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Author(s): Wayne A. Meeks

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THE MAN FROM HEAVEN IN JOHANNINE SECTARIANISM

WAYNE A. MEEKS

YALE UNIVERSITY, NEW HAVEN, CONNECTICUT 06520

THE uniqueness of the Fourth Gospel in early Christian literature consists above all in the special patterns of language which it uses to describe Jesus Christ. Fundamental among these patterns is the description of Jesus as the one who has descended from heaven and, at the end of his mission which constitutes a *krisis* for the whole world, reascends to the Father. Not the least of Rudolf Bultmann's enduring contributions to Johannine studies was his recognition and insistence that any attempt to solve the "Johannine puzzle" must begin with this picture of the descending/ascending redeemer. Moreover, he saw that it is not simply a question of explaining the *concept* "pre-existence," but rather of perceiving the origin and function of a *myth*. The solution could not be found, therefore, by comparisons with philosophical developments in the hellenistic schools, such as the long-favored *logos spermatikos* of the Stoics, or its adaptation by middle Platonists or Alexandrian Jews. Myths have a logic of their own, which is not identical with the logic of the philosophers.¹

Nevertheless, Bultmann's own proposed solution has not commanded general assent. To be sure, his observation that the closest extant analogies to the Johannine myth are to be found in the literature of gnostic movements stands firm and has been reinforced by more recent discoveries. The problem comes in assessing the very important differences between the typical gnostic myths and that of John, and therefore the direction of the relationship between the two patterns. Perhaps the most important difference, which Bultmann did not fail to notice, is the fact that in gnostic myths most comparable with the Johannine pattern the redeemer's descent and ascent parallel the fate and hope of the human essence (soul, pneuma, seed, or the like), while in the Fourth Gospel there is no such *analogia entis* between redeemer and redeemed. Bultmann's hypothesis is that the typical gnostic myth was deliberately modified by the fourth evangelist,

¹ See R. Bultmann, "Die Bedeutung der neuerschlossenen mandäischen und manichäischen Quellen für das Verständnis des Johannesevangeliums," ZNW 24 (1925) 100-46 (reprinted in *Exegetica* [Tübingen: Mohr, 1967] 55-104), and especially his criticism of Ernst Percy in "Johanneische Schriften und Gnosis," OLZ 43 (1940) 150-75 (*Exegetica*, 230-54) and C. H. Dodd in NTS 1 (1954-55) 77-91 (ET: *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 27 [1963] 9-22). Dodd's focus upon "the logos-doctrine" as the *tertium comparationis* between John and the Hermetica and Philo was particularly vulnerable to this objection.

effectively "demythologizing" it. This hypothesis, plausible as it is, ran into difficulties of two sorts: (1) It required the support of very complex additional hypotheses about the literary sources of John, about the relationship between the Johannine Christians and the disciples of John the Baptist, and about the latter's role in the origins of the Mandaean sect. None of these hypotheses has received support from further specialized investigations.² (2) The *typical* gnostic myth with which Bultmann compared the Johannine pattern is an abstraction, obscuring the variety of actual gnostic myths in extant texts.³ Furthermore, Bultmann's synthetic myth is heavily dependent on the terminology of the Fourth Gospel; there is hardly any single document other than John in which all the elements of the "gnostic redeemer myth" listed by Bultmann in his 1925 article are integrally displayed.⁴

A number of scholars have proposed to stand Bultmann's hypothesis on its head: Johannine christology was not an adaptation of gnostic myth, they would say, but a step *towards* gnosticism. Older forms of this proposal, supported only by pointing to the lateness of the Mandaean and Manichean sources used by Bultmann, are not adequate. While no extant document of definite pre-Christian date may present a descending/ascending redeemer of the gnostic type, sufficiently strong inferences may be derived from later sources to make an argument from silence highly precarious.⁵ More weighty are studies which use the logic and

² For example, K. Rudolph's careful investigation of the Mandaean materials convinced him that "Johannes der Täufer und seine Jüngerschaft haben nach dem Befund der uns zugänglichen Quellen keine Beziehung zu den Mandäern gehabt" (*Die Mandäer*, Vol. I: *Prolegomena* [FRLANT, n.s. 56; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1960] 80). Both E. Käsemann ("Aufbau und Anliegen des johanneischen Prologs," in *Libertas Christiana: Friedrich Delekat zum 65. Geburtstag* [Munich: Kaiser, 1957] 75-99 [reprinted in *Exegetische Versuche und Besinnungen* II (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1965) 155-80; ET: *New Testament Questions for Today* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969) 138-67]) and E. Haenchen ("Probleme des johanneischen 'Prologs,'" *ZTK* 60 [1963] 305-34 [reprinted in *Gott und Mensch* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1965) 114-43]) reject the hypothesis of a *Redenquelle*. See also D. M. Smith, Jr., *The Composition and Order of the Fourth Gospel* (New Haven: Yale, 1965).

³ Cf. C. Colpe, *Die religionsgeschichtliche Schule* (FRLANT, n.s. 60; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1961), especially 186-208. See also A. D. Nock, "Gnosticism," *HTR* 57 (1964) 255-79.

⁴ This is even clearer in his article "Johannesevangelium," *RGG*³ 3. 840-50.

⁵ E. Haenchen has established a high probability that the essential gnostic features of Simon Magus were developed in the Simonian sect prior to any Christian influence ("Gab es eine vorchristliche Gnosis?" *ZTK* 49 [1952] 316-49; reprinted in *Gott und Mensch* 265-98). The question of the date and interpretation of the *Hymn of the Pearl* is more difficult; see most recently C. Colpe, "Die Thomaspsalmen als chronologischer Fixpunkt in der Geschichte der orientalischen Gnosis," *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum* 7 (1964) 77-93, and the survey by K. Rudolph, "Gnosis und Gnostizismus, ein Forschungsbericht," *TbRu* 34 (1969) 214-21. The Nag Hammadi documents prove that Christian gnostics did borrow and adapt mythical elements from non-Christian gnostics — and vice versa — at a later period. While these sources cannot directly prove anything about first century gnosis, careful analysis of them is providing cumulative evidence that myths of descending/ascending revealers flourished without any Christian influence. See, e.g., G.

literary form of the Johannine christological discourses to suggest a historical location somewhere between primitive Christianity and emerging gnosticism. For example, Siegfried Schulz's study of the Son of Man passages in John, despite the occasional artificiality of his "themageschichtliche Analyse," is able to show frequently that the re-interpretation of a basic substratum of *apocalyptic* motifs serves as the center for "Ankristallisationen von gnostisch-hellenistischen Elementen."⁶ Helmut Koester locates the Johannine farewell discourses at "a crucial place in the development of the genre 'Revelation'" which would lead to such theophany-type revelations as the Apocryphon of John.⁷ M. Jack Suggs has very plausibly argued that the identification of Christ with Sophia by Matthew, in contrast to Q, and by Paul, in contrast to his opponents in Corinth (so also Koester, against Wilckens), created a peculiar symbolic dialectic that paved the way for the developed gnostic Sophia-myths.⁸ What he says could be applied *mutatis mutandis* to John.

It is now commonly agreed that the Jewish Wisdom myth in some form lies behind both the Johannine christology and the gnostic soul and savior myths.⁹ The question is whether both the Johannine and the gnostic myths are independent variants of the Jewish, or whether one has influenced the other. The present essay will not attempt a direct answer to that question by re-examining the possible antecedents of John's symbolism, but will only explore the function of the mythical pattern within the Johannine literature. Such a study may have its own contribution to make to the question of inter-group influence.

The problem has been treated too one-sidedly as a problem in the history of ideas. Mythical language tends to be reduced to theological categories, and *historical* judgments are then made on the basis of the presumed *logical* priority of

W. MacRae, "The Coptic Gnostic Apocalypse of Adam," *HeyJ* 6 (1965) 27-35, and F. Wisse, "The Redeemer Figure in the Paraphrase of Shem," *NovT* 12 (1970) 130-40. Finally, it is impossible to dismiss the question whether the NT itself may not provide the earliest documentation of pre-Christian gnosticism, depending upon one's evaluation, for example, of the opponents of Paul in Galatia, Corinth, and Colossae, and of the sources of mythical elements found in liturgical traditions that are quoted in Pauline and deutero-Pauline letters. There remain, however, many vexed questions in this area.

⁶ *Untersuchungen zur Menschensohn-Christologie im Johannesevangelium* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1957) 179.

⁷ "One Jesus and Four Primitive Gospels," *HTR* 61 (1968) 240; reprinted in *Trajectories through Early Christianity* (eds. J. M. Robinson and H. Koester; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971) 197.

⁸ *Wisdom, Christology, and Law in Matthew's Gospel* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1970) 10, n. 14; 42, n. 18; 53, n. 41; and especially 58, n. 49.

⁹ G. W. MacRae ("The Jewish Background of the Gnostic Sophia Myth," *NovT* 12 [1970] 86-101) seems to me correct against U. Wilckens (*Weisheit und Torheit* [Beiträge zur historischen Theologie, 26; Tübingen: Mohr, 1959]) that it was precisely the *Jewish* form of the Wisdom myth that was used by the gnostics — at least those that may be usefully compared with the Fourth Gospel. On the other hand, I doubt the propriety of speaking of a *single* Jewish Wisdom myth or one single Wisdom movement. "Wisdom" as the ideology of a royal bureaucracy was obviously different from the "Wisdom" cultivated in an apocalyptic conventicle, for example.

one or other of these categories. Where this has occurred, Bultmann's insight, that the language of myth has a special logic, has been ignored. The Bultmann-Jonas theory of myth as the objectivation of the religious person's sense of his relationship to self and world was a significant step towards a more appropriate hermeneutic for mythical language. Yet, as Jonas later observed, the categories of existential philosophy that seemed to fit the *gnostic* myths so well are by no means a universal key.¹⁰ And even Bultmann tends to reduce the function of myth in John to theological categories; that is shown by his obsessive attempt to discover a *rational* sequence in the Johannine discourses and narratives by the incredibly complex rearrangement-hypotheses in his commentary. We have not yet learned to let the symbolic language of Johannine literature speak in its own way. It is symptomatic of the impasse in NT hermeneutics that we have as yet no adequate monograph on the Johannine symbolism as such.¹¹

Bultmann's starting point was the observation that the symbolic picture of Jesus as the man who descended and ascended constituted a *puzzle* within the Fourth Gospel. It seemed to identify Jesus as a revealer come from the heavenly world, and therefore able to communicate what he had "seen and heard" in that world — but his promise to do so was never fulfilled in the Gospel. He revealed only *that* he is the revealer.¹² Bultmann's solution involves the argument that this pattern ordinarily, in the gnostic milieu posited for the Johannine group, depicted a "revealer." The pattern as such therefore did not have to make sense within the literary structure of the gospel; it made sense in the extrinsic historical setting. The only thing necessary for John was to show that Jesus *was* the one and only one to whom the well-known pattern ought to be applied. If we are not satisfied with Bultmann's reconstruction of the historical situation in which the puzzle could be explained, then we are forced to ask his initial question all over again: In what situation does a literary puzzle provide an appropriate means of communication?

