

The Meaning of the Death of Jesus in the Gospel of John

by Virginia Orton

<http://lifemessenger.org/meaning-death-jesus-gospel-john/>

"The Crucifixion" Andrea Mantegna, 1457–1459

The Gospel of John is distinct from the synoptic gospels containing unique narratives, sequences and themes that interpret Jesus' life, death and exaltation. The forth evangelist's selection and purposeful arrangement of historical events essentially subordinates historiography in order to illuminate Jesus' historical self-disclosure in the light of his true origin and glory as the eternal "Word made flesh".^[1] Nevertheless, this "'meta-historical' aspect" of the gospel, disclosing Jesus as the Son who descends from the Father and returns to him, does not negate the historicity of events, but interprets their meaning.^[2] Additionally, while authorship remains divided within scholarship, what is stressed as important in the gospel is that the author is an eyewitness to Jesus' glory (1:14). Therefore, the forth evangelist specifically writes, not concerning the faith or tradition of the later church, as some suggest, but as a "witness" to the historical self-disclosure of the only begotten Son of God "so that you may believe" (Jn 20:30-31).^[3]

With this purpose in mind, the gospel interprets the meaning of Jesus' death "within a scriptural, salvation historical framework"^[4] in order to expound its significance as the climactic fulfillment of God's redemptive purposes fulfilling the law and the prophets. Thus Jesus' death is pivotally cast not as an error of human judgment but as the divine plan — a voluntary sacrifice, which definitively conquers the forces of evil as the terminal point of the old creation and the inauguration of the eschatological new age of the Spirit. Therefore the whole trajectory of the gospel, beginning in the Prologue (1:1-18) and continuing throughout the 'Two books': the Book of Signs (1:19-12:50) and the Book of Glory (13-20),^[5] concluding in the Epilogue (21), builds on the anticipation of "the hour" of Jesus' death, interpreting it as the climactic completion of his earthly mission, sent from the Father, and the greatest witness to his identity. As the completion of the Father's will, the hour of his death on the cross is crucially not an hour of humiliation but paradoxically the hour of his glorification; being 'lifted up' to give life to the world.

The death of Jesus: *the anticipated hour*

The plot of the forth gospel is intimately tied to the anticipation of the climactic 'hour' of Jesus' death. The first half of the gospel builds on the imminence of that hour as 'not yet' having arrived (2:4; 4:23; 5:25; 7:30; 8:20). Every attempt of those who sought to take Jesus by force — either for kingship or for death — were futile because his hour had not yet come (6:15; 8:20; 8:59; 10:39).^[6] The hour is signaled as having arrived in the pursuit of the Gentiles after Jesus, prompting Jesus' announcement "for this reason I have come to this hour" — referring to his death on the cross being "lifted up from the earth" in order to draw all people to himself (12:32). Emphasising this as his hour of purpose, the forth evangelist hasn't included the synoptic gospels account of Gethsemane and Jesus' inner turmoil in the face of the cross (Matt 26:36-46). While it is not without its parallel, Jesus is still troubled in soul over the immanence of his death (12:27) — likened to Gethsemane as his "hour of anguish".^[7] rather than dwelling on Jesus' inner struggle it is the evangelists supreme aim to highlight Jesus' death as the resolute purpose for which he came. Accordingly, Jesus' prayer in John 17 is the "complement not contradiction" of the Gethsemane narrative, as the explicit expression of Jesus embracing the hour of his death as the Father's will.^[8] Consequently, Jesus' death was not to be understood as an accident of fate or tragedy, but as the purposed plan of God.^[9]

This is evident from the first of Jesus' seven miracles throughout the gospel at the Cana wedding. In response to his mother, who reckons on Jesus' ability to resolve the wine shortage, he says, "Women, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come" (2:4). Not only is it the first instance pointing forward to his "hour", it is also highly significant against the OT backdrop. The prophets had characterised the Messianic age as a time when wine would flow liberally (Amos 9:13). Consequently, through Jesus' miracle that followed; turning water into wine, John profoundly points to the hour of Jesus' death as being the divinely appointed time for the new age when the Spirit would be poured out.^[10] The act of filling the Jewish purification water jars to the brim (2:7) signifies the fulfillment of the OT purification rituals and the abundance of the provision that would occur through the hour of Jesus' death.^[11] Therefore, the first miracle in the gospel provides the framework for understanding Jesus' death as the hour for which he had come to complete God's redemptive purpose.^[12]

The death of Jesus: *a cosmic victory*

In connection with the immanence of Jesus' hour, John links the arrival of the hour immediately with its cosmic reality, saying "Now is the judgment of this world; *now* the ruler of this world will be driven out" (12:31). The dramatic double use of the time-orientated word *now* underscores the arrival of the hour of his death as the decisive event defeating the ruler of this world. Therefore, integral to John's theology is the death of Jesus enacting the definitive victory of God over the forces of evil in the world.^[13] This cosmic reality provides the framework for the gospel, being set forth in the prologue. Referring to Jesus' divinity and pre-existence "in the beginning", John outlines

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*.

