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The Historical and Theological Backdrop of Jesus's Names in John Chapter One: A Baseline for Christology

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The Historical and Theological Backdrop of Jesus's Names in John Chapter One: A Baseline for Christology

Abstract

At the beginning of John's gospel, a rich theology of Christ's person unfolds through multiple professions of newly called disciples. In order to understand the person of Christ, the various titles associated with his name should be analyzed in their historical and theological contexts. Full of Jesus' titles, John 1 is an intersection of history, title-giving, and theology, rich with the meanings of Jesus' titles; furthermore, John 1 is written with historical accuracy and with impactful theology for the Church. It orients the trajectory for the following chapters and gives a foundation for Christology. Cumulatively, the names of Jesus in John 1 build a base for Christology by historically pointing back to Old Testament prophecies and by theologically declaring the pivotal role of Jesus Christ. Accordingly, this essay outlines each of Jesus' titles in John 1 and argues that, as a whole, these declarations of who Jesus is provide a foundation for Christology.

Keywords

John, Christology, Biblical Studies, Typology

Cover Page Footnote

B.A. in Philosophy with minors in Biblical Studies, Biblical Languages, and Greek

Introduction

In order to understand the person of Christ, the various titles associated with his name should be analyzed in their historical and theological contexts. Overflowing with Jesus's titles, John chapter one is an intersection of history, title-giving, and theology, rich with the components of Jesus's significant names; furthermore, John 1 is written with historical accuracy and impactful theology.¹ It orients the trajectory for the following chapters and gives a baseline for Christology.² Cumulatively, the names of Jesus in John chapter one can build a base of semantic potential for Christology by historically pointing back to Old Testament prophecies and by theologically declaring the pivotal role of Jesus Christ.

The Prologue

John's prologue is theologically rich, historically packed, and poetically satisfying.³ Containing clear and fundamental propositions regarding Christ, the introduction to John's gospel deserves extra attention, as it includes pithy claims (cf. John 1:1, John 1:4, and John 1:14)⁴ and rich theology. Johannian scholar Gerald Borchert succinctly writes, "An entire seminary semester's course could be taught on these eighteen verses...The Prologue contains some of the most tightly reasoned patterns of theological reflection in the New Testament."⁵ Like a seed ready to grow, John's prologue encapsulates most of his gospel's themes.⁶ The Witness (i.e., John) steps back and speaks outside the historical narrative of Jesus' time on earth, pointing to Christ's preeminence in creation, his relation to the Father, and his ontological attributes (e.g., being God, being creator, and becoming human). John gives three primary names to Jesus in the prologue: the *Logos*, the light, and the life.

¹ Leon Morris, *Studies in the Fourth Gospel* (W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1969), 65, 68-69.

² Andreas J. Köstenberger, *Encountering John: The Gospel in Historical, Literary, and Theological Perspective* (Second ed. Encountering Biblical Studies. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 36-37; D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 111.

³ Gerald L. Borchert, *John 1-11* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2002), 100-101.

⁴ Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the *English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001).

⁵ Borchert, *John 1-11*, 100-101.

⁶ Köstenberger, *Encountering John: The Gospel in Historical, Literary, and Theological Perspective*,

Historical Context for *Logos*

“Word,” or *Logos*, has an entangled background that could pull from multiple ideologies, including Greek philosophy, Gnostic Christianity, personification in Jewish literature (e.g., Wisdom and the Torah), and an Old Testament background. First, Saint Augustine, a philosopher, theologian, and church father, appreciated the Platonist hue in John’s use of *Logos*, and recognized early in history the connections to philosophy in John 1:1-18.⁷ However, Augustine could not take Platonist philosophy as the primary background for one main reason: “the Word became flesh” (John 1:14). Unlike Plato’s philosophy of ideal forms, being separate from the material world, *Logos* in John’s prologue both created the cosmos and benevolently took on flesh.⁸ Similar to a Platonist background, the Stoics believed that *Logos* was the only god (i.e., ultimate order).⁹ Supporting this view with a slight variation, some scholars point to Philo of Alexandria who combined religious movements with Greek philosophy (e.g., intersecting Judaism and Stoicism), espousing the “history of religions approach.”¹⁰ These scholars use the vast overlap between Jewish and “Syncretistic Hellenistic” movements as evidence for philosophical intersectionality in the prologue.¹¹ Yet, Johannian scholar Herman Ridderbos turns their argument, writing, “Precisely because of the commonality of similar usage one has to be extremely cautious before assuming direct connections of dependence and mutual influence.”¹² Likewise, Andreas Köstenberger concisely summarizes the arguments against a Greek philosophical background (1) by reminding scholars that John is writing a religious book, not a book about metaphysical theory and (2) by referencing John’s strong Jewish background as mutually exclusive to a Greek philosophical framework.¹³ Therefore, the historic context for *Logos* likely does not originate from Greek philosophy.

