

# Did Jesus Emanate from the Father?

By Ekkehardt Mueller

The Gospel of John mentions repeatedly that Jesus came forth from God the Father (John 8:42; 13:3; 16:27, 28, 30; 17:8). This formulation may suggest to some readers that Jesus in one way or another emanated from God in eternity past. Is this really the case?

## The Greek Verb Translated “Emanate”

The Greek verb that is used in these places is *exerchomai*. It is employed more than 200 times in the NT and is typically translated as “to go/come out, go forth,” “to proceed.” It can also mean “to go away,” “to leave,” “to depart,” “to escape,” “to be descended,” and “to disappear.” It is used literally and figuratively. While the Samaritans “came out of the city” (John 4:30), Jesus escaped the grasp of the people (John 10:39), Paul departed (Acts 20:1), the faith of the Thessalonians “has gone forth,” that is, it was proclaimed (1 Thess 1:8), news of one of Jesus’ miracles spread (Matt 9:26), and for their masters the hope of profit had disappeared as soon as Paul healed the demon-possessed slave-girl (Acts 16:19). Sometimes the location from where someone came or went out is not stressed. Instead the emphasis is on the direction of the journey. Therefore, a number of translations render *exerchomai* in these cases as “to go” (e.g., John 1:43).<sup>1</sup> “The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee” (John 1:43). This short review of the usage of *exerchomai* indicates that we have to study the context of each occurrence of the term to determine its precise shade of meaning.

## References in John to Emanation

Six verses occur in John’s Gospel where *exerchomai* is applied to Jesus describing his going forth from God the Father. They are John 8:42; 13:3; 16:27, 28, 30; and 17:8. We will take a look at them in order to find out, if they address Jesus’ emanation or procession from the Father. Such an understanding would most likely affect our view of the Trinity. If Jesus were an emanation from the Father, he may have been within the Father from eternity but would not have existed as a distinct person from eternity because at some point he would have flowed out, emanated from the Father. Typically the idea is that the procession of the second transcendental being from the first indicates that the second is inferior to the first. The source is more important than the emanation.<sup>2</sup> Does the Gospel of John suggest Jesus to be an emanation from the Father? We will take a look at the passages important for answering this question.

**John 8:42.** This text is part of a longer debate between Jesus and the Jews which deals with the rejection of Jesus’ message. The passage focuses strongly on “father.” However, the term “father” relates to three persons, twelve times to the heavenly Father (8:16, 18, 19<sup>ter</sup>, 27, 28, 38, 41, 42, 49, 54), three times to Abraham (8:39, 53, 56), and five times to the devil (8:38, 41, 44<sup>ter</sup>). Jesus is sent by God the Father, but he is not accepted because the Jews do not belong to God. While claiming to have Abraham as their father, they do not exhibit Abraham’s attitude but in reality have Satan as their father, the liar and murderer. In this connection Jesus mentions that he has come forth from God. What does this mean?

The context refers to Jesus’ incarnation—see John 8:14. “Jesus’ origin and his destination are the same, whether viewed as a Place or as a Person. He has come ‘from above’ (3:31) or ‘from heaven’ (3:13, 31; 6:33, 38, 51, 58), and he will return there (3:13; 6:62), or, to put it another way, God the Father is both ‘the One who sent him’ (see 4:34; 5:24, 30, 37; 6:38, 39-40, 57; 7:16, 28-29), and the One to whom he will return (7:33).”<sup>3</sup> The context also repeatedly refers to Jesus as having been sent by the Father (8:16, 18, 26, 29, 42). He is on the Father’s mission.

John 8:42 continues with these concepts. Obviously Jesus is not talking about his origin in eternity past but about his relationship to the Father. He has been sent by God. He is “God’s messenger.”<sup>4</sup> In verse 42 Jesus

states literally, “From God I have come forth [*exēlthon*] and have come/am here [*hēkō*].” Brown comments on this statement by observing “. . . the aorist tense indicates that the reference is rather to the mission of the Son, i.e., the Incarnation. ‘I came forth and am here’ is all one idea.”<sup>5</sup> So the issue is not the life in or of the Godhead. *Hēkō* describes *exēlthon*.

