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convention, designed to bring out the *significance* of what Jesus was and did and is. Only so can we read the Gospel aright. Take it at its face value and we are saddled with a doubly impossible Christ: on the one hand a conscious pre-existent being alongside God the Father—a misconception which, as you say, the fathers did their best to overcome with their insistence on a *Logos-Son*; and on the other hand a self-consciously incarnate Jesus who is not in any proper sense of the word human—a misconception from which the Church is by no means fully free even now. So when I speak of the need to distance ourselves from the legacy of the Fourth Evangelist's synthesis, it is in your terminology 'the dogmatic John' rather than 'the historical John' whom I want to keep at bay. You want to be wary of him too, though you are less worried than I am about his liability to mislead. Meanwhile I remain grateful for your contribution towards clarifying the nature of 'the historical John'.

Yours sincerely,

MAURICE

James Dunn has recently been appointed Professor of New Testament in the University of Durham

Maurice Wiles is Regius Professor of Divinity in the University of Oxford

A further contribution to the debate will be found in Letters to the Editors.

Dunn on John

JOHN ROBINSON

In the illuminating encounter in the March number between Maurice Wiles and James Dunn on Johannine Christology one thing was agreed between them, namely, that Dunn is right in understanding John—and within the New Testament John alone—to speak of the personal pre-existence of Jesus as a divine being. Wiles regards this as a disastrous step, from which we should seek to distance our Christology. Dunn disagrees, unless this is 'interpreted in terms of our modern idea of personality', or, in historical terms, 'the Gnostic redeemer myth'. I fully agree that this last is not what John intends. But I also agree with Wiles that the effect of viewing incarnation as the coming to earth of a heavenly person is destructive, though not primarily, as Dunn supposes, for its threat to monotheism (the subordination of the Son to the Father, 'the one true' and 'only' God, is never in doubt in John), but for its threat to the genuineness of Christ's humanity. But clearly John has no intention of being docetic either, as the reaction in the Epistles to those who take him that way fully bears out.

This raises the question whether the two are in fact right in what they agree upon, that John does understand Christ as having pre-existed from all eternity as a divine person, who then assumed human nature. It may indeed look to us as if this is what he is saying, but, as Dunn rightly insists of Paul and the others, we must make the effort 'to understand their words as they would have intended, to hear them as their first readers would have heard them' (*Christology in the Making*, p. 9). And for all the critical acumen and masterly judgement of his study I am not convinced that he has put his finger on the right place in identifying the difference or describing the distinctiveness of John.

There is no doubt whatever that there is a decisively new situation introduced with Jesus. As Dunn puts it elsewhere, with him the boundary is crossed between inspiration and incarnation: Jesus is 'the man Wisdom became—not merely inspired, but became' (p. 212). But this is said—and very well said—of Paul and Hebrews. Similarly he recognizes the decisive step introduced at John 1.14 as the transition 'from impersonal personification to actual person' (p. 243), for which only the language of incarnation is appropriate. In Jesus the Logos is 'identified with a particular person'. This is the great new thing. But is it the great new thing of Christianity or of John?

I suggest it is the former—and that it is precisely what Paul is saying, e.g., in Col. 1.19, that 'in him the complete being of God, by God's own choice, came to dwell'. The subject in each case is the self-expressive activity and being of God. Dunn recognizes that up to John 1.14 there is nothing in the Prologue that would be strange to a Hellenistic Jew. The Word is 'the utterance of God personified' and it is merely incidental that in Greek *logos* is masculine, rather than feminine like wisdom or neuter like spirit (p. 243)—*rhēma* might have established itself, as in Acts 10.37. But in verse 14 the Logos becomes personalized and not just personified, comes into being as a particular person: 'The Word of God is identified with a particular historical person'; but he goes on, 'whose pre-existence as a person with God is asserted throughout' (p. 250). It is this latter clause that I would question, of John as much as of any other New Testament writer.

