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### Signs and Christology in John 6:1-21 in Light of Jewish and Greco-Roman Frames of Reference: Prophet, King, and Revealer of God

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# Signs and Discourses in John 5 and 6

Historical, Literary, and Theological Readings  
from the Colloquium Ioanneum 2019 in Eisenach

Edited by

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# Signs and Christology in John 6:1–21 in Light of Jewish and Greco-Roman Frames of Reference

Prophet, King, and Revealer of God

*Craig R. Koester*

The signs in John's Gospel convey Jesus's identity and mission through actions that can be seen, touched, and tasted. Yet the signs suggest meaning rather than stating it directly, and the Gospel depicts characters responding to signs in different ways, depending on their frame of reference. Recent studies have shown that characters in the Fourth Gospel can be portrayed along a continuum.<sup>1</sup> Some seem completely misguided, while others show greater insight; but even faithful characters often fail to grasp Jesus's purpose or show only partial insight, and characters portrayed more negatively can say things that are truer than they know.

John 6 recounts two signs that evoke responses from characters: First, Jesus feeds the five thousand with bread and fish, and the crowd responds by acclaiming him "the prophet" and wanting to make him king (6:1–15). Second, he walks on the sea, the disciples see him and are afraid, but after he says, "I am, do not fear," they want to receive him into the boat (6:16–21). The discourses that follow develop the bread motif from the first sign and the "I Am" from the second sign, giving readers deeper insight into what the signs reveal. Here, however, I want to focus on the initial responses to the signs, asking how those responses might in turn shape the perspective of the readers and how they might contribute to our understanding of Johannine Christology.

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<sup>1</sup> For surveys of recent research see Steven A. Hunt, D. Francois Tolmie, and Ruben Zimmermann, "An Introduction to Character and Characterization in John and Related New Testament Literature," in *Character Studies in the Fourth Gospel: Narrative Approaches to Seventy Figures in John*, ed. Steven A. Hunt, D. Francois Tolmie, and Ruben Zimmermann, WUNT 314 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 1–33; Christopher W. Skinner, "Introduction: Characters and Characterization in the Gospel of John: Reflections on the *Status Quaestionis*," in *Characters and Characterization in the Gospel of John*, ed. Christopher W. Skinner, LNTS 461 (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), xvii–xxxii.

A number of questions inform our work<sup>2</sup>: First, at the narrative level, how does the Gospel portray the responses of the crowd and the disciples to the signs? What perspective and interpretive framework is ascribed to each group? Are the characters' responses portrayed as adequate or inadequate from the narrator's point of view? Can they be insightful in some ways and mistaken in others? Second, how might the portrayal of the responses of the crowd and the disciples within the text prompt readers to recall beliefs and practices from outside the text? What networks of associations might be drawn from Scripture, Jewish tradition, and the Greco-Roman context? To what extent does the narrative adopt older patterns and to what extent are these reshaped in distinctive ways? Finally, how do the multiple facets of Jesus's identity that emerge from John 6:1–21 function within the Gospel's overall portrait of Jesus?

## 1. The Gift of Bread and Perspective of the Crowd

John's account of the feeding of the five thousand introduces the crowd (ὄχλος) as a group that followed Jesus "because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick" (6:2).<sup>3</sup> Although the disciples responded to the sign at Cana with faith (2:11), the crowd seems more like the "many" (πολλοί) whose dependence on signs is considered unreliable (2:23–25; 3:2; cf. 4:48). That impression will be confirmed in later scenes when Jesus says they have not actually seen what the signs mean (6:26) and the group shows incomprehension by asking for yet another sign without grasping what the previous sign meant (6:30; cf. 2:18). Yet in the initial account of the feeding of the five thousand, there are aspects of the crowd's response that seem valid from the Gospel's point of view.

### 1.1 *Jesus as the Prophet*

Jesus's actions constitute a sign that the crowd must interpret. He blesses five barley loaves and gives them to the people, and he does the same with two fish. Afterward, he has the disciples gather up twelve baskets of leftover pieces. The crowd's first interpretation is that Jesus is "the prophet who is coming into the world" (6:14). Their frame of reference is Jewish tradition, which according to 1:19–21 anticipated the coming of three figures: the Anointed One, Elijah, and

<sup>2</sup> Craig R. Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 115–24.

<sup>3</sup> Although a crowd in Jerusalem was mentioned in passing in 5:13, the crowd is developed as an important collective character here and in subsequent chapters. See Cornelius Bennema, "The Crowd: A Faceless, Divided Mass," in *Character Studies in the Fourth Gospel: Narrative Approaches to Seventy Figures in John*, ed. Steven A. Hunt, D. Francois Tolmie, and Ruben Zimmermann, WUNT 314 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 347–55.

“the prophet,” who is presumably the prophet like Moses, promised in Deut 18:18. There God told Moses, “I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people.”<sup>4</sup> Later, the crowd in Jerusalem again works within this frame of reference when calling Jesus “the prophet” after he promises to give them living water (John 7:40).

Interpreters often conclude that from a Johannine perspective, the crowd’s acclamation of Jesus as a prophet shows their inability to comprehend who he is.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, there are good reasons to think that when they call Jesus “the prophet” the category is valid, at least to some extent. First, characters who are portrayed positively in John refer to Jesus as “a prophet” at moments that show developing insight. The Samaritan woman identifies Jesus as a Jew, then a prophet, and finally raises the prospect that he is the one called “Messiah,” who will declare all things to them (4:9, 19, 25, 29). Each step in the sequence discloses something that the Gospel assumes to be true: Jesus effectively claims a Jewish identity by saying that salvation is from the Jews (4:22). As a prophet he shows insight into human character and speaks with authority about matters pertaining to worship (4:17–18, 21–24).<sup>6</sup> Finally, he affirms that he is Messiah, which does not negate what has been disclosed before but rather expands it (4:25–26).

Similarly, the man born blind calls Jesus the man (ἄνθρωπος) who healed him (9:11), then adds that Jesus is a prophet (9:17), who is from God (9:32), and in the end he worships Jesus as Son of Man (9:35–38). The beggar’s final insight – that Jesus is the Son of Man who can be worshipped – does not negate his first insight, namely, that Jesus is a man, a human being (ἄνθρωπος). From the Gospel’s incarnational perspective, the man’s initial and final responses are both true, as is his comment that Jesus is from God. No one aspect of the man’s testimony fully encompasses Jesus’s identity and each contributes in a distinctive way to disclosing who Jesus is. In the same way, calling Jesus “prophet” does reflect genuine insight and it contributes to the Gospel’s overall portrait of who Jesus is.

Second, Jesus uses the title “prophet” for himself. According to 4:44, “Jesus himself had testified that a prophet has no honor in his own country.” Drawn from early Christian tradition, this saying appears in contexts where Jesus por-

<sup>4</sup> On the prophet like Moses see IQS IX, 11; 4Q175 4–8; Acts 3:32; 7:37; Richard Bauckham *The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple: Narrative, History, and Theology in the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 212–15.

