# How Yahweh Finds Embodiment in John’s Jesus

# John Goldingay

The *logos* was there at the beginning, at creation and before creation (John 1:1). If you were philosophically knowledgeable and you heard John refer to the *logos*,you might take him to be speaking of a rational principle immanent in the world. John’s subsequent references to God’s *logos* or Jesus’s *logos*, however,would rather suggest that you should think of the prophetic word of God or of Jesus’s message, and if you had read Acts, you might think of the message, the *logos*, about Jesus. One way or another, though, this is a *logos* that goes back to the beginning, and it is then a *logos* that “became flesh” and was “full of grace and truth” (1:14). Thus “the law was given through Moses—grace and truth came about through Jesus Messiah” (1:17).

That statement should seem one of the more eyebrow-raising ones in this eyebrow-raising Gospel. It would surely be a statement to make its Jewish or God-fearing listeners think, because if they have been listening to the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings over the years, they will know that grace and truth were characteristics that Yahweh claimed in speaking to Moses at Sinai, and that the rest of these Scriptures incorporate multiple reaffirmations of that description. At Sinai, Yahweh describes himself more completely as “God compassionate and gracious, long-tempered and big in commitment and truth” (Exod 34:6). There would be nothing to raise Moses’s eyebrows in that statement, because it describes the way Yahweh has been behaving towards the Israelites in Exodus 32–33.

Although the Scriptures do many times take up those words in Yahweh’s self-revelation in Exodus 34:6 (e.g., Neh 9:17; Pss 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2), they much more often take up an equivalent to John’s more succinct phrase “grace and truth.” The equivalent Hebrew phrase, *ḥesed wā′ĕmet*, often features in English translations as “steadfast love and faithfulness” (e.g., Gen 24:27; 32:10[11]; 2 Sam 2:6; 15:20; 1 Kgs 3:6; Pss 25:10; 40:10–11[11–12]; 57:3, 10[4, 11]; 61:7[8]; 86:15; 89:14[15]; 115:1; 138:2). “Faithfulness” translates *′ĕmet*, which denotes truth in the sense of truthfulness. “Steadfast love” is more complicated, as is suggested by the varying English translations of the Hebrew word, *ḥesed*. Constant love, loving kindness, kindness, mercy, or simply love are all attempts to translate *ḥesed*. It denotes the commitment that someone shows when they have no reason to make a commitment (so it overlaps with grace, John’s word) or when the person to whom they show it has forfeited all right to it (so it overlaps with mercy, the Septuagint’s word). In my view “commitment” is the nearest English equivalent. But given that John never refers to mercy, and that “grace” features prominently in Christian parlance “grace and truth” is a fair equivalent of *ḥesed wā′ĕmet*. It does deserve noting that as well as never referring to mercy, only in 1:14–17 does John refer to grace, though he often talks about truth (e.g., 8:32; 14:6; 17:17). He prefers to speak about love (e.g., 3:16; 13:1; 15:9), light (1:4–9; 8:12; 9:5), and judgment (!) (5:22; 9:39; 12:31). In words, then, the Scriptures and the Gospel differ. But in substance, they compare.

And steadfast love and faithfulness or commitment and truthfulness or grace and truth do sum up the character of Yahweh. To say that the *logos* became flesh, and as such was full of grace and truth, is therefore to say that the Jesus who had become flesh was someone who was like Yahweh in his essential nature.

Now Jesus can issue the challenge or rebuke, “you people search the Scriptures… and they testify about me” (5:39). Occasionally they testify about him by promising the coming of a new David (we will consider John 10 in due course), but John’s opening paragraphs point in a different direction for this testimony. Those opening paragraphs invite his readers to see Jesus not as a new David but as the embodiment of God, of the God of Israel, of God as Israel’s Scriptures speak of him. And the Scriptures testify more widely and deeply of Jesus in their talk about Yahweh than they do in their talk about David. While Jesus made a point of distinguishing himself from the Father, he also declared that the Father was in him (10:38). People who saw him saw the one who sent him (12:45). They saw the Father (14:9). His accusers who said he was implying that he was equal to God (5:18) were onto something. In retrospect, his followers realized that he was indeed the embodiment of God. At the time, they hadn’t realized that “the arm of the Lord [had] been revealed” in him (12:38). But it had been. As he himself puts it a page later, it is in the process that would lead to his death that “God has been glorified in him” (13:31).

