

"They Saw His Glory and Spoke of Him": The Gospel of John and the Old Testament

PAUL MILLER

Early Christian Exegesis

Between the resurrection of Jesus and the writing of the Gospels, the early Christians busied themselves with a complex process of interpreting, assimilating, and adapting the primitive traditions of Jesus that had been passed on to them. Through preaching, teaching, and prophesying, through liturgy and catechesis, the church both encountered the living Christ and answered the question "Who is Jesus?" at deepening levels of comprehension.

Exegesis of Scripture was an indispensable tool in this "Christology in the making." Biblical study and christological reflection were dynamically related and mutually enriching. Faith in the risen Christ guided their approach to the Scriptures, and their interpretations of Scripture informed their understanding of Jesus. I want to explore this interrelationship between Scripture and Christology as it pertains to the Gospel of John. I am a historian and theologian by training and a pastor and preacher by trade, and I will approach the task at hand as such. This is appropriate, however, because the Fourth Gospel, like most of the New Testament, does not differentiate sharply among exegesis, theology, and pastoral concerns. John interpreted Scripture (exegesis) so he could better proclaim Jesus the Way, the Truth, and the Life (theology); but he did so with a pastoral burden for a community struggling to affirm Christ's lordship in the face of determined opposition and competing truth claims. Is it any different today? Christians must wrestle practically with what it means

to follow the one who was God's Word made flesh in a radically pluralistic environment. This raises vexing issues, and yet it is a claim that Christians cannot evade. I will be arguing that Christ was John's primary hermeneutical principle in whose light the Scriptures of Israel were to be properly construed. Because this approach raises such problems, I will follow an exploration of John's treatment of Scripture with some reflections on what it all means today.

Christological Function Determines Form

John's use of Scripture was guided by his Christology. We can see this when we examine seemingly technical, non-theological matters such as his selection of biblical texts. Whether drawing on passages common to the New Testament tradition, like Isa 6:9-10 (John 12:40) or Ps 22 (19:24), or highly unusual texts like Zech 12:10 (19:37), Christology was the determining factor. The apparently straightforward question of how John made use of Scripture in his presentation of Jesus the Messiah conceals a world of complexities. Issues of translation, tradition, and intertextuality lead directly to deeper christological and theological concerns.

For example, we might start with the seventeen or so instances in which John quotes Scripture explicitly and ask, When John quotes the Bible, *which* "Bible" does he quote? John uses those texts and versions that serve his christological purposes. He quotes often from the Greek, but at least once from the Hebrew against the Greek (19:37), indicating his familiarity with the Hebrew text and his facility in its use.¹ There is evidence that John knew the Aramaic Targums.² However, in several cases his quo-

1. John 19:37 quoting Zech 12:10. See C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text* (2nd ed.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978) 28.

2. For example, Raymond Brown notes that the MT of Deut 18:19 says that God will take vengeance on the one who does not listen to the prophet, while Targums *Neofiti I* and *Pseudo-Jonathan* say that the word (*memra*) itself will take vengeance. This is reflected in John 12:48: "that very word which I spoke will condemn him in the last day" (*The Gospel according to John* [2 vols.; AB 29, 29A; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970] 1:492). See also Barrett, *John*, 29; Craig A. Evans, *Word and Glory: On the Exegetical and Theological Background of John's Prologue* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993) 158; Martin McNamara, *Targum and Testament: Paraphrases of the Hebrew Bible: A Light on the New Testament* (Shannon, Ireland: Irish University Press, 1972) 142-59.

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tations depart from all known versions; and in at least two instances (7:38 and 17:12) he cited a reference so obscure that generations of scholars have been kept busy trying to figure out exactly what he is quoting. As with other New Testament exegetes, function determines form in John's use of Scripture. The text was a tool for illuminating some aspect of Christology, and John picked the version that best supported his purpose. Frequently, he altered or adapted the wording if it would bring out his point more clearly.³

This phenomenon of textual variance is characteristic of Jewish exegetical practice, with which John was certainly familiar. It is now a commonplace that the early Christian exegetes inherited and adapted forms of Jewish Scripture study. Early rabbinic scholarship attempted to "contemporize" the Scriptures to make them relevant to the concerns of the first century.⁴ The rabbis did this in often ingenious ways. The early church adopted Jewish approaches, especially the method broadly referred to as *midrash*, which refers to the practice of commenting on Scripture in order to bring out meanings latent within the text. Close study of the New Testament shows many places where authors quote an Old Testament text and then follow it with an exposition according to a pattern found in rabbinic exegesis.⁵ For example, John 6 has been read as an extended midrash on Ps 78:24, "He gave them bread from heaven to eat." But while Christians and Jews shared a general desire to make Scripture meaningful to a new situation, they had fundamentally different aims. The rabbis wanted to use both the narrative (haggadic) and legal (halakic) traditions of the Torah to shape Jewish identity and practice in a rapidly changing context. Christians wanted to show that Scripture anticipated Jesus, and they used biblical interpretation in their controversy with the synagogue to demonstrate that their claims on behalf of Jesus were supported by the very Word of God.

3. E. Earle Ellis, *Prophecy and Hermeneutic in Early Christianity: New Testament Essays* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1978) 148; Bruce G. Schuchard, *Scripture within Scripture: The Interrelationship of Form and Function in the Explicit Old Testament Citations in the Gospel of John* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992) xvi.

4. Ellis, *Prophecy and Hermeneutic*, 151, referring to the seminal article on "Midrash" by Renée Bloch in *Supplément au dictionnaire de la Bible* (ed. by L. Pirot, A. Robert, and Henri Cazelles; Paris: Librairie Letouzey et Ané, 1957); Jacob Neusner, *Invitation to Midrash* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989) vii, 141-42.

5. Ellis, *Prophecy and Hermeneutic*, 155-59.

The Dead Sea Scrolls show the prevalence in the first century of that peculiar form of midrash known as *pesher*, which "receives its name from the Hebrew word used in the explanatory formula, 'the interpretation (*pesher*) is.'"⁶ *Pesher* exegesis is first and foremost eschatological because it assumes that the text contains a hidden meaning that is uncovered only in events occurring in the time of the interpreter, indicating that the interpreter is living at the climax of history.⁷ The purpose of *pesher* exegesis is to find concealed eschatological mysteries beneath the surface of the biblical word. Throughout the New Testament we find evidence of *pesher* type exegesis as the early church sought to demonstrate that the prophetic meaning of Scripture was fulfilled in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.⁸ Christ was a mystery hidden for long ages but in the fullness of time made known to the world.⁹ John does not tend to follow the *pesher* technique formally by explicitly spelling out that the proper interpretation of a given text is such-and-such, but he certainly moves within the same conceptual orbit of promise and fulfillment as the practitioners of *pesher* exegesis.¹⁰ The quotations in the latter part of the Gospel, 19:28-29, for example, are intended to show that Christ's Passion was not the failure of God's Word, as it seemed, but its fulfillment.