The problem may be best approached by complicating it: this pattern is not

¹⁰ *The Gnostic Religion* (rev. ed.; Boston: Beacon, 1963) 320-21. The Bultmann-Jonas concept of "objectivation" is significantly parallel to the notion of "projection," particularly as the latter has been re-defined by C. G. Jung. The reaction of Bultmann and other kerygmatic theologians to the "psychologism" of earlier theological Liberalism has blocked off what might have been a fruitful area of interaction, particularly in view of the Jung school's profound interest in gnosticism. However, Jung's discussion of the motif of descent and ascent as it occurs in medieval alchemy (*Mysterium Coniunctionis* [2d ed.; Princeton: Princeton Univ., 1970] 217-24) offers little that is directly useful for our present discussion.

¹¹ The analysis by E. Schweizer in his early work *Ego Eimi* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1939, Part IV) is abstruse and rather artificial. The perennial attempts to discover OT typologies in John have usually demonstrated more the ingenuity of eisegesis than the grammar of Johannine symbols. E. Stemberger's recent *La symbolique du bien et du mal selon saint Jean* (Paris: Seuil, 1970), violating the impressive canons in his own introduction, reduces the symbols to a puzzle picture where the categories of moral theology are to be discovered.

¹² ZNW 24 (1925) 102 (= *Exegetica* 57).

the only puzzling thing about the Fourth Gospel. The major literary problem of John is its combination of remarkable stylistic unity and thematic coherence with glaringly bad transitions between episodes at many points. The countless displacement, source, and redaction theories that litter the graveyards of Johannine research are voluble testimony to this difficulty. Many of the elements of the unitary style are probably not specific to a single author, but belong to the Johannine "school," for they are frequently found distributed between portions of the gospel which, on other grounds, we would attribute to "source," "evangelist," and "redactor." On the other hand, not all the *aporiae* in the present form of the gospel can be attributed to clumsy redaction; most of them evidently were acceptable to the evangelist, despite his ability to produce large, impressively unified literary compositions (the trial and crucifixion scenario, as the most notable example). There are a number of examples not only of double entendre which are progressively clarified by repetition and modification, but also of self-contradiction that are manifestly deliberate ("I do not judge . . . yet if I do judge . . .," 8:15). Above all there are parallel, slightly varying formulations of similar thematic complexes, ranging from double Amen-sayings side by side within one didactic dialogue ("Unless one is born *ἄνωθεν* he cannot *see* the kingdom of God" // "Unless one is born *of water and spirit* he cannot *enter* the kingdom of God," 3:3,5)¹³ to whole compositions that seem to be alternate interpretations of the same group of themes belonging to different stages of the history of redaction of the gospel (ch. 14 // chs. 15-16).¹⁴

We may find a clue to the proper understanding of these peculiar relationships in the attempt of some contemporary anthropologists to get at the function of myths in the societies that create them by means of close analysis of their *structure*. For example, the distinguished English scholar Edmund Leach proposes that the way in which myths work may be understood by analogies drawn from the study of electronic communications. If a message is to be conveyed in the face of pervasive distractions — "noise," or, in the case of myth, the overwhelming complexity of the total social matrix — then the communicator must resort to "redundance." He must repeat the signal as many times as possible, in *different* ways. From the repeated impact of varying signals, the basic *structure* which they have in common gets through. It is, therefore, only by paying attention to the underlying structure of the components in a system of myths that an interpreter can "hear" what the myths are "saying," or, to put it another way, can discover the function which the myths have within the group in which they are at home.¹⁵

¹³ On this form, see K. Berger, *Die Amen-Worte Jesu* (BZNW, 39; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1970) 95-117.

¹⁴ See J. Becker, "Die Abschiedsreden Jesu im Johannesevangelium," ZNW 61 (1970) 215-52.

¹⁵ "Genesis as Myth," *Discovery* (London) n.s. 23 (1962) 30-35; reprinted in *Myth and Cosmos* (ed. John Middleton; Garden City, N.Y.: Natural History Press, 1967) 1-13. This "structural" approach is now associated especially with the theories of the French social anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (see, e.g., the latter's *Structural Anthropology*

It is astonishing that attempts to solve the Johannine puzzle have almost totally ignored the question of what *social* function the myths may have had.¹⁶ No one, of course, is in a position to write an empirical sociology of Johannine Christianity. Nevertheless, it has become abundantly clear that the Johannine literature is the product not of a lone genius but of a community or group of communities that evidently persisted with some consistent identity over a considerable span of time. We know at least a few things about its history — all from direct allusions in the documents themselves. The group had to distinguish itself over against the sect of John the Baptist and even more passionately over against a rather strong Jewish community, with which highly ambivalent relationships had existed. It suffered defections, conflicts of leadership, and schisms. I shall argue that one function of the “symbolic universe” communicated in this remarkable body of literature was to make sense of all these aspects of the group’s

[New York: Basic Books, 1963], especially chs. II and XI), but Leach has brought *structuralisme* into connection with the functionalist and empirical traditions of English and American social anthropology. See his fascinating appreciation and critique in *Claude Lévi-Strauss* (“Modern Masters,” ed. F. Kermode; New York: Viking, 1970). Among other recent examples of the social-structural analysis of myth-systems which I have found suggestive for developing my own method are: V. W. Turner, “Colour Classification of Ndembu Ritual,” *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion* (ed. M. Banton; ASA Monographs, 3; New York: Praeger, 1966) 47-84; J. Z. Smith, “Birth Upside Down or Right Side Up?” *History of Religions* 9 (1969-70) 281-303; W. D. O’Flaherty, “Asceticism and Sexuality in the Mythology of Siva,” *ibid.* 8 (1968-69) 300-37; 9 (1969-70) 1-41.

¹⁶ Two partial exceptions are A. Kragerud’s proposals to see certain of the symbols, particularly the “beloved disciple,” as a covert self-justification of a charismatic sect of Christianity (*Der Lieblingsjünger im Johannesevangelium* [Oslo: Osloer Universitätsverlag, 1959]) and E. Käsemann’s attempts to explicate the argument between Diotrophes and the Elder (“Ketzer und Zeuge,” *ZTK* 48 [1951] 292-311; reprinted in *Exegetische Versuche und Besinnungen*, 1, 168-87) and the “naive docetism” of the Gospel (*Jesu letzter Wille* [Tübingen: Mohr, 1967]) within “conventicle piety” in conflict with “early catholicism.” Kragerud’s thesis, however, is undercut by highly arbitrary exegesis at points; Käsemann’s by the imposition of categories from post-Reformation church history on the first-century phenomena (see my review in *USQR* 24 [1969] 414-20). More important, J. L. Martyn has made a major contribution toward locating the kind of milieu in which the anti-Jewish polemic of one stratum of the Johannine materials was formed (*History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* [New York: Harper and Row, 1968]). His position is reinforced by the investigation, from quite a different perspective, of H. Leroy, *Rätsel und Missverständnis* (BBB 30; Bonn: Peter Hanstein, 1968). I became acquainted with Leroy’s careful and provocative monograph only after I had completed the present essay; hence I shall forego the detailed *Auseinandersetzung* with him which would be appropriate at points where our analyses run parallel. While our methods are different (but not, I believe, incompatible) and the passages and motifs he examines only partially overlap those treated here, I am delighted to find a remarkable convergence of my results with his. On the basis of a wide-ranging survey of the *riddle* in folklore and literature (pp. 13-45), Leroy describes the form of the Johannine dialogue-with-misunderstanding as a “verborgenes Rätsel,” which presupposes a tight-knit community with a “Sondersprache” unintelligible to outsiders. In order to “know the truth,” one must join this community — probably a cluster of small congregations — hear its preaching, be instructed in its catechesis, and participate in its ritual.

history. More precisely, there must have been a continuing dialectic between the group's historical experience and the symbolic world which served both to explain that experience and to motivate and form the reaction of group members to the experience.

In the following pages an attempt is made to discern the function which the motif "ascent and descent" serves, first, within the literary structure of the Fourth Gospel, then, by analogy, within the structure of the Johannine community and its relationships to its environment.

I

At the outset it may be as important to indicate what is *not* said about the descent and ascent of Jesus as what is said. For example, the descent from heaven is not described in John, but everywhere presupposed as a *fait accompli*. The prologue offers no real exception, for it is not really a "Prolog im Himmel," though the standpoint of the poem's narrator is, in a sense, *sub specie aeternitatis*. The story of Jesus in the gospel is all played out on earth, despite the frequent indicators that he really belongs elsewhere. Consequently, those stories which describe the commissioning of an envoy, his arming for the journey, and the dangers of the descent itself are not parallels, for the center of attention in them is different. In this general category could be included not only many of the Mandaean myths of the descent of the messengers of light, but also the more ancient myths of the descent of gods or heroes into the underworld: Inanu, Demeter, Heracles, Orpheus, etc. The references to descent and ascent are introduced into the middle of things in John, as explanations of something else. *The motif belongs exclusively to discourse, not to narrative.* A description of a descent or ascent, in narrative form, can identify the actor as a hero, by describing the dangers he overcomes. Or it can serve the quite different function of an occasion for a cosmography: the geography of Hades, for example. In John, neither use of the motif is present. It is used exclusively to identify Jesus — but not as a hero. It depicts him rather, as a detailed analysis of specific passages will show, as the Stranger *par excellence*.

The pair of verbs ἀναβαίνειν/καταβαίνειν, "ascend/descend," appears in John for the first time¹⁷ in the perplexing promise made to Nathanael in 1:51: "Amen, amen I say to you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man." This traditional logion¹⁸ depends on a midrash on Gen 28:12,¹⁹ from which the participles, in just this

¹⁷ The descending (καταβαίνον) of the spirit (1:32-33) is from the traditional baptism pericope which the evangelist has deliberately omitted, substituting only a report by John of the Spirit's descent.

¹⁸ R. E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John, I-XII* (AB 29; Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1966) 88-91; Schulz, *Menschensohn-Christologie* 98; K. Berger, *Amen-Worte*, 113. Whether *all* double-Amen sayings in John are traditional logia or rephrasing of such, as Berger claims, is open to question.

