

## JESUS THE NAZOREAN

### On the publication of *King of the Jews. Temple Theology in John's Gospel*

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John's Jesus seems different from the Jesus in the synoptic gospels. The figure in Matthew, Mark and Luke teaches in the synagogues and homes of Galilee, in the hills and even in a fishing boat on the lake. He forgives sins and eats with sinners. He heals the sick and exorcises evil spirits. He even raises the dead to life, and the people who throng to hear him conclude that he is a great prophet (e.g. Luke 7.16). He also preaches about the kingdom of God and arouses first the suspicion and then the hostility of Jewish religious leaders. They eventually contrive to have him killed. All the synoptic gospels are clear about this; it was the chief priests, scribes and elders who had Jesus arrested and put on trial. The crime, according to the notice on his cross, was his claim to be the King of the Jews. Pontius Pilate understood this as treason, because that is how the situation was presented to him, but 'King of the Jews' meant far more than just a political leader.

John's Jesus is a much more mysterious figure: he too teaches in the synagogue and by the lake, he too heals the sick and raises the dead, but he also speaks of things he has seen and learned in heaven (John 3.31-32) and he engages in long debates with the Jewish religious leaders. He speaks of coming from heaven and returning to heaven, he speaks of unity with his Father and of unity with his disciples. The Jewish religious leaders have him arrested and killed, but according to John, the notice on his cross did not say simply 'The King of the Jews'. It said '*Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews*' (John 19.19). That is how the words are usually translated. But 'of Nazareth' here is not the usual word *Nazarēnos*; it is *Nazōraios*, and Jesus' followers were called Nazōreans (Acts 24.5). This suggests that the Greek word did not mean 'of Nazareth' but came from the Hebrew *nāšar*, which meant to guard, preserve or keep. In the Talmud, Jesus was called the *nôšrî*.<sup>1</sup> The Nazōreans would then be the preserved or guarded people, *n<sup>e</sup>šûrîm*, and with different vowels, they would be the guardians or preservers, *nôšrîm*, which became the Hebrew name for the Christians.

It was also the name for those people whom the Servant of the LORD would restore.

My servant, to raise up the tribes of Jacob,  
and to restore *the preserved* of Israel;

I give you as a light to the nations... (Isa.49.6)

The Servant was an enigmatic figure in the book of Isaiah, and scholars cannot agree on who inspired the original poems about him or even when they were written. The most likely author was the first prophet Isaiah, who lived in the late eighth century BCE. Such matters as date and authorship would not have mattered to the first Christians. They saw the ancient poems as prophecies of Jesus, presumably because Jesus had seen himself as the Servant.<sup>2</sup> One of the roles of the Servant was to restore the *preserved* of Israel. The next line of Isaiah's poem is more familiar: 'I give you as a light to the nations'. In the Song of Simeon,

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<sup>1</sup> E.g. in the original text of Babylonian Talmud *Sanhedrin* 43a.

<sup>2</sup> See my book *King of the Jews*, London: SPCK, 2014, p.227.

the Nunc Dimittis, the words became 'to be a light to lighten the Gentiles' (Luke 32.32 quoting Isa.49.6), showing that early Christian hymns linked Jesus to the Servant prophecies.

John presents Jesus as the Servant whose role was to restore. In other contexts, John seems to use the word servant interchangeably with lamb. This reflects the wordplay characteristic of temple discourse, and here is based on an Aramaic word *talya* ' that can mean both 'Servant' and 'Lamb', and so sometimes John speaks of Jesus as the Lamb. John had John the Baptist identify Jesus as 'the Lamb of God', which is the same as 'the Servant of the LORD'. 'Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world', said the Baptist to his disciples (John 1.29, 36). This points to another role of the Servant: to make atonement and so to take away the effects of sin.

A few lines later in Isaiah's poem about the preserved of Israel, we learn that the Servant himself had been preserved. He is told by the LORD:

I have preserved you and given you as a covenant to the people' (Isa.49.8, my translation). The Servant restored the preserved and was himself preserved. All this underlies the original name for the Christians: the Nazōreans, who were both the preserved and the preservers. This may help to explain why John says the title on Jesus' cross was: 'Jesus the Nazōrean, the King of the Jews'.

But why was he preserving? And why was he also King?

It is important to remember that both in his gospel and in his other great work, the Book of Revelation, John shows that he had a special relationship with Jesus. In the gospel he describes himself as the beloved disciple, and in the Book of Revelation, he recorded the visions of Jesus that had been entrusted to him by his Master. In other words, certain things were revealed to Jesus, who in turn passed them on to John.

The opening lines of the Book of Revelation are: 'The revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave to him to show to his servants what must soon take place...' (Rev.1.1). Jesus had shared with John a vision of himself as the Servant /Lamb who was worthy to open the book with seven seals and who was enthroned in heaven. This became the opening vision in the Book of Revelation (Rev.5.6-14). In other words, John was entrusted with a vision of the Servant who was given secret knowledge and enthroned as the king. The first part of the Book of Revelation describes opening the seals of the book.

In a later vision which is also recorded in the Book of Revelation, the same Servant but this time described as a mighty angel, brings the opened book from heaven to earth and gives it to John. He tells John to eat it (Rev.10.1-11). In other words, the mighty angel passes on teaching to John that must not be written down. It must be 'eaten', and then taught. This is what Jesus restored. He brought from heaven the sealed book which he had opened, and this is what John had to preserve.

The sealed book represented teaching that was important in the original temple but had been abandoned by the teachers in the second temple. Some people - we do not know who or where - had preserved this teaching, and Jesus felt called to restore it.

