

JOHN
for
EVERYONE

PART 1
CHAPTERS 1-10

20TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION WITH STUDY GUIDE

N. T.
WRIGHT

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NEW TESTAMENT FOR EVERYONE
20TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION WITH STUDY GUIDE

N. T. Wright

Matthew for Everyone, Part 1

Matthew for Everyone, Part 2

Mark for Everyone

Luke for Everyone

John for Everyone, Part 1

John for Everyone, Part 2

Acts for Everyone, Part 1

Acts for Everyone, Part 2

Romans for Everyone, Part 1

Romans for Everyone, Part 2

1 Corinthians for Everyone

2 Corinthians for Everyone

Galatians and Thessalonians for Everyone

Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon for Everyone

1 and 2 Timothy and Titus for Everyone

Hebrews for Everyone

James, Peter, John and Judah for Everyone

Revelation for Everyone

*For
Oliver,
remembering John's words
about the father and the son*

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INTRODUCTION TO THE ANNIVERSARY EDITION

It took me ten years, but I'm glad I did it. Writing a guide to the books of the New Testament felt at times like trying to climb all the Scottish mountains in quick succession. But the views from the tops were amazing, and discovering new pathways up and down was very rewarding as well. The real reward, though, has come in the messages I've received from around the world, telling me that the books have been helpful and encouraging, opening up new and unexpected vistas.

Perhaps I should say that this series wasn't designed to help with sermon preparation, though many preachers have confessed to me that they've used it that way. The books were meant, as their title suggests, for everyone, particularly for people who would never dream of picking up an academic commentary but who nevertheless want to dig a little deeper.

The New Testament seems intended to provoke all readers, at whatever stage, to fresh thought, understanding and practice. For that, we all need explanation, advice and encouragement. I'm glad these books seem to have had that effect, and I'm delighted that they are now available with study guides in these new editions.

N. T. Wright
2022

INTRODUCTION

On the very first occasion when someone stood up in public to tell people about Jesus, he made it very clear: this message is for *everyone*.

It was a great day – sometimes called the birthday of the church. The great wind of God’s spirit had swept through Jesus’ followers and filled them with a new joy and a sense of God’s presence and power. Their leader, Peter, who only a few weeks before had been crying like a baby because he’d lied and cursed and denied even knowing Jesus, found himself on his feet explaining to a huge crowd that something had happened which had changed the world for ever. What God had done for him, Peter, he was beginning to do for the whole world: new life, forgiveness, new hope and power were opening up like spring flowers after a long winter. A new age had begun in which the living God was going to do new things in the world – beginning then and there with the individuals who were listening to him. ‘This promise is for *you*,’ he said, ‘and for your children, and for everyone who is far away’ (Acts 2.39). It wasn’t just for the person standing next to you. It was for everyone.

Within a remarkably short time this came true to such an extent that the young movement spread throughout much of the known world. And one way in which the *everyone* promise worked out was through the writings of the early Christian leaders. These short works – mostly letters and stories about Jesus – were widely circulated and eagerly read. They were never intended for either a religious or intellectual elite. From the very beginning they were meant for everyone.

That is as true today as it was then. Of course, it matters that some people give time and care to the historical evidence, the meaning of the original words (the early Christians wrote in Greek), and the exact and particular force of what different writers were saying about God, Jesus, the world and themselves. This series is based quite closely on that sort of work. But the point of it all is that the message can get out to everyone, especially to people who wouldn’t normally read a book with footnotes and Greek words in it. That’s the sort of person for whom these books are written. And that’s why there’s a glossary, in the back, of the key words that you can’t really get along without, with a simple description of what they mean. Whenever you see a word in **bold type** in the text, you can go to the back and remind yourself what’s going on.

INTRODUCTION

There are of course many translations of the New Testament available today. The one I offer here is designed for the same kind of reader: one who mightn't necessarily understand the more formal, sometimes even ponderous, tones of some of the standard ones. I have of course tried to keep as close to the original as I can. But my main aim has been to be sure that the words can speak not just to some people, but to everyone.

