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Avatāra and incarnation: A paradigm analysis and comparison of their respective meanings in the Bhagavadgītā and in the Gospel of John

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AVATAR AND INCARNATION: A PARADIGM ANALYSIS AND COMPARISON OF THEIR RESPECTIVE MEANINGS IN THE BHAGAVADGĪTĀ AND IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

by

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Avatāra and Incarnation: A Paradigm Analysis and Comparison of Their Respective Meanings in the Bhagavadgītā and in the Gospel of John

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Abstract

This study attempts a critical comparison of avatāra and incarnation in the Bhagavadgītā and in the Fourth Gospel on the basis of Kuhnian paradigm analysis. From this perspective, we argue that substantial similarities exist between these notions of incarnation: they reflect a similar mythical pattern, and each portrays incarnation as realistic yet non-kenotic. In the Gītā, avatāra represents a parallel to the cosmic creation and shares in its reality. Nevertheless, Kṛṣṇa's incarnations are no less an epiphany of his divine characteristics: freedom, omniscience, and omnipotence. Again, John portrays incarnation in non-kenotic terms. On his prophetic view, neither the act of incarnation nor the passion mark a change in the nature of the Christ; thus, incarnation is the earthly sojourn of the heavenly revealer who always maintains his unity with God.

Despite these similarities, the assumptions that underlie the appropriations of the incarnation pattern vary considerably. Their fundamental differences derive from the fact that John conceives incarnation as a soteriological event. This assumption underlies the christocentric emphases of the Gospel and conditions the nature of the incarnate Christ. This incarnation paradigm introduces a dialectical quality into the comparative
relationship of Kṛṣṇa and Jesus. It can produce a model that is strikingly similar to the portrayal of Kṛṣṇa, or a kenotic model that is just as striking in its dissimilarities. In contrast, the Bhagavadgītā conceives avatāra as the manifestation of a general movement of grace, a cooperating grace that promises assistance on the path toward release. This assumption is reflected in its unique emphases. Within its cyclical cosmology, God's offer of divine assistance results in the notion of repeated incarnations. Again, this portrayal of avatāra permits a more broadly conceived conception of God's activity: Kṛṣṇa's incarnations not only mediate salvation, but they redeem the social order. Finally, the soteriological functions and incarnate nature of Kṛṣṇa remain separate in the Gitā, and his nature is correlated to metaphysical considerations. Thus, there is neither the need nor the possibility to elaborate a kenotic-type model of incarnation.
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Chapter One
Paradigm Analysis and the Comparative Study of Religions

The history of comparative studies of the Indian theistic tradition and Christianity has been dominated by theological and apologetic concerns. For example, J. N. Farquhar pays tribute to the Bhagavadgītā in his *Permanent Lessons of the Gita*, yet argues that it is a purely imaginative work and that its appeal lies in the fact that humankind needs an incarnate savior. Again, Raimundo Panikkar is more sympathetic to the Indian tradition in *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, yet espouses the goal of leading this tradition to a full recognition of the Christian Christ. While such apologetic and theological endeavors are legitimate, they cannot be allowed to substitute for critical study undertaken from the perspective of the history of religions whose purpose is not to evaluate and rank respective religious traditions, but to understand both their irreducible natures as expressions of humankind’s religious experience and their mutual relations.

In contrast to this prevailing trend, Rudolf Otto produced several critical comparisons of the Indian theistic tradition and Christianity, the most noteworthy being his *India’s Religion of Grace and Christianity Compared and*

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Contrasted.\(^1\) It is rather curious, however, that while this work competently and fairly analyses and relates the respective elements of these traditions, the concepts of avatāra and incarnation play scarcely a role.

In a recent series of comparative studies published under the title *Avatar and Incarnation*, Geoffrey Parrinder has attempted to fill the void created by this scarcity of critical comparisons of the Indian theistic tradition and Christianity, and especially of the respective concepts of avatāra and incarnation.\(^2\) He correctly notes in the preface to his study that little critical attention has been devoted to the concept of avatāra in the Indian tradition, and that comparisons with the Christian notion of incarnation have been characterized by a lack of rigor.\(^3\) In response to this situation, he calls for a critical study to ascertain just how much or little common ground exists between the respective notions of avatāra and incarnation.\(^4\)

Despite his recognition of the need for a critical comparison, Parrinder's approach is itself clearly dominated by apologetic concerns that preclude the achievement of a truly unbiased, critical comparison, and weaken the conclusions reached in his study. These apologetic concerns are

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\(^2\) (London: Faber and Faber, 1970). These studies were presented at Oxford University's Wilde Lectures in Natural Theology and Comparative Religion from 1966 to 1969.

\(^3\) *Avatar*, p. 7.

\(^4\) Ibid., p. 13.
reflected, first, in the fact that Parrinder holds up the Christian kenotic model of incarnation as the definitive norm to which all related concepts are to be compared and, second, in the fact that he fails to question rigorously the assumptions that underlie the development of christological reflection in the Christian tradition.

Parrinder formulated his comparative approach in direct opposition to works such as Aldous Huxley's The Perennial Philosophy in which an uncritical approximation or even identification of religious concepts of incarnation is made. For example, early in his study Huxley asserts that "the doctrine that God can be incarnated in human form is found in most of the principal historic expositions of the Perennial Philosophy- in Hinduism, in Mahayana Buddhism, in Christianity and in the Mohammadanism of the Sufis." While Parrinder is completely justified in objecting to such facile approximations, his own work makes it clear that he is offended not so much by the diluting effect of Huxley's interpretation on the various religious concepts of incarnation as by the equation of the Christian notion with related concepts. His comparative study, therefore, is guided by a concern to establish the uniqueness of the Christian incarnation, and to comprehend its relationship to similar notions in other religions. This apologetic concern has been recognized, for example, by Ninian Smart who notes that the ultimate

2 Huxley, Ibid., p. 60.
concern of Parrinder's study is to make sense, from a Christian perspective, of the pluralism of religion.¹

The significance of Parrinder's theological agenda for our concerns lies in the fact that it conditions his methodology and precludes an unbiased approach to the material. That is to say, guided by his apologetic concerns, Parrinder does not explicate the Indian concept of avatāra within the religiocultural context that actually determines its meaning, but considers it in contrast to the Christian kenotic model of incarnation. Thus, he tends to reduce the Indian notion of avatāra to its comparative relationship with the latter. He assumes, in short, that true incarnation "... does not appear in all forms, but only in those which are consistent with humanity, life and death. Christ 'emptied himself' and lived and died on earth, and yet at the same time he is the eternal Word 'in whom all things consist'. As the Unknown Christ he inspired many forms in the world religions, and as the Known Christ he was incarnate."² In consequence, Parrinder's characterization of avatāra is primarily determined by the response to one question "... is it a real incarnation, in the flesh? Is it, to use an ugly theological term, an 'inhistorization' of the Deity?"³


Within these tightly drawn parameters Parrinder marks a radical distinction between the respective notions of avatāra and incarnation. Noting the characteristic absence of kenotic features from Indian avatāra theory, he characterizes it not as incarnation properly speaking, but rather as theophany, a manifestation of the divine in visible form. Following Heinrich Zimmer, he notes that in the avatāras 'the Godhead, in its very aloofness,' freely engages in cyclical descents for generally soteriological purposes, yet in doing so, never truly enters the human sphere. The avatāras appear and disappear calmly and impassively, triumphant in their passage from beginning to end, never divesting themselves of divine power. It is true that Parrinder recognizes the non-docetic nature of Kṛṣṇa in the Bhagavadgītā, but even here he argues that Kṛṣṇa has been so worked into an ideal pattern of theophany that most of his human traits have been lost. It is clear from

1 Ibid., pp. 226ff.


4 Ibid., p. 227. Parrinder's intention is not to deny the realistic aspect of avatāra faith in the Indian tradition, but to differentiate it from a fully kenotic concept of incarnation as found in Christianity. In the final analysis, however, the imposition of this preconceived model of Christian incarnation causes him to exaggerate the divine characteristics and mythical elements involved with the concept of avatāra in the Indian tradition, and to obscure the real relationship to humanity that is to be found there, especially in the Bhagavadgītā.
the above considerations, however, that the imposition of apologetic concerns on his methodology has precluded the achievement of an unbiased understanding of the Indian notion of avatāra in its own terms. In consequence, its characterization as theophany rather than as incarnation properly speaking is based on an inadequate methodological foundation.

Second, Parrinder's study suffers from a lack of critical depth that, again, appears to be related to his apologetic concerns. That is to say, his primary interest does not lie in critically analyzing the structure of incarnation belief in Christian thought, but rather in comparing non-Christian concepts of incarnation to the Christian kenotic model. Consequently, he fails to question rigorously the assumptions that underlie the development of christological reflection in the Christian tradition. Quite the contrary, he insists that this christological development is universally characterized by the realistic emphases of kenotic christology. In mainstream Christian thought, that is, an insistence on the historicity of the incarnation event— the true birth, life, and death of the man Jesus— provides the fundamental substratum upon which all theological interpretations are founded.¹ As often pointed out, however, this type of realistic interpretation is

¹ Ibid., pp. 209-239 passim. Consider, e.g., his statements at pp. 213ff. "Compared with Avatar beliefs, Christian faith in the Incarnation is not simply guaranteed by birth but by death, by the whole of human life, and this makes for its distinctiveness... The canonical New Testament, and this was doubtless one reason for it being established as a canon, insists on the historicity, the true birth, life and death of Jesus." In short, according to Parrinder "...Christian faith began with Jesus as a man, and... theologies which speak of Jesus as 'man', normal or typical man, but not 'a man', a historical individual.
anachronistic and represents the imposition of modern historical categories onto primitive Christian thought.¹ In contrast, Biblical scholarship has clearly demonstrated that primitive Christianity did not share our historical concerns. Thus, an adequate explication of its christological thought depends upon discerning the unique assumptions that underlie and determine its expression. Otherwise stated, we must learn to distinguish between the historical Jesus and the earthly Jesus. On one hand, the historical Jesus is the object of a distinctly modern quest that rests on historical assumptions. The earthly Jesus, on the other hand, is the object of primitive Christian faith whose interest lay not in preserving the memory of Jesus of Nazareth, but rather in discerning the significance for faith of this man called the Christ.² 

In this formative period, christological reflection was guided by explicitly

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1 E.g., Kasemann notes that this type of historical realism "...has become one of the last bastions of Christianity, which now uses slogans that were originally hostile to Christianity and which understands the incarnation in a modern sense, that is, historically..." The Testament of Jesus, translated by Gerhard Krodel (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968), p. 45.

2 As discussed below at chapter 4, the origins of christology lie in a confessional response to the act of God in Jesus, an elaboration of the faith that sees him as the one in whom God has acted redemptively. See Reginald H. Fuller, The Foundations of New Testament Christology (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965), p. 15.
theological concerns whose discernment is necessary for its explication. It is clear, therefore, that Parrinder's comparative study suffers from a lack of critical depth. In consequence of his tendency to impose modern, specifically historical assumptions onto the primitive Christian situation, he oversimplifies the nature of its christological reflection and obscures the unique assumptions upon which it is founded.

In short, the imposition of Parrinder's theological agenda on his approach to the material precludes the achievement of an adequate critical basis on which to compare the concepts of avatāra and incarnation. He is able neither to achieve an unbiased understanding of the Indian notion of avatāra in its own terms, nor to penetrate to the fundamental assumptions on which these respective notions are founded and that determine their scope and content. Thus, while we have no intention of challenging the legitimacy of Parrinder's theological endeavor, providing its orientation and concerns are made explicit, it clearly cannot be allowed to substitute for critical study undertaken from the perspective of the history of religions.

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1 Specifically, we will attempt to show that it was the soteriological significance attributed to Jesus that, more than any other element, conditioned christological thought in primitive Christianity, including its conception of his nature. This can be illustrated by kenotic thought itself. As discussed below at chapter 3, the notion of kenosis originated in the attempt to understand the salvific death of Jesus as the culmination of a process of self-emptying, or obedient self-abasement, that is extended backwards from the humiliation of the cross to the glory of the preexistent Christ. Thus, the emphasis in this christological model on the humility and lowliness of the incarnate Christ derives in the first instance from its conception of God's soteriological activity in Jesus and represents an attempt to understand and to preserve the significance of the cross as a soteriological event.
The methodological approach to the notions of avatāra and incarnation in the Bhagavadgītā and in the Gospel of John applied in this study has been formulated in an attempt to avoid the problems involved in Parrinder's approach, and to achieve a critical and unbiased basis for comparison.¹ Specifically, we will employ an adaptation of paradigm analysis as explicated by Thomas Kuhn in his work, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions.² While conceived as an explication of scientific rationality and the nature of scientific development, Kuhn's work has recently exerted significant influence on the humanities in general, including the history of religions, and its adoption will afford many advantages for our study.³ In view of the above critique of Parrinder's method, for example, it is significant that

¹ In this comparative study we have decided to focus on representative creative documents in the Indian theistic tradition and in Christianity, specifically the Bhagavadgītā and the Gospel of John. The decision to base our comparative study on the Bhagavadgītā is without need of explanation, given the universal recognition of its central importance in Indian theistic thought. The Gospel of John has been chosen for this study primarily because its christological thought can only with difficulty be made to conform to traditional christological categories. In consequence, we are forced to consider not only John's description of the incarnation event, but as well the structure of incarnation belief and the assumptions that underlie its elaboration.


paradigm analysis entails an approach to the material that is strictly historical and descriptive, and that conceives meaning as highly contextualized. The very nature and function of a paradigm as normative for the structuring of experience in the life of a community necessitate that any phenomenon be explicated from within its specific historical context. This approach, therefore, theoretically structures out both the use of theological assumptions as a norm in the explication of a specific tradition and the subjugation of one tradition to another. In short, as will become clear in the following discussion, we will attempt a comparative analysis of avatāra and incarnation in which comparison will not be used as a primary hermenutical device, but rather as a secondary tool, brought in only after the two concepts have been explicated in their respective historical contexts, and employed for the purpose of illuminating and clarifying their comparative relationship.

Some justification of a Kuhnian type approach to our study is called for by the fact that his work has been conceived specifically in relation to the rationality and development of the scientific disciplines. Indeed, it can be questioned whether Kuhn's work offers anything new to the humanities. Kuhn himself, while not wanting to discourage the wider application of his thought, raises this very question in the postscript of the second edition of his work. Specifically, he notes that the theses through which he explicates scientific development as a succession of tradition-bound periods punctuated by non-cumulative breaks do possess a wide range of applicability, but this is primarily because they were originally borrowed from the humanities for
application to the sciences.¹ Kuhn’s perplexity is heightened by the fact that in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* his aim is to demonstrate and to account for the uniqueness of the sciences and their development in relation to other disciplines.² As Kuhn himself implies, however, it is not the nature of paradigms and their role in historical development that accounts for this uniqueness, but rather the specific structure of the scientific community that determines its relationship to and appropriation of specific paradigms.³

As it pertains to disciplinary structures and the methodological appropriation of paradigms, Kuhn’s work does emphasize the differences between the sciences and the humanities. Nevertheless, as it pertains to the study of culture in general, or the application of a general theory of the sociology of knowledge and its development, Kuhn’s work has been found to be of benefit to humanities studies as well.⁴ In a global sense, Kuhn defines a paradigm as a set of beliefs, a way of seeing, or an organizing principle that determines perception itself, and governs large areas of reality.⁵ This defini-

¹ Kuhn, *Structure*, p. 208.

² Ibid., p. 209.

³ Ibid.


tion, which emphasizes the normative function of a paradigm in structuring experience in the life of a community, bears much in common with the philosophical conception of a Weltanschauung. It is not in this conception, therefore, that Kuhn’s work necessarily offers anything new. In his conception of the nature of the historical progress of knowledge through revolution and the displacement of paradigms rather than through the cumulative acquisition of knowledge, however, Kuhn’s thought has much to offer humanities studies. Specifically, assuming that his general pattern of paradigm shifts holds true—initial acquisition of a paradigm, period of stability, crisis, and finally acquisition of a new paradigm—our approach to the development of religious traditions must be sensitive not only to periods of stability and continuity of development, but as well to crucial periods of crisis and transition during which the hold of a paradigm on a given community is weakened and eventually broken by the search for and acquisition of a new paradigm.

Of particular interest for our study is the potential impact of this conception of progress on the interpretation of specific historical documents. That is to say, it is quite feasible that a document created during a period of crisis, when the hold of a dominant paradigm on a community has deteriorated and the search has begun for a viable alternative, may itself reflect the nature of crisis and the shift of paradigms and represent a transitional phase between paradigms. A document of this sort would have to be labeled transitional or

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1 Ibid. At page 67 of her article, Ms Masterman identifies what she refers to as Kuhn’s metaphysical paradigms with the concept of a Weltanschauung.
revolutionary and be approached as such. We will argue below that this situation is reflected in the Bhagavadgītā and in the Fourth Gospel. Thus, it has significance both for their individual interpretation and for their comparative relationship.

The first problem with which one must contend in adapting Kuhn's method to a study of religion is the ambiguity involved in his definition of a paradigm. For example, in an attempt to determine the precise Kuhnian definition, Margaret Masterman claims to have isolated some twenty-one definitions or at least senses of a paradigm, not all of which are consistent.¹ Kuhn has responded to her charge by pointing out that although his original attempt at the delineation of a paradigm was obscure at many points, most of Masterman's definitions represent nothing more than instances of stylistic inconsistency in the delineation of two characteristic uses of the term.²

The first and most inclusive definition of a paradigm refers to what Kuhn calls a 'disciplinary matrix.'³ This, according to Kuhn is an entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques and other commitments shared by the members of a given community.⁴ It is this 'ordered set of elements' that accounts for both the unanimity of judgment and the relative fullness of

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¹ Ibid., pp. 61-66.
² Kuhn, Structure, p. 181 f.
³ Ibid., p. 182.
⁴ Ibid., p. 175.
communication shared by a given community.\textsuperscript{1} In other words, at its most fundamental level, a paradigm functions cognitively. It represents an intersubjective 'network of theory' or 'common body of belief' concerning the constituents of the world, their nature and interrelations, without which experience could not be structured nor world apprehended and explored.\textsuperscript{2} At its most fundamental level, then, a paradigm is a way of seeing the world.

Of more importance to Kuhn is the narrower definition of a paradigm as an 'exemplar' or an 'exemplary past achievement.'\textsuperscript{3} An exemplar can be differentiated from a disciplinary matrix in two ways. First, an exemplar is a subset of the wider constellation; that is to say, it is one of the elements that constitutes the matrix.\textsuperscript{4} Of more importance, however, is the fact that an exemplar, as the 'embodiment' of scientific theories, laws, instrumentation etc., is a paradigm that has been applied to nature. Thus, it represents the concrete solution to a scientific problem. As such, an exemplar can be used as a model for the solution of similar problems.\textsuperscript{5}

For Kuhn, moreover, while an exemplar represents a specific application to nature of scientific theory, the concrete example itself is

\textsuperscript{1} Ibid., p. 182.
\textsuperscript{2} Ibid., pp. 7, 13, 109.
\textsuperscript{3} Ibid., pp. 175, 187
\textsuperscript{4} Ibid., p. 186f.
\textsuperscript{5} Ibid., pp. 10 f, 187 ff.
irreducible and prior to the conceptual constellation.\(^1\) By this he means that the constellation of theory that is included in an exemplar cannot be fully abstracted from the example and made to function in its stead.\(^2\) Indeed, according to Kuhn, much of the knowledge embedded in an exemplar is tacit, acquired through direct inspection of the example and not capable of explicit articulation.\(^3\) Even those elements of theory or law that can be abstracted from an exemplar cannot function independently because their meaning is largely determined by their paradigmatic context.\(^4\) Consequently, when an exemplar is employed in the solution of similar scientific problems, this takes place not by the independent application of its theories and laws to a second situation, but rather through the recognition that the second situation is 'like' the first, and that the solution of the latter may be adapted to the new situation.\(^5\)

It is the narrower definition of a paradigm as an exemplar that is of central importance to Kuhn's conception of science and his critique of logical positivism. Positivism conceives of the scientific enterprise as the application to nature of objectively derived theories and laws, and scientific rationality as residing in the integrity of these theories and laws. Given the centrality of

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\(^1\) Ibid.

\(^2\) Ibid., pp. 10-11.

\(^3\) Ibid., p. 44.

\(^4\) Ibid., p. 188.

\(^5\) Ibid.,
exemplars to the practice of science, however, Kuhn argues that the enterprise takes place rather by the application of paradigms that give definition to the theories and laws derived from them. In this context, scientific rationality cannot be located in objectively derived theories, but rather in the intersubjectivity of the scientific community that generates and applies disciplinary paradigms.

In our comparative study of avatāra and incarnation, the narrower definition of a paradigm as an exemplar will not be of primary importance. This is not to deny the occurrence of exemplars in the life of a religious community, but rather to recognize that they are not central to its fundamental constitution. Our attention will be turned rather to the general understanding of a paradigm as a constellation of beliefs, values, techniques, etc., that structures the experience of a community and constitutes thereby its unique view of reality. In this context we will develop certain cognitive and normative functions of a paradigm and their implications for interpretation. We refer specifically to what we have called the contextuality of meaning, or the fact that the meaning of an element is contingent on its situation within a specific paradigm and the relationships therein.¹ and to the function of a paradigm in providing both the scope and definition of admissible problems and their solutions.²

¹ Ibid., see especially p. 142.
² Ibid., pp. 37-42.
Following this orientation, we will be able to explicate the christological model in the Fourth Gospel and the portrayal of Kṛṣṇa in the Bhagavadgītā as elements within the general religious paradigms of the two documents, and to determine their respective meanings in relation to the network of relevant elements that constitute the paradigms. Again, we will be careful to consider only those problems that are raised within the context of the paradigms, and then only within the range of legitimate solutions defined by such. In this way the differentiated treatment of problems shared by the two documents, where they exist, will help to clarify the distinctiveness of the traditions.

Second, as mentioned above, we will approach the development of the religious traditions reflected in the Bhagavadgītā and in John on the basis of Kuhn's notion of paradigm shifts. Kuhn maintains that a tradition does not develop through the accumulation, correction and gradual perfection of knowledge, but rather through periods of crisis and revolution during which a dominant paradigm or group of paradigms is called into question and eventually replaced partially or totally by a new paradigm.\(^1\) We are especially interested in the nature of this period of crisis and its effect on a religious tradition.

According to Kuhn, a crisis, which is usually induced by the awareness of an 'anomaly' or a breakdown in the application of a paradigm,\(^2\) functions to

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\(^1\) Ibid., see especially pp. 92 ff.

\(^2\) Ibid., p. 79. On page 69, Kuhn notes that crisis can be induced not only by the internal breakdown and failure of a paradigm, but as well by external cultural and social developments. This point will be important in our consideration of the Bhagavadgītā.
blur a paradigm and weaken its hold on a community.\textsuperscript{1} Consequently, the paradigm becomes vague, suffers a decline in utility, and the rules for its application are loosened.\textsuperscript{2} During this period there occurs a proliferation of versions of the paradigm, and a debate over the fundamentals of the tradition much like that of the pre-paradigm period.\textsuperscript{3} If subsequent research is unable to resolve the crisis, it will be resolved by the eventual acquisition of a new paradigm to replace the old, now discredited paradigm.\textsuperscript{4}

As suggested above, a literary document created during such a period of crisis may itself reflect the dynamic of this process and represent a transitional phase between paradigms. Such a document would, then, be characterized by the replacement or reformulation of traditional concepts, their integration into a new matrix of relationships and meanings, and by a certain ambiguity in its thought as a result of the simultaneous influence of conflicting orientations. We will argue below that both the Bhagavadgītā and the Fourth Gospel are revolutionary documents in this sense. In consequence, therefore, their religious thought must be understood in terms of the direction of its development, or in terms of the paradigms emerging in and with the documents themselves. This approach will afford us fresh insights into the nature and thought of both documents. As we will see below, it has significant

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{1} Ibid., p. 84.
\item \textsuperscript{2} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{3} Ibid., pp. 72, 84.
\item \textsuperscript{4} Ibid., p. 84.
\end{itemize}
implications both for the question of the literary unity of the Gītā, and for the
fundamental nature of christological reflection in the Fourth Gospel. By
approaching the documents from the perspective of paradigm analysis,
therefore, we hope to achieve an adequate basis on which to compare their
respective notions of incarnation.
Chapter Two

The Paradigm of the Bhagavadgītā: Emerging Universal Theism

The Epic Setting of the Bhagavadgītā

India's great epic poem, The Mahābhārata, of which the Bhagavadgītā forms but one short episode, comprises multiple strata of traditional history overlaid with didactic materials. These strata manifest a wide diversity in terms of both dates of origin and religio-cultural perspectives. The principal narrative line of the epic, which probably antedates the origin of Buddhism, recounts the fratricidal war between the two branches of the Kaurava family, the Kauravas proper, the sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra led by Duryodhana, and the Pāṇḍavas, the sons of Pāṇḍu, lead by Yudhiṣṭhira. During the early period, the Bhārata war symbolized the beliefs and ways of life of the great Kṣatriya families of northern India and was therefore enthusiastically venerated in tradition. At the time of the collection of the materials to be included in the final redactional version of the epic, however, a change of sensitivity had

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2 Ibid., p. 3f.
taken place away from the bellicose attitudes of the war books toward a more reflective and quietistic mood. This development is expressed in the later materials as an ambivalence toward armed conflict that oscillates between its now questionable moral status and its reluctant acceptance as a fate predestined for members of the Kṣatriya class. Consequently, the Bhārata war had ceased to be celebrated as a glorious event and was regarded as a horrendous and bloody finale to an eon. From this point there would be no more happy warriors, only resigned ones.

The Bhagavadgītā forms a part of the later materials redacted into the narrative framework of the Mahābhārata, and its setting in the epic occurs at a most crucial point both dramatically and thematically. Following the political machinations that precipitated the Bhārata war and the aborted attempts at its aversion, the opening scene of the Gītā reveals the opposing armies drawn up and arrayed in battle formation. War is now inevitable, yet in the dramatic tension of this suspended moment transpires the dialogue between Arjuna, prince of the Pāṇḍavas, and Kṛśna, his friend, charioteer, advisor, and the incarnate Lord. Thematically, Arjuna embodies the latter day moral dilemma concerning the status of armed conflict. Ordering his chariot

1 Ibid.

2 Ibid., p. 4.

3 Franklin Edgerton refers to this situation as a dramatic absurdity, caused by the artificial insertion of the Gītā at this point in the narrative. See The Bhagavad Gītā, rev. and abr. ed. in 1 vol. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), pp. 105f.
halted in the midst of the poised armies and regarding there kinsmen arrayed on either side, he falters before the prospect of this war that is at the same time both just and pernicious. The Pândavas were clearly wronged, but now it seems the only way to redress the situation is by committing the greater wrong of destroying the entire family. Faced with this dilemma, Arjuna formally accepts Kṛṣṇa as his teacher and appeals to him for his advice.¹

From the perspective of its epic setting, the Bhagavadgītā can be understood as a document conceived and developed to offer a solution to this moral dilemma concerning war that runs through the Mahābhārata.² As expressed through Arjuna’s personal dilemma and subsequent request for teaching, this problem provides the thematic orientation for Kṛṣṇa’s religio-philosophical revelations in the Gītā.³ From the perspective of the Gītā’s

¹ This account loosely summarizes Gītā 1.20-2.8.

² Van Buitenen, The Bhagavadgītā in the Mahābhārata, p. 5 f. A consideration of the literary relationship between the Bhagavadgītā and the Mahābhārata lies beyond the concerns of this dissertation. It is worth noting, however, that the discussion by van Buitenen on which our introduction to the Bhagavadgītā draws was undertaken to demonstrate the intimate relationship between the two documents referred to in the text above. Van Buitenen argues against such scholars as Franklin Edgerton, The Bhagavad Gītā, pp. 105 f., who maintains that the Gītā is an independent document and that its setting in the epic is a random choice dictated by purely dramatic considerations. According to van Buitenen, the Gītā was conceived and created in the context of the Mahābhārata. It was not an independent text that somehow wandered into the epic.

³ Ibid. In this passage, Van Buitenen states that "...the Gītā provides a unique religious and philosophical context in which it [i.e. the moral dilemma over war] can be faced, recognized, and dealt with. Whatever the further thrust of Kṛṣṇa’s teaching and its elaborations, the Gītā addresses itself in the first place
global orientation and concerns, however, Arjuna's moral dilemma provides but the occasion for Kṛṣṇa's revelations that far surpass it in scope. It is true that the Bhagavadgītā never wholly loses sight of this problem, and as many have noted, the ostensible purpose of the poem is to persuade Arjuna to accept his Kṣatriya duty and to enter the battle.¹ But the Bhagavadgītā responds to Arjuna's dilemma by transposing it to a metaphysical dimension where dharma is grounded cosmologically and theologically, and Arjuna is offered a new approach to his problem, a new set of values whereby he can avoid the incurrence of all guilt.²

The Question of Literary Unity

In the process of extending the scope of its concerns beyond that determined by its epic context, the Bhagavadgītā has presented us with an eclectic, if not contradictory, collection of religious and philosophical orientations. In addition to the devotional theism of the Bhāgavata sect and the Vedic sacrificial-ritual system, the Gītā at times reflects the perspectives of Vedāntic monism, Sāmkhyā dualism, and Yoga. This situation has lead some to a specific issue that the Bhārata war posed to a more reflective age, whose attitude toward violence was changing."


² Ibid. As expressed by Zaehner: "...the bulk of the poem is not concerned with the respective merits of war and peace, but with the deepest things of man and God." Edgerton refers to Kṛṣṇa's "...views of life and destiny as a whole, which it is the purpose of this book to explain." The Bhagavad Gītā, p. 105.
scholars to question the literary integrity of the Gitā. Most responses to the
complex problem of literary unity in the Bhagavadgitā fall into one of three
categories: The denial of literary unity based on redaction theories; a
mediating position that denies unity of perspective on the basis of the mystical
and a-systematic nature of the poem; and, finally, the assertion of literary
unity based on an attempted synthesis of religious and philosophical ideas, but
not on the achievement of a logically coherent system of thought.

As early as 1826, the German scholar W. von Humboldt suggested that the
Gitā contained numerous additions, but added that one was in no position to
determine them precisely.¹ By the middle of the same century, A. Weber
argued that the Bhagavadgitā could pass for a collection of diverse materials.²
Again, by the turn of the century, both E. W. Hopkins and A. Holtzmann argued
that the Gitā had undergone one or more redactions; a position based by
Holtzmann on the contradiction in the poem between the impersonal and
immanent world soul on the one hand, and the personal God Krṣna on the
other.³ Finally, this trend in scholarship was brought to maturity in the

¹ See Etienne Lamotte, Notes sur La Gitā, with a preface by Louis de La Vallée
Poussin, Société Belge D’Études Orientales (Paris: Librairie Orientaliste Paul
Namen Bhagavad-gitā bekannte Episoden des Mahābhārata (Berlin, 1826), p. 53:
"The interpolations and additions can with great probability be conjectured
even if one be not in the position to single them out."

394.

³ Ibid. References cited: Hopkins, The Great Epic of India: Its Character and
Origin (New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1901), pp. 205, 234; The Religions of India
(London: Edward Arnold, 1896), pp. 389, 399; Holtzmann, Das Mahābhārata und
studies of Richard Garbe in which these general theories were given depth and precision, and the formulation of a redaction theory was accompanied by the attempt to reconstruct the text of the ur-Gitā. Founding his argument primarily on the contradictory juxtaposition of theism and monism in the Bhagavadgītā, Garbe suggested that the poem originally appeared in a theistic redaction that was subsequently reinterpreted on the basis of Vedāntic monism. In sum, then, this line of scholarship has attempted to resolve the problem of doctrinal ambiguity and contradiction in the Bhagavadgītā by suggesting that it has undergone a series of redactions, each of which interpreted the poem on the basis of its underlying philosophical orientation. On this view the literary unity of the Gitā is denied, and the poem is viewed as a heterogeneous collection of religio-philosophical materials.

Franklin Edgerton responds to the problem of conflicting religious and philosophical orientations in the Gitā by appealing to the tendencies of its literary genre, which is most nearly akin to a verse Upaniṣad. According to

seine Teile, volume 2 (Kiel, 1895), pp. 163-165: According to Holtzmann, we have "On the one hand, the pantheistic and thoroughly impersonal World-Soul, on the other, the extremely personal and realistic Kṛṣṇa-Viṣṇu, incorporated as a human being; and we are called upon to believe that these two principles are identical... We have before us a Viṣṇuite revision of a pantheistic poem. We must distinguish between an older and a later Bhagavadgītā. The older poem was a philosophico-poetical episode of the old genuine Mahābhārata, being composed with a pantheistic tendency."


2 See The Bhagavad Gītā, pp. 106-109. Edgerton points out that the Gitā is regularly regarded as a Upaniṣad by the Indian tradition, and that it shares two important characteristics with the earlier Upaniṣads: first, speculation on
Edgerton, the Gitā is a religious, devotional poem that appeals to mystical intuition rather than to logical categories of thought. Consequently, the poem is able to juxtapose rival religious and philosophical formulas that would contradict its principal doctrines if judged by strict logic.¹ This mystical orientation is further reinforced by the a-systematic nature of speculation shared by the Gitā with the older Upaniṣads. It has become increasingly acknowledged that the Upaniṣads are incapable of systematic exegesis.² Indeed, Edgerton maintains that the concept of system did not exist in India at the time of the early Upaniṣads and of the Bhagavadgītā. The intellectual circles responsible for these documents produced spontaneous and varied metaphysical speculations rather than logically coherent systems of philosophical thought.³ Edgerton sees in the religious and philosophical doctrines of the Gitā just this sort of intellectual fluidity and tentativeness that is willing to admit at least a provisional validity to the various doctrines it embraces.⁴ In short, the doctrinal ambiguity and contradiction in the Bhagavadgītā do not indicate to Edgerton a lack of literary unity. Rather, they indicate the a-systematic perspective of mystical poetry from which it would

a full range of metaphysical concerns, and, second, a certain intellectual fluidity or tentativeness to its conclusions.

¹ Ibid.

² In addition to the position maintained by Edgerton, see J. A. B. van Buitenen, Rāmānuja on the Bhagavadgītā. A condensed rendering of his Gitābhāsya with copious notes and an introduction (The Hague: H. L. Smits, 1953), p. 3.


⁴ Ibid.
be wrong to expect logical explication and systematic coherence. Edgerton, then, maintains the literary unity of the Gitā at the expense of any unity of religio-philosophical perspective.

Despite the Bhagavadgītā's vexing problems of doctrinal ambiguity and seeming contradiction, many scholars have recognized a relative unity of content and perspective in the poem.¹ As mentioned above, this unity is usually understood to result from an attempt by the author of the Gitā to create a somewhat eclectic synthesis of religious and philosophical ideas, but not from the achievement of a logically coherent system of thought. Douglas P. Hill, for example, understands the purpose of the Bhagavadgītā to lie in its insistence on the absolute supremacy of Kṛṣṇa, and at the same time in the conciliation of the enemies of his cult, the orthodox Brāhmans.² Consequently, the Gitā should be understood as a unity in which the author has attempted to reconcile the religious and philosophical ideas of his day under the Lordship of Vāsudeva Kṛṣṇa.³ Similarly, Etienne Lamotte argues that the purpose of the Gitā lies in its author's missionary attempt to proselytize from as broad a range of Indian culture as possible.⁴ According to Lamotte, the success of the Bhāgavata cult among the intellectual milieu

¹ Lamotte, Notes, pp. 6ff.


³ Ibid.

⁴ Lamotte, Notes, p. 127f.
depended upon the philosophical development of its doctrinal tenets, and not
the propagation of the sectarian cult. Otherwise stated, its success depended
upon the Brahmanization of the Kṛṣṇa cult.¹ Lamotte suggests that the unity
of the Gītā should not be sought in the logical coherence of its doctrines or in
the order of its exposition, but rather in the general tendency of the poem and
in the goal pursued by its author.² The unity of the Bhagavadgītā should be
sought, therefore, in the author's attempt to synthesize and unify
contemporary religious and philosophical ideas, and thereby to make Kṛṣṇa
accessible to all. In sum, this third line of scholarship preserves both the
literary unity of the Bhagavadgītā and the unity of its religio-philosophical
perspective by locating the source of this unity in the purpose of its author.

Critique of Redaction Theory and the Contribution of Paradigm Analysis to the

Question of Literary Unity in the Bhagavadgītā

The analysis of the concept of avatāra within the religio-philosophical
paradigm of the Bhagavadgītā that will be attempted in this study assumes the
literary unity of the poem. Consequently, its justification requires a
consideration of the literary problem introduced above in summary fashion.
The purpose of this chapter is to augment the arguments for the literary unity
of the Bhagavadgītā by approaching the problem from a Kuhnian perspective.

¹ Ibid.
² Ibid. "L'unité de notre poème doit être cherchée dans la tendance générale
de l'œuvre, dans le but poursuivi par l'auteur."
It will be argued that the application of Kuhnian categories of paradigm analysis to the Bhagavadgītā both strengthens the arguments for its literary unity and affords us a deeper insight into the nature of that unity.

Paradigm analysis shares with such scholars as Lamotte and Hill the presupposition that the Bhagavadgītā must be understood within the cultural context that fostered its emergence. As seen above, both of these scholars locate the basis of the Gītā’s unity in the response of its author to a specific cultural situation. In similar fashion, it will be argued below that the basis for unity in the Bhagavadgītā should be located in its attempt to create a universal synthesis of religious and philosophical ideas in response to a generally diffused religio-cultural crisis facing Indian culture at the time of its composition. In short, the Gītā will be interpreted as a revolutionary document that emerged in response to its cultural situation at a time when traditional paradigm attachments had been destabilized and had become tentative. It will be suggested that the doctrinal ambiguity and seeming contradiction in the Gītā evince just such a situation: a document involved in a

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1 Lamotte refers to the ‘milieu d’éclosion’ of the Gītā. Ibid., p. 8. For a similar perspective on these scholars, see Zaechner, *The Bhagavat-Gītā*, pp. 1ff. In these passages it is clear that these scholars apply the concept of cultural context primarily in terms of the history of ideas, and insist on the interpretation of the Gītā against the background of the development of Indian philosophical systems at the time of its composition. The prominence of this aspect is explained by the polemic against redaction theories that interpret the Bhagavadgītā anachronistically, against the background of the developed philosophical systems. It will shortly be clear that the present study extends the scope of this concept to include non-cognitive elements of the cultural situation that exert an influence on the Gītā, specifically, the effects of crisis on the strength of paradigm commitments and the resulting shift of these commitments.
shifting of paradigm commitments. Consequently, the Bhagavadgītā should be understood as a unified document responding to its specific cultural situation.

It has long been recognized that the Bhagavadgītā forms part of a larger historical development in the Hindu religious tradition. In general, the Gitā forms part of a theistic reaction to the metaphysical tendencies of the early Upaniṣads, and of a reassertion of the beliefs and sentiments of the Indian religious spirit. More specifically, this development includes the incorporation of the non-Vedic cult of Vāsudeva Krṣṇa into that of the Vedic Viṣṇu as one contributing element in the latter's ascendency in Hindu theology. Finally, the Gitā makes a unique contribution to the reassertion of Brahmanical values and its defense against non-Vedic religious systems such as Buddhism and Jainism. Despite this understanding, however, the dynamic nature of the Bhagavadgītā itself has often eluded scholars, and its doctrines have been interpreted in predominantly static categories. It will be suggested below that certain notions in the Gitā reflect the revolutionary status of a document involved in a shifting of paradigm commitments and therefore manifest a dynamic, emerging quality that cannot be grasped in static categories of interpretation. Consequently, certain fundamental notions of the Bhagavadgītā, for example the relationship between Krṣṇa with Brahma and Viṣṇu respectively, long recognized as refractory, should be interpreted in terms of the direction of their development. Again, the unity of the Gitā itself should be recognized as an emerging or developing unity, a predominant tendency, but not as a completed system of thought. In the remainder of this chapter we will elaborate the contribution of paradigm analysis to the
question of literary unity in the Bhagavadgītā in relation to a critique of redaction theory,¹ and to the theories of literary unity proposed in its place.

Garbe maintains that the final form of the Bhagavadgītā is constituted by an admixture of heterogeneous theological and philosophical orientations. The resulting inconsistency that pervades the greater part of the Gītā forces on its doctrines an ambiguity and vagueness that cannot be explained on the basis of a single redaction.² Theologically, the Gītā expresses both a theistic and a pantheistic orientation.³ Garbe argues that the character of the poem in both its design and execution is predominantly theistic. It presents Kṛṣṇa in the most personal terms as the God who claims devotion from his votaries and in turn offers them salvation. Beside this personal God, however, the Bhagavadgītā presents a description of Brahman, the absolute, impersonal principle of the universe, devoid of any and all attributes. The association of the two conceptions in the poem is, moreover, purely external. At times they

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¹ As exemplified by the thought of Richard Garbe, the most influential advocate of redaction theory in the Gītā. See Die Bhagavadgītā aus dem Sanskrit übersetzt mit einer Einleitung über ihre ursprüngliche Gestalt, ihre Lehren und ihr Alter (Leipzig: H. Haessel, 1905). Garbe’s work was continued primarily by his student Rudolf Otto. See Otto, The Original Gītā, The Song of the Supreme Exalted One, translated and edited by J. E. Turner (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1939). For a summary of subsequent scholarship in this line, see Lamotte, Notes, pp. 3-6.

² Die Bhagavadgītā, p. 3.

³ Ibid., p. 2f.
are mixed together or linked, but never are they more than loosely connected.\textsuperscript{1}

According to Garbe, the doctrinal inconsistency created by this concatenation of theism and pantheism cannot be accounted for in any way other than redaction. He argues that there is in the Bhagavadgītā no hint of the empiric theism characteristic of Advaita Vedānta, according to which theism would be interpreted as an exoteric, lower doctrine, a preliminary step toward the knowledge of the ultimate reality of which it is a symbol- Vedāntic pantheism.\textsuperscript{2} Nor can the contradictions in the Gītā be explained by reference to the alleged poetic nature of the document, or to the syncretistic identification of Kṛṣṇa and Brahman.\textsuperscript{3} In Garbe's view "one can remove the inconsistency only by the supposition that out of the two heterogeneous doctrines that are put in the mouth of the personal God Kṛṣṇa, one must be a later addition."\textsuperscript{4}

From a philosophical perspective, the Bhagavadgītā is again constituted by the conjunction of irreconcilable systems of thought. The Gītā draws

\textsuperscript{1} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{2} Ibid., p. 3.

\textsuperscript{3} Ibid. According to Garbe, the Gītā represents a serious, philosophical poem. He maintains that "...the Gītā is not the product of a genuinely poetic creative impulse, but is partially a purely artistic didactic poem for the propounding of certain definite religio-philosophical ideas." Garbe maintains that the syncretistic identification of Kṛṣṇa and Brahman belongs to a later epoch than that of the ur-Gītā. This aspect of his argument will be considered below in detail.

\textsuperscript{4} Ibid.
primarily upon the philosophical systems of Sāmkhya and Yoga for the basis of its metaphysics.\textsuperscript{1} In places, however, the Gītā draws upon the resources of Vedānta and Mīmāṃsā. In Garbe's view, the irreconcilable difference between these philosophical orientations can only be overcome if one distinguishes between layers of material in the document.\textsuperscript{2}

On the basis of these theological and philosophical considerations, Garbe posits two stages in the history of the composition of the Bhagavadgītā. The original redaction, the ur-Gītā, which expresses a devotional monotheism within a metaphysical framework provided by Sāmkhya and Yoga, was composed probably in the second century BCE, at a time when Kṛṣṇa, now identified with the Brahmanical God Viṣṇu, was the supreme God of Brahmanism.\textsuperscript{3} The subsequent monistic reinterpretation of the poem based on Vedānta was effected probably in the second century of the common era, at a time when a tentative identification of Kṛṣṇa and Brahman had begun. Consequently, according to Garbe "In the older poem Krishṇa speaks of himself- and Arjuna of Krishṇa - as an individual, a person, a conscious God-Head. In the additions made at the time of the revision, the neutral Brahman steps in as the highest principle and is occasionally identified with Krishṇa."\textsuperscript{4}

\begin{enumerate}
\item Ibid., p. 6.
\item Ibid.
\item Ibid., pp. 5, 17-19, 29-33.
\item Ibid., p. 5.
\end{enumerate}
Both the theological and philosophical considerations upon which Garbe based his redaction theory of the Bhagavadgītā have come under criticism by subsequent scholarship. Louis de La Vallée Poussin, for example, charges that the theological criterion for redaction theory—the conjunction of theism and monism in the Gitā—is based on the false assumption of the mutual exclusivity of these two theological orientations. Against such a position, Poussin argues that religious thought, and especially Indian religious thought, usually manifests a rapprochement of some sort between theism and the absolute. Consequently, to pose the problem of the Bhagavadgītā in these terms is to mistake the psychological problem of the alliance between monism and religion with the historical problem of redaction. On this basis Poussin rejects the results of redaction studies as historically contestable.

Following this line of argument, Lamotte maintains that it is precisely the intimate association between Kṛṣṇa and Brahman that characterizes the Gitā.

Poussin’s argument against redaction theory in the Bhagavadgītā is intended as a general critique. If, however, one applies his argument directly

1 Preface to Lamotte, Notes, p. viiif.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid. See also: La Vallée Poussin, “Religions de l’Inde,” Revue d’Histoire et de Littérature religieuses (Paris, 1905), p. 205ff. Quoted in Lamotte, Notes, p. 6. “La reconstruction du savant indianiste a une grande valeur comme analyse: elle permet de poser, en des termes plus précis, le problème psychologique que constitue l’alliance du monisme et de la religion; mais j’ai bien peur que son importance au point de vue historique soit très contestable.”

4 Lamotte, Notes, p. 8.
to the redaction theory of Garbe,¹ it proves to be a distortion of the latter's thought and an inadequate critique thereof. A close reading of Garbe's introduction reveals that his denial of the compatibility of theism and monism in the Bhagavadgītā is based on the manner of their association, and not on the general assumption of their mutual exclusivity. According to Garbe, the majority of passages in the Bhagavadgītā present Kṛṣṇa as unequivocally personal and reveal no conception of a relationship to the absolute. Indeed, there are few passages that clearly identify Kṛṣṇa and Brahman, and in general the passages that consider them together do so with a certain reticence and tentativeness.² In short, Garbe does not argue against a synthesis of theism and monism in Indian thought, as he clearly states.³ Instead, he argues that the ur-Gītā antedates the historical period that produced such a synthesis. On his view, the monistic reinterpretation of the Bhagavadgītā alone was produced in the period when the identification of Kṛṣṇa and Brahman had begun.⁴

Poussin's general critique of redaction theory in the Bhagavadgītā fails to address the issues raised by Garbe because the weakness of the latter's theory lies not in a certain philosophical bias, but in the proposed chronology of the synthesis of theism and monism in Indian thought. R. C. Zaehner has

¹ Which it was obviously intended to include.
² Garbe, Die Bhagavadgītā, p. 4.
³ Ibid.
⁴ Ibid.
argued that such a synthesis began in the late Upaniṣadic period, and that it is
prominent in certain Upaniṣads upon which the Bhagavadgītā is directly
dependent.¹ In both the Īṣa and Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣads, Brahman has come to
mean the All, the totality of existence, both the eternal world of changeless
being and the phenomenal world of becoming. But in these two Upaniṣads, a
personal God appears alongside Brahman, and this personal God is both other
and greater than the All.² This Lord encompasses even the unmoving One that
is yet swifter than thought. He is the wise Sage, all conquering, self-existent..., pure, unpierced by evil.³ Similarly, it is declared in the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad:

Perishable is Nature,
Immortal and imperishable [the self]:
Both the perishable and the self
Doth the One God Hara rule.⁴

Again:
In the imperishable, infinite city of Brahman
Two things there are-
Wisdom and unwisdom, hidden, established there:
Perishable is unwisdom, but wisdom is immortal:

¹ Zaehner, The Bhagavad-Gītā, see especially: pp. 36f.; 258f.; 313; 337-344.
² Ibid., p. 36f.
³ Īṣa Upaniṣad, 4: 8.
⁴ Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad, 1.10.
Who ever wisdom and unwisdom rules, He is
Another.¹

Zaehner argues convincingly that the Bhagavadgītā's conception of the relationship between Kṛṣṇa and Brahman is based on the synthesis of theism and monism found in these later Upaniṣads. The precise nature of this relationship will be considered below. In the present context, it is important simply to note that its possibility existed in the period to which Garbe attributes the composition of the ur-Gītā, and consequently militates against his redaction theory.

The philosophical considerations upon which Garbe founded his redaction theory of the Bhagavadgītā have come under criticism as well, and, again, precisely for reasons of chronology. Garbe's theory of the Gītā as a Mischphilosophie, or a composite philosophy comprised principally of Sāmkhya and Vedāntic ideas, presupposes the antiquity of these philosophies as distinct, systematic schools of thought.² According to Garbe, the Sāmkhya metaphysical speculation encountered in the Mahābhārata is not a new current of thought attempting to express itself, but rather a poetic expression of the doctrines already constituted by Sāmkhya and mixed with the alien expressions of Vedānta. While the didactic sections of the Mahābhārata do antedate the systematic writings of Sāmkhya philosophy, they do not

¹ Ibid., 5.1.

² Garbe, Die Bhagavadgītā, p. 21. For a summary of Garbe's position on the antiquity of the philosophical systems, see Lamotte, Notes, p 32.
antedate the formulation of its classical doctrines and its constitution as a
distinct system of philosophy.¹

Subsequent scholarship has undermined this position by its recognition
that the development of philosophical systems in Hindu thought was a
medieval phenomenon, and that their development presupposed a long and
complex prehistory.² For example, Émile Senart maintains that at the time of
the composition of the Bhagavadgītā, the currents of thought that were later
to issue in the orthodox systems manifested a flexibility and fluidity
characteristic of a stage of emergence and formulation. Consequently, far
from representing mutually exclusive systems of thought, at this stage in their
development they represented traces of independent speculation favorable
more to mutual completion than to comparison.³ Similarly, Hermann
Oldenberg maintains that the expression of Sāmkhyāan ideas in the
Mahābhārata manifests the characteristics of a Sāmkhya in formation, a
middle stage of development between the ancient ideas of the Upaniṣads and
the expression of classical Sāmkhyā.⁴ Following both Oldenberg and Deussen.

¹ Ibid., p. 5 (German edition); Die Sāmkhya philosophie, eine Darstellung des
Lamotte, Notes, p. 32.

² For illustrative attempts to penetrate the pre-history of Sāmkhya see J. A. B.


⁴ Die Lehre der Upaniṣadhen und die Anfange des Buddhismus (Göttingen,
Lamotte suggests that at the time of the composition of the Bhagavadgītā Sāmkhya-style ideas represented one current of Upaniṣadic speculation that reflected both realist tendencies and an interest in the material universe and psychology. In short, it represented a pre-classical Sāmkhya that was in the process of formation and had not yet opposed itself to Vedānta. Consequently, the attempt by Garbe to base a redaction theory of the Bhagavadgītā on the distinctions between classical Sāmkhya and Vedānta must be viewed as anachronistic. One is forced to agree with Poussin's conclusion that we simply do not possess enough precision of knowledge concerning the development of the Indian tradition to erect redaction theories thereon. He observes that "As long as the chronology of the Gitā and the Darśanas is fluctuating, and the origin of the Kṛṣṇa sect is mysterious, we will be 'in the dark' concerning the prehistory of the Gitā."

Recognition of the tenuousness of chronological arguments has resulted in a tendency among Gitā scholars to demonstrate the unity of the poem on internal grounds. As previously mentioned, even from this

1 Lamotte, Notes, p. 33f. Paul Deussen, Der Gesang des Heiligen (Leipzig: F. A. Brockhaus, 1911), p. XVII.

2 Lamotte, Notes, p. viif. "Aussi longtemps que la chronologie de la Gitā et les Darśanas sera flottante, et que la genèse du culte de Kṛṣṇa sera mystérieuse, aussi longtemps serons-nous in the dark sur la préhistoire de la Gitā."

3 See Lamotte, Notes, p. 8: "Nous sommes bien persuadés de l'unité de la composition de la Bhagavadgītā et de l'homogénéité relative de ses doctrines, mais nous pensons que cette unité et cette homogénéité ressortiront mieux de l'étude du poème en lui-même que de discussions stériles engagées avec les partisans de l'avis opposé." Hill, The Bhagavadgītā, p. 20, maintains that redaction theories of the Bhagavadgītā are based on exaggerated criticism of
perspective the highly eclectic and synthetic nature of the Bhagavadgītā has presented obstacles to a theory of unity. It is widely recognized that the doctrines of the Gītā are ambiguous and developed in a manner that lacks systematic coherence.¹ Edgerton is indeed correct in attributing to the doctrines of the Bhagavadgītā an intellectual fluidity and tentativeness characteristic of the Upaniṣads. In view of this situation, scholars have attempted to locate the unity of the Gītā in the purpose of its author and in the attempt to create a broad religio-philosophical synthesis, rather than in the systematic explication of its doctrines. It should not be surprising, therefore, to find that there has been much diversity of opinion concerning the nature and extent of the unity to be found in the Bhagavadgītā.

The broadly synthetic religio-philosophical perspective evident in the Gītā has been accounted for in several ways. In a similar manner, both Hill and Lamotte attribute the synthetic nature of the Gītā to the attempted promulgation of the concerns of the Bhāgavata cult to a broader Indian audience. According to Hill, the synthetic nature of the Bhagavadgītā indicates the attempt by the Bhāgavata cult to conciliate its enemies, the orthodox Brāhmans, and to assert the universal supremacy of its God Kṛṣṇa.² At least by the second century BCE, Vāsudeva was regarded as Supreme, and, according to Hill, "...it is not to be supposed that this supremacy of Kṛṣṇa

¹ See, e.g., Lamotte, Notes, p. 127.

² The Bhagavadgītā, p. 20f.
Vāsudeva was accepted by all outside the sect without jealousy or protest.  

Hill sees indications in the Mahābhārata that there were some who would subordinate Kṛṣṇa to Siva, revile him, or cast aspersions on his character. In Hill's opinion, this swiftly rising sect would have posed a serious threat to the Brahmanism of its day. Its comprehensive tolerance would seem to endanger the tradition of caste, the status of the priests, and the observance of the Vedas; its insistence on the value of devotion to a personal God would endanger the Brāhmaṇa's doctrine of knowledge. In light of this situation, Hill interprets the Bhagavadgītā as a conciliatory, synthetic work. "The poem is determined to appease the orthodox; the Veda and its devas, the Upaniṣads with the Vedāntic theory of Brahma-Ātman, the conceptions of puruṣa and iśvara, Sāmkhya knowledge and Yoga practice—none of these are neglected; liberation is won by work, by knowledge, by devotion—by all these three in due proportion; and over all three broods the grace of God that stirs and meets the love of man."

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1 Ibid., p. 12f.

2 Ibid., p. 13. There are evidences of this type of skeptical attitude in the Bhagavadgītā itself. See for example 3.32: "But those who do dispute and fail to follow my view, deluded in all they know, they, to be sure, are witless and lost." Again at 7.24: "To the unenlightened I am some unseen entity that has become manifest, for they are ignorant of my transcendent being, which is eternal and incomparable." Zaeher mentions in his commentary ad loc that unmanifest here is used in the ordinary sense of finitude, i.e. Kṛṣṇa, like all mortals, appears at birth and disappears at death. See also 9.11; 18.67.

3 Ibid.

4 The Bhagavadgītā, p. 21.
Lamotte attributes the synthetic perspective of the Bhagavadgītā to its author's attempt to extend the influence of the Bhāgavata cult to all echelons of Indian society.¹ According to Lamotte, the Bhāgavata cult possessed at the time of the composition of the Gitā only a practical theology that emphasized a traditional karmayoga, which the Kṣatriyas had practiced for generations, and bhakti, or devotion, as a means of salvation. Consequently, its acceptance in broader Indian circles necessitated the recognition of the religious concerns of the masses and the explication of the Bhāgavata doctrines within the philosophical framework provided by the Brahmanism of its day. Thus, it is in the Bhagavadgītā that the theology of the Bhāgavata cult first receives philosophical expression.²

In addition to the dissemination of its devotional theism, another principal goal reflected in the Gitā according to Lamotte is the attempt to raise its ancient doctrine of proper duty to the status of a universal obligation.³ In order to achieve this end, the author had to contend with the prevailing Upaniṣadic conception of renunciation. Lamotte sees evidence in the Gitā of a debate raging at the time of its composition between the adherents of an Upaniṣadic doctrine of release by wisdom alone, and the adherents of a

¹ Notes, p. 128.

² Ibid., pp. 20ff.; 22; 41. See also pp. 127ff.

³ Ibid., pp. 94ff.
traditional attachment to sacrifice and ascetic practice.\textsuperscript{1} According to the Upaniṣadic doctrine, works are detrimental to the achievement of release, or union with the absolute. Works impede the acquisition of a distinctive knowledge of Brahman and perpetually do more to engage the self in existence than to effect its liberation. Every act, as interpreted by the accepted doctrine of karman, is a cause of attachment that eventually but inevitably translates itself into a prolongation of individual life. In consequence, the Upaniṣadic position subordinates ascetic practice and works to jñāna, the apperception of transcendent reality, and prescribes the rejection of all actions.\textsuperscript{2} The position formulated in the Bhagavadgītā, on the other hand, aligns itself with the tradition of ritual and ascetic activity.\textsuperscript{3} According to the position expressed in the Gītā, complete inactivity is neither possible, since one acts inevitably in conformity with one's nature, nor is non-action correlated to true renunciation in Upaniṣadic fashion.\textsuperscript{4} It is possible, that is, to abstain from all external activity and still desire its fruits, thereby remaining attached to phenomenal existence. Consequently, true renunciation can be obtained only by the renunciation of desire itself, and not by the mere cessation of activity.

\textsuperscript{1} Ibid. See Gītā 18.3: "Some teachers propound that all acting should be renounced, as it is all tainted; while others hold that such acts as sacrifice, donation, and askesis are not to be renounced."

\textsuperscript{2} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{3} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{4} See for example, Gītā 3.4-7.
In other words, the condition sine qua non of true renunciation is a supreme indifference to the fruits of action.¹ This conception of renunciation is compatible with the prescribed performance of all duties, now understood as disinterested action. Indeed, this is the path to liberation followed by the ancient sages of the tradition, and revealed anew in the discourses of the Gitā by Kṛṣṇa.²

Diversity of opinion exists as well concerning the basis of doctrinal unity within the synthesizing framework of the Bhagavadgītā. According to Lamotte, the foundation of doctrinal unity in the Gitā lies in its soteriology.³ While the theological question of the relationship between Kṛṣṇa and Brahman in the Bhagavadgītā is important, its exact determination is difficult.⁴ Exegetically, it is difficult to determine whether Kṛṣṇa is considered inferior, equal, or superior to Brahman. Implicitly, however, there is in the Gitā a confessional affirmation of Kṛṣṇa as superior to Brahman.⁵ Given this confused situation, Lamotte finds a surer foundation for unity in the soteriological catholicity of bhakti, or devotion, that is able to integrate various approaches to release into its concept of a gracious God who informs and

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¹ Lamotte, Notes, p. 96.

² See for example, Gitā 3.19ff.

³ Notes, p. 125f.

⁴ Ibid., p. 19. “Nothing is more curious than the Bhagavadgītā’s confused speculations on their mutual relations.”

⁵ Ibid.
fulfills the soteriological aspirations of humankind. Bhakti alone is a sufficient means of release in the Gitā, and its action is not necessarily tied to knowledge or to yoga. Yet its implicit doctrinal tolerance admits connected ways of release, and ultimately the Bhagavadgītā sees one complex way of salvation that consists of jñāna-, karma- and bhaktiyogas. Bhakti in the Bhagavadgītā is presented in relationship to jñānayoga as a way to achieve knowledge, and in relationship to karmayoga as an aid in the exercise of disinterested action. In relationship to both it provides orientation and fulfillment by leading through devotion to an ultimate union with God. On the basis of this soteriological integration, Lamotte concludes that bhakti is the center of gravity that accords to the poem its unique character. It is again the powerful breath of the Bhagavadgītā that is responsible for the elevation of its thought, the grandeur of its concepts, and the sincerity of its religious beliefs. In short, bhakti is the foundation of doctrinal coherence in the Gitā, the basis of the harmonization of the diverse doctrines of brahmanism and the caste traditions of the Kṣatriyas.

1 Ibid., pp. 117ff.
2 Ibid., p. 122.
3 Ibid., p. 125. Lamotte sees the quintessence of this integration expressed at Gitā 10.10-11: "To those who, always yoked, love me joyfully I grant the singleness of mind by which they attain to me. Residing in their own being I compassionately dispel the darkness of their ignorance with the shining lamp of knowledge."
4 Ibid., pp. 123ff.
5 Ibid.
Zaehner attributes to the Gītā a more explicit, theologically based doctrinal unity. He maintains that the theological passages of the Gītā describe the clear superiority of God to Brahman.\(^1\) God, as the Absolutely Supreme, the Person All-Sublime, is both inclusive of and transcendent to the phenomenal world and Brahman.\(^2\) As the eternal spiritual principle that informs and animates all beings, God is wholly immanent, and can be said to be identical with Brahman. But God transcends even this Imperishable Brahman and stands as its origin and base.\(^3\) In other words, by analogy with the ātman that informs and animates the material nature that forms its body, God informs and animates the world that consists of both material nature and spirit, and that may be said to constitute his body.\(^4\)

This clear theological hierarchy is reflected as well in the soteriological schema of the Bhagavadgītā. In accord with such scholars as Lamotte and Hill, Zaehner affirms the unity of the ways of salvation expounded in the Gītā. For Zaehner, however, they constitute a hierarchy leading from a penultimate experience of release conceived as monistic identity with Brahman to the ultimate experience of personal union with God through higher bhakti.\(^5\) In

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1 *The Bhagavad-Gītā*, pp. 38ff. See as well, for example, the commentary at Gītā 15.16ff., the principal passage on which Zaehner bases his interpretation.

