

## Article

# The Universal Light, or the Only Way to the Father? Universalism and Exclusivism in John's Provocative Christology

Paul N. Anderson 

School of Theology, George Fox University, Newberg, OR 97132, USA; panderso@georgefox.edu

**Abstract:** Among the most perplexing of John's theological riddles is question of salvific universalism and particularity. John is both the greatest biblical source of *Christian universalism* and the greatest source of *Christian exclusivity*. After all, the Johannine Overture affirms universal access to the saving-revealing Light of Christ, declaring: "The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world!" (Jn 1:9). What else could this mean, other than to affirm that every person has saving access to the divine Light of Christ? And yet, Jesus also declares in John 14:6, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me!" What could this mean, other than to assert that there is only one means of access to God, and that it involves saving belief in Jesus as the Christ? Sorting out the apparent contradictions within these tensions is the goal of the present essay.

**Keywords:** salvation; illumination; continuing revelation; inclusivity; exclusivity; supersessionism; evangelism; early Christianity

## 1. Introduction

John's theological tensions abound, but one of the most pressing in recent times is the issue of soteriology and related subjects. Is John's presentation of salvation through Christ universal or particular? Is John pro-Jewish, or anti-Jewish? Is the Fourth Evangelist's theology supersessionist or restorationist? More pointedly, if John 1:9 is true—that the Light of Christ is accessible to *all* humanity—how could it be that Jesus is *the* Way, *the* Truth, and *the* Life, through whom all who come to the Father do so, according to John 14:6–7? Are these two precepts inherently contradictory, or are they in some way both true if understood authentically? It could be that the evangelist is demented, or perhaps we have different literary sources here which disagree with each other.<sup>1</sup> Then again, if we ask *why* each of these precepts is asserted, that might help us appreciate what each of these verses is saying, and perhaps more importantly, what it is not. And, in addition to its relevance for John's soteriology, such an inquiry will have weighty implications for understanding John's perspectives on Judaism and so-called supersessionism.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, inferred meanings of John's theological statements hinge upon an understanding of the Johannine situation.<sup>3</sup> As the Gospel of John is written so that people might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and, believing, to have life in his name (John 20:31), the witnesses, the signs, and the fulfilled word provide the bases for that belief.<sup>4</sup> Given this apologetic interest, those who believe in Jesus are accorded favor within the narrative, whereas those who reject the Revealer are described as the unbelieving world, who loved human praise rather than the glory of God. Often, they are numbered among the *Ioudaioi*, but is such a term a reference to Jews in general, or to Judeans in particular? If the former, why is Jesus presented as the quintessential Jewish Messiah? If the latter, is the presentation simply an account of the northern prophet rejected by the religious elite in Jerusalem and Judea, which is also confirmed by the Synoptics?

In either case, how does the move of the Johannine leadership from Palestine to Asia Minor around 70 CE also affect a contextual understanding of John's message, given that Johannine believers were facing tensions with local Jewish communities and Gentile



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populations in the last three decades of the first century CE?<sup>5</sup> On one hand, if the parting of the ways has already been actualized, John's message might be seen as Christianity supplanting Judaism, and Jesus-adherents as God's chosen people. If, however, the debate is over the center of Judaism, with the evangelist self-identifying as embracing the heart of Judaism from his perspective, the Johannine evangel must be seen as a universalizing extension of the Abrahamic blessing (Gen 12:1–3; cf. John 1:11–13; 8:31–58) to include any and all who believe in the Jewish Messiah as an eschatological manifestation of God's love for the world: a manifestation which all are invited to receive in grace and truth (John 1:16–18).<sup>6</sup>

As the present analysis will show, the latter is clearly the most plausible way forward, critically.<sup>7</sup> Thus, God's eschatological manifestation of love in the work and witness of Jesus as the Jewish Messiah-Christ extends the blessings of Israel to the world, inviting a response of faith to the Divine Initiative. And, this universal gift of grace and truth (John 1:16–17) is extended to Samaritans, Greeks, and others. All who respond receptively to that gift in faith are welcomed into the divine family, and this was a scandal among the religious then, as it is now.

## 2. The Origins of John's Theological Tensions

The theological tensions of the Fourth Gospel are best understood as originating within at least four primary sources: the dialectical thinking of the evangelist (operating in both/and ways rather than either/or dichotomies); the Prophet-like-Moses agency schema (originating in Deut 18:15–22); the dialectical Johannine situation (involving at least seven crises over seven decades); and the literary artistry of the narrator (drawing emerging audiences into dialogical engagements with the protagonist, Jesus).<sup>8</sup> As John's account of Jesus and his ministry reflects a self-standing augmentation of and dialectical engagement with Mark, John's dialogical autonomy must be considered in addressing any of the three dozen Johannine riddles.<sup>9</sup> While the primary source of this particular theological tension involves the Mosaic-agency-schema, reflecting the imperative for humans to respond in faith to the Divine Initiative, the other three features are by no means absent.<sup>10</sup>

For instance, the dialectical thinking of the Fourth Evangelist is present in this particular subject, as a both/and approach to soteriological inclusivity and particularity allows these features to cohere around the conviction that God's saving-revealing work is accessible to all.<sup>11</sup> Interpreters failing to appreciate John's dialectical tensions fail to apprehend the overall thrust of the Johannine witness, leading to flawed judgments.<sup>12</sup> Thus, while God has acted eschatologically in the flesh-becoming Word, recognizable by those who have been responsive to the Light over and against religio-political investments, not all do so in faith, and the evangelist reflects upon why this is so. Second, the extension of the Jewish Messiah/Christ to the Hellenic populations of the Diaspora reflects a universal outreach of Judaism as an inclusive welcome extended to responsive Gentiles, inviting them into the familial blessings of Abraham. Third, the rhetorical crafting of the Johannine narrative presents positive and negative responses to the Revealer in ways that point the way forward for later audiences. Thus, within John's story of Jesus, commended and critiqued responses to the Revealer are presented rhetorically within the narrative—especially within the dialogues—typifying credited and flawed responses to Jesus as the divine agent of the Father.

As this particular set of theological tensions is considered within each of these features of the Johannine tradition's development, a fuller understanding of Johannine soteriology is availed in historical- and literary-critical perspective. That being the case, the cojoined universalism and particularity of Johannine Christology deserves a closer look.

## 3. The Universalism and Particularity of Johannine Christology

In taking John 1:9 seriously, some might see its content as affirming universal enlightenment: that all roads lead up the mountain, and that all people will be saved. Universal access to the saving-revealing Light of Christ, however, does not imply that: (a) all people

will apprehend it authentically (we tend to package our understandings of the Deity in our own images—as projections of our own interests and needs—which is why revelation is essential within the human–divine dialogue); and that (b) all people will respond in faith to the Divine Initiative (we tend to trust in our human-made platforms and scaffolds—those in darkness refused to come to the Light, lest it be exposed that their investments were in constructions of human origin rather than divine—failing to embrace what God has done and is doing; John 3:18–21).

Thus, while all humanity might have at least potential access to the saving-revealing Light of Christ—just as Heraclitus argued that the divine *Logos* as reason, or a divine spark, or a principle bringing order out of chaos by the illuminative power or truth, is accessible to all humans—this does not mean that all *will perceive* the Ground and Source of our Being correctly.<sup>13</sup> Nor does it ensure that all *will be receptive* to the truth, *will embrace* the Light, and *will walk* therein in the newness of life. Some clearly do not get it right, failing to respond to the Divine Initiative in faith; and in Johannine perspective, humanity’s stance toward the Light of revelation is measured by their response to the Revealer: Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the sin of humanity is the failure to believe (3:36), and what gets in the way of glimpsing the truth of God at work in the ministry of Jesus is that humanity claims in blinded arrogance, “we see” (9:41).

While the Gospel of John has been taken by many to be the Gospel of Universalism, it is also seen by others as the Gospel of Particularity.<sup>15</sup> On one hand, the Christ-hymn of John 1:1–18 (vv. 1–5, 9–14, 16–18) declares that Jesus is the Pre-Existent Word, the Life of humanity, and the Light of the World, yielding a theology of God’s inclusive welcoming of any who believe into the divine family. The Light of Christ apprehended inwardly is efficacious, whether or not one is familiar with the words and works of Jesus. On the other hand, John 14:6–7 declares that Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, through which all who come to the Father do so.<sup>16</sup> Is this a divine recipe and requisite—one way, Jesus only—or is it descriptive of how things tend to work rather than prescriptive of how things must be? It could be that these thrusts are contradictory; both cannot be true. Or, do they represent two sets of realities held together in dialectical tension? Perhaps, if we ask *why* each set of claims is made, that might point the way forward.

### 3.1. Jesus as Word, the Life, and the Light

At the outset, it should be noted that both sets of these three terms in John 1:1–18 include the word “life” (in Greek, ζωή), and the Gospel of John is written so that people might believe that Jesus is the Messiah/Christ, the Son of God, and that believing, they might have Life in his name (20:31). The narrative constructs a compelling case for believing “in” Jesus—embracing and abiding in him as a relational reality. And yet, belief also implies content—believing *that* he is sent from the Father, and that he embodies God’s love for the world (3:16).<sup>17</sup> Just as 1 John 1:1–3 reflects a community’s response to hearing the evangelist preach and teach over the years, so the Christ-hymn of John 1 also reflects the community’s response to the content delivered over the years (as does the prologue of 1 John 1:1–3): a response now packaged around the references to John the Baptist and his ministry (1:6–8, 15, 19–42), which served as the original beginning of John’s story of Jesus, an apparent expansion upon Mark’s account.

