

John's Theocentric Christology

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Abstract

This article is a brief survey of the dominant conceptualisation in the Gospel of John. Most readers of the New Testament recognise that the Gospel of John varies considerably from the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke). There are many ways of explaining these differences. This study offers a theological paradigm, John's theocentric Christology. To John, Jesus was God and every statement and story carries this theological imprint.

Introduction

The Gospel of John stands out for its startling difference from the Synoptics. The differences come in the form of language and history. Chronologically, John dates somewhere between 30-50 years after the Synoptics. Even the most casual reading of the Gospel reveals fundamental differences of narrative, sermon, and episodic data. Yet it becomes fairly evident that the primary difference between John and the Synoptics is the conceptualisation of Jesus Christ that is employed in the Gospel.

Who is the Jesus of John? How does John portray this Jesus? Does this portrayal account for the principal difference between John and the Synoptics? This paper explores the principal theological construct of the Gospel in as much as this pertains to Jesus. We will conduct a comprehensive investigation of the textual data and attempt to draw some understanding from the way John treats this vital subject.

The Prologue of the Gospel (1:1-17)

Whoever opens the Gospel of John is struck by the force of his first statement: 'In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God' (John 1:1)

Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος, καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν, καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος.

Regardless of our theological persuasions, we hear in these words an inescapable echo of the first words of the Hebrew Bible (the very first words of Scripture): 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth' (Gen 1:1)

בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ:

The unmistakable intent of the Gospel is clearly to identify Jesus as God (Barker & Kohlenberger, 1994, 294). The Word (Christ) of John is presented, in no uncertain terms, as the God of creation. This Word who 'became flesh and lived among' humans (1:14) is the God who blew the world into existence at the beginning of time. The issue is intensified in vs 3 when John emphatically states that 'through him all things were made' (see also vs 10). Arguably, this sets the stage for John's presentation; his opus on the life and work of Jesus Christ (Johnston, 2006, 197). John's 'purpose statement' is evidently designed to 'encourage the conviction that Jesus' is 'the Son of God' (Thielman, 2005, 150 & 154).

Having set the stage for his Christology, John assembles an impressive array of evidence to support this basic claim. The rest of the Gospel is carefully constructed with one narrative intention, to demonstrate that Jesus Christ, the Word, is God, the creator God. To achieve this goal, John uses materials about and from the life of Jesus with utmost selectivity. It is to this narrative intentionality that we need to turn our attention.

The Miracles of the Gospel

While we read of about 35 miracles in the Synoptics, there are only seven miracles recorded in John. The Gospel treats these miracles as the seven 'signs' whose chief purpose appears to be the desire to

highlight the creative (thus, divine) power of Jesus (Thielman, 168). Each miracle is carefully designed to demonstrate this underpinning truth that Jesus is the creator God. The generalisations that sometimes accompany miracle accounts in the Synoptics do not appear in John. This is a writer who is driven by one purpose.

Every miracle recorded in John is crafted to demonstrate a particular aspect of divine creativity. Jesus is billed as the fulfilment of this profile. A detailed examination of each miracle reveals this intentionality of John.

