

THE CHRISTOLOGY OF THE JOHANNINE WRITINGS

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John is the most overtly theological of the Gospels, and Christology is its central focus. Nevertheless, to speak of Christology is to bring to bear on the Gospel a systematization of thought and an abstraction of theological categories that had not yet developed in the history of Christian thought. In the Gospel of John memory has passed into tradition, and tradition has been rendered into a narrative that tells the story of Jesus for a particular community. This narrative has clear implications for the community's debates about the person and work of Jesus, but those debates are still carried on in the medium of narrative rather than in doctrine or dogma. First John moves one step further in that it interprets the community's debates by making judgments about christological claims apart from the Gospel's narrative context.

Typically, Johannine Christology has been approached through a survey of christological titles, through efforts to reconstruct various stages in the development of the Johannine community and its thought, or through some combination of the two. The survey of Johannine Christology in this chapter shows that these approaches are not easily compatible or complementary. On the contrary, the conceptual relationships within the Gospel of John make it very difficult to sort out stages in the development of Johannine Christology. I survey briefly both some leading reconstructions of the development of John's Christology and the ways in which John uses some of the christological titles. This survey calls attention to relationships between various strands of John's Christology so that one can see, in rough outline at least, the difficulty of harmonizing theories regarding how the

Gospel's Christology developed historically and how the Gospel develops its Christology.

HOW THE GOSPEL'S CHRISTOLOGY DEVELOPED

Because the prevailing view is that the Gospel of John was composed over a period of time in a process that probably involved the testimony of the beloved disciple, materials shaped within the Johannine community, perhaps two editions of the Gospel, and the work of a redactor, various interpreters have sought to show how Johannine Christology developed in the course of this process. The writers I survey here developed their views independently, but they form an interesting lineage in American Johannine scholarship. Robert Fortna was a student of J. Louis Martyn shortly before Martyn published his *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (1968). Raymond Brown and J. Louis Martyn both taught at Union Theological Seminary in New York, and Martinus de Boer studied with them.

Robert Fortna recast Rudolf Bultmann's hypothesis of a signs source, advancing the study of Johannine sources methodologically and identifying the contours of an early signs Gospel.¹ Fortna subsequently developed his earlier work on the signs Gospel by showing how the evangelist edited it into the present form of the Gospel.² The function of the signs Gospel, which probably included a passion narrative, was simply to present Jesus as the Messiah. The signs were "demonstrations of his messiahship," and belief was "the paradigmatic response."³ The signs Gospel's account of Jesus' death is apologetic, showing that Jesus suffered and died in order to fulfill the scriptures. Accordingly, there is little theological reflection on the soteriological significance of Jesus' death. The fourth evangelist reaffirmed the source's Christology, changed it, and deepened and enhanced it. Christology remains central, however. The presentation of Jesus' ministry revolves around the signs, but the fourth evangelist drops the report "We have found Elijah," which probably stood at 1:43, in order to defend the claim in John 3:13 that "no one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man." Jesus is the one "sent by the Father," and John the Baptist is solely a witness to him. Similarly, Jesus is a "new Moses," like him but greater, for through Jesus came not the law but grace and truth (1:17).

The fourth evangelist enhances the Christology of the signs Gospel by adding the discourses in which Jesus speaks revelatory words. The christological titles, which were all subsumed under Jesus' messiahship in the

source, are now differentiated and their significance deepened. The title "Son of man" appears in material added to the source, and Jesus speaks as one from heaven. Jesus declares what the Father has given him to say. He knows what is in the hearts of others; he uses the divine "I am"; and he lays down his life and takes it up again. In short, he reveals the divine glory. The fourth Gospel's Christology of the incarnation, therefore, transforms the Jewish, messianic view of the source into "a cosmic christology."⁴

J. Louis Martyn and Raymond E. Brown have set the framework for understanding the development of the Johannine community and its Christology. Their work is well known and hardly needs to be summarized again. Of particular interest for our survey of Johannine Christology, however, is the way in which each of these interpreters views the development of John's Logos Christology. Both affirm that the conflict with the synagogue was in a sense christological and related, either before or after the fact, to the move from a lower (messianic miracle worker) to a higher (otherworldly Logos) Christology. Martyn contends that during the early period, while the Johannine believers were still within the synagogue, they preached Jesus as a miracle worker, "the Mosaic prophet, the eschatological Elijah, the expected Messiah."⁵ The success of this preaching eventually led the authorities to take radical steps to control the problem of conversions and dissension within the synagogue. During the middle period, after the expulsion of believers from the synagogue, the socially dislocated believers increasingly conceived of Jesus as "a numinous and somewhat other-worldly figure."⁶ Martyn therefore assigns the Logos hymn to this period of the Johannine community's history.⁷