¹⁹ C. F. Burney, *The Aramaic Origin of the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 115-

peculiar order, are drawn.²⁰ As Eduard Schwarz noticed in his famous article on the "aporiae" in the Fourth Gospel, the saying has the form of a solemn prophecy which, because of its place at the beginning of the book, demands some fulfillment in the subsequent narrative.²¹ This is all the more so if, as Schulz argues, the logion's purpose is to use the Bethel midrash to "correct" the traditional prophecy of the parousia which is found in similar form in the Synoptics (Mark 14:62 par.; cf. 13:26; Luke 17:22; Mark 16:7 par.) in the direction of a "realized eschatology."²² Yet there is certainly no explicit fulfillment in John; as Windisch notes, there are no angelophanies in the Fourth Gospel.²³ Nevertheless, to suppose that the evangelist has merely extracted the prophecy from a source in which there *were* angelophanies (Windisch) is a solution of embarrassment, while the more common explanation, that the "ascending and descending" angels are merely a "symbol" of the union of the celestial and terrestrial worlds,²⁴ evades the exegete's responsibility to deal with the specific way in which the author handles symbols. This larger question is one which can only be approached after we have gathered more information about the over-all structure of our theme. At the moment it is enough to notice that the prophecy in its present context does two things: (1) It introduces the title "Son of Man," thus completing the series of titles whose announcement is evidently one of the major functions of the whole section vss. 29-51.²⁵ (2) It introduces the *pattern* of ascending and descending. If angels play no further role in John, perhaps it is precisely this *pattern* which is to be remembered from the saying. In any case, it is a mistake to focus upon the question, what are the angels supposed to be doing for the Son of Man?²⁶ It may not be entirely accidental that the next time the Son of Man title appears in the gospel is also the next time the verb-pair "ascend/descend"

16; H. Odeberg, *The Fourth Gospel* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksells, 1929) 33-42; C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: University Press, 1953) 244-45; B. W. Bacon, *The Gospel of the Hellenists* (New York: Henry Holt, 1933) 158-59; G. Quispel, "Nathanael und der Menschensohn (Joh 1 41)," *ZNW* 47 (1956) 281-83; N. A. Dahl, *Das Volk Gottes* (2d ed.; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1963) 170; "The Johannine Church and History," *Current Issues in New Testament Interpretation* (eds. W. Klassen and G. F. Snyder; New York: Harper, 1962) 136; Schulz, *Menschensohn-Christologie* 96-103.

²⁰ From the Heb. text or its equivalent, as Burney points out. The LXX has finite verbs and, of course, removes the ambiguity of the *bó*, "on him"/"on it," which is the starting point of the midrash. (The latter point is ignored by the interpretations of Quispel [see previous note] and J. Jeremias, "Die Berufung des Nathanael [Jo 1, 45-51]," *Angelos* 3 [1930] 2-5).

²¹ "Aporien im vierten Evangelium," *Nachrichten der Göttingischen Gelehrten Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften* (1908) 517.

²² *Menschensohn-Christologie* 99-103.

²³ "Angelophanien um den Menschensohn auf Erden," *ZNW* 30 (1931) 215-33, esp. 226-27.

²⁴ W. Bauer, *Das Johannevangelium* (3d. rev. ed.; *HNT*, 6; Tübingen: Mohr, 1933) 42; Odeberg, *Fourth Gospel* 37; Bacon, *Gospel of the Hellenists* 158-59.

²⁵ Windisch, "Angelophanien" 215-19.

²⁶ As Jeremias does, "Berufung des Nathanael."

appears, 3:13, where we are told that ascending and descending are the exclusive properties of the Son of Man. There is a curiously close connection throughout the gospel between this title and the descent/ascent language.²⁷ Moreover, while the promise of the vision of "greater things" is made in 1:51 to Nathanael, "the real Israelite,"²⁸ it is "the teacher of *Israel*," Nicodemus, who in 3:11-13 is told that he cannot or will not see certain superior things.²⁹

In the dialogue with Nicodemus the evangelist has brought together a number of disparate traditional motifs³⁰ which have to be understood in terms of their place in the rather loose structure of the dialogue as a whole.³¹ In vss. 11-14, the third Amen-saying of the section is followed by three statements that are merely juxtaposed without any clear connecting links. Within this small collection the descent/ascent of Jesus seems to serve as the warrant for the esoteric revelation which he brings. Only he can tell about "heavenly things," because only he has descended from heaven — and no one else has ascended. As Odeberg showed, the *exclusivity* of the revelation by the Son of Man must be construed as a polemic, not against claims of other gnostic revealers (since they, too, would claim to have "descended"), but against the claim of prophets or seers to have received revelations by means of "heavenly journeys," as for example in apocalyptic or in the *merkābāb* speculation, or in the traditions of the theophanies to Moses and the Patriarchs.³² Note that this statement clarifies the ambiguous meaning of the previous two Amen-sayings, for the unusual formulation "to see the kingdom of God" in vs. 3 can only refer to a *Himmelsreise* tradition.³³ The more traditional-sounding saying of vs. 5, asserting that only one born of water

²⁷ Cf. Bacon, *Gospel of the Hellenists* 325; E. M. Sidebottom, "The Ascent and Descent of the Son of Man in the Gospel of St. John," *ATR* 2 (1957) 115-22.

²⁸ R. Kieffer is certainly correct in his observation that ἀληθῶς, as usual in John, modifies the predicate (cf. R. Bultmann, *Das Evangelium des Johannes* [Meyer, 2; 16th ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1959] 73, n. 6), but his translation "voici véritablement un 'voyant Dieu,'" which appeals, I assume, to Philo's allegory of the name Israel, is an overinterpretation (*Au delà des recensions?* [Coniectanea biblica, NT ser., 3; Lund: Gleerup, 1968] 153).

²⁹ The sacral name Israel is extremely rare in John, elsewhere only 1:31 (where it is rather clearly an introduction to the manifestation of Jesus to the "real Israelite" in 1:48-51) and in 12:13 (which like 1:50 is a confession of Jesus as King of Israel). Cf. W. Meeks, *The Prophet-King* (NovTSup, 14; Leiden: Brill, 1967) 82-83.

³⁰ Cf. Schulz's analysis, *Menschensohn-Christologie* 104-9.

³¹ The attempt to reconstruct a written source from which the evangelist may have drawn here (Bultmann, *Evang. Joh.* 91-121; H. Becker, *Die Reden des Johannesevangeliums und der Stil der gnostischen Offenbarungsrede* [ERLANT, n.s. 50; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1956] 94-96) produces more difficulties than it solves.

³² Odeberg, *Fourth Gospel*, 72, 89; Bultmann, *Evang. Joh.* 107, n. 5; Meeks, *Prophet-King*, passim; *contra* Sidebottom ("Ascent and Descent," 119-22), who sees no polemic at all here.

³³ Cf. Wis 10:10, where we are told that Sophia "showed him [sc. Jacob] the kingdom of God and gave him knowledge of holy things." This passage proves that, at this significantly early date, Jacob's vision at Bethel was understood as a vision of the *merkābāb* (see Dahl, "Johannine Church" 136 and n. 20). On the significance of the fact that the typical form of early Jewish mysticism was associated with *royal* imagery ("basileomor-

and spirit can *enter* the kingdom, is thus re-interpreted to refer to an *ascent to heaven*,³⁴ while vs. 13 shows that ἀνωθεν has to mean “from above” and that “the one born from above/from the spirit” can only be the Son of Man, Jesus. This interpretation is confirmed by vss. 31-36, which provide a reprise of the themes of the dialogue, for there ὁ ἀνωθεν ἐρχόμενος is ὁ ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ ἐρχόμενος, and as the one “above all” — even above John the Baptist — is obviously Jesus alone. Whether the general formulations in vss. 3, 5, and especially 8, leave room for reference *secondarily* to the community of believers is a very important question which must be discussed in another context below. Initially, vs. 13 provides a fair summary of the whole dialogue: Jesus alone has access to heavenly secrets. On the surface, then, the descent/ascent motif serves here as a warrant for the truth of those secrets. Careful analysis of the form of the dialogue, however, will show that the revelation-warrant language is here being used for a special purpose.

Nicodemus plays a well-known role: that of the rather stupid disciple whose maladroit questions provide the occasion (a) for the reader to feel superior and (b) for the sage who is questioned to deliver a discourse. The genre is widespread in the Greco-Roman world,³⁵ though perhaps the closest parallels to the present dialogue are to be found in the dialogues between the seer and the *angelus interpretis* in apocalypses and in the gnostic revelations such as the Apocryphon of John or the Pistis Sophia. In such contexts, one frequently meets the cliché, “You do not understand earthly things, and you seek to know heavenly ones?” This may serve to mock a student who seeks to know something beyond his powers,³⁶ or to rebuke an attempt to ascend to heaven.³⁷ Only the use of the Johannine term πιστεύειν distinguishes vs. 12 from this commonplace. Precisely because the riposte is a cliché, whose function is always to administer a more-or-

phism”: Graetz), see G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1961) 54-57.

³⁴ Cf. K. Berger, *Amen-Worte* 103.

³⁵ Cf. the observations by H. A. Fischel, “Greco-Roman Rhetoric and the Study of Midrash,” a paper read to the Biblical Literature Section, American Academy of Religion, October 25, 1970, as yet unpublished.

³⁶ Formally, the closest parallel is 4 Ezra 4:1-11, 20-21. Compare the story of Thales, who fell into a pit while looking at the stars. To his plea for help an old woman retorted: σὺ γάρ, ὦ Θαλῆ, τὰ ἐν ποσὶν οὐ δυνάμενος ἰδεῖν τὰ ἐπὶ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ οἶει γινώσκειν; (Diogenes Laert. I. 34). Similarly, Alexander the Great, giving a moral blow to Nectanebus while the latter was trying to teach him astrology, said: τὰ ἐπὶ γῆς μὴ ἐπιστάμενος τὰ ἐν οὐρανῷ ἐκζητεῖς (Ps.-Callisthenes, *Life of Alexander*, 1.14). Cf. Wis 9:16 and Ign Trall 5:1-2, as well as Cicero, *De Rep.*, 1.30: Quod est ante pedes nemo spectat, caeli scrutantur plagas.

³⁷ So Alexander's attempt to ascend to heaven is rebuked: Ἀλέξανδρε, τὰ ἐπίγεια μὴ γινώσκων, πῶς τὰ οὐρανὰ (οὐράνια) καταλαβεῖν ἐπιζητεῖς; ὑπόστρεψον οὖν διὰ τάχους ἐπὶ τὴν γῆν (Ps.-Callisthenes, 2. 41; MSS Leiden and Paris Supp. 113; not in the oldest recension). And in Seneca's satire of Claudius' would-be apotheosis (*Apocolocyntosis*, 8.3), one of the gods says to Hercules: “Quid in cubiculo suo faciat nescit, et iam ‘caeli scrutatur plagas!’” (So O. Weinreich, *Senecas Apocolocyntosis* [1923] 140; Waltz's text reads *nescio* for *nescit*, but that would spoil the point of the quip. “Caeli scrutatur plagas” is an oft-quoted line from Ennius, *Iphigenia*; see the Cicero quotation in n. 36).

less serious warning or rebuke — that is, to put the would-be learner in his place — the difficulty in deciding just what are the ἐπίγεια which Jesus has told Nicodemus is not so important as most commentators have believed. The point of vs. 12 is not at all the contrast between earthly and heavenly information, but the contrast between the questioner and the one who possesses the information.