- John 2: The first recorded miracle (and according to the Gospel this is also Jesus' first ever miracle) involves the changing of water into wine at the wedding feast in Cana. This is a much loved story among Christians and, to this day, the townspeople of Cana make a good living selling wine to tourists who visit the town. A closer reading of the story uncovers certain inescapable facts. From a scientific perspective, to change water into wine requires the changing of the molecular structure of a substance. The molecular structure of water is H_2O . However, wine (whether fermented or not) contains Carbon in addition to Hydrogen and Oxygen atoms. Fermented wine contains ethanol a 'basic psychoactive constituent in alcoholic beverages' (Wikipedia). Its molecular formula is C_2H_5OH . Fresh grape juice contains sucrose, a sugar whose molecular formula is $C_{12}H_{22}O_{11}$. What all of this means is that creative power is required to alter the molecular structure of a substance.
- Chapter 4: The second 'sign' of Jesus involves the healing the official's son from Capernaum. The text clearly reveals that the precise timing of the healing coincided with the power of Jesus' word. This is reminiscent of the creation account of Gen 1 where the word of God was the primary cause of creation. 'And God said . . .' and 'there was . . .' While the first miracle demonstrated the awesome power of the Creator to alter the molecular structure of a substance, the second miracle highlights the power of this Creator through word.
- Chapter 5: Jesus' third miracle is healing the cripple at Bethesda. In this story, the power of healing is coupled with the capability to forgive, a divine prerogative (vs 14). His Jewish audience understood that by doing this Jesus was making himself equal with God (vs 18). Even without this, the miracle itself is rather astounding. The man had been an invalid for 38 years. Such a prolonged paralysis meant that most of his muscles had completely atrophied. For the man to stand up and walk required as total a rebuilding job as the completeness of his illness. In this episode we notice the power of the creative, regenerative creation, and divine prerogative all brought to bear in the telling of the story.
- Chapter 6: In the next miracle of Jesus we learn of the extraordinary event where a crowd of people that numbered in the thousands are fed with the simple lunch of a little boy. This miracle is not simply a showpiece of the providence of God on display. More significantly, it is another demonstration that Jesus is God, for surely only the Creator could conjure up food for thousands from virtually nothing. The nature of this miracle boggles the mind. This food story resonates with the numerous food stories in the Bible. Man's first sin involved food and resulted from man's distrust of the creator (Gen 3); in the desert, the Israelites were provided with heavenly manna as food (Exod 16); the prophet Elijah was fed by divinely instructed ravens and then he and a mother and her son witnessed the ability of God to make food appear for an extended period from almost out of nothing (1 Kgs 17); and the first temptation of Jesus pertained to his divine ability to produce food out of nothing (Matt 4).
- Chapter 6: The fifth miracle of Jesus depicts Jesus walking on the water. Experience tells us that such an act does not fall into the realm of the normal. Modern science informs us that due to the lack of sufficient displacement, it is nor possible for a person to stay afloat upright on the surface of the water. Conversely, ships, because of their larger displacement factor are able to sail on the surface of the water. Two facts make this miracle so astonishing. First, Jesus did not walk on calm, tranquil water. John 6:8 tells us that there was a strong wind and the waves were rough. While the Gospel does not claim a storm, we can safely assume that it was stormy that night. Second, the distance from the shore to the boat (the distance Jesus apparently walked), was approximately 5 kilometres (John 6:19). It is one thing to walk on the water for a short distance; it is quite a different story to do it over such a long distance. It seems reasonable to assume that without the power of the Creator to

suspend the laws of nature, this miracle would have been impossible, perhaps even unimaginable.

- Chapter 9: The healing of a man who was born blind, is Jesus' penultimate miracle. The pertinent feature in this story is the fact that the religious establishment felt compelled to investigate the miracle (John 9:13-34). Whatever we conclude about this episode, we at least must acknowledge that it caused quite a stir in the community. Another intriguing feature of the miracle is the exchange between Jesus and all interested parties regarding the nature of the illness. The conventional wisdom of the people, including that of Jesus' disciples, is that the man's blindness is a result of sin. Jesus did not simply reverse the blindness; he overturned the theology by emphatically stating that 'this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.' The creative reversal of a lifelong condition, coupled with the divine prerogative to forgive sin, clearly establishes the theocentric nature of John's Christology.
- Chapter 11: All the preceding miracles may be viewed as curtain raisers for the final and most astounding miracle of all, the raising of Lazarus. In terms of narrative space, this is also the longest healing story. Every detail in the story highlights the deliberateness with which Jesus was directing this event. There are certain pertinent facts to reflect upon. First, John does not tell us exactly where Jesus was. Suggestions include the Transjordan (John 10: 40-42 seems to imply this) and possibly Galilee. Second, there is the faintest a hint that Jesus already knew that Lazarus was sick (the passage before this story hints at that possibility). Third, when the messenger from Bethany delivers his message, we are somewhat perplexed by the initial response (almost devoid of empathy) of Jesus (John 11:4). Next, is the puzzle of the time delay, almost coolly calculating (John 11:6-16). Jesus' intentional delay means that Lazarus had been buried for four days (John 11:17) when Jesus finally arrives in Bethany. Finally, we come face to face with the most incredible claim that Jesus makes in the Gospel. He says, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, will live even if he dies, and whoever lives and believes in me will never truly die' (lit., 'will never die forever'; John 11:25-26). This remarkable statement indicates that Jesus had changed the very definition of life and death. Only the Creator has the power to reverse death and therefore to create new life. So disturbed was the establishment by this miracle, that they summoned an emergency meeting of the Sanhedrin intent on the death of Jesus. As C S Lewis once suggested, Jesus is either a lunatic or he really is God.

The 'I Am' (ἐγώ εἰμι) statements in the Gospel

The 'I AM' statements that Jesus uttered on a metronomic basis throughout the Gospel are clear allusions to Exod 3:14, the ultimate self-designation of Yahweh himself. It is helpful briefly to examine each of these statements.

