Divine Visibility in the Gospel of John*

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Abstract

This article argues that John's christology affirms the material visibility of God by reconciling the notion of an "unseen" God to the visibility of the Father that Jesus presents. Three pieces of evidence support this claim. The first is that "unseen" and "invisible" are not synonymous. A survey of Second Temple, biblical, and rabbinic literature reveals that one may not assume that all hellenized Jews embraced Platonist notions of invisibility. Second, Jesus presents the Father as visible, however restricted that visibility may be to Jesus's person. Third, John's use of Isaiah suggests that the visibility of God in the theophanies is consonant with God's visibility in Jesus.

Keywords

Fourth Gospel, John, God, theology, christology, invisibility, theophany, Isaiah

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> The idea of the invisibility of God is by no means so obvious as one might assume.
> —Rudolf Bultmann[1]

Introduction

John 1:18a has enjoyed a long history as a star witness in theological accounts of divine transcendence.[2] For many early Christians, "no one has ever seen God" (θεὸν οὐδεὶς ἑώρακεν πώποτε) suggests that the human inability to see God is descriptive of God's invisible nature and thus invokes the metaphysical distinction between the worlds of being and becoming in Platonism. The phrase "no one has ever seen" becomes synonymous with the implications of the adjective "invisible" (ἀόρατος) in the Platonist construal of reality. In this context, ἀόρατος often forms a constellation with many other alpha privatives to describe God as "immortal" (ἀθάνατος) and "bodiless" (ἀσώματος) and thus incapable of change and decay.[3] Visibility and invisibility become the hallmarks of a hierarchy of being: the material human world and the rarefied noetic realm of an immaterial creator. Before offering a reading of John 1:18a and of the nature of divine invisibility in the Fourth Gospel, this section asks whether the Platonist reading of 1:18 finds traction within the literature of Early Judaism.

The answers are complicated. While the theologies of Second Temple Judaism admit of similar understandings of divine invisibility, they also suggest that a

[1] Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (ed. George Beasley-Murray; trans. George R. Beasley-Murray et al.; Oxford: Blackwell, 1971) 81.

[2] Origen, *Princ*. 1; Augustine, *Homilies on the Gospel of John 1–40* (trans. Edmund Hill; ed. Allan D. Fitzgerald; The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century III/12; Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2009) 3.18–19; Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of John, Chapters 1–8* (trans. Fabian R. Larcher; Latin/English Edition of the Works of St. Thomas Aquinas 35; Lander, WY: Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2013) 11.209–214.

[3] For instance, ἀόρατος (invisible), ἀσώματος (incorporeal), ἀειδῆ (without form), ἄρρετος (ineffable), and ἀδέκαστος (incorruptible) often occur in various combinations across Philo's corpus. See Peter Frick, *Divine Providence in Philo of Alexandria* (TSAJ 77; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999) 40. Pseudo-Aristotle [*Mund.*] 399b11–22; Plutarch, *E ap. Delph.* 392E–393D; Alcinous, *Epit.* 10; Numenius, Frags. 4a–b and 16; Apuleius, *Dogm. Plat.* 1.5–191; Philo, *Opif*., passim; Josephus, *B.J.* 7.341–357; Aristides, *Apol.* 1; Justin Martyr, *1 Apol*. 13–14; Tatian, *Or. Graec.* 4.3; Athenagoras, *Leg.* 10.1; and Theophilus of Antioch, *Autol.* 1.3–5. All of these authors take time to explain the worlds of being and becoming and situate divine transcendence according to them. Each uses alpha privatives to do so, ἀόρατος often foremost among them; and Justin Martyr claims that the Jews think God has a body (*Dial.* 114). Guy Stroumsa observes that Origen (*Gen. hom*. 1.13), Basil the Great *(Hom. De hominies struc*. 1.5), and Arnobius of Sicca (*Adv. Nations* 3.12) likewise attest to (and reject) a Jewish conception of divine corporeality; see his, "Form(s) of God: Some Notes on Metatron and Christ," *HTR* 76 (1983) 269–88. For Clement of Alexandria, see Henny Fiskå Häig, *Clement of Alexandria and the Beginnings of Christian Apophaticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) 153–79, esp. 159. Examples of ἀόρατος in the NT include Rom 1:20 (τὰ γὰρ ἀόρατα αὐτοῦ ἀπὸ κτίσεως κόσμου τοῖς ποιήμασιν νοούμενα καθοράται); Col 1:15 (τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀορά́του); 1 Tim 1:17 (ἀφθάρτῳ ἀορά́τῳ μόνῳ θεῷ) and 6:16 (ὁ μόνος ἔχων ἀθανασίαν, φῶς οἰκῶν ἀπόσιτον); Heb 11:27 (τὸν γὰρ ἀόρατον ὡς ὁρῶν ἐκαρτέρησεν). Invisibility also characterizes God across the Nag Hammadi literature, e.g., Tri. Trac. 59, 66; Apoc. Adam 2:3.

distinction exists between "invisible" and "unseen."[4] Here I take "invisibility" to mean what I have described above: that God is invisible in his being and thus necessarily invisible to empirical sense. The Jewish authors for whom the notion of "invisibility" manifests itself most prominently are—potentially—Aristobulus (*Praep. ev.* 8.9.38–8.10.17),[5] Sib. Or. (1–3), Josephus (*Ag. Ap.* 2.17, 23; *B.J.* 7.341–357), and Philo (*Opif.* and across his oeuvre).[6] These authors entertain notions of the worlds of being and becoming similar to those of some early Christians and Middle Platonist philosophers.

By contrast, I take "unseen" to refer to the challenge that God's majesty and holiness pose to human seeing rather than to his intrinsically invisible nature. "Unseen" therefore characterizes God as difficult to see because his visibility is so overpowering that it endangers mortal life.[7] Here, the Hebrew Bible[8] and LXX[9]

[4] For this distinction see also Andrew Malone, "The Invisibility of God: A Survey of a Misunderstood Phenomenon," *EQ* 79 (2007) 311–29, and Brittany Wilson, *The Embodied God: Seeing the Divine in Luke-Acts and the Early Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021) 63–77, esp. 73–74.

[5] Aristobulus describes a God who descends and makes himself manifest at Sinai even as he emphasizes the metaphorical nature of God's limbs. Dragoş Giulea thus characterizes him as not belonging to the noetic turn in Judaism, which Giulea finds to begin properly with Philo; see his "The Noetic Turn in Jewish Thought," *JSJ* 42 (2011) 23–57.

[6] Further attestation to Hellenistic Jewish conceptions of God that may suggest immateriality are found in Strabo and Tacitus. See Menahem Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism* (3 vols.; Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1976–1984). For Strabo see 115 and for Tacitus see 281. Regarding Tacitus, who says that the Jews conceive of one God with the mind only, it is important to recall that prohibition of images is not synonymous with an intrinsic invisibility. In Origen, *Cels.* 1.5, Numenius is quoted as attributing a view like Tacitus's to the Jews. Ekaterina Matusova traces the influence of Peripatetic and Platonic notions of divine transcendence on Aristobulus's and Philo's accounts of seeing God; see her "'Seeing' God in Alexandrian Exegesis of the Bible: From Aristobulus to Philo," in *Gottesschau – Gotteserkenntnis. Studien zur Theologie der Septuaginta, Band I* (ed. Evangelia G. Dafni; WUNT 387; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017) 63–86.

[7] See Benjamin D. Sommer, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) 1–10, for emphasis on this point regarding the Jewish Scriptures' depiction of God. Simeon Chavel locates the danger less in an overpowering divine radiance than in failure to approach God properly. God is like a king and only those invited to see him in the proper context may do so. Inappropriate approach leads to death; see his "The Face of God and the Etiquette of Eye-Contact: Visitation, Pilgrimage, and Prophetic Vision in Ancient Israelite and Early Jewish Imagination," *JSQ* 19 (2012) 1–55.

[8] Prominent examples include: Abraham (Gen 18:1); Hagar (Gen 16:13); Jacob (Gen 32:30); Moses (Exod 33:11, 20; 34:5–6; Num 12:6–8; Deut 34:10); Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, the seventy elders (Exod 24:9–11); Gideon (Judg 6:22; cf. 2:1); Manoah and his wife (Judg 13:22–23); Micaiah (1 Kgs 22:19); Amos (Amos 9:1); Isaiah (Isa 6:5); Ezekiel (Ezek 1:1–28); Job (Job 42:5); and Daniel (Dan 7:9–10).

