

John's prologue and God's rejected children

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Rejection, by Suzanne Marie



Leclair.

The prologue to John's Gospel has always been foundational to traditional Christian theology. In its language of the transcendent, eternal *Logos*, it has provided a basis for seeing Christ as equal to God and as the second person of the Trinity. Its principal theme, the Incarnation, has been a cornerstone for understanding God's revelation in Christ, God's love for the material creation, and the nature of Jesus Christ as both human and divine. I continue to cherish these themes as central to the Christian faith. Nevertheless, I think that John's prologue has much more to say. In speaking about this Word become flesh, it also speaks powerfully to us about what it means to be *human*. Over the years, I kept returning to a few verses that changed the way that I saw the entire prologue and which consequently changed my

entire theology.

The words of John 1:11 kept jumping out at me: “He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him” (NRSV). Rejection. In the middle of this lofty passage about creation, light, and incarnation, there is the profoundest and most intimate of rejections. Not only was the Word not recognized by the world they^[1] had created (1:10), the Word was not accepted by her own home and the people closest to her (1:11). This deep rejection caught my attention, but the verses that proceeded it also captivated me: “But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God” (1:12-13). In the midst of rejection, the text also speaks about this rejected one giving power to people to become children of God on a basis that transcends biology and purity. Radical rejection followed by radical inclusion and acceptance. What does all of this say about the various ways in which God’s children are rejected today?

Biblical scholar Leticia Guardiola-Sáenz speaks of the need to study both the socio-historical conditions of production for the biblical text and the socio-historical conditions of consumption.^[2] Just as biblical texts were written within a history and social location, our interactions with the text, in which “meaning” is produced, arise from our history and social location. Guardiola-Sáenz writes: “...the text is then the site where the socio-historical conditions of consumption (in which I read) and my social location as reader merge with the text to produce what I call a hybrid text, a crossroads-text.”^[3] I want to employ Guardiola-Sáenz’s understanding in order to see John’s prologue as a “crossroads,” a “borderless” text. Not only does this approach justify bringing in contemporary concerns to the text, I think that it also helps highlight the hybridity present in John’s prologue which says something about the hybridity present in all human life. Additionally, employing a “borderless” understanding of John’s prologue helps to explain why these verses about rejection/acceptance resonated so strongly with me.

Reading from Rejections

Before considering the socio-historical conditions of John’s prologue, I want to reflect on my own socio-historical conditions as a reader approaching this text. Why did these particular verses, John 1:10-13, jump out at me within the past few years? What is there about me and what is going on around me that has enabled these

verses to strike me like lightning? Upon further reflection, I think there are two main factors that shape my interpretation. First, I am a second-generation Afro-Colombian who was born and raised in the United States. Like many younger Latin@s, I have found myself caught between my parent's Colombian culture and the United States' "All-American" [white-dominant] culture. Many experiences in the U.S. have reminded me that I am not fully accepted by the dominant culture here. I get the question, "Where are you *really* from?" Hollywood is an excellent example of how Latin@s in the U.S. are rendered invisible, voiceless, or one-dimensional. Educational curricula in schools may barely acknowledge my existence. Additionally, many experiences remind me that I am not considered "fully" or "truly" Colombian. I have been called "Gringo" before because of my differences and the accent I have when speaking Spanish. In many ways, I understand that no matter how much I go back to the motherland, or improve my Spanish, or practice cooking arepas, I can't attain the purity of Colombian-ness or Latin-American-ness. In this exilic existence, this third space, I can sense the suspicions and sometimes outright rejections of Latin American and U.S. cultures. My blackness also further complicates things. This rejection is intimate and painful. It is a painful thing for Latin@ kids when they go back to their parent's country and realize that this place, even though it is bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh, can never truly be home. Similarly, it is painful to be marginalized in the country where we grow up. We are foreigners in our own house. Indeed, our very identity is *dis-placed*.

