

## John 1:6-8, 19-28

<sup>1</sup> In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup> He was in the beginning with God. <sup>3</sup> All things came to be through him, and without him nothing came to be. What came to be <sup>4</sup> through him was life, and this life was the light of the human race; <sup>5</sup> the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

<sup>6</sup> A man named John was sent from God. <sup>7</sup> He came for testimony, to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. <sup>8</sup> He was not the light, but came to testify to the light.

<sup>9</sup> The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. <sup>10</sup> He was in the world, and the world came to be through him, but the world did not know him. <sup>11</sup> He came to what was his own, but his own people did not accept him. <sup>12</sup> But to those who did accept him he gave power to become children of God, to those who believe in his name, <sup>13</sup> who were born not by natural generation nor by human choice nor by a man's decision but of God. . And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, and we saw his glory, the glory as of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth. <sup>15</sup> John testified to him and cried out, saying, "This was he of whom I said, 'The one who is coming after me ranks ahead of me because he existed before me.'" <sup>16</sup> From his fullness we have all received, grace in place of grace, <sup>17</sup> because while the law was given through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. <sup>18</sup> No one has ever seen God. The only Son, God, who is at the Father's side, has revealed him

<sup>19</sup> And this is the testimony of John. When the Jews from Jerusalem sent priests and Levites (to him) to ask him, "Who are you?" <sup>20</sup> he admitted and did not deny it, but admitted, "I am not the Messiah." <sup>21</sup> So they asked him, "What are you then? Are you Elijah?" And he said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" He answered, "No." <sup>22</sup> So they said to him, "Who are you, so we can give an answer to those who sent us? What do you have to say for yourself?" <sup>23</sup> He said: "I am 'the voice of one crying out in the desert, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as Isaiah the prophet said.'" <sup>24</sup> Some Pharisees were also sent. <sup>25</sup> They asked him, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Messiah or Elijah or the Prophet?" <sup>26</sup> John answered them, "I baptize with water; but there is one among you whom you do not recognize, <sup>27</sup> the one who is coming after me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to untie." <sup>28</sup> This happened in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing.



### 3rd Sunday of Advent

*A man named John was sent from God. He came for testimony, to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him (John 1:6-7)*

Image credit: "Saint John the Baptist Preaching to the Masses in the Wilderness" by Pieter Bruegel the Younger (1564–1638), Galerie de Jonckheere, Paris | US-PD

## John's Gospel

Last week the Gospel reading focused on the preaching and ministry of John the Baptist as the precursor or forerunner of Jesus, the one who came to "Prepare the Way of the Lord," by calling the

people to turn back to God. The readings often include passages from the Old Testament, particularly from the book of Isaiah, which contain prophecies about a voice crying out in the wilderness, making the paths straight for the Lord. This week John the Baptist is still prominent, but the readings move from penitential in nature to one that anticipates the coming of the Christ child. We also move from the Gospel of Mark to the Gospel of John.

The 3rd Sunday of Advent, often called Gaudete Sunday, is more joyful and celebratory compared to the previous weeks of Advent. “*Gaudete*” means “rejoice” in Latin, and it is a day of joyful anticipation. The readings often emphasize that the time of waiting is nearing its end, and the fulfillment of God's promises is drawing closer. It is a reminder of the joy that comes with the anticipation of Christ's arrival. The Gospel reading shifts the focus from a solely penitential and preparatory tone to one of joy and hope. It encourages believers to rejoice in the Lord's coming and to maintain a sense of hope and expectation.

The gospel for this Sunday is taken from the prologue and beginning of the Gospel of John (John 1:1-28) it does not include all the verses. Our gospel reading uses verses 6-8 and 19-28. The passage does not include such well known verses such as “*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God*” (John 1:1) nor the verses that emphasize the “light” coming into the world - rather it concentrates on the role of John the Baptist as the one who announces the light and his testimony to the light come into the world.

While this Sunday does not make full use of John's opening chapter, the whole of the Advent and Christmas season does.

