

On Seeing God

R. W. L. MOBERLY
Durham University
Durham, England

Introduction

One of the perennial questions of life is “Where in this world, if anywhere, is God?” Many people reckon that, because they cannot see God, there is no God to be seen. At least two preliminary questions, however, need to be asked: “If we are looking for God, what should we be looking for?”; and relatedly, “What counts as seeing God?” One of the prime purposes in reading the Bible as Christian Scripture should be to learn how to answer these questions, and to recognize how easily people, who look for God, look for the wrong thing in the wrong way.

Scripture offers numerous accounts of differing modes of seeing God, a rich plurality which is important. The Old Testament, for example, has famous visionary accounts, best known of which are probably Isaiah in the Jerusalem temple (Isa 6) and Ezekiel beside the river Chebar (Ezek 1). Unfortunately, these, and much else, are beyond my present scope—though I would say that the seeing of such visions, while obviously memorable, is not representative of the prime scriptural concerns in this whole area.

I will here develop one particular line of approach. In the New Testament, in John’s Gospel, there is strong language about seeing God the Father in Jesus the Son. There is, for example, the famous exchange between Philip and Jesus: “Philip said to him, ‘Lord, show us the Father, and we will ask no more.’ Jesus replied, ‘Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Anyone who has seen me has seen

the Father” (John 14:8–9).¹ There are, of course, obvious questions about this. On the one hand, why did so many who saw Jesus not see the Father in him? Why did some even want to kill him? On the other hand, does what is said of Jesus apply to him alone as “the Christ, the Son of God” (20:31), or might it apply in some way to others also in the light of the risen Jesus’s words to his disciples: “As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you” (20:21)? If so, how? In this discussion I want to try to set the Johannine material in a wider scriptural context, in the hope that this will contribute to a better understanding of what John’s portrayal of seeing God in Jesus does, and does not, envisage. It is intended as an example of constructive analytical and synthetic theological thinking in relation to the content of both Old and New Testaments together—an undertaking whose viability is, to be sure, much contested in contemporary scholarship, but which must be known and evaluated by its fruits.

“Knowing God” in Jeremiah

I want to focus on one Old Testament account in particular, that found in the book of Jeremiah.² This may seem *prima facie* surprising, as Jeremiah does not use the terminology of “seeing God.”³ He does, however, regularly speak of “knowing God.”⁴ My hope is that some reflection on this subject matter, when Jeremiah speaks about “knowing,” will enable us to see how we can formulate a preliminary answer to our questions about “seeing” (and we may note that “seeing” and “knowing” are juxtaposed in John 14:9).

I would like to start with one of the better-known of Jeremiah’s prophetic pronouncements, a passage which has been regularly extolled by Christian commentators as “a succinct summary of the religion of Israel at

¹ The translations of the biblical text, here and elsewhere in the paper, are my own.

² In this essay I am revisiting and extending a discussion in my *Prophecy and Discernment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), chap. 2 (esp. 64–70, re. Jeremiah), and chap. 5 (esp. 155–66, re. 1 John).

³ A passing reference such as “From a distance [*or* Long ago] YHWH appeared to me [*or* to him (LXX)]” (Jer 31:3) is not, I think, a significant exception.

⁴ In the passages I will be looking at, I will take Jeremiah as the speaking voice in the book that bears his name—or, in other words, I will engage with the world of the text with full imaginative seriousness—without prejudice to questions around the formation of the text or its complex text-critical history (interesting questions in their own right, but distinct from the question I am asking here). I do the same with regard to Jesus in Matthew’s and John’s Gospel and John in 1 John.

its highest” or “the essence of the biblical understanding of God.”⁵ If such evaluation is warranted (and I would not demur), the passage becomes an interpretive key not only for the book of Jeremiah but for Scripture and life more generally. Jeremiah says:

Thus says YHWH:

Let not the wise boast in their wisdom,

let not the mighty boast in their might,

let not the wealthy boast in their wealth;

but [*ki*] let those who boast boast in this,

that they understand [*haskel*] and know [*yada*] me.

