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CHAPTER

20 The Purpose of the Ministry and Death of Jesus in the Gospel of John

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Abstract

The paratext of the narrative, i.e. the Prologue (1:1–18) and the conclusion (20:30–31), specify the identity of the Johannine Jesus. The dominant perspective in John's presentation of the person of Jesus is that of the envoy. This Christology of the envoy constitutes the hermeneutical matrix of the story. This enables a career of three phases for Jesus in John: The first focuses on his pre-existence and the incarnation. The second, which takes place in the fulfilment of his mission, is realized in the signs he performs and the words he speaks in both dialogues and discourses. The third and last phase is the return of Jesus to the Father through the cross. The interpretation of Jesus' death occupies an important place in the Gospel from the beginning. The Christology of the envoy in three phases leads the reader to a new understanding of monotheism.

Keywords: Johannine Christology, pre-existence, incarnation, sign, 'I am' words, Christological discourse, Farewell Discourse, Paraclete, death of Jesus, monotheism

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Introduction

The Fourth Gospel is an act of memory and this work of *anamnesis* (remembering) presupposes the Easter faith. The incident in the Temple (2:13–22)¹ emphasizes that full understanding of Jesus and his message is retrospective and cannot occur until after Easter: ‘When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this’ (2:22; cf. 2:17). The same point is made at the triumphal entry (12:12–19) of Jesus into Jerusalem: ‘His disciples did not understand this at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that this had been written of him and had been done to him’ (12:16). Only the Easter event provides access to understanding the action and words of Jesus (cf. also 13:7 and 20:9).

This work of post-Easter memory, the result of which is an account of the life of Jesus, is, for John, the product of the Paraclete, i.e., the Spirit (Theobald 2012: 79–168). Indeed, only the Spirit is the faithful witness and qualified interpreter of the life and work of the Johannine Jesus. If the first word concerning the Paraclete (14:15–17) announces the coming of ‘another Paraclete’ (*allon paraklēton*) after the departure of Jesus, i.e. a figure intended to make up for his absence after Easter, the second passage on the Paraclete specifies the task assigned to it: ‘But the Paraclete (*paraklētos*), the Holy Spirit, whom ↪ the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you’ (14:26). This task is twofold. On the one hand, it consists in the recollection of the person of Jesus. On the other hand, this recollection involves instruction in the interpretation of the earthly Jesus’ message for the present. The last two passages on the Paraclete (16:7–11, 13–15) expand its mission: the recollection of Jesus will not only enable refutation of an incorrect grasp of the life and death of Jesus, but also a glimpse of how it determines the future of life in faith.²

In short, only the post-Easter perspective, which is affected by the Spirit, enables discovery of the complete meaning of the incarnation, of the earthly ministry, of the passion, and of the elevation of the Son. The Gospel is therefore a witness par excellence to Christ incarnate, in the power of the Spirit, which both preserves the memory of the earthly Jesus and expresses the relevance of faith for today.

This description of the activity of the Paraclete shows that John’s story is basically a Christological story: the person of Jesus, his history and meaning, are the focus of the Gospel.³ What then is the Christological conception propounded by John? What is the purpose of the ministry and death of Jesus?

The Significance of the Gospel’s Conclusion and Prologue

We begin by examining two elements of the Gospel’s paratext,⁴ namely, the conclusion (20.30–31) and the Prologue (1.1–18). Both passages are important because they formulate from the Johannine perspective the meaning of the coming of Christ in the world at a meta-linguistic level.

The Conclusion of the Gospel

The intention which is manifested through the ministry and death of Jesus is clearly stated in the first conclusion of the Gospel (20:30–31).⁵ In this passage, the purpose of the story is explicitly formulated and draws the reader’s attention to three aspects. Firstly, the ‘doing’ of Jesus is qualified by the notion of ‘sign’. This means that the actions ↪ done by Jesus have no meaning in themselves, but they point beyond themselves to the one who did them in order to reveal through them his distinctive significance.

What then—and this is the second point—is the identity thus disclosed? The answer is to be found in two Christological titles: Christ and Son of God. These two qualifications specify the special relationship which unites Jesus to God. The title ‘Christ’, which was a Jewish hope before becoming an early Christian one, has

a confirmed eschatological dimension: it emphasizes Jesus' ultimate and liberating role with regard to the people of God. The title 'Son of God' reveals the unique relationship of proximity that links Jesus to the Father and that qualifies him to be the revealer. Both the appellation 'Christ' and the appellation 'Son of God' indicate that what is at stake in the ministry of Jesus is the revelation of the person of God and his plan for the world.

Thirdly, a soteriological claim follows from this Christological claim. Faith in Jesus' identity as the Christ and Son of God is not a dogma closed in on itself. It contains the potential of life. The 'life' in view concerns not merely biological vitality but 'life' as God wants and gives it here and now, what the Gospel frequently calls 'eternal life'.⁶ In John, this (eternal) life involves a new relationship with God, which cannot be threatened or destroyed by the hostile forces that inhabit the world or by death, for example.

