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**JOHN**

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**THE NIV**  

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**APPLICATION**  

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**COMMENTARY**

*From biblical text . . . to contemporary life*

**GARY M. BURGE**

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# *NIV Application Commentary* **Series Introduction**

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THE NIV APPLICATION COMMENTARY SERIES is unique. Most commentaries help us make the journey from our world back to the world of the Bible. They enable us to cross the barriers of time, culture, language, and geography that separate us from the biblical world. Yet they only offer a one-way ticket to the past and assume that we can somehow make the return journey on our own. Once they have explained the *original meaning* of a book or passage, these commentaries give us little or no help in exploring its *contemporary significance*. The information they offer is valuable, but the job is only half done.

Recently, a few commentaries have included some contemporary application as *one* of their goals. Yet that application is often sketchy or moralistic, and some volumes sound more like printed sermons than commentaries.

The primary goal of the NIV Application Commentary Series is to help you with the difficult but vital task of bringing an ancient message into a modern context. The series not only focuses on application as a finished product but also helps you think through the *process* of moving from the original meaning of a passage to its contemporary significance. These are commentaries, not popular expositions. They are works of reference, not devotional literature.

The format of the series is designed to achieve the goals of the series. Each passage is treated in three sections: *Original Meaning*, *Bridging Contexts*, and *Contemporary Significance*.

## *Original Meaning*

THIS SECTION HELPS you understand the meaning of the biblical text in its original context. All of the elements of traditional exegesis—in concise form—are discussed here. These include the historical, literary, and cultural context of the passage. The authors discuss matters related to grammar and syntax and the meaning of biblical words.<sup>1</sup> They also seek to explore the main ideas of the passage and how the biblical author develops those ideas.

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1. Please note that in general, when the authors discuss words in the original biblical languages, the series uses a general rather than a scholarly method of transliteration.

## Series Introduction

After reading this section, you will understand the problems, questions, and concerns of the *original audience* and how the biblical author addressed those issues. This understanding is foundational to any legitimate application of the text today.



THIS SECTION BUILDS a bridge between the world of the Bible and the world of today, between the original context and the contemporary context, by focusing on both the timely and timeless aspects of the text.

God's Word is *timely*. The authors of Scripture spoke to specific situations, problems, and questions. The author of Joshua encouraged the faith of his original readers by narrating the destruction of Jericho, a seemingly impregnable city, at the hands of an angry warrior God (Josh. 6). Paul warned the Galatians about the consequences of circumcision and the dangers of trying to be justified by law (Gal. 5:2–5). The author of Hebrews tried to convince his readers that Christ is superior to Moses, the Aaronic priests, and the Old Testament sacrifices. John urged his readers to "test the spirits" of those who taught a form of incipient Gnosticism (1 John 4:1–6). In each of these cases, the timely nature of Scripture enables us to hear God's Word in situations that were *concrete* rather than abstract.

Yet the timely nature of Scripture also creates problems. Our situations, difficulties, and questions are not always directly related to those faced by the people in the Bible. Therefore, God's word to them does not always seem relevant to us. For example, when was the last time someone urged you to be circumcised, claiming that it was a necessary part of justification? How many people today care whether Christ is superior to the Aaronic priests? And how can a "test" designed to expose incipient Gnosticism be of any value in a modern culture?

Fortunately, Scripture is not only timely but *timeless*. Just as God spoke to the original audience, so he still speaks to us through the pages of Scripture. Because we share a common humanity with the people of the Bible, we discover a *universal dimension* in the problems they faced and the solutions God gave them. The timeless nature of Scripture enables it to speak with power in every time and in every culture.

Those who fail to recognize that Scripture is both timely and timeless run into a host of problems. For example, those who are intimidated by timely books such as Hebrews, Galatians, or Deuteronomy might avoid reading them because they seem meaningless today. At the other extreme, those who are convinced of the timeless nature of Scripture, but who fail to discern

its timely element, may “wax eloquent” about the Melchizedekian priesthood to a sleeping congregation, or worse still, try to apply the holy wars of the Old Testament in a physical way to God’s enemies today.

The purpose of this section, therefore, is to help you discern what is timeless in the timely pages of the Bible—and what is not. For example, how do the holy wars of the Old Testament relate to the spiritual warfare of the New? If Paul’s primary concern is not circumcision (as he tells us in Gal. 5:6), what is he concerned about? If discussions about the Aaronic priesthood or Melchizedek seem irrelevant today, what is of abiding value in these passages? If people try to “test the spirits” today with a test designed for a specific first-century heresy, what other biblical test might be more appropriate?

Yet this section does not merely uncover that which is timeless in a passage but also helps you to see *how* it is uncovered. The authors of the commentaries seek to take what is implicit in the text and make it explicit, to take a process that normally is intuitive and explain it in a logical, orderly fashion. How do we know that circumcision is not Paul’s primary concern? What clues in the text or its context help us realize that Paul’s real concern is at a deeper level?

Of course, those passages in which the historical distance between us and the original readers is greatest require a longer treatment. Conversely, those passages in which the historical distance is smaller or seemingly nonexistent require less attention.

One final clarification. Because this section prepares the way for discussing the contemporary significance of the passage, there is not always a sharp distinction or a clear break between this section and the one that follows. Yet when both sections are read together, you should have a strong sense of moving from the world of the Bible to the world of today.



Contemporary  
Significance

THIS SECTION ALLOWS the biblical message to speak with as much power today as it did when it was first written. How can you apply what you learned about Jerusalem, Ephesus, or Corinth to our present-day needs in Chicago, Los Angeles, or London? How can you take a message originally spoken in Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic and communicate it clearly in our own language? How can you take the eternal truths originally spoken in a different time and culture and apply them to the similar-yet-different needs of our culture?

In order to achieve these goals, this section gives you help in several key areas.

(1) It helps you identify contemporary situations, problems, or questions that are truly comparable to those faced by the original audience. Because

## *Series Introduction*

contemporary situations are seldom identical to those faced by the original audience, you must seek situations that are analogous if your applications are to be relevant.

(2) This section explores a variety of contexts in which the passage might be applied today. You will look at personal applications, but you will also be encouraged to think beyond private concerns to the society and culture at large.

(3) This section will alert you to any problems or difficulties you might encounter in seeking to apply the passage. And if there are several legitimate ways to apply a passage (areas in which Christians disagree), the author will bring these to your attention and help you think through the issues involved.

In seeking to achieve these goals, the contributors to this series attempt to avoid two extremes. They avoid making such specific applications that the commentary might quickly become dated. They also avoid discussing the significance of the passage in such a general way that it fails to engage contemporary life and culture.

Above all, contributors to this series have made a diligent effort not to sound moralistic or preachy. The NIV Application Commentary Series does not seek to provide ready-made sermon materials but rather tools, ideas, and insights that will help you communicate God's Word with power. If we help you to achieve that goal, then we have fulfilled the purpose for this series.

The Editors

# General Editor's Preface

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IN SOME WAYS John's Gospel functions as both a gospel and a letter. As a gospel it tells the story of Jesus, of his role as revealer of God the Father and provider of redemption to all humanity. As a letter it encouraged first-century Christians in the life they had chosen (and it encourages us today), showing how life in Christ differed from Judaism and Gnosticism. It corrected some followers of John the Baptist who didn't quite get who the Baptizer was in relation to Jesus. As Gary Burge shows in this fine commentary, the Gospel of John narrates the life of Jesus and teaches what that life meant to those who knew him or had heard about him.

This dual purpose lends itself particularly well to one of the principle emphases of the book of John—Christology. Christology is the doctrine that studies the person and work of Christ. Needless to say, "Christology" was not a "doctrine" in John's day. Jesus had come among them. He had done signs that revealed God's plan of redemption to them in public settings around Galilee and Jerusalem. He taught those who chose to follow him, and they were with him when he encountered resistance and was crucified. He was raised from the dead. Yet in spite of the miraculous signs, pointed teachings, and resurrection (the raw data out of which Christology was shaped), it took hundreds of years for the church to come to some agreement about Jesus' incarnation—his humanity and divinity. The Gospel of John is in many ways the first reflection on his incarnated nature.

Little wonder, then, that the Gospel of John has been used to support the misplaced emphases that such a difficult teaching can fall prey to—and that it is still used to support mistaken impressions of who Jesus was. The present book is valuable today because in talking about who Jesus was, it resonates so clearly with spiritual needs common to our twenty-first century world.

For example, one of those needs is to be assured that Jesus was indeed the Son of God. Our faith rests on it. Although some suggest that we could better identify with a purely human Jesus, such a teaching would result in a much different religion—call it Jesusianity—that would do little to meet our needs for God. True, Christ's divinity can be overemphasized if it ignores his humanity. Some early Christians did precisely that, saying that Christ was only divine and that his fleshly body was an illusion. That position (often called adoptionism), however, overlooks a second, balancing teaching in John regarding Christ's humanity. We need a human Jesus with whom to

## General Editor's Preface

identify. But such a Jesus can only help us if he also has the power of God as part of his make-up. Jesus Christ needs to be both human and divine.

Jesus' power to help us comes through another teaching of the book, the power of the Holy Spirit. The author makes clear that Jesus was filled with Holy Spirit power and that when he left the earth, the power of that Holy Spirit remained with us, accessible to us all to enable us to reach out to God.

