



Hermes & John:

The Fourth Gospel in the Early Gnostic World

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Abstract

The Gospel of John is an evangelistic, multi-front polemic written, in part, to compete with an early Hermetic-Gnosticism. Alongside GJohn's exaltation and defense of Jesus in the face of Jewish rejection, GJohn also offers a Jesus, and a Jewish-Christianity, congenial to both the Jewish and Greek minds. John presents the Jewish-Christian versions of Gnostic religious trends in order to persuade a Hellenistic audience to adopt Christianity, and probably to draw back members of his own community who were being lured away by those trends. Despite the insistence of many scholars that Judaism can account for every feature of the Fourth Gospel, some features are best, and even only, explained by an awareness of Hermetic Gnosticism. Thus GJohn proves to be a multi-front polemic: dealing with Jewish objections to Jesus, and competing with a rising Gnosticism, are two arms of John's great mission to establish a Jesus, and a Jewish-Christianity, which can stand on its own in a widening, Hellenistic world. Ultimately, a careful analysis of GJohn's deliberate contrast with early Hermetic teaching will reveal serious implications for orthodox readings of John's Christology, namely, that John's Jesus is a genuine human being who does not literally pre-exist or share a substance with God.

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I. The Primacy of John

The Fourth Gospel has fascinated Christians for centuries. John is certainly one of the most peculiar and most complex works of the New Testament, and throughout the ages it has demonstrated an uncanny ability to be employed in support of vastly divergent theologies. Christians from all backgrounds consider John a favorite text, and one which loudly champions their denominational Christology. Does the Fourth Gospel's wide appreciation speak to a degree of Christological ambiguity in John?

Trinitarian scholars like Stephen Smalley have indeed condemned John's Christology to a perpetual balancing act, hovering somewhere between docetism and adoptionism, oscillating between a Jesus who is fully God and a Jesus who is human and distinct from God.¹ It is this ambiguous sort of reading which has allowed the Fourth Gospel to become a stronghold for Trinitarian theology, which searches the New Testament for validation of the Chalcedonian definition of Jesus as fully God and fully man. But we are continuously forced by evidence both internal and external to the Gospel to wonder if John's Christological picture really is so flexible, or if his scheme has only suffered routine misunderstanding and exploitation. Biblical Unitarians have indeed argued that quests to discover a Chalcedonian portrait of Christ in John are misguided. In this view, approaching the Gospel of John through a first-century Jewish prism will yield no Chalcedonian God-Man, but a Human Christology set against the backdrop of Jewish Wisdom tradition, the LXX, and the Hebraic law of agency. Needless to say, in the realm of Trinitarian versus Unitarian controversy, the Fourth Gospel has become the prime battleground. In popular apologetics, the overwhelming majority of scriptural proofs alleged to support orthodox Christology are derived from John. But what has allowed such asymmetrical proof-texting? In other words, what makes John's Gospel especially congenial to the support of Trinitarianism while the Synoptics lie starved for such attention?

The Fourth Gospel certainly differs from the Synoptics in many ways: The Synoptics feature parables and proverbial sayings of Jesus while John features long symbolic discourses. The Synoptics also seem more deliberately biographical,

¹ Smalley writes: "The Johannine Christ, we may conclude, was neither God alone, nor man alone. The Christology of the Fourth Gospel is perfectly balanced between two poles which are now labeled 'docetic' and 'adoptionist'... The Chalcedonian Definition... was an attempt to resolve the difficult problem of maintaining that in one person there were two distinct natures; and to this understanding, as we have discovered, the Fourth Gospel pointed and contributed. However, ultimately we have to agree that Chalcedon was a statement, not a solution. It is balanced, like John's Christology. But no more than the Fourth Gospel itself does it show us *how* the human and the divine are related in Jesus; it merely places these truths side by side" (Stephen A. Smalley, *John: Evangelist and Interpreter* (New York: Thomas Nelson, 1984 [1978]), pp. 250-251, emphasis his).

while John is more reflective; it can sometimes be difficult to know where Jesus' words end and John's commentary begins. And the Greek itself is of a different style in John; the range of vocabulary is smaller, for example. But beyond these differences there is very often said to be unique *theological* information presented in the Fourth Gospel.

In the early twentieth century, Hans Windisch argued that "the evangelist viewed the Synoptics as so inadequate both theologically and christologically that he created his own narrative in the hope of replacing these inferior accounts."² On the other hand, it has been widely suggested by "orthodox" readers that John has the very same Jesus in mind as the Synoptic writers, but that his Gospel was written to enhance or draw out the "deity of Christ" in a way the Synoptics had neglected, or, in a way that better addressed the concerns of Jews still troubled by this proposition.³ In other words, Trinitarians have regularly looked to frame the concern of the Fourth Gospel as one about monotheism, one which the Synoptics had not adequately settled; for them, John's mission was to establish a Jesus who is fully God (and whose deity had been held from the very beginning of the faith) within the Jewish, monotheistic matrix of the first century. On the other hand, it has been suggested, recently by Ehrman⁴ and Kirk,⁵ that the Synoptics present an explicitly human Jesus who is not ontologically God or literally pre-existent, but that GJohn positively represents a later Christian *development* which moved in precisely in this direction. Most of Johannine scholarship, however, has contended that John wrote only to strengthen or supplement a latent "high" Christology already present in the Synoptics.⁶

Regardless, each of the aforementioned views contends that GJohn provides new information about the identity of Christ, and looks to establish a "high" Christology in the wake of either insufficient or consciously "lower" presentations in the Synoptics. However, these assessments have not paid enough attention to the fact that the Fourth Gospel is not overly concerned with questions about monotheism. As James McGrath notes, "There are only two clear references in the Fourth Gospel to what today is called 'monotheism,' and both affirm the oneness of God in rather axiomatic language without defense or explanation."⁷ Thus the "monotheism" of John is assumed, and is supposed to be shared by both Jesus, his disciples, and the antagonistic "Jews." John is supremely concerned, not with establishing Jesus of Nazareth as *Yahweh*, the ancestral God of Judaism, but with establishing Jesus of Nazareth as *the Messiah*. This is, in fact, the *raison d'être* of the Fourth Gospel (John 20:31). The language and concepts which John employs in this effort, rather than representing any novel (e.g. Trinitarian) theological developments, are instead to be located elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible and in the proximate non-Christian Jewish literature of Palestine. Thus, as McGrath concludes, "John would not have been regarded by his Jewish contemporaries as having 'taken a step too far' beyond the bounds of what was acceptable" in Jewish monotheism, and should even now be considered "a first-century Jewish-Christian monotheist."⁸

Of course, McGrath and others may ultimately consider the developed Trinitarian theology not necessarily incompatible with the Fourth Gospel, since the "specific questions" about monotheism asked by the later Trinitarians were simply not asked by John.⁹ But this is where the consideration of the Fourth Gospel as *polemic* will begin to show its value: here we may have a chance to recognize not only the positive side of John's Jesus, but also the negative. In

² According to Windisch, this contributed to "a clear conflict in the canon which the early church had tried to explain away" (David C. Sim, "Conflict in the Canon: The Pauline Literature and the Gospel of Matthew," *Religious Conflict from Early Christianity to the Rise of Islam* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2013), p. 74). See Hans Windisch, "Johannes und die Synoptiker: Wollte der vierte Evangelist die alteren Evangelien erganzen oder ersetzen?", *UNT*, Vol. 12 (Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs, 1926), pp. 193-194, n. 8.

³ The preface to the Fourth Gospel in Harvest House Publisher's *New Inductive Study Bible* reads: "God in the flesh. The incarnation would be hard for some to believe, but their belief or unbelief would be a matter of life or death. Three other Gospels had been written, and years had passed. One more Gospel was needed, one which would answer these questions and more, one which would illumine the shadows of doubt. So the apostle John answered God's call to write a fourth and final Gospel..." (*The New Inductive Study Bible* (Eugene: Harvest House Publishers, 2000), p. 1711).

⁴ Bart D. Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of Jewish Preacher from Galilee* (New York: HarperOne, 2014);

⁵ J.R. Daniel Kirk, *A Man Attested By God: The Human Jesus of the Synoptic Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016).

⁶ Sim, p. 74.

⁷ James F. McGrath, *The Only True God: Early Christian Monotheism in Its Jewish Context* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2010), p. 69. For GJohn's notices of monotheism, McGrath cites John 5:44, as well as John 17:1a, 3, in which Jesus declares that "the Father" is "the only one who is true God."

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

other words, through a careful consideration of not only John's method but of the rival concepts or texts which John might have had in mind to compete with, we may identify not only what John does mean when he speaks about Jesus-as-Messiah, but just as importantly what he deliberately does *not* mean. Thus any incompatibility with Trinitarianism, or with any other dogma, has a chance to reveal itself. In the end, I will argue that the forthcoming analysis of GJohn in light of early Gnostic (especially Hermetic) thought, will yield a clearer picture of not only John's Christology, but of John's place in the gospel tradition and in the history of doctrinal development. I ultimately accept the dominant view that John wrote to enhance and support the Synoptic portrait of Jesus, but I also agree with those scholars who recognize that the Jesus of the Synoptics is not portrayed as ontologically God or literally pre-existent. Thus GJohn presents the same human, non-pre-existent Jesus as the Synoptics, but does so in a different light for both polemical and evangelistic reasons.

II. GJohn as Polemic

Scholars have long debated the nature of the Fourth Gospel: some have classed it as a purely historical and biographical account,¹⁰ while others have considered it a piece of reflective literature, even a drama.¹¹ Some have found John a partly historical, partly elaborated upon account of the life and teachings of Christ,¹² and still others an appropriation of non-Christian mythology.¹³ But one approach which has regularly coursed through the diversity of Johannine studies is the consideration of the Gospel as *polemic*. Indeed, recognizing a background of *community conflict* has been integral to many scholarly conclusions about the Fourth Gospel's intentions. Recent studies of John as polemic have, however, proven somewhat unbalanced: much has been written on John's contest with "the Jews" over the identity and role of Jesus,¹⁴ while in recent times scholarly interest in other possible targets for the Gospel has dwindled.¹⁵ The widespread modern notice of John's background of Jewish conflict may be largely owed to J. Louis Martyn's striking proposal that the visible conflict with the Jews in the Fourth Gospel is to be understood in light of Jewish expulsion of Jewish-Christians from the synagogue.¹⁶ We have now been forced to consider the possibility that "the statements in John mirror an actual historical situation and set of circumstances," and that these statements "have been retrojected into the time of Jesus and his disciples."¹⁷ Thus the question for GJohn as to whether or not the content of the Gospel itself could reveal the times, conditions, and reasons for its composition, has been opened, and has yet to be shut. However, this door has revealed to the present majority a world of factional, intra-Jewish conflict. Is there room today for consideration of other (Gnostic) opponents for John's Gospel?

1. The history of GJohn as anti-Gnostic polemic

While the internal evidence certainly lends to the view that John's Gospel is written against a background of community conflict, this line of questioning is also easily ignited by the Gospel's proximity to the Johannine epistles,

¹⁰ Richard Burridge, *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison With Graeco-Roman Biography* (Cambridge: CUP, 1992) pp. 222-223. See also Craig Keener, *Commentary on Matthew* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997), p. 24.

¹¹ See F.R.M. Hitchcock, "Is the Fourth Gospel a Drama?" *The Gospel of John as Literature: An Anthology of Twentieth-Century Perspectives* (Leiden: Brill, 1993), pp. 15-24.

¹² See the "partition theory" of H.H. Wendt, who saw GJohn as "a theological interpretation of the notes which the Apostle John made on the discourses of Jesus... greatly elaborated and set in a historical frame by a member of the Asiatic community, working in the first quarter of the second century" (Mark W. G. Stibbe, *The Gospel of John as Literature*, p. 2). See also Hitchcock's analysis of Wendt in *Das Johannesevangelium* (Edinburgh, 1902), Ch. 3.

¹³ See Rudolph Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2014 [1941]), pp. 7-9.

¹⁴ See D. Moody Smith, "Judaism and the Gospel of John," *Jews and Christians: Exploring the Past, Present, and Future* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), pp. 76-96.

¹⁵ Kyle Keefer, *The Branches of the Gospel of John: The Reception of the Fourth Gospel in the Early Church* (London: T&T Clark, 2006), p. 23.

¹⁶ Martyn highlighted John 9:22; 12:42; and 16:2 to point us in this direction. See J. Louis Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968).

¹⁷ See Smith, "Judaism and the Gospel of John," pp. 76-96.

which so immediately reveal an evangelist locked in combat with theological adversaries advancing on his community.¹⁸ Naturally following from a consideration of 1 John, another pattern of Gospel study has attracted a modest measure of scholarly interest which has yet to be exhausted: John's relationship with "Gnostic" thought and literature.

This relationship did, in fact, seem to dominate the studies of the first half of the twentieth century. However, in the wake of the 1947 recovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, most New Testament scholars have recognized instead a Palestinian Jewish background for the Fourth Gospel. Many Johannine features once thought to be relatable only to second-century Hellenistic-Gnostic ideas were discovered to have parallels in the Qumran documents of the first century CE. This caused a massive paradigm shift among scholars away from a Hellenistic background for GJohn towards an essentially Jewish one. In this light, many conclusions about the composition of GJohn, its audience, and its intentions, have trended in the same general "Jewish" direction, though there has yet to develop any universal consensus.

In order to provide a background for my own unique analysis, which draws from the very best Johannine scholarship of the past century, I will complete a brief survey of opinions on the Fourth Gospel's destination and purpose, but without any intention of exhausting the many divergent viewpoints which have emerged.

a. Ancient Views

The opinion that the Fourth Gospel was composed to refute Gnostic ideas is an ancient one. Irenaeus of Lyon (130-202 CE) wrote that John was engaged in a personal conflict with the Gnostic Cerinthus (fl. 100 CE),¹⁹ and that John's Gospel was specifically "an antidote to this heresy."²⁰ J.D. Michaelis once argued that "even if Irenaeus had not asserted that St. John wrote his Gospel against the Gnostics, and particularly against Cerinthus, the contents of the Gospel itself would lead to this conclusion. The speeches of Christ, which John has recorded, are selected with a totally different view from that of the three first evangelists... In the very choice of his expressions, such as 'light,' 'life,' etc. he had in view the philosophy of the Gnostics, who used or rather abused these terms... Unless John had an adversary to combat who made particular use of the words... he would not have thought it necessary."²¹

Interestingly, we find that in the late second century Cerinthus' name was attached to the Gospel in two radically different ways: some Christians, like Irenaeus, indeed held the Gospel to be written against Cerinthus, while some Christians, like the ultra-conservative Alogi sect,²² held that it was actually written *by* Cerinthus! What could account for such radically different opinions? Similarly, modern scholars have continued to ask if the Gospel of John is not only an answer to Gnostic heresy, but is also a product of Gnosticism itself. Could both Irenaeus and the Alogi be correct? Could GJohn be simultaneously Gnostic and anti-Gnostic? The difficulty in properly recognizing the Gospel's unique method, and its tendency to draw near to Gnostic ways of thinking, seems to have enabled such divergent conclusions. The original difficulty early Christians had with GJohn was probably generated not only by the Gospel's subtle and peculiar approach, but because proto-orthodoxy had already experienced a dramatic enough philosophical and theological shift by the late second century that its doctrines were becoming hard to distinguish from the Gnostic worldview which the Fourth Gospel was regularly working against. Modern scholars may be encountering the same difficulties for the same reasons.

¹⁸ In light of their comparable style, language, content, and circumstances, the traditional view has been that GJohn and 1 John share a common author or authors, or at least originate from the same Johannine community in Asia Minor. See Keener, pp. 122-126. The interesting question of Johannine authorship is not one necessarily targeted by this study. See below pp. 15-16.

¹⁹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3, 11, 1-2. Hippolytus says that Cerinthus derived his ideas "from the teachings of the Egyptians" (Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies*, VII, 21—cf. X, 17, where he claims that Cerinthus received training in Egypt). Cerinthus is often seen as having a Jewish background, and upheld Jewish food laws, said that the world was created by angels, and opposed both John and the Apostle Paul. According to Irenaeus, Polycarp once said that John had entered a bathhouse in Ephesus, and upon seeing that Cerinthus was inside, got up and left the building saying, "Let us fly, lest even the bath-house fall down, because Cerinthus, the enemy of truth, is within" (Ibid., 3, 3, 4).

²⁰ J. B. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers, Part II: S. Ignatius, S. Polycarp* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1889), pp. 379-383.

²¹ J. D. Michaelis, quoted in Thomas Horne, *An Introduction to the Critical Study and Knowledge*, Vol. 2 (New York: Robert Carter, 1847), p. 316.

²² Philip Schaff, "Alogi" in *A Dictionary of Christian Biography and Literature to the End of the Sixth Century A.D., with an Account of the Principal Sects and Heresies*, by Henry Wace (Grand Rapids: CCEL, 2000), 34. Dodd writes that the Alogi were late second-century "ultra-conservative theologians who thought [GJohn] smacked of heresy" (Dodd, p. 102).

b. E.F. Scott

Long before the discovery of the Nag Hammadi Codices stirred a new interest in Gnosticism,²³ biblical scholars were already exploring the possibility that John had written his Gospel with Gnostic ideas in mind.

In 1906, E.F. Scott laid an important foundation for considering John as anti-Gnostic polemic in his *The Fourth Gospel*.²⁴ For Scott, GJohn represented a transitional gospel in which John was restating the Christian message for a Hellenistic culture in terms of current philosophy. For example, the Johannine “eternal life” he found to be an essential translation of the Jewish “kingdom of God.” But Scott furthermore detected other polemical motivations in John: he saw the Gospel working in several different directions, namely, against the Jews, the Baptist sect, and against Gnostics, even demonstrating an anti-docetic²⁵ tone. However, Scott surprisingly found John to be simultaneously “sympathetic” towards Gnosticism, and indeed “semi-docetic” himself! For Scott, John still stressed the “ideal value” of Jesus’ life, cosmic dualism, and Gnosis of God—Scott still viewed John’s Jesus as a divine and spiritual being.²⁶ Scott believed he could resolve the antimony between John’s anti-Gnostic arguments and his tendency toward Gnostic thinking by claiming that GJohn and Gnosticism were simply drawing on the same background of ideas.²⁷ Overall, Scott saw the Gospel as one addressed to Hellenistic, non-Christians in an attempt to persuade them to adopt Christianity.

c. R. Bultmann

In 1941 Rudolph Bultmann was moved in a similar direction as Scott, but arrived at a more dramatic conclusion. Bultmann caused a stir by arguing that GJohn was based upon a “Gnostic discourse source” related to Mandaean concepts and literature, a source which was later altered by members of the Johannine community to reflect an anti-gnostic viewpoint. Bultmann even argued that the author(s) was actually a former Gnostic disciple of John the Baptist’s sect, and that GJohn’s prologue was, in fact, composed precisely to combat that sect. Similar to Scott, in Bultmann’s view, the Fourth Gospel is ultimately a work which is at its core both Gnostic, as well as anti-Gnostic.²⁸ Though Bultmann’s interpretation eventually fell out of favor, largely due to the absence of the alleged “source” material and the late date for the Mandaean sect to which Bultmann drew attention, Bultmann’s efforts continued to draw at the possibility that GJohn was an anti-Gnostic polemic.

d. C.H. Dodd

The History of Religions school had, in the 19th and early 20th centuries, seen GJohn almost entirely in terms of Hellenism. Thus the Gospel’s Jewish affinities were regularly downplayed. Reasons for the overturning of the imbalance included important studies in Semitic languages and Rabbinical Judaism.²⁹ In the aftermath of these studies, an attempt at rebalancing was to be found in C.H. Dodd’s landmark *Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (1953).

Dodd emphasized, much more than Bultmann, the relationship of the Gospel with the Jews and Judaism. However, Dodd also compared GJohn to Hellenistic Judaism as represented by Philo, and to pagan Gnosticism as represented by Hermeticism. In each of these movements Dodd detected a degree of affinity with the Fourth Gospel in its concepts and language. Dodd ultimately held that GJohn was addressed to all peoples outside the Church, Jewish and Gentile, and that John was in contact with the higher pagan thought of the time. Though Dodd made clear that John’s own

²³ The NHC, discovered in 1945, represent twelve leather-bound codices containing Gnostic literature from sects flourishing in the second and third centuries. For an introduction into the NHC, see Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Vintage books, 1979), pp. xiii-xxiii; Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1975), pp. 34-52.

²⁴ See E.F. Scott, *The Fourth Gospel: Its Purpose and Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1908 [1906]), pp. 86-103.

²⁵ Docetism is the general term for a Christological tendency, strong in Gnostic Christian circles, which saw a divine Jesus whose body was in some way distinct from the rest of mankind—usually the fleshly nature was a sort of phantasm, or a celestial substance. See below for more on other Gnostic Christologies, pp. 32-33.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 95. See also Smalley, p. 133.

²⁷ Scott, p. 101.

²⁸ Bultmann, pp. 7-9; See also Urban C. von Walhde, *Gnosticism, Docetism, and the Judaisms of the First Century* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), pp. 27-28.

²⁹ C.H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: CUP, 1968 [1953]), pp. 74-75.

background was Jewish,³⁰ like Bultmann and others he mostly bypassed a historical contest with the Jews as the focus of the Gospel.

In the end, despite the close parallels, Dodd found that GJohn was not the work of a truly Gnostic mind. Dodd pointed to the diversity of the traditions which could be identified as Gnostic, and specifically targeted Bultmann's thesis regarding Mandaean literature, ultimately exposing it as a highly improbable influence on John.³¹ Regarding Hermeticism, Dodd concluded that along with Rabbinic Judaism and Philo, the Hermetic writings "remain our most direct sources for the background of thought [in GJohn],"³² and "represent a type of religious thought akin to one side of Johannine thought, without any substantial borrowing on the one part or the other."³³ Ultimately, Dodd felt that Hermeticism and Hermetic literature were not truly conscious targets of John's Gospel, but that the Hermetica represented the same philosophical tendencies held by "the kind of public which... John had in view."³⁴

e. Brown, Yamauchi, Perkins, and Keener

Following Dodd, in the 1970s Raymond E. Brown took Scott and Bultmann's awareness of a Johannine relationship with Gnosticism into account, but ultimately increased the distance between John and Gnosis. Brown concluded that the dominant source of GJohn's ideas was to be found in sectarian Judaism.³⁵ Brown wrote: "One cannot claim that the dependence of John on a postulated early Oriental Gnosticism has been disproved, but the hypothesis remains very tenuous and in many ways unnecessary."³⁶ Immediately on Brown's trail, Edwin Yamauchi likewise resolved, perhaps with more force, that there was not yet enough evidence to prove that Gnosticism had any direct influence on John's Christianity.³⁷ In the following decades, PHEME PERKINS continued to separate GJohn from the Gnostic world. She did so, while at the same time accounting for their similarities, in the following way: GJohn and the Gnostic writings had developed independently, but John had adopted the style of the revelation discourse from his Hellenistic milieu, a milieu which the Gnostics simply shared.³⁸ This resolution seemed to satisfy many: no true relationship with Gnosticism need disturb the reputation of the Fourth Gospel. And today, many scholars continue to put distance between GJohn and Gnostic literature, as texts developing independently and as merely products of a common setting.³⁹ Thus the flame once ignited by Scott, Bultmann, and Dodd was to a large degree dampened by Yamauchi and Perkins.

Craig S. Keener, arguably one of the foremost commentators on John today, represents the current paradigm dominant in Johannine studies: Keener ultimately argues that "the Jewish evidence is sufficient to explain the Fourth Gospel's context by itself."⁴⁰ Like many, he distances GJohn from any meaningful relationship with Gnosticism, Christian or Hermetic, and in his view the stunning parallels with Gnosticism are, essentially, accidental. He even goes so far as to say that "none of John's purportedly gnostic (or antignostic) traits are limited to gnosticism."⁴¹ Regarding the affinities with Hermeticism in particular, while finding many of them "significant," Keener sees them as probably reflecting only a common milieu.⁴² He thus finds the conflict in GJohn to be set against a background of intra-Jewish dispute; John's purpose is to emphasize, even to reclaim, the Jewishness of his community in the face of Jewish leaders who challenged their identity.⁴³ He locates the "highest" Christology in John: "Jesus is deity (1:1, 18; 20-28-31)"⁴⁴ and

³⁰ Ibid., p. 133.

³¹ Ibid., pp. 115-130.

³² Ibid., p. 133.

³³ Ibid., 53.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Christopher W. Skinner, *John and Thomas—Gospels in Conflict?: Johannine Characterization and the Thomas Question* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2009), p. x.

³⁶ Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (New York: Doubleday, 1966-1970), p. lvi.

³⁷ Edwin Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism* (London: Tyndale, 1973), p. 186.

³⁸ PHEME PERKINS, *Gnosticism and the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993), p. 141.

³⁹ Wahldt, p. 30.

⁴⁰ Keener, p. 166.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 162.

⁴² Ibid., p. 165.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 232.

⁴⁴ Keener, p. 281.

he “pre-existed as divine.”⁴⁵ In this, Keener’s reading of the Fourth Gospel supports the current Trinitarian paradigm, but it also, on a basic level, supports the Gnostic thesis that Christ is by nature a spiritual being.⁴⁶ As it stands, Keener’s more isolated Jewish context for the Gospel, and a “balanced” (Chalcedonian) interpretation of its Christology, are today the dominant themes in Johannine study. As Kyle Keefer observes, “In recent scholarship, little time is spent on dealing with the possible Gnostic background to John’s Gospel.”⁴⁷

2. Exploring the anti-Gnostic polemic hypothesis today

In 2005, in an analysis of the Johannine corpus, Pheme Perkins admitted that “the appropriate paradigms that would account satisfactorily for the complexity of the relationships [between John and Gnosticism] had not yet been articulated.”⁴⁸ There appears, then, still room and need for further analysis. Today we do benefit from the diligence of several scholars who have been unsatisfied with the progressive disassociation of John and Gnosis swelling in Bultmann’s wake. Tempted perhaps by the same uncanny affinities between the two which Scott and Bultmann saw, some have continued to peer through the doorway once pried open by them, towards the study of GJohn as an anti-Gnostic polemic.

a. Riley, DeConick, Pagels

Gregory J. Riley,⁴⁹ April DeConick,⁵⁰ and Elaine Pagels⁵¹ have all suggested that the Gospel of John is, in some ways, a response to the Gospel of Thomas. GThomas is a Coptic sayings Gospel discovered among the library of Gnostic documents at Nag Hammadi in 1945, and most scholars believe that GThomas is, in fact, the work of an early Christian Gnostic community, likely originating in Syria.⁵² Riley, DeConick, and Pagels have postulated that GJohn represents a conflict with this Thomasine tradition for several reasons: First, Thomas is only transformed into “Doubting Thomas” in the Fourth Gospel; this may suggest a subversive attitude towards a rival Thomasine school of thought. Furthermore, some have also detected a docetic Christology in GThomas. GJohn’s presentation of a real, flesh-and-blood Jesus, whom Doubting Thomas is made to touch with his hands after the resurrection, has thus been seen as refuting a Thomasine docetism. Of course, other scholars are not convinced that GThomas is truly docetic.⁵³ In 2009 Christopher Skinner replied to the proposal of Riley, DeConick, and Pagels, arguing that Thomas was not truly given special treatment apart from the other characters in GJohn, and ultimately that drawing too much of a parallel between the Fourth Gospel and GThomas was unnecessary.⁵⁴ Regardless, the idea that an anti-Gnostic polemic is to be discovered in GJohn has continued to provoke scholarly interest.

b. Human Christology: A Neglected Key

Peder Borgen and George W. MacRae provide examples of others who have come near to exposing GJohn’s anti-Gnostic method, or at least to asking the right questions.⁵⁵ In Borgen’s analysis for example we find a John who is

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Adolph von Harnack, *History of Dogma*, Vol. 1 (1894), p. 193.

⁴⁷ Kyle Keefer, *The Branches of the Gospel of John*, p. 23.

⁴⁸ Wahlde, surmising Perkins, in Ibid., p. 30.

⁴⁹ Gregory J. Riley, *Resurrection Reconsidered: Thomas and John in Conflict* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995).

⁵⁰ April DeConick, *Voices of the Mystics: Early Christian Discourse in the Gospel of John and Thomas and Other Ancient Christian Literature* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001).

⁵¹ Elaine Pagels, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas* (New York: Vintage, 2004).

⁵² Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures* (New York: Doubleday, 1987), p. 361. Orthodox rejection of GThomas as a legitimate Gospel is an old habit; it was probably referred to by Eusebius in his account of scriptures used by “the heretics” that were to be rejected (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, III, 25:6).

⁵³ Stevan L. Davies, *The Gospel of Thomas and Christian Wisdom* (Bardic Press, 2005), p. 88. See also *The Gospel of Thomas*, Logion 28-29 concerning Christ’s “flesh.” It is in no way inconceivable, however, that these sayings could not be interpreted in a docetic way. See Bertil E. Gartner, *The Theology of the Gospel of Thomas* (New York: Harper, 1961), p. 142. See also my analysis of the Johannine commentary on Christ’s “flesh” below, pp. 26-27.

⁵⁴ Christopher Skinner, *John and Thomas—Gospels in Conflict?* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2009).

⁵⁵ Peder Borgen, *The Gospel of John: More Light from Philo, Paul, and Archaeology* (Leiden: Brill, 2014); George W. MacRae, “Gnosticism and the Church of John’s Gospel,” *Nag Hammadi, Gnosticism and Early Christianity* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1986).

positively Jewish-Christian, as well as reliant on Jewish Wisdom tradition, but a John who is also aware of Hellenistic religious trends. Alongside him, McRae raised the question: “is the Fourth Gospel an independent development from the wisdom tradition or is it a part of a larger movement of speculation in which Gnosticism also reinterprets wisdom?”⁵⁶ Reflecting on this question, Kyle Keefer doubts whether or not we can ever untangle the Jewish Wisdom tradition, which has been suggested forms the real background of John, from the potentially “Gnostic” tradition expressed in the Gospel.⁵⁷ Attempts to discern the orthodox Jesus from the Gnostic Jesus possibly lurking in John have certainly proven daunting for many, thanks in part to the uncanny similarities between Catholic and Gnostic Christologies.⁵⁸ Indeed, as Daniel R. Streett admits, “in its more moderate form [Gnostic Christology] is very difficult to differentiate from orthodox Christology...”⁵⁹ However, the pathway to sorting out what is “Jewish-Christian” in John, and what is “Gnostic” or “anti-Gnostic” becomes clearer once we work backwards from certain assumptions about John and early Christianity which have gone widely unconsidered.

On a larger scale, it is certain that the majority of scholars have heretofore neglected the power which the Biblical Unitarian interpretation of GJohn has to not only fill in John’s Christological portrait, but to harmonize it with the human Jesus of the Synoptics and the monotheism of the Hebrew Bible. And ultimately, Borgen and others who have drawn near to exposing John’s polemic, have relied overmuch on the philosophical principles which John was refuting in order to draw out the positive side of the Johannine Christology. The Biblical Unitarian reading, which sees in John’s Jesus a human being apart from any literal pre-existence, is one which sheds much-needed light on the careful distinctions we need to make in order to recognize the true nature of John’s polemic.

III. John’s mission and method

In my view, John’s mission for his Gospel appears to be two-fold: 1) to present Jesus as a universal, salvific figure congenial to both educated Jews and Gentiles; and 2) to compete with rival traditions which threaten his message and community. John’s method for accomplishing these goals is this: to construct an evangelistic, narrational polemic for a mixed audience which will both confront the various claims of his opponents about the Messiah, and offer the *Jewish-Christian versions* of Hellenistic fashions.⁶⁰ Granting this mission, the format of the narrational polemic reveals itself as a powerful method: John is able to summon Jesus to defend himself against a range of challengers, to “correct the record” in the face of Christological speculation, and ultimately to present a Jewish-Christianity which can stand on its own in a widening, Hellenistic world.⁶¹

1. GJohn as an evangelistic, multi-front polemic

In reality, my solution is one which draws and combines the best elements from previous observations: First, I take the essential Palestinian Jewish background for John proposed by most modern scholars. But I combine it with one side of the view of E.F. Scott, that GJohn also features a restatement of the Christian message in Hellenistic terms, and that it is a layered polemic against Jews, the Baptist sect, and Gnostic influences; the arguments against the Gnostics and the arguments against the Jews stand side-by-side as two arms of John’s mission to present a Jesus, and a Jewish-Christian faith congenial to both Jew and Gentile. I also accept J.L. Martyn’s basic proposal that GJohn features a two-level history in which Jesus’ confrontations with Jewish leaders reflects John’s community conflict, and I apply that elemental principle in some places to reveal another Johannine conflict with Gnosticism.⁶² I finally overlay the Biblical

⁵⁶ Ibid., pp. 95-96.

⁵⁷ Keefer, “The Branches of the Gospel of John,” p. 23.

⁵⁸ For an analysis of the similarities between the orthodox and Gnostic family of Christologies, see my own volume, *The God of Jesus in Light of Christian Dogma* (McDonough: Restoration Fellowship, 2016), pp. 82-106.

⁵⁹ Daniel R. Streett, *They Went Out From Us: The Identity of the Opponents in First John* (De Gruyter, 2011), p. 54

⁶⁰ By narrational polemic I mean a report of sequential events, real or fictitious, designed to support an argument.

⁶¹ For notice of John’s affinity with Hellenistic internationalization, see Borgen, “The Gospel of John and Hellenism,” p. 117.

⁶² J. Louis Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968).

Unitarian interpretation of John's Christology, as in H.H. Wendt,⁶³ and more recently in Buzzard,⁶⁴ and Tuggy.⁶⁵ This ultimately yields a Gospel which has no trouble standing as an evangelistic polemic working against both Jewish objections and Gnostic ideas, and one which seeks to establish John's unique brand of Judaism in the Hellenistic world.

