

I had different goals than the other three gospel writers. Matthew stressed Old Testament prophecies to prove to the Jews that Jesus was the Messiah, the anointed one, and the King of the Jews. Mark used the life of Jesus to prove to the Jews that Jesus was the Messiah and the Suffering Servant talked about by Isaiah. Luke used the life of Jesus to show that Jesus came for all peoples, not just the Jews. He had a special interest in showing how inclusive Jesus was. So, yes, I had different goals when I wrote my account, the *Gospel of John*.

I was the last one to write a gospel. There was no need for me to repeat the actions and words of Jesus that were recorded by the other three. Many of the actions of Jesus had become well known, and the others did not need to be stressed. In fact, I ended my gospel by saying that Jesus did so many things that if every one of them were written down, they would fill the whole world with the books that would be written.<sup>1</sup>

I wanted to show that Jesus was the Son of God, and explain more about the natures of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. We Jews often repeated “The Shema,” found in Deuteronomy 6:4: “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one.” This incredible prayer illustrates the monotheistic essence of Judaism. We worshiped the one and only God of the universe.

We Jews worshiped one God, but it was not a conflict for us to understand that God was a spirit and had a spiritual nature. The second sentence in Genesis says that the Spirit of God hovered over the waters of the earth. The Jews saw God as an entirely different type of being than humans, although they slowly started visualizing God as their father, not just their creator.<sup>2</sup>

In the view of the Jews, Jesus became a blasphemer when he talked of God as his personal father, and him being the literal son of God.<sup>3</sup> This conflicted with their view of God being one, and also equated Jesus with God. It got even more complicated as Jesus began talking about the Holy Spirit. For the next two thousand years people would try to understand the relationships of God the Father, God the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

I did address those things, but my main purpose was to explain the nature of God that had not been revealed in the Old Testament. The Old Testament revealed God as creator of the universe, a just judge, all powerful, all knowing, and a myriad of other characteristics. What the

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<sup>1</sup> John 21:25

<sup>2</sup> 2 Samuel 7:14 was one of the early instances when God started revealing his nature as a father.

<sup>3</sup> John 5:18

Old Testament did not reveal was the extent to which God was a loving father of all people. A father who loved all people so much that he would sacrifice his very Son, so that all people could be reconciled to God.

What the more perceptive Jewish leaders understood was this: if Jesus was truly the Son of God and the Messiah, he had the right to teach about the true nature of God. If that happened, they would lose their preeminent position to teach about God. That contention would cause a battle to the death.

Jesus started teaching about God in a manner that appears benign to modern Christians, but would have been a slap in the face to the Jews of his time. In my gospel, I chose seven instances when he talked about himself, using “I am” statements. Modern Christians are so used to hearing people talk about themselves that they might miss the significance of this form of Jesus’ statements. The significance is found in an Old Testament story.

When God called Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, Moses asked about the name of God so that he could tell the Israelites. God said, “I AM THAT I AM.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, one name of God is “I Am.” When Jesus began his statements with the words, “I am”, he was not only equating himself with God, but was revealing new facets of God’s nature. To the Jews, Jesus was blaspheming.

Jesus said, “I am the bread of life.”<sup>5</sup> Jesus had recently fed the 5,000 but some were still wanting miraculous signs to prove who he was the Messiah. They pointed to the manna that their ancestors ate in the wilderness. Knowing that they really wanted to have bread to eat that didn’t require any work, Jesus switched the subject to spiritual bread. He said that the bread of God comes from heaven and gives life to the world. He pointed to himself as that true life-giving bread coming down from heaven.

Jesus said, “I am the light of the world.”<sup>6</sup> Jesus was saying that his followers would walk in spiritual light and truth. They would have the power of understanding spiritual truths that bring eternal life. This must surely have been good news to those around him who were used to relying on the Jewish leaders to tell them about spiritual truth. It must have also been comforting because Jesus did not require them to follow the hundreds of rules that their leaders had instituted.

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<sup>4</sup> Exodus 3:14

<sup>5</sup> John 6:35, 48, 51

<sup>6</sup> John 8:12, 9:5

Jesus said, “I am the gate.”<sup>7</sup> Jesus was using the gate of a sheep pen for an analogy. The gate keeps the sheep in a protected state, but also allows them to go out for food and water. Jesus does the same for his followers. He protects them and provides them life-sustaining resources.

Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd.”<sup>8</sup> This statement would have reminded the Jews of their Shepherd-King, King David, and of the many shepherds they saw in the daily lives. Good shepherds allowed their flocks to survive and thrive. A good shepherd would risk his life to protect his sheep. Jesus’ hearers would certainly remember how David had risked his life to protect his flock from bears and lions.<sup>9</sup> His hearers didn’t know it, but Jesus would soon lay down his life for the sake of his followers.

Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life.”<sup>10</sup> This must have been a stunning statement to the Sadducees who did not believe in any resurrection. Jesus was saying that even though people would experience a physical death, they could have eternal life through believing and following him.

Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life: nobody comes to the Father, except by me.”<sup>11</sup> Jesus was saying that access to God came through belief in Jesus, not through sacrifices at the Temple. The only way to have eternal life is through belief in Jesus. This must have been a slap to the Jewish leaders who were acting as access to God and teaching that life came through obedience to their manmade commandments.

Jesus said, “I am the true vine.”<sup>12</sup> Everyone in the audience that day knew that grapes grew on the branches connected to the vines. Life came through the vines to the branches. Jesus was saying that true life could only come through him. Without him it was impossible to have spiritual life or to bear spiritual fruit.

These seven “I am” statements certainly taught people about the nature of Jesus, but they also taught about the nature of God. God loved them and wanted to have good relationships with them. This was quite a different notion than they had learned from the Old Testament. Now that God loved them, it was going to be much easier for them to love God...the one thing he had always wanted from his people.

No matter how poor a person was, no matter what sins they had committed, no matter who their fathers and mothers were...God wanted to forgive them and have relationship with them.

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<sup>7</sup> John 10:7, 9

<sup>8</sup> John 10:11, 14

<sup>9</sup> 1 Samuel 17:36

<sup>10</sup> John 11:25

<sup>11</sup> John 14:6

<sup>12</sup> John 15:1

This had to be incredibly good news to them. Jesus chose to teach these lessons by going on the first foreign mission trip.

Jesus left the region of Judea where he was baptized, and returned to his home region of Galilee. He had two choices. He could have headed north up the Jordan River valley and turned west near the Sea of Galilee, or he could go west through the hills of Samaria and then turn north. Given those choices, most Jews would have gone north through the Jordan River Valley so they could purposely avoid Samaria.

Samaria was home to the Samaritans, a group of people despised by the Jews. Samaritans were descendants of the people groups transplanted by the Assyrians to the lands of the Northern Kingdom after its destruction hundreds of years before Jesus. Many of these people groups intermarried with Jews through the centuries. As such, the Jews considered the Samaritans to be an inferior ethnic and spiritual group, even though many of them had similar beliefs to the Jews. When the Jews had to travel through Samaria, they kept away from contact with them as much as possible.

Jesus stopped at the town of Sychar, and told his disciples to go into town and buy food. While they were gone, Jesus entered into an entirely inappropriate conversation. He started talking to a Samaritan woman of ill-repute. She had three strikes against her. Jesus should have stayed away from her instead of purposely talking with her.

He started the conversation by asking her for a drink from the well. Before the talk was over, he had taught her about the importance of having spiritual life, revealed her sinful life, and taught her to repent and receive forgiveness. In turn, she brought the whole village to hear Jesus.

Can't you just imagine that scene. A woman who had an awful reputation for sleeping with many different men convinced her entire village to come hear the words of Jesus. Maybe a few of the men were a little hesitant because she said that Jesus had told her everything she ever did. In the end, they convinced Jesus to stay two days and teach them. When Jesus left, many of them believed in him.

This must have been a shock to Jesus' followers. Jesus purposely went to obvious sinners, "bad people", to bring them into relationship with God. But the shock must have turned to joy. After all, if Jesus wanted the Samaritans to be reconciled to God, surely he would be happy to have Jews do so as well, no matter how much they had sinned. That was the nature of Jesus the Son reflecting the nature of the father, God. God, like Jesus, was in the midst of his people...all of his people... to show them how much he loved them.