A Study of the “I Am” Phrases in John’s Gospel

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ABSTRACT. This work is a brief analysis of one of the specific features of theological discourse in John’s Gospel, namely the I am sayings. These assertions are interwoven in the fabric of the Gospel and intended to prove out some certain facts regarding the role and identity of Christ. The article is based on the premise that the I am sayings are the genuine assertions of Jesus which John reproduced through the Holy Spirit and not sayings attributed by John (or the author of the book) to Jesus in order to achieve his purpose. Starting from this premise, the aspects regarding the cultural and religious background of the sayings are still important, but not decisive. The primarily role of the I am sayings is to reveal the person of Christ. Therefore I chose for the present study the seven I am sayings which appear in the majority of biblical commentaries, to which I also added the assertion from 8:58, probably the most important of all, in order to see the truths they reveal concerning the identity of Christ.

KEYWORDS: “I am”, sign, person of Christ, image, wonder

Even at first sight, for the non-critical eye as well as for the neophyte, John’s Gospel stands in sharp contrast to the synoptic Gospels. From the very beginning, the reader will notice that John’s prologue is very different from the narrative of Jesus’ birth told by Matthew or Luke. Nevertheless, the most striking features are to be found in the wonders performed by Jesus as well as in His speeches. John writes in chapter 20:30 that Jesus “performed many signs”, yet from all of them, he selects only seven. Most of them do not appear in the synoptic Gospels ei-
ther. John makes a certain selection having a clear purpose in mind, as mentioned in 20:31 where it reads: “But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name.” Not only does John winnow the wonders, but he also enriches substantially their purports, calling them *signs*. They are not simply wonders, but signs; therefore, they have a special meaning. As W. Barclay asserts, “the wonderful works of Jesus were not simply wonderful; they were windows opening on to the reality which is God.”¹ John wants to reveal the real meaning, which lies beyond appearances. That is why we can detect in John a special connection between wonders and speeches. For example, the healing of the paralyzed man in chapter 5 represents the introduction of a speech about Jesus, as being the life giver; the bread distribution is followed by a speech in which Jesus says He is the Bread of Life; Lazarus’ resurrection is closely linked to Jesus’ identity as the resurrection and the life.²

We have cited the two aspects, the wonders and the speeches, because they are essential for the study of the “I am” sayings. Reading John’s Gospel, one cannot ignore the fact that the “I am” sayings represent a significant feature of the Fourth Gospel. David Mark Ball writes that “like many of the major themes of John, they are interwoven in the fabric of the Gospel, gathering further meaning each time they occur. Because the ‘I am’ sayings also focus attention on the person of Jesus, each time the words occur they further reveal something of Jesus’ role or identity so that the narrator’s point of view first disclosed in the prologue is reinforced.”³ Thence the “I am” sayings are scattered throughout this whole Gospel, and they cannot be redu-

² “To John a miracle was never an isolated act, it was always a window into the reality of that which Jesus always was and always is and always did and always does.” Barclay, *John*, xxv.
ced to being a pattern or having a particular setting. Sometimes the statement follows the wonder (e.g. “I am the bread of life”) but in other instances it precedes it (e.g. “I am the light of the world” precedes the wonder of healing the blind man). Likewise, there are cases when the affirmation is interwoven with the wonder (e.g. the resurrection of Lazarus).

What is the role of these assertions? Leon Morris thinks that through the “I am” sayings, Jesus reveals “important teachings about his person.” There are a few questions, which appear repeatedly in the Gospel of John: “who is Jesus?”, “who are you?”, and “who is he that I might believe in him?” (John 1:11, 4:10, 5:12, 6:64, 8:25, 53, 9:36, 18:33). Thus, the whole Gospel is preoccupied to give an answer to these questions. Therefore, we can state that through the “I am” sayings, not only does Jesus Christ teach important truths about himself, but he also reveals his identity. If so, the primordial role of the “I am” statements is to reveal the person of Christ. This would fit very well within the clear expressed purpose of John regarding his Gospel, namely that everything he said targeted the revelation of Jesus Christ in order “that ye might believe” (20:31). Accordingly, Ball is persuasive when he declares that, inter alia, an important function of the use of ego eimi is soteriological. Of course, we can talk here about the problem of the addressees of the Gospel, whether it was written primarily for the Jews or for the Gentiles. We must not be one-sided in developing a theory, but it is obvious that the readers who were hinted at had some acquaintance to the Scriptures and the Jewish customs. From this point of view, the “I am” sayings acquire a new significance because through these, Jesus Christ is proclaimed as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. Yet, we cannot confine John’s Gos-

