

# SEMITIC LOAN-WORDS IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN: Elements of Anti-Language or Points of Contact?

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Yevgeny USTINOVICH, *Simferopol, Ukraine*

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**Yevgeny Ustinovich** was born in 1976 in Sevastopol. He holds a Bachelor's degree in English and German from the Crimean-American College and a Master's degree in Practical Theology from Cincinnati Bible University. He is a Candidate in Germanic Languages and since 2009 has been working on his doctoral dissertation on "Semitisms in the Greek Language of the Gospel of John" through the Evangelische Theologische Faculteit in Leuven, Belgium. He works as a free-lance translator/editor and teaches at both the Crimean-American College and the Institute of Theology and Philosophy in Simferopol. Yevgeny and his wife are raising a son.

Much has been said about the Aramaic substratum ascribed to the Fourth Gospel, but relatively little attention has been given to the socio-linguistic aspects of John's Semitisms and even less to their relationship with their Hellenistic equivalents. The question of why John alternates between [Ραββί] and [διδάσκαλος], between [Μεσσίας] and [Χριστός], or why he chooses to transliterate the Hebrew [אֵלֹהֵי אֱלֹהִים] (Ὠσαννά) while the Greek equivalent [σῶσον δὴ] was readily available to him, still deserves serious consideration.

The research in this direction, however, did not seem very promising within the paradigm that dominated much of Johannine studies until recent times. This paradigm resulted in a proliferation of views similar to that of Martyn who saw the Fourth Gospel as a story of a sectarian<sup>1</sup> community with its somewhat esoteric language. According to Martyn,

[The Gospel of John] was written for a community of people who had a shared history and who in the course of that history developed a highly symbolic language with numerous expressions which *they* would easily understand as referring to their shared history...<sup>2</sup>

If that community were indeed highly idiosyncratic and totally separated from "the world" (and Judaism) then it would be quite pointless to try to understand the meaning of John's Semitisms<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The term "sectarian" is somewhat anachronistic, since it is often used in its modern meaning which corresponds to the "church-versus-sect" typology outlined by the famous sociologist Max Weber. As Joe-Ann Brant (*John* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011], p. 10) observes, "the primitive church itself seems more like a sect of Judaism than what Weber calls church."

<sup>2</sup> J. L. Martyn *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), p. 146, italics in the original.

<sup>3</sup> Generally, a Semitism is understood as "... an element of vocabulary, grammar, syntax, idiom or style, which (1) deviates from expected Greek usage, and in that

(or any other terms) in reference to something or someone outside of this sectarian group. The author of the Fourth Gospel would be “preaching to the choir.” Instead of trying to relate to possible outsiders, he would be emphasizing the believers’ need for further separation from them. Hence Ashton writes about “...the prima-facie absurdity of any theory that sees the Gospel as a *Missionsschrift* written with the aim of gaining Jewish converts.”<sup>4</sup>

The last years, however, have been marked by a growing skepticism toward such views.<sup>5</sup> Bauckham<sup>6</sup> lists several presuppositions necessary for reconstructing the history of such a community and explains why none of them can be held without serious doubt.<sup>7</sup> The traditional paradigm of “parting the ways” between the church and the synagogue is also based on presuppositions that are not so firmly established as it seemed two decades ago.<sup>8</sup> While many aspects in the history of the relations between early Christianity and mainstream Judaism still remain unknown, it becomes clear that even after the decrees of Jamnia the boundaries between the real communities were not drawn as sharply as it used to be thought.

Those considerations partly explain the renewed interest in the “apologetic” aspect of John as a *Missionsschrift* (to use Bornhäuser’s term). One of the foci of the studies in this direction is what Motyer called “points of sensitivity”: issues that after the destruction of the Second Temple were hard to resolve within mainstream Judaism. One such point is “the trauma resulting from the destruction of the Temple and the cessation of its worship.”<sup>9</sup> If John was written shortly after 70 A.D., then the tragedy of the failed national liberation movement was impossible to ignore.<sup>10</sup> The Fourth Gospel, therefore, contains both a radical message of condemnation for the religious establishment responsible for the disaster and an explanation of what the true Hope of Israel is.

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deviation coincides with idiomatic Aramaic or Hebrew usage, or (2) although attested in Greek is relatively more frequent in the NT, possibly because it coincides with idiomatic Aramaic or Hebrew use” (M. Wilcox, “Semitic Influence” [*Dictionary of the New Testament Background*, Craig A. Evans, Stanley E. Porter, eds. Downers Grove; Leicester: InterVarsity, 2000], p. 1094). In this article, however, the term is used in a very restrictive way meaning a *transliterated* Hebrew/Aramaic word or expression.

<sup>4</sup> J. Ashton, *Studying John: Approaches to the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p. 36.

<sup>5</sup> See A. Köstenberger, “The Destruction of the Second Temple and the Composition of the Fourth Gospel” (*TRINJ* 26 NS, 2005), pp. 206-212, for a helpful survey of sources and arguments against Martyn’s and similar views.

<sup>6</sup> R. Bauckham, *The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic), p. 12.

<sup>7</sup> See also the insightful critique of the “Johannine community” hypothesis by Martin Hengel (*The Johannine Question* [London: SCM Press; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2009]) who points out the lack of historical evidence (including patristic testimony) for this view. According to Motyer (*Your Father the Devil?* [Carlisle: Paternoster, 1997], p. 25), Martyn “attempts no overview of Judaism in the post-70 period, does not engage at all with the issues surrounding the destruction of the Temple and its aftermath, and leaves many contemporary Jewish sources untouched.” Cf. also A. Köstenberger, “Jesus as Rabbi in the Fourth Gospel” (*Bulletin for Biblical Research* 8 [1998]), pp. 56-59.