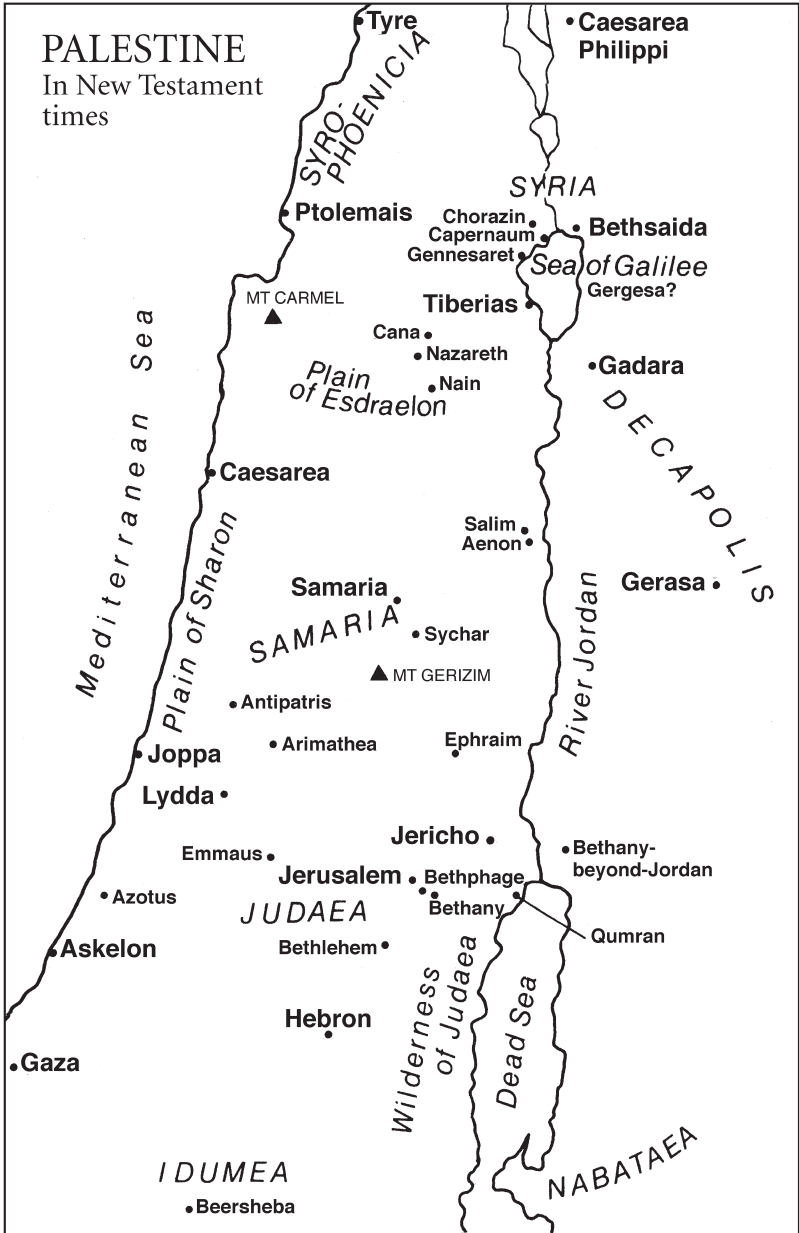
Let me add a note about the translation the reader will find here of the Greek word *Christos*. Most translations simply say 'Christ', but most modern English speakers assume that that word is simply a proper name (as though 'Jesus' were Jesus 'Christian' name and 'Christ' were his 'surname'). For all sorts of reasons, I disagree; so I have experimented not only with 'Messiah' (which is what the word literally means) but sometimes, too, with 'King'.

The gospel of John has always been a favourite for many. At one level it is the simplest of all the gospels; at another level it is the most profound. It gives the appearance of being written by someone who was a very close friend of Jesus, and who spent the rest of his life mulling over, more and more deeply, what Jesus had done and said and achieved, praying it through from every angle, and helping others to understand it. Countless people down the centuries have found that, through reading this gospel, the figure of Jesus becomes real for them, full of warmth and light and promise. It is, in fact, one of the great books in the literature of the world; and part of its greatness is the way it reveals its secrets not just to high-flown learning, but to those who come to it with humility and hope. So here it is: John for everyone!

