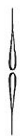


Chapter 9

THE GOSPEL OF JOHN



When we turn from the synoptic Gospels to the Fourth Gospel, we move in some respects into a different world. The differences between John and the synoptics have long been recognised, reference often being made in this context to the famous statement of Clement of Alexandria (early third century) that, whereas the other Gospel writers gave the 'bodily' facts about Jesus, John wrote a spiritual Gospel.¹ Although the differences between John and the synoptics can perhaps be exaggerated, there can be no denying that at many levels John presents a radically different presentation of the life and ministry of Jesus. There are differences at the more superficial level of dates and places,² but there are also differences in the whole mode and content of Jesus' own teaching,³ and the area where this is most prominent is precisely the area of Christology.

In general terms, the synoptic Jesus says very little explicitly about himself; his preaching is about God, the kingdom of God, the nature of God's demands, etc. The Johannine Jesus by contrast is far more explicit about himself so that his teaching focuses on his own person far more directly. John's Jesus makes himself the object of faith far more explicitly than in the synoptics.⁴ And he teaches quite openly about himself and the importance of his own role in God's plan, supremely in the great 'I am...' sayings which come throughout the Gospel.⁵ In line with this, the beginning and end of the Gospel focus directly and explicitly on the person of Jesus. Thus the prologue of the Gospel (1: 1-18) speaks of Jesus as the Word of God, and in what is probably the ending of at least one version of the Gospel,⁶ it is stated that the book has been written 'so that you may [?] come to believe' that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God (20: 31).

So too the figure of Jesus is portrayed in a more exalted role throughout the story. Jesus is fully in control of all the events concerned. His miracles highlight his person, and indeed at times Jesus acts in order to highlight even more his activity. Thus in chapter 11, when Lazarus falls ill and dies, Jesus is portrayed as deliberately delaying going to heal him in order apparently to make the miracle of raising him all the more stupendous (11: 4, 15). John describes what appears to be a vestige of the agony scene in Gethsemane (12: 27); but in John there seems to be no real agony on Jesus' part and Jesus displays unbounded and unquestioning confidence in God. So too, in the account of Jesus' actual death, little if anything is made of Jesus' suffering. Jesus admits to thirst on the cross, but only in order to fulfil scripture (19: 28); and his final word is no agonized cry of dereliction, as in Mark, but a statement of supreme confidence: 'it is finished' (19: 30). Above all, it is in John that we get the two most explicit statements in the New Testament about the divinity of Jesus. Moreover they come at key points in the narrative – at the beginning and at the end – encompassing the whole story in a powerful *inclusio*. Thus the first verse of the prologue affirms that the Word was not only in the beginning with God, but in some sense also 'was God' (1: 1); and Thomas at the end of the story openly confesses Jesus as 'my Lord and my God' (20: 28). John thus presents Jesus explicitly in far more exalted terms than anything we find in the synoptic Gospels.

In terms simply of historical reliability or 'authenticity', it seems impossible to maintain that both John and the synoptics can be presenting us with equally 'authentic' accounts of Jesus' own life.⁸ The differences between the two are too deep seated and wide ranging for such a position to be sustainable. If there is a choice, it is almost certainly to be made in favour of the synoptic picture, at least in broadly general terms. The Johannine picture then presents us with a view of the Jesus tradition which has been heavily coloured and influenced by John and his own situation.

Further, it has now become clearer in recent Johannine studies that we should almost certainly think of 'John', the author of the Gospel, not necessarily as some individual writing his Gospel in splendid isolation, but as part of a community facing very real pressures and tensions.⁹ At the very least we have to take note of the existence of the three Johannine epistles, all of which are written in an idiom very similar to that of the Fourth Gospel and with much of the same highly

distinctive Johannine vocabulary and terminology. The epistles are probably not by the same author as the Gospel,¹⁰ so one must postulate at the very least one other author heavily influenced by the ideas of John. But the epistles also clearly shown the existence of a community, and in the case of 1 John and 3 John it is a community where a certain amount of disagreement and division has evidently taken place. The communal aspect is probably also indicated in the Gospel by the use of the first person plural at times: for example, in the prologue the writer states that 'the Word became flesh and *we* have seen his glory' (1: 14), probably indicating that the writer is part of a larger group. Thus the trend in recent years has been to see the Gospel not so much as the work of a particular individual theological genius (though it may be that in part), but also as the product of a particular Christian community facing its own particular problems in its own situation.

The nature of that situation may be reflected at one or two points in the story of the Gospel itself. For example, in the story of the man born blind in John 9, the story tells of the dialogue between 'the Jews' who do not accept the reality of the miracle and the man's parents (9: 18–23). In the dialogue, the parents refuse to answer the Jews' questions. This, it is said, is because 'they were afraid of the Jews: for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue' (v. 22). Such a situation makes virtually no sense in terms of the time of the ministry of Jesus or of the earliest church.¹¹ Rather it seems to reflect a much later situation when Christian allegiance to Jesus and membership of the Jewish synagogue were regarded as incompatible and Christians were excluded from the synagogues. The same setting is implied by two other verses in the Gospel, one (12: 42) again purporting to be a reflection of the situation at the time of the narrative, the other (16: 2) being a prediction by the Johannine Jesus of what is in store for the disciples. The fact that this state of affairs is mentioned on more than one occasion suggests that it is of some importance for the writer of the Gospel. Thus many have argued (in my view convincingly) that these verses reflect the situation of the Johannine community itself. The Johannine Christians as a group have been put out of the synagogue and excluded from participating with Jews there. The story as it is told in John thus reflects more than one level: indeed it has become customary to speak of John as a 'two-level drama'.¹² The story is at one level a story about Jesus and his disciples in the 30s, but it is also a reflection of the situation of a

later Christian community, probably in the last quarter of the first century.

