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Jesus the Messiah

Matthew V. Novenson

Introduction

The peculiar problems surrounding messiah Christology in the Gospel of John are well known. On the one hand, John preserves more and more varied indigenous Judean, Galilean, and even Samaritan messiah traditions than any other Gospel. On the other hand, however, the author's (or redactor's, or redactors') own Christology has seemed to many to be a world away from these messiah traditions, so that Rudolf Bultmann, for instance, could say, not without justification, "In John one feels that one has been transported into the world of C[orpus] Herm[eticum] 13 and the Λόγος τέλειος [*Logos Teleios*, "Perfect Discourse"]."¹ If John wants to make the point that Jesus is μονογενής θεός, "the one and only god" (1:18), then Jesus's being the Jewish messiah might seem rather beside the point. My task in this essay is to canvas the evidence and to try to understand this perplexing state of affairs. I will examine each of the key messiah Christology passages in the Fourth Gospel in order, from prologue to epilogue, arguing that, although John does make some quite brazen christological moves, he also demonstrates a conspicuous interest in preserving and curating many archaic messiah traditions. There is, in other words, a striking aspect of conservatism to John's theological radicalism.

Dramatis Personae (John 1)

In contrast to the concluding, summary purpose statement of John 20:31 ("These

1 Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, trans. G. R. Beasley-Murray et al. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971), 132. On this issue, see further Paul N. Anderson, *The Christology of the Fourth Gospel*, WUNT II/78 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996), 1-47; and also now Troels Engberg-Pedersen, *John and Philosophy: A New Reading of the Fourth Gospel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the messiah son of God”), the prologue to the Gospel does almost entirely without the language of messiahship.² Jesus is the eternal divine logos who made the world (1:1-3) and, latterly, entered into the world (1:9, 11, 14) in order to reveal the deity to human beings (1:12-13, 18). This is a fascinating cosmology,³ but it does not correspond neatly to any of the diverse strands of Jewish messiah tradition which we know from the sources and which John himself introduces in short order.⁴ John first identifies Jesus as *χριστός*, “messiah,” in 1:17, where he also introduces a crucial contrasting parallel with Moses: “The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus *χριστός*.”⁵

On the heels of this prologue we get a discussion of the identity of the *χριστός*, though in connection with John the Baptizer, not Jesus.⁶ Priests and Levites from Jerusalem come out to Bethany to enquire of John who he is (1:19). He responds at first not with an affirmative but with a denial: *ἐγὼ οὐκ εἰμι ὁ χριστός*, “I am not the messiah” (1:20, and repeated in 3:28). But this is not a proper answer, so the priests and Levites press him, suggesting two other possibilities: Are you Elijah? And are you the prophet? To both of which leading questions John answers no. Rather, he says, he is “the voice of the one crying in the wilderness” of Deutero-Isaiah (Isa 40:3). So, three titles of eschatological office are

2 See Morna D. Hooker, “The Johannine Prologue and the Messianic Secret,” *NTS* 21 (1974): 40-58.

3 See Harold W. Attridge, “Philo and John: Two Riffs on One Logos,” *SPhiloA* 17 (2005): 103-17.

⁴ Ancient Jewish messianism is fundamentally a political discourse; hence cosmological speculation is not an essential element of it and in fact intersects with it only occasionally and variously in the sources.

⁵ Later in the Gospel, Jesus’s Judean opponents paint him as a rival to Moses (John 9:28-29; cf. 8:5), but our author enlists Moses as a prophetic witness to Jesus (John 1:17, 45; 3:14; 5:45-46; 6:32; 7:19, 22-23).

⁶ On which see Walter Wink, *John the Baptist in the Gospel Tradition*, SNTSMS 7 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 87-106.

proffered: the messiah, the prophet, and Elijah.⁷ Elijah is not mentioned again in the Gospel after 1:25.⁸ (Perhaps Elijah is only mentioned here so that the author can have John deny the role, in contradistinction to the Synoptics, where John is Elijah [Mark 9:11-13; Matt 11:14; 17:10-12; Luke 1:17].) The other two titles, however, ὁ χριστός and ὁ προφήτης, will recur throughout the Gospel in connection with the identity of Jesus.

The balance of John 1 comprises a series of scenes of people's first encounters with Jesus. When Baptizer lays eyes on Jesus, he acclaims him as ἀμνὸς τοῦ θεοῦ, "lamb of God" (1:29, 36), and υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ, "son of God" (1:34). John's disciple Andrew, hearing this, promptly tells his brother Simon, εὐρήκαμεν τὸν μεσσίαν, "We have found the messiah," which, the narrator adds, is translated χριστός, "anointed one" (1:41). This is an interesting narrative development because the Baptizer had not said "messiah." He says "lamb of God" and "son of God," and Andrew takes this to mean "messiah." To gloss "son of God" with "messiah" makes a certain sense (cf. John 11:27; 20:31),⁹ but the lamb of God–messiah connection is unusual.¹⁰ What is more, Andrew's report to Simon in 1:41 is the earliest

⁷ "Messiah" is the most multivalent of the three; see at length below. "The prophet" here probably presupposes an eschatological interpretation of Deut 18:18, on which see further below. The myth of Elijah redux has roots in the tale of Elijah's apotheosis in 2 Kgs 2:11 and becomes a prophetic topos in Mal 4:5 = MT Mal 3:23 = OG Mal 3:22.

