10 The Gospel according to John

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Our consideration of the Gospel according to John begins with several observations about its importance and impact. First, few New Testament writings have had as significant an influence upon the various shapes of Christian theology. Apart from Paul's Letter to the Romans, one struggles to find a New Testament text that has shaped contemporary Christian thinking more than the Gospel of John. Following its appearance in the late first century, the gospel became a source of inspiration and authority for many early Christian groups. The earliest surviving commentaries for any of the canonical gospels were written on John by Ptolemy (c. 140–60 CE) and Heracleon (c. 170 CE), both Valentinian Gnostics. A second, related observation is that the earliest Christian communities would have been unable to arrive at the Chalcedonian formulation of Jesus' identity without the Fourth Gospel's presentation of Jesus.[1] Whereas the synoptics leave the question of Jesus' divinity implicit, the Gospel of John explicitly addresses this question throughout (e.g. 1.1–2; 8.58; 10.30), providing a foundation upon which later generations constructed theological propositions about Jesus' humanity *and* divinity.[2] Third, although the Johannine Jesus is recognizable, there is little doubt that his presentation in the Fourth Gospel differs in substantial ways from how he appears elsewhere in the New Testament. The Johannine Jesus is not merely a Galilean peasant but also a stranger from heaven.[3] He does

[1] In 451 CE the Council of Chalcedon established the dogma that Jesus was both fully divine and fully human. This formulation has become a foundational element of orthodox Christian theology.

[2] For a treatment of the synoptics that sees heavenly identity and pre-existence as more explicitly connected to their respective christologies, see Simon J. Gathercole, *The Preexistent Son: Recovering the Christologies of Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006).

[3] I borrow this description from Marinus de Jonge, *Jesus, Stranger from Heaven and Son of God: Jesus Christ and the Christians in Johannine Perspective*, Sources for Biblical Study (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1977).

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not often display the more mundane features of human existence – though twice he weeps (11.35, 38) – but instead bears the marks of one with a unique identity and relationship to Israel's God. Fourth and finally, the Gospel of John possesses a unique eschatological vision which sees the inauguration of what God wants to do in the world as being present in the ministry of Jesus. God's plan is not off in some distant future but is here and now, embodied in what Jesus has come to accomplish. This chapter will focus on John's unique contributions to our understanding of Jesus and important discussions that currently attend scholarly reflection on the gospel.

WHAT MAKES JOHN DISTINCTIVE?

As early as the late second century, Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–215 CE) referred to John as the 'spiritual gospel'.[4] Comparing John with the synoptics, which he believed reported the 'outward facts' of Jesus' ministry, Clement recognized that John told a story with a style and substance that differed significantly from the synoptic portraits of Jesus. Against that backdrop, it is helpful to begin by briefly noting some important ways in which the Johannine Jesus differs from how he is characterized in the synoptic gospels:

(1) In the synoptics, Jesus is commonly presented as an exorcist. Exorcism is in fact one of the most important activities of Jesus in the synoptic gospels, especially Mark. That element of Jesus' ministry has been omitted altogether from John.[5]
(2) In the synoptics, Jesus' characteristic manner of teaching the crowds is through parables. However, there are no parables in the Fourth Gospel. Instead, Jesus teaches in extended revelatory discourses, characterized by their symbolism and sophisticated double entendre. The discourses make occasional use of synoptic-like material, to the end of emphasizing John's unique christological purposes (e.g. the

[4] See Eusebius, *Church History*, 6.14.7.

[5] I use the word 'omitted' here because I am persuaded that John was familiar with all three synoptics, though there is not space here to make the argument. There is at present no consensus on John's use of the synoptic gospels. See the recent discussion of competing proposals in James Barker, *John's Use of Matthew* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2015), 1–14. For John's familiarity with all three synoptics, see Steven A. Hunt, *Rewriting the Feeding of Five Thousand: John 6.1–15 as a Test Case for Johannine Dependence on the Synoptic Gospels* (New York: Peter Lang, 2011).

image of 'good shepherd' in 10.1–21) but are substantially dissimilar from his teaching elsewhere.

(3) In the synoptics, the ministry of Jesus lasts somewhere from several months to a year. In John, however, the public career of Jesus spans three Passover celebrations (2.13–25; 6.4; 11.55), and probably lasts around two years.[6]

(4) The public ministry of Jesus in the synoptics begins with his being baptized by John the Baptist (Mk 1.9–11; Mt 3.13–17; Lk 3.21–22). In the Fourth Gospel, however, not only is Jesus *not* baptized by John, but there appears to be a conscious attempt by the evangelist to distance Jesus from the idea that he was subservient to John in any way. At the level of the narrative, this is accomplished by having John continually proclaim Jesus' greatness and his own unworthiness (cf. 1.29, 34, 36, 3.27–30).

(5) Throughout the synoptics Jesus regularly performs 'miracles' or 'deeds of power' (Greek: *dynameis*). In John, however, these extraordinary actions are referred to as 'signs' (Greek: *sēmeia*), of which there are seven: turning water into wine (2.1–11); curing the official's son (4.46–54); healing the paralytic (5.1–5); multiplying the loaves (6.1–15); walking on water (6.16–21); healing the man born blind (9.1–41); and raising Lazarus from the dead (11.1–44).