The precise date of any exclusion of Christians from Jewish synagogues is debated. Much has been made in the past of a version of the twelfth of the eighteen benedictions which includes a clause cursing all heretics and which has been dated by some to a decree from Jamnia c. CE 85. In recent years more doubt has been thrown on this and it is uncertain how far Christians were ever formally banned from Jewish synagogues.¹³ Nevertheless, however formal and legally binding it may or may not have been, it seems clear that the Johannine Christian community found itself thrown out of a setting where its members had thought formerly they belonged. Thus John reflects a situation of some bitterness on the part of Christians against Jews, as well as some considerable anger and rejection by Jews against Christians. It is this sense of mutual hostility that is reflected in much of John, reaching one of its most intense peaks in John 8 where the Johannine Jesus accuses the Jews of not being children of Abraham, or of God, but of the Devil (8:44). The negative portrayal of 'the Jews' pervades the whole Gospel, and the use of the blanket term 'the Jews' to refer to Jesus' opponents in the story has led to many charges that John is in some sense anti-Semitic'. There is no space here to discuss the issue further, though one should simply note that John's language is the reflection of a situation of intense hostility, probably on both sides, and indeed it may be a situation which has led to deaths on the Christian side.¹⁴ Further, as we shall see shortly, John himself is very firmly convinced of the Jewish basis of his Christian convictions about Jesus. Moreover, if Christians have been expelled from synagogues, this is probably something forced on Christians by other Jews: presumably the Johannine Christians would have been happy to stay as part of the Jewish community. To use what has become standard scholarly jargon, they have moved from being 'Christian Jews' to becoming 'Jewish Christians' but it is against their own will and maybe they would have much preferred to stay as 'Christian Jews'.¹⁵

The suggestion that Christians in John's community have (probably recently) been expelled from the synagogue indicates that the situation of the Johannine community is probably a changing one. Certainly the trauma of the expulsion has led to a dramatic change in their situation. So too the (probably later) Johannine epistles let us see a further point in the changing history of the community with internal splits within

the community leading to some kind of 'schism' (cf. especially 1 John 2:18-22). Thus the community behind John was clearly not a static or unchanging one.

Some scholars in recent years have tried to build on this and have, on the basis of the Gospel (and the epistles), postulated a number of different stages in the history of the Johannine community.¹⁶ This might be correlated with the fact that the present form of the Gospel suggests at times that it has come together in stages, and not all parts fit together entirely happily as a connected whole.¹⁷ Some quite ambitious histories of the Johannine community have been proposed, though whether we can be so precise is not absolutely certain. For some, too, this developing history is to be connected with changes in the christological beliefs of the Johannine community, so that one can distinguish between earlier and later Christologies within the Gospel.¹⁸ Such precision may be a little optimistic, though the whole issue should make us alert to the possibility that John is at times taking up earlier traditions and adapting them so that they are significantly changed in the course of the adaptation.

On any showing John is clearly using earlier traditions.¹⁹ One widely held theory is that John is using an earlier source which included the stories of Jesus' miracles, the so-called 'Signs Source'.²⁰ This is perhaps indicated by the numbering of the first two signs (the 'first' in 2:12, the 'second' in 4:54, though the numbering then peters out), and the conclusion in 20:30-1 that Jesus did many other signs not recorded in this book; there is also the fact that in the present form of the Gospel, the miracles are clearly taken *as signs*, that is as pointers to some deeper reality beyond themselves, usually focused on Jesus himself and often developed in a discourse following the account of the miracle. Thus the miracle story of the feeding of the 5000 in John 6 is followed by the long discourse about Jesus as the 'bread of life', clearly by the end leaving far behind the issue of real food and physical hunger.

All this suggests that, in terms of Christology, we may have to be alert to the possibility of different layers in the tradition in John, and that some ideas may have been changed and developed as they were taken up by the final evangelist. Perhaps though, in seeking to discover something of the Christology of John, we should respect the fact that the present form of the Gospel²¹ was felt to make sense to the author/editor responsible for it. Thus even if the final author has used earlier traditions, these traditions were felt to be still valuable and valid

enough to be included in the Gospel. In seeking to delineate John's Christology I shall therefore use the whole of the Gospel as at least a potential witness to that Christology, but bearing in mind the possibility that we may see at times earlier Christologies which the evangelist may be using and which may be slightly less in tune with his own beliefs than other parts of the Gospel.

Signs and Messiahship

The fact that John may reflect a complex development of tradition history is probably shown in the use of the term Messiah/Christ. In one way, John's use of the term appears to be surprisingly undeveloped, at least when compared with some other New Testament writers. Thus John regularly uses the term as a clear title with the definite article (cf. 1:20, 41; 11:27; 20:31), unlike the usage of, say, Paul and Acts where often the word Christ seems to have lost its titular sense and become virtually just another proper name ('Jesus Christ'). In one way, John thus appears to be aware of the origins of the term in Jewish expectation more than other New Testament writers. However, such an impression may be misleading and on closer inspection John's usage turns out to be rather more complex.

The usage in 20:31, where it is said that the 'signs' recorded in John have been written so that 'you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God', has led many to claim that John's Signs Source (if it existed) may have been related to the idea of Jesus as the Messiah.²² Similarly, in 6:15 the response of the crowds to the miracle of the feeding of the 5000 is apparently that they want to make Jesus into a 'king' (cf. too 7:31). It is clear that the miracle stories in John are intended to draw attention positively to the person of Jesus himself as the miracle worker (in a way that is perhaps rather different from the synoptics, where the focus is rather more on the power of God at work in the miracles, and on Jesus as the channel of God's activity). Thus many have argued that the miracle stories in John may reflect an earlier stage in the history of the Johannine community, at a time when Johannine Christians still belonged to the Jewish synagogues and were trying to win over Jews to their cause by claiming that Jesus was indeed the Messiah of Jewish hopes.