Raymond Brown, in contrast, posits the entrance into the community of a "second group" of antilemple Jews who also brought in Samaritan converts. This group served as a catalyst for the development of the preexistence Christology, which in turn precipitated the expulsion of the Johannine Christians from the synagogue. As support for this reconstruction, Brown appeals to three elements in the text of John: (1) the conversion of Samaritans in John 4:4-42, which occurs prior to the conflict with "the Jews" in chapter 5; (2) the antilemple attitude expressed in John 4:21; and (3) the new title "Savior of the world" in John 4:42.⁸

In short, Brown and Martyn differ over the causal relationship between the development of a higher Christology and the expulsion of believers from the synagogue, with Brown contending that the development of such a Christology led to the expulsion and Martyn contending that the development of the higher, otherworldly Christology followed the expulsion. Nevertheless both agree that the Johannine believers moved from a lower

to a higher Christology and that the Johannine Logos Christology developed prior to the entrance of Gentiles into the Johannine community.

Martinius C. de Boer has proposed a similar developmental approach to the Christology of John by uncovering a series of stages in the christological perspectives on the death of Jesus in the Gospel of John.⁹ Building on the work of Brown and Martyn, de Boer identifies three crises in the history of the Johannine community: (1) expulsion from the synagogue, (2) execution of Johannine Christians for making the claim that Jesus was one with God, and (3) schism within the community (reflected in 1 and 2 John). The three crises divide the development of the Johannine community into four periods. Correspondingly, de Boer identifies four stages in the composition history of the Gospel, with each stage formulating a different understanding of Jesus' death.

John I (the Gospel of the first period) was a collection of miracle stories. Its "miracle-working prophet-messiah" (a term de Boer borrowed from D. Moody Smith)¹⁰ performed "signs" reminiscent of Elijah and Elisha, fulfilling the contemporary expectations of the "prophet like Moses" who was to come. This presentation of Jesus sought to convince Jewish readers that Jesus, not John the Baptist, was the Messiah. Jesus' death was an embarrassment, but one that was deflected by demonstrating that it fulfilled the scriptures. It also served as a prelude to the climactic sign (his resurrection).¹¹

The argument with the Jews culminated in the expulsion of Johannine believers from the synagogue, and this separation from the synagogue prompted a major revision of the Gospel (John II). Believers were challenged for professing that Jesus was the Messiah, and the question of Jesus' authority centered on the issue of where he was from. Did he not come from Galilee, and did they not know his family? How then could he have divine authority? In response, John II affirms that Jesus is the Son of God, the one sent by the Father. Hence he bears divine authority and can even use God's name, "I am."¹² John II also presents an appeal to those believers who remained in the synagogue to declare their faith publicly and depart with the other believers. Consequently, John II develops the importance of Jesus' departure to the Father. Following Brown, de Boer argues that John 20:17 requires the reader to understand that the exaltation to the Father has already occurred in the resurrection. The focus on the departure of the Son to the Father in John II means that the death of Jesus is still subordinate in significance to the resurrection/exaltation/departure of Jesus.¹³

John III, produced after the persecution of Johannine believers, sought to vindicate Jesus and his followers while condemning their persecutors ("the Jews") as those who were controlled by the murderous "ruler of this

world."¹⁴ To this end, the designation "the Son of man" was introduced into discourses that had already been framed in John II, and the emphasis was on the departure or exaltation of the Son of man rather than on his coming. The "lifting up" sayings precipitate a striking change in perspective: "The ascension of Jesus to heaven is newly interpreted as a hidden reference to the sort of death Jesus had died (3:13-15, 12:32-33)."¹⁵ The crucifixion, then, served as an outward sign of its own significance: the exaltation of Jesus. As a result of this reinterpretation, references to Jesus' glorification have in view not merely his resurrection/ascension but also his death.¹⁶ Jesus' death can therefore serve as a paradigm in the Gospel's two-level drama for the martyrdom of his followers, who also glorify God through their deaths. As in the case of Jesus' death, their deaths will bear fruit also.¹⁷

