

BOOK REVIEW

Pamela E. Kinlaw, *The Christ is Jesus: Metamorphosis, Possession, and Johannine Christology* (SBL Academia Biblica, 18; Leiden: Brill, 2005). vii + 206 pp. Hdbk. US\$113.00. Pbk. (Atlanta: SBL). US\$32.95.

Building on the ancient Mediterranean context for divine–human interactions, Pamela Kinlaw’s *The Christ is Jesus* argues that the permanent possession of the human Jesus at his baptism by the divine Christ is the centerpiece of Johannine Christology. While her book, a revision of her dissertation under Charles H. Talbert at Baylor University, synthesizes a competent model for metamorphosis and possession in the ANE, it is eclipsed largely by her arguments for the existence of an adoptionist-type incarnation in the Johannine literature.

The primary purpose of the book is to examine ‘the Christology of the Johannine literature within the ancient Mediterranean audience expectations of divine appearances’ (p. 173). Along the way, the author considers a range of issues such as docetism, *daimones*, ANE audiences, incipient Jewish binitarianism and the Johannine community.

Kinlaw begins her work with an introductory chapter describing various approaches to the Christology of the Johannine literature and her concentration on audience-oriented criticism. In this section, she contends there are two general modes of god–human interaction that will be a focus of the remainder of the work: ‘(1) metamorphosis, which involves a change in form, and (2) possession, which involves a change in substance’ (p. 12).

Chapter 2 introduces metamorphosis as the first model of god–human interaction in the ancient Mediterranean world. Kinlaw defines the metamorphosis phenomenon as involving a heavenly being whose interaction with humans ‘entails a change in form and, therefore, in appearance, not a change in substance’ (p. 79). The first half of the chapter surveys direct epiphanies, metamorphoses, and polymorphic deities in Greco-Roman literature, and the second half reviews the same

categories in Jewish literature in order to build a ‘semantic fields’ pattern in the Greek and Latin (p. 39).

In a similar way, Chapter 3 surveys the possession model for ancient Mediterranean god–human interaction through the ‘semantic fields’ pattern. Recognizing the difficulty in synthesizing a clear-cut definition for ANE possession, the author develops three continua to qualify the divine overtaking of humans through possession: the degree of frenzied behavior that accompanies possession, the degree of the suspension of the human host’s faculties, and the degree of the permanency of the possession (pp. 41-42). Using these continua as guides, Kinlaw argues that possession occurs in the Greco-Roman and Jewish source materials in three discrete categories: *ecstasy* (frenzied, suspended, occasional possession), *inspiration* (rational, cognizant, occasional possession), and *indwelling* (rational, cognizant, permanent possession). In spite of this, the author never clarifies exactly how a possession constitutes a change in substance (from p. 12).

Since the first three chapters serve as the book’s groundwork for detecting audience expectations about the divine–human interface in the Johannine Jesus, they can be considered together first. Kinlaw constructs her taxonomy clearly and succinctly, and admits to the fluidity and complexity of the various categories (pp. 41-42). In this regard, her work lends itself very favorably to further discussion. Where the work enters troubled waters is in Kinlaw’s personal proclivities: for example, the sections on divine–human interaction in Jewish literature spotlight the pseudepigrapha and Philo far more than the Old Testament (thus no mention is made of the notable ‘divine man wrestles Jacob’ narrative in Gen. 32.22-32). While one could argue that (perhaps) the original audience and opponents of the Johannine literature were more familiar with the *Testament of Job* than the LXX, Kinlaw makes no such argument. Another problem is the choice of terms: Kinlaw selects charged words such as ‘metamorphosis’ and ‘possession’ as labels for her primary models, but it seems possible from the results of her survey to label them also as the deity-transmorphs-yet-remains-deity (p. 39) and the deity-affects-not-becomes-a-human (p. 67) models, respectively. If this or something similar is in fact possible, Kinlaw’s personal proclivities color the results of her study as we will see below.

Kinlaw applies her findings to the christological statements in the Johannine Epistles in Chapter 4. The section opens with discussion of the ordering of the Epistles and Gospel, and the role of docetism in

appreciating Johannine Christology through the author's models. She concludes docetism is 'an umbrella term and is best understood as referring to a diversity of phenomena' (p. 93). Next she examines the christological statements in the Epistles, and using the evidence from the semantic fields of god-human interaction in Greco-Roman and Jewish literature, contends that the controversy was not so much about the material/immaterial nature of Jesus as about the permanence or impermanence of the god-human interface.

In Chapter 5, the author observes Johannine Christology throughout the major sections of the Fourth Gospel through the lens of her god-human interaction models. In the Johannine prologue, Kinlaw claims that the 'Word became flesh' does not at all fit the metamorphosis model, but fits best within the indwelling category of the possession model; she reasons this Word-flesh interface is a permanent 'union' between a human Jesus and a binitarian Jewish god (p. 122). Kinlaw argues the Fourth Evangelist depicts the inception of the permanent possession of the human Jesus by the divine Christ (in other words, the incarnation) at his baptism. Somewhat unconvincingly, the author maintains that an incarnation at baptism through possession is not adoptionist because it has nothing to do with the merit of the human agent Jesus. From this point, Kinlaw follows her semantic fields evidence through the remainder of the passages that emphasize Christology in the Fourth Gospel (culminating in Jesus' 'vine and branches' statement in the Farewell Discourse) and reads them from the perspective of a permanent indwelling union. The author sees the Johannine post-resurrection narratives as offering additional support to the idea of a permanent indwelling of the Christ in Jesus.

Kinlaw faces an uphill battle to convince many readers that the author/s of the Johannine literature—and their opponents—all agreed to an adoptionist-type Christology and were simply disagreeing over the permanence of the adoption (p. 98). Again, of greater concern are the author's personal proclivities that color her findings. For example, she reasons that the incarnation in the Fourth Gospel is an instance of the ancient Mediterranean idea of indwelling (rational, cognizant, permanent possession) in which the deity affects a human but does not become human. Therefore, indwelling, whether permanent or not, seems to be far closer to divine intrusion than divine becoming—at least this is the case in every Greco-Roman and Jewish example cited by Kinlaw (pp. 61-67). In contrast, is it not possible that the whole

point of the ‘Word became flesh’ Johannine prologue is to signal to the reader that there is a massive *difference* in god–human interaction from what might normally be expected. This new model of interaction would then powerfully influence the reading of the later baptism scene. In all likelihood, a deity-became-flesh direct statement from the author (Jn 1.14) is more essential to our understanding of Johannine Christology than the retelling of John’s testimony of the Spirit descending as a dove at Jesus’ baptism (Jn 1.32-34). Clearly, it is possible to recolor the Johannine Christology as god–human indwelling, but it just does not seem necessary. The simplest explanation for Johannine Christology—and the reason why it had many ancient Mediterranean opponents—is that it signals a shift *away* from past ANE god–human interactions.

In the end, *The Christ is Jesus* is an interesting foray into the possible views held by an ancient Mediterranean audience confronted with examples of god–human relations, and Kinlaw’s categories are an invaluable starting point for future discussion. Further work will be necessary to convince others that the distinctive Johannine christological spin reflects a type of indwelling or adoptionism. The book will prove a useful source for scholars or educated readers.

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