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Jesus the Rabbi and Teacher in John's Gospel: The Gift of Divine Instruction

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**PORTRAITS OF JESUS IN THE
GOSPEL OF JOHN**

A Christological Spectrum

**Edited by
Craig R. Koester**

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Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK
1385 Broadway, New York, NY 10018, USA

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First published in Great Britain 2019

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Koester, Craig R., 1953– editor.

Title: Portraits of Jesus in the Gospel of John : a Christological spectrum /
edited by Craig R. Koester.

Description: 1 [edition]. | New York : Bloomsbury Academic, 2018. |

Series: Library of New Testament studies, ISSN 2513-8790 ; volume 589 |

Includes bibliographical references and index. |

Identifiers: LCCN 2018019116 (print) | LCCN 2018033179 (ebook) |

ISBN 9780567684837 (ePUB) | ISBN 9780567675132 (ePDF) |

ISBN 9780567675125 (hardback : alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Bible. John–Criticism, interpretation, etc. |

Jesus Christ–Person and offices–Biblical teaching.

Classification: LCC BS2615.52 (ebook) |

LCC BS2615.52 .P763 2018 (print) | DDC 226.5/06–dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018019116>

ISBN: HB: 978-0-5676-7512-5

ePDF: 978-0-5676-7513-2

eBook: 978-0-5676-8483-7

Series: Library of New Testament Studies, ISSN 2513-8790, volume 589

Typeset by Newgen KnowledgeWorks Pvt. Ltd., Chennai, India

Printed and bound in Great Britain

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Chapter 5

JESUS THE RABBI AND TEACHER IN JOHN'S GOSPEL: THE GIFT OF DIVINE INSTRUCTION

Craig R. Koester

Early Christian tradition recalls that Jesus was widely understood to be a Jewish teacher. The Synoptic Gospels picture him gathering a group of disciples and teaching people in synagogues, the temple, and other places, and he is often called a teacher by those who meet him.¹ That way of understanding Jesus can seem peripheral for the Fourth Gospel, which introduces him as the Word of God made flesh and concludes with Thomas declaring that Jesus is Lord and God (Jn 1:14; 20:28). Given John's emphasis on Jesus' origin from above and oneness with God, one might conclude that those who address the Johannine Jesus as a teacher or rabbi are showing their inability to comprehend who he really is.²

Yet teaching is integral to the Fourth Gospel's portrayal of Jesus.³ He tells his disciples, "You call me Teacher and Lord, and do so rightly, for that is what I am" (13:14). John pictures him teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum and the Jerusalem temple (6:59; 7:14; 8:28). When detractors challenge the legitimacy of Jesus' teaching role, the Gospel portrays him offering a sharp rebuttal and claiming

1. James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered, Christianity in the Making*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 696–704; Dale C. Allison Jr., *Constructing Jesus: Memory, Imagination, and History* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 24; Rainer Riesner, "Jesus as Preacher and Teacher," in *Jesus and the Oral Gospel Tradition*, ed. Henry Wansbrough, JSNTSup 64 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1991), 185–210; idem, *Jesus als Lehrer: Eine Untersuchung zum Ursprung der Evangelien-Überlieferung*, WUNT II/7 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1981); Craig A. Evans, "Prophet, Sage, Healer, Messiah, and Martyr: Types and Identities of Jesus," in *Handbook for the Study of the Historical Jesus*, ed. Tom Holmén and Stanley E. Porter, 4 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 2:1217–43, esp. 1223–28.

2. D. Moody Smith, *The Theology of the Gospel of John* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 91; Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, SP 4 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1998), 60.

3. Andreas Köstenberger, "Jesus the Rabbi in the Fourth Gospel," in *Studies in John and Gender: A Decade of Scholarship* (New York: Lang, 2001), 65–98; Bruce Chilton, "The Gospel according to John's Rabbi Jesus," *BBR* 25 (2015): 39–54.

that he has the qualifications of a teacher (7:14-24). When questioned by the Jewish authorities after his arrest, Jesus replies, "I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all Jews come together. I have said nothing in secret" (18:20).

In the Fourth Gospel, Jesus' identity is not limited to that of a teacher, yet it includes the role of a teacher. The interpretive framework is the incarnation, which holds multiple perspectives in tension. John portrays Jesus as the Word of God, who becomes flesh in a particular human being, Jesus of Nazareth, who was a Jewish teacher, as well as prophet and Messiah. Each aspect is understood to be true, and no one of them alone is entirely adequate. People are not to deny Jesus' genuine humanity in order to affirm his divine origin; both are to be taken together. In the same way, the widely held tradition that Jesus was a teacher belongs to his particularity.⁴

Theologically, the Gospel argues that God's teaching is conveyed through Jesus' teaching, so that people are taught by God when they are taught by Jesus. This is part of the Johannine perspective and shows why the validity of Jesus' teaching role must be affirmed. By portraying Jesus in this way, the Gospel shows that he does have the traits of a legitimate teacher, even as it connects the teaching role to other aspects of Jesus' identity, and shows how the teaching role itself is transformed.

1. Addressing Jesus as teacher and rabbi

The Gospel's portrayal of Jesus as teacher begins in the opening scenes, where two disciples of John the Baptist address Jesus as "rabbi," which a parenthetical comment explains means "teacher" (διδάσκαλος, 1:38). The Gospel concludes in a similar way when Mary Magdalene calls the risen Jesus by the related term "rabbouni," also defined as "teacher" (20:16). Given the use of these terms for the sages who later produced the Mishnah and Talmud, one might assume that the Gospel is simply giving conventional translations of the Hebrew or Aramaic words for readers who do not know those languages. Yet the Gospel's definition of the terms makes the teaching role more apparent than might otherwise be the case.