On the contrary I would say that John's position is essentially contained in statements Dunn makes on p. 262:

Initially at least Christ was not thought of as a divine being who had pre-existed with God but as *the climactic embodiment of God's power and purpose . . . God's clearest self-expression, God's last word.*

The Christ-event defined God more clearly than anything else had ever done.

'Incarnation' means initially that *God's love and power had been experienced in fullest measure in, through and as this man Jesus, that Christ had been experienced as God's self-expression (italics his).*

This I believe is exactly what John sums up in 1.18 when he says that Jesus Christ as Son of God has given an exegesis of the Father.

Where I would differ from Dunn is in my conviction that John gives us the richest and most mature interpretation of this 'initial' doctrine of incarnation, not that he changes it into something else which, Dunn claims, can for the first time properly be described as a 'myth', that of a heavenly divine figure who becomes man. Yet the personification of Wisdom as God's companion and agent in creation is surely just as 'mythical': it is merely a different myth.

What I contend John is saying is that the Word, which was *theos*, God in his self-revelation and expression, *sarx egeneto* (1.14), was embodied totally in and as a human being, became a person, was personalized not just personified. But that the Logos came into existence or expression as a person does not mean that he was a person before. In terms of the later classic distinction, it was not the Logos which was hypostatic (a person or hypostasis) who then assumed human nature as well as his own, but that the Logos was anhypostatic *until* the Word of God finally came to its full expression not merely in nature and in a people but in an individual historical person, and thus *became* hypostatic (so Piet Schoonenberg, *The Christ*, pp. 54–66, 80–91).

This distinction, I believe, is vital in order to guard John's Christology, and our own, from the charge of docetism, to which it has so often been subjected (supremely of late by Käsemann), namely, that Jesus was a heavenly being, a divine person, living as a human, passing through this earth on the path of a parabola yet always a few inches off the ground. For John, I am convinced, as for all the other New Testament writers, Jesus is genuinely and utterly a man (he uses *anthropos* of him more often than all the other Gospels together) who so completely incarnates God that whoever has seen him has seen the Father. This is precisely what John Bowker seems to be saying in the restatement in modern terms, considerably less pellucid than John's, which Dunn commends (on p. 352, n. 7), of Jesus as 'the wholly God-informed person'. 'It is possible on this basis', concludes Bowker, 'to talk about a wholly human figure, without loss or compromise, and to talk also of a wholly real presence of God so far as that nature . . . can be mediated to and through the process' of a human life. This quotation occurs in a footnote to Dunn's statement (p. 265) that 'we honour [John] most highly when we follow his example and mould the language and conceptualizations in transition today into a gospel which conveys the divine, revelatory and saving significance of Christ to our day as effectively as he did to his'. For prior to this (p. 264) Dunn shows himself uneasily conscious that the way John put it (as he interprets it) cannot really be ours today, and indeed that he was perhaps being taken for a bit of a ride by the 'cultural evolution' of the late first century.

It could be said that the Fourth Evangelist was as much a prisoner of his language as its creator . . . That is to say, perhaps we see in the Fourth Gospel what started as an elaboration of the Logos-Son imagery applied to Jesus, inevitably in the transition of conceptualizations coming to express a conception of Christ's personal pre-existence which early Gnosticism found more congenial than early orthodoxy.

I agree that this happened, but I believe it happened to John rather than in John, and that he was 'taken over' by the gnosticizers. In evidence I would cite the Johannine Epistles, which are saying in effect: 'If *that's* what you think I meant, that I was teaching a docetic-type Christology, denying Christ come in the flesh and trying to have the Father without the Son, then this is very Antichrist'. Käsemann and others like him, as E. Schweizer pointed out, ignore the Johannine Epistles and the vehement repudiation they contain.

Yet John is so near as well as so far. It is entirely explicable that he should have been taken in this way. For the 'retrojective process' was probably inevitable, which Geoffrey Lampe so well described in his *God as Spirit*, of reading back the revelation of the Logos as 'a son', that is, as a human being who perfectly imaged God, like an only son his father, on to the revelation of 'the Son', a heavenly being, later the second person of the Trinity, who took on a human nature. The content of the Christian revelation of God in and as an individual human person was combined with the cultural transition in late first-century Judaism and Gnosticism to the notion of fully hypostasized pre-existent heavenly figures to produce this result.