The Gospel's Prologue

The Prologue (1:1–18), which opens the Gospel establishes the hermeneutical framework in which the Gospel should be read. It consists of a hymn to the Logos. Even before the story begins (cf. 1:19), it reveals the identity of the hero who will be the centre of the story being told (1:19–20:31). Jesus of Nazareth, whose life is going to be recounted, is none other than someone who lives in a unique intimacy with God. His pre-existence with God and in God is the warrant.

The basic movement which lies behind the Prologue is that of the coming of God among his own, of the consecration of God for 'his own', i.e. for the whole human world. This coming is effected through the intervention of the 'Logos' (*logos*), more specifically through the pre-existent Son who lives in unity with the Father and who is the mediator of creation. The Logos becomes flesh (1:14). As indicated by the title 'Logos' (meaning 'Word'), there will be an event of revelation which is reflected in an articulate and intelligible message. By his incarnation, the Logos brings light and life in fullness. In the person of Jesus, God becomes a close and loving presence within creation and humanity. The whole story of the man Jesus—his words, his actions, his life, his death—is to be read in the light of this initial affirmation.

The role of the Prologue is thus clear: it is to establish the identity of Jesus—he is the Envoy of the Father, God's presence among human beings. The purpose of his coming is also specified: it is an event of grace, to bring life in fullness.

Jesus, the Envoy of the Father

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While the Prologue is dominated by the movement from the pre-existence of the Logos (1:1–2) to his incarnation, the body of the Gospel (1:19–20:31) develops a Christology of the Envoy, i.e. of Jesus as 'sent' by God.⁷ The Christology of the envoy is not in tension with or incompatible with the Christology of the incarnation; the former constitutes, in another language, the latter's development and explication. Precisely because Jesus is the pre-existent Son become flesh, his historical destiny can be presented as a *coming*, as a sending.⁸

The Semantics of Sending

By presenting Jesus as the envoy of the Father,⁹ the Fourth Gospel uses a widespread motif found in the ancient Near East.¹⁰ This motif makes use of language that must be understood against the background of the notion of the envoy, which is well attested in the Jewish world of the first century. An envoy was a duly authorized messenger who represented his sovereign to a foreign court. The central category attached to the figure of the envoy was that of *representation*. It played on the dialectic between oneness and difference: the ambassador represented his king fully while yet remaining distinct from him. The potential significance of this notion of representation for Christology is obvious. As an envoy of the Father, Jesus represents Him in the world. He does not utter his own words, but the words of the Father (3:34; 14:10; 17:8, 14). He does not perform his own works, but those of his Father (4:34; 5:17, 19ff., 30, 36; 8:28; 14:10; 17:24, 34). He does not do his own will but that of his Father (4:34; 5:30; 6:38; 10:25, 37). He wants nothing else than to be the voice and the hand of God among human beings. In the logic of John, Jesus is truly God insofar as he is God's envoy—both fully one with Him and yet distinct from Him. This assertion is of decisive importance. Because no one has ever seen God (1:18), the mission of the Johannine Jesus is characterized by its representational role. In other words, he is the Revealer.

p. 335 The Significance of the Envoy

According to the Fourth Gospel, the meaning of the sending of Jesus into the world has three essential aspects.

Firstly, the sending of the Son is the expression of *God's love* in action (3:16). Through the coming of the Son, God reveals himself as a God whose work is characterized by his kindness and his grace.¹¹ To the extent that a human being accepts the Johannine Jesus, he or she is given the benefit of this love.

Secondly, this love as manifested in the world is not an event among other events; it has a unique and decisive character. It is, on the one hand, the fulfilment of the Old Testament promise. According to John, the history of God with his people thereby attains its pinnacle. Abraham (8:56), Moses (5:46–47) and Isaiah (12:41) become witnesses of God's envoy. This fulfilment of the history of Israel in the person of Jesus has, on the other hand, an eschatological character: in the coming of the envoy the judgment of the world occurs (3:18–19; 5:24–25; 9:39). Insofar as John claims that the judgment happens in the coming of the Son he distances himself from the classic apocalyptic conception of judgment. Eschatology is 'historicized'. The judgment no longer involves an intervention at the end of time, but it is accomplished in the encounter with the Son. It is indeed in the confrontation with the Son, in the faith given or rejected, that the separation between believers and unbelievers occurs. The ministry of Jesus is thus no longer a historical event among others; it becomes the manifestation of the decisive and final coming of God among human beings.