5 Ball, “I Am”, 283.
pel to a single purpose. It is addressed to the Jews, as well as to the Gentiles, Christians, or non-Christians.6

Returning to the “I am” sayings, it is generally accepted that there are two groups of affirmations: those in which the “I am” sayings are accompanied by a certain image (I am the bread of life), and those in which the “I am” sayings are self-contained. The latter have also been called “absolute” or “predicateless”.7 An important aspect in the study of these assertions is the speech similarity with the Greek translation of the Old Testament, which led to the opinion that the Old Testament represents the context, or the source of John’s usage of this formula.8 It is neither the place nor the aim of this paper to debate this particular context. Still, few remarks need to be made. It is inappropriate to say that every exegesis of the biblical text should include the study of the appropriate context. This does not mean that the study of the context is not important for the “I am” sayings. However, the perspective from which one approaches these assertions seems to be crucial. Are these statements of Jesus (writ-

6 I.-A. Bühner, The Exegesis of the Johannine “I am” Sayings, translated from Der Gesandte und Sein Weg Wunt, 2 Reihe (Tübingen: Mohr, 1977), 168-180, does not see the “I am” sayings as a revelation formula, but only as a self-introduction of a messenger: “Accordingly there are good grounds, both in cultural history and in the Fourth Gospel, for asserting that what we have in the ‘I am’ sayings is not a revealer or divine being disclosing himself directly in a kind of epiphany, but rather the one sent by God, the only one, the mediator, who stands obediently at God’s service and thus receives high legitimacy—as the ‘Son’.” Thus, according to Bühner, “John is using a messenger formula common in Ancient world. The ‘I am’ sayings should be understood in the context of prophecy.” Bühner argues that the Fourth Gospel has a “Sending Christology” and that this messenger formula is central to understanding John’s whole Christology.” Ball, “I Am”, 43.

7 Ball, “I Am”, 162.

8 For example, Morris, The “I Am” Sayings. David Mark Ball is especially concerned to demonstrate the Old Testament background of the “I am” sayings (particularly Isaiah). Some of the scholars who agree on the non-Jewish background are the following: Wetter and Deissman, who agree on Hellenistic background, and Bultmann and Schweitzer, who believe that the primary source should be found in Gnosticism and Mandaism.
ten by John, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit), or are these “I am” sayings the sayings of the Johannine Jesus? In other words, are the “I am” sayings the historical assertions of Jesus, recorded by John, or are they attributed by John (or the author of the book) to Jesus in order to achieve his purpose? If we go too deep into the study of the background, one can reach the conclusion that John simply assumed these types of affirmations and transposed them, giving them a Christian meaning and attributing them to Jesus. An even further step would be to believe that the “I am” sayings are the result of “a certain development within the Johannine tradition, one that is bound up with Christological centering and structuring.” By accepting the Jewish background, the whole issue does not change much. As we shall see later on, it is clear that Jesus, through his sayings, draws some references to Jewish concepts, beliefs, and expectations. Nevertheless, one can still raise the question whether Jesus himself made these statements or it was John who attributed them to Jesus. If these are the words used by John to characterise Jesus, than the context is essential. If Jesus was the one who made these affirmations, as recorded by John, the context still remains important but not crucial. As far as we are concerned, the “I am” sayings are the genuine assertions of Jesus which were recorded by John through the Holy Spirit. It is true that John, like all the evangelists, selected and adjusted his material, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, following certain patterns in order to emphasize certain aspects and themes, with the clear purpose that the readers should believe in the Son of God (see 20:31). Although such a view may not meet the expectations of many contemporary scholars, it is definitely neither irrational nor impossible.