In Lectionary Cycle B, the prologue and beginning of the Gospel appears on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent as well as the gospel for the Mass on Christmas during the day (all years) and on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Christmas (all years). In all the uses John the Evangelist is orienting the reader of the gospel with a fusion of traditional materials: a hymn about the pre-existing Word of God, John the Baptist, as well as many OT images. The goal of the fusion is most powerfully seen in the closing verses of the Prologue (vv.14-18) in which the language about God and Word (v.1) becomes the language about Father and Son (v.17). The story of the Word becomes identical with the story of Jesus. The Word became flesh (v.14) is the defining event of human history in which the relationship of God and humanity is forever changed in the Incarnation. The Incarnation means that people can see, hear, and know God in ways never before possible. Such is the effect of the divine light in the world. *What came to be through him was life, and this life was the light of the human race* (vv.3-4)

David Lose has a wonderful reflection that I thought good to include here:

There is, John says, a point to the universe. That is a debatable conclusion these days. Theories about the beginning of the cosmos, evidence of an expanding universe, the discovery of dark matter, and so on – all of this and more raise questions about whether there is anything or anyone behind the creation of the world and the point – or lack thereof – of our existence.

The typical – or at least culturally dominant – Christian response has been to argue backwards from the complexity of our present world to the existence of an intelligent designer. This assumes, of course, that chaos cannot ever result in something complex and useful. And it often leads to an embrace of a pre- if not un-scientific view of the world that is difficult for most of us to accept.

So is that our only choice – random meaninglessness or uncritical biblicism? I don't think so, as John offers another model.

John doesn't seek to prove the existence of a creator, you see, he confesses it. In fact, he sings it. When you read these first eighteen verses of John's Gospel, what we often call the Prologue, you realize quite quickly that it is as much poetry as narrative, filled not with equations but metaphors,

and therefore is far closer to a song than a scientific essay. John makes a confession, not seeking to prove but persuade the way all art persuades, through beauty.

And so John confesses that at the heart of all we do and are, and at the core of all that is, lives God’s Word, not merely existing but giving life, and not life in general but life with meaning and purpose. Life, that is, that gives light.

Skeptics on both the most liberal and most conservative ends of the spectrum may scoff at confession, seeking instead some kind of proof, whether scientific or scriptural. But John simply confesses with poetry, metaphor, and song that at the very core of the universe is the heart beat of God, the Word that gives life, and the Word that thereby also enlightens our life.

Faith, like love, can be understood only from the inside. And so the question isn’t simply whether you assent to this confession, but rather, when you sing John’s song, do you feel the light of the world pulsing through your voice?”

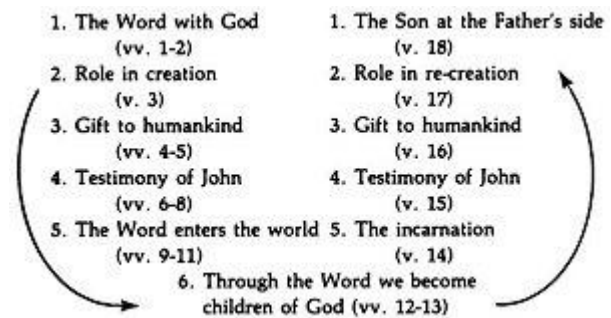
This is Advent – an invitation to enter into the inside, to be lifted up in love, and to let the song of your life in Christ be your testimony.

### Context and the Fourth Gospel

John the Evangelist has deftly changed the narrative presented in the Synoptic Gospels. Here in the fourth gospel the story of Jesus is not ultimately a story *about* Jesus; it is *the* story of God as God reveals God’s self in the person of Jesus. Thus the narrative is well placed in Advent at the head of the liturgical year: “*In the beginning...*”

This prologue of John’s Gospel serves as an introduction to the context of the fourth gospel. In its short span of eighteen verses, it states briefly what the whole of the Gospel will spell out over twenty-one chapters. It has both structure and content. The *structure* has been partially determined by the presentation of “wisdom personified” in the Old Testament books. There, as in Wisdom 9:9–12 or Proverbs 8:22–36, Wisdom is first with God, then shares in creation, will come to earth, and there gift humankind. This same progression is found in our prologue. The other factor that has determined the structure is the Hebrew fondness for parallelism — notions being repeated in order — and for inverse parallelism, that is, repeated in inverse order.

Visually, John’s poetic prologue unfolds as follows:



In *content*, these eighteen verses speak of God’s revelation, of how he has explained himself to us. It is this that accounts for the extraordinary title that our author uses — “the Word.” Its best equivalent is “revelation.” As we humans reveal ourselves through what we say and, even more, by what we do (our body language), so God through the centuries has offered his own self-revelation through act and speech. The prologue details this. God revealed himself through creation (vv. 2–5), but also through his Old Testament word (vv. 10–13), that is, through his covenants, the Mosaic writings, the prophets, and the wisdom literature. Those who opened their eyes and believed in this ancient revelation became “children of God ... born ... of God” (vv. 12–13). Finally God has revealed himself to the utmost through the incarnation of the Word, in whom God’s glory, his presence, stands revealed as a sign of his enduring love (v. 14). (The Greek text tells us that the Word “pitched his tent” among us, a striking reference to God’s Old Testament presence in the tent-tabernacle during Moses’ wanderings with Israel in the desert.) To this incarnate Word John the Baptist has given testimony, a testimony that initiated the historical manifestation of Jesus, in whom the Father stands completely revealed and in whose

fullness we, the Christian community, have all shared. The prologue ends with the upstroke of the pendulum arm to the right, in parallel to the very beginning of the poem. The Word, whose name is Jesus Christ (v. 17), is the Son, the only Son, who is “at the Father’s side” (v. 18) and reveals him to those open to light and truth.

The prologue is reminiscent of the first chapter of *Genesis* on a number of scores:

- The opening words are identical, “*In the beginning....*”
- There is a parallelism in the role of the Word. In *Genesis* God creates things through His word (“*And God said....*”); in the gospel we are told that they were made through the Word.
- In *Genesis*, God's creation reaches its peak when He creates man in His own image and likeness; in the gospel, the work of the Incarnate Word culminates when man is raised in a new creation to being a child of God.
- In *Genesis* God proclaims “*Let there be light....*”; in the gospel we are told that the Word is a “*A light to the world...*”.

Also the Prologue immediately presents one of St John's most common features - the double entendre; a word with two meanings. St John never chooses these words lightly. They always provide the careful reader with a deeper spiritual insight.

The opening phrase, “*In the beginning....*” presents the reader with a choice. The Greek beginning (*aiken*) and the Hebrew word (*bereshet*) are literally translated as “*In the first...*”. Does it refer to chronology/sequence or does it refer to rank? The casual reader probably only sees the chronology. In typically Johannine fashion it represents both. For St John, Jesus is the “first,” the one who creates and the only begotten Son of the Father.

**The Word Made Flesh.** Jesus was not born into a time of theological vacuum. Jewish theology was robust and with a history of succeeding and competing rabbinic schools. The followers of Jesus and the people of his time were Jews who were raised and lived this theology. It provided the framework for their daily lives and shaped their expectations about the Messiah, the Anointed One, who was to come. Among the gospels, John's is the writings whose work expresses the fulfillment of those expectations and provides the theology for those that would follow Jesus. The basis of the theology is evident from the opening:

*John 1:1 "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and Word was God..."*

The Greek word used for 'Word' is *logos*. Many commentaries on this topic discuss this passage in terms of *logos*, Greek for reason and speech. When this is viewed from a Greek philosophical point of view, it is explained that Jesus was by reason the very idea of God and by speech, the very expression of God. If this gospel is attributed to John the Apostle, the approach suffers from the fact John was a Jewish fisherman whose family had connections to the high priestly families of Jerusalem. He is more likely to have used his Jewish background as a basis for the philosophical opening.

This basic Jewish theology was important because it is by understanding the background that the fullest sense of the meaning of Jesus can be obtained. The introduction to John's gospel, when viewed from the existing Jewish theology, provides continuity from the Old Covenant to the New. It shows that the Messiah existed from before creation and sets the theological basis for the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy through Jesus, and the forming of a new creation.

**The Targumim.** A great deal of our understanding of the Jewish theological interpretation of the Old Testament comes from original writings of the Hebrew scholars. The Old Testament was originally

recorded in Hebrew and then translated (with interpretative embellishment) in Aramaic - known as the *Targumin*. For example:

- *Isaiah 52:13 (Hebrew) "See, my servant shall prosper.."*
- *Isaiah 52:13 (Targumin) "See, my servant the Messiah shall prosper.."*

In fact most of the OT citations in *John* are taken, not from the Hebrew or Septuagint (Greek language) Scriptures, but from the *Targumins*. From study of the *Targumins* we can begin to understand the full nature of Jesus.