Second, Gnostic Christianity is a potential candidate for the derivation of *Logos*. Portrayed in the Odes of Solomon, Gnostics believed that the *Logos* was an intermediary between God and flesh-imprisoned man.¹⁴ Significant problems,

⁷ George R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (Second ed. Vol. 36. Word Biblical Commentary. Nashville: T. Nelson, 2000), 6.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁹ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 114-115.

¹⁰ Herman N. Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1997), 27-28.

¹¹ Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John*, 27-28.

¹² *Ibid.*, 28.

¹³ Köstenberger, *Encountering John: The Gospel in Historical, Literary, and Theological Perspective*, 40.

¹⁴ Beasley-Murray, *John*, 6-7.

however, exist for a Gnostic background. Namely, the sources from which the “Gnostic Redeemer Myth” derive come much later in the historical timeline than John’s gospel, making their influence unlikely.¹⁵ Furthermore, Gnostic doctrine and John’s idea of a redeemer are contradictory. While Gnostics viewed their redeemer as opposed to the physical world, John connects *Logos* to creation, where the cosmos is endorsed as good. Thus, the *Logos* in John 1:1-18 is not inspired by Gnosticism.

Third, personification of Wisdom and the Torah in Jewish literature could be the nexus of meaning behind *Logos*. Proverbs 8:22 contains a prime example of personified wisdom: “The Lord possessed me [i.e., Wisdom] at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old.” Likewise, the Torah was often personified with salvific and cosmological responsibilities.¹⁶ The connection between *Logos* in John’s prologue, Torah, and Wisdom seems to be strong. Yet, addressing such connections to Jewish literature, Johannian scholar D.A. Carson writes, “The lack of wisdom terminology in John’s Gospel suggests that the parallels between Wisdom and John’s *Logos* may stem less from direct dependence than from common dependence on the Old Testament uses of ‘Word’ and Torah, from which both have borrowed.”¹⁷ Indeed, direct dependence seems like a reaching claim. Furthermore, significant differences between personified Wisdom/Torah and the Prologue’s *Logos* invalidate this background; for example, Wisdom is a creation, it is never portrayed as a part of the Trinity, and John uses *Logos* for “Word,” not the Greek word for Sophia, which connects to personified wisdom.¹⁸ For these reasons, personified Wisdom/Torah as the primary background for *Logos* is unlikely.

The Old Testament and Conglomeration Backgrounds for *Logos*

By far, the most relevant history regarding *Logos* is the Jewish Old Testament.¹⁹ The prologue’s opening (cf. John 1:1) overtly references Genesis 1:1. Additionally, Isaiah 55:11 is an example of the prologue’s Old Testament references: “...my word shall be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose...” John, throughout his prologue, alludes to God’s “Word” in the Old Testament, allowing its meaning to saturate his opening verses. More explicitly, the prologue references the Old

¹⁵ Ibid., 30-31

¹⁶ Charles K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John: An Introduction With Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text*, (London: Spck Pub., 1962), 128; Sirach 24:1, 6-8.

¹⁷ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 115.

¹⁸ Köstenberger, *Encountering John: The Gospel in Historical, Literary, and Theological Perspective*, 40-41; Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John: A Theological Commentary*, 33-34.

¹⁹ Borchert, *John 1-11*, 104-105.

Testament “Word” through creation, revelation, and deliverance.²⁰ John freely adapts this background and seemingly makes it his primary foundation for *Logos*.

