

CHAPTER FOUR

JESUS AS RABBI IN THE FOURTH GOSPEL*

From Rudolf Bultmann to C. H. Dodd to the Jesus Seminar, Johannine scholarship has emphasized the Greek background of the Fourth Gospel. In doing so, Mandaean gnosticism, hermetic literature, and cynicism have been postulated as likely paradigms into which the Johannine Jesus may be fitted.¹ These contentions, however, run aground the now almost universal recognition that Jesus must foremost of all be understood in terms of his Jewish cultural context,² a conclusion aided decisively by the terminological and theological affinity between the Fourth Gospel and the Qumran writings.³ But usually it is the Synoptic Gospels that are used to

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¹On the probable milieu of the Fourth Gospel, see esp. C. A. Evans, *Word and Glory: On the Exegetical and Theological Background of John's Prologue*, JSNTSS 89 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1993), chap. 1; note particularly the plethora of bibliographical data in the notes on pp. 13–17.

²Cf. even R. Bultmann's own comment, "Yet in face of the entire content of the Tradition it can hardly be doubted that Jesus did teach as a Rabbi, gather disciples and engage in disputations." Cf. *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* (trans. J. Marsh; Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1963), 50. See also M. Karrer, "Der lehrende Jesus: Neutestamentliche Erwägungen," *ZNW* 83 (1992): 1–2, who also refers to a similar quote in Bultmann's 1926 volume, *Jesus* (Berlin: Deutsche Bibliothek, 1926), 2, n. 5. An ardent defender of the Jewishness of John's Gospel was A. Schlatter, *Die Sprache und Heimat des vierten Evangelisten* (BFCT 6; Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1902) and idem, *Der Evangelist Johannes* (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1930).

³Cf. esp. J. A. T. Robinson, "The New Look on the Fourth Gospel," in *Twelve New Testament Studies* (SBT 34; London: SCM, 1962), 94–106, esp. 99. Cf. also *John and the Dead Sea Scrolls*, ed. J. H. Charlesworth (New York: Crossroad, 1990). But see now R. Bauckham, "The Qumran Community and the Gospel of John," presentation at the Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature (November 24, 1997), who argues, persuasively, that the Fourth Gospel does not depend directly on the Qumran writings but that both are indebted to a common Jewish theological and interpretive milieu. Even so, the evidence adduced by Bauckham further aids in demonstrating the

elucidate this view.⁴ The Johannine Jesus, on the other hand, is often understood in terms of the Fourth Gospel's emphasis on Christ's deity, especially as portrayed in the Prologue. Works such as Marianne Thompson's *The Humanity of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel*, however, have countered the arguments of Käsemann and others that John portrays Jesus in docetic terms, that is, as a divine rather than an earthly human figure.⁵

In this debate, with its matrices of Jewish/Greek and human/divine, one important aspect of John's presentation of Jesus has been neglected in recent discussion: the evangelist's portrayal of Jesus as a Jewish rabbi. This may in part be due to the influence of M. Hengel, who, in his significant work *The Charismatic Leader and His Followers*, flatly states that "Jesus was not a 'rabbi.'" ⁶ While acknowledging that "Jesus was doubtless addressed as 'Rabbi,'" Hengel contends that this expression did not necessarily carry the connotation of teacher but may merely have functioned as a term of respect.⁷ He himself considers Jesus primarily as an "eschatological charismatic," the focus of whose message was no longer the Old Testament.⁸ For Hengel, Jesus "stood outside any discoverable uniform teaching tradition of Judaism,"⁹ so that he concludes, with G. Friedrich, that "there was between him [Jesus] and the rabbis not a difference in degree as between two different teachers, but a difference in principle. He taught as someone specially authorized by God, so that his Word was God's Word, which men could not evade."¹⁰ For this reason

thoroughgoing Jewish provenance of the Fourth Gospel.

⁴Cf. M. M. Thompson, "The Historical Jesus and the Johannine Christ," in *Exploring the Gospel of John. In Honor of D. Moody Smith* (ed. R. A. Culpepper and C. C. Black; Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1996), 21. Thompson helpfully contrasts the respective contents of Jesus' teaching in the Synoptics and in John on pp. 22–25 and 29–31.

⁵M. M. Thompson, *The Humanity of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988).

⁶M. Hengel, *The Charismatic Teacher and his Followers* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1981), 42–50. The quotation is from the heading on p. 42. Cf. also K.-H. Rengstorf, "μαθητής, κτλ.," *TDNT* 4:455: "He [Jesus] is for them [his disciples], not the rabbi/διδάσκαλος, but their Lord."

⁷Hengel, *Charismatic Teacher and His Followers*, 42–43.

⁸Ibid., 44, 46.

⁹Ibid., 49.

¹⁰Ibid., 50.

Hengel suggests that “we should desist altogether from the description of Jesus as a ‘rabbi.’”¹¹

In recent years, however, Hengel’s treatment has been eclipsed by the magisterial work of R. Riesner on Jesus as a teacher.¹² While Riesner focuses primarily on the Synoptic Gospels, his argument remains valid that Jesus operated within the Palestinian framework of a Jewish religious teacher.¹³ Nevertheless, Riesner’s work remains to be supplemented by an equivalent study on Jesus as a rabbi in the Fourth Gospel. C. Evans’ discussion of rabbinic terms and methods as well as targumic and midrashic traditions in John likewise is most helpful but is conducted primarily on the level of the fourth evangelist rather than that of Jesus.¹⁴ The present study is thus designed to provide a corrective to the current debate regarding the historical Jesus as well as a modest supplement to Riesner’s work by studying John’s presentation of Jesus as a teacher in the Fourth Gospel. It is not argued here that this is the major, or even a major, aspect of Johannine Christology.¹⁵ Rather, as will be seen, John

¹¹Ibid.

¹²R. Riesner, *Jesus als Lehrer* (WUNT 2/7, 3d ed.; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1988). See also R. T. France, “Mark and the Teaching of Jesus,” in *Gospel Perspectives: Studies of History and Tradition in the Four Gospels I* (ed. R. T. France and D. Wenham; Sheffield: JSOT, 1980), 101–36 and R. P. Meye, *Jesus and the Twelve* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), esp. 30–87.

¹³Cf. *ibid.*, esp. 246–76; cf. also *id.*, “Jesus as Preacher and Teacher,” in *Jesus and the Oral Gospel Traditions*, ed. Henry Wansborough (Sheffield: JSOT, 1991), 185–210. Other relevant works include C. H. Dodd, “Jesus als Lehrer und Prophet,” in *Mysterium Christi: Christological Studies by British and German Theologians*, ed. G. K. A. Bell and A. Deissmann (London: Longmans & Green, 1930), 67–86; E. Fascher, “Jesus der Lehrer,” *TLZ* 79 (1954): 325–42; H. Riesenfeld, *The Gospel Tradition and its Beginnings. A Study in the Limits of “Formgeschichte”* (London: Mowbray, 1957); and F. Hahn, *Christologische Hoheitstitel*, FRLANT 83 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1963), esp. 74–95.

¹⁴Cf. Evans, *Word & Glory*, 146–86, esp. 151–68. Cf. also B. D. Chilton, *A Galilean Rabbi and His Bible: Jesus’ Use of the Interpreted Scripture of His Time* (GNS 8; Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1984); and E. Lohse, “**ῥαββί, ῥαββουvi**,” *TDNT* VI: 961–65.

¹⁵For a more detailed investigation of John’s portrayal of Jesus as the Christ see the present author’s *The Missions of Jesus and the Disciples According to the Fourth Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) where the following three roles of Jesus are discerned in John’s presentation: Jesus as the Sent Son; Jesus as the one who came into the world and returned to the Father (descent-ascent); and Jesus as the eschatological Shepherd-teacher. A survey of the history of interpretation of John’s Gospel shows that while the first two aspects of Johannine Christology have been adequately recognized, the third role has often

reflects the common perception of Jesus among his contemporaries, friends and foes alike: that Jesus was, perhaps more, but certainly no less, than a rabbi.

It is not surprising that this aspect of Johannine Christology has not been given much attention.¹⁶ Too striking are the more dominant aspects of John's portrayal of Jesus. Jesus is cast as Son of God (1:34, 39; 5:25; 10:36; 11:4, 27; 20:31), the eschatological Son of Man (1:51; 3:13, 14; 5:27; 6:27, 53, 62; 8:28; 9:35; 12:23, 24; 13:31), and the Christ (1:17, 20, 25, 41; 3:28; 4:25, 29; 7:26, 27, 31, 41, 42; 9:22; 10:24; 11:27; 12:34; 17:3; 20:31).¹⁷ However, it is noteworthy that the only way Jesus is *addressed* in the Fourth Gospel is as Rabbi (ῥαββί), Teacher (διδάσκαλος), and Lord or Master (κύριος),¹⁸ terms largely synonymous in John.¹⁹ Thus, while the evangelist's portrayal of Jesus transcends that of Rabbi/Teacher/Master, enlarging the scope of his Christology to include terms such as Son of God, Son of Man, or Christ, his account makes clear that Jesus' contemporaries perceived and addressed Jesus primarily as a religious teacher, a rabbi.²⁰

been overlooked or neglected.

¹⁶Notably, J. Ashton, in his comprehensive survey of Johannine scholarship, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991), discusses Jesus according to John primarily as Messiah, Son of God, and Son of Man, but not as a Jewish religious teacher. R. Schnackenburg's recent biblical Christology, *Jesus in the Gospels* (trans. O. C. Dean, Jr.; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1995), likewise omits reference to Jesus as a Jewish religious teacher in his discussion of Johannine Christology.

¹⁷To this may be added two references to Jesus as son of Joseph (1:45; 6:42), numerous references to Jesus as Lord and Master (κύριος; see further the following note), and the 244 instances of the name Ἰησοῦς in John's Gospel.

¹⁸Thomas' confession of Jesus as "my Lord and my God" (Ὁ κυριός και ὁ θεός μου; 20:28) is no real exception, if for no other reason than that these words are attributed to a disciple *after* Jesus' resurrection.

¹⁹ῥαββί: 1:38, 49; 3:2; 4:31; 6:25; 9:2; 11:8 (translated as διδάσκαλε in 1:38 and 20:16); κύριος: 4:11, 15, 19, 49; 5:7; 6:34, 68; (8:11;) 9:36, 38; 11:3, 12, 21, 27, 32, 34, 39; 12:21, 38; 13:6, 9, 25, 36, 37; 14:5, 8, 22; 20:15, 28; 21:15, 16, 17, 20, 21. Cf. also the references to Jesus' teaching activity (διδάσκαω) in 6:59; 7:14, 28, 35; (8:2;) 8:20; 9:34; 18:20. Most references are to Jesus teaching in synagogues or the Temple; moreover, the Gospel contains one reference each to the teaching activities of the Father (8:28) and the Spirit (14:26).

