

Unit 7

Jesus as the Key to the Jewish Scriptures

In earlier units I have repeatedly highlighted the Jewish matrix from which John's Gospel emerged and, in particular, emphasized the influence of Jewish scriptural motifs on the shaping of its christology. Whether one focuses on the Prologue, with its allusions to Genesis and Wisdom traditions, or on the christological titles and the descent-ascent pattern of the heavenly emissary as appropriated in the main body of the text (Messiah, Son of God, Son of Man), it cannot be denied that Jewish scripture and tradition have had a profound influence on John's presentation of Jesus. But what is the precise hermeneutical function of Scripture for John? To what extent is Jesus depicted as the key to the Jewish Scriptures?

John's Use of Explicit Quotations

The Scriptures are important because, in the author's estimation, they point forward and bear witness to Jesus. This certainly applies to the fourteen explicit quotations found in the Gospel (as set out on in the accompanying handout). In a gospel narrative marked by the deeply embedded and allusive character of its scriptural reference, these fourteen passages can be confidently identified as quotations because they fulfil two important criteria: a) they use a citation formula such as 'it is written', and b) it is possible to detect word combinations recognizable from their occurrence in the same form but in another text. This second criterion indicates that Ps. 118:25-26 (Jn 12:13) can also be categorized as an explicit quotation; although there is no introductory formula (because it appears as the content of the crowd's spontaneous acclamation), it bears striking verbal correspondence to its Psalm source. The four other passages (placed in boxes on the handout) are more appropriately defined as

implicit quotations; they all use an introductory formula to direct readers to the content of Scripture, but the wording of the text is not of sufficient length or adequately close to one scriptural passage for it to be categorized as an explicit quotation (7:38; 7:42; 17:12; 19:28).

The majority of John's explicit (and implicit) quotations are drawn either from the Prophets or the Psalms, and in this respect the choice of quotations corresponds broadly to the preference attested in other New Testament writings (especially the Synoptic Gospels and the letters of Paul) and in Jewish texts such as the Dead Sea Scrolls. However, what binds together all quotations in John is their strong christological focus. By selecting and subtly modifying key scriptural passages, Jesus is depicted as the one to whom Scripture bears witness: he is the one who brings to fulfilment the promised way of the Lord (1:23); he is the bread of life descending from heaven (6:31); he is the one who mediates God's eschatological teaching (6:45); he is the Messiah (7:42); the Son of God (10:34); the one who comes in the name of the Lord (12:13); the king (12:15); the Servant rejected by his people (12:38); the righteous sufferer (2:17; 13:18; 15:25; 19:24; 19:36).

John's Patterning of Citations

The desire to offer scriptural proof within the framework of Christology is certainly exhibited by the content of these citations, but also by the way in which each quotation is introduced and distributed in the Gospel. John makes conscious use of two distinct patterns of citation formulas incorporated into the overall structure of his narrative. In the first half of the Gospel, which focuses on Jesus' public ministry (and is widely known as 'the Book of Signs'), all the quotations from Scripture are prefaced by the formula 'it is written' (Greek: *estin gegrammenon*) or a closely related expression (2:17; 6:31; 6:45; 10:34; 12:14). However, when Jesus' ministry draws to a close and the events of his passion begin (12:23 - the arrival

of the hour), all quotations from that point onwards (in what is known as ‘the Book of Glory’) are introduced by the formula ‘in order that Scripture might be fulfilled’ (Greek: *hina plērôthē*; 12:38; 13:18; 15:25; 19:24; 19:36; cf. 17:12).

This clustering of citation formulas accords with the main narrative division in the Gospel, but it also indicates that John attributes strategic importance to his citations. Jesus’ public ministry is thus depicted as conforming to scriptural expectations (1:29-12:36a) and as anticipating its fulfilment, but, with the arrival of Jesus’ hour (12:36b-19:37), explicit citations become expressions of the decisive fulfilment of scriptural prophecies in Jesus’ rejection and death. Indeed, the closer one gets to the passion narrative, the more precise and detailed the citations become, thereby attesting to John’s apologetic aims of showing that the rejection and death of Jesus are scripturally grounded and are in accordance with God’s will. Jesus’ obedience to God’s will and his desire to complete God’s work through his earthly mission is none other than the fulfilment of what has been predicted about him in Scripture.