For [*ki*] I am YHWH who acts with steadfast love/gracious

kindness [*hesed*],

justice [*mishpat*], and righteousness/integrity [*tsedaqah*]

in the world;

for [*ki*] in these [*elleh*—things? people?] I delight,

says YHWH. (Jer 9:22–23 [English 23–24])⁶

There is one significant issue of translation.⁷ What is the referent of *elleh* (“these”) in verse 23b? In the Hebrew, there is no noun to accompany the

⁵ John Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), 321; Douglas Jones, *Jeremiah*, New Century Bible (London: Marshall Pickering; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 170. Cf. “a magisterial epitome of the claims of Israel’s covenantal and prophetic faith” (Walter Brueggemann, *To Pluck Up, To Tear Down: A Commentary on the Book of Jeremiah 1–25*, International Theological Commentary [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans; Edinburgh: Handsel, 1988], 95).

⁶ The form of the material is unclear, as it can be read as either poetry or prose. Prose: New Revised Standard Version trans.; Louis Stulman, “prose sayings” (*Jeremiah*, Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries [Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2005], 104–5). Poetry: New Jewish Publication Society *Tanakh*; Wilhelm Rudolph in *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (ed.) and *Jeremia*, 3rd ed., Handbuch zum Alten Testament 12 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1968), 69, where he sets it out as: 3+3, 3+3, 3+4, 3+2(4); also William McKane, *Jeremiah, Vol. I: I–XXV*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1986), lxxxiii, 212. However, nothing of substance hangs on this for present purposes. The pronouncement’s relationship to its immediate literary context is likewise unclear, although its congruity with content elsewhere in Jeremiah, especially the importance of “knowing YHWH,” is not in doubt.

⁷ A minor issue is: Is the *ki* in v.23aβ a fuller explication of the content of the just-mentioned knowledge of God, and so to be rendered “that”—i.e., “know me, that I am YHWH who . . .” (so NRSV)? Or is it an explanation of why the knowledge of YHWH is of surpassing value, and so to be rendered “for”? I.e.: “know me; for I am YHWH who . . .” Both make good sense. There is something to be said for taking the

adjective. It is possible to take it to be the three immediately preceding qualities which characterize YHWH's actions, "these things" (so NRSV). This makes sense, though one might think that it should be self-evident that YHWH approves of those qualities which he displays. So it makes better sense to find the referent in people just mentioned—those who know YHWH are "these people," with a sense of "in such people I delight"—as this better ties together the oracle as a whole.⁸ The point of the pronouncement is about what is necessary to boast, to find self-confidence and status, in the right place and thereby be the kind of people whom YHWH looks for.

This prophetic saying initially raises for consideration three obvious things that people commonly seek and value, those things that apparently make life worthwhile: intellect or knowledge; strength or power; riches or resources. In such things people naturally and readily boast, that is find their sense of self-worth and value. The prophetic voice does not deny all value to such things (other than with rhetorical flourish), but rather relativizes them in relation to something more important, "the one thing needful": an informed knowledge of God. This knowing (*yada*) is less intellectual (*savoir*; *wissen*) than relational (*connaître*; *kennen*), for relational knowing is a common idiomatic sense of *yada*; though this knowing of YHWH also involves an understanding in the mind (*haskel*). Two reasons are given for this alternative ground for boasting. The first is that it brings recognition of YHWH's character and priorities, which means recognition of a deity who acts in life-giving ways, for which our convenient shorthand epithet is "moral" (though the shorthand can be potentially misleading because the sense of "moral" can all too easily be unduly narrowed). The second is that those who have this recognition, and find their own true human value in it, are the kind of people in whom God delights.

There is also a further dimension, an implication I would like to draw out: if YHWH acts in particular ways in the world—and what this might look like is not specified, especially whether or not it is humanly mediated—so too should those who know him and who find their own self-understanding on that basis. The mark of their relational knowing, if that knowing involves God, would be that the character and priorities of the one they know are in significant ways replicated in them. Thus people should find their true self-worth and value, their "boast," in themselves living in modes of gracious kindness, justice, and integrity (I propose "gracious kindness" and "integrity"

second and third uses of *ki* as parallel, each with the sense of "for" (so NJPS), whereby an understanding of God and of righteous humanity are closely tied together.

