

## The Johannine Son of Man: A New Proposal

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How is the association of the descent/ascent motif with the Johannine Son of Man to be explained if the gnosticism theory no longer holds? ἀναβέβηκεν (3.13) is usually taken to refer to Jesus' final ascension. But Odeberg saw that it refers to a tradition of heavenly ascent in Jesus' lifetime. Bühner argued rather for a double reference—to the ascent of a visionary seer involving a metamorphosis into a heavenly being *and* a final ascent at death. Yet he ignores the likelihood, sustained by Jarl Fossum and Morton Smith, that the transfiguration tradition was based on an authentic memory. In chs. 9 and 5 the evangelist recognizes that Jesus had been invested with the authority of the heavenly Son of Man. He sees the crucifixion as an exaltation (3.14), and follows a statement of Jesus' ascent, descent and exaltation by a full summary of God's loving gift to the world.

**Keywords:** Son of Man, apocalyptic, ascension, exaltation, transfiguration, Moses/Sinai, visionary seer

Closing the introduction to his seminal study, *The Prophet-King* (1967), Wayne Meeks argued for the validity of a new approach in the study of Johannine christology 'in the face of Bultmann's elaborate theory that had seemed to account so cogently for the total christological picture in John', an approach that his own work was intended to exemplify. Instead of a comprehensive explanation of the whole, he suggested, 'it is appropriate in the study of the Fourth Gospel to focus upon a single phenomenon or group of closely related phenomena'.<sup>1</sup> Subsequently there have been many such studies which, like his own, employ a history-of-traditions approach to the material, but the source of the one motif that seemed to Meeks to furnish the strongest argument for a gnostic background to the Fourth Gospel, the descent/ascent motif associated with the title Son of Man, is still something of a mystery.<sup>2</sup> No satisfactory explanation has yet been

1 W. A. Meeks, *The Prophet-King: Moses Traditions and the Johannine Christology* (Leiden: Brill, 1967) 16.

2 All commentators discuss the title, many in considerable detail, but only in order to explain its use and significance in the Gospel itself. This is also true of other studies, including the chapter

offered for the striking differences between the synoptic and the Johannine Son of Man. In his famous 'Man from Heaven' article<sup>3</sup> Meeks himself successfully outlined the significance of the motif within the Gospel, but made no attempt to account for its origin.

Towards the end of *The Prophet-King*, in fact, Meeks had felt able to say that the pattern of the descent/ascent of a heavenly messenger 'has been and remains the strongest support for the hypothesis that the Johannine christology is connected with gnostic mythology'.<sup>4</sup> In 1969, two years after the publication of Meeks's book, this support was skilfully and ruthlessly dismantled by Carsten Colpe in a long article in *TWNT*.<sup>5</sup> There is indeed in some gnostic texts a sort of descent/ascent myth; but this involves the descent and subsequent ascent of a being called Man, who represents the totality of mankind. Colpe argued that there is nothing to show that this being stands behind the Son of Man in John. It is not that the idea of humankind as a collective soul has been [deliberately] left out of the Gospel (*weggelassen*), 'the Evangelist, being interested in neither cosmology, nor anthropology, nor the destiny of the soul, was simply not acquainted with it'.<sup>6</sup> The gnostic Man is in no sense an ancestor of the Johannine Son of Man; indeed if any relationship is involved it must be the other way round. To account for the up and down conundrum of the descending and ascending Son of Man in John what we need, paradoxically, is lateral thinking.

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'Son of Man' in my own book, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1991, rev. ed. 2007). What is probably the most thorough discussion to date (Benjamin E. Reynolds, *The Apocalyptic Son of Man in the Gospel of John* [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008]) sets out to prove that John is everywhere indebted to Dan 7, but goes no further.

<sup>3</sup> 'The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism', *JBL* 91(1972) 44-72.

<sup>4</sup> *Prophet-King*, 297. Meeks adds that except for an isolated statement in Philo 'this pattern of descent/ascent of a heavenly messenger has no direct parallel in the Moses tradition'. This conclusion has been strongly challenged by Jan-Adolf Bühner, who argues that much of the material actually quoted and commented on by Meeks, not just from Philo but also from rabbinical and Samaritan sources, proves that Moses' commission by God was thought of as the descent and subsequent ascent of a heavenly messenger: *Der Gesandte und sein Weg im vierten Evangelium. Die kultur- und religionsgeschichtliche Grundlagen der johanneischen Sendungschristologie sowie ihre traditionsgeschichtliche Entwicklung* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1977) 306-13. Moreover, focusing as he does exclusively on the Moses tradition, Meeks takes no notice of the possible influence of traditions concerning other heavenly messengers. These are treated in some depth by Bühner (*Der Gesandte*, 322-41).

<sup>5</sup> C. Colpe, 'ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου', *TDNT* 8.400-477.

<sup>6</sup> *TDNT* 8.415 (translation modified). In the printed English version *nicht weggelassen* is translated, unintelligibly and unintelligently, as 'not refuted'.

### 1. The Descent and Ascent of the Son of Man

Where should we begin? No doubt with the very first occurrence of the title in the Gospel, John 1.51, which presents commentators with the knotty little puzzle of how to explain Jesus' use of the title in his allusion to Jacob's ladder.<sup>7</sup> He speaks of angels ascending and descending upon the Son of Man—himself, of course; but the use of this term here, as well as in its next occurrence, in 3.13 ('No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man') is obviously different from the indirect self-reference found occasionally in the synoptic gospels, where it is at least arguable that Jesus himself employed an Aramaic idiom that still lies under the surface of the clumsy Greek expression we know so well. But who was the first to associate the title Son of Man with the motif of descent and ascent? If we rule out the gnostics what about the evangelist himself? But then we need to ask what there was about the title that could have induced him to make this association.

It was with some such question at the back of my mind that when composing the chapter 'Son of Man' for my book, *Understanding*, I turned to an article by Charles H. Talbert in which he deliberately sets out to refute the suggestion of Meeks and others that John drew upon gnostic sources.<sup>8</sup> Talbert cites a huge number of texts from both pagan and Jewish writers to show just how widespread was the myth of a descending redeemer in Mediterranean Antiquity. The most pertinent of these are the apocalyptic and pseudepigraphical Jewish texts he discusses under the heading 'Archangels'. He concludes that 'in certain circles of Jewish angelology...there existed a mythology with a descent-ascent pattern, in which the redeemer figure descends, takes human form and then ascends back to heaven after or in connection with a saving activity'.<sup>9</sup>

After giving qualified approval to this article, I argued (following a brilliant suggestion by Hugo Odeberg) that in the verse under discussion (John 3.13) what the evangelist has in his sights is not the idea of a heavenly figure descending to earth

7 I have given a detailed comment upon this verse in *Understanding*, 342–8, and will say no more about it here.

8 C. H. Talbert, 'The Myth of a Descending-Ascending Redeemer in Mediterranean Antiquity', *NTS* 22 (1975/76) 418–43. See *Understanding*, first edn, 350–3, where this article is summarized and assessed. Bühner (*Der Gesandte*, 335–41) adds some important rabbinical material to the texts discussed by Talbert.

