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Jesus as the Way in the Fourth Gospel

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PEETERS

THEOLOGY AND CHRISTOLOGY IN THE FOURTH GOSPEL

ESSAYS BY THE MEMBERS
OF THE SNTS JOHANNINE WRITINGS SEMINAR

EDITED BY

G. VAN BELLE – J.G. VAN DER WATT
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JESUS AS THE WAY TO THE FATHER IN JOHANNINE THEOLOGY (JOHN 14,6)

A question that lies at the heart of Johannine theology concerns how people come to know God. The Fourth Gospel assumes that God is "from above", that people are "from below", and that no one has ever seen God (1,18; 8,23). A cleft separates the human from the divine. The problem, therefore, is how can God be known? The evangelist recognizes that people do not have unmediated knowledge of God, but he also relates that God is made known through the Word that became flesh in Jesus of Nazareth, who communicated divine reality through what he said, through what he did, and through who he was.

A passage that sums up Jesus' role is, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (Jn 14,6)¹. This saying deals with relationships between God, human beings, and Jesus, each of whom will be considered below². The passage refers to people "coming" to God, which in the immediate context means knowing God and believing in God. After identifying himself as the way by which people "come" to the Father (ἔρχεσθαι, 14,6), Jesus shifts to the verb "know" when he says, "If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him" (γινώσκειν, 14,7). Then he shifts from "knowing" to "believing" by saying, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father ... Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?" (πιστεύειν, 14,9). Coming, knowing, and believing are overlapping expressions for human relationships with God in this passage, as they are elsewhere in the Gospel (e.g., 1,10-12; 6,35.68-69; 7,37-38)³.

1. An earlier form of this article was read in the seminar on "The Mission of the Church: Exegesis and Hermeneutics" at the SNTS meeting in Durham in August 2002.

2. Studies of the historical Jesus frequently conclude that none of the "I am" sayings in John are authentic sayings of Jesus. Among the more skeptical critics see F. SCHLERITT in G. LÜDEMANN, *Jesus after 2000 Years: What He Really Said and Did*, London, SCM, 2000, pp. 540, 695. For more nuanced views of John's use of the Jesus traditions see F.J. MOLONEY, *The Fourth Gospel and the Jesus of History*, in *NTS* 46 (2000) 42-58; M.M. THOMPSON, *The Historical Jesus and the Johannine Christ*, in R.A. CULPEPPER – C.C. BLACK (eds.), *Exploring the Gospel of John: In Honor of D. Moody Smith*, Louisville, KY, Westminster John Knox, 1996, pp. 21-42. Our concern is not to determine whether 14,6 is a saying of the so-called historical Jesus, but to consider how this statement fits into the framework of Johannine theology.

3. On the various expressions used in the Johannine vocabulary of faith see J.

The question of the knowledge of God and the particularity of Christ are related to both ancient and modern contexts. In terms of its ancient context, a number of scholars understand Johannine Christianity to be a kind of introverted sect, whose Gospel deals with the world's failure to understand Jesus and about its hostility toward Jesus and his followers (1,10; 7,7; 15,18-19)⁴. This construal of Johannine Christianity seems unlikely, however, for several reasons that can be stated here only briefly but are treated more extensively elsewhere⁵. One is that the Gospel's Christology has a persistent emphasis on sending, which points to an ongoing interest in and engagement with the world. The evangelist speaks of God sending (ἀποστέλλειν, πέμπειν) the Son into the world in order that the world might be saved through him (Jn 3,17). Through Jesus' words and actions he bore witness to the God who sent him, in order that people might come to know God and find eternal life (17,3). Before his crucifixion, Jesus promised that he would send the Spirit or Paraclete from the Father, and that the Paraclete would remain with his followers as a continuing witness to Jesus (14,26; 15,26; 16,7). After his resurrection, Jesus sent his followers into the world and breathed the Spirit into them (20,21-22; cf. 17,18).

Second, the Fourth Gospel reflects its interest in the world by telling how the circle of Jesus' followers came to include both Jews and Samaritans through the testimony that one person bore to another (1,35-51; 4,31-42), and in its account of Jesus' public ministry the Gospel anticipates the inclusion of Greeks in the Christian community (12,20). The final chapter of the Gospel, which may have been added at a late stage of its composition, tells of the disciples bringing a great catch of fish to Jesus – an action that is generally recognized to anticipate people being drawn to Jesus through the work of his disciples (21,1-14). The Johannine Epistles, which were probably written later than the Gospel, deal with questions of proper support for traveling evangelists (3 Jn 5-8). The Johannine writings manifest of Christian separation from the world,

yet continue to expect Christian engagement with the world⁶. The language of the Gospel includes sayings with double meanings and ironic undertones that are difficult for the uninitiated to grasp, but the leading images would have communicated more readily with a broader audience. Images like bread, water, shepherding, and the vine would have been familiar to people of many backgrounds, providing a way for readers to engage with the message of the text even though the nuances of its meaning emerge only gradually with rereading.

