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Secret epiphanies: The hermeneutics of revealing and concealing in the Fourth Gospel

Hancock, Frank Charles, III, Ph.D.
Rice University, 1994

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SECRET EPİPHANIES:
THE HERMENEUTICS OF REVEALING AND CONCEALING
IN THE FOURTH GOSPEL

by

FRANK CHARLES HANCOCK III

A THESIS SUBMITTED
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

APPROVED, THESIS COMMITTEE

Werner H. Kelber, Isla Carroll and Percy E.
Turner Professor of Religious Studies, Director

Gerald P. McKenny, Assistant Professor of
Religious Studies

Stephen A. Tyler, Herbert S. Autrey Professor
of Anthropology and Linguistics

Houston, Texas
May, 1994
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Frank Charles Hancock III

1994
ABSTRACT

Secret Epiphanies:  
The Hermeneutics of Revealing and Concealing  
in the Fourth Gospel

Frank Charles Hancock III

In this thesis I attempt to demonstrate that the so-called "Johannine problem" should be re-constituted as a narrative that deconstructs unity and coherence through a dynamic process of concealing and revealing, revealing and concealing. With that as the operating thesis, it follows that the goal of this project is to demonstrate that the Gospel of John resists interpretation and understanding when read on its own terms.

In Chapter 1 Johannine secrecy is placed in the context of the work of William Wrede who first introduced the notion of secrecy into gospel studies, and in doing so, raised the issue of understanding in biblical hermeneutics. Wrede concluded that the notion of Jesus as a bringer of truth and light is not fully sustained in the narrative of John’s Gospel as an unbroken whole.

In Chapter 2 Rudolf Bultmann’s hermeneutic and exposition of the Fourth Gospel is presented as an example of one who has astutely perceived the central issues with which a specifically modern program for biblical interpretation must wrestle; that is, the alien character of the world views represented in biblical language.

In Chapter 3 Martin Heidegger’s hermeneutic of concealing and revealing is introduced through his concept of aletheia, or truth as the interplay between conceal-
ing and revealing. It is this concept which provides the cornerstone of this thesis. In Heidegger's terms, secrecy is the ground of revelation. What gospel narratives reveal is also withdrawn again into concealment, thus making the valid interpretation sought by traditional critics extremely difficult to achieve.

In the final two chapters of this thesis the Prologue of the Fourth Gospel (John 1:1-18) and the story of the trial of Jesus before Pilate (John 18:28-19:16a) are examined as test cases for the hermeneutic developed by Heidegger. Using Heidegger's hermeneutical categories I show that the Gospel of John is as much a story about concealing as it is about revelation. The narrative pushes toward the full revelation, but revelation takes place in concealing. Revelation is promised, but the promise is left unfulfilled.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

When a project like this one is completed at mid-life and mid-career there are many whose influence and support need to be acknowledged, but space will allow only a few to be singled out. I want first to acknowledge those who along the way provided encouragement and support. I am indebted to Charlie, Betty Jean and Don, all of whom expressed confidence that I could complete the requirements of graduate school when I did not share their certainty. I am also indebted to Kay, my good friend, who has been my constant companion from the beginning of this project to the end. I gratefully acknowledge the supportive role played the people of the Holy Trinity and Emmanuel United Methodist Churches in Houston, Texas while I was still in the early phases of this project. However, I am especially grateful for the members of the Paul United Methodist Church in Paul, Idaho who, during the last hectic months I was getting the final drafts of the dissertation ready, seemed to know instinctively when I needed the time and space to accomplish the task at hand.

I wish to express my appreciation to my thesis committee, Professors Stephen Tyler and Gerald McKenny, and especially to my advisor, Professor Werner Kelber. Dr. Kelber has been everything one could hope for in a thesis director. Above all, he took my work seriously, read every draft carefully, provided thorough instructions for improvement, and always had a word of encouragement to keep me going. I gratefully acknowledge my indebtedness to Dr. Kelber for his participation in this project.

This work would never have been completed without the help of Barbara, my best friend and soulmate. She not only provided the major portion of the financial
support for our family so I could be free to work on this project, but she also
patiently, and without judgment, heard every excuse I could muster for doing other
things when I was supposed to be working on my dissertation. More than that,
however, Barbara read every word of every draft, and along the way made many
suggestions for significant improvement. Finally, I want to acknowledge my deepest
gratitude, love, and respect for all that Frank and Eleene have meant to me over the
years of my life. To them I joyfully dedicate this dissertation.
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INTRODUCTION

The history of Johannine scholarship is characterized by the struggle for clarity with a mysterious and problematic text. The history of scholarship is replete with solutions to this "Johannine problem," which has become the most commonly used term to describe a broad range of issues (including, historical, literary, and theological) associated with the problematics of reading the Fourth Gospel.¹ The difficulties of reading and interpreting the Fourth Gospel were recognized very early. Eusebius (ca 260-ca 340 C.E.) called upon the prestige of Clement of Alexandria (ca 150-ca 215 C.E.) to justify his solution to his version of "the Johannine problem"—why the Gospel of John was written last.

But John, the last, being conscious that external facts (literally, "things of the body") had been exhibited in the Gospels, on the urging of his disciples and inspired by the Spirit, composed a spiritual Gospel. This is the account of

Clement. (emphasis added).  

Eusebius failed to define for his own readers what Clement meant by the word "spiritual," but the comment has been appealing enough to find its way into many introductions of the New Testament. The authority attached to such ancient characterizations of New Testament literature, however, usually does more to shortcircuit discussions about the problematics associated with gospel narratives than it does to promote dialogue. Taken as it stands, Clement's solution was not an accurate reflection on the narrative as a whole because, as some modern interpreters have remarked, the gospel may be "spiritual" in many respects, but it also has its "earthy moments," as well.

At the very least, Clement's comment indicates that the classic dichotomy between "body" and "spirit" had been established at a very early date. This distinction between "body" and "spirit," or "literal" and "spiritual," became even more pronounced when Origen (ca 185-ca 254 C.E.) published his Commentary on the Gospel According to John in the third century. By implication, Origen argued that

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the "spiritual" content of the Gospel could be separated from its narrative form. That is to say, the form and content of biblical language are not always identical; the meaning of a text is not necessarily what it says on a literal, or "bodily" level. And with that idea, the now famous "eclipse of biblical narrative" was well under way.\(^6\)

Origen not only separated the spiritual from the literal, but he also argued that the spiritual level could be attained only by the Spirit-led exegete. In Origen's terms, the meaning of the Gospel of John, "the first fruits of the Gospels,"\(^7\) is not open to just anyone. Only those who have leaned on Jesus' breast and received Mary as his or her mother will be able to understand the Gospel of John. \(^8\) The Fourth Gospel itself, that is, the words of the written text, is a mere symbol that points beyond itself to the "spiritual gospel," as Origen called it. The Gospel of John, then, conceals the secrets of God hidden in the mysteries of Christ's words.\(^9\) Thus, the written text of the Fourth Gospel, which is constituted by words "stored up in the earthen treasures of paltry language,"\(^10\) can be read or heard by anyone, but the true meaning of the narrative can only be discerned by those who can say: "We have the mind of Christ, that we may know the things that are given us by God."\(^11\) In other words, the

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\(^8\) Ibid.

\(^9\) Ibid., 1,40.

\(^10\) Ibid., 1,24.

\(^11\) Ibid.
"paltry language," or the "bare letter," conceals the truth of the spiritual meaning to all except those who have "the mind of Christ."

In Origen's scheme, then, there are actually two gospels. One, which anybody can read and understand, consisting of the literal language which tells the story of Jesus' teachings and activities. The other gospel, "the spiritual gospel," is the truth behind the literal words of the gospel story. In that light, the task of exegesis, according to Origen, is

...to translate the gospel perceptible to the senses into the spiritual gospel. For what is the interpretation of the gospel perceptible to the senses unless it is translated into the spiritual gospel? It is little or nothing, even though the common people believe they receive the things which are revealed from the literal sense. 12

For Origen, translating "the gospel perceptible to the senses into the spiritual gospel" implicated hermeneutical categories rather than epistemological categories. The emphasis here is on "translation" rather than on "perception" and cognition. In this sense, then, "spiritual" refers to the way one reads, it is to be let in on the secret of the "unspeakable mysteries" contained in the Gospel. 13 Understanding occurs only for those who have been "initiated into what is hidden or obscure." 14 Thus, in Origen's terms, one can arrive at an understanding of the Gospel only by reading the text in "the spirit of Christ," or in "the mind of Christ." According to Origen, all

12 Ibid., 1,45-6.


biblical texts have multiple and hidden meanings which God uses to stimulate and educate the more intelligent readers, while remaining concealed and hidden from those for whom a fuller glimpse of the truth might prove harmful.

Gerald Bruns has argued that for Origen, as well as for other ancient biblical thinkers, the hiddenness of meaning, or secrecy, was an indispensable category.\textsuperscript{15} Using the category of secrecy ancient critics could think of a biblical text as being revelatory while it simultaneously concealed what is most essential to its essence. In its ordinary sense, secrecy is involved with the properties of mystery, obscurity, and hiddenness, and to ancient biblical critics like Origen secrecy was the quintessential feature of sacred literature.\textsuperscript{16} Origen understood better than most modern interpreters, perhaps, that when one has reached the place where the text no longer makes sense, it is precisely there that one is in the presence of secrecy and mystery. And it is only in the presence of secrecy and mystery that one can then even begin to ponder the text in earnest.

Thus, Bruns argues, that for ancient interepeters, biblical narratives may be plain or obscure, but never meaningless. "As if to avoid the thought of meaninglessness the figure of the secret (or of darkness or veiling) is brought into play as a way of designating that which has been set apart or out of the way of understanding,


or that which remains to be said or understood."\(^\text{17}\) For Origen, then, secrecy is the form in which meaning makes its appearance: it is a word for meaning or, more exactly, it is a way of figuring meaning in the absence of the thing itself, or even a word for it.\(^\text{18}\)

Origen assumed that if one reads the Gospel "in the spirit of Christ" the literal sense of the narrative will eventually give way and the spiritual meaning can be realized. The opposite possibility never seemed to have occurred to him; that is to say, the possibility that the text might not yield its spiritual sense to those who were initiated into the "unspeakable mysteries." Origen never seems to have considered the possibility that even if the reader could read the text in the "right way," it might not be possible to translate the gospel from its literal sense into the spiritual sense.

In light of the question raised by this concern, the thesis of this project can be stated in simple terms: The "Johannine problem," so-called, is deeply involved in the issues of concealing and revealing, secrecy and mystery. If that is the case, then the Gospel of John is characteristic of most good literature in that it denies the positivist creed which assumes that everything can be expressed clearly, and that interpretation should yield something plain and obvious.\(^\text{19}\) This raises the "Johannine problem" to the level of a hermeneutical problem that has as much to do with the text's ability to resist understanding as it does in yielding to interpretation. Thus, the so-called

\(^{17}\) Bruns, Inventions, p. 22.

\(^{18}\) Bruns, Inventions, p. 21.

"Johannine problem" is in reality constituted in a narrative that deconstructs unity and coherence through a dynamic process of concealing and disclosure, disclosure and concealing. With that as an operating thesis, it follows that the goal of this project will be to demonstrate how the Gospel of John resists understanding when read on its own terms.

This project will begin by looking at the history of Johannine scholarship from William Wrede to the present with the idea of reviewing several selected hermeneutical models which acknowledge the possibility of a dynamic of concealing/revealing at work in gospel literature.

The work of William Wrede comprises a significant first chapter in this study because, with the possible exception of David Friedrich Strauss' Life of Jesus, no book in the history of biblical scholarship has had the impact of Wrede's Das Messiasgeheimnis in den Evangelien.20 Albert Schweitzer, for one, said Das Messiasgeheimnis was like a bomb dropped in the midst of biblical scholarship.21 It was as important a contribution to biblical criticism as Freud's The Interpretation of Dreams (1900), and Darwin's The Origin of Species (1859), were to Western


intellectual history in general. Its effect cannot be exaggerated. It has taken two
generations to digest Wrede's insights and, in some respects, his ideas still have not
been completely assimilated into the mainstream of scholarship. No one doubts that
the book is dated now, and few scholars would even accept the term "messianic
secret" as the operative narrative feature, but in many ways the issues raised by
Wrede, in his reading of the Gospel of Mark (and John), continue to influence the
ways gospel literature is read. Because Wrede was the first in modern times to
introduce the notion of secrecy into gospel studies, and in doing so, to raise the issue
of understanding in biblical hermeneutics, the Wredestrasse is still the Hauptstrasse

The importance of Wrede's work for Marcan studies is well known, but his
work in the Fourth Gospel has remained relatively obscure. Yet, when he applied the
secrecy motif to the Fourth Gospel, Wrede concluded that the notion of Jesus as a
bringer of truth and light is not fully present in the narrative of John as an unbroken
whole, or as a closely conceived idea. He insisted that to understand the Fourth
Gospel all its motifs of revealing and concealing must be considered.

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22 I am indebted to Werner Kelber for this insight regarding the significance of Wrede's
contribution to intellectual history. On the continuing importance of Wrede, see also: Chris-
1983), esp. pp. 1-28, and 97-98; see also, Rudolf Bultmann, "The New Approach to the
Synoptic Problem," Existence and Faith: The Shorter Writings of Rudolf Bultmann, pp. 35-

23 Christopher Tuckett, "The Problem of the Messianic Secret," pp. 1-28 in The Messiah-

24 Norman Perrin, "The Wredestrasse Becomes the Hauptstrasse: Reflections on the
In chapter two we will turn from Wrede to Rudolf Bultmann's hermeneutic and exposition of the Fourth Gospel. As we make this turn, we will observe the shift that took place between nineteenth century liberalism, represented by Wrede’s radical insistence upon the New Testament as a source for history and not theology, and the twentieth century reaction to liberalism, represented by Bultmann’s insistence upon using the New Testament as source for history and theology. Wrede had discounted the New Testament documents as possible sources of revelation and Bultmann counters by arguing that it is precisely in the documents of the New Testament that our understanding of revelation must first be grounded.

Bultmann also makes a significant contribution to this study in that he astutely perceived the central issues with which a specifically modern program for biblical interpretation must wrestle; namely, the alien character of the worldviews represented in the biblical writings for twentieth-century readers. But Bultmann was also pre-modern to the extent that he, like Origen, observed how the language of gospel texts does not always mean what it says. The exegete is thus required to work through the literal level of the text to expose its "deeper, hidden meaning." In this regard, Bultmann observed how the tension between concealing and revealing is implicated in the mythological language used by the Fourth Evangelist, and as such, the text often subverts the modern reader's ability to understand.

In the third chapter Martin Heidegger's hermeneutics will be introduced into

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the discussion of concealing and revealing in gospel narratives because he has suggested some ways of reflecting on the hermeneutical dynamics of concealing/revealing that go beyond both Wrede and Bultmann. Heidegger's hermeneutic will open avenues to the Gospel of John that allow the reader to consider all the motifs of the gospel, the unsaid as well as the said, untruth as well as truth, and darkness as well as light. There is an uncanny linguistic similarity between many of Heidegger's categories and some of the key terms used in the Gospel of John. Thus, there is no need to impose Heidegger's philosophical categories on a narrative gospel, indeed, it almost seems as if Heidegger developed many of his categories in conversation with the Fourth Evangelist. One of the most striking points of contact between Heidegger and the Gospel of John, as we shall see, is in the relationship that he established between aletheia (ἀλήθεια) and logos (λόγος).

Heidegger is significant for this discussion because he, more than anyone else, radicalized the hermeneutic tradition by undercutting many of the previous methodological presuppositions at work in Western philosophy. Defined by Heidegger, hermeneutics is not concerned with formulating the methods or rules of interpretation, but in coming to terms with the conditions that make understanding possible. More importantly, it is concerned with the possibility of understanding itself. For Heidegger, hermeneutics is the working out of the conditions on which the possibility of interpretation depend. 26

The discussion of concealing/revealing will continue by using the Prologue of the Fourth Gospel (John 1:1-18) and the story of Jesus’ trial before Pilate (John 18:28-19:16a) as tests cases of the hermeneutic developed by Heidegger. Using Heidegger’s hermeneutical categories, we will see that the Gospel of John is as much a story about what is concealed as it is about what is revealed. On the surface the gospel is straight-forward. Jesus, the preexistent Logos who is truth and light, reveals God. Yet, the preexistent Logos is also hidden behind the veil of flesh. A dissembling, as it were, occurs when the Logos enters into the human realm disguised "in the flesh." This gospel is about revelation, to be sure, but its revelation takes place in concealing. It is about the light which emerges into the darkness and remains surrounded by the darkness. Indeed, revelation takes place in the very midst of the mystery of darkness.

It just might be that Origen was wrong. The Gospel of John might not lend itself to translation from the literal to the spiritual. Said in other words, the narrative logic of the Fourth Gospel itself, when read for what it says, not only presents difficulties that block meaning, but the Gospel also undermines meaning, conceals revelation, and prevents disclosure in ways that Origen could not have foreseen. Unlike Origen, who when confronted with an obscure text, eclipsed the literal sense of the narrative with a spiritual interpretation, the reading advocated in this project will stay with the narrative logic long enough to feel the impact that the narrative and textual difficulties encountered in the Fourth Gospel have on reading and understanding.
Chapter 1

SECRET AND REVELATION: WREDE

Wrede's Hermeneutical Presuppositions

William Wrede's place in the history of biblical scholarship is secure if for no other reason than that he represents the climax of many of the most significant discussions that took place in the academy of biblical scholars during the nineteenth century. The hermeneutic that guided Wrede's approach to biblical studies was developed in an essay entitled, "The Task and Methods of 'New Testament Theology,'" written just before the turn of the century (1897).¹ In that essay, Wrede raised the question of what the phrase "New Testament Theology" means and whether it is an appropriate description of the task. As Wrede saw it, there was a contradiction between the methods used to study the New Testament as a "historical" document and the methods used by theologians.

In Wrede's terms, the phrase itself, "New Testament Theology," does not describe the task of New Testament research because the New Testament itself is concerned more with religion than with theology.² Thus, his aim was to separate

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² Ibid., p. 116.
"theology" from "history" so the integrity of the historical aspects of New Testament studies could be maintained. In place of the term "theology" Wrede substituted "the history of religions" as the proper name for the discipline. This is not surprising since Wrede himself was a member of a study group of young scholars in Göttingen in the late 1880s who became famous as the "history of religions school." Among those in the group were Albert Eichhorn, William Bousset, Herman Gunkel. Ernst Troeltsch and Wilhelm Heitmüller joined the group later. Johannes Weiss was also associated with the group, and had similar interests. These scholars were united in their opposition to Albrecht Ritschl (1822-1889), whose theology was built upon a historical foundation, to be sure, but who arbitrarily abandoned that foundation at the point where it conflicted with his doctrine, especially his belief in the canon. The Göttingen group argued that if historical methods were applied in theology, then they must be applied consistently, even if it meant that the older dogmatic methods of doing theology had to be abandoned.

Wrede, Bousset, and Gunkel were biblical scholars; that is to say, historians and not systematic theologians or philosophers of religion. Their work in the narrower field of historical theology both continued and corrected the great liberals of the previous generation, i.e., Harnack, Wellhausen, and Holtzmann, who had themselves advanced beyond Ritschl. These older scholars were soon outflanked by the younger advocates of a purely historical theology.\(^3\) However, both groups were

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in fundamental agreement that the subject-matter of the Bible was human religion, and both groups were theologically interested in religion rather than doctrine. But the younger historians, Wrede, et. al., drew more methodological conclusions and criticized the literary orientation of their teachers' historical practice. They assumed, for instance, that biblical literature was the result of literary processes, but that religion was more a matter of traditions and popular conceptions handed down orally than it is a matter of written traditions. The history of biblical religion, therefore, cannot be treated like the history of philosophy or literature. The canons previously used to study literary sources are inadequate when one tries to account for the background and meaning of religious documents.

Thus, the "history of religions school" was interested in the origin and the history of traditions. This involved both the pre-literary history of biblical documents, as well as the historical processes which led to the composition of those documents. Unlike Gunkel and Bousset, Wrede did not study the mythic origins of the biblical traditions, because he was more interested in the New Testament traditions prior to their inclusion in the biblical documents. More than anyone before him, he made significant contributions to the reconstruction of the history of that tradition.\(^4\)

In Wrede's view, then, New Testament theology was a purely historical discipline engaged in the investigation of the historical character of early Christian religion. In his mind, it was an anomaly for New Testament theology to study

\(^4\) Ibid., p. 11.
"dogma," or "doctrine."

One cannot speak of "early Christian history of dogma," because
dogma in the proper sense only comes into view at the end of this
period. The appropriate name for the subject-matter is: early Christian
history of religion, or rather: the history of early Christian religion and
theology.... the name is obviously controlled by the subject-matter, not
vice versa.5

Thus, modern historical methods exclude on principle such dogmatic presuppositions
as the notion of revelation.6 The historian is guided by "a pure disinterested concern
for knowledge," and his or her own presuppositions must be kept separate from the
object of research, i.e., the New Testament.7

In addition to maintaining a disinterested objectivity, New Testament "theology,"
as a historical discipline, had for its boundaries all of the available sources as
primary data. Indeed, to confine one's attention to the canonical writings of the New
Testament is to allow theological considerations to determine one's conception of the
historical task. Expressed in Wrede's terms: "no New Testament writing was born
with the predicate 'canonical' attached."8 The point is that even a term like "canon"
implies a dogmatic category, and as such, must not be allowed to influence a histori-


6 In a footnote (#4), Wrede says that "Biblical theology investigates the New Testament
writings first of all without presuppositions, to find out the content of the biblical religion.
Then afterwards a judgment is made about what is discovered: it is revelation in such and
such a sense--i.e. the judgment is demonstrated. For before I can call something revelation, I
have to know what this 'something' is. But then it is clear that the question of revelation is
one for dogmatics, and no concern of biblical theology," Ibid., p. 183.

7 Ibid., p. 70.

8 Ibid.
cal account of early Christianity. With the whole range of early Christian literature as his database, Wrede was able, as we shall see, to bring extracanonical documents like *Pistis Sophia* into the purview of his historical concern.

The object of Wrede's attack in this programmatic essay was H. J. Holtzmann's two-volume *Textbook of New Testament Theology* which had just appeared. In his work Holtzmann had rejected the more conservative views of Bernhard Weiss about authorship, the isolation of New Testament literature from its surrounding thought-world, and especially the view that revelation could be presupposed by the discipline. There was much about Holtzmann's work with which Wrede agreed, but Holtzmann had also retained the more traditional term, "New Testament Theology," and he had restricted himself to the canonical documents. Wrede saw this as a serious flaw in Holtzmann's work because it was "oriented upon the New Testament documents rather than upon the history to which they witness, and an assumption that the content of the New Testament was (revealed) doctrine." Wrede rejected outright any notion that the needs of the church could influence the historian's presentation of New Testament theology, or that the church could restrict to the canon the documents to be studied. Historical research has its own goals and it requires methods appropriate to its own sources. So throughout the essay at hand, Wrede argued that New Testament theologians, like Holtzmann, should recognize the intellectual revolution that had already taken place in liberal theology in

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10 Wrede, "The Task and Methods of 'New Testament Theology'," p. 84f.
which the old dogmatic method of deduction from revealed data had been replaced by historical induction from human evidence. As such, Wrede does not argue about theological presuppositions, but about historical method. Since New Testament research is still sometimes influenced by theological and ideological interests, Wrede’s account of what historical research involves is therefore still worth pondering, but his own theological presuppositions are also worth considering because of the implications of what he says about the nature of New Testament theology if left unexamined. It is his own theological presuppositions which motivate his claim that the subject-matter of New Testament theology is not theology or doctrine, but religion.

The primary emphasis of Wrede’s hermeneutic, for which the sharp distinction between the literary sources and the historical subject-matter sets the stage,\(^\text{11}\) is that the historian is concerned with what lies behind the gospel texts, in this case the history of religion. The theological motive for this shift in New Testament studies was that the old authority of the biblical text as revelation had disintegrated in the harsh light of historical research. Thus, in Wrede’s mind, the biblical record has value only as a source for the history of Christianity. If Christianity is, thus, to be defended at all, it cannot be defended by appealing to the New Testament as revelation, but only by an appeal to religion visible in history.\(^\text{12}\) Wrede tried to work out the implications of this hermeneutical principle in his major work, Das Messias.

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\(^{11}\) Ibid., p. 79-81.

geheimnis in den Evangelien (1901). Wrede’s methodology in this monograph was not to study the Gospel of Mark as a literary witness to revelation, but to study it as a witness to historical events which presuppose the theological ideas of revelation and secrecy which were already operating in the tradition of the religion.

This alternative between revelation and religion reconstructed from historical sources had been avoided earlier by F. C. Baur of Tübingen (1792-1860), the father of historical theology. Baur’s Hegelian metaphysics allowed him to see the totality of history as itself revelation. So, for Baur the subject-matter of Christian history, and so too of New Testament theology, conceived as the history of early Christian thought, was the movement through history of the divine or infinite spirit which could be apprehended by the historian. The period between Baur and Wrede had produced little methodological reflection. So when Wrede’s essay appeared, it signified an important advance, and as such, remains a landmark in the history of the discipline because of his single-minded focus on the central importance of historical understanding for New Testament studies.

During the first half of the twentieth century Wrede’s suggestions about how historians of early Christianity should arrange and delimit the discipline did in fact prevail among critical scholars. At individual points subsequent research suggested further refinements, but the general direction was along the lines pioneered by Wrede

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and his contemporaries.\textsuperscript{15}

Wrede created problems for theologians, however, when he described the task and methods of historical research without reference to the interests of Christian theologians. As far as he was concerned, however, those problems had to be solved by theologians themselves. His responsibility was to his own historical work, regardless of any consequences it might have for theology. What the systematic theologian did with the historian's results was of little concern to Wrede.\textsuperscript{16} The historian's goals are dictated by the discipline itself and its subject-matter, and not by external interests. Wrede's sole concern was to rid his discipline of the remnants of such heteronomy.

It is to Wrede's credit that Christian theology has to take seriously the concerns that he raised: the answer to the question of what Christianity essentially is can be answered only in reference to what it had been. And the answers based on history inevitably came into competition with answers based upon claims to revelation. As the central locus of revelation, and the most important sources for the history, the New Testament was the natural battleground for historians and theologians. The New Testament has always been a uniquely important source for Christian theology, and the concept of revelation used in association with it reflects this fact. Yet, the character of the New Testament as a source for theology had been understood in different ways. Sacred text and historical source represent the sharp alterna-

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., p. 18.

\textsuperscript{16} Wrede, "The Task and Methods of 'New Testament Theology,'" p. 69.
tives posed by Wrede and the hermeneutical issues which have occupied Protestant theology for the past seventy-five years are still related to these two basic poles of Christian theology.

**Wrede on the Hermeneutics of Secrecy**

When Wrede published his *Das Messiasgeheimnis* in 1901 it inaugurated a new epoch in gospel criticism. Many nineteenth-century critics before Wrede had tried to use the Gospels to recover the Jesus of history, unencumbered by ecclesiastical dogma. In addition, the earlier studies of Holtzmann and others had convinced the majority of scholars of the literary priority of Mark’s Gospel. That idea was then taken as an indication of Mark’s historical reliability. As a result, a number of "lives of Jesus" were written,\(^{17}\) and all based their chronology on the Marcan outline. Many of those studies also centered on the idea of Jesus’ gradual revelation of his own conviction that he was the Messiah. Wrede’s work had such a stirring impact on New Testament studies because it was his thesis that the secrecy motif was a dogmatic concept that was not directly transferable to the life of the historical Jesus. In other words, secrecy was not part of the consciousness acted out by the historical Jesus. In Wrede’s assessment, then, the Gospel of Mark could not be construed as history, but must be looked upon as an interpretation of a preceding tradition.\(^{18}\)

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Ironically enough, it was Wrede, the purist historian, who arrived at his theses regarding messianic secrecy by taking seriously the narrative logic of the gospels. Long before Hans Frei lamented "the eclipse of biblical narrative," as a matter of fact, Wrede had argued that most critics of gospel literature were far too eager "to leave the terrain of the evangelist’s account" in order to utilize it for historical purposes. That was a remarkable statement for a student of the Bible to make in 1901, but even more remarkably, Wrede commented on the communication which takes place between the narrator and readers. Based on his reading of the text as a narrative, Wrede observed that the narrative logic of Mark (and to some extent that of the Fourth Gospel as well) was dominated by what he called the "messianic secret."

