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Drawing and Transcending Boundaries in the Dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus: Fresh Perspectives from John's Hellenistic Background and Chrysostomic Reception

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ABSTRACT

This article offers fresh perspectives on the dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus in John 3 by considering both the dynamic interaction of the author(s) of the Gospel of John with ancient Mediterranean philosophical and religious traditions and the Homilies of John Chrysostom on the Fourth Gospel. The current analysis demonstrates that the idea of “being begotten from above” refers to a transcending of ontological and epistemological borders by the power of the Spirit, which presupposes a ritual baptism. The way the Fourth Gospel describes the “process of being begotten from above” answers contemporary Jewish and Greco-Roman questions in an unconventional way. This is due to the fact that it links the convert’s transformation to the narrative regarding the descent of the Logos from above (v.31): A birth *anōthen* ontologically transforms the believer, for he/she receives the same origin with Jesus who comes *anōthen*. Lastly, the Chrysostomic exegesis helps the modern reader to read the Johannine text anew from the perspective of the discussions regarding human union (*henōsis*) with God and divine condescension (*synkatabasis*) in late antiquity.

Keywords: John 3; religious conversion; John Chrysostom; Hellenistic philosophy

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Introduction

We tend to understand revelation mostly as communication of truths from the divine sphere to rational beings. However, the Fourth Gospel provides another kind of revelation.¹ Andrew Byers recently demonstrated in his dissertation that in John the divine not only transcends some boundaries and reveals itself to humans but also *becomes* flesh so that those who believe in the divine identity of Christ *become* children of God.² The incarnate Logos is God's ultimate *epiphany* to humans which surpasses all human expectations. It is a manifestation not only of God's glory but also of God's inexplicable love for His creation (John 3:16; 1 John 4:9 cf. Rom 5:8; Eph 2:4). Jesus's words and signs but also His passion, resurrection and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit reveal God's glory and love in an embodied form. The aim of this revelation is that humans enter into the Kingdom of God (3:5) as the Johannine Jesus claims in His dialogue with Nicodemus. Jesus declares how humans can transcend the boundaries of the flesh and become partakers of another life, i.e. life eternal (3:16).

This article delivers fresh perspectives on the way the Johannine Jesus draws and transcends ontological, moral, ethnic and social boundaries in His discourse with the Jewish leader (archon) and how the Jewish leader reacts. My point of view comprises a synchronic approach to the Fourth Gospel that includes a parallel research of other relevant biblical texts and John's Hellenistic background. Furthermore, I will consider some stimulating insights from the perspective of Chrysostom's homilies on John's

1 John uses φανερώω and ἀποκαλύπτω as synonyms. The only usage of the verb ἀποκαλύπτω is in the quotation of Isa 53:1. Instead the author of the Fourth Gospel very often uses the verb φανερώω (John 1:31; 2:11; 7:4; 9:3; 17:6; 21:1, 14; 1 John 1:2; 2:19, 28; 3:2, 5, 8; 4:9).

2 On the correlation of these two "becomings" and their relevance for the Johannine ecclesiology and Christology see Andrew J. Byers, *Ecclesiology and Theosis in the Gospel of John*, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 167 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 60–70. According to Byers "the Incarnation of Christ and the ecclesial formation of the children of God are presented together in an instance of divine-human exchange and cannot be viewed separately" (60). This idea is the basis of the theosis concept in the reception of John in the Eastern patristic tradition (Byers, *Ecclesiology and Theosis in the Gospel of John*, 155–168); See more bibliography in Athanasios Despotis, "From Conversion According to Paul and 'John' to Theosis in the Greek Patristic Tradition," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 38, no. 1 (2016): 88–109, <https://doi.org/10.1163/18712207-12341317>.

Gospel,³ which he preached in Antioch around 390–391.⁴ I do not intend to analyse the entire Chrysostomic reception of John 3 but rather to critically reflect on crucial Chrysostomic aspects regarding the drawing and transcending of ontological and epistemological boundaries.

The Structure of the Dialogue and Its Literal Context

The structure of the main part of Jesus's dialogue with Nicodemus is similar to a common pattern which we find in revelatory dialogues both of the OT and the NT. These dialogues are called “revelatory” because they refer to the explanation of the words of a revealer. The typical outline in vv.3–8 is *revelation—misunderstanding—further revelation*.⁵ However, Nicodemus cannot understand the further revelation either. Therefore, in v.9 he asks for further explanation, but Jesus does not fulfil his second request. Thus, the revelatory discourse remains incomplete. The Lord only accuses Nicodemus of not accepting His testimony and closes the dialogue with a rhetorical question based on the

- 3 See generally on Chrysostom's 88 homilies on the Fourth Gospel: Abe Attrep, “The Teacher and His Teachings: Chrysostom's Homiletic Approach as Seen in Commentaries on the Gospel of John.” *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 38 (1994): 293–301; Marie-Émile Boismard, and Arnaud Lamouille, *Un évangile pré-johannique. I. Jean 1,1–2,12*, Etudes bibliques 17–18 (Paris: Librairie Lecoffre 1993); Marie-Émile Boismard, and Arnaud Lamouille, *Un évangile pré-johannique. II. Jean 2,13–4,54*, Etudes bibliques 24–25 (Paris: Librairie Lecoffre, 1994); Marie-Émile Boismard, and Arnaud Lamouille, *Un évangile pré-johannique. III. Jean 5,1–47*, Etudes bibliques 28 (Paris: Librairie Lecoffre, 1996); J. Förster, “Die Exegese des vierten Evangeliums in den Johannes-Homilien des Chrysostomus,” doctoral diss., Berlin, 1951; P. W. Harkins, “The Text Tradition of Chrysostom's Commentary on John,” in *Studia Patristica 7: Papers Presented to the Fourth International Conference on Patristic Studies held at Christ Church, Oxford, 1963*, ed. F. L. Cross (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1966), 210–20; Robert Joseph Murray, “The Use of Conditional Sentences in Saint John Chrysostom's Homilies on the Gospel of Saint John.” Doctoral diss., Ohio State University, 1960; Ashish J. Naidu, *Transformed in Christ: Christology and the Christian Life in John Chrysostom*, Princeton Theological Monograph Series 188 188. (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2012); Stephen D. Patton, “A Reconstruction and Evaluation of the Johannine Text of John Chrysostom,” Ph.D. diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2003; Justin Taylor, “The Text of St John Chrysostom's Homilies on John,” in *Studia Patristica 25: Papers Presented at the Eleventh International Conference on Patristic Studies Held in Oxford 1991*, ed. Elizabeth A. Livingstone (Leuven: Peeters, 1993), 172–75. There is also a Syriac translation of a probably earlier version of the Chrysostomic work than the one in the surviving Greek manuscripts. See Jeff Childers, *The Syriac Version of John Chrysostom's Commentary on John: I. Memre 1–43*, Corpus scriptorum christianorum orientalium 653 Scriptorum Syri 250–251 (Leuven: Peeters, 2013).
- 4 Regarding the historical context of these homilies see Wendy Mayer and Pauline Allen, *The Churches of Syrian Antioch (300–638 CE)*, Late Antique History and Religion 5 (Leuven: Peeters, 2012); On the problems regarding the dating of the homilies see Wendy Mayer, *The Homilies of St John Chrysostom: Provenance Reshaping the Foundations*, Orientalia christiana analecta 273 (Roma: Pontificio Istituto Orientale, 2005).
- 5 Dan 12:7–9; Luke 1:29, 35–37; 2:41–52; Mark 7:15–23; 9:14–29 Matt 16:5–12. See also John 4:7–15, 31–38; 6:25–59; 11:11–16, 21–27; 16:16–22.