The terms "rabbi" and "rabbouni" were primarily expressions of respect, similar to "sir," and only in the late first and early second centuries CE did the use of these titles for teachers become more common. The root "rab" (רב) refers to a master in contrast to a slave.⁵ With the added suffix, "rabbi" (רבי) means "my master," which is a respectful form of address. The related term "rabboun" (רבון) also means "master" or "lord" in both Hebrew and Aramaic.⁶ Rabbinic sources do not refer to

4. On the approach taken here, see Craig R. Koester, *The Word of Life: A Theology of John's Gospel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 82-107.

5. E.g., "Be not like slaves that minister to the master (רב) for the sake of receiving bounty, but be like slaves that minister to the master not for the sake of receiving bounty" (*m. 'Abot* 1:3).

6. *Tg. Neof. Exod.* 21:4; *Tg. Ps.* 12:5.

sages like Hillel and Shammai, who were contemporaries of Jesus, as rabbis. The term "rabban" (רַבָּן) seems to have been used in a limited way for leaders of the Sanhedrin in the mid- to late first century, but it was only after 70 CE that "rabbi" came to be used for Torah scholars in some Jewish circles in Palestine.⁷ At the same time, Jewish inscriptions from the second, third, and fourth centuries use "rabbi" as a term of respect, but do not clearly link it to teaching. The word is not used by Philo, Josephus, or other Jewish authors who wrote in Greek, and there is little inscriptional evidence for the term in the Diaspora.⁸

Mark's Gospel includes some scenes in which Jesus is addressed as a teacher and other scenes in which people call him rabbi and rabbouni, but Mark does not actually define a rabbi as a teacher.⁹ When Matthew and Luke revise Mark, they give significant attention to Jesus' teaching role and depict people speaking to him as a teacher.¹⁰ But at the points Mark used "rabbi" or "rabbouni" they replace the words with "lord" (κύριος, Mt. 17:4; 20:33; Lk. 18:41) and "master" (ἐπιστάτης, Lk. 9:33), not "teacher." Matthew's narrative even warns against using the title "rabbi," because it was coveted by status seekers (Mt. 23:6–7). Accordingly, the term "rabbi" in Matthew has negative connotations. Notably, the only person who addresses Jesus as a rabbi in Matthew is Judas, and he does when betraying Jesus (26:25, 49). Such a scene again cautions against using "rabbi" as a title, since readers would presumably not want to follow Judas's example.

By way of contrast the opening scenes of the Fourth Gospel, Jesus is called a rabbi in a positive way by those who follow him (1:38, 49). The term continues to connote respect so defining it as "teacher" makes that aspect much clearer than would be the case with the term "rabbi" alone.¹¹ Moreover, the way the Gospel provides translations of both "rabbi" and "Messiah" in these initial scenes (1:38,

7. Hayim Lapin, "Rabbi," *ABD* 5 (1992), 600–2; J. Andrew Overman, *Matthew's Gospel and Formative Judaism: The Social World of the Matthean Community* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 44–48; Catherine Hezser, *The Social Structure of the Rabbinic Movement in Roman Palestine*, TSAJ 66 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997), 55–77.

8. Hayim Lapin, "Epigraphical Rabbis: A Reconsideration," *JQR* 101 (2011): 311–46. Of the more than five hundred Jewish inscriptions from Rome, none refers to a "rabbi." See Shaye J. D. Cohen, "Epigraphical Rabbis," *JQR* 72 (1981): 1–17, esp. 15.

9. In Mark, Jesus is called "teacher" (διδάσκαλος) by the disciples (e.g., 4:38; 10:35) and others (e.g., 12:14, 19, 32). The term "rabbi" is used in Mark 9:5; 11:21; 14:45, while "rabbouni" appears in 10:51.

10. Samuel Byrskog, *Jesus the Only Teacher: Didactic Authority and Transmission in Ancient Israel, Ancient Judaism and the Matthean Community*, ConBNT 24 (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wicksell, 1994).

11. Connotations of respect are apparent in the way people alternate between calling Jesus "rabbi" and "lord" (Jn 6:25, 34; 11:8, 12; 20:13–18) and "teacher" and "lord" (11:3, 21, 28, 32, 39; 13:13–14). See also Andreas Obermann, *Die christologische Erfüllung der Schrift im Johannesevangelium: Eine Untersuchung zur johanneischen Hermeneutik anhand der Schriftzitate*, WUNT II/83 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996), 43–46.

41) calls attention to both aspects of Jesus' identity, making sure that readers understand the meaning of each term, so that readers can see how both roles are developed in the narrative that follows.

2. Teacher and disciples

Jesus' first action as rabbi and teacher is to form a circle of disciples (μαθηταί) who are to learn (μανθάνω) from him (cf. 7:15). The pattern of a sage with a group of learners had emerged in philosophical circles, and it was also used by Jewish teachers and their students.¹² According to the Synoptic gospels, Jesus called his disciples by issuing the command, "Follow me" (Mk 1:17-18 par.). In antiquity it was not common for teachers in philosophical schools or rabbinic circles to summon students in that way. The usual pattern was that students would seek out a teacher.¹³ There are traces of the way Jesus commands others to follow in the Fourth Gospel (Jn 1:43; 21:19, 22), and he can tell the disciples, "You did not choose me, but I chose you" (15:16). There are, however, elements in John's account that more closely fit the relational pattern of a disciple to a teacher—at least initially.

