

Gospel Christology Paper Assignment

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Christology, in its simplest form, is the study of the person Jesus Christ and what he did.¹ While there are numerous Christological titles that could be explored in the Gospel of John—Logos, Son of Man, Son of God, etc.—this paper will focus on the Apostle John’s view of Jesus as the I Am (*egó eimi*) or Incarnate God. While the other Gospels hint at Jesus being the incarnation, John’s Gospel supplies the “only explicit discussion of Jesus as being God in human form,”² and James McGrath agrees that “the author of the Fourth Gospel viewed Jesus not just as one who bears God’s name, but as God’s name ‘made flesh.’”³

Throughout history and typical to human nature, various theological groups have swung to one extreme or the other, where Jesus is exclusively human (low Christology) or exclusively divine (high Christology). Those who adopted a low Christology chose to see Jesus as a human agent of God endowed with divine power, privilege, and wisdom.⁴ Some scholars theorize that this is how the Synoptic Gospel writers viewed Jesus, and the awareness and acceptance of his divine identity was in development throughout the second century.⁵ Some of the early Johannine communities of the first century who adopted an exclusive high Christology were proto-gnostic and isolated themselves from the rest of the church eventually leading to gnostic theology which proposed that Jesus was fully divine and only seemed to be human.⁶ In the last two millennia, scores of scholars have spilled oceans of ink in exploring the vast chasm between high and low

¹*Ultimate Bible Dictionary* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2019), 13.

²David L. Bartlett, *Christology in the New Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2017), 109.

³James F. McGrath, *The Only True God* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 63.

⁴Alan J. Spence, *Christology* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Place, 2009), 18.

⁵Joel B. Green, Jeannine K. Brown, and Nicholas Perrin, eds., *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Westmont, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 954.

⁶Robert Wayne Stacy, "The Petrine Epistles, the Johannine Epistles, and Jude" (video lecture in NBST 515 at Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA, 2022), at 6:45.

Christology. There is, however, a divinely-characteristic “third way” that is often a mystery to the inheritors of the original Edenic stewardship because it cannot be easily measured, graphed, postulated, or proved based on human reasoning. This third way is “both profound unity and yet also diversity within the Divine Being.”⁷ It is to support this third way and defend Jesus’s dual identity that John wrote his Gospel sometime in the AD 90s.

In John’s prologue, Jesus is temporarily introduced as the Logos or divine Wisdom who both created and participated in Creation.⁸ Throughout the rest of his Gospel, the author clearly introduces Jesus as God the Incarnate using a series of absolute “I Am” sayings. While ἐγώ εἰμι (*egó eimi*) is not a code for the Tetragrammaton (YHWH) in the NT, by using these “I Am” statements (with and without a predicate), John declares either Jesus’s bipartite divine identity or he highlights Jesus’s divine characteristic that are unique to God.

Prologue (John 1:1-18)

A prologue in most canonical books is designed to fashion or form a reader’s expectations about what will follow in the body of the text. This is especially true in John’s Gospel. In fact, John presents Jesus as the Incarnate I Am in both the prologue (Jn 1:1-18) and the conclusion (20:30-31) of his account. Further, Craig Keener states that even John’s prologue is itself “framed by affirmations of Jesus’s deity and relationship with the Father (1:1, 18).”⁹

⁷Walter A. Elwell and Robert W. Yarbrough, *Encountering the New Testament*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 98.

⁸James F. McGrath, *John's Apologetic Christology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 109-110.

⁹Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 343.

With the words “in the beginning” (1:1 [New International Version]), John is alluding to Genesis 1:1, and by stating it thus, he emphasizes the intimacy of God the Father and God the Son at Creation.¹⁰ Jesus’s preliminary title as the Word or Logos is mostly reserved to the prologue¹¹ (although John does allude back to this in 6:63). With the seemingly conflicting phrases “the Word was with God” and “the Word was God,” John introduces a tension that many Ancient Easterners would have had difficulty comprehending or accepting. Jesus in the beginning is more than just the proverbial “Wisdom” with which a Jewish audience would be familiar or the impersonal Logos that spoke chaos into order; he is fully flesh *and* fully divine.¹²

