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Worship in Spirit and in Truth

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# WORSHIP ἐν πνεύματι καὶ ἀληθείᾳ ("IN SPIRIT AND IN TRUTH")

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## Introduction

John 4:23-24

But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.<sup>1</sup>

Many Pentecostal/Charismatic preachers preached these two verses as such; Jesus taught the Samaritan woman that God was looking for people who would worship God in Spirit (in an ecstatic sense) and in Truth (by means of using the Word of God). These preachers interpret the dative as dative of manner, where worship should be in the “spiritual ecstatic manner” and also in the “cognitive confessing of the Word of God”. Some even went further by suggesting worship should consist of using “spiritual language” (speaking in tongues) and scriptural language.<sup>2</sup>

Such interpretation poses a few problems. First, there is no evidence that Jesus intended “spirit” (πνεῦμα) to be understood as an ecstatic experience in the Gospel of John. Second, the Samaritans who received

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<sup>1</sup> All scripture quotations are taken from English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Bill Hamon in Charisma Magazine website used John 4:21 as his supporting text for teaching on “spirit to Spirit communication with God”. See <http://www.charismamag.com/spirit/supernatural/17419-10-reasons-for-speaking-in-tongues> (5 December 2013).

Jesus at the end of the episode did not worship Jesus ecstatically. Third, the interpretation is hard to fit into the dialogue, in which the Samaritan woman was not asking “how” but “where” is the place of worship. Hence, in this article, I will demonstrate that worship ἐν πνεύματι καὶ ἀληθείᾳ (in spirit and truth)<sup>3</sup> is to worship “in relationship with Jesus”, and I will analyse the phrase based on its narrative context.

## Literature Survey

In the history of interpretation, worship ἐν πνεύματι καὶ ἀληθείᾳ have been interpreted in many ways.<sup>4</sup> Using historical approach, C. H. Dodd seeks to interpret worship ἐν πνεύματι καὶ ἀληθείᾳ through the lens of Greco-Roman world. He sees “spirit” as the dualistic counter part of “flesh,” and “truth” as the philosophical antithesis of “false”.<sup>5</sup> In other words, Jesus in this episode, is offering “a new kind of religion”, in which the worshiper worships in the sphere of the spirit and it is the “ultimately real”.<sup>6</sup>

Following Dodd’s approach but with a different mode of contrast, George Johnston interprets worship ἐν πνεύματι as “inward worship, the offering of the heart, done out of love”.<sup>7</sup> He contrasts worship ἐν πνεύματι with the outward ritualistic worship of the Temple. Worship ἐν ἀληθείᾳ, according to Johnston, is the divine truth (God’s presence) in communion with the worshipers. However, Johnston’s interpretation fails to take into consideration the larger symbolic framework of spirit and truth within the

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<sup>3</sup> I choose to use Greek language for this phrase in order to avoid misrepresentation in English.

<sup>4</sup> In view of the length of this article, this survey is limited to highlight only a few prominent Johannine scholars who have thoroughly examined John 4:23-24.

<sup>5</sup> C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), 314.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> George Johnston, *The Spirit-Paraclete in the Gospel of John* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 45.

## Gospel of John.

Besides using historical and dualistic criticism, there are those who pay more consideration to the literary features of the Gospel. One of them is Raymond E. Brown who interprets worship ἐν πνεύματι καὶ ἀληθείᾳ as a hendiadys (the two words referring to a single idea). He suggests “spirit and truth” is equivalent to “Spirit of truth”.<sup>8</sup> His argument is based on the theme of “eschatological replacement” in the Gospel of John, where in this context Jesus is telling the Samaritan woman that the Temples are replaced by Jesus himself and the new kind of worship is “animated” by the Spirit given by him.<sup>9</sup> Brown supports his argument by pointing to the creative composition of John, where the Evangelist intertwines spirit and truth in Jesus:

Jesus is the truth (14:6) in the sense that he reveals God’s truth to men (8:45, 18:37); the Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus and is the Spirit of truth (14:17, 15:26) who is to guide men in the truth.<sup>10</sup>