The people who meet Jesus in the opening scenes are already disciples of John the Baptist, who later is called a rabbi (1:37; 3:25-26).¹⁴ When John declares that Jesus is the Lamb of God, two of these disciples follow Jesus and call him rabbi (1:35-38). The Gospel does not suggest that addressing Jesus as a rabbi or teacher is incorrect; rather, it is a starting point. They are depicted as "seeking" and the relationship with Jesus will develop as other dimensions of Jesus' identity emerge.

The disciples' relationship to Jesus as teacher involves personal loyalty, expressed by following him (1:37, 38, 40). In one sense following shows physical movement, but it also signifies a more enduring relationship.¹⁵ These disciples "remain"

12. K. H. Rengstorf, "μαθητής," *TDNT* 4:415–60, esp. 416–41; R. Alan Culpepper, *The Johannine School: An Evaluation of the Johannine-School Hypothesis Based on an Investigation of the Nature of Ancient Schools*, SBLDS 26 (Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1975). Most philosophical schools avoided the term "disciple" (μαθητής), but in Jewish circles a learner was commonly called a student or disciple (תלמיד).

13. Rengstorf, "μαθητής," 4:444. A good example of the pattern in Judaism is a saying attributed to Joshua b. Perahyah (ca. 120 BCE), "Provide yourself with a teacher (רב) and get for yourself a fellow-disciple (חבר)" (*m. 'Abot* 1:6). There were examples of someone being told to "follow" a philosopher (Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 2.48; 7.2–3), but this is an exception.

14. John the Baptist is called a "teacher" in Lk. 3:12 and is said to have disciples (Mk 2:18; Lk. 11:2; Acts 19:1-7).

15. Jesus commands disciples to follow (1:43; 21:9, 22). Those who follow will have the light of life (8:12) and engage in true service (12:26). Jesus' sheep follow him (10:4, 5, 27). Marianne Meye Thompson, *John: A Commentary*, NTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2015), 50, 333.

making sure that readers can see how both roles are

of disciples (μαθηταί) who learn of a sage with a group. It was also used by Jewish apocryphic gospels, Jesus called his disciples (1:17-18 par.). In antiquity, schools or rabbinic circles to which students would seek out teachers so that students would seek out teachers and demands others to follow in their footsteps. I tell the disciples, "You did not know, however, elements in John's Gospel of a disciple to a teacher—at

are already disciples of John the Baptist.¹⁴ When John declares that Jesus is the Messiah and call him rabbi, the disciples begin to follow Jesus as a rabbi or teacher. The disciples are depicted as "seeking" and the search for the identity of Jesus emerge. The disciples' personal loyalty, expressed in their following, shows physical movement, and the disciples "remain"

p. 416–41; R. Alan Culpepper, *School Hypothesis Based on an Apocryphal Gospel* (Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1975). The Greek (αθητικός), but in Jewish circles a

the pattern in Judaism is a saying "I will follow you" with a teacher (רבי) and there were examples of someone following a teacher (Lives 2.48; 7.2–3), but this is an

as said to have disciples (Mk 2:18;

2). Those who follow will have Jesus' sheep follow him (10:4, 5, 11) (Louisville: Westminster John

with him (μένω, 1:38-39), and the Gospel identifies this abiding relationship as essential for discipleship (8:31-32; 15:4-10). The disciples' bond with Jesus forms the context in which understanding emerges. It is by following that they learn that the teacher is also Messiah (1:41). Similarly, Nathanael responds to testimony about Jesus with questions, and he comes to Jesus with his questions unanswered. Yet in the encounter he learns that the one he calls rabbi is also Son of God and King of Israel (1:46-49).

The Fourth Gospel recognizes that there are similarities between the circles of disciples attached to John the Baptist and to Jesus. People in each group refer to their leader as a rabbi (1:38, 49; 3:26), and Jesus' disciples continue to address Jesus that way even after they have declared him to be the Messiah (4:31; 9:2; 11:8). Each group practices baptism with water (3:22-25; 4:1-2), and each takes up disputed questions (3:25; 9:2). It is precisely because the groups seem so similar that the Gospel must emphasize what makes Jesus distinctive, namely, that he is the Messiah, the Son of God who comes from above and gives eternal life (3:27-36). Theologically, the paradox is that the Son from heaven also embodies the role of a Jewish teacher.¹⁶

The Gospel includes scenes in which Jesus says or does something that makes the disciples ask questions of him as their rabbi. When traveling through Samaria, the disciples go into a village to buy food, which was the kind of service one might expect students to perform. Upon returning, they are astonished to find Jesus talking with a woman beside a well, but they say nothing (4:27). When she leaves they say, "Rabbi, eat something" and Jesus responds with a baffling comment that he has food they do not know about (4:31-32).