⁸ Of course, Jesus himself bears more than a passing resemblance to Elijah: both charismatic, wonder-working prophets from the north (Nazareth and Tishbe, respectively). But in the Fourth Gospel, again differently from the Synoptics, this resemblance is never actually suggested (cf. Mark 6:15; 8:28; Matt 16:14; Luke 4:25-26; 9:8, 19).

⁹ The precedent of Ps 2, in which God calls the anointed king "my son," is all-important here. See Adela Yarbro Collins and John J. Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God: Divine, Human, and Angelic Messianic Figures in Biblical and Related Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008); Matthew V. Novenson, "Whose Son Is the Messiah?" in *Divine Sonship in the Ancient World*, ed. Garrick Allen et al. (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, forthcoming).

¹⁰ John does not use the word "lamb" again after this scene, although he famously departs from the Synoptic tradition in making Jesus's death contemporaneous with the slaughter of the lambs for Passover (John 19:14, 31). The apostle Paul, writing decades earlier, had expressly figured the messiah as a Passover lamb: τὸ πάσχα ἡμῶν ἐτύθη Χριστός, "The messiah, our Passover [lamb], is sacrificed" (1 Cor 5:7).

attestation of the Greek word *μεσσίας*, a transliteration of Hebrew or Aramaic משיח.¹¹ In Greek-language Jewish sources, almost without exception, we find *χριστός* for משיח, this equivalency having been adopted early and consistently by the LXX and OG translators. (Aquila, however, apparently used *ἠλειμμένος*—from *ἀλείφω*—for משיח in his second-century translation of the scriptures, thereby reclaiming all of the “Christ” oracles from the Christians.)¹² Greek *μεσσίας* never gained general currency among Jews or Christians, although it does appear again in John 4, on which more in a moment.

In John 1, the initial encounters with Jesus continue. As in the scene by the Jordan Andrew announced his *eureka* moment to Simon, now in a scene set in Galilee Philip reports a *eureka* moment to Nathanael: *ὃν ἔγραψεν Μωϋσῆς ἐν τῷ νόμῳ καὶ οἱ προφῆται εὐρήκαμεν*, “We have found him of whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote” (1:45). It is not clear from Philip’s announcement which oracles of Moses and the prophets are meant. In view of the prophet Christology attested in the Fourth Gospel (1:21, 25; 6:14; 7:40), it is possible that this saying refers to the latter-day prophet like Moses of Deut 18: “I [God] will raise up for them a prophet like you [Moses] from among their brethren; and I will put my words in his mouth” (Deut 18:18), although there is little or nothing in the biblical prophets that elaborates, or was thought in antiquity to elaborate, on such a mythical figure.¹³

Alternatively, in view of the messiah Christology which is also well attested in the Gospel (1:41; 4:25, 29; 7:26, 31, 41; 9:22; 10:24; 11:27; 12:34; 17:3; 20:31), the logion of Philip could be taken as a shorthand reference to a familiar cluster of oracles thought by many ancient interpreters to refer to a king messiah (e.g., Gen 49:10; Num 24:17; Isa

11 See BDAG *s.v.* *μεσσίας*; TDNT *s.v.* *χριστός*; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The One Who Is to Come* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 1-2.

12 See the lexical data in Joseph Reider and Nigel Turner, *An Index to Aquila* (Leiden: Brill, 1966).

13 But on the function of this passage in the Pentateuch, see Jeffrey Stackert, *A Prophet Like Moses: Prophecy, Law, and Israelite Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press,

11:1-5).¹⁴ Or perhaps our author does not mean to specify at all. In favor of a king messiah connection, however, is the response of Nathanael, who, when Philip straightaway takes him to meet Jesus, addresses Jesus thusly: ῥαββί, σὺ εἶ ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ, σὺ βασιλεὺς εἶ τοῦ Ἰσραήλ, “Teacher, you are the son of God, you are the king of Israel” (1:49).¹⁵ Nathanael makes this identification in spite of the fact that he knows Jesus to be a Galilean from Nazareth (1:45-46), an issue which will rear its head again later in the Gospel.¹⁶ John 1, then, presents us with a dizzying eschatological *dramatis personae*: logos, messiah, Elijah, prophet, lamb of God, son of God, king of Israel, and him of whom Moses and the prophets wrote. A few of these titles are denied to the Baptizer, while many of them are provisionally here attached to Jesus. I say “provisionally” because, as the Gospel unfolds, our author variously drops, qualifies, combines, or foregrounds certain of these titles by way of painting his portrait of Jesus.

The Messiah in Samaria (John 4)

Another cluster of messiah traditions comes in John 4, which finds Jesus making his way from Judea to Galilee by way of Samaria, where he stops at Jacob’s well in Sychar.

2014).