2 Ibid., pp. 38ff. See Gītā 13.22; 15.17.

3 See Gītā 6.15; 14.27; 15.17.

4 *The Bhagavad-Gītā*, p. 40. This analogy is of course taken from Rāmānuja’s commentary on the Gītā.

5 Ibid., pp. 30ff.
sum, then, it is clear that Zehner bases the theological and soteriological unity of the Bhagavadgītā on the doctrine recognized by Rāmānuja as the central insight of the poem: the Absolute Supremacy of God.

These arguments for the unity of the Bhagavadgītā, which are based on the purpose of its author and the attempted creation of a broad religio-philosophical synthesis, can be strengthened by an analysis of the document from a Kuhnian perspective. Employing this approach, it is possible to understand the poem as a response to a cultural situation capable of motivating just such a synthesis as that proposed for the Bhagavadgītā. In addition, from this perspective we are able to account for the doctrinal ambiguity of the Bhagavadgītā within the context of a shifting of paradigm commitments in the poem, and to obviate the need for elaborate composition theories.

A wide range of dates has been proposed by various scholars for the composition of the Bhagavadgītā, and this fact alone illustrates the difficulty encountered by any attempt to date the poem.1 As Hill and others have noted, however, there are good reasons to date the Gītā from the first half of the second century BCE, during the post-Mauryan period of Indian history.2 The post-Buddhistic origin of the Gītā can be established from a number of

1 To mention but the extremes for example, Surendranath Dasgupta considers the Gītā pre-Buddhist, see A History of Indian Philosophy, vol. 2 (Cambridge: The University Press, 1932), pp. 548ff.; Farquhar dates the poem from the first two centuries of our era, see An Outline of the Religious Literature of India, first Indian reprint 1967 (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass,1920), p. 86.

2 The Bhagavadgītā, pp. 22ff. For general agreement with this dating see for example Lamotte, Notes, p. 8; J. A. B. van Buitenen, The Bhagavadgītā in the Mahābhārata, p. 6.
considerations. First, the Bhagavadgītā reveals a familiarity with the principal teachings of early Buddhism and at points reflects a dependence on Buddhist concepts in the formulation of its ideas.\(^1\) For example, the soteriological neologism brahma-nirvāṇa, which occurs in chapter two of the Gītā, is dependent on the Buddhist concept of Nirvāṇa for its meaning.\(^2\) In addition, the definition of yoga at Gītā 6.23 as "...the unlinking of the link with suffering-and-pain" shows a direct Buddhist dependence.\(^3\) As a result of these and other examples of Buddhist influence, Zaehner argues that the ambiance of the conception of release in the early chapters of the Bhagavadgītā includes a strong Buddhistic element.\(^4\) Second, the religious epic tradition, including the Bhagavadgītā, is dependent on a non-Brahmanical development from a literary perspective. At least until the time of the Buddha, the primary vehicle for religious learning in India was centered on the Vedic tradition. The only evidence of stories and legends during this period comes from the inclusion of materials of this sort in the Vedic texts. During and after the Mauryan period, however, the Buddhists and Jains who rejected the Brahmanical tradition were able to adopt new genres for the expression of

\(^1\) Zaehner, The Bhagavad-Gītā, pp. 7; 158; 229; passim.

\(^2\) Ibid., p. 158f. Zaehner argues that the term Nirvāṇa is Buddhist, and was not incorporated into Hinduism until after its adoption in the Bhagavadgītā. Likewise, the term Brahma- used in compounds is Buddhist and therefore likely to be used in that sense when compounded with Nirvāṇa, especially in a section of the Gītā otherwise influenced by Buddhist terms.

\(^3\) Ibid., p. 229.

\(^4\) Ibid.
their faith. One of these was the use of popular stories and legends to convey religious teachings.¹ In view of this situation, the religious epic tradition must be viewed either as a response to the challenge of Buddhism and Jainism, or as an example of the new development that occurred after the third century BCE.²

Other evidence, both internal and external, indicates the early second century BCE as the probable date for the composition of the Bhagavadgītā in its present form.³ First, Kṛṣṇa in the poem has decidedly attained the status of Supreme Deity, yet, as previously mentioned, the poem was written at a time when Kṛṣṇa had not yet gained acceptance by the orthodox tradition.⁴ The earliest external record in which Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa is conceived as supreme is the Besnagar inscription, which dates to the earlier part of the second century BCE. In this inscription, Heliodora, who calls himself a Bhāgavata, records the erection of a column with the image of Garuḍa at its top in honor of Vāsudeva, the god of gods.⁵ This inscription informs us that from the early years of that


² Ibid.

³ For the following we are indebted in great part to Hill, The Bhagavadgītā, pp. 2-24.

⁴ See Gītā 3.32; 9.11; 18.67.

century Vāsudeva was worshiped as supreme. Second, while the identification of Kṛṣṇa with Viṣṇu has begun in the Bhagavadgītā, there is not the emphasis on the identification that a later date would lead one to expect.\(^1\) There are indications that the process of identification had begun in the third century BCE,\(^2\) but the understanding of the relationship between the two in the Bhagavadgītā falls short of the explicit identification expressed in the final portions of the epic, and therefore must be dated before the latter.\(^3\) Finally, several important developments of the Bhāgavata faith indicate an early composition date for the Gītā precisely by their conspicuous absence from the poem. The identification of Kṛṣṇa with Nārāyana, a Brahmanical deity identified with Viṣṇu in the Taittirīya-Āraṇyaka,\(^4\) occurs in the final redaction of the didactic epic that was completed in the first or second century CE. In these latter portions of the Mahābhārata, the names Nārāyana, Hari, Viṣṇu, Vāsudeva and Kṛṣṇa are used interchangeably with reference to the Lord, Bhagavān, worshiped by the Bhāgavatas.\(^5\) Reference to Nārāyana in the Gītā, however, is completely lacking. Again, the development of the doctrine

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\(^1\) Hill, *The Bhagavadgītā*, p. 23.

\(^2\) Ibid., pp. 14ff.

\(^3\) This aspect will be treated in more detail below. This identification takes place specifically in the Anugītā and the Sāntiparva, which date to the early centuries of the common era. Bhandarkar, *Vaisnavism*, p. 13.


\(^5\) See the description of the Nārāyanīya section of the Mahābhārata by Bhandarkar, *Vaisnavism*, pp. 4ff.
of vyūhas, or the successive deity-forms of God, occurs in the Nārāyaniya section of the didactic epic, yet receives no mention in the Bhagavadgītā itself. On the basis of the absence of these important developments of the Bhāgavata tradition from the Gītā, one must conclude that the latter was composed before their systematic formulation. According to Hill, it would seem "...incredible to suppose that these elements which play so important a part in Bhāgavata belief of a later date should be entirely absent from the Gītā if the poem had been composed later than 150 B.C."  

This dating assigns the composition of the Bhagavadgītā to the period immediately following the breakup of the Mauryan empire in northern India. Two aspects of this period, its political and cultural instability and the resurgence of the Brahmanical tradition, favor it as the localization of a document like the Gītā that reflects conditions of instability and crisis, and represents the Brahmanical baptism of the non-Vedic cult of Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa.

The historical evidence from this period is fragmentary and precludes the composition of a detailed account of its developments. On the basis of the

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1 Ibid., pp. 12ff. This later doctrine holds that God exists in four forms: from Vāsudeva the Supreme issues in succession Saṃkarshaṇa, Pradyumna, and Aniruddha, the personifications of jīva, manas or mind, and ahamkāra or the principle of individuation. These three individuals are members of Vāsudeva's family, his brother Saṃkarshaṇa and his sons. Saṃkarshaṇa is associated with Vāsudeva in worship early in the tradition, a fact attested by two inscriptions and a citation by Patañjali. Despite one possible early reference to the existence of the theory of four forms, it is not probable that a theory of more than two forms, of Vāsudeva and Saṃkarshaṇa, existed before the latter inscription, i.e. 100 BCE.

2 *The Bhagavadgītā*, p. 24
extant evidence, however, a view is accorded of a period of extreme political turmoil and instability precipitated by the downfall of the imperial rule of the Mauryas.\(^1\) The rapid disintegration of the empire was almost ensured by the structure of the empire itself. The most powerful of the Mauryas, Aśoka, was the head of a great confederation of quasi-independent states that were joined under him for imperial purposes, but that retained their independence in matters of civil government and internal administration. In short, Aśoka was the link binding together in common pursuit regional and tribal powers that were naturally rivals.\(^2\) In consequence, the latter days of the empire gave way to a weakening of central power, internal strife, and foreign invasions. In the central and eastern regions, the supremacy of the later Mauryas and of their successors, the Suṅgas, was challenged by two tribal kingdoms, the Andhras of the Deccan and the Kaliṅgas of Orissa.\(^3\) In the northwest regions beyond the Punjab, the borders could no longer be secured against invasion, and the period under discussion saw the extension of Yavana or Greek power from Bactria through the Kābul valley as far as the Jumna river in the midland country.\(^4\) The final coup came circa 184 BCE when Pushyamitra, founder of the Suṅga dynasty then serving as commander-in-chief of

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2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid., see also pp. 540ff.
Bṛihadratha, the last of the Mauryas, slew his master and seized control of the already diminished empire.¹

Tumultuous political conditions such as those described above carry the potential to destabilize the cultural situation and to precipitate crisis and paradigm shifts. Evidence from external sources and from the Bhagavadgītā indicates that the political conditions during the post-Mauryan period intensified an already existing condition of crisis, and through their effect of destabilizing paradigm commitments encouraged debate over fundamentals and the search for new paradigm solutions. The point of crisis evident in the culture of the period to which the Bhagavadgītā responds concerns the status of works and required duty. The established order had in fact been under siege since the time of the Buddha. The rejection of Brahmanical restrictions encouraged free religious speculation and the rise of numerous sects. It became a common understanding that from any class and at any time, one could abandon duty and family to found or join a religious or philosophical sect.² Lawbooks that arose during the Mauryan period witness this problem by forbidding the practice of abandoning domestic life without formal sanction and without provision for wife and family.³ The edicts of Aśoka, which date from the second half of the third century BCE, indicate from another perspective a concern for the general deterioration of moral duty in

¹ Ibid., p. 517f.
² Ibid., p. 484.
³ Arthaśāstra, ch. 19. Cf. Ibid.
Indian culture. The very insistence of Aśoka on basic duties such as familial obedience, conformity to the tradition, appropriate treatment of Brāhmans and ascetics etc.,¹ can be explained only by means of a moral deterioration in Indian culture, a fact acknowledged in the fourth Rock Edict.² In an interesting statement, for example, F. W. Thomas attributes this deficiency during the Mauryan period to "...the social and other changes which might naturally accompany the growth of a great empire, the succession of dynastic tragedies, the subjugation of small states, the Greek invasion, and the initiation of numerous sects."³

This situation must be assumed to have continued into and even intensified during the post-Mauryan period. Reference has already been made to the indications in the Bhagavadgītā of a debate raging at the time of its composition concerning the status of works, and to its attempt to raise the conception of proper duty to the status of a universal obligation.⁴ In short, the Bhagavadgītā asserts that salvation is attainable not by the rejection of

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¹ 7th Pillar Edict: "And thereby they have grown and will grow in obedience to mothers and fathers, in obedience to venerable persons, in conformity to the old, in right behaviour towards Brāhmans and ascetics, the poor and wretched, slaves and servants." Quoted from Cambridge History, p. 510f.

² "In the past, during many centuries, there has been steady growth in the practice of taking life, ill-usage of living creatures, misbehaviour among relatives, misbehaviour towards Brāhmans and ascetics." Quoted from Ibid., p. 509.

³ Ibid., p. 507.

⁴ See Gītā 18.3: "Some teachers propound that all acting should be renounced, as it is all tainted; while others hold that such acts as sacrifice, donation, and asceticism are not to be renounced."
proper duty, but in and through its performance. Philosophically, the
doctrine of the Gītā reconciles the bondage of work with its necessity by
means of its concept of renunciation. According to the Gītā, that is, bondage
lies not in the act itself as in the prevalent Upaniṣadic conception, but in the
attachment to its fruits. Consequently, true renunciation lies in the
renunciation of fruits, and not merely in inactivity.

The Bhagavadgītā is still more tightly bound to the post-Mauryan period
by the fact that there occurred during this time a resurgence of Brahmanism.
Indications in both Buddhist and Hindu legends inform us that Pushyamitra,
the founder of the Suṅga dynasty, was regarded as a champion of a
Brahmanical reaction that set in after the Buddhist tendencies of the Asoka
era.¹ The power of the Brāhmans during this period is as well indicated in the
cave inscriptions of Nānāghāt concerning the establishment of the Andhra
kingdom. Certain of these inscriptions record the performance of great
sacrifices and excessive fees paid to the officiating priests as part of the
matrimonial alliance between two royal houses.² These indications point to
the post-Mauryan period as most auspicious for the baptism of a popular non-
Vedic cult by a resurgent Brahmanism, especially a cult that emphasized the
observance of proper duty.

¹ Cambridge History, p. 519. For example, in Buddhist literature, Pushyamitra
is regarded as a persecutor of Buddhism, bent on acquiring fame as the
annihilator of the Buddha's doctrine. In Kālidāsa's drama Mālavikāgnimitra,
which dates from the fifth century CE, Pushyamitra is attributed with the
reinstatement of the Brahmanical horse-sacrifice.

² Ibid., p. 530.
The perspective on the Bhagavadgītā accorded by this analysis of its cultural milieu is consistent with the understanding of such scholars as Hill and Lamotte. The political chaos of the era and the cultural instability it caused may be seen to have precipitated a broadly diffused cultural crisis concerning the status of works, a destabilization of paradigm commitments, a consequent debate over the fundamentals of the tradition, and the search for new paradigm solutions. Both crisis and aspects of debate are reflected in the Gītā, and in this context the document itself can be understood as a new paradigm solution, proposed in response to the crisis situation, and motivated by that situation itself.

Arguments for the synthetic unity of the Bhagavadgītā are further strengthened by the ability of paradigm analysis to account for the doctrinal ambiguity in the poem. As indicated above, the tentativeness with which the Gītā holds certain doctrines and the ambiguity of its expression have been taken to indicate a wide range of compositional possibilities. According to Garbe, they indicate the redactional history of the poem and the concatenation of conflicting metaphysical orientations. According to Edgerton, they indicate the mystical, a-systematic nature of the poem. From a Kuhnian perspective, however, they can be understood as the reflection of the revolutionary status of the document; that is, the reflection of the destabilization of paradigm commitments and the search for new solutions. Consequently, the tentativeness and ambiguity of doctrinal positions in the Bhagavadgītā do not preclude its unity, but rather indicate the dynamic nature of its attempted synthesis as a developing or emerging unity.
In consequence of the failure to recognize the dynamic nature of several of the doctrinal positions in the Gītā, many scholars have suppressed one or the other tendency in its expression in order to identify the true position of the poem. For example, Zaehner subordinates the identification of Kṛṣṇa and Brahman in chapters eight and thirteen of the Bhagavadgītā to the pronouncement in chapter fifteen that Kṛṣṇa is the Highest Person, distinct from and superior to all other persons, including the eternal Brahma.¹ Hill maintains the complete identification of Kṛṣṇa and Brahman in the poem and consequently understands its theistic expression as empiric only.² A fairer assessment of the Gītā would recognize the ambiguity and tentativeness of its expression and seek to interpret its doctrines in terms of the direction of their development, rather than in terms of static categories. From this perspective, the Bhagavadgītā can be understood as developing toward the expression of a universal theism through the identification of Kṛṣṇa and Brahman,³ the tendency to elevate Kṛṣṇa above Brahman itself,⁴ and the progressive

¹ Gītā 15.16ff. See The Bhagavad-Gītā, ad loc., and esp. his commentary at 13.17.

² The Bhagavadgītā, p. 45.

³ See for example, chapter 8 where Kṛṣṇa and Brahman are identified through the concept of the Imperishable. Kṛṣṇa here implies that he is identical with the Imperishable, and Arjuna understands him as such during the theophany at 11.37f. Again, chapter 13 attributes to Kṛṣṇa the same metaphysical attributes as Brahman. See esp. 13.17.

⁴ See for example, 14.27 where Kṛṣṇa declares himself to be the base supporting Brahman; 6.15 where the peace of Nirvāṇa is said to subsist in God; see as well the previously mentioned 15.17f.
identification of Kṛṣṇa with Viṣṇu. Edgerton succinctly expresses the relationship between Kṛṣṇa and Brahman in the Bhagavadgītā, and the tendency of the Gitā to subordinate the impersonal Brahman to its personal theism. In his discussion of Gitā 14.3-4 and 5.10, in which Brahman is identified with material nature, he observes:

In these passages a strange fate has overtaken the Upaniṣadic Brahman. Originally the Soul of the universe, it has been so far degraded as to be definitely deprived of all spirituality, and identified with the inert cosmic Matter, which is precisely all that is not Soul. No more significant indication could be found of the Gitā’s personal theism. For nothing could be clearer than the reason for this deethronement of the Brahman. It was impersonal; and so, logically, it must either make way for, or be absorbed by, the personal God of the Gitā. Of these two alternatives, the Gitā, with the catholicity of the true mystic, chooses both, and neither...Brahman (1) is absorbed into God, who assumes all its characteristics; (2) is differentiated from God and placed in some sort of subordinate position to him; and (3) still at times retains its ancient prestige as the Absolute, the One-in-All. All these positions appear side by side in the Gitā. Often its references to the Brahman are so vague as to leave us in doubt as to just how the author was thinking of it for the moment.  

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1 See Hill, The Bhagavadgītā, pp. 14ff.; 33f.

2 The Bhagavad Gītā, p. 154.
Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter has been to augment the arguments for the literary unity of the Bhagavadgītā by approaching the problem from a Kuhnian perspective, and to justify thereby an analysis of the concept of avatāra within the emerging paradigm of the Bhagavadgītā. It has been suggested that the political and cultural conditions under which the Gītā was composed were capable of producing such an attempted synthesis as that reflected in the Gītā. In addition, it has been suggested that the doctrinal ambiguity and tentativeness of certain doctrines in the Bhagavadgītā reflect the destabilization of paradigm commitments and the search for new solutions. Consequently, they indicate the dynamic nature of the poem and obviate thereby the need for elaborate composition theories.

In conclusion, it seems advisable to anticipate the following chapter by indicating two important consequences of the synthetic and emerging nature of the Bhagavadgītā's religio-philosophical paradigm for the concept of avatāra. First, the commitment of the Gītā to the universality of class duty and the proper maintenance of society necessitates the association of avatāra with salvation at two levels: the penultimate level of the four class system, and the ultimate level of release and final union with God. In the Bhagavadgītā, that is, God wills the preservation of society that is divinely ordained, and toward this end the God-head is revealed as the archetypical yogin who maintains the
world while remaining disinterested in the fruits of actions.\(^1\) Indeed, in the classical statement of avatāra doctrine at Gītā 4.6–8, the express purpose of avatāra in the Bhagavadgītā is given as the preservation of the law of righteousness. Second, the synthesis of the devotional theism of the Bhāgavata cult with the metaphysics of Upaniṣadic speculation on Brahman influences the concept of salvation in the direction of a mystical gnosis.\(^2\) In other words, salvation in the Gītā, under the influence of Upaniṣadic speculation, is conceived primarily in ontological terms as the realization of an essential unity with God. Consequently, the grace of God operative in the Gītā is to a large degree an assisting grace that authenticates the unified ways of salvation open to humankind, and the avatāras of God function primarily as divine revealers, imparting to humankind a knowledge of God, and the way of ultimate release. These and other implications for the concept of avatāra in the emerging paradigm of the Bhagavadgītā will be considered in the following chapter.

\(^1\) Gītā 4.13f.; 3.21-24.

\(^2\) See for example, Lamotte, Notes, p. 87.
Chapter Three
Avatāra in the Paradigm of the Bhagavadgītā

The Origin and Early Development of Avatāra Theory

The sanskrit term avatāra comes from the combination of the root tr, which means to cross over or attain, with the verbal prefix ava-, meaning down or off. The word means then to descend or come down, and is especially applied in classical Indian thought to the descent from heaven to earth of divine beings who become incarnate in finite form.¹ The term itself is relatively late; it does not occur in the classical Upaniṣads, and occurs only infrequently in later Upaniṣads.² The same phenomenon is referred to by the older word prādurbhāva, or manifestation, which is found in the Mahābhārata,³ and although the term avatāra itself does not occur in the Bhagavadgītā, the completely formulated doctrine appears there for the first time. The term gained more frequent usage in the later tradition of the Purāṇas, and in the second great Indian epic, the Rāmāyana.

² See G.A. Jacob, Concordance to the Principal Upanishads and Bhagavadgītā, p. 117.
³ See E. Abegg, Der Messiasglaube in indien und Iran, p. 39 n.
The historical origin of avatāra theory in Indian thought is obscure. The idea made a rather sudden appearance in the epic literature at the time of the first sectarian redactions of the material, that is, from the late third century BCE.\(^1\) Although there is nothing in the earlier Indian tradition that would seem a natural and sufficient source for the concept, both J. Gonda and J. N. Farquhar point to the traditional phenomena of divine multifomity, metamorphosis and other temporary forms of self-manifestation as influences on the later development.\(^2\) Others attribute its origin to the identification of Kṛṣṇa with the supreme in the epic. Hill, for example, maintains that the doctrine of avatāra was the necessary corollary to this identification. The paradox expressed in the portrayal of Kṛṣṇa in human form, Arjuna's charioteer at Kurukṣetra and at the same time the highest God, could only be explained by the theory of descent.\(^3\) Lamotte expresses essentially the same idea in asserting that Kṛṣṇa was brought into relationship with Viṣṇu as avatāra rather than being wholly assimilated to the Vedic god in order to unify

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\(^2\) Ibid. Farquhar cites the tales of the fish and dwarf as examples of a god's temporary assumption of finite form. Both of these tales were known in the Brāhmaṇas and were later incorporated into the cycle of avatāras of Viṣṇu. Gonda, *Aspects of Early Visnuism* (Utrecht: N.V.A. Oosthoek's Uitgevers Mij, 1954), pp. 124ff., cites the multiformity of Indra, from whom Viṣṇu borrowed many features. At (gveda 6.47.18 he is portrayed as the god who wandered about in many forms. Indra could, for example, assume the form of a ram or a bull at (gveda 1.55.4; 1.9.4. It is in general this archaic motive of a god descending to the earth that has influenced the development of the concept of avatāra.

\(^3\) *The Bhagavadgītā*, p. 14.
the divine and human aspects of his personality.\textsuperscript{1} However appealing these suggestions, they remain speculative possibilities, and at this point the historical origin of the avatāra concept must remain obscure.

As mentioned above, avatāra theory made its initial appearance in the Mahābhārata at the time of the first major redactions of the material. During the subsequent period of epic development the theory remained fluid, and therefore receives no systematic articulation in the Mahābhārata.\textsuperscript{2} The early books of the epic present Kṛṣṇa and Rāma as amśāvatara, or partial avatāras of the supreme;\textsuperscript{3} that is, the incarnation of a minute particle of the infinite essence of the Godhead that suffers no diminution as a result of its incarnational activity.\textsuperscript{4} These passages in the Mahābhārata give the first tentative exposition of the nature and purpose of avatāra. The Adi Parva, for example, relates Kṛṣṇa's birth "...of Devakī and Vasudeva, for the sake of the three worlds. He who is without birth and death, the splendid creator of the universe, the Lord and invisible cause of all, the unchanging and all-pervading soul, the centre round which everything moves...that originator of

\textsuperscript{1} Notes, p. 18. In a later passage, Lamotte resorts to a psychological explanation of the origin of avatāra in the attempt to rapproche God and humankind by giving the former a human body, p. 59.

\textsuperscript{2} Gonda, Aspects, p. 125, n 1.

\textsuperscript{3} Farquhar, Outline, p. 84.

all beings 'appeared'\(^1\) in the family of the Andhaka-Vrishnis for the increase of right.\(^2\)

It is in the Bhagavadgītā itself that the concept of Kṛṣṇa as a full avatāra of the supreme appears for the first time.\(^3\) At Gitā 4.5ff., Kṛṣṇa declares that he, though in reality God who knows neither birth nor change, has many times been born. Lord of all creatures, he creates himself by resorting to material nature and freely taking on birth by his creative energy. From eon to eon, whenever dharma declines and lawlessness flourishes, Kṛṣṇa takes on existence to re-establish the eternal dharma, rescue the good, and destroy the evil. This declaration of avatāra theory by Kṛṣṇa contains in germ the completely formulated doctrine and provides the framework for its further development in the latter portions of the Mahābhārata and in the Purāṇas.\(^4\) Once formulated, the doctrine gathered strength, and as Kṛṣṇa became more definitely identified with Viṣṇu, avatāra theory was anachronistically applied to ancient legends of theriomorphic and

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\(^1\) i.e., prādurbhūta.

\(^2\) 1.58.51; 59.83.

\(^3\) See Farquhar, *Outline*, p. 87. Technically, there is no discussion in the poem of the degree to which the Kṛṣṇa avatāra is the manifestation of God. Traditional belief holds, however, that Kṛṣṇa in the Gitā is a complete descent (pūrṇāvatāra) of God, not a partial one (aṃśāvatāra). See Robert W. Stevenson, "The Concept of Avatāra in Ancient and Modern Commentaries on the Bhagavadgītā," p. 58.

anthropomorphic descents assimilated to Viṣṇu and to other heros of the epic tradition.¹

First, Gitā 4.5ff. expresses the doctrine of repeated avatāras of Kṛṣṇa, and these descents are distributed between eons, occurring whenever the need arises. In this passage, the repetition of avatāra is paralleled with the ordinary cycle of birth and death, and explains Kṛṣṇa’s statement that, having taught earlier sages of the tradition, he has now come to reestablish dharma by teaching Arjuna that same doctrine which had vanished with the lapse of years.² While there is no indication in this or other passages in the Bhagavadgītā of avatāras other than Kṛṣṇa, the repetition of his descents throughout the eons is the pattern for the later concept of the Yuga Avatāras of Viṣṇu.

Second, Kṛṣṇa’s incarnations have a specific purpose to achieve. The primary purpose of Kṛṣṇa’s descents is expressed at Gitā 4.7, ‘to re-establish the dharma, rescue the good and destroy the evil.’ This purpose reflects the general understanding of avatāra as a movement of grace from God to humankind. God wills the welfare of humankind, and toward this end does not rest passively in transcendent perfection, indifferent to all that goes on outside of the Godhead, but gravely inclines toward humankind in the avatāras.³ According to Gonda “…the very idea underlying all avatāras is the

¹ Ibid.
³ Lamotte, Notes, p. 118.
selfsame antagonism between the great upholder of the cause of the good, and
the evil power of destruction, starvation, and death."¹ Hill relates the pur-
poseful aspect of avatāra in the Gitā itself to the importance of sacrifice in the
poem and in the Bhāgavata tradition. From the earliest times sacrifice had
been accounted the most important work, and the Gitā places so much
emphasis thereon that sacrifice is considered to be the base of Brahman
itself.² In the Chāndogya Upaniṣad, in a passage related by Hill to the
Bhāgavata tradition, Kṛṣṇa son of Devaki receives instruction in the
sacrificial character of life.³ Hill concludes that it is natural to find that
Kṛṣṇa in the Gitā regards his own life in the body, and his own work here on
earth, as in some sort a sacrifice.⁴

In the latter portions of the Mahābhārata, with Kṛṣṇa more definitely
identified with Viṣṇu, the theory of avatāra was extended to incorporate
certain ancient accounts of divine self-manifestation into the Viṣṇu cycle.
While certain editions of the Mahābhārata mention the classic list of ten
avatāras at book twelve, this does not reflect the stage of development of the
tradition at that time. During this period avatāra theory was still developing,
and consequently receives no systematic exposition in the Mahābhārata. In
the late appendix to the epic, the Harivamṣa, the list is not yet that of the

¹ Aspects, p. 162.
² Gitā 3.15.
³ iii. 16. 1
⁴ The Bhagavadgitā, p. 34.
classical ten, and even the Purāṇas include lists of avatāras other than the ten. For the purpose at hand however, it suffices to bring together for discussion the scattered mention of avatāras in the early tradition.

Book twelve of the Mahābhārata recounts the cosmic myth of Viṣṇu sleeping in the primeval ocean, resting on the enormous serpent Saṅgāma and sheltered by his thousand hoods. In his sleep, a lotus appears from Viṣṇu’s navel from which the god Brahmā is born, who then proceeds to create the world. Through a thousand cycles of Mahā Yugas, or great eons, the creation continues, until it again dissolves into Viṣṇu. Each Mahā Yuga in this eternal cycle of creation and dissolution is divided into four lesser yugas: the Kṛta, Tretā, Dwāpara, and Kali, during which there occurs a steady decline in dharma from its original perfection in the Kṛta Yuga. In the Kali Yuga, lawlessness is rampant, individuals are weak and unable to follow their proper duty, rulers plunder their subjects, and pursuit of wealth is humankind’s predominant concern. The world in general is a place of suffering and discord, waiting for renewal in the recurrence of the Kṛta Yuga. By means of the Yuga avatāras that are distributed between the lesser yugas, Viṣṇu actively intervenes in the world for the welfare of humankind. In the Tretā Yuga, for example, Viṣṇu is incarnate as Rāma, and between the Dwāpara and Kali Yugas as Kṛṣṇa.

The expansion of the list of avatāras involved the incorporation into the Viṣṇu cycle of ancient stories of theriomorphic and anthropomorphic descent

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1 Gonda, Aspects, p. 125, n 1.
not belonging initially to this god.\textsuperscript{1} For example, Viṣṇu's theriomorphic appearance as a swan was borrowed from speculation on this bird which was originally identified, inter alia, with the sun, Agni, and the soul.\textsuperscript{2} Again, it is normally assumed that the elements of the Fish avatāra were suggested by the story of Manu who was saved from a flood by a great horned fish, which is recounted in the Satapatha Brāhmana.\textsuperscript{3} Once begun, this process of assimilation resulted in the classical lists of the Viṣṇu avatāra cycle, although there remained much diversity in the tradition.\textsuperscript{4}

The Horse-head, mentioned in book twelve of the Mahābhārata as a prādurbhāva of Viṣṇu,\textsuperscript{5} is a form assumed by the latter in order to rescue the Vedas from the demons Madhu and Kaitabha. These demons had stolen the Vedas from Brahmā at the very moment of their creation.\textsuperscript{6} By the time of the Viṣṇu Purāṇa, the Horse-head was listed as an avatāra of Viṣṇu and occupied the place that in the usual series of avatāras was taken by the Dwarf incarnation.\textsuperscript{7}

\textsuperscript{1} Gonda, Aspects, p. 125.

\textsuperscript{2} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{3} Ibid. Satapatha Brāhmaṇa 1.8.1.1ff.

\textsuperscript{4} See Ibid., p. 125, n. 1. the Bhāgavata Purāṇa lists some 22 avatāras of Viṣṇu.

\textsuperscript{5} I.e., a manifestation of Viṣṇu.

\textsuperscript{6} Mahābhārata 12.127.347.

\textsuperscript{7} Viṣṇu Purāṇa, 5.17.11. See also the discussion at Gonda, Aspects, p. 148.
The Swan, mentioned above as originally associated with the sun, leads some lists of avatāras in the Mahābhārata, but little is said of it aside from its part in the recovery of the Vedas. According to one story, after the theft of the Vedas Viṣṇu, as Swan and Horse-head, ranged through the oceans until the Vedas were recovered and recreated in the Kṛta Yuga.¹

As mentioned above, the principal elements of the Fish avatāra were taken from the earlier story of Manu and the flood, recounted at Satapatha Brāhmaṇa 1.8.1. In this account, Manu, while bathing, is approached by a small fish who promises to save him from the impending disaster of a flood. Manu nurtures the fish to maturity and transports it to the sea. When the flood comes, he builds and enters a ship, which is pulled to the safety of the mountains by the fish. In the epic, this story is enlarged and adapted to reflect a more complex cosmological orientation. It is at the dissolution of the world that the fish instructs Manu to build and enter a ship, and to take with him seven sages and samples of all varieties of seed from the earth. The fish tows the ship for many years to the highest peak of the Himalayas, and there pronounces to Manu, 'I am Brahmā, the lord of creatures.' The fish is later identified with Viṣṇu.²

The Tortoise avatāra is, again, a Viṣṇuite adaptation of an old mythical function attributed to the animal.³ In the Satapatha Brāhmaṇa, the tortoise

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¹ Cited at Parrinder, Avatar, p. 23.

² Mahābhārata 3.186.

³ See Gonda, Aspects, p. 127.
belongs to Varuṇa, the lord of the waters. Thus, at 7.5.1.9, the tortoise itself is the lord of the waters, and at 7.5.1.6, it functions as a surrogate for Varuṇa in a cosmogonic passage. In the Mahābhārata, the tortoise assists the gods at the churning of the ocean, itself a form of creation myth, but is not yet identified with Viṣṇu. According to Gonda, the aiding and supporting functions attributed to the tortoise in the tradition coincided with the conceptions of the purpose of Viṣṇu's incarnations to such a degree that his devotees could identify this creature with their god in the form of an avatāra. By the time of the Viṣṇu Purāṇa, the tortoise was formally identified with Viṣṇu.

The Boar avatāra, who delivered the world from the power of the demon Hiraṇyākṣa, is mentioned several times in the epic. At Mahābhārata 3.142.28ff., it is recounted that once the population of the earth, the support of all beings and the producer of all sorts of grains, increased to such an extent that the world sank down under the weight. Viṣṇu, assuming the form of a boar, lifted her up from the nether regions into which she had sunk. Book twelve recounts that Kṛṣṇa-Viṣṇu assumed the form of a roaring boar, penetrated into the nether regions and destroyed the daityas, dānavas, and asuras who had become jealous of the prosperity of the gods and oppressed the

1 Ibid., p. 129.
2 Ibid., p. 127.
3 Viṣṇu Purāṇa 1.9.87.
earth with such a heavy load that 'she seemed as if going down into the nether region.'

The Man-lion avatāra continues the purpose of deliverance from demonic oppression. The epic recounts that the demon-king Hiranyakāśipu was invulnerable to the assault of god, man or animal, and thus was all-powerful. Viṣṇu, however, appearing with a body half lion and half man, rent the demon king in two with its claws.

The essential element of the Vāmana myth underlying the Dwarf avatāra, the three steps taken by the god for the good of the world, was already known to the authors of the Rgveda. Again, in the Satapatha Brāhmaṇa, Viṣṇu is represented as a dwarf. In the Mahābhārata, Viṣṇu as Dwarf avatāra approaches the demon Bali, who had gained control of the world and threatened even the gods by his extensive powers, and procures a gift of three paces of ground. Viṣṇu as dwarf then assumes gigantic proportions, spans the totality of the universe in these three strides, and rescues it from Bali.

There are two Rāma avatāras of Viṣṇu celebrated in the Mahābhārata. The first, Paraśu-Rāma, or Rāma with the axe, is depicted as a Brāhman, and is attributed more than once with the complete destruction of the kṣatriya caste. Paraśu-Rāma was present as well at the war council of the Kaurava princes.

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1 Mahābhārata 12.209.
2 Ibid., 3.270.
3 Gonda, Aspects, p. 145.
4 See 1,2,5,4ff; 6,5,2,8; 8,73,58; 9,33,25.
before the central battle of the epic. The second, and far greater, of the Rāma avatāras is Rāma-chandra, or Rama-moon. Though early overshadowed by the Kṛṣṇa cycle, Rāma-chandra became one of the most popular of all avatāras, and his story forms the central subject of India's second great epic poem, the Rāmāyana. In the Mahābhārata, Rāma-chandra is depicted as Viṣṇu incarnate for the express purpose of the destruction of the demon Rāvana, who reigned in the kingdom of Ceylon.

Finally, Kalkin is portrayed in the Mahābhārata as a future avatāra, whose advent at the renewal of the Kṛta Yuga will usher in the new age. He will exterminate the foreign presence, institute a great horse sacrifice, and restore order and peace to the world, roaming about in search of thieves and robbers.

From this discussion it is clear that the notion of avatāra in classical Indian thought reflects the general structure of incarnation, at least in its most general sense of the self-manifestation of a deity in finite form for soteriological purposes. A more precise understanding of the portrayal of Kṛṣṇa in the Bhagavadgītā, however, will depend upon its explication within the context of the specific commitments and beliefs through which the Gitā orders its religious experience and understanding. We must attempt to determine the extent, for example, to which the Gitā's notion of avatāra

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1 Mahābhārata 3.115: 5.96.
2 Ibid., 3.25; 3.146ff.
3 Ibid., 3.190,94.
requires the assumption of human existence and its limitations, and the role of
the divine avatāras in the realization of soteriological goals. In short, the
notion of avatāra in the Bhagavadgītā must be understood as an element in the
religio-philosophical paradigm of the poem. The consideration of the nature
of Kṛṣṇa in the Bhagavadgītā that follows, therefore, will focus on the fact
that in the Gītā, the divine acts of cosmogony and incarnation are parallel.
Consequently, the nature of Kṛṣṇa as incarnate must be understood in relation
to both the poem's cosmology and to the role of divine māyā in the creation
process. From this perspective it will be suggested that Kṛṣṇa's incarnations
in the Bhagavadgītā are indeed realistic, yet without exhibiting traits of the
Christian notion of kenosis, or the complete assumption of the human
condition. Second, it will be suggested that the soteriological significance of
Kṛṣṇa in the Gītā reflects a twofold involvement with the world for the
welfare of humankind: Kṛṣṇa is to be understood both as a divine guardian of
the social order in consequence of the Gītā's strong commitment to the four
class system, and he is to be understood as a mediator-revealer in consequence
of its ideas on the nature and bondage of humankind in saṃsāra, and the
means of ultimate release.

The Nature of Kṛṣṇa in the Bhagavadgītā

The classical statement of avatāra doctrine is found at Bhagavadgītā 4.5-8. In chapter three, Kṛṣṇa had expounded the nature of karmayoga, and he
opens this chapter with the astounding announcement that he had revealed
this same doctrine at the beginning of the eon to Vivasvat, the primal ancestor of humankind. Arjuna is obviously disconcerted by the announcement, and questions Kṛṣṇa concerning its possibility. "...your birth is recent; Vivasvat's birth belongs to the distant past! How am I to understand that you 'propounded it in the beginning'?" In response to Arjuna, Kṛṣṇa declares both the fact and doctrine of avatāra.

...I have known many past births, and so have you, Arjuna. I remember them all, while you do not, enemy-burner. Although indeed I am unborn and imperishable, although I am the lord of the creatures, I do resort to nature, which is mine, and take on birth by my own wizardry. For whenever the Law languishes, Bhārata, and lawlessness flourishes, I create myself. I take on existence from eon to eon, for the rescue of the good and the destruction of the evil, in order to reestablish the Law.3

In his commentary on the Bhagavadgītā, Rāmānuja notes that the context of this declaration of avatāra theory, and especially the query of

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1 More precisely, Vivasvat is a sun-god, the father of Manu who is himself the primal ancestor. See Zaeherner, The Bhagavad-Gītā, commentary at Gītā 4.1.

2 Gītā 4.4. All translations are from van Buitenen, Bhagavadgītā in the Mahābhārata, unless otherwise noted.

3 Ibid., 4.5-8.
Arjuna raises already the question of the nature and purpose of avatāra.\(^1\) Arjuna’s question appears anomalous in view of the fact that Kṛṣṇa had already informed him that reincarnation stretches back endlessly in time for everyone.\(^2\) In addition, if one reads the Gītā in its epic context, Arjuna at this point is well aware that Kṛṣṇa is the Supreme Person, and that it is quite possible that he taught Vivasvat.\(^3\) According to Rāmānuja, in this situation Arjuna can only be inquiring into the nature of the divine incarnations. Specifically, Arjuna questions whether Kṛṣṇa’s avatāras are real or merely docetic- illusory like magic-\(^4\) since God is not subject to the karmā- determined births of humankind. If real, what is the manner of his birth, the nature of his body, and the purpose for which he has become incarnate?\(^5\)

Rāmānuja affirms the reality of the Kṛṣṇa avatāra on the basis of the parallelism established in this passage between the incarnations of Arjuna and those of Kṛṣṇa. This parallelism is established by the phrase ‘I have

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\(^1\) See Sri Bhagavad-Gītā with Sri Rāmānujachārya’s Visishtādvaita-Commentary, translated into English by A. Govindāchārya (Madras: The Vaijayanti Press, 1898), pp. 133-143.

\(^2\) Ibid., p. 136. See Gītā 2.12ff.

\(^3\) Ibid. Rāmānuja refers to Mahābhārata 2,38,23, where Arjuna heard from Bhīṣma that “Kṛṣṇa alone is the origin and end of the universe. All this universe composed of the movable and of the immovable (things), is verily for Kṛṣṇa’s sake.” He also refers anachronistically to Gītā 10.12f.

\(^4\) Indrajāla.

\(^5\) Sri Bhagavad-Gītā with Sri Rāmānujachārya’s Visishtādvaita-Commentary, p. 137. Van Buiten points out that since the origination of every being is due to karmā, the birth of God, who is not subject to karmic influence, might be thought of as an illusion. Rāmānuja on the Bhagavadgītā, p. 77, n. 164.
known many past births, and so have you, Arjuna...,' and is taken by Rāmānuja to mean 'My Incarnation now is real as your present birth is real, and so the past Incarnations of both of us are real.' Rāmānuja then interprets the term ātmamāyā at 4.6 by ātmajānānena, 'by my own will,' and differentiates the incarnations of Kṛṣṇa from those of Arjuna in that they are voluntary, while Arjuna's are compelled by karman.

Saṅkara, on the other hand, interprets the Kṛṣṇa avatāra as explicitly docetic. In his commentary on the Bhagavadgītā, he explains that Kṛṣṇa is eternal and unborn, and yet is involved with the world of his own volition, descending by virtue of the fact that he controls its constituents, which are māyā in the sense of illusion. Under these conditions, Kṛṣṇa comes into existence as if embodied, as if born, by his own māyā and not really according to the way of humankind. At 4.7 and 9, Saṅkara reiterates that Kṛṣṇa issues forth by means of his own māyā, and that his birth itself is of the nature of māyā. Thus, Saṅkara would translate Gītā 4.6 to mean "I appear to be born and embodied, through my own illusive power, but not in reality, unlike others."

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1 Ibid., p. 138.
2 Ibid., pp. 138ff. See also van Buitenen, Rāmānuja, p. 77, n. 165.
4 Ibid., p. 121.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
The conflicting interpretations of the nature of avatāra articulated by these preeminent Indian commentators on the Bhagavadgītā graphically illustrate the fact that the primary concern in the determination of Kṛṣṇa's nature in the Gītā is metaphysical. The interpretations of both Rāmānuja and Saṁkara turn on the respective understanding of cosmology and the nature of māyā as the divine power expressed through the creation process. According to Saṁkara's Advaita Vedānta, māyā signifies the illusory nature of phenomenal reality when viewed from the perspective of the absolute. For him, Brahman as absolute reality is the one essence and all else is mere appearance.¹ Thus, in the Gītā, prakṛti- nature with its three constituents by whose compulsion the world revolves- is considered māyā, and deluded thereby the world does not recognize Kṛṣṇa as its own Self.² According to Rāmānuja, māyā signifies the wisdom and will of God by which realistic incarnations in the world are effected.³

A casual reading of the Gītā favors Rāmānuja's interpretation of avatāra, for the poem's narrative treatment of Kṛṣṇa engenders a sense of realistic incarnation. As previously mentioned, Kṛṣṇa in the Bhagavadgītā, as in the Mahābhārata at large, is portrayed as a hero of the Great Bhārata war, the charioteer and advisor of Arjuna. In this role it is simply assumed that Kṛṣṇa participates in the full dynamic of human life: he eats, drinks, sleeps,

¹ See Zehner, The Bhagavad-Gītā, p. 183.
² Bhagavadgītā with Commentary of Sri Sankarachārya, p. 121.
³ Sri Bhagavad-Gītā with Sri Rāmānujachārya's Visishtādvaita-Commentary, pp. 139-40.
sports, and is even mistaken by Arjuna for a mere comrade. Indeed, in the aftermath of Arjuna's graciously accorded vision of Kṛṣṇa in his universal form, he requests Kṛṣṇa's indulgence for having treated him as a mere human: "If, thinking you friend, I have too boldly cried, 'Yādava! Kṛṣṇa! Come here, my good friend! Not knowing of this your magnificence, out of absence of mind or sheer affection, if perchance I have slighted you—merely in jest—in matters of sport, bed, seating, or meal, in privacy, Acyuta, or before others—I ask your indulgence, immeasurable One!"  

In addition to the narrative treatment of Kṛṣṇa, there is evidence in the Bhagavadgītā that at the time of its writing, Kṛṣṇa was subjected to public derision, and his divinity denied. At Gītā 9.11, for example, Kṛṣṇa charges that "The deluded disregard me in my human form, being ignorant of my higher nature as the great lord of creatures." Again, at 7.24, he states that "To the unenlightened I am some unseen entity that has become manifest, for they are ignorant of my transcendent being, which is eternal and incomparable." It is quite possible that more was involved in this situation than the simple criticism and ridicule of a sectarian god. It was perhaps not so much the divinity of Kṛṣṇa affirmed by the Bhāgavata sect as the conjunction of

1 Gītā 11.41-42.

2 I.e., they deny his divinity. The first sentence appears to mean that Kṛṣṇa, like any mortal, appears at birth and disappears at death. This idea is expounded at Gītā 2.28: "Bhārata, with creatures their beginnings are unclear, their middle periods are clear, and their ends are unclear—why complain about it?" See Zaehner, The Bhagavad-Gītā, p. 253.
humanity and divinity in the Kṛṣṇa avatāra that was offensive to those outside the sect.

By way of analogy, it is often remarked that in western antiquity claims of divine manifestation in human life and history were not considered offensive by religious individuals who were, in general, quite willing and able to entertain many such claims. Rather, offense was taken at the Christian claim that the one who fully reveals God is nevertheless a man.¹ In this instance, it was not the divine nature of the manifestation, but rather the conjunction of humanity and divinity that was considered offensive. In India as well, claims of divine manifestation were known in the tradition from the earliest times.² Concerning the Kṛṣṇa avatāra, then, it was again the conjunction of humanity and divinity that offended those who, deluded by nature, could see no further than his humanity. These tendencies toward the expression of a realistic incarnation in the Bhagavadgītā can be confirmed by a consideration of its cosmological speculations, and of their implications for the conception of avatāra in the poem.

¹ For example, see D. Moody Smith, John, Proclamation Commentaries, Gerhard Krodel, ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), p. 27.

² Consider, for example, the mythical exploits considered by Gonda to form the historical backdrop of avatāra theory at Aspects, pp. 124ff.
Cosmological Speculation in the Bhagavadgītā: Māyā and Prakṛti

In consequence of western scholarship's early preoccupation with Saṁkara's Vedāntic philosophy, the Sanskrit term māyā has practically entered the English language in the sense of world illusion.¹ This use of the term reflects the extreme monism of Advaita Vedānta, and is claimed to be founded on Upaniṣadic thought. This claim is true only to the extent that the Vedāntic doctrine of māyā is the logical conclusion, or better, the extreme application of Upaniṣadic speculation on the identification of the individual ātman with the essential reality of the universe.² Upaniṣadic speculation did not deny the existence of non-spirit, although one trend of Upaniṣadic thought tended to ignore its existence or importance, and to consider it unworthy of investigation.³ Thus, even though māyā was used as early as theṚgveda in the sense of magic or deceit, there are compelling reasons to believe that its development into the doctrine of world illusion occurred centuries after the appearance of the Bhagavadgītā.⁴ The conception of māyā in the


³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., p. 121, n. 6. See also Dasgupta, History, pp. 467, 478ff.
Gitā itself reflects an earlier stage of development in which the term retains the Vedic meanings of creative power and deceit.¹

In the Rgveda, māyā is one of the terms employed by the rṣis to express the ambivalence that they saw in the universe. Māyā represents the convergence of two currents of ideas and refers to one and the same divine power that can be used for creative or destructive purposes, and the working out of truth or deceit.² Consequently, it is possible to distinguish three senses of māyā in the Rgveda. First, māyā is used in the sense of the supernatural power of the gods, especially of Indra, Mitra, and Varuṇa to transform themselves or to assume strange forms, as at Rgveda 6.47.18. Second, māyā signifies the world sustaining power possessed by the gods, for example, at Rgveda 3.38.7; 9.18.3. Finally, māyā in the Rgveda signifies the deception or cunning exercised by the asuras in their fight against the devas. Like the gods, demons also possess the power of assuming any shape at will, but they excel in the power of subtle trickery.³

The fundamental meaning of māyā in the Bhagavadgitā reflects the Rgvedic conception of māyā as creative power. Accordingly, māyā in the Gitā is understood as synonymous with material nature.⁴ At Gitā 7.14, māyā is

³ Ibid., p. 114f.
described as synonymous with the three constituents of nature: sattva, rajas, and tamas, which together constitute the material universe; and it is said that the one who resorts to God will escape the grip of māyā or of the guṇas. Although there is a slight shift of meaning at 7.15 to emphasize the deceiving or veiling function of the term, there too māyā is defined in terms of material nature.¹ This verse states that it is ignorant and sinful individuals who, through demonic ideas, lose their perspective under the influence of māyā and do not resort to God. Since it is repeatedly stated in the Gītā that demonic tendencies occur under the predominant influence of rajas and tamas, this verse is to be understood as referring to the influence of these two guṇas.² Finally, at Gītā 18.61, God is said to reside in the heart of all creatures, inciting them to action by the divine māyā, like puppets mounted on a machine. In commenting on this verse, Dasgupta points out that in the Gītā, it is God who generates the guṇas through prakṛti, which in turn are responsible for the psychical tendencies and moral propensities that move humankind to action. Consequently, māyā at 18.61 can again be taken in reference to material nature.³ On the basis of the conception of māyā expressed in these verses, Dasgupta concludes that while the Gītā uses māyā in the sense of inscrutable power, and as a form of ignorance, it never conceives of māyā as the power of illusory or magical creation. In its fundamental sense, therefore, Dasgupta

¹ Dasgupta, History, p. 478.

² Ibid. For example, see Gītā 14.10ff.

³ Dasgupta, History, p. 478.
defines māyā in the Bhagavadgītā as "...the power of God from which the three gunas have emanated."¹

Zaehner also argues that the fundamental meaning of māyā in the Bhagavadgītā derives from its cosmological orientation, and therefore that the term is synonymous with material nature.² He cites as evidence the one passage in the classical Upaniṣads in which māyā is used in a cosmological sense. At Svetāśvatara Upaniṣad 4.10, it is stated that "Māyā is material nature, this must be known, and He who possesses it is the Mighty Lord." On the basis of this parallel, he argues that the meaning of māyā in the cosmological context of the Gitā is precisely material nature, and that its interpretation will depend on one's conception of the latter.³ It will be shown below that māyā as material nature in the Bhagavadgītā refers to the prakṛti of early Sāṃkhya speculation, the material substratum of the universe that possesses irreducible reality, and consequently not to an illusory or magical creation.

¹ Ibid., p. 467 f.; p. 526. Thus: "The idea that the world or any of the mental or spiritual categories could be merely an illusory appearance seems never to have been contemplated in the Gitā. It is not, therefore, conceivable that the lower, or the kṣara, puruṣa might be mere illusory creation, accepted as a necessary postulate to explain the facts of our undeniable daily experience." For a similar view, see Edgerton, The Bhagavad Gītā, p. 153. Edgerton here maintains that the reality of material nature is clearly indicated at many passages in the Bhagavadgītā. The poem accepts the doctrine of the evolution and devolution of all nature at the beginning and end of successive world-epochs, and makes God the overseer of this process. Most importantly, it is God's material nature that forms the basis of all creative activity. See Gitā 9.7, 8, 10; 8.18, 19. According to Edgerton, there is no indication in any of these passages that creation is in any sense unreal.

² The Bhagavat-Gītā, p. 183.

³ Ibid.
The fundamental meaning of mâyā in the Bhagavadgītā reflects the Rgvedic idea of creative power; consequently, mâyā is conceived in the poem as synonymous with material nature. It has been pointed out, however, that mâyā in the Vedic tradition represents the convergence of two currents of ideas, and that the one divine power can be used for deceptive as well as creative purposes. This current is also reflected in the Bhagavadgītā, which knows mâyā as a divine power that deludes humankind and conceals one's own essential self and God.¹ For example, the passage at Gītā 7.12-15 represents mâyā not only as a creative power synonymous with material nature, but also as an uncanny power or a divine illusion that, through the very constituents of prakṛti, blinds humankind to the true nature of reality.² Edgerton correctly qualifies the nature of mâyā as illusion in this passage. According to him "The Gītā only means that the Soul-universal Soul or God as well as individual soul- is utterly distinct from material nature or body; the 'illusion' consists in the apparent blending of the two. The wise man should recognize the distinction; but this does not imply the nonexistence of either."³ Thus, the Bhagavadgītā preserves the ambiguous conception of mâyā in the Vedic tradition as both divine and demonic. Mâyā as material nature is divine in that it is dependent on God, the expression of a unique, creative power, and demonic in that it functions to bewilder and confuse, and to stand between God

¹ Ibid., p. 278.
² Ibid., p. 249.
and humankind.\(^1\) In neither instance, however, does the Bhagavadgītā contemplate the notion of māyā as illusory and magical creation.

In sum, the conception of māyā as world illusion, which some would read in the Bhagavadgītā, reflects the monism of Advaita Vedānta, and represents the extreme application of Upaniṣadic speculation on the identification of the individual ātman with the essential reality of the universe.\(^2\) This current of Upaniṣadic speculation tended to ignore the existence of non-spirit, and to consider it unworthy of investigation. The Bhagavadgītā, however, antedates this Vedāntic development and reflects an earlier stage of development in which māyā retains the Vedic meanings of creative power and deceit. In addition, the Gītā gives expression to a current of Upaniṣadic speculation with realist tendencies and a marked interest in the material universe and psychology.\(^3\) From this current of speculative thought, which is expressed in the Bhagavadgītā in an early form, eventually developed the system of classical Sāmkhya that was systematized in the Sāmkhya-kārikā of IśvaraKrisna and accepted as one of the six orthodox philosophical schools of the Hindu tradition. Consequently, the conception of māyā in the Bhagavadgītā as synonymous with material nature must refer to the prakṛti of early Sāmkhyan speculation, the material substratum of the

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\(^1\) Zaehner, *The Bhagavad-Gītā*, p. 249.


universe that possesses irreducible reality, and not to an illusory or magical
creation.

In distinction from the monistic current of Upaniṣadic speculation that
obeys the relationship between material nature and the universal ātman,
Sāṃkhya cosmological speculation draws the clearest possible distinction
between the two orders of reality: prakṛti and puruṣa. Prakṛti is the
metaphysical substratum of the material universe that is in a perpetual state of
flux, without beginning and without end. It is the eternal womb from which
evolves material nature. Puruṣa, on the other hand, is immutable and

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1 On the presence of this strain of thought in the Bhagavadgītā, see Edgerton,
The Bhagavad Gītā, p. 166f. There are significant differences between the
early Sāṃkhya speculation upon which the Bhagavadgītā bases its
metaphysics and the system of classical Sāṃkhya represented in the Sāṃkhya-
kārikā. These differences will be discussed in this and the following notes in
preparation for the discussion to follow. In classical Sāṃkhya, to begin, the
two eternal principles of prakṛti and puruṣa constitute the totality of the
universe. There is no transcendent reality to which they owe either their
origin or the stimulus for their cosmogonic union. In the Bhagavadgītā,
however, the one God Kṛṣṇa stands over both prakṛti and puruṣa as their
source, Gītā 7.4ff., and wills the creation of the universe, Gītā 9.8.
Furthermore, in the Gītā, the spiritual monads or selves are not independent
entities, but minute parts of God, the seed with which God fecundates the womb
of prakṛti, see Gītā 15.7; 14.3.

2 See, for example, Gītā 14.3. Again, in classical Sāṃkhya, the guṇas that
spring from prakṛti signify both the characteristic qualities of all experience
and states of being, and the evolutionary source of all physical and psychical
reality. In the Gītā, according to Dasgupta, History, p. 464f., the guṇas seem to
refer only to the characteristic qualities; i.e., they imply the enjoyable,
emotional, moral and immoral qualities of all experience. The categories of
physical and psychical reality seem to constitute a parallel conception of
prakṛti as the lower nature of God, existing independently of the guṇas, see
Gītā 7.4ff.
unchanging, existing beyond time, space, and causation.\textsuperscript{1} It is the all pervading principle of self that, though omnipresent, remains untouched by any qualities of the body in which it manifests itself.\textsuperscript{2} Prakṛti and puruṣa in Sāmkhya speculation are totally distinct, independent, and eternal principles, and from their union issues the universe as we know it.\textsuperscript{3}

In its attempt to articulate the fundamental nature and characteristics of these irreducible metaphysical principles, the Bhagavadgītā employs several metaphors that emphasize the parallel reality and eternality of prakṛti and puruṣa. At Gītā 8.18-21, for example, both prakṛti and puruṣa are referred to as avyakta, or unmanifest. In reference to prakṛti, avyakta signifies its

\textsuperscript{1} Zaehner, \textit{The Bhagavad-Gītā}, p. 140.

\textsuperscript{2} Dasgupta, \textit{History}, p. 464. In classical Sāmkhya, the puruṣas are conceived as infinite in number. The Gītā seems to maintain this view, although at times the whole category of spirit is referred to as one, as at Gītā 2.17, see Zaehner, \textit{The Bhagavad-Gītā}, p. 345; Dasgupta, \textit{History}, p. 467f. Van Buitenen suggests that in early Sāmkhya speculation, the soul was still the creative, or at least initiative, force in an evolution seen on a cosmic scale, and was therefore single. Later speculation shifted to a microcosmic perspective that, under the separatist tendency of Sāmkhya thinking, demanded one soul per body. This development led in two directions: the old polarity of 'Soul: prakṛti' was restated as 'souls: prakṛti'; or, as in the Gītā, the two polarities were combined in 'Soul: souls: prakṛti'. In other words, the ancient Upaniṣadic idea of a single Soul persisted on a macrocosmic level, even when speculation on the microcosmic level had become fragmented, see \textit{The Bhagavadgītā in the Mahābhārata}, p. 28. Finally, reference to the emerging character of the Sāmkhya ideas expressed in the Bhagavadgītā can be seen in the lack of technical rigor in its use of such seminal terms as puruṣa, buddhi, ahaṁkāra, etc. See Lamotte, \textit{Notes}, pp. 52; 67.

\textsuperscript{3} See, for example, Gītā 13.26.
primordial state, the undifferentiated primal nature of classical Sāmkhya.\(^1\) Zaehner notes that, in distinction from all that evolves from it, prakṛti is uncaused, eternal, all-pervasive, inactive, one, relying on itself alone, without characteristics or parts, and independent. While it shares these qualities with the puruṣas, the lower unmanifest is distinguished from the order of spirit in that it is productive and dynamic. Its eternity is one of endless duration, not of timeless and unchanging being. Prakṛti remains constant under all the manifestations that proceed from it.\(^2\) Beyond prakṛti, however, there is another being, an eternal unmanifest beyond the unmanifest.\(^3\) This is the puruṣa of classical Sāmkhya, the absolute principle of the self to which the Gītā refers in this passage as the personal form of the Imperishable Brahman.\(^4\)

At Gītā 7.4-6, the two orders of reality are referred to as the natures of God. In this passage the aparā prakṛti, or lower nature, is said to consist of certain Sāmkhyan categories of material nature: the three cognitive faculties—buddhi, ahamkāra, and manas—plus the five material elements of the

\(^1\) Sāmkhya-kārikā, 10-11.


\(^3\) Gītā 8.20.

\(^4\) At Gītā 2.25, the term avyakta is applied to the individual self in itself that is described as 'Unmanifest, unthinkable, immutable...'. This individual self is identical with the primeval Brahman of 4.31 and 8.3 that is indestructible and does not pass away, see 2.17. Gītā 8.21 explicitly identifies this eternal unmanifest with the Imperishable Brahman as its personal form. See Zaehner, *The Bhagavad-Gītā*, p. 267f.
universe—earth, water, fire, wind, and ether. God also possesses a higher
nature, or purā prakṛti, that consists of the embodied puruṣas, the collective
universe of material nature and spirit.¹

The most complete reference to the Śāmkhyan conception of the
phenomenal world is found at Bhagavadgītā chapter 13, where the metaphor
of kṣetra and kṣetra-jña, the field and knower of the field, is employed in
description of prakṛti and puruṣa.² Kṣetra in these passages comprises the
entire complex of body and mind: the three guṇas: sattva, rajas, and tamas; the
senses and their objects; the five material elements; as well as buddhi,
ahaṁkāra, and manas.³ This term seems to have been reserved to specify the
psycho-somatic complex, exclusive of the kṣetra-jña, the absolute principle of
the self, which at 13.26 refers specifically to the Śāmkhyan puruṣa. In
parallel passages of the same chapter, the Gītā affirms that both prakṛti and
puruṣa are without beginning, and that the manifest universe springs from
their union as kṣetra and kṣetra-jña.⁴

¹ Gītā 7.5. See Dasgupta, History, p. 463ff.

² Various reasons have been suggested for the application of this term to
prakṛti. In consequence of the fact that the function of prakṛti is unconscious
activity, Śaṁkara notes that 'the fruits of action are reaped in it, as in a field.'
Hill, The Bhagavadgītā, p. 173, n. 3, suggests that the conception evokes the
image of an area in which things grow and develop, then wither and die, and
again come forth; i.e., a scene of continuous activity. As to the kṣetra-jña, in
Śāmkhyan thought, inactive consciousness is the function of puruṣa.

³ Gītā 13.5-6.