In contemporary theology, discussion of John's presentation of Jesus as the way often occurs in terms of Christianity's relationship to other religious traditions. For many, the Johannine claim that Jesus is the way is one of Christianity's most essential teachings. It is heard as good news because it announces that through Jesus Christ one may relate rightly to God, and it provides impetus for mission because it is a message to be shared. For others, however, the idea that Jesus is the way is uncomfortably narrow. It is heard as an expression of Christian exclusivity that is awkward at best and dangerous at worst in a pluralistic world⁷. A large part of the problem arises from the repeated use of the definite article in Jesus' statement. Many objections presumably would fade if the text read, "I am a way, and a truth, and a life". To call Jesus the bringer of "a way" among other ways and the bearer of "a truth" among other truths would be a rather modest claim that would probably elicit little opposition from those outside the Christian fold. Moreover, referring to Jesus as "a way" would ease the discomfort of those within the Christian community who want to avoid the impression that Christianity is exclusivistic. The difficulty with this approach, of course, is that the word "the" stubbornly appears before each of the three terms "way", "truth", and "life" in Greek as well as in English.

Understanding the passage involves coming to terms with its particularity, and the best way to do this is to think through the questions that have been raised about the Fourth Gospel's presentation of Christ's uniqueness in light of the theological dynamics of the Gospel as a whole. Although some sense that portraying Jesus as the way makes the gospel message too exclusive and insufficiently open, reading Jesus' words in light of the theological dynamics of John's Gospel suggests that the opposite is true. When each element of the saying is given due

PAINTER, *The Quest for the Messiah: The History, Literature and Theology of the Johannine Community*, Edinburgh, T.&T. Clark, 1991, pp. 327-333.

4. See, e.g., W.A. MEEKS, *The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism*, in *JBL* 91 (1972) 44-72; J. NEYREY, *An Ideology of Revolt: John's Christology in Social Science Perspective*, Philadelphia, PA, Fortress, 1988; N. PETERSON, *The Gospel of John and the Sociology of Light: Language and Characterization in the Fourth Gospel*, Valley Forge, PA, Trinity Press International, 1993; H. LEROY, *Rätsel und Missverständnis: Ein Beitrag zur Formgeschichte des Johannesevangeliums* (BBB, 30), Bonn, Peter Hanstein, 1968, pp. 21-25; T. THATCHER, *The Riddles of Jesus in John: A Study in Tradition and Folklore* (SBL MS, 53), Atlanta, GA, Society of Biblical Literature, 2000, pp. 104-108.

5. C.R. KOESTER, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community*, 2nd ed., Minneapolis, MN, Fortress Press, 2003, chaps. 1 & 7.

6. Studies of mission in relation to John's Gospel include T. OKURE, *The Johannine Approach to Mission: A Contextual Study of John 4:1-42* (WUNT, 31), Tübingen, Mohr/Siebeck, 1988; A.J. KÖSTENBERGER, *The Missions of Jesus and the Disciples according to the Fourth Gospel*, Grand Rapids, MI – Cambridge, Eerdmans, 1998. For discussion of the sectarian quality of the Johannine writings see D. RENSBERGER, *Johannine Faith and Liberating Community*, Philadelphia, PA, Westminster, 1988, pp. 25-29.

weight, we find that Christ's words can best be read as an assessment of the human condition and an indication of the divine response to that condition through Jesus' death and resurrection.

I. GOD THE FATHER

The goal of Jesus coming into the world is that people come to God, know God, and believe in God. According to John's Gospel, belief in Jesus is not an end in itself but a way of relating to God. The prologue introduced the ministry of Jesus by saying that no one has ever seen God, but Jesus the Son came to make God known (Jn 1,18). During Jesus' public ministry he imparts what he has seen and heard from God and carries out God's work in the world (3,11; 5,19; 8,26.28.40; 12,49-50). In using the words "I Am" for himself, he recalls the expression that identified God in Israel's tradition (Ex 3,14), so that the "I Am" points not only to Jesus but to the God whom he reveals. At the conclusion of the account of Jesus' public ministry, the evangelist includes sayings that summarize the purpose of Christ's work. Jesus said, "Whoever believes in me believes not in me but in him who sent me. And whoever sees me sees him who sent me" (Jn 12,44-45)⁸.

Knowing and believing in God is central to Jesus' work because God is the source of life. After healing the royal official's son and the invalid at Bethzatha, Jesus identifies God as the source of the life that Jesus gives to others. According to the Fourth Gospel, God has life in himself, and Jesus also has life in himself because God has granted it (5,26). God the Father raises the dead and gives them life, and the Son also gives life to whomever he wishes (5,21). The work of God is carried out through

7. For differing perspectives on the uniqueness of Christ in John's Gospel see D.M. SMITH, *Prolegomena to a Canonical Reading of the Fourth Gospel*, in F.F. SEGOVIA (ed.), *"What Is John?" : Readers and Readings of the Fourth Gospel*, Atlanta, GA, Scholars Press, 1996, pp. 169-182, esp. 175-176; R.A. CULPEPPER, *The Gospel of John as a Document of Faith in a Pluralistic Culture*, in *"What Is John?"* pp. 107-127, esp. pp. 121-125. See also the reflections by G.R. O'DAY in *The Gospel of John* (New Interpreter's Bible, 9), Nashville, TN, Abingdon Press, 1995, pp. 743-745.