The first and primary message of the dialogue is thus simply that Jesus is incomprehensible to Nicodemus. They belong to two different worlds, and, despite Nicodemus' initial good intentions (vs. 2), Jesus' world seems quite opaque to him. It becomes important then to discover just what or whom Nicodemus represents, that his obtuseness should be depicted so paradigmatically by the evangelist. Of course, the specific designations "ruler of the Jews" (vs. 2; 7:50) and "the teacher of Israel" (3:10) provide a solid starting point. His two subsequent appearances in the gospel are as fraught with ambiguity as this one; this ambiguity is doubtless an important and deliberate part of the portrait of this obscure figure. Nevertheless, there is a consistent analogy between the narratives about Nicodemus and certain statements about the Jews in John which gives us important clues about his function in the gospel and also about the extraordinarily subtle way in which certain themes are elaborated in this gospel.

First, he comes to Jesus "by night," a detail hardly necessary to the story, but also not merely a random bit of color, for the evangelist takes pains to remind his readers of it later on, in a note which in fact *characterizes* Nicodemus as "the one who came to him previously [or, "at first"] by night" (19:39). This casts a certain suspicion over him, because of what is said in the dialogue itself about the division between people who come to the light and those who remain in darkness (3:19-21). Nicodemus does *come* to the light, but he is depicted as one who does not perceive that light very clearly, and who is hesitant and unable to make the decisive step from darkness to light.

Nicodemus' opening statement to Jesus is, in effect, a declaration of faith. He believes that Jesus has "come from God," and the basis for that belief is the *signs* which Jesus has performed. Nicodemus' case is, therefore, rather closely parallel to that of the blind man healed by Jesus in ch. 9, who on the same grounds, viz., Jesus' signs (especially, of course, the one performed to his own benefit; but also in general, *ταῦτα σημεῖα*, 9:16), declares that Jesus is "a prophet," not a sinner, but "from God" (9:16-17, 30-33). Like that man, Nicodemus confesses a faith in Jesus which, if imperfect, at least corresponds to an acceptable first stage of faith as viewed by the Johannine community.³⁸ Also like

³⁸ This is not the place to raise again the vexed question of "sign faith" in the *Redaktionsgeschichte* of John. I believe that the difference between the viewpoint of the "signs source" and that of the evangelist is not so great as Bultmann (*Evang. Joh.*, *passim*) and Haenchen ("Johanneische Probleme," *ZTK* 56 [1959] 19-54; reprinted in *Gott und Mensch*, 78-113) and others have maintained. See the paper by P. Meyer, "Seeing, Signs, and Sources in the Fourth Gospel" (read to the Gospels Section, American Academy of Religion, October 18, 1968, unfortunately unpublished), for a different view. R. Fortna's source analysis (*The Gospel of Signs* [SNTS Monograph Series, 11; New York: Cambridge, 1969]) has moved the discussion towards a solid footing, though at times the

the “enlightened” blind man, Nicodemus will defend Jesus before the authorities (7:50f.). But unlike him, Nicodemus will not go so far as to master the “fear of the Pharisees” [or, “of the Jews”] and risk being expelled from the synagogue (9:22, 34; 12:42). And unlike him, he is unable to comprehend the identity of the Son of Man (9:35f.; 3:13ff.). When he appears for the third and last time — in a distinctly Johannine addition to the Joseph of Arimathea tradition (19:39) — it is to bury Jesus. His ludicrous “one hundred pounds” of embalming spices indicate clearly enough that he has not understood the “lifting up” of the Son of Man.³⁹

Nicodemus thus becomes the representative of those Jews mentioned in 2:23f., who “believed in [Jesus’] name because they saw the signs which he did,” but to whom Jesus would not “entrust himself” because of his suprahuman knowledge of their hearts. The theme of Jews who have begun to believe in Jesus but whose faith is not to be trusted is further developed in 8:30-59, a dialogue that depicts them in such dark tones — potential Christ-killers and sons of Cain or the Devil — that the shabby treatment of Nicodemus in ch. 3 seems mild by comparison. More attention must be given to ch. 8 below, for in that context occurs the most sharply dualistic statement of the above/below theme in the Fourth Gospel. It is already apparent, however, that the theme is closely connected with the trauma of the Johannine Christians’ separation from the synagogue.⁴⁰

The final portion of ch. 3 (vss. 31-36) is so closely related to the themes of the Nicodemus dialogue that many commentators have proposed that in some original form of the gospel these verses stood immediately after vs. 21. Such rearrangement hypotheses result from failure to perceive one of the most striking characteristics of the evangelist’s literary procedure: the elucidation of themes by progressive repetition.⁴¹ In part this procedure was probably forced upon the author by the nature of the traditional material he was using, which had evidently produced, within the Johannine community, a number of stylized didactic units, in the form of the “revelation discourse,” on overlapping themes. Alternative formulations produced by the community did not always perfectly coincide. The variant formulations could be simply juxtaposed, and that in fact is most frequently the case in the *Sammel-literatur* of sects which make use of the revelation

assumption of divergent theologies seems to enter his *Quellenscheidung* decisions as an *a priori*. His summary evaluation is a model of clarity and precision (“Source and Redaction in the Fourth Gospel’s Portrayal of Jesus’ Signs,” *JBL* 89 [1970] 151-66). For a survey of recent literature on the subject and a defense of Haenchen’s position, see J. M. Robinson, “The Johannine Trajectory,” *Trajectories* 238-56.

³⁹ Suggested by P. Meyer, in private communication.

⁴⁰ In this respect I am in full accord with Martyn, *History and Theology*, though I doubt whether the separation can be identified specifically with the *Birkat ham-Minim* promulgated at Yavneh, and whether that decree itself can be dated so precisely. Cf. the criticism by Stemberger, *Symbolique* 106, n. 3.

⁴¹ E. Hoskyns, who speaks of the Fourth Gospel’s “self-contained allusiveness,” has seen this more clearly than any other commentator I know (*The Fourth Gospel* [2d. rev. ed.; London: Faber and Faber, 1947] 67).

discourse form, whether apocalyptic or gnostic.⁴² That can happen also in the Fourth Gospel, but characteristically the variants are interspersed with narrative episodes or other kinds of material, with connectives and restatements by the evangelist. The result is not only a dramatic effect produced by the connection between discourse and narrative, but also a certain distance for the reader from the ambiguous and paradoxical statements, so that the internal tensions of the material begin to work in a progressive, didactic spiral.⁴³ John 3:31-36 is a splendid example. As the composition of the evangelist, it brings together in his own language the principal themes of the Nicodemus dialogue, which was composed in part from pre-Johannine material. A number of ambiguities from the dialogue are here cleared up. For example, as we noticed above, *ἀνωθεν* in vs. 31 can only mean "from above." Moreover, implications which, in our analysis above, were suggested by the *structure* of the dialogue are here stated explicitly. Thus, while the traditional style of the dialogue suggested that the one "from above" would communicate supraterritorial *knowledge*, the net effect of the dialogue was only and purely to indicate *his own* superiority to the questioner — and to any "earthly" person. That is precisely what is now said in vs. 31: "He who comes from above *is* above all." Vs. 32 is exactly parallel with vs. 11, but in the third person singular rather than the communal, confessional first plural. The empty "revelation form" persists: "what he has seen and heard, this he testifies," but the subsequent verses (33-36) make it even plainer than do vss. 11-21 that the question is not whether one is able to receive the special information which the heavenly messenger brings, but whether one will accept the messenger himself. The evangelist will later develop this further, in a classic example of his deliberate and didactic use of self-contradiction. In 5:31-41 Jesus is made to insist that he does not testify to himself; in 8:12-20 he takes up the same theme, in response to a "Jewish" accusation, with the remarkable concession:

Even if I testify about myself, my testimony is true . . .
I do not judge anyone,
but even if I judge, my judgment is true. . . .

The total "testimony" of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel, the sole object of his mission in "the world" (18:37), is in fact about himself, and the presentation of that self-testimony is depicted as the *krisis* of the world. But the Johannine "self-contradiction" forces the reader to think of Jesus' self-testimony in distinction from a false kind of self-testimony (that identified with the arrogance of the false prophet in Deut 18:22, the seeking of *doxa* from men: 5:44).⁴⁴ Because this *krisis* of faith or unfaith is the major point of the dialogue, both the dialogue

⁴² D. M. Smith, Jr. makes this point effectively against Bultmann's rearrangement hypotheses (*Composition and Order* 178).

⁴³ I am grateful for suggestions made by Jan Wojcik, a graduate student in comparative literature at Yale, who has compared the Johannine style with the didactic dramaturgy of Berthold Brecht.

⁴⁴ See Meeks, *Prophet-King* 47-57, 303-4.

(vss. 16-21) and the evangelist's summary (vss. 35-36) conclude with a statement about it in connection with the sending of the "beloved" son.

But why should the summary be separated from the dialogue it summarizes by an apparently irrelevant discussion of the relationship of Jesus to John the Baptist? The transition from vs. 30 to vs. 31 makes the reason rather plain. Because Jesus, being "from above," is "above all," John "must diminish" in comparison with him. There is no escaping the conclusion that, for the evangelist, John and his movement belong among those who are "of the earth" (vs. 31). By placing his summary immediately after this self-testimony of John, therefore, the evangelist makes a statement which is functionally the equivalent of the "Q" saying, "among those born of women none is greater than John; yet he who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he" (Luke 7:28 // Matt 11:11).

Thus the dialogue with Nicodemus and its postscript connected with John the Baptist constitute a virtual *parody* of a revelation discourse. What is "revealed" is that Jesus is *incomprehensible*, even to "the teacher of Israel" who holds an initially positive belief in him — within the context of Jewish piety — and even to the Baptist who has been his primary human witness (5:32-35). The forms of speech which would ordinarily provide warrants for a particular body of information or instruction here are used in such a way that they serve solely to emphasize Jesus' strangeness.

Yet it is not quite accurate to say with Bultmann that Jesus reveals only that he is the revealer. He reveals rather that he is an enigma. But he also reveals some positive content of the Johannine christology; i.e., the dialogue is the vehicle for introducing into John's literary schema several significant christological themes: (1) the ironic "exaltation" (= crucifixion) pun,⁴⁵ (2) the mystery of the origin and destiny of the spirit-born (*πρόθεν ἔρχεται καὶ ποῦ ὑπάγει*, vs. 8),⁴⁶ and (3) the explicit identification of the Son of Man with *ὁ καταβάς* (vs. 13).⁴⁷ As we have seen, these themes become clear only as their progressive development is traced through the gospel. The form of the dialogue itself is such that the reader without special prior information would be as puzzled as Nicodemus. Only a reader who is thoroughly familiar with the whole Fourth Gospel or else acquainted by some non-literary means with its symbolism and developing themes (perhaps because he belongs to a community in which such language is constantly used) can possibly understand its double entendre and its abrupt transitions. For the outsider — even for an interested inquirer (like Nicodemus) — the dialogue is opaque.

II

Space does not permit an analysis of the other occurrences in John of the ascent/descent motif in the same detail that we have devoted to the Nicodemus

⁴⁵ See below, pp. 62-64.

⁴⁶ See below, pp. 60-61.