<sup>8</sup> D. Wenham (“The Enigma of the Fourth Gospel: Another Look” (*Tyndale Bulletin* 41.2 [1997], p. 152, fn. 7) does not exclude the possibility that this view may be based on a false understanding of Jamnia.

<sup>9</sup> Motyer, ‘*Your Father the Devil?*’, p. 38.

<sup>10</sup> Motyer observes that many among the Jews of that time would agree that the Temple was destroyed because of Israel’s sins. Yet there were wide differences of opinion on who exactly was responsible, which particular sins caused the destruction, and what should be done about it. The author summarizes the chief responses to A.D. 70 (zealotry, rabbinism, quietism, apocalyptic mysticism, etc.) and places in that context the Fourth Gospel and the answers it was offering.

If John indeed had a missionary or apologetic agenda in mind, it would be natural to expect that he would use some linguistic features to help him accomplish his task. In the words of Dodd, John

...is thinking in the first place, not so much of Christians who need a deeper theology, as of non-Christians who are concerned about eternal life and the way to it, and may be ready to follow the Christian way if this is presented to them in terms that are intelligently related to their previous religious interests and experience.<sup>11</sup>

It would be natural then to expect that some terms and concepts characteristic for first-century Judaism would be used in a way that would be “intelligently related” to the religious experience of non-Christian Jews of John’s time: that [Ῥαββί] in John would have at least something in common with the Jewish teachers of the law, that [Μεσσίας] would have to do with their messianic expectations (modified, but not abandoned after the tragedy of A.D. 70), that [Ῥσαννά] would be somehow connected with their memories of Temple worship and the contemporary synagogue liturgy. Yet this rather natural initial assumption does not fit well into the framework of the “Johannine anti-language” hypothesis.

“Anti-language,” according to Halliday, is a language of an anti-society, “set up within another society as a conscious alternative to it.”<sup>12</sup> The purpose of the anti-language is to keep the outsiders out and to strengthen the in-group’s identity in “us-versus-them” kind of terms.<sup>13</sup> It is interesting to note that while Halliday himself wrote extensively on this subject, none of his examples or case studies included religious communities. A number of attempts have been made to apply his concept of anti-language to the Johannine community;<sup>14</sup> one such attempt is reflected in Malina’s article “John’s: The Maverick Christian Group.” Malina bases his approach on speech accommodation theory (developed by Howard Giles). One of the main points of this theory is that when people communicate they adjust their speech depending on whether they wish to minimize or emphasize social differences between the speaker and the receiver. Convergent forms (words, expressions, intonation patterns, etc.) indicate the speaker’s effort to accommodate the receiver’s social background; divergent ones highlight the differences and increase the social distance. Malina succeeds in showing on a number of occasions how the author of the Fourth Gospel identifies himself with the Johannine community and its view of reality. But the sociolinguistic analysis offered in Malina’s article does not include treatment of

<sup>11</sup> C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), p. 9; quoted in: L. Morris, *John* (Grand Rapids; Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 34.

<sup>12</sup> M. A. K. Halliday, “Anti-Languages” (*American Anthropologist* 78:3 [1976]), p. 570.

<sup>13</sup> See J.-A. Brant (*John*), p. 10; W. A. Meeks (“The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism,” [*Interpretation of John*. Ed. John Ashton. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997], passim); B. J. Malina and R. L. Rohrbaugh (*Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), esp. pp. 7-9; P. M. Phillips (*The Prologue of the Fourth Gospel: A Sequential Reading*. London: T & T Clark; New York: T & T Clark, 2006), pp. 59-65.

<sup>14</sup> R. H. Gundry, *Jesus the Word According to John the Sectarian* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), pp. 56-57; cf. N. R. Petersen (*The Gospel of John and the Sociology of Light: Language and Characterization in the Fourth Gospel* [Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1993]), passim, esp. pp. 1, 20, 36.

the forms converging toward the speech of the “outsiders,” particularly “the Jews.” Below it will be argued that the obvious preference given to such forms (with three examples analyzed) is better interpreted as an indication of John’s desire to relate to some Jewish readers outside of his immediate circle of disciples.

The separation between Judaism and Christianity (and correspondingly, between the two speech communities) took some time and was characterized by the attempts from both camps to eliminate, in the words of Boyarin, “the fuzziness of the borders, semantic and social, between Jews and Christians and thus produce Judaism and Christianity as fully separate (and opposed entities)...”<sup>15</sup> Yet at the time of John’s writing, the process was far from complete, so John could use many of the words, expressions, concepts, and symbols that had not fallen into disuse in both communities – Christian and Jewish, in spite of the growing antagonism between their members.

If John consistently shows Jesus’ superiority to the rituals, concepts, and institutions of Judaism, then Hebrew/Aramaic loan-words in his Gospel can also be studied in three different contexts: pre-A.D. 70 Temple worship, post-A.D. 70 synagogue setting, and the Christian community (as a higher expression of those concepts).

