

## The Lamb of God



*Saint John the Baptist Preaching to the Masses in the Wilderness | Pieter Bruegel the Younger |  
Galerie de Jonckheere, Paris | Wikimedia Commons, PD-US*

<sup>29</sup> The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.” <sup>30</sup> He is the one of whom I said, ‘A man is coming after me who ranks ahead of me because he existed before me.’ <sup>31</sup> I did not know him, but the reason why I came baptizing with water was that he might be made known to Israel.” <sup>32</sup> John testified further, saying, “I saw the Spirit come down like a dove from the sky and remain upon him.” <sup>33</sup> I did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, ‘On whomever you see the Spirit come down and remain, he is the one who will baptize with the holy Spirit.’ <sup>34</sup> Now I have seen and testified that he is the Son of God.” (John 1:29-34)

### In the Wilderness

The Gospel of John begins with the well known prologue that proclaims Jesus as the preexistent and incarnate Word of God who has revealed the Father to us: “*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*” (John 1:14) The rest of the first chapter forms the introduction to the gospel proper and consists of the Baptist’s testimony about Jesus. John is presented as “*a man sent from God*” who “*came for testimony, to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to testify to the light.*” (John 1:6-8) That naturally raises the question - who exactly is this wilderness character? Which is exactly what the Jerusalem delegation asks of him. They want to know if he is some end-time figure: the Christ, Elijah, the promised great prophet like Moses (cf. Deut. 18:15, 18)? After denying each one of those identities he finally tells the delegation who he is. He is the end-time figure spoken of in Scripture. He is “*the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord’*” (1:23)

That phrase often heard in the season of Advent is taken from Isaiah 40:3 which, interestingly, reads slightly different than the Baptist’s response. In John 1:23 it is the voice of the one crying out in/from the wilderness – in other words, telling us the location of the messenger. In Isaiah the messenger cries out, “*In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD.*” – in other words the messenger is speaking to those who

are in the wilderness. Why the difference? The Hebrew version of Isaiah 40:3 is slightly different from the Greek translation of Isaiah in the Septuagint (LXX). John 1:23 is clearly taken from the LXX.

John the Evangelist adapts Isaiah's message to the person of John the Baptist. If God intends people to be prepared in the wilderness, it makes sense for the voice to cry in the wilderness to call for such preparations. Another important part of the message is that God will come to his people through the wilderness. The wilderness reference echoes many such OT references, for example, Habakkuk 3:3 - *"God came from Teman, the Holy One from Mount Paran. His glory covered the heavens, and his praise filled the earth."* Both Teman and Paran are wilderness areas. In particular, Paran is connected to Israel's wandering in the wilderness after the events in and around Mt. Sinai (Num 10:12; 12:16). Paran is described as the place from which God's glory "shone forth" in Moses' Blessing (Deut 33:2). The wilderness is a fitting figure for the desolate condition of God's people in the Baptist's day. There is a sense that the Spirit of God that Ezekiel saw leaving the Jerusalem Temple during the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem almost 600 years prior, is now returning - not to the Temple - but to the people.

How are God's people to prepare the way for this moment in salvation history? While, again, not explicitly stated, the probable answer is by way of repentance. If Yahweh is to return, his people must prepare the way by repenting of the sins that caused them to be led into exile. This is borne out clearly by the Baptist's own message: *"Produce good fruit as evidence of your repentance."* (Mt 3:8). As Isa 40:1-2 makes clear, God's ultimate purpose for his people is not judgment but salvation, life rather than death (cf. the Fourth Evangelist's words in John 3:17-18; and Jesus' words in John 12:47). According to the Johannine Gospel, the Baptist's witness centered on Jesus' role in the divine plan of salvation as the *"Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world"* (1:29, 36). At its very heart, the purpose of John's baptism and ministry is described as being bound up with revealing Jesus' true identity to Israel.