As a result, Jesus is presented by John not only as the decisive fulfilment of Scripture, but as its completion or consummation. This is indicated above all by the striking shift in fulfilment terminology in John 19:28-30. This passage depicts Jesus’ final moments before his death and it is held together by three occurrences of yet another ‘fulfilment’ verb, not *plēroō* as on all the earlier occasions, but *teleoō/teleioō*. John 19:28-30 reads as follows:

After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished/completed (*tetelestai*), he said (in order to complete the scripture: *hina teleiôthē hē graphē*), ‘I am thirsty’. A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the wine, he said, ‘It is finished/completed’ (*tetelestai*), then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

Jesus' declaration 'I am thirsty' (*dipsō*), alluding to Psalm 69:22, is here interpreted as an expression of his self-conscious desire to complete Scripture, because, with the drinking of wine, all is brought to completion. The immediate context of Jesus' declaration also confirms that the focus is on the ultimate fulfilment of the Scriptures. John has deliberately placed the clause 'in order to complete the scripture' between the two occurrences of the verbal form *tetelestai* ('it is completed'), and does so in order to express Jesus' accomplishment of his work of revelation and salvation (cf. 4:34; 5:36; 17:4). By surrendering his life on the cross and completing his Father's work on earth, Jesus not only fulfils Scripture but brings it to its all-encompassing and decisive conclusion.

As soon as this systematic and careful distribution of scriptural quotations is recognized, it becomes clear that John intends these citations to serve as enactments of Scripture's positive witnessing role to Jesus. Both individually and collectively, they function as prophetic testimonies waiting to be fulfilled in the Christ-event, and, with the arrival of Jesus' death, are brought to their definitive realization. However, in addition to presenting individual scriptural passages as *examples* of christological prophecy, there is evidence in the Gospel that the Fourth Evangelist also views Jesus as the eschatological fulfilment of Scripture in its entirety. This is confirmed by a number of passages, including one in an early narrative scene, where Philip declares to Nathanael: 'We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth' (1:45). This christological confession proclaims that Scripture as a whole - not simply individual verses - testifies to Jesus. This theme is then taken up in the fifth chapter where, in an appeal to a series of witnesses, Jesus tells his Jewish opponents: 'You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is they that testify on my behalf' (5:39). He then continues, 'If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me' (5:46). Once again, no reference is

made here to a specific passage, again indicating that the whole of Scripture is understood as pointing to Jesus and as bearing witness on his behalf. But Scripture, for John, has a hidden eschatological meaning that needs to be revealed. A proper understanding of the Jewish Scriptures is only possible for those who believe in Jesus and, from a Johannine perspective, cannot be fully understood until after his glorification (cf. 2:22; 12:16).

This emphasis on the witnessing role of Scripture is also inextricably linked to John's focus upon Jesus as the exclusive revealer of God, as emphasized in the concluding line of the Prologue: 'No one has ever seen God; the only-begotten one, God, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known' (1:18; cf. 6:46). Such statements, when read in the light of Jewish scripture and tradition, also point to the polemical force of the claim that Jesus is the definitive revelation of God. Jesus' claim that 'no one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man' (3:13) must be read as a response to those Jews who claimed, through their interpretation of certain biblical theophanies, that figures like Abraham, Moses and Isaiah had ascended to heaven and were granted visions of God. Evidence of such interpretations of biblical theophanies abound in first-century Judaism, including the belief that Moses' ascent to Mount Sinai was an ascent to heaven where he experienced a direct vision of God 'face to face' (Philo, *Mos.* 1:158). There is no doubt that John highlights important figures in Israel's history in their role as witnesses, but it is their testimony to Jesus that is accentuated. Indeed, for the purposes of his message that only the Son can reveal the invisible Father, John claims that Abraham rejoiced because what he saw was Jesus' day (8:56) and even Isaiah, during his temple vision, saw his glory and spoke about him (12:41).

