

## **Word of God, Messiah of Israel, Savior of the World: Learning the Identity of Jesus from the Gospel of John**

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The Gospel of John presents a peculiar challenge to modern interpreters who simultaneously confess Jesus as Lord and engage in historical study of the Gospels and Jesus. Paradoxically John is the Gospel that is deemed least reliable in providing useful data for the quest of the “historical Jesus,” but most penetrating in providing the fundamental categories for Christian confession of who Jesus ultimately was and is -- resurrection and life, Son of the Father, Word of God made flesh. While these designations and metaphors may be pivotal for Johannine and, finally, Christian witness to the identity of Jesus, they play little if any role in the contemporary efforts to reconstruct the historical Jesus. Contemporary reconstructions of Jesus seek to recover his aims, his words, and his deeds, sometimes summarized in terms of “what he actually said,” or “what he actually did,” the so-called “indisputable facts” about Jesus.<sup>1</sup> But what Jesus “actually said” and Jesus “actually did” are categories in which John has not achieved high marks.<sup>2</sup> For many interpreters of John, it appears that the past of Jesus has been swallowed up by the present of the Evangelist or the experience and theology of the “Johannine community.” John was interested in the reality and presence of Jesus for Christians of his day; in writing about the past, he rewrote it so as to virtually collapse past into present. As a result, the “historical Jesus” is scarcely visible in or recoverable through John.

Such a way of posing the problem assumes that we know what we mean by “history” and “historical.” But the meaning of these terms is not transparent. On the one hand, “history” does not simply mean “the past,” the sum total of all events and situations that have ever occurred. Rather, “history” refers to those events which have become part of the historical record because they influenced culture or made an impact in such a way that they were remembered. In this sense, “history” refers to events in their significance within their context and in light of their

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<sup>1</sup>Note the number of titles that play on some variation of this theme: *The Five Gospels: What Did Jesus Really Say? The Search for the AUTHENTIC Words of Jesus* (Harper San Francisco; Reprint edition [January 1997]); N. T. Wright, *Who Was Jesus?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992); F. Scott Spencer, *What did Jesus do?* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2003). There are of course exceptions; one such, notable for its pointed title, is Leander Keck’s *Who is Jesus? History in Perfect Tense* (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 2000; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001).

<sup>2</sup>Assessments of the so-called “historical reliability” of John range across a spectrum. For presentations at opposite ends of the spectrum, see Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of John’s Gospel* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2001); and Maurice Casey, *Is John’s Gospel True?* (New York/London: Routledge, 1996).

subsequent influence and impact. All history then comes to us because of the impact, negative or positive, of a person or event on individuals, cultures, institutions and societies, and all history is in some way mediated to us through human memory and experience. On the other hand, the term “historical” refers to those things which are factual rather than fictional, to things that “really happened” in the past. But sometimes this sense of history is contrasted not only to that which is fiction, but to the “significance” attached to those past events. “Historical” therefore means what happened *apart from* any attribution of significance to it.<sup>3</sup> It is this second sense of the term “historical” that dominates discussions of Jesus; the “historical Jesus” often designates the “past” of Jesus apart from any attribution of significance to that past. But it is precisely this sense of the term that serves inadequately to disclose the identity of Jesus, whether we are speaking of his ongoing significance for the church, his pre- and “post-existence” with God – or even the identity of the so-called historical Jesus.

There is no denying that Jesus as a figure of the past matters in the Gospel of John, and that he matters in specific and concrete ways. Two ways of construing this assertion may be ruled out. First, it is not enough to say that, for John, it is the “sheer fact” of Jesus’ historical existence that matters, and that John has subsequently made of Jesus what he wanted or needed to make of him. John is bound by traditions received about Jesus, and at every turn these seep through the pages of the Gospel. The Gospel traditions may be malleable, but they are not infinitely so. But, second, to say that the historical figure of Jesus matters in the Gospel of John does not mean that the identity of Jesus can be ascertained entirely through historical reconstructions of the “undisputed facts” about Jesus. Even if one could verify every detail of the Fourth Gospel as “authentic,” one would not have therefore grasped the identity of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel -- the “what” that makes Jesus who he is.<sup>4</sup>