### **The Lamb of God**

The exact expression "lamb of God" does not appear in the Old Testament, however, the idea and imagery behind that title, especially when read through the lens of the New Testament, is deeply rooted in several Old Testament sacrificial themes. The primary image is that of the Passover lamb described in the *Book of Exodus*. In Exodus 12 each family is to take *"a lamb, one for each household"* (v.3). The lamb must be *"a year-old male and without blemish"* (v.5). Its blood is placed on the doorposts so that the Angel of Death passes over the house (v.13). The Passover lamb is the lamb appointed by God for Israel's deliverance; in this way it is the "Lamb of God." Another way to describe this imagery is a divinely appointed lamb whose blood saves God's people from death. The Baptist's use of the phrase anticipates Jesus' death on the Cross which saves God's people from something far worse than death.

Exodus 29 and Numbers 28 point to a daily morning and evening offering of lambs understood as offerings to the LORD, commanded by Him as an ongoing and atoning sacrifice on behalf of God's people. Again, although not titled "Lamb of God," the imagery is clear when seen through NT lenses.

The reference with the most theologically charged background comes from Isaiah 53 and is associated with Lent and Good Friday. *"Like a lamb led to slaughter, or a sheep silent before shearers, he did not open his mouth."* Isaiah 53 describes the Suffering Servant whose life becomes an offering for sin as *"The LORD laid upon him the guilt of us all"* (v.6) and *"He shall take away the sins of many"* (v.12). This lamb is not literally a sacrificial animal but a figure of a person who fulfills the role of a sacrificial lamb given by God for sin.

In Genesis 22 we read the account of the binding of Isaac the son of Abraham. The father tells his son: *"God himself will provide the sheep for the burnt offering."* (v.8) And indeed, God provides the lamb for the offering that will redeem all humanity. *"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life."* (John 3:16)

When the Baptist proclaims “*Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world*” - there is a whole story of promise, covenant, and redemption that is being announced. It is time to prepare.

### The Beginning of “Ordinary Time”

The celebration of the Baptism of the Lord marks the end of the Christmas season and the entry of the Church into “ordinary time,” so called not because it is the regular, nothing-special liturgical season, but it is the season when we number the weeks. The word ordinary in this liturgical context comes from the Latin *ordinalis*, meaning “ordered,” “numbered,” or “arranged in sequence.” Ordinary Time is simply the part of the liturgical year counted by ordinal numbers: 1st week, 2nd week, 3rd week, and so on.

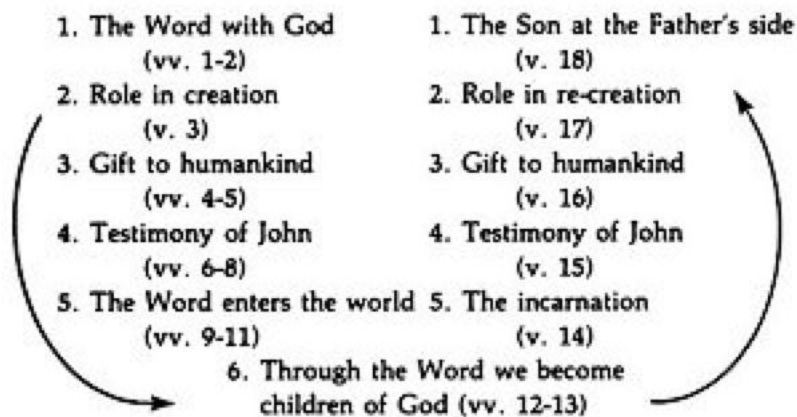
Each year as we enter Ordinary Time, no matter which year, the gospel for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday is taken from the first chapter of the Gospel according to John. The purpose for this is essentially the same – following the celebration of the Baptism of the Lord, which reveals the relationship of the Father to the Son and to the Holy Spirit – this week’s gospel reveals the relationship of Jesus to the world. And perhaps no one does so more robustly than the Fourth Evangelist.

The fourth Gospel is a book of “signs;” namely things, events, and people who point to something else. Such “intermediaries” are the means by which people prepare and come to faith. The “lamb of God” is a sign in this sense. Even Jesus is a type of intermediary as the *logos* -- the “Word” or “Revealer” of God. The theme and purpose of the “signage” becomes clear in John 20:31 – “*But these are written that you may (come to) believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through this belief you may have life in his name.*” This entirety of the gospel itself is a “sign” to point us to the Messiah, who is a “sign” who points us to God. As O’Day (*John*, NIB, 524) states about this gospel: “... the story of Jesus is not ultimately a story *about* Jesus; it is, in fact, the story of God.”