Tom Wright

PALESTINE

In New Testament times



JOHN 1.1–18

The Word Made Flesh

¹In the beginning was the Word. The Word was close beside God, and the Word was God. ²In the beginning, he was close beside God.

³All things came into existence through him; not one thing that exists came into existence without him. ⁴Life was in him, and this life was the light of the human race. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

⁶There was a man called John, who was sent from God. ⁷He came as evidence, to give evidence about the light, so that everyone might believe through him. ⁸He was not himself the light, but he came to give evidence about the light.

⁹The true light, which gives light to every human being, was coming into the world. ¹⁰He was in the world, and the world was made through him, and the world did not know him. ¹¹He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹²But to anyone who did accept him, he gave the right to become God's children; yes, to anyone who believed in his name. ¹³They were not born from blood, or from fleshly desire, or from the intention of a man, but from God.

¹⁴And the Word became flesh, and lived among us. We gazed upon his glory, glory like that of the father's only son, full of grace and truth.

¹⁵John gave evidence about him, loud and clear.

'This is the one', he said, 'that I was speaking about when I told you, "The one who comes after me ranks ahead of me, because he was before me."'

¹⁶Yes; it's out of his fullness that we have all received, grace indeed on top of grace. ¹⁷The law, you see, was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus the Messiah. ¹⁸Nobody has ever seen God. The only-begotten God, who is intimately close to the father – he has brought him to light.

'It's on the right just beyond the end of the village,' my friend had said. 'You'll see where to turn – it's got the name on the gate.'

It sounded straightforward. Here was the village. I drove slowly past the pretty cottages, the small shops and the old church.

To begin with, I thought I must have misheard him. There didn't seem to be any houses just outside the village. But then I came to the gateway. Tall stone pillars, overhanging trees and an old wooden sign with the right name on it. Inside, a wide gravel drive stretching away, round a corner out of sight. There were daffodils on the grass verge either side, in front of the thick rhododendron bushes.

I turned in to the driveway. He never told me he lived somewhere like *this*! I drove round the corner; then round another corner, with more daffodils and bushes. Then, as I came round a final bend, I gasped.

There in front of me was the house. Sheltered behind tall trees, surrounded by lawns and shrubbery, with the morning sunlight picking out the colour in the old stone. And there was my friend, emerging from between the pillars around the front porch, coming to greet me.

Approaching John's **gospel** is a bit like arriving at a grand, imposing house. Many Bible readers know that this gospel is not quite like the others. They may have heard, or begun to discover, that it's got hidden depths of meaning. According to one well-known saying, this book is like a pool that's safe for a child to paddle in but deep enough for an elephant to swim in. But, though it's imposing in its structure and ideas, it's not meant to scare you off. It makes you welcome. Indeed, millions have found that, as they come closer to this book, the Friend above all friends is coming out to meet them.

Like many a grand house, the book has a driveway, bringing you off the main road, telling you something about the place you're getting to before you get there. These opening verses are, in fact, such a complete introduction to the book that by the time you get to the story you know a good deal about what's coming, and what it means. It's almost as though the long driveway contained signs with pictures of the various rooms in the house and the people you were going to meet there. This passage has become famous because it's often read at Christmas carol services – though it isn't just about the birth of Jesus, but about the full meaning of everything he was, and is, and did. And the more we explore the gospel itself, the more we'll discover what a complete introduction to it this short passage is.

The gateway to the drive is formed by the unforgettable opening words: 'In the beginning was the **Word**.' At once we know that we are entering a place which is both familiar and strange. 'In the beginning' – no Bible reader could see that phrase and not think at once of the start of Genesis, the first book in the Old Testament: 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.' Whatever else John is going to tell us, he wants us to see his book as the story of God and the world, not just the story of one character in one place and time. This book is about the creator God acting in a new way within his much-loved creation. It is about the way in which the long story which began in Genesis reached the climax the creator had always intended.

And it will do this through 'the Word'. In Genesis 1, the climax is the creation of humans, made in God's image. In John 1, the climax is the arrival of a human being, the Word become 'flesh'.

When I speak a word, it is, in a sense, part of me. It's a breath that comes from inside me, making the noise that I give it with my throat, my mouth and my tongue. When people hear it, they assume I intended

it. ‘But you said . . .’, people comment, if our deeds don’t match up to our words. We remain responsible for the words we say.

