

Reading John's Story of Jesus within Judaism

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John's Gospel is 'deeply embedded in the thought world of the Judaism of its day' (Thatcher 2017: 6).

- Use of the Jewish Scriptures
- Jewish symbols and imagery
- Characters and events from Israel's past
- Jewish feasts and festivals
- Jewish methods of interpretation

The Jewishness of the Johannine Jesus

1. Identity and significance expressed through various (christological) titles and designations
2. Composite scriptural allusions
3. Jesus' self-declarations
4. The 'testimony' of the Jewish Scriptures
5. Who can see God? The issue of revelation

John's Double Introduction

Introduction 1 (John 1:1-18)

'In the beginning (*en archē*) was the Word (*logos*)'.

Cf. Genesis 1:1 LXX: 'In the beginning (*en archē*) God created...'

Proverbs 8:30: 'Then I [Wisdom] was beside him, like a master worker'.

Wisdom of Solomon 9:1-2 'O God of my ancestors and Lord of mercy, who has made all things by your *word*, and by your *wisdom* have formed humankind..'

Logos as the agent of God's creative activity (see Philo, *On the Cherubim* 127: 'Let us contemplate the universe.... Its cause is God, its instrument the word of God').

Ps. 107:20: 'He sent out his word and healed them and saved them from destruction'.

John's Double Introduction

Introduction 2 (John 1:19-51)

‘I am not the Messiah... Elijah... the Prophet’ (1:20-21; cf. 3:28) – three separate Jewish expectations?

‘We have found the Messiah’ (1:41: *messias*, translated as *christos*; cf. 4:25).

‘We have found him about whom Moses in the law and the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth’ (1:45).

‘You are the Son of God the King of Israel’ (1:49).

‘Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God descending and ascending on the Son of Man’ (1:51).

Jesus as Rabbi

Jewish Usage

Jewish expression of respect ('my master').

Authoritative status for learning and instruction (especially the instruction of the Torah).

Not a prominent title in first-century Jewish writings (e.g., absent from the writings of Josephus and Philo).

New Testament Usage

Expression of respect (Mark 9:5; 10:51) and some examples of it as a designation for a teacher (Matt. 23:6-7).

Extensive use in John's Gospel – *rabbi* and *rabbouni* – teacher.

1:38: 'They said to him, "Rabbi" (which translated means Teacher)'.

20:15-16: 'Sir' (*kurios*) ...Rabbouni (which means Teacher)' (cf. also 1:49; 4:31; 9:2; 11:8).

Glimpses into Jewish practice in the first century CE?

Jesus as Prophet

‘Sir, I see that you are a **prophet**’ (John 4:19).

‘Jesus himself had testified that a **prophet** is without honor in his own country’ (4:44).

‘This is truly **the prophet** who is to come into the world’ (6:14). When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force and make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself’ (6:15).

‘This is truly **the prophet**’ (7:40).

‘He is a **prophet**’ (9:17).

A ‘prophet’ or ‘the Prophet’?

Prophet like Moses: eschatological expectations

Deut. 18:15-19: ‘The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet.... “I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command. Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable”’.

Implicit evocations of Elijah and Elisha: e.g., healing miracles (2 Kings 5:1-28) and feeding miracles (4:42-44).

Popular prophetic figures: see Josephus’s descriptions of Theudas and ‘the Egyptian’ (*Antiquities* 20:97-98; 20:168-70).

Composite Scriptural References

‘Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world’ (1:29; cf. 1:36).

- Daily offerings of the *tamid* sacrifice in the temple (Exod. 29:38-41; Num. 28:3-10).

Passover lamb whose blood is smeared on the doorpost (Exod. 12) – blood is a *sign* that will be seen by God (12:23): Hebrew word is *śeh*.

Servant of the Lord – ‘like a lamb before its shearer’ (Isa. 53:7) – who bears the sin(s) of many (53:12). Hebrew word is again *śeh*.

Catchword associations and fusions based on shared language in two or more ‘distant’ texts.

The presence of identical or similar words (Hebrew or Greek) in a separate but analogous context.

Prominent in the writings of Philo, the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Greek Bible (Septuagint).