### Introduction and Context

We begin the new liturgical year’s ordinary time with the beginning of John’s gospel. What precedes our Sunday gospel is the very rich and complex Prologue to the Fourth Gospel. Where Mark begins with the gospel message, Luke and Matthew begin with the birth narratives, John takes us back to the time before Time to reveal the eternal purpose of God.

John 1:1-18 is the prologue and outlined here by Fr. Raymond Brown to show the eternal purpose that all of creation began with God through the Word, and through the Word Incarnate, Jesus Christ, all the created world will return to God.



No sooner than this sweeping revelation of eternal purpose is revealed, the opening chapter in the Fourth Gospel begins to lay out 7 days of new creation via an artistic first week in the good news recalling the first week of the creation story in the Book of Genesis. Both Genesis and John’s Gospel begin with the

identical phrase, “In the beginning.” This “re-creation” story is embedded with a whole list of witnesses to Jesus who, one by one, identify Jesus for John’s audience. From the very beginning they are told who and what Jesus is. As detailed in the Collegeville Bible Commentary [892-3] the testimonies flow as follows:

*First day* (vv. 19–28).

*Witness:* John the Baptist to priests and Levites.

*Testimony:* John is not Christ, nor the expected Elijah of Mal 3:23 (4:5 in some versions), nor the prophet of Deut 18:15, 18, but “the voice of one crying out in the desert,” himself unworthy to untie the sandal strap of the one coming after him.

*Second day* (“next day” of vv. 29–34).

*Witness:* John the Baptist at sight of Jesus.

*Testimony:* Jesus is “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world”; he who ranks before John; he on whom the Spirit descended and who baptizes with the Spirit; God’s chosen One.

*Third day* (“next day” of vv. 35–39).

*Witness:* John the Baptist to two of his disciples, who go to Jesus about 4 p.m. and stay.

*Testimony:* “Behold, the Lamb of God.” (This would be a reference to the paschal lamb and/or to the suffering servant of Isa 53:7, silent before its shearers.)

*Fourth day* (vv. 40–42).

*Witness:* Andrew to Simon.

*Testimony:* “We have found the Messiah.”

*Fifth day* (“next day” of vv. 43–51).

*Witness:* Philip to Nathaniel.

*Testimony:* “the one about whom Moses wrote in the law, and also the prophets.”

*Witness:* Nathaniel.

*Testimony:* “You are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel.”

*Seventh day* (“On the third day” of 2:1–11).

*Witness:* Jesus’ Cana miracle.

*Testimony:* “... and so revealed his glory, and his disciples began to believe in him” (2:11).

Such is the context for our Sunday Gospel - we are on the second day of a new creation narrative. It is to this that John testifies: “*Now I have seen and testified that he is the Son of God.*”

## **The Gospel**

<sup>29</sup> *The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.”* <sup>30</sup> *He is the one of whom I said, ‘A man is coming after me who ranks ahead of me because he existed before me.’* <sup>31</sup> *I did not know him, but the reason why I came baptizing with water was that he might be made known to Israel.”* <sup>32</sup> *John testified further, saying, “I saw the Spirit come down like a dove from the sky and remain upon him.”* <sup>33</sup> *I did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, ‘On whomever you see the Spirit come down and remain, he is the one who will baptize with the holy Spirit.’* <sup>34</sup> *Now I have seen and testified that he is the Son of God.”* (John 1:29-34)

After John’s interrogation by priests, Levites and Pharisees, the evangelist proclaims Jesus as “*the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!*” This is but the start of a short, compact testimony by the Baptist witnessing to the One he had just baptized.