¹⁴ On which issue in general, see John J. Collins, *The Scepter and the Star: Messianism in Light of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010); Matthew V. Novenson, *The Grammar of Messianism: An Ancient Jewish Political Idiom and Its Users* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

¹⁵ But cf. John 6 and 19, where Jesus is figured as a king and not as a messiah, suggesting that John at least knows of a possible distinction between these terms. On this issue, see further below.

¹⁶ On this litany of titles in John 1, see C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), 228: “In none of the Synoptic Gospels, and indeed in no other New Testament writer, do these Messianic titles receive such prominence as here [in John 1].... It is as though the evangelist had intended to emphasize the fact that his own distinctive teaching rested directly on the messianic beliefs of the primitive Church, and with this aim had begun his work by calling the roll of the traditional messianic titles of the Lord.”

There he asks a local woman for water and so initiates a long and complicated dialogue.¹⁷ At one point in this dialogue, the woman marks Jesus as a prophet—“Sir, I see that you are a prophet” (John 4:19)—and so engages him on the interesting theological question whether the God of Abraham is properly to be worshiped on Mount Gerizim or on Mount Zion. Jesus complicates the terms of the question (“An hour is coming when you will worship in neither place”), whereupon the woman diplomatically appeals to a future time at which this and all other questions will be resolved: οἶδα ὅτι μεσσίας ἔρχεται ὁ λεγόμενος χριστός, “I know that the messiah, who is called anointed, is coming.” And “When he comes, he will tell us everything” (4:25). Here one should note, first, the portrayal of the messiah who is to come as a revealer (“He will tell us all things”) and, second, Jesus’s response: “I who speak to you am he” (4:26). It is striking, in view of John’s subsequent emphasis on the importance of confessing or believing “that Jesus is the messiah” (John 9:22; 11:27; 20:31), that here he has Jesus say, in so many words, “I am the messiah.”

It is remarkable that the Greek word μεσσίας should be attested just here, on the lips of a Samaritan character, since a messiah as such is not part of Samaritan mythology. This is a natural consequence of the Samaritans’ reverence for the the Pentateuch alone—not the Former or Latter Prophets or the Psalms—as a holy text.¹⁸ There is of course a well developed Samaritan myth—for which our evidence is relatively late but which may be quite ancient—of an eschatological *Heilsbringer*, namely, the Taheb, תהב or תאבה, a participial form of Aramaic תוב (Hebrew שׁוּב), “turn” or “return,” thus “he who returns” or “he who restores.”¹⁹ Wayne Meeks notes, “The sources which mention the Taheb generally agree in

17 On this episode, in addition to the commentaries, see David Daube, “Jesus and the Samaritan Woman: The Meaning of ΣΥΓΧΡΑΟΜΑΙ,” *JBL* 69 (1950): 137-47.

18 See J. Zsengeller, “Canon and the Samaritans,” in *Canonization and Decanonization*, ed. A. van der Kooij and K. van der Toorn, SHR 82 (Leiden: Brill, 1988), 161-72; Robert T. Anderson and Terry Giles, *The Samaritan Pentateuch* (Atlanta: SBL, 2012).

19 On which see Adalbert Merx, *Der Messias oder Ta'eb der Samaritaner*, BZAW 17

making him the prophet like Moses promised in Deuteronomy 18, and on the basis of Numbers 24.5-7 and 17 he was also expected to reign as king.”²⁰ Ancient Samaritan piety, therefore, made a place for this latter-day Mosaic prophet, as in this prayer from the fourth-century *Memar Marqah*: “May the Taheb come in peace and expose the darkness that has become powerful in the world. May the Taheb come in peace and destroy the opponents who provoke God. May the Taheb come in peace and offer a correct sacrifice before the house of God [Bethel]” (*Memar Marqah* 1.9).²¹ The Taheb, then, is an ἐρχόμενος, “coming one,” but he is not a μεσσίας. Hence John’s choice to have the Samaritan woman use the latter technical term in John 4:25 is puzzling. So puzzling, in fact, that the Swedish exegete Hugo Odeberg proposed a conjectural emendation to the text of John 4:25: read Ταεβ for μεσσίας, thus “the Taheb, who is called [by you Jews] ‘the anointed one,’ is coming.”²² This is admittedly ingenious, but a simpler and, to my mind, more compelling explanation is that John has either confused or deliberately conflated his Judean and Samaritan eschatologies.

A Prophet King (John 6)

Jesus moves on to Galilee. There, following the feeding of the 5,000 episode in John 6, where Jesus—like Moses before him—produces bread from heaven in the wilderness, the narrator reports how the people, when they saw the sign that Jesus did, were saying amongst

(Giessen: Töpelmann, 1909); John Bowman, “Early Samaritan Eschatology,” *JJS* 6 (1955): 63-72; Wayne A. Meeks, *The Prophet King: Moses Traditions and the Johannine Christology*, NovTSup 14 (Leiden: Brill, 1967), 250-54; Ferdinand Dexinger, *Der Taheb: Ein “messianischer” Heilsbringer der Samaritaner* (Salzburg: Müller, 1986); idem, “Samaritan Eschatology,” in *The Samaritans*, ed. Alan David Crown (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1989), 266-92.

