

Borrowing from Paul to Understand John: Using Barclay's *Paul and the Gift* to Probe the Circularity of Gift in the Fourth Gospel

Jeannine Hanger

Associate Professor of New Testament, Talbot School of Theology,
Biola University, Ph.D.

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Abstract

In response to John Barclay's momentous *Paul and the Gift*, many are exploring how grace is defined and deployed in other scriptural texts by making use of his taxonomy of the six perfections of gift—where “perfection” speaks of a quality of grace in its purest expression. Among these perfections, the *non-circular* gift—one offered without expectation of return—is notable for how it tends to align with the more modern, Western notion of gift. By contrast, gifts in the ancient world were circular: when gifts were given, reciprocity was anticipated. Barclay observes a quality of circularity in Paul's writings related to the “obedience of faith.” This article explores a similar dynamic of circularity in John's Gospel evident in John's theme of belief (1:12; 3:16; 6:28; 11:25; 20:31). Those who encounter Jesus are repeatedly invited into a believing response which suggests a quality of circularity. This response is particularly evident in the seven *I am* sayings, where John presents seven animated portrayals of what ongoing belief looks like in metaphorical terms. For example, respondents express belief by eating Jesus, the bread of life (6:51). As this study explores all seven animated metaphors, an analogous quality of circularity materializes, which is both similar and complementary to Paul's obedience of faith.

Keywords: grace, gift, I am, circularity, Paul, John

1. Introduction

“Amazing grace! How sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see.”

The opening lyrics to John Newton’s 18th century hymn draw attention to the notion of “amazing” grace, a reassuring concept for those who perceive their need for it. Many turn to Paul’s writings to understand grace in Scripture—and for good reason!—since they are teeming with it. He opens and closes most of his letters with “grace be with you,” and grace is included in weighty theological statements like: “it is by grace you have been saved through faith.”

John Barclay’s momentous *Paul and the Gift* has provided clarity to the definition and deployment of grace throughout Paul’s writings.¹ Barclay significantly identifies a polyvalence to the notion of “grace,” which he locates within the category of “gift.” He addresses this polyvalence by establishing a taxonomy of six “perfections” of gift—where “perfection” speaks of a particular quality of grace being drawn out to an “end-of-the-line extreme.”² In other words, to perfect these six facets of grace is to denote and describe each in their ideal or true form.³

These perfections of grace include its superabundance, singularity, priority, incongruity, efficacy, and non-circularity. Superabundance refers to the scale of the gift in terms of its size and even its extravagance. Singularity focuses on the posture of the giver as one who is good and benevolent. Priority refers to the timing of the gift: it is initiated by the giver and is not based on any prior obligation. Incongruity speaks to the gift offered without taking into consideration the worth of the recipient. Efficacy references the effect of the gift; does it accomplish its goal? The sixth and final perfection is that of non-circularity, a gift which is non-reciprocal. This is the “no-strings-attached” gift which does not expect any return.⁴ Together these form the rubric by which Barclay explores how both Paul—and significantly, his interpreters—define, understand, and apply grace.⁵ In the wake of this research, many have begun to utilize Barclay’s taxonomy of gift to evaluate its presence in other texts.⁶

¹ John Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015).

² Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 4. He borrows the term “perfection” from the work of Kenneth Burke. To illustrate, 67, he likens this to how we might speak about a “perfect storm.”

³ Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 67–75.

⁴ Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 70–75.

⁵ His particular focus is how Paul deploys *grace/gift* in Galatians and Romans.

⁶ E.g., Edward Adams, et al., eds., *The New Perspective on Grace: Paul and the Gospel after Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2023); Paul Lamicela, “Grace in Place of Grace: Perfections of Grace in Old and New Covenants,” *JETS* 66.3 (2023): 421–36; Charles Nathan Ridlehoover, “Matthew and the Gift:

Adjacent and not unrelated is the notion of grace present in the Fourth Gospel.⁷ Observe how the opening stanza of Newton's hymn about "amazing grace" connects more closely with the Gospels. Being lost and found hints at the prodigal son parable in Luke 15, while the blindness and sight metaphor resonates with Jesus bringing sight to blind eyes, such as in John 9. While it is true that Paul's preferred word χάρις appears infrequently in John, when we explore the broader concept of gift, its presence is prominent. For example, the notion of gift and giving is housed in one of John's most well-known passages (3:16), "For God so loved the world that he *gave* his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him may not perish but have eternal life."⁸ This is not so different from Paul's words in Romans 6:23, where "the *gift* of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."⁹

This brief study will make use of Barclay's taxonomy to focus primarily on one perfection of "gift" as it relates to the Fourth Gospel, namely the non-circular gift. According to Barclay, the non-circular gift is one which is offered without expectation of return; it is a gift which "escapes reciprocity." Barclay's significant observation about the non-circular gift is how it tends to align better with modern notions of the "pure gift."¹⁰ This diverges significantly from gifts in the ancient world, which tended to be more circular. In other words, when gifts were given, reciprocity was anticipated, and this circularity was an important way to foster social connection and relationship between two parties. Notably, this kind of circularity seems operative in Paul's presentation of the divine gift of Christ, which Barclay deems *not* non-circular.

Closely tied to this discussion about circularity is another perfection of gift which will also be relevant to address at the outset. Barclay observes that for Paul, a significant perfection of grace throughout Galatians and Romans is the *incongruity* of the gift of Christ. Christ is consistently portrayed as the gift offered to those who are unworthy. The notion of circularity enters the conversation when Barclay observes how the *incongruous* gift of Christ *does* expect something in return. He states, "Paul perfects the incongruity of the gift (given to the unworthy) but he does *not* perfect its non-circularity (expecting nothing in return)."¹¹ Barclay thus calls it an "incongruous gift that is strongly obliging."¹² This quality of circularity, he says, is related to an "obedience of faith." This is an important finding for how it corrects Christian interpretations of Paul which sometimes speak of grace as a "free" gift, or, a gift offered without

Forgiveness and Mercy as Matthew's Expression of Grace," *CBQ* 84.4 (Oct 2023): 686–703.

