

## JOHN'S CHRISTOLOGY

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"Where are you from?"  
(Jn. 19: 9)

### 1. Introduction

To speak about Christ and his salvific activity was the main concern of the evangelists, "so that everybody believes that Christ was the son of God and has eternal life (Jn. 20:31)." The writers of the four gospels have had a delicate task: to communicate the teaching of Christ to different types of community some decades after Christ's death and resurrection. All four evangelists wrote from a post-resurrection perspective and understanding. The evangelists before writing down the message of the gospel have undergone an experience of faith in Jesus Christ as saviour. In fact, they have edited their gospels with this belief in their minds and hearts. However, every gospel has its specificity in speaking about Christ and therefore its theology, Christology, which at the very end reflects the intention of the author, the understanding of Christ's function and nature, and indirectly the setting of the Christian community within which the gospel was written. Hence, the existence of four gospels - against Marcion - is not at all a matter of repetitions or contradictions! It is also not a superfluous quantity about Christ's life and activity, but a precious documentation in understanding how the four evangelists believed, understood and spoke about Christ's life.

To speak of and understand Christ's life, nature and activity was/is an ongoing process of whom the four evangelists are the main witnesses. In this essay I will focus my attention on how John's gospel speaks about Jesus Christ, which kind of Christology does it contain, which christological titles does John use for his theology and Christology, and which understanding of Jesus Christ's person has John throughout his gospel. The Christology is the way of speaking about Jesus. This can be explicit or implicit, low or high Christology. We find this through the reading of the gospels. Every gospel has its Christology or way of speaking about Jesus Christ. By analyzing John's Christology we are lead to see the portrait of John's Jesus, to compare it with the other christologies and to try to understand its shaping.

### 2. John's Christology and the synoptics

"The gospel of John fundamentally contains but a single theme: The person of Jesus."<sup>1</sup> Is there any difference between John's description of Jesus Christ and the synoptics portrait? In what does this difference of presentation consist? How is it realised and why is so different? Compared with synoptics' Christ, the Johannine's Christ does not belong to this world at all: he enters the

world with the purpose of leaving it, or descends in order to ascend. He is a pre-existent divine being, whose real home is in heaven. He knows precisely who he is. He is also portrayed as subject to human weaknesses, but in control of his fate.<sup>2</sup>

The beginning of John's gospel, is the first and main hint of difference between the synoptics and John. Among the four evangelists, only John speaks so obviously about the pre-existence of Jesus Christ. His prologue is a very direct introduction in the ontological question about Christ's origin, nature, with a dense articulation on Jesus pre-existence. There are hints about this concept in Matthew, Mark and Luke's gospels<sup>3</sup>, but not so intense, emphasized and developed like In John's prologue. I think that we can say that John wants to indicate from the beginning to his listeners, from which perspective he is speaking about Christ. This starting point, so much impregnated by theology and Christology, will be developed in his manner of depicting Christ till the end of the gospel. In fact, John is speaking about Christ, throughout his gospel, as the Logos, the Lamb of God, the Son of Man, the Son of God, the Saviour of the world, the Lord and God, but in such a way that is very different with the Christology adopted by the synoptics.

The Jesus Christ of John's gospel is "from above". This way of speaking about Jesus occurs throughout the gospel and it seems that it works as a reminder for those who are reading/listening to it. Moreover, John's gospel contains and develops a high Christology. His gospel is very much centred on the person of Jesus Christ. It seems that all the stories, miracles, dialogues are used by John just for pointing out to Jesus, in a way which is more emphasised than in synoptics. The goal is that Jesus Christ's person emerged from all the paragraphs of the gospel. His Christology is not first of all functional, but *ontological*. John is more concerned in speaking to people about *who is Jesus Christ*, then what is Jesus Christ for us! The signs which Jesus performs throughout the gospel are directed to point out the nature of Jesus. The signs leads the disciples beyond themselves, toward the person of Jesus.

