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Introduction

Worship in the Gospel of John

The Gospel of John has been examined from many different perspectives, but a comprehensive treatment of the rich theme of worship in this Gospel has not yet appeared.¹ With this book I will offer a contribution toward a remedy of this deficiency by analyzing the entire Gospel of John from the perspective of its various dimensions of worship. I aim to illustrate that three different but complementary dimensions of worship dominate this Gospel. Indeed, these different types of worship represent the ways one expresses and demonstrates the faith that includes having divine life eternal, which is the stated purpose for writing the signs Jesus did in this Gospel—“that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that, believing, you may have life in his name” (John 20:31).

A first dimension of worship is the confessional worship that takes place through verbal expressions and/or gestures of devotion or reverence. This type of liturgical worship includes individual and communal professions of faith, various kinds of prayer, hymns, doxologies, etc. In the Fourth Gospel Jesus prays several times, repeatedly addressing God as “Father” (11:41; 12:27, 28; 17:1, 5, 11, 21, 24, 25). But Jesus himself is also an object of confessional worship by various individuals before his resurrection, e.g., Nathanael (1:49), the man born blind (9:38), Martha (11:27), and Mary (11:32). The confession addressed to the risen Jesus by Thomas, “My Lord

1. As Neyrey (*Give God the Glory*, 167) notes, “To be sure, discussions of worship in the Fourth Gospel are rare, and in most commentaries worship does not even rate a place in the topical index.” Some brief treatments of worship in John include Cullmann, *Early Christian Worship*, 37–119; Borchert, *Worship*, 43–57; Lee, *Hallowed*, 61–84; Koester, *Word*, 203–9.

and my God!” (20:28), climaxes this type of confessional worship in John. It reaffirms the basis for the communal act of doxological worship proclaimed in the prologue: “We observed his glory, glory as of the unique one from the Father, full of a gift of truth” (1:14).

A second type of liturgical worship is the sacramental worship that includes not only verbal expressions but ritual actions. The two primary sacraments involved in John are baptism and the Eucharist. Baptism involves the ritual immersion or cleansing in water which gives believers a new birth into the kingdom of divine life eternal (3:3–5) as children of God (1:12). The Eucharist or Lord’s Supper involves a ritual meal consisting of bread and wine transformed into the body and blood of Jesus, which is based upon the life-giving blood and the water symbolic of the Spirit that went out from the pierced side of Jesus after his self-sacrificial death (19:34) as the Passover Lamb of God (1:29, 36). It nourishes and maintains the believer’s divine life eternal (6:51–58).²

A third dimension of worship is the ethical worship constituted by the way a believer behaves and conducts his life. In John this primarily involves believers keeping Jesus’ new commandment to love one another in the self-sacrificial (ethical rather than cultic) way that he has loved them (13:34; 15:12). This is part of what it means to be a true worshiper who worships the Father in Spirit and truth (4:23–24). The Spirit of truth is given to believers as a result of Jesus being glorified by God (7:39) through his self-sacrificial death. The Spirit will guide believers in all the truth (16:13; cf. 14:17, 26; 15:26) that includes keeping the commandment to love one another in a self-sacrificial way in order to have divine life eternal (12:50).³

Methodological Presuppositions

In the following analysis of John from the perspective of its various dimensions of worship I will employ a narrative-critical, audience-oriented approach. While not denying a diachronic dimension which recognizes that John has developed from earlier traditions and perhaps undergone different editions over time, I will treat John synchronically, including all twenty-one

2. “The Johannine references to these two sacraments [baptism and Eucharist], both the more explicit references and those that are symbolic, are scattered in scenes throughout the ministry” (Brown, *Introduction*, 234). See also Cullmann, *Early Christian Worship*, 37–119; Hurtado, *Christian Worship*; Neyrey, *Give God the Glory*, 171–90; Campbell, “Worship,” 70–83; Gieschen, “Baptism,” 23–45.

3. For a detailed treatment of various dimensions of biblical worship, see Block, *Glory of God*.

chapters we have today, as well as the story of the adulteress (7:53—8:11).⁴ The focus will be on the responses that the text evokes from its implied, textual, or ideal audience in the sequential manner in which the Gospel would have been performed orally, most likely in a communal worship context.⁵

Along with most commentators I consider John to be one of the later documents in the NT. Considered to be the Fourth Gospel, John was most likely completed later than the letters of Paul as well as the three Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, whether or not John is directly dependent on any of these Gospels. Although we cannot presume that the audience of John was familiar with any of the other documents of the NT as we have them, the text of John presupposes its audience's knowledge and practice of common forms of Christian worship alluded to elsewhere in the NT, such as baptism, Eucharist, professions of faith, prayers, hymns, etc.⁶ Other significant presuppositions include the audience's knowledge of Jewish forms of worship and festivals as well as the OT scriptures. Significant for its theme of worship, the Fourth Gospel presents itself as not only the fulfillment and completion but also the continuation of the Jewish scriptures and thus, like the Jewish scriptures, functions as a source for listening to the word of God in Christian worship services.⁷

Preliminary Overview

The following chapters will treat the theme of worship in John in the sequential order in which the audience would have heard this Gospel performed within a context of communal worship. With its communal pronouncement

4. Although for some reason this story was omitted very early on in the manuscript tradition, there is very strong internal evidence for considering it original, as it fits quite well into its narrative context. See Heil, "Jesus and the Adulteress," 182–91; Heil, "Rejoinder," 361–66.

5. This literary, narrative-critical approach is very similar to that articulated by Brown, *Gift*, 11–15.

6. For various forms of worship in the letters of Paul, see Heil, *Rituals of Worship*. "What we see in this Gospel is a strong emphasis on events in Jesus' ministry that foreshadow the sacramental life of the church. The evangelist speaks to a Christian audience that depends upon baptism and the Eucharist for that life. Thus, he does not mention these institutions, but presupposes them through references to living water and rebirth, as well as living bread and the wine of the new dispensation" (Brown, *Gift*, 247). On the various practices of early Christian worship, see McGowan, *Ancient Christian Worship*.

7. "The author has written his story that the readers may come to life as a result of this exposure to the Word of God: a story of Jesus he already understood and passed on as Scripture (20:31)" (Moloney, "John as Scripture," 467). See also Smith, "Gospels Become Scripture," 3–20; Brown, *Gift*, 70–78; Moloney, "Know the Scripture," 97–111.

celebrating Jesus' gift of divine life eternal, the hymnic prologue in 1:1–18 sets a preliminary tone of communal worship for the rest of the narrative. In 1:19–51 the first four days of the narrative present scenes focused on the worship of Jesus. In 2:1–4:54 Jesus reveals that the “place” for true worship is not physical or geographical but rather “in Spirit and truth” (4:23–24). In 5:1–10:42 Jesus perfects and transcends various aspects of Jewish festival worship. In 11:1–12:50 Jesus reveals that sacrificial worship for divine life eternal glorifies God. In 13:1–17:26 Jesus presents his farewell address to his disciples at his last supper with them, revealing further aspects of true worship and concluding with an extensive prayer. In 18:1–19:42 Jesus' self-sacrificial death provides the foundation for a life-giving worship. And finally, in 20:1–21:25 the risen Jesus establishes the worship for divine life eternal.

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