

## "Jesus's Deity in John's Gospel and Letters: Do We Force the Issue?"

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Paper for the Johannine Literature Section (Edward W. Kink III, Moderator)  
presented at the 71<sup>st</sup> Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society,  
Thursday, November 21, 2019, at San Diego, CA.

In considering links between John's Gospel and the Johannine epistles concerning the deity of Jesus, it's readily admitted that John offers a "post-resurrection" reflective look about the life of Jesus and his significance as "*the* Messiah" (ὁ Χριστός) in order to address "post-resurrection" issues of the early church.<sup>1</sup> Yet, there is an undeniable tension between the opening prologue about Jesus's full deity (John 1:1–3) that often blurs the significance of Jesus's full humanity (John 1:14; 1 John 1:1; 4:2; 2 John 1:7). Accordingly, some misread John's portrayal of Jesus who was sent in the flesh as God's Messiah, who spoke in the flesh as God's Messiah, who did miraculous signs in the flesh as God's Messiah, and who died in the flesh as God's Messiah. "As a Rabbi with disciples," says Harris, "Jesus exercises his leadership not through claims of privilege, exalted position, and power, but through demonstrated weakness, vulnerability, humility, and self-sacrificial love that ends with him on a Roman cross, dying for those he came to save."<sup>2</sup> Consequently, followers of Jesus are called to emulate Jesus who lived life as a real person (John 15:18; 24; 16:2; cf. 1 John 3:16; 4:9). So, it seems *appropriate* to separate John's "post-resurrection" purpose in retelling Jesus's life and ministry from Jesus's "pre-resurrection" Judean historical context, especially when it comes to Jesus's stated mission in John 10:24–39 because there is in fact a tale of two histories to be recognized in all the Gospels.<sup>3</sup> This is also true about our confession of Jesus as "son of God" in John's letters.

I liken my thoughts to an erroneous theological statement that concludes Frank Capra's celebrated and endearing movie traditionally watched by many during the Christmas season entitled "It's a Wonderful Life."<sup>4</sup> The movie is a 1946 Christmas film based upon a short story *The Greatest Gift* by Philip Van Doren Sterns written in 1939 and published privately in 1943. The film portrays George Bailey (played by James Stewart) as a man who has given up on his dreams to travel the world in order to help people in the small town of Bedford Falls. Fiscal misfortune, however, drives George to imminent suicide on Christmas Eve at which point viewers are introduced to George's guardian angel, Clarence Odbody (played by Henry Travers). Clarence intervenes to prevent George's suicide. Unfortunately for Clarence, he is a guardian angel who has yet to earn his angelic wings. Nevertheless, his success in convincing George

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<sup>1</sup> In my article entitled "Defining the Titles 'Christ' and 'Son of God' in Mark's Narrative Presentation of Jesus" (*JETS* 50.3 [September 2007]: 537–59), I argue that most of the titles ascribed to Jesus throughout Mark's narrative story about Jesus and in Mark 1:1 serve only to present Jesus to be "the Christ."

<sup>2</sup> W. Hall Harris, "Understanding the Gospel of John" in *Understanding the Gospels: A Guide for Preaching and Teaching*, edited by Herbert W. Bateman IV and Benjamin I. Simpson (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2017), 131–32.

<sup>3</sup> Herbert W. Bateman IV, "Interpreting the Gospels Historically: A Tale of Two Histories" in *Understanding the Gospels: A Guide for Preaching and Teaching*, edited by Herbert W. Bateman IV and Benjamin I. Simpson (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2017), 23–44.

<sup>4</sup> In 2007, "It's a Wonderful Life" was recognized as "the most inspirational American films of all times." Capra considered it "his personal favorite among the films he directed." See *It's a Wonderful Life*, Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/It%27s\\_a\\_Wonderful\\_Life](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/It%27s_a_Wonderful_Life), viewed September 25, 2019.

Bailey of his life having been meaningful earns Clarence his wings. Yet, the statement that I'd like to underscore from this heart-warming film is one that George Bailey's daughter makes at the very end of the movie when all of George's friends appear at his home to show their appreciation of him. While holding his daughter Suzie, a bell on the Christmas tree rings at which point she says, "Look daddy, teacher says, 'Every time a bell rings an angel gets his wings.'" At which point George Bailey agrees, looks up, and says: "That-a-boy Clarence."

I'd like to suggest that George and Suzie Bailey's mistaken belief about angels parallel in some ways our thinking about the "son of God" claims in John's Gospel and his letters. Every time "son of God" *like* claims appear in John's writings, particularly John 10:24–39 and statements in 1 John, they need not necessitate a systematic theological endorsement of Jesus's deity, but rather they may actually endorse his messiahship.

### The Mission of Jesus: John 10:24–39

While setting aside but not denying the indisputable high Christology in John's Gospel, I'd like to suggest that the threefold dialogues between "the Jews" (οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι) and Jesus in John 10:24–39 affirms his messiahship and not his deity. John draws his readers to engage Jesus as he lived, worked, and dialogued with "the Jews" as God's appointed Messiah within a Jewish cultural and theological setting during the latter part of the second temple period. As a preamble to Jesus's proclamation about his messiahship, John 7:1–8:59 presents an array of interchanges between "the Jews" and Jesus about paternity. They serve as a backdrop for Jesus's discourse in John 10:24–39 about his messianic mission. More pointedly, Jesus, in three dialogues with "the Jews" (10:24–30, 31–32, 33–39), denied their disingenuous assumptions about him as equal with God and described himself as the Messiah who worked so closely together with God the Father that they were unified as one with regard to his messianic mission.

#### *Contextual Orientation: John 7:1–8:59*

Verbal interactions between the Jewish leaders (οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι, "the Jews") and Jesus appear frequently in John. Significant to the context of John 10:24–39 is the set of dialogues that appear at the conclusion of several Succoth (= Feast of Tabernacle) conflict scenes in John 7:1–8:59. These scenes of oral conflict between "the Jews" and Jesus occurred during the time of Succoth (beginning: 7:2, 10, midst: 7:14, and end: 7:37) and centered on Jesus, namely, from where he came and his paternity (7:1–53, 8:30–59). The frequent mention of the Jewish leaders' desire to kill Jesus reflects the intensity of the situation (7:1, 19–20, 25; 8:37, 40, 59).

For instance, during the clash about paternity (8:31–56), the Jewish religious leaders intended to stone Jesus. Jesus had argued that one's conduct determined one's father and concluded that the father of the Jewish leaders was the devil (8:42–47). Similar matters about paternity appear in 1 John (3:9–10; 5:12, 18). But in John 8, paternity concerned the Jewish leaders (οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι, "the Jews") with whom Jesus was in oral conflict. The series of exchanges in John climaxes in verse 58 with Jesus's ambiguous declaration "I *myself* am *the one* before Abraham's coming into being" (πρὶν Ἀβραὰμ γενέσθαι ἐγὼ εἰμί) or perhaps "before Abraham was born, I am *the one*" promised (cf. Gen. 17:1–6; BDAG, s.v. "εἰμί" 1, p. 282; s.v. "ἐγὼ," p. 275).<sup>5</sup> At which point "the Jews" picked up stones with the intention to stone Jesus for

<sup>5</sup> Many view Jesus's quotation "before Abraham was, I am" as a means to equate himself to God. (cf. Exod. 3:6–18; NET n. 160). Yet, some argue that Jesus is not quoting Exodus 3:14 (Alan Feurbacher). Exodus 3:14 reads, "God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM.'" He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" Nevertheless, Wallace contends that "If Jesus were speaking Hebrew, he could have said  $\text{אֲנִי הוּא}$  or I AM. This would explain why the Jews were so angry, angry enough to kill him. If he were speaking Greek, this idea of eternal

blasphemy (8:58–59). John 8:58 *may* be a reference to Jesus's messiahship (in a pre-resurrection context) or perhaps his equality with God (in a post-resurrection context). In either case, no charge of blasphemy is explicitly mentioned. Still, John's readers knew the Jewish intention to stone Jesus for blasphemy was in keeping with their cultural practice.<sup>6</sup> So while Jesus never cited the name of God, to the Jewish leaders of the second temple period, Jesus's "I myself am the one" statement *rang* of arrogance, *disrespected* God, and was seen as a *challenge* to their authority.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, John 10:24–39 most certainly underscores his messiahship. Immediately after Jesus's controversial healing of a blind man (9:1–41), John places another set of dialogues between "the Jews" and Jesus (10:24–39)<sup>8</sup> as an appendix to the Succoth narrative that heightens Jesus's conflict with "the Jews" as it pertained to Jesus's messiahship.<sup>9</sup>

### *First Dialogue: John 10:24–30*

After identifying the historical setting of the event at Solomon's portico during the "Feast of Dedication" (10:22–23),<sup>10</sup> the first of three verbal exchanges occurred between the Jewish leaders (οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι, "the Jews") and Jesus. John 10:24–30 opens with Jewish leaders inquiring about Jesus's messiahship and concludes with Jesus's proclamation about his unified mission

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existence which εἰμί carries still would allude to Exodus 3:14, in the sense that Jesus is eternal much like אֵלֶּיךָ is eternal" ("John 8:58: How do we translate?" Kelton Graham [KGRAHAM0938@comcast.net](mailto:KGRAHAM0938@comcast.net); see also *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996], 515, 530–31. Granted, Jesus was probably speaking Greek. Furthermore, within Jesus's historical context, he was probably referring to his messiahship (E. Freed, "Who or What was Before Abraham in John 8:58," *JSNT* 17 [1983], 52–59)). The theological disposition about God's transcendency emphasized during this time period, also would argue for Jesus as referencing his messiahship with the statement "before Abraham was born, I am *the one*," namely, he was God's predetermined promised Messiah.

<sup>6</sup> The theological basis behind stoning for blasphemy during the second temple period is Leviticus 24:16, which is evident in extra-biblical sources. While reviewing the Law Moses gave to the people of Israel, Josephus summarizes Leviticus 24:16 with Deuteronomy 21:22–23 and says, "Let him that blasphemeth God be stoned, then hung for a day, but buried ignominiously and in obscurity," which seems to be echoed in the Mishnah's discussion of how to carry out a capital execution (Josephus, *Ant.* 4.8.6 § 202; cf. *m Sanhedrin* 6.4, *y Sanhedrin* 6:23c [Neusner 6:6], *b Sanhedrin* 45b–46b). Reflecting second temple perspectives, *m Sanhedrin* 9.3 (cf. Sifra Leviticus Emor Parashah 14) contends that the most severe crimes deserve the most severe form of punishment, namely death by stoning, which is reserved for the blasphemer and idolater (*y Sanhedrin* 6.23b [Neusner 6.1], *b Sanhedrin* 49b–50b). In addition, the *Targum Neofiti*'s (perhaps 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D.) translation / paraphrase of Leviticus 24:11–23 says, "Anyone who pronounces the name of God in blasphemy will receive (the punishment of) his sins. And whoever pronounces the name of the Lord in blasphemy shall surely be put to death: all the people of the congregation shall stone him" (vv. 15b–16; cf. *m Sanhedrin* 7.5; *b Sanhedrin* 55b–57a). McNamara's translation in *Targum Neofiti 1: Leviticus/Targum Pseudo-Johnathan: Leviticus*, The Aramaic Bible, vol. 3, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994), 96.

