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Going up and coming down in Johannine legitimation

James F McGrath

ABSTRACT

In his study of Johannine christology Wayne Meeks stressed the importance of understanding the ascent-descent schema in any attempt to understand this christology or explain its origin. The work of sociologists Berger and Luckmann on legitimation has the potential to shed light on an earlier stage in this development. Key passages in John show that ascent-descent language is linked to the motifs of the Son of man and wisdom, and suggest that John has developed these two traditional aspects of christology in response to objections and conflict over Jesus' qualifications to be the revealer, and his relationship to God and monotheism. Conflict and the ensuing legitimation can thus help us to understand something of the reason why Johannine christology developed along the distinctive path that it did.

In his highly influential study of Johannine christology from a sociological perspective, Wayne Meeks (1986:141) argued that any valid attempt to understand the workings of the christology of the Fourth Gospel would have to provide an explanation of the origin and function of the ascent/descent schema, which is so distinctive of John among the New Testament documents. Meeks' own solution is that this motif is to be explained in terms of its *social function*, that is, in terms of what it expresses about the social experience of the community which gave rise to it. In his view, the Johannine Jesus is presented as a stranger in the world, and his identity as one who is in the world, but who is not of the world but is 'from above', parallels the community's experience of alienation from society.

Meeks has clearly brought to the attention of scholars the importance of the way this motif functioned in the Johannine community's worldview in the wake of their expulsion from the synagogue. After their unwilling expulsion from and rejection by the Jewish community of which they had been a part, the Johannine Christians interpreted Christ in the light of their own experience and their own experience in light of their traditions about Christ, and this dynamic process produced the picture which we now find in the Fourth Gospel of Jesus as a 'stranger from heaven', one who came to his own but was not received. This is not to be understood as a one-way process which would be open to the charge of reductionism: it does not presuppose

that there was first a social setting, and then an ideology was created *ex nihilo* in order to interpret and justify that social experience. Rather, we must envision a dialectical process, as Meeks points out towards the end of his study. '[T]he christological claims of the Johannine community resulted in their becoming alienated, and finally expelled, from the synagogue; that alienation in turn is 'explained' by a further development of the christological motifs (i.e., the fate of the community projected onto the story of Jesus); these developed christological motifs in turn drive the group into further isolation. It is a case of continual, harmonic reinforcement between social experience and ideology' (Meeks 1986:164). Religious beliefs never exist in a vacuum, without any social context, but beliefs and traditions which had a certain significance in their original context can come to have quite a different one, and to be developed in quite different ways, when they find themselves in a different social setting from that in which they were first formed.¹

However, if Meeks has given a helpful insight into the way this important and distinctive Johannine motif functioned towards the final stage of the history of the community prior to the writing of the Gospel, then the problem still remains of how this imagery came to be part of the community's christological tradition in the first place. There must have been something already present in the tradition which could be taken up and interpreted in light of these fresh experiences, and before we can claim to have 'explained' this key element of Johannine christology, we need to probe deeper into the earlier stages of the community's history and christology, and to attempt to explain, to whatever extent possible, how and why the language of ascent and descent first became attached to the figure of the Son of man.

Given the difficulties involved in reconstructing the history of an early Christian community and its beliefs, such as the one that gave rise to the Fourth Gospel, some clear methodological principles need to be established as to how such an endeavour may be undertaken. Most importantly, we need to ask what mechanism may be appealed to as an explanation of development in christology and other areas of belief. Meeks has rightly emphasized the importance of social experience, but to what extent can sociological factors be regarded as providing a more or less comprehensive explanation? It would appear that an explanation along these lines is indeed possible (as I hope to demonstrate below) provided we do not conceive of it in a reductionist sense: once again, we are not to think of a religious system being created 'from scratch' in order to explain or justify a particular experience of society. However, once we realize that society and religion are not separate compart-

¹ Holmberg 1990:138 refers to this as the 'multifunctionality' of beliefs.

ments but aspects of a unified continuum which constitutes a worldview, the way is open for us to identify what may be considered the key factor in doctrinal development. It must further be stressed that the creativity of the individual or community responsible for the Gospel is not to be excluded as a factor. We must distinguish between two levels of explanation: On the one hand, the creativity of the individual has determined the style and the shaping of the material in any given New Testament document (see especially Hengel 1989:102ff, 134f on this aspect). On the other hand, it is generally true that documents are produced in response to some need or situation, which stimulates the author to take up his or her pen and write. It is the latter level of explanation that we are considering here, but this should in no way be understood to exclude the former. In other words, we are attempting to explain the origins of Johannine christology, but are not attempting to *explain away* Johannine christology as *only* the product of certain social factors.