*Word, Messiah, Savior: A Sketch of the Identity of Jesus in John*

Who, then, is Jesus? This way of putting the question already suggests the way in which the answer will need to be framed: Jesus is not simply a figure of the past, but one who is alive. In part, John’s aim in writing his Gospel is to show that “what Jesus is to the faith of the true Christian believer, he was in the flesh.”<sup>5</sup> Jesus was, is, and will be life for the world. Indeed, if the statement that Jesus is alive is true – and if it is not, then the Gospel bears false witness to Jesus – it will indicate that Jesus’ identity can not be limited to what can be known about him from the past, and this is what John does in fact indicate in direct and indirect ways throughout

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<sup>3</sup>As the following quotation, taken from the blog “Biblical Theology,” demonstrates: “The point of the Bible, OT and NT, is not to recount facts. It is to recount the SIGNIFICANCE of facts from a purely theological perspective.” [<http://biblical-studies.blogspot.com>]

<sup>4</sup>For this definition of identity, see Markus Bockmuehl’s discussion in “God’s Life as Jew” in the present volume.

<sup>5</sup>See John Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991), p. 42.

the Gospel. His past is remembered in the very narrative of the Gospel, but there is also the promise of his continued presence with his people (14:18, 23; 15:4-7), as well as that of his future coming (21:23). In brief, Jesus' identity is truly recognized only if we see him in his past, his present, and his future.

By Jesus' past we refer to the "historical" or "earthly" Jesus, the past that is partially documented in historical accounts of various sorts. But the opening sentences of the Gospel of John identify its central figure as "the Word," and, with allusion to Genesis 1:1, locate its account of this Word in relationship to God the Creator and the origins of the cosmos. Because the Word that was "in the beginning" was the agent of God's creation of all that is, the identity of that Word cannot be construed apart from relationship to God on the one hand or to the created order on the other hand. Moreover, what can be said about the relationship of God to the world can also be said of the Word's relationship to the world: the world is answerable to its Creator (see 1:10-11). Indeed, the Word is called God (1:1; cf. 20:28). In this sense, the identity of Jesus in John is thoroughly theological, inasmuch as it must be delineated in relationship to the God who created the world, the God whose identity is attested through the Scriptures as the God of Israel. It follows, then, that genuine knowledge of Jesus, perhaps even genuine historical knowledge of Jesus, depends upon theological insight in order to know and articulate his identity. To know Jesus as he "really was" in the past will require not that we strip away the theological aspects of his identity, but that they be brought to bear on our understanding and articulation of who he was and is. His identity is not reducible to his past historical context.

The theological aspect of Jesus' identity shapes the way in which John portrays Jesus in every role and deed: it is as the Word of God, as the one who was the agent of creation, that the incarnate Jesus carries out his prophetic, messianic, and salvific vocation. Throughout the Gospel there are hints and reminders that in the words of Jesus it is the Word incarnate who speaks: as the embodiment on earth of Jacob's ladder (1:51), he opens the heavenly realms of glory; he has come "from above" and will return to his previous state of glory; he offers the divine gift of life in the face of death that pervades the cosmos; as the unique Son, he alone makes God known (1:18).

But while confession of the pre-existent Word of God introduces the Gospel (1:1, 14, 18), it is the Word made flesh who heals, teaches, debates, hungers, thirsts, bleeds, and dies. While the narrative establishes that Jesus was indeed a human being, and that Christian faith cannot be docetic, it does more: it anchors the account of Jesus in an identifiable time and specific places.<sup>6</sup> The designations that dominate the Gospel locate Jesus within the story of Israel in the context of the Roman empire of the first century: Jesus enters the public scene in connection with the

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<sup>6</sup>In my experience of teaching courses on Jesus and the Gospels, it is not the "humanity" of Jesus that causes problems for students, but rather grappling with Jesus as a particular historical figure. They are not troubled that Jesus got tired, hungry, thirsty and angry, or that he agonized in Gethsemane; but they are deeply troubled that he might have spoken words such as are recorded in Matthew 15:26.

