

John 1:19-34 The Ministry of John the Baptist

Introduction: Joke: *What do John the Baptist and Winnie the Pooh have in common?* They both share the same middle name—"the"! Today we'll consider the role John the Baptist played in identifying Jesus as the Messiah.

Review:

Purpose: *Why did John write his Gospel?* John wrote his Gospel as an evangelistic tract:

ESV **John 20:30-31** . . . these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

Arguably, he was writing to Jewish unbelievers who were scattered throughout the Roman Empire (Hellenistic Jews). John's Gospel assumes the readers were well familiar with the Hebrew Scriptures—something that would not have been true of the typical Gentile living in the Roman Empire. John drew a sharp line between his readers (unbelieving Hellenistic Jews) and the Jews of Palestine who had already rejected Jesus.¹ It was not written *to us*, but it is recorded *for us*.

Focus: The key question of John's Gospel is this: *Who is Jesus?*²

Application: The key application of John's Gospel is that he wants you to believe in Jesus, so that you may have life.

******How did John introduce the idea that Jesus is God (1:1-3)?** Every Jew knew that Moses had written, in Genesis 1:1, "In the beginning, God created . . ." John, taking that familiar text, wrote that in the beginning was—the Word! And it was the Word who *created!* *What does that tell us about who the Word is?* The Word is the God who created the heavens and the earth back in Genesis 1:1. The Word is the Jehovah God of the Old Testament.

Eternal Word: When the beginning began, God was already there. When the beginning began, the Word was already there. There never was a time when the Word was not:

ESV **John 17:5** Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed.

¹ Carson, *John*, 91.

² D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 95.

Of all the ways that John could have referred to Jesus (as Jesus, Son, Christ), why did John call Jesus “the Word” (1:1)? The Greek behind “word” is *logos* and refers not to an individual word, but rather to a “message” or communication.³ It was a saying, a statement, a declaration.⁴ If a school principal says to a naughty little boy, “I want to have a word with you in my office,” the principal means he wants to have a talk with the boy. That is the sense of *logos*. The Bible is God’s written word; Jesus is God’s living word.

ESV **Hebrews 1:1-2** . . . in these last days he [God] has spoken to us by his Son . . . through whom also he created the world.

Here are two possible Scriptural reasons John might have called Jesus the “Word”:

1) The phrase, “And God said” is repeated throughout Genesis 1-2 to describe God’s creative activity. God spoke the universe into existence.

ESV **Colossians 1:16-17a** . . . by him [Jesus] all things were created . . . all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things . . .

Conclusion #1: Part of the reason John called Jesus the Word may be because speaking a command of creation is how God was depicted as creating the world in Genesis 1-2.

2) Throughout the Old Testament, you find the statement that something called the “Word of the LORD” spoke to or appeared to various people.⁵ The word of the LORD could be heard, be seen, could touch people, was described as having body parts (hands), and was directly addressed as “LORD”. It is likely that mysterious “the word of the LORD” is a pre-incarnate appearance of Jesus. This is known theologically as a theophany (an appearing of God in the Old Testament).

Conclusion #2: John may have called Jesus the “Word” because the “Word of the LORD” in the Old Testament referred to appearances of Jehovah God in human form.

******What did God send John the Baptist to do (1:6-8)?** God sent John to bear witness about the light (Jesus, 1:7) in order that all might believe through his witness.

******John the Baptist was mentioned again in 1:15. What was John the Baptist’s witness (1:15)?** John’s testimony was that he had come to prepare the way for the Lord, and that Jesus was the One! John, considered by first-century Jewish people to be a great prophet, declared that Jesus ranked higher than he did and existed before he did.

³ Carson, *John*, 115.

⁴ George Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1922), 270.

⁵ “LORD” (all caps) in the Old Testament translates YHWY (Yahweh or Jehovah).

New Material

******What was John's testimony (1:19-23)?** His testimony was: *not!* He said that he was *not* the Christ, *not* Elijah, and *not* the Prophet. He did, however, admit to being a prophetic figure, the voice that Isaiah prophesied would be crying out in the wilderness to prepare the way for the Lord.

What's the difference between a testimony (1:19) and testament (as in New Testament)?

A testimony is a formal record or witness given in a court of law. A testament is a legal document, similar to a contract (as in "last will and testament").

The fact that "the Jews" bothered to send a delegation out from Jerusalem to interview John tells us what about John's importance? It tells us that John the Baptist made enough of a *splash* (pun intended) to get their attention! John warranted an official probing.

The Jews (1:19): It was a group called "the Jews" who sent this delegation. "The Jews" is an expression used 68 times by the author. He most often used it with specific reference to the hostile Jewish leadership of Israel that ultimately opposed Jesus.⁶

The delegation was composed of priests and Levites. What was the difference between a priest and a Levite (1:19)? Every priest was a Levite, but not every Levite was priest. The Levites were one of the twelve tribes of Israel. All priests had to be members of the tribe of Levi. However, only those Levites who were also descended from Aaron could serve as priests:

Family Chart: Abraham ► Isaac ► Jacob ► 12 sons (Levi) ► Aaron ► Priests

All In The Family: As it turns out, John the Baptist was a Levite and an Aaronite, and his father served as a priest. No doubt the priests and Levites knew this about John.