gal-wahomer or *ad minore a majus* argument: *If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how shall you believe if I tell you heavenly things* (12)?⁶

In this way, the author picks up again the notion πιστεύειν in a sense both of “believing” and “trusting” as it is discussed at the end of John 2. This is because Nicodemus represents the “many” Jerusalemite Jews who believed in Jesus after *seeing His signs*.⁷ However, Jesus did not *entrust himself to them* because they had only inadequate faith (2:24). The dialogue is also followed by a long monologue⁸ in which the Johannine Jesus, firstly, explains the Christological fundament of the birth-from-above⁹ concept in vv.14–17 and, secondly, reflects on the relationship between turning to light, i.e. faith in Christ and human behaviour in vv.18–21. However, we shall now turn to the text in question.

Nicodemus’s First Word

As mentioned above, the Jewish leader who seeks to meet Jesus (a religious seeker) represents a circle of Jerusalemites who, although they believe in Jesus after witnessing His signs, do not yet have perfect faith. Therefore, Nicodemus’s first question reflects the understanding of this circle: “We know that you are a teacher who has come from God.” This conviction relies on a common Jewish understanding of revelation: God has sent a teacher like Moses (cf. 9:28) who delivers a divine message, and His signs prove His relationship to God. It is not the scheme of a God who steps down¹⁰ to the limitations of human beings but rather who commissions a human being to transfer His message. At this moment, Nicodemus indirectly invokes Jesus to reveal to him the very message He delivers from God.

6 It is highly disputed whether the dialogue ends with v.12 or with another verse, e.g. 21. However, vv.11–12 contain Jesus’s last words formulated in the second person plural. These words surely are addressed by Jesus to Nicodemus. Afterwards, it is not clear who speaks, i.e. Jesus, the narrator or the Johannine community, for the author constructs the following speech in an impersonal way. The reflections on Jesus’s ascent and descent are formulated in the third person, as if someone else speaks about him. See further Jörg Frey, *Die johanneische Eschatologie III: Die eschatologische Verkündigung in den johanneischen Texten*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 117 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 248–59.

7 Cf. the usage of the plural form in the dialogue: οἶδαμεν (v.2), ὑμεῖς (v.7), λαμβάνετε (v.11), πιστεύ(σ)ετε (v.12). With Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 533. See further bibliography in Keener, fn. 2.

8 Cf. Jesus’s long monologue in ch. 15 after His dialogues with the disciples, Peter, Thomas, Philip and Jude in ch. 14.

9 See fn. 15.

10 This idea was very provoking both for Jewish hearers and Greek philosophers, as can be observed in Celsus’s criticism. See Origen, *Cels.* 5.2²⁻³: Θεὸς μὲν, ὧ Ἰουδαῖοι καὶ Χριστιανοί, καὶ θεοῦ παῖς οὐδεὶς οὔτε κατήλθεν οὔτ’ <ἀν> κατέλθοι. Cf. Plato, *Symp.* 203a: θεὸς δὲ ἀνθρώπων οὐ μίγνυται.

Jesus's First Answer

Jesus's first answer begins with a double *amen* which gives strong emphasis¹¹ and authority to the following saying. The saying is a conditional sentence which is negatively formulated: ἐὰν μὴ τις γεννηθῆ ἄνωθεν, οὐ δύναται ἰδεῖν τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ (v.3). Jesus also makes a second similar statement with a parallel structure in v.5, where He explains the first claim: ἐὰν μὴ τις γεννηθῆ ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος, οὐ δύναται εἰσελθεῖν εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ. Both sayings have in their *protasis* a negation (μὴ) of the verb γεννάω and in their *apodosis* the phrase οὐ δύναται as well as the term βασιλείαν τοῦ Θεοῦ. The *if clause* refers to a requirement for what follows in the *apodosis*: seeing or entering the Kingdom of God.¹²

Several studies have already shown that this form of speaking is common to NT texts that refer to entering the Kingdom of God.¹³ A Matthean logion introduced with an *amen* (Matt 18:3; cf. Justin, 1 *Apol.* 61.1 and Gos. Thom. 22,1–2) echoes a similar insight to John 3:3, 5 and describes “turning” and humiliation (ἐὰν μὴ στραφῆτε καὶ γένησθε ὡς τὰ παιδία) as a requirement for entering the Kingdom in a negative way. Another similar Markan text focuses on accepting the Kingdom like a child (Mark 10:15, parr. Luke 18:17), while Matt 5:20 requires “greater righteousness” from the disciples for their entrance into the Kingdom. This similarity does not necessarily mean that John revises the Synoptics but that all these texts share the idea that one shall firstly be transformed to participate in the Kingdom, and use several common literary elements (*amen*, conditional speech, negation, the notion of βασιλεία) to stress it. Before reflecting on the origin and real purpose of such negative formulations, it is helpful to focus on the meaning of the expression γεννηθῆναι ἄνωθεν and the infinitive ἰδεῖν.

The “birth from above” concept does not describe Jesus's origin,¹⁴ but rather refers to the spiritual transformation of converts. This is justifiable for the following reasons: First, it is never said about the Logos that He is born/begotten¹⁵ from above but rather

11 Klaus Seybold, *Der Segen und andere liturgische Worte aus der hebräischen Bibel*, 2nd ed. (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2005), 113–14.

