

# BY WHAT AUTHORITY? NEW TESTAMENT PERSPECTIVES ON THE AUTHORITY AND LEADERSHIP OF JESUS

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## *Introduction*

**T**HE QUESTION OF AUTHORITY and its use by leaders is one which engages people in our world today, whether the discussion is of secular authority or sacred. Church leaders, from televangelists to the Roman Catholic Curia, are the targets of claims that their exercise of leadership is at times inappropriate because it is exercised from above and outside. Some ecclesial groups, like the Latin American Basic Ecclesial Communities and North American Women-Church, proclaim a new locus of authority, an authority from within the local community, seen as originating in the gospel mandates of freedom and justice.<sup>1</sup>

Theologies of liberation, with their emphases on empowerment of the oppressed and transformation of the social order, are aware of the enormous potential for abusing authority as well as its immense liberative capacity. They hold that when authority is properly invested, it becomes a powerful force for cooperation with God in bringing about the active presence of the realm of God in this world. So it is that liberation theologians, and I count myself one, look to the bible for indicators of the meaning of authority.

Inevitably such controversies about the appropriate exercise of authority and leadership with a Christian context seek the New Testament for legitimation and clarification of one or another of the conflicting positions. Yet the choice of a single proof text to support a position denies the creative variety of theologies in the New Testament canon. We are possessors of a flexible and pluriform

canon, one which is able to contain in tension a number of viewpoints,<sup>2</sup> and no single voice should be isolated as the sole support of a position on authority.

Yet the figure of Jesus stands out for Christians as a model of authority and leadership, even as he embodies a profound paradox:

For the Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, Jews and Greeks alike, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God (1 Cor 1,23-24).<sup>3</sup>

How are we to understand that perplexing phrase, 'Christ crucified', and what meaning does it have for us in struggling with the issues at hand? It seems to me that if there is one notion which unites early and late voices, simple and sophisticated theologies and radical and conservative viewpoints in the New Testament, it is the image of Christ on the cross. For no one of the voices in the canon is it a simple idea. Greek *Christos* renders the Hebrew *mesiah*, which means anointed one, that is, the royal ruler. Regardless of whatever connotations Messiah had in Second Temple Judaism, the royal implications of the term were not overlooked.

Yet a *crucified* royal one seems to play into the intentions of Pilate, who ordered the mocking (and offensive) title 'King of the Jews' attached to the cross (Mt 27,37, Mk 26,15, Lk 28,38, Jn 19,19). But the followers of Jesus refused to let the secular world have the last word, and their insistence on 'Christ crucified' shows that this tremendous paradox was the basis of their belief and praxis.

But in investigating the question of authority, does one half of the phrase have greater meaning than the other? If we seek to know about authority, we are inclined to investigate 'Christ', which Christians believe transcends the Davidic/royal meaning of anointed one in a political sense to embrace divinity and relationship with God, surely the ultimate authority. Yet it is only in the light of the cross, with the adjective 'crucified', that the interpretation above is meaningful. From 1 Thessalonians to 2 Peter, the definitive act of God through Jesus was redemption, effected through the cross.

Therefore I plan to examine multiple voices of the New Testament for their views of 'Christ crucified', and to examine these views in the light of a liberative hermeneutic which seeks to speak

to the world today about the type of authority meaningful in the Churches of Christ. Three major traditions are represented among the New Testament writings. These are the Pauline, the Synoptic/Apostolic,<sup>4</sup> and the Johannine. The Pauline tradition focused primarily on the death and resurrection of Jesus for its understanding of the Christ event. The Synoptic/Apostolic tradition looks to the earthly life of Jesus which leads inexorably to the crucifixion for its focus. The Johannine tradition emphasises a pre-existence and the close inner connection between God and Jesus in its depiction of the life and death/resurrection of Jesus.