What follows fits a Johannine pattern in which the disciples misunderstand Jesus by relating his comment to ordinary food, so Jesus reframes the issue by saying that his food is to do the will of the one who sent him (4:33-34). His response draws on two proverbial sayings, which summarize conventional wisdom that he both invokes and reinterprets.¹⁷ One is, "Four months more, then comes the harvest," which in most contexts would emphasize the need for waiting, since initial efforts like planting take time to mature before the harvest can be gathered in (4:35). Jesus, however, insists that the proverb does not fit the current situation, since the harvest is already ripe. He wants the disciples to see that at the level of divine purpose, people are already being gathered in or drawn to Jesus through the witness of the Samaritan woman (4:30, 39). The other proverb is, "One sows and another reaps" (4:37), which in most contexts would function as a comment about life's unfairness: one person makes the effort but another gets the benefit. Here again Jesus alters the conventional meaning to emphasize that the efforts of both sower and reaper lead to shared joy at the harvest (4:36). In the immediate context

16. Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, trans. G. R. Beasley-Murray, R. W. N. Hoare, and John Riches (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971), 100, n. 5.

17. Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, 2 vols. AB 29–29A (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966–1970), 182–83.

the disciples can rejoice at the positive response generated by Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman and her testimony to her townspeople, and the implication is that such work will continue through the future work of Jesus' followers (4:38).

Another example is the disciples seeking instruction. When seeing a blind beggar they ask, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, so that he was born blind?" (9:2). They attempt to understand the situation in terms of perspectives attested in Scripture, Jewish tradition, and other ancient sources. On the one hand, many assumed that children could suffer because of the sins of their parents, which would explain congenital blindness (Exod. 20:5). On the other hand, it was understood that people could suffer because of their own sins (Ezek. 18:20). Applying that idea to congenital blindness raised the theoretical question as to whether someone could suffer for sins committed in the womb.¹⁸

Jesus rejects both options: "Neither this man nor his parents sinned" (9:3). He does not offer another explanation of the cause of the blindness or appeal to a passage of Scripture. Instead, his instruction shifts attention to what can be done about the blindness through the work done by himself and his disciples, and claiming to be the light of the world (9:4-5). Although a teacher could be said to give light through instruction, Jesus' act of healing and its aftermath show that the light-giver is also a prophet, Messiah, and Son of Man, who is worthy of worship (9:16, 22, 35-38).¹⁹ Those aspects of Jesus' identity go beyond his role as teacher but do not negate it.

Jesus' most significant comments about the roles teacher and disciples are made at the Last Supper. He begins by laying down his outer robe, girding himself with a towel, and washing the disciples' feet (13:4-5). In antiquity people typically washed their own feet. A slave might be compelled to wash another person's feet, but no free person could be expected to do so. Rare exceptions were someone voluntarily taking the role of a slave by washing another person's feet in order to show complete devotion. That idea is made apparent in the literary context, which says that Jesus acted out of love, which would culminate in his laying down his life (13:1-3).²⁰

According to social convention it was unthinkable that a teacher would wash the disciples' feet, and Peter initially rejects it (13:6, 8). Jesus, however, retains the role of teacher in order to instruct the disciples about the implications of his action:

You call me Teacher and Lord, and do so rightly, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another's

18. On Jewish and Greco-Roman perspectives see Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, 2 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 1:777-78.

19. Light imagery was used for those who illumined others by their teaching (Sir. 45:17; LAB 33:1, 3; 51:3, 6; 2 Bar. 46:1-3; 4 Ezra 12:42). Rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai was remembered as "the lamp of Israel" and the "lamp of the world" (*b. Ber.* 28b; *m. 'Abot R. Nat.* 25).

20. Craig R. Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 127-34.

feet. For I have given you an example, so that as I have done for you, you also should do. Very truly I tell you, the slave is not greater than the master, and the messenger is not greater than the one who sent him. (13:13-16)

According to convention, no teacher or master would wash others' feet. Jesus, however, alters the paradigm by directing the disciples to wash each other's feet, following their teacher's example.

Jesus restates the point by telling them, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another" (13:34). In the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus teaches that the biblical commands to love God (Deut. 6:4-5) and neighbor (Lev. 19:18) are the greatest in the Law (Mk 12:28-34 par.) But in John, Jesus goes beyond the role of teacher by issuing a new commandment that makes his own love the source and norm for love among the disciples, and by interpreting love in terms of his crucifixion, resurrection, and gift of the Spirit. Jesus' most radical expression of love is laying down his life (15:12-13); his resurrection makes his love an ongoing reality in which his disciples' abide (15:8-11, 17); and through the Spirit the abiding presence of the risen Jesus and his Father is revealed (14:15-23).²¹

3. Teaching in the synagogue

The portrayal of Jesus as teacher is developed in the bread of life discourse, where Jesus is teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum (6:59). Synagogues could be described as places of instruction (διδασκαλεία), where leaders would teach the community proper modes of conduct.²² This typically involved reading from the Law and the Prophets on the Sabbath and other days when the community assembled, and then having someone expound the Scripture or offer a word of exhortation.²³

The Synoptic Gospels depict synagogues as a place where Jesus teaches about the kingdom of God.²⁴ On some occasions he heals a person on the Sabbath in a synagogue, using the action as a basis for instruction about the Sabbath law and

21. Koester, *The Word of Life*, 147-57.

22. Philo, *Moses* 2.215-16; *Special Laws* 2.62-64. A first-century CE inscription from Jerusalem says that Theodotus synagogue was built "for the reading of the Law and for teaching (διδασκαλία) of the commandments" (Jonathan Price, trans., "Synagogue Building Inscription of Theodotus in Greek, 1c BCE-1c CE" in *Corpus Inscriptionum Iudaeae/Palaestinae*, vol. 1/1, *Jerusalem*, ed. Hannah M. Cotton, Leah Di Segni, Werner Eck, Benjamin Isaac, / Alla Kushnir-Stein, Haggai Misgav, Jonathan Price, and Ada Yardeni [Berlin: de Gruyter, 2010], 54).

