

WHO *IS* JESUS?

ALSO BY J. V. FESKO

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WHO *IS* JESUS?

Knowing Christ through His “I Am” Sayings

J. V. Fesko



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Who Is Jesus?

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To
Wally and Beth King

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Preface

Most preachers have favorite books of the Bible, and that includes me. For many reasons, the gospel of John is one of my favorites: it is rich in imagery, thick with theological significance, and bursting at the seams with a message that requires great meditation. I'm not implying that other books of the Bible do not bear the same characteristics; I simply have a particular interest in John's gospel.

I first seriously studied the book of John when I was in Scotland doing my postgraduate work. I wanted to study the Bible even though I was immersed in researching sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Reformed theology for my doctoral dissertation. John's gospel made a tremendous impact on me then as it does now.

I again took up my study of John during my pastorate, when I preached through the book beginning in the spring of 2008. One thing I tried to impress on my congregation was John's numerous and rich allusions and connections to the Old Testament. Far too many of us read the New Testament unaware of how often the authors employ the Old Testament. At the time I likened John's frequent allusions to the Old Testament to Joseph's coat of many colors. I told my church that Jesus regularly donned this beautiful coat of Old Testament themes, images, and passages to

show the people around Him His true identity—that He was and is the Son of God—God in the flesh—and the long-awaited fulfillment of Old Testament promises and prophecies.

I borrow, if you will, the idea of Joseph’s coat of many colors, though I am not arguing that there is an interpretive or exegetical connection between Joseph’s coat and Jesus’s continual references to the Old Testament. Rather, I simply borrow the idea because Joseph’s coat was a sign of his father’s favor—it was costly and beautiful. In a similar fashion, the Father ordained all of redemptive history to point to His Son; He prepared a rich and costly robe for His Son, and the Son put it on when He became incarnate and walked the dusty roads of Israel. He may have looked like an ordinary man, as many assumed that He was, but with the Spirit-wrought eyes of faith, God’s people could see this magnificent coat.

I hope and pray, therefore, that this little book will be a source of encouragement to the broader church. Too many believers are plagued by doubts about who Jesus is. Is He truly God in the flesh? John gives a resounding yes to this question! I also believe this book can serve as a useful tool for evangelism. Do you know anyone who wants to know who Jesus claimed to be? Is He merely a moral teacher, or is He God in the flesh? John’s gospel gives us a clear answer to this question, and I hope I have captured at least a glimmer of the glorious truth he sets forth.

I want to note that two sources were of immense help in the preparation of this book: D. A. Carson’s commentary on John’s gospel, and the *New Testament Commentary on the Use of the Old Testament*, edited by G. K. Beale and

D. A. Carson. Serious students of the Bible would benefit greatly from owning a copy of this wonderful commentary.

Thank you, Jay Collier, for inviting me to write this book, and Dr. Beeke, for your willingness to publish it. Thanks to both of you for your continued interest in and encouragement of my work. I owe thanks to Annette Gysen for her keen editorial eye and her helpful suggestions for ways to improve my unpolished manuscript. I am grateful to my family: to my wife, Anneke, and my three bairns—Val and Rob, my lads, and Carmen, my wee lass and all-around crazy woman. Thank you, dear family, for your love and encouragement and for your willingness to forgive me when I sin against you. I hope and pray, dear family, that you will meditate on the themes in this little book and that you will write them on the walls of your hearts.

I dedicate this book to Wally and Beth King—good friends, fellow servants in Christ’s church, and all-around fun people. From the first moment that you met me, you showed me love, warm hospitality, and friendship. From the first moment you met Anneke, you warmly received her and treated her like a long-lost friend. You have shown great love for my children, continually bathing them in care and attention. You have also continued faithfully to serve Christ’s church—Wally, in your service as an elder for nearly three decades, and Beth, in your continual sacrificial service to the church in whatever area you can. Our family is grateful for your friendship, and it is to both of you that I dedicate this book.

Introduction: Son of God, or Merely Man?

Who is Jesus? Is He the Son of God? Is He God incarnate? Is He merely a man that the church has mistakenly identified as God? These are some of the questions that naturally surround Jesus's identity. The church has claimed for nearly two millennia that Jesus is God in the flesh. Every Lord's Day, many Christians today profess the Nicene Creed, which was written in AD 325. As we recite this ancient creed, we join hands with our ancestors and collectively profess the deity of Christ, that He is "the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of his Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father; by whom all things were made." Such claims are catholic; that is, they are universal—Christians everywhere profess the deity of Christ. In spite of this universally confessed truth, there are often two types of responses.

The first type of response comes from unbelievers who deny key tenets of the faith such as Christ's divinity. The second type of response comes from the Christian believer who willingly affirms the deity of Christ but might be hard pressed to demonstrate it from Scripture. Such a person might rightly point to the opening verse of

John's gospel to prove the deity of Christ: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (1:1). But if he is asked to show other passages that demonstrate Christ's deity, he is stumped. He might rightly appeal to Jesus's miracles, such as when He walked on water or raised Lazarus from the dead. But often Christians appeal to these kinds of passages merely because they know that only God can do things such as walk on water or raise the dead—certainly no human being is capable of such feats.

