

‘Night’ and ‘Day’ in John 9.4–5: A Reassessment*

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This article argues that John 9.4–5 should be reanalysed as an appeal parallel to 12.35–6, so that the ‘night ... when no one can work’ of 9.4 corresponds to the avoidable ‘darkness’ of 12.35. Viewed in this manner, ‘night’ represents the condemned state of the unbelieving after the departure of Jesus. Jesus urges his disciples to ‘work the works’ of God so that, at the historical onset of ‘night’, the Paraclete may mediate a continuing, covert experience of ‘day’ within them. That onset, then, marks a critical phase in the eschatological separation of the ‘children of light’ from ‘the world’.

Keywords: Johannine, symbolism, eschatology, light, darkness, departure

In John 9.4–5, Jesus warns his disciples of a coming ‘night’ in which it is impossible to perform ‘the works of God’ (cf. v. 3):

ἡμᾶς δεῖ ἐργάζεσθαι τὰ ἔργα τοῦ πέμψαντός με ἕως ἡμέρα ἐστίν·
ἐρχεται νύξ ὅτε οὐδεὶς δύναται ἐργάζεσθαι.
ὅταν ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ ᾶ, φῶς εἰμι τοῦ κόσμου.

We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day;
night is coming, when no one can work.
As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.

Interpreters generally identify the ‘works’ cited both here and in v. 3 with the ministry of Jesus and his disciples, especially acts of miraculous healing (cf. 10.32).¹

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1 ‘Die Werke Gottes werden durch das Folgende eindeutig definiert: Sie bestehen hier in der Heilung, die an dem Kranken geschieht’ (C. Dietzfelbinger, *Das Evangelium des Johannes* (2 vols.; ZBKNT 4; Zürich: TVZ, 2004) 1.277); see discussions of τὰ ἔργα in ch. 9 in: J. Reidl, *Das Heilswerk Jesu nach Johannes* (Freiburg/Basle/Vienna: Herder, 1973) 292–306; P. W.

Furthermore, since Jesus describes this 'night' as a time 'when *no one* [οὐδεὶς] can work', most interpreters infer that this 'night' is universal in scope, embracing all human beings at its arrival. In this reading of the text, Jesus urges his disciples to maximise their efforts in the limited window in which it is still possible for them to work ('day'). When that window inevitably closes ('night'), their spiritual labours will come to an end. In turn, the beginning of this 'night' is associated with (1) the end of human lifespan in general² and/or (2) the events surrounding Jesus' death and ascension.³

Studies endorsing the first possibility compare the form and content of 9.4 to rabbinical aphorisms and proverbs (e.g. R. Simeon b. Eleazar in *B. Shabbath*, 151b: 'perform [deeds of righteousness] so long as you can find [an object of charity] while you have the means, and while it is in your power').⁴ Viewed as a statement of this type, the saying 'becomes a summons to do what is required at any particular time', so long as life persists.⁵ Studies endorsing the second

Ensor, *Jesus and his 'Works'* (WUNT 2/85; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996) 98-128, especially at 116.

2 Studies endorsing this possibility include G. Delling, 'νύξ', *TDNT* IV.1123-6, at 1125; C. H. Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963) 186; C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978²) 357; E. Haenchen, *Das Johannesevangelium: Ein Kommentar* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1980) 377-8; C. R. Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, and Community* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2003²) 162; K. Wengst, *Das Johannesevangelium* (2 vols.; ThKNT 4/1; Verlag W. Kohlhammer, 2004) 1.355-6; J. R. Michaels, *The Gospel of John* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010) 301 (but note the ambivalence in n. 28).

3 Certain studies affirm both possibilities, often within a two-level framework. See R. Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St John*, vol. II (New York: Crossroads, 1990) 242; H. N. Ridderbos, *Het Evangelie naar Johannes: Proeve van een theologische Exegese* (2 vols.; Kampen, the Netherlands: Uitgeversmaatschappij J. H. Kok, 1987) 1.386-7; O. Schwankl, 'Die Metaphorik von Licht und Finsternis im johanneischen Schrifttum', *Metaphorik und Mythos im Neuen Testament* (QD 126; ed. K. Kertelge; Freiburg: Herder, 1990) 135-67, at 154-5; id., *Licht und Finsternis: Ein metaphorisches Paradigma in den johanneischen Schriften* (HBS 5; Freiburg: Herder, 1995) 223-34; Ensor, 'Works', 115.