(6) The synoptic portraits of Jesus have him appointing the twelve disciples all at one time, at a specific moment early in his ministry (Mk 3.13–19; Mt 10.1–4; Lk 6.12–16). Additionally, in the synoptics, the disciples struggle to understand who Jesus is throughout the public ministry. By contrast, in the Fourth Gospel, there is not a specific episode where Jesus calls the twelve. Instead, various disciples begin to follow Jesus after his first public appearance (cf. Andrew, Peter, Philip and Nathanael in 1.35–51), and those who follow make extraordinary proclamations about his identity at their first interactions with him (viz., 'We have found the Messiah', 1.41; 'We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote', 1.45; 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel!', 1.49).

(7) Each synoptic has a Passover meal in which a specific institution of the Eucharist is depicted (Mk 14.1–11; Mt 26.17–30; Lk 22.7–30).

[6] A long-held misconception is that Jesus had a three-year ministry, an idea that supposedly finds its support in the Fourth Gospel's presentation of three Passovers at which Jesus is present. The temporal span between three Passovers is actually a period equivalent to *two years*.

> While John's gospel includes a meal on the day before Passover (13.1), there is no specific command that such a memorial continue in the future. It is often argued, however, that the Johannine community's understanding and practice of the Eucharist underlie the so-called bread of life discourse in John 6, though this remains up for debate.[7]

In addition to these differences between the synoptics and John, a host of chronological differences abound.[8] The foregoing should suffice to illustrate that the Johannine portrait of Jesus and his ministry differs markedly from those of Matthew, Mark and Luke. We turn our attention now to prominent themes from the gospel as well as questions of major importance raised by contemporary scholarship.

THE WORD WHO REVEALS THE FATHER: JOHANNINE CHRISTOLOGY

The Gospel of John begins with a lengthy prologue (1.1–18) that explicitly connects Jesus 'the Word' (Greek: *logos*; 1.1, 14) to the God of Israel in a way not previously seen in the canonical gospels. John's application of the term *logos* to Jesus would have been significant within the cultural milieu in which the gospel emerged, and scholarly reception of John has yielded numerous proposals for how to understand this term. Scholars have variously read John's *logos* in light of Hellenistic Judaism (particularly the writings of Philo), incipient forms of Gnosticism, and rabbinic mysticism. There is little doubt that pride of position belongs to John's connection to Hellenistic philosophical concepts, a view that held sway in Johannine research for over a century. However, with the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the growing recognition that Hellenism and Judaism of the period are not easily disentangled, John's Jewishness has become widely accepted among contemporary scholars.

[7] On the denial that John 6 is eucharistic, see Meredith J. C. Warren, *My Flesh Is Meat Indeed: A Nonsacramental Reading of John 6.51–58* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2015).

[8] Two noteworthy differences are (1) the temple cleansing, which appears on the first day of the last week of Jesus' life in the synoptics (Mk 11.15–19; Mt 21.12–17; Lk 19.45–48), but at the outset of Jesus' public ministry in John 2.13–16; and (2) John's changing of the passion week chronology so that the last supper is not a Passover meal as in the synoptics (Mk 14.12–26; Mt 26.17–30; Lk 22.7–39), but occurs a day earlier (see Jn 13.1 ff.). By this reckoning, Jesus is condemned to die at the very moment when lambs are being prepared for sacrifice in the temple– a connection to the Baptist's earlier pronouncement that Jesus is the 'Lamb of God' (1.29, 36).

As a part of this renewed recognition of John's Jewishness, it has been proposed that John's *logos*, along with the rest of the prologue, has numerous points of connection to specific passages in the Hebrew Bible.

The opening words of John's gospel – 'in the beginning' (Greek: *en archē*) – are a transparent reference to the creation account in Genesis 1. The Septuagint version of Genesis begins with the identical Greek phrase, and as the prologue advances it is difficult to escape the conclusion that John's story of Jesus is meant to be situated within the broader story of Israel's God as recounted in Genesis and Exodus. Throughout Genesis 1, the God of Israel is shown creating and sustaining all living things. Just as the first creation account takes place 'in the beginning' where God creates by speaking light, land, sea and all living creatures into existence (see Gen 1.3–31), so the Johannine prologue presents the Word as the one through whom everything was created (1.3). The Word is also the purveyor of life (1.4) and the light of humanity which shines forth into the darkness (1.5; cf. Gen 1.3).

The climactic christological moment in the prologue comes in the final section (1.14–18), which tells of the incarnation (1.14) and of Jesus Christ as the one who reveals the Father to the world (1.18). As Rudolf Bultmann first noted over seventy-five years ago, to affirm that Jesus is the 'Revealer' is to tap into the most important christological and ecclesiological themes in the gospel.[9] Jesus is full of grace and truth (1.14, 17) and bestows upon humanity grace upon grace (1.16). To recognize these things in Jesus is to experience a tangible, visible representation of the Father and what he offers the world.