⁸ So, e.g., Bernhard Duhm, *Das Buch Jeremia*, Kurzer Hand-Commentar zum Alten Testament (Tübingen and Leipzig: Mohr Siebeck, 1901), 97; Rudolph, *Jeremia*, 68.

as heuristic idiomatic renderings of the more formal “steadfast love” and “righteousness”). Such humans become more like their God.⁹

The finding of this implication becomes more likely if we move on to a second pronouncement that speaks of “knowing YHWH.” This passage denounces the self-serving and corrupt practices of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, who is unfavorably contrasted with his father, Josiah:¹⁰

Woe to him who builds his house in unrighteousness [*belo tsedeq*],
 and his upper rooms in injustice [*belo mishpat*],
 who makes his fellow Israelites work for no pay,
 and does not give them their wages;
 who says, “I will build for myself a spacious palace
 with large upper rooms,”
 and who cuts out windows for it,
 paneling it with cedar,
 and painting it a rich red.
 Is this what makes you a king [*batimlok*]?
 That you compete in cedar?
 Did not your father eat and drink
 and do justice and righteousness [*mishpat utsedaqah*]?
 Then he was a true king [*az tov lo*; lit. “then it was good
 with regard to him”].
 He defended the rights of the poor and needy;
 that was being a true king [*az tov*; lit. “then it was good”].
 Is not this to know [*yada*] me?
 says YHWH.
 But your eyes and your mind
 are only set on your own profits,
 on shedding innocent blood,
 and on practicing oppression and violence. (Jer 22:13–17)

The thought of the passage is easily misread, at least in part, and so a few clarificatory comments are in order. First, it is important to see that the issue at stake is what constitutes true kingship. Is it a prestige building

⁹ The “imitation of God” is an important ethical and spiritual principle in the Old Testament, even though caveats and qualifications must be offered in any full account.

¹⁰ The identity of the two kings is specified in Jer 22:18 (“Therefore thus says YHWH about Jehoiakim son of Josiah . . .”). The context is a series of oracles to several kings of Judah in 21:11–23:8.

project, a palace, carried out with forced labor, that is, self-aggrandizing display (Jehoiakim's practice)? Or is it ensuring justice and righteousness for the poor—moral service and care for those in need (Josiah's practice)?

Secondly, if this issue is kept in focus, it becomes easier to resolve two interpretive difficulties. On the one hand, there is the initially puzzling sequence that Josiah “ate and drank and did justice and righteousness.” Why “ate and drank”? Interpreters tend to set this over against the extravagant palace building project. Thus the eating and drinking becomes “enjoying in measure the pleasures of the table” or “he was content with the simple necessities of life”; and this indeed makes sense.¹¹ Yet I would argue that it makes better sense to see the eating and drinking, which are in continuous sequence with doing justice and righteousness, as depicting a single reality, not two separate things. That is, they depict regular daily practice, what someone does to live, with the point being that the practice of justice and righteousness was as consistent and natural to Josiah as eating and drinking.¹² Enacting justice with integrity had become intrinsic to his life.¹³ On the other hand, there is the repeated comment *az tov*, “then it was good.” This tends to be read as “then it went well for him.”¹⁴ But things going well or badly is irrelevant in context, which has said nothing about things going badly for Jehoiakim.¹⁵ If, however, the point at issue is what constitutes true kingship, then the comment “then it was good” makes excellent sense as a comment on Josiah's understanding and practice of kingship: “he got it right”; “that was the good/proper way of being a king,” “that was the right way of exercising royal power over people.”

Thirdly, once the prophetic voice has established the interpretive contrast between false and true ways of being king, there is a further interpretive comment on Josiah's enactment of justice with integrity on behalf

¹¹ John Skinner, *Prophecy & Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1930), 248; NJPS marginal note.

¹² So also Arnold Ehrlich, *Randglossen zur Hebräischen Bibel*, vol. 4 (1912; repr. Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1968), 298–99.

¹³ Perhaps the most famous passage in Jeremiah is his vision of a new covenant, written in the heart (31:31–34). Discussion of what exactly this envisages, and how it might be realized—questions posed for the Christian especially by the citation in Heb 8:8–12—might perhaps be refreshed by allowing the account of Josiah to be included. For the internal appropriation of God's will that the new-covenant language envisages is surely well captured by the less familiar notion of its becoming as basic to life as eating and drinking.

