

## ‘Some were saying, “He is good”’ (John 7.12b): ‘Good’ Christology in John’s Gospel?\*

JANE HEATH

*School of Divinity, History and Philosophy, King’s College, University of Aberdeen,  
Aberdeen, AB24 3UB.*

*email: j.heath@abdn.ac.uk*

Far from being the banality suggested by commentators, John’s use of the vocabulary of ‘goodness’ for Jesus (ἀγαθός and καλός) is christologically significant. It points to Jesus’ unity with God. The Johannine treatment of Jesus’ ‘goodness’ and interpretation of the Shema contrasts with and complements the Synoptic treatment of these themes in the rich man pericope (Mark 10.17–22 parr.).

**Keywords:** John’s gospel, monotheism, goodness, rich man, Shema, Christology, commandments

### 1. Introduction

It is the Feast of Tabernacles in Jerusalem, a bustling festival where the Jews are gathered to dwell in booths for eight days,<sup>1</sup> remembering God’s gift of shelter in the wilderness (Lev 23.43), and looking forward to his eschatological manifestation of his kingship on all the earth (Zech 14).<sup>2</sup> Before Jesus’ appearance on the scene, the crowds are already muttering about him: οἱ μὲν ἔλεγον ὅτι ἀγαθός ἐστιν, ἄλλοι [δὲ] ἔλεγον οὐ, ἀλλὰ πλανᾷ τὸν ὄχλον (‘Some people were saying, “He is good”; others were saying, “No, he is leading the people

\* Earlier versions of this paper were presented in 2009 for the John Seminar at the British New Testament Society Conference and for the New Testament Seminar at the University of Aberdeen. I am grateful to both audiences and to the editor of this journal for very helpful feedback. Errors and infelicities remain my own.

1 Possibly outside the Temple itself: cf. H. Ulfgard, *The Story of Sukkot: The Setting, Shaping, and Sequel of the Biblical Feast of Tabernacles* (BGBE 34; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998) 135, 177 on Neh 8.16; 11QT cols. 42 and 44.

2 On the Feast in general, see esp. Ulfgard, *Story of Sukkot*. Other literature includes: J. Daniélou, ‘Les Quatre-Temps de Septembre et la Fête des Tabernacles’, *MD* 46 (1956) 114–36; G. W. MacRae, ‘The Meaning and Evolution of the Feast of Tabernacles’, *CBQ* 22 (1960) 251–76; R. E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (AB 29; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 326–7; H. Ulfgard, *Feast and Future: Revelation 7:9–17 and the Feast of Tabernacles* (CBNTS 22: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1989) 108–30.

astray”,’ John 7.12). Commentators on the gospel usually have little to say about this verse, and if they do dwell on it, then it is the second, pejorative half that they focus on. This is true of great exegetes, such as Rudolf Schnackenburg and Charles Kingsley Barrett, but the most interesting and extended discussion in this vein is by James Louis Martyn.<sup>3</sup>

Martyn explains why it is that John 7.12 is so disappointing: after the healing of the cripple in ch. 5, John had recorded the Jews’ increased hostility toward Jesus:

διὰ τοῦτο οὖν μᾶλλον ἐζήτουν αὐτὸν οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι ἀποκτεῖναι, ὅτι οὐ μόνον ἔλυσεν τὸ σάββατον, ἀλλὰ καὶ πατέρα ἴδιον ἔλεγεν τὸν θεὸν ἴσον ἑαυτὸν ποιῶν τῷ θεῷ.

The Jews started seeking to kill him, because he was not only breaking the Sabbath, but also saying that God was his own father, making himself as great as God. (John 5.18)

John 7.1 then verbally repeats the first part of this verse, ἐζήτουν αὐτὸν οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι ἀποκτεῖναι (‘the Jews were seeking to kill him’). The repetition raises expectations of a claim about Jesus that will be of the magnitude of John 5.18—that he was ‘making himself as great as God’ and thus, from a hostile perspective, challenging monotheism. It is in the light of this, Martyn argues, that John 7.12 seems rather bland.<sup>4</sup>

However, like Schnackenburg and Barrett, Martyn does find that on closer inspection ‘He is leading the people astray’ is more significant than at first appears. The language of ‘leading astray’ can be traced through later accounts of the legal basis for Jesus’ death (Just. Mart. *Dial.* 69, 108; *Sanh.* 43a), to show that at least by the second century Jews were claiming that Jesus was put to death as one who tried to ‘lead [Israel] astray’, like the prophet or dreamer mentioned in Deut 13.6-10: there the same verb (πλανᾶν) is used for one who urges people to ‘go worship other gods, gods we have not known’ (Deut 13.6-7). That passage commands faithful Israelites to put this ‘person who is leading astray’ to death by stoning (Deut 13.10). Accounts of persecutions of Christians in the second century<sup>5</sup> suggest that Deut 13.6-10 was also turned against Jesus’ followers. Martyn and others thus argue that John was probably familiar with this text as a Jewish charge in his own day against Jesus and the Christians, and so

3 J. L. Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (2nd rev. ed.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1979) 60-8.

4 Martyn, *History and Theology*, 61.

5 Polycarp: *Polyc. Mart. Pol.* 12.2; it is also plausible that the ‘Ben Stada’ of rabbinic literature was a Christian persecuted on this charge, see *j. Sanh.* 25c, d; *b. Sanh.* 67a with discussion in Martyn, *History and Theology*, 82.

for that reason portrays it on the lips of the crowds who seek to kill him, as well as drawing attention several times to the attempts specifically to *stone* him, as Deuteronomy commanded (John 8.59; 10.31-3; 11.8).<sup>6</sup>

From a literary perspective, it is unlikely that the dark half of the diptych of the crowds’ beliefs about Jesus should be so rich in meaning, while the bright half that balances it semantically should be as banal as is suggested by the exegetes. From a theological perspective, it is unlikely that ‘He is good’ is in fact utterly banal in any case, for although ‘good’ can be as bland an adjective as the English ‘nice’ without context, where theological debates are in view it is an important claim that demands inspection. Indeed, Martyn’s formulation has turned the problem into more than a question simply of whether ‘He is good’ is banal (Schnackenburg’s word was ‘colourless’; Barrett’s was ‘inadequate’). Rather, Martyn’s presentation has raised the question as to whether ‘He is good’ offers any challenge to traditional Jewish understandings of monotheism, corresponding both to John 5.18, he was making himself *as great as* God, and to the implication of ὁ πλανῶν in John 7.12 that he is seeking to lead people to other, unknown gods. This question demands a closer study of Johannine vocabulary of ‘goodness’, its resonances in the early Christian tradition, and John’s own literary deployment of it.

## 2. John’s Vocabulary of ‘Goodness’: ἀγαθός and καλός

Greek has a range of adjectives that correspond to aspects of the English ‘good’ or the Hebrew טוב. Particularly prominent in the LXX as translations for טוב are ἀγαθός and καλός; χρηστός is rare outside the psalms; ὠραῖος occurs occasionally; ἐσθλός is absent. In John, ἀγαθός and καλός are the only terms in this semantic domain that appear.

J. H. Neyrey is the only scholar to my knowledge to have written specifically on John’s language of ‘goodness’. He draws a sharp distinction between ἀγαθός and

6 Martyn, *History and Theology*, 61-8; cf. C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St John* (2nd ed.; London: SPCK, 1978) 314; R. Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St John, Vol. 2: Commentary on Chapters 5-12* (HTCNT 2; London: Burns & Oates, 1980) 143-4. Other commentaries find ‘He is good’ similarly bland, and some do not comment at all: F. Godet, *Commentaire sur L’Évangile de Jean* (3 vols.; 3rd rev. ed.; Neuchâtel: Attinger, 1885) 3.15; R. Bultmann, *Das Evangelium des Johannes* (KEKNT 2/12; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1952) 222 n. 3; E. Haenchen, *Das Johannesevangelium: ein Kommentar* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1980) 347; D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Pillar New Testament Commentary; Leicester: Intervarsity; Grant Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991) 308; B. Witherington III, *John’s Wisdom: A Commentary on the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1995) 171; H. N. Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John: A Theological Commentary* (Grant Rapids, MI/Cambridge: Eerdmans, E.T. 1997) 260; L. Schenke, *Johanneskommentar* (Kommentare zu den Evangelien; Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1998) 160; C. S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (2 vols.; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003) 1.710.

καλός. However, the only text that he cites in support is Aristotle *Rhetoric* I.3.6—a surprising witness to choose, since Aristotle here contrasts τὸ καλόν not with τὸ ἀγαθόν but with τὸ συμφέρον. Neyrey's other piece of evidence is his observation (for which he gives no textual support) that the opposite of ἀγαθός is πονηρός but the opposite of καλός is αἰσχρός. This is often true (e.g. Aristotle *Rhetoric* I.3.5), but it did not always hold. In particular, the LXX and NT rarely use αἰσχρός at all and favour πονηρός as the opposite of both καλός and ἀγαθός.<sup>7</sup> John uses κακῶς as the opposite of καλῶς (John 18.23).

