

TXR2017: The Theology of John

How and why does John depict the death of Jesus as his hour of glorification?

Introduction

The presentation of Jesus in John has long been recognised as dramatically different from the presentation of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels and this applies especially to the significance, manner and meaning assigned to Jesus' death. Tuckett as a modern interpreter describes that the Johannine Jesus 'is far more explicit about himself [than in the Synoptics]...Jesus makes himself the object of faith'¹ and further '...John...presents Jesus explicitly in far more exalted terms.'² These remarks are the first clues as to why the death of the Johannine Jesus is portrayed as He is. The Christological lens provided by the Prologue helps identify that John wants the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus to be viewed as a whole, as part of his continuing mission. Fenton comments on this unique Christology in this way, " 'I AM' identifies a passage as Johannine, because there are no such sayings in the Synoptics... according to John, the believer enters eternal life in the present."³ This essay will attempt to show that the dissection of the motifs of

¹ Tuckett, C.M., *Christology and the New Testament: Jesus and his earliest followers*, p151, Edinburgh:2001.

² Tuckett, op.cit, p152.

³ Fenton, J.C., *The Gospel according to John*, p1, Oxford:1970.

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“lifting up” and “glory” are the keys to understanding why he considers the death a glorious event.

Firstly, some preliminary remarks should be made about the meanings of the words translated “glorification” and “lifted up”. The words used for ‘glory’ by John all belong to the family of words derived from the Greek noun *doxa* and the words for lifted up derive from the Greek verb *hupsoo*. Some commentators see a strong theological connection between the two in the sense of elevation and exaltation referring equally to the Crucifixion and Resurrection, “the ‘exaltation’ and the ‘glorification’...are regarded [by John]...as theologically so [close]...that to separate [them]...seems hardly meaningful.”⁴ Similarly, many commentators emphasise that the concept of glory is tied to the Incarnation and Ascension also. Ashton prefers to think in terms of the ‘glory motif’ as being defined in the ‘Incarnation and Easter’⁵.

Ashton particularly notes the absence from John of the Transfiguration scene where Jesus is perceived as a ‘heavenly being’ and he comments that this is because the Johannine Jesus ‘carries His glory with Him and His garments are always glistening’⁶. This emphasises the powerful dualism in the narrative between the *λογος* and the historical Jesus and how ‘glory’ helps provide the theological glue. He is both heavenly and earthly, ‘the earthly Jesus is the

⁴ Barrett, C.K., *The Gospel According to John*, pp2-3, London:1978.

⁵ Ashton, J., *Understanding the Fourth Gospel*, p496, New York:1991.

⁶ Ashton, *op.cit.*, p501.

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Risen Lord'⁷ and He is not a passive spectator or player in salvation history but the architect.

Thus, it is primarily through the word field of *doxa* to draw out the meanings he applies to the crucifixion. He uses forms of *doxa* on twenty-three occasions whereas Luke uses it just nine times⁸. 'Lifting-up' occurs less frequently but where it does, it is always connected directly with 'glorification' at his 'hour', so the two should indeed be seen as strongly related, complementary concepts.⁹ Johannine glory can best be thought of as a concept that synthesises God's fundamental nature, e.g. absolute righteousness, grace, truth, purity, justice, love and then exposes these qualities that are distinctively God's to the world through who Jesus was and how He acted, 'the word [glory] expresses the impression He makes...when He is manifesting power.'¹⁰ This interpretation is supported by the first use of *doxa* in the prologue:

'And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.'¹¹

So the connection between glory, power and revelation is seen to be very strong. Fenton commenting on the prologue describes the same relationship in this way:

⁷ Ashton, op.cit, p499.

⁸ Morris, L., *The Gospel According to John*, p427, Grand Rapids:1971,1989.

⁹ Barrett, op.cit., p402.

¹⁰ Ashton, op.cit, p496.

¹¹ John 1:14, NKJ.