⁷ This article refers interchangeably to the "Fourth Gospel" and "John" as a simple way to denote the voice of the author/speaker responsible for the Fourth Gospel narrative, and does not reflect any assertions regarding authorship.

⁸ Although note the word used here is ἔδωκεν from δίδωμι. Also, all Scripture quotations in English are from the NIV unless otherwise noted.

⁹ The word used here is χάρισμα.

¹⁰ Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 74.

¹¹ Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 500.

¹² Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 500.

expectation of return. Barclay's work reveals that for Paul, a gift can be "unconditioned" without being unconditional.¹³

Therefore, this article will identify and briefly explore a similar dynamic of gift-circularity in John. This seeks to complement Paul Trebilco's work featured in the 2023 edited volume, *The New Perspective on Grace*.¹⁴ While Trebilco focuses on gift-circularity in the Farewell Discourse,¹⁵ the following will explore a quality of circularity playing out in the seven predicated *I am* sayings in John. Throughout John's narrative, Jesus makes seven *I am* statements, each accompanied by an image (or predicate) that suggests a kind of circularity. These statements include: 1. I am the bread of life; 2. I am the light of the world; 3. I am the gate; 4. I am the good shepherd; 5. I am the resurrection and the life; 6. I am the way, the truth, and the life; and 7. I am the true vine. My assertion is that each of these sayings present a quality of circularity as it pertains to believers interacting with "the gift" of the Son. As we inspect the circularity of these *I am* sayings, particularly as they together contribute to the notion of Johannine abiding, I suggest that this resembles—and in some ways even complements—Paul's circular "obedience of faith" that Barclay identifies.¹⁶

The following will ultimately consist of an exploration of the circularity of the *I am* sayings. First, however, we will look at how Paul identifies the Christ-event as an incongruous, circular gift. This will have set us up for our exploration of John's understanding of the Christ-event in conversation with Paul's. We will do this by surveying the notion of grace and gift in John, including a survey of χάρις in the prologue and John's use of δίδωμι. This will lead us finally to the *I am* sayings, where we will observe the elements of circularity threaded through each.

2. The Pauline Incongruous, Circular Gift of the Christ Event

To set up our focus on the *I am* sayings, let's isolate a common starting point between the Pauline and Johannine articulations of gift. One of the primary findings of Barclay's study is his recognition that Paul ultimately frames the Christ-event as gift:

¹³ Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 562. A gift is unconditioned when it is "free of prior conditions regarding the recipient," but it is unconditional when it is "free of expectations that the recipient will offer some 'return.'"

¹⁴ Paul Trebilco, "Gift and Reciprocity in John's Gospel," in *The New Perspective on Grace*, ed. Edward Adams, et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2023), 142–56.

¹⁵ Trebilco, "Gift and Reciprocity," 148n27, acknowledges his essay captures only some of the relevant passages.

¹⁶ I hope to flesh this comment out in the balance of the article. It stems from an observation made by my Biola colleague M. Elizabeth Lewis Hall and is perhaps a distinctive of John's notion of grace worth exploring further. I am grateful to Liz for providing feedback on an earlier version of this research. This article is the fruit of a Biola Faculty Integration Seminar held in 2023, where a faculty cohort got to spend a week with John Barclay discussing how his insights on Paul and gift/grace interact with our own respective disciplines. I am grateful for what I learned in this time.

“Christ’s death ‘for our sins’ (e.g., 1 Cor 15:3–4) is interpreted by Paul in the language of gift (God’s gift of his Son, or Christ’s gift of himself)...Grace is discovered in an *event*, not in the general benevolence of God, and its focal expression lies not in creation nor in any other divine gift, but in the gift of Christ, which constitutes for Paul *the Gift*.”¹⁷

Moreover, this gift, Barclay observes, is “experienced and interpreted as an *incongruous* gift.”¹⁸ As stated, incongruity describes a kind of gift given “without regard to the worth of the recipient.”¹⁹ Barclay observes how Paul’s understanding of grace is borne from his special mission to the Gentiles. This “incongruous Christ-gift” was given to all, regardless of ethnicity or “Torah-based definitions of value (‘righteousness’).”²⁰ Barclay identifies this incongruity of the Christ-gift to be central to Paul’s articulation of gift.

2.1. The Circularity of the Gift of Christ in Paul

While Paul’s writings emphasize a perfection of the incongruity of the gift of Christ (the Christ-event), Barclay observes that Paul does *not* perfect its non-circularity, stating, “The gift is entirely undeserved but strongly obliging.”²¹ In other words, the gift of Christ invites response on the part of recipients, and this response is one which “bears as its ‘fruit’ obedience to God.”²² Barclay is careful to explain that this is always a responsive obedience, “aris[ing] in conjunction with faith and gratitude as the answer to a prior gift.”²³ Moreover, in the life of the believer who receives and responds to this gift, Barclay states, “Paul imagines not just an imitation of Christ, but a form of participation, such that the believers’ new life is no ordinary existence, but the product of an impossibility, the resurrection of Christ.”²⁴ As a result, believers live with new “allegiances, dispositions, emotions, and actions” which he attributes to the miraculous life of Christ.²⁵ Believers who are both dead to sin and alive to God are both

¹⁷ Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 566.

¹⁸ Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 566.

¹⁹ Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 73.

