

The Gospels Revisited

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The following material has been extracted, adapted, and expanded from my article "Trinity and Incarnation: In Search of Contemporary Orthodoxy," *Ex Auditu* 7 (1991) ©1992 Pickwick Publications. For fuller statements see my article on "Person of Christ," *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. G.W. Bromiley, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986, 3:781-801; and my books *Miracles and the Critical Mind*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984, and *That You May Believe*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984; reprint Portland, Or.: Wipf and Stock. I believe that these more detailed studies justify the deliberately provocative and anachronistic claim that we can speak of a Trinitarian testimony of the Gospels.

1. Early Christian Apologetics

I would like to start with some comments on a couple of passages in the Acts of the Apostles which seem at first sight to present a very unpromising beginning because they seem to say *so much less* than we want them to say. The first is taken from the account of Peter's preaching at Pentecost:

Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs which God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know . . . (Acts 2: 22).

The second is drawn from Peter's proclamation to Cornelius and the first Gentile converts:

You know the word which he sent to Israel, preaching good new by Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all), the word which was proclaimed throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism which John preached: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power; how he went about doing good and healing all that were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him (Acts 10: 36-38).

In the narrative of Acts the two declarations follow the outpouring of the Spirit when the church was opened up first to Jewish believers and then to Gentiles. In neither declaration is it said that Jesus did things because of his personal divinity. In the first passage Jesus is described as *a man attested by God*; his works are actually the *works which God did through him*. In the second passage his works are more specifically attributed to *God's anointing him with the Holy Spirit and power*; his actions in doing good and healing all that were oppressed by the devil show that God was with him.

These statements seem to downplay the notion of personal divinity. What, in fact, I believe they do is to lay the foundations of what might anachronistically be called a Trinitarian approach to christology. I believe that these statements belong to the apologetic of early Christianity and its defence against the charges of the Jewish leadership that Jesus was really an evil doer, a blasphemer, who sought to lead Israel astray by his teaching and signs and wonders. I believe that these statements sum up the underlying strategy of the first three Gospels, if not all four Gospels, in their presentation of Jesus and their vindication of him against hostile charges.

2. A Two-Part Thesis

As I have pondered the debates about miracles over the past few years, I have come to a number of conclusions. One is that the philosophical discussions of the past were not really about the abstract possibility of miracles happening. Behind them was the hidden agenda of attacking or defending the truth-claims of Christianity. Orthodox strategy tended to argue that Jesus must be divine, because he did miracles which ordinary people could not do, and thus the truth-claims of Christianity were objectively attested. Skeptical strategy counterattacked by claiming that the miracle stories are scientifically impossible or that they were later inventions, and thus the truth-claims fell to the ground. It now seems to me that such arguments miss the point and, in fact, misread the New Testament, not least because they fail to notice *the question of who exactly is doing what*. They also miss the significance of *the Jewish context*. I will call the two parts of my thesis *Thesis A* and *Thesis B*.

Thesis A argues that in recording and giving prominence to the prophecy of John the Baptist (Mark 1: 8; Matt. 3: 11; Luke 3: 16; cf. John 1: 33) the evangelists intend their readers to understand that the prophecy was fulfilled at least initially in the earthly ministry of Jesus.¹ Mark's version of it reads: "I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." Broadly speaking the Christian tradition has treated the prophecy in three main ways. In Catholic teaching it is linked with the rite of water baptism. In Reformed theology it is taken to refer to regeneration. In the Pentecostal and charismatic traditions it is related to post-conversion spiritual gifts and power. In their different ways all three lines of interpretation have failed to pay sufficient attention to the text. They have read it as if it was the same as Acts 1: 5 and 11: 16, and thereby have failed to notice that the prophecy is addressed not to the church but to the crowds that have come to John for baptism.