Thus, the Christ-hymn as a new beginning to the finalized edition of John’s Gospel functions experientially and inclusively for its audiences. They might even have known the hymnic confession as it circulated among the churches of Asia Minor and beyond around the turn of the first century CE, but it now functioned to prepare hearers, as a transformative appetizer, bolstering their receptivity to the full account that follows. Thus, these three universalizing terms (*Word, Life, Light*) deserve to be seen within the literary form of worship material designed to engage audiences personally and transformingly in the content of the narrative itself.

### 3.1.1. Jesus as the Word

Again, the *Logos* theme in the Johannine literature is closer to 1 John 1:1–3 than the overall Johannine Gospel, and in both cases, it functioned to connect Hellenistic and Jewish audiences with the creative-redemptive work of God throughout the ages, eschatologically revealed in the words and works of Jesus of Nazareth. As the fifth-century BCE philosopher of Ephesus, Heraclitus, taught, the cosmos is ever in flux. One cannot step into a moving stream in the same place twice; the water has always flowed on. Life itself is a spark, making things happen in surprising and uncontrollable ways; and yet, despite the flux, the world does not fall apart. Why? In the view of Heraclitus, the divine *Logos*—the Word of God—is that which holds things together as an ordering divine principle—reason, truth, and light—which is available to every person. As people embrace the divine Word, problems are solved, order is achieved, and the ordered cosmos advances. Thus, the Christ-hymn of John 1 connects the universal, principled, reasoned, and revelational thought of Heraclitus—built upon by Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, and Philo<sup>18</sup>—with the saving-revealing work of Jesus Christ, the Light of the World.

And yet, the Johannine Christ-hymn is also constructed upon Jewish understandings of the creative-revelational work of God, echoing Genesis 1 and the prophetic utterances of the Hebrew prophets.<sup>19</sup> From a Jewish perspective, God created the cosmos not by the violence of Marduk, as narrated in the Babylonian creation myth (*Enuma Elish*, Tablet 4), but by his Word (Gen 1:1–2:4; Psa 33:6–9). Thus, in celebrating God’s creative Word—now become flesh in the mission of Jesus (John 1:14)—the divinity and humanity of Jesus as the creative-redemptive Word of God is celebrated. The Word of the Lord is also presented as a revelational medium and a prophetic action in Hebrew Scripture. The Word of the Lord promises a blessing to Abram (Gen 15:1–6) and instructs Moses in organizing the Levites (Nu 3:14–16). It also serves as the authoritative basis for prophetic addresses (Nu 24:11–14) and a source of guidance (2 Sam 7:4).

The Christological hymns of the New Testament also must be seen as Jewish pushback against the divinity claims of the Roman emperors, going back to the divinity claims of Caesar Augustus, and echoed later by Caligula and Domitian. The point is this: Caesar is not the Divine Son (*filius deus*); the Jewish Messiah is! Populace and authorities, take note.<sup>20</sup> God has acted in history, making all things new, not by means of a pagan governor, but via the Jewish Messiah/Christ, extending the blessings of grace and peace to the whole world. Also palpable within John’s story of Jesus is the wisdom motif, as Proverbs 8:22–30 identifies Lady Wisdom—*Sophia*—as the divine agency of creation. In that sense, the *Logos*-motif of the Johannine Christ-hymn celebrates the conviction that the God who created and ordered the cosmos became flesh in the ministry of Christ Jesus. He is thus the creative-redeeming Savior of the World (John 4:42; 1 John 4:14), inviting a response of faith whereby any and all who believe in him receive the empowerment to become children of God (John 1:11–13).

### 3.1.2. Jesus as the Life of All Humanity

In this extending of Abrahamic blessing to the entire world, the Johannine Christ-hymn celebrates the conviction that the divine *Logos* is the source of life for all humanity. Nothing ever came into being apart from his creative work, and the *Logos* is the source of biological and spiritual life itself. Not only is the first miracle of Jesus the producing of wine at the Cana wedding—bolstering the celebrative life of the occasion—but Jesus also is the Water of Life and the Bread of Life, enabling people to be born again from above. As his culminative sign, Jesus raises Lazarus from the tomb after four days of entombed darkness, and Martha confesses climactically that Jesus is Christ, following his declaration of himself to be the Resurrection and the Life (John 11:26–27). While no one has seen God, the one and only Son, who is at the Father’s side, has made him known (1:18); he indeed is the Life of the world (1:3–4).

### 3.1.3. Jesus as the Light of the World

In the first verse of the Christ-hymn, these three themes (*Word, Light, Life*) are presented together, with each leading into the next. The Word was with God and was God; the Word was the Life of all humanity; the Life was the Light of the world (1:1–4). However, though the Light has shone in the darkness, the darkness has neither understood nor received it (v. 5). And yet, the Light that is accessible to all humanity has come into the world via Jesus—the Word become flesh, tenting among humanity—and Johannine believers confess that in the Incarnation, they have beheld and encountered divine glory (v. 14). As developed more fully in the narrative, Jesus is the Light of the World, and those who receive him do not walk in darkness but abide in the newness of Life (8:12; 9:5).

However, despite God’s breaking into human history in the ministry of Jesus, not all received him. He came unto his own, and his own received him not; but those who did receive him were welcomed into the divine family, born not of human instrumentality or a man’s desire, but born of God and the Divine Initiative (1:10–13). Thus, unevenness of reception is not a factor of divine selection; it is the result of humans’ refusal to come to the Light, lest it be revealed that their lives are constructed upon platforms of human initiative, rather than the divine (3:18–21). John’s witness to Jesus as the Word, Life, and Light therefore extends the mission of the Jewish Messiah/Christ to the Hellenic world as a universal manifestation of God’s eschatological saving-revealing breaking into human history.

### 3.2. Jesus as Way, the Truth, and the Life

Conversely, some who take John 14:6 seriously see this passage as declaring that an explicit, knowing commitment to Jesus Christ is the only way to be saved; all other paths lead to perdition. Becoming children of God thus requires believing “in his name” as a particularistic requirement (1:12). Further, Jesus declares himself to be the singular gate for the sheep—those coming beforehand are thieves and bandits—and that those who enter through him find salvation and pasture (10:7–9). So these texts are often seen as requiring a knowing confession of Jesus as the Christ and Son of God, if one is to also receive the gift of eternal Life availed to believers.

If that were the case, though, it would contradict the assertion that the saving-revealing Light of Christ is available, at least potentially, to all, whether or not they know the Christian story or get their confessions right. For indeed, the point of John 1:10–13 is that being welcomed into the Abrahamic family of God is rooted in a response of faith to the Divine Initiative—born of God, “not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man” (v. 13). Thus, believing “in his name” is not “*the right answer*” on a soteriological final exam; it is an acceptance of the Revealer’s agency from the Father, which the words and works of Jesus make manifest. Likewise, the shepherding work of Jesus extends beyond Jewish (and even Christian?) flocks (John 10:16), and the work of Christ is to bring them all together into one sheepfold: a universal ingathering.

Therefore, in contrast to a dogmatic approach to confessional correctness, the central thrust of the Johannine witness holds that Jesus as the Revealer shows himself to be eschatologically sent from the Father, as attested by his decisive words and delivering deeds. The dozen or so explicit fulfillments of Scripture referencing Jesus as being the promised Messiah/Christ, as well as his implicit fulfillments of Scripture, show him to be fulfilling the typologies of the eschatological Prophet-like-Moses and that of Elijah/Elisha, posing proof that Jesus is indeed *the Way, the Truth, and the Life*.<sup>21</sup> Again, it could be that John’s universal and particular themes are contradictory, but if we inquire as to *why* Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life, and *how so*, those tensions might be more adequately understood.

#### 3.2.1. Jesus as the Way

While the above themes are sounded in the Johannine Christ-hymn, Jesus as the Way is presented in the teachings of Jesus within the narrative, as Jesus reflects upon his mission



in the first of the farewell discourses. Following his promise of heavenly dwelling-places prepared for his own in John 14:1–3, his followers fail to comprehend his meanings. Thomas asks how they will know the way to the Father, and Jesus responds that he himself *is* the Way, the Truth, and the Life (vv. 5–6). That being the case, what is meant by the assertion that Jesus is the Way? When compared with the Synoptics' presentations of Jesus and his teachings, in the latter he declares that the way is broad that leads to destruction, but the way is narrow that leads to eternal life (Matt 7:13–14).

