

Fatherhood and Sonship in John's Gospel: A Literary Analysis

John's Gospel has rightly commanded much scholarly attention as to its focus on God portrayed as Father and, concomitantly, Jesus as Son. Whilst such terminology is present in all of the Gospels, it is the frequency of usage, and depth of meaning in John which is unique.¹ Most studies of John have explored this Father-Son relationship theologically, and in doing so have employed the tools of form criticism, source criticism and other historical critical techniques. Only recently have literary critical techniques been applied directly to the Gospel of John and these are only slowly gaining the approval of the scholarly community. Stibbe (1992, 2) laments the fact that British scholars have been especially slow to embrace new literary approaches. In this essay I undertake an analysis of father-son relationships in John, using the methodology and tools of literary and narrative criticism. Section I provides a brief introduction to literary criticism in relation to John's Gospel. Section II explores how sons and fathers can be seen as a genuine Johannine theme and vehicle for communicating meaning. Section III looks at how through the characterisation, images and titles of Jesus as *Son*, and through related metaphors and symbols, John intends his readers to better understand Jesus, model ourselves upon Him, and respond to His challenge. The essay concludes with a brief consideration of the applicability of literary criticism to the Gospels.

Section I

Whilst a new generation of Bible students are accustomed to reading the Bible specifically as *literature*, and seeing as valid approaches that utilise literary critical techniques, it is important to recognise that such approaches are not universally embraced; neither have they been employed for very long (since the early 1970s). It was Culpepper who, in his groundbreaking *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, complained that "biblical scholars have been slow to appropriate the perspectives used by literary critics" (1983, 10). Culpepper was the first to systematically explore literary aspects of John's Gospel, albeit in a relatively haphazard and naïve fashion. Such explorations start from a fundamental (and usually explicit) assumption: that meaning is text-immanent, i.e. found in the *final form* of the text and, as such, an appropriate literary interpretation "bypasses extrinsic, historical and sociological factors" (Stibbe 1992, 11).

One staunch advocate of such an approach to New Testament study is Leland Ryken, who argues (1987, 21) that New Testament authors employed "rhetorical patterns and devices [that]... communicate more than ordinary language conveys" and, therefore, literary analysis of the Gospels is a requirement for understanding them. In Ryken's opinion, John is the most literary of the four Gospels,² i.e. its being understood rests, more than the Synoptics do, on a correct reading of it as literature and an appreciation of its literary devices.³ Ashton (1994, 141) has strongly criticised such approaches to, specifically, John's Gospel, arguing that since narrative criticism "misconceives the true nature of the Gospels the results it yields are trifling, if not altogether illusory." Since Ashton, however, a number of scholars have called for a fusion, or 'balancing' of literary with more traditional, historical approaches to biblical interpretation, and it now seems possible that these quite different approaches may be able to coexist, if not necessarily integrated. Thus Green (1995, 9) was able to conclude that "[t]oday, no one interpretive method can claim to provide the one authentic understanding of any given New Testament text." In the familiar language of this discourse, then, it may well be possible to both look through the window of historical criticism, as well as into the mirror of narrative criticism, when seeking to understand biblical texts.

¹ Pryor (1992, 26) attempts to establish that the "Johannine Jesus goes beyond [the Synoptics' Jesus]... basing his case not on his role as inaugurator of the rule of God but on his relationship to God his Father."

² Ryken's claim (1987, 51) is based on two points: that John is especially sensitive to image and symbol; and that he has a tendency to work with long episodes which employ literary techniques.

³ As to its literary style, Johnson (1999, 532) claims that John's gospel "is stylistically simple yet symbolically dense" and that "the subtlety of the Gospel's literary technique can easily be missed." Culpepper (2000, 17) considers John's to be "a relatively simple and Semitic Greek style... [which is] relatively uniform," which quite possibly represents a revision of his earlier description of John as "[m]agnificent in its complexity, subtlety, and profundity" (1983, 231). Stibbe (1992, 198,199) effusively acclaims John as "a masterful storyteller... with a style noticeable for its economy and connexity, [whose work is] a quite brilliant literary achievement."

Section II

In this section we demonstrate how Father-Sonship should be seen as one of the central themes of John's writing. Each of John's twenty-one chapters contains at least one reference to a father, son, or children. God is referred to as 'Father' a remarkable 120 times, with Jesus called 'Son' (including 'Son of God', 'Son of Man' and 'the Son') 41 times. In all, there are over 200 references to fathers and their offspring, so that, on average, 1 in 4 verses has this feature. Clearly, then, Father-Son language is frequent within John's Gospel, but it is also significant for other reasons: its centrality to John's portrayal of who Jesus (and God) is; its indication of how John describes how humans should relate to God; and its importance to John's understanding of human identity.