An adequate Christology needs all of these elements today: a human Christ to redeem us, a divine Christ to reveal God's nature, and a powerful, Spirit-filled Christ to help us lead holy lives. The Gospel/letter of John provides all three—and it does so in a mysterious, literate way that beguiles and reveals as it pulls us deeper and deeper into the mystery of who God is.

Arguably the best-known passage in this book is the prologue, the first eighteen verses of John 1, where the author invites us to join in a poetic witness of intellectual praise to who Jesus was. The prologue tells us that Jesus was God, the *logos* or "Word [that] was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning." But the Word was more than God: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us."

That's a summation of Christology. It tells us who Jesus was. It is the distinctive teaching of our faith, and the world has never needed it more than now. The Gospel of John tells us the story.

Terry C. Muck

# Author's Preface

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THE GOSPEL OF JOHN has always been the "beloved Gospel" of the church. Every pastor knows that a series of sermons from John—or an adult education course on John—will be greeted with enthusiasm. I have asked audiences to tell me their favorite verses from the Gospels, and they will always recite a dozen or more from John's Gospel. "For God so loved the world. . . ." "I am the resurrection and the life. . . ." "In my Father's house are many rooms. . . ." John is the beloved Gospel because John probes the depth of Christ's character with a simplicity and majesty that cannot be forgotten. This is why, perhaps, this Gospel gained a reputation (thanks to Clement of Alexandria) for being the "spiritual Gospel." And why medieval scribes symbolized the Gospel with an eagle. Profundity is matched with clarity in a manner not found elsewhere in the New Testament. When the earliest theological councils in the fourth and fifth centuries worked to define Christian beliefs about the Trinity and the Incarnation, it was John's Gospel that gave critical guidance.

My initial interest in the writings of John came almost twenty years ago when I began a doctoral program in Scotland under the mentorship of Prof. I. Howard Marshall. I now realize that my present instincts for the wedding of history and theology in this Gospel were shaped under Dr. Marshall's wise leadership. I will always be in his debt. That early study on John's view of the Spirit (published in 1987) launched a fascination with the Gospel that has not ended. A variety of articles, a seminary primer on John (1992, 1998<sup>2</sup>), and a commentary on John's three letters in the present NIV Application Commentary series (1996) have each permitted me to pursue these interests further. The present commentary is written for the pastor/teacher laboring in the church. I have always kept in mind the man or woman who works week after week feeding the flock of Christ from pulpit and lectern. If this book brings some gift of insight or inspiration, I will be deeply gratified.

While every commentary should provide solid exegesis to get at John's original meaning, this series posed a new challenge. Each chapter explains how John's ancient text can be "bridged" to the present modern context. Then specific examples are given that show how these passages can be applied in preaching and teaching. Most commentaries give cursory attention to modern application, but in this series writers have been challenged not only to show examples of application but to explain the interpretive (or hermeneutical) method at work. This task was the most difficult—and the

## Author's Preface

most exhilarating aspect of writing. Like never before, I became aware of the power and relevance of this Gospel for our present age.

It remains to thank many who have rendered remarkable support over the course of two years of writing. Marianne Meye Thompson and Terry Muck read the manuscript with great care, providing countless corrections and advice. They improved the commentary immeasurably. At Zondervan Publishing Jack Kuhatschek wins the award for the most patient editor. And Verlyn Verbrugge's expert editorial skill has helped the manuscript on every page. Finally, special thanks are due to Ashley Burge, who compiled the Scripture index with care and accuracy—a difficult task indeed.

Much of my research was completed during a sabbatical in 1998, when I worked at Tyndale Library in Cambridge, England. To be surrounded by one of Europe's best theological libraries with its tremendously helpful staff has to be every writer's dream. Special thanks belong to Tyndale's administrative staff: Bruce Winter (Warden), Fiona Craig, Denise Jillions, and Bruce Longenecker; to Lyn Winter, for her cheerful hospitality and advice about British cooking and ironmongers; and in the library to David Instone Brewer and Kirsty Corrigan, who were never too busy to help track down obscure articles or rabbinic texts. Above all, I owe my greatest debt to my wife, Carol, whose unending support has always sustained and encouraged me.

Most of my students know that J. B. Lightfoot will always remain one of my personal heroes. Born in 1828, Lightfoot's gifts of intellect were quickly recognized at Trinity College, Cambridge, where he was tutored in classics by B. F. Westcott. From 1859 till 1879 he taught at Cambridge, defending the historicity of the New Testament against "new" historical criticism coming from Tübingen, Germany.<sup>1</sup> In 1879 Lightfoot became Bishop of Durham, which meant leaving the academy and ministering in the church. From 1879 till his death in 1889 he lived at Auckland Castle and over the years disciplined eighty-six young men who lived at the castle with him and became "sons of Auckland"—or perhaps more accurately, sons of "the Bishop."<sup>2</sup>

John's Gospel was deeply important to Lightfoot. He recognized its theological value for the theology of the church and defended its historicity when many other voices gave John limited serious attention. But above all, John's Gospel fed this great scholar's soul. Lightfoot summed up its value in a lecture given in 1871, and his words are a fitting reminder of the treasure this Gospel offers to any who study it:

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1. To this day, the postgraduate New Testament seminar at Cambridge University meets in the "Lightfoot Room," under an imposing portrait of the scholar.

2. See G. R. Eden and F. C. MacDonald, ed., *Lightfoot of Durham: Memories and Appreciations* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1932). The motto of the fellowship was ἀνδρίζεσθε κραταιοῦσθε ("be courageous, be strong"), taken from 1 Cor. 16:13.

*Author's Preface*

I believe from my heart that the truth which [St. John's] Gospel more especially enshrines—the truth that Jesus Christ is the very Word incarnate, the manifestation of the Father to mankind—is the one lesson which duly apprehended will do more than all our feeble efforts to purify and elevate human life here by imparting to it hope and light and strength; the one study which alone can fitly prepare us for a joyful immortality hereafter.<sup>3</sup>

Gary M. Burge  
*Epiphany*, 2000  
Wheaton, Illinois

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3. J. B. Lightfoot, *Biblical Essays* (London: MacMillan, 1893), 44.

# Abbreviations

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AB	Anchor Bible
ABD	<i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i>
ABR	<i>Australian Biblical Review</i>
ASV	American Standard Version
<i>b.</i>	<i>Babylonian Talmud</i>
BA	<i>Biblical Archaeologist</i>
BAR	<i>Biblical Archaeology Review</i>
BAGD	Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, Danker, <i>A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament</i>
BBC	Broadman Bible Commentaries
BDF	Blass, Debrunner, Funk, <i>A Greek Grammar of the New Testament</i>
<i>Bib</i>	<i>Biblica</i>
BBR	<i>Bulletin for Biblical Research</i>
BSac	<i>Bibliotheca sacra</i>
BSC	The Bible Speaks Today
BTB	<i>Biblical Theology Bulletin</i>
BZ	<i>Biblische Zeitschrift</i>
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
EBC	Expositor's Bible Commentary
EGNT	Expositor's Greek New Testament
ETL	<i>Ephemerides theologicae lovanienses</i>
<i>EvQ</i>	<i>Evangelical Quarterly</i>
<i>ExpTim</i>	<i>Expository Times</i>
IBS	<i>Irish Biblical Studies</i>
IEJ	<i>Israel Exploration Journal</i>
IRM	<i>International Review of Missions</i>
ISBE	<i>International Standard Bible Encyclopedia</i>
ICC	International Critical Commentary
<i>Int</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
IVPNTC	InterVarsity Press New Testament Commentary
KJV	King James Version
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JETS	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
JQR	<i>Jewish Quarterly Review</i>
JSNT	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>

## Abbreviations

JSNTSup	Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series
JTS	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
LXX	The Septuagint (Greek translation of the Old Testament)
m.	<i>Mishnah</i>
NAC	New American Commentary
NCS	New Century Series
NEB	New English Bible
NIBC	New International Biblical Commentary
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NIV	New International Version
NIVAC	NIV Application Commentary
<i>NovT</i>	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
NLT	New Living Translation
NTS	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
RB	<i>Revue biblique</i>
REB	Revised English Bible
RSV	Revised Standard Version
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SJT	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>
SVTQ	<i>St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly</i>
TDNT	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i>
TLZ	<i>Theologische Literaturzeitung</i>
TNTC	Tyndale New Testament Commentaries
TR	<i>Theological Review</i>
TS	<i>Theological Studies</i>
TT	<i>Theology Today</i>
UBS	United Bible Societies
VE	<i>Vox Evangelica</i>
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
ZNW	<i>Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>

# John 1:1–18



**I**N THE BEGINNING was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup>He was with God in the beginning.

<sup>3</sup>Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. <sup>4</sup>In him was life, and that life was the light of men. <sup>5</sup>The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.

<sup>6</sup>There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. <sup>7</sup>He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. <sup>8</sup>He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. <sup>9</sup>The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.

<sup>10</sup>He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. <sup>11</sup>He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. <sup>12</sup>Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—<sup>13</sup>children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

<sup>14</sup>The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

<sup>15</sup>John testifies concerning him. He cries out, saying, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'" <sup>16</sup>From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another. <sup>17</sup>For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. <sup>18</sup>No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known.



ONE REASON WHY the Gospel of John was symbolized in the ancient church by the eagle is the lofty heights attained by its prologue. With skill and delicacy, John handles issues of profound importance. It comes as no surprise that this prologue has been foundational to the classic Christian formulation of the doctrine of Christ. Here divinity

and humanity, preexistence and incarnation, revelation and sacrifice are each discussed by John with deceptive simplicity.