⁴ Gītā 13.19, 26. In his commentary at 13.19, Śaṁkara notes that prakṛti and
puruṣa are the same as aparā prakṛti and parā prakṛti at 7.4 ff, and kṣetra and
kṣetra-jña in chapter 13. There is not a complete correspondence, since parā
Sāmkhya cosmology conceives the phenomenal world as a complex evolution from prakṛti in its undifferentiated state, the lower unmanifest of the Bhagavadgītā. Within this ultimate principle is contained the entire manifest universe in a state of pure potentiality. The conception of prakṛti in the Gitā lacks systematic coherence, however, and it is difficult to discern exactly what is meant by prakṛti in itself, before its fertilization by God.¹ Classical Sāmkhya conceives prakṛti in its primal state as a condition in which the three guṇas exist in equilibrium. The evolution of the phenomenal world from this primal state occurs by the differentiation and recombination of the guṇas in varying ratios that determine the nature and characteristics of material nature. Whatever its precise conception, prakṛti in the Bhagavadgītā represents the eternal source of this manifest universe. In distinction from prakṛti at 7.5 refers not to puruṣa as the absolute principle of self, but as embodied, i.e. the collective universe of material nature and spirit.

¹ Dasgupta, History, pp. 464f. According to Dasgupta, the ambiguity of prakṛti in the Bhagavadgītā stems from the question of the evolutionary character of the guṇas in its conception. The Gitā nowhere clearly states that the psycho-somatic evolutes of material nature are produced through the guṇas as in classical Sāmkhya, see Gitā 9.10; 14.20, although the translation of the latter verse is problematic. Instead, the Bhagavadgītā employs the term in three different senses: prakṛti as an ultimate principle, coexistent with God, from which is produced the three guṇas as the characteristic qualities of all experience, but not as the evolutionary source of the psycho-somatic evolutes, see 3.5, 27, 29; 13.21; 14.5; etc.; aparā prakṛti, or the lower nature of God that consists of the psycho-somatic categories of material nature; and parā prakṛti, or puruṣa. Dasgupta suggests that classical Sāmkhya combined the Gitā’s concepts of aparā prakṛti and prakṛti, and held that the guṇas produced not only the characteristic qualities of experience, but the psycho-somatic evolutes as well. In classical Sāmkhya, therefore, the guṇas are not the product of prakṛti, but themselves constitute prakṛti when in a state of equilibrium.
all that evolves from it, which is finite, contingent, and cyclically recurring. prakṛti is conceived as the eternal, uncaused, all-pervasive, and undifferentiated substratum that remains constant under its multiple manifestations.¹

The Bhagavadgītā makes only occasional references to the evolution of material nature from prakṛti.² The psycho-somatic categories and constituents to which it refers, however, are essentially the same as those detailed in the Sāṃkhya-kārikā. The faculties of the psyche: buddhi, ahaṃkāra, and manas, are the first to evolve from the unmanifest. Buddhi, or intellect, stands at the head of this hierarchy of cognitive faculties. In Sāṃkhyan thought, buddhi not only stands closest to the self, but is by nature oriented to the contemplation of universal essence. Consequently, by contrast with the senses, which are multiple and oriented to their diverse objects, buddhi is naturally unitive, and its ultimate function is to integrate the whole personality into the self.³ From buddhi arises ahaṃkāra, the principle of

¹ "They know of days and nights who know the Day of Brahmā that lasts thousands of eons, and the Night that ends after thousands of eons. At the dawning of the Day all manifestations emerge from the unmanifest; at the falling of the Night they dissolve in that self-same unmanifest. This village of creatures helplessly comes into being again and again and dissolves at the fall of Night. Pārtha, only to be reborn again at the dawn of Day." Gītā 8.17-19. See also 9.7; 14.2.

² For the psycho-somatic evolutes, see for example, Gītā 3.42; 5.9; 13.5. For the production of the guṇas from prakṛti, see Gītā 3.5, 27, 29; 13.21; 14.5; 18.40.

³ See Zaehner, The Bhagavad-Gītā, p. 22f. See Gītā 2.41; 2.39ff.; 6.20-21, where it is stated that buddhi alone is capable of grasping and apprehending the ātman.
individuation or the empirical ego. Its function is clearly stated at Bhagavadgītā 3.27, a passage which expresses an almost pure Sāmkhyan dualism. Action is there conceived as the exclusive prerogative of the three constituents of material nature. Self, which is given to experience while incarnate, is incapable of action of any sort.\(^1\) Under the delusive influence of ahamkāra, however, which falsely centers the psycho-somatic organism on itself and identifies the whole with self, the self appears to act. In this deluded state, self considers itself part of an integrated personality and an agent in the world. Strangely, the Bhagavadgītā says little of this faculty that deludes the self and binds it in attachment to material nature other than that it must be eliminated. From ahamkāra, first, arises manas, or mind, a faculty that functions in a manner similar to the sensus communis of western scholasticism, controlling and coordinating sense experience.\(^2\) Finally, the evolution through ahamkāra terminates with the ten senses— the five senses plus five motor senses: speech, handling, walking, evacuation, and reproduction; the five subtle elements, that is, the objects of the five senses; and the five gross or material elements: earth, water, fire, wind, and ether.

Sāmkhyan thought accords a fundamental importance to the constituents of material nature, the three guṇas: sattva, rajas, and tamas. These three constituents, whether in the equilibrium of the lower unmanifest

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\(^1\) Gitā 13.20. See also Sāmkhya-kārikā 21, where the self and the psycho-somatic organism are compared to a blind man seated on the shoulders of a lame man—spirit sees and experiences, material nature acts blindly.

\(^2\) Dasgupta, History, p. 463.
or the varied combinations of manifest nature, constitute the fundamental reality of the material universe. The term guna itself literally means strand; consequently the conception of prakṛti as composed of the three guṇas has traditionally evoked a comparison to a rope woven together from three independent strands of fiber. The conception of the guṇas in the Bhagavadgītā, which is ambiguous concerning their role in the evolution of material nature, emphasizes their nature and characteristics as the determining qualities of all states of being and spheres of activity in the phenomenal world.¹ The boundaries of their permeating and conditioning influences are coterminous with those of the phenomenal universe itself. Gītā 18.40 stresses that "There is not a creature on earth, nor in heaven among the Gods, which is free from these three guṇas that spring from Prakṛti."

¹ Ibid., pp. 461ff.
The Bhagavadgītā clearly articulates its conception of the guṇas and their essential characteristics at 14.5-9:

The guṇas called sattva, rajas, and tamas are born from Prakṛti, and they fetter the eternal embodied souls to their bodies, strong-armed one. Among these guṇas, sattva, which because of its spotlessness is illuminating and salubrious, binds the soul by means of an attachment to joy and an attachment to knowledge, prince sans blame. Know that rajas is characterized by passion and arises from an attachment to craving; it binds the embodied soul by an attachment to action, Kaunteya. Know, on the other hand, that tamas arises from ignorance and deludes the embodied souls; it binds through absentmindedness, sloth, and sleep, Bhārata. Sattva attaches one to joy, rajas to activity, Bhārata; tamas attaches one to negligence by obfuscating knowledge.

The production of the three guṇas from prakṛti again constitutes a descending hierarchy of qualities or states that ranges from the subtlety and purity of the reality constituted by sattva to the gross materiality of tamas-constituted reality. Sattva, usually translated purity or goodness, while belonging to material nature actually mediates between the two orders of reality. Its natural tendencies, as the expression of purity, are illuminating

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1 For example, Zaeohner notes that in classical Śāmkhya and in much of the didactic portions of the Mahābhārata, buddhi, whose ultimate function is to integrate the whole personality in the self, is conceived as constituted predominantly of sattva, and the two are sometimes identified. Bhagavad-Gītā, p. 22 f.
and salubrious; thus its predominance increases being and naturally facilitates a movement toward self.\textsuperscript{1} Rajas, passion or energy, expresses desire and attachment and moves one to action and involvement in the world. Tamas, symbolized by the color black, is the product of ignorance and constitutes all that is heavy, dark, slothful, and inert. The dynamic interweaving of these guṇas in the constitution of the phenomenal world translates into a shifting predominance of sattva, rajas, or tamas. The condition constituted by the predominance of sattva over rajas and tamas is characterized, for example, by an increase of knowledge from all sources. The predominance of rajas is characterized by greed, efforts, and endeavors for different types of action, and the rise of passions, emotions, and desires. The predominance of tamas over sattva and rajas produces ignorance, sloth, errors, delusions, false beliefs, etc.\textsuperscript{2}

The fundamental importance of the doctrine of the three guṇas for the religio-philosophical paradigm of the Bhagavadgītā is indicated by the functions attributed to them in the poem: the guṇas bind the self to the phenomenal world: as māyā, they stand between God and humankind, deluding and blinding the latter to the true nature of reality; through their dynamic interaction, the guṇas determine the characteristic qualities of all states, mental and material, and all spheres of activity in the phenomenal world; and

\textsuperscript{1} See Dasgupta, \textit{History}, p. 462.

\textsuperscript{2} Dasgupta, \textit{History}, p. 462.
finally, the three guṇas represent the unique principles of action in the phenomenal world, the sole agents and causes of activity.

Bhagavadgītā 13.21 asserts that "...Puruṣa residing within Prakṛti experiences the guṇas that spring from Prakṛti: his involvement with the guṇas is the cause of births in either high wombs or low ones."¹ Each of the three guṇas binds the self in a manner consistent with its nature. Even sattva, which is naturally one and whose predominance facilitates the movement toward self, binds this self with an attachment to knowledge and joy.² Rajas binds the self with egocentric attachment to action, and tamas overcomes the illumination of knowledge and binds the self with attachment to negligence, carelessness, and sloth.³ The only means of breaking this bondage entertained in the Bhagavadgītā is expressed at 14.19-20: "When a man of insight perceives that no one but the guṇas acts and knows the one who transcends the guṇas, he ascends to my being. By transcending these three guṇas, which are the sources of the body, the embodied soul rids himself of the miseries of birth, death, and old age and becomes immortal."

The second function of the guṇas, as māyā, is to delude humankind, and to obscure the true nature of reality. Reference has been made to the fact that the Bhagavadgītā understands māyā not only as a creative power synonymous with material nature, but also as an uncanny power or a divine

¹ See also Gītā 14.5-9, cited above.
² Ibid.
³ Ibid.
illusion that, through the three guṇas, deludes and distracts humankind from a recognition of the essential nature of self and of God. According to the Gītā, "Confused by the conflicts that spring from desire and hatred, all creatures in creation are duped into total delusion..."¹ Again, "This entire world is deluded by these three conditions of being which derive from the guṇas, and thus it fails to recognize me who am in all eternity beyond the guṇas."² The illusion created by the guṇas is the deluded misconception of a fundamental unity or blending of self and body in the phenomenal world. According to the Bhagavadgītā, the wise individual should strive to recognize the distinction between prakṛti and puruṣa, and to transcend the guṇas in the achievement of release.

Third, through their dynamic interweaving and shifting predominance in the constitution of the phenomenal world, the guṇas determine the characteristic qualities of all states, mental and material, and all spheres of activity. On the microcosmic level, this means that all human individuality and personality is reducible to the determining interplay of sattva, rajas, and tamas. All temperaments, sentiments, tendencies, virtues, and actions ultimately correspond to these fundamental constituents of material nature.³ In practical application of this doctrine, the Bhagavadgītā exhaustively categorizes states and actions with reference to the tripartite division of

¹ Gītā 7.27. Both desire and hatred are held to arise from rajas at Gītā 3.37.
² Gītā 7.13.
³ Lamotte, Notes, p. 67f.
determining qualities.\textsuperscript{1} Actions and states under the influence of sattva, which represents the moral and supermoral planes of experience, are referred to as sāttvika; those under the influence of rajas, the ordinary mixed and normal plane, as rājasa; and those that suffer the influence of tamas, which represents the inferior and immoral characteristics of experience, as tāmasa.\textsuperscript{2} Thus, for example, religious inclinations are described as being of a threefold nature.\textsuperscript{3} Those of a sāttvika nature render worship to the gods, those of a rājasa nature worship sprites and monsters, and those of a tāmasa nature worship ghosts and ghouls. Again, sāttvika sacrifices are those performed solely out of reverence for the scriptural injunctions and from a pure sense of duty, without any desire for worldly or heavenly goods. Rājasa sacrifices are performed for the realization of benefits or for reasons of personal vanity and pride. Tāmasa sacrifices are performed with improper faith, improper ceremonials, and in disregard for Vedic injunctions.\textsuperscript{4}

Finally, the guṇas represent the unique principles of action in the phenomenal world, the sole agents and causes of activity: "...actions are performed by the three forces of nature, but, deluded by self-attribution, one

\textsuperscript{1} See esp. Gītā 17.1-22; 18.7-39.

\textsuperscript{2} Dasgupta, History, pp. 468-70.

\textsuperscript{3} Gītā 17.2-4; 11-13.

\textsuperscript{4} In addition, the Gītā lists in groups of three: caste at 4.13; caste duty at 18.42ff.; doctrines at 18.20-22; acts at 18.23-25; agents at 18.26-28; intelligence and will at 18.30-35; renunciation at 18.4-6; beliefs at 17.2-6; alms at 17.20-22; and pleasure at 18.37-39.
thinks: 'I did it!' But he who knows the principles that govern the distribution of those forces and their actions knows that the forces are operating on the forces..."¹ In addition, the perpetual activity of the guṇas as agents in the phenomenal world negates the possibility of inaction. Humankind is at the mercy of the guṇas that not only determine one's nature, but constrain one to act even against one's will: "...no one who has a body can renounce all acts completely...no one lives even for a moment without doing some act, for the three forces of nature cause everyone to act, willy-nilly."²

In the atheistic system of classical Sāmkhya, the dualism between prakṛti and puruṣa is ultimate. Thus, Sāmkhya thought locates the condition of release in the separation of material nature and spirit, and the eternal isolation of the individual puruṣa. The Bhagavadgītā, however, adapts its Sāmkhya-based cosmology to a theistic perspective in which the antagonism of these irreconcilable metaphysical principles is understood to operate only penultimately, at the cosmological level. Ultimately, both prakṛti and puruṣa are referred to the divine dimension and the transcendent unity of God in which they are grounded. For example, reference has been made to the Gītā's conception of prakṛti and incarnate puruṣa as the two natures of God at 7.4ff.

¹ Gītā 3.27 f. See also 14.19.

² Gītā 18.11; 3.5. This somewhat detailed explication of the nature of prakṛti in the Bhagavadgītā surpasses the purpose of this section, which is to demonstrate its irreducible reality in the thought of the Gītā, and its influence on the nature of Krśṇa as avatāra. The consideration of Krśṇa's soteriological significance below will require an understanding of the nature and functions of prakṛti; hence, it has seemed advisable to provide an explication in this context.
In the same way that all creatures originate in these two natures as in a womb, prakṛti and puruṣa originate in God. In reference to his two natures, Kṛṣṇa urges Arjuna to "Realize that all creatures have their source therein: I am the origin of this entire universe and its dissolution. There is nothing at all that transcends me, Dhanamjaya: all this is strung on me as strands of pearls are strung on a string."¹ Again, Gitā 7.12 attributes the origin of the three constituents of material nature to God: "Know that all conditions of being, whether influenced by sattva, rajas, and tamas, come from me; but I am not in them; they are in me." Rāmānuja interprets verse 12b on the basis of his metaphorical conception of the universe as the body of God. By analogy with individual material nature that is possessed and employed by the self, all conditions of being, as manifestations of the three guṇas, are possessed and employed by God as God's cosmic body. In distinction from the individual self, however, God depends on nothing, and becomes involved with contingent existence purely as sport, or līlā.²

In consequence of the Bhagavadgītā's theistic perspective in which the collective universe of material nature and spirit originates in God, the principle conceptions of cosmogony in the poem are as well referred to Kṛṣṇa's will and agency.³ Gitā 14.3-4 symbolizes the divine creative process as

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¹ Gitā 7.6-7.
² Rāmānuja, Śrī Bhagavad-Gītā with Śrī (ānunīchārya's Visishtādvaita-Commentary, p. 238.
³ See for example Gitā 9.8. At 8.18-19, cosmogony is conceived as purely material, without even the conception of God as the overseer of the process.
a union between God and Brahman: "The Large Brahman is womb to me: in it I plant the seed, and thence the origination of all beings takes effect, Bhārata. The Large Brahman is the original womb from which the forms that are born from any wombs ultimately issue, Kaunteya, while I am the father who bestows the fruit." In this passage Krṣṇa is identified with the male principle or seed, the Supreme Self who fecundates the female principle of receptive matter. Curiously, the female principle in this passage is identified with Brahman, and not called by the usual name of prakṛti. This occurrence, which reflects the Gitā's tendency to subordinate Brahman to Krṣṇa, establishes an equivalence between prakṛti and Brahman in a cosmological context. Thus, instead of an evolution of beings out of matter independently of God, or with God merely as the overseer of the process, Krṣṇa here plants his seed in the womb of his own material nature, and from this union all beings evolve.

This passage most clearly resembles the purely Sāmkhyan conception of cosmogony, even though the subsequent verses refer to the unmanifest beyond the unmanifest, or Krṣṇa as the Imperishable Brahman. See Edgerton, The Bhagavad Gitā, p. 153. Gitā 9.7f. refers to God as the overseer of the cosmogonic process, and God's material nature as the matrix from which all creatures evolve and dissolve. Finally, Gitā 14.3-4 conceives the creative activity as a union between God and Brahman, which in this passage means material nature. See below for further explication of this passage.

1 See also Gitā 7.10.

2 See Gitā 9.8.

3 See also Gitā 5.10.
Cosmology and Avatāra

The implications of the Bhagavadgītā’s cosmological speculations for the nature of Kṛṣṇa stem from the fact that in the Gitā the avatāra event is conceived as a microcosmic parallel to the creation of the universe. In the conception of the Bhagavadgītā, therefore, the avatāra event, as a special creative act of God, shares both the creative process and the reality of the macrocosmic creation. This parallel is evidenced by the fact that the metaphor at Gitā 14.3–4 amplifies not only the statement of macrocosmic creation at Gitā 9.8, but as well the classical statement of avatāra doctrine at Gitā 4.6. Both passages express the same idea; that is, by consorting with or subduing his own material nature, Kṛṣṇa produces all beings.¹ At Gitā 4.6, Kṛṣṇa states that "...by my creative energy I consort with Nature—which is mine—and come to be in time." Again, at Gitā 9.8, he states that "Subduing my own material Nature ever again I emanate this whole host of beings..."² Zaeher notes that it is this

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¹ The term employed at Gitā 4.6 is adhiṣṭhāya: to consort with, govern, etc. Zaeher cites various interpretations of the term and parallel usages from the Upaniṣads. The term employed at 9.8 is avaraṣṭabhyā, although one manuscript reads avaraṣṭhāya. As noted by Zaeher, the underlying idea is the same at both verses, and both exhibit a sexual connotation that is made explicit at 14.3. See Zaeher, The Bhagavad-Gītā, ad loc.

² Translations by Zaeher, The Bhagavad-Gītā, ad loc.
parallel process of consorting with or subduing that is interpreted by reference to the union of God as both seed and womb at Gitā 14.3.¹

The Bhagavadgītā's concept of avatāra shares not only the process of creation, but its reality as well. It has been argued that the appearance of the Bhagavadgītā antedated the Vedāntic conception of māyā as world illusion, and that its conception reflects an earlier stage of development in which the term retains the Vedic meanings of both creative power and deceit. Consequently, māyā in the Gitā is understood primarily as synonymous with material nature. At Gitā 7.14,15 and 18.61, māyā is described as synonymous with the three guṇas- sattva, rajas, and tamas- that together constitute the material universe. On the basis of this conception of māyā, Dasgupta concludes that while the Gitā uses the term in the sense of inscrutable power, it is never conceived as the power of illusory or magical creation. The Gitā does know māyā as an uncanny power or a divine illusion that, through the constituents of material nature, blinds humankind to the true nature of reality.² The illusion referred to by the Gitā, however, consists in the deluded misconception of a fundamental union or blending of prakṛti and puruṣa in the phenomenal world. The wise individual should strive to recognize the eternal distinction between nature and spirit, and to transcend the guṇas in the achievement of release; but this distinction in no way implies the nonexistence of prakṛti. In sum, the Bhagavadgītā preserves the ambiguous conception of māyā in the

¹ Ibid., p. 352.
² Gitā 7.12ff.
Vedic tradition as both divine and demonic. Māyā as material nature is divine in that it is dependent on God, the expression of creative power, and demonic in that it functions to bewilder and confuse, and to stand between God and humankind. In neither instance, however, does the Bhagavadgītā contemplate the notion of māyā as illusory or magical creation. Consequently, when Kṛśṇa declares at Gītā 4.6 that he consorts with his material nature by means of his māyā in order to take on existence, the term must be understood in reference to his creative power, and not to the power of illusory creation.

Finally, the Bhagavadgītā’s conception of material nature itself was formulated on the basis of early Sāmkhya cosmological speculations that exhibited realist tendencies and a marked interest in the material universe and psychology. Consequently, prakṛti in the Bhagavadgītā must be understood in reference to the metaphysical substratum of the material universe, an eternal, independent principle that is dualistically opposed to puruṣa. While the manifest nature that evolves from prakṛti through the three guṇas and the categories of cognitive and material nature is contingent and cyclical, it nevertheless possesses irreducible reality in the Sāmkhya system. Thus, according to the Bhagavadgītā, by subduing or consorting with this material nature, Kṛśṇa realistically assumes human form. In distinction from contingent human birth, however, which is determined by the binding characteristics of the guṇas and the inexorable effects of karmāna, Kṛśṇa takes on existence by his own free will, whenever the need arises. Kṛśṇa is neither
bound nor limited by his works, which he undertakes without attachment and for the welfare of the world.\footnote{See Gîtā 3.22-24: "I have no task at all to accomplish in these three worlds, Pārtha. I have nothing to obtain that I do not have already. Yet I move in action. If I were not to move in action, untiringly, at all times, Pārtha, people all around would follow my lead. these people would collapse if I did not act; I would be the author of miscegenation; I would assassinate these creatures." See also: 4.14; 9.8-10.}

In sum, then, when considered within the context of the religio-philosophical paradigm of the Bhagavadgîtâ, or in relation to the Gîtâ’s conceptions of mâyâ, prakṛti, and the parallel nature of the avatāra event with the macrocosmic creation, avatāra in the Bhagavadgîtâ must be understood as the free yet realistic incarnation of Krṣṇa for the welfare of the world.

The Incarnate Nature of Krṣṇa: Divine Characteristics

If it is true that avatāra in the Bhagavadgîtâ is realistic, it is equally true that the portrayal of Krṣṇa’s incarnate state in the poem exhibits none of the kenotic features of incarnation so prevalent in Christian thought. The classical statement of kenotic incarnation in the New Testament is found in the christological hymn of Philippians 2.5-11, according to which the preexistent Christ emptied himself, or voluntarily submitted to a limitation of the majesty and prerogatives of deity, and assumed all the conditions and consequences of human life, even to death. As discussed above, the act of incarnation in the Bhagavadgîtâ is conceived as the subduing of material nature by God, an act that, in the thought of the Gîtâ, in no way necessitates such limitation of deity.
Parrinder correctly recognizes that Krṣṇa in the Bhagavadgītā never really divests himself of the divine prerogatives and fully assumes the conditions of human existence. He quotes with approval the characterization of avatāra by Zimmer as the calm and impassive descent of deity, who, after subduing the forces of evil, "withdraws from the phenomenal sphere as calmly, solemnly, and willingly as he descended." Moreover, God's avatāra never becomes the seeming victim of the demonic powers who are engaged in combat, "but is triumphant in his passage, from beginning to end." According to Parrinder, again, the avatāra doctrines of Indian thought are weak in historicity. The Krṣṇa cycle may well be founded on an historical figure, Krṣṇa the son of Vasudeva and Devakī, sprung from the Sātvata branch of the Yadu tribe, but its legends have been so worked into an ideal pattern of theophany, a manifestation of the divine in finite form, that little historical content remains. Consequently, while Krṣṇa in the Bhagavadgītā exhibits

1 Avatar, pp. 226ff., and passim. It must again be emphasized, however, that Parrinder's theological bias toward Christian Incarnation causes him to exaggerate the consequences of this fact, and to deny to avatāra doctrine the status of incarnation. According to Parrinder, "The successive Avatars of Hinduism are theophanies, manifestations of the divine in visible form." On the other hand, "The Incarnation does not appear in all forms, but only in those which are consistent with humanity, life and death. Christ 'emptied himself' and lived and died on earth, and yet at the same time he is the eternal Word 'in whom all things consist.'" See pp. 226, 279.

2 Ibid. See Zimmer, Philosophies of India, p. 390.

3 Avatar, p. 226f. In referring to this integration of the Krṣṇa cycle into an ideal pattern of theophany, Parrinder ostensibly alludes to certain historical developments that certainly influenced the conception of avatāra in Indian thought. For example, however be resolved the question of Krṣṇa's historicity, he was worshiped as divine in his own right before his assimilation to the
some human traits, these are mixed with and so dominated by his divine characteristics that any notion of Kṛṣṇa's true humanity is lost. Concerning the nature of Kṛṣṇa in the Bhagavadgītā, Parrinder concludes that "There is never any suggestion that Krishna was a man among men, for he could not really divest himself of divine power."²

Throughout the Bhagavadgītā, the divine freedom, knowledge, and power of Kṛṣṇa are revealed even through his incarnate nature. Reference has been made to the fact that, in the Bhagavadgītā, Kṛṣṇa takes on existence by his own free will, whenever the need arises.³ There is no inexorable law of karman with determining power over his existence. Kṛṣṇa is neither bound nor limited by his works, which he undertakes without attachment and for the welfare of the world. "Actions do not stick to me, for I have no yearning for the fruits of my actions..."⁴ In this, as in other aspects, the freedom of the divine avatāra participates in the freedom of the transcendent God who.

Visṇu cycle as an avatāra. See Hill, The Bhagavadgītā, p. 4f.; pp. 9ff. In addition, reference has been made to the fact that the avatāra doctrine was expanded by means of the assimilation of certain ancient myths of divine descent and soteriological exploit. While the Bhagavadgītā mentions no heroic exploits of Kṛṣṇa, the legend of his slaying the demon Kaṁsa was known around the time of its composition. Reference to this legend is made in the Mahābhāṣya of Patañjali, ca. 150 BCE. These developments could scarcely have avoided influencing the conception of the Kṛṣṇa avatāra.

¹ See for example Gītā 11.41f.

² Avatar, p. 227.

³ Gītā 4.6f.

⁴ Gītā 4.14.
though changeless in timeless essence, is perpetually active, creating and sustaining the worlds. "I have no task at all to accomplish in these three worlds, Pārtha. I have nothing to obtain that I do not have already. Yet I move in action. If I were not to move in action, untiringly, at all times, Pārtha, people all around would follow my lead. These people would collapse if I did not act; I would be the author of miscegenation; I would assassinate these creatures."¹

At the same passage in which Kṛṣṇa proclaims the freedom of his successive incarnations, which he undertakes for the welfare of the world, Kṛṣṇa reveals that, in distinction from Arjuna, he possesses a full knowledge of all his previous incarnations.² This claim to a plenary knowledge of previous incarnations is not in itself a claim to omniscience. In Indian thought, this type of enhanced memory is broadly understood as an epiphenomenon of high spiritual achievement. For example, in commenting on this passage, Rāmānuja can explain Kṛṣṇa's claim to have taught yoga to the primal ancestors of mankind by appealing to this type of knowledge, without reference to his divinity.³ Once again, however, a distinction must be made in the case of Kṛṣṇa. Whereas the sage achieves this type of knowledge by transcending the bondage of samsāra, Kṛṣṇa, whose successive incarnations are freely undertaken, has never been bound. Consequently, the plenary knowledge of previous incarnations claimed by Kṛṣṇa implies no

¹ Gītā 3.22-24.
² Gītā 4.5-8.
³ Sri Bhagavad-Gītā with Sri Rāmānuja Chārya's Visishtādvaita-Commentary, p. 136.
previous limitations and must be understood as a reflection of the infinite knowledge of God.

Kṛṣṇa’s claim to divine omniscience becomes explicit at Gitā 7.24-26. In this passage, Kṛṣṇa contrasts the deluded misconception of his nature asserted by the unenlightened with his true, transcendent being. To the unenlightened, deluded by the māyā of material nature, Kṛṣṇa is conceived as any other mortal who comes to be and passes away in time.¹ Clouded by the illusion of his yoga, they do not recognize Kṛṣṇa’s transcendent being, which is unborn, eternal, and incomparable. At the conclusion of this passage, in stark contrast to the misguided apprehensions of the ignorant, Kṛṣṇa claims divine omniscience. “Since they are clouded by the illusion of my yoga, I am opaque to all, and the muddled world does not recognize me as unborn and immortal. Arjuna, I know the creatures of past, present, and future, but no one knows me.”

Kṛṣṇa’s omniscience is again attested by his revelations throughout the Bhagavadgitā that are conceived as the self-revelation of the transcendent Godhead. God is revealed in all aspects of the divine life. The creative power and activity of God are revealed throughout the poem, but nowhere more poignantly than at chapter nine, where Kṛṣṇa claims that “All this world is strung on me in the form of the Unmanifest; all creatures exist in me, but I do not exist in them.”² Again, at 9.17-19: “I am the father of this world, its

¹ See also, Gitā 2.28.
² Gitā 9.4.
mother, the Placer and Grandfather, the object of knowledge, the strainer, the syllable OM, the Ré, sàman, and yajus; goal, master, lord, witness, abode, refuge, friend, source and destruction and continuity, container, imperishable seed. I shine and withhold rain or pour it out, I am immortality and death, the existent and the non-existent, Arjuna." In addition, God is revealed in a soteriological role as incarnate,\(^1\) and in the eternal attributes: "The Sage and Preceptor primordial, more minute than an atom, creator of all, of form unimaginable, hued like the sun at the back of the night..."\(^2\) "I am the beginning, middle, and end of the creations, Arjuna, the wisdom of the self among all wisdom...I am everlasting Time, the Placer who looks everywhere, I am all-snatching Death, and the Source of things yet to be."\(^3\) Finally, God is revealed in both immanence and transcendence as the absolute principle of self, Brahman, and as the transcendent Godhead, the Supreme Soul of Gîtâ 15.17-18 that transcends even Brahman, the Imperishable Unmanifest: "For I am the foundation of brahman, of the immortal and intransient, of the sempiternal Law, and of perfect bliss."\(^4\) Again, "There is yet a third Person, whom they call the Supreme Soul, the everlasting lord who permeates and sustains the three worlds. Inasmuch as I have passed beyond the transient and transcend the

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\(^1\) See above, and especially Gîtâ 4.6-8; 7.24; 9.11.

\(^2\) Gîtâ 8.9.

\(^3\) Gîtâ 10.33-34.

\(^4\) Gîtâ 14.27.
intransient, therefore I am, in world and in Veda, renowned as the Supreme Person."  

Finally, Kṛṣṇa's transfiguration, which is recounted at chapter eleven, shows that in his incarnate state he possesses not only the divine freedom and knowledge, but power as well. This chapter represents the climax of the Bhagavadgītā in which Kṛṣṇa reveals himself in all of his terrifying majesty as the Unending Lord God, the repose of the world, what is and is not and what is beyond it. Arjuna has heard from Kṛṣṇa the origin and dissolution of the phenomenal universe, and his self-revelation as the transcendent God, but, not content with this account, Arjuna requests to see the highest sovereign form of God. In response, after according to Arjuna a celestial eye with which to look upon the divine sight, Kṛṣṇa transforms himself by means of his power of yoga, and reveals his supreme supernal form. The remainder of the chapter recounts Arjuna's vision of this transcendent form in which the universe in all its diversity is perceived as Kṛṣṇa's body. "In that body of the God of Gods the Pāṇḍava saw the entire universe centered, in its infinite differentiations." At the completion of the vision, with Kṛṣṇa revealed not only as the origin but the dissolution of the universe, that is, as all-consuming

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2 Gītā 11.37.

3 Gītā 11.1-10; see also 11.47.

4 Gītā 11.13.
Time, wrecker of the world's destruction, resolved to swallow up the worlds, Arjuna recoils in fearful ecstasy, and Kṛṣṇa graciously resumes his human form.

Despite the divine characteristics of the incarnate Kṛṣṇa, it is clear that the Bhagavadgītā does not conceive of him in docetic fashion. Reference has been made to several passages that indicate a veiling of the divine by the human characteristics of Kṛṣṇa. It is simply assumed in the Bhagavadgītā that Kṛṣṇa participates in the full dynamic of human life: he eats, drinks, sleeps, sports, and is even mistaken by Arjuna as a mere comrade. Indeed, in the aftermath of his graciously accorded vision of Kṛṣṇa in his universal form, Arjuna requests Kṛṣṇa's indulgence for having treated him as a mere human.¹ In the Bhagavadgītā, however, the relationship between the divine and human characteristics of the incarnate Kṛṣṇa is conceived on the basis of māyā, according to which his divinity is concealed rather than truly limited by the incarnation. To the unenlightened, deluded by the māyā of material nature, Kṛṣṇa is conceived as any other mortal who comes to be and passes away in time. Clouded by the illusion of his yoga, they do not recognize Kṛṣṇa's transcendent being that is unborn, eternal, and incomparable.²

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¹ Gītā 11.41f.

² Gītā 7.24-26.
Incarnation in the Bhagavadgītā: Kenosis as a Pseudo-problem

The question of kenotic incarnation can be legitimately posed to the doctrine of avatāra in the Bhagavadgītā if it is conceived in its most general sense as the question of the extent to which the incarnate Kṛṣṇa assumes the conditions, limitations, and consequences of human existence. This is obviously true in a cross-cultural study in which the range of phenomena to be compared necessarily conditions the categories of analysis. It has been pointed out, however, that Parrinder adopts for his comparative study of avatāra and incarnation a specifically Christian model of kenotic incarnation as the norm for all comparable religious phenomena; consequently, he evaluates the Indian notion of avatāra on the basis of its conformity to the Christian model. In consequence of this approach, Parrinder’s study obscures the specific significance of avatāra doctrine in the Indian tradition and implicitly introduces a pseudo-problem into the theological context of the Bhagavadgītā. Otherwise stated, he searches in vain for the equivalent of a christology of humiliation in the Indian doctrine of avatāra.

One of the principle functions of a paradigm in the Kuhnian sense is to provide not only the hermeneutical context for its constitutive elements, but as well to define the scope of admissible problem and solution sets. Consequently, in order to achieve an understanding of the specific meaning of avatāra in the Bhagavadgītā, the question of full incarnation must be integrated into the religio-philosophical paradigm of the Gītā and interpreted
on the basis of its categories. While the doctrine of kenosis in Christian thought constitutes an adequate solution to a specific set of soteriological and christological problems, the theological commitments presupposed by its development are lacking in the paradigm of the Bhagavadgītā. In addition, the somewhat exalted nature of Kṛṣṇa in the Gītā is consistent with its conception of soteriology and the role of divine revealer assumed by Kṛṣṇa in the poem. Consequently, the doctrine of kenotic incarnation as it developed in a specifically Christian context does not constitute an adequate solution to any problem posed by the Bhagavadgītā, and represents therefore a pseudo-problem.

The Christian doctrine of kenosis, as with primitive christological reflection in general, developed from a soteriological basis and represents an attempt to understand the salvific significance of Jesus. Kenosis specifically attempts to understand the salvific death of Jesus as the culmination of a process of self-emptying, or obedient self-abasement, that is extended backwards from the humiliation of the cross to the glory of the preexistent

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Christ.\(^1\) This close correlation between christology and soteriology in the origin of the Christian concept of kenosis necessarily presupposes the Judaeo-Christian concept of Heilsgeschichte, or salvation as the history of God’s intervention in human affairs, and the convergence of this soteriological event with the person of the incarnate savior on the cross. In short, the kenotic emphasis in Christianity on the full assumption of the conditions, limitations, and consequences of humanity by the preexistent Christ is both dependent on and motivated by its conception of salvation. In Christianity, the response to the question of full incarnation carries serious soteriological implications.

In the Bhagavadgītā, as will shortly be shown, salvation is conceived not in historical terms as the soteriological intervention of God in and through the Christ event, but rather in ontological terms as the realization of an essential unity with God. In this context, the avatāra of God functions primarily as a divine revealer, imparting to humankind a knowledge of God and the way of ultimate release. Consequently, the incarnate nature of God’s avatāras is elaborated from a metaphysical basis, and not, as in Christian kenotic christology, from a soteriological basis. The proper response to this question in the Bhagavadgītā is contingent on the poem’s conception of cosmology and divine māyā, and thus carries no serious soteriological implications.

\(^1\) So Cullmann, Ibid., pp. 174-181. Concerning the christological hymn of Philippians 2.5-11, Cullmann asserts that "We do not have to do here with speculation about 'natures', but with Heilsgeschichte...the Heavenly Man, who in his pre-existence represented the true image of God, humbled himself in obedience [expressed in a double way: in becoming flesh, and in humbling himself unto death, i.e. accepting the role of the servant of God] and now receives the equality with God he did not grasp as a 'robbery'." See p. 181.
implications. This fact is evidenced by Śaṅkara's attitude toward avatāra. It has been pointed out that Śaṅkara interprets avatāra as an explicitly docetic phenomenon. In his commentary on the Bhagavadgītā, he explains that Kṛṣṇa is eternal and unborn and yet is involved with the world of his own volition, descending by virtue of the fact that he controls its constituents, which are māyā in the Vedāntic sense of illusion. Under these conditions, Kṛṣṇa comes into existence as if embodied, as if born, by his own māyā and not really according to the way of humankind. Despite this fact, however, Śaṅkara's interpretation implies no doubts concerning the soteriological effectiveness of the divine incarnations.¹

Second, the somewhat exalted nature of Kṛṣṇa in the Bhagavadgītā is consistent with his role as a divine revealer, and with the conception of salvation as the realization of unity with God. In consequence of this almost exclusive emphasis on revelation and divine presence in the person of Kṛṣṇa, the Bhagavadgītā tends to neglect the narrative framework of his life and his human characteristics. While it is true that, in the context of the Mahābhārata, the Bhagavadgītā presents Kṛṣṇa as a central figure in the great Bhārata war, this narrative framework is but the reference point for the revelations of the divine avatāra. In distinction from the later Purānic tradition, the Gitā expresses no interest in the birth or childhood of Kṛṣṇa, nor does it provide any account of his death. In the Bhagavadgītā, incarnation is

¹ See Robert W. Stevenson, "The Concept of Avatāra in Ancient and Modern Commentaries on the Bhagavadgītā," p. 61.
not conceived as a soteriological event as in the Christian tradition, but rather as the occasion for divine revelation.

In sum, then, the question of total incarnation in the Bhagavadgītā does not presuppose the problem set of New Testament christology, and the implications of its position must be evaluated in relation to its specific theological and philosophical commitments. In clear contrast to Christian thought, Kṛṣṇa's nature in the Bhagavadgītā is elaborated on a metaphysical basis and is clearly distinguished from his soteriological role. Consequently, the position of the Bhagavadgītā concerning the incarnate nature of Kṛṣṇa does not carry the serious soteriological implications of the Christian doctrine of kenotic incarnation.

The Soteriological Significance of Kṛṣṇa

Reference was made at chapter two above to the fact that the Bhagavadgītā forms part of a large historical development in the Hindu religious tradition. In general, the Gītā participates in a theistic reaction to the tendencies of early Upaniṣadic speculation and represents a reassertion of the beliefs and sentiments of the Indian religious spirit.\(^1\) More precisely, it

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\(^1\) See J. A. B. van Buitenen, Rāmānuja on the Bhagavadgītā, p. 4. The earlier Upaniṣads sought a single, unifying principle that they eventually identified with brahman and ātman, that was attainable only by immediate intuitive comprehension, and in which individuals escape from samsāra. A reaction against this speculative current became marked in some later Upaniṣads, especially the Śvetāsvatara, but found its most remarkable expression in the Bhagavadgītā. These documents reacted against the tendency to divorce religion from its natural object—God.
was suggested that the religio-philosophical paradigm of the Bhagavadgītā represents a synthesis between the devotional theism of the Bhāgavata cult and the metaphysical speculations of the early Upaniṣads. This synthesis, which retains the metaphysical perspective of the Upaniṣads, effects nonetheless a significant shift from their soteriological paradigm. In the theistic context of the Bhagavadgītā, that is, the notion of divine grace is introduced into the process of salvation. In the Gītā, significant emphasis is placed on salvation as a movement of grace from God to humankind. This emphasis is reflected in the theology proper of the Bhagavadgītā, in its notion of avatāra, and in the introduction of bhakti as a means of release.¹

Lamotte has observed that it is difficult for a profound religious sentiment, a sincere mysticism, to nourish itself on a conception of the supreme as neutral, abstract, unknowable, and without attributes or history.² This, however, is precisely the case in certain Upaniṣads. According to Edgerton, most of them, particularly the earliest, do not think of Brahman in sufficiently personal terms to envision its exercising grace in saving humankind or as the object of any personal devotion.³ Consequently.

¹ Ibid. According to van Buitenen, the Bhagavadgītā opens the way to release to all by emphasizing the personal character of the deity who can be attained, not magically or mystically through knowledge, but devoutly through bhakti.

² Notes, p. 117. As Lamotte points out, the Bhagavadgītā itself recognizes this problem. At Gītā 12.5, Kṛṣṇa asserts that the attainment of release "...requires greater toil for those whose minds are directed to the Unmanifest, for their goal is not manifest and the embodied attain it with hardship."

³ The Bhagavad Gītā, p. 128.
primitive Vedānta accords but limited scope to the notion of divine grace, and release is conceived as a movement of the individual ātman to the universal Self, Brahman.¹

In certain late documents, however, contrary to the prevailing spirit of the Upaniṣads, the notion of divine grace is introduced into the process of salvation, and bhakti is anticipated as a soteriological means.² The Svetāśvatara Upaniṣad, for example, speaks of release coming 'by the grace of God' and recommends bhakti, or devotion to God, as a means for its attainment.³ Again, the Kaṭha Upaniṣad speaks of 'beholding the greatness of the ātman by the grace of the Creator' and, shortly thereafter, asserts that this ātman, now understood in a universal sense, is not to be attained by instruction, by

¹ Lamotte, Notes, p. 118.

² So Edgerton, The Bhagavad Gītā, p. 129. Reference is made to the Kaṭha and Svetāśvatara Upaniṣads, both of which were known and employed by the author of the Bhagavadgītā.

³ Svetāśvatara Upaniṣad 6.21, 23: "Through the power of his penance and through the grace of God has the wise Svetāśvatara truly proclaimed Brahmān, the highest and holiest, to the best of ascetics, as approved by the company of Rishis...If these truths have been told to a high-minded man, who feels the highest devotion for God, and for his Guru as for God, then they will shine forth,—then they will shine forth indeed." Translated by F. Max Müller, The Upaniṣads, in two parts, part 2, The Sacred Books of the East, volume XV, translated by various Oriental scholars and edited by F. Max Müller, new Dover edition, unabridged and unaltered (New York: Dover Publications, 1962), pp. 266-267.
intellect, or by much holy learning; rather it is to be attained only by the one chosen by the Creator; for this one the Creator’s own form is revealed.1

In the Bhagavadgītā, whose thought is dependent on both the Svetāsvatara and Kaṭha Upaniṣads, the notion of God’s grace active in the process of salvation becomes prominent. In contrast to Brahman, God does not rest passively in transcendent perfection, indifferent to all that goes on outside of the Godhead, but rather is graciously inclined toward humankind.2 Perhaps the clearest expression of the movement of God’s grace in the Bhagavadgītā is found at 12.6-8: "Those who cast off all their works on Me, solely intent on Me, and meditate on Me in spiritual exercise, leaving no room for others, [and so really] do Me honour, these will I lift up on high out of the ocean of recurring death, and that right soon, for their thoughts are fixed on Me. On Me alone let your mind dwell, stir up your soul to enter Me; thenceforth in very truth in Me you will find your home."3 Again, at Gītā 10.10-11, Krṣṇa announces: “To those who, always yoked, love me joyfully I

1 Kaṭha Upaniṣad 2.20, 23: "The Self, smaller than the small, greater than great, is hidden in the heart of that creature. A man who is free from desires and free from grief, sees the majesty of the Self by the grace of the Creator...that Self cannot be gained by the Veda, nor by understanding, nor by much learning. He whom the Self chooses, by him the Self can be gained. The Self chooses him (his body) as his own." Ibid., p. 11. Cf. Gītā 11.47-48: "Out of grace for you, Arjuna, have I revealed by my power of Yoga my highest form, full of fire, universal, primeval, unending, which no one but you has ever beheld. Not with Veda or rites, not with study or gifts, not with sacrifice or with awesome tapas can I in this world be beheld in this form by any but you, great hero of Kuru."

2 Lamotte, Notes, p. 118.

3 Translation by Zaehner, The Bhagavad-Gītā, p. 327.
grant the singleness of mind by which they attain to me. Residing in their own very being I compassionately dispel the darkness of their ignorance with the shining lamp of knowledge.¹ In short, God in the Bhagavadgītā is not only the divine source of the world, but as well the savior of humankind to whom God promises release from the endless cycle of saṃsāra.

Nowhere is the shift from the soteriological paradigm of the Upaniṣads more evident than in the Bhagavadgītā's introduction of avatāra doctrine.² According to Dasgupta, its introduction signifies that the revelation of God in the Bhagavadgītā becomes concrete and living. In other words, in distinction from certain tendencies of Upaniṣadic speculation, "...the Gītā is not a treatise of systematic philosophy, but a practical course of introduction to life and conduct, conveyed by God himself in the form of Kṛṣṇa to his devotee, Arjuna. In the Gītā abstract philosophy melts down to an insight into the nature of practical life and conduct...For the God in the Gītā is not a God of abstract philosophy or theology, but a God who could be a man and be capable of all personal relations."³ In consequence of this shift in the conception of salvation in the Bhagavadgītā and its expression in the doctrine of avatāra, Kṛṣṇa's divine incarnations are best understood as movements of God's grace. In contrast to the Upaniṣads, which recognize no figure who could occupy the place held by a Buddha or a Jesus for their followers, Kṛṣṇa in the

¹ See as well Gītā 4.11: 9.26-32; and 18.65.


³ Ibid.
Bhagavadgītā is recognized as a personal savior, the incarnation of God who has come "...to play a special part in the drama of life, and to teach his fellow-players how best they may win through the 'thicket of delusion' to the 'calm bliss' of perfect truth that is himself."\(^1\) A more precise understanding of the soteriological significance of Kṛṣṇa in the Bhagavadgītā, however, necessarily involves a consideration of the extent to which the conception of salvation in the Gitā is determined by the notion of divine grace as a means of release, and of the extent to which the roles of Kṛṣṇa in the poem reflect this unique soteriological emphasis.

At the conclusion to chapter two above, reference was made to two significant consequences of the synthetic nature of the Bhagavadgītā’s religio-philosophical paradigm for both its conception of salvation and its understanding of Kṛṣṇa’s soteriological roles. First, the commitment in the Gitā to the universality of class duty and to the preservation of the four class system necessitates a two-fold conception of Kṛṣṇa’s involvement with the order of salvation: penultimately, Kṛṣṇa reveals himself as the origin and eternal guardian of the social order; ultimately, in relation to the properly soteriological concerns of the Gitā, Kṛṣṇa is revealed as the mediator of release and final union with God. In the Bhagavadgītā, God wills the preservation of the four class system that has been ordained from eternity and toward this end is revealed in the divine avatāras as its guardian and redeemer. Indeed, in the classical statement of avatāra doctrine at 4.6-8, the express purpose of avatāra

\(^{1}\) Hill, The Bhagavadgītā, p. 36.
in the Bhagavadgītā is given as the preservation of this 'law of righteousness.' Second, as previously mentioned, the Gītā's synthesis of the devotional theism of the Bhāgavata cult with the Upaniṣadic speculation on Brahman retains the general metaphysical perspective of the latter. Under this influence, the Bhagavadgītā's conception of salvation is elaborated as a type of mystical gnosis. In other words, salvation in the Gītā is not conceived as an eschatological creation, God's soteriological presence and intervention on humankind's behalf, but rather in ontological terms, the realization of an essential unity with God. Consequently, the grace of God operative in the Gītā is to a large degree an assisting grace that authenticates the unified ways of salvation available to humankind, and God's avatāras function primarily as divine revealers, imparting to humankind a knowledge of God and the way of ultimate release. In relation to this soteriological paradigm, then, Kṛṣṇa's incarnations in the Bhagavadgītā are conceived as events of revelation and mediation, but not as soteriological events in themselves.

Kṛṣṇa, Guardian of the Social Order

As previously mentioned, one point of crisis evident in the culture of Mauryan and post-Mauryan India to which the Bhagavadgītā responds concerns the status of works and required duty. The established order had in fact been under siege since the sixth century BCE when political and cultural

1 Lamotte, *Notes*, p. 87.
developments precipitated a rejection of Vedic authority and the rise of such heterodox traditions as Buddhism and Jainism. The rejection of Brahmanical restrictions during this and subsequent periods encouraged free religious speculation and the rise of numerous sects. It became a common understanding that from any class and at any time, one could abandon duty and family to join a religious or philosophical sect.¹ Lawbooks that arose during the Mauryan period witness this problem by forbidding the practice of abandoning domestic life without formal sanction and without provision for wife and family.²

This crisis situation must have continued into and even intensified during the turmoil of the post-Mauryan period. Hill maintains that the Bhagavadgītā was written during just such a time "...when men were afraid of the influence of free speculation on the restricting power of caste. Religious ideas were filtering through to lower social levels, and the 'natural duties' of the various castes were being neglected or interchanged."³ The Bhagavadgītā itself presents evidence of a debate raging at the time of its composition between the advocates of an Upaniṣadic doctrine of release by wisdom alone.


² Arthaśāstra, ch. 19. See Ibid.

³ The Bhagavadgītā, p. 23.
and the advocates of a traditional attachment to sacrifice and ascetic practice.\textsuperscript{1} The Bhagavadgītā clearly aligns itself with the tradition of ritual activity and, in response to the Upaniṣadic doctrine, attempts to raise the ancient notion of class duty to the status of a universal obligation.\textsuperscript{2}

This fundamental commitment to the performance of class duty is reflected in the Gītā’s attempt to ground the four class system metaphysically and theologically and, importantly, in the articulation of the role of Kṛṣṇa in terms of its preservation as the guardian of the eternal law.\textsuperscript{3} Metaphysically, the social order is grounded in the necessity of action as the expression of one’s nature; that is, it is grounded in the nature and function of prakṛti.\textsuperscript{4} Ultimately, however, it is God, acting through the three constituents of material nature, who represents the primal source of all order and activity.\textsuperscript{5} In sum then, the necessity and fundamental importance accorded to the four class system in the Bhagavadgītā derive from its origin in the two-fold nature of God, who both ordains its nature and continuously acts to insure its preservation.

\begin{enumerate}
\item Gītā 18.3: “Some teachers propound that all acting should be renounced, as it is all tainted; while others hold that such acts as sacrifice, donation, and ascesis are not to be renounced.” See Lamotte, Notes, pp. 94ff.
\item Ibid.
\item Gītā 11.18.
\item See Gītā 3.5, 27-29.
\item See Gītā 4.13; 9.4-5; 18.59, 61.
\end{enumerate}
The metaphysical grounding of the social order is insured by the Sāmkhya notion of necessary action that underlies the thought of the Bhagavadgītā. In considering the nature of prakṛti above it was pointed out that Sāmkhya thought conceives prakṛti in its primal state as a condition in which the three guṇas—sattva, rajas, and tamas—exist in equilibrium. The evolution of the phenomenal world from this primal state occurs by the differentiation and recombination of the guṇas in varying ratios that exclusively determine the nature and characteristics of material nature. Consequently, the boundaries of their conditioning influences are coterminous with those of the phenomenal universe itself.\textsuperscript{1} More specifically, on the microcosmic level, the dynamic interweaving and shifting predominance of the guṇas that determine the characteristic qualities of all states and spheres of activity means that all human individuality and personality is reducible to the determining interplay of the three guṇas. All temperaments, sentiments, tendencies, virtues, and actions ultimately correspond to these fundamental constituents of material nature.\textsuperscript{2} In addition, it has been pointed out that the guṇas represent the unique principles of action in the phenomenal world, the sole agents and causes of activity.\textsuperscript{3} This perpetual activity of the guṇas as agents in the phenomenal world negates any possibility of inaction. Thus "...no one who has a body can renounce all

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\textsuperscript{1} See Gītā 18.40.

\textsuperscript{2} Lamotte, Notes, p. 67f.

\textsuperscript{3} Gītā 3.27f. See also 14.19.
acts completely...no one lives even for a moment without doing some act, for
the three forces of nature cause everyone to act, willy-nilly."¹ In sum, one's
existence is contingent on the three guṇas, which not only determine one's
nature and the scope of all required duties, but constrain one to act even
against one's will. "If you self-centeredly decide that you will not fight, your
decision is meaningless anyhow: your nature will command you. Fettered by
your own task, which springs from your nature, Kaunteya, you will inevitably
do what you in your folly do not want to do, Arjuna."²

Theologically, the four class system is grounded in the fact that God,
acting through the three constituents of material nature, represents the
primal source of all order and activity in the phenomenal world. In the
theistic perspective of the Bhagavadgītā, the collective universe of material
nature and incarnate spirit constitutes the two natures of God.³ Ultimately, the
guṇas themselves, which constitute the aparā prakṛti, or lower nature of God,
are referred to this transcendent unity in which they are grounded. At Gitā
7.12, Kṛṣṇa reveals to Arjuna that "...all conditions of being, whether
influenced by sattva, rajas, and tamas, come from me; but I am not in them:
they are in me." Consequently, all activity in the phenomenal world, normally
attributed to the action of the three guṇas, must ultimately be attributed to God.
The passage cited in the preceding paragraph, in which Kṛṣṇa describes to

¹ Gitā 18.11; 3.5.
² Gitā 18.59-60.
³ Gitā 7.4-6. See above, pp. 73ff.
Arjuna the necessity of action as the expression of his nature, concludes with Kṛṣṇa's self-attribution of all activity in the world. "The lord of all creatures is inside their hearts and with his wizardry he revolves all the creatures mounted on his water wheel."¹ Again, in the course of the divine theophany at chapter eleven, Kṛṣṇa reveals himself as imperishable Time, the wreaker of destruction, resolved to swallow up the worlds, and emphasizes thereby his role as sole agent in the world. The assembled warriors of the Kaurava clan, whose lives now hang in the balance, have in fact long been slain by Kṛṣṇa. The hand of Arjuna in battle is to be the mere occasion of their destruction. "Therefore raise yourself now and reap rich fame, rule the plentiful realm by defeating your foes! I myself have doomed them ages ago: be merely my hand in this, Left-handed Archer!"²

In the Bhagavadgītā, God is the origin and dissolution of the entire universe. There is nothing at all that transcends the Godhead. The universe was spun by God and is strung on God 'as strands of pearls are strung on a string.'³ Acting through the lower nature, prakṛti, God is the source of all activity in the phenomenal world. Accordingly, God is conceived as the author of the social order that has been divinely structured on the operation of the three constituents in the phenomenal world. This claim is explicitly made at Gitā 4.13: "I have created the society of the four classes with due regard for the

¹ Gitā 18.61.
² Gitā 11.33. See also 10.33f.
³ Gitā 7.6f; 8.22.
various distribution of the guṇas and the range of their working: know that I am its author, and that I am forever without karman."

In consequence of this two-fold grounding in divine sanction and metaphysical necessity, the four class system and the performance of prescribed duty is commended to Arjuna in all seriousness by Krṣṇa.¹ To resist would be futile at any rate, for in the end Arjuna is constrained to action by nature: that is, nature in general operating through the three constituents of material nature,² or Arjuna's personal nature as it has developed in past lives.³ Accordingly, the Bhagavadgītā categorizes the respective nature of the four classes of society and of all classes of action on the basis of the activity of the three constituents in the phenomenal world.

The acts of brahmins, barons, commoners, and serfs, enemy-burner, divide themselves according to the guṇas that spring from nature. Tranquility, self-control, austerity, purity, patience, honesty, insight, knowledge, and true faith are the brahmin's task, which derives from his nature. Gallantry, energy, fortitude, capability, unretreating steadfastness in war, liberality, and the exercise of power are the baron's task, which spring from his nature. Husbandry, cattle herding, and trade are the

¹ See, e.g., Gītā 18.45.

² See Gītā 3.27; 14.23, etc.

commoner's task, which derives from his nature; while the
natural task of the serf is to serve.¹

Again, the Bhagavadgītā categorizes all classes of action with reference to the
tripartite division of the guṇas.² Actions and states under the influence of
sattva, which represents the moral and supermoral planes of experience, are
referred to as sāttvika; those under the influence of rajas, the ordinary mixed
and normal plane, as rājasa; and those which suffer the influence of tamas,
which represents the inferior and immoral characteristics of experience, as
tāmasa.³ In sum, the notion of the four class society elaborated in the
Bhagavadgītā participates in the natural order of the universe ordained by
God, and the performance of prescribed duty itself amounts to the expression
of this divinely sanctioned order. Consequently, it is precisely through the
performance of one's proper duty that an individual will move toward the
final goal.⁴ Defiance of this order, on the other hand, can only lead to disaster
and ruin. Thus, "It is more salutary to carry out your own Law poorly than

¹ Gītā 18.41-44. At his commentary on this verse, Saṅkara suggests a more
direct derivation of the classes from the three guṇas. According to him,
brahmīns originate from sattva, barons from rajas mixed with sattva,
commoners originate from a mixture of rajas and tamas, and serfs originate
from tamas and a minute admixture of rajas.


³ Dasgupta, History, pp. 468-70.

⁴ Gītā 18.45.
another's Law well; it is better to die in your own Law than to prosper in another's."\(^1\)

The commitment in the Bhagavadgītā to the universality of class duty and to the preservation of the four class system is clearly reflected in its conception of avatāra. The classical statement of avatāra doctrine at Gītā 4.6-8 describes the primary purpose of the divine incarnations as the preservation of the dharma, or the law of righteousness, which must be taken in reference to the four class system described above.\(^2\) "Although indeed I am unborn and imperishable, although I am the lord of the creatures, I do resort to nature, which is mine, and take on birth by my own wizardry. For whenever the Law languishes, Bhārata, and lawlessness flourishes, I create myself. I take on existence from eon to eon, for the rescue of the good and the destruction of the evil, in order to reestablish the law." At this and related passages, Kṛṣṇa is revealed as the eternal guardian and defender of the social order.\(^3\) In the Bhagavadgītā, in short, God wills the preservation of the four class system that has been ordained from eternity, and toward this end takes on existence at need for its defense and reestablishment.

\(^1\) Gītā 3.35. See as well 18.47-48.

\(^2\) Especially in view of the fact that at 4.13 Kṛṣṇa claims to have founded the system. Both Śaṁkara and Rāmānuja take it in this sense. See Zaehner, The Bhagavad-Gītā, p. 184.

\(^3\) For example, at Gītā 11.18, Arjuna refers to Kṛṣṇa as the 'guardian of the eternal law.'
Krṣṇa fulfills his role as guardian in the Bhagavadgītā in several ways. First, as the archetypical yogin who, though free from all attachments, continues to act for the welfare of the world, Krṣṇa functions as a divine exemplar, worthy of emulation by humankind. Again, by resorting to his function as the divine revealer, Krṣṇa reestablishes the eternal law by revealing both its divine origin and sanction and its intimate relationship to the achievement of release and union with God. That is to say, employing the Bhagavadgītā's conception of saṁnyāsa, the renunciation of the fruits of all actions rather than actions themselves, Krṣṇa reveals a path to release that can be achieved through the performance of class duty rather than through its rejection.

Reference has been made to the fact that, in the Bhagavadgītā, there is no inexorable law of karman with determining power over Krṣṇa's existence. Krṣṇa is neither bound nor limited by his works, which he undertakes without attachment and for the welfare of the world.1 In this, as in other aspects, the freedom of the divine āvatāra participates in the freedom of the transcendent God, who, though changeless in timeless essence, is perpetually active, creating and sustaining the worlds. "Resting on my own nature I create, again and again, this entire aggregate of creatures involuntarily by the force of my nature. No acts bind me, Dhanaṁjaya, for I remain disinterested and detached from all acts."2 At Gītā 3.19-26, Krṣṇa commends the divine freedom in action

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2 Gītā 9.9-10.
to Arjuna as an example to be emulated, for "People do whatever the superior man does; people follow what he sets up as the standard." 1 Thus, in the same way that God acts in detachment for the preservation of the world order, 2 the wise individual should act for the sake of others, and 'only to hold the world together.' "The wise, disinterested man should do his acts in the same way as the ignorant do, but only to hold the world together, Bhārata. One should not sow dissension in the minds of the ignorant, who are interested in their actions: the wise man should take kindly to all acts, but himself do them in a disciplined fashion." 3

Second, Kṛṣṇa reestablishes the eternal law in the Bhagavadgītā by revealing both its divine origin and sanction and its intimate relationship to the achievement of release and union with God. In this the perspective of the Bhagavadgītā is somewhat unique. The epic and Purānic tradition of avatāra doctrine generally depicts the threat to the welfare of humankind in mythological terms as demonic assaults against God's pious devotees and the world order. In consequence, the soteriological interventions of God’s avatāras are depicted as heroic incursions against this demonic realm. For example, Viṣṇu was the boar avatāra, Varāha, who killed the demon

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1 Gitā 3.21.

2 Gitā 3.22-24: "I have no task at all to accomplish in these three worlds, Pārtha. I have nothing to obtain that I do not have already. Yet I move in action. If I were not to move in action, untiringly, at all times, Pārtha, people all around would follow my lead. These people would collapse if I did not act; I would be the author of miscegenation; I would assassinate these creatures."

