

Jewish Traditions as an Obstacle to Believing in Jesus: A Rhetorical Criticism of John 8: 31–59

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Abstract

The apostle John, in John 8:31–59, shows how Jewish traditions were an obstacle to believing Jesus. The passage deals with truth, liberty of true discipleship, the fatherhood of God, Abraham, the devil, and the divinity of Jesus. It relates true discipleship to knowing the truth that sets people free. By contrasting the fatherhood of God and the devil, the passage demonstrates how Jews had subscribed to false discipleship akin to open rebellion against God. This was in contrast to the conduct of Abraham, whom the Jews claimed to be their father. The study highlights that the Jewish claim of Abraham as their father was an indirect justification for practicing their traditions against the teachings of Jesus, which they presumed was a threat to their values and customs. In addition, the passage addresses the question of truth by relating falsehood with the devil and truth with God. The researcher used the rhetorical criticism approach to interpret the selected text.

Keywords: Jewish Traditions, Jesus, Gospel according to John, Truth, Abraham

Introduction

The message of the gospel is centered on the truth of the words of Jesus as recorded in the gospels (Barclay, 1975). However, Jesus encountered resistance from the Jewish audience he addressed during his earthly ministry, as recorded in the John 8:31–59 text. By clinging to their traditions, the Jews resisted the words and teachings of Jesus because they found the values of Jesus a threat to their traditional values and culture. The argument of the Jews revolved around the question of the fatherhood of Abraham as their central identity. They



argued that having Abraham as their father did not obligate them to fulfill the requirements demanded of them by the words of Jesus for salvation. In response, Jesus presented the idea of the fatherhood of God and contrasted it with the fatherhood of the devil. Severally, the Jews opposed the message of Jesus (John 9:22; 12:42; 16:2). Later, the proclamation of the gospel by his apostles largely encountered stiff resistance in the various cultures of the ancient world (Mugambi, 2020). This was evident at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15), where some Jews demanded that the Gentiles be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses as a prerequisite for salvation.

Like other disciples of Jesus, the apostle John used the prevailing cultural setting to communicate the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ both to the first-century Hebraic Jews and to Hellenistic Christians (Lamb, 2014). It enabled the Jews to understand the message by identifying with the cultural setting of the gospel. It also intended to persuade the Gentiles to believe in Jesus by relating the gospel to their cultural context (Barclay, 1975). However, this came with much resistance by Jews and Gentiles (Acts 15 and Acts 19:23-41). Through the rhetorical criticism approach, this research sought to discover the meaning of the text by looking at the rhetorical devices and units (the selected passage is organized into subsections) the author uses.

Background of the Gospel According to John

The author, John, identified himself as the disciple whom Jesus loved (John 20:2–9, 13:23 and 21:20–24) and was part of the Lord's inner circle with Peter and his brother James (known as the sons of Zebedee, John 21:2 and Matthew 10:2). The Gospel of John's apostolic origin was accepted without debate during the canonization process (Burge, 2014). However, there are some marginal dissenting views on John's authorship (Edwards, 2015). Emphatically, the internal and external evidence by Church Fathers (such as Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen, and Clement of Alexandria) have proved more credible than those used to support alternative views (Guthrie, 1981). The Gospel of John is generally dated between AD 90 and 100 when it achieved its final form (Robinson, 1985). According to early Church tradition, John wrote his Gospel in Ephesus (Asia Minor), where he stayed after the temple's destruction and where his opus, the book of Revelation, was written (Keener C. S., 2019).



After the destruction of the temple in AD 70, some Jewish Christians returned to the ancient practices of Judaism to earn favor with the Pharisees and regain their social position, which they had lost because of their faith in Jesus (Barret, 1978). The Pharisees had taken over the Jewish customs during this period and modified the Mosaic Law and temple offerings into many of today's Jewish rituals (Krejcir, 2010). The religious sacrificial systems disappeared with the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple; as a result, they saw a Messiah as a symbol of betrayal and hopelessness because he did not come to deliver them from the Romans as they expected (Guthrie, 1981).

By pointing to the life and ministry of Jesus, John, the apostle, persuades the Jews and their leadership to believe in Jesus (Edwards, 2015). Summarized by the two verses in John 20:30–31, the goal of John's Gospel was evangelistic and to reaffirm and secure Christians in their faith (John 3:16 and 8:24, also noted by Werner Kummel (1975). The study looks at the selected text (John 8:31–59) to locate the tension between Jesus and his Jewish audience and how the tension is resolved.