This prologue may well have been an ancient Christian hymn. We know of other hymns extant especially in Paul's writing, and here too there is an artful flowing of language and theology.<sup>1</sup> In the medieval church the prologue was so venerated that it was sometimes worn in an amulet around the neck to ward off disease and evil spirits. The Roman church read it over the sick and newly baptized. It was even the final prayer of the Roman mass.

Many scholars have attempted to give some literary form to the hymn, and it is impossible here to survey their results.<sup>2</sup> I have found a satisfying structure that combines a number of scholarly insights and breaks down the prologue into four theologically distinguishable *strophes*. In Greek literature a strophe was a turn (as in dance) or a choral poem or lyric used with dance. In poetry we might call it a stanza. Here John offers four artful "turnings," which give us separate glimpses of the Word and his relation to God and the world.

This prologue is also an overture to the story of the rest of Gospel. Themes mentioned here will be picked up later and given fuller development: the preexistence of Christ (1:1; 17:5), divine light entering the world (1:4, 9; 8:12; 9:5), the opposition of light and darkness (1:5; 3:19), the visibility of glory (1:14; 12:41), Jesus as the *only* Son (1:14, 18; 3:16), divine birth (1:12–13; 3:1ff.), and the place of John the Baptist in Jesus' work (1:7, 15; 1:19, 30).<sup>3</sup> More precisely, 1:11–12 reflect the layout or the emphasis of the Gospel's entire structure: "He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God." The first half of the Gospel (chs. 1–12, the Book of Signs) describes the rejection of Jesus by Judaism, "his own people." The second half of the book (chs. 13–21, the Book of Glory) describes the "flock of Jesus," those who have embraced his messiahship and followed him.

In its earliest edition, John's Gospel may have begun at 1:19 with the story of John the Baptist.<sup>4</sup> This hymn was presumably later added by John

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1. Other New Testament hymns are found in Eph. 5:19; Phil. 2:5–11; Col. 1:15–20; 3:15.

2. Rearrangement theories are often criticized since there is so little consensus. See the number of theories outlined in Brown, *John*, 1:22ff. Some have found chiasm (inverted parallels) here: see A. Culpepper, "The Pivot of John's Prologue," *NTS* 27 (1980–81): 1–31; J. Staley, "The Structure of John's Prologue: Its Implications for the Gospel's Narrative Structure," *CBQ* 48 (1986): 241–63.

3. For a more complete list, see D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 111.

4. This is a commonplace reconstruction of the literary history of the Fourth Gospel found in most technical commentaries (see Brown, Barrett, Smalley, Schnackenburg, Morris).

about the same time he wrote his letters (cf. the opening verses of 1 John and the Gospel) to serve as a literary preface or prologue. In order to knit this section to his Gospel, John added material from the story of John the Baptist (1:6–8, 15) as well as his own personal commentary on the hymn (1:13, 17–18). Of course, any reconstruction such as this is speculative; but when examined closely, it enhances our understanding of the theological message of the prologue.<sup>5</sup>

### The First Strophe

In the beginning was the Word,  
And the Word was with God,  
And the Word was God.  
He was in the beginning with God.

### The Second Strophe

All things came into being through him,  
and without him not one thing came into being.  
What has come into being in him was life,  
and the life was the light of all people.  
The light shines in the darkness,  
and the darkness has not overcome it.

*[There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.]*

### The Third Strophe

The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.  
He was in the world, and the world came into being through him;  
yet the world did not know him.  
He came to what was his own people,  
and his own people did not accept him.  
But to all who received him, who believed on his name,  
he gave the power to become children of God.

*[Who were {who was} born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.]*

### The Fourth Strophe

And the Word became flesh and dwelt  
among us, full of grace and truth.

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5. In the following structure, I am using my own translation.

And we have seen his glory,  
the glory as of a father's only son.

[John testified to him and cried out, "This is he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'"]

From his fullness  
we have all received grace upon grace.

[The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is {God} the only Son, who is close to the Father's bosom, who has made him known.]

### The First Strophe: The Logos and God (1:1–2)

THE FIRST VERSES of John's Gospel are a triumph of Christian theology. John begins by establishing the preeminence of the Word existing before the creation of the world. The initial allusion to Genesis 1 cannot be missed (John 1:1). This is a Gospel that will record the re-creation of men and women, the giving of life in darkness where there is no hope. This parallels the thought of Genesis 1, in which God breathes life into the nostrils of Adam and provides new possibilities for the world.

John begins by introducing Jesus as "the Word" (*logos*) and is building here on much contemporary Jewish thought, where the word of God took on personal creative attributes (Gen. 1; Ps. 33:6, 9).<sup>6</sup> In the New Testament period it was personified (Wisd. Sol. 7:24; 18:15–16) and known by some as the immanent power of God creatively at work in the world (Philo). John identifies this Word as Jesus Christ. As such John can attribute to him various divine functions, such as creation (John 1:3, 10) and giving of life (1:4, 14, 16).

But John goes further. He is ready to infer some personal identity between the Logos and God. "And the Word *was* God" (1:1). John often employs similar Greek verbs in order to develop a contrast of themes. The Greek words *ginomai* (to become) and *eimi* (to be) have similar nuances, but John frequently uses them together to make a point. For instance, in 8:58 Jesus says (lit.), "Before Abraham was [*ginomai*], I am [*eimi*]." The first verb suggests "coming into being," such as Abraham's birth; the second implies ongoing existence. Thus in 1:6 John writes, "There *came* [*ginomai*] a man sent from God." In 1:1 John carefully writes, "In the beginning *was* the Word"—"the Word *was* with God"—"the Word *was* God." In each case he uses *eimi*. John

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6. Some scholars are convinced that the best contextual setting for *logos* is Hellenistic. While it is true that Hellenism had deeply influenced Jewish thought by the first century, the commentary will make clear that John's frame of reference is primarily indebted to traditional Jewish religious concepts.

is making an absolute affirmation about the eternal existence of the Word. It did not come into being nor was there ever a time when “the Word was not.”<sup>7</sup> Whatever we can say about God, we can and must say about the Word.

But who is this Word? “The Word was *God*.” Attempts to detract from this literal translation for grammatical reasons (e.g., “the word was a god [or divine]”) run aground when we consider the number of other times when such a divine ascription is made for Jesus. For example, Jesus employs the divine Old Testament title “I Am” (8:24, 28, 58, etc.), he is “one with God” (10:30), and he is even addressed by Thomas in the Gospel’s final scene as “my Lord and my God” (20:28).

Some have argued that because *theos* (God) does not have a definite article, the better translation would be, “The word was divine,” thereby limiting any absolute claim for the Logos. But this cannot be the case. Greek has another common word for divine (*theios*), and in other passages, John omits the article but does not imply a change in meaning.<sup>8</sup> In Greek the word order is even reversed (“and *God* was the Word”), emphasizing not that the Word contains the entirety of the Godhead, but that the divinity possessed by God is also possessed by this Word.

This is John’s overture to Christology and the beginnings of his Trinitarian thought. Indeed, “John intends that the whole of his gospel shall be read in the light of this verse. The deeds and words of Jesus are the deeds and words of God.”<sup>9</sup> This is the theme that will be echoed throughout the Gospel. We will be introduced to Jesus time and time again, and in each case we will be forced to picture Jesus with increasingly profound images. He is the greatest of all people; he is the Messiah of Jewish expectation; but more (this is John’s unique message), he is the Son of God, the divine messenger from the Father. Any reading of the Fourth Gospel that omits this supreme and ultimate claim for Jesus misses its central affirmation.

### **The Second Strophe: The Logos and Creation (1:3–8)**

ONCE JOHN HAS identified the Logos with God, he continues to mark the relation of this Logos to the world. As God’s creative agent, he was responsible for the creation of the world. John’s language here is careful and specific: The Logos was not one preeminent creation that went on to create others. In fact, the Logos was never created. *Nothing* came into being without

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7. These are the words of Arius, a fourth-century theologian who questioned the eternal existence of the Logos. Arian theology was deemed heretical in A.D. 325 at the Council of Nicea.

8. John 1:49; 8:39; 17:17; cf. Rom. 14:17; Rev. 1:20.

9. Barrett, *John*, 156.

him (v. 3).<sup>10</sup> This is another parallel with the thought world of Genesis. In Genesis 1 we are introduced to the God of Israel, Creator of the universe. Now we learn more. The creative capacity of God was Logos. Therefore John stresses not merely that who God is, the Logos is (Strophe One), but that what God does, the Logos does. Therefore in the Gospel, what Jesus does is divine activity. When he heals or speaks—when he gives eternal life (v. 4)—this is God at work, just as God worked at the foundation of the world.

The entry of the Logos into the world (his incarnation) is described as light shining in the darkness (v. 5). Even though John the Baptist's testimony was clear (vv. 6–9), still, Jesus experiences rejection (vv. 10–11). But there is more. The darkness is hostile. There is enmity. The NIV translates 1:5 that the world cannot *understand* the Word, following the traditional KJV reading. But the verb used here has a double significance: to grasp with the mind and so to comprehend; and to grasp with the hand and so to overcome or destroy. Both ideas are at work in John, but the second meaning seems foremost here.<sup>11</sup>

John suggests that the darkness cannot defeat or overcome the Word. This theme gives us some hint of the struggle between light and darkness that will sound throughout the Gospel. The opposition to Jesus will be severe. The world that the Logos enters and God loves is a place of remarkable unbelief. Those opposed to him will try to defeat this Word. But they will fail. John is thinking of the cross—the place of attempted defeat. But as this Gospel will show, the cross is not a place of defeat, but of glory. Jesus overcomes the world (16:33; cf. 12:31; 14:30).