The emphasis on present eschatology does not signify the disappearance of traditional eschatology (cf. 5:28–29; 6:39, 40, 44, 54; 12:48; 14:3; Frey 2000: 464–88).¹² The latter has a dual function. It underlines, on the one hand, that although salvation is received here and now, living in faith is still characterized by the seal of historicity. On the other hand, the function of the final judgment is revised: it will make manifest for all to see the chasm between faith and unbelief.

Thirdly, the sending the Son into the world leads to a *dualistic* worldview. Christology is not therefore a function of eschatology (*contra* Becker 1991: 174–9).¹³ On the contrary, eschatology is a function of Christology. The coming of the Revealer indeed discloses the darkness in which human beings live. If the order of revelation is characterized by light, truth, spirit, freedom, and life, the sphere of the world proves to be the area of darkness, falsehood, flesh, servitude, and death. This dualism is not ontological, but historical: it is caused by the coming of the Son.

The Career of the Envoy

How is the sending of the Son, of which we have just pointed out the ultimate significance, concretely carried out? There are three phases to be distinguished in the career of the Envoy.

Pre-Existence and the Incarnation

The identity of the envoy of the Father is defined primarily by his pre-existence with the Father before the world began. This claim, repeated frequently throughout the Gospel (cf., e.g. 1:1–3, 15, 30; 8:58; 17:5, 24), is particularly developed at the beginning of the Prologue (1:1–3). In order to indicate who Christ is, the hymn that opens the Gospel effects a return to the origin, to the ‘beginning’. In saying what was in the beginning, even before the foundation of the world, the hymn wants to describe both what is the most fundamental and the most inaccessible. What is at the origin is the unique relationship of proximity between the Logos and God. This extraordinary intimacy indicates the distinctive dignity of the Logos but also his legitimacy in representing God among human beings. Jesus of Nazareth, whose ministry will be illuminated in the Gospel, is none other than the incarnate Logos (1:14–18). The first phase in the career of the envoy thus establishes the rationale for Jesus as the Revealer of the Father through his life and death.

The Fulfilment of the Mission

The second phase of the envoy’s career consists of the fulfilment of his mission both by the signs he performs and by the words he speaks.

The Signs of the Johannine Jesus

The Johannine Jesus first of all fulfils his mission by performing miracles. The Fourth Gospel contains the story of seven major miracles.¹⁴ The number seven is not random, but suggests wholeness. Moreover, the Gospel indicates at the outset that these miracle stories should be regarded as ‘signs’. This notion has a hermeneutical import: it signals that these miraculous acts are not ends in themselves, but refer beyond themselves to the decisive reality that Jesus reveals and of which he is the visible manifestation in the world: one God, merciful creator and giver of life in abundance.

p. 337 The first sign, that of Cana (2:1–11), is of programmatic significance: it reveals the ‘glory’ of Jesus, which is none other than the divine reality he unveils. As suggested by ↵ the symbolism of the wedding and wine in abundance, divine reality is manifested as the creator of joy and life. From the outset, the centre of Jesus’ ministry is unveiled in its central intention: it is a gift that provides access to life in fullness.

The theme of the second Cana sign (4:46–54) is access to life. This motif is reflected in two ways: by the healing of the sick child and by the faith of the father in his encounter with Jesus. The third sign—the healing of the paralytic at the pool of Bethesda (5:1–18)—contains an additional dimension: it reveals a Jesus who not only gives life but also has eschatological authority over it. The Johannine Jesus reveals himself as the one who has authority over life and over death. As such, he exercises a prerogative that belongs to God himself. This claim arouses the strong opposition of his opponents who accuse him of blasphemy (5:18). This, in the Fourth Gospel, is the start of the conflict between Jesus and the religious authorities of his time—a conflict that will culminate in the decision to kill Jesus, a decision taken by the Sanhedrin, led by Caiaphas (11:53).

The following three miracles—the miracle of the loaves (6:1–15), the healing of the man born blind (9:1–41), the raising of Lazarus (11:1–44)—have a symbolic significance. They play, respectively, on the metaphor of the bread of life (6:35), the opposition light and darkness (9:5), and that of life and death

(11:25), and they exhibit in this way the offer of the Revealer. In each of these signs, the Johannine Jesus offers what is most necessary for life—both literally and figuratively. Finally, Jesus walking on the sea (6:16–21) is an account of an epiphany (6:20) that discloses a central motif of the Fourth Gospel: the unity between the Father and the Son.

Although the narrative succession of the seven miracle stories is marked by a progression in the magnitude of the action performed (the return of Lazarus to life being the climax of the activity of the miracle worker), the theme that unites them is profoundly consistent. The purpose of the action of Jesus is to bring—in the form of a gift—life, and to bring it in fullness. In this way he reveals the God of whom he is the envoy.

