

***Title:* How does John portray the Person of Jesus Christ in his Gospel? Why does he do so?**

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DECLARATION

I certify that this ASSIGNMENT is my own work. I have acknowledged all material and sources used in it, and that I have not plagiarised in part or whole the work of others without stating the references.

Introduction

To even the casual reader, it quickly becomes clear how John's testimony about the life and works of Jesus Christ differs significantly from the other three gospel accounts (i.e. the Synoptics)¹. Various theories have been put forward as to why this is so, but perhaps a simple explanation is that John wrote his gospel sometime around 70-90 A.D.² – long after the other three accounts had already been widely circulated and even considered to be holy scripture (e.g. Luke 10:7 being cited in 1 Timothy 5:18³). Why rehash the same items that most of the church already knew? John could instead share other aspects and recollections of Jesus' life and ministry, including lesser-known events that he was privy to as one of Jesus' innermost circle of apostles.

While the Synoptics are replete with declarations of the divinity of Jesus – some more subtle, some more overt⁴ – it is commonly accepted that John's gospel contains the clearest statements that Jesus is no less than YHWH, the one true creator God of the universe. One need look no further than that famous first sentence of John 1:1 – *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. (ESV)*

John's purpose in writing his testimony is stated in the closing of the gospel account: "... we have the author's own words to guide us. John is writing so that readers might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and by believing have life in his name (20:31)."⁵ John's approach throughout his gospel can be summarized by the bookends or *inclusio* found in the first (John 1:1) and last (John 20:31) sentences of the book: "... if the term Logos here stands for the Holy Name of God, the Memra, there is an all-embracing *inclusio* around the entire gospel, whose purpose is that 'believing, you may have life *in his name*' (20.31)."⁶

To say that Jesus Christ is 'the Name' of God is no less than equating Him to the very person of YHWH. As scholar of Hebrew and the Old Testament Michael Heiser states: "In several [passages] the Name is personified—the Name is *a person* ... The Name is clearly cast as an entity, as Yahweh himself".⁷ Hence this framing informs the entire thrust of John's portrayal of Jesus Christ – Jesus *is* YHWH, the one true God in whose divine Name the Old Testament believers trusted for salvation.

In this essay, I shall demonstrate the multifarious ways in which John hammers home the point of Jesus' identification as YHWH Himself. For the sake of orderliness and clarity, these different approaches toward declaring the divinity of Jesus are arranged topically. I then conclude with the reason why John goes to the lengths he does in portraying Jesus as the God of Israel.

The Prologue – The Word who is YHWH

It is the consensus of any serious scholar of Greek that John 1:1 plainly states that 'The Word was God'⁸. The usage of the term Logos to refer to the pre-incarnate Jesus is sometimes tied back to

¹ Walter A. Elwell and Robert W. Yarbrough, *Encountering the New Testament: A Historical and Theological Survey* (MI/USA: Baker Publishing Group, 2013), 94.

² Elwell and Yarbrough, *Encountering the New Testament*, 96.

³ J. Warner Wallace, *Cold-Case Christianity: A Homicide Detective Investigates the Claims of the Gospels* (CO/USA: David C Cook Publishing Company, 2013), 163.

⁴ Anthony Rogers, "THE 'HEAVENLY' & 'EARTHLY' YAHWEH: A PROTO-TRINITARIAN INTERPRETATION OF GENESIS 19:24 Part II," in *Our God is Triune: Essays in Biblical Theology*, edited by Michael R Burgos Jr (N.p.: Church Militant Publications, 2018), 77-78.

⁵ Elwell and Yarbrough, *Encountering the New Testament*, 97.

⁶ John F. McHugh, *John 1-4: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary (International Critical Commentary) 1st Edition* (NY/USA: Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2009), 10.

⁷ Michael S. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible* (Bellingham/USA: Lexham Press, 2015), 144-145.