Another important aspect of Jesus' identity in John has to do with his origins: while it is presumed that he is from Nazareth in Galilee (1.45–46; 7.41), the reader knows that he has descended from heaven (1.1–2; 3.13). He is not merely the son of Joseph, as some presume (6.42), but the Son of God. Since these truths remain unknown to the characters of the gospel (e.g. 6.32–58), many reject him, just as the prologue proleptically announces (1.10–11). This emphasis contributes further to the gospel's dualistic distinction between the things above and the things below. Regarding this detailed christological unveiling, Andrew Lincoln has noted,

[9] See Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, trans. G.R. Beasley-Murray, R. W. N. Hoare and J. K. Riches (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1971), 45–83.

> As would be expected from an ancient biography, the Fourth Gospel's focus is on the subject, Jesus of Nazareth. What would not necessarily be expected from an ancient biography, but what becomes immediately clear, is that its subject is so closely related to the God of Israel that the focus on Jesus of Nazareth also becomes a focus on God.[10]

The unique relationship between Jesus and the God of Israel is emphasized not only by the narrator, but by Jesus himself (e.g. 5.19–23; 8.12–20, 54–55). These affirmations come in various forms but most explicitly in the so-called 'absolute I am' statements (see the discussion below). By means of these proclamations, Jesus claims to be the incarnation of God in the world. In one exchange with the religious leaders, Jesus claims authority to work on the sabbath by noting, 'My Father is still working, and I also am working' (5.17, NRSV). His interlocutors understand this as a claim to equality with God, which they also regard as blasphemous, and thus seek to kill him. During another controversy Jesus confidently exclaims, 'I and the Father are one' (10.30), and again, his interlocutors recognize this claim as blasphemous and pick up stones to kill him.

Elsewhere when Philip begs Jesus, 'Show us the Father and we will be satisfied' (14.8), Jesus responds: 'Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.' For John, Jesus is the divine Word, the chosen Son, and the revealer of the Father, sent from heaven to do God's will. Even while dwelling below, Jesus remains oriented to the realm above and the things of the Father. This unique relationship with God forms the foundation for our understanding of the distinctively Johannine presentation of Jesus.

DUALISM AND SYMBOLISM IN THE JOHANNINE WORLDVIEW

It has long been recognized that the Fourth Gospel develops its portrait of Jesus within a dualistic framework. The Johannine story begins with a *cosmic dualism*, in which the universe is divided into two realms that represent the opposing forces of good and evil. This is most clearly developed in the descent–ascent schema that appears throughout the

[10] Andrew T. Lincoln, *The Gospel according to St John*, Black's New Testament Commentary (London: Continuum, 2005), 59.

gospel, especially in Jesus' teaching about his coming to earth and return to the Father (1.51; 3.13; 6.32–42; 13.1–2; 14.1–5). As noted in the prologue (1.10–11), Jesus is from above (or alternatively 'from the Father'), and he has descended to earth, which is 'his own place' (Greek: *ta idia*; 1.11a) and consists of 'his own people' (Greek: *hoi idioi*; 1.11b). Yet the outward orientation of the realm below is one of hostility towards Jesus and the things of God. As Wayne Meeks notes, 'The story of Jesus in the gospel is all played out on earth, despite the frequent indicators that *he really belongs elsewhere*.'[11]

Additionally, the gospel includes an *ethical dualism*, which is not to be confused with the question of whether the gospel actually has its own ethics (on which see below). Like cosmic dualism, ethical dualism also presents a contrast between good and evil, but one more directly related to human behaviour. John accomplishes this both through a presentation of characters who variously succeed and fail in their attempts to understand Jesus, and through symbols that represent human understanding and behaviour. First, misunderstanding is a key theme in the gospel, especially as it relates to characterization. The Johannine Jesus is the 'light of the world' (8.12; cf. 1.4–5), a symbolic description that carries with it many of the resonances of 'light' from the Hebrew Bible, where it is commonly related to both goodness and spiritual insight. Against that backdrop, many if not most of John's characters fail to understand what Jesus reveals about the Father and are therefore, metaphorically, 'in the dark' (see especially Nicodemus in 3.3–15). Conversely, those who, like the mother of Jesus (2.1–11) the Samaritan woman (4.7–42) and the 'beloved disciple' (13.21–30; 19.25–27; 20.2–9; 21.7), comprehend Jesus' teaching and identity and respond appropriately in faith, have 'come into the light'. In John's dualistic economy, there is no middle ground; there are those who understand and those who do not and, by extension, those who do good and those who do evil. John's ethical dualism can also be seen in passages that contrast blindness and sight (9.26–41), freedom and slavery to sin (8.33–36), 'walking in the day' and 'walking in the night' (11.9–10), lies and truth (8.42–47; 16.12–13) and one's relationship to God or the devil (7.28–29; 8.44–47).[12]

[11] Wayne A. Meeks, 'The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism', *JBL*, 91 (1972), 50 (emphasis added).

[12] See the discussion of Johannine dualisms in Richard Bauckham, *Gospel of Glory: Major Themes in Johannine Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), 106–29.