Yet, D.A. Carson proposes a more nuanced, historically conglomerated background, writing, “Many of the terms they [i.e., early Christians] chose, including this one, had semantic ranges so broad that they could shape the term by their own usage to make it convey...what they knew to be true of Jesus Christ.”²¹ Understanding the historical and cultural variations of “Word” (e.g., the Stoic’s *Logos*, the personified Wisdom/Torah, and the Messianic Old Testament) is critical because John, as D.A. Carson argues, conglomerates these histories with a more prominent Old Testament background to make a distinctly Christian meaning for *Logos*. The most defining Christian feature of John’s *Logos* is the incarnation in verse 14. Neither Stoic/Platonist philosophy, Gnostic Christianity, nor Jewish literature account for the incarnated God-man, John’s greatest twist to all of *Logos*’ histories. Charles Barrett boldly argues, “No other New Testament writer shows such mastery of the material as does John, who holds together Jewish, Hellenistic, and primitive Christian strands of thought in a consistent unity.”²²

Light and Life Motif

Not only does John skillfully employ *Logos* as a defining name for Jesus, he also introduces his light and life motif. In John 1:4-5, 9-10, the Witness describes the “Word” as containing life, which is the light for humanity. Gerald Borchert, regarding the prologue, argues that light is “a gift or a power from outside the human situation that confronts the world.”²³ This characterization aptly fits Jesus. To understand light and life in the prologue, one must also apply the propositions about the “Word” because light and life derive as attributes of the “Word.”²⁴ Accordingly, Christ as humanity’s life has a creational quality, the initiator and continual sustainer of the cosmos.²⁵ Elaborating on this thought, D.A. Carson writes, “It is quite possible that John, subtle writer that he is, wants his readers to see in the Word both the light of creation and the light of the redemption the Word brings in his incarnation.”²⁶ The *Logos*, life, and light are intertwined to theologically describe Jesus at the outset of John’s gospel, giving

²⁰ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 115.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 116.

²² Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John: An Introduction With Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text*, 129.

²³ Borchert, *John 1-11*, 108-109.

²⁴ Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John: A Theological Commentary*, 49.

²⁵ Beasley-Murray, *John*, 11.

²⁶ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 119-120.

readers the necessary concepts for viewing Christ's redemptive work later described by John.

Christology in the Prologue

Everything previously regarding historical context and the light and life motif contributes to the theological focus of the prologue: the redemptive shift brought by Christ. Rudolf Schnackenburg, a New Testament scholar, insightfully describes John's Christological focus, "The prologue concludes with a pointed statement of the one historical (aorist) revelation brought by the unique Son of God. Here we can recognize once more the Christological interest which made the evangelist put the prologue before the Gospel narrative proper."²⁷ Though it impacts many doctrines, the prologue undoubtedly has a Christological focus that significantly supports the dual-nature theology of Christ.

The orthodox doctrine of Christ's dual nature is exemplified in the Athanasian Creed, where the Church fathers described Christ as "human from the essence of his mother, born in time; completely God, completely human, with a rational soul and human flesh; equal to the Father as regards divinity, less than the Father as regards humanity."²⁸ While less nuanced, John boldly propagates the same doctrine. Having established the Word's divinity in John 1:1, the Apostle John writes in verse 14, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." Thus, the prologue clearly affirms the humanity and the divinity of Christ; both are essential. On the one hand, the incarnation ensures that Christians have an empathetic mediator, a penal atonement, and a perfect example of obedience.²⁹ In his dissertation on John's Christology, Daniel Mitchell goes further to say that "for the person who has been vitally united to God . . . the in-flesh-ment of Christ is critical (cf. John 6:51, 'the bread also which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh'). To deny the incarnation is to deny . . . redemption."³⁰ On the other hand, the deity of Christ ensures that his work is perfect and infinite, without which salvation would be uncertain, as sin is an infinite offense against God. John's prologue richly, poetically, and pithily unfolds the two natures of Christ and gives a Christological foundation to dual-nature theology.

²⁷ Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John*. (Vol. 1. 2 vols. New York, NY: Seabury Press, 1980), 224.

²⁸ *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions* (Grand Rapids, MI: CRC Publications, 1988), 10.

²⁹ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 540.

³⁰ Daniel R. Mitchell, "The Person of Christ in John's Gospel and Epistles" (PhD diss., Dallas Theological Seminary), 1982, 62.

John The Baptist's Profession

Having already prepared for John the Baptist's testimony in 1:6-8,15, the Apostle John uses comparison in 1:19-28 to define the prophet's role and establish his inferiority to Christ (e.g., "he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie," John 1:27). Then, in verse 29, the narrative moves away from deductively defining John the Baptist with negative statements to positively proclaiming Christ: "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the World!" (John 1:29). Here begins a succession of disciples' professions in John 1 which heavily impact Christology; John the Baptist's account significantly includes "Lamb of God" and "Son of God" (John 1:29 and John 1:34).