Another problem arises at this point. How many “I am” assertions are there in John’s Gospel, and how many of them are just formal coincidences? David Mark Ball explains that “the

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9 The reference is to what critics generally call the “theology” of each evangelist.
belief that *ego eimi* in John is a formula leads to a further danger that where *ego eimi* in John does not fit the formula that has been assumed, it may be excluded from discussion.” There is always the danger of attributing to the text certain aspects which are not presupposed by it, or of excluding other aspects which seem to be inconsistent with a generally-accepted view. In order to avoid these tendencies, Ball takes into account all the occurrences of the “I am” sayings. Even if one wishes to avoid the above-mentioned mistakes, some may still believe that the “I am” sayings are only a common formula of addressing or identification. Therefore, in John 6:20, where Jesus presents Himself as the One that walks on water, *ego eimi* may have a deeper meaning as reference to the Old Testament, although this is far from being unanimously accepted. The same problem occurs in connection to the “I am” sayings in chapter 18 and particularly to Jesus’ arrest. Concerning the reaction of the soldier, who fell when Jesus identified Himself, the power of *ego eimi* should not be ascribed to the words themselves, because it would mean that the words have some kind of magical powers, but to the presence of Jesus Christ as divine. The danger to categorise these affirmations in too much details can be detected in Ball’s writings, which reveal that chapters 4:26 and 8:18 present in fact a subcategory of these affirmations with no image or absolute. However, two occurrences do not seem to be enough to form a category. The very fact that John’s sayings occur in such diverse contexts is a strong proof that John does not follow a preordained pattern. To make sure, he selects some *semeia* and assertions, which disclose the person of Jesus Christ in a special way, with the intended purpose stated in 20:31.

Ball though makes a useful distinction between the two categories by suggesting that the “I am” sayings with an image to

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10 Ball, “I Am”, 15. He also cites Schweitzer and Schultz who focus on the “I am” sayings with images. On the other hand, Dodd, Hener, Richter and Stauffer prefer those without images.

11 According to Ball, “I Am”, 74.
be seen “as emphasizing Jesus’ identity in relation to his role (for others),” while the other “I am” sayings should be seen as emphasizing Jesus’ identity in itself. In other words, while the “I am” sayings without a predicate are primarily concerned with who Jesus is, those with a predicate focus on what Jesus does.”

On the other hand, Ball himself admits that one cannot make such a strict division, because of the very close relationship between the two categories. However, one can easily detect the obvious connection between who Jesus is and what he does, in the sense that the things he does actually disclose his identity; at the same time, what Jesus really is, his very Self, can be seen in what he does. Therefore, the primarily role of the “I am” sayings is to reveal the person of Christ, as mentioned before. To quote Morris: “when Jesus used the ‘I am’ construction, he was speaking in the style of deity. ‘I am’ mostly represents the speech of the heavenly Father or of the Son.”

As we have already seen, the number of the “I am” utterances is far from being unanimously accepted. Therefore, it is difficult to make a selection based on certain criteria. It is interesting though that some seem to ignore these affirmations, in the sense that they do not set them apart from the main text or they select a certain number of sayings without mentioning the criteria they used for such a selection. Thus, in his commentary, Barclay does not include these affirmations in the category of the special features of the Fourth Gospel. On the other hand, W. Hendriksen and R. H. Lightfoot simply affirm that John is the Gospel of the seven I am’s or the seven self-declarations. The two also agree upon the seven signs: the bread of life (6:35), 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). We shall briefly present the “I am” say-

12 Ball, “I Am”, 174, 175.
ings for two reasons: first, because they appear incontestably in the majority of commentaries, and secondly, because the “I am” sayings are self-evident to all the readers of the Gospel. It is relevant to mention at this point that they belong to the category of assertions with an image. However, we shall also add the “I am” assertion in 8:58 to the cited assertions, because it is of great importance as the absolute “I am” saying. Its importance is disclosed by the Jewish reaction to Jesus’ teaching. Unfortunately, given the restricted space of this work, we can only give some hints regarding each I am saying.