If we start, then, from the fact that Jesus is the embodiment of the God who is grace and truth, that he is the Son of God, that he and the Father are one, it should enable us both to see things about Jesus and to see things about that God, about Yahweh. We will not be surprised to find that there are things that the scriptural account of Yahweh helps us to see about John’s Jesus, and that there are things that John’s account of Jesus enables us to see in the scriptural account of Yahweh. To put it another way, one can approach John and the Scriptures in an intertextual fashion. There may be only a little by way of the intertextuality that spots allusions to the Scriptures in John (once again, John 10 will be a standout example). But there will be more of the kind of intertextuality that perceives things such as neither the Scriptures nor John were conscious of, but perceives things about Yahweh and about Jesus through setting the Scriptures and John alongside each other.

So how did John’s Jesus show himself as like Yahweh? We will approach this question by considering what Yahweh was like as the God of grace and truth. First, Israel’s story is, all the way through, a story of God’s grace and truth. Second, this story is then the context for accounts of the speaking in the Torah in which God expresses his grace and truth in laying down his expectations of his people’s relationship with him in worship and everyday life, expectations that express his vision for their life but also make allowance for their stubbornness. That is an expression of grace and truth, too. So, thirdly, is his speaking through prophets. Through them he directly confronts his people with warnings about where their stubbornness will lead, and with promises about where his grace will lead. Fourth, in the Psalms his grace and truth find expression in his openness to his people’s protests about their experience as well as their enthusiasm for his generosity and championing.

To that portrait of grace and truth, at each point we may juxtapose what John’s Jesus was like.

## Working and Not Giving Up

First, running through and fundamental to the scriptural story is the fact that Yahweh was committed to Israel. It is key to the framework of the Scriptures. It is expounded from the beginning in the Torah and the Former Prophets and it is reaffirmed at the end in the works that close the Writings in the usual Jewish order, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Chronicles. The Scriptures do start with Yahweh as the creator of the entire world, but they focus on Yahweh’s involvement with Israel. He initiated that involvement with Israel’s ancestors, made promises to them of increase and a land and blessing, and fulfilled those promises. Israel’s response to him was at best patchy, and he thus found himself in an up and down relationship with them that made no progress through their story, from Abraham and Sarah through Moses and Joshua, Saul and David, Hezekiah and Josiah, Joshua and Zerubbabel, Ezra and Nehemiah. Eventually the story stops rather than finishes, as if there could have been another series of the drama, but another series didn’t get made.

How does John’s Jesus embody this Yahweh? John begins with creation, like the Torah, with that midrash about the *logos* asserting not only that the *logos* was with God at the beginning but that that the *logos* *was* God (1:1). But like the Torah, John soon leaves creation behind, to focus on Jesus’s relationship with the Jewish people.

Ironically, John has the reputation for being the most anti-Judaic of the Gospels, but John’s Jesus comes to be revealed to Israel (1:31). “Come and see,” he says to the Jewish Andrew and Peter, “Follow me,” he says to Jewish Philip, and “truly an Israelite,” he says to his brother: “you will see greater things” (1:39, 43, 47, 50). “Do you want to be made well,” he asks a disabled Jew, and then tells him he can walk (5:5–9). He takes pity on five thousand Jewish people and feeds them, then urges them to come to him for real food on the basis of the fact that they can all be taught by God (6:45; cf. Isa 54:13). As Jews, they can know the truth and find that it makes them free (John 8:32). As long as he is in the world he is the light of the world (9:5)—the Jewish world. When he prays out loud to the Father as he bids Lazarus to come out of his tomb, he does so in order that the Jewish crowd may believe that God sent him, and many of them do (11:41–45; cf. 12:11, 17).