Baptism is a rite of washing, cleansing, purification, and consecration. I wish to suggest that the evangelists see the activity of Jesus as a counterpart to this rite. Following his anointing as the Christ, the messianic Son of God anointed by the Spirit of God, he embarked on a mission to cleanse and consecrate Israel. He did so under the authority of and in the power of the Spirit. This theme provides the overarching context for

¹ Among the scholars who see the prophecy as relevant to Jesus' earthly ministry are J.E. Yates, "The Form of Mark 1.8B," *New Testament Studies* 4 (1957-58): 334-338; Yates, *The Spirit and the Kingdom* (London: S.P.C.K., 1963); B.M.F. van Iersel, "He will Baptize You with the Holy Spirit: The Time Perspective of *baptisei*," in T. Baarda, A. Hilhorst, G.P. Luttikhuisen, A.S. van der Woude, eds., *Text and Testimony: Essays on New Testament and Apocryphal Literature in Honour of A.F.J. Flijn*, (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1988), pp. 132-141; C.H. Dodd (so James D.G. Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit*, *Studies in Biblical Theology*, Second Series 15 [London: S.C.M. Press, 1970], p. 20, n. 45); E. Manicardi, *Il cammino di Gesù nel Vangelo di Marco*, *AnBib* 96, Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1980, pp. 166-169; and Robert M. Gundry, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 108 (1989): 154.

Yates and Dodd take the prophecy to relate to the sifting and judging of Israel through Jesus' ministry of the Spirit. Van Iersel relates it to the impending judgment and the destruction of the temple which was initiated when Jesus let go of the Spirit when he breathed his last breath. Robert P. Menzies observes: "John declared that a deluge of messianic judgment was coming; the righteous would be separated from the wicked by a powerful blast of the Spirit of God, and the latter would be consumed by fire. In this way the righteous remnant would be gathered together and the nation purified" (*The Development of Early Christian Pneumatology with Special Reference to Luke-Acts*, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series* 54 [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991], p. 144. It seems to me that there are important elements in these various positions. However, I would want to stress that baptism is not a purely negative and destructive act; its purpose is to purify and consecrate. Jesus' Spirit-ministry began, not at Pentecost, but after his own baptism and anointing. It sifted the wheat from the chaff. Those who responded positively were consecrated; those who responded negatively became like the chaff to be burned (Matt. 3: 12; Luke 3: 17; cf. John 3: 16-21).

understanding Jesus' teaching, exorcisms, miracles and actions, right down to the cleansing (or baptism) of the temple and his death on the cross. Thus the stories of cleansing of lepers, forgiveness of sin, freeing people from the defiling, enslaving power of demons, and the debate about what makes a person clean may be seen as different facets of Jesus' cleansing, restoring, and consecrating the people of Israel. The nature miracles may be seen as the freeing of nature from demonic forces and consecrating it for the people of God.

Jesus' climactic act of cleansing the temple may be understood as a "baptism" of the temple in the light of Jesus' response to the question of his authority. At first sight, his counter question about whether the baptism of John was from heaven (i.e., God) or from men might seem irrelevant and evasive (Mark 11: 30; Matt. 21: 25; Luke 20: 4). To my mind, it directly addresses the issue and supports my thesis. If the opponents were to deny that John's baptism was from God, they would risk offending the people who held that John was a real prophet. But if they were to admit that it was from God, they knew what would be the next question: "Why then did you not believe him?" But what had John declared about his baptism? The answer is to be found in the prophecy of Mark 1: 8: "I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." The event that we call the cleansing of the temple was the climactic fulfillment of the prophecy that "he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

Thesis B represents the other side of the coin and is bound up with Jewish attitudes to witchcraft, sorcery, and prophets who lead the people astray. It is linked with such passages as Deut. 13-18 and finds echoes in the Mishnah and Talmud. Deut. 13 states that if a prophet comes among the people and performs a sign or wonder and says, "Let us go after other gods," the people are not to go. They are to know that the Lord is testing them to see if they love the Lord with all their heart and soul. Not only are they to pay no heed to the prophet; they are to kill him and so "purge the evil" from their midst.

Thesis B argues that, when the Jewish authorities saw Jesus profaning the sabbath, propounding deviant teaching, and apparently performing signs and wonders in an evident attempt to gain a following and lead the people astray, they turned to the Torah for guidance. Finding passages like Deut. 13, they decided that they had no alternative but to "purge the evil" from their midst and liquidate him.² There are further ramifications of this thesis which I cannot pursue here, viz. that Jesus' opponent were working with a strict Torah theology based on the Law, especially those parts of the Law like Deuteronomy (which has nothing to say about the Spirit) which dealt with everyday life. Jesus and his followers, on the other hand, were working with a theology based on the Law and the Prophets (which focus on the Spirit and the Servant of the Lord). Incidentally, the fact that Jesus was perceived in this way by his opponents is an indication that miracle and exorcism stories belong to the earliest strata of tradition.