baptismal ministry of a Jewish prophet named John, calls Galilean fisherman to be his disciples, discusses and disputes with Pharisees, interprets the Torah, teaches in synagogues and in the temple, frequently journeys to Jerusalem, and dies by crucifixion at the hands of Roman imperial power. Jesus shared the beliefs of his fellow Jews, including the acknowledgment of one living God, the heritage received from the patriarchs, the validity of Torah and the role of Moses in giving it, the sanctity of the temple, the resurrection from the dead, and the promised in-gathering of God's scattered children under the Messiah,<sup>7</sup> symbolized in anticipatory fashion by the selection of Twelve disciples. In John, Jesus alludes to the halakhic regulations that allow for circumcision on the Sabbath (7:22; *m. Shabbat* 18:3-19:4); is aware of the custom of using stone jars for the waters of purification (2:6; *m. Kelim* 10.1); knows the Palestinian manna traditions of the Jewish *haggadah* (6:35-51); and the significance of the last day of the feast of Tabernacles and the water poured in front of the altar (7:37; *m. Sukkah* 4:1, 8, 9). The designations used for Jesus reflect the categories that come from the Scriptures and the world of first century Judaism: he is called prophet, Messiah, Son of man, and king of Israel and of the Jews. His speech is replete with metaphors from Scripture, such as the vine, shepherd, bread, and light; he interprets Scriptural texts (e.g., John 6:32, 45; 10:34-35); he alludes to narratives of Israel's past, such as the sojourn in the wilderness. His public deeds and teaching take place near Passover, on the Sabbath, at Tabernacles and Hanukkah. These dimensions of Jesus' life are central, not incidental, to his mission as portrayed in John.

Jesus' mission is directed to "his own" (1:11) and he dies in order to save "the nation" and to "gather together the children of God who are scattered abroad" (11:48-52). The purpose of John's baptism is to make Jesus known to Israel (1:31), and he is subsequently acknowledged as the Messiah, the "King of Israel" (1:49) by "an Israelite in whom there is no deceit" (1:47) and by the crowds upon his entry into Jerusalem (12:13). Speaking with a Samaritan woman, Jesus identifies himself as belonging to "the Jews" (4:22), and non-Jews in the Gospel speak or think of Jesus as a Jew (4:9; 18:35). Virtually the entire Roman trial scene in John turns on the question whether Jesus is King of the Jews, and on this charge Pilate has him crucified (18:33; 18:39; 19:3, 12, 14, 19, 21). It is in the light of such data that one must read the frequent and puzzling references to "the Jews" in John – puzzling, inasmuch as the term "the Jews" often separates those so designated from others who are also clearly Jewish, including John the baptizer (1:19; 3:25), and Jesus himself (5:16, 18).<sup>8</sup> While in John the term does seem to distance Jesus and his followers from "the Jews," Jesus does not reject "his own", nor does he stand over against "Judaism" as a religious system. Although there is evidence of friction between two groups of Jews, namely, those who follow Jesus and those who do not, the conflict

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<sup>7</sup>For the hope of the regathering of God's people or of the twelve tribes, see Isa 11:12, 43:5-6, 54:7-8, 56:8; Jer 23:1-5; Ezek 34:5-1, 37:20-28; see also Sir 35:11, 48:10; Bar 4:37, 5:5; 2 Macc 1:27; 2:17-18; Jub. 1:15; Ps. Sol. 11.2, 17:28-31.

<sup>8</sup>For a survey and discussion of the evidence regarding "the Jews" in John, as well as additional bibliography, one may consult R. E. Brown, *Introduction to the Gospel of John* (ed. by Francis J. Moloney; New York: Doubleday, 2003), 157-88.

between them has yet to become the chasm found in such early Christian documents as the epistles of Ignatius,<sup>9</sup> Barnabas,<sup>10</sup> or Diognetus.<sup>11</sup> In John, the identity of Jesus is bound up at every level with the people of Israel and their destiny, so much so that he gives his life for them.

Specifically, Jesus is the Messiah of Israel. This is the confession of the Evangelist (1:17; 20:31) and of Jesus' disciples (1:41, 45, 49; 11:27), but also the subject of dispute and inquiry (7:26-42; 10:24). As Messiah, "the son of God, the King of Israel," Jesus raises up a temple for God (compare 2:19-22 and 10:17-18). But it is not precisely the kind of temple that Solomon, the son of David, or his descendants, would build. Similarly, while the crowds acclaim him as King of Israel upon his entry into Jerusalem, his kingship will bring about his own death, not the death of his enemies. Jesus is not a king by any recognizable criteria, whether these be Jewish or pagan assumptions about what a king should be and do. The confession of Jesus as Messiah cannot simply be read off the surface of his life and deeds, for his messianic vocation is undertaken not in terms of the exercise of power against his enemies, but as service (13:1-11) and self-giving (10:1-18; 12:23-26) and through his death on the cross. But in order to recognize this one as God's Messiah, to see, enter, and understand the kingdom that is genuinely God's kingdom (3:3, 5, 18:36), the work of the Spirit of God is required. Recognition of Jesus as the Messiah is not the product of human logic or reason, or even accepting his claim to be the Messiah, but of the revelation of God (John 6:44-45; see also Mt 16:17; Mt. 11:25-27; Luke 10:21-22;). Hence, what ultimately matters for the confession of Jesus as Messiah is God's acknowledgment of him, God's witness to him (5:36-7; 6:27).<sup>12</sup>