²⁰J.-A. Bühner (*Der Gesandte und sein Weg im 4. Evangelium* [WUNT 2/2; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1977], 428) speaks of a "rabbinisch beeinflussten Botenverständnis" in the Fourth Gospel where "der Menschensohn wird zum bevollmächtigten שליח Gottes, zu seinem בן בית, der den geordneten Weg einer שליחות durchläuft, die beim Sendenden begründet wird und zu ihm

The present essay thus seeks to establish this one thesis: John's Gospel bears witness that Jesus was perceived by his contemporaries primarily as a Jewish religious teacher. The validity of this assertion will be established by a demonstration of the following facts: first, "rabbi" or "teacher" is the customary address of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel; and second, John portrays the relationship between Jesus and his closest followers in terms of the customary teacher-disciple relationship in first-century Judaism. This entails Jesus' assuming the role of teacher by instructing his disciples through word and action, protecting them from harm, and providing for their needs; and the disciples' assuming the role of faithful followers, including the performance of menial tasks and the perpetuation of their Master's teaching.

By proving this thesis, the present study contributes to the study of the historical Jesus, the notion that Jesus was perceived by his contemporaries primarily as a Jewish religious teacher; to Johannine studies, the fact that Jesus' role as a rabbi constitutes the historical starting point for the fourth evangelist's presentation of Jesus, a fact that has generally been overlooked owing to a focus on John's "high" Christology and on Johannine theology rather than the historical Jesus. The results of this study should also contribute to a further rehabilitation of John's historical reliability.

Prolegomena

Before we proceed, it is necessary to address several possible objections or problem areas. First, a word must be said regarding the dating of Jewish sources. Since Judaism did not compile its traditions systematically in written form until the end of the second century CE, and since pre-CE 70 Judaism was characterized by comparatively greater variety than its later counterpart,²¹ Rabbinic Judaism (post-CE 70), it is difficult to secure

zurückkehrt." But the present essay is not primarily concerned with Johannine theology or Christology as such but with historical reflections in the Fourth Gospel of Jesus' own historical role and people's perception of Jesus.

²¹Cf. Chilton, *Galilean Rabbi*, 31: "The early Judaism of Jesus' time seems to have been so heterogeneous that to claim his continuity or discontinuity with the religion of his day in general terms is problematic in the extreme: in almost anything he did or said, he would have been accepted by some Jews and rejected by others."

reliable background information for first-century CE rabbi-disciple relationships. Hence several scholars have recently issued appropriate cautions against an undiscerning use of rabbinic materials for the illumination of the background of the New Testament.²² In the following treatment every effort will be made to date a given reference, keeping in mind that an attribution to a particular rabbi may or may not be accurate.²³ At the same time, mishnaic or talmudic references, even if dated post-CE 70, may still reflect traditions current in Jesus' day.²⁴ In the end, the case

²²Cf. esp. P. S. Alexander, "Rabbinic Judaism and the New Testament," *ZNW* 74 (1983): 237–46; and the works by J. Neusner, *Rabbinic Literature and the New Testament: What We Cannot Show, We Do Not Know* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1994) and *The Rabbinic Traditions about the Pharisees before 70* (3 vols.; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1971). On criteria for the use of rabbinic materials, see esp. Evans, *Word and Glory*, 20–28. Cf. further the essays by L. H. Silberman, "Anent the Use of Rabbinic Material," *NTS* 24 (1978): 415–17 and "Once Again: The Use of Rabbinic Material," *NTS* 42 (1996): 153–55; B. Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity* (Uppsala: C. W. K. Gleerup, 1961), 15 and 77–78; and the discussion in G. F. Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), 3:17–22.

²³Cf. here esp. H. L. Strack and G. Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (trans. M. Bockmuehl; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992; henceforth Str-St).

²⁴For a positive attitude toward the judicious use of rabbinic materials for the purpose of establishing a framework for understanding John's portrait of Jesus, see, e.g., C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John* (2d ed.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), 33: "Great caution is necessary. No part of the rabbinic literature was written down until a date later than the composition of John. Direct literary relationship is out of the question, and some apparent parallels may be merely fortuitous. *But when all such allowances have been made it remains very probable that John himself (or perhaps the authors of some of his sources) was familiar with the oral teaching which at a later date was crystallized in the Mishnah, the Talmud, and the Midrashim*" (emphasis added). Chilton (*Galilean Rabbi*, 32–33), after issuing similar cautions, concurs: "Neither Sanders' criticisms nor others to a similar effect, however, has vitiated the essential insight which Billerbeck's monumental volumes so authoritatively convey: the Judaism of the rabbis is comparable to a great deal in the New Testament, especially when we set Jesus' teaching and ministry alongside the views and actions attributed to first century rabbis." Chilton also points out that the rabbis did not invent Judaism *de novo*: "Methodologically, they were traditionalists who handed on the views of predecessors." The verdict of M. Hengel, "The Old Testament in the Fourth Gospel," in *The Gospels and the Scriptures of Israel* (ed. C. A. Evans and W. R. Stegner; JSNTSS 104; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 395, echoes these sentiments: "One thing remains certain: . . . the Fourth Gospel is to be understood primarily from the Jewish sources of its period."

made by the present study does not stand or fall with the dating of individual rabbinic references. The aim of this essay is rather modest. All that is needed to establish the thesis argued here is to provide a credible first-century Jewish framework for John's portrayal of Jesus and his followers, a general backdrop that makes it possible to test the contention that Jesus assumed the role of a Jewish religious teacher in keeping with Jewish practices and that he was so viewed by his contemporaries.

Second, the perception that the present study is reductionistic must be warded off at the outset. It is not argued here that *rabbi* is the *only* Johannine category for Jesus, or even the most important. Rather, it is merely contended that John reflects the fact that this was the way Jesus was primarily perceived by his contemporaries. To be sure, on the basis of this common perception speculation arose whether Jesus was the prophet like Moses or the Messianic king.²⁵ But if the historical starting point for John's presentation of Jesus is lost, there no longer remains any common ground on the basis of which the historical Jesus conducted the interchange with his Jewish interlocutors and the locus from which the evangelist seeks to lead his readers into a deeper understanding of Jesus' full and true identity. The present essay's focus on John's presentation of Jesus as a *rabbi* should in no way be viewed as an effort to diminish John's portrayal of Jesus in apocalyptic-prophetic terms, including Jesus' working of miracles. But the notion must be resisted that these elements are incompatible with John's basic presentation of Jesus as a religious teacher. As Riesner contends, a "high Christology" need not necessarily conflict with a portrayal of Jesus as a teacher, and the role of teacher and the working of miracles may complement each other rather than stand in conflict.²⁶ Hengel likewise notes that "prophet" and "teacher" should in no way be regarded as opposites.²⁷ The felt tension in this case may rather be the result of an unduly narrow concept of the category of teacher that excludes prophetic, miracle-working, or messianic notions but is incompatible with scriptural and Jewish notions in Jesus' and John's day.

Third, a distinction must be made between *ῥαββί* as an address for teachers prior to CE 70 and *ῥαββί* as a fixed title in the period of full-

²⁵Cf. esp. W. A. Meeks, *The Prophet-King: Moses Traditions and the Johannine Christology* (SNT 14; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1967); M.-É. Boismard, *Moses or Jesus: An Essay in Johannine Christology* (trans. B. T. Viviano; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1993), esp. 1-68.

²⁶Cf. Riesner, *Jesus als Lehrer*, 252.

²⁷Hengel, *Charismatic Leader and His Followers*, 45.

fledged rabbinism. The present essay uses the term “rabbi” in the former sense without implying in any way that Jesus conforms to the formalized picture of the institutionalized rabbinate after the destruction of the Jewish Temple in CE 70 and the bar Kochba revolt in CE 135.²⁸ Moreover, calling Jesus a “rabbi” does not necessarily imply buying into the theory that Jesus had a highly sophisticated didactic philosophy, including teaching his students to memorize large portions of his words or other similar methods.²⁹

Fourth, the effort to demonstrate that Jesus’ contemporaries viewed him first of all as a rabbi in keeping with established Jewish custom does not intend to level all distinctions between the teachings and actions of Jesus and those of other Jewish rabbis. To the contrary, it will be seen that Jesus adapted this model in a number of ways and even broke common convention in his actions as well as in his teaching. In particular, Jesus’ messianic consciousness led him to interpret Old Testament messianic interpretations with reference to himself, something no other rabbi of his day would have dared to do.

Fifth and last, the present essay does not view the Fourth Gospel merely as a “window” to the history of the “Johannine community,” as recent influential voices have proposed.³⁰ This disclaimer seems justified in light of the massive recent refutation of the “Johannine community hypothesis” by M. Hengel and the equally devastating critique by R.

²⁸Cf. Riesner, *Jesus als Lehrer*, 274, following G. Dalman, *Die Worte Jesu mit Berücksichtigung des nachkanonischen jüdischen Schrifttums und der aramäischen Sprache* (2d ed.; Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1930), 272–80.

²⁹Cf. Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript*. For an assessment of Gerhardsson, see esp. P. H. Davids, “The Gospels and Jewish Tradition: Twenty Years After Gerhardsson,” *Gospel Perspectives I*, 75–99. Cf. also A. Schlatter, *The History of the Christ* (trans. A. J. Köstenberger; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997): “The means by which he facilitated their work consisted merely of the free and continual access he granted them. The accounts know nothing of a formal preparation for their work, any more than they imply that Jesus used some ‘method’ of conversion. Therefore we do not hear anything of lessons, of sentences he had them memorize, of religious activities he drilled them in, or any other methods.”

³⁰Cf. R. A. Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983); J. L. Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (rev. ed.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1979). For a representative sampling of recent trends in Johannine scholarship, particularly in North America, see “*What is John?*” *Readers and Readings of the Fourth Gospel* (SBL Symposium Series 3; ed. F. F. Segovia; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996).

Bauckham.³¹ It is therefore not necessary to share the negative evaluation of interpreters since Bretschneider (1820), climaxing in the work of R. Bultmann, regarding the (lack of) historicity and historical accuracy of the Gospels in general and the Fourth Gospel in particular.³² Arguably, the recent focus on the level of the later "Johannine community" and the negative assessment of the Fourth Gospel's historical accuracy has blinded interpreters to the truth embodied in the argument of the present essay.³³ While this cannot be fully developed here, a case can very well be made that the Fourth Gospel provides a historically reliable portrait of Jesus.³⁴ While the Fourth Gospel is given to more theologizing than the Synoptics, this arguably does not mean that history is treated lightly. This is already indicated, among other things, by the Johannine "witness" motif, which evidences John's concern for historical accuracy. As M. Thompson has recently put it, being left with the options of historical or unhistorical in the case of the Fourth Gospel "may finally be as futile and irresolvable as arguing that photography is superior to Impressionism."³⁵ The following should therefore be granted: that the purpose of John's Gospel is primarily to present the historical Jesus, not the history of a "Johannine community"; and that John's Gospel be assumed innocent of historical

³¹M. Hengel, *Die johanneische Frage* (WUNT 67; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1993); R. Bauckham, ed., *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), esp. the introductory essay on pp. 9-48. Cf. also R. G. Maccini, *Her Testimony is True: Women as Witnesses according to John* (JSNTSS 125; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), esp. 144 and 240-41.

³²Cf. the present author's essay "Frühe Zweifel an der johanneischen Verfasserschaft des vierten Evangeliums in der modernen Interpretationsgeschichte," *European Journal of Theology* 5 (1996): 37-46.

³³Cf. W. D. Davies ("Reflections on Aspects of the Jewish Background of the Gospel of John," in *Exploring the Gospel of John. In Honor of D. Moody Smith* [ed. R. A. Culpepper and C. C. Black; Westminster/John Knox, 1996], 43-64), whose focus is exclusively on the level of Johannine composition.