[9] While some scholars might see signs of a philosophical construal of transcendence behind Exod 24:9–11 LXX, the translators more frequently emphasize the sight of God in the Pentateuch. Genesis 16:13; 22:13; 31:13; and Exod 25:8 LXX clarify that someone did see God or introduce the concept where the Hebrew *Vorlage* may not have. Likewise, the priestly blessing (Num 6:24–27) becomes a plea for an epiphany in which God will manifest (ἐπιφάναι) his face. As Robert Hayward notes, something like this comes to pass after the blessing in Lev 9:22–24 in both the MT and LXX: the glory of the Lord appears; see his "Understanding of the Temple Service in the Septuagint Pentateuch," in *Temple and Worship in Biblical Israel: Proceedings of the Oxford Old Testament*

stand alongside a variety of deuterocanonical sources,[10] early Christian literature,[11] rabbinic texts,[12] and the Merkabah and Shiur Koma mysticisms[13] in their portrayal of a visible God. Access to God differs across these texts and seeing him remains difficult to achieve and highly dangerous. However, whether in the visions of mysticism—which nonetheless have substantial physical effects—or in the concrete experience of theophany or apocalyptic journey, God remains overwhelmingly visible: he is too glorious and too bright to see fully. Human flesh cowers in his presence because of its sinful and less powerful nature rather than its failure to be immaterial. Thus, rather than an absolute immateriality, God's holiness, power, and size appear to distinguish him from humanity.[14] The literature of early Judaism does

Seminar (ed. John Day; LHBOTS 422; London: T&T Clark, 2004) 390–92. One should also note W. Barnes Tatum's "The LXX Version of the Second Commandment (Ex. 20, 3-6 = Deut. 5, 7-10): A Polemic against Idols, not Images," *JSJ* 17 (1986) 177–95 for the argument that the Second Commandment in the LXX is "anti-idolic, not anti-iconic" (178).

[10] Prominent examples include 1 En. 14:15–25; 46–48, 62, 71; 2 En. 22:1–2; 39:4, 8; 3 En. 22B:5–6; T. Levi 3–5. Across the apocalyptic literature narrators balk at describing God once their protagonist attains the final level of heaven; but the sense is that an overwhelmingly and physically manifest visibility—one beyond description—is present. Such overwhelming physical visibility cuts against the otherwise complementary account in Philo of the soul's noetic ascent to a spiritually radiant God. On seeing God in relation to John in the apocalyptic literature, see Catrin Williams's "(Not) Seeing God in the Prologue and Body of John's Gospel," in *The Prologue of the Gospel of John: Its Literary, Theological, and Philosophical Contexts: Papers Read at the Colloquium Ioanneum 2013* (ed. J. G. Van der Watt, Alan Culpepper, and Udo Schnelle; WUNT 1/359; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016) 79–98; idem, "Text and Experience: Reflections on 'Seeing' in the Gospel of John," in *The Study of Religious Experience: Approaches and Methodologies* (ed. Bettina E. Schmidt; London: Equinox, 2016) 135–50. See also Benjamin Reynolds, "Apocalyptic Revelation in the Gospel of John," in *The Jewish Apocalyptic Tradition and the Shaping of the New Testament* (ed. Benjamin Reynolds and Loren T. Stuckenbruck; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017) 109–28.

[11] For early Christian literature, see Rev 4:1–11; T. Isaac 6.27–28; T. Jac. 2.14–18; Apoc. Sedr. 2.3–5. See also Christoph Markschies, *Gottes Körper. Jüdische, chrisliche und pagane Gottesvorstellungen in der Antike* (Berlin: Beck, 2016).

[12] As Rafael Neis has shown, cultivating the sight of God after the destruction of the temple was especially important to the Tannaim; see *The Sense of Sight in Rabbinic Culture: Jewish Ways of Seeing in Late Antiquity* (Greek Culture in the Ancient World; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). Primary texts cited there regarding the sight of God include Mek. 1–2, 9; Gen. Rab. 65:0, 86:5; b. Sotah 30b–31a; m. Hag. 1.1–2l; Sipre Deut 143. See also Yair Lorberbaum's detailed denial of Maimonides's claim that "the doctrine of God's corporeality never occurred to the sages, may their memory be blessed, for even a single day" (*Guide for the Perplexed*, 1.46) in his *In God's Image: Myth, Theology, and Law in Classical Judaism* (trans. Michael Prawer; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015) 15–45, esp. 35.

[13] The Hekhalot ("palaces/temples") literature overlaps with Merkabah ("chariot") mysticism and Shiur Koma ("measure of the stature)" literature as rabbinic ("mainstream" or otherwise) reflections on seeing God and measuring God's body. These texts are aware of the danger of seeing God, but this is due to an overwhelming visibility. See Christopher Rowland and Christopher R. A. Morray-Jones, *The Mystery of God: Early Jewish Mysticism and the New Testament* (CRINT 12; Brill: Leiden, 2009). Primary texts adduced there regarding the Hekhalot and Merkabah include HekhZ and HekhR, while SKoma 47–63, SShiur 23–30, SRaziel 88–117, SidRBer 48–66, and MerkR 21–26 include measurements of the body of the Kavod on the throne and lists of secret names.

[14] Even the Platonist authors describe the noetic realms in highly visual terms. The eyes of the

not therefore present a decisive background or set of parallels that support reading Platonist notions of invisibility in John 1:18.[15]

Whatever the case, Johannine scholarship rarely makes the distinction between "invisible" and "unseen." Many have relied on older, now problematic understandings of Israelite religion and early Judaism as "aniconic," in which it is "classically Jewish" to understand God as invisible; but this view fails to comport with the visuality of the theophanies across the Jewish Scriptures and other early Jewish texts.[16] Others have assumed that because John is hellenized, he must consider God to be invisible, such that the phrase "no one has ever seen" describes God's invisible nature in a way that has close parallels with a Platonist understanding.[17] One striking example is the recent proposal that Jesus can manifest the Jewish God of Hebrew Scripture but not the "transcendent" God who appears to stand behind him.[18]

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soul perceive reality in the forms of colors, shapes, places, and light. See, e.g., Plutarch, *Gen. Socr.* 590A–592F and Philo, *Opif.* 69–71. In Plato, *Tim.* 29A–32D, *Resp.* 10 595A–598D, and Philo, *Opif.* 16–17 this world is somehow a copy or image of an invisible realm.

[15] John may have had as much access to the Greek materialists as he did to the Middle Platonists. See Troels Engberg-Pedersen, *John and Philosophy: A New Reading of the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), but see also Fergus J. King, *Epicureanism and the Gospel of John: A Study of their Compatibility* (WUNT 2/537; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020), in which King finds Epicureanism to be incompatible with John. It remains difficult to associate John with any one school. For a distinction of popular philosophy from the schools in contemporary literature, see Johan C. Thom, "Theology and Popular Philosophy," in *The Origins of New Testament Theology: A Dialogue with Hans Dieter Betz* (ed. Rainer Hirsch-Luipold and Robert Mathew Calhoun; WUNT 1/440; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020) 119–126; idem, "Popular Philosophy in the Hellenistic-Roman World," *Early Christianity* 3 (2012) 279–95.

[16] Commentators who take aniconism for granted include J. Ramsay Michaels, *The Gospel of John* (NICNT; Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2010) 91, and Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St. John* (trans. K. Smyth et al.; 3 vols.; HTCNT 4/1–3; New York: Crossroad, 1982) 1:278. But see Christoph Uehlinger, "Beyond 'Image Ban' and 'Aniconism': Reconfiguring Israelite and Early Jewish Religions in a Visual and Material Religion Perspective," in *Figurations and Sensations of the Unseen in Judaism, Christianity and Islam: Contested Desires* (ed. Birgit Meyer and Terje Stordalen; Bloomsbury Studies in Material Religion; London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019) 99–123.

