

The Gospel according to John's Rabbi Jesus

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The Fourth Gospel follows the Synoptics in the consistent address of Jesus as "*rabbi*," utilizing the Aramaic term in transliteration. Although the Johannine range of usage is comparable to that of the Synoptic Gospels, John develops a more systematic presentation; the meaning of the reference to Jesus as "*rabbi*" for both insiders and outsiders is refined.

The Johannine pedagogy, focused on what the term means contextually, enables hearers or readers of the Gospel to frame a socially sensitive definition of "*rabbi*." Within its cultural setting the term in general involves a teacher known for one or more of the following accomplishments: attracting students, demonstrating unusual insight and knowledge, performing signs, defining a distinctive style of purity, interpreting tradition as well as Scripture, and entering into controversy. Each of these categorical aspects of activity is instanced within Judaic literature in respect of figures also known as rabbis.

But the Fourth Gospel is unusual in bringing these characteristics together in order to concentrate on a single figure. The Johannine focus on Jesus as *rabbi* enables the Gospel to coordinate different activities as all expressive of one identity. In every case, the activity introduced as that of Jesus in his role as *rabbi* develops into a major thematic statement within the Gospel. At the same time, elements within those presentations involve unexpected assertions that sometimes amount to *apories*. The most discussed *aporia* (John 3:22, 26; 4:1) is the statement that Jesus baptized more successfully than John the Baptist did, followed by the assertion that Jesus did not baptize (John 4:2). But that proves to be just one example of a profound pattern.

Aporetic presentation in John is by no means limited to cases in which Jesus appears as *rabbi*, but it remains striking that *apories* are consistently involved when Jesus is so addressed. Two explanations of that phenomenon emerge: (1) that the source traditions connected with Rabbi Jesus present him in ways no longer current when the Gospel was produced and (2) that John developed *apories* as a sign of mystery, so that the use of *rabbi* became an invitation to other identifications of Jesus. These two explanations may on occasion prove valid at the same time, and Johannine presentation often defies the clear distinction of one from the other.

JESUS AND THE DESIGNATION "RABBI"

Teachers framed oral traditions that fed into Rabbinic Literature and vied with others groups—priests, apocalyptic teachers, philosophical writers, and separatists—over the definition of Israel's faith and practice. Some of those called Pharisees in the NT probably featured among the framers of the Rabbinic movement, but they considered themselves as Sages, and used the common address of "*rabbi*," which reflected their status as teachers.¹ It is this that has caused them to be known as the Rabbis in a preeminent sense, but many teachers—such as Jesus of Nazareth—were called "*rabbi*" even though they were not Pharisees or exponents of what became characteristic Rabbinic theology.

The teachers known as rabbis were masters (in varying degrees) of parable and exposition and judgment and ethics and purity and health and healing and other aspects of covenantal wisdom. It has long been commonplace in the field to acknowledge that the formalism of a rabbinate, including a concern for succession and a notion of a syllabus to be mastered by disciples, only prevailed with the emergence of rabbis as the basis of systemic redefinition of Judaism in the period well after A.D. 70.

In the Gospels, Jesus is addressed as "*rabbi*," a Greek transliteration of the Aramaic title for a teacher, more than as any other single designation (Matt 26:25, 49; Mark 9:5; 10:51; 11:21; 14:45; John 1:38, 49; 3:2; 4:31; 6:25; 9:2; 11:8). The term meant "my great one" or "my master" and was a regular means of referring to a teacher, as in the case of the disciples (or *talmidim*) of John the Baptist, who call him *rabbi* in John 3:26. When Greek words are factored in that plausibly render *rabbi*—namely, "master" and "teacher" when used as forms of address—and when it is recollected that the "lord" might also correspond to "rabbi" on occasion, the numerical preponderance of this title is nothing short of overwhelming.²

Moreover, Jesus is addressed as *rabbi* not only by his disciples, but also and explicitly by those on the margins of his movement (Mark 10:51; John 6:25), and he is known as such even among those potentially or actually opposed to him (John 3:2, a usage that will occupy us below; cf. Mark 12:14). As judged by the depth and breadth of these references, as well as their number, the best emic designation for Jesus is *rabbi*.³

That the term *rabbi* was current in Jesus' time is plain from related usages in Dan 2:48; 4:6; 5:11 and Mishnah Avoth 1:6, 16, as well as from the

1 For a discussion of such issues, see my earlier articles "Rabbis," in *Dictionary of New Testament Background* (ed C A Evans and S E Porter, Downers Grove, IL InterVarsity, 2000) 914–17, "Rabbinic Traditions and Literature," in *The IVP Dictionary of the New Testament* (ed Daniel G Reid, Downers Grove, IL InterVarsity, 2004) 881–91, "Giudaismo (NT)," in *Dizionario dei Temi Teologici della Bibbia* (ed R Penna, G Perego, and G Ravasi, San Paolo Milano, 2009) 610–17

2 In this regard, see William O Walker, "KURIOS and EPISTATES as Translations of RABBI/RABBOUNI," *Journal of Higher Criticism* 4 (1997) 56–77, Bruce Chilton, "Master/Rabbi," in *Encyclopedia of the Historical Jesus* (ed Craig A Evans, New York Routledge, 2008) 395–99

3 Development of "rabbi" as an emic category for Jesus is available in my *Rabbi Jesus An Intimate Biography* (New York Doubleday, 2000)

inscriptional evidence.⁴ (In earlier Hebrew texts that also reflect Aramaic expressions, a *rab* was a high officer [2 Kgs 18:17]). But being called “rabbi” did not involve an institutional qualification until a much later period, well after the destruction of the temple, although it seems clear that during the first century a Jewish teacher in Galilee whose wisdom was valued would be called “rabbi,” or one of several variants with or without the possessive suffix, including *rab*, *rabbouna*, *rabbouni*, and *rabbān*.⁵