I Am the Bread of Life
The assertion “I am the bread of life” (6:25) is included in the speech, which follows the distribution of bread. As we have already mentioned, the wonders are not isolated events, but signs, through which we can transcend visible reality. This speech serves perfectly for the accomplishment of this purpose. Morris writes that the section 30-40 of the discourse “is to be understood against the background of a Jewish expectation that, when the Messiah came, He would renew the miracle of the manna.” Indeed, as it emerges from the previous verses, 30 and 31, by the signs asked for by the Jews, they expressed their expectation that Jesus should perform the same signs as Moses did. In this context, the Lord’s words come as a reinterpretation of the Old Testament. Jesus Christ highlights two errors of the Jews: it was not Moses who gave the bread from heaven to the people but God; and not only did God give them bread in the past, but He also gives the true bread from heaven today.

Through the distribution of bread, Jesus demonstrated the power to sustain life physically. At the same time though, Jesus emphasizes his power to satisfy the real hunger, which is spiritual. The Jews, however, were interested only in the physical aspects of the wonder, which is why Jesus declares in verse 26

14 Morris, The “I Am” Sayings, 109, 110.
15 Morris, The “I Am” Sayings, 109, 110.
that the real reason of their presence there is not the sign, but
the physical act of eating.

The way the Samaritan woman asks Jesus for the water of
life, without being aware of its significance, the Jews ask Jesus
for the bread of life. It is at this point that Jesus does not only
speak about the bread of life, but actually identifies himself to
it. His “I am” saying is a solemnly emphatic statement, and in
this context it discloses his divinity.16 Lindars also believes that
this saying constitutes a self-revelation.17 As for Ball, he main-
tains that with these words “Jesus claims that the ‘authentic’
sign which they seek is actually fulfilled in him.”18 The unique-
ness of Christ is proved even through the way the affirmation is
stated. Jesus Christ is not a bread of life among the others; he is
the bread of life. As Morris declares, this remark regarding the
emphatic definite article (the), which is included, can also be
made with respect to each of the remaining “I am” sayings.19

What else should be noted in connection to this statement,
beyond the fulfillment of a Jewish expectation in Christ? The
statement is directly linked to faith. In fact, faith in him is an es-
sential theme of this chapter (see verses 40, 47). To have this
bread means to have faith in Jesus Christ, to appropriate him by
faith. As soon as Jesus says that “he that believeth on me hath
everlasting life” (6:47), he repeats again in verse 48, “I am that
bread of life”. Thus, in this text, the accent is placed on faith in
Jesus Christ, and not on the reality of the Eucharistic bread.20

I Am the Light of the World
The background of this chapter is very important for the un-
derstanding of this assertion, because it presents the Feast of the
Tabernacles, as in the previous chapter. The festival backgro-

16 Morris, John, 365.
17 Barnabas Lindars, The Gospel of John (London: Marshall, Morgan, Scott,
1987), 259.
18 Ball, “I Am”, 207.
19 Morris, The “I Am” Sayings, 110.
20 As Lindars believes, John, 259.
und indicates the starting point for the understanding of the saying.\textsuperscript{21} Water and light were essential for this feast. We should remember the illumination provided by the great candelabrum (\textit{menorah}), which was a crucial aspect of the festival. In the light of this event, Jesus’ assertion is even more important. Through this, Jesus fulfilled the symbolism suggested by the ceremony of the lights as part of the Feast of the Tabernacles.\textsuperscript{22} However, its significance is deeper. Ball thinks that Jesus’ claim to be the light of the world resides in Isaiah’s concept of the servant of the Lord, who is a light for the nations. Therefore, as in the first assertion, Jesus takes over a concept from the Old Testament and applies it to himself.\textsuperscript{23}

