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EPISTEMOLOGY

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CHAPTER 6

Christ, the Spirit and the Knowledge of God: A Study in Johannine Epistemology

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Introduction

Contemporary Christian philosophers and theologians have devoted considerable time to the study of epistemology, but biblical scholars have largely neglected the subject. As a consequence, Christian philosophical and theological examinations of human knowledge often draw only superficially upon Scripture. In fact, I am aware of only a few contributions to the subject of Johannine epistemology – the focus of this study – but these are inadequate in that they deal only with certain aspects of John’s epistemology, and especially the crucial role of the Spirit has been neglected.¹ This chapter seeks to address this problem in a wider perspective and against the background of contemporary questions in epistemology.

The aim of this study is to elucidate the epistemology of the Johannine literature in relation to its theology and in particular its soteriology, since the purpose of both the gospel and the epistles is soteriological (Jn 20:30-31; 1 Jn 5:13). Our task is simply to *infer* an epistemology from the Johannine literature that is based on Johannine words, themes and concepts, which we might then call a ‘Johannine’ epistemology. The key questions we will address are as follows: Can people know God? What hides knowledge of God from people? How does God make himself known? How does one acquire knowledge of God? What are the roles of Jesus and

¹ M.R. Ely, *Knowledge of God in Johannine Thought* (New York: Macmillan, 1925); I. de la Potterie, ‘*Oida et ginōskō*: Les deux modes de la connaissance dans le quatrième évangile’, *Biblica* 40 (1959), 709-25; J. Gaffney, ‘Believing and Knowing in the Fourth Gospel’, *TS* 26 (1965), 215-41; J. Painter, ‘Johannine Symbols: A Case Study in Epistemology’, *JTSA* 27 (1979), 26-41; J.H. Neyrey, ‘John III: A Debate over Johannine Epistemology and Christology’, *NovT* 23 (1981), 115-27; *idem*, ‘The Sociology of Secrecy and the Fourth Gospel’ in F.F. Segovia (ed.), *What is John? Vol. II: Literary and Social Readings of the Fourth Gospel* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), 79-109; M.M. Thompson, *The God of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), Ch. 3; H.C. Kee, ‘Knowing the Truth: Epistemology and Community in the Fourth Gospel’ in D.E. Aune, T. Seland and J.H. Ulrichsen (eds.), *Neotestamentica et Philonica: Studies in Honor of Peder Borgen*, *NovTSup* 106 (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 254-80.

the Spirit in one's knowledge of God? What is the dialectic between knowledge and belief? What is the purpose of knowledge?²

Regarding the scope of this study, we shall investigate primarily the Gospel of John but also consider the Johannine Epistles.³ Further, although epistemology *per se* is concerned with both how we know what we do and what justifies us in believing what we do, this study will only consider the former, i.e., we will examine the Johannine concept of knowledge rather than the justification of that knowledge. Moreover, we will not explore John's concept of general knowledge but, more specifically, the knowledge *of God* (i.e., about God). Finally, besides divine revelation as the main source of knowledge of God for John, we will also consider human perception as a source of knowledge, especially since visual, aural and cognitive perception are common in the Johannine literature.⁴

We will first delineate the Johannine epistemic language and the method we shall follow in section I. The epistemic themes that are defined in section I will be arranged under three major headings, forming sections II-IV respectively. In section II it is argued that the human condition of epistemic darkness is matched by a divine response of illuminating revelation. However, as section III explains, an escape from this darkness by a proper human response of belief to this divine initiative can only be achieved with further divine help in the form of the Spirit as a cognitive agent. In section IV we will demonstrate that being in a saving relationship with the Father and Son, the believer has ongoing access to further knowledge, and the Spirit continues to provide cognitive assistance. After having presented these main aspects of John's epistemology, section V will attempt to explain the dialectic between knowledge and belief, and section VI will then formulate a coherent Johannine epistemology. Finally, we shall summarize our findings and draw some conclusions.

Since certain terminology shall be used in this study in slightly specialized ways to make appropriate distinctions, we employ the following definitions:⁵ 'sensory perception' describes the activity of becoming aware of something through the senses; 'cognitive perception' is the conscious mental activity or process of

² Since John writes from within a theistic worldview, we are not concerned with questions regarding God's existence.

³ Although we remain agnostic whether the gospel and the epistles of John have common authorship (an author we call 'John'), the similarities in language, style and theology suggest that they at least belong to the same school of thought. The limitations of our study prevent us from indulging in the possible environments of John's epistemology, but for a plausible Jewish wisdom background, see C. Bennema, *The Power of Saving Wisdom: An Investigation of Spirit and Wisdom in Relation to the Soteriology of the Fourth Gospel*, WUNT II/148 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), Ch. 2.

⁴ Other sources of knowledge are testimony, memory, consciousness and reason. See R. Audi, *Epistemology: A Contemporary Introduction to the Theory of Knowledge* (London/New York: Routledge, 1998), Chs. 2-5. We refer to testimony and memory in fn. 42 and fn. 49 respectively, and consciousness and reason come partly under our concept of cognitive perception.

⁵ Section I shows that these definitions are based on Johannine words.

acquiring and evaluating information and understanding through thought/reason, experience and sensory perception in order to determine the meaning and significance of what is perceived; ‘truth’ is conformity with reality, and, particularly for John, ‘truth’ is the divine reality – the reality of God and divine things. This study upholds a distinction in the definition of belief by contemporary epistemologists and by John. Epistemology in general defines ‘belief’ as ‘accepting a particular proposition as true’, whereas Johannine ‘belief’ (which Christians generally call ‘faith’) *also* connotes (as we will see) personal allegiance to Jesus and following him as a disciple.⁶ Hence, we shall use ‘to believe’ and ‘belief’ in our chapter in this Johannine sense. The word ‘adequate’ is used to qualify knowledge and belief as both authentic (true, valid, genuine) *and* sufficiently salvific. Finally, we use the term ‘agent’ to refer to someone who produces or causes an effect.

I – John’s Epistemic Language

One approach to defining the semantic domain of Johannine epistemology would simply be to identify all the individual Johannine words with epistemological under- and overtones. A possible danger of this approach, however, is that we may read meaning into these words that is foreign to John or overlook their interrelationship in John’s thought. Nor do we want to engage in diachronic word studies, since the etymology of a word is not necessarily the hermeneutical key to its meaning.⁷ We thus propose another, more comprehensive method, namely, a thematic and conceptual synchronic approach to the Johannine epistemic language. That is, we shall identify within the Johannine literature epistemic themes and concepts (which are naturally made up of individual words) as the main building blocks. This approach has two advantages. First, as just indicated, a primarily synchronic approach is a safer road to John’s thought world. Second, context rather than individual words produces meaning, and hence we choose themes and concepts as the context for words to understand John’s epistemology.

We have identified the following main epistemic themes and their associated Greek terms:⁸

1. epistemic darkness (*skotia, skotos, tuphlos, tuphloun, ou ginōskein/eidenai, ou katalambanein, ou blepein/horan/theōrein/theasthai, ouk akouein, ou noein*)
2. illumination/enlightenment (*phōs, phainein, phōtizein*)
3. Jesus’ revelation/teaching (*exēgeisthai, emphanizein, phaneroun, gnōrizein, anaggellein, didaskein, didaskalos, didachē*)

⁶ Without intending a difference in meaning, we prefer the categories ‘to believe’ and ‘belief’ rather than ‘to have faith’ and ‘faith’, partly because John exclusively uses the verb *pisteuein* and never the noun *pistis* (except for 1 Jn 5:4).

⁷ This point has been made clear by J. Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford: OUP, 1961).

⁸ We do not claim to be exhaustive in our themes or that these words do not have other denotations and connotations, but merely elucidate their *epistemic* dimension.

4. saving truth (*alētheia*)
5. sensory perception (*blepein, horan, theōrein, theasthai, akouein*)
6. cognitive perception and understanding (*ginōskein, eidenai, mimnēskesthai, mnēmoneuein, eraunan, noein*)
7. the Spirit as a cognitive agent
8. people's response (*pisteuein, pistos, [para]lambanein*)
9. the relationship between the Father and Son
10. the relationship of the believer with the Father and Son (*koinōnia, philos, hen einai, menei en*).

These epistemic themes can subsequently be grouped in the following thematic clusters or concepts: (i) people's epistemic darkness and Jesus' illuminating revelation (themes 1-4); (ii) people's perception of, and responses to, Jesus' revelation, and the assistance of the Spirit (themes 5-8); (iii) people's epistemic relationship with the Father and Son (themes 9-10). After having done the groundwork, we are now in a position to flesh out these concepts in the following three sections.

