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# The Dark Side of Christology

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THE EVANGELISM EFFORT which Key '73 undertook and similar Christian missionary endeavors in other cultures inevitably prove to be a source of embarrassment (to some) because a number of Christians continue to insist that the only authentic encounter with God comes through Jesus Christ. Thus, arguments continue to rage over the advisability of proseletyzing those of Jewish faith, since both they and the Christians alike accept the Old Testament as a valid, authentic revelation of God. Arguments also arise over whether or not those of other faiths need to be converted to Christianity as well. In a day when there are supposedly no absolutes, Christianity exposes a darker side of itself in that at the same time as it claims to reveal God's love, it also insists that only Christianity brings the love of God and is a valid encounter with him.

In exploring this dark side of Christology (really soteriology!), we have chosen to study the Gospel of John, for it well represents the paradox: John's gospel contains more statements about love than the other gospels and it contains the most familiar statement of God's love (3:16), yet at the same time it also contains a surprising number of references to an exclusive soteriology, sometimes judged to be rather unloving. Before examining these statements<sup>1</sup> it would be well to glance at the Old Testament for indications of this same exclusivity.

The first example of exclusivity is God's relation to one nation, Israel. He made a covenant with this one nation and the events of Joshua and Judges indicate that Israel's displacement of the peoples who occupied Canaan reflects the conviction that Yahweh had promised it to them as an inheritance. Throughout various prophets, too, one collides with a number of these exclusive statements. For example, in Hosea 9:10 Israel is likened to grapes in the wilderness; at 12:9 (and a number of other places throughout the Old Testament) Yahweh identifies himself as "your" God. Through the prophet, the Lord even has the audacity to claim that besides him, there is no savior (13:4). Along similar lines, Amos records God's word to Israel: "You only have I known of all the families of the earth."<sup>2</sup> Isaiah stresses the same idea that Israel is unique: "Because you are precious in my eyes, and honored, and I love you, I give men in return for you." "I give Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you" (43:4,3). "You are my witnesses," says the Lord, "and my servants whom I have chosen that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he" (10). "I, I am the Lord and besides me there is no savior" (11). God may use other nations and individuals (Cyrus, for example) but all is done for the sake of Israel.<sup>3</sup>

The second example of exclusivity is the relationship of Yahweh to one man, Moses, which allowed Moses to glimpse God and to

reveal his will to Israel in the form of the covenant. He became the prototype for all prophets to come in Israel, and especially of the messianic prophet of Deuteronomy 18:15. The author of Deuteronomy 34 can say of Moses, "There has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face," and it is that prophet whom the Pharisees of John 1:25 are expecting. Indeed, it is the exclusive relation of God-Moses and God-Jesus which leads into the New Testament and the examples of exclusivity in John's Gospel.

Within the fourth Gospel the relation of the old to the new may be seen in the comparison—contrast of Moses and Jesus. The author reminds the reader that Moses gave the law, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. Furthermore, Moses' glimpse of God was not complete, "no one has seen God; the only Son who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known" (1:17-18). Moses did not give the true bread, but the Father gives it in Jesus (6:32). It was Moses who wrote about Jesus (1:45) and it is Moses, not Jesus, who accuses the Jews because if they had believed Moses, they would have believed Jesus (5:45-46). In John's view, Jesus has a more exclusive, intimate relation to the Father and, thus, his followers have a more intimate relation to the Father than those who are apart from Jesus.

But now to the various exclusive passages in John. Two features stand out: 1) Jesus' remarks and John's comments are in relation to the Jews. Although many have considered John's gospel to be "anti-Semitic" (to the extent that one version of it was published with these anti-Semitisms deleted), serious scholars today understand that *hoi Ioudaioi* of John are to be viewed, not ethically, but *theologically*.<sup>4</sup> They are the Jews who refuse to accept the more exclusive relationship which Jesus offers and who rely on Moses instead (9:29). It will do no good to see them as literary foils designed to "put down" the Jews and present the church in a superior light.<sup>5</sup> They are best seen as those who had trouble integrating this claim of Jesus with their understanding of the scriptures. Nevertheless, it was to God's own people that the message and claim of Jesus of Nazareth was first directed. To the people to whom Moses had revealed God's will, Jesus said, "for you will die in your sins unless you believe that I am he" (8:24); "For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in him should have eternal life and I will raise him up at the last day" (6:40). It was to the people of the Torah that Jesus said, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he sent" (6:29).