Now the parable 'as in a son', to use Theodore of Mopsuestia's language and indeed John's too (for in 1.14 there are no articles: he employs a simile from human life—'glory, or reflection, as of an only son of his father'), is already allegorized as 'the Son' in relation to 'the Father' not only in John (we can watch the process in the 'hidden parable', as Dodd called it, of 5.19) but in Mark (13.32) and Q (Matt. 11.27 = Luke 10.22). Yet, as Dunn rightly argues, that does not imply the personal pre-existence of a heavenly being in the theology of the Synoptists, let alone in the consciousness of Jesus. But when he comes to John he contends that the *combination* of the Wisdom-Logos Christology of the Prologue hymn (which he thinks, I believe improbably, is pre-Johannine, but agrees does not itself speak of a pre-existent Person) with John's dominant Son of God Christology produces an entirely different situation. And in fact it is this latter Son of God language rather than the Logos language as such which compels him to this conclusion.

Yet is John really so divergent at this point from the rest of the New Testament? Dunn fully accepts that initially this language 'had no overtones of pre-existence' (p. 244), and even when Paul speaks

of God 'sending his own Son' (Gal. 4.4) or of 'the second man from heaven' (1 Cor. 15.47) this does not necessarily imply *personal* pre-existence. I would agree with him. Moreover I have long interpreted Phil. 2 along the same lines as he does, as telling not of a divine being who became man but of a man whose entire being was shaped by God (*en morphē(i) theou*), perfectly reflecting his nature and glory, who yet chose to live the poverty-stricken, humiliating form of existence common to all other men. The deepest veriest significance of Jesus Christ, what at bottom he really was (*hyparchōn*), is phrased not so much in terms of pre-existence as of true existence. So it is with the Johannine Son of Man whose whole life, as the authentic man, has its source, centre and goal in God. This true existence is of course given expression in terms of eternal existence, primacy in terms of priority, of the above rather than the below, the heavenly rather than the earthly. Thus there are constantly two stories, two answers to where Jesus comes from—out of the Father as well as out of Nazareth or Galilee. He is sent from God, but that does not mean for John any more than for Paul that he is not also born of woman, a genuine product of the natural process. And the same language which John uses about Jesus being 'from God' or 'sent into the world' he uses also of other men (for the details I would refer to my *Human Face of God*, pp. 172–5). As son of God and as children of God (for Jesus alone truly embodies the role of 'son') Jesus and believers are not born of fleshly birth; but that does not mean that as human beings they are not so born. Jesus is *the* son because he is always in the Father's house, listening to what he says, doing what he does, totally 'at one' with him, saying nothing 'of himself', but transparent always to the Father's will. Everything the Father has is his because everything he has is the Father's. Heaven is where he 'belongs', in the bosom of the Father, and he alone can thus share and communicate to others, his glory, his 'name'. But he does this completely as a man, the uniquely normal man, the son that all are called but fail to be. Hence his claim to be 'son of God' (again with no articles) is no blasphemy: it could be refuted only if the moral correspondence could be shown to be lacking (10.36f).

The trouble starts when the two sets of language are mixed up, as they are by Nicodemus, and the eternal Word he embodies is confused with the ego of the human Jesus and the utterances of the one crossed with the utterances of the other. This happens when the words of Christ in this Gospel are judged by the criterion of psychological verisimilitude rather than of theological verity. For the ego of the human Jesus is no more pre-existent than that of any other human being, and to suggest that he is reminiscing at that level about a state which he enjoyed with the Father before the world began is clearly to throw in doubt the genuineness of his humanity. But at the level of theological verity the voice with which he speaks and the authority with which he acts and claims allegiance are those of the Word which transcends time and space.

