

Unit 6

The Presentation of Jesus in John's Narrative

The Prologue, whatever its origins and composition history, is intended as the interpretative christological key to the Gospel in its present form, and some indications of its relationship with the christology encountered in the main body of the Gospel have already been outlined in the previous unit. But what about the statement widely regarded as the original conclusion to John's Gospel in 20:30-31, 'Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name'. The wording and location of these two verses point to their function as an overt statement of this Gospel's purpose and as an expression of the commitment of faith held by John and expected from his readers and hearers. Due to the Johannine focus on the titles 'Messiah' and 'Son of God' in 20:31, it is necessary to enquire: to what extent is the conceptual background of these titles adopted or adapted by John? What is their interrelationship in the Gospel and their links with other christological expressions? What, moreover, is the effect of reading the narrative presentation of Jesus as 'Messiah' and 'Son of God' in the light of the Prologue?

Jesus as Messiah and Son of God

What can be stated from the outset is that the two titles highlighted in John 20:31 reflect a provenance in Jewish text and tradition, and, as already seen in relation to the Prologue, point to John's understanding of Jesus as the fulfilment of Israel's hope for

salvation. In view of the Gospel's long and probably complex process of development, the highlighting of these two titles again suggests that the origins of Johannine Christianity are to be sought in Jewish Christian circles where the messianic identity of Jesus was a primary christological category. That the messianic claim remains central in the Gospel is suggested by numerous factors, although the precise contours of this messianic claim need to be explored.

An appropriate starting-point for determining the meaning of the messianic category (or categories) in John's Gospel is the narrative section immediately after the Prologue, where Jesus' identity is gradually disclosed in a series of short encounters between himself and various characters. John the Baptist, the first in a chain of witnesses (1:19-51), denies that he is the Messiah, Elijah or the prophet (with phrasing that implies that there is another who fits these categories), before pronouncing that Jesus is the Lamb of God (1:29) and Son of God (1:34), or, according to an alternative reading, 'the Chosen One of God'. That these two designations complement John's understanding of Jesus as Messiah is suggested by the fact that when the Baptist, for the second time, refers to Jesus as 'the Lamb of God' (1:36), the conclusion drawn by Andrew is, 'We have found the Messiah' (1:41). The chain continues when Philip tells Nathanael that they have found the one 'about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote' (1:45). Nathanael, in turn, declares that Jesus is 'the Son of God, the King of Israel' (1:49), which, at least on one level, attributes to Jesus the messianic, regal status of Jewish expectation. There is no suggestion in this extended narrative that the one title is cancelled out by another or that they are to be held in complete isolation from each other. Rather, the individual designations are presented as intricately woven in order to explicate each other and as possessing a cumulative effect. And yet, as the

narrative sequence demonstrates, the culmination of its witness surpasses these messianic categories, for Jesus tells Nathanael that he will see ‘far greater things than these’ (1:50), namely the Son of Man on whom the angels will ascend and descend (1:51). In language reminiscent of Jacob’s dream of the ladder reaching to heaven (Gen. 28:1), Nathanael the true Israelite is told that he will see what Jacob/Israel, his ancestor, saw. Jesus acts as the means whereby heavenly things are revealed on earth. Due to his own heavenly origins, he is the locus of human encounter with God.

Messianic categories resurface at various points in the Gospel. In 7:25-31 (and 7:40-44) the Jewish crowd asks Jesus whether he is the Messiah, and his response that they know his origins (that he really comes from God) creates a division among them. Similarly when ‘the Jews’ demand an answer by Jesus as to whether he is the Messiah (10:24), he affirms this but goes further by expressing the connotations of his unique relationship with God (10:30: ‘I and the Father are one’), leading them to bring a charge of blasphemy against him (10:25-39). Such episodes point to a redefinition of Jesus’ messianic status. In other words, the true meaning of his identity as the Messiah of God, the fulfilment of Jewish expectations, must also embrace his transcendent significance as the divine, pre-existent Son, the one who has been sent by God ‘from above’ (8:23). This is the truth or ‘secret’ already known to readers of the Prologue, but one that continues to be debated (and not recognized) by several characters within the Gospel.

In Communion with God: Jesus as Son

John employs categories firmly anchored in early Jewish and Christian (including Synoptic) tradition, but his narrative strategy is to merge and fill them with new meanings. This is certainly true of his presentation of the Father-Son relationship, which

features for the first time in the final section of the Prologue. Although the title *logos* disappears at this point, John both sustains and intensifies his use of the Father-Son terminology (the term 'Father' occurs 104 times and the title 'Son' absolutely 16 times).