Another feature of Johannine exegesis is his distinctive use of formulae to introduce his Scripture quotations. Introductory formulae did not originate with John but were widespread in the Old Testament, Qumran, Philo, and among the rabbis.¹¹ Matthew and John, alone among the four Gospels, use standardized formulae to introduce scriptural quotations. However, even this technique, whose repetitiveness might suggest a lack of imagination, is a subtle theological tool in John's hand. We can illustrate this by noting that John's introductory formulae change at a certain point in his narrative. Structurally, the Gospel of John falls into two main sections — chapters 2 to 12, and chapters 13 to 20 — with a Prologue (chapter

6. Ellis, *Prophecy and Hermeneutic*, 160.

7. Richard N. Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 139.

8. Ellis, *Prophecy and Hermeneutic*, 160.

9. This understanding of Scripture is stated clearly in Rom 16:25-26.

10. John Painter, "The Quotation of Scripture and Unbelief in John 12:36b-43," in *The Gospels and the Scriptures of Israel* (ed. Craig A. Evans and W. Richard Stegner; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994) 430.

11. Ellis, *Prophecy and Hermeneutic*, 148.

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1) and epilogue (chapter 21) added.¹² The first section (2–12) deals with Jesus' public ministry when the Word made flesh appeared in Galilee and Judea. During this time, Jesus performed signs that pointed to his true identity as the revealer of God, the light come into the darkness, and, more important, that confronted the world with a choice whether to receive that light or to reject it. In these chapters, biblical quotations are introduced with the words "It is written," "as the Scripture says," or something similar.¹³ According to E. E. Ellis, this particular formula was employed to "introduce an eschatological . . . summation or elaboration of the Old Testament," or to imply "that the revelational 'Word of God' character of Scripture is present within the current interpretation."¹⁴ During the period of Jesus' ministry in which his claim to be the light of the world was being advanced and tested, Scripture itself functions as a kind of sign pointing ahead to the appearance of the Word.¹⁵ It is a proleptic announcement of what is to come that carries the stamp of divine authority. After chapter 12, however, when Jesus has been completely abandoned by the world and is preparing to go to the cross, the formula changes to "in order to fulfill."¹⁶ In chapters 13–20, Jesus glorifies the Father, and the Father glorifies Jesus as he embraces fully his mission of love and is lifted up on the cross. John is telling us that, once the chain of events leading to the crucifixion is set in motion, the role of Scripture changes. Scripture does not only point to Jesus but is fulfilled in two senses: first, its meaning is fully disclosed in Christ; and secondly, it is completed, superseded, and even replaced by the living words of Jesus.¹⁷ The true meaning of Scripture cannot be found within the text itself, but only in its fulfillment in Jesus and in the sending of the Spirit. Through the rather workaday editorial device of the introductory formula, then, John deepens and expands his christological vision.

12. C. H. Dodd calls the two principal sections "The Book of Signs" and "The Book of the Passion" (*Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963]). Raymond Brown calls them "The Book of Signs" and "The Book of Glory" (*The Gospel according to John*).

13. 1:23; 2:17; 6:31; 6:45; 7:38; 7:42; 10:34; 12:14–15.

14. Ellis, *Prophecy and Hermeneutic*, 148.

15. The relation of Scripture to signs in the Fourth Gospel will be taken up in more detail below.

16. 12:38; 13:18; 15:25; 17:12; 19:24; 19:28; 19:36.

17. Judith Lieu, "Narrative Analysis and Scripture in John," in *The Old Testament in the New Testament: Essays in Honour of J. L. North* (ed. Steve Moyise; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000) 158.

Barnabas Lindars has compared Matthew's and John's use of formal quotations. He argues that Matthew took stock texts from the tradition and applied them in a merely "pictorial" manner without exploiting their full theological potential. Matthew, he says, might quote a text simply on the basis of a common catchword, for example, or a merely semantic resonance. For example, he uses Isa 7:14 ("Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son," Matt 1:23) mainly because the word "virgin" illustrates his account of Jesus' conception and birth without adding anything of true christological substance.¹⁸ John, Lindars argues, deals with Scripture on a more sophisticated level. For instance, in 19:33-36, John tells us that the soldiers came to break Jesus' legs to hasten his demise but found him already dead. This was in order to fulfill Exod 12:46: "Not one of his bones shall be broken." This is not an arbitrary proof text, but a significant contribution to John's Christology. The original verse from Exodus refers to the Passover lamb. When John brings the verse into proximity with his Passion narrative, it exerts a powerful centrifugal pull, drawing a whole constellation of biblical imagery to itself, declaring that Christ is the true Passover lamb without blemish, with all that that association implies. Whether Lindars is being entirely fair to Matthew or not, he is certainly right about John. As this example demonstrates, each of the relatively small number of explicit quotations in the Fourth Gospel is a tiny window opening onto the vast panorama of the biblical story. John is such a skilled exegete that he can use a mere fragment of biblical texts as a kind of exegetical magnet, attracting whole clusters of other texts and themes to it.

However, John's use of Scripture goes well beyond explicit quotations. Compared to Matthew, for instance, John quotes Scripture relatively infrequently. However, none of the other evangelists has assimilated the overall sweep of the biblical story as completely as John. C. K. Barrett noted this over fifty years ago. No other New Testament book, Barrett argues, exceeds John in its thorough incorporation of the Bible from start to finish:

the evangelist had a wide knowledge of the Old Testament but . . . he used it, not in the primitive Christian manner of citing proof texts but as a whole. . . . For him, the OT was itself a comprehensive unity, not a mere quarry from which isolated fragments might be hewn. . . . The

18. Barnabas Lindars, *New Testament Apologetic* (London: SCM, 1961) 259-65.

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whole body of the OT formed a background, a framework, upon which the new revelation rested.¹⁹

John's Gospel is permeated by the great themes of salvation history narrated in the Scriptures, a fact that we could miss if we confine our attention to the relatively small number of explicit quotations. Jesus, according to John, discloses the true and full meaning of such biblical motifs as creation, the Exodus, the Jewish feasts, the Jacob tradition, the motif of the shepherd, and divine wisdom.²⁰

John's Hermeneutics

These observations outline the basic contours of John's use of Scripture. However, we can pursue the matter even deeper by inquiring into John's underlying hermeneutical presuppositions. Technical questions of method lead us to John's understanding of the nature of Scripture itself. Like all New Testament writers, John believed that Scripture had divine authority. However, I would argue that the manner in which John spelled out his particular understanding of the relation of Scripture to Christ is distinctive.