Others affirm only the second, including R. E. Brown *The Gospel according to John* (2 vols.; AB 29; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 1.217; O. Cullmann, 'Sabbat und Sonntag nach dem Johannesevangelium: ἕως ἄρτι (*Joh* 5, 17)', *In memoriam E. Lohmeyer* (Stuttgart: Evangelisches Verlagswerk, 1953) 127-31; L. Morris, *The Gospel according to John* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) 426; O. Böcher, 'Das Verhältnis der Apokalypse des Johannes zum Evangelium des Johannes', *L'Apocalypse johannique et l'Apocalyptique dans le Nouveau Testament* (ed. J. Lambrecht; Gembloux: Duculot, 1980) 298-301; Dietzfelbinger, *Johannes*, 1.277. See also H. Thyen, who posits several visits of the 'light' (*Das Johannesevangelium* (HNT 6; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005) 457-8).

4 See discussion in Dodd, *Tradition*, 186. Compare also Ps 104.23.

5 Schnackenburg, *John*, II.242. In this reading then, 'day' stands for the normal span of human activity on earth, and 'night' for its cessation' (Dodd, *Tradition*, 186).

reading, however, note that the verse immediately following 9.4 points instead to a single, universal starting point for this ‘night’, anchored in historical time. In it, Jesus compares his presence in the world to the presence of the sun in the daytime sky: ‘as long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world’ (cf. 11.9: ‘if anyone walks in the day, that one does not stumble, because he or she sees the light of this world’). Read in concert with 9.4, this text suggests that Jesus’ earthly life frames the earth’s ‘day’ (cf. 12.46; 18.37a; 1.9–10, 14). *Mutatis mutandis*, the ‘night’ must correspond to a time when Jesus is no longer in the world – a time anticipated in several texts in John:

The light is with you for only a little while longer. (12.35a)

Jesus then said, ‘I shall be with you a little while longer, and then I go to him who sent me; you will seek me and you will not find me; where I am you cannot come.’ (7.33–4)

I came from the Father and have come into the world; again, I am leaving the world and going to the Father. (16.28)

Jesus departs from this world through the events of the second half of the Gospel (chs. 13–21), especially the crucifixion (after which point Jesus is no longer seen by the world (cf. 8.21–2; 12.32–4; 14.19)) and the ascension (which conducts Jesus to his Father, the place where his hearers ‘cannot come’ (7.34; cf. 3.13; 6.61–62; 20.17)).⁶ These events evidently mark the beginning of the ‘night’ of 9.4. Not coincidentally, this half of the Gospel is also characterised by what Alan Culpepper describes as an ‘explosion’ of ‘darkness’/‘night’ imagery, drawing attention to the broader problem of Jesus’ increasing absence.⁷

Despite the popularity of these schemes, however, both are vulnerable to criticisms issued nearly eighty years ago in the writings of Hugo Odeberg. With respect to the first interpretation, Odeberg notes that it is difficult to characterise human

6 In his discussion of Jesus’ departure, M. C. de Boer argues that the image of Jesus’ departure was ‘in the first instance ... an image of his resurrection/ascension’ (conceived jointly following Brown, *John*, 1012–15) though this language was secondarily transferred to the crucifixion (‘Jesus’ Departure to the Father in John: Death or Resurrection?’, *Theology and Christology in the Fourth Gospel: Essays by Members of the SNTS Johannine Writings Seminar* (ed. G. Van Belle, J. G. van der Watt, P. Maritz; BETL 184; Leuven: Leuven University Press/Peeters, 2005) 18–19). According to the Gospel, the ‘hour’ for Jesus ‘to depart the world and go to the Father’ begins on the night of his betrayal (13.1).

7 ‘The reader can also be expected to sense that torches and lanterns (18:3) are a pathetic substitute for the light of the world. And a charcoal fire (18:18) is a miserable alternative on a cold dark night It is appropriate that Mary Magdalene goes to the empty tomb in darkness (20:1) and that the disciples find the fishing at night to be futile but enclose an astonishing catch when it is morning’ (R. A. Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) 192).

death as a true limit in a gospel that so emphatically 'offers the possibility of life' to the believer (cf. 5.19-29).⁸ In Johannine thought, all who believe in the Son 'will never die' (11.25-6) because they possess 'eternal life' within them (3.16, 36; 4.14). With respect to the second, Odeberg argues that it is 'quite against the whole [Johannine] system of thought to say that the end of [Jesus'] earthly activity would mark the beginning of a ... period of darkness, when all spiritual activity would be excluded'.⁹ As J. Louis Martyn would later argue in his classic critique of a one-level interpretation of the Gospel, 'if the Johannine church lives in this night - that is to say, if in an absolute sense Jesus has departed from the world - then we must recognize a sharp contradiction between John 9:4a and 14:12 on the one hand, and John 9:4b-5 on the other':¹⁰ 'Truly, truly, I say to you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will that one do, because I go to the Father' (14.12). Whereas 9.4-5 suggests that work will not be possible after the ascension of Jesus, 14.12 affirms that the disciples will be able to work precisely because of Jesus' ascension.¹¹ The ascension, after all, facilitates the coming of the Paraclete (16.7), who by mediating the presence of Jesus within the disciples (17.20, 21-3)

8 H. Odeberg, *The Fourth Gospel* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1929) 311-12.

9 Odeberg, *Fourth Gospel*, 311-12.

10 J. L. Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (NTL; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2003³) 39.

