

Jesus the Creator in the Gospel of John

Lita Cosner

Each of the Gospels presents us with a unique portrait of Jesus, so that when we look at them together, we get a fuller sense of who Jesus is than any individual one can give by itself. While all the Gospels teach the divinity of Christ, John gives us the clearest picture of what that meant for Jesus' life and ministry. He shows us that Jesus was the Creator of the universe, and that as Saviour He inaugurated the new creation which takes place in the hearts of believers, and which will culminate in the New Heavens and earth.

Jesus, the Word

The very beginning of John's Gospel is intended to evoke Genesis in the minds of his audience. The first words, ἐν ἀρχῇ (*en archē*), are identical to those in the Greek translation of Genesis (Genesis 1:1 LXX). He goes back further than Jesus' baptism, further than the virginal conception, to eternity past to explain who Jesus is and why He came. But before he introduces Him as Jesus, John tells us about the λόγος (*logos*)—the Word.

The first notable thing about the Word is that He existed in the beginning—before creation: “In the beginning was the Word.” So John immediately attributes a divine attribute to Jesus—He is uncreated. But John immediately makes impossible the heresy of modalism (which denies the distinctness of the Persons of the Godhead) when he asserts, “and the Word was with God”. The word ‘with’ (πρός, *pros*) indicates a very close relationship between the Word and God—it might be paraphrased, “The Word was face-to-face with God”. Jesus constantly makes claims about the relationship between Himself and the Father: e.g. 5:19–24; 6:37–40; 10:30; and 14:28–31. Perhaps the most intimate picture of this relationship is revealed in Jesus' High Priestly Prayer in John 17.

The idea of God having a companion would not be totally alien to John's audience. By the first century, Aramaic paraphrases of Scripture called *Targums* spoke about the *memra* of God. Since Jews by that time had stopped saying God's covenant name, Yahweh, they used a number of other terms when the paraphrase called for it, and one of them was *memra*, the Aramaic word for ‘word’. But the *memra* could also be an entity distinct from God who acted as His agent or messenger. For instance, in Psalm 33:6, “By the word of the LORD the heavens were made” and “the word of Yahweh” was actually translated as the *memra*; in other words, the *memra* became an agent of creation. However, “it does not denote a being in any way distinct from God. It is just a reverent way of referring to God himself.”¹

Wisdom in Proverbs was also said to be with God at creation and almost a co-creator (Proverbs 8). However,

Wisdom is there presented clearly as the “first of his acts of old” (8:22), so she is clearly not a divine Person, as John presents Jesus. And while there was a great deal of Wisdom literature in John's day, John never explicitly refers to Jesus as Wisdom.

But it seems that the Scriptures themselves were John's major source, especially considering the repeated claim in his Gospel that the Scriptures testify to Christ. Carson states: “Whether this heritage was mediated to John by the Greek version of the Old Testament that many Christians used, or even by an Aramaic paraphrase (called a ‘Targum’), the ultimate foundation for this choice of language cannot be in serious doubt.”² In the Old Testament, there is some almost-personification of the Word of God with regard to creation (for instance in Psalm 33:6 cited above). And God's revelation always happens through words. For instance: “Then the Lord spoke to you out of the midst of the fire. You heard the sound of words, but saw no form; there was only a voice” (Deuteronomy 4:12). And John presents Jesus as the ultimate revelation of the Father: “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 15:24), so “the Word” is an ideal image for the One who is both co-Creator and the ultimate revelation of the Person and Nature of God.

If there is any remaining ambiguity about John's claims regarding the Word, he removes it with his next statement: καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος (*kai theos ēn ho logos*, and the Word was God). In wonderfully compact language, this communicates both that the Logos shares the being of God, while differentiating Him from the Father. Wallace argues for a qualitative understanding of *theos*, i.e. “the Word was divine”,³ by which he means *fully* divine, having the nature of God. While a common response to this is that there is a perfectly good Greek word for ‘divine’ (θεῖος *theios*) in Koine Greek,⁴ it would hardly be the only ‘synonym’ that exists in the language. However, due to the downgrading of the word ‘divine’ in the English language, the translation “The Word was God” is probably still the best way to convey John's true meaning.