The narrative dynamic that Wrede observed was plotted in the gospel primarily through Mark’s characterization of the disciples. "According to the Gospel of Mark," Wrede said, "the disciples show themselves throughout the story as incapable of understanding Jesus" (Mk 4:13, 40-41; 6:50-52; 7:18; 8:16-21; 9:5-6, 19; 10:24; 14:37-41). The idea was presented by Mark in various ways: the disciples either lacked insight or faith, or they were astonished or frightened. Each of these variant themes in the plot suggest that for the disciples, much is concealed.

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21 Ibid., pp. 5-6, 202.

22 Ibid., p. 101.

23 Ibid., p. 103.
There is in the plot, however, a correlate to the disciples' failure to understand. They are also the primary recipients of revelation.\textsuperscript{24} The disciples represent the inner circle of companions who witness Jesus' self-manifestation. They are the ones to whom "has been given the secret of the kingdom of God" (Mk 4:11). Through various ways in the plot this summary statement is acted out. For instance, the disciples receive the meaning of the parables. They also receive special revelations of the passion and resurrection. In the same way, the miracles, like the stilling of the storm, the feeding of the multitudes, and the raising of Jairus' daughter all point toward a manifestation of who Jesus is.\textsuperscript{25}

But even as an attempt is made to disclose Jesus' messiahship to the disciples, much remained concealed to the latter because of their lack of understanding—until the resurrection when the scales will fall from their eyes.\textsuperscript{26} At that point all that has gone before is a \textit{posteriori} revealed. What was not understood then, is now understood. Then and only then do all Jesus' revelations begin to make sense:

What was once unintelligible now becomes known and the knowledge is and has to be spread abroad. Thus in spite of their blindness the disciples receive from Jesus himself all the equipment which they necessarily must have if they are to be his witnesses and apostles. For this standing of theirs rests upon what they have themselves received from him, and obtained from tradition.\textsuperscript{27}

Wrede also held that the earliest traditions about Jesus were memories with no

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., p. 110.

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., p. 111.

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., p. 112.

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid.
particular messianic content: the secrecy theory was a way of giving those traditions a Christian meaning without altogether distorting them. In the gospel, Jesus is portrayed as concealing his mission and the disciples are portrayed as recipients of revelations which they do not understand. These two factors are resolved at the resurrection, which ends the period of self-concealment.

The interesting aspect of Wrede's theory is that he found the idea of secrecy to have a theological source that came about in the contrast between what the Christian community thought of Jesus and how his life had been understood during his ministry. The discrepancy as he saw it, was between a non-messianic life, or pre-gospel tradition, and a post-resurrection tradition which regarded Jesus as the messiah.

According to Wrede, because the early tradition about Jesus regarded him as messiah after the resurrection, those same traditions had to find a way to explain the lack of an explicit declaration of his messiahship by Jesus during his ministry. The resolution was to suggest that Jesus had indeed revealed his messiahship, but that he had done so secretly.

Wrede's thesis has been endlessly debated, and it could very well be that Jesus did indeed make messianic claims in his lifetime. But even if he did not, the traditions both of his words and of his actions could well have been christologically slanted from the very beginning. But as presented in the Gospel of Mark, every episode, every saying and story, is intended to be heard or read in the light of the resurrection. To establish the continuity between the time of the early Christian community and the life of Jesus that preceded it, Mark had to provide his readers
with a guiding thread. He found what he needed in the secrecy theory.

In Wrede’s assessment, Mark’s contribution was to gather together a mass of dissimilar material and to give it a measure of shape and consistency. The Gospel itself is the result of the interpretative resolution of two contradictory traditions which stood chronologically prior to the written narrative gospel. According to one tradition, Jesus became the messiah only at the resurrection (Rom. 1:3-4; Phil. 2:6-11; Acts 2:36). In the competing tradition, Jesus was already the messiah during his earthly life. The juxtaposition of these two traditions produced a contradiction, and the secrecy motif originated as a compromise between those competing traditions. Mark resolved the conflict in his narrative by portraying Jesus as the messiah during his earthly life, although under the veil of secrecy. His messiahship was kept secret throughout his earthly ministry, and was not to be fully revealed until the resurrection. The dynamics of this compromise cooperated in the narrative logic to bring the focus of revelation at the resurrection. Jesus’ identity had to remain hidden during his earthly ministry so that it could shine all the more brightly at the resurrection.

In his argument Wrede rejected a traditional view of Mark’s Gospel as a

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28 Ibid., p. 215.

29 Ibid., p. 217.

30 Ibid., p. 229.

progressive narrative unfolding of the life of Jesus because the commands to secrecy fail to fit the scheme of either a gradual growth in understanding by the disciples, or a gradual revelation by Jesus himself. The specific reference in this regard was Jesus' explicit claim to be the "Son of Man" in the very early stages of his ministry (cf. Mark 2:10,28). The confession at Caesarea Philippi cannot be cited as an example of steady growth in understanding by the disciples either, since they were as blind immediately before Peter's confession (Mark 8:1-9; 15-17) as they had been up to that point in the story. The disciples had learned nothing in the scenes in which the multitudes were fed (Mark 6:33-41; 8:17-21). All of the scenes which took place before the confession scene, then, indicate that the disciples were blind before Peter's confession. And from Jesus' rebuke of Peter, it is also clear that the disciples were equally blind after the confession (Mk 8:32). After reviewing this evidence, Wrede concluded that "the narrative does not look like an intentional record of messianic developments."33

After he discounted a sense of progressive messianic revelation, Wrede focused on those moments of messianic self-concealment in the text. The most obvious were the prohibitions addressed to the demons (Mk 1:25, 34; 3:12), and the prohibitions addressed to those who had witnessed the miracles (Mk 1:43-5; 5:43; 7:36; 8:26). There were also prohibitions addressed to the disciples following Peter's

32 Ibid., p. 18.
33 Ibid., p. 16 (the emphasis is Wrede's); see also Robert M. Fowler's account of the two feeding scenes in Loaves and Fishes: The Function of the Feeding Stories in the Gospel of Mark (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981), p. 4.
concession (Mk 8:30; 9:9). Wrede also included in his analysis instances when Jesus intentionally tried to preserve his incognito (Mk 7:24; 9:30f.), and the prohibitions to speak made by many in the crowd who tried to silence Bartimaeus (Mk 10:47-48).34

In his analysis of the history of interpretation of the prohibition passages Wrede found that in each case a different theory had been formulated to explain each injunction. Weisse had argued, for example, that Jesus did not want to be considered as a miracle worker. Ewald and Strauss had written that the prohibition passages were a matter of humility; that is to say, Jesus did not want to be held in high esteem as messiah. Strauss had further insisted that Jesus regarded the people as too immature to understand the implications of messiahship; and Klostermann added that Jesus did not want testimony from powers that were opposed to God, i.e., the demons.35

Wrede rejected the interpretations of his predecessors because none of them had been able to explain how the narrative feature which they had discovered functioned throughout the rest of the gospel.36 For Wrede, the stereotypical nature of the injunctions, that is, the sharpness of the command coupled with the lack of expressed motive, indicated a common, unified logic which ran throughout the narrative. He sought an explanation that could consistently account for the injunctions throughout the narrative. Wrede was trying not to abandon prematurely the logic

34 Ibid., pp. 34-6.

35 Ibid., p. 37-8; for Wrede’s summary of his predecessors see also, pp. 255-61.

36 Ibid., 48.
inscribed in the narrative by the evangelist.

Closely related to the injunctions to silence were instances of what Wrede called Jesus' "cryptic speech"--a mode of messianic self-concealment. In "cryptic speeches" private instructions were given to a few intimate associates. Also included in this category were a few miracles which were performed in the presence of a small group of chosen witnesses (Mk 1:29-31; 5:35-43). 37

The clearest evidence that Wrede found for the presence of "cryptic speech" was in the parable of the sower. In the dramatic scenario of public parabolic interaction, followed by private explication, the evangelist expressed the idea that Jesus had used his teaching to veil himself from the people (Mk 4:10-13, 33-34). 38 Contrary to the observations of previous critics, Wrede argued that the evangelist had actually misinterpreted the parabolic tradition. 39 The evangelist assumed that when the tradition reported that Jesus had spoken in parables, he must have been imparting a secret. 40 Thus, Mark's understanding of parables ran directly counter to the way parables actually function in the narrative. That is to say, parables, by their very nature, were never intended to obstruct Jesus' message, but to illuminate it by presenting ideas and concepts in concrete images. 41

37 Ibid., p. 53-66.

38 Ibid., p. 56.

39 For this insight Wrede was following Jülicher's work on the parable in his Gleichnisreden Jesus, 1888.


41 Ibid., p. 62.
Wrede also argued that when the Marcan Jesus spoke in the veiling language of parables, he was being consistent with procedures he had followed in other places of the gospel. For example, the issue at stake in the injunctions to keep silent was Jesus' identity as messiah. Messianic identity was consistent with the implicit content of the parabolic form of "the mystery of the kingdom of God" (Mk 4:11), which was Jesus himself. Wrede was able to observe a congruence of secrecy in the narrative logic between the injunctions to keep silent and the parabolic speech form in the gospel. That is, both forms of speech were concerned with the concealment of Jesus' identity.

In Wrede's view, the key verse was Jesus' command to the disciples to keep silent what they had just witnessed at the transfiguration until after the resurrection: "And as they were coming down from the mountain, he charged them to tell no one what they had seen, until the Son of Man should have arisen from the dead" (Mk 9:9). Wrede argued that this verse is the central passage in the messianic secret motif. Along with the injunction to silence was given the promise that full revelation would take place at the resurrection. In these terms, then, Jesus' messianic identity was to be concealed until the denouement when full revelation would take place. Therefore, according to Wrede, Jesus' career was divided into two parts: one of secrecy, which would be followed by revelation.

During his earthly life Jesus' messiahship is absolutely a secret and is supposed to be such; no one apart from the confidants of Jesus is supposed to learn about it; with the resurrection, however, its disclosure ensues.

This is in fact the crucial idea, the underlying point of Mark's
entire approach.\textsuperscript{42}

In Wrede's view, the same explanation could be applied to the parables. That is to say, the meaning of the parables was concealed only for a time, for in the final analysis all secrets "urgently seek disclosure." That approach to the parables was consistent with Mark 4:21-22 ("Is a lamp brought in to be put under a bushel, or under a bed, and not on a stand?... For nothing is hidden, except to be revealed; nor is anything secret, except to come to light."). This passage referred back to the idea that a secret was being imparted in the parables. It was revealed only to the disciples at first, but "after the resurrection" the veil was to be lifted and the message was to be revealed to others.\textsuperscript{43}

Thus, secrecy and concealing were not the last words for Wrede. The aim of the narrative was disclosure and illumination, with narrative secrecy ultimately serving in the interest of revelation. A point that remains unresolved in Wrede's work, however, is that the assumed point of revelation, the resurrection, is actually withheld in the narrative logic.

**Excursus: Marcan Secrecy Since Wrede**

Since the rise of form criticism, there has been a willingness to accept some, if not all, of Wrede's evidence as indicating the existence of secondary elements in the tradition. Bultmann and Dibelius, in particular, accepted much of Wrede's theory,

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., p. 68.

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., p. 71 (emphasis is Wrede's).

Dibelius also endorsed Wrede's theory in some respects, although he too made some modifications. He claimed that the number of features which Wrede had included from Mark should be reduced, e.g., the withdrawal of Jesus from the crowds to perform miracles (cf. 5:40; 7:33; 8:23) has nothing to do with the messianic secret, but is simply a standard feature in such miracle stories.\footnote{Martin Dibelius, \textit{From Tradition to Gospel} translated from the revised second German edition by Betram Lee Woolf (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1935), p. 93f.} On the other hand,
the injunctions to silence after the miracles are part of Mark's messianic secret.\textsuperscript{47} Like Bultmann, Dibelius ascribed the secrecy theory to Mark's own redaction, but he interpreted it differently. For Dibelius, the origin of secrecy lay in Mark's effort to explain the fact that Jesus' messiahship had not been universally recognized. Thus, Mark used the secret to show

why He [Jesus] was not recognized as Messiah by the people and why He was opposed, despised, and finally sent to the Cross. In this way the gospel of Mark was written as a book of secret epiphanies.\textsuperscript{48}

In more recent years the issue of secrecy has been stated differently by Frank Kermode, a literary critic who based his reading of Marcan secrecy on a theory of how narratives work.\textsuperscript{49} Kermode's thesis was that secrecy is an intrinsic feature of all narrative, but secrecy is best exemplified in the Gospel of Mark. Kermode suggested that since a narrator cannot have full control over all the properties of his or her narrative, fractured surfaces appear in the narrative that invite latent understanding.\textsuperscript{50} It is inevitable, Kermode argued, that some aspects of the narrative remain hidden from even the most scrupulous and self-conscious narrator. The naked young man in Mark who makes an appearance, but remained unexplained and enigmatic in the story, is a classic example of the lack of narrative coherence that

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., p. 73f.

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., p. 230.


\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., p. 45.
Kermode found so intriguing.  

By its very nature, narrative involves a certain amount of opacity, because an author, or a reader for that matter, can only attend to a small part of the story at any given moment. Thus, when the reader is confronted with a multitude of meanings, he or she is turned into an outsider. To this end, Kermode insisted that all readers are like the disciples in Mark, insiders who had been turned into outsiders.

In contrast to Wrede, Kermode did not see secrecy as standing in the service of revelation. In the Gospel of Mark, secrecy does not push toward revelation, he argued, but remains concealed. In Kermode's view, secrecy is the last word. So, from a hermeneutical standpoint secrecy asserts the impossibility of understanding.

In a more recent discussion, Werner Kelber advanced the discussion beyond both Wrede and Kermode by arguing that the narrative dynamic of Mark was one of concealing, revealing, and reveiling. Kelber took up the issue by first differentiating between the types of secrecy that operate in the Marcan narrative. The first is esoteric secrecy which is deconstructed across the gospel. The second type consists of identity secrets which push the narrative toward epiphany.

Despite the differences between esoteric secrecy and identity secrets, Kelber

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51 Ibid., pp. 49-73.


53 Ibid., pp. 4-10.

54 Ibid., pp. 11-3.
insists that both types of secrecy are used in the gospel to deconstruct secrecy.\(^{55}\) The momentum is toward a revelatory breakthrough, but at the very point where revelation is expected to take place, a reveiling occurs. In the Gospel of Mark, revelation comes not with the resurrection, as Wrede expected, but with the crucifixion. Kelber argued, as he had in other places, that Easter revelation is withheld from the disciples in the narrative logic.\(^ {56}\) This, of course, is the unresolved issue in Wrede’s work.

Kelber’s thesis was an argument against Wrede’s insistence that the Marcan narrative was born out of Easter. In Kelber’s view, the narrative decision was to redirect the reader’s attention toward the cross and away from Easter. By denying the resurrection to the disciples, the narrative gospel undermined a sayings tradition in which the living Jesus addressed his sayings and parables to a select group of insiders epitomized by the disciples and the women.

Since Wrede, Mark has been looked upon as a paradigm of secrecy. That notion was later confirmed by Kermode. Kelber, on the other hand, advanced the discussion beyond Kermode when he argued that Mark was a “demythologizer” of secrecy—that the gospel betrays a hostility toward secrecy.\(^ {57}\)

\(^{55}\) Ibid., p. 13.


\(^{57}\) Kelber, "Narrative and Disclosure," p. 10.
Kelber also observed a rhythm of revealing and concealing in the gospel narrative which heightens tension, and serves to focus attention on the climax of the story, the death of Jesus. While Wrede saw narrative pushing its way toward revelation, Kelber, in contrast, viewed the narrative dynamic as a dialectic of concealing and revealing, with mystery at the peak of the narrative. Revelation was viewed in its narrative connection with ambiguity and secrecy. The crucifixion constitutes the point of revelation, but, also the reveiling, and the mystery, for what is revealed also remains concealed. Ultimately, the gospel did not narrate a risen Christ whose sayings reveal wisdom and give life, as in the sayings tradition. Instead, the story presents an earthly Jesus who is accessible to the readers of the story, and whose death constitutes the revelation which, in the last analysis, remains a mystery.

In summary, Wrede discovered a narrative logic in the Gospel of Mark in which secrecy served the interest of revelation. Kermode, on the other hand, demonstrated that secrecy is inherent in all narratives. Kelber later reformulated the argument of secrecy by observing in Mark the narrative dynamic of concealing/revealing/reveiling. Thus, Kelber does not agree with Wrede’s understanding of the Marcan gospel as being a compromise between two competing messianic traditions. In Kelber’s view, the narrative form of Mark, and its narrative dynamic, constitute an argument against the religious sensibilities of sayings traditions.

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58 Ibid., p. 16.
Secrecy in the Fourth Gospel

Prior to Wrede it had been unthinkable to find close connections between Mark and John,\textsuperscript{59} and to this day, the difference between the Synoptics vis-à-vis the Fourth Gospel is thoroughly institutionalized in scholarship. Wrede, on the other hand, thought that Mark and John were closer to each other than they were to the other two Synoptics. The close resemblance between John and Mark, superficially so dissimilar, was well spotted by Wrede, and in the course of his book he makes some penetrating observations about these two gospels. What Wrede observed was a secrecy motif in the Gospel of John similar to what he had found in the Gospel of Mark, though strictly speaking, John makes only limited use of the secrecy theory—at least in its Marcan form. The hermeneutical device of concealing and then revealing in John can be aligned with Marcan secrecy only at the price of some strain and distortion because most of the narrative features of secrecy found in Mark (i.e., the knowledge of demons, miracles worked in secret, parables, and injunctions to silence) are absent in John.\textsuperscript{60} But Wrede argued that the crucial similarity does not lie in the secrecy theory as such, but in the profound awareness common to both gospels for the need to establish continuity between the earthly Jesus and the risen Jesus. The idea common to both Mark and John was that the resurrection differentiates two periods


\textsuperscript{60} Ibid. p. 182.
for the disciples, i.e., "that of blindness and that of full knowledge."  

In contrast to Mark, the narrative of the Fourth Gospel leaves no doubt about who Jesus is. From the opening lines of the prologue, the narrator is interested in having Jesus do things which reveal his δόξα, and to say things which reveal the secrets of the Father. The activity and speech of Jesus is presented as continuous revelation. For example, the Baptist knows that Jesus is the Son of God very early in the story (John 1:34). Some of the disciples also know early on that Jesus is the Messiah (John 1:41). Jesus is at various times confessed as the Savior of the world (John 4:42), the Holy One of God (John 6:69), and as the Christ, the Son of God (John 11:27). For Wrede, Jesus' comment to the high priest is paradigmatic for the Fourth Gospel as a whole: "I have spoken openly (παρηγορήσα) to the world ... I have said nothing secretly (κρυπτα)" (John 18:20).

The Fourth Gospel contains only three passages (John 2:22; 12:16; 20:9) which correspond closely to the secrecy motif in Mark. In each case the motif concerns "remembering," or a "phase of higher knowledge" which for the disciples was to begin at "the resurrection or glorification of Jesus." In John 2:22 and 20:9 the narrator's emphasis is on the disciples who are reported to remember rather than on Jesus who withholds information or conceals his identity. In those passages Jesus is not quoting Scripture or making a prediction. Instead the narrator is commenting

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62 Ibid.

63 Ibid., p. 184.
on the idea that the prophecies concerning the resurrection became clear to the disciples only after the fact.\textsuperscript{64} Thus, the most noticeable characteristic of secrecy in the Gospel of John is that the evangelist focuses on the transcendent character of Jesus' teaching and the disciples' inability to understand. Because of their failure to understand, revelation for the disciples is arrested and deferred to a later time, i.e., the resurrection/glorification.

The passage which best supports Wrede's thesis is John 12:16, a statement made by the narrator in connection with Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, and suggested as the fulfillment of the Zechariah prophecy (Zech. 9:9): "These things his disciples did not understand (ἐγνωσαν) at the first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered (ἐμνήσθησαν) that these things were written of him, and that they had done these things to him." Since the triumphal entry is no more related to the glorification or the resurrection of Jesus than any other significant event in his life, the verse (John 12:16) confirmed for Wrede that there was a time when Jesus' mission was obscure to the disciples, "but after his victory over death it became clear and transparent."\textsuperscript{65}

Wrede observed the same idea at work in the confusion that followed Jesus' instruction to Judas to do what he had to do on their last night together (John 13:27-29). John 13:28 indicates that what Jesus said to Judas remained "completely


\textsuperscript{65} Wrede, The Messianic Secret, p. 185.
uncomprehended" by the disciples.66 This was also the case with the footwashing scene that occurred earlier in the story: "What I am doing you do not know, but afterwards you will understand (John 13:7)." In these verses, the implication of Jesus' action has a secret meaning which will become clear at some future date. In Wrede's exegesis, the Fourth Evangelist viewed the disciples' inability to recognize Jesus in ways closely related to the view expressed in the Gospel of Mark. According to Wrede, the narrative feature which dominates John's presentation is one in which the narrator singles out the resurrection as "the decisive moment in time" for the disciples.67

Wrede bolstered this thesis by analyzing the Farewell Discourse in which there is a foreshadowing of impending revelation in the lives of the disciples.68 At the time of the farewell speeches, the teaching of Jesus was concealed from the disciples, but here again there was the anticipation of future revelation.

In that day (ἐν ἐκείνῃ τῇ ἡμέρᾳ) you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you (John 14:20).

But the Paraclete, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you (John 14:25).

This pattern of concealed speech accompanied by a promise of future disclosure is repeated in Chapter 16.

I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear

66 Ibid., p. 185.
67 Ibid., p. 186.
68 Ibid., p. 186.
(θωστάξεω) them now. When the spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth... (τό πνεύμα τῆς αληθείας ὁδηγήσει υμᾶς εἰς τὴν αληθείαν πάσαν) (John 16:12-13).

I have said this to you in figures (ἐν παροιμίωσι) but the hour is coming when I shall no longer speak to you in figures but tell you plainly (παραθύρωσι) of the Father (John 16:25).

The "hour" is the moment of Jesus' glorification, which for the disciples will be "the dawning of a new period" of knowledge to counter the earlier period of obscurity. "If 'now' they will know, then previously they had not known; if now they 'plainly' will hear of the Father, then up till now they have only heard obscure, unclear remarks about him."69

Wrede summarizes this argument as follows:

...the evangelist makes his Jesus say that he does not wish to say anything to the disciples for the present or that he is veiling what he does say in enigmatic figures so that it will not be comprehensible like proper speech. And yet this concealment and veiling does not appear as the real will or wish of Jesus; it is in reality only something necessitated by circumstances. The weakness of the disciples is too great for them to be able to pick up everything. His teaching is too overpowering and heavenly to penetrate their earth-bound senses. Jesus' taciturnity or reserve thus takes the form of a natural and necessary pedagogical expedient. The real reason lies in the gap between the capacity of the disciples and the transcendent character of Jesus' teaching.70

Thus, the tension between revelation and secrecy is a necessary pedagogical function of the narrative in that mystery and concealment are constitutive aspects of revelation. As Wrede saw it, the evangelist describes the disciples' lack of knowledge in order to create a contrast with the sayings about the knowledge the Spirit will

69 Ibid., p. 187.
70 Ibid., p. 187.
bring after the resurrection. It is apparent, in Wrede's view, that the pattern of concealed speech and open speech, teaching withheld and teaching later imparted represents the fundamental direction of the narrative logic of the Fourth Gospel. Jesus teaches openly, but what he says remains concealed to the disciples because secrecy is necessarily prior to revelation.

In contrast to the disciples' misunderstanding, the inability of "the Jews" to understand Jesus was another matter altogether. In the case of Jesus' opponents, Wrede observed a different kind of narrative strategy at work. To "the Jews" Jesus' sayings were enigmatic not because he was withholding information, but because the profundity of divine truth could only be expressed "in mysterious sayings that are hard to understand."71 Thus, instead of having meaning withheld, as in the case of the disciples, "the Jews" were confronted with the full light of divine truth. The light was so powerful, however, that "the Jews" were blinded by its rays. Wrede stated the case more precisely as follows: "The more dazzlingly the sun shines, the more plainly can we see how blind those eyes are which encounter none of its rays."72 To "the Jews" the light revealed everything, but its brightness also caused blindness, and the message was thus concealed. Thus, it was not misunderstanding, but the power of revelation which led to concealment of the message for "the Jews."

Finally, Wrede raised the question of what it was that Jesus was concealing. What was hidden behind the veil of obscurity? What future revelation was presently

71 Ibid., p. 203
72 Ibid., p. 204.
concealed? Was the teaching of Jesus somehow incomplete? In his answer, Wrede concluded that there is a "contradiction" in the narrative at this point:

I am thereby ascribing to the Gospel of John a manifest contradiction. Jesus refers to the future revelation and to the imparting of information on a higher level than the disciples have meanwhile experienced, and yet during his life he said everything that was to be said. And this contradiction could not in any circumstances be evaded by the evangelist if he was going to postpone the unveiling of the truth to the disciples till the time of glorification at all (emphasis added).\textsuperscript{73}

This "manifest contradiction" was, in Wrede's terms, the driving force of the narrative. Indeed, the "contradiction" is not only direct, it is a narratological necessity. The narrator wishes to impart to his readers, in narrative and discourse, that the most important knowledge Jesus has to offer to his disciples is yet to come, but he also has to reveal who Jesus is, or there would be no rationale for writing the gospel. Said in Wrede's words: "John had to make his Christ postpone the fullness of the revelation and yet he is obliged to make sure all the time that it is pronounced by him down to the last detail, for otherwise he would not need to write any Gospel at all."\textsuperscript{74}

Here Wrede has arrived at the heart of the matter. That is to say, the intrinsic narrative contradiction in the Fourth Gospel lies in the tension that exists between secrecy, concealment, and withholding, on the one hand, and revelation, openness, and full narrative exposure on the other. One cannot fully sustain secrecy if one wants to write a life of Jesus. To do so would contradict John's narrative premise.

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., p. 193.

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., p. 193.
Thus, the narrator has Jesus conceal himself to the disciples through enigmatic speech, while at the same time revealing that he is the Christ who is one with the Father.

Strictly speaking, the narrative "contradiction" Wrede discovered in John took several forms. On one level there are scenes in the gospel in which the disciples misunderstand what is said, but their lack of understanding is followed immediately by an action or teaching of Jesus in which what he said is fully explained. Thus, no other explanation or disclosure is forthcoming. The Fourth Evangelist even acknowledges that no future teaching will be forthcoming when he has Jesus say that he had already taught the disciples everything that he had received from the Father: "all (πάντα) that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you" (John 15:15). To the disciples, and the reader, too, Jesus states that everything he has to say has been said already. So, no new teaching will be forthcoming.

To complicate matters, however, Jesus contradicts what he had just said in John 15:15 by adding that he still has many things to say, and that the Spirit will lead the disciples to all truth (John 16:12-13). In reality, what Wrede observed was a contradiction of a contradiction. That is to say, a promise is made that future revelation will take place ("the Paraclete...will teach you all things," 14:25) which is contradicted ("all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you," 15:15). That contradiction (John 15:15), in turn, is itself contradicted ("I have yet many things to say to you....when the spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth," 16:12-13). In this give and take the reader is victimized by revelation
promised, then withdrawn, and then promised again.