<sup>7</sup> Compare Darrell L. Bock, *Blasphemy and Exaltation in Judaism: The Charge against Jesus in Mark 14:53–65* (Tübingen: J. C. Mohr, 1998; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 30–112.

<sup>8</sup> John 9:1–10:21 reflects a seven scene structure that may be presented as (1) The Healing, 9:1–7; (2) The Blind Man and the Pharisees, 9:8–12; (3) The Pharisees and Neighbors of the Blind Man, 9:13–17; (4) The Pharisees and Parents of the Blind Man, 9:18–23; (5) The Pharisees and the Blind Man, 9:24–34; (6) The Blind Man and Jesus Crew, 9:35–38; (7) The Risen Lord and Pharisees, 9:39–10:21. The point of this narrative is that all are born spiritually blind and all are called to believe when confronted with the sent one from God.

<sup>9</sup> The closing exchanges in 10:31–39 appear to be reminiscent of or a further development of the conflicts between Jesus and "the Jews" introduced in 5:1–47.

<sup>10</sup> Feast of Dedication or Hanukkah celebrates the cleansing, rededication, and re-establishment of temple worship in Jerusalem after Judas Maccabee victoriously defeated first Gorgias and then Lysias in 164 B.C. (1 Macc 4:1–59, 2 Macc 10:1–8; Josephus, *Ant.* 12.7.6 §§ 316–25).

with God as the Messiah. This first oral interchange introduces the central question for all three dialogues and to which Jesus was responding: "Are you the Messiah?" We read,

<sup>24</sup>The Jews surrounded him and asked,  
"How long will you keep us in suspense? *If you are the Christ, tell us plainly.*"

<sup>25</sup>Jesus replied,  
"I told you and you do not believe. *The works I do in my Father's name testify about me.* <sup>26</sup>But you refuse to believe because you are not my sheep. <sup>27</sup>My sheep listen to my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. <sup>28</sup>I give them eternal life, and they will never perish; no one will snatch them from my hand. <sup>29</sup>My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one can snatch them from my Father's hand. <sup>30</sup>I and the Father, we are one."

Sometime during the "Feast of Dedication" while at the temple in Jerusalem (10:22–30), the Jewish leaders asked Jesus, "if you are *the Christ* (= *the Messiah*), tell us plainly" (εἰ σὺ εἶ ὁ Χριστός, εἰπέ ἡμῖν παρρησίᾳ, 10:24; cf. 16:29).<sup>11</sup> There was a sense of urgency (εἰπέ), perhaps a sense of strong-arming Jesus to speak directly to the issue of his messiahship. (BDAG, s.v. "λέγω" 2c, p. 589). Jesus responded to them by pointing to "the works" (τὰ ἔργα) he had done in God's name (ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι τοῦ πατρὸς μου) as proof of his messiahship (v. 25), by announcing that he was the good shepherd (a messianic image) who had followers (vv. 26–29; an allusion to Ezek. 34), and by claiming his harmonious mission with God the Father (v. 30; cf. 1 John 2:22–23). More specifically, he said, "I and the Father, we are one" (ἐγὼ καὶ ὁ πατὴρ ἓν ἐσμεν).

Unfortunately, "the works" (τὰ ἔργα) performed, to which Jesus alluded in order to answer "plainly" (παρρησίᾳ) their question about his messiahship, were ignored. Instead, they overreacted to Jesus's latter portion of his answer, namely, his unique working relationship with God the Father. Yet, their seemingly self-righteous act to stone Jesus was disingenuous because culturally it was not uncommon for any Jew of the first century to refer to God as Father.<sup>12</sup> It seems the Tanakh's designation of "father" for the nation (Isa. 63:16) shifted to Jewish individuals, though one could certainly argue it was implied in the Tanakh though never explicitly stated.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Although there are limited second temple resources that focus attention on eschatological messianic figures, there are multiple types of eschatological messianic figures portrayed in second temple literature. The messianic figure of whom the Jewish leaders are inquiring of Jesus is that of a Davidic king. While the equivalent of the Hebrew term "Messiah" (מָשִׁיחַ) in Greek is "*the Christ*" (ὁ Χριστός), other terms for an expected Davidic Messiah are "son of God" (1Q28a, 4Q174, 4Q246, 4Q369, Psalms of Solomon, 1 Enoch, and 4 Ezra), "the branch" (4Q161; 4Q174; 4Q252; 4Q285; T. Jubilees), "prince of the congregation" (CD; 1QM; 1Q28b; 4Q161; 4Q285; 4Q376; 4Q423; Jubilees). See Herbert W. Bateman IV, Darrell L. Bock, and Gordon H. Johnston, *Jesus the Messiah: Tracing the Promises, Expectations, and Coming of Israel's King* (Grand Rapids, Kregel, 2012), 211–329.

<sup>12</sup> See Tobit 13:1–4; Wisdom 2:16; 14:1, 3; Sirach 23:1, 4–5, 51:8–9; 3 Maccabees 5:5–8; 6:1–3, 8–9; 1QH 17:35. In her evaluation of the use of Father in these texts, D'Angelo places them and others into "the context of traditional prayer strategies in early Judaism": prayers of the afflicted and persecuted (4Q372 16–20; *Jos. Asen.* 12:8–15; 3 Macc 6:3–4, 7–8; Sir 23:1; Wis 2:16–20), in recourse to the deity as wise and provident in caring for the petitioners or directing history (1QH<sup>a</sup> 9:35; 4Q372 1:17–19, 24; *Jos. Asen.* 12:15; Wis 14:1–4; 3 Macc 6:3; Jub 19:29) and appeals to God's mercy and forgiveness (4Q372 1:19; 1QH 9:30–35; *Jos. Asen.* 12:14–15; *Apocr. Ezek.* Fragment 2; Tob 13:4–6 Josephus, *Ant.* 2:152). Mary Rose D'Angelo, "Intimating Deity in the Gospel of John: Theological Language and 'Father' in 'Prayers of Jesus,'" *Semeia* 85 (1999): 59–82, especially 69–70. Thus, Father is not an uncommon reference for God in Judaism.

<sup>13</sup> The term Tanakh is derived from the three Divisions of the Hebrew Bible: The Torah (Pentateuch: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy), The Nevi'im (Prophets: Former Prophets: Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings; Major Prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel; The Minor Prophets: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zachariah, Malachi), and The Ketubim (Writings: Wisdom: Psalms,

Of particular interest for our study are the references to God as “my Father” (Sir 51:8–9) as well as the plea to “look upon the descendants of Abraham, O Father, upon the children of the sainted Jacob, a people of your consecrated portion” (3 Macc 6:1–3). The latter passage is of significance in light of Jesus’s previous charge against “the Jews” in John 8:34–48, namely that their father was the devil. D’Angelo’s point about Jesus’s use of “Father” is well taken: “John’s Jesus uses ‘father’ in dialogue with those who do, can, or ought to claim the same divine paternity as he does: the Jews, those other Israelites the Samaritans, the disciples and friends before whom he speaks with *παρρησία* (16:29).”<sup>14</sup> So, Jesus’s referencing God as “my Father” was in keeping with cultural usage throughout John (5:17, 18; 6:32, 40; 8:19, 49, 54; 10:37; 14:7, 20–23; 15:1, 8, 15, 23–23). It is a point John also makes in his letters about those who follow Jesus (1 John 2:22–23; 3:1; 5:1–4a). Nevertheless, it was the reaction of “the Jews” picking up stones with the intent to kill Jesus (v. 31) that opens John’s second dialogue.

### *Second Dialogue: John 10:31–32*

The historical setting for the second dialogue between the Jewish leaders (οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι, “the Jews”) and Jesus remains at Solomon’s portico during the “Feast of Dedication.” Despite their attempt to redirect attention from Jesus’s verification of messiahship to a disingenuous and over-reaction, Jesus responded to their insinuated indictment (v. 31) by returning to his response about his “many good works” as a testimony to his messiahship (v. 32). We read,

<sup>31</sup> The Jews took up stones again so they might stone him.

<sup>32</sup> Jesus answered them, “I have shown you *many good works from the Father*. For which one of *these works* do you stone me?”

The *Jewish response* to stone Jesus for some religious violation (10:31) is not specified until 10:33. Nevertheless, the cultural act or intention to stone Jesus was the same as saying to Jesus, “You are a blasphemer, and you deserve death,” a charge to which Jesus eventually responded. But at this point, the insinuated charge of blasphemy was disingenuous because the statements about his relationship with God merely offended Jewish leadership (10:30–31; cf. 5:17–18, 8:58–59, 10:38–39).<sup>15</sup> Jewish leaders like Philo of Alexandria (d. ca. A.D. 50) argued that those who think to ascribe to themselves honor like that given to God “with a loud-mouth frenzy, publish abroad samples of their deep-seated impiety and attempt to blaspheme the Godhead, and when they sharpen [*sic* whet] the edge of their evil-speaking tongue *they do so in*

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Proverbs, Job; Megillot: Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations Ecclesiastes, Esther; Histories: Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, Chronicles). The first letter of each main division creates an acronym T-N-K. Vowels are added to craft another word for the Hebrew Bible: The Tanakh.

<sup>14</sup> Whereas “the Jews” asked Jesus to speak with *παρρησία* in 10:24, Jesus spoke to the disciples and friends with *παρρησία* in 16:29. D’Angelo, “Intimating Deity in the Gospel of John,” 73.

<sup>15</sup> Similarly, in Philo, the claim to be divine as it was the case of an unnamed Egyptian prefect and governor is “evil of an extraordinary nature” (*On Dreams*, 2.130–33). Elsewhere he argues not to worship rulers who claim to be *like* God. There is no possibility of equality given to creature and creator (*Decalogue* 61–65). Such claims are blasphemy. The question that needs to be asked here in John 10, is this: Is Jesus claiming equality with God? Or is he claiming that his works are evidence of Father / Son unity of mission? Similarly, Moses and the Davidic King were to be unified in mission with God. Moses appeared unified with God in mission and thereby “*like* God” (מִיִּשְׁׁרָאֵל) before Pharaoh in the manner of the miracles he performed (Exod. 7:1). The Davidic king was unified in mission with God and thereby “*like* God” (מִיִּשְׁׁרָאֵל) before his people in the manner in which he was to rule in righteousness and justice (Ps. 45:6–7).

the wish to grieve the pious who feel at once the inroad of a sorrow that is indescribable and inconsolable" (*Decalogue*, 63 [Colson]; cf. *On Dreams* 2.130–31). So, even though the Jewish leaders may have felt intense infliction over Jesus's statements about his relationship with God the Father deserving of death, Jesus *redirected* their self-righteous feelings back to their initial question about his messiahship and challenged their insinuated indictment of blasphemy.