ἀγαθός and καλός could have different nuances, depending on date, provenance, and context. ἀγαθός is the general term for 'good', used of the ideal or formal 'good' and appearing in a wide range of contexts. καλός often evokes especially 'beauty' or 'nobility'. However, the two also frequently overlap closely. In the Greek world from the fifth century on, καλός and ἀγαθός were yoked in the expression καλὸς κἀγαθός or καλός τε καὶ ἀγαθός. This description of a good man was important originally in socio-political discourse, later also in more general discourse, or in specifically ethical contexts.<sup>8</sup> The same expression appears for the devout in hellenistic Jewish literature, including the LXX; and in the NT and other early Christian literature.<sup>9</sup>

καλός and ἀγαθός could also often be used in close association without being formally combined in a fixed expression. Plato considered very closely together the ideal forms of the good (ἀγαθόν), beautiful (καλόν), and true (e.g. *Rep.* VI.506d–VII.518b, esp. 507b; cf. *Hipp. Maj.* 297c); Aristotle sometimes distinguished them (e.g. *Metaph.* XIII.3.1078a36–7). Their combination in the notion of deity was taken up in Platonic fashion in Philo, the *Hermetica*, and in the work of some church fathers.<sup>10</sup>

In hellenistic Jewish literature, including the LXX, καλός and ἀγαθός are often used together without sharp distinction between them, e.g. 'they should assign forty-eight ἀγαθάς and καλάς cities to the Levites' (Jos. *Ant.* 4.67); 'Praise the

7 E.g. καλόν vs. πονηρόν (Gen 2.9, 17; 3.5, 22; Lev 27.10 (twice), 12, 14, 33; Num 24.13; Josh 23.15; Ps 34.12; Amos 5.14–15; Mic 3.2; Mal 2.17; Isa 5.20; Matt 7.17–18 etc.); ἀγαθόν vs. πονηρόν (Gen 50.20; 1 Sam 25.21; 2 Sam 13.22; 14.17; Neh 2.10; Eccles 12.14; Sir 13.24; 14.5; Isa 7.15–16; Ezek 36.31, Matt 5.45 etc.). κακόν is also quite often used as the opposite of ἀγαθόν (Num 14.23; Deut 30.15; Mark 3.4 etc.).

8 H. Wankel, 'Kalos kai Agathos' (PhD diss.; Julius-Maximilians-Universität zu Würzburg, 1961); W. Grundmann, 'καλός', *TDNT* 3 (1965) 538–40; W. Donlan, 'The Origin of καλός κἀγαθός', *AJP* 94 (1973) 365–74.

9 E.g. Jos. *Ant.* 10.188; 15.373; Tob 7.6; 9.6; 2 Macc 15.12; 4 Macc 1.10; 3.18; 4.1; 11.22; 13.25; 15.9; Luke 8.15; Cl. Al. *Strom.* 7.3.15. J. B. Weaver, 'The Noble and Good Heart: καλοκἀγαθία [*sic*] in Luke's Parable of the Sower', *Scripture and Traditions: Essays on Early Judaism and Christianity in Honor of Carl R. Holladay* (ed. P. Gray and G. R. O'Day; NovTSup 129; Leiden: Brill, 2009) 151–71.

10 E.g. Philo *Leg. Gaj.* 5; CH XI.3; see further: Grundmann, 'καλός', 542–3; G. W. H. Lampe, ed., *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1961) 699.

Lord for the Lord is ἀγαθός; sing praises to his name, for it is καλόν’ (Ps 134.3).<sup>11</sup> In the NT the two also occur in close combination: ‘Every good (ἀγαθόν) tree produces good (καλοῦς) fruit’ (Matt 7.17-18, twice), ‘do good works (ἀγαθοεργεῖν), be rich in good works (ἐν ἔργοις καλοῖς)’ (1 Tim 6.18).<sup>12</sup> This last quotation cites a tradition of ‘good works’ which is common to Judaism and Christianity; rabbis discuss them as טובים טוים, and in the LXX and NT ἀγαθὰ ἔργα and καλὰ ἔργα both occur widely.<sup>13</sup>

Since καλός and ἀγαθός were often closely related, this essay will differentiate them sharply only if the Johannine context demands it. This is not to assume that they are ‘synonyms’, although it is plausible that John intended them as a pair of words to highlight a key theme by elegant variation, much as he did with the pairs ἀγαπῶ and φιλῶ,<sup>14</sup> or ὥρα and καιρός.<sup>15</sup> Rather, the decision to treat together καλός and ἀγαθός responds to the fact that they are in the same semantic domain, which in Hebrew and English respectively is covered by a single adjective, and that the lexical evidence outside John forbids presupposing a sharp distinction, while the study of John’s language of ‘goodness’ for Jesus would be incomplete if only one of the two terms were examined.

### 3. The Wider Context for ‘Good’ Christology

In the context of NT scholarship, the project of investigating the use of these particular terms stirs the debate well remembered from the response to Kittel’s *Wörterbuch*, about word studies vs. concept studies.<sup>16</sup> The ‘goodness’ of Jesus and of God is perceptible in many ways without the presence of the particular term, hence as a ‘concept’ much work has been done on it before. Is a study of the application of the adjective ἀγαθός to Jesus in John, or even of the range of adjectives ἀγαθός and καλός, likely not merely to repeat previous work, but more importantly to circumscribe and distort the topic of the goodness of Jesus, because of its lexical focus? These are not insignificant questions, but a study focusing on the use of these particular words in John is useful if it can be shown that words for ‘good’ were important for early readers. This section will briefly consider the role of ‘goodness’ in Greek philosophy, Paul, and the

11 Cf. Eccles 5.17; Zech 9.17.

12 Cf. 1 Tim 5.10.

13 E.g. καλὰ ἔργα (Matt 5.16; 21.10; Mark 14.6; 1 Tim 3.1; 5.10, 25; 6.18; Tit 2.7, 14; 3.8, 14; Heb 10.24; 1 Pet 12.2); ἀγαθὰ ἔργα (Job 21.16; Acts 9.6; Rom 2.7; 13.3; 2 Cor 9.8; Eph 2.10; Phil 1.6; Col 1.10; 1 Tim 2.10; 2 Tim 2.21; 3.17; Tit 3.1). See further: Str.-B. 4.559-610; Grundmann, ‘καλός’, 545-8; and below, p. 532.

14 M. Lattke, *Einheit im Wort: Die spezifische Bedeutung von ἀγάπη, ἀγαπᾶν und φιλεῖν im Johannesevangelium* (SANT 41; Munich: Kösel, 1975) 11.

15 My thanks to Yong Shin Jung for pointing out these comparanda.

16 J. Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1961) esp. 206-62.

Synoptics, as scholars have widely found relationships between these and John in other ways.

In the Greek philosophical tradition, the language of 'goodness' was given prominence by Plato when he began his pattern-story for education in his city with the characteristics of the god, of which the first is, 'God is in actual reality good' (*ἀγαθὸς ὁ γε θεὸς τῶ ὄντι*, *Rep.* II.379b1), and he made a sight of the form of the good and the true the end of the philosopher's pilgrimage (*Rep.* VI.506d–VII.518b). By 'good', he envisaged a single, transcendent One. Aristotle's discussion of the good opposed this; he argued that we should speak only of 'good' in particular categories of human experience, the good in quality is virtue, in essence it is divinity or reason, and so on.<sup>17</sup> These two traditions of how to think about the 'good' developed over the following centuries in new ways. The Stoics were more influenced by Aristotle, but Philo and the Hermetica by Plato. For them, *καλόν* and *ἀγαθόν*, both together and separately, remained closely connected with the deity.<sup>18</sup>

'Good' (*ἀγαθός*) emerged occasionally as a keyword in a wider debate about the boundaries between humanity and god. Diogenes, the Cynic of Sinope, is reported to have said that 'good men are images of gods' (*DL* 6.2.51);<sup>19</sup> Philostratus records that Apollonius of Tyana learned from the Indians that good men are worthy of the title 'god', and used this as part of his defence at his trial, when charged with having received the appellation 'god' (*Philostratus Vit. Ap.* 3.18; 8.5).<sup>20</sup> For these philosophers, 'god' was not the Platonic transcendent idea, but present in mortal men of virtue.<sup>21</sup> This contrasts with the Platonic tradition of *homoiosis theoi*, whereby men through virtue become *like* gods, which was also widespread in the first century, though it deployed a broad range of keywords for the relevant virtues required for the transformation.<sup>22</sup> Wisdom of

17 The main discussions in Aristotle are in *EN* I, esp. 6.1096a11–8.1099b8; *EE* I.8.1217b16–1218a32 cf. 1217b2325; 1218a33–38. Other passages are identified and concisely discussed in J. M. Cooper, 'The Magna Moralia and Aristotle's Moral Philosophy', *AJP* 94 (1973) 338–42. On the relationship between τὸ καλόν and τὸ ἀγαθόν in ethics, see *EN* III.5–IV.9 with M. Palakuk, *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2005) 153–6.

