

Excursus: Stories of Jesus in John

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The pervading themes running through the four literary compositions of Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John are of a Christological nature. Messianic themes or motifs are found in the Gospels in the names or titles ascribed to Jesus in his sayings, his stories or parables, his discourses and debates, in the reactions of the people to him, in his miraculous deeds, and in the narrative comments of the authors of these compositions. The themes of greatest significance in the Gospels are those having to do with the messianic identity of Jesus of Nazareth. This is the primary emphasis of the stories found in this composition. This is demonstrated in the following excursus on the stories of Jesus in John.

The Gospels found in the New Testament Scriptures are titled under the names of their historical authors: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. These writings are the collected messianic stories concerning Jesus of Nazareth as told, proclaimed, and taught by those recognized as apostles of Christ. The messianic stories of Mark are believed to have the apostle Peter as their source. Those of Luke are believed to have the apostle Paul as their source, and Matthew and John's collections have themselves and Mark's Gospel as their source. It is a reasonable assumption that a large body of oral and written tradition was available to all these writers. These Gospels have been preserved through the centuries by Christians as treasures of messianic stories of the one they believe to be the Messiah/Christ, Jesus of Nazareth.

The Gospel According to John

The Gospel of John is the last the canonical Gospels to have been written. It's author is believed to be John, the brother of James, one of the two sons of Zebedee, who was selected by Jesus to be one of the twelve disciples, and later an apostle of Christ. With the synoptic gospels there is a similarity in the story collection, with John only 10% of his material is found in the other Gospels. It is obvious that John selected his stories from a different source and for a different purpose than Mark, Matthew, and Luke.

In fact, John says in John 21:25, "Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written." It is obvious from these words that John selected his stories from a large body of oral tradition concerning Jesus of Nazareth. But he selected what he did with a specific purpose in mind, as is reflected in 20:30-31, "Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."

John and the Synoptic Gospels

Is he implying here that only his Gospel will bring eternal life to the believer? Not at all! However, it doesn't appear that John was knowledgeable of the synoptic Gospels. None of John's material appears verbatim in the synoptic Gospels as the material of Mark appears in work of Matthew and Luke. John appears to have been a lone reed blowing with the wind of his own agenda. Of all the material available to John, it appears that he chose the material that best addressed the needs of the church with which he was identified. It is also probable that one or more of the letters of John were written before the fourth Gospel. From his letters it is clear that a Christological heresy had disrupted the community of churches to whom he was writing. The Christology of John evidences a continuation of the same kind of problem as to the identity of Jesus.

John's gives the most explicit presentation of Jesus as a visitation of God; there were several heretical groups, however, who held position far different that of the synoptic Gospels. In some heresies Jesus was not God and in others he was not human. For someone presenting a story of Jesus not true to the Jesus known and represented by the apostles of Christ, a presentation of stories giving a true depiction of the identity of Jesus of Nazareth.

The Jesus of John's Story

This is the traditional view of why John's Gospel is so different from the synoptic Gospels. John's presentation of Jesus is focused on his divinity. The Jesus presented by the synoptic Gospels was a historical figure who many believe to be a Galilean rabbi, to others a prophet, and to some he was the Messiah; but there is always suspicion that he was someone else, someone more. Mark has a Messianic secret theme running through his Gospel. Jesus actually forbids others from revealing who he was. Matthew presents Jesus as the fulfillment of the Messianic expectation of Israel, the Son of David, the prophet like unto Moses as Moses prophesied in Deut 18:15-18. Matthew concludes his Gospel with a Roman centurion confessing Jesus as the Son of God. Luke also presents Jesus as a teacher, a prophet of God, and the Messiah. But he also reveals that his birth, his baptism, and the transfiguration suggested that he was more, but in his resurrection Jesus explicitly reveals himself to be the Messiah. John, however, opens his Gospel with a declaration of Jesus' preexistence and his oneness with God and throughout his composition presents Jesus as one who was truly human and at the same time, he was God in our midst.

