John 20:31 and the Purpose of the Fourth Gospel

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I am honored and grateful to have the opportunity to offer these observations in honor of my mentor and colleague, Jim Cook. Jim has always modeled for me the integration of eloquence, meticulous care in exegesis, and theological passion. I hope that these remarks reflect in some small way the impact that these values have had in shaping my own life and work.

Of all the books in the New Testament, the Gospel of John is the only one to contain an explicit statement regarding the purpose for which the book was written. John 20:30-31 declares: "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name." This explicit statement of purpose has nonetheless been the subject of much debate over the years.

One source of contention has been the existence of a difficult textual variant in verse 31. Should we translate "that you may come to believe" as the New Revised Standard Version does, accepting the manuscripts which read the verb as an aorist subjunctive, or should we translate "that you might continue to believe," reading the verb as a present subjunctive? The debate over the tense of this verb is often tied to a debate over whether the gospel is written to convert non-Christians or to nurture the faith of Christians. If one takes the aorist reading ("that you may come to believe"), then the accent seems to fall on an evangelistic purpose; if one takes the present tense ("that you may continue to believe"), then the accent seems to fall on a purpose of nurturing or deepening Christians in their faith.

Unfortunately, the manuscript evidence is evenly divided, and most commentators acknowledge that either reading is possible from the perspective of textual criticism. Moreover, a number of commentators have pointed out that either the present or the aorist could be used to indicate either an evangelistic or nurturing purpose. Hence, the tense of this verb alone cannot resolve the dilemma of the purpose of John.

In an important 1987 Journal of Biblical Literature article, D.A. Carson probes another important question in this verse, bringing a fresh angle of vision to the question of the purpose of John. He addresses the syntax of the διαβάσω.
clause in 20:31: Ιησοῦς ἐστιν ὁ Χριστὸς ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ. Traditionally, this has been translated following the Greek word order directly: "Jesus is the Christ (or Messiah), the Son of God." Carson points out, however, that the name "Jesus" lacks the definite article in the Greek. He appeals to the dissertation of Lane C. McGaughy, Toward a Descriptive Analysis of EINAI as a Linking Verb in New Testament Greek, arguing that in constructions using ἐστιν such as this one, the word or word cluster without the definite article should be regarded as the predicate noun, and the word or word cluster with the article should be regarded as the subject of the sentence. Therefore, he argues, the verse should properly be translated as follows: "These things have been written that you may believe that the Messiah, the Son of God is Jesus." In other words, the Fourth Gospel is written not to answer the question "Who is Jesus?" but rather the question, "Who is the Messiah?" For Carson, John assumes that his readers are already concerned with the identity of the Messiah. John writes evangelistically to persuade them that the Messiah has come, and that his name is Jesus.

At first glance, the argument seems simple and compelling. Yet I believe that the language patterns of the Fourth Gospel make Carson’s reading unlikely. In what follows, I hope to describe my objections to Carson's reading in more detail, and then to offer my own observations on John 20:31 and the purpose of the Fourth Gospel. My first objection to Carson's reading is based on a confessional formula in the Gospel of John, in which someone attributes a title to Jesus by asserting "You are ... [the Christ, or the Holy One, or some such name]." In these instances, the second person verb requires that the subject be "you," and that the title be read as the predicate, even though the title carries the definite article with it. Note the following examples, and their similarity to John 20:31:

John 6:69 We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.

John 11:27 Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.

There is yet another set of examples, not quite as close to John 20:31, which nonetheless show that John has a fondness for titles which use the definite article, but which nonetheless must be regarded as predicates:

John 1:49 Nathanael replied, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!"

John 10:24 If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly."

John 3:28 I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him.

John 6:35 Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life." (cf. 6:41,48,51)
John 8:12  Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world."

John 10:7  So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep." (cf. 10:9,11,14).

John 11:25  Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life."

John 14:6  Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life."

John 15:1  "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower." (cf. 15:5)

These examples illustrate John's fondness for titles in the predicate, and his tendency to retain the definite article with the title, even when it is used in the predicate. On the other hand, if one looks at the first and second person forms of εἰμι which have anarthrous predicates, a strong case can be made that in almost every case, the predicate is either indefinite or non-titular. The natural conclusion is that John does not remove the article from titles when they appear in the predicate, even though the "normal" grammatical pattern is for predicate nouns to be anarthrous.