In his article, Meeks refers briefly to the work of Berger and Luckmann in the field of the sociology of knowledge (Berger & Luckmann 1967; cf Meeks 1986:163). The work of these two important sociologists has been having a growing influence in the field of New Testament studies, and it would appear that their work on the defense of worldviews can shed light on the process of christological development. Berger and Luckmann emphasize that societies and worldviews are human constructs, even though they give the appearance of being an objective, given reality. A worldview thus does not maintain itself spontaneously, but must be defended and upheld, and this process they call *legitimation*. Legitimation becomes necessary when one aspect or another of the social universe in question has become problematic. This usually occurs when an alternative understanding of the world confronts the society with its own relativity. Such challenges may come from outside, through contact with other cultures or societies, or from within, through conflict with 'heretics'.² In response to this challenge, the beliefs which have been called into question are thought through more fully, new arguments and proof-texts are found or formulated to support them, and in the process the beliefs are not only defended, but also expanded and developed. The relevance of this model for our purposes can be seen in the example which Berger and Luckmann give of the development of the doctrine of the Trinity.³ The

² The use of the term heretic here does not prejudice the validity or otherwise of this alternative understanding of the world. Orthodoxy and heresy are distinguished not only, and perhaps not even primarily, on the basis of fidelity to tradition, but also on the basis of power and authority.

³ Berger & Luckmann 1967:125. Wiles 1967 proposes a similar model of development to Berger and Luckmann, albeit without any explicit use of sociological models or categories.

question of whether the Son was eternal was not always an issue, but when it became one it provoked the convening of numerous councils, and the drawing up of numerous creeds and formulations in an attempt to settle the issue. These new credal statements were clearly intended as a defense of certain beliefs, but it cannot be denied that they also developed and changed those beliefs in numerous ways in the process.

This sociological model would appear to provide a means of studying an earlier stage in the development of Johannine thought. The process of conflict leading to development in beliefs (which then intensify conflict, provoking further development, and so on) which Meeks refers to, applies not only to the final stages of the process, the expulsion from the synagogue and subsequent rethinking of their identity and self-understanding undertaken by the Johannine Christians, but also to the debates which took place prior to their expulsion. In the Gospel of John, we see evidence of conflict between the Johannine Christians and 'the Jews', in particular between them and the leaders of the synagogue. This conflict appears to have focused especially on the issue of Christology. In the Johannine epistles, which are generally agreed to have been written after the Gospel,⁴ there is no evidence that the community was still in conflict with the synagogue from which it had been expelled. It would therefore seem reasonable to suggest that the conflict with the Jews over Christology reflected in the Fourth Gospel stems from an earlier stage in the history of the community, and thus that Berger and Luckmann's model may be of use to us in studying and understanding this earlier period.

In this study we may focus our attention on two major issues in the conflict, Jesus' qualifications to reveal God and heavenly things⁵ and the exaltation of Jesus to a status which at least some Jews felt to be a threat to monotheism.⁶ It is not clear whether both issues were to the fore at the same period in the community's history, but if not then it is likely that the debate over Jesus' relationship to Moses began earlier than the debate over his relationship to God,⁷ and we may thus treat these two topics in that order. The concern of the rest of this study will be to determine whether these aspects of

⁴ See the discussion in Brown 1983:32-35. For the minority view that 1 John was written before the Gospel, see Grayston 1984:12-14.

