass death. In such works, biblical reception becomes neither celebratory triumph nor neutral remembrance. It becomes the difficult re-summoning of scripture under the ethical conditions created by catastrophe.

5. Conclusion: Hearing the Canon after Catastrophe

This article has argued that the musical reception of biblical war-and-peace texts after total war can be understood through four dominant acoustic grammars: direct quotation, collision, nonverbal apocalyptic temporality, and testimony/memorialization. These grammars are not rigid taxonomic boxes, but recurrent ways in which scriptural texts are reorganized when historical violence alters the conditions of hearing.

The central claim has been methodological as much as historical. Musical reception transcends decorative afterlife or illustrative appendix to verbal exegesis. In many cases it functions as *acoustic commentary*: a mode in which sound, temporal structure, and communal listening actively reshape how scripture becomes present. This is particularly important for apocalyptic literature. Revelation, after all, presents itself not only as text to be interpreted, but as prophecy to be read aloud and heard. If so, then the re-presencing of scripture in sound belongs within the legitimate field of reception-historical and even commentarial practice within biblical studies. It is worth marking precisely how this category differs from its closest neighbors. Leneman's "musical midrash" names the way opera and oratorio elaborate and retell biblical narrative, filling its gaps much as classical midrash does; reception-historical commentary, in the manner of the Blackwell series, gathers such afterlives as evidence for interpreting a text, yet its attention remains largely on the visual and the verbal. Acoustic commentary differs from both not in its object but in its locus of meaning: it asks how sound organization, temporal design, and the position of the listener themselves rework the theological and political force of the text — how the text signifies differently when heard, and not only when read or retold. Where midrash supplements the narrative and reception-historical commentary catalogues its afterlives, acoustic commentary treats the act of sounding as itself an interpretive event.

The historical trajectory traced here also carries a sharper conclusion. Before the twentieth

²⁶ "Dies Irae," Schott Music, accessed 16 Jun 2026, <https://en.schott-music.com>. The Aeschylus fragment is sung in Greek while the contemporary poets are rendered into Latin; the work closes on 1 Cor 15:54.

century, biblical war and peace could often be heard within relatively stable alliances of liturgy, polity, and public order. After the catastrophes of modern warfare and genocide, the same canon no longer sounded under those same conditions. It could still be sung, but not innocently; quoted, but not transparently; remembered, but not without fracture. Handel's triumphant apocalyptic proclamation and Messiaen's suspended apocalyptic temporality therefore do not merely show two styles. They reveal two historically distinct conditions under which scripture becomes audible.

The trajectory traced here opens at least three avenues for further inquiry. First, the inquiry must be extended beyond Western art music into popular, cinematic, and political-musical media. Second, the reception of biblical war-and-peace texts in Korean church music deserves dedicated study, particularly in relation to the trauma of national division, war memory, and liturgical language. Third, reception-historical study of apocalyptic literature would benefit from developing "sound" not as metaphor alone, but as a rigorous interpretive axis alongside text, image, and vision.

Ultimately, the reception history of the Bible provides a concrete record of how the canon bears witness to itself in time. The same canon can resonate so differently not simply because of the inherent polyvalence of the text, but because historical violence reorganizes the conditions under which certain scriptural possibilities become audible.

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Exorcising Trauma: Jesus, Roman Militarism, and the Gerasene Demoniac (Mark 5:1-20)

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Abstract

The following reading of the Gerasene Demoniac makes a case for this event as an exorcism performed by Jesus. The strongly religious elements of Roman military life provide a starting point. The history of Roman military presence within the Decapolis makes the identity of the Demoniac as a victim of some form of military trauma plausible. The appropriateness of a biopsychosocial model of healing, rather than a biomedical one, is then reviewed. That the healing might then be located within the sphere of the demonic or supernatural as an exorcism is then ascertained by noting the deeply spiritual elements of Roman military life and identity. The Demoniac as presented as a victim of Roman imperial policy who is restored to wholeness by Jesus. What is envisioned here is visible elsewhere in the NT: a challenge to social and political convention by his personal authority rather than political might.

Keywords: Gerasene Demoniac, exorcism, Roman militarism, Genii, Fides

1. Introduction*

The healing of the Gerasene demoniac invites consideration in light of Roman militarism, at least in two variants. The Marcan version is the focus here: the Matthean variant (Matthew 8:28–34) does not identify the unclean spirit as Legion (Mark 5:8–9; also in Luke 8:29–30), a critical step in the interpretation offered.¹ Mark 5:1–20 may be read as a critique of Roman militarism,² in which the consequences of such a culture are revealed and transformed in an encounter with Jesus. Such a reading demands that case be made for the demoniac as a victim of militarism and for Jesus as a solution to its ills. The first asks that two phenomena be potentially present. First is the identification of the demoniac as a victim of militarism. This necessitates an historical examination of Roman military presence, and that the ancient world recognised militarism as a source of trauma. The second, how an exorcism might engage with ancient understandings of such phenomena as militarism embracing both a this-worldly and a supernatural dimension.

Of course, the episode may well be read in other ways: psychologically,³ or as an anticipation of both the resurrection and/or the realisation of a cosmic struggle.⁴ These themes all remain and are not consumed or banished by focus on trauma and the Roman military.

2. Locating the Event

The location of the miracle is problematic. Gerasa is the preferred reading in Mark 5:1 and Luke 8:26, Gadara in Matthew 8:28. Whilst the distance of Gerasa from the lake may be a complication,⁵ Craig S. Keener suggests that these are not precise locations but “simply

* A draft version of this paper was read at SNTS 2024, Melbourne. I am grateful to Prof. Gabrielle Gelardini, Dr. Alistair C. Stewart and the peer reviewers for their comments. Any errors remain all my own work.

¹ The Matthean account posits two afflicted persons (Matthew 8:28–34).

² Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and Magic: Freeing the Gospel Stories from Modern Misconceptions* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014), 145–146.

³ Michael Willett Newheart, “My Name is Legion”: *The Story and Soul of the Gerasene Demoniac* (Interfaces. Cleeveville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004), 53–69. For mental illness; Christine J. Guth, “An Insider’s Look at the Gerasene Disciple (Mark 5:1–20): Biblical Interpretation from the Social Location of Mental Illness.” *Journal of Religion, Disability & Health* 11/4 (2007): 61–70.

⁴ Eugene M. Boring, *Mark: A Commentary* (The New Testament Library. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 204–205 (E-book); Sanghwan Lee, “Jesus vs Seth-Typhon: An Audience-Critical Approach to Mark 4:35–5:20.” *The Journal of Theological Studies* 75/2 (2024): 320–335; Hans M. Moscicke, “The Gerasene Exorcism and Jesus’ Eschatological Expulsion of Cosmic Powers: Echoes of Second Temple Scapegoat Traditions in Mark 5.1–20,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 41/3 (2019): 363–383.

⁵ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1–13* (WBC 33A. Nashville, TN: Nelson, 1993), 224; see further, Gabriella

identify the region”.⁶ They emphasise a non-Jewish setting.⁷ If this is so, rather than giving an exact location, a site in the Decapolis may be all that is indicated, with a recognition of Mark not knowing the geography, and Matthew attempting a still problematic correction.⁸ The difficulty in identifying the place exactly warns against claiming a detailed reconstruction.⁹

Such details may equally support an historical account or a fictive one with some grounding in a reality recognisable to the audience. Whether viewed as historical or fictive, it still communicates a message. It is always possible that “the myth, the fiction, the poetry are, ... , the superordinate constituents of the texts. Fiction is mainly how they are about that about which they are” (Templeton: 151).¹⁰ There is no need to choose history or fiction: “he [Mark] is offering us some third thing, a τρίτον γένος (*triton genos*, a ‘third kind’), that allows both literary and historical analysis”.¹¹ Put another way, the reading which follows “does not claim any representation of an actual event, but recognizes that the narrative is embedded in, assumes, and inscribes cultural ideological, social, and political structures from the world in which it originates”.¹²

3. Roman Military Presence in Syria and the Decapolis

Roman military presence affected the urbanisation of both Syria and Mesopotamia in two ways: the deployment of soldiers on active service near regional towns and cities, and veteran colonisation, in which demobilised veterans were settled in the area.¹³ Nigel Pollard identifies five legionary bases near five cities in Roman Syria: “Zeugma, Cyrrhus, Apamea on the

Gelardini, *Christus Militans: Studien zur politisch-militärischen Semantik im Markusevangelium vor dem Hintergrund des ersten jüdisch-römischen Kriegen* (NovTSup 165. Leiden: Brill, 2016), 161–162.

⁶ Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew : A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 282.

⁷ Mary Ann Beavis, *Mark* (PCNT. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 93.

⁸ Robert A. Guelich, *Mark 1–8:26* (WBC 34A. Nashville, TN: Nelson, 1989), 275–277; W.D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *Matthew Vol. 2: VIII–XVIII* (ICC. Edinburgh, UK: T&T Clark, 1991), 79.

⁹ Joseph S. Fitzmyer, *Luke I–IX* (AB 28. New York, NY: Doubleday, 1981), 737.

¹⁰ Douglas A. Templeton, *The New Testament as True Fiction: Literature, Literary Criticism, Aesthetics* (Playing the Texts. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 151.

¹¹ Templeton, *The New Testament as True Fiction*, 151.

¹² Warren Carter, 2015. “Cross-Gendered Romans and Mark's Jesus: Legion Enters the Pigs (Mark 5:1–20)”, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 134 (1): 139–155.

¹³ Nigel Pollard, *Soldiers, Cities, and Civilians in Roman Syria* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 38–39.

Orontes, Samosata, and Raphanaea”.¹⁴ With the exception of the last, all had previously had Hellenistic military associations.¹⁵ There is evidence of further military presence at other sites: Beroea, Tyre, Sidon and Damascus, though much of the evidence comes from the 2nd and 3rd centuries CE.¹⁶ There is evidence for a documented colony of veterans at Ptolemais, founded by Claudius, circa 53 CE.¹⁷

Most significantly for the argument being developed here are three first century CE funerary inscriptions for cavalrymen from a Thracian squadron which have been found at Gerasa.¹⁸ Such a unit (an *ala*) would have numbered about 450 in strength: a Claudian inscription (*Ch LA xi n501*) counts 434 soldiers and 12 decurions.¹⁹ Thus, there is extant evidence for a military presence in the area around Gerasa which might offer an origin for the demoniac as one affected directly or indirectly by militarism.²⁰

Records show military operations and campaigns in the territories predate the Principate and persist into the formative period of the gospels.²¹ Military activity during the Jewish War of

¹⁴ Pollard, *Soldiers*, 39. Graham Webster, *The Roman Imperial Army of the First and Second Centuries A.D.* (3rd Edition. Totowa, NJ: Barnes & Noble, 1985) notes 3 or 4 legions in Syria in the time of Augustus (25), and that the proximity of Parthia indicates a continued military presence (34–35, 40, 43–44, 65). Israel Shatzman, “The Beginning of the Defensive System in Judaea” Pages 37–66 in *Essential Essays for the Study of the Military in First-century Palestine: Soldiers and the New Testament Context*, ed. Christopher B. Zeichman (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2019) 37–66 identifies the problems of using Ptolemy’s *Geography* and archeological data to reconstruct the presence of Roman military sites in Palestine during the Flavian period.

¹⁵ Pollard, *Soldiers*, 40.

¹⁶ Pollard, *Soldiers*, 42, 43.

¹⁷ Pollard, *Soldiers*, 62.

¹⁸ Welles, C.B. “The Inscriptions” in Gerasa: City of the Decapolis, An Account Embodying the Record of a Joint Excavation by Yale University and the British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem (1928–1930), and Yale University and the American Schools of Oriental Research (1930–1931, 1933–1934) ed. Carl H. Kraeling (New Haven, CT: American Schools of Oriental Research, 1938), 355–494, here at 446–447.

¹⁹ Karen R. Dixon and Pat Southern, *The Roman Cavalry from the First to the Third Century AD* (London, UK: Routledge, 1992), 23; see further, Thomas R.S. Broughton, “The Roman Army” in *Essential Essays for the Study of the Military in First-century Palestine: Soldiers and the New Testament Context*, ed. Christopher B. Zeichman. Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2019), 1–25.

²⁰ I. Howard. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC. Exeter, UK: Paternoster, 1978), 338–339. There is an unattributed suggestion that the demoniac’s suffering may originate with a childhood experience at the hands of the military. It is not linked to the comments of Jeremias which Marshall queries about Legion, “My name is ‘Soldier’” (Joachim Jeremias, *Jesus’ Promise to The Nations: The Franz Delitzsch Lectures for 1953*, trans. Samuel H. Hooke (SBT 24. London, UK: SCM, 1958), 30–31, fn.5.

²¹ Jonathan P. Roth, “Jews and the Roman Army: Perceptions and Realities” in *The Impact of the Roman Army (200 BC–AD 476): Economic, Social, Political, Religious, and Cultural Aspects*, ed. Lukas de Blois and Elio Lo Cascio. IMEM. Leuven: Brill, 2006) 409–420, here at 413–418; further Edward Dąbrowa, “The Roman Army in

the 60s CE which saw troops loyal to the empire moving through the provinces of Syria, Judaea, and Palestine would also be significant (Roth 2019).²² Of particular significance here is Josephus:

“He also sent Lucius Annius to Gerasa with a squadron of cavalry and a considerable body of infantry. Annius, having carried the city by assault, put to the sword a thousand of the youth who had not already escaped, made prisoners of women and children, gave his soldiers licence to plunder the property, and then set fire to the houses and advanced against the surrounding villages. The able-bodied fled, the feeble perished, and everything left was consigned to the flames.”²³

Noting that this event has been questioned,²⁴ it may still provide a further instance of Roman militarism, a possible comparison of Vespasian and Jesus, and therefore a potential *Sitz im Leben* for the Marcan audience.²⁵ The same issues of history, fiction and true fiction persist here as well as in relation to Jesus.

Jewish recruitment and participation in Roman military life may also be reckoned as a potential factor informing the account: the geographic indicators (already reckoned as problematic) are likely supported by experiences of the intended audiences as sources of meaning, and Jews lived in Syria as well as the more recognisably Jewish regions and provinces. Terms like “Roman”, “Syrian”, and “Jew” resist clear definitions and may be confused.²⁶

The evidence given shows both a military presence within the context of the event, and more widely. No surprise given that Roman militarism was, at this stage, “pervasive”, if not ubiquitous.²⁷

Action in Judaea (4BCE–66CE)”in *Ad Fines Imperii Romani: Studia Thaddaeo Sarnowski Septuagenario ab Amicis, Collegis Discipulisque Dedicata*. Edited by Agnieszka Tomas. Warsaw: Instytut Archeologii UW, 2015), 59–68; Joshua Garroway, “The Invasion of a Mustard Seed: A Reading of Mark 5.1–20,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, 32/1 (2009): 57–75, here at 63, fn. 13 .

²² Jonathan P. Roth, “Jewish Military Forces in the Roman Service” in *Essential Essays for the Study of the Military in First-century Palestine: Soldiers and the New Testament Context*, edited by Christopher B. Zeichman. Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2019.

²³ Josephus, *B.J.* 4.487–489. Translation from Josephus, *The Jewish War, Volume II: Books 3–4*, trans. Henry St. J. Thackeray (LCL 487. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1927), 301; Carter, “Cross-Gendered Romans”, 144.

²⁴ Hans Leander, *Discourses of Empire: The Gospel of Mark From a Postcolonial Perspective* (Semeia Studies 71. Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2013), 214.

²⁵ Leander, *Discourses*, 214; Carter, “Cross-Gendered Romans”, 143–144; Adam Winn, *The Purpose of Mark’s Gospel: An Early Christian Response to Roman Imperial Propaganda*. WUNT 2/245. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 178–179, 184.

²⁶ Roth, “Jews”, 410.

²⁷ Eli J. S. Weaverdyck, “Chapter 7. The Roman Empire” in *Handbook of Ancient Afro-Eurasian Economies*:

4. Ancient Militarism and Trauma

With the recognition of a military presence in the area, it is appropriate to consider whether the ancient world would have known what our contemporary thinking identifies as trauma, and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in the military cultures of antiquity.

“Trauma” is not easily defined.²⁸ As an example, the Australian Psychological Society offers:

“Potentially traumatic events are powerful and upsetting incidents that intrude into daily life. They are usually experiences which are life threatening or pose a significant threat to a person’s physical or psychological wellbeing.”²⁹

The modern term of course, is not to be imported anachronistically, There is more value in comparing symptoms with phenomena described in ancient accounts. So, attention turns to the symptoms of trauma. A number of behaviours may result:

“Symptoms of trauma can be described as physical, cognitive (thinking), behavioural (things we do) and emotional.

Physical symptoms can include excessive alertness (always on the look-out for signs of danger), being easily startled, fatigue/exhaustion, disturbed sleep and general aches and pains.

Cognitive (thinking) symptoms can include intrusive thoughts and memories of the event, visual images of the event, nightmares, poor concentration and memory, disorientation and confusion.

Behavioural symptoms can include avoidance of places or activities that are reminders of the event, social withdrawal and isolation and loss of interest in normal activities.

Emotional symptoms can include fear, numbness and detachment, depression, guilt, anger and irritability, anxiety and panic.”³⁰

The description of the demoniac (Mark 5:3–5) resonates with these symptoms and suggests analogues with ancient accounts of military trauma. Accounts from ancient Mesopotamia

Volume 1: Contexts, ed. Sitta Reden (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2007), 241–304, here at 292–293. See also the overview in Albert L. A. Hogeterp, “Trauma and Its Ancient Literary Representation: Mark 5,1-20,” *Zeitschrift Für Die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft Und Die Kunde Der Älteren Kirche* 111/1 (2020): 1–32, here at 14–20.

²⁸ Selma Leydesdorff, Graham Dawson, Natasha Burchardt and T.G. Ashplant. “Introduction: Trauma and Life Stories” in *Trauma and Life Stories*, ed. Kim Lacy Rogers and Selma Leydesdorff with Graham Dawson (Routledge Studies in Memory and Narrative. London, UK: Routledge, 2002), 1–26, here at 1.

²⁹ Australian Psychological Society, “Trauma,” <https://psychology.org.au/for-the-public/psychology-topics/trauma>. Accessed 24 December 2024.

³⁰ Australian Psychological Society, “Trauma”.

recognise a number of traumas, including those associated with militarism.³¹

A variety of ancient Hellenistic texts seem to address the phenomenon, notably, the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, and Euripides' *Heracles*.³² Gorgias's *Encomium of Helen* describes symptoms observed during and after battle:

“And it has already happened that some people, seeing frightening things, have been driven out from their present mind (*phronêma*) in the present moment: in this way fear has extinguished and expelled thought (*noêma*). And many have fallen victim to groundless sufferings, terrible diseases, and incurable madnesses.”³³

The passage, though lacking in detail, indicates both immediate and long-term symptoms of trauma. Herodotus also records the account of Epizelus:

“[A] certain Athenian, Epizelus son of Cuphagoras, while he fought doughtily in the mellay [*sic*] lost the sight of his eyes, albeit neither stabbed in any part nor shot, and for the rest of his life continued blind from that day. I heard that he told the tale of this mishap thus: a tall man-at-arms (he said) encountered him, whose beard spread all over his shield; this apparition passed Epizelus by, but slew his neighbour in the line.”³⁴

Alan Greaves notes that diagnosis from such a text is difficult. PTSD is one possible explanation of Epizelus's symptoms: others include hysterical blindness or Conversion Disorder.³⁵ Xenophon's account of Clearchus (*Anabasis*, 2.16.1–15) includes possible symptoms of some disorder related to war:

“...for he was gloomy in appearance and harsh in voice, and he used to punish severely, sometimes in anger, so that on occasion he would be sorry afterwards...for they said that at such times his gloominess appeared to be brightness in the faces of others, and his severity seemed to be resolution against the enemy, so that it appeared to betoken safety and to be no

³¹ Walid Khalid Abdul-Hamid and Jamie Hacker Hughes “Nothing New under the Sun: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders in the Ancient World”, *Early Science and Medicine* 19/6 (2014): 549–557, here at 554–556.

³² Yulia Ustinova and Etzel Cardeña, “Combat Stress Disorders and their Treatment in Ancient Greece,” *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, 6/6 (2014): 739–748, here at 741.

³³ Gorgias, *Hel.* 17. Translation from “Sophists”, *Early Greek Philosophy, Volume VIII: Sophists, Part 1*, ed. and trans. André Laks, Glenn W. Most (LCL 531. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 183; see also, Daniel W. Graham, *The Texts of Early Greek Philosophy: The Complete Fragments and Selected Testimonies of the Major Presocratics. Vol. 2*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 760–761.

³⁴ Herodotus, *Hist.* 6.117. Translation from Herodotus, *The Persian Wars, Volume III: Books 5–7*, trans. Alfred D. Godley (LCL 119. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1922), 271.

³⁵ Alan M. Greaves, “Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) In Ancient Greece: A Methodological Review” in *Warfare and Society in the Ancient Eastern Mediterranean*. Papers arising from a Colloquium held at the University of Liverpool, 13th June 2008, ed. Stephen O'Brien and Daniel Boatright. BAR International Series 2583/2013. Oxford, UK: Archeopress, 2013), 89–100, here at 96.

longer severity.”³⁶

The Latin poet Lucretius also seems to describe military-related PTSD:

“Moreover, the minds of men, which with mighty motions accomplish mighty feats, often do and carry out the same things in dreams: kings win victories, are captured, join battle, cry aloud as if their throats were being cut on the spot. Many struggle violently, groan with pain, and, as if they were being gnawed in the jaws of a panther or cruel lion, make the place ring with their cries.”³⁷

Aislinn Melchior is cautious about the extent of PTSD in Roman culture noting that Roman soldiers were likely to experience events which might well trigger trauma: “witnessing horrific events and/or being in mortal danger and/or the act of killing - especially close kills where the reality of one's responsibility cannot be doubted”.³⁸ However, other factors are also at play: the nature of warfare, in particular the concussive and sonic elements of modern weaponry, attitudes to violence, and degrees of sensitivity to it may alter the frequency with which PTSD occurs.³⁹ That said, a lower rate of occurrence does not mean an absence.⁴⁰ Alan Greaves is also cautious against an overly quick diagnosis of PTSD, but concludes that “it is possible to suggest that in ancient Greece PTSD, Conversion Disorder and other traumatic stress conditions were not rare but, in fact, completely ubiquitous”.⁴¹

The precise diagnosis of PTSD in antiquity is, thus, elusive, but plausible. The measured conclusions of Lawrence Tritle about Clearchus are apposite:

³⁶ Xenophon, *Anabasis*, 2.16.1–15. Translation from Xenophon, *Anabasis*, trans. Carleton L. Brownson; revd. John Dillery (LCL 90. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 205, 207. Hippocrates also appears to identify a case of PTSD, but not in a military setting: Hippocrates, *Epid.* 3.142. Translation from Hippocrates, *Ancient Medicine. Airs, Waters, Places. Epidemics 1 and 3. The Oath. Precepts. Nutriment*, ed. and trans. Paul Potter (LCL 147. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022), 81; further Abdul-Hamid and Hughes, “Nothing New”, 551.

³⁷ Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura* 4. 1011–1017. Translation from Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, trans. William H. D. Rouse; revd. Martin F. Smith (LCL 181. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1924), 355. Roman attitudes might focus on physical signs- what Korneel van Lommel identifies as impairment and disfigurement. These lead to marginalisation as they might be considered sources of bad luck or of being “misshapen and morally inferior”; Korneel van Lommel, “Heroes and Outcasts: Ambiguous Attitudes Towards Impaired and Disfigured Roman Veterans,” *The Classical World* 109/1 (2015): 91–117, here at 93. For men, marks of conflict might be ambiguous: marks of bravery, or of a loss of masculinity; those on the front of the body suggested bravery, whereas those on the back might indicate cowardice (94–96, 101–105).

³⁸ Aislinn Melchior, “Caesar in Vietnam: Did Roman Soldiers Suffer From Post Traumatic Stress Disorder?” *Greece and Rome* 58/2 (2011): 209–223, here at 217.

³⁹ Greaves, “Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder”, 94–95.

⁴⁰ Melchior, “Caesar”, 223.

⁴¹ Greaves, “Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder”, 95–98; Melchior, “Caesar”, 217–218.

“Xenophon may not have understood exactly why Clearchus was troubled, but he clearly sensed that he was and that the reasons for this were to be found in his long years of service as a soldier.”⁴²

It may also be worth noting that military associated trauma need not be restricted to those involved in military service. Philip Esler has identified a number of texts which illustrate the ways in which Roman military personnel might be free to brutalise the local populace (Apuleius, *Metamorphoses*, 9.39; Juvenal, *Satire* 16).⁴³ Whilst these indicate a certain heavy-handedness, they may need to be tempered by other data which record integration into local communities.⁴⁴

This may be as much as we can speak of the demoniac. Possession may also be a means of describing trauma:

The Gerasene demoniac has occasionally been considered as an example of a traumatized person, from a psycho-analytical viewpoint of individual introjection of traumatizing experiences that lead to dissociative disorders...Trauma is also conceptualized in terms of possession: “(a traumatic) scene or thought is not a possessed knowledge, but itself possesses, at will, the one it inhabits”.⁴⁵

The gospel texts give no precise indication of physical marks on the demoniac, but Mark 5:5's detail of self-harm would suggest aversion or shame rather than pride and admiration, as would the separation from society by physical restraint, and living amongst the tombs, mountains and/or desert (variously in Matthew 8:28; Mark 5:3, 5; Luke 8:27, 29):⁴⁶ an unclean place and an unclean behaviour.⁴⁷ Indeed, his location and behaviour suggest that he may be further identified with the dead and excessive mourning.⁴⁸ So does his recurring behaviour:

If applied to the question of the traumatized person in Mark 5,1-20, insistent return of possession may well be implied in Mark's narration. Mark 5,2b-3 includes the observation that “no one could bind him anymore (οὐκέτι), even with a chain” (5,3, RSV). Behind Mark's description of demonic possession is an implied process of deterioration of the person's situation from communal acts of restraining and binding him to his complete isolation from

⁴² Lawrence A. Tritle, “Xenophon's portrait of Clearchus: A Study in Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder” in *Xenophon and His World: Papers from a conference held in Liverpool in July 1999*, ed. Christopher Tuplin and Vincent Azoulay (Historia Einzelschriften 172. Stuttgart, Franz Steiner, 2004), 325–339, here at 336.

⁴³ Philip Esler, “Reading Matthew by the Dead Sea: Matthew 8:5–13 in Light of P. Yadin 11,” *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 70/1 (2014): 1–12, here at 3.

⁴⁴ Richard Alston, *Soldier and Society in Ancient Egypt: A Social History* (London: Routledge, 2014), 67; Esler, “Reading Matthew”, 5.

⁴⁵ Hogeterp, “Trauma”, 5.

⁴⁶ Guelich, *Mark*, 278.

⁴⁷ Newheart, 2004, 42–43.

⁴⁸ Hogeterp, “Trauma”, 8–9.

any social environment, living among the tombs. Mark 5,4 further relates the demoniac's past in terms of repeated (πολλάκις) unsuccessful attempts of others to bind and subdue him.⁴⁹

The identification of the unclean spirit with "Legion", meaning the Roman army, (Mark 5:9; Luke 8:30) potentially indicates some criticism of the military.⁵⁰ Some go further, seeing a reference to the Tenth Legion, whose mascot was a boar, and had been garrisoned in Jerusalem during the Jewish War.⁵¹ At some point, the story has picked up, by referring to "legion", "anti-Roman, antiwar" overtones.⁵²

5. Healing and Exorcism

The casting out of spirits (Mark 5: 1, 8, 12–13, 15–16, 18) may be problematic for modern readers. This particular episode contains some fantastical images that many academics would view as fictitious.⁵³ Today's reader may need to *unthink*, to use Owen Barfield's term, if the text is to be read in context:

"Unless he has enough imagination, and enough power of detachment from the established meanings or thought-forms of his own civilization, to enable him to grasp the meanings of the fundamental terms— unless, in fact, he has the power not only of thinking, but of *unthinking*— he will simply re-interpret everything they say in terms of subsequent thought."⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Hogeterp, "Trauma", 25.

⁵⁰ Beavis, *Mark*, 93–94, but not necessarily the occupation of Palestine: Warren Carter, *Mark* (Wisdom 42. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2019), 114; Mikael C. Parsons, *Luke* (PCNT. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), 140.

⁵¹ David E. Garland, *A Theology of Mark's Gospel: Good News about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God*. Biblical Theology of the New Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2015), 275 fn. 73 notes that Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.18.9-10 refer to soldiery from the Twelfth Legion rather than the Tenth (Josephus, *The Jewish War, Volume I: Books 1–2*, trans. Henry St. J. Thackeray (LCL 203. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1927), 516–521; see also *Jewish War* 7.1.3 (Josephus, *The Jewish War, Volume III: Books 5–7*, trans. Henry St. J. Thackeray (LCL 210. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1928), 312–313. For the Tenth Legion, see Josephus, *Jewish War* 7.1.2–3 (Josephus, *The Jewish War*, 307–311; Carter, "Cross-Gendered Romans", 153–154; Garroway, "The Invasion", 65; Gelardini, *Christus Militans*, 165–167; Markus Lau, "Die Legio X Fretensis und der Besessene von Gerasa. Anmerkungen zur Zahlenangabe "ungefähr Zweitausend" (Mk 5,13)," *Biblica* 88 (2007): 351–364, here at 354; Paul Winter, *On the Trial of Jesus* (SJ 1. Berlin: De Gruyter, 1961), 129; Boring, *Mark*, 205–207 (E-Book); Hogeterp, "Trauma", 19–20 rejects the interpretation as a caricature or parody.