'John is...connecting 'glory' with the exposure ('*hos*'...in the manner of) as the 'one and only' (*monogenes*) from the Father. The concept of 'glory' is connected with revealing the Father – His will and His purposes...Glorification is connected with the activity of 'gracious love and truth' which points onwards to the activity of the Holy Spirit.'¹²

However, a distinctive feature of the narrative is that although John may extend and modify the concept of 'glory', it is clearly rooted in Jewish and not Gnostic or docetic interpretations of Jesus. 'Glory' was associated with the Tabernacle as the symbol of God's presence and it is no coincidence that John uses a word in the Prologue translated 'tabernacled' in the Authorised Version. John's use of glory is also derived from the imagery in Isaiah 6 where Isaiah 'saw the Glory'; glory or the activity of that glory is something that can thus be seen.

The concept of 'glory' in John does though use a modified or 'individualised'¹³ eschatological framework where glory is connected with the coming, departure and return of Jesus rather than focussing on the *parousia* (2nd coming) as in the other gospels. However, it must be said that a specific unique, aspect of 'glorification' is assigned to the crucifixion event as the gateway of returning to the Father. This is the 'glory' that Jesus had with the Father that He alludes to in the High Priestly prayer of John 17 where it is described rather tautologically by Barrett as the "glory He would possess [simply] from 'being with the Father'"¹⁴. On its own this is not particularly helpful but as it is understood in the prayer that Jesus prays for his followers,

¹² Fenton, *The Gospel According to John*, p27.

¹³ Barrett, *op.cit.*, p455.

¹⁴ Barrett, *op.cit.*, p404.

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the repeated references to glorification of disciples in the perfect tense and the use of the perfect tense by Jesus “have given” (δέδωκας) may point, in the light of the references to the *paraclete*, to the presence of the Holy Spirit amongst them as the additional element of the glorification.

So it is seen that the “glorious” death can only be correctly interpreted beyond the so-called “Passion narrative” approach of the Synoptic Gospels. Koester observes:

“...The gospel carries no separable theology of Jesus’ death. John’s understanding of it must be discerned in and through his telling of the story.”¹⁵

John redefines primitive Christian, Jewish and Gentile categories or extends them so that they take on new meanings. John never refers to the “suffering” of Jesus by using the verb directly. Quoting Koester again:

“...where the Synoptics tell of Jesus’ suffering, John tells of Jesus’ triumph...in the Synoptics Jesus warns that the Son of Man must undergo great sufferings...be rejected...killed...In John, Jesus says the Son of Man must be ‘lifted up’, an expression that suggests exaltation to glory...The scenes of mockery at Golgotha are gone...There is no pall of darkness...no cry of abandonment.”¹⁶

Some interpreters, most notably after Bultmann, labelled John’s interpretation as “Gnostic” and asserted there was no place in the Gospel for the death, retained only because of the weight of Christian tradition. However, such an interpretation ignores the central motif introduced by John early on that Jesus was the “Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world”. This is clearly a paschal reference and Jesus, through the story, repeatedly refers to his “hour”

¹⁵ Koester, C.R. , ‘The Death of Jesus and the Human Condition: Exploring the Theology of John’s Gospel’, p141, *Life in Abundance: Studies of John’s Gospel in Tribute to Raymond E. Brown*, Collegeville:2005.

¹⁶ Koester, op.cit., p141-142.

which is a clear allusion to His Death. It is impossible to assert that John is not interested in the death or attaches no theological significance to it.

Rather, John is not concerned with the violence of the death would distract from what he considers to be the true significance of that death, "...The Johannine approach...to the event of crucifixion, a 'lifting up'...reveals a way of thought prepared to look for deeper meanings in outward events."¹⁷

The issue would seem to be one of spiritual maturity. Christians are stuck, weeping at the Cross and are failing to see the glorious and triumphant significance of the death. Paul expressed this in his theology as 'knowing Him in the power of His Resurrection'¹⁸ and John in his distinct way could be said to be pushing believers in a similar way into *zoe*, the 'life in all its fulness'¹⁹.