Light is one of the essential themes in John’s Gospel. The word is used 23 times, starting with the prologue (1:4). Light is a prominent theme not only in John’s Gospel, but also in the Old Testament. Therefore, we do not need to seek non-biblical sources to support this affirmation. It might be possible that, as the reference to the water in chapter 7 hints at the rock in the desert, the light should refer to the fire pillar seen at that time. Therefore, in three consecutive chapters, Jesus uses the wilderness imagery to reveal certain aspects of his work and his person.\textsuperscript{24} Beasley Murray offers an adequate explanation of the fact that Jesus asks people to “follow” the light, and not to receive it or to walk in it. The Jews did the same: they followed the light in the desert. Moreover, this image matches perfectly Jesus’ appeal to the disciples, who are urged to follow him.\textsuperscript{25}

Jesus sets light and darkness in sharp contrast. To believe in Christ is to be \textit{in} the light. To refuse him is to be in great danger, to walk in darkness.

\textsuperscript{21} G. R. Beasley Murray, \textit{John}, 36, 128.
\textsuperscript{22} Morris, \textit{John}, 436.
\textsuperscript{23} Ball, “\textit{I Am}”, 217.
\textsuperscript{24} Morris, \textit{John}, 437.
\textsuperscript{25} G. R. Beasley Murray, \textit{John}, 128.
I Am
This assertion is the climax of the discussion in chapter 8. Even if at the beginning of the Gospel, John talked about the pre-existence of the Word: “In the beginning was the word” (1:1), the whole Gospel is anchored in this very truth. The faith we must display must be placed in the Son of God, who existed before all ages. Leon Morris correctly notices that this assertion from 1:1 means more than that. Nevertheless, the meaning of the pre-existence of God is set off in a more striking fashion.26 This emphatic form of speech was not commonly used in the regular conversation of the time. Therefore, its use signified the divine style. As Ball highlights27, due to the contrast between genesthai and eimi, the accent is on the verb, rather than the pronoun. Jesus does not only claim to have existed before Abraham, but he also talks about his existence in the present. Therefore, we should connect this assertion with chapter 1:1; the result is probably the most profound affirmation of Christ’s nature or essence in John’s Gospel.

The contrast between the tenses of the verbs is evident. The meaning of the aorist is translated “came into existence”. Thus, “a mode of being which has a definite beginning is contrasted with one which is eternal”.28 It seems that behind this affirmation lies the text of Exodus 3:14, “I am that I am”. In other words, through this statement, Jesus Christ identifies himself with God. This was also the reason why the Jews picked up stones to kill Jesus. Beasley-Murray writes that this affirmation does not refer mainly to his being but to what Jesus means for salvation. Following the remark that in Exodus 3:14, Yahweh does not disclose his nature but his faithfulness towards the people, Beasley-Murray states that “in this context the assertion ‘Before Abraham was I am’ forms the basis of the promise of

26 Morris, John, 437.
27 Ball, “I Am”, 195.
28 Morris, John, 473.
salvation to God’s people”. This is why Jesus can give true freedom and the life which overcomes death.29

I Am the Door
By this assertion, Jesus says he is the only possible way of access to God. As Morris states, “There is something exclusive about the door”.30 Jesus is set off in direct contrast with the others, those before him who claimed to be the door (verse 8). Nevertheless, he is the only one who opens the way to God. Barclay shows that Jesus described what it means to have access to God by using a well-known Jewish comment: “To be able to come and go in and out unmolested was the Jewish way of describing a life that is absolutely secure and safe. When a man can go in and out without fear, it means that his country is at peace, that the forces of the law and order are supreme, and that he enjoys a perfect security for his life.”31 Biblical examples which support this understanding can be found in Numbers 27:17, Deuteronomy 28:6, and Psalm 121:8.