19. C. K. Barrett, "The Old Testament in the Fourth Gospel," *JTS* 38 (1947) 168.

20. On creation, see E. C. Hoskyns, "Genesis i-iii and St. John's Gospel," *JTS* 21 (1920) 210-18; Calum M. Carmichael, *The Story of Creation: Its Origin and Its Interpretation in Philo and The Fourth Gospel* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996). On the Exodus, see Wayne A. Meeks, *The Prophet-King: Moses Traditions and Johannine Christology* (Leiden: Brill, 1967); Peder Borgen, *Bread from Heaven* (Leiden: Brill, 1965); T. F. Glasson, *Moses in the Fourth Gospel* (London: SCM, 1963); Jacob J. Enz, "The Book of Exodus as a Literary Type for the Gospel of John," *JBL* 76 (1957) 208-15. On the Jewish feasts, see Gale A. Yee, *Jewish Feasts and the Gospel of John* (Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, 1989). On the Jacob tradition, see Ellen B. Aitken, "At the Well of Living Water: Jacob Traditions in John 4," in *The Interpretation of Scripture in Early Judaism and Christianity* (ed. Craig A. Evans; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000) 342-52. On the shepherd motif, see Johannes Beutler and Robert T. Fortna, eds., *The Shepherd Discourse of John 10* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). On divine wisdom, see Sharon H. Ringe, *Wisdom's Friends: Community and Christology in the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1999). When looked at from the perspective of broad themes, John's use of Scripture resembles not so much that of Matthew but of the Apostle Paul (see E. Earle Ellis, *Paul's Use of the Old Testament* [Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1957] 11).

I want to start with three fascinating and unusual verses that give us an initial clue to John's understanding of Scripture:

5:46: "If you believed Moses, you would believe me, *for he wrote about me.*" — *seeing*

8:56: "Your father Abraham *rejoiced to see my day; he saw it and was glad.*" — *vision of testimony*

12:41: "Isaiah said this because *he saw his [Jesus'] glory and spoke of him.*"

We will deal with these texts in detail below, but note the prevalence of verbs of seeing and of making known ("speaking" or "writing"). This suggests a dynamic interaction of seeing and testifying, of vision and witness. "John affirms that the Word, through whom creation had its being, was revealed to Moses and the Prophets."²¹ But that Word is rightly understood only by those who see that it refers to the Logos who was manifested most completely in Jesus. In fact, Scripture is not really the direct self-disclosure of the Father, but testimony to the Son whom the Father has made known. The witness of Scripture, though true, cannot be anything but partial and provisional; and those who read it truthfully must realize that "Moses and the prophets bear witness to Jesus."²² John shares with the other New Testament writers this basic understanding of "the christologically founded unity of the Scriptures";²³ but he is unique in the way he makes this hermeneutic explicit. John's hermeneutic could be stated briefly like this: *Scripture is the enduring record of those who saw the activity of the divine Logos prior to its appearance in Jesus and then testified to what they had seen.* What John says of the prophet Isaiah in 12:41 is true of all Old Testament witnesses: they saw Christ's glory and spoke of him.

"Seeing" in the Fourth Gospel

If the above definition of John's understanding of Scripture is valid, we need to consider how he uses vision as an epistemological and theological

21. John Painter, *The Quest for the Messiah* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993) 32.

22. Painter, *Quest for the Messiah*, 32.

23. Martin Hengel, "The Old Testament and the Fourth Gospel," in Evans and Stegner, eds., *The Gospels and the Scriptures of Israel*, 389.

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category. It has been noted that "seeing" is the predominant metaphor in John for the knowledge of Jesus that comes by faith.²⁴ There is no question that verbs of seeing dominate the Fourth Gospel. What is open to debate is the relationship between seeing and believing. Some have argued that John opposes faith and vision, exalting the latter and denigrating the former, on the basis of passages like 20:29: "Because you have seen me you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." This reading fails to appreciate the complexity of John's understanding of vision. G. L. Phillips has noted that vision and faith are not mutually exclusive but stand at different points on a continuum of modes of apprehension. Throughout the Gospel there is "the mounting significance of intensity of vision," culminating "in faith which is here conceived . . . as the consummation of an act of illumination which derives its quality from what it sees, rather than a decision which we make with reference to some external object."²⁵ Phillips analyzes a hierarchy of terms for various levels of "seeing." He begins with βλέπω, which is the most basic kind of seeing, mere oracular vision or garden-variety "eyesight." John uses this word fifteen times.²⁶ The main cluster of occurrences is found in chapter 9, in which Jesus heals the man born blind. However, βλέπω is not an inherently negative term. Everyone needs to see at this level all the time. But the mode of seeing must be appropriate to that which is to be seen; and if one insists on seeing superficially with the eyes what can only be perceived on a deeper level, one will be misled. Βλέπω is perfectly adequate for negotiating the everyday reality of life, but not for apprehending deep spiritual truth. It is useful, but not adequate in and of itself.

Next up the ladder, according to Phillips, is θεωρέω. It means "to look at with concentration" but without "a very high perception of the significance of what is contemplated."²⁷ It is used twenty-two times, often in reference to those who witness Jesus' signs but do not grasp the deeper meaning to which they point.²⁸ Closely related is θεάομαι, which carries

24. Craig A. Evans, *To See and Not Perceive: Isaiah 6:9-10 in Early Jewish and Christian Interpretation* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989) 129.

25. G. L. Phillips, "Faith and Vision in the Fourth Gospel," in *Studies in the Fourth Gospel* (ed. F. L. Cross; London: A. R. Mowbray, 1957) 83.

26. 1:29; 5:19; 9:7, 15, 19, 21, 25, 39, 41; 11:9; 13:22; 20:1, 5; 21:9, 20.

27. Phillips, "Faith and Vision," 83.

28. 2:23; 4:19; 6:2, 19, 40, 62; 7:3; 8:51; 9:8; 10:12; 12:19, 45; 14:17, 19; 16:10, 16, 17, 19; 17:24;

20:6, 12, 14.

the added nuance of looking at a spectacle, of "beholding" something sensational.²⁹

Opáō is a critical, pivotal term in the Fourth Gospel. It suggests that "the intellectual content of what has been seen has come to dominate the physical act of seeing,"³⁰ and it is John's most frequently used "seeing" word.³¹ *Opáō* often stands as the gateway to the most exalted type of vision, *πιστεύω* (belief), which means a full relational encounter with the one who is seen.

In general, Phillips's analysis stands up to scrutiny.³² This is not to say that we can lock the Fourth Gospel into an unbending terminological straitjacket. John is too sophisticated for that. There is a fluidity to his use of seeing terms that resists a rigid one-to-one correspondence. However, what Phillips says is sound. In the Gospel of John there are different levels of seeing that result in different degrees of knowledge; but the pinnacle of that hierarchy is faith or belief. This is an important point because it goes against the idea that seeing and believing are contradictory modes of perception. John's hierarchy of vision accounts for the ironic blindness of those who see Jesus with their eyes but to whom the truth about him remains hidden on a deeper level. They "see," but improperly. The Johannine Jesus teaches that these blind can be deeply pious because they rely on the words of Scripture (5:39); but they are nonetheless blind because they refuse to see the true meaning of that for which they so diligently search. When Jesus says, "Blessed are those who have not seen (*μη ἰδόντες*) and have believed," he is not making a sharp distinction between two mutually contradictory phenomena but cautioning against those who would stop short of the full vision of faith. We might render John 20:29b (somewhat clumsily) like this: "Blessed are those who, though lacking the sensory evidence satisfying to lower levels of seeing, have entered into such a relationship of intimate communion with Christ that they see the truth in all its fullness, not with the eyes, but by faith."

