1. Introduction
The theology of the Fourth Gospel, designated first by Origen as the ‘eternal’ or ‘spiritual Gospel’, is grounded paradoxically in a specific understanding of sensuality and the body. This worldview sees the Word-made-flesh at the centre of the Gospel’s perception of time and history, where the pre-existent Son comes to dwell in divine solidarity not only with humankind but also the material life of creation. The incarnation is the mid-point of history for the evangelist, from which he looks back to the beginning and forward to the end from this central vantage point. As the underpinning of the Gospel’s theological vision, creation is the backdrop for the incarnation, for the life and ministry of the Johannine Jesus, for his death and resurrection, and for the birth of the community of faith, with profound eschatological implications. This paper seeks to demonstrate the inherent narrative sensuality of John’s understanding of salvation, as the ongoing action of the one, creating God — a sensuality that involves, not a crude materiality, but an understanding of matter as God-given and God-transfigured, and therefore adaptable and open to transposition.

2. Sensuality in the prologue
The prologue, long apprehended as the key to the Gospel, sets the scene for the sensuous perspective of the ensuing Johannine narrative. While there are a number of theories of the prologue’s structure, the simplest pattern from a literary and theological perspective is a division in three overlapping cycles: the Word in creation, which outlines the relationship of the Word to God and creation (1:1-5); the response to the Word, which bookends the faith of John the Baptist and believers on either side of those who reject (1:6-13); and the Word in flesh, which unfolds the incarnation and its ‘exegetical’ significance (1:14-18). This structure highlights the inherent sensuality of the Fourth Gospel, with its focus on creation in the first cycle and flesh in the third cycle, each embracing the response of faith to the divine self-revelation in material form in the second cycle.

The Johannine focus on sensuality as the precondition for, and indeed object of, salvation, is apparent from the opening cycle of the prologue. These verses, as is widely attested, echo the first creation account where God’s dynamic speech brings the universe to birth in a stately progression over an archetypal period of seven days (Gen 1:1-2:4a). It is apparent in the opening words, ‘in the beginning’, which echo the opening of Genesis in the Greek Old Testament (ἐν ἀρχῇ, Gen 1:1 LXX), while the introduction of the Word (ὁ λόγος) parallels the repetition of ‘and God said’, around which the order of creation turns (καὶ ἐπηνέψε ὁ θεός, Gen 1:3 LXX). Mortal life is visible in the emerging of

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6 The words are repeated at Gen 1:6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26, and 29. God’s voice also speaks throughout the creation account in naming (Gen 1:5, 8, 10) and blessing (Gen 1:22, 28; 2:3).
light from primordial darkness, light being the first created element on the first day of the week (Gen 1:3). God’s word is enough to bring to birth the universe, to bless it and declare it ‘good’ (καλὸν, Gen 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). In other words, for the fourth evangelist, it is the one creative, self-donating God, who lies behind both creation and incarnation. The prologue demonstrates that the story about to be told is the continuation in the ongoing narrative of God’s relationship to the world. It is a narrative, moreover, in which light and darkness, life and death, contend, with the ultimate, eschatological victory of life and light assured (1:5). The creation story is thus established as the backdrop to the Gospel, without which its understanding of salvation and eschatology cannot adequately be grasped.

A similar sensuality is to be apprehended from the second and third cycles of the prologue, with the theme of faith and unbelief, and the full revelation of the incarnation. John’s use of the term ‘flesh’ (σάρξ) in these cycles is definitive for understanding how the language is employed later in the Gospel narrative. John’s portrayal of the flesh here is complex and nuanced, and at some variance with, for example, the use of the same terminology in the Pauline corpus. For Paul, flesh is a form of metonymy for fallen human nature and its disordered desires; ‘body’, however, is different, being destined for resurrection. For John, flesh is by definition the creation of God which, though limited in being mortal, is not itself inextricably allied to sin.

The first appearance of ‘flesh’ occurs in the second cycle, in the context of people’s tragic lack of recognition of the light and their rejection of it (1:10-11). On the one hand, ‘flesh’ itself is the work of God, called forth by the voice of God, as the first cycle has made plain: πάντα δὲ αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο (1:3). On the other hand, this God-created flesh, being mortal, does not possess the ‘authority’ (ἐξουσία, 1:12) to effect a new birth. No generative human power can achieve such a divinely creative act (1:13). For all its original goodness, flesh cannot cross the abyss which now yawns between God and God’s creation (cf. 1:5). On the contrary, though created, flesh is weak and ineffective because it belongs to the realm of ‘becoming’ rather than ‘being’. It cannot of itself combat the darkness.