John also mentions Jesus' heavenly visions in his gospel. He has the Baptist say: 'He who comes from heaven is above all. He bears witness to what he has seen and heard, and yet no one receives his testimony, his *marturia*' (John 3.32). *What Jesus has seen*. There were people who did not accept what Jesus taught them about his visions, and John says that many people *could* not understand Jesus.

This fulfilled another of Isaiah's prophecies, given to him in his vision when he stood before the heavenly throne. The eyes and ears of his people would be closed because they had chosen false teaching. They had 'unclean lips' (Isa.6.5) and so would not be able to recognise the truth. 'Hear, hear but do not understand, See, see but do not perceive' (Isa.6.9b). John has Jesus reflect on these words at the end of his public ministry, why it was that the Jews of his time could not see (John 12.37-41).

Returning to the Book of Revelation, there is a second vision of enthronement which we must consider. In the first vision, the Servant/ Lamb receives the book with seven seals; and in the second, a male child is born and then taken up to the throne in heaven. The second vision marks the beginning of the second half of the Book of Revelation. The seventh angel sounds his trumpet - the last trumpet - and the kingdom of the world becomes the kingdom of the LORD and his Messiah. At the same moment, the woman clothed with the sun appears in heaven, in the holy of holies of the heavenly temple. She is crowned with twelve stars and the moon is under her feet. She gives birth to her son. The dragon is waiting to devour the child, but the child is taken up to the throne of God in heaven, and the dragon 'that ancient serpent who is called the Devil and Satan' is thrown down to earth. The woman, who has great wings, then flies off to the desert, and the dragon goes to attack her other children. These are described as the people who *guard or keep* the commandments of God (Rev.12.1-17).

'Guard or keep' is the Greek word *tēreō*, one of the words used on the Greek Old Testament [the Septuagint] to translate the Hebrew *nāšar*, preserve. Here, then, in their Greek form, are the *Nošrim*, the Nazōreans, the preserved who preserve. They are the other children of the woman clothed with the sun, but their Mother has been driven from the temple by the ancient serpent and she has gone to the desert.

We do not have time to say all that could be said about this woman clothed with the sun who appears in the temple, or rather, re-appears. She was the Lady of the original temple that was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586BCE and she had many titles and names: Queen of heaven and Wisdom were but two of them. She was the heavenly mother of the priest-kings who ruled in Jerusalem, and so here in the vision her new-born son is set upon the throne.

One of her symbols was the winged sun, which was the royal seal of the kings in Jerusalem. She was often depicted as a cow or a lioness: the throne in Jerusalem was surmounted by the

head of a calf because the priest-king was her son (1 Kgs 10.19); and the crown prince of Jerusalem was called her lion cub. The prophet Ezekiel came from a family of priests who lived through the destruction of the temple, and in his lament for the princes of Jerusalem, he said this:

What a lioness was your mother among lions!  
She couched in the midst of her young lions,  
Rearing her whelps.' (Ezek.19.2).

In the Book of Revelation, the Servant Lamb who is worthy to open the sealed book is also her lion cub, proclaimed as 'the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David' (Rev.3.5). He is the priest-king of the house of David and the son of the woman clothed with the sun. In the second throne vision, the woman's son escapes from the dragon and is taken up to the throne in heaven. Her other children preserve the commandments of God and have the vision, the *marturia*, of Jesus.

The Lady was driven from the original temple after a long struggle that lasted for over two centuries. People who wanted an exclusive emphasis on a different aspect of the tradition, a tradition which emphasised Moses as law-giver, were hostile to the priest-kings in Jerusalem and their heavenly Mother, and they finally drove the cult of the Lady from the temple in 623 BCE (2 Kgs 23.4-14). There had been many attempts to expel her before that, and it was one such attempt that prompted Isaiah's warning about false teaching and unclean lips. But she was never forgotten.

Whenever the Lady disappeared from view, her children were in danger of forfeiting her spiritual gifts, so that they had eyes that could not see and ears that could not hear. When the prophet asked how long this state of spiritual blindness and deafness would last, how long his people would have 'unclean lips' due to wrong teaching, he was told: 'Until the Forsaken One is great again in the midst of the land' (Isa.6.12b). This is my literal translation. The line is usually understood as 'the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land'. Isaiah looked for the day when the forsaken Lady would return. Only many centuries later, in the Book of Revelation, are we given the assurance that the Lady has been restored to her temple and is giving birth to her royal son. And we know from John's gospel that this son is Jesus the Nazōrean, the King of the Jews.

There was another prophecy of her return at the end of the Book of Malachi. As with Isaiah's prophecy, these lines are usually translated differently, and so the Lady is hidden. The literal translation of the lines is: 'But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall arise with healing in *her* wings... Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes' (Mal.4.2, 5). *The winged sun of righteousness*.

This is how the people of Jesus' time expected the day of judgement to come: Elijah to warn, and then the LORD himself; but before both of them, the Lady would return, the winged sun who brought healing. Jesus taught that Elijah had come in the person of John the Baptist (Matt.17.10-13; Mark 9.13-17), which meant that he himself was the LORD bringing the day of judgement. It also meant that the Lady had appeared since he, her son, had been born on

earth. In the Book of Revelation, the woman clothed with the sun has great wings and she flies from the dragon into the desert where she is kept safe. The dragon attacks her other children, the *Noşrim*, and the vision suggests that her children had a settlement in the desert.

