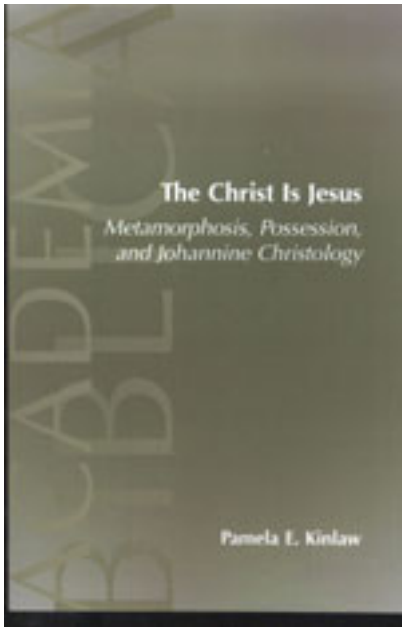


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The Christ Is Jesus: Metamorphosis, Possession, and Johannine Christology

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The first chapter must be read carefully to understand and appreciate Kinlaw's approach, and especially her terminology. Her aim is to understand "Jesus' humanity/divinity" (2) in the Fourth Gospel and the Johannine Epistles against the background of the "ancient Mediterranean context" (1) in which gods were believed to appear on earth. Although she appreciates Paul Anderson's detailed classification of approaches to Johannine Christology, she surveys three such approaches as being of special interest to her own work. First, the history of religions approach posited various backgrounds as the defining soil out of which Johannine Christology grew. The most important figure, Kinlaw asserts, is Rudolf Bultmann, whose dependence on gnostic, especially Mandaean, parallels has been largely dismissed. Kinlaw herself seems to be less impressed by the lateness of the sources than by the fact that several scholars have "demonstrated the preponderance of descending-ascending redeemer figures in the Mediterranean environment without recourse to late gnostic evidence" (3)—which of course sets the reader up for the breadth of her own sweep through the sources. Still, within *die religionsgeschichtliche Schule*

(which she anglicizes to *Religionsgeschichte Schule*), Kinlaw briefly surveys and largely dismisses evidence for the influence of the θεῖος ἀνὴρ concept on John and notes the impact of the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls: “No commentators would argue at this point for an exclusively non-Jewish background to the Gospel” (5–6). Second, Kinlaw lumps together a substantial number of commentators under what she calls “Jesus’ Humanity/Divinity Approach” (6–8). There is a bit of terminological confusion here, since, as we have already seen, “Jesus’ humanity/divinity” is in fact the focus of her entire inquiry. What she has in mind here, however, are those discussions that focus directly on the “human” and the “divine” categories without necessarily probing very deeply into the history of religions background out of which the categories might have emerged. Here, therefore, Kinlaw treats scholars as diverse as Ernst Käsemann, C. K. Barrett, F.-M. Braun, and M. M. Thompson. Third, Kinlaw surveys another set of approaches under the category “History of the Johannine Community Approach” (8–10). She has in mind the Martyn/Brown axis and the alternative proposals of Georg Strecker and Charles H. Talbert. Here the focus is on the belief systems of the community through which and to which the documents were written.

Kinlaw’s approach is closest to the first—that is, she adopts a modified history of religions approach. The modifications are of two kinds. First, she refuses to limit herself to Greco-Roman sources. By “ancient Mediterranean context,” she intends to include both Greco-Roman and Jewish antecedents. Second, her history of religions approach is baptized by a form of reception theory. In other words, she does not want to appeal to possible antecedents to *explain* the genesis of Christian categories for Jesus as he is found in the Gospel and letters of John but rather intends, by elucidating the antecedents that were already in the atmosphere, to winkle out how John’s readers were likely to have understood what he was saying and thus to gain better access to the actual Christology of these documents.