8. On the importance of understanding Jesus in relation to God see P.W. MEYER, *"The Father" : The Presentation of God in the Fourth Gospel*, in CULPEPPER - BLACK (eds.), *Exploring the Gospel of John* (n. 2), pp. 255-273, esp. p. 259; M.M. THOMPSON, *The God of the Gospel of John*, Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans, 2001, pp. 6-15, 227-240; W. LOADER, *The Christology of the Fourth Gospel: Structure and Issues* (Beiträge zur biblischen Exegese und Theologie, 23), Frankfurt, Peter Lang, 1992, pp. 77, 138; D.F. TOLMIE, *The Characterization of God in the Fourth Gospel*, in JSNT 69 (1998) 57-75. On different theological approaches to the question of God in John's Gospel see T. LARSSON, *God in the Fourth Gospel: A Hermeneutical Study of the History of Interpretations* (Con-BibNT, 35), Stockholm, Almqvist & Wiksell, 2001.

the work of Jesus, and therefore the life-giving acts that Jesus performs bear witness to the life-giving power of the God who sent him. At the end of the Gospel the evangelist indicates that he wrote of the signs in order that people might believe in Jesus and have life in his name (20,31); yet the narrative context shows that the life Jesus offers comes from God. This "is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (17,3). By knowing and believing in Jesus, people receive life in relationship to God.

Jesus calls God "the Father" in 14,6 as in many other passages; it is his most characteristic form of speaking about and to God. "Father" is a relational term, which identifies God by his relationship to Jesus the Son. Throughout John's Gospel, Jesus refers to God as "my Father" or "the Father" and to himself as "the Son", disclosing the unique relationship between them. The Father and the Son are not identical, but neither can be known apart from the other. Readers find that Jesus is the one figure in the Gospel who can call God "Father" without qualification, and on the rare occasions when others do speak of the Father, their words manifest confusion about who the Father is (8,19.41-42). There were, to be sure, precedents in Jewish and Greco-Roman tradition for referring to God as Father because of his care for Israel or his creation of all things, but in the Fourth Gospel the identity of the Father is disclosed through his relationship with Jesus the Son⁹.

What does Jesus reveal about God? In its statements about God, the Fourth Gospel is remarkably sparing. Jesus says that he proclaims what he has seen and heard in the Father's presence (8,38.40; 12,49-50), yet the "disconcerting fact" is "that the Gospel never spells out just what it is that the Son has seen and heard", as Paul Meyer has noted; the Gospel does not yield "some detached doctrine of God"¹⁰. On the one hand, some of what is said about God is rather commonplace. For example, the idea that God has the power to give life and to determine how judgment will take place is certainly not unique to Johannine theology,

9. There were precedents speaking of God claiming, supporting, and disciplining Israel as a father would do for a son. You, "O Lord, are our Father; our redeemer from old is your name" (Is 63,6). "O Lord, you are our Father ... we are all the work of your hand" (Is 64,8; cf. Dt 32,6; Jr 31,9). Similar usage appears in later Jewish texts (Tob 13,4; Jub. 19,29; 1QH XVII,35; Josephus, *Ant.* 5.1.25 §93). On calling God "Father" because of his creation of all things see Josephus, *Ant.* 7.14.11 §380; Philo, *Cherubim* 49; *Creation* 77. On calling Zeus the father of humankind see Homer, *Iliad* 15.47; Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History* 5.72.2; Dio Chrysostom, *Discourses* 53.12. On God as Father in John's Gospel see THOMPSON, *The God of the Gospel of John* (n. 8), pp. 57-100, and the essays in A. REINHARTZ (ed.), *God the Father in the Gospel of John* (Semeia, 85), Atlanta, GA, Society of Biblical Literature, 1999.

10. MEYER, *The Father* (n. 8), pp. 255-256.

and the familiarity of this idea meant that it could simply be presupposed by the evangelist (5,21-22). On the other hand, much of what is distinctive about the Fourth Gospel's presentation of God concerns the relationship of the Father to the Son rather than information about God's being or nature. The Father is the one who loves the Son (5,20) and sent him into the world (3,17; 5,37); he gives the Son life and authority to judge (5,26-27), and gives people to Jesus (6,37-39). Jesus reveals his unity with the Father by words and by actions such as healing (5,19-30; 9,4; 10,30-38) and feeding a crowd with bread, which identifies God as the one who gives the world bread in the form of his Son (6,32-35). God is not known apart from the Son, but through and in relation to the Son.

Knowing God, in the Fourth Gospel, means relating to God. The knowledge of God includes information, but it finally presses readers beyond knowing things about God to knowing God as one knows and relates to a living being. The principal mode of divine revelation is incarnation, which makes the Word of God present to the world in a form that can be encountered; and Jesus' words and actions, culminating in his death and resurrection, are integral to this encounter. Responses to the embodied word included belief and unbelief, acceptance and rejection, knowing and not knowing. By extension, the Gospel presents the story of this encounter in written form in order to bring the readers to the knowledge of God that is faith. Reasons why the evangelist tells the story in this manner emerge from his understanding of human life.