The Reception of Isaiah in John's Gospel

This reference to Isaiah is particularly significant, because it is one of those rare cases where John seeks to account for his christological reading of Scripture by pointing to Jesus as the visible revelation of God. Following the theologically difficult quotation from Isa. 6:10 (which interprets the Jewish crowds' rejection of Jesus as resulting from their divinely determined blindness), John comments: 'Isaiah said these things (that is, the quotation from Isa. 6:10 and the one from Isa. 53:1 concerning unbelief) because he saw his glory and spoke about him'. The 'his' in question must be Jesus, not only due to John's emphasis on the impossibility of seeing God other than through Jesus, but because Jesus alone is the referent of the comments in the surrounding context about 'his signs' and the lack of faith 'in him' (12:37, 42). The setting for this comment is the prophet's temple vision (Isa. 6), with the result that the 'Lord' who converses with Isaiah, the one whose glory is seen by the prophet, is Jesus. He is, according to John, the embodiment of God's glory and name. What is also striking is the way in which the second and third clauses in 12:41 are linked together ('because he saw his glory and spoke about him'). It is as a result of Isaiah's vision of Jesus that he is able to bear testimony on his behalf, not only in the two quotations but also in other parts of his prophecy.

'Absolute' I AM Statements in the Gospel of John

The influence of Isaiah on John's christology has long been recognized, but for the remaining part of this unit I wish to focus on one aspect which links John's interpretation of Isaiah's testimony to his presentation of Jesus as the revelation of God, namely Jesus' utterance of the expression 'I am' or 'I am he' (Greek: *egō eimi*). In addition to the metaphorical statements (considered in an earlier module unit), two other categories of 'I am' pronouncements can be

identified by applying the criterion of whether or not a predicate can be supplied from the immediate context of the phrase. A differentiation can then be made between Jesus' so-called 'absolute' *egō eimi* statements (especially 8:24, 28, 58; 13:19 and probably 6:20) and those where the phrase serves to establish identification (4:26: I am he (the Messiah); 18:5, 6, 8 (Jesus of Nazareth); 9:9 (the blind man in question)). One of the aims of my earlier publications on this subject has been to determine whether John in fact secures a firm, watertight distinction between these two categories ('absolute' and self-identification), although this cannot be isolated from the task of establishing the conceptual background of the non-metaphorical 'I am' statements and their interpretative role within John's narrative.

With regard to background Christian exegetes through the centuries have appealed to YHWH's self-disclosure to Moses in the burning bush, 'I am who I am' (Exodus 3:14: *ehyeh asher ehyeh*). It certainly cannot be ruled out that this solemn scene may have contributed to John's understanding of *egō eimi*, although the rendering of Exod. 3:14a in the Septuagint (the textual version upon which John is largely dependent) reads 'I am the one who is' (*egō eimi ho ōn*) and the repetition of 'I am' in 3:14b highlights the second part of the formula rather than *egō eimi*: 'Thus shall you say to the Israelites, 'The one who is' (LXX: *ho ōn*) has sent me to you'. More instructive is the use of *egō eimi* in its bipartite (two-part) form by God in the Septuagint versions of Second Isaiah and the Song of Moses (Deut. 32:39) to render the Hebrew expression *anī hū* ('I am he'). Without exception this phrase is used in these scriptural texts to encapsulate YHWH's uncontested claim to be the only true God. It serves as the culmination of arguments about the exclusiveness of YHWH over and against the gods of other nations; YHWH's active intervention in the past and his promise of future deliverance are presented as proof of his sovereignty and exclusive divinity. He is the eternally active

God, responsible for all forms of deliverance and judgement, ‘the first and the last’, the only one who can proclaim *anī hū’* (*egô eimi*).

The exclusive nature of YHWH’s claim in Second Isaiah and the Song of Moses reverberates in John’s use of *egô eimi* as Jesus’ self-declaration of his identity as the revelation of God. The presentation *egô eimi eimi* as the object of belief (8:24 and 13:19) and knowledge (8:28) bears close verbal resemblance to Isa. 43:10, where YHWH calls upon Israel to act as witnesses: ‘so that you may know and believe and understand that I am’ (LXX: *hoti egô eimi eimi*; MT: *anī hū’*).

In addition, several thematic and structural parallels can be identified which indicate that John has consciously reflected on the setting and significance of *egô eimi* as the self-declaration of God.

