



Bible Commentaries

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John 1 ▾

Verse 1

This chapter falls easily into five divisions: (1) the prologue, **John 1:1-18**; (2) the deputation from Jerusalem to John the Baptist, **John 1:19-28**; (3) the events of the next day after that deputation, **John 1:29-34**; (4) the events of the second day after the deputation, **John 1:35-42**; and (5) the events of the third day following the historic interview with John the Baptist, **John 1:48-51**. Thus, aside from the prologue, this chapter records the events of only four days of Jesus' ministry. Appropriately, it begins with the words, "In the beginning," for a number of important beginnings appear in it, such as:

The beginning of all things, **John 1:3**.

The beginning of the recognition of Jesus as the Son of God, **John 1:34**.

The beginning of Jesus' disciples, **John 1:41**.

The beginning of the apostleship, **John 1:41f**.

The beginning of the use of the title, Son of Man, **John 1:51**.

The beginning of Jesus' public ministry.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. (John 1:1)

The eternal existence of the Lord Jesus Christ and his absolute identification with God and as God are unequivocally stated in the first line of this gospel; and this may be considered the theme of the whole Gospel, every word and every event of the entire narrative having been skillfully chosen by the narrator for the purpose of proving the Godhead of Jesus Christ and of persuading people to believe in him. From this opening word to the end of the Gospel, there is not the slightest deviation from the sacred author's intention of presenting Jesus Christ as God come in the flesh for the purpose of human redemption, and to whom every person owes the uttermost worship and devotion.

In the beginning ... is like the opening words of Genesis; and, by such a choice of words, the apostle John evaluates the new creation through Jesus Christ in the same

category of importance as the physical creation itself, and, in fact, being another creative act of the same Word which was active in the first. A bolder beginning cannot be imagined.

Was the Word ... The Greek word [logos] from which Word is translated was widely known in the world of John's day, being found some 1,300 times in the writings of Philo,[1] a Hellenistic Jew of Alexandria (30 B.C. to 40 A.D.). However, John owed nothing to Philo, who taught that "the absolute purity, perfection, and loftiness of God would be violated by direct contact with imperfect, impure, and finite things."^[2] He even went so far as to say that "God could not be conceived of as actively concerned with the multiplicity of individual things."^[3] Philo's [logos] had no hard identity of any kind, being called the "reason of God" in one view, and in another, "a distinct individual, or hypostasis, standing between God and man." Philo's [logos] did not create anything, for matter was viewed by him as eternal; and it is impossible to form any intelligent harmony out of Philo's writings on the [logos], described in the Encyclopedia Britannica as "self-contradictory." It was the inspired genius of the apostle John which seized upon this word, applied it to Christ, and gave it a meaning as far above anything that Philo ever dreamed as the heavens are above the Nile Delta where Philo lived. The Word, as applied to Jesus Christ, is found only four times in the New Testament, twice in this prologue (**John 1:1,14**), in **1 John 1:1**, and in **Revelation 19:13**.

John's use of "Word" [Greek: logos] for Christ Jesus might have been suggested by **Psalms 33:6**, "By the word of Jehovah were the heavens made," a passage which, according to Hendriksen, represents the Word of God as a person.^[4] Whatever the source of the thought that led John to so designate Christ, it was truly inspired by the Holy Spirit and perfectly appropriate. A word, in the primary meaning of the term, is a vessel for the conveyance of an idea; and Christ was the vessel which conveyed the true idea of God to humanity. As Jesus stated it. "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father" (**John 14:9**).

And the Word was with God ... means that our Lord was intimately associated with the Father upon a parity and equality with him. Hendriksen's bold translation of this place is:

He himself was in the beginning, face to face with God. The fully divine Word, existing from all eternity as a distinct Person, was enjoying loving fellowship with the Father. Thus, the full deity of Christ, his eternity, and his distinct personal existence are confessed once more, in order that heretics may be refuted and the church may be established in the faith and love of God.^[5]

And the Word was God ... This truth might have been deduced from either of the two preceding clauses, but the apostle left nothing to chance, categorically affirming in this third clause that the Word was indeed God, a truth reaffirmed at the end of the prologue (**John 1:18**), and again by the apostle Thomas (**John 20:28**). John's estimate of the deity of Christ does not exceed that of other New Testament writers. For a detailed study of ten New Testament passages that call Jesus "God," see my Commentary on Hebrews, **John 1:8**.

The apostle's doctrine of the [Greek: logos] is thus seen to differ from the [logos] of Greek philosophy in these particulars: (1) The New Testament [logos] is God; (2) is personal; (3) created all things, including matter; and (4) became flesh and dwelt among human beings. To presume that John got anything like that out of Philo's [logos] is like supposing that Thomas Jefferson got the Declaration of Independence out of McGuffey's Third Reader!

On the statement here that the "Word was God," Dummelow declared that this means that Christ was divine, and is therefore to be worshipped with the same worship as is due the Father.^[6]

[1] William Hendriksen, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1961), p. 69.

[2] Encyclopedia Britannica (Chicago: William Benton, 1961), Vol. 17, p. 740.

[3] Ibid.

[4] William Hendriksen, op. cit., p. 70.

[5] Ibid., p. 71.

[6] J. R. Dummelow, Commentary on the Whole Bible (New York: Macmillan Company, 1937), p. 774.

Verse 2

The same was in the beginning with God.

The three propositions of **John 1:1** are here reduced to a single declaration and re-affirmed. As Hovey said:

This emphatic repetition of the first verse prepares the way for the statement that follows in verse third; and the practice of repeating an important truth for the sake of emphasis, or of preparing the mind for connected truth, is characteristic of this evangelist's style.^[7]

ENDNOTE:

[7] Alvah Hovey, Commentary on John (Philadelphia: The American Baptist Society, 1885), p. 60.

Verse 3

All things were made through him; and without him was not anything made that hath been made.

Other New Testament passages which attribute the creation of the universe to Jesus Christ are as follows:

For in him were all things created, in the heavens and upon the earth, things visible and things invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers; all things have been created through him, and unto him; and he is before all things, and in him all things consist (**Colossians 1:16-17**).

Yet to us there is one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we unto him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and we through him (**1 Corinthians 8:6**).

(God hath) spoken unto us in his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom also he made the worlds ... (And of the Son he saith) Thou Lord, in the beginning didst lay the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the works of thy hands (**Hebrews 1:2,10**).SIZE>

Some seek to make a point of the fact that creation is not directly attributed to Jesus in the synoptics, claiming a "contradiction." The point fails in light of the fact that Matthew represented Jesus as having twelve legions of angels, that is, some 75,000 angels, at his command (**Matthew 26:53**), quoting his words that "All authority in heaven and upon earth" were his (**Matthew 28:18-20**). One wonders just how such an accumulation of power in Jesus' hands is any less than the power of God! **Mark 5:6** represents Jesus as having authority over the entire demonic creation; **Luke 10:19** plainly presents Christ as a being capable of creating all things - hence, there is no conflict. Added to this is the fact that each of the synoptics records instances of Jesus' raising the dead; and that is an act fully equal to the creation of the world in that only God could have done it. Also, the synoptics are filled with Jesus' promises of eternal life, which, again, is just as wonderful as creation, or even more wonderful, since the creation itself is not eternal! Those who wish to open a conflict between John and the synoptics must do it upon other grounds than this.

REGARDING CREATION

Throughout the Bible, creation is declared to be an act of God and Christ, or God through Christ; and this Biblical explanation of how the universe came into existence is the only reasonable and intelligent explanation ever given. For the benefit of persons who might have fallen into the foolish and hurtful superstition that this universe merely happened, through chance, or the fortuitous concurrence of atoms, a little further study of the problem of creation is in order. Is it scientific to view the universe as having been created by God?

There is no better answer to this question than some of the statements of brilliant scientific minds; therefore we shall present a short anthology of what some of the greatest scientists of this age are saying with regard to creation. The men whose views shall be offered here hold the highest academic degrees from some of the greatest universities on earth and are as qualified to speak on this subject as any who could be heard. That some scientists are indeed atheists is of no consequence; so are some preachers. The point to remember is that no atheistic scientist holds any higher degrees, has any more intelligence, or possesses any more information pertinent to the question, than do the men cited here. Also, it should be remembered that one's answer to questions of this kind does not depend upon intelligence alone, but upon spiritual wholeness also.

Frank Allen, Ph.D., Cornell University, Professor of biophysics, University of Manitoba, recipient of the Tory Gold Medal, Royal Society of Canada, commented on the ponderous protein molecule, the basic building block of all life, and noted that it has about 40,000 atoms arranged in an exceedingly complicated pattern. Regarding the possibility that even a single molecule, such as that, could have been produced by chance, he said:

The amount of matter to be shaken together to produce a single molecule of protein would be millions of times greater than that in the whole universe. For it to occur on earth alone would require almost endless billions of years (10 to the power of 243). But proteins as chemicals are without life. It is only when the mysterious life comes into them that they live. Only Infinite Mind, that is, God, could have foreseen that such a

molecule could be the abode of life, could have constructed, and made it live.^[8]

Merritt Stanley Congdon, natural scientist and philosopher, holder of three doctorates from Webster and Burton Universities, and a member of several learned societies, stated that:

There are no facts yet wrested from the intriguing mysteries of this strange onrushing cosmos which can in any degree disprove the existence and intelligent activities of an unconditioned, personal God. On the contrary, when we as careful scientists analyze and synthesize the data of the natural world, we are observing only the phenomena of the operations of that unseen Being who cannot be found by mere scientific seeking, but who can and did manifest himself in human form. For science is indeed "watching God at work."^[9]

John Cleveland Cothran, Ph.D., Cornell University, mathematician and scientist, Chairman of Mathematics and Science Division, Duluth, University of Minnesota, said:

Lord Kelvin, one of the world's greatest physicists, has made the following significant statement: "If you think strongly enough, you will be forced by science to believe in God." I must declare myself in full agreement with this statement Now the material realm, not being able to create itself and its governing laws, the act of creation must have been performed by some non-material agent That is to say, we unhesitatingly accept the fact of the existence of the supreme spiritual being, God, the Creator and Director of the universe.^[10]

Donald Henry Porter, Ph.D., University of Indiana, distinguished mathematician and physicist, declared that:

Whatever process of nature is considered, or whatever question of origins is studied, as a scientist, I derive satisfaction only by placing God in the leading role. God is the central figure in every picture. He alone is the answer to the unanswered questions.^[11]

Edward Luther Kessel, Ph.D., University of California, outstanding zoologist and entomologist, also editor of distinguished scientific publications, affirms that:

During recent years, scientific research has been yielding new evidence supporting the traditional philosophical proofs that there is a God. Not that this new evidence was necessary, for the old proofs were more than adequate to convince anyone whose mind was not encrusted in a capsule of prejudice.^[12]

