INTRODUCTION

> I would like to begin this study with the unusual confession that I shall be discussing a subject which, in the last analysis, I do not understand.
>
> —Ernst Käsemann (1968)

In his recent book *The Word Made Flesh: A Theology of the Incarnation*, Ian McFarland applies 'a Chalcedonianism without reserve' to the NT's portrayal of Jesus as the God of Israel and as a human being.[1] On McFarland's account,

> fundamental to a Chalcedonianism without reserve is the principle that because the divine nature is inherently invisible and so not capable of perception (1 Tim. 1:17; cf. Col. 1:15; 1 John 4:12), when we look at Jesus, what we see is his humanity only. It follows that no aspect of that which we perceive in Jesus – his miracles, his faith, his obedience, or anything else – can be equated with his divinity; all are fully and exclusively human, and thus created, realities.[2]

He then goes on to distinguish the 'what' – or nature – of Jesus from his 'who' – or hypostasis – and concludes:

> The upshot of applying the distinction between nature and hypostasis to the person of Jesus may be summarized in the following two theses:
>
> 1. When we perceive Jesus of Nazareth, we perceive no one other than God the Son, the second person of the Trinity.

[1] McFarland (2019).
[2] McFarland (2019), 13. Divine invisibility was also the subject of McFarland's *The Divine Image: Envisioning the Invisible God* (2005).

> 2. When we perceive Jesus of Nazareth, we perceive nothing other than created substance, and thus nothing that is divine.[3]

For McFarland, 'what we see in Jesus is simply and exhaustively human flesh and blood'.[4] While one does 'see' God in the sense that one can come to recognize that Jesus is God, '*what* is seen in any such encounter is purely human'.[5] God does not possess a substance available to the empirical senses or to any other kind of objectifying observation because God is not a part of the world. Because he remains distinct as its creator, to equate any portion of the world with God is to commit idolatry.[6] God is therefore invisible even when Scripture and theologians describe him as becoming flesh.

Such thoroughgoing invisibility affects the ways in which one could come to believe in God. For McFarland, miracles cannot display Jesus's divinity since the biblical narratives also portray non-divine figures like the prophets as capable of performing them.[7] Their very visibility renders them 'non-divine' and precludes their ability to directly reveal God, because 'to argue that the divine nature "shines forth" anywhere in Jesus' life seems to contradict the fundamental Christian conviction that the divine nature is inherently invisible'.[8] McFarland will later argue that the visible creation can and does attest to God as its creator and sustainer.[9] Yet his conviction that divinity is inherently invisible and his appeal to the Chalcedonian claim that the Son 'must be acknowledged in two natures, without confusion or change, without division or separation'[10] results in the assertion that Jesus's visible human life never

[3] McFarland (2019), 15.
[4] McFarland (2019), 15. He further notes: 'It is a central thesis of this book that an orthodox account of Jesus' divinity necessarily includes the affirmation that nothing divine can be perceived in him. All that can be perceived in him is his humanity, and because his humanity is purely and exhaustively human, no empirically identifiable feature of Jesus – his height, strength, speed, knowledge, gender, piety, or anything else – may be identified with the divine. A Chalcedonian understanding of the incarnation thus denies that Jesus' status as the "one mediator between God and humankind" (1 Tim. 2:5) depends on his possessing certain empirically observable characteristics that constitute a link or bridge between the human and the divine.'
[5] McFarland (2019), 15.
[6] McFarland (2019), 14.
[7] McFarland (2019), 12.
[8] McFarland (2019), 12.
[9] McFarland (2019), 25–26.
[10] McFarland (2019), 11.

directly reveals God. One is left to surmise that belief cannot be a function of visible encounters with Jesus.

Despite the apparent tension that his position creates between the scriptural narratives of a visible God (e.g., Gen 16:13; 18:1; 32:30; Exod 24:9–11; 33:11, 20; 34:5–6; Num 12:6–8; Deut 34:10; Judg 6:22; 13:22–23; 1 Kgs 22:19; Job 42:5; Isa 6:1; Ezek 1:1–28; Dan 7:9–11; Amos 9:1; Matt 5:8; John 6:46; 1 John 3:2; Rev 22:4) and a metaphysically rigorous account of divine transcendence, McFarland remains eager to ground his understanding of God's invisibility in the Bible itself. Because he takes the God revealed in the incarnation to be the God of Israel, he claims:

> If true knowledge of God comes through Jesus – whose life, in terms of both its immediate content and its broader Israelite context, is communicated in Scripture – then the words we use to talk about God must be grounded in the terms the biblical authors use to talk about God. And in this context it is significant that one of those things Scripture says about God is precisely that God cannot be seen.[11]

Scripture is the source, or at least provides the warrant, for the apophatic emphasis so prevalent in the theology of the creeds and thus for later theological endeavours. Nor should one fail to observe that, in the course of making his case for divine invisibility, McFarland makes frequent appeals to the Johannine literature (e.g., John 1:18; 1 John 4:12). The terms one predicates of God 'must hew closely to the biblical witness in order to ensure that they are interpreted in a manner consistent with God's own self-disclosure'.[12] God is invisible, even in deeply metaphysical ways, because John and his fellow biblical authors say so.

But what precisely *does* John say about God's invisibility? McFarland is surely right when he shows the centuries-long importance of divine invisibility for Christian theology and the extent to which the claim that God is both invisible and incarnate has been

[11] McFarland (2019), 25.

[12] McFarland (2019), 28. The full quotation runs as follows: 'Given that in this life we remain incapable of perceiving how the terms we apply to God encompass and complete their everyday application, it follows that their deployment in theological contexts must hew closely to the biblical witness in order to ensure that they are interpreted in a manner consistent with God's own self-disclosure rather than simply following the conventions of everyday use.'

grounded in the Johannine literature.[13] Yet on a plain reading, the Fourth Gospel seems to present God as both visible and invisible. At one level, John contends that God cannot be seen: the prologue concludes that 'no one has ever seen God' (1:18). In conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus adds that 'no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born from above' (3:3). In echo of Deut 4:12, Jesus later claims of God that 'you have never heard his voice or seen his form' (John 5:37), a statement he reiterates in 6:46 when he asserts: 'Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father.' Jesus also implies that 'the Jews' do not have the authority he possesses, because he can declare 'what I have seen in the Father's presence; as for you, you should do what you have heard from the Father' (8:38). God's invisibility appears to be assured.

While such statements invite McFarland's Chalcedonian reading, John's equally adamant claims about seeing God call it into question. The Logos, who is God, becomes flesh and dwells or 'tabernacles' among humanity with the result that 'we have seen his glory' (1:14). Jesus has also 'exegeted' the Father whom no one has ever seen (1:18) because Jesus has been in proximity to the Father (3:3–12; 8:38) and has seen him (6:46). The very statements that emphasize the Father's invisibility also undercut it by implying or announcing that Jesus has seen God.

As the narrative progresses, the emphasis shifts from invisibility to visibility. After the hour of glorification has struck, Jesus announces that the one who sees Jesus sees the Father (12:45; 14:9; cf. 15:24); and Thomas calls Jesus 'my Lord and my God' after seeing him (20:28–29). The sense that God is visible in Jesus finds further support in Jesus's manifestation of glory in the signs (2:11; 11:40; 12:37–43) and from the emphasis on seeing Jesus himself, particularly at the opening and close of the Gospel (1:29–36, 39, 46, 51; 4:29; 6:40, 62; 9:37; 12:15, 41; 16:16; 17:24; 19:5, 35, 37; 20:18, 20, 25). The notion that God remains invisible even in the flesh of Jesus is by no means certain. Numerous questions arise regarding the relationship between seeing God, seeing Jesus, and belief.

[13] Barnes (1993, 1995, 2002, 2003); Ayres (2010); and especially Kloos (2005, 2011) have shown the importance of divine invisibility in Patristic Trinitarian theology. Divine invisibility also continues to capture broader theological, ethical, historical, and artistic interest. Works by Finney (1994); Kessler (2000); Jensen (2005, 2008); Kleinberg (2015); Welz (2016); and Carnes (2018) are representative of broader cross-disciplinary studies.

From the perspective of a 'Chalcedonianism without reserve', one of the most pressing questions is whether the metaphysical foundations of Nicaea and Chalcedon are implicit in the Johannine narrative. What do the words 'visible' and 'invisible' mean and are they applicable to John's portrayal of God, in which ὁρατός and ἀόρατος never occur? Even the casual reader of John may query the extent to which one should privilege statements about not seeing God when numerous others suggest that he is visible in Jesus. One may also ask: if belief in Jesus as 'the Christ, the Son of God' is the purpose of John (20:31), then how does God's invisibility affect one's understanding of this purpose? Regarding human beings, what does it mean to 'see'? Is the 'sight' in question physical, metaphorical, or noetic; and do different approaches to invisibility condition how one understands 'sight' and its relation to 'belief'?