Therefore, the evangelist has determined the context for interpreting Jesus' climactic death is his pre-existence as the source of life. By alluding to the Genesis account of creation, and thus to the cosmic impact of sin having opened the door to death—characterized as darkness, the incarnation is pivotally linked with the theme of re-creation; as light that shines into darkness, with the vital premise that the darkness would not overcome. In this vein, Jesus warns his disciples concerning the cosmic reality at play in his death, alerting them that "the ruler of this world is coming" but that he had no power over him because he is doing the Father's will (14:29-31). Thus, John illuminates how the enemy's active role in Jesus' crucifixion was in reality carrying out the divine redemptive plan,^[14] and would ironically be the enemy's undoing.^[15] Accordingly, Jesus' last words on the cross, rather than a cry of dereliction (Matt 27:46; Mark 15:34), are the declaration: "it is finished" (19:30). Consequently, 1:5 may be the first suggestion of the victory of the cross; the aorist verb "overcome" suggesting a specific event where darkness unsuccessfully attempts to extinguish the light.^[16] Within this framework Jesus' death is cast as the "crucial turning point in the war against the powers of darkness".^[17]

John also views the events leading up to Jesus' death from this cosmic perspective. While the forth gospel doesn't include the temptation narrative, it is potentially reproduced through Jesus' brother's temptation for him to openly reveal his authority and Messiahship before the divinely appointed time, mirroring the satanic temptation: "if you are ..." (John 7:4; Matt 4:2, 5, 8-9; Luke 4:3-12).^[18] While Jesus' response, like the synoptic gospels, is constrained to do the Father's will, John points forward to Jesus' death by contrasting the divine timing with the world's timing saying, "My time [*kairos*] has not yet come, but your time [*kairos*] is always here" (7:6).^[19] He therefore emphasizes the hour for which he came was not orchestrated by human decisions or enemy activity, but was the divinely appointed time. Additionally, while similar to Luke, Judas' betrayal of Jesus is fuelled by Satan entering him (Luke 22:3; John 13:27), in John alone it is ignited by Jesus "knowing that the Father had given him all things into his hands" (13:3), commanding Judas to do what the devil had put in his heart (13:2, 27-28). This cosmic perspective is underscored again at Jesus' trial before Pilate who asks him "Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?" Jesus answered, "You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above" (19:11). Accordingly, Jesus' death is repeatedly framed within the cosmic perspective that it is God who gives himself freely, sovereignly reigning over Satan and the decisions of men.^[20] Therefore, Jesus' death, while played out on the stage of history, is to be understood as the divinely appointed time that Jesus overcomes the world by bringing judgement against its evil ruler (16:33).

In light of the cosmic victory in Jesus' death, the nature of salvation is also illuminated. Within the cosmic framework, John's themes of light and darkness; above and below; life and death; salvation and judgement; and sonship and slavery, are ultimately situated within the two antithetical personifications of darkness; the devil, who "comes only to steal, kill and destroy", and light; Jesus, who comes to dispel the darkness (12:46) so that we "may have life and have it abundantly" (10:10). John also locates humanity within these two natures — those who couldn't receive Jesus were of their "father the devil, and ... choose to do [their] father's desires" (8:44-45). Consequently, the gospel announces in the prologue the purpose for which Jesus came was to give all who believed in him the right "to become children of God" (1:12). Therefore, Jesus' death as the definitive judgment of the father of evil realises salvation, not as political freedom (8:33), but as freedom from slavery to sin — "passing from death to life" (5:24) — by becoming sons in God's household (8:34-36); not by natural descent, but by being "born from above" with a new nature as sons of the light, in the family of God (3:3; 10:16; 11:52; 12:36; 17:21).

The death of Jesus: a voluntary sacrifice

The cosmic perspective of the Father sending his Son for the life of the world entails the theme of Jesus' death as sacrificial. While some scholarship cite a "paucity of references to sacrifice" surmising that the cross is of little importance to John's theology — the emphasis being on Jesus exaltation and glory^[21] — the concept of sacrifice is woven so thoroughly throughout the gospel that the all pervasive theme of 'glory' cannot be understood apart from it.

The witness of John the Baptist, declaring twice that Jesus is “the Lamb of God”, and once in relation to “taking away the sins of the world”, is an exclusively Johannine reference with a multifaceted meaning.^[22] Dodd argues that it is a title of power referring to the apocalyptic Lamb of God rather than to an expiatory death, which only came to be associated later in the faith community and is therefore not related to his suffering and humiliation but to his power and glory.^[23] While this may be one facet, the intimate connection throughout the gospel between Jesus and the Passover festival, communicated through John’s unique sequence of three Passovers – in contrast to one Passover in the synoptic gospels at the time of the Last Supper (Mark 15:12-26) – substantiates this title’s relation to his suffering and humiliation and thus its sacrificial intent.

The first Johannine Passover provides the backdrop for the temple cleansing and Jesus’ prophecy of the destruction of the temple, which is interpreted as a sign of Jesus’ death with his body replacing the OT dwelling place (2:13). Advancing this fulfillment thrust, the second Passover provides the context for the multiplication of bread (6:4), additionally interpreted as a sign of his death, however, more graphically refers to the need to “eat”, literally chew, Jesus’ flesh and drink his blood in order to have life (6:53). Consequently, Jesus’ “flesh and blood are represented as salvific” using language that is covenantal and sacrificial.^[24] Finally, the last Passover significantly coincides with Jesus’ death rather than the Last Supper (John 18:28; 19:14, 31, 42).^[25] Therefore, rather than instituting the Lords Supper, the Johannine interpretation of Jesus’s death is concerned with its fulfillment of the Passover sacrifice, thus making it essential to understanding the meaning of Jesus’ death.^[26] The Passover lamb was specifically to be without blemish (Ex 12:5), finding its true meaning in Jesus’ sinless humanity (John 18:23). Nevertheless, while the paschal lamb was not a sin offering, it was a sacrifice that averted the wrath of God.^[27] Therefore, just as the Passover lamb averted the wrath of God, bringing deliverance for Israel from death, Jesus’ death adverts the wrath of God for “the sins of the world” (1:29). Consequently, the gospel both expounds the true meaning of Passover in Jesus and enlarges it with ideas of atonement.^[28]

Connected to the paschal imagery is Isaiah’s suffering servant (53:7), which suggests “not only deliverance from oppression, as does the paschal lamb, but also vicarious suffering and sacrifice”.^[29] This vicarious nature of Jesus’ death is expounded by John in various ways: as the death of the shepherd for the sheep (10:10), the sacrifice of one man for his nation (11:49-52), the life that is given to the world (6:51) and the grain of wheat that must die to bear much fruit (12:24). Each of these dialogues, unique to John, interpret Jesus’ death as a vicarious sacrifice expounding the thrust of the gospel that “whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him” (3:16).