⁸ F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John: Introduction, Exposition, and Notes* (Grand Rapids/USA: William B Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1994), 31.

Philo's Platonically inspired writings⁹. However, an alternate view is that John's usage of *logos* (Greek for 'word') actually stems from the Targumic concept *memra* (Aramaic for 'word'). As Jewish scholar Daniel Boyarin states:

The conclusive evidence for the connection of the Targumic *Memra* and the *Logos* of John appears in the Palestinian Targumic poetic homily on the "Four Nights," ... when the Lord was revealed above the world to create it. The world was unformed and void and darkness was spread over the surface of the deep; *and through his Memra there was light and illumination* [italics added], and he called it the first night. This text matches the first verses of John's Prologue, with its association of *Logos*, the Word, and light."¹⁰

Indeed, Targum Neofiti's rendering of the creation account is replete with interpolations of the personified Wisdom and Word (*Memra*) of God. These find parallels in John's prologue:

In the beginning and in great wisdom, God created and finished the heavens and the earth. ... God saw that the light was good, and he separated (by word) between light and dark.
– Genesis 1:1,4 (Targum Neofiti)¹¹

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. – John 1:1-5 (ESV)

By mentioning the key phrase 'in the beginning' and light/dark, John brings to mind the creative act of YHWH in Genesis 1:1. By also echoing the language of the Targum's expanded creation account, John intended to convey to his readers that the Word – who would take on flesh as the man Jesus Christ – is the same Wisdom and *Memra* expounded upon in the Targums. Furthermore, it was commonplace among Second Temple Jews to hold that the *Memra* was YHWH Himself: "... the Angel/Messenger of the Biblical text, whether by that name or one of its many cognomens in Jewish thought (*Memra*, *Logos*, etc.), constituted a second divine person in the Godhead."¹²

Hence, in the very opening of his gospel account, John begins with the claim that Jesus was from eternity past together with, *and is*, the same creator God of Genesis 1 – namely, YHWH.

I AM – The God of Isaiah

It is commonly understood that Jesus' usage of the phrase 'I Am' (Greek: 'ego eimi') is meant to evoke the Horeb theophany, whereby YHWH declared to Moses in Exodus 3:14 that "*I AM WHO I AM.*" (ESV)¹³

⁹ Stephen L. Harris, *Understanding The Bible* (CA/USA: Mayfield Publishing Co., 1980), 177.

¹⁰ Daniel Boyarin, "Logos, a Jewish Word: John's Prologue as Midrash," in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, edited by Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler (NY/USA: Oxford University Press, 2011), 546–549.

¹¹ The Sefaria Library, "Targum Neofiti" (accessed 07-Jun-2021):

https://www.sefaria.org/Targum_Neofiti.1.1?vhe=The_Vatican_Manuscript_of_the_Targum_Neofiti&lang=bi

¹² Rogers, "THE "HEAVENLY" & "EARTHLY" YAHWEH: A PROTO-TRINITARIAN INTERPRETATION OF GENESIS 19:24 Part I," in *Our God is Triune*, 47-48.

¹³ Karl Scheffrahn and Henry Kreyssler, "Jesus of Nazareth: Who Did He Claim To Be?" Dallas: Pat Booth (1968): 11, quoted in Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence That Demands A Verdict* (TN/USA: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), 151.

Closer parallels can be drawn from several ‘I Am’ statements in John to occurrences of the phrase in Isaiah (all renderings are from NKJV, bold emphasis mine):