**The Word.** In Jewish theology, the *memra* – Aramaic for the *Word* (*dabar* in Hebrew) – had several characteristics. It means more than "spoken word"; it also means "thing", "affair", "event", and "action". Because it covers both word and deed, in Hebrew thought, *dabar* had a certain dynamic energy and power of its own. When connected to Yahweh it took on the divine. Its energy and power were from God. The Targuminic reflections on *memra* (*Targum Onkelos*) offers some insight into the meaning of the *Word* in Jewish theological thinking:

- The *memra* was highly personified (e.g., *Isaiah 9:8, 45:23, 55:10; Psalm 147:15*)
- When the word of God came to a particular prophet (*Hos 1:1; Joel 1:1*) it challenged the prophet to accept the word; when he accepted it it impelled him to go forth and give it to others and it became the word that judged men.
- The *memra* was a means of making a covenant (e.g., *Genesis 15:1; Exodus 34:10*).
- The word was is described in the OT as a light for men (*Ps 154:105, 103*)
- The *memra* was life-giving (e.g., *Dt 32:46-47*)
- For the Psalmist the *memra* has the power to heal people (e.g., *Ps 107:20*)
- Salvation was by means of the *memra* (e.g., *Wis 16:26*)
- The revelation of God to his people came through the *memra* as His agent (e.g., *Genesis 15:1; Ezekiel 1:3*)
- The *memra* was an agent of creation (e.g., *Psalm 33:6; Is 55:10-11; Ws 9:1*). In *Is 40:11* God says, "*So shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty. Rather it shall accomplish what I want and prosper in the things for which I sent it.*"
- The *memra* was bearer of the judgment of God (*Wis 18:15; Hab 3:5*)
- The *memra* was the agent of the theophany, or visible manifestations of God's presence (*Gen 3:2*). John uses this thought (*Jn 1:14*) in the use of the term "dwelling", which loses something in the translation. The Greek literally reads "pitched his tent/tabernacle", describing the place of God's presence among His chosen people. The Greek word for dwelling uses the same/near equivalent consonance sounds as the Aramaic work, *Shekinah*, meaning theophany .

**The Fulfillment of Covenants.** From the opening Prologue we see the portrait of Jesus as the fulfillment of all of these Targuminic themes. Jesus is personified (*vv. 1-2*), the agent of God and creation (*v.3*), the life-giver (*v.4*), the source of life and knowledge (*vv.4-5*), the maker of covenants (*v.12*), the means of salvation (*v.16*), the same as God and different (God and human natures), and the visible presence of God on earth. *John 1:14* says:

*"And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, and we saw his glory, the glory as of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth"*

The Prologue also presents Jesus as "*grace and truth*" - two Old Testament words describing Yahweh in covenant with Israel, thus the Word made flesh (Jesus) establishes a new covenant with his people. Thus is borne out in *John 1:17* "...while the law was given through Moses, *grace and truth* came

through Jesus Christ. But more importantly in v.12 we are told “*But to all who receive him, who believe in his name, he gave the power to become children of God.*” In the OT, covenant is seen as the means of extending family bonds. Thus Jesus as the maker of covenants becomes the means by which membership in the Divine Family is extended to us. St Athanasius explains:

“The Son of God became man in order that the sons of men, the sons of Adam might become sons of God....He is the Son of God by nature; we by grace” (*De Incarnatione contra arrianos*)

This covenantal theme becomes a principal component of St John's gospel message.

The relation of the Word in Old Testament theology sets the stage for John's telling of the story:

- The Word came,
- The world did not recognize/know the Word,
- The Jewish people did not recognize the Word, and
- Those that did recognize the Word became the children of God
- The Word continues to be the agent of salvation

The relation of the Word to Old Testament theology also establishes the framework of this Scripture study and is the story that we will attempt to understand: The Word was made flesh and is the ultimate agent of salvation. Only by recognizing the Word may we become the children of God and thus obtain salvation.

### Commentary

***A man named John was sent from God*** (v.6) Into this overarching narrative of the grand plan of salvation, we have the curious insertion of John the Baptist. We should note that this fourth gospel never uses the moniker “the Baptist” or “the Baptizer” – in fact John is never called the “forerunner” or “herald.” John has one role and one role only: witness (v.7). Leon Morris suggests that this is a response to a late 1<sup>st</sup> century controversy about the role and place of John the Baptist in the story of Christianity. “We should recall that some had baptized in John’s name as far afield as Ephesus (Acts 19:3), and they may have gone further. The great Apollos is first introduced as one who “knew only the baptism of John” (Acts 18:25). Our author does not enter directly into controversy with such people, but he insists more than any of the other Evangelists on the subordinate place of the Baptist. One of the aims of this Gospel plainly was to show how clearly and consistently John had pointed people to Jesus.” (Morris, 78) John the Evangelist does not directly confront the claims of the Baptist’s followers, but he insists more than any of the other Evangelists on the subordinate place of the Baptist. One of the aims of this Gospel plainly was to show how clearly and consistently John the Baptist had pointed people to Jesus.