Kinlaw adopts Rabinowitz’s expression “authorial audience,” that is, the readers *presupposed* by the text, the “*contextualized* implied readers” (11). Their assumed competency can be uncovered “by examining the interrelation between the text and the context in which the text was produced” (11). The context, then, is to be reconstructed “by the use of comparative material from Mediterranean antiquity” (12): Kinlaw sets out “to survey the behavior patterns of human/divine interaction” (12), with special attention paid to the vocabulary used in these systems. “The goal of this dissertation is to place the Christology of the Fourth Gospel, particularly its understanding of the incarnation, in an ancient Mediterranean context” (12). Anticipating her conclusions, Kinlaw states, in her first chapter, that all of the diverse texts can be assigned to one of two patterns: (1) metamorphosis, “which involves a change of form”; and (2) possession, “which involves a change in substance” (12). Both expressions need unpacking. By metamorphosis

models, involving “change of form,” Kinlaw is thinking of such divine manifestations as those in which a god changes his or her appearance (i.e., form), assuming the appearance of being a human in order to interact with humans—although she includes under the category of metamorphosis those changes in which the god appears as an angel in order to interact with humans (12–13). By possession models, Kinlaw includes diverse phenomena “expressed by three continua,” namely, (1) “the expression of ecstatic behavior”; (2) “the displacement of the rational mind”; and (3) “the duration of the possession” (13). In other words, the possession model does not demand the presence of all three of these “continua,” but one or more of them must be strongly present.

In chapter 2 Kinlaw surveys her Mediterranean sources for examples of the metamorphosis model (15–40). In the Greco-Roman world, heavenly beings may appear without any alteration in form, an appearance Kinlaw labels “direct epiphany” (17–18). But metamorphosis is more common—and metamorphosis covers every kind of transformation, including humans metamorphosing into animals or inanimate objects and gods metamorphosing into humans or into nonhuman forms. Kinlaw carefully tabulates the language used, running from Homer and Ovid through Sophocles and Euripides. Clearly, the gods have the power to take on different forms at different times (“polymorphism”). Sometimes the emphasis is on their *appearance* in some form or other, in the sense of a vision or a phantom without material reality. But in any case, there is a “continuity of mind and identity” (26–29). Jewish literature, Kinlaw avers, displays a similar spread. Direct epiphany is not unknown (e.g., Exod 6:3; Num 12:5–8). Sometimes the language is very restrained (e.g., Exod 33). Once again, however, such direct epiphanies cannot compete with the prevalence of metamorphosis in Jewish literature: angels that look like humans, for instance (e.g., *Test. Levi* 8:2; notably Michael in Recension A of *Testament of Abraham*). Josephus can describe the baby Moses so generously as to affirm his “divine form” (*Ant.* 2.232.5). Not uncommonly the fallen angels transform themselves into men and visit women, especially when they are cohabiting with their husbands (e.g., *Testament of Reuben*). In Jewish literature, the potential for polymorphism seems to be “a talent of evil beings” (37). Some metamorphosis can be visionary and thus nonmaterial: Kinlaw cites Job 4:12–21, in which Eliphaz testifies that he was in a deep sleep when a spirit (רוח) glided by his face. Eliphaz could not see its appearance (מראהו), but a form (תמונה) was in front of his eyes, and a voice said, “Can mortals be righteous before God...?”

In chapter 3 Kinlaw turns to the possession model (41–67). Here a god makes his or her presence known “literally through human beings” (41; cf. Cicero, *De Div.* 1.79). Most of the relevant texts have long been studied “under the context of prophecy” (41). Kinlaw argues that the category is too rigid: the “possession phenomenon is better expressed by three continua” (41). The first runs from extremely frenzied behavior to no frenzied