23. Philo, *Hypothetica* 13; *Embassy* 156; *On Dreams* 2.127; Acts 13:14. See Lee I. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 145-58.

24. Mt. 4:23; 9:35; Mk 1:21, 39; 6:2; Lk. 4:15, 44.

his relationship to it.²⁵ Luke also pictures Jesus reading from the book of Isaiah at a synagogue gathering, and then relating the passage to the situation of his listeners. His comments do not offer sustained commentary on the biblical passage but combine various biblical themes with aspects of his ministry, in order to indict those who will oppose him (Lk. 4:16-30).

John's portrayal of Jesus teaching in the synagogue differs in that it does not focus on the message about the kingdom of God but on life (ζωή), which is a major Johannine theme. Healings and disputes about the Sabbath appear elsewhere in John, but are not part of the synagogue scene. Here the controversy is provoked not by a healing but by the crowd misunderstanding the significance of Jesus miraculously feeding them bread and fish, which motivates them to look for Jesus in the synagogue on the following day, hoping for more to eat (Jn 6:1-15, 22-24).

Jesus' teaching adopts the form of biblical exposition when the crowd cites a passage from Scripture. They ask him for a sign and say, "As it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat'" (6:31). Their words seem to combine and paraphrase several lines from Scripture:

Exod. 16:4 I am going to rain *bread from heaven* for you.

Exod. 16:15 This is the *bread* that the Lord gave you to eat.

Ps. 78:24 He rained on them manna to eat and gave them the grain (LXX *bread*) of heaven.

The main source of the paraphrase is probably Exod. 16:4 and 15. That passage refers to manna as bread from heaven, and it tells of the assembly or "synagogue" (συναγωγή) of Israel in the wilderness murmuring or complaining, which is also said of the synagogue at Capernaum.²⁶ The paraphrase could also recall Ps. 78:24, where similar words occur, especially in Greek translation.²⁷

Jesus' comments take the form of a homily in three parts²⁸: The first considers the expression, "he gave them" (Jn 6:32-34), the second interprets "bread from heaven" (6:35-48), and the third indicates what it means "to eat" (6:49-58). The extent to which this homiletical pattern was typical in first-century synagogues is not clear. Philo said that a synagogue leader would expound the Scripture "point by point" (*Hypothetica* 13), but it also seems likely that various forms were used.²⁹

25. Mt. 12:9-14; Mk 1:23-27; 3:1-3; Lk. 4:31-37.

26. Where Exodus uses διαγογγύζω for complaining (16:2, 7, 8) John uses the shorter form γογγύζω (6:41, 43, 61).

27. On the biblical passages informing Jn 6:31 see the overview in Ruth Sheridan, *Retelling Scripture: "The Jews" and the Scriptural Citations in John 1:19-12:15*, BIS 110 (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 146-57.

28. Peder Borgen, *Bread from Heaven: An Exegetical Study of the Concept of Manna in the Gospel of John and the Writings of Philo*, NovTSup 10 (Leiden: Brill, 1965).

29. See Levine, *Ancient Synagogue*, 157-58; William Richard Stegner, "The Ancient Jewish Synagogue Homily," in *Greco-Roman Literature and the New Testament: Selected Forms and Genres*, ed. David E. Aune, SBLSPS 21 (Atlanta: Scholars, 1988), 51-69. Later

In the first part Jesus adopts interpretive devices used by Jewish teachers of the period, insisting that the text does not say one thing but another (οὐ . . . ἀλλὰ . . . ; 6:32). One form of this pattern emphasized the way something was written in the text. For example, when God told Abraham to go “to the land that I will show you” (Gen. 12:1), Philo commented that it does not say, “which I *am* showing you” but “which I *will* show you,” since the time of fulfillment is not present but future (*Migration* 43). Similar examples appear in Paul (Gal. 3:16) and rabbinic works.³⁰

Another form contrasts alternative ways of reading a biblical text, sometimes by proposing a different vocalization of the unpointed Hebrew biblical text.³¹ An example is Isa. 54:13—the text cited in Jn 6:45—which says, “And all your children shall be taught of the Lord and great shall be the peace of your children.” To emphasize that Torah scholars increase peace in the world, the midrashic commentary proposes an alternative vocalization of the word בּוֹנֵי: “Do not read ‘your children’ (*bānayik*) but ‘your builders’ (*bōnayik*),” since Torah scholars “build peace for their generation” (*b. Ber.* 64a).³²

The people in the synagogue at Capernaum assume that the biblical expression, “he gave them bread from heaven,” refers to the manna Moses gave Israel in the past (Jn 6:31). Since Jesus provided bread at the time of Passover, they conclude that he must be the prophet like Moses, whose coming was promised in Deut. 18:15-18 (Jn 6:4, 14). Accordingly, they might expect him to keep giving bread as manna was provided day after day in Moses’s time.