II – Epistemic Darkness and Illuminating Revelation

This section examines John's understanding of the human epistemic condition and the divine response to it. Regarding the human condition, the Prologue already introduces this theme, which is not surprising since the Prologue sets the agenda for the rest of the gospel (as most scholars agree). The darkness in 1:5 can be understood, *inter alia*, as an *epistemic* darkness since the verb *katalambanein* can either mean 'to overcome, overpower' or 'to comprehend, understand'. We do not need to choose between these potential meanings; this word is an example of John's literary technique of *double entendre*.⁹ That the epistemic denotation of *katalambanein* is also in view is clear from the context, which speaks about witnessing, (not) knowing, accepting and believing (1:6-13). This cognitive darkness is a characterization of the general epistemic human condition. The life-giving Logos-Light came into the world (1:4, 9) but the world did not know him (1:10); the Light shines in the darkness (of the world) but the darkness did not understand or grasp it (1:5).¹⁰ Thus, John's evaluation of the epistemic condition of humanity is a

⁹ Cf. R. Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, G.R. Beasley-Murray (tr.) (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971), 48 fn. 1; C.K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St John* (London: SPCK, 1978²), 158; D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Leicester: IVP, 1991), 120, 138.

¹⁰ Contra Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: Sketches for a Missionary Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 197-99, we take 1:9 as a reference to the incarnation since the context refers respectively to the Baptist's testimony to Jesus (1:6-8) and to people's reaction to Jesus (1:10-13). Cf. C.H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: CUP, 1953), 281-84; Barrett, *Gospel*, 160-61; G.R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, WBC 36 (Dallas: Word, 1991), 12. Carson, *Gospel*, 119-22, and Bultmann, *Gospel*, 45-46, even think that 1:5 already refers to the incarnation. Besides, if the Prologue hints at natural revelation in 1:4-5, 9, does John perhaps indicate that all religions contain partial revelation/knowledge of God?

pessimistic one: the world is enveloped in an epistemic darkness, and hence its people reject the Logos-Light (1:11; cf. 3:19-20). Nevertheless, although the world as 'world' may not improve in its condition (3:19; 16:8-11; 1 Jn 2:15-17; 4:1-6),¹¹ those people who are given to Jesus *from the world* by the Father (17:6)¹² are able (with divine help) to accept and believe in him (e.g., those in 1:12-13, the Twelve, the Samaritan woman). Therefore, John is able to write to the believers in his church(es) that this darkness is passing away (1 Jn 2:8).

The theme of epistemic darkness is also expressed by the concept of 'blindness'. Despite their claim to knowledge (9:24, 29) and 'sight' (9:40-41), the Pharisees are ironically diagnosed with epistemic blindness (9:41). Darkness and blindness are implicitly related in 12:35, in that the person who walks in the darkness does not know where she goes (i.e., she experiences epistemic blindness). In 1 John 2:11, darkness and blindness are explicitly related: (being in) darkness causes spiritual blindness. In fact, the phrase 'to blind the eyes' in 1 John 2:11 and John 12:40 (where it is paralleled by 'to close the heart/mind'), is an idiomatic expression for 'to cause not to understand' and hence denotes epistemic blindness. Those who are in darkness are epistemically blind and need epistemic illumination or enlightenment.

Another way of expressing epistemic deficiency is by a lack of sensory and cognitive perception – people do not 'see', 'hear' (i.e., understand) or know the meaning and significance of Jesus' words. As mentioned above, Jesus' assessment of the Pharisees in 9:39-41 was that they were not able to 'see'. People whose eyes are blinded are not able to 'see'/understand (12:40). In a fierce debate with 'the Jews', Jesus asked them why they were not able to 'hear'/understand his word (8:43; cf. 8:47). As already noted, the world does not have knowledge of Jesus (1:10, 26; 8:14; 9:29; 16:3), or of God (7:28; 8:55; 15:21; 16:3; 17:25; 1 Jn 3:1) or of the Spirit (14:17), nor is it able cognitively to penetrate Jesus' words (8:27, 43; 10:6).

In fact, epistemic darkness or dullness, referring to a lack of *adequate* understanding or knowledge of God and Jesus, is the general condition of the world and its people.¹³ Nicodemus, for example, is portrayed as someone who is interested in and sympathetic towards Jesus, yet also as one who is and remains in the darkness (at least on the basis of John 3).¹⁴ Or consider the Jewish religious authorities, who

Also, what would this imply for religious pluralism or relativism that says that all religions are equally valid?

¹¹ 'World' is in some sense personified as the great opponent of Jesus. Cf. H. Sasse, '*Kosmeō*, *ktl.*' in *TDNT*, 3:894.

¹² Rather than reading a doctrine of predestination or election into John, I suggest that these texts show the priority of divine initiative over human response. Cf. D.A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: Biblical Perspectives in Tension* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1981), Chs. 11-12.

¹³ Cf. J.G. van der Watt, 'Salvation in the Gospel According to John' in *idem* (ed.), *Salvation in the New Testament: Perspectives on Soteriology*, NovTSup 121 (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 107.

¹⁴ Note the symbolism of 'by night' in 3:2. For a detailed interpretation of Nicodemus, including the possibility that he made cognitive progression and eventually came to adequate belief, see Bennema, *Power*, 168-81.

become increasingly alienated from Jesus because they are not able to take in his words (6:41, 52; 8:12-59; 10:1-39). Even many of Jesus' own disciples turn their backs on him because they find his teaching too difficult to understand (6:60, 66). Ironically, these people who are entrenched in epistemic darkness nevertheless make claims to knowledge (Nicodemus in 3:2; 'the Jews' in 5:38-40; 6:42; 7:27; 8:54-55; the Pharisees in 9:24, 29). Yet, though the epistemic darkness has been lifted for those who have come to an adequate belief, they do not have perfect knowledge. They still know in part, and misunderstanding or lack of understanding remains. The disciples, for example, continue to struggle in their understanding of Jesus' words (14:9; 16:18; 20:9). Hence, an epistemic 'cloudiness' remains, but they have been sufficiently enlightened to come to a saving knowledge of God.¹⁵

Why is knowledge of God hidden from people? Why are people not able to 'see', 'hear' and know God/Jesus? John suggests a few reasons. One reason is that, according to John's dualistic worldview, all people belong naturally to the realm below (3:6; 8:23). The person who is 'from below' cannot 'see' God (1:18; 6:46) and does not have the necessary epistemic 'sight' that is needed to enter into the realm above (3:3). People are not able to 'see' and 'hear', i.e., to understand, because they are not from God, they are not 'from above' (3:3; 8:23, 47). There is no natural contact between the two realms (cf. 1:10; 3:6, 31; 14:17; 1 Jn 4:4-6),¹⁶ and therefore Jesus functions as the mediator between them (1:51; 3:13, 31-36). To 'see' the kingdom of God (i.e., to enter into the divine realm of salvation) requires a birth 'from above', a birth of water and Spirit (3:3, 5), and, as we shall see in section III, this epistemic 'sight' is provided by the Spirit. Elsewhere John restates people's inability to 'see' and know God as epistemic blindness and closed hearts (i.e., the minds of some people are closed to cognitive perception and understanding) (12:39-40).¹⁷ Another reason is sin. Part of the work of the Spirit-Paraclete is to convince the world of sin, which is in its very essence disbelief in Jesus (16:8-9).¹⁸ In 8:31-36, Jesus explains that knowledge of the truth will set people free from sin, which implies that sin keeps people from attaining saving knowledge. Moreover, in the

¹⁵ Neyrey argues that, even for insiders, there is a hierarchy of knowledge (i.e., various degrees of being 'in the know') ('Sociology', 98-105).

¹⁶ The realm above is characterized by, or as, 'heaven', 'Father', 'Son', 'Spirit', 'revelation', 'knowledge', 'free', 'light', 'love', 'truth', 'life' (1:32; 3:13, 31; 6:38; 12:28). The characteristics of the realm below are 'earth', 'world', 'devil', 'hate', 'sin', 'death', 'evil', 'lies', 'darkness', 'flesh', 'slave' (3:19, 31; 8:23, 44; 12:35; 17:16, 25; 1 Jn 3:1).

¹⁷ John 12:39-40 is probably not a description of the *general* epistemic condition of humankind (although lack of perception and knowledge of the divine is a general condition of people), but, more specifically, the condition of those who *oppose* Jesus. This passage, then, may simply refer to the resulting condition and inevitable consequence of rejecting Jesus rather than the result of divine predestination: by rejecting Jesus one *remains* blind (cf. 9:39-41).