11 Compare Augustine, *In Joannis Evangelium, Tractatus* 44.5: *Putamus eum, fratres, fuisse hic tunc, et modo non hic esse? Si ergo hoc putamus, iam ergo post ascensum Domini facta est nox ista metuenda, ubi nemo possit operari: si post ascensum Domini facta est nox ista, unde Apostoli tanta operati sunt? ipse discipulis dixerat, 'Majora horum facietis' (PL 35.4715).*

One attempt to salvage this interpretation suggests that the 'night' of 9.4 corresponds only to 'the darkness of the period when Jesus is first taken from his disciples', and not to 'what prevails after Jesus is glorified and has poured out his Spirit (9:37-39)' (D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 363). In this view, the period of the church's ministry represents a new 'day' (cf. Brown, *John*, II.579; T. Knöppler, *Die theologia crucis des Johannevangelium* (WMANT 69; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1994) 178-9). However, the absence of darkness imagery in the crucifixion account suggests that 'Jesus illuminated the world from his cross, and according to 20:17 ("I have not yet ascended to the Father") ... remained in the world at least till Easter Sunday morning' so that one cannot yet speak fully of 'night' in this period (R. H. Gundry, 'New Wine in Old Wineskins: Bursting Traditional Interpretations in John's Gospel (Part Two)', *BBR* 17.2 (2007) 285-96, at 288). Furthermore, as indicated in n. 3, the darkness imagery characteristic of the second half of the Gospel grows only more intense in the post-resurrection accounts. In ch. 20, Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene 'while it was still dark' (20.1) and again to his disciples, 'when it was evening on that day, the first day of the week', at which time he imparts the Paraclete (20.19). Even the final episode of the Gospel begins in a night setting (20.3). These indications hardly demonstrate the dawn of a new 'day' for the world with the coming of the Paraclete, though the use of light imagery in 21.4 could indicate a new, covert 'day' limited to the experience of the disciples.

empowers them to perform these ‘greater works’ (14.12–14, 20; 17.23). Thus, even Jesus’ physical absence from the earth hardly represents a limit to the works of God.

1. ‘Night’ and the Unbelieving

In fact, upon a broader examination of the Gospel, it would appear that only the absence of Jesus ‘in’ the human person, i.e. via the mediation of the Paraclete, marks an enduring limit to the works of God. According to 5.17, the lives of the Father and Son are characterised by continuous and uninterrupted ‘work’ (cf. 5.17: ‘the Father is working until now, and I am working’). In turn, the Son is also active in the disciples he indwells through the Paraclete, continually producing his ‘works’ within them (14.12–14, 20; 17.23).¹² However, the one who does not abide in the Son, and in whom the Son does not abide, ‘can do nothing’ (15.5; cf. 9.33; 14.17), a point brought out in instances of irony in the Gospel (cf. 12.19). Tellingly, the only other text of the Gospel utilising the ‘night’ metaphor in discourse identifies it with the absence of Jesus, the light (cf. 8.12), ‘in’ the human person: ‘if any one walks in the night, that one stumbles, because the light is not in him or her’ (11.9–10). Read against this text, the ‘day’ and ‘night’ of 9.4 may represent two alternatives of human existence.

Odeberg himself develops a very similar conception of the ‘night’ of 9.4 in his discussion of the text.¹³ In his view, 9.4–5 ‘presupposes the situation of the narrative’, so that the ‘light of the world’ metaphor anticipates Jesus’ role as ‘the light of the blind man’ that restores his sight.¹⁴ In that case, one should align the image of ‘day’ with sight and ‘night’ with the ‘blindness’ that overtakes those who reject Jesus and condemn themselves (cf. 9.39).¹⁵ In turn, Odeberg insists that these ideas ‘should be put in relation to 3^{19–21}’, where ‘we meet with the same correlation of the ideas of “judgment”, “light” and “darkness” and where “too, the “light” is viewed in its relation to the world’:¹⁶

12 For the semantic equivalency of ἕως ἄρτι (‘until now’) and αἰεὶ in certain contexts, including 9.5, see R. Bultmann, *Das Evangelium des Johannes* (KEK 2; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1985²¹) 183; C. Maurer, ‘Steckt hinter Joh. 5,17 ein Übersetzungsfehler?’, *Wort und Dienst* 5 (1957) 130–40; cf. G. Stählin, ‘vὐν (ἄρτι)’, *TDNT* iv.1106–23, at 1111.