Hiraṇyākṣa and raised up the earth on his tusk to save it from the depths of the cosmic ocean. He was the dwarf Vāmana who procured from the demon Bali a gift of three paces of ground and, assuming gigantic proportions, destroyed the power of the demon with three strides that spanned the three worlds. Finally, Kalkin is portrayed in the Mahābhārata as a future avatāra whose advent at the renewal of the Kṛta Yuga will usher in a new age. He will roam the earth in search of evil, restoring peace and order to the world.¹

In the Bhagavadgītā, however, the threat to world order is not conceived mythologically as demonic assaults against God's realm. Rather, the threat is clearly historical and posed by the prevalent notion of release by wisdom alone that advocated the renunciation of all acts as binding. At the time of the composition of the Gītā, religious ideas of this sort were filtering through to lower social levels, and the natural duties of the various classes were being neglected or interchanged. Appeal to this conception of release precipitated the neglect of family and duty, and retirement from the social order in the pursuit of release. Consequently, in order to reestablish the eternal law, or raise the notion of class duty to the status of a universal obligation, it was necessary to contend with this prevailing notion of sāmnyāsa. In this context, Kṛṣṇa fulfills his role as guardian and redeemer by resorting to his function as the divine reveler. Not only does he reveal the divine origin and sanction of the four class system, but he instructs Arjuna concerning the intimate relationship that exists between the proper

¹ See above, pp. 56ff.
performance of class duty and the attainment of release. This he accomplishes by means of the Bhagavadgītā’s conception of saṁnyāsa.

According to the prevailing notion of saṁnyāsa, the renunciation of works, all actions are detrimental to the achievement of release. They not only impede the acquisition of a distinctive knowledge of Brahman, but perpetually do more to engage the self in existence than to effect its liberation. Every act, as interpreted by the accepted doctrine of karman, is a cause of attachment to the phenomenal world that eventually but inevitably translates itself into a prolongation of individual life. Consequently, the prevailing position subordinates ascetic practice and works to jñāna, the apperception of transcendent reality, and prescribes the rejection of all actions.¹ According to the position articulated in the Gitā, however, complete inactivity is impossible, since one acts inevitably in conformity with one’s nature. Furthermore, true renunciation is not to be conceived as nonaction.² It is possible to abstain from all external activity and still desire its fruits, thereby remaining attached to phenomenal existence. Consequently, in distinction from the prevailing position that locates the binding power of works in the act itself, the Bhagavadgītā understands this binding power to reside in the inner disposition of the agent, that is to say, in the desire of the individual for results of whatever nature. Thus, true saṁnyāsa can be attained only by the renunciation of desire itself, and not by the mere cessation of activity. “He is

¹ Lamotte, Notes, pp. 94ff.

² See, for example, Gitā 3.4-7.
possessed of the right spirit who is able to discern that there is no karman in action, while there is karman in nonaction; if he among all men is yoked with this spirit he can perform any act. ¹ In sum, the condition sine qua non of true saṁnyāsa is a supreme indifference to the fruits of action, and not the renunciation of action in itself.² The one who understands this understands as well the ultimate unity that exists between Śāmkhya and Yoga, wisdom and practice, in the thought of the Bhagavadgītā. "Both the renunciation and the practice of acts lead to the supreme good...Only fools propound that insight and the practice of acts are different things, not the wise: by undertaking one you find the full fruit of both."³ Finally, this conception of saṁnyāsa is consistent with the prescribed performance of all class duties, now understood in the sense of disinterested action. Indeed, this is the path to liberation followed by the ancient sages of the tradition and revealed anew in the discourses of the Bhagavadgītā by Krṣṇa, who therefore instructs Arjuna to "...pursue the daily tasks disinterestedly, for, while performing his acts without self-interest, a person obtains the highest good. For it was by acting alone that Janaka and

¹ Gītā 4.18. Van Buitenen gives a clearer, if more awkward, rendering of this verse at The Bhagavadgītā in the Mahābhārata, n. 2, p. 164: "He who sees that in acting [there need be] no [binding consequences normally resulting from] acting, and that [there may be binding consequences of] acting in the abstention from acting..."

² Lamotte, Notes, p. 96.

³ Gītā 5.2-6.
others achieved success, so you too must act while only looking to what holds together the world."¹

In sum, Kṛṣṇa in the Bhagavadgītā is portrayed primarily as the guardian of the social order. Whenever there is decline from within or assault from without, Kṛṣṇa appears to reestablish the four class system ordained from eternity. In consequence of this prevailing conception, it is often claimed that Kṛṣṇa is no innovator in ethical matters. In each incarnation he merely reestablishes the old dharma.² It should be stressed, however, that while the Gitā may be conventional in its conception of social order and the performance of class duty, it is revolutionary in its conception of the relationship between the social order and the attainment of release. First, the reconciliation of works with the pursuit of release that is attained by the Gitā’s conception of sāṁnyāsa means that the social order both anticipates and opens out to the soteriological dimension. In its insistence that release be pursued through the performance of class duty, that is, the Bhagavadgītā establishes a unity between the social and soteriological orders that reflects the transcendent unity of prakṛti and puruṣa in God. Second, the Bhagavadgītā mitigates certain class restrictions on religion. The performance of karmayoga, or the dedication of works to God, and of bhaktiyoga, exclusive devotion to God, are not reserved for the twice-born, but are extended even to women and sūdras. "Even a hardened criminal who loves me and none other is

¹ Gitā 3.19ff.

² See, for example, Zaehner, The Bhagavad-Gītā, p. 175.
to be deemed a saint, for he has the right conviction; he soon becomes Law-
minded and finds peace forever. Understand this, Kaunteya: no servitor of
mine is lost. Even people of low origins, women, vaisyas, nay sddras, go the
highest course if they rely on me, PArtha."1 In consequence of the unity
established in the BhagavadgitA between the social and soteriological orders,
the portrayal of Ksna as the guardian and redeemer of the social order
anticipates his role as the mediator of release.

Ksna, Mediator of Release

RAmAnuja's discussion of avatAra doctrine at the introduction to his
commentary on the BhagavadgitA captures in summary fashion the
soteriological purpose of God's incarnations. While God, the Supreme Person
who has created the entire universe from BrahA to minerals, is inaccessible
to the meditation and worship of gods and humankind alike when existing in
transcendent form, God has freely taken on human existence, and "in that
shape he has descended repeatedly to various worlds in order that he might be
worshipped by the beings who live in these worlds and so bring them nearer
to the fruits of dharma, artha, kAma and release..."2 God has descended to
alleviate the burdens of samsAra and so become visible to all humankind; God
has accomplished feats that drove away the sufferings of people of all classes;

1 GitA 9.30-32.

2 RAmAnuja on the BhagavadgitA, p. 47.
finally, under the pretext of persuading Arjuna to fight, God has revealed bhaktiyoga, declared in the Vedānta to be the means of attaining the supreme end.\(^1\) In short, from a theological perspective, Krśna’s incarnations in the Bhagavadgītā occasion the self-revelation of the supreme, personal God to whom one can respond in specifically religious ways, through worship, sacrifice, and personal devotion.

The jñānayoga ideal of release through the intuitive apprehension of the absolute is referred to in the Bhagavadgītā as a valid, yet extremely arduous approach to salvation.\(^2\) On the one hand, the achievement of true saṁnyāsa without some form of yoga is in itself problematic.\(^3\) More specifically, however, unassisted meditation on that which is by nature unmanifest, omnipresent, inconceivable, immovable, and fixed, is attained only with great difficulty by individuals in an embodied state. In contrast to this Upaniṣadic-style speculation on the impersonal absolute and its consequent notion of release, Krśna in the Bhagavadgītā reveals a personal God who, as expressed by Dasgupta, "...is not a God of abstract philosophy or theology, but a God who could be a man and be capable or all personal relations."\(^4\) Thus, in the Gītā, God is revealed as the universal agent acting through the constituents of nature to whom one can sacrifice all works.

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1 Ibid.
2 Gītā 12.1-5.
3 Gītā 5.6.
thereby obtaining release from one's bondage,¹ and as the true object of knowledge who transcends even Brahman itself and is attainable only through the highest form of love and devotion.² In addition, it has been pointed out that the notion of God's grace active in the process of salvation is prominent in the Gitā. Accordingly, Kṛṣṇa recommends to Arjuna a manifest approach to release; that is, an approach through worship and exclusive devotion to the supreme, personal God. "...those who, absorbed in me, resign all their acts to me and contemplatively attend on me with exclusive yoga, soon find in me their savior from the ocean that is the run-around of deaths. Pārtha, for their minds are conducted to enter into me."³

From a philosophical perspective, the theistic orientation occasioned by the revelations of Kṛṣṇa in the Bhagavadgītā represents a significant shift from the soteriological paradigm of the Upaniṣads. In the synthesis effected in the Bhagavadgītā between the devotional theism of the Bhāgavata sect and the metaphysical currents of the early Upaniṣads, significant stress is placed not only on the necessity of action for the proper functioning of world and society, but as well on the personal character of deity, the movement of grace toward humankind, and the opening of the way of release to all through karma- and bhaktiyogas.⁴ In the soteriological paradigm of the Bhagavadgītā.

¹ See Gitā 3.9, 30.
² See Gitā 7.3: 18.55.
³ Gitā 12.6-7.
⁴ See van Buitenen, Rāmānuja on the Bhagavadgītā, p. 4.
in short, the Upaniṣadic notion of wisdom is integrated into one complex approach to God.

As indicated above, however, this synthesis between devotional theism and philosophical speculation retained the metaphysical orientation of the Upaniṣads. Thus it is significant that the Gitā's shift from the paradigm of the Upaniṣads was effected without rejecting their soteriological assumptions.¹ In other words, the Bhagavadgitā follows the Upaniṣads in conceiving release as the realization of an essential unity between the individual ātman and universal Brahman. Consequently, while the notions of divine grace and personal devotion in the Bhagavadgitā reorient the conception of salvation, they do not alter its essential structure. Release remains the realization of the ātman's eternal freedom in which the soteriological action of God cooperates with the efforts of individuals toward release. Accordingly, the grace of God operative in the Gitā is to a large degree an assisting grace that authenticates the unified ways of salvation available to humankind, and Krṣṇa functions primarily as a divine revealer, imparting to humankind a knowledge of God, and the way of ultimate release. Within this soteriological paradigm, then, Krṣṇa's incarnations are conceived as events of revelation and mediation, but not as soteriological events in themselves.

¹ Ibid.
Samsāra

From the time of the Brihadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, the intimately related notions of karman and samsāra, or transmigration, have become the cornerstone of Hindu thought, and a fundamental axiom of all Indian religio-philosophical speculation. Continuous rebirth is the inevitable result of the binding power inherent in works. Every act, as interpreted by the accepted doctrine of karman, is a cause of attachment to the phenomenal world that eventually but inevitably translates itself into a prolongation of individual life. For the author of the Bhagavadgītā as well, the notions of karman, samsāra, and salvation through ultimate release from their vicious cycle are axiomatic.¹ They are not so much points to be proven as underlying principles that are developed along the lines of the Gītā’s Sāmkhyān-based metaphysics.²

In accordance with Sāmkhyān cosmological speculation, the Bhagavadgītā draws the clearest possible distinction between the two orders of reality: prakṛti and puruṣa. Prakṛti has been defined above as the metaphysical substratum of the material universe that is in a perpetual state of

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¹ Edgerton, *The Bhagavad Gītā*, p. 157. For example, see Gītā 2.13, 22, where Kṛṣṇa simply compares the successive lives of an individual to successive stages in one life (i.e., childhood, maturity, old age), or to changes of garments.

² Reference has been made, however, to the restrictions placed on the received notion of karman by the Bhagavadgītā’s conception of saṁnyāsa. In the Bhagavadgītā, the binding power of acts lies not in any inherent quality of the acts themselves, but in the internal disposition of the agent.
flux, without beginning and without end. It is the eternal womb from which evolves material nature.\(^1\) Puruṣa, sometimes referred to as ātman, on the other hand, is the eternal spiritual monad, the absolute principle of self that does not perish at death. "It is never born nor does it die; nor once that it is will it ever not be; unborn, unending, eternal, and ancient, it is not killed when the body is killed."\(^2\) In itself, the ātman is static, timeless, and eternal; thus, to speak of its birth or death is meaningless.

This notion of the nature of the ātman clearly reveals Upaniṣadic influence; yet the Gītā will not go so far as to identify the individual ātman with God.\(^3\) Instead, the Gītā speaks of the eternal ātman as a particle of God that becomes the principle of self in a living being.\(^4\) This conception of the relationship between the individual ātman and God has significant implications for the final eschatology of the Bhagavadgītā. While the Gītā regards God as immanent in all things, and aspires to ultimate union with God, it stops short of the assertion 'I am God.' Thus, union with God is projected into the future, and is not put on a basis of equality between the ātman and God.\(^5\) Instead, final union with God will be expressed in terms of personal

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\(^1\) See, for example, Gītā 14.3.

\(^2\) Gītā 2.20.

\(^3\) Although the doctrine is not unknown in the Bhagavadgītā. See Gītā 2.17, 24; 13.27. Edgerton discusses this issue at The Bhagavad Gītā, p. 139f.

\(^4\) Gītā 15.7.

\(^5\) Edgerton, The Bhagavad Gītā, p. 139.
communion in which God and the individual ātman retain their proper identity.¹

While prakṛti and puruṣa in Sāmkhya speculation are totally distinct, independent, and eternal principles, the manifest universe issues from their union. As discussed above, prakṛti in the Gītā is not independent; it belongs to Krṣṇa as his aparā prakṛti, or lower nature. He possesses as well a higher nature that consists of the embodied puruṣas, the collective universe of material nature and spirit.² Consequently, insofar as the individual ātman informs a living being as its principle of unity, or insofar as it becomes linked up with an individual psychosomatic organism, it is eternal in a second sense: it is constantly born and constantly dies.³ In other words, while the ātman in itself is static, timeless, and eternal, in its union with prakṛti it is conditioned by the phenomenal world and bound by the three constituents of material nature. According to the Bhagavadgītā, this involvement is the cause of rebirth. "...Puruṣa residing within Prakṛti experiences the guṇas that spring from Prakṛti: his involvement with the guṇas is the cause of births in either high wombs or low ones."⁴

¹ See Gītā 6.30.

² Gītā 7.4ff.

³ Gītā 2.26.

⁴ Gītā 13.21. See as well, Gītā 14.14-15. "If the embodied soul dies when sattva reigns, he attains to the pure worlds of those who have the highest knowledge. The one dying in rajas is reborn among people who are given to acting; while one expiring in tamas is reborn among the witless."
In the Bhagavadgītā, the bondage of the spirit to material nature is understood on the basis of the power of the guṇas, as māyā, to blind humankind to the true nature of reality, and to bind the eternal ātman through desire and attachment to the phenomenal world.¹ The blinding power of the guṇas leaves humankind prey to both ignorance and desire.² Reference has been made to the fact that the Bhagavadgītā understands māyā not only as a creative power synonymous with material nature, but also as an uncanny power or a divine illusion that, through the three guṇas, deludes and distracts humankind from a recognition of the essential nature of self and God.³ According to the Gitā, "Confused by the conflicts that spring from desire and hatred, all creatures in creation are duped into total delusion..."⁴ Again, "This entire world is deluded by these three conditions of being which derive from the guṇas, and thus it fails to recognize me who am in all eternity beyond the guṇas."⁵ In other words, the blinding power of the guṇas precipitates an ignorance involving not only the deluded misconception of a fundamental unity or blending of ātman and material nature in the phenomenal world, but an ignorance of the supreme essence of God and God’s role in the world.⁶

¹ See above pp. 73ff.
² Respectively, ajñāna, and kāma.
³ See above, pp. 73ff.
⁴ Gitā 7.27. Both desire and hatred are held to arise from rajas at Gitā 3.37.
⁵ Gitā 7.13.
⁶ See Lamotte, Notes, p. 75.
Again, the eternal ātman is bound to material nature by the attachments fostered by the respective guṇas, and by the mortal enemy, desire, that arises from rajas. Sattva binds the ātman with an attachment to knowledge and joy.¹ Rajas binds the self with egocentric attachment to action, and tamas overcomes the illumination of knowledge and binds the self with attachment to negligence, carelessness, and sloth.² The Bhagavadgītā portrays desire as the active manifestation of evil: it forces one to commit evil acts even against one's will, and, when thwarted, gives rise to anger, which sets off a disastrous chain reaction. "When a man thinks about sense objects, an interest in them develops. From this interest grows desire, from desire anger; from anger rises delusion, from delusion loss of memory, from loss of memory the death of the spirit, and from the death of the spirit one perishes."³

In sum, in the Bhagavadgītā the eternal ātman is bound to material nature by the blinding and deluding power of the guṇas, their power of desire and attachment, and, finally, by the works that necessarily arise from their incessant activity in the world.⁴ So long as one is in the phenomenal world one is swayed by the guṇas and is therefore bound to act, if only for the purpose of sustaining life.⁵ In consequence, these acts affect one's future

¹ Gītā 14.5-9.
² Ibid.
³ Gītā 2.62-63.
⁴ See above, pp. 73ff.
⁵ Gītā 3.8.
births because "Even the man of knowledge behaves according to his nature-creatures follow their natures: who will stop them?" The only means of breaking this bondage of the spirit to material nature entertained in the Bhagavadgītā is expressed at 14.19-20: "When a man of insight perceives that no one but the guṇas acts and knows the one who transcends the guṇas, he ascends to my being. By transcending these three guṇas, which are the sources of the body, the embodied soul rides himself of the miseries of birth, death, and old age and becomes immortal."

Mokṣa

The ātman in itself is static, timeless, and eternal; yet, in its transmigration from body to body it is indissolubly connected with human personality, and conditioned by the constituents of material nature. Consequently, mokṣa consists in the final dissociation of the spiritual monad from the material personality to which it is bound. "When thought ceases, curbed by the practice of yoga, when he himself looks upon himself and is contented with himself, when he knows a total bliss beyond sensual pleasure, which can be grasped by the spirit alone, and when he knows it and, once fixed upon it, does not truly stray from it, when he has acquired it and can think of no greater acquisition, when firm on it he cannot be swayed even by profound grief- then he knows that this is the unbinding of his bond with

1 Gitā 3.33.
sorrow..."¹ All trace of empirical egohood, indeed, all trace of possessing anything at all must be swept away if the ātman is to realize the freedom, unity, and eternity of its natural state.

The characterization of release as the unbinding of the bond with sorrow reflects the Buddhist influence in the early chapters of the Bhagavadgītā.² In Buddhist thought, release is described exclusively in negative terms, and what is understood by Nirvāṇa is simply the cessation of phenomenal existence. The word literally means blowing out; thus, the achievement of Nirvāṇa amounts to the blowing out of the lamp of existence: the cessation of sensation of any kind and the extinction of becoming, craving, and pain. Nirvāṇa is the peace of eternity that can be won only by detachment from, disgust at, and cessation of phenomenal existence, and by the tranquilizing of the senses and the attainment of wisdom and enlightenment.³ Zehner remarks that this Buddhist understanding of Nirvāṇa underlies the minimal description of what is meant by mokṣa, and is the premiss from which the Bhagavadgītā starts.⁴

In addition to Buddhist influence, mokṣa in the Bhagavadgītā is influenced by the Śāmkhyān metaphor of release as the separation of the

¹ Gitā 6.20ff.
² The Bhagavad Gītā, p. 30.
³ Ibid., p. 159.
⁴ Ibid., p. 29.
spiritual monad from prakṛti. In classical Sāṁkhya, release means the definitive detachment of the individual puruṣa from the material envelope to which it is bound, and the complete isolation within itself both from prakṛti and from all other puruṣas. While reflecting the influence of both Buddhism and Sāṁkhya, however, the mature notion of release in the Bhagavadgitā receives its primary orientation from the poem's theistic perspective. In the Gitā, that is, the ātman is conceived as a particle of God whose nature is pure wisdom, but which in its embodied state is overcast by ignorance and desire. Consequently, release is achieved by the purification of the self, and the achievement of the original oneness that is characteristic of both the ātman and Brahman. Once the ātman has achieved this integration, it becomes the 'very self of every contingent being'; it is omnipresent, beyond space and time. In short, it is Brahman. Despite this fact, however, the Gitā stops short of identifying the ātman with God and, consequently, portrays the final state of the ātman not as identity with God, but rather as personal communion with God.

In the Gitā, this process of spiritual integration is initially the responsibility of buddhi, or intellect, which stands at the head of the

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1 See especially Gitā 13.34. "those who with the eye of insight realize the boundary of field and guide, and the mode of separation from the Prakṛti of beings, attain the ultimate."


3 Ibid., p. 31.

4 See Gitā 5.7, 24; 6.27, etc.
hierarchy of cognitive faculties that evolve from prakṣṛ. In Sāmkhyan thought, buddhi stands closest to the ātman and is by nature oriented to the contemplation of universal essence. In contrast to the senses, which are multiple and oriented to their diverse objects, buddhi is naturally unitive, and its ultimate function is to integrate the whole personality into the ātman. In consequence, buddhi must control manas, or mind, as manas must control the senses. The fickle senses rove here and there, creating attachments to phenomenal reality. Thus, if attuned to them, manas will "...carry off a man's capacity for insight, as the wind a ship at sea." If, however, the mind and senses are restrained and subdued by buddhi, little by little one will come to rest in the eternal ātman. Buddha draws the senses, mind, and ego into itself in order finally to concentrate them in a unified whole upon the eternal center of the human personality, the ātman. The ātman in turn absorbs buddhi, manas, etc. into itself in the same way that God absorbs the universe at the end of a world cycle. Thus, "Renouncing without exception all objects of desire that are rooted in intentions, taming the village of his senses all around with his mind, he should little by little cease, while he holds his spirit with fortitude, merges his mind in the self, and thinks of nothing at all." This

1 See Zaehner. The Bhagavad-Gītā. p. 22f. At Gītā 2.41; 2.39 ff; 6.20-21, it is stated that buddhi alone is capable of grasping and apprehending the ātman.

2 Gītā 2.67.


4 Gītā 6.24ff.
process of spiritual integration requires a gradual detachment from all outside stimuli, and a contentment of self in itself alone.

A man is called one whose insight is firm when he forsakes all the desirable objects that come to his mind, Pārtha, and is sufficient unto himself. Not distressed in adversities, without craving for pleasures, innocent of passion, fear and anger, he is called a sage whose insight is firm... When he entirely withdraws his senses from their objects as a tortoise withdraws its limbs, his insight stands firm. For an embodied man who does not eat, the sense objects fade away, except his taste for them: his taste, too, fades when he has seen the highest.¹

Finally, by gradually cultivating this yoga of sameness, one will come to realize the eternal sameness: that is, "the unvarying presence of timeless Being in and behind all that comes to be and passes away."² "While yet in this world they have overcome [the process of] emanation [and decay], for their minds are stilled in that—which-is-ever-the-same: for devoid of imperfection and ever-the-same is Brahman: therefore in Brahman [stilled] they stand."³ Thus, "His joy within, his bliss within, his light within, the man who-is-

¹ Gitā 6.5ff.

² Zaehner, The Bhagavad Gitā, p. 159.

integrated-in-spiritual-exercise becomes Brahman and draws nigh to Nirvāna that is Brahman too.¹

In the Bhagavadgītā, then, to attain release is both the goal and final result of the process of spiritual integration in the ātman. The condition of this release is wisdom, by which one realizes the essential unity between the individual ātman and universal Brahman. The liberated individual has indeed transcended the influence of the three guṇas, the sphere of karman, and has entered that of transcendent wisdom, which is synonymous with perfect peace.² As mentioned above, however, final eschatology in the Bhagavadgītā is not founded on identity with God, but rather on personal communion with God. The Gītā will not go so far as to identify the individual ātman with God. Instead, it speaks of the eternal ātman as a particle of God that becomes the principle of self in a living being.³ Consequently, liberation in the Gītā is not precisely the realization of an identity with God, but rather a participation in God’s timeless mode of existence.⁴ The transcendent God is the base that supports both Brahman and Nirvāṇa.⁵ God is, indeed, the Supreme Person who transcends both the manifest universe and timeless Being. “In this world there are two Persons, the transient and the intransient. The transient

³ Gītā 15.7.
⁴ Zaehner, The Bhagavad Gītā, p. 34.
⁵ Gītā 6.15; 14.27.
comprises all creatures, the intransient is called the One-on-the-Peak. There is yet a third Person, whom they call the Supreme Soul, the everlasting lord who permeates and sustains the three worlds. Inasmuch as I have passed beyond the transient and transcend the intransient, therefore I am, in world and in Veda, renowned as the Supreme Person."¹ Moreover, this Supreme Person is attained by the highest personal love and devotion, and not by wisdom alone.² Thus, while the Gitā regards God as immanent in all things and aspires to ultimate union with God, it stops short of the assertion 'I am God.' Beyond release as participation in God's timeless being, there lies personal communion with the transcendent God in which the individual ātman retains its identity.³ This is the final word of the Bhagavadgītā.

The Means of Release

In the Bhagavadgītā, Kṛṣṇa reveals a Supreme, Personal God to whom one can respond in specifically religious ways through worship, sacrifice, and personal devotion. Accordingly, Kṛṣṇa reveals a unified approach to release that includes not only wisdom, but the performance of works in a spirit of detachment, or karmayoga, and especially the personal devotion and love of God, bhaktiyoga.

¹ Gitā 15.17-18.
² Gitā 8.22; 18.5ff.
³ See Gitā 6.30.
It is often asserted that karma-, jñāna-, and bhaktiyoga are, in Kṛṣṇa’s view, alternative and equally efficient means to release. While Kṛṣṇa does at times speak of the independent sufficiency of one or the other method of release, the general tendency in the Gītā is to integrate all three into one complex unity. According to Hill, "...it is important to insist that these three methods are throughout the Gītā regarded as complementary, each no more than the application of the single theory of control to one department of man’s being."¹ Reference was made above to the fact that Kṛṣṇa recognizes and respects those seekers of wisdom who divorce knowledge from action and who, ignoring personal devotion, seek release through meditation on the impersonal absolute. Time and again, however, Kṛṣṇa exhorts Arjuna not to follow their example, for ultimately theory and practice cannot be separated. In the Bhagavadgītā, the condition sine qua non of true sāmnyāsa is a supreme indifference to the fruits of action, and not the renunciation of action in itself. The one who understands this, then, understands the intimate unity that exists between Sāmkhya and Yoga, wisdom and practice, in the thought of the Bhagavadgītā. “Both the renunciation and the practice of acts lead to the supreme good...Only fools propound that insight and the practice of acts are different things, not the wise: by undertaking one you find the full fruit of both.”²

¹ The Bhagavadgītā, p. 54.

² Gītā 5.2-6.
According to Hill, even in passages where Kṛṣṇa seems to exalt one method over another, a careful analysis reveals that the 'true balance of personality,' of works, of knowledge, and of devotion, is not forgotten. Hill refers, for example, to the passage at Gītā 7.17-18, where Kṛṣṇa exalts the individual of knowledge as his very self. Even here, however, the jñānī most excellent is the one who practices bhakti, 'to one alone devoted.' Again, the description of Kṛṣṇa's true devotee at Gītā 12.13-20 "...contains those elements of right renunciation and knowledge isolated from which devotion would be a state of unsubstantial ecstasy." 3

While release in the Bhagavadgītā is to be attained by the complementary achievement of disinterested action, wisdom, and devotion, Hill maintains as well that the proportion of each will vary according to the stage attained. 4 There are three stages of yoga in the Gītā, and at each stage will, reason, and emotion are brought into play. The first stage is especially characterized by disinterested action, and 'work is said to be the means'; the second stage is characterized by contemplation and the growth of knowledge, and here 'quietude is said to be the means'; finally, the third stage, at which

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1 The Bhagavadgītā, p. 54.
2 Ibid.
3 Ibid., p. 55.
4 Ibid.
one attains to release and personal union with God, is especially characterized by bhakti, that 'highest devotion that leads to entry into him.'

Karmayoga is understood in the Bhagavadgītā as the method of release that is characterized by participation in normal, worldly activity without interest in the results of that activity. It consists in the unselfish performance of whatever action is required in a given circumstance; taking no interest in the possible benefits of the action for the agent, yet not seeking to avoid responsibility by refusing to act at all. The philosophical basis of karmayoga in the Gītā lies in its notion of saṁnyāsa, which, as mentioned above, is reconciled in the Gītā with a fundamental commitment to the four class system. According to the doctrine of the Bhagavadgītā, the binding quality of action lies not in the mere performance of a deed, but in the internal disposition of the agent, or in the motive that prompts it. Consequently, the gradual abandonment of desire for results destroys that element in action which causes rebirth. This is the true renunciation that leads to release, not the abandonment of action itself.

1 Ibid. See Gītā 6.3; 18.54f. "When a sage wishes to rise to this discipline, action is called his means; when he has risen to this discipline, serenity is called his means...Having become Brahman, serene of spirit, he does not grieve, he does not crave: equable to all creatures, he achieves the ultimate bhakti of me. Through this bhakti he recognizes me for who I am and understands how great I really am, and by virtue of his true knowledge he enters me at once."


3 Hill, The Bhagavadgītā, p. 59.
In the Bhagavadgītā, Kṛṣṇa's incarnations occasion the revelation of God as sole, universal agent, and on this basis, Kṛṣṇa encourages Arjuna to the practice of karmayoga. In commenting on Gitā 4.9, Zaehner remarks that "By meditating on Krishna's incarnation and his deeds both as God and man, one comes to know Him as the God who acts..."1 Accordingly, while everyone must 'follow in God's footsteps' since they must act in accordance with nature,2 those who realize that nature itself is subject to God who acts through the three guṇas, and that God, while eternally free, takes on existence for the protection of the good- these willingly conform themselves to God's will.3 In other words, knowing God's transcendent nature as changeless and perpetually active yet not bound by actions, these will never be bound by works. Instead they will work themselves while seeking release.

Knowing God as the sole, universal agent, moreover, who works through the constituents of material nature, Arjuna is encouraged to resign all his actions to God as a sacrifice, and so be released from action and all its effects. Action as sacrifice is presented in two aspects in the Bhagavadgītā. First, it means to attribute all works to God, since it is God who acts through material nature. In other words, since one does not really act oneself, one should renounce the agency in all activity to God, and with it, all attachment to potential results. Second, according to Saṃkara, one should offer up whatever

1 The Bhagavad-Gītā, p. 185.
2 Gitā 3.33.
3 Gitā 4.6ff.
one does to God as a servant offers up service to her or his master. According to Zehner, this is the meaning at Gitā 3.9 where action is identified with sacrifice. One offers back to God actions that seem to be one's own, but are really initiated by God 'consorting with material nature.' At Gitā 3.31, Kṛṣṇa promises that the individual who follows this doctrine, which is his, will be freed from the bondage of works.

Work must not, and indeed cannot, cease before death. Instead, one must constantly strive to suppress all selfish motive, and "...to fix his mind on release, and, to that sole end, on the service of God and the welfare of the whole world." In this way one accomplishes the purification of the self, and the lower nature is brought under control. With this cleansing and governing of the self, however, the yogin begins to transcend this stage of development and to practice a stricter course of meditation that leads to fuller knowledge. In other words, the practice of karmayoga leads naturally to wisdom, because all works find their consummation therein. "The sacrifice of knowledge is higher than a sacrifice of substances, enemy-burner, but all action culminates in knowledge, Pārtha." As Gitā 5.20 points out, freedom from attachment leads to contentment in the self alone, and to that sameness and indifference that is characteristic of Brahman and that anticipates its full

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1 The Bhagavad-Gitā, p. 172f.
2 Hill, The Bhagavadgitā, p. 62.
3 Ibid.
4 Gitā 4.33.
realization.\textsuperscript{1} At this point, all works melt away; that is, while the work may be burnt up, as at Gitā 4.19, or reduced to ashes as at 4.37, they also melt into or find consummation in wisdom. This, according to Zaeher, is the point of the mystical equation of works with sacrifice. Whether the sacrifice is conceived as a gift, as at Gitā 3.11-12, or as the immolation of a living thing to a higher power, "...the expectation is that what is lost will be restored in another and higher form. Our 'works' are offered to God (3.30) and burnt up in his 'wisdom' like a burnt-offering; they are dissolved in Him and thereby find their consummation in Him. By offering up our works we gain 'wisdom'- intuitive knowledge of the Eternal- and what in our works is valueless is reduced to ashes."\textsuperscript{2}

In the Bhagavadgitā, then, the condition of release is clearly wisdom, understood as the intuitive apprehension of the absolute and the realization of the essential unity between the individual ātman and universal Brahman. According to Lamotte, while the Gitā does not exclude other means of salvation, and indeed, ultimately insists upon one complex approach to God, it defends a soteriological ideal that is clearly gnostic.\textsuperscript{3} In the Bhagavadgitā, "...it is by knowledge that man escapes rebirth, and attains release."\textsuperscript{4} Thus, at Gitā 4.38-

\textsuperscript{1} Gitā 2.48; 5.19.

\textsuperscript{2} The Bhagavād-Gītā, p. 191.

\textsuperscript{3} Lamotte, Notes, p. 87.

\textsuperscript{4} Ibid. "...c'est bien par la connaissance que l'homme, échappant aux renaissances, parvient à la délivrance."
40. Kṛṣṇa reveals that "...there is no means of purification the like of knowledge; and in time one will find that knowledge within oneself, when one is oneself perfected by yoga. The believer who is directed to it and has mastered his senses obtains the knowledge; and having obtained it he soon finds the greatest peace."

Hill also maintains that, apart from the insistence on the union of work with knowledge, there is no great difference between the Gītā's notion of jñāna and that of the Upaniṣads. For centuries, Upaniṣadic philosophers had taught the principle of knowledge: to know is to be, and to know the ātman is to realize its identity with Brahman.¹ In the Gītā as well, jñāna is primarily concerned with the ātman, and aims at realizing its oneness with the absolute.² In both the Upaniṣads and the Bhagavadgītā, jñāna bears a lower and a higher sense. Lower wisdom is obtained by ordinary means, and is dependent on authority. Thus, in a secondary sense, wisdom in the Gītā has for its object the contents of the sacred books, the interpretation of these books by the teacher, and the solution of all religious and metaphysical problems.³ Higher wisdom differs from the lower not so much in content as in its nature;

¹ The Bhagavadgītā, p. 63f.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.
that is, higher wisdom is the uncaused, direct apprehension of Brahman.\footnote{Ibid.}

Thus, the principal object of jāna in the Bhagavadgītā is Brahman itself.\footnote{Lamotte, \textit{Notes}, p. 89.}

I shall set forth to you that object of knowledge by knowing which one attains to the beginningless brahman, which is called neither existent nor non-existent... While devoid of all the senses, it appears to have the qualities of all of them; while disinterested, it sustains all; while beyond the guṇas, it experiences the guṇas. While within and outside the creatures, it is both that which moves and that which stands... It should be conceived of as at once sustaining, bringing forth, and devouring the creatures. It is called the light of lights beyond the darkness, the knowledge, the object of knowledge and the goal of knowledge that abides in the heart of everyone.\footnote{Gitā 13.12ff.}

In consequence of its theistic orientation, however, the Bhagavadgītā insists that beyond a knowledge of the impersonal absolute, one must aspire to a knowledge of God as the ultimate object and goal of jāna. Thus, it is important to know God’s transcendence, immanence, incarnations, and power.\footnote{Lamotte, \textit{Notes}, p. 89. See Gitā 7.30; 9.13; 6.30f; 4.9; and 10.7.} In sum, whoever knows the mystic truth of God’s nature will be freed from rebirth and goes to God. “He who knows me as the unborn, beginningless great lord of all the world, he among mortals is undeluded and freed from all
evil taints."¹ It follows, therefore, that in the Gītā, final eschatology is not conceived as participation in God’s timeless mode of being, but rather as personal communion with the transcendent Lord. This state of ultimate communion with God can be attained, not by wisdom alone, but by the highest personal devotion and love.² This is the ultimate attainment that Kṛṣṇa holds out to his disciples, the highest devotion, release, where perfect love and perfect knowledge coincide, and where becoming Brahma and entry into Kṛṣṇa’s being are unified.³ For this reason the best jñānīn is also the best bhakta: one who is devoted in love to a Lord whose being one understands, whose eyes have pierced the ‘veil of delusion’ and sees in Kṛṣṇa not only Brahma, but as well the incarnate Lord of all. Conversely, the jñānīn cannot hope to be perfect in knowledge unless completely devoted in love to the Lord.⁴

Bhakti, which is usually translated as loving devotion, derives from the root bhaj-, to share or participate in. This root idea is never quite lost, but in classical sanskrit it comes to mean a participation in something or someone

¹ Gītā 10.3.

² See Gītā 11.54; 18.55.

³ Hill, The Bhagavadgītā, p. 68. See Gītā 6.47. “Him I deem the most accomplished man of yoga among all yogins who shares in me in good faith, with his inner self absorbed in me.”

⁴ Ibid., p. 68f.
through affection. Thus, in the Bhagavadgītā, bhaktiyoga is the approach to God as personal Lord through pure, disinterested love; its foundation is śraddhā, or faith, and the response of God with which it meets is prasāda, or divine grace. According to Hill, the Bhagavadgītā's notion of bhaktiyoga reflects and clearly derives from its theism, for bhakti can only manifest itself in response to a personal God, a Savior worthy of trust and ready to be gracious. The history of the Hindu idea of God before the Gitā did little to encourage the growth of bhakti. The pantheon of gods in the Rgveda inspires awe rather than affection. Again, the speculation of the Upaniṣads provides no appropriate ground for the development of such personal devotion. Reference was made above to the fact that the word bhakti does not appear in the Upaniṣads until the last verse of the Svetāsvatara, where its theistic teachings are held to become manifest only to one who possesses the highest devotion to God and to one's teacher. In the Bhagavadgītā, however, Kṛṣṇa's incarnations occasion the revelation of just such a personal God, the Supreme Person, who is not only the immanent principle of being in the universe, but as well the friend of all contingent beings, a personal Savior who accords grace to humankind. In the Bhagavadgītā, that is, Kṛṣṇa is impartial, desiring

1 Zaehner, *The Bhagavad-Gītā*, p. 181. At this passage Zaehner cites a number of epic meanings for the derivatives of bhaj-.


3 Ibid.
the welfare of all humankind. He returns the love of any and all devotees; in them he dwells perpetually, and they in him;¹ he delivers them from sin; and, finally, he grants to his devotees knowledge, true discernment, and the power to retain what they have won.²

From humankind's perspective, bhakti is the means of participation in a personal relationship with God. In the Bhagavadgītā, this relationship is attained in stages, for, as in the case of disinterested action and knowledge, there is a development in bhakti. At the lower stages, bhakti is little more than a conventional piety directed to God, one of the means that will lead to release.³ Thus, at Gītā 9.26ff., Kṛṣṇa declares that however modest be the gift that is offered to him in love it will be accepted, and in response he will undo the bonds of karman.⁴ No one who manifests such a right conviction, that is, no one who devotes oneself to Kṛṣṇa, will be lost, though being a criminal, a woman, or even a śūdra. Instead, this one will be deemed a saint, will soon become 'Law-minded,' or cognizant of one's proper duty, and attain to eternal peace. At a higher stage of attainment, however, bhakti gives content and

¹ See Gītā 9.26-29.
² See Gītā 9.22. See as well, Hill, The Bhagavadgītā, p. 70.
³ Zaehter, The Bhagavad-Gītā, p. 27.
⁴ As a means of release, lower bhakti operates on the same principle as karmayoga. In other words, the devotion of all that is performed in disinterested love of God loosens the bonds of attachment and the expectation of results.
purpose to release itself. In other words, higher bhakti in the Bhagavadgītā is the means by which the penultimate experience of participation in God's eternal mode of being is transcended in the ultimate communion of the ātman with God. "Having become brahman, serene of spirit, he does not grieve, he does not crave: equable to all creatures, he achieves the ultimate bhakti of me. Through this bhakti he recognizes me for who I am and understands how great I really am, and by virtue of his true knowledge he enters me at once."  

Conclusion

It has been suggested above that the soteriological paradigm of the Bhagavadgītā is based on a synthesis between the devotional theism of the Bhāgavata sect and the metaphysical currents of early Upaniṣadic speculation. The theistic orientation occasioned by the revelations of Kṛṣṇa in the Bhagavadgītā represents, therefore, a significant shift from the soteriological paradigm of the Upaniṣads. In the synthesis effected in the Bhagavadgītā, significant stress is placed not only on the necessity of action for the proper functioning of world and society, but as well on the personal character of deity, the movement of grace toward humankind, and the opening of the way of release to all through karma- and bhaktiyogas. In short, the soteriological

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1 Zaehner, The Bhagavad-Gītā, p. 27.
2 Ibid., pp. 30ff., and passim.
3 Gitā 18.54-55.
paradigm of the Bhagavadgītā attempts to integrate the Upaniṣadic notion of wisdom into one complex approach to God.

It is significant, however, that the Gīta’s shift away from the paradigm of the Upaniṣads was effected without completely rejecting its soteriological assumptions. In other words, as explicated above, the Bhagavadgītā essentially retains the Upaniṣadic identity of essence between the individual ātman and universal Brahmaṇ, and accordingly conceives of salvation as the realization of the eternal freedom of the ātman in its natural state. In the Bhagavadgītā, the release of the eternal ātman from its bondage to material nature is effected by the various yogas, or disciplines, methods, and spiritual exercises, whereby the self is purified and integrated into the ātman. Consequently, while the notions of divine grace and personal devotion in the Bhagavadgītā reorient the conception of salvation toward an ultimate communion with God that transcends participation in God’s timeless mode of being, they do not alter its essential structure. Release remains the achievement of the ātman’s eternal freedom in which the soteriological action of God cooperates with the efforts of individuals toward release.

In this context, Kṛṣṇa’s incarnations in the Bhagavadgītā fulfill the soteriological purposes of God by occasioning the self-revelation of the supreme, personal God to whom one can respond in specifically religious ways, and by the declaration of the unified approach to God through karma-, jñāna-, and bhaktiyogas, the spiritual exercises whereby one can attain release. As mentioned above, however, Kṛṣṇa in the Bhagavadgītā reveals not only a personal God, but a God of grace who assists one in one’s efforts toward release.
Zaehner points out that in Buddhism and in classical yoga, one must reach one’s soteriological goal, whether it be Nirvāṇa or the isolation of the eternal puruṣa, by one’s own efforts. To a certain extent, this is true in the Bhagavadgītā. Thus, for example, in the earlier parts of the Gitā, the word ātmanā, the instrumental case of ātman used in many passages dealing with release, means ‘by your own efforts.’¹ Again, Gitā 6.5 declares that one should “...by himself save himself and not lower himself, for oneself alone is one’s friend, oneself alone one’s enemy.” In the Gitā, however, one has another friend, for Kṛṣṇa is not only the Imperishable and even what is beyond it but “...a God of grace who assists the self of man in every stage of his development.”² Thus, for example, at Gitā 4.11, Kṛṣṇa promises that in whatever way he is approached, he returns the love of his devotee. Even those who worship other deities receive the gracious assistance of Kṛṣṇa. “Whatever form, [whatever god,] a devotee with faith desires to honour, that very faith do I confirm in him [making it] unswerving-and-secure. Firm-established in that faith he seeks to reverence that [god] and thence he gains his desires, though it is I who am the true dispenser.”³ Perhaps the clearest expression of the operation of God’s assisting grace in the Gitā is found at 12.6-8: “Those who cast off all their works on Me, solely intent on Me, and meditate on Me in spiritual exercise, leaving no room for others, [and so really] do Me honour, these will I

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¹ The Bhagavad-Gītā, p. 327. According to Zaehner, this is the sense at Gitā 2.55; 3.43; 6.20; and 13.24.

² Ibid.

lift up on high out of the ocean of recurring death, and that right soon, for
their thoughts are fixed on Me. On Me alone let your mind dwell, stir up your
soul to enter Me; thenceforth in very truth in Me you will find your home.”¹

In short, in a soteriological paradigm that defines salvation as the
achievement of the ātman’s eternal freedom and in which the soteriological
action of God cooperates with the efforts of individuals toward release, Kṛṣṇa’s
incarnations in the Bhagavadgītā function as mediations of salvation or divine
revelations that impart to humankind a knowledge of the supreme, personal
God, and the way of ultimate release through karma-, jñāna-, and bhaktiyogas.
The grace of God revealed by Kṛṣṇa in the Gītā operates through the unified
ways of salvation available to humankind, assisting one at every stage of one’s
pilgrimage. Consequently, there remains a certain distance between avatāra
and salvation in the Bhagavadgītā: that is, while Kṛṣṇa’s incarnations are
conceived as events of revelation and mediation, they are not conceived as
soteriological events in themselves.

¹ Translation by Zaehe, The Bhagavad-Gītā, p. 327.
Chapter Four

Incarnation in the Fourth Gospel: The Affirmation of Flesh and Glory in the Context of Shifting Paradigm Commitments

The Origin and Early Development of Christological Reflection

Of the origin and early development of the Indian notion of avatāra, as we have seen, little is known. The historicity of Kṛṣṇa remains an open question for scholars, and the notion of avatāra appears rather abruptly and fully developed in the Bhagavadgītā. In contrast, christological reflection in primitive Christianity clearly developed in response to the life of Jesus of Nazareth, and early Christian literature reveals something of the process by which its concept of incarnation developed. While it is beyond the scope of this study to treat in detail the origin and development of christological reflection in primitive Christianity, the process of its development must be summarized in preparation for our discussion of christology in the Fourth Gospel.

Little is known with any certainty of the life of the historical Jesus.¹ He was born to a Jewish family from the Galilean town of Nazareth in the north of Palestine. Matthew 13:55 reports that Jesus' father Joseph was a building

artisan or a carpenter, as was perhaps Jesus himself. While Jesus presumably spoke Greek, his mother tongue and the language of his own proclamation was Aramaic.

At some point after joining the eschatological sect of John the Baptist, Jesus left to begin his own ministry. The places in which he was active are not known with any certainty, but Galilee stands out in the tradition as the primary locus of his activity. Jesus' ministry in Judea and the frequency of his visits to Jerusalem must remain uncertain since the Gospels vary in the number of visits reported. The same uncertainty remains concerning the duration of Jesus' ministry. There are no early traditions on which to base such determinations, and it has become clear to modern scholarship that even the chronology of Jesus' life in the canonical accounts has been conditioned by theological considerations. It is certain, however, that Jesus was arrested while at Jerusalem for the celebration of Passover, probably in the year 30 CE. He was subsequently charged by the Roman governor Pontius Pilate with crimes of sedition or rebellion, condemned, and executed by the obscene method of crucifixion.

It is difficult to find categories with which to correctly describe the ministry of Jesus and, especially, his understanding of himself. That Jesus made no messianic claims is clear from the fact that none of the messianic or christological titles attributed to him in the Christian tradition is fixed firmly

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1 See Mark 6.3. Koester notes that according to Justin Dial. 88 Jesus made yokes and ploughs. See Ibid., p. 73.
enough in the primitive tradition to witness his self-understanding.\(^1\) Again, there is no indication that such non-messianic titles as priest, philosopher, or apocalyptic seer should be applied to Jesus. Instead, it appears that Jesus consciously renewed Israel's archaic prophetic tradition and continued, in a somewhat changed form, John's proclamation of the coming rule of God.\(^2\)

While it is probable that Jesus, like John, announced no messianic figure other than God, we cannot know if he made any connection between his proclamation of God's coming rule and his own death. He did celebrate a last meal with his disciples before his arrest, but we can only conjecture as to the meaning of this meal.\(^3\) Whether Jesus expected a visible manifestation of God's rule in the imminent future in consequence of his death is a question that must remain unanswered. All that is certain is that Jesus died on the cross at the hands of the Roman authorities.

The situation of the disciples in the aftermath of the crucifixion is more accessible to historical inquiry. It is clear that the disciples' belief in the

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\(^1\) In addition, one can infer from the messianic secret motif so prominent in Mark that an understanding of Jesus' messianic status was not achieved until after the resurrection and consequently that Jesus made no messianic claims during his ministry. Pioneering work on this motif was done by William Wrede, The Messianic Secret, translated by J. C. G. Grieg (Cambridge: James Clark, 1971).

\(^2\) Ibid., p. 79. In distinction from John, that is, Jesus did not emphasize the coming of God for judgment. Instead, he proclaimed the coming of God's rule which began in his words, and in which his hearers were invited to immediately participate.

\(^3\) It could have been celebrated, for example, as a messianic banquet, a meal in anticipation of the future banquet in the rule of God.
resurrection of Jesus provided the catalyst for christological reflection in the early church. Reginald H. Fuller, for example, characterizes this response to the resurrection as the process by which the proclaimer became the proclaimed.¹

There are obvious historical problems underlying the assertion that God raised Jesus from the dead and that he subsequently appeared to many of his followers. One must readily acknowledge that such an event transcends the realm of history and that its expression necessarily involves mythical elements. Despite this fact, we need not attempt to determine the objective or subjective nature of the resurrection appearances because it was their impact on the disciples that has been decisive for the Christian tradition. Within a few weeks of the crucifixion, that is, the disciples came to believe in the resurrection as an indisputable fact of history.² Indeed, one of the earliest post-Easter traditions in the New Testament, dating possibly to 33 CE, concerns the appearance of Jesus to Peter, to the smaller circle of disciples, and to the five hundred brethren.³ As Fuller points out, the subsequent history of the Christian tradition is founded on this belief and is inexplicable without it.⁴

The Easter faith of the earliest Christian community affirmed that the mission of Jesus had been vindicated by God in the resurrection; that is, by its


² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.
means God had removed Jesus from the past of history and inserted him into the eternal now.\textsuperscript{1} In consequence, the salvation that was proffered in Jesus' mission could not be remembered as a mere past event, but was recognized as a salvation that continues to be offered in every historical now.\textsuperscript{2} Otherwise stated, the earliest community did not simply continue Jesus' proclamation of the rule of God as the eschatological act beginning in his earthly ministry. Instead, it proclaimed Jesus himself "...as the One in whom God began to act eschatologically, in whom he acted eschatologically in the supreme crisis of Jesus' death and resurrection, in whom he continues to act eschatologically in the church's kerygma, and in whom he will consummate his eschatological action at the End. In this way the proclaimer became the proclaimed..."\textsuperscript{3}

For all this it must not be assumed that Easter faith provided an unequivocal explanation of the authority and significance of Jesus and his mission. Indeed, the opposite is indicated by the sheer multiplicity of christological titles applied to Jesus in early Christian tradition. Rather, the resurrection and appearances of Jesus are best understood as the catalyst for christological reflection in the early church, and christology itself as a confessional response to the act of God in Jesus, an elaboration of the faith that sees him as the one in whom God has acted redemptively.\textsuperscript{4}

\textsuperscript{1} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{2} Ibid., p. 143.

\textsuperscript{3} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{4} Fuller, \textit{Foundations}, p. 15.
Christology, then, belongs to the church, and represents the attempt to elaborate its faith understanding of Jesus as the Christ. It follows, therefore, that christology must be articulated from within the matrix of symbols, concepts, and patterns espoused by the Christian community.¹ On this assumption it is possible to discern layers of christological interpretation in the early tradition that reflect the situation of the church, first, in a Jewish milieu, and, subsequently, in an environment saturated with Hellenistic assumptions. Fuller, for example, sees reflected in the New Testament a progression of christological patterns that culminates in the incarnation christology that underlies its theologies and that became normative for the church at large in the post-apostolic era.²

According to Fuller, this incarnation christology developed in response to the religious needs of the Hellenistic world in which the search for redemption was centered, not on the hope of national restoration as in Israel.

¹ Ibid., p. 16.

² Ibid., p. 246. The most primitive pattern, which Fuller calls 'Earliest Palestinian,' was formulated in the Palestinian Jewish-Christian community. It is sometimes loosely referred to as 'adoptionistic,' though this is not entirely accurate. This pattern includes neither a conception of preexistence nor of any special action by God in sending the Son. Instead, Jesus' word and work were vindicated at the resurrection, so that they were seen to have continued significance for the life of the church, and Jesus himself, while not active in the church as the exalted Messiah, was identified as the Messiah designate, who would soon return as the Son of Man to consummate his mission. The second pattern, which Fuller calls 'Hellenistic Jewish,' makes reference to the special action of God in sending the Son, and understands Jesus, at his exaltation, to be already enthroned and active as Messiah and not merely waiting as the Messiah designate. Thus, in the interim between the resurrection/ascension and the parousia, he reigns in the life of the church as Christ and Lord. See Ibid., pp. 142-202, 243ff.
but on deliverance from the cosmic powers that enslaved humankind. In order to adapt the Christian message to this situation, missionaries appropriated a christological pattern in which the preexistent Christ descended into the human realm at the incarnation, defeated the cosmic powers on their own ground, and ascended.\(^1\) This Christ myth appears in many variations in Christian literature and no one of these represents its normative statement.\(^2\) Nevertheless, in an inclusive sense the Christian adaptations of this myth incorporate the following elements: preexistence, agency in creation, descent at the incarnation, life as epiphany, atoning death, resurrection and exaltation, victory over the cosmic powers, continued reign in Heaven until the parousia, and final consummation at the parousia.\(^3\)

The clearest expression of incarnation christology in the New Testament is found in the prologue to the Fourth Gospel.\(^4\) John's christological hymn opens with a statement of preexistence and a description of the divine

\(^1\) Ibid., pp. 245f. He calls it the 'Gentile Mission' pattern. Its history of religions origin will be discussed below.

\(^2\) In addition to the Fourth Gospel, which will be discussed below, this pattern is expressed at Phil. 2.6-11; Col. 1.15-20; 1 Tim. 3.16; 1 Peter 3.18-22; and Heb. 1.1-4. For a discussion of these passages, see Ibid., pp. 204-221.

\(^3\) Ibid., p. 246.

\(^4\) While the history of religions origin of this mythological pattern is debated, there is good reason to attribute it primarily to the sophia-logos myth of the Hellenistic-Jewish wisdom tradition. So e.g. Fuller, Ibid., pp. 222ff., against Bultmann, who would derive the myth from Mandaean Gnostic mythology. For a discussion of this issue, see also Brown, The Gospel According to John, vol. 29, second edition (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1980), pp. CXXII ff., 519ff.
mode of being of the Logos who shares the reality of God and yet remains distinct from God. In a statement that goes well beyond Phil. 2.6, the prologue asserts that the Logos enjoyed this state 'in the beginning': that is, the preexistence of the Logos is prior to creation itself.¹

The hymn continues with a description of the Logos as the agent of creation, and vv. 4ff. introduce a new element of the sophia myth: the Logos as the agent of general revelation. Although the Logos was the agent of its creation and present to it in the form of general revelation,² the world chose to remain under the dominion of darkness and refused to know the Logos. As in the sophia myth, those who accepted the Logos were accorded the privilege of becoming children of God.

At v. 14, the incarnation of the Logos is expressed in terms that surpass the sophia myth: the Logos became flesh. This is a distinctly Christian formulation as seen by the fact that it focuses, not the veiling of the descending deity as in Hellenistic epiphany accounts, but rather on the incarnation as the medium of revelation.³ The precise meaning of becoming flesh in the Fourth Gospel will occupy us below.

¹ This summary of the prologue's incarnation christology is indebted to Fuller's discussion in Foundations, pp. 225ff.

² I.e. the cosmos as the creation of the Logos.

The prologue itself does not present the anabasis, or ascent, of the redeemer. Only the first half of the Christ myth—preexistence, agency in creation, and incarnation—are discussed there.\footnote{Foundations, p. 227. Fuller points out that this is not necessary for the christology of the prologue, because the anabasis is concentrated into the incarnate life and thus assumed by the prologue. For example, v. 14 reports that the incarnate Logos is 'full of grace and truth.' But these are terms that describe the being of God; thus, what Col. 1.19 could only say of the exalted one, John's prologue can assert of the incarnate.} In John, the completion of the incarnation event, the ascent of the redeemer or his return to the state of preexistence, is reported only at the conclusion of the Gospel and takes place precisely on the cross.\footnote{See especially John 12.23; 13.1; 17.1. In the same way that the prologue assumes the ascent, the body of the Gospel refers to the preexistence and incarnation of the Logos. E.g. throughout, Jesus is identified with the heavenly realm and described as the stranger par excellence who is exiled in this world (see John 3.13; 6.33ff., 51; 7.28ff.; 8.14, 23, 42.). Again, John insists at 3.13 that the only one to ascend to heaven is he who has first descended, the Son of Man.}

Approach to the Christological Paradigm in John: the Question of Ambiguity in the Relationship between the Flesh and Glory of Jesus

It is clear that the general structure of John's christology was determined by the Hellenistic Christ myth described above. A reading of the Gospel also makes it clear, however, that the Evangelist adapted this myth in such a way as to express a christological perspective that varies considerably
from the general Christian and Pauline view, and that is characterized by a certain ambiguity in the relationship between the flesh and glory of the earthly Jesus. A brief comparison with Pauline christology will illustrate both the uniqueness and the ambiguity of the Johannine perspective.

First, unlike Paul, the Gospel of John does not present the act of incarnation in kenotic terms as the voluntary abandonment of all divine prerogatives. John 1.14a does make a powerful statement of incarnation that appears to represent the christological center of the Gospel. As Ernst Kasemann has noted, however, this perspective is not followed through in John. Indeed, the prologue itself continues paradoxically with the confession 'we beheld his glory,' and the coming from above rather than the becoming flesh appears to be the decisive factor in John.

Second, it follows that John does not portray the earthly life of Jesus in terms of lowliness, nor his crucifixion as the consummation of a life of humiliation that was reversed by the power of resurrection. If in the Pauline view the historical ministry was a time of lowliness and the life-creating power of Jesus was not released until his resurrection, the Johannine Jesus,

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2 See e.g., Bultmann, *Gospel*, pp. 63, 634. Cf. Phil. 2.6ff.

like the Father, has life in himself from the first.\(^1\) Indeed, according to Käsemann, "no other Gospel narrates as impressively as John the confrontation of the world and of the believers with the glory of Jesus..."\(^2\) Even here, however, there is ambiguity, for "...though Jesus' glory is recognized as being already manifest, ...in a certain respect, it is also regarded as still being in the future, for his glory will be perfected only with his death."\(^3\)

Finally, John attributes no soteriological significance to the cross in itself. For Paul the salvation event occurred precisely in the death-and-resurrection, and "The deed of divine grace consists in the fact that God gave Christ up to die on the cross..."\(^4\) Indeed, death-and-resurrection so dominates Paul's theology that incarnation and earthly life are but implicitly included as bare facts, the Christ is preached as 'the crucified,' and the gospel is called the 'word of the cross.'\(^5\) In John, on the other hand, the cross is never discussed as a unique saving event. Rather, it is presented as the crowning conclusion of the unified event that began with the incarnation. In itself it has no specific

\(^1\) Bultmann, *Gospel*, p. 634. Cf. Phil. 2.6ff.; II Cor. 8.9; Rom. 8.3.


\(^3\) Ibid., p. 7.


\(^5\) Ibid. See I Cor. 1.23; 2.2; Gal. 3.1; I Cor. 1.18.
soteriological significance and adds nothing to the cleansing already accomplished by Jesus' word. ¹

The uniqueness and ambiguity of John's perspective indicate that while its christological reflection is structured by the Hellenistic Christ myth, its precise notion of the incarnation and its significance is conditioned by a unique set of assumptions and beliefs that governed the adaptation of the myth; that is to say, by the religious paradigm within which it developed. In the following discussion, therefore, we will attempt to identify the fundamental criteria that condition John's christology and to explicate its notion of incarnation from within the religious paradigm of the Gospel.

This effort will itself be guided by the christological studies of Rudolf Bultmann and of his pupil Ernst Kasemann that, more so than those of other Johannine scholars, have been characterized by the attempt to determine the relationship between the flesh and glory of the earthly Jesus. ² We will appropriate in large measure the concerns of their approach; thus, we will assume that the relationship between flesh and glory is central to the christological problematic of the Gospel and that any explication of John's thought must account in some way for its apparent ambiguity. From this perspective we will inquire concerning the relative importance of flesh and glory for John's christology. For example, to what extent does the act of incarnation in John require the assumption of the limits and conditions of

¹ Bultmann, Gospel, pp. 632-34. See esp. n. 1 p. 634.

human existence, if at all? Again, although John doesn't know, or chooses to ignore, the concept of kenosis, is there as Bultmann suggests a sense in which the glory of Jesus is veiled by his flesh only to become manifest at his exaltation on the cross?

Bultmann, whose position will be discussed in detail below, interprets the christology of John as a unity in which the glory of the preexistent Logos is paradoxically present in yet concealed by the flesh, or full humanity, of the man Jesus. This interpretation is founded on the assertion that incarnation in John has been conditioned by the Gospel's notion of revelation.¹ According to Bultmann, John developed his christology by appropriating a Gnostic version of the redeemer myth and applying it to Jesus. In so doing, however, he reinterpreted the myth on the basis of his notion of revelation that he understood, not as an event of visible and demonstrable divinity, but as a paradoxical event, a divine act that confronts the individual with an eschatological decision in a human word.² Interpreted through this notion the language of the myth, which originally spoke literally of the descent of a divine revealer who assumed human form in order to bring revelation and salvation, is no longer allowed to refer mythologically to the divine nature of Jesus as the revealer, to some actual preexistent state and literal descent. Instead, it reveals the significance of his word by elaborating the Gospel's

¹ See Gospel, pp. 13 n. 1, 143 n. 1.
² See Theology, p. 41, Gospel, pp. 266, 62.
claim to revelation: in this man, God is encountered.\footnote{Gospel, e.g., pp. 145ff., 443ff. See also Theology, p. 62.} In short, the Evangelist has demythologized the Gnostic redeemer myth and, as a result, the paradoxical occurrence of revelation in a human word is reflected in the full humanity of the man Jesus who nevertheless claims to be the revealer of God and who demands from the world a decision of faith.