From the beginning, however, interwoven with this demonstration of grace and truth to Jewish people is a confrontational stance to Jewish people, such as an individual Jew like poor, clueless Nicodemus (3:1–10) and “the Jews” who oppose Jesus (e.g., 5:16–18). While there were many Jews who came to believe in him because he bade Lazarus come out from the tomb and Lazarus did, some of the Jews who were there went to tell the Pharisees (11:46). Apparently it was not so that they would also come to believe, but as part of the process that would lead to their working together with Gentiles to get Jesus killed (there is a parallel with Israelite leaders and ordinary people unconsciously working together with Gentile leaders such as Nebuchadnezzar for the downfall of Israel). Jesus came into this (Jewish) world for judgment, so that people who did not see might see and people who did see might become blind (9:39). He manifests grace and truth towards Israel in an open and in a confrontational way, and thus he operates as someone who is the embodiment of Yahweh. He is Godlike in his reaching out to the Jewish people and in his hostility to the Jewish people. He continues to relate to Jews in the same way to the end. From the beginning, he loved his own people who were in the world (1:11) and he loved them to the end, to the ultimate (13:1), in Yahweh-like fashion.

Isaiah 53:1 asks rhetorically “to whom has Yahweh’s arm been revealed?” Yahweh’s arm stands for Yahweh’s power, but Isaiah 52:13–53:12 sees Yahweh’s power embodied in a servant of his whom people dismissed. Reading the story of Yahweh’s relationship with his people in light of the rhetorical question in Isaiah 53:1 makes one read Israel’s story as an account of his people’s dismissal of him. But Yahweh promises that this will not be the end of his servant’s story, and the long haul of the story of Yahweh and Israel suggests that it will not be the end of Yahweh’s story, either. It fits that John will apply Isaiah 53:1 to Jesus (12:38). In my NRSV, John’s further comment that Jesus loved his people to the end (13:1) comes lower down in the same column of text. And for Jesus as for Yahweh’s servant and for Yahweh, the dismissal will not be the end.

Both versions of the story of Yahweh and Israel make the point. The Torah—Former Prophets narrative ends not with the 587 events of the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, and the blinding and deportation of King Zedekiah, but with the 562 event of the release and elevation of David’s descendant, King Jehoiachin. The Ezra-Nehemiah-Chronicles sequence similarly but differently looks beyond those 587 events to the 537 event of Cyrus’s declaring that Yahweh has charged him to commission Judahites to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. Yes, Yahweh will love his people to the end, and Jesus will do the same. “Every Christological affirmation has a theological correlate,”[[1]](#footnote-1)and every theological affirmation has a Christological correlate, too.

## Laying the Law Down

In the Torah, there is an essential relationship between God being at work with and for his people, and his expecting them to live in light of what he does, what he says, and who he is. The same is true of John’s Jesus. John’s Jesus is Godlike in laying the law down. There is another, slightly more puzzling similarity. When the Hebrew Scriptures tell Yahweh’s story, it is Yahweh’s followers who tell it. It is not Yahweh’s memoir. Similarly, in John it is not Jesus who tells his story, but one of his followers who does so. It is also not a memoir. But in the Torah, much of the time Yahweh himself speaks to lay the law down, and in John, Jesus speaks to lay the law down. Yahweh’s story and Jesus’s story work by having the people who listen to them use their imagination, but the storytellers also work by quoting Yahweh’s biddings and quoting Jesus’s biddings in a way that puts their listeners close to being Yahweh’s addressees and Jesus’s addressees, with results that are often uncomfortable.

“I am Yahweh your God who got you out of the country of Egypt, from a household of servants. There will not be other gods for you, over against me ” (Exod 20:2–3). “You are to be sacred people, because I, Yahweh your God, am sacred” (Lev 19:2). “Listen, Israel: Yahweh our God, Yahweh one” (the Hebrew clause or clauses have no verb, and it is hard to know where to put a verb or two to make an English sentence out of it). “You will commit yourselves to Yahweh your God with all your mind, and with all your spirit, and with all your energy” (Deut 6:4–5). In contrast to Exodus and Leviticus, admittedly, in Deuteronomy it is mostly Moses speaking and referring to Yahweh in the third person.

