

“Who is this Jesus?”

John 1:19-51

September 28, 2008

Dr. Jerry Nelson

Appendices:

P. 15, *The Gospel of John*, Keener, p.465

P. 16, *The Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, Ridderbos on Kostenberger, p. 72-73

P. 17, *The Gospel of John*, Boice, p. 145

These past few weeks have not been good for the American economy.

- Some retired people have watched their retirement funds rapidly diminish.
- Baby-boomers have seen their early retirement 401k.s melting away.
- Even those who are not directly affected by the market listened to our President speak of the dire consequences for all of us if things don't change – companies downsizing or simply going out of business, people losing their jobs and all the rest that go with a recession or worse.

It's hard not to get caught up in the hand-wringing and despair-mongering going on around us.

In the midst of a presidential campaign real concerns are addressed and fears are exploited.

We hear, and to a certain extent it is true, that the future of the Republic hangs on this election.

Uncertainty is rampant, anxiety increases and we begin to worry about tomorrow in exactly the ways Jesus said not to.

In the midst of all the confusion and concern it is necessary to step back and ask ourselves again, “Are we human beings solely on our own or worse yet are we controlled by the hands of unseeing and uncaring fate?”

Or **is there** a sovereign and benevolent God who is ultimately in control of the American economy, the future of this country even our individual lives?

I believe that the answers to those questions and even Christianity itself really depend on the identity of Jesus?

I pointed out again last week that the only God you can know from creation and conscience is a holy, powerful and just God.

And knowing ourselves as duplicitous, selfish, and even hurtful to others, the last thing we need is to stand judged before that God.

But God **has** chosen to reveal himself as not only holy, powerful and just but also as loving, gentle and forgiving.

We can only know those things about God, however, as he has revealed himself in Holy Scriptures **and ultimately through his own Son.**

Hebrews 1:1-3 “In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets...but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son... (who) is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being.”

So **who Jesus is**, makes all the difference in the world and yes, even all the difference in today’s political and economic uncertainty.

So who is Jesus?

The author of the Gospel of John, which we are studying these weeks, spells out the purpose of his Gospel very succinctly in 20:31 “These are written that you might believe **that Jesus is the Christ the Son of God** and that by believing you might have life in his name.”

What the author is intending to do it to build a case.

But it will not happen all at once.

He will build event upon event, conversation upon conversation, and encounter upon encounter until we see the true identity of

Jesus not only revealed to our minds **but also to our willing hearts** – until we believe him to be who John demonstrates him to be.

In the introduction, which we saw last week, the author said “to all who **received** (Jesus), to those who **believed** in his name, he gave the right to become children of God...”

The author writes not only to confirm the believer, but also to convince the skeptic.

Some of you might actually become believers along the way.

I don't know when the evidence will pile sufficiently high for you to accept Jesus as the God you desperately need, but I pray that, by God's grace, it will happen.

What follows in the Gospel is the first of many evidences, the author will present, to prove to the willing person, who Jesus truly is.

He will start with the testimony of a witness almost as if in a courtroom.

The author of this Gospel emphasizes the issue of witness.

He will use the noun and verb form of the word “witness” 47 times.

The other Gospel writers combined only used the words 5 times. (Leon Morris, *Reflections on the Gospel of John*, 31)

The author will speak of the witness of people, the testimony of Jesus' actions, and the witness of the Scriptures but he starts with the testimony of John the Baptist.

In the early chapters of the Gospel of John we must carefully distinguish between two Johns –

The first is John the Baptist who in this Gospel is named simply John and the other is John the Apostle, who wrote the Gospel, who is not named at all.

So when you hear the name John in the reading of the text, understand it is a reference to an unusual preacher of the 1st Century, elsewhere called John the Baptist.

We learn of his unusual beginning in Luke 1:5-25.

- His father was a priest named Zechariah (not the OT prophet Zechariah).
- His mother, Elizabeth, was unable to have children – she was both barren and elderly.
- But the Lord intervened and told Zechariah that his wife would have a son and that unlike the custom of naming the boy after his father, Zechariah was to name him John.
- The angel added this prophecy regarding the boy: “And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”
- There is one other thing to note about this man – his mother was cousin to Mary the mother of Jesus who born just months later.

John and Jesus were cousins once removed.

Now it was told to John’s father that John was to be what was earlier called a Nazirite – one especially dedicated to God’s work.

Some of the signs of a Nazirite were that they didn’t cut their hair and they abstained from all alcohol.

So thirty years later here came this specially chosen man doing what he had been called to do.

