

Exegesis of John 13:31-38

by Matthew Clendineng

One only needs to read the phrase, “In the beginning was the word,” to realize that the Gospel of John approaches the story of Jesus in a manner that is truly unique. The gospel of Mark may represent the first unpolished record of the gospel message, and Luke may have finally written “an orderly account,” but it is the author of the gospel of John that truly delves into the theological implications of God coming to earth and dying for humanities transgressions.

There are many times throughout the gospel of John where Jesus tries to make it clear to his disciples that he is God incarnate, who has come to this earth as their savior; as their messiah. Jesus also tries to make it clear that he will die; unfortunately, the disciples never fully understand. One of these occasions occurs near the oratorical climax of the text, while Jesus and his disciples are eating what will be their last Passover meal together. Judas has just left the room to setup his betrayal and Jesus tries to explain to his disciples what is about to happen. The vast majority of John’s account (13:31b-36) of this event is entirely original and holds no semblance to any part of the other three gospels.

John 13:31-32: “Now is the Son of Man glorified”

John’s gospel, while being very unique, seems to be framed with passages similar to Matthew and Mark at the beginning and end of this passage. John opens with “When he had...” (v 31) and nearly closes with, “Truly..., I say to you...” (v 38); both of these phrases are also found in Matthew and Mark.

Luke’s account of this event seems to be nearly as unique as the account in John. In the beginning statement of Jesus (vv 31-32), he seems to be telling Peter that he is being tested and he will turn away, but then he will turn again, moving back toward Jesus and he will be a leader. This sort of statement is not found in this passage in the other three gospels.

The phrase “therefore when he had” is a chronological marker denoting that Jesus waited to speak these words until after Judas had left. He waited until the disciple who would turn him over to be killed had left before he told his other disciples that his glorification was eminent. This provokes the question, “did Jesus know that one of his disciples would betray him that night? Did Jesus know which disciple?” While it is interesting to consider what specific knowledge Jesus had it is not a terribly useful line of thought as it is completely unanswerable. What is important is that Judas leaving to betray Jesus set into motion Jesus final revelation about his death and resurrection.

It seems that none of the disciples truly understood at the time what Jesus meant by the idea of the Son of Man being glorified. What would a first century Jew understand the concept of glorification to be? If we look through the religious literature of the day we can begin to piece together a first century Jewish understanding of the term “glorified.”

Perhaps one of the most interesting conclusions that can be drawn from a brief study of this term is that it is very rare for anyone or anything other than God to be glorified. In Azariah 1:2-4 Azarais prays to God saying that God's name is worthy to be praised and glorified. In Azariah 1:26-34 Azarias and his friends "praised, glorified, and blessed" God through song while in an oven being protected by the angel. Only 2 Esdras 8:48-52 speaks of someone other than God being glorified, but this passage speaks of an individual who is praised for humbling himself and not seeking to be glorified among the righteous. So we still do not find anyone other than God being glorified.

When we expand our study to the word "glorify" we discover that it is still God who is most commonly glorified (Prsi 43:29-30) but there are also a few places where God's people or God's king is glorified (Wisdom 19:22, 1 Esdras 8:25). Overall glory seems to be reserved for God or God's representative.

Even when looking at Jesus own words in this passage in John one can tell that there is a significant relationship between God and glory. It is God who is glorified and it is God who has the ability to glorify. However, interestingly enough, there is a reciprocal glorification that exists between the "son of man" and God (vv 31-32).

Going back to the first century religious literature, in only one instance does an individual glorify themselves (Prsi 10:27-28) and in that instance the individual is glorifying themselves with meekness. It would seem that it is improper for anyone, other than God, to seek to be glorified. However, there is ample evidence that God does, in fact, glorify those who are righteous (Wis 18:5-8). In fact, Glorification is the eventual end for the righteous, whereas destruction is the eventual end for the adversaries of the righteous.

Glorification has some relationship to physical appearance. In Judith 10:6-8 the evidence of the glory is in the change and beautification of the appearance of Ozias. In 1 Maccabees 2:6-13 the loss of glory comes from the destruction and ransacking of Jerusalem and the temple.

How would the first century Israelites have understood Jesus statement, "Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in Him; if God is glorified in Him, God will also glorify Him in Himself, and will glorify Him immediately"(vv 31-32)? The sense of the term glorified in this passage may be very similar to the sense of the term glory in Judith 10:6-8 or in 1 Maccabees 2:6-13. Rather than the temple being destroyed it is being brought into fulfillment.

The idea of Jesus (the Son of Man) being glorified seems to play off of this idea of the temple being destroyed. We can see that Jesus may have had this in mind if we think back to John 2:18-21 when Jesus said, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up"...He was speaking of the temple of His body.' When Jesus speaks of his glorification he seems to be speaking of his death and resurrection.