18 W. Grundmann, 'ἀγαθός etc.', *TDNT* 1 (1964) 10–15; Grundmann, 'καλός' 542–3; and n. 10, above.

19 G. H. van Kooten, *Paul's Anthropology in Context: The Image of God, Assimilation to God, and Tripartite Man in Ancient Judaism, Ancient Philosophy and Early Christianity* (WUNT 1.232; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008) 99–101.

20 H. Windisch, *Paulus und Christus: Ein biblisch-religionsgeschichtlicher Vergleich* (UNT 24; Leipzig: Hinrich, 1934) 71. Cf. Nero appears as 'the good god' (*ἀγαθὸ θεῶ*) on a votive inscription: A. Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient Near East* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, E.T. 1940) 349.

21 Similarly: Aristotle, *EN* 7.1–2.1145a19–24.

22 Van Kooten, *Paul's Anthropology*, 124–80.

Solomon stands in this tradition when wisdom is said to be ‘a spotless mirror of God’s activity and an image of his goodness (ἐικὼν τῆς ἀγαθότητος αὐτοῦ); though she is one, she is capable of all things, and abiding in herself she makes all things new and goes across into holy souls in each generation and makes them friends of God and prophets’ (Wis 7.26-27). This carefully preserves the distinction between humanity and god, while articulating how Wisdom, as image not of God but of his goodness, transforms souls not into gods, but into friends and prophets of God.

In Christian tradition, Paul nowhere calls Jesus ‘good’ in so many words. He underlines often that Christians are to be good, and that God is good to them; this presupposes the ascription of ‘good’ at least to ‘the Christ-event’, but Paul’s understanding of the sinlessness of Jesus himself has been much debated in view of texts like ἐν ὁμοιώματι σαρκὸς ἁμαρτίας (Rom 8.3), or τὸν μὴ γνόντα ἁμαρτίαν ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν ἁμαρτίαν ἐποίησεν (2 Cor 5.21).<sup>23</sup>

The Synoptics have a little more to say than Paul does about calling Jesus ‘good’. It is very plausible that John had access to some form of the Synoptic tradition; for a literary relationship to Mark and Luke there is not insignificant evidence.<sup>24</sup> It is in Mark and Luke that the story about Jesus’ encounter with the rich man raises the question of the ‘goodness’ of Jesus himself explicitly. According to these two gospels, the rich man approached Jesus and addressed him, ‘Good teacher’; Jesus’ sharp reaction suggests that he perceived the epithet as anything but banal or ‘colourless’. ‘Why do you call me *good*?’ he said, ‘No one is *good* except One, God’ (οὐδεὶς ἀγαθὸς εἰ μὴ εἷς ὁ θεός, Mark 10.18//Luke 18.19). εἷς ὁ θεός—this closing expression probably cites the *Shema*, the central confession of Judaism.<sup>25</sup> This is an index of how much is at stake for *theology* in the application of ‘good’ to Jesus in the Synoptics, at least in Jesus’ eyes.

23 For the debate: V. P. Branwick, ‘The Sinful Flesh of the Son of God (Rom 8:3): A Key Image of Pauline Theology’, *CBQ* 47 (1985) 246–62; R. Bell, ‘Sacrifice and Christology in Paul’, *JTS* 53 (2002) 1–27.

24 The ‘Johannine Question’ continues to be much debated, but some form of relationship is now widely accepted. See esp.: A. Denaux, ed., *John and the Synoptics* (BETL 101; Leuven: Leuven University, 1992), esp. the contributions of Neiryck and Barrett; D. M. Smith, *John Among the Gospels: The Relationship in Twentieth-Century Research* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992); M. Labahn and M. Lang, ‘Johannes und die Synoptiker: Positionen und Impulse seit 1990’, *Kontexte des Johannesevangeliums: Das vierte Evangelium in religions- und traditions-geschichtlicher Perspektive* (ed. J. Frey and U. Schnelle; WUNT 1.175; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004) 443–516.

25 The history and meaning of the *Shema* is another major debate, but its citation here is likely: see esp. K. H. Tan, ‘The Shema and Early Christianity’, *TynB* 59 (2008) 203–6; cf. Athanasius *Orationes tres contra Arianos* 26.336.13–17.

The meaning of the pericope is much debated. The main lines of debate are very well known and there is no need to reiterate them here.<sup>26</sup> Most importantly for the present discussion, the pericope is intended to provoke reflection on the application of 'good' to Jesus. His response in Mark 10.18 to the rich man's use of the epithet ἀγαθός for him does not close down answers: he does not say *either* 'I am not good' or 'I am god', though his words have been received in both ways by readers from antiquity to today.<sup>27</sup>

Matthew's version of the pericope has often been understood as evidence for an early interpretation of Mark 10.18 that heard in Jesus' words a denial of his own goodness. In Matthew, the rich man does not address Jesus as 'Good teacher', but asks only, 'What good thing must I do to inherit eternal life?' and Jesus replies, 'Why do you ask me about the good? He Who Is Good is One (εἷς ἐστὶν ὁ ἀγαθός)' (Matt 19.16-17). Scholars see this as a deliberately 'sanitised' redaction of Mark, written in an historical setting where Mark 10.18 was an embarrassment to Christian theology.<sup>28</sup> However, Matthew goes further: where in Mark and Luke Jesus' instruction to the rich man begins, 'One thing you lack . . .' (Mark 10.21; Luke 17.22), in Matthew it begins, 'If you want to be perfect (τέλειος) . . .' (Matt 19.21). Only once before has Jesus spoken about the command to perfection in Matthew; that was in the Sermon on the Mount, where he said, 'Be perfect (τέλειος), as your heavenly father is perfect (τέλειος)' (Matt 5.48). Perfection there was likeness to the father; in speaking to the rich man, it becomes likeness to Jesus, for Jesus' command about how to be perfect is to give up everything and 'follow me' (Matt 19.21). In the LXX, τέλειος corresponds to the Hebrew דַּמַּט; it suggests blamelessness before God (Gen 6.9; Deut 18.13; 2 Sam 22.26; Wis 9.6; Sir 44.17) or the perfection of his 'way' and 'teaching' (2 Sam 22.31; Ps 18.30; 19.7), but not usually a quality of God himself.<sup>29</sup> In philosophical Greek it indicates the maturity of having attained the 'end' (τέλος), but although philosophers speak of humans and other creatures as having 'ends', the perfection of the deity involves no progression to a goal. Matthew's use of τέλειος for the heavenly father in the Sermon on the Mount probably implies already a christology that associates *imitatio dei* with *imitatio Christi*. In the literary context of the first gospel, however, Matt 19.21 appears to be an allusion to Matt 5.48. This suggests that in the rich man pericope Matthew does not merely avoid the issue that Mark 10.17-18 raises as to whether Jesus is good as God is good. Matthew's text suggests

26 An article that deserves more attention than it has received is J. C. O'Neill, "Good Master" and the "Good" Sayings in the Teaching of Jesus', *IBS* 15 (1993) 167-78.

27 V. Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (London: Macmillan, 1952) 426-7; O'Neill, "Good" Sayings', 167-8.

28 E.g. F. W. Beare, *The Gospel according to Matthew* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981) 394; W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison, *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (3 vols.; ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988-97) 3.42.

29 But cf. Deut 32.4. Thanks to Markus Bockmuehl for these references.



awareness of not one but *two* ways of reading the Mark 10.18: not only the challenge that ‘Jesus is not good (ἀγαθός)’, as a result of which problematic ambiguity in the opening exchange with the rich man is avoided, but also the counter-assertion that although ἀγαθός is reserved for God alone, in being the person to follow in order to become τέλειος, Jesus offers a model like the heavenly father (*and* the heavenly father offers a model like Jesus).