The Immediate Context Background of John 8:31–59

John 8:31–59 records the resistance Jesus faced from the Jews and their rulers, Pharisees, chief priests, and scribes (John 7:32, 45, 8:3). At one point, the Jews sought to kill Jesus-accusing him of breaking the Sabbath (John 5:16 and 7:21–24), and for blasphemy (John 5:18), for the Law of Moses required those who were guilty of such offenses be condemned to death (Exo 31:14 and Lev 24:16). The events in John 8:31–59 happened during the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles at the Jewish temple in Jerusalem (John 7:2–14, 37; 7:53–8:2; 8:20, 59), at the treasury (John 8:20). A back and forth dialogue ensued when Jesus was instructing those who had believed his message (John 8:30, 31). Two prominent groups highlighted by the author are those referred to as ὁ ὄχλος, 'the people' or 'the crowd' (John 7:12, 20, 25, 31–32, 40, 43 and 49), and the οἱ ἄρχοντες the Jewish 'rulers/ leaders' (John 7:26, 32, 45–52 and 8:3, 13). Some people believed he was the Christ while others did not (John 7:12 and 40–43); however, the Pharisees were unwilling to believe in him (except Nicodemus- John 7:47–52). The term οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι, 'the Jews' (John 7:1), is used interchangeably to mean ὁ ὄχλος (John 7:19–20; 8:31–33 and John 8:39–40, 48, 52) or οἱ ἄρχοντες and οἱ Φαρισαῖοι (plural of Φαρισαῖος), 'Pharisees' (John 7:11, 13, 25–26; 8:13, 19–21; 9:13–16 and 8:22, 31; 9:18–24,34). However, those who engaged Jesus in the



dialogues were the Pharisees (John 8:13) and the ‘people’ who resisted his teachings (John 7:19–20). It is this specific group that Jesus addresses in the selected text of John 8:31–59.

H. Ridderbos (1997) identifies the two nuances of the term “Jew” comparable to the internal evidence above. First, he identifies the usage with the post-Old Testament period, where the terms ‘Jew’ and ‘Israelite’ were used to indicate that a person belonged by ancestry to Israel both as a people and as a religious community- in which ‘Jew’ gradually replaced ‘Israelite.’ Second, he identifies its usage with ‘Jews that were hostile to Jesus’ or, more specifically, to the Jewish rulers and authorities, the Pharisees. Ridderbos demonstrates the impossibility of a sharp line of demarcation between these two nuances by observing that the pilgrims (the people/crowd) in Jerusalem, being themselves Jews - dared not speak of Jesus “for fear of the Jews” (John 7:13). The disciples of Jesus, being Jews themselves, had been prepared by the Lord to learn his ways and to witness to others.

Interpretation of John 8:31–59

The Truth and Freedom (Verses 31–36)

Knowledge of Truth through Discipleship (Verses 31–33)

Greek text: 31 Ἐλεγεν οὖν ὁ Ἰησοῦς πρὸς τοὺς πεπιστευκότας αὐτῷ Ἰουδαίους· Ἐὰν ὑμεῖς μείνητε ἐν τῷ λόγῳ τῷ ἐμῷ, ἀληθῶς μαθηταὶ μου ἔστε, 32 καὶ γνώσεσθε τὴν ἀλήθειαν, καὶ ἡ ἀλήθεια ἐλευθερώσει ὑμᾶς. 33 ἀπεκρίθησαν πρὸς αὐτόν· Σπέρμα Ἀβραάμ ἐσμεν καὶ οὐδενὶ δεδουλεύκαμεν πώποτε· πῶς σὺ λέγεις ὅτι Ἐλεύθεροι γενήσεσθε;

Translation. 31: Then Jesus began saying to the Jews who had believed him: “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, 32 and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free”. 33 They replied to him, “We are Abraham’s offspring, and no one has enslaved us at any time: how do you say that we shall become free?”

This is the first instance Jesus addresses those who had believed in him since he faced resistance from the Jewish people and leaders. The phrase ἀληθῶς μαθηταὶ μου ἔστε (you are truly my disciples) implies that there exists false discipleship that those Jews had ascribed to (Wallace., 2000). The knowledge of the truth referred to above is experiential, not merely cognitive, as indicated by the use of the Greek word γινώσκω (I know) (Frame, 1987). Believing him, in this context, refers to the fact that they simply regarded him as a prophet, someone sent by God (Ngewa, 2003) - which was acceptable to Jesus as long as



they were willing to proceed further in their faith. And since the Jews understood the concept of discipleship well (Laan, 2012), by calling them to true discipleship, Jesus was telling them that there was more than just believing in him as a prophet - that could only be known through true discipleship.

The interrelationship between abiding in his word and knowing the truth is theologically significant here. According to D. A. Carson, the Jewish religion taught that the study of the law made a man free (Carson, 1991), but the teachings of Jesus point to his own words, as Moses had written about him (5:46). The context in which Jesus was addressing the Jews implies that it is through abiding in his word that the Jews would attain the saving faith (Morris, 1995). That is, through the knowledge of the truth- a progression from just recognizing him as God-sent to accepting him and acknowledging him as their master and teacher (Ngewa, 2003).