What did priests do in first-century Judaism (1:19)? They were mediators between the people and God. Only the priests could offer sacrifices. The Levites assisted the priests in temple worship, served as musicians, and also as temple police.⁷ It may be that it was the priests who did the questioning of John the Baptist, with the Levites close-by for security purposes.⁸

Since these priests and Levites were sent out "from Jerusalem" (1:19), what does that tell you about where John was? He was *not* in Jerusalem! John was in a wilderness area, in fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy.

⁶ Dennis & Grudem, editors, *ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 2020.

⁷ Carson, *John*, 142.

⁸ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1954; reprint), 94.

The Christ (1:20): John's first denial was about being Christ (1:20). The word Christ remains an untranslated word in our Bibles (from the Greek *christos*). If *christos* were actually translated, what would it say? *Christos* is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word Messiah, and means anointed. To anoint means to rub or smear with oil. Ceremonially it also meant to confer a holy office on someone (prophet, priest or king), symbolized by the anointing with oil. The Christ was the ultimate anointed one—prophet, priest and king all rolled into one. The Hebrew word for Christ is Messiah. Jesus' last name is not Christ. He is Jesus, the Christ.

It's About Time: That John began by denying that he was the Christ suggests that the Jews were looking for the appearance of the long prophesied Christ. Where did they get the idea that the coming of the Christ was at hand (1:20)? See *Daniel 9:24*.

Messianic expectations were high during the first century. This most likely was due to Daniel's prophecy that the Messiah would manifest himself 70 weeks of years (70 x 7 = 490 years) after the decree to rebuild Jerusalem. That worked out to be about the time John the Baptist started his ministry.

Elijah (1:21) Elijah lived many centuries before John the Baptist. Why would they ask him if he were Elijah (1:21)? See *2 Kings 2:11*, *Malachi 4:5-6*. Elijah was supernaturally taken up to heaven by a chariot of fire (Song: "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot") and the prophet Malachi later predicted that Elijah would return in advance of the coming Messiah.⁹

The Prophet (1:21): Who was "the Prophet" (1:21)? See *Deuteronomy 18:15-19*. Moses was considered the greatest prophet, but Moses predicted that God would one day send another prophet like Moses to lead the Hebrews.

Give Me An Answer (1:22): What frustration did the delegation express in 1:22? They couldn't go back empty-handed, merely reporting who John was *not*. They needed some kind of an answer for their report.

A Voice (1:23): What is the prophetic significance of John claiming to be a voice crying in the wilderness (1:23)? See *Isaiah 40:3*. John understood that his ministry was in fulfillment of a prophecy by Isaiah:¹⁰

ESV **Isaiah 40:3-5** A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God . . . the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

a) Jehovah (1:23): In the Hebrew of Isaiah 40:3-5, it is none other than the LORD (Jehovah¹¹), our "God", who would be coming. The One who came, of course, was Jesus, who is Jehovah in human form (the Word became flesh). *Start list on board of descriptions of who Jesus is.*

⁹ Although John denied literally being Elijah, Jesus said that John was the spiritual fulfillment of Malachi's prophecy, Matthew 11:14, 17:12 (Carson, *John*, 143).

¹⁰ The original context of Isaiah 40:3 concerned the Babylonian exiles' return to the Promised Land. Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, I-XII (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 50.

¹¹ In our English Bibles, the Hebrew name for God (Jehovah) is translated by LORD (call capital letters).

Application: Every person should make straight the Lord's highway that leads into his own heart. Genuine sorrow for sin and prayer for God's mercy and forgiveness are involved with making the road straight.¹²

******How did John answer a challenge to his authority (1:24-28)?** He freely admitted to being sent by God. It was God who gave John the authority to baptize in preparation of the coming Messiah. When John's authority to baptize was questioned, he did his job by comparing the relative insignificance of his water baptism to the momentous arrival of the One who was soon coming. John was very effective at carrying out the ministry God gave him: a voice calling out to make ready for the coming of the Lord.

Pharisees (1:19): According to 1:24, which faction of "the Jews" (1:19) also played a role in the delegation sent to interview John? The Pharisees played some sort of role. The Jewish leadership was made up of several different factions within Judaism. The Pharisees did not control the leadership, but they were a strong enough party that they had to be given a voice at the table.¹³ The Pharisees were a Bible-believing faction of laymen within Judaism. So zealous were they for keeping the Laws of Moses, they added extra laws to be sure they did not even come close to breaking Moses' Law.

Example: If Moses gave a law against touching a dog house, the Pharisees built a fence around the dog house and forbid even touching the fence so that there were no chance a person could touch the dog house. (John's original readers obviously already knew who the Pharisees were).