20 Meeks, *Prophet King*, 252.

21 Trans. Meeks, *Prophet King*, 249. The critical text, with translation and notes, is provided by John MacDonald, *Memar Marqah: The Teachings of Marqah*, 2 vols., BZAW 84 (Berlin: Töpelmann, 1963).

22 See Hugo Odeberg, *The Fourth Gospel* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1929), 187, who cites the precedent of Theodor Zahn, *Das Evangelium des Johannes* (Leipzig: Deichert, 1908), 251.

themselves, οὗτός ἐστιν ἀληθῶς ὁ προφήτης ὁ ἐρχόμενος εἰς τὸν κόσμον, “Truly this is the prophet who is coming into the world” (6:14). Some intent of mob action is implied in this, because the next verse reads: “Jesus, knowing that they were about to come and take hold of him that they might make him king [ἵνα ποιήσωσιν βασιλέα], went away again to the mountain alone” (6:15). Many interpreters have connected the popular acclamation of Jesus as βασιλεύς with the motif of Davidic messianism, which motif is of course widely attested in early Christian sources. There are problems with such a move, however, as Wayne Meeks influentially argued.²³ The people in John 6 identify Jesus not as messiah—a title which, as we have seen, John knows and uses elsewhere—but as “the prophet who is coming into the world,” and it is on these grounds that they conspire to make Jesus king.

The title “king” is coordinated here not with “messiah” but with “prophet.” This might seem strange, but it is quite explicable in terms of Jewish traditions about Moses as both prophet and king, of which a parade example is Philo’s *Life of Moses*: “I conceive that all these [offices] have fitly been united in him [Moses], inasmuch as in accordance with the providential will of God he was both a king and a lawgiver and a high priest and a prophet, and because in each office he displayed the most eminent wisdom and virtue” (*Mos.* 2.3).²⁴ The crucial point is that John can conceive of the kingship of Jesus in other than messianic terms. To paraphrase Meeks, it is not the case that king equals messiah equals son of David. Here in John 6, Jesus evades coronation, although in his dialogue with Pilate in John 19 he will accept the title of king (see further below). In neither chapter, however, is kingship correlated with messiahship, even though John also insists that Jesus is the messiah. Our author claims a number of these venerable titles for Jesus, but not in the same ways that or for the same reasons that other early Christian writers—to say nothing of modern

23 See Meeks, *Prophet King*, 32-99.

24 See further Meeks, *Prophet King*, 100-75; and also Louis H. Feldman, *Philo’s Portrayal of Moses in the Context of Ancient Judaism*, CJA 15 (Sound Bend, IN: University

interpreters—do.

Whence the Messiah? (John 7)

This, perhaps, helps to clarify several problems that arise in the next chapter, John 7, where the Judeans assembled for the Feast of Sukkot discuss whether Jesus can be the *χριστός*. Upon hearing him teaching in the Jerusalem temple, the people say, “Do the rulers really know that this is the messiah? But we know where this man comes from. The messiah, when he comes, no one will know where he is from” (7:26-27). The people pose a theoretical objection to the identification of Jesus as messiah on the grounds of one strand of messiah haggadah: the messiah will arise from parts unknown. Such an idea is indeed attested, albeit sparsely, here and there in Jewish messiah legend.²⁵ In *4 Ezra* 13, for instance, God explains to Ezra about the messiah, “Just as no one can explore or know what is in the depths of the sea, so no one on earth can see my son or those who are with him except in the time of his day” (*4 Ezra* 13.52).

As for Jesus, however, the people know where he is from. They do not say where in this passage, but John so often and so consistently assigns Jesus origins in Nazareth in Galilee (1:45-46; 7:41, 52; 18:5, 7; 19:19) that that must be the unstated premise here. Jesus replies, however, by mystifying the question of his origins: “You know me? And you know where I am from? I have not come of my own accord, but he who sent me is true.... I know him, for I came from him” (7:28-29). Jesus comes proximately from Nazareth, yes, but ultimately from parts very unknown indeed, from heaven (3:13, 31; 6:38, 51), from the bosom of the father (1:18). Thus from our author’s point of view, Jesus actually does meet

of Notre Dame Press, 2007).

25 E.g., *1 Enoch* 48.6; *4 Ezra* 13.52; Justin, *Dial.* 8; 110. On this motif, see Sigmund Mowinckel, *He That Cometh: The Messiah Concept in the Old Testament and Later Judaism*, trans. G. W. Anderson (Nashville: Abingdon, 1956; repr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 304-8.

the criterion that the Judeans here cite against him.