W. O. Lundberg, Ph.D., Johns Hopkins University, physiologist and biochemist, noted writer in scientific fields, observed that:

The scientific method is founded on orderliness and predictability in natural phenomena. It is precisely this orderliness and predictability that constitute a revelation of God in nature. Order and predictability in the framework of non-existence of God is a meaningless contradiction.^[13]

Paul Clarence Abersold, Ph.D., University of California, member of National Research Council, specialist in nuclear physics, Manhattan Project, Atomic Energy Commission, an authority on neutron radiation and isotopes, wrote:

Although science can develop very plausible theories of a cataclysmic birth of the universe resulting in galaxies, stars, worlds, and atoms, it cannot explain where all this matter and energy came from and why the universe is so constituted and ordered. Straight thinking and clear reasoning demand the concept of God.^[14]

Marlin Brooks Kreider, Ph.D., University of Maryland, physiologist, member of American Society of Professional Biologists, said:

Both as an ordinary human being, and also as a man devoting his life to scientific study and research, I have no doubt at all about the existence of God. There definitely is a God.... I see at the beginning of the cosmic road, not eternal energy, or matter, not "inscrutable fate," not a "fortuitous conflux of primordial elements," not "The Great Unknown," but the Lord God Almighty.^[15]

George Earl Davis, Ph.D., University of Minnesota, a specialist in solar radiation, and widely known physicist, denied the popular notion that atheism is more prevalent among scientists, noting that such a thesis has never been proved. He then added:

Such a popular belief is, in fact, contrary to impressions gained at first hand by many of the scientists themselves. These revelations in the natural world of transcending intelligence ... are, for me, sufficient evidence of a God. They are sufficient even without the inference that no material thing can create itself.^[16]

John William Klotz, Ph.D., University of Pittsburgh, noted specialist in genetics, began his answer to this question with two quotations from the Old Testament:

The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament showeth his handiwork. The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God. This world of ours is so complex and intricate that it could hardly have risen by chance. It is filled with intricacies which require as their cause an Intelligent Being, not blind fate.^[17]

Irving William Knobloch, Ph.D., Iowa State College, Professor of Natural Science in Michigan State University, wrote:

I believe in God because mere chance could not account for the emergence of the first electrons or protons, or for the first atoms, or for the first amino acids, or for the first protoplasm, or for the first seed or for the first brain. I believe in God because His divine existence is the only logical explanation for things as they are.^[18]

There is no need to multiply scientific witnesses of the truth that there is nothing unscientific about accepting the Scriptural account of creation, which is indeed the **ONLY** account that makes any sense whatever. In Monsma's impressive anthology from which the above examples have been taken, there are thirty others just as bold and emphatic; and, in this writer's library, there are at least a hundred more. These few have been introduced here to refute the notion that any man, or any group of men, on earth has any knowledge or information disproving even in the slightest degree the Scriptural account of creation. The conclusion of this study of the creation might be summed up by the Lord's word: "The fool hath said in his heart, there is no God" (**Psalms 14:1**).

With characteristic clarity and emphasis, the apostle stated the truth of **John 1:3**, first positively, and then negatively, to avoid any possible misunderstanding.

[8] John Clover Monsma, Evidence of God in an Expanding Universe (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1958), p. 24.

[9] Ibid., p. 35.

[10] Ibid., pp. 37,42.

[11] Ibid., p. 48.

[12] Ibid., p. 49.

[13] Ibid., p. 57.

[14] Ibid., p. 61.

[15] Ibid., pp., 63,68.

[16] Ibid., pp. 70,72.

[17] Ibid., p. 77.

[18] Ibid., p. 89.

Verse 4

In him was life; and the life was the light of men.

In him was life ... Life was a favorite term with the author of John. "The noun occurs thirty-six times, and eleven are in conjunction with the adjective **ETERNAL**."^[19] The use of the past tense shows that true spiritual life was in Christ before the incarnation, emphasizing the truth that all of the hopes of worshipers under Israel's law were actually in the Lord Jesus Christ, just as it is with all who ever lived. Physical life does not seem to be the subject here, but as the agent of creation, Christ contained all life of every kind. All life came through Christ, is sustained by him, and is responsible to him.

The light of men ... God's revelation of Himself to sinful and fallen humanity appears in this. Beginning at the gates of Eden, God laid down the program of instruction and revelation designed for the enlightenment of all people, and the guidance of all people into the way of eternal life (**Genesis 3:15**). Although the Adamic fall is not mentioned here, it is implied through the identification of man's source of light, being not within himself, but derived from the Saviour. Only they are enlightened who know the life in Christ; all others are in darkness.

ENDNOTE:

[19] Merrill C. Tenney, John, the Gospel of Belief (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972), p. 66.

Verse 5

And the light shineth in the darkness; and the darkness apprehended it not.

The dramatic shift to the present tense shows that John was not here dealing merely with a past phenomenon, but with a present reality. In the very nature of that ineffable light in Christ Jesus, it is at once past, present, and future, ever shining in the gloom of mortal darkness; and in the remarkable truth of this Gospel, that light was viewed as a blazing sun illuminating the night of human sin and rebellion against God.

And the darkness apprehended it not ... Some of the translations favor "the darkness overcame it not"; however, a comparison with parallel expressions: "the world knew him not" (**John 1:10b**), and "his own received him not" (**John 1:11b**), justifies the rendition here. Of course, it is also true that "the darkness overcame it not," nor will it ever do so. The basic hostility between light and darkness, good and evil, the kingdom of God and the kingdom of evil, appears in this verse. The unregenerated world hates God and the knowledge of his truth; but the hatred and opposition of evil men cannot prevent the light from shining. It shines of its own inherent glory regardless of how inadequate human response to it might be. The history of the last two millenniums is here summarized as the Light shining in darkness!

Verse 6

There came a man, sent from God, whose name was John.

The apostle John nowhere referred to the great herald as John the Baptist, but simply as John, as should have been expected, since the apostle himself was the only other John of Biblical significance in that entire era, thus supporting the conviction of apostolic authorship of this Gospel, and demanding the inference that the other John was the writer of this Gospel. Any forger would have been careful to explain which John he meant; but the apostle John had no need to do so.

Sent from God ... identifies John the Baptist as a true prophet with a valid message from God. This verse, and the two following, form a parenthesis in this prologue dealing with the mission of John the Baptist.

Verse 7

The same came for witness, that he might bear witness of the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came that he might bear witness of the light.

This parenthesis, including **John 1:6**, presents the following facts with reference to John the Baptist:

He came from God and was therefore a true prophet.

He was not the light.

His mission was to bear witness to the light.

To bear witness to the light was to bear witness to Jesus Christ.SIZE>

It is true, of course, that Jesus himself said of John, "He was the lamp that burneth and shineth; and ye were willing to rejoice for a season in his light" ([John 5:35](#)); but the apostle John here made a distinction between the light of John the Baptist, which was a dim and borrowed light, and that true light which lighteth every man coming into the world. In no sense could John the Baptist be that light. As the true light, Christ was self-revealed, independent, pre-existent, and eternal. He was the perfect light, in that the source was in himself as identified with the Father.

That all might believe through him ... The purpose of God in sending John the Baptist was that all people might believe in Christ. His was the function of a herald who went ahead of a king to announce his coming and to prepare the popular mind to receive him. John the Baptist effectively discharged that responsibility. The fact that many would not believe was due to hardening and prejudice on their part and not to any fault of the noble herald who went before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah.

Verse 9

There was the true light, even the light which lighteth every man, coming into the world.

There was the true light ... coming into the world ... This speaks of the sudden appearance of Christ the world's Redeemer, his "coming into the world" indicating his preexistence, and making his appearance among human beings an act of our Lord's own volition. This corresponds perfectly with Luke's account of the "Dayspring from on High" and his visitation among people ([Luke 1:78](#)). "Coming into the world" is here a reference to the light, not to "every man."

Which lighteth every man ... This could be viewed as hyperbole, of course, since that figure is often used in Scripture; but there seems to be something far more than mere hyperbole here. Hovey thought that:

It may signify that some knowledge of God is given to every man by the Word. We understand it, however, as a description of the normal relation of the Word to mankind, as an affirmation that, if one fails of true and saving knowledge, it is because he closes the eye of his soul to it, and not because the Word has failed to offer it to him.^[20]

The view maintained by this writer is that light from Jesus Christ has truly reached and benefited, in some degree, every person who ever was born after Jesus came. Whatever enlightenment there may be anywhere on earth, it derives finally from Christ. Wherever there is concern for the poor, the downtrodden, the helpless, the aged, the hungry, the bereaved, or whatever - there the light has dispelled at least some of the darkness. The great pity is that light even unto eternal life is available for every man, but not all avail themselves of it.

ENDNOTE:

[20] Alvah Hovey, op. cit., p. 63.

Verse 10

He was in the world, and the world was made through him, and the world knew him not.

These words bluntly state a near incredibility. That the very Creator of the world should cast aside the glory of His eternal existence and choose to enter earth life as a man subject to all the inconveniences and limitations of the flesh - that is a fact of awesome wonder; but added to that is the obstinate and rebellious refusal of the Lord's creation to acknowledge Him when he came! As the prophet cried out so long ago, "Lord, who hath believed our report?" ([Isaiah 53:1](#)). God was not taken by surprise by man's refusal to know the Lord, for His prophets had faithfully foretold it. The repetition of "world" in these lines dramatizes the marvel of humanity's not knowing Jesus when he came.

Verse 11

He came unto his own, and they that were his own received him not.

Here is the same dramatic repetition of "his own," similar to the repetition of "the world" in the previous verse. The better part of a century had passed since Jesus came, when John wrote these words; and yet, in these words, the apostle seems still to be struck with the marvel that the Lord's own people, the chosen people, who should have been the first to know and hail his coming, that even **THOSE PEOPLE** did not welcome him. The words of the apostle in this passage reveal a profound and pathetic grief on his own part that Israel, in its major aspect, had rejected the Lord - but not all of them. These words strongly remind one of Paul's words ([Romans 9:1-5](#)). John, having registered the fact of the unbelief of the chosen people (in major part, that is), next turned to a consideration of those who had received him.

Verse 12

But as many as received him, to them gave he the right to become children of God, even to them that believe on his name.