13 Odeberg’s conclusions have been most recently endorsed in D. A. Lee, *The Symbolic Narratives of the Fourth Gospel: The Interplay of Form and Meaning* (JSNT 95; Sheffield: JSOT, 1994) 166.

14 Odeberg, *Fourth Gospel*, 312; see also L. Morris, ‘The Relation of the Signs and the Discourses in John’, *The New Testament Age: Essays in Honor of Bo Reicke* (ed. W. C. Weinrich; Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1984) 368.

15 In his rebuttal to Odeberg, Morris concedes that this alignment better suits ‘John’s use of ‘light’ and ‘darkness’ elsewhere’ (Morris, *John*, 426). See also Gundry, ‘Traditional Interpretations’, 288–9.

16 Odeberg, *Fourth Gospel*, 312.

And this is the judgment [ἡ κρίσις], that the light has come into the world, and human beings loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For every one who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his or her deeds should be exposed. But the one who does what is true comes to the light, that it may be clearly seen that his or her deeds have been wrought in God. (3.19-21)

According to this text, the world was once cloaked in a 'darkness' that obscured the moral differences between human beings (5.35). However, the coming of 'the light of the world' offers the possibility of illumination to every person (cf. 1.9). Some willingly 'come to the light', unafraid to expose their deeds because they were accomplished 'in God' (cf. 9.4). Others, who have committed evil deeds, shrink back from the light to find shelter in the darkness.¹⁷ On the plane of the Gospel's present eschatology, these varying responses represent a judgment, a κρίσις (3.19), in 'the threefold sense of discrimination (division, "sifting" ...) verdict and condemnation'.¹⁸ According to the passage, a person in the latter class, who remains in darkness, 'is condemned (κέκριται) already, because that one has not believed in the name of the only Son of God' (3.18). Odeberg identifies the 'night' of 9.4 with this experience of 'turning away from the Light' into darkness.¹⁹ Thus, the 'night ... when no one can work' is a reality that embraces 'unbelievers alone', whereas 'for the believers there will ever be day; there will never come any 'night' for the believers, just as there will be no 'death' for them (5²⁴)'.²⁰

17 Viewed in this light, 'the purpose of Jesus' coming in the Gospel of John is not so much "conversion" as "revelation" of who belongs to God and who does not' (Michaels, *John*, 207; id., 'Baptism and Conversion in John: A Particular Baptist Reading', *Baptism, the New Testament and the Church: Historical and Contemporary Studies in Honour of R. E. O. White* (JSNTSup 171; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999) 145-8).

18 Odeberg, *John*, 147 (cf. C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1953) 357-8). Jörg Frey describes 3.19-21 as 'a *locus classicus* of Johannine present eschatology'. Although the text can be taken to mean 'that the final judgment has already been finished in relation to both, the believers and the non-believers', Frey believes that this present judgment does not exclude that a 'sentence will be uttered "on the last day"', as suggested in 3.36; 12.47 ('Eschatology in the Johannine Circle', *Theology and Christology in the Fourth Gospel* (ed. G. van Belle, J. G. van der Warr, P. Maritz; BETL 184; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2005) 75). For a more extensive analysis of this passage, especially within the issue of Johannine present eschatology, see id., *Die johanneische Eschatologie*, vol III: *Die eschatologische Verkündigung in den johanneischen Texten* (WUNT 117; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000) 242-321.

19 Odeberg, *Fourth Gospel*, 312.

20 Odeberg, *Fourth Gospel*, 312. Notably, Augustine pursues a similar interpretation of οὐδεὶς in *In Joannis Evangelium, Tractatus* 44.6, albeit with reference to a future eschatological judgment: *quid igitur? quid dicemus de nocte ista? quando erit, quando nemo poterit operari? nox ista impiorum erit: nox ista eorum erit quibus in fine dicitur, 'ite in ignem aeternum, qui paratus*

Odeberg himself refuses to anchor this ‘night’ in ‘the temporary history of [Jesus]’ but argues that it is realised in ‘the temporal continuity of men in general’. At any time, human beings can ‘reject the light that comes to them’.²¹ He then insists that the primary ‘cause of the failure to grasp the real import of 9^a–5 is that the reader is almost as by a hypnotical force misled into adding to 9^b a parallel to 9^a, that parallel then naturally forming itself into some such sentence as “the time cometh, when I shall no longer be in the world etc.” Instead, he argues that the clause ὅταν ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ ᾧ, φῶς εἶμι τοῦ κόσμου ‘serves only to underline the nature of [Jesus]’ activity, and does *not* admit of any negative corollary’.²²