It is interesting to note that while John is among the most dualistic writings in the New Testament, the evangelist has departed from one of the more traditional expressions of dualism within early Christian writings: *eschatological dualism*. Many Hellenistic Jewish and early Christian writings contain an eschatological dualism that contrasts the present (evil) age with the coming age in which God will right the world. This eschatological outlook has been labelled *future eschatology*. While the gospel does make reference to a future resurrection on the 'last day' (e.g. 6.40, 54), John's eschatological outlook is primarily characterized by a view that C. H. Dodd famously labelled 'realized eschatology'.[13] Rather than proclaiming that the 'end is near', realized eschatology affirms that 'the end is here', or, more properly, that the kingdom of God is present in Jesus. This perspective is woven throughout John's gospel. For example, to those who believe in Jesus' name, divine sonship is a present rather than future reality (1.12); in Jesus, 'we' already behold God's glory (1.14); 'we' are not waiting to see God's judgement because the light has already come into the world (3.19); those who believe have life while those who do not already stand condemned (3.18); the time has come when true worshippers worship God in spirit and truth (4.23–24); the one who hears and believes has already passed from death to life (5.24). It is worth noting that John's eschatological outlook is not always consistent in its projection of this realized eschatology, but however it is described, it cannot properly be called an eschatological dualism.

Intimately connected to Johannine dualism is the gospel's use of symbols. Craig Koester helpfully notes: 'In Johannine terms, symbols span the chasm between what is 'from above' and what is 'from below' without collapsing the distinction'.[14] As the revealer of the Father, Jesus makes known to humanity an otherwise hidden God (1.18). John's symbols thus clarify the mission and identity of Jesus, which in turn helps the reader answer the question 'How is it possible to know God?' There are two major types of symbolism in the gospel: symbolic action and symbolic language.

[13] C. H. Dodd argued that the most distinctive feature of Jesus' teaching in the New Testament was realized eschatology, particularly as it appears in John. This view was most clearly argued in his book *The Parables of the Kingdom* (London: James Nisbet, 1935). Over time, Dodd's view softened to what might be described as 'realizing eschatology' once he began to recognize how John had also incorporated elements of an inaugurated eschatology.

[14] Craig R. Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2003), 4.

Actions that function symbolically include the miraculous as well as the non-miraculous. The clearest symbolic actions in the gospel are the seven signs Jesus performs (2.1–11; 4.46–54; 5.1–5; 6.1–15; 6.16–21; 9.1–41; 11.1–44). That they are designated 'signs' (*sēmeia*) rather than 'miracles' is key insofar as they possess 'transcendent significance'.[15] Above all, they point to God. Through each act Jesus ushers humans into the presence of God or, to express it differently, carries that which is 'from above' to the realm 'down below'. Some have questioned whether non-miraculous events such as the cleansing of the temple (2.13–25) and the washing of the disciples' feet (13.1–17) also represent encounters with God. However, in these instances, Jesus continues to reveal the character and will of the Father; the revelatory value of Jesus' actions should not be overlooked, even in the non-miraculous.

Symbolic language in the gospel includes images such as light (1.4–9; 3.19–21; 5.35; 8.12; 9.5; 11.9–10; 12.35–36, 46), water (3.5; 4.10–15; 7.38; 19.34), food (4.32–34; 6.27, 55), flesh (1.14; 3.6; 6.51–63), shepherd (10.1–21) and vine (15.1–5), among others. These symbols serve both a literary and a theological function in the gospel. At the literary level, each symbol signifies a substantive spiritual reality. However, an examination of characterization in the gospel reveals how often the delicate balance between the literal and metaphorical is upended by characters who, unable to understand Jesus' mission and identity, approach him on the basis of a well-intentioned but misplaced literalism. At the theological level, the symbols point beyond the earthly realm to the realm above and continually reinforce the gospel's emphases on cosmic dualism and the divinity of Jesus.

THE ENIGMATIC SPEECH OF THE JOHANNINE JESUS

Numerous elements of Jesus' teaching are unique to John's portrait. Three of them will briefly be examined here: (1) the use of irony and double entendre and its role in creating misunderstanding, (2) 'I am' sayings and their relationship to Jesus' identity; and (3) the revelatory christological discourses.

Irony and Double Entendre

In the Greek of John's gospel, there is heavy use of double entendre as a device for revealing the heavenly identity of Jesus. A good example

[15] Ibid.

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comes in John 3. Here, a religious leader named Nicodemus approaches Jesus by night. Their interaction unfolds as follows:

> Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to him by night and said to him, 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.' Jesus answered him, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above [Greek: *anōthen*].' Nicodemus said to him, 'How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?' (Jn 3.1–4, NRSV)

Many readers will recognize this passage and assume that Jesus is speaking to Nicodemus about being 'born again', a common English rendering of the term. However, the primary meaning of *anōthen* is 'from above', and this is in keeping with how Jesus is using the word; he is speaking about things of a heavenly nature. However, a misplaced literalism leads Nicodemus to understand *anōthen* as 'again' or 'anew' – a secondary and less common use of the term. Jesus tries to help Nicodemus understand what it means to be born 'from above', but Nicodemus can conceive only of literal birth, so he raises a question that borders on the ludicrous: 'How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?' (v. 4). The reader understands what Nicodemus does not. Jesus has come from above (cf. 1.1–2) and therefore speaks as one from above. Nicodemus's focus on the literal creates this misunderstanding and places the reader in a position of privilege consistent with the understanding of Jesus that has been revealed in the prologue.

