WORSHIP IN THE SPIRIT OF TRUTH:
PRAYER & WORSHIP IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN & EARLY FATHERS

Dorothy Lee

The scholarly writings of Eric Osborn’s work, over several decades, show a remarkable ability to span the New Testament and Patristics. The bridge between them is the theology of the New Testament writers—Paul, John, the Synoptics—and its interpretation in those crucial centuries following the events of Easter.

The story of Jesus’ encounter with a Samaritan woman involves, at its centre, an important conversation about worship. The first scene of the narrative uses water as a symbol of the Spirit and of the revelation that the Johannine Jesus embodies (Jn 4:7-15). The woman at this stage has not reached full understanding, but is slowly growing in comprehension. In the second scene the focus switches from water—although the well is still the dramatic centre-piece of the narrative—to that of sacred place (tovpo~, 4:16-30). In asking the woman to call her husband (anhr, 4:16), Jesus is not so much making moral judgements but rather seeking to uncover, in Bultmann’s words, her “thirst for life”, evidenced in the restlessness and unease of her relationships. As a consequence of her dawning insight, the woman raises the question of the locus of worship, an issue that bitterly divides Jew and Samaritan (4:20). Jesus’ response is to the point to a new dispensation in which worship of the Father is dependent, not on a specific geographical location but on the “Spirit of truth” (4:23f.; 14:17; 15:26; 16:13; cf. 1 John 4:6). This scene is the most explicit reference to worship in the Fourth Gospel, presenting the major players: the Father, the Spirit, Jesus himself, and the woman who represents, in this context, the community of faith.

Jesus as the Locus of Worship
The opening chapters of the Gospel have already indicated that the Johannine Jesus is himself the locus of true worship. In the Prologue, the evangelist uses temple language and imagery to speak of the incarnation. The ‘dwelling’ of the eternal Word in flesh suggests the tabernacle in the Old Testament (ejskhvnwsen, 1:14). The revelation of glory within God’s dwelling-place on earth reflects Zion traditions, with their stress on Jerusalem and the temple as the residence of divine glory (dovxa, 1:14). For the fourth evangelist, however, the sacred site radiating the divine presence is now the incarnate Logos.

A similar theme is present in the Cleansing of the Temple, an event that occurs early in the ministry of the Johannine Jesus (2:13-22). The focus now is on Jesus’ risen body (sw’ma, 2:21) rather than his incarnate flesh. There is a tension in this narrative in the identity of Jesus. On the one hand, Jesus ‘cleanses’ the temple in order to purify “my Father’s house”

2 C.K. Barrett argues that 4:23 has as much right to be considered as expressing the purpose of the Gospel as 20:30f. See M.M. Thompson, The God of the Gospel of John, pp. 189-90.
3 On representation in the characterisation of the Fourth Gospel, see ??
5 On the distinction between sarx and sôma in the Johannine narrative (both terms used positively, for the most part), see D. Lee, Flesh and Glory...
(2:16), acting in the prophetic tradition and taking a stand against the idolatrous abuse of religion. On the other hand, Johannine redaction turns the incident into a programmatic statement of Jesus’ own resurrection. The real sanctuary is Jesus himself, and the resurrection signifies the rebuilding of this incarnate ‘temple’. Jesus is thus the house (οἶκος) in which the Father dwells (2:16f.), the “indestructible eschatological temple”. By the end of the episode, Jesus has not only re-claimed the temple for his Father, but has also claimed it as his own. Its geographical terrain and his own body/flesh are mysteriously identified, and vindicated in his bodily resurrection. Whereas in the first part of the narrative, Jesus points to the Father, in the second the focus is on his own role in the transformation of Judaism.

The Spirit is also linked to John’s Christology at this point. The testimony of John the Baptist—the descent of the dove and the divine Voice—confirm Jesus’ identity as the dwelling-place of the Spirit (1:32-34). The Spirit is central to the creative and re-creative work of God: birth ‘from above’, that is, from the Spirit, is the only way to enter the new eschatological order embodied in Jesus (3:1-10). Similarly, the Spirit is the hidden centre of the Samaritan woman’s story, mysteriously at work in the unfolding development of the woman’s understanding.