E.F. Scott, Bultmann, and others who embarked upon similar considerations as my own saw John as a gospel of antimony—both Gnostic and anti-Gnostic.⁶⁶ Scott had resolved this inconsistency, however, by claiming that John was not in any true sense a Gnostic, but had only adapted common philosophical ideas of his time.⁶⁷ As Scott rightly pointed out, “we must distinguish between the essence of John's thought from the forms in which he embodied it.”⁶⁸ However, it has often been thought that GJohn's parallels with Gnostic thought are accidental: John was simply working from the same background of ideas which later contributed to the formation of Gnostic sects. But I believe the parallels are much more careful and deliberate than this. I affirm Scott and others' recognition of only a “superficial resemblance” between GJohn and Gnostic thought,⁶⁹ but this resemblance is not accidental: John is presenting the Jewish-Christian versions of those trends in order to both compete and evangelize. As G.W. MacRae once recommended, “the evangelist is not merely influenced by a complex and syncretistic religious background, but... deliberately makes use of such a background for his interpretation of Jesus.”⁷⁰ And as Scott fleetingly suggested: “It is not improbable that [John] was influenced also by a practical motive—that of regaining for the orthodox faith the more speculative minds which were gradually drifting apart from it. He may well have judged that mere antagonism to the prevailing errors served little purpose. What was needed was such a widening and deepening of the common faith that all the varieties of religious temperament might find their home within the Church of Christ.”⁷¹ Thus we might say that GJohn utilizes a Gnostic framework for his Jewish-Christian doctrine in order to draw disciples away from Gnostic circles and towards his own religion. Indeed, Scott did recognize that GJohn shared in 1 John's antagonism with the new Gnostic movement,⁷² and that the Gospel ultimately stands for the historical tradition of Jesus against a vague idealism, giving prominence to “the ethical demands of Christianity.”⁷³ In my view, however, John is indeed concerned with the historical Jesus, and with ethics over ideals, but Scott and others have failed to properly translate these concerns to the Gospel's discourses, and ultimately to the Gospel's Christology, an exercise which, I believe, yields only an unqualified Human Christology.

Despite potential objections to my theory, which I will address below, I believe it is possible to locate in John a unified and coherent front against a developing Gnostic world, specifically against Gnostic interpretations of Jesus, humanity, and human salvation. In this view, John's Gospel dwells not in the simultaneously docetic and anti-docetic tension of many Trinitarian readings.⁷⁴ But neither does GJohn live in a world as narrowly-focused and as insulated from “Gnosticism” as some of Bultmann's critics might suggest. Rather, the Fourth Gospel is one which is positively Jewish-Christian and dependent on Wisdom tradition, but one that is also intimately aware of Gnosis and sallies forth to meet it on its own terms. But recognizing a John that is truly Jewish as well as anti-Gnostic will prove difficult as long as orthodox readings of John's Christology are allowed to color the view. Analyzing John as a polemic in light of the Biblical Unitarian interpretation will lend us much-needed clarity in the untangling of Jewish and Gnostic thought in John, and valuable insight into not only what John *does* mean, but just as importantly what he does *not* mean. Only the Biblical Unitarian reading is capable of offering this degree of visibility because many of the ideas which GJohn

⁶³ H.H. Wendt, *System der Christlichen Lehre* (Vandenhoeck and Rprecht, 1906), pp. 348-349.

⁶⁴ Anthony F. Buzzard, *Jesus Was Not a Trinitarian* (McDonough: Restoration Fellowship, 2007), pp. 273-275, 289-293.

⁶⁵ Dale Tuggy, “The one God and his Son according to John,” at the *2014 Eastern Regional Meeting of the Society of Christian Philosophers*, Niagara, NY, November 2014.

⁶⁶ E.g. Scott, pp. 98-99.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 373.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ G.W. MacRae, “The Ego-Proclamation in Gnostic sources”, *The Trial of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1970), p. 133.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 102-103.

⁷² As Dodd later admitted, there was indeed “a Gnostic movement, or at least a tendency” (See Dodd, p. 101).

⁷³ Scott p. 102.

⁷⁴ See Smalley, pp. 250-251. The “Chalcedonian” recognizes and hovers between the two poles of “docetic” and unitarian, human Christology. If the assumption that some of GJohn's Christological evidence tends towards docetism is removed, the way is cleared for a purely human Christology.

specifically sets itself against happen to show a surprising affinity to much of what is considered orthodox theology. Little work has heretofore been done in analyzing how John's relationship with Gnosticism could actually *support* John's Jewish background, and ultimately a Jewish-Christian portrait of Jesus. If it can be granted for a moment that John's Jesus is the same human Jesus of the Synoptics, cast in a different light for polemical and evangelistic reasons, the fog surrounding both GJohn's relationship with Gnosis and its own Christology will begin to rapidly dissipate.

2. GJohn's audience

Scholars have often painted the Fourth Gospel as being either addressed to the Church, or addressed to non-Christians. But, as Wind argues, this is a false dilemma which must be dropped.⁷⁵ Scholars have likewise pointed to either an ethnically Jewish or Gentile audience; but again, this is another dilemma which should be abandoned. In my view, the Gospel's audience is a mixed audience of Jew and Gentile: The Gospel was probably published in Ephesus,⁷⁶ and there it was to be read publicly,⁷⁷ and eventually copied for dissemination in a Hellenistic environment.⁷⁸ The primary reading audience was probably the Johannine community itself,⁷⁹ but the Gospel's evangelistic qualities prove it was also intended to be read by non-Christians (e.g. John 20:31).

The Johannine community was a Jewish diaspora community, but one with a Gentile element.⁸⁰ What percentage of the community was Gentile is impossible to know, but I suggest the membership was mostly Jewish. The Gospel's concerns with the synagogue, the destruction of the Temple and its replacement with Jesus, and its deep relationship with Jewish thought, particularly Jewish thought as found in the LXX,⁸¹ would resonate best with a Jewish diaspora audience. But GJohn's presentation of its unique Jewish-Christian teaching in Hellenistic forms, including its affinity to Hellenistic, philosophical dialogues,⁸² and its willingness to draw near to "Gnostic" ways of thinking, would resonate with both Hellenized or even gnosticizing Jews,⁸³ as well as Gentiles either already associated with, or still outside of, John's community. Here we may locate yet another affinity between the Fourth Gospel and trends in Hellenism which will help to establish its setting and intentions: *internationalization*. Borgen explains that:

It can be seen in John's broadening of ethnic Jewish concepts into cosmic concepts. John's Gospel reflects a situation in which the Johannine community had moved beyond the ethnic Jewish boundaries into the broader world of other nations, as indicated by John's use of the terms 'the Samaritans' and 'the Greeks.' It may even be said that the cosmic broadening of ethnic ideas in John corresponds to the cosmic broadening of the ideas of the city-state to the view that the whole cosmos is a city-state, inhabited by gods and mortals. As the Johannine community moved beyond the ethnic Jewish boundaries, it understood its identity both in continuity with and in discontinuity from the Jewish people and their traditions. God's Son, as the commissioned agent, caused a division to take place within the Jewish people between recognition/belief and rejection/disbelief, and this dual reaction represented what was to happen everywhere.⁸⁴

⁷⁵ A. Wind, "Destination and Purpose of the Gospel of John," *The Composition of John's Gospel* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), p. 65.

⁷⁶ See below, pp. 46-47.

⁷⁷ Keener, p. 7.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ "The well-to-do would have readings as entertainment following dinner at banquets, but the Gospels would be read in gatherings of believers in homes" (Ibid.).

⁸⁰ Being located in Asia minor, there were "undoubtedly" Gentile elements in the community (Keener, p. 126).

⁸¹ Keener points out that "only about 4 percent of John's words do not appear in the LXX, 60 percent of John's words do not appear in the Hermetica. This suggests that John's vocabulary is derived primarily from the Jewish Bible in its Greek form" (Ibid., p. 165).

⁸² Dodd explains that "The Johannine dialogue is an original literary creation, having in some respects more affinity with Hellenistic models than with dialogues of the Synoptic Gospels or their rabbinic analogues" (Dodd, *More Studies*, p. 41, cited in Keener, p. 68).

⁸³ Some have suggested that John was addressing a single Jewish-Gnostic, or gnosticizing Jewish front. See Kummel, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1975), p. 226, pp. 264-265.

⁸⁴ Borgen, "The Gospel of John and Hellenism," p. 117.

How might this interact with Keener’s suggestion that the Johannine community was largely working to “reclaim” its Jewishness?⁸⁵ Should we understand GJohn as an effort to reunite Jewish-Christians with the synagogue, or as an effort to broaden the community to include Jews, Greeks, and whoever else was willing to join them on the side of recognition/belief in Jesus-as-Messiah? In light of the deliberate internationalization in GJohn, its evangelistic preaching (intended to be published in a Hellenistic environment), and the conscious parallels it draws with popular Hellenistic, even Gnostic religious thinking, it seems best to view John as a Gospel reflecting a Jewish-Christianity looking to move beyond the confines of the synagogue (a choice made easier after their alleged involuntary expulsion!), and beyond the ethnic boundaries of their exclusivist Jewish history. This is not to suggest that the community was willing to abandon or dilute its Jewish identity. Rather, for purposes of universal evangelism, and probably survival, it welcomed the participation of the Hellenistic world in its Christian brand of Judaism.⁸⁶ However, it sought only a participation within clearly defined boundaries: those Hellenists who would join them on the side of recognition/belief in Jesus must be prepared to recognize the *Jewish* Jesus; it must be *that* Jesus of the Apostolic preaching (1 John 4:3). Jesus as Messiah is king of the whole world, yes, but he is first the king of Israel and the prophet like Moses, who must be accepted within the framework of Jewish monotheism. This standard must likewise be maintained by those already in John’s community, or they must be prepared to secede, as evidently some of them did (cf. 1-3 John). Thus John’s work becomes that of evangelism as well as defense. As Wind recommends, “It is therefore not improbable that the purpose of John’s Gospel is as broad as its universalistic character seems to suggest.”⁸⁷

We should be careful, with as cosmopolitan a community as John’s, not to over-tighten the focus of his Gospel towards either Judaism or Hellenism to the end that we lose too much sight of one or the other. In the early twentieth century, Johannine commentators saw GJohn almost exclusively in Hellenistic and Gnostic terms, and this has, in light of the DSS, proven insufficient. But has the current paradigm, in which “little time is spent” considering a Johannine relationship with Gnosticism,⁸⁸ been an overcorrection? Schnackenburg cautioned against one-sidedness: like myself, he saw the Gospel as having a missional purpose, but did not exclude secondary motives, including polemics against the Baptists, apologetics against Jewish attacks, and even reactions against Gnostic views of Christ—for Schnackenburg these could all move the Gospel in the direction of both defending the faith and winning new converts.⁸⁹ The present tendency to ignore or downplay Gnostic parallels in John in favor of exclusively Jewish ones appears to be an overreaction, and one possibly strengthened by a desire to segregate John from a sympathy with Gnostic ways of thinking which earlier commentators, and indeed many early Christians, detected. Nevertheless, the background of the Fourth Gospel proves to be both Jewish and Hellenistic, and so are the problems it addresses. The solutions John provides, however, are undeniably Jewish-Christian.

3. The misunderstanding motif and GJohn’s polemic

Recognizing one Johannine technique will prove increasingly helpful in establishing the Fourth Gospel’s polemic, and in better recognizing its targets: the *misunderstanding motif*. “Misunderstanding Jesus” is a major and pervasive theme in John’s narrative: Jesus’ audience misinterprets him in at least fifteen out of the twenty-one chapters.⁹⁰ Interestingly, in this light we find that most of the Johannine passages which both the Christian Gnostic readers of GJohn and modern Trinitarians cite for Christological support are not only connected to this misunderstanding motif, but are often taken directly from the mouths of Jesus’ mistaken opponents. In the course of this analysis, we will be led to wonder if John has taken some of the speculative Christological views of his late-first-century rivals, retrojected them into the mouths of Jesus’ historical adversaries, and cast those views as misunderstandings. On the other hand, it is just as plausible that

⁸⁵ Keener, p. 232.

⁸⁶ Though arguing against my position on the Gospel’s audience, even Robinson notes that “There are no more universalistic sayings in the N.T. than in the Fourth Gospel” (Robinson, quoted in A. Wind, “Destination,” p. 53).

⁸⁷ Wind, p. 69.

⁸⁸ Kyle Keefer, *The Branches of the Gospel of John*, p. 23.

⁸⁹ See Wind’s summary of R. Schnackenburg’s *Das Johannesevangelium* in A. Wind, “Destination,” p. 62.

⁹⁰ 101 See John 2:19-22, 3:4-13, 4:31-34, 6:51-61, 71, 7:33-36, 8:18-19, 21-22, 27, 33-34, 38-44, 51-52, 56-58, 9:39-41, 10:1-6, 26-36, 11:11-14, 11:23-25, 12:16, 32-34, 40, 13:6-12, 27-29, 33-37, 14:25, 7-11, 16:16-18, 16:25-29, 20:9, 21:22-23.

John could have selected historical sayings of Jesus' enemies which mirrored or paralleled what John's Gnostic opponents were teaching about Jesus, and cast them as misunderstandings. The holy spirit could have enabled John to recall these sayings, and Jesus' responses, which the Synoptics might have little of, to assist John in his community conflict. Regardless, here we might detect a multi-level history *pace* Martyn's hypothesis: John could utilize the misunderstanding motif in order to portray Jewish religious authorities (who were troubling John's community), as ignorant, foolish, and hard-headed, as well as to counteract erroneous (Gnostic) Christological tendencies. Again, several of the most poignant episodes which Gnostic (and orthodox) readers have pointed to as evidence of an ontological pre-existence of Christ are connected to this misunderstanding motif: Jesus' opponents believe he has claimed to have literally descended out of the sky like manna (John 6:41-42), they also believe he has claimed to be literally older than Abraham (8:57)—these perceptions occur right alongside their other erroneous conclusions, like their misunderstanding that Jesus intends for them to literally eat his flesh, drink his blood (6:52-56), and so on. Recognizing the misunderstanding motif, and its place within GJohn as a polemical text, will prove helpful in discerning the evangelists' targets.

4. The questions of authorship and reliability

How might different views of the historicity of the Fourth Gospel interact with the proposal that John is a narrational polemic? Working from the standpoint of the Gospel as history, as a document at the very least based on eyewitness accounts, John could, reflecting on the ministry of Jesus, select and then interpret those historical discourses of Christ best suited to assist him in his own social and theological conflicts.⁹¹ From the standpoint of the Gospel as literary theology, John simply retrojects statements and concepts into the ministry of the historical Jesus.⁹² From the standpoint of the Gospel as part history and part theology, as in the "partition theory" of Wendt for example, we might say that the historical outline, or even the "notes source" of John, was elaborated upon by members of the Johannine community to reflect contemporary issues; the basis of the discourses is historical but their settings are not. Regardless of what conclusion one arrives at regarding the historicity of John, the proposal that John is a polemical Gospel reacting to circumstances in the writer's environment remains viable. It should be said that determining John's historicity, or pursuing the intriguing question of authorship,⁹³ are not the aims of this investigation. Just as questions about authorship have surprisingly little impact on historical reliability,⁹⁴ neither do the tensions over authorship or historicity threaten significantly the viability of GJohn as a polemical narrative. Though the nature of our inquiry naturally draws out questions of reliability and authorship, our goal is to consider the meaning of John's content, and why the author(s) chose to include it in the way that he did, with only secondary concern for exactly by whom, and by what means, it was composed. In the end, my underlying position is that GJohn is an account of the historical ministry and teachings of

⁹¹ Perhaps the most famous argument for the Fourth Gospel as history is to be found in J.A.T. Robinson's *The Priority of John* (1984), in which Robinson further proposes, in contrast to most scholars, that GJohn actually predates the Synoptics. Robinson and others have ultimately taken serious notice of the Gospel's accurate description of Palestinian geography, and the writer's insistence on the historical truth of his account (Jn 19:35). As Blomberg notes, these are claims which "are not easily explained away" (Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2007 [1987]), p. 240). The great F.F. Bruce likewise concluded that "the events which [John] presents... are real, historical events. It could not be otherwise, for the Word became flesh—the revelation became history" (F.F. Bruce, "Trial of Jesus," *Gospel Perspectives*, Vol. 1 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1980), p. 18).

⁹² See J. Louis Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968).

⁹³ Regarding this question, my own conclusion falls in line with the general conclusion of modern scholarship, that GJohn is not to be ascribed to the pen of St. John the Apostle. Blomberg provides a succinct analysis: "Today, for a variety of reasons, not all of equal weight, all but the most conservative of scholars no longer believe that John the apostle was the author of the Fourth Gospel. The strongest of these reasons stems from the data of the Gospel itself. The 'beloved disciple' (and it is never clear that this disciple must be John, because he remains unnamed) is referred to in the third person, not as an 'I' or a 'we' who is writing the book, while the work concludes with a reference to a 'we' who know that his testimony is true' (21:24). Moreover, the last episode in the book seems designed to correct the erroneous belief that the beloved disciple would stay alive until Jesus' second coming (21:20-23). The most natural way of explaining why the Gospel writer should have included these verses is that the disciple had just died... Many scholars go so far as to postulate several editors who continually expanded an original core of the Fourth Gospel, so that only a small historical nucleus need be linked with eyewitness testimony" (Blomberg, p. 205). Still, as Blomberg notes, "a strong case for the apostle John's having written a substantial portion of the Fourth Gospel—perhaps even all but the closing verses—can still be credibly defended" (Ibid., p. 206). For such a defense, one might look to F.F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), pp. 1-6.

⁹⁴ C.H. Dodd was able to demonstrate, rather convincingly, the historical reliability of the Palestinian sources employed by John regardless of the Gospel's final date and authorship (see Blomberg, p. 206; Dodd, pp. 444-453).

Jesus which has been “tuned” to confront the circumstances which the Johannine community found itself in by the end of the first century CE, and this is, I believe, a basic proposal which has the potential for wide acceptance alongside a variety of positions on John’s authorship and reliability.⁹⁵

IV. The targets of the Fourth Gospel

If GJohn really is, in part, a polemic, then who or what was John writing against? I suggest that GJohn’s targets can be broken down into three general categories, all of which were causing problems for John’s community during the time of the Gospel’s composition: 1) non-Christian Jews; 2) the Baptist sect; and 3) Gnostics. One potential strength of this “multi-front” view is that it does not force John’s focus too narrowly in one direction; we need not neglect either the Gospel’s visible contests with “the Jews,” or its incredible parallels with Gnostic thinking and literature. Resolving both the Jewish and Gnostic conflicts is to be seen as part of the Johannine mission to establish a Jesus congenial to both the Jewish and Greek mind, and to prove the viability and superiority of John’s Jewish-Christianity. In as complex and cosmopolitan a gospel as John’s, it is not surprising that he could, and would, battle on multiple fronts. As E.F. Scott rightly observed, we should today view GJohn as a carefully formulated “answer to certain groups of opponents who can still, at least in a general way, be identified.”⁹⁶

1. Polemic against Jews who reject Jesus and his followers

First we will briefly consider GJohn as an “anti-Jewish” polemic. While the prospect of anti-Semitism in GJohn has long proven a popular topic of investigation,⁹⁷ scholarship has refocused, and rightly so, on GJohn as a work from within Judaism.⁹⁸ The Dead Sea Scrolls have provided a basis for locating Johannine thought, so often said to represent either overt Hellenistic intrusion (or novel Trinitarian revelation), squarely within Palestinian Judaism.⁹⁹ As McGrath confirms, “we are correct, with the majority of scholars, to set the Fourth Gospel in the context of Judaism... it is in no way implausible to suggest that John’s Gospel is correctly classed as *Jewish Christian*, and, [does not] demonstrate distance from Judaism... the burden of proof rests on those who seek to deny a *Jewish/Jewish-Christian* setting for the Fourth Evangelist’s community and Gospel.”¹⁰⁰ Nevertheless, “the Jews” are the regular opponents of John’s Jesus. Many scholars have interpreted this peculiar language as reflecting not an anti-Semitic attitude, but an intra-Jewish factional dispute: John clashes, probably, with Jewish religious authorities. While this view may not be universal, James Dunn notes that the “boundaries and definitions” of John’s factional dispute were in fact part of that dispute—if we

⁹⁵ One view which may or may not be able to fit as well with my proposal would be the conclusion famously offered by J.A.T. Robinson in his landmark *Priority of John* (1983), that GJohn is chronologically earlier and perhaps even more historically reliable than the Synoptics. Robinson’s early dating of GJohn *might* preclude its composition from the throes of the first century’s Gnostic controversy, and the presence of Gnostic (Hermetic) ideas and literature, which I suggest guided the selection of historical discourses and episodes for inclusion in the Gospel. One could, however, still draw attention to the Pauline conflicts with proto-Gnostic ideas occurring perhaps in the middle of the first century, but my own proposal rests much more comfortably in a later date for GJohn.

⁹⁶ Scott, p. 70.

⁹⁷ Larry R. Helyer, *The Witness of Jesus, Paul and John: An Exploration in Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2010), p. 324.

⁹⁸ See Gary A. Staszack, “Anti-Judaism and Ethnic Conflict: Does John 8:44 Inherently Promote an Ethic of Anti-Judaism.” Paper submitted to Gospel and Social Ethics, St. Mary’s Seminary & University, Spring 2014.

⁹⁹ Charlesworth sums up the new state of things: “The Dead Sea Scrolls have certainly revolutionized our perception of Judaism before the burning of the Temple in 70 CE. They have also dramatically altered our understanding of the origins of Christianity... The exegesis of no document in the New Testament, however, has been so fundamentally altered by the recovery of the scrolls as the Gospel according to John: What some nineteenth-century scholars had identified as a second-century Greek composition is now perceived to be a late first-century Jewish writing. That is a shift in paradigms, and it is due in part to the assessment of archaeological discoveries, especially the Dead Sea Scrolls (James H. Charlesworth, “The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Gospel according to John,” *Exploring the Gospel of John: In Honor of D. Moody Smith* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), p. 65).

¹⁰⁰ James F. McGrath, “Johannine Christianity – Jewish Christianity?” *Koinonia*, 8.1 (Butler University Libraries, 1996), pp. 14-15, emphasis added.

remove the Gospel from this context, only then might it be possible to glean any anti-Judaism or anti-Semitism from John.¹⁰¹ In the end, as McGrath says, the burden of proof lies more on those who look to set GJohn against Judaism.

As many scholars have proposed, GJohn's antagonism with the Jews is probably directed at traditionalist Jewish authorities in the writer's environment who had rejected or even expelled Jewish-Christians from their communities.¹⁰² This expulsion was not due to any reformulated monotheism proposed by the Johannine community—again, "monotheism" is not an object of debate in GJohn—but rather on the basis of Christian acceptance and promotion of Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah. These Jews appear to have rejected Jesus, and the salvation which his disciples claimed he presented, in favor of the more traditional mediators of God's covenantal promises to Israel, such as Moses and Abraham. Thus the Gospel's polemics towards these Jews are largely focused on establishing Jesus as the Messiah, and demonstrating what Jesus as Messiah offers over Moses and Abraham. For example, in John 5:45, the Jews have claimed to have no need for Christ, and have looked instead to Moses. Jesus responds by saying that if the Jews really believed in Moses, the one in whom they have "put their hope," then they would follow Jesus, since Moses had written about him. "*But since you do not believe what he wrote,*" Jesus says, "*how will you believe what I say?*" (v. 46).¹⁰³ Likewise in John 8:31-59, the Jews claim to have no need for Christ on the basis of their hereditary connection to Abraham: "*We are Abraham's descendants and have never yet been enslaved to anyone; how is it that You say, 'You will become free?'*" Jesus responds by claiming to have priority over Abraham, being the Messiah, or designated as the Messiah, long before Abraham was even born.¹⁰⁴ Episodes of this sort are buttressed by warnings from Jesus about his followers being expelled from the synagogue for bravely accepting him as Messiah (John 9:22, 12:42, 16:12). In this way, John works against his Jewish opponents on the one hand, while also providing context and comfort for the Johannine community in the wake of rejection. Since the focus of our own investigation is rather on the Gospel's third class of opponents, the Gnostics (and within that class, Hermeticism), the above description will provide at least a rudimentary introduction to the subject of GJohn's Jewish conflict.

2. Polemic against the Baptist sect

Here I will provide a brief consideration of another class of opponents, the Baptist sect. The Fourth Gospel's treatment of John the Baptist has moved many scholars to perceive a conflict between John's Christianity and persistent elements of the historical Baptist community. In the Synoptics, John the Baptist was portrayed as a great preacher and reformer working alongside of Jesus and even baptizing him. In GJohn, however, his position changes: he is now one who openly testifies that he is not the one that people are looking for, and that his chief purpose is only to point others to Jesus before he himself disappears (John 3:29-30). John evidently directs his own disciples to leave him and follow after Jesus (John 1:35-37), John's own light was only "for a season" (John 5:35), and John's baptism of Jesus is omitted from the Fourth Gospel completely. The Gospel ultimately makes too clear the subordination of the Baptist to Jesus: John is not worthy to even untie Jesus' sandals (John 1:27). Furthermore, in later chapters, the Jesus movement even outperforms the Baptist sect in regard to converts: "*the Pharisees had heard [Jesus] was gaining and baptizing more disciples than John*" (John 4:1). Even the role of water-baptizer appears to be portrayed as a role beneath the office and dignity of Jesus: in John 4:2, Jesus himself does not even baptize, but he leaves that duty to his subordinate disciples.

These and other passages have led many scholars to conclude that after John the Baptist's death, his sect continued to flourish and even to compete with the Johannine community.¹⁰⁵ Later, in the Pseudo-Clementine literature,¹⁰⁶ we indeed find Christians complaining that "some even of the disciples of John, who seemed to be great ones, have

¹⁰¹ James Dunn, "The Questions of Anti-Semitism in the New Testament Writings of the Period," *Jews and Christians: The Parting of the Ways, CE 70 to 135* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), p. 209.

¹⁰² "The Johannine community found itself in sharp controversy with a powerful, long-established Jewish community in the major cities of Asia Minor. John's transformation of the Jesus traditions in his Gospel clearly reflects this tension and responds to it" (Helyer, p. 326).

¹⁰³ These statements appear to reflect a general Jewish-Christian polemic concerning Jesus' superiority over Moses in the first century CE, one that may also be detected in other later NT writings, e.g. Hebrews 3:1-6. Thus the Jewish rejection of Jesus in favor of Moses in GJohn probably represents a widespread phenomenon not contained to the cities of Asia Minor.

¹⁰⁴ See Chandler, pp. 394-397.

¹⁰⁵ See Keener, pp. 388-390.

¹⁰⁶ The dating and authorship of these documents is highly contested. Many scholars do, however, assign them to the third century CE.

separated themselves and proclaimed their own master as Christ.”¹⁰⁷ Scott argues that this evidences “not only a Baptist party existing alongside of the Church, but of an active controversy with it, which was still in process at the beginning of the third century.”¹⁰⁸ Thus we seem warranted in concluding that John’s Gospel was drawn partly to correct the record in the face of such a controversy: ‘*John replied... You yourselves can testify that I said, I am not the Christ, but am sent ahead of him*’ ” (John 3:27a-28). As Scott furthermore notes, “it may well have been that in the Baptist’s own lifetime extravagant claims were put forward on his behalf: but if they had been abandoned after his death there was no need to disprove them by elaborate evidence... we can only infer that the relative positions of John and Jesus were still debated in the circles for which the Gospel was written, and that in his account of the person and work of the Baptist the writer is influenced by a direct polemical intention.”¹⁰⁹

Observations like these were what eventually led scholars like M. Lidzbarski, R. Reitzenstein, and R. Bultmann to seek out and form a connection between the later Mandaean baptist sect and John’s baptist sect, and ultimately with the most primitive Christianity.¹¹⁰ While Bultmann’s specific conclusions about Mandaeism were overdrawn, as Dodd demonstrated,¹¹¹ the claims of Johannine antagonism with a Baptist sect are still warranted. Whatever form that Baptist opposition took in the years during the Fourth Gospel’s writing, it is clear that John found them powerful enough to at least potentially detract from his community and message. As the Clementine literature proves, that fear continued to be felt by later Christians.

3. Polemic against Gnosticism

Regarding the Gnosis-inclined adversaries of John, this third class of opponents appears to have consisted of Christian Gnostics, Gnostic Jews, Hermeticists, and/or other gnosticizing syncretistic groups. If this second class of opponents, which I have collectively labeled “Gnostics,” seems broad, it is due to the nearly uncontainable nature of Gnosis, a trend born in the philosophical latitude and syncretistic spirit of Middle Platonism.

On the one hand, the term “Gnostic” has been used rather narrowly—it is in fact the self-given name of an ancient Christian sect, which scholars have since identified as the Sethians, the Barbelognostics, or the Ophites.¹¹² However, beyond this limited sense, “Gnostic” has also proven a broad term used to describe a fluid category of religions developing in the first to second centuries CE, which may not be confined by or even dependent upon Christian tradition. Exactly what qualifies as a “Gnostic” religion has become the subject of endless debate. Michael Williams’s book *Rethinking Gnosticism* (1999) certainly forced historians to be more careful in their use of the term “Gnostic.”¹¹³ Despite Williams’ protest against the word, however, I will continue to use it in this study, as I did in my book *The God of Jesus in Light of Christian Dogma* (2016), because I continue to see the value of “Gnosticism” and related terms.

Barnstone and Meyer are correct, I believe, in framing Williams’ concern in the following way: “[Williams] recognition of gnostic diversity merely parallels the similar recognition by scholars of diversity in Judaism and Christianity. This recognition has led Jacob Neusner to suggest ‘Judaisms’ and Jonathan Z. Smith ‘Christianities’ as appropriate terms for these diverse religious movements. Perhaps we might also opt for ‘gnosticisms’ or ‘gnostic religions’ as a similar way of acknowledging the differences among religions of gnosis.”¹¹⁴ I agree with Barnstone and Meyer also in their insistence on utilizing this terminology as a means of comparison and classification. Essentially, my view is that certain traditions will inevitably not share in every characteristic, but that each tradition will nevertheless prove “more like” one than another. Thus my usage of “Gnosticism” will tend towards that broader usage which serves to indicate a fluid collection of religious beliefs which do share in several fundamental qualities. These qualities often include, but are not limited to, an emphasis on salvation from the material world through the acquisition of “gnosis”

¹⁰⁷ *Clementine Recognitions*, I, 54.

¹⁰⁸ Scott, p. 80.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

¹¹⁰ Dodd, p. 121.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 115-130.

¹¹² Willis Barnstone, Marvin Meyer (ed.), *The Gnostic Bible: Revised and Expanded Edition* (London: New Seeds, 2006), p. 12.

¹¹³ Williams called for the dismantling of Gnosticism as a “dubious category.” But the replacement category he proposes, “biblical demiurgical traditions” may also prove too narrow and cumbersome for the purposes of this investigation.

¹¹⁴ Barnstone, Meyer, p. 14.

(mystical and intimate knowledge of the divine), a demiurgical cosmogony, and at least a tendency towards dualistic thinking. Used in this sense, “Gnosticism” would include not only Christian Gnostic sects like the Sethians, but also pagans like the Hermeticists, and possibly some Neoplatonists.¹¹⁵ Furthermore, I will continue to use the word “Gnosis” to describe the philosophical trend which embodies the sensibilities which contributed to the formation of the various “Gnostic” groups. As Smalley rightly put it, “Gnosticism” is, in fact, “more a climate of thought” than a religious system.¹¹⁶ Ultimately, I expect that readers will be keen enough to distinguish between the use of “Gnosticism” to describe a broader religious movement, “Christian Gnosticism” to describe the various sects within that movement which are largely dependent on Christian tradition, and finally terms like “Sethians,” and “Valentinians” to describe those unique Christian Gnostic sects.

I will not embark on the mystifying question of Gnostic origins.¹¹⁷ It is only necessary for our study that we recognize the diversity of the traditions which have been approached with the Gnostic label. Indeed, Gnosticism is probably best viewed as a “many-headed hydra,”¹¹⁸ as it can be seen as falling into definite patterns or groups.¹¹⁹ We could also envision the original Gnostic trend as the hub of a wheel from which diverse spokes radiate: being part of the same wheel, and in their origins connected to the same philosophical and religious concerns, each spoke shares fundamental qualities, but in the end prove distinct and parallel. R.M. Grant was comfortable with classifying several unique types of Gnosticism: *Oriental religion*, (Zoroastrian, Mesopotamian, and Indian), *heterodox Judaism* (apocalyptic and “mystical”), *heterodox Christianity* and *late Hellenistic Philosophy* (especially incipient Neo-Platonism).¹²⁰ To this last proposed category we could doubtless add the Hermetic tradition of Gnosis which bears the greatest focus of our present inquiry.¹²¹ As Groningen surmises, however, “whether one attempts to type Gnosticism according to leading spirits, to cultic practices, to geographical environment, to specific phenomena from which it originated, or to documents, Gnosticism remains an elusive many-headed hydra.”¹²²

It is not the aim of this particular study to draw out every parallel with Gnostic thought located in John’s Gospel, nor is its aim to pinpoint exactly which Gnostic sects John had in mind and which he did not. It is important to remember that Gnosticism is indeed a syncretistic “climate of thought” embodied in a wide range of traditions, and that each expression of Gnosis had the power and opportunity to shape the others. However, I am willing to identify certain Gnostic traditions which I believe were of value to some of the opponents of the Fourth Gospel. But again, when I say that “Hermeticism” was a target of GJohn, I do not mean to limit John’s polemic to “Hermeticists,” that is, to a particular pagan, non-Christian group. One of the mistakes often made when attempting to identify the Gnostic opponents of GJohn is the failure to properly account for the vast interchange between religious groups in that period. One example of a highly syncretistic Gnostic sect which represents a great confluence of religious traditions is the sect of the Naassenes.¹²³ Indeed, as we will consider later, this sect may have even been among those which John had in mind when writing his Gospel.¹²⁴ The Naassenes are usually classed as Christian Gnostic, but in reality they owe just

¹¹⁵ Plotinus, the massively influential but dubiously named “founder” of Neoplatonism, shares enough in common with the Christian Gnostic sects and the Hermeticists that he might be grouped alongside them. Plotinus himself appears to use the term “Gnostic” in a generic sense (see his *Ennead* II, ix). Though Plotinus wrote passionately against the mythologizing and philosophical abuse of “the Gnostics”, we discover that “almost all of the ideas that Plotinus finds objectionable in the Gnostics have been asserted by himself too in one form or another” (Joseph Katz, “Plotinus and the Gnostics,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* (University of Pennsylvania Press, (Apr., 1954), p. 289). For a brief introduction to Plotinus’ complicated relationship with the Gnostics see my own article “Plotinus Among the Gnostics: The Neoplatonic Trinity in the Late Third Century,” Buried Deep Blog, 25 October 2016. Web. <<http://burieddeepblog.wordpress.com>>. This complicated relationship often mirrors that of the anti-Gnostic Christian polemicists of the second and third centuries such as Clement of Alexandria and Origen. See Chandler, *The God of Jesus*, pp. 106-113, 122-123, 154-155.

