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The Power of Saving Wisdom

An Investigation of Spirit and Wisdom
in Relation to the Soteriology
of the Fourth Gospel

*Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen
zum Neuen Testament 2. Reihe*

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ch. 5). Nevertheless, the Fourth Gospel seems to indicate a difference between the work of the Spirit before and after the cross (hence the comments in Jn 7.39 and 16.7), and between the quality and availability of salvation before and after Easter. The Fourth Gospel seems to have differentiated between what was possible before and after the cross, i.e., the Gospel retains the difference that Jesus' hour (namely, the cross-resurrection-ascension) had made.⁸² The issue we shall examine in our study (from the post-Easter stance of John and his readers) is how (and to what extent) life was already available before the cross, and what role the Spirit had in this. It seems unlikely to us, for example, that life only became available after the cross and that John had read this back into the time before the cross; rather, from a post-Easter, Spirit-provided perspective John understood much more clearly what actually had happened during Jesus' earthly ministry. Our observation after the brief overview of Johannine scholarship so far is that the realized dimension of salvation and the Spirit's work prior to the cross need more investigation.

While we will investigate the work of the Spirit and the availability of life before the cross, we will not attempt to reconstruct a 'historical' account in a strict sense. In our view, the Fourth Gospel is a theological narration from a post-Easter perspective (as are indeed the other Gospels) (cf. the brief treatment of the genre of the Fourth Gospel in ch. 3 section 2).⁸³ John's aim in retelling the dialogue between Jesus and, for example, Nicodemus or the Samaritan woman, was to persuade and convince his readers not of certain historical facts but of their significance and theological truths. However, our presupposition is that theological truth needs a historical anchor — the existence of the historical Jesus, the crucifixion and resurrection are necessary historical facts for theological truth. Whether it is necessary (in order to accept the truth claim of John 3) that Nicodemus existed, or whether it is necessary that his conversation with Jesus took place exactly as has been recorded is perhaps more ambivalent. Nevertheless, even if historical facts cannot be reconstructed any more, we still require a kind of narrative plausibility: for example, we prefer to see some historical reality behind the Nicodemus story, in that it must be plausible that such a conversation could have taken place. In our understanding, the Fourth Gospel moves along a spectrum of a mixture of (what we would call) 'history' and 'fiction', in which the stories about Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman, for example, perhaps contain more fiction than the passion narrative in John 18-19.

Looking at some scholars who have adopted Bornkamm's hermeneutical perspective on the Fourth Gospel, it seems that such a post-Easter perspective virtually neglects (and probably finds irrelevant), or remains (deliberately?) agnostic (so in general Frey),⁸⁴ or even (implicitly) denies (so Hoegen-Rohls)⁸⁵ the work of the Spirit and the availability of

⁸² Cf. J. Frey, *Die johanneische Eschatologie II: Das johanneische Zeitverständnis* (WUNT 110; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998) 250-51, 262-63, 290-92.

⁸³ Cf. the designation of John's Gospel as 'fictionalized history' (M.W.G. Stibbe, *John as Storyteller: Narrative criticism and the fourth gospel* [SNTS.MS 73; Cambridge: CUP, 1992] ch. 4), 'theologized history' (D. Tovey, *Narrative Art and Act in the Fourth Gospel* [JSNT.S 151; Sheffield: SAP, 1997] 226-27, 255), or 'history-like narrative' (A.T. Lincoln, *Truth on Trial: The Lawsuit Motif in the Fourth Gospel* [Peabody: Hendrickson, 2000] 389-90).

⁸⁴ See Frey, *Eschatologie II*, *passim*.

⁸⁵ C. Hoegen-Rohls, *Der nachösterliche Johannes: Die Abschiedsreden als hermeneutischer Schlüssel zum vierten Evangelium* (WUNT II/84; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996) 294-95, cf. 310-11). Cf. those in n.68, above.

complete way of presenting important aspects of the Johannine concept of salvation.