In response, the Jews questioned why Jesus would tell them they would be made free, considering that they were Abraham's offspring and were never in bondage to any man. The Jews embraced the ideology that freedom was part of the heritage of Abraham's seed. C. K. Barret (1978) observes that there was a Jewish belief that all Israelites were kings by being descended from Abraham. This implies they were, and always have been, free- because Abraham was their ancestor. Moreover, in his promise to Abraham, God promised that the nations would be blessed through Abraham (Gen 12:1–3), which included freedom (according to those Jews). Therefore, if the freedom of the nations would come through them (as Abraham's offspring), then how could Jesus say that they needed to become free themselves? This is the most likely argument by his audience because only a free person can set others free and does not need to be made free. Whether this ideology by the Jews refers to spiritual or physical freedom- or both - will become more apparent as the conversation unfolds.

Truth Embodied by Jesus (Verses 34–36)

Greek Text: 34 Ἀπεκρίθη αὐτοῖς ὁ Ἰησοῦς· Ἀμὴν ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι πᾶς ὁ ποιῶν τὴν ἁμαρτίαν δοῦλός ἐστιν τῆς ἁμαρτίας· 35 ὁ δὲ δοῦλος οὐ μένει ἐν τῇ οἰκίᾳ εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα· ὁ υἱὸς μένει εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα. (36) ἐὰν οὖν ὁ υἱὸς ὑμᾶς ἐλευθερώσῃ, ὅντως ἐλεύθεροι ἔσεσθε.



Translation: 34: Jesus replied to them, “Verily, verily, I say to you that everyone who practices sin is a slave of sin: 35 the slave does not abide in the house forever, but the Son abides forever; 36 if the Son, therefore, should set you free - you shall be free indeed.”

Then, in response to the believing Jews, Jesus introduces a spiritual concept by clarifying his focus as not physical bondage but spiritual bondage of sin. The present participle ὁ ποιῶν (everyone who practices) indicates a continuous action in view - habitual sinning. He further appeals to them through their understanding of their cultural laws of slavery to bring out the assurance and certainty of the freedom he is referring to. The status or position of a slave in the house is not permanent, but the son’s status is permanent; therefore, if the son sets free, then the freedom granted is sure (Ngewa, 2003). Metaphorically, it referred to the Son in the house of God as the embodiment of the truth that sets free (verse 32). The explicit revelation of this claim is stated in John 14:1–6. In verse 2, Jesus declared, ἐν τῇ οἰκίᾳ τοῦ πατρὸς μου μοναὶ πολλάι εἰσιν- “in my Father’s house are many mansions”; and in verse 6, Ἐγώ εἰμι ἡ ὁδὸς καὶ ἡ ἀλήθεια καὶ ἡ ζωὴ - “I am the way, the truth and the life (Holmes, 2011–2013).” By referring to the Son of God - the Son in the house of God - Jesus is giving the assurance of this freedom because the concept of “the Son of God” was not new to the Jews (John 9:35–38; 10:36). Thus, in this context, Jesus introduces the subject of salvation, a concept that will become more apparent in the subsequent verses.

The Truth and Fatherhood (Vv. 37–47)

Contrasting Fatherhood through Conduct (Verses 37–38)

Greek Text: 37 οἶδα ὅτι σπέρμα Ἀβραάμ ἐστε· ἀλλὰ ζητεῖτέ με ἀποκτεῖναι, ὅτι ὁ λόγος ὁ ἐμὸς οὐ χωρεῖ ἐν ὑμῖν. 38 ἃ ἐγὼ ἑώρακα παρὰ τῷ πατρὶ λαλῶ· καὶ ὑμεῖς οὖν ἃ ἠκούσατε παρὰ τοῦ πατρὸς ποιεῖτε.

Translation: 37 I know that you are Abraham’s offspring; but you seek to kill me, because my word has no place in you. 38 I speak that which I have seen with my Father: and so you practice that which you have heard from your father.

The implication here is that even though the Jews were aware of the genuineness of Jesus as one who was sent by God (Ridderbos, 1997), they were not willing to change their ways to become disciples. Thus, Jesus ascribed the rejection of his words to the fact that they had a father who was different from his own Father. Also, by practicing what they had heard



(ἠκούσατε, a resultative aorist) from their father they were acting contrary to the words that Jesus had learned by observing (ἐώρακα, an extensive perfect) and imitating his Father (Croy, 1999).