9 It may be worth including at this point the most striking of these: the visit of the angel Raphael to Tobit and his son Tobias. About to take his leave, Raphael first summarizes his healing mission, and then tells them to give thanks to God, 'for I am ascending to him who sent me' (ἀναβαίνω πρὸς τὸν ἀποστείλαντά με, Tob 12.20). 'This text', comments Bühner, 'gives the clearest indication of the possibility that Johannine christology may have taken over some elements of Jewish angelology' (*Der Gesandte*, 337).

but the idea of a human being—other than Jesus—ascending to heaven.<sup>10</sup> So for further enlightenment I turned to an article by Peder Borgen published in 1977, in which he maintained that the verse is to be explained against the background of a strong rabbinical tradition according to which Moses, after climbing Mount Sinai to receive the tablets of the law, actually went on as far as heaven itself.<sup>11</sup> According to Borgen, what John actually maintains in 3.13 is ‘that the historical Jesus represents the reverse phenomenon [to the idea of Moses’ ascent into heaven] of descent from heaven and subsequent exaltation’; and he goes on to propose that the ascent of the Son of Man in 3.13 is what he calls ‘a pre-existent installing in office’. This proposal is not borne out, however, by the passages he invokes in its support. There is no reason to think that when Jesus claims divine authority for all he says (3.34; 7.16; 8.43; 12.49; 14.24; 17.6) he is referring to a commission given to him prior to the incarnation. Jesus often declares that he was sent by God, but this need not imply an installation in office beforehand (Moses, the archetypal prophet, was sent from where he stood); and in any case the idea of a pre-existent ascent is incoherent, for a pre-existent being like the Logos is with God already (πρὸς τὸν θεόν, 1.1) and has neither need nor opportunity to climb any higher: Jacob’s ladder reached as far as heaven but not beyond. Borgen’s convoluted paraphrase of 3.13 (‘only he who descended from heaven to execute his office, the divine being, the son of man, has ascended to heaven for the installing in office prior to his descent’)<sup>12</sup> is unpersuasive.

Placing the articles of Talbert and Borgen side-by-side, I concluded that

what we have in the Gospel is *a fusion of two mythological patterns*, one angelic, starting in heaven (stressed by Talbert), the other mystical, starting from earth (stressed by Borgen). How great a conceptual leap is involved in this fusion may be gauged from the fact that in at least one document, *The Testament of Abraham*, the two patterns lie virtually side-by-side, without the least suggestion that the archangel Michael, who illustrates the first pattern, could ever be confused with Abraham, who illustrates the second. The blinding realization that in Jesus angel and seer are one and the same marks one of the most significant advances in the whole history of Christian thought: its ramifications are endless. Although both elements are abundantly attested in the Jewish tradition their fusion has consequences which Judaism could not contain. Taken separately neither pattern presented any threat: the blending of the two meant a new religion. The conviction that the heavenly being was human and the

10 H. Odeberg, *The Fourth Gospel Interpreted in its Relation to Contemporaneous Religious Currents in Palestine and the Hellenistic-Oriental World* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1929).

11 P. Borgen, ‘Some Jewish Exegetical Traditions as Background for Son of Man Sayings in John’s Gospel (John 3, 13–14 and Context)’, *L’Evangile de Jean: Sources, rédaction, théologie* (ed. M de Jonge; Louvain: University Press; Gembloux: Duculot, 1977) 243–58.

12 ‘Exegetical Traditions’, 254. Biblical texts cited by Borgen (251–2) referring to the ascent of God (1 Sam 2.10; Pss 47 [46].6; 68 [67].19) are irrelevant in the context of a pre-existent installing in office.

human being heavenly was the conceptual hub round which the huge wheel of Christian theology would revolve for centuries to come.<sup>13</sup>

Over twenty years on this still seems to me a clever idea (although I now see that I had misinterpreted Borgen, who thought that the starting-point was already in heaven). What is more, a wheel does not revolve *round* a hub, since the hub is at the centre of its revolution. In any case the blinding realization was mine, not the evangelist's. But although I no longer think that he arrived at his insights simply by setting two series of texts side-by-side, I am still convinced that these may help us to understand his Gospel.

John did of course believe that Jesus descended from heaven and then went back up again. That is no more than a summary of the career of the Logos, identified as Jesus Christ at the end of the Prologue. (I will return to this topic later.) James Dunn objects to Talbert's use of Jewish angelology to explain the evangelist's portrayal of Jesus' life-giving mission on the grounds that the angels were all short-term visitors.<sup>14</sup> But from John's perspective so was the Logos. His was a theophanic appearance, displaying the glory of God.<sup>15</sup> Yet in the body of the Gospel when John combines the notions of descent and ascent it is in relation to the Son of Man, not the Logos.

This is what he does in 3.13, after the dialogue with Nicodemus. But, once again, why? Having extricated ourselves from the long and tortuous cul-de-sac of gnosticism, we still find ourselves in an impasse. For nowhere else apart from the Fourth Gospel is the figure of the Son of Man associated with the notions of ascent or descent, not in the synoptic gospels, not in the Enochic corpus, and not in Daniel 7, which is where the tradition began. The reason for this is obvious. The one resembling a human being in Daniel's dream (literally, but only literally, 'like a son of man') is actually a divine being, an angel (quite possibly the angel Michael, a suggestion supported by a few lines in the War Scroll, 1QM 17.7f.).<sup>16</sup> His home is in heaven, not on earth: he has no need to ascend into heaven and no reason to descend to earth. Unlike the angels in Zachariah, who tell the prophet's *angelus interpretes*, standing among the myrtle

13 *Understanding*, 355.

14 J. D. G. Dunn, 'Let John be John: A Gospel for its Time', *Das Evangelium und die Evangelien* (ed. P. Stuhlmacher; Tübingen: Mohr Seibek, 1973) 309-39.

15 Admittedly Ben Sirā uses the word *κατασκηνοῦν* (literally 'to tabernacle') of what he thought of as the enduring presence of wisdom/torah on earth. But the word is used more naturally (as in the *Prayer of Joseph*) of short stays, since the *σκήνη*, the Tent of Meeting, was designed (unlike the Temple) for brief and occasional divine visits.

16 See C. Rowland, *The Open Heaven: A Study of Apocalyptic in Judaism and Early Christianity* (London: SPCK, 1982) 181-2, plus n. 47. Divine beings in apocalyptic visions are regularly represented as human, just as human beings are regularly represented as animals or beasts. The name Michael (who is like God?) is peculiarly appropriate to the role played by one like a man in Dan 7.

trees, that they have been patrolling the earth (Zech 1.10–11), and the sons of God in the opening chapters of Job, who present themselves before God ready to do his bidding (Job 1.6; 2.1), the Son of Man is not sent on a mission. Although he is given ‘dominion and glory and kingship’ (Dan 7.14) he has no need to come down to earth in order to exercise his authority any more than ‘the people of the holy ones of the Most High’ who are given the same authority (7.27) have to go up to heaven in order to exercise theirs. In the Gospel there is no suggestion that the Son of Man was *sent*, like other angel-messengers, to carry out a particular commission.