¹⁴ So, e.g., NRSV, NJPS, CEB, NIV.

¹⁵ Robert Carroll rightly observes that such a comment about wellbeing is “out of place here” (*Jeremiah*, Old Testament Library [London: SCM, 1986], 426).

of the poor: “Is not this to know [*yada*] me?’ says YHWH.” Here we have another weighty construal of what relational and participatory engagement with YHWH truly means: a way of living in which God’s qualities and priorities, justice and righteousness, are embraced and appropriated by the one who knows him. Through responsive relationship, the creature becomes more like the Creator. Thereby God’s qualities and priorities also become evident in the life of the world.

A nice highlighting of some of the hermeneutical challenges posed by this equating of justice for the poor with knowledge of God is provided by the impassioned affirmation of the text by liberation theologian Jose Miranda in 1977:

Here we have the explicit definition of what it is to know Yahweh. To know Yahweh is to achieve justice for the poor. Nothing authorizes us to introduce a cause-effect relationship between “to know Yahweh” and “to practice justice.” Nor are we authorized to introduce categories like “sign” or “manifestation of.” The Bible is well-acquainted with these categories, and when it means them, it says so. A fundamental hermeneutical principle is at stake here: What possibility are we leaving to the sacred authors of affirming a strict identification if, whenever they attempt it, we “interpretatively” put in our categories of “sign of” or “cause” or “manifestation,” which imply duality? If we were to use this procedure the biblical authors could never tell us anything which our theology did not already know.¹⁶

It is hard not to sympathize with Miranda’s evident frustration at the ways in which, as it seems to him, scholarly biblical interpreters so often manage to water down the radical challenge of the sacred text, by moves which may be learned and judicious but which may also be evasive. Nonetheless—at the risk of being such an evasive interpreter!—it remains necessary to question Miranda’s own rhetoric, and whether he does justice to the rhetoric of the text, not least in his finding here a “strict identification” of “to know Yahweh” and “to practice justice.”

On the one hand, the identification is hardly as “strict” as Miranda contends, despite the clear *prima facie* sense of 22:16. Elsewhere Jeremiah’s poetry parallels “not knowing YHWH” with generalized moral failure: “They progress from evil to evil, and they do not know [*yada*] me, says

¹⁶ Jose Miranda, *Marx and the Bible* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1974), 44–45.

YHWH" (9:2); "Deceit upon deceit, they refuse to know [*yada*] me, says YHWH" (9:4–5 [English 3, 5–6]).¹⁷ This likewise affirms the intrinsic moral content of "knowing YHWH," but without specific reference either to justice or to the poor. On the other hand, the exercise of justice on behalf of the poor was a responsibility belonging characteristically to kings and judges, and not available to people generally. The book of Jeremiah makes no mention of Jeremiah himself exercising justice for the poor (let alone *achieving* justice, as in Miranda's strong formulation), nor does it see that as Jeremiah's responsibility in his vocation as prophet. Yet we should hardly infer from that silence that, by his own account, Jeremiah himself did not "know YHWH." Even if justice for the poor remains a prime critical criterion for "knowing YHWH," the moral dimensions of "knowing YHWH" and thereby living with integrity surely remain in principle broad and accessible to people other than kings.

Thus, in summary, the equation of "knowing YHWH" with "practicing justice" must be construed with sufficient flexibility to include a lifestyle of integrity (*tsedaqah*)—and also gracious kindness (*hesed*), if we synthetically include Jer 9:22 in our account—in whatever context people of any kind may find themselves.