Moreover, the contradictions occur at precisely those points where the resurrection/glorification was set to issue in the period of full revelation. The promise of revelation is thus undermined by the dissonance created in a narrative logic in which promises remain unfulfilled. After the resurrection the disciples were able to remember many things, and perhaps even understand, but the promise of new teaching beyond what Jesus had already said remained unfulfilled in the narrative itself.\(^{75}\)

In trying to answer the question of what it was that Jesus was concealing, Wrede observed a second narrative feature which involved speaking \(\varepsilon\nu\ \pi\alpha\rho\omicron\mu\iota\alpha\varsigma\). He argued that it takes some imagination on the part of the reader to find anything enigmatic in most of Jesus' sayings (cf. John 12:32f.). The importance of the idea of speaking \(\varepsilon\nu\ \pi\alpha\rho\omicron\mu\iota\alpha\varsigma\), however, is not whether the sayings were indeed obscure, but that the evangelist must have thought that they were. This pointed Wrede toward the conclusion that the idea of speaking "in figures" was borrowed by the evangelist from the same tradition which had informed the Synoptic parable tradition.\(^{76}\) In the tradition behind the Synoptics, at least according to Wrede, the parables were placed in the service of revelation by illuminating the teaching of Jesus in concrete images. In the Fourth Gospel, however, speaking \(\varepsilon\nu\ \pi\alpha\rho\omicron\mu\iota\alpha\varsigma\) was a narrative strategy used by the evangelist to call attention to a dynamic that differed from the way parables

\(^{75}\) Ibid., p. 195.

\(^{76}\) Ibid., p. 198.
were used in the Synoptics. Thus, in John, figurative speech was contextualized in a new relationship.

In the Fourth Gospel, secrecy is closely connected with speaking ἐν παρομίας. As we have already observed, Jesus remains misunderstood, or not fully understood in John because of his enigmatic speech, referred to in the Gospel as ἐν παρομίας. The promise was made, however, that a time would come when Jesus would speak "plainly." Thus, we see once again that concealing is a function of revelation, as it was in Mark. In Mark, however, Jesus veiled himself from the people by teaching in parables. To the disciples, on the other hand, the secrets of the kingdom were revealed.77 Said in different words, the Marcan tradition focused on Jesus as a parabolist in order to emphasize the idea that he veiled himself from the people. John, however, transformed that tradition by focusing on the disciples' inability to understand Jesus. In the Fourth Gospel, the idea in the tradition that Jesus spoke on earth in riddling speech is joined together with the idea that revelation occurs at the resurrection/glorification. Those two ideas then supplement another idea in the tradition regarding the weakness of the disciples. The disciples misunderstood Jesus' teaching, the evangelist might have argued, precisely because Jesus was speaking ἐν παρομίας. From the disciples' point of view Jesus was concealing the real meaning of his teaching until a later time.

From this observation Wrede was able to draw two major conclusions. First, he observed that the presence of the messianic secret idea in both Mark and John was

77 Ibid., p. 56-7.
an indication that the historical Jesus did not regard himself as the Messiah. Instead, the written Gospel is the evangelists’ effort to come to terms with an unmessianic life and messiahship at resurrection. Neither one of those two concepts reflects knowledge of the messianic consciousness of the historical Jesus. Second, and more importantly, Wrede observed that the concept of messianic secrecy was not invented by the evangelists, but was itself already a tradition behind the Gospels. Thus, the secrecy motif is not history, nor is it a tradition "invented" by Mark or John, but both evangelists are interpreting a prior tradition.

To supplement his thesis that the idea of secrecy was in prior traditions, Wrede suggested a couple of places in the history of religions where the idea of a hidden messiah was also already at work. In the first place, he found traces of the idea of a hidden messiah in Judaism. In the second place, Wrede turned to *Pistis Sophia*, a document closely related to the documents found at Nag Hammadi in the mid-twentieth century. According to *Pistis Sophia*, Jesus met with his disciples, both male and female, eleven years after the resurrection. During that time the higher truth (that Jesus had promised in the Farewell Discourse of the Fourth Gospel) had not been forthcoming. In *Pistis Sophia*, then, Jesus teaches openly. His speech was ἐν παρρησίᾳ in contrast to his earlier teaching ἐν παροιμίαις. Wrede observed an affinity between the two periods of concealment and revelation promised in John and the teaching in *Pistis Sophia*. Where the Gospel of John ended, *Pistis Sophia*

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78 Ibid., p. 213ff.

79 Ibid., p. 250.
began. Wrede argued that although *Pistis Sophia* originated later than the Gospel of John, he found it difficult to believe that the idea of a concealing and revealing pattern of Jesus’ message was adopted by the gnostic document as a result of reading the Fourth Gospel. Instead, it was an idea that had remained alive in the tradition.

With fresh documentation from Nag Hammadi James Robinson has been able to confirm what Wrede was only able to suspect. The sayings gospels, or revelation discourses, found at Nag Hammadi confirm the existence of a gospel genre which expresses many of the same ideas about the risen Christ expressed in *Pistis Sophia*; that is, a risen Christ teaching openly to a select group of disciples and women. Confirmed also was the division into a period of revealed speech which overshadowed the time of the earthly Jesus as a period of speaking in parables, e.g., in riddling language.

As a result of his work on the Nag Hammadi documents, however, Robinson argued that the term "messianic secret" itself is inadequate because the phenomenon is broader than its inclusion in Mark (and John). Instead, Robinson asserted that the idea of a "messianic secret" should be reconceptualized as a hermeneutical project in which there is a period of obscurity and a period of clarity. In other words, the resurrection is the hermeneutical turning point from concealed, riddling language to revealed language, or in the terms of the evangelists, speaking εν παρομίας versus εν παρομίας.

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80 Ibid., p. 251.


82 Ibid., p. 23.
speaking ἐν παρθησίᾳ. From these two hermeneutical levels—concealed speech before the resurrection and revealed speech after the resurrection—Robinson was able to draw genre critical conclusions, hence his formulation: "Gnosticism's Gospel gattung begins just as regularly after the resurrection as the orthodox gattung ends there."\(^{83}\) That is to say, in Mark and John Jesus speaks—for the most part—in a way that demands revelation or disclosure because he speaks in figures, but in the Nag Hammadi gospels Jesus speaks as the risen One ἐν παρθησίᾳ, or in revelatory speech.

Robinson argued further that what Wrede had called the "messianic secret," or what he himself now called the two levels of hermeneutics, were due not to tension between a non-messianic life of Jesus versus a messianic risen Christ, but rather due to two gospel genres which were in conflict with each other. Tension between the two genres manifests itself in both Mark and John insofar as both undertake what Robinson has called the "Easter shift."\(^{84}\) In Mark, for example, Jesus speaks ἐν παρθησίᾳ in his first passion-resurrection prediction (8:32). The functional equivalent of this passage is John 16:25,29. In both instances Jesus speaks ἐν παρθησίᾳ during his earthly ministry. This speaking ἐν παρθησίᾳ, Robinson suggests, is the kind of revelatory speech reserved for the risen Christ in the sayings gospels, or revelation discourses. From this perspective, John and Mark shift the hermeneutical turning point (from concealed to revealed speech) back into the life of Jesus.\(^{85}\) Jesus

\(^{83}\) Ibid., p. 27.

\(^{84}\) Ibid., pp. 26, 29.

\(^{85}\) Ibid., p. 25f.
speaks openly already during his lifetime, and he speaks openly about his death. The
turn back to the earthly ministry is likened to a theologia crucis in which death
assumes revelatory significance.

Despite the similarities in their work, it is important also to observe the
differences between the conclusions reached by Wrede and Robinson. For Wrede the
narrative gospels of Mark (and to some extent John) forged a compromise between two
traditions: one tradition claimed that Jesus was messiah with the resurrection, and the
other claimed that the earthly life of Jesus was already messianic. But Wrede also
recognized that both Mark and John had used, or wrestled with, older, pre-Marcan
ideas about concealed speech versus revealed speech. For Robinson, on the other
hand, the issue was not one of negotiating an unmessianic life with a messianic risen
Christ, but was rather the conflict between two gospel genres. By emphasizing the
earthly life, and by projecting attributes of the risen Christ back into the earthly life,
the narrative gospels sought to stem the trajectory of gnosticism represented by the
sayings gospels of Nag Hammadi. In contrast to gnostic revelatory discourses, both
Mark and John were on a trajectory toward orthodoxy which sought to block gnostic-
ism.

In an essay that takes the case beyond both Wrede and Robinson, Werner
Kelber has argued that the Fourth Gospel absorbed a considerable number of the
attributes characteristic of a sayings gospel. 86 Above all, the gospel has adopted an

86 Werner H. Kelber, "The Authority of the Word in St. John's Gospel: Charismatic
Idem, "Die Fleischwurdung des Wortes in der Korperlichkeit des Textes," in Materialitat der
Kommunikation, eds., Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and K. Ludwig Pfeiffer (Frankfurt am Main:
extraordinarily large amount of sayings material, and has further developed these sayings into dialogues and monologues. In the farewell discourse, for instance, Kelber tried to show that when Jesus speaks, at times it is not clear if it is the earthly Jesus who is speaking or the risen Lord.\textsuperscript{87} It also seems to be the case that for the characters in the gospel the resurrection/glorification constitutes the hermeneutical turning point. Much like the sayings gospel, the narrative gospel argues that the resurrection/glorification will issue the time of the Spirit and full revelation. Following Kelber’s argument, which is a further elaboration of Robinson’s thesis, facilitated, among other things, by a hermeneutics of orality-literacy, it would be difficult to use John 16 as an argument for Jesus speaking presently \textit{ēn παρρησίας}.\textsuperscript{88} Jesus himself refers to "the hour" when he no longer will speak \textit{ēn παρομίας}; but "the hour" in the Johannine narrative refers back to the hour of glorification. Moreover, it is the disciples who claim that Jesus now speaks \textit{ēn παρρησίας}, and so one must question whether they fully understand. The very least one can say is that in John there is not an unambiguous narrative affirmation of \textit{ēn παρρησίας} in reference to the earthly Jesus as there was in Mark 8:32.

The glorification initiates the time of the Spirit, the time of remembering, the

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Suhrkamp, (1988), pp. 32-36; idem, "In the Beginning Were the Words: The Apotheosis and Narrative Displacement of the Logos," IAAR 58/1 (Spring 1990), pp. 82-5.

\textsuperscript{87} Kelber, "In the Beginning Were the Words," p. 83.

\textsuperscript{88} see also Gail R. O’Day, Revelation in the Fourth Gospel: Narrative and Theological Claim (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), pp. 105-9, who argues that \textit{ēn παρομίας} and \textit{ēn παρρησίας} are two modes of revelatory language, even though \textit{ēn παρομίας} is clearly speech that conceals.
time of the Paraclete, and therefore also the time in which the readers will be able to
remember in the Spirit. With the help of the Spirit and the narrative gospel they will
be able to understand what the disciples did not fully understand.

It is important to remember that a significant recontextualization of the sayings
tradition has taken place in the Fourth Gospel. After all, the resurrection/glorification
initiates a period in which one remembers the earthly Jesus and the sayings inscribed
in the framework of an earthly Jesus, and not the sayings empowered by the risen
Christ.

As in Mark, there is not a messianic secret in the classic sense of the term, at
least for the readers. The concealing-revealing pattern functions for the characters in
the gospel, above all for the disciples, not, as in Mark, to bring the focus on the
crucifixion, but on the hermeneutical turning point, the glorification which will usher
in the time of remembrance in the Spirit. To this end, one must ask whether full
revelation and participation is possible in the Fourth Gospel because the promised
"hour" when understanding will be given remains unfulfilled in the narrative logic.

Conclusions

The messianic secrecy motif was Wrede's attempt to explain the mysterious
and confounding narrative dynamics that he discovered in his reading of the Gospel of
John. What confronted Wrede in the Fourth Gospel, however, is not a text whose
difficulties can be explained in terms of aporiae or displacement, but a text that challenges explanation, resists disclosure, and questions our ability to interpret and understand biblical narratives. What Wrede called "messianic secrecy," and identified in the Johannine narrative as postponement and contradiction, is in reality the primordial conflict between the mystery of concealment and the light of revelation which is never fully resolved in gospel narratives. In my view, this unresolved conflict present in John has led to many of the narrative difficulties recognized by other interpreters of the Fourth Gospel. As we shall see in the chapter of this project which deals with Martin Heidegger's hermeneutics, this "primal conflict" is a struggle which takes place as language strives toward unconcealment by overcoming concealment. 90

The hermeneutical issues raised by Wrede point in the direction of such a conflict in language to reveal while it conceals. When, for example, Wrede called attention to the idea that John has his Christ postpone the fullness of revelation until a later time, a time after the resurrection, he was observing a text that struggles with meaning and disclosure. He used the language of "contradiction" to explain those places in the Fourth Gospel where promises of future revelation are made, even though everything had already been said. As the narrative unfolds, however, the

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unfulfilled promise of future disclosure subverts the possibility of arriving at a full understanding of the story. When the reader is given the promise of future disclosure through the disciples, and that disclosure is not forthcoming, the narrative dissonance between expectation and the reality of unfulfilled promises subvert the possibility of the full disclosure of meaning. Thus, the deferral of revelation (the promise of future teachings after the resurrection), together with the narrative contradictions, resist any attempt to assert literary, logical, or ideological unity. The understanding of the narrative as a fully integrated whole, either as it stands in the canon or as some source behind the present text, is undermined by the dynamics of language that both reveals and conceals in the narrative of the Gospel.

Wrede inadvertently discovered the difficulty of thinking of the Johannine narrative as a "vehicle" of revelation. He discovered a narrative that conceals meaning as well as it reveals meaning—that what lies at the very heart of the secrecy motif is the paradoxical unity of hiddenness and revelation.

Wrede has brought us face-to-face with an experience of language that goes beyond the historical and literary analysis of a narrative. The Evangelist of the Fourth Gospel struggled with ways to express in language ideas and concepts for which he has no vocabulary. As Heidegger argues, it is the job of the poet, or in this

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91 Robert W. Fortna argues that the source text behind the Gospel of John was a unified whole which unity was frayed by editorial additions to the text. See Robert W. Fortna, The Fourth Gospel and Its Predecessor: From Narrative Source to Present Gospel (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988).

92 Contra Gail R. O'Day, Revelation in the Fourth Gospel, p. 31, who argues that the irony used by the Fourth Evangelist is a mode of revelatory language.
case, the creator of a gospel story-world, to put into words his experience. In the narrative, the writer tries to bring to reality his experience; that is to say, to bring something into being. If there is no language, there is no story and where there is no story, there is no reality. But because language often cannot express experience or accurately portray reality, much remains unsaid, and even when it is expressed, it looks like contradiction and postponement, when in fact, it is simply the slipperiness of language itself. When that occurs, then language has touched us with something of the mystery that is part of its essential nature.

Wrede read the narrative more closely than most, but even with his profound insight, he was unable to see that the dynamics of concealing and revealing lie within the problems associated with art and language, rather than lying in the way tradition is interpreted historically. When he discovered the dissonance created by the unfulfilled promise of future revelation, however, he was raising the problem of secrecy to a different hermeneutical level, although Wrede himself never left the historical level. In his work on messianic secrecy Wrede moved biblical scholarship beyond hermeneutics as the theory or method of interpretation toward hermeneutics as the theory of understanding itself. That, in turn, has cast a shadow of doubt over the possibility of resolving the issue of Johannine revelation as classically suggested by theologians and literary critics.

The great virtue of Wrede’s contribution is the clarity and consistency with

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which he defined his own historical task in his earlier programmatic essay and then carried out his hermeneutic in his exegetical study. His brusque criticism of those who allowed theological interests to prejudice their historical method left no room for any interests in the New Testament other than historical ones, even though the conclusions he drew from his exegetical work have wider implications than those limited to history.

In his discussion of the task and methods of the historical study of early Christian thought, Wrede was sensitive to the relationship between sources and subject-matter, the two poles upon which the historian's attention is concentrated. The point at which questions may be posed about his own understanding of the historical method must be raised about an issue he did not discuss: the hermeneutical question about the conditions that make understanding possible in the first place. The most significant contribution in this regard is that of Bultmann, who has been the towering figure in New Testament scholarship during this century.
Chapter 2

CONCEALING/REVEALING AND EXISTENCE: BULTMANN

Bultmann's Hermeneutical Presuppositions

New Testament theology in the twentieth century has been, and to a large degree, still is dominated by the synthesis between historical research and theological concerns achieved by Rudolf Bultmann. In some circles the demythologizing controversy has overshadowed much of his other important work, but his commentary on The Gospel of John (1941) and his Theology of the New Testament (1948-51) are monuments of intellectual achievement, and cannot be disregarded even by contemporary theologians and historians of early Christianity. One reason for Bultmann’s enormous impact was the patience with which he plotted his position in relation to his predecessors. As a direct successor to the history of religions school, his critical position is close to that of Wrede, but for Bultmann, the New Testament is the place where historical and theological questions converge. Immediately, then, we are able to see one of the more important differences between Bultmann and Wrede: Bultmann was a self-consciously Christian theologian and approached the Gospel of John as such.

Bultmann’s grasp of most of the questions that constitute "the Johannine problem" enabled him to view the Gospel with a depth of perception and completeness that is still unrivalled in the history of New Testament scholarship. In an early
essay (1925), Bultmann discerned two riddles, or puzzles set out by the Fourth Gospel. The first was historical: "the riddle of where John's Gospel stands in relation to the development of early Christianity" (Bultmann's emphasis).\(^1\) Thus, he began this essay by defining the problems associated with reading the Fourth Gospel in terms strikingly similar to Wrede's concerns. But Bultmann also saw a second problem, a theological problem, that Wrede did not see, or chose not to see.

In this chapter we will be preoccupied with Bultmann's answer to this second riddle: the theological issue of revelation as the central theme of the Fourth Gospel. "Taking the Gospel as it sees itself (für sich), what is its central intuition, its basic idea?" Bultmann answered his own question:

Doubtless, it must lie in the constantly repeated proposition that Jesus is the emissary of God (e.g., 17:3; 3:23, 25), who through his words and deeds brings revelation. He performs the works given him by the Father, he speaks what he has heard from the Father or what he has seen in his presence. The man who believes is saved, he who does not is lost. But there lies the riddle. Precisely what does the Jesus of John's Gospel reveal? One thing only, though put in different ways: that he has been sent as Revealer.\(^2\)

Thus, in ways that Wrede would not have considered legitimate, Bultmann attempted a massive synthesis of history, theology, philology, philosophy, and hermeneutics in his effort to understand the tension between the dynamics of concealing and revelation that the Gospel of John presents to the reader.


\(^2\) Ibid., p. 57.
At the risk of oversimplification one can argue that four important elements converged to form the core of Bultmann's hermeneutical method. The first was the intellectual legacy he inherited from the nineteenth century intellectual tradition. He was influenced as much by Schleiermacher's and Dilthey's examinations of understanding, as he was by Heidegger's existential philosophy. The second major influence in Bultmann's thought was his appropriation of Karl Barth's dialectical theology, and its new "subjectivity" in hermeneutics which reversed the previous subject-object orientation. The third influence on Bultmann's hermeneutical synthesis was his adoption of Heidegger's existential analytic as the philosophical system which enabled the first two elements to emerge into full, formal expression. Finally, there was Bultmann's confessional stance, grounded as it was in orthodox Lutheranism, and which served as the catalysis for this new synthesis.3

Like Barth, Bultmann was among those whose intellectual roots were firmly planted in the nineteenth-century, but who reacted to its "liberalism." Bultmann, like Barth, affirmed a qualitative difference between God and the world. Bultmann maintained that God's transcendence must be conceived dialectically. The events in which God is revealed can be perceived only in faith; to those outside of faith all is concealed. Bultmann generally followed the other tenets of early neo-orthodoxy, as well, but he later distanced himself from Barth over the place of philosophy in theological inquiry.⁴

Bultmann revealed the nineteenth-century heritage of his intellectual life when he refused to follow beyond the point where Heidegger turned toward a hermeneutic of language. Bultmann abandoned Heidegger rather than betray his pre-modern intellectual roots because, as he expressed in a letter to Heinrich Ott, the early Heidegger was more relevant for theological inquiry than the later Heidegger.⁵ The grip that the nineteenth-century maintained on Bultmann is most clearly evident in his essay on "The Problem of Hermeneutics," written in 1950, just one year before his retirement from Marburg. In that essay he struggled with the Romanticism of Schleiermacher and Dilthey even as he tried to respond to it, reformulate it, and even


get beyond it.\textsuperscript{6}

In "The Problem of Hermeneutics" a number of key themes emerge that are important for understanding Bultmann's hermeneutic. In the first place, "the interpretation of biblical writings is not subject to conditions different from those applying to all other kinds of literature."\textsuperscript{7} This principle is a simple restatement of a position first articulated by Schleiermacher and generally accepted by biblical critics throughout the nineteenth-century. And on this point there is no appreciable difference between Bultmann and Wrede.\textsuperscript{8} The method of interpretation that Bultmann proposes, then, is appropriate for the interpretation of any text, historical, philosophical, religious, or otherwise.

Bultmann also accepted Dilthey's thesis that hermeneutics is "the technique of understanding expressions of life set in written form."\textsuperscript{9} Said in different words, hermeneutics is "the science of understanding history in general."\textsuperscript{10} Each text is a reflection of the linguistic usage that was dominant at the time it was written. Thus,

\textsuperscript{6} Bultmann, "The Problem of Hermeneutics," pp. 234-61. It is widely acknowledged that Martin Heidegger, who is credited with redefining hermeneutics in the modern era, had a profound influence on Bultmann during their years together at Marburg. Yet the focus of this essay is almost exclusively on the hermeneutics of Schleiermacher and Dilthey. Heidegger, mentioned only once with regard to "his interpretation of the historical nature of existence (p. 252)," is prominent only by his absence from the discussion.

\textsuperscript{7} Ibid., p. 256.


\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., p. 235.
all documents, including the New Testament, are "historically conditioned." To understand such texts one must have a diachronic understanding, or an understanding of the historical development of the language, along with a general knowledge of the historical period in which the text was written.\textsuperscript{11} But, Bultmann argues that "real understanding" cannot be adequately defined simply by observing the "traditional" hermeneutical rules for historical research.\textsuperscript{12}

This flight from history, which included a denigration of the so-called search for the "historical Jesus," is characteristic of Bultmann’s theology. It was a natural reaction against the loss of revelation as a theological category due to the emphasis upon history in nineteenth century liberalism. As historians, like Wrede, fulfilled the requirements of modern historical methods, they saw human religion as the only subject-matter of the New Testament. The result was an inevitable break between their talk about God and their scientific study of the New Testament. Bultmann’s intention finally was to relocate theological talk about God precisely in the interpretation of the New Testament. As a Christian theologian he was convinced that the subject-matter of the New Testament was God’s encounter with human beings, and he was not satisfied with treating it merely as a historical source for human religion.

Since God, as "wholly other" is radically different from the world, God’s self-revelation cannot, in Bultmann’s view, be communicated directly through historical knowledge. God can only be apprehended in faith, Christian theology must therefore

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., p. 236.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., p. 237.
be connected with evoking faith.

Bultmann also argued that understanding has to get beyond Schleiermacher's one-sided assertion that a document is understood as part of the "life-moment" of a particular person. For in that formulation, hermeneutics becomes a "reproduction" of the author's thought processes at the time of literary production.\textsuperscript{13} Bultmann proposed instead to replace Schleiermacher's "psychological" relationship to the author with the interpreter's "prior understanding of the subject."\textsuperscript{14} Interpretation is guided by the "preunderstanding" (\textit{Vorverständnis}) of the subject matter spoken of, either directly or indirectly in the text.\textsuperscript{15} Unless the interpreter already has some sense of what the text is about, he or she cannot understand it at all. Bultmann further stresses the role of motivation and interest in this process. The subject matter investigated in the text must not be indifferent, like "the coiffure of Greek women of the Periclean Age generally can be indifferent," it is rather knowledge that interpreters have, whether or not they recognize that they have it.\textsuperscript{16} Interpretation, therefore, is not a matter of reconstructing the thought processes of authorship, it is instead a recognition

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., p. 237f.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., pp. 239; 240-3.

\textsuperscript{15} "The presupposition of every comprehending interpretation is a previous living relationship to the subject [\textit{Sache}], which directly or indirectly finds expression in the text and which guides the direction [\textit{Woraufhin}] of the enquiry. Without such a relationship to life in which text and interpreter are bound together, enquiry and comprehension are not possible, and an enquiry is not motivated at all. In saying this we are also saying that every interpretation is necessarily sustained by a certain prior understanding of the subject which lies under discussion or in question" ("The Problem of Hermeneutics," p. 252).

of an appeal in the text to a human experience common to all people.

The Hidden and Revealed in the New Testament

The above is Bultmann's reformulation of the hermeneutical circle. The process begins when an interpreter becomes sufficiently interested in the subject matter of a text to attempt an interpretation.\(^\text{17}\) To be "interested" in the subject matter in this case means that the subject is in some way or another decisive for one's existence, "that your own relation to the subject-matter prompts the question you bring to the text...."\(^\text{18}\) That is to say, the subject matter discloses the possibilities of existence about oneself. For example, everyone knows something about love, friendship, hope, hate, jealousy, sickness, and death as possibilities for human existence.\(^\text{19}\) The prior questions one has about his or her existence then guide the direction of the subsequent interpretation. As a result of one's investigation of the text, the prior questions and concerns one brings to the text are then either qualified, reinforced, or undermined by the examination. One must be prepared to have the notions that he or she brings to the New Testament corrected in the process of hearing what the New Testament has to say. In making that assumption Bultmann unapolo-

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\(^\text{17}\) Bultmann provides another summary statement of the hermeneutical circle in *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, pp. 49-51.

\(^\text{18}\) Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology,* p. 51. In his essay, "Is Exegesis Without Presuppositions Possible?" Bultmann refers again to the "interest" one has in the subject matter as a "life-relation," which is genuine only when "the subject matter with which the text is concerned also concerns us and is a problem for us. If we approach history alive with our own problems, then it really begins to speak to us" (p. 245).

\(^\text{19}\) Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology,* p. 51.
getically has turned the subject-object relationship on its head.

It is of no value to eliminate the prior understanding: on the contrary, it is to be brought into our consciousness and critically tested in our understanding of the text--it is put to the test; in short, it is valid in the investigation of the text to allow oneself to be examined by the text, and to hear the claim it makes.\textsuperscript{20}

When one allows oneself to be examined by the text that person is engaging in the only interpretation of the New Testament that has any relevance, as far as Bultmann is concerned. At stake is nothing less than an understanding of human existence. Here Bultmann turns to the philosophy of Martin Heidegger to provide the nonmythological categories for working out the phenomena of concrete human existence. Bultmann appropriates Heidegger's existential analysis because he believes that the New Testament and Heidegger have a similar understanding of human existence. That is to say, Heidegger provides the preunderstanding for anyone who would approach the New Testament with the intent of understanding the questions it addresses.

Bultmann believed that when the New Testament is approached in the posture of asking the question of existence there is a possibility of resolving the theological problem posed by the mythological forms of expression which confront the modern reader therein. Here then lies the connection between Bultmann's famous hermeneu- tic of demythologization and Heidegger's existential analytic: "demythologizing endeavors to bring forth the authentic intention of myth; namely, the intention to

\textsuperscript{20} Bultmann, "The Problem of Hermeneutics," p. 253f. Even more forthrightly, Bultmann states that "the demand that the interpreter must silence his subjectivity and extinguish his individuality, in order to attain to an objective knowledge is, therefore the most absurd one that can be imagined" (p. 255).
speak of the authentic reality of man."21

In Bultmann’s view, then, the hermeneutical problem one faces in trying to read the New Testament is manifested precisely in the language of myth which presents an objective picture of the world. Such language distorts, hides, and obscures the real "subject matter" of myth, i.e., the revelation of a certain understanding of human existence grounded in the transcendent reality of God. The task of Bultmann’s hermeneutic of demythologization, therefore, was to strip away the mythological form in which revelation is expressed. In different words, demythologization is the translation of New Testament language into a linguistic form that more adequately expresses the existential self-understanding of the believer presupposed in the mythology. Thus, in Bultmann’s hermeneutic, revelation is not dependent upon the form in which it is expressed. Indeed, the text of the gospel serves only to "hide" the revelation proclaimed in the word. This pattern of concealment and revelation is different from what we observed in Wrede. Here, concealing and revealing is not manifested in the tension between traditions, but in the hermeneutical tension between mythological language, which conceals true meaning, and the interpretation of such language, as hermeneutical translation, which sets out the possibility for revelation.