In the discussion, Jesus introduced the idea of spiritual fatherhood, which is not a matter of genes, but rather an imitation of the words or conduct of the spiritual father. Therefore, conduct is a clue to paternity, an idea that is also explored by J. N. Sanders (1943) and Hall Harris III (2004). This was a way of introducing his concept of fatherhood, as outlined in the subsequent verses.

Contrasting Fatherhood through Imitation (Verses 39–41a)

Greek Text. 39 Ἀπεκρίθησαν καὶ εἶπαν αὐτῷ· Ὁ πατὴρ ἡμῶν Ἀβραάμ ἐστιν. λέγει αὐτοῖς ὁ Ἰησοῦς· Εἰ τέκνα τοῦ Ἀβραάμ ἐστε, τὰ ἔργα τοῦ Ἀβραάμ ἐποιεῖτε· 40 νῦν δὲ ζητεῖτέ με ἀποκτεῖναι, ἄνθρωπον ὃς τὴν ἀλήθειαν ὑμῖν λελάληκα ἣν ἤκουσα παρὰ τοῦ θεοῦ· τοῦτο Ἀβραάμ οὐκ ἐποίησεν. 41a ὑμεῖς ποιεῖτε τὰ ἔργα τοῦ πατρὸς ὑμῶν.

Translation: 39 They answered and said to him, “Abraham is our father.” Jesus said to them, “If you were Abraham’s children, you would practice the works of Abraham: 40, but now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth, which I have heard from God: Abraham did not practice this. 41 You practice the works of your father.”

The Jews responded by reiterating their claim that Abraham was their father. This was an attempt to refute the claim by Jesus that they had another father who was different from the Father that Jesus revealed to them. The term τέκνα (children) is used instead of σπέρμα (offspring) to emphasize the aspect of the imitation of conduct rather than mere biological descent (Wallace., 2000). Those Jews were practicing the works of their father- who was certainly not Abraham- because they were acting contrary to the conduct of Abraham. Craig Keener (2012) observes that the Rabbis also spoke of those who were disciples of Abraham and Moses by walking in their ways. The idea was, therefore, not new to them, as shown by the claim of the Jewish leaders in John 9:28, where they claimed to be disciples of Moses. Thus Jesus responded by explicitly reiterating what he had just implicitly said to them in verses 37–38. In addition, he relates his word with the truth. L. Morris (1995) observes that ‘word’ in Jesus’ statements refers to the sum of his whole message. It is the word of God because Jesus was sent from God. Therefore, the word of God does not just cause a person to know the truth (verse 31) but is truth (verse 40).



The claim of Abraham being their father directly references their traditions and customs. Hence they resisted Jesus because they found the teachings of Jesus as a threat to their values and traditions. However, (also referred to in Matthew 15:1–9), Jesus pointed out (verse 40) that the traditions they were referring to were not really from Abraham, who kept the traditions commanded to him by God. Rather, they were traditions handed over to them by commandments of men and not from God.

Contrasting Fatherhood through Love (Verses 41b–42)

Greek Text: 41b εἶπαν αὐτῷ· Ἡμεῖς ἐκ πορνείας οὐ γεγεννήμεθα· ἓνα πατέρα ἔχομεν τὸν θεόν. (42) εἶπεν αὐτοῖς ὁ Ἰησοῦς· Εἰ ὁ θεὸς πατὴρ ὑμῶν ἦν ἠγαπᾶτε ἄν ἐμέ, ἐγὼ γὰρ ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ ἐξῆλθον καὶ ἤκω· οὐδὲ γὰρ ἂπ' ἐμαυτοῦ ἐλήλυθα, ἀλλ' ἐκεῖνός με ἀπέστειλεν.

Translation: 41b They said to him, “We were not born through fornication; we have one Father, God.” 42 Jesus said to them, “If God were your Father, you would love me: for I came forth from God and I am here; for I have not even come by myself, but he sent me.

The claim in verse 41b is an attempt by the Jews to justify their purity. Through this claim, they meant that the law did not disqualify them from being counted among the Israelites, the people of God, whose heritage was from their father Abraham (Hosea 1:9, 2:2–5). The claim of having one Father- God, meant that they understood that the children of Abraham were also the children of God. The claim by the Jews also points to the monotheistic basis for their religion and national existence in Deuteronomy 6:4 (Ridderbos, 1997). Thus they were relating the Fatherhood of God to them with their biological birth, a claim that Jesus refutes in the subsequent verses.

Jesus responds, stating that the Jews would have had the same love for him if God was their common Father, an idea that is elaborated in 1 John 5:1b. The true heritage of Abraham was not determined purely by their biological descent but by imitating the relationship that Abraham had with God. Thus, being a child of God is not a racial matter - of being born into the Jewish race - but a matter of having the right relationship with God. The extensive perfect ἐξῆλθον (came forth) (Wallace, 1996) emphasizes the origin and mission of Jesus: he came from God and was sent by God (Morris, 1995). Jesus’ teachings were from God, who had sent him (John 7:16–17). In addition, the verb ἐξῆλθον (came forth) was for the dawning of great events in their Jewish traditions, the appearance of



important personages and the like (Ridderbos, 1997); therefore, the speech by Jesus had a certain contextual solemnity.