Furthermore, Jesus’ sacrificial death is utterly voluntary. Jesus reveals, “No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father” (10:10-18). His final miracle, raising Lazarus from the dead, was a sign of the voluntary nature of his sacrifice by becoming the catalyst for Jesus’ own death.^[30] Thus the giving of life, “paradoxically and poignantly, becomes the impetus for Jesus’ death”.^[31] From this point the gospel moves swiftly toward the passion, beginning the narrative by interpreting Jesus’ death through the foot-washing scene (13:1-11). This is exclusively Johannine expressing the voluntary self-humiliation of Jesus.^[32] Jesus willingly adopts the lowliest role, on the way to a death reserved for the lowliest criminals, signifying the voluntary self-abasement of his sacrifice as the means for our cleansing.^[33] Additionally, while the synoptic accounts represent Simon the Cyrene helping Jesus carry his cross (Matt 27:32), John depicts Jesus carrying his cross alone (19:17), expressing his complete involvement in offering himself up^[34] as the only one who can atone for the sins of the world.^[35] This voluntary nature of Jesus’ sacrifice is underscored at the point of death with Jesus offering up his own spirit (19:30). The verb John uses for the surrender of his spirit is the same as that used in Isaiah’s prophecy in the Septuagint regarding the sacrifice of the suffering servant having “poured out himself to death” (Isa 53:12).^[36] Accordingly, John testifies to the voluntary nature of Jesus’ sacrifice, as the fulfillment of scripture, from beginning to end.

The death of Jesus: the fulfillment of scripture

Jesus’ death as the fulfillment of scripture is a major emphasis throughout the gospel. In doing so, it would appear as Carson infers, that the evangelist has a biblically literate Jewish audience in mind,^[37] seeking to persuade them that Jesus is the anticipated Messiah. Thus, as the gospel approaches the passion narrative it increases in scripture fulfillment presumably in order to counteract the scepticism of the Jewish mind regarding a crucified Messiah.^[38] Every detail of Jesus’ death is interpreted as fulfilling God’s divine plan revealed in the scriptures right down to the seemingly insignificant actions of the soldiers dividing Jesus’ garments among them (19:23-24), while the timing of John’s climactic words of Jesus on the cross (19:28) “constitute the final instance of [his] active, self-conscious fulfillment of scripture”.^[39] Consequently, the OT scriptures remain authoritative in the gospel, forming the touchstone for the evangelist’s theological selection and arrangement

of historical events to explicate how the law and the prophets bear witness to Jesus as the Messiah and foretold his death (1:45).[\[40\]](#)

The multitude of allusions to OT figures and institutions throughout John are shown to find their true meaning in Jesus and his death.[\[41\]](#) While the Lamb of God wasn't an obvious messianic title, having allusions to fulfilling Isaiah's suffering servant and to the apocalyptic lamb, it most fully signified that Jesus, through his death, fulfilled the feast of Passover.[\[42\]](#) Not only does Jesus' death coincide with the sacrifice of the Passover lamb in the temple,[\[43\]](#) but the events at his death; the presence of the hyssop (Ex 12:22; John 19:29) and having no broken bone (Num 9:12; John 19:36), also occur so "that the Scripture might be fulfilled" (19:36), attesting to the Passover and Exodus finding their true meaning in the death of Jesus as the means of deliverance from death.[\[44\]](#) Additionally, the evangelist's references to Moses and the prophets (1:45), Jacobs ladder (1:51), the Jewish rites of purification (2:6-11), the temple (2:18-22), the snake in desert (3:14-15), the manna in the wilderness (6:49-51), the feast of Tabernacles (7:37-39), the Son of Man (8:28), Isaiah's suffering servant (19:27) and the mercy seat in the Ark of the Covenant – alluded to in Jesus' tomb after he had risen (Ex 25:17-22; John 20:11)[\[45\]](#) – are each interpreted as finding their true meaning and fulfillment in Jesus' flesh being broken open on the cross for the life of the world.[\[46\]](#) Furthermore, it is only through Jesus' death as the Son that humanity could become "children of God" (1:12), a concept that clearly fulfills "the OT characterisation of Israel and God's children (Deut 14:1)".[\[47\]](#)

Additionally, John's theme of glory residing in Jesus has clear implications that he replaces the ark of God's presence in the tabernacle.[\[48\]](#) The context for this is set forth in the prologue: the eternal Word "dwelt [*literally, "pitched his tent," skeno?*] among us and we have seen his glory" (1:14),[\[49\]](#) thus alluding to how "God formerly manifested his presence among his people in the tent which Moses pitched, now in the fuller sense he has taken up residence on earth in the Word made flesh".[\[50\]](#) This emphasis is enhanced in Jesus' reference to Jacobs ladder (1:51). While Messianic expectation included the King of Israel and the son of God,[\[51\]](#) from the outset the evangelist explicates that Jesus is "something greater" than expected (1:50). As the Son of Man (Dan 7:13-14) and the fulfillment of Jacobs ladder (Gen 28:10-17), Jesus is the God-Man; the bridge between heaven and earth with authority over all nations — which "being lifted up" in his death would be the sign of (1:51; 8:28).