As many as received him ... and "them that believe on his name" refer to the same persons, namely, to those who accepted the claims of Jesus Christ as the Son of God and believed the message that he delivered to mankind. Since the days of Martin Luther, many religious persons have believed that faith alone makes people children of God; but, in this verse, it is clear that believers are not sons of God merely because they are believers, but that believers have the right to become sons of God. As Johnson explained it:

It is not declared that they were made children by believing, but to the believer he gives the power to become a child. When one believes in Christ, his faith becomes a power to lead him to yield himself to God and to receive the Word into his heart. He can then repent of sin, surrender to the will of the Father, and, being baptized into Christ, he puts on Christ, becomes the Lord's brother and a child of God by adoption.
[21]

The efforts to get rid of the plain teaching of this verse have resulted in some fantastic assertions, as, for example,

The right to become children of God is reserved for the future, when freed from every impurity, the life of God, his holiness and love, shall have become completely manifest in us.[22]

But, of course, John was speaking here of the right, or power; that men enjoy now, the privilege of being children of God now. Absolutely nothing in this text warrants removing the privilege to some far-off eternity. That some should have recourse to such an explanation is proof enough that the text contradicts the popular notion of salvation by faith only.

Gave them the right ... The privilege of being a child of God is the greatest privilege afforded by life on earth; but even when people have complied with the conditions antecedent to the gift, no one can ever be considered as deserving or meriting so marvelous a gift. The disagreements of people regarding the terms of salvation should never obscure the truth that salvation **CANNOT** be earned or merited by mortal man. Conditions there certainly are, else salvation would have to be universal; but when all conditions are complied with, the sinner is still saved by grace.

[21] B. W. Johnson, New Testament Commentary (Cincinnati, Ohio: Christian Standard, 1886), p. 30.

[22] William Hendriksen, op. cit., p. 82.

Verse 13

Who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor the will of man, but of God.

New birth is a condition of salvation, and it was assumed by John that believers who received the right to become God's children would exercise it by obedience of the gospel, thus being born again (see under **John 3:5**); and the burden of the thought in this verse is that the new birth is of God, spiritual, and from above, and that it does not derive from Abrahamic descent, that is, "of blood," nor "of the flesh" nor "of the will of man." The new birth is not caused by, nor does it follow, sexual activity, whether of men or of women. Two thoughts in this verse were developed later in the Gospel - that of the new birth in **John 3**, and that of the true children of Abraham in **John 8**.

Verse 14

And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us (And we beheld his glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father), full of grace and truth.

They greatly err who suppose that John differed from the synoptics regarding the virgin birth of our Lord, for it is in this verse recorded that the Word who was God did in fact become flesh, and that he was "the only begotten" of the Father! John's terminology here is fantastic. He did not use any of the terminology employed by the synoptics, and yet he stated here the doctrine of the virgin birth in terms that were suggested by his presentation of Christ as the divine Word. That the author was an eye-witness of Christ's glory is affirmed in the parenthesis. Significantly, the pronoun "we" indicates that others besides the author had opportunity to witness the Word incarnate; and thus the statement here has the weight of a confession by **ALL** the apostles of the deity and Godhead of Jesus Christ.

The Word became flesh ... connects with **John 1:1,2** and means that God became a man. This is John's statement of the doctrine of the incarnation, the central mystery of our holy religion. As Hendriksen observed, however,

The verb "became" has a very special meaning here. Not "became" in the sense of ceasing to be what he was before. When the wife of Lot "becomes" a pillar of salt, she

ceases to be the wife of Lot; but when Lot "becomes" the father of Moab and Ammon, he remains Lot. So also here, the Word "becomes" flesh but remains the Word, even God.[23]

Thus, our Lord was perfect in Godhead and perfect in manhood, and yet one Person.

Flesh ... as used here simply means human nature in possession of a body but does not imply any taint of sin (**Romans 8:3**). This assumption of a human body by our Lord was of his own volition, as attested in **Hebrews 2:16** and **Philippians 2:7**. "Flesh," as used by John in this verse, carries with it none of the implications of Paul's frequent usage of the term, a distinction that Paul himself carefully preserved. It means the genuine, perfect, holy, human nature of our Lord. Thus, in this single verse, John refuted all of the Gnostic disparagement of man's physical nature.

And dwelt among us ... may imply a great deal more than the English words denote, because:

The Greek word (translated "dwelt") derived from the noun for "tent," is often used without any reference to its etymology; but so allusive a writer as John may well have been thinking of the tabernacle in the wilderness where the Lord dwelt with Israel (**Exodus 25:8-9**; 40:34), and more particularly of that pillar of cloud above the tent of meetings, typifying the visible dwelling of the Lord among his people.[24]

On account of this, some translators, following the Greek more exactly, render it "tabernacled among us." The idea is that Christ's earthly sojourn was not a fleeting, or illusory, appearance, but a sustained and continued existence as a man among human beings, giving his contemporaries every opportunity to observe and evaluate his life and mission.

And we beheld his glory ... The verb "beheld" does not refer to some casual or incomplete observance; but, as Tenney noted:

The verb "beheld" contains the root of the word "theater" and connotes more than a casual glance. It involves careful scrutiny of what is before one in order to understand its significance. The incarnate Logos was studied under all possible conditions, favorable, and unfavorable. All the information that human investigation could produce was made available by his willingness to be questioned and observed.[25]

As of the only begotten from the Father ... There can be little doubt that John here referred to the transfiguration; but the glory of Christ included far more than that. As Dummelow said:

Not merely the visible glory of the Transfiguration and the Ascension, but the moral and spiritual splendor of his unique life, which revealed the nature of the invisible Father. (It was) not a reflected glory, as would have been the case had he been a mere human saint or prophet, but it was the glory of God's only begotten Son, and therefore God's own glory, for Christ and the Father are one.[26]

Only begotten ... is unique to this apostle, and is used in **John 1:18**; **John 3:16-18**, and **1 John 4:9**. As noted above, such a title could never have been used except by one who understood and accepted the doctrine of the virgin birth of Christ. The unique authority and glory of Christ also appear in this, because such a title excludes the notion that any human being, or any angel, could be the Son of God in the sense that Jesus is.

Grace and truth ... Commenting on these two words as reference to our Lord, Westcott wrote:

The combination recalls the description of Jehovah, **Exodus 34:6**, and is not infrequent in the Old Testament. As applied to the Lord, the phrase marks him as the author of perfect Redemption and perfect Revelation. Grace corresponds with the idea of

revelation of God as love (**1 John 4:8,16**) by him who is Life; and **TRUTH** with that of the revelation of God as light (**1 John 1:5**) by him who is himself Light.[27]

[23] Ibid., p. 84.

[24] W. F. Howard, The Interpreter's Bible (New York: Abingdon, 1952), Vol. 8, p. 473.

[25] Merrill C. Tenney, op. cit., p. 71.

[26] J. R. Dummelow, op. cit., p. 775.

[27] B. F. Westcott, op. cit., p. 13.

Verse 15

John beareth witness of him and crieth, saying, This was he of whom I said, he that cometh after me is become before me: for he was before me.

The principal purpose of this Gospel is stated in **John 20:30-31**; but this teaching on John the Baptist could have been included, partially at least, to refute the erroneous views of a sect which had continued to follow the Baptist, even continuing to be baptized in his name, as was the case with certain disciples mentioned in **Acts 19:3**. Although Paul had taught against such an error and had even required the re-baptism of those who held to John's baptism, there could still have been some vestiges of the old error remaining until the time when this Gospel was written. Whether or not this could have been true, the apostolic author here stressed the fact that John the Baptist pointed away from himself and toward the Christ. As one of the great herald's own disciples, originally, John was in a position to speak with the greatest authority on all matters pertaining to the relationship between John the Baptist and Jesus Christ. This verse shows exactly what the relationship truly was. Between the two, there was the difference between God and man, time and eternity, the finite and the infinite, between the sun and the reflected light of the moon, between the Lord and the servant unworthy to unloose his sandals. Furthermore, John the Baptist himself had faithfully borne witness to the difference.

The statement of the herald John that Christ was "before" him shows that the apostle's understanding of the pre-existence of Christ and the eternity of the Word had begun with his own acceptance of the teaching of the herald John on those very subjects. The herald was six months older than Jesus, and, only in respect to Jesus' eternal existence before the incarnation, could he have affirmed that Christ was before him. Westcott and others reject the meaning here attributed to **BEFORE**; but Dummelow thought the meaning valid, paraphrasing it thus, "He existed before my birth, and even before his own birth, as the eternal Son of God."^[28]

ENDNOTE:

[28] J. R. Dummelow, op. cit., p. 775.

Verse 16

For of his fullness we all received, and grace for grace.

All blessings come from God. The wealth that people receive is invariably through the employment of God-given talents and opportunities; the vigor, strength, health, and intelligence of every person is given to him from above. The great artists have no cause for the vanity which often marks their conduct, since all skills and abilities are from the Lord. In his remarkable *Essay on Experience*, Emerson wrote:

Nothing is of us or our works ... all is of God. Nature will not spare us the smallest leaf of laurel. All writing comes by the grace of God, and all doing and having. I would gladly allow the most to the will of man, but I have set my heart on honesty in this chapter, and I can see nothing at last in success or failure, than more or less of vital force supplied from the Eternal.[29]

ENDNOTE:

[29] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essay on Experience*.

Verse 17

For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

Christ was not only greater than the mighty John the Baptist, but was also transcendantly above the great law-giver, Moses. This verse does not mean that grace and truth were not evidenced by the law of Moses, but that the grace and truth through the Lord Jesus Christ far exceeded anything in the old dispensation. The great heroes under the old covenant, all of the majestic ceremonial of the Jewish system, as well as all the burden of the great prophecies reached the zenith of their meaning and fulfillment in Christ. The true knowledge of God the Father of all creation came uniquely in the Lord Jesus who could truly say, "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father!" (**John 14:9**). The very next verse is even a more forceful statement of the same truth.

Verse 18

No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him.

Westcott observed that "truth" and "knowledge of God" throughout this passage, as well as elsewhere in John, have reference to one and the same thing. This verse reveals Christ as the true basis of all genuine human enlightenment concerning God, but it begins by pointing out the inherent human limitation of being unable actually to see God (in the highest sense) while still in the flesh. Thus, due to his limitation, man can enjoy true knowledge of God only through the revelation of the one who, as both God and man, is in a position truly to reveal him. This verse declares that Christ has indeed provided for man such a faithful revelation of the Father.

No man hath seen God at any time ... This is not a contradiction of **Exodus 24:10**, where it is recorded that a whole company of Israelites "saw the God of Israel"; nor is this a contradiction of **Job 42:5**, where Job said of God, "Now mine eye seeth thee." Of course the **TERMINOLOGY** of these passages is contradictory: no man hath seen ... they saw; but "seeing" is not used in the same sense in these passages. As Torrey observed:

We must remember that two statements which in terms flatly contradict one another may be both of them absolutely true, for the reason that the two terms are not used in

the same sense in the two statements.^[30]

Language offers hundreds of examples of the same words used in different meanings. This writer has a friend who is blind; but on his recent return from Europe, he spoke of "seeing" some of the great cities. If one asks another if he ever saw the back of his head, the answer could be either affirmative or negative, depending on the sense of the verb. Obviously, God is a Spirit, eternal, immortal, invisible; and no man has seen God in the sense of seeing the invisible Spirit; but God has manifested himself in Jesus our Lord; and he that hath truly "seen" Jesus has seen God.