Herman Ridderbos agrees with Brown in treating worship ἐν πνεύματι καὶ ἀληθείᾳ as a hendiadys, but he does not equate it with “spirit of truth”. Instead, he suggests “spirit and truth” refers to the new relationship between God and human through Jesus Christ. It is through Jesus that true worshipers are able to receive the “life-creating” and “life-giving power” of God.<sup>11</sup>

Gary Burge agrees with Ridderbos in relating worship ἐν πνεύματι καὶ ἀληθείᾳ with Jesus, but he supports his argument further by highlighting

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<sup>8</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John I-XII*, vol. 29, Anchor Bible (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, 1966), 180.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Herman N. Ridderbos, *The Gospel according to John: A Theological Commentary*, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 164.

the symbolism of “spirit” and “truth” in the Gospel of John.<sup>12</sup> Burge points out that the “spirit” in this context is related to the “living water” given by Jesus. Only those who receive the water (the Spirit) from Jesus can authentically worship God.<sup>13</sup> As for “worship in Truth”, Burge argues that “Truth” should be interpreted through Jewish background. Thus, “Truth” refers to “the personal and moral features of God’s revelation, and possibly even wisdom”.<sup>14</sup> This description of “Truth” points to Jesus, where Burge describes Jesus as “the highest reality of God” in the Gospel of John.<sup>15</sup> Since both “Spirit” and “Truth” are depended on Jesus, Burge argues that they must function as a unity, and they refers to Jesus as the true means of worship.

On the same camp with Brown, Craig S. Keener agrees that worship ἐν πνεύματι καὶ ἀληθείᾳ refers to Jesus with additional support from an in-depth words study. Keener comments that the word “Spirit” usually refers to God’s Spirit rather than human spirit.<sup>16</sup> Thus, he suggests that “worship in Spirit” in the context refer to the “experience with God’s Spirit”. As for worship in truth, Keener highlights that true worship (as in contrast with false worship) “is impossible (cf. 15:15) without the Spirit’s activity”.<sup>17</sup> Thus, Keener concludes that “spirit and truth” refers to Jesus, who is the epitome of truth in the Gospel of John and whom the Spirit (of God) bear witness to.<sup>18</sup>

Finally Dorothy A. Lee. She disagrees with Brown in interpreting “worship ἐν πνεύματι καὶ ἀληθείᾳ” as a hendiadys that refers to the Spirit

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<sup>12</sup> Gary Burge, *The Anointed Community: The Holy Spirit in the Johannine Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 194.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 193.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 194. See also Brown, *The Gospel According to John I-XII*, 29:500.

<sup>15</sup> Burge, *The Anointed Community: The Holy Spirit in the Johannine Tradition*, 194.

<sup>16</sup> Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, vol. 1 (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003), 615.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 1:618.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

of Truth. She argues that the Evangelist could have use the same phrase if that is what he intended. Instead, Lee proposes that “worship ἐν πνεύματι καὶ ἀληθείᾳ” is to worship in “the Divine Spirit”.<sup>19</sup> She supports her argument further by pointing to the chiasmic structure of the two phrases, “ἐν πνεύματι καὶ ἀληθείᾳ” and “πνεῦμα ὁ θεός” (4:24).<sup>20</sup>

In this short survey, we see a spectrum of interpretation on the ambiguous phrase, worship ἐν πνεύματι καὶ ἀληθείᾳ. Those who have take into consideration the literary features of the Gospel agree that spirit and truth is a hendiadys (or at least they are closely related). We may also conclude that πνεῦμα (spirit) and ἀλήθεια (truth) are part of John’s Gospel symbolism. In the proceeding segment, I will analyse the phrase based on the Evangelist’s narrative framework.

### **The Narrative Context of Worship ἐν πνεύματι καὶ ἀληθείᾳ.<sup>21</sup>**

The dialogue between Jesus and the Samaritan woman is part of a narrative framework that begins at the prologue of the Gospel (1:1-18). The prologue prepares the reader about the plot of the story.<sup>22</sup> As Culpepper points out, the prologue elevates the readers to the “vantage point”, in which they can see the deeper meaning of the ironies, symbols, and metaphors in the Gospel.<sup>23</sup> One of the key information that Evangelist

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<sup>19</sup> Dorothy A. Lee, “In the Spirit of Truth: Worship and Prayer in the Gospel of John and the Early Fathers,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 58, no. 3 (2004): 280.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> This segment is partially adapted from Lee Tat Yan, “Irony in the Gospel of John: Interpreting the Irony in the Nicodemus and the Samaritan Woman Episodes” (MTh Thesis, Trinity Theological College, 2012), 37–40.