Each tradition was shaped in, and directed towards, a community of believers who sought from these collected and refined traditions not only the focus of their beliefs in the Son of God, but their own basis for Christian existence and practice. *What* they preserved about Jesus, *how* they preserved it and *what use* they made of the preserved recollections and interpretations become more important in this approach than questions of what 'really happened' in Jesus's life. I believe that these three sets of writings which reflect the sixth, eighth and tenth decades of the Common Era share an understanding of the authority of Jesus and of his example of leadership, even as they exhibit a striking variety of styles in which this understanding is preserved.

#### *Pauline traditions*

[Jesus Christ], though he was in the form of God did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather he emptied himself taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross (Phil 2,6-8).

In this early Christian hymn,<sup>5</sup> which Paul uses with evident approval in his letter to the Christian community at Philippi, the authority of Jesus is seen as that which he receives through God. If pre-existence is described in verse 6, that authority is graphically described as being let go. This humbling of Jesus leads to his exaltation by God (Phil 2,9, 'Because of this . . .'). As a result of obedient suffering, he is given greater power and authority by God. The bent knees and confessing voices of all beings in the three-storied universe reflect the post-resurrection status of Jesus as Lord.

An even more striking interpretation is available if verse 6 refers to the human Jesus's refusal to seek divine status (and Paul gives no evidence of knowing of pre-existence for Jesus). Then 'in the form of God' is interpreted in the light of Gen 1,26-27, and 'equality with God' in the light of the first *adam*'s quest in Gen 3,5-6; thus the divine prerogative in exalting Jesus as Lord is shown even more strongly.<sup>6</sup>

Paul further describes the power of Jesus as Lord being given him by God ('descended from David according to the flesh, but established as Son of God in power according to the spirit of holiness through resurrection from the dead . . .' Rom 1,3-4). This power is given Jesus by God so that human beings are enabled to become daughters and sons of God (Rom 8,14). In the Pauline view then, God is different from and greater than Jesus (1 Cor 15,24-28). It is God's authority which guarantees the message of God, and God who leads in the plan of redemption through the cross.

Jesus is God's agent, messenger and message to all humanity of what is planned for us, as Paul argues in 1 Cor 15,12. 'If Christ is preached as raised from the dead, how can some among you say there is no resurrection of the dead?' Paul reasons that Christ is a new archetype for humanity, replacing the old and incomplete archetype of Adam who brought death. Thus if Jesus and Adam stand in analogy to one another, Jesus too is a creation of God, who like the Earth-Creature (Adam) and the Mother of All the Living (Eve) has a role to play in human history. The mortality of Adam and Eve spoke of the mortality of the human person. But Christ, 'the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep', reveals for us God's plan for all who have faith.

Jesus thus functions in God's redemptive plan as the instrument of reconciliation, 'God was reconciling the world to himself [sic] in Christ' (2 Cor 5,19). Jesus is God's best instrument to date (in the Pauline tradition's reading of salvation history) to bring about right relations with God, severed by human sin and unreconcilable by any other means<sup>7</sup> (Rom 1 and 2).

#### *Synoptic/Apostolic traditions (The Gospel of Mark)*

The Pauline traditions focused on the death and resurrection of Jesus, but ignored the earthly ministry of Jesus as redemptive. The first of the extant gospels to be written, the Gospel of Mark

recognizes the final events in the earthly career of Jesus as important, but sets them in context with the life of Jesus, which it presents in narrative as the working out of a commission to be the 'beloved son'.<sup>8</sup> I will focus on the Gospel of Mark, recognizing that Mark formed the basis which Matthew and Luke modified according to the needs of their communities.

Devoid of any stories about the human origins of Jesus, and (in the oldest Greek manuscripts) of any resurrection appearances, the author of Mark concentrates our interpretation of Jesus on his words and his works.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the first half of Mark concentrates detail in the mighty deeds of Jesus, often only summarizing his teaching, as in the early scene in Capernaum in Mark 1,21-28. The reader/hearer learns *that* Jesus taught, but not *what* he taught (1,21-22). Rather, the focus is on *how* he taught: with authority notably different from that of the scribes. It is in 1,23-28 that we encounter details with the narrative. A demoniac is in the synagogue, a brazen challenge by a messenger of evil to the messenger of good (1,14). When the demon comes face to face with the person who resisted Satan's temptation (1,12-13), the unclean spirit can only cry out, 'What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? . . . I know who you are, the Holy One of God!' (Mk 1,24). Jesus silences and expells the unclean spirit, and again the crowd is amazed (Mk 1,22a.27a) and comments anew on his authority to command spirits (Mk 1,22b.27b).