In a subsequent scene in John 7, Jesus again addresses the gathered crowd. Hearing him, some say, οὗτός ἐστιν ἀληθῶς ὁ προφήτης, “This really is the prophet” (7:40), referring to the prophet like Moses mentioned in John 1:21, 25; 6:14. Others in the crowd, however, identify Jesus with a different eschatological character: οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ χριστός, “This is the messiah” (7:41). (John does, therefore, distinguish between the prophet and the messiah.)²⁶ But then, just as in the passage discussed above about the messiah coming from parts unknown, there arises a debate about the provenance of the messiah and of Jesus. “Some said, ‘Is the messiah to come from Galilee? Has not the scripture said that the messiah is descended from David and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David was?’” (7:41-43). These anonymous skeptics question Jesus’s fitness for the office of messiah on the grounds that he is known to come from Galilee, whereas, according to the tradition they report, scripture says that the messiah would be a Davidide and would come from Bethlehem (cf. Mic 5:2). This report is striking, because the Fourth Gospel does not mention either David or Bethlehem anywhere else. Some interpreters have suggested that this is dramatic irony on John’s part, that he knows—and expects his audience to know—that Jesus is a Davidide from Bethlehem and so has the crowd unwittingly testify to the truth.²⁷ This is possible, although elsewhere John is rather more heavy-handed with his use of dramatic irony (e.g., John 11:49-52; 18:14), so this instance would be remarkable for its subtlety. I think it is too much to say, as Christoph Burger and others have done, that John knows and roundly

26 See Richard Bauckham, “Messianism according to the Gospel of John,” in *Challenging Perspectives on the Gospel of John*, ed. John Lierman, WUNT II/219 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 67: “John’s account of Jewish expectations of eschatological figures is not systematic.... Nevertheless he makes careful distinctions among such expectations, distinctions that are hardly necessary for his own christological purposes.” Bauckham is right about John’s precision, but I would say that these distinctions are relevant for John’s own christological purposes.

27 E.g., F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 183-84; Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John I-XII*, AB 29 (New York: Doubleday,

rejects the tradition that Jesus is descended from David.²⁸ It may be, depending on one's view on John's knowledge of the Synoptics, that all John knows about Jesus's family background is that he comes from Galilee, which by itself would not suggest a Davidic pedigree.²⁹ Since John's Christology is happily unconcerned with Jesus's family tree anyway, this is no loss for him.

Acknowledging Jesus as Messiah (John 9-12)

The story of the healing of the man born blind in John 9 figures prominently in the discussion of messiah Christology in John, especially since J. Louis Martyn's seminal 1968 study *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*.³⁰ Jesus's healing of the man results in a controversy with the Pharisees (9:13-17), which morphs into a controversy with the Jews (9:18-34). At the center of both phases of the controversy is the question of the identity of Jesus (9:17, 29), and in particular the social stakes of confessing the messiahship of Jesus. When the Jews subpoena the parents of the blind man, they decline to testify one way or the other about the man who healed their son on account of fear, because, the narrator explains, "The Jews had already agreed that if anyone should confess him [Jesus] as messiah, he or she would be put out of the synagogue [ἐάν τις αὐτὸν ὁμολογήσῃ χριστόν, ἀποσυνάγωγος γένηται]"

1995), 330.

28 Christoph Burger, *Jesus als Davidsohn: Eine traditions-geschichtliche Untersuchung*, FRLANT 98 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1970), 158. Cf. John P. Meier, "From Elijah-like Prophet to Royal Davidic Messiah," in *Jesus: A Colloquium in the Holy Land*, ed. James D. G. Dunn and Doris Donnelly (London: Continuum, 2001), 54: "The 'from the seed of David' tradition... is witnessed in a back-handed way even in John, though whether it is accepted, ignored, or rejected by John remains uncertain."

29 On the question of John's knowledge (or ignorance) of the Synoptic Gospels, see D. Moody Smith, *John among the Gospels*, 2d ed. (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2001).

30 J. Louis Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968). On the considerable influence of the book, see D. Moody Smith, "The Contribution of J. Louis Martyn to the Understanding of the Gospel of John," in J. Louis Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*, 3d ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 1-26.

(9:22).

The term ἀποσυνάγωγος is a neologism here (and see 12:42; 16:2), one which Martyn finds implausible in the context of Jesus's career circa 30 C.E. but quite plausible in the context of the Johannine sect at the turn of the second century. He points, for instance, to the farewell discourse, where Jesus uses the same term in an *ex eventu* prophecy of the social situation of the disciples after his departure: ἀποσυναγώγους ποιήσουσιν ὑμᾶς, “They will put you out of the synagogues” (16:2). Aspects of Martyn's argument have come in for criticism,³¹ but his core point about a late first-century dispute between the Johannine sect and the synagogue over “confessing Jesus as messiah” continues to command wide though not universal assent. For my part, I consider it likely that this episode may indeed reflect a schism between the sect and the mainstream Jewish community in which the confession of Jesus as messiah is a neuralgic point.³²

There are several short scenes of messianic recognition that occur seriatim in the middle part of the Gospel. In chapter 10, at yet another festival in Jerusalem, this time Hanukkah, the Jews gather around Jesus and ask, “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the messiah [εἰ σὺ εἶ ὁ χριστός] tell us plainly” (10:24). But although he did tell it plainly to the Samaritan woman (“I who speak to you am he”), here Jesus sidesteps: “I told you, and you did not believe... My works bear witness on my behalf” (10:25), and so on. This exchange ends with the near-stoning of Jesus on a charge of blasphemy because he “makes himself God” (ποιεῖς σεαυτὸν θεόν [10:33]) by saying that “I and the father are one” (ἐγὼ καὶ ὁ

31 See, e.g., Adele Reinhartz, “The Johannine Community and Its Jewish Neighbors: A Reappraisal,” in *Literary and Social Readings of the Fourth Gospel*, vol. 2 of *What Is John?*, ed. Fernando Segovia (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), 111-38; eadem, “Reading History in the Fourth Gospel,” in *What We Have Heard from the Beginning: The Past, Present, and Future of Johannine Studies*, ed. Tom Thatcher (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007), 190-94.

