

I. Review: John 1: 1-18

- 1 Theological Prologue which, like an overture to an opera, contains many of the themes relating to John's witness to Jesus Christ.
- 2 Logos = Word -- linked to Genesis in order to establish Jesus' divine origins as well as how he represents God's original intent to redeem creation even as it comes into being.
- 3 Jesus is the "light" the darkness could not overcome—meaning he brought heaven to earth, God to humanity.
- 4 John the Baptist was sent to testify to the light; he himself was not the light.
- 5 He [Jesus] was not recognized by the world even though creation itself point to him as its redeemer. His people did not accept him even though he came from them according to the promises given by God that created this people. (Abraham and God's promises)
- 6 Believing in him means receiving power to become "children of God." Becoming such is not the result of human birth (contrary to popular use of this concept) but rather is the result of being born of God. Faith in Christ is the same thing as receiving the Spirit of God and this, in turn, results in a spiritual birth, the meaning of which will be further demonstrated throughout the gospel.
- 7 The Logos became flesh in the historical figure Jesus of Nazareth. This is whom John testified to in his baptism of repentance. Theologically, this is referred to as the "incarnation." God appears in human form. Jesus is both God and human so that he can bring the divine and the human together, in Paul's words, so that we can be "reconciled" to God. As a human, Jesus takes on our existential condition. As God, Jesus redeems the human condition, and overcomes alienation from God and the death that results from that alienation.
- 8 This being the case, Jesus is "full of grace and truth." He is God's gift of salvation to us is the meaning of grace. So, while the law came through Moses, the knowledge of God came through Jesus.

II. John 1:19-34 John the Baptist

John the Baptist speaks clearly to the Jewish authorities that he is not the Messiah. Wondering if he sees the one who was to announce the Messiah's coming, they ask if he is either Elijah or the Prophet Moses spoke of. Both of these traditions existed at the time. He says, "No."

Rather he identifies himself using a passage from 2nd Isaiah where Isaiah wanted to encourage the Babylonian exiles to return to their homeland by traveling through the vast desert (wilderness). John recontextualizes this passage so as to refer to his role as the forerunner of the Messiah.

The authorities are identified as "Pharisees," a Jewish sect concerned with a proper understanding of the law. They were a "holiness" movement living according to a strict interpretation of the law, and they accepted the prophets and writings in addition to the Torah as canonical books. They wondered why John baptized with water. In John's gospel, the Baptist does not say anything about "repentance." Rather, he deflects the question and points to Jesus as the One who baptizes with the Holy Spirit. Later we will see that the gift of the Spirit comes to human beings precisely because of Jesus' death and resurrection. Jesus' victory over death enables the Spirit of eternal life to be poured out on all humanity. It is through the gift of the Spirit that we receive new and eternal life (Salvation), and so it can be said that it was Jesus' resurrection into eternal life that resulted in the Spirit coming into the hearts of believers.

Another characteristic of John's gospel is that he includes seemingly unimportant details. One of these comes in this passage: He identifies the place where the Baptist's ministry occurred as being in "Bethany across the Jordan." This is also where Jesus' good friends Mary, Martha, and Lazarus lived. It is also the place where Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead.

"The next day..." is another of those historical details. (Perhaps John wishes us to know that he was an eyewitness and because of that, he includes this minor observation.) Here, John identifies Jesus using the familiar "Lamb of God" terminology. This would have helped his Jewish readers understand the kind of Messiah Jesus is. He is like the sacrificial lambs of the Passover story when blood kept the "Angel of Death" at bay, saving Jewish households from losing their firstborn children. Similarly, it is by shedding the blood of Jesus that the gift of eternal life is given to all believers. While the synoptic gospels

do not contain this designation, the Book of Revelation (written by another John who may have come from the “Johannine community” in Ephesus) also uses this terminology.

Here, John also identifies why he baptizes with water, namely, so that Jesus might be revealed as the Messiah to Israel. He also claims to have seen the Spirit (the gift which makes us children of God) descend on Jesus. This is a sign from God that Jesus is the chosen Messiah. Moreover, having been gifted with the Spirit, Jesus becomes the one through whom the Spirit is given to believers.

In sum, the Baptist’s role in John’s gospel is to identify Jesus as the Messiah, also referred to as the Lamb of God and the Son of God. Unlike the synoptics, nothing is said of the Baptist’s call to repent or of his preaching about the coming of God’s Kingdom. Because of that, John’s version of the Baptist looks nothing like the apocalyptic preacher of the synoptics. Rather, everything he says and does is meant to reveal Jesus’ identity as the savior of the world.

III. John 1:35-51 The First Disciples

In verses 35-42, John describes how Jesus called his first three disciples. Andrew and another unnamed disciple were at first disciples of the Baptist. Hearing him identify Jesus as “the Lamb of God,” they follow Jesus. Jesus does not command them to follow as in the synoptics. Rather, he asks them what they are looking for. They respond, “Where are you staying?” He invites them to “come and see.”