The only begotten Son ... The oldest and most reliable manuscripts of this Gospel read "only begotten God" in this passage, and it should be so translated.^{[31]">John 1:18:">[31]} Tenney declared that "The evidence for **ONLY BEGOTTEN GOD** is so strong as to be practically conclusive ... **ONLY BEGOTTEN GOD** makes an unequivocal affirmation of the deity of Christ."^[32] Archaeological evidence continues to strengthen the preference for **ONLY BEGOTTEN GOD** in this place. Frank Pack, in a critical study of Papyrus Bodmer II, P66, writing in 1960, stated,

P-66 here (**John 1:18**) contains the very interesting reading [@monogenes] [@Theos] (only begotten God) ... Thus, another early witness is given to [@monogenes] [@Theos] despite the fact that English Revised Version (1885) and the **RSV** continue to follow the second reading. [@Monogenes] [@Theos] (only begotten God) must be the original meaning.^[33]

In view of the practical certainty that Jesus is here called the "only begotten God," it may be inquired why so many versions and translations continue to render the passage, "only begotten Son"; and the answer lies in the truth that **SON OF GOD**, as applied to Jesus Christ, has exactly the same connotation, being in fact no less an unequivocal affirmation of our Lord's deity than **ONLY BEGOTTEN GOD**. Thus, as Westcott said, "The common translation makes no difference in the sense of the passage."^[34]

Of course, what Westcott said is true, provided only that people understand all that is meant by the expression, **SON OF GOD**; but that is exactly where the problem is. Many people misconstrue **SON OF GOD** as meaning something less than absolute deity; and, since the apostle John here employed terminology incapable of being misunderstood, it is all the more regrettable that the translators in their wisdom (!) have violated the Received Text in their handling of this verse, a violation they would not have committed if the weight of it had been in the opposite direction.

In this magnificent verse, the apostle shows how human beings may know God, despite the fact that God may not be known through human sensory perception. God is revealed to mankind by Jesus Christ, the Holy One. The nature and attributes of God are revealed through Christ whose identity with the Father is complete and whose identity with man is also perfect. This verse is the climax of the prologue and the topic sentence of the entire Gospel. John carefully assembled and deployed his amazing material in this Gospel to prove that Christ is God come in the flesh and to induce faith on the part of man in the world's only Redeemer.

Who is in the bosom of the Father ... suggests the most intimate union and identity with God on the part of Christ. The bosom of the Father is best understood, not as a literal place or location, but as a state of existence. In a similar use of this expression, Jesus declared that Lazarus was in Abraham's bosom (**Luke 16:22**).

He hath declared him ... means far more than merely talking about God. Jesus said, "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father" (**John 14:9**). In Gnosticism, prevalent after John's time, so-called wise men taught esoteric "knowledge" that was supposed to make one "wise," hence the name of the sect; and, in the Hellenistic mystery cults, there were all kinds of teachers of secret lore; but the revelation in Jesus Christ was not something whispered in a cave. His revelation of God to man was like the star that announced his birth, blazing forth the truth to all generations of human beings, his very life being the Light of people.

This verse concludes the prologue. Before passing on to a consideration of subsequent passages, there is one further comment regarding The Word. The Holy Scriptures themselves have been called the word of God in all generations; and, since Jesus is here designated the Word, a comparison of Christ and the Bible is suggested.

CHRIST AND THE BIBLE

1. Christ was both human and divine, and so is the Bible. The Lord identified himself as one with the Father, and yet he was also the son of the virgin Mary, of the posterity of David and of Abraham. Likewise, the Bible is in fact the word of God; yet, at the same time, it is the writing by men like Isaiah, Moses, Matthew, Luke, and Paul. That there is mystery here is certain, and it cannot be explained exactly how this is true; but every child of God knows that these dual qualities of humanity and divinity are found both in Christ and in the Bible.

2. Christ and the Bible are both "of the Jews." Jesus was born of Jewish ancestry, his forbears being the great worthies of the Old Testament; and also the Bible is Jewish, most of its writers being Jews. The parallel between Christ and the Bible even extends to this, that as there were a few Gentiles conspicuously among the Lord's fleshly ancestors, such as Ruth and Tamar, there are also some Gentile writers of the Bible, notably Job and the evangelist Luke,

3. Both Christ and the Bible have been disbelieved, mocked, tried with false trials, and crucified. The passion and crucifixion of the Lord are well known; but some may not know that during the French Revolution the Bible was publicly tried and condemned, tied to the tail of a donkey which was ridden by a harlot, and dragged through the streets of Paris to the city dump. As John Macmillan wrote, "The Bible is like the Lord in its crucifixion, being crucified by many who are enemies of the cross of Christ."^[35]

4. Both the Lord and the Bible have triumphed over death, the Lord by rising from the new tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, and the Bible by rising from every grave to which it was ever consigned. One astonishing example of this is seen in the burning of Tyndale's Bibles at the foot of St. Paul's cross in London; and the more money that was received from the Bibles that were bought to be burned, the greater the output of presses making more Bibles. However, the Bible survived another type of death. As languages changed, there came a time historically when the Bible no longer existed in the language of common men; but with the coming of men like Wycliffe and Tyndale, the Bible cast off the grave clothes of the dead languages in which it was enshrouded; and today it is published in practically every language under heaven.

This subject is rather extensive, and only the barest suggestion of it is included here. John Macmillan's book, *The Crucified and Risen Bible*, gives it full treatment.^[36]

DEPUTATION FROM JERUSALEM TO JOHN THE BAPTIST

This paragraph ([John 1:19-28](#)) takes note of the impact of John's mission upon the religious hierarchy in Jerusalem, who were impressed with the thousands of people being baptized and with the bold and dynamic preaching of the great herald. A delegation was sent to investigate.

[30] R. A. Torrey, *Difficulties in the Bible* (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1907), p. 80.

[31]">[John 1:18](#)." [31] B. F. Westcott, *The New Testament in the Original Greek* (New York: Macmillan and Company, 1889), on [John 1:18](#).

[32] Merrill C. Tenney, op. cit., p. 72.

[33] Frank Pack, op. cit., Vol. 4, No. 1, p. 5.

[34] B. F. Westcott, The Gospel according to St. John, op. cit., p. 15.

[35] John Macmillan, The Crucified and Risen Bible (London: Marshall Brothers Ltd.), p. 64.

[36] Ibid.

Verse 19

And this is the witness of John, when the Jews sent unto him from Jerusalem priests and Levites to ask him, Who art thou? And he confessed and denied not; and he confessed, I am not the Christ.

The apostle John had already referred to John the Baptist ([John 1:6-8](#)); and as it was he who had first turned the eyes of the apostle to Jesus, it was most appropriate that he should have developed that witness more fully. These events were placed in the holy record primarily because of their testimony to the divine Messiahship of Jesus; but, since these things resulted directly in his becoming a follower of Christ, John recorded them in detail. A great deal of time had intervened between the events and their narration; but their importance to the apostle made it natural that his vivid memory would have retained all the details, even apart from his inspiration. The four successive days with their remarkable chain of happenings changed the whole course of the apostle's life. These four days were in the spring, about the first of March, of the first year of our Lord's ministry.

The Jews from Jerusalem ... The word "Jews," by the end of the first century and the time John wrote this Gospel, had acquired a sinister meaning in the entire Christian society, resulting from official Israel's rejection of the Saviour, and from the ensuing hardening of secular Israel, as had been prophesied by the Lord, and which had been treated at length in the writings of Paul, John's use of this word throughout the Gospel was to designate the avowed enemies of Christ; and it should never be understood as including the whole race of Israel, despite the fact that the vast majority of Israel had followed their evil leaders in rejecting Christ. The notable exceptions, beginning with the apostles themselves, included many who were Israelites indeed, and who, along with many Gentiles, composed the true Israel of God, the spiritual Israel.

The Sanhedrin, the official religious hierarchy which condemned Jesus to death, was doubtless the body that initiated this inquiry; and why? The popular report of John's success had reached Jerusalem; and, unthinkably, from their viewpoint he was even teaching that "Jews" needed repentance and baptism! Were they not the chosen people? What brand of teaching was this, then, that demanded repentance of Jews? Also, there had been whispers that this man might be the Messiah; and were not the lords of the Sanhedrin God's chosen instruments for running down and foiling any false Messiah?

Priests and Levites ... Most of the high priestly class were Sadducees, and it is remarkable that some of the delegation were Pharisees ([John 1:24](#)). The mutual hatred of those sects raises a question of how the Pharisees came to have a part in the inquiry; but one obvious explanation is found in the invariable tendency of bitterest enemies to unite in a common opposition to Christ. These same two sects made common cause against Jesus ([Matthew 22:23-40](#)), despite the fact that Jesus had publicly triumphed over the Sadducees in their position on the resurrection, and despite the further fact that the Pharisees themselves also rejected the Sadducees' position. Those who attribute any mistake to John in his identifying Pharisees as party to the investigation must do so upon an unjustifiable presumption.

Confessed and denied not; and he confessed, I am not the Christ ... The double use of "confessed" derives from the statement in the first clause that there was a confession and the identification in the second clause of what the confession was. The unique construction reflects Jewish idiom. Thus, Josephus wrote of King Saul, "Saul confessed that he was guilty and denied not the sin."^[37] Numerous little touches like this throughout the Gospel make it absolutely certain that the writer was Jewish.

ENDNOTE:

[37] Flavius Josephus, Antiquities, 6:7,4.

Verse 21

And they asked him, What then? Art thou Elijah? and he saith, I am not. Art thou the prophet? And he answered, No.

John the Baptist was called Elijah by Christ himself (**Matthew 17:12**), and this raises the question of why John here denied it. This is another example of the kind of "contradiction" which so delights some of the critics. Literally, John the Baptist was **NOT** Elijah, and John's literal answer **WAS** literally true. Typically and spiritually, John the Baptist was **THAT** Elijah foretold in **Malachi 4:5**; but there is no evidence that John the Baptist knew his own identity as that Elijah; and, if he did know it, his answer was still the truth. The angel's annunciation of the birth of John the Baptist had clearly linked the great herald with the promised return of Elijah, a fact which the Sanhedrin should have known, since the announcement was made in the temple itself and to one of their priests in the course of his solemn duties therein. However, the popular notion was that the original Elijah would rise from the dead; and, if John the Baptist had given an affirmative answer to their question, it would have been, in the context, a falsehood. Therefore, he denied that he was Elijah, in the sense in which the question had been asked. Thus, even if John the Baptist knew that he was "that Elijah," and it may be assumed that he did know it, the gross literalization of the promised return of Elijah in the popular mind would have made it impossible for him to have answered affirmatively.