From these early passages flows much of the theology of the Fourth Gospel in relation to worship. The feasts and traditions of Judaism, associated with the temple, are gathered into the person of the Logos who fulfills them in his own flesh (chaps 5-10). As the eschatological temple, the Johannine Jesus in his divine humanity is the ‘place’ where the Father is worshipped. In similar geographical imagery, the Farewell Discourse speaks of Jesus as the ‘way’ to the Father (14:6) and as the Vine on whom the branches hang, tended by the Father as the Vinedresser (15:1-8). Augustine interprets the latter symbolism in terms of worship:

> For we cultivate God, and God cultivates us. But we do not cultivate God in such a way as to make him better for our cultivating. For we cultivate him in adoring, not in ploughing. But he cultivates us as a farmer the fields. Because therefore he cultivates us, he makes us better.8

Thus the Johannine Jesus acts as the means of worship, the medium through which adoration is offered to the Father. Through his mediation, the Samaritan woman comes to understand what Jesus reveals to her explicitly about the nature and focus of true worship.9

Jesus as the Object of Worship

Jesus is also arguably the object of worship in the Fourth Gospel, as evidenced in a number of contexts.10 This role is based both on his divine authority and identity. In John 5, the Father possesses unique authority to give life and to make judgement. The Son shares the same authority, bestowed on him by the Father and apparent in his sabbath work (5:17-31). In the Shepherd Discourse, the terminology is not that of God raising Jesus—as elsewhere in the NT—but of Jesus' active role in his own resurrection:

6 Thompson, God of the Gospel of John, 212.
7 In contradistinction to the Synoptic version (cf. Mk 11:15-18/pars.).
8 Augustine, Sermons, LXXXVII.1, M 5.
9 John 16:2 speaks also of worship (latreiva) in reference to persecution of Christians. Thompson argues that the [Jewish] persecutors think that, by killing Christians, they are ‘offering sacrifice’ to God (God of the Gospel of John, pp. 220-222).
10 See Thompson, God of the Gospel of John, pp. 223-226.
“For this reason the Father loves me because I lay down my life (yuvch), in order that I may take it up again. No-one takes it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have authority (ejxousiva) to lay down my life, and I have authority to take it up again.” (10:17-18)

This authority is based on the role of the Logos in creation—“all things came into being through him” (1:3)—and on the ‘sabbath Christology’ of John 5. It is visible in the Raising of Lazarus where Jesus reveals himself as “the resurrection and the life” (11:25-26).

Moreover, the authority over life which Jesus shares with the Father is based on his identity, an identity established in the Prologue where the one who is the divine Logos, the agent of creation, the eternal Son, surpassing Moses and the Law, becomes incarnate (1:1-18). The language of sonship is developed in the discourse of John 5 around the theme of work (5:17-31). Here the honour owed to the Father is to be offered also to the Son (5:23), language that is synonymous to worship. Jesus’ identity is most vividly portrayed in John 17, which echoes the language of the Prologue: once more Jesus stands pro;~ to;n geovn, face-to-face with God (1:1f.), as the eternal Son of the Father. The mutuality of glorification between Father and Son points to their essential equality (17:1-4; 5:16b).

On this basis, it is comprehensible that disciples in the Fourth Gospel accord Jesus worship. In John 9, for example, the man born blind sees his healer for the first time only at the end of the story. When Jesus reveals his identity, the man responds by worshiping Jesus (kai; prosekuvnhsen aujtw`, 9:38b). While there is a textual dispute over this, the weight of evidence supports its inclusion.11 What the man born blind recognises is that Jesus is the Light of the world (8:12; 9:5).12 His believing response to Jesus leads appropriately to worship.