In his gospel, John mentions the Lady twice. Or rather, on the two occasions when he mentions the mother of Jesus, he does so in a curious way which could indicate that he is not merely referring to the woman who bore and raised him, named elsewhere as Mary. At the wedding feast in Cana, Jesus' first public appearance after calling his disciples, John says that the mother of Jesus was there *but he does not name her*. It is possible to read this as implying the presence of the Lady whom Jesus as first resists and tries to deny. According to the story, the Lady inspires the servants to do as Jesus tells them. And so they fill the six huge stone jars with water, Jesus changes the water into wine, and this shows his glory (John 2.1-11). This was a sign that he was a priest of the order of Melchizedek, who represented the old royal priesthood. The kings of Judah before the exile in Babylon were priests of the order of Melchizedek (Ps.110.4). Melchizedek priests were an eternal priesthood, based on the belief that each one was already resurrected and so could not die, as opposed to the Aaron priests who were temporal and changed as each son inherited from his father. In the Genesis story (Gen.14.17-24), Melchizedek offered wine to Abraham when he was expecting water<sup>3</sup>, and so the miracle at Cana was a sign of Melchizedek.

John also mentions the mother of Jesus at the crucifixion. He describes the women standing by the cross, but there is a problem with punctuation, and it is not certain how many women were there. The first mentioned is the mother of Jesus, but *she is not named*. This may be because her name was well known, but there may be something more. John may be implying the presence of the Lady. The other gospels do not mention the Virgin Mary at the cross; like John, they name Mary Magdalene, another Mary, and a third woman. John has the mysterious fourth woman with no name. We are told that Jesus entrusts his Mother to John, and he entrusts John to his Mother, which may mean no more than Jesus making provision for his Mother. But there is another possibility: that John became the son of Jesus' heavenly Mother, another child of Wisdom, because John was the one to whom Jesus revealed his visions and his secret teaching.

Luke's Jesus spoke of 'all the children of Wisdom' through whom she worked and spoke (Luke 7.35); John the Baptist and Jesus were but two of them (Luke 7.33-34). There is a striking illustration of this idea - the idea of Wisdom as a female being with many children - in the two accounts of Jesus' prophecy of disaster. Take the words: 'Truly I say to you, all this will come upon this generation'. Matthew says they were the words of Jesus, but Luke's Jesus says they were the words of Wisdom (Matt.23.34; Luke 11.49). Luke implies that Wisdom spoke through Jesus, that he was her messenger. John tells us that he - the beloved disciple - was named by Jesus as a successor in this role, as the speaker of the words of Wisdom.

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<sup>3</sup> Philo, *Allegorical Interpretation* III.82.

John implies elsewhere that Jesus entrusted his most important teachings to him. Indeed, he even compares his own relationship to Jesus to the relationship between Jesus and his heavenly Father. In the prologue to his gospel, John says of Jesus that ‘The only begotten who is in the bosom, *kolpos*, of the Father made him known’ (John 1.14, 18). At the last supper, the beloved disciple John is described as being in the same position, physically at least, in relation to Jesus. He was ‘in the bosom, *kolpos*, of Jesus (John 13.25), another statement with two meanings. It describes where the disciples were placed at the last supper, but it also describes the relationship between Jesus and John. John was the spiritual heir of Jesus and was authorised to explain his teachings.

There is an early Christian text called *The Teaching of Silvanus*. It was found in 1945 at Nag Hamadi in Egypt, along with several texts which scholars identify as Gnostic. But *The Teaching of Silvanus* is different and does not contain the elements that are used to define a Gnostic text. It draws on the gospel of John and uses images only found in John: Jesus as the Word, the Life, the Power, the Door, the Light, the Good Shepherd.<sup>4</sup> It also describes him as the Messenger. In addition to all that familiar language, Silvanus shows Wisdom as the Mother of Christians: ‘My son, return to your divine nature... Return, my son, to your first Father God, and to Wisdom your mother, from whom you came into being.’<sup>5</sup> Wisdom clothes her children in the garment of high priesthood:

Wisdom summons you in her goodness saying, ‘Come to me, all of you, O foolish ones, that you may receive a gift, the understanding which is good and excellent. I am giving you a high-priestly garment that is woven from every wisdom.’<sup>6</sup>

Now let us go back to John’s gospel. Implicitly at least, John presents Jesus as a high priest, not a high priest descended from Aaron the brother of Moses, but a royal high priest, a Melchizedek of the kind who served and reigned in the original temple.<sup>7</sup> Like the Melchizedek whom Abraham encountered, he had given wine instead of water at Cana. When a prince from the house of David became a Melchizedek, he was anointed in the holy of holies and this was described as his heavenly birth. That was the moment when he became a son of God. The Davidic priest-king was thus a divine figure.

In John’s gospel, Jesus often spoke of God as his Father, and the Jews stoned him for blasphemy (John 8.59; 10.31). He claimed that the Father had consecrated him, that is, he had anointed him as the priest-king and sent him into the world. He was therefore the Son of God (John 10.36). *John attributes to Jesus the language of sacral kingship*. This claim is not unique to John; the Book of Hebrews explains that Jesus was Melchizedek, come to replace the priesthood of Aaron (Heb.4.14; 7.1-28). Another familiar story may hint at the same claim. In the Nativity story, Luke says that when Mary gave birth to her son, she ‘wrapped

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<sup>4</sup> It also describes him as the Messenger, Wisdom and the Tree of Life, the latter being more often used of Wisdom herself.

<sup>5</sup> *The Teaching of Silvanus*, CG VII.4.90, 91.

<sup>6</sup> *Silvanus*, 89.