In response to these questions, this study argues that, for John, God must become physically visible in Jesus in order for belief to obtain. Belief in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God and the reception of life in his name are impossible unless God himself becomes visible in the incarnation. To put it positively, the one who sees God in Jesus has come to believe. There is much to say and there are many important qualifications to make about how I read John and how I intend to unfold this argument. First, however, I wish to tell the 'story' of divine invisibility in John at key points in the history of its reception and scholarship. Doing so will allow me to contextualize this study and make an argument for its value to the discipline.[14] Following this modified 'literature review', I will turn to methodological considerations and provide a brief overview of how I read the text before presenting the structure of the book as a whole.

Divine Invisibility in Johannine Scholarship

One of the most striking features of the study of divine invisibility in John is that 'invisibility' almost never receives a clear definition. As noted above, John never uses ἀόρατος in the Gospel; but most scholars are content to predicate 'invisibility' of God on the strength

[14] Frey (2018), 3 acknowledges what Johannine scholars have known for some time: the 'abundance of scholarly literature on the Gospel of John . . . can no longer be processed even by a specialist'. Comprehensive literature reviews are no longer possible. This 'review' targets influential strands of thought and prioritizes work on invisibility in the last fifteen years.

of the passages in which John and his Jesus insist that no one has ever seen him (1:18; cf. 5:37 and 6:46). It is surely reasonable to make this predication; yet the meaning of 'invisibility' is often contingent on the philosophical and theological assumptions that the reader brings to the text. Chief among these is the long-standing association between 'invisible' and 'immaterial' in the secondary literature.

One also finds that the relationship between invisibility and belief is often assumed rather than argued for. The two are rarely treated in dialogue with one another, despite the fact that assumptions about one have implications for the other. If I believe that God is invisible, then I am less likely to endorse a mode of belief in which sight plays a formative role. If I argue that sight can lead to belief, then I am more likely to accept the position that God can make himself visible in earthly space and time. In what follows, it will become apparent that – with important exceptions – Johannine scholarship has not always investigated the links between divine invisibility and belief, although it has often attempted to define belief and determine its relationship to sight and other senses.

With these observations in mind, one may undertake the following survey as a means of showing the intertwined 'gaps' that this study stands to resolve: the nature of invisibility and its relationship to faith. I begin with a brief account of the early Fathers since, as McFarland has shown, their readings of invisibility continue to influence contemporary scholarship. From the Fathers, who determine the underpinnings of mainstream Christianity for the Medieval and Reformation Churches, I will move directly to modern scholarship on John. Beginning with F. C. Baur, I trace influential work on divine invisibility in John before turning to specific clusters of Johannine scholarship.

The Fathers

For much of the last two millennia, the answers to the question of what invisibility means have been apophatic and Trinitarian. They are apophatic in the sense that, from Justin Martyr to Clement of Alexandria and Origen and then from Augustine to Thomas Aquinas and through to scholars like McFarland, 'invisibility' joins a cluster of predicates that define what God is not and that entail one another. A God who is metaphysically simple is a God who does not change and must therefore be a God who is not material and thus not corporeal or situated in space and time. Such a being is

necessarily invisible. He is not simply hidden; he is intrinsically unavailable to empirical vision. Thus, when the Bible describes a God that people see, it cannot be God-in-himself that they saw.[15]

The Trinitarian solution is twofold. For many of the Fathers, the theophanies are christological. In their accounts, visibility and invisibility often distinguish the Son from the Father. As the visible member of the Trinity, a feature the incarnation determines, the Son is necessarily the subject of the theophanies.[16] However, against the threat of the Arian-adjacent Latin Homoians, Augustine eventually came to contend that all divinity everywhere is necessarily invisible.[17] The Father is not greater than the Son because he is invisible and the Son is not; rather, the divine nature of the Son is as invisible as the divine nature of the Father. This need not prevent the Son from being present and active in the theophanies, but Augustine argues that he is not theologically obligated to be their subject by virtue of his visibility. Augustine introduces the concept of 'creature control' to explain how the Father can work through angels or created matter to interact with his creation while retaining the integrity of his divine nature.[18] Only the 'pure in heart' (Matt 5:8) will attain the sight of God in the beatific vision that follows the final judgement. Until then, God remains invisible.[19]

The metaphysical construal of invisibility provides the lens through which the Johannine statements about not seeing God are

[15] For good examples of the renewed interest in marrying Classical Theism to exegesis, see Carter (2021); Duby (2022, 2023); and Jamieson and Wittman (2022).

