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Reading the Gospel of John's Christology as Jewish Messianism:

An Introduction

Benjamin E. Reynolds

The authors of the essays in this volume read John's Gospel as an early Jewish text and consider what it might mean to understand John's Christology as a form of Jewish messianism. Rudolph Bultmann and C. H. Dodd are well-known for arguing that the background of the Gospel of John is essentially Hellenistic, whether that be gnostic or Mandaean influence.¹ With the publication of the first Dead Sea Scrolls, Johannine scholars such as C. K. Barrett and Raymond Brown noted the striking similarities between the thought of the Scrolls, particularly the Treatise on the Two Spirits in 1QS III–IV, and the Gospel of John.² Some of the early claims of possible dependence between the Fourth Gospel and the Dead Sea Scrolls are now seen as exaggerated, but because the Judaism evident in the Dead Sea Scrolls was clearly much closer to the Gospel than the Hellenistic material, making connections of this sort between the Qumran material and John was

¹ Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, trans. G. R. Beasley-Murray, R. W. N. Hoare, and J. K. Riches (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971); C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968).

² C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel of John and Judaism: The Franz Delitzsch Lectures, University of Münster, 1967*, trans. D. Moody Smith (London: SPCK, 1975), 12; Raymond E. Brown, "Qumran Scrolls and the Johannine Gospel and Epistles," *CBQ* 17, no. 3 (1955): 403–19; *idem*, "Qumran Scrolls and the Johannine Gospel and Epistles: Other Similarities," *CBQ* 17, no. 4 (1955): 559–74.

almost inevitable. Those initial claims have been tempered, but the relevance of early Judaism for understanding the Gospel of John should no longer require argument.³

However, even as John has been understood to be more “Jewish,” there has been a reticence among scholars to claim that the Fourth Gospel is entirely Jewish. Usually after a nod toward the Jewishness of John, many scholars argue that John’s Judaism is an adapted or corrected version of Judaism.⁴ This idea of John as Jewish and yet non-Jewish influences the way John’s Christology may be considered as a form of early Jewish messianism. Dodd states, “The positive and significant elements in the Johannine Christology find little or no point of attachment to Jewish messianic ideas.”⁵ Similarly, Marinus de Jonge—and numerous other scholars—contends that John has “corrected and supplemented” Jewish messianism with a Son of God Christology.⁶ More recently, Judith Lieu has likewise claimed that John redefines the Messiah as Son of God and that “the primary influences for this lie outside what may properly be called messianism...”⁷

³ Mary L. Coloe and Tom Thatcher, eds., *John, Qumran, and the Dead Sea Scrolls: Sixty Years of Discovery and Debate*, EJS 32 (Atlanta: SBL, 2011).

⁴ Barrett, *John and Judaism*, 63.

⁵ Dodd, *Interpretation*, 92.

⁶ Marinus de Jonge, “Jewish Expectations about the ‘Messiah’ According to the Fourth Gospel,” in *Jesus: Stranger from Heaven and Son of God: Jesus Christ and the Christians in Johannine Perspective*, trans. John E. Steely, SBLSPS (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1977), 92.

⁷ Judith M. Lieu, “Messiah and Resistance in the Gospel and Epistles of John,” in *Redemption and Resistance: The Messianic Hopes of Jews and Christians in Antiquity*, ed. Markus Bockmuehl and James Carleton Paget (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 97–108 (102); however, for an alternative understanding of

The reticence of many Johannine scholars to see John's Christology as Jewish messianism is often due to the "high Christology" of the Fourth Gospel. In other words, Jesus's oneness with the Father, his divine sonship, and heavenly origin are understood to be foreign to first-century Jewish messianic expectations. In other words, the Gospel of John may use early Jewish messianic terminology, but the Gospel has revised and adapted the Jewish expectations to the extent that John's Christology is no longer Jewish.

Recent scholarship in early Judaism challenges these assumptions.⁸ Almost twenty years ago, William Horbury argued for a Jewish origin for the "cult of Christ,"⁹ and more recently, Daniel Boyarin has boldly claimed that the Gospels are Jewish and that their "high Christology" is Jewish and not an early Christian development.¹⁰ In his book on Pauline Christology, Matthew Novenson has argued for the inclusion of early Christian "messiah texts" as part of Jewish messianism. He states,

Johannine Christology, one more at home with this volume, see William Loader, *Jesus in John's Gospel: Structure and Issues in Johannine Christology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017).

