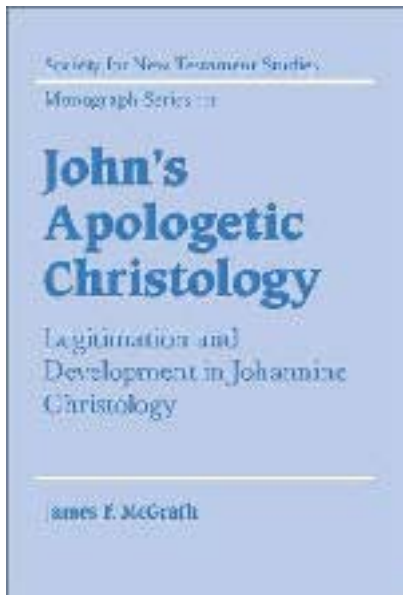


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McGrath, James F.

John's Apologetic Christology: Legitimation and Development in Johannine Christology

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This study of the Fourth Gospel's christological dialogues is a significant and helpful addition to our understanding of the pattern of argumentation in the Gospel. It is a revised version of a dissertation produced under the direction James D. G. Dunn in Durham and is eminently readable with clear and sustained arguments.

McGrath's basic thesis is that the christological discussions in John functioned as legitimating arguments for already-existent beliefs within the Johannine community. This legitimation was necessary because of conflict from outside the community, primarily the synagogue, which questioned the validity of certain key beliefs about who Jesus was. In particular, the validity of the belief that Jesus was the Messiah was at stake, especially a Messiah who was also claimed to be the unique and special agent of God, one greater than Moses. This argumentation was necessary because opponents questioned the validity of Jesus' actions and statements. McGrath argues that the Fourth Evangelist developed arguments, in response to such opposition, that directly responded to various aspects related to Jesus' validity as the Messiah.

The book is structured in four parts, each of which takes up a different aspect of this thesis: an introductory section; a section dealing with the relationship between Jesus and God; a section dealing with Jesus, Moses, and Torah; and a final section in which various other issues that relate to the central problem of the validity of Jesus' messiahship are discussed.

The introductory section lays out the problem and details the major features of Johannine Christology that are the issues of contention. McGrath is at pains here to reject approaches to understanding John's particular Christology from various developmental models, especially rejecting a history of religions approach. Instead he sees the christological formulations as being primarily a reaction to conflict with opponents. McGrath calls this model sociological and draws upon the work of Berger and Luckman in seeing a sociological development in the rise of any group with distinct ideas: first a stage of initial diversity, then a stage in which the new ideas come in contact and conflict with prevailing views, followed in turn by the need for legitimation. The christological discussions, then, have a distinctly rhetorical quality in that they anticipate and respond to objections that have been raised against already-held beliefs.

Despite this seeming pattern of a closed belief system (the Johannine community), McGrath attempts to connect John's argumentation with beliefs that were more broadly held within the Christian community. Thus John's view of Jesus was not unique to this community alone but was formed on already-existent traditions. What is unique about this Gospel is its reaction to opposition, hence the overarching concept of legitimation.

The second section of the book, and perhaps the major focus, addresses Jesus' relationship with God. Using the prism of four primary texts in John (5; 8:12-59; 10:22-39; 1:1-18), McGrath explores the distinctive features of how Jesus' relationship with God is depicted. A central feature in this section is McGrath's discussion of Jesus as "God's agent." The depiction of Jesus as uniquely revealing God's will was seen by opponents as invalidating his role as the Messiah, since it claimed an equality with God. McGrath very carefully examines discourses in which Jesus is shown always to be functioning appropriately as God's representative, pointing to God's primacy. But as God's agent, Jesus also had a responsibility to reveal God's will and speak for him in an authoritative way. McGrath successfully develops Jewish ideas of agency as the backdrop for the key dialogues, especially in John 5 and 8. The operative concept for John was that Jesus was the preexistent Logos, understood against the background of a wisdom ideology. As the incarnation of the preexistent Logos, Jesus was privy to

special knowledge of God. Thus by wedding the wisdom idea with concepts of agency, John interpreted traditional Christian views of Jesus in such a way as to explain them to Jewish opponents.

The third section develops another aspect of conflict over Jesus' role, specifically the comparison of Jesus with Moses and the Torah. Here McGrath applies his insight gained in section two to the Sabbath controversies and the resulting conflict over the Torah. Jesus' signs are seen to be compared with Moses' signs as legitimating activities, and resistance to these signs are depicted as resistance to God.

The fourth section attends to a number of subsidiary issues in John's Gospel, in particular Jesus' relationship to various individuals, specifically John the Baptist and Abraham, and the larger question of a suffering and crucified Messiah. Again McGrath finds that these issues were shaped by a pattern of legitimation in the face of Jewish opposition. Each of the issues reflects an attempt to shape already-existent traditions in such a way that they respond to the criticisms of opponents.

McGrath's study convincingly weaves together a number of issues that have certainly been part of Johannine studies for some time. He accounts for the extensive feature of conflict in the Gospel. For McGrath the dialogues with opponents are opportunities for John to deal more extensively with christological questions that have already arisen between Christians and opponents. However, the basic beliefs are not unique to John but rather are seen to be tied to traditions in common with other strains of Christianity. Instead, John is simply reacting in a sustained and theological way to objections to Christian belief in Jesus as the Messiah. He nicely connects the ideas of wisdom/Logos thought with the belief that Jesus is uniquely God's agent and the future judge. In particular, I found McGrath's analysis of the various points of argumentation against a backdrop of Jewish thought intriguing, and this book will help confirm the developing idea that John's Gospel was written wholly within the thought world of Judaism, not extraneous to it.

McGrath's study also links John more integrally with traditions in other strains of early Christianity—those found in the other Gospels and in Paul. In other words, John is not a hermetically sealed distinct approach but rather should be seen as rhetorically engaging and defending traditions found in the other Gospels.

I did have some questions about certain assumptions about the originating cause of the Fourth Gospel. McGrath takes as his starting point the historical situation outlined by Martyn in *History and Theology of the Fourth Gospel*, that is, the expulsion from the synagogue perhaps in the latter part of the first century. I did not see that as a necessary correlate to his study. The existence of opposition by Jewish leaders to a Christian understanding of Jesus as Messiah could have taken place in a number of contexts, and tensions within synagogues could have occurred at various points in the growth of the early church. In a related way, McGrath also seems to assume a "Johannine community" as the origination of much of the thought contained in the Fourth Gospel, but perhaps the pattern of legitimation was developed by a single individual without the development of ideas attached to a special community. Especially given the way McGrath links the central christological ideas to other Christian traditions, is it not possible that we have simply the argument for legitimation coming from a single individual living within "mainstream" Christianity? A final question deals with the audience of the Gospel. It was not clear in the book whether the audience was Christians, as a source of support for their beliefs as they encountered opposition, or the Jewish opponents themselves, which would make the Gospel a truly apologetic instrument.

However, these questions suggest the provocative and engaging nature of the study. To frame the Fourth Gospel in terms of rhetorical engagement, of dialogue with opponents, is certainly an appropriate effort. McGrath has added a significant voice to the discussion about the purpose and interpretation of this Gospel.