behavior at all, the second from displacement of the rational mind to retention of rational faculties, and the third from occasional possess to permanent possession. The first continuum generates a discussion of “ecstasy,” both in Greco-Roman (42–48) and in Jewish (48–55) literature. In the latter, Kinlaw surveys the experiences of Daniel (8:18; 10:16–17), Jeremiah’s inability to stop prophesying (Jer 20:9), Hosea described as “mad” (μᾶνία, Hos 9:7 LXX), Elijah’s “romp in front of Ahab’s chariot” (1 Kgs 18:46), and the music that accompanies Elisha’s prophesying (2 Kgs 3:15). In none of these instances do the prophets appear to lose their rational faculties, but Saul’s ecstasy can go that far (1 Sam 10:5–13). Some streams of Second Temple Judaism are less reluctant to describe ecstasy (esp. the Sibyl and parts of Philo). The second continuum generates a discussion of “inspiration,” once again covering Greco-Roman (55–57) and Jewish (57–61) literature. Apollos breathes “huge strength into [Hector] the shepherd of the people” (Homer, *Il.* 14.236–238, 262); Athena stands beside and encourages Odysseus (Homer, *Od.* 17.360–361); Mars gives strength and bravery to the hearts of the Latins (Virgil, *Aen.* 9.717–718); and so forth. Dio Chrysostom describes an old woman who prophesies without the customary ecstasy: she “spoke with total self-control and mastery” (*1 Regn.* 56). Other examples of nonecstatic inspiration occur. On the Jewish side, God places his word into the prophet’s mouth (e.g., Num 23:5; Deut 18:18), or the word of the Lord “comes” to the prophet (*passim*). The spirit of the Lord comes upon Othniel, with the result that he judges the people and leads them in war (Judg 3:10). Kinlaw follows David Winston in asserting that Philo distinguishes between ecstatic prophecy and mystic vision, the latter being less a “psychic invasion” than a “psychic ascent” (59)—but both are characterized by a certain frenzy. On the other end of the continuum, when the Spirit is poured over Enoch, he tells the future but afterwards has full recall of the experience and understands it through his rational faculties (*1 En.* 82:7; 91:1). The third continuum generates a discussion of “indwelling” in both Greco-Roman (61–62) and Jewish (62–67) sources. “Exceptionally wise people were seen to have some added impetus of the divine in their soul” (61). The ascent of the philosopher’s mind, at least in Plato, seems to resemble a permanent possession, for such a philosopher “is always, according to his ability, able in memory to be with that by which God is divine” (*Phaedr.* 249C). On the Jewish side, Kinlaw draws attention to the permanent distribution of the Spirit among the seventy elders (Num 11:17, 25–27)—clearly a permanent arrangement. When David is anointed by Samuel, the spirit of the Lord “leapt upon David from that day forward” (1 Sam 16:13 LXX). Other witnesses are added from the literature of Second Temple Judaism.

Chapter 4 is devoted to the Johannine Epistles, examined in the order 2 John, 3 John, and 1 John (69–108). Kinlaw argues that both the authors [*sic*] and their opponents “use a possession pattern to explain the association between Christ and Jesus” (69). She holds

that some form or other of Docetism is at issue, and the opponents, adopting a variety of positions but well exemplified by (*inter alios*) Cerinthus, are thinking in terms of temporary possession (84), while the Johannine author(s) are holding out for permanent possession, especially clearly defended in μένειν ἐν and related expressions. (One cannot help observing that these expressions are *not* found to be typical expressions in the “permanent” form of “possession” literature that Kinlaw surveys.) Along the way she must give new spins to old texts; for example, πᾶν πνεῦμα ὃ ὁμολογεῖ Ἰησοῦν Χριστὸν ἐν σαρκὶ ἐληλυθότα generates discussions on “flesh” and the force of the perfect participle, leading to the conclusion that “Jesus Christ has come and permanently remains in the flesh” (101). Conversely, to deny that “the Christ is Jesus” is “shorthand for denying that Jesus and the Christ are permanently associated” (101).