Through this assertion, Jesus talks again as a divine person. “Thus once again we encounter the thought of one exclusive salvation, exclusive in the sense that it can be entered only through the one door, Jesus Christ. If there is but one door for the entire race, than once more we are reminded of something very important about Jesus. Like the other ‘I am’ sayings, this one leads us to think of deity.”32

I Am the Good Shepherd
This image Jesus identifies himself with is well-known and suggestive for every Christian. Jesus is the good shepherd who lives within ourselves, and this represents the one who takes care of us. The image of the shepherd originates in the Old Testa-

29 Beasley-Murray, John, 129.
30 Morris, The “I Am” Sayings, 114.
31 Barclay, John, vol. 2, 68.
ment. Psalm 23 is famous in this respect. God presented himself as the shepherd who cares for his people, Israel. Ezekiel 34 is an important text in which God asks Ezekiel to prophesy against the shepherds of Israel (verse 1). Then, in verses 15 and 16, God presents himself as the one who takes his sheep to green pastures, so he is Israel’s shepherd. It is very likely that Jesus considered this prophecy when he said he was the Good Shepherd. As in John’s text, in Ezekiel 34 the emphasis is between the real shepherd, who is God, and the false shepherds, namely those who think only of themselves. The important aspect that needs further attention is this: since God introduces himself as the shepherd of his people, and Jesus says the same thing, it means that Jesus identifies himself with God. So again, the “I am” saying is revelatory.

However, the image of the shepherd that guides his sheep was common in the time of Jesus. Jesus also used the pastoral metaphor on other occasions (e.g. Luke 12:32). Jesus, as the perfect model of the shepherd, also appears in the epistles. For example, Peter asserts in chapter 2, verse 25 of his first epistle: “For ye were as sheep going astray; but are now returned unto the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls.” Later on, in chapter 5:4, he writes: “And when the chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away.”

The main feature which characterizes the good shepherd is the fact that he gives his life for us. This is clearly emphasized by Jesus. As Morris declares: “This must have been a fairly rare occurrence among Palestinian shepherds. But for Jesus it is the characteristic thing... Moreover when the Palestinian shepherd did die in defence of his sheep, that was an accident. He planned to live for them not to die for them.” Jesus wants to draw our attention to this particular fact, namely that he willingly gave his life for us. Consequently, his death was not accidental. Verse 18 clearly shows Jesus Christ unveiling that he was in control, that his death was not a tragic misfortune, but it was

33 Morris, John, 510.
his purpose for his sheep to have abundant life. The only way the sheep can have life is through his death, the death of the good shepherd.

There is one aspect which should be noted at this point. The original word for “good” is kalos, which in Greek does not only refer to the idea of goodness but also to that of beauty. Therefore, even if we cannot translate this verse by using the word “beautiful”, we should not lose sight of this aspect. It is logical then for Morris to write that “in the present passage, the emphasis is not on the way we are morally upright, but on the attractiveness of the Good Shepherd. Whatever be the case with his followers, Jesus is the Beautiful Shepherd as well as the morally Good Shepherd.”

I Am the Resurrection and the Life
This assertion was uttered in the context of Lazarus’ resurrection. Chapter 11 is crucially important for the architecture of the Gospel because it is placed between the public work of Jesus and the Passion Week. The wonder appears somehow as a climax of Jesus’ works and the “I am” saying is at the same time a climax of the wonder. Ball is not mistaken when he writes that “this whole episode is set up as a revelation of God’s glory to Jesus… Without the claim to be the Resurrection and the Life, the raising of Lazarus would be no more than a spectacular miracle.”

Ball also shows that this wonder took place exactly before the Passion Week. Lazarus’ resurrection is the event which makes the Pharisees and the priests decide to kill Jesus (verse 53): “thus the ‘I am’ saying is crucially placed at the beginning of the Passion story.”

John states in 1:4 that “in him was life; and the life was the light of men.” What Jesus says here is not that he just offers the

34 Morris, The “I Am” Sayings, 115.
35 Ball, “I Am”, 102, 103.
36 Ball, “I Am”, 110.
life and resurrection, as Lindars thinks, but also that he is the life. It is certainly true that Jesus talks about the future (eternal) life. In this sense, the words are an actual assurance to the believer who, following physical death, enters eternal life and worships God forever. To have eternal life is to believe in him and “he that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life.” (3:36). This means “that the moment a man puts his trust in Jesus he begins to experience that life of the age to come which cannot be touched by death.”