²⁰ Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 565–66. Thus, the Christ-event is “*the definitive enactment of God’s love for the unlovely*.”

²¹ Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 500, 518.

²² Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 500.

²³ Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 518.

²⁴ Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 500. Barclay goes on (501), to speak of this participation as a new mode of existence, with new allegiances, dispositions, emotions, and actions. Believers “live to God” (Rom 6:11) as “walking miracles.”

²⁵ Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 501.

“like” and “in” Christ (Rom 6:11).²⁶ Thus according to Paul, the Christ-event is the incongruous, circular gift that invites a form of participation with Christ that amounts to a responsive obedience of faith.

3. Surveying Grace and Gift in John

John, for the most part, speaks of grace and gift in distinct ways compared to Paul. For example, Paul’s preferred word for “gift,” *χάρις*, features infrequently in John, occurring only four times near the conclusion of the Prologue. John’s preferred way of representing “giving” and “gift” is through use of the root word *δίδωμι*. This is not unrelated to *χάρις*. Barclay observes Paul at times using *δίδωμι* and *χάρις* in combination with one another (e.g., Rom 12:3; 2 Cor 8:1),²⁷ demonstrating how Paul recognizes a collection of terms which denote gift.²⁸

Despite these differences, however, John’s presentation of grace and gift carries similarity with Barclay’s primary finding about Paul’s notion of gift as the Christ-event. That is, while “John’s grace” is not precisely the same as “Paul’s,” the following aims to show that comparable to Paul’s gift as the Christ-event, John’s use of *χάρις* and certain appearances of *δίδωμι* and its cognates may be similarly equated with Jesus Christ himself as gift.

3.1. *Χάρις* in John 1:14–17

Directly after John proclaims that “the Word became flesh,” he declares that “we have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of *grace* (*χάριτος*) and truth (1:14).”²⁹ Interpreters of John have long wondered if this phrase “grace and truth” connects to passages like Exodus 34:6, where the LORD passes before Moses proclaiming his steadfast love and faithfulness.³⁰ Marianne Meye Thompson points out how LXX translators

²⁶ Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 501.

²⁷ Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 578. He also mentions passages where love features alongside *δίδωμι* and *χάρις*, together highlighting “personal and emotional dimensions of the gift relationship,” including Rom 5:2–5; Gal 2:20–21; 2 Cor 8:19–24.

²⁸ Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 582, uses “gift” and “grace” interchangeably in his study, but notes that “gift” reflects but one nuance of “grace,” while “grace” is sometimes unhelpful because of how it has been “over-determined” by Christian assumptions.

²⁹ Francis Moloney, “The Use of *χάρις* in John 1:14, 16–17: A Key to the Johannine Narrative,” *Pacifica* 29.3 (2016): 275, is friendly toward Bultmann’s rendering of v. 14d as a hendiadys, although he suggests the *καί* may be read as epexegetical, translating v. 14cd as “the glory of an only Son from the Father, full of a gift that is truth.”

³⁰ Edward W. Klink, *John*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 111; Moloney, “The Use of *χάρις*,” 272–73, acknowledges this long history of interpretation and its appeal, while highlighting its difficulties and problems. He points out the lack of philological match

sometimes render this phrase as mercy and truth, mercy and righteousness, or compassion and truth. And yet John prefers “grace” (χάρις) over mercy (ἐλεος). Why? It could reflect the increasingly common use of “grace” in the early church, or it could be the result of John’s own translation of the Hebrew text.³¹ If these do connect, then in essence this suggests the Son’s coming is “the ultimate expression and source of God’s covenantal faithfulness.”³²

John continues (1:16), “Out of his fullness we have all received, *χάριν ἀντὶ χάριτος* already given.” This passage has been translated in two primary ways: either as “grace upon grace,” to suggest a heaping on of more grace, or, as “grace in place of grace,” which hints at more of an exchange of graces. While both options are plausible, the latter rendering of *ἀντὶ* is by far the most common translation represented in parallel Greek literature.³³ This might settle the matter for some, however the difficulty with this reading materializes upon arriving at the parallelism introduced in v. 17: “For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” “Grace ‘in place of’ grace already given” appears to refer to this parallelism, which places Moses into a kind of comparison with Jesus, while “the law” is correlated with “grace and truth.” Thus, one grace being given “in place of” another is sometimes read as a replacement, similar to certain readings of Paul which view the law and grace in antithetical relationship to one another.³⁴

A more probable way to understand this Johannine parallel is to view it as synthetic.³⁵ That is, as Francis Moloney indicates, there are two gifts. The law given through Moses is the first gift of grace, and the second is the grace and truth given through the revelation of God through Jesus Christ.³⁶ Moloney describes how the latter gift does not disavow the former’s value, choosing instead to understand one grace as being “perfected” by the other.³⁷ As Klink

between a passage like Exod 34:6 and John 1:14d; the LXX does not come close to John’s wording for “*χάριτος* and *ἀληθείας*.”

³¹ Marianne Meye Thompson, *John: A Commentary*, The New Testament Library Edition (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), 34.

³² Klink, *John*, 111.

³³ Ruth Edwards, “XAPIN ANTI XAPITOS (John 1.16): Grace and the Law in the Johannine Prologue,” *JSNT* 32 (1988): 3–15.

³⁴ Moloney, “The Use of *χάρις*,” 274, sees this as an imposition of a Pauline approach to *χάρις* which is foreign to John.

³⁵ Klink, *John*, 116.

³⁶ Moloney, “The Use of *χάρις*,” 276–78. God is the “author” of both gifts. One is not nullified by the other, but both express the same reality of God’s gracious gift. Moloney suggests that John is presenting one as a “sign and a shadow” of the other, borrowing this imagery from Leo the Great (*Sermon 8 on the Passion of the Lord*: PL 54.341B).