**The Contrast between Jesus and John.** “*He [John] was not the light...*” (v.8) The contrast is continued when John is described as “*a man,*” for Jesus has already been spoken of as “*the Word.*” While the Evangelist is concerned that John should not be accorded the place that belongs to Jesus he is also concerned that John’s true greatness should be seen. John was “*sent from God*” (cf. v. 33; 3:28). His mission was not of human origin but of divine origin. This bold assertion at the very first mention of the Baptist is clear evidence that the Evangelist is not engaging in a campaign of denigration. He fully recognizes the greatness of the forerunner.

**The Work of the Baptist: Testimony.** Verse 8 is clear. John came “to testify” (*martyreō*, “bear witness”). Witness is one of the key concepts of this Gospel – John the Evangelist uses this word more than all the other gospel writers combined. He speaks of John the Baptist as a witness often – and only as a witness. In the Synoptic Gospels John the Baptist’s preaching of repentance and his practice are noted. In this Gospel his one function is to bear witness to Jesus; the references to his baptism are

incidental. It is perhaps significant that there is no mention of his baptizing Jesus. But there is repeated reference to his witness; cf. 1:7, 8, 15, 19, 32, 34; 3:26 (cf. 3:28), 5:33. For this gospel writer John's witness is what matters. It was for witness that John came, and nothing else that he did can be compared in importance to this.

In this Gospel there are seven who bear witness to Jesus. Each of the three Persons of the Trinity does this—the Father (5:31–32, 34, 37; 8:18), Christ himself (8:14, 18; cf. 3:11, 32; 8:37), and the Spirit (15:26; cf. 16:14). The works of Jesus bear witness (5:36; 10:25; cf. 14:11; 15:24), as does sacred Scripture (5:39; cf. 5:45–46). A sixth witness is John the Baptist, while seventh is the variety of human witness consequent on the ministry of Jesus, that of the disciples (15:27; cf. 19:35; 21:24), the Samaritan woman (4:39), and the multitude (12:17). This emphasis on testimony should not be minimized. It is clear that our author wants his readers to take what he writes as reliable. He is insistent that there is good evidence for the things he sets down. Witness establishes the truth. It does more. This gospel shows us that there are those like John the Baptist who have committed themselves by their witness to Christ. John's work was “*to testify to the light.*” [Note: the verb “testify,” incidentally, is in the aorist. The meaning is not that John continually witnessed (though that, too, was true), but that he accomplished a finished work. He bore his witness to the Word, and there was nothing more that he could do.]

This bearing of witness was not an end in itself. Behind it was the purpose “*so that all might believe through him.*” (v.7) Grammatically, “believe” is not in the continuous tense, and this is perhaps significant. John came to bring people to decide, to make the definitive act of faith.

***An Interlude.*** Verses 9-18 are not part of our gospel reading for this 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Advent (Year B), but let us at least summarize its content

***The Word Incarnate*** (1:9–14) Attention is now fastened on the incarnation. Two points receive special emphasis: one is the astonishing fact that the Word of God, true God as he is, took upon him human nature, and the other is the even more astonishing fact that when he did this, people would have nothing to do with him. John is concerned that we should miss neither the good news of the incarnation of God, nor the tragedy of the human rejection of God.

***The Word's Surpassing Excellence*** (1:15–18) The Prologue concludes with a little section underlining the uniqueness of Christ. First we are reminded of his superiority to the Baptist, then of the great truth that he supplies all the needs of his people. He is shown to surpass Moses by supplying grace and truth instead of the Law. The Prologue concludes with the point that he is the one revealer of the God whom no human eye has seen.

### ***John's Testimony***

John's testimony to Jesus will lead others to faith, but it is also offered as evidence in a trial. John's interrogators in this passage are not curious passersby, but are a delegation sent by official Judaism (vv. 19, 22). The expression “the Jews” (*hoi Ioudaioi*, v. 19) occurs repeatedly in the Fourth Gospel and has a wide range of meanings. Its most common usage, as in v.19, is as a synonym for the Jewish religious establishment, which is the source of most of the opposition to Jesus' ministry in John. Here it likely refers to representatives from Jerusalem leadership who quite naturally are going to make inquiries about what may well be a new religious movement – especially if there are messianic claims. There was a history of such movements and claims leading to religious disappointment and political ruin. Once John the Baptist acquired a following, the questions were sure to come. The first one was simple and straightforward.

*Who Are You?* The delegation from Jerusalem asked a simple question, “*Who are you?*” John was a puzzle. He did not conform. Officialdom wanted to know more about him. Perhaps understanding the question they would ultimately reach, John replies “*I am not the Messiah.*” This is even though no one in the delegation is reported to have said anything about the Messiah. Messianic speculations were in the air, and he framed his reply accordingly.