If this is a correct reading of Matthew, then it suggests that Matthew found Mark 10.18 an occasion for reflecting on the extent, character, and limits of the proximation of Jesus to God, leading him to point toward an aspect of the unity between father and son. On this theme of unity Matthew does not go nearly as far as John, notwithstanding the so-called ‘Johannine thunderbolt’ in Matt 11.26-30,<sup>30</sup> but the redaction of the rich man pericope suggests a direction that John took much further. Even without Matthew’s evidence, Jesus’ response to the rich man in Mark 10.18 // Luke 18.19 remains at least *open* to an interpretation in terms of Johannine christology that ‘I and the father are one’ (John 10.30) and that ‘the son cannot do anything of himself, but what he sees the father doing’ (John 5.19),<sup>31</sup> for it highlights two themes on which John did reflect: the goodness of Jesus and his unity with God, which is the Johannine interpretation of the monotheistic *Shema*.<sup>32</sup> Acceptance of Johannine christology facilitated the early patristic reading of Mark 10.18 as a claim by Jesus to divinity.<sup>33</sup> John was aware that it was controversial to say of Jesus, ‘He is good’ (John 7.12), though he includes no close reworking of the rich man pericope. He does, however, use ἀγαθός for Jesus on two separate occasions, and καλός a number of times; by contrast, in the Synoptics only ἀγαθός is applied directly to Jesus, and that only this once. This lends the theme a relative prominence in John’s gospel, albeit in a distinctive way. Such convergence of interest with the Synoptics in both the verbal occasion for theological reflection, and in the theological themes that are raised, makes it significant to investigate more closely John’s reception of Jesus as ‘good’ and its relationship, theological if not historical, to the Synoptic tradition.

This essay will examine in literary sequence each of the passages in John’s gospel where he uses the terms ἀγαθός or καλός in relation to Jesus. The central questions of the discussion as a whole will be Martyn’s challenge about

30 K. von Hase, *Geschichte Jesu nach akademischen Vorlesungen* (Leipzig : Breitkopf & Härtel, 1876) 422; cf. A. Denaux, ‘The Q-Logion Mt 11,27 / Lk 10,22 and the Gospel of John’, *John and the Synoptics* (ed. Denaux) 163-200.

31 J. A. Bengel, *Gnomon* (ed. E. Bengel and J. C. F. Steudel; 3rd ed.; 2 vols.; Tübingen: Ludov, 1850) 1.222-3.

32 C. K. Barrett, ‘The Old Testament in the Fourth Gospel’, *JTS* 48 (1947) 161-2.

33 R. E. Brown, *An Introduction to New Testament Christology* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1994) 174. Discussion of the Synoptic verse was significant in the Trinitarian debates of the fourth century: Athanasius *De Sancta Trinitate* XXVIII, 1133.28-53; 1136.22, 41-4; 1141.1.

whether 'He is good' implies any significant reevaluation of Jewish understandings of monotheism, and, secondly, the relationship (theological if not historical) of Jesus' 'goodness' to the Synoptic pericope about the rich man.

#### 4. Passages in John's Gospel where ἀγαθός or καλός Appears

##### 4.1. 'Can anything good (ἀγαθόν) come out of Nazareth?' (John 1.46); 'You have saved the good (καλόν) wine till now' (John 2.10)

The first time 'goodness' is mentioned in John's gospel is not in ch. 7, in the account of the Feast of Tabernacles, but at the calling of the first disciples in ch. 1, then it is picked up in the story of the wedding at Cana in ch. 2. Nathanael's question, 'Can anything *good* come out of Nazareth?' (John 1.46) is not unreasonable from a historical perspective quite apart from the scriptures to which Philip referred: messianic claimants from Nazareth had caused some trouble (Jos. *Ant.* 20.5; Acts 5.36-37).<sup>34</sup> However, doubt as to whether good can come thence is swiftly laid to rest in the intimate encounter that follows: Jesus recognises Nathanael as 'a true Israelite, in whom there is no treachery', and Nathanael Jesus as, 'The son of God; the King of Israel'. These mutual acknowledgements in trust and anticipated fidelity mirror the perfect relationship also between Israel and her God, which is often expressed biblically with the twofold 'I-thou' formula: 'Thou shalt be my people' and 'I shall be thy God'. In both cases, the mutual, self-giving recognition binds each side in love and devotion to the other alone.<sup>35</sup>

Nathanael's choice of words does not necessarily imply recognition at this stage of a person who is more than human, or who was before the world began. 'Son of God' and 'King of Israel' can both be understood in purely human terms. Jesus' response, however, indicates how much more is involved: this Son of *Man*, however humanly Nathanael has understood him up to this point, promises to be perceived as the thoroughfare of divine revelation and, by probable allusion to Jacob's ladder, the very locus of the vision of God.

Thus far, Nathanael's question, 'Can anything *good* come out of Nazareth?' is answered without repetition of the keyword 'good' (ἀγαθόν), though the question is found to open onto a direct, intimate encounter with the divine, and one that is structured according to Jewish expectations of fidelity between Israel and God. Another term for 'good', however, καλόν, features prominently in the episode that immediately follows this meeting. The scene is a wedding; this resonates

34 E. C. Hoskyns, *The Fourth Gospel* (ed. F. N. Davey; 2 vols.; London: Faber & Faber, 1940) 1.188-9.

35 Cf. E. Norden, *Agnostos Theos: Untersuchungen zur Formgeschichte Religiöser Rede* (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1956) 177-239. On the relationship between the so-called 'covenant formula' and the *Shema*: E. Aurelius, 'Der Ursprung des Ersten Gebots', *VT* 100 (2003) 1-21.

with the intimate confession of trust between Nathanael, true Israelite, and Jesus, son of God, Israel’s holy king: that encapsulated the relationship between Israel and her God in the Hebrew bible, often portrayed there as marriage.<sup>36</sup> The location for the wedding in John 2 is Cana, which we later learn is Nathanael’s home town (John 21.2). Politically, much as no good came from Nazareth, our (rather limited) evidence about Cana points to problems there also.<sup>37</sup> Here, however, Jesus performs his first sign, and thus reveals his glory. What he does is to turn water into wine—and not just any wine, but, as the host ignorant of its source comments, ‘good wine’ (καλὸν οἶνον): ‘Every human being’, he says, ‘offers first the good wine (καλὸν οἶνον) and when the guests are drunk, the worse, but you have kept the good wine (καλὸν οἶνον) till now’ (John 2.10).

This abundant, miraculous provision of good wine recalls vivid depictions of the eschatological, materialistic experience of God’s goodness envisaged in earlier Jewish tradition, beginning in the OT. Amos reports God speaking of a time when the treader of grapes shall overtake the one who sows seed and the mountains shall drip sweet wine and all the hills shall flow with it. Cities are promised, where Israel will plant vineyards and drink their wine (Amos 9.13-14). Jeremiah writes vividly of how God’s people ‘shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion, and they shall be radiant over *the goodness of the Lord* (ἐπ’ ἀγαθὰ κυρίου), over the grain, *the wine*, and the oil, and over the young of the flock and the herd; their life shall become like a watered garden, and they shall never languish again’ (Jer 31.12 [LXX 38.12]). Baruch learns from God of extraordinary viticultural abundance and of the hungry seeing ‘marvels every day’ (2 Bar 29.5-6). In Gen 49.10-12, the Messiah was interpreted as someone who would wash his garments in wine, his robes in the blood of grapes, and whose eyes would be darker than wine. Hengel also points out that ‘the wine-cup, pitcher, grape-leaf and grape appear frequently on the coins of the uprisings of 66-73 and 132-5, which were motivated by eschatological-Messianic considerations’.<sup>38</sup> The good wine at Cana, then, seems one sign that the messianic age is now here.

John emphasises the significance of this moment by summarising: ‘This was the beginning of the signs Jesus did in Cana in Galilee and manifested his glory, and his disciples believed in him’ (John 2.11). This is the first time that ‘glory’ has been mentioned since the prologue, where it was used programmatically in the statement: ‘the word became flesh and tabernacled among us and we

36 E.g. Cant. *passim*; Isa 49.18; 62.5; Jer 2.2, 32; Ezek 16; Hos 1-3.

37 Cana is likely to have been a Zealot stronghold in the war of 66-70 CE: Jos. *Vita* 86 with A. Geysler, ‘The Semeion at Cana of the Galilee’, *Studies in John: Presented to Professor Dr. J. N. Sevenster on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday* (ed. A. Geysler; NovTSup 24; Leiden: Brill, 1970) 13, 21.