Monologues and Dialogues

The Johannine Jesus continues his ministry through *his word*. It is expressed in a privileged way through the device of *dialogues*. The reader remembers the conversations of Jesus with Nicodemus (3:1–12), with the Samaritan woman (4:4–26), with the crowd (6:22–59), with Martha and Mary (11:1–44), and finally with the Greeks (12:20–36). Each time the subject matter relates to the gift of ‘eternal life’, in other words salvation. It is formulated using different metaphors: new birth, living water, bread of life, resurrection. These dialogues aim to lead the people encountered by Jesus from an elementary understanding of faith to a deeper conception. The course of the dialogue proves to be sowed with pitfalls as shown by the frequent misunderstandings that arise and that constantly require further clarifications from Jesus. This means that the discovery of the new possibility of life offered by Jesus is not obvious, but involves a transformation of the listener. These true journeys of faith culminate in the discovery of the person of Jesus as the Envoy of the Father and the bearer of life.

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But these conversations can also be conducted in a hostile environment and turn into controversy. Such is the case with Jesus’ dialogue with his brothers (7:1–9) which concerns the identity of Jesus, with the great controversy in chapter 8 where the matter of monotheism is at issue, or with the confrontation during the Feast of Dedication (10:22–42) where the issue of Jesus’ identity is settled in violent terms. In this connection we must also locate the conversation with Pilate (18:28–19:16a), the final revelatory discourse centred on the theme of royalty, which leads to the decision to crucify him. In these polemical exchanges, the central theme is always Jesus’ identity and his relationship to the God of whom he claims to be the Envoy.

This collection of dialogues already illustrates what will become evident in the discourses proper. In contrast to the Synoptics, the centre of Jesus’ teaching is no longer the announcement of the imminent coming of God’s Kingdom and the interpretation of the Torah, but himself. Among these discourses is the notable monologue following the conversation with Nicodemus (3:13–21), which constitutes a brief summary of the theology of John. There is also the discourse on the eschatological authority of Jesus (5:19–30) and the one on him as the good shepherd (10:1–21).

That the Johannine Jesus becomes the subject matter of his own teaching appears in particularly clear fashion in the words ‘I am’, of which there are two distinct categories. Firstly, there are the words ‘I am’ without predicate (8:24, 28, 58; 13:19; 18:6; see also 4:26; 6:20; 18:5, 8). They represent a formula used by God in the Old Testament to reveal his identity (e.g. Isa. 43:10, 11 LXX; 45:12 LXX). By adopting this divine revelation formula, the Johannine Jesus claims to be the ‘face’ of God for all human beings. Secondly, it is necessary to mention the seven instances of ‘I am’ with predicate (6:35; 8:12; 10:7, 9; 10:11, 14; 11:25; 14:16; 15:1, 5). These seven sayings express the central intention of revelation. They articulate Christology and soteriology in stating what Jesus, the visible manifestation of God for the world, means to those he encounters. The predicates ‘bread’, ‘light’, ‘door’, ‘resurrection’, ‘shepherd’, ‘road’, ‘truth’, ‘vine’ effectively summon up the human attempt to obtain life in fullness. The claim of the Fourth Gospel is that

this quest finds its answer in the 'I am' of the Johannine Jesus. In him, the offer of 'eternal life' becomes reality here and now. Only faith is required to obtain it (6:35; 8:12; 11:25b).

Among the instructions given by the Johannine Jesus, the farewell discourses¹⁵ have a special place. These discourses, held as part of the last meal, address the crucial issue of the future of revelation: how can the Absent One be present after the crucifixion? How can one who has gone to the Father be with his own? To answer these questions, the Johannine Jesus explains the meaning of his impending death and his coming at Easter. Through the gift of the Paraclete, he assures his disciples that his work of revelation will not end, but will abide. So, the time that will follow the ministry of Jesus (the post-Easter period) will not be empty time but a time of fullness.

p. 339 The work of revelation of the Johannine Jesus ends with the farewell prayer. In this prayer addressed to God, but meant for the disciples, the Johannine Jesus summarizes his work by recalling its origin, fulfilment, and eschatological goal. More than any other text, this prayer shows that the centre of the message of the Johannine Jesus is his own person and his significance for the world. In this astonishing synthesis, Jesus on the eve of his death incorporates his followers into, and associates them with, his fate.

The Death of Jesus

The third phase in the career of the envoy is the *anabasis*, in other words the return to the Father. This return is affected by the death on the cross.

The Death of Jesus as the Narrative Horizon

The death of Jesus is not a marginal element in the Fourth Gospel. It is the constant horizon of the story (cf. Zumstein 2004: 219–52).

This orientation of the narrative to the cross is confirmed by several plot elements. It first appears in the inclusion that frames the story through the metaphor of the paschal lamb. In 1:29, John the Baptist formulates in a positive way the identity of Jesus in these words: 'Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world'. The Baptist's testimony probably refers to Jesus' death on the cross, since it corresponds to the hint found in 19:14 which situates the conviction and execution of Jesus at the time of the immolation of the paschal lambs. Even before the commencement of Jesus' ministry, the shadow of the cross falls on the story.