Such a theory cannot, however, be maintained in such a simple form without qualification. One problem is that there is virtually no evidence

that any 'messianic' figure in Jewish thought was expected to be a miracle worker. It is thus hard to correlate the 'signs' of John's Gospel with an idea of Jesus as Messiah, at least in terms of Jewish messianic beliefs at the time.

In fact the word 'signs' is more evocative of the Moses tradition in the Old Testament, where Moses performs legitimating 'signs' before Pharaoh and the Egyptians. From Qumran we know too of an expectation of a 'prophet like Moses'.²³ And from Josephus we know of a number of popular figures in the first century who promised to be able to repeat the Mosaic-type 'signs' of deliverance such as dividing the Jordan (*JW* 2.259; *Ant.* 20.97-8, 168-9; cf. Acts 5:36; 21:38).

It is also the case, however, that although the language of 'signs' may relate to the Moses tradition, not many of Jesus' miracles in John are similar to those associated with Moses himself. For example, Jesus' healing and feeding miracles may show closer resemblance to the activity of *prophetic* figures like Elijah and Elisha (cf. 1 Ki. 17; 2 Ki. 4). In fact both Elijah and/or 'the prophet' (possibly the prophet like Moses, possibly simply a prophet like Elijah) are mentioned in John alongside 'the Messiah' (cf. 1:20-2; 7:40-2, 52; 9:17-22). So too in 6:14-15, when the people see the feeding miracle, their response is that Jesus is 'the prophet who is to come into the world', and Jesus hastily withdraws because he apparently interprets this as an attempt to make him a 'king' (v. 15).

In the light of this, many have argued that, although originally a number of rather diverse expectations are involved, we may see reflected here an amalgamation so that Jesus is seen as a miracle-working prophet-Messiah figure, summed up in the term 'the Messiah'.²⁴ If so, then it clearly shows that ideas of 'messiahship' have already undergone a significant shift and development.

It is, however, doubtful whether messiahship as such, or messiahship as reinterpreted via prophetic ideas (Mosaic or otherwise) and/or miracle working activity, is the most important christological idea for John. It may be that such an idea was important at an earlier stage in the history of the Johannine community, possibly at the level of the Signs Source used by John (if indeed it existed). However, by the time of the present form of the Gospel, it would seem that other ideas have been superimposed on this earlier idea. Thus the notion (and the language) of Jesus as a prophet-Messiah figure is in part retained, but it is also deepened and extended.²⁵ This can be seen in a number of ways.

In chapter 1, in the series of encounters between Jesus and various figures, some of whom are to become his disciples, each of the latter makes a christological statement. Thus John the Baptist denies that he is the Messiah, Elijah or the prophet, by implication indicating that it is Jesus who fits these categories (1: 20, 22); Andrew says 'we have found the Messiah' (1: 41); Philip says 'we have found him about whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote' (1: 45); Nathanael says 'you are the Son of God, the King of Israel' (1: 49). Yet all these seem to be surpassed by the statement of Jesus himself at the end of this series, referring to himself as the 'Son of Man' on whom the angels will (somehow) be ascending and descending (1: 51). In the story of the Samaritan woman in chapter 4, the extended conversation between Jesus and the woman seems to reflect a steadily deepening awareness by the woman of Jesus' true identity. Relatively early on she recognises Jesus as a 'prophet', in response to his (? miraculous) knowledge about her marital affairs (4: 19); but this leads on to further developments in the dialogue whereby the woman recognises Jesus as the Messiah (v. 25 – apparently 'Messiah' is something deeper than 'prophet') and then eventually as 'the Saviour of the world' (v. 42). A similar progression takes place in the story of the man born blind in chapter 9: the man's early response is that Jesus is a 'prophet' (v. 17), but this leads on to his believing acceptance that Jesus is the 'Son of Man' whom he then 'worships' (v. 38), and it is this that forms the climax of the story and the true 'insight' which the man attains. The category of 'prophet' is thus one that seems to reflect for John at best a somewhat inadequate idea of who Jesus is.

So too messiahship on its own, be it a royal messiahship or a prophetic miracle-working messiahship, does not seem to be the most adequate category for John's Christology. If Nathanael's confession in 1: 50 of Jesus as 'King of Israel' reflects royal ideas, then he is told that he will see 'greater things than these', and that Jesus is the Son of Man of 1: 51. In 11: 27 Martha confesses Jesus to be 'the Messiah, the Son of God'. So too in the Johannine account of the trial of Jesus before Pilate, where so much of the debate and the dialogue revolves around the idea of Jesus' kingship, the true issue seems to emerge precisely when 'the Jews' bring into the discussion the claim that Jesus has claimed to be the 'Son of God' (19: 7).

Similarly, for all that there are similarities between Jesus' activity and that of Moses, so that Jesus might be seen as in some sense a

Mosaic-type prophet, there are also clear contrasts drawn between Jesus and Moses. For example, in the long discourse on the bread of life following the feeding miracle in chapter 6, John's Jesus contrasts the manna given by Moses in the desert with the true 'bread of life' which the Father now gives (cf. vv. 32, 49), which Jesus himself is (v. 35) and which is also related to eating the flesh and drinking the blood of the 'Son of Man' (vv. 51–8). Similarly, in the verse at the end of the prologue in 1: 17 ('the Law was given through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ') it is hard not to hear at least an element of sharp contrast between the figure of Moses and that of Jesus.