12 See Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 696–99.

13 John W. Pryor, “John 3.3, 5. A Study in the Relation of John's Gospel to the Synoptic Tradition,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 13, no. 41 (1991): 71–95, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0142064X9101304104>. See further bibliography in Maren Bohlen, “Die Einlasssprüche in der Reich-Gottes-Verkündigung Jesu,” *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 99, no. 2 (2008): 167–84, <https://doi.org/10.1515/ZNTW.2008.015>.

14 Contra Wayne A. Meeks, “The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 91, no. 1 (1972): 44–72, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3262920>; Ernst Haenchen, *Das Johannesevangelium: Ein Kommentar* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1980), 202; Hartwig Thyen, *Das Johannesevangelium*, 2nd ed., Hefte zum Neuen Testament (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), 186–87.

15 The verb γεννάω can mean both to give birth and to beget. However, it refers more often to begetting on the part of the father. In this context, the evangelist focuses rather on the origin from above than

that He *comes* or descends from above (v.31). The Son of God descends from above so that humans can be born/begotten from above. Second, Jesus never “sees” the Kingdom because He and the King are one (1:49; 12:13, 15; 18:33, 37; 19:3, 14, 19, 21), i.e. people experience in His presence the Kingdom of God. Third, the explanatory sentence in v.5 reveals that Jesus hereby refers to the spiritual rebirth of believers and not to the Son of God. Therefore, the “birth from above” concept expands and explains the sense of the idea of “being born from God” in 1:12–14.¹⁶

Though there are many reflections regarding eschatological renewal or spiritual rebirth both in the canonical books and in the Jewish¹⁷ and Greco-Roman environment (e.g. Ezek 36:26; 4Q393,1–2 2.5–6¹⁸), one detects that there is no evidence for the expression γεννάσθαι ἄνωθεν in the Pre-Johannine literature. Perhaps one of the most striking parallel texts can be found in Philo. Philo characterises Moses’s ascension to Mount Sinai on the seventh day as a second birth, which is better than the first birth or creation of Adam because Moses receives the holiest nature (ἱερωτάτη φύσις).¹⁹

Back in our text, the adverb ἄνωθεν is used instead of the expression “from/of God,” ἐκ θεοῦ, in 1:12. It also replaces the preposition ἀνά (from the beginning) which occurs in the composite ἀνα-γεννάω (1 Pet 1:3) or the adverb πάλιν (again) incorporated in the noun παλιγγενεσία (Matt 19:28; Titus 3:5). The adverb ἄνωθεν is also used and later explained by ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ (from heaven) in v.31 to refer to Jesus’s heavenly origin²⁰ and implies His preexistence.²¹ By applying the same adverb to His dialogue with Nicodemus, John firstly links the believer’s transformation to the narrative regarding Jesus’s descent from above (cf. the “two becomings” concept according to Byer): A birth ἄνωθεν ontologically²² transforms the believer, for he/she becomes a “heavenly

on the action of begetting or giving birth. Therefore, I use both expressions in my analysis of the Johannine text.

- 16 See an expanded comparison in Jerome H. Neyrey, “John III—A Debate Over Johannine Epistemology and Christology,” *Novum Testamentum* 23, no. 2 (1981): 125, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1560867>.
- 17 *Jos. Asen.* 8:10–11: Κύριε ὁ θεὸς τοῦ πατρὸς μου Ἰσραήλ, ὁ ὑψίστος, ὁ δυνατός, ὁ ζωοποίησας τὰ πάντα καὶ καλέσας ἀπὸ τοῦ σκότους εἰς τὸ φῶς καὶ ἀπὸ τῆς πλάνης εἰς τὴν ἀλήθειαν καὶ ἀπὸ θανάτου εἰς τὴν ζωὴν, σὺ αὐτὸς κύριε ζωοποίησον καὶ εὐλόγησον τὴν παρθένον ταύτην. Καὶ ἀνακαίνισον τῷ πνεύματι σου καὶ ἀνάπλασον αὐτὴν τῇ χειρὶ σου τῇ κρυφαίᾳ καὶ ἀναζωοποίησον τῇ ζωῇ σου.
- 18 See further Keener, *Gospel*, 87.
- 19 *QE* 2.46: Ἡ δὲ ἀνάκλησις τοῦ προφήτου δευτέρα γένεσις ἐστὶ, τῆς προτέρας ἀμείνων. Ἐβδόμη δὲ ἀνακαλεῖται ἡμέρα, ταυτῇ διαφέρων τοῦ πρωτοπλάστου, ὅτι ἐκεῖνος μὲν ἐκ γῆς καὶ μετὰ σώματος συνίστατο, οὗτος δὲ ἄνευ σώματος· διὸ τῷ μὲν γηγενεὶ ἀριθμὸς οἰκείου ἀπενεμήθη ἐξᾶς, τούτῳ δὲ ἡ ἱερωτάτη φύσις τῆς ἐβδομάδος. (Cf. Ex 24:16).
- 20 See further Murray J. Harris, *John, Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2015), 85.
- 21 Urban C. von Wahlde, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, vol. 2, Eerdmans Critical Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 154.
- 22 I use the term “ontological” to refer to the fact that John presents human turning to faith in Christ as a transference to another ontology. It is striking that for John a set of concepts crucial for the understanding of the human being (e.g. life) receives another meaning (life eternal) for those who turn

man,” i.e. receives the same origin with Jesus who comes ἄνωθεν.²³ Second, it has a special rhetorical function: Due to its ambiguity, the term ἄνωθεν, which can mean both “again” and “from above” has a twofold didactic function: on the one hand it exposes the ignorance of Nicodemus, and on the other hand, it reveals the correct knowledge. Lastly, it refers to a characteristic differentiation between the two kinds of humanity, the earthly and the heavenly, both of which can be detected in the works of Paul and Philo as well.²⁴ Though John does not reflect on the future resurrection like Paul in 1 Cor 15 or on the dualistic-middle-platonic basis (spiritual vs material) like Philo, it is striking that, according to both Philo and John, the “heavenly man” is born (not created, οὐ γέννημα) by God.

