



Believe

JOHN

MESSAGE

STUDY GUIDE

GROUP MATERIAL

SONGS

Examining the text & our hearts:

Bible Reading: John 16:5-15

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5 But now I am going away to him who sent me, and not one of you asks me, ‘Where are you going?’
 6 Yet, because I have spoken these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart. 7 Nevertheless, I am telling you the truth. It is for your benefit that I go away, because if I don’t go away the Paraclete [‘Counselor’] will not come to you. If I go, I will send him to you. 8 When he comes, he will convict the world about sin, righteousness, and judgment: 9 About sin, because they do not believe in me; 10 about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will no longer see me; 11 and about judgment, because the ruler of this world has been judged. 12 “I still have many things to tell you, but you can’t bear them now. 13 When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth. For he will not speak on his own, but he will speak whatever he hears. He will also declare to you what is to come. 14 He will glorify me, because he will take from what is mine and declare it to you. 15 Everything the Father has is mine. This is why I told you that he takes from what is mine and will declare it to you. (John 16:5-15)

SUMMARY: Often, we interpret John’s depiction of the Spirit through the lens of Paul’s spiritual gifts or of Luke’s Pentecost narrative, resulting in distortion. It’s crucial to realize that John’s teaching sharply contrasts with both Paul and Luke; Paul’s diverse spiritual gifts are absent, replaced by the unique gift of the Paraclete. Luke’s concepts of ‘filling,’ ‘pouring out,’ & ‘clothing’ by the Spirit of Power find no mention; it’s the Spirit of Truth in John’s Gospel. To truly understand John’s perspective, let’s allow John to be John. At John’s Pentecost, the Spirit manifests as Jesus’ breath, unlike Luke’s mighty wind and burning fire (Acts 2). The Paraclete is sent to teach, remind, testify, convict, glorify, and guide. The crucial question is: Are we are willing to be guided into all truth? John argues against ecstatic spiritual experiences; John’s Jesus rejects the idea that heavenly ascent leads to visions of God. Instead, Jesus Christ alone descended to reveal God to humanity. Among the Gospels, John has the final word. Applying John’s message means forsaking ecstatic experiences and embracing guidance from the Spirit of Truth.

I. Let John Be John: John's Unique Perspective on the Spirit

- John's "concept of the Spirit differs considerably from the views of Paul & Luke..." — Jörg Frey
- "John's view of the Spirit is markedly different from both Paul's & Luke's..." — Ben Pugh

A. Don't conflate the views of NT writers

- "Not to understand [the] Spirit in John in its unique Johannine sense is to risk interpreting John's Spirit passages according to, say, Pauline or Lukan categories... Such a method of interpretation is clearly flawed. Unlike Paul, the 4th Evangelist does not conceive of the Spirit as...enabl[ing] believers to fulfill ...the Law (Rom. 8:4) ... Furthermore, the 'ecstatic' element of Paul's conception of the Spirit lacks mention in John. Similarly, Luke's fundamental emphasis on the Spirit... giving [believers] the ability to do miracles, preach & prophesy, comports ill with John..." [Tricia G. Brown, Spirit in...John, p. 4]
- "John's view of the Spirit is markedly different from both Paul's & Luke's... Paul combines the work of Christ with...[that] of the Spirit...almost obliterating their personal distinctions: the Spirit is the 'Spirit of Christ' ... Luke...soft-peddles the Spirit's union with the Son & emphasizes the Spirit's distinct personhood & functions. The Spirit...seems to act quite independently. John sees the Spirit... as always having reference to the Son... He's the 'chief witness for Christ.'" [Ben Pugh, Theology in the Contemporary World, pp. 34-5]

B. Pneumatology: The Spirit in Luke/Acts, Paul, & John

- "Each NT author has their own distinctive pneumatology... Lucan pneumatology shows the Spirit of mission... Pauline pneumatology shows the Spirit of salvation... & Johannine pneumatology shows the Spirit of Christ & a relationship with God as well as synthesizing Luke & Paul." [Will Loescher, Transformation by the Spirit, p. 91]