Therefore I said to you that you will die in your sins ; for if you do not believe that I am He, you will die in your sins . – John 8:24	I, even I, am He who blots out your transgressions for My own sake; And I will not remember your sins . – Isaiah 43:25
Jesus said to them, “Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM. ” – John 8:58	Who has performed and done it, Calling the generations from the beginning ? ‘I, the LORD, am the first ; And with the last I am He.’ – Isaiah 41:4
Now I tell you before it comes , that when it does come to pass, you may believe that I am He. – John 13:19	“ You are My witnesses ,” says the LORD, “And My servant whom I have chosen, That you may know and believe Me , And understand that I am He. - Isaiah 43:10
Jesus said to them , “I am He.” And Judas, who betrayed Him, also stood with them. Now when He said to them , “I am He,” they drew back and fell to the ground. – John 18:5-6	Therefore My people shall know My name; Therefore they shall know in that day That I am He who speaks : ‘Behold, it is I.’ – Isaiah 52:6

As John makes frequent reference to passages from Isaiah, it is not mere happenstance that these ‘I Am’ statements of Jesus echo those found in Isaiah.

They Saw YHWH – The New Testament clarifying the Old

The New Testament authors frequently include citations or allusions to Old Testament passages. Apart from various prophecies of the coming Messiah, on many occasions a text that originally referred to YHWH in the Old Testament is applied to Jesus in the New Testament. In this manner, the New Testament authors unabashedly proclaim that Jesus is the one and same divine God that the Jews have always known.

In John 1:18, the sweeping claim is made: *No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.* (ESV) If this statement is taken literally (as it should be, when considered alongside similar statements in Col 1:15, 1 Tim 1:17 & 6:15-16 and Heb 11:27), then a case can be made that every theophanic appearance of YHWH in the Old Testament – especially passages where people are directly stated to have seen God (e.g. Gen 16:13 & 18:1, Exo 24:10) – was a manifestation of the pre-incarnate Jesus.

Indeed, it resolves the puzzle that nobody can see God and live (Exo 33:20), and yet many people did indeed see God and live – despite knowing the inherent danger (e.g. Gen 32:30 and Judg 6:22-23 & 13:22-23). The Father cannot and has never been seen, but seeing Jesus is in a way seeing the Father (John 14:9):

It will be necessary to that this Divine Person was not God the Father. The following argument has been adopted in proof of this: “No man hath seen God at any time. Ye have neither heard his voice at any time, nor seen his shape. Not that any man has seen the Father. It is however said in the Old Testament, that God frequently appeared under the Patriachal and Levitical dispensations; and therefore we must conclude that the God who appeared was God the Son.”¹⁴

¹⁴ Richard Watson, *Theological Institutes, Or, A View of the Evidences, Doctrines, Morals, and Institutions of Christianity, Volume 1, Third Edition* (London/UK: John Mason, 1829), 551-552.

Such a conclusion was common among the early church fathers such as Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Theophilus of Antioch, the Synod of Antioch, Cyprian, Hilary of Poitiers and Basil of Caesarea.¹⁵

In John 1:23, the beloved apostle makes reference to another John – the Baptist, who declared: *“I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ as the prophet Isaiah said.”* (ESV) Indeed, this is a reference to Isaiah 40:3, where it is YHWH and Elohim for whom the way is to be made. Shortly afterwards in John’s gospel, the Baptist makes it clear that it is Jesus whose way he is preparing. A comparison of the Baptist’s introduction in Mark 1:2-3 informs that a parallel Old Testament prophecy is to be found in Malachi 3:1, which expands on the details by warning: *And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple.* (ESV) Indeed, within the span of a few verses after the Baptist’s proclamation, John’s account describes Jesus visiting the temple in John 2:13-25.

In John 8, Jesus makes one of His ‘I Am’ pronouncements (v58 as covered earlier), which here is prefaced with the statement *“before Abraham was”*. This claim is widely regarded as Jesus plainly stating both His timeless existence and His self-identification as YHWH – as evident by the reaction of the listeners who immediately attempt to stone Him for the perceived blasphemy.