John hereby presupposes, without explanation, a rent in the fabric of creation that has had the tragic consequence of separating human beings from their Creator and their true, creaturely identity as children of God, made in the divine image (Gen 1:26-27). This disjunction is apparent from the inability of ‘his own’ to recognise their Creator in the coming of the light, although he enters what is, by right of creation, his own domain (εἰς τὸ ἰδία, 1:11). In the face of the human inability to heal the wound in creation, the prologue makes plain that God is willing to do so — and, indeed, that only the Creator can enable human beings to recover their lost identity and overcome the darkness which has

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7 A similar notion is present in the prologue to the Epistle to the Hebrews, where the speech and self-communication of God addresses the world, first and partially through Moses and the prophets, and then definitively through the Son (Hebr 1:1-4). See e.g. Harold W. Attridge, The Epistle to the Hebrews (Hermeneia: Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 36-41.


9 On the symbolic role of ‘flesh’ throughout the Johannine narrative, see especially D.A. Lee, Flesh and Glory, 29-64.

10 See B.J. Byrne, Romans (SP6; Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1996), 212.

11 The distinction between the two verbs (γίνομαι and ἔγνω) is preserved, more or less consistently, throughout the prologue; see Frank Kermode, ‘John’ in R. Alter & F. Kermode, The Literary Guide to the Bible (London: Fontana, 1987), 445-447.

intruded into the goodness of the world. A new ‘birth’ is required to restore the original authenticity of creation (1:13).

The third cycle reveals that the way in which the restoration occurs is paradoxical, a paradox that lies at the root of the Gospel’s Christology and ecclesiology. The damage inflicted on mortal flesh is repaired astonishingly by flesh. The second instance of σάρξ at 1:14 is itself creative and re-creative. John sees the flesh of the Word as arching the gulf between God and humankind, between the celestial and the terrestrial realms, once painfully parted but now reunited: καὶ ὁ λόγος σάρξ ἐγένετο καὶ ἐσχήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν (1:14a). Restoration is effected in the union of mortal flesh and immortal glory (δόξα), a glory that is closely allied to light.

Note that the image of light, linked explicitly to the first day creation — where it is formed before the sun and moon and stars (1:3) — moves quickly in the prologue to the descent of the Word (1:5). The light given in creation is symbolic of the divine glory revealed in the incarnation. The distinction is not between light in an immaterial sense (the divine self-projection) and light in a physical sense (the sun), but rather between the light of God, as the source of creation, and the light of God as revealed definitively in the Word, but visible and palpable only to the eyes of faith (‘we beheld his glory’, 1:14b). This is the point at which John’s ecclesiology begins: in the recognition of divine light glory in the mortal flesh of Jesus.

Tertullian captures well the physical transposition involved in John’s understanding of the incarnation as an act of divine self-enfleshment, where the Word is ‘born yet not born, carnal yet spiritual, weak yet strong, dying yet living’. John’s point in the prologue is that, while flesh of itself cannot re-create the lost image, the flesh of the Son can achieve precisely that because, in becoming flesh, the Word ‘became himself what was his own image’. For Athanasius, human beings, originally made in the image of the Word, can be restored only by the one who is the ‘image’ (εἰκόνα) of the Father: ‘the Word of God came through himself, in order that, being the Image of the Father, he might re-create humanity according to the image’. In both uses of σάρξ, therefore, John in the prologue is speaking of sensual reality: the first instance being original to creation, with the second belonging to the incarnation, understood as a fundamental act of re-creation by the one creative, self-disclosing God in physical form.

