

**Essay Title:**

# **The Identity and Significance of Jesus in the Gospel of John: A Study of Johannine Christology**

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# Introduction

Among the New Testament writings, the Gospel of John offers one of the most distinctive portrayals of Jesus, revealing not only who he is but why his identity is central to Christian faith. Rather than simply recording the events of Jesus' life and ministry, John constructs a theological narrative in which Jesus' identity is progressively disclosed through the Prologue, his words, his signs and ultimately his death and resurrection. Throughout the Gospel, Jesus is presented as the eternal Word made flesh, whose divine identity is inseparable from his mission to reveal the Father and bring eternal life to those who believe. This essay argues that John's presentation of Jesus' identity and significance is intentionally progressive, demonstrating that recognising who Jesus is cannot be separated from understanding what he came to accomplish. By examining John's presentation of Jesus' identity, his self-revelation through words, the revelatory function of his signs, and the Gospel's stated purpose, this essay will show that Johannine Christology culminates in an invitation to faith and eternal life (John 20:30–31).

## John's Presentation of Jesus' Identity

John presents Jesus' identity progressively throughout his Gospel, beginning with a theological declaration before revealing it through the testimony of witnesses and the responses of those who encounter him. Unlike the Synoptic Gospels, which introduce Jesus primarily through his birth, baptism or public ministry, John opens with the Prologue (John 1:1–18), immediately identifying Jesus as the eternal Logos who "was with God" and "was God" (John 1:1). The declaration that "the Word became flesh" (John 1:14) establishes the central Christological claim of the Gospel: Jesus is not merely God's messenger but God's self-revelation in human form.<sup>1</sup> Richard Bauckham argues that John portrays Jesus not simply as one who exercises

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<sup>1</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1991), pp. 114–117, 126–128.

God's authority, but as one who belongs within the unique identity of the one God.<sup>2</sup> This opening therefore provides the theological framework through which the remainder of the Gospel is to be understood.<sup>3</sup>

However, although the Prologue reveals Jesus' identity to the reader, John deliberately allows the characters within the narrative to discover that identity progressively. This literary technique creates a gradual unfolding of Christological understanding rather than an immediate recognition by those within the story.<sup>4</sup> John the Baptist becomes the first witness, identifying Jesus as "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29) and later affirming, "I have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God" (John 1:34). These titles introduce both Jesus' sacrificial mission and his unique relationship with the Father. As Andreas Köstenberger observes, the testimony of John the Baptist functions as the first authoritative witness that directs readers towards Jesus' true identity, establishing a pattern of witness that continues throughout the Gospel.<sup>5</sup>

The theme of progressive revelation continues through the responses of Jesus' first disciples. Andrew proclaims Jesus as the Messiah (John 1:41), Philip identifies him as the fulfilment of the Law and the Prophets (John 1:45), while Nathanael confesses, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" (John 1:49). Rather than presenting these titles as isolated confessions, John arranges them to demonstrate an increasing recognition of Jesus' identity. Craig Keener notes that these early confessions prepare readers for the fuller Christological claims that emerge later in the Gospel, particularly through Jesus' own words and signs.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, John's presentation of Jesus' identity is both theological and narrative: the reader is informed from the outset that Jesus is the incarnate Word, while the unfolding

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), pp. 1–5, 18–30

<sup>3</sup> Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John, Sacra Pagina* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998), pp. 34–35.

<sup>4</sup> Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, pp. 50–57.

<sup>5</sup> Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), pp. 66–71.

<sup>6</sup> Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary, 2 vols* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), I, pp. 475–491.

narrative invites both its characters and its audience to grow into a deeper recognition of who he truly is, thereby preparing them to understand the significance of his words, signs and saving mission.<sup>7</sup>

## Jesus' Words as the Revelation of His Identity

While the Prologue introduces Jesus' identity to the reader, John presents Jesus' own words as the primary means by which that identity is progressively revealed throughout the Gospel. Rather than relying solely upon miraculous acts, Jesus repeatedly interprets his own person and mission through dialogue, discourse and the distinctive "I am" sayings.<sup>8</sup> These declarations invite readers to understand not only what Jesus does, but who he claims to be. D. A. Carson argues that John's Gospel consistently intertwines Jesus' words with his identity, ensuring that his teaching cannot be separated from his person.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, John's Christology is conveyed not simply through narrative description but through Jesus' own self-revelation.