38 M. Hengel, *Studies in Early Christology* (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1995) 315. On materialism in Jewish eschatological hope: M. Weinfeld, ‘Jeremiah and the Spiritual Metamorphosis of Israel’, *ZAW* 88 (1976) 47 n. 110.

beheld his *glory*, the *glory* as of the only begotten from the father, full of grace and truth' (John 1.14). That opening claim summarised John's christology and indeed his gospel. At Sinai too God 'tabernacled among' the Israelites, first at the tent of meeting at Sinai and then through the building of the tabernacle there as his permanent dwelling place. At Sinai it was granted the Israelites to 'behold his glory', which was intended to ground their faith and obedience to the divine law (Exod 24.16-17). John develops his expression 'full of grace and truth' three verses later into a comparison of 'grace and truth' through Jesus with the gift of the law through Moses, and thus he suggests a comparison between Sinai where the law was given and the incarnation, wherein Jesus dwelt among us, 'full of grace and truth'. Thus the first mention of 'glory' in the prologue associates it with the theophany at Sinai.<sup>39</sup>

The miracle at Cana is where *glory* is next mentioned in the gospel; John links the manifestation of *glory* to the sign consisting in *good* wine. God's *glory* and his *goodness* are associated in a number of passages in the OT, but the most significant of these is again the Exodus account of Sinai.<sup>40</sup> There Moses asked God to show him his *glory* (כבוד); in Hebrew, God responded with the promise to make all his 'goodness' (כל־טובי) pass before Moses; in the Greek, however, the LXX translator homogenised God's response with Moses' petition; he translated the Hebrew 'I shall make *all my goodness* pass before you' with the more personal, 'I shall pass before you *in my glory*' (τῆ δόξῃ μου, Exod 33.18-19).<sup>41</sup> So in the prologue when John first mentions beholding divine glory in the incarnation, he evokes Sinai; the first time he picks this up in the gospel itself, the link between seeing the *glory* and seeing the *goodness* of God (realised here in the *good things* he gives through Jesus) develops the association.

In these opening scenes 'goodness' associated with Jesus emerges as anything but banal or 'colourless'. It receives definition but of a different kind from in the rich man pericope in the Synoptics. Unlike in that pericope the 'luxury' miracle at Cana implies no critique on material satisfaction. And yet, like in the rich man episode there is a challenge to interpreting goodness as *mere* material ease, for there is a poignant side to Cana. Jesus is not recognised; the *goodness* of his wine is not in doubt, but the host who acknowledges it does not acknowledge Jesus' own goodness or recognise that this goodness is the goodness of God. The only ones who perceive Jesus' glory are his disciples; by and large, his goodness is hidden. More darkly still, 'my hour has not yet come' points to when it does come, when Mary appears in the narrative for the second time but now at the foot of the cross.<sup>42</sup> These aspects of humility and sombreness define an aspect of the

39 Brown, *Gospel*, 1.32-4.

40 J. Ferreira, *Johannine Ecclesiology* (JSNTSup 160; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998) 142.

41 For John's use of both LXX and Hebrew scriptures, see Barrett, *Gospel*, 27-30.

42 Some scholars think the blood and water from Jesus' side at the cross recall the water made wine at Cana. This is plausible but not certain and is often associated with a strongly

call to ‘give up everything and follow’ Jesus which is less well drawn out in the rich man episode in the Synoptics because of their particular focus on wealth. John does not use the language of ‘give up everything and follow’, but Cana is integral to the call of the disciples since it is they who there first behold his glory in the good things he gives, and believe in him.

#### 4.2. ‘He is good (ἀγαθός)’ (John 7.12)

Scholars have noted a number of links between the early chapters of the gospel and the account of Tabernacles in ch. 7. Nathanael’s initial doubt, ‘Can anything good come out of Nazareth?’ is recalled in the crowds’ doubt, ‘Surely the Christ does not come from Galilee?’; in both cases, the uncertainty is at least partly rooted in the use of scripture to identify the messiah (John 1.45; cf. 7.42). Secondly, Jesus’ brothers, before they urge him to manifest himself at Tabernacles, have only appeared once before: namely, when they were at Capernaum with him, his mother and disciples in 2.12. They are as awkward about Tabernacles in ch. 7 as his mother was about the wedding in ch. 2: they want him to manifest himself dramatically at the festivities, but he says his time has not yet come (John 7.4; cf. 2.3-4). Thirdly, Cana is immediately followed by the episode where Jesus expels traders from the Temple; Ulfgard points out that this is a sign of the inauguration of the messianic age in accordance with Zech 14.21; similarly, the appearance of Jesus at the Temple at Tabernacles offering fountains of living water marks the start of the messianic age, plausibly also drawing on images from Zech 14.8.<sup>43</sup>

In these ways, then, when some of the crowds start to mutter, ‘He is good’, the scene is similar to one where Jesus’ ‘goodness’ has already been manifested and explored. But in other ways, the scene is different. It is the Feast of Tabernacles. Booths have been built in Jerusalem and eschatological expectation grows high: discussion among the crowds increasingly centres on whether ‘he’ is the messiah or not (John 7.26-7, 31, 40-3). The comment ‘He is good’ is the one that opens the debate about Jesus at this festival.

For readers of the gospel with the prologue, it has already been celebrated that the word became flesh and ‘tabernacled (ἐσκήνωσεν) among us and we have seen his glory’ (John 1.14). For these readers, Jesus’ appearance in the flesh at the Feast of Tabernacles (σκηνοπηγία) evokes the divine ‘tabernacling’ of the *word made flesh*. To attentive readers, the crowds’ ‘He is good’ is a further answer to Nathanael’s question, ‘Can anything good come out of Nazareth?’ in addition to the responses already given in John 1.46-2.11. The depiction of the

---

sacramental reading of John. See, e.g., R. E. Brown, ‘The Johannine Sacramentary Reconsidered’, *TS* 23 (1962) 199-201.

<sup>43</sup> Ulfgard, *Story of Sukkot*, 258-61.

various things Jesus did at the Feast details the 'goodness' to which the crowd refers. It is manifested in manifold ways, but it is never to be seen apart from the goodness of God, who gave the tabernacles in the wilderness and whose word here tabernacles in flesh; whose teaching Jesus gives (John 7.16-17); whose glory Jesus seeks (v. 18); whose law Jesus manifests to a point beyond visible circumcision in the flesh to the healing of the 'whole man' according to 'true judgement' (vv. 19-23). God is Jesus' whence and whither (vv. 27-9, 33-6), and the idea that Jesus will go to the Greeks of the diaspora only serves to evoke the eschatological manifestation of God's kingship over all the earth (v. 35; cf. Ps 86.9; Isa 66.18, 33), while the streams offered by Jesus on the last day of the feast evoke the divinely granted fountains bestowed on the day of the Lord (vv. 37-9; cf. Zech 14.8). For the readers, then, 'He is good' depicts Jesus' implication in God's goodness.

For those actually discussing 'him' in the streets of Jerusalem amidst the booths, John's presentation suggests that neither his supporters nor his detractors fully understood Jesus. All real dialogue is between them, the different groups at the festival; the interweaving of their debate with Jesus' own utterances is in the manner of antiphony, such that they do not attain to comprehending conversation with him.

However, their lack of full comprehension does not imply that the crowds mean nothing but, 'What a nice man!' when they said ἀγαθός ἐστιν. The response that they provoke, that 'He is leading the crowds astray' has been traced by scholars to the accusation against a divisive seducer in Deut 13.6-10, as noted at the start of this essay. That passage in Deuteronomy dealt specifically with how to charge and penalise such a person; it is therefore significant in explaining why the Jews are seeking to kill Jesus in this chapter. If those who utter it are intentionally using the language of Deuteronomy, then that suggests that they, not only John's readers, perceive the claim 'He is good' as something more than a casual 'He is a pleasant sort'. Rather, they are then associating the attractive 'goodness' of Jesus with that of the Deuteronomic seducer who seeks to lead people astray 'to other gods'.