Philo states:

Leg. 1:31: διττὰ ἀνθρώπων γένη· ὁ μὲν γὰρ ἐστὶν οὐράνιος ἄνθρωπος, ὁ δὲ γήϊνος. ὁ μὲν οὖν οὐράνιος ἄτε κατ’ εἰκόνα θεοῦ γεγονώς φθαρτῆς καὶ συνόλων γεώδους οὐσίας ἀμέτοχος, ὁ δὲ γήϊνος ἐκ σποράδος ὕλης, ἣν χοῦν κέκληκεν, ἐπάγη· διὸ τὸν μὲν οὐράνιον φησὶν οὐ πεπλάσθαι, κατ’ εἰκόνα δὲ τετυπῶσθαι θεοῦ, τὸν δὲ γήϊνον πλάσμα, ἀλλ’ οὐ γέννημα, εἶναι τοῦ τεχνίτου (Cf. *Abr.* 1:157).

Thomas Tobin has clearly demonstrated that though there is no direct influence of Philo on John both share traditions from the larger world of Hellenistic Jewish speculative interpretations of biblical texts.²⁵ Therefore, it is not a coincidence that John uses the lexeme γενν* instead of κτιζ* to refer to the spiritual transformation of the converts and their union with God. Thus, he differentiates the process of spiritual transformation from normal human procreation in an emphatic way.²⁶ Two further comments of Chrysostom enlighten the connotations of the verb γεννᾶσθαι. The first refers to the issue of sexuality. Those “born from above” are not begotten through sexual intercourse

to faith and abide in Christ’s fellowship. From this point of view, the entrance into the community causes an alteration in the deep root of the human being, i.e. an access to another reality beyond the ordinary physical one.

- 23 Karl O. Sandnes, “Whence and Whither: A Narrative Perspective on Birth ἄνωθεν (John 3:3–8),” *Biblica* 86, no. 2 (2005): 170–73.
- 24 1 Cor 15:47 (ἄνθρωπος ἐξ οὐρανοῦ).
- 25 Thomas H. Tobin, “The Prologue of John and Hellenistic Jewish Speculation,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 52, no. 2 (1990): 268; see also Thomas H. Tobin, *The Creation of Man: Philo and the History of Interpretation*, Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series 14 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1983) and more recently Jörg Frey, “Between Torah and Stoa: How Could Readers Have Understood the Johannine Logos?,” in *The Prologue of the Gospel of John: Its Literary, Theological, and Philosophical Context: Papers Read at the Colloquium Ioanneum 2013*, ed. Jan G. van der Watt, R. A. Culpepper and Udo Schnelle, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 359 (Mohr Siebeck, 2016), 213–16.
- 26 However, John Chrysostom understands the two concepts as reflections regarding the same transformation process: Εἴ τις γὰρ ἐν Χριστῷ καινῆ κτίσις, φησί. Ποία καινῆ κτίσις; Ἄκουσον αὐτοῦ λέγοντος: Ἐὰν μὴ τις γεννηθῆ ἔξ ὕδατος καὶ Πνεύματος, οὐ δύναται εἰσελθεῖν εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ Θεοῦ (*Hom. Jo.* 26.1, PG 59:153).

between man and woman, but they receive a new nature created above (ἀνω ὑφαίνεται τῆς ἡμετέρας φύσεως ἢ κατασκευῆ), i.e. by the Spirit. The new existence of the believer transcends the limitations or the desires of organic human reproduction. From this point of view, to receive a new nature is essential both for the convert as well as for the religious community to which this individual belongs. Hence, Chrysostom's second comment refers to the ecclesial background of the idea of having been begotten from above. Concerning the lexeme γενν* the exegete claims that believers share a common kinship from above (ἀνωθεν συγγένεια) which unites them to God and differentiates them from the non-baptised.²⁷

The Epistemological Interpretation of ὁρᾶν

Furthermore, the verb ὁράω can have either an epistemological or an experiential metaphorical meaning in this context. Some exegetes adopt the latter. In their view, the verb ὁρᾶν means “experiencing” or “participating in,” which is the sense it has in v.36 (οὐκ ὄψεται ζώην). This seems to be a plausible reading because the verb ὁρᾶν is placed parallel to and explained by the verb εἰσερχομαι in v.5.²⁸

However, already in the early church, some exegetes do not understand the conditional clause of v.3 as a simple parallel to v.5. They rather focus on the cognitive meaning of the verb ὁράω and draw some remarkable conclusions regarding the relationship between the concepts of “spiritual rebirth” and “seeing” the “Kingdom.” According to this interpretation, the renewal by the Spirit which the converts experience during their baptism has an epistemological consequence. Baptism opens the eyes of their soul to comprehend Jesus's identity and words.

Unless you are born again, unless you receive the Spirit by the laver of regeneration, you cannot conceive the proper idea of Me. For this idea you have is not spiritual but carnal (John Chrysostom, *Hom. Jo.* 24.2, *FC* 33:237).

This latter interpretation is no less plausible than the first one for two reasons. On the one hand, the Fourth Gospel declares that one can fully understand Jesus's words only by the power of the Spirit (14:26). On the other, the receiving of the Spirit is embedded in contexts alluding to ritual baptism.²⁹ Rituals played a crucial role in Early Christianity. One might recall how Luke presents the recognition scene on the way to Emmaus, where the disciples identify Jesus only after the “breaking of the bread,” an allusion to Eucharist (24:45).³⁰ Modern research on the beginnings of Christianity also confirms

27 *Hom. Jo.* 25.3, PG 59:151.

28 See the discussion in William C. Weinrich, *John 1:1–7:1*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2015), 384–385.

29 Cf. the participle βαπτίζων in 1:33 and the remissions of the sins in 20:23.

30 Another example of the priority given to baptism in the Matthean great commission (28:19). Disciples shall first *baptize* and teach thereafter. Therefore, it is not a coincidence that converts in the early

the crucial role which rituals played in the transmission of embodied and embedded religious knowledge in the primitive church.³¹

Furthermore, the epistemological interpretation of “seeing” is deeply linked to the idea of “being begotten from above.” Philo stresses that only the elect race (γένος) of Israel can see God³² and that seeing God causes an alteration,³³ a participation *in* and union *with* God. For it is possible to “see” God only through God,³⁴ i.e. by being attached to God³⁵ (cf. the Hellenistic philosophical principle “to know the same by the same,” γινώσκεισθαι τῷ ὁμοίῳ τὸ ὅμοιον³⁶). This truth is also highlighted by Origen who claims that knowledge of God is a consequence of a union with God.³⁷ It follows, that, in John’s view, only those who are begotten from above, i.e. who already share a kinship from above, can see Christ, i.e. experience in His presence the Kingdom of God (cf. 1 John 3:2³⁸).