³⁴Cf., e.g., L. Morris, "History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel," in *Studies in the Fourth Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 65-138; R. E. Brown, "The Problem of Historicity in John," in *New Testament Essays* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965), 187-217; C. L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1987), 188-89; and now Thompson, "Historical Jesus and Johannine Christ," esp. 25-26 and 32-35. Cf. also J. D. G. Dunn, "John and the Oral Gospel Tradition," in *Jesus and the Oral Gospel Tradition* (ed. H. Wansbrough; JSNTSS 64; Sheffield: JSOT, 1991), 351-79, building on C. H. Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963); and Bauckham, "John for Readers of Mark," in *Gospels for All Christians*, 147-71.

³⁵Thompson, "Historical Jesus and Johannine Christ," 35.

inaccuracies unless proven guilty, rather than vice versa.³⁶ In the present case, two factors in particular suggest that John's depiction of Jesus as rabbi is historically accurate: first, the observation made by Riesner that the portrayal of Jesus as a teacher cannot be explained merely by a later Jewish-Christian "rabbinization" as some have alleged in the case of Matthew;³⁷ and second, the agreement between all four evangelists regarding people's perception and address of Jesus as a Jewish religious teacher.

The present study may now proceed in the attempt to establish the thesis that John portrays Jesus primarily as a religious teacher. The first part of this demonstration is an investigation of the instances where Jesus is addressed or referred to as "rabbi" or "teacher" in the Fourth Gospel.

The Perception of Jesus as Rabbi by His Contemporaries

Introduction

John's Gospel features eight instances where Jesus is addressed as **ῥαββί**: 1:38, 49; 3:2; 4:31; 6:25; 9:2; 11:8; and 20:16 (**ῥαββουνί**). This constitutes over half of the references in the four Gospels combined.³⁸ The address is attributed to Jesus' first followers (1:38), Nathanael (1:49), Nicodemus (3:2), his disciples (4:31; 9:2; 11:8), the multitudes (6:25), and Mary Magdalene (20:16). A comparison between John and the Synoptic writers shows that John frequently provides the Hebrew/Aramaic term **ῥαββί** while the Synoptists generally use the Greek equivalent **διδάσκαλος**. In the first instance where **ῥαββί** is used, John translates **ῥαββί** as **διδάσκαλος** (1:38).³⁹ He does the same at the end of the Gospel where the variant **ῥαββουνί** is used (20:16).⁴⁰ Even in those two instances, how-

³⁶Cf. esp. C. L. Blomberg, "Where Do We Start Studying Jesus?" in *Jesus Under Fire* (ed. M. J. Wilkins and J. P. Moreland; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 30–36.

³⁷Cf. Riesner, *Jesus als Lehrer*, 252.

³⁸There are two references to Jesus as **ῥαββί** in Matthew, four in Mark, and none in Luke.

³⁹The equivalence of the terms **ῥαββί** and **διδάσκαλος** is also confirmed by the synonymous parallelism in Matt 23:8. Cf. Riesner ("Jesus as Preacher and Teacher," 186), who also refers to epigraphical evidence from pre-70 CE Jerusalem (*CCII*, II, 1266, 1268/69).

⁴⁰As Karrer ("Der lehrende Jesus," 19 n. 100) points out, the correspondence between the first and the last reference to Jesus as teacher in the Fourth Gospel (1:38 and 20:16) provides evidence for the unified perspective with which the Fourth Gospel views the earthly and the resurrected Jesus.

ever, John retains the original appellation. Thus John, who is often considered to be less interested in preserving original parlance or historical accuracy, is in this instance found to be closer to the actual address of the earthly Jesus than the Synoptic writers.⁴¹ Matthew, by contrast, seems to avoid reference to Jesus as **ῥαββί** in an effort to safeguard his uniqueness as the Jewish Messiah.⁴² Of his four uses of the term, two caution Jesus' disciples against allowing themselves to be addressed as **ῥαββί** and two are by the traitor, Judas (26:25, 49). Luke does not use the Hebrew/Aramaic term **ῥαββί** at all and generally substitutes the Greek expressions **διδάσκαλος** or **ἐπιστάτα** in deference to his Gentile audience. He does this, however, without downplaying the significance of Jesus' role as a teacher.⁴³ Mark has three people address Jesus as **ῥαββί**, a blind man (10:51), Peter (9:5; 11:21), and Judas (14:45). He also features several instances where Jesus is addressed or referred to as **διδάσκαλος**.⁴⁴ Interestingly, Mark thus comes closest to John in reflecting the probable historical address of Jesus as **ῥαββί** by his contemporaries.⁴⁵ Still, John is

⁴¹Hengel (*Charismatic Leader and His Followers*, 43, n. 19) ascribes this to John's "historicizing tendency." The above argument assumes that Jesus was in fact addressed as **ῥαββί** by his contemporaries, a contention that is rendered highly probable by the multiple attestation of all four Gospels. On this issue, see esp. the interchange by J. Donaldson, "The Title Rabbi in the Gospels—Some Reflections on the Evidence of the Synoptics," *JQR* 63 (1972–73): 287–91; H. Shanks, "Is the Title 'Rabbi' Anachronistic in the Gospels?" *JQR* 53 (1963): 337–45; and the reply by S. Zeitlin (pp. 345–49); as well as Riesner, "Jesus as Preacher and Teacher," 188.

⁴²But see the references to Jesus as **διδάσκαλος** in Matt 8:19; 9:11; 12:38; 17:24; 19:16; 22:16; 22:24, 36; 26:18.

⁴³Jesus is addressed as **διδάσκαλος** in Luke 7:40 (Peter), 9:38 (man from the multitude), 10:25 (a certain lawyer), 11:45 (one of the lawyers), 12:13 (someone in the crowd), 18:18 (a certain ruler), 19:39 (some of the Pharisees), 20:21 (scribes and chief priests), 20:28 (Sadducees), 20:39 (some of the scribes), 21:7 (disciples); to this should be added the references in 8:49 and 22:11. Riesner ("Jesus as Preacher and Teacher," 187) claims that Luke "was also careful to avoid the address **διδάσκαλε** in the mouth of disciples although he preserved this form of address on the lips of non-followers" for the purpose of underlining "that for him Jesus was far superior to any teacher." But this fails to consider Luke 7:40 and 21:7.

⁴⁴Cf. Mark 4:38; 5:35; 9:17, 38; 10:17, 20, 35; 12:14, 19, 32; 13:1; 14:14. Cf. France, "Mark and the Teaching of Jesus," 101–36.

⁴⁵This observations appears to support Markan priority. See P. M. Head, *Christology and the Synoptic Problem: An Argument for Markan Priority* (SNTSMS 94; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), esp. 148–73; and my review in *Faith & Mission* 15/1 (Fall 1997): 76–78.

unmatched both in the range of individuals referring to Jesus as **ῥαββί** and the consistency with which **ῥαββί** is the chosen address of Jesus.

Jesus as Rabbi in the Fourth Gospel

The next step is a brief investigation of the individual instances where Jesus is addressed as **ῥαββί** in the Fourth Gospel. At the outset, two preliminary remarks are in order.⁴⁶ First, the term **ῥαββί**, derived from the Hebrew **רבי** (“my great one”), expressed considerable respect. *M. ’Abot* 4:12, a saying attributed to R. Eleazar b. Shammua (CE 130–160), student of R. Aqiba, says: “Let the fear of your teacher be as the fear of heaven.”⁴⁷ According to Matthew, Jesus discouraged his disciples from appropriating the title **ῥαββί** (23:8),⁴⁸ which stood in contrast with contemporary Jewish practice where a student, after several years of association with his teacher, earned the right to be addressed as **ῥαββί**.⁴⁹ The use of **ῥαββί** for a Jewish religious teacher as an address rather than a title is attested for R. Eleazar b. Azariah, who addressed his teacher R. Yoḥanan b. Zakkai (d. c. 80 CE) as **רבי** when visiting him at the occasion of the death of Yoḥanan’s son (*’Abot R. Nat.* 14). Hillel likewise was addressed as **רבי** (*Lev. Rab.* 34, 130d).⁵⁰ Riesner, following Cohen, notes that the term **ῥαββί** is confined to Palestine in the first century CE, a fact that further accentuates John’s concern for historical accuracy.⁵¹

Second, it is significant that the address of Jesus as **ῥαββί** in John is confined to the time of Jesus’ earthly ministry. The one instance in 20:16 where Jesus is addressed as **ῥαββουνί** by Mary Magdalene is no real

⁴⁶Owing to the constraints of the present study, the focus will not be on the content of Jesus’ teaching but on Jesus’ role as teacher in relation to his disciples. Thus the question of the exact nature of Jesus’ teaching role according to John will be left open. A caution must be registered, however, against categories that are too rigid, such as “teacher of wisdom” or “teacher after the manner of rabbinic authorities” (e.g., Rengstorf, “**μαθητής, κτλ.**,” 454, n. 256), which fail to do justice to the uniqueness of Jesus as teacher.

⁴⁷Cf. E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ* (rev. and ed. by G. Vermes, F. Millar, and M. Black; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1979), 2:325; and Lohse, “**ῥαββί**,” 961–62.

⁴⁸See the discussion in Riesner, *Jesus als Lehrer*, 259–64, 269–72.

⁴⁹Cf. Lohse, “**ῥαββί**,” 962, 965.

⁵⁰Cf. Str-B 1:917, 971; Lohse, “**ῥαββί**,” 962, n. 19; and Riesner, *Jesus als Lehrer*, 268.

⁵¹Cf. Riesner, “Jesus as Preacher and Teacher,” 188, referring to S. J. D. Cohen, “Epigraphical Rabbis,” *JQR* 72 (1982): 1–17. Cf. further Hengel, *Charismatic Leader and His Followers*, 43, n. 20.

exception. John may indicate the inappropriateness of such an address subsequent to Jesus' resurrection by translating the term and following it in short order with Thomas' confession of Jesus as "Lord and God" (**κύριος καὶ θεός**; 20:28). By this John draws a very important distinction in identity between the earthly and the exalted Jesus. Moreover, as will be seen below, the Farewell Discourse already portrays the exalted Jesus as transcending the identity of **ῥαββί**.