In John's well-known Prologue, Jesus is initially referred to as the Word (1:1,1:14) but, after this introduction, He is generally referred to as either the Son of Man (13 instances) or Son of God (28 instances, including 22 abbreviations as 'the Son'), and this point of view is how the reader is invited to primarily understand His identity. God is revealed as Father from 1:14 onwards, and followers of Christ are seen as "children of God" from 1:12. From the outset, then, the implied reader is invited to comprehend Jesus' identity (and, as we shall see, his own) in familial terminology.⁴ At one notable and unusual point, the implied author breaks into the narrative to explain his reason for writing his work: "these [things] are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (20:31). Thus belief in Jesus, the formation of which is the stated purpose of this work, rests on one's acknowledgement of Christ as "Son of God."

Morris once observed (1986, 181) that "[it] is to John more than anyone that we owe our use of 'Father' when we think of God," and this fact is as important as our recognition of Jesus as Son. In the next section we look at specific literary aspects of John's Gospel to understand the author's characterisation of Jesus and also to assess the extent to which the motif of family extends beyond the obvious Father-Son examples.

Section III

(a) Understanding Jesus – Son of Man, Son of God

As mentioned above, much Johannine study has focussed on the theological (and, especially, Christological) meaning of Jesus' titles, such as Son of Man and Son of God. Whilst traditional methods of understanding John's Gospel attempt to trace the origin of these titles back to Jesus himself, literary methods interrogate the text to understand the *author's* use of titles and descriptions. This practice can be justified on the grounds that, even if we accept a historical reality underpinning the text, it is a history which has been recorded – and interpreted – differently by the four evangelists, who have set down their accounts in their own particular idiom. We are entitled to ask, therefore, why is John four times more likely than Luke to refer to Jesus as "the Son"? And why is Luke twice as likely to refer to Him as the "Son of Man"? Why does John refer to the Jews as having Abraham and Jacob as their ancestral fathers, while Luke mentions Abraham and David? Given that both authors are referring to the same history, their differences must be due to theological and literary differences (although we may well have difficulty differentiating between those two aspects).

John is very specific in his use of the word 'son', and this carefulness points to the fact that it is a highly significant term for him, one which he uses deliberately and consciously. John calls believers not sons of God, but 'children', reserving the word 'son' for Jesus himself.⁵ As Morris (1986, 13) observes, "[t]his seems to be part of the way in which he brings out the

⁴ Literary critics typically write of an "implied reader" whom can, to an extent, be deduced from the text. Koester implicitly questions the singularity of this literary device, arguing that John's Gospel "envision[s] a spectrum of readers" (1995, 24) and, from a logical perspective, it is indeed conceivable that a literary work has a plurality of implied readers, each equally valid.

⁵ Similar terminology is used in 1 John 3:1, "How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!" Paul, however, avoids such circumlocution: "You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:26).

uniqueness of our Lord. He is the Son of God in a way that nobody else is, and John's language points to this truth." This is an excellent example of Lee's claim (1994, 24) that not just the words of a text but also "rhetorical devices, are indispensable bearers of meaning." John is masterful at reserving certain words for communicating meaning, and using repetition to stress where significance lies. Examples of such repetition are 10 references to Jesus as Son in John 5 alone (and in John 14, 23 references to God as Father).

Excellent discussion has taken place within academia concerning the meaning of the (still disputed) titles Son of God and Son of Man, and it is not the place here to dwell on their meaning or full theological import. Clearly the fact that there are two distinctive terms for Jesus suggests that John is trying to convey at least two meanings about Him. It would be premature, however, to conclude that these are simply reflections of Jesus' divine and human nature.⁶ Servotte (1994, 45) has suggested that the appellation Son of Man is closely connected with Jesus' suffering, although this seems unlikely since the term is nowhere used during the Passion, nor in John's last eight chapters. Others argue that the title is either a Hebraic idiom for oneself or that it has messianic significance. It is at least partly based on the "one like a son of man"⁷ of Daniel 7:13, which exemplifies the intertextuality of John's writing.⁸ Son of God, on the other hand, may be seen as pointing jointly towards Jesus' divine nature, and His fulfilment of the tradition of Israel's own sonship claims.⁹

We should not let that discussion detract us from an important point, namely that in both terms Jesus is portrayed by John as being a *son*, one who is defined as subordinate to the will of the Father in a mutually loving relationship. It is also interesting to note *who* is characterising Jesus as Son in the narrative. He is declared Son of God by a range of witnesses, including John the Baptist (1:34), Nathanael (1:49) and Martha (11:27), signifying the intended belief of the implied reader, and the narrator himself uses this title (20:31). Jesus characterises himself both as Son of God (5:25) and, more typically, Son of Man (1:51, 3:13, 12:23 and elsewhere). Further, in direct conversation with God, Jesus continues to define Himself as "your Son" (17:2). These multiple testimonies as to Jesus' sonship, which testify about a relatively static character, are intended to make us accept the author's point of view concerning Jesus' identity and purpose. In the following subsection, we consider how John signals to his readers that they should, in many ways, copy Jesus' sonship, to the extent that sonship becomes both a metaphor of right living and a model for faith.