⁵² Boring, *Mark*, 204–205 (E-Book). For anti-Roman; Rowland Onyenali, "The Markan Proskuneo (Mark 5:6; 15:19) as Anti-Roman Motif in Mark's Gospel." *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 52/2 (2022): 77–87.

⁵³ Leander, *Discourses*, 209.

⁵⁴ Owen Barfield, *Poetic Diction: A Study in Meaning* (Oxford, UK: Barfield Press, 2009), 129; see also, Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a way of life: Spiritual exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson and

Richard A. Horsley has identified this issue in reference to accounts in the gospels identified as miraculous or magical.⁵⁵ This, in part, arises from modern biomedical patterns of healing and curing.⁵⁶ Biomedical paradigms for healing dominate today's Western world, reflecting a Cartesian mind-body dualism which separates physical from mental and social worlds.⁵⁷ In contrast, biopsychosocial models reject a mind body-dualism and see healing as "much more the result of a complex set of factors than merely medical, chemical, or surgical intervention".⁵⁸

Ancient conceptualities tend more toward the biopsychosocial. Such a model includes elements which might be identified as spiritual, given that many institutions and phenomena of antiquity were considered to have two aspects:

"Every Power tends to have a visible pole, an outer form — be it a church, a nation or an economy — and an invisible pole, an inner spirit or driving force that animates, legitimates and regulates its physical manifestation in the world. Neither pole is the cause of the other. Both come into existence together and cease to exist together. When a particular power becomes idolatrous, placing itself above God's purposes for the good of the whole, then that Power becomes demonic."⁵⁹

Thus, the restoration of a person to wholeness may involve an engagement with spiritual and physical realities as identified. Both healing and exorcism, the matters with which Jesus is engaged in this pericope, are part of this process: they mark a particular Judaic practice, which can be seen in both Josephus and the Dead Sea Literature.⁶⁰ Evidence for the healing of the demoniac includes a spiritual dimension, even if viewed under the lens of trauma. This also demands a re-assessment of the Roman military- and how it might be reckoned as both a physical and spiritual entity.

trans. Michael Chase (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 61. *Unthinking* asks such readers to question both the reductionist marginalisation of indigenous readings (Leander, *Discourses*, 209), and "the critical distance between those who create narratives and the scholarly community analysing them"; thus, Katherine Southwood, *Job's body and the dramatised comedy of moralising* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021), 26).

⁵⁵ Horsley, *Jesus and Magic*, 63.

⁵⁶ Horsley, *Jesus and Magic*, 31–32.

⁵⁷ Pieter F. Craffert, *The Life of a Galilean Shaman: Jesus of Nazareth in Anthropological-Historical Perspective* (Cambridge, UK: James Clarke, 2008), 251–252.

⁵⁸ Craffert, *The Life of a Galilean Shaman*, 262.

⁵⁹ Walter Wink, *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1984), 5.

⁶⁰ Hogeterp, "Trauma", 21–24.

6. The Roman Army: A Physical, Spiritual and Religious Entity

The Roman military would not have been viewed as a purely physical, material or this-worldly entity. The army had a pluriform religious identity which could accommodate official religion, approved cults, acceptable local cults, and deities of particular places.⁶¹ It also included the symbolism of the *aquila* (eagle) and other emblems, and empirically visible from the first century BCE.⁶² Legionaries would die in defence of the *aquila*, perhaps because it symbolised their *esprit de corps*, a religious function, or embodied the *genius* of the legion, where *genii* are “the multitude of the more shapeless powers and spirits that held in their care every action and event, every person and every place”.⁶³ This last may be described as “the sum of one's vitality, energy, and capability of enjoyment, in short for his personality and his higher, inner self”.⁶⁴

Military *genii* were “so manifold and plentiful that one has rightly said no other manifestation of Roman life left more remains of the cult of the Genii than the army”.⁶⁵ These included *genii* of military units and divisions, military deities, non-commissioned officers and their clubs, as well as military installations.⁶⁶ Genii were connected to the *sacramentum* (an oath of obedience made by recruits):⁶⁷

“*Genio sacramenti, veterani.*”

The inscription, no doubt, refers to the oath of service, worshipped as a deity by soldiers. A hint for the interpretation of this Genius is found in Apuleius' 'Metamorphoses' (9, 41) where a

⁶¹ Eric Birley, “The Religion of the Roman Army: 1985–1977”, *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt* II 16.2 (1978): 1506–1541; Georgia L. Irby-Massie, “Army Cult, Roman” in *The Encyclopedia of Ancient History*, ed. Roger S. Bagnall, Kai Brodersen, Craige B. Champion, Andrew Erskine and Sabine R. Huebner (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 736–737; Graham Webster, *The Roman Imperial Army of the First and Second Centuries A.D.* (3rd Edition. Totowa, NJ: Barnes & Noble, 1985), 275–279.

⁶² Benjamin J.R. Greet, “The Roman Eagle: A Symbol and its Evolution.” Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Leeds (2015): 52. The eagle may be symbol of a number of Roman deities including Jupiter, Vulcan, and Sol (81–83, 129–130, and linked to divination (89).

⁶³ Michael P. Speidel and Alexandra Dimitrova-Milčeva, “The Cult of the Genii in the Roman Army and a New Military Deity” *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt* II 16.2 (1978): 1542–1555, here at 1542; Greet, “The Roman Eagle”, 89–98; Earl S. Johnson, “Mark 15,39 and the So-Called Confession of the Roman Centurion” *Biblica* 81/3 (2000): 406–413, here at 409.

⁶⁴ Speidel and Dimitrova-Milčeva, “The Cult”, 1543.

⁶⁵ Speidel and Dimitrova-Milčeva, “The Cult”, 1543.

⁶⁶ Speidel and Dimitrova-Milčeva, “The Cult”, 1544–1551.

⁶⁷ Louis Rawlings, “Army and Battle during the Conquest of Italy (350–264 BC)” in *A Companion to the Roman Army*, ed. Paul Erdkamp (Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World. Chichester: Blackwell, 2011), 45–62, here at 51.

soldier is described as in fear of the *Genius sacramenti* because he lost his sword: *militaris...sacramenti Genium ob amissam spatham verebatur*. Important for military discipline, the *Genius sacramenti* here functions as an externalized conscience, a role the less personifiable oath itself could have taken only with difficulty.”⁶⁸

The status of the *genius* gives an additional layer of authority. The plurality of *genii* alone might provide a rationale for the “Legion” as both singular and plural (Mark 5:2, 8, 9, 13): one Legion, many *genii*.

In the early imperial period, the military *aquila* which was linked closely to the *imagines* (images of the emperor).⁶⁹ Other military standards were linked to deities like Mars Ultor and Vesta.⁷⁰

Military religious activity likely included cultic and sacrificial elements:

“Worship, especially sacrifice, was the system of communication between men and the gods, whereby each was supposed to get what he deserved...one may argue that the entire military life of Rome was, implicitly or explicitly, a religious phenomenon.”⁷¹

What emerges is the identification of a military spiritual pole which might well be described as a spirit or demon, given the diversity of spiritual entities whose worship was practised. Military religious activity potentially included:

“[t]he cult of the standards, the use of the sacred oath (*sacramentum*), the importance of the military religious calendar, the veneration of various abstractions (virtues) such as *Eirene*, *Themis*, *Pax*, *Virtus* and Victory, as well as the importance of specifically military *Genii*...”⁷²

One further *genius* may be added: *Fides* (faith, loyalty, allegiance) – a hallmark of military life which likely included a religious dimension.⁷³ *Fides*, like other virtues or qualities, might be termed a “conceptual deity”.⁷⁴ In the Flavian period, “*Fides* appears prominently as a theme associated with the aftermath of civil war and as part of an attempt by new emperors to consolidate their position among the army and people of Rome”.⁷⁵ More widely, it was a

⁶⁸ Speidel and Dimitrova-Milčeva, “The Cult”, 1547–1548.

⁶⁹ Greet, “The Roman Eagle”, 141.

⁷⁰ Greet, “The Roman Eagle”, 142.

⁷¹ John Helgeland, “Roman Army Religion,” *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt* II 16.2 (1978): 1470–1505, here at 1471. It made an “all-inclusive system” (1500).

⁷² Johnson, “Mark 15,39”, 409–410; see further, Helgeland, “Roman Army Religion”, 1473–1488. It produced an “all-inclusive system” (1500).

⁷³ Teresa Morgan, *Roman Faith and Christian Faith: Pistis and Fides in the Early Roman Empire and Early Churches* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015), 77–85.

⁷⁴ Daniele Miano, *Fortuna: Deity and Concept in Archaic and Republican Italy* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2018), 7.

⁷⁵ Claire Stocks, “Broken Bonds: Perfidy and the Discourse of Civil War” in *Fides in Flavian Literature*, ed.

significant component of military behaviour:

“Few relationships in Graeco-Roman societies are so often or so positively described with the language of *pistis/fides* as those between armies and the state and army commanders and their troops... At the same time, we occasionally catch a hint that relationships of military *pistis/fides* cannot be taken for granted and need to be worked at—and not only because the loyalty of armed forces is formally created and maintained by that most potent reification of *différance*, the military oath of allegiance.”⁷⁶

At Gerasa, there is a clear identification of an unclean spirit or demons (Mark 5: 2, 8, 13; Luke 8:27, 29, 30, 33). The connection to militarism is suggested by vocabulary throughout: ““Legion” has only a military association”, ἀγέλη (Mark 5:11 – a multitude, possibly “a band of trainees”), ἐπέτρεπεν (Mark 5:13 – of a military command) and ὄρμησεν (Mark 5:13 – rushed as a herd – of an uncharacteristically porcine, but potentially military, manoeuvre.⁷⁷ A poetic layer of meaning has also been postulated: the Hebrew גָּרַשׁ may be translated as “banish”, “drive out”, “cast out”.⁷⁸

Under the postulated reading, the tomb-dweller is freed from the control of spirits which bind them to the spiritual realities of the military and its *genii*. Further identification is elusive. The demoniac might be a traumatized veteran: physically, or morally,⁷⁹ even potentially an “instigator of violence”.⁸⁰ But, veterans were not the only victims of militarism: the demoniac might equally be a non-combatant – a subordinate or victim of the Roman “Land Empire”

Antony Augoustakos, Emma Buckley, and Claire Stocks (Toronto: University of Toronto Press. Stocks, 2019), 21–44, here at 23; for *Fides* as a deity on coins, 31.

⁷⁶ Morgan, *Roman Faith*, 77–78. The *genius sacramenti* likely was the oath of allegiance; Speidel and Dimitrova-Milčeva, “The Cult”, 1547–1548).

⁷⁷ J. Duncan M. Derrett, “Contributions to the study of the Gerasene demoniac,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, 2/3 (1979): 2–17, here at 5; see also Carter, “Cross-Gendered”, 140–141, 144–145; Garroway, “The Invasion”, 60–63, 66; Gelardini, *Christus Militans*, 165–166; Leander, *Discourses*, 206; Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 182–183. For an overview, Leander, *Discourses*, 203–207.

⁷⁸ Stephen D. Moore, *Empire and Apocalypse: Postcolonialism and the New Testament. Bible in the Modern World* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2006), 28; also, Carter, “Cross-Gendered Romans”, 143; Leander, *Discourses*, 212.

⁷⁹ Michael Yandell, “Hope in the Void: How veterans with moral injury can help us face reality.” *Plough Quarterly* 8 (2021). <https://www.plough.com/en/topics/justice/nonviolence/hope-in-the-void>; Brad E. Kelle, *The Bible and Moral Injury : Reading Scripture Alongside War's Unseen Wounds* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2020), 46.

⁸⁰ Michael Yandell, ““Do Not Torment Me”; The Morally Injured Gerasene Demoniac” in *Exploring Moral Injury in Sacred Texts*, ed. Joseph McDonald (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2017), 135–149, here at 136–138, quotation from 138.

focused on its own interests.⁸¹ The text does not offer material for a more precise identification.

Furthermore, even if the specific language of πίστις (*fides*, faith) is absent, traces remain. The healed demoniac expresses loyalty or allegiance to Jesus, in wishing to accompany him (Mark 5:18; Luke 8:38). This anticipates the profession to be made by the centurion who witnesses the crucifixion.⁸² Even if denied the chance to follow, the demoniac is to express this new relationship by being obedient, staying in this locale and telling, as requested, of what the Lord/God has done for them (Mark 5:20).⁸³ Any potential prior orientation (πίστις/*fides*), whether voluntary or involuntary, to the military has been removed. Such suffering need not be the consequence of sin or choice by the demoniac. It may be “explained as being ineffable (the reason is unknown but a reason exists), or as incidental or just ‘happens’”.⁸⁴ There may be more indicated than either healing or some superiority to Rome: Jesus’s actions may well indicate his superior authority in an apocalyptic struggle between God and Satan.⁸⁵ Indeed, as the wider context shows:

For Mark, the meaning of the story cannot be reduced to an allegory of liberation from the Romans—its horizon is broader than that, within a cosmic and eschatological framework—but it could hardly have been read in Mark’s time without political overtones. It is also important to note that the demons do not ask to remain in the man, but that they not be forced to leave the territory. Jesus’ first foray into Gentile territory not only frees individuals from demonic power but purges the country itself (cf. LaVerdiere, *Beginning*, 1:130). Israel is no longer exclusively the Holy Land—the Christ-event exorcizes Gentile territory; analogous to 7:19, Jesus proleptically makes all lands clean.⁸⁶

The pericope may be making multiple claims: there is no obligation to set these against each other in an opposition when they might well be combined in a hybrid form.

7. Conclusion

The upshot of this train of thought is straightforward, even if not eventually classed as definitive: it is, at best, a possible scenario.

Military presence in the area, given that “the whole region around Gerasa, both valley and mountains, became a war zone by 68 C.E. (Josephus, *Bell.* 4.490)”,⁸⁷ allows the possible

⁸¹ Margaret Moore, “Justice and Colonialism”, *Philosophy Compass* 11/8 (2016): 447–461, here at 448.

⁸² Craig A. Evans, *Mark 8:27–16:20* (WBC 34B. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2001), 510.

⁸³ Guelich, *Mark*, 285; see also, Luke 8:39; Marshall, *The Gospel*, 341.

⁸⁴ Southwood, *Job’s body*, 7.

⁸⁵ Garland, *A Theology*, 275, fn. 73.

⁸⁶ Boring, *Mark*, 205–207 (E-book).

⁸⁷ Hogeterp, “Trauma”, 25.

identification of the demoniac as one who has been scarred by Roman militarism, either as a combatant or non-combatant. This trauma lends itself to a biospsychosocial framework in which religious and spiritual elements are at play. Jesus' deliverance of the demoniac from the power of an unclean spirit identified as Legion may be viewed as a healing or an exorcism. It accomplishes not just the healing of a psychosomatic condition, but a release from the plural spiritual dimensions of Roman militarism which had wreaked such devastating mental, physical, and social harm on the demoniac (Mark 5: 3–5): Jesus as a foil to Rome or the emperor.⁸⁸ Scholars debate whether the Kingdom with which Jesus would replace Rome will be of a different order or essentially Rome on steroids, as Mark sends contradictory messages.⁸⁹ Jesus's action suggests a critical engagement with those social structures (empire, army, and slavery) which a small movement like emerging Christianity could never, socially, have hoped to dismantle.⁹⁰ If Jesus here challenges the claims of Vespasian,⁹¹ his is a victory over the military achieved by exorcism, by spiritual authority, not military prowess: a qualitative difference. Healing the demoniac replaces violent Roman rule quietly and passively with a "message...of restored life and bestowed mercy".⁹² It further points to victory in a cosmic struggle, of which Rome is only symptomatic.⁹³ Reading the narrative as a τρίτον γένος means that it may embrace both historical and mythic aspirations. The structures of empire (earthly or spiritual) are critiqued, dismantled, and re-orientated one encounter or relationship at a time. Jesus models a strategy for disciples who do not have access to the corridors of power to effect change in their contexts, and reveals his superiority to the powers of this world.

There is a twist in the tail. Desirable though these outcomes may seem now to the modern reader, they were met with resistance. Jesus was asked to leave:

For the demoniac, Jesus' appearance had meant salvation. His neighbors had become accustomed to the status quo and considered Jesus' presence uncomfortable or dangerous.⁹⁴

⁸⁸ Leander, *Discourses*, 214–215, also Carter, "Cross-Gendered Romans", 146–147, 149; Winn, *The Purpose*, 184. Carter, "Cross-Gendered Romans", 150–153 further argues for a gendered reading of the exorcism. Moscieke, "The Gerasene Exorcism" grounds it in Judaic Atonement theory and practice.

⁸⁹ Garroway, "The Invasion", 58–59.

⁹⁰ Esler, "Reading Matthew", 10–11 notes that Matthew 8:5–13 may well have provided another challenge to views of Roman militarism through the interaction of Jesus and the centurion.

⁹¹ Winn, *The Purpose*, 184.

⁹² Garroway, "The Invasion", 70–73, here at 70.

⁹³ This resists a demystified reading, pointing solely to Rome as the source of oppression; Newheart, "My Name is Legion", 84. Newheart's conclusion, based on Girard and Fanon, is a modernist reduction which departs from ancient worldviews.

⁹⁴ Boring, *Mark*, 207–208; see further, Hogeterp, "Trauma", 28. The drowning of the swine may be too much for the community to bear: a threat to the "total system" of which they are a part; René Girard, "The Demons of Gerasa" in *The Daemoniac Imagination: Biblical Text and Secular Story*, ed. Robert Detwiler and William G. Doty (AAR Studies in Religion 60. Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1990), 77–98, here at 94.

In analogous contexts, similar reactions to the good news may be encountered. The evangelists are nothing if not realistic in their assessments of human nature. Even so, the triumph over death, powers and principalities in the life of the demoniac remains.

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Beyond Roman and Jewish Reckoning: Reassessing the Temporal References in John 1:39, 4:6, 4:52, and 19:14 in Dialogue with Adam Kubiś

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Abstract

This study reexamines the explicit temporal references in John 1:39, 4:6, 4:52, and 19:14 in dialogue with Adam Kubiś's influential reassessment of time reckoning in the Fourth Gospel. Kubiś challenges the long-standing assumption that John employed a distinct Roman system of hourly reckoning, arguing that both Jewish and Greco-Roman societies generally divided daylight into twelve hours beginning at sunrise. While affirming the significance of Kubiś's historical critique, this study contends that the removal of a distinct Roman system does not resolve the exegetical questions raised by the Johannine temporal notices. Instead, Kubiś's work redirects attention from competing chronological systems to the literary, narrative, and communicative functions of time references within the Gospel. By examining the broader Greco-Roman context of the Fourth Gospel and analyzing each temporal reference within its literary setting, this study argues that Johannine temporal notices function not merely as chronological markers but as significant narrative devices that contribute to the Evangelist's theological presentation of Jesus.

Keywords: Gospel of John, Adam Kubiś, Time Reckoning, Johannine Theology, Greco-Roman Audience

Introduction

This study examines the explicit temporal references in John 1:39, 4:6, 4:52, and 19:14 in critical dialogue with Adam Kubiś's influential reassessment of time reckoning in the Fourth Gospel.¹ For much of the twentieth century, scholarly discussion of these passages was framed by the assumption that John employed either a Jewish system of hourly reckoning, beginning at sunrise, or a Roman system, beginning at midnight. This distinction became particularly important in attempts to explain apparent chronological tensions within the Gospel and between John and the Synoptic accounts. Kubiś has demonstrated that the traditional distinction between Jewish and Roman systems of hourly reckoning lacks firm historical support. Consequently, the discussion must shift from competing chronological systems to the literary and narrative functions of temporal notices within the Fourth Gospel.

The majority of commentators continue to interpret Johannine temporal references according to Jewish reckoning, a position represented by scholars such as Brown, Barrett, Beasley-Murray, Carson, Haenchen, Keener, Köstenberger, Kruse, Lindars, Moloney, Morris, Schnackenburg, Schulz, Schwank, Wengst, and Witherington.² Other scholars have proposed various forms of Roman reckoning,³ while still others have emphasized symbolic or

¹ This essay is a substantially revised and expanded version of my earlier study, "Understanding Time Mentioned in the Gospel of John: Focusing on John 1:39; 4:6, 52; and 19:14," published in *The Biblical Studies for the Church* 4, no. 1 (2006): 143–69. The revision has been undertaken in direct dialogue with Adam Kubiś's important reassessment of Johannine time reckoning, "Roman versus Jewish Reckoning of Hours in the Gospel of John: An Exegetical Misconception That Refuses to Die," *The Biblical Annals* 11, no. 2 (2021): 247–80, which has significantly reshaped contemporary discussion of the subject.

² R.E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John* (2 vols., New York: Doubleday, 1966–70); C.K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text* (London: SPCK, 2nd edn, 1978); G.R. Beasley-Murray, *John*. (Word Biblical Commentary 36, Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2nd edn, 1999); D.A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991); E. Haenchen, *John* (trans. R.W. Funk. 2 vols. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984); C.S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (2 vols. Peabody: Hendrickson, 2003); A.J. Köstenberger, *John* (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004); C.G. Kruse, *The Gospel according to John* (TNTC. Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 2003); B. Lindars, *The Gospel of John* (NCBC. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972); F.J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John* (Sacra Pagina. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1998); L. Morris, *The Gospel according to John* (NICNT. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, rev. edn, 1995); R. Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St. John* (trans. K. Smyth et al. 3 vols. Tunbridge Wells: Burns & Oates, 1968–82); S. Schulz, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes* (NTD. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1987); B. Schwank, *Evangelium nach Johannes* (St. Ottilien: EOS Verlag, 1996); K. Wengst, *Das Johannesevangelium* (TKNT. 2 vols. Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 2000–2001); B. Witherington, *John's Wisdom* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995).

³ B.F. Westcott, *The Gospel according to St. John* (London: John Murray, 1908), 282; N. Walker, "The Reckoning of Hours in the Fourth Gospel," *NovT* 4 (1960): 69–73; R.A. Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 219; J. Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology: Principles of Time Reckoning in the Ancient World and Problems of Chronology in the Bible* (Princeton: Princeton

theological dimensions of Johannine time.⁴ Kubiś's study, however, requires a reassessment of the assumptions underlying each of these approaches.

The present study does not seek to revive the traditional hypothesis that the Fourth Gospel employs a distinct Roman system of hourly reckoning. Rather, it argues that Kubiś's historical critique, while persuasive, does not fully resolve the exegetical questions posed by John 1:39, 4:6, 4:52, and 19:14. These passages continue to present interpretive challenges that cannot be explained solely through appeals to a common ancient method of timekeeping.

Accordingly, this study proceeds in two stages. First, it examines evidence suggesting that the Fourth Gospel was composed for readers situated within a broader Greco-Roman cultural environment. Second, it analyzes each temporal reference within its immediate literary context, asking how these temporal notices contribute to the Evangelist's narrative presentation of Jesus. The central argument is that Johannine temporal references must be interpreted not only in light of ancient chronological practices but also in relation to the literary strategy, theological aims, and communicative context of the Fourth Gospel.

1. Roman influence and the Communicative Context of the Fourth Gospel

Any discussion of Roman influence in the Fourth Gospel must begin with Adam Kubiś's important observation that the ancient evidence does not support the existence of a distinct Roman system of hourly reckoning. His analysis has demonstrated that the traditional opposition between Jewish and Roman methods of counting hours rests upon a fragile historical foundation. Consequently, the question is no longer whether John employed a demonstrably Roman method of reckoning hours, but whether the temporal references in the Gospel should be interpreted within the communicative context of a narrative addressed to readers living in the Roman Empire.⁵

Although Kubiś's critique undermines the historical basis for a distinct Roman system of hourly reckoning, it does not diminish the significance of Roman political, cultural, and linguistic influence within the world of the Fourth Gospel.⁶ The issue, therefore, is not chronology alone but audience and communication. If the Evangelist composed his Gospel for

University Press, 1964), 8, 12-13. Cf. J.E. Bruns, J.E. "The Use of Time in the Fourth Gospel." *NTS* 13 (1967): 285-90; J.V. Miller, "The Time of the Crucifixion." *JETS* 26 (1983): 157-66.

⁴ R. Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (trans. G.R. Beasley-Murray. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971), 100, 178, 208-209, 664; C.R. Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 1-31; D.A. Lee, *The Symbolic Narratives of the Fourth Gospel: The Interplay of Form and Meaning* (JSNTSS 95, Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), 11-22.

⁵ W. Carter, *John and Empire: Initial Explorations*. (New York/ London, T&T Clark, 2008), 11-16, 52-82.

⁶ Carter, *John and Empire*. 52-82; M. Hengel, *The Hellenization of Judaea in the First Century after Christ*. (London: SCM Press, 1989), 30-44.

readers situated within a broader Greco-Roman environment, the temporal references may reflect that communicative setting even if they do not presuppose a distinct Roman method of counting hours.

This perspective is supported by several features of the Gospel. First, John uniquely emphasizes Roman political realities.⁷ In John 11:48 the Jewish authorities warn that “the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation,” highlighting the pervasive influence of Roman power in Judea. While this passage does not address chronology directly, it demonstrates the Evangelist's awareness of the political framework within which the Gospel narrative unfolds.⁸

Second, John 19:19–20 underscores the multilingual character of the Roman world. Pilate's inscription identifying Jesus as “King of the Jews” is written in Hebrew (Aramaic), Latin, and Greek. Unlike the Synoptic Gospels, John explicitly notes these languages, thereby emphasizing the public and universal character of Jesus' crucifixion. The trilingual inscription reflects a world in which diverse linguistic communities coexist under Roman rule and suggests that the Evangelist was attentive to readers beyond a narrowly Palestinian setting.⁹

Third, the Gospel repeatedly employs geographical terminology recognizable within the wider Roman world. Particularly noteworthy is John's preference for the designation “Sea of Tiberias” (6:1; 21:1) and his reference to “Tiberias” in 6:23. The name derives from the city founded by Herod Antipas in honor of the emperor Tiberius and appears more prominently in John than in the Synoptic tradition.¹⁰ By adopting terminology familiar within the Roman imperial context, the Evangelist appears to frame aspects of his narrative for readers living beyond the immediate world of Palestinian Judaism.

Taken together, these observations suggest that the Fourth Gospel exhibits a pronounced awareness of Roman political, cultural, and linguistic realities. Such evidence does not establish a Roman method of reckoning hours, as Kubiś correctly observes. Rather, it demonstrates that the Evangelist frequently frames his narrative in terms intelligible to readers living within the Roman world. Nevertheless, it does indicate that the Gospel was composed within a Romanized communicative environment. Consequently, the temporal references in John should be examined not merely as chronological indicators but also as narrative elements addressed to readers living within the broader cultural world of the Roman Empire.

⁷ R.J. Cassidy, *John's Gospel in New Perspective: Christology and the Realities of Roman Power*. (New York: Orbis Books, 1992), 80-88.

⁸ Cassidy, *John's Gospel in New Perspective*. 40-53.

⁹ J.H. Neyrey, “‘Despising the Shame of the Cross’: Honor and Shame in the Johannine Passion Narrative.” in D.G. Horrell (ed.), *Social-Scientific Approaches to New Testament Interpretation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 172-74.

¹⁰ J.F. Strange, “Tiberias” in D.N. Freedman (ed.), *Anchor Bible Dictionary*. VI (6 vols., New York: Doubleday, 1992), 547-49; S. van Tilborg, *Reading John in Ephesus*. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996), 205-207; Morris, *Gospel according to John*. 302.

2. Readers within a Greco-Roman Cultural Environment

Adam Kubiś has persuasively argued that the ancient evidence does not support the existence of a distinct Roman system of hourly reckoning fundamentally different from Jewish practice. His analysis rightly distinguishes between the Roman practice of reckoning the civil day from midnight and the widespread ancient convention of dividing daylight into twelve hours beginning at sunrise. Consequently, the intended audience of the Fourth Gospel cannot be invoked as evidence for a separate Roman method of counting hours.

Nevertheless, Kubiś's historical conclusions do not eliminate the question of audience reception. Even if Jewish and Greco-Roman societies largely shared a common method of reckoning hours, the communicative situation of the Fourth Gospel remains an important hermeneutical consideration.¹¹ The Evangelist repeatedly explains Jewish customs, institutions, and festivals in ways that suggest at least a portion of his readership was not fully familiar with Palestinian Judaism. These explanatory comments therefore provide important evidence regarding the cultural environment in which the Gospel was intended to be read.

First, the Evangelist frequently clarifies Jewish customs and practices. In John 2:6, for example, the six stone water jars are identified as being used for “the Jewish rites of purification” (τὸν καθαρισμὸν τῶν Ἰουδαίων). Such an explanation presupposes readers who were not fully acquainted with Jewish purification customs. Similarly, John 11:55 and 18:28 contain explanatory references to purification rituals associated with Passover.¹² In John 4:9, the narrator explains that “Jews do not associate with Samaritans” (οὐ γὰρ συγχρῶνται Ἰουδαῖοι Σαμαρίταις), a social convention that would have required little explanation for readers thoroughly familiar with Jewish society. This statement is particularly significant because it represents one of the clearest examples of the Evangelist providing an explanatory comment for readers who were presumably unfamiliar, or at least not fully familiar, with Jewish–Samaritan relations. As such, it lends support to the view that the Fourth Gospel was addressed to a broader Greco-Roman readership.¹³

Second, the Evangelist regularly explains Jewish festivals and religious observances. John repeatedly refers to Passover as “the Passover of the Jews” (2:13; 6:4; 11:55), while John 7:2 speaks of “the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles.” Likewise, John 10:22 notes that the Feast of Dedication occurred during winter. Such explanatory comments suggest that the Gospel was not written exclusively for readers already immersed in Jewish religious traditions.¹⁴

These observations indicate that at least part of the Gospel's readership lived outside the

¹¹ S. Cho, *Jesus as Prophet in the Fourth Gospel*. (NTM 15, Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2006), 53–64.