When the data set of Aramaic documents was smaller several decades ago, attempts were made to explain the variants in terms of differences between Hebrew and Aramaic and/or formal and intimate speech. In his Schweich Lectures, given at Oxford University in 1941, Paul Kahle argued that the Palestinian Targum as a text was earlier than the NT, so that interpretations found in the Palestinian Targums and the Gospels resulted from the NT writers—or perhaps even Jesus himself—borrowing from the Targum.⁶ This caused Kahle to argue that *rabbouni* in John 20:16 must be primitive, a suggestion endorsed by Matthew Black.⁷ Occasionally, these explanations still surface in commentaries, but today the evidence indicates that all the variants of *rabbi* circulated widely, and Stephen A. Kaufman demonstrated to devastating effect how the uncritical claim of a linguistic precedence for the alleged Palestinian Targum could not be sustained.⁸

Pharisaism instances how local rabbis, in this case within urban environments, might crystallize into a movement. Josephus portrays the Pharisees as being critical of the Hasmonean priesthood. Their expression was at first political (*Ant.* 13.288–98), and could extend to violent action, as in

4 See J P Kane, “Ossuary Inscriptions of Jerusalem,” *JSS* 23 (1978) 268–82 Kane shows the influence of works such as Asher Finkel, *The Pharisees and the Teacher of Nazareth* (Arbeiten zur Geschichte des Spätjudentums und Urchristentums 4, Leiden Brill, 1964), and Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus An Investigation into Economic and Social Conditions during the New Testament Period* (trans F H Cave and C H Cave, London SCM, 1969), views that find their echoes in Emil Schurer, *A History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ* (ed G Vermes, F Millar, et al., Edinburgh T & T Clark, 1973–87)

5 Updated instances of usages are available from “The Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon,” a project located at Hebrew Union College The Lexicon may be accessed freely and searched electronically on-line at <http://call.cnu.edu> This site may be used by means of transliteration, and some material may be consulted in English

6 Published as Paul Kahle, *The Cairo Geniza* (Oxford Blackwell, 1959) The Palestinian Targum that he invoked was best evidenced by the Targum fragments from the Cairo Geniza, which he had published in 1930 in his *Masoretens des Westens* (2 vols., Beitrage zur Wissenschaft vom Alten Testament 33, 50, Stuttgart Kohlhammer, 1927–30)

7 See *An Aramaic Approach to the Gospels and Acts* (Oxford Clarendon, 1968) 21 Jonas C Greenfield takes this third edition to task in *JNES* 31 (1972) 58–61

8 Steven A Kaufman, “On Methodology in the Study of the Targums and Their Chronology,” *JSNT* (1985) 117–24 I remain grateful that Professor Kaufman permitted *JSNT* to publish his paper at the time I edited the journal For a balanced appraisal of Kahle’s suggestion in regard to John 20 16, see Raymond E Brown, *The Gospel according to John Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (AB 29A, Garden City Doubleday, 1970) 991–92 Joseph A Fitzmyer offers a more acerbic perspective in *CBQ* 30 (1968) 417–28 On the Targumic field as a whole, see Paul V M Elesher and Bruce Chilton, *The Targums A Critical Introduction* (Waco, TX Baylor University Press, Leiden Brill, 2011)

the demand that the counselors who advised Alexander Jannaeus to kill some of their sympathizers should themselves be executed (*J.W.* 1.110–14).

At base, however, the orientation of the Pharisees was toward the achievement and maintenance of purity.⁹ The purity they sought had fundamentally to do with making offerings, people, and priests fit for the cult of sacrifice in the temple. For that reason, the issues of the personnel of the priesthood, the sorts of animals and goods that might be brought and by whom, and their permitted proximity to all sources of uncleanness, were vitally important.

By the dawn of the Common Era, the Pharisees found a distinguished teacher in the person of Hillel, who is justly famous for the dictum, uttered some 20 years before Jesus, "That which you hate, do not do to your fellow; that is the whole Torah, while all the rest is commentary thereon" (*Bavli* [the "Babylonian Talmud," *Shabbath*. 31a). The similarity to Jesus' teaching (see *Matt* 7:12; *Luke* 6:31) is striking, but it can also be misleading. Hillel in the tale is talking to an impatient proselyte, who wished to learn the Torah while standing on one foot; his impatience had just won him a cuff with a measuring rod from Shammai, the rabbi with whom Hillel is typically contrasted in Rabbinic literature. Obviously, Hillel has no desire to reduce the Torah on the grounds of principle, and he goes to tell the proselyte, "Go and learn it." In other words, the Gentile learns that the revelation to Moses is the expression of the best ethics, and that for that reason the whole should be mastered.

In any case, Hillel was understood among the Pharisees to have come to prominence for adjudicating quite a distinct issue: whether the Passover could be offered on the Sabbath. Hillel first offers a Scriptural argument for accepting the practice: because other forms of priestly service are permitted, so is the slaying of the lamb. He also states that he learned the position in Babylon, from Shemaiah and Abtalion, distinguished predecessors in the movement. Their authority is sufficient to guide the current leaders of Pharisaic opinion, the sons of Bathyra (*Bavli*, *Pesachim* 66a).

This story is redolent of Pharisaic concern with cultic questions. Hillel is also said to have convinced another teacher, Baba ben Buta, to provide approved animals in great numbers for slaughter, with the stipulation (against the school of Shammai) that the offerer laid hands on the victim immediately prior to the killing (*Bavli*, *Bezah* 20a, b). To conform to this teaching, Baba ben Buta mounted a demonstration in the temple.

