

JESUS AND THE WITNESSES (JOHN 3:11)

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Abstract: *This article concerns the use of the first person plural in John 3:11. It examines eight different proposals as to how these plurals should be understood, six of which are considered at length: namely, these are the words of the church, not of the historical Jesus; the plurals refer only to Jesus; the testimonies are those of Jesus and those who will follow him; the witnesses are Jesus and the Father; the witnesses are Jesus and the Spirit; the testimonies are those of the OT prophets and of John, now crowned by that of Jesus himself. The article provides a detailed argument for adopting the last of these interpretations and counters five arguments that have been made against it. It argues that the subject of these testimonies is the eschatological work of the Spirit as generator of new life and the significance of Jesus as the Spirit-anointed Spirit-baptizer who launches this promised age.*

Key words: *Nicodemus, the Spirit, regeneration, begotten from above, Ezekiel, testimony, the prophets, John (the baptizer), the disciples, heavenly life*

John 3:11 and its immediate context pose a series of questions for the reader. Why does Jesus switch from the first person singular (λέγω) to the first person plural (οἴδαμεν), and then revert to the first person singular in verse 12 (εἶπον; εἶπω)? Whose spoken testimony is he joining with his own (ὁ οἴδαμεν λαλοῦμεν καὶ ὁ ἐωράκαμεν μαρτυροῦμεν ... τὴν μαρτυρίαν ἡμῶν)? And why, after retaining the second person singular of verse 10 (σὺ εἶ ... λέγω σοι), does he change to the second person plural (οὐ λαμβάνετε), and retain it in verse 12 (οὐ πιστεύετε)? Who else is in view along with Nicodemus?

This study aims to provide a convincing answer to these questions, focusing in particular on the identity of the witnesses. This is not because this matter has received little or no scholarly attention until now.¹ It stems rather from believing that the most widely held interpretations are unconvincing and that there are solid reasons for an alternative that has not received the attention it deserves. We will consider in turn eight interpretations of this verse and its plural verbs, setting out the weaknesses of the first seven and the reasons for adopting the eighth.

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¹ One study identifies twenty-four different interpretations: Martin Schmidl, *Jesus und Nikodemus: Gespräch zur johanneischen Christologie; Joh 3 in schichtenspezifischer Sicht* (BU 28; Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 1998), 217 n. 743. This claims more precision than is warranted, as most discussions speak in fairly general terms: where one refers to “the [Johannine] community,” another says “Christians,” and another “the church,” without any significant distinction in meaning. I believe the eight interpretations discussed in this study adequately represent the range of different views.

The verse we are to analyze forms part of the dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus (2:23–3:21).² The structure of this passage is best seen as follows: (1) the introduction which sets the scene for their meeting (2:23–3:1); (2) the dialogue between them (3:2–15); and (3) the narrator’s interpretive commentary (3:16–21).³

The eight interpretations of the plurals will be examined in six sections, the first and fifth of which will each discuss two interpretations. The seventh and final section will respond to arguments against the eighth interpretation.

I. INTERPRETATIONS REQUIRING MORE SUBSTANCE

These two interpretations can be dealt with briefly, the first because it offers too little and the second because it claims too much. The first deals only indirectly with the key question about the referent of the plurals, suggesting that Jesus was simply echoing Nicodemus’s opening words, *ῥαββί, οἶδαμεν* ... (v. 2).⁴ This should be—but is not always—followed by some indication of his reason for doing this, and most of those who give an explanation see it as a put-down of some kind.⁵ This is almost certainly mistaken: a statement that begins with *ἀμὴν ἀμὴν λέγω σοι* is, to put it mildly, “an unlikely vehicle for satire”!⁶ Like the two that precede it (vv.

² On what can be known about Nicodemus, see Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Jesus in Jerusalem: The Last Days* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 35–40.

³ I refer throughout to the “narrator” because for the purposes of this study his function is more important than his identity. Vv. 16–21 are best understood as the narrator’s words for the following reasons: (1) they contain important words and expressions found elsewhere only in the Prologue: Jesus as the *μονογενής*; believing *εἰς τὸ ὄνομα*; Jesus as *τὸ φῶς* who comes *εἰς τὸν κόσμον*; (2) like the Prologue, and unlike the future perspective of vv. 14–15, they comment retrospectively on the Christ-event as a whole (vv. 16–18) and on the widespread failure of people to respond rightly (vv. 19–20) (Michael Theobald, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes, Kapitel 1–12* [RNT; Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 2009], 243, who notes that this section “fasst ... das Heilsgeschehen retrospektiv als *ganzes* in Auge”); (3) reading them as editorial commentary means that, just as he had done previously (1:51), Jesus concluded his words to Nicodemus by referring to himself as the “Son of Man” (vv. 13–15); (4) when articulating his identity and mission as “Son of Man” or “Son,” Jesus usually speaks of himself in both the third person and the first person (e.g. 5:19–32; 6:29–40, 53–58), which makes it most unlikely that he is the speaker throughout vv. 13–21, given its unbroken use of the third person singular; (5) whenever Jesus speaks of “God” he normally also refers to him as “my/the Father” (e.g. 5:41–45; 6:29–33; 16:25–32), but vv. 16–21 use only *ὁ θεός*; and (6) in “vv. 1–15 the categories and concerns are Jewish ... [but] from v. 16 to v. 21 the claims of Christ are now universalised” (John W. Pryor, *John, Evangelist of the Covenant People: The Narrative and Themes of the Fourth Gospel* [London: DLT, 1992], 20).

⁴ E.g. Henri van den Bussche, *Jean: Commentaire de l’Évangile Spirituel* (Brussels: Desclée de Brouwer, 1967), 167; William J. Dumbrell, *John, Gospel of the New Creation: A New Covenant Exposition* (Caringbah, NSW: New Covenant, 2006), 48–49; M.-J. Lagrange, *Évangile selon Saint Jean* (EBib; Paris: Gabalda, 1925), 79; Nicolas Farelly, *The Disciples in the Fourth Gospel: A Narrative Analysis of their Faith and Understanding* (WUNT 2/290; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 38; Sunny Kuan-Hui Wang, *Sense Perception and Testimony in the Gospel according to John* (WUNT 2/435; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 135 n. 50.

⁵ E.g. Jo-Ann A. Brant, *John* (Paideia; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 76 (“Jesus’ sarcastic question ... provides the riposte”); Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John* (2 vols.; AB 29–29A; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966, 1970), 1:132 (“a parody of Nicodemus’ hint of arrogance”); D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John* (PNTC; Leicester: IVP; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 198–99 (“sardonically aping ... Nicodemus”); Mark W. G. Stibbe, *John* (Readings; Sheffield: JSOT, 1993), 57 (“satirical imitation”).

⁶ J. Ramsey Michaels, *The Gospel of John* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 191.

3, 5), this statement too is making an important point that Jesus expects Nicodemus to heed.⁷

The second interpretation is at the opposite end of the spectrum, seeing Jesus's plurals as comprehensive in scope: "autour de Jésus se rangent les prophètes, le Précurseur, les premiers disciples, Jean l'évangéliste (qui avait peut-être assisté à l'entretien), toute l'Église de Dieu ..." ⁸ There are two major problems here. In the first place, without a remarkable degree of prophetic foresight Nicodemus could not possibly have understood Jesus's words in this way. Second, such maximal interpretation is, at best, where the exegete's task begins and not where it ends: to identify all the possible meanings of a word or statement is only a prelude to establishing which of those meanings is most likely in the literary and historical context concerned. Without such exegetical argument, this interpretation is inadequate at best.

II. THE PLURALIS ECCLESIASTICUS

This third interpretation is presented in the great majority of scholarly commentaries on this Gospel and in many other works.⁹ Its advocates do not state it in

⁷ In addition to these three uses, this formula occurs another twenty-two times in this Gospel: 1:51; 5:19, 24–25; 6:26, 32, 47, 53; 8:34, 51, 58; 10:1, 7; 12:24; 13:16, 20–21, 38; 14:12; 16:20, 23; 21:18. For its significance in the context of the "lawsuit" motif, see Andrew T. Lincoln, *Truth on Trial: The Lawsuit Motif in the Fourth Gospel* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000), 30–31 (it emphasizes Jesus's "complete reliability as a witness and the solemnity of [his] testimony").

⁸ Alfred Durand, *Évangile selon Saint Jean* (VS 4; Paris: Gabriel Beauchesne, 1938), 86; cf. Edwin C. Hoskyns, *The Fourth Gospel* (ed. Francis N. Davey; rev. ed.; London: Faber & Faber, 1947), 204, 216 (Abraham, Moses, Isaiah and all the prophets, the Scriptures, John the baptizer, and the disciples); Benedikt Schwank, *Evangelium nach Johannes: Praktischer Kommentar* (3rd ed.; Erzabtei St. Ottilien, BRD: Eos, 2007), 109 (all the OT prophets and the apostolic church).

⁹ Commentaries presenting this view include the following: C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John* (2nd ed.; London: SPCK, 1978), 202, 211–12; Walter Bauer, *Das Johannesevangelium* (3rd ed.; HNT 6; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1933), 55; Jürgen Becker, *Das Evangelium des Johannes, Kapitel 1–10* (ÖTK 4/1; Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn; Würzburg: Echter, 1979), 139; J. H. Bernard, *The Gospel according to St. John* (2 vols.; ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1928), 1:110; Christian Dietzfelbinger, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes* (2 vols.; ZBK 4; Zurich: Theologischer Verlag Zurich, 2001), 1:84–85; Kenneth Grayston, *The Gospel of John* (EpComm; London: Epworth, 1990), 35; Ernst Haenchen, *John* (2 vols.; Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 1:202; Jey J. Kanagaraj, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Secunderabad, India: OM Books, 2005), 122–23; Jey J. Kanagaraj, *John* (NCCS; Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013), 31–32; Robert Kysar, *John* (ACNT; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), 53–54; R. H. Lightfoot, *St. John's Gospel: A Commentary* (ed. C. F. Evans; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957), 117; Andrew T. Lincoln, *The Gospel according to St. John* (BNTC 4; London: Continuum, 2005), 152; G. H. C. MacGregor, *The Gospel of John* (MNTC 4; London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1928), 74–75; Michael Mullins, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Dublin: Columba, 2003), 142; Johannes Schneider, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes* (ThHKNT; Berlin: Evangelisches Verlagsanstalt, 1976), 96; Udo Schnelle, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes* (3rd ed.; ThHKNT; Leipzig: Evangelisches Verlagsanstalt, 2004), 84; Yves Simoens, *Selon Jean, 2. Une interprétation* (Collection IET 17; Brussels: Institut d'Études Théologiques, 1997), 191; Gerard S. Sloyan, *John* (Int; Atlanta: John Knox, 1988), 45; Hermann Strathmann, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes* (NTD 4; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1968), 69; Fritz Tillmann, *Das Johannesevangelium* (Bonn: Peter Hanstein, 1916), 71; Klaus Wengst, *Das Johannesevangelium* (2 vols.; 2nd ed.; ThKNT 4; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2004), 1:138–39; Rodney A. Whitacre, *John* (IVPNTC 4; Downers Grove, IL; Leicester: IVP, 1999), 89; Alfred Wikenhauser, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes* (RNT 4; Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 1961), 88; Ulrich Wilckens, *Das Evangeli-*

exactly the same way, identifying the speaker as the Johannine community, or the church more generally, or the ascended Christ speaking through the church—but these seem to be alternative ways of making essentially the same point. Many of these discussions also see the second person plural *οὐ λαμβάνετε* as addressed to the Jewish community.