This orientation of the whole Gospel to the cross then appears in the fact that John places in the first part of the Gospel a number of elements which, in Mark, belong to the account of the Passion: the incident in the Temple (2:13–22), the question of authority (2:18–22), the sentence of death (11:45–53), and the anointing of Jesus (12:1–8), his entry into Jerusalem (12:12–19), as well as the allusion to Gethsemane (12:23, 27–29). Further essential elements of the trial of Jesus are transposed to chapter 2 (the saying concerning the Temple) and chapter 10 (the messianic question and the charge of blasphemy) (Klauck 2002: 140–41).

It is necessary, in addition, to mention three prolepses¹⁶ announcing the death of Jesus and found in chapters 1–12. The first is 'the hour' (2:4; 7:6:30; 8:20). The mysterious hour which has not yet come and towards which Jesus advances is that of the Passion (13:1). The second is the 'elevation' (3:14; 8:28; 12:32–34). The elevation on the cross is inextricably linked to the elevation to the Father. The third prolepsis, that of 'glorification' (7:39; 12:16, 23; 13:31, etc.), affirms that the cross, far from being the place of God's absence, is that of his full presence. These three prolepses have a dual function: they anchor the theme of Jesus' death in the first part of the Gospel and simultaneously interpret them even before it takes place. The tone is set: by referring to Jesus' death and not to his resurrection with the terminology of elevation and

glorification, the Gospel says that the cross is a productive event, the place of a victory rather than of a defeat.

p. 340 **The Footwashing**

The scene that opens the Johannine passion narrative is the Footwashing (13:1–20). In contrast to the Synoptics, where the last meal of Jesus culminates in the institution of the Eucharist and offers a sacrificial interpretation of his death, the Fourth Gospel puts at the centre of this last meal a surprising symbolic gesture—the washing of feet. Its purpose is equally to interpret the significance of the impending death of Jesus, but it does so by claiming other values for it.

The Footwashing is to be understood as a metaphor of the cross. By adopting the form of a servant and rendering his disciples the most humble service that is usually left to a slave, the Johannine Jesus performs a reversal of values. He wants to indicate that his authority is not exercised in domination, but to the contrary that it becomes concrete in selfless love and service. It is a service that leads to making his companions ‘clean’ (13:10). For this reason, his death must not be understood as a terrible failure, but as an act of love and service that transforms the lives of those who are the beneficiaries. The death of Jesus becomes a productive death, a death that ‘cleans’ the disciples, that is to say that restores their relationship with God.

The First Farewell Discourse

The first farewell discourse is of great importance because it shows that in the Fourth Gospel it is Jesus himself who is the interpreter of his impending death.

In that first discourse, given after the last meal with the disciples, Jesus first makes a pronouncement on the meaning of the death to which he is progressing. In discerning in this impending event, the moment of his ‘glorification’ (13:31–32), he announces that his death cannot be understood as a sign of the absence of God (contrast Mark 15:34: ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’), but rather as that of his full presence. And if so, his death cannot be a defeat, but a productive event. This is what he emphasizes when speaking of his death as a ‘going to God’. The cross does not therefore sever his relationship with God, but brings it to fulfilment. In addition, it is also to be understood as the expression of Jesus’ love for his own (cf. 15:12–13). This love is to remove the sorrow of separation and give them the strength to face the future.

The separation which takes place at the cross between the earthly Jesus and his companions causes a complete transformation of the relationship that bound them so far. The disciple must mourn the master whom he accompanied on the roads of Galilee in order to discover his Lord who, at Easter, comes to him in a completely other manner. The cross does not signal the end of their common way, but it effects the creation of a completely new way. The one who dies, and at the moment he dies, is ‘the way, the truth and the life’ (14:6). Therefore, it is not appropriate for the believer to ask Jesus to show him God to confirm his faith. Precisely because he is the way, the crucified fully and finally reveals the reality of God for the world and thus gives life to his own.

The Jesus who returns to the Father also intends to divulge an essential truth to his own who live in the world. The time following his departure is not empty, marked by regret and sorrow, but full of an unsurpassable quality. That is so because the disciple benefits from three privileges:

p. 341 The first privilege of which the disciple benefits after the departure of his Master is the completion of revelation. As indicated in the last words of Jesus on the cross (19:30, ‘It is finished!’), the work of Jesus has now come to an end; from now on it is perfectly comprehensible and can develop all its effects—which was not possible before Golgotha.

The second privilege is that a new relationship with the exalted Christ is now possible. This new relationship takes shape in prayer—prayer under the sign of the promise that it will be heard.

The third privilege of living in faith is reflected in the sending of the Spirit which in the farewell discourse is given the name 'Paraclete'. The time after Easter is not the time of divine absence, but the time of a divine presence renewed, without limitation in time or space.