According to Bultmann, the concept of "revelation" is usually defined as "the disclosure of what is veiled, the opening up of what is hidden." This definition can be differentiated in two ways: either as a (1) "communication of knowledge by the

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word," as the passing on of information that was previously unknown, or as (2) "an occurrence that puts me in a new situation as a self (the emphasis is Bultmann's)."22 Employing the language of analogy, Bultmann illustrated the latter by pointing out that one person "reveals" himself or herself to another through an act of friendship or love, or through meanness and hate. In so doing, a new state of affairs between the two people is created. To be sure, information and knowledge are imparted, but they merely mediate the new conditions that define the relationship between two people that was created by the act of revealing.

The same twofold differentiation of "revelation" is present in "religious" discourse, but here the term is used in a much more specific sense. Accordingly, revelation is defined as "that opening up of what is hidden which is absolutely necessary and decisive for man if he is to achieve 'salvation' or authenticity; i.e., revelation here is the disclosure of God to man...."23 In this definition there is an underlying presupposition regarding human existence. That is to say, in the divine/human encounter something about human existence is revealed that was previously inaccessible. In this transaction new knowledge is conveyed to be sure, but more importantly, this knowledge creates a new situation in which people are now able to see their limitations.

Therefore, when one asks what the New Testament understands by revelation, the person asking the question already has some prior understanding (Vorverständnis)

23 Ibid.
of what revelation means. Revelation is always already a part of human life, just as love and hate, light and darkness are a part of human life. When a person asks the question of revelation there is the expectation that something about his or her life will be heard in the answer. Thus, in Bultmann's terms, the concept of revelation is not an indifferent question, as it would be for Wrede who argued that the historian is guided by "a pure disinterested concern for knowledge."^24 Here there is always already a prior "life-relation" which precedes one's question.^25

In these early essays on revelation Bultmann lifts the discussion of the hiddenness and revelation of God out of the realm of historical investigation and places it squarely within the context of theological and philosophical concerns. Theologically, God is both revealed and hidden. In fact, the mystery that results from God's hiddenness is constitutive of God's nature. If God was not hidden and mysterious, constantly changing, full of contradiction and riddle, then our own inner lives would quickly adjust to the light of revelation, become static, and God would cease to be God. The miracle of the divine/human relationship is that God is constantly enriching human life by offering new facets of his existence that heretofore had not been experienced.^26

Once again, the divine/human relationship is analogous to the relationship that human beings have with each other. One person can never be fully disclosed to

^24 Wrede, "The Task and Methods of 'New Testament Theology'," p. 116; see the discussion of this idea in the preceding chapter, p. 15.


^26 Bultmann, "Concerning the Hidden and the Revealed God," p. 27.
another. Indeed, it is the mystery that each person keeps hidden from the other that nurtures the relationship and keeps it alive and growing. "We rejoice in hiddenness and mystery because it is a promise to us of the wonderful and undreamed-of powers that slumber in the heart of the other, awaiting only our readiness for their revelation." 27

In Bultmann’s theology, then, mystery and hiddenness are not the last words, nor are these concepts the only qualities of God’s nature. The mystery and hiddenness of God are counterbalanced by revelation. 28 Human beings long for a revelation of the infinite God to lead them through the maze of riddle and mystery. It is impossible, however, to express the revelation of God in the objective language of assertion or proposition. To do so would limit God to a formula, to a book, and to space and time that could be worked out with the methods of historical research. 29 "God’s handiwork cannot be labelled and docketed like the work of an artist or an engineer," Bultmann argues. 30 It is impossible to find a historical formula that will solve all the riddles and enable a person to harmonize all the contradictions. 31

Without calling attention to it specifically, there is beginning to emerge in

27 Ibid., p. 28.

28 Ibid., p. 30.

29 Ibid., p. 30. In this essay which was first published in 1917 there is a foreshadowing of Bultmann’s aversion to the objective language of myth that would occupy a prominent role in his later essay, "New Testament and Mythology."


these early essays the idea of the recurring interplay between concealing and revealing. According to Bultmann, as we have seen, both concealing and revealing, hiddenness and disclosure, are constitutive qualities of the infinite God; both are analogous to the relationship humans have with each other; and neither can be expressed in the objective terms of myth or assertion. Thus, concealing and revealing are grounded in the mystery of God rather than in the conflict between traditions or genres (Wrede and Robinson) or in the structure of the narrative itself (Kermode and Kelber). Humans are confronted with the God of mystery, who gives himself in revelation, but "scarcely is he known than he again disappears." 32 This is a theological theme that Bultmann will carry over into his discussion of the concept of revelation in the Gospel of John.

It should be stressed that revelation, in Bultmann's terms, is not always straightforward and unambiguous. On the contrary, paradoxical elements are always at work in the New Testament concept of revelation. Revelation consists in nothing other than the fact of Jesus Christ, whose coming is designated as revelation. What is revealed in Jesus, however, is not continuous, uninterrupted disclosure, 33 there is much yet to be revealed, much yet to look forward to. In this sense, Bultmann argues, the revelation that takes place in Jesus is "veiled." "Therefore, life is veiled," says Bultmann, "even though it has been revealed in Christ." 34 For those

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32 Ibid., p. 28.


34 Ibid.
outside faith, "the world," the revelation is hidden, life is veiled, so they seek demonstrations.

When one asks "how" revelation occurs, Bultmann reasserts the Lutheran orthodoxy that later guided his hermeneutics of demythologization. That is to say, that revelation takes place not through the narratives of the Bible, nor through the written words of Scripture, but in the proclamation of the word. Furthermore, the proclamation not only reveals, it is itself revelation. In his preaching, for instance, Paul becomes Christ for his audience. Again, it must be emphasized that all is not clear and unambiguous, for what is revealed in preaching is also hidden. For those who live outside faith the proclaimed word remains a mystery hidden in figures.

By way of summary, several of Bultmann's key theological themes emerged in his early discussions of revelation that foreshadowed their further explication in his project of demythologization and in his commentary on The Gospel of John. In the first place, one already has a preunderstanding of revelation that originates in one's own existence as a human being even before the question is asked. There is a prior "life-relation" in which the revelation concerns us directly. Bultmann also understood revelation to be an "event" that occurs in the present moment, therefore, it does not communicate something out of the past. Revelation is, therefore, inaccessible to historical research. Thus, Bultmann restores to "New Testament theology," some of what Wrede had eliminated, i.e., the discussion of revelation as a Biblical concept.

In the second place, revelation is not a report that can be expressed objectively

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35 Ibid., p. 76.
in mythological, other-worldly categories. Third, the "content" of revelation is communicated as a personal address through the proclaimed word apart from the written words of Scripture. Bultmann agreed with Luther when he argued that the New Testament itself is revelation only insofar as it "preaches Christ." The dynamic of revealing and concealing was also prominent when Bultmann added that to those on the inside who live in faith, everything about one's own existence is revealed, but to those on the outside of faith all is hidden. "It is only in faith that the object of faith is disclosed; therefore, faith itself belongs to revelation." 

The idea that best expresses the divine/human encounter in which revelation occurs is the doctrine of the Incarnation which Bultmann derived from the prologue of the Fourth Gospel. In the first few verses of the Gospel, the encounter between God and world is expressed in the sharpest possible terms: "Jesus is the krisis (κρίσις) in whom one passes from death to life." Jesus is sent as the revealer who reveals that he is the revealer so that in believing in him one is not given simply insight to life, but is rather given life itself.

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36 After all what we are talking about here is "life," and "Life," says Bultmann, "is not an objective condition in which we find ourselves, but rather as a mode of being that we lay hold of in faith" Ibid., p. 80.

37 Ibid., p. 90.

38 Ibid., p. 85,

39 Ibid., p. 79.

40 Ibid., p. 79.
Revelation in the Gospel of John

Throughout his career Bultmann paid special attention to the Fourth Gospel because it best exemplified his own theological beliefs. Before his commentary on The Gospel of John appeared in 1941, however, Bultmann had already published a number of preliminary articles on the Fourth Gospel. Yet, the commentary represents a watershed not only for biblical studies in general, and for Johannine studies in particular, but for Bultmann's own career as well. Bultmann later summarized the results of his work in the commentary in his Theology of the New Testament.

In Bultmann's exegesis of the Fourth Gospel, the idea of "revelation," first expressed in the "Logos doctrine" in the prologue, dominates the whole gospel.

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42 There are numerous surveys and critiques of the historical-critical results of Bultmann's commentary, but those issues will not be addressed here. For an assessment of Bultmann's commentary and the resulting "industry" in Johannine studies that it produced see, D. Moody Smith, The Composition and Order of the Fourth Gospel: Bultmann's Literary Theory (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965); idem, Johannine Christianity: Essays on Its Setting, Sources, and Theology (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1984); Robert Kysar, The Fourth Evangelist and His Gospel: An Examination of Contemporary Scholarship (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1975).


through the "revelation-discourses" (Offenbarungsreden). The Johannine Jesus is portrayed in terms of an oriental Gnostic Redeemer mythology, although viewed through the lenses of the Old Testament idea of the Creator-God. In this portrayal of Jesus, the Fourth Evangelist has already begun the process of demythologization. The Johannine version of the myth pushed aside the Gnostic cosmology in favor of incarnation and creation, and a concern for the relation of humans to the revelation of God.

The revelation-discourses, placed on the mouth of Jesus by the evangelist, are patterned after the kind of Semitic poetry found in the Odes of Solomon, and so named because of their "chief content." They reveal the abiding influence of a type of Hellenism that was saturated with the kind of Gnostic dualism that permeates the Gospel of John: light/darkness, truth/falsehood, above/below, heavenly/earthly, freedom/bondage, life/death. These antithetical pairs illustrate the radical difference between God and world. Each pair is defined in terms of its contrasting opposite, and they all derive meaning from the search for genuine human existence. The interpreter already has a preunderstanding of these concepts, but they must be understood authentically. Thus, each pair of terms holds out the double possibility of


46 Ibid., pp. 24-30.


48 Ibid., p. 11.
choosing authentic existence or inauthentic existence—"life," or "death."\textsuperscript{49}

In his analysis of these Johannine dualisms Bultmann translates terms located in the history of religions into the existential category he calls the "dualism of decision." That is to say, Bultmann maintains that the basic dualism is between God and "world" (κόσμος), the two poles of existence about which human beings are forced to decide. The "world" stands apart from God by not recognizing that it was created by God, and thus declares its independence from God. Inasmuch as the "world" stands against God, its essence is "darkness."\textsuperscript{50} Darkness and "falsehood," then, are synonymous terms which express the power that keeps the world in "bondage"—a power that brings "death."

"Light" (φῶς) stands in contrast to the darkness and falsehood of a world under the sway of death. This "light" is not the literal light of day which makes it possible to orient oneself in the world. The brightness itself is not an outward phenomenon, but "the illumined condition of existence."\textsuperscript{51} It is "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."\textsuperscript{52} Thus, "light" is the revelation of God whereby one is confronted with the possibility of a genuine self-understanding.

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., p. 20.

\textsuperscript{50} Bultmann, The Gospel of John, pp. 54f.

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., p. 40.

If "light" is revelation,\textsuperscript{53} then revelation is not new knowledge, but the creation of a totally new situation. To live in the "light" is to choose to live authentically. But human beings also have the power to live in the "darkness" (οὐκορίω), that is, to live by an illusory self-understanding in which one grounds his or her origins in the self. To do so is to choose darkness.\textsuperscript{54} Darkness is shutting oneself off against the ground of existence, turning away from the light.

In Bultmann's terms, therefore, darkness is ontologically prior to the light.\textsuperscript{55} Before the light came into the world all people were in darkness, but the coming of the light confronts those living in the darkness with a choice: do they choose to remain in the darkness, which is to choose death, or do they want to choose light and life?\textsuperscript{56} The power to choose life over death comes only in the "clarity of the self-understanding which is given through the revelation."\textsuperscript{57} In the above terms the tension between concealing and revealing is translated into the existential possibilities of light and darkness. The darkness conceals the possibilities for choosing life, conceals even the possibility of choice itself. Light, on the other hand, discloses the existential possibilities of choice.

The same tension is also at work in the concepts of truth and falsehood.

\textsuperscript{53} Bultmann, \textit{The Gospel of John}, p. 43.

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 47.

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., see also Bultmann, \textit{Theology of the New Testament}, vol. 2, p. 18.


\textsuperscript{57} Bultmann, \textit{The Gospel of John}, p. 53.
"Falsehood," in Bultmann's view, intensifies the illusion that one can live apart from the Creator. "Truth," on the other hand, represents the reality of God in which humans find the ground of their existence. In Bultmann's understanding of the Johannine meaning of aletheia (ἀλήθεια), the concept denotes a "divine reality" which is radically different from human reality, yet, it discloses itself as a genuine possibility of human existence.⁵⁸ "Aletheia (Ἀλήθεια) does not refer to the 'uncoveredness' of all (worldly) existents, but to God's reality, in particular to God's reality as it unveils and reveals itself to man and so brings him to his authenticity."⁵⁹ Pseudos (Ψεῦδος), on the other hand, refers to the will to create a false reality which presents itself in opposition to the true reality of God.⁶⁰ Thus, when Jesus says "I am the way and the truth and the life" (John 14:6), he is not merely telling the truth, he is the truth—in the sense that his existence is grounded in, and determined by, the truth which is God's reality revealing itself in Jesus.⁶¹ "In the person of Jesus the transcendent divine reality became audible, visible, and tangible in the realm of the earthly world,"⁶² but not always understandable.

According to Bultmann, misunderstanding is a literary device used in the Fourth Gospel to express the underlying theological dualism between God and world,

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⁵⁸ Ibid., 245.


⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 321.


and the dualism of decision presented in the encounter with Jesus. Wrede, of course, was more interested in locating misunderstanding in the tradition rather than observing how it operated in the narrative. On this point, Bultmann is the more narratologically sensitive reader.

In Bultmann's terms, the Fourth Evangelist uses ambiguous statements and double entendre to invoke a misunderstanding that represents something more than a working out of the tension between traditions. Misunderstanding involves more than one word having two meanings, so that a misunderstanding occurs when one chooses one meaning over the other.63 In Bultmann's view, misunderstanding is constitutive of the difference between God and world. To the world, the Revealer is a stranger. To the world, the origin and the destination of the Revealer is hidden, concealed.64 Thus, the Revealer speaks in riddles and figures; he does not speak the language of this world, because the people of the world confuse truth with appearance. The world seeks objective explanations and assertions which it can control.65 This theme is summarized in the incarnational statement: "The word became flesh" (John 1:14).66

In this mythology the concept of revelation receives a definite form; it affirms 1) that revelation is an event with an other-worldly origin; 2) but that this event, if it is to have any significance for men, must take place in the human sphere.67

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64 Ibid., p. 143 n. 1.


66 Ibid., p. 40.

Because the Revealer has an "other-worldly origin" it is concealed, but because his coming is an event that takes place in the human sphere, it is also revealed. According to the Gnostic Redeemer myth, the coming of the Son is a cosmic event which sets in motion the unfolding events of redemption. In John, the cosmological motifs, the Gnostic anthropology and the mythological descriptions of redemption are missing, but the language of the Gnostic Redeemer myth is adopted whereby Jesus, as the pre-existent Son of God, is sent into the world by the Father. In a way similar to that of the Gnostic Redeemer myth, the Logos must be concealed in the "flesh" in order to deceive the people of this world and to avoid causing alarm.\(^{68}\)

Here, then, is the real source of the tension between the dynamics of concealing and revealing in the Gospel of John. The tension is a problem intrinsic to the incarnation. Bultmann illustrates the scandal of the incarnation, by saying that what "the Jews" call mystery is really no mystery at all. The theology of "the Jews" in John, Bultmann says, is a mythologizing theology that defines the other-worldly (Jesus' origins), in terms of the this-worldly. In that way any assertion about Jesus is subject to their approval and proof. But Jesus' actions and words are always misunderstood, concealed, and hidden from meaning as long as he is conceived in the categories of this world.

The same dynamic is apparent in the confrontation scene between Jesus and his brothers (John 7:1-8). Jesus' brothers want him to do his work openly. They do not

\(^{68}\) Ibid., p. 25.
understand, however, that from the standpoint of the world, revelation is always hidden, even as it occurs openly. Revelation is mediated in the "unobtrusiveness of everyday events." Thus, revelation is always a two-edged sword: for "revelation" to be revelation it must break into this world from beyond. If that were not so, then it would be subject to human proof and control. At the same time, however, it is sheer audacity to proclaim that revelation comes from beyond this world because it also comes in a human form. Indeed, this must be the case, otherwise the revelation would not be recognized. This is what Bultmann calls the paradox of the incarnation which runs through the whole gospel: the doxa (δόξα) is not to be seen alongside the sark (σάρξ), nor through the σάρξ as through a window; it is to be seen in the sark (σάρξ) and nowhere else. If man wishes to see the doxa (δόξα), then it is on the sark (σάρξ) that he must concentrate his attention, without allowing himself to fall victim to appearances. The revelation is present in a peculiar hiddenness (emphasis added).  

This passage is absolutely crucial for Bultmann because it states in unambiguous terms that the tension between concealment and revelation is intrinsic to the incarnation itself. Such tension, then, is not only necessary for John's narrative logic, it is theologically unavoidable.

In Bultmann's exegesis of John, the dynamics of concealing and revealing, or in his words, "the hiddenness of revelation," is a summary statement of his whole

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69 Ibid., pp. 290f.


72 In the terms of Dibelius, we might also use the phrase "epiphanies which are secret" to describe this dynamic.
hermeneutical project. First, the Johannine use of mythological language conceals because it covers over, or hides the true scandal, which can only be revealed in the encounter with the word of God. When such language is translated into existential categories, however, the possibility for revelation is made available. In the existential encounter with the Word there is revealed the potentiality for authentic existence. The encounter is sought precisely "in the flesh," which also presents the double possibility of concealing or revealing. It is only "in the flesh" that the Word is revealed, and for those who seek the Word in faith everything is disclosed. But being "in the flesh" it also conceals. That is to say, it is a scandal for those who continue to seek the other-worldly in terms of this world. And for those who see only "the flesh," the Word of life will always remain hidden.

Bultmann maintains that the Johannine dynamic of hiddenness in revelation deepens the theory of the Messianic secret that first appeared in the Gospel of Mark. Bultmann’s summary statement of this idea is as follows:

By his presentation of Jesus’ work as the incarnate Son of God John has singularly developed and deepened Mark’s theory of the Messiah-secret. Over the figure of Jesus there hangs a mystery, even though—or rather just because—he quite openly says who he is and what claim he makes. For to the world he is still in spite of all publicity the hidden Messiah, not because he conceals anything or commands anything to be kept secret, but because the world does not see with seeing eyes (12:40). His hiddenness is the very consequence of his self-revelation; his revealing of himself is the very thing that makes "those who see" become "blind" (9:39).73

In his encounter with the world, however, Jesus’ conveys nothing concrete or

specific. He does not communicate cosmological or soteriological mysteries. His theme is simple and consistent: "The Father sent me as light and truth, and to the Father I must return." In John, then, according to Bultmann at least, the mythological assertions of the Gnostic Redeemer have been demythologized. That is to say, their literal reference to one who would reveal the secrets of redemption have been translated into a terminology that highlights the existential significance of his word. In other words, mythology has now been placed in the service of revelation. The word of Jesus has a transcendent origin, and is thus not subject to human scrutiny or control because it conveys no definable content except that it is the word of life.

Thus it turns out in the end that Jesus as the Revealer of God reveals nothing but that he is the Revealer. And that amounts to saying that it is he for whom the world is waiting, he who brings in his own person that for which all the longing of man yearns: life and truth as the reality out of which man can exist, light as the complete transparency of existence in which questions and riddles are at an end. But how is he that and how does he bring it? In no other way than that he says that he is it and says that he brings it--he, a man with his human word, which, without legitimation, demands faith. John, that is, in his Gospel presents only the fact (das Dass) of the Revelation without describing its content (ihr Was).74

Said in a different way, John demythologizes the cosmological presuppositions of the Redeemer myth, and thus retains only the empty fact of revelation. Bultmann's understanding of the Gospel of John, thus coincides with his own theology, which is why the gospel occupies the place of pride in his thought. Revelation shatters and negates all human self-assertion and all human norms and evaluations.75 In the


75 Ibid., p. 67.
encounter with Jesus, the existence of each person is revealed and called into question. The limitations of the foundations of one’s security are revealed and called into question. It is also revealed that each person is confronted with a choice between authentic and inauthentic existence. Thus, revelation does what faith does in Bultmann’s orthodoxy: it deconstructs all foundations that lead to human self-confidence and self-assertion.

Conclusions

In their discussions of the hermeneutics of revelation, the contemporary literary critics of the Gospel of John have tried to overcome Bultmann’s Dass/Was distinction by arguing that the what of revelation is tied to the how of revelation.\(^{76}\) The literary critics have argued that in failing to take seriously the narrative logic of the gospel, Bultmann was unable to explore the relationship between texts and revelation. Thus, in contrast to Bultmann, they focused on how the impact of reading the narrative contributes to the experience of revelation. The literary critics view revelation, in part, as that which takes place in the reunification of gospel narrative form and content. Bultmann in particular was singled out for criticism because he ignored “the particularity of the Johannine language and the interrelatedness of form

and content in the Gospel narrative."77

In this regard, literary critics, like Culpeper, Duke, and O’Day, have argued that the literary devices used by the evangelist, such as misunderstanding, symbolism, and irony, help the reader toward understanding.78 Irony, in particular, contributes to the process of revelation because it engages the reader in a process of education in which the reader is invited by the narrator to rise above the literal level of meaning to the place of enlightenment endorsed by the narrator. The reader is thereby invited to participate in the story. "The Fourth Gospel answers our yearnings for revelation," O’Day argues, "by inviting the reader to enter that world and to be addressed by the life-giving disclosure from God in the text."79 By taking this approach, the literary critic stands over the text, now conceived as a self-contained object of study.

Literary critics see a unified structure that was hidden from those, like Bultmann, who were looking for meaning in the historical situation behind the text.

When stated in theological terms, however, the goals of literary criticism are similar to the hermeneutical goals of Bultmann. That is to say, their wish is to recover a sense of revelation that was lost in the shift toward a historical understand-

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ing of the Bible that took place in the nineteenth century—a shift epitomized by Wrede's work. In a statement that could have been written by Bultmann himself, one contemporary narrative theologian argues that "revelation is not merely a historical artifact that lives only in the distant past, but also an event that occurs in the contemporary experience of individuals and communities." Further, revelation is an "experienced reality" which occurs when the "narrative identity" of the individual "collides" with the narrative identity of the community. In that encounter the individual begins a process of reinterpreting, and even altering, his or her identity in light of the narratives and symbols that define the faith community. The community-building contribution that irony makes in the process of revelation is a major theme in the work of Culpepper, Duke, and O'Day.

In their efforts to achieve literary unity, the literary critics have suggested that irony helps the reader to see the light and thereby establishes a relationship of mystical participation in the story world through the medium of the text. One must ask whether this is not too positivistic an understanding of ironic narrative: does it really bring about the kind of unqualified revelation suggested? Narrative seeks to reveal and to disclose, to be sure. But is all disclosed? To view the gospel as a struggle with language, as we are advocating here, suggests that not all is revealed because concealing also takes place in gospel narratives.

Indeed, Werner Kelber and Stephen Moore have gone beyond the literary

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80 Stroup, The Promise of Narrative Theology, p. 239-40.
81 Ibid., p. 170-1.
critics in demonstrating that in the Gospel of John the distinction between the figurative and the literal senses often collapse, causing insurmountable problems of meaning for readers of this gospel.\textsuperscript{82} Instead of using revelatory language that educates and invites the reader to move up into the "community of believers"\textsuperscript{83} which comprehends the meaning of the story, the narrator blocks the way to revelation and understanding. The conflict that prevents closure and resolution is not between the characters who do not understand and the insiders who do understand, because the story is as confusing for the "community of believers" as it is for the characters in the story.

Perhaps Bultmann was correct all along when he maintained that it was the concept of revelation, not simply as community-building, but the notion of a Revealer who entered the world from another world which accounts for much of the irony and misunderstanding in the Fourth Gospel? In Bultmann's terms, what this Revealer discloses is bound to be strange, the language he speaks is bound to be odd, and the reception he receives is bound to be mixed. As the Revealer, Jesus is the Stranger \textit{par excellence}. He speaks the language of the wholly other, which provokes misunderstanding, ambiguity, and confusion. In other words, God's acts are concealed because they take place in language whose natural tendency is to conceal rather than to reveal.


More than most critics, more even that the contemporary literary critics, Bultmann recognized many of the obstacles that language places in the path toward understanding. And unlike Wrede before him, Bultmann was able to see that biblical language is polysemous; that the words of the texts do not always mean what they say; and that there is always a dialectic between what is hidden and what is revealed. Bultmann's whole hermeneutical project, in fact, was dedicated to working through the difficulty of the surface language which hides the true meaning of the story for human existence. Bultmann formulated his hermeneutical program in ways that he could overcome the difficulties of language. His hermeneutic was a consistent and profound reflection on the notion that language, and especially mythological language, conceals even as it strives for disclosure.

In Bultmann's hermeneutic, concealing and revelation are part of the existential encounter in which the hearer is faced with the dualism of decision. For those who live by faith everything is clear and understandable, but for those on the outside of faith everything is ambiguous, subject to misunderstanding, and encompassed by darkness. The goal of the encounter between word and person is to create such an existential impact, or crisis, that blind eyes will be opened. In that encounter, the person recognizes his or her dependence on the one and only ground which can ultimately define human existence. Only in faith is such an understanding of one's existence possible. Thus, in Bultmann's view, hermeneutics is a method of interpretation that removes the "false scandal" concealed by mythological language, and reveals the true scandal of the existential encounter.
It is at this point that Paul Ricoeur raises the most serious criticism of Bultmann's work. Ricoeur argued that Bultmann took a "short cut" through Heidegger's existential anthropology without first following through with Heidegger's discussion of the disclosure of being in language. Bultmann was preoccupied with Heidegger's anthropological categories which he used to bring to light in existential terms what was concealed in the mythological assertions in the Bible. As a result, Bultmann missed the turn when Heidegger began to move toward a hermeneutic of language. In Heidegger's terms, it is only when language is thought of as the disclosure of being that religious texts can finally be considered as vehicles of revelation. Therefore, it is important, that interpreters of the Bible take the long route back through Heidegger's analysis of the disclosure of being in language.

Ricoeur's criticism that Bultmann shortcircuited Heidegger's question of being disclosed in language has important implications for this project. At the same time, however, Ricoeur's own notion of truth as disclosure, and the corresponding idea that biblical narratives, as poetic texts, are "vehicles of revelation," must be questioned. In working our way through Wrede's theory of "messianic secrecy," we have already seen, that the notion of biblical texts as agents of disclosure is problematic when the interpreter is confronted with a narrative which incorporates a dynamic of secrecy. In

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his discovery of the reciprocal relationship between concealing and revealing, Wrede cast a long shadow of doubt over the possibility of resolving the issue of revelation, as it stands in gospel narrative. In working through Wrede’s theory of the "messianic secret" we observed that the notion of biblical texts as agents of disclosure is problematic when confronted with a narrative which incorporates a dynamic of secrecy.

What I want to argue is that the problematic of concealing and revealing can be observed in the Gospel text when the narrative is read on its own terms. The hermeneutical problem is a problem of language, as Bultmann correctly observed. However, the problem is not so much with mythological language that conceals the true meaning, as it is with the fact that language itself both discloses meaning and obscures meaning at the same time. This idea was developed more fully by Heidegger, and some of Bultmann’s own students continued to read Heidegger at this point. In his move from existentialism to ontology Heidegger revalued the importance of language for human self-understanding, and elevated language from a secondary position to primal authority. Language became the home of being human.
Chapter 3

CONCEALING/REVEALING AND LANGUAGE: HEIDEGGER

Heidegger is appropriate for this project because his "hermeneutic phenomenology" is a working out of the conditions that make interpretation possible,\(^1\) the opening up of what is hidden.\(^2\) The object of Heidegger’s hermeneutic is the "primary act of interpretation which first brings a thing from concealment" to unconcealment, from the hidden to the disclosed.\(^3\)

Hermeneutics, in Heidegger’s terms, is not just an interpretation of what an author said, or intended to say, but a bringing to light what was left unsaid, as well as what was subsequently covered up in the process of interpretation.\(^4\) Thus, Heidegger's philosophy lends itself to a literary hermeneutics of dis-closure, or a literary "dis-closing" of what has been closed off and forgotten by traditional methods of literary analysis.