Art thou the prophet? ... is a reference to the prophet like unto Moses (**Deuteronomy 18:15-18**) who must be identified with the Messiah. This question therefore covers the same ground as the query, "Art thou the Christ?" which had already been answered. It was the old reporter's trick of asking the same question again in different words, and John again answered it negatively.

Verse 22

They said therefore unto him, Who art thou? that we may give an answer to them that sent us. What sayest thou of thyself?

Them that sent us ... are identified as Jews (**John 1:19**), and Pharisees (**John 1:24**), that sect, due to the nature of their party, being far more concerned with the promised coming of a Messiah than were the Sadducees, and likewise with what they suspected might be the literal resurrection of Elijah. The Sadducees did not believe in any resurrection.

The manner and content of the questioning here, as well as the appeal to the prophecy of Isaiah, a moment later, are in full harmony with the apostle's statement that the Pharisees had initiated this investigation. The supposition that the Sadducees made up the whole body of the Sanhedrin has

never been proved; and for men to make such a supposition the grounds of declaring John in error here is illogical. People know too little about Democrats and Republicans in our own times to make any assumption that we have any thorough knowledge of the political intricacies of the Jewish Sanhedrin in the times of Christ. In fact, all that we really know is the information contained here in the Gospel, which came from inspired sources and not from contemporary human records, which, it may be assumed, have been colored and distorted in every conceivable manner through the bias or ignorance of uninspired writers.

Having answered their threefold question regarding Christ, Elijah, and that Prophet, negatively, John next responded with an affirmative statement regarding himself.

Verse 23

He said, I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord, as said Isaiah the prophet.

The prophecy mentioned here is **Isaiah 40:3**, and thus John laid claim to the office of the harbinger of the Messiah. The synoptics applied this prophecy to John the Baptist (**Matthew 3:3; Mark 1:3; Luke 3:4**).

Verse 24

And they had been sent from the Pharisees. And they asked him and said unto him, Why then baptizest thou, if thou art not the Christ, neither Elijah, neither the prophet?

From the Pharisees ... This mention of that sect was to explain why the investigation continued with such persistence. Had only the Sadducees been involved, it is inconceivable that those hypocrites would have proceeded any further than John's admission that he was not the Messiah. Certainly, they would never have concerned themselves about any possibility of John's being Elijah raised from the dead! They did not believe in the resurrection. Therefore, John the apostle explained the extent and duration of the interview by noting the Pharisees' part in it.

It was the baptizing and not the preaching which caused the greatest perplexity in John's questioners. The extensive mass cleansing of the whole nation through repentance and baptism clearly suggested the great cleansing that had been prophesied by Ezekiel of the times of the Messiah (**Ezekiel 36:25**; 37:23); why then was John doing it if indeed he was not Christ nor the kind of forerunner they expected to precede the Christ? This query shows that they had missed completely the implication of John's quoting **Isaiah 40:3**, in which he made it clear that he was actually the forerunner of the Messiah, but not the literal Elijah they had expected.

Verse 26

John answered them saying, I baptize in water: in the midst of you standeth one whom ye know not, even he that cometh after me, the latchet of whose shoes I am unworthy to loose.

Hendriksen's comment on this is:

Why does he baptize? He answers that while he administers the sign (water), he does not claim to be able to bestow the thing signified (the Holy Spirit). That is Messiah's high prerogative, and that glorious One has even now arrived upon the scene of Israel's history, though they have not recognized him.^[38]

Such a comment misses the point. John was answering the question of why he was baptizing; but, if Hendriksen's comment is what John meant, he did not answer the question at all. The thought that "Well, my baptism is only a sign" is no reason at all for baptizing, but is rather a good reason for not baptizing! It will be noted that there is no reference to the Holy Spirit in this passage.

I baptize in water ... Note that it was IN, not **WITH**, water that John baptized, indicating immersion as the action which constituted baptism. John repeated the fact already mentioned by his questioners that he was baptizing people, and then he told them why he was baptizing. Why was it? The Messiah had already arrived but had not yet been publicly revealed. Hence, it was appropriate that the herald should be about the business of cleansing the nation through repentance and baptism, that being God's way of making ready a people prepared to receive the Messiah. The concise answer of why John was baptizing is in the last clause of this verse, "In the midst of you standeth one whom ye know not."

ENDNOTE:

[38] William Hendriksen, op. cit., p. 97.

Verse 28

These things were done in Bethany beyond Jordan, where John was baptizing.

The place names mentioned in John are so numerous, yet always incidental to the main narrative, that their very profusion compels the conclusion that the author was writing truth which belonged to his immediate knowledge and recollection. The scenes of John's baptizing were Bethany, as here, and Aenon (**John 3:23**). Since there were two Bethanys, the other being only a couple of miles from Jerusalem, he distinguished this one as being "beyond Jordan." The exact location of this Bethany is not certain. Hendriksen placed it thirteen miles below Lake Galilee and twenty miles southeast of Nazareth and presented convincing arguments why the more southerly location near the Dead Sea, as shown on some of the old maps, is probably wrong. This verse concluded the apostle's record of the first one of those four great days which lived in his memory.

Verse 29

On the morrow he seeth Jesus coming unto him, and saith Behold, the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world!

EVENTS OF THE SECOND DAY

The previous verses of this chapter give the historical situation leading to the call of the first disciples, one of the key elements in that situation having been the delegation from the religious community in Jerusalem and the ensuing discussion with John the Baptist, which resulted in a clearer definition of the true status of John as the harbinger of the Messiah and the forerunner of one even greater than himself. The humble acceptance of the great herald of such a secondary and subordinate position was exceedingly significant in the eyes of his more perceptive disciples,

especially to the deeply spiritual author of this Gospel; and their consequent awakening to the expectation of the Greater One paved the way for all that followed.

On the morrow ... the very next day following the events just related, John saw Jesus coming toward him, exactly at the most propitious moment. The Lord Jesus Christ was exactly on schedule; and his providential appearance before John and his followers at that precise juncture of events must have been due to the supernatural knowledge and wisdom of our Lord. The great Immerser was in exactly the right frame of mind to identify the Saviour, and his most able disciples had been fully prepared, emotionally and intellectually, to transfer their love and loyalty to Jesus Christ. Far more than merely accidental circumstances are evident in these momentous developments.

Behold the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world ... Thus John the Baptist hailed Jesus of Nazareth as the long expected Messiah of Israel and the Saviour of all mankind. From the gates of Paradise until that dramatic instant, the sacrificial lamb had been the paramount and dominating feature of the worship of God throughout both the patriarchal and Mosaic dispensations; and John's thundering announcement which identified Jesus Christ as the antitype of the passover lamb, and even of the lambs slain previously from the foundation of the world, was as crucial and important as any utterance ever made on earth. The author of this Gospel, at that moment one of John's disciples, heard that epic announcement in all of its dimensions and overtones. It was a truth that thundered and reverberated in his mind throughout a lifetime; and this narrative of the exact circumstances of its revelation is one of the richest heritages of our holy faith.

In this first announcement of the great office of the Son of God, it was his relation to man's sin that was emphasized. He "taketh away the sin of the world!" Christ did not come to solve the political problems of Israel, nor to break the back of Roman tyranny, nor for bringing improvements in agriculture, trade, medicine, or education, nor for any similar thing. Christ came to redeem people from sin. This is the only problem incapable of solution by the race of man; but this problem is so malignant and pervasive that it requires to be solved first, before the final solution of all the other problems can be achieved, thus being the one great need of mortal man that it should be truly solved.

CHRIST AND MAN'S SIN

Sin is man's worst enemy, his greatest problem, all human wretchedness issuing from a single fountain of bitter waters, that of sin. The glory of Jesus our Lord lies in what he does to sin.

A. He reveals sin. People would never have known their sin adequately had it not been for Christ. Paul could face his enemies and, speaking from a human standpoint, say, "I know nothing against myself" (**1 Corinthians 4:4**); but, when he contemplated the work of Jesus on the cross, he had a far different estimate of himself, saying, "Jesus came to save sinners ... of whom I am chief!"

(**1 Timothy 1:15**). Every person who brings his heart to Christ will find it bleeding from a consciousness of sin; and this effective work of revealing man's sin constitutes a step in their redemption.

B. Christ ransoms from sin. Wonderful is the word that Christ ransoms people from sin. In this world's terrible night of darkness and despair, how grandly do the words go marching in the gloom: ransomed, redeemed, propitiated, bought with a price, saved by the blood of Christ (**1 Timothy 2:6**; **1 John 4:10**; **2:1,2**; **Romans 3:25**; **1 Peter 1:18,19**; and **1 Corinthians 6:20**).

C. Christ removes sin far away. He takes away the guilt, the penalty and the practice of sin. He is the sin-bearer for all humanity. God "laid upon him the iniquity of us all" (**Isaiah 53:6**). He bore our sins in his own body on the tree, thus accomplishing what no typical lamb ever achieved. Only in Christ Jesus is there an effective de-contaminator for human transgression. In the tragic sleep-

walking scene from Shakespeare's Macbeth, following the murder of the king, Lady Macbeth cried because of the blood on her hand:

Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather
The multitudinous seas incarnadine, Making the green one red All the perfumes of Arabia
cannot sweeten this little hand![³⁹]

It is the blood of Christ alone which is able to do what all the oceans and the perfumes of Arabia cannot do - make the guilty innocent!

D. Christ overrules sin for the good of those who love him. "Where sin increased, there grace abounded all the more" (**Romans 5:20**). Under the great Mormon organ in the Salt Lake City Tabernacle, a great pit was opened up to give the organ deeper tones. Similarly, people who have been scarred and burned in the ugly pits of sin are often more **CONSCIOUS** of God's grace than some who have led more conventional lives. Perhaps in this is explained why the publicans and harlots entered into the kingdom of heaven before the Pharisees. Sin is overruled to the benefit of those who truly love God by increasing their appreciation for God's holiness, and through the discipline of sorrows suffered because of sin. Through tragic experience, people learn what they should have known already, that God's word is indeed true, and that "the wages of sin is death." God's teaching with regard to sin is confirmed and verified by every sin ever committed by either saint or sinner. This endlessly-repeated proof and verification of God's word is a strong inducement to fidelity.

E. Christ remits sin. He forgives it! This is the great difference between the new covenant and the old covenant (**Jeremiah 31:31-35**), that God indeed forgives sin, removing it as far as the east is from the west, as far as the bottom of the sea, forgiving sin so completely that God will not even remember it any more! How wonderful is the thought that God will remember sin no more, especially when people themselves are unable to forget it.