II. Distinctives of John's Paraclete-Spirit

A. Spirit in John: Silences in the Text

- In John "there's no language of filling or being filled with the Spirit, such as is common in Luke-Acts. The Spirit is not said to be 'poured upon' or in a person. In John, Jesus is not driven by the Spirit (Mk. 1:12). Neither is he said to do anything 'in the Spirit' or 'in the power of the Spirit.' In fact, [in John,] the Spirit is not explicitly linked with power, a clear attribute of the Spirit...both in the OT & the NT. While in other documents of the NT the Spirit is the 'power from on high' (Lk. 24:49; Acts 1:8) ... and a power explicitly associated with miracles or... deeds of power (Acts 8:19 [etc.]), terms for power or strength are not a feature of...the Johannine Spirit-Paraclete." [Marianne M. Thompson, God of the Gospel of John, p. 156]

B. The 'Paraclete'-Spirit

- "The Paraclete in John is not just the Spirit with another name... The Johannine doctrine of the Paraclete adds to what we know of the Spirit..." [Stephen S. Smalley, John, p. 262]
- "Unique to the 4th Gospel is the description of Spirit as Paraclete...The presentation of the Paraclete in the 4th Gospel is a very particular view of the Spirit. The final discourses describe the Paraclete as Spirit of Truth, Advocate, Teacher, Comforter." [Robert A. Hill, Courageous Gospel, p.]
- John's use "of the word 'Paraclete' to designate the Spirit means... for some reason the Johannine community was not entirely satisfied with the simple title of 'Spirit'...The Paraclete is a continuation of Christ, even the alter ego of Christ." [Robert Kysar, John, the Maverick Gospel, pp. 109-10]
- "The Paraclete is intimately tied to Jesus' preparation of his disciples for their life after his return to God. In none of the other Gospels does the Spirit play such a central role... By speaking of the Spirit as the Paraclete, the 4th Evangelist...[is] attempting to free his portrait from early Christian preconceptions of the nature of the Spirit in order to get a fresh hearing for the role the Spirit plays... For e.g., John does not identify... the Spirit... with specific spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 12:1-11 [etc.]) ... The Paraclete...is...one of the most... distinctive theological contributions of this Gospel, & it warrants... careful reflection." [Gail O'Day, John, p. 660]

C. John's Five Paraclete Passages

•“The 5 Paraclete passages (NIV ‘Counselor’) ... present the Holy Spirit in turn as helper (14:16-17), interpreter (14:26), witness (15:26-27), prosecutor (16:7-11), & revealer (16:12-15) (FF Bruce).” [Craig L. Blomberg, Historical Reliability of John..., p. 201]

1. “Another Paraclete” –like Jesus, the first Paraclete (14:16)

•The “Paraclete is a gift of God. He is for the community as though he were another Jesus.” — D. Sadananda

•“I will ask the Father, & he will give you another Paraclete to be with you forever. He is the Spirit of truth. The world is unable to receive him because it doesn’t see him or know him. But you do know him, because he remains with you & will be in you.” (Jn. 14:16-17)

•“The Paraclete is Jesus’ replacement & the substitute for his presence...The Spirit comes to replace Jesus & mediate his presence.” [Max Turner, Holy Spirit & Spiritual Gifts, p. 96]

•“While there are parallel descriptions of Jesus & the Paraclete, the Paraclete [also] exercises the specific functions of making Jesus’ word & presence real among the disciples. [see below] If the Spirit is... primarily a ‘replacement’ for Jesus, then it’s difficult to understand the Spirit’s role of testifying & bearing witness to Jesus.” [Marianne M. Thompson, God of the Gospel of John, p. 181]

2. The Paraclete—the Teacher, teaching & reminding of Jesus’ words (14:26-27)

•“The Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things & remind you of everything I have told you.” (Jn. 14:26-27)

•“He is the master-teacher, expositor & prophetic interpreter of the Jesus tradition...the source of creativity in the community...[By] reminding the community of Jesus’ [words & work], he helps it to re-interpret, contextualize, re-live, & re-enact the Christ event.” [Daniel R. Sadananda, Johannine Exegesis, pp. 272-3]