This replacement of the OT dwelling place of God's glory through Jesus' death becomes explicit in the cleansing of the temple.[\[52\]](#) While the synoptic gospels record the narrative chronologically, and therefore at the end of the gospel occurring in his last Passover in Jerusalem (Luke 19:45; Mark 11:15; Matt 21:12), John locates it theologically at the beginning as an interpretative lens to read the entire gospel through.[\[53\]](#) After radically clearing the sanctuary, the Jews asked him:

"What sign do you show us for doing these things?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews then said, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?" But he was speaking about the temple of his body. When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken

John 2:18-22

In contrast to the synoptic account John uses the phrase "raise up" rather than "build" (Matt 27:40), pointing to his death, being raised up on the cross, and his resurrection and ascension, being raised up to the right hand of the Father, establishing the new dwelling place of God with his people in his body. Thus as the locus of glory, Jesus' withdrawal from the temple (8:59), alluding to the glory of the Lord departing the temple in Ezekiel (10:18), underscores the replacement of the physical temple through the death of Jesus – the destruction of his body – with his resurrected ascended body as the ultimate meeting place between God and humanity (4:15-26).[\[54\]](#)

The death of Jesus: the witness to Jesus' identity

While Jesus is the fulfillment of the scriptures the question the gospel focuses on, in order to establish how messianic expectation is fulfilled, is "Who is Jesus?" (8:25).[\[55\]](#) There is a repetitive questioning over where Jesus has come from, climaxing with Pilate's alarm regarding Jesus' identity, asking, "Where are you from?" This theme throughout John expresses the Messianic expectation that "when [he] appears, no one will know where he comes from" (7:27). Thus Jesus' opponents

stumbled over his earthly and Galilean origin (7:41, 52; 8:41). Jesus challenged them saying, “You know me, and you know where I come from. But I have not come of my own accord” (7:28). It was this claim that he came “from above” (8:23), sent from his Father, that they sought to arrest him (5:18; 7:30; 10:33, 39) and put him to death “because he made himself the Son of God” (19:7).

Jesus’ unique relationship to the Father is exactly “the crux and scandal of the Christian faith”.^[56] This is the central theme shaping John’s gospel: Jesus identity as the only begotten Son — the one who descends from the Father to complete his will is also the one who ascends (1:14; 3:13; 6:62; 13:3; 16:28; 17:5; 20:17). Thus the theme of being sent from the Father is a major emphasis in the gospel, appearing almost sixty times, while the term ‘Father’, for God, used in relation to Jesus as ‘the Son’ appears over 120 times.^[57] In answer to the continual question of Jesus’ identity John constructs his gospel around seven miracles (2:1-11; 4:43-54; 5:1-9; 6:1-5; 6:16-25; 9:1-41; 11:1-44), with the emphasis that they are ‘signs’, rather than ‘wonders’, pointing beyond the miracles to the Father as “manifestations of Jesus’ identity as the one who works by God’s authority ... [and] to the unity of Jesus’ work with the Father”.^[58] Furthermore, John weaves seven “I AM” claims of Jesus throughout the gospel: the bread of life (6:35), the light of the world (8:12), the gate for the sheep (10:7, 9), the good Shepherd (10:11, 14), the resurrection and the life (11:25), the way the truth the life (14:6) and the true vine (15:1). Each claim witnesses to Jesus’ divinity and equality with the Father as the basis for faith in, and obedience to, Jesus’ words — even the number seven, symbolic of completeness, witnesses to the completed salvation that the Father has given through his Son.^[59] Additionally, John includes an explicit claim to Godhood — Jesus declares to the Jews: “before Abraham was, I am” (8:58). Ironically, while it is this claim that drives the Jewish leaders to kill Jesus, it is his death that verified his claims: “When you have lifted up the Son of Man you will realise that ‘I AM’” (8:58). Consequently, the cross in John is revelatory of Jesus’ identity.

The Johannine use of the title “the Son of Man”, always as Jesus’ self-reference as in the synoptic gospels, in connection to his death being “lifted up” grounds Jesus’ divine glory in his humanity and humiliation (19:34, 20:20, 27). Jesus prophesied concerning his death as the Son of Man so that when it did take place his disciples could “believe that I am he” (13:19) and did nothing on his own authority, but spoke just as the Father taught him, always doing the things that were pleasing to him (8:28-29). Therefore, Jesus’ “lifting up” on the cross is the definitive witness to his identity as the Son of Man: to his union with the Father (3:14; 8:28; 12:32-33) and his subordination to the Father in solidarity with humanity (5:19; 14:28-31).^[60] Accordingly, Jesus’ death in John is the ultimate sign and final witness to “the truth” (18:37). While Jesus is *the* truth, he came to disclose his Father and complete the Father’s will (4:34; 5:36; 6:38-40; 9:4; 10:37; 17:4).^[61] Therefore, Jesus exhorted those that did not believe in him to “believe [his] works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father” (10:38; cf 14:11). Jesus’ final miracle in John, raising Lazarus from the dead, pointed to this truth as the OT and second temple literature agreed that the resurrection of the dead was the sole prerogative of God.^[62] Furthermore, Lazarus’ condition was “for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it” (11:4). Thus, as the catalyst for Jesus’ crucifixion, this miracle signified that Jesus’ own death was the culmination of his work in obedience to the Father, “as the Son can do nothing on his own, but only does what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise” (5:19). Thus, Jesus’ death is to be understood as the greatest sign of Jesus’ glory in unity with the Father and completion of his salvific work.