¹² Keener, *Gospel of John*. vol. I, 509–13; vol. II, 858, 1145–47; B.J. Malina and R.L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 70–72, 204–208.

¹³ C.L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of John's Gospel*. (Leicester: Apollos, 2001), 99–100; Brown, *Gospel according to John*. vol. I, 170; Schnackenburg, *Gospel according to St. John*. vol. 1, 425.

¹⁴ G.A. Yee, *Jewish Feasts and the Gospel of John*. (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1989), 26–27, 83–92.

immediate cultural world of Palestinian Judaism. Although the precise location of the Gospel's composition remains debated, many scholars have proposed settings within the broader Greco-Roman environment of the eastern Mediterranean. Whether or not a specific location such as Ephesus can be established with certainty, the Gospel appears to address readers who required clarification concerning Jewish customs and institutions.¹⁵

At this point Kubiś's contribution especially relevant here. The presence of a Greco-Roman audience does not establish the existence of a distinct Roman method of reckoning hours. Such a conclusion would exceed the available evidence. Nevertheless, the repeated explanatory comments demonstrate that the Evangelist consciously adapted aspects of his narrative for readers situated beyond the immediate world of Palestinian Judaism. Consequently, the temporal references in John should be interpreted not only in relation to ancient chronological practices but also in relation to the communicative needs of the Gospel's intended audience.

The following sections therefore examine the explicit temporal references in John 1:39, 4:6, 4:52, and 19:14 within their immediate literary contexts. Rather than presupposing either a Jewish or a Roman system of hourly reckoning, the analysis seeks to determine how these temporal notices function within the narrative and how they may have been understood by readers living within the broader cultural environment of the Roman Empire.

3. Explicit Temporal References in the Gospel of John

The Gospel of John contains four explicit references to specific hours of the day:

John 1:39: “about the tenth hour” (ὥρα ἣν ὥς δεκάτη)

John 4:6: “about the sixth hour” (ὥρα ἣν ὥς ἕκτη)

John 4:52: “at the seventh hour” (ὥραν ἐβδόμην)

John 19:14: “about the sixth hour” (ὥρα ἣν ὥς ἕκτη)

Whether the sixth hour in John 4:6 should be interpreted in the same manner as the sixth hour in John 19:14 will be examined in the discussion of those passages. It is noteworthy that John 4:52 alone provides an unqualified hour, whereas the temporal references in 1:39, 4:6, and 19:14 are modified by the particle ὥς, indicating approximation. These references therefore function less as precise chronological markers than as indications of a particular period within the day.

The interpretation of these temporal notices has long occupied a central place in discussions of Johannine chronology. Traditionally, most scholars have interpreted them according to Jewish reckoning, while a minority have appealed to Roman reckoning, particularly where tensions arise between Johannine and Synoptic chronology. Adam Kubiś has significantly reshaped this discussion by arguing that the historical distinction between Jewish and Roman methods of hourly reckoning has been overstated. If Kubiś is correct, then the primary question

¹⁵ Tilborg, *Reading John in Ephesus*.

is no longer which chronological system John employed, but how these temporal references function within the narrative and communicative strategy of the Gospel.

Accordingly, the following analysis does not begin by presupposing either a Jewish or a Roman system of reckoning hours. Instead, each temporal reference will be examined within its literary context in order to determine how it contributes to the narrative presentation of Jesus and how it may have been understood by readers situated within the broader Greco-Roman world.

3.1. John 1:39 and the Tenth Hour

The first explicit temporal reference in the Gospel occurs in John 1:39. Although temporal terminology appears elsewhere in the Prologue and throughout the Gospel, the present discussion is limited to references that designate specific hours of the day.

John 1:39 reads:

“He said to them, ‘Come and see.’ So they came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about the tenth hour (ὥρα ἣν ὡς δεκάτη).”

The phrase “about the tenth hour” (ὥρα ἣν ὡς δεκάτη) has generated considerable discussion.¹⁶ If interpreted according to the traditional Jewish reckoning of daylight hours beginning at sunrise, the tenth hour would correspond approximately to 4:00 p.m. If interpreted according to the view traditionally described as Roman reckoning, the reference would correspond approximately to 10:00 a.m.

Recent scholarship, particularly the work of Kubiś, cautions against assuming that these alternatives represent two historically distinct systems of hourly reckoning. Nevertheless, the narrative context raises an important interpretive question: what temporal setting best explains the sequence of events described in the passage?

The narrative reports that two disciples of John the Baptist followed Jesus after hearing John's testimony (1:35–37). They asked where Jesus was staying (1:38), accepted his invitation to “come and see,” and then remained with him “that day” (τὴν ἡμέραν ἐκείνην). The demonstrative expression “that day” highlights the significance of the encounter and suggests an extended period of association with Jesus.

For this reason, several scholars have argued that a morning setting provides a more natural reading of the narrative. If the meeting occurred around 10:00 a.m., the disciples could indeed have spent a substantial portion of the day with Jesus. By contrast, if the reference corresponds to approximately 4:00 p.m., the available time before sunset would have been considerably shorter. Barrett himself acknowledges that 4:00 p.m. is not an especially natural time at which

¹⁶ K. Hanhart, “‘About the Tenth Hour’... on Nisan 15 (Jn 1:35–40).” in M. de Jonge (ed.), *L'Évangile de Jean: Sources, rédaction, théologie*. (BETL 44, Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1977), 335–46.

“to begin to spend a day” with someone.¹⁷

At the same time, the narrative does not explicitly exclude a late-afternoon meeting. Ancient descriptions of a “day” need not imply a full daylight period, and it remains possible that the disciples continued their fellowship with Jesus into the evening. Consequently, the passage does not provide conclusive evidence for either interpretation.

Other scholars have proposed symbolic readings. Bultmann interprets the tenth hour as a symbol of fulfillment, while others have associated the number ten with completeness.¹⁸ Schnackenburg, however, rejects such symbolism and argues that the temporal reference primarily serves to underscore the historical vividness and personal significance of the disciples’ first encounter with Jesus.¹⁹

In light of these considerations, John 1:39 appears to preserve a vivid temporal memory of the disciples’ first encounter with Jesus. Although the passage cannot establish the existence of a distinct system of hourly reckoning, the narrative context may be more readily explained by a morning setting, although the evidence remains inconclusive. The reference to the disciples remaining with Jesus “that day” suggests an extended period of fellowship, which is more easily explained if the encounter occurred earlier in the day. Consequently, while the passage remains inconclusive with respect to the broader debate concerning time reckoning, it raises legitimate questions regarding the traditional interpretation of the tenth hour as approximately 4:00 p.m.

3.2. John 4:6 and the Sixth Hour

John 4:6 contains the second explicit temporal reference in the Fourth Gospel:

“Jacob’s well was there. Jesus, wearied from his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about the sixth hour” (ἦν δὲ ἐκεῖ πηγή τοῦ Ἰακώβ• ὁ οὖν Ἰησοῦς κεκοπιακῶς ἐκ τῆς ὁδοιπορίας ἐκαθέζετο οὕτως ἐπὶ τῇ πηγῇ• ὥρα ἦν ὡς ἕκτη).

The interpretation of the sixth hour has long been debated. Most commentators understand the reference according to the conventional Jewish reckoning of daylight hours beginning at sunrise, which would place the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at approximately noon. Others have proposed that the temporal setting should be understood differently. More recently, Adam Kubiś has questioned whether the traditional distinction between Jewish and Roman systems of hourly reckoning can be sustained historically. His

¹⁷ Barrett, *Gospel according to St. John*. 181.

¹⁸ Bultmann, *Gospel of John*. 100.

¹⁹ Schnackenburg, *Gospel according to St. John*. vol. I, 309, “The time mentioned (the tenth hour, four in the afternoon) can hardly have a symbolic meaning. It serves to indicate the length and fruitfulness of the conversation, which went on all the evening - or does ‘that day’ mean the following day? It also suggests the importance of the hour for the disciples - the hour in which they enter into fellowship with Jesus”.

critique requires that the discussion move beyond appeals to a presumed Roman system and focus instead upon the literary and narrative features of the text itself.

The traditional noon interpretation has often been connected with the symbolism of biblical well scenes. Lincoln, for example, draws attention to parallels with Genesis 29 and suggests that John intentionally evokes earlier scriptural traditions associated with meetings at wells.²⁰ Likewise, Köstenberger accepts a noon setting while acknowledging that such a reading presupposes a particular understanding of Johannine time reckoning.²¹ These proposals rightly highlight the theological and intertextual dimensions of the narrative. Nevertheless, they do not entirely resolve the practical and narrative questions raised by the passage.

Several features of the narrative raise questions about the traditional noon interpretation and have prompted scholars to consider alternative explanations. The narrative emphasizes Jesus' physical exhaustion following a lengthy journey and his need for water. At the same time, the Samaritan woman arrives alone at the well. As Morris, Brown, and Keener observe, the collection of water at noon would have been unusual in the climate of Samaria.²² Although some scholars explain her presence by appealing to her personal history (4:16–18), the narrative itself never states that she was socially ostracized. Indeed, her subsequent interaction with the townspeople suggests that she remained integrated within the life of the community (4:28–30, 39–42). Consequently, the proposal that she deliberately came at noon to avoid social contact remains speculative.

Additional narrative details further complicate the traditional interpretation. The disciples have gone into the town to purchase food (4:8), and later urge Jesus to eat (4:31). While such details are not incompatible with a noon setting, they also fit naturally within a later stage of the day when preparations for an evening meal would become increasingly important. Taken together, Jesus' weariness, the woman's arrival at the well, and the disciples' concern for food create a narrative picture that is not easily explained by the conventional interpretation.

At this point Kubiś's contribution becomes particularly significant. If the ancient evidence does not support a distinct Roman system of hourly reckoning, then the difficulties raised by John 4:6 cannot be resolved simply by appealing to "Roman time." Yet neither does Kubiś's critique remove the narrative tensions associated with the traditional noon interpretation. The question therefore remains not merely how ancient people reckoned hours but why the Evangelist chose to situate this encounter at the sixth hour and how that temporal setting contributes to the literary development of the narrative.²³

The symbolic dimension of the passage must also be taken seriously. John frequently invests

²⁰ A.T. Lincoln, *The Gospel according to Saint John*. (BNTC. London/ New York: Continuum, 2005), 171-74.

²¹ Köstenberger, *John*. 146-47.

²² Morris, *Gospel according to John*. 227-28; Brown, *Gospel according to John*. vol. I, 169; Keener, *Gospel of John*. vol. 1, 590-93.

²³ T.L. Brodie, *The Gospel according to John: A Literary and Theological Commentary*. (New York/ Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 219-21.

ordinary narrative details with theological significance, and themes such as water, revelation, worship, and mission dominate the episode. Nevertheless, the recognition of symbolic meaning does not eliminate the chronological question. Symbolic significance and temporal reference need not be mutually exclusive categories. The sixth hour may contribute both to the narrative setting of the encounter and to its theological presentation.

In conclusion, John 4:6 does not provide decisive evidence for either Jewish or Roman reckoning. Nevertheless, the traditional noon interpretation leaves several narrative features insufficiently explained. Kubiś has rightly cautioned against resolving these difficulties through appeals to a distinct Roman system of hourly reckoning. At the same time, his historical critique does not eliminate the literary questions raised by the text itself. Consequently, the sixth hour should be interpreted within the broader narrative and theological framework of the Gospel, where its function extends beyond the mere indication of chronological time.

3.3. John 4:52 and the Seventh Hour

The third explicit temporal reference in the Fourth Gospel occurs in the account of the healing of the royal official's son. John 4:52 reads:

“So he inquired of them the hour when he began to recover, and they said to him, ‘Yesterday at the seventh hour the fever left him’” (ἐπυνθάνετο οὖν τὴν ὥραν παρ’ αὐτῶν ἐν ᾗ κομψότερον ἔσχεν• εἶπαν οὖν αὐτῷ ὅτι ἐχθὲς ὥραν ἐβδόμην ἀφῆκεν αὐτὸν ὁ πυρετός).

Unlike the temporal references in John 1:39, 4:6, and 19:14, this verse does not employ the particle ὥς (“about”). The narrator therefore reports a specific hour rather than an approximate time. The precision of the temporal notice is narratively significant because it enables the official to recognize the exact correspondence between Jesus' declaration and his son's recovery (4:53).

Traditionally, many interpreters have understood the seventh hour according to Jewish reckoning, which would place the healing at approximately 1:00 p.m. Others have proposed a later setting. More recently, Adam Kubiś has challenged the assumption that such alternatives should be framed in terms of distinct Jewish and Roman systems of hourly reckoning. His critique appropriately redirects attention from hypothetical chronological systems to the narrative logic of the text itself.

From this perspective, the most significant feature of the passage is not the seventh hour alone but the repeated emphasis upon “yesterday” (ἐχθὲς).²⁴ After receiving Jesus' assurance that his son would live (4:50), the official begins his return journey. Yet he does not arrive home on the same day. Instead, he encounters his servants on the following day and learns that the healing occurred “yesterday at the seventh hour” (4:52). The narrative therefore creates a temporal gap that requires explanation.

²⁴ Morris, *Gospel according to John*. 258-59; Brown, *Gospel according to John*. vol. I, 191.

If the seventh hour is understood as approximately 1:00 p.m., the delay becomes difficult to explain. Cana and Capernaum were separated by approximately twenty to thirty kilometers, a distance that could ordinarily be covered within a day's journey. Morris acknowledges the difficulty and suggests that the official may have felt sufficiently reassured by Jesus' promise that he did not hurry home.²⁵ Such explanations remain possible, but they also reveal that the traditional interpretation requires additional assumptions to account for the narrative sequence.

The narrative unfolds more naturally if the healing occurred later in the day. In that case, the official may have remained in Cana overnight and resumed his journey the following morning. Such a reconstruction provides a straightforward explanation for the servants' report that the fever had left the boy “yesterday.” While this observation does not establish a distinct Roman method of hourly reckoning, it does suggest that the traditional interpretation may not fully account for the chronology implied by the narrative.

Geographical considerations further support this conclusion. The repeated use of καταβαίνω (“to go down”) in 4:47, 49, and 51 reflects the substantial descent from Cana to Capernaum. As Keener and Brown note, travel in antiquity was constrained by terrain, daylight, and practical considerations.²⁶ These factors do not determine the meaning of the seventh hour, but they reinforce the narrative plausibility of an overnight stay before the official's return.

At this point Kubiś's contribution is particularly important. His critique demonstrates that the narrative coherence of a later hour cannot by itself establish the existence of a distinct Roman system of reckoning hours. Nevertheless, neither does his historical argument eliminate the narrative problem created by the traditional interpretation. The central issue therefore remains exegetical rather than chronological.

Among the Johannine temporal notices, John 4:52 presents the most substantial challenge to interpretations based solely on conventional Jewish reckoning. The precise reference to the seventh hour, the repeated emphasis upon “yesterday,” and the geographical framework of the narrative together suggest that the temporal setting of the episode deserves further reconsideration. Accordingly, the significance of this passage lies not in proving a separate Roman system of reckoning hours but in demonstrating that the narrative logic of the story remains insufficiently explained by conventional interpretations.

3.4. John 19:14 and the Sixth Hour

The final explicit reference to a specific hour in the Fourth Gospel occurs in John 19:14:

“Now it was the day of Preparation for the Passover; it was about the sixth hour” (ἦν δὲ παρασκευὴ τοῦ πάσχα, ὥρα ἦν ὡς ἕκτη).

Like the temporal reference in John 4:6, the expression is qualified by the particle ὥς and

²⁵ Morris, *Gospel according to John*. 258-59.

²⁶ Keener, *Gospel of John*. vol. 1, 630-33; Brown, *Gospel according to John*. vol. I, 191, 195-98.

therefore denotes an approximate rather than a precise hour. The notice appears at a climactic moment in the narrative immediately before Pilate delivers Jesus over for crucifixion.

Historically, discussion of this passage has been dominated by the apparent chronological tension between John 19:14 and Mark 15:25.²⁷ Whereas Mark states that Jesus was crucified at the third hour, John places Jesus before Pilate at approximately the sixth hour. Many interpreters have attempted to resolve this difficulty by appealing to a distinction between Jewish and Roman systems of hourly reckoning. According to this proposal, John's sixth hour would correspond to approximately 6:00 a.m., thereby allowing sufficient time for the events leading to the crucifixion described in the Synoptic tradition.

Adam Kubiś has fundamentally challenged the historical basis of this solution. Through a comprehensive examination of ancient Roman, Greek, and Jewish sources, he argues that the evidence does not support the existence of a distinct Roman system of hourly reckoning beginning at midnight. Consequently, the traditional harmonistic appeal to Roman reckoning can no longer be accepted without substantial qualification. Kubiś's critique has redirected scholarly attention away from hypothetical chronological systems and toward the literary and historical contexts of the Gospel narratives themselves.

Yet the abandonment of the Roman-reckoning hypothesis does not entirely resolve the exegetical difficulties posed by the text. The narrative sequence of John 18–19 continues to raise chronological questions that are independent of attempts to harmonize John with Mark. Following Peter's final denial, marked by the crowing of the rooster (18:27), Jesus is brought before Pilate *πρωῖ* ("early in the morning"; 18:28).²⁸ The term naturally suggests the early hours of the day and establishes a temporal framework for the ensuing trial narrative.

The proceedings then unfold through a series of interrogations, accusations, and judicial exchanges before culminating in Pilate's final judgment (19:14–16). The combined force of the rooster's crow (18:27), the temporal marker *πρωῖ* (18:28), and the rapid sequence of judicial events continues to raise important chronological questions regarding the interpretation of the "sixth hour" in John 19:14. Although Kubiś has persuasively challenged the historical basis for a distinct Roman system of hourly reckoning, these narrative features remain significant and invite further examination of the literary and chronological function of the temporal notice within the Passion narrative.

The narrative sequence itself invites further reflection. Following the reference to *πρωῖ* (18:28), the Passion narrative proceeds rapidly through a series of judicial encounters before reaching Pilate's final judgment at "about the sixth hour" (19:14). Whether this sequence should be read as a precise chronological account is uncertain. Ancient narrative frequently compresses temporal progression for literary purposes, and the Fourth Gospel appears to subordinate chronological precision to theological presentation. Consequently, the significance

²⁷ A. Mahoney, "A New Look at 'the Third Hour' of Mk 15:25." *CBQ* 28 (1966): 292–99.

²⁸ Brown, *Gospel according to John*. vol. II, 828, 844, 859–62; J.H. Bernard, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to St. John*. vol. I (ICC. 2 vols. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1928), 603–604, 606.

of the sixth hour lies not simply in determining the exact time of Jesus' condemnation but in understanding how the Evangelist structures the Passion narrative to reveal Jesus' identity as the fulfillment of Israel's Passover.

The theological dimensions of Johannine chronology must also be considered. Many scholars argue that the Evangelist intentionally aligns Jesus' death with Passover imagery in order to present him as the true Paschal Lamb.²⁹ From this perspective, chronological references may serve theological as well as historical functions. The sixth hour therefore should not be treated merely as a chronological datum but as an element within a carefully constructed narrative that advances the Gospel's christological and theological aims.

This theological perspective also helps explain the relationship between the sixth hour in John 19:14 and the Passover chronology. Although the slaughter of the Passover lambs in the Temple normally began later in the afternoon,³⁰ after the daily sacrifice, John does not appear to be concerned with reproducing the precise liturgical timetable. Rather, the Evangelist narratively compresses the sequence of Jesus' trial, condemnation, crucifixion, and death into the broader temporal framework of the Day of Preparation. In doing so, he invites readers to interpret the entire Passion narrative through the lens of Passover rather than through strict chronological precision. The sixth hour therefore functions less as an exact chronological marker than as part of a carefully constructed theological narrative that presents Jesus as the true Paschal Lamb whose sacrificial death fulfills the meaning of Israel's Passover.

At this point Kubiś's contribution proves most instructive. His critique rightly cautions against resolving the problem through appeals to a distinct Roman system of reckoning hours. At the same time, the rejection of Roman reckoning does not eliminate the literary and chronological questions raised by the narrative itself. The relationship between *πρῶτ'* in 18:28, the sequence of judicial proceedings, and the temporal notice of 19:14 continues to invite further investigation.

In conclusion, John 19:14 remains one of the most contested temporal references in the Fourth Gospel. Kubiś has persuasively demonstrated that the traditional Roman-reckoning solution rests on uncertain historical foundations. Nevertheless, the narrative sequence of John 18–19 continues to raise significant exegetical questions that cannot be resolved solely through historical reconstruction. Accordingly, the sixth hour must be interpreted within the broader literary, theological, and narrative strategy of the Fourth Gospel, where chronology functions as more than a simple record of time.

Conclusion

Adam Kubiś's study represents a significant turning point in Johannine scholarship. By

²⁹ Brown, *Gospel according to John*. vol. II, 882-84; Beasley-Murray, *John*. 341-42, 344-45.

³⁰ Danby, H. *The Mishnah: Translated from the Hebrew with Introduction and Brief Explanatory Notes*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), Pesahim 5.1, 141-43.

demonstrating the lack of convincing evidence for a distinct Roman system of hourly reckoning, he has fundamentally challenged one of the assumptions that shaped discussions of Johannine chronology for more than a century. His work has rightly redirected scholarly attention away from harmonistic appeals to competing chronological systems and toward a more careful evaluation of the historical evidence.

Yet the elimination of a distinct Roman system of hourly reckoning does not resolve the interpretive questions posed by the temporal notices themselves. The passages examined in this study continue to present literary, narrative, and theological problems that invite renewed investigation. John 1:39 raises questions concerning the temporal setting and significance of the disciples' first encounter with Jesus. John 4:6 presents unresolved tensions regarding the narrative setting of the Samaritan woman episode and the function of the sixth hour within the story. John 4:52 remains particularly significant because the explicit reference to “yesterday” (ἐχθές) creates a narrative problem that cannot be resolved solely through appeals to ancient methods of time reckoning. John 19:14 continues to generate debate concerning the relationship between Johannine chronology, Passion theology, and the literary shaping of Jesus' trial before Pilate.

The present study has argued that Kubiś's historical critique, while persuasive, does not fully explain the narrative function of these temporal references. Once the traditional opposition between Jewish and Roman systems of hourly reckoning is set aside, the central question becomes how these temporal notices contribute to the Evangelist's literary presentation of Jesus. The significance of Johannine time lies not merely in chronology but in the way temporal references structure narrative development, highlight key theological themes, and guide readers' interpretation of the Gospel's portrayal of Jesus.

The enduring significance of Kubiś's contribution therefore lies not in closing the discussion but in redefining its terms. Future research should move beyond the traditional debate concerning Jewish and Roman reckoning and focus more fully on the literary, theological, and communicative dimensions of Johannine temporality. In this respect, temporal references in the Fourth Gospel should be understood not merely as chronological data but as integral components of the Evangelist's narrative strategy and theological witness.

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Borrowing from Paul to Understand John: Using Barclay's *Paul and the Gift* to Probe the Circularity of Gift in the Fourth Gospel

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Abstract

In response to John Barclay's momentous *Paul and the Gift*, many are exploring how grace is defined and deployed in other scriptural texts by making use of his taxonomy of the six perfections of gift—where “perfection” speaks of a quality of grace in its purest expression. Among these perfections, the *non-circular* gift—one offered without expectation of return—is notable for how it tends to align with the more modern, Western notion of gift. By contrast, gifts in the ancient world were circular: when gifts were given, reciprocity was anticipated. Barclay observes a quality of circularity in Paul's writings related to the “obedience of faith.” This article explores a similar dynamic of circularity in John's Gospel evident in John's theme of belief (1:12; 3:16; 6:28; 11:25; 20:31). Those who encounter Jesus are repeatedly invited into a believing response which suggests a quality of circularity. This response is particularly evident in the seven *I am* sayings, where John presents seven animated portrayals of what ongoing belief looks like in metaphorical terms. For example, respondents express belief by eating Jesus, the bread of life (6:51). As this study explores all seven animated metaphors, an analogous quality of circularity materializes, which is both similar and complementary to Paul's obedience of faith.

Keywords: grace, gift, I am, circularity, Paul, John

1. Introduction

“Amazing grace! How sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see.”

The opening lyrics to John Newton’s 18th century hymn draw attention to the notion of “amazing” grace, a reassuring concept for those who perceive their need for it. Many turn to Paul’s writings to understand grace in Scripture—and for good reason!—since they are teeming with it. He opens and closes most of his letters with “grace be with you,” and grace is included in weighty theological statements like: “it is by grace you have been saved through faith.”

John Barclay’s momentous *Paul and the Gift* has provided clarity to the definition and deployment of grace throughout Paul’s writings.¹ Barclay significantly identifies a polyvalence to the notion of “grace,” which he locates within the category of “gift.” He addresses this polyvalence by establishing a taxonomy of six “perfections” of gift—where “perfection” speaks of a particular quality of grace being drawn out to an “end-of-the-line extreme.”² In other words, to perfect these six facets of grace is to denote and describe each in their ideal or true form.³

These perfections of grace include its superabundance, singularity, priority, incongruity, efficacy, and non-circularity. Superabundance refers to the scale of the gift in terms of its size and even its extravagance. Singularity focuses on the posture of the giver as one who is good and benevolent. Priority refers to the timing of the gift: it is initiated by the giver and is not based on any prior obligation. Incongruity speaks to the gift offered without taking into consideration the worth of the recipient. Efficacy references the effect of the gift; does it accomplish its goal? The sixth and final perfection is that of non-circularity, a gift which is non-reciprocal. This is the “no-strings-attached” gift which does not expect any return.⁴ Together these form the rubric by which Barclay explores how both Paul—and significantly, his interpreters—define, understand, and apply grace.⁵ In the wake of this research, many have begun to utilize Barclay’s taxonomy of gift to evaluate its presence in other texts.⁶

¹ John Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015).

² Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 4. He borrows the term “perfection” from the work of Kenneth Burke. To illustrate, 67, he likens this to how we might speak about a “perfect storm.”

³ Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 67–75.

⁴ Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 70–75.

⁵ His particular focus is how Paul deploys *grace/gift* in Galatians and Romans.

⁶ E.g., Edward Adams, et al., eds., *The New Perspective on Grace: Paul and the Gospel after Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2023); Paul Lamicela, “Grace in Place of Grace: Perfections of Grace in Old and New Covenants,” *JETS* 66.3 (2023): 421–36; Charles Nathan Ridlehoover, “Matthew and the Gift:

Adjacent and not unrelated is the notion of grace present in the Fourth Gospel.⁷ Observe how the opening stanza of Newton's hymn about "amazing grace" connects more closely with the Gospels. Being lost and found hints at the prodigal son parable in Luke 15, while the blindness and sight metaphor resonates with Jesus bringing sight to blind eyes, such as in John 9. While it is true that Paul's preferred word χάρις appears infrequently in John, when we explore the broader concept of gift, its presence is prominent. For example, the notion of gift and giving is housed in one of John's most well-known passages (3:16), "For God so loved the world that he *gave* his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him may not perish but have eternal life."⁸ This is not so different from Paul's words in Romans 6:23, where "the *gift* of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."⁹

This brief study will make use of Barclay's taxonomy to focus primarily on one perfection of "gift" as it relates to the Fourth Gospel, namely the non-circular gift. According to Barclay, the non-circular gift is one which is offered without expectation of return; it is a gift which "escapes reciprocity." Barclay's significant observation about the non-circular gift is how it tends to align better with modern notions of the "pure gift."¹⁰ This diverges significantly from gifts in the ancient world, which tended to be more circular. In other words, when gifts were given, reciprocity was anticipated, and this circularity was an important way to foster social connection and relationship between two parties. Notably, this kind of circularity seems operative in Paul's presentation of the divine gift of Christ, which Barclay deems *not* non-circular.

Closely tied to this discussion about circularity is another perfection of gift which will also be relevant to address at the outset. Barclay observes that for Paul, a significant perfection of grace throughout Galatians and Romans is the *incongruity* of the gift of Christ. Christ is consistently portrayed as the gift offered to those who are unworthy. The notion of circularity enters the conversation when Barclay observes how the *incongruous* gift of Christ *does* expect something in return. He states, "Paul perfects the incongruity of the gift (given to the unworthy) but he does *not* perfect its non-circularity (expecting nothing in return)."¹¹ Barclay thus calls it an "incongruous gift that is strongly obliging."¹² This quality of circularity, he says, is related to an "obedience of faith." This is an important finding for how it corrects Christian interpretations of Paul which sometimes speak of grace as a "free" gift, or, a gift offered without

Forgiveness and Mercy as Matthew's Expression of Grace," *CBQ* 84.4 (Oct 2023): 686–703.

⁷ This article refers interchangeably to the "Fourth Gospel" and "John" as a simple way to denote the voice of the author/speaker responsible for the Fourth Gospel narrative, and does not reflect any assertions regarding authorship.

⁸ Although note the word used here is ἔδωκεν from δίδωμι. Also, all Scripture quotations in English are from the NIV unless otherwise noted.

⁹ The word used here is χάρισμα.

¹⁰ Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 74.

¹¹ Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 500.