II. HUMAN ESTRANGEMENT

Jesus' saying about the way in Jn 14,6 introduces human relationships with God in stark terms, "no one comes to the Father". This comment is perhaps the Gospel's most disturbingly comprehensive claim, since the context makes clear that "no one" includes everyone. The assumption is that all people are separated from God. To say that "no one comes to the Father" assumes that all people are separated from the Father – otherwise there would be no need to come to him. This separation from God arises from human sin, and sin figures into the condition of every human being. To say that no one comes to the Father means that sin separates everyone from the Father. The claim is categorical.

Humanity's separation from God is a persistent theme in John's Gospel. When speaking of God's Word, the prologue declares that "he was in the world, and the world came into being through him, yet the world did not know him" (1,10). A cleft separates the human from the divine. Throughout the Gospel Jesus addresses listeners who do not

know God, who have never heard God's voice and have never seen God's form (5,27; 7,28; 8,19). God and his Son belong to the world above whereas human beings belong to the world below, and the cleft between the divine and human realms is characterized by alienation. Jesus says to his opponents, "You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world", and "I told you that you would die in your sins" (8,23-24). Therefore, when the Son of God crosses the divide and enters the world, the world hates him because he testifies that its works are evil (7,7). The statement that "no one comes to the Father" (14,6b) points to humanity's estrangement from God.

Because separation from God is a fundamentally *human* problem, it affects Jesus' followers as well as his foes. The disciples do not show the same kind of animosity that Jesus' opponents do, but the context of the comments about "the way" indicates that John's Gospel understands separation from God to be an issue for all people. The point bears consideration. Although there are places in the Gospel where the principal contrast seems to be between the Jews and the followers of Jesus or between the world and the disciples, a more fundamental aspect underlies these distinctions. The disciples of Jesus share the same humanity that other people do; they do not have any inherently privileged position with respect to God. Note that earlier in the Gospel, Jesus told the temple police, "You will search for me, but you will not find me; and where I am, you cannot come" (7,34). When challenged again by his Jewish opponents, he repeated, "I am going away, and you will search for me, but you will die in your sin. Where I am going, you cannot come" (8,21). In a remarkable turn, however, Jesus speaks to his followers at the last supper in essentially the same way. He tells them, "as I said to the Jews" who have shown opposition, "so now I say to *you*" who belong to the inner circle: "Where I am going, *you* cannot come" (13,33). At a fundamental level the disciples are in the same position as the Pharisees and temple police who tried to arrest Jesus: none of them has any innate ability to go where Jesus goes.

The portrayal of individual disciples at the last supper reinforces the sense that Jesus addresses a fundamentally human problem. First, Peter protests, "Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you" (13,37). In reply Jesus discloses that Peter will deny him three times (13,37-38). According to the fourth evangelist, Peter had been a loyal disciple since the beginning of Jesus' ministry (1,41-42), and when many of Jesus' followers fell away because of Jesus' insistence that they eat his flesh and drink his blood, Peter confessed that Jesus was the Holy One of God, who had the words of eternal life (6,68-69). Nevertheless

when Peter, in the high priest's courtyard, denies that he is Jesus' disciple, he shows that he shares the condition that manifests itself in Jesus' Jewish opponents. Recall that previously some of the Jewish leaders were asked whether they wanted to be included among Jesus' disciples, and they denied it (9,27-28). During Jesus' hearing before the Jewish authorities, Peter will do the same by repeatedly denying Jesus (18,17.25.27).

Second, Thomas interrupts Jesus' discourse at the last supper by declaring, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" (14,5). Earlier in the Gospel, Thomas had been ready to follow Jesus back to Judea to attend to Lazarus, even though Jesus' adversaries posed a threat in that region (11,16). Yet during the last supper Jesus spoke of another kind of journey, one that Thomas was not able to fathom. Jesus was going to God, and Thomas's inability to understand this recalls the incomprehension that Jesus' adversaries showed earlier when they asked, "Where does this man intend to go that we will not find him?" and "What does he mean by saying ... 'Where I am you cannot come?'" (7,35-36; 8,22). Thomas is as unknowing as Jesus' opponents had been.

Third, Philip says, "Lord, show us the Father and we will be satisfied" (14,8). Philip was called by Jesus early in his ministry, and Philip had confessed that Jesus was the one "about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote" (1,45). Philip had been present for the miraculous feeding of the five thousand (6,5.7), and he was one who told Jesus that the Greeks wanted to see him when Jesus entered Jerusalem (12,20-23). Yet Philip's request at the last supper indicates that he is not satisfied with what he has seen thus far, and his words echo previous episodes in which Jesus' Jewish opponents were the ones who demanded to know, "Where is your Father?" (8,19). Accordingly, Jesus' response is poignant: "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me?" (14,9). Like others, Philip does not genuinely know Jesus at this point in the story. Jesus' words, "no one comes to the Father" (14,6b), level the distinctions between people by directing attention to the separation from God that all human beings share.