The technical question of which lamb John had in mind, whether the paschal lamb or the daily sacrifice, is resolved by including all of them. As Hendriksen stated it, "Were not all these types fulfilled in Christ, and was not he the antitype to whom they all pointed?"[⁴⁰]

It is particularly significant that Christ was thus presented as the Saviour of all people, and not merely as the Saviour of a class or nation. "The sin of the world ..." identifies the grand theater of our Lord's redemptive service, making it encompass all mankind, but only in the sense of salvation's being available to all, and not in the sense of the universal procurement of salvation.

[³⁹] William Shakespeare, Macbeth, Act II, Scene 2line 61, and Act V, Scene 1line 56.

[⁴⁰] William Hendriksen, op. cit., p. 98,

Verse 30

This is he of whom I said, After me cometh a man who is become before me: for he was before me.

Every line of the fourth Gospel is directed to establishing the identity of Christ as God incarnated, or God come in the flesh; and this verse can be true only in that context. John the Baptist was older than Christ, having been conceived six months earlier (**Luke 1:36**), and it could be true that Christ was "before" John the Baptist only with respect to his eternal existence, a truth John had already recorded in **John 1:15**.

Verse 31

And I knew him not; but that he should be made manifest to Israel, for this cause came I baptizing in water.

These words of John the Baptist are remarkable for a number of reasons. He was a cousin of Jesus and as well acquainted with him as it was possible to be, from the purely human standpoint; and the meaning here has to be that John did not know that Jesus was the Messiah. He did know, however, that the Messiah was soon to appear, that he would shortly be manifested to Israel, and that his own heavenly commission was definitely connected with the appearance and identification of the Messiah. The words here are the equivalent of saying, "I did not know who Jesus really is, any more than you did." This and the following verses reveal the means by which John himself was enabled certainly to identify Jesus Christ as the Messiah.

Verse 32

And John bare witness, saying, I have beheld the Spirit descending as a dove out of heaven; and it abode upon him. And I knew him not: but he that sent me to baptize in water, he said unto me, Upon whomsoever thou shalt see the Spirit descending, and abiding upon him, the same is he that baptizeth in the Holy Spirit.

In order for John to be able to see the Holy Spirit, it was necessary for the Spirit to assume a physical form; and, appropriately, it was that of a dove, long the symbol of peace and goodness. For a fuller comment on this symbolism of the dove, see my Commentary on Matthew, [Matthew 3:16](#). Of course, this was not a mere case of a bird lighting on Jesus for a moment, a phenomenon which, while rare, is occasionally experienced by men. Much more was involved. The heavens were opened, and the dove visibly descended from on high, an action totally dissociated from the invariable flight pattern of a dove, which is always horizontal. Also, there was a voice out of heaven ([Matthew 3:17](#)), the same being the testimony of God himself that "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased." In addition to all this, the Spirit-dove remained visibly upon the Lord. Thus, Jesus was absolutely identified as the one who would baptize in the Holy Spirit, with the necessary deduction that the same was the Messiah. For discussion on the subject of baptism, see my Commentary on Matthew, [Matthew 3:11](#), and my Commentary on Hebrews, [Hebrews 6:1,2](#).

Without the witness of this Gospel, people might never have known how John the Baptist arrived at the conviction that Jesus was indeed the Christ. The apostle John, one of the great herald's disciples at first, was enlightened on this by John himself, and was, moreover, an eye-witness of the fulfillment of the key prophecy of identification.

Verse 34

And I have seen, and have borne witness that this is the Son of God.

These words are the climax of the witness of John the Baptist and form here a direct quotation from him; but they also stand as the witness of the apostle John as well, being a part of the testimony which had convinced him that Jesus is the Son of God. The expression "Son of God" means the divine Messiah and was understood by all the Jews as having that unique and absolute

meaning; and it was because Jesus confessed under oath that he was the Son of God ([John 19:7](#)) that the Sanhedrin condemned him to death. These and other considerations require, therefore, that "Son of God" be understood in its most exalted sense.

Verse 35

Again on the morrow John was standing, and two of his disciples.

EVENTS OF THE THIRD DAY

The actions described in this chapter occurred on successive days; and the memory of every word and action was indelibly engraved upon the apostle's heart. The things here described changed his life, and every detail of those momentous events was ineffaceably etched upon the curtains of memory. He vividly recalled, in its steepest detail, the time when, the place where, and the manner, words, and attitudes of every participant in those epic scenes. From the clear vantage point of a near-century of life, the apostle clearly saw that all humanity had there made a pivot; and not one meaningful detail of all that occurred had been lost by the marvelous witness who authored this Gospel. God did indeed choose His instruments.

From the impact of these words, it is clear that John was recalling, through the power of memory, exactly where he and that other disciple had been standing, with their beloved teacher John the Baptist, on the day following that world-shaking identification of Jesus of Nazareth as God's divine Messiah.

On the morrow ... that is, on the very next day, he and that other disciple were standing there with John the Baptist; and Jesus walked in that vicinity, not toward them, as on the previous day, but near them; and, once more, John the Baptist, perhaps a little sadly, due to the impending departure of some of his most discerning disciples, thundered the identification of Jesus as the Lamb of God, doing so as emphatically and bluntly as possible.

Verse 36

And he looked upon Jesus as he walked, and saith, Behold the Lamb of God!

It was as if John the Baptist had said, "There! I have identified him. There is no more for me to say. It is now up to you." John, the apostle-to-be, and that other disciple took the decisive step. They followed Jesus!

Verse 37

And the two disciples heard him speak, and they followed Jesus. And Jesus turned, and beheld them following, and saith unto them, What seek ye? And they said unto him, Rabbi (which is to say, being interpreted, Teacher), where abidest thou?

With reference to the identity of these two disciples, the words of Hovey are logical. One of them, of course, was Andrew, as revealed in [John 1:40](#). Hovey said:

But who was the unnamed companion of Andrew? Probably the Evangelist himself. For: (1) the narrative in this place is very particular and graphic, making it probable that the writer was an eye-witness. (2) The writer of such a narrative would have been sure to mention the name of the other disciple, unless there had been some reason for withholding it. (3) The writer of this Gospel never refers to himself by name, and the same feeling which led him to withhold his name elsewhere accounts for his withholding it here.^[41]

What seek ye? ... was an appropriate response by Jesus to the fact of their following him; but their response was more timid and hesitant than we might have expected. Instead of declaring flatly that "We understand that you are the Messiah and would like to follow you," they politely addressed him as "Rabbi," and inquired where he lived! John's explanation of the term "Rabbi" indicates that the greater part of the Christian world to whom this was written was Gentile. The hardening of Israel, as prophesied by Jesus and discussed in the writings of Paul, had long ago occurred; and thus the "Jews," as referred to in this Gospel, are to be identified as the unbelieving and antagonistic portion of Israel.

Rabbi ... By the use of this title, and by their inquiry as to where the Master lived, the two disciples clearly indicated a desire to know more of that Person of whom their beloved teacher had made such amazing statements. The Lord rewarded their interest and desire by his encouragement.

ENDNOTE:

[41] Alvah Hovey, op. cit., p. 78.

Verse 39

He saith unto them, Come and ye shall see. They came, therefore, and saw where he abode; and they abode with him that day: and it was about the tenth hour.

Jesus thus rewarded the two disciples by inviting them home with him, which resulted in their spending the whole day. From this statement, coupled with the information that it was about the tenth hour, it has been supposed that John was here using the Roman method of counting time, thus making it about 10:00 A.M. when this occurred. The Jews numbered the hours of the day from 6:00 A.M., and by their method of reckoning, the tenth hour would have been 4:00 P.M.; and it would appear inappropriate to refer to the time remaining as "that day." The significant thing to note in this place, however, is the fact that the author recalled so exactly the very hour of the day when these events took place. The reason for this was the fact that it was the very day and hour that brought him into the presence of the Holy One of God, a presence that changed John's life and changed the world. No wonder the events and words of that day were burned into his memory forever.

Verse 40

One of the two that heard John speak, and followed him, was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother.

It is incorrect to find in this prior mention of Andrew any diminution of the place and honor ascribed to the apostle Peter in the New Testament; because, despite the fact that the simple chronology of events required Andrew's being named first; even so, he was introduced as Simon

Peter's brother. Also, the special recognition of Peter by the Lord is evident in this paragraph which records the giving of the new name to Peter.

Here in this chapter is recorded where it all began. The apostle John and Simon Peter's brother Andrew were the first disciples of the Lord Jesus; and John's detailed account of the events and circumstances of those four days which began with the deputation to John the Baptist from Jerusalem is of the greatest interest and significance. Like the tiny stream that issues from Lake Itasca, Minnesota, to become the mighty Father of Waters (the Mississippi River), this first hesitant and timid approach to Jesus reveals the intimate and personal beginning of that stream of numberless millions swelling the ranks of his disciples in all ages.

Verse 41

He findeth first his own brother Simon, and saith unto him, We have found the Messiah (which is, being interpreted, Christ).

He findeth first ... The exact meaning of the word "first" here is thought to be difficult; but the exact shade of various meanings is really of no great consequence. Hendriksen said:

The meaning is that two men (Andrew and John), having spent a day with Jesus, became so impressed with what they found in him that they became missionaries. Each started out to find his own brother. Andrew, as the first, found his brother Peter. It is implied that John as the second missionary found his brother James. However, in keeping with his delicate reserve, John did not say that directly.^[42]

We have found the Messiah ... implies that Andrew, Peter, James and John had been earnestly expecting and waiting for the Messiah and that they had been searching to find him, their attitude of expectancy having resulted from John the Baptist's preaching, "Repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (**Matthew 3:2**). Thus, the prior attitude of those first disciples accounts for their rapid progress. They first addressed the Lord as "Rabbi"; and, after only a day with him, they affirmed that he was the Messiah. Note that John again interpreted the Jewish term "Messiah" for his Gentile readers.

CONCERNING ANDREW

Lockyer mentioned the old tradition that this apostle was crucified "because of his rebuke of Aegeas for obstinate adherence to idolatry. He was nailed to a cross in the form of an "X." hence the name St. Andrew's Cross."^[43]

The greatest contribution of this apostle would appear to have been the exercise of his ability to enlist others. He enlisted his own brother, Peter; he discovered the lad with the barley loaves and fish; he, along with Philip, brought the Greeks to Jesus; and, upon at least one occasion, he was associated with the "inner three" in a private meeting with Jesus (**Mark 13:3**). There is no evidence that he ever resented the greater prominence of his brother Peter; and he never tried to parlay that relationship into any special privilege for himself, as did James and John. As one of the twelve apostles, his name is inscribed upon the foundations of the Eternal City coming down from God out of heaven (**Revelation 21:14**).

[42] William Hendriksen, op. cit., p. 106.

[43] Herbert Lockyer, All the Men of the Bible (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Company, 1958), p. 49.

Verse 42

He brought him unto Jesus. Jesus looked upon him and said, Thou art Simon the son of John: thou shalt be called Cephas (which is by interpretation, Peter).