¹² Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 500.

expectation of return. Barclay's work reveals that for Paul, a gift can be "unconditioned" without being unconditional.¹³

Therefore, this article will identify and briefly explore a similar dynamic of gift-circularity in John. This seeks to complement Paul Trebilco's work featured in the 2023 edited volume, *The New Perspective on Grace*.¹⁴ While Trebilco focuses on gift-circularity in the Farewell Discourse,¹⁵ the following will explore a quality of circularity playing out in the seven predicated *I am* sayings in John. Throughout John's narrative, Jesus makes seven *I am* statements, each accompanied by an image (or predicate) that suggests a kind of circularity. These statements include: 1. I am the bread of life; 2. I am the light of the world; 3. I am the gate; 4. I am the good shepherd; 5. I am the resurrection and the life; 6. I am the way, the truth, and the life; and 7. I am the true vine. My assertion is that each of these sayings present a quality of circularity as it pertains to believers interacting with "the gift" of the Son. As we inspect the circularity of these *I am* sayings, particularly as they together contribute to the notion of Johannine abiding, I suggest that this resembles—and in some ways even complements—Paul's circular "obedience of faith" that Barclay identifies.¹⁶

The following will ultimately consist of an exploration of the circularity of the *I am* sayings. First, however, we will look at how Paul identifies the Christ-event as an incongruous, circular gift. This will have set us up for our exploration of John's understanding of the Christ-event in conversation with Paul's. We will do this by surveying the notion of grace and gift in John, including a survey of *χάρις* in the prologue and John's use of *δίδωμι*. This will lead us finally to the *I am* sayings, where we will observe the elements of circularity threaded through each.

2. The Pauline Incongruous, Circular Gift of the Christ Event

To set up our focus on the *I am* sayings, let's isolate a common starting point between the Pauline and Johannine articulations of gift. One of the primary findings of Barclay's study is his recognition that Paul ultimately frames the Christ-event as gift:

¹³ Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 562. A gift is unconditioned when it is "free of prior conditions regarding the recipient," but it is unconditional when it is "free of expectations that the recipient will offer some 'return.'"

¹⁴ Paul Trebilco, "Gift and Reciprocity in John's Gospel," in *The New Perspective on Grace*, ed. Edward Adams, et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2023), 142–56.

¹⁵ Trebilco, "Gift and Reciprocity," 148n27, acknowledges his essay captures only some of the relevant passages.

¹⁶ I hope to flesh this comment out in the balance of the article. It stems from an observation made by my Biola colleague M. Elizabeth Lewis Hall and is perhaps a distinctive of John's notion of grace worth exploring further. I am grateful to Liz for providing feedback on an earlier version of this research. This article is the fruit of a Biola Faculty Integration Seminar held in 2023, where a faculty cohort got to spend a week with John Barclay discussing how his insights on Paul and gift/grace interact with our own respective disciplines. I am grateful for what I learned in this time.

“Christ’s death ‘for our sins’ (e.g., 1 Cor 15:3–4) is interpreted by Paul in the language of gift (God’s gift of his Son, or Christ’s gift of himself)...Grace is discovered in an *event*, not in the general benevolence of God, and its focal expression lies not in creation nor in any other divine gift, but in the gift of Christ, which constitutes for Paul *the Gift*.”¹⁷

Moreover, this gift, Barclay observes, is “experienced and interpreted as an *incongruous* gift.”¹⁸ As stated, incongruity describes a kind of gift given “without regard to the worth of the recipient.”¹⁹ Barclay observes how Paul’s understanding of grace is borne from his special mission to the Gentiles. This “incongruous Christ-gift” was given to all, regardless of ethnicity or “Torah-based definitions of value (‘righteousness’).”²⁰ Barclay identifies this incongruity of the Christ-gift to be central to Paul’s articulation of gift.

2.1. The Circularity of the Gift of Christ in Paul

While Paul’s writings emphasize a perfection of the incongruity of the gift of Christ (the Christ-event), Barclay observes that Paul does *not* perfect its non-circularity, stating, “The gift is entirely undeserved but strongly obliging.”²¹ In other words, the gift of Christ invites response on the part of recipients, and this response is one which “bears as its ‘fruit’ obedience to God.”²² Barclay is careful to explain that this is always a responsive obedience, “aris[ing] in conjunction with faith and gratitude as the answer to a prior gift.”²³ Moreover, in the life of the believer who receives and responds to this gift, Barclay states, “Paul imagines not just an imitation of Christ, but a form of participation, such that the believers’ new life is no ordinary existence, but the product of an impossibility, the resurrection of Christ.”²⁴ As a result, believers live with new “allegiances, dispositions, emotions, and actions” which he attributes to the miraculous life of Christ.²⁵ Believers who are both dead to sin and alive to God are both

¹⁷ Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 566.

¹⁸ Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 566.

¹⁹ Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 73.

²⁰ Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 565–66. Thus, the Christ-event is “*the definitive enactment of God’s love for the unlovely*.”

²¹ Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 500, 518.

²² Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 500.

²³ Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 518.

²⁴ Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 500. Barclay goes on (501), to speak of this participation as a new mode of existence, with new allegiances, dispositions, emotions, and actions. Believers “live to God” (Rom 6:11) as “walking miracles.”

²⁵ Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 501.

“like” and “in” Christ (Rom 6:11).²⁶ Thus according to Paul, the Christ-event is the incongruous, circular gift that invites a form of participation with Christ that amounts to a responsive obedience of faith.

3. Surveying Grace and Gift in John

John, for the most part, speaks of grace and gift in distinct ways compared to Paul. For example, Paul’s preferred word for “gift,” *χάρις*, features infrequently in John, occurring only four times near the conclusion of the Prologue. John’s preferred way of representing “giving” and “gift” is through use of the root word *δίδωμι*. This is not unrelated to *χάρις*. Barclay observes Paul at times using *δίδωμι* and *χάρις* in combination with one another (e.g., Rom 12:3; 2 Cor 8:1),²⁷ demonstrating how Paul recognizes a collection of terms which denote gift.²⁸

Despite these differences, however, John’s presentation of grace and gift carries similarity with Barclay’s primary finding about Paul’s notion of gift as the Christ-event. That is, while “John’s grace” is not precisely the same as “Paul’s,” the following aims to show that comparable to Paul’s gift as the Christ-event, John’s use of *χάρις* and certain appearances of *δίδωμι* and its cognates may be similarly equated with Jesus Christ himself as gift.

3.1. *Χάρις* in John 1:14–17

Directly after John proclaims that “the Word became flesh,” he declares that “we have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of *grace* (*χάριτος*) and truth (1:14).”²⁹ Interpreters of John have long wondered if this phrase “grace and truth” connects to passages like Exodus 34:6, where the LORD passes before Moses proclaiming his steadfast love and faithfulness.³⁰ Marianne Meye Thompson points out how LXX translators

²⁶ Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 501.

²⁷ Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 578. He also mentions passages where love features alongside *δίδωμι* and *χάρις*, together highlighting “personal and emotional dimensions of the gift relationship,” including Rom 5:2–5; Gal 2:20–21; 2 Cor 8:19–24.

²⁸ Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 582, uses “gift” and “grace” interchangeably in his study, but notes that “gift” reflects but one nuance of “grace,” while “grace” is sometimes unhelpful because of how it has been “over-determined” by Christian assumptions.

²⁹ Francis Moloney, “The Use of *χάρις* in John 1:14, 16–17: A Key to the Johannine Narrative,” *Pacifica* 29.3 (2016): 275, is friendly toward Bultmann’s rendering of v. 14d as a hendiadys, although he suggests the *καί* may be read as epexegetical, translating v. 14cd as “the glory of an only Son from the Father, full of a gift that is truth.”

³⁰ Edward W. Klink, *John*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 111; Moloney, “The Use of *χάρις*,” 272–73, acknowledges this long history of interpretation and its appeal, while highlighting its difficulties and problems. He points out the lack of philological match

sometimes render this phrase as mercy and truth, mercy and righteousness, or compassion and truth. And yet John prefers “grace” (χάρις) over mercy (ἐλεος). Why? It could reflect the increasingly common use of “grace” in the early church, or it could be the result of John’s own translation of the Hebrew text.³¹ If these do connect, then in essence this suggests the Son’s coming is “the ultimate expression and source of God’s covenantal faithfulness.”³²

John continues (1:16), “Out of his fullness we have all received, *χάριν ἀντὶ χάριτος* already given.” This passage has been translated in two primary ways: either as “grace upon grace,” to suggest a heaping on of more grace, or, as “grace in place of grace,” which hints at more of an exchange of graces. While both options are plausible, the latter rendering of *ἀντὶ* is by far the most common translation represented in parallel Greek literature.³³ This might settle the matter for some, however the difficulty with this reading materializes upon arriving at the parallelism introduced in v. 17: “For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” “Grace ‘in place of’ grace already given” appears to refer to this parallelism, which places Moses into a kind of comparison with Jesus, while “the law” is correlated with “grace and truth.” Thus, one grace being given “in place of” another is sometimes read as a replacement, similar to certain readings of Paul which view the law and grace in antithetical relationship to one another.³⁴

A more probable way to understand this Johannine parallel is to view it as synthetic.³⁵ That is, as Francis Moloney indicates, there are two gifts. The law given through Moses is the first gift of grace, and the second is the grace and truth given through the revelation of God through Jesus Christ.³⁶ Moloney describes how the latter gift does not disavow the former’s value, choosing instead to understand one grace as being “perfected” by the other.³⁷ As Klink

between a passage like Exod 34:6 and John 1:14d; the LXX does not come close to John’s wording for “*χάριτος* and *ἀληθείας*.”

³¹ Marianne Meye Thompson, *John: A Commentary*, The New Testament Library Edition (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), 34.

³² Klink, *John*, 111.

³³ Ruth Edwards, “XAPIN ANTI XAPITOS (John 1.16): Grace and the Law in the Johannine Prologue,” *JSNT* 32 (1988): 3–15.

³⁴ Moloney, “The Use of *χάρις*,” 274, sees this as an imposition of a Pauline approach to *χάρις* which is foreign to John.

³⁵ Klink, *John*, 116.

³⁶ Moloney, “The Use of *χάρις*,” 276–78. God is the “author” of both gifts. One is not nullified by the other, but both express the same reality of God’s gracious gift. Moloney suggests that John is presenting one as a “sign and a shadow” of the other, borrowing this imagery from Leo the Great (*Sermon 8 on the Passion of the Lord*: PL 54.341B).

³⁷ Moloney, “The Use of *χάρις*,” 278, joins Sherri Brown, *Gift Upon Gift: Covenant Through Word in the Gospel of John* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2010), in her approach. Both are very careful with their language to avoid any hint of supersessionism, emphasizing how Jesus comes to fulfill rather than displace what came

suggests, grace is not replaced so much as it is now fully expressed in the new covenant gift of Jesus Christ, stating, “*The progression of the prologue has moved from a God who has “given” to his people to a God who has “come” to his people.*”³⁸ “Grace and truth” are thus now embodied in Jesus Christ. Notably, this last mention of *χάρις* in the Gospel is associated with the first time the name “Jesus Christ” is introduced in the Gospel, as if to say, “[f]rom this point on, ‘grace’ has no meaning outside of ‘Jesus Christ.’”³⁹

This does not seem far off from Barclay’s understanding of Paul’s rendering of “gift” as the Christ-event. John’s prologue concludes with this comment that grace and truth came through Jesus Christ, and then states, “No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.” The Fourth Gospel proceeds to unfold Jesus Christ as the revelation of God. “We have seen his glory (1:14),” is later articulated as the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus (John 17:1–5);⁴⁰ it is, in essence, the Christ-event.

Since Paul and John are emphasizing particular themes, their deployment of grace (*χάρις*) may not be identical, and yet the Prologue’s function as overture to the Gospel would suggest that Jesus being “full of grace and truth” intends to say more than “here is someone with a gracious countenance.”⁴¹ Rather, it must imply that grace and truth embody all of who Jesus is and what he has accomplished on behalf of the world (1:12).

3.2. Δίδωμι in John

John refers to “giving” and “gift” frequently, up to ninety-three times in the forms of

before, drawing also on Daniel Boyarin, “The Gospel of the Memra: Jewish Binitarianism and the Prologue to John,” *HTR* 94.3 (July 2001), 280. Both Moloney and Brown thus translate v. 16 as “grace *upon* grace” as a way of emphasizing the goodness and graciousness of God’s gifts and to avoid “lessening the importance” of the first one. Thompson, *John*, 35, affirms that John emphasizes the abundance of God’s grace found through Christ to interpret it something like “one grace after another,” or “grace abounding.”

³⁸ Klink, *John*, 116, italics his. Lamicela, “Grace in Place of Grace,” brings more precision to this question by applying Barclay’s taxonomy to conclude, 436, that the grace of the new covenant is “greater” due to its superabundance, which “grounds its new efficacy.”

³⁹ Klink, *John*, 116.

⁴⁰ John Froula, “The Glory of Jesus as the Gift of Grace in the Gospel of John,” *The Downside Review* 129 no. 457 (Oct 2011): 1–13, writes about the glorification of Jesus on the cross as the gift of grace.

⁴¹ Although we will also explore his gracious countenance or, *habitus*, near the end of this essay.

δίδωμι,⁴² παραδίδωμι,⁴³ διαδίδωμι,⁴⁴ δωρεά,⁴⁵ and δωρεάν.⁴⁶ The following highlights several of the more theologically significant places where the notion of *giving* and *gift* appears.

We have already mentioned John 3:16, where God *gives* the son to the world so that those who believe may have eternal life. Shortly following this statement John narrates that God *gives* the Spirit without measure (3:34). The Father loves the Son and is said to *give* much over to him, including life (5:26), “all things” (3:35; 13:3; 17:7), authority to enact judgment (5:22, 27), works to do (5:36; 17:4), sheep/people/disciples (6:37, 39; 10:29; 17:6, 9, 24; 18:9), requests (11:22; 16:23), commandments (12:49), another helper (14:16), authority (17:2), words (17:8), the Father’s name (17:11, 12), glory (17:22, 24), as well as the cup of suffering (18:11). The Father-Son connection is prominent throughout John, and this repeated and ongoing notion of the Father giving to the Son only bolsters this connection.⁴⁷

Jesus is also said to *give* (δίδωμι) even as early as the Prologue, as Jesus *gave* the right to become children of God to those who believe in his name (1:12). The Son of Man *gives* the food which endures to eternal life (6:27), characterized as bread (6:34, 51) and his own flesh (6:51). Jesus *gives* eternal life (10:28; 17:2), he *gives* bread to Judas (13:26), he *gives* a new commandment to love one another (13:34), he *gives* peace (14:27), he *gives* the words of God to the disciples (17:8, 14), and he has *given* his glory (17:22).

The one occurrence where δίδωμι articulates giving in noun form—as a *gift* (δωρεά)—is in John 4, when Jesus sits down at Jacob’s well and asks a Samaritan woman for a drink. The woman calls out the impropriety of this request, since, John narrates, Jews don’t associate with Samaritans. Jesus responds by telling her (4:10), “if you knew the δωρεάν of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given (ἔδωκεν) you living water.” What is this “gift of God”? Klink observes that this is a gift *from* God and yet it is a gift rooted in the “Trinitarian identity of God.” The Father gives this gift of salvation through the work of the Son, which is ultimately realized through the Spirit, the “living water” (cf. 7:37–39) welling up to eternal life (4:14).⁴⁸

It is at this point we observe closer resemblance to the Pauline incongruous Christ-event as gift, albeit wrapped in Johannine terms and conveyed through narrative rather than in didactic

⁴² To give, grant: seventy-five occurrences.

⁴³ To hand over, deliver, or betray: fifteen occurrences.

⁴⁴ To distribute or give: one occurrence.

⁴⁵ Gift: one occurrence.

⁴⁶ As a gift; freely: one occurrence.

⁴⁷ Paul Trebilco, “Gift and Reciprocity in John’s Gospel,” in *The New Perspective on Grace*, ed. Edward Adams, et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2023), 143, highlights how John presents God the Father as giver and Jesus the Son as the gift. Barclay, 4, similarly focuses on divine gift-giving whereby for Paul, Christ is the gift.

⁴⁸ Klink, *John*, 238.

form.⁴⁹ First, the water of the Spirit poured into believers depends on the death and resurrection of Jesus—the Christ-event. As Carson suggests, the gift of God consists of “the eternal life that only Jesus can bestow.”⁵⁰ Second, within the narrative this gift of living water is marked by incongruity, as Jesus offers it without regard to the woman’s ethnicity, gender, or religious affiliation.⁵¹ Thus, similar to Paul, whose articulation of grace stems from his mission to the Gentiles, John’s Jesus extends salvation and abundant life (10:9–10) to Israel and beyond, as Jesus says, “I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also” (10:16). The incongruity of the Christ-gift so prevalent in Paul’s writings is present in John: God gives his Son to the world (3:16), and within the Fourth Gospel narrative, people are invited to respond.

4. The Circularity of the Gift of Christ in John

Turning to address the circularity related to the gift of Christ in John, Trebilco observes that this gift “results in obligations and can be thought of as strongly circular. The gift calls forth a response and it is obligatory that, out of reciprocity, the recipients of God’s gift of salvation should live in a certain way.”⁵² The seven *I am* sayings are spread across John’s gospel and present a particular kind of circularity understood against the backdrop of how these sayings operate as a collection in the Johannine text. More specifically, this collection of predicated *I am* sayings must be understood in relation to the unpredicated, “absolute” *I am* sayings (e.g., 8:24; 8:28; 8:58). Catrin Williams demonstrates that many of the absolute sayings in context carry echoes of the Isaianic divine self-declaration.⁵³ So, when John’s Jesus declares, “I am,” he is understood to be identifying with God, and therefore able to bring salvation.⁵⁴ This then

⁴⁹ This was not an exhaustive study of John’s *δίδωμι* language, since this part of the discussion is primarily concerned to demonstrate how John portrays the Christ-event as gift. Our survey stopped short of its appearance in the Farewell Discourse (Chs 13–17), where there is a higher concentration of giving language, culminating especially in the high priestly prayer. In this conversation Jesus has with his disciples, he discusses this abiding life whereby the Father, Son, and the “other Paraclete” participate with believers in ongoing, reciprocal relationship of presence, which is marked by giving and sharing life together.

⁵⁰ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 218; Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 95.

⁵¹ Thompson, *John*, 99.

⁵² Trebilco, “Gift and Reciprocity,” 148. He focuses his examination on the farewell discourse, where a triangulated circularity exists between Jesus and his followers as Jesus invites them to respond by washing each other’s feet. He also observes circularity in the high priestly prayer.

⁵³ Catrin Williams, *I am He: The Interpretation of ‘Ani Hu’ in Jewish and Early Christian Literature*, WUNT 113 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), sheds important light on how the absolute sayings are connected to monotheistic declarations like Deut 32:39 and the Deutero-Isaianic texts (e.g., Isa 43:10; 46:4).

⁵⁴ See also Grant Macaskill, *Union with Christ in the New Testament*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, 259.

connects with the predicated sayings, where each saying articulates how Jesus brings salvation through an invitation for believers to participate with him “out of the fullness of his own divine fellowship.”⁵⁵

To understand how the predicated sayings function more specifically, recall how in the Prologue John presents Jesus as the Logos made flesh who came to dwell among us, *revealing* the glory of God (1:14). This revelatory role carries through the seven predicated *I am* sayings as each one presents a metaphor through which Jesus reveals his identity and salvific role.⁵⁶ Because of their metaphorical quality, the sayings feature rich, relatable imagery, made potent because of how they resonate with familiar, significant backgrounds for hearers steeped in the Scriptures and Jewish tradition.⁵⁷ In this way these statements are invested with Christological, soteriological implications.

The following will address each saying in the order they appear. Jesus says *I am* the bread of life, the light of the world, the gate, the good shepherd, the resurrection and the life, the way, the truth, and the life, and the true vine. As we take each saying in turn, we will observe how each one carries an invitational quality—a *strongly obliging* invitational quality, if you will—as Jesus summons engagement with him using the sensory, embodied language relevant to the metaphor.⁵⁸

What we will observe in each of these sayings is that those who are receptive to Jesus’s invitation—within the metaphor and/or in the surrounding narrative—are those who participate with Jesus, and in doing so these respondents demonstrate belief. And to set up these sayings, I suggest that their *belief* or participation with Jesus is the element that represents the circular quality of faith in response to the gift of Christ. Within each saying we will also observe that

⁵⁵ Jeannine Hanger, *Sensing Salvation in the Gospel of John* (Leiden: Brill, 2023), 19. This is part of a rich discussion initiated by Grant Macaskill, “Name Christology, Divine Aseity, and the I Am Sayings in the Fourth Gospel,” *J. Theol. Interpret.* 12.2 (Fall 2018): 217–41, whose discussion of the *I am* sayings suggests the need to recognize how Johannine soteriology is shaped by the ontology of the incarnation.

⁵⁶ Hanger *Sensing Salvation*, 5.

⁵⁷ Hanger, *Sensing Salvation*, 5. This imagery and symbolism has been studied with great rigor over the years. E.g., Jörg Frey, Jan G. Van Der Watt and Ruben Zimmermann, *Imagery in the Gospel of John*, WUNT 200 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006); Ruben Zimmermann, *Christologie der Bilder im Johannesevangelium: Die Christopoetik des vierten Evangeliums unter besonderer Berücksichtigung von Joh 10*, WUNT 171 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 77–87; Craig Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995); Dorothy Lee, *The Symbolic Narratives of the Fourth Gospel: The Interplay of Form and Meaning*, JSNTSup 95 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994); Christopher Skinner, “‘The Good Shepherd Lays Down His Life for the Sheep’ (John 10:11, 15, 17): Questioning the Limits of a Johannine Metaphor,” *CBQ* 80 (2018): 97–113; David Mark Ball, *‘I Am’ in John’s Gospel: Literary Function, Background, and Theological Implications* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996).

⁵⁸ I have explored the embodied, sensory elements of each of these *I am* sayings with greater depth in *Sensing Salvation*. That study was more focused on the sensate elements of the text and how these spur the imagination of both ancient and modern readers to reflect on the more tangible qualities of participation with Jesus.

the unreceptive who do not engage with Jesus are those who demonstrate unbelief. Thus, it is in the context of these animated, sensory *I am* statements where we will observe the circularity of the gift of Jesus.

4.1. I Am the Bread of Life

In the first saying Jesus asserts four times in varying forms, “I am the bread of life.”⁵⁹ Jesus makes this claim before a selection of seekers during Passover season, a day after he feeds bread and fish to a hungry crowd (6:1–15).

This miraculous feeding leaves the people wanting more of Jesus, and when Jesus discerns that they are seeking him for superficial reasons, he exhorts them not to work for food that spoils but for food that endures to eternal life (6:27). This sets up their question (6:28), “What must we do to do the works God requires?”, to which Jesus replies, “the work—[singular]—of God is this: to *believe* in the one he has sent.”⁶⁰ This is one of many Johannine references to belief, presented as the ideal response to Jesus. It corresponds to the purpose of the Gospel itself, as the Evangelist writes “so that you might *believe* that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by *believing* you may have life in his name (20:31).

When Jesus claims, “I am the bread of life,” he issues an invitation, saying “whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever *believes* in me will never be thirsty” (6:35). In this first saying, the paradigm of belief that Jesus advances pictures believers as those who eat of Jesus. As Jesus develops this metaphor—from eating bread to ingesting flesh and blood, still the action of belief is portrayed as a kind of sensory participation with Jesus. The one who eats the bread of life is a believer who is said to “abide” (μένει)—to make his home in—Jesus, as Jesus abides in him (6:56).⁶¹ Within the narrative, there are many disciples who turn back and no longer follow Jesus after these words (6:66), while the Twelve declare their continued belief, and Peter affirms, “You have the words of eternal life. We have come to *believe* and to know that you are the Holy One of God” (6:68–69).

Returning briefly to Paul’s “obedience of faith,” recall how Barclay describes this as a belief which receives and responds to the gift of Christ as a form of participation, a new life made possible by the resurrection of Christ.⁶² The Johannine response of belief within the context of

⁵⁹ Worded as Ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ ἄρτος τῆς ζωῆς in 6:35, 48; slightly differently in 6:41, 51. Lee, *Symbolic Narratives*, 132, understands John 6:1-71 in four scenes with parallel patterns. The opening scene introduces the theme of faith and the closing scene displays divided reactions of belief and unbelief.

⁶⁰ Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John: Introduction, Translation and Notes*, 2 vols. AB 29 and 29A (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc, 1966), 1:264–65, notes that Jesus here is emphasizing faith: “having faith is a work; indeed, it is the all important work of God.”

⁶¹ Bruner translates μένω as a kind of home-making in 435–36, 881.

⁶² Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 500.

this *I am* saying pictures a type of salvific participation. In this first bread of life saying, belief is pictured primarily through the sensory participation presented in the animated metaphor—the one who eats of this bread of life lives forever (6:58). Eating is believing; to eat is to respond in faith. Moreover, belief and unbelief are displayed in the broader narrative as we observe how people respond to Jesus’s words. Many disciples grumble and desert Jesus (6:60–61, 66), while the Twelve remain, with Peter affirming Jesus as the Holy One of God (6:69).

Moving now to the six remaining sayings, a similar pattern will emerge as what we have observed in the bread of life saying. Jesus makes a claim about who he is—*I am*—and then he invites response in the form of sensory participation with him. Within the animated metaphor itself, sensory participation with Jesus is how faith is expressed. It is an obedience of faith that embodies the “work” of belief Jesus invites in John 6:29. The ways that people respond to Jesus within the narrative within the context of each *I am* metaphor will also present a divided response of belief and unbelief.

4.2. I Am the Light of the World

In the second predicated saying, Jesus states, “I am the light of the world” amid the Festival of Tabernacles, in a location recalling the nightly Temple lamp-lighting ceremony (8:20).⁶³ Readers of the Fourth Gospel will pick up on the thematic light imagery, notably prominent in the Prologue (1:4–5, 7–9). Jesus’s claim resounds with Christological force. Again, there is an invitational comment accompanying the *I am* claim. Jesus states, “Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (8:12). Those who respond with belief are those who follow Jesus the light, and as a result they never in the dark. However, notice an additional implication: in order to follow Jesus, the light, one must be able to *see* him.

In the next scene Jesus again calls himself the light of the world (9:5) when he encounters a man born blind. Jesus uses the dust of the ground to create light in the man’s eyes, the man washes in the living waters of Siloam, and he comes back seeing. Jesus has given him the ability to now see and follow the light, this man now an animated, embodied portrait of belief.⁶⁴ Near the end of the scene Jesus finds him and asks (9:35), “Do you *believe* in the Son of Man?” The man declares his belief and worships Jesus (9:38).

The circularity of this interaction suggests that belief is conceived as seeing the light and then continually following the light to stay near. By this, believers never walk in darkness and are always with Jesus. By contrast, there are some within the narrative who do not believe and whom Jesus declares to be blind, unable to see the light of the world for who he is (9:40–41).

⁶³ Keener, *John*, 1:739, comments that only God or his wisdom/Torah would make this public claim for himself. The context of this feast begins in Chapter 7 and appears to extend through 10:21. See, for example, Ball, ‘*I Am*,’ 93–94.

⁶⁴ Sherri Brown, “Jesus in Word & Deed through the Ritual Activity of Tabernacles in John 7:1–10:21,” in *Johannine Christology*, ed., Stanley Porter and Andrew Pitts (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 255–56

4.3. I Am the Gate, I Am the Good Shepherd

In the very next scene Jesus shares an illustration with the Pharisees about a sheepfold that resonates with the shepherds of Israel in Ezekiel 34.⁶⁵ In describing this scene, he makes two more *I am* statements. The first, “*I am the gate*” (10:7, 9), pictures the gate as a safe, legitimate entry for sheep in and out of a sheepfold. Jesus is that way through. By comparison the thieves and robbers climb into the sheepfold another way (10:1, 8), intending to steal, kill, and destroy. Jesus says, “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full” (10:10).

Jesus then declares, “*I am the good shepherd*” (10:11, 14). He calls his own sheep by name and leads them in and out of the sheepfold through the gate. This contrasts with thieves and strangers, whose voices the sheep do not know. Sheep only recognize, listen, and follow the voice of the shepherd. As Jesus the good shepherd leads the sheep through Jesus the gate, those who enter through him will be saved, as they avoid danger, find pasture, and enjoy abundant life. The metaphor takes a Christological turn when Jesus talks about the good shepherd laying down his life for the sheep (10:11). In the wider narrative this illustration results in division: some think Jesus is demon-possessed and pick up stones to stone him (10:31), while people continue to come to him and are said to *believe* (10:42).

Notice again the invitation inherent within this animated sensory metaphor. Jesus, the shepherd, calls his sheep by name. Hearing the sound of his voice, they respond by following him. This good shepherd who lays down his life leads them in and out of the gate that saves, providing security, freedom, and abundant life. There is a circularity involved in this relationship between sheep, shepherd and gate, as sheep follow and depend on the shepherd for every provision.

4.4. I Am the Resurrection and the Life

In the fifth *I am* statement Jesus makes the claim—“*I am the resurrection and the life*”—and then he embodies this claim by calling Lazarus from the tomb.⁶⁶ Here readers may recall the words of John 5:25–29, where Jesus declares that the time is now when “the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live” (5:25).⁶⁷

Within this scene, Jesus’s claim is followed up by an invitation to respond, when he says,

⁶⁵ Skinner, “The Good Shepherd,” 101, observes that 10:1–21 is best understood as Jesus’s response to the division that took place in the previous chapter over the healing of the blind man.

⁶⁶ Andrew Lincoln, “The Lazarus Story: A Literary Perspective,” in Bauckham and Mosser, *Gospel of John*, 224.

⁶⁷ See Hanger, *Sensing Salvation*, 127, for a more detailed presentation of the texts which contribute to this moment when Lazarus hears the voice of Jesus, the son of God and shepherd, and emerges out of the tomb to life (John 5:25, 28, 29; 11:43–44; 10:3, 4, 10).