One needs to be careful not to read too much into the preposition *ek* (*ex* before vowels) which is used as a prefix in *exerchomai* but is also found by itself. According to John 8:42 Jesus has come from God (*ek tou theou*). The unbelieving Jews are “of the father the devil” (*ek tou patros tou diabolou*, 8:44). They are not “of God” (*ek tou theou*, 8:47). On the other hand, believers are “born of God” (*ek theou egennēthēsan*, 1:13). One can be from below (*ek tōn katō*) or from above (*ek tōn anō*, 8:23), from this world (*ek toutou tou kosmou*) or not from this world (*ouk . . . ek tou kosmou toutou*, 8:23). In these cases, the preposition *ek* does not describe an emanation. Therefore in this sense, it cannot be applied to Jesus either. Schnackenburg sees that Jesus “speaks and argues from a sense of complete union with God.”<sup>6</sup> But he makes it also very clear that the verse deals “with Jesus’ coming into the world, and not with his eternal going forth from the Father . . .”<sup>7</sup>

**John 13:3.** This verse is taken from the passage that deals with Jesus washing the feet of his disciples and instituting the ordinance of the footwashing which in some way is related to his death. According to verse 3 Jesus “had come forth from God and was going back to God.” The second part of this statement helps in understanding the first part. The issue is again Jesus’ coming from and returning to the Father, not his eternal origin. The marvelous fact is that the incarnate Lord, the divine Christ serves his disciples in washing their feet, while at the same time having all things in his hands, i.e., maintaining universal dominion.<sup>8</sup>

**John 16:27, 28, 30.** These verses come at the end of Jesus’ farewell speeches. While verses 27 and 28 contain words of Jesus, verse 30 is a response of the disciples. In all three verses the term *exerchomai* is applied to Jesus. Twice Jesus states that he came forth from the Father/from God (*para tou patros/para theou*), while the disciples confess that they believe in Jesus having come forth from God (*apo theou*). In verse 5 Jesus had mentioned that he would return to the One who has sent him. According to verse 7 Jesus would go away. The disciples would no longer see him (16:16), and the Holy Spirit would take his place as a Friend and Advocate. But Jesus pointed also to his union with the Father (16:32).<sup>9</sup> The context underscores that Jesus is talking about his incarnation. This is supported by verse 28 which helps us understand verses 27 and 30: Jesus came from the Father into the world and would soon leave the world and return to the Father. Brown commenting on v. 28 writes: “The first tense [‘I came,’ aorist] acknowledges that the incarnation took place at a particular moment in time; the second [‘I have come,’ perfect] acknowledges its enduring effect.”<sup>10</sup> We also notice that different prepositions are used in connection with *exerchomai*. In John 8:42 it is *ek*, in 16:27 *para*, in 16:28 *para* or *ek* depending on the manuscript, and in 16:30 *apo*. Obviously they are all used to mean “of”/“from” and there is no real difference between them when John uses them in conjunction with *exerchomai*.<sup>11</sup> But this also tells us that *exerchomai ek* should be handled carefully and not taken too far. “*Ek* cannot be interpreted theologically in reference to the intra-Trinitarian relationship of Father and Son (‘came out of the Father’), for this line refers to the incarnation, not to what later theology would call the procession of the Son.”<sup>12</sup>

**John 17:8.** The last reference is found in Jesus’ high priestly prayer (John 17). Jesus confesses that he has come from the Father and that his disciples believe that he was sent by him. The context points to his preexistence (17:5) and to the fact that he will return to the Father (17:11, 13). As Jesus is not from the world (*ouk eimi ek tou kosmou*) so his disciples are not either (*ouk eisin ek tou kosmou*; 17:14, 16). There is also a strong emphasis on Jesus being sent (17:3, 8, 18, 21, 23, 25). In other words, we have the same situation as with the other references discussed above. The phrase “to come forth from” God/the Father has to be

understood in the context of Jesus' incarnation and earthly mission. This is also evident when one looks carefully at the end of verse 8. The two phrases there seem to be parallel:

They truly understood      that I came forth from you,  
and they believed          that you sent me.