<sup>5</sup> E.g., Udo Schnelle in *Das Evangelium nach Johannes*, THKNT 4 (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1998), 161–62, n. 18; idem, *Antidocetic Christology in the Gospel of John: An Investigation of the Place of the Fourth Gospel in the Johannine School*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 103–04; Jörg Frey, *The Glory of the Crucified One: Christology and Theology in the Gospel of John*, trans. Wayne Coppins and Christoph Heilig, BMSEK (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2018), 298–99.

<sup>6</sup> On the insight ascribed to prophets see Jos. As. 23:8; Luke 7:39. For the expectation that God would send a prophet to deal with questions relating to worship and leadership see 1 Macc 4:46; 14:41



trays himself as rejected prophet (Mark 6:4; Matt 13:57; Luke 4:24; cf. 13:33). The other Gospels exhibit a tension in which Jesus is a prophet and yet much more than a prophet, and the same is true in John.<sup>7</sup> By stating that Jesus “testified” about himself in this way, the Gospel emphasizes the truth of what is said, and that readers are to take “prophet” as one of the valid dimensions of Jesus’s identity.

Importantly, Jesus ascribes to himself the traits of the prophet who was promised in Deut 18:15–19. At the conclusion of John 5, Jesus addresses his opponents in a discourse that resembles a legal defense. In it he recognizes the principle that witnesses are needed to support a truth claim. According to Deut 17:6 and 19:15, two or three witnesses are needed (cf. John 5:31; 8:17), so Jesus appeals to the witness of God, which comes in two forms: his works and the Scriptures (5:36–40). When invoking Scripture, Jesus presents a configuration of elements from the section about the prophet like Moses. Jesus says that Moses wrote about him (John 5:46; Deut 18:15, 18), that he has come in his Father’s name (John 5:43; Deut 18:19a), and that those who refuse to believe are accountable in light of what Moses has said (John 5:45; Deut 18:19b). In its original context, the promise concerning the prophet was given to those who no longer wanted to hear God’s voice or see his fire as at Horeb (Deut 18:16), and Jesus now speaks to those whom he says have not heard God’s voice or seen his form (John 5:37). No one of these elements alone would necessarily recall Deut 18:15–19, but together they show what it means for Moses to have written about Jesus as the figure who would speak definitively in God’s name.<sup>8</sup>

Third, in John 6, Jesus acts in a manner reminiscent of Moses. The setting is Passover (John 6:4), which recalls the exodus, when Moses led the people out of Egypt. Jesus performs a “sign” (6:14), and Moses was known for his signs (Deut 34:11). The specific sign involves giving bread to a crowd (John 6:11), which fits the centrality of bread in the Passover celebration, as well as the theme of the people receiving manna or “bread from heaven” throughout the time of Moses (Exod 16:4, 14, 31).<sup>9</sup> John’s account of the sign, however, sets up an interpretive tension: The literary setting and many features of the sign seem to confirm Jesus’s identity as the prophet like Moses. Yet in the discourse that follows, Jesus will make clear that he is not simply another Moses but is the bread of life that comes down from heaven (John 6:32–40).

<sup>7</sup> See Joel Marcus, *Mark 1–8: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 27 (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 376.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Paul N. Anderson, *The Christology of the Fourth Gospel: Its Unity and Disunity in the Light of John 6*, WUNT 2/78 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996), 174–75.

<sup>9</sup> Ways in which Jesus’s sign in John 6:1–15 recalls Moses traditions have often been noted. See, e.g., Susan E. Hylan, *Allusion and Meaning in John 6*, BZNW 137 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2005), 120–30.

This tension in the narrative reflects a theological tension that involves the integrity of God and the identity of Jesus. On the question of divine integrity, the Gospel's opening scene identified several figures who were expected to come: the Christ, Elijah, and the prophet (1:19–21). People could expect these figures to appear because each one was promised by God in Scripture.<sup>10</sup> If God has integrity, then having made such promises, God should keep them. Accordingly, the Moses-like features of the sign attest that in Jesus, God has sent the prophet whom he promised in Deut 18:15–19, which fits the Gospel's insistence that "God is true" (John 3:33). On the question of Jesus's identity, however, the Gospel must show that Jesus not only fulfills the promise made in Scripture (5:39, 46) but redefines what fulfillment means.

In a surprising way, the crowd's perspective can help readers discern how expectations concerning the prophet like Moses are being reshaped. Earlier in the Gospel, the prophet like Moses was distinguished from Elijah, the other prophet whom God promised to send (Mal 3:1; 4:5–6; John 1:21, 25). But the crowd in John 6 signals that the traits usually associated with two different prophets are now being fused in one person, Jesus. They are following Jesus because of the signs he was doing for the sick, and the one healing miracle recounted thus far in the Gospel involved giving life to a boy who was deathly ill (6:2; cf. 4:46–54). Elijah was known for healing a sick boy, whereas Moses was not (1 Kgs 17:17–24), and Elijah too worked a feeding miracle by providing a widow and her household with meal and oil (1 Kgs 17:8–24). Expectations for Elijah's return, like those concerning the prophet like Moses, were based on divine promise. In the opening scene, the Fourth Gospel made clear that the Elijah promise was not fulfilled in John the Baptist, while directing attention to the greater one who was coming (John 1:21, 27). The Gospel does not explicitly say that Jesus is Elijah, but the way Jesus both heals and feeds people implies that God's promise to send Elijah is being realized in the ministry of Jesus.<sup>11</sup>

Many have also noted that the prophet Elisha healed a sick boy and performed a feeding miracle similar to that of Jesus (2 Kgs 4:8–36, 42–44). In both feeding stories, there is a large group of people. A bystander has loaves of barley bread, and a servant or disciple indicates that the bread will be insufficient for the crowd. Yet the central figure directs that the bread be given to the crowd, so that everyone eats and there is food left over. There are notable differences in scale, since Elisha feeds one hundred people with twenty loaves, whereas Jesus

<sup>10</sup> Texts understood as promising a messianic king included 2 Sam 7:11–14; Gen 49:10; Num 24:17; Isa 11:1–5. See John J. Collins, *The Scepter and the Star: Messianism in Light of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 21–78. On Elijah see Mal 4:5–6 and on the prophet see Deut 18:15–19.