This analysis is important for our purposes because Scripture origi-

29. 1:14, 32, 38; 4:35; 6:5; 11:45.

30. Phillips, "Faith and Vision," 83.

31. 1:18, 34, 39, 50, 51; 3:11, 32, 36; 4:45; 5:37; 6:36, 46; 8:38, 57; 9:37; 11:40; 14:7, 9; 15:24; 16:16, 17, 19, 22; 19:35, 37; 20:18, 25, 29.

32. However, John Painter, following Bultmann, rejects out of hand the notion that John's several verbs for seeing carry different nuances of meaning. They are interchangeable, according to Painter. See *John: Witness and Theologian* (London: SPCK, 1975) 71.

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nates with those who have "seen" the Logos even though the evidence was only indirect and hidden.³³ Although he does not come right out and say it, John regards the Old Testament witnesses as those who saw the Logos by faith. Otherwise, in what sense could they have "seen" at all since the Logos was not yet fully visible? Scripture communicates the experience of those who preceded the λόγος ἔνσαρκος but were blessed with a vision of the truth that appeared in Christ.

John's method of employing Scripture could be described as typological in the sense that the correspondence with the past is rooted more in historical events than in the written text.³⁴ However, I would argue that John is not interested even in "events" in the sense of historical happenings per se, but in the recurrent "event" of "seeing" the Logos of God in diverse settings, manners, and contexts by those graced with prophetic vision. Scripture is essentially the preserved record of those who have seen the Logos and borne testimony to what they have seen.

Vision and Witness:

John the Baptist, Abraham, Isaiah, and Moses

It is time to return to the three texts cited above (5:46; 8:56; 12:41). In keeping with what I have just argued, however, I want to consider the figures behind these texts — Moses, Abraham, and Isaiah — and add to them a fourth, John the Baptist. I am following Martin Hengel, who has argued that John regards these four as the paradigmatic recipients of the Logos in Israel.³⁵ All four can be seen as "Old Testament" figures, though not in precisely the same sense. Moses and Isaiah are biblical authors. Abraham is a key actor in the biblical drama. John the Baptist stands between Scripture and the enfleshment of the Logos. All are relevant to our discussion because they demonstrate the role of seeing and testifying that preceded the coming of Jesus. By examining these four exemplary witnesses, we can un-

33. "[T]he Logos was both the visibility and audibility of God . . . and [John] regards all those occasions on which God is described in Scripture as having been either seen or heard as manifestations of the pre-existent Logos." A. T. Hanson, "John's Technique in Using Scripture," in *New Testament Interpretation of Scripture* (London: SPCK, 1980) 163.

34. James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1977) 86.

35. Hengel, "The Old Testament and the Fourth Gospel," 386.

derstand the theological framework out of which John worked and in terms of which he thought of Scripture.

John the Baptist, even though not strictly speaking an Old Testament figure, illustrates the relation between seeing and testifying most clearly. John is both "the quintessential witness to the Logos"³⁶ and a transitional figure between the old and new eras of salvation history. He is "the representative of believing Israel all through the ages, the last of the prophets who sums up in himself the message of the prophets."³⁷ Unlike the prophets of the Old Testament, however, John saw Jesus in the flesh, so his testimony bears a special weight. He "came to testify to the light, so that all might believe in him. He was not the light, but he came to testify to the light" (1:7-8). John's special status as the one who points to the light is made clear in the Gospel. John identified Jesus as "the Lamb of God" (1:29, 36), witnessed the descent of the Spirit on Jesus (1:33), and recognized the presence of the Son of God (1:34). However, he is not to be confused with the one to whom he testifies: "[John] himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light" (1:8). In so doing, the Baptist demonstrates both the importance and the limitation of the forerunners of Christ. Their testimony is valid as far as it goes, but it must give way to the infinitely fuller and more glorious revelation of the Father in Christ. John describes his own function in 3:30: "He [Jesus] must increase, but I must decrease." To heed John but fail to see that his light was purely derivative would be to remain in the darkness. Many were able to see in John a "burning" and shining lamp" (5:35) but could not see beyond his reflected light to the one to whom he pointed.³⁸ John's role in relation to Jesus is essentially the same as that of the Old Testament witnesses who went before him.

The language and imagery of Isaiah, and particularly Deutero-Isaiah, furnish John with many of his main themes.³⁹ The text in which John explicitly states Isaiah's role in seeing and testifying to the Logos is 12:36b-41, a passage set at a critical juncture in the Gospel, drawing chapters 2 to 12 to a close and providing a transition to chapters 13 to 20. Francis Moloney calls chapter 12 "The Hour Has Come," underlining its climactic place in

36. Schuchard, *Scripture within Scripture*, 12.

37. Hanson, "John's Technique in Using Scripture," 164.

38. Francis J. Moloney, *Signs and Shadows: Reading John 5-12* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996) 22.

39. F. W. Young, "A Study of the Relation of Isaiah to the Fourth Gospel," *ZNW* 46 (1955) 215-33.

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John's narrative. If the testimony of John the Baptist in chapters 1 to 3 provides an introduction to the Book of Signs, 12:37-50 forms an epilogue to this section, summarizing Jesus' public ministry as "a story of [human] refusal of divine light and life."⁴⁰ John the Baptist and Isaiah serve to frame the first main section of the Gospel.

³⁶"While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of the light." After Jesus had said this, he departed and hid from them. ³⁷Although he had performed so many signs in their presence, they did not believe in him. ³⁸This was to fulfill the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah: "Lord, who have believed our message, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?" ³⁹And so they could not believe, because Isaiah also said, ⁴⁰"He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart, so that they might not look with their eyes, and understand with their heart, and turn — and I would heal them." ⁴¹*Isaiah said this because he saw his glory and spoke about him.* (John 12:36-41)

John quotes Isa 53:1 and 6:9-10, two passages from the primitive tradition found also in the Synoptics, the Book of Acts, and Paul.⁴¹ John uses these texts to ponder the puzzling failure of Jesus to win a greater following. John's narrative up to this point has, in a sense, been commentary on 1:11: "He came to his own and his own received him not."⁴² Lesslie Newbigin says in regard to this passage that it concerns "the inescapable paradoxes of revelation. How can the truth be grasped by a world whose fundamental patterns of thought are shaped by the lie?"⁴³ Jesus has performed signs and wonders like Moses before him, but they are met with stubborn unbelief. However, from John's perspective, this is only to be expected because the entire story of Israel bears witness to the disinclination of God's people to accept God's word. The experience of Moses and the prophets foreshadows that of Jesus. Their words were also words of judgment on those who refused to hear.