On Bultmann's interpretation, the apparent ambiguity between the flesh and glory of Jesus results primarily from the tension between the perspective of the Gnostic tradition appropriated by the Evangelist and that of the Gospel and is resolved on the basis of the Evangelist's demythologizing interpretation of this tradition. That is to say, while the Gnostic view presents the incarnation in purely mythological terms as the epiphany of the divine revealer in the human realm, John, guided by his notion of revelation, reinterprets this tradition to present the incarnation as the appearance of an ordinary mortal, Jesus of Nazareth.\footnote{Gospel, pp. 60ff., 251, 445, etc.} The glory of this Jesus can be seen, as affirmed at John 1.14, but only paradoxically; that is, not by focusing alongside or through his humanity, but by focusing precisely and exclusively on his humanity itself.\footnote{Ibid., p. 63.}

James M. Robinson has noted that Bultmann's dialectical interpretation of the Johannine Jesus remains at least within the orbit of a general
incarnation christology. It is, however, precisely the alleged proximity of Johannine christology to orthodox thought that has been challenged by Ernst Kasemann. In his Shaffer Lectures of 1966, Kasemann definitively expressed his dissension from Bultmann by delineating a Johannine christology that presents the incarnation in decidedly Gnostic fashion as the epiphany of the heavenly Son of God. According to Kasemann, incarnation in John does not mean the entry into a totally human life either in the sense required by kenotic theory— the voluntary abandonment of the divine prerogatives— or in the sense required by the dialectical theory of Bultmann— the paradox of a glory hidden in lowliness. Rather, incarnation in John indicates the descent of the Logos into the realm of suffering and death as the occasion for eschatological encounter.

According to Kasemann, the origins of Johannine christology may very well lie in a traditional interpretation of the Christ myth similar to that proposed by Bultmann; that is, based on the two-fold pattern of humiliation—exaltation. The key to the Gospel's christology, however, lies in recognizing the radical modifications of this pattern effected by the Evangelist. Kasemann


2 See e.g. Testament, p. 13 "John is...the first Christian to use the earthly life of Jesus merely as a backdrop for the Son of God proceeding through the world of man and as the scene of the inbreaking of the heavenly glory."

3 Ibid., pp. 9-13.

4 Ibid., pp. 6ff., 19.
argues that these modifications are based on the experience of an enthusiastic prophetic community whose christological reflection focused on the utterances of Christian prophets in which Jesus continued to speak and to be present to the community.\(^1\) After Easter, however, Jesus was known only as the one exalted to glory in whose word resurrection and life had become present reality.\(^2\) According to Kasemann, this continuing experience of the risen Christ eventually effected a shift from the primitive two-fold eschatology to a realized eschatology that, significantly, underlies the christology of the Gospel itself.\(^3\) Otherwise stated, this Jesus, in whom the eschatological reality is present and remains present continually, cannot be understood on the basis of the traditional christological pattern as one whose mission led from lowliness to glory, humiliation to exaltation, but only as the one who is always and everywhere one with the Father. In consequence, neither the incarnation nor the passion in John conforms to the perspective of the ecclesiastical tradition. Incarnation does not mean the entry into a totally human life, but rather the descent of the Logos into the human realm. Jesus’ death does take place on the cross, but John presents the passion as a triumphal procession, the return of the revealer to the Father. In short, neither incarnation nor passion "...mark a change in Christ according to his

\(^1\) Ibid., pp. 19, 38.

\(^2\) Ibid., pp. 15ff.

\(^3\) Ibid., pp. 13ff.
nature, but only a change in terms of 'coming' and 'going' of descending and ascending.\(^1\)

From Kasemann's perspective, the ambiguity between the flesh and glory of the Johannine Jesus results from the tension between the traditional christological interpretation, whose residual influence is felt in the Gospel, and the perspective of the Evangelist, which is conditioned by the experience and beliefs of an enthusiastic prophecy.\(^2\) While the former presents the incarnation as a process leading from the lowliness of the incarnate state to a glory perfected in death, John presents it as the earthly sojourn of the Son of God and the occasion for encounter with his heavenly glory. Indeed, according to Kasemann, the manifest glory of Jesus so dominates the Gospel that his flesh has become superfluous and its christology should be labeled a naive, unreflected docetism.\(^3\)

We will argue in this chapter that Kasemann's interpretation of Johannine christology not only represents a significant critique of Bultmann, but more accurately depicts the situation of the Gospel and the fundamental beliefs that condition its thought. Thus, our attempt to explicate the notion of incarnation within the religious paradigm of the Gospel will build upon Kasemann's interpretation by clarifying, supplementing, and at times critically amending his argument. First, we will attempt to confirm his

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1 Ibid., pp. 9, 17f, 20.
2 Ibid., pp. 6ff.
3 Ibid., p. 25f.
assertion that the christology of John should be understood against the background of an enthusiastic prophetic community whose experience and beliefs lie behind the Gospel and provide its fundamental orientation. We will see below that Kasemann's attempt in *The Testament of Jesus* to interpret John against a prophetic background exemplifies a recent tendency among scholars to address the issue of the social setting reflected in the Gospel and that, with increased frequency, scholars have recognized the profound influence of Christian prophecy on its fundamental features. Second, we will defend in modified form his assertion that the center of John's proclamation is the praesentia Christi, and that this emphasis has effected a shift from a traditional interpretation of the incarnation to an interpretation modeled on the exalted Lord. Finally, as mentioned above, Kasemann characterizes John's christology as naively docetic and attributes the christological ambiguity in the Gospel to the tension between the pre-Johannine christological orientation and the perspective of the Evangelist. We will challenge these conclusions below by addressing the question of christological ambiguity in the Gospel from the perspective of crisis and paradigm shift.

**Bultmann: The Paradoxical Unity of Flesh and Glory**

Two aspects of Bultmann's exegesis of the prologue indicate its importance for a consideration of his christology. First, Bultmann emphasizes the close association between the prologue and the body of the Gospel. According to Bultmann, the prologue is analogous to an overture that alludes
to motifs developed in the Gospel itself. Precisely because these motifs are half mysterious and only half comprehensible, this technique provokes in the reader the question concerning their authentic meaning that is essential to the reader's understanding of the Gospel.\(^1\) One such motif, which is of particular importance for our concern, is the Logos concept that expresses the notion of revelation so dominant in the Gospel.\(^2\) Second, Bultmann argues, and in this he follows the prevailing trend of Johannine scholarship, that the prologue's christology should be recognized as its exegetical center. Indeed, his exegesis is characterized by the fact that it is founded on v. 14a. According to Bultmann, that is, the purpose of the prologue lies in its announcement at v. 14a of the Gospel's central concern: the incarnation of the Logos.\(^3\) For these reasons, a consideration of Bultmann's christology must take account of his exegesis of the prologue: its structure and purpose, and in particular the stress he lays on v. 14a. All that follows depends on his interpretation at this point.\(^4\)

According to Bultmann, the basis of the prologue is a pre-Christian liturgical poem that was translated by the Evangelist from its Aramaic original and adapted to his purposes by the addition of exegetical comments.\(^5\) The

\(^1\) *Gospel*, p. 13.

\(^2\) Ibid., n. 1.

\(^3\) Ibid., p. 32: "The hymn that forms the basis of the prologue praises the Logos as the Revealer; and the Evangelist's aim is to show that the Logos has become flesh in Jesus of Nazareth." See also p. 64.

\(^4\) So Kasemann, "Structure and Purpose," p. 156.

\(^5\) *Gospel*, pp. 13-18. These additions include vv. 6-8, 12c, 13, 15, 17-18.
literary integrity of the hymn is assured by a pattern of poetic couplets that governs its composition; that is, two lines, each with two stressed words, that dovetail regularly in the hymn either as complements, parallels, or antitheses. The result is an intricate and chain-like construction in which the conclusion of the first line is often taken up in the second.\(^1\) Given this basic structure, the prologue divides into two sections: vv. 1-4, which deal with the pre-existence of the Logos, and vv. 5-18, which develop the theme of the Logos as revealer within history.\(^2\)

Bultmann argues that at vv. 1-5, 9-12 the source spoke of the preexistent Logos, describing his almost fruitless effect as revealer in this form, before introducing the incarnation at v. 14.\(^3\) It is also clear, however, that the Evangelist understood the text from v. 5 on to refer to the incarnate Logos, a situation indicated both by the parallelism between vv. 5, 9ff., and 14ff., and by his insertion of the witness of the Baptist after v. 5.\(^4\) Despite this parallelism, vv. 14ff. are sharply distinguished from the preceding verses by the emphasis placed on them by the Evangelist. According to Bultmann, vv. 5-

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\(^1\) Ibid, p. 15. There are a number of places where this construction is disturbed in the prologue, e.g. vv. 9, 10, 12 and 14. Bultmann attributes this disruption to the translation process of the Evangelist, including his own exegetical comments. See pp. 16ff., and see Kasemann, "Structure and Purpose," p.139.

\(^2\) Bultmann, Gospel, pp. 17, 19ff.

\(^3\) Ibid., p. 17.

\(^4\) Ibid. I.e., it is only because the Evangelist misunderstood the source and took the phrase 'the light shines in the darkness' as an expression of the revelation given by the historical Jesus that he was able to introduce the Baptist at this point.
provide a picture of the Redeemer's historical mission that anticipates what is to follow. The Evangelist here speaks indirectly, alluding only obliquely to the incarnation.1 At v. 14, however, the character and style of the prologue changes and the incarnation is explicitly proclaimed.2 Thus, according to Bultmann, this dramatic announcement of the incarnation at v. 14 represents the climactic statement for which the earlier portions of the prologue prepare, the center from which the Evangelist's theology is developed.

Bultmann compares the Evangelist's notion of incarnation to that of speculative Gnosticism. In the Gnostic myth the redeemer descends to the lower world in human form by way of a disguise, in order to deceive the demonic powers of darkness and, at the same time, not to alarm those who are to be saved. Alternatively, the redeemer assumes human form as an act of divine condescension, in order to become accessible to a frail humanity.3 In the Fourth Gospel, on the other hand, the act of incarnation refers neither to a disguise nor to an act of divine condescension, but rather to the redeemer's assumption of full humanity. According to Bultmann

It is in this sphere that the Logos appears, i.e. the Revealer is nothing but a man. And the men who meet him take him for a man, as is seen most clearly in the 'behold the man' (19:5). For they know his father and mother (6:42; 7:27 f.; 1:45) and therefore take offence at his claim to be the Revealer (10:33); they cannot

1 Ibid., pp. 46, 61.
2 Ibid., p. 60f.
3 Ibid., pp. 25f., 61 n. 1.
tolerate the 'man' who tells them the truth (§ 40). It is therefore perfectly appropriate for the title Logos to play no further part in the rest of the Gospel. The Logos is now present as the Incarnate, and indeed it is only as the Incarnate that it is present at all.¹

This interpretation of the incarnation is founded on the assertion of a fundamental correspondence between the notions of incarnation and revelation in the Fourth Gospel.² That is to say, while John has taken over a Gnostic redeemer myth and applied it to the person of Jesus, he has demythologized its language on the basis of his notion of revelation. In consequence, the language of the myth is no longer allowed to refer mythologically to the divine nature of Jesus as the revealer. Rather, it reveals the significance of his word by elaborating the Gospel's claim that in the man Jesus God is encountered.³ In this way the paradoxical occurrence of revelation in a human word in which individuals are confronted with the decision of life and death is reflected in the full humanity of Jesus who claims to be the revealer of God and demands from the world a decision of faith.

According to Bultmann, the Evangelist understands revelation as an event of divine origin that, nevertheless, must occur in the human realm to have any significance for humankind.⁴ Indeed, this much his notion shares

¹ Ibid., p. 62f.
² Ibid., pp. 13 n. 1, 143 n. 1.
³ Gospel, e.g., pp. 145ff., 443ff. See also Theology, p. 62.
⁴ Ibid., p. 61.
with the world’s, in consequence of an innate if preliminary understanding of revelation.\textsuperscript{1} Thus, while revelation is never at the disposal of humankind, it is not confronted as something completely beyond understanding with no intelligible bearing on life.\textsuperscript{2} Even in its rebellion the world cannot escape being God’s creation and "...knows, overtly or covertly, of its dependence upon that from which it can live."\textsuperscript{3} Consequently, for example, when Jesus is called the true light at John 1.9, it is presupposed that humankind does know of light in general and is in quest of it.\textsuperscript{4}

At several additional passages in the Gospel this innate understanding comes to light through the world’s possession of concepts appropriate to revelation. For example, at John 6.41ff., the world’s representatives know that revelation must come from God and not from humankind and, consequently,

\textsuperscript{1} Idem, \textit{Theology}, p. 26f.

\textsuperscript{2} \textit{Gospel}, p. 344.

\textsuperscript{3} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{4} Ibid. According to Bultmann, one must make a way in the world, and to do so requires self-understanding in relation to one’s world. It is possible to go astray and follow a false light. But even should one do so and become, like the representatives of the world in the Fourth Gospel, a blind person with a pretension to sight (John 9.39ff.), one nevertheless shows oneself consciously or unconsciously concerned with a quest for light. Thus when Jesus calls himself the light of the world, he presents himself as the genuine object of humanity’s quest. At several places the predicate true is used to contrast Jesus’ gift with some other imagined or temporary good. In addition to John 1.9, see 6.32; 15.1. See also Bultmann’s comments on John 2.1-11, \textit{Gospel}, p. 120f.
take offense at the claim of a mere man to be the revealer of God.\(^1\) Again, at John 7.27, the world's representatives express an awareness of the mysterious, transcendent origin of revelation, and on this basis reject Jesus' claim to be the Messiah because his origins are known.\(^2\) On the other hand, however, these passages show that when confronted with the revelatory event the world betrays its prior understanding and perverts its knowledge into ignorance by judging the revelation on the basis of its own criteria. According to Bultmann, that is, the world clearly expects that the revelation will give proof of itself and will in some way be recognizable.\(^3\) In so doing, however, the world fails to realize that the divine cannot be contrasted with the human in such a facile and confident manner, nor its presence in the world measured by human standards.\(^4\) In short, by judging the revelation with its own illusory criteria the world cuts itself off from an event that cannot be apprehended by

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\(^1\) Ibid., p. 229f. We have chosen to employ the term world's representatives rather than Jews simply to avoid any pejorative misunderstanding. John understands the life of Jesus as a struggle with the world; that is, that division of humankind that refuses to respond to Jesus in belief. This group is characteristic of the Jews and particularly by their leaders. It is abundantly clear, however, that John is not anti-Semitic. The Evangelist condemns not race or people but opposition to Jesus. See Ibid., p. 86; Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, vol. 29, pp. LXXff.

\(^2\) *Gospel*, p. 296.

\(^3\) Ibid., pp. 6 ff.; 229f.

\(^4\) Ibid.
questions of the world and that can only be experienced as judgment on the fundamental status of the world itself.¹

In stark contrast to the expectations of the world, revelation in the Fourth Gospel does not occur as an event of visible and demonstrable divinity. The revealer does not appear as a mystagogue communicating divine teachings, formulas, and rites, as in Gnosticism.² Indeed, every demand that the claim to revelation be substantiated is refused.³ Instead, according to Bultmann, the revelatory event occurs in John as a paradox, that is, a divine act that confronts individuals with the eschatological decision in the word of a mere man.⁴

In the Fourth Gospel, Jesus’ words and actions are determined by what he has seen and heard from the Father.⁵ This fact alone qualifies his word as eschatological; that is, it does not represent a personal judgment originating in the world and based on knowledge of a particular situation, but rather an eschatological word, determined by its divine origin.⁶ The word of the revealer, therefore, represents a declaration to the world of the divine reality

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¹ Ibid.
² Theology, p. 41.
³ Gospel, p. 266.
⁴ Ibid., p. 62.
⁵ See, for example, 5.19f., 30f.
⁶ Gospel, pp. 253ff.
and a confrontation with the ultimate decision.¹ Bultmann notes, however, that John makes no attempt to fill out this eschatological word by means of speculative content. Jesus never describes things he has seen or heard in Heaven, nor does he communicate cosmological or soteriological mysteries like the Gnostic redeemer. Indeed, he imparts no information at all about God, the origin of the world, or the fate of the self. In the end this revealer does not communicate anything, but rather calls humankind to himself.² According to Bultmann, this means that the word of revelation does not represent a word about reality that can be separated from the person of the revealer, but rather an event of personal address in which individuals are confronted by God in his person.³ This word-event can never be contemplated, for at each moment it addresses and confronts one with the decision of faith. Consequently, it lies always beyond human criticism and assessment and simply demands belief.⁴ In sum, the word of revelation in the Fourth Gospel represents an eschatological event that, as the act of God in the word of the revealer, can never become something that has been revealed. It remains at each instance an address that demands a decision.⁵

¹ Ibid. See also p. 60f.
² Ibid.; see also Theology, pp. 41, 62.
³ Ibid., p 344.
⁴ Ibid., p. 255.
⁵ Ibid., pp. 255, 344.
On this basis Bultmann maintains that it is of the nature of revelation to cause offense. Aside from the very assertion of the revelatory claim, there is no way for the revelation to authenticate itself; thus, it must risk being misunderstood as mere presumption and rejected as the claim of a man seeking his own glory.\(^1\) But precisely in this claim lies the offense of the revelation: the divine reality is encountered exclusively in the word of the man Jesus.\(^2\) There is but one proof of revelatory authority: the one who hears the challenge of the revelatory word and obeys it will be able to judge whether it is the word of God or the assertions of an arrogant man.\(^3\) To the unbelieving world, however, the word of Jesus remains an offense and a scandal.

In Bultmann's view, to summarize, revelation does not occur in a suprahuman manifestation of divine reality that can be authenticated by human criteria, but, paradoxically, in the word of a man, Jesus of Nazareth. Otherwise stated, the Fourth Gospel presents only the fact of revelation without attempting to describe its content.\(^4\) For a world that expects revelation precisely as a divine demonstration and requires that any revelatory claim meet its standards of judgment, the claim of an ordinary man to be the revealer represents a scandal. This is clearly demonstrated by the frequent

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\(^1\) Ibid., p. 274. See also p. 447.

\(^2\) Ibid., pp. 443 ff. See also pp. 229, 299.

\(^3\) Ibid., p. 274.

\(^4\) Ibid., p. 66.
misunderstandings and demands for authorization in the Gospel. But this is
the very absurdity proclaimed in the event of revelation, and the condition of
its understanding is that one give up the pretension of judging the divine
reality, overcome the scandal, and respond in faith to the word of Jesus.

According to Bultmann, this notion of revelation underlies and provides
the fundamental orientation for John's conception of the incarnation. On its
basis he has demythologized a Gnostic redeemer myth and applied it to an
interpretation of Jesus. This is evidenced, for example, by the fact that while
the Johannine Jesus speaks frequently of his unity with the Father, of what he
has seen and heard from the Father, and of being sent by the Father—
all expressions referring to the preexistence and mission of the redeemer—John
has no interest in depicting an actual pre-temporal existence of the redeemer,
nor his mission as a literal descent in which he assumes human form in an act
of revelation or condescension. As seen above, the Evangelist understands
revelation as a divine act that occurs only paradoxically in the word of an ordi-
nary mortal. There are no criteria by which to determine its presence in the
world, and no external authority to which appeal might be made for
authentication. In giving expression to this notion of revelation, therefore,
John's christology completely conceals all aspects of divinity such as those
expressed in the redeemer myth. There are again no criteria by which the
revealer can be identified and the offense of revelation avoided. In short,

1 Gospel, p. 443.

2 Ibid., p. 230.
Jesus is known in the Fourth Gospel only as a man, and his status as the revealer of God is recognized in the response of faith to his word. Evidence of this demythologizing activity can be seen in several key notions of the Gospel.

First, there are several indications that the Evangelist has given up a mythological notion of preexistence. The first of these occurs in the Logos doctrine of the prologue. According to Bultmann, John defines the preexistence of the Logos at 1.1 through a series of apparently contradictory statements that precludes the mythological notion of a divine being either alongside, subordinate to, or identical with God. In effect, by placing the phrase 'the Logos was God' between the two statements of 'the Logos was with God,' the Evangelist has shown that any direct expression of their relationship is impossible. Otherwise stated, the truth expressed in this verse cannot be adequately expounded in the language of the myth and can only be grasped from the succession of contradictory propositions. The truth that John expresses through this dialectical procedure, therefore, is no longer the mythological notion of preexistence found in the Gnostic myth. Rather, John's notion of preexistence gives expression to the paradox inherent in the concept

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1 Ibid., pp. 32ff. The statements asserting relationship preclude the notion of an emanation from God, the statement asserting identity precludes the idea of a second divine being, but the dialectical combination of the two precludes as well the notion of a simple identity between the Logos and God.

2 Ibid., p. 34.
of revelation: "the paradox that in the Revealer God is really encountered, and yet that God is not directly encountered, but only in the Revealer."¹

The second indication that John has given up a mythological notion of preexistence lies in his rejection of mythological ideas of Jesus' entry into the world. He shows a total lack of interest in the manner of occurrence of the incarnation or the time at which the Logos was united with Jesus.² For example, John 1.45ff.; 6.42; and 7.27f. show that John knew or wished to know nothing of a virgin birth. 1.45ff. neither disputes the fatherhood of Joseph nor corrects the assertion of Jesus' birth at Nazareth by the tradition that he was born at Bethlehem.³ Again, the notion that the Logos descended at the baptism is unacceptable because 1.32 does not speak of the descent of the

¹ Ibid. According to Bultmann, the Evangelist's aim in the prologue is to show that the Logos has become flesh in Jesus of Nazareth; consequently, it is natural that the paradox expressed here pervade the whole of the Gospel. E.g. at 10.30 the Father and the Son are one, and yet at 14.28 the Father is greater than the Son. The Son obediently carries out the Father's will at 5.30; 6.38, yet the Son has the same power as the Father, 5.21-27. In short, "God is there only in his revelation, and whoever encounters the revelation, really encounters God...". At other points in his commentary, Bultmann augments his argument for the rejection of preexistence by appealing to the dualism of the Fourth Gospel. For the Evangelist, that is, the dualism of flesh and spirit refers not to the opposed substances of the demonic and divine realms as in Gnosticism, but rather to distinct spheres of influence that determine the character of an individual. Thus, 'to be of' God refers not to the preexistent origin of spiritual individuals, but rather to the determination of their words and actions by the divine reality. According to Bultmann, "This is important for the understanding of the notion of pre-existence in Johannine christology, for it means that for John pre-existence refers not to a mythical existence, but to the character of a man's existence." See for example, pp. 62, note 4, 135-138.

² Ibid., pp. 62, note 4, 254.

³ Ibid. See as well p. 104, note 1.
Logos, but of the Spirit.\textsuperscript{1} For the Evangelist, in short, the man Jesus is, as the revealer, the Logos.\textsuperscript{2}

Finally, the rejection of preexistence is indicated by the fact that Jesus nowhere reveals what he has seen or heard from the Father.\textsuperscript{3} He never initiates us into cosmogonic or soteriological mysteries in the manner of the Gnostic redeemer, nor does he ever show us any particular thing. Indeed, "...His 'showing' consists in his speaking to us and challenging us to believe."\textsuperscript{4} According to Bultmann, it makes no difference whether the present or past tense is used of this seeing and hearing. The use of the past tense clearly refers to preexistence at 5.36, where the works are granted to be accomplished in the preexistence, and performed in the historical ministry.\textsuperscript{5} The statements in the present tense, however, are decisive. They indicate that "...the pre-existence is not thought of as some former observable state and that the mission is not conceived as a mythical event."\textsuperscript{6}

It is important to note that, according to Bultmann, the Evangelist has not rejected the notion of preexistence altogether, but has shifted its

\textsuperscript{1} Ibid., p. 62, note 4.

\textsuperscript{2} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{3} Ibid., pp. 253ff.

\textsuperscript{4} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{5} Ibid. See also 8.26 where the phrase 'to the world' makes it clear that the hearing has not taken place in the world itself, or 1.18 where the identity of the pre-existent one and the revealer is affirmed.

\textsuperscript{6} Ibid., p. 254.
significance.\textsuperscript{1} Jesus’ preexistence, that is, can no longer be understood on the basis of Gnostic speculation as an actual, pre-temporal state. Rather, his preexistence can be understood only in the act of faith in which its meaning is perceived as the eternity of the divine word of revelation.\textsuperscript{2} Otherwise stated, the notion of preexistence in the Fourth Gospel no longer describes the metaphysical nature of the revealer, but has been retained as an image to express his soteriological significance.\textsuperscript{3} All of the expressions asserting that the Son does what the Father does, fulfills his commandment, works his work, that he is one with the Father, etc., are not pronounced as the basis of a speculative christology, but together express the idea that “...he is the revealer in whom we encounter God himself speaking and acting.”\textsuperscript{4} In sum, on the basis of the evidence presented above, Bultmann concludes that “…the mythological statements have lost their mythological meaning. Jesus is not presented in literal seriousness as a pre-existent divine being who came in human form to earth to reveal unprecedented secrets. Rather, the mythological terminology is intended to express the absolute and decisive significance of his word- the mythological notion of pre-existence is made to serve the idea of the Revelation.”\textsuperscript{5}

\textsuperscript{1} Ibid., p. 255, note 2.

\textsuperscript{2} Ibid., p. 328.

\textsuperscript{3} Ibid., pp. 253ff.

\textsuperscript{4} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{5} Theology, p. 62.
According to Bultmann, the Evangelist's demythologizing activity extends to the portrayal of Jesus as a theios aner, or divine man, and is evidenced by the treatment of the theme of omniscience and the miraculous signs performed by Jesus. At several passages in John, Jesus' portrayal in the style of a Hellenistic divine man is indicated by his possession of supernatural knowledge.\textsuperscript{1} In distinction from the similar ability of a prophet that is possessed as an occasional gift from God, the ability of Jesus as a divine man results from his personal divinity.\textsuperscript{2} Thus, for example, at John 11.4, 11-14 Jesus knows events that occur at a distance; he knows his future destiny in advance at 2.19, 21; 3.14; etc.; and at 13.36; 16.2; etc., he knows the fate of others. According to Bultmann, however, the divine man motif is not the decisive element in the Gospel. Rather, it portrays a notion of omniscience that is not understood as an abstract attribute, a supernatural ability that enhances Jesus' humanity, but as an expression of his unity with God that he enjoys in his full humanity.\textsuperscript{3} Consequently, the meaning of omniscience in the Gospel goes beyond outward miracle, and gives expression to the idea of revelation.\textsuperscript{4} Through it "Jesus shows himself to be the Revealer because he knows the people who meet him; he knows his 'own' (10.14) and in his word reveals to

\textsuperscript{1} See, for example, 1.42; 1.47f.; 2.24f.; 4.17-19; 11.11-14. \textit{Gospel}, p. 101f.

\textsuperscript{2} Ibid., p. 102, note 1.

\textsuperscript{3} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{4} Ibid. See also pp. 107, 590f.
them what they are and what they will be." In other words, John has demythologized this ability. It no longer represents the manifestation of a divine attribute, but reflects the effect of encounter with the revealer in which the believer's own existence is uncovered. In short, Jesus' omniscience, expressed through the divine man motif, forms part of the mythological elaboration of revelation.

A similar situation is reflected in John's appropriation of the semeia, the tradition of miraculous signs performed by Jesus in the Fourth Gospel. According to Bultmann, the Evangelist is critical of a faith that seeks the authentication of signs and includes them in the Gospel only as a concession to human weakness. As with the divine man motif and its expression of omniscience, the meaning of the semeia is not contained simply in the miraculous events. They are included not as actual manifestations of the glory of Jesus that authenticate his divine status, but rather as symbolic representations of the revelation of glory that takes place throughout the whole of the historical ministry.

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1 Ibid., p. 107.
2 Ibid., see also p. 590f.
3 Ibid., p. 102, note 1.
4 Ibid., pp. 204-209. Bultmann bases this interpretation on the insertion at John 4.48 of a verse critical of such a signs faith: "Jesus therefore said to him, 'unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe.'"
5 For example, in commenting on the wine semeion at 2.1-11, Bultmann says that Jesus' revelation of glory is nothing more or less than the revelation of the Father's name that takes place throughout the ministry. Of this revelation
Bultmann maintains, to summarize, that by interpreting the mythological elements of his christology through the paradoxical notion of revelation, the Evangelist has stripped them of any mythological meaning. They no longer allow the identity of the revealer to become visible as that of a preexistent divine being who came in human form to earth to reveal unprecedented secrets and to bring salvation. They serve, rather, to elaborate the notion of revelation that takes place through his word. Consequently, Bultmann maintains that the Evangelist allows nothing to become visible beyond the offense of revelation, which is brought out as strongly as possible by the incarnation: the Word became flesh. Indeed, this is the main theme of the Gospel: the revealer is nothing but a man whose origins are known and whose life ends in death. It is true that as the revealer of God his own have beheld his glory, as affirmed at John 1.14, for were it not so there would be no grounds on which to speak of revelation. This, however, is the christological paradox that runs through the entire Gospel: Jesus' glory cannot be seen alongside or through his humanity, but precisely and exclusively in his humanity. "...If man wishes to see the doxa, then it is on the sarx that he must concentrate his attention, without allowing himself to fall a victim to appearances. The revelation is present in a peculiar hiddenness."

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the epiphany story provides only a picture, and the belief of the disciples provides a picture of the faith aroused by the revealer through his word. Ibid., p. 119.

\[1\] Ibid., p. 63.
Bultmann's dialectical interpretation of John's christology extends to his treatment of Jesus' passion as the proper hour of his glorification. Despite the fact that the Evangelist understands the earthly ministry as a ministry in glory and attributes no soteriological significance to the passion as an isolated event, Jesus' passion in the Fourth Gospel retains a unique significance and remains one of the principal determining factors of its christology. For the Evangelist, that is to say, Jesus' passion represents the event in which his mission as a whole becomes effective as eschatological event.\(^1\) Consequently, it is only in paradoxical unity with this hour of glorification that the earthly ministry of Jesus takes on its eschatological character and can be understood and described as it really was: revelatory event.\(^2\)

In John, according to Bultmann, the eschatological event extends to the mission of the Son in its unity. For example, in discussing the passage at John 3.9-21 he notes that "The mission of the Son, embracing as it does both his humiliation and his exaltation, is of decisive importance, for it is by faith in this mission that man gains life. This means that the mission is the eschatological event... In this event the judgement of the world takes place."\(^3\)

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\(^1\) Ibid., pp. 428f., esp. 492f.

\(^2\) Ibid.

\(^3\) Gospel, p. 154. According to Bultmann, the passage at John 3.16ff. expresses this conviction. This is clear, first, from the fact that the mission, which includes both descent and ascent, is grounded in the love of God who sent the Son; that is, the mission represents the expression of God's soteriological will. Second, the nature of the mission as eschatological is indicated by the present tense of 'to have' already at v. 15: "that whoever believes in him may have
Accordingly, the earthly ministry of Jesus is conceived by John as an existence in glory: the believers beheld the fullness of his glory (1.14); the Father gave him power over all flesh to give eternal life to all whom the Father gave him (17.2);¹ indeed, the Father who loved the Son had given everything into his hand (3.35; 13.3).

When considered in this context, the glorification of Jesus refers to an event that occurred in the activities of his earthly ministry. At 12.28, however, the Gospel looks forward to an event in which the glorification of the Father's name, and thus of the Son,² will take place. In response to Jesus' request that the Father glorify his name, a heavenly voice declares "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." Bultmann argues that this future glorification cannot be understood as a simple renewal of the old glory, or a changing of the old, lesser glory for a higher one, for the old glory was itself that of the only Son in its fullness.³ Rather, the Gospel looks forward paradoxically to a glorification that will occur precisely in the passion. In John, that is, the hour of the passion, in which Jesus is lifted up from the eternal life," and by the express statement at vv. 17-21 that in this event the eschatological judgment of the world occurs.

¹ I.e., the royal power that belongs to God alone, and that he transmits to the Messiah. See Ibid., p. 492, n. 3.

² As Bultmann points out, Father and Son are one (10.30), so that if the Father is glorified through the work of the Son, that is, reveals himself, at the same time the Son is glorified as the revealer. Ibid., p. 429.

³ Ibid., p. 493.
earth, represents the fulfillment of his mission and the proper hour of his glorification.\textsuperscript{1} Thus, the eschatological event by which the Son's mission is made effective occurs precisely in the passion, and without it his coming and action would be meaningless.\textsuperscript{2}

Bultmann explains this view of glorification by reference to the conception of the eschatological event in John, which is itself paradoxical. This is made clear at John 4.35ff. that depicts the mission of the disciples as the eschatological harvest. In commenting on this passage, Bultmann notes that, like the mission of Jesus into the world of which it is a consequence, the mission of the disciples is itself an eschatological event.\textsuperscript{3} As such, however, it does not really follow on the mission of Jesus, for the rules of human activity are no longer applicable. In the eschatological event, the joy of sower and reaper, seedtime and harvest, coincide, because the tension between present and future is overcome and events that appear separate in earthly time are contemporaneous.\textsuperscript{4} An additional proverb introduced at v. 37 heightens this paradox by emphasizing the fact that sower and reaper are two different persons. At the same time, however, it points out that, for a while at least, the

\textsuperscript{1} John 12.23. In the Fourth Gospel, the term 'lifted up' is deliberately ambiguous and refers both to exaltation and to being lifted up onto the cross. In the same way, 'glorification,' which is synonymous with 'lifted up,' is ambiguous and is achieved through the cross. See Ibid., pp. 152, n. 4; 392; 397; 424.

\textsuperscript{2} Ibid., pp. 152f.; 467.

\textsuperscript{3} Ibid., p. 197.

\textsuperscript{4} Ibid., p. 197f.
law governing earthly time remains in effect. That which is contemporaneous in eschatological time must continue to unfold in earthly time.¹

According to Bultmann, this paradox underlies the Evangelist's notion of the glorification of Jesus that took place in his past activity, yet that becomes effective only in his death. "In earthly time the 'coming' of the Revealer and his 'going away' are separate events, in eschatological time they are contemporaneous."² Otherwise stated, for Bultmann the significance of passion in the Fourth Gospel lies in the fact that it unifies past and future in the now of the eschatological event.³

From the eschatological perspective, the coming and going of the Son are simultaneous events that in their unity constitute the eschatological event. Indeed, the passion represents a glorification only because the Son's activity as a whole serves the revelation.⁴ On this basis the Evangelist can speak of the earthly ministry as a time of glory. Nevertheless, that which occurs simultaneously in eternity must unfold itself in the temporal future; consequently, the Son's glorification will occur precisely in his passion.⁵ This means, however, that the passion unifies past and future in such a way

¹ Ibid.
² Ibid., p. 198.
³ Ibid., pp., 428f.: 431; 492f.: 523.
⁴ Ibid., p. 429.
⁵ Ibid., p. 523.
that the past is given meaning by the future event in which it is actually fulfilled for the first time.¹ When, therefore, the ministry of Jesus is described by the Evangelist as a ministry in glory, this is only in paradoxical unity with his future passion, for although "...every part within the revelation is at one and the same time the whole; ... that is only true sub specie of the future event, which is 'greater' than the past in the sense that in it the significance of what is past is preserved and thus fulfilled for the first time. Thus Jesus' coming into the world is the judgement (3.19; 9.39), and yet the hour of his departure is the judgement (12.31) and the hour of victory (16.33)."²

In two significant senses, to conclude, Bultmann's dialectical manner of presenting the Johannine Jesus exhibits affinities with kenotic christology in its tendency to veil the glory of Jesus beneath his true humanity. First, as we have seen, the Evangelist has stripped his christology of any mythological meaning by interpreting its mythological elements through the paradoxical notion of revelation. Interpreted in this way they no longer depict the revealer as a preexistent divine being who descended into the human realm for soteriological purposes, but elaborate the notion of revelation that takes place through his word. In John the notion of preexistence and the portrayal of Jesus as a divine man capable of both prescience and the performance of miraculous signs illustrate and confirm the Gospel's claim to revelation: in this man God is encountered. Thus, on Bultmann's interpretation, John's notion of

¹ Ibid., pp. 493; 611.
² Ibid., p. 611.
the incarnation allows nothing to become visible beyond the offense of revelation: the Logos has appeared in an ordinary mortal, Jesus of Nazareth, whose origins and family are known and whose life ends in death. Insofar as he claims to be God's revealer, therefore, he does so in his true humanity. The glory of this Jesus is veiled in the sense that it is present only paradoxically and can be seen neither alongside nor through his humanity, but precisely and exclusively in his humanity. In a second sense, the glory of Jesus is veiled by John's interpretation of glorification. According to Bultmann, the Evangelist employed a paradoxical concept of the eschatological event to interpret the life of Jesus in light of its end that was at the same time its fulfillment. Only in its unity with the passion, the event that unifies past and future in the eschatological now, could the work of Jesus be understood as eschatological.¹ This means, however, that the earthly ministry was not the time in which to recognize the glory of the revealer.² Though there is no temporal division between the glorification of the past and that of the future when viewed eschatologically, there is such a division when viewed from the human perspective.³ Jesus' disciples, that is, had to await the passion and resurrection to realize the full significance of his mission. Only then would

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¹ Ibid.

² Ibid., pp. 493f. Viewed in isolation, the life of Jesus quickly becomes 'something in the past,' and as such it does not reveal his glory.

³ Ibid., p. 524.
the spirit bestow knowledge and lead into all truth, and the disciples be able to judge what Jesus had done for them.\textsuperscript{1}

Finally, it is clear that Bultmann attributes the apparent christological ambiguity in John to the tension between the perspective of the pre-Johannine traditions incorporated into the Gospel—specifically those of Gnosticism and the Hellenistic divine man—and the perspective of the Evangelist. The Gnostic view certainly depicted the incarnation in purely mythological terms as the epiphany of the divine revealer in the human realm. Again, the Hellenistic divine man tradition understood both supernatural knowledge and the performance of miraculous signs as overt demonstrations of the divine status of uniquely gifted individuals. The Evangelist, on the other hand, understood the incarnation in realistic terms as the appearance of an ordinary mortal, Jesus of Nazareth. It is also clear, however, that this tension was resolved by John's appropriation of these traditions in which their meanings were reinterpreted. Guided by his notion of revelation, he stripped his christology of any mythological meaning and thereby presented the incarnation as a paradoxical unity in which the glory of the Logos is present in yet concealed by the true humanity of Jesus. Again, while the Evangelist clearly presents the historical ministry of Jesus as a ministry in which his glory was revealed, this perspective is based on a second paradox that interprets the life of Jesus from its end that was at the same time its fulfillment. Thus, only in its unity with the passion, the event that unifies

\textsuperscript{1} Ibid. See also p. 467.
past and future in the eschatological now, could the work of Jesus be understood as eschatological.

Kasemann: The Dominance of Glory over Flesh

Kasemann observes in *The Testament of Jesus* that the formation of the New Testament canon was possible only because the complexity and diversity of primitive Christianity was seen naively and perhaps even ideologically in the light of a trend toward unity.\(^1\) Indeed, John was included in the canon only because its uniquely independent and heterodox thought was mistakenly dissolved into this early development toward Catholicism.\(^2\) If one detects a polemical tone in these observations, which are sounded as if in challenge to contemporary Johannine scholarship, this is because Kasemann understands the modern situation to reflect that of the ancient church.\(^3\) Despite the advances of historical criticism, that is, customary Johannine scholarship has tended to succumb to the domination of apologetics and to interpret the Gospel within the framework provided by the canon.\(^4\) This trend is clearly evidenced by the tendency to read John 1.14a as a classic statement of full incarnation. to

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\(^1\) *Testament*, p. 39.

\(^2\) Ibid., p. 75.

\(^3\) Ibid., p. 8.

\(^4\) Ibid.
make it the center of Johannine proclamation, and to interpret John's christology on the basis of a traditional pattern of humiliation-exaltation.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 8ff., 19, 44.}

In contrast to this prevailing trend, Kasemann emphasizes the need for historical criticism to avoid harmonizing everything into a normative theology.\footnote{Ibid., p. 76.} However one assesses Kasemann's controversial exposition of John, its minimal value lies in the consistent separation of critical scholarship from dogmatic concerns. In consequence, Kasemann strives to understand the Fourth Gospel in terms of its historical uniqueness as expressed through different nuances and divergent viewpoints.\footnote{Ibid., p. 8.} In The Testament of Jesus specifically, this concern underlies the attempt to uncover the historical situation of the Fourth Gospel and to illuminate its thought on the basis of the presuppositions arising from this situation.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 1ff. At p. 2 Kasemann asserts that "The historian... must be able to localize an historical object in order to recognize it. Men can stand only when they have ground under their feet and this ground is also the presupposition of understanding."}

Kasemann's criticism of this prevailing trend extends to the work of Bultmann himself with its characteristic emphasis on the paradoxical unity of flesh and glory. However different Bultmann's position may be from that of others, his interpretation is oriented on the traditional pattern of humiliation-exaltation and he thus interprets incarnation in John as the entry into a
totally human life. Kasemann has presented an effective critique of Bultmann's position and has shown that Johannine christology, when understood against the background of the enthusiastic prophetic community whose experience and thought provide its fundamental orientation, cannot be understood in these terms. Kasemann's position is presented especially in two important studies; in "The Structure and Purpose of the Prologue to John's Gospel" he critiques the literary and theological foundations of Bultmann's view of incarnation, and in The Testament of Jesus he focuses on the conception and role of the passion in a critique of the conventional humiliation-exaltation pattern and discloses the foundation of his own interpretation.

Kasemann's critique of Bultmann begins with his exegesis of the prologue. He objects to its characterization as an overture to the Gospel and understands it rather as a faith confession of the Johannine community. Despite this fact, he follows Bultmann in underscoring the close association between the prologue and the body of the Gospel. Although the prologue represents neither a summary of nor introduction to the Gospel for its readers, it does provide an indication of the direction taken in the Gospel. This is so

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1 Ibid., p. 17.

2 Ibid., pp. 139, 165. According to Kasemann, Bultmann's characterization obscures rather than clarifies the real question of the purpose of the prologue, by simply pointing to the close affiliation of terminology and themes.

3 Ibid., p. 167, note 107.
primarily because vv. 14-18 come from the pen of the Evangelist and clearly reveal his emphases and stresses.  

It is precisely in the exposition of these emphases that Kasemann's critique comes into view. As we have seen, Bultmann understands v. 14a 'the Word became flesh' as the climactic statement of the prologue and the center from which John's theology is developed. Kasemann argues that Bultmann's literary reconstruction of the prologue is mistaken and that, consequently, he has wrongly distributed its emphases. According to Kasemann, the Evangelist places the weight of his propositions not on v. 14a, but rather on v. 14c 'we beheld his glory,' the communities faith confession. In consequence, it is a mistake to give exegetical priority to v. 14a and to understand the central purpose of the prologue in terms of its christology.

From Kasemann's perspective, Bultmann's reconstruction of the Logos hymn is founded on a number of questionable hypotheses. First, the primary identifying characteristic of the hymn, the pattern of couplets, can be strictly maintained for the prologue only by assuming an Aramaic original whose rhythmic pattern was disrupted in the process of translation. The arguments for an Aramaic original, however, are not convincing and have not gained widespread acceptance by Johannine scholars. Second, even Bultmann's

1 Ibid., p. 163.
3 Ibid., pp. 153ff., 164f.
4 Ibid., pp. 140f.
attempt to restore the original by textual emendation does not succeed in reestablishing a consistent pattern of couplets.\(^1\) Kasemann thus concludes that we should give up the hypotheses of an Aramaic original and of a consistent pattern of couplets and the textual changes necessitated by it. In his view the hymn can be reconstructed without recourse to either.\(^2\) Finally, Kasemann rejects the attribution of vv. 14ff. to the Logos hymn, a point crucial for Bultmann's interpretation. The presupposition for this connection lies in the explanation of the parallelism between vv. 5ff. and vv. 14ff., passages concerning the manifestation of the Logos in history.\(^3\) Bultmann attributes this parallelism to the Evangelist's adaptation of the Logos hymn. In vv. 5ff., he applies language to Jesus that in the source referred to the preexistence, and in this manner creates a picture that indirectly and obliquely anticipates the climactic statement of the incarnation at v. 14a. Kasemann objects that while Bultmann's hypothesis can explain the parallelism between these verses, it cannot account for a number of additional problems posed by the prologue at this point.\(^4\) Most obvious is the fact of the poor connection of v. 14 with vv. 12ff. The theme of sonship to God that is

\(^1\) Ibid., p. 142.

\(^2\) Ibid.

\(^3\) Ibid., p. 148.

\(^4\) Ibid., pp. 150f. He is dubious even of this, noting that there is no convincing evidence that vv. 5ff. ever referred to anything other than the period of the incarnation.
pursued in vv. 12ff. is discontinued and abruptly replaced by the motif of the incarnation at v. 14;¹ stylistically, the pattern of couplets that dominates through v. 12 is not to be found in vv. 14ff. and the third person singular of the Logos hymn is replaced at v. 14 by the first person plural of the confession of faith;² finally, Kasemann questions the credibility of ascribing the Johannine theme of incarnation, which is distinctly Christian in both formulation and intention, to a pre-Christian source.³ These critical considerations lead Kasemann to conclude that the Logos hymn ends at v. 12 and that vv. 14ff. represent an epilogue added by the Evangelist.⁴

This being true, we can dismiss the somewhat strained hypotheses that vv. 5ff. ever referred to the Logos' preexistent activity and that the parallelism with vv. 14ff. is grounded in the misunderstanding of the Evangelist. In Kasemann's view, this parallelism results from the fact that the Evangelist connected his epilogue to the hymn by recapitulating the incarnation theme.

1 Ibid., p. 148. This poor connection has been noted by other scholars, notably Loisy and Hoskyns works cited op cit. Kasemann doesn't accept their explanations, but points out that they bring out in sharp relief the fact of the missing connection.

2 Ibid., p. 149.

3 Ibid., pp. 149f. Kasemann points out that while the motif of becoming flesh is Greek, Hellenistic epiphany narratives emphasize less the moment of incarnation than the veiling of the descending deity. In pure Judaism the Messiah, once he has appeared, cannot conceivably be the object of proclamation, and as far as Gnosticism is concerned, there have been no parallels found to John's formulation and paradoxical statement. His conclusion: the stress on the incarnation as the medium of revelation is a special characteristic of Christianity.

4 Ibid.
at v. 14 and thus provided a transition to his own emphases. The implications of this reconstruction for the interpretation of the prologue are quite serious. Within the literary structure proposed by Kasemann, v. 14a cannot represent its climactic statement. Pace Bultmann, it cannot be said that a new emphasis sets in at v. 14. In this verse 'the Word became flesh' says no more than was expressed already at v. 10a 'He was in the world' and represents a mere transitional phrase which allows the Evangelist to express his own unique emphasis at v. 14c 'we beheld his glory.' It is clear that, on this interpretation, the purpose of the incarnation lies not in the becoming flesh, but precisely in occasioning the manifestation of glory. Kasemann thus concludes that, from a literary point of view, Bultmann is justified neither in the particular stress he lays on v. 14a nor in its interpretation as a statement of total incarnation. He speaks easily of 'a man and nothing else' and of 'pure and simple humanity,' but if v. 14a does nothing more than recapitulate v. 10a as a transition to what follows this interpretation is not justified.


2 Ibid.

3 Kasemann quotes Baldensperger on this point: "The Prologue never loses sight of the programme laid down for it by the Evangelist- and we beheld his glory, the heavenly glory of him who has become flesh. This presupposes that, according to the original intention of the Evangelist, the becoming flesh does not fit in to the Prologue in the way which the Church soon came, for dogmatic reasons, to assume that it did and which was therefore read back into the text." (Der Prolog des vierten Evangeliums, 1898, pp. 36f). Ibid., p. 156.

4 Ibid., p. 156.
From a theological point of view Bultmann's interpretation might seem justified by the Evangelist's use of the concept flesh at v. 14a. That is, he does not speak simply of becoming man or of existence in the world, but precisely of the assumption of a complete human nature in its corporeality, personality, frailty, etc. Against this suggestion Kasemann argues that John's notion of flesh has been determined by the dualistic thought so characteristic of the Gospel and, consequently, that its use in no way suggests such a kenotic-like emphasis.\(^1\) In his view, John does not contrast flesh and spirit as irreducible and antithetical realities. Rather, he understands flesh either as "...that which, over against the heavenly world is subordinate, limited and in need of divine help ...or that which, over against the heavenly world, strives for autonomy..."\(^2\) Otherwise stated, John understands flesh not as earthly reality, but rather as the earthly condition of creatureliness that is characterized by its opposition to God.\(^3\) The implication for v. 14a is that flesh must be understood as the realm where the Word of God is recognized or rejected, and

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\(^{1}\) Ibid., pp. 156ff.

\(^{2}\) Ibid., p. 158.

\(^{3}\) I.e., Kasemann argues that the dualism of the Fourth Gospel does not correspond to the cosmological dualism of a Gnostic or Hellenistic type, but rather to the modified dualism characteristic of some Jewish sectarian groups which continues to be controlled by the Hebrew Bible's notion of creation. In this view the world, as the creation of God, is not inherently evil, but a reality oriented toward and dominated by evil. This interpretation of Johannine dualism will be discussed below.
the becoming flesh amounts to entering this realm of createdness.\footnote{"Structure," pp. 156ff. This is confirmed by the emphasis expressed at v. 14b 'the Word became flesh- and dwelt among us- ' i.e. the real goal of the becoming flesh is the presence of God on earth.} On this basis Käsemann concludes that the use of flesh at v. 14a does not justify Bultmann's interpretation, because flesh here means nothing other than the possibility for the Logos to have communication with humankind.\footnote{Ibid.}

According to Käsemann, in sum, neither a literary analysis of the prologue nor a theological analysis of the notion of sarx justifies Bultmann's interpretation of incarnation in John. Käsemann insists that while the incarnation itself cannot be questioned one can and should question the characteristic emphasis placed on the notion by the Evangelist and the extent to which it requires the entry into a totally human life.\footnote{See Testament, pp. 9-10.} As Käsemann has shown, John's emphasis lies not on the becoming flesh in itself, but rather on its occasioning the manifestation of glory. On this interpretation, the notion of incarnation in John does not require the entry into a totally human life either in the sense required by kenotic theory- the voluntary abandonment of the divine prerogatives- or in the sense required by the dialectical theory of Bultmann- the paradox of a glory veiled by true humanity. In John the incarnate Logos undergoes no transformation of nature and thus does not
cease to exist as a heavenly being. In short, John in no sense interprets the activity of the Word in his fleshly state as a humiliation.\textsuperscript{1}

The second aspect of Kasemann’s critique concerns Bultmann’s attempt to found his dialectical christology on John’s notion of revelation and the related issue of the interpretation of the semeia in the Gospel. There is, as Bultmann insists, a dialectical nature to revelation in John; but while he is fully justified in his insistence at this point, he is not justified in interpreting the incarnation on this basis in such kenotic-like terms. According to Kasemann, he is able to do so only by isolating the notion of revelation from the tradition of miraculous signs in which the glory of Jesus is revealed and that consequently precludes such an interpretation.\textsuperscript{2}

Despite the fact that Kasemann interprets incarnation in John as the epiphany of the heavenly revealer, he does not understand this in the manner of some earlier scholars as an overt demonstration of divine glory.\textsuperscript{3} Rather, he recognizes that revelation in John is dialectical and describes its occurrence in the following manner: in John "Man can never see the Creator in the same sense in which he can see a phenomenon within the created world. He can only be seen in reality by those who hear and obey him. If it were otherwise, we might come face to face with a wonder but not with the

\textsuperscript{1} "Structure." p. 160.

\textsuperscript{2} Ibid., pp. 161f.

\textsuperscript{3} Examples cited, Ibid., p. 159f.
Lord, who does not expose himself to the neutral observer."¹ In John, that is, it is possible to misapprehend both the person and work of Jesus. He can quite obviously be taken as an ordinary mortal, the son of Joseph and Mary, whose claim to revelation constitutes blasphemy and whose miraculous works represent mere wonders not unlike those of other gifted individuals.² Only to those who are 'from God,' that is, who respond to Jesus in faith, is he revealed as the only Son from the Father.³

One of the ways this dialectic is expressed in John is through the reduction of Jesus' message to his self-proclamation. That is, despite his claim to reveal what he has seen and heard from the Father, he discloses no information about the nature of the heavenly realm and brings no specific teaching other than his self-proclamation as the revealer. As we have seen, Bultmann cites this characteristic as primary evidence of John's demythologizing activity and a concern to present the incarnation in kenotic-like terms as the appearance of an ordinary mortal in whose word God is encountered. Kasemann, however, argues that this interpretation is precluded by the recognition that the signs performed by Jesus in the Gospel are seriously presented as epiphany scenes in which Jesus' glory is revealed, and

¹ Ibid., p. 160. In terms of the history of religions, this dialectic derives from the fact that John has adapted a Gnostic notion on whose view the revelation can be understood only by those who are 'from God' (John 8.47), or 'from the truth' (John 18.37). For the Gnostic origin of revelation, see e.g. Koester, Introduction, p. 189.

² See e.g. John 6.42; 5.18; 6.26.

³ John 8.47.
that the reduction of Jesus' message to self-proclamation is best explained in relation to John's critical appropriation of this miracles tradition.¹

In Bultmann's view, as we have seen, John is critical of a faith that seeks the authentication of signs and includes them in the Gospel only as a concession to human weakness. Their meaning, however, is not contained simply in the miraculous events and they are not presented in the Gospel as actual epiphanies in which Jesus' glory is revealed. Rather, their value for the Evangelist lies in their ability to symbolize the revelation of glory that takes place throughout the whole of the historical ministry. In contrast, Kasemann insists that the Evangelist has freely incorporated the miracles tradition into the Gospel. Were they included as mere concessions to human weakness, it would have been unnecessary to heighten the miraculous element to the extreme or to present the miracle of the raising of Lazarus as the event that incited the passion.² Thus, for John, the miracles are indispensable and described 'clearly and emphatically' as demonstrations of the glory of Jesus.³

This is not to imply that the Evangelist has incorporated the semeia uncritically into the Gospel. He is critical of a craving for miracles, but his critique does not apply so much to the miracles themselves as to a

² Testament, p. 21. E.g. the healing of the official's son at chapter 4 occurs at a distance and at chapter 11 it is reported that after hearing of the death of Lazarus Jesus waited several days before journeying to Bethany for his resuscitation.
³ Ibid.
misapprehension of their significance. In his view, everything depends on understanding the miracles of Jesus as signs that point beyond themselves to the Creator whose glory is revealed. Otherwise stated, Jesus' miraculous works, like his words, are ambiguous and susceptible of misunderstanding. In consequence, if the gifts offered by Jesus in these works—gifts of bread and water, sight for the blind, and even resuscitation from death—are isolated from the giver, they remain 'mere wonders' and 'fruitless demonstrations' that do nothing but harden those to whom they are addressed. If, however, they are allowed to point beyond themselves, they indicate the identity of Jesus as the one in whom the Creator is present and who is himself the true gift to humankind: bread, light, resurrection and life. Thus, in the Fourth Gospel, the gifts of the revealer in isolation can not be confused with or substituted for the gift that is the revealer himself and to which they can only point.

According to Kasemann, it is in this context that the reduction of Jesus' message to self-proclamation should be understood. That is to say, by reducing Jesus' message to the challenge to accept him as the revealer, John emphatically underscores the belief that no gift can be substituted for the revealer himself, because it is not the gifts as such but only the presence of God in Jesus that is and conveys the salvation of humankind. On Kasemann's

1 Ibid.


3 Ibid., pp. 161f.

4 Ibid.
view, then, the reduction of Jesus' message to self-proclamation does not indicate the Evangelist's demythologizing activity and a concern to present the incarnation in kenotic-like terms. Rather, it indicates and reinforces his critical attitude toward the miracles tradition, which he has appropriated for the Gospel, and a concern to bind faith not to isolated facts of salvation, but to the word of Jesus that presents him as salvation personified.¹

Finally, Kasemann critiques the attempt by Bultmann and others to interpret the passion in John on the basis of the christological pattern of humiliation-exaltation. In his view, the passion is not presented by the Evangelist as an event that marks the reversal of a life lived in lowliness either in the kenotic sense— the depth of humiliation that is reversed only by the power of the resurrection— or in the paradoxical sense suggested by Bultmann— the event in which Jesus is exalted to glory and his mission in its unity becomes eschatological. Rather, the passion in John represents exaltation only in the sense that it marks the return of the revealer to the Father and thus to the glory of his preexistence.

The dramatic conclusion of Jesus' mission in the passion is referred to in John simply yet suggestively as his hour.² At John 12.23f., for example, Jesus obviously refers to his passion in asserting that "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of

¹ Ibid. See also Testament, p. 21.
² For the history of religions background of the hour motif see Bultmann, Gospel, p. 117, note 1. John's appropriation of this motif corresponds to the hour determined by God for the destiny of an individual.
wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." Käsemann notes, however, that the hour in John does not refer exclusively to the passion, but rather connects passion with glorification. This is evident in the verse cited above in which Jesus' passion is in a unique sense his exaltation.\(^1\) Käsemann argues that this connection precludes an interpretation of the passion as humiliation or even as exaltation beginning paradoxically in humiliation.\(^2\) On the contrary, John can present the passion as exaltation precisely because in it the revealer returns to the glory of his preexistence. This is evident from the fact that the Evangelist characteristically describes the passion as a departure and from the fact that the marks of lowliness generally associated with the cross in kenotic theory are lacking in John.

If John does not refer to the cross as a pillory of shame and insist upon the divine necessity of Jesus' suffering this is because, according to Käsemann, his conception is governed by the verb hypagein- to go away- and indicates the revealer's separation from the world and his return to the Father.\(^3\) This verb includes exaltation insofar as this return is at the same time the return to the glory of his preexistence. Thus, the hour of death is in a

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\(^1\) Testament, p. 19. John 7.30; 8.20; 12.23, 27; 13.1; 17.1 all refer primarily to passion. John 2.4; 4.21, 23; 5.25, 28 however, refer to the hour of glorification. They are connected at John 12.23; 13.1; 17.1.

\(^2\) Ibid.

\(^3\) Ibid., pp. 17ff. See John 7.33; 8.14, 21f.; 13.3, 33, 36; 16.5, 10, 17.
unique sense the hour of glorification precisely because in this hour Jesus leaves the world and the limitations on his glory entailed thereby.\textsuperscript{1}

Kasemann supports this argument by noting that the marks of lowliness generally associated with the cross in kenotic theory—obedience and humiliation—are uniquely understood in John and cannot be used to support a christology of humiliation. Obedience in John is a characteristic of the triumphant Son of Man and, similarly, humiliation refers to the descent of the redeemer into the sphere of suffering and death, to his exile in an alien realm, but not to a kenotic incarnation.\textsuperscript{2}

John never uses the noun obedience nor the verb to obey. Rather, he uses two synonymous formulae— to do the will and to hear the word.\textsuperscript{3} According to Kasemann, both formulae can be paraphrased with obedience only if the kenotic sense of humility is precluded. This is because John interprets these concepts through the notion of the unity of Father and Son to express a commitment to remain in the heavenly truth that opposes the power and deceit of the world even during the earthly sojourn.\textsuperscript{4} Otherwise stated, Jesus' obedience represents the manifestation of the divine Lordship and glory in a world alienated from God. This notion of obedience can express lowliness

\textsuperscript{1} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{2} Ibid., pp. 10ff., 17ff.

\textsuperscript{3} Ibid., p. 18.

\textsuperscript{4} Ibid.
only insofar as this manifestation must occur in the world. But this in turn means that obedience and exaltation cannot be contrasted in the Fourth Gospel, nor exaltation understood as the reward for obedience. On the contrary, Jesus’ obedience in John is the result of his glory and its attestation in the situation of earthly conflict.

The notion of humiliation is not lacking in the Gospel, but rather interpreted from the same perspective. That is to say, John’s notion of humiliation expresses the fact that the mission of the redeemer required his descent into the world. But this world is for him only a point of transit and, thus, humiliation simply means being in exile. Insofar as this descent involves limitations on his glory the humiliation of Jesus does involve features of lowliness. But these features reflect the nature of the situation into which Jesus entered and he does not thereby give up his unity with the Father. In short, “He does not really change himself, but only his place.” It is true that John distinguishes the earthly glory, which was necessarily connected with features of lowliness, from the exaltation on the cross in which Jesus’ glory was perfected, since in the return to the Father the realm of lowliness was

1 Ibid.

2 Ibid., p. 18f.

3 Ibid., p. 12.

4 Ibid., p. 10. Kasemann argues that the features of lowliness in John represent “...the absolute minimum of the costume designed for the one who dwelt for a little while among men, appearing to be one of them, yet without himself being subjected to earthly conditions...”
transcended.\(^1\) Again, however, this does not mean that humiliation and exaltation can be contrasted. Rather, they complement each other in the attainment of the one work of the redeemer that can be summarized in two words: mission and return.\(^2\)

Kasemann concludes, in sum, that the conception of the passion in John, like that of the incarnation, cannot be interpreted on the basis of the christological pattern of humiliation-exaltation. It is not presented as the depth of humiliation and defeat that is reversed only by the resurrection, nor even as an exaltation that begins paradoxically in humiliation. Rather, it is presented as the triumphal return of the revealer to the Father and to his preexistent glory. In short, John clearly does not present Jesus’ mission as a process leading from lowliness to glory, but rather as the earthly sojourn of the one who is always and everywhere one with the Father. Neither the incarnation nor the passion mark a change in his nature, but only a change in terms of his descending and ascending.\(^3\)

Kasemann suggests that the origin of Johannine christology may very well lie in a traditional interpretation of the Christ myth similar to that proposed by Bultmann.\(^4\) Nevertheless, as we have seen, the key to the Gospel’s christology lies in recognizing the radical modifications of this pattern

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1 Ibid., p. 20.
2 Ibid., pp. 12, 20.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid., pp. 6ff., 19.
effected by the Evangelist. Kasemann argues that these modifications are based on the experience and belief of an enthusiastic prophetic community.\textsuperscript{1} He argues, in short, that this communities continuing experience of the risen Christ as the one in whom salvation had become a present reality through the inspired utterances of Johannine prophets eventually effected a shift from the primitive two-fold eschatology to a realized eschatology that, significantly, underlies the christology of the Gospel itself.\textsuperscript{2} Otherwise stated, this Jesus, in whom the eschatological reality is present and remains present continually, cannot be understood on the basis of the traditional christological pattern as one whose mission led from lowliness to glory, humiliation to exaltation, but only as the one who is always and everywhere one with the Father.