The Western literary tradition, like its metaphysical and logocentric counter-

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part from Plato to Hegel, is motivated by a willful objectification of "mystery."\(^5\)
That is to say, most interpreters share a need to produce clear, univocal readings, or
to demonstrate the intention or purpose of the narrative. Heidegger’s hermeneutics,
on the other hand, provides the opportunity for discovering, or re-dis-covering,
elements of truth in the text that the methods of historical and formalist literary
criticism cover over and close off. In contrast to the modernist versions of historical
and literary criticism, Heidegger’s hermeneutic is still open to the mystery of the
text,\(^6\) because it is open to the mystery of language.

For the purposes of this project, Heidegger opens unique avenues into the
thought of the Gospel of John. Some of his key themes are terms familiar to all
readers of the Fourth Gospel, i.e., logos (\(\lambda\gamma\ο\zeta\)), truth aletheia (\(\alpha\lambda\theta\epsilon\iota\alpha\)), etc. In his
eyearly writings Heidegger established an important relationship between aletheia
(\(\alpha\lambda\theta\epsilon\iota\alpha\)) and logos (\(\lambda\gamma\ο\zeta\)), and his thought continued to develop well into his so-
called later writings.\(^7\) Heidegger brought language and truth into a relationship in

\(^5\) William V. Spanos, "Breaking the Circle: Hermeneutics as Dis-closure," \(\textbf{Boundary} 2\)
5/2 (Winter 1977), p. 435. The corresponding motivation in biblical studies has been,
according to Hans W. Frei, a motivation toward uncovering the "factuality," or "positivity of
revelation," \textit{The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century

\(^6\) William V. Spanos, "Heidegger, Kierkegaard, and the Hermeneutic Circle: Towards a
455-88.

\(^7\) Martin Heidegger, \textit{Early Greek Thinking}, trans. David Farrell Krell and Frank A.
which both terms represent processes that disclose Being. ¹⁸

Heidegger’s Hermeneutics

In "A Dialogue on Language, between a Japanese and an Inquirer," Heidegger remarked that he was first introduced to hermeneutics as a student at the Roman Catholic Theological Faculty of the University of Freiburg im Breisgau. ⁹ He took up the term hermeneutics into his own philosophical vocabulary when he began to write Being and Time in 1923, using the term to distinguish his phenomenology from that of Husserl. ¹⁰ In the "later Heidegger" the term was used again just long enough to indicate how the meaning for him had changed. And what is decisive for this project is that interpretation now has its focus not in terms of understanding existence, as it was for Bultmann, but rather in terms of language. Stated negatively, hermeneutics is not now a theory of interpretation, but rather the process of interpretation itself. ¹¹

The expression "hermeneutic" derives from the Greek verb hermēnē-.


⁹ "The term ‘hermeneutics’ was familiar to me from my theological studies. At that time, I was particularly agitated over the question of the relation between the word of Holy Scripture and theological-speculative thought. This relation, between language and Being, was the same one, if you will, only it was veiled and inaccessible to me, so that through many deviations and false starts I sought in vain for a guiding thread…. Later on, I met the term ‘hermeneutic’ again in Wilhelm Dilthey, in his theory of the History of Ideas. Dilthey’s familiarity with hermeneutics came from that same source, his theological studies and especially his work on Schleiermacher." Martin Heidegger, On the Way to Language, trans. Peter D. Hertz (New York: HarperSan Francisco, 1971), p. 9f.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 28.

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 11, 28.
euein. That verb is related to the noun hermēneus, which is referable to the name of the God Hermes by a playful thinking that is more compelling than the rigor of science. Hermes is the divine messenger. He brings the message of destiny; hermēneuein is that exposition which brings tidings because it can listen to a message. Such exposition becomes an interpretation of what has been said earlier by the poets who, according to Socrates in Plato's Ion (534e), hermenes eisin ton theon—"are interpreters of the gods."... Socrates carries the affinities even further by surmising that the rhapsodists are those who bear tidings of the poets' word... All this makes it clear that hermeneutic means not just the interpretation but, even before it, the bearing of message and tidings. ¹²

This passage points to the idea that disclosure is not perceptual, but is rather discursive in character: Hermes listens to what the gods say and then "re-speaks" that message of destiny, or fate, to his audience. The re-speaking of the message, or the re-telling of the story, is an interpretation in itself, it is not the report of an original event. Hermeneutics, then, is not a theory of interpretation that attempts to get behind the message spoken by Hermes to some "original" message spoken by the gods. It is rather an attempt to focus on the process of speaking, or the process of bearing a message. This is a completely different aspect of hermeneutics than is evident in the historical methods used by Wrede and Bultmann.

In Bultmann's categories, for instance, Jesus in the Fourth Gospel could be a "Hermes-like" figure who listens to the Father. Instead of re-speaking what the Father has said, however, he has become himself the revelation--a revelation that has no content in language, but simply is. Wrede tried to locate that message in a history of religions behind the text, but Bultmann was more concerned with translating those

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¹² Ibid., p. 29.
terms into the existential categories of divine/human encounter. Thus, Bultmann was not interested in the process of message bearing.\textsuperscript{13} Hermeneuein, on the other hand, points to the process and to the open realm within which the message is encountered and suggests further that the openness is intimately connected with the way Heidegger uses the term logos (λόγος). Hermeneutics is then linked with appearing (phainesthai) and also with letting-come-forth (λόγος).

For Heidegger the basic meaning of logos (Λόγος) is "discourse," not in the sense of what is said, but in the sense of making manifest that which is being talked about.\textsuperscript{14} Logos (Λόγος) lets something be seen, a revealing of what the discourse is about. It is not that which is seen. Logos (Λόγος), in Heidegger’s terms, is not "the primary locus of truth,"\textsuperscript{15} the thing itself, rather it is the process of disclosure. This is an important distinction, because in Bultmann’s understanding of the Johannine terminology, logos (λόγος) is the revelation itself, not the process of revelation. Heidegger developed his ideas about logos (λόγος) out of a concern for the creative activity that occurs linguistically and historically, and not in reference to the unveiling of preexistent Being. This points to a close connection between the language of disclosure and ontology.\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{13} This is what Gail R. O’Day means when she says that Bultmann is interested in the "what" of revelation to the exclusion of the "how" questions, Revelation in the Fourth Gospel: Narrative Mode and Theological Claim (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), pp. 33-48.

\textsuperscript{14} Heidegger, Being and Time, p. 56.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., p. 57.

\textsuperscript{16} DiCenso, Hermeneutics and the Disclosure of Truth, p. xvi.
...in language being is disclosed and in language being is concealed. Only where there is language is there world, and only where world predominates is there history. Language is the means by which man exists historically.  

The emphasis in this statement is on language that creates and discloses world and on language that conceals, but there is no simple disclosure, and understanding is not perfect. Heidegger himself expressed the matter as follows: "Language is the lighting-concealing advent of Being itself." Language illuminates, reveals, brings out into the open that which is hidden, but it also conceals as much as it discloses.

One cannot gain a proper understanding of the unfolding power of language, nor of one's relation to it, simply by talking about the formal structures of language. To talk about the formal structures of language is to concentrate on the question of how language refers to things and events in the world. Certainly this is one dimension of language, but there are other dimensions as well. In Being and Time Heidegger argues, for instance, that in language, human beings express themselves in their own being-in-the-world; and likewise they use language to communicate with the other people. Thus, expressing and communicating are just as

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20 Heidegger, Being and Time, pp. 203-10.
essential to language as is referring, but expressing and communicating have a distinctly human and existential character. Here Heidegger correlates language analysis with existential analysis, which is a more concrete understanding of language than those found in abstract logical analysis.

In any case, to understand language as the expression of existence is to allow for possibilities of interpretation which are ruled out where empirical referring is taken to be the standard function of language. It makes possible the existential interpretation of such language forms as myth, which appear to be fantastic if taken as objective empirical propositions, but which can make good sense if they are interpreted as expressions of human self-understanding. As we have seen, the example of this kind of existential interpretation is Bultmann's demythologizing project, in which he was able to infuse new meaning into the mythological language of the New Testament, by translating those terms out of the objective language of myth and into the existential language of self-understanding.

Heidegger's later thoughts on language and hermeneutics go beyond Bultmann, however, because there is a shift in attention away from the existential characteristics of language. Instead of insisting that human beings express themselves in language, Heidegger argues that it is language itself that speaks.\textsuperscript{21} Interpretation then demands that one be open to the address of Being, rather than attempting an existential translation of what is said. It follows that the hermeneutic rules which are laid down

for demythologizing are inadequate to this kind of listening, which cannot be formulated in the rules of method at all. Such interpretation is not so much a science as an art.

The significance of this shift in Heidegger's thought is that now language cannot merely be talked about, it must be encountered as coming-forth, as *phainesthai*. Yet language is not a phenomenon in the sense of something-which-appears; a deliberate focus of attention of some sort is required in order to encounter language in one's proper and full relationship to it. Here Heidegger also points to the importance of *logos*, letting-come-forth-and-be-present, and that in turn points to the inner unity of *phainesthai* and *logos*.

Heidegger uses the terms "revealing" and "concealing" to express this inner unity of *phainesthai* and *logos*. For a thing to be revealed it must be shown and it must be taken as something. But the apophatic level is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it brings into focus the things which are revealed as this or that. But in doing so, it makes them accessible in an odd way. According to Heidegger, for example, "hammerness" is already an interpretation of the hammer that was revealed. One cannot ask how a hammer in itself came to be; rather, one must "work backwards." One cannot ask about the hammer as hammer, but about the hammer as a thing-which-is. The truth (unconcealment) of things can only be approached when they are taken as things-which-are, and not as uprooted particulars such as hammers,
shoes, roses, smiles in themselves. The domain of truth is therefore not the particulars themselves but the domain and the showing which opens up this domain.

This brings us to a central theme in Heidegger's thought, that every revealing is at once a concealing. Although the ideas of revealing and concealing are fundamental to Heidegger's thought, they are also among the most difficult to clarify. They permeate a variety of levels, so that it is difficult to acquire a feeling for when these ideas are appropriate to invoke and when not. The status of the principles of revealing and concealing, is thus puzzling. How does revealment or concealment affect the ontological status of things? Revealed or concealed to whom? How are revealing and concealing related to each other? These issues are best considered under the topic of how Heidegger develops the concept of \textit{aletheia} (\textit{\alpha\lambda\eta\theta\epsilon\iota\alpha}).

\textbf{Aletheia as Revealing and Concealing}

Heidegger introduced the theme of truth as disclosure in \textit{Being and Time} where he combined a historical analysis with a phenomenological/etymological investigation of the Greek word \textit{aletheia} (\textit{\alpha\lambda\eta\theta\epsilon\iota\alpha}). He introduced his thesis that truth is disclosure by observing the limitations of the traditional, correspondence

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theories of truth determined by "the agreement of knowledge and its object."  

As he developed the theme of aletheia (αληθεία), Heidegger rejected and extended the traditional definitions of truth: veritas est adaequatio rei et intellectus, "truth is the correspondence [Angleichung] of the matter to knowledge." He added, however, that the classic conception of truth can also be expressed as veritas est adaequatio intellectus ad rem, "truth is the correspondence of knowledge to the matter." There is more here than the simple inversion of the order of a sentence, however. The idea behind the first assertion--"that objects conform to knowledge"--is the implicit assumption of Christian theology since Aquinas. What is assumed is that the subject matter is true only if it corresponds to the mind of God. Thus something is true if it measures up to "the idea preconceived in the intellectus divinus." The second statement, the older and more traditional of the two, asserts that "truth is the accordance (homoiosis) of a statement (logos) with a matter (pragma)." That is to say, a statement is true if it is in accord with the thing itself.

The epistemological impulse behind both notions of truth stated as correspondence is to achieve a sense of distance from the object so the interpreter can become a "privileged observer" who "overlooks" process. The result is that truth then

24 Heidegger, Being and Time, p. 258.
26 Ibid., p. 120.
27 Ibid., p. 122.
becomes static and visual. The object is taken out of the existential/temporal context, and rendered as pure presence. Heidegger suggested that the spatialization of temporal experience transforms it into a self-contained, self-reflexive referential surface. Such spatialization closes off interpretation and transforms "the mystery of being into certainty." 

In contrast to traditional correspondence theories of truth, Heidegger argued that a concept of truth can also be derived from the Greek notion of aletheia (ἀλήθεια) as "uncoveredness." Heidegger demonstrated this thesis phenomenologically by recalling a fragment from Heraclitus. For there to be a correspondence between knowledge and object, Heidegger argued, the object must first be uncovered, hidden, or brought out into the open. To be understood, the thing must first show itself. Thus, the logos (λόγος) is related to unhiddenness, or aletheia (ἀλήθεια).

Because the logos (λόγος) lets lie before us what lies before as such, it discloses what is present in its presencing. But disclosure is Aletheia (Αλήθεια). This (λόγος) and aletheia are the same.

Heidegger insisted that by proposing a definition of truth as "uncoveredness" he had not "shaken off" the traditional concept of truth as adaequatio. He had, instead, appropriated it in its primordial sense. That is, the primordial phenomenon

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29 Heidegger, Being and Time, p. 413.


31 Heidegger, Being and Time, p. 257-61.

32 Heidegger, Early Greek Thinking, p. 70.
of truth is not as the correspondence between knowledge and object, but as the "uncoveredness," or unconcealment of the object.\textsuperscript{33}

In his reading of truth as uncoveredness, however, Heidegger actually went beyond the Greeks when he added that a-\textit{letheia} (\textit{ἀ-λήθεια}) is a privative expression. The expression a (\textit{ἀ}) indicates that a kind of "robbery" takes place.\textsuperscript{34} Truth is something that is wrested from an entity as it is snatched away from its hiddenness. Expressed hermeneutically, this means that truth can never be finalized, for an element of "hiddenness" always remains in any disclosure.\textsuperscript{35} Hiddenness, or concealment, is not simply opposed to disclosure, for unconcealment is always accompanied by concealment.\textsuperscript{36} Heidegger expressed it as follows: "Dasein is already both in the truth and in untruth."\textsuperscript{37}

Heidegger resumed the theme of "truth in untruth" in "The Origin of the Work of Art," a later essay in which he continued to develop the concept of truth as unconcealment. Unconcealment was not disclosure purely and simply, he argued. There is always an inextricable bond in \textit{ἀλήθεια} between unconcealment and concealment.

To answer the question of "how truth as unconcealedness happens," Heidegger reflected on what unconcealment in itself is. To this end, he concluded that uncon-

\textsuperscript{33} Heidegger, \textit{Being and Time}, p. 262.

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., p. 265.


\textsuperscript{36} Bernasconi, \textit{The Question of Language in Heidegger's History of Being}, p. 16.

\textsuperscript{37} Heidegger, \textit{Being and Time}, p. 265.
cealment is the "clearing" in which what is stands. In other words, unconcealment is that through which beings pass so they can be known as beings. He illustrated this idea in his commentary on Van Gogh's painting of a pair of peasant shoes. Van Gogh did not simply reproduce a pair of shoes that were present at a particular time. Rather, Heidegger claims, Van Gogh's painting discloses the peasant's shoes in their unconcealment.

What is different about Van Gogh's painting when compared to a pair of shoes literally worn by a peasant? The peasant woman uses the shoes; she consumes or uses them up. When they are worn out, she replaces them. The replacement of them creates the impression that they are mere things hammered out by an abstract production process and then sold in stores. Thus the shoes are in a way "belittled" or "put down" as commonplace. Such is the very antithesis to unconcealment. The painting, on the other hand, allows the shoes to be present in their fullest significance; which is to say, the painting disclosed what shoes in truth are. The painting allowed a pair of peasant shoes to stand out in a clearing and to be truly seen for what they are.

Its [the artwork] truth does not lie in the reproduction of reality but in extending it beyond the limitations of extant ranges of vision and understanding. Creative disclosure, whether affected by means of the artwork or otherwise, occurs through the interpretive transformation of what is there. Art provides the vision whereby repressed and unknown aspects of reality are unveiled.

Truth or openness then does not consist of a timeless, "objective" set of facts.

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or possibilities. Truth is a dynamic interplay of revealing/concealing. As such, truth has to happen, take place, be anchored and localized. Truth or revealing/concealing cannot be derived from the everyday world and the things in it; we are in need of a prior horizon which must come from "without." As such, it is an overflow, an endowing, a bestowal.\textsuperscript{40} Truth in its highest and deepest sense is always original; it is founded through poetic art or thought, not caused or derived from the things-that-are.\textsuperscript{41} Truth is not a system of mechanically related parts and wholes but rather a dynamic happening: "Truth is present only as the conflict between lighting and concealing in the opposition of world and earth."\textsuperscript{42}

It is important to stress here the interplay between revealing and concealing. Beings are not only unveiled, they are also concealed in the same clearing in which they are unconcealed.

Each being we encounter and which encounters us keeps to this curious opposition of presence in that it always withholds itself at the same time in a concealedness. The clearing in which beings stand is in itself at the same time concealment.\textsuperscript{43}

Said in other words: as beings are unconcealed there is a simultaneous withholding, a concealedness, that occurs in the same clearing in which unconcealedness stands.

The concealment aspect of truth occurs in two ways: it "can be a refusal or

\textsuperscript{40} Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," p. 75.

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., p. 72-5.

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., p. 62.

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., p. 53.
merely a dissembling (das Verstellen)."44 "[I]t can be self-seclusion or withdrawal on the one hand, and masking, disguise, or figure on the other, where something appears only by concealing itself as something other or as what it is not."45 In any case, truth derived from concealment indicates that an interpretation which desires full disclosure of phenomena is elusive and that interpretation can never be final or definitive. "[T]ruth is not found in closed certainty but in continual inquiry and openness."46

Truth is never certain in any given moment. The clearing in which all beings stand disclosed is never a lucid stage with a permanently raised curtain. Thus, truth cannot be characterized as continuous revelation or disclosure. Neither does it "exist in itself beforehand, somewhere among the stars, only later to descend elsewhere among beings."47 Said in different words, truth cannot be a transcendental logos (as is the Logos in the Gospel of John) because it "is always self-divided."48 As such, truth is never a state of things, but a happening, an event, a process by which things emerge from their concealedness into unconcealedness. Yet, at the very instant that unconcealedness takes place, concealedness, in the form of refusal or dissembling, also occurs.

44 Ibid., p. 54.


46 DiCenzo, Hermeneutics and the Disclosure of Truth, p. 64.


48 Bruns, Heidegger's Estrangement, p. 34.
Concealment preserves what is most proper to aletheia (ἀλήθεια), the lethe (λήθε) of aletheia (ἀλήθεια). Thus, concealment should not be considered as the fragmentary nature of knowledge, but as that which is not yet revealed, that which remains veiled. Expressed in these terms, concealment is ontologically prior to unconcealment. It is always already there before unconcealment takes place. It is that from which unconcealment springs. The hidden, the dark, the mysterious is that from which disclosure, light, and truth emerge, and into which they return.

Based on the relationship of concealment to unconcealment, Heidegger argued that "truth, in its nature, is un-truth." He was not insisting that untruth is falsehood, or a perversion of truth. Untruth is not the opposite of truth, but its other. Untruth is that which is concealed. ἀλήθεια, truth as unconcealment, is always accompanied by concealment as the ground of its possibility. Said in other words, "the truth is there is no truth," which means for Heidegger that truth is an ongoing process by which being emerges from its hiddenness, or concealment, to unconcealment.

Whatever else it is, aletheia (ἀλήθεια) is not truth in the sense of privileging one thing over another because it corresponds to known facts. Aletheia (Ἀλήθεια) as the process of unconcealing is prior to truth traditionally defined as correspon-


51 Bruns, Heidegger's Estrangement, p. 34.

dence. *Aletheia* (Ἀλήθεια) is the matrix out of which truth, as traditionally understood, originates. *Aletheia* (Ἀλήθεια) is the strife, the conflict, the "primal opposition" that takes place as unceasement strives to overcome the inertia of concealment.53

It is important to add that what Heidegger called *Verstellen* ("dissemble, dissimulation") in his essay, "On the Essence of Truth," meant more than a concealing under some pretense, or the hiding behind a false appearance. It meant errancy and mystery.54 In these terms, mystery is the conservation or preservation that takes place in concealment. It is not a mystery of this or that thing, but the process of concealing what is hidden.55 Just as *aletheia* (ἀλήθεια) is the process of unceasement, so, too, is mystery the process of concealment. The two belong together, mystery and truth, truth and mystery. Mystery is immune to methodological applications which search for solutions, because mystery, like *aletheia* (ἀλήθεια), is not a thing, but a process. Mystery is that which remains behind in the hidden, the unsaid, the unthought, and serves as the ground spring for the revealed, the expressed, and the thought.

According to Heidegger, the shift away from the conceptualization of truth as

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manifestation took place in the history of philosophical thought that followed Plato.\textsuperscript{56} The philosophical concept of truth subsequent to Plato became the static ability to see "what is right and the correctness of seeing."\textsuperscript{57} In "standard Western thinking" truth was no longer defined as \textit{aletheia} (\(\acute{a}\lambda\acute{\eta}\theta\varepsilon\iota\alpha\)) in the sense of unconcealedness.

"\textit{Aletheia} (\(\prime\Lambda\lambda\acute{\eta}\theta\varepsilon\iota\alpha\)) is turned around and thought of as the opposite of \textit{pseudos} (\(\psi\epsilon\delta\omicron\omicron\varsigma\)), i.e., of the false in the sense of incorrect, while truth is thought of as correctness."\textsuperscript{58} This "falling away" from the original insight of the pre-Socratic thinkers contradicted Heidegger's own hermeneutic project because it got stuck in the muck and mire of the metaphysics of original essences he was trying to overcome.\textsuperscript{59}

At this point, Heidegger's closest readers have accused him of lapsing into the same kind of originary thinking that has dominated the history of metaphysics.\textsuperscript{60} Undoubtedly, Heidegger's hermeneutic of truth is informed by old logocentric dream of language in its original sense before its escape into Platonic idealism. As such,

\textsuperscript{56} see Martin Heidegger, "Plato's Doctrine of Truth," \textit{Philosophy in the Twentieth Century}, vol. 3, eds. William Barrett and Henry D. Aiken (New York: Random House, 1962), in which Heidegger abandoned the hermeneutical approach that he had developed in his interpretations of the pre-Socratic philosophers. In his interpretation of the cave allegory, for instance, Heidegger lapses into the old dream for the originary language. He argues that while there is a suggestion of \textit{aletheia} as the process of unconcealment, the overall thrust of the cave allegory is toward relinquishing an understanding of the essence of truth as unhiddleness. In the allegory truth becomes \textit{orthotes}, or "correctness of the ability to perceive and to declare something (p. 265)." It is, in other words, perception and assertion.

\textsuperscript{57} Heidegger, "Plato's Doctrine of Truth," p. 265.

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., p. 266.

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., p. 270.

"Heidegger is a primitive with regards to language," which is to say, he tracks "the metaphysical traditions in the West back to the soil out of which it sprang."\(^{61}\)

One must be attentive to the larger parts of Heidegger's thought that discourage a new metaphysical positivism, however. To focus one's critical attention on the Heidegger of "Plato's Doctrine of Truth," would be to ignore the Heidegger of "The Origin of the Work of Art," in which he recognized the difference between the unthought dimension and the originary meaning, even if he was not always consistent in maintaining that distinction in his later essays. It is the Heidegger of "The Origin of the Work of Art," the Heidegger who argues truth as a process, and not the Heidegger in search of primordial origins that his critics sometimes miss.\(^{62}\)

According to John Caputo, one of Heidegger's closest readers in the U.S., Heidegger "was looking for a word which would do for him what différance did for Derrida."\(^{63}\) He was looking for a word to point out how a text never offers itself for a final authoritative interpretation, but that it defers full disclosure by concealing, withholding, and hiding meaning. The truth, according to Heidegger, is not that which is manifested in its full presence, but rather that which denies that full disclosure can indeed occur. \(\text{Aletheia (}\check{\text{Λλήθεια))}\), like différance, is not a present entity. It is not a thing which is made visible, but the process of bringing that which is invisible into view. But even here, complete understanding of what has been

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\(^{63}\) Ibid., p. 179.
disclosed must be postponed because much always remains hidden. The full presentation of being itself never occurs. Said in other words, the text is a mystery from which disclosure springs. It is also the ground, the untruth, the concealed, which remains hidden, or not yet revealed. The full meaning of the text lies in the domain of the yet unexperienced.

In Heidegger's terms, then, mystery is not the opposite of, or perversion of disclosure, but the ground of revelation. It is that from which disclosure springs. The more something is revealed, or unconcealed, however, the more it remains hidden and concealed. In other words, the full essence of truth includes a respect for mystery, an appreciation for what is held back from unhiddenness.

To forage through all the creases, crevices, and aporiae of a text in search of full disclosure in order to make the narrative intelligible to contemporary ears, is to pass the mystery by, to flee from it, or in Heidegger's terms--"to err." Mystery, errancy, and the concealed belong "to the primordial essence of truth." Pre-critical interpreters knew this. They knew that words could be both luminous and dark, but modernist interpreters, using historical and literary critical methods, have approached the task of exegesis with the purpose of stultifying the darkness and nullifying the mystery. But the darkness should be entered into because it is precisely in the darkness that illumination takes place. Just as mystery is not the opposite of disclo-

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65 Ibid., p. 137.
sure, so too, darkness is not the opposite of light, but its other.\textsuperscript{66}

\section*{Conclusions}

In this chapter we have attempted to offer a philosophical correction to the hermeneutical principles of the historical method and theological concerns epitomized in the work of William Wrede and Rudolf Bultmann respectively. At the same time, Heidegger's philosophical categories point to new possibilities for reading gospel narratives because the tension between concealing and revealing, secrecy and mystery are now considered as hermeneutical obstacles to full disclosure and understanding. This, of course, was an issue first discovered, but not fully executed by William Wrede, who argued that the tension between revelation and secrecy is a necessary pedagogical function of the narrative in that mystery and concealment are constitutive aspects of revelation.\textsuperscript{67}

In Wrede's mind, however, the rationale for the concealing/revealing dynamic was in the end not narratological, but historical purely and simply--it had to do with two competing concepts in the tradition. But in Heidegger's philosophical program, what Wrede called the messianic secret, and then identified in the narrative as postponement and contradiction, is the primordial conflict between the mystery of concealment and the light of revelation which is never fully resolved in gospel narrative. It is this unresolved conflict which has led to many of the difficulties in

\textsuperscript{66} Bruns, \textit{Heidegger's Estrangement}, p. 40.

\textsuperscript{67} See above, p. 42.
John observed by critical readers through the centuries. Now we can see, however, that in the Gospel of John, mystery is a basic hermeneutical issue that challenges explanation, resists disclosure, and questions the readers' ability to interpret and understand biblical narratives.

The difference between Bultmann’s and Heidegger’s understanding of the dynamics of revealing and concealing is exemplified in their quite different understanding of the nature of language. For Bultmann, gospel language, and we are referring here primarily to mythological language, is defective. True meaning is concealed in mythological categories. Those categories must then be translated hermeneutically into the categories of existential encounter, so the meaning of the kerygma can be expressed and experienced. In that encounter the existential reality of a person is revealed, and the person is confronted by a "dualism of decision"—either choose to live authentically or inauthentically.

In Heidegger’s thought, language is not defective. Language, is rather, a living presence which both arrives and withdraws, reveals and conceals. Language is hermēneuein: announcing and letting-come-forth. Heidegger’s understanding of language is thus from an understanding of being human that is not oriented toward existentialism but rather toward "ontology." Being human is where being’s voice is heard and given room. Humans are the loud-speakers for the silent tolling of being. When human beings fulfill this role, they are truly human. It is for this reason that Heidegger regards the poet as humankind’s true priest. It is the poet who names the gods, who speaks forth the world of meaning that being addresses to the poet; it is the
poet who calls humankind out of the forgetfulness of being into its true role as shepherd of being. It is because of this understanding of being human that Heidegger's hermeneutic moved from an existential analysis Dasein to an interpretation of poets such as Hölderlin.