⁵ Often in contrast with Moses. The debate in this area is reflected in the words of the Pharisees in John 9:29: 'We know that God spoke to Moses, but as for this man, we don't even know where he comes from'.

⁶ A clear example of this conflict is found in the accusation made by 'the Jews' against Jesus in John 10:33: 'you, a mere man, claim to be God'.

⁷ The question of the relationship of Jesus to Moses is a commonplace in Jewish Christianity, whereas the question of Jesus and monotheism is less widely attested.

the conflict could have provided the catalyst for John's distinctive development of the christological motifs and traditions which he inherited, in particular the ascent/descent motif.

However, before proceeding it is important to note the evidence available to us concerning the pre-Johannine Son of man traditions. In Judaism prior to John's Gospel,⁸ it would appear that the Messiah had already come to be described as 'Son of man' in direct connection with belief in his pre-existence,⁹ although it is important to stress from the outset that this use of the *language* of pre-existence in this instance probably signified something akin to what we would call 'predestination'. In Christianity prior to John, however, we have no evidence that the title 'Son of man' was linked with pre-existence (cf Dunn 1989 ch 3), and in neither Christianity nor Judaism prior to John do we have evidence of an ascending and descending Messiah. It would thus appear that John could have appealed to the pre-existence of the Son of man as a concept which would have been familiar to the Jews of his time,¹⁰ but his portrait of Jesus as the Son of man who descends from heaven and ascends again is a distinctive Johannine development.¹¹ We must now turn to a consideration of whether the conflict in which the Johannine community was involved, and the apologetic in which they were forced to engage, can bridge the gap between the pre-Johannine and the Johannine portraits of the Son of man.

The first reference to the Son of man as one who descends from heaven and ascends there again is John 3:13,¹² a passage which has been the subject of

⁸ Note that we are not concerned with whether these ideas are *pre-Christian*, but only whether they are *pre-Johannine*, and could conceivably have been known to the Johannine Christians.

⁹ The key examples of this are found in the Similitudes of Enoch and 4 Ezra. The former is now generally agreed not to be a Christian work, since it lacks distinctively Christian features. The latter was written in roughly the same period as the Fourth Gospel, and thus it is unlikely that there could be any question of literary dependence, but it does provide evidence of the attribution of pre-existence to the messianic son of man in Judaism independent of the influence of Christianity.

¹⁰ By saying that it would be familiar we are not saying that this points was necessarily accepted by all Jews. However, the fact that even the later rabbinic literature refers to the Messiah as pre-existent suggests that this belief was both widespread and widely accepted. See further Schimanowski 1985:210ff.

¹¹ The contention of Lindars (1973:48 n 16) that 'John never says that the Son of Man has come down from heaven' is simply unjustifiable. That the Son of man had descended from heaven is clearly implied in both John 3:13, where 'the one who came down from heaven' is explicitly said to be 'the Son of man', and 6:62, where the Son of man's ascent is portrayed as a return to where he was before, and thus from whence he had descended. The same criticism of Lindars is made by Ashton 1991:356 n 60.

¹² The first appearance of Son of man in John is 1:51, and the language of ascent/descent is also present. However, although the Son of man is here portrayed as the link between heaven and earth, he is not said to pre-exist, nor to ascend or descend

much interest and discussion. The immediate context of this Son of man pericope is a discussion with Nicodemus, who is presented as Israel's teacher. Nicodemus' ignorance of the things which Jesus tells him emphasizes that Israel, even though it has Moses and the Torah, remains ignorant of heavenly things. Since Odeberg first suggested it in 1929,¹³ it has come to be generally accepted that this verse has a polemical thrust, since it is clearly contrasting the Son of man with other unmentioned figures concerning whom claims had been made of heavenly journeys. The author argues that no one, whether Moses or Enoch, had ever gone up into heaven, in order to be able to tell what he saw there. However, the Son of man, who had descended from heaven, was qualified to reveal these things.¹⁴