¹¹⁶ Smalley, p. 49.

¹¹⁷ For such a study, see Gerard van Groningen, *First Century Gnosticism: Its Origins and Motifs* (Leiden: Brill, 1967).

¹¹⁸ Van Unnik, quoted in Groningen, *First Century Gnosticism*, p. 6.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Grant, *Gnosticism an Anthology*, p. 16, op. cit., Groningen, p. 6.

¹²¹ “Hermeticism is more Hellenic and chronologically earlier, at least in origins, than Christian Gnosticism” (Garth Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes: A Historical Approach to the Late Pagan Mind* (1993) [1986], p. 114).

¹²² Groningen, p. 8.

¹²³ Our source for information on the Naassenes is found in Hippolytus, who recorded their sermon in his *Refutation of All Heresies*, V, 5.

¹²⁴ See below, pp. 45-48.

as much to overtly pagan traditions and to Hellenistic philosophical traditions like Hermeticism.¹²⁵ Thus, when I say GJohn targets Hermeticism, I do not mean that it has necessarily a pure Hermeticism in view, but that it could be targeting just as easily Hermetic ideas or Hermetic literature which were being appreciated or appropriated by parallel sects, or which had been synchronized with quasi-Christian tradition, as we may find in the Naassenes.¹²⁶ Are we then able to simply identify parallel streams of thought in any Gnostic sect or writing and declare that sect or writing to have been in John's mind? No. We are not justified in identifying only one or two similarities with John in any body of literature and claiming they were also GJohn's targets; a similar emphasis and concentration of ideas in the proposed Gnostic source should be mirrored in the Gospel. Furthermore, if any particular sect or body of literature is to be convincingly proposed as an opponent of John's, it must be able to demonstrate not only a quality, quantity, and concentration of affinities, but it also must be able to be located in the historical vicinity of John's writing. This was, perhaps, the greatest pitfall of Bultmann, and one which we will be careful to avoid.

But at present I believe we are safe in simply identifying the general streams of thought with which John interacts, regardless of whichever specific sect generated or appropriated them. In this way, we may confidently identify one of GJohn's Gnostic targets as "Christian Gnosticism," and another target as "Hermeticism," without need to conclusively identify a single named historical sect or teacher which accounts for all the Gnostic parallels in the Gospel. In the end, John may not write against any one sect, but against a world of ideas which contain both Gnostic Christian and Hermetic fashions.

V. Objections to GJohn as anti-Gnostic polemic

Before we begin an in-depth analysis of GJohn's relationship with Christian or Hermetic Gnosticism, it will behoove us to first deal with several possible objections to my proposal: 1) Trinitarian objections on the basis of an ambiguous or "balanced" Johannine Christology; 2) objections on the basis of a presumed lack of polemical clarity; 3) objections on the basis of a perceived lack of interest in historical polemic in the other Gospels; 4) objections on the basis of later Gnostic infatuation with GJohn; 5) objections on the basis of a presumed lack of doctrinal clarity in the first century; 6) Trinitarian objections on the basis of alleged inefficiency of potential anti-Gnostic statements; and 7) objections based on the satisfaction provided by Jewish evidence.

1) An ambiguous or "balanced" Johannine Christology

First, Trinitarian Stephen S. Smalley, in his book *John: Evangelist and Interpreter* (1978), provides an intriguing conclusion about John's Christological outlook: "The Johannine Christ, we may conclude, was neither God alone, nor man alone. The Christology of the Fourth Gospel is perfectly balanced between the two poles which are now labeled 'docetic' and 'adoptionist'."¹²⁷ This reading draws what Trinitarians have called "a paradoxical shape" for John's Christology.¹²⁸ But as Smalley demonstrates, by describing GJohn as simultaneously "docetic" and "adoptionist," the Trinitarian reading is really presenting a contradiction: a Jesus who oscillates between being fully God, and not God. We are not to ever choose one side of the contradiction or the other—this would be to neglect clear and important data. Rather, we are to "balance," as Smalley says, between the two.

Let us consider the evidence for such a radical and challenging proposal. Smalley writes, "At one moment Jesus can be reported by St John as saying 'I and the Father are one' (Jn 10:30) and at another, 'the Father is greater than I' (14:28). Again, Jesus in this Gospel is both one with God and distinct from him; he is 'from the Father', but he has also

¹²⁵ Dodd, pp. 98-99.

¹²⁶ The discovery of Hermetic texts (*Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth, Prayer of Thanksgiving, the Asclepius*) alongside Christian Gnostic works in the Nag Hammadi collection (NHC Codex VI) reveals an association of Christian and Hermetic Gnosticism, and may be helpful for considering GJohn's opponents as persons who were familiar with both trends, and saw less of a break between the two.

¹²⁷ Smalley, p. 250.

¹²⁸ Helyer, p. 326.

come ‘into the world’ (16:28). So far as the relation between Jesus and God or Jesus and man is concerned, John’s Christology swings quite happily between the extremes of what were later defined as docetism and adoptionism.”¹²⁹

Other reasonable interpretations of this language notwithstanding,¹³⁰ the Trinitarian interpretation of the data leads Smalley to identify on one side a docetic Jesus, that is, a Jesus who is completely God, and on the other side a Jesus who is truly human and subordinate to God. Of course, isolating the “docetic” side of Smalley’s interpretation would immediately yield a Gnostic Christology, while isolating the other would yield a Biblical Unitarian interpretation. Trinitarians reel, of course, at the thought of falling too deeply into either side, and hope to balance on a fulcrum. Biblical Unitarians on the other hand happily agree with Trinitarians on their second conclusion, that John presents a human Jesus distinct from God; their issue is with the side which Trinitarians share with the Gnostics, that John’s Jesus was fully God. From the Unitarian perspective, the Trinitarians have processed half of the data correctly, and the Unitarian quest becomes one to convince the Trinitarians that both they and the Gnostics are misunderstanding or abusing the other half. The Trinitarian may prove to have the more difficult situation here: his is a battle on two fronts, against both Gnosticism and Unitarianism, which both offer evidence he wholeheartedly agrees with. In other words, the Trinitarian’s game becomes one of stamina, of keeping up a balancing act between two undesirable options as long as possible.

Because Trinitarianism agrees in part with the Gnostic interpretation of Jesus, this evidently prevents many Trinitarian scholars, like Smalley, from recognizing that the Gospel of John contains anti-Gnostic polemic. As Smalley concludes, if John really were concerned with refuting Gnostic visions of Jesus, then “presumably the evangelist would not have been so unguarded in his theological statements that these could have been used (as they were used) by orthodox and heretic alike in due course in support of their respective positions—it becomes difficult if not impossible to sustain the opinion that the purpose of the Fourth Gospel was polemic against (gnostic) heresy.”¹³¹ This is, as Smalley admits, a presumptuous conclusion, but it is also a problematic one. First, it assumes that John would have considered the Gnostic Jesus and the orthodox Trinitarian Jesus very different—but depending on which Gnostic Christology one consults, the two Christs have proven to have fewer differences than has commonly been suggested.¹³² Second, it comes close to presuming to know the best way to deal with the circumstances John was facing—but because those exact circumstances are cloudy and still a matter of regular debate, it is difficult to make such a judgment; a polemical approach which may have served one set of persons in a certain time and place may not seem as useful in another. But our concern should be only for determining what the intentions of the Fourth Gospel were, not whether or not it utilized the most effective methods possible. Third, Smalley’s conclusion unfairly assumes that if John is concerned with heresy, then John’s theological statements are “unguarded.” Smalley ignores the possibility that John not only *was* careful in his argumentation, but also that the Trinitarians have fallen into the same misunderstanding and tendency towards exploitation as John’s opponents. Again, it will be important to keep the Gospel’s prominent *misunderstanding motif* in view.¹³³ In this light, we discover that most of the passages which both the Gnostics and Trinitarians cite for support are not only connected to this motif, but are often taken directly from the mouths of Jesus’ ignorant and abusive opponents. It is thus easy to imagine that the Trinitarians and the Gnostics have themselves either misunderstood or

¹²⁹ Smalley, p. 135.

¹³⁰ For John 10:30 see Chandler, pp. 182-183, 402-404; for John 16:28 see *Ibid.*, pp. 388-394.

¹³¹ Smalley, p. 136.

¹³² “The early Christian fathers, foremost Irenaeus and Tertullian, strove hard to find forms which make intelligible, in a non-Gnostic sense, the prevailing division of the one Jesus Christ. Strictly speaking they did not succeed. Already [German historian Adolf] Harnack was forced to say: ‘Who can maintain that the Church ever overcame the Gnostic doctrine of the two natures or the Valentinian docetism?’ Even the later councils of the Church which discussed the Christological problems in complicated, and nowadays hardly intelligible, definitions did not manage to do this; the unity of the Church foundered precisely on this... It has often been forgotten that Gnostic theologians saw Christ as ‘consubstantial’ (homoousios) with the Father, before ecclesiastical theology established this as a principle, in order to preserve his full divinity” (Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), p. 372); “[Trinitarians] affirm that John, while he denies the divinity of Christ in the Gnostic sense, asserts it in the orthodox sense. My position on the other hand is, that the apostle in affirming the *real* humanity of Christ, affirms his simple humanity, and in denying his divinity in *one* sense, denies it *every sense*” (Ben David, *The Monthly Repository of Theology and General Literature*, p. 469, emphasis added); For an account of Christological parallels between Gnostic Christianity and orthodoxy, see Chandler, pp. 89-101, 122-123.

¹³³ See Chandler, p. 39, 395, 405.

abused John. Here, analyzing the relationship between John and Gnosis in light of Biblical Unitarian Christology begins to show its value: only the Biblical Unitarian interpretation, which finds no common ground with Gnostic exegesis, is able to put enough distance between GJohn and Gnosticism to discern GJohn's anti-Gnostic polemic.

Ultimately, Smalley holds that maintaining an anti-Gnostic view of the Gospel is "difficult if not impossible" because John *sounds* Gnostic in some passages. But in this we may reveal another strength of my proposal, which not only distances John from true dependence on Gnosis, but also accounts for why he frequently *sounds* Gnostic: GJohn is both refuting *and* competing with Gnosticism by presenting *Jewish-Christian versions* of Gnostic trends. If this is true, then both the Gnostic and the Trinitarian reading of John as truly tending towards some degree of docetism is spoiled. In the end, the only thing which becomes "difficult if not impossible" is discerning an anti-Gnostic polemic in John from the standpoint of Trinitarianism.

2) A presumed lack of polemical clarity

We will now confront the second possible objection, which is closely related to the first: that of the Gospel's alleged lack of clear anti-Gnostic argument. It has already been well established that John wrote during the rise of Gnosticism in the late first century. It is also widely accepted that John's *epistles* are concerned with some sort of Gnostic refutation, and their direct argumentation about Christology make this conclusion easy—we are safe in saying, with the majority of scholars, that 1 John has in mind to attack either a docetic or a separationist vision of the Savior, or both.¹³⁴ However, some might cite GJohn's lack of the same explicit polemic as reason to doubt that Gnosticism is also the Gospel's concern. But such analysis is short-sighted.

GJohn and 1 John represent two genres of literature which are working independently towards a mutual purpose. 1 John is a church epistle drawn up to combat a direct and immediate threat to the community; the real and present danger of Gnosis demands the lucid and immediate polemic which 1 John so urgently offers. On the other hand, GJohn is a gospel; its biographical nature will not allow for the controversies of the late first century to be as present and explicit as they are in 1 John. Thus GJohn's approach, out of necessity, becomes that of a restrained, narrational polemic: the life and ministry of the historical Jesus provide an *indirect assault* on John's doctrinal foes. John's ingenious decision to patiently allow Jesus himself to "correct the record" through the misunderstanding motif is effective, and perhaps more strategic than the frustration and urgency bleeding through the evangelist's letters, which in my view were written at least after the Gospel's first edition.¹³⁵

3) A presumed lack of early Jewish-Christian interest in polemical history

Similar to the above objection, some might point to the Synoptic Gospels' evident lack of anti-Gnostic polemic, or lack of answers to other community controversies, as reasons to doubt that the Fourth Gospel aims to address theological conflict in John's community. Keener and others have suggested that "early Christians did not indulge the temptation to create answers for their own situations in the Jesus tradition preserved in the Synoptics; 'several of the major problems that the early church encountered' (such as conflict over circumcision) 'never show up in the gospel materials.'" ¹³⁶ But how valuable is such analysis to our present inquiry into John? It should go without saying that the Synoptic writer's habits and intentions should not cage the writer of the Fourth Gospel; today endless scholars incessantly point out the many differences between GJohn and the Synoptics in terms of style, content, grammar, and even theology, and Keener himself writes, "That John's biography of Jesus differs from those of the Synoptics is evident; what accounts for these differences?" ¹³⁷ One way to account for some of these differences, at least some of the differences related to the content and presentation of the discourse material, is that John was working in unique

¹³⁴ "The first letter of John, also, was no doubt partly written in the light of a docetic heresy which was gnosticising in character" (Smalley, p. 51). See Chandler, pp. 91-93.

¹³⁵ Martin Hengel similarly concludes that "the letters of John were written before the editing of the Gospel" (Martin Hengel, "The Prologue of the Gospel of John as the Gateway to Christological Truth", *The Gospel of John and Christian Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), p. 269, n. 14).

¹³⁶ Keener, citing Stein "Criteria," pp. 225-228, and Theissen, Gospels, pp. 25-29, in Keener, *The Gospel of John*, p. 64.

¹³⁷ Keener, p. 47.

circumstances, and with unique polemical and evangelistic purposes in mind. For example, GJohn was written after the destruction of the Temple; the rabbis were consolidating power and tightening community definitions, power was concentrating in the synagogues in the vacuum of the Temple system's loss, and Jewish Christians were evidently coming into conflict within their synagogues. At the same time, John was facing a crisis in the other direction: elements within the Johannine community were being drawn away by Hellenistic, gnosticizing speculation and mythology (see 1-3 John),¹³⁸ and these forces, siphoning away the membership of the Asiatic churches, had already begun to be felt by Paul (see 1 Timothy, Ephesians),¹³⁹ and by the time of John's writing in the late first century, these tendencies had given rise to a serious community crisis. Furthermore, being pushed away from the synagogue, the community was faced with isolation or evaporation if it could not thrive in the wider, Hellenistic world, that is, if it could not successfully attract new converts in the centers of Asia minor. This particular set of circumstances was largely unique to the fourth evangelist, and the influence of each of these circumstances can be detected in his Gospel. If the writers of the Synoptics did not use their Gospels to address current issues (can we be so sure that they did not?), it should have little bearing on our conclusions about John.

Furthermore, it may be helpful to mention that other Jews writing in John's time apparently *were* dealing with current events facing the Jewish community by recasting them in historical literature. For example, 4 Ezra, dating around 90-95 CE (and thus during the most popular dates for GJohn),¹⁴⁰ addressed the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE through a historical discourse set in Israel's past: the ministry of the prophet Ezra became the vehicle for processing questions being asked by Jews in the late first century; the past was "rebooted" in order to deal with the present.¹⁴¹ Similarly, 2 Baruch, also dating to the late first century, dealt with the Temple destruction and the Jewish community's response to it through an apocalypse ascribed to the Old Testament figure Baruch.¹⁴² 2 Baruch acts as a two-level history (*pace* Martyn?): Baruch's prophecy about Nebuchadnezzar's destruction of Zion doubles as a portrait of Jerusalem's fall in 70 CE (2 Baruch 78-86). GJohn likewise proves to be concerned with the Jewish response to the destruction of the Temple: in GJohn, "Jesus is presented as the new temple, a new center of worship, in and through whom Jews and Gentiles could worship God in spirit and truth (see esp. 1:14, 51; 2:14-22; 4:19-24; 9:38; 20:28)... The Jewish apocalyptic books Apocalypse of Abraham, 2 Baruch, and 4 Ezra, written within a few decades of John's Gospel, represent some of the manifold ways in which the Jewish people were coping with the loss of Jerusalem and the temple."¹⁴³

Like this proximate Jewish literature, the Fourth Gospel also looks to summon the past in order to provide answers for current problems. This is not to force the question of reliability of course, much less to challenge John's historicity; it is obvious that GJohn is concerned with establishing history, and a historical Jesus learned about through eye-witness testimonies (John 1:15; 20:30-31; 21:24-25). It could be argued, however, that the author of 2 Baruch was also concerned with establishing history, opening his book in the typical manner of biblical histories: "*And it came to pass in the twenty-fifth year of Jeconiah, king of Judah...*" (2 Baruch 1:1). Regardless, considering Jewish literature like 4 Ezra and 2 Baruch allows us to establish in John's time at least a Jewish tendency to scour history for solutions to community challenges or disputes. In the case of the Fourth Gospel, it is more recent history which provides the hunting ground: the ministry of Jesus, separated from John's writing by (probably) a span of around sixty to seventy years.

Ultimately, there is no good reason why John could not have revisited the historical life of Jesus in order to resolve community conflict. This was, of course, the powerful thesis of J.L. Martyn in his *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (1968), and it is still widely accepted that Jesus' conflict with the Jewish leaders also represents a conflict between John's

¹³⁸ "it is not at all impossible that tendencies toward Gnosticism were already creating problems for the Johannine community (cf. 1-3 John)" (Ibid., p. 169).

¹³⁹ See Willis Barnstone, "1 Timothy," in *The Restored New Testament* (London: W.W. Norton & Co., 2009), p. 945, n. 37.

¹⁴⁰ Richard Gottheil, Enno Littmann, Kaufmann Kohler, "Books of Esdras," *Jewish Encyclopedia* (1906).

¹⁴¹ See Hindy Najman, *Losing the Temple and Recovering the Future* (Cambridge: CUP, 2014).

¹⁴² C. Marvin Pate, *The Reverse of the Curse: Paul, Wisdom, and the Law* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), p. 86; see also Steven D. Fraade, "4 Ezra and 2 Baruch with the (Dis)advantage of Rabbinic Hindsight," *Fourth Ezra and Second Baruch: Reconstruction after the Fall* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), p. 363.

¹⁴³ Andreas J. Kostenberger, "Lifting Up the Son of Man and God's Love for the World," *Understanding the Times: New Testament Studies in the 21st Century* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011), p. 143.

community and the Jewish leaders of the late first century.¹⁴⁴ Even conservative scholars like R. Alan Culpepper have agreed with Martyn that John transposed his community's expulsion from the synagogue onto the Jesus narrative.¹⁴⁵ If John could have transposed this particular conflict, why not also the conflict with Gnosticism which most scholars, via a consideration of 1 John, agree that the community was embroiled in at the same time? The way remains ever clear for the consideration of GJohn as a work composed to deal, in part, with the encroaching challenge of Gnosis.

4) Later Gnostic infatuation with GJohn

We will now confront the issue of Christian Gnostic use of John's Gospel, which in reality is closely related to our very first objection. It is probable that the unique method and patience of GJohn, and the fact that its genre discouraged anachronism (and thus too direct of argumentation) inadvertently provided an avenue for the Gospel's exploitation. Several of the careful parallels which John had drawn to compete with Gnostic thinking were evidently misinterpreted, consciously or not, as open doors to the Gnostic worldview. Could we cite here a possible disconnect existing between some of the Gnostics and the traditionalist Palestinian Jewish background of John? It seems that some in John's environment were as quick to miss his Gospel's careful and unique argumentation as many in our own time. The epistle of 1 John, with its clarity and fiery condemnation, should probably be seen as a reaction against the Gospel's abuse, or at least as frustration at the unchecked swelling of Gnostic Christianity which John hoped his Gospel might stifle. And this is not to say that GJohn was completely ineffective in its time: representing one of the most complex and carefully-crafted works of the New Testament, it likely served much of its highly-educated audience well, especially on the "Jewish" side of its polemic. On the other hand, history bears witness to the fact that some of its most important lessons were missed, and continue to be missed, by its most influential readers on the Christian and Gnostic side. On one hand we might be tempted to say, as equitably as possible, that John is a brilliant work, a Gospel of pearls just beyond the masses. On the other hand, we might consider it a thing once so tragically abused that it is now, due to dogmatic pressures and the hereditary failure of Christian theology, virtually impossible to conceive of any other meaning than what has been handed down. Indeed, Irenaeus had established the *proper* reading for "orthodox" Christians, and identified all other readings as heretical. This same basic reading has remained the popular standard since the heresiologists first divided orthodoxy from heresy, and made those distinctions a matter of life and death.¹⁴⁶ It is probable that some combination of the aforementioned factors compose the reason for the current popularity of the orthodox reading of GJohn, that is, the Christologically ambiguous, "balanced" reading of Smalley. In the end, despite the Gospel's brilliance, we can point to several factors which have allowed for its exploitation: 1) the widening diversity of the Church, which progressively diffused Jewish influence and dampened awareness of John's Palestinian Jewish background; 2) the subtlety involved in the Gospel's misunderstanding motif which ironically allowed for misunderstanding among less-critical readers; and 3) the honed exegetical habits of the Gnostics and the Platonizing converts which could elicit any meaning out of words.

I will focus on this third and most important factor: Though the parallels had been intended to refute and compete with Gnosticism, the deliberate notional and terminological alignment between GJohn and the Gnostic world was recognized by the Gnostics, particularly the Valentinians of the second century CE, and thus, as Sanders reveals, "they tried to use the fourth gospel as a mine from which to extract proof-texts. By doing this they showed that they cannot have felt that it was anti-gnostic propaganda... they tried by this means to vindicate their own systems as having apostolic authority."¹⁴⁷ But again the radically speculative exegesis of the Gnostics can account for their drawing unintended meaning from the Gospel. For example, the Valentinians famously applied allegory to the Gospel of John's account of the life of the earthly Jesus and so discovered a complicated symbolism which reflected real goings-on

¹⁴⁴ J.L. Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (New York, 1968).

¹⁴⁵ R. Alan Culpepper, "Anti-Judaism in the Fourth Gospel as a Theological Problem for Christian Interpreters," *Anti-Judaism and the Fourth Gospel* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), pp. 61-62.

¹⁴⁶ See Kyle Keefer, *Branches of the Gospel of John*, p. 54; see also Morwenna Ludlow, "Criteria of Canonicity and the Early Church," *The Unity of Scripture and the Diversity of the Canon* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2003), p. 81.

¹⁴⁷ J.N. Sanders, quoted in C.K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978), p. 113.

occurring in the heavenly realm.¹⁴⁸ The Valentinian Heracleon's commentary on GJohn, thought to be the first commentary on the Gospel, provides a prime example of this habit. J.N.D. Kelly explains that "when St. John reports that the Lord 'went down to Capernaum,' the Gnostic commentator Heracleon deduces from the verb 'went down' that Capernum must signify the lowest stratum of reality, i.e. the world of matter, and that the reason why Christ apparently neither accomplished nor said anything there must be that the material order was uncongenial to Him."¹⁴⁹ Realizing the flexibility of the Valentinian approach to GJohn's meaning and intentions, it is not impossible to conclude that the Gospel's anti-Gnostic polemic was passed over, perhaps deliberately, in order to elicit an interpretation never intended by John. When one considers the problem which Gnostic Christianity posed for the proto-orthodox Christians of the second and third centuries, and, of course, for the Johannine community, there is often a tendency to paint the non-Gnostic Christians as on the defense. But it may be helpful to consider equally the Gnostics' struggle for legitimacy: this pressure may have led some Gnostics to push John's Gospel, consciously or unconsciously, towards saying what they needed it to say.

Proto-orthodox Christians, like Justin Martyr in the second century and Lucius Lactantius in the fourth century, themselves had no problem discovering in the works of pagans their own proto-orthodox doctrines of God. In their eyes, the data gleaned from the literature of the philosophers was even enough to count them as "Christians" before Christ.¹⁵⁰ This sort of radical reinterpretation of texts from parallel religious traditions had already been in vogue by the time of the Fourth Gospel's emergence in the late first century. For example, Middle Platonists like Plutarch (45-120 CE) consciously brought Egyptian pagan texts in line with Plato,¹⁵¹ and Philo of Alexandria (25 BCE-50 CE) likewise discovered Platonism in the Septuagint.¹⁵² These readings were, of course, only possible if they ignored those elements which contravened with their native tradition and emphasized those with which they could discover some affinity. The Christian Gnostics, striving for legitimacy and apostolic authority, could have easily applied similar reading techniques in order to locate at least some implication of their own doctrines in John. Just as Christians today, at least on the Protestant side of things, often feel a pressure to locate their denominational theology in the Bible on the basis of *Sola Scriptura*,¹⁵³ it is not unimaginable that Christian Gnostics felt similar pressures to discover and overemphasize any open door to their own doctrines, on the basis of a quest for sectarian legitimacy. Indeed, for the sectarian, once the *implication* of precious dogma is able to be found and convincingly argued for, any textual evidence contravening with that dogma tends to recess first in importance, then in visibility. For example, Smalley's recognition of *both* a docetism and an adoptionist-type subordinationism in John represents, at least from a Trinitarian perspective, a balanced account: Smalley understands that the Gospel data, interpreted in a Trinitarian way, presents a paradox, a Jesus who is both God and not God. But the vast majority of Trinitarians will not admit both sides of this conclusion. Most Trinitarians choose to emphasize only that half of the contradiction which declares that Jesus *is* God.¹⁵⁴ The data which evidences that John's Jesus is *not* God is either downplayed or wholly bypassed. In light of this phenomenon, there are grounds for imagining how Christian Gnostics could similarly bypass the anti-Gnostic polemic in the Fourth Gospel, especially a polemic as careful as John's, through either genuine misunderstanding (which the Gospel has for one of its chief themes and polemical mechanisms), or through deliberate appropriation.

5) A presumed lack of doctrinal clarity in the first century CE

¹⁴⁸ See my article, "The Woman of Blood: The Gnostic Exegesis of the Gospels," *Buried Deep Blog*. Web.

<<http://burieddeepblog.wordpress.com/2016/08/22/the-woman-of-blood-an-introduction-to-the-gnostic-exegesis-of-the-gospels>>.

¹⁴⁹ J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (London: Continuum, 2006 [1958]), p. 71.

¹⁵⁰ For early Christian recognition of Socrates as a Christian and a Saint, see F.G. Oosterhoff, *Ideas Have History: Perspectives on the Western Search for Truth* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2001), p. 17; see also Roger E. Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition & Reform* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999), p. 59.

¹⁵¹ Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003 [1987]) p. 270.

¹⁵² David T. Runia, *Philo of Alexandria and the "Timaeus" of Plato* (Leiden: Brill, 1986), pp. 503-504.

¹⁵³ Jason David BeDuhn, *Truth in Translation: Accuracy and Bias in English Versions of the New Testament* (Lanham, University Press of America, 2003), pp. 163-164; see also Chandler, pp. 30-33.

¹⁵⁴ For examples, see Dale Tuggy, "On Bauckham's Bargain," *Theology Today*, pp. 11-12.

Objections to the anti-Gnostic hypothesis are frequently made on the presumption of a lack of doctrinal clarity during the first century. The fact which scholars like Scott and Bultmann emphasized, that John “seems on occasions to approximate to a gnosticising way of thought while at other times appearing antagonistic to it”¹⁵⁵ is often de-emphasized by Trinitarian scholars. This is, I believe, a mistake, and one quite possibly made under dogmatic pressures. For example, Smalley’s reason for bypassing Scott and Bultmann is that he believes that in the time of the Johannine clash with Gnosis it was difficult to discern what was hetero-Gnostic and what was “orthodox” Christology. Thus Smalley finds it improbable that GJohn was able or even intended to assist in this fight. But this may come near to assuming that John himself had trouble making distinctions between Gnostic views and his own doctrine of Jesus, which I suggest was not the case. In truth, it often *is* difficult to tell the difference between the Gnostic Christ(s) and the “orthodox” (Chalcedonian) Christ. But if John’s Jesus is truly and only human, then his discrepancy with hetero-Gnostic Christs is immediate and clear, since all Gnostic Christs are in some sense a spiritual being, even God. Thus all of the signs recognized by Scott and Bultmann which point to an anti-Gnostic mission in John need not be ignored. Again we see that if one refrains from projecting later Chalcedonian orthodoxy onto John, then the nature of the Fourth Gospel and its real antagonism with Gnosis comes into view.

6) Alleged inefficiency of potential anti-Gnostic Johannine statements

Along the same lines as Smalley’s objections about GJohn being anti-Gnostic, Daniel R. Streett has offered similar objections about the related epistle of 1 John, which may have some bearing on our inquiry into John’s Gospel. Streett especially targets the notion that John’s epistle is anti-Gnostic or is reacting against either docetic or separationist Christology. While there is not space to address all of Streett’s challenging arguments, we will take some time to confront several interesting points.

The dominant opinion among scholars has been that 1 John is, in fact, a reaction to some sort of docetic, Gnostic-type Christology. Passages like 1 John 4:2-3, “*every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus is not from God,*” have made this clear for many scholars. However, a major concern of Streett’s is that the author of 1 John, if he really means to address a Christological heresy like docetism, does not move to qualify or contextualize his own view of Christ’s “flesh.” He points out that this and other passages such as 1 John 1:1-3 have language which “could easily be co-opted” by docetists. He also finds similar passages from John’s Gospel, such as John 1:14 and 6:51-58, vulnerable to exploitation, and these passages evidently did suffer appropriation by ancient Gnostics. Streett explains that “many docetists—in light of their statements concerning the flesh of Jesus—would find nothing in 1 John 4:2 necessarily impossible to confess, given their equivocations on the term ‘flesh.’ The docetists ability to incorporate ideas of incarnation and fleshliness into his system would allow him virtual immunity to 1 John’s attacks.”¹⁵⁶ Streett is correct: some Gnostic Christians, such as those in the schools of Valentinus, did contend that Jesus had a “heavenly” flesh, a real human nature, but one free from sin. Some thus held a developed “dual-nature” view of the Savior.¹⁵⁷ In light of this, Streett ultimately finds the argument as it exists in 1 John, if intended to be anti-Gnostic, as ineffective: how could one distinguish between an “orthodox” view of Christ’s flesh and a “Gnostic” view of Christ’s flesh by John’s simple affirmation of Christ’s flesh?¹⁵⁸ The problem with Streett’s concern is that it assumes that John’s Christological outlook is Trinitarian, that is, it assumes John holds to a Chalcedonian-type view of Christ’s humanity which John’s unqualified statement about “flesh” would not adequately preserve against Gnostic equivocation. But what if John’s statement about “flesh” really did simultaneously describe his own doctrine of Jesus, *and* refute the entire family of Gnostic claims about Christ?

Streett himself does take notice of a valid response to his charge of inefficacy, in an answer from Larry Hurtado, who writes that the accusation in 1 John 4:2 “reflects the author’s polemical judgment about the teaching of the secessionists, not a simple quotation of their teaching. The secessionists could well have referred to Jesus’ ‘flesh,’ but

¹⁵⁵ Smalley, p. 135.

¹⁵⁶ Streett, p. 202.

¹⁵⁷ See Chandler, pp. 93-97.

¹⁵⁸ Daniel R. Streett, *They Went Out from Us: The Identity of the Opponents in First John*, (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011), p. 202.

if so, their interpretation of it was unsatisfactory to the author, and he judged it to be, to all intents and purposes, a denial of Jesus' real fleshly existence."¹⁵⁹ In other words, Hurtado's argument is that "the author is engaging in a fight to define flesh on his terms. He is denying that the Valentinians use the term properly."¹⁶⁰

Ultimately, Streett's largest problem with Hurtado's answer seems to be that he still expects John to attempt some nuance.¹⁶¹ But again, what if John's real view required no nuance? What if John's view was in fact, as he declares without qualification, that Jesus was *human*?¹⁶² In the end, I strongly agree with Hurtado that John refuses to meet the Gnostics on their terms; as the evangelist and authority on Jesus, the world must conform to his own language and meaning. Therefore, we must ask: did John believe that by affirming Christ's real flesh, that is, his real humanity, that he could simultaneously refute all of his opponents? This possibility would be strengthened if there happened to be one unifying feature between the proposed antagonistic Gnostic Christologies which John's statement could target and effectively crush in a single blow. Of course, as Harnack pointed out, the feature which unifies each of the Gnostic Christologies is the thesis that the Savior is, in some sense, a spiritual being, even God.¹⁶³ Thus John's statements may have consequences not only for Gnostic Christianity, but also for modern orthodoxy: by declaring the unqualified humanity and denying the deity of Christ in one (Gnostic) sense, John denies it in every sense. Indeed, John calls those arguing for (some form of) Christ's deity *liars, false prophets, and antichrist*. It thus becomes more and more difficult to imagine that John was denying the deity of Christ in a Gnostic sense, but was affirming it in the orthodox sense (it has already been admitted how difficult this distinction is). If John had really held to the simultaneously docetic and adoptionist Christology perceived by Smalley, the "balanced" view of Chalcedon, we would agree with Streett that an unqualified affirmation of Jesus' humanity is not effective as an anti-Gnostic polemic. The Trinitarian ultimately has difficulty discerning the efficacy of John's statement because his own view of the Johannine "flesh" is too close in principle to what John was collectively refuting.