The hermeneutical task advocated by the "later" Heidegger is best illustrated as a dialogue. Understanding arises not out of the subjectivity of the interpreter facing up to the objectivity of the text, or the objectivity of the text confronting the subjectivity of the interpreter, but out of a dialogical dynamic. In that interaction the interpreter's questioning will be changed, and the question posed by the text to the interpreter will also change. In the end, interpreter and text are no longer quite the same. Dialogue brings something new into existence, a new understanding, a new understanding also of one's self. Hermeneutics would be misunderstood if it merely rendered more explicit what is already explicit in the text. Rather, hermeneutics understood in these terms renders explicit something implicit in the text, but made explicit only as a result of the interpreter's questioning.

In terms of dialogue, then, the interpreter "listens" closely to what the text itself has to say. The text does not reproduce a particular world outside itself. It does not refer to a particular historical setting in life "behind" the text. But neither is the text "created" in the interaction with the reader. Rather the text speaks for itself, it discloses its own world, on its own terms, in the interpretive process. In this way, then, one can say that word-art, poetry, narratives, etc., are "vehicles of revelation," in that they disclose a world as it truly is. On the other hand, however, what is
revealed is also withdrawn, either through self-seclusion, or through disguise and
figure where something appears only by concealing itself in what it is not. Texts
are indeed "vehicles of revelation," as Ricoeur would say, but they are also "vehi-
cles" of concealment, disguise, and mystery, which makes valid interpretation elusive.

In addition to the linguistic differences between Bultmann and Heidegger,
Bultmann also expressed the tension between concealing and revealing in gospel texts
in theological categories. Concealing and revelation are considered to be constitutive
to the nature of God. Moreover, Jesus is installed as the transcendental Revealer
in the incarnation. "In the flesh," however, the Revealer is disguised, but it is also
precisely "in the flesh" that the Revealer can be recognized. In being recognized and
disguised, the Revealer is then both revealed and hidden. Of course, the primary
emphasis in Bultmann’s thought was on the revealing side of the concealing/revealing
dichotomy. Revelation occurs in the divine/human encounter in which human beings
are confronted with the inauthenticity of their existence.

As we have seen, Heidegger's formulation of concealment in unconcealment,
mystery in disclosure, hiddenness in revelation is philosophical and is therefore
altogether different than Bultmann’s theological conception of the terms. Indeed,
Heidegger went to great lengths to deny the presence of revelation as "a present
reality." Revelation is rather a process whereby that which is concealed moves into
the opening of unconcealment—it is not the reality of what has been revealed. The

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69 The particulars of this discussion are developed more fully in the previous chapter, see
esp. p. 66.
difference between Bultmann and Heidegger becomes more clear in Bultmann’s formal definition of "truth" αληθεια (αληθεια). There he tried to appropriate much of Heidegger’s conceptualization of αληθεια (αληθεια) as unconcealment, but he also missed the point.

Etymologically αληθεια (αληθεια) has the meaning of non-concealment. It thus indicates a matter or state to the extent that it is seen, indicated or expressed, and that in such seeing, indication, or expression it is disclosed, or discloses itself, as it really is, with the implication, of course, that it might be concealed, falsified, truncated, or suppressed. Αληθεια (Αληθεια), therefore, denotes the "full or real state of affairs."^70

In this statement, the motif of non-concealment, or disclosure informs Bultmann’s definition of αληθεια (αληθεια), and through that, his theology of revelation. When Bultmann used αληθεια (αληθεια) in the specifically Johannine sense, however, he abandoned Heidegger’s hermeneutics of "truth" as a process in favor of embracing Heidegger’s existential categories. In Bultmann’s interpretation of John, αληθεια (αληθεια) is no longer a process in which being moves from concealment to disclosure, it is rather a transcendental signified denoting "divine reality." Furthermore, "truth" and "falsehood" are no longer different parts of the same process, but opposite ends of the reality pole which are to be understood "as genuine possibilities of human existence."^71

Hermeneutically, Bultmann thought interpretation was difficult, but not

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^71 Ibid., p. 245
impossible. The message hidden behind the mythological language, or "in the flesh," was revealed to those on the inside who have faith. Years later, Frank Kermode would echo much the same thought:

In all works of interpretation there are insiders and outsiders, the former having, or professing to have, immediate access to the mystery, the latter randomly scattered across space and time, and excluded from the elect who mistrust or despise their unauthorized divinations.\(^{72}\)

That only explains one half of the process of interpretation, however, for the valid interpretation is not only exceedingly difficult for those on the outside, it may even be more difficult for those on the inside. When confronted by a contradiction in a beloved text, the insider is more likely to find a rational way to explain the problem away, rather than facing it head-on. Heidegger teaches us, however, that in the process of that kind of insider interpretation, what the text truly says is covered over in the very process of trying to uncover its mystery. Thus, as meaning is uncovered, it is also hidden. *Altheia* (Ἀλήθεια), as unconcealedness and disclosure, must always be thought together with concealedness, by insider and outsiders alike.

In contrast to Bultmann, Heidegger calls into question the hope for permanently valid interpretations. In any text where the hermeneutics of secrecy are significantly present, and not simply as concepts to be worked out existentially, no one has enough control over the text to declare a reading free of ambiguity. Narratives, and especially biblical narratives, resist disclosure, and thus question our ability to interpret and understand them.

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In these terms, the Gospel of John can be thought of as a mysterious text of darkness and concealedness that resists the attempts of even the insider with faith from seeing it as a narrative of sustained revelation and light. In the reading of the Fourth Gospel which will be attempted in the next two chapters, Heidegger's category of truth as revealing in concealing will also be thought of as an advance over Wrede's discovery of the narrative dynamic of concealing/revealing. The dynamic is not located in the tension between two competing traditions, but in the tension of language that conceals as easily as it reveals. Throughout the narrative of the Fourth Gospel there is this dynamic of concealing and revealing which creates a sense of anticipation for further disclosure, but that expectation is left unfulfilled.

The categories of revealing in concealing will illustrate the inconclusiveness of the narrative conflict between truth and untruth, light and darkness in the Fourth Gospel. The purpose of the next section is to look at how these categories are introduced into the Prologue of the Fourth Gospel.
Chapter 4

REVELATION IN CONCEALMENT:
THE PROLOGUE (JOHN 1:1-18)

Introduction to the Text

Beginnings are extremely important because they mark the boundary of
differences between the world that will unfold in the story and all others worlds.
Beginnings are the thresholds readers must cross in order to enter into the story-world
of the text. If the reader does not enter, the story cannot be told. So beginnings
must be of sufficient interest to invite the reader to enter into the story world, and
then they must in some way prepare the reader for what is to come. But John's
beginning, the so-called "Prologue," seems to be more ambitious than what is called
for in conventional beginnings.¹

The peculiarity of its vocabulary makes the Prologue stand apart from the rest
of the gospel, and has drawn the attention of most critical readers of the Fourth
Gospel. Most of the scholarly discussion of the Prologue has centered on three
factors--its origin, its structure, and/or its meaning. The research has been generally
dominated by the idea that the Prologue consists largely of an early hymn (consisting

¹ For a further analysis of how John's ambitious beginning decenters the Logos and
provides the rationale for the narrative itself see Werner H. Kelber's "The Birth of a
of John 1:1-5, 10-11, 15)² which was edited and to which other more prosaic material was added. There are good reasons for this view, of course. Particularly evident are those points in the Prologue where the rhythm of the text changes from that of poetry to straightforward prose. The references to John the Baptist (John 1:6-8, 15) tend to be seen as especially obtrusive, and they are frequently referred to as patent interpolation.³ There are additional concerns, however, that make the Prologue difficult to understand (a) Why is John the Baptist introduced twice in the Prologue (vs. 6-9, 15)? (b) Why is the entry of the Logos into the world spoken of twice (vs. 11, 14)? (c) Why is the form of verses 1-13 so different from that of verses 14-18?

In contrast to the source critics who attempt to get behind the Prologue in order to isolate and reconstruct a hypothetical hymn, however, literary critics have offered solutions to some of the problems inherent in the Prologue by trying to grasp the exceedingly difficult nuances of the literary structure of the poem rather than focusing on its origin. From that perspective, the surface structure of the Prologue is often thought of as a "spiral"⁴ or as a "chiasm."⁵ The most notable example of the


latter is the work of Jeffrey Staley.\(^5\) In his study of the Prologue, Staley discovered that the first two verses (John 1:1-2) are a microstructure of the entire Prologue which, in turn, sets the pattern for the four major divisions of the narrative which follows.\(^7\) In Staley’s reading, the Prologue follows a chiastic pattern developed in seven strophes which are arranged in a step pattern (abc, cbd, bdc, etc.) in which the second term appears in the next clause as the lead word. The subsequent repetition of key words is then coupled with a concentric variation of the chiastic pattern which provides the narrative symmetry for the narrative portions of the gospel.

In contrast to Bultmann who very quickly discarded the literary form of the Prologue in the interest of his theology, Staley’s thesis required an extremely close reading of the Prologue. He is sensitive to the key words, themes, and nuances of the poetry. In another sense, however, Staley was not any closer to solving the complex problems of Johannine language than was Bultmann, for when Staley set up his analysis on the pattern of a chiasm, he abandoned language in favor of geometric design.

Staley claims that typographic roots make his kind of exposition possible. We are able to think in terms of chiastic patterns, he says, because the text can be visual-


\(^7\) Ibid., p. 52.
ized. But Staley has adopted the spatial model of "the well wrought urn" in which the gospel narrative is visualized more like a box or container, rather than heard, or read in temporal sequence. Staley has succeeded in recasting the readers of the gospel into spectators of a text which is insulated from a direct encounter with the human situation that Bultmann thought so necessary. To adopt Staley's hermeneutic is to conceal the agonistic stance of poetry in which the poet was an invested contestant and competitor in some kind of a struggle.

As we read the Prologue, let us keep this agonistic struggle for clarity firmly in mind. For if it is true that the Prologue is a programmatic statement of what is to be worked out in the narrative that follows, then the reader can expect many of the themes and problems that have been encountered in the Prologue to resurface again throughout the narrative. Potential conflictual themes then include the development of the relationship between the Logos/Jesus and the Father, the struggle between light and darkness, light and the world, truth and untruth, the conflict the Logos/Jesus has with his own people, John's subordination to Jesus, and Jesus' superiority over Moses, the clash between being born of "blood" and being born of the "will of God," the tension between sarx and doxa, and the continuing struggle in language between the urge to reveal, and the conserving aspects of concealing. From our reading of the

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8 Ibid., pp. 119-22.


10 Ibid., pp. 224-6.
Prologue, however, it will become evident that the conflict is not only between characters and agents in the story, but between the meanings of the words themselves.

Theologically and literarily, the Prologue sets the framework within which the rest of the Gospel story is told. Theologically, the Prologue establishes God as immensely distant and other. It is also quite sobering, for the Prologue indicates that life is surrounded by darkness. Thus the Prologue brings out the fact that at a certain point vision gives way to darkness and mystery. But amid the encircling darkness there is a keen sense of the reality of light, a sense of the way in which the distant God has entered into the flow of human history. From a philosophical perspective, darkness also surrounds the light because language is so dense and the text is so ambiguous.

Analysis of the Text

**John 1:1-5**

(1) In the beginning was the Logos, and the Logos was with God, and the Logos was God. (2) This one was in the beginning with God; (3) all things were made through it, and without it was not anything made that was made. (4) In it was life, and the life was the light of humankind; (5) and the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

The Prologue of the Fourth Gospel is not a mere foreword to the story of Jesus. It describes the beginning of that story and, at the same time, interprets the significance of Jesus’ entire life. In contrast to Matthew and Luke, the author of the
Fourth Gospel sees this beginning, not within history, but from the beginning of time, in God. This is the secret of the man Jesus; the secret is the incarnation of the eternal word. The incarnation itself is not described; there is no story of a virgin birth and no narration of descent. Thus, his becoming a human is not a biological curiosity, but a mystery that lies hidden behind the natural events of conception and birth. As such, it can neither be explained nor understood; it can only be witnessed to and proclaimed. And that is what the evangelist seeks to do.

The introduction itself is extraordinarily dense. The opening words remind the reader of Genesis 1:1, and epitomize the difficulties which confront the reader in this gospel. In an exact quote of the opening words of the Septuagint, the evangelist says, En arche (Ἐν ὀρχῇ)—"In the beginning was the word" (Ἐν ὀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος) (John 1:1a). The definite article before logos (ὁ λόγος) indicates an individualizing use of the term which focuses attention on a single unique concept that is already known.

The supposition is that ὁ λόγος has some meaning for the community to which this poem was addressed, but the real stress is on the idea that it somehow lies in

11 L. William Countryman, argues, for example, that the first readers of the gospel may have sensed a familiarity with Stoic philosophy which held that the logos was a link between divine will and the human mind, in, The Mystical Way in the Fourth Gospel: Crossing Over into God (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), p. 13. There are other possibilities besides Stoicism, of course. In the history of scholarship, in fact, there are many suggestions for solving the problem of identifying the background of ὁ λόγος (see Bultmann, The Gospel of John, pp. 21-31; Brown, The Gospel According to John, pp. 519-24. The most common solution to the puzzle of the Logos posits a background in the mythology of the Judaic Wisdom tradition. But such an answer raises more questions than it answers because, as Kelber has correctly pointed out, the text does not say anything about wisdom (Werner H. Kelber, "In The Beginning Were the Words: The Apotheosis and Narrative Displacement of the Logos," JAAR 58/1 (Spring 1990), pp. 124ff.). The text asserts quite matter-of-factly that it was the Logos that was in the beginning, not wisdom. For the reader twenty centuries removed from the community there are no textual clues which provide answers beyond the
God's nature to reveal himself. Without this self-revelation, however, God remains hidden in the mystery of what it means to be God. The text seems to suggest that no power of thought, no meditative or mystical technique, either in the Hellenistic world or of ours, is able to attain to God. God is recognized only through the Logos, and there is no other God than he who has revealed his secret, and ever continues to disclose it, through his own Word.

From John's brief reference to the theme in 1:1, however, it is impossible to specify exactly what the connections were with the word logos that the author intended to raise in his reader's mind. It seems to be quite clear, however, that the stress is on the identification of the Logos with God, while at the same time, maintaining a sense of difference. That is to say, the Logos both is and is not God.

Immediately after installing the Logos as the primordial Word ἐν ἀρχή, the text states that "the word was with God" (ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν) (John 1:1b). Although there is some controversy over how pros (πρὸς) should be translated, the general consensus is that it indicates accompaniment.12 Thus, the Logos "is in the presence of, or is accompanying God." In the phrase that follows, however, the assertion is also made that "the Logos was God" (θεόν ἦν ὁ λόγος). The noun theos (θεόν) without the definite article places "God" in the predicate position of the sentence, thus the Logos is identified with the divine without distinction.

questions. Thus, the true background of the Logos will remain forever concealed.

At this point, the language is seemingly paradoxical. On the one hand, the *Logos* is distinct from God (*ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν*), it accompanies God; but, on the other hand, it is synonymous with God (*θεόν ἦν ὁ λόγος*).

The Greek expressions used in this verse are sufficiently ambiguous to suggest both identity and difference. In the phrase, "the Logos was with God," the differences between God and other beings, i.e., the Logos, is maintained. However, in the phrase that follows, "the Logos was God," the lines of distinction are blurred. This cannot simply be attributed to "a paradox of simultaneous unity and distinction." Apodictic statements such as that conceal the true difficulty of the verse in question. What is at stake here is the collapse of distinctions.

In the attempt to solve this problem of identity and difference raised in the first sentence of the Prologue, traditional interpretations cover over, hide, or conceal the problem because they abandon the text for history, or leap from literary logic to theology. It is implied by the theological interpretations of this verse that the identity of the Logos is established through a kind of self-relation independent of any reference-to-other. From that point of view, identity and difference are indifferent. But

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13 Bultmann is correct in recognizing that the issue is the status of "equality" between the Logos and God—"the Logos is given the same status as God." He is also correct in noting the contradiction between vs. 1b and vs. 1c. And he may even be correct in designating the contradiction as a "paradox" ("A paradoxical state of affairs is to be expressed which is inherent in the concept of revelation, and which will be developed further in what follows: the paradox that in the Reveal God is really encountered and yet that God is not directly encountered, but only in the Reveal (p. 34.").), but the "contradiction" raises more problems than the concept of "paradox" can overcome, *The Gospel of John*, pp. 33-35.

that line of interpretation is also seriously misleading because it is hard to have a self-showing when there is absolutely nothing else around.

When the text is taken seriously for what it says, then we must recognize that the reader has been given no rhetorical clues to help establish the identity of either God or the Logos, because the differences between the signs have broken down--there is no identity because there is no difference. Altizer was correct when he pointed out that

we can evoke an actual and real identity only by embodying difference, a real and actual difference, a difference making identity manifest, and making it manifest as itself. Only the presence of difference calls identity forth, and it calls it forth in its difference from itself, in its difference from an identity which is eternally the same.\(^\text{15}\)

We cannot decide the meaning of the first two clauses of the Prologue, therefore, because the distinction between identity and difference has collapsed and we are unable to decide between meanings.\(^\text{16}\) In short, the question of the identity of the Logos figure cannot easily be boxed and packaged. At the outset, the reader comes face to face with the mystery of the revealer, and the reader will wrestle with that mystery for still another twenty chapters. It is precisely here in the first verse,


\(^{16}\) In a recently published book, Norman R. Petersen argues that the semantic problems raised by John's use of language can be illustrated in the fact that the reader is not given any clues about the meaning of the words "God" and Logos because we do not know how John is using those words or to what they refer. What the reader does know is that "God" and Logos cannot have conventional meaning because they refer to the same entity, *The Gospel of John and the Sociology of Light: Language and Characterization in the Fourth Gospel* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1993), p. 9.
however, that the mystery of the Johannine narrative begins.\textsuperscript{17} Without taking the route through the history-of-religions to find a rationale for such curious language, the reader is confronted with a mystery—a mystery of language that reveals, and in the same sentence, withholds something back in concealment.

We might suggest at this point, that the issue of identity in/and difference mirrors the interplay of disclosure and concealment characteristic of all language. In Heidegger's terms, language always means more than it says; the being language discloses is always more than appears. Unthought relations remain hidden and unrealized in all actuality. By maintaining the tension between the revealed and the concealed, the Logos, as language, insures that understanding always evolves through ceaseless reinterpretation.

The second and third verses reiterate the problems raised in the first verse. In vs. 2 difference is reestablished in the repetition of vs. 1b, "This one was in the beginning with God" (οὗτος ἦν ἐν ἀρχῇ πρὸς τὸν θεόν). In vs. 3, however, the differences collapse again when the Logos is identified as creator, "All things were made through (δι') it, and without it was not anything made that was made." In vs. 2, the difference between Being and beings (the creator God and the Logos) are maintained, but in vs. 3 difference again collapses into identity when the Logos assumes the role usually reserved for the creator. We cannot assume that the Logos here is a mediator between the divine and the created order in Philo's sense of the

Logos, but is instead "God himself in so far as he reveals himself."\(^{18}\)

In summary fashion, the first three verses of the Prologue disclose that the Logos has existed from the beginning (ἐν ἄρχῃ), that it both is God and is not God, and that it assumed the role of creator in the creation. In that context, the Logos is by now a thoroughly ambiguous figure. The reader does not have a privileged position from which he or she can make a valid determination of how the first three verses should be interpreted. The tendency is to find a way to get around the appearance of polytheism in which the Logos is identified with God. Yet, the perception of just such a theological quandary is unmistakable. Any meaning that the reader chooses (the Logos is God, or the Logos is not God) is immediately concealed or called into question by an opposing statement in the text which is equally legitimate. Thus, the Logos is enthroned as the center of the cosmos in the opening statement, but very quickly a decentering begins to take place in the slipperiness of language which destabilizes the one, true meaning so coveted by traditional interpretations. To attribute to the problem a paradox only complicates the dilemma by deferring it to a theological discussion, but the problem never gets resolved. Petersen is forthright in his summary analysis of these verses:

...logically, he (the Fourth Evangelist) is *contradictory* because he is predicating of two different things that they are both different and identical. For us to understand what John means, we would have to be able to identify the elements that would make his language meaningful (emphasis added).\(^{19}\)


In vss. 4-5 the theme of creation and the participation of the Logos in creation, is continued. The Logos brought into existence all there is (vs. 3), including "life" and "light" (vs. 4).

\textit{In Him was life (ζωή), and the life was the light (ϕως) of humankind; and the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it} (John 1:4-5).

The question in these verses has to do with the reference of "life" and "light." Is the text to be taken literally, so that "life" is "natural life"? Or, should the verse be read figuratively (spiritually) as "eternal life," or philosophically, i.e., "life in its existential possibilities."\textsuperscript{20} If the implied subject is the whole created order, then the figurative interpretation, "eternal life," would be inappropriate. If, on the other hand, the subject of the sentence is some "special aspect of creation," then it would be appropriate to interpret "life" figuratively, i.e., "eternal life." Brown argues that the identification of "life" with "the light of men" suggests that "eternal life" is indeed the intended meaning.\textsuperscript{21} Yet, the only rhetorical clue available to the reader is the \textit{en arche} (ἐν ἀρχῇ) of the first verse. There the creation myth of Genesis is recalled in which light is a force in the \textit{physical universe}. In that context, the "light" is the literal light of creation that shone in the darkness of the physical universe.\textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{20} See Bultmann, \textit{The Gospel of John}, p. 41.

\textsuperscript{21} On the difficulties in translating this sentence, see Brown, \textit{The Gospel According to John}, pp.6f., 25f.

\textsuperscript{22} Petersen acknowledges that such a reading may be taken to be "overly literal." But he also concludes that these early verses \textit{must} be taken literally because the nouns do not have any of the characteristics usually attributed to "symbol" or "metaphor." At the same time, Petersen insists that John uses language in a "special" sense because his nouns do not mean what they should mean in everyday language, \textit{The Gospel of John and the Sociology of Light}. 
There is another often debated issue concerning these verses (frequently stated in terms of either/or), and that is, whether "life-giving" refers to the life residing in the Logos or in the creation which had "come into being."\textsuperscript{23} The conclusion of vs. 3, a verse dealing with creation, may also be read, depending on the punctuation, as the beginning of the sentence in vs. 4--the verse which moves away from creation towards the incarnation. The RSV, through a note,\textsuperscript{24} takes account of both possibilities, and, beginning with the early manuscripts, opinion on the matter has always been deeply divided.\textsuperscript{25} An either/or approach is questionable, however, because the text has a certain intrinsic ambiguity. The ambiguity resides in the fact that two statements are being made simultaneously. In one statement life is all things that "came into being through" the Logos (vs. 3) and in the other, "that which was made was life in him" (vs. 4b).

The text has no punctuation. Therefore, while the ambiguity may indeed have been exploited doctrinally (the Arians put the conclusion of v. 3 with v. 4 and then used it for their own purposes), it was not scribal error or doctrinal tendentiousness which first brought it into being.\textsuperscript{26} The ambiguity was always already in the text. It


\textsuperscript{24} The text can also be read as follows: "...was not anything made. (4) That which has been made was life in him..." (RSV).


\textsuperscript{26} See the full discussion on the difficulty of vss. 3 and 4 in Bruce M. Metzger, \textit{A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament} (United Bible Societies1971), pp. 195f.
is possible therefore to see it not as a problem to be solved, or as carelessness on the part of the author that needs to be corrected, but as part of the inherent ambiguity of language that reveals while it conceals.

The issues which confront the reader in these verses cannot be resolved with certainty, because there is a linguistic impasse. In a situation similar to that of the first two verses, two possible meanings exist side by side—one literal, and one figurative. The evangelist lets the reader know that "life" is an important theme, but the one true meaning is concealed from the reader who is unable to make an authoritative decision between the two possible readings.

In vs. 5, the reader is faced with yet another undecidable term that obstructs a valid interpretation. Katelaben (Κατέλαβεν) is ambiguous. It can be translated either as "overcome," or as "comprehend." If the former translation is preferred, then katelaben (κατέλαβεν) in the text sets up a will-to-power struggle between light and darkness in which neither is able to gain the upper hand, to "overcome," or to supplant the other. But darkness and light are also epistemologically at odds with one another. That is to say, the Logos, as the light, speaks in a language that prevents those who live in the darkness of the world from understanding. In that regard, the

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27 John may well be involved here in an intentional play on words as C. K. Barrett suggests in The Gospel According to John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1978), pp. 158-9; see also Edwyn Clement Hoskyns, The Fourth Gospel, ed. Francis Noel Davey, 2nd ed. (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1947), p. 143. Bultmann, on the other hand, insists that since οὗ κατέλαβεν has its parallels in οὗ έγνω, οὗ περέλαβον in vss. 10f. the verbs are used synonymously to mean "see through" or "to understand," but not in terms of "simple understanding. Rather, the reference is to the "comprehension of faith," The Gospel of John, p. 48 n. 1. In his critical notes on the verse, Brown translates οὗ κατέλαβεν as "overcome," The Gospel According to John, p. 8.
darkness would be unable to "comprehend" the light. In either case, an obstacle is placed in the road to revelation because the reader is unable to make a firm decision about how *katalaben* (καταλαβεῖν) should be translated. Both meanings have their place, but if one is not able to determine a right or a wrong reading, then the text is undecidable.

When vss. 4-5 are read theologically, the common course is to take darkness as the perversion of light. Light implies life and presence; darkness is death and absence. Light also lends itself to symbolism: "With its clarity and warmth, it is obviously something desirable and good, while darkness is spontaneously feared as evil."28 In Bultmann's theology the light/darkness dualism is not so much symbolic as it is a reflection of his existentialist hermeneutic. According to Bultmann, light is the definitive state of enlightenment, or self-understanding, which includes freedom from death and inauthentic existence. The Creator is light and life, and it is only by returning to those origins that human beings can properly understand themselves as creatures.29 In searching for an understanding of themselves, human beings search for the light.30

If we were to engage in a Heideggerian dialogue with the text before us, rather than following Bultmann on this point, we would first point to the emphatic ending of

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29 Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, p. 44.

30 Ibid., p. 52.
vs. 3 (οὐδὲ ἐν ὁ γέγονεν) which implies that everything without exception was brought into being by the Logos (Λόγος). That would have to include the darkness. In such a scenario, darkness would be derived from the light. Light and Logos (Λόγος) were in the beginning as creators of the darkness. In a dialogue with the text, however, that would not be the last word, because the text also says that "the light shines in the darkness" (ἐν τῇ σκοτίᾳ φαίνει) (John 1:5). The suggestion here is that the darkness was already in the world prior to the coming of the light. It would then be difficult to reach a theological decision about the ontological priority of light and darkness. According to the first reading, light creates darkness. The second reading, however, indicates that light and darkness are not opposites, but the two sides of the same process of creation. The darkness, as co-equal to the light, cannot "overcome" the light, nor can it "comprehend" the light. Neither is the light able to subdue the darkness, however.

In a Heideggerian hermeneutic the darkness and the light co-exist. The darkness surrounds the light, and the light emerges into the darkness. There is a will-to-power between the light and darkness, but in the end the light still remains surrounded by the darkness. The light does not eliminate the darkness, but enters into it, and abides with it, because illumination can only occur within darkness. Light and darkness are both necessary requirements for difference and disclosure. If the world is flooded by the pure light of day, without color, and without contrast, then

31 Ibid., p. 37.

disclosure is impossible. When one looks directly into the brightness of the sun
vision is blurred; blindness can even result. Thus, the very thing that makes disclo-
sure possible, vis-à-vis, light, is also the thing that conceals.  

The Prologue begins on the lofty note of offering reliable and essential
knowledge, but early on the offer is already withdrawn. The "apotheosis of the
Logos" is not matched by clarity of meaning. At crucial points the text seems to be
providing information, but the message is concealed by the ambiguity of language. It
is only when the Prologue is read philosophically, and with a sensitivity to the
revealing/concealing potential of language, that one can begin to discover the reveal-
ing/concealing work of its language.