The theme of rejection is explicated in John's editorial comment:

40. Dodd, *Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, 379.

41. Mark 4:11-12; 8:17-18; Matt 13:13-15; Luke 8:10; 19:42; Acts 28:26-27; Rom 10:16; 11:8, 10.

42. Dodd, *Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, 380.

43. Newbigin, *The Light Has Come: An Exposition of the Fourth Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 162.

"Isaiah said this [that they will be blinded by unbelief] because he saw his [clearly, Jesus'] glory and spoke about him" (12:41). What the evangelist is trying to say is not immediately obvious, however. John maintains that Isaiah's words were fulfilled in the refusal of Jesus' own people to accept him. What does this have to do with his vision of Jesus' glory? Immediately we hear an echo of Isaiah 6 in which the prophet saw "the Lord, high and lifted up." *Targum Jonathan* says that the prophet saw the "glory" of the Lord in the temple.⁴⁴ But there is another "lifting up" in Isaiah. In 52:13 God says through Isaiah, "See, my servant will act wisely; he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted." According to Craig Evans, the Isaiah texts help to explain the rejection of Jesus by identifying Jesus as the servant of the Lord about whom Isaiah spoke.⁴⁵ John's use of Isaiah in chapter 12 evokes an implicit but unmistakable reference to Isaiah 52 and 53, Evans argues. This allusion is especially meaningful coming as it does at the point of transition to the Passion narrative. Isaiah saw the truth that the Logos would glorify God and be glorified by God as he was lifted up on the cross. By means of the key word "lifted up," John links the temple vision of Isaiah 6 with the theme of the suffering servant in Deutero-Isaiah. The Servant Songs are the key scriptural background to this passage, according to Evans; otherwise it is difficult to make any sense out of verse 41.⁴⁶ This is consistent with John's overall employment of Scripture: "Isaiah passages are not quoted and specifically related to their fulfillment in the light of Christ. Instead, the metaphors and figures of Isaiah are interpreted symbolically and spiritually and become the media for the expression of the meaning of Jesus Christ and his words."⁴⁷ The reason the texts are able to function like this is that their author saw Christ in the temple and spoke of his destiny of righteous suffering. In 12:36b-41, then, John presents Scripture as preserving Isaiah's vision of the Lord/Logos to whom the prophet bore witness.

John the Baptist and Isaiah illustrate the vision-witness schema and form a kind of frame around the Book of Signs. Abraham and Moses do

44. McNamara, *Targum and Testament*, 49.

45. Craig A. Evans, "Obduracy and the Lord's Servant: Some Observations on the Use of the Old Testament in the Fourth Gospel," in *Early Jewish and Christian Exegesis: Studies in Memory of William Hugh Brownlee* (ed. Craig A. Evans and William F. Stinespring; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987) 221-36.

46. Evans, "Obduracy and the Lord's Servant," 236. Also, Young, "Study," 235ff.

47. Young, "Study," 235.

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not fit the pattern quite so neatly because, while John says that Abraham saw the Logos, he does not mention Abraham's testimony; and while Moses testified (wrote) about Jesus, he did not, strictly speaking, see him. However, each of these objections may be dealt with in due course.

Turning to the treatment of Abraham in the Fourth Gospel, we note that John is unique among the evangelists in the emphasis he places on Abraham, a tradition that is not central to the Synoptics.⁴⁸ John's purpose in using the Abraham tradition is twofold: to prove that true descent from Abraham comes from faith and obedience, not birth; and to show that Abraham saw the future salvation in Christ. The key text for our purposes is 8:51-59:

⁵¹"Very truly I tell you, whoever keeps my word will never see death."

⁵²The Jews said to him, "Now we know that you have a demon. Abraham died, and so did the prophets, yet you say, 'Whoever keeps my word will never taste death.' ⁵³Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? The prophets also died. Who do you claim to be?" ⁵⁴Jesus answered, "If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me, he of whom you say, 'He is our God,' ⁵⁵though you do not know him. But I know him; if I would say that I do not know him, I would be a liar like you. But I do know him and I keep his word. ⁵⁶Your ancestor Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day; he saw it and was glad." ⁵⁷Then the Jews said to him, "You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?" ⁵⁸Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am." ⁵⁹So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple.

This passage is set in a longer section (chapters 7 and 8) that takes place at the Feast of Tabernacles, and John builds the narrative around allusions to two Jewish rituals: the carrying of water from the Siloam pool up the steps of the temple and the lighting of lights. By the first century, the Feast of Tabernacles "had become filled with a strong element of eschatological expectation,"⁴⁹ and John skillfully uses his narrative to argue that Jesus is the

48. A significant exception is the Q passage Matt 3:9/Luke 3:8: "I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham," an interpretation similar to that found in John. Paul uses Abraham extensively as the paradigm of faith, but, like John, Paul also ascribes to Abraham foreknowledge of Christ (Gal 3:8).

49. Newbigin, *The Light Has Come*, 91.

fulfillment of those expectations. In chapter 7, Jesus says that he is the one out of whom "streams of living water" flow (7:38). In chapter 8, he identifies himself as the "light of the world" (8:12), a claim that triggers conflict with the unbelieving "Jews" who "see" but do not really see. Jesus is talking to the chief priests and Pharisees, the religious leadership of Israel, who ought to recognize the light but instead are willfully blind.

The controversy centers on their insistence that they are descendants of Abraham. Their freedom and dignity come from their relationship to Abraham, but John makes clear that they are only descendants (σπέρμα) after the flesh, not children (τέκνα) after the Spirit. They may very well be biological descendants of Abraham; but, Jesus says, "if you were Abraham's children, you would be doing what Abraham did" (8:39). Jesus has brought the truth to light. They refuse to see the truth, thereby showing that their father is not Abraham — or God — but the devil.

Telling the professionally religious that they are children of the devil is one sure way to get a reaction. In verse 52, Jesus' interlocutors say, "Now we know that you have a demon. Abraham died and so did the prophets. . . . Are you greater than our father Abraham?" Even though they "see" only at a lower level, they bear inadvertent witness to the truth. Indeed, "I am greater than Abraham," Jesus says, "because Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day; he saw it and was glad" (8:56).

In Jewish tradition, Abraham was granted a vision of the future fulfillment of God's promises.⁵⁰ Early Christianity revered Abraham as a man of faith because of "his openness to the word of God."⁵¹ He lived in faithful anticipation of the promises of God, and his only security was in radical dependence on God. In John's view, the texture of Abraham's own life anticipated fulfillment in Jesus. By faith, Abraham saw that dependence on God would be established as the ultimate truth of the cosmos. Abraham foresaw that Jesus' mode of glorifying the Father through perfect obedience would be the ultimate glorification. However, "Abraham, for all his greatness belongs to the sequence of events that mark time. . . . His story is finished; he has come and gone." Jesus, because he is the Logos, "reaches back behind the days of Abraham, behind any time,

50. Brown, *The Gospel according to John*, 1:359; Moloney, *Signs and Shadows*, 112. See, e.g., Tg. Onq. on Gen 17:16-17; Gen. Rab. 44:22, 28; 4 Ezra 3:14; T. Levi 18:14; 2 Baruch 4:4; Apocalypse of Abraham 31:1-3.