3. The Paraclete –the Witness, testifying (Jn. 15:26-27)

•“When the Paraclete comes...—the Spirit of truth...—he will testify about me. You also will testify, because you have been with me from the beginning.” (Jn. 15:26-27)

4. The Paraclete—Advocate-Prosecutor, convicting the world (Jn. 16:7-8)

•“...If I don’t go away the Paraclete will not come to you. If I go, I’ll send him to you. When he comes, he will convict the world about sin, righteousness, and judgment: About sin, because they do not believe in me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father...& about judgment, because the ruler of this world has been judged (perfect tense).” (Jn. 16:7-11)

a. “Convict (expose) the world”

• The world “is condemned, proven wrong, & pronounced guilty of sin by the Paraclete”—Robert Kysar

• “To say that the Paraclete will expose [‘convict’] the world regarding sin, righteousness, and judgment means that the Paraclete will bring out into the open the true meaning of sin, righteousness, & judgment & hold the world accountable to those standards.” [Gail O’Day, John, pp. 657-8]

• In the light of the [world’s] hostility... the role of the Paraclete in convicting the world is welcome [news]. The advantage to the disciples ...is...their Paraclete is the prosecuting attorney in the court of the human heart... arguing the truth against the world.” [L. Scott Kellum, Preaching the Farewell Discourse, p.]

b. “About sin, because they do not believe in me”

• In “the 4th Gospel, sin is a theological, not a moral, category. The world’s sin is not to believe in Jesus –i.e., not to believe that Jesus is the incarnate Logos of God. The present tense verb [‘not believing’] ... shows...the world’s ongoing rejection of the revelation of God in Jesus, not simply with one particular rejection of Jesus...” [Gail O’Day, John, p. 658]

c. “About righteousness (vindication), because I’m going to the Father”

• “In the context... ‘righteousness’ should be read as synonymous with ‘vindication,’ & not as referring to the believer’s justification by faith...Righteousness is exposed in 2 ways. [1.] First, Jesus’ death is not defeat, as the world assumes. Rather, his death shows forth the righteousness (‘rightness’) of God, because in death Jesus goes to God & completes his work... [2.] Second, the disciples no

longer see Jesus... Jesus' absence is...corroboration of his departure &...the seal of his vindication." [Gail O'Day, John, p, 658] d. "About judgment, because the ruler of this world has been judged (perfect tense)."

- "The ruler of the world was judged in the past (at Jesus' hour), and that judgment continues into the present [Implied by perfect tense verb]. In Jesus' death, resurrection, & ascension, the ruler of the world, the devil, the embodiment of all that is opposed to God, is defeated & God is victorious. The life & death of Jesus are ultimately about the governance of the world." [Gail O'Day, John, p, 658]
- 5. The Paraclete—the Guide of believers & Glorifier of Jesus (Jn. 16:13-14)
- "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth... He will also declare to you what is to come. He will glorify me, because he will take from what is mine & declare it to you." (Jn. 16:13-14)
- "In the 4th Gospel the Paraclete...has the mission of accompanying the disciples on their future way...In the post-Easter situation...after the death & resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Paraclete stands by the community throughout its history as guide & encourager." [Georg Strecker, Theology of the NT, p. 509]
- The Spirit of truth "will also declare to you what is to come" (16:13b) "The Evangelist himself ['John'] & the Johannine Jesus...show little or no interest in predicting future events either [End-time] or historical... [Scholars suggest] 'the things...to come' should be understood... [by those] in the upper room, most naturally referring to 'the hour' that's coming [imminently]." [D. R. Sadananda, Johannine Exegesis of God, p. 271]
- "The link between the Spirit and prophecy is absent from John..." — Marianne M. Thompson
- "'Spirit of Truth' (16:13) underscores the reliability of the Paraclete & points to his link with Jesus, who is the truth (14:6). 16:13 describes 2 interrelated functions of the Spirit...in the future life of the community. First, 'he will guide you into all the truth' (16:13a). The verb 'to guide' ... occurs only here in John, & is a compound verb from the roots: 'way' & 'lead,' thus literally 'lead in the way.' ... This verb thus points to the teaching role the Paraclete will have in the future life of the faith community. Its combination with 'truth' is a direct echo of 14:6, [Jesus'] 'I am the way, & the truth, & the life,' & thus specifies the content of the Paraclete's teaching. To say that the Paraclete will guide the disciples into all the truth is to say that in the future the Paraclete will lead the community into the life-giving revelation of God in Jesus." [Gail O'Day, John, p. 659]