John is not interested in presenting Jesus as a "victim" of a cowardly Gentile governor. It has been said that Jesus' questioning of Pilate was quite inappropriate for a prisoner, 'confronted by Pilate, He is the real Judge...Jesus controls and orchestrates the whole performance'²⁰ and even on the Cross, there is time for arranging the future care of His mother (19:26), "Jesus' farewell and departure are tranquil and assured."²¹ The final moments on the Cross are not cries of one abandoned but the triumphant *τετελεσται*, translated 'It is accomplished' and the perfect tense inviting 'now and

¹⁷ Barrett, C.K., *The Gospel according to John*, p400, London:1978.

¹⁸ Philippians 2:10

¹⁹ John 10:10.

²⁰ Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel*, p489.

²¹ Ashton, *op.cit.*, p496.

forevermore'. As Ashton emphasises, 'by replacing the anguished appeal recorded by Mark and Matthew with a shout of triumph John transforms the cross into a throne.'²² Jesus becomes the author and the finisher of the entire drama and by His own choice, in perfect obedience to the Father, he finishes the work on Earth and initiates the new era. No one has forced Him to the Cross, he is *οωτως ποιω* 'I act thus' making a rational choice. With great confidence He has proclaimed that He has authority to rise from the dead:

"Therefore My Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This command I have received from My Father."²³

The glorification is the perfect revelation of the nature, power and purposes of God. The malevolent power of Death and the princes of the world are judged, cast out and defeated. Jesus is glorified as the crucifixion pronounces the final judgement on Satan. Death, Satan's highest work, will not hold Him and John moves swiftly and seamlessly announcing the next phase of His ministry, the sending of the Spirit.

His vindication and final glorification that occurred at His death is confirmed in the Resurrection encounters. The glorification is also a revelation, an epiphany, that will allow Jesus to "draw all men to Himself":

"Jesus' death is the crucial moment of God's revelation and judgement in and through him...as it opens the way to the future...and of the Spirit...who continues and extends his revelation...Jesus is not said simply to expire or breathe his last but to give up...his (or the) spirit...underpinning [John's] distinctive view as the revelation of God's judgement and of his gift of eschatological life: judgement against those who reject...but life for those who believe."²⁴

²² Ashton, op.cit., p489.

²³ John 10,17-18.

²⁴ Smith, D.M., *The Theology of the Gospel of John*, p120.

This concept of revelation as part of glory is rooted in the Exodus narrative as Moses prays that to “see your glory”. It is connected with the self-revelation of God and His delivering power. In seeing the death of Jesus for what it is, Men are liberated from the power and dominion of darkness and are able to walk in the light and liberty of eternal life. John confirms this cleverly in the narrative by contrasting the faithlessness of Thomas with his final confession, ‘my Lord and my God.’ The reader is focussed once again on how the Gospel began – ‘the Word was God’ and now to God He has returned. John provides the theological key to salvation, ‘Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed’²⁵ and the readers are left with the recurring theme through the Gospel that true faith is beyond the physical realities to the spiritual power of believing.

Conclusion

John presents the death as ‘glorification’ through a “lifting up” at the “hour” after establishing the concept of ‘glory’ both in the Person of Jesus and the Life of Jesus. It is brought into particularly sharp focus in John 17. The repeated use of the perfect tense by Jesus with reference to glorification as already given but the additional dimension of glorification as the world sees the union of God with His people through the ‘sanctifying’ (17:19), i.e. paschal death, of Jesus. The purpose (indicated by the Greek $\iota\upsilon\alpha$ clauses of v23) is that the world may know that God loves them and will now be among them by His Spirit.

²⁵ John 20:29

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This complete revelation of God, is the ultimate glorification accomplished through the death of Jesus, 'Calvary is the necessary prelude to Pentecost'²⁶. John is keen to compress Incarnation, Passion, Crucifixion and Ascension into a single continuous stream that we might understand the λογος took upon himself humanity and lived amongst us for a short time before rejoining the Father having obtained the desired purpose of the souls of fallen Men.

2065 words.

²⁶ Morris, L., *The Gospel According to John*, p427.

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