Jesus teaches by using the contrastive patterns to challenge their perspective. One aspect involves clarifying the subject of the verb, “he gave.” Jesus insists that the giver is “not Moses . . . but my Father” (6:32). His point essentially clarifies what is apparent in the manna stories themselves. Scripture consistently identifies God, not Moses, as the giver of the manna or bread from heaven. A more creative contrast involves the verb tense. In Hebrew the unpointed verb נתן could be read as a qal *nāthan* (“he gave”) or as a participle *nōthēn* (“he gives”). Although John’s Gospel is in Greek, the pattern is apparent: “It was not Moses who *gave* you the bread from heaven, but my Father who *gives* you the true bread from heaven” (Jn 6:33). That shift in verb tense redirects attention from the past to the present,

sources include complex forms with a proem an expository section, and a parenetic conclusion. See Rivkin Ulmer, “Pesiqta Rabbati: A Text-Linguistic and Form-Critical Analysis of the Rabbinic Homily,” *JJS* (2013): 64–97.

30. The rabbinic expression is, “It is not written here . . . but . . .” (. . . אלא . . . כאן . . .). See Borgen, *Bread from Heaven*, 64.

31. On this formula (. . . אלא . . . תקרי) and its uses see Carmel McCarthy, *The Tiqqune Sopherim and Other Theological Corrections in the Masoretic Text of the Old Testament*, OBO 36 (Freiburg: Universitätsverlag and Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1981), 139–66; on alternative vocalization see p. 141. Cf. Emmanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, 3rd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 55.

32. The pattern occurs in Philo, *Worse* 47–48. See Borgen, *Bread from Heaven*, 63.

making the text immediately applicable to the audience in the synagogue. For the most part, the pattern could have been used by other Jewish teachers of the period.

In the second section of the discourse Jesus interprets the middle part of the biblical text, "bread from heaven." Here, however, he does what no ordinary teacher would do by saying, "I am the bread of life" (6:35, 48). Other Jewish teachers would identify bread from heaven with God's word and wisdom. Moses had taught that God fed Israel with manna so they might come to "understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord" (Deut. 8:3). Philo said that manna signified the divine Word from which wisdom flows.³³ Bread imagery could also be extended to the law of Moses in which God's word and wisdom were found, since God commanded Israel to gather the manna in order to see whether they would walk in his law or torah (Exod. 16:4). The words "bread of life" are reminiscent of the expression "law of life."³⁴

In John's Gospel the imagery is refocused, so that the law is not bread but a witness to Jesus, who is the bread from heaven. People may seek life from Scripture (Jn 5:39), but as the embodiment of God's Word, Jesus provides it by meeting the human hunger for God and promising resurrection (6:35-40). Listeners complain at Jesus' claim to have come down from heaven, because they know his parents (6:41-43). Jesus counters their claim to have understanding by introducing a passage from the prophets: "And they will all be taught by God" (6:45a). The passage is apparently Isa. 54:13 LXX, which says, "And all your sons will be taught by God." The form used in John omits the reference to "your sons" and says that being "taught" (διδάκτοί) by God is something available to all (πάντες). That does not mean that all who encounter God's teaching have actually "learned from the Father," because what reveals that learning (μαθών) has taken place is that the person comes to Jesus in faith (6:45b). The unbelief at Capernaum shows that the people may have been taught, but they have not learned.³⁵

Finally, in part three (6:49-58) Jesus explains what it means "to eat." The passage contrasts the way Israel's ancestors ate manna and died with receiving Jesus as the bread that brings eternal life (6:49, 58). In a basic sense, eating means believing. Jesus teaches that whoever believes has eternal life (6:35, 40, 47) and saying that the one who "eats" has eternal life makes the same point. Jesus speaks of the future, when he will give his flesh for the life of the world, which anticipates crucifixion (6:51). The offensive quality of the allusion to crucifixion is intensified when Jesus speaks of faith as eating his flesh and drinking his blood. Readers familiar with the Christian practice of using bread and wine to celebrate the Lord's Supper would hear echoes of its language in this passage. Yet, in a context where Jesus is teaching in a synagogue, the imagery is repugnant, since Jewish law prohibited the

33. Philo, *Flight* 137; *Heir* 191; *Names* 259-60.

34. Sir. 17:11; 45:5; 4 *Ezra* 14:30; cf. *Pss. Sol.* 14:2.

35. For a survey of research on the quotation of Isa. 54:13 and its significance in John 6 see Sheridan, *Retelling Scripture*, 159-73; cf. Obermann, *Die christologische Erfüllung*, 151-67.

consumption of blood (Lev. 17:10-14). The imagery is as offensive as the idea that faith is centered in someone who is crucified and that life is provided through his death.³⁶

Jesus teaches in the synagogue using Jewish homiletical patterns, yet he invokes and redefines the manna tradition to bear himself in a way no traditional Jewish teacher would do. His role as a teacher is essential to his identity, even though it does not fully encompass his identity. The Scripture promised that people would be "taught by God," and God's instruction is now carried out through the teaching of Jesus (6:45, 59). As a teacher, Jesus illumines the meaning of Scripture, and the Scripture in turn illumines the meaning of Jesus.