In Matthean and Lukan perspective, Jesus is the rock upon which a solid house-project can be built, while other foundations are like shifting sands (Matt 7:24–27; Luke 6:46–49). In Acts, the Jesus movement is described as “the Way” (Acts 9:2; 19:23; 24:14, 22), and in Johannine perspective, Jesus as the Way serves as the bridge between humanity and God. In that sense, the Son's representation of the Father's love, character, and will are revealed to the world in time-changing ways, and as the eschatological manifestation of the Ground and Source of our Being (God), Jesus reveals the Father's love and grace in pivotal ways. Like the hourglass of time, God's saving-revealing work before Christ points to his coming, and God's saving-revealing activity after Jesus builds reflectively upon his ministry and work on the Cross for the rest of time. For indeed, the God who has spoken in many times and in many ways has now spoken in his Son, Jesus Christ, who is appointed the source and heir of all things (Heb 1:1–4; Col 1:15–20).

### 3.2.2. Jesus as the Truth

In addition to being the way that God has provided for humanity to envision God's transformative love and grace, Jesus also embodies God's truth in ways sacramental.<sup>22</sup> If a sacrament is an outward and physical expression of an inward and spiritual reality, the ultimate manifestation of God's loving character and gracious being is the Incarnation. In revealing God's love to the world, the Father did not send another book, or a sign, or a liturgical practice; he sent a *person*: his Son, Jesus Christ. While God's love and grace are revealed in the Ten Commandments, people too easily make them into legal codes. God's justice and righteousness are declared by Israel's prophets and the witness of John the Baptist, but people too easily construe them as heroes to be idolized or as pests to be resisted.

While religious practices seek to further the highest and most meaningful of spiritual encounters, they too easily become forms to be practiced rather than facilitators of spiritual vitality. Indeed, truth is always liberating (John 8:32), and Jesus not only reveals God's truth by his deeds and teachings; he *is* God's truth, manifesting the Father's love for the world in ways that no other manifestation has ever approximated. To come closer to the Truth is to come closer to Christ, and to come closer to Christ is to come closer to the Truth. In this modern age, where objective truth has reigned supreme though insufficiently, subjective and personal truth is also required, and such is what the Incarnation avails in liberating ways.<sup>23</sup>

### 3.2.3. Jesus as the Life

In addition to being the way to the Father and the truthful revelation of the Father's love, Jesus is also the giver of Life to the world. Not only is the Creator the source of physical Life,<sup>24</sup> but the Son also offers eternal Life to all who believe. In Johannine perspective, believing in Jesus as the Messiah/Christ empowers the believer to receive eternal Life in his name (20:31); and yet, Jesus has also come in order that humanity might experience abundant Life in the here and now (10:10). For indeed, as Moses lifted up the bronze serpent in the wilderness, bringing healing to those who had been poisoned, all who look to the uplifted Son on the Cross are saved (3:14–16). For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved (v. 17). Likewise, if Jesus be lifted up from the earth, he will draw all humanity to himself (12:32), a statement prefiguring his death on a Roman cross. If the wisdom of 1 Peter 2:20 can be drawn in here, undeserved suffering is always redemptive in its potentiality, and the

death of an innocent man on the Cross proved redemptive in its actuality. Therefore, in understanding the meanings of Jesus as the Way, the Truth, and the Life, all who come to the Father do so through him (14:7). Is their coming, however, a prescriptive matter or a descriptive reality, rooted in the human situation?

### 3.3. No One Can Come to the Father except Being Drawn by God

If the universal reach of the Light of Christ can be held in tension with Jesus being the singular way through whom all who come the Father do so, the answer may lie in John 6:44. Here we also see the declaration by Jesus of the universal accessibility of revelation, fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah 54:13: “They shall all be taught by God.” This promise, however, is countered by the explanation that “No one can come except being drawn by the Father.” Note that the text does not claim that no one *may* come—a matter of permission; it declares that no one *can* come—a factor of possibility (οὐδεὶς δύναται ἐλθεῖν). Again, the explanation is given that no one has seen the Father except the Son, and that in his revelation of the Father’s love for humanity, the world is invited to receive the divine embrace of God’s transforming love. For the Law came by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ, who climactically revealed God’s love for the world in time-changing ways (John 1:16–17).

Thus, interpreters get it wrong in claiming the gospel message to be one of God’s “spiritual laws” requiring death to atone for humanity’s sins. This would make God subject to the penal requirements of sin. Rather, in Johannine and Pauline perspective, humans live conventionally by deservedness, and in the light of God’s loving deservedness—which is justice—all have sinned and come short of God’s glory (Rom 3:23). However, God’s undeserved love is also a reality, and such is what God has been communicating for ages before the coming of Christ, but it is *humans* that have failed to comprehend God’s grace. Thus, the epoch-changing work of Christ on the Cross reveals God’s undeserved love to the world—offered as a loving sacrifice for all humanity—to be received by faith as a gift of grace. And the reason that no one can come to the Father except by being drawn by the Divine Initiative is that humans cannot imagine God’s undeserved love. Thus, the reason that Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life—the Father’s gift of love in sending his own Son to die on behalf of his love for the world—is that no *one can come* except by being *drawn by God*, which Jesus eschatologically does and is.

So, are these theological thrusts contradictory? Do they reflect distinctive literary sources with different perspectives? Or do they reflect two sides of a single perspective, if we consider *how* a particular tenet is held to be true? Rudolf Bultmann saw John 14:6 as reflecting the Johannine evangelist’s Christocentric and revelatory soteriology, and so, the so-called “instrumentalist sacramentology” of 6:51c–58 supposedly reflects an interpolation by the ecclesiastical redactor. In my view, though, that passage is calling for adherence to the Way of the Cross—calling for martyrological faithfulness if required by the Truth (note similar associations in Mark 10:38–39), so the theological tension is actually minimal.<sup>25</sup> In John 6:56, to embrace the incarnational reality of Jesus is to abide in him and to remain in his community, not to split off like those who never were really convinced of the Truth (1 John 2:19), but to remain with Christ and his community of followers (John 15:1–10). Thus, to receive the life-producing food is to respond to the Revealer in faith and to embrace his community in solidarity and faithfulness (John 6:17, 35, 48–58). It is not a ritual or cultic action that is required; it is corporate solidarity with Jesus and his fellowship that is expected if one also wishes to be raised with him on the Last Day.

In addition to the presentation of Jesus as the Word, the Light, and the Life in John 1:1–18, he is also presented as the Way, the Truth, and the Life within the larger chapter. In vv. 19–51, John the Baptist fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah 40:3, preparing “a way in the wilderness” (v. 23). And indeed, *grace* and *truth* come through Jesus Christ, the Word-become-flesh (vv. 14, 17). For in him was Life—the Light of all humanity (v. 4)—inviting a response of faith to the Divine Initiative, whereby any and all who believe become adopted into the divine family (vv. 10–13). Thus, John’s universal outreach centers on

humanity's responses to the Divine Initiative, which Jesus as the Jewish Messiah/Christ eschatologically is. However, while he came unto "his own," that reception was mixed, and the Judeans (not "the Jews" in general, as many of them believed, 8:31) are presented in the narrative as rejecting Jesus and plotting his death. Does this mean that the Fourth Gospel is anti-Jewish, or is it pro-Jewish?

#### 4. Does the Gospel of John Supplant or Restore Judaism?

While some interpreters have seen the Johannine Jesus as supplanting Judaism with a new religion, a closer reading reflects the evangelist's seeing Jesus as restoring the heart of Judaism. Thus, it is not a matter of Christianity superseding Judaism as "the right religion" over and against "the wrong religion;" it reflects the God of Israel as eschatologically breaking into human history in ways that potentially transform Jewish faith and practice in fulfilling Israel's original vocation. In that sense, the Johannine Jesus is presented as furthering the prophetic mission of John the Baptist, performing signs rooted in justice and love, embodying the typologies of Elijah and Moses, and extending the blessings of Abraham to the larger world beyond first-century Judaism.

##### 4.1. Furthering the Prophetic Mission of John the Baptist

As the Johannine Jesus is announced at the outset by John the Baptist, Jesus is presented as furthering John's prophetic work at the outset of his ministry. First, the original beginning of the Johannine narrative likely began with the witness of John (John 1:6–8 and 15):

There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. (He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.)

John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me."

As the Johannine Christ-hymn was added to the final version of the Fourth Gospel, the beginning of the initial Johannine narrative echoes the beginning of Mark 1:1–14. The narrator here explicitly clarifies that Jesus came ministering *before* John was thrown into prison (John 3:24 versus Mark 1:14), so the Gospel of John augments Mark chronologically, with the first two signs preceding those reported in Mark 1. Second, when the Baptist was asked if he were Elijah or the Eschatological Prophet, he denies being either (John 1:19–21; contra Mark 9:13). This clears the ground for Jesus to fulfill those two typologies, although historically, the Baptist was likely identified with Elijah's ministry by himself and by others, and Mark's connecting of John with Elijah possesses its own historical weight. Third, followers of John become followers of Jesus (John 1:35–51), and when John's own disciples come to him complaining that Jesus is garnering more followers than him, he declares the elevation of Jesus—at his own expense—to be the purpose of his mission (3:25–30). As John had said earlier, the reason he came baptizing was to point out Jesus. Fourth, the prophetic thrust of John's ministry is mirrored in the early presentation of the Johannine temple incident, as Jesus—like John—was comforting the disturbed and disturbing the comfortable (2:13–22). Thus, the early placement of the temple demonstration in John fittingly stands alongside the prophetic ministry of the Baptist, joining their ministries together historically.