<sup>7</sup> Solomon had been anointed to the dual role of priest and king, Zadok and Yahweh, but the Hebrew text here had become opaque. See my book *King of the Jews*, n.2 above, pp.82-83.

him around' (translating literally, Luke 2.7). Luke alludes to Wisdom wrapping her child in a high-priestly garment woven from wisdom. So, in many different ways, John presents Jesus as the preserver and restorer in his own person of the old royal priesthood, and this role was extended to John. A second century bishop of Ephesus where John spent his later life, knew that John had been a high priest. He wrote in a letter that survives: 'The one who had leaned on the LORD's breast at the last supper later wore the insignia of a high priest'<sup>8</sup>.

The opening words of the Book of Revelation show that John was entrusted with the visions of Jesus, and enabled by his spirit, elsewhere called the Paraclete, to explain them: 'The revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave him to show to his servants what must soon take place; and he made it known by sending his angel to his servant John...' (Rev.1.1). In his gospel, John wrote of the Paraclete who would teach the disciples all things and help them remember all that Jesus taught them (John 14.26). 'When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth; for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come' (John 16.13). He was speaking of the same Spirit of truth when he wrote of the mighty angel who appeared to John with the open book and told him to eat it (Rev.10.1-11).

John received the secret teachings and in the Book of Revelation he wrote: 'Blessed is he who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who *keep* [that word again, preserve or guard] what is written therein...' (Rev.1.3). At the end of the book too: 'Blessed is he who keeps, *tēreō* [preserves, guards] the words of the prophecy of this book' (Rev.22.7; also 22.9). This is almost a quotation from Psalm 119: 'Blessed are those who *keep* his testimonies' – the *nōsrīm* again; and 'keeping' the testimonies is repeated throughout the psalm.<sup>9</sup> This form of words is often found in the Hebrew Scriptures: people had to *keep* the covenant, the statutes and the laws<sup>10</sup>, and in return the LORD *kept* the faithful (Ps.31.24). Isaiah said the LORD was *the keeper* of his vineyard - the guardian and preserver (Isa.27.3). Jesus was the Nazōrean, the King of the Jews.

The first Christians, however, were not preserving the Law of Moses; they were preserving something different. Their secret teachings were temple teachings, the esoterica of the high priests which the Law of Moses had replaced, teachings in which Wisdom or the Lady had a central role. Deuteronomy, which sets out the teachings of the 'Moses only' people who had banished the Lady from the temple, emphasises that the secret things were to be left alone.

The secret things belong to the LORD our God; but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law' (Deut.29.29).

Elsewhere, Deuteronomy shows that the secret things were wisdom teaching. Moses says:

Behold I have taught you the statutes and ordinances, as the LORD my God commanded me...

Keep them and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples... (Deut.4.5, 6).

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<sup>8</sup> Polycrates, bishop of Ephesus, quoted in Eusebius, *Church History* 3.31.

<sup>9</sup> vv.22, 33, 34, 56, 69, 10, 115, 129, 145

<sup>10</sup> e.g. Psalms 25.10; 78.7; 105.45; 110.2

Deuteronomy was saying that the Law of Moses replaced the Wisdom teachings of the original temple.

Wisdom's children preserved what the Law of Moses sought to replace. After the Lady had been rejected, says a fragment of poetry in the Book of Enoch [*I Enoch*], she returned to her place with the angels, and unrighteousness went forth in her place. A different sort of woman replaced the Lady, and she personified the new identity of Jerusalem. The woman 'Unrighteousness' was received, says Enoch, 'as rain in the desert, as dew in a thirsty land' (*I Enoch* 42.3). Another text embedded in the Book of Enoch is a cryptic history of Jerusalem, which says that those who rejected Wisdom lost their spiritual sight (*I Enoch* 93.8). The cryptic history agrees with the warning from Isaiah that the people of unclean lips would lose their spiritual sight and hearing.

Jesus implies something similar when he explains his parables:

When he was alone, those who were about him with the twelve asked him concerning the parables. He said to them, 'To you has been given the secrets of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything is in parables; so that they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand...' (Mark 4.10-12; also Matt.13.10-15; Luke 8.9-10).

The Christians, the Nazōreans, learned the secrets of the kingdom of God.

The kingdom of God was represented in the original temple by the cherub throne in the holy of holies, where the Davidic king used to sit as the visible presence of the LORD with his people, as Melchizedek. The people who were called into his presence learned the secrets of the kingdom. In the Book of Revelation, John, or perhaps Jesus, was summoned to stand before the throne and learn about the future:

'Come up hither and I will show you what must take place after this.' At once I was in the Spirit, and lo, a throne stood in heaven... (Rev.4.1-2).

The prophet Isaiah stood before the throne when he learned the fate of the people with unclean lips. The prophet Enoch also ascended to stand before the throne. This is worth remembering because many fragments of Enoch texts were found among the Dead Sea scrolls – he was an important figure – and the first Christians quoted them as scripture. When Enoch stood before the throne he learned: 'all the hidden things... all the secrets of heaven, and how the kingdom is divided, and how the actions of men are weighed in the balance' (*I Enoch* 40.2; 41.1).

*The secret of the kingdom was the secret of unity, how the One became many, and how the original unity was restored by divine judgement.* The Lady, or Wisdom, was clearly seen as indispensable for this process. Enoch said that what he experienced was a 'the vision of wisdom' (*I Enoch* 37.1), and the Greek translation of the Book of Proverbs described Wisdom as 'she who holds all things together in harmony' (Lxx Prov.8.30, *harmozousa*).