The second factor in my interpretation is the contemporary rejection of people who self-identity as LGBTQI (i.e., lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, or intersex). Back when I read John 1:11 as a Christian college student, I couldn't help but think of my friends and acquaintances who faced the possibility of rejection simply by being honest about their sexual identity. I knew these friends were fearful of how their families would respond if they were to come out; I knew that some LGBTQI students were deeply hurt by family rejection. I also heard stories of youth who were kicked out of their homes because their Christian parents learned that they were gay. In 2012, the William Institute at UCLA released a study documenting that 40 percent of homeless youth self-identified as LGBTQI.^[4] The top reason why these LGBTQI youth were homeless was family rejection. Knowing that many parents, although not all, were fueled by the Bible and Christian faith in their rejection of these youth also deeply disturbed me. How could Christ inspire such actions? With this reality taking place in society around me, John 1:11 took on new meaning. The rejection of LGBTQI people was not unlike the rejection that Christ experienced from his own home. While the text was saying that being a child of God

was based on faith and not based on blood or procreation, I saw many churches basing faithful Christian identity precisely on biology, on heteronormativity, on the ability to procreate in a “heterosexual” marriage.

The Hybridity of Logos

Having considered my own socio-historical conditions as a reader of this text, I now want to focus on the socio-historical conditions that produced John’s prologue. In moving between contemporary experiences and the text, I hope that aspects of this text—that were perhaps overlooked—become highlighted. In reality, a neat delineation between where “our experience” begins and where the “text’s history” begins cannot be made. Phenomenologically and hermeneutically, there is always a constant interplay between contexts. Yet, for heuristic purposes, these artificial distinctions can still be helpful for understanding meanings in the text. In my opinion, a borderless reading of the biblical text should not be misconstrued as simply forcing scripture to fit the trends of contemporary culture. Instead, a borderless reading shows how our experiences uncover and unlock possibilities within the text. Just as the New Testament writers and early Christian readers saw their encounter with Jesus Christ as unlocking possibilities within the Hebrew Scriptures, the Holy Spirit’s ongoing guidance and pouring out on *all* flesh can help us unlock possibilities within the OT *and* the NT.

“In the beginning was the Word...” (John 1:1). What is the meaning of *Logos* (Word) here? Many scholars detect an association with Jewish wisdom (*Sophia*) and/or Greek philosophy. The literary antecedents in biblical wisdom traditions are found in places such as Prov. 8:22-31; Sir. 24:3-34; Wis. 7:22-8:1.^[5] For example, Proverbs 8 says: “Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth...then I was beside him, like a master worker” (8:23, 30). In these passages, Wisdom is depicted as a person accompanying God in the act of creation. The Word’s personification and creative activity in John’s prologue suggests a link with Jewish *Sophia*. What is particularly striking about this link is that Wisdom is always personified as a *woman* in the places where it is personified in the Hebrew and Deutero-canonical texts. For example, we read in the intertestamental literature: “For she is a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness” (Wisdom of Solomon 7:26). What does it mean that John’s personification of the Word draws upon the personification of *Sophia*? In other words, John seems to be mixing gendered metaphors. Whether John intended it or not, I see the *Logos* as enacting a gender-bending performance. The *man* Jesus Christ who is the eternal

Logos was/is also the woman Sophia. This is a good reminder that God transcends the gender binaries and essentialisms that humans have sharply defined. John's prologue depicts Jesus as transgressing not only what distinguishes the human and the divine, but transgressing gender norms. As such, I think it is right to see Jesus as a transgressive "border-crosser" in multiple ways.^[6] For some time now, feminist scholars such as Elizabeth A. Johnson have highlighted the importance of Sophia in Christological gender-dynamics. Is it a stretch to see the *Logos* as bending gender? I don't think so. If we consider the rest of the prologue, the rest of John's Gospel, and the rest of Jesus' life, this is consistent. Jesus' family is non-traditional; it is not based on simple "biology." Jesus' life is not necessarily emblematic of a "straight" lifestyle.

In addition to being associated with Wisdom, *Logos* has strong Greek, philosophical connotations. *Logos* figured prominently in early Stoicism as the term for the rational principle of the universe.^[7] Given the cosmic scope of the Word's power, "which enlightens everyone" (John 1:9), in John's prologue, the connection to Greek philosophy is clear. The Word is the ordering principle of the universe through which everything came into being.