4. *Teaching in the Temple (Jn 7:14-24)*

Teaching in the temple is part of Jesus' public ministry in all four gospels. According to the Synoptics, he taught there at the end of his career. They tell of public interest in his teaching, as well as opposition from the Jewish authorities, which was fueled by the temple cleansing and culminates in his arrest and crucifixion. When teaching, Jesus takes up questions about his own authority and the Messiah's relationship to David, as well as taxation, resurrection, and other topics.³⁷ John differs by depicting Jesus teaching in the temple in the middle of his ministry, during the Festival of Booths (7:14; 8:20), and many of the issues differ, although here too there is public controversy and plans to arrest Jesus and put him to death.³⁸

According to John, people are divided over whether Jesus is a good man, who speaks and acts in a manner acceptable to God, or whether he is a charlatan, who deceives people (7:12). The passage recalls that Jesus previously healed a man on the Sabbath, which his opponents considered to be a violation of Jewish law. Jesus defended himself by claiming that healing was giving life, which is what God did, even on the Sabbath (5:17, 19-21). Jesus' opponents heard this as a blasphemous attempt to make himself equal to God, which was condemned by Mosaic law (5:18). Jesus' however, reversed the charge by indicting his opponents for refusing to believe the one whom God had sent, and he invoked the writings (γράμματα) of Moses to support his claim (5:45-47).³⁹

Against that backdrop the scenes in the temple address Jesus' identity as a teacher (7:14-24), as prophet and Messiah (7:25-52), and his unity with God

36. On this aspect of the imagery see Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel*, 102-4.

37. Mk 11:27-12:44; cf. Mt. 21:23-23:39; Lk. 20:1-21:4.

38. Jn 7:1, 19, 25, 30, 45; 8:20.

39. On 7:14-24 as the sequel to 5:45-47 see Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St John*, trans. Kevin Smyth, Cecil Hastings, Francis McDonagh, David Smith, Richard Foley, and G. A. Kon, 3 vols. (New York: Herder/Seabury/Crossroad, 1968, 1980, 1982), 2:130-31. His detailed analysis shows the connection between the passages, though it is not necessary to rearrange the Gospel text as he proposes.

(8:12-59). Each facet of his identity is affirmed and no facet excludes the others. According to the Fourth Gospel, God is the source of legitimate teaching and God's teaching is conveyed through Jesus' teaching (7:16-17; 8:20, 28). Therefore, this passage argues for the integrity of Jesus' identity as a teacher.

Debate begins when some Jewish leaders ask, "How does this man understand what is written when he has never studied?" (7:15). Here the leaders are depicted as hostile to Jesus (7:1, 13), and with their question they challenge Jesus in two ways. First, they are dismissive of his ability to understand Scripture. The expression "what is written" (γράμματα) recalls that during Jesus' previous visit to Jerusalem he invoked "what is written" in the law of Moses against his opponents (5:47), but they now insist that he does not understand Scripture well enough to teach it. Second, they assume that a legitimate teacher must have studied (μεμαθηκώς) under another knowledgeable teacher, and they are not aware that Jesus has done so.

The narrative does not reject the criteria but shows that Jesus meets the criteria in an unexpected way, thereby underscoring the validity of his role as a teacher. Jesus takes up the issues in reverse order. He first insists that he has received instruction from a recognized teacher, namely, God (7:16-18). Then he demonstrates his understanding of Scripture by working through issues of Mosaic law and Jewish practice in order to show that his act of healing on the Sabbath is congruent with the will of God (7:19-24).

The idea that someone who teaches should previously have studied under another teacher reflects a high regard for tradition. It was understood that authoritative interpretation of the Mosaic law was not a matter of individual opinion. On certain legal questions there were traditions of interpretation that were handed down over time, lending a degree of consistency to practice. There were also customs that were not directly mandated by Scripture but were handed down by word of mouth, and many of these were also considered normative.⁴⁰ This was the perspective of the Pharisees and those associated with them.⁴¹ Similarly, Philo valued the "unwritten laws, the decisions approved by men of old," which were passed down from generation to generation and were to be faithfully observed.⁴²

Since tradition helped ensure valid interpretation of Mosaic law, the corollary was that those who taught should learn the tradition from accepted teachers and pass it on with integrity. That pattern would be developed in later rabbinic sources, which traced the way authoritative tradition was handed down from one recognized teacher to the next over many generations.⁴³ But in the first century

40. E. P. Sanders, *Jewish Law from Jesus to the Mishnah: Five Studies* (London: SCM Press and Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), 125-30.

41. Josephus, *Ant.* 13.297, 408; cf. 18:12; Mk 7:1-5; Gal. 1:14. Sanders, *Jewish Law*, 108-9.

42. Philo, *Special Laws* 4.149-50; cf. *Embassy* 115.

43. *m. 'Abot* 1:1-18. Rabbi Eliezer said, "I received a tradition from Rabban Johanan b. Zakkai, who heard it from his teacher, and his teacher from his teacher, as a *Halakah* given to Moses from Sinai" (*m. Yad.* 3:8; cf. *m. 'Ed.* 8:7).

CE there was not yet a standard means for granting someone formal standing as a rabbi.⁴⁴ For the interpretation of John 7 it is enough that Jesus' opponents insist that a recognized teacher must have studied with a recognized teacher.

Jesus accepts his opponents' criterion for legitimate teaching, but he challenges the way they apply it. He argues that he *has* studied with a master teacher, namely God; and he is not voicing his own opinion but is communicating God's teaching with integrity (7:16). The problem is not that Jesus lacks teaching credentials—he has them—the problem is that the opponents do not discern that God is the source of Jesus' teaching.

Accordingly, Jesus introduces two additional criteria for discernment. One is the disposition of his hearers. If their will is to do God's will, then they are in a position to discern whether Jesus' teaching is from God (7:17). The idea is analogous to saying that those who want to see the light must be willing to open their eyes. The other criterion pertains to Jesus himself. He has them ask about the goal of the teaching in order to discern the source of the teaching (7:18). In antiquity those trying to look behind an action to determine who did it—usually in cases of wrongdoing—would ask, "Cui bono?," that is, "For whose benefit?"⁴⁵ If Jesus benefitted from teaching by winning glory for himself, then he would presumably be the source of the message, and that would undercut his credibility. But if the teaching is for the glory of God—and not for Jesus' own benefit—then it shows that the message comes from God and therefore has integrity.