The fact, then, that the Son of Man is so clearly located in heaven in this key text (as well as in the references to it in the synoptic gospels)<sup>17</sup> is a major source of difficulty for the interpretation of the Fourth Gospel, where Jesus passes down from heaven and back again. No doubt this is why so many of the early commentators were tempted to turn for an explanation to gnostic documents in which the Heavenly Man did in some fashion descend and then re-ascend. By the time that the Fourth Gospel was fully composed Jesus, now known to the Gospel’s readers as the Son of Man, spoke readily of his ascent and descent: ‘What if you were to see the Son of Man ascending where he was before?’ (6.62).<sup>18</sup> A little earlier the Jews had enquired, ‘Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does he now say, “I have come down from heaven?”’ (6.42; cf. 38). The combination of descent and ascent explains both why the recollection of the ascending and descending angels in Jacob’s dream prompted a reference to the Son of Man, and why when John came to use the manna tradition in his account of the feeding of the five thousand he could build upon it with the descent/ascent pattern now associated with the Son of Man (6.50–51, 62).<sup>19</sup> But the allusions in chs. 1 and 6 still require explanation. Why did the fourth evangelist think of Jesus as a *heavenly* figure?

Let us return to 3.13: ‘No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man’. What is the context of this saying within the Gospel? Having first (v. 7) corrected Nicodemus’s misunderstanding of the meaning of the word *ἄνωθεν*, Jesus turns in v. 11 to explain how he has the authority to speak of heavenly things: he is speaking of what he knows and of what he has seen, having ascended to heaven and then come down (to convey his knowledge to others). Armed, or rather blinkered, by our knowledge of the rest of the Gospel, we can easily miss this, the natural reading of

17 And indeed in one variant of John 3.13, where some MSS add the words *ὁ ὢν ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ* to qualify *ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου*. Some commentators, including C. K. Barrett, Nils Dahl and Jarl Fossum, hold this to be the correct reading.

18 I am here assuming that (as I argued in *Understanding*, rev. ed., 44–8) ch. 6 belongs to the second edition of the Gospel.

19 See Bühner, *Gesandte*, 406 n. 1.

vv. 11–13. Rudolf Bultmann, who recognizes the obvious implication of these verses, nonetheless objects that v. 13

cannot bear the meaning which is normally attributed to it, that ‘no one has ever ascended into heaven, in order, that is, to bring back knowledge of the ἐπουράνια, except the one who descended from heaven’. For Jesus did not first ascend into heaven to bring such knowledge back to earth again. Rather he first came down from heaven with the message entrusted to him by the Father and then he ascended into heaven. The evangelist cannot have thought of his ascent as a means for him to gain knowledge of the ἐπουράνια.<sup>20</sup>

Like the vast majority of commentators Bultmann uses his knowledge of the general thrust of the Gospel and of the Prologue in particular as a conclusive argument for rejecting the straightforward interpretation of these three verses. (His own solution to the problem is that the evangelist found them in his revelation discourse source.)

An alternative solution, which we have just glanced at, is Peder Borgen’s ingenious suggestion of a *pre-ascension* that took place before the incarnation. Yet another is Christopher Rowland’s observation that 3.14 acts as a commentary on the previous, enigmatic, verse and relates it to the cross: ‘12.33 shows that “ascent” means being lifted up on a cross’.<sup>21</sup> But in 12.33, as in the other references to the crucifixion in this Gospel, the verb used is not ‘ascend’ but ‘exalt’. Moreover Rowland is ignoring the fact that the ascent spoken of in 3.13 has already taken place. Why would an event said to have already happened in the first half of a verse be then *predicted* to take place in the second half? The later parallels (8.28; 12.23) do indeed show that the prediction of exaltation in 3.14 refers to Jesus’ being raised on the cross; so the reversal of tenses is intolerably harsh: ascension in the past, crucifixion in the future. The same objection can be made against Jörg Frey’s revival of the suggestion of Loisy and Bauer that the words ‘no one has ascended except’ are spoken from the standpoint of the Christian community.<sup>22</sup> The extra nuance of Frey’s theory of *Horizontverschmelzung* in no way eases the problem of the temporal dislocation. There are plenty of instances elsewhere in the Gospel that display two levels of understanding, the first the story level, the second the level of the Gospel’s Christian readers. But here, if Frey is to be believed, the story-level meaning is missing altogether, *which never happens elsewhere in the Gospel*. I am equally unconvinced by Benjamin Reynolds’s suggestion of a gnomic perfect (‘No one

20 R. Bultmann, *The Gospel of John* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1971) 150–1.

21 C. Rowland and C. R. A. Morray-Jones, *The Mystery of God: Early Jewish Mysticism and the New Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 2009) 128.

22 J. Frey, *Die johanneische Eschatologie*, vol. 2 (Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 1997) 252–5. See Bultmann, *Gospel*, 150 n. 2.

ascends except the Son of Man the one who descended').<sup>23</sup> We must accept that John meant what Jesus said: 'No one *has* ascended except...' and somehow account for the anomaly.

It is hard to over-emphasize the magnitude of this problem.<sup>24</sup> The device of two levels of understanding, whereby Jesus' hearers are able to put one interpretation on his words, and John's readers a very different one, works on the whole very well. Here it does not work at all, for the verb is in the past, and in the time-frame of the Gospel there was no opportunity in Jesus' career for a heavenly ascent prior to Nicodemus's visit. But how could poor dim Nicodemus, who has hitherto shown little aptitude for abstruse theological discussion, possibly be expected to understand the past perfect ἀνεβέβηκεν to refer to an event in the future? Yes, all John's readers know that such an ascent did indeed take place. But the suggestion of Bultmann and others that the statement in 3.13 alludes to Jesus' final ascension into heaven seems to require an impossibly violent disruption of the story line.

What I believe to be the right answer to the problem was sketched out before I was born by Hugo Odeberg. The evangelist is taking over a tradition that Jesus had indeed ascended into heaven during his lifetime, and the affirmation concerning such an ascent was made in the teeth of rival claims of other Jewish groups on behalf of a variety of prophets and patriarchs.<sup>25</sup> The meaning of the saying is the one Bultmann rejected as impossible: 'no one has ever ascended into heaven, in order, that is, to bring back knowledge of the ἐπουράνια, except the one who descended from heaven'. Rightly, I think, Bultmann saw a sequential connection between v. 13 (ascent into heaven) and v. 12 (speaking of earthly and heavenly things).<sup>26</sup> But having offered this suggestion, Odeberg fails to follow it up. How could such a tradition have arisen, and how can it be placed within the development of the christology of the Fourth Gospel?

A particularly ingenious answer to this problem is to be found in the generally excellent study of Jan-Adolf Bühner, *Der Gesandte und sein Weg*, that I have already mentioned. Bühner thinks that this logion is drawn from an early layer

23 *Apocalyptic Son of Man*, 115. There is no other example of the gnomic perfect in the Gospel, and none of the four NT texts cited by Reynolds (cf. Funk, *Greek Grammar*, §344) allows an historical exception to the gnomic generalization. See R. Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St. John*, vol. 1 (London: Burns & Oates, 1968) 393.

24 Somewhat surprisingly Meeks makes no mention of it in his 'Man from Heaven' article.

25 *Fourth Gospel*, 72. Cf. Bultmann, *Gospel*, 150 n. 1; and Meeks, *Prophet-King*, 301 n. 1, who praises Odeberg's 'unusual perception'. In *Understanding*, 350, I wrongly stated that Odeberg does not mention Moses. He does so in *Fourth Gospel*, 97, along with Enoch, Abraham, Elijah and Isaiah. J. Louis Martyn argues that Elijah was among the evangelist's targets: *The Gospel of John in Christian History* (New York: Paulist, 1978) 20-1. Also, I think, Enoch.