Hillel embodied the Pharisaic principle that the "chains" of their oral tradition were normative for purity. Such chains were understood to have been developed from Moses to Ezra, after that by "the men of the great congregation," and then by teachers who were generally invoked as "pairs" (*Mishnah*, *Avoth* 1:1–18). The last "pair" was Hillel and Shammai, from which point the Pharisees/Rabbis acknowledged that division increased in Israel (*Bavli*, *Sanhedrin* 88b). The notion of primeval unity disturbed

9. See Jacob N. Neusner, *The Pharisees: Rabbinic Perspectives* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1973).

by recent faction is doubtless mythical, but it is plain that the Pharisees developed their oral tradition by means of a structured understanding of the past, as well as by mnemonic techniques.

The term *Pharisee* is probably an outsiders' name for adherents of the movement, meaning "separatist" or "purist"; participants in the movement appear to have referred to their ancient predecessors (after Ezra) as "the sages" or "the wise," and to their more recent predecessors and contemporaries as "teachers" (cf. *rab* in m. Avoth 1:6, 16; see the usage of *sophistes* in Josephus). Like the Pharisees, Jesus also showed a characteristic interest in purity, one that put him at odds with Pharisaic teaching in his time (see Mark 7:15). A dispute concerning appropriate sacrifice in the temple cost him his life.

This explains why in the Gospels Jesus typically enters into disputes with Pharisees (Matt 9:10–13, 14–17; 12:1–8, 9–14; 15:1–26; 16:1–12; 19:3–12; 22:15–22; Mark 2:15–17, 18–22, 23–28; 3:1–6; 7:1–23; 8:11–21; 10:2–12; 12:13–17; Luke 5:29–32, 33–39; 6:1–5, 6–11; 11:37–12:1; 15:1, 2). These characteristically center on issues of purity (Matt 9:10–13 / Mark 2:15–17 / Luke 5:29–32; Matt 15:1–26 / Mark 7:1–23; Matt 16:5–12 / Mark 8:14–21 / Luke 12:1; 15:1, 2), fasting (Matt 9:14–17 / Mark 2:18–22 / Luke 5:33–39), keeping the sabbath (Matt 12:1–8, 9–14 / Mark 2:23–28; 3:1–6 / Luke 6:1–5, 6–11), tithing (Matt 23:23 / Luke 11:42; cf. Matt 17:24–27; 22:15–22 / Mark 12:13–17 / Luke 20:20–26), and the interpretation of Scripture (Matt 19:3–12 / Mark 10:2–12 / Luke 16:18), all of which are representative of Pharisaic interests. The natural inference is that, as a rabbi from rural Galilee, Jesus' concerns intersected with the Pharisees', but he frequently differed with them in approach.¹⁰

When scholars have expressed reservations in respect of that finding, they have had in mind the distortion of identifying Jesus with the Rabbinic movement after A.D. 70, which was more systematized than before that time, and which amounted to the normative authority within Judaism. Unfortunately, anxiety in respect of that anachronism can result in the far greater error of bracketing Jesus within "sectarian" Judaism (as if "orthodoxy" existed in early, pluralized Judaism prior to the Rabbinic period), or—worse still—of placing him within no Judaism at all.

Until A.D. 70, Pharisaic teaching targeted the conduct of the cult in the temple, but its influence was limited. Nonetheless, Pharisees seem to have succeeded reasonably well in towns, even in Galilee (and beyond, in the case of self-described enthusiasts such as Paul; Phil 3:4–6¹¹), where they urged local populations to maintain the sort of purity that would permit them to participate rightly in the cult. Josephus's fellow in the armed resistance against Rome and archrival, John of Giscala, may well

10 This perspective is developed in my *The Temple of Jesus His Sacrificial Program within a Cultural History of Sacrifice* (University Park Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), this is taken up in Paula Fredricksen, *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews A Jewish Life and the Emergence of Christianity* (New York Vintage, 2000)

11 See Bruce Chilton and Jacob Neusner, "Paul and Gamahel," *BBR* 14 (2004) 1–43

have been representing Pharisaic interests when he arranged for Jews in Syria to purchase oil exclusively from Galilean sources (*J.W.* 2.591–594). In any case, it appears plain that some Pharisees supported the revolt of A.D. 66–70, and that others did not. But while many priests and Essenes perished in the war with the Romans and the internecine strife of the revolt, and the aristocracy of scribes and elders in Jerusalem was discredited and decimated, the Pharisees survived the war better than any other single group. They were well accepted locally, had long ago accommodated to marginal influence and survived with their personnel and their traditions comparatively intact.

Rabbinic literature personifies the survival of the movement in a story concerning Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai. In the narrative, Yochanan had himself borne out of Jerusalem on the pretense he was dead and hailed the Roman general Vespasian as king; on his ascent to imperial power, Vespasian granted Yochanan his wish of settlement in the town of Yavneh, the group of Rabbi Gamaliel, and medical attention for Rabbi Zadok (cf. *Bavli*, *Gittin* 56a, b). In that Josephus claims similarly to have flattered Vespasian (*J.W.* 2.399–408) and to have seen in his coming the fulfillment of messianic prophecy (*J.W.* 6.310–315), the tale is to be used with caution, but it remains expressive of the Rabbinic ethos.