If this was Mark’s gospel, we might have just said “*I am not the Messiah.*” Instead we have a rather complicated expression: “*he admitted and did not deny it, but admitted.*” The NAB’s translation of *hōmologēsen* as “admit” is an odd choice, as the normal meaning is “confess.” Nonetheless, this piling up of one expression on top of another is perhaps intended to indicate the seriousness of the Baptist’s reply. He rejected any suggestion that he might be the Messiah. His replies here and in vv. 23, 26, 27, 30, 31, 33, and 34 are all clear expressions that there is someone greater coming. The effect is to make it quite clear that John claimed a subordinate position.

In v.20 the point is that, whatever John was, he was certainly not the Christ. There was a Christ, but not him. While modern Christians might think of “Christ” as little more than a personal name for Jesus, properly it is a title, “the Christ,” which means “the anointed” (as does “the Messiah”). In the Old Testament various people were anointed, but notably priests and kings (for the latter, cf. the phrase, “the Lord’s anointed”). The rite was used to set men apart for special functions. When in due course the expectation grew up that one day God would send into the world an exceptionally great Person, a mighty Deliverer, One who would represent him in a very special sense, this coming great One was thought of not as “an anointed one,” but as “*the anointed one,*” “the Messiah.” Among those set apart by God for special functions Jesus stood out.

**More Questions.** Unlike the delegation’s first question, the second and third are pointed, “*Are you Elijah?*”; “*Are you the prophet?*” (v. 21). Elijah and the prophet were both figures upon whom some of the messianic expectations of Judaism came to rest. Elijah was transported into heaven without dying (2 Kgs 2:11), and many Jews expected his return as the harbinger of the messianic age (e.g., Mal 4:5). “The prophet” derives from the prophet-like-Moses of Deut 18:15. In the Qumran community, this prophet was seen as a messianic figure, and similar expectations may lie behind the delegation’s question

**Elijah.** It had been foretold by the prophet Malachi that before “*that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes*” God would send Elijah the prophet (Mal. 4:5). This was understood to mean that Elijah would precede the Messiah. Accordingly when John made it so clear that he was not the Christ his interrogators bethought them of this prophecy and inquired whether then he was Elijah. His denial puzzles many, for Jesus explicitly asserted that John was “*the Elijah who was to come*” (Matt. 11:14). This is one of the passages that seem to show that this Gospel was written in independence of the Synoptics.

Leon Morris addresses this oddity: “The solution to the difficulty is probably that there was a sense in which John was Elijah and a sense in which he was not. He fulfilled all the preliminary ministry that Malachi had foretold (cf. Luke 1:17), and thus in a very real sense Jesus could say that he was Elijah. But the Jews remembered that Elijah had left the earth in a chariot of fire without passing through death (2 Kings 2:11), and they expected that in due course the identical figure would reappear. John was not Elijah in this sense, and he had no option but to deny that he was. And, of course, we must bear in mind the possibility that John may not have known that he was Elijah. No man is what he is in his own eyes: he really is only as he is known to God. At a later time Jesus equated John with the Elijah of Malachi’s prophecy, but that does not carry with it the implication that John himself was aware of the true position. It is further proper to point out that, whereas the Synoptics give something of a biography of the Baptist, this Evangelist does not. Instead he concentrates on John’s theological



significance, and derives this rigorously from his relationship to Jesus. Jesus confers on John his true significance. John's own estimate of himself matters little." (Morris, 118-19)

**The Prophet.** If John was not Elijah, then perhaps he was "*the prophet*." The Jews appear to have expected all sorts of prophets to appear before the coming of the Messiah (cf. Matt. 16:14; Mark 6:15; Luke 9:19). More particularly they thought of the prophet like Moses (Deut. 18:15–19). But John was not that prophet either, so he answered briefly, "*No*." It is not without its interest that from the days of the very earliest Christian preaching it was held that "the prophet" was identical with the Christ (see Acts 3:22), whereas the Jews distinguished between the two, as we see from this passage and 7:40–41. The increasing curtness of John's successive answers should not be missed. It appears to stem from a dislike for answering questions about himself. He had come to bear witness about Another.

**What can you say about yourself?** The inquisition was in a difficult position. So far all they had elicited from John had been a string of denials; they had no positive statement to put in their report. Yet John was preaching, drawing crowds in the wilderness, and baptizing. They must have something to say about him. So they turn the matter over to John. Instead of making another suggestion they ask him what he thinks about himself. They must have some answer to take back to those who had sent them.