The same can be said of Mary of Bethany’s symbolic action in anointing Jesus’ feet after the raising of Lazarus (12:1-8). The anointing functions as an act of gratitude and “a proleptic burial ritual”;13 it signifies the response of the community of faith to Jesus’ gift of life. As a true disciple, Mary responds to the costliness of Jesus’ gift of life with the costliness of her own gift in an act of “self-giving extravagance”.14 The language of Mary’s anointing comes very close to that of worship. In the Gospel of Matthew, the two women disciples at the tomb, Mary Magdalene and ‘the other Mary’, fall at the feet of the risen Jesus in an act of faith and worship (Matt 28:9; 2:11). This is the same Jesus who proclaims, only a few verses later, that “all authority in heaven and on earth has been given me” (Matt 28:18).15 In a parallel way, the anointing of Jesus’ feet in the Fourth Gospel functions arguably as an act of worship.16

11 The majority of MSS include the longer reading, but the shorter reading is found in P75, Aleph*, W and others. Metzger supports the inclusion of 9:38-39a (Textual Commentary, p. 229); see also Schnackenburg, St. John, II.254, 499. Against this, cf. R.E. Brown, John, I.375.
12 The same imagery is used in the Old Testament of God and Torah (e.g Ps 27:1; 119:??).
15 In Luke’s Gospel, several of the characters—disciples or suppliants—find themselves at Jesus’ feet as an act of faith and recognition (e.g. Luke 5:8; 7:38, 44-46; 8:35; 10:39; 17:16).
16 The anointing of Jesus’ feet in the Fourth Gospel is distinct from the other Gospels, particularly Mark and Matthew where the unnamed anoints his head in a kingly, prophetic act (Mk 14:3-9/par.); it is also distinct from the penitential actions of the sinful woman at Luke 7:36-50.
The story of Thomas operates in a similar fashion (20:24-29). Once again, explicit terminology for worship is absent, yet the language points in the same direction. Thomas’ confession represents in many respects the climax of the Fourth Gospel. Thomas’ words—“My Lord and my God”—bring the narrative of the Gospel back in a full circle to its beginning (20:28). Just as the Prologue commences with the revelation of Jesus’ divine identity (1:1-2), so the same identity is confirmed at the end of the Gospel, this time by a human being. Once more the revelation is that of life. The tokens of death on the body of the risen Jesus are paradoxically symbols of his divine authority over life. Thomas’ confession involves both recognition and worship: a confession of faith that is itself an act of adoration. Nor is it insignificant that Thomas’ confession immediately follows the giving of the Spirit in the previous scene (20:19-23). As a consequence of the Spirit’s presence, Thomas is able to make his faith confession, an expression of worship that brings the Gospel to completion. The Spirit of truth leads even the unbelieving Thomas to the highest act of worship in the Fourth Gospel.

**Jesus and Prayer**

While worship is directed both to the Father and Jesus (and, by implication, to the Spirit), Jesus himself is recorded as praying three times in the Fourth Gospel. On the first occasion, immediately before Jesus summons Lazarus from the tomb, Jesus addresses God for the first time:

“Father, I thank you that you heard me. I know that you always hear me. But I have spoken for the sake of the crowd standing around, that they might believe you sent me.”

(11:41-42)

In one sense, the Johannine Jesus has no need to pray. The close bond of unity between Father and Son makes such petitionary prayer unnecessary.\(^1\) The harmony of will is so perfect that there is no gap between them, no need for Jesus to struggle with the Father’s will (cf. Mk 14:14:32-42).\(^2\) The only purpose of intercession for the Johannine Jesus is to deepen the faith of his hearers. Jesus’ prayer becomes a form of revelation, another way in which he discloses his true identity.

Twice more in the Gospel Jesus offers intercession to God. Just after the coming of the Greeks, Jesus debates the form of prayer he should offer as he faces the distress of his impending Passion:

“No my soul is troubled, and what am I to say? ‘Father, save me from this hour?’ But for this reason, for this hour, I have come. Father, glorify your name!” Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it and I will glorify it again.”

(12:28-29)

Not only is this the only time in the Fourth Gospel where Jesus soliloquises, it is also the only time the Father directly speaks (apart from the report of John the Baptist, 1:33). From a Johannine point of view, Jesus is setting out the two ways in which he might respond to his death: either by asking to be spared the ‘hour’, as he does in the Synoptic tradition (where he prays that the ‘cup’ be taken away, Mk 14:36/pars.) or by accepting his destiny unhesitatingly, based on an understanding of the cross as the glorification of the Father. His choice for the second option is confirmed in the Father’s response. Yet once again, Jesus’ prayer is not

---

1. There is no actual petition here, in any case, although Jesus implies there is.
2. Bultmann’s comment is that Jesus, unlike most human beings, has no need to rouse himself from his natural state of godlessness to a stance of prayer; on the contrary, “for he continually stands before God as the asker and therefore as the receiver” (*John*, p. 408).
strictly intercessory. As the crowd debates the significance of the voice they have heard—thunder? an angel speaking?—Jesus asserts that the voice is addressed not to himself but to the crowd: “Not for me did this voice occur but for you” (12:29-30).