That the connection between the Son of man and pre-existence or ascent/descent language was first made in a polemical context thus seems likely. The identification of Jesus as the (one like a) Son of man from Daniel 7 and also possibly 1 Enoch was evidently made prior to John.¹⁵ However, there is simply no evidence in the New Testament outside of John's Gospel for the development of the concept of Jesus' *pre-existence* in connection with the Son of man figure and related motifs (see the discussion in Dunn 1989:88-90). The potential was there in the traditional material for the development of the view that the Son of man, Jesus the Messiah, was pre-existent, and thus knew things about God and heaven which no one else could, but only John drew this conclusion. His motivation for doing so would appear to have been the need to engage in apologetic for Christ's ability to reveal heavenly things. In this context, he interpreted the traditional use of pre-existence *language* in relation to the figure of the Son of man in a literal way: the Son of man pre-existed in heaven, and Jesus is the Son of man, *therefore* Jesus is better qualified than any other to reveal these things to human beings.

This development was bound to be controversial, and there is evidence within the Fourth Gospel that even some Christians found this innovative

development difficult to accept. In John 6:25ff we find Jesus presented as the bread of life: he, as the Son of man who has come down from heaven, is the true manna which gives life. Here too a contrast with Moses is explicitly made (6:32), and it is generally accepted that manna was understood to be a symbol of Torah.¹⁶ Here also, then, we have a contrast between the revelation (and salvation) brought by Moses and that brought by Jesus. In this context, an assertion that Jesus is the true bread from heaven is made. The focus of debate among scholars has for so long revolved around the question of whether or not a sacramental reference was intended, that an objection which is made here, one which is just as important as the discussion of 'eating his flesh', is frequently missed. The claim that Jesus, the son of Joseph whose family is well known, *came down from heaven*, is equally a stumbling block (6:41f), and it is this, and not just the statements about eating his flesh, which causes many of those who believed in him to no longer follow him (cf Hooker 1974:46). This would appear to mean that the christological developments within the community were not accepted by all, and actually caused a division in the community. In this passage we thus have further evidence that this imagery was first applied to Jesus in the context of the debate over the relationship between Moses and Jesus, or more specifically, between the respective value of the revelations brought by them. Here we also find indications of what we should anyway have expected to be the case: some Christians recognized that new developments were taking place, and were uneasy about where these innovations were leading.

The remaining Son of man sayings in John are not significantly different from their Synoptic counterparts.¹⁷ In them, the Son of man is not explicitly or implicitly said to have come down from heaven, although there is a great deal of focus on his upward movement, on his being 'lifted up'. The majority of scholars regard the Johannine use of *ὑψώω* as an instance of Johannine *double entendre*, since the verb could refer both to 'exaltation' and 'crucifixion'. John has thus run together two types of Son of man sayings found in the Synoptics, those predicting suffering and those predicting future (eschatological) vindication by God. The exaltation of Jesus expressed in these traditional sayings was also a stimulus for christological development. Even in the Synoptic accounts of the trial of Jesus, the statement that he will come as the

himself.

¹³ Odeberg 1929: *ad loc.* See also Ashton 1991:350.

¹⁴ The *εἰ μὴ* is notoriously difficult to translate. It does not seem impossible that Sidebottom 1961:120, may be correct in suggesting that the meaning is 'No one has ascended, but one has descended' (although see Ashton 1991:350 n 37). Regardless of whether one thinks the author had in mind the ascent and subsequent descent of the seer, or the descent and subsequent ascent of a pre-existent figure, what is clear is that the Son of man is portrayed as descending, and this is done in a polemical context in which it is emphasised that no other figure can do what he can.

¹⁵ In particular Matthew appears to provide evidence of the influence of the Similitudes of Enoch on the portrait of the eschatological Jesus. See the major commentaries on Mt 25:31ff.

¹⁶ Brown 1966:272-274, suggests that the imagery in this passage would also have been understood as alluding to the Word or Wisdom of God, a point to which we shall return later on. This view is also upheld by Lindars 1972:259f.

¹⁷ These Synoptic-type sayings are best regarded as early, part of John's inheritance from earlier tradition, although this is not to exclude the possibility that John has still used and/or developed them in his own distinctive way.