Rabbinic use of the technique known as *gezerah shawah*.

Jesus' Self-Declarations (1)

Metaphorical 'I Am' (*egō eimi*) Sayings

'I am the bread of life' (6:35, 48; cf. 6:41, 51).

'I am the light of the world' (8:12; 9:5).

'I am the good shepherd' (10:11).

'I am the true vine' (15:1, 5).

Linked to conditional statements highlighting the importance of following Jesus.

Rooted in Jewish Scriptural Promises of Divine Salvation

Images of Israel as a flock (Pss. 77:20; 78:52) and a vine (Ps. 80:8; Jer. 2:21; Ezek. 17:6-8; cf. Isa. 5:1-7).

Servant of the Lord as a 'light to the nations' who opens the eyes of the blind (Isa. 42:6-7; 49:6; 51:4).

Wisdom invites people to eat her bread (Prov. 9:5) and to eat and drink of the fruits of her vine (Ben Sira 24:17-18) so that they will hunger for more and thirst again (24:21).

Shepherd imagery to denote the successor of Moses (Num. 27:17), God (Ezek. 34:11-16; Mic. 2:12) and his 'servant David' (Ezek. 34:23).

Jesus' Self-Declarations (2)

Absolute 'I Am' Sayings – bipartite, without a predicate

'Do not fear; it is I (or I AM)' (John 6:20).

'I told you that you would die in your sins, for you will die in your sins unless you believe that I am he (*egō eimi*)' (8:24)

'When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he (*egō eimi*)' (8:28).

'Before Abraham was, I am (*egō eimi*)' (8:58).

Exod. 3:14 LXX: 'I am the one who is (*egō eimi ho ōn*)'... 'He who is' (*ho ōn*) has sent me to you'.

I AM - Greek: *egō eimi*, Hebrew: *anî hû'*

Deut. 32:39a: 'See now that I, I am he, and there is god apart from me'.

Isa. 41:4: 'I the Lord am the first and with the last I am He'.

Isa. 43:10: ' "You are my witnesses", says the Lord, and my servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am He'.

‘No one has ever seen God’

‘The law was given by Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, he has made him known’ (1:17-18).

‘And the Father who sent me has himself testified on my behalf. You have never heard his voice or seen his form’ (5:37; cf. Deut. 4:12, 15).

‘Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father’ (6:46).

‘You cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live’ (Exod. 33:20; cf. Judges 13:22; 1 Kings 19:11-13; Isa. 6:5).

Note many examples in Jewish tradition that Moses ascended to heaven to receive knowledge of the divine mysteries and to receive a direct vision of God (e.g., 2 *Baruch* 4:1-7; 4 *Ezra* 14:3-6).

Jewish debates on the impossibility of seeing God, especially in the Jewish apocalypses:

Rejection: *Apocalypse of Abraham* 19:4 emphasizes that God, the invisible glory, remains hidden from human view.

Reticence: *1 Enoch* 14 focuses on what surrounds the enthroned Great Glory (blazing fire) but adds that no angel can come and look at his face (14:21).

Restraint: 2 *Enoch* where the seer declares that he has seen the face of the Lord ‘like iron made burning hot by fire’ (22:1) and even gazed into his eyes, but that there is no way of communicating the indescribable face of God (22:2) and that to stand before the face of the divine King is dangerous (39:6).

Jesus as the Definitive Revelation of God

John 5:46: 'If you believed Moses you would believe me, for he wrote about me'.

John 8:56: 'Your ancestor Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day; he saw it and was glad'.

John 12:41: 'Isaiah said these things [Isa. 53:1; 6:10] because he saw his glory and spoke about him'.

Abraham's Rejoicing at the blessings promised by God (cf. *Jubilees* 14:21; *Apocalypse of Abraham* 10:15) and at the gift of a son (*Jubilees* 15:17; 17:12) and the promise of a holy seed (16:17-19; 17:25-27).

Abraham Sees visions of the future and of the end times (IV Ezra 3:14: To Abraham only you revealed the end of the times, secretly by night'); he sees 'what will be, and everything that will be in the last days' (*Apoc. Abraham* 24:2).