[17] C. H. Dodd, *Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953) 72; Schnackenburg, *St. John*, 1:278; Th. Korteweg, "The Reality of the Invisible: Some Remarks on St John XIV 8 and Greek Philosophical Tradition," in *Studies in Hellenistic Religions* (ed. M. J. Vermaseren; Leiden: Brill, 1979) 59; George van Kooten, "The 'True Light which Enlightens Everyone' (John 1:9)," in *The Creation of Heaven and Earth: Re-interpretations of Genesis 1 in the Context of Judaism, Ancient Philosophy, Christianity, and Modern Physics* (ed. G. H. van Kooten; TBN 8; Leiden: Brill, 2005) 156–57; Panayotis Coutsoumpos, "The Difficulty of ΜΟΝΟΓΕΝΗΣ ΘΕΟΣ in John 1:18: A Reassessment," *Bib* 98 (2017) 440. John Behr likewise integrates many of the tenets of classic theism across his challenging *John the Theologian and His Paschal Gospel: A Prologue to Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019). One can also take note of the resurgence of "invisibility" as a divine attribute in Katherine Sonderegger's *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, *The Doctrine of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015) esp. 49–131; and Ian A. McFarland has also recently framed Chalcedonian orthodoxy in terms of (in)visibility and draws heavily on John to do this in his *The Word Made Flesh: A Theology of the Incarnation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2019).

[18] See Jutta Leonhardt-Balzer, "Divine Manifestations in the Gospel of John," in *Epiphanies*

By contrast, several John scholars assert that John 1:18—and John's general conception of God and of sight—have little to do with Platonist metaphysics.[19] John never describes the worlds of being and becoming in Platonist terms, and he never uses alpha privatives to describe God's ontology. Likewise, John 1:18 does not describe God so much as it describes human inability to see him.[20] John may deploy "prepositional metaphysics" to distinguish the Son from the Father, but he appears unconcerned to establish Platonist notions of transcendence.[21] For instance, in John 12:28, God speaks with an audible voice from heaven, thus revealing a disregard for, or even an ignorance of, metaphysics. A Platonist reading is not, therefore, the only way to understand John 1:18, although this does not negate the possibility of

of the Divine in the Septuagint and the New Testament (ed. Roland Deines and Mark Wreford; WUNT 1; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, forthcoming 2024) 209–30. Leonhard-Balzer assumes that John 1:18 can only describe a divine transcendence that is intrinsically invisible in a way that precludes God's visibility in Jesus. Drawing from Philo, she argues that John 1:14 refers to the visibility of the "Jewish God" rather than the "transcendent God." Here, she follows Roukema, "Jesus and the Divine Name in the Gospel of John," in *The Revelation of the Name YHWH to Moses: Perspectives from Judaism, the Pagan Graeco-Roman World, and Early Christianity* (ed. George van Kooten; TBN 9; Leiden: Brill, 2006) 207–23. Roukema also appears to assume that transcendence entails an absolute invisibility. However, it is not clear that one can approach John with preconceived notions of what "transcendence" means or what it entails regarding the nature of divine invisibility. Nor is it clear that John assumes the existence of a "Jewish God" and of a "transcendent God" as Leonhardt-Balzer and Roukema suggest.

[19] Bultmann, *John*, 80–81; Craig Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (2 vols.; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003) 1:406–7, 423; Marianne Meye Thompson, *The God of the Gospel of John* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2001) 105; Birger Olsson, "*Deus Semper Maior*? On God in the Johannine Writings," in *New Readings in John: Literary and Theological Perspectives; Essays from the Scandinavian Conference on the Fourth Gospel in* Århus *1997* (ed. Johannes Nissen and Sigfred Pedersen; trans. James Starr; JSNTSup 182; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999) 158–70. See also Rudolf Bultmann, "Untersuchungen zum Johannesevangelium," *ZNW* 29 (1930) 169–92. In his "Between Jewish Monotheism and Proto-Trinitarian Relations: The Making and Character of Johannine Christology," in *Monotheism and Christology in Greco-Roman Antiquity* (ed. Matthew V. Novenson; NovTSup 180; Leiden: Brill, 2020) 189–221, Jörg Frey observes that "in John, there is no dualism between the immaterial and the material world, as in Philo. On the contrary, the Johannine Prologue is concerned with keeping these two together" (208). Yet Frey also describes the "fundamental invisibility" of the "God of Israel's Scriptures," the God John describes; see his "'John within Judaism?' Textual, Historical, and Hermeneutical Considerations," in *Jews and Christians – Parting Ways in the First Two Centuries CE? Reflections on the Gains and Losses of a Model* (ed. Jens Schröter, Benjamin A. Edsall, and Joseph Verheyden; BZNW 253; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2021) 185–215. It is not entirely clear what Frey means by "fundamental."

[20] Rainer Hirsch-Luipold acknowledges this even as he dismisses it; see *Gott wahrnehmen. Die Sinne im Johannesevangelium* (Ratio Religionis Studien 4; WUNT 1/374; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017) 27–32.

[21] After arguing that prepositional metaphysics aid Paul and John in distinguishing members of the godhead, Chris Kugler claims: "there is no evidence in the Gospel of John, Paul's letters or the letter to the Hebrews that the early Christians included Jesus within their doctrine of creation so as to safeguard the transcendence of God the father, as though the latter's superior ontology required a safe distance from the material *kosmos*." See his "Judaism/Hellenism in Early Christology: Prepositional Metaphysics and Middle Platonic Intermediary Doctrine," *JSNT* 43 (2020) 214–25, at 221. See also Christopher S. Atkins, "Rethinking John 1:1: The Word was Godward," *NovT* 63 (2020) 44–62.

Platonist or even Stoic elements in the Gospel. John was a hellenized Jew; yet he remained free to accept, reject, modify, or ignore the worldviews of his time, and his portrayal of Jesus indicates someone who knew his own mind.

Here one must recognize two further truths. The first is that the distinction I make between "invisible" and "unseen" is not always clear in the primary texts. Some authors have enlisted the language of "invisibility" and incorporeality to describe a God whom they simultaneously depict as available to human vision.[22] Aspects of my definitions of "invisible" and "unseen" appear to merge in some accounts, however philosophically inconsistent such an overlap may be. From Philo onward, some Jews and then many early Christians reconciled an overwhelmingly visible God with an overwhelmingly invisible one.[23] Different linguistic and

[22] Apoc. Ab. 16–19 provides a good example of overlap between "invisible" and "unseen." The Old Slavonic seems to have picked up the Greek alpha privatives like "invisible," "incorporeal," "incorruptible," "immortal," and "ungenerated" to describe a God who is also overwhelmingly visual and bright. God can be seen coming (16:3) but in a great sound (16:3), which is also fire (17:1); and Abraham is not allowed to look on God himself (16:4), but seemingly because God is overwhelming bright (17:19; 18:13). Abraham needs Iaoel's help to bear the sight. Angels are described as invisible and incorporeal, yet their bodies also receive description (11:2–4), as does the heavenly chariot (18:13). See Andrei Orlov, *Heavenly Priesthood in the Apocalypse of Abraham* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013) 46–53. T. Ab. 4:9–11 is also contradictory in Recension A. Angels are incorporeal, but Michael is visible as a man; however, he requires permission from God to eat and not "give away" his identity as incorporeal, so God sends a devouring spirit to keep up appearances. God himself is the "unseen Father" (16:3), although entities can stand in his presence. See also Ezek. Trag. 68–76, which describes God as a man seated on a throne atop Mt. Sinai and then describes Moses as unable to see God in the fire, even though Moses can perceive his shining words (96–103). Jacques T. A. G. M. van Ruiten thus appears to neglect 68–76 when he claims that God is invisible in Ezek. Trag. in ways that he is not in Exod 3:6; see his "A Burning Bush on the Stage: The Rewriting of Exodus 3:1–4:17 in Ezekiel Tragicus, Exagoge 90–131," in *Revelation of the Name YHWH* (ed. van Kooten) 71–88. In Apoc. Mos. 35:3 God is ἀόρατος; but in 37:4 he is sitting on a throne and stretching out a hand to receive Adam. Indeed, in spite of his assertions regarding God's invisibility, Josephus himself describes God as possessing a "form (μορφή)" and "magnitude (μέγεθος)" that "surpass our powers of description" (Ag. Ap. 2.190–91), of which Markus Bockmuehl notes: "he clearly has a μορφή but it is not accessible to humans" ("'The Form of God' (Phil. 2:6): Variations on a Theme of Jewish Mysticism," *JTS* 48 [1997] 1–23, at 15).

