

Zeitschrift: Theologische Zeitschrift
Herausgeber: Theologische Fakultät der Universität Basel
Band: 36 (1980)
Heft: 5

Artikel: The Christology of John 8:25
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-878464>

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The Christology of John 8:25

We raise here the much discussed but yet problematic saying of Jesus at John 8:25.

In 8:21 Jesus says that he is going away and that his hearers cannot come where he goes; in v.23 he says that he is, in contrast to his hearers, "from above", and "not of this world"; in v.24 he says of himself "I am"¹; in v.25a his hearers ask him: "You are who?"; and in v.25b he answers: τὴν ἀρχὴν ὃ τι καὶ λαλῶ ὑμῖν. We will use as touch-stones for our considerations three expositions of this difficult line, that of Barrett², Brown³, and Schnackenburg⁴, each of whom opts for a different interpretation, and together represent the important alternatives.⁵

To begin with the most recent, Schnackenburg's rendering of the line is determined by his understanding of the question which elicited it, σὺ τίς εἶ; which he interprets with the emphasis "You are *who*?" and meaning "wie kommst du dazu, dass du dir das anmasst?" Thus, Jesus' answer in accordance with the context and the form of the Greek expression is, according to Schnackenburg, probably to be translated,

¹ Most translations supply the predicate pronoun, "I am *he*," though it is lacking in the Greek, here and also at 4:26; 6:20; 8:28; 18:5, 6, 8. These passages no doubt involve a double meaning, in view of the absolute "I am" (without a pronoun supplied even in translation) at 8:58 and 13:19 which contain an allusion possibly to Ex 3:14 or more likely to Isa 41:1-4; 43:8-13, 25; 44:6-8, 22; 46:3-13; 51:12; 52:6. The great "I am" motif that pervades the Gospel is, in this relation, also to be taken into account. Cf. Ph. B. Harner, *The "I Am" of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Johannine Usage and Thought*, Philadelphia 1970.

² C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John*, London, 1955, pp. 283 f.

³ R. E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John*, Garden City, N.Y. 1966-1970, I, 347 f.

⁴ R. Schnackenburg, *Johannesevangelium*, Freiburg 1965, II, 254 f.

⁵ It is simply not feasible to cite a host of overlapping treatments or those which have proven to be irrelevant. For general reviews of the problem and summaries of conclusions, however, one may note in addition to the three commentators mentioned above: E. R. Smothers, *Two Readings in Papyrus Bodmer II*, HThR 51 (1958), pp. 109 ff., and L. Morris, *The Gospel according to John*, Grand Rapids, Mich. 1971, pp. 448 ff.

(i) «Was rede ich überhaupt noch zu euch?»

or, as an exclamation,

«Dass ich überhaupt noch zu euch rede!»

For these skeptical Jews it was pointless, on this interpretation, for Jesus to clarify his identity further: "... jedes weitere Wort ist in dieser Situation überflüssig." The translation of the adverbial accusative τὴν ἀρχὴν as "überhaupt" ("generally", or "at all") is, says Schnackenburg, in itself linguistically possible and in this instance probable in view of the evidence of the Greek Fathers.⁶

There are, however, questions to be raised about this interpretation. The first must concern Schnackenburg's understanding of σὺ τίς εἶ; An honest "You are *who*?" is very different from a wide-eyed and astonished "You are *who*!?" It is difficult to see, as Schnackenburg seems to, that the Greek expression alone yields the first emphasis rather than the second. Further, it would be rather in accordance with John's style in these discourses for him to play upon the misunderstanding (or incomplete understanding) contained in the question, and for the questioners here to set the stage for an instructive and illuminating comment from Jesus. Also, Schnackenburg's rendering, either in the form of a question or exclamation, does not fit well with what follows. After Jesus responded to the question he did not withdraw from the discussion in despair or disgust over their unbelief, but is represented as continuing quite coolly to consider with them further his identity, his relation to the Father, and so on.⁷

As for the linguistic question, further doubts may be raised. For evidence that τὴν ἀρχὴν can mean "überhaupt" or "generally" (in the sense of "at all"), Schnackenburg cites the Liddell-Scott note that ἀρχὴν with a following negative can mean "not at all", and suggests on the authority of Bauer that the negative also may be omitted. But (1) the evidence in Liddell-Scott is exceedingly meager by comparison with

⁶ Schnackenburg (n. 4), II, 254 f.