To conclude this section, we will take notice of one further observation of how the Gnostics utilized Johannine literature by Raymond E. Brown: "While second-century Gnostics used GJohn (almost to the point of appropriating it), there is no clear evidence that they drew upon 1 John as a source for reflection. Indeed, as I shall point out..., 1 John became a tool of the orthodox church writers in their arguments against the Gnostic interpretations of GJohn. This would indicate that, whether or not he was combating proto-Gnostics, the thought of the author of 1 John was oriented in a direction that the Gnostics could not find amenable."¹⁶⁴

If we assume that the Christology of GJohn is the same as that of 1 John, then Brown's observation opens the possibility that there was only a difference in presentation between the two works which allowed for the appropriation of one and not the other. Brown's observation may also lend weight to my earlier conclusion that the polemical statements and warnings in 1 John are a reaction to the abuse of GJohn: in 1 John there was no longer room for the patience exhibited in the Gospel's misunderstanding motif—the Gnostics were now at the door and moving to cross the threshold.¹⁶⁵ They could no longer be allowed to exploit one side of the Gospel's thought, forcing John's epistles to once again make the Gospel's case for the human Jesus, but this time with even more force and clarity.

7) The satisfaction provided by Jewish evidence

¹⁵⁹ Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), p. 547.

¹⁶⁰ Streett, p. 203.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶² We may also need to account for the fact that 1 John is a church epistle, written to a Johannine community intimately familiar with the situation at hand. John may not have felt the need to elaborate on his own view of Christ's "flesh" with this particular audience. In fact, both 1 and 2 John appear just as concerned with providing direction for the community in the wake of this scandal as they are with refuting the ideas which contributed to it.

¹⁶³ Adolph von Harnack, *History of Dogma*, Vol. 1 (1894), p. 193.

¹⁶⁴ Raymond E. Brown, *The Epistles of John* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1982), p. 65.

¹⁶⁵ 2 John 1:7, 10-11: "For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. This is the deceiver and the antichrist... If anyone comes to you and does not bring [our] teaching, do not receive him into your house, and do not give him a greeting; for the one who gives him a greeting participates in his evil deeds."

In light of the Gospel's clear concern with Jewish arguments about Jesus, and its deep connection with Jewish thought, Keener has cited the principle of Occam's Razor against the hypothesis that the Gospel is *also* concerned with challenging Gnosticism.¹⁶⁶ He concludes that "the Jewish evidence is sufficient to explain the Fourth Gospel's context by itself."¹⁶⁷ Of course, Occam's Razor does not actually determine a solution, but only suggests what the "best" answer probably is by asking us to identify the "simplest" solution. But Occam's Razor is by nature highly subjective: one investigator may easily differ from another on what the "simpler" solution is. Furthermore, the problem with a theory which emphasizes the "simplest" solution for the background and intentions of the Fourth Gospel is that, as Barrett explains, "it cannot be maintained that the background of the Gospel is simple."¹⁶⁸ Indeed, in regard to the many questions which the Gospels raises, "The evidence is not sufficient to present a simple answer."¹⁶⁹ If we aren't careful, employing Occam's Razor here can easily become the fallacy of oversimplification, which occurs when it is assumed that there is a single, simple cause of an outcome when in reality it may have been caused by a number of sufficient causes. In my view, Keener's approach misses the larger picture of the Johannine community's circumstances at the end of the first century, and wrongly downplays the significance of the Johannine parallels with Gnostic thought and Hermetic literature. Most importantly, there are several features which cannot be explained or accounted for by Judaism alone, such as the Johannine teaching on rebirth, and the Gospel's presentation of the relationship between God, teacher, and disciple.

First, let us consider the broader picture of Johannine conflict at the time of GJohn's writing. Keener's proposal seems to ignore the anti-Gnostic polemic in the proximate Johannine epistles. Many scholars have concluded that GJohn and 1 John share the same author(s), and most conclude that they at least originate from the same community,¹⁷⁰ and are dated to the same time period.¹⁷¹ Should we then be so quick to accept that GJohn and 1 John do *not* share the same community concerns? Keener himself admits that: "it is not at all impossible that tendencies toward Gnosticism were already creating problems for the Johannine community (cf. 1-3 John)."¹⁷² Thus Keener does perceive that half of the Johannine literature is anti-Gnostic, and other scholars like J.A.T. Robinson, who saw "less evidence of a polemical motive in the Gospel", still found that there is "undoubtedly such a motive in the Johannine epistles."¹⁷³ Since the majority of scholars conclude that 1 John *is* an anti-Gnostic polemic and reflects Gnostic-Christian conflict in the Johannine community, the probability that GJohn is concerned with a similar situation increases. If we grant, along with many scholars, that 1 John is written against a background of Gnostic conflict, and that GJohn and 1 John are written around the same time and share either an author or a community—we are pressed to wonder if Keener's "isolationist" view of the contexts of GJohn and 1 John is really the "simplest" or best solution. It seems just as reasonable, given their parallels and historical proximity, to conclude that GJohn is written to address concerns posed by a range of troublemakers for the Johannine community, which includes both Jews and Gnostics.

Considering 1 John may provide further value: The Jews in the Gospel of John were arguing that Jesus of Nazareth was not the Messiah, and the Jews in John's environment were rejecting Jesus and those who looked to him. But in 1 John, John is clearly writing against an *appropriation* of Jesus. 1 John argues not simply against people who reject Jesus as Messiah completely, but against those who have mishandled him or replaced him with a counterfeit version; John calls this *antichrist*, that is, a *replacement* Christ.¹⁷⁴ John stresses the human Jesus in light of this challenge, and warns

¹⁶⁶ Keener, p. 166.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Barrett, p. 3.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 4.

¹⁷⁰ Until the twentieth century, the view of common authorship between GJohn and 1 John stood virtually unopposed. Today, many scholars have offered challenges, but they are ultimately challenges which have trouble derailing the old view (see Keener, pp. 122-126). As Keener concludes, "the burden of proof remains on those who challenge common authorship" (Ibid., p. 126).

¹⁷¹ "we may at least consider this position as established, that the Epistle belongs to the same period of time with the Gospel. An attentive observation, however, will carry this position still further, and lead to the assumption that the two documents were strictly simultaneous. And in this case the Epistle must be considered to have been a companion-document to the Gospel, as it were an epistle dedicatory. This view has been defended by Heidegger, Berger, Storr, Lange, Thiersch, and others" (John H.A. Ebrard, *Biblical Commentary on the Epistles of St John* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1860), p. 25.

¹⁷² Keener, p. 169.

¹⁷³ J.A.T. Robinson, *Twelve New Testament Studies* (London: SCM Press, 1962), p. 125.

¹⁷⁴ "antichristos," appearing five times in the NT, can be mean not only "opposed to" Christ, but "one who puts himself in the place of" Christ; one who is opposed to Jesus for the purposes of replacement.

against any deviation from his specific doctrine of Christ (1 John 4:2-3). There indeed appears to be an important article missing from most English translations of 1 John 4:3, which might read: “*every spirit that does not confess that Jesus is not of God.*” Here we are engaged with the question: what kind of Jesus do we have? Thus 1 John’s opponents are to be seen as promoting or making use of Jesus, but in a way that John did not approve of. Certainly this cannot be accounted for by only an “anti-Jewish” polemic. If GJohn and 1 John share dating, authorship, community, and Christology, then GJohn begins to come into view as not simply and only promoting “Jesus of Nazareth” in the face of Jewish rejection, but to be promoting “*that Jesus*” of 1 John alongside the epistles in the face of Christological *abuse* by gnosticizing Christians or appropriating pagans. As Scott concluded, “the affinity between the Gospel and the Epistle makes it probable at the outset that a similar purpose underlies both writings.”¹⁷⁵

Finally, it is important to note that not all of the evidence in the Fourth Gospel can be accounted for by a purely anti-Jewish view of John. Though Keener argues that “none of John’s purportedly gnostic (or antignostic) traits are limited to gnosticism,”¹⁷⁶ we will find that this is simply not the case. These peculiar features, like the teaching on rebirth and the relationship between God, teacher, and disciple, we will discuss in later sections. But ultimately, in light of 1) the historical context of GJohn and the philosophical trends of the time; 2) GJohn’s probable origins in a cosmopolitan and Gnostic center like Ephesus; 3) its striking parallels with Gnostic thought and literature (which are not completely accounted for by Judaism); and 4) its proximity in date to anti-Gnostic polemics written by the same author(s) or community—the multi-front conflict solution I am proposing begins to appear more helpful than the more isolationist reading.

VI. On Christian Gnosticism and the New Testament Church

Of the subcategories of Gnostic thought which the Gospel of John confronts, the focus of this study is on Hermeticism, that is, on the Hermetic ideas (and possibly literature) appreciated by whichever gnosticizing group(s) John opposed. But in this section, after an introduction to the nature of Jewish-Christianity in the NT period, a brief analysis of how the ideas of the Christian Gnostics in particular may have been targeted by GJohn will prove valuable, especially since their ideas overlap so regularly with that of their Hermetic counterparts.

1. The Earliest Jesus community

The recovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in the middle of the last century continues to force reconsiderations of the nature of late Second Temple Judaism. Modern scholarship reveals that the most primitive Christianity, emerging in the twilight of that Second Temple, was first viewed, not as a separate and antagonistic religion, but as a natural extension of its parent faith. The language, eschatological concerns and exegetical habits of the Qumran community reflect a surprising sympathy with the sensibilities of the New Testament writers. Even framing Christianity and Judaism in a parent-child analogy now barely seems justified in light of the fact that the earliest Jesus community championed no fundamental break with the monotheistic and apocalyptic traditions which defined the religion of their countrymen. The first Jewish believers in Jesus saw the recently crucified Nazarene as the long-awaited Messiah; many of them fostered a new concern and benevolence toward the Gentile; and certain eschatological expectations were thought by them to be fulfilled while others were drawing near. But there was nothing in the first Christian’s teaching about God which threatened to push them beyond the bounds of their Jewish identity and community; they proposed no revision or update to the bedrock confession of monotheism which had so alienated their ancestors from the outside world, and which remained a last bastion against the encroaching Hellenistic influence of their time. Indeed, the preaching of the Jewish Jesus was neither enabled nor motivated by the speculations of Plato, or the syncretistic fashions of Philo, but by the writings of Moses, Daniel, and David. Frederic Farrar of Trinity College, chaplain to the Queen of England, rightly observed that “the first teachers of Christianity were never charged by the Jews (who unquestionably believed in

¹⁷⁵ Scott, p. 90.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

the strict unity of God), with introducing any new theory of the Godhead. Many foolish and false charges were made against Christ; but this was never alleged against him or any of his disciples.”¹⁷⁷

Later Christianity, being rapidly subsumed in a vast and diverse Gentile world, strayed wildly from this tradition. By the fourth century, a domineering, state-sanctioned form of Christianity was openly adapting and adopting Greek polytheism into its creedal statements. Though during the Maccabean revolt Judaism had compelled her adherents to resist compromise with Hellenism on pain of martyrdom, Judaism was eventually diffused and transformed into a new and parallel religion so congenial to the Greco-Roman mind that the Jews of the earliest Christian communities could have nothing to do with it. In the wake of Nicaea, that is, after the imperial cementing of the homoousian as the cornerstone of legal Christian confession, the portal leading back to the Jewish world of Jesus was officially and forcefully shuttered. The Nazarene and Ebionite Christians, the Jews who owed their church and tradition to the Apostolic movement in Jerusalem, were unable to press their Jewish Messiah, highly exalted and honored though he was, into the Godhead. As one New Testament scholar confirms, “The Deity of Jesus is inherently un-Jewish. The witness of Jewish texts is unvarying in belief that a second being in God involves departure from the Jewish community.”¹⁷⁸ It is this idea of a second being in God, of plurality within unity, which was the chief export of the Gnostic traditions, and which eventually became the great concern of the Christianity which ultimately, through the power of the State, came to triumph. But the idea of a second being in God is without doubt the terrible wedge forever driven between “Christianity” and “Judaism” as two separate and incompatible religions. The first Jewish Christians, doubtless represented by the Nazarene and Ebionite sects, were unwilling to allow this wedge to penetrate the purity of their great monotheism and so receded into the shadows of history.¹⁷⁹ The post-biblical history of Jewish-Christianity is, ultimately, one of an uncompromising commitment to the teachings of the Apostles and a tragic last stand against Hellenistic theology.

It is clear that the earliest Jewish-Christian tradition, as evidenced by the New Testament writings, had already come into serious conflict with Gnosticism. After the destruction of Jerusalem, and the evaporation of the power of the Jerusalem church, the challenge of competitive interpretations of Christianity rapidly intensified. At the end of the first century, the writer of the Gospel of John's great fear was that the increasingly popular association of a divine being with the historical person of Jesus Christ would unravel his humanity and his mediatorial role as creation's representative. Likewise, other Gnostic trends which eventually manifested in the Christian Gnostic sects of the second century, and in the writings of the Hermetic Corpus, were causing trouble for John's community. With these challenges in view, along with the acutely Jewish conflicts, John composed his Gospel.

2. Early Christian Gnostics according to the Church Fathers

Irenaeus, in his *On the Detection and Overthrow of the So-Called Gnosis* or *Against Heresies* (c. 180 CE), and Hippolytus, in his *Refutation of All Heresies* or *Philosophumena* (c. 215 CE), set down the origins of Christian Gnosticism.¹⁸⁰ Because the Christian Gnostics often claimed to have received their traditions through secret teachings passed on by Jesus or various disciples in his inner circle, both Irenaeus and Hippolytus looked to trace the Christian Gnostic sects backwards through long genealogies in order to prove their sources were pagan or demonic. Again, I will not embark on the question of Gnostic origins, but it is conducive to our study to take note of several of the names which appear in the Church Father's Gnostic pedigree. Hippolytus lists among the first sects the Cainites, the Nicolaitans (probably the same group mentioned in Revelation 2:6), Simon Magus (the sorcerer from Acts 8:9-24), Menander, Cerinthus, and the Naassenes (which Hippolytus classes as the earliest sect, and which we have already mentioned utilized Hermeticism).¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁷ Frederic W. Farrar, *Early Days of Christianity*, Vol. I (Boston, Massachusetts: DeWolfe, Fiske & Company, 1882), p. 55

¹⁷⁸ Maurice Casey, *From Jewish Prophet to Gentile God: The Origins and Development of New Testament Christology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991), p. 176.

¹⁷⁹ See Chandler, pp. 126-133, esp. 263. See also Ray A. Pritz, *Nazarene Jewish Christianity* (Jerusalem-Leiden: Brill, 1988).

¹⁸⁰ Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies*, Books IV-VIII.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, V, 1-11.

Dodd, in his examination of early Christian Gnosticism, found that the earliest of those Gnostic theologians often labeled “Christian,” owed just as much to paganism, and indeed could hardly be identified as Christian.¹⁸² In the middle of the second century, however, teachers like Valentinus (100-160 CE) brought Gnosis further in-line with Christianity, and transformed it into a major Christian force competing with, and often blending in with, proto-orthodoxy.¹⁸³ As modern scholars reveal, “far from being a local sect with limited appeal, Valentinian adherents *permeated* Christianity.”¹⁸⁴ Dodd surmises: “If Valentinus is a Christian theologian of an adventurous type, Justin [the Gnostic] and the Naassene writer are nothing of the kind; still less ‘Simon’. On the other hand, there is a certain general framework of thought which appears in all or almost all the Gnostic systems. There does seem to have been something which might be called a Gnostic movement, or at least a tendency. It was essentially syncretistic, actuated by the belief that revealed truth was witnessed by various religions, or mythologies, and making use of Greek philosophical ideas at a remove. Contact with Christianity quickened this movement, already influenced by Judaism, and a rank growth of Christian, or semi-Christian and quasi-Christian, systems arose.”¹⁸⁵

3. Christian Gnostic trends

Garth Fowden writes that “Thanks to its esotericism and consequent lack of formal restraints, all Gnosticism tended to be anarchically speculative; and Christian Gnosticism was worst of all, a many-headed hydra, as the heresiologists put it, likely to devour and regurgitate, often in virtually unrecognizable form, any idea that came into view.”¹⁸⁶ But out of this incredible melting pot of Oriental, Egyptian, and Persian mythology, we are able to discern several distinct features of those sects which can be cautiously labeled Christian.

a. Creation and the Demiurge

The Christian Gnostics appear to have gathered from Platonic philosophy that the physical, material world was an inferior reality, a lower plane of existence, which stood in contrast to a higher, spiritual world. Indeed, Plato’s *Timaeus*, with its Demiurgic creation account, often appears to provide just as much a background for Christian Gnostic cosmology as the OT book of Genesis.¹⁸⁷ Various Platonists had interpreted Plato to mean that the world had been created, not directly by the highest God, but by a lower entity, the Demiurge (Craftsman). While in Platonic systems, the Demiurge was a more benign figure, in Christian Gnosticism the Demiurge was often cast as an evil entity bent on enslaving mankind.¹⁸⁸ This lower being was said by them to be none other than Yahweh, the God of the OT, the one responsible for the Genesis creation. According to the Christian Gnostics, the Jews worshipped this wicked god unawares. Jesus was, they claimed, an emanation of a better god, the Highest God, who came to liberate humanity from the clutches of the Demiurge and his material creation.

b. The Aeons/Divine hypostases

In their portraits of God, Christian Gnostics tended to compose a grand vision, probably drawn from Egyptian and Persian mythology, in which the one God was composed of a descending hierarchy of divine entities. These entities are often described as Aeons, or hypostases,¹⁸⁹ usually representing different Greek philosophical concepts, and their gender was determined by the grammatical gender of the Greek term used as their name. For example, in the Valentinian system, “*Sophia*” (Wisdom) was an especially important female member of the lower order of Aeons—it was, in fact, her folly which had inadvertently caused the production of the wicked Demiurge, who had to be cast away from the Good God out of the divine realm. “*Christ*” was also held to be one of these heavenly emanations of the Good God;

¹⁸² Dodd, pp. 97-100.

¹⁸³ See Chandler, p. 93, pp. 106-107.

¹⁸⁴ C. Wilfred Griggs, *Early Egyptian Christianity: From Its Origins to 451 CE* (Leiden: Brill, 1991), p. 55, emphasis added. See also

¹⁸⁵ Dodd, p. 101.

¹⁸⁶ Fowden, p. 113.

¹⁸⁷ Christian Gnostics typically viewed the Genesis creation account as a flawed report, and took a revisionist approach to Genesis in works such as the famous *Apocryphon of John*, discovered at Nag Hammadi.

¹⁸⁸ In the *Apocryphon of John*, this demiurgical figure was named Yaldabaoth, an accidental creation imbued with the divine power to create who was cast out of the spiritual realm.

¹⁸⁹ For a terminological analysis of these entities, and how they compare with the orthodox concept of the three hypostases of the Trinity, see Chandler, pp. 116-122.

it was ultimately his task to descend and rescue the (human) entities who had also found themselves outside of God's realm.

c. The divine nature of humanity

In the Christian Gnostic view, man is essentially a spiritual being, containing within himself a spark of divinity. This divine shard is lodged within a material form created by the Demiurge, a wretched body made for the very purposes of distracting man from his real nature. It is the destiny of man (or of those elect members of humanity who were blessed with a certain spiritual nature able to receive Gnosis), to come to an awareness of oneself as divine: to know oneself is to know God. Gaining this Gnosis is the pathway to returning to the divine realm upon death, and thus assimilation to God. This belief is shared notably by the pagan, Hermetic form of Gnosticism, which chronologically precedes Christian Gnosticism,¹⁹⁰ and which looked to Hermes (or one of his successors) as the figure who imparted this Gnosis. Of course, in the Christian Gnostic systems, the central figure who imparted Gnosis was Jesus Christ.

d. Christology

As Harnack observed, the fundamental Gnostic thesis was that Jesus was by nature a spiritual being.¹⁹¹ Jesus was in essence an emanation of the highest God, who came down and took on humanity (in one sense or another). As the Good and Highest God opposed the Demiurge, Jesus was sent to provide humanity with Gnosis, secret knowledge of the divine, in order to rescue the divine sparks trapped in humanity from the created world and to return them to the fullness of God. The burning question for the Christian Gnostics became: if Jesus was from the spiritual realm, and if he came to save those in the material realm, how are we to account for the visible and apparently physical ministry of Jesus—especially his death on the cross? Being God, he could not have come in material flesh (which would have been evil), or at least he could not have come in the same kind of humanity as the rest of mankind, and ultimately there had to be a way that the divine, immortal person of Jesus was untouched by the destruction of the crucifixion. Various Christian Gnostic schools devised ways of solving these problems, which we will briefly survey below.

i. Docetism

Christ was completely spiritual. The Savior only *seemed* to be in physical form, his image actually being a sort of phantasm. The docetic Jesus only appeared to suffer, only appeared to require food, only appeared to be crucified, since he was not truly a man, but a divine being clothed in the form of a man.¹⁹²

ii. Separationism/Possessionism

The human "Jesus" and the divine "Christ" were two different entities. "Jesus" was not born of a virgin, but was the natural son of Mary and Joseph. "Christ" descended upon the man Jesus at his baptism and remained with him throughout his ministry. At the crucifixion, the Christ left Jesus so that the human being alone would experience death.¹⁹³

iii. Valentian Christology

The two school of Valentinus (100-160 CE), Eastern and Western, taught that Jesus descended from heaven with a special, uncorrupted human body. This Jesus was born through the virgin Mary, and was joined by the divine Christ either at birth or baptism. The human nature suffered pain and death, while the divine survived. According to this family of Gnostic thought, "the Incarnation and contact with the physical body was real... they stressed the link between the divine and human elements in Christ."¹⁹⁴

¹⁹⁰ Fowden, p. 114.

¹⁹¹ Harnack, *History of Dogma*, Vol. 1 (1894), p. 193.

¹⁹² Chandler, p. 86.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

¹⁹⁴ Piotr Ashwin-Siejkowski, *Clement of Alexandria on Trial* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), p. 108. One mysterious Gnostic work titled *Melchizedek* reveals that some Gnostics were using Jesus' eating and suffering as evidence against a purely docetic view. This demonstrates their "awareness of the alternative (docetic) models and teaching" that contrasted with their dual-nature view.

iv. Eastern Valentinianism – real but heavenly “flesh”

In the Eastern Valentinian view, the uniting of the human and divine elements began in the highest heaven: the angelic Aeons (powers of God) had collaboratively produced a new divine entity, Jesus, and sent him down through the heavens. As he descended into our world, the Aeon named Acamoth (the lower Sophia) gave him an uncorrupted human body that was “made in such a way that it was visible and tangible and could suffer.”¹⁹⁵

v. Western Valentinianism – two persons, two natures bound together

According to the Western Valentinians, however, it was actually the Demiurge (a more positive figure in this system) who constructed his human body. Eventually, this Jesus passed into and through the womb of the virgin “like water through a tube.”¹⁹⁶ In the Western system, it was at the baptism of this specially-made human Jesus that the Demiurge clothed him with the divine Christ. While the human Jesus and the divine Christ were two distinct personalities, at the Incarnation it was the celestial ego, the one divine Person of Christ, who became the operative center of the two entities.¹⁹⁷ Both of these entities’ natures were to exercise diverse and critical duties during the Savior’s earthly life.

vi. Replacement theory

Some Gnostics, like the writers of the *Second Treatise of the Great Seth*, held that a docetic Jesus was even “replaced” on the cross just before the crucifixion. In his place, they said, Simon of Cyrene was crucified, while the Savior stood by laughing at the ignorance of his enemies.

VII. Johannine relationship with Christian Gnosticism

The Gospel of John works in several ways to attack the diverse positions of Christian Gnosticism. For example, John stresses the physical details of Christ’s human life: he sweats, he eats (even after his resurrection), he becomes tired, he bleeds and dies, etc. In order to disown the belief in a world of descending, intermediary spiritual entities, John omits the many angelic and demonic entities so prevalent in the Synoptics. Also, “divine sonship” in GJohn is not gained by one’s inherent nature, but by belief and obedience to Jesus—those who do this are given power to *become* sons of God; they are not already God by nature, as in much of Christian Gnosticism (and Hermeticism).¹⁹⁸ There is furthermore an avoidance of Gnostic watchwords,¹⁹⁹ and even a conscious and repeated effort to connect Jesus to the creator God of the Jews, *contra* the Gnostic doctrine of the Demiurge. We will take a moment to consider a few of these examples in more detail below.

1. Jesus and the Creator God of the Jews

Even from the outset, the Gospel of John, in its famous and controversial prologue, seems interested in not only emphasizing the centrality of Jesus, but in destroying the rising demiurgic speculations of Gnosticism. The Christian Gnostics had essentially taught that Jesus, being the son of a higher God, had come to change course on the wicked creator god’s program—that Jesus and his God were opposed to the creator of the Old Testament, and his creation. In response, GJohn is forced to return to “*the beginning*,” to set the record straight. He testifies that it was through God’s own divine word, or wisdom, intimately related to him and fully representative of his goodness, that the world was made—this same word or wisdom became manifest in the person and work of Jesus Christ (John 1:1-14). John’s Jesus has not come to work against the creator God, but was the very spiritual center of that God’s creation.

¹⁹⁵ Broek, *Gnostic Religion in Antiquity*, p. 194. The body the Son took on, though specially made, was still completely human and able to undergo the fullness of human experience. Ibid., p. 193. See also Chandler, pp. 93-102.

¹⁹⁶ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1, 7, 2.

¹⁹⁷ J. L. Mosheim, *Historical Commentaries on the State of Christianity During the First Three Hundred and Twenty-Five Years*, Vol. 1 (New York: Converse, 1851), p. 467.

¹⁹⁸ See below pp. 63-66.

¹⁹⁹ Scott, p. 93.

Barclay writes that “It may seem strange to us that John so stresses the way in which the world was created; and it may seem strange that he so definitely connects Jesus with the work of creation. But he had to do this because of a certain tendency in the thought of his day. In the time of John there was a kind of heresy called Gnosticism... [In this] the creator god was utterly divorced from and utterly at enmity with the real God... In the time of John this kind of belief was widespread.”²⁰⁰ While the Gnostics taught that Jesus’ Father was a God above the wicked or incompetent god of the OT (the god of the ignorant Jews)—John repeatedly connects Jesus to the Israelite deity. In John 8:54, Jesus declares to the Jews: “*it is my Father... about whom you say, ‘He is our God.’*” When Jesus meets the Samaritan woman, he teaches her: “*You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews*” (John 4:22). John adds to Mark’s account of the Temple cleansing (Mark 11:15-19), that Jesus is “zealous for his Father’s house” (John 2:17). Being the Temple of the God of Israel, John’s addition may be yet another motion to connect the Father of Jesus to the old God of Judaism; Jesus passionately, even violently defends the ritual worship of the Jews which the Christian Gnostics believed was the work of ignorance. Ultimately, Jesus’ efforts to connect himself not simply to “God” or to “the Father”, but specifically to “the God of the Jews,” might be best understood not only in light of traditionalist Jewish concerns about the Messiah, but also in light of an early Gnostic controversy in which such questions were beginning to be raised.

2. Human Christology in GJohn

Mirroring the charge of 1 John 4, but perhaps not written by the same author, 2 John 7 makes a startling declaration: “*Many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh. Such a one is the deceiver and the antichrist.*” Because of this express opposition, we know that “docetic Christologies were already circulating while the New Testament was being written.”²⁰¹ As I highlighted above,²⁰² Christological statements like these regarding Jesus “flesh” have been criticized by orthodox commentators as being ineffective if intended to be anti-Gnostic. But as I also explained, an unqualified declaration of Christ’s humanity is an effective polemic when confronting a variety of Gnostic Christologies which all share an affirmation in Christ’s deity in common. Indeed, there is a concerted effort, across the whole of Johannine literature, to present and defend a Jesus who is truly and undoubtedly a human being.

John’s Gospel, being an account of Christ’s historical human life, could not as blatantly challenge the Gnostic Jesus as the epistles. Nevertheless, the humanity of the Gospel’s Jesus is just as pronounced, and the Gospel as a whole is just as effective in dealing with a wide range of Gnostic, docetic-type Christologies, which tended to devalue, deemphasize, or even eliminate the body or humanity to one degree or another. There is an incessant emphasis on Jesus’ body, and its bodily functions, throughout the Gospel (Jesus sleeps, bleeds, weeps, etc.). The figure the Gospel calls the “beloved disciple,” who provides the Gospel’s eye witness accounts, declares that he personally saw the water and the blood flow from the body of Jesus (John 19:34-35)—the crucifixion was no illusion. We may find GJohn reacting against another Gnostic theory about the Savior’s death in his treatment of the cross: in the Synoptics we read that Simon of Cyrene carried Jesus’ cross for him (Mark 15:21), but in GJohn, Simon of Cyrene is omitted completely. GJohn makes it all too clear: Jesus “*carried his own cross himself*” (John 19:17). These details may have served to disown an early version of the Gnostic replacement theory in which Simon of Cyrene took Jesus’ place, as we find in the later Gnostic text *Second Treatise of the Great Seth*. Further emphasizing the bodily death and bodily resurrection of Jesus, in GJohn, Jesus invites Thomas to touch his bodily wounds with his hands (John 20:27-29)—this is an episode completely unique to GJohn. Other theories about the body of Jesus had evidently begun to boil in John’s day: the Gospel writer feels compelled to emphasize Jesus’ consumption of real food. Indeed, Jesus not only eats in GJohn, but he shares the same food with the disciples, even after his resurrection (John 21:12-15). In the second century, we see that Christian Gnostic theories about Jesus not requiring food, or not defecating, or being sustained by a heavenly sort of food different from the disciple’s food, abounded, and GJohn must have been reacting to early speculation of this kind.²⁰³

²⁰⁰ William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, Vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975 [1955]), pp. 40-41.

²⁰¹ Peter Jeffery, *The Secret Gospel of Mark Unveiled: Imagine Rituals of Sex, Death, and Madness in a Biblical Forgery* (London: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 48.

²⁰² See above, pp. 26-27.

²⁰³ See Chandler, p. 110. It is possible that John 4:31-34, in which Jesus is asked to eat by his disciples and he responds that he has food to eat that the disciples do not know about, had occasioned Gnostic speculation about his diet. The last chapter of GJohn, in which Jesus eats the same food as the disciples, may have been added later to stifle such ideas. In the second century, probably in order to reconcile his Christology with

Ultimately, we find that GJohn is supremely concerned with establishing the human Jesus of history over an idealized substitute, or family of substitutes, which were evidently creeping in. While the above information does not cover all of the parallels, and contrasts, between the Fourth Gospel and the theological trends current in early Christian Gnosticism, it provides a basis for understanding GJohn's general polemic towards this thinking, and adequately prepares us for a deeper analysis of GJohn's much more neglected rival: Hermeticism.

VIII. On Hermeticism, and the prophet Hermes

In this section we will begin an exploration of the history and role of the pagan figure Hermes Trismegistus. It will be helpful during the forthcoming analysis of Hermeticism's relationship with John if we are familiar with the process by which Hermes Trismegistus himself emerged. In this, we will move to build a foundation for the rising Gnostic world looming behind the Fourth Gospel.

1. Graeco-Egyptian syncretism

In the fall of 332 BCE, Alexander the Great conquered Egypt. His victory, however, marked not the defeat and silencing of the Egyptian civilization but a new phase of its life. The young Macedonian was mostly uninterested in forcing his own religious ideas on his Egyptian subjects, so long as they remained compliant with his rule. Both Alexander's latitude, and the uniqueness of the Egyptian culture, enabled Egypt's surprising durability as a national and independent religious force long after her kings had bowed the knee. In reality, Egypt was largely resistant to Hellenistic syncretism. It was a land with a long-established connection to heaven, with its own divine legacy—Egyptian theology needed no Grecian assistance. Records at the temple in Esna may evidence that Egyptian theology, as a unique religious force, was still evolving even at the end of the first century CE, and at the very least we probably discover the *terminus quo* for an independent Egyptian religion around the close of the fourth century CE, as evidenced by the latest known hieroglyphic text etched on the Gate of Hadrian on the island temple at Philae (c. 394 CE). These late dates ultimately demonstrate both the “durability as well as the conservatism of Egyptian paganism.”²⁰⁴

Enthusiasm for religious and cultural harmony was more widely felt on the Greek side of things. Greek philosophy, evolving in Plato's wake (d. 347 BCE), surely contributed to Greek interest in general synthesis with Egypt. The intellectual freedom of the Greek philosophical world and its grand search for truth had fostered a vision of mankind on a shared journey towards the divine; there was often a tendency in Plato's students to view all religions as diverse paths leading towards the same truth.²⁰⁵ In this regard the Egyptian religion took special hold of the Greek mind: Egypt's mysteries, its pyramids, sphinxes, and magic eventually came to be viewed as the primordial rites and symbols of human civilization. The Greeks began to say that the Egyptians were the first to invent organized religion, and that the various philosophies of esteemed Greek thinkers were first held by, and even directly learned from, Egyptian priests. Plato himself was said to have studied in their temples.²⁰⁶ Homer became an Egyptian.²⁰⁷ This was the result of the Greek infatuation with myth, and the tendency of their philosophers to reflect upon their own culture and religion as but one expression of a shared human condition. Indeed, despite its own domineering influence, Hellenism “was held captive by those it had conquered.”²⁰⁸

the final Gospel's clear portrayal of Jesus' eating, Valentinus taught that “Jesus ate and drank in a special way, without excreting his solids. He had such a great capacity for continence that the nourishment within him was not corrupted for he did not experience corruption” (fragm. 3 *ap.* Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis*, III, 59, 3).

²⁰⁴ See Fowden, pp. 63-65.

²⁰⁵ The Middle Platonist and biographer Plutarch (d. 120 CE), for example, believed that “all religions are essentially one in spirit and aim, and that a common truth underlies all the diversified forms of religious faith” (L. L. Paine, *The Ethnic Trinities* (Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1901), p. 138).

²⁰⁶ This tradition would be perpetuated by the Romans. See Fowden, pp. 14-15, 30.