Not only is misunderstanding a key theme throughout the gospel, but Johannine irony – especially as it is expressed through double entendre – cannot work apart from characters who misunderstand Jesus. Here are a few examples:

(1) Jesus' opponents mistakenly believe he is referring to the Jerusalem temple when he is speaking metaphorically about his own body (2.13–21).
(2) In his conversation with the Samaritan woman (4.7–42), Jesus speaks of offering her 'living water' (*hydōr zōn*), by which she understands the euphemism, 'running water'. However, Jesus is speaking of 'water which imparts life'.
(3) 'Many disciples' leave after Jesus announces that followers must 'eat my flesh' and 'drink my blood' (6.52–59, 66). He is not speaking

about cannibalism, but they have misunderstood his words by interpreting him literally.

(4) The disciples misunderstand Jesus' statement that Lazarus has 'fallen asleep' (11.7–14) and respond that he will 'wake up'. They have missed the point that Lazarus has died, and that Jesus will resurrect him.

Throughout the gospel, ironic speech and double entendre are employed in a number of ways. First, they are used to confound characters and give expression to veiled mysteries, while reinforcing for the reader truths about Jesus that have been revealed in the prologue. Second, they are also used to add theological depth to a description of Jesus and his mission. This device is used both by the narrator and the Johannine Jesus in a way that serves the overall theological rhetoric of the gospel. Hand in hand with double entendre is the gospel's emphasis on misunderstanding, which is itself an expression of the gospel's concern with Jesus as the revealer of Israel's God. One must move beyond a strict literalism to comprehend the identity of Jesus. Only then can one see what he has come to reveal.

Jesus' 'I Am' Sayings

As discussed already, one of the gospel's central themes is that Jesus is the unique representation of Israel's God to humanity (1.18). This theme is emphasized in numerous ways, one of which is Jesus' consistent use of the phrase 'I am' (Greek: *egō eimi*) when speaking about himself. There is little doubt that this phrase is intended as a transparent allusion to the divine name. Two types of 'I am' pronouncements are found in the gospel of John: absolute 'I am' statements and 'I am' statements followed by a predicate.

Much has been written about the absolute use of *egō eimi*. The background of these pronouncements is the revelation of God's name on Mount Horeb in Exodus 3. There, Moses stands before a burning bush that is not consumed by its flames; in this passage, the God of Israel commissions Moses to lead his people to freedom. Expressing scepticism, Moses asks, 'If I come to the Israelites and say to them, "The God of your ancestors has sent me to you", and they ask me, "What is his name?" what shall I say to them?' (3.13). God's response follows:

> 'I am who I am. Thus you shall say to the Israelites, "I am has sent me to you." God also said to Moses, 'Thus you shall say to the Israelites, "The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of

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> Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you": This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations.'
> (Ex 3.14–15)

Perhaps more than any other passage in the Hebrew Bible, this text provides the foundation for Jesus' use of 'I am' in the Gospel of John. The phrase 'I am who I am' (Hebrew: *ehyeh asher ehyeh*; Ex 3.14) can also be translated, 'I am that I am', or possibly, 'I will be what I will be.' The divine name, which God reveals to Moses is YHWH, a form of the Hebrew verb *hayah*, 'to be'. In the Septuagint, the Greek phrase *egō eimi* is used to translate the Hebrew verb *hayah* here in Exodus 3.14 and elsewhere. Here the Gospel of John is reaching back into the Exodus story, this time to make an explicit connection between the identity of Jesus and the name of God.

The name of God was of central importance to Jewish life and worship, though over time reverence for the name of God within Judaism led to it being avoided in social and religious discourse. As a result, pious Jews began to use the phrase 'I am he' (Hebrew: *ani hu* or *anoki hu*) as a substitute. This phrase is found in a number of passages in the Hebrew Bible, the most important of which appear in Second Isaiah:

> Isaiah 43.10: 'You are my witnesses', says the Lord, 'and my servant whom I have chosen, in order that you might know and believe that *I am* (he) [Hebrew: *ani hu*; Greek: *egō eimi*]. No god was formed before me and there shall be none after me.'
> Isaiah 43.25: 'I am, *I am* (he) [Hebrew: *anoki anoki hu*; Greek: *egō eimi egō eimi*] who blots out transgressions for my own sake and will remember your sins no more.'
> Isaiah 48.12: 'Hear me O Jacob, and Israel whom I have called: *I am* (he) [Hebrew: *ani hu*; Greek: *egō eimi*]. I am the first and I am the last.'
> Isaiah 52.6: 'Therefore, my people will know my name, thus, on that day, that *I am* (he) [Hebrew: *ani hu*; Greek: *egō eimi*] is speaking. Behold, here I am.'