However, there is another bold statement in this chapter that is often overlooked. In John 8:40, Jesus contrasts the antagonism of the Jews towards Him against Abraham’s welcoming attitude: *... but now you seek to kill me ... This is not what Abraham did.* (ESV) As Anthony Rogers points out: *“This can refer to no other occasion than Genesis 18 when the Angel of the Lord appeared to Abraham to announce the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (18:16-33) and to announce the coming birth of a son (18:9-15). On that occasion, rather than try to kill him, Abraham received the Lord in all hospitality (18:1-8)”*.¹⁶ Michael Heiser concurs that Jesus identifies Himself as the same YHWH who visited Abraham, with respect to John 8:58: *“Only Genesis 12 and 15 provide the coherent backdrop to this claim.”*¹⁷

In John 12:41 the author states that: *Isaiah said these things because he saw his glory and spoke of him.* (ESV) John is citing something which in Isaiah 6:1 was originally about the Adonai of Israel. The citation becomes even clearer in the Septuagint’s rendering of Isaiah 6:1, which has ‘glory’ instead of the Masoretic Text’s ‘the train of his robe’: *... I saw the Lord sitting on a high and exalted throne, and the house was full of his glory.*¹⁸ Even the Jehovah’s Witnesses – who go to great lengths in denying that Jesus is divine – make this connection (perhaps inadvertently?). As critical consultant for the NASB translation, James White points out: *“Even the New World Translation Reference Bible cross-references Isaiah 6:1 to John 12:41!”*¹⁹

The HANDS that Belong only to God

The book *Putting Jesus in His Place: The Case for the Deity of Christ* demonstrates that Jesus is accorded the Honour, Attributes, Names, Deeds and Seat ascribed only to YHWH in the Old Testament. Or more memorably: *“We summarize these five categories using an acronym based on the word HANDS.”*²⁰ Along these lines, I shall provide a few examples from the gospel of John.

¹⁵ Richard Watson, *Theological Institutes, Volume 1* (1829), 563-564.

¹⁶ Rogers, “THE “HEAVENLY” & “EARTHLY” YAHWEH: A PROTO-TRINITARIAN INTERPRETATION OF GENESIS 19:24 Part II,” in *Our God is Triune*, 93.

¹⁷ Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, 130.

¹⁸ Sir Lancelot Charles Lee Brenton, “Brenton's Septuagint Translation”, *Bible Hub* (accessed 07-Jun-2021): <https://biblehub.com/sep/isaiah/6.htm>

¹⁹ James White, “IS JESUS YAHWEH?”, *Alpha & Omega Ministries* (accessed 07-Jun-2021): <https://www.aomin.org/aoblog/jehovahs-witnesses/is-jesus-yahweh/>

²⁰ Robert Bowman and Ed Komoszewski, *Putting Jesus in His Place: The Case for the Deity of Christ* (MI, USA: Kregel Publications, 2007), 22.

In John 9:38, a blind man whom Jesus healed worships Him; whereas Exodus 34:14 reserves this *Honour* for YHWH alone (which Jesus repeats in Matthew 4:10). In John 17:5, Jesus tells (using the Greek imperative!) the Father to glorify Him with the eternal glory they shared; whereas in Isaiah 42:8, YHWH states that He will not give the *Honour* of His glory to anyone else.

John 1:1-3 & 17:5 state that Jesus was eternally pre-existent; multiple passages such as Psalm 90:2 and Isaiah 48:12 proclaim this *Attribute* of YHWH. John 16:30 & 21:17 have the disciples declaring that Jesus knows all things; various passages such as Psalm 139:1-6 and Isaiah 46:9-10 state that YHWH possesses this *Attribute* of omniscience.

Thomas bluntly calls Jesus “My God” in John 20:28; the First Commandment in Exodus 20:2-3 and its reiteration in the Shema of Deuteronomy 6:4 are very explicit in reserving this *Name* for YHWH alone. In John 10:1-18 Jesus also portrays Himself as the good shepherd who seeks out the sheep to bring them back; while in Ezekiel 34 YHWH *Names* Himself as Israel’s shepherd who will seek out His sheep and bring them back – but at the same time, *I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David (ESV)*, which is an intriguing hint of God’s multipersonality and the divinity of Messiah.