“The one who *believes* in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by *believing* in me will never die.” And then he asks Martha, “Do you *believe* this?” (11:25–26). Martha responds with a robust declaration of faith, saying (11:27), “Yes, Lord, I *believe* that you are the Messiah, the Son of God.” When Jesus tells bystanders to take away the stone, Martha protests, highlighting the permanence of Lazarus’s condition (11:39): “But Lord, by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days.” Jesus reminds Martha, “Didn’t I tell you that if you *believe*, you will see the glory of God?”

Notice the multi-sensory quality of Jesus’s *I am* claim playing out in the narrative. The stone is rolled away, and then Jesus prays, all presumably while the stench of death emanates from the tomb. Then Jesus calls in a *loud voice*, “Lazarus, come out!” The dead man, Lazarus, *hears* the voice of the Son of God, and comes out of the tomb (cf. John 5:25). Much like sheep who hear the voice of the good shepherd call them by name and follow the sound through the gate, Lazarus is awakened from death by the voice of Jesus and rises to cross the threshold of the tomb into the bright of day. The sights, sounds, and smells of this moment punctuate Jesus’s claim to be the resurrection and the life. Many respond to this event with belief (11:45), while John reports that others go and tell the Pharisees about what happened. As the religious leaders confer, they reason, “If we let him go on like this, everyone will *believe* in him” (11:48). This prompts them to plot Jesus’s arrest and death.

Within the scene where Jesus utters this fifth *I am* statement, the invitation is for respondents to believe, and it is by believing that they see the glory of God (11:40). Lazarus hears Jesus’ voice and emerges from the tomb (11:44). Martha, Mary, and the bystanders see their beloved Lazarus alive again. Like the previous four statements, the circularity of this *I am* claim plays out through the belief of those who witness Jesus’s actions (11:45).

4.5. I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life

The sixth and seventh *I am* sayings are located within the Farewell Discourse (John 13–17),⁶⁸ when Jesus’s death is imminent and narrative time has decelerated. Jesus has gathered his disciples to give them final encouragement and instructions.

After washing his disciples’ feet and exhorting them to love one another in the same way, Jesus begins to discuss his departure, which the disciples find troubling. Jesus encourages their belief and goes on to describe the many-roomed home (*μονή*) he is preparing for them (14:1–3). This home is where the disciples will eternally abide with God in his household, but how will they get there? Jesus explains, “*I am* the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (14:6). By this Jesus is referring to his death, resurrection, and

⁶⁸ The exact boundaries and structure of the Farewell Discourse are debated. Perhaps the formal discourse spans 13:31–16:33, although 13:1–30 describes the foot washing occurring in the same setting, and the high priestly prayer (17:1–26) concludes the scene.

ascension,⁶⁹ which sets in place this forever-home with Jesus, stating, “On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you” (14:20).

There is a circularity in Jesus’s invitation to traverse along a path—Jesus is “the way”—which pictures him both as the route and the destination. Disciples walk along this path to the Father by belief in Jesus, this eternal abidance fostered by the Spirit who empowers them to express humble love and obedience to his commands.⁷⁰ Uniquely within this scene there is no divided response, since the only one who exhibits unbelief, Judas, has already departed the meal (13:30).

4.6. I Am the True Vine

This seventh, final *I am* saying is also embedded within Jesus’s farewell instructions. Jesus introduces a metaphorical picture that resonates with notions of Israel as a vine,⁷¹ as Jesus says, “I am the *true* vine,” while his Father is the gardener, and believers are the branches who abide in the vine (15:1, 5). This abiding relationship between vine and branches is reciprocal—they are said to mutually abide in one another, and yet the vine is critical for the branches’ flourishing. This abiding connection presents a more static picture of circularity, as branches simply stay where they are, fused to the vine. Branches and vine maintain a fixed posture of presence together.

Circularity is further animated when the vine-branch metaphorical connection takes on more human characteristics.⁷² Jesus focuses on the implications for his disciples by inviting them to abide directly in him and his love (15:7, 9). His words living in them will produce answered prayer (15:7), and fruit-bearing will bring glory to the Father (15:8). Obedience to his commands demonstrates their abidance in Jesus’s love (15:10). This, Jesus says, is what friendship looks like (15:14).

This final *I am* saying with branches and vine abiding together presents the high point of John’s abiding language. Μένω appeared significantly in the first bread of life saying to describe Jesus’s relationship with those who express belief by “eating” bread for nourishment. The picture has culminated in branches depending on the vine for life. Abiding in the vine pictures a reciprocal union that suggests ongoing presence with one another, described as a friendship and marked by obedience and sacrificial love.⁷³

⁶⁹ Klink, *John*, 616; Carson, *John*, 489.

⁷⁰ There is much more that could be said about the introduction of the other Paraclete, but for the purposes of this study we remain focused on believers’ circular response to the gift of Jesus.

⁷¹ Keener, *John*, 2:991–94. Psalm 80:8–16; Isa 5:1–7; 27:2–6; Jer 2:21; Ezek 15:1–8, etc.

⁷² Hanger, *Sensing Salvation*, 169.

⁷³ Hanger, *Sensing Salvation*, 173.

5. Conclusions

As Barclay observes about the notion of gift-circularity in the ancient world, when gifts were given, reciprocity was anticipated, and this circularity was an important way to foster social connection and relationship between two parties. Similar to the gift displayed throughout Paul's writings (where the gift is the Christ-event), Jesus is the gift in the Johannine narrative, and people are repeatedly invited to respond to him with belief.⁷⁴ Within the context of the *I am* sayings, John displays seven animated portrayals of what this ongoing belief looks like. Each presents a circular response of belief, a participatory action that fosters connection and relationship. To believe is to eat the bread of life, to see and follow the light of the world, to listen and walk through the gate as one hears the voice of the shepherd calling from death to life. To believe is to walk the path of Jesus, the way, and to abide in Jesus, the true vine. Together these create a picture of life-giving, reciprocal, interaction with Jesus, the Father, and the other Paraclete. The reciprocity inherent in these animated metaphors suggests a kind of circularity similar to Paul's obedience of faith, since Barclay also identifies a kind of participation operative in a believer's new life, one which is Spirit-filled and Spirit-empowered (Romans 8:10–11).⁷⁵

Perhaps the main difference between Pauline and Johannine circularity lies in how they choose to describe this "obedience of faith" in response to the divine gift of Christ. As Barclay observes, Paul emphasizes the need for believers to consider themselves dead to sin and alive to God (Rom 6:10). The power of the miraculous resurrection life of Christ is so magnificent and extrinsic to believers that their new life is "no ordinary existence," presenting themselves "as those alive from the dead" (Rom 6:13), and all because of Christ.⁷⁶

John similarly presents Jesus as the resurrection and the life through the raising of Lazarus, and later as one who himself is raised from the dead.⁷⁷ Aside from this, the *I am* sayings say less about considering oneself dead to sin and alive to God, and they do more to present animated pictures of flourishing life. And yet this is a life that is only possible for those who respond to the gift of Christ with belief. Such believers are pictured as alive and flourishing through these metaphorical depictions of union with Jesus. Ultimately John has laid out a *believing life*, where believers make their home with Jesus, and he with them.

In the final analysis, I suggest that the Fourth Gospel's emphasis on the abiding, believing life serves as a complement to Paul's circular "obedience of faith," with its own distinct display of a relational, dynamic quality of circularity. According to Paul, believers live a new life united with Christ in his death and resurrection (Rom 6:4–5), while John reminds us that believers

⁷⁴ John 1:12; 3:16; 6:28; 11:25; 20:31.

⁷⁵ Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 500–501.

⁷⁶ Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 500–501.

⁷⁷ The bread of life saying may also gesture toward death and life through the eating and drinking of Christ's flesh and blood.

have life in His name, abiding together in a loving household with Jesus.

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The Theological Implications of Seeing Jesus in the Gospel of John: Partakers of the Divine Life

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Abstract

In the Gospel of John, “seeing Jesus” appears as a crucial theme (e.g., John 1:14, 18, 34; 2:23; 6:46; 8:19; 9:1–7, 33; 13:12–15; 14:9–10; 20:29). This study examines the meaning of seeing Jesus within the framework of theosis, a theology of the early church fathers that has been the subject of discussion in recent New Testament scholarship. While Johannine themes such as mission, incarnation, sacrament, and sonship have been connected to the concept of theosis, the theme of seeing Jesus has not been explored according to the significance of theosis. In John’s Gospel, seeing is not merely limited to the act of physical sight. Rather, it involves perceiving God revealed in Jesus, which yields knowledge of God. Moreover, this knowledge becomes believers’ participation in the life of God, who shares his life with us. The dynamics of this participation are rooted in the relationship between God and Jesus. Jesus sees God as the giver of life, and by acting according to what he sees, Jesus participates in the life-giving works of God, thereby embodying theosis (e.g., John 5:26; 9:7; 10:38; 14:11). Likewise, believers behold the divine life revealed in Jesus and become partakers of the divine life. In particular, Jesus’s washing of the disciples’ feet in John 13 serves as a quintessential model of “seeing-knowledge-participation” structure. By seeing Jesus’s washing of their feet, the disciples come to live out the life of love and service after the pattern of Jesus’s life, thereby becoming partakers of Jesus’s life-giving work (John 13:12–14).

Keywords: seeing, knowledge, participation, oneness, theosis

1. Introduction

Recently, the theology of the Gospel of John in conjunction with *theosis* (θέωσις)—a theological concept developed in the early church fathers—has been the subject of discussion. New Testament Scholars, for instance, have examined several key Johannine themes, such as the incarnation of the word becoming flesh (John 1:14), divine sonship (John 1:12), the sacrament of participating in the bread of life (John 6:51–57), and mission (i.e. being sent by God), in connection with theosis.¹ This study investigates how “seeing Jesus”—a vital theme in the Gospel of John that has nonetheless been overlooked in relation to theosis—can be illuminated within this framework. The Gospel of John shows a profound interest in who Jesus is, depicting his identity throughout the narrative (e.g., John 6:48; 8:12; 10:7–9; 11:25). In John, Jesus is especially presented as the one who reveals God. Thus, seeing Jesus is directly linked to seeing God (e.g., John 14:9).

This study aims to demonstrate that seeing Jesus forms knowledge of God, and when this knowledge is understood in terms of theosis, it becomes our participation in the life of God that goes beyond a mere informational level. To carry out this research, this study will first examine the dynamics of the relationship between God and human beings in the Old and New Testaments and then analyze how the early Christian patristic tradition understood the God-human relationship in connection with theosis. Next, it will introduce previous research on theosis in the Gospel of John. Based on these observations, this study will explore the implications of seeing Jesus in the Gospel of John within the framework of theosis. Through this exploration, this study proposes that the knowledge of God formed by seeing Jesus can be semantically connected to theosis, which entails participating in the life of God, who shares his life with us.

2. The Notion of Theosis in the Biblical and Christian Patristic Traditions

Before we examine the Johannine theology in conjunction with theosis, it is worth exploring the notion of theosis in the biblical and Christian patristic traditions. In the early Christian patristic tradition, theosis has been understood as human participation in the character and power of God. Although the explicit vocabulary of theosis does not appear in the biblical texts, the motif of human beings participating in the divine nature and attributes is already present

¹ Stephen J. Davis, “The Copto-Arabic Tradition of Theosis: A Eucharistic Reading of John 6:51–57 in Būlus al-Būshī’s Treatise *On the Incarnation*,” in *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions*, ed. Michael J. Christensen and Jeffrey A. Wittung (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 163–174; Stephen Finlan, “Deification in Jesus’ Teaching,” in *Theosis: Deification in Christian Theology*, vol. 2, Princeton Theological Monograph Series 156, ed. Vladimir Kharlamov (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011), 21; Andrew J. Byers, *Ecclesiology and Theosis in the Gospel of John*, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 166 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Michael J. Gorman, *Abide and Go: Missional Theosis in the Gospel of John* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2018).

throughout the Old and New Testaments. For instance, God creates human beings in the image of God (Gen 1:27). Being created in the divine image indicates that human beings originate from God, with the result that human beings exist are called to commune with God, partaking in God's life.

A specific case that illuminates this relationship between God and human beings in the Old Testament is Jacob's wrestling match with a divine figure. When Jacob wrestles with God at the river Jabbok, he receives the name Israel. Here, the meaning of Jacob's newly bestowed name, Israel, is generally translated as "you have striven with God and with humans and have prevailed" (Gen 32:28).² Jennie Grillo and Caitlin Joy Hubler suggest that if this passage is understood as "a poetic couplet instead of prose," and if the Semitic meaning of the verbal root *s-r-h* ("to strive," or "to rule") is taken into account, the clause can also be translated as follows: "Because you are like God, you will prevail over humans."³ More importantly, the river Jabbok, where Jacob wrestled with God, marks the territorial boundary secured during the Israelites' first military victory during the wilderness wanderings (Num 21:24).⁴ It represents the very boundary the Israelites would later have to cross to claim the promised land. Within this context, Jacob's wrestling match with God can be understood as an experience wherein Jacob transcends the boundary—that is, an experience of transcending limitations, thereby participating in the power of God. Elsewhere in the Old Testament, there is a scene where Moses' face shines after speaking with God, causing the people to fear approaching him (Exod 34:29–30). Moreover, in Israel's history, kings are referred to as the "son of God" at specific moments, such as their coronation (cf. Ps 2:7). The Davidic dynasty and house are called not merely an individual's dynasty and house, but the kingdom and house of God (2 Sam 7:16; 1 Chron 17:14). The interconnectedness between David and God is also confirmed when the Israelites bow down before both Yahweh and king David (1 Chron 29:20). Rather than deifying David, this indicates that he is respected as one who participates in God's authority and power, thereby acting as God's representative before the people of Israel. Not only the kings but also the people of Israel are depicted as intimately connected to God. God declares to the people of Israel, "One who touches you touches the apple of my eye" (Zech 2:8). This connection is further illustrated as Israel is described as participating in God's holy character: "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy" (Lev 19:2). Just as God is holy, so the people of Israel are called to participate in that holiness.

In the New Testament, a representative expression is found in the phrase "partakers (κοινωνοί) of the divine nature" (2 Pet 1:4).⁵ Here, "divine nature" (θείας φύσεως) can be interpreted as the divine essence or the divine character. In the context of 2 Peter 1, those who participate in the divine nature do not lose their distinct human identity to be absorbed into

² All the Old Testament translations are adapted from NRSV.

³ Jennie Grillo and Caitlin Joy Hubler, "The Hebrew Bible/Old Testament," in *The Oxford Handbook of Deification*, ed. Paul L. Gavriluk, Andrew Hofer O. P., and Matthew Levering (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), 40.

⁴ Grillo and Hubler, "The Hebrew Bible/Old Testament," 39.

⁵ Unless noted otherwise, translations from Greek are my translations.

God. In this regard, when we think of theosis, there is no ontological fusion between God and human beings. Believers are rather called to escape the corruption of the world and participate in God's holy character. That is, the phrase partakers of the divine nature refers to those who manifest and project God's holy character through their lives. In the Gospel of John, within the context where Jesus expresses his identity as the Son of God, he quotes Psalm 82:6, stating, "I said, you are gods (θεοί)" and refers to those to whom the word of God comes as "gods" (John 10:34–35). Additionally, in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus teaches his disciples to "be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt 5:48). In context, participating in the perfection of the heavenly Father is realized through a life of loving and forgiving one's enemies (Matt 5:43–47). Moreover, just as Jesus casts out demons and performs healings by the power of the Holy Spirit (e.g., Matt 12:28), so his disciples also cast out demons and exercise healing in the name of Jesus (e.g., Matt 10:1; Acts 3:6–8; 16:16–18). The continuity between Jesus and his disciples demonstrates that the disciples become partakers of Jesus's power.

The church fathers articulated the dynamics of the divine-human relationship already rooted and expressed in the Old and New Testaments by using the term theosis.⁶ According to Athanasius, for instance, the incarnation in which God takes on human flesh serves as the ground for human theosis (De Inc. 54). The church fathers reworked the notion of theosis from Greek philosophy to understand the purpose and transformation of human life brought about by the incarnation of Jesus.⁷ In the Christian patristic tradition, the concept of *participation* was recognized as uniquely vital to understanding theosis.⁸ While the concept of participation in Greek philosophy was understood as sharing in the attributes of the divine, the church fathers applied this participatory language to understand the incarnation of Jesus, the Eucharist, and the relationship between God and human beings.⁹ As we have seen, the expression "partakers (κοινωνοί) of the divine nature" (2 Pet 1:4) shows an example of the participatory dynamic between God and human beings. For the church fathers, the notion of theosis, embedded with this meaning of participation, provides an interpretive framework for understanding the scriptural theme of human participation in the divine nature. In line with this view, this study defines theosis as follows: *theosis is our transformative participation in the life-giving works of God, who shares his life with us.*

3. Previous Research on Theosis in the Gospel of John

⁶ Kangil Kim, "Theosis and Stephen's Prayer of Forgiveness in Acts 7:59–60," *Korean New Testament Studies* 31 (2024): 40.

⁷ Heleen E. Zorgdrager, "On the Fullness of Salvation: Tracking theosis in Reformed Theology," *Journal of Reformed Theology* 8 (2014): 363, 368.

⁸ See Grant Macaskill, *Union with Christ in the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 42–76.

⁹ Kim, "Theosis and Stephen's Prayer of Forgiveness," 40.

To date, studies on theosis in the Gospel of John have primarily centered on John 1:12–14, 10:34–35, and chapter 17. Among New Testament scholars, Stephen Finlan focuses on Jesus’s quotation of Psalm 82:6, “I said, you are gods” (John 10:34), insisting that Jesus intends the theosis of believers.¹⁰ Edith M. Humphrey draws attention to the term “sonship” in the Gospel of John, observing that sonship implies not merely one’s legal status but a genuine participation in divinity (cf. John 14:20).¹¹ Humphrey points out that when believers are referred to as “gods” (θεοί) in John 10:34, the term “gods” is used synonymously with “children.” In the Gospel of John, the children of God are those who believe in Jesus and receive him (John 1:12–13; 12:36): “Believe in the light, so that you may become children of light.” Humphrey suggests that this divine sonship can be understood through the lens of theosis in the Gospel. While Humphrey’s connection between sonship and theosis is apt, the meaning of sonship warrants a more explicit elaboration. In John, sonship entails believing in Jesus and thereby living a life that participates in God’s authority and power (John 1:12). Consequently, those who receive Jesus are granted the power (ἐξουσία) to become children of God (John 1:12–13). Believing in Jesus is inherently linked to being born again of the Holy Spirit (John 3:5–6). In the Spirit, believers see heaven opened (John 1:51), with the result that they become partakers of the kingdom of God (John 3:3). Therefore, by believing in Jesus, human beings come to live a life that participates in divine power (ἐξουσία) as children of God.

Būlus al-Būshī, a medieval Coptic Orthodox Egyptian theologian, emphasizes believers’ sacramental participation in the incarnate body of Jesus within the Johannine narrative.¹² Influenced by Athanasius and Cyril, al-Būshī lived within an Arabic-speaking culture, translating Coptic theology into Arabic and writing treatises defending Christ’s incarnation, particularly in dialogue with Muslim scholars. Grounded in John 6:51–57, where Jesus describes himself as the living bread that comes down from heaven and declares that whoever eats this bread will live forever, al-Būshī analyzes partaking in this sacrament as believers’ participation in the life-giving, divine body of Christ.¹³ He observes that participating in the divine body through the sacrament allows believers to participate in eternal life.¹⁴ Thus, al-Būshī articulates participation in divine life through the sacrament. In a similar manner, this study seeks to examine participation in divine life through seeing Jesus. Yet, this study does not attempt to force later patristic idea of theosis into Johannine theology. Rather, it proposes that the notion of theosis can be semantically useful for understanding the dynamics of the divine-human relationship already embedded within the Gospel of John.¹⁵ Through this approach, this study aims to illuminate the meaning of seeing Jesus—a crucial Johannine theme

¹⁰ Finlan, “Deification in Jesus’ Teaching,” 21.

¹¹ Edith M. Humphrey, “The Synoptics and the Johannine Literature,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Deification*, ed. Paul L. Gavrilyuk, Andrew Hofer O. P. and Matthew Levering (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), 84.

¹² Davis, “The Copto-Arabic Tradition of Theosis,” 163.

¹³ Davis, “The Copto-Arabic Tradition of Theosis,” 168.

¹⁴ Davis, “The Copto-Arabic Tradition of Theosis,” 171.

¹⁵ Byers, *Ecclesiology and Theosis in the Gospel of John*, 169.

that has nevertheless been overlooked in relation to theosis—within this participatory framework.

4. Seeing Jesus and Theosis in the Gospel of John

4.1. The Meaning of Seeing Jesus

The Gospel of John employs a diverse array of sensory language, encompassing sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch.¹⁶ Within this sensory spectrum, the scope of this study is limited to sight. Verbs of sight in John's Gospel (e.g., βλέπω, εἶδος, ἐμβλέπω, θεάομαι, θεωρέω, ὁράω) are generally employed with two distinct layers of meaning: physical sight and perception with a new cognitive awareness. Marianne Meye Thompson observes that sight in John refers not only to physical sight but also to "perception or spiritual insight."¹⁷ For instance, the expression "we saw (θεάομαι) his glory" (John 1:14) transcends the physical dimension of sight, signifying an insight that comes to see Jesus through a new perception. The term θεάομαι refers to spiritual insight again when John the Baptist testifies that he sees (θεάομαι) the Spirit descending from heaven (John 1:32). In a similar vein, Dale C. Allison Jr. points out that sight is frequently used as a metaphor for insight, meaning that it refers not to physical sight but to "spiritual and intellectual apprehension" through which we will have clear vision of who God is (Matt 5:8).¹⁸

The Johannine author records that "no one has [ever] seen God" (Θεὸν οὐδεὶς ἑώρακεν πώποτε) (John 1:18; cf. John 5:37; 1 John 3:6; 4:12; 3 John 1:11). Declaring that no human being has directly seen God, the author states that only "the one who is from God" has seen (ὁράω) the Father (John 6:46). Here, the one who is from God refers to Jesus. Jesus is depicted as the one who was with God (John 1:1–2), who came from God, and who was sent by God (John 7:29). Consequently, Jesus is the one who has seen (ὁράω) God.¹⁹ Nicodemus recognizes Jesus as "a teacher who has come from God" (John 3:2), and Jesus introduces himself in his dialogue with Nicodemus as "the one who came down from heaven" (John 3:13). Thus, Jesus is the one who has seen (ὁράω) God. In this context, the term ὁράω refers to spiritual insight or revelation that goes beyond mere physical sight. Yet, it is hard to draw the

¹⁶ For the extensive discussion on the five senses in the Gospel of John, see Dorothy Lee, "The Gospel of John and the Five Senses," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 129 (2010): 115–127.

¹⁷ Marianne Meye Thompson, "Word of God, Messiah of Israel, Savior of the World: Learning the Identity of Jesus from the Gospel of John," in *Seeking the Identity of Jesus: A Pilgrimage*, ed. Beverly R. Gaventa and Richard B. Hays (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 175.

¹⁸ Dale C. Allison Jr., *Studies in Matthew: Interpretation Past and Present* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 54–55.

¹⁹ C. S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 1:686.

strict distinction between physical sight and perception involving deeper cognitive awareness. There are other cases in John where the term ὁράω refers to physical sight: The disciples come to see (ὁράω) the resurrected Jesus (John 20:25); Jesus asks Thomas to see (ὁράω) his hands (20:27); Jesus says, “Have you believed me because you have seen (ὁράω) me?” (20:29). All of them are related to physical sight. This suggests that literary context decides whether verbs of sight in John refer to physical sight or spiritual insight.

The declaration that no one besides the one from God has seen God implies that no human has directly laid eyes on God—a point that aligns with the testimony of the Old Testament. Although Moses is said to have encountered God face-to-face (Exod 33:11; Deut 5:4), what Moses sees is not a direct face-to-face vision of God himself, but rather the manifestation of the divine glory (cf. Ezek 1:28).²⁰ Notably, the Septuagint translation of Numbers 12:8 states that God speaks “mouth to mouth” (στόμα κατὰ στόμα) instead of “face-to-face,” and records that Moses sees “the glory of the Lord” (δόξαν κυρίου) rather than the form of Yahweh. Moreover, God tells Moses, “you will not be able to see (ὁράω) my face, for no one may see me and live,” adding, “you will see (ὁράω) my back; but my face will not be seen to you” (LXX Exod 33:20, 23). Thus, it can be understood that Moses does not directly see God, but he rather partially experiences the manifestation of God’s glory. This Old Testament witness resonates with the Johannine declaration that “no one has ever seen God” (John 1:18).

4.2. Seeing Jesus and Knowledge of God

In the Gospel of John, seeing Jesus is linked to *knowledge* of God.²¹ Since Jesus makes God known (ἐξηγήομαι, John 1:18), to see Jesus is to know God. Jesus is described as seeing what the Father does and acting accordingly: “The Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise” (John 5:19). This indicates that Jesus’s ministry is inherently a revelatory ministry that makes known the works of God. Elsewhere in John, it is said that Jesus is one with God (John 10:30; 14:10; 17:21), with the result that he has the divine life, power, and glory. Since Jesus is one with God in the Gospel of John, God cannot be known apart from Jesus. Because of this “thoroughgoing character of their unity,” knowledge of God is inseparable from knowledge of Jesus.²² In response to Philip’s request, “Lord, show us the Father,” Jesus replies, “Whoever has seen (ὁράω) me has seen the Father” (John 14:8–9). Jesus also teaches his disciples, “If you know

²⁰ Marianne Meye Thompson, “Jesus: ‘The One Who Sees God,’” in *Israel’s God and Rebecca’s Children: Christology and Community in Early Judaism and Christianity. Essays in Honor of Larry W. Hurtado and Alan F. Segal*, ed. D. B. Capes, A. D. DeConick, H. K. Bond and T. A. Miller (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2007), 222.

²¹ In the Old Testament, the Hebrew term “know” (יָדַע) is used in various meanings. It is used to refer to observation (Gen 3:7; 15:13; Exod 2:4), obedience (Hos 4:1; 5:4; 8:2), or an intimate relationship (Gen 4:1, 17; 1 Sam 1:19; Ps 88:18; Jer 31:31–34; Hos 2:20).

²² Marianne Meye Thompson, *The God of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 141.

(γινώσκω) me, you will also know my Father. From now on you do know him and have seen (ὁράω) him” (John 14:7). Here, seeing and knowing are explicitly intertwined, which confirms that knowledge of God is given precisely through seeing and knowing Jesus. It will be shown that when believers see Jesus, they see Jesus’s action of love and service—that is, Jesus’s life-giving work. Since to see Jesus is to know God, seeing Jesus’s life-giving works enables believers to know that God is the God of life.

In particular, knowing expresses deep intimacy in the Gospel of John.²³ For instance, Jesus uses the metaphor of the shepherd and the sheep, stating, “I know (γινώσκω) my own and my own know me” (John 10:14). In the context of Jesus’s knowledge of his sheep, this language of knowledge is used when Jesus declares that he lays down his life to his people and thus gives them life (John 10:14–15). This knowledge is thus concerned with an intimate relationship where the shepherd (Jesus) and the sheep (his people) share life. In this sense, knowledge of God formed by seeing Jesus denotes a life-sharing intimacy. In a similar vein, Harold W. Attridge observes that in the Gospel of John, “In order to ‘see’ God through the lens of the Son, one must look at the Cross.”²⁴ At the cross, the side of Jesus is pierced, and his blood and water flow out, through which Jesus shares his life with his people.

4.3. Beholding Jesus and Participation in the Divine Life

In the Gospel of John, “oneness” or “unity” has been recognized as one of the significant theological themes.²⁵ For instance, the depiction of God as “one (εἷς) Father” (John 8:41), the phrases “one (μία) flock” and “one (εἷς) shepherd” (John 10:16), the oneness of God and Jesus (John 10:30), and the expression that “one (εἷς) man” should die for the people (John 11:50)

²³ Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 1:244. Keener points out that John never uses the Greek noun *gnosis*. But it is difficult to know whether the absence of the term indicates John’s rebuttal against the Gnosticism. According to Keener, John’s choice of using the verb “to know” instead of the noun “knowledge” seems to stem from a Semitic tendency to favor verbs over nouns. It also reveals that other early Christian writers similarly preferred using verbs rather than nouns (1:238). Keener further observes that the themes of knowledge and revelation appear in Christian texts long before the rise of gnostic influence (e.g., 1 Cor 1:21; 2:2, 4–16).

²⁴ Harold W. Attridge, *History, Theology, and Narrative Rhetoric in the Fourth Gospel* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2019), 89.

²⁵ See, for instance, Andrew J. Byers, “One Flock, One Shepherd, One God: The Oneness Motif of John’s Gospel,” in *One God, One People: Oneness and Unity in Early Christianity*, ed. Stephen C. Barton and Andrew J. Byers (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2023), 195–215; Mark L. Appold, *The Oneness Motif in the Fourth Gospel: Motif Analysis and Exegetical Probe into the Theology of John* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011); C. T. R. Hayward, “The Lord Is One: Reflections on the Theme of Unity in John’s Gospel from a Jewish Perspective,” in *Early Jewish and Christian Monotheism*, ed. L. T. Stuckenbruck and W. E. S. North (JSNTSup 263; London: T&T Clark, 2004), 138–154. The motif of oneness is in some ways connected with the theme of imitation in the Gospel of John. See Cornelis Bennema, *Mimesis in the Johannine Literature: A Study in Johannine Ethics*, The Library of New Testament Studies 498 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017).

all suggest that unity is a central theme in John's Gospel.²⁶ Although the term theosis does not explicitly appear in John, a theology of oneness is already embedded within the Gospel, and the meaning of this oneness can be semantically linked to theosis. While the theological terms such as incarnation and Trinity do not appear in New Testament texts, the realities denoted by these terms are already inherent within the texts (e.g., John 1:14; Matt 3:16–17; 28:19). Thus, interpreting New Testament texts in light of the patristic notion of theosis is not anachronistic.²⁷ A phenomenon exists first, and only later the phenomenon is conceptualized. The relational reality of the triune God—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—is already present in Scripture, and this phenomenon is subsequently conceptualized through the later term Trinity. This implies that the Johannine theology of unity through seeing Jesus can be fruitfully understood in connection with the patristic idea of theosis.