The term "glorified" (Strong's 1392) is most commonly used to mean honored, praised, or exalted; but it is only a small step from that concept to the concept of being lifted up. One who is honored is often raised above others (if only in reputation). It certainly seems possible that the term glorified could be referring to the death and resurrection of Jesus. This same idea seems to

be present a chapter earlier in John 12:16,23. This idea is supported by D. Moody Smith when he writes, “John’s distinctive understanding of Jesus’ death comes most clearly to expression in his presentation of it as Jesus’ being glorified and lifted up. Jesus’ death is the hour of his glorification, in which his glory and the glory of God are revealed.” (Smith, 119)

For Jesus to say that he would be glorified would certainly be controversial, as it is almost always God who is glorified. Those Israelites listening could take great offense if they understood him to be saying that he would be glorified by God. The seeking of glorification would be improper and would be looked down upon. The Israelites would feel that rather than seeking to be glorified Jesus should seek to be righteous. But if Jesus is in fact God (as John 1:1 suggests) then it would be perfectly appropriate for Jesus to seek glorification.

John 13:33-35 “A new commandment”

The term “Little Children” (Strong’s 5040) is unique to John’s writing; it occurs this one time in the gospel of John and then seven times in 1 John. In each instance it seems to be used as a term of affection for the audience being spoken to. It may also have a parental connotation; even though the audience is adult, they still need a parental authority figure to guide them through a difficult course. It seems that Jesus is explaining something very difficult to his disciples and he does not truly expect his disciples to understand.

The difficult thing he is telling them is that they can not come with him, so in his place he is leaving a new commandment to love one another. The phrase “even as” tells us that this is to be extraordinary love; it is to be a reflection of the love Jesus had for his disciples.

This love had just been exemplified by Christ when he washed his disciples feet prior to the Passover meal. Paul Duke writes, “Love is cruciform, downward for us, and outward through us.” (Duke, 402)

The phrase “by this” tells us that it is through the reflection of Jesus love that others will know that they are Jesus’ disciples. The word “if” again places emphasis on the fact that their witness of being Jesus’ disciples is dependent upon their having love.

It is somewhat confusing that Jesus refers to this commandment as “new”. There have certainly been commandments that existed before that promoted love (Deut 6:5). D.A. Carson sheds some light on why this commandment might be thought of as “new.” “Its newness is bound up not only with the new standard (‘As I have loved you’) but with the new order it both mandates and exemplifies.” (Carson, 484) Therefore we can understand that “new” refers to the standard of love as set by Jesus and exemplified throughout his life and ministry. In essence the new command is to be Christ-like.

John 13:36-38 – Peter’s Denial

It is interesting that Peter believes Jesus is going to a physical place in verse 36 (as denoted by the word “where”); it seems fairly clear that Peter does not understand Jesus to be predicting his own death.

Jesus response to Peter is also interesting. Jesus is telling Peter that he cannot (does not have the ability to) follow now, but he will follow later.

The phrase “Lay down [my/your/his] life” is completely unique to the gospel of John. There do not seem to be any references to this phrase (or similar phrases) in any of the other gospels. While this particular phrase is only picked up in two passages in John (10:11-17 and 15:13) it seems to be a part of a strong theme within the framework of the gospel of John.

What is it that Peter is offering to lay down? The Greek word for life (Strong’s 5590) can mean life, soul, self, or breath. It is very difficult to determine whether Peter is offering his life, self, or soul. Judging from the context it would seem that Peter is offering, in essence, everything he has.

The word “until” in verse 38 is quite striking. It tells us that the rooster’s crow is dependent upon Peter first denying him three times.

The NIV, NRS, and NLT all render the word “until” as “before”. The phrase “will not crow until you deny me” is substantially different from the phrase “before the cock crows you will have denied me”. In the first the cock’s actions are dependent upon the denial. The second is merely saying that one will happen before the other. There do not seem to be any significant theological implications stemming from this variation, but it does read differently depending upon the translation.

In the same way, the section about the cock in Luke and John seems to suggest that the cock’s actions are dependent upon Peter first denying Christ three times. No such causal relationship is found in Matthew or Mark. For that matter nothing from Matthew or Mark is repeated in Luke that is not also repeated in John (with two exceptions of the word ‘said’).

Concluding Summary

Several scholars view this passage as, essentially, an introduction to the Christ’s farewell discourse (Segovia, 478). It seems that the disciples needed to begin processing the idea of Jesus dying and this introduction allowed that process to take place. One could view Peter’s discussion with Jesus as being Peter interrupting Jesus because he could not accept Jesus would soon die.

It is interesting that Jesus final conversation with Peter is also about love (John 21:15-18). Jesus three times asks Peter if Peter loves Jesus; each time Peter affirms that he does. It is interesting that that in the passage studied above Jesus first gives a command to love one another which is followed by a prediction that Peter will deny Christ. Then after Christ’s resurrection there is a focus on Peter loving Christ almost as an illustration of the forgiving love which Christ represents and which Christ’s disciples are expected to live out.

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