I have set apart verses 6–9 to distinguish them from the prologue itself. This section (as well as v. 15) may come from materials John has added into the prologue in order to weave it into the body of the Gospel. In fact, these tie in nicely with the story that begins at 1:19.<sup>12</sup> John emphasizes the true nature of the Baptist's ministry and shows how he came as a witness to Jesus; this theme is clear in the other "Baptist" sections of the Gospel (1:19–34; 3:22–36; 10:40–42). What does the writer say? John the Baptist was *not* the Messiah (1:20) or the light. Instead, he came as a witness to tell the truth about what was happening in the world.

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10. John makes this completely clear: *Everything* (Gk. *panta*) came to be through him.

11. The Gk. *katalambano* is in the active voice in Greek here. In nine of its fifteen New Testament uses, it means to seize with hostile intent. In Mark 9:18 a demon "seizes" a man. In John 12:35 Jesus says to walk in the light lest the darkness "overtake" you. John also uses it in 8:3–4 (the woman is "caught" in adultery), and a variant of 6:17 reads that the darkness had not yet "overtaken" people. When the word appears in the middle voice, it generally means "comprehend" (see Acts 4:13; 10:34; 25:25; Eph. 3:18).

12. We might even speculate that the Gospel originally began at 1:6 with these short verses, then continued with 1:19. It was only later that the prologue was added (both before and after 1:6–9).

This is the first time we see the word group for “witness” (Gk. *martyreo*, *martyrs*, *martyria*) in the Gospel. This group is important because it communicates what happens as the Word enters the world.<sup>13</sup> As if in a courtroom, evidence and witnesses will come forward to verify the truth of Jesus’ case. John the Baptist is the first of these “literary” witnesses. We will see this more completely in 1:19ff., where the Baptist (as forerunner to Jesus) speaks directly to Judaism’s leadership about the identity of Jesus. But here we have a foreshadowing, a hint, that John (and others like him) will enter the Johannine stage providing insight into the meaning of Jesus (5:31–37, 39; 8:18; 10:25; 15:27; 19:35; 1 John 5:6–11). Essential to John’s mission is a denial of his own significance: “He was not the light.” This will reappear in a triple denial in John 1:19–24, suggesting that John’s main role is simply to glorify and identify Jesus.

### The Third Strophe: The Logos and Revelation (1:9–13)

JOHN THE BAPTIST was bearing witness not to an abstraction or a hope, but to a reality. The “true light” was coming. “Coming into the world” is difficult. It can modify either “everyone” (i.e., the true light enlightens everyone who comes into the world) or “light” (i.e., the true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world).<sup>14</sup> Because the entry of the Word into the world is such a frequent thought for John, the latter reading is the better interpretation (cf. 1:10; 3:17, 19, etc.).<sup>15</sup>

However, the virtue of this divine entry is in how it reaches all people, particularly those hostile to God. In John’s vocabulary, the “world” (Gk. *kosmos*) is an important theological term, appearing seventy-eight times in this Gospel alone. In some cases it bears a positive connotation (e.g., 3:16: “God so loves the world”). Other times it is neutral (e.g., 8:26, where Jesus says, “What I have heard from him [God] I tell the world”). But for the most part, references to *kosmos* are decidedly negative. The world is not the created order of things; it is not the natural environment per se. It is the sphere of creation that lives in rebellion (1:10; 7:7; 14:17, 22, 27, 30; 15:18–19; 16:8, 20, 33; 17:6, 9, 14, 25). Thus when we read about Jesus’ appearance in the world, God’s love for the world (3:16), or Jesus’ salvation of the world (4:42), such passages are not ringing endorsements of the world, but testimonies to the character of God and his love.<sup>16</sup>

13. The word group appears in the Johannine literature 64 times (47 in this Gospel).

14. The NIV places the first option in the margin. The grammar can fit either exegesis.

15. The Gk. phrase “into the world” occurs 14 times in John and almost always refers to Jesus.

16. Carson, *John*, 123.

But if the world is hostile—and here we anticipate the rejection described in 1:10—how can it enlighten *everyone*? Does the arrival of this true light illumine every heart? Perhaps John is thinking of the accessibility of everyone to this one source of illumination. Or is this the distribution of the knowledge of God (general revelation) that makes all people responsible, as Paul argues in Romans 1?<sup>17</sup> Another option is to think of the primary meaning of the verb *photizo*: to light up, expose, bring to light. What is at stake here is how the objective revelation of the Word works: The light invades the darkness, shining on every person and exposing them for who they are. No one is exempt, and in the course of this Gospel the divine revelation divides the audience: Some flee because their deeds are evil (3:19–20), while some receive the revelation because their deeds are true (3:21). Either way, the light shines on everyone, forcing a distinction (8:12; 9:39–41).

Despite the presence of the Logos in the world (1:10a), despite his creative work making the world (1:10b) and leaving the marks of general revelation, still, the world failed to recognize him. “He came to that which was his own [neut. pl., *his own place or home*], but his own [now masc. pl., *his own people*] did not receive him.” The focus of revelation has been Judaism, the spiritual birthplace of the Messiah. And the great irony of this Gospel’s story is that *even here*, where readiness and receptivity should have been keen, there was only rejection. Similar to Luke’s description of Bethlehem’s homes, there was no room. Similar to the parable of the vineyard owner and his renters, the residents repudiated his visit (Mark 12:1–12). Therefore John has made a startling claim. Even though the focus of revelation has been in Israel, the natural home for the truth of God, the Word has come for the entire world, not merely Judaism.

John indicates, however, that the light has its followers; Jesus has his disciples (1:12–13). Even though his own people—adherents to Judaism—spurned his message, those who did receive him obtained power to become God’s children. Verses 12–13 anticipate the story of Nicodemus (3:1–21), in which this rebirth is explored.

Verse 13 poses an interesting challenge. Some manuscripts supply a singular verb in verse 13a: “who *was* born, not of blood . . .,” implying that the subject here is Jesus. That is, Jesus was born uniquely through the will of God. Most translations, however, retain the plural, so that verse 13 echoes the thought of verse 12. Those who follow the Word, who believe and obtain divine power, will share in divine birth. This is John’s understanding of conversion: Deliberate faith joined with divine transformation. A careful reading of 1 John shows that “child of God,” “rebirth,” and “born of God” were commonplace names describing Johannine discipleship (1 John 3:2, 9; 4:4,

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17. So J. Calvin, *John 1–10* (Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 15.

7, 12–13). In other words, there will be a powerful transformation of those who embrace this light, who align themselves with the light instead of the darkness, who cling to the Messiah instead of the world.

### The Fourth Strophe: The Logos and Incarnation (1:14–18)

THE PROLOGUE'S FINALE is found in verses 14–18. John sums up in fresh language what has already been said. Now the abstract thought of light and darkness gives way to concrete Old Testament images.

John 1:14 is one of the most important verses in the Bible. The Word did not just appear to be human; *the Word became flesh*. This assertion stunned the Greek mind for whom the separation of the divine spirit and the mundane world (flesh, *sarx*) was an axiom of belief. But the second phrase is equally stunning for the Jew. This Word dwelt (*skenoo*) among us and revealed his glory (*doxa*). This verb for dwelling is employed in the Greek Old Testament for the tabernacle of God. In other words, Christ is the locus of God's dwelling with Israel *as he had dwelt with them in the tabernacle in the desert* (Ex. 25:8–9; Zech. 2:10). Hence the glory of God, once restricted to the tabernacle (Ex. 40:34), is now visible in Christ (John 1:14b).

But two things must be noted. (1) This experience of glory is concrete. It is not a mystical vision and an inward illumination. The glory of God took up tangible form and was touched (20:20–29; 1 John 1:1ff.). (2) This glory was not merely a display of power. For John the deepest irony is how glory is to be found in suffering and humiliation, for in this Gospel, the cross of Christ is again and again described as Jesus' *glorification* (John 12:23–24; 13:31). His signs and miracles showed his glory, to be sure (2:11; 11:4), but it is in the cross that the mysterious, unfathomable glory of God is to be found.

It is curious that the word "grace," so common in the rest of the New Testament, is virtually unused by John and appears only here in the prologue (four times) and then disappears. Following the common understanding of the New Testament, John likely has in mind the generous work of God in sending his Son, which results in our salvation. Grace is found in God's coming and working *despite* the hostility and rejection of the world. Grace is not merely an attribute of God. It is known when someone enjoys his goodness. It is the recipient who knows grace, not the theologian who has studied it. Thus in 1:16 John emphasizes our experience and reception of this grace as its chief merit.

The more important word for John, however, is "truth."<sup>18</sup> Most simply it is the opposite of falsehood, but John sees truth as penetrating far deeper.

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18. "Truth" appears 25 times in this Gospel and 20 times in the letters. The entire word group based on "truth" (true, truthful, etc.) appears 55 times in the Gospel.

Truth is the self-disclosure that alone comes from God; truth is not just what is right, but what is divine *and this is right*. Thus Jesus can describe himself as the truth (14:6) and likewise say that the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth (15:26; 16:13). Therefore the incarnation of Christ (1:14a) silences the fraudulent voices of the world whose truth claims are inimical to God.