⁴⁷ Presupposed in the midrashic dialogue of ch. 6: below, pp. 58-59.

dialogue. It can readily be seen, however, that wherever the motif occurs, it is in a context where the primary point of the story is the inability of the men of "this world," pre-eminently "the Jews," to understand and accept Jesus.

This is quite clear in the "midrash" in ch. 6 on the "bread from heaven."⁴⁸ This discourse is linked to the traditional feeding and sea-crossing stories by a question from the crowd to which Jesus responds, as he responded to Nicodemus, with an Amen-saying totally unrelated to the question. If Nicodemus came to Jesus because he saw signs, the crowd comes, Jesus tells them, because they *failed* to see signs — a failure that is confirmed, in typical Johannine fashion, by their own words in vs. 30. The irony in vss. 30-31 is very heavy, for precisely the "sign" which they request — one analogous to the manna which Moses gave — has already been provided, for "the men who saw" (vs. 14).⁴⁹ The crowd which crosses the lake — though the evangelist does not distinguish it from οἱ ἰδόντες in vs. 14 — does not see and cannot believe (vss. 36, 40). The irony is now carried yet farther by the identification of the "bread from heaven" not with the bread of the miracle but with "the Son of Man." The theme is announced by the positive half of Jesus' Amen-saying (vs. 27), which introduces the motifs that, by a complex series of interweavings with the biblical texts cited in vss. 31 and 45, provide organization of the entire discourse, reaching its summation in vs. 58.⁵⁰ That organization, insofar as it relates to our theme, can be made plain by a simple outline of the discourse's progression: (1) "Work for the food that remains for eternal life, which the Son of Man gives" (vss. 27, 58). (2) "Work" means "believe" in the one whom God has sent (vs. 29, cf. 36-40, 45-47). (3) The "food" that the Son of Man gives is "bread which descends from heaven" (vss. 31-33), which God, not Moses, gives. (4) That bread is identical with the Son of Man himself, for he *ἰς ὁ καταβὰς ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ* — as we learned in

⁴⁸ P. Borgen (*Bread from Heaven*, [NovTSup, 10; Leiden: Brill, 1965]) has demonstrated the midrashic character of the discourse and has shown that a number of motifs incorporated in it were already familiar in Alexandrian Judaism and attested somewhat later in haggadah from Palestinian sources. A number of details of his reconstruction are unconvincing, but his work is fundamental for the understanding of this passage.

⁴⁹ Fortna guesses that vs. 14 is the evangelist's rewriting of the source's conclusion to the feeding miracle, which already contained the acclamation of Jesus as a prophet (*Gospel of Signs*, p. 61). If so, it is "not impossible," as he puts it with due caution, that the identification of the feeding with the manna tradition was also pre-Johannine.

⁵⁰ Vss. 27 and 58 form an *inclusio*; my chief criticism of Borgen's analysis is that he fails to see this because of his fixation on the scripture text so loosely cited in vs. 31. Consequently his work seemed vulnerable to G. Richter's ingenious attempt to show that vss. 51-58, by Borgen's own method, ought to be regarded as a later addition ("Zur Formgeschichte und literarischen Einheit von Joh 6 ³¹⁻⁵⁸," ZNW 60 [1969] 21-55). The literary unity of vss. 27-58 seems to me assured, whatever theological self-contradictions it may contain. Though it is a saying of Jesus rather than a scripture text that provides the starting point of the "midrash" (and we should therefore recognize that the form of explication may have had a wider application in rhetoric than only the exposition of sacred texts), that saying already has the manna tradition in mind, for the manna's propensity to "perish" was a part of the biblical story (Exod 16:19-21), as was the death of the wilderness generation that fed on it.

ch. 3 (vss. 35, 38, 48-51).⁵¹ (5) The “murmurings” of the Jews produce an even more pointed statement: the bread of life is the very flesh of the Son of Man (vss. 51b-58).⁵²

The descent of Jesus from heaven is of course unacceptable to “the Jews,” for they say: “Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How then does he say, ‘I have descended from heaven?’” (vs. 42). Quite analogously, in the following dialogue with those disciples who are disturbed by the notion of “eating the flesh of the Son of Man,” the ascent of the Son of Man “where he was before” offers “a still greater offense.”⁵³ In the chapter as a whole, the movement is from a concept familiar to Jews (something which comes down from heaven is given by the hand of a prophet), but doubted in the specific instance of Jesus, to their total alienation by his outrageous claim to be *himself* that which comes down from heaven — and returns thither. We may perhaps compare the movement we observed earlier, from the promise to Nathanael of something like Jacob’s Bethel vision (“angels ascending and descending upon the Son of Man”) to the statement to Nicodemus that only the Son of Man (not angels, and not *merkābāh* visionaries) ascends and descends.

In one sense what is happening in the Johannine dialogues is the combination of familiar patterns from Jewish tradition — above all the picture of the apostolic prophet, that of the heavenly Wisdom that seeks a home among men only to be rejected, and, perhaps, that of the angel who bears Yahweh’s name⁵⁴ — in such a way that the basic relationships are exaggerated to the point of

⁵¹ If G. Vermes’ ingenious reading of Targum Neofiti on Exod 16:15, “He [viz., Moses] is the bread which the Lord has given you to eat,” is correct, then we have a striking parallel in the Moses haggadah. See “He is the Bread,” *Neotestamentica et semitica* (eds. E. E. Ellis and M. Wilcox; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1969) 256-63. However, I am inclined to believe with Prof. Schreiber (ibid. 258, n. 7) that the antecedent משה is a simple scribal error for משהו, “what it was.”

⁵² The fact that both the “murmuring” and the giving of “flesh” are motifs found in the biblical manna story (note especially Exod 16:8 and compare John 6:51b with Num 11:18 καὶ δώσει κύριος ὑμῖν κρέα φαγεῖν) reinforce my conviction that vss. 51b-58 are an integral part of the midrashic discourse that begins with vs. 27, but further analysis of the connection would lead us too far from the present topic. Even more difficult is the question whether vss. 60-71 belong to the same stage of redaction as vss. 27-59. Logically, of course, the “offense” occasioned by the notion of eating the *flesh*, which here upsets “some of the disciples,” comes later in the development of the tradition than the notion of descending from heaven, which offends “the Jews.” But historically both offenses would have been repeated many times, so we can draw no necessary conclusions about the stages of redaction. In any case, vss. 60-71 are closely connected with the preceding discourse in their present form. At whatever stage they were added to the bread dialogue, they clearly presuppose it and are built upon it.

⁵³ Schulz, *Menschensohn-Christologie* 117, n. 5.

⁵⁴ It appears to me more and more likely that the combination of these figures, perhaps also the connection with the title Son of Man, had been prepared for by *merkābāh*-exegesis in mystical Jewish sources. The “angel of the face,” the image of Israel in heaven (*Gen. R.* 68:12), the “human face” on the beasts of the *merkābāh* (Ezekiel 1 and 10), and the “one like a son of man” of Dan 7:13 could readily be identified. However, the problem cannot be pursued here.

virtual absurdity. Thus while the tradition of the apostolic prophet includes the performance of signs to authenticate his commission,⁵⁵ the signs in John place their observers in a situation where more and more is demanded of them until they are forced to accept or to reject an unlimited claim, as is the case with Nicodemus and the witnesses of the bread miracle. Basic to the common definition of the apostolic prophet was the understanding that he did not speak his own words but the words of him who commissioned him, and that is a prominent motif in the Fourth Gospel.⁵⁶ This notion could be underlined by the mythical picture of the apostle's assumption to heaven to receive the secret message,⁵⁷ and that was doubtless a point of contact for the development of the Johannine picture of Jesus' descent and ascent, in connection with the Wisdom myths. But as we have already seen, the secret message which Jesus brings is virtually reduced to the statement of the descent and ascent, and of the relationship to God which that pattern implies. The content of his prophetic *martyria* is progressively more clearly identified with his knowledge of his own origin and destiny, which demonstrates his unique relationship to the Father.

The pattern, descent and ascent, becomes the cipher for Jesus' unique self-knowledge as well as for his foreignness to the men of this world. His testimony is true *because* he alone knows "where I came from and where I am going" (8:14). The evangelist has carefully laid the groundwork for this statement. In 3:8 he introduced the motif, with the statement to Nicodemus that of both the Spirit and of the one born of the spirit (= "from above") "you do not know where he comes from and where he goes." The Jerusalemites at the feast of Tabernacles think they know where Jesus is from: his Galilean origin precludes his being the Prophet or the Christ (7:37-52).⁵⁸ Moreover, simply the fact that, as they think, "We know where he is from," means he cannot be the Christ, for "the Christ — when he comes, no one knows where he is from" (7:27). This is a choice example of the evangelist's irony, for not only does the dialogue itself tell the reader that the Jews do not really know where Jesus is from (7:28-29: he is from God), but in a later dialogue he has them precisely reverse the basis for their rejection, in the process admitting that they do not know where he is from: "We know that God spoke to Moses, but this man — we do not know where he is from" (9:29). Pilate also asks Jesus, "Where are you from?" (19:9) and receives no answer. The descent and ascent of the Son of Man thus becomes

⁵⁵ A fundamental element in the Moses haggadah, beginning in the biblical accounts; see my *Prophet-King* 162-64, 302-3.

⁵⁶ 7:16, 18; 8:26; 12:49; 14:24; cf. 4:34; 5:19, 30; 6:38-39; 9:4; 10:37-38; 17:4; see *Prophet-King* 301-11.

⁵⁷ See W. Meeks, "Moses as God and King," *Religions in Antiquity* (ed. J. Neusner; Studies in the History of Religions, 14; Leiden: Brill, 1967) 354-71. Recently C. Colpe has suggested that the *Himmelsreise* tradition flourishes only in religions that include the figure of the "shaman" ("Die 'Himmelsreise der Seele' ausserhalb und innerhalb der Gnosis," *Le origini dello gnosticismo* (ed U. Bianchi; Studies of the History of Religions, 12; Leiden: Brill, 1967) 429-47.

⁵⁸ W. Meeks, "Galilee and Judea in the Fourth Gospel," *JBL* 85 (1966) 159-69.

not only the key to his identity and identification, but the primary content of his esoteric knowledge which *distinguishes* him from the men who belong to "this world."

In this manner the descent, as a "coming into the world," is clearly identified as the judgment of the world (9:39, but adumbrated already in 3:14-21). With that an element of the prologue becomes clear. It is commonly recognized that 1:10 and 11 are parallel and that the Wisdom myth, particularly in the form seen most clearly in 1 Enoch 42, provides the essential background. Commentators are divided on the question whether *οἱ ἱδιοὶ* in vs. 11 are the Jews or mankind.⁵⁹ From the dialogues which we have analyzed it should be apparent that the Jews are meant — precisely as the representatives of the disbelieving world. Only recognition of this essential part of the Johannine symbolism reveals the full pathos of the prologue. Vs. 10 expresses the central theme of the common Jewish version of the Wisdom myth: Wisdom sought a home among men, in the world which was made through her, but found no acceptance — except, most Jewish versions would add, finally in Israel, through the revelation at Sinai. It is precisely that exception that is rejected by vs. 11: those who accepted — and there were some who accepted (vs. 12)⁶⁰ — are *not* "his own," the Jews, but some yet-to-be-defined group whose extraordinary status, belonging neither to *ὁ κόσμος* nor to *οἱ ἱδιοὶ*, is miraculous (vs. 13).