In the Book of Revelation, the kingdom of the LORD and his Anointed One is established on earth as the Lady appears again in the temple to give birth to her son. This is the moment of judgement, and heavenly voices proclaim that the servants of the LORD are rewarded and the



destroyers of the earth are destroyed (Rev.11.17-18). This is also the moment when the Sun of righteousness arises with healing in her wings (Mal.4.2).

Theodotus, the second century teacher whose work survives only as quotations in Clement of Alexandria, was condemned by later generations as a Gnostic. He taught about Jesus' role in restoring the unity, just as John's Jesus did in his final prayer after the last supper. This is what Theodotus said:

They say that our angels were put forth as a unity and are One in that they came out from the One. Now since we existed in separation, Jesus was baptised that the undivided should be divided until he should unite us with them in the Fullness, that we, the many, having become one, might be mingled with the One which was divided for our sakes.<sup>11</sup>

And this is what John's Jesus said:

[I pray] that they may all be one, ; even as Thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they may also be in us, so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. (John 17.21).

Restoring the unity was a sign of divinity. But John's Jesus also brought judgement: '[The Father] has given all judgement to the Son' (John 5.22).

Theodotus is not telling us anything different from what Paul said in his message to the Ephesians.

For he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. (Eph.1.9-10).

So too in his letter to the Colossians, Paul said that Christ holds all things together (Col.1.17). The secret of the kingdom was the secret of unity, restoring all things to their unity with God, and so Paul saw the future as the Son of God bringing all things into the kingdom – he called it subduing all things, the judgement – 'that God may be all in all' (1 Cor.15.28).

What the gospels call the secrets of the kingdom were also called the secret things of God. Ignatius, bishop of Antioch in the early second century, knew that the secrets were temple teaching about the holy of holies. He said this:

The priests of old, I admit, were estimable men, but our own high priest is greater, for he has been entrusted with the holy of holies, and to him alone are the secret things of God committed. He is the doorway to the Father...<sup>12</sup>

The holy of holies was beyond the veil of the temple and represented the hidden world of the divine presence. Only the high priest and his sons could enter and so only the high priests knew what the holy of holies and its furnishings represented. The ancient high priests had been granted these secrets:

You and your sons with you shall attend to your priesthood, for all that concerns the altar and is within the veil; and you shall serve. I give your priesthood as a gift, and anyone else who comes near shall be put to death' (Num.18.7).

So sacred were these furnishings that even the lesser priests were not allowed to see them. Before the Levites were allowed to carry them through the desert, the high priests had to wrap them in several layers of fabric and leather (Num.4.1-15).

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<sup>11</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Excerpts from Theodotus* 36.

<sup>12</sup> Ignatius, *To the Philadelphians* 9.

These were the secret things that the Christians preserved. The writer of Hebrews showed how the temple rites foreshadowed the work of Jesus, but when s/he came to describe the holy of holies 'behind the second curtain' (Heb.9.3) and listed the furnishings, s/he stopped: 'Of these things we cannot now speak in detail' (Heb.9.5). Clement of Alexandria, writing about 200 CE, distinguished true Christian teaching from the many variations that were current in his time by saying: 'They do not enter in as we enter in, through the tradition of the LORD, by drawing aside the curtain'.<sup>13</sup>

Clement also quoted a saying of Jesus not written in the gospels: 'My mystery is for me and for the sons of my house.'<sup>14</sup> In the *Clementine Homilies* 'Peter' has a dispute with Simon Magus and quotes the same saying of Jesus:

We remember that our LORD and teacher, commanding us, said, 'Keep the mysteries for me and the sons of my house.' Wherefore also he explained to his disciples privately the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven. But to you who do battle with us, and examine into nothing else but our statements, whether they be true or false, it would be be impious to state the hidden truths'<sup>15</sup>

There is also an early Syriac hymn, one of the *Odes of Solomon*, which has the line: 'Keep my mystery, you who are kept by it.'<sup>16</sup> 'Keep' and 'kept' here are from the Syriac word *n<sup>e</sup>tar*, equivalent to the Hebrew *nāšar*, and show how the Christians used both forms of the word: they were the keepers and they were kept.

'Keep my mystery' is yet another quotation from Isaiah. It is Isaiah 24.16, but not the translation found in English versions of the Bible. The Hebrew text here is not clear, and the Aramaic translation probably preserves the original meaning. It describes the moment when heavenly voices are heard in the sanctuary praising the Righteous One, and when the prophet learns the mystery of the rewards and punishments of the Righteous One. The wisdom texts from Qumran are similar: 'Gaze upon the *raz nihyeh*, and understand the birth time of salvation, and know who is to inherit glory and trouble;<sup>17</sup> 'O understanding child, gaze on the *raz nihyeh* and know the paths of everything that lives...'<sup>18</sup> *The Gospel of Philip*, found in Egypt in 1945, is a deposit of very early teaching from Hebrew speaking Christians. It too knows of the secrets in the sanctuary behind the veil: 'The veil at first concealed how God controlled the creation.'<sup>19</sup> This is exactly the scene in the Book of Revelation as the Lady appears in the temple to give birth to her son: voices in heaven and then the fate of the servants and the destroyers is revealed (Rev.12.1-6). The mystery of God, as he announced to his servants the prophets, was about to be fulfilled (Rev.10.7).

In the teaching of Jesus, these were the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven which were revealed to him and which had to be preserved by the sons of his house: the mysteries of

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<sup>13</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies* 7.17.

<sup>14</sup> *Miscellanies* 5.10.