The most distinctive examples of this self-revelation are the metaphorical "I am" sayings, through which Jesus identifies himself as the bread of life, the light of the world, the good shepherd and the resurrection and the life (John 6:35; 8:12; 10:11; 11:25). These declarations do more than employ vivid imagery; they reveal aspects of Jesus' divine identity by presenting Jesus as the source of life, light, guidance and salvation. According to Richard Bauckham, John's Gospel locates Jesus within the unique identity of the one God rather than presenting him simply as a figure who exercises divine authority, while Craig Keener observes that the "I am" sayings draw extensively upon Old Testament imagery to communicate Jesus' identity through Israel's Scriptures.<sup>10</sup> However, Marianne Meye Thompson

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<sup>7</sup> Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), pp. 349–425.

<sup>8</sup> Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, pp. 337–358.

<sup>9</sup> Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, pp. 252–260.

<sup>10</sup> Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel*, pp. 39–50; Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, I, p. 318.

emphasises that the significance of these sayings lies not in the expressions alone but in their place within John's wider narrative, where Jesus' identity is progressively revealed through his relationship with the Father and his role as the Father's definitive self-revelation.<sup>11</sup> Taken together, these perspectives demonstrate that the "I am" sayings function both as profound Christological declarations and as integral elements within John's progressive revelation of Jesus' identity.

John further develops Jesus' identity through extended dialogues that invite both characters and readers into deeper theological reflection. In his conversation with the Samaritan woman (John 4), Jesus gradually reveals himself as the giver of "living water" before openly identifying himself as the Messiah (John 4:26). Similarly, Martha's confession follows Jesus' declaration, "I am the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25–27), illustrating how revelation leads to faith. Francis Moloney argues that these dialogues intentionally move individuals from misunderstanding to belief, reflecting John's wider theological purpose.<sup>12</sup> Andreas Köstenberger likewise observes that Jesus' conversations consistently function as revelatory encounters, challenging readers to respond to his claims.<sup>13</sup>

Consequently, Jesus' words function as revelatory acts that disclose his identity while simultaneously demanding a response from those who hear them. Larry Hurtado argues that this emphasis upon Jesus' own claims contributed significantly to the earliest Christian devotion directed towards him.<sup>14</sup> John's presentation of Jesus' identity is therefore inseparable from Jesus' own voice, demonstrating that recognising who Jesus is depends upon listening to what he says as much as witnessing what he does.

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<sup>11</sup> Marianne Meye Thompson, *John: A Commentary, New Testament Library* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), pp. 194–198.

<sup>12</sup> Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, pp. 128–135, 319–327.

<sup>13</sup> Köstenberger, *John*, pp. 144–152.

<sup>14</sup> Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, pp. 370–391.

## Jesus' Signs as the Revelation of His Significance

While Jesus' words progressively reveal who Jesus is, John presents his signs as visible demonstrations that confirm and interpret that identity, revealing why it is significant for those who believe. Unlike the Synoptic Gospels, John consistently describes Jesus' miracles as "signs," emphasising that they point beyond the miraculous event itself to a deeper theological reality.<sup>15</sup> Rather than functioning simply as displays of divine power, the signs reveal Jesus' glory and invite belief in him (John 2:11). As G. R. O'Day argues, the signs are not merely displays of miraculous power but revelatory acts that disclose Jesus' identity and invite readers to faith.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, John's presentation of Jesus' significance is inseparable from the revelatory purpose of the signs.

The first sign at Cana (John 2:1–11) establishes this pattern. Jesus' transformation of water into wine not only demonstrates miraculous authority but also symbolises the arrival of the new covenant and the abundance associated with the messianic age.<sup>17</sup> John concludes the account by stating that Jesus "revealed his glory, and his disciples believed in him" (John 2:11). Craig Keener argues that this concluding statement provides the interpretive key for understanding every subsequent sign: each one reveals Jesus' glory while leading observers towards faith.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, the raising of Lazarus (John 11) is not merely a demonstration of power over death but an enacted revelation of Jesus' declaration, "I am the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25). Marianne Meye Thompson argues that the raising of Lazarus functions as the final sign, anticipating Jesus' death and resurrection while preparing readers for the Gospel's climactic revelation of life through the cross.<sup>19</sup>

John further emphasises that the signs require interpretation rather than guaranteeing belief. Following the feeding of the five thousand (John 6), many

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<sup>15</sup> Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, pp. 166–169.

<sup>16</sup> Gail R. O'Day, 'John', in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, IX: Luke–John, ed. by Leander E. Keck and others (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995), pp. 491–865 (pp. 535–540).

<sup>17</sup> Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, pp. 65–73.