In the final substantive chapter Kinlaw examines the Gospel of John (109–71). Much of the reasoning she developed in her treatment of the epistles resurfaces here: in John’s Gospel, “the permanence of this union between the divine Christ and the human Jesus is repeatedly emphasized, and it is particularly explored both existentially and spatially through the use of the term μένω” (110). Because she asks what the audience would hear as the narrative progresses (one must remember that Kinlaw understands her work to be an outworking of reception theory), she works through the entire Gospel developing this “permanent indwelling” theme. Two points are especially crucial for her case. In her treatment of John 1:14, Kinlaw argues (119–25) that “the word *became* flesh” is an expression like that in Luke 24:19, “Jesus *became* a prophet.” The complement establishes what the subject becomes without the subject ceasing to be what the subject was. The word “flesh” in this context establishes that the Word entered into “some type of real union with humanity” (122). But how? Surely when the expression “tabernacled with us” is explored, this real union must not be tied to the moment of Jesus’ conception or birth but to what took place at Jesus’ baptism (126–35). For Kinlaw, John’s Gospel presents Jesus’ baptism as the point of incarnation, and the Spirit is the “possessor.”

The final concluding chapter (173-176) merely summarizes the results and offers suggestions as to future research.

Kinlaw’s study is so sweeping that a reader may at first be overwhelmed by its comprehensiveness and by her attempt at fresh methodological rigor in a complex and disputed field. Certainly her proposals cannot be dismissed out of hand. They require painstaking evaluation. But I must confess that it is at the methodological level, which of course she claims gives her work rigor, that I have most doubts about this book.

(1) The breadth of the survey of material touching the human-divine interaction first appears to be admirably comprehensive but gradually seems to be so broad that it distorts

one's vision. First, the survey sweeps from the eighth century before Christ to the second century after him, all part of the "Mediterranean context." That is a bit like saying that a sermon preached in Cleveland in 2005 has as its context all of Western civilization from the century before Aquinas down to the present. There is some vague sense in which that is true; indeed, in the same vague sense, the horizons could be enlarged to take in Roman law, Greek language, Hebrew thought, and much more. Yet this context is so broad that it may clarify relatively little in the particularities of the sermon. It may even distort one's understanding of the sermon, especially if this millennium of background texts is being deployed by a species of reception theory to create a framework for understanding what the preacher is saying. Second, it ignores the fact that the quotations and allusions that John specifically makes are drawn from what we call the Old Testament. Not for a moment does this observation yank John out of the late first-century context of his life. Doubtless in some measure he read those Old Testament texts through filters supplied by Second Temple Judaism; doubtless he was more or less at home in the Greek-speaking world of his day, with corresponding Greco-Roman influences playing upon him. Yet there is not a hint of respect in Kinlaw's work for the fact that *John himself* seeks to ground his understanding in *specific texts drawn from one corpus of work*. How different would her analysis of John's presentation of Jesus' humanity/deity have been if the Old Testament had been the primary matrix?

(2) After a while one begins to wonder if the diversity of texts being cited as part of "the Mediterranean context" are most usefully broken down into only two categories: metamorphosis and possession. When Athena encouraging Odysseus, Elijah's "romp," Jeremiah's inability to stop prophesying, and the incarnation are all taken as instances of one kind or another of "possession," one wonders whether finer distinctions might be called for. Moreover, astonishingly different notions of "god" are in play. When the divine makes itself known through a human being (cf. Cicero, above), one must remember that many writers in the Greco-Roman tradition can alternate between "god" (sing.) and "gods" (pl.) under the assumption that the singular often betokens "godness" in a vaguely pantheistic sense, doubtless manifesting itself in many thousands of finite "gods," and sometimes, in some measure, in gifted humans. That is scarcely the frame of reference controlling a first-century Palestinian Jew. It is not exactly that Kinlaw is mistaken. One cannot help but appreciate the distinction she is drawing between gods whose appearance changes in their manifestation in this world (metamorphosis) and instances of some kind of manifestation or other that involves no unambiguous change of appearance but that is somehow associated with a human being (possession). The bifurcation is worth making. But it is difficult to see how this simple bifurcation would in any sense constitute a sufficient criterion for explaining or understanding the highly diverse phenomena she examines.