¹⁸ We take *hoti* as explicative rather than causal. Cf. M. Turner, *The Holy Spirit and Spiritual Gifts: Then and Now* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1999 [rev. ed.]), 86-87.

light of 8:34-35 and 15:15, a slave of sin has no knowledge of God. Hence, sin has affected the intellect in that it has caused epistemic darkness.¹⁹

The divine response to the epistemic darkness of people is light or epistemic illumination. The Logos-Light came into the darkness to enlighten people by revealing the Father (1:4-5, 9, 18).²⁰ This theme is later developed as Jesus is portrayed as the life-giving light of the dark world (8:12; 9:5; 12:35-36, 46). But how, and in what way, is Jesus the light of the world? We suggest that Jesus is the light of the world precisely in his capacity of revealer. The world's problem is that it does not have (adequate) knowledge of God and hence remains in darkness, but Jesus' illuminating revelation expels darkness and gives life. Jesus can be the perfect revealer of divine reality because: (i) he has an intimate relationship with the Father (1:18), including a sharing of knowledge (10:15); (ii) he has open access to heaven/revelation (1:51; 3:12-13); (iii) he only reveals what he sees the Father doing and hears the Father speaking (3:32; 5:19; 8:26, 28; 15:15); (iv) he is endowed with the Spirit, which is primarily an empowerment of revelatory wisdom to reveal God (1:32; 3:34).²¹ In his revelatory teaching, Jesus reveals the Father and himself in terms of their identity, character, mission and the nature of their relationship.²² Jesus often uses mundane objects (bread, water, light, etc.) as symbols in his teaching to point to a deeper reality. John thus employs a *symbolic epistemology* as a response to the problem of human epistemic darkness, in that the Johannine symbols are the key to knowing Jesus and hence God.²³

In presenting Jesus and his revelation as the key to knowing God, John introduces a significant epistemological paradigm shift. For Judaism at large, the source of knowledge of God was the law, and the Gospel of John reflects this understanding (5:39; 7:49; 9:28-29). With the coming of Jesus, however, the epistemic foundation for knowing God has now become Jesus himself and the revelation he brought.²⁴ For John, then, the main source of knowledge of the divine is *Jesus' revelation*, in that knowledge of God is revealed to people in and by Jesus. Hence, Jesus supersedes the law as the epistemic basis for knowledge of the divine (1:17-18; 5:39, 46). Ironically, Jesus points out to 'the Jews' that if their epistemology based on the law

¹⁹ In turn, epistemic darkness causes sin to remain (9:41; 15:22). Others also mention some causes/conditions of not believing/knowing (e.g., Gaffney 'Believing', 233-35; Neyrey, 'Sociology', 97).

²⁰ In 1:9, *phōtizein* means 'to illuminate', 'to give understanding'. The verb *exēgeisthai* ('to make fully known') in 1:18 has the connotation of 'to reveal'.

²¹ Concerning the last point, see fn. 35 below.

²² Since Jesus' revelation and teaching are inextricably linked we do not make a significant distinction between them. Bultmann and others have argued that there is little or no definable content to Jesus' revelation/teaching (Jesus merely reveals that he is the Revealer) but this contention is mistaken (Bennema, *Power*, 117-20). Jesus' signs also have a revelatory character. They reveal, for example, Jesus' identity (6:14; 7:31), aspects of his character (2:11), and the nature of his relationship with the Father (10:38; 14:11).

²³ See especially Painter, 'Symbols', for the epistemic potential of Johannine symbols.

²⁴ Cf. Painter, 'Symbols', 34.

had been correct, they would have been able to make this new epistemological shift, since the law points to Jesus (5:39-40, 46-47; 7:19). However, as it is, this shift was too scandalous for many, as the growing opposition to Jesus and his claims demonstrates (e.g., 6:41, 52, 60, 66; 7:1, 32; 8:31-59).

Although it is evident *that* Jesus' revelation/teaching illuminates and gives life (e.g., 4:1-42; 5:24; 6:63, 68), it is less clear *why* this is so. We suggest that Jesus' revelation is life-giving because it contains saving truth which may result in saving knowledge. In 8:31-36, Jesus states that his teaching contains truth that will set people free from sin. Moreover, Jesus speaks God's words, which are truth that purifies (3:34; 17:17; Cf. 15:3). Thus, Jesus communicates divine truth through his teaching, and knowledge of this truth will liberate (8:26, 31-32, 40). Besides, 17:3 explains that eternal life is (the result of) knowledge of the divine, which comes from accepting Jesus' teaching (17:8). In other words, truth is the reality of God and divine things, which is revealed to the world in and by Jesus; truth is the saving content or aspect of Jesus' revelatory teaching.²⁵ Knowledge of the truth is salvific because it is knowledge of the identity, character, work and relationship of the Father and Son, and this knowledge *of God* will prepare a person to become *from God* (see section III). It must be noted that this knowledge is *revealed* knowledge (i.e., it cannot be achieved by human experience or reason alone, cf. 1:18; 15:15; 17:6-8).

Conclusion

The world is enclosed in epistemic darkness; people do not have (saving) knowledge of God. The reason for this epistemic darkness is that people do not belong to the realm of God and cannot access this divine realm. The solution, then, must come from the realm above, and the divine response to this crisis is illuminating revelation. The Logos-Light enlightens the epistemic darkness through his revelation of God (in terms of the identity, character, mission and relationship of the Father and Son). Thus, for John, the primary source of knowledge of God is divine revelation, presented as Jesus' person and his teaching. This revelatory teaching contains saving truth or knowledge of the divine, and for those who accept this revelation, the darkness is passing away.²⁶ Nevertheless, the acceptance of Jesus and his revelation requires cognitive effort, and the question is whether people are up to this task. To this issue we now turn.

²⁵ If Jesus as the Word is full of truth (1:14) then probably his words are also. Cf. I. de la Potterie, 'The Truth in Saint John' in J. Ashton (ed.), *The Interpretation of John* (London: SPCK, 1986), 54-57. For the concept of knowing the truth as a mode of behaviour within the community of faith, see Kee's article 'Truth'.

²⁶ Interestingly, the Old Testament prophets also attribute Israel's exile and spiritual bankruptcy to her lack and rejection of knowledge (of Yahweh) (Is 1:3; 5:13; 56:10-11; Jer 8:7; 9:3, 6; 14:18; Hos 4:1, 6; 5:4). However, they could also describe Israel's restoration in terms of, or in relation to, knowledge (Is 11:9; 33:6; 43:10; 60:16; Jer 3:15; 24:7; 31:34). Not surprisingly, then, the envisaged Messiah is expected to be endowed with revelatory knowledge (Is 11:2; 53:11).

III – Human Response and Further Divine Help

This section elucidates the Johannine view of human sensory perception, cognitive perception and belief, and the concept of the Spirit as an epistemic agent. John's categories of 'seeing' and 'hearing' operate on two levels: at one level, people literally hear Jesus' words and see his signs; at another level, people are invited to perceive and understand the spiritual reality or significance of what is seen and heard (e.g., 3:3; 5:24-25; 8:47; 14:9).²⁷ Similarly, the verbs *ginōskein* and *eidenai* can simply mean 'to know, to have knowledge of', but in John, they frequently denote 'to understand', 'to perceive' (e.g., 1:48; 2:25; 5:42; 6:15; 8:43; 13:12; 17:3; 20:9; 21:17).²⁸ Thus, the cognitive penetration of the deeper, spiritual significance of what has been heard and seen should result in an adequate understanding or knowledge of the Father and Son.

In reality, however, people struggle to understand, misunderstand or fail to understand.²⁹ Nicodemus, for example, misunderstands *anōthen* as 'again' instead of 'from above' (3:3-4), and he fails to understand the meaning of the birth of water-and-Spirit (3:5-10). It is clear that Nicodemus has a cognitive problem – he does not understand Jesus' revelation.³⁰ In John 4, the Samaritan woman also struggles for understanding but she makes, with Jesus' help, such cognitive progression that she acquires saving knowledge of Jesus and even brings her own people to him.³¹ After a long struggle to understand Jesus' words, 'the Jews' essentially fail to understand and reject Jesus (6:41-59; 8:31-59; 10:1-39). Even many of Jesus' 'disciples' find his teaching too demanding, and probably also too difficult to penetrate, and they defect (6:60-66). Because of this lack of understanding and cognitive inability, people are

²⁷ Cf. Thompson, *God*, 105-17, 142, for the concept of 'seeing' God in Jesus, although she may have over-emphasized 'seeing' at the expense of 'hearing'. Besides, Thompson does not explain that the Spirit provides true epistemic 'seeing'. C.R. Koester, however, over-emphasizes the concept of 'hearing' at the cost of 'seeing' ('Hearing, Seeing, and Believing in the Gospel of John', *Biblica* 70 [1989], 327-48).

²⁸ Cf. the semantic domains of *ginōskein* and *eidenai* in the Louw-Nida lexicon. John does not differentiate between these two verbs (contra de la Potterie, '*Oida*', 709-25).

²⁹ In John, misunderstanding functions as a hermeneutical device: the misunderstanding of the character in the story and Jesus' subsequent explanation benefits the reader. See esp. D.A. Carson, 'Understanding Misunderstandings in the Fourth Gospel', *TB* 33 (1982), 59-91; R.A. Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 152-65.

³⁰ Neyrey observes that Jesus' statement in 3:3 is an attack on Nicodemus' knowledge professed in 3:2, and the fact that Nicodemus must *ask a question* in 3:4 demonstrates a lack of certain knowledge ('John III', 119).