26 Schnackenburg, reorganizing this chapter, effectively severs this link. But there is no good reason for any such reorganization.



of the Johannine tradition according to which Jesus went up to heaven as a visionary seer so as to receive secrets to bring down to earth. Whilst in heaven he was transformed into a heavenly being (the Son of Man) and then descended to earth again *as* the Son of Man.<sup>27</sup> So for Bühner the ascent, in this early tradition, was the ascent of the human Jesus into heaven and the descent was the descent of the now heavenly Jesus down to earth. He also thinks that according to the same tradition the experience of this heavenly journey was what entitled Jesus to affirm, as he does repeatedly in the course of the Gospel, that he had 'seen the Father'.<sup>28</sup>

This is a bold and attractive reading, which breaks new ground. This may be why, so far as I can ascertain, it has been completely ignored by other scholars, including myself. For it is hard to divest oneself of the notion that the ascent into heaven mentioned in this verse must, somehow or other, be a final end-of-life ascent, and equally hard to think of the descent as anything other than the coming down to earth of the Logos.

For a long time one difficulty standing in the way of Bühner's proposal seemed to me insuperable. On the face of it the passage states very clearly that it was the Son of Man who ascended into heaven, having previously descended to earth. If that were right there could be no question of Jesus' transformation into an angelic being *after* his ascension. For the Son of Man is already an angelic being in his own right. But although this seems the obvious and most straightforward reading it does not work. For having once come down to earth, the Son of Man has no need to re-ascend into heaven in order to obtain secret knowledge unavailable to earthbound mortals. I have somewhat reluctantly come to accept that Bühner must be right: 'No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended *as* the Son of Man'. What I previously thought was a targum-like interpretation not justified by the text now seems to me the reading that presents the least difficulties.

Let us take another look at the problem. If Odeberg was right about John 3.13 then the opening words ('No one has ascended') allude not to an end-of-life ascent but to the ascent of an apocalyptic seer for the purpose of receiving special revelations. But the verse as it stands appears to imply that the seer's descent preceded his ascent, which makes no sense. Bühner has a particularly ingenious solution to this problem, one for which he draws upon his extensive knowledge of the abundant rabbinical material concerning the figure of Moses.

27 Bühner cites numerous examples from the apocrypha and rabbinical writings, as well as the Dead Sea Scrolls, of a human seer being transformed into an angel as a crucial part of an argument concerning the fusion of the concepts of prophet and מלאך (*Der Gesandte*, 341–75). He is clear about the relevance of this argument to the association of the descent/ascent motif with the Johannine Son of Man.

28 *Der Gesandte*, 374–99. This is how Bühner sums up his reading: 'Jesus ist in einer Art Berufungsvision anbatisch in den Himmel gelangt, dort zum Menschensohn gewandelt und als solcher in seine irdische Existenz hinabgestiegen' (398).

This is how he concludes a long section headed 'Der Prophet als שליח Gottes':

The single most important result [of our enquiry] has been to establish that under the influence of [reflection upon] the שליח (emissary) the prophetic element in the Moses tradition has changed into the project of a journey that starts with a commission high up on the mountain and ends with the emissary's final report to God in heaven. This results in a pattern of descent and subsequent ascent.<sup>29</sup>

Earlier Bühner had suggested that the actual order of the two verbs, 'ascend' and 'descend', in John 3.13 may point to an earlier form of the saying in which the ascent did indeed precede the descent: 'The possibility of such a reversal from the point of view of religious history is supported by the rabbinical tradition that ties Moses' commission on Sinai together with his descent and subsequent ascent to God'.<sup>30</sup>

In the course of his argument in support of this contention Bühner made use of Meeks's study (in *The Prophet-King*) of how the biblical tradition of Moses' double ascent was developed. Very often it is simply taken for granted that after climbing Sinai Moses proceeded to ascend as far as heaven itself, as for instance in a midrash on Ps 106.2 quoted by Meeks: 'Not even Moses who went up to heaven to receive the Torah from God's hand into his own could fathom heaven's depth'.<sup>31</sup> What is more, in the abundant material concerning Moses in both the Jewish and the Samaritan tradition we find that very often Moses' final ascent of Mount Nebo to receive a last revelation before his death is blended into his ascent of Sinai, where he received the tables of the Law. One example discussed by Meeks is a passage from the Midrash Tannaim that sets a verse from Exodus (34.28) referring to Sinai side-by-side with a verse from the end of Deuteronomy (34.5) referring to Nebo, in which the one and only point of resemblance is that both verses say that Moses was *there* (שם). Meeks finds this connection 'very strained', and concludes that Moses' final ascension must have already been connected with his ascent of Sinai. The bringing-together of two texts on the basis of the coincidence of a single word is a fairly common rabbinical ploy; but there are other examples too of a close association between the two ascents. In a particularly striking instance from the Samaritan *Memar Marqah*, Moses, addressing the people, tells them that "Three times my Lord said to me, "Go up to it", and I went up with the mind of prophethood on the first two occasions. I delivered the first and second tablets and on this (third) occasion I receive the portion that He presented me through Adam. Twice I ascended and descended as God commanded me; on this occasion I go up and will not come

<sup>29</sup> *Der Gesandte*, 271–315.

<sup>30</sup> *Der Gesandte*, 307.

<sup>31</sup> *Prophet-King*, 205.

down'.<sup>32</sup> There is no direct reminder here that the mountain climbed on the third ascent (when 'the portion through Adam' must have been Moses' death) was different from the first two; but it was. For Philo, who has a very different approach to the biblical texts, each ascent is a visionary experience, indeed a mystical translation in which Moses, as Meeks puts it, 'leaves the mortal, bodily realm to enter the "incorporeal and intelligible"'.<sup>33</sup>

Bühner, who brings these three sources together, points out that from different perspectives they all link Moses' ascent of Mount Sinai to his final ascent and death.<sup>34</sup> Two of the three are late, and the third, Philo, is hardly likely to have influenced the fourth evangelist. But there is a much earlier instance of the same phenomenon in the *Exagoge* of the playwright Ezekiel, where Moses tells Reuel, his father-in-law (Παγουηλ in the play), that he 'had a vision of a great throne on the top of Mount Sinai', where upon his reception of a royal crown he beheld 'the whole earth all around, and beneath and above the heavens', a vision that Reuel interprets to mean that he will see 'what is now, what has been, and what shall be' (68–89) thus extending and expanding not, evidently, the revelation on Sinai but the final revelation on Mount Nebo.<sup>35</sup> Like the later writers Ezekiel collapses the two revelations and the two ascents together.

Of course it is impossible to be sure that the fourth evangelist was influenced, consciously or not, by any of these different strands of tradition. But he may well have been, and if he was then he will have been much less bothered than his later readers are likely to be by the ambiguity of 'No one has ascended'. He would wish to insist upon the exclusive claim of his own hero, and deny outright that any other Jewish seer, above all Moses, but also Enoch and Elijah, had either mounted up to heaven as an apocalyptic visionary or had been translated there at the end of his life. The core of the difficulty presented by John 3.13 is the essential and ineradicable ambiguity of the tradition of Moses' ascent. But it may be that this ambiguity, besides giving rise to our perplexity, can also help to dispel it.