With the foundation of academies such as the one at Yavneh after A.D. 70, one may speak of the transition of Pharisaism to Rabbinic Judaism. The Rabbis (with an initial capital), who directly contributed to Rabbinic literature and to the Judaism which is framed by that literature, belonged to a movement much changed from the popular Puritanism of the Pharisees. The sort of leadership that a Yochanan ben Zakkai might offer became unexpectedly attractive beyond the natural Pharisaic constituency, in the absence of priestly, Essene, or scribal alternatives. The target of the tradition's application became correspondingly wider, as the Pharisaic/Rabbinic program was applied, not simply to issues of purity and sacrifice, but comprehensively to worship, ethics, and daily living. To Yochanan is attributed the view that the world, which had been sustained by the temple, the law, and deeds of faithful love, now was to be supported only by the last two of the three (*Avoth de Rabbi Natan* 4¹²). Moreover, he adjudicated, on the basis of his tradition, how feasts might be kept in the gathering for reading, prayer, and discussion that was called a "congregation" or "synagogue" (*keneset*, also applied to buildings erected for the purpose of such gatherings; cf. *Mishnah Sukkah* 3:12; *Mishnah Rosh Hashanah* 4:1, 3, 4). Developments of this sort have nothing directly to do, of course, with the way in which Jesus was addressed as "rabbi."

In the wake of A.D. 70 and the Roman confiscation of the tax formerly paid for the temple, neither Jerusalem nor its environs was amenable to the maintenance of a hub of the movement, and even Yavneh was eclipsed

12. Available in translation in the Soncino edition of the Talmud (Israel Epstein, ed., *The Babylonian Talmud* [London: Soncino, 1948]); see also Judah Goldin, *The Fathers according to Rabbi Nathan* (Yale Judaica Series; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1955).

during the second century by centers in prosperous Galilee, such as Usha and Beth She'arim. Later, the metropolitan cities Sepphoris and Tiberias were the focuses of leadership. The health of the movement required a shift from the highly personal authority of the Pharisees to an ideal of learned consensus.

Just that shift is reflected in a Talmudic story concerning a great teacher, Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus. The story has it that, against a majority of his colleagues, Eliezer held that a ceramic stove, once polluted, might be reassembled and considered clean, provided the tiles were separated by sand. The majority taught that the result would be unclean; materials of this sort should never be used again. Eliezer's correctness was demonstrated by a tree that was uprooted at his behest, by a stream that ran backwards at his command, by a building he demolished in the same way, and by a voice from heaven. Despite all this, the majority held that its decision was binding—and God approved the result (Bavli, Baba Metzia 59a, b). As institutional authority emerged, even Eliezer's personal authority diminished; the Rabbis of the second century were to stress a coherent, consensual achievement of purity, and the Talmud confirmed that orientation.

The historic concern for the temple as the actual focus of purity nonetheless resulted in a final and disastrous attempt—encouraged by some Rabbis—to free and restore the holy site. The most prominent Rabbinic supporter of that attempt was a student of Eliezer's renowned for his expertise in the tradition, Aqiba. Aqiba supported the claims of Simeon bar Kosibah to be the new prince of Israel, acting in conjunction with a priest named Eleazar. Simeon's supporters referred to him as Bar Kokhba, "son of a star," projecting onto him the messianic expectations of Num 24:17, while his detractors came to know him as Bar Koziba, "son of a lie." His initial success and military acumen is attested in letters he sent his commanders during his revolt and regime, which lasted from A.D. 132 until 135.

The response of the Roman Empire was even more definitive than it had been in A.D. 70. The remnants of the temple were taken apart, and new shrines were built in the city. Jerusalem itself was now called Aelia Capitolina, Jews were denied entry, and Judea came to be designated Syria Palaestina.

The Rabbis survived by disowning the aspirations embodied by Aqiba, but keeping much of his teaching. "Aqiba, grass will grow out of your jaw, and the messiah will not have come!" (Yerushalmi, Ta'anit 4:5); that is to say, the messiah is to be of David, not of popular choosing, and his time cannot be pressed. But the greatness of the Rabbinic response to national defeat, and their consequent redefinition of Judaism consisted less in their formulation of a particular teaching regarding messianism (which emerges in any case from time to time in many forms of Judaism, particularly in the Targumim) than in their textual constitution of a form of thought, discipline, and life: the Mishnah.¹³ By that time, of course, Christians had long

13. See Lee I. Levine, *The Rabbinic Class of Roman Palestine in Late Antiquity* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary Press, 1989). For a useful diglot edition, see Philip Blackman,

before moved into a different position, maintaining in their master's name that, just as the messiah was the one true guide, so only that teacher could truly be called "rabbi" (Matt 23:8, 10).

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JOHN

John's Gospel presents a considerable proportion of the evidence that supports the understanding that "rabbi" was a term applied to Jesus by both insiders and outsiders. That application is to such an extent that the term should long ago have been used as an initial category of historical analysis. John does so despite the fraught attitude toward "the Jews" in the fourth Gospel.¹⁴ In precisely that setting, it is notable that John develops a distinctive pattern in the usage of the term, one that helps to account both for the orientation of the Gospel toward its tradition and the theological perspective that it develops.

The pattern is established in the usage at 1:49 (introduced in v. 38), when Nathanael says to Jesus, "Rabbi, you are the son of God, you are Israel's king." The respectful address "rabbi" encapsulates the information given to Nathanael by Philip, that Jesus "son of Joseph, from Nazareth," is the one of "whom Moses wrote in the law, and the prophets" (v. 45). But "rabbi" also marks a transition, as Nathanael then identifies Jesus as "the son of God" (v. 49, as well as "Israel's king") echoing the statement of John the Baptist in 1:34.¹⁵ The reason for the change is Jesus' statement, "Before Philip called you I saw you when you were under the fig" (v. 48). This insight brings Nathanael to the same conclusion that John offered about Jesus' identity as God's son. But whereas John's conclusion is the awareness that the Spirit that rests on Jesus and that he is the one who "immerses with Holy Spirit" (v. 33), Nathanael's is associated with seeing Jesus as the king of Israel.