This negative assessment of humanity's situation is the presupposition for the Gospel's positive presentation of Jesus as the way. The fourth evangelist presses readers to see the depth of human estrangement from God and to understand the person and work of Christ as God's response to that estrangement. John's Gospel does not identify Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life in order to close off relationships with God, but to open up relationships with God where sin has created separation (14,6a).

The word "except" ($\epsilon\lambda\ \mu\eta$) in the phrase "except by me" (14,6c) means that the categorical judgment that "no one comes to the Father" is not the last word (14,6b). The "except" introduces the prospect of relationship with God despite human estrangement from God. "Except" is like a window that lets light into a closed room. The term is congruent with what the Gospel says about Christ coming as light into a world of darkness (1,5.9; 3,19) and serving as the gate that enables people to enter God's sheepfold (10,7-10). Rather than restricting access to God the word "except" indicates access to God.

The interplay between a judgment on human separation from God and a promise of new relationship with God is part of the fabric of John's Gospel. One of the most memorable characters in the story is Nicodemus, who is identified as a Pharisee, but who speaks of signs like the people in the crowd in Jerusalem, and who also appears to be a representative of a benighted humanity (2,23-25; 3,1-2.17-21). Jesus speaks categorically when he says to Nicodemus, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God" (3,3a). After hearing Nicodemus's reply about the incomprehensibility of Jesus' words, Jesus reiterates his judgment by saying, "no one can enter the kingdom of God" (3,5a). Both sayings presuppose that the human condition is one of separation from God's kingdom. To say that "no one" can see or enter the kingdom means that everyone begins at a point outside the kingdom.

Against the backdrop of this negative judgment Jesus inserts the word "unless". The word "unless" ($\epsilon\delta\upsilon\nu\ \mu\eta$), like the "except" in 14,6, provides for relationship with God in the face of separation from God. To say that "no one" can enter or even see God's kingdom makes an unequivocally negative assessment of human capacities to relate fully and rightly to God, but adding that this is true "unless" he or she is born anew (3,3b.5b) points to the prospect of a relationship where one would otherwise be impossible. Being born anew means coming to faith, which is why "believing" is mentioned so often in Jesus' comments to Nicodemus (3,12.15.16.18). Believing is a relational notion in John's Gospel; it is the way people relate rightly to God. Faith is evoked by the Spirit (3,6) through the message that God so loved the world that he gave his Son to suffer and die in order to redeem it (3,16).

Similar dynamics appear in Jn 6, where Jesus speaks to representatives of the multitude that he had fed with five loaves and two fish. In the middle of his discourse Jesus makes the categorical judgment that "no one can come to me" (6,44a), using "come" as a synonym for faith (cf. 6,35). The crowd's demeanor bears out his statement. Jesus transformed five loaves and two fish into a meal for five thousand people

with plenty left over (6,1-15), yet they continued to demand a sign in order that they might believe (6,30). Their insistence on signs, after having been given a sign, discloses their inability to perceive the presence and work of God, whose power was manifested through the Son whom he sent (6,27.29.32.33). They not only do not come, but evidently lack the ability to come, for the text says that "no one *can*" do so (οὐδεὶς δύναται, 6,44a). The evangelist underscores the depth of the problem by noting how the people "complained" against Jesus, using a word that was associated with the contemporaries of Moses in the biblical accounts of the wilderness wanderings (γογγύζειν, 6,41.43). Moses' generation had benefited from divine actions like the deliverance at the Red Sea, the gift of water from the rock, and a daily provision of manna, the bread from heaven (Ex 14,21-31; 16,4; 17,1-7), yet they persistently complained and refused to trust God (Ex 16,7; 17,3; Nu 14,27.29). By developing the parallels between the wilderness generation and the crowd fed by Jesus, the Fourth Gospel enhances the sense that their responses to Jesus reflect a fundamentally human estrangement from God that has persisted over time.

Jesus tells the crowd that "no one can come", making a negative pronouncement on the human condition (Jn 6,44a), but this judgment is met again by the word "unless" (ἐὰν μή, 6,44b). Taken on its own the statement that "no one can come" means that relationships with God and the Christ whom God sent are impossible. Yet adding the words, "unless the Father who sent me draws" him or her, means that relationships can occur when God acts to overcome the barrier that separates the human from the divine. God "draws" (ἐλκύειν) people to Jesus and so to himself by communicating with them, according to 6,45. Later, readers learn more specifically that people are "drawn" to Christ by the power of his being lifted up in crucifixion, as well as by his resurrection and return to the Father (12,32-33)¹¹. According to John's Gospel, Christ's death and resurrection are means by which God communicates his love to the world and thereby draws the world back into relationship with himself.

III. JESUS AS THE WAY

Calling Jesus "the way" points to the prospect of a relationship with God in the face of the negative judgment that "no one comes to the

11. On the verb "lift up" (ὑψοῦν) see J.T. FORESTELL, *The Word of the Cross: Salvation as Revelation in the Fourth Gospel* (AnBib, 57), Rome, Biblical Institute Press, 1974, pp. 61-65; R. SCHNACKENBURG, *The Gospel according to St John*, 3 vols., New York, Herder - Seabury - Crossroad, 1968-84, vol. 2, pp. 399-401.