Jesus, the Messiah of Israel, is also the "Savior of the world" (4:42). The Gospel is peppered with promises that the death and resurrection of Jesus will bring about the ingathering not only of Jesus' own people, but also of all people (3:15; 10:16; 12:32, 47; see also 7:35). As the living one, Jesus sends the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of life, from the Father (14:26; 15:26). Jesus breathes the life-giving spirit of God into humankind as God breathed the Spirit into Adam, and as God will breathe life into the desiccated bones of the people of Israel (20:23; Gen 2:7; Ezek 37:9). Jesus' risen mode of existence and the sending of the Spirit to bear witness to him make it possible for him to be present and known beyond the boundaries of Judea and Galilee.

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<sup>9</sup>"It is outlandish to proclaim Jesus Christ and practice Judaism" (*Ign. Magn.* 10).

<sup>10</sup>"Do not become like some people ... saying that the covenant is both theirs and ours. For it is ours" (*Ep. Barn.* 4:6).

<sup>11</sup>"Christians are right to abstain from the vulgar silliness, deceit, and meddling ways of the Jews, along with their arrogance" (*Ep. Diog.* 4).

<sup>12</sup>See here the helpful and insightful essay of Walter Moberly, "The Christ of the Old and New Testaments," in *The Cambridge Companion to Jesus* (ed. Markus Bockmuehl; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 184-99.

There is also a brief allusion at the end of the Gospel to Jesus' expected return (John 21:22-23), and the few descriptions of the future and of what will be emphasize the twin themes of eternal life and presence – the presence of the Father, and the Son, with the people of God. The Gospel of John thus comprises in itself the whole biblical story from creation (1:1-3) to the second coming of Christ (21:22-23), implicitly identifying Jesus of Nazareth as the one who was, is, and is to come: what can be predicated of the eternal God can also be predicated of him. Word made flesh, Messiah of Israel, and Savior of the world: this is who he was and is and will be.

In John's witness to Jesus, these aspects of Jesus' identity are related in such a way that each determines and shapes the other. It is as the Word made flesh that Jesus is the Messiah: Israel's deliverance is an act of Israel's God, and "Messiah" is defined and redefined in terms of the embodied presence of God's own Word, who speaks words of life to his people. As the agent of creation, the King of Israel delivers his people from the ultimate forces that threaten their very existence, namely the powers of death, by subjecting himself to the powers of the Roman authorities who execute him as they would other would-be rebels. Again, it is as the Messiah of Israel that Jesus is the Savior of the world, and as the Savior of the world that he is the Messiah of Israel, and thus to gather Israel together, as a shepherd gathers his flock (10:16), is to gather together *all* God's scattered children (11:52). As King of Israel, the Word incarnate accomplishes deliverance not only for his own, but for the world, which was "made through him" (1:3). The mission of the Word in the world includes the people of Israel, and intends their deliverance, but also extends to the whole world, because the God of Israel is the Lord of the universe and the incarnate Word the agent of the creation of it.

To be sure, it has not been easy to hold these aspects of Jesus' identity together, whether in scholarly assessment or popular piety. Ernst Käsemann once famously characterized John's picture of Jesus as "God striding across the earth."<sup>13</sup> Here, contended Käsemann, is a portrait of the Word, of the Savior, of God – but not of one who genuinely belongs to this world, this flesh, or to Israel. It is surprising how apt many seem to find this characterization, but it is perhaps not surprising to understand how John has contributed to acceptance of it.<sup>14</sup> John's descriptions of Jesus as the one who comes from above, and who is one with the Father, have made it difficult not to see John's Jesus as hovering somewhat above the realities of this world and life. Interestingly, the pagan critics of Christianity seemed to grasp the point that it is precisely in claiming this crucified human being as Son of God that the heart and offense of Christianity lies,

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<sup>13</sup>In *The Testament of Jesus: A Study of the Gospel of John in Light of Chapter 17* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968).