This would be an additional affirmation that the issue under discussion is Jesus' incarnation and mission. In this case, coming from God may be the same as being sent by him.<sup>13</sup> Commenting on John 7:29, "I know Him, because I am from him, and he sent me," Schnackenburg correctly states: "Jesus' coming forth from God (cf. 8:42; 17:8) always means, in John, his mission in historical time.... The sentence also expresses his abiding unity with the Father"<sup>14</sup>

### **The Larger Context within John's Gospel**

A biblical doctrine cannot be based on one Greek or Hebrew word or phrase only. Therefore, it is important to take a look at what Scripture teaches in other places. For now, we will remain in the Gospel of John and just list a few statements about Jesus without commenting much on them.

The Gospel of John teaches that Jesus is God (1:1; 20:28). It accepts multiple persons in the Godhead. Jesus is the creator (1:3). He is life (1:4; 14:6) which is unpacked later: Jesus has life in himself (5:26) and is able to lay down his life and take it again (10:17); he is the bread of life (6:35) and the resurrection and life (11:25). He is the light (1:9) and the owner of the world (1:11). In his incarnation he became a human being (1:14) and the revealer of the character of God the Father (1:18). He is the Son of God (1:34), but also the I AM, the eternal God (8:58), one with the Father (10:30) to whom people may pray (14:14). He has come to save the world (12:47), and those people are saved who believe in him (3:16, 36; 5:24).

Some of these statements clearly militate against the idea of Jesus having emanated from God. This is especially true for those describing him as "life." Schreiner states: "The subordination of the Son in John's theology . . . does not mean that Jesus is not divine or is a lesser deity. John does not work out for readers how the Son can be dependent upon the Father and be sent by the Father while at the same time sharing deity with the Father."<sup>15</sup>

### **Conclusion**

An exegetical investigation of relevant terms in the Gospel of John as well as theological considerations raised by the same Gospel affirm that the term *exerchomai* as applied to Jesus should not be understood in the sense of Jesus' being an emanation from God. The term is best translated as "to come from." This is reflected in various English translations (ESV, NIV, NRSV), which consistently translate *exerchomai* with "to come from." The New Jerusalem Bible (NJB) and the Revised Standard Version (RSV) also render it "to come from." The only exception is John 8:42, but this is due to the occurrence in the same verse of the term *hēkō*, which they translate "have come from" and "came forth from" respectively. The New American Standard Bible (NASB) and the New King James Version (NKJV) prefer "to come forth from," but use also the translation "to come from" in 13:3 (NKJV) and in 16:30 (NASB).

John is concerned with the incarnation of Christ, not his emanation from the Father. He ascribes full divinity to Jesus the Christ (see, e.g., 1:1-2, 8:58; 10:29-33; 20:28). Already Ellen G. White has pointed out that in the Son is "life, original, unborrowed, underived."<sup>16</sup> Let us not forget to honor the Son as we honor the Father. "He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him" (John 5:23).

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<sup>1</sup>E.g., ESV, NIV, NRSV and others.

<sup>2</sup>See H. Dörrie, “Emanation,” *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (ed. Kurt Galling; 7 vols; 3d ed; Tübingen: Mohr, 1957-1965), 2:449-450.

<sup>3</sup>J. Ramsey Michaels, *The Gospel of John* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2010), 480.

<sup>4</sup>Michaels, 516.

<sup>5</sup>Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (2 vols; AB 29-29A; New York: Doubleday, 1966), 1:357. See also Barclay M. Newman and Eugene A. Nida, *A Translator's Handbook on the Gospel of John* (London: United Bible Societies, 1980), 285, who confirm this observation.

<sup>6</sup>Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John* (3 vols; New York: Crossroad, 1980-1982), 2:212.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Cf. Gerald L. Borchert, *John* (NAC 25A-25B; Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman and Holman, 1996-2002), 2:79.

<sup>9</sup>Cf. Oscar Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1963), 301.

<sup>10</sup>Brown, 2:725 (brackets supplied).

<sup>11</sup>Cf. Ibid., 2:726: “. . . the change of preposition is meaningless.”

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 2:725.

<sup>13</sup>George R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (WBC 36; Waco, Tx.: Word, 1987), 298, talks about “faith-knowledge.” Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1992), 725, suggests that the two phrases are very similar and yet not identical. However, Johannes Schneider, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes* (THKNT Sonderband; Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1978), 286, would disagree with Morris and see the two phrases as parallel, suggesting that perceiving and believing describe the same process.

<sup>14</sup>Schnackenburg, 2:147.

<sup>15</sup>Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2008), 242,

<sup>16</sup>Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, 530.

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