[16] Examples abound, but see Kloos (2005), who emphasizes the role of invisibility when tracing the christological reading of the theophanies across Justin Martyr (e.g., *1 Apol.* 62–63; *Dial.* 56); Hilary of Poitiers (e.g., *Trin.* 4.23–27), and Ambrose of Milan (e.g., *Exp. Luc.* 1.24–27) and offers further examples in her monograph (2011).

[17] Kloos (2011) provides an in-depth account of the development of Augustine's thought regarding divine invisibility and shows that while Augustine may be the first to break with a christological reading, Hilary and Ambrose had already sown the seeds for doing so. See, also, Barnes (1993, 1995, 2002, 2003), who, like Kloos, emphasizes the polemical nature of the Fathers' arguments, particularly Augustine's.

[18] Augustine makes these arguments in *De Trinitate* 1–3. Kloos (2005, 2011) and Barnes (2003) describe the historical and polemical situation and present Augustine's arguments in detail. See Chambers (2019) for a fascinating comparison of Augustine's notion of 'creature control' with Sommer's (2009) account of a multiplicity of divine bodies in ancient Israel.

[19] While it is not difficult to see the Platonic and Neoplatonic influences across the Fathers, one should bear in mind their commitment to the reality of the incarnation. Augustine, in particular, is critical of the Platonists for thinking that they could achieve the vision of God by way of philosophy alone. The incarnation is a necessary feature. See Ayres (2010), esp. 147.

read. Simultaneously, these statements become the warrant for applying such metaphysics to God. Once again, God is invisible because John 'says so'. Even by the second century, Clement of Alexandria had called John a 'spiritual gospel', thereby distinguishing it from the more earthbound, 'historical' narratives of the synoptics.[20] As he must be for so many of the Fathers, God must be invisible for Clement.[21] John is oriented towards a revelation of a God that not even the incarnation renders available to physical sight. In what follows, I will refer to the idea that God is necessarily and irrevocably invisible as an 'absolute invisibility'.

Modern Scholarship

This absolute invisibility also appears in the modern study of NT theology, even where that study has abandoned Platonist metaphysics. While Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus shaped the ancient and medieval church, Luther, Kant, and Hegel form the theological and philosophical backdrop to F. C. Baur and Rudolf Bultmann, both of whom read John as the apex of NT thought.[22] Baur and Bultmann also understood John to emphasize divine invisibility. For Baur, John 1:18 describes the impossibility of seeing God

> because God's essential being as such absolutely transcends everything finite and is, by its nature, invisible. If God is invisible in himself, then this of course entails that nothing corporeal can be predicated of God. It entails that his essential being is purely spiritual, as opposed to all that is corporeal.[23]

God is also spirit (4:24), which means that he is 'incompatible with spatial limitations' and 'by nature invisible. His invisibility is just the negative side of the positive expression that he is

[20] In *Hist. eccl.* 6.14.7, Eusebius gives this account of John, taken from Clement: 'Last of all, John, perceiving that the external facts had been made plain in the Gospel, being urged by his friends, and inspired by the Spirit, composed a spiritual Gospel. This is the account of Clement.'

[21] See *Strom.* 6.5, in which Clement quotes the *Preaching of Peter* and its description of God as ἀόρατος (invisible), ἀχώρητος (uncontained), ἀκατάληπτος (incomprehensible), ἀέναος (everlasting), ἄφθαρτος (incorruptible), ἀποίητος (unmade). Hägg (2006), 153–79 and Steenbuch (2017) provide an overview of the apophatic elements of Clement's theology.

[22] Morgan (2017), 236–60 has traced the similarities in their approaches to John.

[23] Baur (1860, ET = 2016), 334.

spirit'.[24] Furthermore, 'to say that no one has ever seen God does not rule out God's ability to be seen in a spiritual way, and God's being an object of representational and thinking consciousness'. For Baur, even when Jesus says that to see him is to see the Father (14:8–11), Jesus means that 'God as such can be seen only in a spiritual way'.[25] Jesus's very flesh is a 'non-physical corporeality, changeable, freely alterable', such that the phrase 'became flesh' 'cannot be understood as referring to a human nature in its authentic and full sense'.[26] John presents an idealism, 'in which, in the self-certainty of its own inner intuition ... even the historical reality is ultimately just an external form that mediates for consciousness what is true in itself'.[27] Thus, near the dawn of modern NT study, Baur presents the 'spiritual Gospel' as spiritual in a truly immaterial and invisible sense; the physicality of the incarnation and of revelation become negligible factors.