##### 4.2. Prophetic Demonstrations of Justice, Truth, and Love

As John's story of Jesus continues, the early Johannine temple incident stands as an eschatological prophetic sign, in keeping with the prophetic-renewal ministry of John the Baptist. It calls for socioeconomic justice and repentance from merchandizing at the expense of authentic worship. This might also reflect a more chronologically plausible ordering, as John's Jesus travels to and from Jerusalem multiple times, in contrast to the singular climactic visit conjectured by Mark and followed by Matthew and Luke.<sup>26</sup> While some scholars imagine that John's chronology is ordered by theological interests,



the narrator expands upon engagements with the likes of Nicodemus in Jerusalem (John 3:1–21), presents him as traveling through Samaria on his way back to Galilee (4:3–4), and comments on people in Galilee having witnessed the signs Jesus had performed in Jerusalem (4:45). Thus, the narrator sees the events in John 2:13–22 as not only standing alongside the ministry of the Baptist in John 1, but also as having direct impacts on what follows in the next three chapters. Further, when Jesus visits Jerusalem a second time during an unnamed feast, the religious leaders already want to kill him, which would be odd if it were his first visit (5:18). Therefore, the Johannine presentation of Jesus ministering alongside John the Baptist presents his missional interest as rooted squarely in a prophetic restoration of Judaism to its own best expressions, not the supersessionist setting up of a new religion.

In contrast to the Matthean Jesus, who advises his followers to not travel among the Samaritans (Matt 10:5), the Johannine Jesus not only travels through Samaria, but he engages the woman at the well, who then becomes the apostle to the Samaritans. Upon her testimony and their own experience, many in the village believe in Jesus, and they even extend him and his disciples hospitality for two days, hailing him as “the Savior of the world” (John 4:4–42). When asked by the woman upon which mountain it is correct to offer worship—Jerusalem or Gerizim—Jesus replies that “Salvation is of the Jews,” but also that authentic worship is dependent neither upon form nor place (v. 22). Further (vv. 23–24),

But the hour is coming and is now here when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.

In addition to justice and truth, the ministry of Jesus is rooted in Love, as God’s love for the world is the basis for the Son’s mission (3:16). The Father’s love for the Son is what empowers his healing ministry (3:35; 5:20), and the Father loves the Son because he is willing to lay down his life in order to take it up again (10:17). This love is what leads Jesus to heal the lame and the blind in Jerusalem, and also to call Lazarus forth from the tomb. Jesus loved Mary and Martha, and especially Lazarus (11:3, 5, 36). Jesus also loved his own unto the end (13:1) and calls his followers to love one another as he has loved them (13:34–35). “For indeed, no greater love is possible than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (15:12–17). However, these values of justice, truth, and love are not novelties within Judaism; they are central to the ministries of the Hebrew prophets, and Jesus is presented in the Gospel of John as embodying and restoring the highest of Jewish values.

#### *4.3. Fulfilling Jewish Scriptures and Embracing the Typologies of Elijah and Moses*

As a witness to the thoroughgoing Jewish thrust of Jesus and his ministry, the Johannine Jesus fulfills Jewish Scriptures textually and typologically.

##### *4.3.1. Biblical Motifs*

First, Jesus cites half-a-dozen biblical motifs, referencing the lifting up of the bronze serpent (Num 21:9; John 3:14); Israel’s people being taught by God (Isa. 54:13; John 6:45); living water being poured out in Jerusalem (Zech 14:8; Isa 44:3; John 7:38); people being called “gods” and children of the Most High (Psa 82:6; John 10:34); and the requirement of two witnesses when proof is to be ascertained (Deut 17:6; John 8:17). Thus, Jesus is presented as claiming biblical precedents for his words and works. Scriptures are also cited by others in the narrative, but these references often expose conventional misunderstandings of a Jewish biblical text.

##### *4.3.2. Biblical Texts*

Second, the narrator cites a dozen or so biblical texts as a means of pointing to Jesus as the Jewish Messiah/Christ, fulfilling Scripture. John the Baptist prepares the way of the Lord in the wilderness (Isa 40:3; John 1:23); Jesus demonstrates zeal for God’s house at the temple incident (Psa 69:9; John 2:17); disciples later come to understand the meaning of being raised up on the third day (Hos 6:2; John 2:22; 20:9); the crowd cites Psalm 118:26,

and the narrator cites Zechariah 9:9 as Jesus enters Jerusalem (John 12:13–15); Isaiah 53:1 and 6:9–10 reference the prophet’s unbelieved report and people’s not seeing, hearing, or comprehending (John 12:38, 40); the betrayal of Judas is anticipated by Psalm 41:9 (John 13:18; 17:12); people hate Jesus without cause (Psa 35:19; John 15:25); the clothes of Jesus are divided, and his robe is gambled over (Psa 22:18; John 19:24); the sour wine offered Jesus is like poison and vinegar (Psa 69:21; John 19:28–29); the bones of Jesus are not broken (Num 9:12; Exod 12:46; Psa 34:20; John 19:31–36); and people look on the one they have pierced (Zech 12:10; John 19:37). The Johannine Jesus thus fulfills Jewish Scripture explicitly, showing that he is indeed the Jewish Messiah/Christ.

#### 4.3.3. Biblical Typologies

Third, in addition to explicit references to fulfilled Scriptures, Jesus fulfills numerous Jewish biblical typologies within the Johannine narrative.<sup>27</sup> Like angels on Jacob’s ladder, the Son of Man ascends and descends (Gen 28:12; John 1:51; 3:13). A number of Moses typologies are also fulfilled, ranging from fulfilling the place of Moses to providing manna in the wilderness (Exod 20:1–17; 14:15–31; 16:1–36; 3:14; John 1:16; 6:19; 8:28; 12:32; 6:1–13, 16–21; 8:56), and as the Prophet-like-Moses of Deuteronomy 18:15–22, the word of Jesus tellingly comes true (John 1:45; 5:39; 8:28; 11:42; 13:19; 18:9, 32). Elijah and Elisha typologies are fulfilled in the raising of Lazarus and the feeding of the crowd with barley loaves (1 Kgs 17:17–24; 2 Kgs 2:8; 4:8–44; John 11:1–44; 6:1–21). Davidic typologies are fulfilled in the triumphal entry (Zech 9:9; John 12:14); and Yahweh’s blessing of the nations by means of Abraham’s lineage comes true in the Greeks’ coming to Jesus (Gen 12:1–3; 12:20–21).

In addition to the explicit and typological fulfillments of Jewish Scripture in the Gospel of John, each of the “I-Am” themes and images connects a biblical image of Israel with the Johannine Jesus. While each of these themes is also present in the language of the Synoptic Jesus, the Johannine evangelist connects them centrally with the self-references of Jesus as a means of identifying in Jesus of Nazareth the restoration of historic Israel. Therefore, Jesus and his followers in John neither supersede nor supplant Judaism or Israel; rather, the Johannine Jesus is both the King of Israel and the Savior of the world (John 1:49; 12:13 and 4:42), restoring and fulfilling Israel’s historic vocation. Therefore, not only does the Johannine Jesus further the prophetic mission of John the Baptist, but he is also presented as fulfilling the historic justice, truth, and love-concerns of Israel’s prophets. It is precisely because Jesus of Nazareth and the Johannine evangelist challenge fellow Jewish audiences within an intra-religious set of engagements—not inter-faith polemics—that they both experience tensions with other Jewish leaders. In that sense, the originative Johannine offence was neither exclusivism nor supersessionism; it was continuing revelation within God’s eschatological history of salvation.

### 5. The True Johannine Offence: Exclusivism, Supersessionism, or Continuing Revelation?

In the light of the above analysis, it is easy to see why the Gospel of John is and has been a controversial and polarizing text. Historically, when one of its “riddling poles”—theological, historical, or literary—gets leveraged by an individual or a group, alternative interpretations get offered from the other side. Thus, in the Early Church, advocates of the quasi-divinity of Jesus (*homoiousious*—Arius and his kin) were countered by advocates of his essential divinity (*homousious*—Athanasius and his kin); advocates of his subordinate relation to the Father were countered by advocates of his egalitarian relation to the Father; and statements of the Spirit proceeding from the Father were counterbalanced by the Son’s also sending the Holy Spirit (hence, *Filioque* debates). Thus, theological challenges in early Christianity were successfully addressed by restoring the Johannine dialectical tensions that were there from the beginning, and the same must be done regarding Johannine soteriology and ecclesiology. So, is the real Johannine scandal its exclusivism, or its universalism; its anti-Judaism, or its pro-Judaism; its fundamentalist dogmatism, or its continuing revelation? Most often, a Johannine text is seen as problematic due to one-sided

interpretations that fail to note the larger, tensive features of John's dialectical theological, historical, and literary account.