We will also employ our findings of Spirit and Wisdom in relation to 'salvation' in sapiential Judaism (see ch. 2) to illuminate our understanding of John's soteriology. The rationale for utilizing such a possible background is as follows. First, all the Johannine soteriological themes we will elucidate in chapter 3 find a parallel in the Jewish wisdom literature (except for one less relevant theme). Second, the Spirit plays a significant part in the soteriology of the Jewish wisdom literature, and hence, it seems advantageous (if not essential) to attempt to understand the Johannine concept of Spirit against such a possible sapiential background. Moreover, in sapiential Judaism Wisdom and Spirit are closely related soteriological categories, which might assist us to elucidate the interrelations between Jesus, Spirit and salvation in the Fourth Gospel. Third, we have selected a Jewish (wisdom) background over against, for example, a Hellenistic (wisdom) background because the author of the Fourth Gospel himself appears to be immersed in Jewish thought, and because he expects his intended readership to have knowledge of Judaism (see ch. 2 section 1).

2. The Fourth Gospel — Some Pertinent Introductory Issues

We may briefly introduce John's Gospel by elucidating the issues of author, reader, genre, plot and purpose of the Fourth Gospel.¹ Concerning the real author, it will suffice to work with the concept of 'John' or 'the Evangelist',² but the question of the identity of the *reader* needs more

¹ With regard to the date of the Fourth Gospel, traditionally, the Gospel has been dated at the end of the first century, but this position has been challenged by J.A.T. Robinson, who believes that the Gospel should be dated before the destruction of Jerusalem at 70 CE (*Redating the New Testament* [London: SCM Press, 1976], ch. IX; cf. L. Morris, *The Gospel according to John* [NIC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995 (rev. edn)] 25-30). Although most scholars have not been persuaded by Robinson's arguments, he reopened the question of the date of the Gospel, and it now seems plausible to give the origin of the traditions of the Fourth Gospel an early date and the final form a date around 80-85 CE (e.g., Beasley-Murray, *John*, lxxv-lxxviii; Carson, *Gospel*, 82-86). At present, the majority of scholars express their preference for the dating of John's Gospel tentatively somewhere within the spectrum of 80-100 CE.

² Concerning the issue of and relationship between the real author, implied author and narrator, see Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 43; J.L. Staley, *The Print's First Kiss: A Rhetorical Investigation of the Implied Reader in the Fourth Gospel* (SBL.DS 82; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988); Tovey, *Art*, 50-51; Hamid-Khani, *Revelation*, 22-28. The explicit evocation of the narratee by the 'you' in 20.31 (cf. 19.35) functions as a direct address to either the implied reader (so, e.g., Motyer, *Father*, 114) or real reader (so, e.g., Tolmie, *Farewell*, 38-39). The narrator probably identifies the eyewitness (the authority behind the Gospel)

attention. The original contribution of Martyn's seminal thesis is that he put the real reader of the Fourth Gospel in a specific social-historical context. He believes that the original readers were members of the so called Johannine community, i.e., a community of Jewish Christians who had become alienated from Judaism as a result of the *birkath ha-minim*, the curse against the Christian heretics formulated in Jamnia probably in the late first century.³ There have always been critics of Martyn's thesis,⁴ but the vast majority of Johannine scholars have accepted Martyn's basic concept that the Fourth Gospel reflects a particular *Sitz im Leben* of the Johannine community — in controversy with Judaism — through a 'two-level' reading of the text.⁵ However, the recent work of Bauckham (and his colleagues) challenges the view that a Gospel was written for a specific community — instead the Gospels were written for general circulation around the churches — and thus seriously undermines the present consensus of a 'Johannine community'.⁶ Esler, however, criticizes Bauckham's position and proposes a *via media*: each Gospel was primarily written for a specific local community, although each evangelist may have