(3) Astonishingly, after so comprehensive a sweep of ancient literature, Kinlaw ignores the rest of the New Testament. We are asked to think that Ovid and Sophocles constitute part of “the Mediterranean context” of John’s readers in a way in which no Christian writer does! Of course, it is fashionable today to treat the New Testament documents as if they represent communities hermetically sealed against one another. But even if one buys into that view, Kinlaw is not claiming that John’s readers had actually read Ovid or Sophocles, only that they constitute part of “the Mediterranean context.” Why does Paul not qualify? Or Mark? Or Luke-Acts? This observation is all the more pertinent if the thesis of Richard Bauckham, not discussed by Kinlaw, prevails: the Gospels in particular were never intended for isolated Christian communities but were written with much wider circulation in view.

(4) The problem with all reception theory, unless its claims are very carefully circumscribed, is that it very easily slouches toward parallelomania. By demonstrating, to the scholar’s satisfaction, that such and such an array of texts constitutes the frame of reference in which the new text is “received,” reception theory very easily demands that the new text be interpreted in the categories of the array. In reality, just a little tweaking of the array of texts can easily generate a fresh interpretation of the new text. In any case, the array often domesticates the new text, not allowing it to speak in its own terms. Plainly put, Kinlaw’s handling of reception theory strikes me as not very sophisticated.

(5) It is Kinlaw’s handling of John that is finally most problematic. Her broad thesis, surely, is right: however we understand John’s Christology, it is closer to her “possession” model than to her “metamorphosis” model. In fact, however, she does not so much argue this as assert it (it seems pretty obvious on the face of things: God/the Word does not change his appearance while preserving his substance in the incarnation). But of the three continua that she finds subsumed under the possession model, only the continuum that runs from occasional possession to permanent possession is of any use to her. She finds little difficulty demonstrating that the Christology of the Fourth Gospel lies on the “permanent” end of the spectrum. But what is it, exactly, that is “permanent”? Possession? But even on her own reckoning, this category is astonishingly broad, so broad as to include an “association” of the divine and the human like that of Athena encouraging Odysseus. How does this give us any insight into what is important to John (beyond the mere datum of something or other being “permanent”), that is, what is peculiar to his understanding of the incarnation?

Moreover, at the textual level, Kinlaw’s treatment of John 1:14 is not reassuring. The two statements “the Word *became* flesh” and “Jesus *became* a prophet” may have some interesting syntactical parallels, but the differences cry out for exploration. In the latter, the (human) Jesus becomes something, a prophet, usually associated in some way with

the divine side; in the former, the Word, identified both as God's own fellow and as God's own self in 1:1, becomes a human being. The direction, in other words, is entirely the inverse. And that surely tilts our expectation of *when* the Word becomes flesh, that is, becomes a human being: the text does not say that the Word comes onto a human being, or possesses a human being, but *becomes* flesh. This is still "possession" as Kinlaw defines the term, but the term, which John does not use, must not be allowed so to control John's thought that the more obvious meaning of the clause is lost to view. I do not find Kinlaw's treatment of Jesus' baptism convincing, partly because of her exegesis of those passages (surely the Spirit in 1:32–34 is portrayed rather more as the one who identifies who Jesus really is than as the one who constitutes him what he is to become), but equally because of other Johannine passages that help to establish Johannine Christology that she largely ignores. For instance, John 5:16–30 is one of the most important "Son" passages in the Fourth Gospel. It is very largely a functional Christology: the Son is dependent upon and obedient to the Father, but this subordination is peculiar in that *everything* the Father does the Son also does—including creation (1:3), exercising final judgment (5:22, 30), and raising the dead (5:21, 25–26). And all of this is because the Father, who has life-in-himself, "grants" the Son to have life-in-himself (5:26)—one of the most difficult verses in the entire Fourth Gospel. None of this depends in any obvious way on the work of the Spirit or on the entailments of Jesus' baptism. This "Son" was sent into the world (3:17)—and there is not a hint that Jesus' baptism *constitutes* him "son of God," making *Jesus* become something that he was not. John 1:14 establishes that *the Logos* becomes something he was not.