Yet in Mark's carefully arranged interpretation of the life of Jesus, the believing reader/hearer is being challenged to echo the demon's question, 'What have you to do with us?' Are we to agree with the synagogue crowd in praising the authority of Jesus? Astonishingly, it is the overpowered demon who reveals the answer: 'You are the Holy One of God'. 'The Holy One of God', like 'Christ crucified', focuses the way for the author of Mark. Jesus is no independent wonder-worker, but he comes as God's agent on earth, an agency of sonship, to be sure, still the visible agent of the unseen God known to Mark's readers/hearers only as a voice (1,11), an overshadowing cloud (9,7), an unearthly gloom in early afternoon (15,33) and a rending earthquake (15,38). Jesus is 'of God', and as such does no work on his own.

But the first half of Mark tests the believer by concentrating on the deeds of Jesus. In rapid succession Jesus exorcizes, heals, cleanses a leper, forgives sin and cures a paralytic, challenges the teaching of Jewish leaders, raises a young woman from the dead,

feeds multitudes, walks on a stormy sea, exorcizes a demon at long distance, restores one man's hearing and another's sight. Following these impressive acts of authority, Jesus asks who people suppose him to be. The disciples hazard some guesses: John the Baptizer *redivivus*, Elijah or a prophet. Then Jesus asks for their opinion, and Peter speaks for the group when he answers, 'You are the Messiah' (Mk 8,29). Jesus silences them and reveals that '[t]he Son of Man must suffer greatly and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and rise after three days', a shocking revelation. He then goes on to teach the crowds and the disciples that he is a model to them of obedience to God's will, and that at the end of days, this same Son of Man 'will come in his Father's glory with the holy angels' (Mk 8,38).

This amazing transition from increasing power to suffering obedience is marked by two uses of the title 'Son of Man', absent up to now in Mark. In Jewish apocalyptic, the Son of Man is God's agent of judgment and victory in the last days. That Jesus is the Son of Man is clear to the believer from the phrase 'his Father's glory', since s/he knows that God is Jesus's Father (1,11). Thus God's Son in this human form ('son of man' in Hebrew means 'human being') will be scandalously devoid of access to power in order to be obedient to divine will.

From this point on Jesus does few mighty acts in the Gospel. The Transfiguration is really God's revelation to the three disciples of Jesus's sonship and agency. 'This is my beloved Son. Listen to him' (Mk 9,7b). Jesus heals a boy afflicted by seizures as a result of a demon after the disciples have failed. But their question to him, 'Why could we not drive it out?' receives a notable reply: 'This kind can only come out through prayer' (Mk 9,28b.29). Again we see that Jesus does not exorcize and heal on his own, but through God's power asked for in prayer.

Next, Jesus cures blind Bartimeus and curses a fig tree, his last acts of power. In the last quarter of Mark, Jesus steadily abdicates his access to God's power.<sup>10</sup> He allows Judas to go off to betray him (14,21), admits that Peter will deny him (14,27) and struggles with conformity to God's will in Gethsemane (14,32-42). In stunning contrast to the first half of the Gospel, Jesus is overtaken by a crowd with swords and clubs (14,43-52), yet he stilled a raging inland sea. He stands silent before lying accusers (14,56-61a), yet he silenced demons. He receives a condemnation of blasphemy (14,61b-64), yet he forgave sins in God's name. He is spat on,

blindfolded, mocked and struck (14,65), yet he gave command to a legion of demons. He is silent in the face of Pilate's questions (15,1-4), yet he will come as the triumphant Son of Man. A murdering rebel is released in his stead (15,6-15), yet he gave life to Jairus's daughter. He is mocked as King of the Jews by the Roman soldiers (15,16-20), yet Peter identified him as Messiah. He is brought to Skull Place to be executed, where he is mocked by his own people (15,22. 29-32), yet they were once astonished by his words and deeds. He cries out in abandonment, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (15,34), yet he twice heard God call him 'Son'.

