

## Lesson 7: John's Gospel – John 1, First Week

### Review: Themes/Items to Watch For

1. Cosmic, “Spiritual/Mystical” Gospel: Jesus is Sent from God, Bringing the Heavenly Down, and then Returns
2. The Heavenly is Salvation as Revelation of the Truth (7s – Signs, I Am statements, etc.)
3. Truth→Cosmic Trial – and Reversal: Jesus Vindicated, All Others Convicted
4. Salvation involves Individual Belief in Jesus the Truth and a Relationship of Love & Friendship with Jesus and One's Fellow Disciples
5. This Coming Down is the Descent of a Glory that Ultimately Includes the Cross
6. In this, Christ IS the Life of all AS the Way to God, Truth, Glory, and Love
7. The Life, Glory, and Love Jesus thus shares with Us is grounded in Life, Glory, and Love He Shares with the Father and the Spirit from Eternity (i.e., in the Triune Life itself)

### Review: Structure of the Gospel

- **Revelation-Drama** (Jn 1-12)
  - **Prologue:** Jesus, the Word Made Flesh (Jn 1:1-18)
  - **Act 1:** Messiah's Signs and Rejection by “His Own” (Jn 1:12-12:50) – Sign-Drama
- **Love-Drama** (Jn 13-21)
  - **Act 2:** The Messiah's Passion and Preparation of “His Own” (Jn 13:1-20:31) – the Cross-and-Resurrection Drama
  - **Epilogue:** Final Resurrection Appearance and Commissioning of Peter and John

### Next Up: The Witness of John the Baptist

#### Read John 1:19-28

#### V.19: Priests and Levites

- This is the only direct mention of priests and Levites in John
- What is the significance of them being sent “by the Jews in Jerusalem”?
  - Sent *by the leadership*
  - John: “the Jews” refers back to this, i.e. *the leadership*
- Roles
  - Levites – Transport and maintenance
  - Priests – Levites descended from Aaron; services and sacrifices
  - But also, Levites – the temple *police*

- John 18:3 – temple “officers” come to arrest Jesus. An “inclusio” (bookend) moment – maybe even a “cameo”?
- They ask him: who are you?
  - Obviously not, “what’s your name?” Rather, what role and authority?

## V.20:

- **“John did not deny but confessed”**
  - The language of a formal legal interrogation / deposition. Context: on pains of excommunication from synagogue and community
  - Recall – major theme of John: cosmic trial. Of Jesus, but of course all on his “side,” to an extent.
  - Historically, the delegation no doubt came because John was very popular. This is reported not only in the Gospels but a 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish historian named Josephus: “many people came in crowds to him, for they were greatly moved by his words.”
- **“I am not the Christ”**
  - **Q: What is “the Christ”?**
    - Messiah: “anointed one.” Prophets, priests, and kings were all anointed in Israel, with King being the “heaviest accent.” The messiah was to be THE King of Israel, the Eternal Son of David.
  - **Important sidebar:** quotation marks are the best way to capture this *as speech*. However, we should be aware that not only are there no quotation marks in ancient Greek, the word that marks speech, *oti*, does NOT mean “a direct verbatim quote.” It can also mean a paraphrase. And maybe most importantly: ancient audiences were considerably less worried than we tend to be about the difference between a verbatim quote and a paraphrase. The important point was to faithfully convey the MEANING of what a speaker said.
    - I mention this because it may help you with the question: “why are two versions of the same text not always worded the exact same way in all Gospels?”
    - For instance, when Jesus teaches the Lord’s Prayer in Matthew 6 he says “forgive us our DEBTS,” whereas in Luke 11 it is “forgive us our SINS” (and, Luke does not include the line “deliver us from evil”).
    - If we start with OUR MODERN expectation of quoting verbatim (exact words), this will look like a contradiction. But that would be *us* bringing *our*

expectation to the text. This is not an expectation the original audience or writers would have had, or worried about. Neither, then, should we worry – much less try to impose *our* thoughts or requirements on *God's* text.

## V.21 - Okay, so you are not the messiah. Are you Elijah or “the prophet”?

- **Key here, Malachi 4:5: “<sup>5</sup> “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes.”**
  - So even when John the Baptist says he’s not the messiah, they don’t just ask him open-endedly, who are you? Instead, they still expect that he is closely linked to the messianic moment – maybe just a step before.
  - **Q: Why would they think that?**
    - John preached repentance – which is exactly what was expected to prepare for the messiah
    - John is also baptizing – which was a KNOWN rite of conversion and/or rededication
      - Gentile “proselyte” baptism – conversion to Judaism
      - Jewish “mikveh” (ritual washings) – consecration of a priest, laymen making a visit to the temple mound, bridegroom on wedding day, dedicating new utensils to be kosher,
        - Here too, a “pivot point” for the baptized
    - As we’ll see in a minute, the interrogators clearly think John’s baptism is something greater than any of the more routine versions, indeed, as something that could only be performed to the messiah or his forerunners.
  - **Q: Mal 4:5 just identified Elijah as a prophet. So who do they mean by “THE prophet” in their second question?**
    - Dt 18:15. Just before Moses dies and the people enter the Promised Land, he tells them: “<sup>15</sup> “The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen.”
      - “like me” – a singular pre-eminent prophet-leader
        - Jn 1 – Jesus, pre-eminent indeed (Only Son, *monogenēs*) and the embodiment of grace and truth vs. Moses as only a transmitter
      - Also, 1<sup>st</sup> century messianic expectation: messiah would lead *a new exodus* – as Jesus indeed does, i.e., out of sin, death, and the power

of the devil, the true and greater Egypt, just as he is the true and greater Moses.