⁸ See the recent work of the Enoch Seminar on Paul as a Jewish author, Gabriele Boccaccini, Carlos A. Segovia, and Cameron J. Doody, eds., *Paul the Jew: Rereading the Apostle as a Figure of Second Temple Judaism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016).

⁹ William Horbury, *Jewish Messianism and the Cult of Christ* (London: SCM, 1998).

¹⁰ Daniel Boyarin, *The Jewish Gospels: The Story of the Jewish Christ* (New York: The New Press, 2012); *idem*, "Enoch, Ezra, and the Jewishness of 'High Christology,'" in *Fourth Ezra and Second Baruch: Reconstruction after the Fall*, ed. Matthias Henze and Gabriele Boccaccini, JSJSup 164 (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 337–61.

if every messiah text is a “creatively biblical” linguistic act, it follows, first, that all such texts should be taken into consideration as evidence of this interpretive practice and, second, that no messiah text has a claim to represent “the messianic idea” in its pristine form over against other messiah texts that do so less adequately. Rather, all messiah texts are on a par in this respect since every particular messiah text is just one instance of the use of certain scriptural linguistic resources.¹¹

If we follow this line of argument, the Gospel of John may be considered as a “messiah text” within the broad spectrum that is early Jewish messianism. But what happens when we come to terms with the reality that the Gospel of John was written about a Jewish individual, apparently by a Jewish author, in a specifically first-century Jewish context, with an awareness of Jewish customs and sensibilities? Clearly not all first-century Palestinian Jews were Jesus-followers, but those who first believed in Jesus were Second Temple Jews. If the Gospel reflects a Jewish sect that understood Jesus as the Messiah, how does the Johannine portrayal of Jesus fit within Jewish messianic expectations of the first century? Too often we have assumed that John’s Christology is not Jewish, and as a result, these questions are never addressed.

Contributors to this volume have been tasked with asking these questions and engaging the rich and varied Christology of the Fourth Gospel as a form of early Jewish messianism. Some contributors begin from the premise that John’s Jesus is a Jewish messiah. Others probe whether or not John’s portrayal of Jesus as Messiah fits with the picture of Jewish messianism depicted in

¹¹ Matthew V. Novenson, *Christ among the Messiahs: Christ Language in Paul and Messiah Language in Ancient Judaism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 62–63.

early Jewish literature, and others highlight the differences in John's Messiah with the various Jewish messiahs. The collection of essays indicates that the separation of the Gospel of John from the historical Jesus and its placement in the echo chamber of the "Johannine community" has unwittingly separated John's Jesus from Jewish messianic expectation. These essays challenge that separation by reading John's Christology as early Jewish messianism and are intended to begin a dialogue concerning the Jewishness of John's Messiah in the context of first-century Jewish messianic expectations.

This volume includes five sections, and the first "John's Jesus as a Jewish Messiah: Paths Taken and Not Taken" includes two essays, both of which serve as introductions to the scholarship and issues related to this topic. In the first essay, Benjamin Reynolds highlights some of the challenges faced in Johannine scholarship when reading John's Messiah as a Jewish messiah. He examines scholarship on early Jewish messianism for instances when the Gospel of John is mentioned and how it is used when it is mentioned. The second essay, by James McGrath, approaches the topic from the opposite direction and examines studies of Johannine Christology and their interaction with Second Temple Jewish literature. McGrath notes various perspectives involved in those discussions and contends that John's high Christology need not negate viewing it as Jewish messianism. Both essays reach similar conclusions about why viewing John's Christology as Jewish messianism has rarely been done and why it will continue to be a challenge, yet both suggest different paths that may be taken in future study.

The second section "John's Word and Jewish Messianic Interpretation" contains three essays, the first is by Adele Reinhartz on John's Word Christology and Jesus's speech in the Fourth Gospel. Reinhartz focuses on Jesus's speech and its connection to his signs. She argues that the Gospel is

not dependent on early Jewish literature for its messianism, but that the Gospel, like the early Jewish literature, begins with the Jewish Scriptures as its basis for messianism and eschatology.

Catrin Williams offers a close look at John's use of Isaianic texts in the depiction of Jesus as Messiah and notes the significant influence Isaiah, particularly LXX Isaiah, has had on John's Christology. She also draws attention to the way that John and the Parables of Enoch make similar use of Isaiah in the depiction of their messiahs.