The Word as the agent of creation

Not only does the Word exist alongside God the Father and share fully in the Divine Being, He works alongside the Father to accomplish what only God can do: “All things were made through him” (John 1:3). The New Testament consistently uses careful language to indicate that the Father is the Creator, and He created *through* the Son—i.e. the Son is the *agent* of creation. “This way of putting it safeguards the truth that the Father is the source of all that is.”⁵ And John clarifies that Jesus acted in this way throughout the entire creation process: “and without him was not any thing made that was made.” This also teaches that Jesus is *not* a created being, because He could not be an agent in His own creation!

Furthermore, ἐν αὐτῷ ζωὴ ἦν (*en autō zōē ēn*, in him was life). This claim is identical to what Jesus later claims in John 5:26: “For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself.” Mankind became a living being only after God placed the breath of life in him, but the Word is self-existent, and His life is said to be what enlightens men: “and that light was the life of men”.

The Light that came into the world

John’s next statement, “The light shines in the darkness” (1:5), recalls Genesis 1:3; light was the first of God’s creations, whereas darkness is not a ‘thing’ in and of itself, but the *absence* of light. There are two possible ways to translate the next clause; either “and the darkness has not overcome it”, as in the ESV, or “the darkness did not comprehend it”, as the NKJV translates it. The latter translation fits the context of John being the witness to the light. Also, John elsewhere uses the word νικάω (*nikaō*) to speak about overcoming (John 16:33; 1 John 2:13, 14; 4:4; 5:4, 5).

John turns from the Word, or the Light, to talk about the witness to the Light, John the Baptist. If we think about it, it may seem odd that the Light needs a witness. The only person who needs a witness to light is someone who is blind, and that is precisely John’s point. The Light came into the world, but the people to whom He came were blind. So they needed a witness, “that all might believe through him” (1:7).

But most people did not believe: “The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him” (1:11). We see examples of this rejection and non-recognition throughout John’s Gospel, culminating in the crucifixion. However, John makes it clear that this rejection was not universal: “But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God” (1:12).

The Word who reveals the Father

John returns to the *logos* imagery: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father” (1:14). The Word who was the agent for the creation of all things entered into His own creation. And just as He brought the universe into being in v. 3, He brought grace and truth into being in v. 17. The same Greek word, γίνομαι (*ginomai*), meaning to ‘become’ or ‘come into being’, is used in both v. 3 and 17, as well as 14, “became flesh”.

The word “only” is the Greek μονογενής (*monogenēs*). The KJV translates this word “only begotten”, following the Latin *unigenitus*, with the presumed derivation from μόνος (*monos*), meaning ‘alone’ or ‘only’; and γεννάω (*gennaō*), ‘to beget’. However, this does not fit the NT usage, e.g. Hebrews 11:17 refers to Isaac as Abraham’s ‘only begotten (*monogenēs*) son’, yet we know that Abraham begat other sons (Ishmael, and by Keturah). Rather, *monogenēs* is derived from γένος (*genos*), which means ‘kind’ (compare: ‘according to kind’ in Genesis 1 (LXX) is κατὰ γένος (*kata genos*)). Thus *monogenēs* means ‘only one of a kind’ or ‘unique’. Thus Isaac was the *unique* son of Abraham through whom the Abrahamic Covenant came. And Jesus is the *unique* son of God.

The greatest claim about Jesus comes in v. 18: “No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known”. John called Jesus *theos* in v. 1, and *monogenes* in v. 14; now He puts them together. The phrase “the unique God who is at the Father’s side” also expresses the same idea of verse 1: Jesus is God, but distinct from the Father and in a close relationship with Him. Even though no one has ever seen the Father, Jesus reveals Him. This idea is brought out even more strongly in John 14:8–9.