D. John's 'Pentecost' (Jn. 20:22) fulfills Jesus' Paraclete Promises

- On 'Easter Sunday,' Jesus breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'" (Jn. 20:22)
- "Reading only the Gospel of John, one would assume that [in Jn. 20:22] the disciples experienced the reception of the Spirit...Jesus promised in Jn. 7:37-39; 14:16-17." [David L. Turner, Interpreting the Gospels & Acts, p. 119]
- R. "Bultmann [& others] argue that the [breathing] in John 20 is, in fact, the authoritative fulfillment of the promises throughout the Final Discourses of the gift of the Paraclete." [Robert A. Hill, Courageous Gospel, p.]
- "R. E. Brown...argued that John has located the definitive gift of the Spirit at Jn. 20:22 (and expects no other [gift/event]). This is the 'Johannine Pentecost': here & now the Spirit has given new birth, as baptism of Spirit, as living waters & as Paraclete (Comforter)." [Max Turner, Holy Spirit & Spiritual Gifts, p. 92]
- In Jn. "the gift of the Spirit ...is represented, not as... a separate outpouring of divine power under the forms of wind & fire (as in Acts), but as the ultimate climax of the personal relations between Jesus & his disciples: ... 'He breathed on them & said... 'Receive the Holy Spirit' (20:22)." [CH Dodd, Interpretation of the 4th Gospel, p 227]
- The intent of John 20:22 "is clear – Jesus' promise... about the coming Paraclete is fulfilled by his breathing of the Spirit upon the disciples. ...While...Luke describes the descent of the Spirit on Pentecost, John clearly connects the reception of the Holy Spirit with the resurrection event. This is 'the Johannine Pentecost' whereby the risen...Lord gives the Spirit to his disciples. By breathing on

them (echoing, perhaps... Gen. 2:7, where God breathed life into Adam), John is 'symbolically proclaiming that, just as in the first creation God breathed a living spirit into man, so now in the moment of new creation Jesus breathes his own Holy Spirit into the disciples giving them eternal life.' In fulfillment... [also of] Jn. 3:5 ('No one can enter the kingdom unless he is born of... the Spirit'), his followers are 'baptized' so that now 'they are truly Jesus' brothers & can call his Father their Father' (20:17)." [A. Edward Siecienski, *Filioque: History of a Doctrinal Controversy*, p. 24]

E. John's Pentecost' (20:22) & Luke's Pentecost (Acts 2) — the Same Event

• "It's bad methodology to harmonize John & Acts by assuming that one treats... an earlier giving of the Spirit & the other ... a later giving [i.e., 2 distinct events]. There's no evidence that the author of either work was aware of or making allowance for the other's approach to the question... So we may hold that functionally each... describe[s] the same event; the one gift of the Spirit to his followers by the risen & ascended Lord. The descriptions are different, reflecting the diverse theological interests of the... authors." [Raymond E. Brown, *John*, pp 1038-9]

• We should avoid "the fundamental mistake... [of] dividing Easter from Pentecost... [of] placing a wedge between the 4th Evangelist & Luke... We have two representations of the sending of the Holy Spirit." —George Beasley-Murray

III. John's Paraclete-Spirit vs. Ecstatic Experiences of the Spirit

A. Silence on Spiritual Gifts (tongues, etc.) & Ecstasy

• "Various gifts of the Spirit... recede... John focuses on one gift: revelation of the Father..." — Alan Culpepper

• "It's well known that the 4th Gospel is silent on the ecstatic experience of the Spirit described, for example, in 1 Corinthians 12." [Gary D. Badcock, *Light of Truth & Fire of Love... Holy Spirit*, p. 32]