[23] Giulea, "The Noetic Turn," 23–57; Scott Mackie, "Seeing God in Philo of Alexandria: Means, Methods, and Mysticism," *JSJ* 43 (2012) 147–79; idem, "Seeing God in Philo of Alexandria: The Logos, The Powers, or the Existent One?," *SPhilo* 21 (2009) 35–47; Deborah Forger, "Divine Embodiment in Philo of Alexandria," *JSJ* 49 (2018) 223–62. Space forbids a longer study of what one might call a "development of doctrine" regarding the shift from notions of a corporeal form of God to an immaterial one; and I refer the reader to Giulea's *Pre-Nicene Christology in Paschal Contexts: The Case of the Divine Noetic Anthropos* (VCSup 123. Leiden: Brill, 2015) and "*Simplicores*, *Eruditi*, and the Noetic Form of God: Pre-Nicene Christology Revisited," *HTR* 108 (2015) 263–88. For now, one should note that both Giulea and Mackie rightly observe that not even in Clement of Alexandria or in Philo is it clear that the noetic realm is perfectly immaterial or that seeing God lacks some level of materiality. It has effects on human bodies, and Philo cannot resist using terms like "light" to describe it. Philo even goes so far as to suggest that God himself might have appeared in the burning bush to Moses with "a most beautiful form (μορφή)" (*Mos.* 1.66). While Philo has embraced Platonism, his own portrayal of God falls somewhere between "invisible" and "unseen," even if it is much closer to "invisible." Forger argues that God could unite himself

philosophical modes of thought have come to describe the same God; and I make the distinction between "invisible" and "unseen" not to categorize John as being on one side of a Platonist divide but in order to underscore the nuance that must attend any attempt to understand what John means by seeing or not seeing God. John's Gospel likely exists in a theological space in which "unseen" and "invisible" have begun to coincide rather than rigidly demarcate one view of God from another. Furthermore, the incarnation is pushing John into new understandings of what seeing and invisibility can mean.

The second, related truth is the basic but important observation that ancient Near Eastern, Israelite, and Greco-Roman religion share a goal with Platonism, Christianity, early Judaism, and the rabbis: each hopes to achieve and/or maintain the vision of their god(s).[24] The question is not so much whether seeing God is possible or good, but how and when one can achieve it and to what degree. This "how" varies. It depends on the "what" and "who" of the god(s) in question and how they reveal themselves. It also depends on the "what" and "who" of human

with bodies, even according to Philo, via νοῦς; this is a common feature of Middle Platonism and hard to reconcile fully with the notion of a corporeal God as described in the Jewish Scriptures and in many of the texts of Early Judaism. See George Boy-Stones on the (very sheer) materiality of the soul as a vehicle for νοῦς in Middle Platonism in *Platonist Philosophy 80 BC to AD 250: An Introduction and Collection of Sources in Translation* (Cambridge Source Books in Post-Hellenistic Philosophy; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018) 253–55, 276.

[24] For the sake of space, I list recent monographs that include physical proximity to god(s) and seeing god(s) as being at the heart of the religions and philosophies I mention above. For ancient Near Eastern approaches to the physical presence of gods among humans and theological anthropology, see Tyson Putthoff, *Gods and Humans in the Ancient Near East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), and Michael Dick, "The Mesopotamian Cult Statue," in *Cult Image and Divine Representation in the Ancient Near East* (ed. N. H. Walls; American Schools of Oriental Research: Boston, 2005) 43–67. On the nature and importance of theophany in Israel, see Sommer, *The Bodies of God*; Esther J. Hamori, *When Gods Were Men* (BZAW 384; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008); Mark Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). On the nature and cultivation of epiphany in Greco-Roman polytheism, see Verity Platt, *Facing the Gods: Epiphany and Representation in Graeco-Roman Art, Literature and Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), and Georgia Petridou, *Divine Epiphany in Greek Literature and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). For the sight of the forms and, potentially, of God as the goal of Platonism, see Boy-Stones, *Platonist Philosophy*, 367–75. For seeing God in the New Testament, see Brittany Wilson, *The Embodied God: Seeing the Divine in Luke-Acts and the Early Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), and J. M. F Heath, *Paul's Visual Piety: The Metamorphosis of the Beholder* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). For an account of Neoplatonist and patristic approaches to the beatific vision, see Hans Boersma, *Seeing God: The Beatific Vision in Christian Tradition* (Cambridge: Eerdmans: 2018). For the sight of God in early Judaism, see Mackie, "Means, Methods, and Mysticism"; idem, "The Logos, The Powers, or the Existent One?"; and Rowland and Morray-Jones, *Mystery of God.* For seeing God in the rabbis, see Neis, *Sense of Sight*, 41–81, and Lorberbaum, *God's Image*, 15–45. See also Eliot R. Wolfson, *Through a Speculum That Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), and Martin Goodman, "The Jewish Image of God in Late Antiquity," in *Judaism in the Roman World: Collected Essays* (Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity 67; Brill: Leiden, 2007) 205–18.

beings in relationship to deity and on the epistemologies their theologies delimit.[25] Thus, the distinction between "invisible" and "unseen" operates within a broader religious trajectory in which nearly all the religions and philosophical schools closest to Christianity participate, albeit in complex and widely divergent ways.

In this article, I therefore read John 1:18 against the backdrop of the ancient endeavor to see God. However, while I follow those who do not assume that John's God is invisible in the sense I have defined it, I also recognize that the only sight of God that John permits is via Jesus.[26] I will therefore argue that one must read John 1:18 within the wider context of John, such that even though the Gospel limits the sight of God to Jesus, Jesus's body need not restrict the fullness of God's visibility within it—even if that visibility is not obvious. Two features of the Gospel lead me to make such a claim. The first is that John describes Jesus as presenting the sight of God (John 12:45; 14:9; 20:28–29). The second is that John suggests that Jesus himself appeared in the theophanies. Read alongside both, the claim in John 1:18 becomes one of degree and not of category; its meaning draws closer to "no one has ever [fully] seen God [yet]."[27] I make this argument by reading John 1:18 first in its immediate context and then alongside the other "seeing God" passages, especially 12:45 and 14:9. From there, I ask how John understands the nature of Jesus's preexistence and of divine visibility in the theophanies by turning to John's use of Isaiah (John 12:37–43). I then return to the syntax of 1:18a before offering conclusions about the sight of God that Jesus presents—even if one insists on reading 1:18 as a blanket statement regarding the direct sight of God for all time.

The Context and Challenges of John 1:18

Scholarship often links the concept of seeing God in John 1:18 to the comparison that John draws between Jesus and Moses in 1:16–18. The law "was given through Moses"; "grace and truth" have been given through Jesus Christ (1:17).[28] Thus, "no one has ever seen God," but Jesus—the only God—has made him known (1:18).[29]

[25] *Seeing the God: Ways of Envisioning the Divine in Ancient Mediterranean Religion* (ed. Jeffrey B. Pettis; Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2013); *Seeing the God: Image, Space, Performance, and Vision in the Religion of the Roman Empire* (ed. Marilis Arnhold, Harry O. Maier, and Jörg Rüpke; Culture, Religion, and Politics in the Greco-Roman World 2; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2018).

[26] Marianne Meye Thompson, "'God's Voice You Have Never Heard, God's Form You Have Never Seen': The Characterization of God in the Gospel of John," *Semeia* 63 (1993) 177–204; eadem, *The God*, 101–43.

[27] For a related argument, see Ole Jakob Filtvedt, "Seeing and Hearing God: On the Relationship between John 5:37 and Deut 4:12," *DTT* 5 (2016) 308–23; idem, "The Transcendence and Visibility of the Father in the Gospel of John," *ZNW* 108 (2017) 90–118. In both articles, Filtvedt argues that God has visually revealed himself in Jesus in unprecedented ways: "1,18 is not meant to negate or limit the degree to which God is seen in Christ, but only apart from Jesus" ("Transcendence and Visibility," 99).

[28] For a summary of what continues to be a consensus, see A. T. Hanson, "John 1:14–18 and Exodus 34," *NTS* 23 (1976) 90–101.

[29] Many commentators agree that the external evidence is in favor of "only God." See Coutsoumpos,

At Sinai, seeing the fullness of God's glory would have killed Moses, but Jesus has "exegeted" the Father and comes from his "breast" (κόλπος) (1:18). While John 1:18 fails to mention that Jesus sees God, most studies of sight in 1:18 argue that the reference to not seeing is meant to elevate Jesus above any figure to whom later tradition or even the Torah has granted the vision of God. Jesus must therefore be able to see God in ways that Moses could not, and Jesus thereby excels him. The context of John 1:18 thus suggests that the sight of God is possible: Jesus has attained it. Moreover, as a means of underscoring Jesus's epistemic authority, John will state that Jesus has seen God (John 6:46; cf. 3:11–13; 5:19; 8:38). What is less certain is whether Jesus's ability to see God can become available to humanity.[30]

One can begin to answer this question by noting that the distinction between Moses and Jesus also turns on the ability to make God visible. John understands Jesus to make God visible in the incarnation. In John 1:14, the Logos became "flesh" and "tabernacled among us." The first thing John chooses to say of this act is "we have seen his glory, glory as of the unique one of the Father." "Tabernacling" in flesh appears to result in visible glory (cf. Exod 40:34–38 LXX). As the Logos, who is God (1:1), and who comes from the Father's κόλπος Jesus can "exegete" the Father (1:18). Jesus makes the kind of relationship he had with the Father available between humanity, himself, and the Father.[31] Such "exegesis" and intimacy are the result of becoming visible σάρξ and the achievement of works on earth, by which Jesus makes God known through his body and person.