But for what reason does Nathanael call Jesus "king of Israel" in v. 49? David lineage through Joseph might conceivably be at issue, although in John 7:42 Jesus' Davidic descent is denied, as though as a matter of routine, by a confused populace. (Their perspective is comparable to the statement in 8:41.) But later in John, "king of Israel" is the greeting that acclaims Jesus

Mishnayoth Pointed Hebrew Text, English Translation, Introductions, Notes, Supplement, Appendix, Indexes, Addenda, Corrigenda (Gateshead Judaica, 1990) The most commonly used translation of Bavli, which is presented in a way that permits recourse to original language editions, is Epstein, ed., *The Babylonian Talmud*

14 See John T Townsend, "The Gospel of John and the Jews The Story of a Religious Divorce," in *Antisemitism and the Foundations of Christianity* (ed Alan T Davies, New York Paulist Press, 1979) 72-97

15 Raymond E Brown, *The Gospel according to John Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (AB 29, Garden City Doubleday, 1966) 57, 66-67, makes the case for the reading *eklektos*, rather than *huos*, in v 34 But he undermines his argument that *eklektos* is the more difficult reading by providing it with a rich theology of Jesus as the servant of God Once that is filled out in prophetic terms, it is straightforward to conceive of later tradition, viewing John the Baptist as a preliminary figure (as John's Gospel insists he is), attributing a less-than-ontological Christology to him

as he enters Jerusalem (12:13) and the acclamation is verified by reference to the image in Zech 9:9 of the king who comes to the daughter of Zion riding on an ass's colt (John 12:15).

Zechariah supplies the true content of Jesus' royal identity, while the dispute over his being "king of the Jews" (18:33, 39; 19:19, 21) conveys a different, locally political and fraught sense. Zechariah is also the probable link to Jesus' kingship in Nathanael's statement. Jesus has just "seen" him under the fig, an image that appears in Zech 3:10 (cf. 1 Kgs 4:25; Mic 4:4)—the place in the Hebrew Bible where neighbor is to *call* neighbor to that fulfillment, as Philip called Nathanael, instead of simply enjoying it alone. Then, too, the Zecharian prophecy, in chap. 3, concerns what happens as a result of the purification of a high priest named *Iesous* in the Septuagint, Hebrew *Yehoshua*.

This Joshua is also promised access to those that "stand" in the heavenly court, the angels (Zech 3:7). That angelic reference provides just the transition that Jesus makes in response to Nathanael, when he promises a greater vision: the heavens opening and the angels of God ascending and descending on the son of man (John 1:51). The wording clearly reflects Gen 28:12, but the context has been prepared by reference to Zechariah.

That context is key to understanding the imagery in John, which pictures the angels ascending and descending "on the son of man" (v. 51). Ernst Haenchen observes that the ladder in Genesis has "verschwunden" with this replacement.¹⁶ This presumes, however, that the meaning of Genesis is unambiguous. The Septuagint does assume the ladder is the means of the ascent and descent, but the Hebrew wording might be referring to the ladder or to Jacob. C. H. Dodd takes the replacement in John to be of Jacob (that is, Israel), which would provide a link to Jesus' identity as Israel's king.¹⁷ Either way, however, Jesus' saying in John makes the son of man the pivot of contact with the divine court. This is how the phrase is first introduced in the Gospel.

"Rabbi" here serves as a status identifier for Jesus, who then moves the discussion into his insight into heaven. In his discussion of the passage, John Ashton assumes that Dan 7:13 is the origin of son of man sayings generally, such that Jesus was fully identified with that angelic figure by the time of John and throughout John's Gospel.¹⁸ This assumption seems to exclude consideration of the idiomatic expression *bar nasha'* in Aramaic, which refers to a class of people, including the speaker.¹⁹ But at the

16 Ernst Haenchen, *Das Johannesevangelium Ein Kommentar* (Tubingen Mohr Siebeck, 1980) 182, cf. the translation by Robert Funk and Ulrich Busse in the Hermeneia series, *John 1 A Commentary on the Gospel of John Chapters 1–6* (Hermeneia, Minneapolis Fortress, 1984)

17 C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge Cambridge University Press, 1963) 245–46

18 John Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford Clarendon, 1991) 338, 340

19 Most recently, this usage has been detailed by Maurice Casey, *The Solution to the "Son of Man" Problem* (Library of New Testament Studies 343, London T & T Clark, 2007) I have had occasion to criticize the adequacy of this solution, see my "Review of *The Solution to the 'Son of Man' Problem*," *Bib* 90 (2009) 290–93, quoting p. 292

conclusion of his comments, Ashton sees that "Nathanael is being tacitly equated with Jacob here,"²⁰ so that the generic usage finally does seem in play in Ashton's view.

Ashton's combination of views of "son of man," the generic (including the speaker with other human beings) and the angelic (deriving from Dan 7:13), obviously raises the issue whether Jesus in John 1:51 refers to the angels ascending and descending on Nathanael or on Jesus himself. But this is the kind of issue that arises elsewhere when "son of man" is involved. The promise to Nathanael complements a Synoptic saying, "Foxes have holes and the birds of heaven nests, but the son of man does not have a spot to lay his head" (Matt 8:20 // Luke 9:58). This is true for Jesus and those who follow him. The promise of John 1:51 covers the same scope.

That the address *rabbi* introduces the idiomatic Aramaic phrase "son of man" seems straightforward, although the transition of the passage to revelation is striking. "Son of man" might have been applied generically, but then the literally angelic setting cannot be missed. This represents a consistent application of the parallax usage²¹ of the phrase *ho huos tou anthropou* within the Synoptic Gospels, where the application is both human and heavenly.