Still, at least a dozen other texts in the Gospel expressly affirm the negative corollary Odeberg rejects at 9.4–5 (i.e. ‘the time cometh, when I shall no longer be in the world etc.’): ‘I am leaving the world and going to the Father’ (16.28b); ‘I am no more in the world’ (17.11a); ‘the light is with you for only a little longer’ (12.35a). In the end, the ‘hypnotical force’ he describes can be credited to none other than the evangelist or redactor of this passage, who has (1) juxtaposed 9.4b and 9.5 in such a way as to suggest this negative corollary, and (2) reinforced this reading with parallel statements in other passages.²³ Odeberg is predisposed to oppose this corollary because of his willingness to interpret ‘the nature of Jesus’ activity’ in 9.5 solely on the basis of 3.19–21. However, whereas 3.19–21 is built upon the image of light entering into the world (‘the light has come into the world’, 3.19), 9.4–5 seems to represent a second stage of this scheme, one not expressly anticipated in the previous text. After the light has entered into the world, leading to the salvation of some and the condemnation of others, it departs again.

2. Rereading 9.4–5

In this case, a better point of comparison to the scheme developed in 9.4–5 can be obtained from the next text in the Gospel that expressly anticipates the departure of ‘the light’ of the world, 12.35–6:

est diabolo et angelis eius’ (PL 35.4715–16). Robert Gundry defends a nearly identical view in ‘Traditional Interpretations’, 285–9, albeit with no apparent knowledge of Augustine’s scheme.

21 Odeberg, *Fourth Gospel*, 311.

22 Odeberg, *Fourth Gospel*, 312.

23 On this basis, one can also dismiss John C. Poirier’s alternative punctuation of 9.3–4, which requires that one ‘treat v. 5 as the beginning of a new paragraph’ – or in fact, an island unto itself, seeing as v. 6 describes the miracle – ‘whose symbolism does not answer to the language of the preceding verses’ (‘“Day and Night” and the Sabbath Controversy of John 9’, *Filologia Neotestamentaria* 19 (2006) 113–19, at 118; cf. id., ‘Day and Night and the Punctuation of John 9,3’, *NTS* 42 (1996), 288–94).

Jesus said to them, 'The light is with you for a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness will not overtake you; the one who walks in the darkness does not know where he or she goes. While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become children of light.'

This text finds a close parallel in 11.9-10, a segment of which I have already examined:

Jesus answered, 'Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, that one does not stumble, because he or she sees the light of this world. But if anyone walks in the night, that one stumbles, because the light is not in him or her.'

Both 11.9-10 and 12.35-6 are embedded in discussions of the imminent death of Jesus (cf. 11.7-8; 12.32-4). Each, in turn, directly adapts the motifs introduced at 9.4-5 to elaborate upon this theme.²⁴ In 11.9-10, Jesus comforts his fearful disciples with the thought that his death cannot and will not overtake him before its time (cf. v. 8). Just as the natural day has a predictable number of hours, so also the metaphorical 'day' of his presence on earth, introduced in 9.4-5, has a predetermined and unalterable length.²⁵ Similarly, in 12.35-6, Jesus takes up the 'light of the world' motif of 9.5 again to warn his hearers that he will be among them for 'only a little longer'.

Notably, both texts conclude with similar sayings framed around the image of walking in the 'day'/'light' or 'night'/'darkness'. In 12.35-6, Jesus links the imminent departure of the 'light' with the spectre of a 'darkness' that threatens his hearers. 'While you have the light, believe in the light', he urges them, extending the 'light of the world' motifs, 'so that the darkness will not overtake you' (ἵνα μὴ σκοτία ὑμᾶς καταλάβῃ). In this text, 'darkness' is a reality Jesus' hearers can and must work to avoid in the short time (μικρὸν χρόνον) 'the light' is present among them. I submit that the coming 'night' of 9.4 corresponds to the avoidable 'darkness' of 12.35. Given the striking parallels between 11.9-10 and 12.35-6, this 'darkness' is at least equivalent to the 'night' discussed in 11.10. Insofar as the categories of 11.9-10 and 12.35-6 are built upon the categories of 9.4-5, however, this 'night' should also be linked to the 'night' of 9.4.²⁶

2.1 *The Unity of 9.4 and 12.35-6*

More to the point, I propose that 9.4 be reanalysed as an appeal parallel to the one contained in 12.35-6. There are, in fact, several striking correspondences

24 On this basis, certain studies assign these three texts to a common underlying source or stage of redaction, e.g. Bultmann, *Johannes*, 304 n. 1; U. C. von Wahlde, *The Gospel and Letters of John* (3 vols.; ECC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010) II.429, 492, 552.