This approach involves a range of complex issues that cannot be dealt with adequately in a study like this. What we can do, however, is to take the necessary first step in any proper assessment of it: that is, testing the exegetical foundations on which it rests. Yet it proves difficult to find commentators who treat this as an exegetical issue, with most appearing to regard this interpretation as too obvious to need justification. As a result, it seems more like an *a priori* judgment resulting from a particular view of the character of this Gospel. However, the crucial test of the validity of such views is the extent to which they provide a satisfactory reading of the narrative and its constituent parts. While it is not the whole of the interpreter's task, careful exegetical examination of the text is always its most fundamental dimension.

This means that this interpretation must make good sense in the immediate literary context. And if the words in question are not what they purport to be, it is legitimate to ask how and where the narrator alerts the reader to this fact. Yet when assessed against these criteria, it quickly becomes apparent that this interpretation has significant problems. We begin with those that concern the immediate context.

(a) It does not explain why the first-person plurals concerned—four verbs and the possessive pronoun—are bounded on both sides by first personal singular verbs (*λέγω*, v. 11; *εἶπον*, *εἶπω*, v. 12). Why would the narrator allow the church to speak only these thirteen words, and only at this one point in the dialogue?

(b) How likely is it that the narrator would use this way of serving as the mouthpiece of the Christian community when he is just about to do so in a more overt manner? That is, since he offers his own commentary in verses 16–21 when the dialogue of verses 2–15 is at an end, why would he think he also needed to insert this perspective into the wording of the dialogue?

(c) The second person plural verbs in verses 11–12 (*λαμβάνετε*; *πιστεύετε*; *πιστεύσετε*) are often regarded as confirmation of this view, being seen as a “synagogal” plural which justifies interpreting the first-person plurals as ecclesiastical. However, these plurals are most naturally seen as a response to the *οἶδαμεν* with which Nicodemus begins the discussion (v. 2). The frequent claim that he is representing those referred to in 2:23 is certainly true on the narrative level, but Nicodemus could hardly think of himself in those terms. A more likely approach understands his *οἶδαμεν* on two levels.

In the first place, it is likely to reflect his awareness, as one of the authorities who needed to keep their ears to the ground during festival times in particular, that some in Jerusalem were now voicing such opinions—including perhaps other

members of the ruling elite (cf. 12:42). That they had formed such a view tells the reader that along with the signs Jesus performed (2:23) he had also been engaged in teaching; hence Nicodemus's ἀπὸ θεοῦ ἐλήλυθας διδάσκαλος (v. 2). Second, it is probable that Nicodemus was also referring to the disciples who accompanied him.¹⁰ It is also likely that Jesus's disciples were there too, as his retrospective comment ἀπ' ἀρχῆς μετ' ἐμοῦ ἔστε (15:27) suggests that their presence was a constant throughout his ministry.¹¹

However, since the narrator saw no need to refer to others who may have been present, a rather general understanding of Nicodemus's words is apparently quite adequate.¹² The essential point of his οἶδαμεν is his awareness that he is voicing an opinion shared by others, and in this sense, that he is acting as their spokesman. The second person plurals in Jesus's response to him do not need to be any more precise than this either. There is therefore no need to look beyond the narrative setting to find a satisfactory explanation of their meaning.

The second question raised by this third interpretation is how and where the narrator alerts the readers that the first-person plurals in verse 11 are the voice of the church. Unless he gave such indications, it is difficult to see how the readers would realize that they were meant to read the plurals this way. There are none in the preceding chapters, however: this is the first time Jesus uses the first person plural, and the only possible "ecclesiastical plural" (1:14, 16) does not come from him. Where, then, do we find these indications later in the narrative? One of the few to address this matter is Jörg Frey, who finds such plurals also in 4:22 and 9:4.¹³

¹⁰ "Nicodemus, who was a wealthy aristocrat and a rabbi, would not have come to Jesus alone: aristocrats were surrounded by retainers and slaves, and rabbis were accompanied by students." (Schnabel, *Jesus and Jerusalem*, 40).

¹¹ On the presence of the two groups of disciples, see F. P. Cotterell, "The Nicodemus Conversation: A Fresh Appraisal," *ExpTim* 96 (1984–1985), 238; Peter Cotterell and Max Turner, *Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation* (London: SPCK, 1989), 280–81; also Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 189–90; Frédéric Louis Godet, *Commentary on John's Gospel* (1886; repr., Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1978), 385–86; Murray J. Harris, *John* (EGGNT; Nashville: B&H Academic, 2015), 74; Gerhard Maier, *Johannes-Evangelium, 1. Teil* (Neuhausen-Stuttgart: Hänssler, 1984), 118; Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to John* (rev. ed.; NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 196; Herman Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 134; Marianne Meye Thompson, *John: A Commentary* (NTL; Louisville: WJK, 2015), 83; B. F. Westcott, *The Gospel according to St John* (London: John Murray, 1898), 52; Richard Bauckham, *The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple: Narrative, History, and Theology in the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 165; Cornelis Bennema, *The Power of Saving Wisdom: An Investigation of Spirit and Wisdom in Relation to the Soteriology of the Fourth Gospel* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002), 168; idem, *Encountering Jesus: Character Studies in the Gospel of John* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2009), 79.

¹² E.g. Lincoln, *John*, 148 ("We know ...' makes this view of Jesus representative of some Jews, including leading ones, who are sympathetic to Jesus' cause"); Richard Bauckham, *Gospel of Glory: Major Themes in Johannine Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 83 ("a group of colleagues for whom he acts as spokesperson").

¹³ Jörg Frey, *Die johanneische Eschatologie, II. Das johanneische Zeitverständnis* (WUNT 110; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998), 252–57; idem, *The Glory of the Crucified One: Christology and Theology in the Gospel of John* (BMSEC; Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2018), 90, 160; so also Haenchen, *John*, 1:202 (9:4); Godfrey C. Nicholson, *Death as Departure: The Johannine Descent-Ascent Schema* (SBLDS 63; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1983), 30–32.

It must be said that this is a surprisingly small tally—which raises the question why this plural occurs only in these three places and not in others where it might have been expected. But is this, in fact, the right way of reading these two verses?

The οἶδαμεν in 4:22 is Jesus's only use of the first-person plural in a discussion beginning with an expression of surprise that a Jewish man would request a drink from a Samaritan woman (4:9). When she goes on to distinguish οἱ πατέρες ἡμῶν from the Jewish people (ὕμεῖς λέγετε, 4:20), Jesus responds by stating a fundamental contrast between Samaritans (οὐκ οἶδατε) and Jews (οἶδαμεν), clearly accepting her identification of him with the Jewish people (ἡμεῖς). There is no reason to believe that this is not what it appears to be: Jesus's use of the first person plural makes good sense as a response to hers, and states what is an appropriate point for him to make in this setting.¹⁴

The plural in 9:4 also makes perfectly good sense on the lips of Jesus.¹⁵ In responding to his disciples' question (9:2), his use of the plural (ἡμᾶς) indicates that they too are bound by the δεῖ ἐργάζεσθαι that governs his ministry—as he had previously indicated in 4:34–38. There is an urgency about this because the night will soon replace the day, a night that will take him from the world whose light he is (9:5).¹⁶ This cannot be the voice of the church, given that what must be done is specified as τὰ ἔργα τοῦ πέμψαντός με, and that the νύξ concerned is what awaits Jesus in Jerusalem, as the reader will learn quite soon (11:8–10; 12:35–36).¹⁷

Despite its popularity, this ecclesiastical interpretation of the first-person plurals in 3:11 fails crucial exegetical tests, and a better alternative must be found. It is, of course, very likely that the readers saw parallels between what Jesus says to Nicodemus and what was happening in their own context, but that concerns the applicability of his words and not their referent—or their origin!

¹⁴ In this Gospel, “Jesus’ own identity as a Jew is never in doubt” (Wendy E. S. North, “Jesus the Jew in John’s Gospel: ‘Scripture Cannot be Broken,’” in *Portraits of Jesus in the Gospel of John: A Christological Spectrum* [ed. Craig R. Koester; LNTS 589; London: T&T Clark, 2018], 31).

¹⁵ There is another way of accounting for this plural, which is worthy of mention only because its proponent is C. H. Dodd. He thinks the ἡμᾶς in 9:4 marks the narrator’s momentary forgetfulness, and that the με six words later represents his “Oops!” (*Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963], 188). It is very difficult to reconcile this author with the one whose work Dodd had previously characterised as “carefully balanced and articulated,” with links between sections that are “intricate and subtle” and containing “carefully composed discourses and dialogues” (*The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953], 317, 388, 445). His explanation of 9:4 also reflects very doubtful assumptions about the production and publication of this Gospel.

¹⁶ Although this “while there is time” principle can be applied more generally—and is taken this way here by, *inter alios*, Dodd, *Historical Tradition*, 377; Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St John, Volume 2* (New York: Seabury, 1980), 241–42; Wilckens, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes*, 157—the νύξ in question is not one that we all face; it is the νύξ that Jesus faces: the fast-approaching climactic “hour” when he must depart and to which he has already referred a number of times (2:4, 19–21; 3:14; 6:51; 7:6–8, 33–34; 8:21).

¹⁷ Although Jesus will later instruct his disciples about their future mission (15:15–21, 27; 17:14–20; 20:21–23), that is not his focus here. In what little remains of that day, only his disciples could play an appropriately limited role in the work the Father has sent him to do, and it is essential that they do so (ἡμᾶς δεῖ ἐργάζεσθαι): see Carson, *John*, 362–63; Ridderbos, *John*, 334–35; Thompson, *John*, 207; Theodor Zahn, *Das Evangelium des Johannes* (4th ed.; KNT 4; Leipzig: A. Deichert, 1912), 435.

III. THE PLURALS REFER ONLY TO JESUS

There are three versions of this fourth interpretation, the first two of which can be dealt with briefly. Some see Jesus as using a *pluralis maiestatis* here, and thus speaking only of himself.¹⁸ An alternative path to the same conclusion regards the plurals as an example of the rhetorical figure known as *heterosis*, here using the plural for the singular.¹⁹

What Jesus says immediately before and after the words in question makes this view very unlikely, however. He uses the singular at the beginning of verse 11 (λέγω) and again in verse 12 (εἶπον; εἶπω). The fact that these verbs refer to speaking means that the change from the singular to the plural does not represent a change of subject matter—and this makes it difficult to see any reason why the plural of majesty is appropriate only for the second and third of these verbs and not for the three that precede and follow them.²⁰ Even more telling is the lack of any other instances of this plural in a Gospel that is full of statements by Jesus about his unique identity and significance, where he employs instead an emphatic ἐγώ.²¹

The third form of this interpretation requires a more extensive discussion. Richard Bauckham argues that this is the plural of “authoritative testimony,” a feature of Johannine style he also finds in 1:14; 21:24, and in 1 John 1:1–5; 4:14; 3 John 9–10, 12.²² The case he makes for interpreting the plurals in 3:11 this way has some significant weaknesses, however.²³

¹⁸ Johannes Beutler, *A Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 95; Walter Klaiber, *Das Johannes-Evangelium, Teilband 1* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017), 89; Stanley B. Marrow, *The Gospel of John: A Reading* (New York: Paulist, 1995), 38; Heinrich A. W. Meyer, *A Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Gospel of John* (2 vols.; 2nd ed.; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1876), 1:173; Francis J. Moloney, *The Johannine Son of Man* (2nd ed.; BSRel 14; Rome: LAS, 1978), 42, 47–48; Willis Hedley Salier, *The Rhetorical Impact of the Semeia in the Gospel of John* (WUNT 2/186; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 54 n. 26; Josaphat C. Tam, *Apprehension of Jesus in the Gospel of John* (WUNT 2/399; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), 37, 76, 165.

¹⁹ Otfried Hofius, “Das Wunder der Wiedergeburt: Jesu Gespräch mit Nikodemus, Joh 3,1–21,” in *Johannesstudien: Untersuchungen zur Theologie des vierten Evangeliums* (ed. Otfried Hofius and Hans-Christian Kammler; WUNT 88; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996), 57.

