

Unit 1 Introduction

Who Is Jesus?

The Fourth Gospel is unlike the other three in most respects. In fact, it is 92% unique. Most of its contents have no close parallels in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Many of the stories and sayings of Jesus in the Gospel of John are found only here. And the most familiar sayings and deeds of Jesus, known from the other Gospels, have no counterpart here.

The Gospel of John is deceptively simple. Early church fathers described it as like a pool in which children could wade and elephants could swim. Simple and profound! The ancient church called John “the spiritual Gospel.” They noticed the need to read John on a “higher” level than the other three. Many of Jesus’ conversation-partners in John don’t understand Him, because their superficial, literal hearing of His words led them to think only on an earthly level. They were incapable of comprehending the spiritual realities Jesus tried to reveal. The early church also noticed that John gives far more attention to the work of the Holy Spirit than do the other Gospels.

John is a spiritual gospel in both these respects. But it was also written to contribute to the spiritual transformation of believing readers, as its explicit purpose-statement demonstrates in John 20:31-32. Given this purpose, we must ask not simply, “Who is Jesus?”, but “Who is Jesus to us?” We cannot consider the question in a detached, disinterested search for irrelevant facts.

The unique starting points of each of the Gospels offer important clues as to their different emphases. Matthew’s genealogy identifies Jesus as the Jewish Messiah; Mark identifies Him as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy; Luke, as the decisive turning point in human history. But John begins in timeless eternity, before the Son of God became incarnate as the man Jesus of Nazareth.

In the infinite epochs before creation, the Son of God existed in eternal unity with God the Father and the Holy Spirit. And yet, a close reading of John reminds us that there was a time when “Jesus” did not exist—before “the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (John 1:14 [unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are to John]), sometime between about 5 BC and AD 30. As Jesus faced crucifixion, He assured His disciples, “I came from the Father and entered the world; now I am leaving the world and going back to the Father” (16:28; see 13:3; 16:30).

The prologue to John (1:1-18) stands behind the paradoxical claim of the ancient Christian creeds that Jesus Christ is fully God and fully human. Incarnation was not limited to the earthly ministry of Jesus. The God-man did not abandon His humanity when He returned in glory to the right hand of God after His earthly ministry (17:5; 1 John 4:2). Jesus Christ remains fully God and fully human.

What Christians believe about Jesus *does not* depend on John alone. It is remarkable what the Fourth Gospel does not tell us about Jesus. For example, it refers to the incarnation without reference to the virgin birth or the role of the Holy Spirit in His miraculous conception. John reports (without comment or correction) Nathanael’s dismay over Jesus’ hometown of Nazareth and his apparent lack of concern over Philip’s claim that Jesus was “the son of Joseph” (1:45-46). Without the other Gospels, we would not know that Jesus was an unparalleled story-teller, that His most characteristic miracles were exorcisms, that He was a preacher of repentance, or that He announced the presence and future coming of the kingdom of God.

Only John mentions that the eternal Son of God, the divine agent of creation (1:1-3, 14), entered His rebellious creation as a creature to reveal God definitively. Most continued in rebellion. But Jesus made it possible for all who welcomed Him, who believed He was who He claimed to be, the privilege of becoming children of God (1:9-13, 18).

John suggests that Jesus fulfilled and replaced old covenant persons and institutions—the temple (ch. 2), sacred mountains (ch. 4), Moses (ch. 5), Jewish festivals (ch. 6), and even the land of Israel (ch. 15). Jesus was the center and source of God’s people. Once crucial places and people were fulfilled and replaced by one person.

Jesus fulfilled the Hebrew Scriptures by coming as the Messiah of Israel (1:19-45) and the Samaritans (4:25). As the Son of Man, He came from God to connect God and all humanity (1:51) by His death on the cross (3:14; 12:32-34). God sent His Son to save and give eternal life to everyone who believes Jesus is the Son of God (3:16, 36; 12:47). Thus, He is “the Savior of the world” (4:42), the source of salvation-life to all who accept Him as the Revealer of God (5:36-39).

In Cana of Galilee, Jesus fulfilled and surpassed Jewish rites intended to make fellowship with God possible (2:1-11). There also, He demonstrated the effectiveness of His word, which was not limited by His physical presence in a particular place (4:46-54).

John the Baptist identified Jesus as God’s “Chosen One,” His Spirit-endowed, Passover Lamb, “who takes away the sin of the world” (1:29-36). Jesus’ first reported visit to Jerusalem in John came during the Jewish festival of Passover. He cleared the temple to show that His crucified and risen body, not the temple, were to be His Father’s restored house (2:13-22). In the person of Jesus, not a place (4:21-24), people encounter God “in the Spirit and in truth” (4:24).

