

Provocative Vocatives in the Gospels: Part 3, John

David J. Clark

Retired Translation Consultant with United Bible Societies and IBT Moscow

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Abstract

This article is the last in a three-part survey of the various vocative forms used in direct discourse in the Gospels, and the similarities and differences among the forms used. Some of the problems associated with finding terms appropriate to each context in English and other languages are raised, and attention is drawn to the complexity of the issues.

Keywords

vocative, *pater*, *kurie*, *rabbi*, *didaskale*, *gunai*

The Gospel of John

In the two previous articles in this series, we have discussed the lexical and sociolinguistic issues raised by the vocatives used in narrative contexts in the Synoptic Gospels. It now remains only to consider those occurring in the fourth Gospel. Although the Gospel of John is the second shortest, it has a relatively high number of occurrences of vocatives, though a relatively restricted variety of terms.

How Jesus addresses God

As in the Synoptics, Jesus consistently addresses God as Father, every occurrence being in prayer. In the *Synopsis of the Four Gospels* (Aland 1972), the word is spelt *patēr* in three occurrences (17.21, 24, 25) and *pater* in the other six (11.41; 12.27, 28; 17.1, 5, 11). However, in UBS4, the word is spelt *pater* in all nine occurrences, so this is merely scribal variation and does not require further discussion. In the long prayer of ch. 17, the vocative

Corresponding author:

David J. Clark, 20 Wellington Lodge, 2 Firwood Drive, Camberley, Surrey GU15 3QD, UK.
Email: djcgrc@hotmail.co.uk

is expanded once to *pater hagio* “holy Father” (17.11) and once to *pater dikaie* “righteous Father” (17.25). These additions are unlikely to cause any new translation problems. Some English versions add “O” or “Oh” to the vocative, and translators should feel free to do the equivalent in their language if it seems appropriate. In 17.25 NJB has “Father, Upright One,” which uses a more colloquial adjective, but overall this expression is not very natural. In the same verse Phps has “Father of goodness and truth,” which is perhaps excessive expansion. Translators will need to consider how they have dealt with the *dikaio*s root elsewhere in coming to a decision in this case.

How Jesus addresses other people

The most common form of address to others in John is *gunai* “woman.” Jesus uses this word to his mother (2.4; 19.26), to the Samaritan woman (4.21), to the adulterous woman (8.10), and to Mary Magdalene (20.15). There is no hint of disdain in any of these contexts, and it is hard to find a single English word that would fit all of them (for a different view on John 2.4, see Knepper 2015; this is, however, essentially an “argument from silence” and is adequately refuted in Voinov 2018). KJV, RSV, and NJB say “woman” in both places where Jesus is speaking to his mother, which is unnatural and indeed rude in modern speech. NIV has “dear woman” both times, which sounds both unnatural and patronizing. Phps and GNB omit the vocative altogether, which is one acceptable solution, but probably the most appropriate rendering is that in NEB, which has “mother” in both verses. This would in all likelihood be a suitable model for translators in numerous languages, but it is always necessary to think carefully about the sociolinguistic implications of all possible options.

In 4.21 and 8.10, where Jesus is addressing the two sinful women, the English versions consulted are consistent. KJV, RSV, NJB, and NIV all have “woman” both times, whereas Phps, NEB, and NLT all omit any vocative both times. GNB retains “woman” in 4.21 but omits it in 8.10. It is not common for such an omission to be the best option, but in these examples, it may well be the least problematic option, as it does exclude the connotation of rudeness or abruptness that “woman” carries. Other terms such as “madam” or “lady” are possibilities, but both sound rather too formal for the contexts. In other languages translators need to consider what terms may sound right, but they should avoid being mechanically literal, and may well decide that in these two cases no vocative is better than a misleading one.

The final occurrence of *gunai* is in 20.15 where the risen Jesus speaks to the weeping Mary Magdalene. She had already been addressed in this way in 20.13 by the two angels, and the problem is essentially the same in both

verses. Phps, NEB, and NLT again omit the vocatives, but this time GNB has “woman” both times, as have KJV, RSV, NJB, and NIV. It is hard to see why GNB has made a different choice in these verses from that in 8.10, and since the context has no hint of distance or reprimand, it is surely better to omit the vocative again. If some equivalent is preferred, “lady” would surely sound more polite and personal than “woman,” not least because in the very next verse Jesus addresses Mary by name. He had also used as vocatives the personal names of Lazarus in 11.43 and Philip in 14.9. As in such instances in the Synoptics, personal names should not usually create translation problems, though politeness may require some accompanying particle or title.

The situation is a little different in 21.15-17 where Jesus three times addresses Peter as “Simon son of John,” using the Greek form of the patronymic rather than the Aramaic form as found in Matt 16.17. In this narrative there is certainly an element of challenge in Jesus’ repeated question, and perhaps of implied doubt or even rebuke. In the Old Testament calling someone “X son of Y” does carry an implication of rebuke or even hostility, as described in my 2005 article (Clark 2005). The threefold repetition of the name is unique in the Gospels, and surely adds to the tension of the narrative. All the English versions consulted have a literal translation in this passage and it is hard to imagine any other possibility, though the repetition does not carry the same impact in English.