Mark 1:4-6 “And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. ⁶ John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey

In the text we looked at last week, we learned more about John's ministry: John 1:6-8 "There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. ⁸He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.... ¹⁵"John testifies concerning him. He cries out, saying, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'"

As we saw last week from the Introduction to the book in verses 1-18, this John, the Baptist, was referring to Jesus when he spoke of the light and of "him who comes after me being before me."

Now when the author, the Apostle John, turns from the Introduction to begin the main body of his Gospel account, at verse 19, he begins with these words, "Now this was John's testimony..." referring to John the Baptist.

Would you stand please in honor of God's Word and listen and watch John 1:19-34 READ or DVD of John 1:19-54

How do you prove someone's identity?

Earlier this month an American dance entertainer with an Arab-sounding name tried to enter Israel.

The immigration officials made him do a dance routine to prove he was who he claimed to be.

I've heard of people who had to convince the Social Security Administration that they weren't dead.

In February of this year the Pennsylvania Times-Tribune carried a story about James Bethel. "Dead Man Buried in Paperwork" [http://www.thetimes-](http://www.thetimes-tribune.com/articles/2008/02/19/top_local_stories/19308518.txt)

[tribune.com/articles/2008/02/19/top_local_stories/19308518.txt](http://www.thetimes-tribune.com/articles/2008/02/19/top_local_stories/19308518.txt) Published: Tuesday, February 19, 2008

In 2005 he received a letter from the Social Security Administration that he would begin receiving payments late that year.

He received the first month's payment but not the next.

When he called to ask why, he was told "Our records show that you are dead."

He had to go to the Administration office to provide papers of identity to prove he was alive.

It appeared that all was cleared up.

But Mr. Bethel's resurrection was short-lived.

His wife received a notice from their bank the next month saying that she was to return that month's payment because her husband was dead.

Again they gave proof of identity and again thought it was taken care of.

But in April, 2007 Mr. Bethel received a letter from the IRS which read, "According to the information provided to the IRS by the Social Security Administration, the primary Social Security number entered on your tax return is that of a deceased individual."

The Bethels recently filled out what they called a "mountain" of paperwork to refinance their home only to be told by the bank that Mr. Bethel is deceased and that it is the bank's policy not to lend money to a dead person.

If you've been listening to the news very recently, apparently Lehman Brothers and others didn't have that policy.

In any case the Bethels gave up on the refinancing.

In February of this year the Bethels spoke with Social Security officials again and are optimistic they are finally close to resolving the issue.

James Bethel said he is dead tired of trying to prove he's alive.

The first witness for the identity of Jesus is John, the Baptist.

To me the key to understanding the author's primary purpose in this text is to see the way the author structures this section:

1:19 “Now this was John’s testimony” and 1:34 “I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God.”

The passage may remind us of other important issues, but the primary one is John’s testimony to the identity of Jesus.

To better understand the text I think it is necessary to keep two groups of people in mind

First are the people, like John the Baptist, Jesus disciples and the many others who lived before Jesus was crucified and rose again.

At times the story is told from their before-the-fact perspective.

At the time of the unfolding of these events the people involved didn’t know what was about to happen and we must read their comments and actions from that perspective.

The other group to bear in mind is made up of the author and his contemporaries who are recalling and reading these events 50 years later.

They have the advantage of knowing what eventually happened.

And in many cases they have the other Gospel accounts of Jesus’ life which were written earlier.

So as we consider the author’s contemporary audience of 50 years later we can also read the comments and actions from their perspective.

Let me illustrate that.

The people around John the Baptist didn’t know who John was and they were trying to find out.

But by the time the author writes the account we read, it is after the fact and the author’s readers know the story of who this man was.

The author can thus keep his descriptions short and still make his point.

So before hearing John's testimony, the author will establish John's bona fides, his credibility.

Why should we listen to this man?

- Back in 1:6 the author already told us John was "sent from God."
- We know from other sources he was a Levite and the son of a Priest.
- Great crowds were coming to see him and many were accepting his message.
- As with Barack Obama or Sarah Palin, this man seemed to come out of nowhere but became so obvious that even the country leaders had to take note of him.

CNN is doing interviews with anyone who will talk about him.

- The first readers would also know the background of this man which I referred to earlier and they would know John was a cousin of Jesus

My point is that this is no backwater preacher – John has become a national phenomenon.

This is as if "Billy Graham" were getting on the stand to vouch for someone's identity.

The witness is believable.

Therefore, we modern readers must not dismiss John's testimony easily.

Establishing the facts of any person or event in history stands on the credibility of those who report it.