Baptizing (1:25): From *baptizo*, the word "baptizing" remains an untranslated word in our Bibles. It means to immerse or do dip. Not found in the Old Testament, the religious practice water baptism was a rite that developed in Judaism during the 400 years that passed between the Old Testament and New Testament. When a Gentile converted to Judaism, he showed this by water baptism. A few Jews even underwent regular baptism to show their continued devotion to God.

What made the act of baptism something that John needed authority to do (1:25)? John's baptism was unusual because **1)** he was baptizing mostly Jews rather than Gentiles and **2)** at the time, people baptized themselves—it was a self-administered act.¹⁴ Thus, it was usual for someone else to perform a baptism. What John did was an innovative new step.

¹² Hendriksen, *John*, 95.

¹³ The Greek here could also be taken to mean that some Pharisees were an actual part of the delegation (Carson, 144). Perhaps some of the priests were of the Pharisee party (Hendriksen, 96).

¹⁴ Carson, *John*, 145.

Where's Waldo (1:26): Based on 1:26, where was Jesus while John was speaking? Jesus was already present somewhere in Judea, but no one recognized him as anything special. This is further indication that, humanly speaking, Jesus did not stand out in any way: no halo, no gleaming white robe that never got dirty, his feet touched the ground, etc. He looked like a normal, everyday guy.

Bethany (1:28)—All this happened in a now unknown place called Bethany (not the more famous town of Bethany near Jerusalem). It is thought to have been a region far from Jerusalem, northeast of the Jordan River.¹⁵

******How did God identify the Son of God for John the Baptist (1:29-34)?** God told John that the Son of God was the man upon whom the Holy Spirit came as a dove, 1:32-33.¹⁶

b) This means Jesus had a special relationship with the Holy Spirit that no one else ever had. *Write on board.*

c) **Lamb of God (1:29): Jesus is the light of the world, but he is not the Lamp of God, He is the Lamb of God! Of all the ways John *could* have described Jesus (Lamp, Christ, Son of God, etc.), why did John refer to Jesus as the Lamb of God (1:29)?** See *Isaiah 53:7-9*. It is easy for us to read back into this something John himself may not have yet realized. It is possible that John, at this point, did not yet realize that Jesus came to die to pay for sin. John may have been thinking that Jesus would remove sin through judgment of the wicked and their removal from the Land. In some inter-testament Jewish writings, the coming Messiah was pictured as a lamb—not to be sacrificed, but to judge the wicked.¹⁷

On the other hand, it is true that in the sacrificial system of the Law of Moses, animals (including lambs) were sacrificed to picture that the penalty for sin is death. The death of the animal was a substitute for the human's death and pictured the taking away of sins through a blood sacrifice. John's word may have had significance far beyond what John himself intended.

ESV **Isaiah 53:7-9** He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter . . . they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death . . .

World (1:29): Notice how John spoke of Jesus taking away the sin of the "world" (1:29), not merely the sin of the Jews. The author's message is that Jesus died for the world in the sense of all men without distinction (Jew and Gentile), but not all men without exception (for then everyone would be saved).

¹⁵ Carson, *John*, 147.

¹⁶ John and Jesus were cousins. John probably knew Jesus (or at least knew of Him) before the dove incident, but John didn't realize that Jesus was the Messiah.

¹⁷ Carson, *John*, 150.

d) Baptizes with the Holy Spirit (1:33): John baptized people with water (1:31); Jesus baptized people with the Holy Spirit (1:33). Water baptism pictures Spirit baptism. Water baptism is symbolic; Spirit baptism is salvific. To be baptized with the Holy Spirit is to be born again, to be born into God's family, and saved from one's sins. *Write on board.*

e) Son of God (1:34): John the Baptist concluded by calling Jesus the "Son of God" (1:34). The Son of God is God the Son. We talk about God the Father and God the Son, but never God the Mother because there is no heavenly mother. To refer to God as Father or Jesus as Son is a figure of speech. It is not as if there ever were a time before the Son was born when God was not a Father. Thus, theologians speak of the eternal generation of the Son (Jesus has eternally been the Son, just as the Father has always been the Father.). *Write on board.*

The point of calling Jesus the Son of God is to depict the unique relationship of oneness and intimacy between Jesus and God. It is a metaphysical sonship.¹⁸

Mission Accomplished: John the Baptist's mission was accomplished: he bore witness specifically to Jesus as the unidentified "coming One".¹⁹

So What?

According to John the Baptist (1:19-51), who is Jesus? Jesus:

- a). Is Jehovah, the One John the Baptist prepared the way for, in fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy, 1:23-28).
- b). Has special relationship with Holy Spirit (dove incident), 1:33.
- c). Is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, 1:29.
- d). Baptizes with the Holy Spirit, 1:33.
- e). Is the Son of God, 1:34, 50.

Based on John 1:1-18, what does Jesus want from you?

He wants you to make straight the road of your heart to receive the Lord.

He wants you to recognize Him as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

He wants you to be baptized with the Holy Spirit (i.e. to be born again).

He wants you to accept him as the Son of God.

You can hear this lesson being taught at SermonAudio.com/NTRF.

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¹⁸ Carson, *John*, 162.

¹⁹ Carson, *John*, 152.