Jesus’s Second Answer

Furthermore, the explanatory phrase ἐξ’ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος demonstrates that by using the term to “be begotten from above” the Johannine Jesus refers to regeneration through water baptism and the power of the Spirit. Though one can list seven different interpretations of this expression,³⁹ the context of chapters 1–3 with the repeated references to water baptism (1:26, 31, 33; 3:23, 25) as well as lexicographical research attest to the fact that the wording “from water and Spirit” refers to ritual baptism and the

churches of Jerusalem and Milan were first baptised and thereafter introduced to the meaning of the Holy Sacraments. See the *Mystagogies* of Cyrill of Jerusalem and Ambrose.

31 A summary of this research can be found in Risto Uro, *Ritual and Christian Beginnings: A Socio-Cognitive Analysis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 7–40, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199661176.001.0001>.

32 *Conf.* 56; *Praem.* 44; *Legat.* 1:4.

33 *Somn.* 1:171.

34 *Praem.* 46.

35 *Post.* 1:92: ὁ γὰρ ὁρῶν τὸν θεὸν ὑπὸ ἐκπρεπεστάτου κάλλους ἀγόμενος τῷ ὁρωμένῳ προσκεκλήρωται τε καὶ μεμέρισται.

36 Aristotle, *De anima* 404b. See also Bertil E. Gärtner, “The Pauline and Johannine Idea of ‘To Know God’ against the Hellenistic Background,” *New Testament Studies* 14, no. 2 (1968): 209–31, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0028688500018622>.

37 *Comm. Jo.* 9.4.22.2: “Ὅρα δὲ εἰ μὴ καὶ ἄλλως ἢ γραφὴ τοὺς ἀνακεκραμένους τινὶ καὶ ἐνωθέντας γινώσκειν ἐκεῖνὸ φησιν, ᾧ ἀνεκράθησαν καὶ κεκοινωνήκασιν· πρὸ δὲ τῆς τοιαύτης ἐνώσεως καὶ κοινωνίας κἂν τοὺς λόγους καταλαμβάνωσιν περὶ τινος, οὐ γινώσκουσιν ἐκεῖνο.

38 Regarding transformation through vision of God grounded in OT examples see John 1:14–18, echoing Exod 33–34; John 8:56; 12:40; cf. 1 Cor 13:12; 2 Cor 3:18. See further Keener, *Gospel*, 247–51.

39 See summaries in D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1991), 191–95; Charles Kingsley Barrett, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes*, *Kritisch-exegetischer Kommentar über das Neue Testament* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991), 230, <https://doi.org/10.13109/9783666516238>; Weinrich, *John*, 413–24.

renewal by the power of the Spirit. The expression “from water and Spirit” cannot be a hendiadys. Water is never used in the context of such a figure of speech.⁴⁰

The fact that John does not use the very verb βαπτίζω but employs symbolical or metaphorical language in this context is a part of his rhetorical strategy. It is a way to create new meanings and to arouse the interest of the hearer or the reader. This is an insight which we gain by considering the Chrysostomic reception of the Johannine text:

Now, it was for this reason that Christ often spoke obscurely, because He wished to make His hearers more inclined to ask questions and to cause them to be more attentive. What has been said with its meaning obvious often escapes the listener, but what has been said obscurely makes him more curious and eager (*Hom. Jo. 24.2, FC 33:237*).

Simultaneously, this kind of speaking belongs to a divine pedagogy which has as its goal to introduce an outsider to the mysteries of the heavens:

Christ did not speak of sublime things plainly, but by speaking in riddles raised him up from his earthly thoughts (*Hom. Jo. 24.2, FC 33:236*).

He raised him unsuspectingly to greater knowledge (*Hom. Jo. 24.2, FC 33:238*).

Besides, in the Gospel of John as well as in 1 John the reference to water links the ritual baptism not only to Jesus's or His disciples' baptising activity (3:22; 4:1) but also to the sacrifice of the “Lamb of God” on the cross (John 19:34; 1 John 5:6–7). Hence, the believers and their community are born from Christ's wounded side. In Chrysostom's view, the Cross is the fountain of life (πηγή ζωής).⁴¹

The Pragmatic Function of the Conditional Statements

Now we shall turn to the pragmatic function of these conditional claims of the Johannine Jesus. The negative sayings that refer to entering the Kingdom of God are not formed only as conditional sentences. It is striking that Paul, too, uses metaphorical language with negative formulations to refer to the same idea. In 1 Cor 6:9–11, he speaks of the ἄδικοι (explained by a list of offenders in religious, social and sexual matters) who will

40 The wording ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος is used by Aristoteles and the grammarian Aristophanes: τὸ ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος, οἶον καὶ ὁ ἀφρός (foam). Aristotle, *Gen. an.* 735b; Aristophanes Byzantius, *Hist. an. ep.* 1.55.10; 1.57.7; 1.58.4; 1.55.18: ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος λέγοι ἂν τις τὸ σπέρμα εἶναι καθάπερ, ὡς προεῖπον, καὶ ὁ ἀφρός. However, the philosopher refers to the wind, not to the divine Spirit ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ ἀέρος (Anaximenes, fr. 19). One can also find other similar expressions, e.g. ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ γῆς (Hippocrates, *De diaeta* 21) ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ πυρός (Xenocrates, fr. 161) which never function like a hendiadys.

41 PG 59:160. See further on Chrysostom's understanding of baptism and its relationship to the event of the cross Dolores Greely, “The Church as ‘Body of Christ’ According to the Teaching of Saint John Chrysostom” (PhD diss., University of Notre Dame, 1971), 86–96.

not inherit the Kingdom of God (θεοῦ βασιλείαν οὐ κληρονομήσουσιν). Paul understood baptism as a juncture of behavioural change. Converts should incorporate another mode of life free from any social and sexual injustice that characterised the outsiders. The baptised had been justified (ἐδικαιώθητε) during their baptism, yet they were still at risk of returning to their prebaptismal status (ἄδικοι) and not inheriting the Kingdom (cf. Gal 5:18–21). Another saying in Mark 10:23 (cf. Matt 19:23; Luke 18:24) reminds us of the particular function of economic ethics for primitive Christianity.⁴² The rich can hardly enter the Kingdom (δυσκόλως εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ εἰσελεύσονται) if they prefer their wealth to Jesus's fellowship.