<sup>15</sup> *Clementine Homilies* 19.20.

<sup>16</sup> *Ode* 8.10.

<sup>17</sup> 4Q417.1. also 4Q416.2.

<sup>18</sup> 4Q417.2.

<sup>19</sup> *Gospel of Philip*, CG II.3.84.

healing and unity and judgement. One of the texts found among the Dead Sea Scrolls describes the return of Melchizedek, and some of the damaged letters have been read as 'the hidden and secret teachers of Melchizedek's people.'<sup>20</sup> Who might these teachers have been?

I suggest they were the spiritual and cultural forbears of the people later known as the Mandaeans. Their leaders were priests and priest-kings, the latter being known as Naṣōreans/Nazōreans. Early Christian sources seem to confuse the words Nazōrean and Nazarene, the latter meaning a person from Nazareth. Lady Drower said that the most important teachings of the Mandaeans were 'the esoteric doctrines imparted only to priests and Nazoraeans, *naṣuraiia*, that is to say, to initiated persons' These teachings were never written down, and initiates were warned not to reveal their treasure.<sup>21</sup> This is very similar to warnings given in the Book of Revelation and by early Christian teachers, and to the widely attested tradition that there was unwritten teaching in the early Church, handed down by word of mouth which concerned the most important elements both of teaching and of ritual<sup>22</sup>. The origin of the Nazōreans is not known, but their own tradition is that a massacre of their people took place in Jerusalem, and that the city was destroyed as punishment. The survivors, 360 prophets, fled from the city and eventually settled in Mesopotamia. A heavenly being, a Man of Light, came to earth to separate the believers from the Jews. He performed many miracles of healing and converted some Jews. Then he went back to heaven just before Jerusalem was destroyed.

All this sounds very like the story of Jesus and the destruction of Jerusalem in 70CE, but the Nazōreans regard Jesus as the false messiah. They claim to be the disciples of John the Baptist, and frequent baptism is at the heart of their ritual practices.<sup>23</sup> John's gospel shows that Jesus' first disciples had indeed been followers of the Baptist (John 1.35-37), and the Prologue to the gospel presents the Baptist as the herald of Jesus. Jesus was the incarnation of the Light, the Baptist was not (John 1.6-9). John's gospel also shows that there was a division between the disciples of the Baptist and the disciples of Jesus over the question of purification (John 3.25-30), and this may explain why the Nazōreans who claim to be the disciples of the Baptist came to regard Jesus as a false messiah.

The high priest's spokesman who spoke at Paul's trial did not distinguish between the two groups: Paul was a leader of the sect of the Nazōreans (Acts 24.5). Jesus was crucified as a Nazōrean, and Stephen was of teaching about Jesus the Nazōrean who would destroy the temple and change the customs that Moses taught (Acts 6.14). The early Christians spoke of Jesus as the Nazorean (Acts 2.22; 3.6; 4.10). On the road to Damascus, Paul saw the Light who spoke to him, whose followers he had been persecuting: 'I am Jesus the Nazōrean...'

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<sup>20</sup> 11 QMelch II.5, as reconstructed in *Discoveries in the Judean Desert XXIII, Qumran Cave 11*, ed. F Garcia Martinez Oxford, 1998.

<sup>21</sup> E S Drower, *A Pair of Naṣorean Commentaries*, Leiden: Brill, 1963, pp.vii, viii.

<sup>22</sup> See my 'The Secret Tradition' in *The Great High Priest*, London: T&T Clark, 2003, pp.1-33.

<sup>23</sup> For a summary, see *The Mandaeans. The Last Gnostics*. E Lupieri, tr. C Hindley, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002, pp.144-164.

(Acts 22.8; 26.9). And just as the later Nazōreans remembered that many of their number were killed in Jerusalem and fled before the city was destroyed, so too the Book of Revelation tells of martyrs (Rev.6.9-11; 12.17; 17.6; 19.1-3) and the voice of the mighty angel of light telling them to leave the city (Rev.18.4-8).

In the last century, many scholars studied the Mandaeans, but ‘the question of the historical and geographic genesis of Mandaeanism remains completely open’.<sup>24</sup> Affinities with the John’s gospel were often noted<sup>25</sup>, and Rudolph concluded that they were probably evidence for a pre-Christian form of Gnosticism.<sup>26</sup> Epiphanius of Salamis (died 403CE), in a somewhat confused text, says the *Nasaraioi* existed before the time of Christ, but he insists that the Christians were the Nazōreans, a different group whom the Jews cursed three times each day.<sup>27</sup> This refers to the 12<sup>th</sup> Benediction, the prayer that the Lord would blot out the *nôšrîm* and the *minim*. But suppose that the *nôšrîm* were the preservers of the old temple secrets? This possibility has not been considered. The roots of ‘gnosticism’ would then lie in the first temple, before ‘the Jews’ returning from Babylon built the second temple and gave to Moses and the Law the roles that had formerly been those of the Davidic priest-king and his heavenly knowledge?

Jesus the Nazōrean? Jesus the Melchizedek? Jesus the preserver and revealer of heavenly secrets?

Due to the presupposition of most scholars, people have been wary of accepting John’s gospel as evidence of the earliest form of Christianity because its secret heavenly teachings have so much in common with ideas that are said to have developed later and are described as Gnosticism. Jesus *cannot* have been a Gnostic heretic, they argue, and so John’s account of him cannot be trustworthy; hence John becomes almost a secondary source, even though he claims to be an eye witness (e.g. John 19.35).