<sup>18</sup> Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, I, pp. 515–516.

<sup>19</sup> Thompson, *John*, pp. 255–256.

seek Jesus because of the miracle itself, yet fail to understand its deeper significance, prompting Jesus to redirect attention towards himself as the true "bread of life" (John 6:35). Francis Moloney observes that throughout the Gospel the signs expose a division between superficial amazement and genuine faith, demonstrating that miracles alone do not produce belief unless their Christological significance is recognised.<sup>20</sup> Marianne Meye Thompson similarly argues that the signs are intended to draw readers beyond the miraculous event itself to the person of Jesus, reinforcing John's theological purpose.<sup>21</sup> Taken together, these perspectives suggest that John's signs reveal Jesus' glory without compelling belief, instead inviting readers to interpret them in light of Jesus' self-revelation.

The supreme revelation of Jesus' significance occurs not in a miracle but in the Cross and Resurrection. John consistently portrays Jesus' death as his "hour" of glorification (John 12:23; 13:31), transforming what appears to be defeat into the fullest revelation of his divine identity and love. Richard Bauckham argues that John's Gospel presents the Cross as the climactic manifestation of God's glory, revealing Jesus' identity through self-giving obedience rather than worldly power.<sup>22</sup> Consequently, John's signs culminate in the Passion, where Jesus' identity and significance become inseparable. His works reveal not only that he possesses divine authority, but that his mission is to bring life through sacrificial love, preparing readers for John's concluding invitation to believe and receive eternal life (John 20:30–31).

## **The Purpose of John's Christology: Belief and Eternal Life**

John's presentation of Jesus' identity and significance ultimately serves a pastoral and theological purpose. Unlike the Synoptic Gospels, John explicitly

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<sup>20</sup> Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, pp. 206–218.

<sup>21</sup> Thompson, *John*, pp. 252–256.

<sup>22</sup> Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel*, pp. 46–49.

states why he has written his account: "these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:30–31). This purpose statement functions as the interpretive lens through which the entire Gospel should be read, demonstrating that John's Christology is not an abstract theological exercise but an invitation to faith and eternal life. C. K. Barrett argues that the Gospel consistently presents belief as the appropriate response to the revelation of Jesus' identity, making Christology inseparable from discipleship.<sup>23</sup>

Throughout the Gospel, belief is portrayed not merely as intellectual agreement but as personal trust in the one whom the Father has sent. John's repeated emphasis upon witness, signs and Jesus' own self-revelation invites readers to move beyond curiosity towards genuine faith. Marianne Meye Thompson argues that, in John's Gospel, eternal life is experienced in the present through relationship with Christ, rather than existing solely as a future hope.<sup>24</sup> Consequently, recognising Jesus' identity carries immediate theological significance, since eternal life begins through faith in him rather than only after death.

John therefore concludes his Gospel by drawing together its central themes of revelation, belief and life. The identity of Jesus as the incarnate Son of God is presented not as an end in itself but as the foundation of salvation. As D. A. Carson observes, John's Gospel consistently directs every sign, discourse and confession towards the decision to believe, demonstrating that its Christological portrait ultimately seeks the transformation of its readers.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text*, 2nd edn (London: SPCK, 1978), pp. 575–576.

<sup>24</sup> Thompson, *John*, pp. 421–425.

<sup>25</sup> Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, pp. 660–663.

## Conclusion

John's Gospel presents a distinctive and carefully structured Christological portrait in which Jesus' identity and significance are progressively revealed through the Prologue, his words, his signs and ultimately his death and resurrection. Rather than presenting Christology as an abstract theological concept, John demonstrates that recognising who Jesus is cannot be separated from understanding what he came to accomplish. The Prologue establishes Jesus as the eternal Word made flesh, while his "I am" sayings and revelatory dialogues disclose his divine identity through his own self-revelation. Likewise, the signs function not merely as miraculous displays of power but as theological acts that reveal his glory, invite belief and point towards his saving mission. These themes reach their climax in the Cross and Resurrection, where Jesus' divine identity and sacrificial purpose are most fully revealed.

Consequently, John's Christology is fundamentally pastoral as well as theological. The Gospel consistently directs its readers beyond admiration of Jesus' teaching or miracles towards the decision to believe in him as the Messiah and Son of God. As John's purpose statement makes clear (John 20:30–31), the ultimate aim of the Gospel is that its readers may encounter Jesus in faith and, through believing, receive eternal life. John's presentation of Jesus therefore remains central not only to New Testament theology but also to the enduring proclamation of the Christian faith.

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