Many places in the Old Testament feature people who see a vision of God, or the angel of the Lord. So how can John say that “no one has ever seen God?” He gives us a hint in 12:41: “Isaiah said these things because he saw his glory and spoke of him”. But the Being Isaiah saw was called *Adonai* (Isaiah 6:1) and *Yahweh* (6:3)—and John equates Him with Jesus. So we can draw the conclusion that John views theophanies from the Old Testament as visions of the pre-incarnate Son of God.

One week in the life of Jesus

Just as Genesis starts with a foundational week—the six days of creation followed by God’s seventh-day rest—John also gives us a foundational week in the life of Jesus, culminating in the first of seven ‘sign miracles’. This sort of detailed chronological detail is uncommon in John, so he probably did this on purpose.

On the first day, John the Baptist gives his testimony: he emphatically declares that he is not the Messiah, but instead the prophet preparing the way for the Messiah (1:19–28). On the second day, John identifies Jesus as the Messiah. On the third day, John testifies about Jesus to two of his disciples, who then leave John and follow Jesus (1:37). They spent the rest of the day with him (1:39), and the next day, Andrew introduced Peter to Jesus (1:40–42). On the fifth day, Jesus went to Galilee and called Philip and Nathanael. “On the third day” (2:1), inclusively counting, places the wedding in Cana and Jesus’ first sign on the seventh day.⁶

Carson states:

“This analysis is not grasping at straws. Only here does John provide a careful record of a sequence of days. ... The week of days climaxing in the miracle at Cana may provide an echo of creation-week (Gn. 1). That means the miracle itself takes place on the seventh day, the Sabbath. Jesus’ performance of redemptive work on the Sabbath is later in this Gospel (5:16ff.; 7:21–24, 9:16) given the most suggestive theological treatment in the New Testament, apart from Hebrews 4.”⁷

Turning water into wine is called Jesus first ‘sign’ (σημεῖον, *sēmeion*; 2:11). John prefers this word to other possible synonyms, because Jesus’ miracles are never arbitrary or purposeless, but tell us something important about who Jesus is and the kingdom He is inaugurating. In John’s Gospel, a sign miracle is always followed by either a response of belief or unbelief on the part of the audience—in this case, “his disciples believed in him” (2:11). The responses of belief and unbelief to Jesus’ teachings and actions are significant throughout the Gospel, but especially so in response to the sign miracles.

Jesus as the agent of a new creation

In John 3, Jesus tells Nicodemus about the new birth—a creative miracle performed by the Holy Spirit in those who believe in Jesus. Just as Jesus was the agent of the original creation, He is the agent for the new creation, beginning with the spiritual regeneration of those who believe in Him.

Nicodemus came to Jesus at the very beginning of His public ministry. He had just cleansed the Temple; an action that Nicodemus, as a Pharisee, would not have been angered by, and might even have approved (at that time the Temple was controlled by the ‘liberal’ Sadducees). Jesus would spend much of the rest of His ministry railing against the hypocrisy and legalism of the Pharisees, but theologically He had much in common with them, including belief in angels and spirits and a future resurrection, which the Sadducees denied (Acts 23:8). Nicodemus’s comments in this section indicate that they had not yet made up their minds about



Figure 1. John manuscript P52, recto and verso. This second-century fragment disproved theories that John was written much later than the Apostle John’s lifetime.

Jesus—they certainly had not started plotting against Him at this point.

It is common to suggest that Nicodemus came to Jesus at night because of cowardice, but this is not necessarily the case. Morris suggests that Nicodemus might simply have been exercising prudence, or simply practicality, by coming at night:

“Nicodemus was a prominent man; since he was ‘Israel’s teacher’ (v. 10), it would never do to commit himself to the unofficial Teacher from Galilee, not at any rate until and unless he was absolutely sure of his ground. ... The Pharisee may have chosen this time in order to be sure of an uninterrupted and leisurely interview. During the day Jesus would be busy and there would be crowds (crowds of common people!). Not so at night. Then there could be a long, private discussion.”⁸