Father". The image of the way can best be understood by noting that Jesus spoke about *going the way* himself before he spoke about *being the way* for others. Focusing initially on what it means for Jesus to go the way casts into relief what it means for Jesus to be the way. Jesus' own journey is mentioned repeatedly in Jn 13-14, and in typically Johannine fashion his statements encompass multiple dimensions of meaning¹². Accordingly, when Jesus speaks of "where I am going" (13,33.36), his words can be taken on two levels: his destination and his route. Each level merits consideration.

First, we can consider what the Gospel says about Jesus' destination. During his public ministry Jesus speaks of going to the one who sent him (7,33-34). Bystanders in the story find these remarks opaque, but the evangelist gives readers enough information to know that God sent Jesus (5,23-24; 6,38-39), so that when Jesus speaks of going to the one who sent him, readers will understand that he refers to his return to the Father. Similarly, the comments that introduce Jn's account of the last supper repeat that Jesus has come from God and is going to God (13,1.3). After piquing the disciples' curiosity about where he is going, Jesus tells of preparing a place for them in his Father's house with its many rooms (14,2-4). Readers who follow these cues will respond to the question, "Where is Jesus going?" (13,36; 14,5) by saying, "He is going to God".

Second, we must note the route that Jesus will take to his destination. Jesus speaks about where he is going in contexts that mention the prospect of arrest and the coming "hour" of the passion (7,30.34; 8,20-21). When the evangelist later tolls the hour of Jesus' return to the Father, readers learn that the path Jesus follows will pass through betrayal (13,1-2). After Judas leaves the company of disciples and plunges into the night in order to carry out the betrayal, Jesus speaks about glorification and going where no one else can go (13,30-33). According to John's Gospel, Jesus' glorification and return to the Father take place through his dying and rising (12,23-24)¹³. Peter unwittingly accents the fact that Jesus is going on a course that will lead through death by declaring that he will follow Jesus and lay down his life for him, which prompts Jesus to foretell Peter's denial (13,36-37). These cues in the text enable readers to respond to the question, "Where is Jesus going?" by saying, "He is going the way of the cross"¹⁴.

12. On the close connection between Jn 13 and 14 see F.F. SEGOVIA, *The Farewell of the Word: The Johannine Call to Abide*, Minneapolis, MN, Fortress Press, 1991, pp. 59-68. On multiple meanings see chap. 1 of KOESTER, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel* (n. 5).

13. On glorification see FORESTELL, *The Word of the Cross* (n. 11), pp. 73-74.

14. J. PAINTER, *John: Witness and Theologian*, London, SPCK, 1975, pp. 41, 47;

Jn 14 begins by identifying the Father's house as Jesus' destination, but when Jesus introduces the term "way" in the statement "You know the way where I am going" (14,4)¹⁵, he focuses attention on the way of crucifixion and resurrection that will lead to that destination. As the narrative unfolds, Jesus goes to the garden where he is arrested, then to the high priest's house where he is questioned, and to the headquarters of the Roman governor where he is scourged. He follows the way out of the city, bearing his own cross, and is crucified at Golgotha. Death and entombment are followed by resurrection – and all of this belongs to the way by which he returns to the Father (20,17).

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The image of the way, like the other images in the Gospel, conveys a distinctive message in a manner that would have been accessible to a broad readership. At the level of life experience the term *way* (ὁδός) was associated with the various kinds of roads and paths that crisscrossed the world in which John's readers lived. The routes between major cities often had level roads paved with stones, which carried a steady traffic of carts and pedestrians as soldiers, merchants, and other travelers made their way across the Roman Empire. At the local level, dirt paths meandered through the hills and valleys, providing ways to

walk from one village to another. Because the pathway was such a familiar part of daily experience, the image was widely used as a metaphor for a way of life. The Scriptures call obedience to God's commands the way of truth (Pss 86,1; 119,30), the way that brings life rather than death (Ps 16,11; Pr 15,24; Jer 21,8). The Dead Sea community called its own distinctive version of the Jewish tradition "the way" (1QS IX,17-21; CD I,11-13). Greek and Latin writers contrasted the way of virtue with the way of vice, or argued that the middle way between extremes was the best path of life, or taught that living in accordance with nature was the shortest way to virtue¹⁷. Philo of Alexandria wrote that the way to life, truth, and knowledge of God comes through the wisdom and virtue that one finds when the Scriptures are read in light of philosophy¹⁸.

The Gospel presents Jesus as the way, using language that had wide currency, but it recasts this common imagery in a distinctive manner, applying it primarily to the person of Jesus rather than to a way of life. Jesus himself is the way; he not only offers teaching about a way, as one might offer instruction in the law or philosophy, but reveals the way by embodying it. Moreover, like other leading images in the Gospel, the image of the way is redefined in terms of Jesus' passion¹⁹. Earlier, John the Baptist invoked the image of the way from the book of Isaiah when he called himself "the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord'" (1,23; Is 40,3). Although the other Gospels link the Lord's way to the call to repentance (Mt 3,2-3; Mk 1,2-4; Lk 3,3-4), the Fourth Gospel says that John the Baptist makes straight "the way of the Lord" by bearing witness to Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (Jn 1,29). Thus the promise of the way, which is mentioned in Isaiah, finds its realization in Jesus' death for the sake of others²⁰.