- **Is John either of these? John says, no.**
  - **Pinch point Q: Jesus in Matthew 11:14 and 17:12-13 says that John was the Elijah prophesied in Mal 4. Is this a contradiction?**
    - Key to know: many 1<sup>st</sup> century Jews thought Mal 4:5 meant Elijah would literally come back himself, since in fact he never actually died but was only “taken up into heaven” (2 Kings 2). So John is saying, “no, I’m not literally Elijah.”
    - However, listen also to what the angel Gabriel says he explains who John the Baptist is going to be to his father, Zechariah, in Luke 1:17: “<sup>16</sup> [He] will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, <sup>17</sup> and he will go before him *in the spirit and power* of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children [which is the end of Mal 4:5, specifically], and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.”
      - So, not literally Elijah. But “in his spirit and power”
    - **Side note:** in fact, Elijah was also associated in the OT with an Eastern Tributary of the Jordan River. So all kinds of connections as John now comes to the Jordan “in the spirit and power” of Elijah.

### V.22-3 – Q: So what DOES John say about who he is?

- “The voice of one calling in the desert” – Isa 40:3.
  - Not a “named player” (even in Isaiah); the point is not John himself but what he is SAYING, namely, come to repentance (“make the straight the way”). He is “not the light, but a WITNESS to The Light.” [Remember John the writer’s “anonymization strategy” with others & even himself as Beloved Disciple – learned from J the B?]
- Out of the four Gospels, only John shows John the Baptist himself quoting Isaiah 40:3. The effect is to let us know that it was not just the latter Gospel writers but the Baptist himself who saw his ministry in these terms, already at the time it was happening.
- There is also a significant **IRONY** here for those who knew Isaiah 40. Because in the Greek version, it says that God spoke this prophecy to PRIESTS, just as John does here. And in Isaiah 40, those priests are to carry with this warning the good news of God’s coming messiah. But as we will see in the Gospel, these priests do neither; instead, as implied here, they become the ones *being told* to “straighten up.”

## v.24 – “(Now they had been sent from the Pharisees)”

- **Q: Why would that matter?**
  - In the Gospel, we’ll see the Pharisees become Jesus’s chief opponents and more or less synonymous with “the Jews” for John
  - They are the keepers and doctors of the law, applying it rigorously...as they are about to do to John...

## v.25 - <sup>25</sup> They asked him, “Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?”

- Here, the clear statement that they see John’s particular baptism as marking the kind of “whole life pivot” that would only be appropriate to the messiah or his forerunners
- Of course, here we also see them implying that John is NOT doing so appropriately – i.e. here the Pharisees are applying the law of “who can baptize” and finding him in violation

### Segue: so what does John answer?

## v.26-27 - <sup>26</sup> John answered them, “I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, <sup>27</sup> even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.”

- Points again to Christ and the kind of priority ascribed to him in the Prologue
  - ADDS: Not worthy to untie his sandal – the job of the *lowliest* slave
- One stands among you that you do not know - a critical judgment back to the Pharisees that they do not yet know or judge as they ought, even that they are missing what’s right in front of them (“among you”)

## v.28 - <sup>28</sup> These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing.”

- John is the only Gospel that records a place, besides “in the Jordan,” for Jesus’ baptism.
- Key geographical point: Lazarus, Mary, and Martha are from a “Bethany” near Jerusalem; but that is about 10 miles from the Jordan at its nearest point. So must have been a different Bethany, as indeed is indicated by John’s addition of the phrase “Bethany across the Jordan,” i.e. not the one most of you 1<sup>st</sup> century readers will think of first, namely, the one near Jerusalem.
- Key theological points:
  - Moses of course parted the Red Sea when the Exodus begin. But remember, after Moses died, as he finally leads the people into the Promised Land, Joshua repeats the parting *as they move West to East across the Jordan*—i.e. in roughly the place

John was baptizing in Bethany. Not incidentally, “Jesus” is nothing other than the Greek translation of Joshua (both names meaning, “the Lord saves”). So Jesus is now the “greater Joshua” that leads us into the ULTIMATE promised land of *complete* rest and sabbath in him (as Hebrews 4 also says, very directly).

- Furthermore, years after Joshua, ELIJAH parts the Jordan in the other direction (East to West). Then, *in that same rough spot “across the Jordan,”* he is taken up into heaven as his mantle—a a double portion of his spirit and power!—is placed on Elisha. Elisha then repeats the division of the waters as he crosses West to East (the original direction of the Exodus). So here’s another parallel – John the Baptist comes to the Jordan “in the Spirit and power of Elijah” but then does a “hand off” to Jesus, who fulfills (and excels) the “Elisha” role by being the pre-eminent bearer of the Spirit.
- Thus, the John to Jesus trajectory and “handoff” is the climax/fulfillment of a core story that has been repeatedly re-enacted across the life and history of Israel.