Jocelyn McWhirter argues that the Fourth Evangelist's presentation of Jesus as Messiah involves Jewish exegetical techniques. She focuses on the Hebrew Bible citations in the Gospel of John that address Jesus's messiahship. McWhirter notes the manner in which the Gospel employs early Jewish exegetical techniques to show that Jesus is the Messiah.

The third section "John's Royal Messiah" also contains three essays. The first is by Beth Stovell who presents Davidic messianic metaphors within early Judaism and shows how they are interrelated. She then argues that John's Gospel makes use of similar messianic metaphors in portraying Jesus as the Davidic Messiah.

Marida Nicolaci also makes the case for a Davidic Messiah in John. She highlights the importance of divine kingship within early Judaism, particularly during the Jewish revolts. Nicolaci argues that John's "high Christology" is Jewish when considered in light of Second Temple messianic texts. She also draws attention to the way that God's kingship is revealed through and in Jesus, the divine Davidic king.

From another perspective, Willits also makes a case for the Davidic messiahship of the Johannine Jesus. He addresses the lack of explicit Davidic references in the Gospel of John and

draws attention to the way 1 and 2 Chronicles depicts David as acting like Moses. Willits contends that Jesus as the Davidic Messiah of John sublates, i.e., surpasses but includes, Moses.

In the fourth section “John’s Prophetic Messiah,” Meredith Warren explores the emphasis on Jesus’s signs and expectations in early Judaism concerning signs prophets. She argues that although not all messiahs in Second Temple literature are depicted as doing signs there was a prophetic Moses-like expectation in which signs played a part. Warren sees links in these expectations between messianic identity, signs, and resurrection and John’s Jesus.

Andrea Taschl-Erber shows how the living water imagery of the Gospel of John presents Jesus as the prophet like Moses, while also being indicative of eschatological hope and wisdom traditions. Jesus the Messiah is like Moses and linked with Wisdom, yet this latter connection allows for the Johannine association of Jesus with the *λόγος* and as one greater than Moses.

Paul Anderson?

The fifth section “John’s Messiah and Divinity” contains essays touching on questions of Jesus as a divine messiah. William Loader traces the Wisdom tradition in relation to Jewish messianism through the Parables of Enoch, Sirach, Baruch, and other texts. He argues that John’s portrayal shows similarity with the Wisdom traditions, but that the Johannine Jesus supersedes Moses and Torah.

In a provocatively entitled essay “How Jesus Became Uncreated,” Gabriele Boccaccini offers an insightful explanation about how a divine understanding of the Messiah might have arisen. He takes issue with Christological views that see angelic Christology, developing worship, and veneration of Jesus as the factors leading to Jesus being seen as divine. He contends that the

primary distinction was the Gospel of John's portrayal of Jesus as "uncreated." Boccaccini argues that these concepts and movements all correspond to the context of early Judaism.

In his essay on the divine bridegroom, Ruben Zimmermann builds on his earlier work and contends that the bridegroom imagery in the Hebrew Bible and in early Jewish literature indicates a relationship with portrayals of God and messianic ideas. The Gospel of John takes this stock metaphor and applies it to Jesus as the Messiah, highlighting Jesus's divine messiahship. John's messiah is thus Jewish and yet distinctive.

Charles Gieschen focuses on the divine name that Jesus shares with the Father in the Gospel of John. He argues that the shared name is the divine name revealed to Moses and examines how the divine name was used within the Hebrew Bible and early Jewish texts. Gieschen argues Jesus's sharing of the divine name points to early Jewish understanding of Jesus as a divine messiah.

Crispin Fletcher-Louis addresses John 5 and its apocalyptic Son of Man. He argues that this messianic picture of Jesus draws on the figure in the Old Greek of Dan. 7:13–14, and that there are numerous similarities with the Son of Man in the Parables of Enoch. Fletcher-Louis contends that this Jewish background must be the starting point of discussions of Jesus as Son of Man in John.

The volume concludes with an epilogue that returns to many of the methodological issues raised in the initial essays and throughout the volume, and it points to possible ways forward. It is hoped that these essays will stimulate ongoing dialogue between early Judaism scholarship and Johannine studies regarding John's Messiah and early Jewish messianic expectations.

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