17. On the way in philosophy see, e.g., Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 2.1.21; Epictetus, *Discourses* 4.1.131; 4.6.9; *Enchiridion* 19.2; Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 6.104; 7.121; W. MICHAELIS, *ὁδός κτλ.*, in *TDNT* vol. 5, pp. 42-46.

18. On the way of life see Philo, *On Planting* 37; on the way to truth see *On Rewards and Punishments* 148; on the way to God see *On the Posterity of Cain* 101; *That God is Unchangeable* 143.

19. Note for example how the image of bread from heaven, which recalls traditions about manna (Ex 16,4), is understood in terms of Jesus giving his flesh for the world through his crucifixion (Jn 6,51). Similarly, the Gospel indicates that the truly good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep even though this action that was not commonly understood to be the mark of good shepherding (10,11). John's Gospel develops the shepherd image in light of the cross.

20. See also Is 42,16; 43,19; 48,17; 49,9.11; 57,15; 62,10; D.M. BALL, "I Am" in *John's Gospel: Literary Function, Background and Theological Implications* (JSNT SS, 124), Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 1996, pp. 232-240.

F.J. MOLONEY, *The Gospel of John* (Sacra Pagina, 4), Collegeville, MN, Liturgical Press, 1998, pp. 395; ID., *Glory Not Dishonor: Reading John 13-21*, Minneapolis, MN, Fortress, 1998, p. 36.

15. The NRSV paraphrases 14,4 to read, "And you know the way to the place where I am going". The words "to the place" do not appear in Greek.

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Coupling the image of the way with the words "I am" in Jesus' saying at the last supper enhances the idea that by going and embodying the way of the cross Jesus reveals God. Various passages in the Fourth Gospel use the words "I am" (ἐγώ εἰμι) in ways that recall the name of God, which God revealed to Moses at the burning bush by saying, "I am who I am" (Ex 3,14). The divine connotations of the "I am", which appear in various Old Testament passages, are developed in John's Gospel²¹. In some contexts the words are used in an absolute, ungrammatical sense in which the divine element is clear. For example, when Jesus says, "Before Abraham was, I am" (Jn 8,58), the crowd recognizes the allusion to God's name and attempts to stone Jesus for blasphemy. In other passages the "I am" is used with an implied predicate, so that it is often translated "I am he" or "It is I". Nevertheless, when Jesus utters the "I am" in this manner in the garden of Gethsemane, his adversaries fall to the ground, apparently in response to the numinous quality of the words (18,5-6). Finally, the "I am" is coupled with images such as bread, light, a door, a shepherd, resurrection, and a vine. In these statements the revelatory quality of the expression persists, so that by saying "I am" Jesus not only identifies who he is, but indicates how he reveals God's power and presence.

Taken together, the two halves of the statement "I am the way" announce that Jesus reveals God through his death and resurrection. The "I am" in the first half of the saying echoes the name of God and, like the other "I am" passages in John's Gospel, indicates that God is made known in Christ. Reference to "the way" in the second half develops what Jesus has intimated about going the way of the cross and resurrection in order to show that Jesus comes to embody the way of the cross and resurrection.

Asking "For whom is Jesus the way?" means considering the prior question, "For whom did Jesus go the way?" or more pointedly, "For whom did Christ die?". According to John's Gospel, Jesus went the way of the cross for all people. In the opening chapter John the Baptist foreshadows "the way of the Lord" (1,23) by pointing to "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (1,29). Using the term world (κόσμος) emphasizes the scope of Christ's mission. Christ sacrificed himself for all because sin, which separates people from God, is part of

21. For example, the Greek translation of the Old Testament reads, "I am and there is no god beside me" (Dt 32,39) and "I am and there is no other" (Is 45,18). On the uses of "I am" in John's Gospel see R.E. BROWN, *The Gospel According to John* (AncB, 29-29A), Garden City, NY, Doubleday, 1966-1970, pp. 533-538; BALL, "I Am" in *John's Gospel* (n. 20), pp. 146-176.

the human condition. According to John's Gospel, Jesus dies as the Lamb of God when he is crucified on the day of Preparation for Passover, when the Passover lambs are slain (19,14). And the conviction that Christ dies for the sake of the world is underscored by the sign above the cross, which proclaims Christ's identity in Hebrew, in Latin, and in Greek for all the world to see (19,20).

The way of the cross is the way of divine love. This is central to the Johannine understanding of Jesus' death. It was because "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son" to suffer, die, and rise, "so that whosoever believes in him might not perish but have eternal life" (3,16). When Jesus reveals God by going the way of the cross, he manifests God's love for a world alienated from its Creator. Human beings are capable of recognizing that the greatest expression of love is to lay down one's life on behalf of someone else (15,13). Accordingly, Jesus went to the cross not only to show his own love for his followers (13,1) but also to reveal the love of the God who sent him in order that the world's relationship with God might be restored (3,16). The absolute quality of the statement "I am the way" expresses the absolute quality of God's love for the world²².