• John's "writings have much to say about the Holy Spirit, [yet] they contain hardly any references to the special spiritual charismata [gifts] —let alone their more ecstatic adaptations." [Ola Tjørhom, *Embodied Faith*, p. 59]

• "John presents... the Holy Spirit's ministry to believers without reference to the gift of tongues. The Holy Spirit had dwelt with the disciples, but soon he would be in them. The work of the paraklētōs in John is not glossolalia, but life in Christ by the new birth... Does this... suggest that glossolalia was not an essential... aspect of the Spirit's ministry in the future... church?" [PA. Lillback, "Holy Spirit in the Gospels," *Unio Cum Christo* (2016) pp. 128, 131]

• "The one who is in Christ already has life, so John emphasizes each person's act of believing. The... direct union of the believer with Christ is emphasized... As a result, the various gifts of the Spirit... recede, & John focuses on one gift: the revelation of the Father in the Son." [R. Alan Culpepper, *Designs for the Church in... John*, p. 459]

• "In... the Gospel & 1 John... The Spirit manifests... himself... not in ecstatic or charismatic phenomena, but in the ... proclamation of the word, specifically in remembrance, imitation, & prediction. Similarly... The unusual nature of the gifts of the Spirit is not emphasized." [Anthony C. Thiselton, *Holy Spirit*, p. 145]

• John's "concept of the Spirit differs considerably from the views of Paul & Luke... It is striking that in [John's] writings the 'charismatic' phenomena are almost totally missing. Here we find no... miracles performed through the power of the Spirit & nothing about ecstatic speech phenomena. This is even more significant... [as] such experiences were not totally unknown to... Johannine communities" [Jörg Frey, *Holy Spirit*, p]

B. A Correction to Spirit-centered Communities?

• The "emphasis on the centrality of Christ in John... [is seen in that] the Spirit himself testifies to Christ and glorifies Christ, not primarily himself. In this sense, John may stand as a conscious correction to those [Christian] communities who are centered on the Holy Spirit." [Anthony C. Thiselton, *Holy Spirit*, p. 134]

C. The focus of the Paraclete-Spirit

1. The Spirit's revealing, reminding, witnessing, guiding, glorifying

• "It is most significant that [John's] pneumatology almost completely limits the work of the Spirit to a revelatory, explaining, reminding or witnessing function, with almost complete disregard of prophetic, ecstatic, visionary or auditory experiences." [Jörg Frey, "Notion of the Spirit," in Ruth A. Clements (ed.) *Religious Worldviews*, p. 98]

2. The Spirit focuses on Jesus

• "It is striking that in the 4th Gospel... the work of the Spirit is entirely focused on its verbal effects... There's no reference to the Spirit in the context of Jesus' miracles, nor is there any idea that the disciples in the post-Easter period should perform miracles through the Spirit. Nothing is said about ecstatic or visionary phenomena in the community of the disciples... The Spirit... is focused... on Jesus. The Spirit's activities are almost completely word-centered: reminding, teaching, guiding." [Jörg Frey, *Holy Spirit*, p.]

• "In his post-Pentecost perspective, John emphasizes the Holy Spirit's focus on Christ, the proclamation of the gospel to the world, & the enablement of disciples to know & teach Christ's word, rather than the continuing participation of believers in the ecstatic experiences of the early church." [Peter A. Lillback, *Op. cit.*, p. 131]

3. The Spirit's activity no independent of the Son (Jesus)

• "The work of the Spirit is only derived from Jesus... It is Jesus who promises the coming of the Spirit after his departure & the Spirit is said to remind of Jesus' words & deeds. There is no space for any 'independent' activity of the Spirit... This may be a reaction to some concerns or debates within the [Johannine] community ... Especially... the last of the Paraclete-sayings (Jn. 16:13-15) emphatically rejects any idea that the Spirit could act in an unauthorized manner, stressing... that everything the Spirit does or proclaims is taken from the realm of Jesus, i.e., everything is closely related to Jesus & is authorized on the basis of relationship with him. ... The whole teaching activity of the Spirit can be summarized as glorifying Jesus." [Jörg Frey, *Holy Spirit*, p.]