For example, today we rely solely on people like Herodotus, Julius Caesar, Plutarch, Thucydides, Josephus and others to inform us of the ancient past.

This John is even more credible.

- He was actually there.
- He saw it with his own eyes.

- And being a relative of Jesus, John had reason to deny who Jesus was if it weren't true; John was not some starry-eyed, easily-swayed young disciple.

So the man on the stand is believable but what does he have to say about Jesus?

1:19 “the Jews of Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask (John) who he was.”

Given the hostility with which the religious leaders treated John and Jesus throughout this Gospel, it is likely that these men showed up to discredit John, not to honestly find out what he was up to.

But it is apparent from another Gospel that their questions stemmed from common understanding among Jewish people regarding the coming of the Messiah.

We read in Matthew 16:13-14, that “When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?”¹⁴ They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”

Jewish people of John's day held onto a belief that a Messiah would come and deliver them from the Roman occupation just as God through Moses had delivered them from the Egyptians centuries earlier.

Knowing the Scriptures, they knew that an Elijah of some kind and a Prophet would come before the Messiah came.

It isn't that they thought the Messiah would be God in human flesh, but that the Messiah would be, like King David, a specially chosen leader to liberate the people.

So apparently these interrogators start by asking John if he is the Messiah.

I have to believe that the question is sarcastic, but they ask it.

The author here describes John's answer as having an emphatic voice inflection, "I am not the Messiah."

Given what happens just the next day when Jesus appears, John is implying, maybe even likewise sarcastically, I am not the Messiah, but you ought to know who he is!

The interrogators go on to ask if he is any of the other people anticipated before the Messiah.

And with shorter and shorter answers, John says no.

It could bother us that elsewhere Jesus refers to John as the new Elijah and yet John says he's not. (Luke 1:17)

Apparently John did not yet see himself and his ministry quite that strongly but as we will see in his next response, he did know that he had a role to play.

Knocked off the offensive, the questioners have to ask "Then who are you? What do you say about yourself."

This is now where the author of the Gospel recalls for us the testimony of John the Baptist to who this man Jesus truly is.

One way of looking at this is to see John's testimony in three parts:

First, John says you must understand that I was sent by God to prepare people for the coming of the Messiah.

I am what Isaiah spoke of, "I am the voice of one calling in the desert, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'"

Even today when a head of state visits, we dress the place up. So in that day and Isaiah's day before, making the place more accessible, the roads smoother, would be done to prepare for the arrival of a dignitary.

But everyone knew this language was an analogy for preparing the way for the Messiah.

Remember that the Gospel's first readers would know John's miraculous background and that as we have already seen, he was sent by God.

The text says in 1:24-26 "Now some Pharisees who had been sent questioned him, 'Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?' 'I baptize with water,' John replied, 'but among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.'"

John's response may seem obscure to us, but not to his questioners.

In that day disciples were like servants to their teachers.

But there was one thing disciples were not asked to do; they were not asked to care for their teachers' dirty feet – that was a slave's job.

So John is saying, "I am not the Messiah, not even an Elijah or a Prophet but I tell you there is One who is already here, who will come after me, who is so great and so worthy that I, as noble as my mission may be and as popular as I may be, I am not even worthy to be his slave.

The point is not to make John less but to show that Jesus is even more worthy than a master.

John describes Jesus in superlative terms fitting only for deity. (Keener, 448)

So the first part of John's testimony is that, by God's calling, he anticipated the coming of the Messiah.

The second part of his testimony is in 1:29-31 "The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is the one I meant when I said, 'A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.' I myself

did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel.”

The next evidence the author presents for the identity of Jesus is that John **saw** Jesus and clearly identified him **as** the Messiah.

I love that part in a courtroom drama where one of the attorneys ask the witness, “Is that person in the courtroom now?”

And the witness points their finger and says, “Yes, there!”

Here the author reminds us of one thing he told us in the Introduction to the book.

Describing Jesus as the “Word,” the author tells us that Jesus has always been.

He is the pre-existent, ever-existing God.

Here John says it again, ‘This Messiah may have been born after me, and he may follow me in public ministry, **but he was before me.**’

‘And I came baptizing in water so he might be revealed to Israel as the Messiah.

That part will make more sense when John refers to the baptism of Jesus just a couple of verses later.

But first I must note how John refers to Jesus; “Look (Behold) the Lamb of God.”

For lots of reasons (see Carson, 150) it is improbable that John the Baptist, at this point in his ministry, understood this statement to mean what the disciples would later understand it to mean.