3. Sensuality in the ministry of the Johannine Jesus

The focus on sensuality as intrinsic to Johannine spirituality is apparent in the narrative of Jesus’ public ministry, and particularly the seven ‘signs’ which are concerned with the healing of, and providing for, bodily needs. In the feeding narrative, for example, the sensuality is palpable (6:1-15). Jesus’ concern for the physical hunger of the crowd is genuine, and the narrative as a whole recalls the wandering of the children of Israel in the wilderness, dependent entirely on the divine, providential goodness (cf. Num 16). As the dialogue progresses, following the miraculous ‘sign’, it becomes clear that more is intended in this ‘sign’ than the sating of physical hunger and that the feeding points to

another and deeper need which Jesus as the Bread of life can alone satisfy in order to gain eternal life (6:35). Towards the end of the dialogue, and as it becomes increasingly hostile, the Johannine Jesus reveals that this life is sacramental, accessed in and through the flesh of the Son of Man: inversely, through his self-gift on the cross and, by transposition, in the eucharist (6:51-58). When Jesus speaks a few verses later of the flesh being ‘of no avail’ in contrast to ‘the life-giving Spirit’ (6:63), the point is not the contrast between the material and the spiritual. Rather, for John, flesh of itself has no power to give life, and only the Spirit who is the author of life has such power to enliven the flesh. This is a variation on the prologue’s understanding of physical transposition and sensuality. It is the flesh of Jesus, the Bread from heaven, revealed on the cross and offered in the eucharist, which alone can transfigure mortal flesh.

In the long narrative of the man born blind, a similar sensuality is apparent. The story concerns the literal gift of new sight to a man impoverished by disability and reduced to beggarm–d (9:1-6). In this case, the miracle which Jesus performs is not strictly the restoration of the man’s sight, since he is born blind, but rather the creation of sight. The use of the mud paste which Jesus spreads on the man’s sightless eyes is linked to the dust of the earth out of which Adam is created in the second creation account (Επλασεν ο θεός τόν ἄνθρωπον χούν ἀπὸ τῆς γῆς, Gen 2:7a LXX). This is an act of creation. Moreover, the core symbol of light, around which the narrative turns, is equally concerned with the revelation of divine glory to the restored man which he immediately recognises (‘sees’, 9:7). Through the experience of physical illumination — and the interrogations which ensue — the man receives knowledge of Jesus’ identity and comes to faith. The sensuality of the experience is the means by which the man achieves true, Johannine faith: sight enables insight.

The same sensuality involved in the public ministry and the ‘signs’ is also apparent in the narrative of the Last Supper, with the story of the footwashing and Jesus’ prayer bounding the Farewell Discourse on either side (13:1-30; 17:1-26). The footwashing is not simply a model for the life of the church, though it is partly that (13:7). It is also, for John, the sensuous experience of intimate union between divine and human that effects a purification of heart and life (13:77). Touch is one of the five senses which are prevalent throughout the Fourth Gospel, each of them stressing the sensuous nature of faith and its capacity to transform human life through material reality: sight, hearing, taste, touch and smell.

In the prayer which follows the discourse, the Johannine Jesus speaks of his divine authority, given him by the Father, over ‘all flesh’ (πάσης σαρκός, 17:2a). The meaning is obscured in English translations such as the NRSV and the NIV, which opt for ‘human beings’, as against the RSV and ESV, which translate literally ‘all flesh’. According to Schnackenburg, “When it stands by itself, sarx is not just another way of saying ‘man’”.

In its wider meaning, ‘flesh’ can incorporate all living creatures formed by the divine Word, and need not be confined to human beings. Indeed, in the first creation account, human beings are created on the same day as all other living creatures, fish, birds, domestic and wild animals (Gen 1:24-27), indicating their close inter-relationship. John’s terminiology suggests the same wider sphere that encompasses all living creatures within the orbit of the incarnation, as the Word/Son is once more turned ‘towards God’ (πρὸς τὸν θεόν, 1:1). In this sense, 17:2 can be read with both creation and incarnation in mind. The Son’s sovereignty over ‘all flesh’ in creation begins alongside the Word/Son became flesh. The one who formed flesh is himself formed

19 Moloney, John, 370-371, 477-479.
22 Lee, Flesh and Glory, 43-45.
by flesh; the Creator of all living creatures becomes a living creature; flesh stands in the place of flesh. The Son who prays to the Father is the one in whose flesh, even in dying, the divine glory will shine, signifying his final ascent to God. The link with creation, suggested by the use of ‘flesh’ both here and in the prologue, points to creation as the backdrop and goal of the incarnation, so that ‘all flesh’ becomes a recipient in the Johannine quality of eschatological life both now and in the age to come (‘η αἰώνιας ζωῆς), which will ultimately defsin, evil and death.