Such an approach implies both synchronic and diachronic treatment of the language material. Perhaps this explains a certain degree of reluctance among scholars when it comes to exploring the semantics of John’s “Judaism terms.” Although New Testament scholarship in the twentieth century was greatly influenced by the diachronic methodology of the source, form, and redaction criticism, diachronic *lexical* studies were not often seen as very productive.<sup>16</sup> In biblical lexicology, and especially semantics, Saussure’s dictum is well-remembered:

Here it is evident that the synchronic viewpoint predominates, for it is the true and only reality to the community of speakers... The same is true of the linguist: if he takes the diachronic perspective, he no longer observes language but rather a series of events that modify it...<sup>17</sup>

Thus, according to Silva, ” [w]e must accept the obvious fact that the speakers of a language simply know next to nothing about its development; and this certainly was the case with the writers and immediate readers of Scripture two millennia ago.”<sup>18</sup> While this principle certainly applies to a broad range of situations, there are some exceptions to it; Jewish religious terms of the second half of the first century A.D. would serve as good examples. Connotations of such words as *Rabbi*, *Messias*, and *Hosanna* underwent serious changes within just one generation.

<sup>15</sup> D. Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), p. 2.

<sup>16</sup> Part of the reason certainly has to do with Barr’s severe criticism of the attempts to transfer anachronistic meanings from one context to another. He believed that tendency was one of the greatest weaknesses of TDNT-based word-studies popular in the middle of the twentieth century.

<sup>17</sup> F. de Saussure (*Course in General Linguistics*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), p. 90; quoted in: M. Silva, *Biblical Words and their Meaning: An Introduction to Lexical Semantics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), p. 36.

<sup>18</sup> Silva, *Biblical Words*, 38.

It is impossible that the massive social changes of the first century A.D. would not result in altering the semantics of many words (both Aramaic and Greek), especially those related to religion and worship. The destruction of the Temple, the large-scale forced migration of Jews, the changed status of their religion in the Roman/Hellenistic world – all those factors certainly affected the meaning of the words used by the first-century Jews and God-fearers.

The formation of the Christian community and its eventual separation from mainstream Judaism is another factor strongly influencing the semantic shift. The new religious paradigm emerging in the teaching of Jesus and the Apostles enabled early believers to re-evaluate (sometimes in a radical way) many of the concepts inherited from the previous generations of Judaism. For example, the word [Κορβαῖν] (Mr. 7:11) describing a rather honorable practice in first century Palestinian Judaism acquired extremely negative connotations for the original Markan (and the larger Christian) community. The word itself remained, but the speech community's attitude to it changed, and the change could not have been more radical.<sup>19</sup>

The Johannine corpus also contains a number of such examples – words and concepts that maintain *formal* continuity with Judaism, but are used in a way that indicates severing ties with the old system of thinking. John's realized eschatology makes the diachronic semantic shift even more inevitable. The old religious features *will* become obsolete – either because the new, “messianic” meaning will transcend the older ones, or because the older ones passed away with the destruction of the Temple. The process is well underway by the time of John's writing. Throughout his Gospel, the reader finds dialogues and episodes where misunderstanding occurs precisely because of the conflict between the “new” and “old” [e.g. Jn. 2:18-22].

In some cases, the semantic shift began long before the first century A.D. and continued long afterwards. It is even possible to trace some “trajectories”: words with a tendency toward a continuous expansion (or shrinking) of their semantic fields (*Wortfelder*).

Below an attempt will be made to analyze John's use of the semantic shifts that affected three Semitic words used in John: [Παββί], [Μεσσίας], and [Ωσαννά]. Possible reasons for John's choice of those words will also be discussed. While every loan-word deserves special attention and while the Fourth Gospel contains a number of other Semitic words and expressions, those three words have been grouped together in this article as they represent one general semantic domain area: the concepts and institutions of first-century Judaism.

### [Παββί]

The Greek [Παββί] is a transliteration of the Hebrew/Aramaic [רְבִי], which originally was a personalized (first personal singular) form of [רַב]. While the basic meaning of [רְבִי] roughly corresponds to the Greek [διδάσκαλος], some Semitic

<sup>19</sup> [Κορβαῖν] in Mk. is originally Hebrew, but it underwent some further semantic shift in Aramaic outside of Christian circles. A tombstone inscription shows that it was used in a way close to “taboo,” denoting prohibition (Fitzmyer, *The Semitic Background of the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Livonia: Dove, 1997], p. 11).

connotations (that are not automatically transferred to Greek) seem to be of crucial importance. Unlike its Greek counterpart, [Ραββί] carries the notion of great respect and honor.<sup>20</sup> The Talmudic tradition contains a story that when King Jehoshaphat saw a teacher of the law, “he rose up from his throne, embraced and kissed him, and addressed him as ‘my father, my father’ (אָבִי, אָבִי), my teacher, my teacher (רַבִּי, רַבִּי), my lord, my lord *господин* (רַבִּי, רַבִּי).”<sup>21</sup>

Originally, the term could apply to any teacher of the law, but after A.D. 70 it began to be used in a more formal way, indicating someone who has undergone formal rabbinic training and ordination. This narrowing down of the semantic field came as a result of the growing influence of the rabbis, who set themselves up as custodians of orthodoxy after the destruction of the Temple. Later on, they played an important role in the separation between the church and the synagogue and were seen as formidable opponents of the growing Christian movement.

John makes it plain that Jesus never studied in any rabbinic school (7:15) and had no need of such training (7:16).<sup>22</sup> Applying post-70 A.D. criteria to the time of his ministry would be anachronistic, and John seems to be aware of the discrepancy between the earlier, general use of the term and the later, more specific one. But he overcomes this difficulty by providing the translation for the first time [Ραββί] is used – in 1:38.<sup>23</sup> In fact, [Ραββί] is the very first word the disciples speak to Jesus in this Gospel (1:38).<sup>24</sup> This “translation aside” makes John’s account relevant for both situations, bridging the growing gap between the uses of [Ραββί] as an address and as a title.

