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CHAPTER 6

Christ, the Spirit and the Knowledge of God: A Study in Johannine Epistemology

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Introduction

Contemporary Christian philosophers and theologians have devoted considerable time to the study of epistemology, but biblical scholars have largely neglected the subject. As a consequence, Christian philosophical and theological examinations of human knowledge often draw only superficially upon Scripture. In fact, I am aware of only a few contributions to the subject of Johannine epistemology – the focus of this study – but these are inadequate in that they deal only with certain aspects of John’s epistemology, and especially the crucial role of the Spirit has been neglected.¹ This chapter seeks to address this problem in a wider perspective and against the background of contemporary questions in epistemology.

The aim of this study is to elucidate the epistemology of the Johannine literature in relation to its theology and in particular its soteriology, since the purpose of both the gospel and the epistles is soteriological (Jn 20:30-31; 1 Jn 5:13). Our task is simply to *infer* an epistemology from the Johannine literature that is based on Johannine words, themes and concepts, which we might then call a ‘Johannine’ epistemology. The key questions we will address are as follows: Can people know God? What hides knowledge of God from people? How does God make himself known? How does one acquire knowledge of God? What are the roles of Jesus and

¹ M.R. Ely, *Knowledge of God in Johannine Thought* (New York: Macmillan, 1925); I. de la Potterie, ‘*Oida et ginōskō*: Les deux modes de la connaissance dans le quatrième évangile’, *Biblica* 40 (1959), 709-25; J. Gaffney, ‘Believing and Knowing in the Fourth Gospel’, *TS* 26 (1965), 215-41; J. Painter, ‘Johannine Symbols: A Case Study in Epistemology’, *JTSA* 27 (1979), 26-41; J.H. Neyrey, ‘John III: A Debate over Johannine Epistemology and Christology’, *NovT* 23 (1981), 115-27; *idem*, ‘The Sociology of Secrecy and the Fourth Gospel’ in F.F. Segovia (ed.), *What is John? Vol. II: Literary and Social Readings of the Fourth Gospel* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), 79-109; M.M. Thompson, *The God of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), Ch. 3; H.C. Kee, ‘Knowing the Truth: Epistemology and Community in the Fourth Gospel’ in D.E. Aune, T. Seland and J.H. Ulrichsen (eds.), *Neotestamentica et Philonica: Studies in Honor of Peder Borgen*, *NovTSup* 106 (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 254-80.

the Spirit in one's knowledge of God? What is the dialectic between knowledge and belief? What is the purpose of knowledge?²

Regarding the scope of this study, we shall investigate primarily the Gospel of John but also consider the Johannine Epistles.³ Further, although epistemology *per se* is concerned with both how we know what we do and what justifies us in believing what we do, this study will only consider the former, i.e., we will examine the Johannine concept of knowledge rather than the justification of that knowledge. Moreover, we will not explore John's concept of general knowledge but, more specifically, the knowledge *of God* (i.e., about God). Finally, besides divine revelation as the main source of knowledge of God for John, we will also consider human perception as a source of knowledge, especially since visual, aural and cognitive perception are common in the Johannine literature.⁴

We will first delineate the Johannine epistemic language and the method we shall follow in section I. The epistemic themes that are defined in section I will be arranged under three major headings, forming sections II-IV respectively. In section II it is argued that the human condition of epistemic darkness is matched by a divine response of illuminating revelation. However, as section III explains, an escape from this darkness by a proper human response of belief to this divine initiative can only be achieved with further divine help in the form of the Spirit as a cognitive agent. In section IV we will demonstrate that being in a saving relationship with the Father and Son, the believer has ongoing access to further knowledge, and the Spirit continues to provide cognitive assistance. After having presented these main aspects of John's epistemology, section V will attempt to explain the dialectic between knowledge and belief, and section VI will then formulate a coherent Johannine epistemology. Finally, we shall summarize our findings and draw some conclusions.

Since certain terminology shall be used in this study in slightly specialized ways to make appropriate distinctions, we employ the following definitions:⁵ 'sensory perception' describes the activity of becoming aware of something through the senses; 'cognitive perception' is the conscious mental activity or process of

² Since John writes from within a theistic worldview, we are not concerned with questions regarding God's existence.

³ Although we remain agnostic whether the gospel and the epistles of John have common authorship (an author we call 'John'), the similarities in language, style and theology suggest that they at least belong to the same school of thought. The limitations of our study prevent us from indulging in the possible environments of John's epistemology, but for a plausible Jewish wisdom background, see C. Bennema, *The Power of Saving Wisdom: An Investigation of Spirit and Wisdom in Relation to the Soteriology of the Fourth Gospel*, WUNT II/148 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), Ch. 2.

⁴ Other sources of knowledge are testimony, memory, consciousness and reason. See R. Audi, *Epistemology: A Contemporary Introduction to the Theory of Knowledge* (London/New York: Routledge, 1998), Chs. 2-5. We refer to testimony and memory in fn. 42 and fn. 49 respectively, and consciousness and reason come partly under our concept of cognitive perception.

⁵ Section I shows that these definitions are based on Johannine words.