²⁰ A quite different version of this approach claims that the plurals serve to “deflect the uniqueness of Jesus somewhat” because “it is still too early in the Gospel for Jesus to speak authoritatively in the first person as the Revealer of God.” Jesus will not be ready to use the authoritative “I” (as he does from chapter 4 onwards) “until John has yielded up the spotlight to Jesus (vv. 27–30), and until Jesus has been more formally presented as ‘the One who comes from above’ and who ‘testifies to what he has seen and heard’ (vv. 31–32)” (Michaels, *John*, 191–92 [omitting his italics]). Since this is about the way the author shapes the narrative, this interpretation of the plural, despite references to “Jesus’s lips” and “Jesus’s words” and the like, really belongs in the previous category.

²¹ Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St John, Volume 1* (New York: Seabury, 1980), 376.

²² Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 370–83 (with his discussion of 3:11 in 377–79). His view has been adopted by Edward W. Klink III, *John* (ZECNT; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 201; Frances Martin and William W. Wright IV, *The Gospel of John* (Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 72.

²³ For the purposes of this essay, we will limit our discussion to passages in this Gospel.

(a) He believes that the introductory formula *ἀμὴν ἀμὴν λέγω σοι* (which appears in verses 3 and 5, as well as in verse 11) “underlines the character of Jesus’s testimony as uniquely self-authenticating.”²⁴ If so, why was there any need for the plural of authoritative testimony as well? Does Jesus’s uniquely self-authenticating testimony not carry sufficient authority in and of itself?

(b) He notes that “there are several occasions in the Gospel where Jesus uses the word ‘testify’ in the first person singular (5:31; 7:7; 8:14, 18; 18:37)” and then states that “the Johannine Jesus uses ‘we’ as a substitute for ‘I’ only on the one occasion when the ‘we’ of authoritative testimony is required by Johannine style.”²⁵ But what makes the discussion with Nicodemus the only occasion which required the plural of authoritative testimony? Was there not much more at stake—and therefore greater need for this note of authority—in the settings to which such passages as 5:31; 8:14, 18; and 18:37 belong?

(c) Bauckham claims that “the natural meaning of the verse in context is that Jesus refers to what he uniquely, as the only one who has descended from heaven (3:13), has seen in heaven (cf. 5:19–20).”²⁶ However, this way of interpreting verse 11—which is shared by many other interpreters—misreads the progression in what Jesus says to Nicodemus. It takes him to be moving the discussion on to the next stage, which has a Christological focus—but that happens only from verse 13, because verses 10–12 form a response to the question in verse 9 and what has led Nicodemus to ask it.

Jesus’s *ταῦτα* in verse 10 responds to that of Nicodemus in verse 9 and makes the point that Nicodemus should have understood what he said in verses 3–8. And *τὴν μαρτυρίαν ἡμῶν οὐ λαμβάνετε* is not making a new point, referring to testimony that is yet to be given, but is continuing the critique contained in *ταῦτα οὐ γινώσκεις*, as well as making it more direct and explicit. Verse 11 therefore underscores Nicodemus’s failure by indicating that he and those he represents already have available to them enough to understand what Jesus was saying. This is reinforced by the fact that the formula *ἀμὴν ἀμὴν λέγω σοι/ὕμῖν* “always carries a reference to what has gone before . . . [and] never introduces a new saying unrelated to what precedes.”²⁷ It is also confirmed by the first half of verse 12, where Jesus describes what he has just told Nicodemus as *τὰ ἐπίγεια*. It is only with the contrasting expression *τὰ ἐπουράνια* that the focus changes to the fact that Jesus is uniquely qualified to give revelation of that kind (v. 13).²⁸

Its place in the logical sequence we have traced shows that verse 11 is referring to the kind of revelation described in verse 12a—which is not of such a kind that it could come only from Jesus.²⁹ The first person plurals in verse 11 are thus

²⁴ *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 379.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 378.

²⁷ Bernard, *John*, 1:67; cf. Moloney, *Johannine Son of Man*, 25, 48.

²⁸ We will consider in section VII below what these terms mean and Jesus’s reason for using them here.

²⁹ William C. Weinrich, *John 1:1–7:1* (CC; St. Louis: Concordia, 2015), 367–68, 398–99, argues that *εἶπον* in v. 12a is third person plural, “referring to the multitude of OT witnesses, joined now by John

indicating that Jesus is not the first and only source of the truths Nicodemus has now heard from him—which implies that Jesus regards his testimony as crowning that of those who preceded him. We will return to this matter in section VI below.

(d) Bauckham further claims that reading verse 11 through the lens of verse 13 is “strongly supported by 3:31–32, where the same claim is made simply of Jesus in the third person singular.”³⁰ Again, this is a widely held view—and again, it fails to recognize the progression in the narrative, signaled by some important differences between verse 11 and verses 31–32 and their contexts.³¹

In verse 32, the narrator certainly echoes the wording of both parts of verse 11—but his commentary is both wider and narrower than what Jesus says to Nicodemus. It is wider in that οὐ λαμβάνετε is now οὐδεὶς λαμβάνει, by which the narrator indicates that the failure Jesus identifies in Nicodemus and others is not true only of them but is universal. But it is also narrower in that Jesus’s τὴν μαρτυρίαν ἡμῶν (v. 11) is now only τὴν μαρτυρίαν αὐτοῦ, which, based on ὁ ἐώρακεν καὶ ἤκουσεν, makes it distinct from the testimony that is grounded only in ὁ ἐώρακάμεν. That testimony concerns the eschatological role of the Spirit, but in verses 31–36 the focus has changed. It is only there, and not in verses 3–11, that the fundamental issue is unique revelation from the Son as its source and about the Son as its subject.

(e) Jesus initiated this change of focus by his closing words to Nicodemus, in which he claims a unique status as revealer (v. 13) and then makes himself the key to ζωὴ αἰώνιος, the life Nicodemus and all devout Jews seek in the coming kingdom (vv. 14–15). This answers Nicodemus’s question as to how regeneration can happen: πῶς δύναται ταῦτα γενέσθαι; (v. 9).³² He has been told that it is essential if he is to have a place in the coming kingdom (vv. 3, 5) and that only the Spirit can bring it about (vv. 6, 8). He is therefore likely to be asking, “Does this mean that I can only wait and hope that it will happen to me? Is there nothing I can do to ensure that it does?” In effect, his πῶς amounts to, “What must I do to be saved?”³³ What Jesus goes on to say is readily understood as an answer to that question, for

the Baptist?” (399). This is unlikely: Why would Jesus distinguish himself from these witnesses immediately after he has referred to their joint testimony? It is not to differentiate between their witness to τὰ ἐπίγεια and his, because v. 11 unites his testimony with theirs—and while both they and he testify about τὰ ἐπίγεια (v. 12a), he goes on to make it clear that only he can declare τὰ ἐπουράνια (vv. 12b–13).

³⁰ *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 378.

³¹ Rightly noted by Nicholson, *Death as Departure*, 87.

³² The widely-accepted translation, “How can these things be?,” wrongly treats γενέσθαι as equivalent to εἶναι here and thus misses the point of the question. It does not indicate that Nicodemus has no idea what Jesus means; it is at least a request for more explanation: see Douglas Estes, *The Questions of Jesus in John: Logic, Rhetoric and Persuasive Discourse* (BIS 115; Leiden: Brill, 2013), 135.

³³ Pierre Létourneau, *Jésus, Fils de l’Homme et Fils de Dieu: Jean 2,23–3,36 et la double christologie johannique* (Recherches n.s. 27; Montreal: Bellarmin; Paris: Cerf, 1992), 151–53, 348–61; cf. Paul Julian, *Jesus and Nicodemus: A Literary and Narrative Exegesis of Jn. 2,23–3,36* (European University Studies, Series XXIII, Theology 711; Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2000), 68–69; John Marsh, *The Gospel of Saint John* (Pelican Gospel Commentaries; Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1968), 179, 186; Schneider, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes*, 94; Merrill C. Tenney, *John, The Gospel of Belief: An Analytic Study of the Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 87.

he makes it clear that ζῶῃ αἰώνιος is only for ὁ πιστεύων (v. 15).³⁴ This is the necessary response to him as the Son of Man descended from heaven and then “elevated” (vv. 13–15)—which is a long way beyond Nicodemus’s “a teacher come from God” (v. 2).

The narrator’s commentary in verses 16–21 seals this change of focus from the unique activity of the Spirit to the unique identity of Jesus. It also moves the discussion to a different level, which he then builds on in verses 31–36 by speaking of testimony that is unique to Jesus. The second-time reader knows that the Son has unique access to the Father, both seeing what the Father shows him (5:19–20; 6:46; 8:38; cf. 1:18) and hearing what the Father tells him (5:30; 8:26, 28, 40). Because he is ὁ ἄνωθεν ἐρχόμενος, that is, ὁ ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ ἐρχόμενος (v. 31), or ὁ ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ καταβάς (v. 13), the witness Jesus gives to the Father’s purposes and his own place in them is *sui generis*.

So, against Bauckham, it is not the case that verses 31–32 are making “the same claim” as that found in verse 11. Although his case is not limited to the passages we have considered, the problems we have identified make it most unlikely that Bauckham is right to interpret the plurals in 3:11 as a Johannine idiom for authoritative testimony.

The question now facing us is this: If the crucial words in this verse are not those of the church, and if Jesus is not speaking only of himself, whose testimony is he joining with his own? The remaining proposals to be considered differ over whether the testimony concerned belongs primarily to the future, the present, or the past.

IV. THE OTHER TESTIMONY IS FUTURE.

This fifth interpretation overlaps with the third, but differs from it by accepting that Jesus speaks here of himself as the first of the witnesses.³⁵ The more general version of this view relates his words to the future testimony of the Johannine community or of church as a whole.³⁶ Others take him to be referring only to the

³⁴ Unlike Nicodemus, readers have the advantage of knowing that these realities belong together, for the narrator began his work by indicating that the τέκνα θεοῦ are those who both believe in Jesus and are begotten by God (1:12–13).

³⁵ It is not always easy to determine whether commentators are advocating this view or the third, but I have done my best not to misrepresent the views of those listed in footnote 9 and in the two footnotes below.

³⁶ George R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (2nd ed.; WBC 36; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999), 49; Gerald L. Borchert, *John 1–11* (NAC 25A; Nashville: B&H, 1996), 178–80; Thomas L. Brodie, *The Gospel according to John: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 198; Bruner, *John*, 189–90; Peter F. Ellis, *The Genius of John: A Composition-Critical Commentary on the Fourth Gospel* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1984), 55; Xavier Léon-Dufour, *Lecture de l'Évangile selon Saint Jean, I: chapitres 1–4* (Parole de Dieu; Paris: Seuil, 1988), 296–97; John F. McHugh, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on John 1–4* (ICC; London: T&T Clark, 2009), 231; Gail R. O’Day, “The Gospel of John: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (ed. Leander E. Keck; 12 vols.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1994–2004), 9:551; Felix Porsch, *Johannes-Evangelium* (SKKNT 4; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1988), 38; J. N. Sanders, *A Commentary on the Gospel according to St John* (edited and completed by B. A. Mastin; BNTC; London: Adam & Charles Black, 1968), 126; Schneider, *Das Evangelium nach*

future ministry of his disciples.³⁷ Either way, his testimony is to be seen as the initial chapter of the witness that will continue after his return to the Father. There are several problems that make this interpretation unconvincing.

(a) The future role of the disciples is certainly an important theme in chapters 14–17, where Jesus informs them about what the Spirit will do in and with them, and then intercedes for them in relation to the unique task entrusted to them. He makes clear that they will have a vital role as his witnesses, because their testimony will be based on their inside knowledge of his entire ministry (15:27). They will indeed be able to speak of what they know and testify to what they have seen—but that is not where Jesus’s words in verse 11 are focused. The failure he identifies in Nicodemus and those he represents is already apparent: οὐ λαμβάνετε; οὐ πιστεύετε (vv. 11–12). This means that the testimony in view is already available to them—and verse 12a, referring to what Jesus has just been saying to him, confirms that it is.