John also joins seeing the divine glory of Jesus's signs to seeing the Father in Jesus. In John 12:45 and 14:9, Jesus claims that to see him is to see the Father; and he makes both statements during the hour of his glorification (John 12:23) and in the context of commentary on his signs, works, and glory (John 12:37–43; 14:11).[32] The Father himself is visible in Jesus; and the timing of Jesus's claims suggests that both the Father and his glory become especially visible during his crucifixion and

"The Difficulty," 435–46; Benjamin J. Burkholder, "Considering the Possibility of a Theological Corruption in Joh 1,18 in Light of Its Early Reception," *ZNW* 103 (2012) 64–83; and D. A. Fennema, "John 1.18: 'God the only Son,'" *NTS* 31 (1985) 124–35.

[30] Marianne Meye Thompson qualifies how directly God is actually available to human sight in Jesus; see her "Jesus: 'The One Who Sees God,'" in *Israel's God and Rebecca's Children: Christology and Community in Early Judaism and Christianity*: *Essays in Honor of Larry W. Hurtado and Alan F. Segal* (ed. David B. Capes et al.; Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007) 218.

[31] The Beloved Disciple reclines on Jesus's κόλπος (13:23), and the Farewell Discourse will essentially explain what that means.

[32] Even Roukema, who identifies Jesus with the Kyrios-YHWH of OT theophany and the Father with the invisible "Most High God" admits—on the basis of John 12:45 and 14:9—that "in spite of God's essential invisibility, it appears to be possible to see God, that is, to see him in the person of Jesus, in whom the Logos and *Kyrios* was incarnated." If this is true, then Roukema must further admit that the Father's invisibility is not "essential." By the conclusion of his essay, he acknowledges that, despite their distinguishing characteristics—among which he has included invisibility— "God the Father" and "Jesus the Kyrios" possess a fundamental unity; but this ultimately suggests that an intrinsic or essential invisibility could not be one of those characteristics. See Roukema, "Jesus and the Divine Name," 218–23.

resurrection. Nevertheless, the sight is restricted to Jesus. However, John makes no qualifications about the fullness of that vision.[33] Furthermore, he uses the same perfect form of "see" (ἑώρακεν), to deny the sight of God (John 1:18); to refer to Jesus's own sight of the Father (John 6:46); to describe the sight of Jesus as the Father (John 14:9); and to describe Thomas's sight of Jesus as God (John 20:29). He thus deploys the most theologically and even philosophically suggestive verb available to situate the sight of God in Jesus.[34] The "journey" of ὁράω across the Fourth Gospel mirrors the journey of belief itself: from a lack of the sight of God to a complete recognition of him in the risen Christ.

With regard to the Platonist understanding of "invisible," one may further note here that whether John assumes a Platonist metaphysics or not, he takes no pains in John 12:45 or 14:9 to explain how the sight of God in Jesus comports with Platonism's metaphysical constraints.[35] He does not distinguish noetic from physical seeing.[36] He does not outline a theory of symbolism in which the Father can remain invisible and transcendent in heaven but can somehow be "seen" in Jesus. Rather, Jesus brings the divine and human together: seeing Jesus *is* seeing the Father. John never qualifies the presence of God in Jesus as being opposed to Jesus's flesh even if seeing God in Jesus requires more than what unaided mortals can achieve (cf. John 3:6; 6:63). For instance, Jesus does not correct Thomas for declaring "my Lord and my God" (John 20:28–29). Regardless of whether one reads Thomas's seeing as problematic, Jesus himself characterizes "My Lord and

[33] Hans Weder notes that "there is no remnant concealed in God that would not encounter the world in the Logos. This means, further, that it is not merely a particular aspect or part of God that has become flesh in the incarnation"; see his "*Deus Incarnatus*: On the Hermeneutics of Christology in the Johannine Writings," in *Exploring the Gospel of John: In Honor of D. Moody Smith* (ed. R. Alan Culpepper and C. Clifton Black; trans. Douglas W. Stott; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996) 331. See also Filtvedt, "Transcendence and Visibility," 94.

[34] Oscar Cullmann, "Εἶδεν καὶ ἐπίστευσεν. La vie de Jésus, object de la 'vue' et de la 'foi', d'après le quatrième Evangile," in *Aux sources de la Tradition chrétienne. Mélanges offerts à M. Maurice Goguel à l'occasion de son soixante-dixième anniversaire* (ed. Oscar Cullmann and P. Menoud; Neuchâtel: Delachaux & Niestlé, 1950) 52–61; G. L. Philips, "Faith and Vision in the Fourth Gospel," in *Studies in the Fourth Gospel* (ed. F. L. Cross; London: Mowbray, 1957) 83–96; Cornelio Traets, *Voir Jésus et le Père en lui, selon l'èvangile de Saint Jean* (Analecta Gregoriana 159; Rome: Gregorian University, 1967); Clemens Hergenröder, *Wir schauten seine Herrlichkeit. Das johanneishce Sprechen vom Sehen im Horizont von Selbsterschliessung Jesu und Antwort des Menschen* (FB 80; Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 1996) 45–214. The consistency of ὁράω to describe the sight of God in John should be read alongside its long association with perceiving divinity.

[35] Compared to Philo of Alexandria's laborious distinctions in the case of theophanies, John makes no effort to qualify what he means. See, e.g., Leg. 3.7–10, 51, 100–101; Abr. 114–32, 142–46; Mos. 1.158–59.

[36] While many of the authors I have cited attempt to find such a distinction in John's choice of verbs, with the important exception of Oscar Cullmann, that hierarchy is difficult to maintain. More recently, Richard Bauckham, "The Fourth Gospel as the Testimony of the Beloved Disciple," in *The Gospel of John and Christian Theology* (ed. Richard Bauckham and Carl Mosser; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008) 136, and Ruth Sheridan, *The Figure of Abraham in John 8: Text and Intertext* (LNTS 619; London: Bloomsbury, 2020) 354–56, have rightly questioned it.

my God" as belief that results from seeing his own body: "put my finger here, and see my hands . . . you have believed because you have seen" (John 20:27, 29). However John understands the ontological relationship of God to Jesus's body, he is clear that Jesus makes God visible in and through it.

Yet, if one returns to the earlier distinction between Jesus and Moses, the challenging fact remains that Moses and the Law "given through Moses" (1:17) also made God visible. It designated the holy place and legislation by which God could be seen in Israel's midst (e.g., Exod 25:8; 34:39 LXX).[37] The challenge is that John knows this, just as he knows the theophanies that occur in various parts of the Jewish Scriptures, but he still claims in John 1:18 that no one has ever seen God and then shows across the Gospel that only Jesus has made him known and visible.

But why would John allude to the tabernacle and temple in order to depict the visibility of God in Jesus if he did not already understand that imagery to convey the prior visibility of God to Israel? I have already suggested that the distinction between "invisible" and "unseen" discourages hellenistic metaphysics as the answer. More probably, John deploys Platonist concepts when it suits him but with less consistency than Philo. Hellenistic metaphysics aside, then, a second answer suggests that John is eager to elevate Jesus at the expense of Israelite and Jewish heroes.

One popular response has been that John 1:18 polemicizes against figures like Enoch or Moses in an effort to reduce their authority vis-à-vis Jesus.[38] While John undoubtedly emphasizes that Jesus has seen God more fully than any other, this explanation does not account for the many theophanies that occur in John's Bible. Is John contradicting them?[39] The challenge here is that John draws heavily on the authority of his Scriptures. They are the only external literature he directly quotes, and he is eager to show their fulfilment. His Jesus claims that "Scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35), that "salvation comes from the Jews" (4:22); and he effectively "subpoenas" Moses (John 5:46), Abraham (John 8:56), and Isaiah (John 12:41) because they attest to him in some way. Likewise, across the Gospel, Jesus criticizes "the Jews" not because of their Scriptures, but because "the Jews" do not accept the Scriptures' witness to himself. If the Scriptures that narrate the theophanies are so crucial to John's understanding of Jesus, then it is difficult to accept that John dismisses the theophanies wholesale.