In almost all these texts the negative expressions and especially the conditional statements aim to demarcate those who do not belong to the eschatological Kingdom of God. They are the *non-baptised*, offenders in religious, social and sexual matters, the rich who prioritise their wealth, non-repenting sinners, etc. John Chrysostom understands it this way, too:

Hear ye, as many of you as are outside the Light; shudder, groan. Fearful is the threat, fearful the sentence. "It is not possible", He asserted, "for him who has not been born of water and the Spirit to enter into the kingdom of heaven", because he bears the garment of death, of the curse, of destruction (*Hom. Jo.* 25.1, *FC* 33:243).⁴³

Such statements have a broad background. Both in the Jewish milieu and the Hellenistic environment, one finds special conditions for entrance into a holy place or into an association. The negative statements in the NT have Deut 23:2–9 as their predecessor.

42 The call for sharing wealth or almsgiving was an essential part of the exhortations to the neophytes in Early Christianity (Cf. e.g. 1 John 3:17; Gal 2:10; Klaus Berger, *Formen und Gattungen im Neuen Testament*, UTB Theologie 2532 [Tübingen: Francke, 2005], 190–194). The neophytes should realise in this way what had happened during their baptism. It is worth noticing that Chrysostom concludes almost all his homilies dedicated to our text by calling for almsgiving. The narrative regarding their descent of the Logos and the idea of being begotten from above should lead the hearers of Chrysostom to a new conduct and especially new economic ethics, imitating God's love for humans by sharing their wealth with the poor. "But let us apply the fire of the Spirit that we may consume the thorns and put to flight the wild beasts that we may provide cleared seed land for the husbandman; and after purifying it, let us water it with spiritual streams. Let us plant the fruitful olive, the most easily cultivated tree, evergreen, illuminating, nourishing, giver of health. All these qualities almsgiving has and is as a seal on those who possess it. Not even death, as it approaches, dries up this plant, but it ever remains, enlightening the mind, nourishing the sinews of the soul, rendering its strength more powerful. If we always possess this, we shall be able with confidence to behold the Bridegroom and to enter the bridal chamber." (*Hom. Jo.* 24:3, *FC* 33:241). See further on the importance of almsgiving for Chrysostom's hearers in Wendy Mayer, "Poverty and Generosity toward the Poor in the Time of John Chrysostom," in *Wealth and Poverty in Early Church and Society*, ed. Edward Moore (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 140–58.

43 Cf. *Hom. Jo.* 25.3, PG 59:151: οὐδέπω συγγενῆς ἐστι γνήσιος ... ἀλλότριος ὁ κατηχούμενος τοῦ πιστοῦ ... πάντα ἐξηλλαγμένα.

In Deuteronomy, one finds special requirements for belonging to the *qahal* of the Jewish people:

Deut 23:2–4^{LXX}: οὐκ εἰσελεύσεται θλαδίας καὶ ἀποκεκομμένος εἰς ἐκκλησίαν κυρίου ³ οὐκ εἰσελεύσεται ἐκ πόρνης εἰς ἐκκλησίαν κυρίου ⁴ οὐκ εἰσελεύσεται Ἀμμανίτης καὶ Μωαβίτης εἰς ἐκκλησίαν κυρίου καὶ ἕως δεκάτης γενεᾶς οὐκ εἰσελεύσεται εἰς ἐκκλησίαν κυρίου καὶ ἕως εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα [cf. Lev 21 regarding the holiness of the priests].

One notices similar demarcating moral requirements in pagan sanctuaries and other Greco-Roman volitional associations, too:

ἐὰν δὲ γινῶ τὴν τοιαύτην μὴ εἶναι ἀγνήν ... μηδὲ θυσίαις παρατυγχάνειν ... μηδὲ ὄρᾶν τὰ τελούμενα μυστήρια⁴⁴

εἰ δ' ἀδίκων ψαύεις καὶ σοὶ νόος οὐ καθαρεύει, πόρρω ἀπ' ἀθανάτων ἔργεο καὶ τεμένους⁴⁵

[μη]δενὶ ἐξέστω ἰσι[έν]αι ἰς τὴν σεμνοτάτην σύνοδον τῶν ἑρανιστῶν πρὶν ἂν δοκιμασθῇ εἴ ἐστι ἀ[γν]ός καὶ εὐσεβής καὶ ἀγα[θ]ός⁴⁶

It is evident that the above texts refer to the entrance into a worshipping community or association while the NT authors rather focus on the participation in the eschatological kingdom of God. It is characteristic that, though the NT authors use a great variety of if clauses, the *apodoseis* in their conditional sentences are very similar: *almost all speak about a future entering or inheriting the Kingdom of God*. In their view, neither ethnicity nor social status plays a significant role in the process of entering the Kingdom and, consequently the messianic community.

The NT authors redefine the Jewish eschatological expectations about the restoration and expansion of the covenant people from a Christocentric perspective. The covenant people is extended to all who *obey the Gospel of Christ*. Cf. Ezek 36; Joel 3, or the Third Isaianic vision:

Isa 56:2–3^{LXX}: μὴ λεγέτω ὁ ἀλλογενής ὁ προσκείμενος πρὸς κύριον ἀφοριεῖ με ἄρα κύριος ἀπὸ τοῦ λαοῦ αὐτοῦ καὶ μὴ λεγέτω ὁ εὐνούχος ὅτι ἐγὼ εἰμι ξύλον ξηρόν.

44 *Inscription from Philadelphia*, 14–15; 38–41, Text in Stephen G. Barton and Gregory H. R. Horsley, “A Hellenistic Cult Group and the New Testament Churches,” *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum* 24 (1981): 8. See also Stanley Stowers, “A Cult from Philadelphia: Oikos Religion or Cultic Association?,” in *The Early Church in Its Context: Essays in Honor of Everett Ferguson*, ed. Abraham J. Malherbe, Supplements to Novum Testamentum 90 (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 287–301, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004267367_020.

45 SEG IG XII,1 789; ID 2529. See further John S. Kloppenborg, “The Moralizing of Discourse in Greco-Roman Associations,” in *“The One Who Sows Bountifully”*: *Essays in Honor of Stanley K. Stowers*, ed. Caroline J. Hodge et al. (SBL Press, 2014), 215–28.

