

Olivet Nazarene University

**"I Know Whom I Have Believed":
Knowing and Believing in the Fourth Gospel**

**BLIT 621-01: Johannine Literature
Dr. Larry Murphy**

By Bradley Buhro

**Bourbonnais, Illinois
March 23, 2000**

“He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him (John 1:7).”¹

“But if I do them [i.e. the works of the Father], even though you do not believe me, believe the works, so that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father (John 10:38.”

“But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name (John 20:31).”

Introduction

The theme of believing runs throughout the Gospel of John. All activity in the Gospel of John—from the preaching of the Baptist, to the miracles of the Christ, to the writing of the evangelist—revolves around a common goal, enlivening faith.

The importance of believing to the fourth gospel can be demonstrated in a variety of ways. First a simple examination of the comparative frequency with which the evangelist uses the word indicates that this is an important concept for this work. Brown points out that of the 241 times *pisteúein* is used in the New Testament, 98 are found in the fourth gospel. When one compares that with the 34 times *pisteúein* appears in the other three gospels combined one gets a sense of how central this theme is to John.

Its importance can also be seen in the way John overlexicalizes this concept.² Several synonymous verbs are used by John to describe the birth of faith. Bultmann lists such verbs as: “to come” to Jesus³, “to follow” the light⁴, “to enter” through the Door⁵, “to drink” the living water⁶, “to receive” Jesus⁷, “to love” him⁸, and “to hear” him⁹ (1955, 70; and The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (*TDNT*), s.v. “*pisteúō*”). It would appear that this concept is so important to John that no one word is enough to capture its essence.

¹ All scripture quotations are taken from the NRSV.

² For a sociological description of the use of overlexicalization of important concepts see Malina and Rohrbaugh 1998, 4-7.

³ Cf. 5:40; 6:35-37, 44ff, 65; 7:37.

⁴ Cf. 8:12.

⁵ Cf. 10:9.

⁶ Cf. 4:13f.

⁷ Cf. 1:12; 5:43.

⁸ Cf. 8:42; 14:15, 21, 23f, 28; 16:27.

⁹ Cf. 5:25; 6:60; 8:43, 47; 18:37.

However, there is another word which may or may not be an example of the overlexicalization of the birth of faith: to know. Knowing and believing appear often in the fourth gospel and their apparent relationship is fairly fluid. While for John it appears that believing and knowing can be distinguished, all true faith knows and all true knowledge believes. This paper will explore the ways in which the fourth evangelist uses these words, as well as the nuances these usages imply.

The Distinction Between Knowing and Believing

It is readily apparent that there must be some distinction in the Gospel of John between knowing and believing. The gospel says often that Jesus knows the Father, but never once is Jesus said to believe or have faith in the Father (Ladd, 1974, 246; Brown 1966, 1:513-514). Gaffney outlines the difference between these two concepts in this way: Believing is “the idea . . . of accepting testimonies, of freely submitting to the moral force of a certain kind of religious evidence.” On the other hand, knowing is “a kind of discernment of signs, a quality of insight into the transcendental reference of various symbolisms, ambiguities and veiled allusions.” He sums up the distinction in this way: “Believing has a more volitional and knowing a more intellectual flavor (1965, 240).” Just how does John use the concepts of knowing and believing in the fourth gospel?

Knowing in the fourth gospel

While Gaffney argues that knowing in the fourth gospel connotes an intellectual orientation, knowing, as John uses it, is far more personal than intellectual. Kysar looks back to the LXX use of the word to translate the Hebrew word *[dy]* (1993, 91). Genesis 4:1 is an excellent example of this usage when it says: "Adam d• egnw Euan t¾n guna¼ka, kaˆ sul laboàsa eteken t¾n Kain." Here knowledge is far more than an intellectual apprehension, it is an intimate, even sexual, knowing between husband and wife. It is not some object known by a subject, but rather "a subject communing with the subject of the knower (Kysar 1993, 92)." Knowing then implies involvement.

Rudolf Bultmann does not see the same correlation between [dý and ginëskw in the Gospel of John. He instead sees pisteýw as corresponding with [dý and ginëskw lies somewhere beyond it (*TDNT*, s.v. "ginëskw"). However, this does not mean knowing for John is not a personal, relational concept. Bultmann also writes "this *knowing* is not contemplating in the sense of the Greek *qewreîn*, which grows out of distance and gives distance, but it is the reception of the truth which grows out of obedient submission to the revelation (1971, 435)." The mutual knowledge between the Good Shepherd and his sheep stresses knowledge's aspect of "mutual relationship" in which the thing known cannot be separated from the knower "as the percept is separated from the percipient." Instead, "it denotes rather an individual realisation in which the knower's whole existence is determined by that which he knows, namely God. It is a knowing in which God discloses himself to man, and in so doing transforms him into a divine being (1971, 380-381)." Elsewhere Bultmann describes John's knowing as "a personal fellowship (*TDNT*, s.v. "ginëskw")."

Whether it is understood as being formally equivalent to the Hebrew [dý or not, knowing in John remains a highly personal, highly relational concept. It moves beyond intellect to intimacy and involves the union of the knower with the known.