³⁷ Moloney, “The Use of *χάρις*,” 278, joins Sherri Brown, *Gift Upon Gift: Covenant Through Word in the Gospel of John* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2010), in her approach. Both are very careful with their language to avoid any hint of supersessionism, emphasizing how Jesus comes to fulfill rather than displace what came

suggests, grace is not replaced so much as it is now fully expressed in the new covenant gift of Jesus Christ, stating, “*The progression of the prologue has moved from a God who has “given” to his people to a God who has “come” to his people.*”³⁸ “Grace and truth” are thus now embodied in Jesus Christ. Notably, this last mention of *χάρις* in the Gospel is associated with the first time the name “Jesus Christ” is introduced in the Gospel, as if to say, “[f]rom this point on, ‘grace’ has no meaning outside of ‘Jesus Christ.’”³⁹

This does not seem far off from Barclay’s understanding of Paul’s rendering of “gift” as the Christ-event. John’s prologue concludes with this comment that grace and truth came through Jesus Christ, and then states, “No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.” The Fourth Gospel proceeds to unfold Jesus Christ as the revelation of God. “We have seen his glory (1:14),” is later articulated as the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus (John 17:1–5);⁴⁰ it is, in essence, the Christ-event.

Since Paul and John are emphasizing particular themes, their deployment of grace (*χάρις*) may not be identical, and yet the Prologue’s function as overture to the Gospel would suggest that Jesus being “full of grace and truth” intends to say more than “here is someone with a gracious countenance.”⁴¹ Rather, it must imply that grace and truth embody all of who Jesus is and what he has accomplished on behalf of the world (1:12).

3.2. Δίδωμι in John

John refers to “giving” and “gift” frequently, up to ninety-three times in the forms of

before, drawing also on Daniel Boyarin, “The Gospel of the Memra: Jewish Binitarianism and the Prologue to John,” *HTR* 94.3 (July 2001), 280. Both Moloney and Brown thus translate v. 16 as “grace *upon* grace” as a way of emphasizing the goodness and graciousness of God’s gifts and to avoid “lessening the importance” of the first one. Thompson, *John*, 35, affirms that John emphasizes the abundance of God’s grace found through Christ to interpret it something like “one grace after another,” or “grace abounding.”

³⁸ Klink, *John*, 116, italics his. Lamicela, “Grace in Place of Grace,” brings more precision to this question by applying Barclay’s taxonomy to conclude, 436, that the grace of the new covenant is “greater” due to its superabundance, which “grounds its new efficacy.”

³⁹ Klink, *John*, 116.

⁴⁰ John Froula, “The Glory of Jesus as the Gift of Grace in the Gospel of John,” *The Downside Review* 129 no. 457 (Oct 2011): 1–13, writes about the glorification of Jesus on the cross as the gift of grace.

⁴¹ Although we will also explore his gracious countenance or, *habitus*, near the end of this essay.

δίδωμι,⁴² παραδίδωμι,⁴³ διαδίδωμι,⁴⁴ δωρεά,⁴⁵ and δωρεάν.⁴⁶ The following highlights several of the more theologically significant places where the notion of *giving* and *gift* appears.

We have already mentioned John 3:16, where God *gives* the son to the world so that those who believe may have eternal life. Shortly following this statement John narrates that God *gives* the Spirit without measure (3:34). The Father loves the Son and is said to *give* much over to him, including life (5:26), “all things” (3:35; 13:3; 17:7), authority to enact judgment (5:22, 27), works to do (5:36; 17:4), sheep/people/disciples (6:37, 39; 10:29; 17:6, 9, 24; 18:9), requests (11:22; 16:23), commandments (12:49), another helper (14:16), authority (17:2), words (17:8), the Father’s name (17:11, 12), glory (17:22, 24), as well as the cup of suffering (18:11). The Father-Son connection is prominent throughout John, and this repeated and ongoing notion of the Father giving to the Son only bolsters this connection.⁴⁷

Jesus is also said to *give* (δίδωμι) even as early as the Prologue, as Jesus *gave* the right to become children of God to those who believe in his name (1:12). The Son of Man *gives* the food which endures to eternal life (6:27), characterized as bread (6:34, 51) and his own flesh (6:51). Jesus *gives* eternal life (10:28; 17:2), he *gives* bread to Judas (13:26), he *gives* a new commandment to love one another (13:34), he *gives* peace (14:27), he *gives* the words of God to the disciples (17:8, 14), and he has *given* his glory (17:22).

The one occurrence where δίδωμι articulates giving in noun form—as a *gift* (δωρεά)—is in John 4, when Jesus sits down at Jacob’s well and asks a Samaritan woman for a drink. The woman calls out the impropriety of this request, since, John narrates, Jews don’t associate with Samaritans. Jesus responds by telling her (4:10), “if you knew the δωρεάν of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given (ἔδωκεν) you living water.” What is this “gift of God”? Klink observes that this is a gift *from* God and yet it is a gift rooted in the “Trinitarian identity of God.” The Father gives this gift of salvation through the work of the Son, which is ultimately realized through the Spirit, the “living water” (cf. 7:37–39) welling up to eternal life (4:14).⁴⁸

It is at this point we observe closer resemblance to the Pauline incongruous Christ-event as gift, albeit wrapped in Johannine terms and conveyed through narrative rather than in didactic

⁴² To give, grant: seventy-five occurrences.

⁴³ To hand over, deliver, or betray: fifteen occurrences.

⁴⁴ To distribute or give: one occurrence.

⁴⁵ Gift: one occurrence.