"Lamb of God" and "Son of God" in Historical Context

Found in verses 29 and 36, "Lamb of God" draws meaning from the Old Testament, specifically from the Passover and Isaiah 53.³¹ Again showing how John melds material into his own terms, Barret writes, "By his amalgamation of Old Testament ideas John indicates that the death of Jesus was a new and better sacrifice."³² Juxtaposing the sacrificial language in Isaiah with John's profession reveals its historical background. Isaiah describes the sacrificial (verse 7) and God-ordained dynamics (verse 10) behind "Lamb of God," writing, "He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter... Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him..." (Isa 53:7,10). Similar to climbing action in literature, John foreshadows Jesus eventual crucifixion. This foreshadowing is especially noticeable when viewed in the Passover context. John the Baptist, appealing to an Old Testament backdrop, gives a profession infused with Isaiah's Messianic prophecy and the Passover tradition.

"Son of God" primarily references Isaiah. After recounting the Trinitarian baptism, where the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus, John the Baptist confidently exclaimed, "I have seen and have borne witness that is the Son of God" (John 1:34). For John the Baptist, the Holy Spirit's involvement in Jesus' baptism confirms that Christ was God's Servant whom Isaiah predicted (e.g., Isa. 42:1-9; Isa. 49:1-9; Isa. 50:4-11; Isa. 52:13-53:12).³³ Alluding to this rich history, John again affirms Jesus as the Messiah. The link is easily observed in Isaiah 42:1: "Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights;

³¹ Köstenberger, *Encountering John: The Gospel in Historical, Literary, and Theological Perspective*, 55-56; Borchert, *John 1-11*, 135-136.

³² Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John: An Introduction With Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text*, 147.

³³ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 152; Borchert, *John 1-11*, 139.

I have put my Spirit upon him.” Jesus’ baptism confirms his salvific role as the historic redeemer from Isaiah.

Christology in John the Baptist’s Profession

As John points to “he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit” (John 1:33) and prepares people for his arrival, the Christological implications on substitutionary atonement are blaring. The sacrificial connotations from the Passover and Isaiah, as the histories supporting John’s professions, suggest to the informed reader that Jesus will eventually die as a substitute, just like the Passover lamb. Herman Ridderbos explains that John names Jesus “Lamb of God,” precisely “because it is Jesus who will effect the reconciliation of the world to God.”³⁴ Ridderbos also argues that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament temple practices, which typologically built anticipation for a Final Lamb. Especially because John had interacted with the Levite priests the day before (John 1:19-28), penal atonement thematically permeates John’s profession. Furthermore, the doctrine of substitutionary atonement is orthodox because it explains the purpose of Jesus’ incarnation and the soteriological means of redemption. Describing “consequent absolute necessity,” Biblical scholar Wayne Grudem argues that Scripture points to Christ’s death as required for humanity’s redemption, given that God benevolently loves His creation.³⁵ Thus, John the Baptist’s Christological allusion supports substitutionary atonement.

Andrew’s Profession

Behind his second profession in verse 36 (“Lamb of God”), John the Baptist also intends to send his disciples to the newly discovered Messiah.³⁶ One of these early disciples, Andrew, begins his lifelong pursuit of Christ with a simple question, “‘Rabbi’ (which means teacher), ‘where are you staying?’” (John 1:38). From this modest inquiry, Jesus’ first disciples arrive in chain succession. As the disciples fall in line, their lofty claims about Christ also begin, with Andrew addressing Jesus as “Rabbi” and “the Messiah (which means Christ)” (John 1:38, 41).

“Rabbi,” “Messiah,” and “Christ” in Historical Context

By calling Jesus “Rabbi,” Andrew classifies him culturally (rather than prophetically) because “‘Rabbi’ is the usual way for a disciple to address his

³⁴ Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John: A Theological Commentary*, 73.

³⁵ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 568-569.