What he is really doing is inviting them to come and see who he is. The time is 4:00 in the afternoon. There is no particular meaning to this. Later in this gospel, Jesus talks of “abiding” with him. This is what these first two disciples do, and that is how they come to believe in Him. The same dynamic is true of us. As we “abide” with Jesus through worship, the word, and the Christian community, we further come to “see” him as our savior.

After coming to faith, Andrew seeks out his brother Simon Peter and tells him they have found the Messiah. When Peter also comes to see for himself, Jesus calls him “Cephas”, the Hebrew of Peter. Thus, the first three disciples are called, not in Galilee as in the synoptics, but in Judea.

In verses 43-51, Jesus returns to his home region of Galilee where Nazareth is located. But he goes to the village called Bethsaida where Andrew and Peter came from. Here he calls Phillip to “follow me” in the same way as is recorded in the synoptics. Phillip then tells Nathaniel about Jesus: he is the one spoken of in both the law and the prophets. Nathaniel asks, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” This question indicates first that the village of Nazareth was not considered a place of any importance. In fact, it probably consisted of a few extended families that lived on a subsistence wage. But it also indicates how God chooses the most unexpected places and people to play a role in salvation history. That is to say, everything salvific that happens, happens because of God’s mysterious grace. There are no human pointers as to where and when God will act. Divine decisions defy human wisdom, expectations, and predictability. One can never know in advance how God will act. Often, the lowliest are the ones through whom God shows up. Examples are the shepherds in Luke, David in I Samuel, and the women as the first to know of Jesus’ resurrection.

When Nathaniel meets Jesus, Jesus indicates that he knows his character. Nathaniel wonders how Jesus knows him. Jesus replies by telling him where he was. This observation is enough to convince Nathaniel that Jesus is “The King of Israel.” Here we see a repeated theme in John’s gospel. Jesus’ miraculous knowledge and power is one way in which people come to believe in him. We will see this again when Jesus performs “signs.”

Finally, the chapter closes as Jesus makes the observation that, “...you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.” This harkens back to the story of Jacob’s journey when, fearful and anxious for his safety, God grants him this same vision to assure him of his presence. Similarly, people will come to see the presence of God in the ministry of Jesus.

IV. Chapter 2:1-12, 13-25

This chapter opens in Cana, another Galilean village, where Jesus and his mother are attending a wedding. This is the beginning of what has been termed “the Book of Signs,” a subsection of John’s gospel wherein is recorded eleven (11) miracles meant to reveal the presence of God in Jesus. Jesus’ mother informs him that the wine has run out, implying, I suppose, that Jesus can provide new wine. He can and he does, but not before rebuffing his mother’s request. He will not be controlled by anyone. Throughout John’s gospel, Jesus is in control of events. This he makes clear. However, he provides the wine anyway by turning water used for the “Jewish rites of purification” into premium quality wine. Perhaps this is meant to point to the fact that it is now Jesus who “cleanses” us rather than the old rituals. Or, perhaps the new and superior wine symbolizes a new and superior divine revelation.

In any case, John observes that through this sign, Jesus revealed his “glory” and that his disciples believed in him because of the sign. These are the purposes of each sign, namely, to reveal the presence of God in Jesus and to bring people to faith.

In verses 13-25 we have the cleansing of the temple story. In the synoptics, this story appears at the end of Jesus’ ministry after his only trip to Jerusalem. In John, Jesus goes to Jerusalem several times, this time to celebrate the Passover. To be precise, he goes to Jerusalem three times to celebrate the Passover. This is how we come to the conclusion that Jesus’ ministry lasted three years.

In John, Jesus justifies his action by accusing the moneychangers and those selling sacrificial animals of turning “his Father’s” house into a market place. This violates its intended purpose. But in the eyes of the authorities, everything going on here was perfectly legitimate in the sense that it enabled pilgrims to come to Jerusalem in order to celebrate the Passover. What Jesus did would have been considered against the law. It was therefore an event that gave rise to suspicions that Jesus was a dangerous zealot. For John, on the other hand, this zealotry pointed to the fulfillment of a scriptural reference that says, “zeal for your house will consume me.”

At this point, the authorities decide to question Jesus and leave it at that. Their question pertains to how he can legitimize his authority for doing such a thing. His answer is a display of something we will see again and again. He speaks on a symbolic level and his hearers can't understand him because they take it literally. "Destroy this body and I will raise it up in three days." His hearers understandably think he is talking about the Temple and so dismiss his remark as ridiculous. But that's not what he was talking about. He was, of course, referring to his death and resurrection.

Why does he answer as he does? For the Jews, the temple was the place where heaven touched the earth. God's presence was thought to be located in the inner sanctuary, a place entered only one time per year by the high priest. Jesus' remark points to the fact that God's presence now is to be found in him. This, his body, replaces the temple in terms of where God is to be found on earth.