John the Baptist's cry as a witness to Jesus (1:15; see comments on 1:6–7) repeats his role as witness. Even though Jesus comes after John chronologically, this does not give John priority. These words pick up on the theme in all of the Baptist texts, where John's secondary status is underscored. However, here we find the reason why Jesus is superior: As in 1:1, his eternal pre-existence surpasses John the Baptist's status in every way. Jesus does not have a relative superiority, but an absolute superiority.

Throughout this Gospel, it is clear that the apostle John and his community are struggling with the counterclaims of the Jewish synagogue. As in John 9, the healed blind man must decide if he is a follower of Moses or a follower of Jesus. One (apparently) cannot be both (9:28)—or at least that is how John's opponents are putting it.<sup>19</sup> John makes clear here that Moses did indeed play an unparalleled role: He provided the first five books of the Bible, the Torah, which John here calls "the law" (1:17). These are not being discredited, for surely grace and truth came through Moses too. John does not intend to show that the grace of Christ stands at odds with the revelation of Moses. The law likewise contains the grace of God and is an earlier display of it.<sup>20</sup>

But what is at stake here is the exhaustive character of the Christian revelation. It is interesting that in Exodus 33:18 Moses' request to see God is denied (33:20; cf. Deut. 4:12); but Jesus has come to us from the very heart of the Father (John 1:18). Indeed, he has seen the Father—and no one else has.<sup>21</sup> This goes beyond Moses and every other claimant for the truth in the world. Hebrews 3:1–6 carries this same thought: The Son's revelation cannot by definition have any rivals.<sup>22</sup>

The NIV indicates an interesting variation in 1:18: "No one has ever seen God, but *God* the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known." Some manuscripts insert "Son" for "God,"<sup>23</sup> but the NIV's more diffi-

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19. See also 5:39, 46; 6:32; 8:32ff.

20. R. Edwards, "χαριτιν ἀντὶ χάριτος (Jn 1:16): Grace and the Law in the Johannine Prologue," JSNT 32 (1988): 3–15; see also Brown, *John*, comments on 1:16; Carson, *John*, 131–34.

21. John's Greek word order makes is emphatic: "God no one has seen."

22. Even though in Ex. 33:11 the Lord spoke to Moses "face to face," this is metaphorical since in 33:17–23 Moses must be protected from seeing God's face, which would surely destroy him (33:20).

23. "Only Son" is a common Johannine expression (see 3:16, 18; 1 John 4:9).

cult, explicit affirmation of Christ's divinity is likely original. John 1:18 then joins 1:1 as the closing frame of the prologue, offering a summary statement about the divine origin and exhaustive knowledge of the Son. Christ's revelation is unique for ontological reasons: It is his identity, his being, the essence of who he is that makes his words God's words. Indeed, Christ is fully God, who in his incarnation is revealing *himself* to the world.<sup>24</sup>

### Bridging Contexts

THESE VERSES OF Scripture are perhaps some of the most important words ever penned. As I work to appropriate their meaning into my own generation, I must be alert to the major theological themes that John has woven into them. The prologue to John's Gospel is densely packed with ringing affirmations about Jesus Christ, God's relation to the world, and the character of humanity. Each of these not only had incisive things to say to John's generation, but likewise to ours. The three themes I have listed here will unfold in the narrative of the Gospel and here can serve as an outline to what is to come.

**The identity of the Son of God.** In early Christian reflection, the catalyst for thinking about the identity and mission of Christ (Christology) was no doubt the resurrection. Jesus had been vindicated and the truth of his claims was assured, because God had delivered him from the grave. The fact of the resurrection and the failure of the cross to defeat Jesus becomes the center of New Testament preaching throughout Acts. Peter's Pentecost speech finds its critical junction at the point where Jesus is described as rescued from the grave: "He was not abandoned to the grave, nor did his body see decay" (Acts 2:31). It is the present reality of Christ, his lordship, and his presence in the church that fuel the church's mission and confidence.

This emphasis is evident in Paul's letters, which manifest virtually no interest in Jesus' earthly life. Paul writes with passion about the present, empowering lordship of Christ, who is a life-giving Spirit (1 Cor. 15:45) and who is sovereign over the church (Col. 1:18). He describes the future when Jesus in glory will return to the world to redeem his church (1 Thess. 5:2).

But it was not long before reflection migrated into the early years of Jesus' life. The earliest narratives written focused on the Passion story and provided an answer to the pressing question: Why was Jesus crucified?<sup>25</sup> And if

24. The Greek verb "made him known" (*exegeomai*), from which we obtain the term *exegesis*, was often used in pagan religions for the revelation of divine secrets.

25. The close parallels among the four Gospels in their Passion stories reflect the uniform explanation given in the early church.

he exhibited power over the grave, surely this power was evident during his ministry. Thus, the Gospels explore other questions: What was the character of God's presence with Jesus on earth?<sup>26</sup> How do we explain his messianic role in Judaism?<sup>27</sup> The work of Mark, Matthew, and Luke began to answer these questions, but there was one more line of inquiry that pressed Christological reflection a step further: Did Jesus have a preexistence? Matthew and Luke's nativity stories open this discussion directly, but it was left to John to give a full theological explanation.

The prologue is the most complete, indeed, the most explicit study of Christ's preexistence in the New Testament. The significance of Jesus is not merely in his ability to be a powerful worker of mighty deeds. Nor is it in his wisdom as a great teacher. Rather, Jesus is God-become-flesh. That is, the phenomenon of Jesus Christ is a phenomenon unlike anything the world has witnessed before. He is God-in-descent, God stepping into the context of humanity. In more technical terms, Jesus has an *ontological* divinity.<sup>28</sup> His being, his essence, his very nature is one with God. This is to be compared with an *ethical* divinity, in which Jesus is valued or aligned with God—as evidenced in what he does. This may at first seem obvious to those who have been nurtured in the Christian environment, but today it simply cannot be assumed that men and women truly understand the Christological implications of John's incarnational theology.

Springing from this doctrine of the high divinity of Jesus—a divinity anchored to preexistence—comes a host of theological themes that I must press home when I apply this text. John's understanding of *revelation* lifts Jesus' words above those of a prophet and any human being. The voice of Jesus becomes the voice of God. It is for this reason that Jesus can tell Philip that seeing him is equivalent to seeing the Father (14:9). This is also why Thomas, at the close of the Gospel, can give Jesus the high acclaim, "My Lord and my God" (20:28). In a similar fashion, John's understanding of *redemption* now becomes a divine work that parallels Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 5:19: "God was reconciling the world to *himself* in Christ." Redemption is thus no divinely inspired human event that sets out to placate God. Redemption is God himself at work in the world, achieving his own goals for repairing the consequences of sin and bringing humanity back into relationship with himself.

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26. Here the accounts of Jesus' baptism and his many miracles and exorcisms helped explain who he was.

27. Here the many messianic prophesies and links to Judaism were woven into the Gospel record.

28. Ontology comes from the Greek verb "to be" (in its participial form). It refers to essence or being.

To sum up, therefore, Jesus must be explained in terms of his unique origin and mission, and this explanation must be forged with a clear understanding of his unity with the Father. To compromise this delicate theme in the Fourth Gospel is to jeopardize John's portrayal of Jesus throughout the Gospel.

**The nature of the world.** High on John's theological agenda is his interest in explaining the rejection of Jesus by Judaism and the world—a rejection leading to the cross. For John this does not mean that Jesus failed in any way; rather, it uncovers the character of the world (a place of darkness) and discloses how the world reacts whenever it is penetrated by the light. John's worldview is strictly dualistic: The forces of light and darkness, good and evil, God and Satan are arrayed against one another to such a degree that there can be no compromise. No intermingling. No association.

John's theology of the world is his vehicle for explaining Jesus' rejection by Judaism (1:11), the failure of most to understand the things of God (1:10), and the hostility of the world in general when the things of God are brought to the fore (1:5). John writes, "Light has come into the world, but [people] loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil" (3:19). In short, *darkness* is a theological description that betrays the world's commitments and confusions. For this reason Nicodemus, who can barely understand Jesus, comes "at night" (3:2). And after Judas betrays Jesus, he departs the Upper Room into the night (13:30). These are literary devices John employs to tell us about the environment in which these two men live and work: "But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them" (11:10 NRSV).

The world, then, is not a neutral place, a place of open inquiry and curiosity about God. As I bring this passage into the modern world, I need to keep John's cosmology, his theology of the world, foremost in my thinking. The world is opposed to the light. Yet despite the world's hopeless and hostile condition, still, God loves the world and has entered it in order to save it (3:16–17). *The world* is thus a *theological* term for humanity set against God. "God so loved the world" is not about God's love for nature, but God's love for those arrayed against him.

**The possibilities for humanity.** John's third message is his theology of hope. The desperate condition of humanity is set against the goodness of God and his overtures toward the world in Christ. This alone, this supernatural intervention, is the only possibility for men and women today. The darkness of the world cannot defeat the Word (1:5) because the Word created the world and understands everything that has gone into it (1:3). In 2:24–25 Jesus is celebrated by many who witnessed his signs at Passover, but then John provides a remarkable commentary about Jesus' savvy understanding of this shallow popularity: He understood all people and understood what was in each one of them.