And yet our words have a life which seems independent of us. When people hear them, words can change the way they think and live. Think of ‘I love you’; or, ‘It’s time to go’; or, ‘You’re fired’. These words create new situations. People respond or act accordingly. The words remain in their memory and go on affecting them.

In the Old Testament, God regularly acts by means of his ‘word’. What he says, happens – in Genesis itself, and regularly thereafter. ‘By the word of the Lord’, says the psalm, ‘the heavens were made’ (33.6). God’s word is the one thing that will last, even though people and plants wither and die (Isaiah 40.6–8); God’s word will go out of his mouth and bring life, healing and hope to Israel and the whole creation (Isaiah 55.10–11). That’s part of what lies behind John’s choice of ‘Word’ here, as a way of telling us who Jesus really is.

John probably expects some readers to see that this opening passage says, about Jesus himself, what some writers had said about ‘Wisdom’. Many Jewish teachers had grappled with the age-old questions: How can the one true God be both different from the world and active within the world? How can he be remote, holy and detached, and also intimately present? Some had already spoken of the ‘word’ and ‘wisdom’ as ways of answering these questions. Some had already combined them within the belief that the one true God had promised to place his own ‘presence’ within the **Temple** in Jerusalem. Others saw them enshrined in the Jewish law, the **Torah**. All of this, as we shall see, is present in John’s mind when he writes of God’s ‘Word’.

But the idea of the Word would also make some of his readers think of ideas that pagan philosophers had discussed. Some spoke of the ‘word’ as a kind of principle of rationality, lying deep within the whole cosmos and within all human beings. Get in touch with this principle, they said, and your life will find its true meaning. Well, maybe, John is saying to them; but the Word isn’t an abstract principle, it’s a person. And I’m going to introduce you to him.

Verses 1–2 and 18 begin and end the passage by stressing that the Word was and is God, and is intimately close to God. John knows perfectly well he’s making language go beyond what’s normally possible, but it’s Jesus that makes him do it; because verse 14 says that the Word became flesh – that is, became human, became one of us. He became, in fact, the human being we know as Jesus. That’s the theme of this gospel: if you want to know who the true God is, look long and hard at Jesus.

The rest of the passage clusters around this central statement. The one we know as Jesus is identical, it seems, with the Word who was there

from the very start, the Word through whom all things were made, the one who contained and contains **life** and light. The Word challenged the darkness before creation and now challenges the darkness that is found, tragically, within creation itself. The Word is bringing into being the new creation, in which God says once more, ‘Let there be light!’

But when God sends the Word into the world, the world pretends it doesn’t recognize him. Indeed, when he sends the Word specifically to Israel, the chosen people don’t recognize him. This is the central problem which dominates the whole gospel story. Jesus comes to God’s people, and God’s people do what the rest of the world do: they prefer darkness to light. That is why fresh grace is needed, on top of the grace already given (verse 16): the **law**, given by Moses, points in the right direction, but, like Moses himself, it doesn’t take us to the promised land. For that, you need the grace and truth that come through Jesus the **Messiah**, the **son of God**.

Perhaps the most exciting thing about this opening passage is that we’re in it too: ‘To anyone who did accept him’ (verse 12) – that means anyone at all, then and now. You don’t have to be born into a particular family or part of the world. God wants people from everywhere to be born in a new way, born into the family which he began through Jesus and which has since spread through the world. Anyone can become a ‘child of God’ in this sense, a sense which goes beyond the fact that all humans are special in God’s sight. Something can happen to people in this life which causes them to become new people, people who (as verse 12 says) ‘believe in his name’. Somehow (John will tell us how, step-by-step, as we go forward into the great building to which this driveway has led us) the great drama of God and the world, of Jesus and Israel, of the Word who reveals the glory of the unseen God – this great drama is a play in search of actors, and there are parts for everyone, you and me included.

As we make our way up this driveway towards the main building, a figure crosses our path. Is this, perhaps, our friend? He turns and looks, but points us on to the house. He isn’t the man we want, but his job is to point us to him. He is, in John’s language, ‘giving evidence about the light’. If we are to meet the Word of God, all four gospels suggest we do well to begin by considering **John the Baptist**.