²⁰⁷ Fowden, p. 23, n. 61.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

Nowhere was the Greek preoccupation with Egypt, and the religious syncretism it engendered, more obvious and important than in Alexandria. Founded by Alexander in 332 BCE and located on the Egyptian coast with port access to a world of ideas, this matchless city became the greatest academic melting pot of the Hellenistic, and later the Roman empires. All religions mixed in the halls of the Alexandrian mystery schools, and all ways of life were traded in her agoras. Various syncretistic movements, like the mystical Hellenistic Judaism of Philo (d. 50 CE),²⁰⁹ and the diverse sects of Christian Gnosticism,²¹⁰ could likely call Alexandria their birthplace, or at least their place of greatest triumph.²¹¹ It was in this milieu that a “hybrid” Graeco-Egyptian culture had developed, and it is here that the traditional deities associated with those peoples first began to be mixed.²¹²

2. Hermes Trismegistus

Nine years after he founded Alexandria, the great Alexander was laid to rest in his golden sarcophagus, abandoning the wide world he’d conquered to the machinations of his generals. Those men had quickly divided the earth between them, and naturally warred for each other’s portions.²¹³ Egypt became the possession of Ptolemy I, who eventually proclaimed himself pharaoh in 305 BCE and established the great Ptolemaic dynasty. This Graeco-Egyptian empire exercised considerable influence with its rivals until its defeat at the hands of the inexorable Romans and the death of Queen Cleopatra VII, the last of the Ptolemaic rulers (30 BCE). But it was Ptolemy I, making his throne in Alexandria, who had first empowered the formal mixture of Greek and Egyptian gods.

The religion surrounding the god Serapis is a prime example of this syncretism. The cult was inaugurated by Ptolemy himself, and evidently as a means of unifying the Egyptians and Greeks within his kingdom. Serapis was a combination of the Egyptian gods Osiris and Apsis, and the Greek gods Demeter and Dionysus. Serapis was never appreciated anywhere as much as he was in Alexandria, and the cult certainly contributed to the uniqueness of that city. Indeed, Alexandria was often distinguished from Egypt proper, and in both the Hellenistic and Roman eras the city was formally called “Alexandria *near* Egypt.”²¹⁴ Interestingly, the native Egyptians appear to have reacted to the Hellenizing forces radiating out of Alexandria by drawing their own religious and cultural power into the city of Memphis, which became “a potent symbol in Egyptian eyes... an antitype of the Greek metropolis of Alexandria.”²¹⁵ Most Egyptians in the wider kingdom therefore did not really embrace the Serapis cult, which to them represented an obvious and forced effort to suture the Greek and Egyptian worlds together. Between the first and third centuries CE, the Greeks Porphyry and Plutarch continued to record an acute resistance to Greek religious thought among the Egyptian people, even hundreds of years after Ptolemy I began his campaign for harmony.²¹⁶ Nevertheless, Ptolemy’s great temple for Serapis stood in Alexandria and enjoyed popularity in that city until its destruction at the hands of a Christian mob in 389 CE, while the Serapis cult itself lasted until it was finally legislated out of existence by the establishment of Christian Trinitarianism as the sole Roman religion by Theodosius I (c. 381 CE).

Of course, the synthesis of other gods during the Ptolemaic dynasty proved equally durable. Relevant to our study was the combination of the Egyptian deity Thoth, and the Greek deity Hermes, who were easily identified with one another due to their similar characteristics. Thoth had been a highly popular deity among the Egyptians: he was a moon god, but never the Supreme God. Just as the moon receives its light from the Sun, Thoth was believed to receive his

²⁰⁹ For a brief introduction to mystical Hellenistic Judaism see Chandler, *The God of Jesus in Light of Christian Dogma*, pp. 375-378.

²¹⁰ For an account of Christian Gnosticism and its influence on orthodox Christianity, see *Ibid.*, pp. 82-123.

²¹¹ See J. Morris, *Revival of the Gnostic Heresy: Fundamentalism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 189.

²¹² Fowden, pp. 18-19.

²¹³ Alexander’s generals, and the founders of the great Hellenistic dynasties, were Antipater, Ptolemy I, Perdiccas, Antigonus I, Perdiccas, and Lysimachus.

²¹⁴ The official Roman title was *Praefectus Alexandriae et Aegypti*, and Romans in Alexandria spoke of traveling *to* Egypt (Peter Green, *From Ikarion to the Stars: Classical Mythification, Ancient and Modern* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), p. 173.

²¹⁵ Fowden, p. 41.

²¹⁶ Fowden, p. 20.

power from Re. Because Thoth governed the phases of the moon, he was also associated with the cosmic order. This even caused some to cast Thoth in a demiurgical light, believing him to have played a role in creation.²¹⁷ Also associated with him were writing, wisdom, science, and the spirit of invention; he was a heavenly scribe and responsible for not only recording divine messages, but for communicating those messages to mankind. Works of literature were eventually ascribed to Thoth, such as the famous *Book of the Dead*, originating around 1500 BCE and used until roughly 50 BCE.²¹⁸ Thoth's great popularity in Egypt, and his ability to assume diverse roles in different regions, facilitated the syncretism which overcame him in the centuries preceding the common era. It was not long before Greek settlers in Egypt began identifying Thoth as their own god Hermes, and for them this was natural identification: both were gods of wisdom and invention, and both conveyed messages from heaven, acting as spiritual guides for mankind.²¹⁹ Again, the total blending of the two was mostly a Greek habit, and only one movement in the larger crusade to establish kinship between the Greek and Egyptian peoples.²²⁰ Ultimately, "Hermes Trismegistus" (Hermes Thrice-greatest), is found to be an *Egyptianized* Hermes, rather than a Hellenized Thoth; he is the result of Greek application of Thothian attributes to Hermes. Thus, the peculiar Greek philosophical elements which had been associated with Hermes remained prominent in his later incarnation.

Before the syncretism with Thoth, Hermes had already been identified with the Greek philosophical concept of the *logos*, first envisioned by the Greek Heraclitus (d. 475 BCE) as the rational blueprint holding creation together.²²¹ After Heraclitus, however, there came to be no single concept of the *logos* among the Greeks; the word itself meant "reason" or "speech", and became useful for describing various principles in philosophy. The Stoics said the *logos* was the animating principle filling the cosmos; Aristotle said it was "reasoned discourse." Indeed, *logos* in Greek philosophy is frequently a principle not only permeating and even holding the universe together, but one that fills and empowers the inner man. The Jew and Middle Platonist Philo of Alexandria later taught that the *logos* was not only the biblical God's own reason, but also an intermediary entity, even an angelic, demiurgical being involved in creation. Jews translating and reading the Septuagint, the Greek Old Testament, had themselves used the term *logos* to refer to their God's creative speech and wisdom. And in the second century, Christian apologists like Justin Martyr, presumably under some influence of Philo,²²² identified God's *logos* as a divine being produced by God before creation, and ultimately, through a Platonic reading of the Gospel of John, identified this being as a pre-existent Jesus of Nazareth. But the ancient Greeks who first applied *logos* to Hermes did not first see this relationship as truly and personally incarnational. Because Hermes was a god of communication who transmitted divine messages to the world, he was seen as embodying the principle of *logos* (reason, or speech), but in this personification, "there is no incarnation but an equation of the revelatory and cosmogonic principle with a deity."²²³ This association of Hermes with the *logos*, an organizing force behind creation, was certainly explored by the Hermetic tradition which was taking shape by the common era.

3. Relationship with Judaism

The relationship between Graeco-Egyptian syncretism and Judaism is a close one. Alexandria, with its famous Jewish Quarter, had always boasted a significant Jewish population. It is probably true that the mystical Hellenistic

²¹⁷ Fowden, p. 24.

²¹⁸ See John Romer (ed.), *The Egyptian Book of the Dead* (London: Penguin, 2008).

²¹⁹ "For the Greeks Hermes was *psychopompous*, 'the guide of souls'" (David Fideler, *Jesus Christ, Sun of God: Ancient Cosmology and Early Christian Symbolism* (Wheaton: Quest Books, 1993), p. 226). See also Fowden, p. 19.

²²⁰ There was, interestingly, even a story that the renowned Greek poet Homer was actually an Egyptian, even a son of Hermes. See Fowden, p. 23.

²²¹ See Chandler, pp. 62-81.

²²² "Justin and the subsequent Fathers, we know, read Philo; and their thoughts and expressions often exhibit a remarkable coincidence with his. Indeed, so deeply are their writings imbued with his sentiments and spirit that without him, as Mosheim observes, they would often be 'altogether unintelligible.' No one who compares their sentiments in reference to the Logos with those entertained and expressed by him, can doubt, we think, that they must have been derived from a common source; and this could be no other than the doctrines of Plato, as explained by his later followers of the Alexandrian School" (Alvan Lamson, Ezra Abbott, *The Church of the First Three Centuries*. Toronto: University of Toronto Libraries, 1875, p. 69).

²²³ G. Kittel, G. Friedrich (eds.), "logos," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament: Abridged in One Volume* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), p. 507.

Judaism of Philo, and the Hermeticism forming around the first century CE, were products of the same environment, drawing from a common well of ideas.²²⁴ Indeed, both Hellenistic Judaism and Hermeticism show traces of mutual inspiration.

Scholars have recognized that the important Hermetic tractate *Poimandres* shows some signs of Judaic influence. The book's creation myth appears on the one hand inspired by Genesis, and on the other hand a pagan response to it. Genesis' tragic portrait of the Fall of Man is transformed by the Hermeticists into a willful descent of the Primal or archetypal Man through the heavenly spheres towards a beautiful Nature. This Fall is made not on the basis of disobedience, but love, and is performed with the blessing of God.²²⁵ Ultimately, elements from Genesis are spun together with Egyptian mythology and Platonic cosmology to form a grand and awe-inspiring creation narrative, which sets the backdrop for not only the *Poimandres*' teaching, but the entire Hermetic religion and life. For example, in *Poimandres* 9, 14, and 25, we find that this creation has produced seven Rulers of Fate that now dominate the world (these are, in fact, the archons of the seven planetary spheres mentioned the *Timaeus* by Plato). These planetary rulers appear in a variety of forms in the parallel Christian Gnostic systems, usually as evil guardians bent on misleading and controlling the lives of human beings.²²⁶ In Hermeticism, however, their disposition towards humanity is more ambiguous. Nevertheless, just as the biblical Adam's progeny are destined for salvation and reunion with God, so too the Hermeticists are destined to ascend upwards, back through the planetary spheres, to God the Father. Thus in both Judaism and Hermeticism there is a Fall of Man, as well as an undoing of that Fall. For the Hermeticists, learning the stages of creation was a way of learning how to return to the source of existence.²²⁷ We can assume that the Genesis creation account, with its stages of creation, provided fertile ground for Hermetic appropriation in this direction. Fowden writes that "The Hebrew creation-myth was bound to be of interest to anyone who, like the Hermetists, regarded cosmology as one of the foundations of philosophy; and the *Poimandres*' debt to Genesis was already remarked by Psellus. Recent scholarship has elaborated this perception, unearthed evidence for Jewish influence on other philosophical Hermetica too, and shown that the sources of this influence are to be looked for not just in the reading of the Septuagint, but also in personal contact with the liturgical life of Jews living in Egypt."²²⁸

Apart from these early mythological influences, the relationship between Judaism and Hermeticism continued during the medieval period, in which mystical Rabbinic commentaries, and works of Kabbalah, show signs of (probably) inadvertent Hermetic influence.²²⁹

4. The historical Hermes: Prophet of Christianity

At this point, we have mostly considered Hermes as a Graeco-Egyptian composite deity, a by-product of cultural fusion, even a political organism, and this is the persuasion of almost all modern scholars of the subject. But the writings of Christian authorities in the late Roman empire lend much to the establishment of an antique consideration of Hermes as a unique and *historical* personality. The opinions of several Church Fathers from the fourth century certainly paint his life as a real one, and one that was only elaborated upon and mythologized by his later pagan admirers.

Lucius Lactantius (c. 250-325 CE), according to Jerome a pupil of Arnobius (d. 330 CE), was a Christian philosopher and apologist, and an important religious advisor to Emperor Constantine. Lactantius speaks often of Hermes, and his

²²⁴ It is true, however, that Philo himself sought to distance Judaism from Egyptian religion, and to more closely associate himself and his background with the Roman world. For Philo, "Joseph and Moses pointed the way and indicated how contemporary Jews should physically live in Egypt, while being on a mental exodus from the country" (Marien Niehoff, *Philo on Jewish Culture and Identity* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), p. 74).

²²⁵ G.R.S. Meade, "Poemandres, the Shepherd of Men." *The Gnostic Society Library*. Web. Accessed 12 December 2016. *Poimandres* also shows influence from

²²⁶ Irenaeus says that the Ophite sect of Christian Gnostics gave names to the seven archons, and connected them not only to planets, but to Israelite prophets (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, I, 30, 5, 9-11). Christian Gnostic sources often identified these archons as the creators of Adam, and so explained the plural in Genesis 1:26.

²²⁷ Fowden, p. 105.

²²⁸ Fowden, p. 36.

²²⁹ See for example the 10th century commentary on the *Book of Creation* by Shabbetai Donnolo, and the 13th century texts of the *Zohar*.

disciple Asclepius, as real philosophical authorities.²³⁰ He believed this Hermes, sometimes called by his Roman name of Mercury, was a real contemporary of Moses who passed his wisdom to the Greek sages.²³¹ Lactantius is clearly sympathetic to Hermes and his books, and even an “admirer.”²³² The contents of the Hermetic tractate *Poimandres* were well-known by Lactantius,²³³ and in his own *Divine Institutes* he enthusiastically summons the work for support in at least fourteen passages.²³⁴ Despite the pagan claims about Hermes’ deification, Lactantius tells us: “He was a man, yet he was of great antiquity, and most fully imbued with every kind of learning, so that the knowledge of many subjects and arts acquired for him the name Trismegistus [“Thrice-great”]. He wrote books and those in great number, relating to the knowledge of divine things, in which he asserts the majesty of the supreme and only God, and makes mention of him by the same names which we use—God and Father.”²³⁵

Lactantius’ notice of Hermeticism’s monotheistic language and its surprising affinity with the ideas of the proto-orthodox Christians may prove to be an important subject in the study of how Christianity came to eventually supersede paganism in the wake of Lactantius’ patron, Constantine.²³⁶

Augustine of Hippo (354-430 CE), one of the most influential Christian thinkers of all time, follows Lactantius in his search for the historical Hermes,²³⁷ and ultimately appears to recognize *two* Hermes figures. One he calls by the Roman name Mercury, and it is this Hermes who was a man-become-god and the writer of the Hermetic texts. The second Hermes was thought by Augustine to be the grandson of an earlier Hermes, and this one was allegedly Moses’ contemporary.²³⁸ Augustine expresses diffidence, however, in establishing his opinion on whether or not they are still one and the same individual.²³⁹ Regardless, the man was to Augustine *historical*, and he ultimately places “the times of Mercury, whom they call Trismegistus, long before the sages and philosophers of Greece, but yet after Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, and even after Moses himself.”²⁴⁰ That the god Hermes Trismegistus was indeed once a human being, was evidently still a matter of discussion among the Hermeticists in Augustine’s day. Considering a Hermetic tractate on Hermes and Asclepius, Augustine records that “[Hermes] is said to be buried in Hermopolis, that is, in the city called by his name; so here are two gods whom [the writer] affirms to have been men, Asclepius and Mercury [Hermes]. Now concerning Asclepius, both the Greeks and Latins think the same thing; but as to Mercury, there are many who do not think he was formerly a mortal.”²⁴¹

Augustine’s writings show him to be less friendly to the Hermetic works than Lactantius: he both cites Hermes for support and criticizes him. One of Augustine’s most poignant passages regarding Hermes is his use of the Hermetic prophesies about a future demise of Egyptian culture to explain and promote the Christian triumph over Roman paganism playing out during his own lifetime. He interjects, however, some caution as he claims Hermes for the cause of Christianity, saying: “But when Hermes predicts these things, he speaks as one who is a friend to these same mockeries of demons, and does not clearly express the name of Christ... he bears witness to Christianity by a kind of mournful prophecy.” Though often harsh, his criticism of Hermes also appears tinged with respect. He identifies Hermes as belonging to a class of persons mentioned by Paul, who indeed *knew God*, “but became vain in their imaginations.”²⁴² For Hermes, says Augustine, “makes many such statements agreeable to the truth concerning the one

²³⁰ Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*, II, 9, 11, 16; IV, 4, 6, 8; VI, 25; VII, 4, 13, 18.

²³¹ John F. Nash, “Hermeticism: Rise and Fall of an Esoteric System: Part I,” *The Esoteric Quarterly*, Winter 2009 (Washington D.C., The Esoteric Quarterly Inc.), p. 43.

²³² *Ibid.*

²³³ Salaman, p. 115. See also Frances Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (London, 1964), p. 7.

²³⁴ Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*, I, 11; II, 11, 13, 15; IV, 6; V, 65; VI, 25; VII, 4, 9, 13; IX; XVI.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, I, 6.

²³⁶ See Elizabeth DePalma Digeser, *The Making of a Christian Empire: Lactantius and Rome* (London: Cornell University Press, 2000).

²³⁷ Augustine, *City of God*, VIII, 23, 24, 26, 39.

²³⁸ Clement Salaman, “Echoes of Egypt in Hermes and Ficino,” *Marsilio Ficino: His Theology, His Philosophy, His Legacy* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), p. 116.

²³⁹ “But are these two different individuals who were called by the same name? I will not dispute much whether they are different individuals or not?” (Augustine, *City of God*, VIII, 26).

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, VIII, 39.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, VIII, 26.

²⁴² Romans 1:21-32, cf. *City of God*, VIII, 23.

true God who fashioned this world. And I know not how he has become so bewildered by that ‘darkening of the heart’ as to stumble [into idolatry].”²⁴³ Augustine is often inclined to portray Hermes as a sort of mediating figure, torn between truth (Christianity) and the Egyptian cults, the latter being only treasured by him while “under the influence of a demon.”²⁴⁴ Augustine, like Lactantius, may demonstrate some degree of sympathy for Hermes in this regard, saying: “Is he not verily compelled by divine influence, on the one hand, to reveal the past error of his forefathers, and by a diabolical influence on the other hand, to bewail the future punishment of demons?”²⁴⁵ It becomes obvious that Augustine, recognizing his theological affinity with Hermes, is shocked and disappointed that Hermes is a pagan. Ultimately, the sentiments of Augustine and Lactantius demonstrate, as Fowden concludes, that “Hermes is a perilously ambiguous figure from the Christian point of view. His doctrine is part divine, part diabolical, a self-contradictory mixture of truth and falsehood.”²⁴⁶

IX. The nature of Hermetic religion

Having explored the background of Hermeticism’s central figure, and the syncretistic world which produced him, we may now embark on a brief analysis of the nature of the Hermetic tradition which eventually came to compete with Christianity.

1. Its relationship to Christian Gnosticism

In general, early Christian Gnosticism leans more into Oriental thought, and much more into myth than Hermeticism, which is more philosophical.²⁴⁷ Hermeticism, as a Hellenistic philosophy, is “more difficult to grasp than other ‘isms’ such as Platonism or Aristotelianism,”²⁴⁸ and Heinrich Dorrie called the Hermetic literature a “thing without corners and edges.”²⁴⁹ In this way, and others, the Hermetic tradition bears a close relationship to Christian Gnosticism. Indeed, there is enough in common between them for scholars to group them under the same “Gnostic” heading: both the Christian Gnostics and the Hermeticists believed that mankind contained a “spark” of the divine; both contended that personal knowledge of God, and of one’s own divinity, was possible for humanity; both had a central figure who couriered this divine, saving knowledge; and both rejected the material world and looked to escape the physical body in order to return to God. While these similarities are important, it is also necessary to recognize that “Hermeticism and Christian Gnosticism are, doctrinally, parallel rather than interlinked movements.”²⁵⁰

As we have already discussed, one of the most obvious and important differences was where they believed divine gnosis actually came from. For the Christian Gnostics, divine Gnosis came through Jesus Christ, while the Hermeticists looked to Hermes; in the world of Hermeticism, Jesus has no place. Another important difference is that Hermeticists did not hold to the typical Christian Gnostic view of creation. While the Christian Gnostics held creation and the Creator to be evil, Hermeticism painted both in a positive light, and even tended to see in creation necessary means to God’s ultimate plan.

In the end, we find that the precise origin-point of Hermeticism, as an exceptional and parallel religious force, is an event doomed to be shrouded by time and historical loss, and proves just as elusive as the birth of Christian Gnosticism. However, we do know, as Fowden reveals, that “Hermeticism is more Hellenic and *chronologically earlier*, at least in origins, than Christian Gnosticism, in which smaller elements of Greek philosophical thought than are to be found in the books of Hermes have become heavily overlaid by exotic oriental, especially Jewish, imagery. It would be mistaken, then, to

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ Ibid., VIII, 24.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

²⁴⁶ Fowden, p. 210.

²⁴⁷ Dodd, p. 101.

²⁴⁸ Florian Ebeling, *The Secret History of Hermes Trismegistus: Hermeticism from Ancient to Modern Times* (London: Cornell University, 2007), p. 11.

²⁴⁹ Heinrich Dorrie, *Opera Minora* (Munich, 1976), p. 104.

²⁵⁰ Fowden, p. 193.

imagine that Christian Gnosticism substantially influenced Hermeticism.”²⁵¹ In fact, the transmission of influence evidently went the other direction.²⁵²

Interestingly, several Hermetic works were found alongside works of Christian Gnosticism in the Nag Hammadi Codices (Codex VI). The discovery of these texts (*Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth*, *Prayer of Thanksgiving*, and *Asclepius*) amidst this Christian collection reveals a close kinship between the Christian and Hermetic forms of Gnosticism. Gnostic sects, being supremely syncretistic, must not have viewed as sharp a break between Christianity and Hermeticism as we might today. In the end, this may prove helpful in identifying the syncretistic streams of thought, and sects, which John had in mind during his Gospel’s writing.

2. The aim of Hermetic Gnosis

As Fowden reveals, there exists a “deeply Gnostic core” in Hermeticism.²⁵³ Gaining salvific Gnosis of God was certainly the chief aim of Hermeticism. But “the knowledge of God that the Hermetic initiation is supposed to bring is not an external knowledge, of one being by another, but an actual assumption by the initiate of the attributes of God: in short, divinization. The way of Hermes is the ‘way of immortality’; and its end is reached when the purified soul is absorbed to God, so that the reborn man, although still a composite of body and soul, can himself fairly be called a God.”²⁵⁴ Thus we read in *Poimandres*: “This is the good, the aim of those who have Gnosis: to become God.” We find this sentiment also paralleled in later Hellenistic philosophy which could arguably be labeled “Gnostic”, like that of the third-century philosopher Plotinus (204-270 CE), the so-called founder of Neoplatonism. He likewise looked “to approach and be united to the God over all.”²⁵⁵ With the goal of assimilation to God in mind, the Hermetic initiation “falls into two phases, the former emphasizing self-knowledge, the latter knowledge of God.”²⁵⁶ Interestingly, in the Hermetic concept of Gnosis, “Not only does Man wish to know God but God likewise desires to be known by the most glorious of his creations, Man; and to this end He freely bestows on the initiate some of His own power, mediated through a spiritual instructor.”²⁵⁷ But the reception of this Gnosis does not automatically guarantee salvation; the Hermeticist must renounce the world and worldly pleasures and be committed to a lifetime of piety and devotion to the truth.

3. The Hermetic Teacher-Disciple relationship and evangelism

One of the most prominent and unique features of the Hermetic tradition is the emphasis it placed on the teacher-disciple relationship. Gnosis of God was transmitted through this bond, and once it was received and mastered, the disciple then became the teacher responsible for passing on this knowledge to his own disciples. In this way, the whole world was to be saved through the teaching of Gnosis. Interestingly, by assuming the role of teacher, each Hermetic master could be viewed as an incarnation of the previous teacher—each master was Hermes Trismegistus, Shepherd and Logos of God.²⁵⁸ As Digeser observed: “Like Trismegistus, his disciples learned to achieve salvation through gnosis, by recognizing the Logos or Hermes-*Thoth* within themselves and following its guidance to the point where they know and join with God. They too much teach others.”²⁵⁹ Thus as *Poimandres* had taught Hermes, Hermes then became the teacher of his son *Tat*, and so on.

As Fowden notes, the Hermetic milieu had “a memorably evangelistic streak in it... *Poimandres* sends [Hermes] out ‘to become a guide to the worthy, that through you humankind may be saved by God.’”²⁶⁰ Nevertheless, Fowden

²⁵¹ Fowden, p. 114.

²⁵² Regarding the Hermetic and Christian Gnostic use of the important philosophical term “*homouosios*”, the earliest occurrence of which is in *Poimandres*, see Chandler pp. 105-106, 194; see also Pier Franco Beatrice, “The Word ‘*Homouosios*’ From Hellenism to Christianity,” *Church History*, Vol. 71, No. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 243-272.

²⁵³ Fowden, p. 105.

²⁵⁴ Fowden, p. 111.

²⁵⁵ Plotinus, in Porphyry, *On the Life of Plotinus and the Order of His Books*.

²⁵⁶ Fowden, p. 106.

²⁵⁷ Fowden, p. 104.

²⁵⁸ “In Hermetist mythology, Hermes Trismegistus and the spiritual guides he inspired were seen as incarnations of Hermes-*Thoth*, God’s *logos*” (Elizabeth DePalma Digeser, *Lactantius, Constantine and the Roman Res Publica* (Santa Barbara: University of California, 1996), p. 243).

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 244.

²⁶⁰ Fowden, pp. 158-159.

concludes, “the followers of Hermes [lacked] the organizing and missionary zeal (the Poimandres notwithstanding), or the common touch, that turned the teachings of Mani into a world religion.”²⁶¹

4. Hermes as Logos

During the period of Hellenistic syncretism we surveyed previously, the Greek god Hermes was viewed as the *logos*; he was the chief messenger, and interpreter of the will of heaven to humanity. In the New Testament era, we find that the Greeks maintained this association: they recognized the Apostle Paul as “Hermes” coming down to the earth, “because he was the chief speaker” (Acts 14:12). The Stoics made this Logos-Hermes a cosmological utility, and even a demiurgic creator. As Fowden notes, this may have been achieved by his growing association with Thoth, the Egyptian deity who had also taken on a demiurgical role in Egyptian creation mythology.²⁶²

Eventually, the Graeco-Egyptian Hermes Trismegistus came to not only embody the Logos, and, in most traditions a divinized human being, came to be an intermediary between God and mankind. Indeed, Hermes Trismegistus “was both god and man”;²⁶³ he was the “theos aner,” the divine man, and this was “the highest appreciation of late paganism and its most characteristic product.”²⁶⁴

5. Its literature

Hermetic thought is represented by literature commonly referred to as the *Hermetica*, a loose collection of dialogues and wisdoms texts regarding theology, cosmology, alchemy, astrology, and magic. These books enjoyed wide distribution and appreciation in the Roman empire,²⁶⁵ but many of the texts have proven difficult to date. Most scholars have dated the majority of the extant texts from the second and third centuries CE, while modern studies have now placed some of the most important texts in the first century.²⁶⁶ The subjects of the *Hermetica* are incredibly diverse, and different groupings such as “technical,” “astrological,” and “philosophical” have been discerned. As Fowden reveals, the philosophical *Hermetica* have now been redated to the late first century CE, and stretch into the third century.²⁶⁷ Some of the astrological *Hermetica* are now thought to have been in circulation in the second and first centuries BCE, and were being widely read by the first century CE.²⁶⁸ Quispel dates the Hermetic *Panaretos*, an astrological work, to the second century before the common era.²⁶⁹ Another astrological Hermetic text was evidently being read in the first century CE by Pamphilus the Alexandrian, who was later criticized by Galen for taking these texts too seriously.²⁷⁰ Ultimately, “it seems safe to say that by the mid-second century CE at the latest an impressive range of technical *Hermetica* was available throughout the Greek-speaking parts of the empire.”²⁷¹

How should we account for the diversity of the Hermetic texts? There is the interesting possibility that the technical and philosophical *Hermetica* actually represent different “schools” of Hermeticism, though the alchemist Zosimus was (arguably) able to demonstrate how the two could be brought into synthesis with one another.²⁷² What is certain is that the texts represent different degrees of skill and understanding within the Hermetic order: certain texts were intended to be initiatory, while others were aimed at more enlightened Hermeticists. Thus “aspiring Hermetic initiates were expected to proceed systematically from elementary to more sophisticated texts, just as the Platonist philosophers of the age graded Plato’s dialogues, for teaching purposes.”²⁷³

Several theories about the origin of thought represented in the *Hermetica* have been posited over the years. André-Jean Festugière found that the *Hermetica* contained surprisingly little “Egyptian” thought, and believed they represented

²⁶¹ Fowden, p. 193. For a brief account of the Gnostic religion of Mani, and its success and influence, see Chandler, pp. 113-114.

²⁶² Fowden, p. 24.

²⁶³ Fowden, p. 31.

²⁶⁴ Fowden, p. 153.

²⁶⁵ Fowden, p. 213.

²⁶⁶ Smalley, p. 52.

²⁶⁷ Fowden, p. xxii, 11.

²⁶⁸ Fowden, p. 3.

²⁶⁹ G. Quispel, “The Asclepius,” *Gnosis and Hermeticism*, p. 74.

²⁷⁰ Fowden, p. 161.

²⁷¹ Fowden, p. 162.

²⁷² Fowden, p. 120.

²⁷³ Fowden, p. 99.

a blend of current Greek philosophies.²⁷⁴ B.H. Stricker offered a divergent and intriguing theory that the Hermetica are actually Greek redactions of Egyptian religious literature, in a similar way that the LXX is a Greek redaction of Hebrew literature.²⁷⁵ In other words, the exterior form of the Hermetica is Greek, but internally they are Egyptian. In light of our survey of syncretistic attitudes within the Graeco-Egyptian culture, I am more inclined to agree more with Festugière, that the Hermetica are representative of mostly Greek thought. Antique Hermetica like *Panaretos* (c. 200 BCE), however, do rely much more on Egyptian religion and magic.²⁷⁶

a. Authorship of the Hermetica

The Hermetic works are almost all ascribed to Hermes Trismegistus, and some to his sons and disciples, Tat and Asclepius. Of course, modern scholars do not believe these works are as ancient as they often claim to be. The main body of extant Hermetic texts, being composed between the first and third centuries, come from an era in which personal ambition was viewed as antagonistic to the aims of the philosopher. To write pseudonymously was not necessarily an act of deceit, but more often an act of humility. Since Hermes Trismegistus was seen as the source of all wisdom and knowledge, it was right that the ancient philosophers would ascribe their writings to him.²⁷⁷

b. Poimandres

We will take a moment to consider one of the Hermetica in some detail, as it takes the largest role in our investigation of the Fourth Gospel. *Poimandres*, also known as Corpus Hermeticum I, is one of the most famous, important, and oldest of the Hermetic writings. As to its date, Quispel reveals that it is now thought to be from the first century CE *at the latest*.²⁷⁸ He argues, however, that the ideas contained in *Poimandres*, and in the rest of the Corpus Hermeticum, “can easily be much older.”²⁷⁹

Fowden considers *Poimandres* an initiatory text,²⁸⁰ and indeed it serves to lay the foundation for the broader Hermetic worldview. In the book, a divine being calling himself the Poimandres (probably meaning something like ‘Shepherd of Men’) appears to a disciple and engages in an apocalyptic discourse. The teacher tells of the creation of the world, the structure of the cosmos, and man’s destiny to return to God; in the end, he sends the disciple (whom we may take to be Hermes Trismegistus himself), on an evangelistic mission to teach others and lead them on a path of light and righteousness in a dark world. The book closes with the disciple’s hymn to “God the Father.”

i. General description of its affinities to GJohn

There are many uncanny parallels between the Gospel of John and *Poimandres*; the themes of Light, Life, Logos, fullness, truth, and sight are prevalent in both, along with the names Shepherd, Vine, and Door. In John’s famous and controversial prologue we read, “*In the beginning was the Logos... In it was Life, and the Life was the Light of men*” (John 1:1a, 4), while in *Poimandres* we read, “*Out of the Light... a holy Logos descended... Light and Life subsisting*” (5a, 9b). References to “light” occur nineteen times in *Poimandres*, with nine pairings of “light” and “life.” John likewise speaks of “light” twenty-three times, and pairs it with “life” at least twice. As Peake observes, “the combination of Logos, Life, and Light occurs in a way not paralleled elsewhere.”²⁸¹ The name “Poimandres” itself likely means something like “Man-Shepherd” in Greek, and the Hermetic emphasis on mankind’s spiritual journey in the care of a divine guide is also paralleled by John, who uses similar shepherd imagery and names to describe Jesus.²⁸² In both works we find a messenger from heaven, a teacher who acts as a benevolent shepherd safe-guarding the faithful through a dualistic world

²⁷⁴ A. J. Festugière, *La Revelation D'Hermes Trismegiste* (Les Belles Lettres, 1750).

²⁷⁵ Wim van den Dungen, “Ancient Egyptian Roots of the Principia Hermetica.” *The Ten Keys*. Web. Accessed 27 December 2016.

²⁷⁶ G. Quispel, “Hermes Trismegistos and the Origins of Gnosticism,” in R. van den Broek and C. van Heertum, *From Poimandres to Jacob Bohme: Gnosis, Hermeticism and the Christian Tradition* (Amsterdam: Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica, 2000), p. 155; see also April D. DeConick, *Recovering the Original Gospel of Thomas: A History of the Gospel and Its Growth* (New York: T&T Clark, 2006), p. 207.

²⁷⁷ Fowden, p. 187.

²⁷⁸ Quispel, “The Asclepius,” p. 75.

²⁷⁹ Quispel, “The Asclepius,” p. 74.

²⁸⁰ Fowden, p. 97.

²⁸¹ Arthur Samuel Peake, *A Critical Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1911), p. 202.

²⁸² Car Clemen, “Does the Fourth Gospel Depend Upon Pagan Traditions?” *The American Journal of Theology*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1908), p. 532.

of light and darkness, teaching mankind to reject “the world” and accept God’s teaching in order to be rejoined to God as his children.