⁷ Bultmann senses this problem and solves it by deleting vss 26–27 as an editorial insertion (possibly misplaced from 8:13–20), linking 8:25 b with 8:28, and paraphrasing Jesus' response as contrasting the Jews' present inability to understand with their future knowledge of who Jesus is: "There is no point in discussing that with you, but when you have lifted up the Son of man, then you will know..." (The Gospel of John, tr. G. R. Beasley-Murray, et al., Oxford, England 1971), pp. 350 ff. But Bultmann's characteristic shifting about of texts is dubious at best.

other relevant meanings of the adverbial accusative,⁸ (2) the negative does *not* occur here, further highlighting what already tends towards an exceptional instance, and (3) though Bauer's 1925 commentary and later *Wörterbuch* provide the proof-texts for τὴν ἀρχὴν-without-the-negative = "at all",⁹ it should be noted that the English Arndt-Gingrich edition of the *Wörterbuch* somewhat weakens this evidence by suggesting as an additional possibility the quite different rendering of John 8:25: "To begin with, why do I as much as speak to you!"¹⁰

Finally, it is true that the Greek Fathers cited by Bauer and then Schnackenburg took τὴν ἀρχὴν to mean ὅλως,¹¹ and this is surely the strongest argument for Schnackenburg's rendering. But it may be asked at least whether these Fathers may not have felt the same difficulty and offered ὅλως as an *interpretation*.¹² And in any event why was a substitution required at all if this meaning of τὴν ἀρχὴν was as standard and unambiguous as Schnackenburg suggests? The fact is, on the contrary, there is no instance whatever of τὴν ἀρχὴν = ὅλως in the New Testament, though there *are* four instances of ὅλως = "at all" or "generally" (Matt 5:34; I Cor 5:1, 6:7, 15:29). On the other hand, ἀρχὴν in John is a theologically charged word; in every other instance it points either to creation (1:1 f.; 8:44), or to the beginning of Jesus' public ministry (2:11; 6:64; 15:27; 16:4), or, in these same instances, also to Jesus' pre-existence, either explicitly (as in 1:1) or transparently (as in 6:64). It is difficult to believe that at 8:25 b we have the sudden intru-

⁸ Liddell-Scott, Greek-English Lexicon, rev. H. Stuart Jones and R. McKenzie, Oxford, England 1940, s. v. ἀρχή, I, 1, c.

⁹ W. Bauer, *Das Johannesevangelium*, Tübingen 1925, pp. 118 f. So also Griechisch-Deutsches Wörterbuch zu den Schriften des Neuen Testaments und der übrigen urchristlichen Literatur, Berlin 1958, s. v. ἀρχή, 1, b («... in der Regel in negativen Sätzen, doch kann die Verneinung im Sinne liegen»). Quite apart from the negative, H. W. Smyth cites τὴν ἀρχὴν with the meaning of "at all" (*Greek Grammar*, rev. G. M. Messing, Cambridge, Mass. 1956), secs. 1606–1611) and F. Blass and A. Debrunner assign it this meaning at 8:25 b (*A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, tr. and rev. R. W. Funk, Chicago 1961, sec. 300, 2).

¹⁰ W. Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, tr. and ed. W. F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich, Chicago 1957, s. v. ἀρχή, 1, b.

¹¹ For example, John Chrysostom, In Joannem Homilia, LII, 1 (P. M., 59, 293), Theophylact, Enarratio in Evangelium Joannis, VIII, 620 (P. M., 124, 20); Euthymius, Commentaria in Joannem, VIII (P. M., 129, 1288).

¹² Cf. Bauer: «τὴν ἀ. J 8, 25 ist, wie die griechischen Väter *fast* [my italics] durchweg verstehen, adverbial gebraucht = ὅλως *überhaupt*» (*Wörterbuch*, (n. 9)).

sion of a meaning of ἀρχήν both obscure in itself and so foreign to John's otherwise carefully considered usage.

Schnackenburg's whole line of reasoning, considered cumulatively, thus seems strained, especially if, as we believe, some other explanation of τὴν ἀρχήν can be suggested and sustained in the present context.

