

John 1:19-27

Introduction

The first eighteen verses of John's Gospel are often referred to as the "prologue." In these verses, John introduces many of the themes that will be more fully unpacked throughout the rest of the book (cf. light and darkness, life, the "world," "believing," new birth, the sovereign grace of God). Most of all, though, John has introduced the theme of who Jesus is – the only one who can "interpret" or "explain" God. Jesus is the eternal Word who was with God and who was God and through whom all things were made, who has become flesh and dwelt among us. He has not just seen God; He is *with* God. He lies, even, in the Father's bosom, and so He is able to make God known to us. He who is all that God is took to Himself all that we are so that we might know God and in knowing God have eternal life.

Already, in the prologue, John the Apostle has twice mentioned the ministry of John the Baptist.

- John 1:6–8 — There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness [*martyria*], to bear witness [*martyreo*] about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness [*martyreo*] about the light.
- John 1:15 — (John bears witness [*martyreo*] about him, and cries out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me is before me [he who comes behind me is in front of me], because he was first with respect to me.'")

And now our evangelist signals that the prologue has ended by returning to this theme of the witness and testimony of John, but now placing it in its historical context. In fact the next nineteen verses will all be taken up entirely with the witness, or the testimony, of John. So we read in verse 19:

I. John 1:19 — And this is the testimony [*martyria*] of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?"

This is a big deal. "The Jews," here, refers to the Sanhedrin, the highest governing body in Israel. The fact that the delegation consists of "priests and Levites" distinguishes it as very official. And finally, the fact that this delegation is sent "*from Jerusalem*"—the site of the Temple and the center of Israel's national and religious life—emphasizes again just how formal and official this is.

But why are the Jews sending priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask John who he is? John the Apostle assumes that we're all somewhat familiar with the ministry and preaching of John the Baptist from the other Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke). We read in Matthew chapter three:

- Matthew 3:1–2, 4–6 — In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" ... Now John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

This official delegation isn't necessarily hostile to John. It's their religious duty to investigate this man whose preaching is drawing such large crowds. And of course, there were political implications as well. They don't need some imposter stirring up the people and inviting trouble with Rome. So in setting the stage here, not only do we have the official delegation, but we also have the large crowds standing by as witnesses. The Apostle John himself would have been one of these witnesses, and as he looks back now it seems that he remembers clearly every detail.

We can easily divide this section up into five questions and five answers. And the first question, as we've already seen, is simply this: "Who are you?" In the Greek, the first word of this first question is actually "you" – "*You*, who are [you]." That's a legitimate question in itself. But for John there's a perverse danger in it. The wording of the question, as "innocent" as it may be, puts the *focus* on John—on who *John* is, and yet for John, to even be asking such a question is to miss the whole point. For John, the best way—and really the *only* way—to truly know who he *is*, is to know who he is *not*. That might sound somewhat inside out and upside down, so we need to say it again: For John, the best way—and really the *only* way—to truly know who he is, is to know who he is *not*. In fact, it's not who *John* is that matters at all, but rather the testimony and witness that he bears to who someone else is. So we read in verse twenty:

II. John 1:20 — He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ."

John was asked who he *is*; and he answered simply: "I am not the Christ." That's it. John didn't follow this up with any further "positive" information because for John this really was all the answer anyone should need. Now we might think that's not quite fair, but let's look a little closer.

Just as the "you" was emphatic in the question ("You, who are [you]"), so now the "I" is emphatic in John's answer: "***I*** [*ego*], ***I*** am not the Christ."—Which is just to say in so many words that the Christ (the Messiah) *was* already present. We could translate John's answer: "It is not ***I*** who am the Christ" (cf. Morris). And so the answer he gives is actually meant to redirect his questioners to what they should be asking: "Who is this one to whom you are bearing witness? Who is the Messiah? Where is *He*?" "Don't ask me who I am. I am not the Messiah. Ask me who *He* is."