Altogether, Jesus in John is addressed as [Ραββί] eight times: by the crowds (6:25), by the disciples (1:38, 49; 4:31; 9:2; 11:8), by Nicodemus (3:2), and in 20:16 by Mary Magdalene (Ραββουσι).<sup>25</sup> Also, John the Baptist is addressed as [Ραββί] in 3:26.<sup>26</sup> In spite of that, relatively little research has been undertaken on Jesus as a *rabbi*. Verdicts by some rather influential scholars seemed quite discouraging for further studies in this area. For example, Hengel<sup>27</sup> stressed that Jesus was

<sup>20</sup> Luke, who never uses [Ραββί], seemed to be aware of this difference; thus he uses [Επιστάτα] as an equivalent of [Ραββί] (comp. Mk. 9:5 and Lk. 9:33).

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in: Lohse, “Ραββί,” TDNT, vol. VI, p. 963.

<sup>22</sup> Even though “the Jews” exhibit a very hostile attitude to Jesus in this episode at the Feast of Tabernacles, their derogatory remark in 7:35 indicates that they perceived him as a teacher.

<sup>23</sup> As Keener aptly notes, “Those who would doubt John’s Jewishness because he translates ‘Rabbi’ read the later dominance of the title into an earlier period or assume too much knowledge of Semitic languages on the part of Diaspora Jews” (*The Gospel of John: A Commentary* [Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003], vol. 1, p. 469).

<sup>24</sup> According to Keener, “In a status-conscious culture, it was appropriate for the disciples (whether wishing to become his disciples or merely to express respect) to defer to Jesus with the title ‘Rabbi’... (although this did not identify Jesus with the post-70 A.D. rabbinic movement, it did imply their recognition that he was a teacher)” (*The Gospel of John*, vol. 1, pp. 468-469).

<sup>25</sup> A “heightened” form of [רַבִּי]” (W. F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* [Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957], p. 740).

<sup>26</sup> The Baptist’s ministry had more in common with Old Testament prophetic activities than with the typical rabbinical training, but the term [Ραββί] at that time was broad enough to include him as well. Since he was the one who directed his disciples to Jesus, it helps John to draw additional (formal) parallels with Rabbinism: there was nothing unusual in disciples switching from one teacher to another.

<sup>27</sup> *Charismatic Leader and His Followers* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1981), p. 46.

a charismatic leader with apocalyptic preaching and the emphasis of Jesus' teaching was no longer on the Old Testament. In Barrett's view, "[t]he figure of Jesus does not (so John in effect declares) make sense when viewed as a national leader, a rabbi..."<sup>28</sup> Such views have also been strengthened by the widespread notion that history in John is sacrificed for the sake of theology, and that John's high Christology leaves little room for Jesus as a teacher.<sup>29</sup>

In his article "Jesus as Rabbi in the Fourth Gospel," Köstenberger strongly argues against this artificial dichotomy. He insists that

John portrays the relationship between Jesus and his closest followers in terms of customary teacher-disciple relationship in first-century Judaism. This entails Jesus' assuming the role of teacher by instructing the 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.<sup>30</sup>

Throughout the Fourth Gospel, Jesus is consistently presented as a teacher. He teaches the disciples verbally and by example (13:15), he protects them from spiritual and physical dangers (10:28; 17:12; 18:8, 11), he takes care that they pass his teaching on to others. The disciples, in turn, follow him, provide for his physical needs (4:31),<sup>31</sup> perform acts of service (6:5),<sup>32</sup> ask questions (for example, 9:2; 13:36; 14:5, 22), and become responsible for his teaching after his death (a major theme in the Farewell Discourse).

It is such similarities between Jesus and the rabbis that help the reader appreciate the radical differences between them. For example, the disciples' question in 9:2 may serve as a typical beginning of a conversation with a rabbi. This question, according to Köstenberger, "can be placed squarely within the context of contemporary rabbinic views. Underlying the disciples' statement is the concern not to charge God with perpetrating evil on innocent people..."<sup>33</sup> Rabbis habitually taught that blindness is caused by sin.<sup>34</sup> Jesus in his response (both verbally and in the act of healing) is shown to be far superior to the rabbis. But the title [Ραββί] in this pericope is skillfully used as an entry point for comparison. It invites the readers to draw their own conclusions that are likely to strengthen the impact of John's missionary effort.

As Köstenberger observes,

This address of Jesus as ῥαββί also confirms that Jesus' assumption of the identity of a Jewish religious leader provided him with common ground on which to interact with other Jewish rabbis such as Nicodemus. At the same time, the difference be-

<sup>28</sup> C. K. Barrett, *The Essays on John* (London, 1982), p. 16; quoted in: Morris, *John*, p. 242, fn. 65.

<sup>29</sup> Although in Nathanael's confession in 1:49, the Christological title "Son of God" is uttered in the same breath with "Rabbi"; so the dichotomy between Jesus as a Teacher and Jesus as the Son of God is not really unavoidable.

<sup>30</sup> Köstenberger, "Rabbi," pp. 100-101.

<sup>31</sup> But note the reversal in Jn. 21:12.

<sup>32</sup> This feature is also reversed in Jn. 13:4-5.

<sup>33</sup> Köstenberger, *John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), p. 281.