- “*Behold the Lamb of God...* (1:29)

- *who takes away the sin of the world.*” (1:29)
- The one who existed before John (1:30-31)
- The one on whom the Spirit came *from the sky and remain upon him* (1:32-33)
- *“he is the Son of God.”* (1:34)

The Fourth Gospel does not record, as the Synoptic Gospels do, the baptism of Jesus by John. However, the coming of Jesus mentioned in this verse was not his coming for baptism, because, as the reading implies, John had already witnessed the descent of the Spirit upon Jesus when he had baptized him. John already knew who Jesus was, and therefore said to those around, *“Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world”*

Christian readers of the Fourth Gospel naturally infer that this is an allusion to the sacrificial death of Christ by which he atoned for the sins of the world as described earlier in this commentary. An interesting question is if there was a difference between what God was announcing to the world through the words of the Baptist - that indeed, a sacrificial death on the Cross was the means of atonement - and what the Baptist himself understood. Although it is not always prudent to “fuse” the different gospel narratives into a single account, one can not help but look “over our shoulder” to Matthew’s account where there are strong indications about what the Baptist understood. He expected the Messiah to carry out judgment against sinners, not to offer himself as a sacrifice for their sins (*cf. Matt. 3:12: His winnowing fan is in his hand. He will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.*”) The Baptist may have been identifying Jesus as the apocalyptic warrior lamb referred to in Jewish writings (e.g. *1 Enoch* 90:9–12; *Testament of Joseph* 19:8–9) as did the author of the book of Revelation (Rev. 5:5–10; 17:14), though the latter fused the idea of the powerful lamb/lion of Judah with the sacrificial lamb. That being said, we should also recognize that the Fourth Gospel was written some 20 years after Matthew’s gospel.

The Fourth Evangelist, for his part, places the Baptist’s declaration into the wider context of his passion narrative. This “lamb of God” will, as the book of Hebrews makes clear, replace the entire OT sacrificial system that was merely provisional until the coming of Christ. Moreover, as God’s lamb, Jesus takes upon himself the sin, not merely of Israel, but of the entire world (*cf. John 1:10*). The idea that the Messiah would suffer for the sins of the world (rather than merely for Israel) was foreign to first-century Jewish ears; John’s gospel, however, makes clear that Jesus came to save the entire world (*John 3:17; 1 John 2:2*), and that he is the Savior of the world, not merely Israel (*4:42; 1 John 4:14*)

The fourth gospel’s teaching on Jesus’ substitutionary atonement builds on the evangelist’s earlier reflection on Jesus’ incarnation. For it is in the flesh that Christ suffered vicariously; his humanity was an indispensable prerequisite for his work on behalf of others. In fact, the atonement theme, far from being absent, is part of the fabric of John’s Gospel: Jesus is the Bread of Life, who will give his flesh for the life of the world (*6:51; cf. 6:32–33, 53–58*); he is the Good Shepherd, who lays down his life for his sheep (*10:15; cf. 10:17–18*); and his sacrifice fulfills Passover symbolism (e.g., *19:14, 31*).

## The Reveal

In his commentary on this gospel, Neal Flanagan [*Collegeville Bible Commentary*, 983] offers an explanation of why there is such a marked difference in the manner the Johannine Gospel reveals Jesus’ deeper identity immediately in the first chapter while the other Gospels let the “reveal” play out as the story unfolds. Or like, Mark’s gospel, keeps it a “secret.”

“This series of test imonies can be a source of confusion and difficulty for anyone who has read Mark’s Gospel, in which the disciples come to their faith-knowledge of Jesus only hesitantly, timidly, and imperfectly — and that over a lengthy period of time. John seems to contradict Mark’s picture. By the end of chapter 1 the Johannine disciples seem to know everything there



is to know about Jesus, even his divinity. I think we must say that John is not attempting here to give a historical presentation of the first disciples' advance in faith. He has a different purpose in mind. He wishes to impress these christological statements on the minds of his audience at the very start of his dramatic presentation; therefore his actors appear in a succession of brief scenes to pass along the required information. The testimonies indicate that the Gospel's main interest is Christology. John may also wish to indicate through this procedure the way in which his own community advanced to its knowledge of Jesus: by moving from the circle of John the Baptist to the greater personage of Jesus, who was gradually recognized as the Lamb of God, God's chosen One, the Messiah, Son of God, and King of Israel. Jesus was the fulfillment of all the Old Testament hopes."