- Trial speeches are a popular vehicle in Second Isaiah and in the Song of Moses for YHWH’s assertion of his unique divinity over against the nations’ gods, while the judicial setting and language of such speeches are echoed in those scenes where Jesus proclaims *egô eimi* during his confrontation with ‘the Jews’ (John 8 is permeated by the language of witness, truth, judgement).
- Furthermore, some of the arguments presented by YHWH as proof that he alone is God bear striking resemblance to the context of Jesus’ *egô eimi* declarations. YHWH, ‘from the beginning’ is the eternally active God (41:4; 48:12: I am the first and the last), the one whose timeless existence is accentuated by its Septuagint rendering as *egô eimi* (‘I am’). Now this is used to full effect in Jesus’ unequivocally absolute statement to his Jewish opponents: ‘Before Abraham was, I am’ (8:58).
- YHWH’s sovereignty is confirmed, according to Second Isaiah, by his unique ability to predict events before they take place (43:9-10; 46:10-11; cf. 42:9; 45:21). This

motif in connection with *egō eimi* is applied to Jesus when he predicts his imminent betrayal by Judas, an event to which the disciples are to act as witnesses: 'I tell you this know before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe that I am (*egō eimi*)' (13:19).

But what about those statements where a predicate could be implied from the context, and may, from a grammatical perspective, be termed no more than statements of self-identification? Does John really maintain a firm distinction between these two categories? This seems unlikely due to the fact that an interpretative strategy can be detected in John's Gospel that secures an effective interplay between the different possible meanings of *egō eimi*. This interplay, I would argue, culminates in the dramatic narrative account of Jesus' arrest where key aspects of John's understanding of this expression as a divine self-declaration are crystallized. Jesus comes out of the garden and asks, 'Whom do you seek?' The captors, guided there by Judas, state that they are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, to which he responds with the words *egō eimi*. Upon hearing his answer, the arresting group draws back and falls to the ground. Jesus repeats his question and then offers the same answer before requesting that his disciples be allowed to go free. These cases of *egō eimi* could certainly be interpreted as everyday expressions of self-identification (Yes, I'm he - Jesus of Nazareth), but the first utterance is highlighted in a way suggesting that the unexpected response of Jesus' captors results directly from his self-disclosure with the words *egō eimi*.

In fact, some of the most distinctive themes attached to *egō eimi* (*anī hū'*) in Second Isaiah resonate in this scene of heightened confrontation between Jesus and his opponents. While YHWH demonstrates his sovereignty by proving his ability to predict and control events and by exposing the powerlessness of all so-called opponents (Isa. 42:17), John

depicts Jesus as the one who, by ‘knowing all that was to happen to him’ (18:4), steers events by coming out to meet his captors. By doing so Jesus fulfils his earlier prediction that the betrayal will take place so that the disciples may believe *hoti egō eimi* (13:19). His first utterance of *egō eimi* in the garden has a formidable effect on his captors and on Judas who was ‘standing with them’; this indicates that they, including Judas, serve as symbols of the world’s opposition, and yet they have no power or authority over Jesus. He proves that he is able to avoid arrest, but, paradoxically, he manifests his sovereignty by submitting himself voluntarily to those who set in motion the events leading to his death.

When Jesus pronounces *egō eimi* for the second time in this scene, it becomes clear that the purpose of his demonstration of divine power is to enable the disciples to go free (‘If you are looking for me, let these men go’). John states explicitly that this intervention amounts to a fulfilment of Jesus’ own word: ‘I did not lose (*apōlesa*) a single one of those whom you gave me’. It is indicative that the earlier statement by Jesus which is echoed here announces that ‘his own’ will not be lost, but that they will receive eternal life (10:28: ‘I give them eternal life, and they will never be lost (*ou mē apolountai*). What this implies is that the physical deliverance of the disciples secured by Jesus’ submission to arrest and, finally, to death is intended by John as a symbolic anticipation of his ability to give them life. In Second Isaiah, the ultimate purpose of YHWH’s claim to *egō eimi* is to assure his people of their future deliverance. In John’s arrest narrative, the freedom secured through Jesus’ use of *egō eimi* already anticipates the saving power of his death.

The use of *egō eimi* in John’s Gospel is therefore to be viewed as an important piece of evidence in support of John’s familiarity with, and indebtedness to the book of Isaiah. It also points to the broader hermeneutical function of the Scriptures as bearing witness to

Jesus, the embodiment of God's name, his glory and his word, the one in whom scriptural prophecies find their decisive fulfilment.

KEY REFERENCES

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OTHER RECOMMENDED STUDIES

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