Certainly from the readers' perspective, the division between the crowds places those crowdspople too, not only Jesus, in the dock,<sup>44</sup> and their division between the sentiments, 'He is good' and 'He is leading the people astray', recalls less Deuteronomy 13 and more Deuteronomy 30, where the Israelites stand at the foot of Horeb and Moses articulates their choice between 'good (ἀγαθόν) and evil' (Deut 30.15), warning them to be careful in making this choice not to be led astray (πλανηθείς) to bow down to other gods (Deut 30.17). The association with that part of Deuteronomy is strengthened by

44 Cf. A. Lincoln, *Truth on Trial: The Lawsuit Motif in the Fourth Gospel* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2001) 24-5, 33, 175.

several other pointers in John 7 to the scene at Mount Horeb. That was where Moses first gave the law and instituted the Feast of Tabernacles where it was to be read; so Jesus now expounds it at that same feast. Moses advised them, ‘the hidden things (τὰ κρυπτά) belong to the Lord our God, but the revealed things (τὰ φανερά) to us and to our children forever, to do all the things of this law’ (Deut 29.28). This enigmatic verse was diversely interpreted in Judaism.<sup>45</sup> The ‘hidden–revealed’ (κρυπτός – φανερός) pair is recalled in Jesus’ brothers’ frustration with his hiddenness and in his own compunction about being revealed just yet. He goes to the festival ‘hidden’ (ἐν κρυπτῷ)—and this is not the hiddenness of the silent, for he stands in the middle of the Temple and cries out the truth, but the hiddenness of what belongs to the Lord and is not yet revealed in a way that the Israelites may ‘do’ it faithfully (cf. Deut 29.28). Further, Moses said that the Lord would gather his people if they turned to him (Deut 30.3-4); Jesus offers the presence of God to gather them into one—but they are divided about him. Moses promised that God would one day circumcise their hearts to make them obedient (Deut 30.6), while Jesus teaches the will of God (John 7.17) and heals the whole man in truth, explicitly opposing this to the merely visible and partial healing of the circumcision (John 7.23-4). Finally, when the Pharisees rebuke their officials at the end of the chapter for not bringing Jesus, their accusation is:

Surely *you* have not been led astray (πεπλάνησθε) too? None of the rulers or Pharisees has believed in him, have they? But this crowd, which does not know the law, they are under a curse. (John 7.48-9)

The term πεπλάνησθε, followed by the reference to the crowd, picks up the language of the debates the crowds were having in secret, when they did not want the Jews to hear (John 7.12-13). The Pharisees comment that crowds led astray are ignorant of the law and under a curse; the close association of ‘leading astray’ with the law and curse recalls Deuteronomy 27-30 where the curses and blessings for obeying or defying the commandments are set out, and where the warnings to choose good not evil and not to be led astray are proclaimed. This close to the Johannine scene, then, makes explicit the allusion that was implicit when the dispute in the crowds was first mentioned.

When the crowds say, ‘He is good’, the term ‘good’ is coloured by the character of ‘goodness’ in Deuteronomy. The adjective ‘good’ (Greek: ἀγαθός) is frequently

45 E.g. Wis 6.22; 7.21; 2 Macc 12.41; B. Z. Wacholder, ‘The “Sealed” Torah versus the “Revealed” Torah: An Exegesis of Damascus Covenant V, 1-6 and Jeremiah 32, 10-14’, *RevQ* 12 (1986) 351-68; A. Shemes and C. Werman, ‘Hidden Things and Their Revelation’, *RevQ* 18 (1998) 409-28. The pair is picked up in Christianity: Matt 6.4-21; Mark 4.22 // Luke 8.17; Rom 2.28-9; 1 Cor 4.5; 14.25; 2 Cor 4.2; Eph 5.12-14; Col 1.26; 3.34; Iren. *Adv. Haer.* 1.2 (Harvey Praef. p. 5).

repeated in the book of Deuteronomy, mostly appearing in the combination ‘good land’, thus indicating the material rewards that God will provide for Israel in his goodness.<sup>46</sup> John 7 emphasises not possessions but certainly the gift of healing and the ‘signs’ Jesus does, both of which are gifts bestowed for the near side of eternity. However, in Deuteronomy, the attractiveness of material satisfaction is never far from the deeper satisfaction of a relationship of mutual (if unequal and incommensurable) fidelity and love, in which such materialistic hopes are fulfilled: God gives good things to his faithful people who love him alone, otherwise he will take away those good things and curse that people. Similarly in John 7, questions of personal fidelity are palpable behind the divisions; the crowds are increasingly explicit about their suspicion that Jesus is the messiah, and the officials accused of being led astray like the crowds (μη καὶ ὑμεῖς...) are the ones who do not bring Jesus because οὐδέποτε ἐλάλησεν οὕτως ἄνθρωπος (John 7.46). Standard Bible translations render this, ‘No one ever spoke like this man’, which avoids amphiboly, but the use of ἄνθρωπος in such an unemphatic way is strange—we would expect rather a phrase with οὐδεὶς. The word ἄνθρωπος, however, allows a richer theological reading: ‘No *human being* ever spoke thus’.<sup>47</sup> What the Jews feared in John 5.18 was that Jesus was making himself ‘as great as God’; it is plausible that they hear this nuance in what the officials say, and that they associate it with the crowds’ impression of Jesus.

As in John 1–2, then, it is unlikely that readers are intended to find ‘He is good’ a mere banality in John 7.12. The crowds were debating whether Jesus was manifesting both the material and personal goodness of God, or seducing them as a deceiver. ‘He is good’ cannot be uttered lightly in this context, for though it testifies to this-worldly attractiveness and personal relationship to God, it is also dangerous. For the Jews who confess ‘He is good’, there is a risk that they are (or will be perceived to be) putting their faith in a person who is ‘leading astray’ and who therefore deserves stoning, together with his followers. For Jesus himself, this threat is vividly real. Again, those who recognise Jesus as ‘good’ and perceive that that is closely implicated in the goodness of God, are not called simply to give up their material possessions and follow him as in the Synoptic encounter with the rich man, but to share in his poignant lack of dialogue with the world, his hiddenness and endurance of the threat of stoning from his own religious community, standing firm because he is irreducibly ‘true’ as well as good: amidst the dispute, he proclaims, ‘he who seeks the glory of the one who sent him is *true* and there is *no injustice* in him’ (John 7.18).<sup>48</sup>

46 E.g. Deut 1.25, 35; 3.25; 4.22; 6.18; 8.7, 10; 9.4, 6; 11.17; 31.20–1.

47 A similar nuance is plausible in John 2.10 in the light of other resonances of the verse.

48 For the allusion to glory at Tabernacles, see above, p. 525.



**4.3. 'I am the good (καλός) shepherd' (John 10.11, 16); 'For which good (καλόν) deed do you put me to death?' (cf. John 10.32)**

After Tabernacles, the adjective ἀγαθός for Jesus drops out but καλός occurs several times in the discourse of the 'good shepherd'. Already in the opening of the gospel καλὸν οἶνον interpreted Nathanael's τί ἀγαθόν.

Much scholarly attention has been paid to the image of the 'good shepherd' in ch. 10. This makes it all the more surprising that the shepherd's epithet has received very little comment.<sup>49</sup> For example, discussions of the relationship of the Johannine passage to the OT have shown significant links to texts about 'shepherds', especially Ezek 34 and Ps 94;<sup>50</sup> but such links serve to underline that in applying the adjective 'good' to the shepherd four times, John creates a descriptive title that is unparalleled in the OT. Again, studies of the relationship of John 10 to the Synoptics have drawn out likely interaction, especially with the Synoptic passion narratives and shepherd parables;<sup>51</sup> but John's treatment of the 'good shepherd' also stands in striking contrast to Synoptic treatment of the 'good teacher': in John, Jesus speaks of himself to his disciples four times emphatically as 'good shepherd' (ὁ ποιμὴν ὁ καλός); in Mark and Luke on the other hand, when a would-be disciple addresses him 'good teacher' (διδάσκαλε ἀγαθέ), Jesus rounds on him to challenge his use of the epithet.

Jesus' first definition or elaboration of 'I am the good shepherd' is, 'The good shepherd offers his life on behalf of the sheep' (John 10.11). The phrase ὑπὲρ τῶν προβάτων conveys the distinctive character and purpose of Jesus' death; it is not a mere ceasing to be, but a death *for* the sheep; similarly, Jesus gives his flesh 'for the life of the world' (ὑπὲρ τῆς τοῦ κόσμου ζωῆς, John 6.51), and fulfils the high priest's prophecy that 'one man' should die 'for the people, and the whole nation should not die' (ὑπὲρ τοῦ λαοῦ; ὑπὲρ τοῦ ἔθνους [twice], John 11.50-2). Earlier in

49 The one exception of which I am aware is Neyrey, 'Noble Shepherd'. Neyrey claims that καλός has a substantially different nuance from ἀγαθός here, and is to be considered an assertion of Jesus' 'nobility' in a culture keenly concerned with issues of guilt and shame. I argued against Neyrey's sharp differentiation between καλός and ἀγαθός above (pp. 515-17). His analysis of John 10 is also problematic as he paraphrases John's text in order to find there the categories of the progymnasmata, and in doing so he substantially alters its nuances, e.g. 'justice' (δικαιοσύνη) is not mentioned in John 10, but Neyrey analyses the shepherd's knowledge of his sheep, love and other characteristics as marks of the duty or virtue of justice.

50 E.g. Barrett, 'Old Testament', 163; J. Beutler, 'Der alttestamentlich-jüdische Hintergrund der Hirtenrede in Johannes 10', *The Shepherd Discourse of John 10 and its Context* (ed. J. Beutler and R. T. Fortna; SNTS.MS 67; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1991) 18-32; R. Zimmermann, 'Jesus im Bild Gottes: Anspielungen auf das Alte Testament im Johannesevangelium am Beispiel der Hirtenbildfelder in Joh 10', *Kontexte des Johannesevangeliums: Das vierte Evangelium in religions- und traditions-geschichtlicher Perspektive* (ed. Frey and Schnelle) 81-116.