Thus Jesus for John is not *just* a 'messianic' figure, nor indeed primarily a prophet like Moses. Rather, it is the twin categories of 'Son of God' (or perhaps just 'Son') and 'Son of Man' that are far important and seem to reflect deeper truths about who Jesus is as far as John is concerned.

It is perhaps at this point that an attempt to stick to specific christological titles, and to try to differentiate between them, probably breaks down. To a certain extent, christological categories, or 'titles', are bound to overlap in Christian usage, simply by virtue of being applied to the one person Jesus. Certainly in John, the different christological categories tend to merge into each other. Thus some of what is said of Jesus as 'Son' or as 'Son of God' applies also to Jesus as 'Son of Man', and indeed is sometimes said of (or by) Jesus without reference to any specific christological category or title at all. So too many of the things said of Jesus as Son in the bulk of the Gospel relate very closely to what is said in the prologue of the Gospel of Jesus as the Logos (Word). This is not to say that the various titles have lost all their individuality and are used with total freedom and complete interchangeability. For example, the things predicated of Jesus as Son of Man are slightly but significantly different from things said about Jesus as Son or Son of God. Jesus as Son of Man is one who *ascends*, language not normally used of Jesus as Son of God; and while Jesus as Son is often said to be 'sent' by God, this language is not used of Jesus *qua* Son of Man.

All this no doubt simply illustrates the fact that the various terms used of Jesus have different origins and hence are used to relate to different aspects of the total picture of Jesus created by the Gospel. Alternatively, we have to recognise that the final completed picture presented by John has developed out of the various constituent elements something

that is very different from anything previously envisaged or (as far as we can tell) articulated. Thus we need to bear in mind here as always the distinction between how terms and/or ideas might have been used in earlier traditions and the way in which they are used in the developed presentation of John's Gospel. It may well be that the term Son of God has its origins as a royal, messianic term and that such a usage may still be visible in John: thus in Nathanael's assertion that Jesus is 'the Son of God, the king of Israel' (1: 49), the term 'Son of God' seems to be primarily (just) a royal designation. Yet in John's overall presentation it is clear that the designation of Jesus as 'Son of God' or 'Son' is intended to say far more than this as well.

It is this 'far more' that is clearly reflected in part in the obvious offensiveness which the claims of the Johannine Jesus cause to the Jews. At one point this is apparently simply connected with the idea of Jesus as Messiah. Thus in 9: 22, the reticence of the parents of the man born blind is said to be due to the fact that the Jews had decided that anyone who confessed *Jesus to be the Messiah* would be put out of the synagogue. Yet it is clear that more is at stake than simply a bald claim that Jesus was a messianic figure. Such a claim must have been part and parcel of Christian claims about Jesus from the very start of the Christian movement, and yet Christians were tolerated as members of the Jewish community for many years. However, it seems clear that this verse in John has in mind the more far-reaching claims about/by the Johannine Jesus, and John's use of the word 'Messiah' had already broadened out in scope considerably.

Son of God

What is evidently much more offensive to the Jews in John is related to other factors more explicitly associated with Jesus' claim to be 'Son of God' (though in any case 'Messiah' and 'Son of God' are closely related for John: cf. 11: 27; 20: 31). It is precisely because Jesus has claimed to be 'Son of God' that the Jews seek to have Jesus condemned to death by Pilate (19: 7). In part this also relates to Jesus' origins. The question of Jesus' origins recurs at many points of the Gospel, though the answer of John's Jesus is clear: Jesus comes from 'heaven', sent by his Father (cf. 6: 41; 7: 29; 8: 23, etc. and the various debates between Jesus and the Jews in these chapters). Above all, the Jews' objection to Jesus is that by claiming to be God's Son, or by calling God his Father

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in the way he does, Jesus has made himself equal to God' (5: 18), or has in fact made himself God (10: 33). The claims of the Johannine Jesus thus make him guilty of blasphemy in the eyes of the Jews and the struggle is literally a life-and-death one (cf. 10: 33). And indeed the claim that Jesus is 'God' in some sense is one that the evangelist himself can affirm positively (1: 1; 20: 28).

John's language about Jesus, and about Jesus as Son of God, has a number of different features associated with it. The most obvious is perhaps inherent in the word 'Son' itself. God is Jesus' Father' in a special way so that Jesus refers to him as 'my Father' (2: 16; 5: 17, 43; 6: 32, etc.). Further, he has been 'sent' by God, so that God is often referred to by the Johannine Jesus as 'the One who sent me' (4: 34; 5: 24, 30; 6: 38; 7: 16, etc.). Sometimes the two are combined so that God is 'the Father who sent' Jesus (5: 37; 6: 44; 8: 16; 10: 36; 12: 49; 14: 24). However, the two ideas of sonship and mission are probably originally separate.

The idea of Jesus as the one who is 'sent' certainly need not imply any very 'high' Christology. Such language is very much at home in Old Testament prophecy. Thus, for example, Isaiah offers himself as the answer to God's cry 'Whom shall I send?' with the words 'Send me' (Isa. 6: 8-9). And the idea that God has commissioned the true prophet is a fundamental belief in Jewish tradition. So too in John's Gospel itself, we may note the words of the prologue in 1: 6 referring to John the Baptist as 'a man sent from God'. The language of 'sending' on its own is thus probably rooted in prophetic traditions showing Jesus as a true prophet figure.