Further, it is observed, John’s Jesus is hostile to the Jews, and so the gospel must have been written to reflect the later period when the Jews did expel the followers of Jesus from the synagogue. This is a problem unique to John’s gospel: it is the most ‘Jewish’ of the gospels, and yet also the most anti-Jewish. *John’s Jesus uses the Jewish scriptures against the Jews.*

After the discovery of the Nag Hamadi texts [in Egypt in 1945] it became clear that the Gnostics, like the *nôšrîm* were hostile to ‘the Jews’. That reinforced the scepticism of some scholars about the Gnostic movement - and ultimately about John. Some forty years ago, Prof. Gilles Quispel wrote this about the origin of the Gnostics:

It seems to me that the real issue is this: Most Gnostics were against the Jewish God who created the world and gave the Law. Is it possible that this doctrine is of Jewish origin? Even those who

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<sup>24</sup> Lupieri, p.125.

<sup>25</sup> For example, R Bultmann, *The Gospel of John* (1952) ET 1971, Oxford: Basil Blackwell; but C H Dodd disagreed, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, Cambridge: University Press, 1953.

<sup>26</sup> In W.Foerster, *Gnosis. A Selection of Gnostic Texts*, vol. 2, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974, p.125.

<sup>27</sup> Epiphanius, *Panarion* 29.1, 6, 9.

do accept that many Gnostic views are to be derived from Judaism, seem to have avoided this theme.<sup>28</sup>

The conclusion has been that John's Jesus was well down a long line of development, on the way to becoming a fictitious character. Prof. James Dunn, for example, concluded as recently as 1991:

Having looked at the beginnings and earliest forms of the tradition which the fourth evangelist used, it remains for us to remind ourselves *how extensive his reworking and elaboration of tradition could be...*

John's gospel is probably best regarded as an *example* of how elaboration of the Jesus tradition did (or might) happen, rather than as a basis for further elaboration.<sup>29</sup>

I propose something very different: far from being a late development, John's picture of Jesus is the best we have, compiled to show what he taught and the context in which he taught. John says that Jesus was the Nazōrean, the preserver who was restoring the ways of the original temple and its royal high priesthood, the ways of the temple before the great apostasy of the second temple period, described in 1 Enoch:

And many shall be its deeds,  
And all its deeds shall be apostate.<sup>30</sup>

The people who built the second temple offered polluted bread.<sup>31</sup>

There were many people in Palestine who claimed to be heirs of first temple tradition, but not all called themselves Jews. Josephus, himself a Jew from a high priestly family, says that 'Jews' was the name given to those who returned from exile in Babylon<sup>32</sup>. Others called themselves 'Hebrews'<sup>33</sup>. This means that 'the Jews' were the descendants and spiritual heirs of those who changed the original temple and expelled the Lady. They emphasised the Moses traditions, and John had Jesus say to them, 'Did not Moses give *you* the law?' (John 7.19), not 'give us the law'. Jesus' debates with 'the Jews', in John's gospel contrast the teaching of Jesus' Jewish contemporaries and the teachings of the original temple. John's Jesus belongs among the temple-rooted 'Hebrews' who became the Church.

The public teaching in John's gospel is a stylised summary of Jesus' many debates with the Jews. His first debate, however, is in private. Nicodemus, described as a Pharisee, a ruler of the Jews and the teacher of Israel is a representative figure (John 3.1, 10). They discuss the kingdom, being born from above, and seeing – all terms from the older royal tradition. Nicodemus does not understand what Jesus is talking about. So too with later debates about Jesus being a son of God (John 10.31-39), or about eating heavenly bread and coming down from heaven (John 6.41-59). There are many examples. 'The Jews' in John's gospel do not

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<sup>28</sup> G Quispel, *Gnostic Studies I*, Istanbul: Nederlands Historisch-Archaeologisch Instituut in het Nabije Oosten, 1974, p.213.

<sup>29</sup> J D G Dunn, 'John and the Oral Gospel Tradition', in *Jesus and the Oral Gospel Tradition*, ed. H Wansborough, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991, pp.351-379, pp.373, 379, my emphases.

<sup>30</sup> *1 Enoch* 93.9.

<sup>31</sup> *1 Enoch* 89.73.

<sup>32</sup> *Antiquities* 11.173.

<sup>33</sup> *Antiquities* 11.344.

understand what Jesus is talking about. Or rather, *they do not recognise what Jesus is talking about*. At the end of his public ministry, John's Jesus reflects on their failure to understand and quotes the prophecy of Isaiah, that the people of unclean lips, those who have false teaching, cannot see and cannot hear and cannot understand (John 12.39-40). They cannot be healed - the role of the Sun of righteousness with healing in her wings.

The incipient 'Gnosticism' that so many have detected in the Fourth gospel shows that 'Gnosticism' was a part of Jesus' teaching even though later forms were declared to be heretical and so excluded from Church teaching. Gnosticism in its earliest forms was pre-Christian, but not Jewish; it was Hebraic and an heir to temple tradition. Gnosticism developed among the people who preserved the teachings of the original temple and were hostile to those who had adopted the newer ways that emphasised the Law of Moses and abandoned the ways of the ancient priest-kings. They were the original Nazoreans, the *nôsrîm*, Recall the words of Gilles Quispel: 'Most Gnostics were against the Jewish God who created the world and gave the Law. Is it possible that this doctrine is of Jewish origin?' The answer has to be 'Yes, if we remember Josephus' definition of the Jews'. They were the people who came back from Babylon, the heirs of the people who expelled the Lady and her royal Son from the temple. They were the 'preserved' of Israel whom the Servant would restore (Isa.49.6).