### 5.1. Universalism versus Exclusivism

While some readers have interpreted John dogmatically and monologically on aspects of soteriology and religious particularity, the facts of the text also reflect a sustained universal thrust. Thus, while well-meaning Christians tend to cite John 14:6 as the only hope for heaven—"one way, Jesus"—and critics see such stances as hegemonic and exclusionary, the Light of Christ in John is also inclusive, universal, and welcoming, and the shepherding work of Jesus embraces the spiritually attentive from other flocks, as well (1:9; 10:17). Thus, these two theological trajectories must be held together, in tension. If one asks *why* Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, through whom all who come to the Father do so—as a descriptive reality, not a prescriptive regulation—helpful insights follow. It's not a new legal constriction, gifting some with heavenly rewards for the right answer, while damning others to hell for not being a Christian. The issue here is the gift of grace—the extension of God's unmerited love and its eschatological revelation in Christ Jesus—which cannot be garnered by human ingenuity, schemes, or initiatives. Here, *revelation*—the Divine Initiative—at times stands in opposition to *religion*—that which is of human initiative—as a creaturely attempt to garner God's grace and spiritual gifts.

Yes, understanding God's saving-revealing action in Christ Jesus reflectively can and will help, but the reach and impulse of the Light of Christ extends before and beyond such particular advances. Or, putting it in Pauline terms, Abraham believed God, and his faith was credited to him as righteousness (Rom 4:3; Gal 3:6). Likewise, we are saved by grace through faith, not by religious works, nor by dogmatic platitudes (Acts 15:11; Eph 2:8). But, why is revelation required? Because humans live by conventional operations—by deservedness—and undeserved grace cannot be imagined in our workaday worlds. Grace does not "work" in merit-oriented life. Thus, the only possibility for grace to be glimpsed is for it to be revealed, which is what the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob has been doing over the millennia and has been fully conveyed in the Incarnation and the Christ Events. Note how the scandal of grace as a universal gift is displayed by Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ of faith, and the Gospel of John.

#### 5.1.1. The Galilean Prophet and the Jerusalem Elite—Loving Concern as An Affront to Legal Observance

While the Synoptics have their own stories of Jesus to tell, John's narrative presents Jesus as extending gracious and inclusive outreach to those beyond the ethnocentric Judaism of his day. Whereas Matthew's Jesus advises his followers to go nowhere among the Gentiles or the Samaritans (Matt 10:5), Jesus not only befriends the Samaritan woman at the well, but she and her people believe in Jesus as the Messiah, the *Tahib*, in Samaritan tradition. They even offer Jesus and his disciples hospitality for two days and hail him as "the Savior of the world" (John 4:4–42). Again, the authentic worship God desires is neither in Jerusalem nor on Gerizim; it is in spirit and in truth—independent of cultic particularities, forms, or sites (vv. 21–24).<sup>28</sup>

The second sign of Jesus is performed from afar, in Capernaum, upon the son of a royal official, and he and his family believe, even though they are not Jewish (vv. 46–54). And, in Jerusalem, when Philip serves as a cross-cultural bridge to Greeks wishing to see Jesus, Jesus declares that his hour is fulfilled (12:20–23). While the hometown prophet is rejected in Nazareth according to Mark 6:5, in John, the Samaritans and Galileans received him, and his shepherding reach extends to sheep beyond particular folds (John 4:43–45; 10:16).

The provincial ethnocentrism of the Jerusalem elite is also challenged at several instances by the Johannine presentation of Jesus of Nazareth, as they refuse to believe in Jesus because he is from Galilee, requiring that the Messiah come from Bethlehem, David's city. When Nicodemus stands up for Jesus, they threaten him with the pejorative label, "Galilean," asserting that no prophet comes from Galilee (7:40–52). Despite Nathanael of

Cana's local provincialism about Nazareth, he nonetheless comes to believe in Jesus and is also present at the great catch of fish (1:46–49; 21:2). John's story of Jesus presents his ministry as expanding the universal reach of Jerusalem's festivals.<sup>29</sup> In addition to his offer to the woman at the well, Jesus promises Living Water flowing from within at the Festival of Booths, a reference to the universal fluency of the Spirit (4:10; 7:37–38; cf. Jer 2:23; 17:13; Zech 14:8). Likewise, while those who ate the manna in the wilderness died, the Bread that Jesus gives and is avails those who ingest it Eternal Life (6:27–58).

Another accounting of why the Jerusalem elite opposed Jesus and his healing on the Sabbath is that they did not have God's love in their hearts (5:41). The motivation for healing the man by the Pool of Bethzatha is the Father's love, which Jesus seeks to further in his ministry (v. 20), whereas the Jewish leaders are foremost concerned with keeping the Mosaic Law. Sabbath regulations versus the Father's love is the way that the Johannine evangelist presents the first contest of Jesus in Jerusalem over his signs, and this is why the religious leaders do not recognize his agency from the Father. God loves the world, and he sent his Son as his divinely commissioned agent of love and redemption (3:16). If people really knew God, they would love and appreciate the words and works of the Son (7:17; 8:42; 16:3); however, those rejecting the Son love the praise of humans more than the glory of God (12:43).

Ironically, in the contest between the religious authorities in Jerusalem and the Johannine Jesus, we have a contest of Deuteronomic midrashim. The Judeans cling to the work-prohibition of Deuteronomy 5:12–15; the Galilean prophet claims the commissioned agency of the Prophet like Moses of Deuteronomy 18:15–22, who speaks and acts solely on behalf the Father's divine commission. Further, his word comes true, showing that he is indeed the authentic Prophet, which is why he and the Father are one (John 2:22; 4:53; 11:42; 12:33; 13:11; 18:19, 32).<sup>30</sup> That claim, then, becomes a second offence among the Jerusalem elite, as they accuse Jesus of blasphemy in referencing his unity with the Father (10:33).

One more issue deserves to be clarified, which is the meaning of Jesus declaring the Judean leaders (*hoi Ioudaioi*) referenced in John 8:44 to be children of the Devil. Yes, this is strong language, but the issue is not Christianity versus Judaism. Johannine pejorative language always refers to particular behaviors and influences, not categories of being. First, in John 6:68–70, Peter's reference to Jesus being the Holy One of God—hence, a reference to his wondrous power to escape suffering and death (cf. Mark 1:24)—is described as being a devil (parallel to “Get behind me, Satan,” in Mark 8:33).<sup>31</sup> And, the Devil, or Satan, had corrupted Judas in his betrayal of Jesus (John 13:2, 27). Further, in 1 John 3:8–10, the children of God and the children of the Devil are differentiated as those who do righteousness versus those who do evil: those who love brothers and sisters versus those who sin. Thus, the contentious issue in John 8 is that the (some, not all) religious leaders are refusing to believe the truth; they are siding with the Father of Lies (8:44), seeking to kill Jesus, as the Devil was a murderer from the beginning, with no truth in himself (vv. 37, 40, 44). While some of the Judean Jews *do* believe in Jesus (8:31), others refuse the truth in their ethnocentric dogmatism. That is the issue, not their religion or ethnicity; Moses, wrote of *Jesus* (5:46), according the Fourth Evangelist.

Thus, the rule-breaking love of Jesus in healing people on the Sabbath is what scandalizes the religious leaders of Jerusalem. They do not have God's love in their hearts, and they do not recognize the Father's loving agency through the Son, who carries out the will of the Father, not his own. He also declares and embodies the Truth, while the religious elite pressure the blind man and his parents to go against their discernment (9:13–34), leveraging human honor over and against the glory and truth of God. Loving concern thus scandalizes legal dogmatism, and the issue is not one religion against another; it is a love-oriented approach to the Divine and to humanity that motivates the mission of the Johannine Jesus, which the Synoptic Jesus also affirms and commands (cf. Matt 22:34–40; Mark 12:28–30; Luke 10:27–28).

### 5.1.2. Jewish Outreach in a Diaspora Context—Synagogue Conservatism versus the Liberalism of Gentile Believers

While the first generation of the Pauline mission to the Gentiles—welcoming them into the family of Abraham by their faith in Jesus as the Jewish Messiah/Christ, not as a factor of circumcision or becoming outwardly Jewish—raised consternation among Jewish leaders in the larger Mediterranean world, tensions did not cease in the post-Pauline Jesus movement. While circumcision might have eased as a required stipulation among believers following the missive from the Jerusalem Council—requiring abstinence from eating meat offered to idols, drinking the blood of strangled animals, and sexual immorality (Acts 15:28–29)—tensions did not cease. Conservative Jewish communities in the Diaspora continued to be concerned regarding Gentile believers in Jesus who did not embrace accepted outward codes of Jewish faith and practice.<sup>32</sup> Further, some of these issues might have varied in their expectations from one setting to another, but with the ascendancy of Pharisaic Judaism following the destruction of Jerusalem and the decimation of its priestly leadership, emphases upon biblical codes of Jewish faith and practice likely increased in terms of expectation, as former residents of Judea and Galilee settled among Diaspora settings.

That being the case, tensions between the Jesus movement and synagogue leaders in post-70 CE Diaspora settings continued, especially around three issues. First, with regard to Social Identity Complexity Theory, Jewish communities within Hellenist-majority settings embraced a *Compartmentalization* stance with regards to matters of Jewish faith and practice, one visibly set apart from non-Jewish populations.<sup>33</sup> This would have included such physical and identifiable traits as circumcision, dress codes for men and women, observing some ceremonial washing practices, and attending sabbath worship. Likewise, being an upstanding Jew included refusals of dining with non-Jews, worshiping pagan gods or venerating idols (including Roman imperial cult participation), eating non-kosher food or foods offered to idols, and celebrating pagan festivals, together with abstaining from associated sexual practices. These and other outward codes of practice signified what it meant to be Jewish in a cosmopolitan setting, and in the post-Pauline mission to the Gentiles, as the Jesus movement grew, tensions with local Jewish communities likely increased.