<sup>22</sup> Elizabeth Harris, *Prologue and Gospel: The Theology of the Fourth Evangelist*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 107 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 13–14.

<sup>23</sup> R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 168; R. Alan Culpepper, “Reading Johannine Irony,” in *Exploring the Gospel of John: In Honor of D. Moody Smith*, ed. R. Alan Culpepper and C. Clifton Black (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 194.

supplies to the reader at the prologue is the “identity of Jesus”.<sup>24</sup> The narrator introduces Jesus as “... full of grace and truth” (1:15) and “... grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (1:17). This is the first time the word ἀλήθεια (truth) appears and it is related to Jesus as the source and giver of truth.

As for πνεῦμα (spirit), the word first appears in the testimony of John the Baptist (1:32-34). In his testimony, the reader is told that the Spirit (referring to the Spirit of God) descended and remained on Jesus, and Jesus is the one who baptises with the Holy Spirit. Prior to the Samaritan woman episode, the word πνεῦμα is mentioned by Jesus in 3:5 where he answers Nicodemus, saying, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit (“ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος”), he cannot enter the Kingdom of God.” As many commentators have pointed out, the imageries of water and spirit probably allude to the renewal of the new age (cf. Isaiah 44:3 and Ezekiel 36:25-27).<sup>25</sup> The two imageries are also a hendiadys, referring to “born from ἄνωθεν”.<sup>26</sup> As the dialogue continues, Jesus tells Nicodemus that ultimately one must believe in the Son of Man (referring to Jesus himself) in order to have eternal life (3:13-15). In other words, to enter into the kingdom of God (that is the new age prophesied by Isaiah and Ezekiel), one has to be born ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος, which is to believe in Jesus.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, 89.

<sup>25</sup> See J. Ramsey Michaels, *The Gospel of John*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 185; D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 195; Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St. John: Introduction and Commentary on Chapters 1-4*, vol. 1 (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 369–370.

<sup>26</sup> “Born of ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος” and “worship ἐν πνεύματι καὶ ἀληθείᾳ” have a similar grammatical construction.

<sup>27</sup> My argument is adapted from Tat Yan, “Interpreting the Irony In the Nicodemus and the Samaritan Woman Episodes,” 55.

From the prologue to the Nicodemus episode, we have seen both πνεῦμα and ἀλήθεια refer to Jesus. In 3:27-36 (particularly verses 33-34), John the Baptist reinforces the idea that Jesus is related to the two words:

Whoever receives his (Jesus) testimony sets his seal to this, that God is true. For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure. (3:33-34)

Thus, before the reader reaches the Samaritan woman episode, he/she has probably developed the link between Jesus and the two words.

### **Worship ἐν πνεύματι καὶ ἀληθείᾳ in the Samaritan Woman Episode<sup>28</sup>**

The conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman is similar to the Nicodemus episode. In both episodes, the dialogue partners (Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman) of Jesus are confused and have misunderstood the symbols and metaphors of Jesus. Although the characters in these episodes do not comprehend the deeper meaning of the teaching of Jesus, the reader should be able to grasp it for the Evangelist has been providing important information to the reader through the narrator.<sup>29</sup>

In the Samaritan woman episode, the confusion begins with the discussion of ὕδωρ ζῶν (4:10).<sup>30</sup> The Samaritan woman is interpreting the word of Jesus on a surface level, and she thought that Jesus, as an ordinary Jewish man (although a strange one), offering spring water to her (4:11).<sup>31</sup> However, the reader should be able to interpret the symbolism

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<sup>28</sup> This section is adapted from Ibid., 56–68.

<sup>29</sup> For example, the prologue provides a vantage point for the reader to see the true identity of Jesus and his mission.

<sup>30</sup> ὕδωρ ζῶν is a *double entendres* and it can be translated as “living water” or “spring water”.