Jesus uses two other terms to address the disciples, *teknia* in 13.33 and *paidia* in the very different context of 21.5. It is not clear why John uses the unusual plural form *teknia* rather than the regular form *tekna* as found in Mark 10.24, but if any connotative difference was intended, it seems impossible to recover it. In 13.33 Jesus is addressing the disciples in the upper room in a highly emotional setting, and seems to show an almost paternal attitude. KJV, RSV, and NJB translate as “little children” and Phps, NEB, GNB, and NIV as “my children,” with Phps adding an initial “Oh.” This rendering (with or without the “Oh”) seems to fit the situation well, and could prove a satisfactory model in other languages.

In 21.5 the context is very different, less intense, and more informal, as the risen and victorious Messiah appears again to his disciples. He addresses them as *paidia*, a vocative he does not use elsewhere in the Gospels, and therefore deserving of careful consideration. KJV and RSV offer “children,” while NEB, NJB, NIV, and NLT all have “friends,” and GNB “young men.” Probably Phps catches the relaxed atmosphere best with “lads,” and in other languages, translators may be able to find some similar term. Another possibility in this setting might be “guys” or “boys” (see Moulton and Milligan 1930, 474). It is interesting to observe that the 1989 Bible Society version

in modern Greek has *paidia* in both 13.33 and 21.5. This word apparently still carries nowadays informal adult overtones as well as referring to small children, and John's use of the word here is evidence that that development began quite early.¹

How other people address Jesus

The vocative addressed to Jesus that is simplest to deal with is in 19.3, where the mocking soldiers address him as *ho basileus tōn Ioudaiōn* "the king of the Jews." It is a little unexpected that John's account contains the nominative form of the noun with the definite article, whereas the parallels in Matt 27.29 and Mark 15.18 both prefer the "correct" vocative *basileu*. However, all three accounts have alternative readings, so this is probably a scribal variation rather than a deliberate linguistic choice of John's, for which there is no apparent reason. The words can be translated as in the other Gospels.

Two other terms, each occurring only once in John, need to be considered together. These are *didaskale* "teacher" in 8.4 and *rabbouni* "master" in 20.16. The first one comes from the scribes and Pharisees who are asking for Jesus' reaction to the case of the woman caught committing adultery. While the encounter is not openly hostile, neither is it particularly friendly, so the word may perhaps carry the same overtone of scepticism as in its occurrences in Mark 12.14, 19; Matt 12.38; 22.16, 24, 36; and Luke 7.40; 10.25; 11.45; 19.39; 20.21, 28. The term chosen in those places may or may not be appropriate here. In possible favour of a negative implication, it may be significant that the vocative *didaskale*, found only this once in John, occurs in a textually problematic paragraph which a few manuscripts place in Luke, where this term used with a negative connotation is much more common. On the other hand, it should be noted that the noun *didaskalos* is used by Jesus of himself in John 13.13, and by Nicodemus in John 3.2 to describe Jesus, with no negative overtones in either place. However, when Jesus applies this label to Nicodemus in 3.10, it does seem to carry a note of mild reproof, though perhaps in this case tempered by a touch of humour.

In 20.16, Mary Magdalene addresses the risen Jesus in Aramaic as *rabbouni*, the more intimate form of *rabbi*, used elsewhere only by Bartimaeus in Mark 10.51, and to be translated as there. But whereas Mark retains the Aramaic term without comment, John glosses it perhaps unexpectedly as *didaskale* (as also in 1.38), which in this context is definitely not negative.

¹ Elena Kolyada informs me that *paidia* is widely used by Greek speakers in Greece and in Melbourne, Australia, to address both children and adults in informal situations (personal communication, September 4, 2018).

So on the whole it seems less than probable that there are any negative implications in 8.4, but translators should make their own decision. Among English versions, KJV, Phps, NEB, and NJB translate as “master” in both 8.4 and 20.16, while RSV, GNB, NIV, and NLT use “teacher” in both. The only variation is that in 20.16, NEB adds a possessive, “my master.” This does help to catch the highly personal nature of the situation, and many translators may find this a helpful model.