(one like a) Son of man in Daniel 7, glorified and vindicated by God and enthroned in heaven, is considered by the Jewish leaders to be blasphemous.¹⁸ In Phl 2:9–11 we also see an early Christian portrait of the exalted Jesus: he is bestowed with God's name and considered worthy of honour alongside God. The exalted functions and status attributed to Jesus came to be regarded as a threat to Jewish monotheism, at least by the rabbis of the post-70 period, when we find them concerned to oppose 'two powers' heresy. This aspect of Christian belief which came to be considered so controversial is also connected with the exaltation of the Son of man, and if we are to understand the role of the ascending-descending Son of man in the fully developed Johannine christology, we must investigate how this aspect of the controversy between the Johannine Christians and the Jews affected the development of their christological beliefs.

In John, the ascent/descent motif is not only linked with the title Son of man, but also with the closely related imagery of the figure of wisdom. The link between the Son of man and wisdom had been made independently of Christianity: for example, in the Similitudes of Enoch (see especially ch 49) the figure of the Son of man, the anointed (messiah), the elect one, is said to have the Spirit of wisdom dwelling in him.¹⁹ In various literature from this period, we find links appearing between the messiah or Son of man on the one hand, and wisdom or the Spirit on the other.²⁰ However, no one drew the conclusion that the Messiah in whom wisdom dwells thus not only functions the role of God's agent or viceroy but is worthy of an honour and status second only to God himself. It is thus important, for this reason and for others which will soon become apparent, that we explore how the figure and language of wisdom relates to the ascending and descending Son of man in the Fourth Gospel.

¹⁸ This scenario is believable when we consider the discussion between Rabbi Akiba and Rabbi Yose the Galilean concerning the two thrones in Daniel 7 (recorded in *b Hag* 14a; *b Sanh* 38b). When Akiba suggested that one is for God and one for David (i.e. the Messiah), he is asked, 'How long will continue to profane the Shekinah?' To identify this figure with the Messiah was unacceptable; to identify oneself as this figure could thus perhaps have been considered 'blasphemous'.

¹⁹ See further Hengel 1995:104–108; also Gese 1981:38–41. Both of these works are also useful in their consideration of the relationship between Jesus' own use of Wisdom language and imagery and that of later New Testament authors. See also my article, *Change in Christology: New Testament models and the contemporary task*, forthcoming in *ITbQ* in 1997.

²⁰ It is generally recognized that in pre-Christian Judaism, and even in some streams of early Christianity, 'Spirit, Wisdom and Logos were all more or less synonymous ways of speaking of God's outreach to man' (Dunn 1989:266; so also Schimanowski 1985:75–77; Talbert 1993:45f).

In the bread of life discourse in John 6, which we have already discussed above because they contain references to the enigmatic figure of the Son of man 'who came down from heaven', a number of recent scholars have also found sapiential imagery. This is not surprising, since as we have already noted, manna had already become symbolic of Torah, probably due in turn to the fact that God's Word or wisdom had become identified with both the manna and the Torah. As early as Deuteronomy 8:3, the manna given in the wilderness was used as an object lesson concerning God's word. The language of the Johannine bread of life discourse is also reminiscent of Isa 55:10f, where God's word comes down from heaven to accomplish his purpose. The language of eating and drinking also abounds in the wisdom literature (cf, e.g., Prov 9:5; Sir 15:3). Jesus is thus not only the heavenly Son of man, but is related in some way to the wisdom of God. Jesus is the one in whom God's wisdom, Word or Spirit dwells.

This emphasis on Jesus as the one in whom God's Word or wisdom has 'come in the flesh' bears a clear relationship to the issue of Jesus' relationship to Moses. In the Targums, it is frequently the Spirit or Memra (Word) with whom Moses is said to speak. Further, as we have already noted, the revelation brought by Moses (i.e., Torah) had also been identified with wisdom. This wisdom imagery may thus be related to the issue of Jesus' qualifications as revealer: Jesus is the one in whom the one who spoke to Moses has come in the flesh; he rather than Torah is the embodiment of the very wisdom of God.