Consequently, Jesus’ climactic words on the cross “it is finished” testified to “his death as the final act of revelation of his identity”.^[63] His cry is one of completion rather than abandonment, emphasising the unity of the Father and Son.^[64] This father/son theme climaxes in Jesus’ death witnessing to the nature of the Father and Son as self-sacrificial love; the Son glorifying the Father in obedience to his will, reciprocated by the Father glorifying the Son, giving all authority into his hands, so that the world may know the truth and share their glory (17:1-8). Therefore, John interprets Jesus’ death, not simply as a sacrifice that atones for sin, nor only as a witness to Jesus’ identity, but also as revelatory of the inner nature of the Godhead and the path of discipleship as walking in the way of the cross — the way of self-sacrificial love (12:25-26; cf 15:12-13). This Way is opened through Jesus’ death inaugurating the eschatological life of the Spirit (14:6, 18-21; 15:9-10; 16:13-15; 17:21-23).

The death of Jesus: *the inauguration of the eschatological new creation*

Jesus’ death is pivotal to the Johannine eschatology and its related themes of creation and new creation. The forth gospel pivotally opens with an allusion to the Genesis creation account (1:1), rather than a birth narrative. Consequently, Ridderbos argues that this “beginning” is the gospels “deepest and most essential *Sitz im Leben*”.^[65] Accordingly, the original creation purpose and the subsequent curse of death through sin provide the foundational context for understanding Jesus’ incarnation

and death. Within this framework, John poignantly captures the tragedy of sin and death through Jesus' grief, being "deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled" over the death of Lazarus and those mourning him, to the point that he himself "wept" (11:33-35). Therefore, as the catalyst for Jesus' crucifixion, John anticipates the cross as the means of abolishing the curse. John alone includes Jesus' prediction of the type of death he would suffer (12:33), which Witherington suggests alludes to the Deuteronomistic understanding that to die on a tree was a sign that one was cursed by God (Deut 21:22-23).^[66] Therefore, another facet to Jesus' death on the cross, crying, "it is finished", is the termination of the curse in order to inaugurate the new creation (3:14-5; 6:51-58).^[67]

The eschatological new creation promised a time when people will neither hunger nor thirst (Is 49:10; 44:3). Thus, Jesus' offer of living water (4:14; 7:37-38) and living bread (6:51) signaled the reversal of the curse through his death.^[68] Only by breaking open his flesh in death could he pour out his life, emphasised through the spear piercing Jesus' side at death causing blood and water to flow out — blood for the remission of sins and water for the life of the world.^[69] This reversal of the curse is further portrayed in the passion narrative being hedged on either side with garden imagery — a symbol of the original paradisiacal condition.^[70] While before Jesus' death the garden scene exhibits humanity in enmity against God (18:1-11), after his death and resurrection the garden is restored as the dwelling of God with his people; Mary Magdalene is re-united with her Lord (20:14). Jesus' tender question to her, "why are you weeping" (20:15), contrasts Jesus' own weeping at Lazarus' tomb, expressing the time for weeping is finished — the eschatological new creation has dawned where "He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away" (Rev 21:4; cf Is 65:19).

As the inauguration of the new creation Mary is commissioned to witness to the *ascended* Christ:

Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, '*I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.*'" Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her. [emphasis mine]

John 20:17-18

Therefore, the Johannine apostolic mandate concerns the proclamation that the Son who descended from the Father has also ascended, receiving "authority over all people" (17:2). Therefore, the Messiah's Kingship is pivotally not ethnic but universal, anticipated through John's account of Pilate's inscription on the cross, "the King of the Jews", written above Jesus in Greek, Hebrew and Latin (19:19-20).^[71] Furthermore, John establishes that it is through Jesus' death he inaugurates a new spiritual family, illustrated by the unique account of Jesus' mother and the beloved disciple at the foot of the cross forming a new family,^[72] which is constituted after the ascension by Jesus breathing on his disciples (20:22) — an allusion to Genesis (2:7) making the new creation theme unmistakable.^[73] Therefore, through Jesus' death and ascension the hour of authentic universal worship of the Father "in Spirit and truth" has arrived (4:21-2) and is therefore the hour of his glorification.^[74]

The death of Jesus: the hour of glorification

The entire gospel moves towards the hour of Jesus' death as the hour of his glorification (17:4-5). The first half of the gospel (1-12) reveals Jesus' glory through 'signs', while the second half reveals Jesus' glory through his death (13-21). Nevertheless, the first half anticipates the hour of Jesus' death as the climactic sign of his glory, thus combining a theology of glory with a theology of the cross.^[75] John's theme of glory is interpreted by Käsemann to be the opposite of the synoptic gospels characterization of the passion's suffering and humiliation. He therefore argues that the crucifixion becomes a problem for John, which is solved by transforming its humiliation into glorification. However, contra Käsemann, Bauckman contends that no other Gospel has as many references to the cross imbedded in the story (1:29, 35, 51; 2:17-22; 3:14; 6:50, 62; 7:33, 39; 8:21, 28; 10: 11, 15, 17-18; 11:51; 12:7-8, 23-24, 32-33) indicating that what John has done is not to dissolve the passion's humiliation into glory, but to "redefine God's glory by seeing the suffering and the humiliation of the cross as the high point of its revelation".^[76]

Therefore, John deploys the language of Jesus' being "lifted up" with a double meaning; being lifted up to his death is also the

lifting up to his glorification — the means of his resurrection and ascension^[77] (12:32-33). This is evident in the arrival of the hour of Jesus' death being accompanied by his declaration, “*Now* is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him” (13:31). Therefore, his humiliation in the eyes of the world is in reality his glorification in obedience to the Father. It crucially defies the world's conception of ‘glory’ that comes from man rather than from God (5:44; 12:43), testifying that Christ's kingdom “is not of this world” (18:36), redefining true glory according to God's self-sacrificial love. Therefore, in view of the reality of Jesus' humiliation and suffering, Köstenberger adduces, “it is at the cross that the glory accrued to the Son is the greatest, because it is here that Jesus revealed the full extent of God's love for the world (3:16)”.^[78]