In his *Institutio Oratoria*, the Roman rhetorician Quintilian observes that in order to become like the subject one wishes to imitate, one must first behold and observe that subject (*Inst.* 10.2.27–28). This process of beholding and observing entails discernment and interpretation of the subject's actions, moving beyond a simple replication toward creative re-creation and reproduction (*Inst.* 10.2.6–9). Similarly, Cornelis Bennema observes that mimesis is “a creative, cognitive and mnemonic process that directs the believers' conduct and character” rather than mere replication.²⁸ With regard to the notion of imitation in the Greco-Roman world, Teresa Morgan points out that imitation is “more than learning to do what is done before you” and it is “a habit of mind or body” that is “established in the pupil until he [or she] is able to *behave and think independently* in the manner of his [or her] teacher.”²⁹ When seeing Jesus is understood in terms of theosis, however, it goes beyond the dimension of imitation or *mimesis* that merely brings about creative reproduction in the imitator. Rather, beholding Jesus as theosis advances toward a transformative life that manifests and expresses the life and power of Jesus within the believer's own existence. While theosis and imitation may be overlapped in some ways, theosis entails a more actualized transformation wherein believers, by participating in the divine life, live out and express the divine life rather than merely observing and copying it creatively. Satan can also imitate what God is (2 Cor 11:14). Satan's sophisticated imitation, however, is not one of theosis—that is, participation in the character and life of God. Thus, believers should not mistake Satan's sophisticated imitation for the life of God. As will be shown, Jesus manifests God's own work because God, who is in Jesus, works through Jesus (John 14:10–11). Thus, human beings reflect God's own life in Jesus, with the result that God and human beings do not act independently as envisioned in the notion of imitation in the Greco-Roman world.

²⁶ On the unity between God and Jesus, Marianne Meye Thompson observes that Jesus's “I am he” (ἐγώ εἰμι, John 8:24, 28, 58) resonates with God's “I am he” (ἐγώ εἰμι) in LXX Deut 32:39. See Thompson, *John: A Commentary*, NTL (Westminster: John Knox, 2015), 159.

²⁷ Gorman, *Abide and Go*, 18.

²⁸ Bennema, *Mimesis in the Johannine Literature*, 201.

²⁹ Teresa Morgan, *Literate Education in the Hellenistic and Roman Worlds* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 253; emphasis mine.

To comprehend how believers participate in the life-giving ministry of God through beholding Jesus, it is necessary to first examine Jesus's own theosis. As previously noted, because believers come to know who God is by looking at Jesus, Jesus's theosis serves as the blueprint for what the relationship between God and believers will be. To be sure, the God-Jesus relationship and the God-believer relationship remain distinct. Jesus is originally with God and is the incarnate word of God (John 1:1, 14). Thus, Jesus's knowledge of God is unique and stands apart from the believers' knowledge of God, which is not a direct vision of God. If we interpret Jesus's life through the lens of theosis, he can be described as a participant in the sharing of divine life. Jesus declares, "Indeed, just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so the Son gives life to whomever he wishes" (John 5:21). Inherently, the domain of life belongs solely to God in Scripture (e.g., Ps 36:9). Yet Jesus gives life to people just as the Father does (John 5:21). Jesus says that just as the Father has life in himself, so the Father has granted him to have life in himself (John 5:26). That is, because the Father's life is granted to him, Jesus becomes the possessor of and participant in the divine life. Possessing this divine life, Jesus introduces himself as the "bread of life" (John 6:35, 48) and says, "the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh" (John 6:51, 57). Jesus sees that God is the one who gives life, and by acting according to what he sees, Jesus participates in God's life-giving ministry (John 10:10, 38; 14:11). This point is further confirmed when Jesus, who possesses divine life, declares that everyone who sees him and believes in him will have eternal life, and that he will raise them up on the last day (John 6:40).

The healing of the blind man in John 9 vividly highlights the theme of sight. Jesus spreads the mud made with saliva on the blind man's eyes and commands him to wash in the pool of Siloam. The man washes his eyes in Siloam and is restored with clear sight (John 9:7). The restoration of this man's sight is not merely physical. The man comes to see who Jesus is and to witness the life-giving work of God revealed in Jesus (John 9:33): "If this person were not from God, he could do nothing." Like life, the power to heal originally belongs to God. In Exod 15:26, God introduces himself, saying, "I am the Lord, who heals you." By exercising this divine healing power over the blind man, Jesus participates in the life-giving power of God. In response to this work, the man addresses Jesus as Lord, expressing his faith ("I believe") and worshipping Jesus (John 9:35–38). The man's response is in stark contrast to the Pharisees who claim to see (βλέπω) God's work but do not believe God's work revealed in Jesus and thus are depicted as the blind (John 9:39–41). In the language of theosis, the Pharisees do not participate in the life-giving work of God by not believing Jesus.

Because Jesus sees God and hears God's will in the Gospel of John, when believers behold Jesus and hear his words, it is equivalent to beholding God and hearing God's word: "Whoever has seen (ὁράω) me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). In context, Jesus also says, "If you have known (γινώσκω) me, you will also know my Father. From now on, you know and have seen (ὁράω) him" (John 14:7). We can find that seeing and knowing are juxtaposed and thus are closely linked together. Moreover, seeing is linked to believing again in this context (John 14:10–11). Since those who see Jesus come to see the Father, they can believe that Jesus is in the Father and vice versa (John 14:10). Thus, Jesus's theosis is made possible through the mutual indwelling of God and Jesus. That is, the Father who is in Jesus works through Jesus (John 14:10). Accordingly, Jesus's works become the very manifestation of God's own work (John 14:11).

This theosis-oriented relationship between God and Jesus extends to the relationship between God and believers through Jesus.³⁰ In John, as we have seen, one way Jesus's theosis extends to believers is expressed through the mutual indwelling (μένω) of God and Jesus (John 10:38): "You may know (γινώσκω) and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father." The relationship of mutual indwelling between God and Jesus is extended to the relationship of mutual indwelling between God and believers through Jesus (John 14:20; 17:21, 23, 26).³¹ Just as God grants life to Jesus (John 5:26), so Jesus grants life to the believers (the sheep): "I came that they may have life and they may have [it] abundantly" (John 10:10). Moreover, Jesus prays that those who believe in him may all be one (εἷς) as God is in him and he is in God, "may they also be in us (ἐν ἡμῖν)" (John 17:21).

Related to this study's thesis, participation in the divine life is concretely realized through beholding Jesus, who possesses the divine life. In the scene where the disciples receive their initial call, Jesus tells them, "Come and see (ὁράω)" (John 1:39). This means they are to come to Jesus and behold the works of God revealed in him. Jesus explicitly states, "the Father who abides in me does his works" (John 14:10). Therefore, seeing Jesus leads to knowing who God is as revealed in Jesus, which subsequently leads to participating in the life-giving work of God. This dynamic shows the sequence of seeing, knowing, and participation. Granted, there are instances that do not fit neatly into this pattern. The Pharisees, for instance, see (ὁράω) Jesus and yet they do not believe him (John 6:36). In this case, seeing Jesus does not lead to believing him or knowing who he is because the Pharisees are not able to see the truth of Jesus (John 9:40–41; 12:37). In this sense, sight involving cognitive awareness and insight rather than a mere physical sight leads to knowing Jesus.

An important scene that illustrates the dynamic of "seeing–knowledge–participation" is Jesus's foot-washing in John 13. After washing the disciples' feet, Jesus asks them, "Do you know (γινώσκω) what I have done to you?" (John 13:12). In context, Jesus's question regarding the meaning of the foot-washing can be understood as an invitation for the disciples to participate in his ministry of love and service. Before this foot-washing, it is recorded that Jesus loves his disciples to the end (John 13:1). Thus, Jesus's foot-washing is the vivid demonstration of his love for his disciples. As Jesus begins to wash the disciples' feet, Peter resists Jesus's foot-washing (John 13:6–8). But Jesus tells him, "Unless I wash you, you have no share (μέρος) with me" (John 13:8). This implies that receiving Jesus's service is being a part (μέρος) of his life. Jesus's foot-washing is thus a place where Jesus shares his love and life with the disciples. Just as the disciples become a part of Jesus's life through his foot-washing, so Jesus encourages the disciples to do likewise, "So if I, your Lord and teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet" (John 13:14). Jesus adds, "For I have set you an example

³⁰ On the dynamics of this extension, see T. Evan Pollard, "The Father-Son and God-Believer Relationship according to St. John: A Brief Study of John's Use of Prepositions," in *L'Évangile de Jean, Sources, rédaction, théologie*, ed. M. de Jonge, *Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium* 44 (Gembloux: Duculot, 1977), 365–366.

³¹ With regard to the time when God, Jesus, and believers come to be one, see Markus Bockmuehl, "The Gospels on the Knowledge of God," in *A Transforming Vision: Knowing and Loving the Triune God*, ed. G. Westhaver (London: SCM, 2018), 55–56.

(ὁπόδειγμα), that you should also do as I have done to you” (John 13:15). Jesus then blesses them that if they know and do them, they are blessed (John 13:17). Thus, Jesus performs the foot-washing so that the disciples might live a life that embody his service as a model (ὁπόδειγμα). The goal of theosis is to become like the one who sets the example. As 1 John 3:2 expresses, “What we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like (ὅμοιοι) him, for we will see (ὁράω) him as he is.” Through beholding Jesus, one embodies the one who sets the example and pattern, and ultimately becomes like (ὅμοιοι) Jesus. By this principle, the disciples behold Jesus’s foot-washing and embody the love and service modeled by Jesus, thereby participating in God’s life-giving ministry. Thus, when Jesus asks the disciples, “Do you know (γινώσκω) what I have done to you?” (John 13:12), this knowledge is not merely informational data. Rather, it can be understood as one of theosis—a transformative life that sees Jesus’s action, knows (perceives) its meaning, and participates in his love and service.

This theosis is the result of believers abiding in Jesus, thereby receiving his life and power (e.g., John 14:20; 17:21–24). Believers see Jesus and come to know who God is as revealed in him. Through Jesus, who possesses the divine life, believers are empowered to participate in God’s life-sharing works. Just as Jesus gives life and participates in the Father’s life-giving works by acting according to what he has seen and heard from the Father (John 5:21, 26; 6:50–51, 57; 10:28), believers also see Jesus and embody his actions by serving others, thereby participating in God’s life-giving ministry. In the final chapter of John, Jesus comes to Peter—who had denied him—and asks him three times, “Do you love me?” commanding him, “Feed my sheep” (John 21:15–17). Jesus lays down his life for the sheep to give them life (John 10:14–15). In this light, feeding my sheep means that Peter must likewise care for and give his life to the people (the sheep) entrusted to him by the Lord. As the history of the early church narrates, Peter goes on to participate in this divine ministry, releasing the life and power of God (e.g., Acts 2:37–41; 3:6).

5. Conclusion

In alignment with recent scholarship that links New Testament studies to the patristic idea of theosis, this study examined the meaning of seeing Jesus within Johannine theology through the lens of theosis. This research demonstrated that seeing Jesus yields knowledge of God, and when this knowledge is understood within the framework of theosis, it becomes a transformative participation in the life of God, who shares his life with us.

There are three significant benefits gained from this theotic reading. First, it offers a fresh theological understanding of what it means to see Jesus in the Gospel of John. Seeing Jesus is not confined to physical vision. Rather, it entails participating in the life of love and service modeled by Jesus, which subsequently leads to participating in the life-giving ministry of God. Second, a theotic reading provides a blueprint for the truth of who we are and how we ought to live. Through a life dedicated to serving others and giving them life, Jesus manifests the life-giving works of God and provides the desirable model for humanity. We are called to exist not as those who oppress others and live solely for self-interest, but as those who reveal who God

is by sharing our life with others, following the example (ὑπόδειγμα) set by Jesus. In doing so, we become partakers of the divine life. Third, by awakening us to sense the true meaning of human existence—by realizing who we are and how we ought to live—this theotic reading finds broad, meaningful applications within Christian spirituality. Moreover, given the tendency within Korean New Testament scholarship to treat early Christian patristic thought with relatively less interest, this study's exploration of the meaning of seeing Jesus in John through the theology of theosis expands our scholarly horizons, demonstrating how New Testament studies can be fruitfully integrated with patristic thought and Christian spirituality.

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Affectivity and the Johannine Jesus

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Abstract

The Johannine Jesus can seem a majestic yet rather cold character, mostly unaffected by human emotions. But this perspective fails to do justice to the Fourth Gospel and its narrative presentation of Jesus' character. Affectivity is much more present in the Gospel narrative than is sometimes conceded, running beneath Jesus' sense of his own vocation and his mission, and centred above all in his unique relationship to the Father. Building on the work of affect theory, both in terms of the ancient world in general and the sphere of Old Testament narrative, it is possible to demonstrate the affectivity of Jesus, not just in obvious places such as the raising of Lazarus in John 11, but also elsewhere in the Gospel. The greatest and deepest of these emotions is that of love which is the driving force behind Jesus' ministry and the determining factor in his passion, death and resurrection, disclosing the divine glory. Behind that love and glory is the Father's love for the world. Jesus in this Gospel expresses passionate emotion, including love, anger, distress, grief and disappointment. These are not extrinsic to his identity but express both the divinity and humanity of his presentation in the Fourth Gospel.

Keywords: emotion, affectivity, love, glory, narrative

1. Introduction

It is possible to read the character of Jesus of the Fourth Gospel as a somewhat aloof figure, displaying a detached composure throughout his ministry and rising above the events and turmoil of the narrative, particularly in his crucifixion. Jesus has even been characterised as a figure of majesty, of a kind of ‘naïve docetism’, who strides high above ordinary humanity, including in its experience and affectivity.¹ There are scenes in the Fourth Gospel which seem to support the assertion that the Johannine Jesus is somewhat apathetic, transcending the events unfolding around him: ‘While Jesus is not entirely lacking in human emotions, his emotional responses ... convey a sense of his being distant or aloof.’² This seems to stand in some contrast to the Jesus of Mark’s Gospel. Gethsemane is a good example where the Markan Jesus is initially overwhelmed by feelings of distress at his impending suffering and death, asking the Father to rescue him from his God-ordained fate (Mk 14:32-42/pars). By contrast, John’s Gospel contains no such scene immediately prior to Jesus’ arrest. Similarly, on the cross his final utterance does not express anguish and distress as we find in the Markan account (cf Mk 14:34/par.) but a sense of victory (Jn 19:30). In this view, Jesus is not necessarily viewed as a figure devoid of affectivity but rather heroically in control of his own emotions and never overwhelmed or directed by them; Jesus ‘faces death with the strength and courage of a superhero.’³ He embodies the power of reason over emotion and projects the ‘ideal masculinity’ so prized in the Greco-Roman world.⁴

Yet this kind of deduction only works by ignoring actual indications of emotion on the part of the Johannine Jesus which itself throws back questions on the supposedly ‘indifferent’ or ‘heroic’ texts in the Gospel. Sometimes these emotional indications may be explicit within the narrative; sometimes they are implied though not explicit; while at other times a narrative gap opens without explanation that can only make sense with an affective response. What happens therefore if we begin with those passages that present an affective Jesus and interpret other, ‘indifferent’ texts from that perspective? It may be that the latter are motivated by a more mysterious range of emotion that does not easily cohere with human expectations. The following discussion explores the narratives which articulate the affectivity of the Johannine Jesus in the plot of the Gospel.

¹ See Ernst Käsemann, *The Testament of Jesus: A Study of the Gospel of John in the Light of John 17* (ET; Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1966), 4–26. For the arguments against this view, cf William Loader, *Jesus in John’s Gospel: Structure and Issues in Johannine Christology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), esp. 12–15, 372–377, 386–392.

² R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (F&FNT; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 109–110.

³ Colleen M. Conway, *Behold the Man: Jesus and Greco-Roman Masculinity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 147.

⁴ Conway, *Behold the Man*, 143.

2. Emotion in the Ancient World

Study of emotions in ancient texts involves awareness of a number of factors.⁵ Affect theory has demonstrated that cultural differences need to be taken into account, avoiding the simplistic assumption that all human beings experience the same type and range of emotions across generational, ethnic, gender and cultural boundaries. Feeling and affectivity are social, shaped by culture and context. At the same time, emotions are often connected to physicality: to bodily sensations and bodily expressions (such as the face). They may be linked to different kinds of metaphorical systems and spatial metaphors, such as up and down, or vessels such as liquid containers. At the same time, drawing a sharp disjunction between reason and emotion, the cognitive and the affective, is unhelpful, since the two are closely connected and often overlap. What we believe affects how we feel and vice versa, and emotions express not only bodily sensations but also cognitive judgements; they are subject to appraisal as good or bad, positive or negative, pleasant or unpleasant, which is itself grounded in culture.⁶

In the ancient world, emotions (πάθη in Greek, though the term could be broader) were regarded in diverse ways.⁷ In some contexts they could be considered indications of a poor and unstable moral character, particularly among the philosophers. Stoicism, for example, distrusted the role of emotions in living well. For the true sage this meant being in harmony with nature and reason in the face of adversity, and in control of feelings and affectivity (αὐταρκεία).⁸ For Epicureanism — not as hostile as Stoicism to affectivity — the ideal state is that of ἀταραξία, which defines a position of equilibrium in which emotions exist and may even be commendable in some contexts — though they are always to be controlled.⁹

Other ancient writers take a different approach to the emotions. ‘Longinus’, for example (whose name and dating are uncertain), on his treatise περὶ ὕψους (‘On the Sublime’) sees feelings of awe as authentic responses to certain sublime passages in literature.¹⁰ Whereas for him, rhetoric works primarily on reason to persuade, the sublime gives rise to feelings of

⁵ Further on this, see esp. Mathieu de Bakker, Bauckje van der Berg and Jacqueline Klooster (eds.), *Emotions and Narrative in Ancient Literature and Beyond: Studies in Honor of Irene de Jong* (MSNG&LL; Leiden: Brill, 2022).

⁶ See the general discussion in David Konstan with particular reference to Aristotle (*The Emotions of the Ancient Greeks: Studies in Aristotle and Classical Literature* [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006], 8-40).

⁷ On the origin and significance of πάθη, see Konstan, *Emotions of the Ancient Greeks*, 3-5.

⁸ See Fergus J. King, *Stoicism and the Gospel of John: A Study of their Compatibility* (WUNT 629; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2025), 39-47.

⁹ Fergus J. King, *Epicureanism and the Gospel of John: A Study of their Compatibility* (WUNT 537; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020), 21-36.

¹⁰ Aristotle: *The Poetics*, ‘Longinus’: *On the Sublime*, Demetrius: *On Style* (LCL 199; Cambridge/London: Harvard University Press/William Heinemann, 1995), 119-254. See Dorothy A. Lee, ‘Emotion, Beauty and the Sublime in the Gospel of John’ *Australian Biblical Review* 71 (2023): 3-5 (1-14).

ecstasy in the reader,¹¹ the sensation of being overwhelmed: the sublime is ‘not to persuade the audience but rather to transport them out of themselves’ (οὐ ... εἰς πειθὼ ... ἀλλ’ εἰς ἔκστασιν).¹² Longinus’ study is concerned admittedly with literature and the reader’s response rather than character analysis within the text, using the tools and technique of ancient literary criticism.¹³ Yet he sees the sublime as having the potential for ethical transformation on the part of the reader or hearer, able to ‘train our minds into sympathy with what is noble (πρὸς τὰ μέγεθ) and ... impregnate them ... with lofty thoughts.’¹⁴ His work demonstrates that the attitude to affectivity is markedly diverse across the ancient world.

In the Old Testament world, affectivity is an intrinsic part of biblical narrative.¹⁵ This is true of characters whose emotions drive the plot (e.g. Jacob’s terror and Esau’s rage, Gen 27:41–45; Ruth’s devotion, Ruth 1:16–17; Hannah’s distress, 1 Sam 1:9–18; David’s lust, 2 Sam 11:2–27). But it is also true of God who shows a variety of emotions: compassion and covenant love (Isa 14:1, 49:15–16; Jer 30:18), anger (Exod 2:9–10), hatred (Ps 5:11), jealousy (Exod 20:5), grief (Jer 9:17–18) and longing (Isa 55:1–5; Hos 11:8–9).¹⁶ Such emotions can be linked to the body and bodily sensations, which is why theology sometimes argues that emotion cannot apply theologically to the divine being who is wholly spiritual and without physicality. For John C. Peckham, however, the argument is not persuasive, as God is depicted as expressing emotions in the biblical world which need not be tied literally to the body:

According to the Hebrew Bible humans were created in the image of God (Gen 1:26–27). Accordingly, it may be more accurate to say that the Hebrew Bible considers humans to be theomorphic and theopathic than to say that biblical language of God that is also used of humans is anthropomorphic ... The term theopathic itself conveys positively that God has emotions ... while qualifying these emotions as distinctly divine.¹⁷

¹¹ Further on the sublime in literature and philosophy, see Robert Doran, *The Theory of the Sublime from Longinus to Kant* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

¹² ‘On the Sublime’, 1:4.

¹³ See Dorothy A. Lee, ‘The Fourth Gospel as Ancient Literary Artifact’ in R.A. Derrenbacker Jnr, D.A. Lee & M. Porter (eds.), *The Enduring Impact of the Fourth Gospel: Interdisciplinary Studies* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock 2022), 43–61.

¹⁴ Longinus, ‘On the Sublime’, 9:1.

¹⁵ On the complexities of emotion in the Hebrew Bible, see esp. Paul A. Kruger, ‘Emotions in the Hebrew Bible: A few Observations and Challenges’ *Old Testament Essays* 28 (2015): 395–420. https://scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1010-99192015000200009&lng=en&nrm=iso&tlng=en. Accessed 16 June 2026.

¹⁶ Stephen Voorwinde identifies over 8000 references in the Hebrew Old Testament to the divine emotions which he sees as tied to the covenant (*Jesus’ Emotions in the Fourth Gospel: Human or Divine?* [LNTS; London: T&T Clark, 2005], 31–42, 271–277).

¹⁷ ‘Theopathic or Anthropopathic? A Suggested Approach to Imagery of Divine Emotion in the Hebrew Bible’

The advantage of this approach is that it allows the biblical text to speak in its own terms. Bodily language is seen as idiomatic and metaphorical rather than literal and ‘the language of divine emotionality is theopathic, without specifying by this term the precise nature and operations of divine emotion.’¹⁸

John’s understanding of emotion need not be seen as alien to attitudes and values in the ancient world. Countless examples of ancient literature in Judaism and the Greco-Roman world display a wide range of human emotional responses, both positive and negative in both the divine and human realms. Jesus’ affectivity is real in this Gospel and not to be side-lined or underrated, any more than we would the emotions of an Achilles or Athene or Antigone. Longinus’ stress on the emotional impact of key passages in literature is often based on the Homeric epics but it includes the openings words of Genesis.¹⁹ Affect theory also belongs within the wider field of Scripture study.²⁰ In this sense, John’s Gospel and its affectivity is not necessarily alien to his wider cultural context, though it can also challenge it, especially in terms of gender expectations.

3. Ministry in Galilee and Jerusalem

According to Voorwinde, the Gospel of John contains twenty-eight references to Jesus’ emotions.²¹ Voorwinde’s sub-title indicates both divine and human emotion in the Johannine Jesus, though they are difficult to distinguish: Jesus ‘fulfills divine and human functions that intersect and interrelate in intricate and highly nuanced ways. An examination of Jesus’ emotions demonstrates this observation again and again.’²² In the end, the distinction, which is porous, lies in part between an affectivity that the reader can identify with on the basis of human experience and an affectivity that may seem absent or aloof but is really the expression of a divine mission that is wider and more comprehensive than the immediate context. Jesus’ explicit emotions, however we may want to categorize them, include zeal (ζήλος), love (ἀγαπάω, ἀγαπητός, φιλέω²³), joy (χαίρω, χάρα), tears (δακρύω), anger (ἐμβριμάομαι) and distress (ταράσσω).

Perspectives in Religious Studies 42 (2015): 355 (341–355).

¹⁸ ‘Theopathic or Anthropopathic?’ 355.

¹⁹ Longinus, ‘On the Sublime’, 10.1.

²⁰ See esp. Fiona C. Black & Jennifer L. Koosed (eds.), *Reading with feeling: Affect Theory and the Bible* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2019).

²¹ *Jesus’ Emotions*, 3-4, 67-115, 299-303.

²² Voorwinde, *Jesus’ Emotions*, 267.

²³ There is no real difference between the two verbs for love in John’s Gospel. Despite attempts to differentiate them, they are used synonymously throughout the Gospel (e.g. ‘the disciple whom Jesus loved’, 19:26 and 20:2); see Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (2 vols; Peabody: Hendrickson, 2003), 2.1235–1236.

There are several indications of these emotions in the narrative of Jesus' ministry. One example is the Cleansing of the Temple, which occurs early in the Fourth Gospel (2:13-25). Though the narrator does not explicitly refer to the emotion which motivates Jesus to make the whip and clear the temple of its animals, his disciples later remember a text of Scripture: 'zeal for your house will devour me' (ζῆλος τοῦ οἴκου σου καταφάγεται με, 2:17; cf Ps 69:9/68:10 LXX, with a change of tense from past to future).²⁴ Most English translations stay with 'zeal' as it derives directly from the Greek and the verb gives the metaphorical sense of something that overtakes Jesus: eats, consumes, devours him — though the Common English Bible translates it as 'passion'.

The reference is clearly to an intense emotion, but what is it? That anger is part of it can hardly be doubted. Both the making of the whip and Jesus' words to the traders indicate wrath at their polluting of the temple. But alongside anger is love, love of 'my Father's house' (2:16b).²⁵ Love of the Father and the Father's will is, in fact, the driving force of Jesus' ministry — a divine emotion that will lead him finally to the cross, the place of shame and dishonour, which in this case 'devour' him: 'Jesus' words anticipate his suffering and death in order to build a new temple, that is, a new community with a new life to worship the Father in spirit and in truth.'²⁶ In the Samaritan narrative Jesus speaks in similar metaphorical terms of the divine will as the 'food' he desires to eat: 'my food is to do the will of the one who sent me and to accomplish his work' (4:34).²⁷ This utterance represents the same passionate zeal for his Father and for the mission he has been given. It is ardent emotion, centered on the Father, which motivates Jesus' ministry. And behind that love for the Father and for 'his own' (13:1) lies the redemptive love of the Father for the world (3:16–17). The dominant emotion here is a divine one, reflecting the affectivity of the Johannine God.

Following the conflict with the Temple authorities, the narrator comments on the people's response to Jesus. While 'many believed in his name' on the basis of the signs (ἐπίστευσαν, 2:23), Jesus does not respond in kind: he 'did not entrust himself to them' (ἐπίστευεν, 2:24a). No emotion is explicit here but the same verb suggests a sense of cautious concern: an affective reluctance to be taken in by people's enthusiasm, especially in relation to the signs. It reflects Jesus' intuitive knowledge of the human heart (2:24b). This concern will be reflected in his incredulous response to Nicodemus in the scene which follows: 'Are you the teacher of Israel and you do not know these things?' (3:10). These scenes indicate the divine capacity of the

²⁴ Jesus' emotional response to the trade business, which takes place in the Court of the Gentiles, may well be intended to make it possible for Gentiles to worship (so Jey J. Kangaraj, *John: A New Covenant Commentary* [NCCS; Eugene: Cascade Books, 2013], 23–24).

²⁵ The question of whether love is in fact an emotion is a complex and disputed one. The argument that it is the behaviour of love that counts rather than the emotion is a false dichotomy; love is a complex amalgam of fleeting and permanent emotion, behaviour, and impulse, but it still an emotion. See esp. Thomas Dixon, *The History of Emotions: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 103–126.

²⁶ Kangaraj, *John*, 24–25; also Voorwinde, *Jesus' Emotions*, 116–138.

²⁷ Kangaraj, *John*, 21.

Johannine Jesus to see into and critically discern the human heart.

The imagery of Jesus as Sophia also has a distinctly affective aspect. The metaphor is particularly powerful in John 6 where Jesus feeds the crowds with bread and fish (1:1–15), pointing to the core symbolism of Jesus as the Bread of Life/from Heaven (6:35) who feeds the hungry and thirsty with his own flesh and blood (6:53–58). Like Sophia Jesus invites the hungry to his table and feeds them; like Wisdom he is both the host and the food itself (Prov 9:1–5; Sir 24:19–21; Wisd 7:12). There is no explicit emotion stated in this imagery but it is implied in the nurture of Jesus for those he loves. It is a distinctly feminine image of a mother giving life to and feeding her hungry infant with her own body which itself implies maternal feelings of nurturing love and care (see also 4:13–14; 7:37–38; 21:12–13).²⁸ The bodily imagery confirms the location of emotion often within bodily sensations or experiences.