⁴⁶ As a gift; freely: one occurrence.

⁴⁷ Paul Trebilco, “Gift and Reciprocity in John’s Gospel,” in *The New Perspective on Grace*, ed. Edward Adams, et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2023), 143, highlights how John presents God the Father as giver and Jesus the Son as the gift. Barclay, 4, similarly focuses on divine gift-giving whereby for Paul, Christ is the gift.

⁴⁸ Klink, *John*, 238.

form.⁴⁹ First, the water of the Spirit poured into believers depends on the death and resurrection of Jesus—the Christ-event. As Carson suggests, the gift of God consists of “the eternal life that only Jesus can bestow.”⁵⁰ Second, within the narrative this gift of living water is marked by incongruity, as Jesus offers it without regard to the woman’s ethnicity, gender, or religious affiliation.⁵¹ Thus, similar to Paul, whose articulation of grace stems from his mission to the Gentiles, John’s Jesus extends salvation and abundant life (10:9–10) to Israel and beyond, as Jesus says, “I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also” (10:16). The incongruity of the Christ-gift so prevalent in Paul’s writings is present in John: God gives his Son to the world (3:16), and within the Fourth Gospel narrative, people are invited to respond.

4. The Circularity of the Gift of Christ in John

Turning to address the circularity related to the gift of Christ in John, Trebilco observes that this gift “results in obligations and can be thought of as strongly circular. The gift calls forth a response and it is obligatory that, out of reciprocity, the recipients of God’s gift of salvation should live in a certain way.”⁵² The seven *I am* sayings are spread across John’s gospel and present a particular kind of circularity understood against the backdrop of how these sayings operate as a collection in the Johannine text. More specifically, this collection of predicated *I am* sayings must be understood in relation to the unpredicated, “absolute” *I am* sayings (e.g., 8:24; 8:28; 8:58). Catrin Williams demonstrates that many of the absolute sayings in context carry echoes of the Isaianic divine self-declaration.⁵³ So, when John’s Jesus declares, “I am,” he is understood to be identifying with God, and therefore able to bring salvation.⁵⁴ This then

⁴⁹ This was not an exhaustive study of John’s δίδωμι language, since this part of the discussion is primarily concerned to demonstrate how John portrays the Christ-event as gift. Our survey stopped short of its appearance in the Farewell Discourse (Chs 13–17), where there is a higher concentration of giving language, culminating especially in the high priestly prayer. In this conversation Jesus has with his disciples, he discusses this abiding life whereby the Father, Son, and the “other Paraclete” participate with believers in ongoing, reciprocal relationship of presence, which is marked by giving and sharing life together.

⁵⁰ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 218; Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 95.

⁵¹ Thompson, *John*, 99.

⁵² Trebilco, “Gift and Reciprocity,” 148. He focuses his examination on the farewell discourse, where a triangulated circularity exists between Jesus and his followers as Jesus invites them to respond by washing each other’s feet. He also observes circularity in the high priestly prayer.

⁵³ Catrin Williams, *I am He: The Interpretation of ‘Ani Hu’ in Jewish and Early Christian Literature*, WUNT 113 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), sheds important light on how the absolute sayings are connected to monotheistic declarations like Deut 32:39 and the Deutero-Isaianic texts (e.g., Isa 43:10; 46:4).

⁵⁴ See also Grant Macaskill, *Union with Christ in the New Testament*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, 259.

connects with the predicated sayings, where each saying articulates how Jesus brings salvation through an invitation for believers to participate with him “out of the fullness of his own divine fellowship.”⁵⁵

To understand how the predicated sayings function more specifically, recall how in the Prologue John presents Jesus as the Logos made flesh who came to dwell among us, *revealing* the glory of God (1:14). This revelatory role carries through the seven predicated *I am* sayings as each one presents a metaphor through which Jesus reveals his identity and salvific role.⁵⁶ Because of their metaphorical quality, the sayings feature rich, relatable imagery, made potent because of how they resonate with familiar, significant backgrounds for hearers steeped in the Scriptures and Jewish tradition.⁵⁷ In this way these statements are invested with Christological, soteriological implications.

The following will address each saying in the order they appear. Jesus says *I am* the bread of life, the light of the world, the gate, the good shepherd, the resurrection and the life, the way, the truth, and the life, and the true vine. As we take each saying in turn, we will observe how each one carries an invitational quality—a *strongly obliging* invitational quality, if you will—as Jesus summons engagement with him using the sensory, embodied language relevant to the metaphor.⁵⁸

What we will observe in each of these sayings is that those who are receptive to Jesus’s invitation—within the metaphor and/or in the surrounding narrative—are those who participate with Jesus, and in doing so these respondents demonstrate belief. And to set up these sayings, I suggest that their *belief* or participation with Jesus is the element that represents the circular quality of faith in response to the gift of Christ. Within each saying we will also observe that

⁵⁵ Jeannine Hanger, *Sensing Salvation in the Gospel of John* (Leiden: Brill, 2023), 19. This is part of a rich discussion initiated by Grant Macaskill, “Name Christology, Divine Aseity, and the I Am Sayings in the Fourth Gospel,” *J. Theol. Interpret.* 12.2 (Fall 2018): 217–41, whose discussion of the *I am* sayings suggests the need to recognize how Johannine soteriology is shaped by the ontology of the incarnation.

⁵⁶ Hanger *Sensing Salvation*, 5.