Is the *Logos* of John's prologue more Jewish or more Greek? Scholars such as Rudolf Bultmann argue that the prologue's *Logos* has more Greek/Gnostic roots.^[8] Other scholars such as C.H. Dodd think that *Logos*, here, has a more Jewish backdrop.^[9] I think these kinds of debates are unfruitful and misunderstand the hybridity present in the text by presupposing notions of cultural purity. As a Latino, I detect a potential violence in this approach which attempts to undo a Hellenistic/Jewish cultural hybridity. One scholar goes so far as to say that the prologue attempts to "reorient the movement away from the Hebraic world of its past toward the Hellenistic world that represents its future."^[10] I do not think that it has to be either/or. As O'Day writes, "One cannot draw a sharp line between Hellenism and Judaism, for example, because the two were in constant contact with each other in the eastern Mediterranean world."^[11] Moreover, the Jewish/Greek dichotomy may even screen out other cultural influences. In her Christological work, Grace Ji-Sun Kim points out that the Jewish wisdom writers were heavily influenced by Egyptian traditions concerning the goddess Isis.^[12]

The hybridity of John's prologue is also connected to the hybridity of the Johannine community. Guardiola-Sáenz discusses how the Johannine community emerged during a time in which it was rejected by the synagogues. As such, this community found itself within a perilous third space between the Jewish and the Greco-Roman

segments of a Hellenistic world. She writes, “Jesus, the border-crosser who has come from above, becomes the model for survival in the hostile world which the Johannine community inhabits.”^[13] In this light, John’s prologue needs to be read beyond a lens which limits the possibilities to two options: cultural preservation or cultural assimilation. Instead, we need to be open to seeing the possibility of cultural fusion and cultural improvisation—indeed, the creation of something new—in John’s prologue.

The Impurity of God’s Children

Notions of purity and biological essentialism are precisely what’s at stake in the verses about rejection and inclusion. The Word came to his “own home” and was rejected by her “own people” (John 1:11). As a masculine substantive, ἴδιοι more clearly refers to people, as in one’s own people or “associates, relations.”^[14] The neuter substantive, τὰ ἴδια, can mean one’s own “home, possessions.”^[15] This accentuates the depths of the Word’s rejection. It is rejection experienced in close relationships and in one’s *home*. Who exactly are the ones who reject the Word? In one sense, the historical answer to this is the many Jewish people who did not recognize Jesus as messiah. Yet, there is a serious danger in tying the rejection in this prologue exclusively to Jewish people. O’Day writes, “The rejection of the Word by Jesus’ own people is restricted neither to the time of Jesus nor that of the Fourth Gospel. The specific referent of ‘his own’ is never explicitly identified...it stands as a figure for those on whom Jesus has some prior claim but who nonetheless reject him.”^[16] Following O’Day, I think the prologue’s cosmic scope means that this act of rejection against Jesus exists as a possibility for anyone who attempts to be part of his people. A supersessionist, anti-Semitic reading essentializes the rejection and reduces it to something pertaining only to Jewish people.

The next verses juxtapose this intimate rejection with a radical inclusion: “But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God” (1:12-13). The noun for blood here, αἱμάτων, is plural (literally= “bloods”), but many scholars agree that this is idiomatic for describing the result of sexual intercourse understood as the joining of two blood-lines.^[17] For this reason, αἱμάτων can be understood as “human procreation.” The word ἀνδρὸς here fundamentally means *man* in contrast to woman, but its range can denote man, male, or *husband*. Since it’s not clear whether John is specifically referring to the will of a husband, the will—here—can be understood as the will of “a man”; at such, I

think John may have not just husbands but perhaps fathers and the structure of *pater familias* in mind. In sum, those given the power to become children of God are those believing in the Word's name and their source or origin is not procreation/flesh-desires/a man's will but God.

Verses 12-13 present a non-essentialist rendering of the children of God. Christ opens up an acceptance that goes beyond purity and a sense of what is "natural" (i.e. human procreation, the will of a male). The Word's hybridity makes room for human hybridity, for a spectrum of experiences which are often *managed* and rejected by constructions of biological essentialism and purity of blood or culture and nationality. Alison Jasper asks: "Does our theological understanding of Incarnation within the Christian tradition not come also from deeply rooted perceptions about human subjectivity—about what it means to be human?"^[18] With this in mind, the Incarnation teaches us as much about humanity, or human incarnation (human *fleshly* life), as it does about God. The Word's experience of rejection and extension of acceptance is also a narration about humanity's fundamental rejections and acceptances. As one scholar puts it: "This is to be a story certainly not of John, not of 'Jesus Christ' only (v.17), but of a new race of humanity. Just as Genesis starts out, 'In the beginning' (1:1) to tell the origins of the cosmos and the human race, this Gospel of John will be a story about fresh beginnings, a new human race."^[19]