Believing in the fourth gospel

Ethelbert Stauffer writes, "On the lips of Jesus faith is an audacious assertion of a possibility; in Paul and John it is an abasement before the glory of God; according to Heb. 11 it is evidence of the invisible and in Revelation, finally, it is the fidelity of the Martyr (1955, 168)." This paper is of course concerned primarily with the understanding of faith in the Gospel of John. Is Stauffer correct in saying faith is an abasement before God?

In the Gospel of John, one finds the concept of believing expressed in several different constructions. Ladd points out that pisteýw has three primary meanings in the fourth gospel. First, when used with the dative or accusative, pisteýw often means "to believe that something or someone is true, to

trust him." We are called to trust the witness of scripture (2:22); Moses (5:46) and his writings (5:47); Jesus' words (2:22; 4:50, 5:47) and works (10:38); and Jesus himself (5:38, 46; 6:30; 8:31, 45, 46; 10:37-38). *pisteýw* also appears with the conjunction *ôti*. In these instances *pisteýw* implies acceptance of the Christological claims of the gospel. We are called to accept that: Jesus is the Holy One of God (6:69); Jesus is the Christ, Son of God (11:27); Jesus is sent by God (11:42; 17:8, 12); Jesus is one with the Father (14:10-11); Jesus has come from the Father (16:27, 30) and that Jesus is "I am" (8:24; 13:19). Third, there is the formula *pisteýw eij* which refers to "the personal relationship of commitment between the believer and Jesus." More than "intellectual assent" or "creedal correctness", Ladd argues that *pisteýw eij* "means the response of the whole man to the revelation that has been given in Christ" (1974, 271-272).

Brown points out that there is no "real parallel" for *pisteýw eij* in the LXX or in Secular Greek. It is a construction somewhat peculiar to the New Testament kerygma. In John we are called to believe into the father (twice), Jesus (31 times), and Jesus' name (4 times)(1966, 1:512). Defining this type of believing, Brown says it is "an active commitment to a person and, in particular, to Jesus. It involves more than trust in Jesus or confidence in him; it is an acceptance of Jesus and of what he claims to be and a dedication of one's life to him (1966, 1:513)."

Bultmann notices that in the fourth gospel we are called to believe Jesus as well as his words and works. But this should not be understood "as if one first had to believe him, trust him *in order* that one might believe *in* him, but that one ought to believe him and in so trusting him is in fact believing *in* him; one can do neither without doing both." Such faith is the same because Jesus is both Revelation and Revealer. Jesus and his words and works are identical. Belief in one is belief in the others (1955, 71).

Given this understanding of the highly personal, highly relational aspect of believing Kysar points out that in the same way knowing is not the intellectual acceptance of dogma, believing is not "a detached intellectual confidence." In words similar to his description of knowing Kysar says of believing, ". . . [F]aith involves the whole person—mind, body, emotions and all the rest—in a personal relationship. . . . It is a personal involvement and trust that links the believer and the object of belief together in a kind of unity."

Knowing and believing distinguished in the fourth gospel

There are some instances in which the concepts of believing and knowing appear distinguished in the Gospel of John. In these instances one precedes the other and may be understood as giving rise to the other. However, the matter is confused somewhat when one realizes there is no standard order in the fourth gospel. Sometimes knowledge gives rise to faith; sometimes it rises out of faith.

Examine 8:31-32. Jesus is said to be speaking with Jews who had already believed in him. He promises that if they will continue in his word, they will come to know the truth. It appears faith gives rise to knowledge here. In 10:38, Jesus calls on the crowd to believe in the works so they may come to know and understand his unity with the Father.

However, elsewhere we find the opposite pattern. In 16:30 the disciples tell Jesus that they know that he knows all things and by this knowledge they have come to believe that he is from God. In 17:7-8 there is perhaps a similar pattern when Jesus says that the disciples know he came from God and have believed that God sent him.

What is the distinction between knowing and believing in these passages? Bultmann argues that in the passage from chapter 8 the faith the Jews had arrived at was a "seeming faith" aroused by Jesus' words and works. Such faith is a "first tentative step" toward Christ but must grow into a genuine faith (1955, 73). When the pattern appears as faith leading to knowledge, *ginēskw* is "the ensuing knowledge to which faith presses on (*TDNT*, s.v. "*ginēskw*")." However in the passages where knowledge gives rise to faith Bultmann says *pisteŷw* is the attitude which grows out of knowledge (*TDNT*, s.v. "*ginēskw*"). It would appear that in these instances faith is the confident assurance which rises out of the intimate relationship implied by knowing.

The Identity of Knowing and Believing

While the knowing and believing appear distinguished in the passages above, far more often knowing and believing are used synonymously. Even Bultmann, who outlines the way the significance of the two concepts varies when their order is reversed notes "Believing in the full sense and knowing are not two different acts of stages (1955, 74)." Brown writes, "For John, being a believer and being a disciple are really synonymous for faith is the primary factor in becoming a Christian (1966, 1:512)." And Ladd argues that the fact the order of faith and knowledge is sometimes reversed makes it impossible to concretely differentiate the two. He continues, "It certainly rules out the possibility of two levels of Christians: beginners who are believers and advanced believers who are knowers."