³¹ For a full elaboration of the story, see Bennema, *Power*, 181-96. We disagree with F.J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1998), 131, who concludes that the Samaritan woman, like Nicodemus, only arrives at a partial faith.

not able to make an adequate belief-response to Jesus; they remain stuck at the level of sensory perception and hence in darkness.³²

As we saw in the previous section, the problem of this epistemic darkness is that people are 'from below', not from God, and do not know God (8:23, 47, 55; 1 Jn 3:1). People often move merely at an earthly or physical level and are not able to go beyond that. Nicodemus' problem, for instance, is that he is not born 'from above' and therefore does not understand the things 'from above'. Hence, sensory perception (a literal or physical seeing and hearing) needs to be followed or complemented by cognitive perception (a spiritual seeing and hearing that understands the significance of what is literally seen and heard).³³ People are, in fact, challenged to think 'from above'.³⁴ However, by nature they are not able to do so, and further divine help is needed. What is needed is a cognitive agent 'from above' who can assist people in thinking 'from above' and consequently in accessing the realities 'from above'.

This cognitive or epistemic divine agent is *the Spirit*. The Spirit, according to the Gospel of John, is instrumental in the process of bringing people to knowledge, belief and hence salvation. First, the Spirit provides Jesus with revelatory wisdom and knowledge that probably forms the basis for his teaching/revelation (1:32-34; 3:34-36).³⁵ Subsequently, the Spirit also actively reaches out to people *through* Jesus' teaching, mediating this saving wisdom or knowledge to people so that they might come to an adequate understanding and belief-response. We must elaborate this latter concept.³⁶

³² Neyrey looks at this issue from a different (perhaps complementary) angle. In a sociological analysis of knowledge and secrecy in the Gospel of John, Neyrey argues that information about Jesus is controlled, i.e., only certain people are given selected information about Jesus. According to Neyrey, this secrecy or information control was John's conscious strategy to distinguish between insiders (those 'in the know') and outsiders (those 'not in the know') in order to provide security for and to classify roles and social standings within the Johannine group ('Sociology', *passim*).

³³ In fact, this concept of a two-level seeing and hearing is confirmed by the semantic domain of *blepein*, *horan*, *theōrein*, *theasthai* and *akouein*, which allows for a connotative meaning of 'to come to understand' (cf. the Louw-Nida lexicon).

³⁴ This phrase dovetails nicely with the concept of setting one's mind on divine things and of the renewal of the mind in other parts of the New Testament (Mt 16:23; Mk 8:33; Rom 8:5; 12:2; Eph 4:23; Phil 2:5; Col 3:2, 10).

³⁵ The coming and remaining of the Spirit on Jesus in 1:32 probably alludes to Isaiah 11:2 which describes the Messiah as being empowered with the Spirit of wisdom, understanding, knowledge and liberating power. Subsequently, 3:35 explains that God has given the entire revelation to Jesus, and 3:34 clarifies that Jesus can bring this revelation because he is empowered with the Spirit. The picture that emerges is that Jesus can carry out his salvific ministry of revealing God precisely because the Spirit empowers him with wisdom and knowledge. Thus, Jesus' revelation or teaching is Spirit-provided and Spirit-empowered. See further Bennema, *Power*, 161-67. Cf. Turner, *Spirit*, 57, 60.

³⁶ For an extensive treatment of the Spirit's cognitive functions, see Bennema, *Power*, Chs. 4-5.

Those people who accept (i.e., believe in) Jesus are born from God and become part of God's family (1:12-13). John 3:3, 5 subsequently elucidates this birth from God as a birth from the Spirit, which alludes to the eschatological cleansing and transformation of Israel that God will bring about by means of his Spirit (Ezek 36:25-27; 37:1-14). When Nicodemus enquires how this new birth into the realm of salvation might be accomplished (3:9), Jesus replies that this will happen through looking in belief at the one lifted up on the cross (3:14-15). However, Jesus also points out in 3:10-13 that Nicodemus has a cognitive problem – he is not able to grasp Jesus' revelation and to respond in belief, which is symbolized by his fading out of the conversation after 3:9. The text seems to imply then that a birth of the Spirit is accomplished through some sort of understanding of Jesus' revelation, especially an understanding of the significance of the cross.³⁷

When we recognize the allusions to the Wisdom of Solomon, we can probe further *how* this understanding of the cross and the consequent spiritual birth will come about. First, as Wisdom shows Jacob the kingdom of God (Wis 10:10), so Jesus shows Nicodemus the way to the kingdom of God in 3:3, 5. Second, 3:12 finds a parallel in Wisdom of Solomon 9:16: if 'earthly things' are already difficult to understand, how much more 'heavenly things'? Wisdom of Solomon 9:17-18 goes on to explain that Solomon will only be able to understand the 'heavenly things', and hence experience salvation, if God sends Wisdom and the accompanying Spirit. Coming back to John, if the Spirit is the agent of the birth 'from above' and if this birth requires a true understanding of the cross, then it follows that the Spirit may also provide such saving knowledge. Thus, I suggest that the Spirit facilitates a true understanding of the cross and subsequently a birth into the realm above.

We now turn to Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman in John 4, where Jesus is depicted as the source of 'living water' (4:10, 14). Judaism knows of four possible referents for 'living water': (i) life or salvation (Is 12:3; 35:6-7; 55:1-3; Jer 17:13; Zech 14:8); (ii) cleansing or purification (Lev 14:5-6; Num 19:17-19); (iii) the Spirit (Is 44:3); (iv) divine wisdom or teaching (Prov 13:14; 18:4; Is 11:9). It is likely that all these possible referents are in view, so we need not choose between them.³⁸ Combining these four referents, I suggest that 'living water' is a metaphor for Jesus' Spirit-imbued wisdom teaching that cleanses and gives eternal life to those who accept it.³⁹

In 6:63, we find the cognitive role of the Spirit in a nutshell: 'The Spirit is the one that gives life, the flesh does not benefit anyone; the words that I speak to you are Spirit and life.' That the Spirit gives life (6:63a) has already been observed in John

³⁷ Cf. Turner, *Spirit*, 68-69; Bennema, *Power*, 168-81.

³⁸ These possible referents of 'living water' in Judaism are also present in John: (i) based on 1:32; 3:34, we had inferred that Jesus was endowed with the Spirit in order to speak God's words (i.e., to provide divine teaching); (ii) in 6:63, Jesus asserts that his teaching is Spirit-empowered and produces eternal life; (iii) in 7:38-39, 'living water' is explicitly identified as the Spirit; (iv) in 15:3, Jesus confirms the cleansing abilities of his teaching (cf. 17:17).

³⁹ Cf. R.E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, AB 29, 2 vols. (London: Chapman, 1971), 1:178-79; Turner, *Spirit*, 61-63; Bennema, *Power*, 183-85.

3–4, where we learned that the Spirit facilitates entry into eternal life through a spiritual birth and empowers Jesus' life-giving teaching. The phrase, 'the flesh does not benefit anyone' (6:63b), is more puzzling because the referent of 'flesh' is uncertain. It could refer to the human, unbelieving mind. Like the contrast in 3:6 between 'flesh' and Spirit, 6:63b may refer to the unbeliever who is locked in her 'fleshly' or human thinking, and then to the life-giving activity of the Spirit which illuminates the human mind. Plausible as it may sound, there are two reasons why I suggest that 'flesh' refers to Jesus' life instead, in particular to the giving of his life in death on the cross. First, in 6:51–58, 'flesh' also refers to Jesus' death. Second, 6:62 refers to Jesus' ascent and return to glory, starting at the cross, and 6:63 then sheds further light on this event. However, if 'flesh' in 6:63b refers to Jesus' death on the cross, how do we explain that this is of no benefit to people? I suggest that one needs to understand the significance of the cross before Jesus' death can be life-giving. Only when Jesus' death on the cross is understood as the supreme expression of God's love for this world, as God's way to deal with sin and provide eternal life – only then is Jesus' death of benefit. Consequently, 6:63c then also becomes clear: Jesus' words are Spirit and life in that the Spirit reveals the meaning and significance of Jesus' life-giving teaching. Jesus' revelation (which culminates at the cross) can only be life-giving if its meaning and significance is properly perceived and understood, and it is the Spirit who will facilitate this cognitive perception and retrieval of saving knowledge. Thus, the Spirit gives life particularly in his role of a cognitive agent – facilitating people's understanding of Jesus and his teaching and hence assisting them to produce an adequate belief-response that will result in a life-giving relationship with Jesus.⁴⁰

This concept of the Spirit moving people from sensory to cognitive perception and knowledge coheres with the notion of the Spirit of truth in John 13–17. After Jesus' departure, the Spirit-Paraclete will mediate or reveal to believers the life-giving truth present in Jesus' teaching (16:13) in order to inform their testimony to the world (15:26–27).⁴¹ Since the disciples have already encountered and experienced the Spirit in and through Jesus' words, Jesus' assertion that the disciples already 'know' this Spirit is then not surprising (14:17). Moreover, as we have argued elsewhere, the combined ministry of the Spirit-Paraclete and the disciples is in strong continuity with Jesus' earthly ministry, and, consequently, the Spirit-Paraclete is expected to be similarly active in and through the disciples' testimony, leading to similar results (cf. 17:20). In other words, the disciples' Spirit-imbued testimony will evoke belief because it is based on Jesus' historical teaching and because the same Spirit who actively reached out to people through Jesus' teaching will also reach out to the world through the disciples' testimony. When people are confronted with the combined testimony of the Spirit-Paraclete and the disciples, they are essentially confronted with the life-giving teaching of Jesus himself. Thus,

⁴⁰ Turner, *Spirit*, 66–67; Bennema, *Power*, 202–04; *idem*, *Excavating John's Gospel: A Commentary for Today* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2005), 83–84.