4. The Spirit of Truth (eternal reality)

• "In John the Holy Spirit is the "Spirit of Truth." 'The Spirit of Truth' points to what the world 'cannot receive' — a reality incomprehensible to the natural man (1 Cor. 2:14) ... The Holy Spirit is the source of spiritual truth... 'truth' [here is not all] truth wherever it is known... [It] does not refer to truth at large or in toto, but to truth that relates to the spiritual realm... John records that Jesus is 'the truth' [14:6. So,] the Spirit will bear witness totally to the truth incarnate in Jesus Christ." [J. Rodman Williams, *Renewal Theology*, p. 141]

• "Truth' in John denotes the eternal reality which is beyond & above the phenomena of the world &, in particular, the eternal kingdom of God... Jesus... bears witness to the eternal reality ('truth')." [Jey J. Kanagaraj, "Jesus the King," *Tyndale Bulletin*, Vol. 47.2 (1996) pp. 358, 366]

IV. John's Polemic rebuffs Mystical Visions of God (Jn. 3:13; 1:18)

A. John's specific polemic regarding the Spirit

• "A polemic presupposes a proclamation or practice." — Charles Gieschen

• "Jewish & Christian texts... provide external evidence... that there is an explicit polemic against mystical ascent in the Gospel of John." [Charles A. Gieschen, "Descending Son of Man: Polemic Against Mystical Ascent to see God," in K. Sullivan (ed.) *Open Mind*, p. 121]

• "Verses like John 3:13... suggest that there is an explicit repudiation of claims to visionary ascent [to heaven], such as those made by [or for] Enoch, Abraham, Isaiah, & others in Jewish & early Christian... literature." [Catrin H. Williams, Christopher Rowland, *John's Gospel & Intimations of Apocalyptic*, p. x]

B. John's Polemic Against Mystical Ascent for Visions of God

• "No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven — the Son of Man"

(3:13)

•“No one has ever seen God. The one & only Son, who is himself God... he has revealed him.” (1:18)

C. Heavenly Journeys in the Ancient World

•Paul: “I know a man in Christ who was caught up to the 3rd heaven 14 years ago... [He] was caught up into paradise & heard inexpressible words.” (2 Cor. 12:1-4)

•“John’s negative pronouncement [in Jn. 3:13] would clash with a great deal of ancient literature, inasmuch as ‘descriptions & reports of heavenly journeys were widespread in ancient literature and appear in Persian, Egyptian, Babylonian, Greek, Roman, Jewish and Christian texts’ (Grese).” [Carson Bay, “Philo, Gospel of John...,” D. T. Runia (ed.) *Studia Philonica Annual* XXXIII, 2021, p. 58]

•James Dunn argues that “in the 1st century there existed ... Jews... interested in engaging in mystical ascent to God’s throne... as reported in Ezek. 1, Isa. 6, Dan. 7... John is in dialogue with this form of Judaism, arguing that the... [mystic’s] real goal is to ‘see’ God through Jesus... Thus Jn. 3:3, 3:5 & 3:13 are polemical sayings [making] the point that only Christ who is from above can bear witness to what he alone has seen above.” [April D. DeConick, *Voices of the Mystics*, pp. 38-39]

•“The polemic against mystical ascent in... John is by no means indicative of a general attitude among early Jewish Christians [against] mystical ascent. There is substantial evidence in early Christianity that some valued & experienced mystical ascent [e.g.] the book of Revelation... Another e.g. of mystical ascent practice... is Paul’s enigmatic discussion of his own ascent experience in 2 Cor. 12:1-10.” [CA. Gieschen, *Op. cit.*, pp. 119-20]

•“The statement that no human has ascended to heaven seems to be a polemic against the claims of some Jews, including some rabbis, that they had ascended to heaven & had seen God’s glory.” [Jey Kanagaraj, *John*, p.]