The presence and activity of such an enthusiastic prophecy in the Johannine community can be detected through the dominance in John of its characteristic feature: realized eschatology. Despite scattered passages that manifest a future orientation, John's thought is dominated by this perspective.\textsuperscript{3} It knows no imminent expectation nor an apocalyptic drama of the end, and at several key passages asserts that the final judgment has

\begin{itemize}
  \item[1] Ibid., pp. 19, 38.
  \item[2] Ibid., pp. 13ff.
  \item[3] Ibid., pp. 13ff, 38. Kasemann views these passages as interpolations, but notes that even if accepted as genuine they "...do not constitute a real counter-balance to specifically Johannine ideas but merely restrain their extreme development."
\end{itemize}
happened already in the coming of Jesus.¹ This dominance clearly indicates that the center of its proclamation has been influenced by an enthusiastic tradition.² John's position, however, is distinguished by the fact that it developed on the basis of its christology and not on the sacraments.³ That is to say, the prophetic experience reflected in John focused on the utterances of Christian prophets in which Jesus continued to speak and to be present to the worshiping community. Significantly, after Easter Jesus was experienced only as the exalted Christ in whom resurrection and life had become reality.⁴ According to Kasemann, this prophetic experience of the praesentia Christi underlies the realized eschatology in John. It is clear that for the Evangelist resurrection life has broken into the world with Christ and is present only within the realm of his influence.⁵

The eschatological shift effected by this prophetic experience is readily apparent. In contrast to the primitive apocalyptic perspective in which christology is determined by a two-fold eschatology, the experience of Christ in the prophetic word has become the focus of Johannine reflection and itself determines eschatology. Consequently, salvation can no longer be conceived


² According to Kasemann, the New Testament itself shows that realized eschatology developed in the tradition of Hellenistic enthusiasm. See, e.g., Col. 2.12f., Eph. 2.5f., Rom. 6.4ff.; and the Corinthian letters.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., p. 16.
as a reality whose consummation lies in the future, but has become a present reality in the word of the exalted Christ.\footnote{Ibid.} Of more consequence for our concerns, however, is the fact that the assumptions of realized eschatology underlie the Gospel's christology itself. That is, the conception of Jesus as the one in whom resurrection and life have become present reality can hardly be expressed on the basis of a two-fold eschatology. Rather, John characteristically assimilates the earthly Jesus to the risen Lord and thereby conceives the period of the incarnation in categories proper to the latter.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 15ff.} Consequently, as we have seen, the incarnation is not presented in John as a process leading from lowliness to glory, but as the manifestation in the world of Jesus' glory. In short, insofar as John's christology expresses an eschatology it expresses a realized eschatology.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 19f. Kasemann argues that this perspective was solidified conceptually by the replacement of eschatology with protology. That is to say, conditioned by the present experience of salvation in the word of the exalted Christ, John no longer emphasizes the end and future, but rather the beginning and abiding. He thus correlates the preexistent glory with the glory of the earthly life and passion, conceives the incarnation as a projection of the preexistent glory, and the passion as a return to that glory. In short, then, if we insist on characterizing the incarnation on the basis of a two-fold eschatology, we can no longer focus on the tension between the suffering and the exalted Jesus, but rather on the relationship of the eternal Logos to the revelation in the earthly Jesus.}

In Kasemann's view, the ambiguity between the flesh and glory of Jesus clearly results from the tension between the traditional christological interpretation, which probably represents the origin of Johannine
christology, and the perspective of the Evangelist, which is conditioned by the experience and beliefs of an enthusiastic prophecy. The former, whose residual influence is felt in the Gospel,\(^1\) presents the incarnation as a process leading from the lowliness of the incarnate state to a glory perfected in death. John, however, has radically modified this traditional pattern and clearly presents the incarnation as the earthly sojourn of the Son of God, the occasion for encounter with his heavenly glory. As we have seen, his notion of incarnation does not require the entry into a totally human life. Insofar as it involves limitations on Jesus' glory and features of lowliness, these merely reflect the limitations of the situation into which he entered and he does not thereby give up his unity with the Father. Indeed, John's emphasis lies consistently not on the becoming flesh in itself, but on the manifestation of glory. This is again evident from the fact that there is no reduction of the semeia in John, which are presented as epiphany scenes in which Jesus' glory is revealed. Finally, the passion is presented not as the depth of humiliation and defeat, but rather as the return of the revealer to the Father and thus to the glory of his preexistence. In a very real sense, in sum, the glory of the divine revealer in John dominates his flesh as the center of the Johannine proclamation.

Kasemann argues that the obvious danger of this position is docetism. That is to say, while the Evangelist does not deny the incarnation as in some forms of Gnosticism, in his Gospel the glory of Jesus so dominates his flesh that

\(^1\) E.g., in passages that look forward to the perfection of glory in death. Ibid., p. 7.
the latter is superfluous and the incarnation is conceived merely as an occasion for eschatological encounter through the Son.\textsuperscript{1} Otherwise stated, the glory of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel is not bound to his flesh, but rather transcends all temporal and spatial limits to such an extent that history itself, including the history of the incarnate Logos, is relativized. Only the eschatological presence of Christ is of significance, and only that which serves to accommodate the continuation of this presence is retained.\textsuperscript{2} Kasemann thus characterizes the earthly life of Jesus in John "...merely as a backdrop for the Son of God proceeding through the world of man and as the scene of the inbreaking of the heavenly glory," and concludes that, while not explicitly so, John's christology is docetic in a naive, unreflected manner. In consequence, the Fourth Gospel should be understood as influenced by or contributing to the development of a Christian Gnosticism, the product of a conventicle pushed to the periphery of the early church.\textsuperscript{3}

\textsuperscript{1} Ibid., pp. 9f., 26.

\textsuperscript{2} Ibid., p. 36. "The dimension of the past is retained only in so far as it points forward to his presence; all of the future is nothing but the glorified extension and repetition of this presence. History remains the history of the Logos, since it is the sphere of his past, present and future epiphany. The sole theme of history is the \textit{praesentia Christi}.

\textsuperscript{3} Ibid., pp., 13, 26, 66. Quote, p. 13.
Assessment of Kasemann's Position

Kasemann's radical conclusions concerning the christology of the Fourth Gospel have prompted vigorous debate within the Bultmann school. For example, in an article entitled "Zur Interpretation Des Johannes-Evangeliums," Günther Bornkamm defends a modified Bultmannian position against Kasemann. He argues, in short, that while Bultmann was wrong to emphasize the absolute incognito of the Johannine Jesus, Kasemann was wrong to emphasize, in undialectical fashion, his manifest glory. Such an interpretation reflects a focus on the perspective of the pre-Johannine miracles source and results in a failure to recognize the centrality of the cross in John as the event from which the portrayal of Jesus is developed. Consequently, "...if, like Kasemann, one interprets the history of Jesus according to John linearly and undialectically as the history of God striding over the earth, stamped by docetism and deprived of the reality of the cross...

1 For a brief discussion, see James M. Robinson, "The Johannine Trajectory," in Trajectories, esp. pp. 252ff.


3 Ibid. pp. 113, 117.
event, one has at best encountered the pre-Johannine tradition, but not John.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 116f. Quote, p. 117: "...interpretiert man wie Kasemann die Geschichte Jesu nach Joh geradlinig und undialektisch als die Geschichte des über die Erde schreitenden Gottes, geprägt vom Doketismus und der Realität des Kreuzesgeschehens beraubt, so hat man allenfalls die vorjohanneische Tradition, nicht aber Joh getroffen."}

In the following pages, however, we will argue that Kasemann's explication of Johannine christology against the background of an enthusiastic prophecy accurately depicts the situation and fundamental assumptions of the Gospel itself, and that his interpretation can be defended with certain modifications. We will attempt to clarify his assertion that the center of John's proclamation is the praesentia Christi, and that this emphasis has effected a shift from a traditional interpretation of the incarnation to an interpretation modeled on the exalted Lord. We will argue that the origin of John's christology is not to be attributed to an enthusiastic reaction to traditional christology, but rather to an early and independent enthusiastic tradition whose perspective, despite being limited and qualified in the Gospel, continues to provide its fundamental theological orientation. Specifically, we will clarify the christological tendencies of a community whose reflection focuses on Jesus as a heavenly revealer in whose word is salvation rather than as a suffering savior whose sacrificial death provided salvation for humankind. We will argue that the underlying assumption of a christology developed from this perspective is indeed realized eschatology, and that it exhibits a real tendency to assimilate the earthly Jesus to the exalted Lord and
to understand the incarnation in categories proper to the latter. Insofar as this christological focus underlies and conditions the thought of the Evangelist, therefore, Kasemann is justified in interpreting the incarnation in non-kenotic terms as the descent-ascent of the divine revealer in which his unity with the Father is always and everywhere retained and his divine glory revealed. Finally, however, we will challenge Kasemann's characterization of John as naively docetic, and his attribution of the christological ambiguity in the Gospel to the tension between the pre-Johannine christological tradition and the perspective of the Evangelist. There are significant indications that the Johannine community was involved in a process of crisis and paradigm shift whose effects are reflected in the Gospel's christology. That is, while John is the product of an enthusiastic prophecy whose experience and belief provide its fundamental christological orientation, there is evidence that the prophetic experience of the praesentia Christi had become anomalous and had precipitated a crisis in the community. In short, a group of radical prophets, empowered by the spirit and a sense of immediate authority, had developed an inflated sense of their own identity. As the rightful successors of Jesus they claimed the same kind of direct access to divine authority that he claimed, denied the significance of the incarnation, and became rivals to Jesus himself. In order to resolve this crisis the Evangelist attempted to limit the excesses of this prophetic perspective by introducing an emphasis on the irreducible significance of the incarnation as the archetypical event of salvation, thereby subordinating the authority of the disciples to that of the Lord and grounding their experience in the incarnation itself. From this perspective we will
argue that Kasemann is wrong to characterize Johannine christology as
naively docetic. While it is true that in consequence of its underlying
prophetic assumptions Jesus' glory tends to dominate and even to obscure his
flesh, it is also true that in the context of shifting paradigm commitments John
affirms his flesh. It is thus not superfluous—a mere backdrop for his divine
glory—but together with his glory marks the event on which the salvation of
all humankind is dependent. From this perspective it will also be argued that
the christological ambiguity in John can be attributed at least in part to the
Gospel itself and understood to result from the situation of crisis in which the
community was involved and to the simultaneous influence of these two
conflicting tendencies.

Kasemann's attempt in The Testament of Jesus to interpret John against
a prophetic background exemplifies a recent tendency among scholars to
address the issue of the social setting reflected in the Gospel.1 It is significant

1 Recent attempts include: Raymond E. Brown, S.S., The Community of the
Beloved Disciple (New York: Paulist Press, 1979); Oscar Cullmann, The
Johannine Circle, translated by John Bowden (Philadelphia: The Westminster
Press, 1976); Alan R. Culpepper, The Johannine School: An Evaluation of the
Johannine-School Hypothesis Based on an Investigation of the Nature of
Ancient Schools, Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series, No. 26
(Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press, 1975); J. Louis Martyn, History and
Theology in the Fourth Gospel, second edition, revised and enlarged (Nashville:
Abingdon Press, 1979); Wayne Meeks, "The Man From Heaven in Johannine
Robinson, "The Johannine Trajectory." Trajectories. For a brief discussion, see
D. Bruce Woll, Johannine Christianity in Conflict: Authority, Rank, and
Succession in the First Farewell Discourse, Society of Biblical Literature
Dissertation Series, No. 60 (Ann Arbor: Edwards Brothers Inc. for the Society
for our concerns that, with increased frequency, many recent studies have confirmed the profound influence of Christian prophecy on its fundamental features.\(^1\) For example, in a paper entitled "The Johannine Words of Jesus and Christian Prophecy," J. Ramsey Michaels attributes a prophetic and pneumatic orientation to the Johannine community, but argues that the prophetic qualities of Jesus' disciples in the Gospel are carefully limited and qualified.\(^2\) Again, in "Johannine Christianity: Some Reflections on its Character and Delineation," D. Moody Smith argues that "charismatic prophetic activity likely played a significant role in the development of Johannine tradition," and that the discourses in John were "obviously spoken from the standpoint of a spirit-inspired post-resurrection community."\(^3\) Similar conclusions have been suggested by Eugene Boring and David Aune.\(^4\) Boring argues, for example, that the function of the Paraclete in John is related to the charismatic

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interpretation of scripture that took place in the Johannine community as a result of the Spirit,\(^1\) and Aune suggests that the coming of Jesus in the farewell discourses reflects the recurring experience of the prophetically mediated presence of the exalted Lord.\(^2\) In short, a general agreement appears to be emerging in recent Johannine scholarship concerning the origin of the Gospel in an enthusiastic prophetic community. The evidence on which this conclusion has been based can be grouped into three categories: the prophetic characterization of central figures in John, indications in the Gospel of prophetic activity in the Johannine community, and indications of a charismatic authority structure in the community.

First, Boring suggests that Jesus, the Paraclete, John the Baptist, and even the disciples are characterized by the Evangelist in distinctly prophetic terms.\(^3\) This is evident especially from the fact that John employs a prophetic sending formula to characterize their respective relationship to the Father and thus to designate them as prophetic spokespersons of God.\(^4\) The classic statement of this formula is found in the witness of John the Baptist to Jesus at John 3.34 "For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for it is not by measure that he gives the Spirit." It is precisely these attributes—the sending


\(^2\) Cultic Setting, p. 15.

\(^3\) "The Influence of Christian Prophecy," pp. 113-23 passim.

\(^4\) Ibid., esp. pp. 113, 121. Jesus is described as the one sent by the Father, e.g., at John 3.34; 17.3, 8; the Paraclete is designated as sent at 14.26; 15.26; and 16.7; John the Baptist and the disciples are so designated at 1.6; 13.20; and 20.21.
by God, speaking God's words, and possessing the Spirit—that characterize the Christian prophet.¹ Thus, John's use of the sending formula to describe central figures in the Gospel is strong evidence of the impact of prophetic language and conceptualization upon the Gospel.

Second, there are significant indications in the Gospel of prophetic activity in the Johannine community. For example, the characterization of the Paraclete as the Spirit of prophecy that functions to guide and inspire the communities proclamation itself indicates the activity of Christian prophets.² Again, many prophetic or prophetically formulated sayings have been woven into the fabric of the Gospel. One characteristically prophetic speech form that is prominent in John is the self-authenticating formula ego eimi, or I Am, used frequently by the Johannine Jesus to authenticate his person and authority.³ It has been shown that the Sitz im Leben of this formula in the Christian tradition is prophecy and that it was employed to make pronouncements in the name and on the authority of Jesus.⁴ Finally, the

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¹ Ibid., pp. 113f., 122, and passim.

² See Ibid., pp. 113f., and Aune, *Cultic Setting*, pp. 15; 70f. Boring suggests that John's characterization of the Paraclete as the Spirit of prophecy indicates "...a function within the community performed by an identifiable group endowed with the Spirit in a particular manner and exercising its gifts on behalf of and for the benefit of the community as a whole..."

³ See, e.g., 6.35, 51 'I am the bread of life;' 8.12 'I am the light of the world;' and 11.25 'I am the resurrection and the life.'

⁴ Mark 13.6, for example, criticizes this activity: "Many will come in my name, saying, 'I am he!' (ego eimi) and they will lead many astray." In other words, utilizing this prophetic style of speech, Christian prophets "spoke as representatives of Jesus and embodied in this manner his very authority." See
assumption behind such pronouncements is expressed in the prophetic sending formula that inspired in the Johannine disciples the sense of immediate authority or commission required to speak on behalf of Jesus.¹ That is, like Jesus himself, the disciples are sent into the world. Insofar as Jesus represents the one who sent him, therefore, the disciples represent Jesus himself. Endowed with such authority they continue his voice in the community, speaking neither human words nor the words of Jesus from the past, but in the name and authority of the living, risen Christ.

Third, D. Bruce Woll suggests that the Johannine Jesus reflects the charismatic authority typical of enthusiastic communities and cites this as evidence of an enthusiastic origin for the Gospel.² According to Woll “Not only does the Johannine Jesus conform to the charismatic type of authority, but. I


¹ Boring, Savings of the Risen Jesus, pp. 143f. This formula is clearly stated at John 13.20: “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who receives any one whom I send receives me; and he who receives me receives him who sent me.”

² Johannine Christianity in Conflict, pp. 109ff. He discusses three features of such authority that are reflected in the portrayal of Jesus. First, it is revolutionary, rejecting traditional authority structures in favor of a direct, unmediated authority; second, it focuses on the authority claims of individuals rather than institutions; third, it tends by definition to crises of succession. Not by coincidence, the Johannine Jesus is portrayed as an outsider in relation to the official authority structures of the day who claims an authority based upon direct access to the Father and whose departure creates a situation of crisis.
suggest, this charismatic Jesus reflects a charismatic group, a group with a 'charismatic tradition of origin.'\(^1\)

In sum, recent investigations into the social setting reflected in John tend to confirm Kasemann's assertion that it should be understood against the background of an enthusiastic prophetic community. In order to assess his position adequately, however, we must consider two additional questions. First, what are the christological tendencies of the type of Christian prophecy reflected in the Fourth Gospel, and, second, to what extent do they underlie and condition the thought of the Gospel itself?

The charismatic use of the sayings tradition in the Johannine community cited above reflects the focus of its experience— the word of the revealer. That is to say, for a community that knows the continued activity of the exalted Christ through the mediation of his prophetic spokespersons, it is not the cross that is of primary significance for theology, but rather the efficacious presence of the Christ in the Christian proclamation. This christological focus certainly underlies the christology of the sayings tradition in John and has thus been recognized as the origin of the Gospel's christology.\(^2\) The implications of this reflective focus for a christology developed on its basis are significant, and its tendencies vary considerably from those of a christology developed from the perspective of the cross.

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1 Ibid., p. 119.

Of the traditions that developed from interpretations of the sayings of Jesus, the group to which John shows closest affinities clustered around his conception as a teacher of wisdom or as the heavenly figure of wisdom whose words carried redemption for humankind.¹ The Gospel of Thomas, for example, represents a collection of wisdom and prophetic sayings of Jesus that shows no trace of the kerygma of the cross and resurrection and that has renounced any eschatological expectation that looks to the future. Rather, in consequence of its reflective focus on the revealer's efficacious word, Jesus is conceived not as a suffering and dying messiah, but as a heavenly revealer in whom salvation has become a present reality.² Significantly, the Gospel of Thomas opens with the statement that this Jesus will grant salvation to those who are able and prepared to hear and understand his words.

It is clear from the Johannine version of this saying at 8.51 that the sayings tradition in the Gospel conforms to this perspective: "Truly, truly, I say to you, if any one keeps my word, he will never see death." That is to say, whether, with Thomas, it is a matter of unraveling Jesus' secret sayings, or, with John, hearing and keeping his word, these words are in both instances experienced as spiritual and inspired, the source of life and truth. Indeed, John 7.46 shows that the key to Jesus' person in the Gospel lies in the power of

¹ Ibid. This group is represented by The Gospel of Thomas and The Dialogue of the Savior, both from the Nag Hammadi library.

² Ibid., pp. 150ff.
his speech, for "No man ever spoke like this man!"\(^1\) The authority of his words is reinforced at 8.26 and 15.15 by the sending formula and the affirmation derived from it that he speaks not his own words, but those he has heard from the Father. Thus, to hear and believe Jesus is to believe the Father himself. This is clearly stated at 5.24: "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears my word and believes him who sent me, has eternal life; he does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life."

Obviously, Jesus' words in John are presented as eschatological events that manifest God's very reality and power. They have a cleansing effect, but even more, according to 6.63 and 15.3, they are spirit and life. Thus, hearing them and believing is a matter of life and death. They not only effect a division between those who accept and those who reject them, but at 12.48 actually contain the power of judgment on the latter. It is not surprising, therefore, that Peter's christological confession in John refers not to "...the Christ, the Son of the living God," but to the one whose words hold the key to life: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life..."\(^2\)

The origin of John's christology, then, can be seen to lie in the sayings tradition that, like the Gospel of Thomas, focuses its christological reflection on the word of Jesus as the eschatological event of salvation and thus portrays him as a heavenly revealer rather than a suffering messiah. A predominant

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\(^1\) The following discussion is indebted to Werner Kelber's unpublished seminar presentation "The Logos and the Logoi in the Fourth Gospel: From Charisma to Gospel."

characteristic of this christological focus is the tendency to assimilate the earthly Jesus to the risen Lord, and thus to speak of him only in terms of his exalted state. In an enthusiastic community whose prophetic spokespersons continue the living voice of Jesus, that is, distinctions between the sayings of the earthly Jesus and those of the exalted Lord are blurred and often nonexistent. Thus, even traditional sayings pronounced in the prophetic community were attributed to the exalted Lord.¹ For example, in discussing the prophetic consciousness reflected in Q, Werner Kelber agrees with Heinz Todt that "it did not even occur to the members of the community which collected the sayings of Jesus in Q to distinguish between pre-Easter and post-Easter sayings, it being self-evident to them that the earthly Jesus and the risen Jesus are one and the same."²

This tendency is exhibited in the sayings tradition of the Fourth Gospel. For example, Koester notes that from their perspective "Even the word of the earthly Jesus is nothing other than the voice of the heavenly revealer who calls human beings into a new existence determined by the spirit."³ Indeed, even within the framework of the gospel, which serves to historicize the sayings tradition, there are passages in which Jesus speaks as a transitional


figure, not quite as the risen Lord, but definitely not as the earthly Jesus. For example, at John 17.11, Jesus says "And now I am no more in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to thee."  

Underlying this tendency to assimilate the earthly Jesus to the exalted Lord is the assumption that this Jesus, the heavenly revealer, can be portrayed only on the basis of realized eschatology. That is to say, an enthusiastic community such as that reflected in John whose christological reflection focused on the revealer's words as eschatological events in which salvation becomes present reality cannot portray Jesus himself as one whose mission led from lowliness to glory by the way of the cross, but only as the one in whom the eschatological reality is continually present. In short, Jesus cannot be portrayed in terms of a now already-not yet eschatology, but, as Kasemann observed, only in terms of a present and abiding reality.  

It is clear that the christology of the sayings tradition directly reflects the experience and thought of a charismatic prophetic community whose perspective belongs to an early stage of Gnosticism. In its present form, however, the Gospel represents an attempt to integrate the theology of the

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1 See also 17.12 "While I was with them, I kept them in thy name..."

2 Testament, p. 20.

3 Koester, Introduction, vol. 2: p. 180f. I.e. it was the Gnostic trajectory in early Christianity that, based on its experience of the praesentia Christi, relegated the earthly life of Jesus to insignificance, and viewed it as a lower or even irrelevant prelude to the activity of the exalted Lord. See e.g. James M. Robinson, "On theGattung of Mark (and John)," Perspective 11 (1970): p. 113.
sayings tradition with the kerygma of the cross and resurrection.\textsuperscript{1} John does not, like the Gospel of Thomas, ignore the cross, but presents Jesus as the one whose mission concludes dramatically in the cross event. In consequence, we must consider the extent to which the perspective of the sayings tradition with its focus on the revealer’s eschatological word continues to underlie and condition that of the Gospel itself. The evidence cited above of the prophetic influence on fundamental features of the Gospel indicates that Christian prophecy for the Evangelist is not a relic from the past, but a living experience that continues to influence his thought. We will attempt to confirm this by showing that this prophetic perspective provides the starting point for much of John’s theological reflection, and that the integration of the sayings tradition with the kerygma of the cross is itself based on thoroughly prophetic assumptions. We suggest, therefore, that in his attempt to fuse the theology of the sayings tradition with the kerygma of the cross the Evangelist has altered rather than rejected the prophetic paradigm of experience, which continues to guide his theological reflection and to provide the model from which his portrayal of Jesus is developed.

First, many of John’s theological perspectives—soteriology, eschatology, sacramentology, and even ecclesiology—are conditioned by the experience of salvation in the word of the Christ as known in the prophetic community. We have already had occasion to examine its influence on soteriology and eschatology. John presents Jesus’ words as spirit and life, or eschatological

\textsuperscript{1} Ibid., p. 185.
events in which God's very reality is made present. Thus, John knows no unequivocal predictions of a future parousia, and references to well known apocalyptic events are missing in the Gospel. Eschatological terms like judgment and eternity occur in John, but they are consistently understood as events of a salvation that is now taking place.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 184f.} Again, John's sacramental reflection focuses on the life giving words of Jesus. If, for example, the words about the bread of life and the true vine at John 6.26ff. and 15.1ff. are intended to interpret the eucharist, the symbols of bread and wine refer neither to Jesus' future coming nor to his fate of suffering. Rather, they represent his life giving words, and symbolize participation in his heavenly message.\footnote{Ibid., p. 181. This position assumes, as is generally done, that John 6.52b-59 was introduced by a redactor into the bread of life discourse in order to insist upon a realistic interpretation of the eucharist as the eating and drinking of Jesus' blood. Elsewhere, John speaks of "Jesus as the bread of life who is present in his word." (Koester, Ibid., p. 187.) For a literary analysis of this passage, see Bultmann, \textit{Gospel}, pp. 218ff.} Finally, the church organization in the Johannine community was constituted under the authority of the word of Jesus.\footnote{See Kasemann, \textit{Testament}, pp. 27ff.} This is evident from the fact that important ecclesiological concepts- including Church, family or people of God, and Body of Christ- are missing in John, and that the disciples themselves come into focus only as individuals; that is, any theological significance of the twelve has been eliminated. For John, quite simply, the church is constituted
by the friends of Jesus or the beloved of God; that is to say, by "...those who are sanctified through the Word."\(^1\)

Second, the continuing influence of the prophetic perspective on the theology of the Evangelist is indicated by the fact that his integration of the sayings tradition with the kerygma of the cross is itself based on prophetic assumptions. That is to say, the cross in John is not interpreted as an event with soteriological significance in itself, but as the conclusion of the Son's mission that is characterized by the qualities of his eschatological word. John clearly attributes no soteriological significance to the cross in itself. There is in the Gospel no foundation either for the conception of Jesus' death as a sacrifice or for the notion of purification through his blood.\(^2\) If considered in isolation, therefore, the cross has no specific soteriological significance and adds nothing to the cleansing already accomplished by the word of Jesus.\(^3\) Its inclusion in the Gospel thus cannot be attributed to its unique soteriological status. Rather, it is included on the basis of John's conviction that the coming and going of Jesus form a unity, and that his revelatory activity occurs, not in individual events, but in his activity as a whole.\(^4\) Within this framework he includes the cross as the conclusion to this unified work of revelation: the

\(^1\) Ibid.


\(^3\) Bultmann, Gospel, pp. 632-34; esp. n. 1, p. 634.

\(^4\) Ibid., pp. 153f.; 265; 428.
exaltation to glory. It is thus clear that the significance of the cross in John rests on the fact that Jesus' activity as a whole serves the revelation, and not on a notion of the cross as a saving event in itself.

John does characterize the significance of the Son's eschatological mission, but, not surprisingly, he does not describe it in terms of the cross and its significance as in Paul. Rather, he describes the mission in its unity on the basis of Jesus' eschatological word. At John 5.19ff., for example, the works of the Father that are accomplished by Jesus are reduced to two: judgment and the giving of life. Again, at 3.15ff. these terms are used to characterize the mission of the Son in its unity as the eschatological event in which life or judgment become reality. As we have seen, however, it is precisely the word of revelation that contains the eschatological power of judgment and is itself spirit and life. In short, the nature of the word of revelation has been extended by John to characterize the mission of the Son in its unity.

For John, in sum, the significance of the cross does not derive from its unique soteriological status, but from its incorporation into a christological framework— the mission of the Son— whose characterization is based on the

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2 Ibid., p. 428.
3 Ibid., p. 265.
4 Ibid., pp. 153f. Bultmann notes that this is indicated by the present tense of the verb to have at John 3.15, and is expressly stated at 3.17-21; in this event the judgment of the world takes place.
5 John 12.48; 6.63.
eschatological significance of the revealer's word. This again indicates that although John has integrated the theology of the sayings tradition with the tradition of the cross and resurrection, the presuppositions that underlie his thought remain squarely rooted in the prophetic orientation of the Johannine community.

The evidence cited to this point concerning the social matrix reflected in the Fourth Gospel and the assumptions underlying its theology indicates that Kasemann has not confused its theological perspective with that of pre-Johannine source material, but has correctly identified the deeply prophetic experience and thought that underlies the Gospel itself. The Fourth Gospel indeed originated in a thoroughly prophetic community whose enthusiastic assumptions, moreover, continue to guide its theological reflection. The significance of this situation for John's christology lies in the fact that it retains the prophetic reflective focus on the word of the revealer as the eschatological event of salvation. The Evangelist does develop his thought within the framework of a true incarnation christology— the incarnation—exaltation of the preexistent Christ— but the assumptions by which he interprets this pattern are thoroughly prophetic. That is to say, it is neither his notion of revelation nor the notion of the cross, but precisely the word of the revealer that is the starting point and primary focus of John's christological reflection, and the notion that determines his portrayal of Jesus. Given the tendencies of this orientation, John develops his christology on the basis of realized eschatology and portrays Jesus not as the one whose mission led from lowliness to glory by the way of the cross, but as the one in whom the
eschatological reality is continually present. Insofar as this christological focus underlies and conditions the thought of the Evangelist, therefore, Kasemann is justified in proposing an interpretation of his christology that reflects its assumptions and presents the incarnation in non-kenotic terms as the descent-ascent of the divine revealer in which his unity with the Father is always and everywhere maintained and his divine glory revealed.

Kasemann is also justified in asserting that, in consequence of its underlying enthusiastic assumptions, John's christology exhibits a marked tendency to emphasize the glory of Jesus, which seems to dominate and at times even to obscure his flesh. This tendency can be seen in the fact that John's interpretation of incarnation consistently emphasizes the manifestation of glory rather than the becoming flesh in itself. Again, there is no reduction of the semeia in John, which are presented as epiphany scenes in which Jesus' glory is revealed. Finally, the passion is presented not as the depth of humiliation and defeat, but rather as the return of the revealer to the Father and thus to the glory of his preexistence. In a very real sense, then, the glory of the divine revealer in John dominates his flesh as the center of the Johannine proclamation.

As we have seen, it was the Gnostic trajectory in early Christianity that developed this tendency to its logical extreme by relegating the earthly life of Jesus to insignificance and viewing it as a lower or even irrelevant prelude to the activity of the exalted Lord. This perspective is visible in a sayings gospel such as the Gospel of Thomas or in the sayings tradition of John in which Jesus, as the heavenly revealer, continues to speak and to promise salvation to
his own. Kasemann argues that John has succumbed to this danger: a naive, unreflected docetism. On his interpretation, the glory of Jesus so transcends all temporal and spatial limits, including his flesh, that the history even of the incarnate Logos is relativized. The eschatological presence of the Christ alone is significant, and the history of his incarnation is retained in John only insofar as it accommodates the continuation of this presence.\(^1\)

It has often been noted, however, that the Evangelist was not content with a gospel of the sayings or revelatory discourse type. On the contrary, he chose to historicize sayings and discourses of the exalted Lord by placing them in the mouth of the earthly Jesus. This historicizing framework, however, emphasizes the incarnation by elevating Jesus to normative significance and thus mitigates the Gnostic tendency to disparage the incarnation.\(^2\) Thus, while it should be clear from our earlier discussion that John's thought is conditioned by a thoroughly prophetic consciousness, this situation indicates that Kasemann is wrong to characterize its christology as naively docetic, and that this question should be considered separately. Again, when considered against the background of the continuing prophetic influence on John's thought, it indicates the possibility that our problem lies in explaining a tension in the thought of the Evangelist himself between a christological perspective that stresses glory and a narrative framework that stresses the incarnation. In the following discussion, therefore, we will challenge

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\(^1\) See above, pp. 232ff.

\(^2\) Robinson, "Gattung," p. 113.
Kasemann's characterization of John as naively docetic, and his attribution of the christological ambiguity in the Gospel to the tension between the pre-Johannine tradition and the perspective of the Evangelist. We will explain John's relationship to both naive docetism and christological ambiguity with reference to a crisis in the Johannine community and a subsequent shifting of paradigm commitments whose effects are reflected in its christology.

In chapter one above we discussed the process of paradigm shift as a period of crisis and revolution during which a dominant paradigm is called into question, usually as the result of an anomaly, or a breakdown in its application, and replaced partially or totally by a new paradigm. During such a period traditional commitments erode, there is active debate over fundamentals, and a proliferation of versions of the paradigm. We also suggested that a document created during such a period may itself reflect the dynamic of this process and represent a transitional phase between paradigms. Such a document would be characterized by the replacement or reformulation of traditional concepts, their integration into a new matrix of relationships and meaning, and by a certain ambiguity in its thought as a result of the simultaneous influence of conflicting orientations. We now suggest that this pattern is reflected in the Fourth Gospel, and, consequently, that its christology exhibits such ambiguity. This is evident from the fact that the Gospel is the product of a time of intense crisis in the Johannine community, that the Evangelist's attempt to resolve this crisis involved a

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1 See above chapter 1, pp. 8ff.
modification of the community's religious paradigm—specifically the
introduction of a counter-emphasis on the incarnation—and, finally, that this
attempted resolution resulted in a certain ambiguity in his thought—in this
case a tension between the prophetic stress on glory and his stress on the
irreducible significance of the incarnation.

Indications of conflict and crisis have been detected in John for some
time. Raymond Brown, for example, suggests that its major theological
emphases were formulated as responses to crises within the Christian
community.1 Again, J. Louis Martyn has detected traces of the expulsion from
the synagogue and a subsequent polemic directed against Judaism; Bultmann
and others discuss a polemic directed against the followers of John the
Baptizer; and still others detect traces of a polemic directed against such
opponents as the Qumran community, Gnostic revealers, and even the Synoptic
Gospels.2 Recently, D. Bruce Woll has approached the question of conflict in
John from the perspective of the sectarian status of the Johannine community
and has detected an intra-Johannine conflict concerning succession and
authority. He argues that the Gospel reflects a polemical and exclusive
concentration of authority in Jesus that is directed against radical prophets

(Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1980), vol 29, p. LXXVIII.

2 See J. Louis Martyn, History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel, second
dition revised and enlarged (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979); Bultmann, Gospel,
Oscar Cullmann, The Johannine Circle, translated by John Bowden
(Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976); Woll, Johannine Christianity in
Conflict, pp. 63ff.
who claimed to be his legitimate successors and who placed themselves on a level with him as rivals.\footnote{Johannine Christianity in Conflict, pp. 63ff.} This conflict is significant for our study precisely because its resolution by the Evangelist involved a shifting of paradigm commitments that directly affects the Gospel's christology.

Woll suggests, first, that this prophetic crisis in the Johannine community is reflected in the first farewell discourse's stress on the absence of Jesus from the community's experience and on his preeminent authority. He notes that conventional interpretations have assumed a crisis in the Christian church posed by the delay of the parousia and the continued absence of Jesus, and have suggested that the discourses solve this problem by reinterpreting futurist eschatology and assuring unity with Jesus through his return in the Paraclete.\footnote{See Woll, Johannine Christianity in Conflict, pp. 12ff.} Woll argues that this interpretation works only superficially; in contrast, the first farewell discourse never treats the absence of Jesus as a problem, but rather enforces his absence. This is evident at John 13.31ff. where Jesus' announcement of his imminent glorification is followed by the shocking statement that none of his disciples will be able to follow him when he goes away. Indeed, in this passage they are likened to unbelievers who will be left alone in the world after his departure.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 18f. Cf. John 8.21.} Again, the theme of successorship at 14.12-17 continues this stress. There will be a successor to Jesus- the Paraclete- but his presence will be made possible only by the
departure and continued absence of Jesus. Thus, in these passages the notion of Jesus' absence is not corrected as demanded by conventional interpretations, but is presupposed and even stressed.

In consequence of this situation Woll argues that the primary theme of the discourse is not the presence of Jesus but rather his preeminence, and that its purpose is not to insure unity between the disciples and Jesus by the announcement of his return in the Paraclete, but rather to subordinate their experience and authority to that of Jesus who remains the exclusive agent of access to the Father even in his absence. Thus, for example, at 13.33ff. Jesus ascends first to the Father by virtue of his heavenly origin, but the disciples cannot follow until afterwards and their ascent depends on Jesus' prior ascent and preparation of a place for them. Again, during the interim period between Jesus' ascent and the disciples' reunion with him in heaven they function as his successors, but in this instance their authority is mediated by Jesus' return in the Paraclete, and thus subordinate to and dependent on his agency.

Woll argues that this tendency of the first farewell discourse to enforce absence and to subordinate the experience and authority of the disciples to

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1 Ibid., p. 19. According to Woll, these vv. presuppose the absence of Jesus, and make provision for the disciples, indwelt by 'another' Paraclete, to take his place.

2 Ibid., pp. 32ff.

3 Ibid., pp. 43ff.

4 Ibid., p. 34.
that of Jesus reflects its origin in an enthusiastic community involved in a crisis of succession. That is to say, in a community in which direct access to the spirit was a dominant fact of experience the question of a soteriologically unfulfilled present would scarcely have arisen. This community would likely face the opposite problem: the claim to direct access to divine reality through the possession of the spirit and a sense of immediate authority.1 According to Woll, therefore, the polemical urgency with which the first discourse concentrates authority in Jesus suggests that it arose in a situation of conflict concerning succession and authority in the community, and is directed against a group claiming the same direct access to divine authority as Jesus himself.2

Second, this prophetic crisis in the Johannine community is reflected in the Gospel's polemic against claims to direct heavenly ascents and visions and to works superior to those of Jesus himself. John 3.13f. and 13.33 appear to reflect a polemic directed against prophetic ascent claims in the community. Wayne Meeks follows Bultmann in detecting at 3.13f. a polemic directed against prophets or seers who claimed to have received revelations by means of heavenly journeys.3 David Aune minimizes the polemical aspect of this verse, but cites it as evidence of 'visionary and auditionary pneumatic experiences'.

1 Ibid., p. 32.
2 Ibid., e.g. pp. 32ff; 66; 91; 128.
through which the exalted Christ was mediated to the Johannine community.\(^1\) Quite plausibly, then, John 3.13f. is directed against a Christian ascent mysticism, of prophets ascending together with the Christ into the heavenly realm. According to Woll, the situation is similar at 13.33. In the first farewell discourse, that is, the authority of the Son is based on his direct and original access to the Father from whom he alone has descended. In contrast, the authority of the disciples is derived from the descent of the Son in the form of the spirit and not from their own ascent to heaven. In this context the pointed statement at 13.33, 'where I am going you cannot come,' appears to be directed against the same type of ascent mysticism proposed for 3.13.\(^2\)

In a charismatic community such as that reflected in John, the authority of the disciples is manifested not only in heavenly visions and journeys, but as well in miracles and judgment. Noting that it is typical of such charismatic figures to place themselves above traditional authority, Woll proposes the presence in the Johannine community of prophets who considered themselves on a par with Jesus or even superior to him.\(^3\) This attitude is suggested by Jesus' critique of autodoxology, or the drive to seek

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\(^1\) *Cultic Setting*, p. 99.

\(^2\) *Johannine Christianity in Conflict*, p. 96. The Evangelist similarly precludes direct heavenly visions. E.g., the prologue concludes at 1.18 with a restriction on direct visions: "No one has ever seen God, the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known." See also 6.46.

\(^3\) Ibid., p. 91.
one's own glory. Again, it seems to underlie the prophetic saying quoted at John 14.12, "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do..." For such prophets, that is, the earthly Jesus had become a mere figure of the past, a voice of tradition. Thus, while acknowledging his legitimacy, they would have considered themselves the representatives of new and superior manifestations of heavenly power.

In sum, the first farewell discourse reflects a crisis in the Johannine community precipitated by the claims of enthusiastic prophets to direct heavenly access and to works superior to those of Jesus himself. For this group the experience of the praesentia Christi had been distorted to signify equality of status. As the rightful successors of Jesus they claimed the same kind of direct access to divine authority that he claimed, identified with the heavenly Christ over against the earthly Jesus, and thus relegated the incarnation to the status of an insignificant prelude. In short, Jesus had become for them a figure from the past whose activity had been transcended by the present manifestations of the spirit in the prophetic community.

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1 See John 7.18 "The one who speaks from himself, seeks his own glory; but he who seeks the glory of the One who sent him, he is true, and there is no unrighteousness in him." See also 13.16; 15.20. The clear implication of these passages is that the disciples must not seek their own glory, and especially not set themselves above Jesus himself, but rather accept their subordinate and mediated position.

2 Johannine Christianity in Conflict, p. 91.

3 Ibid., pp. 32ff, 66, 91ff., 95ff., 128.
According to Woll, the Evangelist clearly considered this radical perspective an aberration that threatened the primacy of the Son by reducing christology to the autonomous experience of the prophets.\(^1\) His response to this crisis, which is reflected in the Gospel, involved an attempt to limit the excesses of the prophetic experience by introducing an emphasis on the irreducible significance of the incarnation as the archetypical event of salvation, thereby subordinating the authority of the disciples to that of the Lord and grounding their experience in the incarnation itself.

This emphasis is evident from the fact that Jesus has both spatial and temporal priority over the disciples. As we have seen, Jesus ascends first to the Father, alone. The disciples cannot follow until afterwards, and their ascent depends on Jesus' prior ascent and preparation of a place for them. This sequence implies, however, that Jesus ascends first to heaven because he belongs there; his place is original, that of the disciples is secondary, derived, and dependent upon him.\(^2\) In similar fashion, any claim to direct, heavenly vision is restricted by or mediated through the authority of Jesus. At John 6.46, for example, Jesus insists that no one has seen the Father except the one who is from God. Again, when Philip requests to see the Father at John 14.8, Jesus responds "He who has seen me has seen the Father." For John, in short, ascent in any form is unconditionally dependent upon prior descent, and

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\(^1\) Ibid., e.g. p. 128.

\(^2\) Ibid., pp. 38, 43ff. See John 16.28 "I came forth from the Father and I came into the world. Again I depart from the world and go to the Father."
"there is only one who can ascend, because there is only one who is originally from heaven."\(^1\)

Jesus also has temporal priority over the disciples in the Fourth Gospel, for John has clearly demarcated the original, paradigmatic time of the incarnation from the derived, subordinate time of the disciples.\(^2\) In response to the claims of charismatic prophets to direct heavenly access through the possession of the spirit, John interprets the spirit as the return of Jesus himself, so that the earthly Jesus in effect becomes his own successor working in his followers, who thereby become subordinate agents.\(^3\) Again, the function of the Paraclete in John confirms this tendency to make the earthly Jesus the norm and authority of the community's sacred tradition. According to the farewell instructions of Jesus at 14.26, the Paraclete "will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all I said to you." The clear implication of this remembering motif is that the disciples' prophetic utterances and teachings in the present are subordinate to the prior, normative teaching of Jesus.\(^4\) In short, the Evangelist's emphasis on the temporal priority of Jesus indicates that he has chosen to characterize the Son

\(^1\) Ibid., p. 45.

\(^2\) Ibid., pp. 25ff.

\(^3\) Ibid., p. 96.

\(^4\) Ibid., p. 102.
in terms of a mission— including words and works— in some sense completed in
the past, and has explicitly subordinated the disciples to this Jesus.\(^1\)

Woll's analysis indicates, to summarize, that in an effort to curb the
excesses of an enthusiastic prophecy that had to a large extent run wild, John
has attempted to anchor the Christian experience of salvation in the history of
the incarnate Logos and has thus united the meaning of this experience with
the event of the incarnation.\(^2\) By means of his emphasis on the spatial and
temporal priority of Jesus he has clearly marked off the incarnation as the
archetypical event, invested with the absolute primacy of cosmogonic time,
and thus the event on which the salvation of all humankind is dependent.\(^3\) In
John, therefore, any claim to heavenly ascent, vision, or work in the spirit is
subordinate to and dependent on the prior activity of Jesus, and thus the expe-
rience and authority of the disciples finds its ground and source of meaning in
the incarnation itself.

The implications of this process of crisis and paradigm shift in the
Johannine community for John's christology are significant. First, the
Evangelist's introduction of an emphasis on the irreducible significance of the
incarnation clearly precludes Kasemann's characterization of his christology
as naively docetic. It is true that, in consequence of its underlying prophetic
assumptions, Jesus' glory tends to dominate and even to obscure his flesh in

\(^1\) Ibid., p. 122.


\(^3\) *Johannine Christianity in Conflict*, pp. 102, 126.
the Fourth Gospel. Thus, John does not present a kenotic view of the incarnation, or a portrayal of Jesus as the true man of later Christian theology. But it is also true that, in response to a crisis precipitated by a group of radical prophets who denied the significance of the incarnation, the Evangelist affirms Jesus' flesh. That is to say, it is not, as Kasemann argues, superfluous—a mere backdrop for his divine glory— but rather, together with his glory marks the archetypical event on which the salvation of all humankind is dependent. In short, within the framework provided by his background and theological orientation, the Evangelist attempted to affirm both the glory of the Son and the irreducibly significant event of the incarnation.

It is also clear from this perspective that the christological ambiguity in John can be attributed, at least in part, to the thought of the Evangelist that reflects both the prophetic emphasis on glory and his own counter-emphasis on the incarnation. At this point we differ from the views of Bultmann and Kasemann. As we have seen, Bultmann attributes the christological ambiguity in John to the Evangelist’s appropriation and demythologization of revelation discourse material and the Gnostic redeemer myth. Kasemann attributes it to the tension between the enthusiastic perspective of the Evangelist and the pre-Johannine christological tradition whose perspective he either could not ignore or simply had not completely transcended. Despite their differences, however, both distinguish between the pre-Johannine tradition in one form or another and the perspective of the Evangelist. In contrast, we suggest that the christological ambiguity in John can be attributed to the Evangelist himself. We have argued that John's christological perspective has its origin
in and continues to be conditioned by the assumptions of an enthusiastic prophetic community whose christological reflection focused on the word of Jesus as the eschatological event of salvation, and consequently conceived Jesus as a heavenly figure of wisdom rather than as a suffering messiah. Insofar as this christological focus with its unique tendencies underlies and conditions the thought of the Evangelist, therefore, he presents the incarnation in non-kenotic terms as the descent-ascent of the divine revealer in which his unity with the Father is always and everywhere maintained and his divine glory revealed. Indeed, in consequence of its underlying enthusiastic assumptions, John's christology exhibits a marked tendency to emphasize the glory of Jesus, which seems to dominate and at times even to obscure his flesh. Despite this fact, however, John's attempted resolution of an intense crisis in the Johannine community involved a modification of its fundamental religious paradigm and the introduction of a counter-emphasis on the irreducible significance of the incarnation. On this basis it should be recognized that the christological paradigm of the Gospel is in transition and simultaneously influenced by these two somewhat conflicting tendencies, and thus that the christological ambiguity in John can be understood to reflect the shifting of paradigm commitments necessitated by the prophetic crisis in which the Johannine community was involved.
The Soteriological Significance of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel

Our discussion in the preceding pages of the prophetic assumptions underlying the christology of the Fourth Gospel has shown that the question of Jesus' nature cannot be addressed without taking into account the soteriological significance attributed to him in the Johannine community that provides the focus of its christological reflection, the model on which his portrayal is based. This indicates, again, that the fundamental assumption underlying John's christology is that in the Christ event God's eschatological act of salvation has decisively occurred. In this concluding section, therefore, we will attempt to explicate the theological basis on which the unique soteriological significance of Jesus is founded in the Gospel. The precise point of departure for this discussion lies in the unusual degree to which aspects of salvation have converged on the person of the Johannine Jesus. To an extent unparalleled in any other New Testament writing, Jesus in the Fourth Gospel fulfills the soteriological promise of God. John shares with early Christianity in general the notion of salvation as the eschatological act of God, but in John this event occurs uniquely in the person of Jesus. To quote Robert Fortna, in John "Jesus does not accomplish salvation; he is salvation." 1

1 "Christology in the Fourth Gospel: Redaction Critical Perspectives," p. 40. The History of Religions origin for this development seems to lie in what Jonathan Z. Smith refers to as the shift from temple to magician as sacred center across the Mediterranean world in late Antiquity. See "The Temple and the Magician," in Map is not Territory, Studies in the History of Religions, Studies
The Fourth Gospel's proclamation can be summarized in the message of John 3.16: God so loved the world that he gave his only son—not to judge the world, but to save it. Nevertheless, when we inquire further into the Gospel's use of the term kosmos, or world, which at 3.16 is the obvious object of God's love, we see that it is not without ambiguity. For John, that is, the term kosmos is primarily used to designate the realm of darkness and falsehood that is radically opposed to God's realm of light and truth.1 Indeed, such dualistic symbolism permeates the thought of the Fourth Gospel; for example, 8.23 contrasts that which is above with that which is below, 3.6 contrasts spirit and flesh, 3.36 life and death, and 13.27 God and Satan. This prominence of dualistic language indicates that John's thought developed within a thoroughly dualistic framework. If, therefore, we are to understand the soteriological significance of Jesus in the Gospel, we must first come to terms with the nature and function of this dualism.

In characterizing the world as the realm of darkness and falsehood that opposes God, John has abandoned the temporal dimension of Jewish dualism that opposes two ages in favor of a spatial dualism that opposes two realms or realities. Like Paul, he refers to the world in its opposition to God as 'this world,' a term which comes from apocalyptic eschatology.2 In his use of the


1 See, e.g. John 1.5. For a discussion, see Bultmann, Theology, pp. 15ff.

2 See Bultmann, Theology, p. 15. See John 8.23; 9.39; 11.9; 12.25, 31; 13.1; 16.11; 18.36.
term, however, John's point is not a contrast between this evil age and the coming age of God, but rather a contrast between the essential nature of the world and of God.¹

It would be a mistake, however, to understand the nature of the world on the basis of a Gnostic dualism of spirit and matter, because John's dualism takes on its specific meaning only in relation to the idea of creation.² Thus, for him, the world is not an inherently evil reality. This is shown by the passages that speak of the world in neutral or even positive terms as God's creation, or as the object of God's love. For example, at John 1.3, 10; 17.5, and 24, the Evangelist shows himself heir to Biblical thought in recognizing the world as the

¹ Ibid. With the exception of the statement at John 12.25.

² Recent research into the history of religions origin of Johannine dualism has tended to undermine its close association with Gnosticism, and to relate it to a sectarian Judaism such as that practiced by the Essenes at Qumran. For example, Raymond Brown suggests that the closest parallel to the dualistic language of John is to be found in the literature of the Qumran community. The parallels between John and Qumran are not close enough to suggest a direct literary dependence, but they do suggest Johannine familiarity with the type of thought in the scrolls. Again, John's dualism, like that of Jewish dualism, continues to be conditioned by the Hebrew Bible's notion of creation according to which God is ultimately sovereign, and all opposing realities are themselves created. Thus, it would seem that the modified dualism of sectarian Judaism, represented by the Essenes at Qumran, best represents the intellectual milieu from which the Evangelist inherited his dualistic orientation. See, e.g., The Gospel According to John, pp. LXII ff., LXIII, 141, 508f., 515f. Similar conclusions have been reached by James Price, "Light from Qumran upon some Aspects of Johannine Theology," John and Qumran, ed. by James H. Charlesworth (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1972), pp. 19-25; and by James H. Charlesworth, "A Critical Comparison of the Dualism in 1 QS 3:13-4:26 and the 'Dualism' Contained in the Gospel of John," John and Qumran, pp. 76-106.
creation of God through the divine Word.1 Brown notes that, especially in the first half of the Gospel, there are many references that show God's benevolence and salvific intent toward the world. According to 3.17, for example, Jesus was sent by the Father to save the world, and at 6.33, 51 he was sent to give life to the world. This dependence on the idea of creation shows that the world is not conceived in John as an inherently evil reality, but rather as a reality in rebellion and thus dominated by evil.2

John's dependence on Biblical thought also shows in the fact that the world, as creation, is related to and receives its orientation from humankind.3 Brown notes that in Biblical thought, "...the world finds its expression in man who was created in the image and likeness of God. It receives its orientation from man—either through him it praises God, or through his sin it is directed to evil."4 Thus, in the Fourth Gospel it is precisely the world of humankind in opposition to the Creator that constitutes the negative pole of the dualistic framework. In John, that is, the world is evil because humankind chooses darkness and falsehood rather than light and truth.

Assuming this modified dualistic structure, the situation of humankind in relation to its Creator in John can be summarized in the following terms.5

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2 Ibid., p. 509.
3 Ibid., pp. 508f.
4 Ibid., p. 509.
5 Following Bultmann's insightful description. See Theology, pp. 15ff.
Clearly one's nature is not determined by metaphysical categories of being and non-being, or of spirit and matter, but rather by one's status as creature. That is to say, unlike God who lives out of God's own resources, the creature can live only contingently, from some external and uncontrollable origin that has power over it.\(^1\) For humankind as creature, therefore, there exists only two possibilities, to live from God or to live from Nothing.\(^2\) Living from God is a possibility for humankind because, in John, the act of creation is simultaneously an act of revelation. According to the prologue, everything was created by the Word, which was with God in the beginning and, indeed, was God. This means, however, that God's act of creation was also an act of self-revelation. The same implication can be inferred from the fact the Word was not only the life for that which was created, but also the light for humankind.\(^3\) According to Bultmann, this true light "...is not the light of literal day, which makes orientation in the external world possible, but the state of having one's existence illumined, an illumination in and by which a man understands himself, achieves a self-understanding which opens up his 'way' to him, guides all his conduct, and gives him clarity and assurance."\(^4\) In short, because creation is simultaneously revelation, humankind possesses the possibility of living the authentic life of a creature which, by existing from

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1 Ibid., p. 20.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid., p. 17. See John 1.4

4 Ibid., pp. 17f.
God, involves a genuine self-understanding and a life illumined by meaning and purpose.¹

In this context, the darkness that characterizes the world means simply that one has rejected dependence upon God and has closed oneself to God's self-revelation. But if one repudiates one's origin in God, the only true reality, then one's origin can only be Nothing; that is, a specious reality created by humankind's delusion that it can live from itself. Such a self-understanding, which rejects reality and truth, can only be characterized by darkness, falsehood, death, and bondage. This second possibility represents what Bultmann calls 'the perversion of creation'; that is, a delusion that arises from the will to exist of and by one's self and that perverts truth into a lie and creation into the world.²

For the Evangelist, then, the expressions to be from or to be born from do not characterize humankind on the basis of metaphysical categories. Rather, they reflect the fact that, as creature, one must exist from one of two origins that determines one's nature and destiny.³ Every individual stands before the opposing possibilities- to be of God or to be of the world, to be born of God or to be born of the flesh. Thus, one's nature, as it were, is determined in the act of choosing, or in the existential situation in which choices are made by all of one's speaking and acting. What for Gnosticism would be a

¹ Ibid., p. 18.
² Ibid., p. 27.
³ Ibid., p. 20.
cosmological dualism of spirit and matter is for the Evangelist a dualism of decision.¹

Within this dualistic framework, John's notion of salvation becomes readily apparent. Salvation in John means nothing other than to exist in the wholeness of authentic creaturehood. Otherwise stated, salvation means openness to God who, as Creator, is the only true reality: the source of light, life, and freedom.² The liberating power of truth is expressed at John 8.32 "and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." As Bultmann has pointed out, this liberating power is not represented by a rational knowledge of reality, a correct understanding freed from prejudice or error. Rather, knowledge of the truth is knowledge of God's reality, which frees from sin. Truth, for John, "is not the teaching about God transmitted by Jesus but is God's very reality revealing itself-occurring!- in Jesus."³ Again, as we have seen, the true light of God represents the illumination of existence in which authentic self-understanding becomes possible. If God, as Creator, is the only true reality, then life, or eternal life, is simply openness to God. This is made clear at 17.3, "And this is eternal life, that they know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent."⁴ Finally, freedom in the Fourth Gospel

¹ Ibid., pp. 20f.
² Ibid., p. 19.
³ Ibid.
⁴ Ibid.
means simply that "...by acknowledging the truth the world opens itself to the reality from which alone it can live."¹

Two additional characteristics of Johannine soteriology are of particular significance for our study. First, the attainment of salvation, or the life of authentic creaturehood, is for the Evangelist exclusively a divine possibility, and, second, this salvation is effected in the eschatological encounter with God's self-revelation in the person of Jesus. It is true that the dualistic language of the Gospel divides humankind into two groups—those who are of God or of the world—and in so doing gives the impression that humankind falls into two categories whose essence and destiny are predetermined according to their metaphysical nature. As we have seen, however, John does not oppose flesh and spirit in Gnostic fashion. In fact, John makes no use of the Gnostic term nature to characterize the essence of humankind and, indeed, presents no explicit anthropology.² But he has no need of an explicit anthropology because, for him, one's nature is determined in one's choice of origins—to live in the delusion of autonomy, which is to live from Nothing, or to live authentically as God's creature. Consequently, the attainment of salvation in John does not represent the realization of one's true nature. Rather, for an individual to attain salvation is to exchange one origin for another, and "...this is manifestly something which he cannot give

¹ Ibid., p. 20.
² Ibid., p. 23.
himself."¹ That is to say, as creature, one is determined by one's origin, and everything that lies within one's power to accomplish is determined by this origin. But, according to 1.10, before the coming of the Light in Jesus the world lay in darkness, having rejected the Light in creation. Thus, as matters now stand, one has no control over one's life and cannot procure salvation. If one's way is to lead to salvation, it must start from another point that allows one to reverse one's origin and to exchange the old origin for a new one. In sum, the condition of salvation can only be satisfied by a miracle, or by God's self-revelation in which humankind is offered the possibility of exchanging its origin and of living from God in the authenticity of true creaturehood.²

John's conviction of salvation as an exclusively divine possibility is clearly reflected, for example, in his appropriation of traditional sayings that reflect a Hellenistic dualism of flesh and spirit. At John 3.6 he quotes a traditional axiom that, as Kasemann expresses it, "...breathes the atmosphere of Hellenistic dualism and ...radicalism."³ "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." That John does not share the radical dualism of this axiom is shown by the fact that in this passage his interest lies in the possibility of a rebirth in which the flesh does not remain flesh but becomes spirit.⁴ This is expressed at 3.5 "Truly, truly, I say to you.

¹ Gospel, p. 137.
² Ibid., pp. 138f.
⁴ Ibid. That is to say, flesh is reinterpreted by John to signify humankind in rebellion against God.
unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God." Indeed, 3.8 shows that the possibility of rebirth is mysterious and miraculous, and lies beyond the power of humankind to effect "The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; so it is with every one who is born of the Spirit." According to Kasemann, it is only because the Evangelist understands rebirth as an exclusively divine possibility—a miracle—that he can appropriate this Hellenistic axiom for his discourse.¹

In sum, the assumption that underlies John's soteriology, and which he shares with Christianity in general, is the conviction that salvation is exclusively a divine possibility. That is to say, only insofar as God's very reality as truth, light, and life are revealed is it possible for humankind to exchange its old origin for a new, divine origin, and to live from God in authentic creaturehood. Before the Light's coming the whole world lay in darkness and death. But precisely in the response of faith to God's self-revelation the possibility is opened up of exchanging one's origin and hence one's destiny, and of being born from above.

It is significant that in John God's eschatological self-revelation as truth, life, light etc., occurs exclusively in Jesus. Consequently, in his person and word God's very reality is made present to humankind and all are placed

¹ "Structure and Purpose," p. 157. I.e. without the intervention of God, the flesh indeed remains the flesh. A similar reinterpretation of Hellenistic dualism occurs at John 6.63.
before the eschatological decision of life or death.\textsuperscript{1} In terms of the Christ myth, Jesus represents the incarnation of the preexistent Logos sent into the world by God to carry out the work of revelation for which he had been commissioned and equipped by the Father. As we have seen, time and again Jesus refers to his having been sent by the Father, uniquely commissioned to reveal the divine reality. This is clear, for example, at 3.34, where Jesus states "For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for it is not by measure that he gives the Spirit." Again, the exclusivity of the revelation in Jesus is stressed by such passages as 1.18 that explicitly deny that God is directly accessible to humankind. According to John, it clearly cannot be said that humankind has the possibility of a special and direct relationship to the Father, for this can be said only of the revealer. In consequence, now when the world has turned to darkness God can be approached only in his revelation, and this revelation occurs exclusively in Jesus.\textsuperscript{2}

As the unique revelation of the Father, the one who has descended from heaven with the divine commission, Jesus in the Gospel of John bears witness to what he has seen and heard from the Father, he declares to the world what he has seen and heard from him, and he does nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing.\textsuperscript{3} Significantly, as we have seen, Jesus never actually describes things he has seen or heard in the heavenly sphere.

\textsuperscript{1} At 3.18, for example, to believe in Jesus as the self-revelation of God is to pass already from death to life; to reject him is to remain in darkness and death.

\textsuperscript{2} Bultmann, \textit{Gospel}, p. 80.

\textsuperscript{3} John 3.31f.; 5.19, 30; 8.26.
In all possible variations, he speaks of nothing else than his sending by the Father, his coming and his departure. This contradictory situation is explained by the fact that, for the Evangelist, Jesus does not reveal truths about the Father, but rather reveals the very reality of the Father in his person and activity. We have already seen that truth in John does not carry the formal meaning of rational understanding freed from prejudice and error, but rather God’s reality as manifest in the Son. Thus, revelation in John refers to the fact that God becomes present in Jesus—whoever has seen him has seen the Father; in him the Father is and works; as Jesus is the truth, so he is the life; thus, if he is full of grace and truth, this can only mean that in him God’s reality encounters humankind as a gracious gift.