From a Jewish rigorist standpoint, believers in Jesus as the Jewish Messiah/Christ ought to become circumcised, adopt Jewish practices in exchange for pagan ones, and attend synagogue Sabbath worship and related events. And, some probably did so. Most, however, met in house churches on First Day, and some more liberal Jews and more committed Gentile believers (including the Johannine leadership) likely worshiped in synagogues on the Sabbath and in house-churches on First Day.<sup>34</sup> Thus, the overall tensions between post-70 Jewish leaders and Johannine believers orbited around concerns that Gentile believers in Jesus as the Jewish Messiah/Christ would see themselves as inheriting the blessings of Abraham without needing to observe stipulations central to what it meant to be Jewish in terms of acceptable faith and practice (Gen 17 and Levitical codes, etc.).

In terms of faith issues, the Prophet-like-Moses agency schema of the Johannine Jesus—rooting his authorization for healing on the Sabbath in Deuteronomy 18:15–22—not only provoked consternation over apparent blasphemy during the actual ministry of Jesus, but now the concern extended to the elevated christological confessions of his followers, which bordered on ditheism.<sup>35</sup> Not only does the gospel narrative call for belief in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God (John 20:31), but the Christ-hymn of John 1:1–18—likely in use before it was added to the final edition of the Fourth Gospel by the compiler as an overture to the narrative that follows—would have been hard for local synagogue leaders to endorse, even if they thought highly of Jesus of Nazareth. Jewish monotheism was likely threatened by perceived Johannine ditheism. Thus, the secession of Jewish members from Johannine house churches referenced in 1 John 2:18–25 is countered by the Elder: if you reject Jesus as the Jewish Messiah/Christ, you will lose the Father; however, if you receive the Son, you will retain good standing with the Father who sent him. On that score, John's high



Christology was seen as an offence to those embracing Deuteronomy 6:4 and the *Shema*. Israel's God is *one God*, not two.

An even greater offense, though, was likely the societal practices of Gentile Jesus-adherents, who refused to adopt observable trademarks of Jewish religious commitments, believing that they were saved by grace and not needing to follow accepted standards of Jewish faith and practice.<sup>36</sup> In the second-generation Pauline mission, perhaps referenced explicitly by the warning of 2 Peter 3:16 and Jude 4, some false teachers were distorting the teachings of Paul and making a mockery of grace, seeing it as license for continuing in what Jewish communities would regard as sinful. Especially under the reign of Domitian (81–96 CE), when public emperor-laud was expected of all subjects of the Roman Empire, those refusing to worship Caesar would have been subject to punishment, and perhaps even capital punishment. As the Pliny–Trajan correspondence two decades later shows (*Letters* 10.96–97), some Jesus-adherents refused to worship Caesar or to deny Christ—and were thus guilty of the name Christian—so the governor of Bithynia questioned whether he should put two virgins to death, despite having been warned thrice. Indeed, some brought to tribunal declared that they were *not* Christians, and that they only met with Christians on a certain day of the week, before dawn, eating common food and singing a hymn to Christ as though he were God; but they denied Christ and venerated the Emperor's image. They had been doing this for two decades or more, and Pliny even declares that such people cannot be considered Christians and are thus innocent of the crime.

Given that the last verse of 1 John (5:21) finally delivers a pointed demand that people stay away from idols, such is clearly the death-producing sin mentioned several verses earlier (v. 16). Thus the references to loving not the world and its enticements is clarified (2:12–17), as are the references to those who claim to be walking in the light while walking in darkness (1:5–10; 2:1–11). Worldly assimilation is also the likely ethical issue legitimating the traveling docetizing prophets of 1 John 4:1–3 and 2 John 7. If Jesus did not suffer or come in the flesh, Jesus-adherents need not risk suffering or death if commanded by Roman officials to worship Caesar, or if pressured by business and civic leaders to support local (pagan) festivals. Thus, while their primary teaching might have involved cheap grace and easy discipleship, when challenged as to the believer's willingness to suffer for Christ as he suffered for us (hence, the witness of the water and the blood: John 19:34–35; 1 John 5:6–8), they denied that Jesus came in the flesh or suffered physically—as the Divine Son—excusing his followers from the same.<sup>37</sup>

This ethical liberalism may also have provoked the departure of Jewish community members, causing them to abandon First Day worship and return to synagogue-only participation (1 John 2:18–25). Thus, the Antichrist-related labels in the Johannine Epistles reference two distinct issues: the abandonment of the community by Jewish former participants in First-Day worship (actualized) and the visitation of traveling Gentile-ministers teaching cultural, pagan assimilation (impending).<sup>38</sup> In their loving the world, the cheap-grace false prophets fail to love fellow believers, providing conservative synagogue leaders ample ammunition to disparage the Jesus movement, including his being referenced as the Jewish Messiah/Christ, let alone the Son of God. While the pre-existent and divinity-associative confessions of Jesus as the Divine Son in the New Testament's Christological hymns might have raised consternation among conservative Jewish groups, these confessions actually bolstered Jewish opposition to divinity claims by Caesar Augustus and his successors. The Jewish Messiah/Christ *is* the Son of God, *not* Caesar Tiberias, Caligula, Claudius, Nero, Vespasian, Titus, Domitian, or Trajan. This juxtaposition of *Jesus versus the Caesars* was likely compelling to many Jewish residents in the Diaspora, but when Gentile believers in Jesus transgressed basic Jewish faith-and-practice codes, that evoked Jewish consternation over some all-too-liberal teachers in the emerging Jesus movement.

### 5.1.3. Offensive Christomorphic Universalism Today

While the Gospel of John is a favorite biblical text among many Christians today, it also provokes offense among both liberals and conservatives, on several levels. In terms

of its historical situation, it offends supersessionists and critics of Christianity alike, as Johannine Christianity had not yet individuated from first-century Judaism.<sup>39</sup> This is a historical fact, as the parting of the ways extended over centuries and differed from one locale to another, and Christians and Jews still regarded one another as siblings or at least cousins within a larger Judeo-Christian family for centuries, even to this day. Nonetheless, analyses of John and Judaism constitute one of the most pressing of religious issues in contemporary society.<sup>40</sup> Thus, John's presentations of Jesus as the Jewish Messiah/Christ continue to offend some Jewish audiences because of their departures from some Jewish values and the tragic history of religious antisemitism. Likewise, some supersessionist readers are baffled by John's thorough Jewishness, but more pressing are the ways that John's Christomorphic particularity and universalism continue to scandalize liberal *and* conservative audiences among contemporary readers of the text.

First, John's universalism scandalizes liberal, secular, and interreligious audiences, as the universally accessible Light of Christ is also tied to its eschatological manifestation in the historic work and mission of Christ Jesus. Thus, while the illuminative and salvific Light of Christ is at least potentially accessible across the bounds of culture, time, and space, the Divine Word became flesh in the life and witness of Jesus of Nazareth, and therein is God's glory revealed and encountered (John 1:9–14). That being the case, the recorded memory of who Jesus was and what he came to do in the New Testament becomes an objective referent by which to check and inform cultural and personal impressions of God's revealed truth, inviting modification and correction, as needed. Such impressions might also have been informed, or even distorted, by *how* Christ is represented—authentically or inauthentically—by his followers and adversaries. Thus, conforming one's impressions to the biblical presentations of Jesus as the Messiah/Christ becomes a refining process by which to purify one's impressions of the Light of Christ within. For instance, just because some fundamentalists or atheists seize upon a Johannine text unreflectively and dogmatically, without considering John's dialectical presentation of an issue, this does not mean that the evangelist would have agreed with their distorted representations. The evangelist was clearly a dialectical thinker, and unless interpreters demonstrate like capacities to hold dual Johannine tenets in tension, they are sure to get it wrong.

Here, though, another crucible is required. It is not "*my* Light," or a subjective infatuation with one's "brilliant notions" that is to be valued; it is *the* Light of Christ, apprehended inwardly, that poses the critical standard of measure. While the Son came not to judge the world but to save it (3:17; 5:19–38; 12:47), the Father has also extended judgment into his hands, because truth itself forces judgment in the hearts of minds of humans (3:18–21; 8:14–16; 9:39; 12:48). Thus, the revelation of truth itself forces one to take a stand for or against the Revealer. In that sense, God's liberating truth is never concentrically consonant with human conceptions of veracity. Bluntly, God's undeserved love—grace—is so totally counter-conventional that it requires a revelation from beyond for humans to even imagine it. If Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, truth itself is *Christomorphic*, rooted in the very form of the Word become flesh, and this is why it scandalizes subjective and self-oriented views of truth, demanding repentance. To see God's saving-revealing Truth and Light as centered in the person and work of Jesus as the Christ, who though he was equal with God, poured himself out, even unto death (Phil 2:6–11), inevitably also calls humanity to the Way of the Cross.