25 Schwankl, *Licht und Finsternis*, 240-3; Koester, *Symbolism*, 162-3; Michaels, *John*, 619-20.

26 In turn, this 'darkness' can also be connected to the darkness in 3.19-21. Important parallels unite that text and 12.31-6 (see J. H. Neyrey, *The Gospel of John* (NCBC; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 223).

between these texts. In the reading I will propose here, Jesus urges his disciples to join him in the works of God *because it is only by persevering in these works that they can avoid being overtaken by the coming 'night'*.²⁷ Consider 9.4 segment by segment.

2.1.1 'We must work the works of him who sent me ...'

At the outset of 9.4, Jesus urges his disciples to join him in working the works of God. Jesus performs the works of God by fulfilling his salvific mission in the world (cf. 4.34; 6.30–2), especially by bringing light to humankind.²⁸ (In this chapter, this light is both physical and spiritual, i.e. sight and belief.) How do human beings 'work the works' of God in their own sphere? By responding to Jesus' salvific mission:

Then they said to him, 'What must we do, that we may work the works of God?' Jesus answered them, 'This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.' (6.28–9)

For human beings, active engagement in the works of God consists primarily of the one work Jesus urges his disciples to accomplish in 12.36: 'while you have the light, believe in the light'. Strikingly, the conventional readings of 9.4 are unable to identify the 'works' mentioned in that text with belief, since the onset of 'night' would then mark the end of belief.²⁹ The interpretation proposed in this study, on the other hand, is able to link Jesus' words at 9.4–5 to those at 6.29. On the basis of this link, there is also little need to posit that the 'we' (ἡμῶς) in 9.4 is realised only across two consecutive phases of ministry: i.e. that of Jesus followed by that of the apostles.³⁰ The plural pronoun may instead encapsulate the synergy between the salvific activity of the 'light' in the world and the co-operation of human beings in that mission, through belief and other spiritual activities (14.12). Both halves of this synergy are, in fact, 'works of God', accomplished by God in his 'sending' of the Son ('the Father who dwells in me does his works', 14.10) and his drawing of believers (e.g. 'no one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them', 6.44, 64–5).

This interpretation is also consistent with J. Ramsey Michaels' recent reinterpretation of the 'works of God' mentioned in the preceding verse, 9.3. Whereas

27 Even in this reading, 9.4 may presuppose an older proverb not unlike that of R. S. b. Eleazar: 'perform [deeds of righteousness] so long as you can' (*B. Shabbath*, 151b). However, juxtaposed with the implicit departure motifs of 9.5, and integrated into the symbolic vocabulary of the entire Gospel, the meaning of that saying has been dramatically altered.

28 Reidl, *Heilswerk*, 298–306.

29 Odeberg, by contrast, is able to identify the 'works' of 9.4 with belief, citing 6.29 (Odeberg, *Fourth Gospel*, 312).

30 So e.g. Schnackenburg, *John*, 241: the 'disciples are perhaps included in the saying about working because they are one day to become witnesses and announcers of his work (15:27) who will perform works like his (14:12)'.

most studies identify the revelation of these 'works' with the miraculous healing Jesus performs immediately following this exchange, Michaels argues that these works correspond, instead, to the man's own righteous 'works done in God', which are revealed upon his coming to the light (v. 38).³¹ In defence of this view, Michaels highlights the striking grammatical parallels between 9.3 and 3.21, the text central to Odeberg's discussion:

Jesus answered, 'It was not that this man sinned, nor his parents, but *that the works of God might be made manifest in him* (ἵνα φανερωθῆ τὰ ἔργα τοῦ θεοῦ ἐν αὐτῷ).' (9.3)

But those who do what is true come to the light, *that it might be made manifest that his or her works are done in God* (ἵνα φανερωθῆ αὐτοῦ τὰ ἔργα ὅτι ἐν θεῷ ἔστιν εἰργασμένα). (3.21)

In Michaels' words, 'the parallel [between 3.20-1 and 9.3] suggests that the man born blind is the Gospel writer's prime example and embodiment of the person who "does the truth" and therefore "comes to the Light".³² The works of God in him are, in turn, 'fully "revealed" or disclosed ... when the former blind man finally "comes to the Light" (3:21) by believing in Jesus (see 9:38)'.³³ In fact, in the very act of confessing Jesus, the man manifests the principal 'work of God' within him: belief (6.28-9). In this case, it would appear that 9.4 takes the example of the blind man as its point of departure. After identifying the blind man as one whose blindness opens him to the possibility of belief (cf. 9.39), Jesus stresses his disciples' need to believe and otherwise co-operate with the 'works of God' as well, after the example of the man born blind.³⁴

2.1.2 '... while it is still day'

In the next segment of 9.4, Jesus urges his disciples to 'work the works' of God, that is to believe, 'while it is still day'. As I have already noted, this 'day' corresponds precisely to the presence of the light in the world (9.5). Similarly, in