JOHN 1.19–28

The Evidence of John

¹⁹This is the evidence John gave, when the Judaeans sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, ‘Who are you?’

²⁰He was quite open about it; he didn't try to deny it. He said, quite openly, 'I am not the Messiah.'

²¹'What then?' they asked. 'Are you Elijah?'

'No, I'm not,' he replied.

'Are you the Prophet?'

'No.'

²²'Well, then, who *are* you?' they said. 'We've got to take some kind of answer back to the people who sent us. Who do you claim to be?'

²³'I'm "a voice calling in the desert,"' he said, "'Straighten out the road for the master!'" – just as the prophet Isaiah said.

²⁴The people who had been sent were from the Pharisees. ²⁵They continued to question him.

'So why are you baptizing,' they asked, 'if you aren't the Messiah, or Elijah, or the Prophet?'

²⁶'I'm baptizing with water,' John replied. 'But there is someone standing among you that you don't know, ²⁷someone who is to come after me. I'm not good enough to undo his sandal-strap.'

²⁸This took place in Bethany beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

'I want to make it quite clear that I'm not a candidate.'

You hear that said over and over as politicians jostle for position before a major election. No, they aren't going to stand. No, they have no intention of running for office. No, they are going to sit this one out. And then – surprise, surprise – suddenly they make a speech saying that friends have advised them, that pressure has been put on them, that for the good of the country they now intend . . . to run after all. And we have become quite cynical about it all.

But here we have a story about a man pushing himself forward in the public eye, gaining a large following, and then refusing to claim any of the offices they were eager to ascribe to him. John, the writer of this **gospel**, assumes that we know a certain amount about the 'offices' or leadership characters that many Jews were expecting at the time. The **Messiah**: well, of course. The king from the house of David. The king who would overthrow all injustice and rule over Israel, and perhaps the world too. But **John** denies quite firmly that he is the Messiah, and seems to mean it. He isn't doing messianic things.

But what about Elijah and 'the Prophet'?

For centuries the Jews had read in the Bible that the great prophet, Elijah, would return before the great and terrible 'day of the Lord' (Malachi 4.5). Elijah, it seemed, hadn't died in the ordinary way, but had been taken up to **heaven** directly (2 Kings 2). Now, many believed, he would return to herald God's new day. Indeed, many Christians, and most likely Jesus as well, believed that John was in fact Elijah, even

if he didn't think so – a puzzle to which the New Testament offers no solution (see, e.g., Mark 9.13). But, anyway, John clearly didn't want anyone thinking he was Elijah.

Elijah wasn't the only great prophet. Most in Jesus' day would have ranked him second to Moses himself. In Deuteronomy 18.15–18 God promises that he will raise up a prophet like Moses to lead the people. This figure, a yet-to-come 'prophet like Moses', was expected in Jesus' day (see 6.14), though most people probably didn't distinguish sharply between the different 'figures' they had heard or read about. Enough to know that *someone* would come, and preferably soon, to sort out the mess they were in.

But John refused all such titles. A group of **priests** and Levites – **Temple** functionaries – came to check him out, sent by the **Pharisees** who were one of the leading pressure groups of the time. They had their own reasons for wanting to keep tabs on people. If someone was behaving in a strange new way, announcing a **message** from God, they wanted to know about it. And John was indeed behaving strangely. Israel's scriptures hadn't spoken of a prophet who would come and plunge people into water. Why was he doing it?

John's answer, here and in what follows, is that he is getting people ready for someone else. The one claim he makes – apart from his belief that Israel's God has commanded him to baptize people in water – is that he is a 'voice'. Or rather, *the* voice, the voice spoken of by Isaiah, in the same passage where he speaks of the grass withering but the **Word** of God standing forever (40.1–8). John wants us to make the connection with verses 1–18. And what the voice commands is to get the road straightened out. The master is coming; the way must be prepared.

I live near a busy city street, and several times a day I hear sirens blaring as a police car, or a fire engine, or an ambulance, tries to make its way through heavy traffic to yet another emergency. That's the sort of task John claims to have: sounding his siren to clear a path for the one who's coming behind him. Already, in the Prologue (the great opening section in verses 1–18), we have seen this picture of John: he wasn't the light, but came to give evidence about it (1.8). He is of secondary importance to the Messiah, although he comes before him in temporal sequence. The reason he comes before him, of course, is that he has to, in order to clear the way ahead.