⁴¹ Cf. de la Potterie, 'Truth', 62–63.

the disciples' Spirit-informed testimony is expected to have the same cleansing and liberating effect as Jesus' Spirit-imbued teaching. To draw on 6:63, *the disciples' words are 'Paraclete' and 'life'*, in that their testimony is prepared and empowered by the Paraclete, which provides eternal life if it is accepted.⁴²

But how will the disciples' Spirit-empowered testimony evoke belief? I suggest that the *aim* of the Spirit-Paraclete's prosecution of the world in 16:8-11 is ultimately soteriological. First, as Jesus' aim was to save and not to condemn (3:17), and as Jesus was the first paraclete (14:16), it is natural to assume that the mission of the Spirit-Paraclete, as a continuation of Jesus' mission, is salvific. Second, the Spirit-Paraclete cannot directly convict the world (14:17) but channels this conviction *through* the disciples' testimony (15:26-27) – a testimony which is aimed at evoking belief (17:20). Therefore, the Spirit-Paraclete brings a case against the world, with the intention that people will repent and come to believe in Jesus.⁴³ In this process, the Spirit-Paraclete acts as an epistemic agent, assisting unbelievers in cognitively perceiving the disciples' testimony so that they may come to adequate belief on the basis of their new understanding. 'Spirit of truth', then, denotes an epistemic function of the Spirit-Paraclete, namely, the Spirit who communicates truth and facilitates saving knowledge.

Conclusion

According to John, people in general do not know God and are not 'from God'. People need to *know God* through an understanding and acceptance of Jesus' revelatory teaching that contains saving truth, and consequently to become '*from God*' through a new birth. To put it differently, sensory perception of Jesus and his teaching should be followed by cognitive perception of the spiritual significance of what has been observed at a sensory level, and result in an adequate belief-response in order to give life.⁴⁴ This implies that belief in the Johannine sense has both a

⁴² Bennema, *Power*, 241-47. Thus, besides revelation, the Gospel of John also regards testimony as an important source of knowledge. First, the disciples' Paraclete-imbued testimony, which is rooted in Jesus' historical revelation/teaching, is a source of saving knowledge (cf. 17:20). Second, the text of the Gospel of John and the Letters are, in their testimony to Jesus, also a source of knowledge (19:35; 20:30-31; 21:24-25; 1 Jn 1:1-4; 5:13). The Spirit-Paraclete functions as a facilitator of cognitive perception and knowledge to those who encounter Jesus' revelation through the oral and written testimony. Third, the testimonies of the Baptist and the Samaritan woman are sources of belief (1:7; 4:39), and the implication of 5:39, 46-47 is that Moses' written testimony is also supposed to be a source of knowledge and belief.

⁴³ Cf. Bennema, *John's Gospel*, 176.

⁴⁴ If John's epistemology is compared with that of Greek philosophy, it is more Aristotelian than Platonic, since for Aristotle knowledge depends on sense experience (cf. also Epicurean epistemology) whereas for Plato knowledge is innate and essentially a recollection of a priori ideas. Cf. E. Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993²), 314-15, 321, 352.

cognitive aspect (one needs to perceive/understand Jesus' teaching) and a *volitional* aspect (one needs to accept Jesus' teaching and commit oneself to him). The Spirit is an epistemic agent in that the Spirit facilitates cognitive perception and knowledge, so that people can think 'from above' about Jesus and his teaching, and produce an adequate belief-response. The Spirit thus creates and provides the basis for a new, Christ-centered epistemology. In other words, in John's view the knowledge of God is *Spirit-informed* and *christocentric*.

IV – An Epistemic Relationship with the Father and Son

The intimate relationship between the Father and Son is primarily characterized by life (5:21, 26), love (3:35; 5:20; 14:31; 15:9), knowledge/truth (8:55; 10:15; 14:6; 17:17) and glory (17:1-5). This relationship of life, love, knowledge/truth and glory between the Father and Son is not exclusive; believers are drawn and participate in this saving relationship through a birth 'from above'. Recognizing and understanding the identity, mission and relationship of the Father and Son enables a person to make an adequate belief-response and to partake in this divine relationship (1 John 1:3 calls this participation '*koinōnia* with the Father and Son'). This intimate relationship between the Father, Son and believer is also expressed in other ways, such as the oneness-language (*hen einai* [10:30; 17:11, 21-23]), the indwelling-language (*meni en* [6:56; 10:38; 14:10-11, 20; 15:4-7; 17:21, 23; 1 Jn 2:6, 24, 27-28; 3:6, 24; 4:12-13, 15-16]), and Jesus' calling his disciples 'friends' (15:13-15). Both concepts of 'oneness' and 'indwelling' between the Father, Son and believer are metaphors for an intimate relationship between them.⁴⁵ Besides, the believing community consists of those who 'hear' and know Jesus' voice (10:3-4, 16).⁴⁶ There is, in fact, a *perpetual* flow of life, love, knowledge/truth and glory between the Father, the Son and the believer (cf. 5:21, 26; 10:14-15; 14:6, 13, 21; 15:9-10; 16:13; 17:5, 22; 1 Jn 1:2; 2:24-25; 3:1; 4:7-19; 5:11-12; 2 Jn 2). The implication, then, is that a believer who continues in her fellowship with the Father and Son continues to have access to the truth or divine reality, and hence to knowledge of the divine.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Cf. the concept of the believer remaining in Jesus' word and love, and vice versa (8:31; 15:7, 9-10).

⁴⁶ Cf. Thompson, *God*, 142-43, who concludes that seeing, and hence knowing, God must be interpreted as *communion* with and *experience* of God, since seeing demands the presence of the one who is seen.

⁴⁷ Note the tremendous claims regarding the knowledge of the Johannine believers, expressed, for example, by the phrase '(by this) we/you know that ...' (1 Jn 2:5, 18, 21; 3:5, 14-16, 19, 24; 4:2, 6, 13; 5:2, 15, 18-20). Moreover, people's participation in the divine reality or truth is expressed by phrases such as 'doing the truth' (3:21), 'to worship in truth' (4:23-24), 'being of the truth' (18:37; 1 Jn 3:19), 'witnessing to the truth' (18:37; 19:35; 21:24; 3 Jn 12), 'knowing the truth' (8:32; 1 Jn 2:21; 2 Jn 1), 'walking in the truth' (2 Jn 4; 3 Jn 3-4).

In fact, in order to remain in a life-giving relationship the believer needs a *continuous* knowing and understanding of the Father and Son. The knowledge generated, received or made accessible in one's relationship with the Father and Son is probably also precisely the knowledge needed to *sustain* the believer's relationship with the Father and Son. We can explain this concept of the need for continuous knowledge as follows.

The knowledge available to the believer in her relationship with the Father and Son forms the basis on which she can know the will of the Father and Son, be obedient to Jesus' commandments, and thus demonstrate discipleship (cf. 7:17; 8:31-32; 10:4; 13:17; 15:15; 15:27-16:4; cf. Jesus' obedience because he knows the Father [8:55; cf. 2:24-25; 13:1; 18:4]). This discipleship based on knowledge guarantees and sustains the believer's participation in the relationship with the Father and Son, and subsequently guarantees the believer's access to further knowledge, which is necessary to remain in this saving relationship (cf. 1 Jn 2:3-6; 4:7). In other words, continuous belief (as expressed primarily in discipleship) guarantees the continuation of the relationship and hence the access to further knowledge. Moreover, belief and knowledge stimulate and inform one another. Continual belief warrants continual access to further knowledge, and further knowledge of God, his will and commandments will probably motivate continual belief.

In this entire dynamic process, the Spirit continues to be the facilitator of cognitive perception and knowledge. First, as the Spirit of truth, the Paraclete will continue to mediate to believers the truth present in Jesus' teaching – to enhance their own spiritual growth *and* to inform and prepare their life-giving testimony to the world (cf. section III). Second, as Teacher, the Paraclete will enable believers to recall Jesus' revelatory teaching and cognitively to perceive and understand it more fully (14:26; 16:12-15).⁴⁸ The Paraclete's anamnesis (14:26) is closely related to (if not an aspect of) the Paraclete's teaching; consequently the explicit examples of the disciples' anamnesis (2:17, 22; 12:16) can be most likely ascribed to the work of the Paraclete (esp. since 2:22 and 12:16 mention that the recalling happened *after* Jesus' glorification). The Paraclete's recalling or bringing to memory of Jesus' words leads to, or is expected to result in, knowledge (and belief) (2:17, 22; 12:16; 14:26; 15:20; 16:4, 21).⁴⁹ Third, in the light of the activities ascribed to the 'anointing' in 1 John 2:20, 27, this 'anointing' most probably refers to the Spirit-Paraclete. Hence, Jesus' promise of the Paraclete's teaching concerning all truth, and the resulting knowledge, have become a present reality in the Johannine church(es) (1 Jn 2:20).