This Johannine theme of God's glory manifest in the cross has an integral Trinitarian dimension.^[79] Above all John ties Jesus' glorification to the gift of the Spirit (7:39).^[80] Jesus told his disciples, “I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the *paraclete* will not come to you” (16:7-14). This distinct Johannine term, *paraclete*, refers to the Spirit of Truth who is sent from the Father and Son (14:26; 16:7) as Jesus' continuing presence with his disciples (14:15-17; 17:21-23), as a teacher and guide (14:26; 16:13), and as a witness or advocate (15:26; 16:7-13).^[81] John interprets the sending of the Spirit as essential to believers being born from above and thus receiving the eschatological promise of everlasting life (3:5-8; 4:14; 6:63; 14:18-20). Consequently, Jesus refers to his death saying: “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified ... unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (12:23-23). His death is essential to reproducing his glorified life in the world through his Spirit, which would enable his disciples to do “greater works” (14:12).

Profoundly then, John explicates that through Jesus' death believers enter into the life and glory of the Godhead. The Spirit is given to disciples with the explicit purpose to “glorify Jesus” (16:14) — just as the Father glorifies the Son (8:54) and the Son glorifies the Father. Thus believers enter into this reciprocal self-giving love of the Godhead (17:21-24), as sent ones; just as the Father sent the Son, the Son also sends his disciples (17:18; 20:21), giving them the glory that the Father had given the Son (17:22), so that the Father and Son will be glorified through them as they incarnate God's character in the world (13:34-35; 15:8; 17:10). Therefore, “the cross is at the heart of John's glory theology ... [and] is the most notable instance where the persons of the divine Godhead collaborate in bringing glory to one another”.^[82] Accordingly, Jesus' death in John's theology is significantly the hour of glorification as the place where the glory of the unseen God is made visible in the unity of the Father, Son and Spirit, enabling believers to receive of their fullness (1:16).

Conclusion

The entire trajectory of the gospel moves toward the hour of Jesus' death as the climactic sign and witness to the glory of the Godhead, revealed through the Son of God. Thus the central theme shaping John's theology is the glory of the only begotten Son, sent from the Father to complete his will. By providing the context for the gospel as “the beginning” of creation, John provides the critical interpretive key for understanding Jesus' death as the original creation purpose and the subsequent curse of death through sin. Therefore, Jesus' death is cast within a salvation historical framework in order to expound its significance as the fulfillment of God's redemptive purposes expressed in the law and the prophets. Thus John's many allusions to OT figures and institutions are understood to find their true meaning in Jesus and his death. Consequently, Jesus' death is not as an error of human judgment but is the divine plan — the fulfillment of Isaiah's suffering servant as a vicarious sacrifice; voluntarily bearing transgression on behalf of the many, and the Lamb of God without blemish, averting the wrath of God not only for Israel but for “the sins of the world”. Furthermore, John interprets the true cosmic import of Jesus' death as the decisive event defeating the ruler of this world. By becoming the curse, Jesus' victorious death on the cross is the terminal point of the old creation and the inauguration of the eschatological new age of the Spirit securing the right for all who believe in him “to become children of God” (1:12). Thus, as the culmination of this work the cross is the greatest sign of Jesus' unity with the Father and completion of his salvific work. These prominent themes are ultimately set within the evangelists overarching purpose that all may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and have life in his name (20:21). Therefore, the climactic Johannine cry of Jesus on the cross, “it is finished”, as completion of the Father's work in defeating sin and death in order to inaugurate the new creation, remains a victory shout that reverberates down the corridors of history, as revelatory of the abundance of life that is to be appropriated *now*, in this present age, in order to extend the glory of God throughout the earth.

Print-friendly pdf: [Gospel of John](#)

Footnotes

[1] Richard Bauckham, “The Johannine Jesus and the Synoptic Jesus”

<http://richardbauckham.co.uk/uploads/Accessible/Johannine%20Jesus%20&%20Synoptic%20Jesus.pdf> (accessed April 16, 2014), pa 11.

[2] Bauckham, “The Johannine Jesus and the Synoptic Jesus”, p. 11.

[3] Herman Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John: a Theological Commentary*. (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, Kindle e-book), p. 428.

[4] Andreas J. Köstenberger, “John.” In *Commentary on the New Testament use of the Old Testament*, eds. Greg. K. Beale & Donald. A. Carson, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007), p. 415.

[5] It must noted, however, that such a division can in fact misrepresent John’s theology of glory because glory pervades the whole gospel. Therefore Köstenberger suggests it is better to refer to Jesus’ glory in his signs (John 1–12) and Jesus’ glory through the cross (John 13–21). Andreas. J Köstenberger, “The Glory of God in John’s Gospel and Revelation.”

<http://www.biblicalfoundations.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/The-Glory-of-God-Chapter-4.pdf> (accessed May 2, 2014), p. 113.

[6] Donald A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 94.

[7] B. Witherington, *John’s Wisdom: A Commentary on the Fourth Gospel*. (Louisville: Westminster, 1995), p. 224.

[8] Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John. A Commentary*. (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2003), p. 1053.

[9] Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, p. 388.

[10] Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, p. 172.

[11] Köstenberger, “John”, p. 431.

[12] Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, p. 95.