In 10:32, Jesus reiterated his plain answer given as proof of his messiahship with a question: "For which of *these works* do you stone me"? By restating his initial answer in the form of a question, the learned leaders to whom Jesus spoke would have been mindful of their own writings that anticipated a Messiah who would have authority over nature and the spiritual world (cf. 4Q521 2.ii.1; 11Q11 1:1–2; Josephus, *Ant.* 8.2.5 § 42–49). The Jewish leaders who wanted to know "plainly" (παρρησία) whether Jesus was the Messiah most assuredly were aware of Jesus's "many good works" or signs he performed because of God the Father's empowerment (πολλὰ ἔργα καλὰ ἔδειξα ὑμῖν ἐκ τοῦ πατρός). He changed water to wine in Cana of Galilee (2:1–11). During a Passover, he carried out numerous undefined signs in Jerusalem (2:23–25). After returning to Cana of Galilee from celebrating the above-mentioned Passover in Judea, Jesus cured a royal official's son (4:46–54). During a Jewish feast,<sup>16</sup> he healed a sick man by the sheep gate in Jerusalem (5:1–9). He completed a number of undefined signs of healing around the Sea of Galilee (6:1–2). It was also during or just before a second Passover<sup>17</sup> that Jesus fed 5,000 people in Galilee (6:3–15). He walked across the Sea of Galilee during a storm (6:16–20). During or at the end of Succoth, he healed a blind man who had been sitting in one of Jerusalem's streets near the temple (9:1–34). And he was yet to raise Lazarus from the dead (11:1–47). Together, these "works" or "signs" explicitly served as a testimony to Jesus's messiahship. They demonstrated that through God the Father's enablement Jesus had power over temporal or physical needs, nature, sickness, and death.<sup>18</sup> They served as a witness to Jesus's claim as one "sent" by the Father.<sup>19</sup> Finally, they affirmed the oneness of his mission with God the Father as *the* Messiah (5:16–23; 10:30, 38; cf. 12:37–43; 14:10–11, 20; perhaps 8:19).

Theologically, Jesus challenged any conjecture of the Jewish leaders (οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι, "the Jews") that his works were a claim to equality with God when in fact they were a testimony to his messiahship (μαρτυρεῖ περὶ ἐμοῦ, "they bear witness of me," cf. v. 25). Nevertheless, Jesus redirected the erroneous conclusion of "the Jews" by identifying himself as a person who worked so closely together with God the Father that they were unified with regard to his messianic mission among them. In many ways, Jesus's abilities paralleled those of two formable prophets

<sup>16</sup> Debate exists about the phrase "after this there was a Jewish festival" (Μετὰ ταῦτα ἦν ἑορτὴ τῶν Ἰουδαίων). Is ἑορτὴ a reference to the Feast of Tabernacles, Passover, or Feast of Weeks (i.e., Pentecost)? Since the only other identification given is that the feast was a Sabbath (v 9), it is difficult to determine with certainty what feast is being attended by Jesus. Raymond Brown, *The Gospel according to John I–XII*, AB (New York: Doubleday, 1985), 206.

<sup>17</sup> Brown, *John I–XII*, 233.

<sup>18</sup> Jesus's authority and power in general appears in John 5:17–23, 10:37–38, 14:10–11, 17:4–8, over temporal or physical needs in John 2:1–11, 6:3–15, over nature in John 6:16–20, over sickness in John 4:46–54, 6:1–2, 9:1–34, and over death in John 11:1–47.

<sup>19</sup> John 5:23–24, 36–38; 6:29, 44, 57; 7:27–29; 8:16, 18, 26, 29, 42; 9:4; 11:42; 12:44–45; 20:21; 13:20; 14:24; 15:21; 16:5, 17:3, 8, 18, 21, 25; 20:21; cf. 16:27–28. Two terms are used to convey that Jesus has been "sent" by the Father: (1) πέμπω in 5:23–24; 6:44; 7:28; 8:16, 18, 26, 29; 9:4; 12:44–45; 20:21; 13:20; 14:24; 15:21; 16:5; and (2) ἀπέστειλλω in 5:36–38; 6:29, 57; 7:29; 8:42; 11:42; 17:3, 8, 18, 21, 25; 20:21. Of significance is the use of ἀπέστειλλω, which is used not only in the sense of Jesus' commission but also to focus on the purpose and goal of Jesus' mission and the completion of that mission.

of the Tanakh, Moses<sup>20</sup> and Elijah.<sup>21</sup> Yet, Jesus was God's most recent agent (cf. Heb. 1:1–2). While some Jewish people believed as the result of these signs and were thereby receptive to Jesus (2:11), some remained skeptical (3:1–15). Others, namely, the Jewish leaders, were blinded by darkness (9:40–41, 11:47–53), they were unable to see the light (12:35–46) and were thereby unreceptive to Jesus.<sup>22</sup> Consequently, Jesus's reiterated reference to his "works" in John 10:22–31 were to redirect the erroneous inferences of blasphemy by Jewish leaders. Unfortunately, the Jewish leaders were unwilling to accept Jesus for who he was, *the* Messiah. Jesus's *ultimate response* to the Jewish leader's disingenuous charge of blasphemy is explicitly stated in John's closing dialogue (v. 33), and Jesus defends himself with an appeal to scripture (v. 34).

*Final Dialogue: John 10:33–39*

The final and longest dialogue between the Jewish leaders (οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι, "the Jews") and Jesus at Solomon's portico begins in verse 33 and extends into verse 38. As he did in 10:31–32, Jesus responded to the disingenuous insinuation of blasphemy (v. 33, cf. v. 31), and he stood his ground (vv. 34–38; cf. v. 32). Yet here, Jesus expanded his response to the now explicitly expressed allegation of blasphemy with Psalm 82:6 (vv. 34–37) and returned to his claim that he and God the Father were working harmoniously together (v. 38; cf. v. 31). We read,

<sup>33</sup>The Jews answered him,

"We are not stoning you for *a good work* but for blasphemy, and because you, a man, are making yourself *a god*."

<sup>34</sup>Jesus answered them,

"Is it not written in the Law, '*I myself said, 'you are gods'*'?"

<sup>35</sup>If those called 'gods' to whom the word of God came, and the writings are unable to be destroyed,

<sup>36</sup>can you say that the one whom the Father has set apart and sent into the world is blaspheming, because I said, *I am God's son*?

<sup>37</sup>If I am not doing *the works* of my Father, then do not believe me.

<sup>38</sup>But if I am doing [*the works of my Father*], and you do not believe in me, *believe in the works*, so that you understand and know that the Father *is* in me and *I am* in the Father."

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<sup>20</sup> Moses, as proof that he was sent by God the Father (Exod. 3:14–15), did numerous miraculous wonders as God empowered him and thereby testified to his being sent by God (Exod. 3:19). In fact, God tells Moses that God would authenticate his message by making it appear as though he were "a God" to Pharaoh (Exod.7:1). Moses had power over nature (Exod. 7:14–8:32; 10:1–29; 15:25; 17:1–4), he had power over illness (Exod. 9:1–35, 14:15–31), he had power over death (Exod. 11:1–8; 12:29–30), and fed a multitude of people (Exod. 16:4–30). *Sirach* 45:2 says that God made Moses "equal in glory to the holy ones, and made him great, to the terror of his enemies." Other Jewish literature emphasizes Moses's authority as God's mediator, prophetic lawgiver who receives God's revelation, and intercessor for God's people. See Daniel K. Falk, "Moses" and "Moses, Text of" in *Encyclopedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, volume 1 edited by Lawrence H. Schiffman and James C. VanderKam (Oxford: University Press, 2000), 576–81.

<sup>21</sup> Elijah, speaking as God's spokesman, has power over nature (; Sir 48:3), over death (1 Kings 17:17–24; Sir 48:4), and able to feed others (1 Kings 17:12–16). He also by-passed suffering of death (Sir 48:12a). It's interesting to note that though Elijah raises a Sidon widow's son from the dead, she does not assume he's "God" but rather "a prophet" (v. 24). It is said of Elisha, a disciple of Elijah, that he performed twice as many signs as Elijah (Sir 48:12b). Julio Treballe Barrera, "Elijah" in *Encyclopedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, volume 1 edited by Lawrence H. Schiffman and James C. VanderKam (Oxford: University Press, 2000), 246.

<sup>22</sup> The idea of recognition, skepticism, and unreceptive (or outright denial) is adapted from Culpepper's recognition scenes in John. R. Alan Culpepper, *The Gospel and Letters of John* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 72–86.

In 10:33, the Jewish leaders (οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι, “the Jews”) countered Jesus with a statement of clarification: “We are not stoning you for *a good work* (περὶ καλοῦ ἔργου).” Ignoring once again Jesus’s response, the Jewish leadership alluded to a single good work, probably the recent healing of the blind man in chapter nine. In a rather strong contrast (ἀλλά) the Jewish leaders clarified their judicious reasoning for stoning Jesus. In their prejudicial and self-serving way of thinking, it was for “blasphemy,” namely, for “making himself *a god*” (BDAG, s.v. “θεός” 4a, p. 451). More specifically, “because you, a mere man, are claiming to be God” (NLT). “The text,” as suitably noted by D’Angelo, “appears to accuse the Jews of disingenuousness in charging Jesus with blasphemy for ‘making God his own father’ (5:19) and ‘though human, making [him]self God’ (10:33).”<sup>23</sup> So, like the disingenuous reaction of “the Jews” to Jesus’s reference to his paternal relationship with God the Father, so too was their seemingly self-righteous charge, “although you are *a man*, you make yourself *a god*” (σὺ ἄνθρωπος ὃν ποιεῖς σεαυτὸν θεόν) to which Jesus responded in a threefold manner: a quoted verse from Psalm 82 (v. 34), his interpretation (vv. 35–37), and finally his application that echoed Jesus’s previously cited assertion that his mission as Messiah (= God’s son) was in harmony with God the Father (v. 38).

### Jesus Quotes Psalm 82

Jesus began his response to the Jewish leaders with a rhetorical question about the Law: “Is it not written in your law, ‘I said, you are gods?’” Jesus expected an answer in the affirmative. He purposely linked Psalm 82 with “the Law” as a means to engage the Jewish leaders judiciously. Theologically, the learned religious leaders with whom Jesus spoke knew “the Law” was not a limited reference to the Pentateuch. It referred to the Tanakh in general (cf. Luke 24:44). Jesus’s choice of Psalm 82 not only underscored the disingenuous of the Jewish leader’s allegation of blasphemy, it served to rebuke them as well.

Attributed to Asaph, Psalm 82 deals with God’s rebuke of corrupt judges over Israel, perhaps even a national lament psalm similar to Psalms 12 and 58.<sup>24</sup> The psalm may be divided

<sup>23</sup> D’Angelo, “Intimating Deity in the Gospel of John,” 67.

<sup>24</sup> Another option is to view the psalm “in the tradition of accounts of the meetings of the divine council or assembly of the gods” based upon 1 Kings 22:19–23; Job 1:6–12, 2:1–6; Zechariah 1:7–17; 3:1–5; Isaiah 6:1–13, 40:1–8. Marvin E. Tate, *Psalm 51–100*, WBC (Dallas: Word Books, 1990), 332–34; particularly Kraus who says, “The prophet sees Yahweh as judge in the midst of the gods and powers.” The gods and powers are the pantheon of demonic powers, rulers of the nations. He continues, “The highest judge calls the judges to account, brings to light their guilt, and reveals the salutary original order, which through his own sovereign word reaches out to all lands (vv. 3–4).” Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 60–150*, translated by Hilton C. Oswald (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989), 153–58. Anderson, who argues also for the religion–historical conclusions noted above, contends that “The crux of the Psalm is the identity of the ‘the gods.’” He argues that is was “doubtful” that the term “gods” (אֱלֹהִים) was “ever used of the earthly administrators.” A.A. Anderson, *Psalms (73–150)*, The New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 591–95.