I proceed with a treatment of individual passages. In 1:38 and 49, it is Jesus' first followers who approach him by addressing him as **ῥαββί**. Only John notes the fact that some of Jesus' first followers had previously been followers of the Baptist and that the Baptist himself had pointed them to Jesus. This might explain the rather developed understanding of Jesus' mission on the part of his first followers. Interestingly, the term **ῥαββί**, in the sole instance in John where it does not refer to Jesus, is applied to the Baptist (3:26).⁵² This indicates that the Baptist was awarded the respect commensurate to a religious teacher by his disciples. The use of **ῥαββί** as address for Jesus in 1:38 and 49 clearly indicates that Jesus' first followers conceived of their relationship with Jesus in terms of a teacher-disciple relationship. This is not mitigated by the fact that they followed Jesus precisely because they saw in him *more* than a religious teacher, as is made clear by Nathanael's statement: "**ῥαββί**, you are the Son of God. You are the king of Israel" (1:49). Nathanael's statement, if historical, may well reflect an initial perception that still required growth in understanding as a result of a committed following of this **ῥαββί**.⁵³ The question addressed to Jesus in 1:38, "**ῥαββί**, where are you staying (**μένεις**)?" together with Jesus' invitation for his first disciples to "come and see" and their acceptance of Jesus' offer (**ἦλθαν οὖν καὶ εἶδαν ποῦ μένει καὶ παρ' ἔμειναν τὴν ἡμέραν ἐκεῖνην**; 1:39) indicates the closeness of relationship sustained by teacher and disciples. In the context of the Johannine narrative, it becomes the starting point for a relationship that eventually comes to transcend boundaries of time and space (compare the use of **μένω** in 6:56; 8:31; 12:46; and especially the eleven instances of **μένω** in 15:4–16). In conclusion, the two references in 1:38 and 49 indicate that Jesus' first followers transferred their allegiance from one religious teacher, the Baptist, to another, Jesus, who was more but not less than a **ῥαββί**. Accordingly, they

⁵²Evans (*Word and Glory*, 151) mistakenly attributes this reference to Jesus. Cf. also Luke 3:12 where the Baptist is addressed as **διδάσκαλος**.

⁵³D. A. Carson, *Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 147–48.

expressed their perception of him as a religious teacher by addressing him as such.

In 3:2, Nicodemus, the “Teacher of Israel” (ὁ διδάσκαλος τοῦ Ἰσραήλ; 3:10), addresses Jesus as **ῥαββί**: “**ῥαββί**, we know that you are a teacher (διδάσκαλος) come from God; no one can do the signs you are doing unless God is with him.” Apparently, this represents an effort by Nicodemus, the Pharisee and member of the Sanhedrin, to award Jesus similar status as a religious teacher. In this Nicodemus contrasts with the increasingly hostile reaction to Jesus on the part of the Pharisees in general (cf. 1:24; 4:1; 7:32–52; 8:3–11; 9:13–41; 11:46–57; 12:19, 42; 18:3).⁵⁴ This must surely have been considered a gesture of goodwill and benevolence on the part of Nicodemus, since it was commonly recognized that Jesus lacked rabbinic credentials (cf. 7:15: **μὴ μεμαθηκώς**). This address of Jesus as **ῥαββί** also confirms that Jesus’ assumption of the identity of a Jewish religious teacher provided him with common ground on which to interact with other Jewish rabbis such as Nicodemus. At the same time, the difference between Jesus and other Jewish rabbis is also highlighted: unlike the Jewish scribes, Jesus relied on his consciousness of having been sent by God and his resultant spiritual authority rather than on rabbinic training. Also, in breaking with Jewish custom, he apparently never attached himself to a particular Jewish rabbi to follow him and learn from him. Jesus does not return Nicodemus’ courtesy. Rather than engaging in polite platitudes, he lectures the “Teacher of Israel” on his need for regeneration. This stands in marked contrast to Jesus’ compassionate treatment of the Samaritan woman in the subsequent chapter.⁵⁵ Jesus’ assertive stance toward Nicodemus strikingly demonstrates for John’s readers that Jesus, while falling short of Nicodemus’ rabbinic credentials, commanded spiritual authority far exceeding that of his Jewish counterpart. It was doubtless impressive to many of John’s original readers that

⁵⁴On the question of whether or not the Gospel portrait of the Pharisees is accurate, see M. Silva, “Historical Reconstruction in New Testament Criticism,” in *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon* (ed. D. A. Carson and J. D. Woodbridge; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 112–21. Cf. also Neusner, *Rabbinic Traditions about the Pharisees*, 1:244–48. One Pharisaic attitude reflected in the Fourth Gospel that can be corroborated from rabbinic sources is their contempt of the scripture-illiterate masses (**עַם הָאָרֶץ**; cf. 7:49). Evans (*Word and Glory*, 166) calls this “a typical attitude toward the common people” in Jesus’ day, referring also to statements attributed to Hillel (“An ignorant man cannot be holy,” *m. ‘Abot* 2:6) and Hanina ben Dosa (*m. ‘Abot* 3:11).

⁵⁵Cf. C. L. Blomberg, “The Globalization of Biblical Interpretation: A Test Case—John 3–4,” *BBR* 5 (1995): 1–15.

Nicodemus later in the Gospel ends up as a secret follower of Jesus (cf. 7:50–52; 19:38–42).

The next relevant passage is 4:31, where Jesus' disciples address their teacher as **ῥαββί** when returning from getting food. The disciples' address stands in marked contrast with the Samaritan woman's consistent reference to Jesus as **κύριος** (translated "sir" in the NIV and NASB; cf. 4:11, 15, 19). If it is true that Samaritans at that time addressed God as Rabbi, the woman may have wanted to avoid any such connotation with regard to Jesus, at least early in the conversation.⁵⁶ The (equivalent of the) term **κύριος** may also have been used by the woman to indicate respect while remaining distant, owing to the ethnic, social, and gender barriers separating her and Jesus. The disciples, on the other hand, address Jesus as **ῥαββί**, indicating their perception of him as their teacher. As will be further discussed below, their getting food as well as their questioning of their teacher's actions (in the present case, his talking with a Samaritan woman) are entirely consistent with the pattern of Jewish teacher-disciple relationships.

The address of Jesus as **ῥαββί** in 6:25 is significant because it is issued by the crowds. The timing, shortly after the feeding of the multitude, is important as well, since it balances the passage in 6:14–15 where Jesus, on account of his messianic sign, is called "the Prophet" and some intend to make him king. The passage makes clear that the Jewish crowds continued to perceive Jesus first and foremost as a religious teacher, albeit one who performed remarkable feats and who taught with unusual authority.

In 7:15, reference is made to Jesus' lack of rabbinic training (**Πῶς οὐτος γράμματα οἶδεν μὴ μεμαθηκώς**).⁵⁷ Strack and Billerbeck note that attachment to a recognized rabbi, including being of service to him, were part of a person's religious education. This was lacking in Jesus' case; hence the question of 7:15. It was possible for someone to acquire scriptural literacy by way of self-study, but this way of obtaining knowledge did not enjoy the same esteem as formal training.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, while the people's comment is derogatory, the statement confirms the common perception of Jesus as a religious teacher. Another piece of evidence is

⁵⁶Cf. Lohse, "ῥαββί," 961, referring also to Dalman, *Worte Jesu*, 275.

⁵⁷Note the later leveling of a similar charge against Jesus' followers in Acts 4:13 where Peter and John are called "unschooled, ordinary men" (**ἀγράμματοι καὶ ἰδιῶται**) who nevertheless spoke with spiritual insight and authority. As in Jesus' case, people "marveled" (**ἐθαύμαζον**; cf. John 7:15 and Acts 4:13).

⁵⁸Str-B 2:486.

provided by the question in 7:35, “Where does this man intend to go that we shall not find him? He is not intending to go to the Dispersion and *teach* the Greeks, is he?”

The disciples’ interrogation of Jesus with regard to the cause of a man’s blindness in 9:2 while addressing their master as **ῥαββί** fits into the pattern which by now has become a familiar one for the reader of John’s Gospel (cf. 1:38, 49; 4:31). The closeness of their relationship and its purpose of providing a framework for religious instruction allow Jesus’ followers to inquire regarding a matter that puzzled them. As they accompanied their master and associated closely with him, teachable moments often arose that allowed a teacher to impart his knowledge and insight to his disciples. In this case, Jesus’ answer transcended the wisdom of his scribal contemporaries, who customarily attributed suffering to a person’s sin. For Jesus, the man’s blindness was an occasion for the revelation of God’s glory (9:3). Again, the passage confirms John’s pattern of presentation of Jesus as a rabbi.

In 11:8, Jesus’ disciples fear for their master’s life, asking, “**ῥαββί**, the Jews were just now seeking to stone you, and are you going there [Bethany near Jerusalem] again?” When Jesus insists that he must go, Thomas, perhaps with thinly veiled sarcasm but nevertheless reflecting genuine concern, remarks to his fellow disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him” (11:16). Similar to 4:31, where the disciples urge their master to eat, knowing that he had not had food for an extended period of time, the disciples here express concern for the physical well-being of their teacher. As will be seen further below, this, too, was a characteristic feature of first-century Jewish disciples.

Three relevant passages remain. First, Martha’s statement to her sister Mary in 11:28 that “the Teacher [Jesus] is here” once again reinforces the notion that Jesus’ contemporaries customarily perceived him as a religious teacher. Jesus’ raising of Lazarus, of course, explodes narrow notions of the role of a religious teacher. Second, when Jesus is summoned before the Jewish high priest subsequent to his arrest, the subjects of interrogation are Jesus’ *disciples and his teaching* (18:19). When it is intimated that Jesus’ teaching was characterized by subversiveness, secretiveness, and exclusivism, Jesus maintains, “I have spoken openly to the world; I always taught in synagogues and in the Temple, where all the Jews come together; and I spoke nothing in secret” (18:20). This interchange, too, points to the common perception of Jesus as a religious teacher. Third, Mary Magdalene addresses Jesus as **ῥαββουνί** following his resurrection in 20:16. As has been noted, however, this appellation may be deemed inappropriate by the fourth evangelist subsequent to Jesus’ resurrection.

Conclusion

It is now possible to summarize the cumulative thrust of the references to Jesus as ῥαββί in John's Gospel. Limited to Jesus' earthly ministry, they present a consistent picture of people's perception of Jesus as a religious teacher. This perception is not confined to the circle of Jesus' immediate followers. It extends also to the crowds (6:25; cf. 7:15, 35), other Jewish rabbis such as Nicodemus (3:2), and Jesus' friends (11:28: ὁ διδάσκαλος). For this reason it appears that the first part of the thesis of the present study has been sustained: the Fourth Gospel indeed indicates that Jesus was customarily perceived by his contemporaries as a religious teacher, a rabbi. The investigation may proceed with the second part of the argument of this essay, John's portrayal of the relationship between Jesus and his closest followers in terms of the customary teacher-disciple relationship in first-century Judaism.

*The Depiction of Jesus' Relationship with His Followers in Terms
of First-century Jewish Teacher-Disciple Relationships*

John's portrayal of the relationship between Jesus and his closest followers in terms of the teacher-disciple relationship customary in first-century Judaism entails depiction of Jesus as assuming the role of teacher who instructs his disciples through word and action, protects them from harm, and provides for their needs. The disciples on their part take on the role of faithful followers, including the performance of menial tasks and the perpetuation of their Master's teaching. The first part of the following discussion will investigate the various aspects of Jesus' assumption of the role of teacher according to John's Gospel.

Jesus as Teacher in the Fourth Gospel

John's Gospel portrays Jesus as providing instruction for his followers in a number of ways.⁵⁹ He does so by verbal instruction as well as action, including "mystifying gestures" followed by an explanation, and personal example. Apart from assuming responsibility for providing instruction for his followers, Jesus is also shown to provide for other needs of his disciples and to protect them from all harm, including the negative influences of false teaching. These features will briefly be surveyed in turn.

⁵⁹On Jesus' teaching techniques, see esp. R. Riesner, "Jesus as Preacher and Teacher," 201-208.