In John 1:3, Jesus as the Word is said to be the one through whom all things were created; while Isaiah 44:24 states that YHWH alone performed this *Deed*. Jesus proclaims Himself the giver and source of life in John 1:4, chapter 3, 4:14, chapter 5, chapter 6, 10:10, 11:25, 14:6, 17:2-3 and 20:31; this is another *Deed* that is the purview of YHWH in multiple passages such as Genesis 2:7, Deuteronomy 32:39, 1 Samuel 2:9, Job 33:4, Psalm 104:29-30 and Nehemiah 9:6.

In John 5:22-30 Jesus states that the Father has given all authority to the Son to execute all judgment over all people; various passages such as Genesis 18:25, 1 Samuel 2:10 and Psalm 50:4-6, 75, 82:8 & 96:9-13 declare that God Himself holds *Seat* as judge over the entire earth. As previously mentioned, John 12:41 applies Isaiah 6:1 to Jesus; this passage in the Old Testament speaks of Adonai *Seated* on the throne.

Conclusion

In the limited space afforded, I have demonstrated that John provides multiple outright statements and subtler hints that Jesus is God – the one same YHWH whom the Jews pledged sole and absolute allegiance to. The question then, is why? What would be gained from making the case that Jesus is none other than YHWH?

The answer lies in the absolute loyalty that a Second Temple Jew was expected to pledge to YHWH. After the nationally traumatic exile to Babylon – which was precipitated by idolatry and religious infidelity – the post-exilic Jews had a renewed emphasis on “fierce monotheism”²¹ and Torah observance in order to “win back God’s favour by adherence to the rules of his covenant”.²²

If Jesus were a mere human, or a created angel, or some other divinity besides YHWH – then it would frankly beggar belief that any Torah-observant Jew would risk the wrath of God (and the religious leaders) by pledging loyalty and worship to *the carpenter’s son (Matt 13:55, ESV)*. As Michael Heiser points out: “... it’s amazing how first-century Jews could embrace Jesus as Yahweh and not feel as if they were betraying the God of Israel. In fact, these same Jews were willing to die instead of worshipping the gods of the Greeks and the Romans.”²³ Alister McGrath similarly notes: “Within the Jewish context in which the first Christians operated, it was God and God alone who was to be worshipped. Paul warned the Christians at Rome that there was a constant danger that humans would worship creatures, when they ought to be worshipping their creator (Romans 1:23). Yet the

²¹ Elwell and Yarbrough, *Encountering the New Testament*, 36.

²² David Novak, “Judaism”, *Encyclopedia Britannica* (accessed 08-Jun-2021): <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Judaism/The-Babylonian-Exile#ref35184>

²³ Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, 134.

early Christian church worshipped Christ as God—a practise which is clearly reflected even in the New Testament.”²⁴

But if Jesus were indeed the very God of Israel, then not only is it permissible – it is *expected* that devout Jews loyal to YHWH would embrace the teachings of Jesus. It was not unthinkable or a violation of the First Commandment to worship *the man Christ Jesus* (1 Tim 2:5, *ESV*) – because this man was also YHWH incarnate. “Divine plurality is not a denial of monotheism. There’s a reason why a Jew who loved God in the first century could be willing to be put to death rather than say ‘Caesar is god’ and then in the next breath say ‘I’m going to pray to Jesus’ and not feel at all like he violated monotheism.”²⁵

The concept that the limitless, immaterial, incomprehensible Creator of the universe could take the limited form of a human was not alien to the Jewish religion. Jewish scholar Benjamin Sommer outright states that Judaism allowed the possibility of an embodied God up until the medieval Jewish theologian Maimonides – who spent about 75 chapters of his tome trying to explain away all evidence of such from within Judaism²⁶. As a major influence on modern Judaism, Maimonides himself was strongly influenced by the surrounding (strictly unitarian) Islamic thinkers²⁷.