**The Voice in the Desert.** John's reply is given in words from Isaiah 40:3 that are applied to him in each of the four Gospels (Matt. 3:3; Mark 1:3; Luke 3:4). In each of the others the words are applied to John by the Evangelist; here John says it about himself. The point of the quotation is that it gives no prominence to the preacher whatsoever. He is not an important person, like a prophet or the Messiah. He is no more than a voice (contrast the reference to Jesus as "the Word"). He is a voice, moreover, with but one thing to say. John's ethical teaching is not large in amount, nor striking in content (see Luke 3:10–14). John's real function was not to teach ethics, but to point people to Jesus. "*Make straight the way for the Lord*" is a call to be ready, for the coming of the Messiah is near. The imagery is that of preparing a roadway by clearing away the obstacles. This was an important process in ancient times, especially for roads in the wilderness.

The sect at Qumran made use of the text from Isaiah to apply to themselves, apart from Israel, and to focus on internal preparation. Not so John. By contrast, John understood Isaiah's words as a clarion call to the nation. He was not concerned with himself and his own safety at all. He was trying to prepare the way of the Lord by getting people ready to meet the Lord. He was only a voice; but a voice proclaiming the Lord's message.

**Why then do you baptize...** This fourth question appears to come from outside the "delegation." The meaning of v.24 (*Some Pharisees were also sent*) is not quite clear. Were they a rival delegation? Folks who took it upon themselves to interject, unhappy with the progress made by the official delegation and accordingly added some questions of their own. In any case, on this occasion their inquiry was natural: this man was preaching and baptizing. He was drawing crowds in the name of religion – and why does he baptize?

Leon Morris again: "Baptism was not a new practice in Judaism. It was the regular rite in the admission of converts from other religions. When such a conversion took place, the males of the family were circumcised and all, of both sexes, were baptized. This was seen as the ceremonial removal of all the pollutions contracted in the Gentile world. The novelty in John's case and the sting in his practice was that he applied to Jews the ceremony that was held to be appropriate in the case of Gentiles coming newly into the faith. All Jews were prepared to accept the view that Gentiles were defiled and needed cleansing. But to put *Jews* in the same class was horrifying. The Jews were God's people already. It is true that on the basis of certain Old Testament passages some people expected that there would be baptizing when the messianic age dawned (Ezek. 36:25; Zech. 13:1). But John had

denied being the Messiah. It was all very perplexing and the Pharisees wanted to know more about it.” (Morris, 123)

Why does he baptize? There is no notion of John’s baptism of repentance (cf. Matt 3:1–12), because John’s baptism belongs solely to his witness. This becomes even clearer in the account of Jesus’ baptism in vv. 32–34. John is not depicted as an actor in Jesus’ baptism; John’s only role is to allude to it, for the text does not actually say that John baptized Jesus. God and the Spirit are the actors. Indeed, as vv. 31a and 33 make clear, John “knew” Jesus only because John had been told by God how to interpret the descent of the dove (v. 32).

John does not offer a detailed explanation, but rather uses the question to again point out the differences between himself and the Messiah. John quickly moves away from the topic of baptism to the person of Jesus. John does not depreciate the importance of baptism, but his baptism is not an end in itself. Its purpose is to point people to Christ (v. 31). John’s interest is in Christ and in nothing less. So he proceeds to tell his inquisitors that the Great One stands among them, though they do not know him (cf. v. 11). Then he repeats the words about his coming after him (v. 15). Finally he brings out the greatness of the one who was to come by referring to his own personal unworthiness. He was not worthy to loosen *the thongs* of the great one’s sandal. Loosening the sandal was the task of a slave; a disciple could not be expected to perform it. There is a rabbinic saying (in its present form dating from c. A.D. 250, but probably much older): “Every service which a slave performs for his master shall a disciple do for his teacher except the loosing of his sandal-thong.” John selects the very task that the rabbinic saying stresses as too menial for any disciple, and declares himself unworthy to perform it. He is unworthy of the most menial of tasks for the one who was to come after him. Humility could scarcely take a lower place.

The section closes with a note of place. These things happened at John’s normal spot for baptizing on the other side of the Jordan (i.e., from Jerusalem). While there are textual variations it seems that “Bethany” is the right reading. But quite early the location was lost sight of. The Evangelist adds “on the other side of the Jordan” to distinguish this locality from the better-known Bethany, which was near Jerusalem.