The logic in the Torah is not that people are to live a certain way, and then will earn the right to belong to Yahweh, as if law comes before gospel. It’s that Yahweh has lived in a certain way in relation to them, and has earned the right to expect them to live a certain way. Each of those three versions of what he expects, in Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy, are the headlines for a spelling out of these expectation in what follows them. The first leads into commands about abjuring the manufacture of images, keeping Sabbath, revering parents, telling the truth, resisting the temptation to want someone else’s spouse, being generous rather than grasping with your property, loving people you could be tempted to hate, and so on. But the Exodus headline speaks of how Yahweh’s action came first. Indeed, there is hardly any expression of expectation in the entirety of Genesis 1 to Exodus 19. It’s all about Yahweh’s action, towards people who are often stupidly resistant. Expectation only follows the action. The second headline, in Leviticus 19, leads into some similar commands, and some complementary ones relating to matters such as the sacredness of worship, honesty, fairness in the community court, and loving the people towards whom you might be inclined to harbor resentment. The third headline, in Deuteronomy, leads into some commands that Jesus directly takes up, not in John but in Matthew 4 and Luke 4.

In Matthew and Luke, that story of Jesus needing to quote Deuteronomy leads soon into the Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon on the Plain, but there is no such block of teaching early on in John. John focuses on Jesus’s direct dealings with people who are often also stupidly resistant, as he looks for people who are sensible enough to trust in him. It is a theme that also runs through the Former and Later Prophets, because Israel found it hard to live life on that basis.

John’s Jesus talks about expectations not at the beginning of his story but when he knows that he has more or less completed his task in relation to his people. “If I have washed your feet, as lord and teacher, you ought to wash one another’s feet, too. Because I’ve given you an example, so that you should also do as I have done to you” (13:14–15). To this implausible requirement he adds that they should love one another as he has loved them (13:34). That expectation corresponds to Yahweh’s expectation that Israelites should show mutual commitment and concern. But there is a novelty in Jesus’s formulation, in his anticipating their following his example of love. Perhaps Peter perceives the horrifying nature of this expectation, given that he immediately changes the subject (13:36).

Like Yahweh, then, Jesus lays the law down in terms that find limited response. Keep my commandments, keep my word, he keeps saying (14:15, 21, 23, 24; 15:7, 10, 12, 14, 17), just like Yahweh. He's disappointed that it doesn’t work, but he’s not surprised (16:32), and that’s like Yahweh, too. Yahweh’s first set of teachings, in Exodus, leads into an account of his people’s flouting his first commands (Exod 32). And it’s after this episode that he offers his self-revelation as “Yahweh, God compassionate and gracious, long-tempered and big in commitment and truth” (Exod 34:6). The revelation goes on less comfortably. While he does “carry” people’s wrongdoing” (the literal meaning of the word conventionally translated “forgive”), “he definitely does not treat people as innocent” (Exod 34:7). Perhaps the implication is that they must repent if they are to have their wrongdoing carried (synagogue worship makes this inference), or that they will still pay a price for their wrongdoing (as Exodus implies, and David’s story shows). The sets of teaching in Leviticus and Deuteronomy close with hair-raising threats of the consequences of such flouting (Lev 26; Deut 28–29). Fortunately, the story in the Hebrew Scriptures shows that Yahweh’s bark is regularly worse than his bite. Is that also true of Jesus (John 15:4)?

## Threatening and Promising

The Latter Prophets (approximately Isaiah to Malachi) spend their time being confrontational. Through them, Yahweh is either critiquing Israel—especially its leaders, its pastors, its heads of families, and its other prophets— when things are going well, for their politics, their theology, and their indulgence, and warning them that they are going to pay a price for their waywardness. Or when things are going badly, he is promising them that he has not finished with them, contrary to the way things look and to the gloomy expectations they not unreasonably have. A time of *shalom* will come, a time when Yahweh makes Jerusalem a glorious city, when a Davidic king reigns there, when he himself betroths the nation as bride again, when he renews his covenant, when the empires no longer control them, when he rebuilds his sanctuary among them, when they see such blessing that the nations will come to them and ask if they can join them, when he brings a change to the way they work as human beings that means they worship him and serve him in accordance with the Torah.