John the Baptist occupies a position like this in all the gospels, and indeed within the early Christian proclamation as a whole. The movement looked back to John as its launch pad. At the same time, there were some groups of John's followers who, for whatever reason, never made the transition to following Jesus. It's possible that the writer,

aware of such groups, is wanting to emphasize that John the Baptist insisted that people should follow Jesus, not himself. And he really meant it.

One of the many points to ponder about the strange character of John the Baptist is the way in which all Christian preachers are called to the same attitude that John had. We don't proclaim ourselves, as Paul said, but Jesus the **Messiah** as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for his sake (2 Corinthians 4.5). Or, as John put it, 'I'm only a voice.' There is his humility, and his true greatness.

JOHN 1.29–34

The Lamb and the Spirit

²⁹The next day, John saw Jesus coming towards him.

'Look!' he said. 'There's God's lamb! He's the one who takes away the world's sin! ³⁰He's the one I was speaking about when I said, "There's a man coming after me who ranks ahead of me, because he was before me!" ³¹I didn't know who it would be, but this was the reason I came to baptize with water – so that he could be revealed to Israel.'

³²So John gave this evidence: 'I saw the spirit coming down like a dove out of heaven and remaining on him. ³³I didn't know who it would be; but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, "When you see the spirit coming down and resting on someone, that's the person who will baptize with the holy spirit." ³⁴Well, that's what I saw, and I've given you my evidence: he is the son of God.'

'What I want to know is – what's that sheep doing there?'

The student had been sick for several days, and I went to visit him. He was in his first year at university, and the whole world of cultural and intellectual enquiry was opening up in front of him like an Aladdin's cave. His girlfriend had brought him a history of Western art, to help him pass the time until he was well enough to study again. And for the first time he was thinking about what the paintings meant.

He had come to a painting of **John the Baptist**. For many centuries it was the rule that in the picture, beside John, there would be a lamb. Sometimes John is pointing to it; sometimes it's simply sitting there looking thoughtful. Sometimes the point is made more obvious by blood pouring from its side, perhaps being caught in a chalice. I can't remember which picture it was the student was looking at, but I presume there was simply what looked like a healthy sheep standing beside the great bearded prophet.

I explained. John the Baptist is famous for many things, but the central and most important role he has in the New Testament is to

point away from himself and towards Jesus. In particular, here in John's **gospel**, he points him out as 'God's lamb'. And with that he indicates, at the very start of the gospel story, how things are going to end, and why. Jesus is to die a sacrificial death for the sins of the world.

By the end of the story, John (the gospel-writer, not the Baptist) has made the meaning clear. The death of Jesus takes place, in this gospel, on the afternoon when the Passover lambs were being killed in the **Temple**. Jesus is the true Passover lamb. John, like many New Testament writers but in his own particular way, wants us to understand the events concerning Jesus as a new, and better, **Exodus** story. Just as God brought the children of Israel out of Egypt, so God was now bringing a new people out of an even older and darker slavery.

But who is this new people? In the original Exodus story, Israel is rescued from the dark powers of the world, which in that case meant the Egyptians under Pharaoh. But now, according to John, God's lamb is going to take away the sin of the world itself. This can only mean that God's rescue operation is moving out, wider than just Israel, to embrace the whole of creation.

This has already been hinted in the Prologue (1.12–13). *Everybody* who receives the **Word**, who believes in his name, can become a new-born child of God. Everybody – not just those with a particular pedigree or certificate of achievement. Again and again in John's gospel we will see the ancient people of God, not least their rulers and self-appointed guardians of tradition, missing the meaning of what Jesus is doing, while people on the edges, outside the boundaries, get the point and find themselves forgiven, healed, brought in by God's transforming love. This is what we are to understand when John the Baptist points Jesus out as 'God's lamb, taking away the world's sin'.

How did John know this? He tells us himself. It was something that happened at Jesus' **baptism**.