In the synoptics Jesus speaks very rarely about himself and even prohibits the others to speak about himself, but in John's gospel, Jesus speaks always and from the beginning about himself, without attempting to prevent the people knowing who is he. "What the Johannine Jesus reveals, constantly and indeed exclusively, is himself."<sup>4</sup> He reveals himself to his disciples, the Samaritan woman, the blind man affirming clearly who is he, namely , the Messiah, the Son of god. John's Jesus is depicted as being aware of being the Son of God, the Son of the Father, the Christ and this since the beginning of the gospel. His consciousness of who he is, is shared with the others! He lives this awareness with serenity. "In the fourth gospel Jesus talks about Christology. This way of talking stands in contrast to the synoptics gospels, where the christological question is more implicit than explicit."<sup>5</sup>

The Book of signs (Jn 1-12) presents Jesus in some personal encounters , where humanity and divinity are revealed altogether. The Book of glory (Jn 13 -21) speaks about a Jesus oriented toward the Father. His relationship with the Father is a constant element of these chapters and definitely of John's gospel. Jesus relationship with the Father is not described only to present Jesus as being sent by the Father, but - and I think that the main reason - to indicate the origin of Jesus, that, is, the pre-existence of Jesus before his incarnation. The extent of references to Jesus' relation

with the Father points at the stress which John put on Jesus' nature and origin. Jesus, as such, has his identity in his relationship with the Father. By revealing the father, Jesus is more than a prophet. He is the Son. " Only the Son knows the Father." (Jn 1:18) This way of speaking about Jesus was considered by the Judaic religion as being blasphemous, and even for Christians there was not yet a clear way to understand the relation between God Father and Jesus, and his divinity.

The gospel of John with its explicit high Christology was shaped by the *Sitz im Leben* within which John wrote it. Written around 95 - 105 AD, it reflects the tension between Christians and the Jewish community<sup>6</sup>, the expulsion of Christians from the synagogue because of their claims in regard to Jesus Christ's divinity and messiahship. The focus in the gospel on the identity of Jesus show the need within the community to assert stronger their faith, which in fact was also part of their identity. From here, the centrality of Christ, the pre-existence of Christ so explicit express and the necessity to be reborn again.(Jn. 3:3-8)

### **3. Christological titles of Jesus in John's gospel**

The fourth gospel rejects simple solutions to the problem of Jesus identity .It does not limit its affirmation about Jesus to predicates like the eschatological prophet, which might be understood by any human. By refusing either antithesis, the fourth gospel sets the parameters for an incarnational Christology.<sup>7</sup>

John's speaking about Jesus is more orientated toward his nature, than mission. Nevertheless, his mission is as such because of his origin. Moreover, John is more interested in developing an ontological Christology than a functional one.

A classical way of reflecting on Christology is through the titles which Jesus is identified. The christological titles as such are saying something about Christ's person, but they have also to be understood against the background of the time, culture and Jewish religion. Their "function" is to point toward Christ's identity, which guide us to ask: "Who is Jesus? Where is he from? What does it mean that Jesus is Son of man, Son of God, Logos?"

#### 3.1. Jesus as Logos

"Throughout the gospel the question of origins is raised: at Cana (2:9), with the Samaritan woman (4:11), by "the Jews" (9:29) and even by Pilate (19:9). If the origin of Jesus is turned toward God as the Logos (1:1), then his presence in history will be the result of his being the 'sent one' of the Father"<sup>8</sup> The prologue is the paragraph where many christological titles present in John's gospel appear together, so that the text itself has a very intense of theology and Christology. John introduces Jesus as being the Word or the Logos. It is the most original and unique way within the New Testament of speaking about Jesus. It is a sapiential and philosophical manner in speaking about the existence and incarnation of Christ. The text recalls from its starting point Gen 1:1 ("In the beginning") and Pv 8:22-23, in regard to the pre-existence of the wisdom. "By claiming that Jesus is the word of god the author supposes that Jesus is the divine medium of communication with humanity."<sup>9</sup> Why is Jesus depicted through the image of the Logos? Was this because John's

community setting and cultural background enhanced the understanding of the idea of Jesus' pre-existence? From where does John bring this image-concept to speak about Jesus?

The image of Jesus as Logos, points toward the pre-existence of Jesus. Probably, in it John has found the better way to speak about this ontological state and origin of Jesus. This episode substitutes the story of Jesus' birth, present in Synoptics. The intention of John is not to deny Jesus' humanity, but to underline his divine pre-existence. The theological method of John is somewhat descendent or "from above." Its starting point emphasises a high Christology and fixes the parameters within which he is going to speak about Jesus. Jesus, "The Word was with God and the Word was God" is a high theological statement. This understanding and speaking about Jesus as Logos, pre-existent with God, makes John's christology distinct from the synoptics and a high one. Here, Jesus is not just Messiah, but first of all a pre-existent person! The emphasis is on Jesus' s pre-existence, who nevertheless "became flesh." The pre-existence of Jesus is strengthened further on in John through other statements (6:62; 17:5,24; 6:33; 7:28; 8:14, 23;) like that where Jesus spoke about his being before Abraham (8:58) or when he spoke about himself as being "from above" or through the titles "I am" (*ego eimi*). "As the gospel began with the assertion that Jesus is God, so the gospel concludes with the confession of Thomas, 'My Lord and My God' (20:28)"<sup>10</sup>, which according to R. Brown is the highest christological title used throughout the gospels.