3. Development of the Thesis

A proper development of the thesis would require us to study the gospel tradition as it is developed separately in all four Gospels, and also to consider counter objections. Here I can do no more than draw attention to a number of points which seem to me to be significant.

² Other scholars who see Deut. 13 as significant in the charges against Jesus include Ethelbert Stauffer, *Jerusalem und Rom im Zeitalter Jesu* (Berne: Francke Verlag, 1957); Stauffer, *Jesus and His Story* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1960); August Strobel, *Die Stunde der Wahrheit. Untersuchungen zum Strafverfahren gegen Jesu*, WUNT 2. Reihe 21 (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1980); Graham N. Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People: Studies in Matthew* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1992), pp. 232-255.

Mathew, Mark, and Luke. The Synoptic Gospels highlight the baptism of Jesus, the consequent descent of the Spirit upon him, and the identification of him as God's Son (Mark 1: 9-11; Matt. 3: 13-17; Luke 3: 21-22). John focuses on the descent of the Spirit on Jesus, his remaining on him, his identity as the one who baptizes with the Spirit, and John's testimony that he is God's Son (John 1: 33-34). In the light of what we have said above about the meaning of the term *Son of God*, Jesus has now been installed with authority as God's anointed Son-king, his vice-regent. The anointing by the Spirit is not some kind of extra boost to enable him to function better. It is the act which *makes him* the Messiah, the Christ, the anointed one. It is constitutive for his identity as the messianic Son. Prior to this event, he was the Messiah designate; the anointing makes him the anointed one, the Messiah.³

The Gospels of Matthew and Luke forestall the question of adoptionism with their accounts of the role of the Spirit in the conception of Jesus (Matt. 1: 18, 20; Luke 1: 35). Jesus was who he was because of the role of the Spirit from the first. But he did not enter into his messianic office until his anointing by the Spirit.

In the temptation stories which follow the baptism it is the Spirit who drives Jesus into the wilderness, where he is tempted (Mark 1: 12-13). In the accounts of the temptations given by Matthew (4: 1-11) and Luke (4: 1-13), the temptations turn on Jesus' identity as the Son of God. The point of the temptations are not "If you are the Second Person of the Trinity. . . ." Rather, they turn on the identification of Jesus as the newly anointed messianic Son. If Jesus has got this power and authority, why not use it to further his purposes?

In Luke's account, upon Jesus' return to Galilee "in the power of the Spirit" (Luke 4: 16) Jesus enters the synagogue at Capernaum where he reads from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord" (Luke 4: 18-19; citing Isa. 61: 1-2). It is the anointing and empowering by the Spirit which defines in Luke who Jesus is and what is his mission.

In Matthew Jesus' identity and mission is defined by a different passage from Isaiah which links Jesus with God's servant upon whom he will put his Spirit and who will reach out to the Gentiles. Jesus' action is seen as the fulfillment of the prophecy, "Behold, my servant whom I have chosen, my beloved with whom my soul is well pleased. I will put my Spirit upon him, and he shall proclaim justice to the Gentiles . . . and in him will the Gentiles hope" (Matt. 12: 17-21; citing Isa. 42: 1-4). The fact that Jesus cast out demons by the Spirit indicates that "the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Matt. 12: 28; cf. Luke 11: 20).