The final period in the history of the Johannine tradition is marked by the division of the community and the departure of a group of Johannine believers who held to different beliefs regarding the significance of Jesus' life and death. In response, the elder, the author of the Johannine epistles, reasserted the salvific, expiatory significance of Jesus' death by emphasizing that Jesus was the Christ who had come in flesh and that the Johannine believers were cleansed by water and by blood. The giving of Jesus' flesh and blood is related to the significance of his death (John 6:51-56), and the foot washing is a demonstration of its cleansing effect. The final redactor of the Gospel weaves this late understanding of Jesus' death into the Gospel through the account of the water and blood flowing from Jesus' side (John 19:34-35). Through this masterful analysis, de Boer shows not one but many Christologies in the Johannine writings, that the various Christologies can be distinguished and related to events in the history of the Johannine community, and that while Jesus' death was not important in the two early stages, it grew in importance in the latter two stages.

The strength of such a careful and comprehensive developmental approach to Johannine Christology is that it provides a rationale for the various christological perspectives in the Gospel by relating them to a reconstruction of the history of the community in which the Gospel was produced. Fascinating and persuasive as its results may be, the developmental approach nevertheless suffers from three weaknesses: (1) It must rely on a reconstruction of the history of the community that is itself uncertain; (2) it distinguishes and separates christological emphases within the Gospel so that they no longer stand in tension, balance, or harmony with one another; and (3) it does not sufficiently account for the ways in which these various Christologies are related to each other and function in

the Gospel as we have it. The solution is not to cease to explore either the variety of christological perspectives in the Gospel or the history of the Johannine community but to bring the historical and literary approaches to Johannine Christology into dialogue with each other.

This survey of developmental approaches to the Christology of John has focused on several closely related proposals that in a sense represent the work of American Johannine scholarship. A more representative survey would consider other approaches to the history of the Johannine tradition as well. One basic line of development would remain constant, however, even in a broader survey of developmental theories: Johannine Christology appears to have developed from an early stage in which Jesus was viewed as a miracle-working Messiah who fulfilled the scriptures to a later stage in which this Messiah was viewed as the Logos who had become flesh. This means that the Johannine signs stem from an early period, while the Gospel's Logos Christology, which is most clearly present in the prologue, represents the mature development of Johannine thought. Paradoxically, when one reads the Gospel, one begins with the prologue and then reads all the rest of the Gospel narrative in the light of its Logos Christology. To a degree not sufficiently recognized, the leading strands of John's Christology are also tied to this late, Logos Christology.

HOW THE GOSPEL DEVELOPS ITS CHRISTOLOGY

Although the christological titles provide important avenues for understanding John's Christology, care must be taken to treat these titles in their Johannine contexts because the Gospel of John uses the titles in distinctive ways, fills them with new meanings, and relates them to one another and to important Johannine themes in ways that give them unique meanings and functions in this Gospel. Closely related to the titles are the Johannine "I am" sayings, and these too need to be interpreted in their narrative context in the Gospel. Similarly, the "signs" that Jesus does point to his identity: He turns water to wine (2:1-11), heals the official's son (4:46-54), heals the man at the pool of Bethesda (5:1-18), feeds a multitude (6:1-15), walks on water (6:16-21), gives sight to a man born blind (9:1-7), and raises Lazarus from the tomb (11:38-44). Other actions, if not actual signs, also fulfill an interpretive function in the Gospel: Jesus drives the merchants out of the temple (2:13-22), enters Jerusalem riding on a donkey (12:12-19), washes his disciples' feet (13:1-11), and directs the disciples to a great catch of fish (21:1-14). Jesus' debates with the religious leaders place his ministry in a

trial-like setting and clarify the charges against Jesus and the basis of his authority. Throughout, Old Testament quotations, allusions, and imagery set Jesus' ministry in the larger sweep of Moses and the prophets in Israel's past and its hopes for the future. From among this at times overwhelming multiplicity of ways in which the Gospel interprets Jesus, a few dominant emphases rise above the others: Jesus is the one sent from above to reveal the Father, take away the sin of the world, and give life to those who receive him.