The actual baptism of Jesus isn't described in this gospel (nor, for that matter, is the Last Supper). The writer seems to assume that we know about it. In fact, throughout this first chapter he seems to assume that his readers are already familiar with a certain amount of the story of Jesus. This doesn't necessarily mean that he's writing after the other gospels were written; the stories were well known in the early church long before they reached their present written form. But here, and frequently, John has in mind the larger scene which we know from elsewhere. He doesn't bother repeating it, because he is keen to draw our attention to its meaning.

Here we have the heart of John's 'evidence': Jesus is the one upon whom God's **spirit** comes down and rests. And this means that he is

the one who will baptize not just with water, like John, but with the **holy spirit**.

Once again, then, John the Baptist points to one of the key things Jesus has come to do. Like Jesus' death, this will be fulfilled in the last pages of the story. We hear about the spirit intermittently in this gospel, particularly in the remarkable passage 7.37–39, and in the great 'farewell discourses' of chapters 14–16. But it's only in the final scenes that the spirit is given to Jesus' followers. Only when the lamb has been killed for the world's sins can the spirit of the living God be poured out on his people. Only when the Temple has been made clean and ready – the Temple of human hearts, polluted by sin and rebellion – can the presence of God come and live there. So, on the evening of the first Easter Day, Jesus breathes on his **disciples**, giving them his own spirit, his own breath, to be theirs (20.21–23).

When John the Baptist declares, on the basis of this evidence, that Jesus is 'the **son of God**', the first and most obvious meaning this deep and rich phrase would have is 'the **Messiah**'. We, reading the gospel, know there is more to it than that, because the Prologue has already told us that Jesus is 'the only-begotten God' (1.18) – an extraordinary and unique phrase, saying simultaneously that Jesus is one with the father and yet to be distinguished from him. He is, in fact, the Word who was always with God, who was always God, yet who has now become flesh. But when we put ourselves back into the minds of the eager Galileans and Judaeans coming to John for baptism, we realize that they would understand the phrase to mean that Jesus was the Messiah, the true king, who would free Israel from pagan domination.

The next two sections confirm that this is indeed what they had in mind – while constantly hinting to us, as we read their story, that there was much, much more going on. If we are to read John's gospel for all it's worth, we have to learn to hold two strands side by side in our minds, and then, as we get used to that, three or four, or even more. Like someone learning to listen to music, we have to be able to hear the different parts as well as the glorious harmony that they produce when put together. And the music of this gospel is, we may suspect, the sort that makes the angels themselves want to join in.

JOHN 1.35–42

The First Disciples

³⁵The following day John was again standing there, with two of his disciples. ³⁶He saw Jesus walking by, and said, 'Look! There goes God's lamb!'

³⁷The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus.

³⁸Jesus turned and saw them following him.

‘What do you want?’ he asked.

‘Rabbi,’ they said (the word means ‘teacher’), ‘where are you staying?’

³⁹‘Come and see,’ he replied.

So they came, and saw where he was staying, and stayed with him that day. It was late in the afternoon.

⁴⁰One of the two who heard what John said and followed Jesus was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother. ⁴¹The first person he found was his own brother Simon.

‘We’ve found the Messiah!’ he said (that means ‘the anointed one,’ like our word ‘Christ’). ⁴²He brought him to Jesus.

Jesus looked at him.

‘So,’ he said, ‘you’re Simon, John’s son, are you? We’d better call you Cephas!’ (That means ‘the Rock,’ like our word ‘Peter.’)

I was staying with my uncle in Toronto. I was nineteen at the time. He took me with him for a day on one of his hobbies: clay-pigeon shooting.

I hadn’t even seen the sport before, let alone done it. Little disks of clay are propelled from a machine; the shooter stands in various positions, trying to hit the disks as they fly past at different angles and trajectories. I wasn’t very good at it, but it was fun and challenging.

The last clay pigeon I had to shoot was coming almost directly at me. It swerved slightly in flight, and all I remember is pulling the trigger and seeing the clay shatter all around me.

My uncle came over to me.

‘Good thing you got that one,’ he said, ‘or it would have got you.’

Up to that moment I hadn’t thought of the sport as a two-way affair.