[37] Gary A. Anderson, "Towards a Theology of the Tabernacle and Its Furniture," in *Text, Thought, and Practice in Qumran and Early Christianity* (ed. Ruth A. Clements and Daniel R. Schwartz; Leiden: Brill, 2009) 161–94.

[38] Williams, "(Not) Seeing God," 80; Reynolds, "Apocalyptic Revelation," 116; Hanson, "John 1:14," 95; Paul Miller, "'They Saw His Glory and Spoke of Him': The Gospel of John and the Old Testament," in *Hearing the Old Testament in the New Testament* (ed. Stanley E. Porter; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006) 127–51.

[39] A. J. Droge reads John to be intentionally undermining the Jewish Scriptures in his "'No One Has Ever Seen God': Revisionary Criticism in the Fourth Gospel," in *From Prophecy to Testament: The Function of the Old Testament in the New* (ed. Craig A. Evans; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004) 174.

"Isaiah Saw His Glory"

I therefore turn to how John understands theophany. The first step in understanding John's approach to the theophanies is to recognize that the patriarchs and prophets have anticipated Jesus. For Abraham (John 8:56–59; cf. Gen 18:1–33), Isaiah (John 12:41; cf. Isa 6:1–10; 52:13–53:1), and Zechariah (John 19:37; cf. Zech 12:10 MT) this anticipation overlaps with their own visual experiences of God.[40] John's references to Isaiah 53:1 (John 12:38) and 6:10 (John 12:40) offer the clearest way forward in the attempt to understand whether John thinks God himself is visible in the theophanies to which he alludes.[41] John's portrayal of Isaiah suggests that John has not diminished or contradicted the authority of the Jewish Scriptures; rather, he has re-interpreted several of its theophanies as Christological.

The context of John 12:41 illuminates how John draws the sight of God and of Jesus together. In John 12:23, Jesus announces that "the hour has come in order that the Son of Man might be glorified (δοξασθῇ)" (John 12:23). He calls on the Father to glorify his name; and the Father responds that he has "glorified it and will glorify it again" (John 12:28). Jesus then goes on to describe his death as being "lifted up" (ὑψωθῶ) (John 12:32), which suggests that his glorification involves his crucifixion. The link to Isaiah begins with John's use of Isa 53:1 and Isa 6:10 to explain why people have not believed in Jesus despite seeing his signs (John 12:38–40).

In the wider context of both Isaiah texts, the subjects of these passages are also "lifted up" and "glorified." In Isa 52:13 LXX "lifted up and glorified" (ὑψωθήσεται καὶ δοξασθήσεται) depict the Servant of the Lord while in Isaiah 6:1 "exalted/lifted up and lifted up" (ὑψηλοῦ καὶ ἐπηρμένου) describe the Lord's throne, and the Lord's "glory" (δόξα) fills the "house."[42] John's use of both the verbs in Isaiah

[40] For further discussions of the theophanic experiences of Abraham, Isaiah, Zechariah, and Moses, see Sheridan, *The Figure of Abraham,* esp. 353–55; Catrin Williams, "Patriarchs and Prophets Remembered: Framing Israel's Past in the Gospel of John," in *Abiding Words: The Use of Scripture in the Gospel of John* (ed. Alicia D. Myers; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015) 187–212; William Randolph Bynum, *The Fourth Gospel and the Scriptures: Illuminating the Form and Meaning of Scriptural Citation in John 19:37* (NovTSup 144; Leiden: Brill, 2012).

[41] In the following argument, I draw heavily from Catrin Williams' "Seeing the Glory: The Reception of Isaiah's Call-Vision in Jn 12.41," in *Judaism, Jewish Identities and the Gospel Tradition: Essays in Honour of Maurice Casey* (ed. James G. Crossley; London: Routledge, 2014) 186–206; and eadem, "Johannine Christology and Prophetic Traditions: The Case of Isaiah," in *Reading the Gospel of John's Christology as Jewish Messianism: Royal, Prophetic, and Divine Messiahs* (ed. Benjamin E. Reynolds and Gabriele Boccaccini; AJEC 106; Leiden: Brill) 92–123.

[42] By virtue of his presence on such a throne, one may also assume that the Lord himself is exalted. Here I also wish to draw attention to the long-standing emphasis in Johannine scholarship that the crucifixion is itself a kind of enthronement, as Deolito V. Vistar, Jr., *The Cross-and-Resurrection: The Supreme Sign in John's Gospel* (WUNT 2/508; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020) 199–202, has recently noted. One can also observe the garden location of the crucifixion in John and the presence God's throne near the Tree of Life in the garden settings of 1 En. 24:4, 25:3–5, and Apoc. Mos. 22:4.

52:13 (John 12:23, 28, 32) in the same context as his quotations of Isaiah 6:10 and 53:1 thus appears to incorporate Isaiah's descriptions of two vastly different kinds of glory into a single account of Jesus's glory. One is the incongruous glory granted to the suffering servant in Isaiah 52:13, otherwise disfigured by the sins of those for whom he suffers. The other is the temple-filling glory of God's radiant majesty in Isaiah 6:1.

John makes the link explicit in John 12:41 when he writes that Isaiah said "these things" (ταῦτα) because "he saw (εἶδεν) his glory (δόξαν αὐτοῦ)." Here, "these things" (ταῦτα) unites both quotations (Isa 6:10 and 53:1), revealing them to be the result of (ὅτι) what Isaiah saw. What Isaiah saw and what prompted him to speak was "his glory" (δόξα αὐτοῦ), and the antecedent of αὐτοῦ is Jesus.[43] Thus, far from denying Isaiah's vision of God, John uses it to draw the sight of God, the Servant, and Jesus together. Each is "lifted up" and "glorified"; and, for John, the glory of God and of the Servant coalesce in Isaiah's vision of Jesus's glory.[44]

John 12:41 thus explains what the sight of Jesus means even as John uses both Isa 53:1 and 6:10 to indicate why "the Jews" cannot see Jesus properly. John knows that Isaiah saw the Lord; and he shows that Jesus's glory was revealed in the Lord Isaiah saw, God himself.[45] Moreover, John's use of Isa 53:1 and 6:10 draws sight and belief together. Directly after the Isaiah quotations, Jesus himself proclaims that seeing him is seeing the Father, just as believing in Jesus is believing in the one who sent him (John 12:44–45). The sight of God in Jesus is therefore possible even if God may choose to obscure it by blinding some (Isa 6:9–10). However, one must acknowledge that John never claims the full vision of God—or of Jesus—for any patriarch or prophet. Abraham saw Jesus's "day," Isaiah saw his "glory," and Moses bore witness to him in the Torah. These are partial visions in which God

A number of early Christians associated the cross with the Tree of Life (e.g., *Cave of Treasures*) and read against these texts and the pseudepigrapha, John's account of a garden crucifixion-enthronement hints at the possible conflation of cross, Tree of Life, and divine throne in his thought.

[43] See Daniel J. Brendsel, *"Isaiah Saw His Glory": The Use of Isaiah 52–53 in John 12* (BZNW 208; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2014) 124–27, for a detailed defence of ταῦτα as referring to both quotations and αὐτοῦ as referring to Jesus.

[44] Debate continues about which glory Isaiah saw: that of the preexistent Logos or the future glory of Jesus in his earthly life. In my view, John is concerned to draw the glories together, and the reader is not left to distinguish between two objects of sight. The challenge of the crucifixion is that the heavenly glory of God and that of the Logos are manifested on the cross; and the quotations suggest this by drawing the servant, God, and Jesus together in the context of John 12, Isa 6:1, and 52:13–53:12. See Williams, "Seeing the Glory," 186–206; eadem, "Composite Citations in the Gospel of John," 94–127; Jonathan Lett, "The Divine Identity of Jesus as the Reason for Israel's Unbelief in John 12:36–43," *JBL* (2016) 159–73; Brendsel, *"Isaiah Saw His Glory,"* 130–31; Bucur, *Scripture Re-envisioned*, 190.