Let us then take the question put to Jesus, σὺ τίς εἶ;, in the sense of an honest question, "You are *who*?!", that is, "You say you *are*, but are *who*?!", and render the τὴν ἀρχήν of Jesus' answer as "at the beginning". Aside from the present context and aside from the possible evidence for τὴν ἀρχήν = "at all", there is plenty of evidence both in secular literature and the LXX of the adverbial use of the accusative ἀρχήν with the temporal sense of "at the beginning", which Bernard adopted in his treatment of 8:25, calling it a "sound classical construction".¹³

From secular literature one might cite especially the contrast in Thucydides, II, 74: οὔτε τὴν ἀρχήν ... οὔτε νῦν;¹⁴ from the LXX, Gen 41:21 and 43:18, 20 may be noted, but especially Dan 8:1 where the Theodotian version gives τὴν ἀρχήν for the LXX τὴν πρώτην, and 9:21 where the LXX gives τὴν ἀρχήν for the Theodotian ἐν τῇ ἀρχῇ. Barrett cites these examples,¹⁵ though it is remarkable that he omits Prov 8:23 where Wisdom speaks the words, "The Lord created me at the beginning (ἀρχήν)", which, though without the definite article, is surely the most interesting antecedent occurrence from the standpoint of our Johannine problem; and there can be no question about the correctness of the interpretation here inasmuch as Prov 8:23 is simply a restatement in other words (*parallelismus membrorum*) of Wisdom's statement in 8:22, "The Lord possessed me in the beginning (ἐν τῇ ἀρχῇ)". Not only so, but the construction is employed elsewhere in the New Testament (though again without the definite article): Heb 2:3: "How shall we escape if we neglect so great salvation which at the beginning (ἀρχήν) was spoken through the Lord...?"

These instances of τὴν ἀρχήν = "at the beginning" (especially in the New Testament) must be compared with the absence of (τὴν ἀρχήν =

¹³ J. H. Bernard, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Gospel according to St. John*, ed. A. H. McNeile, Edinburgh 1928, II, 301. Cf. Smyth on the adverbial accusative of "time and successions" (e.g., τὸ πάλαι, τὸ πρῶτον, τὸ τελευταῖον, etc.) (n. 9), and Liddell-Scott: *Greek-English Lexicon* (n. 8).

¹⁴ Bultmann is too much preoccupied with this idea of contrast in his discussion of the temporal meaning of τὴν ἀρχήν (n. 7, pp. 351 ff., and notes).

¹⁵ Barrett (n. 2), p. 283.

“at all” in the New Testament and the presence of ὅλως = “at all” in the New Testament. Further, especially in view of the Johannine ἀρχήν = “(temporally) first” (2:11) and the numerous occurrences in John of ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς/ἐν ἀρχῇ, it seems to me exactly backwards to conclude as does Schnackenburg that “in der LXX kann τὴν ἀρχήν ‘von Anfang an’ bedeuten... aber für Joh ist das nach seinem Sprachgebrauch unwahrscheinlich.”¹⁶

We are inclined, then, to think that Brown is at least on the right track with his rendering,

(ii) “What I have been telling you from the beginning.”¹⁷ which we may designate the “temporal” interpretation inasmuch as it takes τὴν ἀρχήν as pointing to a moment in past time, in this instance the beginning of Jesus’ public teaching. In his brief treatment of the line, Brown touches on several of the points already considered in our discussion of Schnackenburg, adding that some precedent for adding words to complete the sense is found in the reading of P⁶⁶: εἶπον ὑμῖν τὴν ἀρχήν ὅτι (or ὅ τι) καὶ λαλῶ ὑμῖν, “I told you at the beginning what I am also telling you now”. But the εἶπον ὑμῖν of P⁶⁶ is a *marginal addition*, and whether or not the insertion was made by the original hand¹⁸, we must again reckon with the possibility – or probability – that the scribe, or corrector, was thus attempting to resolve the same difficulty which faces us, perhaps modelling his addition after Jesus’ words in a similar interchange at 10:24f., or 16:4 where ὑμῖν (οὐκ) εἶπον is connected with ἐξ ἀρχῆς. Funk writes, “P⁶⁶ thus provides the basis for a solution to a thorny textual and exegetical problem, and, if adopted, should ease the burden of future commentators”.¹⁹ But of course that is just the problem: This reading, both unique and simplest among the witnesses, is immediately suspect.²⁰

¹⁶ Schnackenburg (n. 4), p. 255 (n. 3).

¹⁷ Brown (n. 3), I, 347f.

¹⁸ The editor of the text, V. Martin, delivers a quite positive verdict (Papyrus Bodmer II: *Évangile de Jean*, Chap. 1–14, Coligny–Geneva, 1956, pp. 30f.), but an examination of the plates and comparison with other insertions raises doubts.