Some New Testament Appropriation of the Content in Jeremiah

At this point, I want to return to our initial Jeremiah passage, about the appropriate grounds for human self-worth. Its biblical resonances are, of course, extensive. Paul cites "Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord" twice: once with reference to the paradoxical wonder of appropriating what God has done in Jesus Christ (1 Cor 1:31), and once with reference to his refusing to provide inappropriate warrants for the validity of his apostolic ministry (2 Cor 10:17). These are both strong affirmations of God's surprising priorities and ways, over against more conventional understandings. It is also possible to see strong resonance with sayings of Jesus, which may be cast in a different form, and yet make an essentially similar point. Thus, for example, Jesus's saying about not storing up perishable treasures on earth, but rather imperishable treasures in heaven, as a way of directing one's human priorities (Matt 6:19–21), sets what it means to be well-off in conventional human terms over against what it means to be rich with God.¹⁸ And if one asks what form riches with God might take,

¹⁷ Cf. also Jer 4:22.

¹⁸ The sense of "in heaven" here is not a different location in the future, but rather "with

then surely the exercise of qualities such as gracious kindness, justice, and integrity would fully qualify. Jesus, like Jeremiah, redirects transient human priorities to a way of understanding and living life in which God's enduring priorities become evident.

Some Contemporary Difficulties with Reading Jeremiah

In today's post-Christendom world, it is salutary to try never to take the value of biblical content for granted. Critiques of biblical content, for many reasons and from many different perspectives, are increasingly common. Attending to them can, in principle (at least on a good day!), refresh one's appreciation of what may perhaps have become timeworn and over-familiar, instead of eye-opening wonderful. In the interpretation of Jeremiah, there are numerous alternatives to the mode of reading the text that I am practicing here. Various kinds of reservation are increasingly common on ideological grounds (especially, at present, feminist and post-colonial). Moreover, attempts to relate the text to the social world of ancient Judah (the world behind the text), although generally intended to "ground" theology in everyday reality rather than allow it to remain abstract and possibly disengaged, can sometimes have the effect of portraying the text as primarily a reflex of ancient partisan group conflict, whose possible enduring significance (if any) is far from evident. A forceful example of both these moves together has been offered by Robert Carroll in his commentary on Jer 9:22–23. Carroll contends:

The terms used [i.e., *hesed*, *mishpat*, *tsedaqah*] are so common to the Bible that specific meaning can hardly be supplied for them here. They appear to represent a displacement of wisdom, power and wealth in favour of piety, and their content would then be defined in terms of the ideology of the group employing them. The piece looks like an ideological declaration of a group determined to undermine the values of other groups and as such would fit that strand in the tradition which criticizes wisdom. . . . It has been described as "a harmless unimportant saying" (Duhm, 97) and attributed to later piety circles. . . . It is both harmless and pious. Using hurrah words, it allows the wise, the powerful and the wealthy to retain all they possess provided they boast only in their piety.¹⁹

God" in the here and now (which will also endure beyond this life).

¹⁹ Carroll, *Jeremiah*, 247–48.

In other words, our passage is evidence for ancient piety in complacent mode, hostile to the values of others, but offering nothing positive to people in need or looking for truth. Such material would hardly seem to be worth the paper it is written on, except as a sobering reminder of how empty religious language can be, or at least apparently was in the context that produced and retained this particular biblical text.

Two comments on Carroll's contention. First, the positing of such ancient social/ideological conflict and such motives informing the text's content, although imaginable, lacks any supporting ancient evidence.²⁰ It is essentially constructed through an imaginative retrojection of how contemporary social and religious reality is perceived, and as such really tells us more about the interpreter and his ideological preferences than the interpreted.²¹

Secondly, Carroll's point about the non-specificity of key terms can be developed in more fruitful ways than he himself envisages. For undoubtedly it can sometimes be difficult to know exactly what weighty Hebrew terms such as *hesed*, *mishpat*, and *tsedaqah* specifically envisage. To be sure, prophetic literature is not short of specific instances of good, and especially bad, practice, and so there are guidelines for understanding; but the emphatic account of Josiah's good practice in Jer 22:15–16 is not much more specific than in 9:22–23. Moreover, there is the always-demanding issue of how one allows contemporary difficulties to bear on the reading

²⁰ Carroll does not attempt to cite evidence, other than critiques of claims to wisdom elsewhere in Jeremiah, e.g., 8:8–9 (which can be read in more than one way). His choice of terminology—"they appear to represent" and "this piece looks like"—is indicative of the key element being Carroll's own sense of "how things go," and thus what he thinks he can reasonably ascribe to people in the world behind the biblical text whose partisan values are, he supposes, represented in it.