<sup>31</sup> Gail R. O’Day comments that the woman “will not be able to interpret the living water correctly until she can recognise the identity of the person with whom she speaks”. See Gail R. O’Day, *Revelation in the Fourth Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 60.

of ὕδωρ ζῶν as the Evangelist carefully develops the “water” symbolism throughout the Gospel.<sup>32</sup>

Since the woman cannot understand the meaning of “living water”, Jesus draws her attention to something that will shift her perception toward him; Jesus told her to call her husband (4:16).<sup>33</sup> When Jesus exposes her marital status, the woman realises that the man she is talking with is not an ordinary man, and he could be a prophet.<sup>34</sup> Then, she asks Jesus about the proper place to worship (4:20). For the Samaritans, the place of worship is historically one of the most burning issues between Samaritans and Jews.<sup>35</sup>

Jesus answers the woman by assuring her that the time is coming where she and her people will worship the Father regardless of the geographical location (4:21). It is the new (eschatological) mode of worship, which causes all previous modes of worship to be relativized.<sup>36</sup> In verse 22, Jesus points out that the Samaritans do not know what they worship, and he asserts that salvation is from the Jews.<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless,

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<sup>32</sup> See John 2:6-10; 3:5; 4:7-15; 7:37-49. The water imagery is also a prominent symbol of new life in the Hebrew Bible (cf. Isaiah 49:10; 58:11; Jeremiah 31:25). See Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St. John*, 1:430–431.

<sup>33</sup> Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, 1:605.

<sup>34</sup> O’Day points out that the dialogue about the marital status of the Samaritan woman is intended to show the growing faith of the woman. See Gail R. O’Day, “John,” in *The Women’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (London: SPCK, 1992), 296.

<sup>35</sup> See George Beasley-Murray, *John*, vol. 36, 2nd ed., World Biblical Commentary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), 61.

O’Day, *Revelation in the Fourth Gospel*, 68; Paul D. Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985), 103; Dorothy A. Lee, *The Symbolic Narratives of the Fourth Gospel: The Interplay of Form and Meaning*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 95 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), 78–79.

<sup>36</sup> Anthony J. Kelly and Francis J. Moloney, *Experiencing God in the Gospel of John* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist, 2003), 101.

<sup>37</sup> Many scholars agree that Jesus has correctly criticised the Samaritans for holding an incomplete view of salvation and salvation history, because they only accept Moses and reject the rest of the Judean salvation history. See Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, 1:610–611; Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St. John*, 1:435.

Jesus declares that the eschatological fulfilment is now (4:23a).<sup>38</sup> In this new age, Jesus describes, true worshipers must worship ἐν πνεύματι καὶ ἀληθείᾳ (4:23b).

As Keener rightly pointed, the preposition ἐν should retain its locative sense. Thus, worship in the new age is not limited in Jerusalem or Mount Gerizim, but in the “realm” of spirit and truth.<sup>39</sup> However, this “realm” is not the “supersensuous and elevated above the visible temporal world”,<sup>40</sup> but rather situated in Jesus himself.<sup>41</sup> In other words, to worship ἐν πνεύματι καὶ ἀληθείᾳ, it is to worship through relationship with Jesus.<sup>42</sup>

This interpretation is supported by the undergirding theme of “identity”. In the prologue, the reader is told the identity of Jesus. However, the characters in the story do not know it. In the Samaritan woman episode, Jesus is leading the woman to discover his identity. There is a progression in the woman’s perspective of Jesus: a Jew (4:9), a prophet (4:19), and the Messiah (4:29).<sup>43</sup> Thus, in this discussion of worship ἐν πνεύματι καὶ ἀληθείᾳ, Jesus is directing the woman to see him as new centre of worship. As O’Day rightly captured,

If the woman can recognise that she is speaking with the person who makes the eschatological age a present reality, she will be able to participate in the spirit as a true worshiper. If not,

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<sup>38</sup> Some scholars comment that this is the Johannine language of “realized eschatology”. See Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, 1:617; Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St. John*, 1:438.

<sup>39</sup> Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, 1:616.

<sup>40</sup> Ridderbos, *The Gospel according to John*, 163.

<sup>41</sup> Carson interprets the new worship is in Jesus as the new temple. Ridderbos also suggests that “spirit and truth” is pointing to Jesus, who replaces the temples in Jerusalem and Mount Gerizim. See Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 225–226; Ridderbos, *The Gospel according to John*, 163–164.