¹⁹ R. W. Funk, Papyrus Bodmer II (P⁶⁶) and John 8:25, *HThR* 51 (1958), p. 100. But Funk’s article as well as Smother’s should be consulted nevertheless on the relevance of P⁶⁶.

²⁰ Cf. C. K. Barrett, Papyrus Bodmer II: A Preliminary Report, *ET* 66 (1957), p. 176. Of the marginal addition at 8:25 Barrett observes: “It seems doubtful whether this is an improvement on the current text, of which it is probably a secondary development.”

More important is the fact that, as Brown himself correctly observes,²¹ it would have been characteristic of John to employ rather the prepositional phrase ἀπ' or ἐξ ἀρχῆς where the same "temporal" idea was intended, as, for example, at 6:64, 15:27, and 16:4. This last instance (16:4) is particularly relevant because here the ἐξ ἀρχῆς is connected with ὑμῖν (οὐκ) εἶπον and, indirectly, with λελάληκα ὑμῖν, where the aorist or perfect tense results obviously in a more natural construction than a present tense would. That is, given Brown's interpretation it is not only the phrase that is uncharacteristic of John, τὴν ἀρχὴν rather than ἀπ' or ἐξ ἀρχῆς, but the tense of the verb also, λαλῶ rather than εἶπον or λελάληκα.

A third possibility, which pushes forward this "temporal" interpretation, is Barrett's suggestion:

(iii) "I am from the beginning what I tell you."²²

Barrett allows the interpretation τὴν ἀρχὴν = "at all" only if the line is rendered as a question, which he rejects on the grounds that thus taken it is pointless in relation to what follows. Taking account of the precedents for the adverbial accusative τὴν ἀρχὴν = "at the beginning" or "in the beginning" (already mentioned above), he nonetheless rejects the Brown-type rendering, "I am what I tell you from the beginning," in favor of "I am from the beginning what I tell you," on the grounds that the latter suits better the present tense λαλῶ, it suits better the sense of the whole discourse, and it follows up particularly well the ἐγώ εἰμι of v. 24.²³ The result is what we might call the "Christological" interpretation of the line. The difference between the Brown and Barrett renderings is that according to the former τὴν ἀρχὴν has reference to something within Jesus' public ministry, namely his repeated declarations about himself, whereas according to the latter it expresses the characteristic Johannine interest in the *pre-existence* of Jesus as the Christ (cf. 1:1; 8:58; 17:15).

We have, yet, some questions about Barrett's interpretation which after all may not do justice to the full Christological import of the saying. First, our comment earlier on John's characteristic use of the prepositional phrase ἀπ' ἀρχῆς must now be applied also to Barrett's translation. Barrett too easily slides from his statement "τὴν ἀρχὴν

²¹ Brown (n. 3), I, 347.

²² Barrett (n. 2), pp. 283 f.

²³ Ibid.

must... be rendered 'at first,' 'at the beginning,' 'in the beginning,'" to the further statement, "We must choose between the renderings (a) I am from the beginning what I tell you, and (b) I am what I tell you from the beginning."²⁴ "From the beginning" is *not* the same as "at first," "at the beginning," or "in the beginning." On the other hand, if, as Barrett thinks, John had wished to say "from the beginning," ἀπ' ἀρχῆς certainly would have been for him the most characteristic way of doing so. Second, Barrett's rendering still does not really provide an answer to the question posed by Jesus' hearers: (i) It places the emphasis on the *when*, which is not in question, rather than the *who*, which is very much in question; (ii) from a literary and dramatic standpoint such a response – which verges on a tautology – is a let-down between its prelude and sequel, whereas it would not be like the Jesus of the Fourth Gospel to miss this chance!

I suggest, then, as a variation on the "Christological" rendering,
 (iv) At the beginning, which is what I tell you"
 with the meaning: "I am the One at the Beginning,
 which is what I keep telling you."

In addition to the various remarks already made which are relevant or supportive of this rendering, the following may be noted. It is true that on this rendering ἐγώ εἰμι, "I am," must be supplied, but that should be no greater problem here than in the case of the Brown or Barrett type interpretations which also require some such adjustment. Further, to omit the *subject* here may be no more elliptical – and every bit as provocative – as to omit the *predicate* in v.24.²⁵ On the other hand, it is just possible (though I will not press it) that Jesus' statement at 25a reaches back for its subject beyond the question to the "I am" of v.24; thus, v.24: "I am..."; v.25a: "You are *who*?"; v.25b: "... at the beginning." It may be objected, however, that this general rendering, like Barrett's, answers the question of *when* (which is not in question here) rather than *who* (which is in question). But on the contrary the *identity* of one who calls himself "(The One) at the beginning" or "in the beginning" or "at the start of everything," would thus be made as clear (with a little room left for "indirect discourse"), as the also elliptical but nonetheless scandalous "I am" spoken at 8:58.