If the "descent" of the Son of Man, his "coming into the world," is construed in the early dialogues of John as the *krisis* of the world, the dramatic structure of the second half of the book identifies the judgment rather with his *ascent*, his "being lifted up." The remarkable sentence in 13:1-5, the elegant periodic structure of which contrasts with the usual Johannine style⁶¹ and which formally divides the gospel in half, speaks in two solemn clauses of Jesus' descent and ascent. The turning-point has come because Jesus knows:

ὅτι ἦλθεν αὐτοῦ ὁ ὥρα ἵνα μεταβῇ ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου τούτου πρὸς τὸν πατέρα,

and

⁵⁹ Bultmann, following Merx, insists that "Der Satz: Er kam in sein Eigentum . . . [mag] bedeuten, was er wolle; eines aber bedeutet er nicht, nämlich: er kam zu den Juden . . ." (*Evang. Joh.*, 37, n. 7). Brown, however, says, "The reference is clearly to the people of Israel" (*Gospel according to John I-XII* 10). Dodd, despite his platonizing interpretation of the prologue as a whole, recognizes the specific referent here as "the Jews" (*Interpretation*, 402); R. H. Lightfoot (*St. John's Gospel: A Commentary*, [Oxford: Clarendon, 1956] 83) does not. Barrett and MacGregor in their commentaries adopt mediating positions.

⁶⁰ Haenchen's argument that vss. 12-13 are the work of a later redactor who has not fully understood vs. 11 (*ZTK* 60 [1963] 329; *Gott und Mensch*, 138-39) is unconvincing. His view that vs. 12b describes, in "becoming children of God," a "higher status" than mere faith, a notion found in the Johannine epistles, but not in the Gospel, is an over-interpretation. The paradox of vss. 11-12 is one of the fundamental themes of the Gospel as a whole.

⁶¹ Cf. F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament*, (tr. R. W. Funk; Chicago: University of Chicago, 1961) §464.

ὅτι ἀπὸ θεοῦ ἐξῆλθεν καὶ πρὸς τὸν θεὸν ὑπάγει.

Naturally more and more emphasis is placed on the ascent as the book progresses, and it becomes apparent that descent and ascent are not treated in precisely symmetrical fashion. The ascent is more complex, for more independent motifs have been bound together in the Johannine picture of Jesus' leaving the world than in the picture of his coming into it.

One constituent of the ascent bundle of metaphors is the pun on "being lifted up" which was introduced in 3:14. A great deal of confusion has surrounded the linguistic nature of the double entendre, and from the supposed Aramaic original impossible conclusions have been reached about the provenance of the Fourth Gospel.⁶² These problems are of no concern here, for the pun was evidently a common one, in Greek as well as in Semitic languages, and it could be expressed with a variety of verbs.⁶³ What is of interest is the way in which the fourth evangelist introduces this jarring bit of gallows-humor and progressively unfolds its implications. For as Kittel noted, the merging of assumption with hanging produces a deliberately jarring, incongruous metaphor, and the literary development clearly indicates that it is intended to call attention to itself, not merely to make use of a common idiom.⁶⁴ Characteristically, the first statement of the motif (3:14) leaves it unexplained. Whether the brief typological statement, comparing the Son of Man's "elevation" with the elevation of the bronze serpent by Moses, is created by the evangelist or, more likely, a pre-formed bit of tradition,

⁶² A. Schlatter's observation that Syr *zqp*, "raise," "set up," came to be used in the sense of "impale" or "crucify" was used by E. Hirsch to argue that the Johannine *Grund-schrift* was written in Antioch. G. Kittel ("ἡρῶν = ὑψωθῆναι = gekreuzigt werden: Zur angeblichen antiochenischen Herkunft des Vierten Evangeliums," *ZNW* 35 [1926] 282-85) exposed the fallacies in that argument, while showing that the pun was *possible* in any Aramaic dialect. It was perhaps least likely in Syr, where, as Joseph A. Fitzmyer kindly informs me, *zqp* could hardly be found with the meaning "elevate." In Mandaean it could be used in the sense of "ascend (to the Abiding Dwelling)" (GL 83:10; see E. S. Drower and R. Macuch, *A Mandaic Dictionary* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1963] 169-70). However, the pun is equally possible in Greek.

⁶³ Although I know no example in a source antedating John, the fact that Artemidorus, in his late second century collection of dream interpretations, mentions various omens of a dream of crucifixion that depend upon such a pun assures us that it must have belonged to the folklore of the eastern Mediterranean for some time. A crucifixion dream is a good omen for a poor man, "for the crucified is exalted (ὑψηλός)"; for a slave it portends freedom, "for those crucified are not subordinate (ἀνυπότακτοι)"; and a dream of crucifixion in the city "signifies a government position (ἀρχή) corresponding to the place where the cross stood" (*Oneirokritikon*, 2.53). The somewhat later Alexander novel by Ps.-Callisthenes tells how Alexander traps the assassins of Darius by his oath to "make them exalted above all men (περιφανεστάτους . . . πᾶσιν ἀνθρώποις)," which he does — by crucifying them (*Life of Alexander*, 2.21). A haggadic midrash on Exod 30:12 explains Moses' intercession for Israel by a parable in which a king is persuaded by an advisor to change his impetuous condemnation of his only son to beheading (שאו את ראשו) ("lift up his head") to a command to promote him (ירומו: את ראשו) (*Pesikta Rabbati*, 10).

⁶⁴ Kittel, "ἡρῶν," 285.

he inserts it here to interpret his own very important christological rule, "No one has ascended into heaven except him who descended, the Son of Man" (vs. 13). That ascension is *not* like the *Himmelsreise* of the *merkābāh* mystics or of Moses, but is like the exposure of the bronze snake. But what does that mean precisely? The reader is not told explicitly that *ὑψωθῆναι* means crucifixion until 12:32 so that some commentators can insist that 3:14 does not even have crucifixion in mind.⁶⁵ But 3:14 is only the first statement of the thrice-repeated saying of Jesus which "signified what sort of death he was to die" (12:33) and which was "fulfilled" when the Jews demanded a Roman execution (18:32). Once the reader is aware of this further explication, he finds sufficient hints already in ch. 3 that the death of the Son of Man is his exaltation. There is a formal parallelism, not often noticed, between vss. 14-15 and vs. 16, a parallelism created by clauses which, assuming vs. 14 to be traditional, are clearly the work of the evangelist:

οὕτως ὑψωθῆναι δεῖ τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου,
 ἵνα πᾶς ὁ πιστεύων ἐν αὐτῷ ἔχῃ ζωὴν αἰώνιον.
 οὕτως γὰρ ἠγάπησεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν κόσμον,
 ὥστε τὸν υἱὸν τὸν μονογενῆ ἔδωκεν,
 ἵνα πᾶς ὁ πιστεύων εἰς αὐτὸν μὴ ἀπόληται ἀλλ' ἔχῃ ζωὴν αἰώνιον.

The "giving" of the Son that believers in him may have life is equivalent to his "being lifted up" for the same end. If, on one hand, one recognizes the allusion in vs. 16 to the binding of Isaac (Genesis 22)⁶⁶ — and it would be easy to pass over it — or, on the other hand, if one is aware already of the "lifted up"/"crucified" pun — and one needs to be acquainted with the whole Johannine language of symbols to be certain of it — then this equivalence is immediately plain. Thus again we meet in John language that has many more nuances for an initiated reader than for an outsider.

The second occurrence of the *ὑψωθῆναι* language (8:28) adds an important new motif: the *identity* of the Son of Man (ἐγώ εἰμι) will be revealed by the elevation, and until then the direct question of the Jews, "Who are you?" (vs. 25) must remain unanswered. How, concretely, this promise is fulfilled is not absolutely certain, though the extraordinary emphasis placed upon the trilingual placard on the cross in John 19:17-22 suggests that it may be taken as one aspect of the evangelist's dramatization of this final self-revelation.⁶⁷ Be that as it may, the identity of Jesus here, as in the other examples of the ascent/descent motif which we have examined, is bound up with the pattern of his coming from heaven and going back there.

⁶⁵ Odeberg, *Fourth Gospel*, 111; Schulz, *Menschensohn-Christologie*, 106, thinks the pre-Johannine logion was an unambiguous reference to exaltation.

⁶⁶ C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John* (London: SPCK, 1955) 180; Brown, *Gospel according to John I-XII* 147; N. A. Dahl, "The Atonement — An Adequate Reward for the Akedah?" (Ro 8:32)," *Neotestamentica et Semitica* 15-29 esp. 28, n. 64.

⁶⁷ See *Prophet-King*, 78-80.

The final occurrence of the *ὑψωθῆναι* theme, which finally makes the double entendre explicit for the dull reader (12:33), also adds a new dimension: Jesus' elevation will result in his drawing all men (*πάντας*) to himself (vs. 32). The disbelieving response evoked by this statement (vss. 34-36) warns us against too hasty a conclusion that with this *pantas* the sharp division of mankind and narrowing of the circle of believers that has characterized the function of the ascent/descent motif everywhere else in the gospel is here replaced by a universalism. Rather, the saying is to be understood in the light of 12:23-26: in death the "grain" ceases to be "alone." "This means that Jesus' death has been understood in its significance as creating the community of the Church."⁶⁸ Those he draws to himself are those who believe, the exceptional ones who "receive" him (1:12; 3:33), who accept his unearthly strangeness and are thus drawn into becoming an unearthly community with him.

The ascension theme in John is thus fraught with opportunity for misunderstanding. Remarkably, the evangelist makes this possibility into an occasion for advancing his didactic purpose, by introducing into the fictional narrative transparent misunderstandings by Jesus' dialogue partners, both opponents and disciples. Thus in 7:33-36, when Jesus tells "the Jews" that he will be with them only "a little time" more before going to the one who sent him, where they can neither find him nor follow him, they say, "Where is he about to go that we shall not find him? He is not about to go to the diaspora of the Greeks and teach the Greeks, is he?" Later the reader will learn that the appearance of "Greeks" from the diaspora is indeed the signal for Jesus that "the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified," i.e., "lifted up," to "draw all men" to himself (12:20-36). Meanwhile, the prediction to "the Jews" has been made a second time (8:21), and this time their "misunderstanding" recognizes that Jesus' "departure" means his death: "He will not kill himself, will he?" (8:22). There is a certain truth in their sarcasm, for this is a pejorative way of saying what the evangelist puts positively in Jesus' words, "No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord" (10:18). The Jews' statement represents the view of the voluntary death *ἐκ τῶν κάτω*; Jesus' statement, the view *ἐκ τῶν ἄνω* (8:23).