Logos Christology and the Wisdom Tradition

Since the publication of Brown's commentary on John, consensus has grown that John's Logos Christology developed against the background of the Jewish wisdom tradition. The wisdom writings served as fertile soil for christological reflection, and from the Gospel itself one familiar with the wisdom tradition can see numerous points of contact. As early as Proverbs 8, the figure of Wisdom was being personified. Wisdom was identified with God's word and therefore was God's agent in the creation (Prov. 3:19). Wisdom was thus created first (Prov. 8:22). Wisdom is received by her children (Prov. 8:32), and she prepares a table of bread and wine for them (Prov. 9:5). With Sirach (190 B.C.E.), Wisdom was identified with keeping the Torah (Sir. 15:1; 19:20; compare Bar. 4:1). The place of the Torah was being elevated, and sages began to claim that it, too, was preexistent. Wisdom, like Torah, provided "the bread of learning" and "the water of wisdom" (Sir. 15:3). She could therefore tell of her "glory" (Sir. 24:2). Wisdom "came forth from the mouth of the Most High" (Sir. 24:3) in the beginning (24:9) and made her dwelling place with Israel (24:8; see also Bar. 3:37). The praise of Wisdom continues with the Wisdom of Solomon. All things were created by God's word (*logos*; Wisd. Sol. 9:1), and Wisdom is unique (*monogenēs*; Wisd. Sol. 7:22). Wisdom, moreover, was pre-sent with Israel throughout its history (Wisd. Sol. 10-11), and the people were saved by Wisdom (Wisd. Sol. 9:18; 10:4).

On this foundation, the evangelist was able to articulate a Christology in which Jesus is identified as the fulfillment of the Torah revealed to Moses, the creative Logos that was in the beginning with God, and the Wisdom of God that tabernacled with Israel and makes its dwelling place among God's people. This constellation of themes drawn from the wisdom tradition explains the development of seemingly diverse elements in John. Like Wisdom, the Johannine Logos was God's agent in the creation, but unlike the praise of Wisdom in Proverbs and Sirach, the evangelist indicates that the Logos was not created first but was with God in the beginning. The Logos

enjoyed "glory" with God before the creation of the world (John 17:5). Then Jesus, as the Word become flesh, can claim that before Abraham was "I am" (John 8:58; compare 8:56) and that Isaiah saw his glory and spoke about him (John 12:41). As the creative Logos, Jesus continues to exercise sovereign and creative power. He can change water to wine, walk on water, and raise the dead. Like Wisdom, Jesus calls to the children of God and feeds them the bread of life and living water. In this respect, the influence of the wisdom tradition on John's Christology is evident not only in the prologue but throughout the Gospel. It is integral to both the actions and the sayings that characterize Jesus in the body of the Gospel.

Son of God

The confession that Jesus is the Son of God functions as a christological climax in the Gospel of Mark. Quite intentionally, according to Mark it is neither the miracles that Jesus does nor the teachings of Jesus that reveal his identity as the Son of God but only his death. The passion of Jesus in Mark is thereby emphasized over his power; the interpretations of Jesus as wisdom teacher and thaumaturge are subordinated to the gospel of his death and resurrection; and the revelatory function of Jesus' death is underscored. In Matthew and Luke, the confession that Jesus is the Son of God is given a literal rather than a metaphorical sense, and the virgin birth accounts serve to defend and explain the literal sense of the confession.

John, by contrast, omits any account of Jesus' birth, thereby opening the way to alternative understandings of the confession that Jesus was the Son of God. Simultaneously, John extends the significance of this confession and gives a much greater role to the Father-Son terminology. Rather than explaining or justifying the confession "Son of God," John treats it as an outgrowth of Wisdom/Logos Christology. To put the matter sharply, Jesus did not become the Son of God by means of the virgin birth; he always was the Son of God by means of the virgin birth; he always was the Son of God. The Johannine Jesus can therefore pray, "Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed" (17:5). The Synoptic Jesus never makes any such claim, and could not, given the Synoptics' more literal, physical grounding of Jesus' Sonship in the birth narratives. This transition allows John to present Jesus as the one who was sent by the Father, sent from above, because he is the preexistent Wisdom/Logos that became flesh in Jesus. He is the one who is in the Father's bosom (1:18), who was sent to reveal the Father. Indeed, he and the Father are one (10:30), yet all that he does and says has been given to him by the Father (5:19, 36; 8:28).

Whereas the centurion's confession that Jesus is the Son of God stands in a climactic position in Mark, in the Gospel of John both John the Baptist (1:34) and Nathanael (1:49) confess that Jesus is the Son of God. Because these confessions come so early in the Gospel, they establish Jesus' Sonship as the standard by which other responses to him will be measured. John the Baptist was sent from God to bear witness to Jesus (1:6-8, 15, 19-20), and Nathanael was "an Israelite in whom there is no deceit" (1:47). The Gospel therefore explicitly certifies both John and Nathanael as authoritative witnesses to Jesus.