⁵⁷ Hanger, *Sensing Salvation*, 5. This imagery and symbolism has been studied with great rigor over the years. E.g., Jörg Frey, Jan G. Van Der Watt and Ruben Zimmermann, *Imagery in the Gospel of John*, WUNT 200 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006); Ruben Zimmermann, *Christologie der Bilder im Johannesevangelium: Die Christopoetik des vierten Evangeliums unter besonderer Berücksichtigung von Joh 10*, WUNT 171 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 77–87; Craig Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995); Dorothy Lee, *The Symbolic Narratives of the Fourth Gospel: The Interplay of Form and Meaning*, JSNTSup 95 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994); Christopher Skinner, “‘The Good Shepherd Lays Down His Life for the Sheep’ (John 10:11, 15, 17): Questioning the Limits of a Johannine Metaphor,” *CBQ* 80 (2018): 97–113; David Mark Ball, *‘I Am’ in John’s Gospel: Literary Function, Background, and Theological Implications* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996).

⁵⁸ I have explored the embodied, sensory elements of each of these *I am* sayings with greater depth in *Sensing Salvation*. That study was more focused on the sensate elements of the text and how these spur the imagination of both ancient and modern readers to reflect on the more tangible qualities of participation with Jesus.

the unreceptive who do not engage with Jesus are those who demonstrate unbelief. Thus, it is in the context of these animated, sensory *I am* statements where we will observe the circularity of the gift of Jesus.

4.1. I Am the Bread of Life

In the first saying Jesus asserts four times in varying forms, “I am the bread of life.”⁵⁹ Jesus makes this claim before a selection of seekers during Passover season, a day after he feeds bread and fish to a hungry crowd (6:1–15).

This miraculous feeding leaves the people wanting more of Jesus, and when Jesus discerns that they are seeking him for superficial reasons, he exhorts them not to work for food that spoils but for food that endures to eternal life (6:27). This sets up their question (6:28), “What must we do to do the works God requires?”, to which Jesus replies, “the work—[singular]—of God is this: to *believe* in the one he has sent.”⁶⁰ This is one of many Johannine references to belief, presented as the ideal response to Jesus. It corresponds to the purpose of the Gospel itself, as the Evangelist writes “so that you might *believe* that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by *believing* you may have life in his name (20:31).

When Jesus claims, “I am the bread of life,” he issues an invitation, saying “whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever *believes* in me will never be thirsty” (6:35). In this first saying, the paradigm of belief that Jesus advances pictures believers as those who eat of Jesus. As Jesus develops this metaphor—from eating bread to ingesting flesh and blood, still the action of belief is portrayed as a kind of sensory participation with Jesus. The one who eats the bread of life is a believer who is said to “abide” (μένει)—to make his home in—Jesus, as Jesus abides in him (6:56).⁶¹ Within the narrative, there are many disciples who turn back and no longer follow Jesus after these words (6:66), while the Twelve declare their continued belief, and Peter affirms, “You have the words of eternal life. We have come to *believe* and to know that you are the Holy One of God” (6:68–69).

Returning briefly to Paul’s “obedience of faith,” recall how Barclay describes this as a belief which receives and responds to the gift of Christ as a form of participation, a new life made possible by the resurrection of Christ.⁶² The Johannine response of belief within the context of

⁵⁹ Worded as Ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ ἄρτος τῆς ζωῆς in 6:35, 48; slightly differently in 6:41, 51. Lee, *Symbolic Narratives*, 132, understands John 6:1-71 in four scenes with parallel patterns. The opening scene introduces the theme of faith and the closing scene displays divided reactions of belief and unbelief.

⁶⁰ Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John: Introduction, Translation and Notes*, 2 vols. AB 29 and 29A (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc, 1966), 1:264–65, notes that Jesus here is emphasizing faith: “having faith is a work; indeed, it is the all important work of God.”

⁶¹ Bruner translates μένω as a kind of home-making in 435–36, 881.

⁶² Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 500.

this *I am* saying pictures a type of salvific participation. In this first bread of life saying, belief is pictured primarily through the sensory participation presented in the animated metaphor—the one who eats of this bread of life lives forever (6:58). Eating is believing; to eat is to respond in faith. Moreover, belief and unbelief are displayed in the broader narrative as we observe how people respond to Jesus’s words. Many disciples grumble and desert Jesus (6:60–61, 66), while the Twelve remain, with Peter affirming Jesus as the Holy One of God (6:69).

Moving now to the six remaining sayings, a similar pattern will emerge as what we have observed in the bread of life saying. Jesus makes a claim about who he is—*I am*—and then he invites response in the form of sensory participation with him. Within the animated metaphor itself, sensory participation with Jesus is how faith is expressed. It is an obedience of faith that embodies the “work” of belief Jesus invites in John 6:29. The ways that people respond to Jesus within the narrative within the context of each *I am* metaphor will also present a divided response of belief and unbelief.

4.2. I Am the Light of the World

In the second predicated saying, Jesus states, “I am the light of the world” amid the Festival of Tabernacles, in a location recalling the nightly Temple lamp-lighting ceremony (8:20).⁶³ Readers of the Fourth Gospel will pick up on the thematic light imagery, notably prominent in the Prologue (1:4–5, 7–9). Jesus’s claim resounds with Christological force. Again, there is an invitational comment accompanying the *I am* claim. Jesus states, “Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (8:12). Those who respond with belief are those who follow Jesus the light, and as a result they never in the dark. However, notice an additional implication: in order to follow Jesus, the light, one must be able to *see* him.

In the next scene Jesus again calls himself the light of the world (9:5) when he encounters a man born blind. Jesus uses the dust of the ground to create light in the man’s eyes, the man washes in the living waters of Siloam, and he comes back seeing. Jesus has given him the ability to now see and follow the light, this man now an animated, embodied portrait of belief.⁶⁴ Near the end of the scene Jesus finds him and asks (9:35), “Do you *believe* in the Son of Man?” The man declares his belief and worships Jesus (9:38).