Verbal Instruction. The study of Jesus' verbal instruction entails an investigation of his use of Scripture, his "rabbinic rulings," and his style of argumentation. Regarding Jesus' reference to the Hebrew Scriptures,⁶⁰ one notes five instances of particular quotations in John: in 1:51, to Gen 28:12; in 6:45, to Isa 54:13; in 10:34, to Ps 82:6; in 13:18, to Isa 41:10; and in 15:25, to Ps 35:19 or 69:5. A brief discussion of some salient features must suffice here.⁶¹ In 1:51, Jesus claims that he transcends God's revelation to Jacob as the new, greater revelation of God.⁶² Jesus' reference in 6:45 to Isa 54:13, "And they shall all be taught of God" (cf. Jer 31:31–34; Ezek 36:24–26), is remarkable for the present study in that the saying emphasizes Jesus' (and later the Spirit's) teaching role of God's new messianic community (cf. 7:37–39). According to the Johannine Jesus, his teaching ministry is in accordance with the divine promise given through the Old Testament prophets. In 10:34–36, Jesus establishes the

⁶⁰Hengel (*Charismatic Leader and His Followers*, 46) contends that the Old Testament is no longer the central focus of Jesus' message. He comments, "As a rule Jesus argues exegetically only when he is questioned or attacked by third parties about the Torah, and, in addition, also at times when his claims and authority are at stake, and here it is often methodologically difficult to distinguish between Jesus' use of scripture and that of the Christian community, as the latter again was for apologetic reasons very much more interested in proofs from scripture." But apart from Hengel's methodological skepticism, it seems precarious to brush aside instances where Jesus uses the Hebrew Scriptures "when he is questioned or attacked by third parties about the Torah, and, in addition, also at times when his claims and authority are at stake" as merely exceptional. Moreover, when Hengel claims that the new content of Jesus' teaching "was not 'scribal' and 'rabbinic' but 'charismatic' and 'eschatological,'" he seems to use the term "rabbinic" in its later, post-70 CE sense. It seems extreme to deny completely that *רַבִּי* carried the connotation of teacher in the instances narrated in the Gospels when applied to Jesus.

⁶¹Cf. D. A. Carson, "John and Johannine Epistles," in *It Is Written: Scripture Citing Scripture* (ed. D. A. Carson and H. G. M. Williamson; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 246; Evans, *Word and Glory*, 174–75. In keeping with the purposes of the present essay, this study is only interested in, not *John's* use of the Old Testament, but *Jesus'* use of the Hebrew Scriptures according to John. Interestingly, this distinction is rarely made in the literature, perhaps owing to the prevailing skepticism regarding the ability of modern interpreters to learn anything about the historical Jesus from John's Gospel, so that all of the uses of the Old Testament in John are subsumed under "Johannine theology." Cf., e.g., G. Reim, *Studien zum alttestamentlichen Hintergrund des Johannesevangeliums* (SNTMS 22; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974).

⁶²Cf. Carson, *Gospel According to John*, 163–64.

legitimacy of his claim to deity by referring to Ps 82:6 where God extends the designation “gods” even to Israel. The reference to Isa 41:10 in 13:18 (“He who eats my bread has lifted up his heel against me”) reveals that Jesus viewed even Judas’ betrayal as in accordance with Scripture (cf. 17:12). Similarly, Jesus in 15:25 acknowledges that people’s rejection of him fulfilled Old Testament prophecy (“They hated me without a cause”; cf. 19:28).

Moreover, Jesus occasionally refers to Old Testament types, such as when making mention of the “serpent in the wilderness” in 3:14–15 (cf. Num 21:8–9). The latter instance is particularly interesting in light of the fact that Jesus here evidences a reading of the Old Testament in light of his messianic calling, in particular the substitutionary nature of his death. Another instance of Jesus’ elaborating on antecedent Old Testament types is his discourse on the “Bread of Heaven” (6:30–59). Responding to the Jews’ challenge for a sign of similar proportions as God’s provision of manna in the wilderness through Moses (cf. 2:18 for a similar request), Jesus points to the fruit of his own mission, again in terms of substitutionary atonement.⁶³ As already mentioned, Jesus’ interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures according to John thus evidences features that transcend common interpretation in his day. Jesus’ messianic consciousness causes him to read the Old Testament with references to himself, a feature not found in contemporary rabbis.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, while there are differences between Jesus’ teaching and the teaching of other Jewish teachers, this does not affect the validity of the thesis postulated in the present essay that people’s primary perception of Jesus was that of a religious teacher, in keeping with contemporary custom.⁶⁵

Jesus’ “rabbinic rulings” are portrayed by John, in keeping with the presentation of the Synoptics, as regularly transcending the wisdom of his contemporaries. When challenged about his healing of a man on the Sab-

⁶³P. Borgen, *Bread from Heaven: An Exegetical Study of the Concept of Manna in the Gospel of John and the Writings of Philo* (NovTSup 10; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1965), emphasizes the midrashic character of the discourse. But see the critique by Carson (*Gospel According to John*, 287–88), who charges that Borgen “does not sufficiently allow for the revelatory stance that Jesus adopts in this chapter, quite unlike any of the teachers in the Jewish parallels that are commonly adduced.” Cf. also R. Schnackenburg, “Das Brot des Lebens (Joh 6),” in *Das Johannesevangelium IV. Teil: Ergänzende Auslegungen und Exkurse* (HTKNT; Freiburg/Basel/Wien: Herder, 1984), 119–31.

⁶⁴John is not the only evangelist who attributes to Jesus this kind of reading of the Hebrew Scriptures: see, for example, Luke 24:44.

⁶⁵See further the discussion in the concluding section below.

bath, he notes that even in rabbinic interpretation the prohibition of work on the Sabbath was not without exception: if the eighth day on which a newborn male was to be circumcised fell on a Sabbath, circumcision was to proceed in order to fulfill the commandment of Lev 12:3 (cf. esp. *m. Šabb.* 19:1–3).⁶⁶ In light of this precedent, Jesus argues, what is wrong with healing an entire man on the Sabbath? On another occasion, when asked by his disciples regarding the cause of a man's blindness, Jesus rejects the customary simplistic cause-and-effect explanations of suffering and proceeds to heal the man (chap. 9).⁶⁷ It may further be noted that Jesus' claim of God as his witness (5:32) and his comments regarding the lack of validity of self-witness (5:31–47) are both consistent with contemporaneous rabbinic discussion.⁶⁸

Jesus also uses rabbinic style, particularly arguments from the lesser to the greater. In 3:12, he asks Nicodemus: "If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how shall you believe if I tell you heavenly things?" In 5:46, he asks: "But if you do not believe his (Moses') writings, how will you believe my words?" In 6:27, he exhorts his audience, "Do not work for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life." In 7:23, Jesus queries, "If a man receives circumcision on the Sabbath that the Law of Moses may not be broken, are you angry with me because I made an entire man well on the Sabbath?" And in 10:34–36, he refers to Ps 82:6 in order to legitimate his claim to deity. If in Psalm 82 God extends the designation of "gods" even to Israel, Jesus contends, how can the one chosen and sent by God be accused of blasphemy when he claims to be the Son of God?⁶⁹

Finally, some of Jesus' sayings recorded in John's Gospel appear to reflect targumic language and tradition, such as his statement "Abraham

⁶⁶Cf. J. C. Thomas, "The Fourth Gospel and Rabbinic Judaism," *ZNW* 82 (1991): 173–74.

⁶⁷Cf. Evans (*Word and Glory*, 154), who notes that the question of the cause of people's suffering was of interest to rabbis. Evans also points to the parallel between Jesus' saying in 9:4, "we must work the deeds of the one who sent me while it is day," and R. Simeon b. Eleazar's admonition to work while one has opportunity and life (*b. Šabb.* 151b; c. CE 200). Cf. also R. Tarphon's statement, "the day is short and the task is great" (*m. 'Abot* 2:15; c. CE 50–120; cf. J. Neusner, "A Life of Rabbi Tarfon ca. 50–120 CE," *Judaica* 17 [1961]: 141–67).

⁶⁸Regarding Jesus' appeal to God as his witness, Evans (*Word and Glory*, 154) refers to the parallels in *m. 'Abot* 4:22 and *Exod. Rab.* 1:15 (on Exod 1:17). Regarding the lack of validity of self-witness, see the discussion by Thomas, "Fourth Gospel and Rabbinic Judaism," 174–77.

⁶⁹Cf. Hengel, "Old Testament in the Fourth Gospel," 386.

your father rejoiced to see my day" (8:56)⁷⁰ and his words to Thomas that they are blessed who do not see but believe (20:29).⁷¹

Jesus' verbal instruction of his disciples and others is clearly consistent with his Jewish environment. His use of the Scriptures, his "rabbinic rulings," his style of argumentation, and even language place him squarely within a Jewish rabbinic context. This, of course, does not mean that Jesus merely conformed to the pattern of teaching used by others rabbis of his day. Rather, his teaching is devoted to establishing his messianic claims on the basis of Old Testament expectations and to distancing himself from the illegitimate heirs of God's calling to Old Testament Israel.

Didactic Actions. Jesus' method of teaching was not limited to verbal instruction. In keeping with contemporary rabbinic practice, it also included the use of "mystifying gestures," that is, startling actions that demanded an explanation. Gerhardsson calls this kind of rabbinic teaching method "the Rabbi's didactic symbolic actions," "concrete, visible measures whereby they capture the attention of their pupils, after which they either explain what they have done or leave it to the pupils to work it out for themselves."⁷² The two major examples of this in John's Gospel are Jesus' cleansing of the Temple and the footwashing, interestingly placed by the fourth evangelist at the beginning and at the end of Jesus' ministry.

Jesus' cleansing of the Temple (2:13–22) is cast by the fourth evangelist as a deliberate action designed to provoke discussion and to provide Jesus with an opportunity to present himself as the fulfillment of the symbolism represented by the Temple.⁷³ People's challenge of Jesus' authority in reaction to his startling act of overthrowing the tables of the

⁷⁰Cf. G. Reim, "Targum und Johannesevangelium," *BZ* 27 (1983): 6–7; Evans, *Word and Glory*, 162.

⁷¹Cf. Evans (*Word and Glory*, 154), referring to R. Yohanan's rebuke of a skeptical student: "Had you not seen, would you not have believed?" (*b. B. Bat.* 75a; cf. *b. Sanh.* 100a). For a more extensive discussion of targumic and midrashic traditions in John, see Evans' discussion on pp. 157–64.

⁷²Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript*, 185.