However, evidence does exist of אֱלֹהִים being used of earthly administrators of Moses (Exod. 7:1), of judges (Exod. 2:6, 22:8 [perhaps Ps. 58:12 – “there are ‘gods’ who provide justice in the earth]), of Samuel (1 Sam. 28:13), and of a Davidite (Ps. 45:6–7). In addition, Elmer B. Smick in “Mythopoetic Language in the Psalms” (*WTJ* 44 [1982]: 88–98) makes a case from internal evidence, namely the inclusio of verses 1 and 8 and God’s triumph on earth and not heaven, to support human administrators. These judges or human administrators may indeed be understood to be influenced by angelic beings or as Smick says “rule on earth by proxy through kings and whose wills they dominate” (pp. 96–97; cf. king of Tyre, Isa. 14 and Ezek. 28). Perhaps the point being that, the Jewish rulers of Israel in Psalm 82 are driven by someone other than Yahweh.

Matitahu Tsevat in “God and the Gods in Assembly” (*Hebrews Union College Annual* 40–41 [1969–1970]: 123), presents a middle of the road position for Psalm 82, which is worth mentioning because it appears to support the human administrator perspective. He argues that “the gods of polytheism, the ‘other gods,’ often equated with the gods of the nations, are nothings” (p. 123). Yet recognizes that “for the historian who is interested in beliefs as they



into three sections, God's stance against judicial administrators (v. 1),<sup>25</sup> God's indictment and sentencing of judicial administrators (vv. 2–7),<sup>26</sup> and an appeal for God's intervention for justice (v. 8).<sup>27</sup> It reflected a Jewish community's concern: Why is the world full of injustice?<sup>28</sup>

Jesus, however, isolated the latter half of verse 6 of Psalm 82 as a premise for his response to "the Jews," which appeared toward the end of Asaph's indictment against judicial administrators (vv. 2–7). God, through the psalmist, accused Jewish judges (i.e., אֱלֹהִים) of perverting justice and respecting persons (v. 2).<sup>29</sup> Then the psalmist moves to God's instruction for Jewish judges (i.e., אֱלֹהִים) to adjudicate fairly and champion the cause of the oppressed (vv. 3–4). Before concluding his warning, the psalmist makes a metaphorical observation. Jewish judges (i.e., אֱלֹהִים) are presented as roaming through the earth without understanding and that the foundations of the earth are shaken (v. 5).<sup>30</sup> So, though God appointed Jewish judges as "gods" (אֱלֹהִים) and

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were held and their formations and transformations, in the appearance and disappearance of concepts in the flow of time there is a middle ground" (p. 125). He concludes that "Ps. 82 must be seen as a historic psalm, historic in the sense that, whatever its date, the thought expressed in it represents a watershed in the history of ideas. The poem presents two views of the gods, an earlier one and a later one, the former and prevailing one yielding dramatically to the new and true one" (p. 134). Verse 6 refers to "any minister and may be an allusion to "the ignominious end of governors, princes, ministers, or generals, to which the Bible makes occasional reference (Isa. 43:28; Jer. 49:38; Hos. 7:16; 13:10f.)" (p. 131).

<sup>25</sup> Asaph first announces that God stands ("God provides," אֱלֹהִים נֹצֵר) among the people to judge his human counterparts ('gods' = judges) (v. 1). Essentially, verses 1 introduces God's a rebuke of Israel's judges. Allen P. Ross, *A Commentary on the Psalms: Volume 2 (42–89)*, (Grand Rapids, Kregel, 2013), 721–22.

<sup>26</sup> Asaph then presents God's word of indictment and instructs the judges, the 'gods' over Israel, through a string of imperatives (v. 3, "defend" שָׁמֵר; v. 4, "rescue" פִּלְטֵנִי; v. 5, "deliver") to end their injustice and rescue the oppressed, for if they do not heed god's appointment, they will fall (vv. 2–7).

<sup>27</sup> Asaph finally calls on God ("rise up, O God," קִרְבָּה אֱלֹהִים) to intervene because he is the judge *par excellence* shall inherit the earth (v. 8).

<sup>28</sup> Leopold Sabourin, *The Psalms* (New York: 1970), 307.

<sup>29</sup> Realizing that Psalm 82:1–2 is quoted in 11QMelch, I feel compelled to say something about the text. One might argue that 11QMelch 2:9–13's quotation of Ps 82:1 and 2 may support a reference to an angelic being, namely that the named Melchizedek figure is an angelic figure much like Michael. See P. J. Kobelski, *Melchizedek and Melcheresa*, CBQMS 10 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic Biblical Association, 1981). However, if Melchizedek is an angelic being, how is it that Melchizedek is transformed from a human to an angelic being especially since another text, 2 Enoch 71:33–35 presents him as a great High Priest and an exalted human figure? It appears to me that a better and more significant argument could be made for the figure in 11QMelch to be an exalted human figure based upon the clearer 2 Enoch passage as opposed to circumstantial parallel concepts with Michael that are made to support an angelic view. Nevertheless, I do concede that Enoch is another earthly figure that is transformed into an angelic like figure in 3 Enoch 48C:3–12 and that an exalted human option would be a minority position. Nevertheless, the infrequent applications of the phrase "son of the Most High" during the second temple period tend to be directed to people and not angelic beings.

<sup>30</sup> With his appeal to Tate, Ross finds the emphasis of the psalm in verse 5. Note the emphasis on 'gods' throughout the chiasmic arrangement.

- v1 God is judging in the divine assembly
- v2 Charge against the gods
- vv. 3–4 Charge violated by the gods
- v. 5 Result of the failure of the gods
- v. 6 Proclamation of the 'gods' former status
- v. 7 Sentence of judgment on the gods
- v. 8 Prayer for God to rise and judge the earth.

“sons of the Most High” (בְּנֵי עֶלְיוֹן),<sup>31</sup> they will fall and die like men regardless of their great position (vv. 6–7). Jesus used Psalm 82:6b as the foundation for his response to the Jews because Jewish leaders were also *like* “gods” (θεοί).<sup>32</sup> Having stated an authoritative premise for his response (Ps 82:6a; cf. 10:35b), Jesus challenged the Jewish leader’s patently asserted allegation of blasphemy with his interpretation of Psalm 82.

Jesus Interprets Psalm 82:6

In his first of three assumed to be true statements (εἰ, “if”), Jesus offers an interpretation of Psalm 82 in a lesser to greater format (*qal wahomer*).<sup>33</sup> **First**, Jesus played with the ambiguity of the clause “If those called ‘gods’ to whom the word of God came . . .” Needless to say, no self-respecting Jew of Jesus’s day would argue with Jesus on this point. The word of the Lord came to numerous Jewish judicial leaders: Moses (Deut. 5:5 [Exod. 19–20]), Nathan (2 Sam. 7:4), Jeremiah (Jer. 1:2), Ezekiel (Ezek. 3:16), Hosea (Hos. 1:2), and others. However, Jesus employed the ambiguity of the clause as the basis for his eventual reasoning for applying “son of God” to himself. On the one hand, it was not uncommon in the Tanakh to reference angels as

Like Tate and Ross, I maintain the more traditional understanding of Delitzsch, namely that אֱלֹהִים in verse 6 are earthly administrators. Furthermore, John uses a “this equals that” midrash / peshet hermeneutic (8:56 of Gen. 15:12 and 12:41 of Isa. 6:10). Nevertheless, it seems that Jesus in John 10:34 views אֱלֹהִים as human judges over Israel. Ross, *A Commentary on the Psalms: Volume 2 (42–89)*, 723. Compare Marvin Tate, “An Exposition of Psalm 8,” *PRSt* 28 (2001): 343–59.

<sup>31</sup> People are sometimes referred to as *servants* of the Most High (of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego: Dan. 3:26; of Paul, Silas, Timothy, and Luke: Acts 16:17) but seldom of a person. Yet, a direct application to an individual exists in the controversial Qumran text 4Q246. In speaking of a cruel tyrant’s son, the text reads “He will be called the Son of God, they will call him the son of the Most High. But like the meteors that you saw in your vision, so will be their kingdom. They will reign only a few years over the land, while people trample people and nation tramples nation.” For discussion and translation of the complete text of 4Q246 2:1–3, see Michael Wise, Martin Abegg, & Edward Cook’s *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), 268–70.

<sup>32</sup> A look at the Hebrew (82:6), the LXX (81:6), and John 10:34 reveals a one-to-one correspondence. It is a direct quotation from Psalm 82:6.

John 10:34	Psalm 81:6 (LXX)	Psalm 82:6 (MT)
<p>Ἐγὼ εἶπα, Θεοὶ ἐστέ</p> <p>I said, “You are gods.”</p>	<p>ἐγὼ εἶπα, θεοὶ ἐστέ καὶ υἱοὶ ὑψίστου πάντες</p> <p>I said, “You are gods, and all of you are sons of the Most High.”</p>	<p>אֲנִי־אָמַרְתִּי אֱלֹהִים אֲתֵם וּבְנֵי עֶלְיוֹן כְּלַכֶּם</p> <p>I said, “You are gods, and you all are sons of the Most High.”</p>

The omission of the phrase “sons of the Most High” (בְּנֵי עֶלְיוֹן) may be because it’s a phrase reserved for Jesus as Messiah. Unlike Fitzmyer, Evans defends a probable messianic reading for 4Q246, which may explain why Gabriel announces that the child to be born of Mary will be called the “Son of the Most High” (Luke 1:32), and then demons refer to Jesus as “Son of the Most High” (Mark 5:7; 8:28). If the phrase “Son of the Most High” came to be associated with Jesus, it then would be no accident that (Jesus [?]) and John shortened the citation of Psalm 82:6 and thereby excluded the phrase “son of the Most High.” Compare J. Fitzmyer, “4Q246: The ‘Son of God’ Document from Qumran,” *Bib* 74 (1993): 153–74 with C. Evans, *Jesus and His Contemporaries*, AGAJU 25 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995), 107–11. Nevertheless, a close parallel exists in Sirach 4:10 as a comparative statement. “Be a father to orphans and be like a husband to their mother; you will then be ‘like a son of the Most High’ (ὡς υἱὸς ὑψίστου), and he will love you more than does your mother.”

<sup>33</sup> *Qal wahomer* is an argument of logic. Arguments begin with a less significant situation to something more significant. Thus, what applies in a less important case will certainly apply in a more important case.

“sons of God,”<sup>34</sup> Israelites as “sons of God,”<sup>35</sup> Davidic royal-priests as a “son of God,”<sup>36</sup> and various Jewish leaders and judges as *like* “god.”<sup>37</sup> On the other hand while the ultimate judgment was understood to belong to God (Deut. 1:17), human judges and Davidic kings had a *divine-like* function as Yahweh's representative to carry out and maintain his divine justice. During the first century, judges were still highly regarded, perhaps even as *quasi-divine*. This opinion seems to manifest itself in second temple Jewish literature because to go against Jewish leadership was considered an act of blasphemy.<sup>38</sup> Jesus eventually used Psalm 82:6b as a witness to support his own claim of authority from God the Father. Thus, Jesus merely reminded them that judges (i.e., Jewish leaders) were referred to as “gods” (Θεοί ἐστε, “you are gods”) and that they were highly regarded as *quasi-divine*. They were to be *God-like* in the manner in which they executed their judicial decisions.