This is the hope to which John clings: Despite the fallenness and corruption of humanity—a corruption at the very heart of things, despite the hostility of humanity to God—nevertheless God empowers men and women to be transformed and become his children (1:12). This is hope: that despite the darkness, One Light shined and this Light worked to illumine others. Despite the darkness, the glory of God radiated in the world (1:14b), displaying the grace and truth of the Father (1:14a).

This is an essentially modern message because we live in a culture that is looking for hope. For some, hope has been anchored in human systems and possibilities. For younger generations, there often seems to be no hope, and as they look at their world, they feel despair. The key here is that I must proclaim a Christological eschatology, an ultimate and final message that is anchored in the possibilities brought about through God in Christ, or else I have betrayed the very essence of what God has done in the Incarnation.



VOICES. THE WORLD in which we live is looking for a diagnosis of its condition and its possibilities for renewal. There are countless voices providing messages that promise to alleviate the struggle of life or the questions that trouble us. We hear political and economic voices, arguing that if we reallocate or reorganize or restructure, we will build the sort of world where equity and charity win the day. Other voices are more deeply personal, arguing that the problem is not sociological but human—the human soul is in need of repair or renewal—and if we provide the right education or therapy or vision of our neighbor, then all will be made right. These voices, these messages, are secular, and they can be heard in pulpits every Sunday. These prophets of our day offer services that are deeply needed and useful, but their voices cannot replace The Voice that John 1:1–18 introduces.

The prologue to John is not about a message that offers hope, but about The Message that is the only hope. It is not about an idea, but a person. *The Word became flesh* tells us that God is intent on communicating with us not about mere concepts, he is intent on communicating about himself. *The Word became flesh* tells us that The Message is accessible and not hidden away for mystics and scholars but was lived in the world and was touched and heard by many. *The Word became flesh* tells us that the man Jesus was no mere mortal. He was not an inspired carpenter or a model human. Jesus was God himself—taking on the clothing of humanity, embracing it fully and eternally, walking in it, speaking through it, and delivering the reality of God to the world in a manner never done before. This prologue tells us that something

definitive has happened in time, something objective and absolute. A marker has been placed in human history, and all humanity is now being called to mark time and progress by that post.

**Three strands.** The prologue provides a theological template, weaving together three strands of thinking that, when taken together, form the essential fabric of the Christian message. Each message is tied to the other two, and together they comprise the core of our faith that men and women, even young children, should have as essential spiritual equipment. These commitments should be reflexes, beliefs so deeply ingrained that we cannot view the world in any other way except through them.

(1) *Definitive Christology.* The scandal that must never be compromised is the nature of Christ and his relation to the Father. Jesus is not one savior among the world's many saviors, nor is he one good man among many men. Jesus is God-in-flesh. Or as the theologians of Nicea framed it, Christ and the Father share the same essence or being. There never was a time when the Son did not exist.

This basic scandal—this unyielding affirmation about Jesus Christ—is constantly at issue in discussions concerning the truth of Christianity and the validity of alternative religions and philosophical systems.<sup>29</sup> But more fundamentally, this notion challenges a major shift in the way the modern world views reality.

This came home to me recently when I read Lesslie Newbigin's *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture*.<sup>30</sup> Newbigin was a career missionary in India, who returned to his home in England after spending forty years in central Asia. But when he returned, he discovered that the culture he was reentering was as alien to the gospel as anything he witnessed in India. During his career he was accustomed to studying culture in order to understand the intellectual structures of a society and how he might communicate cross-culturally. But when he returned home, he discovered that if he was going to speak of the gospel at all in Western Europe, this communication too had to be cross-cultural. To his modern listeners, the gospel sounded like foolishness—much as Paul experienced among the Greeks in Corinth (cf. 1 Cor. 1:23).

In brief, Western society had emptied modern life of the ability to see the world *theocentrically*. God had been dismissed from his role of running the external world, thanks to the advent of science, and God's last domain—the inner world—had been taken over by psychology. While the notion of

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29. See here D. Okholm and T. Phillips, eds., *More Than One Way? Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).

30. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986.

an ambiguous God may still have a place, so Newbigin argues, the idea of a personal, self-revealing God has become incomprehensible to many. This means that we cannot simply announce that God has become human in Christ; rather, we must lay bare the fundamental structures of modern thought that have invalidated this idea in the first place. We must uncover today's *pagan cosmology*.<sup>31</sup>

History is not simply buffeted by the forces of social change. The cosmos is not merely explained by cause and effect. God is the architect of history, who delights in making himself known and who enters our reality through word and miracle, showing his glory and power. And what we claim he has done in Jesus Christ fits excellently into any *theological cosmology*: Christ is God once more at work, disclosing himself to his creation. Christ is God reaching into the realm of men and women; he takes *their form* in order to give exhaustive and certain revelation of who he is.

This theme will reappear as we continue to examine the balance of John's Gospel. Jesus is God's intervention in the world, and as the gospel story unfolds, his audiences will intuit that here there is something—someone—greater than Moses. Someone who antedates Abraham. Someone whose history goes back to the beginning of time.

(2) *Complete rejection*. The great irony of Christian theology is that the very medicine that can cure the human condition is rejected. People love the darkness rather than the light because their deeds are evil (3:19). It is naive to think that the world is eagerly waiting for some disclosure from heaven. Such a disclosure is welcome if it comes in the world's terms, if it is a message that affirms the systems of the world, upholding the personal aggrandizement of power and the prowess of human capacity. But if it names the darkness for what it is, if it describes sin for what it does, if it identifies unbelief in its many sophisticated forms, then the Word will experience sheer antagonism. If the Creator of the world now calls for dominion as its Creator and Lord, the world will have no part.

Christian theology affirms that humanity is in a state from which there is no freedom. Sin is not a series of bad choices, but a state of being from which bad choices continually come. This means that humanity's moral, intellectual, even aesthetic capacities are fallen and poised to move away from the presence of the Light. This is true for the world that is steeped in darkness as well as it is true for those who have a religious disposition: "He came to . . . his own, but his *own* [people] did not receive him" (1:10, italics added). No one is exempt from this dilemma.

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31. The same case has been made by D. F. Wells, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

John understands that we do not live in a nice world that God desires to make nicer. We live rather in a world that repudiates the Truth and replaces it with fashionable truths. The Truth of God must excise from the human soul the condition that has been honed since Adam and Eve. Humanity must be reborn.

(3) *Absolute transformation.* There is only one hope, and it is God in Christ. In this incarnation God has exhibited the glory and grace that is native to his selfhood; and through this incarnation, humankind can regain the glory and grace it once had when it was created. The natural eye cannot see the glory of God since it is dimmed by sin. Instead, it is necessary for God to work, to self-disclose, to send his Son, who alone has exposed God's heart (1:18).

When God takes this initiative, new possibilities are born. Divine power is released into the broken world and its broken lives so that new life is possible. The theological key that the world finds so foreign lies here: Transformation and hope cannot be the fruit of some human endeavor. Only God can take the initiative, and men and women must see, receive, and believe the work he desires to do. And when they do, they are reborn to become God's children.

The pitfall of the pagan world is to find hope in its own canons of thought and behavior. But history has proven the futility of this dream. The pitfall of the religious person is to think that human spiritual proclivities can bring God into reality through religious devotion and practice. John says that God takes the initiative, for God becomes flesh. God discloses himself. God enters our world bearing truth and grace in order to transform whoever will receive him. Transformation is not an inspired human work; it is a divine work through and through.

I am reminded at every turn how the world is aware that it needs transformation, that it is incomplete and in need of repair. The self-help books in bookstores and the late-night info-mercials bear eloquent testimony to the deficiencies sensed by the world's citizenry. One late-night commercial is by the hypnotist Marshall Snyder, who promises to deliver "Prosperity, Passion, and Power" to any who purchase his tapes (three easy installments of \$39.95). These three promises unveil the world's admission that all is not well, but they also unveil the emptiness of the world's solution.

# John 1:19–51



**N**OW THIS WAS John's testimony when the Jews of Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. <sup>20</sup>He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, "I am not the Christ."

<sup>21</sup>They asked him, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?"

He said, "I am not."

"Are you the Prophet?"

He answered, "No."

<sup>22</sup>Finally they said, "Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"

<sup>23</sup>John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one calling in the desert, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'"

<sup>24</sup>Now some Pharisees who had been sent <sup>25</sup>questioned him, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?"

<sup>26</sup>"I baptize with water," John replied, "but among you stands one you do not know. <sup>27</sup>He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie."

<sup>28</sup>This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

<sup>29</sup>The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" <sup>30</sup>This is the one I meant when I said, 'A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.' <sup>31</sup>I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel."

<sup>32</sup>Then John gave this testimony: "I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. <sup>33</sup>I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.' <sup>34</sup>I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God."

<sup>35</sup>The next day John was there again with two of his disciples.

<sup>36</sup>When he saw Jesus passing by, he said, "Look, the Lamb of God!"

<sup>37</sup>When the two disciples heard him say this, they followed Jesus. <sup>38</sup>Turning around, Jesus saw them following and asked, "What do you want?"

They said, "Rabbi" (which means Teacher), "where are you staying?"

<sup>39</sup>"Come," he replied, "and you will see."

So they went and saw where he was staying, and spent that day with him. It was about the tenth hour.

<sup>40</sup>Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, was one of the two who heard what John had said and who had followed Jesus. <sup>41</sup>The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, "We have found the Messiah" (that is, the Christ). <sup>42</sup>And he brought him to Jesus.