- John 4:26 and 13:19: Jesus states, 'I am ... HE' (that is, the Messiah). In these verses, Jesus is announcing his mission and the allusion to the Exodus text is intended to underscore the point that the Messiah is a divine personage.
- John 6:35 and 48: This statement is made in conjunction with a miracle. 'I am the bread of life,' says Jesus. Two things are juxtaposed in the claim, the Exodus 'I AM' text and the 'bread' imagery found in several stories in the Bible (manna in the desert, Christ's temptation, etc.). Humanity's most basic need is aligned with a divine claim. At his temptation, Jesus had pronounced that 'man shall not live on *bread* alone but by every *word* that comes out of the mouth of God' (Matt 4:4). In John, this fact is stressed further in the accompanying statement, 'I am the bread that came down from heaven' (6:41, 51). John presents Jesus as both the 'Word of God' and the 'bread of life.' Christ's claim of divinity via this compound idea is difficult to ignore.
- John 7:29: At a Feast of Tabernacles, Jesus is challenged by his critics concerning the authority of his teachings (7:14ff.) and the accusations engender a debate about his origins. Immediately preceding vs 29, some are saying that Jesus could not be the Christ because his origin is known. Jesus responds to this by asserting, 'I am from him' (that is, God). He also states that this meant that he knows God in a way no one else could. The severity of the reactions in the crowd that day (see vs 30-32)

underscores the fact that his listeners read more into his statement (which appears innocuous to us) than modern readers would. They knew he was claiming divinity for himself.

- John 8:12 and 9:5: Twice in John's Gospel Jesus makes the claim, 'I am the light of the world.' This claim does not appear in the Synoptics. However, there is a very different statement in Matt 5:14-16. There, Jesus says that his disciples are the light of the world. Clearly in John there is another agenda at work. 'I am the light of the world' either alludes to or resonates with certain Old Testament texts. Ps 27:1 reads, 'The Lord (Yahweh) is my light and my salvation . . .' Here God is light and light is a metaphor for God. Isa 60:1 says, 'Arise, shine, for *has come your light* and **the Lord's (Yahweh) glory upon you has risen.**' This literal translation highlights the chiasmic parallelism in the verse making 'your light' equivalent to 'the Lord's glory.' The verse employs light as a metaphor for divinity. Isa 60:20 succinctly states, 'The Lord (Yahweh) shall be your eternal light.' In these verses it is Yahweh who is light and light is a metaphor for God. By employing this same metaphor and having Jesus so state, John's Gospel is ascribing divinity to Jesus.
- John 8:18: In his discourse about light in chapter 8, Jesus intertwines this thought with another discourse, about the validity of his self witness (John 8:14-18). He concludes this second discourse with an emphatic assertion, 'I am one who testifies *for myself.*' He makes this claim with the certainty of knowing that he is God. C S Lewis' observation seems truly apropos here.
- John 8:23: Also in the same chapter Jesus pointedly says, 'I am from above . . . I am not of this world.' To his Jewish audience, this is another claim of divinity.
- John 8:28: Once again Jesus asserts his claim to divinity by saying, 'I am the one I claim to be.' The self perception of this statement is difficult to argue against.
- John 8:58: Jesus punctuates his lengthy discourse about his godhood in chapter 8 with the words 'before Abraham was, *I AM!*' Here we meet a clear allusion to Exod 3:14 where Yahweh identifies himself to Moses as 'I am who I am.' He tells Moses to inform the Israelites that 'I AM has sent you to them.' John 8:59 tells us that the Jews picked up stones to stone Jesus. This was the fit punishment for the blasphemy of claiming equality with God; such an unmistakable claim was not missed by his listeners.
- There are several other 'I am' statements that also emphasise the divinity of Jesus. In John 10:7 and 9 Jesus says, 'I am the gate for the sheep' and 'I am the gate.' In John 10:11, 14 he says, 'I am the good shepherd' (a text that alludes to Eze 34). In John 10:36 he says, 'I am God's son.' In John 11:25 Jesus states, 'I am the resurrection and the life'; only God could really have made such a claim. In John 13:13-14 Jesus says, 'I am . . . Lord.' While in John 14:6 he states, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life' and follows this up by asserting that he is the only way a person may come to God.
- John 14:10-11: This is the final piece in the sequence of 'I AM' statements that we encounter in the Gospel. Here Jesus says, 'I am in the Father and the Father is in me.' In this discourse, Jesus poses a challenge to his disciples; they must accept his divinity. To do so would enable the disciples to access 'him' who is the way (see John 14:6-7) while also preparing them to receive the coming *parakletos* (see John 14:15ff.). This is the climax of the 'I AM' statements because this verse is more than an assertion of divinity. What we see here is the call to submit to his godhood. John's Gospel does not merely suggest that Jesus is God; it compels its readers to accept and submit to the claim.