⁷³Evans (*Word and Glory*, 159–60) points out that Jesus' statement that he will build the "Temple" may represent an adaptation of the targumic tradition that Messiah will build the Temple (cf. *Tg. Isa.* 53:3; *Tg. Zech.* 6:12–13); cf. also Reim, "Targum und Johannesevangelium," 10. On John's theology of Jesus occupying "holy space," see esp. W. D. Davies, *The Gospel and the Land: Early Christian and Jewish Territorial Doctrine* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1994), 288–335.

moneychangers did not seek evidence of the usual type.⁷⁴ Rather, the Jews sought confirmation of Jesus' special, divine call as the Prophet or Messiah. Indeed, a rabbi's authority included both didactic and prophetic functions and was manifested by both words and actions. Jesus' miraculous healings and other amazing acts thus may be viewed, among other things, as serving the purpose of attesting to his authority as a religious teacher. In this particular instance, however, Jesus does not acquiesce to the Jews' demand for a sign. Rather, he elaborates on the significance of the act he has just done, the temple cleansing.⁷⁵ At the time, Jesus' explanation of this act as a prophetic foreshadowing of the meaning of his death and resurrection remained a mystery, not just to the Pharisees, but even to his inner core of disciples. Only much later would they understand, as the fourth evangelist duly notes (2:22; cf. 12:16).⁷⁶

The second "mystifying gesture" performed by Jesus is the footwashing (13:1–17). Daube notes that the unfolding of Jesus' last extended time with his disciples follows the rabbinic pattern of "mystifying gesture—question—interpretation."⁷⁷ He cites the parallel of Yoḥanan ben Zakkai (d. CE 80), who sobbed on his death bed in order that his followers might inquire about the cause of his grief, thus providing the opportunity for an explanation. Similarly, Jesus performs the footwashing to teach his disciples about the need for mutual service. He gets up, girds his loins with a towel, and begins to wash the feet of his followers, a task commonly reserved in that day for household slaves. According to Jewish belief, "All manner of service that a slave must render to his master, the *pupil* must render to his *teacher*—except that of taking off his shoe" (*b. Ketub.* 96a).⁷⁸ Only a Canaanite slave performed this menial service, and a student performing it might be mistaken for such a slave.⁷⁹ Jesus' actions in the Upper Room thus dramatically run counter to contemporary Jewish convention: Jesus the *teacher* renders a service to his *pupils* rather

⁷⁴Cf. D. Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism* (New York: Arno, 1973), 211.

⁷⁵On the temple cleansing as a Johannine sign, see my "The Seventh Johannine Sign: A Study in John's Christology," *BBR* 5 (1995): 87–103.

⁷⁶Cf. D. A. Carson, "Understanding Misunderstandings in the Fourth Gospel," *TynB* 33 (1982): 59–89.

⁷⁷Daube, *NT and Rabbinic Judaism*, 182–83.

⁷⁸This saying is attributed to R. Joshua b. Levi (third century CE). Cf. Str-St 92–93.

⁷⁹Cf. M. Aberbach, "Relations Between Master and Disciple," *Essays presented to Chief Rabbi Israel Brodie* (London: Soncino, 1967), 5.

than vice versa, and the specific task performed exceeds that from which even *pupils* in contemporary Judaism were exempt.

Owing to its startling nature and the power of personal example, Jesus' "mystifying gesture" constitutes an extremely effective teaching method. As the Johannine Jesus remarks, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a slave is not greater than his master; neither is one who is sent greater than the one who sent him."⁸⁰ If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them" (13:12b-17).⁸¹

Other Provision and Protection. Among other things, the role of rabbi also entailed the provision for his disciples' various other needs and the protection of his disciples from false teaching and any harm. In keeping with this role, Jesus frequently issued warnings to his disciples regarding the pervasive negative influence of the Jewish religious leadership. These issues come particularly to the fore in Jesus' shepherd allegory (chap. 10). There, in allusion to Ezekiel 34 and utilizing the familiar motif of God as Israel's shepherd, Jesus identifies the Jews' current leadership as faithless (cf. Zech 11:15-17) in contrast to himself, who is the "good shepherd." Here the image of shepherd and the role of rabbi merge in that Jesus, the shepherd-teacher, is shown to take great care to nurture a close, trusting relationship with his followers in order to protect them from any spiritual harm resulting from their exposure to false teaching.⁸²

Teaching by Example. Jesus also taught by example. Reference has already been made to Jesus' statement in 13:13-15, "You call me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am. If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you." The issue of example also comes to the fore in 5:20, where Jesus claims that "the Father loves the Son, and shows him all things that he himself is doing" (cf. 1:18). Jesus' teaching by example has the desired result that his

⁸⁰Cf. Riesner, *Jesus als Lehrer*, 256-59.

⁸¹Cf. Matt 10:24-25; Luke 6:40. Cf. the discussion by Riesner, *Jesus als Lehrer*, 256-59.

⁸²Cf. R. T. France, *Jesus and the Old Testament* (London: Tyndale, 1971), 208-209; Carson, "John and Johannine Epistles," 255.

followers do his works: “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do; because I go to the Father” (14:12).⁸³

As the sent Son of the Father, Jesus modeled absolute dependence, obedience, and faithfulness to his sender (cf. e.g. 4:34; 5:23, 30, 36, 38; 6:38–39; 7:16, 18, 28; 8:26; 9:4; 12:44–45, 49; 13:20; 14:10b, 24).⁸⁴ In accordance with contemporary Jewish belief, the presence of a messenger was equivalent to the presence of the sender himself (cf. 13:20; *m. Ber.* 5:5: שליחו שלאדם כמרתו).⁸⁵ How much more was this true if the one sent was the son, particularly the first-born son, of a father.⁸⁶ At the occasion of the disciples’ commissioning, Jesus charged his followers to emulate the same characteristics he had displayed during his earthly sojourn as the paradigmatic Sent One: “As the Father has sent me, I also send you” (20:21; cf. 9:7).

In short, Jesus the teacher sought to impart the core characteristics of his own disposition toward his mission to his closest followers as part of their preparation for ministry. This transcends even verbal instruction, the use of mystifying gestures, and other methods of teaching.

The Disciples in the Fourth Gospel

The term customarily used for Jesus’ followers in the Fourth Gospel, as in the Synoptics, is μαθητής.⁸⁷ It occurs some 74 times with reference to followers of Jesus in every chapter but 5, 10, 14, and 17, the first instance being 2:2 at the wedding in Cana.⁸⁸ Linguistically, this expression is

⁸³Cf. my “The ‘Greater Works’ of the Believer According to John 14:12,” *Didaskalia* 6 (1995): 36–45.

⁸⁴For a detailed discussion of Jesus as the sent Son in John, see my *Missions of Jesus and the Disciples According to the Fourth Gospel*. For a listing of representative references on agency in John, see Thompson, “Historical Jesus and Johannine Christ,” 41, n. 47.

⁸⁵For further Jewish references, see Bühner, *Der Gesandte und sein Weg*, 209, n. 1. Bühner contends that this understanding already had currency in Jesus’ day. Cf. also Matt 10:40; Mark 9:37; Luke 10:16.

⁸⁶Cf. esp. A. E. Harvey, “Christ as Agent,” in *The Glory of the Christ in the New Testament. Studies in Christology in Memory of George Bradford Caird* (ed. L. D. Hurst and N. T. Wright; Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), 239–50.

⁸⁷The term μαθητής is found 72 times in Matthew, 42 times in Mark, 35 times in Luke, 78 times in John, and 28 times in Acts, for a total of 259 occurrences. John, closely followed by Matthew, has the highest instance of the term, while Luke has the lowest.

⁸⁸Μαθητής is used with reference to the Baptist’s followers in 1:35, 37 and 3:25. Cf. also the expression “disciples of Moses” in 9:28.

closely related to the rabbinic **רמלן**.⁸⁹ The fact that the term occurs nowhere else in the New Testament outside of the Gospels and the book of Acts indicates that the early church tied the term inextricably to the historical followers of the earthly Jesus. This suggests that the term **μαθήτης** is part and parcel of the teacher-disciple relationship Jesus sustained with his followers during his earthly ministry.

The Disciples' Relationship with Their Teacher. The disciples of a certain rabbi would often follow their teacher wherever he went (*b. Ber.* 23a,b, 24a, 60a; *b. Šabb.* 12b, 108b, 112a; *b. 'Erub.* 30a; *b. Roš Haš.* 34b; *y. Hag.* 2:1; *y. B. Meš.* 2:3).⁹⁰ In keeping with this practice, John portrays Jesus' disciples as accompanying their teacher at a large variety of occasions. They lived with him (e.g., 1:39; 3:22). They joined him at a wedding together with his mother and brothers (2:1–12; on Jesus' relationship with his brothers, see 7:1–10). They were the witnesses and beneficiaries of his teaching. They accompanied him when he healed the sick (4:43–54; 5:1–15; chaps. 9 and 11) and fed the multitudes (6:1–13). In this, the Johannine portrayal concurs impressively with that of the Synoptics, where the disciples' major characteristic likewise is their "following" (**ἀκολουθεῖν**) of Jesus, that is, their close fellowship (*Lebensgemeinschaft*) with him.⁹¹ The following discussion will look at some of the features of

⁸⁹Cf. Rengstorf, "μαθητής, κτλ.," 442.

⁹⁰Cf. Aberbach, "Relations," 7. The various passages refer to disciples of famous teachers "following" or "walking behind" them. *B. Ber.* 23a–b, 24a mentions Rabbah b. Bar Ḥana (first-generation Amoraim; cf. Str-St 94) following R. Yoḥanan (d. 279; Str-St 95) and Raba (d. 352; Str-St 104) following R. Nahman (third-generation Amoraim); *b. Ber.* 60a refers to a disciple following R. Ishmael son of R. Jose; *b. Šabb.* 12b mentions Rabbah b. Bar Ḥanah (first-generation Amoraim; see above) following R. Eleazar (130–160; Str-St 85); *b. Šabb.* 108b refers to Rabin walking behind R. Jeremiah, and *b. Šabb.* 112a to R. Jeremiah walking behind R. Abbahu (d. c. 309; cf. Str-St 98); *b. 'Erub.* 30a mentions Rabban b. Bar Ḥana (first-generation Amoraim) following R. Yoḥanan (d. 279); *b. Roš Haš.* 34b discusses R. Abbahu following R. Yoḥanan; *y. Hag.* 2:1 refers to R. Eleazar ben Arakh walking behind Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai (c. CE 70; Eleazar ben Arakh is mentioned by Str-St 74–75 as one of Yoḥanan b. Zakkai's five most important students); and *y. B. Meš.* 2:3 mentions someone walking behind R. Ḥalafta (c. 330? cf. Str-St 84) and Simeon b. Va walking behind R. Eleazar.

⁹¹Cf. Anselm Schulz, *Nachfolgen und Nachahmen. Studien über das Verhältnis der neutestamentlichen Jüngerschaft zur urchristlichen Vorbildethik* (SANT VI; München: Kösel, 1962), 137. The word **ἀκολουθέω** is also used in John in 1:37, 38, 40, 43; 6:2; 8:12; 10:4, 5, 27; 11:31; 12:26; 13:36, 37; 18:15; 20:6; 21:19, 20, 22.

the Johannine portrait of Jesus' disciples in light of their Jewish background.