Nicodemus reports the consensus of at least some of the ruling class: Jesus is a teacher who has come from God because of the miracles Jesus has done (John 2:23). But Jesus challenges their idea that they have the ability to even evaluate Him; the expression, “Truly, truly, I say to you”, “serves to draw a contrast between Nicodemus’s opening statement and Jesus’ response. ... Not human observation, reasoning, and ‘believing’ are required, but rather, a spiritual rebirth.”⁹

This is not the answer Nicodemus would have expected to hear, which may explain his overly literalistic response. Jews believed that they all would enter the kingdom of God, except for those who apostatized or committed some great sin. Since their physical descent from Israel was thought to be sufficient (an idea Jesus specifically refuted), he did not believe that the utter transformation of an individual was a prerequisite to participation in God’s kingdom.

Jesus clearly believed that someone who set himself up as a teacher of Israel (“the teacher of Israel” may refer in some way to Nicodemus’s reputation as a great teacher in Israel) should be able to understand what He is saying. He insists that the new birth is real, although invisible as the wind, and that it is an absolute necessity for anyone who wants to enter the Kingdom of God.

Furthermore, Jesus claims first-hand knowledge of the truth about which He speaks. He echoes the first-person plural Nicodemus used in his introductory comments: “Truly, truly I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony” (3:11). In Jesus’ analysis, Nicodemus’s problem is not misunderstanding, but simple unbelief. And this unbelief about something that should have been simple for a ‘teacher of Israel’ to understand is a barrier to understanding the deeper truths that Jesus reveals to believers: “If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?” (3:12). If Nicodemus doubts God’s work that takes place on earth, how can he believe Jesus’ testimony about things which occur in Heaven and thus are not observable? Carson puts forward this interpretation: “The ‘heavenly things’ are then the splendours of the consummated kingdom, and what it means to live under such glorious, ineffable rule.”¹⁰

Jesus is able to speak about these heavenly realities because He has descended from Heaven (3:13). And just as Moses lifted up the bronze serpent to give life to those who had been bitten by the serpents in the wilderness (Numbers 21:4–9), Jesus would be lifted up so that all who look to Him in faith will receive the new spiritual birth. The “lifting up” (ὑψώω *hypsōō*) would eventually be back to heaven whence He came, but it’s clear from John 12:32–34 that this *hypsōō* referred to being raised on the Cross.¹¹

If Nicodemus had a response to all this, John does not record it. Rather, Nicodemus disappears from the narrative, to appear later in the Gospel (7:50; 19:39). John instead introduces his own commentary in 3:16–21. Most translations see these as the continued words of Jesus, but these verses have a clear post-Resurrection viewpoint, and John is careful not to impose that sort of anachronism in the events of Jesus’ ministry.

Jesus gives life by His word

In John 4:46–54, Jesus heals an official’s son who was at the point of death, simply by speaking. Jesus’ ability to proclaim the boy to be healed without touching or even seeing the recipient of the healing was unique, and shows that Jesus, the Word, has the ability to give life to whomever He wants.

The official did not come with any notable faith. Rather, he seems to have come out of desperation, having heard that Jesus was a great worker of miracles. Jesus rebukes the Galileans in general as lacking faith, but seeking ‘signs and wonders’ (4:48). The man simply responds, “Sir, come down before my child dies” (4:49). Jesus replies, “Go; your son will live” (4:49). The father believed, indicating that he did not share the general Galilean interest only in signs and wonders. John records that the son actually did become well at the very moment Jesus said that he would live, resulting in the belief of the man’s entire household. So we see that Jesus performed a greater miracle than the man requested; he wanted physical life for his son, while Jesus gave spiritual life for his whole household.

This miracle, as well as several others in John’s Gospel, are designated as ‘signs’. This shows that they were not spectacles in and of themselves, but they served to show his divine nature and authority, and thus challenged the recipients of the signs to respond.