46 IG II² 1369. On the regulations regarding the entry in Greco-Roman associations and pagan sanctuaries see resources on <http://www.philipharland.com/greco-roman-associations>.

From this point of view, the negative formulations in John 3:3, 5 revise eschatological expectations in the messianic communities and transcend ethnic, moral and social boundaries. However, the exclusion of those unbaptised from the kingdom of God and simultaneously from the eschatological community draws new boundaries.

We find similar processes of transcending and drawing boundaries, i.e. where ethnicity or prior moral and social status do not play any role, in pagan temples⁴⁷ and philosophical schools. One can refer to the famous saying which prohibited the entrance of those having no idea of geometry into the school of Plato: ἀγεωμέτρητος μηδεις εισίτω.⁴⁸ Similarly, Epictetus advised his pupils to change their way of life and avoid the company of non-philosophers (φεύγετε ἔθη τὰ πρότερον, φεύγετε τοὺς ιδιώτας, εἰ θέλετε ἄρξασθαι ποτέ τινες εἶναι⁴⁹). Those attending a philosophical school experienced both a moral transformation and social isolation. Therefore, Lucian, who satirises those who attend the school of the philosophers, asks an old man (γέρων, cf. v.4!) to leave the philosophical way of life and συμπολιτεύσαι, i.e. to live as a fellow citizen of one state with all others.⁵⁰

However, the pupils of the philosophers did not explain their philosophic conversion as an eschatological renewal. This interpretation differentiates the Johannine idea from reflections regarding philosophical conversion in the Hellenistic world. Therefore, we can conclude that the Johannine concept of the birth from above or the birth from water and Spirit “is more than a metaphor of social conversion from one group to another (although it includes that); it is an image of complete transformation.”⁵¹ Or, in the view of Chrysostom, a new birth occurs in baptism, leading to union with God:

And just as in the beginning He fashioned him perfect, so also now He creates him without blemish. Yet, at that time, He said: “Let us make for him a helper” <Gen 2:18> but here no such thing. Will he who has received the grace of the Spirit need any other help? How much need of assistance in future has he who fills out the body of Christ? At that time He made man to the

47 Πάντας ἀνθρώπους ὁ θεὸς ἐπὶ τὴν ἐστίασιν καλεῖ καὶ κοινὴν καὶ ἰσότημον παρέχει τράπεζαν τοῖς ὀποθενοῦ[ν]. Letter of a priest of Zeus to the Rhodians, inviting them to festival of Zeus; 2; found at Panamara: Hatzfeld, BCH 51, 1927, 73, no. 11; BE 1928:380; SEG 4, 247; *IStratonikeia 22; **M. Ç. Şahin, EA 3, 1984, 22 (l. 1); SEG 34, 1073 (see <http://inscriptions.packhum.org/>).

48 Pseudo-Galenus, *Part. phil.* 2,6; Elias, *Comm. cat.* 118,18. Cf. Diogenes Laertius, *Vit. phil.* 8.10 regarding the examination of candidates for full membership at the school of Pythagoras: καὶ αὐτοῦ οἱ μαθηταὶ κατετίθεντο τὰς οὐσίας εἰς ἓν ποιούμενοι. πενταετίαν θ' ἡσύχαζον, μόνον τῶν λόγων κατακούοντες καὶ οὐδέπω Πυθαγόραν ὀρώντες εἰς δὲ δοκιμασθεῖεν· τούνητύθεν δ' ἐγίνοντο τῆς οἰκίας αὐτοῦ καὶ τῆς ὄψεως μετεῖχον.

49 *Diatr.* 3.16.6–9.

50 Lucian, *Hermot.* 84: Καὶ σὺ τοῖνον, ἐπεὶπερ οὕτω σοὶ δοκεῖ, ἐξ τῶ λοιπῶν ἂν ἄμεινον ποιήσῃς βίον τε κοινὸν ἅπασιν βιοῦν ἀξίων καὶ συμπολιτεύσῃ τοῖς πολλοῖς οὐδὲν ἀλλόκοτον καὶ τετυφωμένον ἐλπίζων, καὶ οὐκ αἰσχυνῆ, ἦνπερ εὖ φρονῆς, εἰ γέρων ἄνθρωπος μεταμαθήσῃ καὶ μεταχωρήσῃ πρὸς τὸ βέλτιον.

51 Keener, *Gospel*, 552.

image of God, but now He has made him one with God Himself (νὺν αὐτῷ τῷ Θεῷ ἦνωσε). (*Hom. Jo. 25.2, FC 33:245–246*)

A Potential Universalism and the Conclusion of the Dialogue

John cites Jesus's words not only to differentiate between the baptised and the non-baptised but also to stress the idea that baptism can transform everyone (πᾶς) by the power of the Spirit (ὁ γεγεννημένος ἐκ τοῦ πνεύματος). It is worthy of attention that Jesus repeats the same idea not as a negative statement but as an exhortation (*protrope*⁵²): δεῖ ὑμᾶς γεννηθῆναι⁵³ ἄνωθεν (v.7). The idea of an eschatological renewal by water and Spirit has its origin in texts reflecting Jewish eschatological expectations, but it is reshaped by Early Christianity, and especially in John, in a way transcending traditional religious, moral, social and cultural values.

This explains why Nicodemus cannot apprehend the revelation of Jesus despite the fact that Jesus offers further explanation of His word. Nicodemus represents a Jewish circle which not only has insufficient faith regarding Jesus but also has not experienced baptism. Therefore, he does not have any access to the new reality of the Spirit and is not able to comprehend Jesus's words. He cannot understand what happens at the beginnings of the Christian life, i.e. that believers begin to experience an ongoing and dynamic transformation which will be accomplished at the eschaton. Therefore, Jesus closes the dialogue with the *qal wahomer* argument: "If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how shall you believe if I tell you heavenly things?" (v.12 NRS). Jesus only partially reveals what happens at baptism. He does not unfold the whole process of spiritual transformation. This is a truth which can be experienced only by those who get baptised, abide in the community and get transformed by the power of the Spirit.