<sup>11</sup> J. Louis Martyn, *The Gospel of John in Christian History: Essays for Interpreters* (New York: Paulist, 1979), 9–54. By way of comparison, traits of multiple prophets seem to be incorporated into Luke's portrait of Jesus. See J. Severino Croatto, "Jesus, Prophet Like Elisha, and Prophet-Teacher Like Moses in Luke-Acts," *JBL* 124 (2005): 451–65.

feeds five thousand with five loaves and two fish. Yet Jesus's actions have much in common with those of Elisha.<sup>12</sup> For readers familiar with the older biblical stories, the effect is that patterns associated with multiple prophets are now encompassed in a single figure: Jesus "the prophet."<sup>13</sup>

Paradoxically, it is important that Jesus's words and actions confirm his identity as "the prophet" because he will soon claim to be more than a prophet.<sup>14</sup> Catrin Williams has pointed out that the "most direct links with Deut. 18:15–19 can be made with regard to John's presentation of Jesus as the one who *speaks and acts* as God's authorized representative."<sup>15</sup> He speaks as God has authorized him to speak, and his actions are consistent with his words. By giving people bread, Jesus does a sign "like" that of a prophet, yet the discourse will show that it does not limit Jesus's role to that of prophet. Jesus giving bread to the people signifies God giving his Son, who in turn will give his own flesh for the life of the world (6:32–33, 51). Moreover, the crowd is correct in declaring that Jesus is the prophet coming "into the world" (εἰς τὸν κόσμον, 6:15), because Jesus uses that same expression for himself.<sup>16</sup> The problem is that Jesus relates that statement to his descent from heaven, whereas the crowd will insist that it cannot be taken in that way, since they know Jesus's human father and mother, which from their perspective excludes heavenly origin (6:35–42). Here again paradox is operative. Just as "the prophet" is also the Son of God, the one who comes "into the world" from above is a human being, the Word made flesh (6:38, 51; cf. 1:9–14).<sup>17</sup>

## 1.2 Jesus as King

The second dimension of the crowd's response to the sign is that Jesus knows they want to "make him king" (ποιήσωσιν βασιλέα, 6:15). Attention has often focused on reasons why the crowd might think the one they just called prophet

<sup>12</sup> Sukmin Cho, *Jesus as Prophet in the Fourth Gospel*, NTM 15 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2006), 213–20.

<sup>13</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, 2 vols. AB 29–29A (Garden City: Doubleday, 1966–1970), 1:234–35; Catrin H. Williams, "Jesus the Prophet: Crossing the Boundaries of Prophetic Beliefs and Expectations in the Gospel of John," in *Portraits of Jesus in the Gospel of John: A Christological Spectrum*, ed. Craig R. Koester, LNTS 589 (London: T & T Clark, 2019), 91–107, esp. 104–05.

<sup>14</sup> Christos Karakolis does not consider "prophet" integral to Jesus's identity in the Fourth Gospel. He emphasizes the differences between Jesus and earlier prophets, as well as the narrative progressions toward Jesus's identity as Messiah and Son of God ("Is Jesus a Prophet according to the Witness of the Fourth Gospel? A Narrative-Critical Perspective," in *Christ of the Sacred Stories*, ed. Predrag Dragutinović, Tobias Nicklas, Kelsie G. Rodenbiker, and Vladan Tatalović, WUNT 2/453 [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017], 119–39). My argument, however, is that the Johannine portrayal of Jesus brings together multiple roles, all of which contribute to the whole.

<sup>15</sup> Williams, "Jesus the Prophet," 106.

<sup>16</sup> John 3:17, 19; 10:36; 12:24; 17:18; 18:37; cf. 1:9.

<sup>17</sup> Hartwig Thyen, *Das Johannesevangelium*, HNT 6 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 341.

should now be regarded as king. Some note traditions that portrayed Moses as both prophet and king, proposing that the crowd transfers those roles to Jesus, whom they regard as a new Moses (John 6:32).<sup>18</sup> Others suggest that fusing prophetic and royal traditions could be evident in the hope that manna, which in the past was associated with Moses, would descend again at the coming of the Messiah, a royal figure (2 Bar. 29:3, 8).<sup>19</sup> Still another possibility is that Josephus referred to some figures who led resistance against Roman rule as prophets, who tried to attract followers by promising “signs” (σημεία) reminiscent of Moses and his successor, Joshua. Such signs included parting the Jordan River and making the walls of a city collapse (*J.W.* 2.259; 6.285; 7.438; *Ant.* 20.168). Josephus also said that similar figures aspired to “royal rank” (βασιλείου τιμῆς, *Ant.* 17.272) or kingship (βασιλεία, 17.278; cf. *J.W.* 2.434) and were sometimes proclaimed “king” (βασιλεύς) by their followers (*Ant.* 17.273–74). Although Josephus seems to distinguish sign-working prophets from figures aspiring to kingship, popular perception might have blended the categories, since both types of figures were alike in their anti-Roman activities.<sup>20</sup> Such a fusion of categories might be reflected in the Fourth Gospel, where the categories of prophet and Messiah are sometimes distinguished and yet closely joined in the perceptions of the crowds (John 1:19–21; 7:40–41; cf. 4:19, 25; 9:17, 22). Accordingly, the crowd in Jerusalem expects the Messiah to be a worker of signs (7:31).<sup>21</sup>

Another important perspective on the crowd’s response, however, involves asking how the feeding of the five thousand relates to notions of kingship that were part of the cultural and political context in which the Gospel was composed and first read.<sup>22</sup> The major reason for exploring this angle is that later episodes

<sup>18</sup> Philo, *Moses* 1.334; 2.2–7. Wayne A. Meeks, *The Prophet-King: Moses Traditions and the Johannine Christology*, NovTSup 14 (Leiden: Brill 1967); John Lierman, “The Mosaic Pattern of John’s Christology,” in *Challenging Perspectives on the Gospel of John*, ed. John Lierman, WUNT 2/219 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 210–34, esp. 216–23.

<sup>19</sup> Second Bar. 29:3, 8. On the royal aspect of the Messiah see 37:7–40:2; 72:2–73:2. Cf. Francis J. Moloney, *Signs and Shadows: Reading John 5–12* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 37.

<sup>20</sup> Bauckham, *The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple*, 215–23.

<sup>21</sup> On the complex factors that might inform the connection between prophet and king see Michael Theobald, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes: Kapitel 1–12*, RNT (Regensburg: Pustet, 2009), 436–39; Marianne Meyers Thompson, *John: A Commentary*, NTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2015), 141–42; Meredith J. C. Warren, “‘When the Christ Appears, Will He Do More Signs Than This Man Has Done?’ (John 7:31): Signs and the Messiah in the Gospel of John,” in *Reading the Gospel of John’s Christology as Jewish Messianism: Royal, Prophetic, and Divine Messiahs*, ed. Benjamin E. Reynolds and Gabriele Boccaccini, AJEC 106 (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 229–47; Paul N. Anderson, “Jesus the Eschatological Prophet in the Fourth Gospel: A Case Study in Dialectical Tensions,” in *Reading the Gospel of John’s Christology as Jewish Messianism: Royal, Prophetic, and Divine Messiahs*, ed. Benjamin E. Reynolds and Gabriele Boccaccini, AJEC 106 (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 271–99; Carsten Clausen, “Mehr als ein Prophet und ein Brotkönig (Die Speisung der Fünftausend) Joh 6,1–15,” in *Die Wunder Jesu*, vol. 1 of *Kompendium der frühchristlichen Wundererzählungen*, ed. Ruben Zimmermann (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2013), 705–15, esp. 709–10.