There are other places which suggest emotion on Jesus' part, including in lacunae in the text: gaps in the narrative that are suggestive of a response. Take, for example, the occasion when Jesus is under attack by the Jerusalem authorities following the Parable of the Sheepfold; they attempt to arrest him (10:39), after previously trying to stone him (8:50). At this point, with the hostility escalating, we find Jesus returning to the Jordan River where John the Baptist had been baptizing. The explicit reason is that Jesus is not yet ready to allow them to arrest him ('my hour/time has not yet come', 2:4b; 7:8). At the same time, it could well be that he is returning to a familiar place, the place of John's baptizing, as an oasis before the real conflict begins (10:40)?²⁹ This very human need is suggested though not made explicit by the narrator, pointing to the affectivity of Jesus at this point in the Gospel: his very human need for consolation after an experience of hostility and rejection.

4. The Tomb of Lazarus

The most explicit and best-known reference to Jesus' emotions appears in the story of the raising of Lazarus (11:1–12:11). Here as elsewhere the narrator has access to the inner life of Jesus: his emotions as well as his responses and intentions. The opening scene presents two apparent anomalies. First is his delay in responding to the sisters' appeal for his healing presence, although the relationship between his delay and Lazarus' death is unclear and unstated (11:5): 'Jesus is shown as loving the sisters equally ... Even so, there was a point when this love seems to have been deliberately and mysteriously withheld.'³⁰ The evangelist assures the reader that Jesus is not indifferent to the suffering of the sisters (11:5) and the narrative

²⁸ See Mary L. Coloe, *John* (2 vols; Wisdom Commentary. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2021), 1.161–191.

²⁹ Dorothy A. Lee, 'The Parable of the Sheepfold: A Narrative Reading of John 10' in A.D. Myers & L.S. Jodrey (eds.), *Come and Read: Interpretive Approaches to the Gospel of John* (Lanham; Fortress Academic, 2020), 92 (81–96).

³⁰ Voorwinde, *Jesus' Emotions*, 157.

seems to suggest that Lazarus is dead by the time the message reaches him.³¹ The second is Jesus' surprising declaration of joy at the prospect of going to 'awaken' Lazarus (πορεύομαι ἵνα ἐξυπνίσω αὐτόν, 11:11), another example of divine affectivity. Clearly the joy is not occasioned by his friend's death or the sisters' grief but by the harvest of faith which his revivifying action will effect (11:45).

As Jesus encounters the Judeans in company with Mary of Bethany, he responds to Mary in a different way than to Martha as she, in company with the mourners, pours out her grief and reproach at his feet (11:32-33). Jesus' emotional response to their grief turns from joy to other emotions: ἐνεβριμήσατο τῷ πνεύματι καὶ ἐτάραχεν ἑαυτόν (11:33)³² ... ἐδάκρυσεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς (11:35). These descriptions include anger and emotional turbulence, as well as grief, which express themselves somatically and visibly: 'he was angry in spirit and disturbed in himself ... Jesus wept'.³³ The anger is repeated as Jesus moves towards the tomb, giving it emphasis (ἐμβριμώμενος ἐν ἑαυτῷ, 11:38). The meaning of these emotions is puzzling and only the context can determine their significance. Most divergence of opinion centers on Jesus' anger. Is it frustration with the lack of faith of the mourners?³⁴ If so, does his anger incorporate Mary of Bethany as well as the mourners? Yet, at the banquet following the raising of Lazarus, Mary is depicted as the ideal disciple who, in stark contrast to Judas, comprehends the cost and significance of Jesus' action in raising her brother to life (12:1-8). There is no criticism of either Martha or Mary's reproach of Jesus so why should he be angry with anyone else? The alternative view is that Jesus is angry at Satan and the power of death, wreaking havoc in human life and giving rise to intense suffering. It would seem that the latter is the more likely explanation in Johannine terms.³⁵ Elsewhere Jesus describes Satan as a murderer who is utterly without truth and who is 'a liar and the father of lies' (ψεύστης ἐστὶν καὶ ὁ πατὴρ αὐτοῦ, 8:44).

If anything, Jesus' grief is more difficult to comprehend than his anger. At one level it is empathetic, a very human emotion that arises when people encounter the intense feelings of others, especially when it comes to grief, yet it also stands in some tension with Jesus' earlier sense of joy. Is there more to Jesus' grief than empathy? The reactions of the mourners to Jesus'

³¹ Keener, *Gospel of John*, 2.838–840.

³² There is a textual variation at 11:33 where some early manuscripts seem to soften the anger: 'he was disturbed in spirit as if angry (ἐταράχθη τῷ πνεύματι ὡς ἐμβριμούμενος or ἐμβριμώμενος), but it is unlikely to be original (see H.A.G. Houghton, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament UBS 6* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2025)).

³³ English translations tend to shie away from Jesus' anger here, translating the verb ἐμβριμάομαι as 'disturbed' (NRSVue, CEB), 'distressed' (NJB), 'moved' (ESV, NIV, RSV) or 'groaned' (KJV, ASV). Of the major English translations, only the REB has 'moved with indignation'. The Vulgate uses *fremo*, which means 'groan'. On 'anger' as the current meaning here, see Voorwinde, *Jesus' Emotions*, 168–173.

³⁴ See, e.g., Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John* (SP; Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1998), 330–331.

³⁵ See e.g. Voorwinde, *Jesus' Emotions*, 173–177, Andrew T. Lincoln, *The Gospel According to Saint John* (BNTC; London: Continuum, 2005), 326–327, Jean Zumstein, *L'Évangile selon Saint Jean* (CNT; 2 vols; Genève: Kabir et Fides, 2007), 376–377, and Kangaraj, *John*, 118–119.

emotions are, in characteristically Johannine style, examples of misunderstanding; therefore they are in some sense misguided. One group of mourners, for example, reproaches Jesus for his absence, drawing in the healing of the man born blind and the power of Jesus' previous signs (11:37). The other group interprets them as the expression of Jesus' grief at Lazarus' death.³⁶ These responses are ironical on the way to the tomb given what Jesus intends to do (11:11).

If Jesus' grief is more than empathy then we need to find a further explanation. One possibility is that Jesus connects the tomb of Lazarus, and his journey towards it, with his own impending death. After all, the evangelist surrounds the narration with indications of Jesus' danger in returning to Judaea (10:39; 11:16, 47–53). The parallels between the tombs of Lazarus and Jesus (the stone against the mouth of the tomb, the grave clothes and the headcloth, 11:38b, 44; 20:1, 5–7), along with the use of the verb 'troubled' which is associated with the Passion (ταράσσω, 12:27a, 13:21), suggest that, in approaching the tomb Jesus comes face-to-face with his own death and responds in a deeply human way. This is what he anticipates as he walks towards the tomb of Lazarus, his grief is caused not only by empathy over Lazarus' demise as he meets the mourners face-to-face, but also by the prospect of his own: Jesus is torn 'between love for his friend and sympathy for the bereaved, on the one hand, and an all too human shrinking from death, on the other.'³⁷ His journey to revive Lazarus becomes, in a sense, his own *via dolorosa*. The narrative of the raising of Lazarus thus depicts emotions that express both the divine and human response of the Johannine Jesus: his joy, grief and anger hold these together.

5. The Hour and Judas

In the following chapters of the Gospel, emotions are twice accredited to Jesus, once in his own words and once by the narrator. In both cases the verb ταράσσω is used which is closely tied, as we have seen, to Jesus' distress and grief near the tomb of Lazarus. The first case (12:27a) is linked to Jesus' recognition of his 'hour' with the coming of the Greeks (12:20) and the prospect of his glorification on the cross (12:28). Note that most translations add the word 'No' to Jesus' questioning of himself though it is not present in the Greek: Τί εἶπω; πᾶτερ, σῶσον με ἐκ τῆς ὥρας ταύτης; ἀλλὰ διὰ τοῦτο ἦλθον εἰς τὴν ὥραν ταύτην. ('What am I to say: "Father, save me from this hour?" But on account of this I came for this hour'). In other words, Jesus's distress causes him to ponder asking the Father to rescue him, as he does in similar though not identical wording in the Synoptic Gospels (Mk 14:35-36/pars.). Too immediate a negation — the intrusion of 'No!' — loses any possibility of a pause to give Jesus time to stay with, and perhaps even struggle with, his own emotions of dread and grief. For some,

³⁶ So Marianne Meye Thompson, *John: A Commentary* (NTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2015), 248–239.

³⁷ Brendan Byrne, *Life Abounding: A Reading of John's Gospel* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2014), 196; see also Voorwinde, *Jesus' Emotions*, 176–177.

however, this clause is only a blip in the narrative, a ‘small cloud’ across the sun.³⁸ Instead the focus moves immediately to his prayer, ‘glorify your name’, which functions equivalently to the Synoptic ‘your will be done’ (Mk 14:36c/pars.).

The other explicit expression of distress occurs immediately before the revelation of Judas as the betrayer and is directly linked to it (ἐταράχθη τῷ πνεύματι, 13:21). Jesus is deeply grieved as Judas’ betrayal draws near, particularly following the footwashing which itself expresses the cleansing union of the disciples in Jesus’ death (13:8). The narrative context makes the betrayal more poignant, because Judas has participated in the footwashing in an act of solidarity with Jesus, a poignancy reinforced by the reference to Judas’ departure into darkness (ἦν δὲ νύξ, 13:30), where he abandons and betrays the one who is ‘the light of the world’ (τὸ φῶς τοῦ κόσμου, 8:12; 9:5). The same is true of other references to Judas which usually occur in the context of the intimacy between Jesus and his disciples. Judas is not only ‘one of the Twelve’ but also has been explicitly chosen by Jesus (ἐξελεξάμην, 6:70-71).

Throughout his ministry Judas Iscariot has stood with Jesus among his closest disciples, never choosing to depart when given the choice along with the other Eleven (μὴ καὶ ὑμεῖς θέλετε ὑπάγειν; 6:67), and despite his at times disapproval of Jesus’ actions (12:5). Yet, as readers, we are never allowed to forget that, however close to Jesus, Judas is always the betrayer, his actions revealed through a foreknowledge that goes to the extent of naming Judas ‘a devil’ (6:70) and therefore ‘unclean’ (13:10). At the Last Supper Judas makes the final journey from light to darkness, taking his stand with the soldiers and Temple authorities who come to arrest Jesus (εἰστίκει, 18:5). Whether Judas is to blame for these actions in betraying Jesus is a larger question, and the Gospel sometimes names Scripture and therefore God as the apparent inspiration (17:12) and at other times the devil (13:2), but John also gives a very human answer to the question of what motivates him: Judas is a lover of money and his sin is that of avarice (ὅτι κλέπτῃς ἦν καὶ τὸ γλωσσόκομον ἔχων τὰ βαλλόμενα ἐβάσταζεν, 12:2).³⁹ His stealing from the common purse, incidentally, is itself an act of betrayal. Whatever his motivation in becoming a disciple of Jesus, which the Fourth Gospel never explores, his greed and covetousness outweigh his devotion and explain his actions in human terms and not just in relation to divine sovereignty.

The Johannine Jesus will again refer to the loss of Judas in his final prayer (οὐδεὶς ἐξ αὐτῶν ἀπώλετο εἰ μὴ ὁ υἱὸς τῆς ἀπωλείας, 17:12) suggesting that it is a cause of distress and grief for him since his desire, above all else, is that no-one and nothing be lost; indeed, that sense of ingathering and unity lies at the core of the divine will which Jesus enacts (10:16; 17:21). Jesus’ love for Judas and his choosing of him is finally thwarted and Jesus’ grief is apparent in his gift of the morsel: ‘Jesus’ special favor done to Judas exemplifies that the loved his own until the

³⁸ Ernst Haenchen, *John: A Commentary on the Gospel of John* (ET; 2 vols; Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 2.97.

³⁹ On the wider issue of predestination in John’s Gospel see Harold W. Attridge, ‘Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility in the Fourth Gospel’ in J. Ashton (ed.), *Revealed Wisdom: Studies in Apocalyptic in Honour of Christopher Rowland* (AJEC; Leiden: Brill: 2014), 183–199.

end'.⁴⁰ It is also apparent in his leave-taking of Judas:⁴¹ an expression of his sadness, disappointment and yet acceptance of Judas' choice (13:26-27). Notice again that emotions express themselves in physical actions: both the footwashing and the morsel expressing love and loss.

6. Glory as Affective

The three uses of the verb *ταράσσω* in John 11 to 13 add up to an intense level of distress on Jesus' part. They connect both to Lazarus and to Judas but, underlying them, is Jesus' anticipation of his own death. Do these affective expressions mean that Jesus allows reason to overpower his feelings of disappointment, revulsion and distress? That would then make him the ideal philosopher in the ancient world, at least in Stoic terms. It may be so but, on the other hand and more significantly, there is another factor at play which alters our perceptions of what is happening in the text. The language of glory and glorify is itself affective language. Glory in John's Gospel is closely allied to love and is the primary motivation in the divine self-giving even to death (3:16-17),⁴² and in Jesus' relationship with his disciples (11:5; 13:1): '*On the cross* Jesus will make the love of God known, and the glory of God will be manifested.'⁴³ Indeed, glory is the basis of the relationship between the Father and the Son, intricately interwoven with notions of unity, intimate knowledge, sending and handing over (3:34-35; 17:1-5, 20-25). It represents honour in the Johannine worldview, in contrast to the dishonour and shame of the cross in ancient understanding.⁴⁴

This focus on glory is nowhere more apparent than in Jesus' great prayer which, as C.H. Dodd has pointed out, it itself an ascent of the Son to the Father,⁴⁵ prefiguring his death on the cross (Jn 17). In the final section, the prayer reaches its climax where the tone, as well as the theme, is that of intimacy (17:20-26), expressing a vivid sense of the sublime.⁴⁶ The language

⁴⁰ Kangaraj, *John*, 140.

⁴¹ On the morsel as eucharistic, see Moloney: 'Just as baptism is a sub-theme of the footwashing, eucharist is a sub-theme to the meal and the gift of the morsel' (*John*, 384).

⁴² Further on glory in relation to the cross, see Jörg Frey, *The Glory of the Crucified One: Christology and Theology in the Gospel of John* (ET; Waco: Baylor University Press, 2018), 237–258.

⁴³ See Francis J. Moloney, *Love in the Gospel of John: An Exegetical, Theological, and Literary Study* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 87.

⁴⁴ Further on the shame of the cross, see Dorothy A. Lee, 'The Significance of the Wounds of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel' *Review & Expositor* 120 (2023). <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/00346373231196609>. Accessed 22 June 2026.

⁴⁵ C.H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), 417–420.

⁴⁶ Lee, 'Emotion, Beauty and the "Sublime"', 11–14.

here is deeply personal and familial and moves to the heart of the Johannine Jesus in his deepest longing, his identity and his mission. It employs repetition around the motif of oneness and union, and a kind of circular ‘logic’ in radically widening the divine circle of love. It includes also the foundational origin story — the Father’s love for the Son ‘before the foundation of the world’ (πρὸ καταβολῆς κόσμου, 7:24), which lies at the core of the Johannine Gospel whose purpose is to draw the world into the same circle through its recognition of the sending of the Son, visible in the communion of love.⁴⁷ It also involves affective transference — I, you, them — in which Jesus transfers the love between Father and Son to the disciples and, aspirationally, to the world: ‘The community, in its communion of love with the Godhead, is to be the locus of divine love in the world, as Jesus himself as incarnate Logos has been and will be until the end (19:30) the embodiment of the same divine love.’⁴⁸

Jesus’ deepest longing in this Gospel is thus to glorify the Father and to do his will, completing the Father’s work, as the one whom he loves above all else, and it is this driving emotion of love which eclipses his distress in the crucifixion story. On the cross his thirst indicates, not only the physical approach of death but also the overpowering desire to obey and return to his beloved Father, even if it means the cross (19:28; cf. 4:34). The cross itself is the somatic symbol of Jesus’ love and longing experienced in the body. That this desire is fully and finally achieved is apparent in his last utterance on the cross, ‘It is accomplished’ (τετέλεσται, 19:30). The love of God has been revealed to the world in all its depth: ‘for the evangelist there is nothing more fundamental than love, either as a theological or an anthropological category.’⁴⁹

7. Broader perspective

From this perspective, it is evident that Jesus’ affectivity is present in far more narrative contexts than would initially seem to be the case. Taking into account love as the catalyst for his ministry throughout the narrative, including his death and resurrection, the emotions of the Johannine Jesus, both human and divine, are a significant driving force for the plot of the Gospel. The Good Shepherd knows and names, and therefore loves, his sheep, even to the point of laying down and taking up his life again in order to bestow eternal life on them in abundance (Jn 10:1–18). This is the linguistic and metaphorical expression of love. Those places where Jesus seems ‘distant or aloof’ belong within the framework of love: not just love for human beings but, more essentially, Jesus’ love for the Father and the Father’s for the world which dictate the nature and timing of his ministry. It is this dominant emotion that overcomes others, such as grief and distress, and are demonstrated in bodily expression and action, as affect theory maintains. Jesus acts at the behest and timing of the Father rather than human beings;⁵⁰ this is

⁴⁷ Moloney, *Love in the Gospel of John*, 129–133.

⁴⁸ Byrne, *Life Abounding*, 291.

⁴⁹ Attridge, ‘Determinism,’ 199.

⁵⁰ C.K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek*

a very different kind of affectivity to what we may expect, representing divine affectivity. The divine perspective underlies Jesus' response to his mother at Cana (2:4) and other occasions when he seems aloof or indifferent. In fact, he is entirely attuned to the Father's voice and the Father's affectivity. Despite the initial sense of distance, such scenes end with the revelation of divine glory which is constituted by redemptive love (2:11; 11:40). All this suggests a distinct mysticism to the Fourth Gospel which embraces both the imagination and the emotions.⁵¹ There is a divine inscrutability and mystery to Jesus' character, which points to divine as well as human emotions that may not always or easily correspond to human experience or understanding.

The affectivity of Jesus — shared also by the Father and the Spirit-Paraclete in a warm and nurturing abiding both among and within disciples (14:16–17) — also has the capacity to challenge gendered notions of masculinity from the ancient (and modern) world. Love leads Jesus to undergo the ultimate experience of shame and dishonour on the cross. The love he expresses is neither dominating nor exclusive but sets disciples free (8:32) making them part of an ever-widening circle of love that attracts and draws others in (13:35; 17:23). Despite the androcentric language, Jesus' affectivity creates friendship in place of master-slave relations, undermining the patriarchal and exclusive ordering of relationships based on status and gender (15:14–15). His capacity to experience not only love but also grief, sorrow, suffering and friendship attests to an affectivity that can speak as much to women's experience as men's, beyond gender or other boundary markers.⁵²

8. Conclusion

What is apparent in this discussion is the importance of recognising the reality and strength of Jesus' emotions throughout the Gospel, whether human or divine. The struggle of the Johannine Jesus is not between reason and emotion but between different kinds of emotion, so that his love and longing for the Father far outweigh other affective responses. For John, the expression of Jesus' emotions has the capacity to reflect the authenticity which he embodies in this Gospel, an authenticity that encompasses the affective as well as the cognitive and which cannot be translated into simple gender categories. The phrase 'grace and truth' in the revelation of the incarnation (χάρις καὶ ἀληθεία, 1:14) perhaps best captures the sense of a truth that is closely allied to beauty, joy and delight with all they imply about the divine theopathic nature. Far from compromising his exemplary role, the emotions of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel reveal the nature of the Johannine God as the source and origin of love (cf. 1 Jn 4:7–8). They also demonstrate how it is possible for disciples to live authentically and affectively in the

Text (2nd ed.; London: SPCK, 1978), 191, 312.

⁵¹ See Gabriel-Mary Fiore, *Spirituality in John's Gospel: Historical Developments and Critical Foundations* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2023), 281–359.

⁵² On gender and God in John, see Dorothy A. Lee, 'Jesus' Spirituality of [Af]iliation in the Fourth Gospel' *Religions* 13 (2022). <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/13/7/647>. Accessed 16 June 2026.

transfiguring presence of divine and human love.

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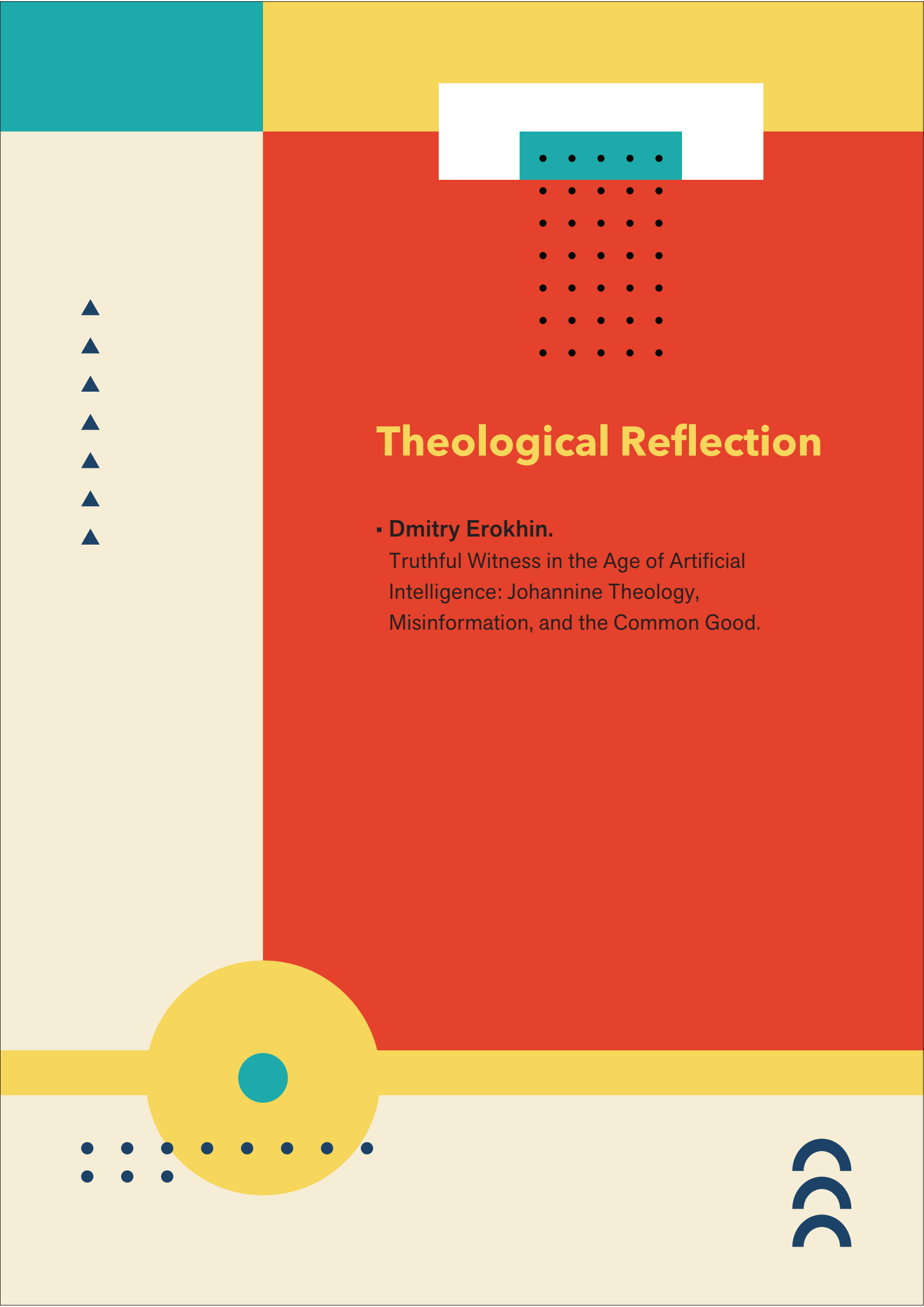
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Theological Reflection

• **Dmitry Erokhin.**

Truthful Witness in the Age of Artificial
Intelligence: Johannine Theology,
Misinformation, and the Common Good.



Truthful Witness in the Age of Artificial Intelligence: Johannine Theology, Misinformation, and the Common Good

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Abstract

The rise of generative artificial intelligence has intensified a crisis that is technological, political, and moral at once. AI systems can now produce fluent prose, realistic images, synthetic voices, and persuasive video at scale. These capacities create new possibilities for education, medicine, accessibility, communication, and public service. However, they also weaken the ordinary practices by which persons and communities test testimony, assign trust, recognize manipulation, and share a common world. Existing AI ethics frameworks rightly emphasize transparency, fairness, accountability, human oversight, privacy, safety, and dignity. These frameworks are indispensable, yet they leave open a deeper question of moral and epistemic formation of what kinds of persons, communities, and institutions become capable of truthful witness under digital conditions. This article argues that Johannine literature offers a distinctive contribution to that question. Through close engagement with the Prologue, the Gospel's testimony passages, the Farewell Discourses, the Passion narrative, and 1 John, the study shows that Johannine theology joins truth, witness, love, and life in a coherent moral framework. The article's central research question is therefore how the Johannine theology of truth, witness, love, and life can provide a morally serious and publicly intelligible framework for responding to artificial intelligence and misinformation in a pluralistic digital age. The answer developed here is that Johannine theology reframes AI ethics around truthful witness, i.e., embodied accountability in the face of synthetic media, testimonial integrity in the face of manipulated provenance, neighbor-love in the design and deployment of automated systems, and life-giving public practices in the face of technological power.

Keywords: Artificial intelligence, misinformation, deepfakes, witness, truth, Christian ethics.

1. Introduction*

Artificial intelligence increasingly shapes how societies speak, judge, remember, decide, and trust. Generative systems produce text, image, audio, and video with a speed and fluency that earlier digital media did not possess. Predictive and classificatory systems influence decisions in education, employment, credit, policing, health care, welfare, border control, journalism, and public administration. The ethical debate around AI therefore concerns more than technical reliability. It concerns the conditions under which human beings recognize one another, assign authority, test claims, and sustain shared life.

AI ethics guidelines contain recurring emphasis on transparency, justice and fairness, non-maleficence, responsibility, and privacy, while also significant disagreement about implementation¹. UNESCO places human rights, dignity, environmental sustainability, fairness, transparency, and human oversight at the center of its global AI recommendation². The OECD frames trustworthy AI in relation to human rights and democratic values³. NIST describes trustworthy AI systems through validity, reliability, safety, security, resilience, accountability, transparency, explainability, privacy enhancement, and bias management⁴. The EU AI Act gives legal expression to a risk-based framework for regulating AI in Europe⁵.

Though these frameworks are necessary, they depend on virtues, habits, and institutional cultures that regulation alone cannot create. A transparent system can still be misused by careless actors. A labeled deepfake can still inflame a community already rewarded for outrage. A formally accountable institution can communicate in ways that erode public trust. A system designed for efficiency can treat human beings as data profiles rather than persons. The digital crisis is therefore formative as well as procedural. Societies need reliable rules, and they also need people and institutions capable of truthful witness.

The Fourth Gospel places this concern at the center of its narrative world. The question “What is truth?” appears in John 18:38, when Pilate confronts Jesus during the Passion. Truth is tested inside a political drama of fear, accusation, calculation, public pressure, and imperial violence. Jesus has just said that he came into the world “to testify to the truth” and that those who belong to the truth listen to his voice (John 18:37). Truth in John is never a possession held by detached observers. It summons hearers, forms communities, exposes falsehood, and

* This article is published as a special contribution in the ‘Theological Reflection’ section.

¹ A. Jobin, M. Ienca, and E. Vayena, “The global landscape of AI ethics guidelines,” *Nature Machine Intelligence* 1/9, 2019, 389–99.

² UNESCO, *Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence* (Paris: UNESCO, 2022).

³ OECD, “OECD AI Principles overview,” *OECD.AI*, accessed 24 May 2026.

⁴ NIST, *Artificial Intelligence Risk Management Framework (AI RMF 1.0)*, NIST AI 100-1, 2023.

⁵ European Commission, “AI Act,” *Shaping Europe’s Digital Future*, last updated 11 May 2026, accessed 24 May 2026.

requires witness.

This study asks how that Johannine theology of truth can speak to AI and misinformation. The research question guiding the article is how the Johannine theology of truth, witness, love, and life can provide a morally serious and publicly intelligible framework for responding to artificial intelligence and misinformation in a pluralistic digital age. The question asks, first, what Johannine literature itself contributes through close textual engagement. It asks, second, how that contribution can be translated into public moral reasoning without treating Christian claims as coercive dogma.

2. Methodology

The study uses a close exegetical and theological reading of selected Johannine passages. The Prologue is read as the foundation for John's account of truth as embodied revelation (John 1:1–18). The Gospel's testimony passages are examined to show how truth is mediated through accountable witness (John 1:6–8; John 5:31–47; John 19:35; John 21:24). The Farewell Discourses are treated as a central site for understanding the Spirit of truth, communal memory, discernment, love, and mission (John 13–17). The study also draws on 1 John, where truth is closely joined to fellowship, confession, discernment, and concrete love (1 John 1:1–10; 1 John 3:16–18; 1 John 4:1–21).

This textual work is placed in conversation with recent Johannine ethics scholarship. For example, Koester has argued that the Gospel's themes of life, truth, and love together create a substantial ethical perspective centered on God's action in Jesus⁶. Hartog similarly identifies believing, loving, following, abiding, serving, obeying, testifying, and imitation as central features of Johannine moral thought⁷. Bennema describes the Johannine writings as a moral narrative world in which human character and conduct are transformed through participation in divine reality⁸. Andrew reads truth in John through encounter, testimony, and mediated relation to Jesus⁹.

After the exegetical analysis, the study brings Johannine theology into dialogue with contemporary discussions of AI ethics and misinformation. It asks how John's account of truthful witness can illuminate present problems such as synthetic media, algorithmic opacity, automated persuasion, deepfakes, loss of provenance, and the erosion of shared trust. In this

⁶ C. R. Koester, "Rethinking the ethics of John: A review article," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 36/1, 2013, 85–98.

⁷ P. A. Hartog, "Johannine ethics: An exegetical-theological summary and a 'desiderative' extension of mimesis," *Religions* 13/6, 2022, 503.