In 1:3-4, John continues to marry the identity of the Logos with the Creator of Genesis 1 when he declares, “Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life.” Then in verse 10-14, John incarnates the Logos and re-iterates a marriage of spirit and flesh: “The Word became flesh,” “he was in the world (flesh),” and “the world was made through him.” To conclude his prologue, John boldly claims what he has been hinting at throughout the last 17 verses, “No one has ever seen God, but the one and only son [*monogenés*], who is himself God [*theos*] and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.” *Monogenés* has also been translated as “God the only Son” (NSRV) and “the only begotten God” (NASB), but there is a consensus of the earliest patristic sources that both “God” and “Only Son” (*theos* and *monogenés*) do not contradict each other especially considering the rest of John’s Gospel message.¹³

¹⁰Keener, *Gospel of John*, 420.

¹¹McGrath, *Only True God*, 66.

¹²Keener, *Gospel of John*, 421-422.

¹³McGrath, *Only True God*, 65.

Part 1 (John 1:19-12:50)

Before introducing the ten “I Am” sayings (five with predicates and five without) in Part 1, it is necessary to explain how a first-century Jew would relate and react to the phrase “I Am” (*’ānî hû’* in Hebrew or *egó eimi* in Greek). When God first called himself by name in Exodus 3:14, it was in response to Moses’s inquiry: “Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ Then what shall I tell them?” (Ex 3:13 [NIV]). God responds: “I AM WHO I AM.” As Joel Green states, the LXX Greek rendering (*ἐγώ εἰμι*) of the original Hebrew term functions as “a kind of self-declaration of uniqueness by God himself in Deuteronomy 32:39 and in the strongly monotheistic prophecies of Deutero-Isaiah,” and “it is an unmistakable indication of the unique identity of the one God.”¹⁴ “I Am” was a kind of “code language for divinity”¹⁵ and no Jewish listener would miss the pointed parallel.

The first of the five “I Am” sayings with a predicate all characterize Jesus as the provider of salvation.¹⁶ They include 6:35 (the bread of life), 8:12 (the light of the world), 10:7 (the gate), 10:11 (the good shepherd), and 11:25 (the resurrection and the life). All of these allude to either John’s prologue or to OT passages that would have been familiar to his audience: The bread of life referring to God’s provision of manna in Exodus 16, the light and life alluding to John 1:4 and Genesis 1:3, 20, 24, 26-27, and the resurrection implying God’s unique power over death, a gift granted to a limited few of his divine agents, and perhaps alluding to Ezekiel 37 where God supplies a vision to the prophet of resurrecting a field of dry bones into a vast, living army. Joel

¹⁴Green, Brown, and Perrin, *Dictionary*, 360.

¹⁵Robert Wayne Stacy, “The Four Gospels—Luke and John” (video lecture in NBST 515 at Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA, 2022), at 8:10.

¹⁶Green, Brown, and Perrin, *Dictionary*, 360.

Green states, “The identification of Jesus with these life-evoking images amounts to a Christological appropriation of the role traditionally ascribed to God alone.”¹⁷

One of the biggest obstacles for the Jews was not Jesus’s claims to be from God since messengers and prophets throughout history were recognized as agents sent from God; their issue was that they believed Jesus was *making himself* equal to God.¹⁸ Jesus denies this, and, through the numerous dialogues in chapters five through six that are unique to the Fourth Gospel, John strives to clarify God’s third way to the people—that Jesus could be the obedient Son, the agent of God, and God himself.¹⁹ By doing this, John defrays any argument that following Jesus as the I Am was a violation of the first commandment to not worship other gods (Dt 20:3), he “redefines monotheism in a radical [third] way,”²⁰ and he presents Jesus’s divine identity as “compatible with Jewish monotheism.”²¹

The first five “I Am” sayings *without* a predicate characterize this divine identity.²² They include the first time Jesus declared his identity outside his disciples to the Samaritan Woman in 4:26, and when he was disputing with the unbelieving Jews in 8:24 and 8:28. Verses 19 and 20 of chapter six are especially interesting. In verse 19, John says, “When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus approaching the boat, walking on the water.” This seems to be alluding to Job 9:8 which states, “He alone stretches out the heavens and treads on the waves of

¹⁷Green, Brown, and Perrin, *Dictionary*, 944.

¹⁸McGrath, *Only True God*, 59.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 59–60.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 61.

²¹Green, Brown, and Perrin, *Dictionary*, 359.