The question of the priority of *Poimandres* over GJohn has been a thorny one.²⁸³ However, the prevailing modern opinion is that *Poimandres* was *not* influenced by the Gospel of John. In fact, in the whole of the Hermetic tradition, “Christian influences... are completely absent.”²⁸⁴ While Hermeticism was not influenced by John, neither did John truly “borrow” his doctrine of Jesus from *Poimandres*. As Dodd concluded, *Poimandres* and GJohn exist “without substantial borrowing” on either side.²⁸⁵ While it is true that John’s Christianity, as presented in his Gospel, does not owe Hermeticism for its philosophical, Christological, or soteriological backbone, we will see that it is not insulated from Hermeticism. John is all too aware of Hermes, and probably the Hermetic literature like *Poimandres*—and rather than truly borrowing from it, sallies forth to meet and compete with it on its own terms.

X. John’s historical awareness of Hermetic thought and/or literature

Having performed a brief overview of Hermeticism, we must now establish the probability of the writer(s) of the Fourth Gospel’s awareness of Hermetic thought and/or literature.

1. The spread of Hermetic teaching

Many modern scholarly objections to a relationship between GJohn and Hermeticism involve the apparent lateness of the majority of Hermetic sources.²⁸⁶ Of course, objections of this sort largely depend on how one dates both GJohn and the origins of Hermeticism. Early dating of the Gospel, like that of J.A.T. Robinson, puts GJohn prior to 70 CE.²⁸⁷ Bultmann on the other hand saw a range of 80-120 CE for the whole period of redaction,²⁸⁸ and C.K. Barrett considered 90 CE the earliest possible date, with 140 CE as the latest possible date.²⁸⁹ If one subscribes to a second-century date for the Gospel, then it is drawn indisputably in line with the common dating for much of the extant Hermetica, which date from the 2nd-3rd centuries CE. Of course, nearly all Johannine experts now, in light of the DSS, do not date GJohn after 110 CE.²⁹⁰ But even if one were to hold to a common date for GJohn, like 90-95 CE, there is no difficulty in connecting it to a time of widespread Hermeticism.

As we have already seen, some of the astrological and alchemical Hermetic material dates to before the common era, and some of the most important works of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, including the *Poimandres*, are now dated within the first century CE. However, we need not rely on the dating of the Hermetic texts themselves. Barrett, though dating the extant Hermetica to the second century and beyond, found that they were “incorporating matter almost certainly early enough to be contemporary with John.”²⁹¹ Indeed, the exact Hermetic books we have in our possession could easily have had earlier predecessors, and at the very least we can say that the teachings they contain were in circulation before their composition. Our justification for this sort of conclusion can easily be located in the fact that while most scholars date the Synoptic Gospels (widely thought to be the earliest Christian accounts of the life of Jesus), between 50-70 CE, their ideas were obviously circulating before the Synoptics were composed. Similarly, according to the Q

²⁸³ “Reitzenstein, the most recent editor of the *Poimandres* and probably the highest authority on the subject, dates it earlier, and thinks it has influenced Paul as well as John, though he rejects the idea that the Gospel can be explained out of the Hermetic literature. Grill seems inclined to admit the probability of influence; Clemen thinks it is really possible, but by no means certain, since it is not clear that the Gospel is the later. Mead in his *Thrice Greatest Hermes* strongly advocates the priority of the *Poimandres* and its influence on the Gospel. The latest discussion of the Hermetic literature, including an argument for early date, is to be found in Petrie’s *Personal Religion in Egypt*” (Peake, p. 202).

²⁸⁴ G. Quispel, “The Asclepius: From the hermetic Lodge in Alexandria to the Greek Eucharist and the Roman Mass,” *Gnosis and Hermeticism: From Antiquity to Modern Times* (New York: SUNY Press, 1998), p. 74.

²⁸⁵ Dodd, p. 53.

²⁸⁶ Keener, pp. 164-165.

²⁸⁷ J.A.T. Robinson’s *The Priority of John* (1984).

²⁸⁸ Rudolph Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971), p. 12.

²⁸⁹ C.K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978 [1955]), pp. 127-128.

²⁹⁰ Charlesworth, “The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Gospel according to John”, pp. 65-67.

²⁹¹ Barrett, p. 38.

hypothesis,²⁹² an earlier Gospel document predated the Synoptics and ultimately contributed material to them. The content of some of the Hermetic texts may have experienced a similar career, first existing as oral preaching before being translated into text collections which, after undergoing a series of revisions and borrowings, ultimately formed the Hermetic corpus we possess. As Willoughby explains, “in the first century A.D. there were people who thought and felt and desired as they are represented in the Hermetic writings. Of this we may be assured. Whatever the date of the writings, Hermetic religion itself was older. A religion is always experienced and lived before it is recorded.”²⁹³ Indeed, “the writing down of a tradition does not date the tradition.”²⁹⁴ As even Stephen Smalley concurs, “[It is] possible for the ideas which were eventually incorporated in the written form of the Hermetica to have been in circulation in the Mediterranean world at a much earlier date, and to have influenced the writing of the Fourth Gospel.”²⁹⁵ And finally, as Arthur Peake concluded, “There is no reason whatever why a Palestinian who had lived in Asia... should have been unfamiliar with Hermetic speculations, if it can be granted that they had been formulated before his time.”²⁹⁶

2. The Naassenes: Possible opponents?

One early group which made use of Hermetic teaching, usually identified as a Christian Gnostic sect,²⁹⁷ is the sect of the Naassenes. The Naassenes may in fact prove to have been among GJohn’s targets: in the 1800’s, scholar Christian Bunsen indeed held that John had the Naassene sect specifically in mind as he composed in his writings.²⁹⁸ At this stage, however, the evidence seems too scant to arrive definitively at such a conclusion. Nevertheless, the evidence for the Naassenes which we do have is worth considering: if they were not themselves GJohn’s target, then they at least represent the kind of syncretistic, quasi-Christian and Hermetic sensibilities the Gospel challenges.

a. Date, Nature of the sect

Our information about the Naassenes comes from Hippolytus, who documents a Naassene sermon in his *Refutation of All Heresies*.²⁹⁹ Various theories about non-Christian, and pre-Christian Naassenism have been suggested.³⁰⁰ Some have posited that the Naassenes are to be identified with the Ophites mentioned by Origen, who rejected Jesus completely.³⁰¹ However, the Naassenes of Hippolytus are certainly “Christian”, or at least appreciate Jesus or make use of him.

The Naassene sermon gives us considerable insight into the syncretistic nature of the sect: the document involves references to Attis, Pan, and Osiris, and cites both Homer and the Christian Gospels, including the Gospel of Thomas. As Dodd surmised, if it has any particular religious aim, “it would seem to be to show that all religions are manifestations of one esoteric truth.”³⁰² Because the Naassene sermon addresses the pagan Hymn to Attis, the text dates probably to the Hadrianic period (117-138 CE).³⁰³ It at least dates after the composition of GJohn, or one of its revisions, as the sermon appears to reference the Gospel several times.³⁰⁴ But the author of the sermon was not likely among the first

²⁹² The “Q source” is a theoretical collection of Jesus’ sayings which the Synoptics appear to have utilized as a source for their information about Jesus and his teachings. For a positive view of the Q hypothesis, see John S. Kloppenborg, *Q, the Earliest Gospel: An Introduction to the original Stories and Sayings* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008); for the negative, see Mark Goodacre, *The Case Against Q: Studies in Markan Priority and the Synoptic Problem* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2002).

²⁹³ Harold R. Willoughby, *Pagan Regeneration: A Study of Mystery Initiations in the Graeco-Roman World* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2007 [1929]), pp. 201-202.

²⁹⁴ James H. Charlesworth, “The Theological Value of the ‘Rejected Texts’ and the Dead Sea Scrolls for Understanding Jesus,” Lanier Theological Library, March 2017.

²⁹⁵ Smalley, p. 52.

²⁹⁶ Arthur Samuel Peake, *A Critical Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1911), pp. 202-203.

²⁹⁷ E. Glenn Hinson, *The Church Triumphant: A History of Christianity Up to 1300* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1995), p. 64.

²⁹⁸ See John H. A. Ebrard, *Biblical Commentary on the Epistles of St. John* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1860), p. 24.

²⁹⁹ Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies*, V, 6.3-11; X, 9.1.

³⁰⁰ Edward C. Hegeler, “Criticism and Discussions,” *The Monist*, Vol. 18 (Chicago: Open Court Publishing Co., 1908), p. 602.

³⁰¹ Origen, *Contra Celsus*, VI, 28. These so-called Ophites “would not hear the name of Jesus.”

³⁰² Dodd, pp. 98-99.

³⁰³ A.D. Nock in *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, p. 49, 115 cited in Charles Evan Hill, *The Johannine Corpus in the Early Church* (Oxford: OUP, 2004), p. 232.

³⁰⁴ Nagel, *Rezeption*, pp. 299-315, cited in Hill, p. 232. Hill writes: “It may be that John’s own spirit/flesh dualism was found particularly congenial, though the dualism of the Naassene author is more metaphysical than ethical” (Hill, p. 234).

of the Naassenes.³⁰⁵ A date between 95-100 CE seems appropriate for origins of the sect.³⁰⁶ If Reitzenstein's date of 100 CE for the Naassene sermon is correct,³⁰⁷ their origins might be pushed back further into the last quadrant of the first century, and indeed some have done so.³⁰⁸ After all, Hippolytus considered them the very oldest of the Gnostic sects.³⁰⁹ Regardless, the Naassenes ultimately appear to find their rise around the same time as most dates for John's Gospel.

b. Use of Hermetica, *Poimandres*

In 1901, R. Reitzenstein, the then authority on *Poimandres*, argued that within the Naassene Sermon recounted by Hippolytus was a reflection of Egyptian lore found in the *Poimandres*.³¹⁰ In Hippolytus' account of their beliefs, we do find them holding to the same cosmological structure, and a similar creation-mythology as that of *Poimandres* and other Hermetic writings. The Naassenes are thought to have earned their name due to their use of the symbol of the snake (the Hebrew for snake is Naacash). The snake is, of course, a symbol of both Hermes and his student Asclepius. The Naassenes connected the snake in the garden of Eden to the generation of a watery substance which provided the basis for all creation; this "watery substance" motif also appears in *Poimandres* creation account. *Poimandres* furthermore had emphasized, as did the Naassenes and other Gnostic sects, the motif of the Primal Man. In addition to these Hermetic affinities, the Naassenes were clearly inundated with the Isis and Osiris cult, further demonstrating their deep Alexandrian, Graeco-Egyptian roots. The earliest Christian Gnostics had probably derived the foundations of their thought from pagan and Jewish speculation in Alexandria, where the Hermetic tradition was beginning to blossom in the first century CE. Thus, as Baynes writes, "Gnostic Schools that were in contact with Alexandrian thought certainly equated Hermes with Christ, also the titles Thrice-born, Thrice-begotten and Triple-power, occurring in our treatise, recall the well-known name of Hermes—Thrice-greatest. In the Greek magical papyri are found invocations and prayers to Hermes as the Logos, and Hippolytus, in the *Ref. Haer.*, points to the identification, by the Naassene School, of Hermes with the Logos and Christ. Commenting on the doctrines derived by the Gnostics from the Greeks, and by the latter from the Egyptians, Hippolytus thus quotes the Naassene teacher: 'For Hermes is Logos... the utterer and fashioner of the things that have been, that are, and that will be...' (Hippol. V, 7)."³¹¹

c. Hermes-Logos-Christ doctrine

Could the Naassenes have identified Jesus with the Hermes-Logos before the Gospel of John was written? Given the overlap between the rise of the Naassenes and popular dates for GJohn's writings, could John have even composed his prologue, with its teaching on the Logos, in order to compete with Naassene Christological speculation? It is much more likely that the Naassene association of Christ with the Hermes-Logos was achieved in the wake of GJohn, which the (probably) later Naassene writers clearly made use of. Regardless, in the Naassene sect, we encounter a movement active around the time of GJohn's composition making use of Hermeticism, as well as Christianity. Such an overlap between the Hermetic ideal and the Christian faith, and its power to draw members of his community away, was surely what John feared, and, I believe, worked to resist.

3. John in Ephesus

The tradition that GJohn was published in Ephesus is an old one. Irenaeus, in the second century, writes that "John, the disciple of the Lord... did himself publish a Gospel during his residence at Ephesus in Asia."³¹² As Trebilco

³⁰⁵ G. Salmon, "Ophites" in *DCB*, IV, p. 86, cited in Hill, p. 232.

³⁰⁶ There has yet to be any consensus reached on an exclusively post-first century date for the Naassenes. See Nathaniel Schmidt, "The New Jesus Myth and Its Ethical Value," *International Journal of Ethics*, Vol. 22 (London: George Allen & Co., 1912), p. 30.

³⁰⁷ Richard Reitzenstein, *Hellenistic Mystery Religions: Their Basic Ideas and Significance* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1978), p. 14.

³⁰⁸ Some scholars have indeed argued that the tradition to which the Naassenes belonged, "can hardly be placed later than the latter part of the first century" (Henry L. Mansel, *Gnostic Heresies of the First and Second Centuries* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2008 [1875]), p. 104.

³⁰⁹ Hippolytus, *Philosophumena*, 5, 1.

³¹⁰ See G. Quispel, "Review: Hellenistische Erlösung in christlicher Deutung by J. Frickel," *Vigiliae Christianae*, Vol. 39, No. 2 (Leiden: Brill, 1985), p. 196.

³¹¹ Charlotte A. Baynes, *A Coptic Treatise Contained in the Codex Bezae Cantabrigiae* (Cambridge: CUP, 2013 [1933]), p. 156.

³¹² Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, III, 1, 1.

explains, because Irenaeus tells us where Mark was written, but does not say where Matthew and Luke were written, his comment “is not something he has created in order to be able to locate each Gospel in a certain place. It is much more likely that it goes back to local Asian tradition.”³¹³ Irenaeus also connects John to Ephesus by recounting an episode related to him by disciples of John, in which John had a public dispute with the Gnostic Cerinthus in that city,³¹⁴ and wrote his Gospel specifically with this enemy in mind.³¹⁵ Regardless, we have the historical foundation for a belief among the second-century Christians that John wrote his Gospel with the intent on repudiating gnosticizing tendencies which evidently threatened his message and community. F.F. Bruce comments that Irenaeus ultimately did not try to prove John's presence in Ephesus, but “he refers to his residence incidentally, as something which was common knowledge.”³¹⁶ As Trebilco concludes, this points to Irenaeus' dependence on an established tradition.³¹⁷ This tradition of Ephesian origins for the Fourth Gospel is one which most scholars have had no problem perpetuating.³¹⁸

4. Pauline conflict with Gnosis: Naassenes in Ephesus?

Christian Gnosticism, which we recall likely owes a good deal to the Graeco-Egyptian synthesis of Alexandria (and evidently to the Hermetic tradition),³¹⁹ was already growing in Ephesus by the mid to late first century CE. We have evidence that even Paul, in his letters to the Ephesians,³²⁰ and in 1 Timothy,³²¹ was dealing with pervasive proto-Gnostic speculation in the community there. Tertullian and Irenaeus, in their own treatises against the Gnostics, both identify the teaching in Ephesus which Paul refuted as an early form of Gnosticism.³²²

Interestingly we also find some evidence for the presence of the Naassenes in Ephesus. J. B. Lightfoot actually connects the specific heresy being addressed in Ephesus by Paul directly to the Naasenes.³²³ Similarly, Christian Bunsen even held that John had the Naassene sect specifically in mind as he composed in his writings.³²⁴ Lightfoot and Bunsen's contentions were not without their challengers, however,³²⁵ and it may be impossible to ever answer these questions definitively. But there is at least enough evidence to begin considering a Naassene presence in Ephesus.

Hippolytus tells us that the Naassene mythology revolved largely around a “Mother of the gods”, who was called Cybele, or Artemis by the Ionian Greeks. Artemis was, of course, the chief goddess of Ephesus, and her ascetic worship contributed to a “matriarchal culture” in that city which had a long history of contempt for the male sex, and of dismissal

³¹³ Paul Trebilco, *The Early Christians in Ephesus from Paul to Ignatius* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007 [2004] p. 256.

³¹⁴ See Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3, 11, 1-2. According to Irenaeus, Polycarp related a story passed on to him by the Apostle John: John had once entered a bathhouse in Ephesus, and upon seeing that Cerinthus was inside, got up and rushed out of the building saying, “Let us fly, lest even the bath-house fall down, because Cerinthus, the enemy of truth, is within” (Ibid., 3, 3, 4).

³¹⁵ Today, a variety of objections have been raised to identifying a Johannine relationship with a “Cerinthus” or even a “Cerinthian” sect. See Street, pp. 276-284. Street includes notice of these possibilities, however: “one might claim, as K. Wengst does, that the secessionists [of 1 John] held to a primitive form of Cerinthianism which taught separation Christology alone and had not yet linked it to a gnostic cosmogony or doctrine of the Pleroma, both of which were later innovations of Cerinthus... A variation of this approach is found in Carson, who believes that 1 John addresses some form of proto-gnostic doctrine akin to what Irenaeus associated with Cerinthus. But, he argues early Gnosticism is a ‘smorgasbord religion’ and not all the teachings of Cerinthus must necessarily be present in the Johannine opponents” (Street, p. 74).

³¹⁶ Bruce, cited in Trebilco, p. 257.

³¹⁷ Ibid.

³¹⁸ Trebilco, p. 254; Andreas J. Kostenberger, L. Scott Kellum, Charles L. Quarles, *The Lion and the Lamb: New Testament Essentials from The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2012), p. 109.

³¹⁹ Chandler, pp. 102-105.

³²⁰ “There is also a corrective to Gnosticism in Ephesians, namely its moralism... This exposition is pointedly anti-Gnostic” (Helmut Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament*, Vol. 2 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2000 [1982]), p. 275).

³²¹ “These Gnostics were concerned with ‘endless genealogies’ (1 Timothy 1:4). They went in for ‘profane myths’ about them (1 Timothy 4:7). They turned their ears away from the truth to myths (2 Timothy 4:4)” (William Barclay, *The Letters to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2003 [1957]), p. 33).

³²² Tertullian writes that the “myths and endless genealogies” rejected by Paul in 1 Timothy 1:4 were “the seeds of heresy even then shooting forth” (Tertullian, *Against the Valentians*, 3). Irenaeus named his work *On the Detection and Overthrow of the Falsely-called Knowledge* (gnosis); echoing Paul's admonition in 1 Timothy 6:20, “O Timothy, guard that which is committed unto thee, turning away from the profane babblings and oppositions of the knowledge (gnosis) which is falsely so called.”

³²³ J. B. Lightfoot, “The Date of the Pastoral Epistles: Additional Note on the Heresy Combated in the Pastoral Epistles,” *Biblical Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1893), pp. 411-418.

³²⁴ See John H. A. Ebrard, *Biblical Commentary on the Epistles of St. John* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1860), p. 24.

³²⁵ See Theodor Zahn, *Introduction to the New Testament*, Vol. 2 (New York: Scribner's, 1909), p. 126.

of marriage.³²⁶ Here we find an environment in which the Naassenes would have thrived: Hippolytus describes the Naassenes as not only developing endless mythology around the Mother Goddess, but also shunning intercourse and marriage.³²⁷ There was also a tendency among the Naassenes, as with most Christian Gnostic sects, to revise the Genesis creation account. In the Naassene revision, the first created “Man” was androgynous; male and female were created simultaneously. In their view, it was only later that the male and female beings were separated. This vision likely contributed to or was enhanced by the female-dominated cultic world of Ephesus. In 1 Tim 1:4 and 4:3, we find Paul clearly writing against an ascetic, mythologizing Christian heresy in that city. Paul complains that these persons “devote themselves to myths” and “forbid marriage.” The suggestion that the target of Paul’s attack is a Naassene, or at least a Gnostic sect in Ephesus is further strengthened by the fact that Paul feels compelled to encourage women in childbirth, that is, in marriage and intercourse (1 Tim 2:15), and to reinforce the Genesis creation account, saying: “For it was Adam who was first created, and then Eve. And it was not Adam who was deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression” (1 Tim 2:13-14).

Scholars who ascribe Pauline authorship to 1 Timothy hold that it was written toward the end of Paul’s ministry around 62-67 CE. The case could be made that by the time John relocated to Ephesus and wrote his Gospel, probably around 90-95 CE, the Naassene influence had time to blossom in that city, and make use of Hermetic teaching and Hermetic documents, like an early version of the *Poimandres*, ultimately giving rise to the Hermeticizing Naassene sermon recounted by Hippolytus produced around the opening of the second century.

At the very least, we encounter a Gnostic presence in Ephesus in Cerinthus. At best, we find a Naassene (Hermetic) presence. And if we are not satisfied that Hermeticism may have presented itself to John by these avenues, then the pagans in Ephesus may serve to fill in the gap.

5. Hermes cult in Ephesus

Still standing in Ephesus today is the site of Domitian Square, where we find a large block bearing a relief of Hermes. On the other side of the block is an image of the Caduceus, or the Staff of Asclepius, bearing the symbol of the snake; Hermes is depicted as shepherd, guarding a ram. One hundred miles north of Ephesus, in Pergamum, lies the great hospital called the Asclepion, the west’s first medical school where the great second-century physician Galen once taught (we recall his awareness of Hermetic literature being read in the first century BCE).³²⁸ The hospital was dedicated to Asclepius, who, according to the *Hermetica*, was the student of Hermes Trismegistus, and has an entire Hermetic book named after him.³²⁹

That Ephesus itself was saturated in Graeco-Egyptian tradition is clear; down the road from the Domitian square sits the Temple to Serapis, the mystical cult first established in Alexandria. Ephesus was also the site of the Domitian Temple, the first temple ever dedicated to an emperor. Domitian was, of course, the Roman emperor who exiled John to the island of Patmos, and the structures at the site date to the time of his reign (81-96 CE), which also encompass the usual range of dates now agreed upon by most scholar’s for John’s Gospel.³³⁰ Sufficient to say, there is here the perfect breeding ground for a Hermetic presence in the pagan world which birthed the Fourth Gospel, and a presence which was likely already being felt by the Christian community first established there by Paul.

³²⁶ A matriarchal culture in Asia, founded by the Amazonian women, is described by the ancient historians Callimachus, Herodotus, Trogus, Siculus, and Pausanius. Trogus writes: “[The female founders of Ephesus] dismissed all thought of intermarriage with their neighbors, calling it slavery rather than marriage. They embarked instead upon an enterprise unparalleled in the whole of history, that of building up a state without men and then actually defending it themselves, out of contempt for the male sex... Then, with peace assured by their military success, they entered into sexual relationships with surrounding peoples so that their line would not die out... they also seized a number of city-states in Asia. Here they founded Ephesus” (J. Yardly, *Epitome of the Philippic History of Pompeius Trogus* (Oxford: OUP, 1994), p. 29).

³²⁷ “According to this account of theirs, the intercourse of woman with man is demonstrated, in conformity with such teaching, to be an exceedingly wicked and filthy [practice]” (Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies*, V). See also Hippolytus, *Philosophumena*, 5, 4.

³²⁸ Fowden, p. 161.

³²⁹ Philo makes mention of the Therapeutae, an ascetic group thriving around 20 CE. They were the mystic followers of the god Asclepius, exhibiting a fusion of Greek, Roman, and Egyptian religion and medicine.

³³⁰ Glyde E. Fant, Mitchell G. Reddish, *A Guide to Biblical Sites in Greece and Turkey* (Oxford: OUP, 2003), pp. 186-189.



Caduceus symbol (two snakes on staff); Rod of Asclepius (one snake)

6. The Shepherd of Hermas

We will consider one more piece of evidence which leads to the plausibility of John's awareness of Hermeticism, particularly Hermetic literature. The *Shepherd of Hermas* was a popular Christian book in the second and third centuries, and one included in the Codex Sinaiticus along with the NT documents. As Ehrman notes, “judging from the manuscript remains, it was copied and read more widely in the second and third centuries than any other noncanonical book, even more than many of the books that later came to be included in the New Testament.”³³¹ The text was even thought to be inspired by some (gnosticizing) Christians like Origen.³³² *Shepherd* is commonly dated to the late first century, usually around 90 CE, which happens to be a popular date for the Fourth Gospel. J.A.T. Robinson, not surprisingly, dates it earlier, before 85 CE.³³³ On the other hand, Dunn puts the date to around 130-150 CE.³³⁴

The importance of this book for our study is its relationship with the Hermetic book *Poimandres*. The name “Hermas” is, of course, easily connected to “Hermes.” In both the *Shepherd of Hermas* and *Poimandres*, a divine Shepherd appears to a disciple and delivers an apocalyptic discourse; G.R.S. Mead confirmed that the Christian work *Shepherd of Hermas* is strongly tinged with Hermetic elements and shows an affinity to Hermetic literature, and that the work probably drew its ideas from what was originally a fuller text of the *Poimandres*. Ultimately, Mead concludes: “the way is cleared for pushing back the earlier *Poimandres* document well into the first century, and for ranking it, therefore, as at least contemporary with the earliest of the New Testament writings.”³³⁵

XI. Johannine parallels with Hermeticism

Now that we have established a foundation for John's historical awareness of Hermeticism, we may consider some of the more striking parallels between GJohn and Hermetic literature. In the end, these parallels should, as C.K. Barrett argued, make it “clear that John was working with similar presuppositions and along similar lines to those of the Hermetic authors.”³³⁶ Our task will be, of course, to determine whether these parallels are accidental or not, and if not, then to learn just what John's intentions were.

1. GJohn's parallels with Hermetic literature

There are undeniable similarities between many ideas in the Hermetica and the Gospel of John. But in establishing a real link, it is important to remember that we are not only concerned with similarities, but with the frequency, concentration, and peculiar combination of ideas between any two sources. It is also important to remember that my proposal does not truly involve a deep reliance on Hermeticism for its doctrine, but instead involves a heavy

³³¹ Bart D. Ehrman, *Apostolic Fathers*, 2.162, cited in James Dunn, *Neither Jew Nor Greek: A Contested Identity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), pp. 123-124.

³³² Charles H. Hoole, *The Shepherd of Hermas* (London: Rivingtons, 1870), p. xii; see also Jostein Adna, *The Formation of the Early Church* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), p. 256.

³³³ J.A.T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2000), p. 335.

³³⁴ James Dunn, *Neither Jew nor Greek: A Contested Identity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), p. 125.

³³⁵ G.R.S. Meade, *Thrice Greatest Hermes*, Vol. 2, p. 386; another modern study finds *The Shepherd of Hermas* being composed around 100 CE (Harry O. Maier, *The Social Setting of the Ministry as Reflected in the Writings of Hermas* (Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2002), p. 58

³³⁶ C.K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978 [1955]), p. 38.

modification and adaptation of exterior Hermetic forms, in order to present what is internally Jewish-Christian doctrine. Though the parallels are strong, and in my view deliberate, they are nevertheless superficial: John's true background is in Palestinian Judaism, and in the LXX.

In this light, objections like Keener's seem to lose their impact: Keener, quoting Yamauchi, stresses that many of the Hermetic terms are missing from GJohn, and this "suggests that it is not as dependent on the Hermetica as we might suppose."³³⁷ Furthermore, he points out that "only about 4 percent of John's words do not appear in the LXX, 60 percent of John's words do not appear in the Hermetica. This suggests that John's vocabulary is derived primarily from the Jewish Bible in its Greek form."³³⁸

But this should not be surprising if John is not truly reliant on Hermetica and is only making use of them in order to support a worldview which is more reliant on the LXX.

A forty percent affinity of vocabulary between GJohn and the Hermetica is still worth paying attention to, especially since it is not merely a terminological alignment that we are looking for, but an emphasis, frequency, and concentration of ideas in order to establish a link between sources.

Of all the Hermetic literature, the Fourth Gospel shows the most affinity with two tractates, *Poimandres*, and *On Rebirth*, also known as *C.H. I*, and *C.H. XIII* respectively. Below we will survey several thematic parallels which GJohn has with this literature:

a. Dualism

Theme	Hermeticism	GJohn
<i>The world is split between light and darkness, "above" and "below"</i>	"the way above..." (<i>Poimandres</i> , 24) "As above, so below" (<i>Hermetic maxim</i>)	"You are from below; I am from above" (8:23)
<i>The pairing of Light and Life</i>	"I go to Life and Light" (<i>Poimandres</i> , 32)	"I am the Light of the world; he who follows me... will have the Light of Life" (8:12)
<i>Light enlightening mankind</i>	"I may give the Light to those in ignorance of the Race, my Brethren, and thy Sons" (<i>Poimandres</i> , 32) "O Light illumine [the All in us]" (<i>On Rebirth</i> , 19)	"there was the true Light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man" (1:9)

b. God, man, and creation

Theme	Hermeticism	GJohn & 1 John
<i>God as Light</i>	"That Light, he said, am I, thy God" (<i>Poimandres</i> , 6).	"God is light; in him there is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5)
<i>God the Father creates through the Logos</i>	"O God... Holy art thou, who didst by Word (Logos) make to consist the things that are." (<i>Poimandres</i> , 31)	"In the beginning was the Word (Logos)... It was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through it, and apart from it nothing came into being that has come into being." (John 1:1-3)
<i>God the Father loves Man/ the Son of Man and gives him authority over all men in the cosmos</i>	"Father... did bring forth Man co-equal to himself, with whom he fell in love, as being his own child... assent was given him by the Father... he was to have his whole authority... and to subdue the	"The Father loves the Son" (5:20) "knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands" (8:3)

³³⁷ Yamauchi, "Mandaean Studies," p. 92, quoted in Keener, p. 165.

³³⁸ Keener, p. 165.

	might... So he who hath the whole authority over [all] the mortals in the cosmos..." (<i>Poimandres</i> , 1:12-14)	"For you gave him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him" (17:2)
<i>"Going to the Father" as the teacher and the disciples' goal</i>	"And then they, in a band, go to the Father" (<i>Poimandres</i> , 26)	"I go to the Father" (14:28) "no one comes to the Father..." (14:6) "I ascend to My Father and your Father..." (20:17)
<i>The Logos</i>	In <i>Poimandres</i> , the Logos is a second God, God's son, who shares a substance with the Father. Elsewhere, Hermes Trismegistus is also identified with the Logos.	The Logos is God's divine reason or command. It resembles the logos of the LXX, God's creative expression. It is personified or embodied in Jesus Christ (1:1-14).

c. Discipleship

Theme	Hermeticism	GJohn
<i>The true disciple will not "stay in darkness"</i>	"but he who through a love that leads astray, expends his love upon his body—he stays in darkness wandering" (<i>Poimandres</i> , 19)	"I have come as Light into the world, so that everyone who believes in me will not stay in darkness." (12:46)
<i>The disciple's fruit will not pass away</i>	"Happy am I, my son, that thou hast brought the good fruits forth of truth, products that cannot die." (<i>On Rebirth</i> , 19)	"I chose you, and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit, and that your fruit would remain..." (15:16)
<i>The disciple's sorrow will be replaced with joy</i>	"Gnosis of joy hath come to us, and on its coming, son, sorrow will flee away to them who give it room." (<i>On Rebirth</i> , 8)	"Truly, truly, I say to you, that you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice; you will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy." (16:20)
<i>Doing the "will of God" sustains the disciple's life</i>	"Thus cry the powers in me. They sing thy praise, thou All; they do thy will. From thee thy will... the All that is in us, O life preserve..." (<i>On Rebirth</i> , 19)	"Jesus said to them, 'My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work.'" (4:34)
<i>The cleansing and purification of the disciple by the teacher</i>	"thou has been made pure" (<i>On Rebirth</i> , 15)	"You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you." (15:3)
<i>The disciple personally and mystically perceives the teacher beyond the normal senses</i>	"I am no longer touched, yet I have touch. Thou seest me with eyes, my son; but what I am thou dost not understand [even] with the fullest strain of body and sight." (<i>On Rebirth</i> , 3)	"After a little while the world will no longer see Me, but you will see Me; because I live, you will live also." (14:19)
<i>Double-sided recognition between teacher and disciples</i>	"I know you, Hermes, and you know me; I am you and you are me." (Magical Hermetic Papyri)	"I know my own, and my own know me, as the Father knows me, and I know the Father." (10:14)

<i>God causes remembrance in the disciples</i>	“This Race, my son, is never taught; but when He willeth it, its memory is restored by God” (<i>On Rebirth</i> , 2)	“But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you.” (14:26)
<i>The teacher prays to “the Father” on behalf of the disciples, who are brothers to the teacher, and also sons of the Father.</i>	“Give ear to me who pray... fill me with thy power, and with this grace [of thine], that I may give Light to those in ignorance of the Race, my brethren, and thy Sons.” (<i>Poimandres</i> , 32)	“Holy Father, keep them in your name, the name which you have given me, that they may be one even as we are.” (17:11)
<i>The disciple’s righteous living wins the Father’s love, revelation, and salvation</i>	“with holy men and good, the pure and merciful, men who live piously. To such my presence doth become an aid, and straightaway they gain gnosis of all things, and win the Father’s love by their pure lives... intent on him with ardent love.” (<i>Poimandres</i> , 22)	“He who has my commandments and keeps them is the one who loves me; and he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and disclose myself to him.” (14:21)
<i>Teachers and disciples “bearing witness” to the truth</i>	“For this cause I believe, and I bear witness” (<i>Poimandres</i> , 32)	“He came as a witness, to testify about the Light, so that all might believe through him” (1:7) “And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God.” (1:34)
<i>Disciples are disconnected from “the world”</i>	“when thou shalt have become a stranger to the world...” (<i>On Rebirth</i> , 1)	“He who has my commandments and keeps them is the one who loves me; and he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and disclose myself to him.” (14:21)
<i>The disciples gain personal knowledge of God</i>	“Gnosis (knowledge) of God hath come to us, and when this comes, my son, Not-knowing is cast out.” (<i>On Rebirth</i> , 8)	“This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.” (17:3)
“Seeing”	In <i>Poimandres</i> , the mystic gazes at the light of the teacher. In Hermetic ritual, one sees the vision of light during rebirth/ascension.	One sees the light of truth found in Christ’s teachings. Note: the healing of the blind man in John 6.

d. The divine teacher/Shepherd

Theme	Hermeticism	GJohn
<i>The teacher is Shepherd for the sheep</i>	“Poimandres” probably translates to “Man-Shepherd” or “Shepherd of Men”	“All who came before me were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them... I am the good Shepherd...” (10:8, 11)
<i>The teacher is “the door-keeper”</i>	“For being the door-keeper, I will close up [all] the entrances...” (<i>Poimandres</i> , 22)	“I am the way... no one comes to the Father but through me.” (14:5-6) “To him the door-keeper opens, and the sheep hear his voice, and he... leads them out” (10:3)

<i>Through the teachers comes the joint arrival of Truth and Life</i>	“I call on Truth. And error flees, and Truth is with us. See how the measure of the Good is full, my son, upon Truth’s coming. For envy hath gone from us; and unto Truth is joined the Good as well, with Life and Light.” <i>(On Rebirth, 9)</i>	“Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the Truth, and the Life; no one comes to the Father but through me.’ ” (14:6)
<i>The teacher speaks in riddles</i>	“in the general sermons, father, thou didst speak in riddles most unclear, conversing on divinity... thy meaning thou didst hide.” <i>(On Rebirth, 1)</i>	“His disciples said, ‘Lo, now you are speaking plainly and are not using a figure of speech.’ ” (16:29)
<i>The teacher gives the words of water and life, or “deathless water”</i>	“... they shall be saved. I sowed in them the words of wisdom; of deathless water were they given to drink.” <i>(Poimandres, 29)</i>	“the water that I will give him will become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life.” (4:14) “Lord... you have the words of eternal life.” (6:68)
<i>Salvation comes through receiving the sayings of the teacher</i>	“I became a leader of the Race towards home, teaching the words, how and in what way they shall be saved.” <i>(Poimandres, 29)</i>	“But the testimony which I receive is not from man, but I say these things so that you may be saved.” (5:34)
<i>God saves the world through a teacher whom he sends</i>	“thou shouldst to the worthy point the way, in order that through thee the race of mortal kind may by [thy] God be saved.” <i>(Poimandres, 26)</i>	“God [sent the Son] that the world might be saved through him.” (3:17)
<i>The prolificacy of the teacher</i>	Hermes was said to be the author of 36,525 books. As the solar year is 365.25 days, if Hermes wrote one book a day, it would have taken him 100 years. This is to suggest Hermes’ innumerable words and deeds.	“But there are also many other things which Jesus did; were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the kosmos itself could not contain the books that would be written.” (21:25)

e. Rebirth

Theme	Hermeticism	GJohn
<i>Rebirth is necessary for salvation</i>	Hermes says: “no one can be saved before rebirth” <i>(On Rebirth, 1)</i>	Jesus says: “unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” (3:3)
<i>Rebirth only accomplished by divine action</i>	<i>On Rebirth, 1-6</i>	John 3:5-8
<i>The mystery of rebirth</i>	“give me the tradition of rebirth, setting it forth in speech or in the secret way. I know not, O Trismegistus, from out of what matter and what womb Man comes to birth, or of what seed.” <i>(On Rebirth, 1)</i>	“Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born, can he?’” (3:4)
<i>The process of rebirth is not seen by the eyes</i>	“Explain to me the manner of rebirth... I am not what I was before; but I am	“Do not be amazed that I said, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows

	born in Mind (Nous). The way to do this is not taught, and it cannot be seen by the compound element by means of which thou seest.” (<i>On Rebirth</i> , 3)	where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit” (3:7-8)
<i>Men are born of God</i>	“Dost thou not know thou has been born a God, Son of the One, even as I myself?” (<i>On Rebirth</i> , 14)	“We were not born of fornication; we have One Father: God.” (8:41)
<i>Men are born of divine “seed”</i>	“Wisdom that understands in silence [such is the matter and the womb from out of which Man is born], and the True Good the seed. (<i>On Rebirth</i> , 2)	“No one who is born of God practices sin, because his seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God” (1 John 3:9)
<i>Sons are begotten by the “will” of God</i>	“Who is the sower [of the seed of Man], father? For I am altogether at a loss... It is the will of God, my son... And of what kind is he that is begotten, father?... The one that is begot will be another one from God, God’s Son?” (<i>On Rebirth</i> , 2)	“who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” (1:13)
<i>Knowledge of the divine leads to resurrection, eternal life</i>	“He who knows himself, go[es] unto Him... If then thou learnest... thou shalt return again to Life.” (<i>Poimandres</i> , 21).	“Now this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent” (17:3). See also 5:24; 11:25.