•“The polemic purpose has been detected in [Jn. 3:13] by some scholars... John 3:13 gives clear evidence for the current belief [at Jesus’ time] that some persons claimed that they ascended to heaven & received revelation to make known to the world below.” [Jey Kanagaraj, *Mysticism in... John*, p. 195]

D. ‘Heavenly Tourism’ Genre in Contemporary Christian Literature & Film

• The book: “Heaven is for Real is part of a popular genre of Christian literature known as ‘heavenly tourism,’ containing testimonies about life after death by people claiming to have experienced the afterlife during life-threatening episodes. One of these is *The Boy Who Came Back from Heaven...* which was disavowed 2 years later by the subject of the book, Alex Malarkey, as a fraud... [This] was one factor that led... Lifeway Christian Resources, to discontinue the sale of ‘experiential testimonies about heaven.’ The reason given was... ‘the sufficiency of Scripture regarding the afterlife.’ Any account... that went beyond the biblical account was judged to be misleading.” [Mary A. Beavis, *What Does the Bible Say?: Critical Conversation with Pop. Culture*, p. 79]

E. John: Jesus’ descent vs. Mystical ascent

•“What the author of John is combating [in 3:13] ‘is not the idea of a heavenly figure descending to earth, but the idea of a human being – other than Jesus – mounting up to heaven’ (Ashton).” [Gieschen, *Op. cit.*, p. 111]

•The “surprising assertion of 3:13 – ‘No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven — the Son of Man’ – may be directed against the characterization of the patriarchs and prophets as those who... ascended into heaven to hear (first hand) what God said.” [James Dunn, *Neither Jew Nor Greek*, p. 345 #141]

•“Against a vision mysticism, the 4th Gospel tells of the pre-existent Logos who cohabited with God & was given the sole visionary experience of... God’ (Talbert). [This]... is suggested... particularly at Jn. 3:13: ‘No one has ascended into heaven except... the Son of Man’.” [Paul Cefalu, *Johannine Renaissance*, p. 314]

- “The Martyrdom & Ascension of Isaiah...is a Christian text, not far from the time of John, that speaks of an individual’s ascent into heaven where he sees God & receives revelation of spiritual matters. John 3:13... defends [argues] against such claims...The Johannine community...[in] the epistles, is experiencing conflict with progressives [claiming] direct revelation of the Spirit severed from ongoing connections with Jesus. In Jn. 3:13a there’s a defense against such [claims]. One is not ‘born from above’ by the Spirit by one’s mystical ascent.” [Charles H. Talbert, Reading John, p. 105]
- “Evidences of [John’s] reaction against such mysticism include: (1.) No one has ever seen God, except the Son (1:16; 6:46; 8:38); (2.) No one has ascended into heaven (3:13), except the Son of Man who descended; (3.) Where the risen Jesus is, others cannot [autonomously] come, rather Jesus will come for his own [people] (14:3) ...Over against a vision mysticism, the 4th Gospel tells of the pre-existent Logos [Christ] who cohabited with God & was given the sole visionary experience of... God’.” [Charles H. Talbert, Reading John, p. 106]

F.Union with Christ through ‘abiding,’ not via mystical ecstasy (Jn. 15)

- “Jesus abides in the disciples [&] his words abide in them [Jn. 15:7] ... There’s perhaps a denial that mystical ecstasy is the way. In John, ‘abiding’ in Jesus denotes relationship...one absorbs his life & is united with him... This differs markedly from [Greek] mysticism...[of] absorption into the divine or deification, & Jewish Merkabah mysticism [of ascent to God] ... Against such...mysticism ...Jn. 14:23 portrays [Jesus’] decent in union with the Father. ‘John’s reinterpretation of the heavenly journey contains polemic against several mystical traditions... to affirm that the purpose of heavenly journeys, i.e., union with God, is now available on earth in Jesus’ (Kanagaraj). With this emphasis on...an abiding connection to Jesus... readers are warned against trying to establish communion with God in any other way or gain revelation from any other source than Jesus.” [John C. Stube, Graeco-Roman Rhetorical Reading of the Farewell Discourse, p. 145]
- “To continue in the blessed state Jesus describes it’s not necessary to indulge in states of ecstasy or mystical transformation, but to keep his commandment. The practice of mysticism was clearly known in the 1st century CE, including in Christian circles. [But,] in John...the believer’s state of blessedness in union with God is not mediated by mystical vision coming by ascent to heaven. Rather, it’s found in the daily abiding in Jesus (15:4) &... keeping his commands (15:10). Here again...is possible evidence ...of a polemic against...mysticism in the early Christian community.” [John C. Stube, Op. cit., p. 147]