Yet there remains a serious problem in Bühner's reading. For him, as we have seen, the tradition represented by 3.13 belongs to the very earliest stage (or level, *Schicht*) of Johannine christology. But this fails to account for the challenge to the primacy of Moses implied by the saying. During its early days, indeed during its early years, the Jesus group, co-existing in the synagogue alongside more conservative members, would have had no reason to reject any Jewish traditions that had

32 *Memar Marqar*, v. 2. trans. Macdonald, 198 (quoted by Meeks, *Prophet-King*, 245).

33 *Mos* 2.288; *Virt* 53.76; *QG* 1.86. See Meeks, *Prophet-King*, 124.

34 *Der Gesandte*, 311–13.

35 What is more, Reuel's interpretation is remarkably anticipatory of the warning in *m. Hag.* 2.1 against indulging in dangerous speculation on things beyond one's competence, namely 'what is above, what is beneath, what was beforetime and what will be hereafter'—the passage that provided Christopher Rowland with the main topics of his trail-blazing *Open Heaven* (London: SPCK, 1982). Cf. Meeks, *Prophet-King*, 208.

developed about Moses, certainly not in the aggressive tone that marks the blunt exclusiveness of John 3.13. Yet if the claim that Jesus and no one else (not Moses, not Elijah, nor any other Jewish seer) had ascended into heaven to receive heavenly secrets was indeed advanced by the Jesus group in the synagogue, it must have been made at a time in the history of the community when what Ernst Käsemann calls 'die göttliche Herrlichkeit des über die Erde schreitenden Christus'<sup>36</sup> had not yet trampled over most of the remaining traces of the human Jesus of the early tradition, to leave at this particular point only the vestigial footprint we have just been contemplating. In particular it must have been made before the evangelist and his community had become convinced that Jesus' sojourn on earth followed a long period in heaven alongside God—at a time when the Jesus group in the synagogue had not yet come to think of him as divine, but saw him simply as the Messiah and a great prophet, a remarkable, but still recognizably human, human being: before, that is to say, the Prologue was added to form a new introduction to the Gospel. The challenge to Moses' privileged position must have come at a time in the history of the Jesus group when it had begun to argue with the disciples of Moses in the synagogue, but before it had confronted them with an assertion of Jesus' equality with God.

In attempting to wriggle out of this tangled skein let us start by putting the Prologue on one side so as to reflect on the simplest form of what Odeberg and, following him, Bühner, thought to be the tradition lying under the surface of John 3.13: that Jesus whilst on earth had had some form of apocalyptic vision, that he was, in other words, a visionary seer. As I have said, this in itself is a very bold suggestion.

But it is arguable that Bühner does not go far enough. According to his hypothesis the Johannine community had inherited a tradition that Jesus' transformation into the angelic being called the Son of Man took place during his ascent into heaven as a visionary seer; but he does not even consider the possibility that there might be an authentic memory lying behind this tradition.

One point in all three synoptic gospels seems to offer the perfect occasion for this hypothetical journey to heaven, namely the Transfiguration. The Fourth Gospel as we have it has no room for a transfiguration story. Jesus had 'manifested his glory' as early as the marriage-feast at Cana (2.11), and this glory did not leave him. But the united testimony of the synoptic gospels is strong evidence for an episode in Jesus' life when he might have been the recipient of heavenly secrets. Surprisingly, no one has ever made this suggestion, not even Bühner.

The transfiguration story has often been dismissed as purely legendary. The early form critics regarded it as a kind of anticipatory resurrection appearance, displaced from its original position: 'that Jesus should have been seen in a vision (*das visionäre Schauen Jesu*)', says Bultmann, 'whilst still corporally

36 *Jesu Letzter Wille nach Johannes 17* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 3rd ed. 1980) 26.

present, is scarcely credible (*eine kaum glaubliche Sache*).<sup>37</sup> Although the three synoptic accounts speak of the transfiguration (or, more precisely, transformation, *metamorphosis*) of Jesus rather than of a heavenly ascent, it is likely that just as some Jewish writers interpreted Moses' ascent of Sinai as an ascent into heaven, the same move was made in some Christian circles of Jesus' choice of a high mountain to display his glory. The gospel story of the Transfiguration was fundamentally, as Bruce Chilton has argued, 'a visionary representation of the Sinai motif of Exodus 24',<sup>38</sup> and so it is quite natural to suppose that the Jewish concept of the divinization of Moses was at some point transferred to Jesus. Indeed Jarl Fossum has suggested that this is how we should understand the event that underlies Mark's version of the story: 'Jesus is not only transformed, but is also installed into office as God's prophet-king with the implicit charge of proclaiming God's will. The Moses pattern continues to hold good'.<sup>39</sup> If so, then the fourth evangelist will have known of this tradition, and although he could not reproduce it he could at least allude to it: I think he did so here, in 3.13.<sup>40</sup>

Had it occurred to Bühner that there might be an authentic memory lying behind the tradition of heavenly transformation he had discerned, then no doubt he would have found additional support in Jesus' words to his disciples as they were coming down from the mountain, when 'he charged them to tell no one what they had seen until the Son of Man should have risen from the dead' (Mark 9.9). If indeed Jesus did descend from the mountain aware of the transformation that had taken place, it would be necessary to revise the widespread opinion that his self-identification with the Son of Man was simply proleptic. From that moment on any of the prophecies made of the Son of Man in Mark's Gospel, not just the explicit reference to Daniel's vision in the eschatological discourse, might actually have been uttered by Jesus!

If I am right in my supposition that the evangelist adopted this ancient tradition at a relatively late stage in the history of the Jesus group within the synagogue, there is still room to ask how it was that the descent/ascent motif associated

37 R. Bultmann, *Die Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 7th ed. 1967) 278 n. 1. One of the earliest scholars to challenge this view, Morton Smith, reinforces his argument with the sour reflection that 'to suggest that the blessed Evangelists, not to mention early Christians in general, wanted to tell what they believed to be the truth, is to strike at the very root of Formgeschichte': 'The Origin and History of the Transfiguration Story', *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 36 (1980) 39–44, here 43.

38 B. D. Chilton, 'The Transfiguration: Dominical Appearance and Apostolic Vision', *NTS* 27 (1980–81) 115–24, here 122 (author's italics).

39 J. E. Fossum, 'Ascensio, Metamorphosis: The "Transfiguration" of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels', *The Image of the Invisible God: Essays on the Influence of Jewish Mysticism on Early Christology* (Freiburg, Switzerland: Universitätsverlag, 1995) 71–94, here 76.

40 There are other passages too where the evangelist alludes to traditions that for one reason or another he does not include in his own story, e.g. Jesus' baptism in 1.32–33 and the Gethsemane episode in 12.27–30. (I owe this observation to Judith Kovacs.)

with the Son of Man became so important for him. Another place in the Gospel is relevant in this connection: the story of the healing of the man born blind in ch. 9. John had inherited from his source, whatever name we give to this, a memory of a miracle-working Jesus. In the course of time the Jesus group in the synagogue was confronted by a denial on the part of the Pharisees that Jesus had performed his healing miracles with divine authority. This was the point at issue in the controversy over the man born blind. The Pharisees insisted that a man who broke the Sabbath could not be from God. Whereupon others demanded, 'How can a man who is a sinner do such things?' (9.16). The man himself, asked what he thought, replied simply, 'He is a prophet' (9.17)—in other words, his authority is from God. Asked a second time, he replied angrily, 'I have told you already. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples?' (9.27), a reply that infuriated his questioners, who responded by emphasizing the ineradicable hostility between the two opposing camps: 'You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses' (9.28). They were clinging to the old assurance that God's definitive revelation had been given to Moses; but the man they were interrogating fought back immediately with the unassailable argument, 'If this man were not from God, he could do nothing' (9.33), a remark that so angered his adversaries that they immediately expelled him from the synagogue. The otherwise imperceptive Nicodemus, it may be noted, had a similar insight to that of the man born blind: 'no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him' (3.2).