(b) The future testimony of the disciples (15:26–27), based on their personal involvement with Jesus (μετ’ ἐμοῦ), is to be about him (περὶ ἐμοῦ). But the testimony which Nicodemus has not received is essentially about the eschatological work of the Spirit (vv. 5–8).

(c) Since the disciples’ testimony will not be independent and distinct, but a Spirit-enabled re-presentation of Jesus’s teaching (14:23–26; 15:26–27; 16:13–14), it is difficult to see why Jesus returns to the first person singular in verse 12. The ἐπίγεια his testimony contains would also be a feature of future Christian testimony—so why does he exclude that testimony by speaking only of himself? But if verse 11 is referring to testimony preceding rather than following his, the singular in verse 12 is not at all difficult to explain. He is not inviting Nicodemus to look beyond him to what is to come; he is insisting that he must receive the longstanding testimony that Jesus has now crowned with his own—and because that existing testimony has been gathered up and re-presented in his, the crucial issue before Nicodemus is how he responds to what Jesus has just told him. And that is exactly the point that verse 12 is making.

Johannes, 96; Siegfried Schulz, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes* (NTD 4; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1972), 57–58; Theobald, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes, Kapitel 1–12*, 256; Hartwig Thyen, *Das Johannesevangelium* (HNT 6; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 197; Ben Witherington III, *John’s Wisdom: A Commentary on the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville: WJK, 1995), 98; M. de Jonge, “Nicodemus and Jesus: Some Observations on Misunderstanding and Understanding in the Fourth Gospel,” *BJRL* 53 (1970–1971), 348; Beth M. Stovell, “Seeing the Kingdom of God, Seeing Eternal Life: Cohesion and Prominence in John 3:1–15 and the Apocryphal Gospels in Terms of Metaphor Use,” in *The Language of the New Testament: Context, History, and Development* (ed. Stanley E. Porter and Andrew W. Pitts; Linguistic Biblical Studies 6; Leiden: Brill, 2013), 444, 449–50; Allison A. Trites, *The New Testament Concept of Witness* (SNTSMS 31; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 95.

³⁷ F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John: Introduction, Exposition and Notes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 86–87; Lincoln, *John*, 152; Maier, *Johannes-Evangelium, 1. Teil*, 118; Marsh, *John*, 179–80; Schnackenburg, *John*, 1:375–76; D. Moody Smith, *John* (ANTC; Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 97; Thompson, *John*, 83; James M. Boice, *Witness and Revelation in the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970), 129–30; Heinrich Bullinger, *John 1–12* (ed. Craig S. Farmer; RCS: NT 4; Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 100; Létourneau, *Jésus, Fils de l’Homme*, 158–63.

(d) This view is really just an alternative form of the third interpretation discussed above. If the referent of the five plurals concerned is Jesus and the disciples and/or the Christian community, then the wording of verse 11 is almost certainly not from Jesus. What point would there be in assuring Nicodemus of a continuing stream of testimony in the coming years? This would give the impression that he can postpone making a firm decision about Jesus and his claims until some indefinite point in the future. But he must not do so! He is in the presence of the messianic king of Israel, the Spirit-anointed Spirit-baptizer, the heaven-sent Life-giver, which means that the crucial moment—the time for believing and receiving new life—is here and now, a point the narrator is just about to make explicit (vv. 18, 36), and that Jesus will often make during his ministry.³⁸

V. THE OTHER TESTIMONY IS CURRENT

We have just shown that since Jesus is referring to Nicodemus's current stance (οὐ λαμβάνετε; οὐ πιστεύετε, vv. 11–12), the testimony concerned is already available to him and those he represents—which could mean that Jesus is speaking of a witness or witnesses contemporary with himself. This is understood in two ways: the sixth interpretation takes him to be referring to human witnesses, while the seventh believes that divine testimony is in view.

If Jesus means human witnesses, he will be referring to his disciples—and this means that his οὐδὲν echoes that of Nicodemus, which included his disciples (v. 2).³⁹ But even if (as seems likely) Nicodemus and Jesus were accompanied by their disciples, the narrator's failure to mention them makes it unlikely that they play any role in what Jesus says here. Nor does the narrative give any indication that the disciples were already bearing testimony to Jesus. It is true that they understood enough about him to want to be his disciples (1:35–2:2; 2:11–12) and were keen to recruit others by personal testimony (1:41–42, 45–46), and they were soon to be baptizing those who came to him (3:22; 4:1–2)—but were they already his witnesses in a public sense?

The narrative clearly indicates that they were not yet ready for such responsibility. First, they will assume this role only after Jesus returns to the Father (15:18–20, 26–27; 17:18–21; 20:21–22). Second, there were crucial things that only became clear to them after his resurrection (e.g. 2:22; 12:16; 13:7; 14:20; 20:9). Thirdly, throughout his ministry there were many things professing disciples got badly

³⁸ 5:24–25, 40; 6:29, 35–36; 8:24, 42; 9:5; 10:37–38; 11:25–27, 42; 12:35–36, 44–46.

³⁹ Cotterell claims that “[the] *oidamen* of 3² and 3¹¹ are then given their natural significances” (“The Nicodemus Conversation,” 238); cf. Bruner, *John*, 196, 197; Godet, *John's Gospel*, 385–86; Harris, *John*, 74; J. A. McClymont, *St. John* (CB; London: Blackwood, Le Bas, n.d.), 145; Morris, *John*, 196; Ridderbos, *John*, 134; R. V. G. Tasker, *The Gospel according to St. John: An Introduction and Commentary* (INTC; London: Tyndale, 1960), 71; H. W. Watkins, *The Gospel according to St. John* (ed. Charles John Ellicott; London: Cassell, Petter, Galpin, n.d.), 78; Westcott, *John*, 52; Bennema, *The Power of Saving Wisdom*, 144 n. 137.

wrong.⁴⁰ Such evidence makes it virtually certain that verse 11 is not referring to testimony that the disciples are giving.

The seventh interpretation takes Jesus to be referring to divine testimony. Some advocates of this view identify the other witness as the Father.⁴¹ There are two subsequent occasions on which Jesus does refer to the Father as a witness (5:32, 37; 8:18), and in the latter he couples the Father's testimony with his own in view of the Torah's stipulation about two witnesses (8:16–18). But this cannot be what Jesus means by verse 11, for those passages specify that the Father's testimony is validating the claims Jesus is making about himself. But the focus of this testimony is the regenerating work of the Spirit (vv. 3–8), and its basis is what the witnesses know (ὁ οἶδαμεν) and have seen (ὁ ἑώρακαμεν)—and the latter can hardly apply to the Father's testimony.

Others maintain that Jesus is linking the Spirit's witness with his own.⁴² The most detailed argument for this view comes in a recent study by Benjamin E. Reynolds.⁴³ He makes his case in four connected stages: first, he argues that the plurals in this verse come from Jesus and not from a group outside the narrative; secondly, he shows how the Gospel presents Jesus's testimony as derived from his unique relation to the Father; third, he argues that none of the others said to be included in Jesus's "we" could have given the kind of testimony Jesus gave; and finally, he presents evidence that the Spirit meets this necessary criterion. Although much of what he says is sound and helpful, Reynolds's case must be judged unsuccessful for the following reasons.

(a) The first part of his essay rightly insists on the priority of the literary context in exegesis of the text. Yet he fails to follow this principle in the next section of the essay, which offers a synthesis of what the Gospel as a whole reveals about the manner and content of Jesus's testifying. This account is clear and accurate but beside the point, because he has not looked for—and therefore has not recognized—the "clear referent within the literary context."⁴⁴ The immediate context makes it clear that the testimony concerned is about the eschatological work of the Spirit (vv. 3–8), and the content of testimony Jesus gives later in the narrative is not relevant at this point.

⁴⁰ 6:60–66; 8:30–47; 13:36–38; 14:8–9; 16:32; 18:10–11. On this point see D. A. Carson, "Understanding Misunderstandings in the Fourth Gospel," *TynBul* 33 (1982), 59–91.

⁴¹ Jonathan D. Huntzinger, *John* (Spirit-Filled Life NT Commentary; Nashville: Nelson, 2006), 73–74; Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (2 vols.; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 1:558, 560; Colin G. Kruse, *John: An Introduction and Commentary* (2nd ed.; TNTC; London: IVP; Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017), 118; Edwin A. Abbott, *Johannine Grammar* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1906), 312 [§2428]; Delbert Burkett, *The Son of Man in the Gospel of John* (JSNTSup 56; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1991), 89.

⁴² Robert H. Gundry, *Commentary on the New Testament: Verse-by-Verse Explanations with a Literal Translation* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2010), 361; Grant R. Osborne, *The Gospel of John* (Cornerstone Biblical Commentary 13; Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2007), 52, 55.

⁴³ "The Testimony of Jesus and the Spirit: The 'We' of John 3:11 in its Literary Context," *Neot* 41 (2007): 168–83.

⁴⁴ "Testimony," 170.

(b) When Reynolds turns to focus on the literary context, he finds support for his proposal in the fact that “Jesus speaks to Nicodemus about the Spirit and says that Nicodemus hears the voice of the πνεῦμα.”⁴⁵ However, verse 8 is most likely a parabolic saying about the wind which is applied to πᾶς ὁ γεγεννημένος ἐκ τοῦ πνεύματος.⁴⁶ This means that τὴν φωνὴν αὐτοῦ refers to the sound of the wind and not to the Spirit’s voice—but even if this had been what Jesus meant, it is highly doubtful that he thinks the Nicodemus of verse 4 is hearing this voice!

(c) He finds further support for his proposal in the many parallels between the work and words of Jesus and those of the Spirit. While these are undeniable—after all, the Spirit is ἄλλος παράκλητος (14:16)—they are beside the point, for they apply to what the Spirit will do in and with the disciples after Jesus returns to the Father (14:16, 25–26; 15:26; 16:7). This is where we find the only reference to the Spirit’s testimony, which he is to give after Jesus sends him: it will be about Jesus (15:26), and will be linked with that to be given by the disciples (15:26–27). But there is nothing to connect the Spirit’s witness with that given by Jesus at this point in his ministry or at any subsequent stage.

Our discussion has shown that verse 11 is most unlikely to be referring to testimony being given by the Father or the Spirit in conjunction with that of Jesus—so where else could this testimony be found?

VI. THE OTHER TESTIMONY IS PAST

We have noted several times that this verse is referring to testimony about the regenerating work of the Spirit (vv. 3–8) that Nicodemus and his ilk should have known and understood (vv. 9–10). Who, then, are the witnesses whose prior testimony Jesus has just stated and thus endorsed? In what follows, I will argue that there are two connected answers to this question. The following section will then respond to criticisms that have been levelled against this eighth interpretation of the plurals in verse 11.

Calvin, along with other interpreters then and now, believed that Jesus is referring to the testimony of the Scriptures: “Christ is joining himself with all the prophets of God and speaking for them all.”⁴⁷ If so, which particular prophetic themes was he highlighting?

⁴⁵ “Testimony,” 179.

⁴⁶ Borchert, *John 1–11*, 176; Carson, *John*, 197; Lagrange, *Évangile selon Saint Jean*, 77; Barnabas Lindars, *The Gospel of John* (NCB; London: Oliphants, 1972), 154; Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John* (SP 4; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998), 93, 99; Schnackenburg, *John*, 1:373–74; Schulz, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes*, 57; Theobald, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes, Kapitel 1–12*, 253–54; Zahn, *Das Evangelium des Johannes*, 190–92.