<sup>14</sup>In fact, it has been my experience that, when presented with Käsemann's description, students sometimes find it odd that one should find it objectionable. Is Jesus not, after all, "God on earth"? Did he not come to "replace" the Jewish people with a universal Christian people? And didn't he offer a "spiritual" kingdom over against the worldly hopes of the Jews for an earthly, political kingdom?

for whereas “Son of God” and “crucified man” ought to be two different figures, Christians in fact alleged that they were one and the same. Origen reports Celsus’ accusation that “[Christians say that] although we proclaim the Son of God to be Logos we do not bring forward as evidence a pure and holy Logos, but a man who was arrested most disgracefully and crucified.”<sup>15</sup> Or, as another critic later sneered, “You allege that a being who was born a man and who died on the cross (a death which would bring shame on the lowest of men) was god, that he still survives to this day, and you address your daily prayers to him.”<sup>16</sup> This is the “what” of the “who” to which John bears witness: The Son of God is the man who was most disgracefully crucified.

*“We saw his glory:” Sight, Insight, and Witness to Jesus*

But if this crucified one is the Son of God, how does one come to know it? For some, the answer is simple: Jesus is who he says is.<sup>17</sup> Strikingly, although in the Fourth Gospel Jesus makes many bold claims for himself, his identity is disclosed largely through the testimony borne to him, and it matters greatly who says what about Jesus, and that these witnesses be trustworthy. Those who bear witness to Jesus do so as the result of encounter with Jesus. John the Baptist asserts that he has “seen and borne witness” that Jesus is the Son of God (1:34); the Samaritans announce that, having heard Jesus, they have come to know that he is the Savior of the world (4:42); his disciples state that he has “the words of life” (6:68); Thomas confesses the Risen Jesus as “My Lord and My God!” (20:28). What is striking about all these confessions is that while they emerge from encounter with Jesus, from having seen, heard, and touched him, the substance of the confessions themselves – Son of God, Savior of the World, Lord and God – is not simply a sum reached by adding up all the right numbers. But neither is there an ugly, broad ditched fixed between the historical figure and the one who is confessed in these terms. It is *in* what Jesus said and did, as well as *in* what happened to him – particularly his crucifixion and resurrection – that one may uncover what it means that he is King of Israel and Savior of the World.

John’s insistence that witness to Jesus emerges from encounter with Jesus creates a problem for those who never encountered the earthly Jesus, since the same sort of encounter with Jesus is no longer possible. The role of the Gospel itself is to serve as a witness to Jesus, so that those who did not or could not encounter the earthly Jesus may know him to be life-giving and confess him as Messiah and Son of God, Lord and God (20:30-31). Those who come to this confession do so because they receive the witness of the Gospel, a “given communal

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<sup>15</sup>Origen, *Contra Celsum* 2.31.

<sup>16</sup>Arnobius, *Adv. Nat.* 1.36, quoting his “opponent;” ANCF 6.

<sup>17</sup>This is the famous “liar, lunatic, or Lord” argument (either Jesus was lying; he was insane; or he is who he says he is: Lord).

embodiment of memory and witness.”<sup>18</sup> But the Gospel does not serve as a substitute for Jesus in the present. It bears witness to the risen and living Jesus by recounting the past in light of the present understanding that he is indeed living. The Gospel therefore offers its readers a link to the history of the past, and also testimony to the one who gives life. While not identical, these are, for John, inseparable. The accountability of later interpreters to the testimony of “eye-witnesses to the word of life” is illustrated well in Irenaeus’ letter to Florinus, in which he asserts that as an eyewitness of the apostles, Polycarp would have recoiled in horror at Florinus’ Gnostic account of their teaching. According to Irenaeus, Polycarp used to recount what he had heard the apostles say about the Lord, his miracles and his teaching, and that he used to do so “in complete harmony with Scripture.”<sup>19</sup> The twin references to “his miracles and his teaching” and to “harmony with the Scripture,” demonstrate both the concern to recount the events of Jesus’ life and to do so in ways that were in harmony with the apostolic testimony. Likewise, the Gospel of John recounts the events of Jesus’ life in order to invite people to accept the apostolic testimony of the Gospel and, like the Samaritans, to come to their own confession of faith. The Gospel directs the believer to know the risen one whose story is told in, but not cannot be reduced to, the narrative of the Gospel.