The debate here evidently originated in a challenge to Jesus' authority to perform acts of healing, but the lesson eventually drawn by the evangelist, very much later,<sup>41</sup> focused upon Jesus' self-identification, in response to a question of the man he had just healed, as the *Son of Man* (9.35); and this in turn led to the assertion: 'For judgment I came into this world', a declaration reinforced by an explicit recollection of the miracle: 'that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind' (9.39). Here is a claim far exceeding the authority to perform healing miracles: the claim that precisely *as Son of Man* Jesus was entitled to exercise *on earth* the authority to judge that in Daniel's vision had been bestowed upon the Son of Man *in heaven*. This means that *the evangelist himself had concluded that the heavenly figure of the Son of Man had come down to earth in the person of Jesus*. The descent of a divine redeemer figure attributed by Bultmann to a gnostic myth was something John had seen for himself. And he did so in consequence of a row with those who called themselves the disciples of Moses.

41 In *Understanding*, 179–81, I argued that the central section of the chapter, 9.18–23, was added on subsequently to the original story, and suggested that the same is true of the conclusion, 9.35–41. I am now no less confident of the first suggestion and rather more confident of the second.

After his extraordinary encounter with Jesus the man born blind did not return to his adversaries in order to confront them with his new-found faith, or at any rate the evangelist does not tell us that he did. Had he done so he would no doubt have been greeted with a fresh outburst of indignation, something like the high priest's response to Jesus' prediction in Mark's version of his trial (14.62–64) that the Son of Man would come with power on the clouds of heaven. In John's much briefer account of the trial (before Annas, not Caiphas) there is no such prediction; and it is noticeable that in his Gospel Jesus' strongest statements linking ascent and descent with the Son of Man (1.51; 3.13) are made to friends and sympathizers. Moreover the *question* 'What if you were to see the Son of Man ascending where he was before?' (6.62) is addressed to his disciples.<sup>42</sup>

The lesson concerning Jesus' authority to judge is also drawn, if anything even more clearly than in ch. 9, from the other great healing miracle, in ch. 5, where a number of strands of the tradition and a number of christological titles have been woven together. Here too the initial protest is against an infringement of the Sabbath rest; here too the initial claim involves a participation in the life-giving activity of God; here too the debate soon comes to focus on the additional claim of authority to judge; here too that claim is associated with the authority conferred upon the Son of Man in Daniel's vision; here too the debate is between the disciples of Moses (portrayed in this story as searching the scriptures for an assurance of eternal life) and Jesus (now making the counter-claim that Moses was really writing of him). But in this scene the association with Daniel's vision is strengthened by the omission of the definite article from the title (reproducing more faithfully than elsewhere the old Greek version of Dan 7.14), when Jesus, as in the conclusion of ch. 9, is left to summarize the significance of his act of healing: 'For as the Father has life in himself so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself, *and has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is [the] Son of Man*' (5.26–27).

'Manifestly', says Bultmann, in one of his rare comments on the historical setting of the Gospel, 'the two stories in chs. 5 and 9 must be understood against the same historical background. Both reflect the relation of early Christianity to the surrounding hostile (in the first place Jewish) world'.<sup>43</sup> But

42 In his *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville/London: Westminster John Knox, 3rd ed. 2003) 130–1, J. Louis Martyn has a brilliant insight into the evangelist's use of the two-level drama of apocalyptic. Yet the preceding argument ('From the Expectation of the Prophet-Messiah like Moses... To the Presence of the Son of Man') overlooks the claims to equality of God that trigger off the murderous fury of 'the Jews' in chs. 5, 8 and 10, and depends on two false assumptions: first that 'the titles Son of Man and Son of God have become interchangeable for John' (128 n. 193); and secondly that there is in the Gospel 'an emphasis on confessing Jesus as Son of Man' (129 n. 195). Not only is there no emphasis upon confessing Jesus as Son of Man; there is no confession at all.

43 *Gospel*, 239.

the history was a long one, and the task of placing the two stories more precisely within it is not easy. Clearly, as it stands now chapter 9 points to a definitive break-up of the two parties within the synagogue; but I have argued that before that happened there was an angry dispute over Jesus' authority to perform miracles, followed by a dawning realization that his healing deed was also a judgment, showing that he had acted with the powers bestowed by God upon the Son of Man. I concluded that in all likelihood this was the first full awareness on the part of the Johannine community that Jesus was something more than an exceptional human being: that he was in fact a heavenly or angelic being who had descended to earth invested with divine authority.<sup>44</sup> Chapter 5 represents a further stage in the same history: the synagogue authorities ('the Jews') saw that what was being now claimed for Jesus was equality with God, and 'this was why they sought all the more to kill him' (5.18).

After reminding ourselves that the *Sitz-im-Leben* of both of these key episodes is *controversy*—specifically controversy between the disciples of Moses on the one hand and either Jesus (ch. 5) or his disciples (ch. 9) on the other—we are perhaps in a better position to understand Jesus' vehement assertion that 'no one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man' (3.13). For although he places this assertion very early in his Gospel the evangelist is taking for granted the conviction he shares with his readers that the angelic figure of Daniel's dream had descended to earth invested with an authority already conferred upon him in heaven.

So what I am suggesting is that the evangelist, enabled by his new understanding of Jesus as the Son of Man, now saw that for the old Jewish tradition—that Moses had gone on from Sinai as far as heaven to receive God's definitive revelation to his people, and that at the end of his life he also ascended into heaven—must be substituted an identical claim made on behalf of Jesus. That he should have made these claims of Jesus *as Son of Man* is of course paradoxical in the extreme, but there is plenty of evidence within the Gospel to prove that Jewish beliefs concerning Moses' central place in God's grand design were appropriated for their own purposes by the Jesus group within the synagogue.

At this point we must return to consider the Prologue, which some readers might think of as, in current parlance, the elephant in the room. Those scholars who assume with Bultmann that because the Prologue comes first the evangelist must have written it first, and consequently that the rest of the Gospel must be read in its dazzling light, have what they must think of as a devastating rejoinder

44 It should be added that the evangelist may have found an additional impetus in one or both of two types of Son of Man sayings in the other three gospels: first those in which the title Son of Man refers to Jesus' activities on earth (although these have no connection whatever with Daniel's dream); and secondly those that refer to the coming of the Son of Man in judgment, such as Mark 13.26 and 14.62 (although in these verses, like the passage in Daniel that they recall, the Son of Man is thought of as in heaven).



to my whole argument, clearly expressed by Bultmann in words I have already quoted: 'Jesus...first came down from heaven with the message entrusted to him by the Father and then he ascended into heaven'. This is probably the majority view nowadays, largely because of the extraordinary impact that narrative criticism has had upon Johannine scholarship;<sup>45</sup> but the suggestion that the Prologue was composed quite late on in the history of the Johannine community is still a perfectly respectable opinion, and requires no further defence from me here. We may reasonably share the conviction of Klaus Berger and Jan-Adolf Bühner that the Johannine circle had come to believe in Jesus' pre-existence *before* the Prologue was grafted onto the Gospel to form a particularly strong introduction.