Notice how we're told that John "confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ." The language of confessing and not denying is the language of a formal and official testimony before this formal and official delegation. But the *repetition* of "he confessed" (two times) and *adding* the negative, "he did not deny" ("He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed") emphasizes the fervency and the zeal of John's response. In other words, if the word order in the Greek emphasizes the "I" ("It is not ***I*** who am the Christ") then the Apostle's introduction of the Baptist's words reveals the emphasis that John must have placed on the word "not" – "It is ***not I*** who am the Christ." And so the reality is that for John, this answer should have been enough to satisfy his questioners. "Ask me not who I am. I am not the Messiah. Ask me who *He* is." Ironically, it's in this negative denial that John does actually answer the question that was put to him: "You, who are you." It's in this fervent *denial* that we should be able to see the truth and the power of the *testimony* of John – *and believe*. If we want to know who John is, then we need only know who he is not; he is not that one to whom He bears witness. But the

delegation from Jerusalem doesn't see it that way. They're still focused on *John* and his identity in his own right. So we come to their first follow-up question in verse 21:

III. John 1:21a — And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?”

Once again, the “you” is emphatic: “*You*, are *you* Elijah?” What the delegation has in mind here are these verses from Malachi chapters three and four:

- Malachi 3:1–4; 4:5–6 — “Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the LORD. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years... Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.”

So the question being asked is just this: “John, are you this Elijah?” And *Jesus* is very clear about the answer. We read in Matthew:

- Matthew 11:13–14 — All the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come.
- Matthew 17:10–13 (cf. Lk. 1:16–17) — The disciples asked him, “Then why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?” He answered, “Elijah does come, and he will restore all things [Jesus is here “quoting” and affirming Malachi’s prophecy]. But I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man will certainly suffer at their hands.” Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist.

The key to understanding how John the Baptist can be the fulfillment of Malachi’s prophecy is a right understanding of the “already” and the “not yet” (not two different Elijah’s, a figurative and a literal). The “great and awesome day of the Lord” is here “already” in the sense that its work has already begun, but “not yet” here in terms of its consummation. That still future, eschatological refining fire (“not yet”) is burning even in the present (“already”). This is the testimony of the New Testament.

So the answer to the question, “What then? Are you Elijah?” should be simple, right? “Yes, I am Elijah.” Only that’s not how John answers.

IV. John 1:21b — He said, “I am not.”

That’s all. He’s not being very helpful, is he? But what we have to remember is that John has already told the delegation from Jerusalem all they need to know. He’s already answered their

question *fully* and *completely*. So when they follow up his answer with yet another question about who *he* is (“*You, are you Elijah*”), it’s clear that whatever their ideas about Elijah or about the fulfillment of Malachi’s prophecy may be, they’re way off base.

For the Jews, this “Elijah” in Malachi’s prophecy had become an eschatological figure *in his own right*. And so they had come to emphasize the *person* of Elijah, even supposing that it would be Elijah *himself* who would return in the flesh (remembering that he had been taken up to heaven without seeing death). In other words, they saw this prophesied Elijah as a figure to be placed subservient to, but still *alongside* of the coming Messiah. And it’s this kind of thinking that explains the shortness of John’s reply. In response to the question, “Are you Elijah,” John doesn’t say, “Yes, I am in one sense, and no, I’m not in the sense that you’re thinking.” John has no time or patience for this. It’s not that he’s necessarily indignant with the priests and Levites (though maybe he is), but only that he *recoils* from even the faintest suggestion that he could be someone to set alongside the Messiah – no matter how subservient or low down on the ladder he might be.

Once again, it’s even in this negative statement of who he is *not* that we should be able to see the truth and the power of the testimony of John – and that in seeing the truth and the power of His testimony, we should believe. But of course, if the delegation from Jerusalem wasn’t satisfied with John’s first answer, they obviously won’t be satisfied with the second. So they follow up, now, with a third question.

V. **John 1:21c** — “Are you the Prophet?”

This time the priests and Levites have in mind the words of Moses to the people of Israel in Deuteronomy eighteen:

- Deuteronomy 18:15–20 — 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—just as you desired of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly, when you said, “Let me not hear again the voice of the LORD my God or see this great fire any more, lest I die.” And the LORD said to me, “They are right in what they have spoken. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him.”