Or, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it: "When Christ calls a man, He bids him come and die".<sup>41</sup> Put further, "There are two ways possible of encountering Jesus: man must die (to self), or he must put Jesus to death".<sup>42</sup>

And yet, this is also precisely why knowing the truth of Christ is liberating (John 8:32). In seeing ourselves as we really are—via the convincing work of the Holy Spirit—we are convicted of both sin and of righteousness (16:8–11). Thus, one need not puff oneself up nor put oneself down; the Advocate-*Paraklētos* leads us into liberating truth, exposing what needs amending, and affirming what abides. And again, authentic worship is in spirit and in truth—regardless of time, form, and place; after such authentic worshipers, the Father

actively seeks (4:21–24). Indeed, to see the other in truth—as Christ sees them—leads us to rehumanize the other, whether they be Samaritan, Galilean, Judean, or Greek, empowering us to thus love one another as Christ has loved us (13:34–35; 15:12–17). Finally, the Risen Christ promises to lead the faithful by means of the Holy Spirit—sent by the Father and the Son—leading his followers into the truth they need for the day, keeping them in the world but not of the world (14:15–17, 26; 15:26; 16:8–15; 17:6–19). Thus, Christomorphic Truth challenges and scandalizes human conventionalities in ways liberating, calling for repentance and belief, leading into the newness of life.

Further, God’s saving-revealing Truth revealed in a person—Jesus Christ, which is also conveyed by the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit—scandalizes even the most nuanced forms of Christian dogmatism. While one cannot imagine any of the theological tenets rejected as heretical over the ages being more adequate than the solid planks of the Ecumenical Councils’ determinations of orthodoxy, this is not to say that Christomorphic Truth is limited to a set and static cluster of propositional tenets.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, following the Resurrected Lord, who continues to lead his followers into liberating truth via the timely workings of the Holy Spirit, puts into motion the biblically correct doctrine of illuminative revelation. As Professor Käsemann reminds us, though, the great irony of a closed canon is that it contains the Gospel of John, which teaches that Christ continues to speak and lead his followers directly and spiritually through the Holy Spirit, beyond the confines of a closed canon.<sup>44</sup> Thus, while aspiring to the best of exegetical inquiry and pursuing the best of faith-seeking-understanding, the Johannine Jesus claims that the Holy Spirit will continue to guide and lead his followers faithfully as they *attend*, *discern*, and *mind* his liberating truth for the day.

Finally, the tensive dialectic between individual and community must also be taken into consideration. Just as no one is deprived of access to the Light of Christ, so too does no one have total access. We need one another in the quest for truth, which advances within the tensive dialectic between the individual and the community. As individuals and community members alike are committed to seeking and minding truth above all else, they help each other advance its discernment. In the quest for truth, several queries advance the process. First, is a view consonant with God’s revelation in Scripture? The Spirit who inspired the Scriptures will not lead contrary to their overall witness. Second, is a view coherent with reason and adequate for experience? Soundness requires validity of argument and veracity of particulars. Third, is a view informed by historical wisdom? Learning from the past alleviates the repeating of errors, although new ones are always on the horizon. Fourth, have all perspectives been welcomed and considered prayerfully and within community? Drawing in the “pros and cons” of an issue allows a more textured appreciation of the issues involved, facilitating more informed discernment. And finally, is the way of Christ and concern for others prioritized over and against personal gain, perceived or actual? A lot of good can get done when it matters not who gets the credit, and this “pentalateral” approach to individual and corporate discernment provides a practical way forward in the attending, discerning, and minding of Christomorphic Truth.<sup>45</sup>

## 6. Conclusions

While the Gospel of John poses the most inclusive and exclusive presentations of soteriology and life-producing access to the Deity, like nearly every other Johannine theological theme, these issues are held in dialectical tension within the narrative. The failure to hold John’s universalism and particularity in tension is thus the bane of monological interpreters: fundamentalists and liberals alike. When asked why Jesus is the only way to the Father, given humanity’s universal access to the saving-revealing Light of Christ, the Johannine answer is that *no one has seen God at any time*. Only the one and only Son who is at the Father’s side has made God’s grace and truth eschatologically known to the world, and whoever responds to the Divine Initiative in faith is welcomed into the divine family. Thus, one may potentially respond in faith to the illuminative spiritual work of Christ within the

individual, and even within non-Christian settings, but that response is aided, clarified, and bolstered by learning more about Jesus and his witness in the canonical Gospels.

John's presentation of Jesus as the Jewish Messiah/Christ, however, neither supersedes nor supplants Judaism; it asserts his fulfilment of the Jewish Scriptures explicitly and typologically, seeking to restore a faithful view of just and loving Judaism as heralded by John the Baptist and embodied by Jesus of Nazareth. In that sense, John is radically pro-Jewish, not anti-Jewish. Some (not all) religious leaders in Judea opposed the Galilean prophet, but this does not imply the parting of the ways just yet; it simply reflects early resistance to the unofficial charismatic leader by the Jerusalem religious elite, and such is attested independently in the Acts of the Apostles. That being the case, the Johannine Revealer scandalizes religious authorities on many levels.

To the rigorist Sabbath observers in Jerusalem, Jesus exercises the love of the Father in healing the lame and the blind. To the followers of Moses among the Diaspora synagogues, Jesus claims to embody the revelatory Prophet predicted by Moses. To dogmatic liberal and conservative interpreters of the present era, the Johannine Jesus poses the scandal of a dialectical presentation of universal and particular tensions in the light of continuing revelation by means of the Holy Spirit, who is sent forth from the Father and the Son. Or, another way of putting it is that if we are to understand exegetically the revelational character of Johannine soteriology, that would be fitting dogma and wisdom upon which to construct our understandings of the Johannine evangel.

Thus, in answer to the sharpened query of whether the Fourth Gospel is universal or exclusive, the answer is an unequivocal YES. It is a matter of both/and, not either/or biblical understanding. For indeed, if the Truth itself is Christomorphic—a living reality in the form of Jesus as the Jewish Messiah/Christ—to know the Truth is essentially a relational reality, involving a dynamic response of faith to the Divine Initiative. And, as the subject of the narrative declares in John 8:32, that promise is worth embracing: “You shall know the Truth, and the Truth shall set you free”.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Source and redaction critics are known for inferring tensions within the Fourth Gospel as reflecting disagreements between alien sources, the evangelist, and an intrusive redactor, but evidence for such inferences is totally lacking. (Anderson 1996, 1997, 2010, pp. 48–136).
- <sup>2</sup> On supersessionism, see Donaldson (2016) and Vlach (2009). While the Gospel of John is not cited as extensively with relation to supersessionism, its primary relevance to the subject relates to issues of soteriology and its treatments of Jewish themes; cf. Korner (2020, 2022, pp. 1–5).
- <sup>3</sup> John Ashton described the genius of Bultmann's paradigm as addressing the two great Johannine riddles: the socio-religious character of the Johannine situation, introducing the Jewish Messiah to the Hellenistic world, and the evangelist's central theological thrust, revelation and its uneven responses by the world. Ashton (1991, pp. 62–66). In my view, we have six or seven issues faced within seven decades of the Johannine situation, four of which are also reflected in the Johannine Epistles and Apocalypse. Anderson (1997, 2006, 2007).
- <sup>4</sup> The witnesses, the signs, and the fulfilled word lead people to believe in Jesus as the Messiah/Christ and the Son of God: Anderson (2000).
- <sup>5</sup> On seven crises over seven decades within the Johannine situation, see Anderson (2007).
- <sup>6</sup> In that sense, the Johannine evangel is seen to be continuing the Pauline iteration of the gospel-message, that saving grace is attained by faith—as it is in the case of Abraham—a charism extended liberally to the world, not simply to an ethnic group or a particular religious movement. On John's universalism and exclusivism, see Culpepper (2002).