As we have seen, this idea is frequently coupled in John with the idea of Jesus as 'Son' or 'Son of God'. Whether these two phrases should be distinguished in terms of their origins is debatable.²⁶ 'Son of God', as we have seen, may have its roots in Jewish messianic traditions. The notion of Jesus as 'Son' may be based in Jesus' own use of 'Abba' ('Father') in addressing God in prayer (cf. Mark 14: 36).²⁷ Sonship language on its own need not imply any very 'high' Christology, as we have already seen in considering the synoptic Gospels, but no more than agreement with God's will and obedience to him. Sonship may imply an element of unity with God, but it is a unity based on total obedience and dependence on the part of the son to his Father. Such an idea may well be reflected in several parts of the talk of the Johannine Jesus. For example, in 5: 19-20, the language of

Jesus' words ('the Son can do nothing on his own but only what he sees the Father doing') may have as its basis a very mundane statement about human fathers and human sons: a son can only learn from his father. In this sense, and it is an important aspect for John, Jesus' sonship implies and entails his total dependence upon God the Father. Thus alongside any claim to unity between Jesus and God (e.g. 10:30¹ and the Father are one) must be placed a note of total dependence and subordination (e.g. 14:28 'the Father is greater than I').²⁸ Indeed there is an important sense in which, for John, Jesus' unity with God is shown precisely *in* dependence and subordination to God.

Yet there is clearly more to John's Christology than simply portraying Jesus as a prophetic figure 'sent' by God and who is obedient to God as a son to a father. John has clearly also enriched these ideas with further notions. One of these, as has become clear in recent years, is that of agency.²⁹

The idea of agency is not necessarily a religious one at all, though it clearly has similarities with notions associated with prophecy. The basic idea is that 'an agent is like the one who sent him',³⁰ so that an agent can be regarded for some purposes as the same, or 'one with', the person who sends him. Within Judaism, the principle of agency applied in a number of different settings and different contexts where an agent would represent another person. The idea is reflected in some parts of the synoptic tradition, applied to Jesus as the 'agent' of God and to the disciples as 'agents' of Jesus (cf. Luke 10:16 pars), and the same idea recurs in, for example, John 13:20: 'whoever receives one whom I send receives me; and whoever receives me receives him who sent me' (cf. too 12:44-5; 14:9). In one way of course the idea is similar to that of prophecy: the prophet *are* the words of God, so that prophetic oracles are typically introduced by 'Thus says the Lord...'. However, the quasi-identity claimed between an agent and the sender takes the language one stage further than anything found in prophecy. In this sense, John's language about the oneness of Jesus with the Father goes further than what is implied by the prophetic model.

Nevertheless, even when an idea of agency is added to the prophetic model, and even if these are both enhanced by ideas of sonship, we have still not fully encompassed everything that John evidently wants to claim for Jesus. Above all, there is the notion that Jesus is the *revealer*, and reveals the things of God – or rather that he reveals God himself.

In the language of John, Jesus has come *from heaven* and tells of what he has seen and heard from his Father (cf. 3:31-2, 34; 8:26, 38; 12:49, 15:15; 17:19); indeed Jesus is himself the *revelation of God*, so that to have seen Jesus is to have seen God himself (1:18; 14:9).

Son of Man

Some of these ideas are expressed in the Son of Man sayings which John records. As we have seen, the Son of Man sayings are firmly rooted in the synoptic tradition. The Son of Man sayings in John bear some similarity to the synoptic sayings, though it is clear that they have been developed very considerably in line with John's own ideas. Perhaps the saying closest to the synoptic tradition is John 5:27, where it is said that God 'has given him [Jesus] authority to execute judgement, because he is the Son of Man'. The language is similar to Daniel 7:14 where the one like a son of man is given vindication and 'justice' in the heavenly court. The saying in John 5 does go further than Daniel 7 in that the Son of Man figure is now the one who actually dispenses judgement – though the same move is made by at least some of the synoptics (notably Matthew: cf. Matt. 25:31) and may also have been made independently by the authors of 1 *Enoch* and 4 *Ezra*.³¹

What is more striking about the Johannine Son of Man sayings is the idea embedded in them that Jesus *qua* Son of Man is a figure who ascends to heaven to a place from which he has previously descended. 'No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man' (3:13); 'What if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?' (6:62). There is debate about whether the prime motif in these sayings is ascension alone, or descending as well as ascending. Certainly the idea of the Son of Man 'ascending' in John is not unrelated to the language used by John of Jesus as Son of Man being 'lifted up' (cf. 3:14-15; 8:28; 12:34). Indeed the conjunction of 3:13 with 3:14-15 make the link clear. But also for John, Jesus' being 'lifted up' is identified – allusively at first but by the end quite clearly – with his being lifted up on the cross (cf. 12:33: the language of being 'lifted up' is 'to indicate the kind of death he was to die'). As we have seen, Son of Man language in the synoptic tradition is strongly linked with Jesus' suffering and death, especially in Mark (and thence in Matthew and Luke: cf. Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:33, 45, etc.). In terms of the origins of the language, it may be then that the language

of the Son of Man's being lifted up/ascending owes quite a lot to the synoptic language about the suffering Son of Man, developed by John who interprets the cross itself as Jesus' glorification and 'lifting up'.

Yet this does not exhaust the meaning of Son of Man language for John. As we have already seen, the Son of Man ascends to *heaven*, to where he has come from originally and from where he has first descended (3:13; 6:62). Thus Jesus as the Son of Man, by virtue of his origins, is uniquely able to fulfil the role of revealing the mysteries of heaven, and of God, to other human beings on earth. It is this idea that may also be implied by the highly enigmatic verse 1:51 'You will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man'. The language is reminiscent of the story of Jacob's dream of the ladder, with angels ascending and descending on it (Gen. 28:12). What seems to be implied by John is that the Son of Man acts as the link by which heaven and earth are connected, the means by which the things of heaven can be revealed to those on earth. Jesus is thus the source or means of divine revelation. Certainly, too, this idea of Jesus as the one who reveals God to others is implied by John in other sayings which do not refer to Jesus as Son of Man (cf. 1:18; 5:17; 6:46; 14:6, 8-9).