It is clear, in short, that Jesus’ mission represents the eschatological event in which God’s self-revelation occurs and in which humankind is placed before the possibility of life or death. But this also indicates that John has radicalized the eschatological character of the incarnation. This means, first, that he has given up the notion of a future consummation of God’s eschatological activity and has collapsed its functions onto Jesus, and, second, that Jesus actually embodies this salvation in himself.

First, to say that Jesus is the exclusive revelation of God, that in him the Father is present and active, is to say that God has given over all things to the

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1 See Bultmann, *Gospel*, pp. 145; 253f.

2 See Bultmann, *Theology*, pp. 18f.

Son who performs God's eschatological functions.¹ For example, according to 13.3 Jesus has received the very name of God;² at 17.22, 24 he has received God's glory; that is, the attribute of the eschatological revelation of the Messiah and the time of salvation;³ at 17.2 he has received power over all flesh;⁴ at 5.26 Jesus, like God, has life in himself; at 5.36 he performs the works of God; and, finally, at 17.4 he speaks the words of God. Similarly, Jesus' coming as the Son of Man is not put off to a future appearing; rather, he is already the Son of Man in his work on earth.⁵ Jewish and early Christian apocalyptic had given expression to the idea that the Son of Man, who will come on the clouds of heaven, will exercise the eschatological judgment alongside or in the place of God.⁶ But John makes no mention of the eschatological drama of the end time. In contrast, at 5.21f. God has bestowed the office of eschatological judge on Jesus who exercises judgment in his present activity as the revealer "For as

¹ John 3.35. See Bultmann, Gospel, p. 165.

² According to Kasemann, when John employs the traditional expression of the revelation of the divine name, this means that "In Jesus, and only in him, we encounter God himself. He alone is the revealer." This is because in antiquity, "...the name meant the manifestation of a being. Through its manifestation one can know and take hold of that being. The name of God is God's reality as manifested within the earthly realm." See Testament, p. 50.

³ See Bultmann, Gospel, p. 490, note 5.

⁴ According to Bultmann, this is not the power of a spiritual individual; on the contrary, power over all flesh is a messianic term that refers to the bestowal of God's royal power. See Ibid., p. 492, note 3.

⁵ See e.g. John 9.35-38.

⁶ See e.g. Bultmann, Gospel, pp. 107, 256f., 338f.
the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will. The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son." Consequently, Jesus claims to be the resurrection and the life at 11.25f. and 14.6, and so promises life to the one who believes in his word without any mention being made of his resurrection. In sum, the Johannine Jesus already executes the eschatological functions of the Father during the incarnation. This is the meaning of John's characterization of his mission as the eschatological event.

Second, as the exclusive revelation of the Father, Jesus actually embodies eschatological salvation in himself. That is to say, for the Evangelist, the God who is coming to earth in Jesus is the authentic life, truth, light, bread and water of humankind; in short, the only reality from which humankind can live in authenticity and wholeness.¹ This Johannine characterization of the eschatological salvation in terms of natural phenomena such as light, bread, and water reflects a dualistic system of archetypes according to which the mundane realities sought by humankind in order to live represent but pale reflections of the authentic, divine reality in which alone true life is possible.² Thus, the light of salvation offered in Jesus does not represent the literal light of the natural world, but rather the divine light in which

¹ See e.g. Kasemann, Testament, p. 51.

² Ibid. See also Bultmann, Gospel, p. 182. According to Bultmann, "...all earthly things, whether food or clothing, birth or marriage, life or death, are temporary, transitory and false, whereas their heavenly counterparts are true, eternal and final."
existence is illumined;¹ the bread from heaven, in contrast to all human food, is the food that endures and bestows eternal life;² and the living water, which is Jesus, represents the divine life-giving source bestowed only in the revelation.³ While it is true that God’s self-revelation in the Son bestows the gifts of eschatological salvation—of light, bread, and water—it is also true that Jesus does not bestow a gift that is separate from himself. Instead, his use of the Ego Eimi, or I am, form of speech shows that Jesus embodies the eschatological gift of salvation. John makes extensive use of what Bultmann calls the recognition formula; that is, a form of Ego Eimi speech in which the I is predicate, which responds to the question: “Who is the one who is expected, asked for, spoken to?”, and to which the reply is: “I am He.”⁴ By the use of this formula, therefore, Jesus identifies himself as the embodiment of God’s eschatological salvation. For example, in response to humankind’s quest for living bread or the bread of life, Jesus responds at 6.35 “I am the bread of life”; and in response to the quest for light, Jesus responds at 8.12 “I am the light of

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¹ Bultmann, Theology, pp. 17f.

² See Bultmann, Gospel, pp. 222ff. For example, in Judaism, the heavenly manna was the food eaten by angels, and that in the messianic age will be eaten by the redeemed. Thus, in general, the bread of life is thought of as an eschatological gift of salvation. In John, the bread of life symbolizes the divine revelation and the gifts it brings.

³ Ibid., pp. 180ff. Again, at p. 182, Bultmann points out that water is sheerly indispensable for natural human life. This dispensability is the basis for the symbolic use of water to refer to salvation. For example, the Old Testament reflects the hope that in the eschatological end time, there will be an abundance of water. See e.g. Is 43.19f.; 49.10; Joel 4.18 etc.

⁴ Ibid., p. 225, note 3.
the world." In Jesus we are confronted with the embodiment of God's gift of salvation; he is, in short, "the way, the truth, and the life."¹

In sum, it is clear that in the Fourth Gospel Jesus has become the sacred center, the point of contact between the heavenly and earthly realms.² If humankind is to encounter the eschatological reality of salvation, this can only occur in the person and activity of Jesus, the incarnate Logos. As we have seen, the Johannine Jesus represents the exclusive revelation of the Father in which the Father's very reality and activity become present. As the Son of Man, he already performs the eschatological functions of the Father during the incarnation and, as God's truth, light, and life, he actually embodies the gift of salvation. Thus, in Jesus, one is encountered with the eschatological decision between life and death, and he represents the exclusive way to the Father. To believe in Jesus as the self-revelation of God is to pass already from death to life; to reject him is to remain in darkness and death.³ In short, the incarnation is for John the eschatological event in which God's soteriological purpose for humankind is both accomplished and made a present reality.


² See e.g., Jonathon Z. Smith, "The Temple and the Magician," especially pp. 185-89. He argues that the christocentrism of the Fourth Gospel should be attributed to a broad socio-cultural development in the Mediterranean world in late antiquity in which the magician rather than the temple was regarded as the sacred center.

³ See e.g. John 3.18, 36.
Chapter Five
Avatāra and Incarnation: Comparison and Conclusions

At chapter one above the methodological approach for this comparative study of avatāra and incarnation in the Bhagavadgītā and in the Gospel of John was formulated in critical response to that of Geoffrey Parrinder in a series of comparative studies published under the title Avatar and Incarnation. It was there noted that, until recently, comparative studies of the Indian theistic tradition and Christianity have been dominated by theological and apologetic concerns. For example, while both J. N. Farquhar and Raimundo Panikkar were sympathetic to the Indian tradition, they remained committed to the superior truth of the Christian faith.¹ Rudolf Otto attempted critical comparisons of the Indian theistic tradition and Christianity but, rather curiously, scarcely considered the concepts of avatāra and incarnation.² Parrinder's work represents an attempt to fill the void created by this scarcity of critical comparisons between these two traditions, and especially between the respective notions of avatāra and incarnation. He correctly notes in the preface to his study that little critical attention has been devoted to the concept of avatāra in the Indian tradition and that comparisons with the

¹ See Farquhar's Permanent Lessons of the Gita and Panikkar's The Unknown Christ of Hinduism, mentioned above at chapter 1, p. 1.

² See, e.g., his India's Religion of Grace.
Christian notion of incarnation have been characterized by a lack of rigor.¹ In response to this situation, he calls for a critical study to ascertain just how much or little common ground exists between the respective notions of avatāra and incarnation.² Despite his recognition of this need, however, it was suggested in chapter one that Parrinder's approach is itself dominated by apologetic concerns that preclude the achievement of a truly unbiased, critical comparison and weaken the conclusions taken in his study.

First, Parrinder's apologetic concerns are reflected in the fact that he holds up the Christian kenotic model of incarnation as the definitive norm to which all related concepts are to be compared; in consequence, he tends to reduce the latter to their relationship to this norm. As we have seen, Parrinder formulated his comparative approach in direct opposition to works such as Aldous Huxley's The Perennial Philosophy in which an uncritical approximation or even identification of religious concepts of incarnation is made.³ While Parrinder is completely justified in objecting to such facile approximations, his work makes it clear that he is offended not so much by the diluting effect of Huxley's interpretation on the various religious concepts of incarnation as by the equation of the Christian notion with similar concepts. His comparative study, therefore, is guided by a concern to establish the

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¹ Avatar, p. 7.

² Ibid., p. 13.

³ See chapter 1, p. 2f. At p. 60 of his book Huxley maintains that "the doctrine that God can be incarnated in human form is found in most of the principal historic expositions of the Perennial Philosophy - in Hinduism, in Mahayana Buddhism, in Christianity and in the Mohammadanism of the Sufis."
uniqueness of the Christian incarnation and to comprehend its relationship to similar notions in other religions. This apologetic concern has been recognized, for example, by Ninian Smart who notes that the ultimate concern of Parrinder's study is to make sense, from a Christian perspective, of the pluralism of religion.¹

The significance of Parrinder's theological agenda for our concerns lies in the fact that it conditions his methodology and precludes an unbiased approach to the material. That is to say, guided by his apologetic concerns, he does not explicate the Indian concept of avatāra within the religio-cultural context that actually determines its meaning, but considers it in contrast to the Christian kenotic model of incarnation. In consequence, he tends to reduce it to its relationship to the latter. Indeed, his characterization of avatāra is primarily determined by the response to one question "... is it a real incarnation, in the flesh? Is it, to use an ugly theological term, an 'inhistorization' of the Deity?"² Within these tightly drawn parameters Parrinder marks a radical distinction between the respective notions of avatāra and incarnation. Noting the characteristic absence of kenotic features from Indian avatāra theory, he characterizes it not as incarnation properly speaking, but rather as theophany, or a manifestation of the divine in visible form.³ Following Heinrich Zimmer, he notes that in the avatāras

¹ The Science of Religion and the Sociology of Knowledge, p. 5.
³ Ibid., pp. 226ff.
'the Godhead, in its very aloofness,' freely engages in cyclical descents for generally soteriological purposes, yet in doing so, never truly enters the human sphere.¹ It is true that Parrinder recognizes the non-docetic nature of Kṛṣṇa in the Bhagavadgītā,² but even here he argues that Kṛṣṇa has been so worked into an ideal pattern of theophany that most of his human traits have been lost.³ It is clear from the above considerations, however, that the imposition of Parrinder's apologetic concerns on his methodology has precluded the achievement of an unbiased understanding of the Indian notion of avatāra in its own terms. Thus, its characterization as theophany rather than as incarnation properly speaking is based on an inadequate foundation.

Second, Parrinder's study suffers from a lack of critical depth that, again, appears to be related to his apologetic concerns. That is to say, his primary interest does not lie in critically analyzing the structure of incarnation belief in Christian thought, but rather in comparing non-Christian concepts of incarnation to the Christian kenotic model. Consequently, he fails to question rigorously the assumptions that underlie the development of christological reflection in the Christian tradition. Quite the contrary, he insists that this christological development is universally characterized by the realistic emphasis of kenotic christology. In mainstream Christian thought, that is, an insistence on the historicity of the incarnation

¹ Ibid. See Zimmer's, The Philosophies of India, p. 390.
² Avatar, p. 119. In this he follows Rudolf Otto, The Original Gita, p. 287f.
³ Ibid., p. 227.
event—the true birth, life, and death of the man Jesus—provides the fundamental substratum upon which all theological interpretations are founded.\(^1\) As often pointed out, however, this type of realistic interpretation is anachronistic and represents the imposition of modern historical categories onto primitive Christian thought.\(^2\) In contrast, Biblical scholarship has clearly demonstrated that primitive Christianity did not share our historical concerns; thus, that an adequate explication of its christological thought depends on discerning the unique assumptions that underlie and determine its expression. Otherwise stated, we must learn to distinguish between the historical Jesus and the earthly Jesus. The historical Jesus is the object of a distinctly modern quest that rests on historical assumptions. The earthly Jesus, on the other hand, is the object of primitive Christian faith whose interest lay not in preserving the memory of Jesus of Nazareth, but rather in

\(^1\) Ibid., pp. 209-239 passim. Consider, e.g., his statements at pp. 213ff. “Compared with Avatar beliefs, Christian faith in the Incarnation is not simply guaranteed by birth but by death, by the whole of human life, and this makes for its distinctiveness... The canonical New Testament, and this was doubtless one reason for it being established as a canon, insists on the historicity, the true birth, life and death of Jesus.” In short, according to Parrinder “…Christian faith began with Jesus as a man, and... theologies which speak of Jesus as ‘man’, normal or typical man, but not ‘a man’, a historical individual, may well guarantee his divinity as an Avatar yet they appear to weaken the doctrine of Incarnation in the flesh.”

\(^2\) E.g., Kasemann notes that this type of historical realism “...has become one of the last bastions of Christianity, which now uses slogans that were originally hostile to Christianity and which understands the incarnation in a modern sense, that is, historically...” See Testament, p. 45.
discerning the significance for faith of this man called the Christ. In this formative period, christological reflection was guided by explicitly theological concerns whose discernment is necessary for its explication. It is clear, therefore, that Parrinder's comparative study suffers from a lack of critical depth. In consequence of his tendency to impose modern, specifically historical assumptions onto the primitive Christian situation, he oversimplifies the nature of its christological reflection and obscures the unique assumptions upon which it is founded.

In short, the imposition of Parrinder's theological agenda on his approach to the material precluded the achievement of an adequate critical basis on which to compare the concepts of avatāra and incarnation. He was able neither to achieve an unbiased understanding of the Indian notion of avatāra in its own terms nor to penetrate to the fundamental paradigms of the

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1 As discussed above at chapter 4, pp. 169ff., the origin of christology lies in a confessional response to the act of God in Jesus, an elaboration of the faith that sees him as the one in whom God has acted redemptively. See Fuller, Foundations, p. 15.

2 Specifically, as we have attempted to show, it was the soteriological significance attributed to Jesus which, more than any other element, conditioned christological thought in primitive Christianity, including its conception of his nature. This can be illustrated by kenotic thought itself. As discussed above at chapter 3, pp. 113ff., the notion of kenosis originated in the attempt to understand the salvific death of Jesus as the culmination of a process of self-emptying, or obedient self-abasement, which is extended backwards from the humiliation of the cross to the glory of the preexistent Christ. Thus, the emphasis in this christological model on the humility and lowliness of the incarnate Christ derives in the first instance from its conception of God's soteriological activity in Jesus and represents an attempt to understand and preserve the significance of the cross as a soteriological event.
respective notions of incarnation; that is, he failed to adequately discern the assumptions on which they are founded and which determine their scope and content. While we have no intention of challenging the legitimacy of Parrinder's theological endeavor, providing its orientation and concerns are made explicit, it clearly cannot be allowed to substitute for critical study undertaken from the perspective of the history of religions whose purpose is not to evaluate and rank respective religious traditions or individual phenomena, but rather to understand their irreducible natures as expressions of humankind's religious experience and their mutual relations. Consequently, the methodological approach to the notions of avatāra and incarnation in the Bhagavadgītā and in John applied in this study has been formulated in an attempt to avoid the problems discussed above and to achieve a critical and unbiased basis for comparison. First, it is obvious that our consideration of these respective notions of incarnation has encompassed a wealth of religious phenomena ranging from the metaphysical speculations of the Upaniṣads to the enthusiastic Christian prophecy of the Johannine community. The complexities of incarnation belief in both the Gītā and in John, however, have not been introduced for their own sake; rather, their introduction reflects the underlying assumption of our approach: both the Bhagavadgītā and the Fourth Gospel represent separate and self-consistent paradigms that must be understood in their own terms before any valid
comparisons can be made between concepts such as incarnation that appear in both.\footnote{I.e., as discussed in chapter 1, our approach has been modeled on Thomas Kuhn’s paradigm analysis as explicated in \textit{The Structure of Scientific Revolutions}.} Second, this approach reflects an attempt to pass beyond description to a consideration of the fundamental paradigms of the Gītā and John’s Gospel and of the underlying assumptions that determine the meaning of their respective notions of incarnation. In consequence, we have attempted to explicate these concepts exclusively within their respective religio-cultural contexts. This means, for example, that the nature of Kṛṣṇa in the Bhagavadgītā has been considered within the context of the metaphysical framework of the poem, specifically in relation to its Sāmkhyān-based cosmology and to the role of the divine māyā in creation. Again, the nature of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel has been considered within the context of the shifting paradigm commitments of the prophetic community that underlie the religious thought of the Gospel.

This methodological approach has afforded us a fresh perspective on incarnation in both the Bhagavadgītā and in the Gospel of John. It should not be surprising, therefore, that the results of our study have differed, at times substantially, from those of Parrinder’s and, thus, that they suggest a different comparative relationship between the notions of avatāra and incarnation as reflected in these two documents. In the following discussion, therefore, we will challenge Parrinder’s general conclusions on the basis of our previous
analysis. First, as we have seen, Parrinder suggests that the nature of the avatāra event in classical Indian thought can be characterized as a docetic-tending theophany in which any realistic relationship to humanity is, at best, obscured. In stark contrast, the nature of the incarnation in Christian thought can be characterized by the realistic emphasis of kenotic christology. We will attempt to show that these characterizations break down vis-à-vis a critical analysis of incarnation in the Bhagavadgītā and in the Fourth Gospel and, thus, that the comparative natures of avatāra and Christian incarnation cannot be characterized on the basis of a polarity between theophany and kenotic incarnation. Quite the contrary, there is a substantial agreement between the notions of incarnation in these two documents. They

1 It should again be pointed out that the results of our study have differed from Parrinder's partially because we have focused on two specific documents, the Bhagavadgītā and the Gospel of John, whereas he has attempted a typological study of avatāra and incarnation in the two traditions. While it is not entirely fair to Parrinder to critique his general conclusions in relation to two specific documents, such a critique will be justified if it illuminates the comparative relationship of the two concepts. The underlying assumption of our critique is that if our results vitiate those of Parrinder, then a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between avatāra and incarnation is called for. We have simply attempted to arrive at a more adequate understanding by means of a comparison of incarnation as it appears in two central writings of the respective traditions.

2 See Avatar, pp. 226ff.

3 Parrinder's characterization of the Christian notion of incarnation as kenotic is discussed at Ibid., pp. 209-222 passim, and succinctly stated at p. 279 "The Incarnation does not appear in all forms, but only in those which are consistent with humanity, life and death. Christ 'emptied himself' and lived and died on earth, and yet at the same time he is the eternal Word 'in whom all things consist."
share a similar mythical pattern of incarnation, and within this framework both express a notion of incarnation that is realistic yet non-kenotic. This situation indicates, we will suggest, that the question of the comparative natures of avatāra and incarnation in the Gītā and in the Fourth Gospel cannot be adequately resolved at the descriptive level, and that the fundamental differences between them lie in the assumptions on which their respective notions of incarnation are based. The clearest differences between avatāra theory and Christian incarnation belief concern the soteriological significance attributed to the incarnation event. Parrinder clearly recognizes this point and suggests, following Rudolf Otto, that while the Indian avatāras are conceived as mediators, Jesus actually became a propitiation for the sin of humankind.¹ We will argue, however, that while Parrinder has in this instance correctly identified one of the characteristic differences between avatāra and incarnation, he fails to exploit its full significance. We will attempt to show that the assumptions underlying the notions of incarnation in the Gītā and in John are intimately bound up with the soteriological paradigms of the respective documents. In consequence, the fundamental differences between avatāra and incarnation derive from their varying assessment of the soteriological significance of the incarnation event and its influence on the portrayal of the incarnate savior.

¹ Ibid., pp. 118, 237f. See Otto's India's Religion of Grace, p. 105f.
Avatāra and Incarnation: Basic Pattern and conception

That the notions of incarnation in the Bhagavadgītā and in the Gospel of John can be compared at all reflects the fact that the incarnation pattern on which they base their respective notions is similar. Both the Gitā and John, that is, develop their concept of incarnation on the basis of a mythical pattern of the descent-ascent of a preexistent, divine being. In the Indian tradition the first half of this pattern—the preexistence and incarnation of the deity—is reflected in the sanskrit term avatāra. This term, which is formed from the combination of the root tr, meaning to cross over or attain, with the verbal prefix ava-, meaning down or off, means to descend or come down, and is especially applied in classical Indian thought to the descent from heaven to earth of divine beings who become incarnate in finite form.¹ The term itself is relatively late and, indeed, does not appear in the Bhagavadgītā.² It is, however, in the Gitā that the concept of Krṣṇa as a descent of the supreme first appears in fully developed form and, thus, becomes the prototype for the elaboration of avatāra theory in the later theistic tradition.³ At Bhagavadgītā 4.5-8 Krṣṇa

¹ See Monier Williams, A Sanskrit-English Dictionary, p. 90. For a fuller discussion of the origins of avatāra theory in Hindu religious thought, see above chapter 3, pp. 61ff.

² It does not occur in the classical Upaniṣads, and occurs only infrequently in later Upaniṣads. See G.A. Jacob, Concordance to the Principal Upanishads and Bhagavadgītā, p. 117.

³ See Farquhar, Outline, p. 87.
makes the classical statement of avatāra theory that includes reference to his preexistence, incarnation, and soteriological activity.

...I have known many past births, and so have you, Arjuna. I remember them all, while you do not, enemy-burner. Although indeed I am unborn and imperishable, although I am the lord of the creatures, I do resort to nature, which is mine, and take on birth by my own wizardry. For whenever the Law languishes, Bhārata, and lawlessness flourishes, I create myself. I take on existence from eon to eon, for the rescue of the good and the destruction of the evil, in order to reestablish the Law.¹

Both the birth and death, or departure, of Kṛṣṇa are reported in the larger context of the Mahābhārata of which the Gitā represents but one short episode.² Book one, for example, reports Kṛṣṇa's birth to Devaki and Vasudeva

¹ Indeed, this passage contains in germ the completely formulated doctrine of avatāra theory. First, while there is no discussion in the poem of the degree to which the Kṛṣṇa avatāra is the manifestation of God, traditional belief holds that Kṛṣṇa in the Gitā is a complete descent (pūrnāvatāra) of God, not a partial one (aṁśāvatāra), (see, e.g. Robert W. Stevenson, "The Concept of Avatāra in Ancient and Modern Commentaries on the Bhagavadgitā," p. 58). Second, this passage expresses the doctrine of repeated avatāras of Kṛṣṇa, and these descents are distributed between eons, occurring whenever the need arises. Finally, Kṛṣṇa fulfills a specific soteriological purpose. The primary purpose of his descent is expressed at Gitā 4.7. 'to re-establish the dharma, rescue the good and destroy the evil'. This purpose reflects the general understanding of avatāra as a movement of grace from God to humankind. For a fuller discussion see above chapter 3, pp. 61ff.

² It is certainly not unusual that the Gitā assume rather than report the birth and death of Kṛṣṇa. As we have seen, it fulfills a specific purpose in its epic context. Specifically, inserted at the dramatic apogee of the epic when war has
of the Vrishni tribe. "Visnu himself, who is worshipped by all the worlds, was born of Devakī and Vasudeva, for the sake of the three worlds. He who is without birth and death, the splendid creator of the universe, the Lord and invisible cause of all, the unchanging and all-pervading soul, the centre round which everything moves...that originator of all beings 'appeared' in the family of the Andhaka-Vrishnis for the increase of right."¹ Again, the death of Kṛṣṇa is reported in the later portions of the epic. After the cessation of all hostilities and the death of most of his comrades, Kṛṣṇa wandered in a forest practicing yoga. One day, while engaged in mediation, a hunter named Jaras² mistook Kṛṣṇa for a deer and shot him in the heel.³ Approaching to secure his prey, Jaras saw a man with many arms, dressed in a yellow robe, and rapt in meditation. He fell at his feet in contrition, but Kṛṣṇa comforted him and immediately ascended to the heavens filling all the world with his glory.⁴

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¹ Mahābhārata 1.58, 51; 59.83.
² i.e., old age.
³ His only vulnerable spot. Kṛṣṇa had once entertained a sage but had neglected to wipe bits of food from his feet. In anger, the sage declared that all of Kṛṣṇa's body would be inviolable except his feet.
⁴ Mahābhārata 16.4.
While it is certainly possible to inquire into the possibility that these birth and death narratives reflect the historical memory of the life of Kṛṣṇa, such an inquiry lies beyond the interests of this study. Their significance for our concerns lies in the fact that they reflect and reinforce the mythical pattern of descent-ascent. In sum, then, given its intimate relationship to the larger mythical context of the Mahābhārata and, especially, its proto-typical relationship to the subsequent tradition of avatāra theory in Indian thought, it is clear that the incarnation event in the Bhagavadgītā is conceived on the basis of a mythical pattern of full incarnation that includes preexistence, incarnation, soteriological activity, and ascent.

Again, as we have seen, the literature of the New Testament reflects several layers of interpretation and, correspondingly, a progression of christological patterns that culminates in the incarnation christology that underlies its theologies and that became normative for the church at large in the post-apostolic era.¹ According to Fuller, this pattern resulted from the attempt by Christian missionaries to adapt their message to the Hellenistic world in which the search for redemption was centered on deliverance from the cosmic powers that enslaved humankind. In response to this situation, they appropriated a christological pattern that affirmed the preexistence and incarnation of the redeemer who descended into the realm of the human

¹ See Fuller, Foundations, p. 246. For a fuller discussion of the incarnation pattern underlying the Fourth Gospel see above chapter 4, pp. 169ff.
situation at the incarnation, defeated the cosmic powers on their own ground, and reascended.\(^1\)

This incarnation pattern is given classical New Testament expression in the Fourth Gospel. The christological hymn that forms the basis for John’s prologue opens with a statement of the preexistence of the redeemer and describes the divine mode of being of the Logos who shares the reality of God and yet remains distinct from God. Indeed, John goes well beyond the christology of Phil. 2:6 in asserting that the Logos enjoyed this state ‘in the beginning’; that is, the preexistence of the Logos is prior to creation itself.\(^2\) Again, at John 1:14, the incarnation is expressed in clear terms: the Logos became flesh. As noted above, this is a distinctly Christian formulation that focuses, not on the veiling of the descending deity as in Hellenistic epiphany accounts, but rather on the incarnation as the medium of revelation.\(^3\) Finally, while the prologue itself does not present the anabasis, or ascent, of the redeemer, it is clearly assumed and is presented in the body of the Gospel as the crowning conclusion of the Son’s mission that occurs on the cross.\(^4\) In the same way that the prologue assumes the ascent, the body of the Gospel refers to the preexistence and incarnation of the Logos. For example, throughout the Gospel Jesus is identified with the heavenly realm and described as the

\(^1\) Ibid., p. 245.

\(^2\) Ibid., pp. 225ff.

\(^3\) So Kasemann, “Structure and Purpose,” p. 120.

\(^4\) Fuller, Foundations, p. 227. For the anabasis of Jesus in John see especially 12.23; 13.1; 17.1.
stranger par excellence who is exiled in this world. Again, John insists at 3.13 that the only one to ascend to heaven is he who has first descended, the Son of Man. Clearly the mythical pattern of the Hellenistic Christ myth, the descent-ascent of the divine redeemer, underlies the christological expression of the Fourth Gospel and provides the framework for its narrative development.

The basis, then, for a comparison of avatāra and incarnation in the Bhagavadgītā and in the Gospel of John lies in the fact that they reflect a similar mythical pattern of incarnation that includes preexistence, incarnation, soteriological activity, and ascent. More noteworthy, however, are the results of the comparison itself that reveal a general conception of the incarnate savior in the two writings that is strikingly similar. Both the Gītā and John, that is to say, express a conception of incarnation that is realistic yet, to use Christian terminology, non-kenotic. In neither instance does the act of incarnation involve setting aside the divine reality and prerogatives. This similar portrayal of the incarnation can be illustrated by a summary of their respective positions.

If one follows Rāmānuja’s reading of the Bhagavadgītā, Arjuna inquires concerning the reality of Kṛṣṇa’s incarnations already at chapter four. That is to say, having been previously informed that rebirth stretches back endlessly in time for everyone and that Kṛṣṇa himself is the Supreme Person,

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1 See John 3.13; 6.33ff., 51; 7.28ff.; 8.14, 23, 42.

2 See Śrī Bhagavad-Gītā with Śrī Rāmānujiachārya’s Visishtādvaita-Commentary, pp. 133ff.
Arjuna’s inquiry into Kṛṣṇa’s previous births at Gitā 4.4 can only refer to the nature of his divine incarnations. Specifically, he questions whether Kṛṣṇa’s avatāras are real or merely docetic-illusory like magic—since God is not subject to the karman-determined births of humankind. If real, what is the manner of his birth, the nature of his body, and the purpose for which he has become incarnate?¹ As we have seen, Rāmānuja affirms the reality of the Kṛṣṇa avatāra on the basis of the parallel established at Gitā 4.5 between the incarnations of Arjuna and those of Kṛṣṇa.² At chapter three above, we attempted to found this realism on two fundamental assumptions underlying the Gitā’s notion of avatāra. First, as in the Mahābhārata at large, Kṛṣṇa in the Gitā is portrayed not only as God incarnate, but also as a hero of the Great Bhārata war, the charioteer and advisor of Arjuna, whose humanity is clearly assumed. More significantly, however, the Gitā establishes a parallel between the divine acts of cosmogony and incarnation; thus, the avatāra event, as a special creative act of God, shares both the creative process and the irreducible reality of the macrocosmic creation.

The Bhagavadgītā’s narrative treatment of Kṛṣṇa certainly engenders a sense of realistic incarnation. As in the Mahābhārata at large, Kṛṣṇa in the Gitā is portrayed as a hero of the Bhārata war, and in this role it is simply assumed that he participates in the full dynamic of human life: he eats, drinks,

¹ Ibid., p. 137. Van Buitenen points out that since the origination of every being is due to karman, the birth of God, who is not subject to karmic influence, might be thought of as an illusion. Rāmānuja on the Bhagavadgītā, p. 77, n. 164.

² Ibid., p. 138. For a fuller discussion see above chapter 3, pp. 73ff.
sleeps, sports, and is even mistaken by Arjuna for a mere comrade. Indeed, in
the aftermath of Arjuna's graciously accorded vision of Kṛṣṇa in his universal
form, he requests Kṛṣṇa's indulgence for having treated him as a mere human: "If, thinking you friend, I have too boldly cried, 'Yādava! Kṛṣṇa! Come
here, my good friend! Not knowing of this your magnificence, out of absence
of mind or sheer affection, if perchance I have slighted you—merely in jest—in
matters of sport, bed, seating, or meal, in privacy, Acyuta, or before others—I
ask your indulgence, immeasurable One!"¹

More importantly, at chapter three above we argued that the nature of
Kṛṣṇa in the Bhagavadgītā must be discussed in the context of the poem's
cosmological speculations, because the Gītā presents the avatāra event as a
microcosmic parallel to the creation of the universe. In the conception of the
Bhagavadgītā, therefore, the avatāra event, as a special creative act of God,
shares both the creative process and the reality of the macrocosmic creation.
As we have seen, the Gītā’s cosmology is based on an early form of Sāmkhyā
speculation that draws the clearest possible distinction between the two orders
of reality: prakṛti and puruṣa.² Prakṛti is the metaphysical substratum of the
material universe that is in a perpetual state of flux, without beginning and
without end. It is the eternal womb from which evolves all material nature.³

¹ Gītā 11.41-42.

² See, e.g., Lamotte, Notes, pp. 33f., Deussen, Der Gesang des Heiligen, p. XVII.,
and Edgerton, The Bhagavad Gītā, p. 166f. For a fuller discussion see above
chapter 3, pp. 80ff.

³ See, for example, Gītā 14.3.
Puruṣa, on the other hand, is immutable and unchanging, existing beyond time, space, and causation.\textsuperscript{1} It is the all pervading principle of self that, though omnipresent, remains untouched by any qualities of the body in which it manifests itself.\textsuperscript{2} Prakṛti and puruṣa in Śāmkhya-style speculation are totally distinct, independent, and eternal principles, and from their union issues the universe as we know it. In distinction from the atheistic system of classical Śāmkhya in which the dualism between prakṛti and puruṣa is ultimate, however, the Bhagavadgitā adapts its cosmology to a theistic perspective in which the antagonism of these irreconcilable principles is understood to operate only at the cosmological level. Ultimately, both prakṛti and puruṣa are referred to the transcendent unity of God in which they are grounded.\textsuperscript{3} In consequence of this theistic perspective in which the collective universe of material nature and spirit originates in God, the principle conceptions of cosmogony in the poem are as well referred to Kṛṣṇa’s will and agency. This is clearly stated at Gitā 14.3–4 where Kṛṣṇa presents himself as the ‘father who bestows the fruit’; that is, the independent source of all life whose seed is nurtured in the womb of Brahman, here

\textsuperscript{1} Zaehner, \textit{The Bhagavad-Gitā}, p. 140.

\textsuperscript{2} Dasgupta, \textit{History}, p. 464.

\textsuperscript{3} See, e.g., Gitā 7.4–6 where the two orders of reality are referred to as the ‘natures’ of God. In this passage the aparā prakṛti, or lower nature, is said to consist of certain Śāmkhya categories of material nature: the three cognitive faculties—buddhi, ahamkāra, and manas—plus the five material elements of the universe—earth, water, fire, wind, and ether. God also possesses a higher nature, or parā prakṛti, which consists of the embodied puruṣas; that is, the collective universe of material nature and spirit.
identified with material nature, from which all creatures subsequently emerge.¹

The parallelism in the Bhagavadgītā between the micro- and macrocosmic creations is indicated by the fact that this passage, which attributes both the source and agency of creation to God alone, amplifies not only the statement of macrocosmic creation at Gitā 9.8, but as well the classical statement of avatāra doctrine at 4.6. Both passages express the same idea; that is, that by consorting with or subduing his own material nature, as interpreted at 14.3-4, Kṛṣṇa produces all beings.² At Gitā 9.8, Kṛṣṇa states that "Subduing my own material Nature ever again I emanate this whole host of beings...", and at 4.6 states that "...by my creative energy I consort with Nature—which is mine— and come to be in time."³ In consequence of this parallel conception, it is clear that the question concerning the reality of Kṛṣṇa's incarnations in the Gitā is synonymous with that concerning the reality of the cosmos itself. An adequate response to this question, therefore, requires a consideration both of the nature and role of the divine māyā, or creative energy, in the

¹ For a fuller discussion see above chapter 3, pp. 80ff.

² The term employed at Gitā 4.6 is adhiśṭhāya: to consort with, govern, etc. Zaehner cites various interpretations of the term and parallel usages from the Upaniṣads. The term employed at 9.8 is avaṣṭabhya, although one manuscript reads adhiśṭhāya. As noted by Zaehner, the underlying idea is the same at both verses, and both show affinities to the seed-womb imagery used at 14.3. See Zaehner, The Bhagavad-Gītā, ad loc.

³ Translations by Zaehner, The Bhagavad-Gītā, ad loc.
process of creation, and of the nature of prakṛti itself, the metaphysical substratum from which all beings arise.

It was noted above that, in consequence of western scholarship's early preoccupation with Saṅkara's Vedāntic philosophy, the Sanskrit term māyā has practically entered the English language in the sense of world illusion. It has become clear, however, that the appearance of the Bhagavadgitā antedated by several centuries this Vedāntic conception of māyā, and that its conception reflects an earlier stage of development in which the term retains its Vedic meanings.\(^1\) In its fundamental sense, māyā in the Bhagavadgitā reflects its Rgvedic conception as creative power and, thus, refers to the power of God by which the creation is effected.\(^2\) In this context, māyā can even be understood as synonymous with material nature itself. For example, at Gitā 7.14.15 and 18.61, māyā is described as synonymous with the three guṇas- sattva, rajas, and tamas- which together constitute and characterize the material universe. It is true that the Gitā knows māyā as a divine power that deludes one and conceals one's own essential self and God.\(^3\) For example, the passage at Gitā 7.12-15 represents māyā not only as a creative power, but also as an uncanny power or a divine illusion that, through the very constituents of prakṛti, blinds

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\(^3\) See, e.g., Zaehner, *The Bhagavad-Gitā*, p. 278.
humankind to the true nature of reality.¹ Edgerton correctly notes, however, that the illusion referred to in this passage consists simply in the deluded misconception of a fundamental union or blending of prakṛti and puruṣa in the phenomenal world. The wise individual should certainly strive to recognize the eternal distinction between nature and spirit and to transcend the guṇas in the achievement of release; but this distinction in no way implies the nonexistence of prakṛti.² In short, then, the Bhagavadgītā preserves the ambiguous conception of māyā in the Vedic tradition as both creative and deceitful, divine and demonic. Māyā as material nature is divine in that it is dependent on God, the expression of God's creative power, and demonic in that it serves at times to bewilder, to confuse, and, thus, to stand between God and humankind. It is important to note, however, that in neither instance does the Bhagavadgītā contemplate the notion of māyā as illusory or magical creation. Consequently, when Kṛṣṇa declares at 4.6 that he consorts with his material nature by means of his māyā in order to take on existence, the term must be understood in reference to his creative power, and not to the power of illusory creation.

Again, as we have seen, the Bhagavadgītā's conception of material nature itself was formulated on the basis of early Sāmkhya cosmological speculations that exhibited realist tendencies and a marked interest in the

¹ Ibid., p. 249.
material universe and psychology. Consequently, prakṛti in the Bhagavadgītā must be understood in reference to the metaphysical substratum of the material universe, an eternal, independent principle that is dualistically opposed to puruṣa. Thus, while the manifest nature that evolves from prakṛti through the three guṇas and the categories of cognitive and material nature is contingent and cyclical, it nevertheless possesses irreducible reality in the Sāṃkhyan system. According to the Gitā, then, by subduing or consorting with this material nature, Kṛṣṇa as avatāra realistically assumes human form.

To summarize, when considered within the context of the religio-philosophical paradigm of the Bhagavadgītā, the parallel conception of the micro- and macrocosmic creative acts of God precludes a docetic interpretation of the avatāra event. The fundamental meaning of the divine māyā by which these acts are effected in the Gitā is the creative power of God, and the resulting creation is, again, irreducibly real. In this context it is clear that the realism of the incarnation event in the Bhagavadgītā is beyond question. This

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1 See, e.g., Lamotte, Notes, pp. 33f.

2 At Gitā 8.18-21, both prakṛti and puruṣa are referred to as avyakta, or unmanifest. In reference to prakṛti, the lower unmanifest, avyakta signifies its primordial state, the undifferentiated primal nature of classical Sāṃkhya. In distinction from all that evolves from it, prakṛti is uncaused, eternal, all-pervasive, inactive, one, relying on itself alone, without characteristics or parts, and independent. While it shares these qualities with the puruṣas, the lower unmanifest is distinguished from the order of spirit in that it is productive and dynamic. Its eternity is one of endless duration, not of timeless and unchanging being. Prakṛti, however, remains constant under all the manifestations that proceed from it. See Zaehner, The Bhagavad-Gītā, p. 266f., and above chapter 3, pp. 80ff.
is not to imply, however, that one should not question the degree to which Kṛṣṇa assumes in his incarnations the conditions and limitations of human existence. Indeed, as we have seen, the act of incarnation in the Gitā in no way requires a limitation of deity, or the setting aside of the divine prerogatives, such as that assumed in Christian kenotic theory. If the incarnation of Kṛṣṇa in the Bhagavadgitā is realistic, it is no less an epiphany of his divine characteristics. Throughout the Gitā Kṛṣṇa’s divine freedom, omniscience, and omnipotence are revealed even in his incarnate state.

Kṛṣṇa’s divine freedom, for example, is given expression in the fact that, in distinction from contingent human birth that is determined by the binding characteristics of the guṇas and the effects of karman, Kṛṣṇa takes on existence by his own free will, whenever the need arises. Otherwise stated, there is no inexorable law of karman with determining power over his existence. Kṛṣṇa is neither bound nor limited by his works, which he undertakes without attachment and for the welfare of the world. “Actions do not stick to me,” he asserts, “for I have no yearning for the fruits of my actions...”. In this, as in other aspects, the freedom of the divine avatāra participates in the freedom of the transcendent God who, though changeless in timeless essence, is perpetually active, creating and sustaining the worlds. “I have no task at all to accomplish in these three worlds, Pārtha. I have nothing to obtain that I do not have already. Yet I move in action. If I were

1 Gitā 4.6.

not to move in action, untiringly, at all times, Pārtha, people all around would follow my lead. These people would collapse if I did not act; I would be the author of miscegenation; I would assassinate these creatures."¹

Again, Kṛṣṇa explicitly claims divine omniscience at Gītā 7.24-26. In this passage, Kṛṣṇa contrasts the deluded misconception of his nature asserted by the unenlightened with his true, transcendent being. To the unenlightened, deluded by the māyā of material nature, Kṛṣṇa is conceived as any other mortal who comes to be and passes away in time. Clouded by this illusion, they do not recognize Kṛṣṇa's transcendent being that is unborn, eternal, and incomparable. At the conclusion of this passage, in stark contrast to the misguided apprehensions of the ignorant, Kṛṣṇa claims divine omniscience. "Since they are clouded by the illusion of my yoga, I am opaque to all, and the muddled world does not recognize me as unborn and immortal. Arjuna, I know the creatures of past, present, and future, but no one knows me."²

Finally, Kṛṣṇa's transfiguration, which is recounted at chapter eleven, shows that in his incarnate state he possesses not only the divine freedom and knowledge, but power as well. This chapter represents the climax of the Bhagavadgītā in which Kṛṣṇa reveals himself in all of his terrifying majesty as the Unending Lord God, the repose of the world, what is and is not and what

¹ Gītā 3.22-24.

² Kṛṣṇa's omniscience is also attested, for example, by his revelations throughout the Gītā that are presented as the self-revelation of the transcendent God-head. For a fuller discussion see above chapter 3, pp. 105ff.
is beyond it.\footnote{\textit{Gitā} 11.37.} In response to a request from Arjuna, Kṛṣṇa here transforms himself by means of his power of yoga and reveals his transcendent form in which the universe in all its diversity can be perceived—its origin and dissolution, all-consuming time, wrecker of the world’s destruction.²

Through our analysis of the Bhagavadgītā to this point we have attempted to show, in sum, that the avatāra event is presented as a realistic, albeit non-kenotic, act of incarnation. As we have seen, the Gitā’s notion of avatāra shares with the Christian tradition a mythical pattern of incarnation that includes preexistence, incarnation, soteriological activity, and ascent. Again, when considered within the religio-cultural context that actually determines its meaning, the Gitā’s parallel conception of the micro- and macrocosmic creative acts of God precludes a docetic interpretation of the avatāra event. From this perspective it is clear that Parrinder’s categorization of the Indian notion of avatāra as theophany cannot be applied to the thought of the Bhagavadgītā. While it is true that its notion of avatāra does not share the emphases of Christian kenotic theory, it is also true that to class it as a theophany purely on this basis obscures the realistic aspects of avatāra theory given expression in the Gitā.

The general structure of the Fourth Gospel’s christology was determined by the Hellenistic Christ myth described above. Nevertheless it is clear that the Evangelist adapted this incarnation pattern in such a way as to express a

\footnote{\textit{Gitā} 11.13.}
christological perspective that varies considerably from the general Christian view. Indeed, as we argued above at chapter four, the uniqueness of the Evangelist's thought is nowhere more evident than in the fact that he either did not know or chose not to employ the notion of kenosis for the elaboration of his christology.¹ In contrast to Paul, for example, he does not present the act of incarnation as the voluntary abandonment of all divine prerogatives.² In consequence, John does not portray the earthly life of Jesus in terms of lowliness, nor his crucifixion as the consummation of a life of humiliation that was reversed by the power of resurrection. If in the Pauline view the historical ministry was a time of lowliness and the life-creating power of Jesus was not released until his resurrection, the Johannine Jesus, like the Father, has life in himself from the first.³

¹ See above chapter 4, pp. 177ff.

² That is, while John 1.14a makes an explicit statement of incarnation that appears to represent the christological center of the Gospel, this perspective is not followed through in John. The prologue itself continues paradoxically with the confession 'we beheld his glory,' and the coming from above rather than the becoming flesh appears to be the decisive factor in John. See e.g. Bultmann, Gospel, pp. 63, 634.; Kasemann, "Structure and Purpose," p. 155; and c.f. Phil. 2.6ff.

³ Otherwise stated, Jesus' mission in John represents the eschatological event in which God's self-revelation occurs and in which humankind is placed before the possibility of life or death. But this also indicates that John has radicalized the eschatological character of the incarnation. This means, first, that he has given up the notion of a future consummation of God's eschatological activity and has collapsed its functions of life giving and judgment onto Jesus, and, second, that Jesus actually embodies this salvation in himself. See, e.g., Bultmann, Gospel, p. 634; above chapter 4, pp. 238ff; and c.f. Phil. 2.6 ff.; II Cor. 8.9; Rom. 8.3.
Again, if one accepts Kasemann's critique, even Bultmann's interpretation of John's christology, which remains within the orbit of kenotic theory, fails to fully grasp the uniqueness of the Evangelist's thought. In two significant senses, as we have seen, Bultmann's dialectical manner of presenting the Johannine Jesus exhibits affinities with kenotic christology.\(^1\) First, on Bultmann's view the Evangelist has stripped his christology of any mythological meaning by interpreting its mythological elements through a paradoxical notion of revelation. Interpreted in this way they no longer depict the revealer as a preexistent divine being who descended into the human realm for soteriological purposes, but elaborate the notion of revelation that takes place through his word.\(^2\) In John, that is, the notion of preexistence and the portrayal of Jesus as a divine man capable of both prescience and the performance of miraculous signs illustrate and confirm the Gospel's claim to revelation: in this man God is encountered.\(^3\) Thus, on Bultmann's interpretation, John's notion of incarnation allows nothing to become visible beyond the offense of revelation: the Logos has appeared in an ordinary mortal, Jesus of Nazareth, whose origins and family are known and whose life ends in death. Thus, insofar as he claims to be God's revealer, he does so in his true humanity. The glory of this Jesus is veiled in the sense that it is present only paradoxically and can be seen neither alongside nor through

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\(^1\) See above chapter 4, pp. 187ff.

\(^2\) See Gospel, pp. 13 n. 1, 143 n. 1.; 145ff., 443ff. See also Theology, p. 62.

\(^3\) Gospel, pp. 102 n. 1, 119, 253ff.
his humanity, but precisely and exclusively in his humanity. In critique of this view, however, Kasemann has shown that the attempt to found a kenotic-like interpretation of incarnation in John on the dialectic of revelation can only be sustained by abstracting from the Gospel's presentation of Jesus' semeia as epiphany scenes in which his heavenly glory is revealed. In contrast, the Gospel's tendency to present only the claim of revelation reflects its critique of a craving after miracles and underscores its fundamental belief that no gift, no knowledge, can be substituted for the revealer himself who not only conveys but actually embodies the salvation of humankind. In a second sense, Bultmann argues that the glory of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel is veiled by the Evangelist's interpretation of glorification. On his view John employed a paradoxical concept of the eschatological event to interpret the life of Jesus in light of its end that was at the same time its fulfillment. Thus, only in its unity with the passion, the event which unifies past and future in the eschatological now, could the work of Jesus be understood as eschatological. Again, however, Kasemann has argued that this interpretation strains the thought of the Evangelist who characteristically portrays Jesus' passion as a

1 Ibid., p. 63.


3 See e.g., Gospel, pp. 493, 611. This aspect of Bultmann's interpretation is discussed more fully above at chapter 4, pp. 186ff.
departure, or a return to the Father and to the glory of preexistence, and not as an event marking his exaltation to a glorified state.¹

The lack of an explicit notion of kenosis underlying Johannine christology and the problems associated with Bultmann’s dialectical interpretation clearly indicate that while the incarnation itself cannot be questioned in the Fourth Gospel, one can and should question the characteristic emphasis placed on the notion by the Evangelist and the extent to which it requires the entry into a totally human life. This question was addressed above at chapter four where we attempted to build on the christological studies of Kasemann to show that the notion of incarnation in John, like that of the Bhagavadgītā, is realistic yet non-kenotic.

First, we suggested that, within limits, Kasemann’s explication of Johannine christology against the background of an enthusiastic prophecy accurately depicts the situation and fundamental assumptions of the Gospel.² Specifically, John’s christology is to be attributed to an early and independent enthusiastic tradition whose perspective, despite being limited and qualified in

¹ See, e.g., Testament, pp. 17ff., above chapter 4, pp. 211ff.

² As we have seen, the issue of the social setting reflected in the Fourth Gospel has become prominent in recent Johannine scholarship and, significantly, many studies tend to confirm Kasemann’s attribution of the Gospel’s origins to an enthusiastic prophetic community. The evidence, cited above, that links John to Christian prophecy can be grouped into three categories: the prophetic characterization of central figures in John, indications in the Gospel of prophetic activity in the Johannine community, and indications of a charismatic authority structure in the community. The question of the prophetic origins of the Fourth Gospel is discussed at chapter 4, pp. 234ff.
the Gospel, continues to provide its fundamental theological orientation. As we have seen, the perspective of such an enthusiastic community is characterized by the continuing experience of the exalted Lord's presence in the utterances of Christian prophets and, thus, by a christological focus on the word of the redeemer as the eschatological event in which salvation is encountered as a present and abiding reality. In consequence, there is a distinct tendency to elaborate a christology on the basis of realized eschatology and to blend the earthly Jesus and the exalted Lord into the unified figure of the heavenly revealer. Thus conceived, it is clear that the

1 See above chapter 4, pp. 234ff.

2 There is significant evidence to indicate the presence in the Johannine community of enthusiastic prophets who continued the living voice of Jesus in their prophetic pronouncements. The characterization of the Paraclete as the Spirit of prophecy itself indicates the activity of Christian prophets; the speech form Ego Eimi, which is prominent in the Gospel, clearly originated among Christian prophets and was used to make pronouncements in the name of Jesus; finally, the prophetic sending formula cited at John 13.20 endowed the prophets with the authority to continue the living voice of Jesus in the community. Again, as we have seen, Jesus' words in John are presented as eschatological events which manifest God's very reality and power. They have a cleansing effect, but even more, according to 6.63 and 15.3, they are spirit and life. Thus, hearing them and believing is a matter of life and death. They not only effect a division between those who accept and those who reject them, but at 12.48 actually contain the power of judgment on the latter. See, e.g., chapter 4, pp. 234ff.

3 In an enthusiastic community whose prophetic spokespersons continue the living voice of Jesus, that is, distinctions between the sayings of the earthly Jesus and those of the exalted Lord are blurred and often nonexistent. Thus, even traditional sayings pronounced in the prophetic community were attributed to the exalted Lord. In consequence, there is a tendency to assimilate the earthly Jesus to the risen Lord, and to speak of him only in terms of his exalted state as the one in whom salvation is continually present. See above chapter 4, pp. 234ff.
mission of the incarnate revealer cannot be presented as a passage from humiliation to exaltation, lowliness to glory, by way of the cross, but rather as the earthly sojourn of the one who is always and everywhere one with the Father.

It was noted above that the perspective of enthusiastic Christian prophecy with its characteristic emphasis on the eschatological word is reflected especially in the sayings tradition incorporated into the Gospel by the Evangelist. In the sayings tradition, as in the Gospel of Thomas, for example, Jesus is portrayed not as a suffering and dying messiah, but as a heavenly revealer in whom salvation has become a present reality.\(^1\) We also argued, however, that despite the fact that the sayings tradition has been integrated in the Gospel with the kerygma of the cross and resurrection, its underlying assumptions continue to condition the thought of the Evangelist. This is evidenced by the fact that the prophetic focus on the word of Jesus continues to underlie much of his theological reflection, including soteriology, eschatology, sacramentology, and ecclesiology.\(^2\)


\(^2\) John presents Jesus' words as spirit and life and, in consequence, knows no unequivocal predictions of a future parousia. Again, John's sacramental reflection focuses on the life giving words of Jesus. If, for example, the words about the bread of life and the true vine at John 6.26ff. and 15.1ff. are intended to interpret the eucharist, the symbols of bread and wine refer neither to Jesus' future coming nor to his fate of suffering. Rather, they represent his life giving words, and symbolize participation in his heavenly message. Finally, John presents the church as a community constituted solely by the friends of Jesus, i.e., by those sanctified through his word. For a fuller discussion, see above chapter 4, pp. 234ff.
importantly, however, the integration of the passion tradition into the Fourth Gospel is itself based on thoroughly prophetic assumptions. That is to say, the cross is never discussed in John as a soteriological event in itself,¹ but is included as the dramatic conclusion of the Son's mission that is itself characterized by the qualities of his eschatological word.² It is clear, therefore, that while John has integrated the theology of the sayings tradition with the tradition of the cross and resurrection, the presuppositions that underlie his thought remain squarely rooted in the prophetic orientation of the Johannine community.

The significance of this situation for John's christology lies in the fact that the eschatological word of the revealer remains the reflective focus from which his portrayal of Jesus is elaborated. Indeed, we have suggested that the assumptions of this prophetic christological model, which presents the incarnation as the earthly sojourn of the heavenly revealer who always maintains his unity with the Father, are reflected in the fundamental features of his christology as explicated by Kasemann, including his notion of

¹ John clearly attributes no soteriological significance to the cross in itself. There is in the Gospel no foundation either for the conception of Jesus' death as a sacrifice or for the notion of purification through his blood. See Koester, Introduction, p. 195.

² At John 3.15ff., and 5.19ff., for example, the works of the Father, which are accomplished by Jesus, are reduced to two: judgment and the giving of life. But it is precisely the word of revelation which contains the power of judgment and is itself spirit and life. This means that the nature of the eschatological word has been extended by John to characterize the Son's mission in its unity.
incarnation, the semeia, the cross and exaltation, and the signs of lowliness attendant to the incarnation.

First, according to Kasemann, neither a literary analysis of the prologue nor a theological analysis of the notion of sarx justifies an interpretation of John 1.14a as a statement of total incarnation. In contrast to Bultmann and others who see in 1.14a the climax of the christological hymn underlying the prologue and the center of its theology, Kasemann argues that it was composed by the Evangelist as a transitional statement linking the christological hymn to his own epilogue. As a statement of incarnation, therefore, 'the Word became flesh' at v. 14a says no more than was expressed already at v. 10a 'He was in the world' and represents a mere transitional phrase that allows the Evangelist to express his own unique emphasis at v. 14c 'we beheld his glory.' On this interpretation it is clear that for John the purpose of the incarnation lies not in the becoming flesh, but precisely in occasioning the manifestation of glory. Furthermore, according to Kasemann, this interpretation is not contradicted by the use of the term sarx at v. 14a. He argues that John's notion of flesh has been determined by the

1 See Gospel, pp. 32, 60-64. For a discussion of his interpretation of the prologue see above chapter 4, pp. 187ff.

2 "Structure," pp. 148ff. According to Kasemann, several problems preclude attributing vv. 14ff. to the christological hymn: the poor connection between vv. 12ff. and v. 14; the cessation at v. 14 of the pattern of couplets characteristic of the hymn; the shift at v. 14 to the first person plural; and finally, the attribution to a pre-Christian source of a distinctly Christian formulation of the incarnation. See above chapter 4, pp. 211ff.

3 Ibid., pp. 153ff.
dualistic thought so characteristic of the Gospel and, consequently, that its use in no way suggests a kenotic-like emphasis. In his view, John does not understand flesh as earthly reality itself that is antithetically opposed to spirit, but rather as the earthly condition of creatureliness that is characterized by its opposition to God. Thus, at v. 14a the term flesh refers specifically to the realm where the Word of God is recognized or rejected, and the becoming flesh itself amounts to entering this realm of createdness. In sum, it is clear that the notion of incarnation in John does not require the entry into a totally human life either in the sense required by kenotic theory- the voluntary abandonment of the divine prerogatives- or in the sense required by the dialectical theory of Bultmann- the paradox of a glory veiled by true humanity. In John the incarnate Logos undergoes no transformation of nature and thus does not cease to exist as a heavenly being.

Again, John's emphasis on the incarnation as the occasion for the manifestation of divine glory is reflected in his appropriation of the semeia, the tradition of miraculous signs, which are clearly presented in the Gospel as epiphany scenes in which Jesus' glory is revealed. In contrast to Bultmann, who argues that John is critical of a faith that seeks the authentication of signs and includes them in the Gospel only as a concession to human

1 Ibid., pp. 156ff.
2 Ibid., p. 158.
3 Ibid., pp. 156ff.
4 Ibid., p. 160.
weakness, Kasemann insists that the Evangelist has freely incorporated the miracles tradition into the Gospel.\textsuperscript{1} Were they included as mere concessions to human weakness it would have been unnecessary, for example, to heighten the miraculous element to the extreme or to present the miracle of the raising of Lazarus as the event that incited the passion.\textsuperscript{2} Thus, for John, the miracles are indispensable and described 'clearly and emphatically' as demonstrations of the glory of Jesus.\textsuperscript{3}

Finally, Kasemann has shown that the passion in John cannot be interpreted on the basis of the kenotic pattern of humiliation-exaltation. In his view, the passion is not presented by the Evangelist as an event that marks the reversal of a life lived in lowliness either in the kenotic sense— the depth of humiliation that is reversed only by the power of the resurrection— or in the paradoxical sense suggested by Bultmann— the event in which Jesus is

\textsuperscript{1} Bultmann bases his interpretation on the insertion at John 4.48 of a verse critical of such a signs faith: "Jesus therefore said to him, 'unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe.'" On his view, therefore, the meaning of the semeia is not contained simply in the miraculous events. They are included not as actual manifestations of the glory of Jesus which authenticate his divine status, but rather as symbolic representations of the revelation of glory that takes place throughout the whole of the historical ministry. See Gospel, pp. 119, 204-209.

\textsuperscript{2} Testament, p. 21. E.g. the healing of the official's son at chapter 4 occurs at a distance and at chapter 11 it is reported that after hearing of the death of Lazarus Jesus waited several days before journeying to Bethany for his resuscitation.

\textsuperscript{3} Ibid. On Kasemann's view, John is not critical of miraculous signs in themselves, but of a craving after miracles that would substitute the gifts of the revealer for the gift that is the revealer himself. It is the identity of Jesus as the revealer which is revealed in his miraculous signs. See "Structure," p. 161 and above chapter 4, pp. 211ff.
exalted to glory and his mission in its unity becomes eschatological. In contrast, Kasemann argues that the connection of passion with glorification in the simple yet suggestive motif of the hour precludes an interpretation of the passion as humiliation or even as exaltation beginning paradoxically in humiliation.¹ On the contrary, John can present the passion as exaltation precisely because in it the revealer leaves behind the constraints of the world and returns to the glory of his preexistence. This is evident from the fact that the Evangelist characteristically describes the passion as a departure and from the fact that the marks of lowliness generally associated with the cross in kenotic theory are lacking in John.

John's characteristic portrayal of passion as departure is reflected in the fact that his conception is governed by the verb ἄφωγον - to go away - and indicates the revealer's separation from the world and his return to the Father. This verb includes exaltation insofar as this return is at the same time the return to the glory of his preexistence. Thus, the hour of death is in a unique sense the hour of glorification precisely because in this hour Jesus leaves the world and the limitations on his glory entailed thereby.² Again, this argument is supported by the fact that the marks of lowliness generally associated with the cross in kenotic theory - obedience and humiliation - are uniquely understood in John and cannot be used to support a christology of

¹ Testament, p. 19. At John 7.30; 8.20; 12.23, 27; 13.1; 17.1 the hour refers primarily to passion. At John 2.4; 4.21, 23; 5.25, 28 however, it refers to the hour of glorification. They are connected at John 12.23; 13.1; 17.1.

humiliation. Obedience, according to Käsemann, is interpreted by the Evangelist through the notion of the unity of Father and Son to express a commitment to remain in the heavenly truth that opposes the power and deceit of the world even during the earthly sojourn.\(^1\) Thus, Jesus' obedience represents a characteristic of the triumphant Son of Man, the manifestation of his divine Lordship and glory in a world alienated from God. This means, however, that obedience and exaltation cannot be contrasted in the Fourth Gospel, nor exaltation understood as the reward for obedience. On the contrary, Jesus' obedience in John is the result of his glory and its attestation in the situation of earthly conflict.\(^2\) In similar fashion, John's notion of humiliation expresses the fact that the mission of the redeemer required his descent into the world. But this world is for him only a point of transit and, thus, humiliation simply means being in exile.\(^3\) Insofar as this descent involves limitations on his glory the humiliation of Jesus does involve features of lowliness. But these features reflect the nature of the situation into which Jesus entered and he does not thereby give up his unity with the Father.\(^4\)

It is clear that, as Käsemann has suggested, the Fourth Gospel portrays the incarnation in terms that lack any kenotic features. In consequence of his underlying prophetic assumptions, John elaborates a christology in which

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1 Ibid.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid., p. 12.

4 Ibid., p. 10. For a fuller discussion of the marks of lowliness in John see above chapter 4, pp. 211ff.
neither the act of incarnation nor the passion mark a change in the nature of the Christ, but rather mark his coming and his going. Otherwise stated, the Evangelist presents the incarnation as the earthly sojourn of the heavenly revealer who always maintains his unity with the Father and whose descent into the realm of darkness occasions the eschatological encounter with his divine glory. It must be noted, however, that on one significant point— the question of naive docetism— we have challenged the position of Kasemann. He argues, it will be remembered, that in John the glory of Jesus so transcends all temporal and spatial limits, including his flesh, that the history even of the incarnate Logos is relativized. The eschatological presence of the Christ alone is significant, and the history of his incarnation is retained in John only insofar as it accommodates the continuation of this presence. It is true that, in consequence of its underlying prophetic assumptions, John's christology exhibits a marked tendency to emphasize the glory of Jesus that seems to dominate and at times even to obscure his flesh; but, as we have argued, it is also true that, in response to a crisis precipitated by a group of radical prophets who denied the significance of the incarnation, the Evangelist has introduced a counter-emphasis on the irreducible significance of the incarnation itself.