In keeping with the bivalent "son of man" usage they were expected to appreciate, John's audience regarded itself as more philosophical than the well-educated rabbi Nicodemus. In a scene of almost comic misunderstanding, he shows himself too literalistic to understand Jesus' teaching about being born again (John 3:1–15). Jesus tells him that a person must be born *anōthen* to see the kingdom of God.²² Nicodemus's imagination is so limited that he finds himself asking how an old man could enter his

The Danielic imagery is, of course, taken up within the New Testament, in order to refer to Jesus' future coming in an anticipated apocalypse, but within Daniel itself, the figure is or represents an agent of redemption and disclosure within the heavenly court, and angels feature at the center of the book's message. The failure to make that distinction weakens the claim of this book to provide a "a complete solution to the Son of man problem." When Casey comes to deal with Luke 12:8–9 and comparable material in Chapter Seven, he does not evaluate the possibility of an angelic reading, despite the explicit place of angels in those New Testament contexts.

Professor Casey and I shared an interest in Aramaic and, with some exceptions, a view of the development of the Aramaic language. I parted company with him because he wished to see the use of "son of man" as being purely generic, when Daniel established the possibility of an angelic usage. Coming after the teaching of Dan 7, "one like a son of man" appears as the authentically human angel, offering a fresh dimension of meaning that does not contradict the generic usage, even as it takes it into new territory. News of Professor Casey's death reached me during the preparation of this article, and I take the opportunity to mourn the passing of a cherished colleague.

20 Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel*, 348.

21 See David R. Catchpole, "The Angelic Son of Man in Luke 12:8," *NovT* 24 (1982) 255–65, my "The Son of Man: Human and Heavenly," *The Four Gospels 1992: Festschrift Frans Neirynck* (ed. F. van Segbroeck, G. M. Tuckett, G. van Belle, and J. Verheyden, BETL 100, Leuven: Peeters, 1992) 203–18.

22 See Brown, *The Gospel according to John*, 130–31, 138–40.

mother's womb a second time (John 3:4). This "ruler of the Jews" (v. 1, with *archōn* a plausible representation of *rab*) struggles to understand what the baptized Christians for whom this Gospel is designed had long appreciated.

But Nicodemus's usage of the term *rabbi* proves to be antecedent to Jesus' teaching at another level, as happened when Nathanael used the term. Calling Jesus "rabbi," he says, "No one is able to do the signs that you do, except God be with him" (3:2). Only two signs have occurred in John, at the wedding at Cana and in the temple, but the term *sign* itself is evocative. Signs accompanied Moses (Exod 24; 33:7–23) and Elijah (1 Kgs 19:1–12) once they approached God's presence, and Nicodemus explains his address of Jesus as *rabbi* in these terms. He stumbles over the conception of rebirth, which Jesus explains in terms of Spirit (vv. 5–8), just the term of reference attributed to John the Baptist in 1:33–34.

When Nicodemus again expresses perplexity (3:9), Jesus dismisses his claim to be "a teacher of Israel," a *rabbi* (3:10; cf. v. 2 and 1:38), and then insists he is only speaking of earthly things. How would you (plural now) grasp heavenly things (3:12)?

In the end, Jesus maintains that "no one has ascended into heaven except the one who has descended from heaven, the son of man" (3:13). Ernst Haenchen takes this to be an advance reference to the resurrection, and many commentators see it as a full-throated assertion of Jesus' pre-existence in John.²³ The audience of the Fourth Gospel probably saw the language in that way.

But "son of man" also has associations, including but not limited to Daniel 7, with the approach of God's *Merkavah*, the heavenly chariot throne from which divine power and wisdom emanated for the ordering of all creation. Just as John assumes that the "word" of God embodied by Jesus is nonetheless, like the *memra* in Aramaic, an aspect of God apart from Jesus (see 5:38; 17:17),²⁴ so the son of man is not to be identified with Jesus without remainder.

The conception of the *Merkavah* is much more ancient, profoundly rooted in the theology of Israel, than the development of kabbalistic techniques during the Middle Ages, with which the term *Merkavah* is often associated today. Indeed, the ascent to the divine throne is older than Israel itself.

Akkadian, Old Babylonian, and Middle Assyrian sources, mainly extant between the 23rd century B.C. and the 15th century B.C., speak of kings and courtiers entering into the palace of heaven and receiving visions and empowerment there.²⁵ Israel learned these royal traditions from Babylonia and converted them into prophetic authorization, especially during the time of Ezekiel (in the sixth century B.C.). Ezekiel himself related his

23. Haenchen, *Das Johannesevangelium*, 224; Brown, *The Gospel according to John* 132–33.

24. See my "Typologies of Memra and the Fourth Gospel," *Targum Studies* 1 (1992) 89–100.

25. See, for example, Stephanie Dalley, "Etana," *Myths from Mesopotamia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989) 189–202; Bernhard Lang, "Die grosse Jenseitsfahrt," *Paragrana* 7 (1998) 24–42.

classic vision of the throne of God as a chariot, and what is usually called *Merkavah* mysticism derives from his vision (in Ezek 1). After Ezekiel, the books of Enoch and Daniel detailed this vision in distinctive ways. By the time of Jesus, fragments in Aramaic at Qumran had taken that tradition further, and it flourished long after.²⁶

The book of Genesis says of Enoch only that “he walked with God, and he was not” (Gen 5:22). This disappearance is taken as a sign that Enoch enjoyed a vision by ascent into the multiple heavens above the earth and was authorized to relate its wisdom to Israel, indeed, to act as an intermediary to the angels who had disobeyed God.²⁷ From Ezekiel, through Daniel and Enoch, and on to John and Jesus, there is a growing tradition, a *kabbalah* (something received), which reflects a deep commitment to the disciplined practice of the vision of God’s throne. The fragments of Enoch at Qumran are found in Aramaic, which suggests that the book was used not only by the Essenes (who tended to guard their sectarian documents in Hebrew) but also by a wider audience, which included the Essenes. In fact, the book of Enoch is also quoted within the NT, so that there can be no doubt of its widespread use. Another work found in Hebrew at Qumran and widely attested elsewhere, the book of Jubilees, also presents Enoch as a figure of revelation: he himself knows the Torah later communicated to Moses by angelic communication.