⁴⁷ John Calvin, *The Gospel according to St John, 1–10* (Calvin’s NT Commentaries; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961 [1553]), 69; also Martin Luther, *Works*, vol. 78 (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia, 2015 [1544]), 46–47; idem, *The Sermons of Martin Luther* (8 vols.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 3:444–45 [sermon for Trinity Sunday, 1526]; Friedrich Büchsel, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes* (NTD; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1949), 53; Werner de Boor, *Das Evangelium des Johannes* (4th ed.; 2 vols.; Wuppertaler Studienbibel; Wuppertal: R. Brockhaus, 1975), 1:110; Philip W. Comfort and Wendell C. Hawley, *Opening the Gospel of John* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1994), 49.

The general background to verses 5–8 is what the prophets say about the comprehensive transformation of God’s people and of the cosmos itself at the end of the age. At the heart of this thoroughgoing newness would be the powerful work of the Spirit: a work that will be *long*, for, in contrast to what Israel had known, the Spirit will never depart (Isa 59:21); *deep*, for the Spirit will effect radical inner change, the gift of a new heart (Jer 24:7; Ezek 11:19; 36:26–27); *wide*, for God will give his Spirit not only to the people of Israel (Ezek 39:28) but to “all flesh” (Joel 2:28); and *rich*, for the outpouring of the Spirit will turn what is barren and oppressive into a lush and secure haven for God’s people (Isa 32:14–18; 44:1–5). What lies ahead will completely outstrip all that Israel had known before.

While this overall depiction of the eschatological work of the Spirit is in the background, many commentators regard Jesus’s ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος (v. 5) as an allusion to Ezekiel 36:25–27.⁴⁸ But it is surprising that more do not note the equally clear connections between verses 6–8 and the next passage in Ezekiel, reporting the prophet’s vision of a valley full of human bones (37:1–14).⁴⁹

Because a potential association between God’s Spirit and wind in Ezek 37 follows directly upon an association between God’s Spirit and purifying water in Ezek 36, a biblically literate teacher of Israel like Nicodemus should have caught both allusions by the time Jesus finished the second one; but he did not (3:9).⁵⁰

Ezekiel’s account of that event involves both a crucial distinction between σὰρξ and πνεῦμα and also the use of πνεῦμα to refer to both the wind and God’s Spirit. When he prophesied to the bones at Yahweh’s instruction, they formed skeletons and were then covered with flesh (רֶשֶׁת; LXX σάρκες)—but they had no life (37:6, 8). It is only when he prophesied to the πνεῦμα at Yahweh’s command that the corpses became living beings: καὶ εἰσῆλθεν εἰς αὐτοὺς τὸ πνεῦμα, καὶ ἔζησαν (37:10

⁴⁸ The frequency with which commentators regard “water” as an obvious reference to baptism is troubling, especially when it leads to such assertions as, “Es gibt keinen anderen Zugang zum Reich Gottes als die Taufe. Allein die Taufe vermittelt die eschatologische Heilsgabe des Geistes” (Schnelle, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes*, 82). It is difficult to see how the author of this Gospel could have made it any clearer that these great realities are linked not with baptism but with believing in Jesus (vv. 15–18, *et passim*)! Given the setting in which Jesus says it, and especially the fact that he goes on to speak only of generation ἐκ τοῦ πνεύματος (vv. 6, 8), the phrase ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος is best understood as an intentional reflection of the way “water” is used in the prophets as a metaphor for the Spirit. We see this again in 7:37–39, where the narrator indicates that Jesus’s reference to what Scripture says about ποταμοὶ ... ὕδατος ζώντος concerns the Spirit.

⁴⁹ Two major studies of this Gospel’s use of Ezekiel do not see any connection between 37:1–14 and John 3: Gary T. Manning Jr., *The Use of Ezekiel in the Gospel of John and in Literature of the Second Temple Period* (JSNTSup 270; London: T&T Clark, 2004); William G. Fowler and Michael Strickland, *The Influence of Ezekiel in the Fourth Gospel: Intertextuality and Interpretation* (BIS 167; Leiden: Brill, 2018). However, this connection is recognised in Brian Neil Peterson, *John’s Use of Ezekiel: Understanding the Unique Perspective of the Fourth Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 174–75, and also by the following commentators: Bruce, *John*, 84; Bruner, *John*, 189; Carson, *John*, 195, 197–98; Dumbrell, *John*, 45–47; Kanagaraj, *Gospel of John* (2005), 120, 122; Keener, *John*, 1:552, 555, 557–58; Klink, *John*, 198, 200; Mullins, *John*, 138; Grant R. Osborne, *John Verse by Verse* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2018), 78, 79; Cullen I. K. Story, *The Fourth Gospel: Its Purpose, Pattern, and Power* (Shippensburg, PA: Ragged Edge, 1997), 72; van den Bussche, *Jean*, 165; Wengst, *Das Johannesevangelium*, 1:135 n. 58, 137; Whitacre, *John*, 88–89.

⁵⁰ Keener, *John*, 1:558.

LXX). Yahweh then told him that this symbolized his plans for his “dead” people, to whom he promised, *δώσω τὸ πνεῦμά μου εἰς ὑμᾶς καὶ ζήσεσθε* (37:14 LXX). The fundamental distinction at the heart of the vision is very clear: so long as there is no more than *σάρξ*, there is no life, for it is only God’s *πνεῦμα* that gives life in place of death.

This allusion implies that Nicodemus and his contemporaries are in much the same condition as the Israel Ezekiel had seen, lifeless and hopeless (Ezek 37:11). It is also worth noting that this section of Ezekiel contains some of the most explicit statements in the OT about Yahweh’s intention to pour his Spirit upon his people and to put his Spirit within them (36:27; 37:14; 39:29). This is to be a major feature of the coming restoration when Yahweh brings them out of exile as a transformed people, cleansed from sin and changed at heart, living in a transformed land—all of this giving new depth and durability to the covenant relationship: “They will be my people and I will be their God.”⁵¹

There are, therefore, strong grounds for thinking that verse 11 is referring to the testimony of the prophetic Scriptures. In addition, there are several reasons for thinking that Jesus also has John’s testimony in mind.⁵² The narrative points the reader in this direction in several ways. The first is the fact that, apart from 2:25, the only uses of *μαρτυρία* and *μαρτυρεῖν* prior to 3:11 refer to John (1:7–8, 15, 19, 32, 34). Second, there is an obvious parallel between *ὁ ἑώρακαμεν μαρτυροῦμεν* in verse 11 and John’s *ἑώρακα καὶ μεμαρτύρηκα* (1:34). In addition, the section that concludes with this affirmation likens John to the prophets in several ways.⁵³ Like them, he has been sent by God (1:33; also 1:6; 3:28).⁵⁴ And his striking experience, with its combination of visual and auditory elements (1:32–33), parallels what a number of the biblical prophets experienced.⁵⁵

Nicodemus would not be aware of these features of the narrative, of course—but he did know enough about John’s testimony to justify the rebuke in verse 11. The occasion for John’s *μαρτυρία* was the arrival of official envoys from Jerusalem,

⁵¹ Ezek 11:16–21; 36:24–30, 33–36; 37:12–14, 21–28; 39:25–29.

⁵² So William Hendriksen, *A Commentary on the Gospel of John* (2nd ed.; London: Banner of Truth, 1961), 136; George Hutcheson, *The Gospel of John* (Geneva Commentaries; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1972 [1657]), 44–45; R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John’s Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1943), 246; Adolf Schlatter, *Der Evangelist Johannes: Wie er spricht, denkt und glaubt: Ein Kommentar zum vierten Evangelium* (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1948), 91; Weinrich, *John 1:1–7:1*, 388, 397; Bernhard Weiss, *Das Johannes-Evangelium* (9th ed.; KEK; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1902), 114; Zahn, *Das Evangelium des Johannes*, 195; Julian, *Jesus and Nicodemus*, 116–17; Keith Vande Vrede, “A Contrast between Nicodemus and John the Baptist in the Gospel of John,” *JETS* 57 (2014): 722, 723.

⁵³ On John’s prophetic profile in this Gospel, see Keener, *John*, 1:458; Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 32; Schnackenburg, *John*, 1:250; Wang, *Sense Perception and Testimony*, 141; Catrin H. Williams, “John (the Baptist): The Witness on the Threshold,” in *Character Studies in the Fourth Gospel: Narrative Approaches to Seventy Figures in John* (ed. Steven A. Hunt, D. Francois Tolmie, and Ruben Zimmerman; WUNT 314; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 60.

⁵⁴ In the OT, this applies especially to Moses (Exod 3:10–15; 4:28; 5:22; 7:16; Deut 34:11; Josh 24:5; 1 Sam 12:8; Ps 105:26; cf. Acts 7:34), but it also applies to Isaiah (Isa 6:8–9), Jeremiah (Jer 1:7); Ezekiel (Ezek 2:3–5; 3:4–6); Haggai (Hag 1:12), Zechariah (Zech 2:9; 4:9; 6:15), and to the prophets in general (2 Chr 24:19; 36:15–16; Jer 7:25; 26:5; 35:15; 44:4).

⁵⁵ See, for example, Isa 6:1–13; Jer 1:11–16; Ezek 37:1–14; Amos 7:7–8; 8:1–2; Zech 2:1–13.

sent to question him about the meaning of his activities (1:19–27), and the narrator makes it clear that Nicodemus was one of the authorities behind that inquiry (3:1; cf. 1:19, 24; 7:45–50). But his response to what Jesus has said reveals that, like his peers, Nicodemus had not heeded John’s testimony: τὴν μαρτυρίαν ἡμῶν οὐ λαμβάνετε. And as the οὐ πιστεύετε in verse 12 shows, this failure was one of unbelief in the face of valid testimony.

The possibility that Jesus had John in mind here is strengthened by his later appeal to his testimony: ὑμεῖς ἀπεστάλακατε πρὸς Ἰωάννην, καὶ μεμαρτύρηκεν τῇ ἀληθείᾳ (5:33). On that occasion, he makes it clear to his accusers that he drew attention to this witness for their benefit: ταῦτα λέγω ἵνα ὑμεῖς σωθῆτε (5:34). He undoubtedly reminds Nicodemus of John’s testimony with the same intention.⁵⁶

John’s testimony does not repeat that of the prophets but complements it: they spoke of the decisive role the Spirit was to play in the coming age, and what John says about Jesus and the Spirit reveals that in him that promised new era has begun. “With the coming of the one who has the Spirit upon him (1:32), who baptizes with the Spirit, the time for God’s Spirit to purify and renew his people has come.”⁵⁷ The John who found his own vocation in Isaiah (1:23) obviously had no difficulty making the connection between the ἐπ’ αὐτόν he both saw and heard (1:32–33) and Isaiah’s use of that phrase in referring to the Lord’s Spirit-endowed servant (Isa 11:1–2; 42:1; cf. 59:21 [ἐπὶ σοί]; 61:1 [ἐπ’ ἐμέ]).⁵⁸ That is why he identifies Jesus as ὁ ἐκλεκτός τοῦ θεοῦ (1:34; cf. Isa 42:1).⁵⁹ But what he saw was more than a messianic anointing, because it also marked Jesus out as ὁ βαπτίζων ἐν πνεύματι ἁγίῳ (1:33).⁶⁰ This puts him in a unique position, for he is “non seulement le seul porteur de l’esprit [sic], mais aussi son seul dispensateur.”⁶¹

⁵⁶ Although the narrator does not say that Jesus knew the content of John’s testimony, we can be confident that he did because of his presence in the locality where John was baptizing (1:26, 29, 36) and because two of John’s disciples had become his disciples (1:35–39).

⁵⁷ Thompson, *John*, 81.