Finally, the question posed to the disciple after the cross and the 'elevation' of Jesus to his Father is: How is the Absent One present? How can the one who has gone to the Father be present with his own forever? At the moment he separates himself from his own, Jesus makes a promise: 'I will not leave you orphans, I am coming to you' (14:18). This coming has two facets.

It is first a matter of the coming of Jesus at Easter. He whom the world does not see is the Living One. As such, he bestows life on his disciples (14:19). So, the disciple is called to discover that his Lord has not been buried in the past, but that he continuously stands in front of him. But is this not an outdated promise applying only to the witnesses of the appearances, e.g. Peter, the Beloved Disciple, and Mary Magdalene? In fact—and this is the second aspect—the Paraclete which is given to every believer has as its mission to bring to remembrance all that Jesus said and did and to interpret the import of faith for the present time (14:26). So, the disciple is not left to him or herself, but thanks to the activity of the Spirit, he or she also benefits from the Easter appearance of the Risen One. The Jesus who revealed himself during his earthly ministry is the one who is with his own during the post-Easter period.

The Passion Narrative

In the Fourth Gospel, the Passion Narrative is not, for Jesus, the place of humiliation, suffering or abandonment. Unlike the Synoptics, the Johannine Jesus is not primarily the Suffering Righteous One (e.g. Ps. 34:17–19; Dan. 3:28; 11:29–35; 12:1–3; Wisd. 2:12–20; 5:1–7), nor is he the incarnation of the Suffering Servant celebrated in the hymns of the prophet Isaiah (cf. e.g. Isa. 52:13–53:12). It is no longer the language of expiation or the forgiveness of sins which takes centre stage. For the Johannine Jesus, the Passion is the 'hour' of the fulfilment of revelation and of the return to the Father. It is the place for the glorification and elevation of the Son. The crucified Jesus is a victorious Christ. This hermeneutical perspective, adumbrated throughout the Gospel, especially in the farewell discourses, is further developed in chapters 18–19 along the following five axes.

1) *The Axis of Sovereignty*. The Johannine Jesus who goes into the Passion retains the initiative and exercises sovereignty in both action and knowledge. According to Bultmann (1986: 490)—who here articulates an almost unanimous consensus—the Johannine Jesus is not presented as one who suffers, but as one who acts. He is described as one who acts at the time of his arrest (18:1–11): it is he who takes the initiative; the cohort that came to arrest him falls at his feet; he allows his own to go away and reaffirms his willingness to go to the cross. He subsequently demonstrates his superiority before the high priest, recalling his custom of teaching openly in synagogues and the Temple and justifying it without allowing himself to be deterred by the blows he receives (18:19–24). Moreover, during his appearance before Pilate (18:28–19:16), he controls the conversation and makes it into a discourse of revelation; he ends by putting the Roman prefect in a difficult spot. Finally, in the crucifixion scene (19:16b–30), he carries his own cross (19:17), clearly expresses his last wish (19:26–27), and dies conscious of having fulfilled his work (19:30).

2) *The Axis of Royalty*. In both the trial before Pilate (18:28–19:16a) and the crucifixion scene (19:16b–22), Jesus—who has been condemned, humiliated and executed—is portrayed as the real 'King of Israel', the one who is the incarnation of the eschatological kingdom.

Before the Roman prefect, he does not remain silent but clearly articulates his royal status: it is not of this world (19:37), but consists of the fulfilment of his mission as Revealer. The royalty which he claims finds its privileged expression in the scene of the flagellation (19:1–3), which culminates in a parody of a coronation: a crown of thorns is placed on his head and he is dressed in a purple robe. Presented to the crowd in this garb with the famous words ‘Ecce homo [Behold the man]’ (19:5), Jesus shows that he is king, but not in the sense that the world wants. His pitiful appearance reveals a paradoxical kingship that questions what the world thinks and believes.

This line of thinking continues in the crucifixion scene which is designed as a coronation: Jesus is king, as emphasized by the *titulus* fixed to the cross (19:19–20, ‘Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews’), but it is the cross that is his throne and two thieves on his left and right are his court. This paradoxical kingship is universal in scope: the three languages (Hebrew, Latin, and Greek) used to write the sign on the gallows provide the warrant.

3) *The Axis of Passover*. The account of the Passion also uses Passover symbolism to give meaning to the death of Jesus. This symbolism is attested by a number of indications scattered throughout the narrative. First, in 19:14, Jesus’ crucifixion is dated to the Day of Preparation for the Passover, at about the sixth hour, when the lambs for the Passover meal were to be sacrificed in the Temple. Readers are invited to discover in the crucified Jesus the sacrificed Passover lamb.

Then, in 19:29, the sponge intended to assuage the thirst of Jesus is fixed on a hyssop branch and not on a reed. Hyssop is in no way suited to fulfil this function, but the reader versed in the Scriptures (cf. Exod. 12:22) will recognize the tuft used to brush the doorposts of the Israelites with the blood of the Passover lamb during the exodus from Egypt. The Passover symbolism is again present.