The relationship between Jesus and Torah had already become an issue as early as Paul's time, provoking the creative use of wisdom literature found in the Pauline literature.²¹ However, the Johannine usage obviously has developed beyond this earlier stage, and this needs to be explained. It would appear that here the second subject of controversy we have noted, the threat which was felt to be posed to monotheism by the exalted status attributed to Jesus, may have provided the catalyst for further development of the tradition. The exaltation of Jesus, the Son of man, proved controversial, and in order to defend it, John needed to demonstrate that Jesus is worthy of these divine honours. In this context, the author of the Fourth Gospel asserts that Christians do not believe in a deified man, but in one whose rightful place is in heaven (cf Neyrey 1988:218–220). This could be emphasized in relation

²¹ The most notable example is Colossians 1:15–20, whether this passage is to be considered pre-Pauline, Pauline or post-Pauline is irrelevant to our discussion; what does seem clear is that this letter reflects the problem of Judaizing which was such a big issue for Paul and the churches he founded. See further my forthcoming article cited above, note 19.

simply to the figure of the Son of man, who was already attributed with a heavenly, pre-existent, angelic-type existence. However, by relating Jesus more strongly also to wisdom, Logos and Spirit imagery, John could emphasize that Jesus is the incarnation of a 'figure' who was rightly called God, one who was separate from God and yet God himself. If certain Old Testament figures²² could be called 'gods', how much more the one set apart by God before creation²³ (John 10:34ff). This emphasis on Jesus as one who is rightly exalted to a place of honour in heaven alongside God, because this was the eternal status of the one who was incarnate in him, also underlies the logic of the prologue: Jesus may be described as being 'in the bosom of the Father'²⁴ in 1:18 because he is the Word become flesh, the Word who was 'with God in the beginning'.²⁵ From the very start, there was a relationship between the Son of man and wisdom/Spirit; in the context of conflict over Jesus' status, the latter began to come to the fore and overshadow the figure of the messianic Son of man.

Finally, it remains for us to consider the relationship between these two sets of imagery, since it appears that Jesus is presented in the Fourth Gospel as both a normal human being, albeit one who pre-existed in heaven,²⁶ and a divine being who is interacting with mankind through the person of Jesus. These dual emphases or tendencies in the Johannine picture are certainly one of the major factors which led to the formulation of Nicene and Chalcedonian orthodoxy, but is the attempt to create a coherent, logical picture from this imagery justified? Firstly, we must take into consideration the fact that to present a figure as both the incarnation of a pre-existent figure and as fully human apparently did not cause major difficulty for Jews of this time, as the *Prayer of Joseph* in particular demonstrates. Secondly, we should note that John was taking advantage of the ambiguity surrounding the status of

²² Whether angelic beings, judges or Israel on Sinai was in mind does not affect the present point.

²³ The language of being set apart and (subsequently) sent into the world implies pre-existence, and could be used equally of the Son of man and Wisdom.

²⁴ Which essentially means 'at God's side' or 'right hand'; cf John 13:23. The structure and logic of the prologue suggests that at the end it is the Logos incarnate, the man Jesus now exalted, who is in view.

²⁵ That the prologue forms an inverted parallelism seems likely, but apart from this point it still appears clear that the beginning and end of the prologue parallel one another.

²⁶ Although the concept of an 'ordinary' human being who existed in heaven prior to his birth is difficult for the modern mind, the fact that pre-existence was attributed to other figures such as Moses, without this being thought to make that individual less fully human, should warn against attempting to rationalize the modes of thought current in this period, as we shall note further below.

wisdom and related intermediary figures, an ambiguity which later formulations sought to eliminate or reduce as much as possible. To speak about a metaphorical figure as neither created nor uncreated, as both God himself and other than God himself, could be accepted even (or perhaps especially) by philosophically-minded Jews like Philo, but once this metaphor was identified with a concrete historical individual, difficulties were bound to ensue.²⁷ As Ashton writes concerning the similar difficulty of the relationship between the earthly and heavenly Jacob in the *Prayer of Joseph*, 'We are dealing here with *myth* and myth, like gossamer, cannot be weighed in our clumsy scales'.²⁸

