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David H. Yarn Jr.

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# Some Metaphysical Reflections on the Gospel of John

DAVID H. YARN, JR.

## *Introduction*

Those persons with even the barest acquaintance with the gospels know that each is an account of the earthly life and ministry of Jesus Christ. This fact being true, it is natural to expect that Jesus would be the central subject of the gospels. The preface to the Gospel of John is a superb example of the centrality of Jesus in those books.

Through the years I have been aware of these facts, but upon my most recent reading and studying the Gospel of John the extent of Jesus' centrality in that book was impressed upon me with far greater rational force than ever before. I am not speaking here of a testimony of Jesus as the Christ—that is another matter. I am speaking of the Gospel of John as a book and the place of Jesus in that book.

It is interesting that the force of my realization came during the process of a metaphysical inquiry rather than during what might be distinguished as theological or doctrinal study. Of course, I have devoted considerable time to the study of doctrine, and I acknowledge my indebtedness to God for the witness of the Spirit that Jesus is the Christ. However, the point that I want to make is that as one reads John's Gospel with metaphysical concepts in mind it is most revealing to see how completely everything is oriented in the Lord. For example, some of the categories one might consider are being, becoming, relation, potency, unity, duality, teleology, change, process, and causation. Let me offer three brief illustrations and some general observations.

## *Being*

First, let us consider perhaps the most basic of all philosophic concepts, being. This word is the noun form of the verb

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Dr. Yarn is dean of the College of Religious Instruction at B.Y.U.

“to be.” “To be” ordinarily means “to exist.” For something to exist or to be means that it is. In case the “it” happens to refer to a person one would more properly say he is. The comparable form in the first person singular is I am. This is the name Jesus used in an encounter with the Jews who claimed to identify themselves with Abraham. In maintaining His priority to Abraham, Jesus said, “Before Abraham was, I am” (John 8:58). Here Jesus referred to Himself in the same language used in the revelation to Moses at the burning bush: “I AM THAT I AM . . . Thus shalt thou say to the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you” (Exodus 3:14). Of course, this statement has the force of saying, I am he who is.

Jesus used the phrase “I am” in many statements to His disciples, in John’s book. We all use the phrase “I am” extensively; however, the “I am” statements of Jesus are of great ontological significance. For example, He says to the Samaritan woman regarding the Messiah, “I that speak unto thee am he” (John 4:26). To others He said, “I am the true bread” (John 6:35), “I am the living bread” (John 6:51), “I am the light of the world” (John 8:12), “I am the door of the sheep” (John 10:7), “I am the resurrection and the life” (John 11:25), “Ye call me Master and Lord: and ye say well; for so I am” (John 13:13), “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6), and “I am the vine, ye are the branches” (John 15:5).

Implicit in all of these statements is the idea that Jesus has a secure ontological status. He, in His own being, is living bread, light, the door, the resurrection, the life, the way, the truth, the vine, the Lord, the Master, the Messiah.

Of course, the preface to John’s Gospel, already alluded to, relates importantly to what I am saying. It identifies Jesus as the Word, who was made flesh, and dwelled among men (John 1:14), and as Him who made all things (John 1:3). Also the preface says, “In him was life, and the life was the light of men” (John 1:4).

These statements are consistent with the others just cited which come from various parts of John’s Gospel on the point that being is in some way inherent in Jesus. Of Jesus, to say He is, is not enough, for isness in Jesus implies so many things beyond mere existence. Jesus not merely is, He is God. To be is



one thing, to be God is quite another. As stated earlier, we all say, "I am," Jesus said, "I am he."

The priority of Jesus is asserted by John in the opening sentences of his book. He said: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God" (John 1:1-2). Therefore, from the outset John identifies Jesus as the Word, says that He was with God in the beginning, and that He was God. And then, as it were, to be sure that although Jesus is God He would not be confused with the Father, he repeated, "The same was in the beginning with God" (John 1:3).

Obviously, there are many implications regarding God, the universe, and man in the foregoing, but my concern here has been to explore very briefly being as it relates to Jesus. One of the very fascinating dimensions of the foregoing, being and Jesus, introduces another metaphysical category, that of relation. One of the most interesting aspects of this category is the relation of Jesus to the Father.