Peter's confession of Jesus as "the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16: 17; "the Christ," Mark 8: 29; "The Christ of God," Luke 9: 20) are confessions that indeed Jesus is the one anointed by the Spirit and who, as such, is the messianic Son. The confession is made against the background of a counter-confession or counter-charge that Jesus was

³ The Greek word Χριστός (*christos*) and the Hebrew מָשִׁיחַ (*mashiach*) both mean "anointed." Initially, when the term was applied to Jesus it probably simply meant "the anointed one" (Anthony Harvey, *Jesus and the Constraints of History*, Bampton Lectures 1980 [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982], pp. 80-82, 139-143, 149-153; John A.T. Robinson, *The Priority of John*, ed. J.F. Coakley [London: S.C.M. Press, 1985], p. 206). Inevitably, the designation of Jesus as "the anointed one" raises the question "By what or whom was Jesus anointed?" The answer of the Gospels is to link the prophecies of Isa. 41: 1 and Isa. 61: 1 to the baptism of Jesus and his subsequent anointing by the Spirit. Thus the term Christ carries with it not only an explicit reference to Jesus, but also an implicit reference to the Spirit which anointed him.

casting out demons by Beelzebul (Mark 3: 22-27; Matt. 12: 20-30; cf. 9: 32-34; Luke 11: 14: 23; cf. John 7: 20, 25; 8: 48, 59; 10: 33). The charge carried with it the implication that he was guilty of a capital offence. It is at this point that my *Thesis B* comes to the fore as the flat negation of *Thesis A*. In other words, the issue is the issue of what has got into Jesus of Nazareth. The opponents say, in effect, that the devil has got into him. The Gospels say that he is anointed by the Spirit of God. It is an issue of the Spirit, and in this light we see the significance of the saying about blasphemy as the unforgivable sin (Mark 3: 28-30; Matt. 12: 31-37). The sin is to identify the Spirit of God with Satan. Jesus counters by asking by whom do your sons cast out demons. "But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Matt. 12: 28; cf. Luke 11: 20).

The attribution of Jesus' power and authority to the Spirit is a theme which stands out clearly in the Gospels, but it has been widely neglected in traditional theology, apologetics, and piety alike. I believe that the reason for the neglect is a desire to express the Incarnation in terms of a metaphysical divine sonship instead of allowing our ideas to be formed by the witness of the Gospels. This emphasis has led to an unfortunate neglect of the *Spirit christology* which is fundamental to understanding the message of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. At the same time these evangelists also develop a concurrent *Word or Wisdom christology*. Jesus proclaims the Gospel of God. He speaks with authority in calling the disciples and expelling the unclean spirits. The people are amazed at his "new teaching" and "authority." By Jesus' word the leper is made clean, and the paralytic is assured that his sins are forgiven. Jesus' sundry pronouncements concerning fellowship with sinners, fasting, new wine, and the sabbath are spoken with an authority above that of the scribes. He is the sower who sows the word of God. He not only lives by the word of God, he fulfills the word of God. He is the divinely authorized and empowered agent through whom the Father speaks and is present (Matt. 10: 40; 11: 27; Luke 10: 16, 22).⁴ In Matthew and Luke Jesus is not only presented as a teacher of wisdom; he is the personal manifestation of God's wisdom in action.⁵

⁴ The idea of the agent plays a significant part in Scripture and rabbinic thought. The rabbis used the term שְׂפִיחַ (shaliach), and maintained that "a man's agent is as himself." See further Jan A. Bühner, *Der Gesandte und sein Weg im 4. Evangelium. Die kultur- und religionsgeschichtlichen Grundlagen der johanneischen Sendungschristologie sowie ihre traditionsgeschichtliche Entwicklung*, WUNT 2. Reihe 2 (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1977; Peder Borgen, *Bread from Heaven: An Exegetical Study of the Concept of Manna in the Gospel of John and the Writings of Philo*, Supplements to Novum Testamentum 10 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1965), pp. 158-164; Borgen, "God's Agent in the Fourth Gospel," in *Logos Was the True Light and Other Essays on the Gospel of John*, Relieff 9 (Trondheim: Tapir, University of Trondheim, 1983), pp. 121-132; Howard Clark Kee, *What Can We Know about Jesus?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 104-110; Ben Witherington, III, *The Christology of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), pp. 142-143.