G.Should Christians give credence to Heavenly Journeys? (Is. 6:1ff; Ezek. 1:1ff)

- Isaiah: “In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a high & lofty throne...” (Is. 6:1)
- Ezekiel: “In the 13th year, 4th month, 5th day... the heavens were opened & I saw visions of God.” (Ezek. 1:1)
- “Jesus’ words about pursuing visionary experiences of God...may be in response to... merkabah [‘Chariot-throne’] mysticism in the 1st century...Jewish...visionaries claimed to ascend to heaven &... receive revelations of cosmological secrets...There are 2 major motifs... (1.) an ascent to heaven... [for] a vision of the throne of glory & the King; & (2.) the receiving of divine revelation... It’s quite plausible... that the 4th Gospel addresses this influence... Should [believers] give credence to... accents to heaven? Should they listen to claims of special revelation apart from that given by & about Jesus?” [John C. Stube, Op. cit., p. 112]
- “In John [there’s an] anti-merkabah [‘Chariot-throne’] polemic in Jn. 1:18, 51 (over against mysticism, there’s no need to ascend to heaven to see God for he’s seen in the Son of man); Jn. 3:13-15 ([has] an outright denial of ascents, except by the Son of man) ...John [has] a polemic against... mystical visions of the heavenly world.” [John C. Stube, Op. cit., p. 113]
- “The [4th] evangelist ‘stands strongly opposed to affirmations of ascent [to heaven], the granting of heavenly visions, & divine commissioning of anyone except Jesus’ ...[He] is seeking to present Jesus

to his readership as the only one who ascends to heaven & the one through whom revelation comes.” [John Stube, Op. cit., p. 113]

H.The Chariot-Throne replaced by Christ's Cross

•In John, Jesus “is himself God’s self-manifestation, [so,] no other claims of ascent or direct revelation are needed (& are, in fact, denied, 1:18; 3:13). Ascent to heaven is unnecessary since...God’s glory is...here on earth with Christ’s death on the cross...The majestic throne of the Merkabah [‘Chariot-throne’] mystical visions is replaced... with the cross of Christ. Jewish throne-mysticism is turned into ‘cross-mysticism’ in John, the place where God’s glory is revealed... We could add the Farewell Discourse where Jesus points his disciples to himself to behold the Father (14:9-11) & ...[in] his death on the cross [we] see the ‘throne’ where God’s glory is revealed (12:23-24; 13:31-32).” [John C. Stube, Op. cit., p. 113]

•“The Son of Man is ‘glorified’...not primarily in his resurrection & ascension, but in his death... Many first-century Jews longed to see the Son of Man, the mystery of YHWH’s tangible form revealed; John indicates that this...vision took place in his crucifixion ...His death...reveals his true identity. It’s the moment when one sees ...him doing what only God can do by bringing life through...giving... himself on behalf of the world ...The Son of Man is seen enthroned on earth providing life & access to the Father in heaven through his death.” [Charles A. Gieschen, “Descending Son of Man: Polemic Against Mystical Ascent...,” K. Sullivan (ed.) Open Mind, p. 126]

•“It is probable that John... used the Merkabah mystical notion...to convey... to his fellow-Jews that the same God, who is claimed by the mystics to have appeared on the throne as King, has now been revealed on earth to be King in the incarnate life of his Son.” [Jey J. Kanagaraj, “Jesus the King,” Tyndale B., V. 47.2 (1996) p. 360]

•Hymn: “Spirit of God, Descend upon My Heart” George Croly (1854) Del Martin, Songs & Hymns of Life #185

•Stanza 1: “Spirit of God, who dwells within my heart...” Stanza 2: “I ask no dream, no prophet ecstasies/ no sudden rending of the veil of clay/ no angel visitant, no opening skies/ but take the dimness of my soul away.”