In each of these instances, the Hebrew phrase 'I am he' is translated with an absolute *egō eimi* in the Septuagint. Here is further evidence from the Hebrew Bible that the absolute use of *egō eimi* was a specific designation for the divine name, YHWH.

With this evidence in mind, it is difficult to deny that John's absolute use of *egō eimi* is an explicit reference to the divine name. Accordingly, absolute 'I am' statements throughout the Fourth Gospel

not only support the evangelist's emphasis on Jesus' unique relationship to the God of Israel *but also present Jesus himself claiming divinity* – an element that is unique to John's presentation of Jesus. Nowhere else in the canonical gospels do claims to divinity appear so explicitly on the lips of Jesus. Altogether, the absolute use of *egō eimi* appears nine times in six different passages (4.25–26; 6.19–21; 8.24–30; 8.54–59; 13.16–20; 18.3–9). In each of these passages, Jesus emphasizes something about his identity and mission. Through these pronouncements the voice of Jesus now confirms what only the voice of the narrator had previously announced (cf. 1.1–18).

A second type of 'I am' sayings appears on the lips of Jesus, and each applies a specific image to Jesus. These sayings appear with a predicate, which has led scholars to label these as 'predicated' or 'predicative' *egō eimi* statements. Each predicate introduces a title that is reminiscent of an important image from Israel's story. In his detailed study of 'I am' formulations in John, David Ball notes that each predicated saying appeals to something of religious significance in the Hebrew Bible:

> Jesus claims to be the Bread of which the Old Testament spoke, the Light of which Isaiah spoke, the Shepherd of whom Jeremiah and Ezekiel spoke, and the Vine of which many Old Testament passages spoke. In addition there may be allusions to the Isaianic concept of the 'way of the LORD' in Jesus' claim to be the Way, the Truth and Life. Jesus also takes the Jewish concept of resurrection of which Martha speaks and transforms it to refer to the present in his own person (11.25). In these sayings it is not the words 'I am' which are found in the Old Testament, but the images which accompany them. The words *egō eimi* thus act as a formula which applies Old Testament and Jewish concepts to the person of Jesus who embodies and fulfils them.[16]

Thus, in their predicated form, the 'I am' sayings are christological while also drawing a connection to an important image or theme from Israel's Scriptures. The predicated 'I am' statements in John are as follows:

'I am the bread of life' (6.35, 48)

'I am the bread / living bread which came down from heaven' (6.41, 51)

[16] David Mark Ball, *'I Am' in John's Gospel: Literary Function, Background and Theological Implications*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 124 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 259.

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'I am the light of the world' (8.12)
'I am the gate / I am the gate for the sheep' (10.7, 9)
'I am the good shepherd' (10.11, 14)
'I am the resurrection and the life' (11.25)
'I am the way, the truth, and the life' (14.6)
'I am the vine / true vine' (15.1, 5)

These images also represent something of value that Jesus does for those who believe in him. As such, the predicated 'I am' sayings are more than christological; they 'emphasize the relationship between Jesus and believers ... and also suggest that John connected Christology closely with early Christian experience'.[17]

REVELATORY DISCOURSES

As noted above, the Johannine Jesus characteristically speaks in revelatory discourses. These discourses allow narrative space for Jesus to instruct the reader on things that have already been revealed but have not yet been explained in detail. The discourses are thus used to clarify important elements of Jesus' identity, message and mission.

The Sabbath Discourse, 5.19–47

A controversy develops after Jesus heals an infirm man in Jerusalem on the Sabbath at an unnamed 'feast of the Jews' (5.1–18). It is worth noting that here is another instance of Johannine distinctiveness. Whereas there are numerous healing stories – and especially *sabbath* healing stories – in the synoptics, there is no instance of a healing that takes place in Jerusalem. As the controversy over Jesus' authority to heal on the sabbath develops, the reader continues to learn what it means that Jesus is the revealer of the Father. Two central charges are levelled against Jesus by the religious leaders. The first charge is that Jesus has violated the sabbath by performing this sign, a charge which relates to his opponents' view that God rested on the seventh day and is no longer working. Jesus responds that God is continually at work and that he, too, is continually at work (vv. 16–17). At the very least this response represents Jesus' claim to authority to work on the sabbath. But it also leads to a second and more serious charge, which is that in his reply to their questioning, Jesus has 'made himself equal to God' (v. 18). Far

[17] Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, 2 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), vol. I, 318, 320.

from denying this charge, Jesus points out that there are four critical witnesses to his unique status with the Father: John the Baptist (vv. 32–35), the works he has been given (v. 36), the Father himself (vv. 37–38) and the very scriptures to which the religious leaders cling with such devotion (vv. 39, 45–47).

The Bread of Life Discourse, 6.22–65

After the feeding of the five thousand on one side of the Sea of Galilee (6.1–15), Jesus and the disciples return to the other side (6.16–21). The next day the crowd begin looking for Jesus and also travel to the other side of the sea. Recognizing that they have the imperfect motivation in seeking him – their hunger – Jesus begins instructing them about seeking food that does not perish. Like other symbols in the gospel, 'food' here is metaphorical. Jesus compares himself to the manna that fell from heaven during the Exodus. That heavenly bread was a daily phenomenon by which God provided for the physical sustenance of the children of Israel. But whereas the manna came daily and provided only temporary nourishment, Jesus is the true bread which is given not by Moses, but by the Father; he is the 'manna made man' who offers eternal and once-for-all nourishment to those who believe and follow; he is the 'food that does not perish'.