Conclusion

A believer has made the transition (through a new birth) from the realm below to the realm above, and hence participates in a relationship of life, love, knowledge/truth and glory with the Father and Son. The Spirit continues to function as an epistemic

⁴⁸ See also Bennema, *Power*, 228-34.

⁴⁹ Thus, John also regards memory as an important source of knowledge.

agent, in that the Spirit-Paraclete continues to facilitate cognitive perception and knowledge of Jesus' teaching in order to sustain the believer's salvation.⁵⁰ John, then, seems to portray a *relational* epistemology, in that knowledge of the divine can only be attained in a relationship with the Father and Son by the Spirit.

V – The Johannine Dialectic between Knowledge and Belief

In sections III-IV, we argued that a certain degree of knowing is required for an adequate Johannine belief-response. That is, one needs cognitively to perceive and understand something of the identity, character, mission and relationship of the Father and Son in order to commit oneself to a personal relationship with Jesus. Hence, we are not asserting a general philosophical principle that we must know a proposition *p* before we can believe *p*. For John, *pisteuein* is not simply to accept a proposition as true, but *also* involves personal allegiance to Jesus in discipleship, based on a certain degree of knowledge of God.⁵¹ Thus, for John, believing involves some knowing; indeed, it is *a knowing belief*.⁵²

Regarding the juxtaposition between knowledge and belief, two passages in the Johannine literature seem to assert that *ginōskein/eidenai* follows *pisteuein* (i.e., belief constitutes knowledge) (10:38; 1 Jn 5:13); two passages put *ginōskein* and *pisteuein* on an equal footing (6:69; 1 Jn 4:16);⁵³ and two passages seem to indicate that *pisteuein* involves *ginōskein/eidenai* (16:30; 17:8). Hence, a clear-cut case for the priority of one or the other cannot be made.⁵⁴ There are, however, reasons to think that some knowing or understanding is required for adequate Johannine belief. We have argued that Jesus' revelation is not empty (see fn. 22) but is informative in that it contains saving truth of the Father and Son, and it is precisely on the basis of the cognitive penetration or understanding of this truth that an adequate belief-response can be made.

A few instances serve to illustrate this concept. We noted that Nicodemus's lack of cognition and knowledge prevented adequate belief (cf. 3:11-12), and the

⁵⁰ In fact, there seems to be no limit to the believer's Spirit-aided access to truth and knowledge of the divine: the Spirit will guide into *all* truth (16:13); the 'anointing' will teach about *all* things (1 Jn 2:27).

⁵¹ Cf. Dodd, *Interpretation*, 178, 182, 184.

⁵² Cf. Bultmann's concept of 'knowing faith', which denotes that *ginōskein* is a constitutive element or structural aspect in *pisteuein* ('*Ginōskō, ktl.*' in *TDNT*, 1:713; *Theology of the New Testament*, 2 vols. [London: SCM Press, 1952, 1955], 2:73-74; *Gospel*, 435 fn. 4).

⁵³ In the case of 6:69 and 1 Jn 4:16, we probably deal with a hendiadys (i.e., 'to know' and 'to believe' express essentially one idea). See H. Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 249 fn. 177; C.G. Kruse, *The Letters of John* (Leicester: Apollos, 2000), 165-66.

⁵⁴ Cf. Bultmann, *Gospel*, 435 fn. 4; R. Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St John*, 3 vols. (London: Burns & Oates, 1968-82), 1:565-66; *idem*, *The Johannine Epistles* (Tunbridge Wells: Burns & Oates, 1992), 221; Brown, *Gospel*, 2:513; *idem*, *The Epistles of John*, AB 30 (New York: Doubleday, 1982), 524-25; Barrett, *Gospel*, 307.

implication is that an adequate belief-response requires adequate understanding or knowledge. In 4:41-42, the Samaritans' knowledge (that Jesus is the saviour) is the *basis* for their belief; to argue *vice versa* disregards the causal use of *gar* ('for', 'because'). In 4:50, the royal official 'believed' Jesus' word (i.e., he accepted it as true) but when that 'belief' had been confirmed (i.e., had become knowledge) the royal official (and his household) believed in the Johannine sense of being saved (4:51-53). Besides, if one of the reasons for unbelief is a lack of cognitive perception and knowledge (see previous sections), then the opposite must also be true: cognitive perception and knowledge is a potential basis for Johannine belief. In 17:8, for instance, the disciples' belief is based on knowing certain truths (as present in Jesus' words). Finally, in 1 John 4:1, believers are encouraged to believe only after discernment (*dokimazein*), i.e., after acquiring the necessary knowledge on which to judge. Thus, the Johannine literature seems to indicate that belief in the Johannine sense includes at least an element of knowing.⁵⁵

I am not arguing for *perfect* or *complete* knowing or understanding prior to belief in the Johannine sense (because who then would qualify?), but at least for *some* intellectual grasp of Jesus and God before one can make an adequate belief-response. I merely assert that *some* true and sufficient insight into Jesus' identity, mission and relationship with God is needed in order to believe adequately. I remain deliberately reticent, however, to spell out what, according to John, is sufficient or adequate knowledge for saving belief. In popular language, John would not advocate faith in a god whom we do not know; rather, he promotes faith in a God whom we understand to be a God who embodies love, is faithful and able to save. Johannine belief is *not* a leap into the epistemic dark or unknown. Instead, Johannine belief has an epistemic basis; it is an intellectual decision to accept the truth claims of Jesus and his teaching (the cognitive element) and to commit oneself to him in discipleship (the volitional element).⁵⁶

Although many people believed in Jesus, not every 'believing' is a saving or adequate belief for John. In 2:23-25, for example, Jesus' decision not to entrust himself (*ouk episteuen*) to those who 'believed' in him reveals that their 'belief' was inadequate or defective. Indeed, this is spelled out further in John 3, where Nicodemus, who is one of these people, displays a deficient knowledge of the divine

⁵⁵ Contra I. de la Potterie, *La Vérité dans Saint Jean*, 2 vols. (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1977), 2:553-58. An interesting observation is that knowing is frequently attributed to Jesus but believing is not. Does this imply that Jesus did not need to believe because he has (perfect) knowledge, and hence that knowledge is superior to belief (so Gaffney, 'Believing', 224)? We do not need to speculate about this; we simply argue that Johannine belief *includes* some knowledge. Moreover, for John, belief also involves personal commitment to Jesus, following Jesus as a disciple, etc., which is not applicable to Jesus. Interestingly, Jesus' decision not to entrust (*ouk episteuen!*) himself to people was based on his knowledge of them (2:24).

⁵⁶ Cf. the disciples' volitional decision to stay with Jesus in 1:38-39; 6:67-69.

and hence is not able to come to an adequate belief-response.⁵⁷ The ‘belief’ of ‘the Jews’ in 8:30-31 is certainly inadequate, as Jesus’ dialogue with them points out in 8:31-59. Finally, 6:60-66 indicates that many of the ‘disciples’ left Jesus because they found his teaching too difficult to understand or too demanding to accept in order to continue their belief in him. Hence, there cannot be an adequate belief-response without prior understanding; a certain degree of knowing is a prerequisite of even an initial adequate belief-response. Nevertheless, once in a saving relationship with the Father and Son, further knowledge may confirm or warrant previous, and stimulate further, belief-responses.⁵⁸

Conclusion

Although John’s epistemology asserts that an initial belief-response is based on some knowing, once a person is brought into a saving relationship with the Father and Son, knowledge and belief stimulate and inform one another. To be more precise – and that is where perhaps some tension remains – for John, an adequate degree of understanding or knowing is necessary for saving belief, and hence it can be called a ‘knowing belief’, which in turn leads to deeper knowledge of the divine. Thus, for John, knowledge and belief have a *cyclical* or *spiral* relationship: knowledge of the divine is available to the believer through the aid of the Spirit, and this knowledge stimulates and informs further belief, which guarantees access to further knowledge. The Johannine concept of ‘knowing belief’ is essentially *one* epistemic concept in which the two ingredients – knowledge and belief – are inextricably interwoven with one another.⁵⁹ In addition to the cognitive aspect, Johannine belief also involves a volitional element, namely a commitment to a trusting relationship with Jesus.