Finally, the episode of the spear (19:31–37) once again evokes the Passover feast in the explanation that is given to it. Unlike the two thieves whose legs are broken, Jesus receives the thrust of a spear in his side because, in accordance with the image of the paschal lamb, ‘not one of his bones will be broken’ (19:36). The assimilation of Jesus to the paschal lamb is again implied.

p. 343 In short, these different indications invite the reader to see in the death of Jesus the sacrifice of the paschal lamb and thus to discern in the cross the event of liberation celebrated in Exodus. A transfer occurs: the deliverance of God’s people is no longer linked to the exodus from Egypt, but to the cross.

4) *The Axis of Fulfilment*. Two words of Jesus on the cross suggest that his death is the place of fulfilment. The first occurs in 19:28 with the words ‘I thirst’. These recall the words uttered by Jesus at his arrest: ‘Shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given me?’ (18:11). The thirst which he experiences is the thirst to accomplish the will of the Father and to fulfil Scripture. This is a free and sovereign Jesus who speaks here and who by his request accomplishes the divine purpose.

The last words of Jesus pronounced on the cross (19:30, ‘It is finished!’) goes in the same direction. The reader can only be struck by the difference from the last words of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark: ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ (Mark 15:34). The death of Jesus is not the place of abandonment, but of completion. But what exactly is completed or ‘finished’?

The completion is, first of all, chronological. Jesus’ death marks the end of his historical existence and, thereby, his mission among human beings. But this completion is simultaneously qualitative. It results in a gain, not a loss. The end of the life of Jesus actually opens the way for the completion of the revelation he has brought. This revelation has now come to an end; it can be displayed in the entirety of its significance. The last word has been said, the last gesture has been made. The project has come to an end. From now on it can be handed down because the revelation is now complete.

5) *The Ecclesiological Axis*. The death of Jesus in John is a productive death. It has a prominent ecclesiological significance. Three aspects are worth mentioning.

First, the famous scene of the seamless tunic (19:23–24) probably has a symbolic significance, but remains difficult to interpret. If at one level it means that Jesus' death does not stand beyond God's authority, but is to be understood as an expression of his will as fixed in Scripture (cf. the words 'that the Scripture be fulfilled' in v. 24), it is the theme of unity that constitutes the dramatic core of the scene. For this reason, it is legitimate to assume that it refers to the unity of God's people which comes into being at the cross. The Johannine Jesus by stripping himself of everything allows his own to build a new unified and 'seamless' community.

It is now necessary to invoke the famous scene that brings together the mother of Jesus and the Beloved Disciple at the foot of the cross (19:25–27). In presenting his mother to the Beloved Disciple, the Crucified One indicates the one who is called to replace him among his own. His ultimate desire is to start a 'new family'. In this sense, the Church is born at the foot of the cross and it gathers around the one who is the faithful witness and the unsurpassable interpreter of the Jesus who now departs.

A final aspect of the creative character of the death of Jesus probably appears in the statement 'he bowed his head and gave up the spirit (*paredōken to pneuma*)' in 19:30. The expression 'give up the spirit' (where 'spirit' can mean 'breath') is in fact never used in the literature of the time to indicate the death of a person. Perhaps then, this term has multiple meanings and has been coined to express a dual reality. In the mundane sense ↴ ('he breathed his last'), it refers to Jesus' death. In a figurative sense ('he handed over the Spirit'), it suggests that Jesus' death is the moment for the outpouring of the Spirit. At the moment of dying, the Johannine Jesus dispenses the divine Spirit that he received at his 'baptism' (1:32) and the bowing of his head suggests that the Spirit is given to those who are at the foot of the cross, to the new family of Jesus. That interpretation is consistent with the farewell discourse which links the gift of the Paraclete to the departure of Jesus. This outpouring of the Spirit on the cross would underline once again the benefit attached to the cross.

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Conclusion

If, in conclusion, one asks about the fundamental orientation of the ministry and of the death of Jesus in John, it is essential to call attention to the theocentric focus of the story. The Johannine Jesus is completely in the service of the God whom he reveals and attests, but he thereby establishes a new conception of monotheism: Christological monotheism.

The question of monotheism immediately arises because—to the horror of the Old Testament–Jewish tradition—the Johannine Jesus claims a special relationship with the Divinity. This theme of the divinity of Jesus (1:1–2; 20:28; cf. also 5:17–30) and that of his unity with the Father (10:30, 38; 14:10–11:20; 17:21, 23) must, at the risk of being misunderstood, be placed under the Christology of the envoy. From John's standpoint, Jesus is 'God' to the extent that he fully and finally represents his Father among human beings. But as shown by the signs he performs and the words he speaks, he does so in perfect obedience to the one who sent him since 'the Father is greater than I' (14:28). In other words, the Johannine Jesus is the 'face' of God in the world.