One important difference between contemporary rabbinic practice and Jesus is the fact that Jesus chose his disciples, while generally disciples chose to attach themselves to a particular rabbi (cf. 15:16).⁹² This had already been borne out in a statement attributed to Joshua b. Perahyah (c. 100 BCE): "Provide yourself with a teacher (רַב) and get yourself a fellow-disciple" (חֵבֵר; *m. 'Abot* 1:6).⁹³

Generally, Jesus and his disciples share a relationship characterized by openness that allows Jesus' followers to inquire regarding the significance of their teacher's actions or even to challenge him. An example of this is Peter's initial refusal to permit Jesus to wash his feet in the upper room (13:6–10). Throughout the Farewell Discourse, the disciples address various questions to their teacher whenever they fail to grasp an aspect of his teaching (Peter: 13:36–38; Thomas: 14:5; Philip: 14:8; and Judas, not Iscariot: 14:22). This coheres with contemporary Jewish practice. As Aberbach notes, "Students would not hesitate to question their teacher when his actions seemed to contradict his teachings or when his behaviour appeared unseemly (cf. *m. Ber.* 2:6–7; *y. Sot.* 1:4)."⁹⁴ He elaborates,

Pupils were not supposed to ask questions irrelevant to the subject under discussion lest the teacher be put to shame (cf. *b. Shab.* 3b).⁹⁵ It was the mark of a wise disciple to confine himself to relevant questions, while the uncultured *Golem* would do precisely the opposite (cf. *m. Ab.* 5:7;⁹⁶ *Der. Ez. Zut.* 1).⁹⁷ On

⁹²Cf. Riesner, "Jesus as Preacher and Teacher," 197; Rengstorf, "μαθητής, κτλ.," 444, 447.

⁹³Cf. Lohse, "ῥαββί," 962; Str-B 1:916; Silberman ("Once Again," 155, n. 12), who provides further references; and Riesner (*Jesus als Lehrer*, 269), who dates Joshua b. Perahyah ca. 104–78 BCE.

⁹⁴Cf. Aberbach, "Relations," 20. *M. Ber.* 2:6–7 is attributed to Rabban Gamaliel (possibly, Paul's teacher: CE 30–40); *y. Sot.* 1:4 is attributed to R. Meir, student of R. Ishmael and R. Aqiba and among the third generation of Tannaites (ca. CE 130–160). Cf. Str-St 73, 83–84.

⁹⁵In *b. Šabb.* 3b, R. Hiyya is quoted as saying to Rab (both ca. CE 200), "When Rabbi is occupied with one tractate, do not ask him a question relating to another."

⁹⁶*M. 'Abot* 5:7 reads: "There are seven marks of the clod and seven of the wise man. The wise man does not speak before one that is greater than he in wisdom; and he does not break in upon the words of his fellow; and he is not hasty in making answer; he asks what is relevant and makes answer according to the *Halakah*; and he speaks on the first point first and on the last point last; and of what he has heard no tradition he says, 'I have not heard'; and he agrees to

the other hand, students were not only permitted but encouraged to ask the master to explain whatever they had failed to grasp during the discourse. It was a well-known principle that “a shame-faced person cannot learn” (*m. Ab. 2:5*),⁹⁸ and it was further said that “he who abases himself (i.e. exposes his ignorance by asking questions) for the (sake of learning the) words of the Torah will eventually be exalted, but he who muzzles himself (i.e. refrains from asking questions) will have to put his hand to his mouth” (viz., when he, in turn, will be asked to answer questions; *b. Ber. 63b*).⁹⁹ Students could also argue freely with their teachers during discussions, which formed the essence of instruction at all higher educational institutions; but they were expected to do so not in a contentious spirit but reverently and with due restraint.¹⁰⁰

This open interchange did not diminish the disciples’ respect for their teacher. Rather, respect grew into love, loyalty, and deep devotion. As Aberbach continues, “In spite of the extraordinary reverence in which rabbis were held by their students, the relations between them were usually very close and far from formal. It was . . . essentially a paternal-filial relationship transcended and surpassed by the intense love master and disciple bore to each other (*Cant. Rab. 8:7; b. Ber. 5b; b. Sanh. 101a*).”¹⁰¹

what is true. And the opposites of these are the marks of the clod. ”

⁹⁷*Der. Ez. Zuṭ. 1:1–2* reads: “The characteristics of a scholar are that he is meek, humble, alert, filled [with a desire for learning], modest, beloved by all, humble to the members of his household and sin-fearing. He judges a man [fairly] according to his deeds, and says ‘I have no desire for all the things of this world because this world is not for me.’ He sits and studies, soiling his cloak at the feet of the scholars. In him no one sees any evil. He questions according to the subject-matter and answers to the point. Be like a gourd split open that the wind may enter, like a deep furrow which retains its water, like a jar coated with pitch which preserves its wine, and like a sponge which absorbs all.” Str-St 251 say that style and content permit a date in the early Amoraic period (c. CE 250); M. Ginsberg, in his introduction to *Der. Ez. Zuṭ.* in *Hebrew-English Edition of the Babylonian Talmud: Minor Tractates* (ed. Abraham Cōhen London: Soncino, 1984), notes that there may even have been an independent collection already in existence in the time of the Tannaim, as the book contains material “which is old and often quoted as Baraithoth [Tannaitic sayings outside the Mishnah] by the early authorities.”

⁹⁸*M. ’Abot 2:5* is attributed to R. Gamaliel V (ca. CE 360–380), son of R. Judah the patriarch.

⁹⁹This saying is attributed to R. Samuel bar Nahman, a third-generation Amoraic (second half of third century CE). Cf. Str-St 97–98.

¹⁰⁰Aberbach, “Relations,” 9.

¹⁰¹*Ibid.*, 17–18. *Cant. Rab.* was composed around CE 650–750 (Str-St 342); *b. Ber. 5b* is placed at the death of R. Yoḥanan (d. CE 279); *b. Sanh. 101a* is attributed to Rabban b. Bar Hana, a first-generation Amoraic (ca. CE 250). Cf.

As Daube points out, the relationship of master and disciples was similar to that of parents and children. However, while the parent-child relationship was based on nature, the master-disciple relationship was a matter of choice.¹⁰² Like family members, master and disciples had responsibilities, not just *to*, but also *for* one another in the outside world.¹⁰³ This identification in the eyes of the world came into sharper focus toward the end of Jesus' ministry, when it became clear that his disciples would be held responsible for his teaching. Thus the Johannine Jesus prepares his disciples, "If the world hates you, you know that it has hated me before it hated you . . . Remember the word that I said to you, 'A slave is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you . . . But all these things they will do to you for my name's sake, because they do not know the One who sent me" (15:18–21).

Performing Acts of Service. One of the characteristics of Jesus' disciples according to the Fourth Gospel is their rendering of service to their teacher. They are sent to buy bread (4:8) and are asked to help provide food for the multitudes (6:5). At the feeding of the multitude, Jesus instructs them to have the people sit down, to distribute the food, and later to gather up leftover (6:10, 12). In this, they conform to the customary pattern expected of disciples in their day. Shopping, together with the preparation and cooking of food and waiting at tables were considered duties of the followers of a rabbi (*y. Šeb.* 9:9; *Lam. Rab.* 3:17,6; *y. Ber.* 8:5; *t. Ber.* 6:4–5).¹⁰⁴ Notably, as in the case of the footwashing, Jesus' preparing of breakfast for his disciples subsequent to his resurrec-

Str-St 94–95.

¹⁰²D. Daube, "Responsibilities of Master and Disciples in the Gospels," *NTS* 19 (1972–73), 3.

¹⁰³*Ibid.*, 1–15. Daube devotes his entire article to a discussion of these responsibilities.

¹⁰⁴Cf. Aberbach, "Relations," 6. *y. Šeb.* 9:9 contains Talmudic commentary on the Mishnaic tractate by the same name; among the teachers mentioned is R. Joshua b. Levi (third century CE; cf. Str-St 92–93). *Lam. Rab.* was compiled ca. CE 450 (Str-St 310); among the rabbis listed is R. Yehudah ben Bathyra, dated either 20/30–90 or ca. 100–160 (Str-St 83); and *y. Ber.* 8:5 provides commentary on the dispute between the houses of Hillel and Shammai regarding the order of a meal. *T. Ber.* 6:4–5 is framed in terms of contrasting rulings of Hillel and Shammai (first century CE).

tion reverses the common pattern of teacher-disciple relationships in his day (21:9–13).

The disciples' duty to care for their master's various needs even transcends his death. In keeping with this, "the disciple whom Jesus loved" is given responsibility of caring for Jesus' mother (19:26–27), while Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, two secret followers of Jesus from among the Pharisees, assume responsibility for Jesus' burial, as was customary for disciples. As Aberbach notes, "The death of a teacher was a major disaster for his students . . . It was a matter of course for disciples to attend their master's funeral or even to bury him themselves" (cf. *y. Ber.* 3:1; *y. Mo'ed Qat.* 3:5; *b. Ber.* 42b; *b. Sanh.* 68a; end of *Ṣemaḥot* 11).¹⁰⁵

Also, disciples were responsible to honor their deceased teacher by following his teaching closely. "After completing their course of studies, disciples were expected, as far as possible, to follow and propagate their master's teaching. The perfect scholar was one who . . . had 'fully absorbed his master's teaching' and 'was drawing on it to spread it abroad' (*b. Yoma* 28a)."¹⁰⁶ The faithful witness borne by "the disciple whom Jesus loved" to his master's teaching in form of a written Gospel can be seen as a discharge of this responsibility.¹⁰⁷ As the fourth evangelist concludes, "This is the disciple who bears witness of these things, and wrote these things; and we know that his witness is true. And there are many other

¹⁰⁵Aberbach, "Relations," 21. The passage in *y. Ber.* 3:1 is attributed to R. Yannai the younger, grandson of R. Yannai "the Elder," Yoḥanan's teacher, and R. Yose, one of the redactors of the Babylonian Talmud; *y. Mo'ed Qat.* 3:5 comments on the Mishnaic tractate *Mo'ed Qatan*, which deals with "lesser holy days" (cf. Str-St 127); *b. Ber.* 42b is placed at the death of Rab (d. CE 247; see Str-St 93); the passage in *b. Sanh.* 68a is attributed to the time of R. Aqiba (c. CE 135); and the end of *Ṣemaḥot* 11 recounts the death of Rabban Gamaliel the Elder, Paul's teacher, and the words of his student and brother-in-law R. Eliezer (CE 90–130).

¹⁰⁶Ibid., 18. The saying is attributed to R. Eleazar (CE 130–160; cf. Str-St 85). The reference is to R. Eleazar's explanation of Gen 24:2, where it is said that Eliezer, Abraham's servant, "ruled over all" his master had, which Eleazar takes to mean that Eliezer ruled over [knew, controlled] the Torah of his master.

¹⁰⁷It is not possible here to discuss at length the degree to which Johannine style flavors the Fourth Gospel's presentation of Jesus' teachings. But note the interesting suggestion by Gerhardsson that John, by reproducing Jesus' statements in his [John's] own words rather than verbatim, may have followed a Hellenistic rather than Jewish approach (*Memory & Manuscript*, 130). Cf. also D. A. Carson, "Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel: After Dodd, What?" in *Gospel Perspectives II* (ed. R. T. France and D. Wenham; Sheffield: JSOT, 1981), 122–23.

things which Jesus did, which if they were written in detail, I suppose that even the world itself would not contain the books which were written" (21:24–25).¹⁰⁸ Gerhardsson comments in this regard, "They [apostolic eyewitnesses] taught in the name of their Master, and bore witness to the words and works of their Teacher in a way which recalled—at least formally—the witness borne by other Jewish disciples to the words and actions of their teachers."¹⁰⁹ Strack and Billerbeck cite the parallel in Rabban Yohanan b. Zakkai (c. CE 80): "Wenn alle Himmel Pergamente und alle Bäume Schreibrohre und alle Meere Tinte wären, so würde das nicht genügen, meine Weisheit aufzuschreiben, die ich von meinem Lehrer gelernt habe."¹¹⁰

Conclusion. The Fourth Gospel provides ample evidence to sustain the second part of our thesis: Jesus is depicted in terms of first-century Jewish teacher-disciple relationships. According to John's Gospel, Jesus exercised his role by way of verbal instruction, didactic actions, other provision and protection of his followers, and teaching by example. In all of this, Jesus is cast as operating within a paradigm used by the Jewish religious teachers of his day. As has been shown, this pattern is further substantiated by the Fourth Gospel's portrayal of the disciples' relationship with Jesus in terms of contemporary rabbi-disciple relationships.