Contrasting Fatherhood through Nature and Character (Verses 43–44)

Greek Text: 43 διὰ τί τὴν λαλίαν τὴν ἐμὴν οὐ γινώσκετε; ὅτι οὐ δύνασθε ἀκούειν τὸν λόγον τὸν ἐμόν. 44 ὑμεῖς ἐκ τοῦ πατρὸς τοῦ διαβόλου ἐστὲ καὶ τὰς ἐπιθυμίας τοῦ πατρὸς ὑμῶν θέλετε ποιεῖν. ἐκεῖνος ἀνθρωποκτόνος ἦν ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς, καὶ ἐν τῇ ἀληθείᾳ οὐκ ἔστηκεν, ὅτι οὐκ ἔστιν ἀλήθεια ἐν αὐτῷ. ὅταν λαλήῃ τὸ ψεῦδος, ἐκ τῶν ἰδίων λαλεῖ, ὅτι ψεύστης ἐστὶν καὶ ὁ πατήρ αὐτοῦ.

Translation: 43 For what *reason* do you not understand my speech? *It is* because you are not able to hear my word. 44 You are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father you want to practice. He was a murderer from the beginning, and he does not stand in the truth, because truth is not in him. Whenever he speaks *a* lie, he speaks from his own: for he is a liar, and the father of it.

The question by Jesus was undoubtedly intended to cause them to reflect on their situation, which they were unable to hear. The present infinitive ἀκούειν (to hear/ to attentively listen to his words) can also be translated as ‘to obey,’ that is, they were not willing to accept or obey his words- a fact that he elaborates in the subsequent verses (Wallace., 2000). The same idea is expressed by Harris III (2004), who observes that the Greek word ἀκούω (I hear) can also be translated as ‘I obey’ in such a context.

Having established that the Jews he was addressing were not children of God because of their evil conduct, Jesus made a bolder statement: that their father was the devil because they wanted to practice his desires. Jesus’ declaration in verse 44 is a culmination of what he had been trying to communicate to those Jews. The use of the gnomic present ἐστὶν with the genitive of source αὐτοῦ presents the general timeless truth that the devil is always a liar and the father lies, which explains why he habitually speaks lies (Wallace, 1996). The reference to the devil and his characteristics in relation to the truth reveals a profound, theologically significant concept that can help us understand Jesus’ definition of truth in this discourse. By saying there is no truth in him, Jesus meant that truth is not just about facts and information - which the devil certainly has - but is more than that. Truth proceeds from the divine nature and character; therefore, an evil being like the devil cannot possess truth or even receive it.



Further, in verse 40 truth (ἀλήθεια) is linked with having the mind of God. The devil thinks or speaks falsehood because he cannot think like God or perceive the way God perceives. Truth, therefore, is the reality of God, just the same way falsehood is the reality of the devil.

The call by Jesus to know the truth in verse 31 is to embrace the mind/reality, and the nature of God expressed through his divine words. And by calling them to become his disciples, Jesus reveals himself as the embodiment of the mind/reality and nature of God that humanity should imitate. In other words, Jesus is the embodiment of the truth, the word of God (John 1:1,14 and 14:6). This idea must have been fresh in the minds of the believers that John the apostle was addressing. This is because the same idea of Christ embodying the word of God had been propagated by Philo, who related λόγος to Yahweh, the God of Israel, before the coming of Christ (Barclay, 1975). He specifically connects it to the Old Testament reference to the Word of God (Genesis 15:1, 1 Samuel 3:21), as well as the Wisdom of God, which is personified poetically (Proverbs 8) (Schultz, 2002). Furthermore, the idea of the λόγος embodying the mind of God had also been taught by the Stoics (Barclay, 1975). Therefore, becoming a disciple of Jesus means learning how to think like Christ and having the mind and heart of Christ.

Contrasting Fatherhood through Obedience (Verses 45–47)

Greek Text: 45 ἐγὼ δὲ ὅτι τὴν ἀλήθειαν λέγω, οὐ πιστεύετε μοι. 46 τίς ἐξ ὑμῶν ἐλέγχει με περὶ ἁμαρτίας; εἰ ἀλήθειαν λέγω, διὰ τί ὑμεῖς οὐ πιστεύετε μοι; 47 ὁ ὢν ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ τὰ ῥήματα τοῦ θεοῦ ἀκούει· διὰ τοῦτο ὑμεῖς οὐκ ἀκούετε ὅτι ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ οὐκ ἐστέ.