This language, for John, expresses the intimate relationship between the Father and the Son (1:18; 6:46). The Father loves the Son 'who is in the bosom of the Father' (cf. 3:35; 5:20; 10:17; 15:9) and the Son loves the Father (14:31). His sonship is also presented as unique, already evident in the use of the term *monogenēs* ('only' or 'only-begotten'). And whereas those who believe in Jesus are given authority to become children (*tekna*) of God (1:12; 11:52), Jesus alone is described as the Son (*huios*) whom God has uniquely endowed with authority to give eternal life.

John also emphasizes that Jesus' identity as Son cannot be isolated from his heavenly origins. He is often described as having been sent in God's name as his representative. However, implicit in such declarations is the belief that the Son who pre-existed with the Father (1:1, 14; 6:62; 8:58) has come down from heaven (6:41; 7:29) and now dwells in the earthly world. In this respect John introduces a new dimension into the image of Jesus' sonship, for none of the Synoptic Gospels associates this title with Jesus' consciousness of his eternal status as the Son of God. When Jesus says, 'I declare what I have seen in the Father's presence' (8:38), he is speaking of the things he saw above before he became flesh. And since no one has seen the Father except the one who has descended from above (6:46), the Son is 'above all' because 'he testifies to what he has seen and heard' (3:31-32). The Johannine Jesus, throughout his earthly life, displays awareness of his unique and eternal relationship with the Father and that the world above is the origin of his existence and his dwelling-place after his departure from the

world (16:28: 'I came from the Father and have come into the world; again, I am leaving the world and am going to the Father').

Indeed, a crucial christological theme for John is the implications for the world of this unique and intimate association between Jesus and God. A programmatic expression of this occurs in John 3:16-17, the first time for the Fourth Evangelist to speak explicitly of Jesus as having been sent by the Father, and whose mission is to reveal God's salvific plan: 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him' (3:16-17). Salvation (or condemnation) is therefore already made possible through the acceptance (or refusal) of the life made available in the revelation of God in the Son. This theme is explicated in many parts of the Gospel, particularly in the controversy over Jesus' healing of a lame man on the Sabbath, where he claims that his miracles are none other than the works of God (5:17). As God's Son Jesus is fully obedient (5:19) and is intimately associated with the Father who loves him (5:20). But what this means is that God has given Jesus the power to do what he does: to raise the dead and to judge all (5:21, 25-27).

Whatever the perception of Jesus' claims by his Jewish opponents, John emphasizes that the Son speaks and acts in perfect unity with the Father (cf. 5:30; 8:16). Unity amounts to reciprocity, so that whoever sees the Son sees the Father (12:45; 14:9) and whoever knows the Son knows the Father (8:19; 14:7). The statement 'I and the Father are one' (10:30) serves as the culmination of statements about this unity, but the Jewish opponents again pick up stones to kill Jesus, accusing him of making himself God. The word 'one', however, is neuter (*hen*) rather than masculine (*heis*, one person), indicating

that Jesus is not claiming to replace God, as though he were stating ‘I and the Father are one and the same person’, but declaring a unity of purpose. John is not chiefly concerned with explaining the metaphysical relationship between the Son and the Father, but rather with the unique role of Jesus as God’s authoritative emissary who is subject to his will and purpose. It is also indicative that the Father-Son unity is proclaimed to be a paradigm or model that binds believers to each other: ‘So that they may be one (*hen*), as we are one (*hen*)’ (17:22). It is by virtue of his role as the visible revelation of God that Jesus can proclaim that believing in him is equivalent to believing in God, and that it is through faith in him that eternal life becomes a reality in the lives of believers.

The unity between the Father and the Son is not expressed in terms indicating that one can no longer differentiate between them. The clearest proof of this are the many statements concerning the Son’s complete dependence on the Father for his words and works (5:19), his mission (4:34), his authority (17:2) and his glory (17:24). Indeed, for John, Jesus’ unity with God is demonstrated precisely in his dependence and subordination to the Father. This is neatly summed up by David Mealand as follows:

‘The Son is distinct from the Father in being Son and in becoming man, but he is one with the Father in intention, in essential divinity. He is subordinate in that he is sent by and reveals not himself but the Father, equal in that he does reveal the Father whose glory he shared in the beginning’.¹

This emphasis on both unity and dependence does not necessarily point to a tension in John’s Gospel or to a fusion of two separate christologies, but reflects what it means to