More specifically, the Gospel stakes its claim to credibility on one who was an eye-witness, and who had a particular personal memory of Jesus, namely, the beloved disciple (19:35;21:24-25). The various meanings of “seeing” in the Gospel point to the importance and character of “eye-witness” testimony, including that of the “disciple whom Jesus loved.” On the one hand, “seeing” refers to the simple act of physical sight; on the other, it refers to perception, or spiritual “insight.” Statements such as “we saw his glory” (1:14), “I have seen and borne witness that he is the Son of God,” or “we have come to know that [he is] the Savior of the world,” show that the insight that grasps who Jesus is cannot be gained entirely by what the eyes can see, but that neither can such insight dispense with what the eyes see. A statement such “we saw his glory” refers to both levels: they saw in Jesus and his deeds the manifestation of the glory of God. There was something concrete to be seen; but there is something that one cannot see simply by looking. Insight cannot be divorced from sight, although insight does not naturally or inevitably arise from sight (e.g., 9:49). Indeed, at times insight, which might also be termed the perception of a matter through the illumination of God’s Spirit, is radically counterintuitive. This is nowhere more evident than in Jesus’ death on the cross. What it means in its historical context and what it means in the testimony of the Beloved Disciple and others contrast quite considerably. On the one hand, sight sees the shameful death of a would-be king; but the insight granted by the Spirit perceives God’s glorification of the rightful King of Israel or, perhaps better, both together. Which of these shall we label “historical”?

The Gospel thus claims that a particular way of telling the story of Jesus’ life and

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<sup>18</sup>Bockmuehl, “God’s Life as a Jew”; see also the discussion of Francis Watson, “*Veritas Christi*,” both in the present volume.

<sup>19</sup>Cited in Eusebius, H.E., 5.20.6.

ministry has the authority of the eye-witnesses. John clearly recognizes that there are other ways to tell the story that he recounts; indeed, the Gospel is shot through with the divisions that arise over differing assessments of Jesus (1:10-13; 6:66; 7:26-42, 9:34). But not all assessments are in harmony with the eye-witnesses, and, therefore, not all testimony discloses the identity of Jesus. Still, even eye-witness testimony does not insure that one will grasp the identity of Jesus. The Gospel indicates that the remembrances of the disciples were prompted by the Spirit, and that Jesus' actions and deeds were to be interpreted through the witness of Scripture and only after his resurrection. The kind of historical account that bears witness to Jesus does not simply recount his past: but it cannot do without it.

*“Afterward you will understand:” Resurrection, Spirit, and Scripture*

It is a truism to note that the Gospel of John -- indeed, all the documents of the NT -- are written from a post-resurrection perspective, and that this perspective has shaped the way in which Jesus is understood. John writes the past from the perspective of the present; specifically, with the conviction that Jesus had been raised from the dead, and that he is now “ever with the Father” (1:18). As the one who now lives with the Father, Jesus was, is, and will be the one who gives life (1:1-4; 14:6; 15:1-9); indeed, his return to the Father signals that he is the living one, the agent of creation (1:1-3), who raises the dead to life “on the last day” (5:28-29; 6:54, 57; 11:25-26). The resurrection thus functions both theologically and hermeneutically. It is the lens through which Jesus' identity as the one through whom God gives life to the world comes into focus. A prime example here is John's presentation of the signs of Jesus as life-giving and the claims of Jesus to be resurrection and life. What he claims for himself in the Gospel of John is what the resurrection confirms him to be, namely, the one who acts with the power of God to give life to the world. Jesus' “I am” statements echo the repeated assertions of the Lord God in the book of Isaiah, where God declares his unique power particularly with respect to his sole creation of the world and his continued sovereignty over it. Jesus' identity as God's life-giving agent takes concrete form in his giving of food to the hungry, sight to the blind, and life to the dying and the dead, and ultimately will be confirmed in the resurrection at the last day.

Put differently, to understand the identity of Jesus, one needs to understand the identity of God, “the living Father,” (6:57), a reality which may be most clearly discerned in the sheer number of the Gospel's references to Jesus as Son and God as Father. The relationship of Father and Son is an interdependent relationship: Jesus is the Son because of his relationship to God the Father, and God is the Father because of his relationship to the Son. “Father” and “Son” are not first titles or designations which are only secondarily brought to bear on each other or which were ascribed to God and Jesus independently on other grounds. Rather, Father and Son predicate an identity that exists only in relationship to an “other.”