It is certainly hard to derive any of these ideas from the Son of Man tradition itself. However, one notable 'parallel' (or anti-parallel) to the use of such language, especially in 3:13, has been noted for some years now. This concerns the claims made about others by some (or about themselves) to have made mystical ascents into heaven and hence to be able to reveal the mysteries of heaven to others. There seems to have been a strong tradition associating Moses with such an ascent into heaven,³² as well as figures like Enoch, Abraham and others. We know too of developing interests in Judaism from around the time of the end of the first century of so-called 'merkabah mysticism',³³ a claim to be able to be transported to heaven as a result of meditating on the vision of the chariot (*merkabah*) in Ezekiel 1. This interest may be implied in 1 Enoch 14, Sirach 49:8, and other texts such as the *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice* from Qumran (4Q400-7). So, too, from a little later, we hear of some rabbis who claimed to have entered the garden (*t. Hag. 2.3-4*), possibly a reference to a claimed vision of the chariot throne. One of these, Rabbi Elisha ben Abuyah, was deemed to be a heretic because he thought the glorious figure he saw on a throne was a second power in heaven' (3 Enoch 16; *b. Hag. 15a*). It thus appears that Judaism at the

time of the writing of John's Gospel was developing a strong interest in such mystical visions and the claims resulting from them; but equally, this seems to have been a time when the Jewish authorities were also clamping down hard on what others evidently regarded as dangerous excesses.

It may be then that it is this background which lies behind much of the Fourth Gospel.³⁴ Certainly the claim in John 3:13 that no one has ascended to heaven except the Son of Man becomes much more pointed when set against such a background: for it becomes a more polemical denial against possible claims by any other rival figure to have entered heaven and to be able to reveal the secrets there.

This suggested background may also help to explain a little more the vehemence of the Jewish reaction to the Christian claims about Jesus. If this were indeed a time when the Jewish authorities generally were entrenching and drawing tighter boundary lines about their religion and excluding some elements as unacceptable, then it is perhaps a little less surprising that Christianity came under the spotlight so harshly. If Christian claims by the Johannine community about Jesus as a revealer figure related to Jesus as one who could reveal the mysteries of heaven itself, or God himself, then similar reactions by the Jewish authorities to figures like Rabbi Elisha may have led to strong rejection of the Christian claims and the decision to exclude Christians from the Jewish synagogues.

Yet John does not present Jesus as *just* a latter day Moses or Enoch-figure, ascending to heaven from earth. Jesus is one who ascends to *where he was before*. Built into the Johannine scheme is therefore an idea of pre-existence in some sense, and of a pattern of descending as well as ascending. Two possible models have been suggested for such language.

According to the first, Jesus' role is described in terms very similar to those used of the figure of *Wisdom* in the Jewish tradition. We have already seen that language of *Wisdom* as some kind of pre-existent being was already present in Judaism (cf. Prov. 8:22; Wisd. 9:9) as also was language about *Wisdom* being sent from God (Wisd. 9:16-17; Bar. 3:9; 1 Enoch 42). It has long been recognised that much of the language of the prologue in John 1:1-18 can be paralleled in language about *Wisdom*, and the same also applies to virtually all of John.³⁵ Thus John's Jesus and *Wisdom* act as the agent in creation (Prov. 8:22-31; John 1:3); both are the source of light (Wisd. 7:26-9; John 1:5; 8:12),

or food and drink (Sir. 24: 19–21; Prov. 9: 2–5; John 6: 35, 51–8). Notably the language of Jesus as the Word (coming to his own' (1: 11) and then becoming flesh' and 'dwelling' (literally 'tabernacled') among people on earth (1: 14) has a parallel in Sirach 24: 8 where God tells Wisdom 'make your dwelling [lit. tabernacle] in Jacob'. So, too, the long first-person discourses of Wisdom (Prov. 8; Sir. 24) are similar in some respects to the long discourses of the Johannine Jesus which are often developed out of an 'I am... ' saying by Jesus.

The application of such language to a human being may well represent a quantum leap from the use of such language in non-Christian Judaism (though if John made such a leap he was almost certainly not the first Christian to do so: as we have already seen, the category of Wisdom was exploited christologically by Paul, the author of Colossians and Matthew). Thus some have suggested recently that another possible background for John's ideas may be that of an *angelic* figure.³⁶

The idea of God being surrounded by an angelic retinue is one that can be traced back to the earliest stages of Israelite history, as we have already seen in chapter 1. Moreover, we have also seen the way in which an angelic messenger can apparently oscillate between being someone separate from God and being God himself.³⁷ It may be then that it is this idea that also informs the total Johannine picture. Jesus in John as the one who re-presents God on earth may thus be adopting in part an angelic-type role.

Against such a view it has been noted that angels are generally only short-term visitors, and certainly Jesus for John is certainly on earth for rather longer than the average angel of Judaism!³⁸ So too, despite the real parallels which can be shown, and which justify the suggestion that John's Jesus is *like* an angel in several significant respects (and therefore 'angelomorphic'), there is still no real parallel in Judaism to an idea of an angel becoming 'incarnate'.³⁹

Maybe all this simply shows that there is no one single category to explain the Johannine picture fully. It may be then that we have to content ourselves with the fact that, in terms of previous ideas, John has taken a number of rather different, disparate notions and combined them in his portrayal of Jesus as the Son of God/Son of Man/Logos who is pre-existent with God in heaven, sent by his Father, who reveals God to those on earth, and who eventually returns to the place where he has come from. There seems to be little doubt that in this composite picture, John has made rich and varied use of Jewish materials. Yet,

as with other New Testament writers, the use made has taken John some considerable distance from the way in which such materials are used in Judaism. We have seen this in relation to John's use of the categories of messiahship and divine sonship, and his use of 'Son of Man'. Clearly for the Jewish opponents of Jesus in John's story ('the Jews', who one assumes represent the Jewish opponents of John's Christian community in John's time), this distancing has reached the point of being intolerable: the claims by the Johannine Jesus (i.e. presumably the claims made about Jesus by Johannine Christians) have become so extreme that they are regarded as blasphemous, threatening the fundamentals of monotheistic belief. Thus in John 10: 33 'the Jews' say 'it is not for a good work that we are going to stone you, but for blasphemy, because you, though only a human being, are making yourself God'.