John 1:6-13

(6) There was a man sent by God whose name was John (7) who came
as a witness to bear witness to the light so that all might believe
through him. (8) He was not the light, but came to bear witness to the
light. (9) The true light which gives light to every person was coming
into the world. (10) He was in the world, and the world was made
through him, yet the world did not know him. (11) He came to his
own, and his own people did not accept him. (12) But to all who
received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become
children of God; (13) who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the

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33 The co-existence of darkness and light is also evident in the creation of beginnings in
Genesis 1:1, which, as we have seen, is parallel to the Johannine Prologue. In the beginning
"when God began to create" the world was in darkness and chaos. The creative process was
in rearranging the chaotic stuff so it could be useful to human beings. That was done when
God brought light into the world, enabling human beings to see. The light was neither the
creation nor the creator. It was rather part of the process by which chaos and darkness were
brought under the control of order. The darkness was not in revolt against creation, it was
the very essence of creation. In Heidegger's terms, the darkness served as the matrix from
which light emerged.
flesh nor of human will, but of God.

After the Prologue raises the issue of the tension between light and darkness, there is a sudden narrative interlude interjected into the poetic hymn. This interlude explains that a man, John, was sent by God as a witness to the light which was coming into the world. The text does not state clearly to which period these verses refer. There is no explicit reference to "the beginning," but neither is it stated with explicit clarity (as it is in v. 14) that the period in question is that of the incarnation. Instead these verses are set, rather vaguely, in between.

Most of the scholarship has fragmented the text, first, by saying that the verses dealing with John the Baptist (vss. 6-8) are alien to the basic rhythm and message of the Prologue, and, further, by setting up an either/or debate in the verses dealing with the coming of the light that follow (vss. 9-12) are seen as referring to the Old Testament period of Wisdom, and by others as referring to the Logos incarnate in the ministry of Jesus. This debate is an expanded variation of the one which surrounds v. 4--the question of whether the process of granting life and light refers to the period after creation or, to the time of the incarnation. In this later debate, as in the case of v. 4, and, indeed, as also in the case of the ambiguities in vss. 3 and 5, it

35 Schnackenburg, 1, p. 88.
seems better, as Dodd suggests, to avoid an either/or approach.\textsuperscript{37}

There is no ambiguity, however, about the purpose of John's mission as one of bringing faith to those who would hear his witness (John 1:6-7). The narrator expresses clearly that this John is not the light itself, but a witness to the light. John came as a "witness" (John 1:7:\textit{μαρτυρίαν}) that "he might bear witness," (John 1:7:\textit{μαρτυρήσῃ}) Then like an echo in the text "that he might bear witness" is repeated again in vs.8. The reader does not know how this parenthetical statement got included in the poem,\textsuperscript{38} but there is little doubt as to the purpose of its inclusion. The redundancy makes it absolutely clear that John is subordinate to the light. John is not the "true light" (John 1:9). John is a forerunner who announces the arrival of the light, which when it comes, will enlighten all people (John 1:9).

The "true light" (vs. 9) thus stands in sharp contrast with the statements in vss. 6-8 concerning John (the Baptist), but here again the reader is faced with an ambiguous text. Part of this ambiguity consists of the fact that the clause may refer not only to the coming of the light (RSV), but also to the coming of people (KJV: "the light which lighteth every man that cometh into the world"). In other words, there is a faint suggestion not so much of the light coming to people as of people


\textsuperscript{38} Robert Tomson Fortna believes that John 1:6-7, along with vss. 19-23, were part of the narrative source material behind the Gospel to which the poetry was later added, \textit{The Fourth Gospel and Its Predecessor: From Narrative Source to Present Gospel} (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), pp. 15-34. This is an interesting reversal of the most common theories which hold that the narrative parenthesis was added to the poetic sections. See Bultmann, \textit{The Gospel of John}, pp. 15f., 48f.; Brown \textit{The Gospel According to John}, p. 27.
coming to the light. At a later stage (3:21) such an idea will be stated clearly. The essential point for the moment, however, is not the detail of the ambiguity, but the ambiguity itself, the fact that the text may be read legitimately in two quite distinct ways.

Lurking behind this ambiguity is the major theological issue of revelation which has received apodictic treatment in scholarship. For what is at stake is the ability of the text to be a "vehicle of revelation." How can an ambiguous text be a "vehicle of revelation" if its meaning is undecidable?

As the Prologue moves into its next section (vss. 10-13), there is a reiteration of the claim that the light was the agent of creation: "He [the light] was in the world and the world was made (ἐγένετο) through him..." (John 1:10a). The egeneto (ἐγένετο) of vs. 3 is repeated. The second half of the verse seems to repeat the notion asserted in vs. 5, only here in vs.10b it is the world (κόσμος) rather than the darkness that is unable to comprehend, or know him: "...and the world did not recognize him (οὐκ ἔγνω)" (John 1:10b). To the world the light was concealed—the world did not recognize him.

The narrator does not explain why the light was concealed from the world, it is simply assumed as a fact. The purpose of light is to reveal. In the light people no longer grope and stumble in the darkness. But now that the light has come, why is the world still unable to see? The light came not only to the world in general, but more specifically, to its own people (οἱ ἴδιοι) and was not received (οὐ παρέλαβον). Its own people apparently had the same problem as the world in general; which is to
say, the light somehow remained concealed. Since it was not recognized by its own people, it was therefore rejected. In sum, the light was revealed to the world in its coming, and it was also concealed. Thus, it remained unrecognized.

The light was not rejected by everyone, however. To those who did receive him--those who were able to see past the veil of concealment--he gave the power (ἐξουσίαν) to become children of God. That is, "to those who believe in his name" (John 1:12: τοῖς πιστεύοντιν εἰς τὸ θνομα αὐτοῦ)--but his name has not yet been given. These were the ones who were begotten (γεννηθησαν) of God, and not by blood(s) (αἷματων) or the will of the flesh (John 1:13).

The Logos came as "light," but still to the world and to its own people it was concealed. There were some who were able to interpret the Logos correctly, however, and to them was given the freedom to become children of God, if they believed in the name of the Logos. It is not yet clear on what basis some received the Logos/light and others did not. The reader does not even know yet what the "name" is that one is supposed to believe. Neither has it been disclosed what it means to be "a child of God," or to be "born of God," but the reader is aware, that being born of God is not a privilege of birth that involves blood relationships, nor is it a result of cultural tradition ("the will of man"). In sum, the first thirteen verses of the Prologue have revealed much, but much remains concealed.

John 1:14-18

(14) And the Logos became flesh (ὁ λόγος σώζει ἐγένετο) and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth (χάριτος καὶ ἀληθείας); we have
beheld (ἐθεώραμεθα) his glory (δόξαν), glory as of the only Son from the Father. (15) (John bore witness to him, and cried, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks before me, for he was before me.") (16) And from his fullness have we all received grace upon grace. (17) For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth (ἡ χάρις καὶ ἡ ἀληθεία) came through Jesus Christ. (18) No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known.

With these verses the reader now moves into a section of the poem that is sometimes characterized as the turning point, not only of the Prologue itself, but of the gospel as a whole.39 For this reader to arrive at such a conclusion, however, would be too hasty. It is too early in the temporal reading process to assess the place these verses occupy in the Prologue, much less within the general context of the narrative as a whole. By now, the reader is simply looking for a few clues that will help resolve some of the mystery and ambiguity that have already become apparent. But rather than clearing up the puzzling language, the Prologue deepens the enigma surrounding the Logos by adding other voices to those who have witnessed the coming of the Logos/light/life. With this, there is a noticeable shift in the narrator's point of view. In vss. 1-13 the focus of the text had been on the Logos and its relationship with God and the world, but beginning in vs. 14 there is a shift from third person to the first person ("we") activity of those who witnessed the glory of the Logos, now identified as "the only Son from the Father."

There is a summary quality about this statement indicated by the reappearance

39 Bultmann, The Gospel of John, p. 60. See also Kelber, who assets that vs.14 "sets the logical and theological premise for the subsequent narrative," "The Birth of a Beginning," p. 133.
of the word *Logos*, which links vs. 14 with vs. 1 (the only two places in the Prologue
where the term is used). Thus, the passage forms an inclusio for what has been said
before, as well as extending the ideas that have been stated so far. For example, vs.
14ab ("And the *Logos* became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth")
sums up, and moves beyond, what had been said in vss. 10-11. For the third time
"became" (*ἐγένετο*) (vss. 3, 10, 14) is used to express the idea of the *Logos* giving up
its place in the world of Being to enter into the realm of becoming. That in itself
presents insurmountable problems of the interpretation. 40 Through the *Logos* the
world became (vs. 3, 10), and now the *Logos* itself has become a part of the worldly
realm (vs. 14). Prior to the incarnation passage, the *Logos* stood in a relationship of
identity/difference with Being, but now it has entered the world of beings and
language. The entry of the *Logos*

into the world in the "flesh" of Jesus is also an entry into the language
of the world, which is a language that, among other things, is designed
to differentiate things by giving them different "names." Consequently,
prior to the incarnation there is no differentiation in the Other, and
therefore prior to that moment there is no "Father" any more than there
is a "Son". By the same token, "Jesus" is not a pre-existent divine
being who came into the world; it is the Other who came into the world
by "becoming flesh". 41

In vs. 14c ("we beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father")
the poet expands the idea of becoming God's children first expressed in vss. 12-13 by
saying that he (the narrator) and his community have shared in the fullness of the

40 On the difficulties John’s mediation of flesh and glory present for the interpretation of

41 Petersen, *The Gospel of John and the Sociology of Light*, p. 15f
begotten. In another comment interjected into the poem, vs. 15 reiterates John's witness in vss. 6-9. Finally, in vs. 16, the last line of vs. 14 is expanded: "We beheld his glory...full of grace and truth (vs.14e)...and from his fullness, we have all received grace (vs.16)."

The phrase, "we have beheld his glory" is a simple assertion that conceals some serious difficulties for the reader. One problem has to do with the meaning of "glory" (δόξα). In Homeric Greece doxa (δόξα) meant "what one thinks," or one's "opinion." Later the term referred to one's "reputation," "status," or "standing" in the community. In this verse, however, the older uses have disappeared, and have been replaced by the Hebrew connotation of kabod which expresses the divine mode of being as "splendor," or "self-manifestation." The term can also denote an outward, or physical manifestation, however. At other times doxa (δόξα) refers to the revelation of the divine character which is invisible. In the present context there are no clues relating to how the term should be taken. Does doxa (δόξα) refer to the splendor of the physical appearance of Jesus, or is it the revelation of an inner divine character that is experienced intuitively?

The dilemma which confronts the reader in the term "glory" is compounded by the ambiguity of what it means to have beheld his glory. There are five verb forms

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43 In his analysis of vs. 14, Petersen raises the possibility that in the first instance "glory" is used literally ("we beheld his glory"), but in the second instance the term is employed metaphorically, with the sense of honor that is befitting "the only Son from the Father," The Gospel of John and the Sociology of Light, pp. 17f.
for "behold," "see," or "sight" used in the Fourth gospel, and the narrator has a habit of frequently interchanging them, so it is not always easy to find the precise meaning that applies in any particular case.\textsuperscript{44} The reference to 	extit{e}theasthai (ἐθεασάμεθα) here in vs. 14 has the connotation of a literal sight—seeing with one’s physical eyes (see John 1:38; 6:5), in which case it would be interchangeable with 	extit{horan} (John 1:18: ἔδωρακεν). Ἐθεασάμεθα can also mean seeing with physical eyes, but in such a way that a "supernatural impression is gained," or even in different words, it can denote "the perception of something wholly supersensual."\textsuperscript{45}

Sometimes ambiguity of reading the Bible is caused not by too little information, but by too much. There are several difficulties associated with reading the phrase, "we beheld his glory." The reader is faced with the dilemma of trying to make a decision about the meaning of an important Johannine phrase. If we decide to read the phrase ("we beheld his glory") as an indication of "supersensual perception (i.e., through faith) of Jesus’ inner divine character," then as much, or more, evidence can be presented to undermine that claim. As soon as one meaning has been chosen, then two other possible interpretations have been covered over and concealed. The language of the text reveals one meaning while withholding other meanings back in concealment. The problems with the concealing/revealing nature of language prevents the reader from placing too much confidence in discriminating between

\textsuperscript{44} See Brown's discussion on this problem in \textit{The Gospel According to John}, pp. 501-3.

meanings that one wishes to make. The hesitancy of choosing between meanings contributes to the undecidability of reading the gospel.

Another important theme is raised in this strophe which has not yet been addressed. That theme has to do with the relationship between truth and Logos which is established in vs. 14: "And the Logos became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory...full of grace and truth (χάριτος καὶ ἀληθεία)." Charis (χάρις) and aletheia (ἀληθεία) are again conjoined in John 1:17 where the Logos is finally identified as Jesus: "For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came (ἐγένετο) through Jesus Christ."

It is obvious from the assertion of having "beheld his glory" that the narrator of this poem is not an objective observer. The narrator is rather an engaged and interested participant on the side of those who have "received" grace and truth, as opposed to those who received the law. In a sense that would call into question the narrator's authority. Authority can only be legitimated if the narrator is considered by the reader to be a reliable witness, but what does the narrator offer as proof of authority? Does the reader consider the narrator to be a reliable witness? Is the witness of the narrator credible?

Unfortunately, the narrator of the Prologue offers little evidence to establish his authority beyond simple assertion. The narrator does not tell the reader, for instance, what truth is, only that it is. There seems to be an assumption that the reader will accept the claim of truth based on no more than the simple fact that it has been asserted. In the terms of Bultmann's classic formulation, the gospel "presents
only the fact (das Dass) of the Revelation without describing its content (ihr Was). No additional information about grace and truth is offered beyond the assertion that the Logos revealed God's glory ($\delta\omega\kappa\tau\nu$), and that in him grace and truth, which displaced Moses and the law, were made known in all their fullness.\footnote{Rudolf Bultmann, The Theology of the New Testament, vol. 2, trans. Kendrick Grobel (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955), p. 66.}

The assertion that the Logos manifests God is even more troubling when the narrator claims that the pre-existent Logos comes in human form. Here are the two competing ideas that the narrator seems unable to reconcile: When the Word became flesh, is the glory of the divine concealed in the flesh, or is the glory of the divine revealed in the flesh? On this point, the narrator is struggling with the limits of a theological concept as he tries to portray revelation. The language of this verse conceals the radical difference between the human and the divine. On the one hand, the Prologue claims that the Logos reveals, explains, or makes the creator God known. Speaking in the first person plural, the narrator affirms that he and his community saw it with their own eyes, "beheld its glory" as it were. What was "beheld," however, was not the revelation of the divine itself, but the flesh, which could have been a disguise for the divine. Said in other words, the epiphany is essentially concealed. Dissimulation takes place in that the transcendent Logos presents itself as something other than what it is. It hides behind the veil of flesh. The narrator asserts that revelation has taken place, but it was a revelation that occurred precisely in concealment. This is a problem that resists a clear narrato-\footnote{Ibid.}
logical solution.

To deliver the truth the Logos has to enter the realm of the flesh, but if he truly "becomes flesh" (σώματε κέντρο), his revelation is concealed at best and invalidated at worst. So he can either "become flesh" and forgo glory, or reflect glory and forgo flesh. The mediation of flesh and glory, earthly and heavenly, literal and figural, a task entrusted to the signifying character of John's narrative, is less successful than often claimed in johannine scholarship.\(^{48}\)

And, as we have seen, "John's language...reserves a wide margin of uncertainty" for the readers of the Prologue.\(^{49}\) That being the case, how is the reader to distinguish between the disguise and the truth which is covered over? How can grace and truth be seen if they are hidden behind a veil? If veiling and concealing is indeed taking place, how will the reader know that what was beheld was not merely a disguise rather than the truth as the narrator claims? The narrator, of course, claims to know the difference between the truth and the disguise. Yet, no information is offered beyond assertion and the collaborating witness of John the Baptist (John 1:15). Instead of providing evidence for his authority, the narrator gives the reader reasons to have uncertainties about the reliability of some of the claims made in the Prologue.

Even the last verse of the Prologue ("No one has ever seen God; the only begotten God, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has explained him," John 1:18) which marks the transition from poetry to narrative, is not without one more roadblock on the path toward full understanding. "No one has seen God," the narrator says, "except the only begotten God" (μονογενής θεός). There are serious textual


\(^{49}\) Ibid.
problems associated with this verse, and Brown, for one, tries to solve the problems by taking monogenes (μονογενής) as a noun and then punctuating the sentence in such a way that the one who makes God known is designated in three ways.

No one has ever seen God; it is God the only Son, ever at the Father's side, who has revealed him.\footnote{51}

As the verse is written, however, the statement is either redundant, or it is a reference to the "only begotten" Logos of vs. 14, which now has been identified as Jesus (vs. 17). In the best attested manuscripts, the text says that "God is the only begotten God," and that "God is in the bosom of the Father." The statement is perplexing in the extreme. That may not be what the text means, but it certainly is what the text says. And that raises problem similar to that faced in the first verse of the Prologue. Is the Logos/ Jesus truly God? Or, is he merely with God? If the Logos was begotten "in the flesh," how is it possible for it to remain the transcendent God? These are problems in the text that defy clear answers, and definitive decisions. The text struggles to reveal, but it is written in the language of mystery and concealment.

Conclusions

In our analysis of the Prologue we have encountered the conflictual nature of language that prevents a clear and definite reading of the text. Bultmann also dealt

\footnote{50 See Bruce M. Metzger, A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament (United Bible Societies, 1971), p. 198.}

with some of the same problems that we have encountered in the Prologue. As we pointed out, Bultmann recognized the difficulty of discerning the meaning of the first verse, i.e., the Logos either is God, or is not God. He solved the problem by placing it within the context of his theology of revelation, an idea which is most clearly expressed in the incarnation which creates a paradoxical state of affairs that Bultmann summarized as follows: "the paradox is that in the Revealer God is really encountered, and yet that God is not directly encountered, but only in the Revealer." 52 In Bultmann's view, it is the incarnation of the Logos in "the flesh" which provides the turning point of the Prologue, and indeed for the whole gospel. It is there, he says, that the "paradox which runs through the whole gospel" is given its most definitive form. Revelation breaks in from the transcendent world beyond human sensibility, but it must also be in a visible form. If it did not break into this world from beyond, there would be no need for revelation. But if it could not be recognized, it would not be revelation either.

In an attempt to avoid the dilemma of Bultmann's "empty that" of revelation the newer literary critics have argued that instead of searching for the content of revelation we should rather concern ourselves with its mode: the "how" of revelation rather than the "what." Gail O'Day, for example, correctly notes that Bultmann's dichotomy between the bare fact of Jesus as revealer and the content of his revelation, "allows almost no middle ground, middle ground that should be occupied by the

52 Bultmann, The Gospel of John, p. 34; see also note 17 above.
Fourth Gospel text."\textsuperscript{53} Accordingly, she proposes to "approach the question of revelation by examining the interrelationship of narrative mode and theological claim in the Fourth Gospel;"\textsuperscript{54} for "without full attention to the revelatory dynamic of the Fourth Gospel Text," as she points out, "we are not in the world of the Fourth Gospel."\textsuperscript{55}

In principle O'Day's project is a good one, but it is badly executed because she assumes, as did Origen centuries before her, that the text not only allows, but invites the reader to participate in the story-world so that he or she can make the proper moves from the literal level to the higher, spiritual (and intended) level of meaning.

In contrast to O'Day, the reading of the Prologue attempted in this chapter stresses the undecidability of the claims put forth in the text which work against the theological tradition. In traditional terms, the Prologue is the \textit{locus classicus} of an original, grounding, universal truth, insufficiently represented in language, which the text intends to bring into the open, but in many ways fails. This absolute criterion, this \textit{Logos}, which exists outside the text in some metatextual space, has been the primary source of mystification, which prevents us from fully understanding how language generates meaning, and how that meaning may be unfolded in new and open and non-predetermined ways. In taking an approach counter to the traditional

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\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{53} O'Day, \textit{Revelation in the Fourth Gospel}, p. 44.
  \item \textsuperscript{54} Ibid., p. 2.
  \item \textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 45.
\end{itemize}}
theological interpretation we have allowed some of the undecidable, ambiguous
dimensions of language itself to appear. We have, in the words of John Caputo, tried
to restore some of the original difficulty to the text that has been lost when interpre-
tive moves are made outside of the text.56

In Bultmann's hermeneutic, language was a problem that needed to be
hermeneutically translated in existential categories. But from Heidegger we learned
that as language struggles toward disclosure, obstacles are often placed in the way of
understanding. In Heidegger's hermeneutic, language shows forth that which is,
while also holding something back in concealment. Therefore, the one, true meaning
of the text can never be finalized because much about the text remains hidden in
mystery.

In the reading of the Prologue attempted above we have illustrated the allusive
nature of full disclosure because of the inherent ambiguities in the text. Because of
those ambiguities interpretation can never be final or definitive or found with certain-
ty, but must be sought in continual inquiry and openness to the text.

56 John D. Caputo, Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneu-
Chapter 5

CONCEALMENT IN REVELATION:
THE TRIAL OF JESUS BEFORE PILATE (JOHN 18:28-19:6a)

Introduction to the Text

After the lengthy Farewell Discourses of chapters 14-17, the reader is transported back to a narrative section—a section of the gospel which serves as the climactic moment in the story, namely, "the hour of glorification" (John 18-19). The text we will examine in this chapter will be limited to the trial of Jesus before Pilate (John 18:28-19:16a), which is the second act of a two-part drama: first the arrest and Jewish interrogation (18:1-27), followed by the trial before Pilate (18:28-19:16a).¹ The first act occurs at night and lasts until the cockcrows at dawn. The second begins in the early morning and lasts until noon ("the sixth hour"). The division between night and morning acts as an initial indication of the division and complementarity of the two dramas.

John's account of the Passion is obviously different from that of the Synoptic

gospels.² For example, Jesus' trial before Pontius Pilate in the Synoptic accounts consist of just three brief episodes: Jesus is silent before Pilate's questioning; Pilate offers to release Jesus instead of Barabbas; and at the crowd's insistence, Pilate delivers Jesus for crucifixion. Luke interrupts this order with a brief appearance before Herod (23:6-12). In the Fourth Gospel, however, the account is quite lengthy, consisting of seven episodes, with the scenes alternating between the inside of the praetorium where Pilate questions Jesus, and the outside where Pilate deals with the Jewish authorities.³

It is possible to regard these exits and entrances as superficial details, perhaps, but the systematic way in which they are emphasized suggests that they are important. This suspicion is heightened when something of the same pattern is found in the earlier arrest and interrogation drama: Jesus goes out with his disciples and goes in to the garden (18:1); then he goes out to meet the arresting force (18:4). The unknown


³ There is some controversy in the commentaries about how this section should be divided. Brown, The Gospel According to John, pp. 857-59, endorses a sevenfold chiastic structure, but Charles H. Giblin, "John's Narration of the Hearing Before Pilate (John 18:28-19:16a)," Biblica 67 (1986), pp. 221-39, indicates that while a sevenfold division may seem plausible at first, the trial, precisely as a trial, consists essentially of only six scenes. There are two more passages, one of which acts as an introduction and the other acts as an interlude: the initial leading of Jesus from Caiphas to the praetorium (18:28) and the scourging which occurs halfway through the trial (19:1-3). The interlude has its purpose within the drama of the trial because it is accompanied by the dressing of Jesus as a king, and thus acts as an introduction to the king motif in the subsequent scenes (19:5,14).
disciple goes in with Jesus to the court of the high priest and then goes out to lead Peter in (18:15-16). It seems unlikely, given the emphasis on "in" and "out" in these earlier references (18:1-27), that the movement of Pilate in the trial scene is of no consequence.\footnote{Giblin, "Confrontation in John 18:1-27," p. 218.} It seems even less unlikely in view of the fact that in Mark, for instance, the distinction between insiders and outsiders is connected with the important idea of revelation. Those with Jesus receive the revelation/ secrets of the kingdom of God, while the secrets remain obscure and hidden to those on the "outside."\footnote{See the discussion of this idea in the excursus in Chapter 1 above.} In fact, it is precisely the dynamic of the tension between concealing and revealing which gives added meaning to the inside/outside contrast of the trial drama: on the inside (the praetorium) Jesus speaks openly (he talks about the true meaning of the kingdom of God); but the Jews are on the outside--outside the praetorium and outside the revelation.\footnote{Thomas L. Brodie, The Gospel According to John: A Literary and Theological Commentary (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 521.} Inside, where Jesus is concealed from those outside, he speaks openly. Outside, where the Jews are in the open, the revelation is concealed. There is thus a continuing dynamic of concealment in revelation and revelation in concealment.

In the first act (18:1-27) the idea of revelation is also of central importance. As Jesus is being arrested, he makes a triple statement using an "I am" revelatory formula (18:5, 6, 8). And in the presence of the high priest, Jesus' primary assertion is about his revelation which he has spoken openly, in short where all Jews meet together (18:20-21). But the matter becomes perplexing because, unlike the trial
before Pilate, there is no suggestion in 18:1-27 that the revelation is in any way secret or that it is restricted only to insiders. On the contrary, Jesus has spoken openly to all, he has said nothing in secret. Thus the two dramas give two quite distinct notions of revelation—one which is fully public (18:1-27) and another which is, in some way is restricted, or secret (18:28-19:16).

There is an additional puzzle: in the drama in which Jesus is speaking openly to everybody (18:1-27) there is juxtaposed a kind of secret knowledge which is destructive (the special insider knowledge which enables Judas to betray him, 18:2-3; and the further insider knowledge which leads Peter and the other disciple to the courtyard of the high priest, the place of Peter's downfall, 18:15-17). During the trial before Pilate (18:28-19:16a), on the other hand, while Jesus is speaking inside, giving, in effect, a kind of secret knowledge, there is a conflict with his opponents on the outside, because they do not share that knowledge.

The overall picture is one that can be characterized as a "secret epiphany" in that Jesus' teaching about the kingdom of God is spoken openly, revealed to all (18:1-27), and then privately in the presence of Pilate (18:28-19:16a). At the same time, the process of revelation is concealed by an intensifying drama of people who abuse inside knowledge (18:1-27) and of people who choose to be left outside (18:28-19:16a).

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7 See especially, de la Potterie, La Passion de Jésus selon l'évangile de Jean: Texte et Esprit, p. 75f.
Analysis of the Text

The second act of the Johannine passion narrative comprises the story of Jesus’ trial before Pilate, and the organizing principle is the shifting of scenes from outside the praetorium to the inside and back again. R. H. Strachan, one of the first scholars in the modern period to comment on the structural characteristics of this section, pointed out that "the trial is presented dramatically in a series of scenes, which are laid out alternately outside and inside the praetorium."\(^8\)

**John 18:28-32.** As the trial before Pilate opens (18:28-32), the veil of darkness that had overshadowed Jesus’ interrogation before "the Jews" begins to give way to morning. In an aside comment, the narrator states that "it was early" (18:28). Bultmann, recalling the night of John 13:30, says "the day of the victory of Jesus over the world is breaking."\(^9\) Without fully accepting Bultmann’s categorical assertion, the shift from the darkness of the arrest and Jewish interrogation (John 18:1-27) to the light of the trial before Pilate is significant. Pilate meets the prisoner and his accusers outside (vs. 29: "Pilate went out to them:" εξῆλθεν οὖν ὁ Πιλάτος ἔξω) the praetorium because the Jews did not want to be defiled before the Pass-

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over. With the Jews on the outside, Pilate is forced into a situation where he has
to go outside to meet with the Jews and to go inside to question Jesus. When Pilate
asks what Jesus has done, the Jews' reply is not an answer to the question but an
evasion: "If this man were not an evildoer, we would not have handed him over to
you" (18:30).

**John 18:33-38a.** In scene two (18:33-38a), Pilate conducts his first interview
with Jesus inside the praetorium ("Pilate entered [εἰσῆλθεν] the praetorium again").
He begins his inquest by trying to ascertain what the charges are that have been
brought against Jesus. The Jews do not specify what the charges are. Even though
the charge nowhere has been made, Pilate asks Jesus bluntly if he is the king of the
Jews. Jesus asks Pilate who made such a charge, and Pilate's response is as evasive
as Jesus' had been: "Am I a Jew?"