**Second**, Jesus toyed with the Jewish leadership concerning their trumped-up charge of blasphemy. He said, “Can you say that the one whom the Father has set apart and sent into the world is blaspheming.” Jesus moved from the lesser ones *to whom* the word of God came and were called “gods” (10:35) to the greater one *whom* God “set apart and sent” (ἡγάσεν καὶ ἀπέστειλεν; 10:36). Jesus applied Psalm 82:6a to himself to validate his declaration, “I am God's son” (υἱὸς [τοῦ] θεοῦ εἰμι) or “I am a *vocal agent* sent from God” (cf. John 1:14; Mark 12:1–12; Heb. 1:1–2). The assertion of “God's son” or “son of God” drew attention to Jesus's relational or honored status with God the Father as Messiah. Similarly, biblical and non-biblical writings used “son” to convey an honored status between God and his chosen people (Exod. 4:22, Hos. 11:1, Jer. 31:9; cf. n. 52 for believers in John's Gospel), his righteous people (Wis 2:18; 5:5), and even his first created “son,” Adam (Luke 3:38). This was particularly true of David's heir, Solomon. In 2 Samuel 7, David's forthcoming son would be heralded as “God's son” and to whom God would be “a father” (echoed in Ps. 2; cf. Ps. 89) as well as in second temple texts about a forthcoming Messiah (4Q174 32–13; 4Q246 2:1–9; etc.).<sup>39</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Clear passages are Job 1:6, 2:1, 38:7 [11QtgJob 30:5]. A somewhat debatable passage is Genesis 6:2, 4 [1 En 6:1–2]. A debatable passage is Deuteronomy 32:8–9. The MT reads “sons of Israel” (בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל), the LXX reads: “sons of God” (υἱοὶ τοῦ θεοῦ), and 4QDeut<sup>f</sup> reads: “sons of God” (בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים). An even more debatable passage is Deuteronomy 32:43. Whereas the MT has no reference to “sons of God,” the LXX does (υἱοὶ θεοῦ) as does Odes 2:43, Justin Martyr in *Dialogus cum Tryphone Judaeo*, and 4QDeut<sup>a</sup> “all you gods” (כָּל אֱלֹהִים).

<sup>35</sup> Clear passages where Israelites are declared “sons of god” are missing in the OT, though several occurrences exist in Wisdom when speaking of a righteous person as a “son of God” (2:14, 5:15) and the nation of Israel as a “son of God” (18:13). Nevertheless, OT national Israel is spoken of as a “son,” and Israelites are spoken of in comparison as “sons” and “daughters.”

<sup>36</sup> Clear passages are 2 Samuel 7:14 [4Q174 3:10–11; Ps Sol], Psalm 2:7 [Ps Sol], and Psalm 89:26. One less than clear passage is Psalm 110:3. For my understanding of Psalm 110, see “The Use of Psalm 110:1 in the New Testament,” *BibSac* 149 (Oct–Dec 1992): 438–53.

<sup>37</sup> It's used of several Jewish leaders: of Moses (Exod. 7:1), of judges (Exod. 21:6, 22:8 [perhaps Ps 58:12]), of Samuel (1 Sam. 28:13), of a Davidite [perhaps Solomon] (Ps. 45:6–7). For my understanding of אֱלֹהִים in Psalm 45:6 see “Psalm 45:6–7 and Its Christological Contributions to Hebrews,” *TJ* 22NS (2001), 3–21.

<sup>38</sup> In the *Life of Moses* from the early first century, the author depicts Moses as a king and vice regent figure, who even bears the name god (1.155–56). In fact, such a high regard for Jewish leaders existed in Israel that to argue against them was seen as a form of blasphemy. Exodus 22:27 links blasphemy of God and rulers together, which carries over in later Jewish history: Moses and Aaron (Num. 16:30), the king (1 Kings 21:10; Isa. 8:21), the temple (1 Macc 2:6–13, Josephus, *Ant.* 10.11.3 § 233, § 242), and the priests (Josephus, *Ant.* 12.10.5 § 406; Acts 23:3–4).

<sup>39</sup> Herbert W. Bateman IV, “Anticipations of the One Called ‘Son’” in *Jesus the Messiah: Tracing the Promises, Expectations, and Coming of Israel's King* by Herbert W. Bateman IV, Darrell L. Bock, and Gordon H. Johnston (Grand Rapids, Kregel, 2012), 295–329.

So, Jesus identified himself as “God’s son” as another more pointed addition to his initial response to the Jewish leaders’ question about his being the Messiah (v. 24). He does not insinuate an ontological existence with God, nor does he suggest that he was the second person of the godhead (cf. Deut. 6:4). In fact, *he appears* to explicitly deny it.<sup>40</sup> Instead, Jesus underscored his self-awareness that as God’s Messiah (= God’s son) he had a unique and honored Father / son relationship with God who had been sent into the world (ἀπέστειλλω in 5:36–38; 6:29, 57; 7:29; 8:42; 11:42; 17:3, 8, 18, 21, 25; 20:21), given authority to judge all things (5:22–23, 26–27, 30; 8:14–18, 26; 12:47–48), and empowered to perform miraculous works or signs (2:1–11, 23–25; 4:46–54; 5:1–9; 6:1–2, 3–15, 16–20; 9:1–34). To put it more directly, the real question Jesus seemed to raise was simply this: What is your problem?

### Jesus Applies Psalm 82:6

The final two assumed to be true statements for the sake of Jesus’s argument in verses 37–38 are in contrast to one another (εἰ ... εἰ δέ, “if ... but if”). Jesus began his application of Psalm 82:6 with yet another declaration about his works as a testimony to his plain answer to the question about his messiahship (εἰ σὺ εἶ ὁ Χριστός, εἰπέ ἡμῖν παρρησίᾳ, 10:24). As “God’s son” (υἱὸς [τοῦ] θεοῦ εἰμι), namely, “*the Messiah*” (ὁ Χριστός), Jesus was sent by the Father (ἀπέστειλλω in 5:36–38; 6:29, 57; 7:29; 8:42; 11:42; 17:3, 8, 18, 21, 25; 20:21; cf. Heb 3:1), and his works were the works of the Father (5:17–23, 30; 14:10–11). One way or the other, whether it be belief in Jesus as *the Messiah* (= ὁ Χριστός) or belief in God’s works through Jesus, Jewish religious leaders were to believe “God’s son,” “*the Messiah*.”<sup>41</sup> The goal (ἵνα, “in order that”) of God’s works by way of Jesus was to bring people to a place of understanding and knowledge about Jesus’s messianic mission (cp. 5:17–23; 14:10–11). Similarly, the signs and wonders Moses performed were an endorsement of his being sent by God as God’s agent (Exod. 3:14–15, 19; 7:1). Thus, Jesus claimed oneness with the Father not as a statement of deity, but rather as an appeal to his messianic mission as he executed miraculous works in harmony with God the Father as God’s mediating messianic agent (cf. Heb. 3:1–6). The Father and the messianic son worked together. Elsewhere, Jesus proclaimed to his disciples the way to the Father was through him (14:6; 1 John 5:12) and prayed that all who followed him might be one in harmony with one another, just as it was between him and God the Father (John 17:20–21; cf. 1 John 4:16; 5:1–2). So, the Jewish leadership in 10:31–38 accused Jesus of blasphemy, not because he *supposedly* claimed to be God but rather because he *displayed* his unique relationship with God the Father as God’s son (υἱὸς θεοῦ εἰμι, “I am God’s son”), “*the Messiah*” (ὁ Χριστός).

The exchange ends with John’s editorial comment, “Then they tried to arrest (πιάσαι) him again, but he escaped (ἐξῆλθεν) from their hands” (10:38). Although the Jews attempted several times to arrest Jesus (7:30, 32, 44; 10:39; 11:57), Jesus was not ready to allow himself to be arrested until his hour had come (7:30, cf. 7:6, 8; 8:20; 12:23, 27; 13:1; 17:1).

<sup>40</sup> Jesus, in his humanity, had “emptied” himself of his knowledge of deity (Phil. 2:5–7). Even though he was God, he had what we might call, deity amnesia. It is in this way that Jesus is able to sympathize with our weaknesses as exalted royal priest who intercedes for us before God (Heb. 4:15–5:10). Otherwise Jesus would appear to be lying.

<sup>41</sup> Humanly speaking, Jesus is sent by the Father (5:23–24, 36–38; 6:29, 44, 57; 7:27–29; 8:16, 18, 26, 29, 42; 9:4; 11:42; 12:44–45; 20:21; 13:20; 14:24; 15:21; 16:5, 17:3, 8, 18, 21, 25; 20:21; cf. 16:27–28). As one who is Spirit lead without measure (3:34), Jesus knows things that others do not (1:48; 2:24–25; 5:52; 6:6, 61, 64; 7:29; 8:14, 55; 11:42; 12:50). Jesus’ authority and power (5:17–23, 10:37–38, 14:10–11, 17:4–8) over temporal or physical needs (2:1–11, 6:3–15), nature (6:16–20), sickness (4:46–54, 6:1–2, 9:1–34), and death (11:1–47) serve to testify of or witness to Jesus’ having been sent by the Father. As one sent by the Father, it is Jesus that the Father has given the authority to judge all things (5:22–23, 26–27, 30; 8:14–18, 26; 12:47–48). Together, these pictures serve to testify of or witness to his oneness of mission with the Father (5:16–23; 10:30, 38; cf. 14:10–11, 20; perhaps 8:19).

### Conclusion

John's narrative from 7:1—10:21 builds up to Jesus's three responses in 10:24–39. Jesus was quite straightforward (or quite blunt) with “the Jews” about their lack of belief in his messianic mission. In the midst of their attempts to determine Jesus's origins in 7:1–53 and 8:30–59, Jesus told them that they were the product of their origin, namely, that their father was the devil and not God (8:42–47). Jesus told them they were blind spiritually (9:39–10:6). Jesus told them, via a parable, that they were thieves and robbers among the sheep of Israel and that he himself was the good shepherd (i.e., *the* Messiah, 10:7–18). In 10:22–38, Jesus spoke of himself as an agent of God who worked in harmony with God the Father in securing the eternal destination of all those who believed him to be “*the* Messiah” (ὁ Χριστός), “*the* son of God” (υἱὸς θεοῦ εἶμι). All of these straightforward comments are leading to John 12:20–50 where a final verdict is issued by Jesus on the unbelieving Jews, particularly in verses 36b–43. His exhortation to believe in “the light,” of course, would have been an affront to the religious leaders (cf. 4QM),<sup>42</sup> an affront that eventually ended in Jesus's death. But only when Jesus was ready to give himself over to them. Nevertheless, in his refutation to the disingenuous charge of blasphemy, Jesus presented himself as one who worked so closely together with God the Father that they were united as one as it pertained to his messianic mission (10:31–38), a picture which seems to permeate the narrative portions of the Gospel of John about the life and ministry of Jesus (cf. 12:41–42; 14:6; 17:1–2).