4. Sensuality in the passion and resurrection

The language in the crucifixion narrative is that of ‘body’ rather than ‘flesh’. The term ‘body’ is more specific, referring to the crucified and risen body of Jesus (19:38, 40; 20:12). This change of language is already indicated in the Cleansing of the Temple (2:21), where the temple itself becomes a symbol of the transposed body of Jesus through the resurrection. The passion narrative makes clear that ‘body’ refers to the dying or dead body, since the term is only used of Jesus and those executed with him in the context of the crucifixion and burial (19:31, 38, 40; 20:12). The paradox in the Cleansing of the Temple is that Jesus’ body is unique: only in his experience is life restored and transformed. Of this the raising of Lazarus from the dead is itself a symbolic ‘sign’, pointing symbolically to the resurrection of Jesus. The threat to Lazarus’ mortality following his emergence from the tomb, makes clear that his raising remains of the body whereas Jesus’ experience if that of resurrection/transfiguration. Lazarus will again die, whereas Jesus will never again die but yet remains flesh.

The sensuality of the passion and resurrection narratives focus particularly around the wounds of Jesus, emblems for the evangelist of Jesus’ redemptive suffering. The most vivid symbol of the sensuous reality of Jesus’ bodily/fleshy reality is the piercing of his side after his death, and the flow of blood and water (ἐξηλθεν εὐθὺς αἷμα καὶ ὕδωρ, 19:31-37). Nothing more vividly expresses the palpable nature of Jesus’ life, the materiality that the Son has so fully embraced. The imagery reinforces the centrality of sensuality in John’s understanding of spirituality. On the cross, the divine glory radiates from the flesh of Jesus. At the same time, the presence of this celestial glory makes possible his rising from the dead. Jesus is neither robbed of life nor is it restored to him in a passive way in the Fourth Gospel. Having divine ἐξουσία over life and death, the Johannine Jesus both lays down and takes up his own life (10:17-18). While embracing mortal flesh, he nonetheless holds its power in his hands, in a way that demonstrates the union of flesh and glory.

John takes the sensuous symbolism further in the resurrection narratives where the risen Christ displays the wounds of his suffering to the disciples, leading them to Easter joy and faith (20:20, 25-28). The wounds signify the creaturely identification with the world, yet also divinely transposed flesh of Jesus in the resurrection that heals the wounds of creation. In his hands, the wounds become symbols, not only of mortality and death, but of eternal life, the life which is given through death. This recognition leads Thomas to his climactic confession of faith: οί κυρίων μου καὶ ο θεός μου (20:28). The sight (and perhaps touch) of the wounds is sufficient to draw this lagging believer to the same experience as Mary Magdalene and the other disciples.

The Risen Christ’s appearance to the disciples in their fear and unbelief empowers and revitalises the disciples with the gift of the Spirit which he breathes upon them (Jn 20:22): ἐνεφύσησεν καὶ λέγει αὐτοῖς λάβετε πνεῦμα ἁγιον. Once again the creation of Adam is recalled, into whose face God breathes the breath of life, so making him a ‘living being’ (ἐνεφύσησεν εἰς τὸ πρόσωπον αὐτοῦ πνοὴν ζωῆς, καὶ ἐγένετο ὁ ἄνθρωπος εἰς ψυχὴν ζωοῦν, Gen 2:7b). Like light in the prologue of the Gospel, breathing is a creately action but it also signifies a deeper level of revelation and empowerment, since the Spirit-Paraclete is the giver of life, both natural and eternal. As elsewhere, the gift is given through the medium of sensuous experience.
5. Conclusion
There are distinctive, eschatological implications for John’s sensual understanding of theology and spirituality is apparent from the Johannine text. Martha is not wrong to affirm her belief in the resurrection ‘on the last day’, following the death and burial of her brother, Lazarus (11:24), but her faith is limited in banishing resurrection to the indefinite future, as well as her inadequate understanding of the centrality of Johannine Christology (11:25-26). Here and elsewhere, John affirms the future destiny of the flesh. Thus resurrection, for this evangelist, is interpreted as transformation of flesh rather than a move to a non-physical existence. The Johannine narrative assures the believing community that the incarnation remains sensuous and palpable, even if in a new, transposed way, through the life-giving presence of the Spirit-Paraclete in the life of the believing community.