On the one hand, these words are God’s promise that even after the death of Moses, the prophetic office will continue (cf. the immediate context; see also Keil). God would continue to raise up prophets to speak for Him to the people. And yet these words were also—ultimately—a promise that one day the prophetic office would culminate in the final and perfect prophet – in one who would himself be the fulfillment of the entire prophetic office. And so there had arisen an expectation in Israel that this prophet would appear in the last days (cf. Jn. 6:14). The only problem is that instead of seeing that the Christ would Himself be God’s final prophet and the fulfillment of the prophetic office (cf. Acts 3:17-24; 7:37), this prophet was thought of as yet another eschatological figure to be placed alongside of “the Christ” – no matter how subservient. So we read in John chapter seven:

- John 7:40–41 — When they heard these words [of Jesus], some of the people said, “This really is the Prophet.” Others said, “This is the Christ.”

The fact that the priests and Levites can go from “the Christ” to asking about “Elijah” to asking about “the Prophet” shows that they’ve not at all understood who the Christ—who the Messiah—would really be. And this is again what causes John to recoil. That he should be thought of as an eschatological figure *in his own right*—someone to be placed alongside of the Christ, no matter how subservient—is a thought that is wholly repulsive and repugnant to him. John could have answered, “No, I am not *the* Prophet, but I am *a* prophet.” Jesus Himself will later say to the people:

- Matthew 11:9 — What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.

And yet what is the answer that John gives this time?

VI. John 1:21d — And he answered, “No.”

That’s it. Just, “No.” John’s “no” is not intended to exasperate. He’s not trying to be difficult. Instead, his three answers to this point—“I am not the Christ,” “I am not,” and “No”—expressive as they are of John’s “recoiling,” are all intended redirect his questioners to the question they ought to be asking. “Ask me not who I am. Ask me *only* who that one is to whom I am bearing witness. When you’ve learned to ask that question, you’ll know all you need to know about who I am.” But the delegation of priests and Levites from Jerusalem still don’t understand. In their mind, John still hasn’t answered their question.

VII. John 1:22 — So they said to him, “Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?”

Hasn’t John already said all that he needs to say about himself? There’s a sense in which John has already thoroughly answered their question. But what they want is not just negative denials, but some positive statement. Are we at the point, then, where we’ve reached a stalemate? What more could there possibly be for John to say? Just this:

VIII. John 1:23 — He said, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ as the prophet Isaiah said.”

Who is John? He’s nothing more than a nameless “voice”—and yet he is still a voice!—a voice that speaks and testifies to the coming of another. This is all that John has to say for himself.

The passage John quotes is from Isaiah chapter forty. Up until Isaiah thirty-nine the message has been mainly one of judgement and exile in Babylon with occasional promises of a future restoration and salvation. But in chapter forty, the theme suddenly changes to one of comfort and hope. God promises that just as He brought Israel out of Egypt and led her through the wilderness to the Promised Land, so now He will accomplish a similar deliverance in bringing them out of Babylon and restoring them again to the land of Promise. The foreign king under

whom this restoration will happen is mentioned by name: Cyrus, king of Persia (Isa. 44:28; 45:1). So when we read these verses in Isaiah forty, we have to remember that they weren't explicitly or first of all a prophecy of John the Baptist or of any individual person, but rather a general prophecy of the return of Israel from exile in Babylon.

- Isaiah 40:1–5 — Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins. A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God [harking back to Israel's travels through the wilderness under Moses; see message on Mat. 3:1-3]. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

Since these verses are referring first of all to Israel's return from exile in Babylon, we could say that John simply sees in this language of Isaiah an appropriate "picture" of his own ministry and calling. In this sense, John wouldn't be saying that he's the fulfillment of this passage, but just that this passage provides a fitting description of what he really is. And yet even in Isaiah, Israel's restoration to the land under Cyrus becomes a type and a picture of that ultimate restoration of God's people under the New Covenant in the Messiah's blood (cf. Isa. 53). And so there is a very real sense in which this "voice" in Isaiah is now finding its true and ultimate "*fulfillment*" in the preaching of John. The point is still not so much that Isaiah was specifically prophesying about John the Baptist, but rather that the "*voice*" that *was* prophesied in Isaiah has been fully and finally *realized*—or "fulfilled"—in the testimony and the witness of John.