Nevertheless, it would seem that John believes that the claims made by the Johannine Jesus can and should be contained *within* the parameters of Judaism and within a monotheistic framework. Even the momentous claim by the Johannine Jesus 'I and the Father are one' is one which he claims can be defended within Jewish presuppositions and does not deserve the charge of blasphemy (cf. the argument of 10: 31–9 and the appeal to Psalm 82: 1). Apparently then even the claim to divinity for Jesus (1: 1; 20: 28) is one which, in John's eyes, can evidently be tolerated without prejudicing the uniqueness of God. For John, Jesus is the revealer – and to a certain extent the embodiment, or 'incarnation' (cf. 1: 14) – of the one true God. Certainly John goes out of his way to emphasise that the revelation provided by Jesus far outpaces any other rival claims to be able to reveal the things of heaven (cf. 3: 13), and even God himself (cf. 1: 18), to human beings. Yet it is precisely as the one who is obedient to the Father in everything that Jesus's unity with God is to be seen.

There can be no question that the claims made about Jesus in John are qualitatively different ('higher') than those in some other parts of the New Testament. But equally, the insistence of John that his Christian claims do not breach the bounds of monotheism forbids a neat equation of Jesus with a(n other) divine figure alongside God. The tensions and complexities of the Johannine picture undoubtedly contributed to the later disputes between Christians in subsequent christological debates, with different sides being able to appeal to different parts of John's Gospel for support.⁴⁰ That lies outside our purview here. Perhaps

we can simply note the way in which John's presentation no doubt sets the agenda for the subsequent discussion by insisting not only on the full humanity of Jesus ('the Word became flesh') but also on the final and definitive nature of the revelation provided by Jesus so that Jesus is the Son sent from the Father, the Son of Man who has ascended back to his place of origin in heaven from where he descended, the embodiment of God's wisdom and word: the one whom the true follower can and should acknowledge as 'my Lord and my God' (20: 28).

NOTES

1. Cited by Eusebius, *E. H.* 6.14.7.
2. E.g., in John, Jesus 'cleanses' the temple early in his ministry; in the synoptics it is much later. In John, Jesus is active for much longer in Jerusalem; in the synoptics, Jesus is in Jerusalem for only one final week of his life. In John, Jesus dies on the eve of Passover, in the synoptics he dies on the feast of Passover itself.
3. Instead of the short pithy sayings and the parables which characterise the synoptic presentation of Jesus' teaching, John's Jesus teaches in long discourses with none of the parables so characteristic of the synoptics. So too, categories such as the 'kingdom of God', which is so prominent in the synoptics, rarely appear in John; in turn other categories, such as teaching about 'eternal life', dominate the picture in John.
4. John 14: 1 is typical: 'Believe in God, believe also in me'; cf. also 20: 31. In the synoptics the motif occurs only in Matt. 18: 6 ('these little ones who believe in me') which is almost certainly due to Matthe (the Markan parallel in Mark 9: 42 lacks the phrase 'who believe in me').
5. John 6: 35; 8: 12; 8: 58; 10: 7, 9, 11; 11: 25; 14: 6; 15: 1.
6. For a variety of reasons, many have argued that ch. 21 is a later appendix to the Gospel, written by another hand: the vocabulary is slightly different, and in any case 20: 30–1 bears all the hallmarks of the ending of a book and is rather anti-climactic when followed by a whole further chapter.
7. There is variation among the MSS of John at this point: some read a present tense *pisteuete*, perhaps implying that the aim is that people continue in their (existing) belief, others read an aorist *pisteusete*, perhaps implying that people should make a single act of belief (i.e. perhaps change their belief in a one-off act). The latter possibility might imply rather more of a missionary aim for the Gospel.
8. By 'authentic' accounts, I mean here historically accurate representations of what Jesus himself actually said and did. The *theological* 'authenticity'

of John's account is quite another matter.