⁵ Matt. 11: 18-19 par. Luke 7: 33-35; Matt. 11: 25-26 par. Luke 10: 21; Matt. 11: 27 par. Luke 20: 22; Matt. 12: 41-42 par. Luke 11: 31-32; Matt. 23: 34-47 par. Luke 11: 49-51; 13: 34-35. Because Jesus is the wisdom of God incarnate, he can issue wisdom's invitation to come to him and take his yoke (Matt. 11: 28-30; cf. Sir. 51: 23-27). See further M. Jack Suggs, *Wisdom, Christology, and Law in Matthew's Gospel* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1970); R.G. Hamerton-Kelly, *Pre-Existence, Wisdom and the Son of Man: A Study of the Ideas of Pre-Existence in the New Testament*, SNTS Monographs 21, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973; James M. Robinson, "Jesus as Sophos and Sophia: Wisdom Tradition and the Gospels," in Robert L. Wilken, ed., *Aspects of Wisdom in Judaism and Early Christianity* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), pp. 1-16; Martin Scott, *Sophia and the Johannine Jesus*, JSNT Supplement Series 71 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992).

It may be noted that, whereas Logos (λόγος) is masculine, Sophia (σοφία, wisdom) is feminine, and is frequently depicted as such. This and other considerations suggest to me that we should not identify the members of the Trinity with one or other sex (i.e. say with Gelpi and others that the Spirit is female as a

John. If Matthew, Mark, and Luke have an explicit Spirit christology accompanied by an implicit Word christology, John presents *an explicit Word christology* accompanied by *an implicit Spirit christology*. We have already noticed John's stress on the Word made flesh, thus becoming God's Son who uniquely reveals his glory and makes the Father known (John 1: 1-18). As the Word, he existed before all things; through Jesus the Father speaks his word. He is the Father's executor in all things (John 1: 3, 9; 3: 16-21, 31-36; 6: 33, 50, 58, 63; 7: 28; 8: 14-20; 10: 36; 16: 28; 17: 1-5, 17, 21-24). Alongside John's stress on the Word, there is a developing Spirit christology. "He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit" (John 1: 33). Unless one is born of water and the Spirit one cannot see the kingdom of God (John 3: 5). True worshippers must worship in Spirit and in truth (John 4: 23).

The paraclete sayings of John 14: 16-17, 25, 15: 26, and 16: 7-15 form a bridge between Jesus' possession of the Spirit and his bestowal of the Spirit. The world cannot receive the Spirit, but the disciples are reminded that the Spirit is already present: "You know him for he dwells with you, and will be in you" (John 14: 17). However, the Spirit is not given as an inner spring of living water until Jesus is glorified (John 7: 39). Finally, the risen Christ breathes on the disciples and says: "Receive the Holy Spirit" (John 20: 22). I see this as a kind of prophetic act in which the action illustrates and embodies the prophecy. The Greek word for Spirit is *pneuma*, meaning wind, moving air, or breath. Obviously it is the latter sense that is present here. The divine breath which gave life to Jesus and made the word of the Father present in him is now bestowed upon the disciples.

Whereas the Synoptic Gospels stress the activity of the Spirit, the Fourth Gospel focuses on Jesus as the one who does the works of the Father (John 10: 37-38). He who has seen Jesus has seen the Father (John 14: 9). For it the Father who dwells in Jesus who does his works (John 14: 10). One may be inclined to look at the Gospel material and ask "Who is doing what?" The traditional answer might be something like "Jesus, the Incarnate Son of God, is the one who taught, worked miracles, drove out unclean spirits, and finally died for our redemption." But such a simplified answer does not do justice to the testimony of the Gospels. Certainly it is Jesus, but the Synoptic Gospels draw attention to the role of the Spirit, and John highlights the working of the Father in him.

Conclusion. I believe that we have here the root of the doctrine of the Trinity and the Incarnation. The picture presented by the NT is not of three divine beings with separate functions like creation, redemption, and sustaining. It is one God who manifests himself as the Father, his revealing word or wisdom, and life-giving life. Just as we cannot speak without breath, the divine word of the Father is not uttered without the Father's divine breath. We are not speaking of three beings. Neither are we merely talking about "inspiration" in the sense of enlightenment. We are talking about the threefold God in human life, the God who always exists and acts in his threefoldness. As God draws near in this mystery of revelation, we are confronted with the mystery of the Trinity and Incarnation.

counterpart to the maleness of the First and Second Persons of the Trinity). Rather, there is a sense in which the persons of the Trinity transcend sexuality and at the same time embody elements contained in sexual imagery.