Jesus’ divine power and authority

After recounting a miracle that resulted in belief, John turns to a miracle that did not. Apparently, there was a superstition regarding the healing powers of the pool at Bethesda (figure 2), and an invalid man had been waiting to be healed there for 38 years. The man clearly believed that the pool was his only hope for healing—when Jesus asked if he wanted to be healed, the man could only think of the impossibility of getting to the pool in time. Not impeded by the man’s unbelief, Jesus summarily commands him to rise with his bed, which the man did.

One would think that a miracle of this magnitude and personal importance would be met with instant gratitude and belief. However, when the Jews confronted the man for carrying his bed on the Sabbath, the man did not hesitate to tell them it was Jesus who told him to do it. And Jesus’ own warning to the man indicates that he never had true saving belief (5:14).

When challenged about healing on the Sabbath, Jesus simply replied: “My Father is working until now, and I am working” (5:17). In other places, Jesus cited a perfectly acceptable, biblical reason for working on the Sabbath—to do good. Because it was lawful to break the Sabbath to rescue an animal from distress, arguing from lesser to greater, it was also lawful to break the Sabbath to relieve a human’s distress caused by demon oppression. Because it was lawful to break the Sabbath to circumcise a baby boy, which was viewed in Judaism as a kind of completion of creation, it is lawful to break the Sabbath to complete a person by physically healing them. The apostles, or any

mere human who could do such things, would be able to use such an argument.

But the way Jesus elaborates makes it clear that He claims the prerogative of working on the Sabbath for the very same reason God does. In Judaism there was a debate about whether God obeys the Law He gave to Moses: specifically, does God work on the Sabbath? The Rabbinic conclusion was that God must work continually to uphold the universe, but that He does not break the Sabbath by doing so, because He does not carry anything beyond the permitted distance, He does not lift anything above His shoulders, and so on.

Jesus' argument is simple: He imitates His Father exactly, and His Father loves Him and has given Him authority. To honour one is to honour the other; to reject one is to reject the other. The truly startling claim to His audience would have been: "For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself." Jesus is basically claiming to have the relationship with the Father that John lays out in his prologue.

Just as the previous sign confirmed the man's faith, as well as that of his entire household, this sign confirmed that



Figure 2. The ruins of the pool in Bethesda where Jesus healed the man who had been lame for 38 years

neither the man nor the Pharisees had true faith in Jesus. Other times, a sign provokes the wrong positive response, which is also held to be a form of unbelief, as when the people at the feeding of the 5,000 wanted to make Jesus king by force.

The man born blind

As the Gospel progresses, the Jewish leadership's opposition to Jesus intensifies, and unbelief becomes the typical reaction to Jesus, as much out of fear of the Jewish leaders as anything. One notable exception is the case of the man born blind. Healing a man born blind was thought, in Jewish tradition, to be a miracle that only the Messiah could perform. Jesus' use of mud made with dust and saliva may be intended to recall the creation of Adam out of dust.

Like the man at the pool of Bethesda, the man was ignorant of Jesus' identity—even more so, since he had been blind when he was in Jesus' presence before. But he had faith that Jesus was from God—he told the Pharisees that He was a prophet (9:17). This of course falls far short of Jesus' true identity, but it is impressive faith, especially considering that he must defy the Pharisees to make this proclamation. Indeed, by the end of their interrogation, he is calling himself a disciple of Jesus (9:27). When Jesus finally comes to him and reveals Himself, the man worships Him, indicating true belief (9:38).

Jesus restores life to Lazarus

In the other Gospels, Jesus raised Jairus' daughter and the son of the widow of Nain, but the only raising John records is that of Lazarus, and in many ways it is the most impressive. Jesus had a close relationship with Lazarus and his sisters Mary and Martha, but when they sent for Him, He waited until Lazarus was already dead before He even set out. By the time He arrived, decay would have set in. But Jesus raised Lazarus with a command (again, giving life by His word). Many believed in Him when they saw the miracle, but the Jewish leadership was only more determined to kill Jesus, and Lazarus too.