### The Confession of Jesus in John's Letters

Like the Gospel of John, John's letters focus attention on Jesus as “*the* Christ” (= *the* Messiah). More specifically, they focus on three expectations: *to believe* in Jesus as the one who came in the flesh as *the* Messiah, *to live* in harmony with one another (i.e., to love one another), and *to support* those who preached Jesus. On the one hand, John's first two letters appear to be letters written to at least two or more community's of believers facing a crises. People (or secessionists) had risen up within their churches who were causing confusion about the person and mission of Jesus as well as spawning unhealthy and perhaps even hostile relationships within the church. Nevertheless, John's focus was on two simple expectations: *believe* that Jesus came in the flesh as “*the* son of God” (ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ), *the* Messiah (ὁ Χριστός), and *live* together harmoniously. On the other hand, third John is a letter of commendation written on behalf of a vocational worker. It was sent to an individual in a sister church in order to secure support for

<sup>42</sup> 4QM (War Scroll) reflects a sectarian's rendition of a war that will end all wars. Ultimately it is a war between good and evil, which involves both human and angelic beings (1:10-11; 7:16; 12:1; 15:14). And though 1QM might be a late-Hasmonean to early Herodian document (circa 75-30 B.C.) written just before the Roman Senate appointed Herod the Great ruler over Judea, Samaria, and Galilee (40 B.C.), 1QM is about an eschatological war between “the sons of light” (those whose paternal father is God)<sup>42</sup> and “the sons of darkness” (those whose paternal father is Belial). Whether “the sons of light” refers to all of Israel (12 tribes) or only or only some of them (Levi, Judah, and Benjamin), they are a faithful remnant (1:1-3; 2:18; 3:13-17; 11:6-13; 12:1-5, 13-16; 13:7-13; 15:11; 17:7-8; 19:5-8). A multitude of angels who dwell with God in the heavens (12:1; cp. 4QM1v-vi: 1:1) are presented as battling with “the sons of light” (1:10-11; 7:6; 12:1; 15:14; cp. 4QM 1i, ii, iii: 1, 3) as well as their commander, Michael, Gabriel, Sariels, and Raphael (9:15-16). “The sons of Darkness” refers to the army loyal to Belial (1:1, 5; 3:6, 9; 4:2; 15:2; 16:11) and the enemies are the Kittim (= Romans; 1:2, 4, 6, 9, 12; 11:11; 15:2; 16:3-6, 9; 17:12, 14, 15; 18:2, 4; 19:10). Belial is a demonic being who stands against God's people (1QS iii 13-iv. 26). He is the “prince” of the kingdom of wickedness (1QM xvii. 5-6). He reigns over his demonic forces and his reign is one of injustice (1QS i. 16-18; iv. 19-20). Likewise, people (*like* the Kittim) who are not “sons of light” but rather perceived as people part of Belial's kingdom (Jub. 14.31-33; 1QM xiii. 10-13). Herbert W. Bateman IV, “Anticipations of ‘the Branch’ and ‘the Prince’” in *Jesus the Messiah: Tracing the Promises, Expectations, and Coming of Israel's King* by Herbert W. Bateman IV, Darrell L. Bock, and Gordon H. Johnston (Grand Rapids, Kregel, 2012), 284-85.

those who traveled from city to city preaching Jesus, *the* Messiah.<sup>43</sup> Consequently, eyewitness proclamations, community confessions, and individual's rejection about Jesus's messiahship appear in John's letters that in turn parallel John's Gospel.

### *Eyewitness Proclamations*

First John<sup>44</sup> opens with a clear proclamation about the humanity of Jesus and its effect on relationships (1:1–3). Verse 3 summarizes the opening clauses of verses 1–2 about the humanity of Jesus with a specified intention, namely, communal relationship with God *the* Father and Jesus *the* Messiah. We read in verse three,

that which *we have seen* and *heard*  
*we* now *proclaim* to you also  
 in order that even you may have *fellowship* with us.  
 And indeed, our *fellowship* is with *the Father* and with *his son, Jesus, the Christ*.

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<sup>43</sup> Unlike 1 and 2 John, 3 John is a letter of commendation directed to an individual, Gaius. The letter opens with Gaius receiving the elder's greeting, prayer, and applause for his living a life of love and kindness (vv. 1–4). The letter moves quickly from salutation to the elder's full disclosure for writing, which can be divided into three sections: the solicitation of all Christians to support God's vocational servants (vv. 5–8), the stubbornness of Diotrephes who refuses to support God's vocationally called servants (vv. 9–10), and the request for sponsoring Demetrius, who is a good servant (vv. 11–12). The letter *concludes* with an expressed desire to speak with the church in person (vv. 14–15). Quoted from Herbert W. Bateman IV and Aaron C. Peer's book *John's Letters* in the Big Greek Idea series (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2016), 377; *idem*. "3 John: Tracing the Flow of Thought" in *Interpreting the New Testament Text: Introduction to the Art and Science of Biblical Study*, edited by Darrell L. Bock and Buist Fanning (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2006), 449–61.

<sup>44</sup> 1 John has a twofold theological theme: the humanity of Jesus (his person and mission) and living as a loving community. Both themes appear in the letter as litmus tests for determining a person's relationship with God. John opens his letter as an authoritative representative of Jesus and underscores his message about Jesus, who was indeed a living breathing human person (1:1–4). Yet he transitions (καί) from his proclamation about the humanity of Jesus to disclosing the good news (ἡ γαγγλία) about God, which in turn serves as the basis for distinguishing between two types of people in the church: those who know God and those who do not (1:5–2:2). For John, the willingness to love others is the ultimate validation for determining a person's relationship with God (2:3–11). Yet John affirms (γράφω) his readers about their relationship with God before moving on to warn them about the world: its negative behavior, its lack of acceptability, and its lack of durability (2:12–17). He then launches into a few emotive appeals (παιδία) to remain in Jesus (2:18–29) before closing out the first half of his letter with a somewhat sharp (ἴδετε) return to his theme about loving others (3:1–10).

As John launches into the second half of his letter (3:11–5:29), he begins it in a manner similar to the first half (1:5–3:10) in that he speaks about the good news (ἡ γαγγλία). Whereas the good news in 1:5 was about God, here in 3:11 it is about love. John underscores this simple truth: love and hate are incompatible passions among followers of Jesus (3:11–17). He then makes an emotive appeal (τεκνία) not to love merely in what one says, but in what one does (3:18–24), before shifting somewhat abruptly (γαπητοί) to his recurring theme about the humanity of Jesus. He makes it clear that teachings about Jesus as a human Messiah distinguish false teachings as a test of faith before returning to affirm (τεκνία) his readers of their heavenly origins (4:1–6). He then somewhat abruptly (γαπητοί) returns to the theme of mutual love with first a calling to love (γαπῶμεν) others because (ὅτι) God is love (4:7–10), to an expectancy (ὀφειλομεν . . . γαπᾶν) to love as proof of their relationship (μένομεν) with God (4:11–16c). Advancing further the theme of love, John speaks of this eternal truth: God is (ἐστιν) love and those that live lives of love demonstrate that they have a relationship (μένει) with God (4:16d–21). John then moves to identify several timeless facts: anyone who believes (πᾶς ὁ πιστεύων) in Jesus identifies his paternal affiliation with God, loves God and other family members, obeys God's commandments, and has victory over the Evil One (5:1–4). John then underscores (δέ) what conquering power is: our faith. Faith in Jesus, who is the Christ, not only has made believers conquerors of the world's system, it has provided eternal life (5:5–12). John closes his letter (ἔγραψα) with a twofold epilogue: to build confidence in approaching God in prayer (5:15–17) and about God's protection of those who belong to him (5:18–20), followed by a command: don't worship idols (5:21). See Bateman and Peer, *John's Letters*, 60–61.

So, John not only underscores the importance of the eyewitness proclamations about Jesus's humanity, they prepare the way for John to underscore Jesus's Messiah as tantamount to one's "relationship" (ἡ κοινωνία) with both Jesus and God (1:3; 2:23, 24; 4:15; 5:1, 20). In fact, the opening verses provide the platform that undergirds John's more pointed proclamation that Jesus is *the* Messiah (= "*the* Christ," ὁ Χριστός) who came in human flesh and its effects (ἵνα, "in order that"), namely that a relationship might exist with the eyewitness community, God the Father, and Jesus, *the* Messiah. He emphasized here and elsewhere in his letter that belief in the humanity of Jesus makes it possible for any person to have a relationship with God (2:22–25; 3:4–12). To that end, John reiterates the importance of his eyewitness testimony later in 4:14–15

<sup>14</sup>And we have seen and we now testify that the Father sent the son to be the savior of the world.

<sup>15</sup>Whoever professes that *Jesus is the son of God* (= *the* Messiah)  
God remains in him,  
and they [*remain*] in God.

Consequently, John's letters expand the eyewitness profession about the humanity and messiahship of Jesus (cf. John 1:14–17; 10:24–39; etc.) and its effects on a relationship with God the Father (cf. John 14:6) by emphasizing God's twofold expectation even for those who are not eyewitnesses: *to confess* Jesus's messiahship and *to live* in harmony within the community just as Jesus had prayed (cf. John 17:1–2).

### Community Confessions

John underscores God's twofold expectation (ἡ ἐντολή) that people believe "in the name of God's son" (τῷ ὀνόματι τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ), Jesus, who is "*the* Christ" (Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ)<sup>45</sup> and that God's people love one another, namely that they may live in harmony with one another. In John 3:23, 4:14, and 5:1, we read

<sup>3:23</sup> And this is **God's commandment**

namely that we **believe** in the name of his *son*, Jesus, *the Christ* (= *the* Messiah)  
and [*that*] we **persist in loving** one another,  
just as he gave us *the* command.

<sup>4:15</sup>Whoever *repeatedly* **confesses** that *Jesus is the son of God* (= *the* Messiah)  
God remains in them, and he [*remains*] in God.

<sup>5:1</sup>Everyone who **persists in believing** that *Jesus is the Christ* has been fathered by God,  
and everyone who **persists in loving** the father loves also those who have been fathered by him.

<sup>5:5</sup>Now who is the one who overcomes the world  
except the one who **persists in believing** that Jesus is *the son of God* (= *the* Messiah)?

On the one hand, the parallel statements "confess that *Jesus is the son of God*" (4:15) and "believe that *Jesus is the Christ*" (5:1) indicates the synonymous nature of the two phrases. On the other hand, people who obey God's expectations *to believe* or *to confess* Jesus as the Messiah and *to live* in harmony with other followers of Jesus have a paternal relationship with God the Father (also 2:23b). In fact, the twofold expectation *to believe* and *to love* appears throughout the letter as litmus tests for determining a person's special and unique family *like* relationship with God ("fathered by God"). Those who have this intimate relationship with God as Father are

<sup>45</sup> Χριστοῦ is a genitive in apposition to Ἰησοῦ and rendered, "Jesus, who is the Christ." Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 95.

characterized as his children (3:1). For John, belief in Jesus's messiahship is intertwined with a relationship with God (cf. John 10:30 with 17:1–2; 14:6).

Yet belief in Jesus is not limited to confessing Jesus as Messiah but includes his coming in the flesh.<sup>46</sup> First John 4:2 and 5:20, discloses the content of one's "confession" (BDAG, s.v. "ὁμολογέω" 4b, p. 708) about Jesus through whom a follower of Jesus can have a relationship with God the Father (cf. John 8:30–59). We read

4:2 By this you know the Spirit of God'  
every spirit . . . is from God,  
that repeatedly **confesses** Jesus to be the Christ<sup>47</sup> who has come in flesh,  
but every spirit . . . is not from God;  
who does not repeatedly **claim** Jesus [*has come in the flesh*]

5:20 And we **know** that the son of God has come (*in the flesh*),  
and [that] he has given us understanding  
in order that we may know the truth);  
and we are in the true one, in his son, Jesus, *the Christ*.