The circularity of this interaction suggests that belief is conceived as seeing the light and then continually following the light to stay near. By this, believers never walk in darkness and are always with Jesus. By contrast, there are some within the narrative who do not believe and whom Jesus declares to be blind, unable to see the light of the world for who he is (9:40–41).

⁶³ Keener, *John*, 1:739, comments that only God or his wisdom/Torah would make this public claim for himself. The context of this feast begins in Chapter 7 and appears to extend through 10:21. See, for example, Ball, ‘*I Am*,’ 93–94.

⁶⁴ Sherri Brown, “Jesus in Word & Deed through the Ritual Activity of Tabernacles in John 7:1–10:21,” in *Johannine Christology*, ed., Stanley Porter and Andrew Pitts (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 255–56

4.3. I Am the Gate, I Am the Good Shepherd

In the very next scene Jesus shares an illustration with the Pharisees about a sheepfold that resonates with the shepherds of Israel in Ezekiel 34.⁶⁵ In describing this scene, he makes two more *I am* statements. The first, “*I am the gate*” (10:7, 9), pictures the gate as a safe, legitimate entry for sheep in and out of a sheepfold. Jesus is that way through. By comparison the thieves and robbers climb into the sheepfold another way (10:1, 8), intending to steal, kill, and destroy. Jesus says, “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full” (10:10).

Jesus then declares, “*I am the good shepherd*” (10:11, 14). He calls his own sheep by name and leads them in and out of the sheepfold through the gate. This contrasts with thieves and strangers, whose voices the sheep do not know. Sheep only recognize, listen, and follow the voice of the shepherd. As Jesus the good shepherd leads the sheep through Jesus the gate, those who enter through him will be saved, as they avoid danger, find pasture, and enjoy abundant life. The metaphor takes a Christological turn when Jesus talks about the good shepherd laying down his life for the sheep (10:11). In the wider narrative this illustration results in division: some think Jesus is demon-possessed and pick up stones to stone him (10:31), while people continue to come to him and are said to *believe* (10:42).

Notice again the invitation inherent within this animated sensory metaphor. Jesus, the shepherd, calls his sheep by name. Hearing the sound of his voice, they respond by following him. This good shepherd who lays down his life leads them in and out of the gate that saves, providing security, freedom, and abundant life. There is a circularity involved in this relationship between sheep, shepherd and gate, as sheep follow and depend on the shepherd for every provision.

4.4. I Am the Resurrection and the Life

In the fifth *I am* statement Jesus makes the claim—“*I am the resurrection and the life*”—and then he embodies this claim by calling Lazarus from the tomb.⁶⁶ Here readers may recall the words of John 5:25–29, where Jesus declares that the time is now when “the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live” (5:25).⁶⁷

Within this scene, Jesus’s claim is followed up by an invitation to respond, when he says,

⁶⁵ Skinner, “The Good Shepherd,” 101, observes that 10:1–21 is best understood as Jesus’s response to the division that took place in the previous chapter over the healing of the blind man.

⁶⁶ Andrew Lincoln, “The Lazarus Story: A Literary Perspective,” in Bauckham and Mosser, *Gospel of John*, 224.

⁶⁷ See Hanger, *Sensing Salvation*, 127, for a more detailed presentation of the texts which contribute to this moment when Lazarus hears the voice of Jesus, the son of God and shepherd, and emerges out of the tomb to life (John 5:25, 28, 29; 11:43–44; 10:3, 4, 10).

“The one who *believes* in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by *believing* in me will never die.” And then he asks Martha, “Do you *believe* this?” (11:25–26). Martha responds with a robust declaration of faith, saying (11:27), “Yes, Lord, I *believe* that you are the Messiah, the Son of God.” When Jesus tells bystanders to take away the stone, Martha protests, highlighting the permanence of Lazarus’s condition (11:39): “But Lord, by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days.” Jesus reminds Martha, “Didn’t I tell you that if you *believe*, you will see the glory of God?”

Notice the multi-sensory quality of Jesus’s *I am* claim playing out in the narrative. The stone is rolled away, and then Jesus prays, all presumably while the stench of death emanates from the tomb. Then Jesus calls in a *loud voice*, “Lazarus, come out!” The dead man, Lazarus, *hears* the voice of the Son of God, and comes out of the tomb (cf. John 5:25). Much like sheep who hear the voice of the good shepherd call them by name and follow the sound through the gate, Lazarus is awakened from death by the voice of Jesus and rises to cross the threshold of the tomb into the bright of day. The sights, sounds, and smells of this moment punctuate Jesus’s claim to be the resurrection and the life. Many respond to this event with belief (11:45), while John reports that others go and tell the Pharisees about what happened. As the religious leaders confer, they reason, “If we let him go on like this, everyone will *believe* in him” (11:48). This prompts them to plot Jesus’s arrest and death.

Within the scene where Jesus utters this fifth *I am* statement, the invitation is for respondents to believe, and it is by believing that they see the glory of God (11:40). Lazarus hears Jesus’ voice and emerges from the tomb (11:44). Martha, Mary, and the bystanders see their beloved Lazarus alive again. Like the previous four statements, the circularity of this *I am* claim plays out through the belief of those who witness Jesus’s actions (11:45).

4.5. I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life

The sixth and seventh *I am* sayings are located within the Farewell Discourse (John 13–17),⁶⁸ when Jesus’s death is imminent and narrative time has decelerated. Jesus has gathered his disciples to give them final encouragement and instructions.