[13] Judith L. Kovacs, “‘Now shall the ruler of this world be driven out’: Jesus’ Death as Cosmic Battle in John 12:20-36”. *JBL* 114 (1995), DOI: 10.2307/3266937, p. 229.

[14] Kovacs, “‘Now shall the ruler of this world be driven out’”, p. 230.

[15] Keener, *The Gospel of John*, p. 880.

[16] Kovacs, “‘Now shall the ruler of this world be driven out’”, p. 231.

[17] Witherington, *John’s Wisdom*, p. 224.

[18] Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John*. 2 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1966), pp. 306-308.

[19] The Greek term *kairos* means “a time when conditions are right for the accomplishment of a crucial action: the opportune and decisive moment”. Merriam-Webster Dictionary. “Kairos.” <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/kairos> (accessed April 17, 2014).

[20] Andrew Lincoln, *The Gospel According to St John*. (London: Continuum, 2005), p. 468.

[21] Brueggeman in Kovacs, “‘Now shall the ruler of this world be driven out’”, p. 227.

[22] Köstenberger, “John”, p. 428.

[23] Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John*, p. 2011.

[24] Dorothy A. Lee, "Paschal Imagery in the Gospel of John: A Narrative and Symbolic Reading". http://ark.divinity.edu.au/pluginfile.php/17291/mod_resource/content/1/Passover%20Imagery%2C%20DLee.pdf (accessed March 5, 2014), p. 6.

[25] Daniel J. Harrington, *John's Thought and Theology: An Introduction*. (Delaware: Michael glazier inc, 1990), p. 23.

[26] Lee, "Paschal Imagery in the Gospel of John", p. 9.

[27] Witherington, *John's Wisdom*, p. 66.

[28] Lee, "Paschal Imagery in the Gospel of John", p. 8.

[29] Lee, "Paschal Imagery in the Gospel of John", p. 3.

[30] Keener, *The Gospel of John*, p. 837.

[31] R. A. Culpepper, "The Plot of John's Story of Jesus." *Interpretation* 49 (1995), <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.csu.edu.au/docview/202704693?accountid=10344> (accessed April 17, 2014), p. 352.

[32] Richard Bauckham, *The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple: Narrative, History and Theology in the Gospel of John*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), p. 195.

[33] Bauckham, "The Johannine Jesus and the Synoptic Jesus", p. 10.

[34] Keener, *The Gospel of John*, p. 1133.

[35] Drury in Keener, *The Gospel of John*, p. 1134.

[36] Keener, *The Gospel of John*, p. 1148.

[37] Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, p. 91.

[38] Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, p. 612.

[39] Donald A. Carson, "John and the Johannine Epistles." In *It is Written: Scripture Citing Scripture; Essays in Honour of Barnabas Lindars, SSF*, eds. D. A. Carson & H. G. M. Williamson, pp. 245-64. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 252.

[40] Claus Westerman, *The Gospel of John in the Light of the Old Testament*. Trans. by Siegfried. S. Schatzmann, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998), pp. 65-66.

[41] Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, p. 98.

[42] Harrington, *John's Thought and Theology*, p. 105.

[43] Harrington, *John's Thought and Theology*, p. 23.

[44] Lee, "Paschal Imagery in the Gospel of John", p. 6.

[45] Dorothy A. Lee, "The Gospel of John" in *The New Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary on the Bible*, (eds). B.R. Gaventa & D. Petersen, (Nashville: Abingdon, 2010), p. 32.

[46] C. K Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John. An introduction and commentary and notes on the Greek text*. 2nd ed.

(London: SPCK, 1978), p. 290.

[47] Köstenberger, “John”, p. 421.

[48] Lee, “The Gospel of John”, p. 7.

[49] W. D. Mounce, *Basics of Biblical Greek* (3rd ed). (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2009), p. 204.

[50] F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), p. 40.

[51] However, the expectation for one who would be the ‘son of God’ was not the Johannine theme of Jesus as the only begotten Son of God, but in the sense of the Messianic expectation for the Davidic king would be a son of God (2 Sam 7:14). It was also common to identify common traits (eg. son of malice [Ps 89:22]; sons of affliction [Prov 31:5]; son of the morning [Isa 14:12] by referring to the son of ‘x’. Donald A. Carson, *Jesus the Son of God: a Christological Title Often Overlooked, Sometimes Misunderstood, and Currently Disputed*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), pp. 22-27.

[52] Lee, “Paschal Imagery in the Gospel of John”, p. 5.

[53] Witherington, *John’s Wisdom*, pp. 88-9.

[54] Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, p. 62.

[55] Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John*, p. 533.

[56] Lincoln, *The Gospel According to St John*, p. 90.

[57] Paul, J. Achtemeier, Joel, B. Green & Marianne, M. Thompson. “The gospel according to John” in *Introducing the NT — Its Literature and Theology*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), p. 187.

[58] Achtemeier, Green & Thompson, “The gospel according to John”, p. 191.

[59] Bauckham, *The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple*, p. 243.

[60] Harrington, *John’s Thought and Theology*, p. 27.

[61] Culpepper, “The Plot of John’s Story of Jesus”, p. 357.

[62] Köstenberger, “John”, p. 442.

[63] Achtemeier, Green & Thompson, “The gospel according to John”, p. 197.

[64] Lincoln, *The Gospel According to St John*, p. 478.

[65] Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John*, p. 784.

[66] Witherington, *John’s Wisdom*, p. 304.

[67] J. Morgan-Wynne, *The Cross in the Johannine Writings*. (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2011), p. 127.

[68] Greg. K Beale, “The Eschatological conception of New Testament Theology.” In *Eschatology in Bible and Theology*, eds. K. E. Browser & M. W. Elliott, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997), p. 29.