Calling Jesus not only "the way" but also "the truth" (14,6) further describes what he reveals by going the way of the cross and resurrection²³. According to the prologue, the word of God entered the world, became flesh, and revealed divine glory as "grace and truth" (1,14). Jesus manifested God's glory during his public ministry by acts of power (17,4), but ultimately he was glorified through death and resurrection, the events by which grace and truth "came" or more literally "happened" (ἐγένετο, 1,17). Shortly before his crucifixion, Jesus tells Pilate that he has come into the world to bear witness to the truth (18,37). When Pilate replies, "What is truth?" (18,38), Jesus responds not so much by words as by going the way of the cross, which is the consummate form of testimony to the truth. To know the truth that sets people free from bondage to sin (8,31-34) is to know the love of God that Christ reveals. By going the way of the cross and resurrection to reveal the truth of God, Christ comes to embody the way and the truth.

22. U. SCHNELLE, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes* (THK, 4), Leipzig, Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1998, pp. 228-229. On John's theology of the cross see chap. 6 of KOESTER, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel* (n. 5).

23. On truth and life as descriptions of the "the way" itself see I. DE LA POTTERIE, *La vérité dans Saint Jean* (AnBib, 73), Rome, Biblical Institute Press, 1977, vol. 1, pp. 241-277. On the revelatory quality and relational qualities of "truth" see BROWN, *Gospel* (n. 21), p. 630; SCHNACKENBURG, *Gospel* (n. 11), vol. 2, p. 237.

"Life", which elaborates what it means for Jesus to be the way and the truth, is a relational expression²⁴. True life means life in relationship with the God who is true (3,33.36). Life has a physical dimension but is not limited to what is physical. People who are alive in a bodily sense pass "from death to life" when they come to believe what Jesus reveals of God (5,24). In the Fourth Gospel "life" is often synonymous with "eternal life", since authentic life comes through knowing the eternal God (17,3). Life is a relationship that begins in faith and continues beyond death into everlasting life through resurrection (5,29). By his crucifixion and resurrection Jesus reveals the divine love that draws people into the relationship with God that is true life.

When Jesus says, "I am the way and the truth and the life" he speaks of a gift that is extended to all human beings whom sin has separated from God. This saying, like the other "I am" statements, announces what God offers to the world. When Jesus says, "I am the bread of life" (6,35) he means that he is "the bread of God ... which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world", and he gives himself to a world that hungers through the crucifixion of his flesh (6,33.51). When he says, "I am the light of the world" he indicates that he came to give "the light of life" to all who experience the darkness of sin and death, and he demonstrates this gift by bringing light to the eyes of a man born blind (8,12; 9,5-7). When Jesus says, "I am the gate", he explains that he came that people might be saved and have life abundant (10,7-10); and the context emphasizes that as the gate Jesus opens up a way for those who would otherwise be shut out, like the man expelled from the synagogue (9,34). When he says, "I am the good shepherd", he promises to give eternal life to his sheep by laying down his life for them (10,11.28). When he says, "I am the resurrection and the life" he emphasizes what he gives to all who believe (11,25-26). When he says, "I am the true vine", he calls people to abide in him because he will sustain them with divine love (15,1.4.9).

The words "I am" direct readers to begin theological reflection by considering who Christ is and what he has done. This has the strange effect of reversing the usual questions that emerge from a reading of John's Gospel. Beginning with the world's many traditions and truth claims makes it natural to ask how anyone can say that Jesus is "the way", because from this perspective the Gospel's claims seem uncomfortably narrow. Beginning with the Gospel's internal logic, however, discloses that Jesus is the way because he went the way of the cross and

resurrection. This makes it natural to ask whether there is anyone for whom Christ did *not* die. If Christ went the way of the cross for all people, then saying that Christ died for some but not for all would be an uncomfortable narrowing of what Christ has done. Again, it seems exclusivistic to say that Jesus is "the way", yet the Gospel calls Jesus "the way" because Jesus went the way of the cross to reveal God's love for the world that was estranged from him. Accordingly, it would be exclusivistic to say that Jesus is the way for some but not all, for it would mean that Jesus reveals God's love only for some but not for all.

The Gospel calls Jesus "the way" because Jesus went the way of the cross and resurrection to reveal God's love for a world that was estranged from him. All people are separated from God, for "no one comes to the Father" (14,6b). Yet Jesus goes the way of the cross and resurrection, and he embodies the way of the cross and resurrection, in order to overcome this estrangement by the revelation of God's love. The Gospel, in turn, tells the story of Jesus, "the way", in order to bring its readers to the knowledge of God that is faith; and the love of God, which is at the heart of Jesus' mission to the world is the hallmark of the faith and life of those whose are shaped by this Gospel's testimony.

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24. SCHNACKENBURG, *Gospel* (n. 11), vol. 2, pp. 352-361.

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