- For an overall view of John's dialogical autonomy, see [Anderson \(2011\)](#), pp. 125–55).
- John's key theological tensions include the humanity/divinity of Jesus as the Christ; the Son's egalitarian/subordinationist relation to the Father; the embellished/existentialist presentation of the signs; John's present/futuristic eschatology [Anderson \(1996, 1997, 2010\)](#), pp. 252–65).
- Note the epistemological origins of each of John's thirty-six theological tensions, historical problems, and literary perplexities: [Anderson \(2011\)](#), pp. 157–69).
- [Anderson \(1999\)](#). Note that in presenting Jesus as the Father's agent within the Mosaic agency schema, the Father–Son relationship is crafted rhetorically—exposing miscomprehending religious leaders as fallacious in their views—and John's apologetic thrust is targeted at emerging audiences—both Jewish and Gentile—within the larger Johannine situation.
- For a clear overview of the Fourth Evangelist's dialectical thought and tensive presentation of most issues in the Gospel of John, see C. K. [Barrett \(1972\)](#). For an analysis of the Cognitive–Critical origins of the Johannine evangelist's dialectical thinking, see [Anderson \(2004\)](#).
- For an overall analysis of John's polyvalent theological, historical, and literary dialectical features, see this extensive application of Bakhtin's dialogism: [Anderson \(2008\)](#). Conversely, the work of Ruth [Sheridan \(2013\)](#) suffers from reading only one feature of John's presentations of Judaism-related issues—the negative only—seeing the evangelist's narrative as Bakhtinian monologism rather than acknowledging any of John's theological tensions. See also [Anderson \(2007\)](#) for an overall view of the dialectical Johannine situation, applying Bakhtin's rhetorical analysis of narratological miscomprehension as a means of understanding a number of pressing issues in the first century, not simply one.
- Heraclitus, *Frag.* pp. 1–2, 11–12, 34, 78, 90–91, 111–15.
- In [Bultmann's](#) ([1970] 2014, pp. 45–83, 218–37) view, the existential crisis of humanity, as put forth in the Gospel of John, is that it forces persons to lay aside their religious and political platforms, responding in faith to the Divine Initiative, which Jesus as the divine emissary from the Father claims to be and is.
- Note the particular texts that populate these tensions: [Anderson \(2011\)](#), pp. 34–35; [Neyrey \(2007\)](#). On departures from the inclusive ministry of Jesus among some proponents of exclusivist soteriologies, see [Meeks \(2005\)](#).
- For an analysis of the dialectical features of Johannine universalism and particularism, see [Anderson \(2011\)](#), pp. 183–86). See also: [Quimby \(1947\)](#), [Reker \(1964\)](#), and [Siliezar \(2019\)](#).
- For an overall analysis of the purpose of the Fourth Gospel, see [Van Unnik \(1959\)](#).
- Plato, *Crat.* 402; *Symp.* 187; Aristotle, *Rhet.* iii. 5; Philo, *Leg. Alleg.* iii. 3.
- “The Word of the Lord” effects changes in its wake: Gen 15:1–6; Nu 24:11–14; 1 Ki 13:1–2; Amos 3:1. On the connecting of the creative power of God's Word in Creation and in John 1, see [Brown \(1966\)](#), “Appendix II: ‘The Word,’” pp. 518–24; and [Kubiś \(2020\)](#).
- Note the Priene calendar inscription, citing “the birthday of the god Augustus” as “the beginning of the gospel” in Smyrna. Later, Domitian (81–96 CE) required people to reference him as “Lord and God” (Dio Cassius, *Hist.* 67.4.7; 67.13.4; Suetonius, *Life of Domitian* 13.3). For the acutely political functions of the Christ-hymns of the New Testament in cross-cultural perspective, see [Anderson \(2016\)](#).
- The Lord's ways are made known to Moses (Psa 103:7); Elisha shows the way to the Arameans (2 Kings 6:19), [Anderson \(2018\)](#).
- Thus, not only is the word of God's prophet the Lord's truth (1 Kings 17:24; 22:16), but to know God's ways is to be instructed in the Lord's truth (Psa 25:4–5).
- So argues Parker [Palmer \(1983\)](#), as truth is personal as well as factual, and subjective as well as objective. See also the works of [Gadamer \(1989\)](#) and [Polanyi \(1974\)](#) on the personal character of transformative truth.
- God breathes life into humans (Gen 2:7; Job 33:4; Sirach 1:12), and God's promise gives life (Psa 119:50).
- In Bultmann's view, the reference to eating and drinking the flesh and blood of Jesus in John 6:51c–58 must have been an interpolation by the “ecclesiastical redactor,” as an instrumentalist form of theophagy—the eating of divine food—as a ritualistic requirement for salvation, citing Ignatius. However, for a historically contextual analysis of the “medicine of immortality” (Ignatius, *Ephesians* 20.2) as an appeal for corporate unity under the single worship service and leader, rather than Egyptian theophagy (partaking of *one* loaf versus *a* loaf), casting historical light on the martyrological thrust of John 6: [Anderson \(1996, 1997, 2010\)](#), pp. 119–36).
- Rightly, [McGrath \(2001\)](#) and [Vistar \(2018\)](#) both see the Johannine temple incident as reflecting an early prophetic confrontation, rather than a later one.
- On Jesus fulfilling the typology of the Eschatological Prophet in John, see [Anderson \(2018\)](#) and [Larsen \(2018\)](#), and [Fowler and Strickland \(2018\)](#).
- [Jojko \(2012\)](#) expands helpfully on the authenticity of Spirit-led worship in the Gospel of John.
- On the presentation of Jewish festivals fulfilled by the Johannine Jesus, see [Yee \(1988\)](#) and [Daise \(2007\)](#).
- On the Prophet like Moses agency schema in the Gospel of John, rooted in Deuteronomy 18:15–22, see [Borgen \(\[1968\] 1997\)](#) and [Reinhartz \(1992\)](#).



- 31 For a close analysis of John 6:67–71, see [Anderson \(1996, 1997, 2010\)](#), pp. 221–50). On the identity of *hoi Ioudaioi* in John 8:44, cf. [Wróbel \(2005\)](#), and [Blumhofer \(2020\)](#), where the issue is the failure to embrace the truth rather than being the wrong religion.
- 32 For a number of observable markers of first-century Jewish identity, [Casey \(1991\)](#).
- 33 For information on Social Identity Complexity Theory, see [Roccas and Brewer \(2002\)](#).
- 34 See the work of Robert J. [Banks \(2020\)](#), who builds a compelling case regarding house churches as constituting the primary sociological setting of early Pauline believers in the Diaspora; those settings likely continued within the second-generation Pauline mission, within which Johannine communities developed between 70 and 100 CE in Asia Minor or elsewhere.
- 35 On views of the highly dialectical Johannine situation, see [Brown \(1979\)](#), [Kobel \(2011\)](#), [Martyn \(1996, 2003\)](#), [Meeks \(\[1967\] 2017, 1972\)](#), and [Smith \(1984\)](#).
- 36 Thus, those denying that Jesus came in the flesh in 1 John 4:1–3 and 2 John 7 were not Gnostics; they refused to believe that Jesus suffered, so as to excuse themselves from the Way of the Cross under the new requirements of Domitian’s imperial cult. [Cassidy \(\[1992\] 2015\)](#), [Carter \(2008\)](#), [Thatcher \(2008\)](#).
- 37 This also is the issue addressed in John 6:51–58; cf. [Anderson \(1996, 1997, 2010\)](#), pp. 194–220).
- 38 For an in-depth analysis of the two Antichrist-related threats in the Johannine situation—the first being Jewish secessions back into local synagogues, and the second representing the threat of Hellenizing traveling ministers teaching cheap grace and assimilation to Greco-Roman cultures, see [Anderson \(2007\)](#).
- 39 On different views regarding the parting of the ways between Christianity and Judaism—with regards to the Johannine churches in particular—see [Becker and Reed \(2007\)](#), [Blumhofer \(2020\)](#), [Charlesworth \(2013\)](#), [Cirafesi \(2022\)](#), [Byers \(2021\)](#), [Katz \(1984\)](#), [Martyn \(1968, 1978, 2003\)](#), and [Meeks \(1972\)](#). In my judgment, the Johannine Jesus movement seeks to be centered within Judaism and has not departed by the end of the first century CE, and that is why there are tensions with local Jewish family and friends. [Anderson \(2017\)](#). Territoriality exists only between members of the same species.
- 40 For the spectrum of treatments of John and Judaism, see the full slate of issues in [Anderson and Culpepper \(2017\)](#), esp. 265–311). See also [Barrett \(1975\)](#), [Bauckham \(2008\)](#), [Beck \(1994\)](#), [Becker and Reed \(2007\)](#), [Blumhofer \(2020\)](#), [Bratcher \(1974\)](#), [Byers \(2021\)](#), [Charlesworth \(2013\)](#), [Cirafesi \(2022\)](#), [Davies \(1996\)](#), [Dodd \(1953\)](#), [Fortes \(2021\)](#), [Freyne \(1985\)](#), [Friesen \(2006\)](#), [Gager \(1983\)](#), [Johnson \(1989\)](#), [Knight \(1968\)](#), [Leibig \(1983\)](#), [Lieu \(2008\)](#), [Mason \(2007\)](#), [Motyer \(2008\)](#), [Moxnes \(2015\)](#), [Reinhartz \(2001, 2017, 2020\)](#), and [Sheridan \(2012\)](#).
- 41 On the cost of discipleship, see [Bonhoeffer \(\[1948\] 2001\)](#), p. 44).
- 42 On Christ the center, see [Bonhoeffer \(1978\)](#), p. 35).
- 43 Note, for sure, the polyvalent aspect of the Johannine presentation of Jesus and his mission, as represented within the dialectical and transformative thinking of the Johannine evangelist, designed also to create such in the experiential lives of the Johannine audiences: [Anderson \(2004, 2008\)](#). See also [Kluska \(2020\)](#).
- 44 In [Käsemann \(\[1968\] 2017\)](#)’s terms, “. . .the Fourth Gospel itself has no conception of closed revelation, but rather advocates, even against itself, the ongoing operation of the Spirit’s witness.” *The Testament of Jesus: A Study of the Gospel of John in the Light of Chapter 17*, The Johannine Monograph Series 6, translated by Gerhard Krodel, edited by Paul N. Anderson, p. 76.
- 45 And, as typified in the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15, such is the goal of authentic Christian leadership from one generation to the next. As an addition to the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, the addition of corporate discernment adds the conciliar work of Acts 15 to the process ([Anderson 2006](#)).

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