51. Moloney, *Signs and Shadows*, 107.

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to proclaim that before the time of Abraham, he was already in existence."⁵² Abraham's worthiness derived from his insight into the ways of the Logos.

The most prominent Old Testament figure in the Gospel of John by far is Moses. Of all the evangelists, John most clearly interprets Jesus against a Mosaic background. John draws many of his key christological titles and motifs from the Moses traditions. It is perhaps not necessary to find references to Moses behind every turn of phrase (as T. F. Glasson does)⁵³ to recognize the extent to which Moses permeates the entire Johannine portrait of Jesus. However, John's Jesus is not a "second Moses" in the sense of merely recapitulating or building on the mission of his predecessor. John states quite clearly that Jesus supersedes and replaces Moses as the decisive bearer of revelation. This is an obviously polemical point, made against a Judaism that continued to turn to the Mosaic Torah for inspiration. The relation of Moses to Jesus is that of forerunner to fulfiller. Jesus is the full flowering of the truth to which Moses, for all his greatness, merely hinted. "The Law was given through Moses," the Prologue to the Gospel declares; "grace and truth come through Jesus Christ" (1:17). Moses, like John the Baptist, recedes into the background with the coming of Christ.

John presents Jesus as the prophet foretold in Deut 18:15-19. After Jesus feeds the crowds with the loaves and fishes, the people begin to say, "Surely this is the prophet who is to come into the world" (6:14). But they misunderstand the significance of Jesus' role because they try to make him king by force. Jesus is much more than the Mosaic prophet.⁵⁴ The successor is so immeasurably greater than the predecessor that he establishes an entirely new paradigm of revelation. Moses' raising up of the serpent in the wilderness furnishes but a pale echo of the glory and splendor that were made known when Christ was raised up on the cross. The manna that Moses gave the children of Israel in the wilderness was nothing more than a

52. Moloney, *Signs and Shadows*, 113.

53. Glasson, *Moses in the Fourth Gospel*.

54. John is adapting a standard technique used in rabbinic exegesis known as *qal wahomer*, in which what is true of a less important case is taken to be true of a more important case. The rabbis used it in both halakic and haggadic exegesis, and it made an easy transition into Christian circles. This argument is used extensively by Matthew, Paul, and the author of Hebrews ("If such and such is true of the old covenant . . . how much more is it true of the new?"). Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis*, 20.

poor foreshadowing of Christ the Bread of Life.⁵⁵ The water that Moses brought forth from the rock in the wilderness was but a hint of Jesus, the living water. Jesus is the Light of the world, the eschatological fulfillment of the divine reality only dimly prefigured in the Torah of Moses.⁵⁶ Moses, although preeminent among Old Testament visionaries and witnesses, must be seen within the same schema of preliminary seeing and testifying as the other figures we have considered.

Several texts could demonstrate this, but for our purposes 5:39-47 is most instructive:

³⁹"You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. ⁴⁰Yet you refuse to come to me to have life. ⁴¹I do not accept glory from human beings. ⁴²But I know that you do not have the love of God in you. ⁴³I have come in my Father's name, and you do not accept me; if another comes in his own name, you will accept him. ⁴⁴How can you believe when you accept glory from another and do not seek the glory that comes from the one who alone is God? ⁴⁵Do not think that I will accuse you before the Father; your accuser is Moses, on whom you have set your hope. ⁴⁶If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. ⁴⁷But if you do not believe what he wrote, how will you believe what I say?"

This passage is set in a longer section (5:1-47) in which Jesus heals a paralyzed man on the Sabbath and then is persecuted by "the Jews" for violating the Sabbath and for blasphemy by "calling God his own Father, thereby making himself equal to God" (5:18). The dominant theme in this chapter is μαρτυρία — testimony. Jesus' words and actions are validated by the testimony of God himself (5:32). Messengers like John the Baptist ("a burning and shining lamp") have pointed the way to Jesus, but their testimony is derivative and their light merely reflective. It is the Father's own testimony that establishes the truth of Jesus and his work (5:31-38).

To "the Jews," Jesus says, "you have never heard [God's] voice or seen his form; and you do not have his word [λόγον] abiding in you, because

55. Peder Borgen, *Bread from Heaven*; also Borgen, "John 6: Tradition, Interpretation, Composition," in *From Jesus to John: Essays on Jesus and New Testament Christology in Honor of Marinus de Jonge* (ed. Martinus C. De Boer; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993) 268-91.

56. Stephen J. Castelli, "Jesus as Eschatological Torah," *TrinJ* (n.s.) 18 (1997) 15-41.

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you do not believe in him whom he has sent" (5:37-38). In other words, seeing God is tied to the apprehension of the Logos of God who has appeared visibly in Jesus. "The Jews" search the Scriptures; but their efforts are ultimately futile and deeply ironic because, while the Scriptures testify to Jesus, they do not see it. "It is they [the Scriptures] that testify on my behalf," Jesus says (5:39). Yet, on allegedly scriptural grounds, "the Jews" seek to kill Jesus, the very one to whom the Scriptures testify. They are seeking glory from merely human sources and failing to trace those sources upward to the true glory to which they point (5:44). Moses, Jesus says, is not their justifier but their accuser because Moses "wrote about me." Earlier Philip says, "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law and about whom the prophets also wrote — Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph" (1:45). This is an encapsulated description of the role of Moses. Moses "saw God." Moses apprehended the glory of the Logos and witnessed to him. The Scriptures that bear the name of Moses preserve this witness until it is fulfilled in Jesus. "The witness of Moses is the witness of the Scriptures. To believe Moses implies believing Jesus."⁵⁷

It is in his use of the Moses tradition that the boldness of John's approach becomes evident. He does not depict Jesus as a "new Moses" in the same way as does Matthew, for whom the relationship between Moses and Jesus is that of type to antitype. John's Logos Christology leads to this startling exegetical phenomenon: Moses is not the pattern for Jesus; rather, Jesus is the pattern for Moses. Moses said and wrote what he did because he saw the Logos who appeared later in Jesus.