⁵⁸ Catrin H. Williams, “Isaiah in John’s Gospel,” in *Isaiah in the New Testament* (ed. Steve Moyise and Maarten J. J. Menken; London: T&T Clark International, 2005), 105; idem, “Johannine Christology and Prophetic Traditions: The Case of Isaiah,” in *Reading the Gospel of John’s Christology as Jewish Messianism: Royal, Prophetic, Divine Messiahs* (ed. Benjamin E. Reynolds and Gabriele Boccaccini; AGAJU 106; Leiden: Brill, 2018), 93–94.

⁵⁹ It is surprising how often the arguments used to support the reading ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ make it inferior on text-critical grounds: e.g. it “finds internal agreement with the theological terminology of the Gospel. The designation ‘the Son of God’ not only fits the immediate context but is formative in John from start to finish” (Klink, *John*, 137). This is, of course, exactly what might prompt a copyist to replace ὁ ἐκλεκτός with ὁ υἱός—and what makes it very difficult to understand why anyone would make the opposite change: see especially McHugh, *John 1–4*, 141–43; Quek Tze-Ming, “A Text-Critical Study of John 1.34,” *NTS* 55 (2009), 22–34; Christopher W. Skinner, “‘Son of God’ or ‘God’s Chosen One’? (John 1:34): A Narrative-Critical Solution to a Text-Critical Problem,” *BBR* 25 (2015), 341–58. On ὁ ἐκλεκτός τοῦ θεοῦ as more consistent with the rest of John’s testimony to Jesus in this section of the narrative, see Bauckham, *Gospel of Glory*, 157–58.

⁶⁰ While it does not occur in the OT, the idea of being “immersed” in the Spirit (βαπτίζω) overlaps with that of being deluged with the “poured out” Spirit (Isa 32:15; 44:3; Ezek 39:29; Joel 2:28; Zech 12:10): “the link between βαπτίζω and God’s Spirit ... is a metaphorical reference to the fulfillment of the OT promises concerning the Spirit whom God will ‘pour out’ (ἐκχεῶ) on all people (Joel 2:28; LXX 3:1) who are thus immersed into the reality of God’s Spirit” (Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Jesus, Paul, and the*

In the report of those sent to investigate John, Nicodemus would have heard this testimony about Jesus as the Spirit-anointed Spirit-baptizer.⁶² Against this background, what Jesus tells Nicodemus about the regenerating work of the Spirit is thus also making the claim that he is the one who launches the promised new age. As a result, accepting Jesus's testimony about the connection between God's kingdom and the essential intervention of the Spirit means that he is much greater than just a teacher who has come from God (v. 2). That should have been evident immediately, as no mere rabbi makes such definitive and yet surprising statements about participation in God's kingdom (vv. 3, 5). The readers have the advantage of knowing exactly what this means: Jesus determines who enters the kingdom, and on what basis, because he is the messianic king of Israel (1:41, 49; 20:31). Readers also know that what the Spirit must do in and for Nicodemus will be possible only after Jesus has been glorified, and then only for those who believe in him (7:37–39).

We conclude, therefore, that the plurals in verse 11 are best understood as referring to the testimonies of both the OT prophets and John. However, a number of arguments have been used against this view, and these require a convincing response if it is to stand.

VII. COUNTERING ARGUMENTS AGAINST THIS INTERPRETATION

If this eighth interpretation of the plurals in 3:11 is as well-grounded as we have argued, why has it not attracted much greater support? There are five main reasons scholars have given for rejecting it.⁶³ The first four can be dealt with fairly quickly, but the fifth requires more extensive discussion.

(1) This understanding of verse 11 overlooks the fact that throughout the Gospel the two speaking verbs are consistently used in a very different manner.

McHugh observes that with only nine of the fifty-nine occurrences of *λαλεῖν* not referring to Jesus, its use is “virtually restricted to Jesus’s *speaking the word of God*

Early Church: Missionary Realities in Historical Contexts: Collected Essays [WUNT 406; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018], 280).

⁶¹ Mulopo Apollinaire Makambu, *L'Esprit-Pneuma dans l'Évangile de Jean: Approche historico-religieuse et exégétique* (FB 114; Würzburg: Echter, 2007), 94; cf. Andreas J. Köstenberger and Scott R. Swain, *Father, Son and Spirit: The Trinity and John's Gospel* (NSBT 24; Nottingham, UK: Apollos; Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2008), 137–38; Marianne Meye Thompson, *The God of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 159–65, 186–88. This gives Jesus a status that far exceeds that of any mere human, for the Spirit of God is obviously not at the disposal of any mere human.

⁶² That the envoys were still present throughout 1:29–34 is indicated by the following features of the narrative: (1) vv. 19–34 are demarcated as a discrete section by an *inclusio*: *αὕτη ἐστὶν ἡ μαρτυρία* ... (v. 19) and *μεμαρτύρηκα ὅτι οὗτος ἐστὶν* ... (v. 34); (2) the witness given by John on the first day (vv. 19–28) is incomplete, as it consists solely of denials about who he is rather than declarations about who Jesus is; (3) the second day's testimony (vv. 29–34) rounds out matters raised but not explained the previous day: compare v. 26a with vv. 31, 33; (4) the admission “I too (*καγὼ*) did not know him” (vv. 31, 33) looks back to the *ὃν ὑμεῖς οὐκ οἶδατε* of v. 26, and thus indicates that John is speaking to the same hearers on both days.

⁶³ Some think no reasons are needed: e.g. Godet, *John's Gospel*, 385 (“The impossibility of these explanations is manifest”); Meyer, *John*, 1:173 (“quite arbitrary, and without a trace of support in the text”).

(50 times).⁶⁴ This is even more evident with the fourteen uses of *μαρτυρία* and the thirty-three uses of *μαρτυρεῖν*: “La grande nouveauté du témoignage johannique, c’est qu’il est entièrement *centré sur la personne même du Christ*.”⁶⁵ This means that our reading of verse 11 is out of step with the remainder of the Gospel and contradicts one of its fundamental themes, for it would mean that “Jesus’s unique claim would fail: Moses and John testify to him, but not with him.”⁶⁶

There are two problems with this argument. Even if the claims about word-use are right, they do not overturn our view. As we have seen, Jesus’s uniqueness as the Spirit-anointed Spirit-baptizer means that any testimony about the eschatological work of the Spirit is necessarily also about Jesus as well. The testimony of verse 11 thus differs from that found elsewhere only because its witness to Jesus is not direct and explicit, not because it overlooks him.

Second, these words are not used only with reference to Jesus. On three occasions *λαλεῖν* refers to speaking of an ordinary kind (1:37; 7:13; 9:21), and in another it refers to God addressing Moses (9:29). In similar vein, one of the fourteen uses of *μαρτυρία* and six of the thirty-three uses of *μαρτυρεῖν* are not about testimony to Jesus.⁶⁷ What this data shows is that this Gospel has an intense focus on the person of Jesus, and thus on revelation by him and testimony to him—but it is not the case that this is its exclusive concern. Even if the Scriptures and John are usually presented as witnesses to Jesus, there is no reason in principle why that must always be the case: the fact that Jesus is the center of this witness does not mean it can have no distinct circumference. And if Jesus appeals to John’s testimony because he wants his accusers to be saved (5:33–34), it is surely possible that the same concern led him on this occasion to join his testimony with those of the prophets and John.

(2) This cannot be what Jesus is doing because, as revealer, he is *sui generis*, superior to the prophets in every way. Raymond Brown speaks for many others here when he insists that “any suggestion that Jesus is joining others in speaking founders on the emphasis on Jesus’s uniqueness in vs. 13.”⁶⁸

The problem with this objection is that it misses the progression in what Jesus says. He is just about to indicate his uniqueness, by referring to *τὰ ἐπουράνια* (v. 12b) and to himself as the only one who is capable of revealing them, the unique Son of Man *ὁ ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ καταβάς* (v. 13). But that is not the focus in verse 11, which concerns testimony that he calls *τὰ ἐπίγεια* (v. 12a), a description that surely implies these are not truths which could only be revealed by him. However, the fact that there is no difference in their testimony does not mean that the witnesses who

⁶⁴ McHugh, *John 1–4*, 232 (emphasis original); cf. Brown, *John*, 1:132 (“it is the verb *par excellence* for Jesus’ revelation of the truth from God”); Julian, *Jesus and Nicodemus*, 114 (it “stands for revelation”).

⁶⁵ Ignace de la Potterie, *La Vérité dans Saint Jean* (2 vols.; AnBib 73–74; Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1977), 1:88 (emphasis original); cf. Zumstein, *L’Évangile selon Saint Jean (1–12)*, 117 (“désigne constamment la révélation christologique”).

⁶⁶ Schnackenburg, *John*, 1:376 n. 92.

⁶⁷ 2:25; 3:28; 4:44; 7:7; 8:17; 13:21; 18:23.

⁶⁸ Brown, *John*, 1:132.

gave it are on the same level: only one of those who testifies about τὰ ἐπίγεια is also able to testify about τὰ ἐπουράνια (vv. 11–13).

What Jesus does by confirming and crowning the testimony of the prophets and of John to the eschatological work of the Spirit exposes the unjustifiable failure of Nicodemus and others to believe that testimony (vv. 11b–12a), testimony which is also about the significance of Jesus himself. What Jesus says to Nicodemus anticipates the way he will later rebuke his opponents for their refusal to heed that testimony by coming to him for life and salvation (5:33–35, 39–40, 46–47).

(3) Jesus cannot be speaking of the prophets, according to Herman Ridderbos, because ὁ ἐωράκαμεν would then be “referring to visions, which certainly does not fit Jesus.”⁶⁹

The flaw in this reasoning is exposed when Ridderbos says that μαρτυροῦμεν can apply to the disciples, “though in another sense than of Jesus himself.”⁷⁰ If so, why must ὁ ἐωράκαμεν apply to Jesus and to the prophets in the same way? If not all testifying is the same, neither is all seeing the same seeing—so ὁ ἐωράκαμεν is not confined only to seeing that had the same source and took the same form.

The seeing of Jesus is quite unique, of course, for he alone testifies about ἃ ἐγὼ ἑώρακα παρὰ τῷ πατρὶ (8:38; cf. 5:19–20; 6:46). But there are other witnesses—such as Abraham (8:56) and Isaiah (12:41)—who have important testimony about what they have seen. And there was a mysterious sense in which the whole message Yahweh spoke both to and through the prophets also counted as a vision (e.g. Isa 1:1–2; 13:1; Amos 1:1–2; Obad 1; Mic 1:1–2)—which means that they too testified about what they had seen. By the time they have reached the end of this Gospel, the readers will be well aware that they should know and receive all the testimony that comes from those who have “seen”: that of the prophets and the Scriptures as a whole, as well as the unique and paramount testimony of Jesus.⁷¹

(4) Jesus cannot be referring to the message of the prophets, because the concept of individual spiritual regeneration is not found in the OT.

While the premise is true, this conclusion does not follow. Although the precise form in which Jesus makes his point does not occur in the OT, he is combining and bringing into sharp focus some of its important themes: “the idea of rebirth or regeneration has its roots in the OT prophecy of restoration and renewal in the messianic age.”⁷²

The Spirit is to have a central role in the comprehensive renewal promised in the prophets, especially by working a lasting transformation in the hearts of God’s people. Many interpreters believe that this prophetic eschatology—centered on the new creation—should have enabled Nicodemus to grasp what Jesus was telling

⁶⁹ Ridderbos, *John*, 133; cf. Julian, *Jesus and Nicodemus*, 112.

⁷⁰ Ridderbos, *John*, 134.

⁷¹ 1:23, 45; 2:17, 22; 3:14; 5:37–40, 45–47; 6:45; 7:37–38; 10:34–36; 12:14–16, 37–41; 13:18; 15:25; 17:12; 19:24, 28, 36–37; 20:9.