9. Cf. e.g. D. Rensberger, *Overcoming the World: Politics and Community in the Gospel of John* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1988), ch. 1. The most influential works on John's community in recent years have been R. E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Geoffrey Chapman, 1979) (as well as his Anchor Bible commentary); also J. L. Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979).
10. This issue is treated in all the commentaries on the Johannine epistles as well as the standard *Introductions* to the New Testament: cf. e.g. Kümmel, *Introduction*, 442–5.
11. All the evidence we have suggests that Jesus, and the earliest followers, remained – and were allowed and expected to remain – within the jurisdiction of the synagogue authorities.
12. The phrase was originally coined by Martyn, but has become very widely used now in relation to John.
13. Cf. the discussion in W. Horbury, 'The benediction of the *Minim* and early Jewish-Christian controversy', *JTS* 33 (1982), pp. 19–61.
14. Cf. John 16: 2: 'The hour is coming when those who kill you will think that by doing so they are offering worship to God'.
15. Again the terminology is that of Martyn: 'Christian Jews' refers to people who were positive in their attitude to Jesus and the Christian movement but who stayed within Jewish structures, religiously and socially. 'Jewish Christians' refers to those who had left the social structures of non-Christian Judaism. In one sense, no New Testament Christian would have regarded himself or herself as a 'Jewish Christian' in this sense since all would have thought of themselves as 'Jews' still in some sense or other.
16. See the works of Brown and Martyn already mentioned. For a useful summary of the different positions, see M. C. de Boer, *Johannine Perspectives on the Death of Jesus* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1996), esp. ch. 2.
17. There is of course the well-known problem of the petriope of the woman taken in adultery in 7: 53–8: 11: this is missing from most MSS of John, is stylistically quite unlike the rest of the Gospel and hence is almost certainly a later addition to the text. We have already noted the phenomenon of ch. 21, which seems to be a slightly redundant 'appendix' after 20: 30–1. There is another well-known problem with John 6 which seems to disrupt the narrative flow between chs 5 and 7 by suddenly transporting Jesus back to Galilee when 7: 1 then presupposes that he is still in Judea.
18. This is above all the view of Brown who correlates the linear progression of the story within the Gospel with the (supposed) historical development

- of the community and its beliefs.
19. If nothing else one should note the common points between John and the synoptics: however they are to be explained in detail, they clearly show John's use of earlier traditions (whether of the synoptics or of the sources used by the synoptics).
 20. The ablest defender of the theory is R. Fortna: see his *The Fourth Gospel and its Predecessor: From Narrative Source to Present Gospel* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989).
 21. Probably with the exception of 7:53-8:11 which can be excluded on text-critical grounds.
 22. Cf. Fortna, *Fourth Gospel*, pp. 226-8; De Boer, *Johannine Perspectives*, pp. 85-90; J. Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford: OUP, 1991), ch. 7.
 23. In 4QTest, the text from Deut. 18, referring to the coming of a 'prophet like Moses' is quoted, apparently with respect to hopes for a future, eschatological figure.
 24. See De Boer, *Johannine Perspectives*, p. 88; Martyn, *History*, pp. 102-11; also W. Meeks, *The Prophet-King: Moses Traditions and the Johannine Christology* (Leiden: Brill, 1967), p. 26.
 25. See M. de Jonge, 'Jesus as prophet and king in the fourth gospel', in *Jesus: Stranger from Heaven and Son of God. Jesus Christ and the Christians in Johannine Perspective* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1977), pp. 49-76.
 26. Cf. Ashton, *Understanding*, p. 318; De Boer, *Johannine Perspectives*, pp. 113-14.
 27. For discussion of this in relation to Jesus' own self-understanding, see pp. 220-1 below.
 28. See C. K. Barrett, 'The Father is greater than I' (John 14:28: Subordinationist Christology in the New Testament', in *Essays on John* (London: SPCK, 1982), pp. 19-36.
 29. See P. Borgen, 'God's agent in the fourth gospel', in J. Ashton (ed.), *The Interpretation of John* (London: SPCK, 1986), pp. 67-78; Ashton, *Understanding*, pp. 313-17.
 30. Cf. *Mek. on Exod.* 12:3; *Ber.* 5:5, etc.
 31. Cf. p. 126 above.
 32. Cf. Philo, *Mos.* 1:158; Josephus, *Ant.* 3:96; *Pseudo-Philo* 12.1. See P. Borgen, 'Some Jewish exegetical traditions as background for Son of Man sayings in John's Gospel (Jn 3:13-14 and context)', in M. de Jonge (ed.), *L'Evangile de Jean* (BETL 44; Leuven: Duculot & Leuven University Press, 1977), pp. 243-58. Also J. D. G. Dunn, 'Let John be John: A gospel for its time', in P. Stuhlmacher (ed.), *The Gospel and the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), pp. 293-322, on p. 307, repr. in Dunn, *The Christ and the Spirit*, vol. 1, pp. 345-75, on 359.

33. See C. C. Rowland, *The Open Heaven: A Study of Apocalyptic in Judaism and Early Christianity* (London: SPCK, 1982).
34. See especially Dunn, 'Let John be John'.
35. See e.g. B. Lindars, *The Gospel of John* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1977), pp. 77-9; R. E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John I-XII* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), pp. cxii-cxxv; Dunn, 'Let John be John', pp. 314-17.
36. Cf. J. Ashton, 'Bridging ambiguities', in *Studying John: Approaches to the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford: OUP, 1994), pp. 71-89.
37. See p. 27 above. The picture of some interchange between the angel and God can be found in several texts: e.g. in Gen. 21, Hagar is addressed by 'an angel of God' in v. 17 who tells her that 'God has heard the voice of the boy [Ishmael]'; but then in almost the same breath, she is told 'I will make a great nation out of him'. (Cf. too Gen. 31:11-13.) In Exod. 3, the angel of the Lord appears to Moses in the burning bush (v. 2), yet it is God who speaks (vv. 4, 6).
38. Dunn, 'Let John be John', p. 313. Ashton's response is that John is also a short-term visitor in John's eyes (*Understanding*, p. 352)! Yet despite e.g. John 16:16-20 and the discussion of the 'little while' that Jesus will be with his disciples, Jesus' time on earth is considerably longer than that spent by any angelic visitor in Jewish literature.
39. The one possible exception might be the *Prayer of Joseph*, a fragment of which is preserved by Origen and which appears to imply that Jacob was an angel who came down to earth and 'tabernacled' as Jacob-Israel. See the discussion by J. Z. Smith, in J. H. Charlesworth, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (New York: Doubleday; London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1985), vol. 2, pp. 699-712, with further literature cited.
40. See T. E. Pollard, *Johannine Christology and the Early Church* (Cambridge: CUP, 1970).