²⁴ Ibid., p.283.

²⁵ See our first note above.

The reference to 8:58 suggests, indeed, that we turn now from philology and grammar to a more careful consideration of the total context of our saying and to ask whether we do not find here a final support for some such “Christological” interpretations as (iv) above.

(1) The mode of Jesus’ statement, as we have interpreted it, is not inconsistent with the indirectness with which Jesus identifies himself with God in the Fourth Gospel²⁶, and it coheres specifically and immediately with the oblique and elliptical character of the statements just made in vss 21, 22, and especially the “I am” statement in v. 24. (2) The statement at 8:25 is both preceded and followed by a predicateless “I am” statement (vss 24 and 28) which, like other such statements, are no doubt intended to suggest Jesus’ unity with God.²⁷ (3) The suggested identity with the Son of Man in v. 28 and Jesus’ claims of a special relation to the Father in vss 26–29 should render a similar claim in v. 25a entirely unsurprising. (4) Though on this occasion many came to believe in him (v. 30), after a series of almost identical claims at 8:54 ff. others would have stoned him, and this presumably because he was perceived in all this *to make himself out to be God*, as in 10:30 ff. where the Jews thus interpret his statement, “I and my Father are one.” (5) Inasmuch as the τὴν ἀρχὴν of 8:25a is immediately bracketed by two “I am” statements (vss 24 and 28), and is followed in the same chapter by yet another “I am” statement, indeed the most familiar and least ambiguous, “Before Abraham was, I am (v. 58),” we might reasonably ask whether the τὴν ἀρχὴν might be interpreted by the latter. Collapsing the statement from both 8:24 ff. and 8:58, the following paraphrase suggests itself:

“I am.” “You are *who*?!” “I am the One before Abraham was, that is, the One at the beginning, as I keep trying to tell you in various ways. I also have many other things to tell you too...”

The same holds true if we survey the yet larger context of the saying. Indeed, ἀρχή is a “Johannine” word, occurring in the Johannine writings 21 times, and frequently with Christological significance. Exam-

²⁶ It is to be noted that even though in the Fourth Gospel, unlike the Synoptics, Jesus is *called* God (in fact the whole of this Gospel both begins and concludes with this claim about him in 1:1 and 20:28), he makes no such straightforward, unambiguous claim about himself. The Fourth Gospel seems to comment on this characteristic indirectness with the interchange at 10:24 f.

²⁷ As at 18:6 where his hearers perceive the theological claim included in the double meaning and respond, appropriately, by falling backwards on the ground.

ples of the latter are John 1:1, 6:64, 15:27, 16:4; I John 1:1, 2:13 f.; Rev. 3:14, 22:6.²⁸ No doubt this Christological significance receives its fullest expression in assertions like "In the beginning was the *Logos*" (John 1:1) and "I am the beginning and the end" (Rev. 21:6). Against such a background of usage the Christological interpretation of the τὴν ἀρχὴν of John 8:25a also should hardly be surprising.

We are, then, arguing for the possibility that Jesus' response at 8:25 be read as suggesting an identification of himself with God. This identification is, in different ways, recurrent throughout the Fourth Gospel, there are specific evidences in the context of this particular saying which commend this meaning here also, and philological-grammatical consideration do not exclude it.

Still, I do not mean to minimize the difficulty of the passage before us. Even if the interpretation I have presented does the most justice to most of the evidence, any proposed resolution, including my own, is bound in the end to be problematic and uncertain. When Barrett opened his brief discussion of the problem with the assertion that "the difficulty of this sentence has perhaps been exaggerated,"²⁹ he exaggerated.

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²⁸ In this regard we note our conviction that the First Epistle does not lie at the margin of the Johannine literature but rather at the center of its development, after the Gospel "proper" and before the Prologue, and that it was composed by the same individual as those other document. The book of Revelation is, of course, more difficult to relate to the Johannine literature.

²⁹ Barrett (n. 2), p. 283.