Christians are correct in these conclusions, but what many do not realize is that there is much more to these passages of Scripture. Imagine rummaging through your attic and discovering an old gold coin. You mount the coin in a frame and hang it on your wall because you want an antique decoration for your office. You know it is a valuable coin because it is made of gold, it is old, and it is in good condition. You suspect that it might be worth a lot of money, but you do not investigate the matter further because you are content with your new office decoration. A few months later a friend walks into your office and notices the coin hanging on your wall and gasps. "Where did you get this coin? This is a 1931 Saint-Gaudens double eagle twenty-dollar gold coin! This could easily be worth over one hundred thousand dollars!" You knew the coin was valuable, perhaps worth a few thousand dollars, but you did not know it was *this* valuable. Such is the nature of our appeal to the miracles of Christ. They are certainly valuable and important pieces of evidence that establish Christ's identity, but most people do not realize how valuable they are.

Many Christians examine Christ's statements and actions and do not realize that they actually gaze on things that have roots that stretch back to the Old Testament and, as such, have great significance. What would people think if a politician today donned a top hat, a black suit, and sported a chin curtain beard, walked out onto the floor of the Senate, and said, "Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation"? Without knowing the actual identity of the politician, people would recognize that he was invoking Abraham Lincoln, the sixteenth president of the United States. Many Americans are familiar with Lincoln's famous Gettysburg Address, and they know of Lincoln's dress and grooming habits from pictures they have seen in various history books. Informed American citizens would immediately understand the politician's actions and would know that he was trying to connect his actions with the nation's history and cloak his policies with the historical legitimacy of a well-respected president.

While Jesus was not a politician, He conducted his ministry in Israel cloaked in what I call His coat of many Old Testament colors. He did not arrive on the earth devoid of a personal history. Rather, for ages God's people had eagerly looked forward to the day when the promised seed of the woman would crush the head of the serpent (Gen. 3:15). Old Testament prophets foretold of the Messiah; God foreordained events, people, and places to foreshadow the person and work of His Son. God the Father created a beautiful coat stitched together by the threads of His holy providence and made of different prophecies, promises, images, themes, and ideas

that would become manifest in His Son upon His arrival. Jesus walked onto the stage of history, donned this coat, and performed the script that His Father gave Him.

People who read the Bible with attention to Christ's Old Testament coat can see many familiar passages of Scripture with fresh eyes. They no longer behold merely an old gold coin but perceive an amazingly rare and highly valuable antique. They no longer view Christ's miracles as bare manifestations of divine power but as the fulfillment of Old Testament promises. Suddenly they recognize that the New Testament shouts from the rooftops, "Jesus the Messiah is here! God in the flesh has come to dwell among men! You can see and know this because He wears the coat of His Father—His coat of many Old Testament colors!"

One way to see the vividness of Christ's coat is to examine the "I am" sayings of Jesus in the gospel of John. There are fourteen places in John's gospel where Jesus says the words "I am," which sometimes stand alone as a title when He invokes the divine name for Himself. In other words, when Jesus says, "Before Abraham was, I AM" (John 8:58), He is taking for Himself the sacred name of Yahweh revealed to Moses at the burning bush (Ex. 3:14) and is claiming to be God. Other times Jesus invokes the words "I am" and then follows them with a complement—a word or phrase that completes His thought. He says He is the bread of life (6:35, 48); the light of the world (8:12); the door (10:9); the good shepherd (10:11); the resurrection and the life (11:25); the way, the truth, and the life (14:6); and the true vine (15:1). Each of these statements reveals something about who Jesus is, but they

chiefly reveal that Jesus is the great I AM. God in the flesh has come down to dwell among men and to seek and save the lost.

We should also note that John intertwines Jesus’s “I am” sayings with the seven signs of His divinity that he presents in his gospel:

- Turning water into wine (2:1–11)
- Healing a nobleman’s son (4:46–54)
- Healing a lame man (5:1–15)
- Feeding the crowd of five thousand (6:1–14)
- Walking on water (6:16–21)
- Healing the man born blind (9:1–7)
- Raising Lazarus from the dead (11:1–45)

Each of these miracles served as a signpost that identified Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah—the fulfillment of God’s covenant promises. Combined, the seven signs and the “I am” sayings present a rich account of Christ’s claims that He was indeed God in the flesh. While the seven signs are definitely worthy of investigation in their own right, my focus in this book is Jesus’s “I am” sayings.¹

In each successive chapter we will examine the fourteen different “I am” sayings of Jesus so that we can have a better understanding of who Jesus is and who He claimed to be. We will keep a close eye on Christ’s Old Testament coat of many colors so that we can have a

1. See Anthony T. Selvaggio, *The Seven Signs: Seeing the Glory of Christ in the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2010).

better and deeper understanding of His claims. In the light of the Old Testament, we will see Jesus in His biblical glory and recognize that we must fall down and worship Him as God in the flesh.