Translation: 45 So because I tell you the truth, you do not believe me. 46 Which of you convicts me concerning sin? If I say the truth, for what *reason* do you not believe me? 47 He that is of God hears the words of God: therefore you do not hear because you are not of God.”

The use of δὲ as an adverbial conjunction ‘so’ and the adverbial ὅτι causal clause in verse 45 emphasizes the reasons for unbelief (see also verse 44) (Croy, 1999). The Jews were neither seeking nor able to know the truth because the nature and character of their father, the devil, were now inherent in them. Notably, the first question in verse 46 is open-ended, requiring an affirmative answer or otherwise to distinguish himself from them. Thus, Jesus explicitly told them that his sinless conduct was proof that they were not of the same



Father. Also, it was a way of telling them that his sinless nature was enough reason for them to believe him. This assertion was a significant theological clue for the Jews to recognize his divinity, as elaborated in verses 57–59 below.

To conclude his idea of fatherhood, he argues that because they hear God’s words, their rejection proves they are not of God. The terms *ῥῆμα* and *λόγος* both mean word (Dongell, 2014); however, *ῥῆμα* is used instead of *λόγος* in this context because it is a concrete expression of *λόγος* (Souter, 1917). Thus, by becoming like the devil in their character, those Jews could no longer receive or obey the words of God, as indicated in verse 43 above. Therefore, the fatherhood a person lives in determines how that person hears (H. Ridderbos (1997).

The Authenticity of Jesus (Verses 48–55)

Jesus Honours God (Verses 48–50)

Greek Text.: 48 Ἀπεκρίθησαν οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι καὶ εἶπαν αὐτῷ· Οὐ καλῶς λέγομεν ἡμεῖς ὅτι Σαμαρίτης εἶ σὺ καὶ δαιμόνιον ἔχεις; 49 ἀπεκρίθη Ἰησοῦς· Ἐγὼ δαιμόνιον οὐκ ἔχω, ἀλλὰ τιμῶ τὸν πατέρα μου, καὶ ὑμεῖς ἀτιμάζετέ με. (50) ἐγὼ δὲ οὐ ζητῶ τὴν δόξαν μου· ἔστιν ὁ ζητῶν καὶ κρίνων.

Translation: 48 The Jews answered and said to him, “Do we not rightly say that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?” 49, Jesus answered, “I do not have a demon, but I honour my Father, and you dishonour me – 50 and I do not seek my own glory - he is the one that seeks and the one that judges.

Using the negative particle *Οὐ* shows that the Jews were ironically expecting Jesus to answer their question in the affirmative (Croy, 1999). The accusation was a direct insult in response to the bold declaration by Jesus in verses 42–47. In the Jewish culture, being referred to as a Samaritan was very offensive because they were considered unclean and inferior in status to the Jews. They were also regarded as enemies by the Jews, and therefore, they were actually calling Jesus a traitor (Mburu, 2010). Worse still, these Jews accused Jesus of having a demon, the most debased state that a man can ever be in their understanding (Ngewa, 2003). Therefore the Jews were not only insulting Jesus but were insulting him with the worst kind of insults. Thus affirming Jesus’ statements that they were as evil as their father, the devil.



By bringing up the issue of honour, Jesus referred to the Jewish understanding of discipleship, in which the fathers were expected to disciple their children like Abraham (Genesis 18:19) (Gregory, 2008). Thayer defines τιμῶ as reverence, to venerate or value (Thayer, 2016). Mounce adds offering oneself to reverent service (Mounce, 2020). Hence it was expected of them to honour their fathers the way a disciple should honour his teacher (Matthew 10:24–25). This is because sons were to be the disciples of their fathers, that is, of their father Abraham (Keener C. , 2012) - something they did not do (verses 39-40). Moreover, to emphasize the import of his conduct, Jesus denies ever seeking his glory, a sign of his authenticity (John 7:18). The word δόξα means ‘to give/receive credit’ in this context (Mounce, 2020), from the root δοκεω (to think, suppose) (Holmes, 2011–2013); Jesus does not seek credit for himself. Then he goes on to present his Father (God) as the one who seeks the glory (ὁ ζητῶν) and the one who judges (κρίνων) (Mounce, 2009).

The theological implication here is that those who honour their fathers should be honoured as well in society, in the community of God’s people (Gregory, 2008). That Jesus should be honoured the same way his Father is honoured, as he had said to them in his teachings (John 5:23). This is because honouring his Father was proof to those Jews that Jesus was authentic (Carson, 1991). Therefore the dishonourable act of insulting Jesus by the Jews indicates how wicked they had become in their conduct, hypocrites, especially because they were claiming to be the people of God. In the Jewish context, the one Jesus referred to certainly had to be greater than him in authority and power because he sent him and was his Father (verse 42) (Gregory, 2008). In addition, the claim of honouring his Father in the previous verse gives a clue to the identity, as will be confirmed in the subsequent verses.