Thou art Simon the son of John ... These are the exact words Jesus used in his confession of Peter (**Matthew 16:13f**), and the Lord's use of them here appears to have been prompted by his divine foreknowledge of the great confession that Peter would make.

Thou shalt be called Cephas ... This new name assigned to Andrew's brother means "stone" or "pebble"; and for the connection this has with the foundation of the church and such things as the so-called primacy of this apostle, reference is made to extensive discussions of these and related subjects in my Commentary on Matthew, pp. 246-253.

"Cephas" is a Syriac word, and is equivalent to the Greek word [**@Petros**], which we render "Peter." Both mean a stone, a portion of a rock. [**@Petra**] means a rock, [**@Petros**] a piece of rock. Peter was the latter, not the former.^[44]

The Lord's perfect understanding of Peter's character the moment he saw him was commented upon by Ryle, thus:

Our Lord here displayed his perfect knowledge of all persons, names, and things. He needed not that any should tell him who and what a person was. Such knowledge was supposed by the Jews to be a peculiar attribute of the Messiah. He was to be one of "quick understanding" (**Isaiah 11:3**) It is a peculiar attribute of God, who alone knows the hearts of men. Our Lord's perfect knowledge of all hearts was one among many proofs of his divinity. His same knowledge appears again in his address to Nathaniel (**John 1:47**), and in his conversation with the Samaritan woman (**John 4:18**).
[45]

[44] J. C. Ryle, Expository Thoughts on the Gospels (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan), John I, p. 76.

[45] J. C. Ryle, op. cit., p. 76.

Verse 43

On the morrow he was minded to go forth into Galilee, and he findeth Philip: and Jesus saith unto him, Follow me.

EVENTS OF THE FOURTH DAY

On the morrow ... This indicates the fourth successive day of the epic events here narrated by John. Critics have sometimes alleged a lack of progression in John; but the progression of events that occurred in these four days was vividly presented in their exact chronological sequence. This verse brings us to the moment when Jesus was ready to leave Bethany beyond Jordan and go to Cana in Galilee where he would perform the beginning of his miracles; but, before his departure two more disciples would be added to the little company. It is not necessary to inquire how the Lord found Philip, who, in all probability, was one of that small select group of John's followers who

were expecting the Messiah. Jesus knew him, no less than he knew Peter and the other apostles; and therefore he called him.

CONCERNING PHILIP

Whereas Andrew and John found the Lord, the case of Philip was different in that the Lord found him; but the genuine nature of his discipleship was evidenced at once by his mission which resulted in the enrollment of Nathaniel in the sacred fellowship. Only Philip and Andrew of the Twelve had Greek names, which might explain the approach of the Greeks through these disciples ([John 12:21](#)). Lockyer noted that Philip was apparently slow to apprehend spiritual truth.

Philip experienced familiar friendship with Jesus, for did he not call him by name? Slow to apprehend, he missed much; Jesus had nothing but kind words for him ([John 14:8](#)). Tradition tells us that Philip died a martyr at Hierapolis.^[46]

There is no Scriptural reference to Philip after Pentecost, which leads to doubt that any great success attended his preaching. It would seem that he was more concerned with practical objections to spiritual projects than the others. It was Philip who counted up the cost of the bread that would have been needed to feed the five thousand. Like many in all ages, he failed to take into account the power of the Lord. The tradition that Philip was the man who wanted first to go and bury his father ([Matthew 8:21](#)) is not authentic, but it seems to fit his type of thinking. As Goodspeed said, "We know little or nothing about the fifth apostle except his name."^[47] It is known, however, that he was one of the Twelve, in fact the fifth in that sacred list, that he was a citizen of Bethsaida, the hometown of Peter and Andrew and James and John, and that he was faithful to the Lord. This is far more than enough to justify the inscription of his name upon one of the foundations of the Eternal City ([Revelation 21:14](#)). Added to that is the precious information revealed here regarding the enlistment of Nathaniel.

^[46] Herbert Lockyer, op. cit., p. 277.

^[47] Edgar J. Goodspeed, *The Twelve* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1939), p. 40.

Verse 44

Now Philip was from Bethsaida, of the city of Andrew and Peter.

The first five of the Twelve came from Bethsaida, which means "place of fish," the same being one of the ten cities, "Decapolis," situated on Lake Galilee, and not far from Capernaum. The fact of there having been two Bethsaidas should not be confusing; because then, as now, the same names were often used for different places. There were two Bethlehems, two Bethanys, etc. There are a hundred examples of the same practice in the United States: two Dallases, two Nashvilles, several Plymouths, Concords, etc. Both Bethsaidas were located near the north end of Galilee on opposite sides of Jordan, the western city being called Bethsaida Galilee, and the other Bethsaida Julius. Peloubet says of the eastern city that "It was built up into a beautiful city by Herod Philip and named by him after Julia, the daughter of the Roman emperor Tiberius Caesar."^[48] It was one of the cities singled out by Jesus Christ for his condemnation ([Matthew 11:21](#)).

ENDNOTE:

^[48] F. N. Peloubet, *Peloubet's Bible Dictionary* (Chicago: The John C. Winston Co., 1925), p. 91.

Verse 45

Philip findeth Nathaniel, and saith unto him, We have found him, of whom Moses in the law, and the prophets, wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.

All that Philip here said of Jesus is true: (1) that Moses and the prophets wrote of him, (2) that he was of Nazareth, and (3) that he was the son of Joseph, although the latter was true legally, not actually. Thus, any effort to force a "conflict" between John and the synoptics is nothing but a device of disbelief. Being the legal son of Joseph, "the husband of Mary" ([Matthew 1:16](#)), Jesus was quite correctly called Joseph's son, for it was through Joseph that Jesus was heir to the throne of David. Furthermore, Luke stated that "Jesus ... being (as was supposed) the son of Joseph" ([Luke 3:23](#)) was about thirty years of age when he began to teach, proving that at this time such a supposition was held by many. In the light of this, is it honest to say that John contradicts the synoptics, two of which (in the verses noted above) plainly refer to Jesus as the son of Joseph? The critics are wrong. Note too that this reference gives the words of Philip, not of the apostle John, suggesting the possibility that at the time Philip spoke he might indeed have thought that Jesus was actually Joseph's son, and that he was then not aware of anything supernatural in regard to Jesus' birth. On the very first day of Philip's discipleship, it would be fair to assume that there were some things that he did not yet know regarding Jesus.

CONCERNING NATHANIEL

Nathaniel, meaning the gift of God, is thought to be another name for Bartholomew, one of the Twelve. Hendriksen wrote:

John never mentions Bartholomew; the synoptics never mention Nathaniel; and thus it is altogether probable that the Nathaniel of John is the Bartholomew of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Nathaniel being his chief name and Bartholomew indicating his filial relationship, meaning son of Tolmai.^[49]

All Jewish names beginning with "Bar-" are patronymic, indicating parentage, such names including: Bartimaeus, Barabbas, Bar-jesus, Barnabas, and Bar-Jonah, the latter being the surname given Peter by Christ himself ([Matthew 16:17](#)). If, then, Nathaniel was the son of Tolmai, it would be no strange thing at all if the synoptics referred to him as Bartholomew. John, in going back to the very beginning of things, would naturally have used the name Nathaniel. This variation is no evidence at all against the apostleship of Nathaniel. As Ryle observed:

The objection that Nathaniel's name is never mentioned by Matthew, Mark, or Luke, is of no weight. No one of the three tells us that Peter was called Cephas; and only Matthew gives Jude (the brother of James) the name of Lebbaeus.^[50]

If Nathaniel was not indeed an apostle, the same man as Bartholomew, how can it be explained that Christ appeared after his resurrection to a group of seven, and, of the five named, all were apostles except Nathaniel? That such a list of named apostles included one who was not an apostle is extremely unlikely ([John 21:2](#)).

Nathaniel was "of Cana in Galilee" ([John 2:12](#)); but this does not mean that he was the bridegroom at Cana when Jesus changed the water into wine, as tradition says, nor that he was one of the disciples on the road to Emmaus. As Goodspeed said of the sixth apostle:

Doubtless there was much to be said of him and his labors, but it had not struck the imagination or engaged the interest (of the Gospel writers). Yet it was precisely the

quiet, patient work of such obscure figures that mainly won the gospel battle in the world of the first century as it does also in the twentieth.^[51]

Jesus called Nathaniel an "Israelite indeed," meaning that he was of the "seed of Abraham," that is, the spiritual seed, and not merely of fleshly descent. This distinction between the genuine children of Abraham and the fleshly nation that claimed the patriarch as their ancestor is overwhelmingly significant and formed the major premise of Paul's letter to the Romans. By such a designation, Christ implied that it was something unusual and that the vast majority of the outward Israel were not true sons of Abraham.

^[49] William Hendriksen, op. cit., p. 20.

^[50] J. C. Ryle, op. cit., p. 88.

^[51] Edgar J. Goodspeed, op. cit., p. 41.

Verse 46

And Nathaniel said unto him, Can any good thing come out of Nazareth? Philip saith unto him, Come and see.

Dummelow said that "Nazareth was an obscure place and not even mentioned in the Old Testament";^[52] but it does not follow that Nazareth was extraordinarily wicked. Nathaniel's question does not mean that Nazareth was any more sinful than other similar places; but it indicates that Nazareth simply did not fit the preconceived notions that people had about where to look for the Messiah. The popular proverb regarding Nazareth, as many popular proverbs are, was quite inaccurate and unfair. Gath-hepher, an adjoining village, was the home of Jonah, first of the Old Testament prophets and a conspicuous type of Jesus (**2 Kings 14:25**), but there is no evidence that anyone in that generation even knew it.

It was true, of course, that prophecy had named Bethlehem as the place where the Messiah would be born, but nothing was said about his continued residence there. Perhaps the obscurity and insignificance of Nazareth, more than other things, accounted for Nathaniel's incredulity that so ordinary a village should be the home of the Messiah. If that is not the explanation of Nathaniel's remark, then, as Adam Clarke suggested:

We may suppose that Nazareth at this time was so abandoned that no good could be expected from those who dwelt in it, and that its wickedness had passed into a proverb: can any good thing come out of Nazareth?^[53]

The passing centuries have not allayed the wonder that the Saviour of all people should have spent thirty years in a place like Nazareth. Horatius Bonar was impressed with the fact that many of the most distinguished places mentioned in the New Testament were unknown in the Old Testament, and that apparently Christ avoided the places like Hebron, Bethel, Shiloh, and even Jerusalem in the sense that he never spent a night there, except as a prisoner, retiring each night to Bethany. Regarding this, Bonar said:

In choosing these unknown places for his Son, God showed that it was not former privilege, nor ancient sanctity, nor a venerable name that could avail anything with him, or attract his favor. Christ was sent to new places, where, so far as we know, the foot of patriarch, judge, prophet, or king had never been; showing that no city was so favored as to exclude others, and that all cities, as well as all souls, had a share in his divine regards.^[54]

Come and see ... Nothing dispels prejudice and clears away misunderstanding like personal investigation; and, of all the challenges ever addressed to prejudiced or skeptical men, none was ever any more effective than this, "Come and see!" It is true now, as always, that the only unbelievers are those who have not made a fair and personal search of the evidence. Clarke's profound statement on this theme is:

He who candidly examines the evidence of the religion of Christ will infallibly become a believer. No history ever published among men has so many external and internal proofs of authenticity as this has. A man should judge of nothing by first appearances, or human prejudices. Who are they who cry out, "The Bible is a fable"? Those who have never read it, or read it only with the fixed purpose to gainsay it.^[55]

[52] J. R. Dummelow, op. cit., p. 777.