'For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ' (John 1.17). What does not have to be determined here is whether the writer is looking at the Law positively (as, for instance, Raymond Brown contends), contrasting the enduring love shown in the Law with the supreme example of enduring love in Christ,<sup>46</sup> or negatively, suggesting that there was no truth and no love to be found in the Law. If the former reading is correct the Prologue will have been composed before the tension between the contending groups of disciples within the synagogue had reached breaking-point; if one prefers the latter interpretation, as I do myself, then the Prologue must be seen as representing the view that the evangelist and his community eventually arrived at, according to which the revelation of Jesus completely superseded the Mosaic Law. If, as is conceivable, the evangelist was taking over the work of someone with a more positive view of the Law than his own he will no doubt even so have interpreted it negatively.

## 2. The Exaltation of the Son of Man

The next verse, John 3.14, is just as problematic as 3.13, though differently so. Here the word requiring explanation is not ascend, but exalt; and this verse focuses not on the ascent of Jesus into heaven but on his having being raised up on the cross: 'And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up' (3.14). Although there is no mention here of cross or crucifixion, this is the first of what, somewhat inaccurately, we call John's passion predictions, all three of which, as in the synoptic gospels from which they are derived, are predicated of the Son of Man. For the quite ordinary verb ἵσταναι used in the Septuagint to tell the story of Moses and the bronze snake (Num. 21.9) John has substituted a word meaning 'exalt'. This extraordinary

45 *Gospel*, 151. Besides Bultmann many major Johannine scholars, for a variety of reasons, adopt the same approach: Dodd, Barrett, Borgen, Culpepper, Moloney, Keener, Lincoln, Frey.

46 R. E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John*, vol. 1 (New York: Doubleday, 1966) 16.

conceit, also figuring in the other two predictions, is surely his own invention.<sup>47</sup> Those who attribute it rather to 'tradition' are simply pushing the problem out of sight and evading the responsibility of considering how such a tradition might have arisen in the first place. (Many commentators believe that John is adopting and adapting the expression 'exalted and greatly glorified' he found in LXX Isa 52.13. They may well be right, but authors borrow for a reason and the reason is never to be found in the text that is borrowed.)

Our familiarity with this well-known trope can blind us to the extraordinary transmutation of a barbaric punishment into a vision of exaltation. *Someone* must have been the first to have had this visionary gleam, and why should not that someone have been the evangelist himself? Meeks speaks of this saying as an 'ironic pun' and a 'jarring bit of gallows-humor',<sup>48</sup> but it is surely more than that. We should ask ourselves then how John *imagined* the crucifixion. If he had ever actually witnessed a man dying in agony on the cross, one might suppose that a memory of this appalling torture would lead him to picture a scene something like, to take a well-known example, the terrifying portrayal of the crucifixion by Mathias Grünewald. If he had done so this tormented figure would surely have blocked out altogether any awareness of a man raised up, exalted, ascending up to heaven.<sup>49</sup> The deliberate choice of a word meaning exalt (reinforced by an avoidance of the words cross and crucifixion, suffering, death and dying) is surely something other than a clever verbal device. The third passion prediction exhibits an even more remarkable modulation, when Jesus declares that 'the hour has come for the Son of Man to be *glorified*' (12.23). Although the predictions in all four gospels refer to the same event, the contrast between John and, say, Mark, is striking. Where Mark's Jesus, in the first prediction (8.31), speaks of suffering and death, John's Jesus (3.14) speaks of lifting-up or exaltation; and where in the third prediction Mark's Jesus (10.34) says that he is about to be mocked, spat upon and scourged, John's Jesus talks of glorification! The crowd's response to this prediction is 'How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up?' (12.34), interpreting what Jesus has just said about glorification as a reference to the exaltation (on the cross) of the Son of Man. Lifting-up or exaltation on the one hand and glorification on the other are alternative ways of speaking of the same event.

Accordingly the evangelist is inviting his readers to *see past* their own memory or knowledge of Jesus' agonizing death to his triumph over the forces of evil: 'Now

47 Contra Borgen, who asserts that it is an independent traditional expression, since it occurs in different contexts in 8.34 and 12.23 ('Exegetical Traditions', 247 and again, 252). But these contexts are not different: they too are predictions of the crucifixion.

48 'Man from Heaven', 181 and 185.

49 Such in fact is the scene portrayed on the reverse side of the Isenheim altarpiece, a glorious Christ rising upwards out of the tomb: with modern technology the transformation might be conveyed by fading one side of Grünewald's painting into the other.

is the judgment of this world, now shall the ruler of this world be cast out' (12.31), words spoken in the context of the third and last passion prediction.<sup>50</sup> This invitation can best be accounted for if we suppose that John himself had a vision overwhelming enough to eliminate the painful and humiliating aspects of Jesus' passion and to replace them with signs of exaltation and glory. Here if anywhere we may see some justification for C. H. Dodd's assertion that 'the thought of this gospel is so original and creative that a search for its "sources", or even for the "influences" by which it may have been affected, may easily lead us astray'.<sup>51</sup> Yet this is no reason for thinking that the solution is to be found simply in what, in the same context, Dodd calls the evangelist's 'powerful and independent mind'. I no longer believe that John arrived at his insight from an especially brilliant collocation of two series of Jewish texts, one concerning the descent of angels to earth on a redemptive mission, the other concerning the ascent to heaven of apocalyptic visionaries. Religion has more to do with imagination than with logic. The explanation must lie rather in some sort of mystical experience that allowed the evangelist to see the hoisting-up of Jesus onto the cross as an exaltation.

Yet exaltation and glorification do not stop at the cross. In the preface to the farewell discourse, the last occurrence of the title in the Gospel, Jesus states: 'Now is the Son of Man glorified, and in him God is glorified' (13.31). In the last of the three predictions, in the preceding chapter, it was clear from the context that the immediate reference of glorification, however surprisingly, was to the exaltation on the cross. But Jesus' announcement of his imminent glorification (εὐθὺς, 13.32) in the supper room, as he is about to take leave of the disciples, must include some allusion to the resurrection—and possibly also to the ascension, which supplied the verb used by the risen Jesus to Mary Magdalene of his proximate and permanent departure (20.17).

But why, it may be asked (and here I would like to return briefly to the affirmation of the ascent of the Son of Man), was a belligerent challenge to the disciples of Moses placed in the immediate context of a response to a sympathetic enquirer, towards the beginning of the Gospel? It is not enough to say that in its finished state the Gospel provides no obvious slot for any reference to a visionary ascent during Jesus' lifetime, and that consequently it would look awkward wherever it was placed. The Prologue, looming over the remainder of the Gospel with its portentous presentation of an incarnate divine being, ensures his uncontested and uncontested dominance over all that follows. But quite apart from the Prologue, which like many other scholars I assign to a second edition, the evangelist's

50 Here is another indication of the association of the figure of the Son of Man with the theme of judgment. Cf. J. Kovacs, "Now Shall the Ruler of This World be Driven Out": Jesus' Death as Cosmic Battle in John 12.20–26', *JBL* 114 (1995) 227–47.