<sup>22</sup> On kingship as a motif in John see Jan G. van der Watt, “‘No One Can See/Enter the

will show how signs led to popular claims about Jesus's kingship were seen as a threat to Roman rule (11:47–48; 12:12–19; 19:12). Therefore, we will ask how the sign in John 6 and the crowd's perception of Jesus as king might contribute to the way the Gospel both reflects and redefines patterns of kingship. The imperial context is also reflected in the setting of the sign near the Sea of Galilee, which John alone among the Gospels explicitly links to Tiberias, the principal city along its western shore (6:1, 23). The city was founded by Herod Antipas, a "friend" of Caesar, who named it in honor of the emperor Tiberius (Josephus, *Ant.* 18.36–38). Several aspects of the narrative should be noted.

First, abundance is a theme in John's account of the sign. People ate "as much as they wanted" (ὅσον ἤθελον, 6:11), and the leftover pieces were abundant (περισσεύσαντα, 6:12–13).<sup>23</sup> Abundance was also a major Roman political theme. Coins minted under various emperors often pictured a cornucopia overflowing with grapes and wheat to emphasize that Roman rule brought prosperity. The motif was widely used in artwork throughout the empire and would have been familiar to a broad spectrum of readers.<sup>24</sup> The cornucopia filled with grain had also been used in coins minted under Jewish kings during the Hasmonean and Herodian periods, again to show the theme of abundance.<sup>25</sup> In Roman ideology, abundance was considered a divine gift of Tyche or Demeter, whose blessings were bestowed through imperial rule, and this too was widely depicted on coins during the first century CE. As a Roman vassal king, Agrippa II adopted the motif on coins minted in his realm, which encompassed Judea, Samaria, and Galilee. The imagery links divinely given abundance to the rule of the Roman emperor and his vassal king (Figure 1).<sup>26</sup>

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Kingdom of God without Being Born from Above' (John 3:3, 5): On the King and Kingdom in John," in *Expressions of the Johannine Kerygma in John 2:23–5:18: Historical, Literary, and Theological Readings from the Colloquium Ioanneum 2017 in Jerusalem*, ed. R. Alan Culpepper and Jörg Frey, WUNT 423 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), 29–50; Beth M. Stovell, *Mapping Metaphorical Discourse in the Fourth Gospel: John's Eternal King*, Linguistic Biblical Studies 5 (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

<sup>23</sup> The verb *περισσεύω* regularly connotes abundance (BDAG, 805). The abundance motif in John 6 and Roman world was noted by Willis Hedley Salier, *The Rhetorical Impact of the Sēmeia in the Gospel of John*, WUNT 2/186 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 104–09; Warren Carter, *John and Empire: Initial Explorations* (New York: T & T Clark, 2008), 219–26.

<sup>24</sup> On the abundance motif see Carlos Noreña, *Imperial Ideals in the Roman West: Representation, Circulation, Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 112–22. In addition to coins, see the first-century relief sculpture in the imperial temple at Aphrodisias in R. R. R. Smith, "The Imperial Reliefs from the Sebasteion at Aphrodisias," *JRS* 77 (1987): 88–138, esp. 104–06.

<sup>25</sup> Ya'akov Meshorer, *A Treasury of Jewish Coins from the Persian Period to Bar Kochba* (Jerusalem: Yad Ben-Zvi; Nyack: Amphora, 2001), 113; Aaron J. Kogon and Jean-Philippe Fontanille, *The Coinage of Herod Antipas: A Study and Die Classification of the Earliest Coins of Galilee*, *AJEC* 102 (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 44.

<sup>26</sup> On the use of the Roman form of the motif by Agrippa II, see Meshorer, *A Treasury of Jewish Coins*, nos. 135, 136, 140, 142, 145, 158, 159, 172.



Figure 1. Left: Emperor Vespasian. Right: Tyche-Demeter holding grain and a cornucopia, signifying abundance. This coin was minted at Caesarea Maritima in 73/74 CE. The abbreviation BA at the far right identifies Agrippa II as Rome’s vassal king (ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ). Courtesy of the Classical Numismatic Group (cngcoins.com).

In practical terms, Roman rulers from the second century BCE onward tried to ensure their popularity with the people by making distributions of grain and bread at little or no cost. Cicero said the practice was agreeable to the masses, since it provided food in abundance without work (*Pro Sestio* 48 §103). Because the distributions drained the treasury, Augustus was inclined to do away with them, but he did not do so, since he knew that others would reinstate them “through desire for popular favor.”<sup>27</sup>

In John 6, the crowd that is about to make Jesus king soon reveals that they want him to “give us this bread always” (6:34). This is comparable to what was said about crowds in various parts of the empire. Dio Chrysostom said the people of Alexandria were a group “to whom you need only throw plenty of bread and a ticket to the hippodrome, since they have no interest in anything else” (*Discourses* 32.31; Cohoon and Crosby, LCL). Similarly, Juvenal satirized those who followed the Roman consul around because he gave them free meal tickets (*Satires* 10.44–46), and Epictetus said that anyone wanting to become counsel needed to hand out plenty of lunch baskets to people (*Diatr.* 4.10.20–21). Juvenal also mocked the fickle crowds that were willing to hail anyone who successfully grasped power as a worthy successor to Augustus, because the crowds had “an obsessive desire for two things only – bread and circuses” (*Satires* 10.44–46, 73–80; Braund, LCL).

Second, Jesus feeds the people in a context with features of a public banquet. He does not simply provide meal tickets or food that can be taken home and eaten. Instead, he has the people recline (ἀναπίπτω/ἀνάκειμαι), which is the appropriate posture for guests at a banquet (John 6:10–11).<sup>28</sup> Next, food is brought

<sup>27</sup> Suetonius, *Aug.* 42.3; cf. Tacitus, *Ann.* 12.31; Paul Erdkamp, “The Food Supply of the Capital,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Rome*, ed. Paul Erdkamp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 262–77, esp. 264–67.

<sup>28</sup> For examples see ἀνάκειμαι and ἀναπίπτω in BDAG, 65, 70.



to them, as it would be to dinner guests (6:11a). Finally, as a good host, Jesus ensures that they have “as much as they wanted” (6:11b). The meal in John 6 is a large-scale event for five thousand. Katherine Dunbabin has pointed out that “the huge public banquets offered by aspiring politicians to all the populace ... played a major part in the political life of the late Republic from the second century BC onwards,” and “were developed on an even larger scale subsequently by the emperors.” At these events, the “opportunity to recline and be served was regarded as a valued part of the benefaction.”<sup>29</sup>

In the late Roman Republic, it was assumed that those seeking the office of consul would provide public banquets (Cicero, *Mur.* 77). Among the office seekers was Crassus, who held a banquet for ten thousand with an additional allowance of grain for three months (Plutarch, *Crass.* 12.2).<sup>30</sup> In the transition toward empire, Julius Caesar made an “effort to surround himself with men’s goodwill as the fairest and at the same time the surest protection,” so he “courted the people with banquets and distributions of grain” (Plutarch, *Caes.* 57.4; Perrin, LCL). On one occasion, he fed the citizens of Rome at a banquet where they could recline on 22,000 dining couches (Plutarch, *Caes.* 55.2). The practice continued in the first century CE, since Tiberius too held large-scale banquets for the populace (Dio Cassius, *Rom. Hist.* 55.2.4). There were of course differences from the meal provided by Jesus, since Greco-Roman banquets often included sacrifices and entertainment, which are not factors in John 6. The point of comparison is that Jesus provides the meal and the crowd responds to him as if he were seeking political support, which would be the common pattern.