¹ D.L. Mealand, “The Christology of the Fourth Gospel”, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 31, 1978, 461

speak of Jesus as God's unique and authorised agent. The sending motif is not only prominent in John (the verb *pempein* [to send] occurs 25x and *apostellein* [to send] occurs 17x) as already indicated in 3:16-17, but it can justifiably be defined as an expression of the Gospel's central christological claim: Jesus' journey is that of the divine emissary who is sent into the world and then returns to his heavenly dwelling-place. The sending motif relates closely to Jewish notions of agency, for, in a variety of settings, Jewish tradition can stipulate that an agent (Hebrew: *shaliach*) is endowed with the authority of the sender: 'an agent is like the one who sent him' (m. Berakot 5:5, [from the Mishnah]), reminiscent of John 13:20 ('whoever receives one whom I send receives me; and whoever receives me receives him who sent me'; cf. also 5:23 ('he who does not honour the Son does not honour the Father')); 12:45 ('he who sees me sees him who sent me')). However, the superiority of the sender is also stated in Jewish principles of agency, 'the sender is greater than the one sent' (Genesis Rabbah 78:1 on Gen. 32:37), echoed in John 13:16 ('Messengers are not greater than the one who sent them'). Furthermore it is presumed that an agent will carry out his mission in obedience to his sender, evocative of Jesus' role as an obedient agent who carried out the command of the Father. While, as in the Johannine text, the agent in rabbinic tradition is to return and report to the agent (j. Hagigah 76d [Jerusalem Talmud]: 'Behold we send to you a great man as our agent, and he is equivalent to us until such a time as he returns to us').

Jewish agency motifs, even when combined with the theme of sonship, do not fully encompass what John claims about Jesus. He goes further by declaring that Jesus is a revealer of heavenly origin; he communicates what he has seen and heard from his Father, and so to have seen Jesus is to see God himself (1:18; 14:9).

The Son of Man as the Descending and Ascending Revealer

These aspects of John's christology lead us to consider briefly the presentation of Jesus as 'the Son of Man'. The Synoptic use of this designation points to a threefold reference, namely Jesus' ministry, his suffering, and his eschatological role as judge when he returns on the clouds. Most of the thirteen occurrences in John's Gospel focus on the pattern of descent and ascent, particularly Jesus' descent to earth and his ascent to heaven, the place from which he previously descended (3:13; 6:62) and on his exaltation (3:14; 8:28; 12:34) and glorification (12:23; 13:31) by means of his death. This represents a notable departure from other Johannine christological categories. The language of descent/ascent is not used of Jesus as Son, whereas the pattern is predominantly that of descent (from above) followed by ascent (to the Father), rather than, as in the Synoptic Gospels, ascent (after his resurrection) followed by descent (for eschatological judgement). In line with this Gospel's realized eschatology, Jesus has already descended for judgment (3:19) occurring in individual responses to him. His exaltation, expressed by the verb 'to lift up' (3:14; 8:28; 12:34), takes place on the cross where he completes his mission to reveal the Father ('It is accomplished').

Of particular significance for the Johannine understanding of Jesus as the exclusive bearer of divine revelation is the declaration in 3:13: 'No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man'. Jesus alone, it is claimed, makes known on earth the heavenly mysteries of God, precisely because, by virtue of his origins, he alone has been sent from heaven. This also provides us with an important clue about a possible motive for John's christology; it acts as a rebuttal of claims made in certain Jewish mystical circles that figures like Moses and Abraham were able to ascend to heaven, receive direct visions of God and then reveal the mysteries to others

on earth.² John reacts vigorously against such claims by asserting that the only one to have seen and to have communicated directly with God is Jesus, who descended to earth from his heavenly dwelling place.

What, therefore, of the visions of God experienced, according to the Scriptures, by individuals like Moses, Abraham and Isaiah? The answer given by John is that the figure whom they encountered was Jesus: Abraham rejoiced because he saw his day (8:56), Moses wrote about him in the law (1:45; 5:46) and even Isaiah, as a result of his vision in the temple, saw his glory and spoke about him (12:41). The inevitable outcome of John's belief in Jesus' cosmic priority and heavenly origins is that, as the exclusive revealer of God, he must also be the key to the Jewish Scriptures. What enabled John to draw such profound conclusions and how this finds expression in his Gospel will be explored in the next unit of this module.

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² Similarly, on the basis of Gen. 15:17, the *Apocalypse of Abraham* 15-30 describes Abraham's ascent to heaven, during which he sees 'the Eternal One' coming towards him and the angel (16:3).

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