### 3.2 Jesus as Son of Man

One of the most frequent titles for Jesus in the gospel of John is "Son." The simple title, "Son" suggests an intimate relationship between God and Christ.<sup>11</sup> The title "Son of Man" is used not only by John, but also in the synoptics, as referring to Jesus. It is found thirteen times in John. (1:51; 3:13, 14; 5:27; 6:27, 53, 62; 8:28; ecc.) It has its background in an apocalyptic<sup>12</sup> context (Dan. 7). Did Jesus use this title in speaking about himself? In which contexts did Jesus use this title to speak about himself? Is this a messianic-soteriological title for Jesus? Son of Man is the manner in which the Johannine Jesus speaks of his origin from god and his destiny to be glorified.<sup>13</sup> "The Johannine Son of man appears in conjunction with the expression "lifted up" (3:14; 8:28;), "glorified" (12:23; 13:31;), and "ascending" (3:13) - all Johannine articulations of the meaning of the cross. But it also appears in conjunction with judgement (9:39; 5:27)"<sup>14</sup>. Although the fourth gospel does not employ Son Of Man as another messianic title, Jesus' description of himself as the descending and ascending Son of Man who will be exalted by being lifted up on the cross enriches the gospel's confession of him as Messiah and son of God.<sup>15</sup>

### 3.3 Jesus as Son of God

This is another significant and frequent title with which Jesus is identified. Central to the revealing task of Jesus is his being the Son of God. The function of the dominant category of John's Christology - the Son of God - is linked with the prologue's ideas about the Logos: Jesus is the Word incarnate, the God incarnate. So, in light of the prologue, it should be clear that the Son of God is the pre-existent Son.<sup>16</sup> John wants the Christ to be understood in the light of the Son of God title (11 :27; 20:31).The reason is also clear from the characteristic Johannine elaboration of Son

language: Son expresses well the intimate relation between Jesus and God.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, this title "appears most often in its traditional role as a messianic designation (1:34; 10:36; 11:27;). It is likewise used in connection with eschatological themes, namely judgement (3:18) and resurrection (5:25).<sup>18</sup>"

### 3.4. Other Titles of Jesus

Jesus is also described as the Lamb of God (1:29, 36), the Saviour of the world (4:42), the Christ, the Lord. All these titles confirm what John already has in mind. They are in line with the other titles and reflects also a high Christology. They serve to indicate the messianic role of Jesus, of his activity and life. If we read them against the Jewish background, as they were intentionally written, we can penetrate deeper the sense conveyed by them.

## **4. High Christology and soteriological faith**

"it cannot be doubted that what the evangelist has at heart is faith in the person of Jesus Christ and his salvific power."<sup>19</sup> The Christology of John, even if is an ontological one, makes sense for him, through soteriology. Such a high Christology is orientated to soteriology and in fact because is a Christology from above, it's also soteriology. Nevertheless, this is also a significant hint in John, that his Christology is also functional. The bridge is the faith: a christological faith which became soteriological faith. Jesus is from above and Messiah! "Faith, as what is demanded of man/woman for salvation (6:29), is completely Christological in its orientation."<sup>20</sup> The christological discourse developed through the titles of Jesus are orientated to make the disciple believe that Jesus is the Logos, The Son of God, the Christ. Such faith is soteriological. John's gospel is written with the intent of helping disciples believe in Christ, the Son of God. "That you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name." (Jn. 20: 31) Therefore, it is not a matter of indifference how do the disciple consider who Christ is, because only that precise christological faith developed by John is christological. The emphasis denotes the struggles within the community around which kind of faith in Jesus is soteriological also.