32 Thus rightly Martyn, *History and Theology* (3d ed.), 92: “Both for John and for his conversation partners in the synagogue, the technical issue of Jesus' messiahship is of

πατήρ ἔν ἐσμεν [10:30]), which would seem to be some way from the Jews' original question about Jesus's messiahship. Here, although the word *logos* is not used, we are close once again to the conceptual world of the prologue (John 1:1-18), where Jesus is both messiah and god.

In the scene in chapter 11 where Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead, Jesus assures Lazarus's sister Martha that Lazarus will rise again, not on the last day but now, because, he explains, "I am the resurrection and the life" (11:25). "Do you believe this?" Jesus presses her, and Martha responds, "Yes, lord. I believe that you are the messiah son of God who is coming into the world [σὺ εἶ ὁ χριστὸς ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ ὁ εἰς τὸν κόσμον ἐρχόμενος]" (11:27), which was not the way Jesus had just identified himself but is, from our author's perspective, a true confession (cf. 20:31). To this point in the Gospel, Jesus has been identified sometimes as messiah and sometimes as son of God, but here the two titles appear in apposition to one another. The author might mean simply to equate them, but I think it more likely that "son of God" stands in restrictive apposition to "messiah," saying what kind of messiah the author means: not messiah ben David, messiah ben Aaron, or messiah ben Joseph, but messiah son of God (cf. Mark 14:61; Matt 26:63).³³

In chapter 12, in the last of his festal visits to Jerusalem, Jesus speaks publicly but cryptically about his impending death, initially in the third person: "The hour has come for the son of man to be glorified" (12:23); and subsequently in the first person: "Now is the judgment of this world... And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" (12:31-32). Here again, a crowd of Jerusalemite bystanders respond to Jesus's words by raising a haggadic question: "We have heard from the law that the messiah remains

paramount importance." See further Joel Marcus, "*Birkat Ha-Minim* Revisited," *NTS* 55 (2009): 523-51.

³³ This onomastic phenomenon is a commonplace in ancient Jewish and Christian messiah texts. See Joel Marcus, "Mark 14:61: 'Are You the Messiah-Son-of-God?'" *NovT* 31 (1989): 125-141; Novenson, "Whose Son Is the Messiah?"

forever. How then can you say that the son of man must be lifted up? Who is this son of man?" (12:35) The crowd cleverly identifies the messiah with the son of man, which is not an obvious move but which the Synoptics Gospels, and, for that matter, the *Similitudes of Enoch* do, too.³⁴

Their claim that the Torah says the messiah remains forever is notoriously obscure. One impressive solution is that of Willem van Unnik, who suggested an allusion to Ps 89:36-37: "I will not lie to David; his seed shall remain forever."³⁵ But this is not the Torah, strictly speaking, although perhaps here by "Torah" John just means scripture broadly conceived. Alternatively, Richard Bauckham has suggested an allusion to the deathbed speech of Jacob in Gen 49:10: "The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs."³⁶ But here we lack the phrase "remains forever." Either way, we might have here an indirect appeal to the notion of a messiah ben David, which is also attested by the crowd in John 7, as noted above. If our author here preserves a messiah ben David tradition, he evidently has no interest in pressing it. When John speaks of messiahship and sonship in the same breath, he speaks of the messiah son of God.

The King Is Dead, Long Live the King (John 18-20)

The story of the trial and execution of Jesus in John 18-19 fits awkwardly in our survey. The language of kingship is at the fore in John's account, but messiahship, which theme John has developed extensively in his Gospel to this point, goes altogether

34 On this conflation of mythical figures, see the essays collected in *Enoch and the Messiah Son of Man: Revisiting the Book of Parables*, ed. Gabriele Boccaccini (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).

35 W. C. van Unnik, "The Quotation from the Old Testament in John 12:34," *NovT* 3 (1959): 174-79.

36 Bauckham, "Messianism according to the Gospel of John," 64-67.

unmentioned.³⁷ In all three Synoptic accounts, Jesus is first interrogated by the Jewish high priest and council, who demand to know whether he is the messiah (ὁ χριστὸς ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ εὐλογητοῦ in Mark 14:61, ὁ χριστὸς ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ in Matt 26:63, ὁ χριστὸς in Luke 22:67 and ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ in Luke 22:70). Then, in all three accounts, Jesus is sent up to the Roman provincial governor, who demands to know whether he is the king of the Jews (ὁ βασιλεὺς τῶν Ἰουδαίων in Mark 15:2; Matt 27:11; Luke 23:3). There is, in these Synoptic accounts, a kind of parallel between the Jewish charge and the Roman one (“messiah” and “king,” respectively). John agrees with the Synoptics on the charge in the Roman trial (John 18:33), but he lacks any parallel to the messiah question from the Jewish council. John only says, “The chief priest questioned Jesus about his disciples and about his teaching” (18:19).