While Jesus releases the power given him by God, God's power is nonetheless evident in the three hours of gloom and in the earthquake which tears the Temple sanctuary veil (15,33.38). And after the spare announcement of the resurrection, 'He has been raised; he is not here' (16,6), the messenger tells the women that Jesus's authority has been restored by God: 'He is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him, as he told you' (16,7b). The one who raised Jesus gives Jesus's words their guarantee. The story has come full circle and is now complete. The Jesus who came from Galilee (1,9) will go back there (16,7). Jesus has lived out his mission as God's agent, has shown that the realm of God is at hand, that the time is fulfilled (1,15). He will come again, 'seated at the right hand of Power and coming with clouds of Heaven' (Dan 7,13, Mk 14,62) in his Father's glory (8,38) as the agent, judge and vindicator.

### *Johannine traditions*

Like the Marcan Gospel, the Gospel of John seeks redemptive meaning within the ministry of Jesus. But it goes beyond the boundaries of Jesus's earthly life to establish his pre-existence. The traditions which stand behind the Johannine gospel are often different than those represented in the Synoptic/Apostolic tradition, as evidenced in the markedly different literary style, narrative format and theology.<sup>11</sup>

Whereas the first announcement of Jesus's sonship in the Gospel of Mark came at his baptism (Mk 1,11), we learn that Jesus is God's Son in the Fourth Gospel's powerful prologue. In 1,1-18 we learn that Jesus is God's message, the dynamic *Logos* (Word) present at creation, now tabernacled in the created world. This incarnational presence came about so that the visible Son might

reveal the unseen God to us (1,18). It is this revelatory function which runs through the Fourth Gospel.<sup>12</sup> Just as John the Baptizer states openly that he is not the Messiah but the forerunner (1,20; 3,28), so Jesus states again and again that he is God's agent, and that the power and authority which he exercises is God's (3,34; 5,17. 19ff; 6,38; 7,14-18; 8,26-29; 12,27-28. 44-50; 14,28; 16,28; 17,25).

Unlike the Synoptic/Apostolic tradition, the Johannine tradition sees this revelation in only a few carefully selected signs (the Fourth Gospel does not use the word 'miracle'). The signs speak to us of the inauguration of the Messianic era (2,1-11), of renewed life through belief in Jesus (4,46-54), of the enabling word of God through Jesus (5,1-18), of the bread of life (6,1-65), of the light of the world which gives perceptive vision (9,1-41), of new life in the glory of God (11,1-44). The final sign anticipates the glorification of Jesus through the cross (12,23-25).

Throughout the gospel Jesus is deliberate and powerful. John locates the cleansing of the Temple in the beginning of his narrative. While in the Synoptics this episode provides the rationale for Jesus's execution, here it stands as Jesus's public declaration of struggle with the cult and teachings of the Jewish leaders. 'Take these out of here, and stop making my Father's house a marketplace' (2,16). Jesus returns to Jerusalem again and again to confront the faithless leaders (8,12-59; 12,20-50). And it is not only religious authority which Jesus challenges. When the soldiers come to arrest him in the Garden, it is they who fall to the ground before Jesus's 'I AM' (18,4-8), and a bemused Pilate discusses kingship with his bound prisoner (18,33-38).

Jesus is so clearly the leader of the disciples (there are no Johannine parallels to the Synoptic struggles for primacy among the disciples—such a quarrel is unthinkable in John) that it is shocking to the reader/hearer when Jesus washes the feet of the disciples. The group is gathered for a meal, and during supper Jesus rises from his place. 'Fully aware that the Father had put everything into his power and that he had come from God and was returning to God . . . he took off his outer garments. He took a towel and tied it around his waist' (13,3-4).