The Christians preserved this teaching, and John's gospel shows that it was remembered as the teaching of Jesus himself. The books found at Nag Hamadi and believed to represent the earliest stages of 'Gnosticism' are evidence of this: *The Gospel of Truth*, for example, reads very like an exposition of Jesus' teaching after the last supper (John 13—17), especially his teaching about the Name; and what *The Gospel of Truth* describes as the current state of error is in fact the teaching of the second-temple period. There was also a pair of texts *Eugnostos the Blessed* and *The Wisdom of Jesus Christ*. *The Wisdom of Jesus Christ* is a Christian version of *Eugnostos the Blessed* and attributes to Jesus an expanded form of the teaching of Eugnostos. One of the expansions in *The Wisdom of Jesus Christ* has Jesus say: 'Behold I have revealed to you... the whole will of the mother of the holy angels...'<sup>34</sup> *The Gospel of Philip*, also found at Nag Hamadi, offers more glimpses of this world: Wisdom is the mother of the angels, implying that the secret teaching came from Wisdom;<sup>35</sup> and Nazorean derives from Nazara, the truth. Jesus the Nazorean in Hebrew means 'the redemption' and 'the truth'.<sup>36</sup> The Nazoreans also called their secret teachings *naşirutha*, which means enlightenment, and only those who possessed the secrets could call themselves Nazoreans.<sup>37</sup>

The other children of the Woman clothed with the sun guarded, *tēreō*, the commandments and had the vision, *marturia*, of Jesus. 'Guard', *tēreō*, occurs frequently in the writings of John, and it too may indicate possession and preservation of secret teachings:

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<sup>34</sup> *The Wisdom of Jesus Christ*, CG III.4.118.

<sup>35</sup> *The Gospel of Philip*, CG II.3. 63..

<sup>36</sup> *Philip*, 62.

<sup>37</sup> E S Drower, *The Secret Adam. A Study of Nazorean Gnosis*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960, p. ix.

- Blessed is he who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who *guard* what is written therein... (Rev.1.3, my translation)
- Remember then what you have received and heard and guard it... (Rev.3.3, my translation)
- You have guarded my word (Rev.3.8, my translation).
- Those who guard the commandments of God and have the *marturia* of Jesus (Rev.12.17, my translation).
- The saints who guard the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus (Rev.14.12, my translation).
- Blessed is he who guards the words of the prophecy of this book (Rev.22.7 my translation)
- You and your brethren the prophets, and those who guard the words of this book (Rev.22.9, my translation).

So too in John's gospel, in Jesus' words to his disciples, after he has washed them and made them his priests.<sup>38</sup> :

- If you love me, you will guard my commandments (John 14.15, my translation, also vv.21, 23, 24).
- If you guard my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have guarded my Father's commandments and abide in his love (John 15.10, my translation).
- They have guarded thy word (John 17.6, my translation)

Also 1 John 2.3, 5; 3.22, 24; 5.2.

Among the Dead Sea scrolls were pieces of a text that had also been found in a Cairo synagogue in 1897, but the Dead Sea fragments showed its age and context. The Damascus Document, as it was called, spoke of a persecuted remnant who held fast to the commandments. God had revealed to them the hidden things in which all Israel had gone astray. They described themselves as the faithful priests from the original temple who had not been led astray. They left the land of Judah and went to the desert. These people sound very like the children of the woman clothed with the sun, who kept the commandments God and the vision of Jesus, and fled from the dragon into the desert.

*The Acts of John* is a second century Christian text, now labelled 'Gnostic', that reveals the identity of the dragon, the ancient serpent who attacked the children of the woman. In this collection of stories, Jesus and his disciples sing a hymn after the last supper, before going to Gethsemane (Mark 14.26). Jesus warns them to 'keep silence' about his mysteries. Then he is arrested by the Jews 'who had their law from the lawless serpent.'<sup>39</sup> The law came from the serpent. This was not a Gnostic fantasy: Matthew has John the Baptist describe the Pharisees and Sadducees as a 'brood of vipers' (Matt.3.7), and John's Jesus describes the Jewish teachers who debated with him in the temple as children of the devil. (John 8.44). The first Christians, and indeed those Hebrews who became the followers of Jesus, regarded

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<sup>38</sup> See my book *King of the Jews*, n.2 above, pp.378-381.

<sup>39</sup> *Acts of John* 94—96

the Law that dominated the teaching of the second temple and the dragon that persecuted the children of the Lady, as expressions of the same malign phenomenon. The Nazoreans, too, regard Moses as the prophet of an evil spirit.<sup>40</sup>

But the Lady and her royal son were not forgotten. Her other children preserved the secrets of the temple, and John presented Jesus as the one who restored them. He recorded the words on Jesus' cross which were the crime for which he had been put to death: 'Jesus the Nazōrean, the King of the Jews' (John 19.19). He also recorded what the current high priests said to Pilate: 'We have no king but Caesar' (John 19.15).

The high priests of the second temple had rejected the tradition of the first temple and its priest kings. But the Christians claimed that they were the restored royal priesthood, heirs to the original temple and its teachings. The heavenly host sang of the Lamb on the throne who had made a kingdom of priests on earth (Rev.5.10); they stood before him in the holy of holies, he was their light, and they reigned for ever (Rev.22.3-5). They were called the Nazōreans, the guardians, the followers of Jesus whom John presents as the Nazōrean, the King of the Jews.

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<sup>40</sup> K Rudolph in Foerster, n.23 above, p.141.