The encounter with the chief priests is over almost as soon as it begins, and Jesus is promptly sent up to Pilate for what turns into an extended dialogue on kingship.³⁸ Pilate asks, as he does in the Synoptic accounts, whether Jesus is king of the Jews (18:33), but in John Jesus replies by challenging the terms of the question: “My kingship is not from this world, for if my kingship were from this world, my servants would have struggled lest I be handed over to the Jews” (18:36). When in the course of the dialogue Jesus does effectively admit to being king of the Jews (“You say that I am a king”), he gives a curious account of his kingly function: “For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, that I should testify to the truth” (18:37). (There is perhaps an echo here of the Samaritan woman’s comment on the function of the χριστός: “When the messiah comes, he will tell us everything” [4:25]. But in John 4 it was a messiah, while here in John 18 it is a king.) But a king whose job is to testify

37 On the passion narrative in John, see Martinus C. de Boer, *Johannine Perspectives on the Death of Jesus* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1996).

38 On which see Martin Hengel, “The Kingdom of Christ in John,” in idem, *Studies in Early Christology* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2004), 333-58.

to truth is, as Meeks notes, something very much like, well, a prophet.³⁹

In chapters 20-21, John devotes considerable space to post-resurrection scenes of Jesus with his disciples, but the category messiah does not figure in these scenes. It is striking that when Thomas finally sees and recognizes the risen Jesus, he confesses, ὁ κύριός μου καὶ ὁ θεός μου, “My lord and my god” (20:28). Jesus acknowledges this confession and blesses those who will believe (πιστεύω) likewise without having seen, as Thomas did. On the heels of this scene comes the well-known summary purpose statement in the voice of an author or redactor: “Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the messiah son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (20:30-31). The exhortation to believe (πιστεύω) is a link back to the dialogue with Thomas just before, but here the title is different: Ἰησοῦς ἐστὶν ὁ χριστὸς ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ. Which, as Martyn rightly emphasized, is virtually identical with the true but socially dangerous confession of John 9, that Jesus is the messiah.

Conclusion

So what are we to make of this? There is a raft of secondary literature on the subject, much of it excellent, which we cannot engage properly in the space of this short essay.⁴⁰ But in brief: In contrast to an older strand of research which took the messiah traditions in John

39 Meeks, *Prophet King*, 63-67.

40 See in particular Rudolf Schnackenburg, “Die Messiasfrage im Johannesevangelium,” in *Neutestamentliche Aufsätze*, ed. J. Blinzler et al. (Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 1963), 240-64; Meeks, *Prophet King*; Wayne A. Meeks, “The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism,” *JBL* 91 (1972): 44-72; Marinus de Jonge, “Jewish Expectations about the ‘Messiah’ according to the Fourth Gospel,” *NTS* 19 (1973): 246-70; Hooker, “The Johannine Prologue and the Messianic Secret”; Dietmar Neufeld, “‘And When That One Comes’: Aspects of Johannine Messianism,” in *Eschatology, Messianism, and the Dead Sea Scrolls*, ed. Craig A. Evans and Peter W. Flint (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 120-40; Bauckham, “Messianism according to the Gospel of John”; 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:

chiefly as evidence either for (e.g., William Sanday)⁴¹ or against (e.g., C. H. Dodd)⁴² the veracity of the Gospel's *mise-en-scène* of early first-century Palestine, much recent research has wisely set aside debates over verisimilitude in favor of more subtle questions of tradition-history. It remains contested, and to my mind it is a genuinely open question, whether the different christological motifs we have noted can confidently be assigned to discrete literary layers (thus, e.g., Fortna, von Wahlde)⁴³ or are simply so many diverse traditions assimilated by an evidently capable author (thus, e.g., Meeks, McGrath).⁴⁴ But even if John is a composite of two or more discrete sources, and all the more so if it is not, it is significant that our author or redactor makes actual use of these messiah traditions in articulating his own constructive Christology. He did not need to do so; other early Christian writers (including some with similarly elaborate cosmologies to John's) did not do so. We could say, as many have said, that John entirely redefines "messiah" to fit his Christology,⁴⁵ but that is not quite right. "Messiah" is not an empty cipher for John; it comes with a lot of

T. & T. Clark, 2007), 97-108.

41 See William Sanday, *The Authorship and Historical Character of the Fourth Gospel* (London: Macmillan, 1872), 124: "How difficult, how impossible it would have been for a writer wholly *ad extra* to throw himself into the midst of these hopes and feelings, and to reproduce them, not as if they were something new that he had learned, but as part of an atmosphere that he himself once breathed. There is no stronger proof of the genuineness and of the authenticity of the fourth Gospel than the way in which it reflects the current Messianic idea."

42 See C. H. Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963). Cf. more recently Maurice Casey, *Is John's Gospel True?* (London: Routledge, 1996), 59: "The fourth Gospel's use of the term 'Christ' is completely unhistorical. It originated from the confessional use of this term in the early church."