<sup>34</sup> See Keener, vol. 1, p. 777, fns. 23, 25, p. 778, fns. 26-33, 36, for references to a variety of Rabbinic sources.

tween 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.<sup>35</sup>

Jesus' interaction with Nicodemus is especially interesting since Nicodemus himself takes the initiative and uses a convergent speech form; he ascribes to Jesus (at least nominally) a status not unlike his own.<sup>36</sup> Yet Jesus chooses not to reciprocate this superficial politeness:

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 later in the Gospel Nicodemus ends up a secret follower of Jesus...<sup>37</sup>

In the post-A.D. 70 context, formal identification of Jesus with the rabbis would be problematic, but in the time described in the Gospel (around 30 A.D.), it was much easier. The fact that the crowds in 6:25 call him [Ῥαββί] is of special interest here. Earlier in this chapter (v. 14), they called him "the prophet" and tried to make him king (v. 15). When they meet him on the next day, "[t]heir polite address of 'Rabbi' suggests that their enthusiasm for making Jesus king has cooled."<sup>38</sup> Yet, while some of their hopes failed the day before, the address [Ῥαββί] shows that Jesus was perceived (by default) as a Teacher – an extraordinary, miracle-working one – but still a Teacher.

While showing that Jesus was in some way similar, but essentially different from the teachers of the Jewish law, John invites the reader to compare the authority of the rabbis with that of Jesus and shows that Jesus' authority is much greater. If Dodd's "missionary" view<sup>39</sup> of John's purpose is correct, and John did have in mind some observant Jews, they would be free to make some far-reaching conclusions from this comparison.

### [Μεσσίας]

Unlike [Ῥαββί] used by the disciples throughout the "Book of Signs" part of the Gospel, [Μεσσίας] is used by them only once, at the very beginning – in Andrew's rather paradoxical confession (1:41), and, in Guthrie's opinion, "it is evident that John intends his readers to understand this in a thoroughly Jewish sense."<sup>40</sup>

On the one hand, this confession represents a "very high" Christology – so high, in fact, that it was considered anachronistic by some. On the other hand, it reflects a

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<sup>35</sup> Köstenberger, "Rabbi," p. 109.

<sup>36</sup> Although Goulder ("Nikodemus," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 44 [1991], p. 154) sees here a parallel with Mt. 22:16: "... a similarly insincere compliment, and one which led to a trap."

<sup>37</sup> Köstenberger, "Rabbi," p. 109.

<sup>38</sup> Brant, p. 120.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. D. Carson, "The Purpose of the Fourth Gospel: John 20:31 Reconsidered" (*JBL* 106.4 [1987]), passim.

<sup>40</sup> D. Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (Leicester: Apollos; Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1990), p. 285.



very early understanding of Jesus by the disciples, understanding that simply could not have been free from widespread nationalistic prejudices. Perhaps it is one of the reasons for which the transliterated form [Μεσσίας] is never again used by the disciples: it may show their eventual growth of understanding.

If that is so, then John's purpose may have been not only to show that Jesus is the Messiah, but also "to refute erroneous ideas about Messiahship. It would be quite in accordance with this that [John] should record the disciples' first inadequate recognition of Jesus as Messiah, preparatory to unfolding in his Gospel the true meaning of the messianic office."<sup>41</sup> While Nathanael's statement, "You are the Son of God" in 1:49 represents a high Christology indeed, it is remarkable that "the Son of God" is placed between two very Jewish concepts: "Rabbi" and "The King of Israel." Jesus does not censor Nathanael's use of any of these three terms, but he hints that Nathanael still has a lot to learn (1:50-51).

The only other instance of using [Μεσσίας] in the Fourth Gospel (and in the entire New Testament) is 4:25; and that is quite remarkable, since the term is used in the most unlikely setting by the most unlikely character: the Samaritan woman at the well.<sup>42</sup> Here the use of the Aramaism [Μεσσίας] definitely creates what Nida called a *shift in expectancy*. Such shifts "depend for their significance on the fact that the reader recognizes the unusual word order, syntactic structure, or *meaning of a word*, phrase or complete sentence."<sup>43</sup> It would have been hard to find a more unusual context for Jesus' self-disclosure. Jesus is reluctant to reveal his messianic identity to "the Jews" (including Nicodemus in the previous chapter), but he freely shares it with the Samaritan woman. Perhaps he felt that in the Samaritan context, where, in the words of Macdonald, "no king was looked for and no royal prerogatives,"<sup>44</sup> his Messiahship would not give rise to false nationalistic hopes.

The Samaritan woman's use of [Μεσσίας] in 4:25 represents a very high level of speech convergence. Mistrustful and somewhat defensive at the beginning of the conversation, she gradually shows more and more trust and understanding toward Jesus. An important marker here is her acceptance of what Jesus says in 4:22: his insistence that "...salvation is from the Jews." Agreeing with this statement would imply suspension (if not rejection) of the cherished Samaritan beliefs about Mount Gerizim and the role of the Samaritan nation. Encouraged by the invitation in 4:23-24, the Samaritan woman utters a very "un-Samaritan" confession, "Οἶδα ὅτι Μεσσίας ἔρχεται, ὁ λεγόμενος Χριστός: ὅταν ἔλθῃ ἐκεῖνος, ἀναγγελεῖ ἡμῖν ἅπαντα." On the one hand, she displays some faith that the coming Messiah

<sup>41</sup> Morris, p. 140.