51 C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1953) 6.

decision to allow Jesus to manifest his glory as early as his first public appearance in the Gospel, at Cana (2.11)—equivalent to what the Prologue itself says about the contemplation of the glory of the incarnate Logos—leaves no room anywhere else for an explicit statement concerning a re-ascent into heaven, so that even a hidden allusion looks intolerably obtrusive, presenting the same sort of disruption of the story-line that I have objected to in the standard explanation of John 3.13 as a reference to Jesus' ascension at the end of his life.

By another authorial decision, however, the evangelist had already placed the visit of Nicodemus, centered upon Jesus' instruction on the true meaning of the word ἄνωθεν, very early in his work. Here then was the obvious place to offer an explanation of all that this word implies, that is to say the true source of his authority to speak of heavenly things, which depended upon an actual ascent into heaven beforehand. The heavenly things are summarized in the next few verses: having descended from heaven, the Son of Man must now be exalted, and this exaltation (only later revealed to be the crucifixion) will fulfill what is now said to be a mission: that is to say the mission of the Son of *God*, God's loving gift to the world, which will be a source of life to all who believe in him. Nowhere else in the Gospel is there such a comprehensive summary of what the evangelist saw as God's salvific will. Of course it is hard to comprehend what he is saying here—that Jesus received a new revelation, so much more than a new Law, in the course of a visit to heaven as an apocalyptic seer—the original meaning, I think, of this lapidary text. Yet some may find it easier to believe than the Prologue's mythical account of a divine being taking flesh.

### 3. Conclusion

The majority of commentators assume that the descent/ascent pattern associated with the title Son of Man in the Fourth Gospel was ready-made, an assumption that depends on a mostly unformulated belief that it was somehow borrowed from gnosticism. Wayne Meeks is bolder. Towards the end of his famous article he comments that the legitimation of the Johannine sect's cultural distancing of itself from the world around it 'would lead to the projection of some myth explaining that members of the group had an origin different from that of ordinary men. In gnosticism it was the Sophia myth which provided the basic images for that projection—that same Sophia myth which provided important elements of the descent and ascent of the Son of Man in John'.<sup>52</sup> But although this myth almost certainly lies behind the incarnation of the Logos, I have argued that the pattern of the ascending and descending Son of Man had nothing to do with any gnostic myth. Rather it must be seen as arising from the confluence of two originally distinct developments, first the tradition of Jesus as

<sup>52</sup> 'Man from Heaven', 71–2.

a visionary seer, and secondly the outcome of a long debate with ‘the disciples of Moses’ that originated within the synagogue. The claim that the authority exercised by Jesus in healing and judging was truly divine, that he was not of this earth but had come down from heaven as the Son of Man was perceived as threatening and insulting by the parent community, and was no doubt one of the beliefs of the Jesus group that eventually led to a bitter and enduring break-up. Among the counter-claims of the Moses faction there were assertions that when the Law was revealed to him at Sinai, this was truly a heavenly ascent.<sup>53</sup> No, said John, remembering the tradition of Jesus’ ascent to heaven at the transfiguration: ‘no one has ascended into heaven except the one who came down, the Son of Man’. The ‘heavenly things’ that he was authorized and equipped to reveal superseded the revelation of Moses, so much so that the scriptures, where the disciples of Moses sought for truth, really spoke of him.

This new proposal rests partly upon a particular exegesis of a few verses in John 9 that tell of a little exchange between Jesus and the blind man whom he has just cured, an exchange that reveals his real identity. This revelation, presented as sudden but almost certainly late, was of incalculable significance not just for the Johannine community but for the whole Christian church. Put simply, it meant that from being thought of as human, as he certainly was in the early days of the community, Jesus had come to be thought of as divine. We cannot say how long it took for this remarkable new idea to make its full impact. What we can say is that from the point of view of the development of Christian belief it was a truly momentous move, a change of mind-set. With characteristically unobtrusive skill the evangelist has incorporated this change into the story of Jesus and integrated it into his Gospel. It is now the climax of a single episode in the book, but its message permeates the whole, radically affecting our understanding both of its time frame and of its space frame. Independently of the Prologue it carries the idea of pre-existence: ‘the glory which I had with thee before the world was made’ (17.5). And it underlines as never before the enormity of the gap between above and below: ‘they are not of the world even as I am not of the world’ (17.14). We have seen how awkwardly the message protrudes from 3.13. At the close of the same chapter the same message, its jagged challenge now planed down, is expressed reflectively, no doubt now with the Prologue also in mind: ‘He who comes from above is above all; he who is of the earth belongs to the earth, and of the earth he

53 ‘It is almost a commonplace in rabbinic traditions’, remarks Meeks, ‘that when Moses “went up to God” on Mt. Sinai, he ascended “on high”, that is, to heaven’ (*Prophet-King*, 205). But in many other places too, where Moses is credited with having received special revelations over and above the law, it is assumed that this must have happened in heaven. See for instance 4 *Ezra* 14.4–5; 2 *Apoc. Bar.* 59.4. Both the book of *Jubilees* and the *Apocalypse of Moses* present themselves as having been revealed in this way. See M. E. Stone, *A Commentary on Fourth Ezra* (Hermeneia Commentaries; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) 418–19.

speaks; he who comes from heaven is above all. He bears witness to what he has seen and heard' (3.31–32).

Before embarking on this essay I had in the penumbra of my consciousness a niggling, lingering dissatisfaction with the failure of scholarship to explain the fourth evangelist's use of the title Son of Man. A long time ago I had advanced a clever but ultimately unsatisfactory explanation of my own, based on the juxtaposition of two Jewish traditions, to which I had been directed by a short article of Peder Borgen and a rather longer one of Charles Talbert. The present essay has arisen from a careful re-reading of the work of two other great scholars, both of whose books were the fruit of years of research into complex and challenging Jewish traditions. The first of these, the American Wayne Meeks, is one of the best-known and most influential biblical scholars of our age. The second, the German J.-A. Bühner, is almost unknown. Inspired by the exceptionally high level of scholarship of their work, I re-read the relevant passages of the Gospel itself, and went on to argue that the evangelist had a double source of inspiration for what we now think of as his descent/ascent motif, the first a recollection of two of Jesus' miracles and a fresh awareness of their significance, the second a contemplation of the crucifixion scene, accompanied by a memory of the triple prediction of the fate of the Son of Man. Towards the end of the Gospel the evangelist rounds off his story of descent and subsequent ascent in a scene in which Jesus announces to his friend Mary that 'I am ascending to my father and your father, to my God and your God' (20.17): an alternative way of stating a message summarized in different words in the hymn prefacing his Gospel.

Readers with this great hymn before their eyes, perhaps picturing Jesus as watching and listening to God in some pre-existent state, are likely to pay no heed to what was probably the apocalyptic, visionary source of the real Jesus' knowledge of God. 'No one has ever seen God', concludes the Prologue, except of course 'the only Son—he has made him known'. This conclusion, unquestionably, is in agreement with the general thrust of the Gospel as we have it. But as is true of any product of human art and ingenuity, John's Gospel is better understood if one's understanding also relates to the making of it.