in 19.35 and 21.24 as the Beloved Disciple (BD) (contra Staley, *Kiss*, 39-41, who thinks that the BD is the narrator [for a critique of Staley, see Culpepper, *Anatomy*, x; Tolmie, *Farewell*, 53-54]). However, there is debate whether the BD is the implied author (Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 47; Beasley-Murray, *John*, lxx-lxxv; Stibbe, *Storyteller*, 77-78; *idem*, *John*, 198, 215) or the real author (Tolmie, *Farewell*, 52-56; Witherington, *Wisdom*, 16). Carson argues that the BD is both the implied and real author (*Gospel*, 684-85), but narratologically the implied author is always distinct from the real author (cf. Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 15-16). Suffice it to say that the illocution of using the character of the BD is to assert the truthfulness of what has been narrated in the Fourth Gospel. That is, the eyewitness language adds to the plausibility of the Gospel's truth claim (cf. esp. A.T. Lincoln, 'The Fourth Gospel as Witness and the Beloved Disciple as Eyewitness', [unpublished paper given at London Bible College, December 2000] 1-17).

³ See J.L. Martyn, *History & Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979²).

⁴ E.g., W. Horbury, 'The Benediction of the *Minim* and Early Jewish-Christian Controversy', *JThS* 33 (1982) 19-61; M. Hengel, *The Johannine Question* (Transl. J Bowden; London: SCM Press, 1989) 114-15; Carson, *Gospel*, 371; Beasley-Murray, *John*, 153-54; Pryor, *John*, 42-43; Wright, *Testament*, 161-66, 451-52; Morris, *Gospel*, 41-42; Witherington, *Wisdom*, 38-39; Motyer, *Father*, 25-30, 211-18; Hamid-Khani, *Revelation*, 181-90.

⁵ E.g., Brown, Barrett, Schnackenburg, Kysar, Fortna, Culpepper, Stibbe, Ashton, de Boer, Painter, Koester and Tolmie. See Motyer (*Father*, 13 n.21) for a more extensive list. Cf. X. Léon-Dufour, 'Towards a Symbolic Reading of the Fourth Gospel', *NTS* 27 (1981) 439-56.

⁶ R. Bauckham, 'For Whom Were Gospels Written?' and other essays in R. Bauckham (ed.), *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998). Cf. Hamid-Khani, *Revelation*, 18, 157-58, 171-72. See also Witherington, *Wisdom*, 32-35.

concepts is one of intensity and quality, i.e., one of strength, amount and calibre of endowment of πνεῦμα, and hence of life and wisdom. Human beings have or are in 'relationship' with the divine Spirit by virtue of being alive, and 'salvation', then, is a matter of intensity and quality — the degree or kind of relationship people have with God through his Spirit. Moreover, if the Spirit functions as the revealing power of Wisdom, in that the Spirit mediates 'saving wisdom' to people, then 'salvation' can also be described in terms of degree of W/wisdom.

Thus, based on our examination of the representative writings of the various wisdom strands, we propose a model of salvation in terms of *various degrees of intensity and/or quality of divine Spirit and W/wisdom*. By virtue of their creation, people have πνεῦμα, a certain measure of wisdom, and the cognitive ability to process wisdom (the 'mind'). 'Salvation', then, is a *sufficient* increase in measure and difference in *quality* of endowment of πνεῦμα and W/wisdom. In other words, 'salvation' can be understood as an intensification of that work of the Spirit that is already immanent to a person, namely, the mediation of life and wisdom, and this saving work of the Spirit was sometimes/often experienced as bringing new qualities of understanding, life and relationship with God. This 'panentheistic' model of salvation is explicitly present in Wisdom of Solomon and Philo, and to a lesser extent in Qumran and Sirach.²¹⁵

The strength of our model is the strong coherence or continuity between the interrelated role of Spirit and Wisdom in both creation and salvation; the same Spirit and Wisdom that are at work together in creation are also co-operating with one another in salvation.²¹⁶ We have also interpreted 'salvation' within a relational framework. At creation, a person is alive and in 'relationship' with God through his Spirit, and the strength and quality of this relationship may be increased through fuller endowment of divine

²¹⁵ In Sir., humanity is endowed with wisdom by creation, and salvation consists of further endowment of wisdom and the gift of the Spirit. Wis. and Philo depict the endowment of humanity with πνεῦμα and wisdom at creation, and salvation entails a further endowment of πνεῦμα and wisdom. In Qumran two S/spirits are at work in or upon humankind since creation (of which the S/spirit of truth mediates wisdom), and salvation depends on whichever S/spirit is predominant. All sapiential writings we investigated confirm the 'mind' as the locus of cognitive activity. Although not every wisdom writing will confirm every single detail of our model, none of them speaks against any detail of our model either. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to test our salvific model of sapiential Judaism against every single wisdom writing.