XII. GJohn’s relationship with Hermetic-Gnosticism

Sufficient to say, the similarities between GJohn and Hermetic ideas are striking. But what is the nature of their relationship? A careful analysis will reveal that GJohn does not rely on Hermeticism for its own doctrine. GJohn's background is Jewish Palestinian, and is dependent on Wisdom tradition and the LXX. However, John, for the purposes of competition, casts his Jewish-Christian doctrine in the superficial form of Hermetic teaching. In this, he presents the Jewish-Christian version of Gnostic trends in order to draw disciples away from various forms of Gnosticism. Though bearing a superficial resemblance, John's true doctrine is in reality radically opposed to Gnostic ideals, and his Gospel's affinity with the teaching of Christian and Hermetic Gnosticism is no accident; it is a deliberate challenge, and a Jewish-Christian alternative, to rising Hellenistic fashions in John's environment. Below we will survey several of GJohn's parallels with Gnostic teaching, including some features of the Gospel which cannot be accounted for by Judaism alone, but are able to be accounted for by a relationship with Hermeticism.

1. Dualism (ethical vs. ontological)

First, what do we mean by “dualism”? Ugo Bianchi defines dualism as “a doctrine that posits the existence of two fundamental causal principles underlying the existence... of the world... dualistic doctrines, worldviews, or myths represent the basic components of the world or of man as participating in the *ontological* opposition and disparity of value that characterize their dual principles.”³³⁹ However, as Stephen Barton notes, it is important to “distinguish dualism

³³⁹ Ugo Bianchi, “Dualism,” *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1987), cited in Stephen C. Barton, “Johannine Dualism and Contemporary Pluralism,” *The Gospel of John and Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), p. 7, emphasis mine.

proper from simple dualities or pairs of opposites, such as male/female, right/left, light/darkness, life/death, good/bad, spirit/matter, sacred/profane, and so on.”³⁴⁰ In essence, a true dualism holds that the world and mankind are ontologically related to the dualities. An ethical dualism, however, which stresses the polarity between good and evil, is in fact not a true dualism unless good and evil are themselves related to ontological principles.³⁴¹

True and ontological dualism belongs clearly to the sphere of pagan religion and philosophy, and is, of course, a fundamental feature of many traditions which we can identify as Gnostic. In Christian Gnosticism we consistently locate a Platonic, metaphysical distinction between the upper world of the spirit, and the lower realm of matter. This dualism regards the inner man, or the soul, as being “from above,” and the material body as “from below.” But also in Hellenistic Judaism we often find an ontological dualism: the Hellenistic Jew Philo did hold to a Platonic, cosmological dualism of heaven and earth, and an anthropological dualism of soul and body. But it is clear that ontological dualism was only taken up in the Jewish world after contact with the Greeks.³⁴² It was during the first to the third centuries CE, during the rise of Gnosis, that scholars recognize the emergence of a “Hellenistic Jewish mystery religion”³⁴³ of which Philo is representative. Parallel to this mystical Hellenistic Judaism, we can distinguish a more traditionalist Palestinian Judaism. Of course, Palestinian Judaism was not completely insulated from Hellenistic ideas and terminology, but it certainly lacked the overt reliance on Platonic and Stoic philosophy of Philo’s Judaism, and Palestinian authorities are indeed found to have resisted Philo to some degree.³⁴⁴ As scholars have concluded, Philo’s philosophical interpretations “were undreamt of by the average Jew.”³⁴⁵

It is in the concept of dualism that we are able to see how the Hellenistic Judaism of Philo and the traditionalist Judaism of Palestine diverge. For example, in the Dead Sea Scrolls (sectarian Palestinian writings) we clearly encounter some sort of dualism: the world is split between light and dark, the spirit of light and the spirit of darkness. But the dualism of the DSS is not an ontological or metaphysical dualism; it is vastly different from the real, Platonic dualism of Philo and the Gnostics. Rather, the dualism of the DSS is ethical. As Borgen reveals: “[In the DSS] the ways of the spirit of light are described by means of righteous attitudes and moral deeds, and the ways of the spirit of darkness or perversity are characterized by means of a list of immoral deeds.”³⁴⁶ The Scrolls’ dualism may involve notions of “domains” and “dominion”, but this language “is used to represent human relationship to the world,” and “is used to express the relation of the Prince of Light with that category of human beings which is designated as ‘children of righteousness.’”³⁴⁷ Thus the dualism of the DSS, of traditionalist Palestinian Judaism, remains ethical, despite its apparent affinities with the real, ontological dualism of paganism and Gnosticism.

Scholars have also recognized some sort of dualism in the Fourth Gospel.³⁴⁸ Throughout GJohn we encounter contrasts between light/darkness, above/below, life/death, spirit/flesh, heaven/earth, and more. But our question must be: what kind of dualism is John’s? Is it ontological, or ethical? Today “most scholars are now inclined to argue for a Palestinian Jewish background for the Gospel of John.”³⁴⁹ James H. Charlesworth famously demonstrated the Fourth Gospel’s relationship with the ethical dualism of the Dead Sea Scrolls.³⁵⁰ Thus the very best of Johannine

³⁴⁰ Barton, “Johannine Dualism,” p. 7.

³⁴¹ Ibid.

³⁴² The literal pre-existence of the soul in heaven, and thus a true anthropological dualism, was only taken up in Judaism at a later stage and rather on the periphery. See Karl Josef Kuschel, *Born Before All Time?* (New York: Crossroad, 1998), p. 184.

³⁴³ See J. Z. Smith, “The Prayer of Joseph,” *Religions in Antiquity: Essays in Memory of E. R. Goodenough* (Leiden, 1968), pp. 253-294.

³⁴⁴ C. H. Toy, C. Siegfried, J. Z. Lauterbach, “Philo Judaeus,” *Jewish Encyclopedia*, 1906.

³⁴⁵ M. Smith, “Goodenough’s Jewish Symbols in Retrospect,” *JBL*, 86 (1967), p. 61. Michael Tuval reveals that “Philo stemmed from an upper-class Jewish family of Roman Alexandria, obviously received very good education, had much leisure, and therefore his writings cannot automatically be considered to reflect what most Egyptian Jews thought, but rather, to a large extent, witness to his own sophistication and worldview” (Michael Tuval, *From Jerusalem Priest to Roman Jew: On Josephus and the Paradigms of Ancient Judaism* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), p.72.

³⁴⁶ Peder Borgen, “The Gospel of John and Hellenism,” *The Gospel of John: More Light from Philo, Paul and Archaeology* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), p. 97.

³⁴⁷ Emmanuel O. Tukasi, *Determinism and Petitionary Prayer in John and the Dead Sea Scrolls: An Ideological Reading of John and the Rule of the Community – IQS* (London: T&T Clark, 2008 [1988]), p. 42.

³⁴⁸ For example, see Rudolph Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, Vol. 2 (London: SCM Press, 1955), pp. 15-32.

³⁴⁹ Mitchell Reddish, *An Introduction to the Gospels* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), p. 183. Keener confirms, “John’s narrower milieu is early Judaism, and a less thoroughly hellenized early Judaism than one finds in Philo, Pseudo-Aristeas, Josephus, and other sources aimed at more Hellenistically, often philosophically, educated audiences” (Keener, p. 407).

³⁵⁰ James H. Charlesworth, “A Critical Comparison of the Dualism in IQS 3:13-4:26 and the ‘Dualism’ Contained in the Gospel of John,” *John and the Dead Sea Scrolls* (New York: Crossroad, 1972), pp. 76-106.

scholarship has concluded that in GJohn, “The dualism is moral, not metaphysical.”³⁵¹ Just as in the DSS “light” reflects righteous deeds and attitudes and “darkness” reflects immorality, Peder Borgen writes that: “In John this ethical dualism is applied to the coming and role of Jesus... the historical person, Jesus, is the light. Thus, evil deeds basically mean the rejection of him, and good deeds are people’s coming to him... Thus, the dualism of light and darkness in John is primarily to be seen against the background of the OT and Jewish writings, especially as exemplified by the DSS.”³⁵²

But another question is *why* does John utilize this sort of imagery in his account of the life and ministry of Jesus? Is John’s ethical dualism drawn up only to serve in intra-Jewish conflict, to lambast other Jewish sectarians in the manner of the Qumran community? Perhaps, but as Wind wonders, “How could the encouragement of Jewish Christians who were banned from the synagogue be combined with the dualistic Johannine terminology?”³⁵³ It is certainly possible that John pushes an ethical dualism to criticize Jewish opponents for not accepting Jesus as Messiah, but there may also be reason to see John’s utilization as deliberately drawing near to, and even working against, Gnostic, even Hermetic thought. Indeed, GJohn utilizes not only a dualistic tension, but combines it with cosmological imagery and spatial-directional language typical in pagan and Gnostic thought.³⁵⁴ A characteristic Johannine contrast sees “the world” framed as “below”, and God’s realm framed as “above,” and ultimately John’s dualism of ethics, and the persons participating in both sides of the moral divide, are likewise cast in this cosmological and spatial-directional framework. Jesus says, “*You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world*” (John 8:23). While this language has long been said (by both Gnostics and orthodox Christians) to portray the Johannine Jesus as a spiritual being who has literally descended from a spiritual plane, GJohn’s use of “above” and “below” becomes clearer in light of a recognition of his Palestinian Jewish, ethical, dualism. Borgen explains: “Jesus’ claim that he is from above while his listeners are from below echoes Gnostic dualism between the lower psychic world and the upper pneumatic world. However, this Gnostic dualism is of a cosmic nature, while the Johannine dualism is basically ethical, despite its spatial framework.”³⁵⁵

As Barton explained earlier, in a real dualism, the world and mankind are ontologically related to the dualistic tension; in an ethical dualism, they are not. In GJohn’s ethical dualism, then, when Jesus says he is “from above” he does not mean that he is ontologically related to an upper pneumatic (spiritual) world; he has not identified himself metaphysically with heaven/above/God, but ethically—Jesus stands in moral alignment with heaven/above/God, while his audience stands in moral alignment with the world/below/Satan. Despite the spatial framework and language, John’s Jesus is not to be understood as a spiritual being metaphysically linked to and literally descending from a spiritual world; if GJohn’s dualism is ethical for Jesus’ audience and his disciples, it is ethical for Jesus. This must be the case, since John describes Jesus’ disciples in the same spatial-directional language and even places them alongside him within the same dualistic, spatial framework, often in the very same breath. Compare the following texts:

- “*You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world*” (John 8:23)
- “*They [the disciples] are not of the world just as I am not of the world*” (John 17:16)
- “*The one who comes from above is above all. The one who is from the earth belongs to the earth and speaks as one from the earth. The one who comes from heaven is above all*” (John 3:31)
- “*They are from the world; therefore they speak as from the world, and the world listens to them. We [the disciples] are from God; he who knows God listens to us; he who is not from God does not listen to us*” (1 John 4:5-6a).

³⁵¹ Francis J. Moloney, *Signs and Shadows: Reading John 5-12* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2004 [1996]), p. 108.

³⁵² Borgen, “The Gospel of John and Hellenism,” pp. 115-116.

³⁵³ A. Wind, p. 63.

³⁵⁴ We may be able to locate Jewish usage, however, of vertical, spatial language within an ethical dualism: see *Gen. Rab.* 12:8, 27:4, 38:6. See also Keener, pp. 162-163; Charlesworth, “The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Gospel according to John,” pp. 68ff.

³⁵⁵ Peder Borgen, *The Gospel of John: More Light from Philo, Paul, and Archaeology* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), p. 98.

Thus the disciples are “from above”; “from God”; “from heaven”; “not of this world”; “not from the earth”. Those who seek to establish a Christology of ontological pre-existence cannot do so by merely appealing to this language (cf. John 1:6; Mark 11:30; James 1:17; 3:17).

Ultimately, we find that the dualism of GJohn has its roots in the moral dualism of Palestinian Judaism. However, GJohn offers a combination of this ethical dualism with the spatial framework of Gnostic dualism. Thus John’s dualism is a Jewish-Christian convention contrasting and ultimately competing with the ontological dualism of his gnosticizing rivals. As even Keener admits, “John develops his themes by means of an antithetical, frequently vertical, dualism [...] John could adapt dualistic language widespread in his culture, but the use to which he puts it serves his critique of his opponents’ religion...”³⁵⁶ However, Keener and others who have correctly recognized this, have failed to follow the Christological implications.

2. Ascending and Descending (the polemic of ascension)

In Jesus’ discourse with Nicodemus, Jesus says: “If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven, but he who descended from heaven: the Son of Man” (John 3:12-13). This is certainly polemical language, but who or what is the target?

In the first century, the religious climate in paganism, Platonism, and Hellenistic Judaism was changing: Gnosis was becoming a force to reckon with; mystics began cropping up and claiming that they had acquired personal and intimate knowledge of God. This was not merely a Christian Gnostic movement; acquiring revelation of the divine was a fixation in Platonic (Neoplatonic), and Egyptian-pagan (Hermetic) schools. It is important to note that these movements were not only teaching that one could escape to heaven upon death as a disembodied soul, but that even now one could mentally and spiritually “ascend” into heaven and personally encounter the divine. This concept was especially prominent in the Hermetic tradition. Dan Merkur explains that “In the Hermetic system, a person who was having a vision had transcended his bodily senses and had, as such, ascended beyond the physical realm of the seven planetary heavens.”³⁵⁷ Oftentimes, experienced Hermeticists who could make the spiritual journey through the celestial spheres described seeing a mystical vision of “light” as their minds received ineffable knowledge: “The ascension was literal, but mental rather than bodily. The ascent beyond the seven planetary zones of the sensible world was a motion of the mind, while it was yet in the living body... For Hermeticists, such an ascension constituted an ontological change in the status of the mind.”³⁵⁸ In essence, during the time of John’s writing, there were persons who were claiming that they could ascend into heaven and get knowledge of the divine firsthand. Thus, one of GJohn’s themes becomes the exclusivity of Christ: no one has “ascended into heaven” but Jesus—he is the exclusive source of knowledge of “heavenly things.”

But has John borrowed from Hermeticism? Does he simply make Jesus into a Gnostic visionary who ascends through the planetary spheres? No, as many scholars have observed, the “ascending and descending” imagery utilized in John 3:12-13 actually reflects John’s Jewish background, and a Hebrew metaphor connected to the idea of acquiring wisdom or divine knowledge. Compare John 3:12-13 with the following OT texts:

- “Neither have I learned wisdom, nor do I have the knowledge of the holy one. Who has ascended into heaven and descended?” (Prov 30:4)
- “[the Torah] is not up in heaven, so that you may ask, who will ascend into heaven to get it for us, to bring it down, so we may hear it” (Deut 30:12)

Compare also with these examples from Jewish writings, representing a tradition in which Moses ascended to heaven at Sinai to receive the Torah (knowledge of divine things), and brought it down:³⁵⁹

³⁵⁶ Keener, pp. 162-163.

³⁵⁷ Dan Merkur, *Stages of Ascension in Hermetic Rebirth* (Toronto: University of Toronto, Nock, 1933), p. 88.

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

³⁵⁹ “Although later rabbinic traditions develop the theme in great detail, the original story of Moses’ heavenly ascent probably did circulate in the first century” (Keener, p. 562).

- “Not even Moses who ascended into heaven to receive the Torah from God’s hand into his own could fathom heaven’s depth” – Midrash on Psalm 106:2
- “I ascended into heaven... spoke face to face with the Lord of the world, conquered the heavenly household, received the Torah, wrote down at the command of the Holy One, blessed be He, the 613 commandments, taught them to the children of Israel” – Petirat Mosheh
- “When Moses ascended into heaven, he saw God occupied in making little crowns for the letters of the Torah” – Men. 29b.

The OT and Jewish writings thus provide a basis for recognizing John's Jewish “ascending” and “descending” motif as one involving the acquisition of divine knowledge. Similarly, both Jewish Wisdom literature and the writings of the New Testament portray Wisdom itself (often personified) as descending from heaven, and in some cases, returning there (James 3:15-17; 1 Enoch 42:1-2). Wisdom is also said to have been “sent” by God to the earth: “Send [Wisdom] forth from your holy heavens and from your glorious throne dispatch her that she may be with me and work with me, that I may know what is pleasing to you” (Wisdom 9:10). In this we see the Wisdom tradition in light of the Hebraic institution of agency; Wisdom is sent forth as God’s agent to represent his will and character.

With this rich background in mind, we must ask: does the ascending/descending language, as it is used in GJohn, indicate a literal transportation to or from heaven, as is claimed by both the Christian Gnostics and the orthodox? Is it simply a metaphor for acquiring divine knowledge? Or is it a metaphor for sending by God? Could it reflect both? Ultimately, we have good reason to believe that the “ascent” portion John 3:13 is a metaphor for acquiring knowledge of the divine. Likewise, we should read the notion of “descent” in John 3:13 (and elsewhere) as a metaphor for “sending.”

First, the “descent” metaphor: since we know that the dualism in GJohn is ethical despite its spatial framework, we know that Jesus does not ontologically participate in an upper pneumatic world; he is not, by nature, a being metaphysically connected to and coming down from heaven (this would reflect a Platonic or Gnostic background of true dualism). The descending language reflects instead a Jewish background in Wisdom tradition and the Hebrew concept of agency/sending; its aim is to cast Jesus as embodying the Wisdom of God, and as the one sent and commissioned by God—Jesus is sent into the world by God in the same way that Wisdom is sent into the world, and in the way that John the Baptist is “a man sent from God” (John 1:6). The same motif of descent from above/heaven/God can be detected elsewhere in the Johannine writings, as well as in the other books of the New Testament: the Johannine writer himself, and the disciples who align with him, are said to come “from God” (1 John 4:6), and James writes that “wisdom comes down from heaven” (James 3:15-17), and that “every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of heavenly lights” (James 1:17)—even John’s baptism came “from heaven” (Mark 11:30). Likewise in the OT, we read that “God sends forth his word (logos) to the earth” (Ps 147:15 LXX). In light of all this, we are to recognize that in GJohn Jesus is not cast as a spiritual being literally sent down through the heavens to the earthly plane; he is instead commissioned by God and sent by God, like John the Baptist, the disciples, God's wisdom, and God’s word.

In John 3:12-13, we find that John uniquely combines the “descent” metaphor with the “ascent” metaphor related to heavenly knowledge: being the uniquely commissioned agent of God, Jesus is the only source for knowledge of “heavenly things.” Thus he says, in a brilliant play, “No one has ascended (gone into heaven and gotten this knowledge), except he who descended (he who was sent by God).”

Having established this reading, our question then becomes: why does John include this saying at all? As Peder Borgen explains, “John 3:13 probably is meant to be a polemic against persons in the Jews’ and Christians’ environment who maintained that they were visionaries who ascended to heaven like Moses... When John reacts against claims of ascent within a Jewish context, he reacts against a Jewish (and Christian) phenomena which at the same time is a widespread phenomenon in the Hellenistic world.”³⁶⁰ Keener similarly admits that while he believes an argument against Jewish concepts of Mosaic ascent/descent is probably the *central* polemic here, it is possible that GJohn also polemicizes

³⁶⁰ Peder Borgen, *The Gospel of John: More Light from Philo, Paul, and Archaeology* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), p. 98.

against other visionary mystics of John's day [e.g. Hermeticists and other Gnostics].³⁶¹ In this, both Borgen and Keener draw near to, and confirm the plausibility of, my proposal, that GJohn is a multi-front polemic working against both Jewish and Gnostic claims.

3. Seeing & Light (the polemic of the 'true' light)

The "Light" motif is a strong one in Hermeticism, Christian Gnosticism, and in the mystical Hellenistic Judaism represented by Philo. Regarding the ascent to the vision of Light found in *Poimandres* and other Hermetica, Dodd called this "light mysticism," and found it being addressed in the Fourth Gospel.³⁶² In John's time, mystics were claiming to have seen the divine light, to have been enlightened by Gnosis, through trance-like visions and mystical ascent. But GJohn, in regard to Jesus, says: "*The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world*" (John 1:9). For John, Jesus is the embodiment of God's Light and Life, and the true and only source of divine revelation and salvation (John 1:4; 3:21; 14:6).

It is true that we can locate the (rare) pairing of "Light" and "Life" in the Old Testament, as in Psalm 36:9: "*For with you is the fountain of life: in your light do we see light.*" However, the combination of Life and Light is much more prevalent and important in the Hermetic writings, such as *Poimandres* and *On Rebirth*. In its use of "Light", "Life", and also "Logos", the Gospel of John ultimately finds a better link with the Hermetic literature than with the Jewish writings: as we mentioned earlier, in *Poimandres* alone, references to "Light" occur nineteen times, with nine pairings of "Light" and "Life." And GJohn speaks of "Light" twenty-three times, and pairs it with "Life" at least twice. Again, "The combination of Logos, Life, and Light occurs in a way not paralleled elsewhere."³⁶³ We must keep in mind that it is the emphasis and concentration of affinities that will prove our best guides towards establishing a believable relationship between any two sources.

Some may still wish to point to the usage of "Life" and "Light" by Philo. But again, my proposal is that GJohn is a multi-front polemic against a Gnosticizing world which manifested in a variety of religious streams: there is no reason why John could not refute or compete with Hermeticism, or with groups utilizing Hermetic literature, as well as the fashions of mystical Hellenistic Jews like Philo.

Jey Kanagaraj detected another important affinity between the Hermetic visions of Light and GJohn: "The idea of 'mystical' vision is described in the Hermetica also in terms of 'seeing.' The *Poimandres* speaks of the mystic's gazing at the light in *Poimandres* who appeared to him, but it is the seeing not so much with one's physical eyes as in one's mind."³⁶⁴ The motif of "sight" is likewise an important one in GJohn (John 9:1-41). Jesus brings light, sight to the blind, and is himself the true light—in contrast to the false lights, or false teachers and seers surrounding John in his day. Indeed, Hermetic mystics and others were claiming to have "sight" and to have seen the Light of the divine. GJohn's polemic is strong against those who claim to have "sight" apart from the light of Christ. In John 9:39-41 we read: "*And Jesus said, 'For judgement I came into this world, so that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind.' Those of the Pharisees who were with him heard these things and said to him, 'We are not blind too, are we?' Jesus said to them, 'If you were blind, you would have no sin; but since you say, 'We see,' your sin remains.'*"

4. Rebirth

One of GJohn's features which cannot be accounted for by Judaism alone, but can be accounted for by Hermeticism, is the Johannine teaching on rebirth presented in John Ch. 3's discourse between Jesus and Nicodemus. As Dodd in his exhaustive study observed, it is "dramatically appropriate that an orthodox Jewish Rabbi should find the idea of rebirth strange, for in fact, in spite of the oft-quoted maxim, 'The proselyte is like a new-born child', and

³⁶¹ Keener seems to find support for orthodox Christology in a polemic which exalts Jesus over Moses. He argues that "we should observe that, unlike Moses (cf. 6:32-33), Jesus did not merely witness heaven; he is 'from heaven' (3:13, 31; 6:38, 41-42, 50-51, 58), from God's realm (1:32; 3:27; 6:31-33; 12:28; 17:1)" (Keener, p. 563). However, as we have seen, coming from heaven/above/God/God's realm is not exclusive to Jesus for John. Again, John the Baptist is "from God"; the writer himself is "from God"; and just as Jesus is "not of this world," and is thus from God's realm, Jesus says of the disciples: "they are not of this world just as I am not of this world" (17:16).

³⁶² Dodd, p. 210.

³⁶³ Arthur Samuel Peake, *A Critical Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1911), pp. 202-203.

³⁶⁴ Jey Kanagaraj, *Mysticism in the Gospel of John* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2014 [1998]), p. 66.

some similar *façons de parler*, the native Rabbinic Judaism seems to have had in this period no real doctrine of regeneration.”³⁶⁵ But was John’s Judaism completely ignorant of such ideas?

First, we will consider what *was* current in Judaism and pre-Johannine Christianity in regard to rebirth. Traces of several of the ideas involved in Johannine rebirth can be gleaned from the OT. Job 15:14, 25;4, and 33:23-30 address the idea that every man who is born is in need of purification, and that God will one day restore him to the days of his youth. Another noteworthy OT passage, which perhaps comes the nearest to anything in the NT, is 1 Sam 10:6: “*the spirit of Yahweh will come upon you mightily, and you shall prophesy with them and be changed into another man.*” This is easily compared to NT examples like 2 Cor 5:17: “*Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature.*” Along these lines we do find a clear concept of rebirth finally arriving among the Jewish-Christian communities by around 57 CE to the time of 1 Peter’s composition around 60-65 CE. Indeed, 1 Peter 1:3, 23 provides probably the best pre-Johannine examples of a developed Christian doctrine of rebirth: “[God] has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead... For you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and enduring word of God.” Around the same date, James 1:18 was also explaining to Christians that God “*gave us birth through the message of truth, that we would be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.*” Of course, the famed rabbinical saying which is so often referenced in analysis of early Christian rebirth, “*The proselyte is like a new born baby,*” is not evidenced till around 500 CE.³⁶⁶ While there is little doubt that this tradition is earlier than that, without any other descriptions in any other literature we cannot know exactly when it originated. Regardless, as Barclay surmised, in the days of the early Church, “*The Jew knew the idea of rebirth.*”³⁶⁷

However, as Barclay also notes, “*The Greeks also knew the idea of rebirth and knew it well.*”³⁶⁸ Barclay reveals that “*The Hermetic Mysteries had as part of their basic belief: ‘There can be no salvation without regeneration,’*” and concludes that “*The ancient world knew all about rebirth and regeneration. It longed for it and searched for it everywhere... When Christianity came to the world with a message of rebirth, it came with precisely that for which all the world was seeking.*”³⁶⁹ It is possible for one to observe a gradual progression of Jewish beliefs about rebirth: the trace notions and implications of the necessity of rebirth gleaned from the OT were evidently later crystalized in Judaism as it was drawn deeper into the Hellenistic world. The doctrine of rebirth encountered in GJohn represents the climax of this process: The early Jewish-Christian notion of rebirth observed in the Pauline and Petrine epistles has been further crystalized as a regenerative process and presented in a unique way which deliberately caters to the expectations of the Hellenistic world, specifically to those exposed to the Hermetic doctrine. Barclay, citing other places in the NT, noted that “*the idea of being reborn is not something which is peculiar to the thought of the Fourth Gospel.*”³⁷⁰ However, only in the Fourth Gospel do we find the Jewish-Christian notion of rebirth presented in a way which so closely mirrors Hellenistic, Hermetic teaching. Scholars who aim to push the Fourth Gospel into an exclusively Jewish light (and away from any relationship with Gnosticism) often reference various examples within Judaism to prove that John’s doctrine of rebirth was a common Jewish teaching. But one clue which points us in a different (Gnostic) direction is the fact that in John’s rebirth discourse, Nicodemus, the quintessential Jewish teacher, *does not understand the teaching* (John 3:4-9). Why is this? Simply put, Nicodemus fails to understand because in John, rebirth is deliberately cast as *a spiritual mystery*. This sort of presentation is simply not found in the Judaism of John’s day.³⁷¹ Indeed, Barclay is correct when he says that Christianity was offering the rebirth which the Hellenistic world was looking for, but John’s Christianity was also deliberately presenting that rebirth *in a way that they were expecting to find it*. Thus, we have cause to look to the mysterious spiritual rebirth found in the growing Hermetic movement.

Most of the information we have about the Hermetic mystery of rebirth is gained from the tractate *On Rebirth*, also known as *C.H. XIII*. The date of *On Rebirth* is unknown, but Dodd believed it to be one of the later Hermetica, and

³⁶⁵ Dodd, p. 304.

³⁶⁶ The saying is attributed to Rabbi Yose in the Talmud.

³⁶⁷ William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, Vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975 [1955]), p. 126.

³⁶⁸ Ibid.

³⁶⁹ Ibid., pp. 126-127.

³⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 127.

³⁷¹ Even Philo, who relied heavily upon Hellenistic teaching, has built his own notions of rebirth on Jewish rather than Hellenistic ideas of rebirth like those found in the Hermetic teachings. Philo identifies Moses’ “second birth” with his ascension at Sinai, and as Borgen notes, “the implication is that Philo draws on Jewish exegetical traditions, which he develops further in his interpretation” (Borgen, “The Gospel of John and Hellenism,” p. 105).

one belonging to a period in which Christianity was widespread in Egypt.³⁷² Thus, in light of their incredible similarities, the question of possible Johannine influence on the Hermetica can be raised. But Reitzenstein confidently rejected any Christian influence,³⁷³ and Dodd also found that the Hermetic word for “rebirth” was pre-Christian, and that the doctrine could also be found in the earlier Hermetica, and was ultimately “not likely to have been derived from Christian sources.”³⁷⁴ Once we have established the Hermetic rebirth as a tradition independent of Christian influence, there is room to push the ideas behind the extant text of *On Rebirth* backwards to coincide with the Johannine development at the end of the first century. It may not be necessary to argue that the existing *On Rebirth* could itself have had an earlier version with which John was familiar, in the same manner as Reitzenstein’s view of *Poimandres*, but neither is such a scenario unimaginable.

Regardless, GJohn demonstrates nearly as many striking parallels with *On Rebirth* as it does with *Poimandres*. As Keener and others have proposed, however, we should ignore these parallels in favor of drawing parallels only between GJohn and Judaism. Again, Keener’s proposal is that the Jewish evidence is able to account for any similarities between GJohn and Hermeticism.³⁷⁵ But this is not the case with respect to GJohn’s teaching on rebirth. Within the Johannine presentation of Jewish-Christian rebirth there remains an emphasis and concentration of ideas which cannot be accounted for by Judaism alone, but can be accounted for by a relationship with Hermeticism.

a. The dialectical framework of the teaching about rebirth

In both *On Rebirth* and John 3:1-21, rebirth is a spiritual mystery presented within a dialectical framework containing several uncanny similarities: (1) Both involve a teacher in private dialogue with a disciple; (2) Both dialogues begin with the disciple seeking the teacher out after hearing his previous teachings; (3) Both involve the teacher offering his disciple the riddle that one cannot be saved without rebirth; (4) Both involve the disciple becoming bewildered and asking how the process of rebirth is to be accomplished; (5) Both involve the disciple questioning the teacher about the “womb” of rebirth; (6) Both involve the teacher reaffirming the mysterious nature of rebirth, and its accomplishment by divine action; (7) Both involve the teacher referring to the blowing of wind, and likening the activity of rebirth to natural activity unperceived by the senses; (8) Both dialogues connect knowledge of the divine to rebirth.