Here John the Baptist is probably using a name that in his day meant a “warrior lamb” (used in several Jewish texts of the day) who would come in judgment and rid Israel of sin (Consistent with Luke 3:7-17 and its theme of judgment.).

But the author notes it because the author knows how significant the term will later become.

So that while John the Baptist didn't realize it, he was speaking a truth about Jesus' role as Passover /Sacrificial lamb that prefigures what the author would describe later in Jesus sacrificial death for the sins of his people.

But again, the second part of John's testimony is the unambiguous declaration that **this Jesus** is the Messiah.

The Third part of the testimony is in 1:32-33 "Then John gave this testimony: 'I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.'"

Listen to what he says.

'I was told to baptize and when I baptized this man, Jesus, the very thing that God told me **would** happen happened. I saw the Spirit come down on him and remain on him.'

Remember the old "spiritual," "Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?"

Well to John there would be a prior verse, "Were you there when the Spirit came on Jesus?"

John says I was told it would happen and **I was there!**

Why is the Spirit coming down on Jesus significant?

The Jews knew their OT.

Isaiah had predicted that God would pour out his spirit on the coming king (Isaiah 11:1ff).

And in Isaiah 61:1, a prophecy regarding the coming Messiah, we read, "The Spirit of the sovereign Lord is upon me..."

It was also predicted elsewhere in the OT (Ezekiel 36:25-26; Jeremiah 31:31ff) that the time would come when God would pour out his spirit on all his people.

This Jesus is the one on whom the Spirit descended at baptism just as God said and further that this Jesus would baptize people in the Spirit (which only God can do) which combined speak of Jesus' deity.

So even John's questioners would understand what that testimony meant – this was a claim that this Jesus was the long-expected Messiah.

We can't tell from the text if the interrogators are still present at this point in the narrative, but I can easily imagine it.

At least the crowds are still there; John's disciples are still there.

I can see him standing to his feet and with all the energy and authority he can muster, he lifts his hands to Jesus and declares for everyone to hear and believe, **“I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God.”**

For most of you this is not the first time you've heard the claim that Jesus is the Messiah, even God who came to earth to save us.

But maybe there are some of you, who today, for the first time, are ready to respond to him in saving faith.

No, John hasn't made his whole case yet.

But you know the end of the story and today is the time to let go of your skepticism and kneel before the savior-God Jesus.

And you know that today you need to repent of your sinfulness and turn to Jesus to save you from the consequences of your sin and be the Lord of your life.

PRAYER OF BELIEF

Lord Jesus Christ, I admit that I am weaker and more sinful than I ever before dared to admit, but through You I am more loved and accepted than I ever before dared to hope. I thank You for paying my debt on the cross, taking what I deserved in order to offer me complete forgiveness. Knowing that You have been raised from the dead, I turn from my sins and trust You as my Saving-Lord. Amen.

Permission: You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format provided that you do not alter the wording in any way and do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction. For web posting, a link to this document on our website is preferred. Any exceptions to the above must be approved by SoundLiving.org.

Additional Notes (especially on 1:35-51)

What happens next corroborates John's testimony and adds the testimony of four disciples to John's testimony.

Verse 35 marks a new section in the story – The questioners are out of the picture and it is now John and his disciples. Here John's testimony has its desired effect – Some of John's disciples do exactly what their teacher called them to – to follow the Messiah. John testifies to his disciples, the disciples trust his witness, and follow Jesus and witness to others about Jesus. (Keener 465)

Jn 1:35 The next day John was there again with two of his disciples.

Jn 1:36 When he saw Jesus passing by, he said, "Look, the Lamb of God!"

This marks the end of John the B's ministry. "Similar to Moses, the Baptist 'brought salvation history to a boundary that he himself was not allowed to cross. All that was left for him to do was make room to 'decrease,' to leave the scene.'" (Ridderbos in Kostenberger, 72-73)

Jn 1:37 When the two disciples heard him say this, they followed Jesus.

Jn 1:38 Turning around, Jesus saw them following and asked, "What do you want?" They said, "Rabbi" (which means Teacher), "where are you staying?"

Jesus' question is probably at two levels – what is on your mind and what is it you really want in life. They were after all followers of John the Baptist who was preaching a message of repentance and seriousness about a relationship with God. Jesus is asking, are you also serious? The disciples

acknowledge Jesus' authority and invite themselves to spend more time with him. I think this would have been a common teacher/student (Rabbi/disciple) relationship in those days.

Jn 1:39 "Come," he replied, "and you will see." So they went and saw where he was staying, and spent that day with him. It was about the tenth hour.