Having responded to the charge that he had never studied, he now takes up the other issue by showing that he does understand what is written in the law of Moses (7:15, 19). According to the opponents, Jesus flagrantly violated the law, which discredited his claim to be a teacher. He healed on the Sabbath, which violated the command to refrain from work, then he claimed to be doing what God did, which seemed blasphemous (5:16-18). So Jesus now turns the charge of disregard for the law against his accusers.

First, he points to the contradiction between what they know and what they do. They may agree that Moses gave them the law, yet Jesus argues that they do not keep the law. His evidence is that they are trying to kill him (7:19). In the narrative context, the opponents think Jesus is a blasphemer, who should be put to death (5:18; Lev. 24:16), and their intent to kill Jesus is public knowledge (Jn 7:1, 25). Jesus counters by alluding to the law's prohibition against killing, thereby challenging the opponents' credibility (Exod. 20:13; Lev. 24:17; Deut. 5:17). The listeners reject the charge out of hand, despite public knowledge of the intent to kill Jesus, but the point has been made for readers of the Gospel (Jn 7:20).

Then Jesus turns to the opponents' inconsistent treatment of the Sabbath laws. He points out that in Jewish tradition some laws take precedence over others. The specific case he cites involves the relationship of the laws pertaining to the

44. Cohen, "Epigraphical Rabbis," 12–13; Hezser, *The Social Structure*, 490–94.

45. Cicero, *Rosc. Amer.* 84; *Mil.* 32.3; Heinrich Lausberg, *Handbook of Literary Rhetoric: A Foundation for Literary Study* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), §§158–59.

Sabbath and to circumcision. On the one hand, people are to refrain from work on the Sabbath (Exod. 20:8-11), but on the other hand they are to circumcise a boy on the eighth day after birth, which was sometimes on the Sabbath (Gen. 17:9-14; Lev. 12:3). In Jewish tradition circumcision took precedence.⁴⁶ Therefore, the opponents' own practice shows that performing circumcision on the Sabbath is not a violation of the law but a way of keeping the law (Jn 7:22-23a).

From that observation, Jesus develops his case that healing on the Sabbath is deeply consistent with the law and is not a violation of it. He argues from the lesser to the greater and from the part to the whole. These techniques were used in Greco-Roman rhetoric and were widely accepted in Jewish tradition.⁴⁷ If the opponents agree that on the Sabbath people keep the law by performing circumcision, which is a form of surgery done on one part of the body, then they cannot object when Jesus heals a man's whole body on the Sabbath (7:23). His action is congruent with the will of God, which centers on giving life (5:21).

This passage defends the legitimacy of Jesus' identity as a teacher by showing that he meets the accepted criteria: he received his teaching from a master teacher and understands what is written in the law. In scenes that follow, the narrative also defends Jesus' status as Messiah and his claim to have come from above, yet his activity as a teacher continues. The temple scenes show that through Jesus' teaching, God is teaching (8:20, 28).

5. Conclusion

Early Christian tradition preserves the memory of Jesus as teacher. The incarnational perspective of the Fourth Gospel does not diminish that role but includes it as essential in its portrayal of Jesus. The Gospel affirms that Jesus was human, was Jewish, and was called rabbi and teacher by his disciples and other people of his time. Like others, Jesus taught in the synagogue and temple using recognized forms of biblical interpretation. At the same time, his message was unlike that of other teachers in that it encompassed his identity as the Son of God, who has come from above to give life through his words, actions, crucifixion, and resurrection. While identifying himself as a teacher he did what other teachers

46. *m. Shabb.* 18:3; 19:2; "Great is circumcision, which overrides even the rigor of the Sabbath" (*m. Ned.* 3:11).

47. Arguing from lesser to greater or *qal va-homer* (קל וחומר) and from the general to the particular or *kallal va-parat* (כלל ופרט) and vice versa are the first and fifth of Hillel's seven *middot* or hermeneutical rules (Abot R. Nat. 37). See Hermann L. Strack and Günther Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, trans. Marcus Bockmuehl, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 18–20. For rabbinic examples in relation to Jn 7:23 see C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), 320. For the practice in Greco-Roman rhetoric see Quintilian, *Inst.* 5.10.87–94; Lausberg, *Handbook of Literary Rhetoric*, §397.

would do by giving his disciples an example to follow, yet his example involved washing feet, which was unlike anything a conventional teacher would do, and it anticipated the love he would later convey by laying down his life (13:13-15). Through his resurrection he would empower his disciples to follow his instruction by abiding in his love and acting in love toward one another.

According to John, God is the source of true teaching and the Scriptures promised that all would be taught by God (Isa. 54:13; Jn 6:45). This occurs through Jesus, who teaches what he received from God (7:16-17; 8:28), and also through the Spirit that reminds the disciples of what Jesus had said and will teach (διδάξει) them its significance in new ways after his resurrection (14:26). Theologically, the portrayal of Jesus as a teacher is integral to the Fourth Gospel because teaching is integral to the activity of the God who sent Jesus and to the work of the Spirit, whose teaching would continue to shape the community of those who follow Jesus.