When we consider these striking parallels in doctrinal presentation, other important parallels worth considering *within* the Hermetic and Johannine doctrines also begin to emerge. We will consider these below.

b. The necessity of rebirth for man’s salvation.

Hermes says: “no one can be saved before rebirth” (*On Rebirth*, 1). Likewise, in GJohn, Jesus says: “no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again” (John 3:3). Philo,³⁷⁶ along with some later rabbinical sources,³⁷⁷ may describe the ascent of Moses at Sinai, or Moses’ experience at the burning bush, as a form of second birth, but in the Judaism of John’s day rebirth was not widely preached as a basic requirement for every man’s salvation. In the Petrine and Pauline epistles we can locate the implication that man’s salvation involves a second birth, through “the word of God” creating him anew or through a future resurrection of the body, but the Jewish-Christian doctrine of rebirth apparently had yet to be represented in the same sort of clear, universal mandate found in John 3:3, which both decrees rebirth for every man and excludes alternative means of salvation. The Johannine preaching mirrors the concise Hermetic preaching found in *On Rebirth* precisely. In reality, John has probably taken the Jewish-Christian rebirth through the word or the resurrection, likely enhanced by the Jewish idea of rebirth associated with the Sinai event, and has *transferred* it to man’s new regenerated beginning abiding in the teachings of Jesus;³⁷⁸ he has furthermore bent the salvation rebirth offers towards Jewish ideas by identifying it as “entering the kingdom of God.” The occasion for this peculiar Jewish-Christian development appears to be the need to produce a Jewish-Christian version of a wider Hellenistic trend.

³⁷² Dodd, p. 304.

³⁷³ Ibid.

³⁷⁴ Dodd cites its use by Chrysippus and the Stoics, and by Philo, as well as the tractate *C.H. III, 3*.

³⁷⁵ Keener, p. 166.

³⁷⁶ Philo, *Quaestiones in Exodum* 2.46

³⁷⁷ *Cant. Rab.* 8:2; *Exod. Rab.* 3:15, 30:5; *Shemot*, 18.

³⁷⁸ Borgen, “The Gospel of John,” p. 58.

c. The process of rebirth is a mystery, unseen by the eyes

In *On Rebirth* we read: “*Explain to me the manner of rebirth... The way to do this is not taught, and it cannot be seen by the compounded element by means of which thou seest*” (*On Rebirth*, 3). Compare this with John 3:7-8 which speaks of the unseen blowing of the wind: “*you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from...*” In the Jewish sources we do not find this same emphasis on the spiritual mystery of rebirth, nor its inability to be seen with the eyes.

d. Rebirth involves being born by way of an invisible spiritual element/substance.

In *On Rebirth*, we read, regarding “the manner of rebirth,” that the Hermeticist is “born in Nous.” In John 3:7-8, we read: “*You must be born again... so is everyone who is born of the Spirit.*” Nous (Mind) is the Hermetic counterpart to the Johannine Spirit.³⁷⁹ As Willoughby explains, in the Hermetic rebirth “a special spiritual endowment added a new element to man’s very being. In Hermetic terminology this new element was Nous, the spirit of Trismegistic religion... [an] ethereal light-substance flowing into man’s being from its heavenly source and transforming him into divine essence.”³⁸⁰ Just as in GJohn, this spiritual air-substance is *invisible*. GJohn says: “*The wind blows where it wishes. You hear its sound but you do not know where it comes from or where it is going*” (John 3:8). So too do the Hermetica say about Nous: “*No one knows whence it comes or whither it goes*” (*C.H. XVI*, 6).³⁸¹ In Philo and in the later Jewish sources, there is no rebirth by way of a spiritual, invisible substance.

e. The spiritual element needed for rebirth/salvation is graciously given by God, then mediated through a spiritual teacher

In Hermeticism, in order to enact the revelatory rebirth, God “freely bestows on the initiate some of His own power, mediated through a spiritual instructor.”³⁸² The Hermetic teacher is “the agent of regeneration” who conveys Nous, however, rebirth is ultimately “the result of God’s mercy.”³⁸³ Likewise in GJohn, Jesus is the agent of the regenerative Spirit. In John 14:26, Jesus says that God will send the Spirit in his name, and in 20:22, Jesus himself breathes on the disciples saying, “receive the holy Spirit.” Elsewhere in GJohn, Jesus says it is God who “gives the Spirit without measure” but “he who believes in the Son has eternal life” (John 3:34, 36a): one must come to the Son, the agent of regeneration, in order to be born of the spiritual element.

f. The process of rebirth/salvation ultimately involves “baptism” in the spiritual element

The Hermetic rebirth is closely connected to the idea of “baptism” in a spiritual substance. The Hermetic teacher, as the agent of regeneration, was to enable for the initiate a spiritual baptism in God’s power, a “baptism in Nous.”³⁸⁴ As Hermes teaches in *C.H. IV*, God “pours Nous” into a great baptismal font or bowl, and declares through his prophet (Hermes) that all who can may plunge themselves into this fullness of God’s Nous, “baptizing themselves in the Gnosis of Him.”³⁸⁵

As Ferguson explains, in the Hermetic works, we find “one of the rare uses of [“baptize/immerse”] outside Judaism and Christianity for something like a ritual bath.”³⁸⁶ But the Hermetic use of “immerse” is metaphorical; there is no indication of a literal bath. This is a spiritual baptism which formed the initial stage of rebirth and ultimate ascent to

³⁷⁹ See Dodd, pp. 223-225, 304.

³⁸⁰ Willoughby, p. 217.

³⁸¹ See also G.R.S. Meade’s translation: “*But whence this Substance doth arise, or floweth forth, He, and He only, knows.*”

³⁸² Fowden, p. 104.

³⁸³ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁴ Russell, p. 49.

³⁸⁵ Duncan Greenlees, *The Gospel of Hermes* (San Diego: The Book Tree, 2006 [1949]), p. 130. See C.G. Jung “The Spirit in Matter,” *Collected Works of C.G. Jung, Vol. 12: Psychology and Alchemy* (New York: Princeton University Press, 1980 [1944]), p. 299.

³⁸⁶ Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), p. 78.

God. As Norman Russell explains, “The choice of Gnosis brings about baptism in Nous and is the beginning of the pursuit of the good. The opposite choice enmeshes human beings in bodily pleasure and leads to destruction.”³⁸⁷

So too, the Johannine rebirth, marking the beginning of the new Christian life, is connected to, and requires, the regenerative baptism in Spirit. Jesus says to Nicodemus, “*unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God*” (John 3:5). As scholars have observed, the tying of water and Spirit here indicates a Spirit-baptism.³⁸⁸ In GJohn, it is God’s prophet (Jesus) who preaches, and enables this baptism. Jesus is even cast as the unique “baptizer with Spirit”; not even John the Baptist can do this (John 1:25-34). The exclusivity of John’s Jesus, standing against the Gnostics looking to “immerse themselves” in Spirit-Nous, shines through.

There is no Jewish source which can account for this peculiar combination of a mysterious, invisible rebirth enacted through a spiritual substance, given graciously by God through a teacher, culminating in Spirit-baptism and rebirth as a child of God, and ultimately salvation.

Ultimately, while some concept of a second birth for Moses can be located in Philo,³⁸⁹ and in later rabbinical commentaries, it is abundantly clear that no Jewish source from the period can match the quality and concentration of the Johannine parallels with the Hermetic teaching about rebirth. John is evidently aware of this Hermetic tradition, or even familiar with an earlier edition of *On Rebirth*, and moves to present a Jewish-Christian version of this Hermetic trend, perhaps in order to draw back those in his community who were being attracted to it.³⁹⁰

In the end, the Johannine rebirth is worlds apart from the Hermetic. In Hermeticism, rebirth allows one to become “a child of God.” We read that “He that is born by that birth is another person: he is a God and a Son of God.”³⁹¹ Likewise in GJohn, we read that Jesus “gave them the right to become children of God” (John 1:12). However, as we have seen, the Hermetic rebirth (salvation) is true deification, or assimilation to God; men become God, like Hermes, while in GJohn, rebirth allows men to become human sons of God, like Jesus. In this, we see that the Johannine rebirth, if it is to stand in contrast to Hermeticism, depends not only on Jesus’ human kinship with his disciples, but also on a lack of inherent deity: if Jesus as son-of-God is by nature God, like Hermes, then his disciples, becoming sons-of-God, would be God as well, like the Hermeticists. But Jesus’ sonship is not like Hermes’, and neither are their disciples’ sonships truly equivalent. GJohn uses the framework of Hermetic teaching on rebirth to offer something completely different, something Johannine and Jewish-Christian. As Scott pointed out:

The metaphysical categories which [John] employed could afford no true explanation of the great inward change effected by Christ in those who confess Him. But we must distinguish between the essence of John’s thought and the forms in which he embodied it. He perceived, as not even Paul had done hitherto, how profound and radical is the ‘change of mind’ involved in Christian discipleship. It is like a new birth, a transition from death to life. However we may judge of John’s own peculiar doctrine of the new life, we cannot but recognize that he has supplied us with the one conception of the work of Christ which can never lose its value and fruitfulness. The eternal need of man is for life, more abundant life. The word may carry with it widely different meanings to different men, in various periods of the world’s history, but in itself it is the one comprehensive word which sums up all the thousand wants and longings of our human nature. And in Jesus Christ, as this evangelist has taught us, we have Life—the supreme possession in which all desire is satisfied.³⁹²

³⁸⁷ Russell, p. 49.

³⁸⁸ For a brief survey of interpretations of John 3:5, see Ferguson, *Baptism*, pp. 143-145.

³⁸⁹ Philo held that Moses’ Sinai experience was a sort of second birth that transformed him into a heavenly man. See Philo, *QE* 2.46 (regarding Exodus 24:16).

³⁹⁰ Again, see Scott: “It is not improbable that [John] was influenced also by a practical motive—that of regaining for the orthodox faith the more speculative minds which were gradually drifting apart from it. He may well have judged that mere antagonism to the prevailing errors served little purpose. What was needed was such a widening and deepening of the common faith that all the varieties of religious temperament might find their home within the Church of Christ” (Scott, pp. 102-103).

³⁹¹ *On Rebirth*, 2.

³⁹² Scott, p. 373.

5. “a God, a Son of God”

In both the Synoptics and GJohn, the phrase “Son of God” is used freely to describe Jesus. However, only in GJohn do we find the added language “only Son” and “only begotten.” Surprisingly, alongside this exclusive language, we find that “Son of God” is also used in GJohn for Jesus’ disciples. Meanwhile in the Synoptics, there is no indication that this phrase should also be used to describe Jesus’ followers, and neither is there any explanation regarding how one can become a “Son of God.” But in the very opening of GJohn we are met with the special title of Jesus being applied to his disciples (John 1:12). Furthermore, in GJohn we find explanations regarding how men become “Sons of God” at least twice (John 1:12; 10:35), and one such explanation is even in the midst of a controversy over the identification of men as “Gods” and “Sons of God” (10:33ff.). Why is the language “only Son”, the use of “Son of God” for Jesus’ disciples, the controversy surrounding it, and the instructions on how to become a “Son of God” completely absent from the Synoptics, but so important in GJohn? In light of our previous analysis, we may easily conclude that John may have been dealing with these issues during the time of his writing in the late first century. Indeed, Gnosticism (and Hermeticism in particular) may once again come into view in the Fourth Gospel.

In *On Rebirth*, we discover that “He that is born by that birth is another person: he is a God and a Son of God.”³⁹³ Indeed, in Hermeticism, the process of rebirth is intended to render one “the offspring of a god—a child of God.”³⁹⁴ Hermes explains further: it is “by this birth we are made into Gods,”³⁹⁵ and he ultimately challenges Tat: “Dost thou not know thou hast been born a God, Son of the One, even as I myself?”³⁹⁶ The process of rebirth is truly one of Gnostic revelation: one is made a God by coming to realize that one has always been God. We recall that Hermes Trismegistus “was both god and man”;³⁹⁷ he was the “theos aner,” the divine man.³⁹⁸ Indeed, the notion that man is by nature “a God, a Son of God” is foundational in Hermeticism, and is arguably its chief religious idea.

This formula evidently gained appreciation outside of strictly Hermetic circles, and is detectable among later Christian Gnostics. Plotinus, in his treatise *Against the Gnostics*, speaks of Christian Gnostics who utilize the phrase “You are the Son of God.”³⁹⁹ Eduard Norden detected the “formulaic character of the phrase,”⁴⁰⁰ and analyzed it against the Hellenistic ceremonial formula “I am a God” (or the variation “I am the Son of God”), and concluded that Plotinus was reproducing “well-known controversial language of Gnostic soteriology.”⁴⁰¹ As John F. Phillips explains, “the expression apparently served as a conventional form of exhortation by which Gnosticism taught man of the possibility of redemption by virtue of his natural affinity with the first god.”⁴⁰² This notion was evidently held not only in Hermeticism and Christian Gnosticism, but in other Hellenistic pagan cults of the first century CE.⁴⁰³ In that era, a pagan prophet might hold himself to be “the instrument of god, himself a god or son of god,” and would appeal for “rebirth of the masses; those who heed his call to salvation will themselves become such as he. More accurately, they will finally share in the knowledge that they have always been the children of god.”⁴⁰⁴ This is a trend which Hermeticism clearly embodies, and champions, and may have even served as its chief propagator in the first century CE.

In the second century, Irenaeus still lambasts the many Christian Gnostic leaders (from the first century to his own time), who evidently made claims to being God and man. Irenaeus argues that while Jesus was the Son of God, “none of these men was the Son of God.”⁴⁰⁵ If second century Christians were aware of the Christian Gnostic use of the formula, “I am a God,” or “I am a Son of God,” surely first century Christians, like the writer of GJohn, were aware of

³⁹³ *On Rebirth*, 2.

³⁹⁴ Borgen, “The Gospel of John and Hellenism,” p. 105.

³⁹⁵ *On Rebirth*, 10.

³⁹⁶ *On Rebirth*, 14.

³⁹⁷ Fowden, p. 31.

³⁹⁸ Fowden, p. 153.

³⁹⁹ See Plotinus, *Against the Gnostics*, 51-60. Plotinus also utilizes the variant form of the phrase, “I am a God,” in his treatise *On the Immortality of the Soul* (4.7.10.32-40).

⁴⁰⁰ Eduard Norden, *Agnostos Theos* (Leipzig/Berlin, 1913), p.193, n. 1. See also John F. Phillips, “The Universe as Prophet: A Soteriological Formula in Plotinus,” *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (Duke University, 1981), p. 269.

⁴⁰¹ Phillips, p. 269.

⁴⁰² *Ibid.*

⁴⁰³ For example, in the Mithras cult, dating from the first to fourth centuries CE, Mithras was depicted as Father, and his dutiful followers as his Sons.

⁴⁰⁴ Phillips, p. 271.

⁴⁰⁵ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, IV, 6, 4.

it, and were certainly aware of the Hermetic usage. As I have already demonstrated, GJohn is conscious of the Hermetic teaching on rebirth, and possibly even familiar with an earlier version of what became the *On Rebirth* treatise, in which Hermes states that he is “born a God, a Son of the One.”⁴⁰⁶ Thus the source of any Johannine awareness of the Hellenistic “a God, Son of God” soteriological formula presents itself most obviously through Hermeticism.

Of course, like the other parallels we have encountered, John’s own usage of the “a God, Son of God” formula is not necessarily derived from Hermetic-Gnosticism. The idea can certainly be located in John’s Jewish background, in the Old Testament, especially Psalm 82:6: “*I said, ‘You are Gods; Sons of the Most High, all of you.’*” Judaism’s use of “god” and “Son of God” as descriptions for human beings differs radically from the Hellenistic usage. As we have observed, in traditional paganism, as well as in Gnosticism, the description more often than not bespeaks some metaphysical quality, some sort of personal, ontological deity. However, this is not the case in traditional Judaism. In the OT, human beings endowed with God’s authority, like Moses, are called “god” (Exodus 7:1); theirs is representational or relational, not ontological deity. Likewise, the Jewish title “son of God” contravenes with the Hellenistic and Gnostic usage: as Keener explains, “The OT and Jewish tradition apply the title to those who belong to God; the OT and early Jewish texts call Israel God’s son, and the title naturally came to be extended to a righteous man in general. Favorite members of Israel, for example. Moses, could be called God’s ‘son’; in another rabbinic text, a heavenly voice identifies a beloved rabbi as his son. Angels, too, could be called ‘sons of God’...”⁴⁰⁷ As Geza Vermes concludes, “In Jewish sources, its use never implies participation by the person so-named in the divine nature.”⁴⁰⁸

In what way did GJohn apply this description “Son of God” to Jesus? Keener concludes, and rightly, that the most appropriate background for GJohn’s application of this description to Jesus is the sense of “Messiah.”⁴⁰⁹ Indeed, the Qumran scrolls reveal that passages like 2 Samuel 7:14, with its identification of the coming king of Israel as God’s son, were being interpreted Messianically within first-century Jewish circles (4QFlor 1:10-11; 1QSa 2:11-12). John’s portrayal of Jesus as “the” Son of God, was to communicate his role as “the” Messiah, the uniquely appointed agent of God, heir to the Davidic dynasty, and thus a ruler in intimate relationship with the deity of Israel (see the synonymous parallelism brought out in John 1:49: “‘Rabbi, You are the Son of God; You are the King of Israel’”). Though he feels it might somehow mean something more profound in GJohn, Keener admits that “deity is neither a necessary nor the usual sense of the term in the Synoptics,” and ultimately fails to provide reasons why “Son of God” should indicate anything like the “God the Son” of orthodox Trinitarianism in the NT.⁴¹⁰ Instead, the Jewish description “God” and “Son of God” describes a kingly, god-like individual who stands in close relationship to the one God, who is imbued with God’s authority and powers, and who is to be owed the dignity of a god. John finds this description to be appropriate, and in fact the most appropriate, for Jesus-as-Messiah. But why has John also included polemically-tinged language like “only Son”? Why include the arguments over this language in John 10, and draw out Psalm 82? What is the theological and anthropological significance of all this?

Knowing how divergent the Jewish and Gnostic meanings are, the drawing out of the “a God, Son of God” phrase in John 10 may consciously stand against the Hellenistic, Gnostic usage of the “a God, a Son of God” formula. Furthermore, as we will soon see, it is possible that John has made this reference to Psalm 82:6, and has included his unique language and arguments about divine sonship, not only in order to present the Jewish-Christian version of the “a God, Son of God” Hellenistic trend, but also to demonstrate that human sons of God, including Jesus, are not ontologically God. This would serve John’s undertaking to establish the human Jesus in the face of rising Gnostic speculation.

Let us first consider John 1:12: here, in the prologue which ultimately identifies Jesus with the logos, we read, “*But to all who did receive him, he gave them the right to become the Sons of God, even to them that believed on his name.*” Thus men become “Sons of God” when they receive Jesus, the embodiment of God’s logos, God’s inspirational word of power. We find a similar idea in John 10:33ff, where we read: “*Jesus replied, ‘Is it not written in your Law: ‘I have said you are Gods, [Sons of the Most High]’? If he called them Gods to whom the word (logos) of God came—and the Scripture cannot be broken... How then can you*

⁴⁰⁶ *On Rebirth*, 14.

⁴⁰⁷ Keener, p. 294.

⁴⁰⁸ Vermes, *Jesus and Judaism*, p. 72, cited in Keener, p. 297.

⁴⁰⁹ Keener, p. 295.

⁴¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 297.

accuse me of blasphemy because I said, I am the Son of God?” (John 10:34-35, 36b). Here also, it is the reception of God’s logos that enables one to be “a God, a Son of God.”⁴¹¹

All of this parallels the Hermetic teaching in which men become Gods when they receive the Gnosis of Hermes the logos.⁴¹² However, in Hermeticism the truth is that men have always been Gods; the “rebirth” or “becoming” a God is really a mystical ascent of the mind, an awakening through prophetic revelation. As it says in C.H. X, “He who has attained gnosis... is already divine.”⁴¹³ Once again, the Johannine teaching is similar, but in the end radically different: in GJohn, it is clear that men are given the right to *become* “Gods, the Sons of God” when they receive the logos; they are not already divine by nature. Furthermore, the reception of the Johannine logos is not passive, it is not a unilateral revelation, but an act of obedience. One enters divine sonship by ethical means, not mystical or metaphysical. The Johannine rebirth, initiated by the reception of the logos, is ultimately a moral alignment with God—it is a new life lived in accordance with the teachings of God and the life of Christ. Men are not literally or ontologically God, but are “Gods” by virtue of God’s grace as a result of their obedience.

All of this helps to shed light on the controversial verses John 10:30 and 10:34, which precipitate Jesus’ citation of the Jewish version of the “a God, Son of God” formula. We know, per our recent analysis, that Jesus’ claim to oneness with God in John 10:30 is not concerned with ontological categories but with ethical. Nevertheless, a claim to “oneness” with God within Hermetic-Gnosticism would double as a claim to be “a God, the Son of God.”⁴¹⁴ This appears to be the exact perception that GJohn locates in the mouths of Jesus’ historical Jewish adversaries (John 10:33). Indeed, John 10:33, though popularly translated to have the Jews accuse Jesus of declaring himself to be “God” should really read “a god.” Both the context of John 10:33-36 (and of Ps 82:6 which is later quoted), and the Greek grammar, demonstrate that “a god” is the most appropriate rendering of the text.⁴¹⁵ Thus, Jesus’ opponents perceive a claim to be “a God” and Jesus responds by pointing out their hypocrisy: God himself called other men “Gods, Sons of God” when they received God’s logos—Why should they criticize him for claiming to be “a God, a Son of God” when their ancestors enjoyed the same status? Jesus is the appointed embodiment of God’s logos, who carries the light of God’s message to the rest of mankind (John 1:1ff.); if only the Jews opposing Jesus would receive him, and the logos of God within him, they too would become “Gods, the Sons of God.” This is the ethical challenge of John’s prologue: coming to Jesus in obedience, in submission to Jesus as the unique revelator of God, yields divine sonship. In this we also locate a challenge to the Hermetic ideal: divine sonship is not achieved through the revelation of Hermes-Logos, or through any other Gnostic mystic, and it is neither something had inherently by nature.

With John 1:12 and 10:30-36, the writer of GJohn ultimately confronts both Jewish and Hermetic-Gnostic opponents: Jesus justifies his claims to sonship in the face of Jewish opposition, and at the same time demonstrates the Jewish-Christian version of the “a God, a Son of God” trend, and ultimately competes with it. He furthermore demonstrates, by his application of the Jewish “a God, a Son of God” formula to not only Jesus, but to the men of the Psalms, and to Jesus’ human disciples, that neither Jesus nor other men are ontologically God, in contrast to the Hermeticists of John’s day. John further argues that Jesus is the “only Son” against the Gnostics who all claim divine sonship—if one is to join in divine sonship, one must go to Jesus, the only Son, to get what he has.

⁴¹¹ David Fideler likewise observed that “The Prologue to the Fourth Gospel makes it clear that those who ‘received’ the Logos experienced a divinizing energy, thus ‘becoming Sons of God,’ a transformation also referred to in the Hermetic writings. Elsewhere in the Fourth Gospel, this is referred to in Greek as ‘the birth from above’” (David Fideler, *Jesus Christ, Sun of God: Ancient Cosmology and Early Christian Symbolism* (Wheaton: Quest Books, 1993), p. 50).

⁴¹² Hermeticism’s logos is closely related to the idea of divine sonship: in *Poimandres* we read repeatedly that the Logos itself is “the Son of God,” and that “what sees and hears inside you is the Logos of the Lord, its Son,” “for the Logos was of one-substance (homouousios) with [God the Father].” Furthermore, in C.H. IV, God offers baptism for mankind so that it might “receive the gift of Nous as well as Logos” (Fowden, p. 113).

⁴¹³ C.H. X, *The Key*.

⁴¹⁴ “This is the good end for those who have gained Gnosis—to be made one with God” (C.H. I, *Poimandres*, 26).

⁴¹⁵ The *NEB* correctly translates John 10:33 to say: “You, a mere man, claim to be a god.” *Young’s Concise Critical Biblical Commentary* likewise argues that the passage should read “‘makest thyself a god,’ not ‘God’ as in [the KJV], otherwise the definite article would not have been omitted, as it is here, and in the next two verses—‘gods...gods,’ where the title is applied to magistrates, and others...” (Robert Young, *Young’s Concise Critical Biblical Commentary* (Baker Book House, 1977), p. 62). C.H. Dodd also provides this meaning: “making himself a god” (Dodd, p. 205). When “God” (as in Yahweh) is meant in GJohn, the noun *theos* usually has the article; when it is missing, as in John 10:33, we should render it “a god.” In Acts 28:6, the Greeks, speaking of Paul, “said he was a god.” The *theos* here has no article and is rightly translated “a god.” The context of Acts 28:6 likewise reveals that Paul was not thought to be Yahweh himself. Likewise, the context of John 10:33, in which Jesus does not teach that he is Yahweh, but that he was doing God’s work, reveals that “a god” is the right rendering of the Jews’ complaint. Thus “a god” is justified on both grammatical and contextual grounds.

6. Oneness/Tri-unity of God, Teacher, and disciples

We will consider another related idea in GJohn which cannot truly be accounted for by Judaism, but is easily recognized in Hermeticism: the tri-unity of God, teacher, and disciple.

As we saw above, in Hermeticism, God and mankind are ontologically related. Each man is, in nature and essence, God, and this is what permits his final union with the One. In *Poimandres* we read, “*This is the good end for those who have gained Gnosis—to be made one with God*” (*Poimandres*, 26). This Gnosis involves, however, the revelation that one already is, and always has been, God. For the Hermeticist, there is a living and present metaphysical oneness with God, which will culminate in ultimate reunification.

This unity of nature can be located in the distinct teacher-disciple relationship of Hermeticism: the human teacher, being an incarnation of Hermes, was to teach his disciples to recognize the Logos or Hermes-Thoth within themselves to the end that they each became one with God, and assumed the role of teacher themselves to pass the Gnosis onward.⁴¹⁶ Thus in Hermetic writings we find a double-sided recognition: “*I know you, Hermes, and you know me; I am you and you are me.*”⁴¹⁷ This was a recognition of the oneness of nature or essence between God, teacher, and disciple. The Gospel of John also features the double-sided recognition: “*I know my own and my own know me, as the Father knows me and I know the Father*” (John 10:14). But is this also a recognition of shared nature? Goppelt explains: in the Hermetic source, “the double-sided recognition was based on a kinship of essence: the light in the soul recognized the one sent from the kingdom of light and the reverse. By using these double-sided forms, the Gospel of John, however, pointed to the eschatological relationship to God that was effective in Jesus’ mission or that came about through it.”⁴¹⁸ Thus John’s *form* resembles Hermeticism, but at its core, John’s is a deeply Jewish, eschatological teaching about the Messiah’s alignment with God as his agent. Again, GJohn is not concerned with ontological categories, but with ethical ones—Jesus and God are ethically “one,” not metaphysically. Jesus says, “*The Father and I are one*” (John 10:30) in the context of the Messiah and God sharing in the work of saving the sheep, of preserving the disciples (vv. 27-29). This ethical and eschatological oneness extends also to the disciples: Jesus prays, “*that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me*” (John 17:21). Thus we have the Jewish-Christian version of the Hermetic-Gnostic tri-unity of God, teacher, and disciples.

Some may attempt to point to Philo to prove that drawing a relationship between GJohn and Hermeticism is unnecessary, under the premise that Judaism is able to account for all of the alleged Gnostic parallels.⁴¹⁹ But even the mystical Philo fails to both adequately represent the Johannine model of tri-unity and to match the parallel with Hermeticism.

Let us consider the “unity” with God advertised by Philo: Philo says that man, in his present form, is “not connected with God.”⁴²⁰ He furthermore says that “it is not possible for one who dwells in the body and belongs to the race of mortals to be united with God,” however, he may be united with him, if “God delivers him from that prison house of the body.”⁴²¹ Interestingly, we also read in Philo that God cannot be truly combined with anything, because he is a pure oneness that exists according to unity.⁴²² How then do we reconcile Philo’s teaching that a disembodied man can be “united with God”, with his teaching that God cannot be “combined” with anything? It seems that for Philo, even in the “unity” which man will enjoy with God in the bodiless afterlife, man still does not share in the essence of the deity; man is not “combined” with the divine essence. This contrasts with the Hermetic ideal that man and God share an essence, and are ultimately assimilated. In typical Gnostic theology, God is composed of a hierarchy of entities who share the divine essence, but Philo says that “God is not a compound being, nor one which is made up of many parts.”⁴²³

⁴¹⁶ Digeser, *Lactantius, Constantine and the Roman Res Publica*, pp. 243-244.

⁴¹⁷ Magical Hermetic papyri, quoted in Fowden, p. 26.

⁴¹⁸ Leonhard Goppelt, *The Ministry of Jesus in its Theological Significance* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), p. 203.

⁴¹⁹ Keener, p. 166.

⁴²⁰ Philo, *On Dreams Being Sent from God*, XL, 1.

⁴²¹ Philo, *Third Book of the Allegories of the Sacred Laws*, XIV, 42.

⁴²² “God is not a compound being, nor one which is made up of many parts, but one which has no mixture with anything else; for whatever could be combined with God must be either superior to him, or inferior to him, or equal to him. But there is nothing equal to God, and nothing superior to him, and nothing is combined with him which is worse than himself; for if it were, he himself would be deteriorated... Therefore God exists according to oneness and unity” (Philo, *Second Book of the Allegories of the Sacred Laws*, I, 3).

⁴²³ Ibid.

Thus it seems more than probable that Philo’s vision of mankind’s final “unity” with God is not a truly metaphysical, Gnostic assimilation.

The most important thing to note about the “unity” of Philo, however, as it relates to the Fourth Gospel, is that Philo’s unity between God and man is not achieved, and cannot be achieved, until after the dissolution of the body. Philo is clear that this unity, whatever it be, is a future hope; a living and present oneness is “impossible.” It would thus be impossible for any kind of double-sided recognition of an essential kinship between God and man to occur in Philo, as it does in GJohn and the Hermetica. In GJohn, Jesus and the disciples do experience a oneness with God (and each other) while in the body. Their unity is not a future hope, it is not a thing awaiting them in a coming after-life—it is a present reality, and a vital dimension of the eschatological activity of God being wrought here-and-now. Jesus presently “knows” his disciples, just as Hermes knows his. Furthermore, there is no sense of any “tri-unity” between God, a teacher, and his disciples ever brought out in Philo. Thus the basic model of “oneness” and “tri-unity” represented in the Fourth Gospel is not to be located in Judaism, but easily parallels with Hermeticism.

Hermeticism	GJohn
God the Father, Hermes the teacher, and the disciples are all “one”	God the Father, Jesus the teacher, and the disciples are all “one”
There is a double-sided recognition	There is a double-sided recognition
They are of one essence, and will ultimately be assimilated into the divine being	They are all of one mind, or purpose; they are united in fellowship and in the eschatological mission
The oneness is metaphysical, that of nature	The oneness is <i>not</i> metaphysical, but ethical
<i>“This is the good end for those who have gained Gnosis—to be made one with God.”</i> <i>(Poimandres, 26)</i>	<i>“That they mall all be one”</i> (John 17:21); <i>“I and the Father are one”</i> (John 10:30)

In the analysis above we find that John has once again utilized the form of Hermetic teaching to frame his Jewish-Christian doctrines about Jesus, God, and discipleship. What are the implications, then, of this deliberate parallel for Christology? Orthodox or Trinitarian readings of the “oneness” between Jesus and God are certainly metaphysical: they, like the Hermeticists, posit a kinship of essence between God and the teacher. However, the Trinitarian reading fails to extend that oneness to the disciples, and without good reason. GJohn clearly does extend the oneness shared by God and Jesus to the disciples: Jesus prays that the disciples would be one with them, “just as” they are one (John 17:22). While the Trinitarian may point to the unity of God and Jesus as one of essence, due to their sharing in “glory” (John 17:5), Jesus says, *“The glory which you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as we are one”* (17:22). If the glory and oneness shared between God and Jesus is metaphysical, then so is the glory and oneness shared between them and the disciples—if Jesus is essentially God, then so are his students. Ultimately, if the Trinitarian reading of the Johannine “oneness” and “unity” is correct, then GJohn proves to be a Hermetic-Gnostic gospel, teaching the deity of humanity. But John, as we have seen elsewhere, is by no means a true Gnostic: his is a gospel concerned with human ethics and eschatological destiny, not with metaphysics.

XIII. Conclusion

In the Fourth Gospel we have discovered a layered polemical narrative which seeks to establish Jesus and John's Jewish-Christianity in a widening, Hellenistic world. GJohn competes both with Jews and with Christian Gnostic and Hermetic trends which were encroaching on his community, threatening to both siphon its members and abrogate its message. In our analysis of John's method, which included presentations of the Jewish-Christian versions of Gnostic trends, we have encountered a Jesus who contrasts sharply with the Gnostic Christ who is a spiritual being literally coming down out of the cosmos, of one essence with God. Within the framework of John's ethical dualism, we are to discern a Jesus who, despite the spatial language, has not literally descended from heaven. Thus, there is no need to view GJohn's Christology as partly docetic; the "balanced" reading of Trinitarians like Scott and Smalley is to be abandoned in favor of an unqualified Human Christology set against the backdrop of Jewish Wisdom literature, the Hebraic law of agency, and the LXX; the human, non-preexistent Jesus of the Synoptics is also to be found in John, presented in a different light for polemical and evangelistic reasons. In the end, the Jesus of the Fourth Gospel is not the spiritual being which both Gnosticism and Trinitarianism need him to be. Only the biblical unitarian interpretation can explain John's Christology in light of the Gospel's multi-front polemic, and thus it emerges as the superior reading.