As noted above, it may seem that Abraham and Moses do not really fit the "vision and witness" schema that I have posited because John says that Abraham saw Jesus but not that he witnessed to him, while Moses witnessed to Jesus (wrote about him) but did not see him. However, what John does not state explicitly is often implied. For example, John does not say that the healing of man at the pool of Bethesda in chapter 5 is one of Jesus' signs, but quite clearly he intends this episode to be included among the signs.⁵⁸ Abraham does not bear self-conscious witness to posterity of his vision of the Logos, but through the work of Moses his life is available

57. Painter, *Quest for the Messiah*, 243.

58. Andreas Köstenberger has argued that it is quite likely John intended there to be seven signs because of the symbolic importance of the number seven in the Gospel, even though he identifies only six. "The Seventh Johannine Sign: A Study in John's Christology," in *Studies on John and Gender: A Decade of Scholarship* (SBL 38; New York: Peter Lang, 2001).

as a testimony. And while John does not explicitly attribute a vision of the Logos to Moses, I think that was his intention. While it is true that the essential contrast between Jesus and Moses is that Moses, like other mere mortals, had "never seen God" (1:18), Moses was granted privileged insight into the nature of the divine glory. Exod 33:11 says that "the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face as friend with friend." Moses' request to see God's glory was not granted, but he was shown God's "back" (Exod 33:18-28). Moses was witness to the signs and wonders that pointed to God's power. "Before all your people," the Lord says, "I will perform marvels, such as have not been performed in all the earth or in any nation; and all the people among whom you live shall see the work of the Lord (LXX τὰ ἔργα τοῦ κυρίου)" (Exod 34:10). Moses saw the prefigurations of tabernacle, signs and wonders, manna and water, whose full meaning was made known in Jesus.⁵⁹ The fact that Moses did not see the face of God does not contradict the point because prior to the incarnation no one saw God fully; and yet, John explicitly states that Isaiah and Abraham *saw* Christ, and the same can be inferred of Moses. In the partial and imperfect manner of all Old Testament witnesses, Moses did see the glory of God in the Logos and bore witness to the same.

59. There is a Jewish tradition of Moses being granted divinely inspired vision. This was tied to the tradition of the ascension of Moses into the heavens where he saw the Kingdom. See Meeks, *The Prophet-King*, 296-301. Moses was regarded as a prophet, which, in certain circles, entailed the gift of vision. E.g., 2 Esdras 14:3-5: "I revealed myself in a bush and spoke to Moses when my people were in bondage in Egypt; and I sent him and led my people out of Egypt; and I led him up on Mount Sinai, where I kept him with me many days. I told him many wondrous things and *showed him the secrets of the times* and declared to him the end of the times. I commanded him, saying, 'These words you shall publish openly, and these you shall keep secret.'" Later, *Lev. Rab.* 1:3 says that Moses is "the father of the prophets who see by the Holy Spirit." More work would be required to establish any kind of connection between these traditions and John, and I am doing no more than making a possible suggestion. However, it would certainly not be farfetched to think that John regarded Moses as seeing the Logos, especially since the line between hearing and seeing is a somewhat fuzzy one in the Fourth Gospel.

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**The Uniqueness of John's Use
of the Old Testament Witnesses**

I have tried to argue that, while John shares much in common with the other New Testament authors in his use of the Old Testament, his approach is unique in several respects. I have tried to illustrate this with the examples of John the Baptist, Isaiah, Abraham, and Moses, who saw the Logos and testified to him. These biblical exemplars function differently in John than they do in the rest of the New Testament because of the Johannine emphasis on seeing and witnessing rather than text per se.

Moses is certainly a key figure throughout the New Testament. But the Synoptic Gospels tend to refer to Moses mostly in the context of halakic disputes between Jesus and his adversaries. Jesus offers the proper interpretation of the Torah of Moses.⁶⁰ Several passages in Luke-Acts contain the introductory formula "Moses writes" or "Moses says," but these are simply conventional vehicles for delivering the kerygma of Jesus' suffering and death.⁶¹ Paul refers to Moses frequently in Romans 9-11 as the source of *testimonia* texts confirming the election of Israel, and 2 Cor 3:12-18 is a midrash on Exod 34:29-35. But one would have to say that none of these passages makes the precise point that Moses wrote about Christ.

Isaiah, when mentioned by name, is almost always incorporated into a standard introductory formula, either in the passive voice ("what was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah")⁶² or the active voice ("Isaiah said/prophesied").⁶³ Again, there is nothing that parallels John's statement that "Isaiah saw [Christ's] glory and spoke of him."

Abraham plays a prominent role in the New Testament as well. He is the prototype of those who are justified by faith,⁶⁴ or he is the recipient of the divine promise.⁶⁵ But nowhere else in the New Testament is Abraham described as "seeing" Christ.

Interestingly, the one figure who is treated in somewhat the same manner as John treats Moses, Abraham, and Isaiah is King David, who is not mentioned in an exegetically significant way in the Fourth Gospel at all. The

60. Matt 19:7//Mark 10:3; Matt 22:24//Mark 12:26//Luke 20:28; Mark 1:44; 7:10.

61. Luke 24:27; Acts 3:22; 26:22.

62. Matt 3:3; 4:14; 8:17; 12:17; Acts 28:25.

63. Matt 15:7//Mark 7:6; Rom 9:27, 29; 10:16, 20; 15:12.

64. Rom 4:3; Gal 3:6; James 2:23.

65. Luke 1:55, 73; Acts 3:25; 7:21ff.; Rom 4:13; Gal 3:18; Heb 6:13.

Synoptic tradition relates a midrashic interpretation of Ps 110:1, in which Jesus asks, "How is it that David calls [Christ] 'Lord'?" (Matt 22:43//Mark 12:36//Luke 20:44); and the book of Acts says that the Holy Spirit spoke through David concerning Christ (Acts 1:16; 2:25; 4:25). There is a certain affinity between David's prophetic experience of Christ in the Synoptic tradition and the vision and witness of Abraham, Moses, and Isaiah in John; but why John does not make the obvious connection between seeing and testifying to the Logos and David is a topic we can only leave for further study.

Is Scripture a "Sign"?

One final aspect of John's understanding of Scripture is its relation to his doctrine of signs. Johannine signs "point to God's glory displayed in Jesus, thus revealing Jesus as God's authentic representative."⁶⁶ Signs (σημεῖα) are analogous to the Synoptic tradition's works of power (δυνάμεις).⁶⁷ Signs in the Fourth Gospel, however, are distinguished by their profound ambiguity, because they derive their significance solely from that to which they point and their efficacy is therefore dependent on the willingness of the perceiver to see correctly. For this reason, signs sometimes evoke belief (2:11; 20:30-31), but sometimes they reinforce unbelief because they are not interpreted according to faith (12:36-37; 2:23-25; 4:48; 20:25).

Properly speaking, Johannine signs occur only during the period of time when Jesus appeared on earth. They are public acts performed by Jesus himself. In this sense, Scripture is not a sign. However, Scripture has a "sign-like" quality in that it conveys the pre-incarnation vision of Old Testament witnesses and it confronts the recipient with a choice between faith, which gives true vision, and unbelief, which is both caused by and leads to blindness. Like the signs of Jesus' ministry, Scripture is valuable because it evokes a response to Christ; but it is insufficient in itself to give a full knowledge of God. Only when seen with the light of Christ do the signs and Scripture serve a positive purpose. Apart from that light, they mislead and distort the truth. We might say that functionally, if not formally, Scripture is related to the signs in its preparatory role.