³⁶ Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John: A Theological Commentary*, 81.

master.”³⁷ Andrew likely wanted Jesus to teach him about the Scriptures and his connection to John’s messianic announcement, believing that John the Baptist professed honestly.³⁸ Unlike the other titles for Jesus in John’s first chapter, “Rabbi” does not seem to pull from a rich history. Rather, it displays the social position in which Christ was perceived. In relation to modern etiquette, this title would equate most closely to “Sir,” or better, “Elder” (in the traditional Presbyterian sense, as it assumes religious wisdom). Surprisingly, the modern address for most professors, “Dr.,” would not be as close of a cultural translation; only near the end of 100 AD were rabbis expected to receive official educations.³⁹ Thus, Andrew addressed Jesus as a wise teacher in their cultural context.

In his proclamation, “We have found the Messiah,” Andrew gave a title rooted in the Old Testament, which John translates into “Christ” for non-Jewish readers.⁴⁰ Transliterated from Hebrew or Aramaic, Messiah means “anointed one,” and it finds its historical connection to passages that refer to offices such as King of Israel (1 Sam 16:6, 2 Sam 1:14), high priest (Lev 4:3), and patriarch (Ps 105:15).⁴¹ Emphasizing that this passage is one of many connecting the Old and New Testaments, Carson writes, “Andrew...probably saw in the term ‘Messiah’ a (perhaps royal) designation of the Coming One.”⁴² Essentially, Andrew’s profession carried with it the anticipatory hope for a coming Jewish savior. Furthermore, these historic roles in Jewish history provide an avenue to better understand Jesus’ fulfillment of Old Testament offices.

Christology in Andrew’s Profession

Understanding Jesus’ roles is comforting and enlightening, especially when considering their Old Testament connections. In this lane of thought, the authors of the Heidelberg Catechism answer the question, “Why is he called ‘Christ,’ meaning ‘anointed?’”⁴³ in the following way:

Because he has been ordained by God the Father and has been anointed with the Holy Spirit to be our chief prophet and teacher who perfectly reveals to us the secret council and will of God for our deliverance; our only high priest who has set us free by the one sacrifice of his body, and who continually pleads our cause with the Father; and our eternal king

³⁷ Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 308.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 155.

⁴⁰ Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John: A Theological Commentary*, 85.

⁴¹ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 155-156.

⁴² Ibid., 155-156.

⁴³ *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions*, 25.

who governs us by his Word and Spirit and who guards us and keeps us in the freedom he has won for us.⁴⁴

Significantly, these reformers liturgically taught their congregants the theological implications of Jesus' roles (i.e., "chief prophet," "high priest," and "eternal king"). In a way, their explanation is also an exposition of Andrew's profession. As the Chief Prophet, Jesus revealed the pinnacle of redemptive truth in a better (i.e., typological) way compared to the previous prophets (cf. Hebrews 1:1-2). Grudem argues that Jesus, as the ultimate High Priest, perfected this role by being "both the sacrifice and the priest who offered the sacrifice."⁴⁵ As the Eternal King, Christ leads the Church and will victoriously culminate his reign with his second coming. Perhaps unknowingly, Andrew made a Christological claim propelled by an Old Testament history; thus, he pointed to Jesus being the culmination of Israel's prophets, priests, and kings.

Philip's Profession

John the Baptist's announcement about Jesus started a chain reaction, and the day after Andrew's profession, Jesus finds Philip and commands him: "Follow me" (John 1:43). Soon thereafter, Philip evangelizes Nathanael, making the lofty claim that "we have found him of whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph" (John 1:45). Once again, Philip's profession is a lofty claim on Jesus' identity, not including the second title associating him with his hometown and father. Similar to "Rabbi," this title is a cultural name used to communicate a person's milieu and has no significant Christological dimension. Thus, it is unnecessary to analyze theologically and historically. Yet, Philip's Mosaic claim on Christ resonates with messianic longings and continues the historical and theological theme that Andrew began; Jesus is the Anointed One, the fulfillment of Israel's messianic hopes.

Jesus as the Telos of Moses and the Prophets in Historical Context

As most commentators acknowledge, Philip's profession is parallel to Andrew's, except with a more specific link to Moses.⁴⁶ Johannine scholar, Raymond Brown writes, "Is anything more specific intended in Philip's description? The 'one described in the Mosaic Law' could well identify Jesus as the Prophet-like-Moses of Deut xviii 15-18."⁴⁷ Additionally, Brown argues that Philip's testimony is a declaration of Old Testament fulfillment in Christ, alluding

⁴⁴ Ibid., 25.

⁴⁵ Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, 626.

⁴⁶ Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John: A Theological Commentary*, 87-88.