There are two ways in which Jesus' *lalia* is misunderstood and his word therefore cannot be 'heard' (8.43) which are reflected in the Fourth Gospel and in its subsequent interpretation. The first is to take Jesus' talk at the level of the ego of western empiricism, the second as usurping the divine name and thus speaking blasphemy, as the Jews assert (10.33) and as, for instance, Stauffer in *Jesus and His Story* understands the 'I am' of this Gospel. Neither interpretation is, I believe, true to it. On the contrary, the 'I' of this Gospel is the totality of the human self, such as Jung speaks of in contrast with the ego, the 'I' of the mystics, of Meister Eckhardt and the Angelus Silesius, of the Sufis or the Upanishads, where *atman* and *Brahman* are completely united as in John 10.30: 'I and the Father are one thing.' But it is Buber the Jew—shall we say the Israelite without guile?—who perhaps gets nearest to what John means:

How powerful, even to being overpowering, and how legitimate, even to being self-evident, is the saying of *I* by Jesus! For it is the *I* of unconditional relation in which the man calls his *Thou* Father in such a way that he is simply Son, and nothing else but Son. Whenever he says *I* he can only mean the *I* of the holy primary word that has been raised for him into unconditional being (*I and Thou*, tr. R. Gregor Smith, pp. 66f.).

There is nothing there that is not utterly and 'superly' human, as well as being totally transparent of God. To have seen the one is to have seen the other, without either being dissolved in the other.

What John is doing here as elsewhere is, I believe, drawing out what is already implicit in the rest of the Christian tradition—not making up, but taking up the things of Jesus and truly seeing them in the most deeply penetrating light of the Spirit. For the 'I' of this Gospel is already in principle that of the tradition behind Matthew and Luke, of the Son who lives in the relation of perfect mutual knowledge with the Father, who in the name of the divine Wisdom speaks the invitation of God and sends his messengers, the 'I' of the Sermon on the Mount who goes behind what was said not merely by but to them of old time and who in Mark as the Son of Man on earth forgives sins, quells the powers of demons and of nature, and exercises before the time the prerogatives of the last judgement. In John this is portrayed and projected, backwards and forwards, in terms of the pre-existence and post-existence of a heavenly person. But that is the language of myth, picturing the other side, as Bultmann would put it, in terms of this side. It is pushing back the truth of the sonship that Jesus embodied to the very beginning of God's purpose—as well as, in the Synoptists, to its end. For John, as for the writer to the Hebrews, it is through the Son and on account of the Son and the bringing of many sons to glory that all things are done that are done. But this is but bringing to recognition the full cosmic significance of what was disclosed in the glory of this utterly human life.

John, I believe, differs simply in the maturity with which he draws out the 'initial' understanding of incarnation, common in principle to all the New Testament writers. He has not, I think, as Dunn suggests (even if only in the form of a question expecting the answer 'yes'), 'left behind the earlier idea of God acting in and through the Christ-event' by presenting 'Christ . . . conceived as a heavenly being distinct from God' (p. 263).

When writing of Paul, Dunn says perceptively on p. 255:

Did he think of Christ as a man, a created being, chosen by God for this purpose, perhaps even appointed to this cosmic role as from his resurrection? or alternatively, as a heavenly being who had pre-existed with God from the beginning? Texts in Paul could readily be interpreted either way. The more plausible interpretation however is that such alternatives had not yet occurred to him: his overwhelming conviction was that God himself had acted in and through Christ, that what happened in the whole Christ-event was God himself opening the way for man for righteousness and redemption, and that this had been the same power and purpose through which and for which God had created the world.

I believe that with little modification of phraseology the same statement could be made about John. The alternative he poses is, I suggest, a false one for both of them. Each has statements which, as he says, could be pushed in either direction, and I am persuaded that he sets up a polarization between John and the rest of the New Testament by taking the statements of Paul and Hebrews and the Synoptists one way and those of John the other. The issue is not for either camp a choice between a 'mere man' Christology and a 'divine being' Christology. Paul, Hebrews and John are I believe much closer than he allows in presenting a real, and not merely what he calls an 'ideal', pre-existence and a genuinely incarnational theology, though *not* of a heavenly being who came to earth in the form of a man but of a man shaping and embodying in its fulness the self-expressive activity of God from the beginning.

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