⁷² Moisés Silva, “γίνομαι,” *NIDNTE* 1:571.

him.⁷³ This seems a little unfair, as there is no straightforward connection between the general expectation of cosmic renewal and the Spirit-wrought begetting that Jesus insists Nicodemus must experience—but there is a particular feature of this new world that should have alerted him to what Jesus meant.⁷⁴

Yahweh's promises to restore his people and their land, and especially his promises to transform them by his Spirit, regularly cite the covenant formula: "You will be my people and I will be your God."⁷⁵ This signaled his intention to restore this unique bond in a way that made it permanent. When he initiated this relationship in the exodus and the Sinai covenant, one important way of describing it referred to him as Father and to Israel as the people he had created (σου πατήρ ... ἐποίησέν σε καὶ ἔκτισέν σε) and begotten (θεὸν τὸν γεννήσαντά σε).⁷⁶ Against this background, what Yahweh will do in restoring this relationship can be thought of as a much greater form of the same divine work of creating or begetting—but this will no longer apply only to Israel as a people, for "they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest" (Jer 31:34). This unique personal bond will involve the transforming presence of the Spirit, Yahweh's new covenant gift to each of his people.

Jesus's response to Nicodemus (v. 10) implies that he should have known these scriptural pictures and promises—and should therefore have been able to make the connections between them which explain why Jesus spoke about a begetting that had the Spirit as its source.

(5) If Jesus was referring to the testimony of the prophets and of John, why was Nicodemus unable to understand what he meant? Some find the explanation in the fact that Nicodemus has not been regenerated by the Spirit: "Nicodemus and Jesus cannot converse meaningfully because Nicodemus has not yet been born from above ... as Jesus is from above (v. 13). Jesus and Nicodemus inhabit two different realms of discourse ... [and so] their conversation is like ships passing in the night!"⁷⁷ It seems that Nicodemus finds himself checkmated: Jesus is telling him that he must be regenerated—but because he has not been regenerated, he

⁷³ Keener, *John*, 1:542–44; Schnackenburg, *John*, 1:371; Thompson, *John*, 81, 82; van den Bussche, *Jean*, 165, 167–68; Julian, *Jesus and Nicodemus*, 69–70, 103–104; Craig S. Keener, *The Spirit in the Gospels and Acts: Divine Purity and Power* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997), 143–46; Makambu, *L'esprit*, 131–34, 138; Klyne R. Snodgrass, "That which is Born from IINEYMA is IINEYMA: Rebirth and Spirit in John 3:5–6," in *Perspectives on John: Method and Interpretation in the Fourth Gospel* (ed. Robert B. Sloan and Mikeal C. Parsons; Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1993), 182.

⁷⁴ Noted by Thyen, *Das Johannesevangelium*, 195.

⁷⁵ Jer 24:4–7; 30:18–31:1; 31:31–34; 32:37–41; Ezek 11:17–20; 34:28–31; 36:25–28; 37:21–28; Zech 8:7–8; 13:7–9. This is at the heart of the Sinai covenant (Exod 6:7; Lev 26:12; Deut 26:16–19) and was also anticipated in the covenant with Abraham (Gen 17:7).

⁷⁶ Deut 32:6, 18 LXX; note also Isa 63:8–10, 15–16; 64:8; Jer 31:9; Hos 11:1–4. See Matthew Velanickal, *The Divine Sonship of Christians in the Johannine Writings* (AnBib 72; Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1977), 23–43, 50–52.

⁷⁷ Smith, *John*, 94; similarly, Michaels, *John*, 190; Theobald, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes, Kapitel 1–12*, 255; R. Alan Culpepper, "Nicodemus: The Travail of New Birth," in *Character Studies in the Fourth Gospel: Narrative Approaches to Seventy Figures in John* (ed. Steven A. Hunt, D. Francois Tolmie, Ruben Zimmermann; WUNT 314; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 256; Hofius, "Das Wunder," 56.

cannot understand what Jesus is telling him! But if so, why does Jesus bother talking to him at all? And why does he go on to engage in extensive public teaching (18:20) since all of his hearers were in the same condition as Nicodemus? Such a starkly deterministic view surely cannot be right. Indeed, if Jesus “sharply chides him (v. 10),”⁷⁸ this must mean that he expects him to understand—and so he does not regard him as doomed not to understand. Should Nicodemus have a complete grasp of these matters? No, because no one can: οὐκ οἶδας (v. 8).⁷⁹ What he should have, however, is enough understanding to respond positively to Jesus’s testimony (vv. 10–11), that is, to believe (vv. 12, 15). The reason that Jesus teaches Nicodemus and many others throughout his ministry is that his word is the point of intersection between the life-giving work of the Spirit and those who hear and believe (5:24; 6:63).

So why did Nicodemus fail to understand? Was it because the prophets’ testimony lacks sufficient clarity? The problem was due to the lenses through which Nicodemus and his contemporaries viewed that testimony. This becomes clear when we ask why Jesus went from the subject of participation in God’s kingdom to the contrast between two begettings, of the σὰρξ and of the πνεῦμα (vv. 5–6)? Since this contrast is a biblical way of distinguishing the human and heavenly realms, the fact that he must be regenerated by the Spirit (vv. 5–6, 8) tells Nicodemus that the kingdom of God is not just *ahead*, a future reality, but also *above*, a heavenly reality.⁸⁰ But why did he need to be told that to enter life in God’s heavenly kingdom he needed this new beginning that comes only ἀνωθεν, that is, ἐκ τοῦ πνεύματος (vv. 7–8)?

The reason is revealed later in the narrative, when Jesus meets hostility from people who insist σπέρμα Ἀβραάμ ἐσμεν and ὁ πατὴρ ἡμῶν Ἀβραάμ ἐστίν (8:33, 39, 53), and who therefore assert, ἓνα πατέρα ἔχομεν τὸν θεόν (8:41). They are furious when Jesus denies that they are children of Abraham or children of God (8:39–42) and instead accuses them of being children of the devil (8:44). Their outraged sense of identity involves twin assumptions commonly made by Jesus’s contemporaries: that membership in Israel was defined by birth, by descent from Abraham, and that, with the exception of apostates, “all Israel has a share in the age to come” (m. Sanh. 10:1).⁸¹ In other words, the kingdom of God is for the people of God, and the people of God are the σπέρμα Ἀβραάμ. Because Nicodemus was Jewish by birth—and also practiced the daily disciplines of a Pharisee—he was undoubtedly confident that his final destiny was secure. So what is Jesus talking about? Even if it were possible, why would any son of Abraham need *another* birth?

⁷⁸ Smith, 96.

⁷⁹ Paul’s observation about the ψυχικός ἄνθρωπος is relevant (1 Cor 2:14)—as is his response to this fact: 1 Cor 1:21–24; 2:1–5.

⁸⁰ E.g. Gen 6:3; Job 10:4–5; Pss 56:4; 78:39; Isa 31:3; 40:6; Jer 17:5; Joel 2:28. This use of σὰρξ and πνεῦμα designates two contrasting but not opposing realms, as is the case in Paul, where σὰρξ denotes the realm of sin and death (Rom 7:5–6; 8:3–14; Gal 5:16–25); see especially Thyen, *Das Johannesevangelium*, 193–94.

⁸¹ Keener, *John*, 1:544; Létourneau, *Jésus, Fils de l’Homme*, 149, 357; Pryor, *John*, 19, 175.

The reader knows that this issue surfaces elsewhere in the narrative. The dispute reported in chapter 8 reveals that Jesus has a very different view of how membership of God's Israel—and thus the identity of God's children—is defined. He insists that only those who respond rightly to him belong to God (8:31, 42, 45–47, 51). The narrator raises this crucial subject before the narrative itself begins by indicating a division within the Jewish people, the ἴδιοι to whom Jesus came (1:11; cf. 4:22). Although they regarded themselves as God's children (cf. 8:41), that status belongs only to those of them who believe in Jesus and are begotten by God (1:12–13). This is reinforced in the second half of the narrative, when the narrator speaks of Jesus's love for his ἴδιοι, his disciples (13:1), and when Jesus speaks of those disciples as his ἀδελφοί, whose Father is the Father who sent him (20:17). In these and other features of the narrative the reader learns of the creation of a new family of God, centered on Jesus the true Israel (15:1), and made up of all who believe in him.⁸² Membership in the people of God is therefore not determined by birth but by faith, and by divine and not human begetting (1:12–13)—and this is exactly what Jesus is telling Nicodemus.

This was so contrary to Nicodemus's frame of reference that he misunderstood both of the key words Jesus used, assuming that ἀνωθεν denotes repetition and that γεννάω is synonymous with τίκτω (vv. 3–4).⁸³ But Jesus's response shows that by γεννηθῆναι ἀνωθεν (vv. 3, 7) he means being begotten from above, that is, ἐκ τοῦ πνεύματος (vv. 6, 8).⁸⁴ Nicodemus must have a new beginning of a radically different kind, one that is heavenly (ἐκ τοῦ πνεύματος) and not merely natural (ἐκ τῆς σαρκός).⁸⁵

Despite his confusion, Nicodemus knew this had not happened to him! This is why he asks, πῶς δύναται ταῦτα γενέσθαι; (v. 9)—and in one sense he has already received an answer. Since the barrier between the realms of the σάρξ and the πνεῦμα cannot be breached from this side, Jesus can only be speaking about a divine gift. Such a beginning is like a birth because it would happen *to* Nicodemus but not *because of* him: “un nouveau début dont le sujet n'a pas la maîtrise, mais qui lui

⁸² See the comprehensive study by Jan G. van der Watt, *Family of the King: Dynamics of Metaphor in the Gospel according to John* (BIS 47; Leiden: Brill, 2000), especially pp. 166–200, 397–434.

⁸³ See the helpful analysis showing that Nicodemus takes γεννηθῆναι ἀνωθεν as “naître à nouveau” when Jesus means “être engendré d'en haut” (Létourneau, *Jésus, Fils de l'Homme*, 143–46, 393–95).

⁸⁴ Four studies published between 2008 and 2012 provide a very thorough diachronic investigation of the usage of ἀνωθεν, and conclude decisively in favour of the spatial sense (*desuper*) in John 3:3–8: Pierre-Marin Boucher, “Γεννηθῆναι ἀνωθεν (IV): L'adverbe ἀνωθεν dans l'aire dialectale du quatrième évangile,” *ETL* 88.1 (2012), 86–92. The claim that ἀνωθεν is intended to indicate *another* birth (e.g. Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971), 135 n. 1; Godet, *John's Gospel*, 376–77; Schulz, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes*, 55; Strathmann, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes*, 68; Zahn, *Das Evangelium des Johannes*, 184–86; Hofius, “Das Wunder der Wiedergeburt,” 40–43) is unlikely anyway, given that πάλιν would make that point in a more direct and obvious way. (The 42 uses of πάλιν in this Gospel put it a long way ahead of the next highest total in the NT: the 28 uses in Mark's Gospel and in the Pauline corpus.)

⁸⁵ In order to emphasize that this new life is generated by God, it is better to translate γενναῖσθαι as “begotten” rather than “born”: Maarten J. J. Menken, “‘Born of God’ or ‘Begotten by God’? A Translation Problem in the Johannine Writings,” in his *Studies in John's Gospel and Epistles: Collected Essays* (CBET; Leuven: Peeters, 2015), 13–28; cf. Vellanickal, *Divine Sonship*, 99–103.

est donné.”⁸⁶ It is essential for him to know this, but he still needs more: if he cannot enter God’s kingdom without this new beginning, he must find out how it can happen to him. Is he just to hope and pray until it arrives? It is this aspect of his question that Jesus is just about to address.⁸⁷

This means that defending our interpretation of verse 11 requires a brief analysis of verses 12–15, although this will extend what is already a quite lengthy discussion. The distinction between τὰ ἐπίγεια and τὰ ἐπουράνια (v. 12) overlaps with the earlier one between σὰρξ and πνεῦμα (vv. 6, 8), because it too expresses the basic biblical distinction between heaven and earth: “The heavens are the LORD’s heavens, but the earth he has given to human beings” (Ps 115:16, NRSV).⁸⁸ Jesus refers to what he has already communicated to Nicodemus and others as τὰ ἐπίγεια—and since οὐ πιστεύετε is equivalent to τὴν μαρτυρίαν ἡμῶν οὐ λαμβάνετε (v. 11), the ἐπίγεια are the content of the testimony given by the prophets and John that Jesus has now crowned with his own testimony. The most likely reason for calling them ἐπίγεια is the fact that they are “in the public domain”—and so Nicodemus should know them. This distinction is thus similar to that between τὰ κρυπτά and τὰ φανερά (Deut 29:29 LXX), between what we know about God and his ways because he has revealed it and what we don’t know—and could never know unless he chose to disclose it.⁸⁹

At first glance, verse 12 implies that there is no point in revealing τὰ ἐπουράνια to someone who has not believed τὰ ἐπίγεια. But careful analysis of verses 13–15 suggests that this is just what Jesus is doing—and he is doing it because it is essential that Nicodemus knows these truths. This will become clear as we consider how Jesus now addresses in turn two crucial issues about τὰ ἐπουράνια.