Jesus looked at him and said, "You are Simon son of John. You will be called Cephas" (which, when translated, is Peter).

<sup>43</sup>The next day Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. Finding Philip, he said to him, "Follow me."

<sup>44</sup>Philip, like Andrew and Peter, was from the town of Bethsaida. <sup>45</sup>Philip found Nathanael and told him, "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph."

<sup>46</sup>"Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" Nathanael asked.

"Come and see," said Philip.

<sup>47</sup>When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, "Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false."

<sup>48</sup>"How do you know me?" Nathanael asked.

Jesus answered, "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you."

<sup>49</sup>Then Nathanael declared, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God, you are the King of Israel."

<sup>50</sup>Jesus said, "You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You shall see greater things than that." <sup>51</sup>He then added, "I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."



THE BALANCE OF chapter 1 moves us into the narrative world of this Gospel. But it is important to keep in mind that we have already been introduced to John the Baptist in the prologue. He was Jesus' forerunner—a witness to the coming of the Messiah, Jesus (1:6ff.). And he understood clearly that Jesus was superior, that Jesus was replacing John's

baptizing ministry with his own (1:15, 33).<sup>1</sup> The evangelist gives minimal attention to the identity and ministry of John the Baptist compared with the Synoptics (cf. Matt 3:1–6, Mark 1:2–6, Luke 1:1–24, 57–80; 3:1–13). Instead, his chief interest is the role the Baptist plays identifying and exalting Jesus.

Verses 19–50 enjoy an interesting unity. The section can be divided into four paragraphs, each marking a successive day (“the next day,” 1:29, 35, 43). In each section we learn something about who Jesus is and what he will accomplish; but more, we learn something about discipleship and what it means to be his witness. There is even a geographical outline. An interesting structure looks like this:

- A. One Disciple in Perea [Bethany Across the Jordan] (1:19–34)  
[Days 1–2]
  - 1. John the Baptist’s Self-Denial (1:19–28) [Day 1]
    - The Baptist bears no witness to himself.
  - 2. John the Baptist Tells Who Jesus Is (1:29–34) [Day 2]
    - The Baptist bears witness to Jesus.
- B. Two Disciples in Judea (1:35–42) [Day 3]
  - Andrew and Peter become disciples and model true discipleship.
- C. Two Disciples in Galilee (1:43–51) [Day 4]
  - Philip and Nathanael become disciples and model true discipleship.

This structure at once makes clear that the author’s purpose in these verses is the nature of discipleship and what it means to meet, know, and follow Jesus. In each case, disciples are invited to have a personal contact with Jesus and to recognize who he truly is. This is a recurring theme in the Gospel: experiencing Jesus and having a correct understanding of his person. John’s literary technique is to tell a story and then exploit that story for some theological purpose: to identify Jesus for us as readers or to help us see what is transpiring in the minds of Jesus’ interrogators.

### **John the Baptist’s Self-Denial (1:19–28)**

THE AUTHOR IS not narrating the events of John the Baptist and Jesus. He is telling someone else’s story. This entire account is the “testimony” of John the

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1. I suggested above that it is likely in an early draft of the Gospel (before the addition of the prologue) these verses (1:6ff., 15) were attached to 1:19 and served as the introduction to the Gospel. Some commentators prefer to include them in the present section. See B. Witherington, *John’s Wisdom: A Commentary on the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1995), 60–75.

Baptist ("this was John's testimony," v. 19), as if we were in a judicial setting and the evidence for and against Jesus was being set before us as readers.<sup>2</sup> The story reads as if the Baptist were telling this in retrospect and John the author is letting the Baptist now have the spotlight.

John's baptizing activity at the Jordan River attracted a great deal of attention, leading many people from Jerusalem and the surrounding regions of Judea to come out to him either to be baptized or to inquire about his work (Matt. 3:5). One such delegation was sent by "the Jews" to interrogate the Baptist (John 1:19). The term *the Jews* (Gk. *Ioudaios*) appears seventy-one times in this Gospel and generally represents the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem (particularly the temple) who are hostile to Jesus. Some have even argued that *Ioudaios* refers to "Judeans" who are hostile to Jesus and his Galilean movement. It clearly cannot refer to all Judaism, for in chapter 9 the parents of the man born blind are Jewish, and we read that they "were afraid of the Jews" (9:22). "The Jews" in this Gospel has a specialized usage stemming from John's own world, a world in which synagogue and church were struggling (see the Introduction).<sup>3</sup>

The delegation coming to John consists of "priests and Levites," so that what we have here is an interrogation by emissaries from "official Judaism," from the temple and its interests. John the Baptist was an odd phenomenon and needed investigating. Three names are at stake and together each of them probe John's intentions vis-à-vis Israel: Does John see himself as an eschatological figure in some way calling Israel to justice? Is he putting the nation on notice because God is about to intervene?

(1) John first denies that he is "the Christ." "Christ" is a Greek translation of the Hebrew word for "Messiah." Throughout the late Old Testament period and especially in intertestamental Judaism hope in a coming Messiah was widespread. This would be "the Lord's anointed," someone filled with God's power and Spirit who would work some saving miracle on behalf of God's people. Judaism frequently thought about Moses as perhaps the ideal messianic model. Not only did he give the people spiritual leadership, but he also provided political redemption from Egypt. It is no accident that in the days of Greek and Roman oppression (a period of over three hundred years), the term *Messiah* (or *Christ*) was filled with political connotations. John the Baptist declares firmly he is not the Messiah.

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2. An important book that explores the judicial themes of John is A. E. Harvey, *Jesus on Trial* (London: SPCK, 1976).

3. Some scholars, particularly Jewish theologians, have concluded that John's frequent use of "the Jews" contributed to Christian anti-Semitism over the centuries. John was Jewish and when this messianic Jew found himself in conflict with his fellow citizens, this intramural rhetoric was born.

(2) Malachi 4:5 taught that the Old Testament prophet Elijah would precede the coming Messiah. If John were not the Messiah, perhaps then he was Elijah. Because Elijah had been taken from the earth without dying (2 Kings 2:11), Jewish speculation proposed that he was mysteriously alive and would return at the end of time (cf. Mark 8:28). John says clearly he is not Elijah (John 1:21). One difficulty with this message is that in Matthew 11:14 Jesus says that John is “Elijah who was to come.” The solution is that John was fulfilling the forerunner’s *role* of Elijah, as Luke explains: “He will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah” (Luke 1:17). John, on the other hand, denies that he is Elijah who has returned to the earth.<sup>4</sup>

(3) “The Prophet” is likely a reference to Deuteronomy 18:15–19, where a prophet “like Moses” would return to Israel sometime in the future. This led to enormous Jewish speculation concerning who this prophet would be and in some cases led to a conflation with the image of the Messiah. Other Jews distinguished the Messiah and the Prophet (see John 7:40; 1 Macc. 4:46; *T. Ben.* 9:2) and understood that he would be simply a forerunner. Qumran, for instance, looked for an eschatological “prophet” who would accompany the Messiah (1QS 9). John’s answer is succinct: No.

Following this series of denials John now identifies who he is. He is “a voice” and quotes Isaiah 40:3 in order to identify his role in Jesus’ mission. He does not elevate himself as having a stature of importance and never identifies his own name. He is a tool in God’s hand, pointing to Another on the horizon. It is interesting that Isaiah 40:3 was also used by the Dead Sea Community (Qumran) as one of their chief passages to identify who they were. They were building a community, preparing a place in the desert, for the arrival of the Messiah. John’s message said that the dawn of the messianic era was at hand and virtually no waiting was needed.<sup>5</sup>

Judaism knew about ritual washings for ceremonial cleansing. But baptism was generally reserved for Gentiles who had converted to Judaism. It was a total cleansing that marked a threshold crossed. John, however, was calling *Jews* to be baptized (1:26), and of course this prompted the question, “What is the threshold? What is the new order that would change us as Jews?” The promise on the horizon is not a new religion but a person (1:26–27). John describes him as so great that by comparison, he (though a prophet) will be

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4. Another possibility is that John did not know he was Elijah or at least did not accept the title. That is, in the Synoptics Jesus gives him a title he preferred to reject. “The Baptist humbly rejects the exalted title, but Jesus, on the contrary, bestows it on him” (C. F. D. Moule, *The Phenomenon of the New Testament* [London: SCM, 1967], 70, cited by L. Morris, *John*, 119n.18).

5. Many scholars have drawn a connection between John the Baptist and the community of Qumran. Not only were they both in the desert with a critical message of Judaism (based on Isa. 40), but each also employed water baptism as a regular means of cleansing.

less than a slave. Untying a sandal thong was a chore never done by disciples for their teacher. Rather, it was a chore reserved for slaves. John says he is unworthy even to do the work of a slave for this One who is coming. This is the measure of Jesus' greatness.

The location of Bethany "on the other side of the Jordan" has always been a puzzle. This is not the village just east of Jerusalem (home of Lazarus, Mary, and Martha, cf. John 11). The patristic father Origen visited the area in the third century looking for the site and identified it as the village "Betharaba," which inspired numerous manuscript variants. But this is surely wrong. This Bethany is in Perea, the region east of the Jordan River, but its location is now lost.