Not only "the Jews" misunderstand, but also the disciples. The farewell discourses begin with a statement of the glorification/ascension theme, followed by precisely the same prediction which offended the Jews, even though he addresses this group as "children": "You will seek me and, *just as I said to the Jews*, 'Where I am going you cannot come,' now I tell you also" (13:33). However, Peter's response (vs. 36)⁶⁹ is not a third-person aside like that of the Jews (7:35; 8:22), but a direct question, "Lord, where are you going?" Jesus' reply now replaces the neutral *ἐλθεῖν* by *ἀκολουθεῖν*, "follow," "be a disciple," and adds the

⁶⁸ E. Schweizer, *Lordship and Discipleship* (SBT 28; London: SCM, 1960) 86. response (vs. 36)⁶⁹ is not a third-person aside like that of the Jews (7:35;

⁶⁹ With good reason, many commentators regard vss. 34-35 as an interpolation. See J. Becker, "Abschiedsreden" 220, and the references there.

all-important qualification, “not . . . now, but . . . afterward” (vs. 36). Peter’s further question and affirmation make it clear that it is now understood that “to go/follow” means “to lay down one’s life.” Note that the evangelist has constructed this whole dialogue in order to provide a new setting for the traditional logion predicting Peter’s denial (vs. 38), so that the denial is now reinterpreted in the light of the descent/ascent motif that separates Jesus from all earthly men, even the disciples. On the other hand, the descent/ascent motif has received a further nuance, for the *future* ascent of *the disciples* is promised.

The following dialogue (14:1-5) takes up another side of the same theme, with a new interlocutor, Thomas. Now the purpose of Jesus’ departure *for* the disciples is adumbrated: He goes to prepare “dwellings” (μοναί), “a place” for the disciples.⁷⁰ Thomas’ “ignorant” question then permits a reply that shifts the terms of the metaphor to a more abstract level: “I am the way” (vs. 6). “Following Jesus” does not mean, as the reply to Peter had suggested immediately before, merely imitating him or accepting a similar fate; it is to go *by means of him*. Stylistically, this shift recalls the “illogic” of ch. 10, in which Jesus himself is both the good shepherd who comes by means of the door and the door by means of which the sheep go in and out.

The εἰ τι μικρόν saying is repeated yet once more, but with significant variations, in 14:19: “the world” replaces “the Jews” as those who will not be able to see Jesus, and now a distinction is made, in contrast with 13:33, between the world that will *not* be able to see and the disciples who *will* see him. The “I shall come” of vs. 18 is hardly a reference to the parousia in the conventional sense, as vss. 22-23 make plain: Jesus and the Father (being one) will make their *μονή* with the believers, unseen by the world. Note that this conception of the mutual “dwelling” “corrects” the commonplace notion of an ascent to heaven after death which was suggested by vss. 2-3, though of course the two are not mutually exclusive.⁷¹

These themes are repeated in ch. 16 with minor variations. The statement of 16:5b, “None of you asks me, ‘Where are you going?’” which flatly contradicts 13:36; 14:5, is surprising and lends support to the hypothesis that chs. 15-16 are an independent formulation of the “farewell discourse” parallel to 13:31–14:31. That would also explain the curious statement in vss. 29-30, appropriate at the end of a discourse comprising chs. 15-16, but mystifying after the rather clear statements of ch. 14. Variants of the theme “you will not see me; you will see me” are found in vss. 10, 16. The principal new motif, in comparison with ch. 14, is the close connection between Jesus’ departure and the coming of the Paraclete (vss. 7-15).

One of the primary purposes of both versions of the farewell discourse is

⁷⁰ The striking resemblance of this saying to the speech of Hibil-Ziwa to the children of Adam in the Mandaean *GL* (ed. Lidzbarski, 442, ll.28-30, and 443, ll.5-6) has often been noted. The Mandaean *š°kīnātā* is the equivalent of *μοναί*.

⁷¹ See the very suggestive discussion of this point by Martyn, *History and Theology* 138-40.

reflection on the purpose of Jesus' departure from the world *as it affects the chosen community*. These chapters provide a poignant expression of the group's negative identity, their fear of being *ὄρφανοί* in the world (14:18). They no longer belong to this world (17:14-15), yet they are "not yet" permitted to "follow" Jesus on his ascent. Hence the farewell discourses assemble their reflections on the purpose of the separation: "a place" is being prepared with the Father; Jesus and the Father will come and make their "dwelling" with them; the Paraclete, whose functions parallel those of the descending/ascending Son of Man, will come to them; the Paraclete's work, through them, constitutes a certain continuing mission in the world (cf. ch. 17).

Ch. 17 as a whole is only intelligible within the descent/ascent framework, for it is the summary "de-briefing" of the messenger who, like the prince in the Hymn of the Pearl (vs. 100), has accomplished his work in the lower regions and is returning: "I have glorified you on the earth; I have completed the work which you gave me to do" (vs. 4); "I am no longer in the world, . . . but I am coming to you" (vs. 11). The trial and crucifixion narratives are remarkably empty of this motif, save for Pilate's unanswered question, "Where are you from?" (19:9) and the ambiguous *ἀνωθεν* in 19:11. It is rather the drama of these scenes, totally reconstructed by the evangelist,⁷² which as a whole completes the theme, while on the other hand the development of the "elevation" and "glorification" themes by the evangelist places the traditional passion narratives in quite a new interpretive context. More difficult to explain is the final definite reference to the ascension: "Do not touch me, for I have not yet ascended to the father . . . I am ascending to my father and your father, my God and your God" (20:17). We can only observe that, since the fourth evangelist's dramatic compression of exaltation and crucifixion motifs into one has left the traditional Easter appearances in a kind of limbo, this strange statement imparts to that limbo a sacred liminality.⁷³ Jesus is no longer in the world, but not yet ascended; he belongs to the intermediate zone that violates these categories and renders him untouchable. Yet even here the promise of further intimacy with the disciples is promised in the words "my father and your father, my God and your God," which is fulfilled in the subsequent appearance to the disciples (20:19-23) and especially in the invitation to Thomas to touch the wounds (20:27). Perhaps by this time it should not surprise us that the evangelist's final use of the theme is in the form of an enigma, and that it paves the way to the concluding statements of the gospel, first about the disciples' faith and task, then about those who are to believe and obtain life *by means of this book* (20:30-31).

III

Many well-known commentaries, particularly those in English, treat the

⁷² See *Prophet-King* 61-78.

⁷³ On the notion of the liminal, neither one thing nor the other, neither here nor there, as a category of the sacred, see J. Z. Smith, "Birth Upside Down," and "A Place on Which to Stand: Symbols and Social Change," *Worship* 44 (1970) 457-74.

descent/ascent motif in John, if they discuss it at all, as a symbol of unity. It is supposed to represent the union of heaven and earth, the spiritual and the physical, eternity and history, God and man.⁷⁴ Our analysis of the function of this motif and its related components within the literary structure of the Gospel suggests an interpretation diametrically opposed: in every instance the motif points to contrast, foreignness, division, judgment. Only within that dominant structure of estrangement and difference is developed the counterpoint of unity — between God and Christ, between God, Christ, and the small group of the faithful.

The dualistic tendency of the motif in John can be seen most sharply in the elliptical use of the adverbs “above” and “below” in 8:23:

ὑμεῖς ἐκ τῶν κάτω ἐστέ,
ἐγὼ ἐκ τῶν ἄνω εἰμί.
ὑμεῖς ἐκ τούτου τοῦ κόσμου ἐστέ,
ἐγὼ οὐκ εἰμὶ ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου τούτου.

The Jews who have just been told by Jesus that they will die in their sins, and who have just “misunderstood” Jesus’ saying about going away, are now told that they *cannot* believe or understand, *because* they are “from the lower world.” This sounds like a typical expression of gnostic self-consciousness, in which the separation between those who can understand and those who cannot is an ontological one, explained by a myth of their origin, as in the *Hypostasis of the Archons*:

for the psychics (ψυχικός) will not be able
to reach the pneumatic (πνευματικός),
because they are from below,
but he is from above.⁷⁵

That mythical picture is reinforced by the following dialogue, for even those Jews who respond to Jesus’ speech with belief (8:30) are quickly provoked by his further pronouncements into hostility, because they are not “children of God,” but children of the devil (via their father Cain, the devil’s son).⁷⁶ “He

⁷⁴ Though not many in this century would put it in such Hegelian language as J. N. Sanders, “To accomplish the Father’s loving purpose, the Logos became man, so uniting flesh and spirit, and making possible the gift of holy spirit [*sic*] to men” (*A Commentary on the Gospel According to St. John* [Harper’s NT Commentaries; New York: Harper, 1968] 19).

⁷⁵ CG II, 4: 87[135], 17-20; tr. R. A. Bullard, *The Hypostasis of the Archons* (PTS, 10; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1970) 21. Cf. the statement of Norea to the Great Archon, 92[140], 25-26: “I am not from you, [but] I came from above.”

⁷⁶ See N. A. Dahl, “Der Erstgeborene Satans und der Vater des Teufels (Polyk. 7₁ und Joh 8₄₄),” *Apophoreta* (ed. W. Eltester; BZNW 30; Berlin: Töpelmann, 1964) 70-84. For an exploration of the background of the “children of Abraham” motif in this chapter and an ingenious attempt to reconstruct a conflict between the Johannine community and a more conservative Jewish-Christian group, see the 1971 AAR student Prize Essay by my

who is ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ hears the words of God; for this reason you do not hear, because you are not ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ."

Yet the Fourth Gospel never provides us with the myth which explains how some men could be from below and others from above. Indeed, since being "from above" is in John the exclusive property of "the Son of Man" (3:13!), it is difficult to see how *any* man could respond to his words with the kind of faith required here. The most significant difference between the Johannine use of the descent/ascent motif and the use in gnostic literature is precisely the fact that the disciples of Jesus, those who do "hear" his words, are *not* ever identified as those *pneumatikoi* who, like himself, have "come down from heaven." They *are* identified as those who are "not of this world" (οὐκ ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου τούτου) (15:19; 17:14ff.). As those who are ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ, they can be contrasted with the "false spirits" (false prophets) who are ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου (1 John 4:1-6). But this status is a *conferred* one, not an ontological one: "I chose you out of the world" (15:19); "I manifested your [God's] name to the men whom you gave me out of the world" (17:6); "they are not of the world, *as I am not* of the world" (17:14). Thus we have in the Johannine literature a thoroughly dualistic picture: a small group of believers isolated over against "the world" that belongs intrinsically to "the things below," i.e., to darkness and the devil. Yet that picture is never rationalized by a comprehensive myth, as in gnosticism, or by a theory of predestination, as later in the western catholic tradition.

So long as we approach the Johannine literature as a chapter in the history of *ideas*, it will defy our understanding. Its metaphors are irrational, disorganized, and incomplete. But if we pose our questions in the form, What functions did this particular system of metaphors have for the group that developed it? then even its self-contradictions and its disjunctures may be seen to be *means of communication*.