The difficulty arises from the fact that John was wrestling with specific issues relevant to his time. In the context of a debate about Jesus' exalted status and its relation to monotheism, John could take the bold step of identifying Jesus as the one in whom the Word or Spirit of God had not just dwelt, but 'become flesh', and who could therefore be said to have eternally possessed this status and thus be worthy of it. In a conflict setting, one rarely, if ever, thinks through the potential problems which may arise from what for that individual in that particular context is a *solution* to a different problem. We should thus not judge John in this respect; we should simply attempt to understand what he wanted to communicate, and why he developed and expounded specific elements of his Judeo-Christian heritage in the way that he did, and to appreciate both that John enabled Christianity to survive and flourish in the hostile setting in which the Johannine Christians found themselves, and also that we today, in a different setting and confronted by other issues, may find it necessary to express our faith in quite different ways than John did.

So, in conclusion, an explanation of the origins and development of Johannine christology appears possible, but only to the extent that we are willing to 'let John be John',²⁹ even when, from the perspective of modern logic (something whose value is becoming much more relative in our 'post-modern' world), his formulations and creative use of imagery do not maintain the coherence and systematic neatness we might desire.³⁰

²⁷ This language faced the further difficulty or ambiguity, which we noted above, in that the intermediary was sometimes an angelic viceroy who was clearly subordinate to God and not to be identified with him (as is the case with the figure of *Jaol* in the *Testament of Abraham*), whereas elsewhere the figure is simply the Wisdom or Spirit of God himself. See further Hurtado 1988.

²⁸ Ashton 1991:345. Lindars 1973:263 writes in connection with John 6:42, 'To be the son of Joseph and to be the one sent from heaven are not mutually exclusive, as the Prologue makes clear'. The prologue seems to have clarified the issue for its original readership, but subsequent readers have found the issue much less clear.

²⁹ To use the phrase which James Dunn (1991) has used as the title of a recent study.

³⁰ This article is a slightly revised version of a paper read at the British New Testa-

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Hebrews, thought-patterns and context: Aspects of the background of Hebrews

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ABSTRACT

The 'religious' or 'philosophical' background of Hebrews has often been called a riddle. Several attempts have been made to unravel this riddle with various suggestions for Hebrews' background, including Platonism, Philo or Middle-Platonism, the Qumran community, Gnosticism, Jewish Apocalypticism. Hebrews, however, shares the thought-patterns of not one but a number of contemporary movements and traditions. The overriding concern of and reason for Hebrews' employment of these traditions is considered, with the suggestion that the Christian church of today should do likewise.

The symbolism of Hebrews is complex, deriving from a variety of traditions (Johnson 1986:420).

1 INTRODUCTION¹

Johnson (1986:412) contends that one of the major reasons Hebrews today 'goes largely unread' by many Christians, is because the world of thought contained in it is thoroughly different from today's modern world: 'the symbolism of the ancient world is foreign to our own' (cf Williamson 1969-1970:371-376). This perception of foreignness encountered in Hebrews is aggravated by numerous unsuccessful attempts to delineate the specific world of thought underlying this document, leading to the background of Hebrews being called 'a riddle'.²

The perception might exist that the 'religious-philosophical'³ context of a writing, like Hebrews, would be easier to describe had we known the

¹ Many important and interesting issues fall outside the discussion: the status of the writing as either letter/epistle or homily, authorship, etc. As will become clear, I have assumed certain positions on specific issues; only where these were important to my argument, have I elaborated on them. A comprehensive and recent overview of scholarship on the Epistle to the Hebrews can be found in Koester (1994:123-145).

² Schenke, quoted in Hickling (1983:115 n 1); Thompson (1982:1). Longenecker (1975:159) calls the identification of the background a 'perennial problem'. Hebrews' literary genre and integrity has also been called a riddle (Attridge 1989:13), as well as the letter as a whole (Scott, quoted in Barclay 1957:xvii).

³ It is difficult to find an adequate way to refer to the 'philosophical' and religious 0254-9356/97 \$4.00 © NTSSA