The contrast in this verse is striking. Jesus is *fully aware* of self, of identity, and of origins, yet he undresses to become a slave. The group is described as 'his own' whom he loved,<sup>13</sup> and so women and men disciples were present, making this deed even

more remarkable in the patriarchial context of the time. Jesus begins to wash their feet and to dry them on the towel around his waist. Once the foot washing is ended, Jesus interprets his deed in the action-discourse pattern so familiar in this gospel.

'Do you realize what I have done for you? You call me "teacher" (*Rabbi*) and "master" (*Kyrios*), and rightly so, for indeed I am. If I, therefore, the master and teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another's feet. I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do. Amen, amen, I say to you, no slave is greater than his master nor any messenger greater than the one who sent him' (13,12b-16).

Thus the prime example of Jesus's leadership in John, like the Pauline paradox of 'Christ crucified' and the Markan suffering Son of God, is a paradox. The magisterial Jesus takes the role of a slave as a model for the disciples. In this regard, it is important to see that Jesus has been sent by God as an agent, and the disciples are sent by Jesus as agents. In each case, the agent is totally identified with the sender. 'I have given them the glory you gave me, so they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me' (17,22f). This is leadership from within the community, which shares equally with all who belong, not setting one above another, as Jesus never creates an elite Twelve Apostles in the Fourth Gospel. In spite of the 'otherness' of the Johannine Jesus, the gospel provides the believer with an accessible, though challenging, way of following Christ, who loved 'his own'.

### *Conclusions*

We have highlighted aspects of three major traditions within the New Testament. All converge around the crucified Jesus, even as each evidences different interpretations of that central reality. While they agree that Jesus is God's agent, whose leadership is based on living out the visible presence of the invisible God, they focus on different aspects of the results of such presence for human beings. In one case it is new relationship with God as daughters and sons. In another it means a community of people who place their trust solely in God's power even as Jesus did. In a third we see agents initiated by Jesus, sent forth as persons with God's own spirit in them.

These multiple voices remind us that the early Christians neither had nor sought a one-dimensional portrait of Jesus. Rather, they

trusted in the abiding spirit to guide them in their efforts to claim and use the authorizing power of God as they imitated Christ. For 'Christ crucified', the paradox and the model, challenged them, no less than us, to engage in the mighty task of obedience to God in the use of our authority within community.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> L. Boff, *Eclesiogenese: As comunidades eclesiais de base reinventam a Igreja* (Petropolis, RJ, Brazil, 1977). ET *Ecclesiogenesis. The Base Communities reinvent the Church* (Maryknoll, NY, 1986), pp 1-9.

<sup>2</sup> L. T. Johnson, *The writings of the New Testament, an interpretation* (Philadelphia, PA, 1986), pp 536-7.

<sup>3</sup> All Biblical quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from the Revised Edition of the New Testament of the *New American Bible* (1988).

<sup>4</sup> I use this term to distinguish the inclination of this tradition to support and reverence apostolic leadership, as well as to form its communities along more hierarchical and authoritarian lines, in distinction to the Johannine traditions, which featured a radical equality among community members, a self-consciously separate ecclesial stance vis-à-vis the 'great church', and the different Jesus-traditions preserved and reflected upon. So R. E. Brown, *The community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York, NY, 1979).

<sup>5</sup> Johnson, p 344.

<sup>6</sup> Notes in the Revised New Testament, *The New American Bible*.

<sup>7</sup> P. Achtemeier, *Romans* (Atlanta, 1985), p 44.

<sup>8</sup> R. C. Tannehill, 'The Gospel of Mark as narrative christology', *Semeia* 16 (1979).

<sup>9</sup> D. Rhoads and D. Michie, *Mark as story. An introduction to the narrative of a Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982).

<sup>10</sup> Tannehill, p 81.

<sup>11</sup> Brown, p 106.

<sup>12</sup> G. R. O'Day, *Revelation in the Fourth Gospel, narrative mode and christological claim* (Philadelphia, 1986).

<sup>13</sup> E. Schüssler Fiorenza, *In memory of her. A feminist theological reconstruction of Christian origins* (New York, 1984), pp 324-325.