²¹ For another, albeit more positive, view of our passage as evidence for an underlying "adversarial social reality," in which the prophetic Jeremiah tradition rejects certain "wisdom teachers" who "were excessively accommodating to the status quo," see Walter Brueggemann, *The Theology of the Book of Jeremiah*, Old Testament Theology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 172–73. Again, it is hard to resist the feeling that Brueggemann's perceptions of contemporary issues is the key element in his account of the situation in ancient Judah. Alternatively, Stulman says of 9:22–23: "These principles represent a radical revision [in an exilic context] of the community's hierarchy of values: the text moves from a royal/urban model that prizes conventional wisdom, military might, and commercial interests (that is, the prominent values of the preexilic dynastic world), to village-based ideals of loyalty, generosity, and integrity" (*Jeremiah*, 105, 106). The key issue, then, for Stulman, is hardly the nature of God and the kind of person God really seeks, but is rather a conflict between the values of differing socio-cultural contexts with religious rationalization added in.

of the biblical text. Insofar as liberal democracies embody permanent arguments about what constitutes just practice in the place and time of our societies, it can be appropriate to become wary of moral-high-ground rhetoric about “justice” (and other similar abstract nouns) until one knows more specifically what is, and is not, envisaged.

Nonetheless, it is important that such non-specificity should not be equated with labelling the key terms as “hurrah words,” even if it must be fully acknowledged that sometimes that is how they may be used in practice. One way of seeing the value of the terms is by noting that each root has an adjectival form, *hasid*, *shophet*, and *tsaddiq*, a form which comes to function as a noun in its own right. Of these three, *hasid* and *tsaddiq*, which come to the fore in classic Judaism, are my concern here (though I prescind from considering their rich historic Jewish embodiments).²² They both come to depict people who embody and display in themselves the core qualities of their living religious tradition. Of course, the terms can be used formally or casually of people who do not in reality display these core qualities. But in principle they are meant to depict people of moral and spiritual maturity, who have so understood and appropriated that which their faith stands for that they become illuminating for others also who may want to understand and/or appropriate that faith. In Christian terms, it is commonly recognized that saints perform such a role.

More modestly and mundanely, this is also a key point in the recent renewed appreciation of virtue ethics. Instead of focusing on abstract answers to various kinds of moral conundrum, the point of virtue ethics is to recognize that good responses to difficult moral questions and situations are most likely to come from a morally well-formed person, who has over time developed good habits and intuitions. The virtuous person, in a Christian as in a Jewish context, will display those qualities and that disposition which are part of being *hasid* and *tsaddiq*. Broadly speaking, the term *hasid* leans towards qualities such as devotion to God and kindness to others, while *tsaddiq* leans towards integrity in relating both to God and to other people. Again, there may be a non-specificity in such terms. But that should surely no longer, in principle, be a problem. The point becomes whether there are people whose character and disposition are such that they can reasonably be *trusted* to make good decisions and to act well, in ways that cannot necessarily be anticipated,²³ and may some-

²² The term *shophet*, “judge,” indicates a responsible role, not personal qualities, however much certain personal qualities are needed for the good fulfilling of that role.

²³ “Improvisation” has become a significant term in some recent ethical discussion.

times be counter-intuitive.²⁴ One does not need to know in advance what “righteousness” will look like, but rather one needs to be open to being able to recognize those people whose lives, sometimes taking surprising forms, will exemplify in practice important dimensions of integrity and caring for others.

Conclusion

Such people—the *hasid* and the *tsaddiq*, as formulated by Jewish tradition in relation to its Hebrew roots—have, as already noted, counterparts, which are expressed in the context of Christian tradition with other terms such as “believers,” “the faithful,” and “saints.”²⁵ In every case, the word seeks to express someone for whom relational and participatory engagement with God in the context of a continuing living religious tradition is an existential reality. In principle they are those who, in the particular contexts and traditions in which they may live, seek to fulfil God’s will “on earth as it is in heaven.” In the light of what I have contended about what it means to “know God,” they are also those in whom, if we know what to look for, God may be seen.