[53] Adam Clarke, Commentary on the Whole Bible (London: Mason and Lane, 1837), Vol. V, p. 521.

[54] Horatius Bonar, Family Sermons (New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1863), p. 49.

[55] Adam Clarke, op. cit., Vol. V, p. 520.

Verse 47

Jesus saw Nathaniel coming unto him, and saith of him, Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile.

Israelite indeed ... See under **John 1:45** for comments on this. The mention of Jacob's dream at the end of this episode makes it likely that Hendriksen's analysis is correct. He wrote:

In the light of the context ... Jesus is here thinking of Jacob ... The employment of trickery for selfish advantage characterized not only Jacob (**Genesis 30:37-43**), but also his descendants ... A really honest, sincere Israelite had become such an exception that at the approach of Nathaniel Jesus exclaimed, "Look, truly an Israelite in whom deceit does not exist"^[56]

ENDNOTE:

[56] William Hendriksen, op. cit., p. 110.

Verse 48

Nathaniel saith unto him, Whence knowest thou me? Jesus answered and said unto him, Before Philip called thee, when thou wast under the fig tree, I saw thee.

Many a person would merely have accepted the compliment and kept his thoughts to himself, but Nathaniel expressed his amazement and asked the source of Jesus' knowledge. Christ's answer convinced him that the Saviour's knowledge was not casual or superficial, but that it was absolute and perfect. There are no secrets from God. "All things are naked and laid open before the eyes of him with whom we have to do" (**Hebrews 4:13**). The sacred writers made a great deal of this quality of omniscience on the part of Jesus. Even on the night of the betrayal, it was that quality in the Lord which evoked their confession of faith (**Matthew 16:18-29**).

Verse 49

Nathaniel answered him, Rabbi, thou art the Son of God: thou art the King of Israel.

This confession hailed Jesus as the divine Son of God, which being true, also entitled him as the King of Israel. John's introduction of this full understanding of Jesus' Messiahship so early in his narrative does not contradict the subsequent failure of the apostles to maintain this high level of conviction. The examples cited in this chapter should be viewed as resulting from the generally accepted opinion which derived from the preaching of John the Baptist and his unqualified identification of Jesus Christ as the Lamb of God. Satan launched a counterattack at once; the Pharisees propounded plausible arguments why Jesus could not be the Messiah; and Jesus himself proved not to be the political figure most were expecting; in consequence of all this, the road to true belief grew very difficult as the years of the Master's ministry unfolded. Despite this, there is no doubt at all that the divine Messiahship of Jesus was enthusiastically believed and confessed from the very first, notwithstanding the fact that many who so confessed him did not have the slightest understanding of the full implications of the truth they confessed.

Verse 50

Jesus answered and said unto him, Because I said unto thee, I saw thee under the fig tree, believest thou? thou shalt see greater things than these.

In this verse, Jesus seemed to hint of a trace of superficiality in so great a confession upon such limited evidence. The confession, true as it was, reflected the shallowness of the popular opinion regarding Jesus. See under preceding verse.

What are those greater things Jesus promised that Nathaniel would see? (1) He had seen an example of Jesus' penetrating supernatural knowledge; but, in the future, he would see that knowledge employed in the achievement of human redemption, a far greater thing. (2) He had seen the truth that Jesus is the Son of God; but, in the future, he would see Christ also as the Son of man and the achiever of reconciliation between God and all humanity. (3) He had seen Jesus as King of Israel; but, in the future, he would come to know that Christ is not merely King of Israel, but King of all creation, King of kings, and Lord of lords (**1 Timothy 6:15**).

Verse 51

And he saith unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Ye shall see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man.

Ryle noted that the expression "Verily, verily" is unique to this Gospel, being used in it 25 times, always by Jesus, and having the equivalent meaning of "Amen, amen." It always implied a solemn and emphatic statement of some great truth. No other New Testament writer ever used this solemn double "Amen."^[57]

But what is the great truth enunciated here? The words certainly point to the vision of Jacob who saw the ladder from earth to heaven with angelic traffic in both directions; and, if a spiritual

meaning is sought, which seems mandatory, Jesus here identified himself as the Ladder bridging the gulf between God and man. In Nathaniel's confession, the prominence of "King of Israel" pointed to the secular and political views usually held regarding the promised Messiah, and in this verse Jesus emphasized the great spiritual objectives of his earthly visitation. (See [Genesis 28:12](#).)

The emphasis upon "Son of man" here, rather than upon "Son of God" was probably due to Jesus' purpose of reserving emphasis on the latter until the time of Peter's confession ([Matthew 16:13f](#)). The meaning of both titles carries the implication of Christ's deity; but "Son of God," in the popular mind, was too closely associated with "King of Israel," in the exact manner of Nathaniel's confession; and it was not time for Jesus to challenge the Pharisees by using "Son of God." A little further attention to the title Son of man is in order.

THE SON OF MAN

The title "Son of man" was used at least forty times by Jesus, twelve times in this Gospel; and, with the exception of Stephen's use of it ([Acts 7:56](#)), it is found only in our Lord's reference to himself. There are two questions of the deepest significance that arise from Jesus' use of this title: (1) did he use it in such a manner as to diminish his claim of absolute divinity? and (2) why did he favor this title as distinguished from "Son of God," which was more popularly associated generally with the coming Messiah?

The answer to the first question is an emphatic negative. Jesus meant by the title "Son of man" to affirm his deity and Godhead just as dogmatically as the title "Son of God" could have done it, but with the additional advantage of stressing his unique relationship to the human race as well. It is evident that **THE** Son of man cannot be any mortal being. Dummelow pointed out that the Greek words so translated cannot mean "A Son of man," but definitely and emphatically, "**THE** Son of man."^[58]

In this conversation with Nathaniel, it is evident that Jesus intended the title "Son of man" to be understood in exactly the same sense as "Son of God." This follows from the fact that, taking the conversation as a whole, the two titles are used synonymously and interchangeably, without any suggestion whatever that Christ rejected either "Son of God" or "King of Israel" as being properly applied to himself. It is as though our Lord had said, "Yes, Nathaniel, you are correct; but for the present, let us use the title Son of man."

Why did Jesus prefer this title? "Son of God" was a title that carried with it; in the popular mind, the meaning King of Israel, a fact proved by Nathaniel's usage of the two together just a moment before; and it would have been disastrous for the Lord to have allowed the multitudes to crown him "king," a thing many of them were eager to do. It was clearly for the purpose of preventing such a thing that Jesus so often used the other title, "Son of man," a title which was not generally known and understood by the people and which was thus free of the connotation of an earthly kingship of Israel. It was absolutely imperative for our Lord to have avoided any semblance of claiming the literal Solomonic throne of Israel; for, if he had been unsuccessful in such avoidance, the Pharisees might have been able to get him crucified for sedition. It will be remembered that that is exactly what they tried to do anyway; but so completely had Jesus thwarted them, that they finally admitted to Pilate that they desired his condemnation for claiming to be the Son of God ([John 19:7](#)). However, if Jesus had permitted the widespread use of that title earlier, some radical mob would have proclaimed him "King" and thus have provided sufficient grounds for a charge of sedition.

That Jesus did positively intend that "Son of man" should be understood in a unique and supernatural sense is proved by his own use of the title, as follows:

He used the title: (1) in connection with his power to forgive sins ([Matthew 9:6](#)); (2) of his lordship over the sabbath ([Matthew 12:8](#)); (3) of his second advent in glory ([Matthew 19:28](#)); (4) of his

resurrection ([Matthew 17:23](#)); (5) of his seeking and saving that which is lost ([Luke 19:10](#)); (6) and of his coming in the final judgment ([Matthew 26:64](#)).

The frustrated hatred and enmity of the Pharisees at his trial before Caiaphas reached a point of frenzy over this very title. The Pharisees knew perfectly that "Son of man" was fully as adequate a title of the Messiah as was "Son of God"; but they were trying to trick Jesus into using the latter title, because of its popular but mistaken identification with an earthly kingship of Israel. At the climax of the trial, Caiaphas placed Jesus under oath, saying, "Tell us, art thou the Christ, the Son of God?" ([Matthew 26:63](#)). In his reply, Jesus used the other terms: "Thou shalt see the Son of man sitting at the right hand of power and coming on the clouds of heaven" ([Matthew 26:64](#)). The Sanhedrin accepted Son of man as equivalent to Son of God on that occasion and certified to Pilate that he had "made himself the Son of God" ([John 19:7](#)). From these and many other considerations, therefore, it must be concluded that the answer to the second question raised at the first of this analysis is that Jesus preferred "Son of man" because of that title's being free of any possible misrepresentation. The very learned, such as the Pharisees, well knew it as a valid and proper designation of the divine Messiah; but it is clear that the multitudes did not so recognize it ([John 12:34](#)).

Emil Von Ludwig's blasphemous biography, "The Son of Man," made this title the ground of his thesis that Jesus never claimed to be anything but a man; but his thesis is contradicted and disproved by the best of all judges of such a question, the Sanhedrin itself, which accepted the title, and so certified it to the governor, as equivalent in every way to "the Son of God." Besides that, Jesus' own use of it leaves no shadow of doubt that it carried the utmost implications of deity and Godhead, as well as connotations of his perfect and unique humanity.

Before leaving this matchless first chapter of John, the observation of Aretius, as quoted by Ryle, should be noted:

This chapter is singularly rich in names (epithets) applied to the Lord Jesus Christ. He numbers up the following twenty-one: The Word, God, Life, Light, The True Light, The Only Begotten of the Father, Full of Grace and Truth, Jesus Christ, The Only Begotten Son, The Lord, The Lamb of God, Jesus, A Man, The Son of God, Rabbi Teacher, Messiah, Christ, The Son of Joseph, The King of Israel, The Son of Man.^[59]

[57] J. C. Ryle, op. cit., p. 91.

[58] J. R. Dummelow, op. cit., p. 654.

[59] J. C. Ryle, op. cit., p. 89.

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