The second observation to be made is that the Father-Son relationship appears indispensable to salvation. Moses revealed the will of God through the Law, but Jesus reveals the Father Himself! In 3:18, condemnation is laid upon those who do not believe in the name of the only Son of God and "it is the work of God that you believe in him whom he sent." The *egō eimi* of 8:58 links Jesus to the *egō eimi* of Isaiah 43:10. If Jesus pictures himself as the Vine, his Father is the vinedresser. No one comes to the Father but by Jesus (14:6); Jesus tells his disciples that the Father loves them because they have loved Jesus and believed that He came from the Father (16:27);

and eternal life consists of knowing God and Jesus Christ whom He has sent (17:3). To those who claim that this a Johannine idea, it is of interest that this relationship of Jesus to the Father in relation to soteriology is one with which Matthew and Luke both agree: "No one knows who the Son is except the Father or who the Father is except the Son and any to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him."<sup>6</sup>

Thus, the pattern of exclusivity becomes complete. Old Testament Israel has an exclusive relation to God, begun at the Exodus event and mediated through Moses. Jesus brings and mediates the complete redemption and revelation which overshadows the old by virtue of its being superior in relation to the Father. Jesus reveals the Father Himself and he urges his own people to accept this new revelation. Of this exclusive nature even Rudolph Bultmann must say, "The Revealer is the access to God which man is looking for and what it more . . . the only access."<sup>7</sup>

A short note is necessary regarding those who are not of the house of Israel—what about the Gentiles?—and it is worth noting that Jesus says that *he* "must bring them also" into the flock, implying that for the Gentiles as well, entrance into the sheepfold is through the same Door.

Is there a need then, for a positive Christian witness to both Jews and Gentiles who have not heard of Jesus? Certainly one ought not to approach with an air of superiority, even though, it seems to this writer, the Christian logically must accept this evaluation of his own way to salvation or find another more satisfying. (Paul reminds the Gentiles that, after all, they are *grafted* branches!) Yet it appears from the mission of Jesus that one cannot say to the Jewish people, "Stay with what you have, it is enough," if one truly believes that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament. Although some contemptuously refer to evangelism as "scalp-hunting," abuses of the past do not logically require cessation of the mission. Paul first went to the synagogue of every town and only secondly did he deal with the cultures to whom "Messiah" was not integral.

Of John 3:16 Martin Luther said, "If a different way to heaven existed, no doubt God would have recorded it, but there is no other way."<sup>8</sup> After Lausanne (1974) it appears that a number of Christian groups are still committed to Jesus Christ as *the* Revealer of God. It has been our intent to show that the idea of exclusiveness in God's relation with certain people is not a New Testament development that was formulated out of polemic interest but that its roots lie in the Old Testament and God's relation to Israel and to Moses, to group and individual. As Israel was to be the light for the nations, so now is the body of Christ. Jesus is unique because only He reveals the Father and it is only when a person believes in the Father and the one whom he sent that an authentic relation to God develops.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. A basic list of passages would include John 3:18, 36, 5:24, 6:29, 40, 8:24, 10:9, 16, 14:6, 16:27, 17:3.
2. Chapter 3:2. For the implication of "to know" a people, see Rudolph Bultmann, "*gignosko*," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. I (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1964), p. 696f.

3. Although God uses Cyrus and calls him his anointed, Cyrus does not "know" Yahweh (Is. 45:4, 5). Any contact of Yahweh with those outside Israel must be tempered with the Hebrews 1:1 statement about various ways in the past over against the one mode of speaking in the latter days.
4. R. T. Fortna, "From Christology to Soteriology," *Interpretation* (January 1973), p. 43.
5. James Barr, *Old and New in Interpretation* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), p. 28.
6. Mt. 11:27; Lk. 10:22.
7. Rudolph Bultmann, *The Gospel of John* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964), vol. 1, p. 605.
8. WA, 10, III, p. 162.