[69] Lee, “The Gospel of John”, p. 31.

[70] Lee, “The Gospel of John”, p. 27.

[71] Keener, *The Gospel of John*, p. 1137.

[72] Morgan-Wynne, *The Cross in the Johannine Writings*, p. 181.

[73] Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John*, p. 570.

[74] Lincoln, *The Gospel According to St John*, p. 177.

[75] Köstenberger, “The Glory of God in John’s Gospel and Revelation,” p. 107.

[76] Bauckham, “The Johannine Jesus and the Synoptic Jesus”, p. 10.

[77] The Johannine concept of the one who is “lifted up” alludes to Isaiah’s suffering servant who was “wounded for our transgressions” and “bore the sin of many” (Isa. 53:5, 12) and “shall be high and lifted up, and shall be exalted” (Isa 52:13). Consequently, the language of being “lifted up” alluded to his exaltation. Köstenberger, “The Glory of God in John’s Gospel and Revelation”, p. 109.

[78] Köstenberger, “The Glory of God in John’s Gospel and Revelation”, p. 111.

[79] Köstenberger, “The Glory of God in John’s Gospel and Revelation”, p. 108.

[80] Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, p. 98.

[81] Consequently, while the term *paraclete* has been translated variously as comforter (NKJV), advocate (NRSV), counselor (NIV) and Helper (ESV), Brown importantly clarifies, “No one translation ... captures the complexity of the functions.” Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, p. 1137.

[82] Köstenberger, “The Glory of God in John’s Gospel and Revelation”, p. 119.

References

Accordance 9.2.1 Bible Software. (2012) *New Revised Standard Version*. OakTree software Inc.

Achtemeier, Paul, J. Green, Joel, B. and Thompson. Marianne, M. “The gospel according to John” in *Introducing the NT — Its Literature and Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001, pp. 175-205.

Barrett, C. K. *The Gospel According to St. John. An introduction and commentary and notes on the Greek text*. 2nd ed. London: SPCK, 1978.

Bauckham, Richard. “The Johannine Jesus and the Synoptic Jesus”

<http://richardbauckham.co.uk/uploads/Accessible/Johannine%20Jesus%20&%20Synoptic%20Jesus.pdf> (accessed April 16, 2014).

Bauckham, Richard. *The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple: Narrative, History and Theology in the Gospel of John*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007.

Beale, Greg. K. “The Eschatological conception of New Testament Theology” in *Eschatology in Bible and Theology*, Edited by K. E. Browser and M. W. Elliott. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997, pp. 11-52.

Brown, R.E. *The Gospel According to John*. 2 vols. New York: Doubleday, 1966.

Bruce, F. F. *The Gospel of John*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983.

Carson, Donald A. *Jesus the Son of God: a Christological Title Often Overlooked, Sometimes Misunderstood, and Currently*

Disputed. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012.

Carson, Donald. A. *The Gospel According to John*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991.

Carson, Donald. A. "John and the Johannine Epistles" in *It is Written: Scripture Citing Scripture; Essays in Honour of Barnabas Lindars, SSF*, Edited by D. A. Carson and H. G. M. Williamson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, pp. 245-64.

Culpepper, R. A. "The Plot of John's Story of Jesus." *Interpretation* 49 (1995), pp. 347-358. <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.csu.edu.au/docview/202704693?accountid=10344> (accessed April 17, 2014).

Harrington, Daniel J. *John's Thought and Theology: An Introduction*. Delaware: Michael Glazier Inc, 1990.

Keener, Craig .S. *The Gospel of John. A Commentary*. Peabody: Hendrickson, 2003.

Köstenberger, Andreas. J. "The Glory of God in John's Gospel and Revelation."

<http://www.biblicalfoundations.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/The-Glory-of-God-Chapter-4.pdf> (accessed May 2, 2014).

Köstenberger, Andreas. J. "John" in *Commentary on the New Testament use of the Old Testament*. Edited by Greg. K. Beale and Donald. A. Carson. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007, pp. 415-512.

Kovacs, Judith L. "'Now shall the ruler of this world be driven out': Jesus' Death as Cosmic Battle in John 12:20-36." *JBL* 114 (1995), pp. 227-247. DOI: 10.2307/3266937

Lee, Dorothy, A. "The Gospel of John" in *The New Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary on the Bible*. Edited by B.R. Gaventa and D. Petersen. Nashville: Abingdon, 2010, pp. 709-734.

Lee, Dorothy. A. "Paschal Imagery in the Gospel of John: A Narrative and Symbolic Reading." http://ark.divinity.edu.au/pluginfile.php/17291/mod_resource/content/1/Passover%20Imagery%2C%20DLee.pdf (accessed March 5, 2014).

Lincoln, Andrew. *The Gospel According to St John*. London: Continuum, 2005.

Merriam-Webster Dictionary. "Kairos." Last modified June 13, 2011. Accessed April 17, 2014. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/kairos>

Morgan-Wynne, J. *The Cross in the Johannine Writings*. Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2011.

Mounce, W. D. *Basics of Biblical Greek* (3rd ed). Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2009.

Ridderbos, Herman. *The Gospel of John: a Theological Commentary*. Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans (Kindle e-book).

Westerman, Claus. *The Gospel of John in the Light of the Old Testament*. Translated by Siegfried. S. Schatzmann. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998.

Witherington, B. *John's Wisdom: A Commentary on the Fourth Gospel*. Louisville: Westminster, 1995.

Copyright © 2025 Lifemessenger Inc.

www.lifemessenger.org

Facilitating biblical teaching & thinking for church & culture

REPRINT AGREEMENT: Duplication and re-transmission of this writing is permitted provided that complete source and website information is included