This point can be illustrated by our attempt to understand the function of the ascent/descent motif within the Fourth Gospel. The unbiased reader feels quite sympathetic with poor Nicodemus and the "believing" Jews with whom, it seems, Jesus is playing some kind of language-game whose rules neither they nor we could possibly know. What we are up against is the self-referring quality of the whole gospel, the closed system of metaphors, which confronts the reader in a fashion somewhat like the way a Semitist once explained to me how to learn Aramaic: "Once you know *all* the Semitic languages," he said, "learning any one of them is easy." The reader cannot understand any part of the Fourth Gospel until he understands the whole. Thus the reader has an experience rather like that of the dialogue partners of Jesus: either he will find the whole business so convoluted, obscure, and maddeningly arrogant that he will reject it in anger, or he will find it so fascinating that he will stick with it until the progressive reiteration of themes brings, on some level of consciousness at least, a degree of

student Bruce Schein, "'The Seed of Abraham' John 8:31-59," AAR/SBL Annual Meeting, October 31, 1971.

clarity. While an appeal to the reader's subjective experience may appear highly unscientific, I have tried to show that such an experience is grounded in the stylistic structure of the whole document. This is the way its language, composed of an enormous variety of materials, from the standpoint of the history of traditions, has been organized, partly by design, i.e., by the actual composition by the evangelist, and partly by pre-redactional collocation of the different ways of talking in the life of the community. *The book functions for its readers in precisely the same way that the epiphany of its hero functions within its narratives and dialogues.*

While this function of the book is undoubtedly the hallmark of some one author's genius, it is unthinkable apart from a particular kind of religious community, in the same way (though not perhaps to the same extent) that the pesher on Habakkuk is unthinkable without the Qumran sect, and the convoluted and overlapping myths of the Mandaean *Ginza* unaccountable without the perduring Nazoreans. Unfortunately we have no independent information about the organization of the Johannine group, and even the Johannine literature gives little description of the community and hardly any statements that are directly "ecclesiological." Nevertheless, the structural characteristics of the literature permit certain deductions.

The observation that the book functions in the same way that its Jesus functions can be elaborated. As we have seen, the depiction of Jesus as the man "who comes down from heaven" marks him as the alien from all men of the world. Though the Jews are "his own," when he comes to them they reject him, thus revealing themselves as not his own after all but his enemies; not from God, but from the devil, from "below," from "this world." The story describes the progressive alienation of Jesus from the Jews. But something else is happening, for there are some few who do respond to Jesus' signs and words, and these, while they also frequently "misunderstand," are progressively enlightened and drawn into intense intimacy with Jesus, until they, like him, are not "of this world." Now their becoming detached from the world is, in the Gospel, identical with their being detached from Judaism. Those figures who want to "believe" in Jesus but to remain within the Jewish community and the Jewish piety are damned with the most devastatingly dualistic epithets. There can be no question, as Louis Martyn has shown, that the actual trauma of the Johannine community's separation from the synagogue and its continuing hostile relationships with the synagogue come clearly to expression here.⁷⁷ But something more is to be seen: coming to faith in Jesus is for the Johannine group a change in social location. Mere belief without joining the Johannine community, without making the decisive break with "the world," particularly the world of Judaism, is a diabolic "lie."

Thus, despite the absence of "ecclesiology" from the Fourth Gospel, this book could be called an etiology of the Johannine group. In telling the story of the

⁷⁷ *History and Theology* passim.

Son of Man who came down from heaven and then re-ascended after choosing a few of his own out of the world, the book defines and vindicates the existence of the community that evidently sees itself as unique, alien from its world, under attack, misunderstood, but living in unity with Christ and through him with God. It could hardly be regarded as a missionary tract,⁷⁸ for we may imagine that only a very rare outsider would get past the barrier of its closed metaphorical system. It is a book for insiders, for if one already belonged to the Johannine community, then we may presume that the manifold bits of tradition that have taken distinctive form in the Johannine circle would be familiar, the "cross-references" in the book — so frequently anachronistic within the fictional sequence of events — would be immediately recognizable, the double entendre which produces mystified and stupid questions from the fictional dialogue partners (and from many modern commentators) would be acknowledged by a knowing and superior smile. One of the primary functions of the book, therefore, must have been to provide a reinforcement for the community's social identity, which appears to have been largely negative. It provided a symbolic universe which gave religious legitimacy, a theodicy, to the group's actual isolation from the larger society.

The sociology of religion has not yet developed theoretical categories adequate for describing the formation of a "sect" of the sort we are discovering in the Johannine group,⁷⁹ but the discipline of the "sociology of knowledge," particularly in the form proposed by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann,⁸⁰ provides categories which help us to understand how a figure like the Johannine Jesus, through the medium of a book like the Johannine Gospel, could bring about a change of world. For one's "world" in the sociology of knowledge is understood as the symbolic universe within which one functions, which has "objectivity" because it is constantly reinforced by the structures of the society to which it is specific. Faith in Jesus, in the Fourth Gospel, means a removal from "the world," because it means transfer to a community which has totalistic

⁷⁸ Against a large number of scholars, including K. Bornhäuser, D. Oehler, J. A. T. Robinson, W. C. van Unnik, and C. H. Dodd, I thus find myself in agreement with R. E. Brown that John's distinctive emphases "are directed to crises within the believing Church rather than to the conversion of non-believers" (*Gospel according to John I-XII* lxxviii).

⁷⁹ I am using "sect" here in a somewhat different sense from the classic definitions by Weber, Troeltsch, and Niebuhr. On the special problems of an adequate definition, see P. Berger, "The Sociological Study of Sectarianism," *Social Research* 21 (1954) 467-85; also his *The Sacred Canopy* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1967) 196, n. 22. Eventually the work of social psychologists on the formation and functioning of counter-cultural groups may provide useful models for the historian; see the survey by T. F. Pettigrew, "Social Evaluation Theory: Convergences and Applications," *Nebraska Symposium on Motivation* 1967 (ed. D. Levine; Lincoln University of Nebraska, 1967) 241-311.

⁸⁰ *The Social Construction of Reality* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1966); cf. P. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, chs. 1, 2. Also extremely helpful is the definition proposed by C. Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion* (ed. M. Banton; New York: Praeger, 1966) 1-66.

and exclusive claims. The Fourth Gospel not only describes, in etiologial fashion, the birth of that community; it also provides reinforcement of the community's isolation. The language patterns we have been describing have the effect, for the insider who accepts them, of demolishing the logic of the world, particularly the world of Judaism, and progressively emphasizing the sectarian consciousness. If one "believes" what is said in this book, he is quite literally taken out of the ordinary world of social reality. Contrariwise, this can hardly happen unless one stands already within the counter-cultural group or at least in some ambivalent relationship between it and the larger society.

I do not mean to say that the symbolic universe suggested by the Johannine literature is *only* the reflex or projection of the group's social situation. On the contrary, the Johannine dialogues suggest quite clearly that the order of development must have been dialectical: the christological claims of the Johannine Christians resulted in their becoming alienated, and finally expelled, from the synagogue; that alienation in turn is "explained" by a further development of the christological motifs (i.e., the fate of the community projected onto the story of Jesus); these developed christological motifs in turn drive the group into further isolation. It is a case of continual, harmonic reinforcement between social experience and ideology.⁸¹

The dialectic we have suggested would surely continue, producing a more and more isolated and estranged group until some disruption occurred. The Johannine letters show a progression of that sort: tighter internal discipline, more hostility towards "the world" and everything "in the world," schism occasioned by a docetic group, whose denial that Jesus could have "come in the flesh" would seem a fairly logical deduction from the symbols we have analyzed.

The analysis undertaken here does not answer the question of the relation between the Johannine christology and gnostic myths, but it provides clues which may be helpful in pursuing that problem. The Fourth Gospel is content to leave unanswered the question how there could exist in "this world" some persons who, by some pre-established harmony, could respond to the Stranger from the world above and thus become, like him, men "not of this world." But that enigma cries out for some master myth to explain it. Both pressures from outsiders and internal questioning would assure that the cry did not long remain unheeded; the legitimation of the sect's counter-cultural stance would lead to the projection of some myth explaining that members of the group had an origin different from that of ordinary men. In gnosticism it was the Sophia myth that provided the basic images for that projection — the same Sophia myth which provided important elements of the descent and ascent of the Son of Man in

⁸¹ This is something like the interaction between scripture text, group organization, and historical experience in the development of apocalyptic ideology proposed by N. A. Dahl in the very important essay, "Eschatologie und Geschichte im Lichte der Qumran-texte," *Zeit und Geschichte* (ed. E. Dinkler; Tübingen: Mohr, 1964) 3-18 (ET: *The Future of our Religious Past* (ed. J. M. Robinson; New York: Harper and Row, 1971) 9-28.

John. As the archetype of the soul-to-be-redeemed, Sophia recovers her normal feminine guise, making possible the elaborate sexual imagery that in the gnostic myths describes the relations between Christ or Logos and Sophia or the soul. In the Fourth Gospel there is no trace of the usual feminine Sophia; she has become entirely the masculine Logos, the Son of Man. But the Fourth Gospel does introduce the motif of Christ's union with the believers, which comes at times quite close to sexual metaphor.⁸² Thus once the Fourth Gospel had identified Christ-Wisdom with the masculine Logos, and once the social dynamics of the anti-worldly sect were in motion, all the forces were present for the production of a myth of the Valentinian type. We cannot say that it happened that way, or that the Johannine literature was the only place where ingredients were brought into the necessary creative association.⁸³ But these conjectures suggest that it is at least as plausible that the Johannine christology helped to create some gnostic myths as that gnostic myths helped create the Johannine christology. A satisfactory answer may be achieved only when studies of gnosticism also begin to ask not only about ideational structure and antecedents, but also about social functions.⁸⁴

⁸² This was first pointed out to me by one of my students, the Rev. James Ameling. Note how Paul explicitly uses Gen 2:4 to express the same notion in I Cor 6:16-17.

⁸³ Philo's peculiar dialectic between Logos and Sophia, and the successive characterization of the wise man's soul as feminine and masculine at different stages of progress, show that such speculations were not unknown to hellenistic Judaism prior to the birth of Christianity. R. A. Baer, Jr. (*Philo's Use of the Categories Male and Female*, [ALGH] 3; Leiden: Brill, 1970) collects and analyzes the most important passages, but offers little help in discerning the pre-Philonian forms of the myths.

⁸⁴ Lately there have been a few preliminary signs of a recognition of this need: E. M. Mendelson, "Some Notes on a Sociological Approach to Gnosticism," *Le origini dello gnosticismo*, 668-75; the two essays by J. Z. Smith mentioned above (notes 15, 73); H. G. Kippenberg, "Versuch einer soziologischen Verortung des antiken Gnostizismus," *Numen* 17 (1970) 211-31 (marred by tendentious over-generalizations, coupled with a Feuerbachian "explanation" of religion); and S. Laeuchli, "The Sociology of Gnosticism," a paper read to the Biblical Literature Section of the American Academy of Religion, October 30, 1971.

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