Isaiah the visionary prophet as the subject of debate in Jewish tradition: does he see (Isa. 6:1-10) what Moses was unable to see?

Fulfilment/Completion of 'Scripture'

Two key hermeneutical principles in John's Gospel:

- Israel's Scriptures provide the backdrop or 'screen' for the telling of the gospel narrative.
- Jesus is understood to be the interpretative key to those Scriptures.

'After this, when Jesus knew that all was now *completed*, he said (in order to *complete* the scripture), "I am thirsty". .. When Jesus had received the wine, he said, 'It is finished/*complete*'. Then he bowed his head and gave up the spirit' (John 19:28-30).

Scripture now reaches its goal, and John's Gospel sets itself up as belonging to the category of new and *written* 'Scripture' (though not as a replacement of the Jewish Scriptures).

John's plan: 'The words of God' recorded in Israel's Scriptures find their key and fulfilment in Jesus as the Word made flesh.

John Within Judaism?

‘John is both Jewish and anti-Jewish’ (C.K. Barrett 1975: 71)

‘John seems to associate himself closely with Judaism as a faith system while distancing himself from its practitioners’ (Thatcher 2017: 11).

Jewish = traditions and ways of thought?

anti-Jewish = nation/religion?

John’s use of the designation ‘the Jews’ (*hoi Ioudaioi*). Negative statements – distancing of Jesus and his disciples from ‘the Jews’.

Jesus’ own opponents > adversaries of members of the Johannine community.

Jesus believers expelled from the synagogue because of their belief in Jesus (cf. 9:22; 12:42 – see J.L. Martyn, R.E. Brown).

Johannine believers voluntarily left the synagogue and rhetorically speaks negatively of ‘the Jews’ to avoid those of Jewish descent returning to the synagogue (A. Reinhartz, R. Hakola).

John Within Judaism?

Rejection of Jewish identity?

Extra muros

Parting of the ways (in the past) to form two separate groups: Jews and Christians.

Emphasis on Jewishness (only) due to recognition of Jesus' Jewish context?

Various aspects of Jewishness viewed exclusively in light of faith in Jesus.

Is John 'depriving' Judaism of its sacred space (Jesus is the true temple) and 'emptying' it of its feasts and festivals (Jesus is the light of the world, the living water).

Has John's Gospel been written for a community that is increasingly becoming Gentile (and adopting a Gentile identity)?

Redefinition of Jewish Identity?

Intra muros

Complex use and interpretation of the term *Ioudaioi*. Closed or open invitation to belief?

Reimagination of Jewishness rooted within what is regarded as the 'true' interpretation of Jewish scripture and tradition.

Polemic often regarded as typical of intra-Jewish rhetoric (e.g. references frequently made to prophetic traditions).

Different from the clearer distancing between Christianity and Judaism in the second century CE (e.g., Epistle of Barnabas, Melito's *Peri Pascha*).

Blurring of Boundaries

Within Judaism or outside Judaism? - Too clear-cut and decisive a distinction to capture a fluid and complex historical process and social reality.

Not two opposites but a continuum between two poles.

Moving towards separation but one that has not yet been completed.

Blurring of Boundaries

John as a Christian Text? John as a Jewish Text?

- John's christology interpreted within Jewish messianic expectations.
- What is Jewish – preservation or (re)interpretation of the past?
- What is Johannine – reflection or correction of Jewish belief?

What would happen if we read John's Christology as if it was part and parcel of the Jewish Messianism of its day... but to push even further... what then do we do with such a perspective?' (Reynolds 2018: 28).

Resources Noted in the Presentation

Tom Thatcher, 'John and the Jews: Recent Research and Future Questions', in R. Alan Culpepper and Paul N. Anderson (eds), *John and Judaism: A Contested Relationship in Context* (Atlanta: SBL, 2017), 3-38.

Benjamin E. Reynolds, 'The Gospel of John's Christology as Evidence for Early Jewish Messianic Expectations: Challenges and Possibilities', in Benjamin E Reynolds and Gabriele Boccaccini (eds), *Reading the Gospel of John's Christology as Jewish Messianism: Royal, Prophetic, and Divine Messiahs* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 13-42.