(b) Copying Jesus – Sons of Light, Children of God

In John's familial references, "it is clear that first-century social conventions are taken for granted" (Davies 1992, 131), that is to say, contemporary understanding of both fatherhood and sonship were appealed to (or merely assumed) by the author as he sought to establish this motif. As Long Westfall (2003, 133) points out, in practice the implied readers "were expected to transfer their positive patriarchal concepts about fathers to God" and conversely, we might add, their ideals of sonship onto Jesus. Thus in John 5 we find Jesus implicitly referred to as an apprentice who, proverbially, "can do only what he sees his Father doing" (v.19).¹⁰ That chapter's long discourse shows Jesus as a perfect Jewish son: he learns from his father and does his father's work, and other passages likewise show Jesus as protecting his father's interests (2:16), honouring his father (8:49) and doing his father's will (6:40). John is encouraging his readers to see Jesus as not just the Son of God in a theological sense,

⁶ As Ryken rightly concludes, Son of Man is not merely an earthly counterpart to Son of God: "Both images are more complex than that" (1998, 447).

⁷ In the 1970s, Smalley noted that "study of the expression 'Son of man,' as used in the New Testament (mostly in the Gospels) is beset with complex problems" (1978, 212). In the three decades since, those problems have remained intractable.

⁸ Culpepper (2000, 19) concludes that John shows a "thorough familiarity with the Old Testament" but only quotes it infrequently, perhaps 17-20 times in all.

⁹ For examples of Israel as the Son of God, see Exodus 4:22-23, Isaiah 43:6, Hosea 11:1. For examples of God as the Father of Israel, see Isaiah 63:16, Jeremiah 3:4, 19.

¹⁰ Within a long history of exegesis, Dodd (1968, 30-40) argued that this section forms a "hidden parable," which he labelled "the parable of the Son as Apprentice" (1968, 39) and Culpepper (1983, 108) has claimed that verse 19 is a Jewish proverb. Dodd's view was challenged by Barrett (1978, 259) and remains unproven.

but also an ideal son figure for all to imitate.¹¹ Whilst Davies (1992, 129) objects that, because of differences between first-century Palestine and today, it is hard to appreciate the metaphor of sonship, I would argue that the core meaning of this metaphor is still accessible today.

As discussed above, John avoids directly calling believers 'sons', in order to highlight Jesus' uniqueness. Instead, he emphasises God's universal fatherhood and introduces two substitutionary labels: sons of light (12:36) and children of God (1:12, 11:52). The former of these is a metaphor directly linked to perhaps John's most favoured dualism, darkness and light. This metaphor corresponds to a universal human understanding of light representing goodness and darkness representing evil; it also echoes the opening verses of John's Gospel, which state that Jesus "was the light of men. The lightness shines in the darkness..." (1:4b-5a). Throughout his book, John is consistent in his use of symbolic images and metaphors, both universal and specific to the Jews.

The second label for believers is children of God, and this label is given by the narrator. In his Prologue, the omniscient narrator says that to "those who believed... he gave the right to become children of God" (1:12). This is an interesting personalization of the Jewish tradition that Israel as a nation was seen as God's son; it may perhaps also be seen as a democratization of the fact that kings of Israel were often proclaimed God's son.¹² Again, the emphasis on sonship is highly significant, and can only be understood in relation to God as Father. This is a Father whose followers will "worship... in spirit and truth" (4:23) and who gives eternal life (6:40). Throughout John's Gospel, the author artfully encourages the implied reader to define himself in relation to God the Father. At times, John's language is distant and abstract; and Jesus often makes *unique* claims about His own relationship to God¹³ – but, with increased intensity as the Gospel progresses, the reader is invited into the relationship, learning that the Father's house has many rooms, and that Jesus is preparing a place there for His followers (14:2-3) – the implication being that believers are members of the Father's household. This trend reaches its climax in John 20:17, when the resurrected Jesus has a message for His followers: "I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." Jesus' Father is, finally, our Father. John thereby invites the implied reader – who seems to already be within a Christian community¹⁴ – to model Jesus' behaviour in obedience to, and dependence upon, God.