31 Michaels, *John*, 541. On the equivalency of 'the works of God' (9.3) and works 'done in God' (3.21), see 10.37-8; 14.11. Early signs of the working of God in the man's life are evident in his sympathy to Jesus, his identification of Jesus as 'the prophet' (9.17; cf. 1.21; 4.19, 44; 6.14; 7.40), and his deduction that Jesus must have come 'from God' (9.17, 31-3). The conventional interpretation is articulated by Bultmann: 'Damit ist auf das Heilungswunder vorausgewiesen; denn der, welcher „Gottes Werke" wirkt, ist ja Jesus, dem der Vater gegeben hat, sie zu wirken (5,36)' (Bultmann, *Johannes*, 251; cf. Brown, *John*, 371-2).

32 Michaels, *John*, 541.

33 Michaels, *John*, 541.

34 In fact, at the end of the chapter, Jesus will expressly designate those called to belief as 'those who do not see', that is the blind (9.39), providing an explanation for why the man's blindness creates the possibility of the manifestation of the works of God in him.

12.35–6, Jesus urges his hearers to ‘believe in the light’ ‘while you have the light’, that is in the short time the light is still in the world.

2.1.3. ‘Night is coming ...’

According to 9.4–5, the disciples must perform the works of God while it is still ‘day’ because that ‘day’ is finite and will soon be superseded by ‘night’. Likewise, in 12.35, Jesus urges his hearers to believe while they have ‘the light’ to avoid being overtaken by ‘darkness’. Insofar as Jesus’ hearers are encouraged to make the most of the ‘little while longer’ when the light is still with them, the ‘darkness’ of 12.35 should be understood as a future threat, aligned with the anticipation of a coming ‘night’.

It is here that 9.4 and 12.35–6 add a second and crucial stage to the framework of 3.20–1. As the light departs, the darkness that previously pervaded the world returns. Those who ‘hate the light’ are abandoned to the darkness they love, sealing their condemnation (cf. 3.18–19). This is the ‘night’ of 9.4. However, just as this advancing darkness is unable to overtake the light (κατέλαβεν, 1.5), it is also unable to fully overtake the ‘children of light’ (καταλάβη, 12.36). Through the Paraclete, those who believe are granted a continuing, covert vision of the light (14.19) and, thus, a continued experience of the day.³⁵ They will not walk in ‘darkness’:

Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, ‘I am the light of the world; the one who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.’ (8.12)³⁶

I have come as light into the world, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness. (12.46)

Thus, in the midst of the world’s ‘night’, they are capable both of belief and of the ‘greater works’ of 14.12.

Taken together then, the entrance of the light into the world (from 3.19–21; i.e. the ‘day’) and its departure again (i.e. the ‘night’) represent a two-step sifting process. ‘Day’ draws the ‘children of light’ out of the world (3.20), and causes the children of darkness to shrink back. In turn, the onset of ‘night’ seals the decisions of each party, effecting a permanent separation of the two. The drama of the

³⁵ In this, one recalls the ‘epistemological crisis’ described by Martyn. While the world can presently see ‘only one level of the drama’, namely, ‘the *einmalig* tradition about Jesus of Nazareth, a figure from the past’, the disciple perceives both that *einmalig* tradition and Jesus’ continued presence through the Paraclete (Martyn, *Fourth Gospel*, 142).

³⁶ Barnabas Lindars sees an intromissive conception of sight here: ‘A man is safe in the daylight because he sees the light of this world, i.e., the daylight enters into him through his eyes’ (B. Lindars, *The Gospel of John* (NCBC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) 390). Compare, however, the extramissive conception of sight underlying Matt 6.22–3 (D. C. Allison Jr, ‘The Eye is the Lamp of the Body (Matthew 6.22–23 = Luke 11.34–36)’, *NTS* 33 (1987) 61–83).

'night' of 9.4, then, is the alienation of the Johannine anti-society (the 'children of light') from the world.³⁷ It is the formation of parallel communities – one forever in the 'light', the other now irretrievably condemned to 'darkness' (cf. 1 John 4.4-6). On the plane of realised eschatology, this separation marks the world's judgement. Thus, at the hour of his departure, and immediately before the second of his two 'walking' sayings (12.35-6), Jesus proclaims: 'Now is the judgement of this world ... And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all to myself' (12.31-2). This sifting process must occur in two stages because the 'day' alone is insufficient to fully effect this separation.³⁸ In the daytime of Jesus' presence, Judas, though unbelieving (6.64, 71), is still numbered among his disciples. Only the onset of 'night' seals him in his unbelief and causes him to break company with the other disciples: 'after the morsel, Satan entered into him ... [Judas] immediately went out; and it was night' (13.27, 30).³⁹