VI – Towards a Johannine Epistemology

Having outlined the main aspects of John’s epistemology, we are now in a position to present a more coherent Johannine epistemology. John’s epistemic starting point is his negative assessment of humanity as being characterized by epistemic darkness: people lack a saving knowledge of God. The divine response to this condition is the coming of Jesus to the world and the illuminating revelation that he brings. This life-giving revelation contains truth (i.e., saving information about God and divine reality), especially knowledge about the identity, character, mission and relationship of the Father and Son (e.g., 1:17-18, 51; 3:12, 31-36). In general, people are unable

⁵⁷ Nicodemus is one of those who believed in Jesus in 2:23, because 2:23-25 is narratologically linked to 3:1ff: (i) the word ‘man’ is repeated in 2:25 and 3:1; (ii) the antecedent of ‘him’ in 3:2 is Jesus in 2:24-25; (iii) the phrase ‘the signs that he was doing’ in 2:23 is repeated by Nicodemus in 3:2.

⁵⁸ Cf. Bennema, *Power*, 124-34, 152-54.

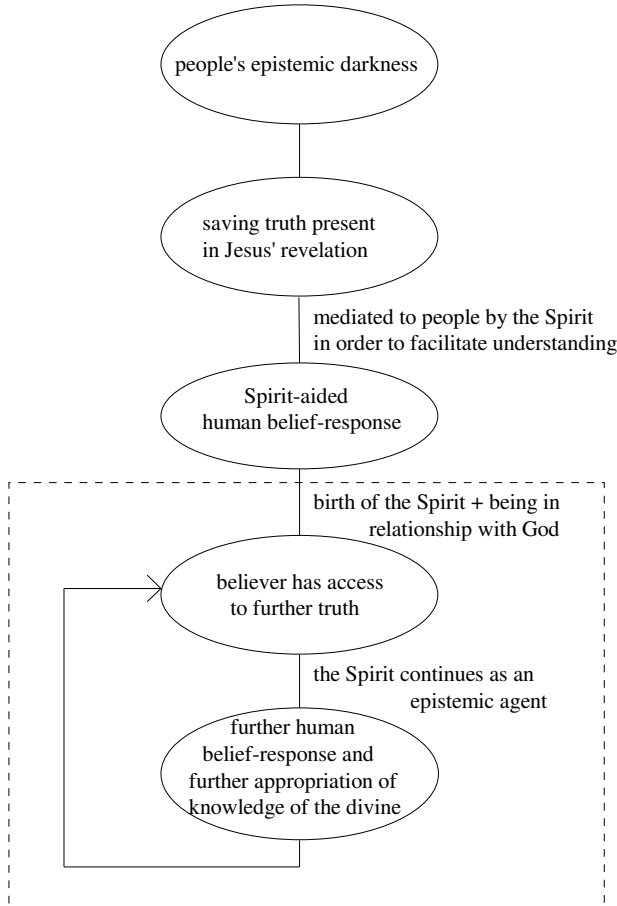
⁵⁹ Although ‘believing’ and ‘knowing’ may be correlated concepts for John, they are nevertheless distinct (contra Bultmann, *Theology*, 2:73-74). However, the contrast Gaffney suggests between the two is probably overstated (‘Believing’, 239-40).

to understand Jesus' revelation unless the Spirit mediates to them the saving truth present in Jesus' revelation and assists them in understanding its meaning and significance. The human belief-response consists (i) of an acceptance of this mediated divine truth, in which this information of the divine *becomes* one's *personal* knowledge of the divine, and (ii) of a personal allegiance to Jesus in discipleship. In other words, with the aid of the Spirit the truth in Jesus' revelation is appropriated by the believer so that it becomes her own knowledge of the divine (the cognitive aspect) *and* she commits herself to a trusting relationship with the Father and Son (the volitional aspect). In fact, the witness of the Spirit provides the warrant that makes true belief knowledge; that is, the Spirit enables belief in such a way that the belief appears as knowledge (cf. 16:13-15; 1 Jn 2:20-21). Thus, belief in the Johannine sense becomes, or virtually is, knowledge because it is a warranted true belief from the moment we have it.⁶⁰

The Spirit-facilitated acceptance of Jesus and his saving revelation by the believer results in a birth of the Spirit into the family of God. In this intimate relationship with the Father and Son, the believer has access to further divine truth, and the Spirit continues to be involved as an epistemic agent, assisting the believer to appropriate these truths. Hence, further human belief-response, expressed in continuing discipleship, then, indicates at the same time the further appropriation of personal knowledge of the divine (e.g., a greater knowledge of God, his will, commandments, etc.). This reveals that there is an important *interaction* between the divine Spirit and the human mind: (i) the Spirit mediates divine truth and facilitates human cognition and understanding; (ii) the human mind, enhanced by the Spirit, accepts and appropriates this saving truth so that it becomes personal saving knowledge of the divine. Thus, *knowledge of God is attained through the Spirit-enabled understanding and believing of the divine revelation of saving truth in Jesus*. This understanding of John's epistemology can be best visualized in the following diagram:⁶¹

⁶⁰ I am grateful to Robin Parry for this insight. Cf. Dodd, *Interpretation*, 186, who calls faith a form of knowledge, and Bultmann's concept of knowing faith (see fn. 52 above).

⁶¹ See also the more comprehensive diagram in Bennema, *Power*, 152.



Excursus: A Comparison between Johannine Epistemology and Contemporary Epistemology

We need to reflect further on our model of Johannine epistemology in relation to contemporary epistemology. At first sight, there seems to be a tension. Some contemporary epistemology advocates an epistemic hierarchy with regard to perception as a source of knowledge: perception leads to beliefs, and beliefs may constitute knowledge.⁶² Even the definition of knowledge as ‘true belief plus something else’, a definition which goes back to Plato⁶³ and is held by virtually every epistemologist,⁶⁴ regards belief as a necessary but not a

⁶² See, e.g., Audi, *Epistemology*, Ch. 1.

⁶³ In his *Theaetetus*, 201c-d, Plato identifies knowledge (*epistēmē*) as true belief (*alēthēs doxa*) plus an ‘account’ (*logos*), although it is debatable whether Plato’s *logos* is what contemporary philosophers mean by justification. See L. Zagzebski, ‘What is Knowledge?’ in J. Greco and E. Sosa (eds.), *The Blackwell Guide to Epistemology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 114 fn. 18. Moreover, a definition of knowledge as ‘justified true belief’ has been more

sufficient condition for knowledge. According to John, however, belief involves a certain degree of knowing since Johannine belief is not simply the acceptance of a proposition as true but also involves a commitment to Jesus based on a certain degree of knowledge of God. In other words, for John, belief requires cognitive perception and understanding of the truth present in Jesus' revelation. In that case, is John's epistemology opposed to a modern understanding of knowledge, or can the two views be reconciled?

We suggest the latter option is correct for several reasons. First, perhaps we should recognize that there are various contemporary epistemologies rather than one uniform theory of knowledge, and some of these are comparable to John's epistemology. For example, Alvin Plantinga, one of the leading Reformed epistemologists, develops an epistemology based on theories of Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin, which advocates that faith involves an explicitly cognitive element.⁶⁵ Plantinga distinguishes between 'belief' (accepting a proposition as true) and 'faith' (a cognitive activity that includes personal commitment).⁶⁶ What Plantinga and other Reformed epistemologists call 'faith' we have labeled 'belief' (since John does not use the noun 'faith').

Second, following from the first point, John and modern epistemologists work with different definitions of 'belief'. Epistemology in general defines belief as accepting a specific proposition as true, whereas John seems to understand belief as a broader concept, which also includes connotations of discipleship (abiding, following, obeying, etc.), participation in and personal allegiance to Jesus. This concept of Johannine 'belief' is generally called Christian 'faith'. Hence, although both contemporary epistemology and John admit that belief contains a cognitive component, in that it is at least an intellectual assent to a proposition, for John belief also includes a volitional and affective aspect (i.e., relating to will, attitude and motivation).

Third, as we argued in sections IV-V, Johannine belief and knowledge stimulate and inform one another; they form two entwined hermeneutical spirals. Knowledge of the divine is available to the believer through the aid of the Spirit, and this knowledge stimulates and informs further belief, which guarantees access to further knowledge. Hence, for John, knowledge and belief have a cyclical or spiral relationship. For John, knowledge-belief is one salvific package, in that a saving belief requires or contains a certain adequate degree of knowledge of the divine.

difficult to retain after Edmund Gettier's classic article 'Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?', *Analysis* 23 (1963), 121-23.

⁶⁴ E.g. (with various nuances), Audi, *Epistemology*, Ch. 8; Zagzebski, 'Knowledge', 92-116; W. Alston, 'Perceptual Knowledge' in J. Greco and E. Sosa (eds.), *The Blackwell Guide to Epistemology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 223-42.

⁶⁵ A. Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: OUP, 2000), esp. Ch. 8. Other eminent Reformed epistemologists are, for instance, William Alston, Nicholas Wolterstorff and C. Stephen Evans, and some of them have crossed the disciplinary boundary of philosophy into theology: e.g., N. Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995); C.S. Evans, *The Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith: The Incarnational Narrative as History* (Oxford: OUP, 1996).

⁶⁶ Plantinga, *Belief*, 244ff.