²²*Ibid.*, *Dictionary*, 360.

the sea.” In verse 20, in response to his disciples’ terror at seeing their rabbi’s unnatural power over the laws of physics, Jesus said, “It is I [*egó eimi*]; don’t be afraid.”

In addition to these “I Am” statements, John encourages his readers to hyperlink back to his prologue and the Genesis narrative when, in 6:63, Jesus reiterates his identity as the Logos: “The words I have spoken to you are spirit and life.” Just as God spoke life into the primordial chaos of the world yet to be,²³ so Jesus’s words speak life into those who are dead in sin.²⁴ Unfortunately, because this crowd was so focused on the flesh, most did not understand that it was Jesus’s words and ultimately himself as *the* Logos and Incarnate God that/who brought life.²⁵ One of Jesus’s followers did grasp this third way. In response to Jesus’s question of whether any of the Twelve wanted to leave, the Peter replies and confirms Jesus’s divine identity: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God” (6:68-69). However, John 6 is a turning point in Jesus’s ministry where many of his disciples desert him in the wake of his call to absolute devotion (v. 66). His call to “eat my flesh and drink my blood” was not incomprehensible to them; it was just difficult and unacceptable (v. 60). By claiming, “I am the living bread that came down from heaven” (v. 51), and declaring that he could give eternal life, John is presenting Jesus’s divine characteristics and supreme power over death.

If these Jews had a difficult time accepting God being incarnate in Jesus prior to the crucifixion, it would have been even more challenging after his torture and death. They would not have been able to fathom the God who created the world from chaos, brought his people

²³McGrath, *Only True God*, 56–57.

²⁴Bartlett, *Christology*, 110.

²⁵Keener, *Gospel of John*, 703.

through the Red Sea out of slavery in Egypt, and established them in the Promised Land by vanquishing their enemies to be so powerless as to be overcome by the Jewish leaders, the local Roman authorities, and a humiliating death on a cross. But John reveals that “in the crucifixion, Jesus does not surrender or diminish his possession of the divine glory,”²⁶ rather he is demonstrating the very nature of God when he has Jesus declare: “When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am [*egó eimi*]” (8:28). Jonathan Lett states, “This new mosaic of God’s glory reveals the incomprehensibility of God and the utter contrast between humanity and God.”²⁷

Part 2 (John 13 – 19)

The final two “I Am” sayings with a predicate are in 14:6 (“I am the way, the truth, and the life”) and 15:1 (“I am the true vine.”) Like John’s earlier sayings, these predicates act like ancient hyperlinks to a variety of OT referents representing the divine that the Jews would have recognized.²⁸ “The way” could allude to numerous examples in the Psalms including 1:6 (“The Lord watches over the way of the righteous”), 25:9 (“He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way”), and 119:30 (“I have chosen the way of faithfulness”). “The truth” immediately points back to John’s prologue (1:14) and to OT passages like Psalm 119:160 (“The sum of your word is truth” [English Standard Version]), and “the vine” could refer to Ezekiel 17:6-8, Isaiah 5:1-7, or numerous other passages.

²⁶Jonathan Lett, “The Divine Identity of Jesus as the Reason for Israel’s Unbelief in John 12: 36-43,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 135, no. 1 (2016): 171.

²⁷Lett, “The Divine Identity,” 172.

²⁸Green, Brown, and Perrin, *Dictionary*, 943.

The last two “I Am” saying without a predicate are in John 13:19 and 18:5. With his statement, “I am telling you now before it happens [his betrayal], so that when it does happen you will believe that I am He [*egó eimi*]” (13:19), John was stating that Jesus is the one “who predicts the future and reveals the secrets of the heart: things that are characteristic of God.”²⁹ Keener states, “He foretold the future so that they might recognize his identity as YHWH (Is 49:9-10 [NIV]).”³⁰