[45] Roukema argues that John does not say that Isaiah saw God, but only his glory, which leads Roukema to suggest that John is shifting Isaiah's vision away from a direct theophany; see "Jesus and the Divine Name," 209. This is a fair point, but it is also highly ambiguous, given the number of times that seeing God's glory is itself tantamount to seeing God in the Jewish Scriptures. Sommer has gone so far as to describe the glory cloud as one of God's bodies in *The Bodies*, 38–57.

appears via angels and glory clouds and in a variety of brief and terrifying glimpses. Such theophanies never deny God's direct and overwhelming presence, even as they never fully reveal it.

John's use of Isaiah thus yields two conclusions for John 1:18. The first is that one need not read John as contradicting Jewish Scriptures. If Jesus is the subject of the theophanies and if one understands that Jesus is God,[46] then no contradiction need exist. The second is that one need not read John 1:18 to affirm the intrinsic invisibility of God. Read alongside John 1:18 and the theophany accounts of the Jewish Scriptures, John's own understanding of theophany is that the patriarchs and prophets never fully witnessed God to the extent that they never fully witnessed Jesus, and vice versa; but this does not entail that God is invisible in a Platonic sense.

John 1:18a can thus be read to describe the theophanies insofar as they were never entirely complete; yet the rejoinder of John 1:14–18, 12:45, and 14:9 is that the theophanies take on unprecedented fullness in Jesus (John 1:17). For John, Jesus is sufficiently aligned with God, and God with Jesus, such that John can equate the theophany granted to Isaiah—and, presumably, theophanies granted to others in Israel's history—with seeing Jesus, even if the sight was fleeting in the past. However, in the incarnation Jesus now presents the unprecedented sight of God. Many scholars here deploy the term "mediation" to describe how Jesus makes God visible,[47] and others suggest that the Logos comes to replace God in John's understanding of theophany.[48] Both readings are appropriate so long as one avoids two assumptions. The first is that "mediation" entails that God is not fully or directly present in Jesus. The second is that the pre-incarnate Christ is not less "transcendent" than God according to a criterion of (in)visibility but actually "overlaps" with God.[49]

Here I return to the distinction I made between "invisible" and "unseen." If one assumes that God the Father is necessarily invisible, then one must assume a break with the Jewish Scriptures and a hierarchy of transcendence between Jesus and God or within God predicated on invisibility. Yet the Jewish Scriptures never portray God as intrinsically invisible, and I have shown that one cannot assume

[46] Frey's conclusions in "Jewish Monotheism," 211 about the deity of the Johannine Jesus are worth quoting in full: "Johannine Christology is consistent in claiming that this earthly Jesus, the Messiah and King of Israel, who died on the cross, was actually a divine being, uncreated, and "God," so that in his words, acts, and passion, he uniquely represents and reveals the one God of Israel, the God of the Scriptures."

[47] As Filtvedt, "Transcendence," 110 notes: "In seeing Jesus, one does not see something that merely resembles God, a manifestation that replaces the vision of God, or some divine attribute. God does not remain partly hidden behind his visible manifestation in Jesus. Although the vision of God in Jesus is mediated, it is not limited or partial . . . it is evident that this full vision of God is tied to Jesus' signs, his passion and his departure."

[48] Hanson, "John 1:14," 96.

[49] "Overlap" is intentionally ambiguous and, perhaps, necessarily so, given the burgeoning discussion of Jesus's relationship to God. See the collected essays in *Monotheism and Christology in Greco-Roman Antiquity* (ed. Mathew V. Novenson; NovTSup 180; Leiden: Brill, 2020).

this to be the case in the Second Temple and early Jewish literature. John's use of Isaiah indicates that God's visibility in the past can be of a piece with his visibility in Jesus.[50] Jesus does not replace God in the theophanies; rather, he is present because God is present. What is clear for John is that Jesus has always been God (John 1:1; 8:59; 12:41; 17:24) and has always been able to become visible in some form.[51] What is clear from his Scriptures is that God has never had trouble in making himself visible even if people are unable to see him fully. The theophanies can thus be read christologically but without a metaphysics that requires one to read Jesus in the place of God on the grounds that the difference between them is that Jesus is irrevocably visible and God is irrevocably invisible.[52] Jesus is visible because God is visible and vice versa, but this does not mean that God is easy to see or that Jesus is easy to recognize as God.

[50] This does not reduce the incarnation to another theophany; rather, it shows that the precedent exists in the Jewish Scriptures. See Sommer, *The Bodies*, 122, 124–44; Michael Wyschogrod, "A Jewish Perspective on Incarnation," *Modern Theology* (1996) 195–209; Hamori, *When Gods Were Men*, esp. 64; eadem, "Divine Embodiment in the Jewish Scriptures and Its Implications for Jewish and Christian Incarnational Theology," in *Bodies, Embodiment, and Theology of the Hebrew Bible* (ed. S. Tamar Kamionkowski and Wonil Kim; LHBOTS 465; London: T&T Clark, 2010) 161–83.

[51] Here I come very close to the view of Charles A. Gieschen, whose exemplary work (e.g., *Angelomorphic Christology: Antecedents and Early Evidence* [AGJU 42; Leiden: Brill, 1998] and "The YHWH Christology of the Gospel of John," *CTQ* 85 [2020] 3–22), acknowledges the importance of divine (in)visibility. Nevertheless, because Gieschen takes God to be invisible (a term that, to the best of my knowledge, he never defines), he has tended to read John as projecting Christ back onto the theophanies as the only option for a manifestation of God. I am less certain that such clear-cut assumptions about visibility are tenable. By contrast, I find much to agree with in Christopher Barina Kaiser's claim in *Seeing the Lord's Glory: Kyriocentric Visions and the Dilemma of Early Christology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014) 9 that "the disciples did not see Jesus as YHWH (as most often stated). Instead, they saw YHWH (the Lord in embodied form) as Jesus. The ability to recognize Jesus as the visible YHWH is "based on the continued appearance of the God of Israel 'from behind,' that is, as an extension of the history of his covenant relations with Israel" (9). Insofar as I understand him, I take Kaiser to mean that the NT authors, John among them, did not project Jesus back onto the theophanies, but read the incarnation as the culminating visibility of a God who had manifested himself visually over the course of the Jewish Scriptures and texts of Early Judaism.

[52] This is not to deny that metaphysics and ontology are somehow absent from John's account; it is simply to recognize that in his account they may not be especially Platonic. Until Augustine and Jerome, the most prevalent view seems to have been that Jesus was eternally visible as the Son. For the economic theologians, Jesus's eternal visibility explained the incarnation and the theophanies without compromising the transcendence of the Father. Augustine will show that this view compromises the transcendence of the Son and will introduce the highly influential position that divinity (whether in the Father or Jesus) is always invisible until after the last judgment. The power of these theological interpretations continues to inform the presuppositions of Johannine scholarship. See Kari Kloos, "Seeing the Invisible God: Augustine's Reconfiguration of Theophany Narrative Exegesis," *Augustinian Studies* 36 (2005) 397–420; eadem, *Christ, Creation, and the Vision of God: Augustine's Transformation of Early Christian Theophany Interpretation* (ed. Jeffrey Bingham; The Bible in Ancient Christianity 7; Leiden: Brill, 2011).

The Syntax of John 1:18a: "No One Has Ever Seen God" (θεὸν οὐδεὶς ἑώρακεν πώποτε)

Given John's understanding of theophany, I return to my proposed reading of 1:18a: "no one has ever [fully] seen God [yet]." Thus far I have examined how the context of the Gospel encourages this view; however, I have not examined the syntax of the verse. If John 1:18 *is* directed at past claims about seeing God, then the references to past time in his statement are important; but one must begin with θεόν. John's anarthrous but not indefinite use of θεός across the prologue has received substantial attention, and many scholars read John 1:18 to identify both the Father and the Son as God, or at least as divine.[53] By 1:18, this is not a new concept in the prologue; but the proximity of an affirmation of the divinity of the Son to the claim that no one has seen God complicates that claim. John 1:14 has already shown that the incarnate Logos reveals a visible glory, but now the same being whose self-disclosure is chiefly visual is somehow also the God no one has ever seen.