But why does "Jesus" lack the article in this verse? Does not this raise suspicion that this is intended as the predicate, rather than as the subject? Certainly this is the normal pattern with copulative verbs. Yet John's pattern of predicative titles should not be ignored. Moreover, it appears that John consistently uses anarthrous Ἰησοῦς as the subject of δὲ clauses. Hence there may be another adequate way of explaining the absence of the article, while affirming John's general pattern of predicative titles and reading "Jesus" as the subject of the clause.

John's common pattern of using the definite article with titles in the predicate with εἰμι makes the traditional reading of John 20:31 the more natural one: "Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God." Hence it appears that contextual considerations support the traditional reading of John 20:31. The central question of John is not, "Who is the Messiah?" (Even though that question does occur) Rather, the central question is, "Who is Jesus?" In that light, it seems that the Fourth Gospel is written to people who may have some familiarity with Jesus, but who may need to be persuaded that this Jesus is indeed the Messiah, the Son of God.

But a return to the traditional rendering of this verse also returns us to the familiar problem: is the Fourth Gospel evangelistic, or is it written to nurture the faith of Christians? I believe that the issue cannot be settled by appealing to text-critical or linguistic arguments; the data and arguments brought forward are insufficient to resolve the issue. Rather, one must look at the narrative strategies in John as a whole.
Recent scholarship has strongly underscored the dynamics of irony, double-meaning, and misunderstanding in the Fourth Gospel. The presence of these literary devices has caused many scholars to doubt whether John was written as an evangelistic tool. There seems to be too much "in-house" language, too much expected of the reader, to make this text useful evangelistically. Likewise the heavily conflictual elements surrounding Jesus and "the Jews" seem problematic for an evangelistic text, particularly one aimed at Jews.

Yet I believe it is equally extreme to assert, as Wayne Meeks does, that John's language is primarily the language of sectarianism, utterly inaccessible to all but those who are already on the inside. Such a perspective fails to do justice to the inviting, contemplative quality of John, a book which begins with the question "What are you looking for?" (1:38) followed by the invitation to "come and see" (1:39).

It may be more helpful to note that the Gospel of John attaches multiple levels of meaning to the word "believe." The story of the healing of the official's son in John 4:46-54 is an apt example. When Jesus commands the man to return, and promises that his son will live, the text says: "The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him, and started on his way" (4:50). Yet later, when he discovers that the healing took place when Jesus commanded him to go, the text says: "So he himself believed, along with his whole household" (4:53). At which point did faith emerge? With the command of Jesus, or the evidence of healing? I suspect that the author of the Fourth Gospel would smile, and would suggest that we are now beginning to understand what faith is.

For the Gospel of John, faith is not a simple possession which one has or does not have. Rather, it is an experience into which one grows, and never stops growing. In this light, I wonder if the "evangelistic versus nurture" debate regarding the Fourth Gospel is not fundamentally wrong-headed. I suspect that John is interested in taking people at whatever place they may be, and leading them more deeply into the life of faith in Jesus Christ. For unbelievers, that may mean an invitation to conversion. For Christians, it is an invitation to enter more deeply into the reality which they confess when they declare their allegiance to Jesus.

It is this emphasis on growth and deepening in John that makes me most uncomfortable with Carson's proposal. John is not out merely to identify the Messiah as Jesus; he wants to deepen and to transform the reader's understanding of "Messiah." Only in this framework do the "I am" sayings make sense. These sayings are meant not only to identify Jesus as the Messiah, but to transform our understanding of what the Messiah is to be and to do. For all, both Christians and non-Christians, the Fourth Gospel is an invitation to a never-ending journey of mystery and wonder into the heart of God's self-revelation found in Jesus, a mystery which cannot be exhausted.
ENDNOTES


2. (SBLDS 6; Missoula, MT: SBL, 1972).

3. Second person singular forms are found in 1:21,50, 4:19, 8:48, 9:28, 18:37, and 19:12; first person singular forms are found in 9:5, 10:36, 18:37, and 19:31.