The final “I Am” statement that John used twice in the Garden (18:6-8) is controversial. Some scholars contend that John is not alluding to Exodus 3:14 because when asked who they are there to arrest, the soldiers state, “Jesus of Nazareth” twice and Jesus replies, “I am he” twice. If this passage were taken in isolation to the rest of John’s Gospel, it could be written off as circumstantial. However, John has spent 17 chapters repeatedly using “I Am” statements. What’s more, Jesus’s divine declaration is repeated (a typical Jewish literary device of emphasis³¹) and the arresting mob consisting of both Jewish leaders and Greek soldiers draw back and fall prostrate³² reminiscent of the reverence the elders and four living creatures demonstrate toward Jesus in Revelation 1:17 and 5:14. What’s most revealing of Jesus’s divine identity is what he declares to the posse: “‘If you are looking for me, then let these men go.’ This happened so that the words he had spoken would be fulfilled: ‘I have not lost one of those you gave me’” (18:8-9). John makes it clear that Jesus is in control of his death and in fulfilling the promises made by him and about him in his role as the I Am. Green says, “It encapsulates the

²⁹Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of John: Vol 13-21* (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 24.

³⁰Keener, *Gospel of John*, 898.

³¹Kaiser and Silva, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 129.

³²Keener, *Gospel of John*, 1058.

Johannine presentation of Jesus as the one in whom God is revealed”³³ and reiterates God’s unexpected third way to present himself to and for his people.

Part 3 (John 20-21)

John crowns his Gospel and Christology of Jesus as the Incarnate God with Thomas’ declaration, “My Lord and my God!” (20:28). What makes Thomas’ confession so powerful is that it comes from the heart and mouth of one who followed Jesus throughout his earthly ministry, but who questioned his dual identity as human and divine. How could a man, Thomas’ rabbi, be alive after such a horrific death? Could it be too much to hope for? As if to encourage his readers who themselves may have doubted Jesus being the Incarnate I Am and the One who has power over what all men fear—death—(Heb 2:14-15), John says through Jesus: “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (Jn 20:29). Perhaps Thomas’ doubts were “arranged by God for our benefit and progress.”³⁴

Perhaps to some degree, John wrote his Gospel for the Thomas’s of the world, doubters in his day and in the present age. This eyewitness to the Incarnate I Am wanted to make God the Son known (Jn 1:18), so that seekers may “believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing [they] may have life in his name” (20:31). It may have been a plan that was and is incomprehensible to some—how can God and man be one?—but it was God’s plan, his unique, divine, and miraculous third way.

³³Green, Brown, and Perrin, *Dictionary*, 946.

³⁴Aquinas, *Commentary*, 276.

Conclusion

The Apostle John designates Jesus as God in the alpha (1:18) and the omega of his Gospel (20:28). Among the Gospel writers, Johannine Christology is the most explicit when declaring Jesus as the Incarnate God. This is evidenced by John's unusual prologue where Jesus is clearly introduced as being a pre-Edenic partner in Creation. Then, using more than 14 "I Am" statements in his narrative that called for every believer—Jew or Gentile—to "hear the voice of the Son of God" (5:25) and eat "the true bread from heaven" (6:32), John walks his readers down an unfamiliar road that reflects neither a high nor low Christology, but a third way that no one could have anticipated where God the Spirit, fulfilling his promises to save not just the Jewish people, but all nations, becomes flesh in the form of his Son, Jesus Christ.

Since the 90s AD when John is purported to have written his Gospel, scholars have argued over doctrine and called believers to "choose between [Jesus's] equality and subordination [to God], between continuity with God and distinction from God."³⁵ Despite multiple millennia of "progress," humans on either side of the Enlightenment are conflicted over God the Incarnate because "the divine beauty of Jesus is nothing like the divine glory that human minds conceive."³⁶ While they aspire to fit everything—including God and theology—into a neat, little box where all can be defined or explained, the Creator is neither compliant nor constrained by his limited and finite creation, nor by their narrow opinions of him.³⁷ Indefinable and beyond comprehension (Is 54:8-9), God is a god of tension, where faith and certainty are held in the same, deft hand. The Fourth Gospel echoes this tautness effectively balancing high

³⁵McGrath, *The Only True God*, 69.

³⁶Lett, "The Divine Identity," 172.

³⁷Elwell and Yarbrough, *Encountering*, 142-143.

and low Christologies.³⁸ For the God whose kingdom is both here and coming, who holds the world in a state of *antara kumbaka* (the pause as the top of an inhale), faith is about living comfortably in the tension of uncertainty because He—the Father and the Son—exist and have always existed in the bipartite form of the Incarnate God (Jn 1:18).

³⁸Green, Brown, and Perrin, *Dictionary*, 949.

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