Once again, the phrases "Jesus to be the Christ who has come in the flesh" and "the son of God has come in the flesh" are synonymous parallels that appear throughout his letter. So, in John's first letter to believe in Jesus's messiahship (1 John 2:22–23; 4:15; 5:1, 5) as well as his humanity (cf. John 5:6)<sup>48</sup> involves acknowledging (= confessing) Jesus's position as God's

<sup>46</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Epistles of John*, AB (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1982), 462.

<sup>47</sup> What is the connection between "Jesus" (Ἰησοῦν) and "Christ" (Χριστόν) and "coming" (ἐληλυθότα)? On the one hand, it is possible that "coming" (ἐληλυθότα) is a simple object complement of the verb "repeatedly confesses" (ὁμολογεῖ) and its direct object "Jesus Christ" (Ἰησοῦν Χριστόν). If that is the case, it would be translated: "that repeatedly acknowledges Jesus Christ as having come in the flesh." On the other hand, Ἰησοῦν could be considered the direct object of ὁμολογεῖ with Χριστόν ἐληλυθότα as an object-complement double accusative to Ἰησοῦν. An object-complement double accusative is a construction in which one accusative is the direct object of the verb and the other accusative complements the direct object (W, 182), which means that the confession specifies the fact that Jesus as Christ has come with a focus on the past action, "that repeatedly acknowledges Jesus to be the Christ who has come in flesh." Martin M. Culy, *I, II, III John: A Handbook on the Greek Text* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2004), 101; cf. Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 492–93.

<sup>48</sup> There is an interpretive issue: surrounding 1 John 5:6 as it concerns the phrase "by water and blood" (δι' ὕδατος καὶ αἵματος). There are at least four explanations. (1) The phrase "coming through water and blood" refers to the sacraments/ordinances of baptism and the Eucharist. This view is as old as the fourth century (*Works of Augustine*, Sermon 5:3). The polemic of 1 John 5:6 and its obscurity within the context of 1 John seem to argue against this view because (a) the two nouns, water and blood appear to be references to events in Jesus' life, and (b) there is nothing in the context to suggest that the misguided teachers were denying the ordinances. (For other presentations and arguments against this view see Brown, *The Gospel according to John I–XII*, 575; Colin G. Kruse, *The Letters of John* in *The Pillar New Testament Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000], 177; Judith M. Lieu, *I, II, III John: A Commentary*. The New Testament Library [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008], 211 #3). (2) The phrase "coming through water and blood" refers to the death of Jesus. Based upon the Gospel of John 19:34, Brown argues that "water and blood" echoes an occurrence during his death. Upon Jesus's death, water and blood flowed from his side. It is the only other passage in John where the two substances are connected. Jesus's death then describes the reason for his advent (John 18:37), and the only other mention of blood in John's Gospel is concerned with Jesus' death (1:7). One weakness is that John 19:34 reads εὐθὺς αἷμα καὶ ὕδωρ, while 1 John 5:6 reads ἐν τῷ ὕδατι καὶ ἐν τῷ αἵματι reversing the order. (3) The phrase "coming through water and blood" refers to the Incarnation of Jesus. This view has more to commend it because it parallels the authentic confession in 1 John 4:2 that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh, which definitely refers to Jesus' incarnation. It also does justice to the implied participle "coming" (ἐλθών). If John is dealing with a docetic-like heresy (cf. Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.* 1.25.1–2), John may be emphasizing Jesus's incarnation and his salvific ministry on the cross (Culpepper, *The Gospel and Letters of John*, 272; cf. Culy, *I, II, III John*, 125–126). (For other presentations and arguments against this view see



Messiah and accepting the real historical life of Jesus.<sup>49</sup> No one can properly love their fellow believers unless this faith in Jesus's messiahship exists first. This belief also moves beyond mere intellectual ascent and refers to putting one's *persistent* trust in Jesus.<sup>50</sup> We read in 2 John 9

<sup>9</sup> Everyone who goes on ahead and does not remain in the teaching about Christ does not have God. the one who remains in the teaching, this one *has both the father and the son*.

So just as it is the case in John's first letter, his second letter<sup>51</sup> expresses belief in the teachings about Jesus as *the* Messiah to be foundational to having a relationship with God the Father and Jesus (= "has both the father and son"; cf. 1 John 1:3).<sup>52</sup> Yet, as it was in John's Gospel, tensions exist between those who believe and those who do not.

### *Individual Rejections*

John's letters reveal numerous descriptions of people that identify those who reject Jesus. Those who refused to acknowledge that Jesus was "*the* Christ" (ὁ Χριστός) or "*the* son" (τὸν υἱόν) were

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Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 575–76; Kruse, *The Letters of John*, 176; Lieu, *I, II, III John*, 209 #1a). (4) The phrase "coming through water and blood" refers to the baptism and death of Jesus. In support of this view is John's statement that Jesus did not come in water only, but in water and blood. This may imply that the misguided teachers with whom John is disagreeing separated Jesus's humanity and his deity. They believed that it was at Jesus's baptism a divine figure separated from Jesus, descended on him to empower his ministry, only to leave Jesus during his crucifixion (Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.* 1:26.1, 3:11.3). In response, John insists on the unity between Jesus and the son of God/ Messiah (2:22, 4:2-3, 6, 15, 5:1, 5). The link between the Holy Spirit and baptism in John 1:33 echoes the same link between water and the Spirit in 1 John 5:6, suggesting a baptism should be equated with water. Thus, the phrase "water and blood" might be a *merismus* (a poetic expression using two halves to indicate a whole) to describe Jesus' entire human ministry (Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Epistles of St. John* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966 reprint from 1892 third edition, 181; R. Schnackenburg, *Die Johannesbriefe HTKNT 13/3* [Freiburg in Breisgau: Herder, 1979 6<sup>th</sup> ed.], 232–33; cf. Stott, John R. W. Stott, *The Letters of John* in *The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988; first edition 1964], 180–81; John Painter, *1, 2, and 3, John* in *Sacra Pagina* [Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2002], 305; Robert W. Yarbrough, *1–3 John* in *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008], 282). John's emphasis is on the humanity and messiahship of Jesus. It seems either one of these fits John's argument the best. See Bateman and Peer, *John's Letters*, 305–06.

<sup>49</sup> See Herbert W. Bateman's "Introduction" in *Jesus the Messiah: Tracing the Promises, Expectations, and Coming of Israel's King*, Herbert W. Bateman IV, Darrell L. Bock, Gordon Johnston (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2012), 19–22.

<sup>50</sup> Culy, *I, II, III John*, 97.

<sup>51</sup> Unlike his first letter, John's second letter has a more targeted audience. It opens with his declared love for a church and his joy for that specific church's commitment to the teachings of Jesus (vv. 1–3). The focus of the letter is twofold: a polite request (ἑρωτῶ) to continue living in accordance with God's expectation, namely, to love one another (vv. 4–6) and then a warning (βλέπετε) about false teachers (vv. 7–11). The letter concludes with an expressed desire to speak with the church in person (vv. 12–13). See Bateman and Peer, *John's Letters*, 344

<sup>52</sup> **In the Gospel of John, believers are said to have divine-like attributes**, such as eternal life (3:16, 36), the word of God (5:38), the love of God (5:42), light (8:12; 12:35–36), peace (16:33), and joy (17:13). These divine attributes are a picture of what it means to "have God." That means having a relationship with God is closely related to remaining in God. In 1 John 2:23, to "have God" is related to the presence of God's anointing of the believer (1 John 2:20, 27). A similar idea appears in 2 John 9, where those who do not affirm the teachings about Jesus, particularly as it relates to his humanity, do not have God. Associating with God and remaining in God seem to be predicated on embracing the basics about the messiahship and humanity of Jesus. The language of "having" expresses the presence or absence of a relationship between God and a person based upon the person's belief that Jesus was (and is) a human Messiah. Raymond E. Brown, *The Epistles of John*, AB (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1982), 370; Smalley, Stephen S. Smalley, 1984. 1, 2, 3 John. WBC 51 (Waco, TX: Word Biblical Commentary, 1984), 116–17. See Bateman and Peer, *John's Letters*, 146–47.

regarded as “*the liar*” (ὁ ψεύστης),<sup>53</sup> “deniers” (ὁ ἀρνούμενος), “*the antichrist*” (ὁ ἀντίχριστος),<sup>54</sup> and “deceivers” (ὁ πλάνος).<sup>55</sup> They had no relationship with God. For example, we read in 1 John 2:22–23, 4:3 and 2 John 7

- 2:22 Who is *the liar*  
 except the one who *persists* in denying that Jesus is *the Christ* (= *the Messiah*);  
 this is *the antichrist*, namely, the one who *persists* in denying the Father and *the son* (= *the Messiah*).
- 2:23 Whoever *persists* in **denying** *the son* does not have the Father;  
 the one who *persists* in their confession of *the son* has *the Father* also.
- 4:3 but every spirit . . . is not from God;  
 who does not *repeatedly* claim Jesus [*has come in the flesh*]  
 and this [*rejection*] is the *spirit* of *the antichrist*,  
 about which you have heard (that it is coming),  
 and [*which*] is now already in the world.
- <sup>7</sup> For many **deceivers** have gone out into the world,  
<sup>7</sup>the ones who do not confess Jesus, *the Christ* has come in the flesh.  
 This one is *the deceiver* and *the antichrist*.

As it was the case in John's Gospel, there is no diplomatic manner in speaking of people who rejected Jesus's messiahship. Jesus referred to religious leaders as people whose paternity was the

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<sup>53</sup> Unlike the other instances where the descriptive noun “*the liar*” (ὁ ψεύστης) occurs in John's literature (John 8:44, 55; 1 John 1:10; 2:4; 4:20; 5:10), this occurrence may have a more specific referent in mind because of the definite article. Given that “*the liar*” (ὁ ψεύστης) in John 8:44 and verse 55 references the devil or people motivated by him, it is possible that John is referring to an eschatological figure like the Antichrist in this context. “The liar” could even be another title for “the Antichrist” (2 John 7; cf. Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 351). A better possibility is that John is referring to the misguided people who have left the community. In 1 John 2:18–19, their departure is identified with the Antichrist because they foreshadow the work of “*the Antichrist*” (ὁ ἀντίχριστος) who is yet to come. Their departure from the community is a sign of the inauguration of the last times, which are characterized by apostasy. It is clear that John is using the term polemically against community deserters (Brown, 351). They are considered liars because they were rejecting the true nature of Jesus as Messiah. John associates them with the career and message of the Antichrist. See Bateman and Peer, *John's Letters*, 144.