<sup>42</sup> O’Day, *Revelation in the Fourth Gospel*, 70–72; Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, 1:608–609.

<sup>43</sup> Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, 137.

the ironic distance between her perspective and Jesus' will remain.<sup>44</sup>

In addition, the interpretation is supported with the fact that "Jesus as the replacement of the Temple" as a prominent theme in the Gospel of John.<sup>45</sup> Kostenberger observes,

The motif of Jesus' replacement of sacred space emerges with increasing clarity as the Johannine narrative progresses, as allusions in 1:14 and 51 give way to more overt references in 2:14-22 and the present passage (4:19-24). While Jesus is identified already as the "new temple" at the temple clearing, his interchange with the Samaritan woman in 4:19-24 crystallizes the thrust of this identification yet further.<sup>46</sup>

Hence, the two undergirding themes of identity and "Jesus as the replacement of the Temple" direct the reader to see Jesus as the focus of worship ἐν πνεύματι καὶ ἀληθείᾳ.

The interpretation is also confirmed by the response of the Samaritan at the ending of the episode. After Jesus explains about the new mode of worship, the Samaritan woman remains unclear, and she expects the Messiah to tell all things to her and her people (4:25). At this point, Jesus reveals himself as the Messiah (4:26).<sup>47</sup> Then, the Samaritan woman goes back to her town and testifies about Jesus (4:39). In 4:42, the Samaritans

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<sup>44</sup> O'Day, *Revelation in the Fourth Gospel*, 71–72.

<sup>45</sup> See Andreas J. Kostenberger, *A Theology of John's Gospel and Letters: The Word, the Christ, the Son of God*, *Biblical Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 422–435; Lee, "In the Spirit of Truth: Worship and Prayer in the Gospel of John and the Early Fathers," 282–284.

<sup>46</sup> Kostenberger, *A Theology of John's Gospel and Letters: The Word, the Christ, the Son of God*, 429.

<sup>47</sup> Keener rightly points out that this is the climax of the story, similar to those classical dramas where the disguised heroes finally reveal themselves to those who have awaited them. See Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, 1:620.

believe that Jesus is the Saviour of the world. The declaration of the Samaritans again affirms worship ἐν πνεύματι καὶ ἀληθείᾳ is to accept and believe in Jesus. They can now worship the Father ἐν πνεύματι καὶ ἀληθείᾳ, for they have accepted Jesus and believed in him. Through the relationship with Jesus, the Samaritans participate in the eschatological worship of the Father.

## Conclusions and Implication of Current Study

Since the prologue, the Evangelist has been guiding the reader to see that Jesus as the giver of truth (1:17), and later John the Baptist introduces Jesus whom the Spirit remain and who will baptise with the Holy Spirit (1:32-33). The reader is prepared further by the Evangelist with the underlying theme of identity and “Jesus as the replacement of the Temple”. As the reader reaches the Samaritan woman episode, the ironic effect is heightened, for the woman ask the right question but failed to see the answer in front of her. Jesus explains to her that the eschatological worship is to worship through him (Jesus). Nonetheless, at the end of the episode the Samaritans finally get it and believe Jesus as the Saviour of the world. They participate in the new mode of worship, which is in Jesus, the dispenser of spirit and truth. As Lee has captured the interpretation well:

As revealed to the receptive Samaritan woman, Jesus is the locus and object of worship, the source of worship and the true worshipper, the bridge between heaven and earth, the one whose search for true worshippers is the expression of the Father’s love and longing.<sup>48</sup>

Therefore, worship ἐν πνεύματι καὶ ἀληθείᾳ is not about two different ways of worship (for instance, worship in ecstatic form and worship using Scripture). In this context, the Evangelist is emphasising

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<sup>48</sup> Lee, “In the Spirit of Truth: Worship and Prayer in the Gospel of John and the Early Fathers,” 297.

that true worship is accessible through Jesus. Only through Jesus we can appropriately worship God.

Having said that, the purpose of this study is not to deny the spiritual experiences when one worships God. The spiritual dynamic of worshipping God may result in various expressions of worship. As the Apostle Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 14, worship can be an ecstatic experience (such as speaking in tongues). Yet, preachers and teachers should not use John 4:23-24 as the proof text for teaching the various expression of worship. The emphasis of John 4 is on the centrality of Jesus in worship.