This too is the likely the next day since v39 says they stayed with Jesus the day before.

Jn 1:40 Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, was one of the two who heard what John had said and who had followed Jesus.

Jn 1:41 The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, "We have found the Messiah" (that is, the Christ).

Jn 1:42 And he brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, "You are Simon son of John. You will be called Cephas" (which, when translated, is Peter).

Andrew and Philip both obviously cared about the person they went to find.. They cared that they too find the Messiah and know him. "That in believing YOU might have life in his name."

This is the next day.

Jn 1:43 The next day Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. Finding Philip, he said to him, "Follow me."

Jn 1:44 Philip, like Andrew and Peter, was from the town of Bethsaida.

Jn 1:45 Philip found Nathanael and told him, "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph."

Jn 1:46 "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" Nathanael asked. "Come and see," said Philip.

Nathanael's skepticism is understandable. First Nazareth was a nothing town and secondly everyone knew the Messiah would come from Judea.

But note that Philip doesn't argue with Nathanael, he invites him to see for himself. I don't need to answer all your objections, I can ask you to consider the evidence for yourself. Meet Jesus and then see if he convinces you.

William Barclay tells the story of the family English agnostic Aldous Huxley (author of *Brave New World*). One Sunday at a friend's home he was invited to church but declined. Instead Huxley asked another guest if he would also stay home and tell Huxley why he is a Christian. The man said that he couldn't do that because Huxley, being brilliant, would demolish his arguments. Huxley insisted that he didn't intend to argue but simply wanted to hear why the man was a Christian. The man stayed with Huxley and simply shared his own experience of Jesus. When he finished Huxley with tears in his eyes said, "I would give my right hand if only I could believe that." It wasn't argument that reached Huxley's heart, it was the genuineness of the man's own faith. (in Boice, 145)

Bearing witness to Jesus:

Andrew found his brother – a relationship already established.

Philip found his friend – a relationship already established.

One's relationships are the primary circumstances in which we bear witness to Jesus.

Many of us find it easier to go to a foreign country and speak to complete strangers about Jesus than to speak of Jesus to friends and relatives. Ask any missionary about the effectiveness of that kind of witness – very little.

It is also true that the overwhelming majority of those who believe, in every century and every culture, do so because of the witness of a family member or friend! Think about it.

A missionary may have been necessary for it to begin, but most who come to saving faith do so, not as a direct result of the missionary but

as an indirect result, through someone they know personally – a parent, sibling, or friend..

Also we like to think that our lives are the witness. It is true that our lives must lend credibility to our verbal witness, but godly living alone is not sufficient witness.

We also like to think that standing up for morality is a witness for Jesus. The man who objects to another's excessive drinking says he has witnessed for Jesus when all he has probably done is anger the other person.

Jn 1:47 When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, "Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false."

Greek – more likely "Truly, here is an Israelite in whom is nothing false" unlike the first Israel (Jacob) known as the deceiver. Nathanael was open to the claims of Jesus rather than closed.

Jn 1:48 "How do you know me?" Nathanael asked. Jesus answered, "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you."

Jn 1:49 Then Nathanael declared, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel."

Nathanael likewise spoke more than he knew when he refers to Jesus as the "Son of God." It is not likely that Nathanael understood "sonship" as deeply as the author John describes it in the prologue but Nathanael is using the name to speak of one who is the Messiah as does the second name he uses, "King of Israel." He accepts that Jesus is the Messiah.

These disciples would falter often in their understanding and following but it is noteworthy that they moved forward with as much as they knew. Discipleship is like that; we can't know everything at the beginning but we act on what we do know.

Jn 1:50 Jesus said, "You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You shall see greater things than that."

Jn 1:51 He then added, “I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.”

Likely referring to the OT account of Jacob’s dream where he saw angels descending and ascending on a ladder from heaven to earth connecting God with man, so Jesus is saying these disciples would see that kind of first-hand evidence of who Jesus truly is.

Like any good Jew these disciples would have had a working knowledge of the OT and would know the story of Jacob whose new name was Israel their ancestor and the one after whom their people were named. Jacob was the one who had an encounter with God one night in which he saw a ladder ascending into heaven and angels going up and down connecting heaven and earth. The next morning Jacob called the place Beth-el – house of God. Those who heard Jesus say this would know that Jesus was claiming that same kind of connection with heaven, with God, and was himself the new Jacob, the new Israel, the house of God.

Likewise when he referred to himself as the “son of man” he knew that the disciples would recognize that title from the book of Daniel, referring to himself as the one given ultimate authority from God. It was a reference to the Messiah.