<sup>42</sup> This use of the word [Χριστός] in an unexpected and unusual context is a good example of John's resemanticization. As Phillips notes, "[t]he problem with Johannine language is not the novelty value of its vocabulary, but rather the interplay of meaning within an accepted mainstream vocabulary... Johannine literature exhibits... '*resemanticization*', that is the alteration of the semantic domain or cognitive categories of key lexemes used in a text" (*The Prologue of the Fourth Gospel*, p. 64, italics in the original). It is, however, important to note that resemanticization in this case does not indicate "anti-language"; rather it shows a high (and still growing) level of speech convergence.

<sup>43</sup> E. A. Nida, S.P. Louw, A.H. Snuman, and J. v. W. Cronje, *Style and Discourse* (New York: Bible Society, 1983), p. 36, italics added.

<sup>44</sup> Macdonald, *The Theology of the Samaritans*, p. 362; quoted in: Morris, p. 241, fn. 63.

has a plan for the Samaritan nation (implied by the pronoun ἡμῖν). On the other hand, she believes that this coming One will be very Jewish; he will be the [Μεσσίας], not only [Χριστός].

According to Josephus (*The Antiquities of the Jews*, XVIII: IV.2), the Samaritans were not immune to the intense messianic expectations of that time; they were also eagerly waiting for some deliverer. Josephus describes an episode in which some messianic pretender gathered a large crowd of Samaritans at Mount Gerizim promising to show them the temple vessels that Moses had hidden. The gullible Samaritans gathered only to be dispersed by Pilate. Josephus' description of this incident seems to have an ironic touch: since Moses himself never crossed the Jordan (Deut. 34:4-5), reports of his alleged activities in Palestine, especially on Mount Gerizim, were not to be thought much of. Yet, however misguided those "messianic" expectations were, it is important to note that they were closely linked with Mount Gerizim. The Samaritan woman's response in 4:25 is often interpreted as evasive (as an attempt to end a theological discussion for which she felt unqualified or to divert attention from personal issues), but her use of [Μεσσίας] seems to indicate her acceptance of Jesus' theological concepts.

While most of our knowledge of Samaritan theology comes from rather late sources, one conclusion seems to be certain: the Samaritans were not waiting for the "Son of David" kind of Messiah. They were waiting for the *Taheb*, a prophet-teacher who would restore all things. A Maccabean-style messiah would be totally outside of their theological horizon (especially after John Hyrcanus destroyed their Mount Gerizim temple in the second century B.C.). So their incipient faith in Jesus in 4:39-42 is based on the woman's testimony, not on their expectations. Later on, they progress to a more mature form of faith – based on what they heard (4:42), and this progress means their readiness to re-evaluate and reject previously held false expectations: something "the Jews" failed to do.

When the woman speaks to the townspeople about "the Christ" in 4:29, she appeals only to his supernatural knowledge of her past life – a sort of "minimal requirement" a prophet would be expected to meet. She does not mention to them her previous acceptance of the "salvation from the Jews" concept. Using the highly divergent term [Μεσσίας] in conversation with them would be counterproductive. But the term [ὁ Χριστός] here is broad enough to include even the Samaritan expectations (very different from the Jewish ones), so this synonym, a convergent one for the Samaritan community, elicits their positive response.

It is also noteworthy that by the end of Jesus' short stay with the Samaritans, their messianic concepts have undergone a radical transformation, so in 4:42 they confess him to be "the Savior of the world," giving him the title usually reserved for Caesar. Free from nationalistic Jewish constraints, Jesus' Messiahship implies universal significance, so in the words of Sir Edwin Hoskyns, "Jesus is more than either a Jew or Samaritan had comprehended in the word 'Christ.'"<sup>45</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Hoskyns, Edwin. *The Fourth Gospel*, ed. F. N. Davey (London, 1823); quoted (no page number) in: Morris, p. 241.

That observation applies not only to the situations described in the Fourth Gospel, but also to its setting and initial audience. Casey's commentary is certainly correct:

By the time the fourth Gospel was written, the Greek word 'Christ' had become an identity marker of the Christian community. The Aramaic *M<sup>e</sup>shiha*, however, still meant 'messiah' or 'anointed', and consequently had a much wider range. Moreover, after 70CE it was still in the process of crystallizing in the Jewish circles into a term for the future Davidic king...<sup>46</sup>

But while accurately observing the growing gap between the semantics of the terms [Μεσσίας] and [Χριστός], Casey seems to miss the point of the *deliberate* shift in expectancy:

While *M<sup>e</sup>shiha* was later used in Christian Aramaic as a fixed term for Jesus, meaning 'messiah' or 'Christ', it must be very doubtful whether it could be used during the first century CE as it is used in John 1:41, 7:26, 27, 31, 41, 42 and 10:24. The use of *Messias*, the Aramaic *M<sup>e</sup>shiha* transliterated into Greek, intended to mean 'messiah' and glossed by the fourth evangelist as 'Christ' (Jn. 4:25), is equally improbable, for Samaritans are not known to have used the term 'messiah'. The Samaritan woman's comment 'I know that (the) Messiah is coming' betrays a Christian perspective.<sup>47</sup>

One can easily agree that the use of [Μεσσίας] in the Samaritan context is "improbable," but if John knew anything about the Samaritans' theology at all (and there is no reason to assume he did not), the use of the very Jewish [Μεσσίας] here is a good example of the *deliberate relexicalization* – placing the lexeme in a highly unusual context where it acquires new shades of meaning. The semantics of [Μεσσίας] and [Χριστός] were substantially altered for the disciples and the Samaritans as they learned more about the nature of Jesus' mission. The two singular uses of [Μεσσίας] and the multiple uses of [Χριστός] in different contexts with widely different semantics can be interpreted as further examples of John's "language of fulfillment."