The Words of Jesus Give Eternal Life (Verses 51–53)

Greek Text: 51 ἀμὴν ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν, ἐάν τις τὸν ἐμὸν λόγον τηρήσῃ, θάνατον οὐ μὴ θεωρήσῃ εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα. 52 εἶπον αὐτῷ οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι, Νῦν ἐγνώκαμεν ὅτι δαιμόνιον ἔχεις· Ἀβραὰμ ἀπέθανεν καὶ οἱ προφῆται, καὶ σὺ λέγεις, Ἐάν τις τὸν λόγον μου τηρήσῃ, οὐ μὴ γεύσῃται θανάτου εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα· (53) μὴ σὺ μείζων εἶ τοῦ πατρὸς ἡμῶν Ἀβραάμ, ὅστις ἀπέθανεν; καὶ οἱ προφῆται ἀπέθανον· τίνα σεαυτὸν ποιεῖς;

Translation: 51 [Jesus said] Verily, verily, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he shall never see death forever.” 52 The Jews said to him, “now we know that you have a demon:



Abraham died, and the prophets, and you say, ‘if anyone keeps my word, he shall never taste of death.’ 53 You are not greater than our father Abraham, who died, are you? The prophets also died: whom do you make yourself?”

Jesus declares that those who keep his word receive eternal life. The use of the negative particle *μὴ* in the first question of verse 53 shows that those Jews ironically expected Jesus to answer negatively to their question (Croy, 1999). This was a way of downplaying the statement of Jesus in verse 51 and evidence that they were unwilling to receive his words. The accusation of being a demoniac is also hyperbolic, designed to express the seriousness of the claim (Tenney, 1981), thereby challenging the greatness of Jesus with ironic questions and again by comparing him with Abraham and the prophets.

The Words of Jesus are True (Verses 54–55)

Greek Text. 54 ἀπεκρίθη Ἰησοῦς· Ἐὰν ἐγὼ δοξάσω ἑμαυτόν, ἡ δόξα μου οὐδέν ἐστιν· ἔστιν ὁ πατήρ μου ὁ δοξάζων με, ὃν ὑμεῖς λέγετε ὅτι θεὸς ἡμῶν ἐστιν, 55 καὶ οὐκ ἐγνώκατε αὐτόν, ἐγὼ δὲ οἶδα αὐτόν· κἂν εἶπω ὅτι οὐκ οἶδα αὐτόν, ἔσομαι ὅμοιος ὑμῖν ψεύστης· ἀλλὰ οἶδα αὐτόν καὶ τὸν λόγον αὐτοῦ τηρῶ.

Translation: 54 Jesus answered, “If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing: my Father is the one who glorifies me, whom you say that he is your God. 55 Yet you do not know him; but I know him: and if I should say that I do not know him, I would be a liar like you: but I know him, and keep his word.”

Jesus boldly refuted their claim by elaborating on the purpose and the essence of true glory; it is not what one bestows upon himself but that which is bestowed upon him by God. And he goes on to show the identity of his Father, that he is actually the one they claim to be their God. This claim did not elicit a hostile reaction like the incident in John 5:16–18, perhaps because they understood this claim in the same breath that they were also claiming to be children of God.

To distinguish himself from their hypocritical claim that he is their God, Jesus elaborates on his knowledge of God in contrast to their lack of knowledge of him. He further distances himself from their hypocritical lies by affirming that he knows God and keeps his words- as a true child of God should. The affirmation of this statement is shown with the use of the perfect present οἶδα (I know) and the habitual present τηρῶ (I keep), which signals an action that always occurs (Wallace, 1996). This means that the knowledge of God is



expressed in the godly character of keeping his words- a continuous action. The conjunction ἀλλὰ (but) is used to show a strong contrast between Jesus and the Jews (Croy, 1999).

The knowledge of God is theologically significant. The Jews were expected to have a theological response to God by keeping his words. However, these Jews did not (verse 47), which Jesus ascribes to their lack of knowledge of him (verse 55). In addition, because knowing the truth was in their manner of speech a reference to the knowledge of the truth about God (Keener C. , 2012), this was an anaphoric reference to the call to true discipleship by Jesus in John 8:31-32; the call to abide in his words so that they can know the truth that would set them free from the bondage of sin.