43 Robert T. Fortna, *The Fourth Gospel and Its Predecessor* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988; repr. London: T. & T. Clark, 2004); Urban C. von Wahlde, *Gnosticism, Docetism, and the Judaisms of the First Century: The Search for the Wider Context of the Johannine Literature and Why It Matters*, LNTS 517 (London: T. & T. Clark, 2015).

44 Meeks, *Prophet King*; James F. McGrath, *John's Apologetic Christology: Legitimation and Development in Johannine Christology*, SNTSMS 111 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

45 E.g., George MacRae, "Messiah and Gospel," in *Judaisms and Their Messiahs at the Turn of the Christian Era*, ed. Jacob Neusner et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 178: "The Fourth Gospel [is characterized by]... an uneasiness about the designation of Christ as Messiah unless the term is understood on purely Christian, in this case Johannine,

quite specific traditions attached to it. John molds it, to be sure, exploiting some of those traditions (e.g., fulfillment of scripture, divine sonship, mysterious origins) and not others (e.g., Davidic sonship). But he seems to me resolute about making his claims about Jesus in the mode of messiah discourse.⁴⁶

It may be helpful to close with an analogy. At the beginning, I noted Bultmann's comment that the Christology of John finds its closest analogy in the Hermetica. As it happens, *Teleios Logos* (also called *Asclepius* in its Latin recension), the Hermetic tractate to which Bultmann refers, is partly attested in a Coptic version in Nag Hammadi Codex VI.⁴⁷ Very close by, in Nag Hammadi Codex II, we find the *Gospel of Philip*, a probably third-century Greek composition extant only in this fourth-century Coptic manuscript.⁴⁸ The *Gospel of Philip* is a Valentinian anthology whose own constructive Christology, so far as one can speak of such a thing, is philosophically quite far removed from the first-century messianic Jesus sect.⁴⁹ And yet, for all this distance, *Gospel of Philip* also includes passages like this one:

The apostles who were before us had these names for him: 'Jesus, the Nazorean, Messiah,' that is, 'Jesus, the Nazorean, the Christ.' The last name is 'Christ,' the first is 'Jesus,' that in the middle is 'the Nazarene.' 'Messiah' has two meanings, both 'the Christ' and 'the measured.' 'Jesus' in Hebrew is 'the redemption.' 'Nazara' is 'the

terms."

46 Thus rightly Christopher Rowland, "Christ in the New Testament," in *King and Messiah in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, ed. John Day (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998; repr. London: T. & T. Clark, 2013), 481: "What is striking about the Gospel of John is how much belief that Jesus is Christ still matters in this sophisticated christological narrative.... There is evidence that the messiahship of Jesus was a live issue in the Gospel of John."

47 See the *editio princeps* by Peter A. Dirkse and Douglas M. Parrott in *Nag Hammadi Codices V, 2-5 and VI*, ed. Douglas M. Parrott, CGL (Leiden: Brill, 1979).

48 See the *editio princeps* by Bentley Layton in *Nag Hammadi Codex II, 2-7*, ed. Bentley Layton, CGL (Leiden: Brill, 1989).

49 See Martha Lee Turner, *The Gospel of Philip: The Sources and Coherence of an Early Christian Collection*, NHMS 38 (Leiden: Brill, 1996); Hugo Lundhaug, *Images of Rebirth: Cognitive Poetics and Transformational Soteriology in the Gospel of Philip and the Exegesis on the Soul*, NHMS 73 (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 153-400.

Truth.’ ‘The Nazarene’ then, is ‘the Truth.’ ‘Christ’ [...] has been measured. ‘The Nazarene’ and ‘Jesus’ are they who have been measured. (*Gos. Phil.* 62)⁵⁰

Whatever else may be going on in this passage (and there is quite a lot going on), there is at least a very interesting third-century, Eastern Valentinian messiah Christology attested here.⁵¹ Our author finds the significance of Jesus in the etymologies of the names given him by his earliest followers: “Jesus,” “Nazarene,” and “messiah-Christ.” Unlike some other early Christian texts which know the messiah Christology of Paul, the Synoptics, et al. and choose to let it fall by the wayside, the *Gospel of Philip* preserves, reinterprets, one might even say fetishizes the messiah Christology of the apostolic generation. *Philip* has his own, very different christological concerns, but he insists on addressing those concerns in terms inherited from “the apostles who were before us.” By this point, I hope that my proposed analogy to the Fourth Gospel is clear. Like the *Gospel of Philip*, the Gospel of John has bigger fish to fry, when it comes to Christology, than whether Jesus fits this or that strand of Jewish messiah haggadah. But again like *Philip*, John cannot fathom simply letting go that most important apostolic confession that Jesus is the *χριστός*. We find an unlikely trove of messiah traditions in the Gospel of John because the author (or redactor), for all his theological bravura, also has a strong conservative streak, an impulse to preserve and to lay claim to the venerable old category of messiah, no matter how creatively he has to reinterpret it.

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51 As was rightly perceived already by W. C. van Unnik, “Three Notes on the Gospel of Philip,” *NTS* 10 (1964): 465-69.

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