### [Ωσαννά]

The third Semitic loan related to Judaism, the transliterated form [Ωσαννά], is used in the Fourth Gospel only once. Unlike the previous two Semitic calques treated in this article and many other Semitisms in John, [Ωσαννά] is not accompanied by a translation aside. (But it is also found in Matthew and Mark's descriptions of Jesus' Triumphal Entry.) Since in John's account [Ωσαννά] is embedded in a passage from Ps. 118, analyzing the Hebrew expression originally used in that Psalm seems like a good place to start in order to trace the diachronic semantic changes occurring up to the end of the first century A.D. and the synchronic

<sup>46</sup> M. Casey, *Is John's Gospel True?* (London: Routledge; New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 95.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

ones resulting from the transfer of the expression across different languages and speech communities.

### [הוֹשִׁיעָה נָא] in Psalm 118

The Greek [Ὡσαννά] is a transliteration of the Hebrew [הוֹשִׁיעָה נָא]. The hiphil of the verb [ישע] is used in an emphatic imperative, which may indicate the urgency of the request. A good example is 2 Kings 6:26, where it expresses pleading in a most desperate situation.<sup>48</sup> In the original liturgical setting of Ps. 118:25,<sup>49</sup> the mood is very different; yet the jubilant tenor does not exclude the use of [הוֹשִׁיעָה נָא]. In fact, the cultic setting with the use of a sacrificial animal rather invites it. The Psalmist and his “choir” are approaching the culmination of their temple-worship experience<sup>50</sup> (the animal is about to be slaughtered – Ps. 118:27b): hence the request for God’s help to be manifested “now,” in their concrete time-and-space situation. From the Old Testament perspective, one can hardly think of a better moment for drawing near to God and experiencing his help. Therefore, it is not surprising that Ps. 118 was used in the processions with prayers for rain<sup>51</sup> and perhaps other urgent needs. Even less surprising is the seemingly sudden shift to the messianic theme in the Psalm (v. 26). The request for the coming of the Messiah is very urgent.

In the LXX, this urgency is reflected in the quite appropriate use of the particle [δη]: “[ὦ κυριε σωσον δη ὦ κυριε ευοδωσον δη]” (LXX Ps. 117:25). Yet neither John, nor the other Evangelists use the LXX translation when they mention the shouts of the crowd greeting Jesus on his triumphal entry into Jerusalem.<sup>52</sup> There seem to be multiple reasons for avoiding the LXX translation in the Gospels, but one of those reasons may have to do with the semantic shift: at some time during the Second Temple period, the Hebrew expression [הוֹשִׁיעָה נָא] acquired a semantic extension, in which some of the original connotations lost their relevance, and new ones became prominent.

The urgency of the request expressed by the [הוֹשִׁיעָה נָא] did not seem to be diminished by the daily use of the Psalm. So every morning, when the Hallel (of which Ps. 118 was a part) was sung in the Temple, “every man and boy would have a lulab (a bouquet of willow, myrtle, and palm branches)... when the choir reached the ‘Hosanna!’ in Ps. 118:25.”<sup>53</sup>

The liturgical use of the [הוֹשִׁיעָה נָא] was one of the factors resulting in a semantic shift: some of the connotations lost their relevance, while others came to the fore and became fossilized. The expression has also shown a tendency toward conver-

<sup>48</sup> Cf. a rather literal translation “σωσον” in the LXX (IV Kings 6:26).

<sup>49</sup> According to Köstenberger, “[i]n its original context, Ps. 118 conferred a blessing on the pilgrim headed for Jerusalem ..., with possible reference to the Davidic king... Later rabbinic commentary interpreted this psalm messianically” (*John*, 370).

<sup>50</sup> One can discern in this section (Ps. 118:19-27) the movement of a liturgical procession: the gates (vs. 19), the sacrifice, and the altar (vs. 27).

<sup>51</sup> Lohse, “Ὡσαννά,” TDNT, vol. 9, p. 682.

<sup>52</sup> Matthew (21:9), Mark (10:9-10), and John (12:13) transliterate the shouts uttered in Hebrew; Luke (19:37-38) chooses to paraphrase them.

<sup>53</sup> Köstenberger, *John*, 369-370. Cf. Lohse, “Ὡσαννά,” TDNT, vol. 9, pp. 682-683.

sion (or affixless derivation): *Hosanna* became an adverb,<sup>54</sup> then a noun,<sup>55</sup> which in turn kept acquiring new meanings.

### [Ὡσαννά] in John 12

Transfer from one language to another also contributed to the semantic shift, making the expression function almost independently from its original Hebrew background. As a result, even a brief survey of commentaries and lexicological sources shows a wide range of meanings. Some dictionary compilers (Abboth-Smith,<sup>56</sup> Bauer,<sup>57</sup> Danker,<sup>58</sup> Liddell and Scott,<sup>59</sup> Moulton,<sup>60</sup> Murre,<sup>61</sup> Perschbacher<sup>62</sup>) see *Hosanna* as a cry for help; others (Bailey;<sup>63</sup> Vine<sup>64</sup>) interpret it as a shout of praise. Many allow both meanings and acknowledge the difficulty of combining them. John could be quite aware of this ambiguity and may have used it deliberately.