51 Esp. M. Sabbe, 'John 10 and its Relationship to the Synoptic Gospels', *The Shepherd Discourse of John 10 and its Context* (ed. Beutler and Fortna) 75-93.

the gospel, Jesus' death has been implicated in his 'goodness' but it is his gifts of good things that have been especially in view. In John 10.1-18, although Jesus is the *gate* to pasture and life (vv. 9-10), his role as 'the good shepherd' is strongly focussed on his death (vv. 11-18).

Jesus contrasts 'the good shepherd' not with 'the bad shepherd' but with 'the hired man'. As in the case of 'thieves' (cf. John 10.8-10), so in the case of the 'hired man', the distinctive characteristic of his relationship to the sheep is that they are 'not his own' (οὐκ ἔστιν τὰ πρόβατα ἴδια). For Jesus, this explains why the hired man does not lay down his life for the sheep when the wolf comes (John 10.12-13). The personal, intimate knowledge, as between a good shepherd and his own flocks, is what the hired man lacks. This is one of the aspects of the good shepherd discourse that recalls Jesus' encounter with Nathanael, which first interpreted how Jesus is τὸ ἀγαθόν. Under a fig tree the king of Israel recognised a true Israelite and a true Israelite recognised the king of Israel (John 1.49); 'I know my own and my own know me' says the good shepherd (John 10.14). The resonance is enhanced by the close association between shepherd imagery and kings in antiquity, not least in OT passages on which John draws in ch. 10 (Ezek 34). Nathanael also said, 'You are the son of God' (John 1.49); this receives express response for the first time in John 10.36, when Jesus says to the Jews, 'I said I was the Son of God'. Nathanael's knowledge is thus acknowledged on the lips of the good shepherd. In Jesus' encounter with Nathanael, literary form and phrasing suggested the I-Thou relationship of God to Israel, especially when Jesus underscored that he was himself, as ladder to the angels, the locus of divine revelation. Similarly, mutual knowledge between sheep and good shepherd implicates the sheep in an analogous relationship to God ('just as the father knows me and I know the father', John 10.15a). It is not only καλὸν οἶνόν then, nor even ἀγαθός ἐστιν, but also ὁ ποιμὴν ὁ καλός that interprets and responds to Nathanael's τί ἀγαθόν.

The twin themes of ownership and knowledge that distinguish the good shepherd receive a fresh focus in the discussion of *unity*: 'And I have other sheep which are not from this fold; I must bring them too and they will listen to my voice, and there will be one flock, one shepherd' (John 10.17). The 'one flock, one shepherd' (μία ποιμὴν εἷς ποιμὴν) emphasises 'one-ness' by repetition of 'one' (μία, εἷς) and also by the assonance of the cognate terms, ποιμνη, ποιμήν. This vocation to unity is an eschatological hope to realise an ideal that was once enshrined in the unity of the Temple cult and continued to be celebrated in the daily recitation of the *Shema*.<sup>52</sup> It is the role of the good shepherd to establish that unity, just as it was Jesus' response to the rich man who addressed him as a 'good teacher' to seek to establish unity around the *Shema*, confessing only one who is good, God.

52 C. T. R. Hayward, "The Lord is One": Reflections on the Theme of Unity in John's Gospel from a Jewish Perspective', *Early Jewish and Christian Monotheism* (ed. L. T. Stuckenbruck and W. E. S. North; JSNTSup 263; London/New York: T&T Clark, 2004) 138-54.

Finally, the good shepherd's act of laying down his life in order to take it up again is described as grounding God's love of him (John 10.17) and as grounded in authority (v. 18ab), as a command received from the father (v. 18c). This is the first time in John's gospel that the language of 'command' appears at all. In the Synoptic rich man pericope commandments are important because Jesus' first response to the question about inheriting eternal life, which is put him as a 'good teacher', is to instruct obedience to the Ten Commandments.<sup>53</sup> In John, Jesus does not emphasise those commandments at all. The language of 'command' is used in other ways, first for the father's command to the good shepherd (John 10.18); then for his command to Jesus concerning what to say, which is eternal life (John 12.49-50). It is also used for Jesus' commands to his disciples, which focus on love of one another and of him so as to bind them in a nexus of relationships to one another, to him and to the father; these relationships are diversely characterised in terms of mimesis, analogy, reciprocation (the three are not always easy to distinguish: often the keyword is *καθώς*, e.g. John 13.34; 15.10, 12); love (14.21); and obedience (14.15; 15.12).<sup>54</sup> These commands are only given to those who already know Jesus in some measure. They are more akin to the conclusion to the rich man pericope, 'Give up everything and follow me', than they are to Jesus' instruction upon first encounter with the rich man.

At John 10.22 the scene changes from the vicinity of Siloam where the blind man was healed (ch. 9) to Jesus strolling in the Stoa of Solomon at the Feast of Dedication in winter. Jesus continues to use the language and concepts of the good shepherd discourse to explain why the crowds do not believe: it is 'because you are not of my sheep' (John 10.26): they do not belong to him, whereas the good shepherd's sheep know him because they are his (John 10.27).<sup>55</sup> Here at last he makes a bold christological claim of the magnitude of John 5.18: 'I and the father are one' (John 10.30). The Jews pick up stones in response: this recalls the penalty in Deut 13.11 for the deceiver who leads Israel astray to other gods, thus evoking the debate at Tabernacles about whether Jesus is 'good' (*ἀγαθός*) or 'leading the crowd astray'.<sup>56</sup> Jesus challenges the Jews now about the goodness of his deeds:

53 Similarly, the Nash papyrus associates the Ten Commandments with the *Shema*. See: W. F. Albright, 'A Biblical Fragment from the Maccabean Age: The Nash Papyrus', *JBL* 56 (1937) 145-76.

54 See further: R. Hirsch-Luipold, 'Prinzipiell-theologische Ethik in der johanneischen Literatur', *Jenseits von Indikativ und Imperativ* (ed. F. W. v. Horn and R. Zimmermann; Kontexte und Normen neutestamentlicher Ethik / Contexts and Norms of New Testament Ethics I; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009) 289-307.

55 The diction of John 10.24b also resonates with the good shepherd's language of 'putting [down]' and 'taking up' his own life (10.11, 15, 17-18).

56 Above, pp. 514-15, 526-7.

'Many good works (ἔργα καλὰ) I showed you from the father; what deed is it for which you are stoning me?' The Jews answered him, 'What we are stoning you for is not to do with a good work (περὶ καλοῦ ἔργου), but with blasphemy, and because you, being a human being, are making yourself (a) god'. (John 10.32-3)

'Good works' (καλὰ ἔργα), correspond to the 'good works' (מעשים טובים) that played an important role both in Jewish piety and in early Christian tradition.<sup>57</sup> They include things like visiting the sick, hospitality to strangers and preparing the dead for burial. Jesus prescribed them (Matt 5.16; 25.35-45), performed them, and encouraged them (Mark 14.6 parr.), although he also challenged the Jewish concept of what constituted a 'good work'.<sup>58</sup> Most parts of the NT draw attention to 'good works', using ἀγαθὰ and καλὰ indiscriminately in this context. Some scholars differentiate this kind of 'good work' sharply from the Johannine 'good works' that Jesus 'showed' (ἔδειξα) from the father; they argue that John is speaking of revelation in contradistinction to the emphasis on human piety elsewhere in the NT.<sup>59</sup> But John is not using a wholly different category to convey the unity between Jesus and God; rather, he is seeking a deeper reflection on traditional categories of Jewish piety in order better to understand both Jesus and God. In John 10.31-9, Jesus seeks to reverse the relative significance of the statements about his good deeds and his claim to divinity respectively. He rejects his accusers' perspectives *both* that the goodness of the deeds is irrelevant to the debate about him, *and* that making himself God is a significant accusation in itself. He cites as 'law' the psalm where God says, 'You are gods' (Ps 82.6). By this he urges that finding gods and Son of God on earth is nothing remarkable. By diminishing attention to those mere words, he throws into greater relief the importance of the *goodness* of his deeds. By believing the deeds, they may know the unity between Jesus and his father ('The father is in me and I in the father', John 10.38). Thus Jesus suggests that his own 'goodness' is more important christologically than this crowd of Jews perceives; it is not (as they think) irrelevant to the redefinition of monotheism conveyed in the claim that 'I and my father are one' (John 10.30).