Throughout the gospel Jesus is depicted as "encouraging" people to accept and believe in him. He stresses very much the importance of believing in him (3 : 12, 15, 18, 36). In fact, the signs, the miracles which he performs are orientated toward helping the people to believe in him (2 :11, 22 - 23). "In John the wonders are indications of the identity of the person of Jesus and point to the "bringer" rather than which is brought."<sup>21</sup> Signs are the vehicle to faith, in Jesus as the Son of God, Messiah and they are often accompanied in the gospel by the terms faith-eternal life: "that every one who sees the Son and believes in him, should have eternal life. (Jn 6:40)" They only disclose their meaning when they are greeted with faith and when their meaning is grasped under the outward event (3:11; 6:26)<sup>22</sup>

## 5. Conclusions

How is the high Christology of John's gospel to be considered in relation to synoptics? A discontinuity or as a development?<sup>23</sup> . "The Christology of the fourth gospel is not higher than that of the synoptic gospel, but it's true that John was more conscious of the importance and centrality of Christology."<sup>24</sup> I do not agree completely with Barrett's opinion, because I consider that John's Christology was not only more explicit, but also more developed theologically." I think that the purpose of John's writing and the context was very determinant for the shape of his gospel, and mainly for the way he depicted Jesus. What John affirms in his gospel about Jesus is not denied by the synoptics or somehow in contradiction with them, because his christological statements are implicitly in their writings also. The particularity of John's Christology is that it is so explicit and high. The context where John wrote his gospel required certainly that he be more explicit in the professed faith and also clearer statements about Jesus' origin and nature. John has had the good audacity to go further than synoptics, in developing theologically and theoretically what was experienced through faith. In fact, "the fourth evangelist is the theologian *par excellence*."<sup>25</sup> I think that John's Christology can be seen as a discontinuity of style in approaching Jesus, but certainly in continuity with the synoptics' content and understanding of who Jesus is. This discontinuity and continuity is a development in understanding deeper Jesus' origin and nature.

Moreover, Christology is linked directly to soteriology and vice versa. The disciple is invited by Jesus, through John's words, to concretise this union in himself/herself through the faith. If it is true that John's gospel's main feature is a high Christology, it is also the core of his gospel, the emphasis on salvific faith grounded in the right understanding of who Jesus is, namely, the right Christology. "Faith is, then, the positive human response to the revelatory act of God in Christ."<sup>26</sup>

### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> R. Bultmann, The Gospel of John. A commentary (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971) 5

<sup>2</sup> John Ashton, Understanding the Fourth Gospel (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991) 239

<sup>3</sup> Xavier Leon-Dufour, Lecture de L'Évangile selon Jean I (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1987) 11

<sup>4</sup> Rudolf Schnackenburg, The Gospel according to St. John vol. I (New York: Burns & Oates, 1968) 22

<sup>5</sup> R. A. Spivey / D. Moody Smith, Anatomy of the new Testament (New York/London: Macmillan Publ. Inc., 1974) 462

<sup>6</sup> R. Brown, The Gospel according to John (i-xii) (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1971) LXX-LXXII

<sup>7</sup> Pheme Perkins, art. "The gospel according to John" in The New Jerome Biblical Commentary, ed. R. Brown/J. Fitzmyer/R.E. Murphy (New York: Geoffrey Chapman, 1990) 949

<sup>8</sup> F. Moloney, art. "Johannine Theology", in The New Jerome Biblical Commentary, ed. R. Brown/J. Fitzmyer/R.E. Murphy (New York: Geoffrey Chapman, 1990) 1422

<sup>9</sup> Robert Kysar, art. "John, The Gospel of" in The Anchor Bible Dictionary vol. 3 (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 923

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 923

<sup>11</sup> James D.G. Dunn, art. "Christology" in The Anchor Bible Dictionary vol. 1 (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 981

<sup>12</sup> R. Schnackenburg, op.cit., 128-129

<sup>13</sup> Frank J. Matera, New Testament Christology Westminster: John Knox Press, 1999) 233

<sup>14</sup> James D.G. Dunn, art. "Christology", op.cit., 981

<sup>15</sup> Frank J. Matera, op.cit., 234

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 231

<sup>17</sup> James D.G. Dunn, art. "Christology", op.cit., 988

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 988

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<sup>19</sup> R. Schnackenburg, op.cit., 154

<sup>20</sup> R. Schnackenburg, op.cit., 157

<sup>21</sup> Robert Kysar, op.cit., 915

<sup>22</sup> R. Schnackenburg, op.cit., 520

<sup>23</sup> J. Dunn, art. "*John and the Synoptics as a Theological Question*" in Exploring the Gospel of John ed., R.a. Culpepper/C.C. Black (Westminster: John Knox press, 1996) 301-308

<sup>24</sup> C.K. Barrett, The Gospel according to St John (London: SPCK, 1960) 58

<sup>25</sup> R. Brown, op.cit., XLIX

<sup>26</sup> Robert Kysar, op.cit., 915

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