The development of these traditions is obviously not independent: there is a successive building and borrowing from one to the other. The ascent to the divine throne was an aspiration that was “received” or “taken,” one source from others. To “receive” or to “take” in both Aramaic and Hebrew is expressed by the verb *qābal*, from which the noun *qabbalah* is derived, and the noun is used in both Mishnah and Talmud to refer to ancient tradition, including the Prophets and the Writings within the Bible of Israel (as distinct from the Torah). What is *qabaled* might be any sort of authoritative tradition, but it is tradition concerning the *Merkavah* that is our concern here.

When Paul wishes to underline that authority of his teaching concerning the Eucharist, he says, “For I received from the Lord what I also delivered over to you,” and he goes on to speak of both Jesus last meal with his followers *and* its significance and correct observance (1 Cor 11:23–33). The sources of Paul’s authority include what he learned from primitive Christians (especially Peter; see Gal 1:18) but more importantly what he calls the *apokalypsis*, the uncovering, of Christ Jesus (Gal 1:12): “For I want to inform you, fellows, of the message of triumph messaged by me, that it

26 See Frederick H Borsch, *Son of Man in Myth and History* (Philadelphia Westminster, 1967), Michael D Schwartz, *Mystical Prayer in Ancient Judaism An Analysis of Ma’aseh Merkavah* (Texte Und Studien Zum Antiken Judentum Series 2, Tubingen Mohr Siebeck, 1992), my “The Kabbalah of Rabbi Jesus,” in *The Jewish Jesus Revelation, Reflection, Reclamation* (ed Zev Garber, West Lafayette Purdue University Press, 2011) 20–35

27 See Michael Langlois, *Le premier manuscrit du livre d’Hénoch Étude épigraphique et philologique des fragments araméens de 4Q201 a Qumrân* (Paris du Cerf, 2008)

is not by a person. For I neither received it from a person, nor was I taught, but through an uncovering of Messiah Jesus." This disclosure occurred in a supernatural realm, the third heaven, the paradise to which Paul on another occasion says he was snatched up, where he was told unutterable wisdoms (2 Cor 12:1–4).

This sort of language is not merely formal or rhetorical; it is also a matter of spiritual practice and personal experience. Paul is attesting, at the generative moment of his identity as an apostle, that the vision of the divine throne to which the risen Jesus had been elevated was at the heart of his own consciousness. There is no trace of Paul's famous tendency toward argumentation here: the practice of ascent is simply taken to be understood among those who first heard his letters.²⁸ The assurance of Paul that this ascent was a self-evident aspect of his authorization invites us to look back, to seek traces of the power of the *Merkavah* in the experience of Jesus. Those traces are perhaps most plain in Jesus' baptism and in what that reception of the Holy Spirit produced in him. This takes us back to Jesus' association with John called the "immerser" (the *baptistēs* in Greek, from the common verb *baptizomai*).

Within this tradition "the son of the man" is manifestly *not* a generic person but an angelic figure, who is in a position to muster the angels of the heavenly court. He appears in Dan 7:13; 10:16, 18 and En. 46:2, 3, 4; 48:2; 60:10; 62:5, 7, 9, 14; 69:27, 29; 71:17. The Danielic imagery is taken up within the NT, in order to refer to Jesus' future coming in an anticipated apocalypse, but within Daniel itself, the figure is essentially an agent of redemption and disclosure within the heavenly court, related to the "likeness of the appearance of a man" in Ezek 1:26.

John's Gospel appears to presume that Jesus is to be identified with the angelic or heavenly son of man throughout, but it is the one source in the NT that poses the celebrated question *who is this Son of Man?* (John 12:34). The issue reflects an earlier understanding (see Luke 12:8), according to which Jesus, the generic son of man, was in parallax with the heavenly son of man, the angelic advocate of Israel in the heavenly court.

The precedent in the tradition to John's Hellenistic dualism between the heavenly and earthly was the distinction between the presence of God in his *Merkavah* and the response to that reality among his people. The term *rabbi* was the gateway to that distinction in its first two uses within the Gospel. The second use, however, in John 3:13, says that "no one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the son of man." In this case, the use is not generic, but it relates to the heavenly figure of Dan 7 and associated texts. This figure of revelation, like the angels in 1:51, opens heaven.²⁹ Once that is stated, John 3:14 has Jesus refer to the necessity that the son of man should be lifted up. The latter reference

28. See my *Rabbi Paul: An Intellectual Biography* (New York: Doubleday, 2004) 114–15, 119, 203, 228.

29. Brown, *The Gospel according to John*, 145, helpfully cites Prov 30:3–4 and Wis 9:16–18 in this regard.

builds on the generic usage in order to *identify* Jesus with the angelic son of man, a preexistent figure. John's intent is to not only to forge, but also to maintain and deepen this identification.