Conclusion: Jesus beyond the White, Capitalist, Heteronormative West

A fresh Christology is needed for those who have been deemed outside of or inferior to Western definitions of rational, developed humanity.^[20] Grace Ji-Sun Kim writes, "Until recent times, Eurocentric patriarchalism has bound, limited, and bottled up Christology."^[21] In *The Grace of Sophia*, Kim builds upon the work of white feminists such as Elizabeth A. Johnson and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza but also goes beyond them in important ways. She highlights how, in the history of reception, *Sophia* fell out of Christian discourse and a *logos* Christology tied to androcentric culture produced exclusively masculine imagery about God. She also adds: "*logos* Christology has reinforced the thought that Western knowledge is better than Eastern thought or wisdom."^[22] In putting Christianity's *Sophia* in dialogue with Buddhism's *prajna* and Korean *Han* for the sake of developing a "Korean North American Women's Christology," Kim is de-Westernizing Christology and challenging the assumption that certain cultures have a monopoly on Wisdom. The problem is not simply *patriarchy* as a universal, but what Maria Lugones has described as the "

[coloniality of gender.](#)” *Logos* Christology needs to be unhooked from the Eurocentric rationality of the West which has sexually, racially, and economically classified people so as to produce and reproduce rejection and inequality.

In the Incarnation, the Word experiences the “No’s” that some of us hear. No, you are not truly American enough. No, you are not Latin American enough. No, you are not sexually normal. No, your societies are not *developed*. No, your culture/civilization is not rational enough. Entering into humanity’s rejection of itself, the Word then demolishes the harmful ways in which we have internalized purity, nationalistic and gendered essentialisms, and Eurocentric rationality to define what it means to be *human*. As such, the *Logos* is the disordering ordering principle who destabilizes the violent means by which we narrowly define humanity and carry out rejections of our own people and peoples around the world. The Wisdom of God is not the progression of rationality from the Greeks to the Romans to the Europeans to the United States. Sophia is the disordering ordering force of life who deconstructs what we deem “natural” in order to make room for a creation that is different and far richer than we imagined.

The Word became flesh and was “full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). Like the rejected Word, those people at the margins who are rejected have grace and truth to give to those who are certain of what is natural, normal, and civilized. The “unnatural” and “damned” children of God who gain their power in the name of Jesus expose the ways in which we continue to reject some of God’s children in the very name of Jesus. As John’s prologue shows us, these rejections are ultimately a rejection of God.

[1] I intentionally switch between multiple pronouns to describe the Word (i.e. “he,” “she,” “they”) in order to highlight the non-essentialist, gender-bending performance of the Word in the prologue. Why and how I see the Word bending

gender will hopefully become clearer as my essay unfolds.

[2] Leticia Guardiola-Sáenz, "Border-Crossing and its Redemptive Power in John 7:53--8:11: A Cultural Reading of Jesus and the Accused," In *John and Postcolonialism: Travel, Space and Power*, edited by Musa W. Dube and Jeffrey L. Staley (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 267.

[3] Guardiola-Sáenz, "Border-Crossing and its Redemptive Power," 271.

[4] "Serving Our Youth: Findings from a National Survey of Service Providers Working with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Youth Who Are Homeless or At Risk of Becoming Homeless," accessed July 30 2015, <http://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/Durso-Gates-LGBT-Homeless-Youth-Survey-July-2012.pdf>

[5] Luke T. Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1986), 479.

[6] Guardiola-Sáenz, "Border-Crossing and its Redemptive Power," 283.

[7] Gail O'Day, *The Gospel of John: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections*, The New Interpreter's Bible 9, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 519.

[8] O'Day, *The Gospel of John*, 517.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Mark Allan Powell, *Fortress Introduction To The Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 127.

[11] O'Day, *The Gospel of John*, 519.

[12] Grace Ji-Sun Kim, *The Grace of Sophia: A Korean North American Women's Christology* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2010), 102.

[13] Guardiola-Sáenz, "Border-Crossing and its Redemptive Power," 284.

[14] Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, edited by Frederick W. Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 467.

[15] Ibid.

[16] O'Day, *The Gospel of John*, 525.

[17] John F. McHugh, *John 1-4: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, International Critical Commentary, (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014), 47.

[18] Alison Jasper, "Communicating: The Word of God," *Journal For The Study Of The New Testament* 67 (1997): 32.

[19][19] Gerard Sloyan, *John, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1987), 15.

[20] For more on Christianity's complicity with western, European constructions of the human, see: Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument," *The New Centennial Review* Volume 3, Number 3 (2003): pp. 257-337.

[21] Kim, *The Grace of Sophia*, 3.

[22] Kim, *The Grace of Sophia*, 136.