In ch. 10 the key term has shifted from ἀγαθός to καλός, but the theme is not very different from in earlier scenes. When the crowds at Tabernacles were divided about whether Jesus was ἀγαθός or a deceiver, the former party were probably thinking of him primarily as a doer of 'good deeds', much as Jesus says of himself to the Jews seeking to stone him in 10.31-9. But after his debate with the Jews, those of the crowds who are attentive to what Jesus does are able to say more: many come to him across the Jordan and start to assert that

57 Above, p. 517 with n. 13.

58 Luke 9.59 cf. Matt 8.21-22, discussed in Grundmann, 'καλός', 547.

59 Grundmann, 'καλός', 549 n. 47; K. H. Rengstorf, 'σημεῖον etc.', *TDNT* 7 (1971) 249 n. 328.

what John the Baptist said about him was true (John 10.41). John the Baptist had said that Jesus surpassed him because he was before him (John 1.30), which could be interpreted as a reference to pre-existence, resonating with Jesus’ own claim to be the son of God (John 10.36).<sup>60</sup> The supportive crowdsfolk are not explicit in making such great claims; they are more like Matthew, who avoided saying that Jesus was ἀγαθός as God is ὁ ἀγαθός, only to say that Jesus is τέλειος and to imply that in that he is as God (above, pp. 520–21). The Johannine crowds’ and Matthew’s reflection on the ‘goodness’ of Jesus point in a christological direction that the Johannine Jesus developed much further.<sup>61</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

‘Some people were saying, “He is good”’; ‘Why do you call me “good”? No one is good but God alone.’ If one of the people who said, ‘He is good’ (John 7.12) were the rich man of the Synoptics, then Jesus’ response, reformulated and represented by John, would imply not Jesus’ sinfulness or separation from God, but the impossibility of calling him good except insofar as that describes God’s words and work manifest in him.

Beyond that, it would differ from the response in the Synoptics in two especially marked ways. First, the emphasis on obedience to commandments has shifted from the Ten Commandments handed over at Sinai to the imperative to ‘love’ in a way that is modelled on and binding to Jesus and the father, in ‘grace and truth’. It is more of the order of ‘If you want to be perfect . . . follow me!’ (Matt 19.21 cf. Mark 10.21; Luke 18.22) than of ‘You know the [Ten] Commandments’ (Mark 10.19 // Luke 18.20; cf. Matt 19.17–20). Secondly, where the Synoptics problematise possessions, John does not seek to do this. His has been described as an ‘aristocratic’ gospel; the first manifestation of Jesus’ goodness is the *luxury* miracle of the ‘good wine’ at Cana; John alone appreciates the *smell* of the expensive ointment with which Jesus is anointed (John 12.3); the upper stratum of society in general plays a comparatively significant role in John.<sup>62</sup> Nowhere does John utter polemic against riches as such.

Yet, although John does not problematise possessions, giving up everything and *following Jesus*, as the rich man is asked to do, is not made any easier than in the Synoptics. If anything, the shift of focus away from possessions makes it harder still. For John’s depiction of Jesus’ goodness ties it closely to themes of non-recognition, danger, and death, and underscores that it cannot be divided

<sup>60</sup> Thanks to Ruth Edwards for pointing this out to me.

<sup>61</sup> The only remaining time that καλ- vocabulary is used for Jesus is in John 18.23; however, the expression καλῶς λαλέω refers to ‘true’ or ‘right’ rather than to ‘good’ speech (cf. John 4.17; 8.48; 13.13), so it is appropriate to omit this adverbial use from the present discussion.

<sup>62</sup> Hengel, *Studies*, 322, citing John 3.1–2; 4.46–54; 6.15; 11; 18.15; 19.38–41.

from those obligations. As good shepherd, Jesus *chooses* to lay down his life for the sheep and it is because of this kind of death that his father loves him. The water changed to wine is not just ‘cheap’ luxury, but abundant riches given ahead of time by the one whose side shed water and blood on the cross, and the reader learns that the former gift was not possible without the latter.

The difference in emphasis between the Synoptics and John is in this respect a difference in emphasis between different parts of the Jewish promise to love the ‘one god’, articulated in the *Shema*.

שמע ישראל יהוה אחד יהוה אחד יהוה אחד יהוה אחד יהוה אחד  
והתקבץ אל יהוה אלהינו יהוה אחד יהוה אחד יהוה אחד יהוה אחד יהוה אחד

Listen, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one,  
Thou shalt love the Lord your God with all thy heart and with all thy soul and  
with all thy strength (Deut 6.4-5)<sup>63</sup>

*Strength* (כח) was frequently interpreted as ‘possessions’;<sup>64</sup> this is the kind of love that Jesus underscores to the rich man in the Synoptics, when he objects to being called ‘good’ because εἶς ὁ θεός as in the *Shema*, and then tells the man to sell his possessions. Loving God with heart and soul/life, however, suggests the kind of love that Jesus particularly underscores in John, where as good shepherd he lays down his life (ψυχή) for the sheep; it is this kind of love that Christians are to imitate, as the dark note ringing throughout the depiction of his goodness suggests. It is plausible that John was interacting with the Synoptic tradition in his presentation of Jesus as ‘good’, shifting the emphasis to underscore that Jesus is ‘good’ inasmuch as God is seen in him; and shifting the emphasis with regard to discipleship from an issue of wealth to an issue of humility and danger, from loving God with my property to loving God with my soul or life.

Finally, in addition to the Synoptic comparison, many scholars have suggested that John’s portrayal of Jesus in general is strongly influenced by wisdom traditions, not least in John 7.<sup>65</sup> In respect of his goodness, we might in the light

63 LXX: ἄκουε Ἰσραηλ κύριος ὁ θεὸς ἡμῶν κύριος εἷς ἐστὶν καὶ ἀγαπήσεις κύριον τὸν θεόν σου ἐξ ὅλης τῆς καρδίας σου καὶ ἐξ ὅλης τῆς ψυχῆς σου καὶ ἐξ ὅλης τῆς δυνάμεώς σου  
64 Hayward, “‘The Lord is One,’” 146, citing 1QS col. vi, ll. 13-23; *Sifre Deut.* 32; *m. Ber.* 9.5; Targ. Ps-J and Targ. Neof. of Deut 6.5.

65 Among modern scholars, e.g. Brown, *Gospel*, 1.CXXII-CXXVII, 328-9; J. D. G. Dunn, ‘Let John Be John: A Gospel for its Time’, *The Gospel and the Gospels* (ed. P. Stuhlmacher; Grant Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991) 330-3; M. Fishbane, ‘The Well of Living Water: A Biblical Motif and Its Ancient Transformations’, *Sha’arei Talmon: Studies in the Bible, Qumran, and the Ancient Near East presented to Shemaryahu Talmon* (ed. M. Fishbane and E. Tov; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1992) 3-16, esp. 10-13; S. H. Ringe, *Wisdom’s Friends: Community and Christology in the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1999); C. Bennis, *The Power of Saving Wisdom: An Investigation of Spirit and Wisdom in Relation to the Soteriology of the Fourth Gospel* (WUNT 2.148; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002). The

of this recall again Wis 7.26-7, quoted above, where wisdom is described as ‘image of God’s goodness; being one she is powerful for many things, she enters holy souls in each generation and makes them friends of God and prophets’. This may seem at first sight a close correlate to John’s application of ‘good’ to Jesus, but Jesus is more personal, more concrete, and unlike wisdom is subject to a death without which his ‘goodness’ cannot be properly conveyed. John avoids the term εἰκὼν entirely;<sup>66</sup> Jesus is not the *image* or likeness of God’s goodness in John, but rather he *is* ‘good’. The good that comes from Nazareth is encountered personally and directly in him and in what he does, says and gives. The proper counterpart to his unity is not his power to do many things (though he does do them) but rather it is that he will *gather* his ‘own’. This is not achieved by entering holy souls without further ado, but rather it depends on his death as ‘good shepherd’. His goodness is thus known in the context of alterity and in mortality that is fully subject to God’s will and command.

Whether one compares the Johannine ascription of ‘goodness’ to Jesus with the Synoptics or with Wisdom, it emerges as anything but banal or ‘colourless’. Considered within the gospel context itself, Martyn is right that the crowds’ comment, ‘He is good’ does not spell out a challenge to monotheism in the way that John 5.18 does, but it is a christologically significant claim, and for the reader who has John’s whole literary presentation of Jesus’ ministry to hand, it develops the depiction of a relationship of Jesus to God in which their shared ‘goodness’ becomes both a theological and an ethical challenge.

---

association of John with Wisdom is much older: for the medieval cult, J. F. Hamburger, *St. John the Divine: The Deified Evangelist in Medieval Art and Theology* (Berkeley/London: University of California, 2002) 95–164.

66 This point was kindly brought to my attention by Reinhard Feldmeier and Rainer Hirsch-Luipold.