Third, the crowd wants to “make” (ποιήσωσιν) Jesus king (6:15). David Aune has observed that there was a “widespread assumption among the Romans that imperial honors, to be both acceptable and legitimate, had to be conferred by others, not claimed by the emperor himself.”<sup>31</sup> Augustus insisted that he received his authority “by universal consent” (*per consensum universorum*) and not by imposing his will on others (Augustus, *Res gestae* 34). By way of contrast, someone who seized power would be perceived as a tyrant and an illegitimate ruler. In the first century CE, the universal dimension of support for imperial rule was expanded to include “the consent of gods and humankind” (*hominum deorumque consensus*).<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Katherine M. D. Dunbabin, *The Roman Banquet: Images of Conviviality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 13.

<sup>30</sup> Angela Standhartinger, “‘And All Ate and Were Filled’ (Mark 6.42 par.): The Feeding Narratives in the Context of Hellenistic-Roman Banquet Culture,” in *Decisive Meals: Table Politics in Biblical Literature*, ed. Nathan MacDonald, Luzia Sutter Rehmann, and Kathy Ehrensparger, LNTS 449 (London: T & T Clark, 2012), 62–82, esp. 63–64, 67–68.

<sup>31</sup> David E. Aune, *Apocalypticism, Prophecy, and Magic in Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 114–15.

<sup>32</sup> Valerius Maximus, *Memorable Doings* I. pref; Tacitus, *Hist.* 1.15.

Important moments for demonstrating popular consent were when the ruler initially assumed power (*accessio*) and when he arrived at a city (*adventus*).<sup>33</sup> Josephus emphasizes both aspects in his account of Vespasian becoming emperor. The process began with initiative from Vespasian's troops and not from Vespasian himself. His supporters recognized the need for a leader who was "worthy of the government" and "they proclaimed Vespasian emperor" (J.W. 4.593, 601). Vespasian initially refused, insisting that he never sought such status for himself, but his supporters prevailed and he "yielded to their call" (4.604; Thackeray, LCL). The process continued when Vespasian arrived at Rome and people went out of the city to meet him. They showed popular *consensus* by lining the roadways and acclaiming him benefactor, savior, and the only worthy emperor of Rome (7.70–71).

In John's Gospel, the crowd in Galilee tries to initiate the process of assuming power (*accessio*) by preparing to "make" Jesus king (John 6:15). In a surprising way, Jesus's refusal to accept the role could be seen as positive, since he makes clear that he is not seeking royal status for himself. The next day, however, he firmly breaks the pattern of *consensus* by alienating most of his supporters. At Passover a year later, another crowd will try to enact the second part of the pattern when Jesus approaches Jerusalem (*adventus*). They go out along the roadway to meet him, which was the appropriate way to welcome a visiting ruler. They carry palm branches, which was a symbol of victory throughout the Greco-Roman world (12:13a).<sup>34</sup> They also acclaim Jesus "the King of Israel" (12:13c). The scene would appear to show the "consent of God and humankind," since the crowd declares that their king comes "in the name of the Lord" (12:13b). Moreover, on the surface it would seem that Jesus has obtained "universal consent," which was the Augustan ideal, since even his detractors say "the world has gone after him" (12:19). But here again, Jesus rejects the pattern of *consensus* and hides himself (12:36).

In the Fourth Gospel the complexity is that Jesus claims the category of kingship and yet he redefines what kingship means. By withdrawing from the crowd in 6:15, he does not reject kingship altogether, but he does reject the crowd's understanding of that role. The implications of the crowd's perspective will culminate when Jesus's opponents determine to put him to death before the Romans become alarmed by his popularity and its political implications, and take violent action against the Jewish people (11:45–52). Accordingly, they do not tell Pilate that the crowd wanted to "make" Jesus king (6:15) but that Jesus "makes himself king" (ὁ βασιλέα ἑαυτὸν ποιῶν) and thereby sets himself against the emperor (19:12). That way of framing the charge shifts responsibility from

<sup>33</sup> Aune, *Apocalypticism*, 114–15.

<sup>34</sup> On palm branches as victory symbols see Philo, *Imm.* 137; Caesar, *Bell. civ.* 3.105; Pliny the Elder, *Nat.* 17.244. The Maccabees used palms to celebrate their victories (1 Macc 13:37; 2 Macc 14:4).



the crowd onto Jesus himself, but from the Gospel's theological perspective, the deeper issue remains.

The essential point is that royal status does not come from below – neither from the crowd nor from Jesus's own aspirations – it comes from above, from God. In the dialogue with Pilate, Jesus will disclose what *accessio* means in his case. He says, “my kingship” (ἡ βασιλεία ἡ ἐμῆ, 18:36) does not originate from this world and is not characterized by violence but by witness to the truth (18:36–37). His kingship is rightly announced on the sign above the cross, since crucifixion is integral to the way he exercises the power God has given him (19:19–22).<sup>35</sup> In John 6, Jesus points in this direction when he speaks of having come from above to provide life by giving his own flesh and blood (6:38, 51–56). He exercises power by laying down and taking up his life (10:17–18). After the resurrection, the disciples will discern that Scripture does point to Jesus as the “king” who is coming (12:14–16).

## 2. Walking on the Sea and the Perspective of the Disciples

The next episode in this chapter involves Jesus meeting the disciples on the sea and their responses to him. Here the dynamics shift from the categories of prophet and king to those involving what was traditionally predicated of human beings versus what was ascribed to God. Earlier in this chapter the disciples functioned as a group (6:3, 12), and two of them – Philip and Andrew – also spoke as individuals (6:5–9).<sup>36</sup> When Andrew and Philip first met Jesus they identified him as the Messiah foretold in Scripture (1:40–45), and the disciples as a group “believed” when Jesus performed a sign at Cana (2:11). Afterward, however, their perspective became surprisingly mundane. In Samaria the disciples were preoccupied with food and could not comprehend what Jesus meant by saying that his “food” was to do the will of the one who sent him (4:31–33). That same perspective continues in their initial appearance in John 6.

### 2.1 *The Human Dimension*

Readers have learned that before the feeding of the five thousand, the disciples construed the situation in terms of ordinary human experience: they did not have enough money to buy food for the crowd and could not imagine how five

<sup>35</sup> Jörg Frey, *Die johanneische Eschatologie III*, WUNT 117 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 271–77; idem, *The Glory of the Crucified One*, 299.