What makes the synoptic Gospel so different from John is their Christological presentation. They were presenting to their first century readers what the people among whom Jesus walked experienced. It did not dawn on the people of Galilee and Judea who this man was. He was first seen as a prophet. Then others began to suspect that he was the promised Messiah. The people wanted to see him as the Son of David, the one coming to restore the Davidic kingdom to Israel as modeled by David in 2 Sam 5-10 and as

promised in 2 Sam 7. Jesus' major theme in his teaching was that the kingdom of God was coming, but it was not to be a military regime.

What Jesus was heralding was the coming of the rule or reign (*basileia* - reign/rule/kingdom) of a loving God, a rule of God as a moral force that would overthrow the rule of Satan and his reign of sin in the lives of men. A developmental Christology from Galilean rabbi to Son of God is present in all three of the Synoptic Gospels. John's Gospel, however, appears to have urgency to it. John does not have time for a presentation of stories showing the development or unfolding of the true identity of Jesus.

The Gnostic Problem

Something is going on in the community to whom John is writing that warrants a bold and dynamic presentation of who this person Jesus of Nazareth really was. Two different historical scenarios make for good possibilities as to who was being addressed within this community. It could have been a Jewish Christian group such as the Ebionites. They taught that Jesus was not God but was a representative of God, as were the prophets of Israel, or in some cases the angels of God, who came to men as messengers of God. This is very likely the view held by the Judaizers, who became constant opponents of the apostle Paul.

Another possibility is the view of who Jesus was as found in the heresy of Gnosticism. There were several Gnostic (or proto-Gnostic) movements around in the late first century, which developed into major heresies in the second century. One such movement was that of Cerinthus, who was active in Asia Minor in the late first century. His view of Jesus was that he was the Son of God by adoption and was not the only begotten Son of God.

Another view, which had its origins in the late first century and became a very formidable movement in the second century, was the Gnostic heresy of Docetism. In their view, Jesus of Nazareth was a human being who was chosen by the divine Spirit or *Logos* to indwell Jesus from the time of his baptism until he left him on the cross.

When Jesus of Nazareth died on the cross, the human body of Jesus died, but the divine Spirit of Christ (the *Logos*), which had indwelt Jesus, exited his body and later returned to reveal himself to the disciples as the risen Lord. This Christological heresy insisted that Jesus of Nazareth only "seemed" (Greek *dokeo* - to seem, hence, "docetic") to be God but was, in reality, only a human being filled with the *Rauch Elohim* (Spirit of God), which exited him at his death. The body of Jesus was only a vehicle indwelt by the Spirit of God or *Logos*. That body of Jesus of Nazareth was not raised from death; rather, what everyone saw was a spiritual manifestation of Jesus, who was, in reality, the heavenly *Logos*. This interpretation of Jesus became one of the greatest heresies of the early church.

The stories chosen by John were all designed to reveal to his readers that the historical figure, Jesus of Nazareth, who walked throughout Galilee and Judea, and was at first believed by many to be the Messiah sent from God was indeed the presence of God himself. To John the Baptist, the early disciples, Nicodemus, the woman at the well, and the people of Samaria, Jesus was the expected Messiah. Jesus, however, revealed himself to a special group of twelve as the very presence of God in their midst (John 14:24). This explains why, following the prologue, only chapters 1-12 contain the kind of messianic stories that are found in the other Gospels. Chapters 13-17 is a collection of discourse material through which Jesus revealed to the chosen twelve who he really was. Chapters 18-19 contain the stories of his arrest, trial, and crucifixion, but 20-21 resume stories of how Jesus continued to reveal his identity to the twelve. This is very forcefully demonstrated in how John brings his Gospel to a thematic climax with the words of Thomas, "My Lord and My God" (John 20:28).

If this scenario of the setting and agenda for the writing of the Gospel of John is correct, this would place the Fourth Gospel in the last part of the first century (the 90s), with a location in Asia Minor where Cerinthus was active. It could, however, have been written in other locations within the Hellenistic world where Docetism appears to have been influential from the late first century through the next two centuries.