⁸ C. Bennema, "Moral transformation in the Johannine writings," *In die Skriflig* 51/3, 2017, 1–7.

⁹ M. Andrew, "What is truth? A Johannine theological epistemology," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 74/2, 2021, 158–67.

sense, Johannine theology provides a lens through which the moral stakes of AI become clearer.

Since these questions arise in pluralistic societies, the article also uses a mode of public moral translation. Johannine theology remains theologically rich, yet its ethical insights are expressed in terms that can be discussed beyond explicitly Christian communities including accountable communication, truthful institutions, protection of vulnerable persons, responsible use of power, discernment in receiving testimony, and commitment to the common good. This approach is informed by Rawls's account of public reason, which addresses justification amid reasonable pluralism¹⁰, and by Habermas's work on religion in the public sphere, which recognizes that religious traditions may contribute to public deliberation when their claims are opened to shared argument and translation¹¹.

The study's contribution lies in showing that the Fourth Gospel and 1 John offer more than general religious inspiration for digital ethics. They provide a serious moral framework for truthful witness in a technological culture where speech, image, authority, and trust are increasingly unstable.

3. The Prologue

The Prologue gives the Fourth Gospel its theological horizon. "In the beginning was the Word" (John 1:1) places the story of Jesus in relation to creation, divine speech, and the order of reality. All things come into being through the Word. In him is life, and that life is the light of all people (John 1:3–4). Truth in this horizon is larger than factual accuracy. It is the self-disclosure of God in the one through whom the world exists and by whom the world is illuminated.

This claim matters for digital ethics because AI systems often operate within a narrowed account of knowledge. They classify, predict, rank, generate, and optimize. These capacities can serve genuine human goods. They can also encourage societies to treat knowledge as pattern extraction and communication as content production. The Prologue offers a thicker account. Reality is gift before it becomes data. The world is intelligible because it is addressed by the Word. Speech therefore carries moral weight. It can illuminate, deceive, heal, dominate, or bear witness.

John immediately complicates any simple confidence that light will be received. The light shines in darkness, yet the world does not recognize the Word (John 1:5, 10). Revelation can be refused. Visibility does not guarantee recognition. This Johannine insight speaks directly to the digital age. More information does not automatically create wisdom. More data does not automatically produce trust. Greater visibility can even increase confusion when images, voices, and documents circulate without accountable provenance.

¹⁰ J. Rawls, "The idea of public reason revisited," *The University of Chicago Law Review* 64/3, 1997, 765–807.

¹¹ J. Habermas, "Religion in the public sphere," *European Journal of Philosophy* 14/1, 2006, 1.

The decisive claim appears in John 1:14 when the Word becomes flesh. Johannine truth is embodied. The Word enters vulnerability, location, relation, history, and human dependence. The glory seen by the witnesses is full of grace and truth. Truth arrives through a life capable of being seen, followed, loved, misunderstood, rejected, and crucified.

That incarnational pattern has direct ethical relevance for synthetic media. Generative systems can imitate the signs of embodiment through, for example, a familiar voice, a face, a gesture, an apparent memory, or a persuasive confession. They can simulate presence without personal accountability. The Prologue gives a criterion. Truth worthy of trust remains answerable to embodied reality and life-giving relation. Digital mediation is not inherently false. The Gospel itself is mediated testimony. The moral problem arises when mediation is detached from responsible authorship, truthful provenance, and the flourishing of persons.

John the Baptist's role confirms this testimonial structure. He comes as a witness to testify to the light, while he himself is not the light (John 1:6–8). Johannine witness is referential. It points away from itself toward the reality it serves. In digital culture, where attention economies reward self-display, personal branding, and confident assertion, John's witness offers a modest and demanding model. Truthful speech does not make the speaker the center. It serves the truth to which it points.

The Prologue therefore establishes three claims for the rest of the article. Truth is life-giving illumination. Truth is embodied in the Word made flesh. Truth is mediated through witness that remains accountable beyond itself. These claims provide a basis for assessing AI systems and misinformation ecosystems. Technologies that detach speech from accountable witness corrode trust. Systems that treat persons primarily as prediction targets or behavioral data obscure the relation between truth and life. Institutions that invoke transparency while shielding their own power fail the testimonial logic of Johannine light.

4. Witness and accountable testimony in the Fourth Gospel

The Fourth Gospel is saturated with the language of testimony. John the Baptist testifies (John 1:7–8). The Samaritan woman bears witness through invitation (John 4:28–30). Jesus names multiple witnesses in John 5:31–47. The Spirit testifies, and the disciples testify (John 15:26–27). The eyewitness at the cross testifies so that others may believe (John 19:35). The Gospel closes by affirming the truthfulness of the beloved disciple's testimony (John 21:24).

This repeated emphasis shows that the Gospel understands faith as mediated. Readers do not bypass testimony. They enter a world where truth comes through witnesses, signs, Scripture, memory, and communal reception. That fact is ethically significant. John does not imagine human beings as autonomous knowers who possess truth apart from relation. People learn truth through trustworthy mediation.

John 5:31–47 is especially important for digital ethics. Jesus says that self-testimony alone is inadequate (John 5:31). The passage then invokes John, Jesus' works, the Father, and the Scriptures as a layered field of witness (John 5:32–47). The truth of Jesus' identity is not presented as unsupported assertion. It is embedded in a network of testimony, interpretation,

action, and divine agency.

Synthetic media present the opposite temptation. A video appears to show what happened. A voice appears to speak. A document appears to come from a trusted institution. A chatbot appears to know. The Johannine witness pattern insists that apparent self-presentation is insufficient. Claims require accountable relation to source, context, purpose, and community. In contemporary governance language, this points toward provenance, traceability, auditability, source transparency, and institutional accountability. NIST's concern for trustworthy and accountable AI and the EU AI Act's transparency obligations for certain AI systems and AI-generated content can be read as public policy analogues to a testimonial concern that communication must remain answerable to its origin and means.

The Samaritan woman in John 4 shows another aspect of witness. Her testimony begins with invitation: "Come and see" (John 4:29). Her words do not close inquiry. They open a path for others. The townspeople later say that they have heard for themselves (John 4:42). Healthy witness therefore does not demand blind dependence. It leads hearers toward shared recognition. This is a powerful model for information environments where credible testimony helps people move from report to verification, from trust to understanding, from dependence on a witness to participation in truth.

The eyewitness claim in John 19:35 deepens this point. The witness testifies to what was seen at the crucifixion, and the reader is invited to trust mediated testimony grounded in embodied perception. The Gospel acknowledges the vulnerability of mediated knowledge while refusing despair about it. Human beings often know through witnesses. The ethical task is to protect the conditions under which witness can be worthy of trust.

Misinformation studies describe a contemporary crisis of exactly this kind. For instance, Lazer and colleagues showed how networked media can scale falsehood and undermine democratic knowledge practices¹². Vaccari and Chadwick found that deepfakes can increase uncertainty and reduce trust in news on social media¹³. Chesney and Citron warned that deepfakes can generate a "liar's dividend", in which dishonest actors dismiss authentic evidence as fabricated¹⁴. These studies describe a collapse of witness. When testimony becomes easy to fabricate and easy to discredit, the public world becomes fragile.

The Fourth Gospel's witness theology resists both gullibility and cynicism. It invites trust, yet it places trust inside accountable testimony. It values witness, yet it requires witness to point beyond itself. It calls for belief, yet belief serves life (John 20:31). This offers an important criterion for AI-mediated communication. Digital systems should sustain the social conditions

¹² D. M. J. Lazer, M. A. Baum, Y. Benkler, A. J. Berinsky, K. M. Greenhill, F. Menczer, M. J. Metzger et al., "The science of fake news," *Science* 359/6380, 2018, 1094–96.

¹³ C. Vaccari and A. Chadwick, "Deepfakes and disinformation: exploring the impact of synthetic political video on deception, uncertainty, and trust in news," *Social Media + Society* 6/1, 2020, 2056305120903408.

¹⁴ B. Chesney and D. Citron, "Deep fakes: a looming challenge for privacy, democracy, and national security," *California Law Review* 107, 2019, 1753.

under which truthful witness remains possible.

5. Truth, freedom, and the danger of weaponized certainty

John 8:31–47 is one of the Gospel’s most difficult ethical passages. It contains the famous claim that truth makes free (John 8:32), while also including severe polemic about falsehood, slavery to sin, and the devil. Its reception history requires vigilance.

The passage begins with abiding: “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples” (John 8:31). Truth is connected to duration, remaining, and discipleship. This is crucial for digital ethics. Misinformation thrives through speed. Viral systems reward quick reaction, emotional intensity, and identity performance. Johannine truth requires patient dwelling. It forms people who can remain with a word long enough to be corrected by it.

The dialogue that follows shows how self-description can resist truth. Jesus’ interlocutors appeal to their descent from Abraham and deny their bondage (John 8:33). Narratively, the point is that inherited identity can become a shield against self-knowledge. Contemporary misinformation often works the same way. Falsehood persuades most effectively when it protects a group’s preferred image of itself or confirms its fears about others. Herdt’s account of partisan epistemology in Christian ethics is helpful here¹⁵. Communities under perceived threat can begin to treat truth as a possession of the group, replacing humility and correction with identity defense.

The Johannine connection between truth and freedom speaks directly to AI-driven personalization. Recommendation systems can surround users with material that confirms their fears. Generative systems can supply persuasive rationalizations for almost any position. Chatbots can produce confident answers without genuine understanding. Under such conditions, freedom cannot mean frictionless access to preferred content. Johannine freedom means liberation from the falsehoods that flatter the self. It requires communities, systems, and institutions that make correction possible.

Empirical research on misinformation supports the ethical importance of this formation. Accuracy prompts can reduce misinformation sharing by redirecting attention toward truth-evaluation¹⁶. Research on intellectual humility suggests that people who recognize the limits of their knowledge are less vulnerable to misinformation and more willing to investigate claims¹⁷. These findings resonate with Johannine discipleship. Abiding in truth requires habits that slow reaction, invite testing, and loosen the grip of identity-protective certainty.

¹⁵ J. A. Herdt, “Partisan epistemology and post-truth power,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 35/1, 2022, 3–15.

¹⁶ G. Pennycook and D. G. Rand, “Accuracy prompts are a replicable and generalizable approach for reducing the spread of misinformation,” *Nature Communications* 13/1, 2022, 2333.

¹⁷ S. M. Bowes and L. K. Fazio, “Intellectual humility and misinformation receptivity: a meta-analytic review,” *Advances.in/Psychology* 2/1, 2024.

1 John 1:5-10 extends the point into communal life. It declares that God is light and insists that claims to fellowship are false when a community walks in darkness (1 John 1:5-6). The same passage warns against claims of sinlessness: “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves” (1 John 1:8). A community of truth must be capable of confession. It exposes deception outside itself and inside itself. This is one of the strongest Johannine resources for Christian participation in AI ethics. Christian communities can speak credibly about truth only when they practice correction, evidence, repentance, and public responsibility.

6. The Farewell Discourses

The Farewell Discourses (John 13-17) are the theological center of Johannine moral formation. They prepare the disciples for life after Jesus’ departure. The community will live by remembered words, mutual love, and the Spirit’s guidance. It asks how truth is sustained when direct sight is absent and testimony must be carried across time.

The Paraclete is called the Spirit of truth (John 14:16-17). The Spirit teaches and reminds the disciples of Jesus’ words (John 14:26). The Spirit testifies, and the disciples testify because they have been with Jesus from the beginning (John 15:26-27). The Spirit guides into all truth (John 16:13).

This guidance should not be mistaken for instant certainty. In the narrative setting, the Spirit’s work is tied to memory, interpretation, and witness. The Spirit sustains testimony rather than bypassing it. The Spirit keeps the community answerable to Jesus’ words rather than granting detached authority to private inspiration. Johannine truth therefore has a communal and temporal shape. It is received through abiding, remembering, discerning, and testifying.

This insight is especially relevant to AI systems that acquire quasi-oracular authority. Large language models answer quickly and confidently. Their fluency can create the impression of wisdom. A distinction between proximate and ultimate concerns in Christian AI ethics is useful here. Proximate concerns include fairness, accountability, transparency, and sustainability, whereas ultimate concerns involve personhood, telos, and the meaning of technological life¹⁸. Johannine theology presses the ultimate question with particular force: what kind of authority is being granted to a system that cannot testify in the Johannine sense, because it cannot remember, love, suffer, confess, or bear responsibility?

The Farewell Discourses also connect truth with sanctification and mission. Jesus prays, “Sanctify them in the truth” and sends the disciples into the world (John 17:17-18). Truth forms a community for public witness. It does not create withdrawal into private purity. The unity of the disciples has communicative force, so that the world may believe (John 17:21).

Digital misinformation fractures precisely this kind of social form. It produces suspicion, contempt, epistemic segregation, and rival realities. Misinformation threatens the epistemic

¹⁸ M. S. Burdett, “Proximate and ultimate concerns in Christian ethical responses to artificial intelligence,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 36/3, 2023, 620–41.

integrity on which democratic life depends¹⁹. Johannine theology names this as a deformation of communal witness. When communities lose shared practices of testing and correction, truth loses social habitation.

The Farewell Discourses therefore support public norms for AI ethics. AI-mediated communication should preserve memory by maintaining reliable provenance. It should support discernment by making sources, limitations, and uncertainties visible. It should serve truthful communion by strengthening shared capacities for understanding. These norms overlap with policy language about transparency and accountability, yet they ask for more than disclosure. Disclosure can become a legal gesture. Johannine truth asks whether communication helps persons and communities become capable of faithful recognition.

7. Love as the credibility of truth

John 13 gives Johannine truth its visible moral form. Jesus knows that his hour has come and that the Father has given all things into his hands (John 13:1-3). This knowledge leads him to wash the disciples' feet (John 13:4-5). The one who knows his divine origin and destiny performs an act of humble service.

This passage links knowledge and power to service. In technological contexts, knowledge often creates asymmetry. Companies know users through data extraction. Platforms know patterns of attention. Predictive systems know populations through classification. Institutions know citizens through records, scores, and risk profiles. Johannine ethics asks what powerful knowledge does to vulnerable persons. The footwashing offers a moral criterion for informational power. Knowledge becomes disordered when it refuses service.

Jesus interprets his action as an example for the disciples (John 13:15). Johannine ethics is mimetic. It forms communities through participation in Jesus' pattern. Hartog emphasizes the importance of imitation, love, abiding, and testimony in Johannine moral theology²⁰. Bennema similarly describes Johannine moral transformation as participation in divine life and conduct²¹.

The love command follows: "love one another" as Jesus has loved (John 13:34). Love has testimonial force. By this, others will know that the disciples belong to Jesus (John 13:35). Love makes witness recognizable. The community's claim to truth becomes credible through mutual regard.

1 John 3:16-18 gives the same logic practical sharpness. Love is known through Christ's self-giving. Those with resources who refuse a sibling in need cannot credibly claim divine

¹⁹ S. Lewandowsky, U. K. H. Ecker, J. Cook, S. van der Linden, J. Roozenbeek, and N. Oreskes, "Misinformation and the epistemic integrity of democracy," *Current Opinion in Psychology* 54, 2023, 101711.

²⁰ P. A. Hartog, "Johannine ethics: an exegetical-theological summary and a 'desiderative' extension of mimesis," *Religions* 13/6, 2022, 503.

²¹ C. Bennema, "Moral transformation in the Johannine writings," *In die Skriflig* 51/3, 2017, 1-7.

love. Love must appear “in truth and action” (1 John 3:18). Truth and action belong together. Speech separated from concrete care becomes empty religious performance.

This Johannine claim matters in digital spaces where “truth” often becomes a slogan for branding, factional identity, or the humiliation of opponents. Neufeld’s study of 1 John shows that truth talk and accusations of lying can be used to negotiate authority, exert epistemic control, define communal identity, and defend innovation amid competing claims²². Johannine literature itself therefore teaches caution. Truth-language must be tested by love and life.

For AI ethics, love as truthful action has practical implications. Systems used in health care, welfare, education, employment, and pastoral care should be evaluated by how they affect vulnerable persons. AI in health care can intensify surveillance, cost containment, and depersonalization while weakening practices of accompaniment²³. The concern extends beyond medicine. Automated advising, grading, screening, and pastoral chatbots can promise access while weakening human responsibility.

Johannine love does not require rejection of every AI tool. It requires moral ordering. AI can assist human service when it reduces burdens, expands access, identifies neglected needs, or supports careful judgment. It becomes dangerous when it replaces relational responsibility with automated convenience, shields decision-makers from those affected by decisions, or invites users to treat simulated empathy as equivalent to accountable care.

The same criterion applies to churches and theological institutions. Recent research on churches and AI adoption shows that Christian communities negotiate AI through concerns about mission, dignity, solidarity, and agency²⁴. Johannine ethics gives these negotiations a textual criterion asking whether the tool helps the community love concretely, witness truthfully, and foster life. A sermon produced quickly by AI may save time, yet it may weaken the pastoral practices of prayer, study, listening, and embodied address through which a congregation is known and served. A pastoral chatbot may provide immediate language to a distressed person, yet it cannot bear the responsibility of friendship, sacrament, confidentiality, and long-term accompaniment.

The credibility of Christian truth in the AI age will depend on this integration of speech and care. Communities that denounce misinformation while circulating unverified claims damage their witness. Institutions that invoke dignity while exploiting data or labor contradict their own moral vocabulary. The Johannine love command gives Christian AI ethics its most demanding public test. Truthful witness becomes visible in practices that protect and serve others.

²² D. Neufeld, “The socio-rhetorical force of ‘truth talk’ and lies: the case of 1 John,” *HTS: Theological Studies* 67/1, 2011, 1–10.

²³ P. Scherz, “Data ethics, AI, and accompaniment: the dangers of depersonalization in Catholic health care,” *Theological Studies* 83/2, 2022, 271–92.

²⁴ P. H. Cheong and L. Liu, “Faithful innovation: negotiating institutional logics for AI value alignment among Christian churches in America,” *Religions* 16/3, 2025, 302.

8. Testing the spirits

1 John 4:1 commands the beloved community to test the spirits. The immediate issue is christological. The community must discern true confession of Jesus Christ come in the flesh (1 John 4:2-3). The wider moral pattern remains highly relevant. Claims that sound spiritual, authoritative, technical, or confident require testing.

The criterion in 1 John is incarnational and communal. The opening of the letter grounds proclamation in what has been heard, seen, and touched (1 John 1:1-4). The testimony invites fellowship. Truth is not detached from embodied life. That emphasis speaks directly to synthetic media, which manipulate the signs people ordinarily associate with presence such as the face, the voice, the document, the familiar style of a trusted person. The new danger is not merely that false claims exist. False claims are ancient. The distinctive problem is that digital systems can manufacture the texture of presence at scale.

Testing the spirits also addresses algorithmic authority. AI outputs often arrive without sufficient explanation of training data, uncertainty, source provenance, or institutional incentives. Users may treat outputs as neutral because they appear technical. Johannine discernment asks questions that are moral as well as informational. What does this claim imply about the human person? What practices does it encourage? Whose vulnerability is protected or ignored? Can the claim be corrected? Who is accountable if harm occurs?

Misinformation research supports the need for this kind of formation. Accuracy prompts can reduce misinformation sharing²⁵. Intellectual humility is associated with lower receptivity to misinformation²⁶. Research on religion and conspiracy susceptibility suggests that some forms of religious interpretation can increase vulnerability to conspiratorial narratives, while more reflexive forms may reduce it²⁷. This finding should matter to churches. Johannine discernment begins inside the community that claims to walk in the light.

The Epistles also hold truth and love together. 1 John 4:7-21 identifies love as the sign of knowing God. A technically accurate statement can still be used lovelessly. A community can defend correct doctrine while practicing contempt. A digital user can expose falsehood in a manner that deepens dehumanization. Johannine discernment asks whether truth is being spoken in a form answerable to love.

For public AI ethics, testing the spirits can be translated into layered discernment. Technical testing asks whether a system is reliable, secure, fair, explainable, and robust. Institutional testing asks whether those deploying the system remain accountable to affected persons.

²⁵ G. Pennycook and D. G. Rand, "Accuracy prompts are a replicable and generalizable approach for reducing the spread of misinformation," *Nature Communications* 13/1, 2022, 2333.

²⁶ S. M. Bowes and L. K. Fazio, "Intellectual humility and misinformation receptivity: a meta-analytic review," *Advances.in/Psychology* 2/1, 2024.

²⁷ A. Jedinger and P. Siegers, "Religion, spirituality, and susceptibility to conspiracy theories: examining the role of analytic thinking and post-critical beliefs," *Politics and Religion* 17/3, 2024, 389–409.

Communal testing asks whether the system strengthens or weakens shared trust. Moral testing asks whether the system serves life and neighbor-regard. This layered discernment prevents technical evaluation from becoming morally thin.

9. AI, misinformation, and the collapse of witness

The contemporary misinformation crisis can be described as a collapse of witness. Speech circulates detached from accountable speakers. Images circulate detached from reliable provenance. Platforms reward engagement without equal regard for truth. Users become targets and distributors at the same time. Public figures can exploit confusion by dismissing authentic evidence as fabricated. The result is a corrosion of the social conditions under which truth can be shared.

AI intensifies this collapse by lowering the cost of persuasive falsehood. Synthetic media give fabricated claims sensory force. Personalization adapts messages to particular fears and hopes. Automated accounts can create the appearance of consensus. Deepfake awareness can foster cynicism even when no deepfake is present. AI-generated media intensify the problems of a post-truth world and produce a broader subjective crisis of knowledge²⁸.

Johannine theology helps name the moral character of this collapse. In John, truth is faithful disclosure, trustworthy witness, and life-giving relation. Misinformation is therefore more than wrong content. It is anti-witness. It breaks the relation between speech and reality, between speaker and hearer, between communication and love. It manipulates the trust on which communal life depends.

This perspective avoids shallow technological solutionism. Detection tools matter. Provenance standards matter. Regulation matters. Platform design matters. Yet a society can possess better detection tools and still lack truthful citizens. It can label AI-generated content while continuing to reward manipulation. It can enforce disclosure while normalizing indifference to the vulnerable. Johannine ethics directs attention to the formation of witnesses, not only the identification of false artifacts.

The Gospel's witness structure suggests concrete public practices. Institutions that use AI to communicate should disclose when content is generated or substantially altered by AI, identify accountable human agents, preserve audit trails, and provide meaningful routes for correction. Media organizations should treat provenance as part of public service. Platforms should evaluate recommendation systems by their effect on truthful public discourse, not only by engagement. Educational and religious communities should teach verification as a moral practice of checking sources, pausing before sharing, distinguishing confidence from evidence, and correcting errors publicly.

Johannine ethics also cautions against generalized distrust. The Gospel itself depends on

²⁸ P. Scherz and L. Vera, "AI and the subjective crisis of knowledge," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 53/2, 2025, 193–216.

testimony. Its purpose is that readers may come to believe through mediated witness (John 20:30-31). A culture that responds to synthetic media by declaring all evidence suspect has lost the ability to receive witness. The public good requires discerning trust careful enough to test claims, generous enough to remain open to truth, humble enough to revise judgment, and courageous enough to act when evidence is sufficient.

Christian communities have particular responsibility here. They often possess practices that can train discernment including confession, testimony, communal reading, pastoral accountability, catechesis, fasting from impulsive desire, and care for neighbors beyond one's group. However, these practices can also be distorted. Johannine truthfulness thus demands that Christian communities examine their own information habits before addressing the wider culture.

10. Human dignity, life, and the common good in AI governance

The Johannine language of life provides an ethical criterion for AI beyond accuracy and efficiency. The Prologue declares that life in the Word is the light of all people (John 1:4). The Gospel states its purpose so that readers may believe and have life in Jesus' name (John 20:31). Koester's work on Johannine ethics emphasizes that life, truth, love, and following Jesus together shape the Gospel's moral vision²⁹.

AI governance often speaks of human dignity, rights, safety, and trustworthiness. Johannine theology thickens those terms by connecting dignity to life-giving relation. Human beings are more than users, data subjects, consumers, workers, patients, students, or risk profiles. They are embodied persons whose flourishing depends on recognition, care, freedom from manipulation, and truthful participation in community. AI systems should therefore be evaluated by their effects on the life of persons and communities.

This has practical consequences. In health care, AI tools should support clinical judgment and patient care without turning vulnerable persons into objects of continuous surveillance. In education, AI should support learning while preserving attention, authorship, and intellectual responsibility. In employment, automated screening requires scrutiny for bias, opacity, and loss of human accountability. In public administration, affected persons should be able to understand and contest life-altering decisions. In pastoral and spiritual contexts, AI should never be allowed to simulate care in ways that obscure the need for embodied community.

The common good provides the public horizon for these judgments. Christian moral reasoning can enter plural societies when it articulates goods open to public deliberation such as protection of the vulnerable, truthful institutions, fair processes, accountable power, and social trust. These concerns overlap with secular governance frameworks. UNESCO emphasizes dignity and human rights. OECD stresses trustworthy AI aligned with democratic

²⁹ C. R. Koester, "Rethinking the ethics of John: A review article," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 36/1, 2013, 85–98.

values. NIST frames AI risk in relation to individuals, organizations, and society. Johannine theology contributes by asking whether these goods are being treated as procedural requirements or as conditions of life.

This question is especially important where AI is justified by innovation. Innovation can reduce suffering, expand access, strengthen knowledge, and assist communities in serving one another. It becomes morally disordered when speed, profit, surveillance, or competitive advantage govern development without adequate regard for those harmed. Johannine life is a criterion against technological prestige. The question is not how impressive a system appears. The question is whether its use fosters truthful, loving, and accountable life.

In public terms, the claim can be stated without requiring all citizens to accept Johannine theology. AI systems should be governed by their impact on human flourishing, shared trust, and the capacity of persons to participate meaningfully in decisions that affect them. The theological dimension remains visible, yet the public norm is discussable across traditions.

11. Christian communities as test cases of truthful witness

A Johannine contribution to AI ethics will fail if Christian communities present themselves as guardians of truth while refusing accountability for their own falsehoods. The Gospel and Epistles do not permit such complacency. 1 John 1:8 warns that self-deception is possible inside the community. 1 John 4:1 commands testing. John 13:35 makes love the sign of discipleship. John 17:21 connects unity with witness. These texts make the church a test case for its own claims.

Christian communities can embody truthful witness through concrete practices. They can teach members to verify claims before sharing them, especially claims that arouse anger or confirm prejudice. They can treat correction as a spiritual discipline. They can create pastoral guidance for AI use in sermons, teaching, counseling, administration, and communication. They can disclose AI assistance where it affects authorship or trust. They can refuse dehumanizing language about opponents. They can support those harmed by automated systems. They can participate in public debates about AI governance with humility, expertise, and concern for neighbors beyond their own institutions.

These practices are ways of walking in the light. A church that corrects misinformation publicly performs the truth it confesses. A theological institution that adopts AI transparently bears witness to accountable communication. A pastor who refuses to outsource care to simulated empathy honors the incarnational pattern of the Word made flesh. A Christian organization that protects vulnerable people from exploitative technologies enacts love in truth and action.

Christian rhetoric about AI should therefore avoid both panic and enchantment. AI is a set of socio-technical systems developed and deployed within human institutions marked by creativity, finitude, ambition, fear, generosity, greed, negligence, and care. Johannine theology has resources for this realism. Darkness is real, light shines. Falsehood deceives, witness remains possible. The world resists, the disciples are sent into it.

The public value of Johannine theology lies in disciplined witness. It speaks truthfully about technology without pretending to possess technical expertise it lacks. It learns from empirical research without surrendering moral vocabulary to measurement alone. It brings scriptural imagination into public debate without demanding coercive privilege. It holds Christian communities accountable to the truth they proclaim.

12. Conclusion

The ethical crisis surrounding artificial intelligence and misinformation is often described as a crisis of information. Johannine literature invites a deeper diagnosis. The crisis is a crisis of witness in the form of speech detached from accountability, images detached from provenance, knowledge detached from love, power detached from service, and technology detached from life.

The research question of this study asked how the Johannine theology of truth, witness, love, and life can provide a morally serious and publicly intelligible framework for responding to AI and misinformation. The answer developed here is that Johannine theology offers a coherent moral framework for truthful witness under digital conditions. The Prologue grounds truth in the embodied self-disclosure of the Word. The Gospel's testimony passages show that truth is mediated through accountable witness. The Farewell Discourses describe the Spirit of truth as sustaining memory, discernment, and communal testimony. The footwashing and love command make humble service the visible credibility of truth. The Johannine Epistles require testing, confession, and love in truth and action.

This framework supports transparency, provenance, auditability, and accountability because witness must remain answerable. It supports human dignity because truth is embodied and life-giving. It supports media literacy and intellectual humility because truth requires abiding, testing, and correction. It supports public regulation because power must serve the common good. It challenges Christian communities because truth claims become credible only when accompanied by love, confession, and responsible action.

The argument therefore differs from a generic claim that Christian values may be useful in technological ethics. Johannine theology is structurally necessary because it names the relation among truth, witness, love, and life with unusual depth. It shows why misinformation is morally destructive even when technically clever. It shows why AI systems should be judged by their effects on persons, communities, and shared trust. It shows why truthful witness in a pluralistic digital age requires embodied accountability, neighbor-regard, communal discernment, and practices that foster life.

In the age of synthetic speech and automated persuasion, Pilate's question remains urgent. "What is truth?" is answered in John by the Word made flesh, the witness who testifies, the Spirit who guides, the community that loves, and the life that light makes possible. A public ethic shaped by that vision can help societies navigate AI with greater humility, courage, and responsibility.

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