<sup>36</sup> See Susan E. Hylen, “The Disciples: The ‘Now’ and ‘Not Yet’ of Belief in Jesus,” in *Character Studies in the Fourth Gospel: Narrative Approaches to Seventy Figures in John*, ed. Steven A. Hunt, D. Francois Tolmie, and Ruben Zimmermann, WUNT 314 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 214–27.

loaves and two fish would suffice (6:5–9). After Jesus fed the crowd, the disciples gathered up the fragments, but nothing is said about what they thought Jesus’s action meant. As the new scene begins, the disciples set out across the sea to Capernaum without Jesus (6:16). The narrator does not explain why they do so, although readers might assume that they have some practical reason for making the trip. The narrator’s description of the setting emphasizes the difficulty of the journey. It has become dark, which elsewhere is said to impede work and travel (9:4; 11:10), and can suggest a lack of understanding (12:35). A strong wind is blowing, yet they have rowed three or four miles (6:16–18). This first part of the journey has been made in Jesus’s absence, since he has “not yet come to them” (6:17). What they now “see” (θεωροῦσιν) – and must interpret – is “Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat” (6:19).

A person walking on the water would not fit the conventional worldview shown by the disciples earlier in the chapter. There they assumed that actions had to fit within the limitations of available resources (6:7–9), which would make a human being striding across the waves unthinkable. Other ancient sources would concur.<sup>37</sup> Artemidorus said that people might dream of walking on the sea, but the dream was to be understood figuratively, not literally. For example, if a statesman dreamed of walking on the sea, it could foretell remarkable gain and great renown, because the sea “resembles a crowd because of its instability.”<sup>38</sup> Menander lampoons a person so arrogant that he could say, “If I needs must tread some pathway through the sea, then it will give me footing” (Menander frg. 924; Allinson, LCL). In Jewish sources, similar hubris was ascribed to Antiochus Epiphanes, who thought “he could sail on the land and walk on the sea, because his mind was elated” (2 Macc 5:21). Lucian satirized people who were so gullible that they thought a magician could “soar through the air in broad daylight and walk on the water” while wearing rough leather shoes (*Lover of Lies* 13; Harmon, LCL).

The bizarre quality of what the disciples see Jesus doing evokes fear (ἐφοβήθησαν, 6:19). On the one hand, this might be regarded as fear of the supernatural.<sup>39</sup> The accounts in Mark 6:49 and Matt 14:26 say the disciples thought Jesus was a ghost or apparition (φάντασμα), like those that inspired terror in the darkness. One might also assume that in John’s account, the disciples’ fear shows

<sup>37</sup> For sources see Adela Yarbro Collins, “Rulers, Divine Men, and Walking on the Water (Mark 6:45–52),” in *Religious Propaganda and Missionary Competition in the New Testament World: Essays Honoring Dieter Georgi*, ed. Lukas Bormann, Kelly Del Tredici, and Angela Standhartinger, NovTSup 74 (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 207–27; Udo Schnelle, ed. with Michael Labahn and Manfred Lang, *Neuer Wettstein: Texte aus Griechenland und Hellenismus I/2* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2001), 345–50. See also Michael Labahn, *Jesus als Lebensspender: Untersuchungen zu einer Geschichte der johanneischen Tradition anhand ihrer Wundergeschichten*, BZAW 98 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1999), 284–91; Salier, *The Rhetorical Impact*, 109–11.

<sup>38</sup> Artemidorus, *Onir.* 3.16; cf. Dio Chrysostom, *Disc.* 11.129.

<sup>39</sup> Cicero, *Nat. d.* 1.42.117; Plutarch, *Moralia* 165B–F.

their inability to recognize the figure whom they meet.<sup>40</sup> On the other hand, people also became afraid at manifestations of God's presence or when encountering God's messengers, so that the disciples' fear could be construed as initial awareness of the presence of God in the person of Jesus.<sup>41</sup> Yet elsewhere in the Gospel, the disciples' response to the sudden appearance of Jesus is joy rather than fear (20:19–20; cf. 16:22). Instead of quelling the disciples' fear, the sight of Jesus on the water seems to generate fear, which points to the incongruous aspect of his action and the disciples' lack of clarity as to its meaning.<sup>42</sup> The turning point in the narrative occurs when the fear generated by what the disciples "see" is overcome, as Jesus speaks words that evoke a desire to receive him (6:19–21).

## 2.2 Revealer of God

Jesus's words to the disciples shift the interpretive framework from what can plausibly be said about a human being to what might be said about God. Four aspects of the scene work together to give the encounter the quality of a theophany.<sup>43</sup> First, the pivotal moment occurs when Jesus says, "I am. Do not fear" (ἐγὼ εἰμι· μὴ φοβεῖσθε, John 6:20). Grammatically the ἐγὼ εἰμι can be read with an implied predicate as "It is I," and some interpreters construe it primarily as a way for Jesus to make clear that he is not an unknown figure but one whom they know, as is the case when the beggar uses the expression in 9:9.<sup>44</sup> Here, however, the ἐγὼ εἰμι is used by someone walking on the sea, which takes it outside the realm of ordinary usage, so that it contributes to Jesus's self-revelation as the one in whom God is present and active.<sup>45</sup> In the discourse that follows Jesus will repeat the ἐγὼ εἰμι, adding claims about his heavenly origin and ability to give

<sup>40</sup> Thompson, *John*, 142–43; J. Ramsey Michaels, *The Gospel of John*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 357; Patrick J. Madden, *Jesus' Walking on the Sea: An Investigation of the Origin of the Narrative Account*, BZNW 81 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1997), 111.

<sup>41</sup> Gen 28:17; Exod 3:6; 20:18; cf. Exod 34:30; Judg 6:22; 13:22. On this interpretation see Hylen, "The Disciples," 217; Gail R. O'Day, "John 6:15–21: Jesus Walking on Water as Narrative Embodiment of Johannine Christology," in *Critical Readings of John 6*, ed. R. Alan Culpepper, Biblical Interpretation Series 22 (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 149–59, esp. 154.

<sup>42</sup> John Paul Heil, *Jesus Walking on the Sea: Meaning and Gospel Functions of Matt 14:22–33, Mark 6:45–52 and John 6:15b–21*, AnBib 67 (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1981), 79.

<sup>43</sup> O'Day, "John 6:15–21," 152–55; Michael Labahn, *Offenbarung in Zeichen und Wort: Untersuchungen zur Vorgeschichte von John 6,1–25a und seiner Rezeption in der Brotrede*, WUNT 2/117 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 198–224.

<sup>44</sup> William Loader, *Jesus in John's Gospel: Structure and Issues in Johannine Christology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 347–54; cf. Heil, *Jesus Walking on the Sea*, 79–80.

<sup>45</sup> Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St John*, vol. 2, trans. Cecily Hastings, Francis McDonagh, David Smith, and Richard Foley, HTCNT (New York: Seabury, 1980), 27; O'Day, "John 6:15–21," 155; Thyen, *Das Johannesevangelium*, 342; Theobald, *Evangelium*, 444–45. See also Kasper Bro Larsen, who compares this passage with recognition scenes in Greco-Roman literature in *Recognizing the Stranger: Recognition Scenes in the Gospel of John*, Biblical Interpretation Series 93 (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 123–24, 148–50.

life, which have divine connotations (6:35, 40, 48, 51), especially because Jesus has already said that he gives life just as God his Father does (5:21). In chapters that follow, the expression ἐγώ εἰμι is used both with and without a predicate in contexts that enable it to have the quality of a divine pronouncement.