After washing his disciples’ feet and exhorting them to love one another in the same way, Jesus begins to discuss his departure, which the disciples find troubling. Jesus encourages their belief and goes on to describe the many-roomed home (*μονή*) he is preparing for them (14:1–3). This home is where the disciples will eternally abide with God in his household, but how will they get there? Jesus explains, “*I am* the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (14:6). By this Jesus is referring to his death, resurrection, and

⁶⁸ The exact boundaries and structure of the Farewell Discourse are debated. Perhaps the formal discourse spans 13:31–16:33, although 13:1–30 describes the foot washing occurring in the same setting, and the high priestly prayer (17:1–26) concludes the scene.

ascension,⁶⁹ which sets in place this forever-home with Jesus, stating, “On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you” (14:20).

There is a circularity in Jesus’s invitation to traverse along a path—Jesus is “the way”—which pictures him both as the route and the destination. Disciples walk along this path to the Father by belief in Jesus, this eternal abidance fostered by the Spirit who empowers them to express humble love and obedience to his commands.⁷⁰ Uniquely within this scene there is no divided response, since the only one who exhibits unbelief, Judas, has already departed the meal (13:30).

4.6. I Am the True Vine

This seventh, final *I am* saying is also embedded within Jesus’s farewell instructions. Jesus introduces a metaphorical picture that resonates with notions of Israel as a vine,⁷¹ as Jesus says, “I am the *true* vine,” while his Father is the gardener, and believers are the branches who abide in the vine (15:1, 5). This abiding relationship between vine and branches is reciprocal—they are said to mutually abide in one another, and yet the vine is critical for the branches’ flourishing. This abiding connection presents a more static picture of circularity, as branches simply stay where they are, fused to the vine. Branches and vine maintain a fixed posture of presence together.

Circularity is further animated when the vine-branch metaphorical connection takes on more human characteristics.⁷² Jesus focuses on the implications for his disciples by inviting them to abide directly in him and his love (15:7, 9). His words living in them will produce answered prayer (15:7), and fruit-bearing will bring glory to the Father (15:8). Obedience to his commands demonstrates their abidance in Jesus’s love (15:10). This, Jesus says, is what friendship looks like (15:14).

This final *I am* saying with branches and vine abiding together presents the high point of John’s abiding language. Μένω appeared significantly in the first bread of life saying to describe Jesus’s relationship with those who express belief by “eating” bread for nourishment. The picture has culminated in branches depending on the vine for life. Abiding in the vine pictures a reciprocal union that suggests ongoing presence with one another, described as a friendship and marked by obedience and sacrificial love.⁷³

⁶⁹ Klink, *John*, 616; Carson, *John*, 489.

⁷⁰ There is much more that could be said about the introduction of the other Paraclete, but for the purposes of this study we remain focused on believers’ circular response to the gift of Jesus.

⁷¹ Keener, *John*, 2:991–94. Psalm 80:8–16; Isa 5:1–7; 27:2–6; Jer 2:21; Ezek 15:1–8, etc.

⁷² Hanger, *Sensing Salvation*, 169.

⁷³ Hanger, *Sensing Salvation*, 173.

5. Conclusions

As Barclay observes about the notion of gift-circularity in the ancient world, when gifts were given, reciprocity was anticipated, and this circularity was an important way to foster social connection and relationship between two parties. Similar to the gift displayed throughout Paul's writings (where the gift is the Christ-event), Jesus is the gift in the Johannine narrative, and people are repeatedly invited to respond to him with belief.⁷⁴ Within the context of the *I am* sayings, John displays seven animated portrayals of what this ongoing belief looks like. Each presents a circular response of belief, a participatory action that fosters connection and relationship. To believe is to eat the bread of life, to see and follow the light of the world, to listen and walk through the gate as one hears the voice of the shepherd calling from death to life. To believe is to walk the path of Jesus, the way, and to abide in Jesus, the true vine. Together these create a picture of life-giving, reciprocal, interaction with Jesus, the Father, and the other Paraclete. The reciprocity inherent in these animated metaphors suggests a kind of circularity similar to Paul's obedience of faith, since Barclay also identifies a kind of participation operative in a believer's new life, one which is Spirit-filled and Spirit-empowered (Romans 8:10–11).⁷⁵

Perhaps the main difference between Pauline and Johannine circularity lies in how they choose to describe this "obedience of faith" in response to the divine gift of Christ. As Barclay observes, Paul emphasizes the need for believers to consider themselves dead to sin and alive to God (Rom 6:10). The power of the miraculous resurrection life of Christ is so magnificent and extrinsic to believers that their new life is "no ordinary existence," presenting themselves "as those alive from the dead" (Rom 6:13), and all because of Christ.⁷⁶

John similarly presents Jesus as the resurrection and the life through the raising of Lazarus, and later as one who himself is raised from the dead.⁷⁷ Aside from this, the *I am* sayings say less about considering oneself dead to sin and alive to God, and they do more to present animated pictures of flourishing life. And yet this is a life that is only possible for those who respond to the gift of Christ with belief. Such believers are pictured as alive and flourishing through these metaphorical depictions of union with Jesus. Ultimately John has laid out a *believing life*, where believers make their home with Jesus, and he with them.

In the final analysis, I suggest that the Fourth Gospel's emphasis on the abiding, believing life serves as a complement to Paul's circular "obedience of faith," with its own distinct display of a relational, dynamic quality of circularity. According to Paul, believers live a new life united with Christ in his death and resurrection (Rom 6:4–5), while John reminds us that believers

⁷⁴ John 1:12; 3:16; 6:28; 11:25; 20:31.

⁷⁵ Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 500–501.

⁷⁶ Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 500–501.

⁷⁷ The bread of life saying may also gesture toward death and life through the eating and drinking of Christ's flesh and blood.

have life in His name, abiding together in a loving household with Jesus.

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