<sup>54</sup> Although it could be that these people are the Antichrist, the parallels in 2:18 negate this possibility. John merely points out that an adversative spirit drives the misguided, speaks through them, and carries functions similar to those of an anticipated Antichrist. This is also made clear by the use of the masculine plural personal pronoun “them” (αὐτούς) to reference the misguided who have left the church (2:19) in the next verse. Brown puts it this way, “The secessionists are not only a manifestation of evil; they manifest eschatological evil” (Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 496). See Bateman and Peer, *John's Letters*, 238–39

<sup>55</sup> In 1 John, John uses “deceiver” (πλανᾶω) in various ways. First, πλανᾶω is used in 1 John 1:8 to indicate that the fraudulent people who left have deceived themselves into thinking that they are free from the effects of sin. John says that this belief separates them from the truth (cf. 2 Tim. 3:13). Second, πλανᾶω is used in admonitions not to be deceived about (1) unethical behavior (1 Cor. 6:9), (2) bad company (1 Cor. 15:33), (3) Jewish tradition (Gal. 6:7), and (4) the belief that something bad comes from God (James 1:16). In 1 John 3:7, John cautions his readers against being deceived about the nature of sin and righteousness. Third, πλανᾶω is used in connection with a mass deception that will occur in the end times. Jesus warns against those who will come and deceive (Mark 13:6; Matt. 24:5, 11, 24; Luke 21:8). The author of Revelation also speaks of a future deception by Satan (12:9; 20:3, 8, 10) and others (2:20; 13:4; 19:20). In 1 John 2:26, John may be linking πλανᾶω with those who left the church (2:18–19). He describes people in the “last hour” trying to deceive those who are followers of Jesus. John wants his readers to stand up in the face of these sorts of deceptions that are manifested in the fraudulent antichrists of their day. Followers of Jesus can avoid misguided deceptions through the anointing of the Spirit that has been given to them and reaffirms them in what they have already been taught. See Bateman and Peer, *John's Letters*, 152–53.

devil (8:45–47). John makes similar comparisons in his letters. Just as Jesus noted that relationship with God occurs through him (John 14:6), John also identifies that life comes through Jesus. We read in 1 John 4:9 that

<sup>4:9</sup>By this the love of God was made known among us,  
that **God sent** his *one and only son* into the world  
in order that we may live through him.

Naturally, the previous emphasis on believing that Jesus, God's "one and only son"<sup>56</sup> sent by God, drives our interpretation of "son of God." We read in 1 John 5:5.

<sup>5:5</sup> Now who is the one who overcomes the world  
except the one who believes that Jesus is *the* son of God (= *the* Messiah)

In fact, it seems, a believer who denies Jesus's messiahship in John's first letter commits a sin, for which if committed, no prayer exists for that person. We read in 1 John 5:16

<sup>5:16a</sup> If anyone sees a brother or sister committing *a sin not leading to death*,  
|they should ask,  
and God will grant to him or her life,  
namely, life to those not committing a sin leading to death.  
*There is a sin leading to death;*

For John, all unrighteousness is sin (1 John 5:17), all believers sin (1 John 1:8), and there is an expectation for believers to confess their sin to God (1 John 1:9). And yet, it seems throughout John's letters, a believer who does not maintain their belief in Jesus as *the* Messiah who was God's man sent into the world is rather serious. It determines a person's real paternity (John 8:42–47; 1 John 4:15) and contextually appears to be "*the* sin" that leads to death (John 14:6; 1 John 5:12).<sup>57</sup> John concludes his first letter with a final disclosure about Jesus *the* Messiah, *the* son of God. We read in 5:20

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<sup>56</sup> How should the adjective "one and only" (τὸν μονογενῆ) be translated? The traditional rendering "only begotten" (KJV ASV NASB CNT) focuses on the root meaning of the word. The root words are "only" (μόνος) and "begotten" (γεννάω). Unfortunately, it falls victim to the root fallacy, which equates the meaning of the word to a sum of its parts (D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996], 30–31). Although the adjective is often used to describe a sole physical child to a set of parents (Luke 7:12; 8:42; 9:38), it is also used in other ways. The author of Hebrews uses τὸν μονογενῆ to speak about the unique relationship between Abraham and Isaac. Ishmael was also a son of Abraham, so in what sense could Isaac be described as his "only begotten"? In that context it is clear that Isaac is the son of promise and that is what makes him the "only begotten." Therefore, the emphasis is on a unique status not on unique ancestry (BDAG, s.v. "μονογενής" 1, p. 658; Culy, *I, II, III John*, 108). And while Jesus does have a special relationship with God, the better rendering is "only" (NRSV ESV) or "one and only" (NIV NET NLT). John stresses that Jesus is "the only one of his kind or class" (BDAG, s.v. "μονογενής" 2, p. 658). God does not physically beget Jesus, nor is he the only child of God, but rather Jesus is the one of a kind "Son." See Bateman and Peer, *John's Letters*, 235.

<sup>57</sup> How does "a sin not leading to death" differ from "a sin leading to death"? Several suggestions exist. On the one hand, death could refer to actual physical death, not some sort of spiritual atrophy or separation from God. If true, it speaks of suicide. However, those committing the sin of suicide would need no prayer. This doesn't seem to fit with the theology of loving our brothers and sisters in Christ as this letter teaches very clearly. Some Second Temple texts seem to suggest a similar view (Jub. 21:22; 26:34; 33:13, 18; T. Isaac 7:1; cf. Num. 18:22; Deut. 22:15; Isa. 22:14). On the other hand, John could be distinguishing between serious sins and less serious sins. Prayer is to be offered for those who commit lesser sins against God, not for those whose sins are more egregious or serious. Many Christian traditions have distinguished between the seriousness of sins, most notably the distinction between what are called venial sins and mortal sins. Jesus himself even suggests that there is a sin that leads to death in Mark 3:29 and its parallel passages in Matthew 12:32 and Luke 12:1. The Didache, however, places wrong speech and murder

- 5:20a And **we know** (that the son of God has come,  
 5:20d and **we are** in the true one, in his Son Jesus, who is the Christ.  
 5:20e This one **is** the true God and eternal life.

So, John not only identifies Jesus as the Messiah, the son of God, but also as the true God. It serves as the basis for his closing exhortation: “Children, *guard* yourselves from idols” (5:21).<sup>58</sup> This warning is not a new idea in 1 John. It sums up John's main ideas of the letter. John wants his readers to guard themselves against any teaching that counters Jesus's messiahship and humanity. They are idolatrous.

### Conclusion

John's letters provide eyewitness proclamations (1 John 1:1–3; 4:14–15), community confessions (1 John 3:23; 4:2, 15; 5:1, 5:20<sup>a-d</sup>; 2 John 9), and individual's rejections (1 John 2:22–23; 4:3; 2 John 7) of Jesus's messiahship. Phrases John uses, Jesus is the Messiah and Jesus is the son of God who came in flesh and sent by God, are intended to address the need to believe in Jesus's messiahship as he carried out his messianic mission as a real man living during the later part of the second temple period and confronting theological misunderstandings and dissertations. John's ultimate disclosure is that to deny Jesus as *the* Messiah who came in the flesh is to reject God for they are one in the same.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, there is no denying of Jesus' equality with the Father by John in his Gospel (1:1 and by Thomas in 20:28 ... both of which are post-resurrection statements) and his first letter (5:20e). Yet, we need not force the issue of Jesus's deity where the text speaks of his life and works as Messiah. Within the first century Jewish culture, Jesus's statements in 10:31 and 38 address his Father / son's unity of mission and not his deity. Several reasons support this. First,

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alongside each other, refusing to distinguish between the seriousness of each sin. Finally, throughout his letter, John addresses the sin of unbelief in Jesus's humanity and his messiahship. In 1 John, the sin that leads to spiritual death is the rejection of God's Messiah, Jesus. When Jesus himself talks about the sin leading to death, it is in the context of confronting the Pharisees who were rejecting him by attributing his miraculous ministry to the work of Satan (Mark 3:29). The rejection of the incarnation of Jesus and his work on the cross brings spiritual death by definition. Therefore, John is urging us to pray for those who are caught in sin, but for those who are so far gone that they have rejected the person and work of Jesus, prayer for them is not required, but voluntary (Bateman1, 569; Brown, 613–19). See Bateman and Peer, *John's Letters*, 330.

<sup>58</sup> What does it mean “to keep yourselves from idols” (φυλάξατε ἑαυτὰ ἀπὸ τῶν εἰδώλων)? The verb φυλάσσω means “to guard.” In its literal usage it can refer to guarding the king's palace or temple from attack (2 Kings 11:5–6; 1 Macc 12:34), prisoners from escape (Acts 12:4; 28:16), or garments from theft (Acts 22:20). It can also be used figuratively to describe protection (John 17:12), perseverance (John 12:25; cf. 2 Thess. 3:3; 2 Tim. 1:12), and, when used with a reflexive pronoun, of guarding yourself against something. The objects to guard oneself against include a person (Timothy against Alexander, the coppersmith, 2 Tim. 4:15), an error (2 Peter 3:17), a religious vice (Acts 21:25), or idolatry (1 John 5:21). John closes his letter by encouraging his readers to protect themselves from idols. The word idols can literally refer to an object of wood or stone that serves as a symbol for a pagan god (Rev. 9:20; Rom. 2:22; 1 Cor. 8:4, 7), but it can also be used with a wider range of meaning. In the Qumran scrolls we read, “Cursed be the man who enters this Covenant while walking among the idols of his heart, who sets up before himself his stumbling-block of sin so that he may backslide (1Q28 II, 11–12; cf. CD XX, 8–10; 1Q36 IV, 9–15; Rom. 1:18–32). For John, it seems he is using εἶδωλον to refer to following after the teachings of the misguided who have left the church. John ends his letter with a warning against leaving the community and joining those who have already left. This warning is not a new idea in 1 John. See Bateman and Peer, *John's Letters*, 342.

the Father / son unity of mission is evident in Jesus' recognition that "a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent (*ἀποστέλλω*) greater than he who sent him" (13:16; cf. 1 John 4:9). Jesus is commissioned (*ἀπέστειλλω*) to do only as the Father has directed. Jesus denies the charge of equality with the Father in 5:16–23 and points to his works as from the Father, which seems to be the case in 10:35–38. In addition, he speaks only of what the Father directs (3:34, 8:42, 14:10). Thus, Jesus does not encourage but rather discourages their perception of his equality with God as deity.

Second, the Father / son unity of mission is evident in John 10:28–30. The sheep that hear the voice of Jesus and follow him can no more be snatched out of the hand of Jesus (10:28) as they can the Father's hand (10:29). The Son is the Father's agent engaged in securing the eternal destination of those who believe (cf. 3:16; 5:25, 28–29; 6:39, 44, 54; 8:51; 11:25; 14:6; 1 John 2:2; 5:12). Finally, the Father / son unity of mission is evident in Jesus' denial of the disingenuous blasphemy charge "though a man, you make yourself God" in John 10:34–38. In his appeal to Psalm 82:6a for support, Jesus argues against the charge of claiming equality with God. If cognizant of his deity, would Jesus discourage such a claim? This is not to deny the deity of Jesus. Rather the question serves to wrestle with the tension in John's presentation of Jesus being both God and man (1:1, 18; 1 John 4:3, 9; 5:20; cf. Phil 2:5–7). The question also serves to wrestle with John's contextual presentations of Jesus in the Gospel narrative that seem to veil Jesus' equality with the Father (5:17–18, 10:30–31, 38–39). Even though readers may know more than the characters due to their post-resurrection understanding, the point cannot be made contextually from John 10:22–38. Jesus is not claiming equality with God the Father because Jesus denies the charge. The point can be made, however, that "the son" is an agent working as one with the Father in securing the eternal destination of those who believe (cf. 1 John 4:9).<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Father, Son, Spirit unity in securing our salvation is evident also in Paul's "post-resurrection" epistle to the Ephesians 1:4–5, 6–8, 13–14; 4:3–7.