In verse 13, he explains how these truths can be known.⁹⁰ It is not the result of any storming of the heavens but of the descent from heaven of the Son of Man: he—and only he—can disclose τὰ ἐπουράνια. This confronts Nicodemus with a staggering claim: Jesus is indeed ἀπὸ θεοῦ (v. 2), but in a way that far exceeds what Nicodemus had thought. Jesus now goes on to make an even more staggering claim:

⁸⁶ Zumstein, *L’Évangile selon Saint Jean (1–12)*, 114; cf. Porsch, *Johannes-Evangelium*, 36; Whitacre, *John*, 89 (“an act of sovereign gracious love initiated by God, not by us”).

⁸⁷ Brown, *John*, 1:145; Ellis, *Genius*, 54–55; Köstenberger, *John*, 128; Sanders, *John*, 127; Weinrich, *John 1:1–7:1*, 396 n. 187; Zumstein, *L’Évangile selon Saint Jean (1–12)*, 120; Létourneau, *Jésus, Fils de l’Homme*, 172, 359.

⁸⁸ For surveys of the various views about the meaning of these terms, see Schmidl, *Jesus und Nikodemus*, 227–36; Jan G. van der Watt, “Knowledge of Earthly Things? The Use of ἐπίγειος in John 3:12,” *Neot* 43.2 (2009): 291–95.

⁸⁹ Cf. Léon-Dufour, *Lecture de l’Évangile selon Saint Jean, I: chapitres 1–4*, 298.

⁹⁰ Although it effectively rules out speculations about Moses or others having access to the secrets of the heavenly realm, this verse is not primarily a polemic against such views: its focus is clearly on the unique status and role of the Son of Man as revealer. Nicholson disputes this, arguing that the point of v. 13 is “that no one has ascended and descended, but one person, the Son of Man, has descended and ascended ... [and] he, and only he, has ascended” (*Death as Departure*, 93, 96, with his analysis of this verse in pp. 91–98). This interpretation fails to recognize the elliptical character of the verse (Köstenberger, *John*, 127; Lagrange, *Évangile selon Saint Jean*, 80; Sanders, *John*, 126–27), and by denying a link with v. 12 and thus making ascent the focus, it also disrupts the progression of thought in vv. 12–15.

by his descent he alone brings heavenly truth—and by his “elevation” he alone secures heavenly life, ζῶν αἰώνιος (vv. 14–15). And since that life is what Nicodemus hopes for, these two verses answer the πῶς-question he asked in verse 9. But there is little doubt that this answer would have been the most bewildering part of the dialogue. How could the Son of Man who descended from heaven be suspended on a pole like the bronze serpent (Num 21:6–9)? How could God possibly require such a thing to happen (δεῖ)? And what connection could such a shocking event possibly have with life in the age to come?

Who knows how much progress Nicodemus and his disciples made later as they tried to process what they had heard? But it is clear that there were four crucial truths Jesus intended Nicodemus to grasp, not only for himself but also in his role as a respected rabbi, ὁ διδάσκαλος τοῦ Ἰσραήλ (v. 10)—because every member of this people needed to know these things: “Wenn der Lehrer Israels weder Kenntnis noch Verständnis für das Wirken des Geistes hat, so ist nicht nur der Rabbi, sondern die ganze Gemeinde in Gefahr.”⁹¹ The narrator specifies that what is at stake is much more serious than Nicodemus’s reputation: It means either life or death, salvation or judgment (vv. 16–18).

(a) Nicodemus is in a perilous situation. Jesus’s allusion to Ezekiel 37 had implied that he belonged to a people without life or hope (Ezek 37:11). Now Jesus’s typological use of Numbers 21 suggested that Nicodemus was no more certain to enter God’s kingdom than the Israelites had been to enter the promised land, because like them he was doomed to death under God’s judgment.⁹²

(b) Just as the Israelites were spared when Moses ὑψωσεν τὸν ὄφιν, Nicodemus’s only way out of his desperate situation requires the “elevation” of Jesus the Son of Man (ὑψωθῆναι δεῖ, v. 14). Although many argue that this refers only to the crucifixion,⁹³ the evidence of the Gospel as a whole shows that it points to one “elevation” with two aspects: Jesus is “lifted up” on the cross (12:32–33) and then also “lifted up” to heaven (8:21–23, 28–29), to glory in the presence of the Father who sent him into the world.⁹⁴ The serpent was suspended on a pole to keep the

⁹¹ Schlatter, *Der Evangelist Johannes*, 91.

⁹² The narrator confirms this with comments that serve to include Nicodemus with all who are under the wrath of God (v. 36), facing the twin threats of “perishing” and condemnation (vv. 16, 18). In fact, the reader will soon discover that Jesus regards all people as νεκροί, needing to be delivered ἐκ τοῦ θανάτου (5:24–25).

⁹³ This Gospel is often said to view the crucifixion as Jesus’s exaltation-and-enthronement-and-glorification: so, for example, Bernard, *John*, 1:112–15; Dietzfelbinger, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes*, 1:249; Schnelle, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes*, 86; Thyen, *Das Johannesevangelium*, 208–11; Weinrich, *John 1:1–7:1*, 369, 405; Wengst, *Das Johannesevangelium*, 1:145; Wilckens, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes*, 72; John Morgan-Wynne, *The Cross in the Johannine Writings* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011), 84–88. The chief problem with this view is the fact that the Gospel does not end with chapter 19! It is certainly true that the crucifixion is not distinguished from Jesus’s exaltation as no more than its prelude—but it is also true that the crucifixion on its own gives us only a permanently entombed Jesus and not a permanently and gloriously enthroned Jesus. This Gospel does teach us to see Jesus’s “hour” as one great “Heilsereignis,” encompassing his crucifixion along with his resurrection and return to heavenly glory with the Father; it does not teach us that every other aspect of his hour is contained in and effected by the crucifixion.

⁹⁴ See especially William R. G. Loader, “John 3:13–15: Re-examining the Exaltation–Glorification–Ascension Nexus in John,” in *Expressions of the Johannine Kerygma in John 2:23–5:18: Historical, Literary, and*

Israelites from death, while the Son of Man is to be lifted up to secure ζῶῃ αἰώνιος for any and every believer (v. 15).

(c) Jesus's very compressed purpose clause makes three points about this ζῶῃ αἰώνιος: the first is that it is only for πᾶς ὁ πιστεύων; the second, that it is not just a future destiny but a present reality (ἔχῃ); and the third, that it can be had only ἐν αὐτῷ.⁹⁵ Jesus thus makes himself the key to this life, which Nicodemus can have only "by him" and only when he is united to Jesus ("in him") by believing in him.⁹⁶

(d) There is a crucial connection between the two events Jesus has described as necessary (δεῖ): his own "elevation" (v. 14) and the regeneration of Nicodemus and his fellow Jews (v. 7). Since entering the βασιλεία (vv. 3, 5) and having ζῶῃ αἰώνιος (v. 15) are essentially synonymous, Nicodemus will now know that the new life he needs comes through believing in Jesus, the Son of Man who descended from heaven and is to be "elevated" (vv. 13–15), and through being begotten by the Spirit (vv. 3–8).

Unlike Nicodemus, the reader knows of this correlation because of the way the narrator sets believing in Jesus in parallel with divine begetting (1:12–13)—and as Jesus does here, he makes it clear that both are necessary without explaining how they are connected. The reader will also know that the two life-giving events must occur in a particular order: It is only after the glorification of Jesus that he will send the Spirit (7:39; 16:7; 20:21–22). But there is something much more immediate that Nicodemus needs to learn.

Whatever Jesus means by the "elevation" he must undergo, it is something that still lies ahead. And this might allow Nicodemus to decide that he can put all of this on hold, to be looked at again whenever that strange event occurs. But Jesus has already warned him against this danger with a question which turns out to be asking, will he believe then—as he must do in order to have ζῶῃ αἰώνιος—if he does not believe now (v. 12)? "[S]i il refuse le témoignage de Jésus (cf. 3,11c–12a), il y a de fortes chances qu'il ne croira pas non plus à la vue du signe définitif (cf. 3,12b)."⁹⁷ The time for ending his not-receiving (v. 11) and not-believing (v. 12) is now!

At this point we can complete our definition of what Jesus meant by the contrast between τὰ ἐπίγεια and τὰ ἐπουράνια. If the ἐπίγεια are what the Scriptures reveal about God's eschatological purposes, the ἐπουράνια are the previously unknown truths now disclosed by Jesus, the unique revealer from heaven (v. 13).

Theological Readings from the Colloquium Ioanneum 2017 in Jerusalem (ed. R. Alan Culpepper and Jörg Frey; WUNT 423; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), 51–69, referring to many significant studies of the issues; also Létourneau, *Jésus, Fils de l'Homme*, 175–78, 388–93; Dominic Chukwunonso Obielosi, *Servant of God in John* (EHS XXIII Theologie; Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2008), 199–202, 210–11; Benjamin E. Reynolds, *The Apocalyptic Son of Man in the Gospel of John* (WUNT 2/249; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 122–27.

⁹⁵ The reasons most regard ἐν αὐτῷ as the right reading, and as attached to ἔχῃ and not πᾶς ὁ πιστεύων, are set out well in McHugh, *John 1–4*, 236–37.

⁹⁶ Taking ἐν in both its instrumental and local senses, on which see Schnackenburg, *John*, 1:397–98; Weinrich, *John 1:1–7:1*, 370–71; Létourneau, *Jésus, Fils de l'Homme*, 177–78. Jesus will later refer several times to the reality of being "in" him: 6:56; 14:20; 15:4–7; 16:33; 17:21.

⁹⁷ Létourneau, *Jésus, Fils de l'Homme*, 347.

These reveal the often surprising and unexpected ways in which the purposes and promises of God made known in Scripture are fulfilled in and by him (vv. 14–15):

Les *epourania* ne sont pas les choses célestes, mais les événements eschatologiques. Ce n'est donc pas l'opposition, terrestre-céleste mais bien l'opposition actuel-eschatologique. ... Le secret eschatologique est l'événement concret qui inaugure les derniers temps.⁹⁸

VIII. CONCLUSION

We have considered eight interpretations of the first-person plurals in John 3:11 and found the eighth to be the most plausible. This means that Jesus is linking his own testimony about the eschatological work of the Spirit with that given by the OT prophets and by John—testimony which also indicates the unique significance of Jesus himself as the one who launches this promised new era. We have argued that this reading of the verse makes a good fit with the rest of the passage, and that none of the arguments against it proves convincing. Hopefully, this will result in a fresh appreciation of its value.

⁹⁸ Van den Bussche, *Jean*, 168; cf. Weinrich, *John 1:1–7:1*, 399–400; Julian, *Jesus and Nicodemus*, 120.