(c) The Challenge of Jesus – Abraham's Children, Father of Lies

As well as utilising metaphors based on the Father-Son relationship to describe Jesus' identity, His relationship with God, and the relationship of believers to God, John also uses father and children metaphors to provoke questions about identity, based on direct challenges made by Jesus. Specifically, John's Jesus challenges the Jews' understanding of themselves as 'Abraham's children' (8:31-41), since this label defined them as a faithful and blessed people. Going further, John's Jesus tells unbelievers that they "belong to your father, the devil... he is a liar and the father of lies" (8:44). This repetition of the word 'father' is a typical Johannine device, with Culpepper (2000, 17) noting John's overuse of key terms, and his fondness for double meanings. In doing so, the author is able to highlight his main themes and can reduce his complex theology to more easily comprehensible metaphors. In Koester's words, symbols such as 'father' or 'son' "capture the imagination, they engage

¹¹ On the biblical significance of sonship, Ryken expounds: "In the Bible a son is a male begotten by a father. In a broader sense sonship denotes a range of familial, hereditary, social and theological relationships. Biblical references to sons need to be understood in context of the extreme value that ancient cultures placed on sons" (1998, 805).

¹² E.g. Psalm 2:7, "I will proclaim the decree of the Lord: He said to me, 'You are my Son; today I have become your Father.'" There was also a tradition that David's descendant(s) would be God's son(s), based on 2 Samuel 7:14.

¹³ Examples include that he has inner knowledge of the Father (John 5:20), that he has seen the Father (6:46), that he shares the Father's glory (17:1ff) and, most fundamentally, that he and the Father are one (10:30). Given the universality of God as Father, there is a tension in John between the uniqueness of his one and only Son (3:16), and the familial inclusion of all believers.

¹⁴ Talbert (1992, 62), for example, argues that John's gospel was written to confirm Christians in their faith, and that, "[a]ccording to the dominant current construct, the occasion that created the need for such confirmation was the exclusion of Johannine Christians from the synagogue." Such speculation regarding the historical background to John's gospel, however, is usually seen as irrelevant within literary criticism.

readers in an ongoing process of reflection... [they] span the chasm between what is 'from above' and what is 'from below' without collapsing the distinction" (1995, 4).

In John's Gospel, many characters are identified and defined in terms of their fathers: Simon is son of John (1:42, 21:15,16,17), Joseph is son of Jacob (4:5), Judas is son of Simon Iscariot (6:71, 13:2, 13:26), two disciples are the sons of Zebedee (21:2) and so on. Likewise, John identifies the Jews as having Abraham as their father (8:31-41) – and even the neighbouring Samaritans are identified as descending from "our father Jacob" (4:12). When some discontented Jews sought to challenge Jesus' authority, John has them asking: "Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I came down from heaven'?" (6:42). Clearly, then, the writer expects his readers to (a) understand that the identity of his characters is defined in relation to their father, both metaphorically and physically; and (b) include themselves in this same conceptual framework and accept God as *their* Father.

Conclusion

It is by now obvious that, when John writes about the divine Father-Son relationship, this is both metaphor and "transcendent relationship," (Davies 1992, 15) i.e. there are different facets of this relationship, or different planes on which it exists. Similarly, when believers are described as children of God, etc., this is both descriptive of an actual relationship but also allusive of their relationship to God, which we cannot yet fully understand. It is one of the strengths of literary readings of the Gospels that different facets can be recognised and allowed to coexist.

This essay has investigated some of the usages of the terms 'son' and 'father' in John's Gospel, in seeking to understand why they are used so frequently by that author, and to what purpose. In doing so, we have found that the central Father-Son relationship is one of the keys to understanding what the text communicates. It is a core metaphor from which other, related, metaphors flow. If we wished to summarise the entire plot of John's Gospel, we could do much worse than following Culpepper's conclusion that it is to reveal the Father and authorize the children of God (1983, 88). Aside from plot, we have seen how titles and characterisation; and metaphors and symbols can not only help express meaning but actually contain meaning themselves.

Such findings will, however, be of little comfort to those who believe that the whole exercise of literary and narrative criticism is irrelevant or flawed. There have been well-founded concerns about the acceptability of investigating the meaning of a religious text using literary tools rather than theological and traditio-historical ones. Yet such concerns are typically based on a misunderstanding of both the nature and the purpose of literary criticism: it is not intended to replace existing approaches to studying scripture but rather it supplements them. On this point, Lee (1994, 26) is admirably clear: a "literary approach to the biblical text... needs to be seen as balancing the findings of the historical critical method rather than replacing or dismissing them."¹⁵ Such balancing is preferable to the twin extremes of dismissing literary criticism out of hand, or relying solely upon it. It is also preferable to De Boer's condescending approval of narrative criticism, believing that for the historical critic, "the real work of interpretation has only begun when the work of the narrative critic is finished" (1995, 108).

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¹⁵ Likewise, leading narrative critic Mark Allan Powell (in Green 1995, 253) argues that those who object to this methodology "miss the point if they assume that commitment to narrative criticism precludes one from also studying texts in other ways."

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