Either way, Yahweh is unfailingly confrontational. He never lets them settle where they are. That’s why he commissions prophets, actually. Their vocation is never to confirm the way people are thinking. It is always to challenge it.

John’s Jesus is also unfailingly confrontational and never lets people settle where they are. He tackles them antagonistically when they are being positive and think that they are serving God and that they are responding positively to him. “Stop making my Father’s house a market place” (2:16). “You worship what you don’t know. We worship what we know” (4:22). “Unless you see signs you won’t believe” (4:48). “You don’t have God’s love in you” (5:42). “You’re only looking for me because I provided you with food” (6:26). “One of you is a devil” (6:70). “None of you keeps the law” (7:19). “You judge by human standards” (8:15). “Why do I speak to you at all?” (8:25). “You are from your father the devil” (8:44). “Do you now believe?” (16:31).

He also meets them head on when they look as if they need their horizon broadened and their hopes raised. “No one who comes to me will ever be hungry” (6:35). “Anyone who believes in me will have eternal life. I will raise him up at the last day” (6:40). “Anyone who follows me will walk in the light” (8:12). “You will know the truth and the truth will free you” (8:32). “People who believe in me will live, even though they die” (11:25). “I go to prepare a place for you” (14:3). “I will not leave you orphaned” (14:18). “The Holy Spirit will teach you everything” (14:26). “Peace I leave with you” (14:27). “Ask and you will receive” (16:24).

In connection with the two-sided confrontational stance that both Yahweh and Jesus take to their people, Ezekiel 34 and John 10 are intriguing. The New Testament never quotes Ezekiel, but Revelation could not exist without it, and perhaps neither could John 10. The context in Ezekiel is the aftermath of the Babylonian destruction of the temple and the city of Jerusalem in 587, its people’s subjugation, the transportation of its king and many of the Judahite people, and the flight into self-imposed exile of many others. Yet the context in Ezekiel 33 is also a conviction on the part of the people who remain that Abraham’s once having gained possession of the land surely means that they can regain it. This two-sided context is one for Yahweh to manifest his two-sided confrontational stance. No, the disaster is not the end. No, their conviction that they can regain possession of the land is not realistic—for religious and ethical reasons.

While the problem is not only the people’s leadership, the problem of its leadership is central to the people’s predicament. Given the unreliable nature of Israel’s shepherds, in Ezekiel 34 Yahweh declares that he will shepherd Israel himself: seek them out, rescue them, feed them, bind up their broken limbs. He indeed makes clear that the problem is not only the people’s leadership but also the people themselves: he will also judge between sheep and sheep. Yet he also says that he will set up a new David over them as their shepherd. So he is ambiguous about how this shepherding will work. “I will shepherd my sheep” (34:11–16). But also, “I will set up over them one shepherd and he will shepherd them, my servant David. He is the one who will shepherd them. He will be a shepherd for them” (34:23). So will Yahweh shepherd them, or will a new David?

The ambiguity of Yahweh’s words suits John 10. Here, too, Jesus confronts Israel’s spiritual leaders. And “while this discourse contains no direct Old Testament citations, it nevertheless draws on the extensive scriptural imagery for both God and the king as Israel’s shepherd.”[[2]](#footnote-2) In Ezekiel 34, Yahweh is Israel’s shepherd, and the king is also Israel’s shepherd. In John 10 Jesus is the good shepherd, fulfilling the role that Yahweh promised that he would fulfill and that he also promised that a new David would fulfill. It is in that context that Jesus declares that he and his Father are one, and that no one will take his sheep away from him (John 10:29–30).

## Approachable and Interactive

The Psalter comprises 150 indications of Yahweh’s being easy to talk to. In 130 or so of these psalms, Israelites address Yahweh; in the remaining ones, Yahweh addresses them or one Israelite addresses others. I assume the Israelites were not deceiving themselves in supposing that they were free to tell Yahweh how much they admired him, how grateful they were for what he had done for them, and how agonized and puzzled they were when he let things go wrong in their lives.