His claim, however, arouses an intense debate about the right understanding of monotheism. In the discourse on the bread of life in chapter 6 or in the great controversy of chapters 7–8, the Johannine Jesus announces that the decisive revelation of the reality of God is no longer to be found in a prestigious past—whether that be the one related to Moses and the giving of the law, or the one attached to the election Abraham. The centre of salvation history has shifted: it is now identified with the Christological revelation.

Scripture is not called into question, but it must be rightly understood, i.e. as a testimony leading to the discovery of Christ (cf. 5:46–47). The Gospel of John thus proposes a fundamental reinterpretation of monotheism: the reader is invited to move from an Old Testament–Jewish monotheism to a Christological monotheism.

Suggested Reading

p. 345 The work of Becker (2004) gives an overview of the history of Johannine Christianity and its theology. Pursuing the same goal, but from a different point of view, Schnelle (2007) explores ↪ the different aspects of Johannine theology. Frey (2013) investigates the recent research involving the classic topics of Johannine literature (history of tradition, history of religions background, the history of the Johannine community, language, theology). In his foundational work, Culpepper (1983) proposes a new approach of the Johannine literature (narrative analysis). Leaving the field of a classic theological approach, Theissen (2000) elaborates a new paradigm giving a history of religions description of the Johannine movement and its literary production. For works on the death of Jesus in John, see Forestell 1974, de Boer 1996, Koester 2003, and Van Belle 2007.

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Notes

- 1 Justification of the interpretation of various passages in this essay may be found in my commentary on the Fourth Gospel (Zumstein 2016).
- 2 See Chapter 21, Catrin H. Williams, 'Faith, Eternal Life, and the Spirit in the Gospel of John'.
- 3 See Chapter 19, Udo Schnelle, 'The Person of Jesus in the Gospel of John'.
- 4 The paratext may be defined as 'the sum of various signs that introduce, frame, present, interrupt or conclude an existing text. ... The paratext generally carries out the functions of accompanying or framing another text' (Hallyn and Jacques 1987: 202). Cf. also Zumstein, 2008.
- 5 John 21:25 constitutes the second conclusion to the Gospel, but it is part of chapter 21, an epilogue which is a later addition.
- 6 '[Eternal] life' (*zōē aiōnios*; 33 instances) is the Johannine equivalent of the concept of salvation.
- 7 Two verbs of sending in Christological contexts are to be indicated: *pempō* (23 x: 4:34; 5:23f., 30, 37; 6:38, 39, 44; 7:16, 18, 33; 8:16, 18, 26; 9:4; 12:44f., 49; 13:16, 20; 14:24; 15:21; 16:5) and *apostellō* (15 x: 3:34; 5:36, 38; 6:29, 57; 7:29; 8:42; 10:36; 11:42; 17:8, 18, 21, 23, 25; 20:21).
- 8 One will note in this regard the inclusion that frames the account and highlights the divinity of Jesus: In 1:1–2, the unique proximity of Jesus with God comes to expression through the affirmation of his pre-existence, while in 20:28, the final confession of Thomas ('my Lord and my God') explicitly recognizes in the person of Jesus the visible presence of God.
- 9 See the sending formulas: a) 'the Father sent me' as the object of faith (5:36; 11:42; 17:8, 21, 23, 25); and b) Jesus as sent by the Father (3:16; 5:23, 24, 30, 37; 6:29, 38, 39, 44, 57; 7:16, 18, 28, 29, 33; 8:16, 18, 26, 29, 42; 10:36; 12:44, 45, 49; 13:16, 30; 14:24; 15:21; 16:5; 17:3, 8, 18, 21, 23, 25; 20:21). Detailed analysis may be found in Becker 2004: 126–79.
- 10 Cf. Bühner 1977, which analyses in detail the representation of the sent one in the ancient Near East.
- 11 The message of the Johannine Jesus is characterized by a fundamental asymmetry: the announcement of salvation constantly takes precedence over that of judgment.
- 12 See Chapter 18, Ruben Zimmermann, 'Eschatology and Time in the Gospel of John'.
- 13 See Chapter 17, Jörg Frey, 'Dualism and the World in the Gospel and Letters of John'.
- 14 In addition to the seven miracles narrated, there are references to further thaumaturgical activity by Jesus (2:23; 4:45; 12:37).
- 15 The Johannine farewell discourses consist of three sections: (1) 13.31–14.31—first farewell discourse; (2) chs. 15–16—second farewell discourse; (3) ch. 17—farewell prayer.
- 16 'Prolepsis is a narrative maneuver which consists in anticipating or relating in advance an event which is later from the point of the view of the story' (Marguerat and Bourquin 1999: 176).