Names and Titles of Jesus in John

That Jesus was believed to be an historical figure known to the people of first century Palestine as Jesus of Nazareth is very evident in this Gospel. The personal and historical name "Jesus," and "Jesus of Nazareth" is found in 247 occurrences in the Gospel of John. This is a significantly greater number of occurrences than in the other Gospels. He is also called "that man," "a good man," "a mere man," "the man called Jesus," "the son of Joseph," and "a Jew," in another 15 occurrences. There can be little doubt that John wishes to establish the fact that the Jesus of his faith was a real historical figure, evidenced as a human being in the fullest sense of the word. Jesus of Nazareth was, in John's belief, "one of us."

Jesus is called "Lord" through this Gospel, some 38 times. He is clearly recognized as an authoritative figure and was greatly respect by those addressing him with this title. In a similar fashion, he is addressed as "Teacher" and "Rabbi" some 14 times, and is called "a Prophet" in 6 occurrences. The title "Christ" or "Messiah" is given to him in 17 occurrences, with a number of other titles associated with the Jewish Messianic expectation. He is called "the one who is to come," "the one sent," "the one of whom Moses and the Prophets wrote," and "the son of David" in some 16 occurrences. The title "king of Israel" is used of him 12 times in the Fourth Gospel. John wishes to show that many of the people of Galilee and Judea believe Jesus to be the expected Messiah spoken of in the Hebrew Scriptures and in the Jewish apocalyptic literature of the time (e.g., the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Jewish Pseudepigraphal writings, and the Jewish oral tradition, which later became the Rabbinic Traditions).

In John's use of Jesus' self-designation, "the Son of Man," the title in all of its 12 occurrences is used, not as a metaphor for a human being, but the human figure of Daniel 7, who came from above, who was to die in his confrontation with evil, and ascended back into the presence of God. This scenario can be seen in the following: John 1:51, 3:13, 5:27, 6:27, 53, 62, 8:28, 9:35, 12:23, 34, 34, and 13:31.

The most significant array of titles given to Jesus in this Gospel

are those which are clearly intended to portray him as one come from God. The titles "the Son" or "Son of God," are found 22 times, the title "only begotten son" is found 4 times. He is called "the one who comes from above" 7 times, and the "Holy One of God" in one occurrence. In the prologue of this Gospel, Jesus is identified as "the Word," "the Word who was with God," who was "the Word of God," was "in the beginning with God," who became flesh and dwelt among us. John concludes this prologue section with the words, "No one has ever seen God, the only begotten God, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known." (John 1:18). The Greek word John uses for "bosom" is *kolpos*, which means, "the breast or chest area," i.e., the place of the heart," Jesus came from the very heart of God.

The word translated, "made him known" in John 1:18 is *exegeomai* which means, "to reveal, explain, to make know, to tell, narrate or recount as in a story." It is also the word from which biblical scholars derive the word "exegesis," the technical term for biblical research. That Jesus came to show us the Father is something of a subtle theme running throughout this Gospel. This is very beautifully presented in John's account of Jesus' answer to Philip's question during the Last Supper. "Show us the Father," Philip asked; to which Jesus replied, "So long a time I've been with you, Philip, and you do not know me? The one having seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:8-9 author's translation-mwl).

Conclusion

This presentation of Jesus in John's Gospel is the result of the collection and development of messianic stories in existence at the time John wrote his Gospel. To approach this Gospel as theological treatises only sets the reader at a distance from them. To approach them as stories gives the reader an ease of access to them that is possible only by seeing them for what they are, stories.

Anyone can listen to a story; everyone enjoys hearing or reading a story. Most of us enjoy telling a story, whether a story about ourselves or someone else. We love hearing and telling funny stories

or jokes. The beauty of this is that most everyone knows what a story is and how to recognize a good story. It is just one step from this to see how easy it can be to analyze a story; or, perhaps, we should say, "take the story apart." That is what "story analysis" is all about.

The gospel is simply "God's story." The Gospel of John is simply a story of stories making up a "God story" - a story of God. The collection of articles under *Storytelling and Bible Study* will introduce the reader to a method of Bible study in which the book being studied is considered from the age-old art of storycraft. Then the reader can enter into the stories, make the story their story, then become themselves storytellers of the greatest and most wonderful story ever told.

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