Like Baur, Bultmann reads John as the culmination of NT theology, and his construal of invisibility forms a central component of his reading.[28] From his 1930 article, 'Untersuchungen zum Johannesevangelium',[29] to his commentary on John,[30] Bultmann remains one of the few scholars in the last hundred years who directly addresses the theme of divine invisibility in the biblical literature. In these works, Bultmann resists the notion that Platonism drives John's understanding of invisibility, and he points out that God is physically visible in numerous Hebrew Bible texts and that the evidence for a metaphysical understanding of invisibility in John is scarce. Bultmann focuses on the σάρξ of Jesus as the sole locus of revelation, revealing an emphasis on corporeality that Baur would eschew.[31]

Despite these differences, Bultmann can still be understood as reading John to portray an absolute invisibility. On his neo-Kantian understanding of God's 'non-objectifiable' nature, God is

[24] Baur (2016), 334.
[25] Baur (2016), 334.
[26] Baur (2016), 342–43, cf. 358.
[27] Baur (2016), 376.
[28] Both thinkers accepted Gnosticism as the primary wellspring of Johannine thought.
[29] Bultmann (1930).
[30] Bultmann (1971).
[31] Nevertheless, idealism is important for both scholars. Where one can see the unfolding of Geist in Baur's reading of John, Bultmann's equally high view of John as the culmination of NT theology, especially in light of his demythologizing, shows a similarly Hegelian infiltration.

not available for humanity to grasp with the senses or by any other means. While this metaphysic is less precisely Platonic, it resembles aspects of apophatic thought, especially in the sense that humanity cannot come to know God or learn about him via empirical observation.[32] God remains 'invisible', and this notion of a 'non-objectifiable' God interlinks with the radical Lutheranism of Bultmann's teacher, Wilhelm Herrmann.

For Herrmann, only a psychological encounter with the risen Christ results in a psychological resurrection.[33] Here, the Lutheran understanding of justification meets the romance of Schleiermacher, the enlightenment constraints of Kant and Lessing, and, perhaps, the 'passionate subjectivity' of Kierkegaard. The result is that those who rely on the empirical foundations and data of history are guilty of 'justification by works'.[34] Read against Herrmann's radicalized justification, Bultmann's anti-empirical redaction criticism becomes a deeply Lutheran endeavour. John has taken an alleged 'signs source' and now critiques its reliance on human seeing. One ought to hear and accept Jesus and thus come to rely on God as the ground of all being. Those who need to see signs or God himself possess little or weak faith; they are seeking 'justification' on their own terms. Although Bultmann himself does not use 'invisible' or 'invisibility' to describe this strain of his thought, one may rightly speak of a principle of invisibility in Bultmann's work, in which God and divine truth remain invisible and must be accepted as such. The need to see and the act of seeing are weaknesses to which God, when he deigns to be visible, makes concession.[35] Invisibility and the belief predicated on it remain the ideal in terms of God's nature and in terms of human responses to him.

Bultmann remains the most influential Johannine scholar of his time and, arguably, of ours.[36] However, he was not alone in his

[32] Bultmann (1971), 81. On non-objectifiability, see Congdon (2015), 32–51.
[33] Jones (1992), 23–24.
[34] See Jones (1991), 24. Fergusson (1992), 12 also notes that 'any attempt to prove the validity of faith by either philosophy or science can only resemble a desire to be justified by works rather than by faith alone'. Barclay (2014), 83 observes that, for Bultmann: 'The gospel is neither factual record nor academic speculation about God but good news *pro me* ("the Son of God loved me and gave himself *for me*"; Gal 2:20). In radicalizing this tradition, Bultmann was strongly influenced by his teacher, Wilhelm Herrmann (1846–1922), for whom faith could be neither identified with nor dependent on objectively provable 'facts' (that would constitute an epistemological form of 'justification by works').'
[35] Bultmann (1971), 696.
[36] For Bultmann's continuing influence regarding the non-objectifiability of God and of God's invisibility, one can adduce many instances. Examples include Haenchen