### The Witnesses

As noted above, this gospel lays out the story of a new creation that flows through the "next day" of our gospel reading and into the remainder of the first chapter. In that vein, Flannagan notes that a similar story is unfolding as witnesses to Jesus are gathered. It is the "new creation" of the people of God. No longer defined by ethnic association, but by belief in Jesus as the Son of God. Flannagan continues:

"There is another purpose that John, a man of rich creative genius, may have intended. His list of characters in this first act/period of seven days seems to typify the basic personal elements of the Christian community. In order there appear: (1) John the Baptist, precursor to the new creation, whose sole function is to witness; (2) the Savior; (3) disciples who hear, follow, look for, and stay; (4) Peter, the rock; (5) missionaries like Andrew and Philip who spread the good news; (6) Nathaniel, the true Israelite in whom there is no guile, who, as some Jewish traditions expressed it, studied law under a fig tree and was rewarded. With this, the founding elements of the community are assembled."

### The Testimony

The Baptist makes clear that until seeing the descent of the Spirit upon Jesus, he did not know Him. This is not to say he had no idea about who Jesus was - after all they were cousins. Given that Jesus was brought up in Galilee and John in the Jerusalem area, perhaps they never met, or perhaps it had been since they were children and so Jesus was not recognizable. But by the time of this testimony, it is clear that the Baptist knows of Jesus and has a sense of his mission - even indicating "*he existed before me...*" We know the baptist is older than Jesus (*cf.* the Visitation story in Luke). Does the Baptist have an idea of the existence of Jesus before time itself? With all that is being revealed to the Baptist (by the Spirit?) it is no wonder that he remarks: "*I did not know him*" akin to "who is this guy, my cousin, I guess I really didn't know him! But now I see..."

*but the reason why I came baptizing with water was that he might be made known to Israel."*

<sup>32</sup> John testified further, saying, "I saw the Spirit come down like a dove from the sky and remain upon him. <sup>33</sup> I did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'On whomever you see the Spirit come down and remain, he is the one who will baptize with the holy Spirit.' <sup>34</sup> Now I have seen and testified that he is the Son of God."

Unlike the Lukan account, this gospel does not say whether the sign of the dove was included in the original revelation, or whether he simply recognized the dove for what it was when he saw it alight on Jesus. But what is clear is that he was given a divinely appointed sign, and that he knew Jesus by that sign. The Baptist is the one disciple who received true illumination about Jesus; every other disciple is dependent on another human witness.

John goes on to describe him as "*the One who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.*" The other three gospels make this point; Jesus came that people might be brought into contact with the divine Spirit who leads people into the infinite divine spiritual resources. This had not been possible previously, for there is a

quality of life that Christ and none other makes available. Baptism with water in John's time was a form of cleansing and an outward sign of repentance. Baptism with the Spirit portends a new thing. It is the bestowal of new life in God. In the Catholic understanding of Sacramental Baptism, both are accomplished. A person is cleansed of all sin and given the Spirit. It is an outward sign of an inward reality.

### A Hinge in History

There is what scholars sometimes describe as a “lovely strangeness” in how the evangelists talk about John the Baptist. Each writer is announcing the same figure, but each tunes John's ministry to a distinct theological key. Modern scholars tend to emphasize those distinct emphases; the Church Fathers, with their characteristic theological imagination, tend to harmonize them.

Mark leads with moral urgency. John appears in the wilderness: “*proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins*” (Mk 1:4). Repentance is the doorway into the story. John's baptism cleans, prepares, and awakens Israel to the coming kingdom. Mark is writing for a community who needs to know that the gospel demands an immediate response. The Gospel of John gives a different angle. John the Baptist says: “*I did not know him, but the reason why I came baptizing with water was that he might be made known to Israel.*” (Jn 1:31) And the Baptist's testimony climaxes in the Spirit descending and remaining: “*I saw the Spirit come down like a dove from the sky and remain upon him.*” (Jn 1:32). The Fourth Gospel is not denying repentance; it simply pivots to revelation. John is the hinge by which Israel sees the One upon whom the Spirit rests. The heart of John's theology is revelation: Jesus is shown as the Lamb of God, the Spirit-bearer, the Son.