There are, to be sure, other well-known designations for Jesus in the Gospel, but each of these also indicates that Jesus is who and what he is in relationship to God. It is God's own Word that is embodied in Jesus (1:1, 14). In Jesus, God's glory dwells (1:14), even as the prophets spoke of a new “encampment” of God with his people (Exod 25:8-9 Joel 3:17; Zech

2:10). Jesus is the Son of man who is the locus of the revelation of God's glory, particularly in his death on the cross (1:51; 3:14-15; 12:23). He is the one who bears the ineffable name of God (17:6, 11, 12, 26). And as the Word, who "was in the beginning with God," and who exercises the divine powers of judgment and life, the Word is in fact called "God" (1:1; 20:28).

As already stated, John explicitly notes that the significance of some events which he has narrated could not be understood until later, until after Jesus was raised from the dead (e.g., 2:22; 13:7) and the Spirit of truth had been given (14:17; 15:26). Without the illumination of the Spirit, the events of Jesus' life remain opaque. Similarly, the identity of Jesus is disclosed through the witness of the Scriptures of Israel. These Scriptures speak of his coming (1:45; 5:37; 5:46); they contain the narratives of Israel's past, such as the wandering in the wilderness; and the promises of the ingathering of God's people and God's presence with his people (Ex 25:8; 29:45; Lev 26:11; 1 Kgs 6:13; Eze 27:26-28; Zech 2:11) that make sense of Jesus' mission. These Scriptures provide the texture and specific imagery used for Jesus (shepherd, king, judge, bread, light). The Gospel also claims that certain texts are actually about this Jesus (12:41 alluding to Isaiah 6:1-6; Psalms 69, cited in John 2:19, 15:25, and 19:28-29). In short, the Scriptures of Israel provide the categories and the framework for understanding the identity of Jesus as the messianic agent of God's decisive act of salvation for his people and for the world.

#### *Concluding Remarks: Learning the Identity of Jesus from the Gospel of John*

From the Gospel of John we learn Jesus cannot be reduced to a figure of the past of human history. Indeed, he is alive. Therefore, any attempt to understand Jesus which limits him to the past, and assumes that "historical" study can on its own produce adequate knowledge of him, leads inevitably to a stunted grasp of who he is. The framework of the Gospel suggests as much. John's Gospel spans the biblical story from creation (1:1) to the promised return of Christ (21:24), and Jesus' identity must be plotted along those coordinates. Through him, God created the world; through his words and deeds, God gives life to the world; and through him God will give life from the dead "on the last day." This cosmic and eschatological framework indicates that restricting Jesus' identity to what can be ascertained through historical study of the past of the man, Jesus of Nazareth, will be to strip away the very interpretative framework necessary to answer the question asked by inquirers in the Gospel, who are you? (John 8:25).

To be sure, the Gospel explicitly and implicitly assigns a central role to eye-witness testimony to Jesus, the embodiment of the Word of God. As the embodied Word of God, Jesus "lived among us" (1:14) assumed our humanity, our creatureliness. But the eye-witnesses speak not only of humanity in the abstract; they bear witness to a man who lived in a specific historical time and place, who held particular religious beliefs and followed particular practices and customs, and whose world was shaped by particular political and social institutions. Consequently, the failure to understand this world, the world of first century Judaism of Galilee and Judea, and the concrete ways in which Jesus is lodged firmly within it, will entail a failure to understand Jesus. While the cosmic and eschatological framework remains essential to understanding Jesus, it does not eradicate his human and historical identity as a first century Jew

whose mission was dedicated to his people Israel.

And yet even the testimony of the eye-witnesses does not guarantee “insight” into who Jesus is. Insight requires the testimony of the eye-witnesses, but it also requires the illumination of the Spirit and of Scripture. The Gospel presents Jesus as one whose identity must be grasped in theological terms, that is, in terms of his relationship to God. Jesus is who he is – Word of God, Messiah of God, Son of God – in relationship to God. To strip away those aspects of his identity that set him in relationship to God, and to conceive of his identity as somehow ascertainable apart from God, will be to strip away that which is indispensable to knowing who he is. The theological aspects of Jesus’ identity are not a layer that can be peeled back to reveal the “real” Jesus underneath. Indeed, to frame Jesus’ identity in theological terms and with reference to God is to disclose his identity.