66. Köstenberger, "The Seventh Johannine Sign," 106.

67. Marianne Meye Thompson, *The Humanity of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) 53.

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John and the Old Testament Today

I have been making the case that the key to John's understanding of the Old Testament is his unique Christology. Scripture witnesses to Christ through the agency of those who had a pre-incarnation vision of the Logos. The vision that gave rise to the text has priority over the text itself, and the interpretation of Scripture is thoroughly controlled by Christology. John wrestled with the problem, at the end of the first century, of how to find the true meaning of the Scriptures of Israel. Today, our challenge is somewhat different: How to find meaning in John's christocentric interpretation of Scripture in the midst of a pluralistic context. John interpreted Scripture. But for Christians John *is* Scripture. The Gospel has an authority for us analogous to that which the Old Testament had for John. And yet, our world is much different from his. The context in which contemporary Christians read the Fourth Gospel is highly pluralistic, with numerous competing voices claiming to represent the truth.

I think it is safe to say that the Fourth Gospel presents special problems for contemporary Christians because its claim to Jesus as the exclusive source of divine revelation is presented with such force. Some have seen John as the most anti-Semitic of the Gospels, expressing Christian hatred of the Jews at its most pathological. According to Rosemary Radford Ruether, the New Testament in general, but the Gospel of John in particular, is the spring from which Western anti-Semitism has flowed. John's exclusivist Christology makes any version of the truth other than his own wrong in principle, a claim that can no longer be sustained in a pluralistic culture.⁶⁸ In her latest book, Elaine Pagels offers a negative comparison of the Gospel of John, which demands exclusive belief in Jesus, to the *Gospel of Thomas*, which teaches "that God's light shines not only in Jesus but, potentially at least, in everyone."⁶⁹ Those who proclaim Jesus as the Way, the Truth, and the Life contend these days with those who "seek to know God through one's own, divinely given capacity, since all are created in the image of God."⁷⁰

In this climate, however, John's presentation of Jesus not as a religious option but as the self-revelation of God becomes not only more

68. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism* (New York: Seabury, 1979) 111-16.

69. Elaine Pagels, *Beyond Belief: The Secret of the Gospel of Thomas* (New York: Random House, 2003) 34.

70. Pagels, *Beyond Belief*, 34.

scandalous but in a sense more necessary. Christianity is founded on the claim that in Jesus we have seen the light, and Christian faith will stand or fall on that claim. According to our gospel, we do not find the truth within ourselves but only in the one who has come from beyond, bearing the truth. We do not remember what we have always known in a platonic act of recollection; rather, we are seized by revelation. The choice that confronted those who first read the Gospel of John still confronts Christians today: Will you see the light of Jesus or will you not?

John did not deny the truth of the Scriptures of Israel. These Scriptures, he wrote, testified not to a new religion but to God's self-manifestation. This is an essential point in this time when all religion is reduced to an expression of time-bound human culture. John challenges us to distinguish between our religious beliefs and practices and the ultimate source from which they arise. And here is where John's witness becomes all the more essential for our time. The truth of God confronts us from beyond ourselves in Jesus Christ, and that truth is the ultimate and uncompromised claim of divine love. So often, Christianity is portrayed as a bullying religion that brooks no dissent; and, unfortunately, the behavior of Christians has done much to contribute to that perception. But Christianity is founded on him who walked the way of the cross. John's essential insights are those of Paul and the other evangelists: in Jesus we witness nothing other than the incredible self-offering of God out of love for the world. The revelation of divine love is at the same time fraught with divine risk. Jesus is the one who gave his all out of obedience to the Father and love for the Father's world, even though he was greeted with far more rejection than acceptance. "It is because Jesus seeks nothing for himself," Richard John Neuhaus writes, "that he is the complete manifestation of the glory of God. . . . We know no Christ other than the crucified Lord, who is Lord precisely in submitting himself to all that defies his lordship."⁷¹ John presents Jesus as the one who said, "Unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies it remains alone; but if it dies it bears much fruit" (12:24). Jesus incarnated this principle in his life and extended it to his followers. I suggest that the main scandal of the gospel in the culture of narcissism is not so much Jesus' claim to be *the* truth but his awful demand of self-giving love and the maddening paradox that we find life only if we are

71. Richard John Neuhaus, *Death on a Friday Afternoon: Meditations on the Last Words of Jesus from the Cross* (New York: Basic Books, 2000) 71, 169.

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willing to lose it. John went to the Scriptures of Israel for assistance in proclaiming this Jesus. He drew on the messianic texts that focused on the self-giving of Christ. He presented Christ, not as one truth among many, a truth standing as an equal alongside the truth of Israel's Torah or of Platonic or Stoic cosmology, but as *the* truth by which all other truth claims are judged and to which they must conform insofar as they are true. Jesus establishes the true meaning of Scripture, not vice versa.

We must interpret John, including his use of Scripture, with an eye to our distance from him as well as our proximity to him. John's situation was one marked by the initial cleavage between church and synagogue. In that context, he mounted an aggressive apologetic defense against those who denied the claim of Christ. In all likelihood, he did so in a situation of isolation from, rather than dialogue with, the living reality of Judaism. We cannot simply mimic this attitude and orientation as if two thousand years of history had not intervened. We have discovered that we must find a way to coexist with those different from us in a shrinking global village. At stake may be nothing less than the survival of the world. We cannot, must not, continue to speak of "the Jews," for example, as the embodiment of ignorance and God-rejection, especially not since the Holocaust. And our relations with the Jews provide an analogy for our relations with other faiths.

However — and here we return to John — when we relate to persons of other faiths we do so with integrity as *Christians*. We are those who have seen the Lord by faith, and what we have seen we cannot keep to ourselves. Christians today, as in John's day, have an obligation to announce that the standard of truth is found in Jesus Christ. What we can take from John's treatment of the Scriptures of Israel is his foundational claim that the self-emptying way of Jesus Christ is the measure of all truth. Christians cannot present this claim as merely what is true "for us" or as "one way to the truth." Surely not. It is the truth. Whatever truth there may be in other belief systems or religions is true insofar as it participates in the fundamental truth revealed in Jesus, the Word made flesh. That is the glory which the prophets foresaw and of which we are heirs and custodians. I would suggest that John's treatment of the Scriptures of Israel leads us to subordinate all cultural and religious expressions to the primary truth of God's self-giving love, revealed in Jesus, even as we recognize that Jesus can be spoken of only in the linguistic forms that our culture gives us. In the maelstrom of postmodernity, the Fourth Gospel calls us to live as those who have also seen the glory of self-giving love and who desire to speak of him.