The next set of references to the Son of God in John further clarifies his role. The Father sent the Son into the world so that those who would believe in him might have life (3:16, 36; see below the exploration of the giving of life in John's Christology). Jesus is the only, or unique, Son. John speaks of "children of God" (1:12; 11:52), but there is no other Son, and none like him.¹⁸

John 3:17 for the first time in the Gospel speaks explicitly of Jesus as the one sent by the Father. John uses both the verb *apostellein* (seventeen times) and the verb *pempein* (twenty-five times) when referring to Jesus as the one sent. Some of these sayings are cryptic ("him whom he has sent," 5:38; 6:29) while others are explicit ("the Father has sent me," 5:36). Recognizing that Jesus is the one sent by God, however, is virtually synonymous with believing in Jesus (see 11:42; 17:3, 8, 21, 23, 25). Although the Jewish concept of the emissary (*shaliah*) charged with the authority of the sender no doubt lies in the background, it is noteworthy that in John the language of sending is closely tied to the portrayal of Jesus as the Son. It is the Father who sends the Son. Accordingly, it is not surprising that Jesus rarely speaks of himself in the Synoptic Gospels as the one sent (see, however, Matt. 10:40; Mark 9:37; Luke 4:18, 43; 9:48; 10:16; 20:13). While the role of Jesus as the one sent has roots in Jewish and early Christian tradition, in John sending is closely related to the Father-Son paradigm in its distinctive Johannine expression.

Because the Son was sent by the Father, the Son can do nothing on his own authority (5:19). Nevertheless, the Son does what the Father has given him to do. Like an apprentice, the Son does what he sees the Father doing, even raising the dead and giving life. A few verses later, the Son (that is, Son of God) assumes the role of the expected Son of man, judging the nations and raising the dead (5:25-27). Likewise, the Son says what the Father has given him to say (8:28).

The latter part of John 8 is a virtual paternity suit in which Jesus and the Jewish religious leaders each contest the other's claims. The Jews say their father is Abraham, while there is uncertainty about who Jesus' father is.

Jesus replies that if the Jews were children of Abraham, they would do what Abraham did. On the contrary, however, their efforts to kill Jesus show that their father is not Abraham, who rejoiced when he saw Jesus' day (8:56), but the devil, who has always been a murderer. Jesus does the will of his Father, and the Father glorifies him (8:54). The Father knows the Son (10:15), loves the Son (10:17), sanctifies the Son (10:36), and sends the Son to do his works (10:36). Indeed, the Father and the Son are one (10:30), and the Father is in the Son and the Son in the Father (10:38). Nevertheless, the one revealed is greater than the revealer, the sender greater than the one sent: The Father is greater than the Son (14:28). The Father will therefore be glorified by the death of the Son (14:13; 17:1). Because the Son has revealed the Father as only the Son could, and because he has been sent to give life, the Gospel was written to lead those who read it to believe that Jesus is "the Christ [NRSV, 'Messiah'], the Son of God," and through believing to have eternal life (20:30-31).

The Gospel of John has therefore tied the title "Son of God" to the Gospel's Wisdom/Logos Christology. Although the title "Son of God" circulated elsewhere in early Christianity quite separate from the wisdom tradition and Logos Christology, John portrays a Son who was with the Father from the beginning and who does and says what the Father who sent him into the world gave him to do and say. It would be very difficult to conceive of such a characterization of the "Son of God" apart from John's Logos Christology.

Son of Man

A similar situation prevails in relation to the confession that Jesus is the Son of man. John uses the same terminology that we find in the other Gospels, but in a very distinctive way. The Synoptic Son of man sayings are traditionally divided into three categories: (1) the Son of man as a glorious figure who will come in the future to judge humanity (Matt. 16:27); (2) the earthly, suffering Son of man (Mark 8:31); and (3) the earthly Son of man apart from his suffering (Matt. 8:20; 11:19; Mark 2:10, 28; Luke 19:10; 22:48). The distinctive feature of the thirteen references to the Son of man in John is that they consistently deal with his descent to earth and his ascent to heaven (3:13; 6:62), his exaltation (3:14; 8:28; 12:34), and his glorification (12:23; 13:31). These are not unrelated; John presents a consistent picture of the Son of man that is another facet of the Christology we have found expressed by the Son of God sayings and the Wisdom/Logos Christology.