Fourth, some systematic theologians and Christian philosophers adhere to the theory that personal knowledge involves belief and propositional knowledge ('knowing that').⁶⁷ Likewise, many biblical scholars distinguish between John's usage of *pisteuein hoti* and *pisteuein eis*.⁶⁸ However, a difference in syntax does not necessitate a difference in meaning; both 'beliefs' can be adequate/salvific and it may simply reflect a variation in Johannine style.⁶⁹ Moreover, instead of distinguishing between propositional and personal knowledge, or between 'belief that' and 'belief in', we argue that for John knowledge and belief is always personal since it is acquired or expressed within a relationship with Jesus and is based on trust, openness, commitment, obedience, etc. In 6:69, for example, Peter's propositional knowledge and belief occurred while he was already in a relationship with Jesus. Similarly, in 14:10-11 Jesus encourages Philip and the other disciples, who are already in a relationship with him, to assent to a certain propositional belief. Finally, the Johannine community, in its fellowship (*koinōnia* [1 Jn 1:3]) with the Father and Son, possessed much propositional knowledge (see fn. 47 above).

Conclusion

For John, accepting or believing Jesus' revelation requires cognitive perception; people need to understand in order to believe. To believe, in the Johannine sense, means to understand and accept the truth in Jesus' revelation so that one obtains personal saving knowledge of the divine. Once in relationship with Jesus, belief and knowledge seem to form a hermeneutical spiral. Hence, John advocates a *knowing belief*. At the same time, however, to believe involves a volitional act, i.e., an act of the will that involves choice or decision – to commit oneself to a personal allegiance to Jesus in discipleship.⁷⁰ In short, Johannine belief consists of a *cognitive* and a *volitional* element – to believe is both an act of the intellect and of the will.⁷¹ John's epistemology seems to show much convergence with that of the so-called Reformed epistemologists, and in particular with the epistemological model of Alvin Plantinga.⁷²

⁶⁷ Cf. M. Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University Press, 1962), *passim*; L. Newbigin, *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt and Certainty in Christian Discipleship* (London: SPCK, 1995), esp. Chs. 1, 4, 7.

⁶⁸ E.g., Dodd, *Interpretation*, 182-86; Gaffney, 'Believing', 228-32; Brown, *Gospel*, 1:512-13; Schnackenburg, *Gospel*, 1:559-63; R. Kysar, *John the Maverick Gospel* (Louisville: WJKP, 1993 [rev. ed.]), 93-94.

⁶⁹ John is quite capable of doing so. There is, for instance, no difference in meaning between John's usage either of *ginōskein* and *eidēnai* (see fn. 28 above), or of *filein* and *agapan*.

⁷⁰ Amongst the specific volitional acts that John mentions are: following Jesus, abiding in Jesus, obeying Jesus' commandments, accepting Jesus.

⁷¹ See also Scott MacDonald's stimulating article in which he discusses the cognitive and volitional components of faith, although he gives more weight to the volitional aspect ('Christian Faith' in E. Stump [ed.], *Reasoned Faith: Essays in Philosophical Theology in Honor of Norman Kretzmann* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993], 42-69).

⁷² Cf. Plantinga, *Belief*, esp. Chs. 6-8.

Conclusions

Epistemologically, John's analysis of humanity (apart from Christ) is negative: people do not have (adequate/saving) knowledge of God and are enveloped in an epistemic darkness. The divine response is twofold. First, as the Light, Jesus brings illuminating revelation that gives life. Second, since people's epistemic condition of darkness prevents them from cognitively penetrating Jesus' revelation, the Spirit opens up Jesus' revelation and mediates its saving truth to people. That is, the Spirit aids people in their understanding of Jesus' revelation and in the appropriation of divine truth as personal saving knowledge of the divine. Hence, John's epistemology is primarily a *pneumatological* and *christocentric* epistemology. It is christocentric in that knowledge of God is revealed and anchored in Jesus. It is pneumatological in that the Spirit functions as an epistemic agent who facilitates cognitive perception and unlocks the truth that is present in Jesus' teaching so that it can be accepted as saving knowledge of the divine. This saving truth is the epistemic constituent of Johannine belief, and the implication of this interrelationship between knowledge and belief is that we cannot have a non-intellectual or anti-intellectual attitude towards the Christian faith.

One question we posed in the introduction – What is the purpose of knowledge? – has not yet been answered. For epistemology in general, the pursuit of knowledge often seems to be an end in itself.⁷³ Contemporary epistemology seems to have indulged itself in eating from the tree of knowledge and to have forgotten the real source and aim of knowledge. For John, however, there are three related purposes of knowledge. The first purpose of knowledge, the knowledge of God at any rate, is *salvific*. Cognitive perception or understanding of the truth in Jesus' revelation makes possible an adequate belief-response and saving knowledge of God that brings a person into a saving relationship with the Father and Son. Within this relationship the believer has access to further knowledge of the divine that may stimulate proper discipleship as a means of sustaining one's saving relationship with the Father and Son. Thus, John's epistemology is directly related to and serves his soteriology, since knowledge of God is salvific. Looking at the *Sitz im Leben* of the Johannine church(es), we may learn *why* John puts so much emphasis on knowledge. Both the gospel and the letters testify to the existence of defective or inadequate christologies (e.g., 1:10-11; 6:42; 8:19, 31-59; 9:24; 1 Jn 2:22; 4:2-3). In facilitating knowledge about the true identity of Jesus, the Spirit assists in the confession of a correct christology (cf. 16:13-15; 1 Jn 4:2), which has direct bearing on the believer's soteriological status.

The second purpose of knowledge is *ethical* and related to the first one. The knowledge that is available to the believer in her relationship with the Father and Son is transformative in that it provides knowledge of God's character, will, commandments, work, etc., and this knowledge is naturally expected to affect a person's will, attitudes, motivations and actions. This ethical aspect of knowledge is

⁷³ The more recent subdiscipline of virtue epistemology is an exception to this.

the focus of the more recent discipline of virtue epistemology.⁷⁴ An important implication can be drawn in the area of Spirit and ethics. If the Spirit facilitates cognitive perception and transformative knowledge, and if orthodoxy (right thinking) is inextricably linked to orthopraxis (right acting), then the Spirit is also significantly related to right morality; a Spirit-informed epistemology must affect people's praxis. Further study must work out how and to what extent the Spirit is involved in Johannine ethics.

The third purpose of knowledge is *evaluative*. If we extrapolate John's admonition in 1 John 4:1-6, the believer is urged to use her Spirit-provided knowledge to examine and evaluate (*dokimazein*) teachings that she hears or reads in the light of authentic Christian doctrine, i.e., in the light of Jesus' revelation of the truth. Moreover, the conclusion that we cannot have a non-intellectual or anti-intellectual attitude towards the Christian faith also extends, for example, to the area of Christian experience. In some sectors of the church there is the tendency to over-emphasize the experiential or emotional side of salvation or the Christian faith to the extent that the cognitive dimension is almost neglected or denied, but this will not do since our cognitive, volitional and affective faculties are all involved. The Spirit, who facilitates knowledge, is presumably also related to orthopathos (right feeling/experience), in that the Spirit helps believers to interpret and evaluate correctly their religious experiences on the basis of their newly perceived knowledge. John's concept of knowledge, then, is not so much that of 'theoretical' knowledge but one that is personal and practical. The knowledge that is acquired in a personal relationship with Jesus through the aid of the Spirit should be used to evaluate ('judge') doctrine, praxis and experience, and the Spirit, then, is also expected to assist the believer in this evaluative process.⁷⁵

In conclusion, John's epistemology is pneumatological and christocentric in nature, is soteriological, ethical and evaluative in its aim, and has cognitive, relational, volitional and affective aspects. We argued that the Johannine notions of knowledge and belief are so closely correlated – stimulating and informing one another – that they essentially constitute one epistemic concept of 'knowing belief'. The extent to which our model of John's epistemology informs, confirms or subverts contemporary epistemologies is an issue that needs to be examined further.

⁷⁴ Virtue epistemology has its roots in ancient Greek philosophy (cf. Ferguson, *Backgrounds*, 309, 321, 337-38), but has only received attention in recent years. See, e.g., E. Sosa, *Knowledge in Perspective* (Cambridge/New York: CUP, 1991); J. Greco, 'Virtues and Vices of Virtue Epistemology', *CJP* 23 (1993), 413-32; L. Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind* (Cambridge/New York: CUP, 1996); W.J. Wood, *Epistemology: Becoming Intellectually Virtuous* (Leicester: Apollos, 1998); A. Fairweather and L. Zagzebski (eds.), *Virtue Epistemology: Essays on Epistemic Virtue and Responsibility* (Oxford: OUP, 2001).

⁷⁵ Cf. the Pauline concept of *dokimazein* in, e.g., Rom 12:2; 1 Cor 11:28; 2 Cor 13:5; Gal 6:4; Eph 5:10; Phil 1:10; 1 Thes 2:4; 5:21. See also A. Munzinger, *Discerning the Spirits: Paul's Hermeneutic of Theological and Ethical Verification* (Cambridge: CUP, 2007).

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