2.1.4. '... when no one can work'

Contrary to the conventional reading of 9.4, the indefinite οὐδείς does not suggest that all persons will cease working when it is 'night'. Rather, it frames a general principle: 'when' it is 'night' – that is, wherever it happens to be 'night' – 'no one (οὐδείς) can work'. In 11.10, Jesus states a parallel idea, also of 'night', in the conditional: 'if any one walks in the night, that one stumbles'. In 12.35, Jesus uses a restricted subject with reference to 'darkness': 'the one who walks in the darkness does not know where he or she goes' (12.36). The images contained in all three texts communicate a common idea: those, and only those, who are apart from 'the light' 'can do nothing' (15.5; cf. 12.19).⁴⁰ Collectively, these images portray the plight of an unbeliever mired in the spiritual futility lampooned throughout the Gospel.

3. John 9.4-5 in its Context

The superiority of this interpretation of 9.4-5 is best appreciated when the context of these verses is taken into account. Neither of the conventional readings

37 These facts should only lend support to Wayne Meeks' characterisation of the Gospel as 'an etiology of the Johannine group', which 'defines and vindicates the existence of the community that evidently sees itself as unique, alien from its world' (W. A. Meeks, 'The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism', *JBL* 91 (1972) 69-70).

38 I suspect this idea reflects an apologetic response to the problem of Jesus' departure.

39 Elsewhere in the Gospel, the image of stumbling is applied to those disciples who, having followed Jesus for a time, doubt, repudiate and desert Jesus (6.61, 64). Thus, for Judas, 'night' is indeed a time of 'stumbling'. Note also that in 13.27, 30, Judas is the one who 'walks in darkness' *par excellence*.

40 One should, then, contextualise references to motion within the Gospel's broader discourse on 'work'. Those who cannot move also cannot work. Thus, Jesus' reversal of the blind man's paralysis permits him to violate the Sabbath by carrying his mat (5.1-18).

of 9.4–5 outlined at the beginning of this study is able to anchor the text in the broader concerns and themes of ch. 9. For instance, no portion of the episode and discourse that follows (9.6–10.21) suggests an urgent need to perform miracles in one's lifespan, or over the duration of Jesus' time on earth. In the reading proposed here, however, the contextual significance of 9.4–5 becomes clear. Jesus' appeal underscores the urgent need for belief throughout ch. 9 – a theme subsequently developed through the related metaphors of 'sight' and 'blindness' (cf. 1 John 2.11: the one who 'walks in the darkness ... does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes').

At the outset of the chapter, Jesus asserts: 'as long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world'. In v. 39, he elaborates upon the character of his mission as the light: 'I have come into this world for judgement (εἰς κρίμα) so that those who do not see may see', that is, receive the light, 'and those who do see may become blind', that is, descend into darkness. These varying outcomes are portrayed in vv. 6–38. On the one hand, Jesus brings physical and spiritual light/sight to a man who cannot see, manifesting the works of God within him. On the other hand, the chapter provides ample evidence of the increasing blindness of 'the Jews' and 'the Pharisees' (9.16, 30–4; cf. 10.6, 19). Even so, as the chapter closes, Jesus concedes that his opponents are not yet fully blind:

Some of the Pharisees near him heard this, and they said to him, 'Are we also blind?' Jesus said to them, 'If you were blind, you would have no guilt; but now that you say, "We see", your guilt remains.' (9.40–1)

The Pharisees can still 'see' the light of the world in the daytime of Jesus' presence. Unfortunately, as Jesus warns his hearers elsewhere, 'you have seen me and yet you do not believe' (cf. 6.36; 12.45). In their unbelief, the Pharisees are exhausting their limited window of sight (cf. 5.35). The peril of their situation is indicated precisely in Jesus' warning in 9.4: 'night is coming'. The time is fast approaching when the light – and the life it offers (cf. 1.4; 8.12) – will no longer be available except to those select few who have improved upon the opportunity afforded by the 'day':⁴¹

'In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.' (14.19–20)

41 These select few will include some from later generations who, though born into the world's 'night' and having no way to see the light, will also be led into belief 'through their word' (17.20): 'Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe' (20.29). For these individuals, the covert illumination of baptism in 'water and Spirit' (3.5), prefigured in the washing of 9.7, is crucial.

When Jesus takes up the warning of 9.4-5 again in 12.35-6, the Gospel reaches a critical turning point. 'After Jesus had said this', the narrator tells us, building to a *double entendre*, 'he departed and hid from them. Though he had done so many signs before them, yet they did not believe in him' (12.36-7; cf. 13.1). The first half of the Gospel comes to a close, and 'night' begins to envelop the unbelieving world.