⁴⁷ Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John (I-XII): Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (New Haven: Doubleday, 2006), 86.

to prophecies such as Moses': "The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you . . . it is to him you shall listen" (Deut 18:15).⁴⁸ With this Old Testament history behind Philip's profession, an analysis of Jesus as the better Moses is necessary.

Christology in Philip's Profession

As noted about Andrew's profession, any claim to be the prophet like Moses is a claim to be the savior anticipated by God's people; yet, the specific connection to Moses and the prophets is still significant. Wayne Grudem, in *Systematic Theology*, gives two reasons for Jesus' superiority to Moses: (1) Jesus "is the one about whom the prophecies in the Old Testament were made," and (2) he "was himself the source of revelation from God."⁴⁹ Grudem additionally establishes Moses as the first significant prophet, later culminating in Christ.⁵⁰ Furthermore, Bible scholars Peter Gentry and Stephen Wellum delineate the importance of the prophets in the biblical storyline:

Through the prophets, God announces hope for the nation of Israel and for this poor, lost world. The prophets who proclaim an overall pattern of renewal do so by recapitulating the past history of redemption and projecting it into the future, when the Lord comes to save his people through a new exodus, a new Jerusalem, a new Davidic king to rule in a glorious and eternal kingdom—all of which is tied to the dawning of the new covenant age. . . . But what is critical to note is that this coming of God's kingdom will occur only through. . . . the work of the Messiah.⁵¹

Thus, by specifically referencing Moses (i.e., the first great prophet), Philip not only professes Jesus as Messiah, he makes a claim on the metanarrative (i.e., covenant) aspect of Scripture. Jesus is the climax, even greater than the Mosaic/Exodus history relished by the Jews. Even if he did not comprehend it, Philip's Christological profession painted a larger picture of Christ, alluding to him typologically fulfilling the line of prophets beginning with Moses.⁵²

⁴⁸ Brown, *The Gospel According to John (I-XII)*, 86.

⁴⁹ Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, 625-626.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 624-625.

⁵¹ Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Gods Kingdom through Gods Covenants: A Concise Biblical Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 246.

⁵² J. Severino Croatto, "Jesus, Prophet like Elijah, and Prophet-Teacher like Moses in Luke-Acts," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 124, no. 3 (2005), 460, 465.

Nathanael's Profession

At first, Nathanael does not fully believe Philip's account. It requires Jesus' evangelism for Nathanael to proclaim: "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the king of Israel!" (John 1:49). Similar to the previous two professions, Nathanael acknowledges Jesus as the "climax of Israel's messianic hopes."⁵³ Furthermore, these two titles have many of the same theological implications as the previous professions, yet they slightly differ in history, which adds new dynamics to the previous analysis. While Philip's profession has a Mosaic/prophetic history and Andrew's pulls from general messianic history, Nathanael's profession specifically alludes to a Father/Son and kingship history. This deserves a new historical and theological breakdown.

"Son of God" and "King of Israel" in Historical Context

"Son of God" and "king of Israel" have intermingled histories that depict the Davidic king as the son of God.⁵⁴ For example, the Psalmist writes, "'As for me [i.e., God], I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill.' I will tell of the decree: the Lord said to me, 'You are my Son; today I have begotten you'" (Psalm 2:6-7). This passage encapsulates the King-as-God's-Son dynamic connoted in Nathanael's profession. Similarly, Beasley-Murray argues for a "Wisdom tradition" behind "Son of God," pointing to the David-Solomon relationship.⁵⁵ As David passed wisdom to Solomon, wisdom culminates in the ultimate Davidic King. And specifically in this passage, the wisdom theme emerges when Jesus piercingly perceived Nathanael's character. Moreover, in their analysis of the Davidic covenant, Gentry and Wellum write, "The significance of this sonship is twofold. First, it inextricably ties the Davidic covenant to the previous covenants, and second, it anticipates in type the greater sonship of Christ."⁵⁶ The historical context once again climaxes in Christ. Therefore, "Son of God" and "King of Israel" intersect in the Davidic-king history, which impacts the Christology of the Father-Son relationship.

⁵³ Borchert, *John 1-11*, 148.

⁵⁴ Brown, *The Gospel According to John (I-XII): Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, 88.

⁵⁵ Beasley-Murray, *John*, 27.

⁵⁶ Gentry and Wellum, *Gods Kingdom through Gods Covenants: A Concise Biblical Theology*, 268.