### *Relation*

As is well-known, the substantial relation of Jesus and the Father was a matter of philosophical and theological controversy for centuries. I have no intentions of entering that controversy here. However, there are a few matters having to do with the functional relation between the Father and Son, which are also of an ontological character, I wish to mention.

In what I have already said I have indicated that in John's Gospel Jesus is the central subject, He is I am, *being* as it were; and yet, in addition to all of the "I am" statements of Jesus, He is represented as continuously paying filial homage to the One who sent Him—the Father. For example, He said: "For I came down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me" (John 6:38). Also, "My doctrine is not mine but his that sent me" (John 7:16). Finally, "My meat is to do the will of him that sent me, and to finish his work" (John 4:34; see also John 6:29; 6:44-45; 7:28-29; 10:36; 12:44; 13:20; 17:3).

Other passages illustrate dimensions of the filial homage in 14:28). In another place He had said, "My Father . . . is greater Jesus. He declared: "For my Father is greater than I" (John

than all" (John 10:29). "As my Father hath taught me, I speak these things" (John 8:28). "I speak that which I have seen with my Father: and ye do that which ye have seen with your Father" (John 8:38). But Jesus is not only represented as acknowledging His Father as Father, but also He acknowledges Him as His God. In giving instructions to Mary Magdalene, He said: "Go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God" (John 20:17).

These passages regarding the functional relation between the Father and the Son perhaps illumine what was said earlier about the I am statements. The essence of all those statements seems to be best expressed in the phrase, "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6), and in the words, "I am the door of the sheep" (John 10:7). That is, as I am, Jesus is not only *being* as such, but He is the "door," the "way," etc., to God, His Father. He pays homage to God as His Father and as His God, yet at the same time He, Jesus, is I am, and central to John's Gospel as the sole means of man's ever returning to God. At this point obviously, the question of the relation of the Father and the Son to man arises, but this question will necessarily have to be ignored here as much as possible in the interest of space.

The I am statements are a few of the many assertions that Jesus is the only way to the Father. Illustrating both this point and that about filial homage is this widely quoted verse: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:17). John quotes Jesus often regarding this matter. Jesus said: "This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent" (John 6:29). This clearly identifies the work of God as belief in Jesus. But Jesus being the "way" or "door" to God He said: "He that believeth on me, believeth not on me, but on him that sent me" (John 12:44). Similarly, "He that receiveth me receiveth him that sent me" (John 13:20). These statements seem to be sufficiently lucid that anyone should be able to grasp the point that one functional relation of Jesus to the Father is that He is the only means by which men can return to the Father. The statements



or verses quoted are formulated positively. There is another statement formulated negatively which John attributes to Jesus which is probably far more emphatic regarding the relation under discussion than any other. Jesus said: "He that hateth me hateth my Father also" (John 15:23). This strikes sharply at those persons who would profess belief in God and reject Jesus. Simply put, those who hate Jesus hate God also. Here is a rather summary verse on this relation of Jesus and the Father: "And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent" (John 17:3). In summary, it appears Jesus was God who was with God from the beginning. He was the Creator who saw what His Father did, was taught by Him, became His only begotten Son, obeyed His commandments (John 14:31; 15:10), identified Himself as the only way men could return to God, and declared that eternal life involved knowing both God the Father and Himself. The metaphysical question of relation in the Godhead involves a number of other questions, the most obvious of which, perhaps, being those of unity, duality, and trinity. These are rooted in such familiar verses as, "I and my Father are one" (John 10:30), "Believe me that I am in the Father, and the Father in me" (John 14:11), "When the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father . . . he shall testify of me" (John 15:26), etc. (See also, John 10:38; 14:11; 14:20; and 17:21.) Up to this point we have attempted to examine briefly certain aspects of two metaphysical issues; Jesus and being, and the functional relation between Jesus and the Father.