The nature of such prayers and praises (like the ones we use in church) is not usually to incorporate Yahweh’s possible responses (the same applies to Lamentations). But the prayers and praises incorporate many references to Yahweh’s having been known to respond and to the expectation that he will respond, and occasionally they include a response: Psalm 12 is an example. More thought-provoking are interactive moments outside the Psalter, when people protest to Yahweh in psalm-like manner, and in response he gives as good as he gets. “Serving you is pointless.” “Okay, I’ll give you a bigger job” (Isa 49:4–6). “Why don’t you pay any heed to us in our need?” “You’ve got some hutzpah, considering the way I’ve been reaching out to you” (Isa 63:15–65:7). Most spectacular is the book of Job, where Job works hard for chapter after chapter, trying to needle Yahweh into responding to him, and eventually succeeds in provoking a rejoinder that makes him wish he had kept his mouth shut, yet which becomes a rejoinder that congratulates him for speaking the truth (Job 38–42).

In the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings, there is no doubt that Yahweh is Lord, but there is also no doubt that he is approachable. He is the monarch living in a castle at the top of the hill, but the drawbridge is down, no security men stand on guard, and you can go and knock on his door. He may respond uncompromisingly, but his forcefulness will be combined with faithfulness, and it may change your thinking in a way that you needed and that would never have happened if you hadn’t gone through the combative interactive process.

John’s Jesus is God-like in letting people come to him with questions and affirmations and in responding in ways that may challenge their presuppositions. “Where are you staying?” “Come and see” (1:38–39). “They’ve got no wine.” “What’s that got to do with us?” (John 2:3–4). “You’re a teacher sent from God.” “You need to be born again—you’re a teacher, and you’re so ignorant” (3:2–3, 10). “I don’t have a husband.” “What about the previous five?” (4:17–18). “Have something to eat.” “I have food you don’t know about” (4:31–32). “You shouldn’t be doctoring on the Sabbath.” “My Father is still working, and so am I” (5:16–17). “When did you come here?” “You’re just interested in gifts of food” (6:25–26). “Go to Judea so people can see you act.” “You can’t tell the time” (7:3–6). “This woman was caught in the act of adultery.” “The one among you who is sinless should be the one to start throwing rocks” (8:4, 7). “Abraham is our father.” “The devil is your father” (8:39, 44). “Who sinned, this man or his parents?” “Neither” (9:2–3). “You’re making yourself God.” “Haven’t you read Psalm 82?” (10:33–34). “Lazarus is ill.” “I’m staying here” (11:1–6). “She’s wasting money that could be given to the poor.” “Leave her alone” (12:5–7). “You can’t wash my feet.” “You’d better let me, otherwise you’re screwed” (13:8). “Show us the Father.” “You ask that, after all you have seen?” (14:8–9). “Now we believe.” “Really?” (16:30–31). “So you are a king?” “Those are your words” (18:37). “I can kill you or release you.” “You have no such power” (19:10–11). “My Lord and my God.” “Do you believe because you’ve seen?” (20:28–29). “What about him?” “That’s nothing to do with you (21:21–22).

Modern readers may find it a surprise that Yahweh is so accessible but not that he cab be combative in his responses. They may not be surprised that John’s Jesus is so approachable, but be shocked by the pugnacious nature of many of his responses. Like Yahweh, Jesus is approachable, but like Yahweh he is also mind-expanding, unsettling, disconcerting, enigmatic, mysterious.

The *logos* was God, but he became flesh and came to live among us. He was like Yahweh, then. He continued to work on his people and not give up on them. He laid the law down in a way that reflected who he was but made allowance for who they were. He set before them the existential and eternal dangers they were putting themselves in and the existential and eternal promises that he wanted to fulfill for them. He was always open to their approaching him but always prepared to mess with the framework of their thinking.

1. Marianne Meye Thompson, *The God of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Meye Thompson, *John*,220. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)