Compare the substance of knowledge and belief in the following passages. In 11:42, 17:8 and 17:21 the fact that Jesus came from the Father is the substance of faith. In 3:2, 17:3 and 17:23 it is the substance of knowledge. In 6:69, 11:27 and 20:31 Jesus' identity as the Messiah is the substance of faith. In 6:69 it is also the substance of knowledge. In 17:3 knowing God is eternal life. In 6:40 and 20:30 believing brings eternal life. Such identity between faith and knowledge can be found outside the gospel of John as well. In Isaiah 43:10 and Ode of Solomon 42:8-9 knowing and believing are used in synonymous parallelism. Due to this evidence Bultmann notes that it would be a misconception to assume knowledge is a step past faith. "It is immediately apparent that faith and knowledge do not differ as to their substance (1955, 73-74).

One strong correlation between faith and knowledge appears to have been overlooked by the literature surveyed in this paper. Knowledge appears frequently in the Jesus' prayer in chapter 17. Knowing is eternal life (17:3). Furthermore, Jesus prays for the unity of believers "that they world may know (v 23)." In John 20:30 the purpose of the activity of the evangelist is belief, and through believing comes life. The purpose Jesus left for his church was to bring knowledge unto life. The purpose of the gospel is faith unto life. Knowing and believing are equated at the very purpose of our existence and activity.

Conclusion

What then can be said about the relationship between knowing and believing in the fourth gospel? It appears that, in the fourth gospel, believing and knowing can be distinguished, but all true faith knows and all true knowledge believes.

Knowing and believing are not identical, but they do not exist in a hierarchy. Grant points out that such a hierarchy existed in Gnosticism. "[The Gnostic]," he writes, "does not know because he has gradually learned, he knows because revelation has been given to him. He does not believe, for faith is inferior to gnosis (1966,7)." Bultmann writes:

In antithesis to Gnosticism it is apparent that knowledge can never take us beyond faith or leave faith behind. As all knowledge begins with faith, so it abides in faith. Similarly all faith is to become knowledge. If all knowledge can only be a knowledge of faith, faith comes to itself in knowledge (*TDNT*, s.v. "pisteýw").

Elsewhere he writes:

The consequence of pisteýein and ginēskēin is not viewed in such a way that whoever accepts dogma becomes the possessor of esoteric knowledge in mystagogical teaching. . . . Nor is it that a new world of thought opens itself to the believer through his sinking down and gazing inwardly . . . faith always remains bound to the Word and does not hover over or beyond in mystic vision. Rather the general way faith is characterized shows it as an attitude which surrenders the previous self-understanding of man, and that the ginēskēin is nothing less than a factor in the structure of faith itself, namely faith insofar as it understands itself (1971, 435).

While Kysar appears to take exception with this last statement, arguing that it implies an unnecessary philosophical sophistication in the evangelist (1993, 91), this appears to be the best explanation of the relationship between knowing and believing. Knowing and believing appear intertwined throughout the gospel and it is readily apparent that true believing knows and true knowing believes. As Bultmann puts it "Since for John, all knowing can only be knowing-in-faith, faith comes to itself, so to say, in knowing (1955, 74)."

Most likely the strong identity between the two rises out of the highly personal, highly relational way each word is used. Both knowing and believing stem from an intimate relationship between knower and known, between believer and believed. Knowing carries with it the Old Testament concept of the intimate unity of husband and wife. Believing also carries this idea of intimate union. Ladd argues that

for John believing into Jesus is a personal identification with Christ in the same way that for Paul baptism into Christ is a union with him (1974, 271-272). Knowing is more than intellectual apperception and believing is more than mental affirmation. Both involve personal commitment, submission and obedience. And as such, the meaning of both is closely intertwined.

Reference List

- Brown, Raymond. 1966. The Gospel according to John. Vol. 29. The Anchor Bible, 2 vols. New York: Doubleday.
- Bultmann, Rudolf. 1954. Theology of the New Testament, Vol. 2. Translated by Kendrick Grobel. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.
- _____. 1971. The Gospel of John. Translated by G. R. Beasley-Murray, R. W. N. Hoare and J. K. Riches. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
- Gaffney, James. 1965. Believing and knowing in the fourth gospel. Theological Studies 26 : 215-241.
- Grant, R. M. 1966. Gnosticism and Early Christianity. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Kysar, Robert. 1975. The fourth evangelist and his gospel: an examination of contemporary scholarship. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House.
- _____. 1993. John: the maverick gospel. Revised Edition. Louisville: Westminster: John Knox Press.
- Ladd, George Eldon. 1974. A theology of the New Testament. Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans.
- Malina, Bruce J. and Richard L. Rohrbaugh. 1998. Social-science commentary on the Gospel of John. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Stauffer, Ethelbert. 1955. New Testament theology. Translated by John Marsh. New York: MacMillan Co.