### *Duality*

Now let us look even more briefly at another metaphysical category manifested in several aspects of John's Gospel. That is duality. There are three basic dualisms in what might be called the metaphysics of John's Gospel. These dualisms may be designated appropriately, condition or state, process, and end. These three categories are interrelated, for the first, condition or state, has to do with things as they are; the second, process, has to do with the becoming of things in one of the two conditions or states; and the third, ends, concerns the consequences of the processes which are operative on things in one of the two conditions or states.

As regards the first category, condition or state, we observe John representing Jesus as contrasting His mortal environment with His pre-mortal environment. He speaks of earthly things and heavenly things (John 3:12). Jesus said: "He that is of the earth is earthly, and speaketh of the earth: he that cometh from heaven is above all" (John 3:31). Speaking to the Pharisees, He charged: "Ye are from beneath; I am from above; ye are of this world; I am not of this world" (John 8:23). The entire context of this passage is an illustration of this dualism. One aspect of it may be an extension of the earthly contrasted with the heavenly, or only a more vigorous and graphic formulation of the same dualism. I am inclined toward the latter interpretation. In Jesus' verbal exchange with the Pharisees they claimed Abraham as their father. Jesus said: "Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do," etc. (John 8:44). Then He said, "He that is of God heareth God's words: ye therefore hear them not, because ye are not of God" (John 8:47). Here Jesus' expression "earthly things" becomes sufficiently inclusive to include men. The earthly things and heavenly things dualism becomes a "Ye are of your father the devil" and "I am of my Father, God" dualism. (See John 8:38-47.) In this dualism, however, all men were not considered earthly, as were the Pharisees alluded to here. Of Jesus' disciples, in a prayer to His Father and God, He said: "And the world hath hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world" (John 17:14). What we see then, fundamentally, is that, according to John's Gospel, of the things that are (speaking with a grammatical interest), or (speaking with a metaphysical interest) of the things that be, some are in a condition or state called earthly and others are in the condition or state called heavenly. As regards being *per se*, ontologically this is a dualism.

Process in John's Gospel is the second example of dualism. Process has to do with the becoming of those who are mortal. Jesus speaks of two potencies in process and these constitute the processive bifurcation. He said: "It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing" (John 6:63). Also He said, "Labour not for the meat which perisheth, but for that meat which endureth unto everlasting life, which the Son of man



shall give unto you" (John 6:27). Therefore, as there is a fundamental dualism of conditions or states, earthly and heavenly, there is a fundamental dualism of process, spirit and flesh. But man does not remain mortal man. Process, whichever one is operative in the case of a given individual, gives rise to consequences. This statement brings us to the third dualism in the metaphysics of John's Gospel, ends.

Simply put, what we have here is this. First there is being; something exists; more specifically, man is. Second, not only is man; he is in a process—that is, he is active and being acted upon; or, putting it otherwise, not only is man, but he is going, or more technically, becoming. Third, not only is man, and is he going, or becoming, but he is going someplace or becoming something. The point is, the processes result in ends. Jesus speaks of two ends, a dualism of ends. For example, He said, "He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth in him" (John 3:36). Perhaps the statement which is as clear as any in John on this point is where Jesus was reported speaking on the eventual judgment of all mankind by Himself, the Son, and He said: "For the hour is coming in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, And shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation" (John 5:28-29). The dualism of ends is clearly distinguished as everlasting life and the wrath of God, or even more clearly, as the resurrection of life and the resurrection of damnation. So, in the condition or state of being, in process, and also in ends, in John's Gospel, we find dualisms.

In this brief paper I have attempted to point out some of the metaphysical aspects of the fourth gospel. Summarily, we have examined three basic concepts, being, relation, and duality. We considered being as it applies to Jesus, relation as it applies functionally between the Father and the Son, and duality as it is found in terms of condition or state of being, process, and ends.

There are other fascinating metaphysical concepts in the light or perspective of which the Johannine Gospel might be examined, such as unity, telology, causation, change, and



especially potency, but my study of that book in those terms, as well as those discussed in this paper, sustains the basic thesis of the entire Christian enterprise, that as far as man is concerned all things are oriented in Jesus the Christ.