Readers familiar with the exodus story would know that when Moses asked for God's name, God said, "I Am who I Am" (Exod 3:14).<sup>46</sup> The expression ἐγώ εἰμι also appears in related texts, such as, "See, see that I Am, and there is no god beside me" (Deut 32:39 LXX), and in Isaiah it was repeatedly used for divine self-identification: for example, "I Am and there is no other" (Isa 45:18 LXX).<sup>47</sup> Moreover, Jesus's words, "Do not fear," recall a formula ascribed to God and God's emissaries, when they assured people that the numinous encounter would bring life and not death, divine favor and not judgment.<sup>48</sup> Finally, God's self-identification as ἐγώ εἰμι was used with the words "do not fear" in oracles of salvation in Isaiah: "I, the Lord, am the first, and at the last I am he ... Do not fear: I am with you ... Do not fear, I will help you (Isa 41:4, 10, 13 NAB). The expressions "I am" and "Do not fear" were used often enough in contexts of divine speech to enable readers to construe them as one of the revelatory elements in this episode.

Second, Jesus's words must be correlated with his actions, and walking on the sea was something that could be said of God. According to Israel's tradition, God "alone stretched out the heaven and walks on the waves of the sea" (Job 9:8). Recalling the exodus, it was said that God's "way was through the sea, your path, through the mighty waters" (Ps 77:19; cf. Isa 43:16). Divine connotations would also be apparent for Greco-Roman readers, since it was said that Poseidon gave Orion the power of striding across the sea (Apollodorus, *Library* 1.4.3), and Herakles "surmounted the seas on foot" (Seneca the Younger, *Hercules furens* 324; Fitch, LCL). At the same time, the discourse in John 6 will make clear that the God for whom Jesus speaks is Israel's God, who gave bread from heaven to Israel's ancestors in the wilderness (John 6:31–34) and is the God of whom Isaiah wrote (6:45; cf. Isa 54:13).

Third, the disciples' response is that they are no longer afraid but "wanted to receive him into the boat" (ἤθελον οὖν λαβεῖν αὐτὸν εἰς τὸ πλοῖον, 6:21). John's account does not say that Jesus actually got into the boat or that the wind ceased, details that are mentioned in Mark 6:51 and Matt 14:32. Some have noted that if the scene is to be construed as divine self-revelation then one might expect a

<sup>46</sup> The LXX of Exod 3:14 reads ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ ὢν.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Isa 41:4; 43:10, 25; 45:19, 22; 46:4; 48:12; 51:12. For extensive discussion of the biblical background see Catrin H. Williams, *I Am He: The Interpretation of 'Ani Hu' in Jewish and Early Christian Literature*, WUNT 2/113 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000). On John 6:20 see esp. pp. 225–28; David Mark Ball, "I Am" in *John's Gospel: Literary Function, Background and Theological Implications*, JSNTS 124 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 181–85; cf. Brown, *John*, 1:533–38; Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St John*, 79–89.

<sup>48</sup> Gen 15:1; 26:24; Judg 6:22–23; Luke 2:10; Rev 1:17.

more dramatic reaction on the part of the disciples, as is the case in John 18:5–8, where the soldiers fall to the ground when Jesus utters the ἐγώ εἰμι.<sup>49</sup> But in John’s account, the response of the disciples in 6:21 recalls what Jesus said at the end of John 5, where he told his critics, “I have come in my Father’s name, and you do not receive me” (οὐ λαμβάνετε με, 5:43). The disciples’ response is the positive alternative: Jesus comes as “I Am” – recalling the name of God – and the disciples do want to “receive him” (λαβεῖν αὐτόν). In the prologue, receiving Jesus and believing in him are parallel expressions: To “all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God” (1:12).<sup>50</sup> This pattern is now developed in John 6, where the disciples initially want to “receive” Jesus, and Peter later speaks for the disciples when saying, “We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God” (6:68–69).

Fourth, the theophany on the sea concludes when “immediately the boat reached the land to which they were going” (6:21b). Discussion of this passage has often focused on whether this detail is to be understood as a miracle. Some picture the boat being whisked across miles of water in an almost magical way, so that the disciples are taken from the middle of the lake to the shore in an instant.<sup>51</sup> Others point out that the disciples could already have drawn near to their destination before they saw Jesus.<sup>52</sup> In contrast to the Synoptics, John does not say that the boat was in the middle of the lake, far from land, when the disciples saw Jesus (Mark 6:47; Matt 14:24). Readers are told that the disciples had rowed for three or four miles (John 6:19), but they are given no information about how much further the disciples intended to travel. It is not clear that the writer expects readers to know how large the lake is or whether they are to picture the disciples traveling directly across it (πέραν) from east to west at its widest part (6:17). Note that when the crowd makes the same journey the next day, one can get the impression that it involved boat travel from a place near Tiberias to Capernaum (6:23–24), both located along the western shore, which would suggest a shorter distance.<sup>53</sup> Josephus

<sup>49</sup> Loader, *Jesus in John’s Gospel*, 348–49.

<sup>50</sup> Heil, *Jesus Walking on the Sea*, 148–49; Williams, *I Am He*, 228.

<sup>51</sup> Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Commentary on the Gospel of John* on 6:21; John Chrysostom, *Hom. Jo.* 43.2; Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, trans. G. R. Beasley-Murray, R. W. N. Hoare, and J. K. Riches (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971), 216; John P. Meier, *Mentor, Message, and Miracles*, vol. 2 of *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, ABRL (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 911–12; Labahn, *Jesus als Lebensspender*, 290; Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, 2 vols. (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2003), 1:674.

<sup>52</sup> Herman N. Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 218; Michaels, *The Gospel of John*, 358; cf. C. H. Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 198.

<sup>53</sup> Some translations give the impression that John 6:23–24 pictures boats from Tiberias, which is located on the western shore, crossing the lake and drawing near to the place where the feeding took place on the eastern shore, and then journeying west across the lake again to Capernaum (NIV, NET). Nevertheless, a more plausible translation of 6:23 is that “boats came from Tiberias [which was] near the place where they had eaten the bread after the Lord had given thanks.” Elsewhere that construction is used for “Aenon [which is] near Salim” (3:23) and

does describe travel between such cities as going across (διαπεραιώω) the sea (*Life* 304).<sup>54</sup> The point is that the text is remarkably vague about the distance the disciples must travel to shore in 6:23 and how readers are to picture this final part of their journey. Virtually all details remain in the background.