There are two other vocatives addressed to Jesus in John’s Gospel, *rabbi* and *kurie*. The first is used seven times and the second more than two dozen times. We may note that *rabbi* is also used for John the Baptist by his disciples in 3.26, which indicates that in this Gospel it is a term of respect, but otherwise not strongly marked. It is used in this way by crowds seeking Jesus in 6.25, and is addressed to him predominantly by his own disciples, two unnamed ones coming to him from among the Baptist’s followers in 1.38, Nathanael in 1.49, and various unidentified disciples in 4.31; 9.2; and 11.8. In 3.2 it is also used by the Pharisee Nicodemus, which may be an inconspicuous way of indicating the sincerity of his inquiry. On its first occurrence in 1.38 it is glossed as *didaskale*, as in 20.16 noted above. This seems to reinforce the conclusion noted above that in John, *didaskale* does not carry the negative implication that it often does in Luke. Among the English versions checked the only one that is completely consistent is Phps, which uses “master” everywhere. “Rabbi” is usually used by KJV, RSV, NEB, NJB, and NIV, and “teacher” by GNB and NIV, though no version is without apparently random variation in one or more places. It is hard to avoid the impression that the translators have not given very careful consideration to their renderings, a temptation that translators in other languages need to beware of and resist.

In John, Jesus is addressed as *kurie* more times than in the other three Gospels combined, and this term is therefore likely to be unmarked more often than not. The first three occurrences are in the conversation of the Samaritan woman with Jesus in 4.11, 15, and 19, and in this context, “sir” is the obvious rendering in English, and is used in all the versions consulted. This rendering is also appropriate in the mouths of the official in 4.49, the man at the pool in 5.7, and unspecified people in 6.34. In this last case, *kurie* may be a little less respectful than *rabbi* used by the same people in 6.25. The translation question becomes more acute in 9.36 and 38, where the dialogue is between Jesus and the man born blind. In v. 36, the man is uncertain who “the Son of Man” is, so “sir” is fitting. However, in the following verse the identity of the Son of Man is revealed, and in v. 38, the blind man is making a confession of faith, so “Lord” is very appropriate. This distinction is made, for instance, by GNB and NLT. The same type of probable

contrast occurs in ch. 11, where *kurie* is addressed to Jesus seven times, by messengers (11.3), disciples (11.12), Martha (11.21, 27, 39), Mary (11.32), and unspecified people (11.34). In all these places except 11.27 and perhaps 11.39, “sir” fits the context unobtrusively. However, in 11.27, Martha is making a confession of faith in Jesus as the Messiah, so “Lord” is clearly called for. But in 11.39, Martha is protesting much more prosaically that the corpse of Lazarus must be stinking after four days in the tomb. Should translators revert to “sir” at this point? The only one of the English versions checked that has “Lord” in 11.27 and “sir” in the rest of the verses is NEB. All the others use “Lord” in every case, which suggests that they have either not considered the contexts carefully enough, or else that they have translated mechanically according to their traditional theological assumptions.

In 13.6, 9, 36, and 37 Peter addresses Jesus four times as *kurie*. In the context of the washing of the disciples’ feet, and the farewell discourses, “Lord” seems more appropriate, and even NEB uses it here. The same reasoning applies to the words of the unnamed disciple in 13.25 and those of Thomas in 14.5, Philip in 14.8, and Judas (not Iscariot) in 14.22. The remaining cases of *kurie* addressed to Jesus all occur in his post-resurrection exchanges with his disciples, and are spoken by Mary Magdalene in 20.15 and by Peter in 21.15, 16, 17, and 21. In 20.15 Mary Magdalene has not yet recognized Jesus, so “sir” is required, but in the conversation of Peter with Jesus in ch. 21, “Lord” is clearly demanded.

Conclusion and warning

The examination and discussion of vocatives in the four Gospels has shown significant differences among them in vocabulary and connotation. In a language like English with many dialects, it is impossible to suggest solutions in every case that would be universally acceptable. In languages with smaller numbers of speakers and less dialectal variation, this may be more achievable. Hopefully, these articles will have given translators greater awareness of the complexities of the various reports of interpersonal exchanges in the Gospels.

No doubt more could be said and others may wish to take up the topic, but it is prudent to close by mentioning one aspect of interpersonal communication in the Gospels that these articles have not raised at all. This is that many conversations in the Gospels have no vocatives at all in the Greek. In some languages, the very absence of a vocative in at least the first exchange can imply disrespect or deliberate rudeness, and in such situations, translators have the added burden of deciding what kind of vocative needs to be added. In some cultures and languages (such as Thai) this may require the

use of a kin term, and where such terms make obligatory lexical distinctions between older and younger siblings, aunts, uncles, and so on, this in turn can entail making estimates of the probable relative ages of the interlocutors in the Gospels. Translators do indeed need wisdom from on high to resolve such tricky questions!

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Abbreviations

GNB	The Good News Bible with Deuterocanonicals/Apocrypha (1976)
KJV	King James Version (1611)
NEB	New English Bible New Testament (1961)
NIV	New International Version (1979)
NJB	The New Jerusalem Bible (1985)
NLT	New Living Translation (1996)
Phps	New Testament in Modern English, trans. J. B. Phillips (1958)
RSV	Revised Standard Version New Testament (1946)
UBS4	UBS <i>Greek New Testament</i> , 4th ed. (1993)