Modern scholars today tend to approach each gospel as its own literary and theological world. So they notice that Mark focuses on the ethical preparation of the people. John's ministry cleans the heart so that one can welcome the stronger One who is coming, focusing on Christological revelation. The Baptist's job is not primarily to purify Israel but to point out and identify Jesus as the one on whom the Spirit “remains” which will be a major Johannine theme. Modern critics don't see these as contradictions but as distinct windows into the same historical event.

The Early Church writers in the 2nd through 4th centuries did not focus on the topics as modern scholars. The Father treated Scripture as a unified symphony, not a set of competing soloists. So they typically harmonize the accounts. They see the accounts as windows with complimentary views of the same historical event. Augustine, Chrysostom, and Hilary of Poitiers all say something like this: John's baptism is first a baptism of repentance, preparing the people; it is also God's chosen stage on which Jesus' identity is revealed. John Chrysostom says that John called Israel to repentance so that they would be ready to see Christ when he appeared. Repentance clears the eyes; revelation fills them. Hilary notes that the Baptist is “the boundary between the covenants”—the last prophet of the old and the first herald of the new. His washing works as a sign, not as a sacrament; its value lies in its direction.

Either way, the outcome is the same: the Baptist's ministry is a hinge between the old age and the new. The ministry calls Israel to turn back to God and pointing, unmistakably, to the One in whom the fullness of the Spirit dwells.

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### Notes

**John 1:29 the next day:** although broader than the context of this Sunday's reading, be aware that this simple expression “*the next day*” is part of a counting of days that occurs from 1:19-2:12 in which the Fourth Evangelist enumerates the seven days of a “new creation” in the coming and revelation of Jesus.

**lamb:** The reference to Jesus here as ‘the Lamb of God’ uses the word *amnos* for ‘lamb’. It is one of only four references in the NT (John 1:29, 36; Acts 8:32; 1 Pet. 1:19) that do so. The word *amnos* is found 101

times in the LXX, of which 82 are references to sacrificial lambs. The two uses of *amnos* in the NT outside the Fourth Gospel are clear references to Jesus, who died as a sacrificial lamb: one speaks of Jesus as the servant of the Lord, who ‘was led like a sheep to the slaughter, / and as a lamb before the shearer is silent’ (Acts 8:32); the other refers to ‘the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect’ (1 Pet. 1:19). In the light of all this we are probably correct to say that the evangelist would be happy if his readers took John’s witness to Jesus as ‘the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world’ to have a double meaning. He was both the apocalyptic lamb who judges unrepentant sinners, and the atoning sacrifice for the sins of those who believe. Perhaps the evangelist believed John spoke more than he knew, just as Caiaphas and Pilate were to do later on (11:50–52; 18:39; 19:14–15, 19, 21–22).

**John 1:30 *he existed before me*:** Some have suggested that the Baptist thought he was preparing for the coming of Elijah (*cf* Mal 3:12) and therefore the statement *he existed before me* would be a simple matter of history since Elijah lived 900 years before John. But in the wider context of the Prologue of this gospel, this clause clearly refers to the preexistence of Jesus. Thus the Baptist is speaking a more profound truth than he realizes, a common occurrence in this Gospel.

**John 1:31 *I did not know him*:** this gospel shows no knowledge of the tradition (Luke 1) about the kinship of Jesus and John the Baptist. ***the reason why I came baptizing with water*:** in this gospel, John’s baptism is not connected with forgiveness of sins; its purpose is revelatory, that Jesus may be made known to Israel.

**John 1:32 *like a dove*:** a symbol of the new creation (Genesis 8:8) or the community of Israel (Hosea 11:11). ***remain*:** the first use of a favorite verb in John, emphasizing the permanency of the relationship between Father and Son (as here) and between the Son and the Christian. Jesus is the permanent bearer of the Spirit.

**John 1:34 *Son of God*:** This expression is the strongest of the textual traditions, but there are some important manuscripts (Sinaiticus, P<sup>5</sup>) which read the “chosen one of God.” “Son” is more in harmony with the Johannine language and theology.

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