Once established, the use of *rabbi* functions smoothly to that effect, with the same anticipation of the difference between divine presence and the human capacity to respond, until the last instance in the Gospel. John the Baptist is addressed as "rabbi" (3:26) in order to underline that Jesus baptizes with Spirit. Jesus is called *rabbi* and asked to eat (John 4:31) to maintain the difference between food that perishes and food that remains. He is asked, as *rabbi*, when he arrived at the shore of the Sea of Galilee (6:25), to emphasize that his presence is a sign. Asked how he explains blindness (9:2), he replies that the end is to bring the light of the world. Reminded that "the Jews seek to stone" him in Bethany, he nonetheless goes there to raise Lazarus (11:8). In each of these cases, the address "rabbi" prefaces a shift to what is held to be the substance of the topic.

The last instance of *rabbi* as an address to Jesus solidifies the pattern and offers insight into the composition of the Gospel. The terrain is prepared by the mention of Nicodemus in connection with Jesus' burial and with the reminder of Nicodemus's nocturnal visit (19:39). John establishes the parameters of chap. 3 as part of the setting. By having Nicodemus join Joseph of Arimathea, the difficulty of women witnesses that attends the Synoptics (see Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 1:8) is obviated. At the same time, the audience expects to see beyond the limitations that Nicodemus has already demonstrated. That expectation is fulfilled, when it is not he but Mary Magdalene who encounters the risen Jesus and, after failing to recognize him, greets him as "*rabbouni*" (an alternative form in Aramaic) after he speaks her name (20:16).

The next part of their exchange fulfills the pattern already discerned. Mary does not complete the greeting because Jesus refuses her touch. He explains, "I have not yet ascended to the father. But proceed to my brothers and say to them, I ascend to my father and your father and my God and your God" (20:17).

Within the Gospel according to John, this ascent is clearly a return. He has said in so many words that Jesus departs to the one who sent him (16:5), so that it makes sense to see the reference to ascending as a matter of going back whence he came. But precisely the address "rabbi," together with the reference to ascent, brings us back to Jesus' earlier exchange with Nicodemus. There, Jesus insists that no one but the son of man has ascended to heaven, because only he descended from heaven (3:13). If the complete identification with Jesus as the Son of Man is assumed, John 3:13 and 20:17 should be read as correlative. But Haenchen, who favors the correlation where the meaning of John as a whole is concerned, nonetheless acknowledges that in 20:17 the Evangelist uses a "naïve Form" of tradition.³⁰

The naivete Haenchen targets is the assumption of the statement that Jesus has not yet made the transition into Spirit. Dodd sees the expression

30. Haenchen, *Das Johannesevangelium*, 571.

in terms of Jesus giving the Spirit³¹ and links this passage to the Signs source. The conviction that John incorporates tradition in this case is shared by many commentators.

But when the traditional, as distinct from Johannine, connection of 20:17 to 3:13 is acknowledged, a different reading emerges. Instead of being the completion of the cycle of Jesus' *katabasis* and *anabasis*, Jesus would be saying to Mary that, unlike the son of man in 3:13, he is only now going to the father. The heavenly son of man has been there before, and all along, while Jesus in his resurrection is identified with that son of man.

CONCLUSION

John deploys the address "rabbi" in a way that helps establish, more than any other single Gospel, this emic category as a commonly accepted designation of Jesus among insiders and outsiders. In addition, this Gospel presents a pattern of usage according to which *rabbi*, as an agreed identity, is a provisional indicator, intended to lead to a revelation that subsumes "rabbi" within another identity (then specified by subsequent material in John) connected with the *Merkavah*. In particular, "rabbi" elucidates Jesus relation to "the son of man."

In the interchange with Nathanael, Jesus is the generic son of man on whom the angels of God ascend and descend. He makes a cognate vision possible for others (John 1:49–51). In the interchange with Nicodemus, the heavenly or angelic son of man is alone the one who ascends into heaven, because he came down from heaven (3:13). That figure is set in parallel to the generic son of man, who must be lifted up so that everyone who believes in him might have eternal life (3:13–14). As the Gospel unfolds, the generic and heavenly son of man are fused; Jesus' preexistence is made into an explicit theme.

This fusion of elements that existed independently within contemporary literature, as Charles H. Talbert has shown, resulted—to use John Ashton's language—in "consequences which Judaism could not contain."³² Whether or not the latter claim can withstand scrutiny within the critical comparison of religions, it does convey John's conviction and suggests that the *novum* of John lay not merely in applying a myth of a descending-ascending redeemer to Jesus but in portraying Jesus as the ascending, human analogue of the descending son of man. Nicodemus cannot even fathom baptism: Jesus' identity as heavenly son of man is totally beyond him.

References to the son of man that follow in the Gospel take this fusion further, with Jesus portrayed as final judge (5:26–29), bread of life (6:27, 53, 62), lifted up (8:28), fully identified with the son of man (9:35–38), and glorified (12:23; 13:31). In several cases, "rabbi" appears prior to these assertions of Jesus' true identity (4:31; 6:25; 9:2; 11:8), perpetuating the pattern we have observed.

31. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, 443.

32. Charles H. Talbert and John Ashton, "The Myth of a Descending-Ascending Redeemer in Mediterranean Antiquity," *NTS* 22 (1975–76) 418–43; quoting p. 355.

The natural inference is that John intends a theology of Jesus' pre-existence as the son of man and uses *rabbi* as an introductory counterpoint. But the address also appears in plausibly traditional material, and Nicodemus's reference to Jesus' "signs" invites investigation of how the title might feature in the hypothetical source named after them. Mary's address of Jesus as "rabbi" causes him to speak of his impending ascension (20:17), but he does not speak of himself as the son of man and does not specify an ascent to "where he was before," as in 6:62. This final scene, precisely by not according with Johannine convention, shows us how—at least in one tradition—Jesus, the generic son of man, came to be seen as merging with the heavenly son of man. He could only ascend to the father by becoming "the one who has descended from heaven, the son of man" (3:13).



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