After this survey of the roles of Jesus as teacher and his followers as disciples in keeping with contemporary Jewish practice, attention may now be drawn to an important theological feature of John's portrayal of Jesus that has relevance for the present study. This will be followed by some conclusions.

The Transcending of Rabbinic Categories for Jesus

¹⁰⁸I have argued elsewhere that the Fourth Gospel establishes an explicit link between the witnessing roles of Jesus and the "disciple whom Jesus loved" by the parallel phraseology of 1:18 and 13:25 (cf. *The Missions of Jesus and the Disciples According to the Fourth Gospel*, 158-61). By virtue of their close proximity to the fount of revelation (the Father or Jesus respectively), Jesus and the "disciple whom Jesus loved" are able to communicate to others the true meaning and inner substance of God's and Jesus' words. Jesus' word, in turn, is put by the fourth evangelist on the same level as Scripture in 2:22.

¹⁰⁹Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript*, 330.

¹¹⁰Str-B 2:587. Reim ("Targum und Johannevangelium," 10) also refers to *Tg. Isa* 53:8: "And the wondrous things that shall be wrought for us in his days who shall be able to recount?"

in the Farewell Discourse

The Johannine Farewell Discourse (John 13–16), without parallel in the Synoptics, is devoted to Jesus' final instructions for his disciples prior to his "departure" to heaven via the cross (cf. 13:1; 16:28). The discourse is reminiscent of Moses' parting instructions to his fellow-Israelites regarding their imminent entrance into the Promised Land in Deuteronomy.¹¹¹ Jesus is here presented as the one who supersedes God's giving of the Law through Moses (cf. already 1:17). Thus he issues a "new commandment" for his disciples to love one another the way he loved them, that is, by giving his life for them (13:34–35; cf. 15:13). In the overall theological context of the Fourth Gospel, the discourse functions as one among several links between Israel, the old covenant community, and the followers of Jesus the Messiah, God's new covenant people.¹¹²

The previous discussion has shown that John's Gospel clearly indicates that Jesus' contemporaries customarily perceived him as a religious teacher and that his relationship with his disciples largely conformed to the pattern of Jewish teacher-disciple relationships of his day. It has also been noted that references to Jesus as **ραββί** are, with the exception of 20:16, confined to the phase of Jesus' earthly ministry in John depicted in chaps. 1–12. Thereafter, Jesus is addressed by his disciples as "Lord" (Farewell discourse: 13:6, 9, 25, 36, 37; 14:5, 8, 22; Peter and the "disciple whom Jesus loved" in the epilogue: 21:15, 16, 17, 20, 21), a sufficiently ambiguous term to accommodate both notions of "master" (teacher) and "Lord" (including God worthy of worship; 20:28).

This shift in terminology suggests that, beginning in John 13, Jesus' role as religious teacher is transcended by his anticipation of his return to heaven. While this fact was already hinted at in the first part of John's Gospel (cf., e.g., 8:31), it now takes center stage. Jesus' relationship with his disciples is elevated above their physical life with him and following of him to a spiritual association and discipleship that transcends mere physical realities, including Jesus' physical departure from his followers, and reaches into eternity (cf. esp. 14:2–3).¹¹³ The disciples are enjoined to

¹¹¹Cf. A. Lacomara, "Deuteronomy and the Farewell Discourse (Jn 13:31–16:33)," *CBQ* 36 (1974): 65–84.

¹¹²Cf. esp. J. W. Pryor, *John: Evangelist of the Covenant People* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992).

¹¹³Evans (*Word and Glory*, 158) notes that Jesus' statement that "there are many dwelling places in my Father's house" probably reflects targumic language. He particularly refers to *Tg. Neof.* Exod 33:13–14: "The glory of my Shekinah will accompany among you and will prepare a resting place for you." Cf. also

move from a physical following of Jesus during his earthly ministry to a vital spiritual connection with him by the study of his word and prayer (cf. esp. chaps. 14–16).

Therefore Jesus' assumption of the role of rabbi during his earthly public ministry now gives way to his role as the exalted Lord.¹¹⁴ As such, Jesus will be the recipient of prayer and worship while remaining involved in the disciples' ministry (cf. esp. 14:12). The Spirit will provide continuity with Jesus' ministry by serving as the disciples' teacher on behalf of Jesus (14:26; 16:13–15). Jesus' earthly pattern of a rabbi gathering around himself a circle of close followers thus is shown to serve the preparatory purpose of instructing God's new messianic community (note the number Twelve and the application of the term ἴδιον "his own" no longer to Israel, as in 1:11, but to his disciples, in 13:1).¹¹⁵

Concluding Reflections

As the preceding discussion has shown, John's Gospel provides unmistakable evidence that Jesus was perceived as a rabbi, a Jewish religious teacher, by his contemporaries. While the disciples came to know Jesus as more than just a rabbi, and while Jesus' own messianic self-consciousness transcended the role of teacher, the Jewish religious leadership, the crowds, and the disciples perceived Jesus in accordance with the accepted cultural role of rabbi. Jesus, in turn, used this role as common ground with other religious teachers, be it hostile ("the Jews") or open (Nicodemus) and conducted his relationship with his disciples within the framework of a religious teacher's dealings with his students.

What are the significance and implications of the present study's finding that Jesus, according to John, assumed the role of rabbi and was first of all perceived as such by his contemporaries? First, this conclusion suggests that Johannine Christology is not a projection onto the life of Jesus

Reim, "Targum und Johannesevangelium," 10.

¹¹⁴This is insufficiently recognized by contemporary patterns of discipleship that seek to duplicate Jesus' culture-related pattern of gathering around himself a circle of close disciples as the primary paradigm for discipleship. For important missiological implications, see my "Challenge of a Systematized Biblical Theology of Mission: Missiological Insights from the Gospel of John," *Missiology* 23 (1995): 445–64.

¹¹⁵Cf. Pryor, *John: Evangelist of the Covenant People*, 55.

but that John's "high Christology" is rooted in Jesus' earthly life and ministry. In this matter the findings of the current investigation concur with the basic argument of Gerhardsson, Riesenfeld, and Riesner, who contend that the disciples learned what they knew about Jesus first and foremost from him.¹¹⁶ Second, Bultmann's extreme skepticism regarding the ability of modern interpreters to learn anything about the historical Jesus from the Gospels is unwarranted. John's Gospel shows an organic development from the earthly Jesus' instruction of his followers to their belief that Jesus continued to be present in his community by his Spirit as the exalted Lord. The relationship between the "historical Jesus" and the "Christ of faith" is not one of radical disjunction but of the gradual emergence of a realization that the disciples' relationship with their rabbi, Jesus, was to be transcended by their spiritual communion with the ascended Messiah.¹¹⁷ This is the message of John's Gospel.

If these observations are correct, they confirm the emerging consensus that Jesus can only be adequately understood within a Jewish framework.¹¹⁸ Moreover, a needed corrective to a conventional understanding of Johannine Christology has been supplied. Far from reflecting a docetic or otherwise idealized Christ, John's Gospel is found to reflect, in accordance with the Synoptics, Jesus' thoroughly human and cultural pattern of living and relating. As mentioned, this does not mean that Jesus was reduced to a merely human figure. It does, however, imply that Jesus' messianic claims and his disciples' understanding of Jesus as the Christ grew from his assumption of the accepted cultural role of a Jewish religious teacher.¹¹⁹

As argued, the Fourth Gospel does not present Jesus merely as a conventional rabbi. Rather, among other things, the Johannine Jesus is cast as

¹¹⁶Apart from the works already cited, see also R. Riesner, "Der Ursprung der Jesus-Überlieferung," *TZ* 38 (1982): 493–513.

¹¹⁷Cf. Thompson, "Historical Jesus and Johannine Christ," 21–42. See also C. S. Evans, *The Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith: The Incarnational Narrative as History* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996).

¹¹⁸Cf. W. R. Telford, "Major Trends and Interpretive Issues in the Study of Jesus," in *Studying the Historical Jesus. Evaluations of the State of Current Research* (ed. B. Chilton and C. A. Evans; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994), esp. 70–71 and the extensive bibliography cited on p. 70, n. 129.

¹¹⁹As Riesner (*Jesus als Lehrer*, 254) points out, contra Hahn (*Christologische Hoheitstitel*, 80–81) and in agreement with Dodd ("Jesus als Lehrer und Prophet," 69), the term **ραββί** should not be understood as a christological title. As Riesner contends, the early church preserved reminiscences of Jesus' being addressed as rabbi during his earthly ministry because he in fact operated as a religious teacher.

the true reformer of Jewish religion. Jesus cleanses the Temple (2:13–22),¹²⁰ instructs the “Teacher of Israel” regarding his need for spiritual regeneration (3:3–8), teaches that true worship is spiritual (4:21–24), points to the true significance of Jewish religious feasts (7:37–38; 8:12; 9:5) or invests them with new meaning (e.g., the Passover), and supersedes Moses, through whom God had given the Law (1:17; 5:45–46) and Abraham, the Jewish patriarch (8:58).

Yet Jesus was even more than a reformer of Judaism. As E. P. Sanders asks, echoing Joseph Klausner: “How was it that Jesus lived totally within Judaism, and yet was the origin of a movement that separated from Judaism?”¹²¹ The answer, at least in part, may be seen in the fact that Jesus, while accommodating himself to the cultural role of rabbi, at the same time transcended this role by virtue of his unique personal identity. Interestingly, difficulty for Jesus’ earthly ministry seemed to arise precisely at the point where his role of rabbi was transcended, be it in terms of his implicit or explicit claims of deity, his “signs” resulting in significant popular acclaim, or other messianic manifestations. Increasingly, Jesus may have appeared to at least some of his contemporaries, including the members of his own family, as a “rabbi gone mad” (cf. Mark 3:21).

Finally, as mentioned, by pointing to John’s casting of Jesus in terms of a first-century Jewish rabbi, I in no way seek to limit Jesus to being a mere marginal Galilean Jew.¹²² On the contrary—the fact that Jesus’ followers came to believe that their teacher was the Son of God (cf., e.g., 1:49; 20:28) shows that the humble role of an uncredentialed Jewish rabbi and that of the heaven-sent pre-existent Word could exist side by side, as in that most famous of all Johannine “oxymorons”: “the Word became flesh.” The Jesus of John’s Gospel is therefore a religious teacher *with a difference*—issuing startling claims and performing powerful “signs”—but a religious teacher nonetheless.

¹²⁰Cf. E. P. Sanders, *Jesus & Judaism* (London: SCM, 1985), 61–76.

¹²¹*Ibid.*, 3.

¹²²Cf. J. P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew* (2 vols.; New York: Doubleday, 1991 and 1994); G. Vermes, *Jesus the Jew* (New York: Macmillan, 1973).