²¹⁶ Wisdom's dual role in creation and salvation has been recognized by virtually all scholars, and hence has not been elaborated in this chapter.

Spirit, to the extent that we can speak of a 'saving' relationship.²¹⁷ Our model differs from that of Davis (and Menzies) in three ways. First, Davis has a model of various levels/stages of sapiential achievement, whereas we propose a model of various degrees of intensity and quality in Spirit and W/wisdom. Second, according to Davis, only the highest level of wisdom is attributed to the Spirit, which is then depicted virtually as a *donum superadditum* with no soteriological consequences, whereas in our model both Spirit and W/wisdom are soteriologically necessary and needed at every 'stage'. Three, we seem to allow for a broader group of potential recipients of the Spirit (in Wis., Philo and Qumran) than Davis.

Excursus 2: Πνεῦμα — A Conceptual Relation of Some of Its Senses in the LXX

The word πνεῦμα is used polysemously in the LXX, in that it has multiple senses — 'wind', 'breath (of life)', '(principle of) life', 'inner being', 'human spirit', 'divine spirit', etc.²¹⁸ We want to raise the question, to what extent there may be shared traits of meaning in those senses of πνεῦμα that are linked to the main focus of our thesis — the concept of πνεῦμα as far as it describes the activities of the divine Spirit in relation to people and 'salvation'.²¹⁹ Hence, to what extent are the senses 'breath/principle of life', 'human spirit' and 'divine spirit' of πνεῦμα related, and how?

We suggest that behind the senses 'breath/principle of life', 'human spirit' and 'divine spirit' is one shared meaning — the divine Spirit of God as the principle of life — since these three senses are linked linguistically, conceptually and theologically. The link between 'breath/principle of life' and 'divine spirit' is most easily established. First, πνεῦμα, as the divine Spirit of God, is depicted as the life-principle (of humankind and animals) (Gen. 6.3, 17; 7.15; Job 7.7; 12.10; Wis. 15.11; cf. Sir. 34.13; 38.23). Second, πνοή ζωής (the breath of life) is also depicted as the principle of the physical life (Gen. 2.7; 7.22; Sir. 33.21), and πνεῦμα frequently overlaps with πνοή in this sense of 'life' (Job 27.3; 33.4; Isa. 42.5; Wis. 2.2-3). Hence, it seems that the senses 'breath/principle of life' and 'divine spirit' of πνεῦμα are related in that God's πνεῦμα-πνοή is transferred to human beings in order to give them (physical) life. It is also possible to link 'breath/principle of life' and 'human spirit', in that the person's πνεῦμα is his life/vitality

²¹⁷ That a person is in 'relationship' with God through his Spirit by virtue of being alive may not necessarily be perceived by the person at a conscious level, but a person can only be in a 'saving relationship' with God through his Spirit at a conscious level; a person can only 'enter' into such a relationship through a cognitive act. In excursus 2, below, we take matters even further, although this should remain tentative.

²¹⁸ Cf. the standard lexicons; Hildebrandt, *Theology*, 1-27.

²¹⁹ Hence, we are not arguing for one single 'basic or 'core' meaning of πνεῦμα, that holds all its senses together (see the warning against this in [F.]P. Cotterell and M.[M.B.] Turner, *Linguistics & Biblical Interpretation* [London: SPCK, 1989] 137-39). We expect that the use of πνεῦμα in the LXX presupposes some synchrony, although further research needs to demonstrate to what extent our suggestion will work across the LXX. We have limited ourselves to Gen., Job, Isa., Wis. and Sir. because wisdom material has always made links to creation, and also, Gen. and Isa. highlight the role of the πνεῦμα in creation and the new creation respectively.