In its original context, and for the priests and Levites questioning John, the "voice" in Isaiah had zero eschatological significance in its own right. No one was looking for a specific eschatological "voice." But this is precisely why this passage was so perfectly suited for John to answer the question that was put to him. The "voice" was nothing on its own. It could only be made sense of by the testimony it bore to the coming of God's salvation. John is "nothing." John is "no one" on his own. He can only be made sense of by the testimony that he bears to the coming of God's Messiah. Calvin puts it this way (paraphrasing slightly): "[John] always insists earnestly on this point, that nothing can be known about his ministry, until men have come to him who is the [reason for] it." And so we see that even in positively saying something about himself, John still finds a way to say that he is nothing.

If the priests and Levites weren't satisfied with the first three answers, they obviously won't be satisfied with this one, either. We read in verses 24-25:

IX. John 1:24–25 — (Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.) They asked him, "Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?"

This delegation sent from the Pharisees (cf. Michaels; contra Morris, etc.) is absolutely convinced that the only way John can justify his baptism (cf. Mk. 1:4; Ezek. 36:25; Zech. 13:1) is to appeal to his own identity as an eschatological figure in his own right. But this John can never, ever do. Paul says that "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to

believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus” (Acts 19:4). Where, then, is the justification for John’s baptism? It is found not ultimately in any calling or commission he’s received from God as a prophet or eschatological figure in his own right, but rather in the identity of that one to whom his every word is bearing witness.

X. John 1:26–27 — John answered them, “I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.”

Some two hundred years after John, we find recorded this Jewish saying: “Every service which a slave performs for his master shall a disciple do for his teacher except the loosing of his sandal-[strap]” (Morris). What if John had said, “I am fit only to untie the sandal-strap of the one who comes after me.” That would have been humility. But that’s not what John says, is it? He says, “the strap of whose sandal I am *not worthy* to untie.” In the words of one commentator: “Humility could scarcely take a lower place” (Morris). And this humility is just the result of properly seeing oneself in relation to the Messiah and, in the words of Calvin, desiring that not for a single moment should “any degree of honor improperly bestowed on [us] obscure the excellence of Christ.”

Conclusion

There are two ways that we should all, already, be responding to these verses. The first is to see *in* John’s “nothingness” the *authenticity* of His witness and testimony to the one who came after him, the strap of whose sandal he was not worthy to untie – and, therefore, *to believe*. Remember what John the Apostle says in verses 6-7:

- John 1:6–8 — There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him – not *in* him, but *through* him.

Have you seen again in these verses the sure foundation of your faith?

The second way we ought to respond to these verses is to ask ourselves this question: Is it my daily and constant desire that no honor should ever be bestowed upon me such that it would obscure the excellence of Christ? Can we with true zeal say along the same lines as John: “Pay no heed to who I am. Ask me *only* who that one is who gave Himself for me. In the answer to that question you will learn *all* that there really is to know about me.”

“If we profess to have any real Christianity, let us strive to be of John the Baptist’s spirit. Let us study humility. This is the grace with which all must begin, who would be saved. We have no true religion about us, until we cast away our high thoughts, and feel ourselves sinners.—This is the grace which all saints may follow after, and which none have any excuse for neglecting. All God’s children have not gifts, or money, or time to work, or a wide sphere of usefulness; but all may be humble.—This is the grace, above all, which will appear most beautiful in our latter end. Never shall we feel the need of humility so deeply, as when we lie on our deathbeds, and stand before the judgment-seat

of Christ. Our whole lives will then appear a long catalogue of imperfections, ourselves nothing, and Christ all.” (Ryle)