Brunson points out at least four reasons why John preferred to transliterate *Hosanna*:

It may be that John followed early Christian tradition when he transliterated *Hosanna*, but since he was aware of the translation options this represents an intentional choice... John points the reader back to the original royal context of Ps 118. This makes an original reading of *Hosanna* more likely, but the transliteration of the phrase itself also serves to draw attention to the ancient royal ritual. First, it calls to mind Ps 118's most familiar sound/word, thus emphasizing the psalmic context for the Entrance. Second, as the most recognizable liturgical formula of Tabernacles, the *Hosanna* would especially evoke the complex of traditions shared by the festival and Ps 118. Third, it enhances the liturgical character and timbre of the Entrance. Fourth, it concentrates the reader's attention on John's purpose: a simple cry of [σῶσον δὴ] would communicate much more of an urgency of supplication when John wants to evoke an ancient royal ritual. This bears not on what meaning *Hosanna* carries in John, but on how it functions.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Augustine went even so far as to consider it practically an interjection. He believed that *Hosanna* in John 12 expresses "rather a state of mind than having any positive significance" (quoted in: Morris, 519, fn. 42).

<sup>55</sup> For example, the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles was called "The Great Hoshanna" (*Hoshanah Rabbah*) (cf. Tavori, "Hoshanah Rabbah as a Day of Judgment"). The palm branches (lulabs) at some point also began to be called "Hoshannas" (*The Expanded Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* [Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1984], p. 564).

<sup>56</sup> "Save, we pray!" (*A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994], p. 491).

<sup>57</sup> "... 'hilf doch', zur lithurg[ischen] Formel gewordener Bittruf..." (*Griechisch-deutsches Wörterbuch zu den Schriften des Neuen Testaments und der frühchristlichen Literatur* [Berlin; New York: Walter de Gruyter], 1988, p. 1792).

<sup>58</sup> "...an appeal that became a liturgical formula" (*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Christian Literature* [Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2000], p. 1106).

<sup>59</sup> "...save now!" (*A Greek-English Lexicon* [Oxford: Clarendon Press], 1996, p. 2040).

<sup>60</sup> "...hosanna! save now, succour now" (*The Analytical Greek Lexicon Revised* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978], p. 444).

<sup>61</sup> "...*help toch! Schenk heil! Ook alleen: heil! (zegenwens)*" (*Lexicon Nieuwe Testament* [Vught: Skandalon, 2009], p. 846, italics in the original).

<sup>62</sup> "Hosanna! save now, succor now" (*The New Analytical Greek Lexicon* [Peabody: Hendrickson, 1990], p. 445).

<sup>63</sup> "...cri de joie, de triomphe" (*Dictionnaire grec-français* [Paris, Hachette, 2000], p. 2190).

<sup>64</sup> "The word seems to have become an utterance of praise rather than that of prayer, though, originally, probably, a cry for help" (*The Expanded Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, p. 564).

<sup>65</sup> A. C. Brunson, *Psalm 118 in the Gospel of John* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), pp. 212-213.

If the pericope of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is read against this kind of background, the crowd's shouts "Hosanna!" indicate that Jesus is replacing the Temple with himself (a continuation of the theme begun in 2:19-21 and 4:20-24). First, he is the proper *object* of such a liturgical address (normally directed to Yahweh in the Temple); and secondly, the *place* where *Hosanna* is to be sung from now on is not the Temple precincts, but Jesus' immediate presence. It is not that the crowds really understand such an important theological issue – even the disciples do not have a lot of understanding before the Resurrection (2:22; 12:16), but, as it often happens in John, non-believers speak better than they know (e.g. 11:49-51; 12:19; 19:14, 21-22).

As one of the royal psalms, Ps. 118 serves John's purpose very well. The Psalm seems to have been originally written on the occasion of a Davidic king's military victory. The victory that Jesus had won shortly before is overcoming death itself by raising Lazarus (12:9-11). Thus [Ὡσαννά] may be interpreted as a cry of homage from the enthusiastic, although fickle crowd.

In the literary context of the Gospel of John, *Hosanna* is an important element strengthening the cohesion of the narrative (parallel development of two themes: Jesus as King and Jesus as the fulfillment of the Temple). It is possible that using the transliterated *Hosanna*, John was challenging unbelieving Jews (or crypto-believers among them) to reflect on their synagogue worship experience, especially on those aspects of it that seemed to be lacking when compared to Temple worship (unavailable after A.D. 70) or to worshipping Jesus (an option available to all the readers).

For non-messianic Jews of that time, *Hoshanna* presents a rather dissatisfactory worship experience and theological concept. Ideally, *Hoshanna* is to be sung in the Temple (which is destroyed), with the application of the animal sacrificial system (not available anymore), in the presence of a triumphant Davidic king (nowhere to be found). In Christian worship, on the other hand, all these elements find their ultimate fulfillment: [Ὡσαννά] is sung to Jesus who replaced the Temple and its sacrificial system with himself and established his reign through his triumph over death.

If this conclusion is strengthened by similar results in studying other Judaism-related terms in John, an improved argument could be made for John as a *Missionschrift* for unbelieving Jews and for those secret believers who were contemplating a public confession (testimony) of their faith. Although Hellenistic equivalents – [διδάσκαλος], [Χριστός], and [σῶσον δὴ] – were available to John, he deliberately chose to use the Semitic calques, quite possibly to establish additional points of contact with those readers who had not yet come to full faith in Jesus and were not ready to leave the synagogue. These considerations may result in a radical reassessment of the notion of John's "anti-language," as this notion contradicts, among other concepts, the sociolinguistic aspects of John's use of Semitisms.

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