52 In John 1–12, the word of the Johannine Jesus functions as *protreptikos logos*. For He tries in different ways to distract His listeners and readers from the worldview of His opponents (*apotrope*) and to invite them to believe in Him (*protrope*). That is why the whole unit is concluded as a *protrope* to faith: ὡς τὸ φῶς ἔχετε, πιστεύετε εἰς τὸ φῶς, ἵνα υἱοὶ φωτὸς γένησθε (John 12:36). See further on the *protreptic* character of the Fourth Gospel John G. Cook, "The *Protreptic* Power of Early Christian Language: From John to Augustine," *Vigiliae Christianae* 48, no. 2 (1994): 105–34, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1583962>. See further Herwig Görgemanns, "Protreptics," in *Brill's New Pauly*, ed. Hubert Cancik and Helmuth Schneider (Leiden: Brill, 2006), accessed June 19, 2018, https://doi.org/10.1163/1574-9347_bnp_e1011490, and Diana Swancutt, "Paraenesis in Light of Protrepsis: Troubling the Typical Dichotomy," in *Early Christian Paraenesis in Context*, ed. Troels Engberg-Pedersen and James Starr, Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft 125 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2004), 113–53, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110916997.113>.

53 The aorist infinitive in the direct speech does not indicate past time, for "outside the indicative and participle time is not a feature of the aorist." See Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 556.

Transcending and Non-Transcending the Boundaries

The last question which remains open is why Nicodemus does not confess his faith in Christ after this dialogue, like others in the Fourth Gospel who encounter Jesus and discuss with Him. The author informs us that many Jewish leaders (ἀρχοντες) believed in Him *but because of the Pharisees they did not confess it, for fear that they would be put out of the synagogue* (12:42). Similarly, Nicodemus is afraid of experiencing social isolation and deprivation. Therefore, he visits Jesus during the night. He is not willing to lose his social status and privileges for his faith. According to Chrysostom, not only ignorance but also this vainglory keeps him away from the birth-from-above process. Hence, he cannot become transformed. Conversely, he remains in the status of the Jewish weakness (ἰουδαϊκὴ ἀσθένεια or ἰουδαϊκὴ εὐτέλεια).⁵⁴

However, the Gospel of John continues the narrative regarding God's revelation in Christ, which vertically is a transcending of boundaries. *And no one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven, even the Son of Man* (NRS 3:13). This is a συγκατάβασις, i.e. *condescension* according to John Chrysostom.⁵⁵ The Antiochian exegete is the first Christian author who stresses this concept to such an extent and believes that not only the Incarnation but also the way Jesus reveals the truth (his words in the Scriptures) is an expression of συγκατάβασις, i.e. God's love which transcends the limits of the divine and descends in order to convert humans. This idea of συγκατάβασις

54 *Hom. Jo.* 24.1, PG 59:144; 26.2, PG 59:155. Indeed, the unbelieving Jews are presented as weak in the Fourth Gospel and Jesus's mission is similar to that of a physician who shall heal them (12:40; 9:39). See further on Jesus's profile as a physician in the Fourth Gospel Jacobus Kok, *New Perspectives on Healing, Restoration and Reconciliation in John's Gospel*, Biblical Interpretation Series 149 (Leiden: Brill, 2017). Concerning the emphasis which Chrysostom puts on the Jewish ἀσθένεια in his homilies on the Fourth Gospel see Michael G. Azar, *Exegeting the Jews: The Early Reception of the Johannine "Jews,"* Bibliotheca de autores cristianos 10 (Leiden: Brill, 2016). This view also has to do with the broader concept of Chrysostom's exegesis that has affinities to "a particular strand of moral philosophy that became formalised within the Hellenistic and early Roman imperial periods as medico-philosophical psychic therapy." Wendy Mayer, "Shaping the Sick Soul: Reshaping the Identity of John Chrysostom," in *Christians Shaping Identity from the Roman Empire to Byzantium: Studies Inspired by Pauline Allen*, ed. Geoffrey D. Dunn and Wendy Mayer, *Vetus Testamentum Supplements* 132 (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 145, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004301573_009.

55 See further on John Chrysostom's hermeneutics and pastoral strategy of synkatobasis David Rylaarsdam, *John Chrysostom on Divine Pedagogy: The Coherence of his Theology and Preaching*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198715382.001.0001>; Courtney Wilson VanVeller, "Paul's Therapy of the Soul: A New Approach to John Chrysostom and Anti-Judaism" (Doctoral diss., Boston University, 2015); Chris Baghos, "The Stylistic Influence of the Second Sophistic on the Exegetical Homilies of St John Chrysostom," in *John Chrysostom: Past, Present, Future*, ed. Doru Costache and Mario Baghos (Sutherland, N.S.W.: AIOCS Press, 2017), 160–61.

plays a dominant role in the Chrysostomic perception of the Fourth Gospel as a guide to a “true philosophy.”⁵⁶

What I have often said I shall now repeat, and shall not cease to say. What is that? It is that Jesus, when about to touch on sublime doctrines, often contains Himself by reason of the limitation (ἀσθένεια) of His hearers, and dwells not for a continuance on subjects worthy of His greatness, but rather on those which partake of condescension (συγκατάβασις) (*Hom. Jo. 27.1; NPNF¹ 14:92*).

Conclusions

To conclude, the following can be asserted. First, Jesus’s claims in His dialogue with Nicodemus have both a demarcating and exhorting function against a Hellenistic backdrop. On the one hand, the conditional statements aim to demarcate those who do not belong to the eschatological Kingdom of God. On the other, v.7 clearly demonstrates that Jesus exhorts His Jewish interlocutor to undergo the process of a birth from above. Second, the idea of being begotten from above refers to a transcending of ontological and epistemological borders by the power of the Spirit, which presupposes a ritual baptism. The Fourth Evangelist reinterprets insights both of his Jewish-biblical background as well as of Hellenistic theosophical speculation to describe the conversion experience as transference to another ontology. Third, the ontological transformation of the baptised is a consequence of God’s transcending of all human expectations regarding the divine, a *descension* due to His love for humans. John Chrysostom calls this concept *synkatabasis* and develops a hermeneutics based on the idea that the Logos not only transcended the borders between the divine and the human realms but also adapted His teaching to the weakness of His listeners’ souls. Lastly, human ascension to the divine sphere requires the willingness of the individual to exit the limitations of his/her physical conditions and social status.

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- 56 In his 88 Homilies on John, the Antiochean Exegete refers 116 times to the term “philosophy” (all three etymologically related forms are taken into account: φιλοσοφία, φιλοσοφία, φιλόσοφος) in a positive sense because he intends to present the Fourth Gospel as a guide to “Christian philosophy” and to compare it with the other (ἕξωθεν) philosophical schools.

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