The answer to this riddle may lie in the perfect "has seen" (ἑώρακεν) and the extent to which it can limit "ever" (πώποτε). The sense of "no one has ever seen" (οὐδεις ἑώρακεν) is that no one has ever seen God and that the repercussions of this lack carry into the present. This is certainly the case in John 5:37, in which Jesus draws on Deut 4:12 and uses "ever" (πώποτε) to tell "the Jews" that they have never seen God's form (John 6:46). However, the irony is that Jesus—the "unique God" (μονογενὴς θεός)—is standing in front of them; and the entire Gospel anticipates the proper recognition of Jesus (John 20:28). Past failure to see may therefore explain disbelief, but it can give way to proper seeing. God can become visible in Jesus.

Thus, "ever" (πώποτε) may mean "ever" or "yet" rather than "at any time in the past, present, or future." The adverb almost always accompanies verbs in the past tense, as if to suggest that no one has ever done "x" up to the present moment, but things may change in the future.[54] This is the case in occurrences of "ever" (πώποτε) across the Gospel (John 5:37; 6:35; 8:33;) as well as in 1 John 4:12 and Luke 19:30, which account for all the occurrences in the New Testament—with the notable exception of John 6:35. There, "ever" (πώποτε) modifies "will thirst" (διψήσει), a verb in the future tense. Those who believe in Jesus "will never thirst"; yet this rare occurrence of a future tense verb with "ever" (πώποτε) only strengthens the sense that the tense of the verb sets the remit of "ever" (πώποτε). Only after belief occurs

[53] See Thompson, *God of the Gospel*, 17–55; Chrys C. Caragounis and Jan Van der Watt, "A Grammatical Analysis of John 1:1," *Filogía Neotestamentaria* 21 (2008) 91–138; Van der Watt, "He Was with God and was God?," *STJ* 4 (2018) 283–302.

[54] See LSJ, s.v. "πώποτε" and BDAG, s.v. "πώποτε," which states that πώποτε "refers to an indefinite point of time: ever, at any time." BDAG further notes that πώποτε almost always occurs with verbs in the past tense. Elizabeth Harris registers the emphasis that πώποτε lends to John's statement, and she defines it as "a temporal reference to human capacities in time and history. This is underlined by the perfect tense of the verb, which is also in contrast to the eternal quality of the μονογενὴς θεός (ὑιός), being (ὁ ὢν) in the bosom of the Father" in *Prologue and Gospel: The Theology of the Fourth Evangelist* (JSNTSup 107; London: T&T Clark, 1994) 93.

will thirst end. The grammar of "no one has ever seen God" (θεὸν οὐδεὶς ἑώρακεν πώποτε) can thereby comport with John's portrayal of the theophanies and with John 12:45 and 14:9, which suggest that the time to see God has arrived.[55]

Nevertheless, I admit that I cannot entirely rule out the fact that John may be describing a state of affairs for all people across all time. The occurrence of "no one has ever seen God" (θεὸν οὐδεὶς πώποτε τεθέαται) in 1 John 4:12 (cf. 1 John 4:20) pushes in that direction, and commentators often take "ever" (πώποτε) to apply to all time. One can also ask why John did not choose the less ambiguous "not yet" (οὐκέτι).[56] Moreover, the question of where John's prologue stands regarding the narrative time of the Gospel remains a challenge. If the prologue is summarizing the Gospel, then it seems to prohibit the sight of God to all people, despite the incarnation. If it is prologue to and thus anticipates the revelation of the incarnation—which it nevertheless appears to summarize—then 1:18 may still refer to the time prior to the incarnation.[57] While I stand by the reading I have presented, I wish to ask further what bearing my study has for those who insist that 1:18 applies to all time.

The Challenge of Recognizing God in Jesus

Three factors must condition John 1:18 regardless of how one reads "has ever seen" (ἑώρακεν πώποτε). The first is that John limits the revelation of God to Jesus (John 12:45; 14:6–9) and that he uses sight to indicate how this revelation occurs (John 14:7–11; cf. 6:40). The second is that if John is making a statement for all time, then John 1:14, 12:41, 12:45, 14:9, and 20:28–29 have mitigated it: somehow the Father is visible in Jesus. The third is that John 1:14, 12:41, 12:45, 14:9, and 20:29 are themselves mitigated: the incarnation qualifies what one sees of God. Unlike the theophanies in the Jewish Scriptures, the Father that one sees in Jesus rarely causes people to die or shrink away in terror (but see John 6:19; 18:6), and across the Gospel the sight of Jesus—one may assume—is often mundane (John 6:42).

Indeed, the visibility of God in Jesus is rarely obvious if one is looking for the overwhelming and dangerous glory of the theophanies. While John suggests that Jesus's preexistent glory with the Father is only fully visible *in heaven* in the sense that the Father himself may only be fully visible in heaven (John 1:18; 17:24; cf. 1 John

[55] Regarding the perfect "has seen" (ἑώρακεν), Harris notes Moulton's description of it as an aoristic perfect, acknowledging that there can be perfects of broken as well as of unbroken continuity, especially in the company of "ever" (πώποτε). See *A Grammar of New Testament Greek* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1906) 144. On the implications of aspect theory for the perfect tense in John, see Madison Pierce and Benjamin Reynolds, "The Perfect Tense-Form and the Son of Man in John 3.13: Developments in Greek Grammar as a Viable Solution to the Timing of the Ascent and Descent," *NTS* 60 (2014) 149–55.

[56] While Harris, *Prologue*, 100–101, acknowledges that John 6:46 and 14:9 indicate that the incarnation could offer "a 'vision of God' strictly without exact parallel," she concludes that "the emphatic use of πώποτε in 1.18 may be doing more than affirming that in history prior to the coming of the Logos, Jesus Christ, no one had in fact seen God. If that were all that were intended, it would have been sufficient to say, 'No one has ever seen God as yet (οὐκέτι) but now the man Jesus Christ is the one who has seen him."

[57] See Behr, *John the Theologian*, 245–70.

3:2), the divine glory is no less present in the radical and counterintuitive visibility of the crucifixion, the marks of which remain visible on Jesus's resurrected body (John 1:14; 12:23).[58] John thus presents a striking irony, given the deadly majesty of the theophanies: the incarnate Logos dies for claiming to be and revealing God (John 8:59; 10:30; 19:7), yet seeing the crucified Christ will result in life for those who believe (John 6:40). A fundamental visibility undergirds the encounter with God whether one approaches his dangerous fullness or Jesus's counterintuitive but life-giving crucifixion and resurrection.

Once again, then, the distinction between "invisible" and "unseen" does not require us to read John as depicting God's visibility at some remove from Jesus's visibility because the latter is material. The glory of heaven is the glory of the crucified Jesus because the Father is in and with the crucified one (John 14:10). John 1:18 (5:37; 6:46) may therefore forbid the sight of God's glory as it is in heaven (except to Jesus, 6:46) until the eschaton (17:24). Nevertheless, John also reveals that Jesus's humanity presents the unprecedented sight of God in a fullness that may be difficult to grasp but is no less present despite the difficulty.[59] John can therefore call on Isaiah to confirm the harmony of both glories—that of a God whose glory fills the temple and that of the servant whose glory results from his physical agony—because Isaiah saw them unite in Christ.

Conclusion

This article has itself worked to harmonize the seemingly contradictory statements in John regarding the sight of God: no one can see God (John 1:18), yet Jesus makes him visible (John 12:45; 14:9). By uncoupling John 1:18 from a Platonist understanding of invisibility, I have shown that it can comport with John 12:45 and 14:9 without needing to suggest levels of transcendence between Jesus and God that a priori assumptions about materiality determine. Rather, John 1:18 anticipates 12:45 and 14:9 as indicating the means by which God makes himself visible on earth. "Visibility" and "invisibility" thus become "seeing" and "not seeing" in John because he is more concerned with the revelation that visibility affords than he is with the ontological categories that (in)visibility can demarcate. The question of whether God and his glory are intrinsically visible is never at stake for John; rather, he is concerned with how they are visible and thus with how one can see them—two questions he intertwines with belief (John 6:40; 11:40; 20:28–31).[60]

[58] Among others, Frey acknowledge that John shows the crucifixion itself to be a manifestation of God's glory; see *The Glory of the Crucified One*: *Christology and Theology in the Gospel of John* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2018) 284.

[59] See Filtvedt, "Transcendence," 112–18.

[60] Here I am largely in agreement with Bultmann, *John*, 80: "the assertion, however, that God is not directly accessible has nothing to do with the Greek idea that God is a being of such a kind that he cannot be grasped by the senses. . . . For the Evangelist it is not the νοῦς but πίστις which sees him, and then only πίστις which is directed toward the Revealer." Unlike Bultmann, I would emphasize the positive relationship of sight to belief.