Attention focuses instead on the *safe outcome* of the disciples' difficult sea journey.<sup>55</sup> By concluding the episode with the disciples' safe arrival at their destination, the Gospel continues to portray Jesus as the agent of divine power. Here again the text can evoke associations from various ancient contexts. In a Greco-Roman letter, a traveler wrote, "I give thanks to the lord Serapis, because when I was endangered at sea, he rescued me immediately."<sup>56</sup> Aelius Aristides was more effusive in recounting how Serapis revealed his power when "the vast sea rose from all sides and rushed upon us," but the god enabled them "to behold the earth and to make port" in a way that went "beyond our expectations" (*Orat.* 45.33).

In imperial and royal iconography, the motif of divine protection and guidance on the sea was coupled with the motif of divinely given abundance, which was noted above. Here again the deity was Tyche or Fortuna, who now holds the rudder that guides a boat. For people of the time the significance of the imagery was clear: "the rudder indicates that Fortune directs the life of men" (Dio Chrysostom, *Disc.* 63.7; Crosby, LCL). By extension, the image of a safe journey on the sea could convey the idea of divine protection and guidance under the reign of the emperor and king.<sup>57</sup> The image was used on coins and artwork throughout the Roman Empire.<sup>58</sup> The example in Figure 2 shows how the motif appeared on the coins minted in Roman Palestine under the Jewish vassal kings Agrippa I and Agrippa II – and Agrippa II erected a statue of this image at Caesarea Philippi in 87/88 CE.<sup>59</sup>

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for the "region [which is] near the desert" (11:54). Similar constructions using ἐγγύς add a form of the verb "to be" in order to make the local sense clear (11:18; 19:20, 42).

<sup>54</sup> Josephus is describing travel across the sea from Tiberias to Taricheae, which is on the western shore and closer to Tiberias than Capernaum is.

<sup>55</sup> Emphasized by Charles Homer Giblin, "The Miraculous Crossing of the Sea (John 6, 16–21)," *NTS* 29 (1982–1983): 96–103.

<sup>56</sup> BGU 2.243; John L. White, *Light from Ancient Letters, Foundations and Facets* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), no. 103 lines 6–8; cf. no. 105 lines 19–20. On Serapis as protector of navigation see Sarolta A. Takács, *Isis and Sarapis in the Roman World*, RGRW 128 (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 180, 189. Aelius Aristides ascribes similar power to Asclepius (*Or.* 42.10).

<sup>57</sup> Noreña, *Imperial Ideals in the Roman West*, 138–40.

<sup>58</sup> A good first-century example is the relief sculpture in the temple at Aphrodisias. See Smith, "The Imperial Reliefs from the Sebasteion," 104–06. For examples of the motif on Roman coins from the first century BCE onward see Noreña, *Imperial Ideals in the Roman West*, 138, nn. 124–27.

<sup>59</sup> For an example minted at Caesarea Maritima under Agrippa I in 42/43 CE see Meshorer, *A Treasury of Jewish Coins* nos. 122, 126 (p. 232). For use of the image by Agrippa II see p. 107 and plate no. 167.





Figure 2. Left: Emperor Vespasian. Right: Tyche holding a rudder set on a globe in her right hand and a cornucopia in her left hand. Minted at Caesarea Philippi mint in 75/76 CE. The abbreviation BA in the lower left identifies Agrippa II as Rome's vassal king (ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ). Courtesy of the Classical Numismatic Group (cngcoins.com).

John's Gospel gives the impression that the safe outcome of the disciples' difficult sea journey comes through the divine power revealed in Jesus. At the same time, the context makes clear that the God for whom Jesus speaks is Israel's God, as noted above. Some biblical texts refer to God leading Israel through the sea (Ps 77:19–20; 78:13) or bringing people out of danger to their desired haven (Ps 107:28–30). But the most notable similarities appear in Isa 43, where God says, "Do not fear (μὴ φοβοῦ) ... When you pass through the waters I will be with you," for "I Am (ἐγὼ εἰμι). Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me" (Isa 43:1–2, 10).<sup>60</sup>

John's account of Jesus coming to the disciples on the sea and bringing them safely to shore both draws on the category of a theophany and redefines how the category is understood. Within the conventional worldview exhibited by the disciples at the beginning of the chapter, it was understood that people did not walk on the sea; the idea was suitable for satire. Instead, walking on the sea could only plausibly be ascribed to God, who in this context is the God of Israel. The crucial point of redefinition is that the Gospel repeatedly insists that no one has actually seen God (6:46; cf. 1:18; 3:13; 5:37). Yet in this theophany on the sea, the disciples do "see" Jesus, who speaks as God when saying, "I Am, do not fear," and whose coming results in the safe outcome of the journey. The Gospel's perspective is distinctly incarnational, since the presence of the unseen God is revealed in the person of Jesus, who can be seen, and who will soon speak of his own flesh and blood (6:51–56).

<sup>60</sup> T. Naph. 6:4–9 tells of Levi praying for God's help in the aftermath of a shipwreck and eventually being brought safely to shore (Heil, *Jesus Walking on the Sea*, 17–21). Nevertheless, in that text the safe arrival involves the ending of the storm, an aspect not found in John 6:16–21.

### 3. Conclusion

The accounts of the signs in John 6 disclose multiple aspects of Jesus's identity in ways that both adopt and reshape familiar categories. When the crowd calls Jesus "the prophet," they are correct in that he is the one God promised to send, who speaks and acts as God's authorized representative. Yet in fulfilling his role as the prophet, Jesus will reveal that he is more than a prophet, since he will speak of coming from heaven and giving life to the world in a way that Moses did not. The crowd is also correct in assuming that the prophet Jesus, who has fed them, is indeed king. Yet they fail to see that he does not work within the pattern of *consensus*, since his royal power comes from above, not from below, and it is exercised in laying down and taking up his life. The disciples begin the chapter with a worldview that sees only the physical limitations of available resources. Yet in the theophany on the sea, they encounter the presence of the unseen God in the person of Jesus, whom they can see.

The dimensions of Jesus's identity disclosed in these encounters must be taken together. No one dimension excludes the others.<sup>61</sup> He is the prophet, the king, and the flesh and blood human being in whom the unseen God is revealed. The older categories that inform the responses of the crowd and the disciples are helpful up to a point, in that each category allows them to glimpse some aspect of who Jesus is. At the same time, no category is left unchanged. All are reshaped in light of the Gospel's incarnational perspective. The crowd finds that in the end they cannot "make" (ποιήσωσιν) Jesus into the figure they desire, because he eludes them (6:15). Instead, the disciples show that one can only "receive" (λαβεῖν) him as the unique revealer of God (6:21).

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<sup>61</sup> See further Craig R. Koester, "Portraits of Jesus in the Gospel of John: A Spectrum of Roles," in *Portraits of Jesus in the Gospel of John: A Christological Spectrum*, ed. Craig R. Koester, LNTS 589 (London: T & T Clark, 2019), 1–16; idem, *The Word of Life: A Theology of John's Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 82–107. On the idea of a christological mosaic see Ruben Zimmermann, *Christologie der Bilder im Johannesevangelium: Die Christopoetik des vierten Evangeliums unter besonderer Berücksichtigung von Joh 10*, WUNT 171 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 407–46.