### John the Baptist Bears Witness to Jesus (1:29–34)

THE EPISODE ON "the next day" is a continuation of John the Baptist's testimony to Jesus (see 1:34). While previously John could only hint at the coming of Christ, now he identifies Christ plainly. Note how confidently the Baptist can speak of his knowledge of Jesus (1:33). The point here is that John can be compared with the questioners from Jerusalem who do not know about God and likely will not understand the things of Jesus. Borchert is correct when he says that "John's knowledge of the coming one was not *innate knowledge* (1:31–33). It was knowledge that had come to him through revelation—when the Spirit descended on Jesus" (1:32).<sup>6</sup> This is John's theology of revelation at work. True knowledge of God is beyond human reach: It is a gift of divine disclosure. John has a number of opportunities to speak directly of the identity and purpose of Jesus.

(1) Jesus is identified as "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (v. 29). Every interpreter finds this phrase to be difficult because the words "Lamb of God," while commonplace in Christian vocabulary, do not appear elsewhere in the New Testament except here and 1:36. The crux is understanding what "Lamb" (Gk. *amnos*) means. Some suggest that it refers to the Passover sacrifice, which could be a lamb (although this was not necessary). However, this animal was not termed *amnos* in Greek-speaking Judaism but rather "the *pascha*." Since John is keenly interested in seeing Jesus as a Passover victim (see 19:31–36), it would not be unnatural for him to use this concept and language for Jesus.<sup>7</sup>

Other suggestions include the sacrificial lamb of Isaiah 53:7 or even the lamb of Genesis 22:8 (provided to Abraham in order to preserve Isaac). John

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6. G. Borchert, *John*, 1:137.

7. Others have argued that the Passover sacrifice did not remove sin. But this is disputed, and many hold that virtually all Jewish sacrifices had some salvific dimension.

may have been thinking of the triumphant eschatological Lamb of Revelation 5. Another possibility is that John is thinking about the daily temple sacrifices, in which a lamb was offered both morning and evening (Ex. 29:38–46). But this is uncertain. It is at least clear that for the Palestinian Jew, all lamb sacrifices were memorials of deliverance (esp. Isaac's deliverance), forgiveness of sin, and messianic salvation.<sup>8</sup> It would *not* be impossible for John to have the Passover lamb in mind in the present context.

The chief thing to keep in mind is that here we see Jesus as a gift provided by God to take away sin. As a lamb he becomes a sacrificial animal whose death "carries away" a condition that is prohibited in the presence of God. Since this Gospel highlights the festivals of Judaism, and in particular the Passover, it is not unreasonable to see Passover imagery here as well.

In 1:30 John describes Jesus as one who was "before [him]." This statement repeats an almost identical phrase in 1:15, which declares the importance of Jesus to be not in what he does but in who he is. This is one of many Christological affirmations in the Gospel that associate Jesus clearly with God.

(2) John's second testimony on this day occurs in 1:32–33. Rather than narrating the story of Jesus' baptism (as in the Synoptics), the Fourth Gospel simply invites John the Baptist to describe what he witnessed that day in the Jordan. Here his testimony is remarkable. John does not emphasize the voice from heaven or the baptism in the river, as do the Synoptics. Instead, three times he refers to the coming of the Spirit on Christ. The Old Testament expected the messianic era to be a day of renewal when the Spirit would not only transform Israel (Isa. 32:15; Ezek. 36:26–27; 37:14; *Jub.* 1:23) but would rest mightily on the Messiah himself (Isa. 11:2; 42:1; *T. Jud.* 24:1–3).

The appearance of the Spirit was common in the Old Testament, but it appeared mainly among designated leaders (such as a king, judge, or prophet) and remained only for the duration of their God-appointed work. John the Baptist's comment is telling: The Spirit descended and *remained* on him. This is a permanent anointing; this is an anointing unlike anything witnessed before in Judaism; this is the messianic anointing. Moreover, this Jesus is not merely anointed himself with the Spirit at his baptism, but he will baptize others in the Holy Spirit as well. Indeed, John has witnessed the dawning of the messianic era.

(3) The final testimony given by John the Baptist in this day appears in 1:34: "I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God." Important ancient manuscripts, however, replace "Son of God" (NIV, NRSV) with "chosen of God" (NEB).<sup>9</sup> I am convinced that "chosen of God" is correct. John will affirm

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8. G. Vermes, *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism* (Leiden: Brill, 1961), 193–227.

9. Variant witnesses are more numerous for "Son," but "chosen" is represented by many strong manuscript families, including Sinaiticus. Some readings conflate the readings with "chosen Son." See any textual apparatus for complete witnesses.

Jesus' title as Son later in 1:49. But here "chosen" is a more difficult reading, which scribes likely changed to the more familiar "Son." Further, "chosen" likely comes from Isaiah 42:1, which emphasizes the Spirit-anointing of the Messiah and uses this title for him: "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my *chosen one* in whom I delight; I will put my *Spirit* on him, and he will bring justice to the nations." This goes to the heart of John's testimony about Jesus: This Messiah is known by his unique anointing, his unparalleled identity in the Spirit of God.

John the Baptist has completed his personal witness. In humility he has deflected glory and interest away from himself and drawn attention to Jesus, describing powerfully who he is and what he will do. It is not in this Gospel's interest to record Jesus' temptations as we have them in Matthew 4 and Luke 4. This chapter is about testimonies, about men who meet Jesus, who recognize they will be changed forever, and who discover the true identity of Jesus.

### **Peter and Andrew in Judea (1:35–42)**

JOHN THE BAPTIST continues his role as witness by speaking to yet another audience. On the third day of this sequence he speaks to his own followers, directing them to follow Jesus instead of himself. On one level, the story serves to show that disciples who followed the Baptist must shift their allegiance to Jesus. On another level, the story provides a template for discipleship generally—now in Judea (1:35–42), later in Galilee (1:43–51).

In verse 37 we learn that two disciples hear John testify to Jesus. One is Andrew, Simon Peter's brother (v. 43). Andrew finds his brother and brings him to Jesus. But that leaves unanswered the identity of the other disciple in verse 37. In the Synoptic Gospels the earliest converts to Jesus are Andrew, Peter, James, and *John* (cf. Mark 1:16–20). It is no accident that this unnamed disciple in verse 37 may be our first hidden reference to the apostle John, likely the person behind the mysterious title "Beloved Disciple" used elsewhere in the Gospel. But note the close connection between the followers of the Baptist and the followers of Jesus: Many who later become Jesus' disciples originally worked in the Baptist's ministry.

The language of 1:38 is explicit language of discipleship. These two disciples follow Jesus, and when asked about their interests by him ("What do you want?") they ask where he is staying (or remaining). "Come . . . and you will see," he replies. This language is consciously designed to describe discipleship: to "follow" (Gk. *akoulotheo*), to "come and see," and to "stay, remain" (Gk. *meno*) each describe aspects of discipleship. It is interesting to see that the same pattern of discipleship is played out with Philip and Nathanael in

the following section.<sup>10</sup> As we explore the wider meaning of this discipleship (see Bridging Contexts section), we will examine these words with some care.

We are told that these events occur “about the tenth hour,” probably about 4:00 P.M. today.<sup>11</sup> This is not only one more indication that John is providing an eyewitness account (cf. 4:6, 52; 18:28; 19:14), but it signals something of Jesus’ intention. This is the end of the day and may refer to the fact that here Jesus has invited them to spend the *entire* day with him. This visit becomes a teaching session, in which Jesus discloses not only his messianic identity, but likewise his mastery over these new followers.

Each time we meet Andrew in the Gospel he is bringing someone to Jesus (6:8; 12:22).<sup>12</sup> When Andrew finds his brother, Peter, and brings him to Jesus, Peter’s name is changed to “Cephas.”<sup>13</sup> Cephas comes from the Aramaic word *Kephas*, which means “rock.” Peter likewise means “rock” (Gk. *petros*), and John is the only Gospel writer to tell us about Jesus’ original Aramaic play on words. Neither *Petros* in Greek nor *Kephas* in Aramaic are usual names but are actually nicknames (like the American “Rocky”), which often point to some feature of a person’s character.

In Jewish culture naming is a significant event.<sup>14</sup> Names unveil something of the character of the person (e.g., Jacob means “he clutches” [his brother’s heel], Gen. 25:26), and renaming indicates something of the authority of one person over another (as God renames Abram, Gen. 17:5). Jesus is here asserting his authority over Peter and telling him that he is a different man, a man who is about to acquire the character of his true name, a name he has likely forgotten. It is striking that “rock” is not the image that comes through the portrait of Peter. Peter is impulsive and in the end will deny Jesus. But despite Peter’s frailty, this name signals Jesus’ vision for what Peter will become.

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10. For some scholars, the reference to coming, seeing, and remaining refers directly to Jewish wisdom. In the Wisdom of Solomon, we are instructed to pursue a romance with Wisdom (Gk. *sophia*, a fem. noun), to discover her, to meet her, and to remain with her (cf. Prov. 8, Sir. 51). Witherington (*John’s Wisdom*) believes that here John is presenting Jesus as both a sage and the Wisdom sages sought.

11. Even though Jews counted their days from sundown to sundown, they still seem to have adopted the habit of marking the hour of the day from sunrise, following a Roman custom.

12. Morris, *John*, 140.

13. This event occurs in the Synoptics later on in Jesus’ ministry, when Peter confesses Jesus’ identity at Caesarea Philippi (Matt. 16:13–20).

14. *The New Bible Dictionary* (3d ed., 1996), 810, gives numerous excellent examples of naming in biblical culture and shows how names could signal an event, a status, even a transformation.