The Divinity of Jesus (Vv 56–59)

Greek Text: 56 Ἀβραὰμ ὁ πατήρ ὑμῶν ἠγαλλιάσατο ἵνα ἴδῃ τὴν ἡμέραν τὴν ἐμήν, καὶ εἶδεν καὶ ἐχάρη. 57 εἶπον οὖν οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι πρὸς αὐτόν· Πεντήκοντα ἔτη οὐπω ἔχεις καὶ Ἀβραὰμ ἐώρακας; 58 εἶπεν αὐτοῖς Ἰησοῦς· Ἀμὴν ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν, πρὶν Ἀβραὰμ γενέσθαι ἐγὼ εἰμί. 59 ἦραν οὖν λίθους ἵνα βάλῳσιν ἐπ’ αὐτόν· Ἰησοῦς δὲ ἐκρύβη καὶ ἐξῆλθεν ἐκ τοῦ ἱεροῦ.

Translation: 56 “Your father Abraham rejoiced that he should see my day: and he saw it, and was made glad.” 57 Then the Jews said to him, “You don’t yet have fifty years, and have you seen Abraham?” 58 Jesus said to them, “Verily, verily, I say to you, before Abraham existed, I am.” 59 So they picked up stones so that they might cast at him: but Jesus disappeared and went out of the temple.

In response to questioning his supremacy, Jesus shows his greatness over Abraham by declaring that even Abraham looked eagerly and rejoiced in seeing Jesus’ day. The response by the Jews implies that they probably understood this statement to mean that Jesus was before the days of Abraham and had seen Abraham, hence the question about the existence of Jesus as indicated by the temporal adverb οὐπω (yet) and the stative present ἔχεις (have) (Wallace, 1996). However, the term ἠγαλλιάσατο (rejoiced) was often used in a religious sense- for joy in God, especially for eschatological coming to salvation and judgment (Ridderbos, 1997), which, according to Jesus, began its fulfillment in Jesus’ coming, as indicated by the phrase τὴν ἡμέραν τὴν ἐμήν (my day) (Croy, 1999). Therefore, the thought of Abraham seeing the Messiah was not offensive to the Jews; instead, the application to Jesus was offensive to them.



According to L. Morris (1995), the focus of Jesus may simply be that Abraham's attitude to this day was that of exultation rather than a specific occasion in the life of the patriarch. Other scholars refer to Jewish tradition (Genesis Rabbah 44:25), in which God revealed to Abraham the most distant future, the world to come (a Messianic eschatological coming) (Ridderbos, 1997). Whichever way, the words of Jesus were theologically significant because they identified Jesus as the ultimate fulfillment of all of Abraham's hopes, as is also observed by D. A. Carson (1991).

Verse 57 reveals the error of limiting the existence of Jesus to his human form by the Jews in their response. However, Jesus took the opportunity to explicitly reveal his deity through his 'I am' declaration. The gnomic present εἰμί (am), used to depict a general timeless truth (Wallace, 1996), reveals that Jesus is eternal; that he not only existed before Abraham but transcends time - without beginning or end, God. The Jews immediately understood the phrase ἐγὼ εἰμί (I am) to mean that he was referring to himself as God, which was the same phrase that God revealed as his name to Moses (Exodus 3:14).

Unfortunately, the Jews did not accept his words but hypocritically purported to execute judgment against him, which was against their law (Lev 24:16), a law that required them to put someone that was accused of breaking the law to trial before condemning them (John 7:50–51). The author uses the passive voice of the aorist ἐκρύβη (being hidden) to focus on Jesus, the subject, to demonstrate his divine ability to disappear, hence strengthening the declarative force of the indicative mood used by Jesus in his explicit claim of divinity in verse 58 (Wallace, 1996). In other words, the supernatural disappearance further proves his divinity before the Jews. Thus Jesus was clearly teaching he is the Son of God, as shown by the present tense in contrast with the aorist tense that is used with reference to Abraham's existence (Krejcir, 2010).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the John 8:31–59 discourse records the call to true discipleship that Jesus extended to his Jewish hearers. Those who abide in the words of Jesus are the true disciples of Jesus, true children of Abraham and God. Therefore, the Jews needed to have a right response to Jesus by believing in the truth of his words so that they might receive eternal life and a permanent place in the house of God. They are the ones who come to the knowledge of



the truth that sets people free from the bondage of sin. However, the true state of Jesus' audience was not what was expected of them because their conduct was contrary to the conduct of Abraham – whom they claimed to be their father. Thus the author used epideictic rhetoric to present the Jews being addressed by Jesus as a foil and Abraham as a mirror of true discipleship. The passage reveals the message of the truth by Jesus and instructs on true discipleship, the imagery of the fatherhood of God, Abraham, and the devil. Truth has been presented as the reality of God, and falsehood as the devil's reality. God is the Source and Father of truth; in contrast, the devil is the father of lies. In this passage, truth is linked with the saving act of the Son of God, who embodies truth.

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