The Passion and Post-resurrection Narratives of the Gospel (John 18-21)

John's Gospel differs from the Synoptics in a number of ways. Bruce Milne has summarised these differences into five areas: (1) materials unique to the Synoptics; (2) materials unique to John; (3) the difference in presentation style (the Synoptics are more anecdotal whereas John is more theological); (4) differences in historical and chronological details; and (5) the disciples' response to Jesus (1993, 19-23). Along a similar vein, John's Passion Narrative also differs from that of the Synoptics in a number of different ways. Here we will examine the most distinctive element of John's Passion and Post-resurrection Narrative: the use of the number 3.

- John 18: John records three trials of Jesus, before Annas (18:13), Caiaphas (18:24), and Pilate (18:28-29). John makes no mention of the Sanhedrin as Matthew and Mark do (see Matt 26 and Mark 14) or of the trial before Herod as Luke does (Luke 22).
- John 18: The same chapter also tells us about the three times that Peter denied knowing Jesus. This fact is corroborated by the Synoptics (see Matt 26; Mark 14; and Luke 22).
- John 18:38; 19:4, 12: Three times in the Passion Narrative Jesus' innocence is declared. Three times Pilate attempts to free Jesus and states definitively that Jesus was not guilty of any crime. In Matthew (chapter 27) Pilate's wife declares Jesus innocent but, Pilate declares himself innocent of Jesus' blood. Mark is silent on this, while Luke has Pilate declare Jesus' innocence once (Luke 23:4).
- John 19:12, 15: The name of Caesar is invoked three times in the story. Amazingly, it was the Jewish leaders and the mob that claimed Caesar as their king. In the parallel accounts of Matthew and Mark the name of Caesar does not appear, while in Luke's account, Caesar is mentioned twice (Luke 23:2).
- John 19:18: We discover that three persons were crucified together that fateful Friday, Jesus and two others (John 19:18). (see also Matt 27:38; Mark 15:27; and Luke 23:32).
- John 19:19-20: John tells us that when Pilate ordered that a placard be placed on the cross of Jesus which read 'Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews,' he had it penned in three languages, Aramaic, Latin, and Greek. The Synoptics tell us about the placard but do not say what language it was written in (see Matt 27:37; Mark 15:26; and Luke 23:38).
- John 19:24, 36, and 37: During the crucifixion scene, three Old Testament texts are cited by John (Ps 22:18; 34:20 [also alluding to Exod 12:46 and Num 9:12]; and Zech 12:10), whereas the Synoptics cite only one Old Testament text each (see Matt 22:46; Mark 15:34; and Luke 23:30).
- John 19: 26-27, 28, and 30: While on the cross, Jesus speaks three times: to Mary and John (19:26-27), to express his thirst (19:28), and to announce the completion of the cross-event (19:29). In Matthew (27:46) and Mark (15:34) Jesus speaks only once. In Luke, he speaks four times: to the mourners (Luke 23:28-30), to God (Luke 23:34), to the thief hanging beside him (Luke 23:43), and a second time to God (Luke 23:46).
- John 21:15ff: In the final conversation with Peter, Jesus asks him three questions about his love. In the same conversation, Jesus commissions Peter three times with the phrase 'Feed my sheep.' This episode does not appear in any of the Synoptics.

Clearly, John sees the threefold repetition of things as significant to his conceptualisation of Jesus. The number three, and its repetitive usage, leads us to infer that this is John's number for the person of God (as seems also to be the case with Revelation). It serves as the identifier of the divinity of Jesus.

Last Thoughts

John's principal theological idea is this, that Jesus is God, the creator God. Jesus is the 'perfect revelation of God' (Thielman, 180). He promotes this idea via the prologue to his Gospel, the miracles recorded in its pages, the 'I AM' statements that Jesus proclaims, and the threefold usage embedded in the Passion and Post-resurrection Narratives of the book. This is John's supreme encapsulation of the nature and ministry of Jesus. To put it another way, John's Jesus was simply 'God on foot.' John's Christology is completely theocentric, with all the awesomeness and mystery that that implies. Milne put this most aptly when he says

The mystery of Jesus Christ is the theme of this gospel; always beyond us, yet always summoning us to explore it more fully. The exploration and service of the Godhead will be our endless, though blissful, task in the world to come; but we can begin it now, and there can be no better place to launch out into the depths of it than to study, and expound, this great gospel by John (1993, 27).

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