Christology in Nathanael's Profession

The Trinitarian doctrine of the relationship between the Father and the Son impacts Soteriology: Jesus' perfect obedience made redemption possible. The history of Nathanael's profession expresses the longing for a perfect Davidic King, a perfect Son of God who is greater than the previous kings' failures. During his "bread of life discourse," Jesus describes his obedience to the Father, "All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me" (John 6:37-38). Christ's purpose derives from the Father. Furthermore, in his article outlining the importance of Jesus' obedience to the Father, Michael Allan writes, "The Father and Son relate in a willed and covenant manner: the Father expresses his will, and the Son submits."⁵⁷ He also argues that the Father/Son relationship is necessary for redemption.⁵⁸ Understanding that the sonship of Christ is at the core of the Gospel, Nathanael professing Jesus as the "Son of God" and "king of Israel" supports this orthodox doctrine.

Jesus' Profession

Lastly, Jesus announces himself. In verse 51 after Nathanael acknowledges him as the Messiah, Jesus makes a promise and gives himself a title (i.e., "you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man," John 1:51). Transitioning to the following chapters with this promise, Jesus gives a foreshadowing of what is to come: his crucifixion and exaltation on the cross.⁵⁹ Furthermore, he significantly names himself the "Son of Man." This title has a mixed history, yet, it also is more ambiguous than any of the previous professions.⁶⁰

"Son of Man" in Historical Context

Certainly, "Son of Man" references Daniel 7:13-14, where Daniel describes his vision, writing, "Behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before

⁵⁷ Michael Allen, "'From the Time He Took on the Form of a Servant': The Christ's Pilgrimage of Faith" (*International Journal of Systematic Theology* 16, no. 1 (2013): 4-24), 23.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁵⁹ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 165.

⁶⁰ Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John: A Theological Commentary*, 93; Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 164.

him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom.” Daniel’s vision pointed to the Coming One, the one previously analyzed as the saving hope of the Jewish Nation. Additionally, Beasley-Murray proposes that the “Son of Man” is surrounded by apocalyptic and eschatological language, seen in verse 51 in the context of Jacob’s supernatural experience at Bethel.⁶¹ From a literary perspective, Borchert adds three motifs to the background: “lifting up, raising, and glorification of the Son of Man...the descent and ascent of the Son of Man...and the judgement role of the Son of Man...”⁶² Further built upon as the Gospel progresses, these motifs are useful tools for both John and Jesus when defining the Messiah. Rather than having one prominent background, however, Jesus uses “Son of Man” in a conglomerated manner, melding histories together to fit his purpose.

Christology in “Son of Man”

Jesus will define himself through the title, “Son of Man.” Indeed, the history behind the title is important, yet Christ uniquely “fuses the authoritative figure of Daniel 7 with the righteous sufferer motif from the Old Testament,” molding it through his teachings and actions.⁶³ Behind the Christology of “Son of Man” stands the Christ who hung on the cross, the one who taught the repentance and forgiveness of sin, and the savior in the fourth Gospel. Explaining the use of “Son of Man,” D.A. Carson writes, “Precisely because the expression was not narrowly tied to one eschatological figure, Jesus could take it and use it without fear of being misunderstood because of doubtful associations in the hearers’ minds.”⁶⁴ Dissimilar to other titles like “King of Israel,” Jesus’s final title in John chapter one lacks politically and culturally preconceived notions. “Son of Man” is Jesus’ concluding proclamation, and the remainder of John’s Gospel narratively delineates the term’s Christology.

Conclusion

The collective account concerning Christ in John 1 theologically supports orthodox Christology, especially in its historical contexts. Supporting Christ’s self-attestation, the Father/Son relationship, typological fulfilment in Christ, teleological fulfilment of offices in Christ, substitutionary atonement, and the dual-nature theology, John’s first chapter concisely holds orthodox doctrines in unity. This passage is essentially a narrative Christology. Furthermore, the

⁶¹ Beasley-Murray, *John*, 28.

⁶² Borchert, *John 1-11*, 149.

⁶³ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 164.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 164.

histories of Jesus' names provide the backdrop for this Christology. Pulling from cultural backgrounds (i.e., "Word" and "Rabbi") and, more prominently, Old Testament backgrounds, John the historian cleverly weaves these aspects into John 1 to "thickly" define Christ.

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