There are significant indications, especially in the first farewell discourse, that the community of the Fourth Gospel was involved in a crisis of authority precipitated by the claims of enthusiastic prophets to direct

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1 Ibid., p. 36.
heavenly access and to works superior to those of Jesus himself.\(^1\) For this group the experience of the praesentia Christi had been distorted to signify equality of status. As Jesus' rightful successors they claimed the same kind of direct access to divine authority that he claimed, identified with the heavenly Christ over against the earthly Jesus and, thus, relegated the incarnation to the status of an insignificant prelude. In consequence, Jesus became for them a figure from the past whose activity had been transcended by the present manifestations of the spirit in the prophetic community.\(^2\)

The Evangelist clearly considered this radical perspective an aberration that threatened the primacy of the Son by reducing christology to the autonomous experience of the prophets,\(^3\) and his response to this crisis is reflected in the Gospel itself. That is to say, in an effort to curb the excesses of this enthusiastic prophecy, John has attempted to anchor the Christian experience of salvation in the history of the incarnate Logos and has thus united the meaning of this experience with the event of the incarnation.\(^4\) He accords to Jesus both spatial and temporal priority and, thus, clearly marks off the incarnation as the archetypical event, invested with the absolute primacy

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\(^1\) These claims are reflected, for example, in the Gospel's polemic against ascent mysticism at 3.13 and 13.33, and in the prophetic pronouncement at 14.12 which seems to have originated as a statement of autodoxology. See above chapter 4, pp. 234ff.


\(^3\) Ibid., e.g. p. 128.

of cosmogonic time, the eschatological event on which the salvation of all humankind is dependent.¹ In John, therefore, any claim to heavenly ascent, vision, or work in the spirit is subordinate to and dependent on the prior activity of Jesus and, thus, the experience and authority of the disciples finds its ground and source of meaning in the incarnation itself.

The implications of this process of crisis and paradigm shift in the Johannine community for the Gospel's christology are significant. John's introduction of an emphasis on the irreducible significance of the incarnation clearly precludes Kasemann's characterization of his christology as naively docetic. It is true that, in consequence of its underlying prophetic assumptions, Jesus' glory tends to dominate and even to obscure his flesh in the Fourth Gospel. Thus, John does not present a kenotic view of the incarnation, or a portrayal of Jesus as the true man of later Christian theology. But it is also true that, in response to a crisis in his community, he affirms Jesus' flesh. It is not superfluous- a mere backdrop for his divine glory- but rather, together with his glory marks the archetypical event on which the salvation of all humankind is dependent. In short, within the framework

¹ Jesus' spatial priority is indicated, for example, by the fact that he ascends first to the Father, alone. The disciples cannot follow until afterwards, and their ascent depends on Jesus' prior ascent and preparation of a place for them. This sequence implies, however, that Jesus ascends first to heaven because he belongs there; his place is original, that of the disciples is secondary, derived, and dependent upon him. Again, John gives Jesus temporal priority by interpreting the spirit as the return of Jesus himself, so that the earthly Jesus in effect becomes his own successor working in his followers, who thereby become subordinate agents. See Johannine Christianity in Conflict, pp. 38, 43ff., 96, 102, 126, and above chapter 4, pp. 234ff.
provided by his background and theological orientation, the Evangelist attempted to affirm both the glory of the Son and the irreducibly significant event of the incarnation.

Our comparative analysis to this point clearly indicates substantial similarities between the notions of avatāra and incarnation in the Bhagavadgītā and in the Fourth Gospel. First, they reflect a similar mythical pattern of incarnation that includes preexistence, incarnation, soteriological activity, and ascent. Again, within this common framework both the Gītā and John express a general conception of incarnation that is realistic yet non-kenotic. In the Gītā the avatāra event represents a microcosmic parallel to the creation of the universe by God and, as such, shares in its irreducible reality. Nevertheless, as we have seen, the incarnation of Kṛṣṇa in the Bhagavadgītā is no less an epiphany of his divine characteristics. Throughout the Gītā Kṛṣṇa's divine freedom, omniscience, and omnipotence are revealed even in his incarnate state. Again, the Fourth Gospel portrays the incarnation in terms that lack any kenotic features. In consequence of his underlying prophetic assumptions, John elaborates a christology in which neither the act of incarnation nor the passion mark a change in the nature of the Christ and, thus, the incarnation is presented as the earthly sojourn of the heavenly revealer who always maintains his unity with the Father, and whose descent into the realm of darkness occasions the eschatological encounter with his divine glory.

This situation indicates, however, that Parrinder's characterizations break down vis-à-vis a comparative analysis of incarnation in the Gītā and in
the Gospel of John. In consequence, the comparative natures of avatāra and Christian incarnation cannot be characterized on the basis of a polarity between theophany and kenotic incarnation. Quite the contrary, the similarities between the respective notions of incarnation in the Gitā and in John suggest that the question of their comparative natures cannot be adequately resolved at the descriptive level and, thus, that the fundamental differences between them result from the unique assumptions on which their respective notions are based. In the concluding section of our comparative analysis, therefore, we will attempt both to clarify these underlying assumptions and to illustrate the differences in the respective notions of incarnation in the Gitā and the Fourth Gospel that result from them.

Avatāra and Incarnation: Fundamental Assumptions

It was noted above that the clearest differences between avatāra theory and Christian incarnation belief concern the soteriological significance attributed to the incarnation event. This point is illustrated by the fact that while the Gitā and John express similar conceptions of incarnation, the religious significance of certain characteristic features of Kṛṣṇa and Jesus vary considerably. For example, the divine characteristics exhibited by Kṛṣṇa in the Gitā— the divine freedom, knowledge and power— are fully consistent with the notion of avatāra as a divine condescension whose purpose is to
inspire worship and devotion.\footnote{\textsc{Rāmānuja} discusses this aspect of avatāra theory in the introduction to his commentary on the Bhagavadgītā. He asserts, in short, that while God as the Supreme Person is inaccessible to the meditation and worship of gods and humans alike while existing in transcendent form, in the self-revelation of the avatāra event God becomes accessible to humankind as a divine model worthy of both emulation and praise. "In that shape he has descended repeatedly to various worlds in order that he might be worshipped by the beings who live in these worlds and so bring them nearer to the fruits of dharma, artha, kāma and release..." See \textsc{Rāmānuja on the Bhagavadgītā}, p. 47.} In the Fourth Gospel, on the other hand, the divine characteristics exhibited by Jesus in his earthly ministry signify the very presence in his person of God's eschatological salvation. This is indicated, for example, by the fact that the divine glory of Jesus in John represents an attribute of the eschatological revelation of the Messiah and the time of salvation.\footnote{See, e.g., Bultmann, \textit{Gospel}, p. 490, note 5.}

This situation indicates, we suggest, that the assumptions underlying the notions of incarnation in the Gītā and in John are intimately bound up with the soteriological paradigms of the respective documents. Thus, in the following discussion we will attempt to show that the fundamental differences between avatāra and incarnation derive from their varying assessments of the soteriological significance of the incarnation event and its implications for their portrayals of the incarnate savior. It is true, as noted above, that Parrinder recognizes the soteriological differences between avatāra and incarnation and suggests, following Rudolf Otto, that while the Indian avatāras are conceived as mediators, Jesus actually became a propitiation for the sin of humankind. But while Parrinder has in this instance correctly identified one
of the characteristic differences between avatāra and incarnation, he fails to exploit its full significance. In the Fourth Gospel, the conception of the incarnation as a soteriological event in itself is the fundamental assumption underlying its christological model from which most of its differences with avatāra theory derive. First, it clearly underlies the Gospel's christocentrism and accounts for both the exclusive convergence of soteriological functions onto the person of Jesus and the emphasis on the uniqueness and absolute primacy of the incarnation. In the Bhagavadgītā, on the other hand, no equivalent soteriological investment is made in the avatāra event. Thus, within the cyclical cosmology of the Gītā the portrayal of Kṛṣṇa as a divine mediator quite naturally issues in the concept of repeated incarnations. Second, the comparative natures of Kṛṣṇa and Jesus in the Gītā and John are themselves differentiated by the soteriological assumptions to which their portrayals are correlated. In the Fourth Gospel, pace Parrinder, the nature of the incarnate Christ is correlated to and conditioned by the soteriological significance attributed to him— in this case that of the heavenly revealer who speaks words of light and life— that represents the center of the Gospel's christological paradigm and the focus of its reflection.¹ By contrast, in the Gītā the

¹ Otto perceived the significance of the soteriological function attributed to Jesus for the elaboration of christology. At p. 105f. of his *India's Religion of Grace* he asserts "But that Christ was a 'propitiator' is the profoundest meaning of his coming, and all speculative doctrines about his person derive their special meaning and the theological criterion of their validity from this fact." It is interesting, then, that Parrinder, who is dependent on the work of Otto, did not incorporate this insight into his comparative theory of avatāra and incarnation.
nature and soteriological functions of Kṛṣṇa remain separate and he is portrayed on the basis of soteriologically neutral considerations.

The soteriology of the Fourth Gospel, as we have seen, was elaborated within the framework of a cosmic dualism that contrasts the world—the realm of darkness and falsehood—with God's realm of light and truth.¹ It would be a mistake, however, to understand either the nature of the world or that of humankind itself on the basis of a Gnostic dualism of spirit and matter, because John's dualism takes on its specific meaning only in relation to the Hebrew notion of creation.² This means, first, that in the view of the Evangelist the world is not an inherently evil reality that stands in opposition to God. Rather, as creation, the world is related to and receives its orientation from humankind. Either through humankind it exists in meaningful relationship to God, or through the sin of humankind is directed toward evil.³ In John, then, the world is evil because humankind chooses darkness and falsehood rather than light and truth. More importantly, however, the conception of the world as creation in John's modified dualism finds its counterpart in the fundamental characterization of humankind as creature. It is true that the

¹ That is to say, in characterizing the world as the realm of darkness and falsehood that opposes God John has abandoned the temporal dimension of Jewish dualism that opposes two ages in favor of a spatial dualism that opposes two realms or realities. See, e.g., Bultmann, Theology, pp. 15ff., and above chapter 4, pp. 266ff.


³ Ibid., pp. 508f.
dualistic language of the Fourth Gospel refers repeatedly to two groups of individuals—those who are of God or of the world—and in so doing gives the impression that humankind falls into two categories whose essence and destiny are predetermined. Despite this appearance, however, the Evangelist does not understand humankind on the basis of metaphysical categories of spirit and matter. Rather, his characterization is determined by the notion of creaturehood. That is to say, unlike God who lives out of God’s own resources, humankind, as created, can live only contingently, from some external and uncontrollable origin that has power over it.¹ For humankind as creature, therefore, there exist only two possibilities, to live from God or to live from Nothing.² Every individual, according to the Evangelist, stands before these opposing possibilities and, in consequence, one’s nature is actually determined in the act of choosing, or in the existential situation in which choices are made by all of one’s speaking and acting. Thus, what for Gnosticism would be a

¹ See, e.g., Bultmann, *Theology*, pp. 15ff, and above chapter 4, pp. 266ff.

² As we have seen, living from God is a possibility for humankind because, in John, the act of creation is simultaneously an act of revelation. This is shown, first, by the fact that the creation was effected through the Logos who was not only with God ‘in the beginning,’ but is God, and second, through the fact that the Logos was not only the life for that which was created, but also its light. See John 1.4, Bultmann, *Theology*, p. 17, and above chapter 4, p. 238f. Again, to reject the dependence on God attendant to one’s created status is to repudiate one’s origin in God and to create a spurious reality—Nothing—from the delusion that one can live from one’s own resources. Such a self-understanding, which rejects reality and truth, can only be characterized by darkness, falsehood, and death. See Bultmann, *Theology*, p. 27.
cosmological dualism of spirit and matter is for the Evangelist a dualism of decision.  

The significance of John's explicitly Hebrew anthropological thought for our concerns lies in the fact that it precludes a conception of salvation as a state in which one's essential being is illuminated. Quite the contrary, salvation in the Gospel of John means simply to choose to live from God and, thus, to exist in the wholeness of authentic creaturehood. But, as we have seen, this choice is not available to humankind as a natural possibility. This is because, according to John 1.10, humankind has rejected the revelation in creation and now lives under the exclusive and total dominion of darkness and falsehood. As matters now stand, therefore, one has no control over one's life and cannot procure salvation on one's own. If one's way is to lead to salvation, it must start from another point that allows one to reverse one's origin and to exchange the old origin for a new one. In short, the condition of salvation can only be satisfied by a miracle, or by God's self-revelation in which humankind is offered the possibility of exchanging its origin and of living from God in true authenticity.

1 So Bultmann, Theology, pp. 20f.

2 Otherwise stated, salvation means openness to God who, as Creator, is the only true reality, and thus the source of light, life, and freedom. Ibid., p. 19. For a fuller discussion see above chapter 4, pp. 266ff.

3 See Bultmann, Gospel, pp. 137ff.

4 Ibid. John's conviction of salvation as a divine possibility is discussed above at chapter 4, pp. 266ff.
It is clear, to summarize, that the assumption underlying John's soteriology, which he shares with Christianity in general, is the conviction that salvation is an exclusively divine possibility. Only insofar as God's very reality as truth, light, and life are revealed is it possible for humankind to exchange its bondage to darkness for the authenticity of life lived from God. But the Evangelist also shares with Christianity in general the assumption that this eschatological act of salvation has decisively occurred in the Christ event. In the Fourth Gospel specifically, God's eschatological self-revelation as truth, life, and light occurs exclusively in Jesus. Consequently, in his person and word God's very reality is made present to humankind and all are placed before the eschatological decision of life or death.

In terms of the Christ myth, Jesus in the Fourth Gospel is the incarnation of the preexistent Logos, sent into the world by God to carry out the work of revelation for which he has been commissioned and equipped. This means, first, that as the one uniquely sent into the world by God, Jesus is exclusively commissioned to reveal the divine reality.¹ But, consistent with the Evangelist's notion of revelation, Jesus nowhere reveals truths about God, but rather reveals God's very reality in his person and activity.² Thus, John's claim that Jesus is the revealer of God actually means that in him God has become both present and active: whoever has seen him has seen the Father; in

¹ This is clear, for example, at John 3:34 where Jesus proclaims "For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for it is not by measure that he gives the spirit."

² See, e.g., Bultmann, Theology, pp.18ff. Revelation in John is discussed above at chapter 4, pp. 187ff.
him the Father is and works; thus, if he is full of grace and truth, this can only mean that in him God's reality encounters humankind as a gracious gift.\(^1\) Second, the portrayal of Jesus as the incarnate Logos sent into the world by God means that the mission of the Son in its unity is presented in John as the eschatological event.\(^2\) This is clear, for example, from the passage at John 3.16ff., in which the Son's mission, which includes both descent and ascent, is grounded in the love of God who sent him; that is, the mission in its unity represents the expression of God's soteriological will. Again, the nature of the mission as eschatological is indicated by the present tense of the verb to have already at verse 15 and by the express statement at verses 17-21 that in this event the eschatological judgment of the world occurs.\(^3\)

In the view of the Evangelist, to summarize, the mission of the incarnate Logos is the eschatological event in which God's self-revelation occurs and in which humankind is placed before the possibility of life or death. To believe in Jesus as the self-revelation of the Father is to pass already from death to life; to reject him is to remain in darkness and death.\(^4\) In short,

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1 See Ibid.; Gospel, p. 165; and John 1.14; 14.6, 9ff.

2 See, e.g., Gospel, pp. 153ff.

3 In commenting on this passage, Bultmann notes that "The mission of the Son, embracing as it does both his humiliation and his exaltation, is of decisive importance, for it is by faith in this mission that man gains life. This means that the mission is the eschatological event." Ibid., quotation, p. 154.

4 John 3.18, 36.
the incarnation is for John the event in which God's soteriological purpose for humankind is both accomplished and made a present reality.

The soteriological significance of Kṛṣṇa in the Bhagavadgītā, on the other hand, must be understood within the context of the document's synthesis of the devotional theism of the Bhāgavata sect and the metaphysical speculations of the early Upaniṣads. As noted above, this synthesis effected a significant shift from the soteriological paradigm of the latter. Specifically, in the theistic context of the Bhagavadgītā, the notion of divine grace is introduced into the process of salvation. In consequence, while salvation is conceived in terms of the release of the essential self from the grasp of the guṇas and, thus, from the eternal cycle of rebirth, the Gītā places significant emphasis on salvation as a movement of grace from God to humankind.

In general, the Bhagavadgītā participates in a theistic reaction to the tendencies of early Upaniṣadic speculation, and represents a reassertion of the beliefs and sentiments of the Indian religious spirit.¹ It is difficult, if not impossible, for an explicitly religious sentiment to nourish itself on a conception of the ultimate as neutral, abstract, unknowable, and without attributes. This, however, is precisely the case in the earliest Upaniṣads that do not think of Brahman in sufficiently personal terms to envision its exercising grace in saving humankind or as the object of any personal devotion.² Quite the contrary, these documents express the quest for a single,

¹ See, e.g., J. A. B. van Buitenen, Rāmānuja on the Bhagavadgītā, p. 4.
unifying principle that they eventually identified with Brahman, that was
attainable only by immediate intuitive comprehension, and in which
humankind escapes from samsāra.¹ Consequently, primitive Vedānta accords
but limited scope to the notion of divine grace, and release is conceived as a
movement of the individual ātman to the universal self, Brahman.²

A reaction against this speculative current became marked in some
later Upaniṣads, especially the Svetāśvatara, and found its most remarkable
expression in the Bhagavadgītā. These documents reacted against the
tendency to divorce religion from its natural object- God- and introduced the
notion of divine grace into the process of salvation.³ In the Gītā specifically,
is evident in the doctrine of avatāra itself. According to Lamotte,
for example, the Gītā's avatāra belief expresses the idea that God wills the
welfare of humankind, and toward this end does not rest passively in
transcendent perfection, indifferent to all that goes on outside of the Godhead,
but graciously inclines toward the world.⁴ Indeed, the notion of God's grace
active in the process of salvation is prominent in the Gītā. Perhaps its clearest

¹ See van Buiten, Rāmānuja on the Bhagavadgītā, p. 4.
² Lamotte, Notes, p. 118.
³ See, e.g., van Buiten, Rāmānuja on the Bhagavadgītā, p. 4. The
Svetāśvatara Upaniṣad, for example, at 6.21, 23 speaks of release as coming by
the grace of God, and recommends bhakti, or devotion to God, as a means for
attaining it.

⁴ Notes, p. 18. Again, According to Gonda "...the very idea underlying all
avatāras is the selfsame antagonism between the great upholder of the cause
of the good, and the evil power of destruction, starvation, and death." Aspects,
p. 162.
expression is found at 12.6-8: "Those who cast off all their works on Me, solely intent on Me, and meditate on Me in spiritual exercise, leaving no room for others, (and so really) do Me honour, these will I lift up on high out of the ocean of recurring death, and that right soon, for their thoughts are fixed on Me. On Me alone let your mind dwell, stir up your soul to enter Me; thenceforth in very truth in Me you will find your home." ¹

In consequence of this soteriological shift and its expression in the doctrine of avatāra, Kṛṣṇa's incarnations in the Bhagavadgītā are clearly presented as movements of God's grace toward humankind.² Despite these soteriological overtones, however, the Gītā does not conceive incarnation as a soteriological event in itself. As we have seen, the Sāṁkhya-based metaphysics of the Gītā asserts that the essential self of the individual, called alternately ātman or puruṣa, is eternally distinct from prakṛti and thus from the individual bodies it inhabits in the course of saṁsāra.³ In consequence,

¹ Translation by Zaehner, The Bhagavad-Gītā, p. 327. Again, at Gītā 10.10-11, Kṛṣṇa announces that: "To those who, always yoked, love me joyfully I grant the singleness of mind by which they attain to Me. Residing in their own very being I compassionately dispel the darkness of their ignorance with the shining lamp of knowledge." See also 4.11; 9.26ff.; and 18.65.

² I.e., in contrast to the early Upaniṣads that recognize no prophet or other figure who could occupy the place held by a Buddha or a Jesus for their followers, Kṛṣṇa in the Bhagavadgītā is recognized as a personal savior, the incarnation of God who has come "...to play a special part in the drama of life, and to teach his fellow-players how best they may win through the 'thicket of delusion' to the 'calm bliss' of perfect truth that is himself." Hill, The Bhagavadgītā, p. 36.

³ The Bhagavadgītā draws the clearest possible distinction between the two orders of reality: prakṛti, and puruṣa. Prakṛti has been defined above as the metaphysical substratum of the material universe which is in a perpetual state
the puruṣa is ontologically free from the beginning. As there is no escape from action for the body because it is prakṛti,1 so there is no ontological bondage for the puruṣa because, in its essential nature, it is free of prakṛti and identical with Brahman.2

Within this metaphysical framework, the Gītā conceives salvation, or mokṣa, as the final dissociation of the spiritual monad from the material personality to which it is bound in saṁsāra.3 In a manner similar to that of classical Sāṁkhya, release means the definitive detachment of the individual puruṣa from the material envelope to which it is bound, and the complete isolation within itself both from prakṛti and from all other puruṣas.4 Thus, the liberated individual has transcended the influence of the three guṇas and of flux, without beginning and without end. Puruṣa, on the other hand, is the eternal spiritual monad, the absolute principle of self that does not perish at death. According to Gītā 2.20 "It is never born nor does it die; nor once that it is will it ever not be; unborn, unending, eternal, and ancient, it is not killed when the body is killed." In itself, then, the ātman is static, timeless, and eternal; thus, to speak of its birth or death is meaningless. For a fuller discussion, see above chapter 3, pp. 80ff.

1 And prakṛti is the exclusive agent of action. See, e.g., Bhagavadgītā 3.27.

2 Nevertheless, while the ātman in itself is static, timeless, and eternal, in its union with prakṛti it is conditioned by the phenomenal world and bound by the three constituents of material nature. According to Bhagavadgītā 13.21, this involvement is the cause of rebirth. "...Puruṣa residing within Prakṛti experiences the guṇas that spring from Prakṛti: his involvement with the guṇas is the cause of births in either high wombs or low ones." The Gītā's notion of Saṁsāra is discussed in detail above at chapter 3, pp. 142ff.

3 See especially Gītā 13.34. "those who with the eye of insight realize the boundary of field and guide, and the mode of separation from the Prakṛti of beings, attain the ultimate."

4 See, e.g., Zehner, The Bhagavad Gītā, p. 31.
the sphere of karman, and has entered that of transcendent wisdom, which is synonymous with perfect peace.¹ As noted above, however, the ultimate state of release in the Gītā is conceived neither as the isolation of the puruṣa as in Sāmkhya thought, nor as identity with Brahma as in the early Upaniṣads. Rather, the Gītā speaks of eternal communion with God. That is to say, the Gītā will not go so far as to identify the individual ātman with God, but speaks of the ātman as a particle of God that becomes the principle of self in a living being.² Consequently, liberation in the Gītā is not precisely the realization of an identity with God, but rather a participation in God's timeless mode of existence and, beyond this, a personal communion in which the individual ātman retains its identity.³

It is clear that the Gītā's notion of salvation, which was elaborated on the basis of early Sāmkhya metaphysics, precludes a conception of incarnation as a soteriological event in itself. Succinctly stated, in the Gītā it is neither necessary nor possible for the incarnations of Kṛṣṇa to effect a change in the eternal puruṣa that is ontologically free from the beginning. Rather, in contrast to the thought of the Fourth Gospel, Kṛṣṇa's incarnations in the Bhagavadgītā fulfill the soteriological purposes of God by occasioning the self-revelation of the supreme, personal God to whom one can respond in specifically religious ways through worship, sacrifice, and personal

¹ See Gītā 4.39.
² See Gītā 15.7.
³ See Gītā 6.30.
devotion. Again, Kṛṣṇa reveals a unified approach to release through karmapa, jñāna-, and bhaktiyogas, the spiritual exercises by which one can realize the freedom of the eternal puruṣa and attain union with God. Otherwise stated, Kṛṣṇa, as the highest Lord, transcends and encompasses both prakṛti and puruṣa and his own transcendent nature properly includes both action and knowledge. Thus, through the self-revelation of his avatāras he mediates salvation by providing both the personal example and unified means by which

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1 For example, at Gītā 4.9, Kṛṣṇa occasions the revelation of God as sole, universal agent and on this basis Kṛṣṇa encourages Arjuna to the practice of karmayoga. In commenting on this verse, Zaehner remarks that "By meditating on Krishna's incarnation and his deeds both as God and man, one comes to know Him as the God who acts..." Accordingly, while all must 'follow in God's footsteps' since they must act in accordance with nature, those who realize that nature itself is subject to God, who acts through the three guṇas, and that God, while eternally free, takes on existence for the protection of the good - these willingly conform themselves to God's will. In other words, knowing God as God really is, that is, changeless and perpetually active yet not bound by actions, these will never be bound by works. Instead they will work themselves while seeking release. See The Bhagavad-Gītā, p. 185. Again, Kṛṣṇa is revealed in the Gītā as the proper object of devotion, i.e. a personal God, the Supreme Person, who is not only the immanent principle of being in the universe, but as well the friend of all contingent beings, a personal Savior who accords grace to humankind. See, e.g., Gītā 9.26ff. For a more complete discussion see above chapter 3, pp. 138ff.

2 As noted above, it is often asserted that karma-, jñāna-, and bhaktiyoga are, in Kṛṣṇa's view, alternative and equally efficient means to release. While Kṛṣṇa does at times speak of the independent sufficiency of one or the other method of release, the general tendency in the Gītā is to integrate all three into one complex unity. According to Hill, for example, "...it is important to insist that these three methods are throughout the Gītā regarded as complementary, each no more than the application of the single theory of control to one department of man's being." See The Bhagavadgītā, p. 54. For a more complete discussion of the means of release in the Gītā see above chapter 3, pp. 153ff.

3 Karma and jñāna respectively.
action and knowledge can be perfected into eternal bliss through personal devotion to him.

To summarize, in the soteriological paradigm of the Gitā mokṣa is conceived as the realization of the transcendent freedom of the eternal puruṣa and its personal communion with God; thus, the soteriological action of God through the divine avatāras is conceived as a cooperation with the efforts of the individual toward release. In consequence, Kṛṣṇa in the Bhagavadgītā is presented as a mediator of salvation, a divine revealer who imparts to humankind a knowledge of the supreme, personal God, and the way of ultimate release through karma-, jñāna-, and bhaktiyogas. The grace of God revealed by Kṛṣṇa in the Gitā operates principally through the unified way of salvation available to humankind, assisting the individual at every stage of the pilgrimage. Consequently, there remains a distance between avatāra and salvation in the Bhagavadgītā; that is, while avatāra is conceived as an event of revelation and mediation, it is not conceived as a soteriological event in itself.

These varying assessments of the soteriological significance of the incarnation event in the Bhagavadgītā and in the Fourth Gospel underlie the fundamental differences between their portrayals of Kṛṣṇa and Jesus. This is clearly evident, first, from the fact that John's conception of the incarnation as a soteriological event in itself underlies a series of christocentric emphases that are quite foreign to the thought of the Gitā. Specifically, it underlies both the Gospel's radical convergence of soteriological functions onto the person of
Jesus and the Evangelist's emphasis on the uniqueness and absolute primacy of the incarnation.

It is clear, as noted above, that John shares with primitive Christianity in general the conviction that God's eschatological act of salvation has decisively occurred in the Christ event. It is also clear, however, that to an extent unparalleled in any other New Testament writing, the soteriological purpose of God is fulfilled by the Johannine Jesus who not only conveys the salvation of humankind, but makes it a present reality. This means, in short, that John has radicalized the eschatological character of the incarnation. Not only does he give up the notion of a future consummation of God's eschatological activity and collapse its functions onto Jesus, but he asserts that Jesus actually embodies the eschatological salvation in himself.¹

First, to assert with John that Jesus is the exclusive revelation of God, that in him the Father is present and active, is to assert that God has given over all things to the Son who performs God's eschatological functions.² This conviction is nowhere more evident than in the fact that Jesus' coming as the Son of Man in John is not put off to a future appearing. Rather, he is portrayed as the Son of Man already in his work on earth.³ As we have seen,

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¹ I.e., in Jesus humankind is placed before the possibility of life or death. To believe in him as the self-revelation of the Father is to pass already from death to life; to reject him is to remain in darkness and death. In the Fourth Gospel, to quote Robert Fortna, "Jesus does not accomplish salvation; he is salvation." See "Christology in the Fourth Gospel: Redaction Critical Perspectives," p 40.

² John 3.35. See Bultmann, Gospel, p 165.

³ See e.g. John 9.35-38.
Jewish and early Christian apocalyptic had given expression to the idea that the Son of Man, who will come on the clouds of heaven, will exercise the eschatological judgment alongside or in the place of God. In contrast, John makes no mention of the eschatological drama of the end time. Rather, he asserts at John 5.21f. that God has bestowed the office of eschatological judge on Jesus who both exercises judgment and grants life in his present activity as the revealer. In consequence, at 11.25f. and 14.6 Jesus claims to be the resurrection and the life, and promises life to the one who believes in his word without any mention being made of his resurrection or of a future consummation.\(^1\) Indeed, in the view of the Evangelist neither is necessary since Jesus, as the Son of Man, already executes the eschatological functions of the end time.

Again, as the exclusive revelation of the Father, Jesus in the Fourth Gospel actually personifies the eschatological salvation. As we have seen, the Johannine characterization of salvation in terms of natural phenomena such as light, bread, and water reflects a dualistic system of archetypes according to which the mundane realities sought by humankind in order to live represent but pale reflections of the authentic, divine reality in which alone true life is possible.\(^2\) In the Fourth Gospel, the true gifts of eschatological salvation—gifts

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1 The eschatological functions of the Johannine Jesus are discussed above at chapter 4, pp. 266ff.

2 See Kasemann, Testament, p. 51. See also Bultmann, Gospel, p. 182. According to Bultmann, "...all earthly things, whether food or clothing, birth or marriage, life or death, are temporary, transitory and false, whereas their heavenly counterparts are true, eternal and final." For a fuller discussion see above chapter 4, pp. 266ff.
of light, bread, and water— are bestowed through God's self-revelation in the
Son. Thus, for example, the light of salvation offered in Jesus does not
represent the literal light of the natural world, but rather the divine light in
which existence is illumined.\(^1\) Nevertheless, the Johannine Jesus does not
offer a gift that is separate from himself. On the contrary, Jesus consistently
employs the Ego Eimi speech formula to identify himself as the embodiment of
God's eschatological salvation.\(^2\) For example, in response to humankind's quest
for living bread or the bread of life, Jesus responds at 6.35 "I am the bread of
life"; and in response to the quest for light, Jesus responds at 8.12 "I am the
light of the world." In Jesus, to summarize, the world is confronted with the
very embodiment of God's gift of salvation: he is for the Evangelist, in short,
"the way, the truth, and the life."\(^3\)

The Johannine conception of the incarnation as a soteriological event
in itself also underlies the Evangelist's emphasis on the uniqueness and
absolute primacy of the incarnation. In the Fourth Gospel, as we have seen,

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\(^1\) Bultmann, *Theology*, pp. 17f. Again, the bread from heaven, in contrast to all
human food, is the food that endures and bestows eternal life; and the living
water, which is Jesus, represents the divine life-giving source bestowed only

\(^2\) As noted above, John makes extensive use of what Bultmann calls the
recognition formula; that is, a form of Ego Eimi speech in which the I is
predicate, which responds to the question: "Who is the one who is expected,
asked for, spoken to?", and to which the reply is: "I am he." See Bultmann,
*Gospel*, p. 225, n. 3., and above chapter 4, pp. 266ff.

\(^3\) John 14.6. For additional discussion of Ego Eimi, its history of religions
origin and usage in the Fourth Gospel, see Raymond Brown, *The Gospel
According to John*, vol. 29, pp. 533ff.
the Christian experience of salvation is grounded in the history of the incarnate Logos who has both spatial and temporal priority over his disciples.\(^1\) Jesus' spatial priority is indicated, for example, by the fact that he ascends first to the Father, alone. The disciples cannot follow until afterwards, and their ascent depends upon Jesus' prior ascent and preparation of a place for them.\(^2\) As pointed out by Woll, this sequence implies that Jesus ascends first to heaven because he belongs there; his place is original, that of the disciples is secondary, derived, and dependent upon him.\(^3\) Again, John gives Jesus temporal priority by interpreting the spirit as the return of Jesus himself, so that the earthly Jesus in effect becomes his own successor working in his followers, who thereby become subordinate agents.\(^4\) In so interpreting the incarnation— the time of Jesus' visible presence and activity among humankind— the Evangelist has clearly marked it off as the archetypical event, invested with the absolute primacy of cosmogonic time, the eschatological event on which the salvation of all humankind is dependent.\(^5\) In John, therefore, the Christian experience of salvation finds its ground and source of meaning exclusively in the incarnation.

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\(^2\) See John 13.33ff.

\(^3\) *Johannine Christianity in Conflict*, pp. 38, 43ff.

\(^4\) Ibid., p. 96.

\(^5\) Ibid., p. 126.
The significance of John's emphasis on the uniqueness of the incarnation for our concerns lies in its implicit response to the question of repeated incarnations. In the Fourth Gospel, as we have seen, God's eschatological self-revelation as truth, life, and light occurs exclusively in Jesus, the incarnate Logos. Consequently, in his person and word God's very reality is made present to humankind and all are placed before the eschatological decision of life or death. It is true that the Evangelist's emphasis on the incarnation was not elaborated in response to the question of repeated incarnations. Indeed, he nowhere addresses this possibility and it is unlikely that such a question would have arisen in his situation. Nevertheless, the fact that salvation is bound by John exclusively to the person and activity of the incarnate Logos, the very way to the Father, clearly precludes the possibility of repetition.

In clear contrast to the Christian tradition in general and to the Fourth Gospel specifically, the Bhagavadgītā does not conceive incarnation as a soteriological event in itself. There is, as we have seen, no sense in which salvation is accomplished by God’s activity in the avatāras and, in consequence, christocentric emphases such as John's on the uniqueness and absolute soteriological significance of the incarnation are foreign to its thought. In contrast, the Gitā conceives avatāra as the preeminent manifestation of a general movement of grace from God to humankind, a cooperating grace that promises assistance to the individual at every stage of her or his path toward release. It is, thus, these irreducibly Indian soteriological assumptions that underlie the unique emphases of avatāra
theory in the Bhagavadgītā. First, within a metaphysical framework in which the world and human existence itself are conceived as eternally recurring cycles, God’s gracious offer of divine assistance through the avatāras quite naturally issues in the notion of repeated and even multiple incarnations. Again, the Gītā’s portrayal of avatāra as a general movement of grace permits a more broadly conceived conception of God’s activity on humankind’s behalf. This is evident from the fact that in the Gītā Kṛṣṇa’s incarnations have a two-fold purpose to fulfill. Not only do they mediate salvation through the self-revelation of the God-Head and the revelation of the unified way to release, but they redeem and safeguard the Hindu social order of which Kṛṣṇa is the self-proclaimed guardian.

As we have seen, the notion that God’s gracious self-revelation in the avatāras can be and is repeated is explicitly stated in the Bhagavadgītā. In the passage at 4.5ff. Kṛṣṇa asserts that from eon to eon whenever there is a need for divine intervention— to destroy evil, to rescue the good, or to reestablish the dharma— he becomes incarnate.¹ Indeed, in this passage Kṛṣṇa draws a direct parallel between his divine incarnations and the ordinary cycle of birth and death in order to explain the possibility of his having taught dharma to the ancient seers of the tradition and of having come to teach Arjuna the same dharma, which had vanished with the lapse of years. It is true that in the Gītā Kṛṣṇa speaks only of his repeated incarnations. Nevertheless, as the

¹ "For whenever the Law languishes, Bhārata, and lawlessness flourishes, I create myself. I take on existence from eon to eon, for the rescue of the good and the destruction of the evil, in order to reestablish the Law."
prototype of avatāra theory, the pattern of repeated incarnations established in the Gitā is reflected in the later notion of Viṣṇu’s yuga avatāras, or multiple incarnations that are distributed between the ages of the world’s decline.

This notion appears, for example, at book twelve of the Mahābhārata that recounts the cosmic myth of Viṣṇu sleeping in the primeval ocean, resting on the enormous serpent Śeṣa and sheltered by its thousand hoods. While sleeping, a lotus appears from Viṣṇu’s navel from which the god Brahmā is born, who then proceeds to create the world. Through a thousand cycles of Mahā Yugas¹ the creation continues, until it again dissolves into Viṣṇu. Again, each Mahā Yuga in this eternal cycle of creation and dissolution is divided into four lesser yugas: the Kṛta, Tretā, Dwāpara, and Kali, during which there occurs a steady decline in dharma from its original perfection in the Kṛta Yuga. By the time of the Kali Yuga, lawlessness is rampant, individuals are weak and unable to follow their proper duty, rulers plunder their subjects, and the pursuit of wealth is humankind’s predominant concern. The world in general is a place of suffering and discord, awaiting renewal in the recurrence of the Kṛta Yuga. By means of the yuga avatāras that are distributed between the lesser yugas, however, Viṣṇu actively intervenes in the world for the welfare of humankind. In the Tretā Yuga, for example, Viṣṇu is incarnate as Rāma, and between the Dwāpara and Kali Yugas as Krśna.²

¹ Great eons.

² Within this mythical framework the classical lists of avatāras developed through the assimilation to the Viṣṇu cycle of ancient stories of
From a Christian perspective, the Indian notion of repeated and multiple avatāras appears to dilute the significance of the incarnation event. It should be clear from this discussion, however, that such is not the case. Indeed, when viewed within its unique religio-philosophical context, the Gītā's notion of repeated avatāras actually strengthens the concept of God's gracious activity on behalf of humankind. That is to say, when, as in the Gītā, the soteriological action of God through the avatāras is conceived as a cooperation with the efforts of every individual toward release, the notion of its possible repetition whenever the need arises indicates the bounty of God's soteriological activity on humankind's behalf and represents a more adequate fulfillment of its purpose.

Second, in contrast to the Fourth Gospel, which presents the incarnation as the eschatological event of salvation, the Bhagavadgītā's conception of avatāra as a general movement of grace permits a more broadly conceived view of God's activity on behalf of humankind. This is evident from the fact that in the Gītā Kṛṣṇa's incarnations fulfill a two-fold purpose. Not only do they mediate salvation through the self-revelation of the Godhead and the revelation of the unified way to release, but they also represent God's active intervention in the world for its general welfare. In the Gītā this intervention is represented by Kṛṣṇa's attempt to preserve the Hindu social order of which he is the self-proclaimed origin and eternal guardian.

theriomorphic and anthropomorphic exploits of this and of other gods. This development of avatāra theory is discussed above at chapter 3, pp. 56ff.
As noted above, the Bhagavadgītā was composed in response to a crisis in Indian society concerning the status of the developing social system and its required duties.\(^1\) Hill, for example, suggests that the Gītā was composed at a time when religious ideas advocating withdrawal from society were filtering through to lower social levels and, consequently, the natural duties of the various castes were being neglected or interchanged.\(^2\) Indeed, the Gītā itself presents evidence of a debate raging at the time of its composition between the advocates of a doctrine of release by wisdom alone and the advocates of a traditional attachment to ritual activity. The Bhagavadgītā clearly aligns itself with the tradition of ritual activity and, in response to the prevailing notion of release, attempts to raise the ancient notion of class duty to the status of a universal obligation.\(^3\)

The Gītā's commitment to the universality of class duty and to the preservation of the four class system is clearly reflected in its portrayal of Kṛṣṇa as the eternal guardian of the social order whose repeated incarnations primarily serve its preservation. At Gītā 4.6-8, the classical statement of avatāra theory, Kṛṣṇa describes the primary purpose of his divine incarnations as the preservation of the dharma, or the law of righteousness, which in this context refers specifically to the four class system: "...whenever

\(^1\) See above chapter 3, pp. 123ff.

\(^2\) See The Bhagavadgītā, p. 23.

\(^3\) See Gītā 18.3: "Some teachers propound that all acting should be renounced, as it is all tainted; while others hold that such acts as sacrifice, donation, and askesis are not to be renounced." See also Lamotte, Notes, pp. 94 ff.
the Law languishes, Bhārata, and lawlessness flourishes, I create myself. I take on existence from eon to eon, for the rescue of the good and the destruction of the evil, in order to reestablish the law."¹ Thus, this passage clearly expresses the conviction that God not only wills the preservation of the four class system which has been ordained from eternity, but toward this end takes on existence as needed for its defense and reestablishment.

Within the framework of the Bhagavadgītā, Krṣṇa fulfills his role of eternal guardian in several ways. First, as the archetypical yogin who continues to act for the welfare of the world even though free from all attachments, Krṣṇa serves as a divine exemplar, worthy of emulation by all.² Again, Krṣṇa emphasizes the necessity and fundamental importance of the four class system by revealing its origin in the two-fold nature of God who both ordains its nature and continuously acts to insure its preservation.³

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¹ This is clear, for example, from the fact that at 4.13 Krṣṇa claims to have founded the system. Both Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja take it in this sense. See Zaehner, The Bhagavad-Gītā, p. 184.

² See, e.g., Gitā 3.22-24: "I have no task at all to accomplish in these three worlds, Pārtha. I have nothing to obtain that I do not have already. Yet I move in action. If I were not to move in action, untiringly, at all times, Pārtha, people all around would follow my lead. These people would collapse if I did not act; I would be the author of miscegenation; I would assassinate these creatures." At Gitā 3.19-26, Krṣṇa commends the divine freedom in action to Arjuna as an example to be emulated. Thus, in the same way that God acts in detachment for the preservation of the world order, the wise individual should act for the sake of others, and 'only to hold the world together.'

³ As we have seen, Krṣṇa attempts to ground the social order both metaphysically and theologically. The metaphysical grounding of the social order is based on the Śaṅkhyan notion of necessary action through the three guṇas that underlies the thought of the Bhagavadgītā. Ultimately, however, it is God alone, acting through the three constituents of material nature, who
Finally, he reveals the intimate relationship of the social order to the achievement of release and of communion with God. That is to say, employing the Bhagavadgītā’s conception of saṃnyāsa as the renunciation of the fruits of all actions and not of actions themselves, Kṛṣṇa reveals a path to release that can be achieved through the performance of class duty rather than through its rejection.¹

In the Bhagavadgītā, to summarize, Kṛṣṇa is portrayed not only as the mediator of salvation, but also as the origin and eternal guardian of the social order. In so portraying God’s divine incarnations, the Gītā addressed a situation of crisis and conflict in Indian life and offered a creative, theological solution to the vexing problem of social stability. According to the Bhagavadgītā, the four class structure is preserved and, indeed, enlightened by God’s self-revelation in the avatāras. That is to say, not only does it provide the necessary structure within which the individual can improve her or his

represents the primal source of all order and activity. Accordingly, God is presented in the Gītā as the author of the social order which has been structured on the operation of the guṇas in the phenomenal world. According to Gītā 4.13: "I have created the society of the four classes with due regard for the various distribution of the guṇas and the range of their working: know that I am its author, and that I am forever without karman." See above chapter 3, pp. 80ff.

¹ As we suggested above, the reconciliation of works with the pursuit of release that is attained by the Gītā’s conception of saṃnyāsa means that the social order both anticipates and opens out to the soteriological dimension. Otherwise stated, in its insistence that release be pursued through the performance of class duty, the Bhagavadgītā establishes a unity between the social and soteriological dimensions that reflects the transcendent unity of prakṛti and puruṣa in the reality of God. See chapter 3, pp. 123ff.
karmic disposition, but it actually anticipates and opens out to the soteriological dimension.

Finally, having explicated the unique soteriological assumptions that underlie the portrayals of Kṛṣṇa and Jesus in the Bhagavadgītā and in the Fourth Gospel, we are in a position to return to the question of their comparative natures. On the basis of our analysis we have already suggested that Parrinder's characterizations of both avatāra and Christian incarnation break down vis-à-vis an analysis of the Gītā and the Gospel of John. As we have seen, there is a substantial agreement between their respective notions of incarnation. Not only do they reflect a similar mythical pattern that includes preexistence, incarnation, soteriological activity, and ascent, but within this framework both express a notion of incarnation that is realistic yet non-kenotic. This situation clearly indicates that the comparative natures of Kṛṣṇa and Jesus cannot be characterized on the basis of a polarity between theophany and kenotic incarnation and, indeed, that this question cannot be adequately resolved at the descriptive level. We now suggest that the comparative natures of Kṛṣṇa and Jesus are differentiated by the underlying assumptions that guide their appropriation of the incarnation pattern and condition their portrayals of the incarnate savior. Moreover, in this case as well it can be shown that these fundamental assumptions are correlated to the soteriological significance attributed to the incarnation event in the respective documents. Succinctly stated, in the Fourth Gospel, in which the incarnation is conceived as an eschatological event of salvation, the nature of the incarnate Christ is correlated to and conditioned by the specific
soteriological function attributed to him that represents the center of the Gospel's christological paradigm and the focus of its reflection. By contrast, in the Bhagavadgītā, in which avatāra is conceived as an event of revelation and mediation with overtones of divine grace, the soteriological functions and nature of Kṛṣṇa remain clearly distinct; in consequence, he is portrayed on the basis of soteriologically neutral considerations. As we will see below, the implications of these fundamentally different incarnation paradigms for the comparative natures of Kṛṣṇa and Jesus are significant. While it is true that their elaboration in the Gītā and in John result in strikingly similar portrayals of the incarnate savior, it is also true that the Christian paradigm reflected in the Fourth Gospel can produce a christological model whose portrayal of Jesus contrasts just as strikingly with the portrayal of Kṛṣṇa in the Bhagavadgītā.

The refractory nature of John's christology vis-à-vis a normative theology of the cross such as Paul's affords us an insight into the underlying structure of primitive christological reflection. As we have seen, John clearly shares with primitive Christianity in general the conviction that God's eschatological act of salvation has decisively occurred in the Christ event. Indeed, to an extent unparalleled in any other New Testament writing, the Johannine Jesus fulfills the soteriological promise of God. Not only does he perform the eschatological function of judgment already during his earthly ministry, but claims, through the use of the Εγώ Εἰμι speech formula, to personify God's eschatological salvation. It is also clear, nevertheless, that the Evangelist attributes no soteriological significance to the cross in itself and
that, in consequence, his portrayal of the incarnate Christ lacks the realistic features of kenotic christology. There is in the Gospel no foundation either for the conception of Jesus' death as a sacrifice or for the notion of purification through his blood.¹ In isolation, then, the cross serves no specific soteriological function, adds nothing to the cleansing already effected by the words of Jesus, and is included in the Gospel as the dramatic conclusion of the Son's mission, his return to the Father and to the glory of his preexistent state. It should not be surprising, therefore, to note that John either did not know or chose not to employ the notion of kenosis for the elaboration of his christology. Vis-à-vis Paul, for example, he neither presents the act of incarnation as the voluntary abandonment of all divine prerogatives, nor portrays the earthly life of Jesus in terms of lowliness and his crucifixion as the consummation of a life of humiliation that was reversed by the power of resurrection.

Rather, in contrast to kenotic thought, the Evangelist's portrayal of the incarnate savior is founded on the continuing experience of the exalted Lord's presence in the utterances of Christian prophets, and is characterized by a christological focus on the word of the heavenly revealer as the eschatological event in which salvation is encountered as a present and abiding reality. Thus conceived, it is clear that the mission of the incarnate revealer cannot be presented as a passage from humiliation to exaltation, lowliness to glory, by way of the cross, but rather as the earthly sojourn of the one who is always

and everywhere one with the Father. In consequence of these underlying prophetic assumptions, therefore, John elaborates a christology in which neither the act of incarnation nor the passion mark a change in the nature of the Christ, but rather mark his coming and his going.

It is precisely the refractory nature of John’s christology vis-à-vis Paul’s kenotic thought for example that affords us a clear insight into the structure of christological reflection in primitive Christianity. First, John’s unique situation, which minimizes the significance of the cross, indicates that the fundamental assumption underlying primitive christological reflection is the general conviction that the incarnation is a soteriological event in itself. This common assumption clearly underlies and is prior to the attribution of any specific soteriological function to Jesus such as the prophetic focus on his efficacious word or the kenotic focus on the cross. Second, it is clear that the differences of John’s portrayal of Jesus as the heavenly revealer from Paul’s portrayal of the suffering Messiah derive from the former’s reflective focus on the words of Jesus as events of eschatological salvation. This indicates in turn, however, that in primitive christological reflection the specific soteriological function attributed to Jesus represents the center of the christological paradigm and the reflective focus from which the portrayal of the incarnate savior is developed.

The fundamental christological paradigm reflected in the Fourth Gospel is, in a word, dynamic. This is evident from the fact that no one christological interpretation can be equated with its underlying structure and that, depending on the precise soteriological function attributed to Jesus, its
elaboration can produce a variety of christological models. The dynamic nature of this paradigm, however, has significant implications for the comparative natures of Kṛṣṇa and Jesus. Succinctly stated, it introduces a dialectical quality into their relationship that precludes a static interpretation. Christological reflection such as that of the Fourth Gospel, which focuses on the words of the revealer as eschatological events of salvation, clearly precludes the kenotic emphasis on the humility and lowliness of the incarnate Christ and tends toward an epiphany christology that portrays Jesus as always and everywhere one with the Father. As we have seen, this christological model presents Jesus in a manner that is strikingly similar to the portrayal of Kṛṣṇa in the Bhagavadgītā. Again, for example, the tradition of aretalogies and divine man christology portrays the life of Jesus as an epiphany that once more precludes the emphases of kenotic thought. In this tradition, that is, Jesus is presented as a theios aner, or a man endowed with divine power who performs miracles to prove his divine quality and character.¹ In consequence of their focus on the mighty acts of Jesus, gospels of this type proclaim that a particular divine power is present in the miracles of Jesus, and that their

¹ See esp. Koester, "One Jesus and Four Primitive Gospels," pp. 187ff. An aretalogy enumerates the great deeds of a god or a divinely inspired human being, a so-called divine man. According to Koester, Introduction, vol. 2, p. 349, an aretalogy can appear in the form of a sequence of brief sentences, each describing a different arete, i.e. a powerful act or virtuous quality, or in the form of a series of stories, such as miracle stories. As we have seen, the Fourth Evangelist incorporated such a miracles source into his Gospel yet, while he was influenced by its tendency to see the life of Jesus as an epiphany, he altered its theology to conform to his exclusive emphasis on the person of Jesus as the divine gift to humankind. See chapter 4, pp. 211ff.
benefits are accessible to or can be repeated in the religious experience of the individual believer.\(^1\) Finally, however, with a shift in reflective focus onto the cross, this christological paradigm can produce the realistic portrayal of Jesus required by kenotic theory. As we have seen, New Testament kenotic christology focuses clearly and exclusively on the cross, and resulted from an attempt to understand the salvific death of Jesus as the culmination of a process of self-emptying, or obedient self-abasement, which is extended backwards from the humiliation of the cross to the glory of the preexistent Christ.\(^2\) Thus, the emphasis in kenotic thought on the full assumption of the conditions, limitations, and consequences of human existence by the preexistent Christ derives from its conviction that God’s eschatological act of salvation has occurred precisely in the cross event, and represents an attempt to understand and preserve its soteriological significance. It is obvious that this christological model portrays Jesus in a manner that contrasts sharply with that of Kṛṣṇa in the Bhagavadgītā.

It is clear, to summarize, that the portrayal of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel, and indeed in primitive Christianity in general, is differentiated from the portrayal of Kṛṣṇa in the Bhagavadgītā by the fact that the incarnation is conceived as a soteriological event in itself, and that the nature of the incarnate Christ is correlated to and conditioned by the specific soteriological function attributed to him. It is also clear, moreover, that the dynamic nature

\(^1\) Koester, "One Jesus and Four Primitive Gospels," p. 188.

of this christological paradigm introduces a dialectical quality into the comparative natures of Kṛṣṇa and Jesus that precludes a static interpretation of their relationship. That is to say, depending on the specific soteriological function attributed to the incarnate Christ, its elaboration can produce a christological model such as that of the Fourth Gospel that is strikingly similar to the portrayal of Kṛṣṇa in the Gitā, or a christological model such as Paul's kenotic thought that is every bit as striking in its dissimilarities. In either instance, however, the fundamental differences with the Gitā's portrayal of Kṛṣṇa can be attributed to the underlying conviction that in the Christ event God's eschatological act of salvation has decisively occurred.

In clear contrast to the thought of the Fourth Gospel, as we have seen, the Bhagavadgitā makes no explicit soteriological investment in Kṛṣṇa's divine incarnations. Within its early Sāmkhya metaphysical framework, the Gitā asserts that the essential self of the individual is eternally distinct from prakṛti and thus from the individual bodies it inhabits in the course of samsāra. In consequence, the puruṣa, or ātman, is ontologically free from the beginning. As there is no escape from action for the body because it is prakṛti, so there is no ontological bondage for the puruṣa because, in its essential nature, it is free of prakṛti and identical with Brahman. Within this context, salvation, or mokṣa, is conceived as the final dissociation of the puruṣa from the material personality to which it is bound in samsāra, and its personal communion with God. This notion of salvation clearly precludes a conception of incarnation as a soteriological event in itself, because, succinctly stated, it is neither necessary nor possible for the incarnations of Kṛṣṇa to effect a
change in the eternal puruṣa that is ontologically free from the beginning. In consequence, the soteriological action of God through the avatāras is conceived in the Bhagavadgītā as a cooperation with the efforts of the individual toward release, and Kṛṣṇa is presented as a mediator of salvation, a divine revealer who imparts to humankind a knowledge of the supreme, personal God, and the way of ultimate release through karma-, jñāna-, and bhaktiyogas.

In the Bhagavadgītā, in short, Kṛṣṇa’s divine incarnations are presented not as soteriological events in themselves, but rather as preeminent manifestations of a general movement of grace from God to humankind. But this in turn means that, in clear contrast to the thought of the Fourth Gospel, the soteriological functions and incarnate nature of Kṛṣṇa remain separate, and his nature is conceived on the basis of soteriologically neutral considerations. This is evident from the fact that, in the Gitā, God’s creative acts of incarnation are presented as events strictly parallel to the creation of the macro-cosmic universe. In consequence, it is clear that the question concerning the reality of Kṛṣṇa’s incarnations in the Gitā is synonymous with that concerning the reality of the cosmos itself. An adequate response to this question, therefore, requires a consideration both of the nature and role of the divine māyā in the process of creation, and of the nature of prakṛti itself, the metaphysical substratum from which all beings arise.¹

¹ As we have seen, when considered within the context of the religio-philosophical paradigm of the Bhagavadgītā, the parallel conception of the micro- and macrocosmic creative acts of God precludes a docetic interpretation of the avatāra event. The fundamental meaning of the divine māyā by which
The appropriation of this uniquely Indian incarnation paradigm in the Bhagavadgītā itself has significant implications for the comparative natures of Kṛṣṇa and Jesus. Specifically, while the incarnation paradigm that underlies the Fourth Gospel can, with a shift of christological focus onto the cross, produce the realistic emphases of kenotic thought, there is no basis in the Gitā on which to speak of such emphases, which are quite foreign to its thought world. We have attempted to demonstrate above that kenotic christology developed on the basis of uniquely Christian soteriological assumptions: specifically the belief that salvation is an eschatological act of God that occurs, moreover, precisely in the cross of Jesus.¹ Thus, the emphasis in kenotic thought on the humility and lowliness of the incarnate Christ is conditioned by his soteriological function and derives from the attempt to understand and preserve the unique significance of the cross. It is obvious, however, that the Bhagavadgītā shares none of these theological convictions. First, as we have seen, the Gitā defines salvation as the realization of the transcendent freedom of the eternal puruṣa and its personal union with God. Second, within this framework, the avatāra event in the Gitā is presented as an event of mediation and, thus, of assisting grace, but not as a soteriological event in itself. In consequence, therefore, the nature of Kṛṣṇa’s incarnations in the Gitā remain unrelated to and unconditioned by his soteriological functions. Thus, in the Bhagavadgītā, which shares none of the assumptions these acts are effected in the Gitā is the creative power of God, and the resulting creation is, again, irreducibly real.

¹ See above chapter 3, pp. 113ff.
on which kenotic christology is based, there is neither the need nor the possibility of elaborating a kenotic-type model of incarnation.

It follows from our analysis of the Bhagavadgītā’s unique incarnation paradigm that any attempt to evaluate its notion of incarnation on the basis of Christian kenotic thought superimposes soteriological and theological assumptions onto its situation that are uniquely Christian and, thus, totally foreign to its thought. In consequence, such an attempt introduces a pseudo-problem into the framework of the Gītā that obscures rather than illuminates its notion of incarnation. Thus, in approaching the Bhagavadgītā we should not ask whether its notion of incarnation reflects a kenotic emphasis, but rather whether such an emphasis could represent an adequate solution to any problem—soteriological or otherwise—that is reflected in the document. On the basis of our analysis we must respond with a definitive no. While it is clear that the Gītā’s notion of incarnation is similar to that of the Fourth Gospel, it is also clear that, based on uniquely Indian assumptions, it stands or falls on the strength of its proper emphases.

Conclusion

In this study we have attempted to illuminate the comparative relationship between the notions of avatāra and incarnation in the Bhagavadgītā and in the Gospel of John while respecting the irreducible and self-sufficient nature of each document. Our conclusions themselves reflect this procedure. We have seen, on the one hand, that there are substantial
similarities between their respective notions of incarnation. First, they reflect a similar mythical pattern of incarnation that includes preexistence, incarnation, soteriological activity, and ascent. Again, within this common framework both the Gītā and John express a general conception of incarnation that is realistic yet non-kenotic. In the Gītā the avatāra event represents a microcosmic parallel to the creation of the universe by God and, as such, shares in its irreducible reality. Nevertheless, as we have seen, the incarnation of Kṛṣṇa in the Bhagavadgītā is no less an epiphany of his divine characteristics. Throughout the poem Kṛṣṇa’s divine freedom, omniscience, and omnipotence are revealed even in his incarnate state. Again, the Fourth Gospel portrays the incarnation in terms that lack any kenotic features. In consequence of his underlying prophetic assumptions, that is, John elaborates a christology in which neither the act of incarnation nor the passion mark a change in the nature of the Christ and, thus, the incarnation is presented as the earthly sojourn of the heavenly revealer who always maintains his unity with the Father and whose descent into the realm of darkness occasions the eschatological encounter with his divine glory.

On the other hand, as we have seen, the assumptions that underlie the respective appropriations of the incarnation pattern in the Bhagavadgītā and in John, which determine their portrayals of Kṛṣṇa and Jesus, vary considerably. The fundamental differences between the two notions of incarnation derive from the fact that John, like primitive Christianity at large, conceives the incarnation as a soteriological event in itself. This central assumption clearly underlies the christocentric emphases of the
Gospel on the uniqueness and absolute soteriological primacy of the incarnation, and, significantly, conditions even the nature of the incarnate Christ. The implications of this incarnation paradigm for the comparative natures of Kṛṣṇa and Jesus lie in the fact that it is dynamic and, thus, introduces a dialectical quality into their relationship. That is to say, depending on the soteriological function attributed to Jesus, it can produce either a christological model like that of the Fourth Gospel that is strikingly similar to the portrayal of Kṛṣṇa in the Gītā, or a kenotic model that is just as striking in its dissimilarities. In clear contrast to the thought of the Fourth Gospel, the Bhagavadgītā conceives avatāra as the preeminent manifestation of a general movement of grace from God to humankind, a cooperating grace that promises assistance to the individual at every stage of her or his path toward release. It is, again, this central assumption that is reflected in the unique emphases of avatāra theory in the Bhagavadgītā. First, within a metaphysical framework in which the world and human existence itself are conceived as eternally recurring cycles, God's gracious offer of divine assistance through the avatāras quite naturally issues in the the notion of repeated and even multiple incarnations. Again, the Gītā's portrayal of avatāra as a general movement of grace permits a more broadly conceived conception of God's activity on humankind's behalf. This is evident from the fact that in the Gītā Kṛṣṇa's incarnations have a two-fold purpose to fulfill. Not only do they mediate salvation through the self-revelation of the Godhead and the revelation of the unified way to release, but they redeem and safeguard the Hindu social order of which Kṛṣṇa is the self-proclaimed guardian. Finally, in
consequence of the fact that Kṛṣṇa's divine incarnations are not presented as
soteriological events in themselves, the soteriological functions and incarnate
close to the comparative relationship between avatāra and incarnation can in some way
contribute to the mutual understanding and respect necessary for inter-faith
discussion. The similarities between these notions of incarnation should
encourage such dialogue, while their fundamental differences should
engender mutual respect and even admiration. In the Bhagavadgītā, Kṛṣṇa
promises to incarnate himself at need for the protection of the good and the
destruction of evil.\footnote{Gītā 4.5ff.} As we have seen, within its unique religio-philosophical
context, this notion of repeated avatāras strengthens the concept of God's
gracious activity on behalf of humankind. That is to say, when, as in the Gītā,
the soteriological action of God through the avatāras is conceived as a
cooperation with the efforts of every individual toward release, the notion of

its possible repetition whenever the need arises indicates the bounty of God's soteriological activity on humankind's behalf and represents a more adequate fulfillment of its purpose. Thus, to subordinate the Gītā's notion of avatarā to the Christian notion of incarnation would be to lose the significant insight that God's gracious activity on behalf of humankind cannot be restricted to one incarnate existence. But, again, the Evangelist promises that in the incarnate Logos humankind encounters God's very self-revelation and, thus, is placed before the eschatological decision of life or death. To believe in Jesus is to pass already from death to life, to reject him is to remain in darkness.\textsuperscript{1} Thus, to subordinate John's notion of the incarnate Logos to the Indian notion of avatarā would be to lose the affirmation that God's soteriological intervention on behalf of humankind is uniquely sufficient in itself. This study has been undertaken in an attempt to clarify and, thus, to preserve the promise of both perspectives.

\textsuperscript{1} John 3.18, 36.
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