In fact, several modern Jewish scholars conclude that Ancient and Second Temple Judaism held the concept of a multipersonal, embodied God – long before the establishment of Christianity, which is today synonymous with these doctrines. Space does not permit full citations, but such authors and their works include: Alan F Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven: Early Rabbinic Reports About Christianity and Gnosticism*; Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity*; Daniel Abrams, *The Boundaries of Divine Ontology: The Inclusion and Exclusion of Metatron in the Godhead*, *Harvard Theological Review* (Volume 87, Issue 3, 1994); Elliot R. Wolfson, *Through a Speculum That Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism*; Moshe Idel, *Ben: Sonship and Jewish Mysticism*; Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis, JPS Torah Commentary*; and the aforementioned Benjamin D. Sommer, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel*.²⁸

It has been said that it is not the fact that Christians preached a Messiah who is the embodied, multipersonal YHWH which astounded the Jews – since many Second Temple Jews did, in fact, accept such a view of God. It was that the candidate they suggested was not somebody impressive like Enoch or Melchizedek or Michael or Yahoel²⁹, but instead an unpedigreed rabbi from Galilee – and one who was crucified, no less! Benjamin Sommer asserts that: “The only significant theological difference between Judaism and Christianity lies not in the trinity or in the incarnation but in Christianity’s revival of the notion of a dying and rising God, a category ancient Israel clearly rejects.”³⁰ Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:23 was keenly aware of this: ... *but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.* (*ESV*)

Therefore, it was of paramount importance that John drive home the point: Jesus Christ is not merely a man, a prophet, an angel or even a non-divine Messiah – He is YHWH Elohim in the flesh.

²⁴ Alister McGrath, “Christian Theology: An Introduction,” Oxford: Blackwell (1994): 280, quoted in Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence That Demands A Verdict* (TN/USA: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), 144-145.

²⁵ Michael S. Heiser, 3:30:49 to 3:31:13 of “The Jewish Trinity - Dr. Michael Heiser - A Walk Through The Old Testament Concerning The Trinity”, *A Victorious Church* (accessed 07-Jun-2021): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IS22MPVFngs>

²⁶ Benjamin D. Sommer, 4:38 to 9:15 of “The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel”, *Sentinel Apologetics* (accessed 07-Jun-2021): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NtSm-InTL0A>

²⁷ Sommer, 1:35:38 to 1:36:56 of “The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel” (accessed 07-Jun-2021): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NtSm-InTL0A>

²⁸ Scott Thong Yu Yuen, “Modern Jewish Scholars on the Embodied, Multipersonal Old Testament God,” *THE SCOTTTCAST* (accessed 07-Jun-2021): <https://scottthong.wordpress.com/2020/05/29/modern-jewish-scholars-on-the-embodied-multipersonal-old-testament-god/>

²⁹ Michael S. Heiser, “The Divine Council in Late Canonical and Non-Canonical Second Temple Jewish Literature” (Ph.D Thesis, The University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA, 2004).

³⁰ Benjamin D. Sommer, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel* (Cambridge/UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 136.

If the people of God were loyal to YHWH's spoken word in times past, then they should be loyal to YHWH's incarnate Word from now on. "The heart of salvation in biblical theology—across both testaments—is *believing loyalty* to Yahweh."³¹ This believing loyalty is not merely expected of the Jews – in fact, it is demanded of the entire world, as Paul states in Acts 17:30-31.

John's portrayal of Jesus in his gospel account is to convince the reader that the man Jesus is also the God YHWH – and that being so convinced, we shall believe and have life in His name (one of the *Attributes* of YHWH as covered earlier). We shall declare of Jesus as Thomas does in John 20:28, "*My Lord and my God!*" (*ESV*)

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³¹ Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, 164.

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