The Creator sacrificed

The allusions to creation are more veiled once Passion Week begins, because the focus turns to the meaning of the Cross. However, in the high priestly prayer (John 17:1–26), we get a glimpse of the interaction between the Father and the Son. Jesus has elsewhere insisted that He and the Father are absolutely unified, and we see the intimate fellowship within the Trinity in Jesus' prayer.

Jesus knows His hour has come, and understands the great significance of it. At this critical moment, His concern is to glorify the Father—yet He also asks, “And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world existed” (John 17:5). It would be insane and blasphemous to ask to share glory with God if Jesus were not actually God, because God shares his glory with no one else (Isaiah 48:11). There is also a claim to have pre-existed Creation; an idea that John introduced in his prologue. Jesus’ request shows that the Incarnation involved ‘emptying’ Himself of His divine glory by adding human nature (Philippians 2:7). In His resurrection, His human body was resurrected and glorified, and He took on an even added dimension of glory as the Saviour of mankind.

In addition, Jesus prays, “Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world” (17:24). This points back to the perfect fellowship and love shared by the members of the Godhead. There is no ‘competition’ among them for glory. Jesus delights in glorifying His Father, and the Father delights in glorifying the Son.

Verses later, John records the arrest of Jesus and, as throughout the rest of the Gospel, Jesus is portrayed as being in complete control. Jesus steps forward from the group of disciples and addresses the mob, and when he says *ego eimi*—a possible allusion to the divine name (cf. Exodus 3:14)—the reaction of the mob is to withdraw and fall to the ground. Carson believes this falls short of a theophany,¹² but most commentators see some significance to the language. Jesus must repeat Himself, and the second time he commands them to let his disciples go.

When Jesus was being mocked before the crucifixion, part of the degrading involved being mocked as the King of the Jews, crowned in thorns (19:2). While it is uncertain if this is a conscious reference to the Curse of Genesis 3:18 on John’s part, it is fitting that the Last Adam should be crucified wearing a symbol of the Curse.

The Resurrected Creator

Only John gives the detail that there was a garden where Jesus was crucified (19:41). The first man, Adam, sinned in a Garden, and the last Adam atoned for sin in a garden and was entombed there. Mary Magdalene initially mistook the resurrected Lord for the gardener, a possible allusion to the vocation of the first man (20:15).

When Jesus first appeared to the disciples after the Resurrection, He breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit” (20:22). This is analogous to when God breathed life into Adam (Genesis 2:7). Jesus was able to

impart spiritual life to his disciples because He successfully atoned for their sin.

Conclusion—Jesus, Creator and Saviour

John’s Gospel consistently portrays Jesus as the Creator, with creative power and authority that belongs only to God. And He portrays Jesus’ mission in the Incarnation in terms of inaugurating a new creation through His atoning death and resurrection. Those who believe in Christ receive a new birth, making Christians part of the new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17), and preparing us for the future Kingdom of God in the restored world.

References

1. Morris, L., *The Gospel According to John*, p. 106, NICNT, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1995.
2. Carson, D.A., *The Gospel According to John*, p. 115, Pillar New Testament Commentary, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1991.
3. Wallace, D.B., *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, p. 269, 1996.
4. Carson, ref. 2, p. 117, and Kostenberger, ref. 9 (below), p. 28 make this argument.
5. Morris, ref. 1, p. 71.
6. Morris, ref. 1, p. 156.
7. Carson, ref. 2, p. 168.
8. Morris, ref. 1, p. 187.
9. Kostenberger, A.J., *John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, MI, p. 122, 2004.
10. Carson, ref. 2, p. 199.
11. Carson, ref. 2, p. 201.
12. Carson, ref. 2, p. 578.

Lita Cosner earned a B.A. in Biblical Studies (Oklahoma Wesleyan University) and an M.A. in New Testament (Trinity Evangelical Divinity School). Her Master’s Thesis is *Jesus the Honorable Broker: A Social-Scientific Exegesis of Matthew 15:21–28*. She is CMI’s full-time Information Officer in the United States office.