Many of the commentaries overdetermine this passage by making judgments
that do not have reference points in the narrative itself. It is impossible for the
reader to determine "tone of voice," (i.e., insolence, contempt) or if Jesus "deftly"

10 Duke notes the heavy irony in passage: "Ingeniously, John presents a motive for the
Jews to hang back which both makes possible his double staging and is itself supremely
ironic. These soon-to-be murderers are at pains to maintain their purity," *Ironic in the Fourth
Gospel*, p. 127.

11 Brown, for instance, points to commentators who hear an undertone of Roman
Jesus "feigns innocence" so that the interrogation can be reversed, *Ironic in the Fourth
question (v.33) shows that the authorities have privately denounced Jesus to him as a royal
pretender." I fail to see where these statements and others similar to them can be justified on
a close reading of the text.
turns the tables on Pilate, or what had been said by "the Jews" to Pilate in private. These kinds of interpretive moves do more to conceal meaning than they reveal about how the text should be interpreted. When read closely, confusion reigns because nobody gives a direct answer to direct questions.

Pilate asks Jesus if he is a king, and Jesus replies, not by answering the question directly, but by asking another question: "Are you saying this on your own initiative?" To that question Pilate answers with one of his own, "Am I a Jew?" When Pilate asks Jesus what he has done, Jesus replies with a discourse about his kingdom not being of this world. When Pilate again tries to pin him down with a direct question: "So you are a king?" Jesus again defers a direct answer.12 Throughout the dialogue the reader is carried from one question to another without being given any reference points for meaning because the dialogue is so indirect. Is being a royal pretender one of the charges being brought against Jesus? The reader is never given any indication that it is. In his discourse about his kingdom being of another realm, is Jesus now claiming to be a king? It seems on the surface that he is, but he never owns up to such a claim. Jesus never refers to himself as a king.

And then in an enigmatic statement, Jesus follows Pilate's accusation in vs. 37 ("So you are a king?") by saying, "For this I have been born (γεγέννημαι), and for this I have come into the world (ἐλήλυθα ἐκ τῶν κόσμων) to bear witness to the truth"  

12 There is no agreement in the scholarship as to whether Jesus' reply to Pilate accusation is affirmative, qualified, or an adversative. Bultmann, The Gospel of John, p. 654 n. 6, says that Jesus' answer is affirmative. Barnabas Lindars, The Gospel of John, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), p. 559, takes it to mean "You say it in a political sense, but my kingship is otherwise." Brown, The Gospel According to John, p. 853, takes the statement in a qualified sense: "it is you who says, not I."
(18:37). The puzzle here is the contrast between "natural birth" and an origin which is outside the visible world of human senses. This is especially troubling in light of the fact that the Prologue had spoken of supernatural origins. On a literal level the hint of "natural" origins would seem to undermine the witness of the Prologue, until it is immediately corrected by "for this I have come into the world."

Positively, Jesus came into the world to bear witness to the truth. He then leaves the door open with an open-ended assertion: "Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice." Pilate's response is one of the most memorable lines in the gospel: "What is truth?"

Duke states that "the dramatic irony of the question lies in our knowledge that the one to whom the question about truth is asked is himself the Truth (14:6)." When read on a literal level, however, the narrative itself undermines Duke's assertion. In John 14:6, Jesus claimed to be the truth—a truth to which he is now only "bearing witness." As important as "bearing witness" (μαρτυρήσω) is in this Gospel, it is still a task for those who are not themselves the light, or the truth (i.e., John the Baptist, John 1:7). By the time the narrative has reached this stage, Jesus both is the truth (14:6) and is not the truth because he is only bearing witness to the truth (18:37). Brief though this exchange is, the text is important because it involves a triple use of the word "truth," and directs the readers' attention back to the

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13 Duke, Irony in the Fourth Gospel, p. 130.

14 The word that is used here, μαρτυρήσω is the same word used to refer to John the Baptist, "not the light" (John 1:8), but who came "that he might bear witness to the light" (John 1:7). If Jesus "bears witness" to the "truth" (John 18:37) he cannot also be the truth.
last discourse where the theme of truth is most conspicuous (cf. 14:6, 17; 15:26; 16:7, 13 [twice] and especially 17:17-19 where there is another triple use of "truth"). It is also important in the history of scholarship because of the many ways the text has been re-shaped according to Pilate's question ("What is truth?").

For some interpreter's Pilate's question is an indication that he (Pilate) thought Jesus was irrelevant. Others argue that Pilate's question indicates that he heard Jesus' words, but his immediate exit also "indicates that he has not really heard." Brown states that Pilate's question represents a politician's impatience with "Jewish theological jargon." Countryman says that the question indicates that Pilate had concluded that the discussion represented some kind of philosophical dispute, and that as a "man of action," he answered with skepticism. Perhaps the most common interpretations of Pilate's question are those similar to the one offered by Bultmann, who said that the question is a rhetorical question that expects no answer.

But how does the reader know that this is a rhetorical question? The same syntactical pattern engenders at least three meanings: The meaning for Pilate, the meaning for Jesus, and the meaning for the reader who brings a certain preunder-

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standing to the text. On the basis of the information at hand, it is difficult for the reader to decide which meaning is the one true meaning. In the final analysis, Pilate could be saying, "What difference does it make?" rather than asking something. If that is the case, then we cannot tell whether he is really asking a question, or making a statement.

This question of truth is a significant question in this gospel because it is one of the key terms for the evangelist. The reader is first introduced to the concept of truth in the Prologue (John 1:14, 17), and throughout the rest of the gospel the question of truth is raised time and again only to be deferred.

In the discourse attached to the scene with Nicodemus a relationship is established between truth and the light which has come into the darkness of the world (John 3:19-21). Those who love darkness remain in the darkness because there their deeds cannot be "exposed" (ἐλεγχθῆ) to public scrutiny. The deeds of those who "do the truth," on the other hand, are disclosed because they have emerged out of the darkness into the clear light of day where everybody can see them. The darkness conceals, the light exposes. From concealment in the darkness to disclosure in the light—that is the process of aletheia (ἀληθεία). The truth and the light emerge from the untruth of darkness.

Traditional interpretations relate that revelation has taken place and that untruth and darkness, which are equated with evil and unbelief, stand in an opposing
relationship to truth and light. What these interpretations neglect to add, however, is that the darkness is always already in the world prior to the light. Darkness is not a perversion of the light, but the matrix from which light and truth emerge. As Nicodemus emerges out of the dark of night into the presence of the light, so too the truth, the unconcealed light, emerges out of the concealedness of darkness and untruth.

In John key words of a narrative are often picked up and transformed through repetition in the discourse which follows. Parts of a dialogue are often repeated in another part of the conversation to emphasize a particular point. Following this train of thought, the conversation in which Nicodemus misunderstood Jesus can be viewed as a commentary on John 1:5--the darkness was unable to comprehend the light.

Similarly, parts of the dialogue with the Samaritan woman at the well remind the reader what "doing the truth" in the Nicodemus scene (John 3:21) might refer to. In this scene "doing the truth" refers to worship. In her conversation with Jesus, the Samaritan woman indicates that a controversy existed between the Samaritans and the Judeans over the proper place of worship. Jesus picked up the theme of worship raised by the woman and transformed the discussion from the consideration of place to the mode of worship: "But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and truth" (John 4:23). Those who worship the Father must worship "in spirit and truth" (John 4:24), because God is spirit.

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There have been many explanations of what it means to worship "in spirit and truth," but most interpreters ignore the fact that the evangelist left unsaid what he himself meant by the phrase.\textsuperscript{21} If the conversation is the self-revelation of Jesus as the Messiah (John 4:26),\textsuperscript{22} however, then it is a revelation which takes place in concealing because the reader is left to guess about the meaning of truth. The meaning of truth is concealed in the mind of the author, who does not tell the reader what truth means in the context of worship. Thus, there is some doubt raised about the question of truth because as truth emerges out of untruth it sinks back into untruth. If truth is the non-concealment of the Revealer, as Bultmann would suggest, then it is a revelation which takes place in concealment (as Heidegger would suggest), because the question of truth remains unclear, unsettled, or misunderstood. The narrator has given few clear signals about what he means by truth. At those points where the meaning of truth emerges, it is concealed again until finally it drops out of sight.

For example, the reader is led by the narrator to that one unambiguous moment in the text where Jesus finally identifies himself as the truth, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). On the surface, the question of truth seems settled. The further one reads, however, the more apparent it becomes that the meaning is far from settled, because a process of concealment now begins in earnest.

\textsuperscript{21} See Gail R. O'Day's extended commentary on this scene, \textit{Revelation in the Fourth Gospel: Narrative Mode and Theological Claim} (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), pp. 49-92, in which she argues that the controversy over the place of worship is "transformed into a statement of the eschatological encounter with divine reality (p. 71)."

\textsuperscript{22} Bultmann, \textit{The Gospel of John}, pp. 189-91.
Immediately following this statement, Jesus defers to the "Spirit of truth" who is to follow (John 14:16), and who, like John the Baptist, will bear witness to Jesus (John 15:26). The Spirit of truth will also guide the disciples into all the truth they have not yet received: "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth" (John 16:13). The word, "guide" used here (διδασκόντες), is derived from διδάσκω (John 14:6), which means, in its figurative sense, "to lead in the way." In this verse, Jesus who proclaimed that he was the way and the truth (John 14:6), defers to the Spirit of truth who leads in the way to truth in a literal sense. There is also a sense in which διδάσκειν means "to instruct." Thus, on a higher level of meaning, the Spirit of truth will continue the teaching of Jesus as a supplement in order to complete it.

The reader is now confronted with the contradiction in the Fourth Gospel first noticed by William Wrede. The difficulty is in the last line of John 16:13. The promise, "he will declare to you the things to come," implies new revelation. Here the text contradicts itself, and it also postpones meaning to a later time. There is a contradiction between John 16:12, ("I have yet many things [Εἰς πολλὰ ἐνδιατέλεσα] to tell you, but you cannot hear them now"), and John 15:15 ("...for all [πάντα τὰ ὑποτέλημα] that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you."). The text also postpones meaning when Jesus, who had earlier taken upon himself the mantle of truth (John 14:6), now defers to the Spirit of truth who is yet to come, and who will guide and

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23 Brown, fails to admit the contradiction in his argument that yet many things in vs. 12 refers not to "new" revelation, but to a "full understanding" of Jesus' ministry, The Gospel According to John, p. 714. Bultmann acknowledges that Wrede was correct in seeing the contradiction, but he bypasses the problem raised by Wrede by arguing that the thrust of the passage is toward the future rather than a hindsight look back to John 15:15.
instruct the disciples into all truth (John 16:13).

This brings us to the exchange with Pilate where the deferral becomes even more pronounced because Jesus now lays aside the mantle of truth he had taken up in John 14:6. When Jesus says, "For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth (John 18:37: μοριμοῦσα τῆ ἀλήθεια)," he has qualified the earlier unambiguous claim in John 14:6. He has now placed himself in the same category as John the Baptist, who also bears witness to the truth (John 5:33; cf. 1:7). The question which has been lying just below the surface throughout the narrative now comes to the forefront in Pilate's inquiry, "What is truth?" (John 18:38). Here at the end of the story when the reader might reasonably expect an answer to the question of truth, no answer is given. The question is simply dropped altogether. It is dropped in the abyss of silence. The question cannot be a rhetorical question, as Bultmann argued, because an answer is expected, if not by Pilate, then at least by the reader.

Throughout the gospel the issue of truth has been raised in such a way that it remained a question just below the surface until it is finally expressed openly by Pilate. The narrator dealt with truth in terms of knowing, doing, speaking, and guiding. But the narrator does not give details, just assertions. Even in the one place where an unambiguous statement is made (John 14:6), there was an immediate deferral. And here at the end of the gospel the question has been raised to the explicit level—and no answer is given. The expectation that the narrator has built up throughout the gospel has been left unresolved.
The identification of Jesus as the truth, and truth as the unconcealment, unveiling, or manifestation of God is not a notion developed consistently in the Fourth Gospel. From the beginning of the gospel, the narrator claims to be a witness to the truth (John 1:14: "and we beheld his glory...full of grace and truth"), and Jesus is further identified as the truth in 14:6. But then truth is deferred to the Paraclete yet to come. The meaning of truth is delayed in the promise that all truth will be disclosed at some point in the future. Finally, Jesus says that he bears witness to the truth. As such, he can no longer be identified with the truth, he has the same status as the narrator (1:14), John the Baptist, the disciples, and the Paraclete, all of whom bear witness to the truth. Pilate asks, "What is truth?" The reader expects an answer, but gets nothing. Truth is no longer unconcealment, but concealment. The truth which was unconcealed in the Prologue becomes concealed again in the non-answer given to Pilate's question, because the question of truth is simply dropped.

What is truth? The answer to Pilate's question remains forever concealed in the mind of the evangelist. At various points in the narrative the evangelist tried to reveal an understanding of truth, to be sure. Yet, each attempt to state something definitive about truth was immediately followed by a postponement to another part of the narrative. Finally he ran out of story, and simply let the matter drop into the abyss where non-answers reside. This is not to say that answers to the question have not been given. On the contrary, many have probed the mind of the evangelist and purportedly spoken for him the answer that he himself left unsaid.

In the end, however, the reader is left with a message that has gotten herme-
neutically garbled and entangled in the process of revealing and concealing. In an observation similar to one made by Wrede, Bultmann correctly noted that a mystery hangs over the figure of Jesus, "His hiddenness is the very consequence of his self-revelation; his revealing of himself is the very thing that makes 'those who see' become 'blind'" (John 9:39). In other words, the very brightness of the revelation leads to blindness. What is revealed remains hidden in the very process of being revealed. The essential dynamic is consistent with Heidegger's categories of truth in which mystery and hiddenness remain even in the midst of unconcealment. Jesus speaks openly to the world, but as he speaks, things are left unsaid, and concealed. In this sense, the mystery, or concealment, is not a perversion of revelation, but the very essence of revelation. It is out of that which is concealed that revelation itself emerges, and into which it returns. So there is hiddenness and mystery in spite of publicity.

John 18:38b-40. In scene three (18:38b-40) Pilate leaves Jesus to return outside to the Jews ("he went out [ἐξῆλθεν] to the Jews again"). He announces unequivocally: "I find no crime in him." This is the first of three protestations of Jesus' innocence (18:38; 19:4, 6). Pilate tells the Jews he will follow the custom of releasing one prisoner during Passover. He asks if they want "the King of the Jews." Their reply? "Not this man, but Barabbas!" The narrator intrudes with the words, "Now Barabbas was a robber."

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John 19:1-3. In scene four (19:1-3) Pilate is back on the inside, where Jesus is scourged and mocked as King of the Jews. According to Matthew and Mark, the scourging took place following the sentencing, just prior to the crucifixion; and indeed normal procedure in such matters would substantiate their report. However, John moves the scourging to make it part of Pilate’s strange way of trying to help Jesus (cf. Luke 23: 16, 22). In this scene Pilate is having his soldiers beat a man whom he has just pronounced innocent (18:38b). Jesus is robed in purple and hailed as King of the Jews. In Heideggerian terms, Jesus is presented as king in truth, although in a way that distorts the epiphany of a “true” king.

John 19:4-7. In scene five (19:4-7), Pilate goes out to the Jews a third time taking with him the beaten Jesus. Pilate asserts Jesus’ innocence, but the Jews call for his crucifixion all the more because they claim that Jesus has called himself the son of God. It is interesting that even while Pilateacknowledges Jesus’ innocence, he refuses to release Jesus.

John 19:8-11. In scene six Pilate is back inside the praetorium claiming power of life and death over Jesus. Jesus tells Pilate that his power has been granted from above.

Pilate’s question, “Where are you from?” has been a central question throughout the gospel, but in response Jesus offers only silence. The reader presumably can

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answer that question for Pilate, having been introduced to Jesus' origins in the Prologue, but now there is only silence. To that silence Pilate makes the response: "You will not speak to me? Do you know that I have the power to release you and the power to crucify you?"

Jesus defuses that threat by telling Pilate that his authority to do anything is granted by a higher authority. It is difficult to tell, however, if Jesus means Caesar, who has authority over Pilate, or God. The section ends with a rather cryptic saying: "therefore he who delivered me to you has the greater sin." Is Jesus referring here to Judas, to Annas, or the Jews? He has just been talking about Pilate's power which is "given from above," therefore, "he who delivered me to you has the greater sin." In the context of the sentence, the therefore makes it look like Jesus was delivered over to Pilate only by one whose power is given from above. So, is Jesus saying that God has the greater sin?

John 19:12-16a. In scene seven Pilate is back outside again facing the Jews in one final effort to release Jesus. Jesus' point is proven, however. Pilate does not have the power to release Jesus despite his own claims of Jesus' innocence. In the face of the crowd Pilate is immobilized. But the Jews claim he will be no friend of Caesar's if he releases Jesus.

The final scene is set in a place called Ἀκρόπολις, literally, "stone pavement." In the gospel the word "stone" has always been associated with disbelieve of the stone-throwing Judeans (John 8:59, 10:31-33; 11:8) and with death at Lazarus' tomb (John 11:38-41). It is thus fitting perhaps that in this climatic scene from which
a death will occur, that it takes place on the "pavement of stone."

It is also fitting that there be an uncertainty about who is occupying the βηματο, or seat of judgment. The text is again ambiguous at this point: "Therefore Pilate hearing these words brought Jesus outside and he sat (ἐκάθισε) on a tribunal."

Who sat on the tribunal, the judgment seat? In Greek, the verb ἐκάθισε may indicate intransitive or transitive, "to sit" or "to make sit."26 What emerges, on at least on one level, is that Jesus who, in earlier episodes in the gospel has been presented as judge, is now sitting in judgment.

Pilate now presents the "King of the Jews" to the Jews who cry out "Away, away--crucify him!" By now Jesus has been totally rejected and turned over to be crucified. With that, the trial is ended.

Conclusions

The scenes of the arrest and trial of Jesus (John 18:1-19:16a) make demands upon the reader. The narrative of Pilate's interrogation of Jesus is especially impressive for its dramatic power. The characterization of Pilate is a subtle artistic achievement that has evoked a wide variety of comments in the literature. For Culpepper, Pilate "represents the futility of attempted compromise."27 For Raymond Brown, "Pilate's story...illustrates how a person who refuses decisions is led to tragedy."28

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26 see Duke, Ironic in the Fourth Gospel, p. 134f.


A more consistent literary approach to the story is O'Day's brief analysis in which she argues that the story of the trial before Pilate (18:28-19:16) demonstrates "how" narrative brings revelation. She states that as the narrative scene progresses the reader senses that Pilate's power and authority diminish.

His questions and responses to Jesus underscore his distance from any true command of power, authority, and knowledge. Yet the Fourth Evangelist does not tell the reader that Pilate is ineffectual, that Pilate is powerless and without authority. Instead he allows the narrative to draw the reader in so that the reader can form his or her own conclusions.

What the narrative shows the reader is a ruler with all the accoutrements of power, with the authority to take away life, who stands powerless in the face of true power, authority, and life. Pilate's frenetic movement inside and outside of the praetorium during the trial embodies his ineffectualness. The trial narrative does what the cross does, it calls into question all the accepted categories of power, of death, and of truth. Pilate's question, "What is truth?" is not a question that can be answered by categories of dogma, encounter, or propositions that exist independently of this Gospel narrative. Jesus has already answered the question of truth, and the reader of the Gospel knows this (14:6). The locus of revealed truth lies in Jesus, a Jesus the Fourth Gospel has been at pains to make available to the reader. Like the crowd of 6:25-35, Pilate does not know the "truth" when he is looking at "him." Again narrative mode and theological claim are inseparable as the Gospel narrative brings the reader face to face with Jesus at his "hour." 29

In opposition to O'Day, I would argue along the lines of those proposed by Wayne Meeks in his discussion of John 3. Meeks says that the third chapter of John is a "virtual parody of revelation discourse." 30 In the same way that Jesus is incomprehensible in the dialogue with Nicodemus, he is also incomprehensible in this dialogue with Pilate. 31 Pilate asks a direct question, but Jesus is evasive. How can

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29 O'Day, Revelation in the Fourth Gospel, p. 112f.


31 See O'Day, Revelation in the Fourth Gospel, p. 47.
such evasiveness be revelatory? It is, as Meeks says of the Nicodemus interview, more like a parody of revelation.

Rather than seeing the figure of Pilate as ineffectual, the reader might feel a sense of empathy with Pilate. He may be an example of the impossibility of neutrality, but his dilemma is not so much his own making as scholars have traditionally asserted. His indecisiveness itself is directly caused by the fact that no one, at any point, answers the perfectly legitimate questions which he asks. "Pilate never gets a straight answer to his question, a fact which has a singularly dislocating effect" on the reader.\(^{32}\) Jesus never answers questions directly. He tends to answer questions with other questions ("Is that your own idea?" 18:34), or with mysterious statements that do not appear to be relevant ("My kingdom is not of this world," 18:36). There are lacunae or logical gaps in what Jesus says. Thus, in the trial before Pilate, Jesus the Revealer becomes Jesus the Concealer; the elusive Word of God has become elusive in his words.

CONCLUSION

This project began with the assertion that the Gospel of John is a mysterious and problematic text that resists full disclosure and challenges one’s ability to understand. In the literature, this struggle for clarity has been referred to as the "Johannine problem," which in broad terms, includes a host of historical and literary questions raised throughout the history of scholarship. In this project, however, the so-called "Johannine problem" has been implicitly reshaped as a hermeneutical problem which is constituted in a narrative which resists interpretation, not only because of the well known aporiae, incongruencies and textual mislocations, but also because the Gospel is a literary production deeply involved in the issues of concealing and revealing, secrecy and mystery.

I also tried to argue that when ancient critics, like Origen, were confronted with a mysterious text like the Gospel of John, the hermeneutical task of exegesis became one of "translating" the literal sense of the text into the so-called "spiritual gospel."1 Interestingly enough, recent literary critics of the Fourth Gospel have arrived at conclusions similar to those of Origen.2 In the hermeneutics of literary criticism, for instance, irony and misunderstanding are narrative modes which help

1 See the discussion of this issue in the “Introduction” of this project, esp. pp. 4.

the reader move from the literal level to the higher, intended level of meaning. By moving from the literal level to the higher level of meaning, however, the literary critics have once again eclipsed the narrative and implicitly raised questions of authorial intent which were banished by Anglo-American New Criticism.

This is ironical in itself because it was precisely on this point of abandoning the narrative that New Testament literary critics rebuked scholars like Wrede and Bultmann. They no doubt did abandon the narrative, Wrede to tradition, and Bultmann to theology and literary sources, but in other ways Wrede and Bultmann were more sensitive to the problematics of Johannine language than are the literary critics. In the end, contemporary literary criticism of the Fourth Gospel bypasses the difficulty of Johannine language by suggesting that irony helps the reader experience a sense of revelation by establishing a means through which the reader can participate in the story-world of the text.\(^3\) In this "world" communities are stabilized, and communal or personal identity is formulated.\(^4\)

The newer literary paradigms have much in common with the historical methods they replaced, however. For one thing, both have typically modern roots deeply embedded in nineteenth century empiricist thought which operated according to "the myth of objectivity and technological control."\(^5\) In addition, the positivist

\(^3\) See O'Day Revelation in the Fourth Gospel, pp. 29-32.


ideology of the literary and historical paradigms is reinforced by an epistemology that posits truth as the correspondence between narrative structure and world. That is to say, narrative texts, and especially biblical narratives, refer to true worlds, either "in front of" the text, "behind" the text, or "in" the text itself. The critics from each camp may debate endlessly about the meaning of a given work, chapter, passage, sentence, or word, and they may never agree on the one meaning, but, like Origen, they never doubt that meaning and understanding is possible. Behind each method, literary and historical, there is the assurance that a valid interpretation is possible, based either on the author's intention, or as part of the transaction between text and reader.

Despite their differences, then, these two contemporary, competing hermeneutical paradigms have a common denominator as ancient as Origen himself. They both take for granted that understanding is at the core of hermeneutics. Texts are meant to deliver understanding and the interpreter is obliged to find understanding. Whether the reader interprets the text, or the text interprets the reader, understanding is in each case the hermeneutical goal. In biblical studies these hermeneutical issues have been translated into the central theological category of revelation. Texts are meant to reveal. Language brings disclosure—which likewise intimates religious significance. Narrative gravitates toward epiphany—a term which carries both literary and religious meaning. Said in the words of Gail O'Day:

...irony is a mode of revelatory language (emphasis is O'Day's). It reveals by asking the reader to make judgments and decisions about the relative value of stated and intended meanings, drawing the reader into its vision of truth, so that when the reader finally understands, he or she becomes a member of the community that shares that vision...one could say irony conceals in order to
reveal, hides in order finally to make visible (emphasis added).  

One must ask, however, if that proposition is not an excessively positivistic and pragmatic notion of hermeneutics? Do biblical texts, even ironic ones, always lead to unqualified revelation as suggested by O'Day? Narrative seeks to reveal and to disclose, to be sure, but is everything disclosed?

Indeed, there is a growing awareness among contemporary readers of gospel narratives that biblical texts (especially the Gospels of Mark and John) are sometimes revisionary in nature. In these terms, the single meaning that critics have traditionally sought is undermined by biblical narratives which do not always invite participation in story-worlds, but sometimes frustrate participation instead. That is to say, biblical narratives not only create worlds, but sometimes destroy worlds and confound meaning through contradiction, postponement, secrecy, and concealing.

In the exegetical chapters of this project I have tried to demonstrate that the reader is conscious of a dialectic of revealing and concealing. Much is revealed to be sure. The reader is even granted the privileged position of knowing that Jesus is the

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7 Werner H. Kelber argues that indeed "the primary observation to be made about irony is not its revelatory power, but its effectiveness in suspending meaning," "In the Beginning Were the Words: The Apotheosis and Narrative Displacement of the Logos," The Journal of the American Academy of Religion 58/1 (Spring 1990), p. 88; see also "The Birth of a Beginning: John 1:1-18," Semeia 52 (1990), pp. 135-38, esp. 138.

"true light" (John 1:9) and "the light of the world" (John 8:12) and "the truth" (John 14:6). But in the narrative which follows those moments of self-revelation the reader is often victimized when such apodictic statements are qualified (John 14:16; 15:26; 16:13; 18:37). In many ways, then, the narrative logic of the Fourth Gospel leaves the reader as bewildered as many of the characters in the story. Revelation is promised, but the promise is left unfulfilled. Truth is disclosed in the person of Jesus, and then concealed again in the deferral to the Spirit. The reader of the Fourth Gospel is led to believe that truth will be revealed, but what is revealed instead is the silence of truth and the presence of confusion and ambiguity and misunderstanding.

We could say finally that the Gospel of John is a narrative labyrinth motivated by a hermeneutic of revealing and concealing, or to use the words of Martin Dibelius, the Gospel of John is a book of "secret epiphanies." That is to say, the narrative force is toward epiphany, revelation and manifestation, but the language of revelation cannot be sustained and succumbs finally to the counter-pressure of secrecy and concealing.

In contrast to the two competing paradigms presently dominating biblical studies (historical criticism and literary criticism), then, the reading of the Fourth Gospel proposed in the final two chapters of this project focused on the obstacles narrative places in the way of such synonymous notions as revelation, valid interpretation, and understanding. The reading here has been without pretense of unity, and it was done without rearranging the text to make it more coherent, or by appealing to a "higher level" of meaning and understanding. To eclipse the narrative in any of those ways would be to artificially impose understanding, or in the spirit of Heidegger, to
pass the mystery by. In contrast to the kinds of essentialist readings of the Fourth Gospel that try to solve the mystery, either by explaining it away, or ignoring the inconsistencies and contradictions, or by filling in the gaps by rearranging the text, the reading taken up in this project has concentrated on the impact such textual difficulties have on reading and understanding. The question presupposed here is whether the Gospel of John actually supports or undermines meaning, revelation, and disclosure. In the final analysis, I argue that the Gospel of John is as much a narrative about darkness and concealment, counterpoints to light and revelation, as it is about openness and disclosure.
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