I Am the Way and the Truth and the Life
This saying is a bit more difficult to understand because of its different translations. Part of the problem is the fact that, in some translations, the words “truth” and “life” are treated as adjectives of the “way”. Thus, Lindars thinks that the “truth” and the “life” are explanatory of the “way”: “It is a matter of believing him as the one sent by the Father (the truth) and existing in the relationship which he creates between them and the Father, a relationship which is not ended by death (the life).” However, there is not enough evidence and no certain reason that the truth and the life should be exclusively the attributes of the way. The best solution is to treat these words as three coordinated nouns, expressing three things about Jesus. Besides, one should not forget that while the “way” appears for the first time in John’s Gospel, the “truth” and the “life” are major themes within the same Gospel. “Way, truth, and life, all have relevance, the triple expression emphasizing the many sidedness of the saving work.”

Again, as with the other assertions, there is something exclusive in Jesus’ sayings. He is the way, the only way of access to God. Moreover, Jesus does not only show us the way, he is the

37 For him, the saying means “through me men are raised up and receive eternal life”, see 395.
39 Lindars, John, 472. See also Ball, “I Am”, 126.
40 Morris, John, 641.
way. Secondly, the truth is not represented by Jesus’ by what he said and his teachings; the truth is Jesus. While the “way” offers man direction, the “truth”—as seen in chapter 8:32—gives him freedom. Jesus though is more than that; he is life itself (we have already seen this in Matthew’s statement recorded in chapter 11, verse 25). These three words reaffirm the uniqueness of Jesus, who identifies himself with God. Therefore, there are three aspects which prove who Jesus was. In this respect, Morris says: “Way stresses the fact that mere physical existence matters little. The only life worthy of the name is that which Jesus brings, for He is life itself.”

I Am the True Vine
G. Beasley-Murray notices that this is the only “I am” saying to which an additional predicate is conjoined (“and my Father is the Vinedresser”). He explains that the relationship of the Son to believers, which represents the theme of the passage, resembles that of the Father to the Son as means of relating the belief of the Father.

Israel is often compared in the Old Testament to a vine (Hosea 10:1-2, Isaiah 5:1-7, Jeremiah 2:21, Ezekiel 15:1-5, 17:1-21, 19:10-15, Psalm 80:8-18). As Morris notes, “all the Old Testament passages which use this symbol appear to regard Israel as faithless or as the object of severe punishment.” Accordingly, it is against this background that we must see Jesus’ affirmation concerning the true vine. Thus, Jesus is described in contrast to faithless Israel.

The text itself discloses two important aspects. The first is the importance of the Christian’s life, which must bear fruit. Should his life be fruitless, he will be rewarded with punishment. The New Testament clearly explains that the fruit is a sign of the true Christian. The second essential aspect highlighted by the

41 Morris, John, 141.
42 G. Beasley-Murray, John, 271.
43 Morris, John, 668, also Beasley-Murray, John, 272.
text is the necessity to abide in Christ. Bringing fruit is not a result of personal human effort, but of abiding in Christ.\textsuperscript{44} The natural, human \textit{self} can never bring forth the fruit of the Holy Spirit. Believers are called to abide in Christ the same way Christ abides in his heavenly relationship to the Father. They are indeed one single being. Left on their own and by their own power, Christians can do nothing. This is why Jesus says “for without me ye can do nothing” (15:5). This was actually the secret of Jesus’ life: his relationship and dependence to God. As far as the Christian is concerned, his life should closely follow this particular model of existence. This fundamental truth is competently revealed by Morris, who writes that “the passage is the Johannine counterpart of the Pauline view of the church as the body of Christ and of believers as \textit{in} Christ. Both are ways of bringing out the vital connection that exists between Christ and His own.”\textsuperscript{45}

\textsuperscript{44} Morris, \textit{John}, 668.

\textsuperscript{45} Morris, \textit{John}, 668.