Jesus’ third and final visit to Jerusalem also came during the Passover season. John alone emphasizes that Jesus was crucified on the afternoon of “the day of Preparation” (19:14, 31, 42). During

this afternoon before Passover began at sunset, the Passover lambs were slaughtered for the evening Passover meals. The crucified Jesus fulfilled the Scripture concerning Passover lambs in that “Not one of his bones” was broken (19:36, citing Exodus 12:46; Numbers 9:12; Psalm 34:20). The other Gospels (Matthew 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20) and the apostle Paul (in 1 Corinthians 11:25) make a similar point by indicating that for Jesus’ followers the Last Supper inaugurated the new covenant, replacing the Passover meal.

Just as manna sustained God’s ancient people in the wilderness, Jesus claimed, “I am the bread of life” (6:35, 48). “This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world” (6:51). This is the first of Jesus’ seven “I am” sayings with predicates. These metaphorically describe the person and ministry of Jesus.

Jesus’ second reported visit to Jerusalem was during the fall Jewish Festival of Tabernacles (7:2). Eight days of elaborate water and light rituals celebrated God’s sustaining presence with Israel during their wilderness wanderings. Jesus claimed to fulfill this festival, first, as the source of living water, the life-giving Spirit (7:37-39). Second, He affirmed in His second “I am” saying, “I am the light of the world” (8:12; 9:5; see 12:46). Jesus revealed who God is and made His salvation available to all who believed.

In His third “I am” saying, Jesus identified himself as “the gate for the sheep” (10:7, 9). He alone was divinely authorized to determine who was a part of God’s people. As “the good shepherd” (10:11, 14), the predicate in His fourth “I am” saying, Jesus claimed to be the model leader, who would die to save God’s people (10:15). Jesus died for “the Jewish nation” and “the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one” (11:51-52; see 18:14).

In His fifth “I am” sayings, Jesus affirmed, “I am the resurrection and the life” (11:25). All who believe in Him will share in His resurrection life. His similar claim, “I am the way and the truth and the life,” is His sixth “I am” saying. Faithfulness to Jesus is the only way to learn the truth about God and to experience the eternal life He gives.

Jesus’ claim, “I am the true vine” (15:1, 5), is His seventh “I am” saying. In the Old Testament, vine-imagery represents unfaithful Israel (see Psalms 80:8-19; Isaiah 5:1-7; 27:2-6; Jeremiah 2:21; 6:9; 12:10-13; Ezekiel 15:1-8; 17:1-10; 19:10-14; Hosea 10:1-2; 14:4-8).

Jesus’ obedience to His Father enabled Him to complete Israel’s failed mission to make God known to the world. Faith in Jesus, not Jewish descent, was decisive for inclusion in God’s people. God’s people were no longer rooted in the land of Israel, but attached to the person of Jesus.

Besides the seven “I am” sayings with predicates, John includes seven examples of Jesus’ use of the absolute “I am”-formula (4:26; 6:20; 8:24, 28, 58; 13:19; 18:5). He employed the divine self-identification God used to introduce himself to Moses in Exodus 3:14—“I am who I am” (see Genesis 26:24; 28:13; Exodus 6:6-7; 7:5; 20:5; Leviticus 18:5; Isaiah 43:25; 51:12; 52:6; Ezekiel 20:5; Hosea 13:4).

By this usage, Jesus revealed that He was God himself. The words “I am” alone were enough to cause the soldiers and police who came to arrest Jesus to fall prostrate and powerless before Him (18:5). Jesus came in His Father’s name to reveal and glorify God (3:18; 5:43; 10:25; 12:28; 14:13, 26; 15:16; 16:23; 17:6, 11, 12, 26). Thus, He could claim, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (14:9).

Jesus came as a man with a mission—to reveal God’s love for the world by a life of obedience to His Father. His love was expressed by humble, selfless service, even to those He knew would betray and deny Him (ch. 13). He invited His disciples to follow His example (13:15). His only command was that they were to love one another as He had loved them (13:34), even if this meant laying down their lives for one another (15:12-17). Jesus prayed that the unity of believers would enable the world to know that God sent Him and loved them (17:21-23).

On the evening of His resurrection from the dead, Jesus appeared to His disciples and urged them to continue His mission: “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you” (20:21). So the final question is: “Does Jesus’ agenda determine mine?”

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