The Temple Discourse, 7.1–8.59

Like the sabbath discourse, this discourse takes place in the context of a Jewish festival. Jesus is back in Jerusalem and in the temple during the Feast of Tabernacles. Most of this discourse is characterized by various controversies that develop over Jesus' teaching and activity. An initial controversy develops between Jesus and his brothers before their departure for Jerusalem (7.1–9). Once Jesus arrives secretly at the feast there is another controversy over whether Jesus is a good man or one who leads people astray (7.10–13). After Jesus teaches at the feast there is significant division over the question of his identity (7.14–36). He unveils his christological resumé by revealing that he has descended from heaven, is here by the authority of the Father and will soon return to heaven. As the discourse continues, Jesus affirms that he is the 'light of the world', over against the religious leaders who are, by contrast, in the dark about both Jesus and his relationship to the Father. After he predicts his death and instructs the crowd on true discipleship (8.21–38), a final controversy develops between Jesus and the Pharisees when he asserts that he is a descendant of Abraham, while they are descendants of their father, the devil (8.39–59).

The Good Shepherd Discourse, 10.1–21

It was noted above that John has no parables of the kind that appear in the synoptics, though there has been some debate in recent years about how to categorize the metaphor that lies at the heart of this discourse.[18] Here, Jesus uses a 'figure of speech' (Greek: *paroimia*) to draw a sharp distinction between himself and the religious leaders who are not to be regarded as noble or caring shepherds; scholars have commonly argued that this image is drawn from Psalm 23, Ezekiel 34 or Zechariah 9–14. Jesus begins by referring to himself as the door for the sheep – a metaphor in which the sheep are his followers and he is the gate through which they enter to find (heavenly) rest. The discourse progresses from the shepherd-as-door metaphor to Jesus' description of himself as the Good Shepherd who knows his sheep, hears their voices, provides for their needs and ultimately lays down his life for their well-being. The somewhat unrealistic picture of the shepherd voluntarily laying down his life for his flock is yet another proleptic moment in the gospel that anticipates Jesus' crucifixion (cf. 3.14). As the reader has come to expect, a controversy arises once again over Jesus' words (vv. 19–21).

The Farewell Discourse, 14.1–17.26

Numerous examples of farewell addresses exist in ancient literature, the most famous of which is Plato's presentation of Socrates addressing his followers and friends just before committing suicide.[19] Jerome Neyrey has outlined the nine elements of a typical farewell address, all of which are present in John 14–17: (1) announcement of death or departure, (2) review of the patriarch's life, (3) relationships to be maintained, (4) revelations of beneficial things to come, (5) predictions of future hard times, (6) exhortation to practice a group-specific virtue and to avoid a group-specific vice, (7) successor named, (8) legacy bestowed and (9) occasionally a final prayer or blessing.[20] While these nine elements do not follow a specific sequence in such farewell addresses, including John 14–17, all are present here. Jesus begins preparing his disciples for his departure by instructing them regarding the future coming of

[18] On this, see Christopher W. Skinner, '"The Good Shepherd Lays Down His Life for the Sheep" (John 10.11, 15, 17): Questioning the Limits of a Johannine Metaphor', *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 80 (2018), 97–113.

[19] The death of Socrates is narrated in Plato's dialogue *Phaedo*. Two examples of a farewell address appear in the Pentateuch (Jacob in Gen 49; Moses in Deut 32). The Second Temple text *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* offers another example.

[20] Jerome Neyrey, *The Gospel of John*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 239–41.

the *Paraclete* (Greek: *paraklētos*, 'advocate', 'comforter', 'intercessor'), the unique Johannine term for the Holy Spirit. He then encourages them to abide in him and in the Father, after which he reminds them that the world hates him and will, by extension, hate them too. The discourse closes with Jesus offering a prayer for himself, his followers and future believers; the final piece of the discourse would have been particularly relevant to communities of believers facing persecution in the period after Jesus' departure (cf. 16.1–4).

CONSENSUS POSITIONS IN DISPUTE: HISTORY AND ETHICS

A long-standing assumption in Johannine research has been that whatever John's value is for the development of later theological trajectories, it ultimately lacks value *as a historical source*. An analysis of scholarship over the past seventy-five years might lead one reasonably to conclude that John's potential value for historical discussions has been all but dismissed by a significant cross-section of Johannine scholars as well as those involved in historical Jesus research. This rejection is perhaps most clearly expressed in Rudolf Bultmann's well-known and unqualified dictum: 'the Gospel of John *cannot be taken into account at all* as a source for the teaching of Jesus'.[21] That having been said, the past two decades have seen a serious attempt to revisit the gospel as a source for our understanding of the historical Jesus.