The same principle applies to the Great Prayer in John 17. Schnackenburg prefers to call this ‘The Prayer of the Departing Redeemer’ rather than the more traditional ‘High Priestly Prayer’, because it is not really intercessory. Another alternative is ‘the Prayer of the ascending Redeemer’. The prayer expresses the mutual glorification of Father and Son and the unity that holds them together—a unity into which the community, both present and future, is drawn. C.H. Dodd interprets the Prayer as an ‘anabasis’, the symbolic enactment of Jesus’ death on the cross as the climax of Jesus’ (and thus the Father’s) glorification. The ‘lifting up’ of Jesus here is an act of prayer, enacting the love and unity which exists between Father and Son and which is the inner meaning of Jesus’ passion, death, resurrection and ascension. As with the previous prayers, its petitions (for glorification, and for the safe-guarding, sanctifying, unification and love of the community) functions for the sake of the believing community. Just as the ‘signs’ of the Fourth Gospel reveal Jesus’ identity, so the prayers function in a similar way.

Jesus’ prayers in the Fourth Gospel are thus revelatory rather than intercessory (in the strict sense), yet they are still authentic forms of prayer. They express the abiding of Father and Son, the love and unity that binds them. They articulate, in other words, that divine indwelling into which the community is drawn. It is inaccurate, therefore, to claim that the Johannine Jesus does not pray. On the contrary, from the beginning to the end of the Gospel, Jesus refers everything to the Father, including the coming of the Spirit: his entire relationship is one of prayerful communion and mutual dependence, a communion that lies at the very heart of prayer.

Conclusion
It is anachronistic to use the language of the early Fathers to describe what John has to say about worship in the Fourth Gospel. At the same time, the later formulations of the fourth and fifth century owe as least as much to the Gospel of John as to anything else. In a forum such as this, honouring the scholarly work of Eric Osborn, it seems somehow permissible to move with some freedom between the New Testament and the early Church. The Gospel of John is trinitarian in its understanding of worship, even if the distinctions are not as clear as they become in later developments. The Nicene Creed declares that the Church worships and glorifies all three Persons of the Trinity. This language has its origins in the Fourth Gospel, as well as a number of other New Testament writings. In different places, John’s Gospel expresses the equality of Father and Son, and their mutual dependence—evidenced in the way each points to the importance of the other (eg. 14:28).

The mutuality and authority within the Father-Son relationship includes, by extension, the “Spirit of truth” who, in the absence of Jesus, leads the believing community “into all truth” (16:13). In the story of the Samaritan woman, the Spirit plays a central role in worship; the phrase literally translated “in spirit and in truth” more probably refers to the Spirit of God. It is through the Spirit, “the other Paraclete” (14:16), that human beings are able to offer authentic worship to the Father. The Spirit shares with Jesus the task of both convicting the world of sin and revealing the truth, thus making present the indwelling Father and Son. True

---

19 R. Schnackenburg, St. John...
20 On the arguments for this view, see Thompson, God of the Gospel of John, 214-6. Brown, John, reads it as hendiadys.
worship is possible only in the power of the Spirit who gives birth to believers, making them “children of God” (1:12-13; 3:5). In the end, the focus of worship is both eschatological and trinitarian. Jesus is the locus and object of worship, the bridge between divine and human, mortal and vulnerable yet also possessing authority over “all flesh” (17:2). Worship is to be offered through him but also, since he is the visible manifestation of God, to him.21 In his flesh the prayer he offers the Father is the symbolic expression of diviner self-offering, the mutual glorification which is the source of the believing community’s life and worship.

---

21 Thompson, God of the Gospel of John, pp. 224-5.