If we return to the Johannine literature in the New Testament, we can see the linkage between “knowing God” and “seeing God” especially in 1 John, which in canonical context is best read as an interpretive commentary on certain aspects of John’s Gospel.²⁶ The whole letter articulates a critical theological epistemology; or, in plain English, it addresses the question, “How can we know that we know God?” (1 John 2:3). Particularly in 4:1–21 there is extended focus on the question of how to recognize the reality of God, where the famous affirmation that “God is love” functions in context as a critical criterion to recognize whether or not claims to “know God” are warranted, and when they can be discounted.²⁷

²⁴ Of course, life being what it is, even the best people can go astray, and wider disciplines will always need to be part of a healthy context.

²⁵ Each of these terms is rooted in the Greek of the New Testament, with underlying forms in the Hebrew of the Old Testament.

²⁶ This is an observation about the function of 1 John in its existing literary-canonical context. It is without prejudice to whatever may be argued about the likely purpose of its author in the document’s context of origin, prior to its preservation and recontextualization within the Christian scriptural canon.

²⁷ It is dismaying that many major contemporary translations (e.g., NRSV, CEB, NIV) introduce a new editorial sub-heading before 1 John 4:7, in a way that separates what is said about love and God from the preceding passage about critical testing in 4:1–6, as though John were moving on from one issue to another. Rather, the one issue of

Beloved, let us love one another, because love comes from God [*ek tou theou estin*]. Everyone who loves—their reality comes from God [lit., they have been “born from God,” *ek tou theou*]. Whoever does not love does not know God. [Why not?] Because God is love. (4:7–8)

In other words, claims to know God are warranted only if the character and priorities of God are reflected in the lives of those who make the claim. Only if their lives display the love that characterizes God, who is love, can their claim to know God be affirmed. If not, it can be discounted. Further, as we read a few lines later:

Anyone who says, “I love God” yet does not love [lit., “hates”] their brother [and sister], is speaking falsely. For people who do not love a brother [and sister] whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. (4:20)

The point is that visible moral practice determines the reality, or otherwise, of claims about invisible spiritual reality. One discerns, or in a significant sense sees, the invisible reality of God via what can be seen in the regular mundane world.²⁸

What John expresses here in terms of love (*agape*) is surely continuous conceptually with what Jeremiah says about gracious kindness (*hesed*), justice (*mishpat*), and integrity (*tsedaqah*). In each context, a claim to know God is evaluated by whether or not the nature and priorities of God can be seen in the lives of those who make the claim.²⁹ The same concern is expressed in both Old and New, in both prophetic and apostolic contexts, albeit each with their own preferred terminology and emphasis.

Let us now finally return to our starting point, John’s portrayal of Jesus in his Gospel, and Jesus’s words to Philip about seeing God the Father in himself. The context of these words, in the farewell discourse, is that of Jesus as the way to the truth and life of God, a way that is realized by

recognizing what does, and does not, truly come from God (*ek theou*—as in 4:1) runs consistently, with varied formulation, throughout.

²⁸ In a different, but not unrelated, vein, some Christian tradition has developed a theology of icons as visible images of the invisible.

²⁹ There are, of course, important questions about how the unqualified accounts of Jeremiah and 1 John—with their, as it were, “all or nothing” timbre—are best understood and appropriated in regular mundane contexts, which tend to be full of qualifications. But that is a discussion for another time.

Jesus's own unreserved self-giving for others (John 13:1–4; 14:6–7). The reality of God is visible in Jesus through how he lives and what he does—a reality that is open to others also, to come to the Father in this same mode. The content of Jesus's way of living is not identical to that spoken of by Jeremiah, and extends it in various ways; but there remain deep continuities. So I would like to finish by returning to a prophetic idiom, as utilized in one of my favorite quotations from one of my most formative theological teachers, Nicholas Lash:

The search for God is not the search for comfort or tranquillity, but for truth, for justice, faithfulness, integrity: these, as the prophets tirelessly reiterated, are the forms of God's appearance in the world.³⁰

N:V

³⁰ Nicholas Lash, "Creation, Courtesy, and Contemplation," in *The Beginning and the End of 'Religion'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 164–82, at 179.