The work of Richard Bauckham, particularly his emphasis on eyewitness testimony (Greek: *autopsia*) in the ancient world, has helped reenergize the debate, both in Europe and in North America. In *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* (1st ed., 2006), Bauckham argues against numerous consensus positions in gospel scholarship.[22] Most notably, he argues that the synoptic gospels are based closely on the testimony of eyewitnesses and that John was actually written by an eyewitness: John the Elder. Such a scenario would guarantee a high degree of reliability and would buttress any claims to the historical value of the gospel. While Bauckham's proposal has not garnered widespread acceptance, it has demonstrated that a well-argued thesis can make a dent in an otherwise firm consensus.

[21] Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word*, trans. Louise Pettibone Smith and Erminie Huntress Lantero (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), 12 (emphasis added).

[22] Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels As Eyewitness Testimony*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017).

Paul Anderson has also been an important voice in the call to reconsider the historical value of the Fourth Gospel.[23] Anderson has been the most prolific voice on the North American scene, and the scope of his investigation has been comprehensive. Beyond a mere desire to connect the gospel to the life of the historical Jesus, Anderson's agenda has included considering the historical development of the Johannine tradition (including the epistles); John's relationship to the synoptics and its bearing on historicity; the thorny process of separating the 'historical' from the 'theological'; and the place of archaeology as it relates to the gospel. Additionally, Anderson's leadership in the 'John, Jesus, and History' project has helped to lay a foundation for an ongoing consideration of these questions over the next few decades.[24]

In addition to doubts about the historical value of John, scholars have long overlooked or downplayed the potential contribution of the gospel to New Testament ethics. A long-held consensus in Johannine research was succinctly expressed over two decades ago by Wayne Meeks, who opined that 'the Fourth Gospel meets none of our expectations about the way ethics should be constructed'.[25] Unlike the portrayal of Jesus in the synoptic gospels, the Johannine Jesus never encourages his followers to 'love their neighbours' or 'love their enemies'. Neither does the gospel provide lists of virtues to pursue or vices to avoid. Instead, the Johannine Jesus instructs his followers only to 'love', 'follow' and 'believe'. According to the consensus, these imperatives are not nearly enough to allow for the construction of a comprehensive ethics, and the problem is compounded by the claim that the *Sitz im Leben* of the gospel is that of an exclusive, sect-type group.[26]

[23] Cf. Paul N. Anderson, *The Fourth Gospel and the Quest for Jesus: Modern Foundations Reconsidered* (London: T&T Clark, 2006).

[24] Between 2002 and 2017, Anderson served as co-convener of the John, Jesus, and History Group of the Society of Biblical Literature, along with Tom Thatcher, Felix Just and R. Alan Culpepper. During its fifteen-year consultation, this group committed itself to exploring 'issues related to the Johannine tradition and the composition-history of the Fourth Gospel and the Johannine Epistles, with special emphasis on the place of these documents in contemporary study of Christian origins'. To date the group has published eight volumes of its proceedings, with four more projected.

[25] Wayne A. Meeks, 'The Ethics of the Fourth Evangelist', in R. Alan Culpepper and C. Clifton Black, eds., *Exploring the Gospel of John: In Honor of D. Moody Smith* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 317–26, at 320.

[26] Cf. Ernst Käsemann, *The Testament of Jesus: A Study of the Gospel of John in Light of Chapter 17*, trans. Gerhard Krodel (London, SCM Press, 1968), 59; Victor Paul Furnish, *The Love Command in the New Testament* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1972), 144–48.

However, scholarly engagement with New Testament ethics has long suffered from a restricted definition of what constitutes ethical instruction, and this has clearly set the lines for understanding John's place in the conversation. Within the current decade a handful of scholars have begun making a more compelling case for an 'implied ethics' that is both inclusive and potentially valuable for incorporation into broader schemes of Christian ethics or moral theology.[27] These works seek to add nuance to the outmoded conceptions of what constitutes 'ethics' and pay closer attention to rhetorical movements within the narrative itself as a basis for examining implicit ethical material. While still in the early stages, this new area of enquiry appears to offer promising prospects.

CONCLUSION

The Johannine Jesus reveals the character and will of the Father while bridging the chasm between what is above and what is below. At the heart of the gospel lies the question 'How can the world know God?' It is clear to readers of the gospel that Jesus is the definitive answer to that question, but within John's dualistic worldview, it is necessary to look consistently beyond the literal and ordinary to the fuller meaning of Jesus' mission and teaching. Through this process, the evangelist aims to guide the reader down the circuitous path that begins with knowledge of Jesus' origins (1.1–18) and results in life through belief in his name (20.30–31).

Further Reading

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[27] E.g. Jan G. van der Watt and Ruben Zimmerman, eds., *Rethinking the Ethics of John: 'Implicit Ethics' in the Johannine Writings*, WUNT 291 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012); Sherri Brown and Christopher W. Skinner, eds., *Johannine Ethics: The Moral World of the Gospel and Epistles of John* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2017); Lindsey Trozzo, *Exploring Johannine Ethics: A Rhetorical Approach to Moral Efficacy in the Fourth Gospel Narrative*, WUNT 2/449 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017).

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