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## Notes

**1:1 *In the beginning***: also the first words of the Old Testament (Genesis 1:1). **was**: this verb is used three times with different meanings in this verse: existence, relationship, and predication. **the Word**: (Greek *logos*) this term combines God's dynamic, creative word (Genesis), personified preexistent Wisdom as the instrument of God's creative activity (Proverbs), and the ultimate intelligibility of reality (Hellenistic philosophy). As noted in the commentary rabbinic and targumic texts often avoided the use of the name and presence of God by replacing it with the Aramaic *memra* – “the word.” **with God**: the Greek preposition here connotes communication with another. **was God**: lack of a definite article with "God" in Greek signifies predication rather than identification.

**1:4-5 *life was the light...the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it***: Just as the expression “the Word” (*ho logos*) the important Johannine symbols of “life” and “light” are present in the opening verses. Verse 4 announces that the Word is light in the world and the latter portion proclaims that light continues to be present despite the hostile reception given to it.

**1:6 *A man named John was sent from God***: John was sent just as Jesus was "sent" (John 4:34) in divine mission. Other references to John the Baptist in this gospel emphasize the differences between them and John's subordinate role. Still the perfect of the Greek verb indicates the permanence of the mission This Gospel makes frequent use of the idea that the Father sent the Son into the world. There

may, however, be significance in the fact that the verb is always in the active when it refers to Christ, never passive as it is here and in 3:28 when it refers to John the Baptist

**1:7 *He came for testimony***: The testimony theme of John is introduced, which portrays Jesus as if on trial throughout his ministry. All testify to Jesus: John the Baptist, the Samaritan woman, scripture, his works, the crowds, the Spirit, and his disciples. The Greek expression lends an emphasis to the testimony itself rather than the one who testifies.

**1:9 *true light***: the expression

**1:11 *What was his own . . . his own people***: literally, "his own property/possession" (probably = Israel), then a masculine, "his own people" (the Israelites).

**1:12-13 *to those who believe in his name, <sup>13</sup> who were born not by natural generation nor by human choice nor by a man's decision but of God***: Believers in Jesus become children of God not through any of the three natural causes mentioned but through God who is the immediate cause of the new spiritual life.

**1:14 *flesh***: the whole person, used probably against docetic tendencies (cf 1 John 4:2; 1:7). ***made his dwelling***: literally, "pitched his tent/tabernacle" (*skēnōō*). Cf the tabernacle or tent of meeting that was the place of God's presence among his people (Exodus 25:8-9). The incarnate Word is the new mode of God's presence among his people. The Greek verb has the same consonants as the Aramaic word for God's presence (*Shekinah*). ***glory***: God's visible manifestation of majesty in power, which once filled the tabernacle (Exodus 40:34) and the temple (1 Kings 8:10-11, 27), is now centered in Jesus. ***only Son***: Greek, *monogenes*, but see the note on John 1:18. Grace and truth: these words may represent two Old Testament terms describing Yahweh in covenant relationship with Israel (cf Exodus 34:6), thus God's "love" and "fidelity." The Word shares Yahweh's covenant qualities.

**1:17 *grace in place of grace***: replacement of the Old Covenant with the New Covenant. Other possible translations are "grace upon grace" (accumulation) and "grace for grace" (correspondence).

**1:18 *The only Son, God***: while the vast majority of later textual witnesses have another reading, "the Son, the only one" or "the only Son," the translation above follows the best and earliest manuscripts, *monogenes theos*, but takes the first term to mean not just "Only One" but to include a filial relationship with the Father, as at Luke 9:38 ("only child") or Hebrews 11:17 ("only son") and as translated at John 1:14. The Logos is thus "only Son" and God but not Father/God.

**1:19 *Jews from Jerusalem***: The scholar G. J. Cuming argues that in this Gospel 'the Jews' ... means Judaeans as opposed to Galileans. Especially does it apply to the chief priests and the Pharisees, whom he depicts as our Lord's bitterest opponents. The indictment is not drawn against the whole Jewish nation but against its religious leaders. The choice of the word 'Judaeans' to describe them strongly suggests that the Evangelist was a Galilean. This last point is not to be overlooked. Some maintain that the use of the term makes the author a foreigner, whereas it is sufficient explanation that he came from Galilee. The scholar T. L. Schram was fully treated this linguistic question and summarizes that the Jews are consistently portrayed in John's Gospel as people whose actions are determined by the Law and usage, and their refusal of Jesus is expressed accordingly. On the point of disbelief they contrast not with Jesus but with his disciples.

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