When we read a passage like this we see that there is more of a two-way process going on than the people in the story realized at the time. What Andrew and Simon Peter thought they were doing was looking for the **Messiah**. What they didn’t realize was that *the Messiah was looking for them*. Eager in their excitement, they had no idea what this was going to involve.

This is the point, I think, where John, in writing the **gospel**, knows that many readers will begin to identify with characters in the story. It’s as well that we pause and ask where that identification might take us. Up to now, the narrative has only told us about **John the Baptist** and the people sent from Jerusalem to check him out. We aren’t likely to identify with them. But now here, it seems, are ordinary characters, people on a quest, looking for something. The chances are that you’re reading this book because that’s been true of you, and perhaps still is. Someone has suggested, as John the Baptist suggested

to Andrew and another **disciple**, that you give Jesus a closer look. So here you are.

You approach, polite but a bit cautious. John translates the conversation into your language so you can make it your own. ‘Rabbi’ means ‘teacher’. ‘Messiah’ means ‘anointed one’ (the word ‘Messiah’ is Hebrew or Aramaic, the word ‘Christ’ is Greek, meaning the same thing). ‘Cephas’ was the Aramaic word for ‘rock’ or ‘stone’, which in Greek is ‘Petros’, as in our name ‘Peter’.

There are four things going on in this quick-fire conversation. Andrew and Simon (and the other, unnamed friend) are looking for the Messiah, and they think they’ve found him. Jesus is looking for followers, and when he finds them, that gives them a new vocation (Simon becomes ‘the Rock’, an important but dangerous name). John’s readers, out there in the **Gentile** world, would sense Jesus calling and renaming them too. And we, reading this book in the hope of finding out more about Jesus, may discover that he is simultaneously coming to find us. And perhaps to give us new names.

This passage introduces us to a shadowy character who is going to flit across the pages of this gospel several times. There were two disciples of John the Baptist who heard him pointing to Jesus as God’s lamb. Only one is named: Andrew, who then finds Simon Peter his brother. Who was the other one? All sorts of answers have been given, and none of them is without difficulty. But the simplest answer is that this was one of the other early disciples who met and followed Jesus right from the start. Since he isn’t named, here or elsewhere, it is not impossible that we are here meeting the author of the book, or at least the one who told the stories on which the book was based.

We shall say more about this later. But there is quite a good chance that this was John, the brother of James, one of Zebedee’s sons. A young man at the time – quite likely still in his teens – he remembered those early days, and the conversations with Jesus, with all the vivid recollection that goes with a life-changing moment. That’s why, though he translates the key words so his readers will understand, he doesn’t want to change the actual words he remembers so well. You don’t alter the foundation of the house you’re living in. When you go looking for Jesus, and discover that he’s looking for you, you will remember that day for ever.

JOHN 1.43–51

Philip and Nathanael

⁴³The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee, where he found Philip. ‘Follow me,’ he said to him.

⁴⁴Philip came from Bethsaida, the town where Andrew and Peter hailed from. ⁴⁵Philip found Nathanael.

‘We’ve found him!’ he said. ‘The one Moses wrote about in the law! And the prophets, too! We’ve found him! It’s Jesus, Joseph’s son, from Nazareth!’

⁴⁶‘Really?’ replied Nathanael. ‘Are you telling me that something good can come out of Nazareth?’

‘Come and see,’ replied Philip.

⁴⁷Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him.

‘Here he comes,’ he said. ‘Look at him! He’s a real Israelite. Genuine through and through.’

⁴⁸‘How did you get to know me?’ asked Nathanael.

‘Oh,’ replied Jesus, ‘I saw you under the fig tree, before Philip spoke to you.’

⁴⁹‘Rabbi,’ replied Nathanael, ‘you’re the son of God! You’re the king of Israel!’

⁵⁰‘Wait a minute,’ said Jesus. ‘Are you telling me that you believe just because I told you I saw you under the fig tree? You’ll see a lot more than that!’

⁵¹‘In fact,’ he went on, ‘I’m telling you the solemn truth. You’ll see heaven opened, and God’s angels going up and down upon the son of man.’

Jacob was a schemer and twister. All his early life he had one eye on the main chance, especially if it meant getting one up on his older twin, Esau. In fact, even the story of how they were born included the telling detail: he’d been holding on to his brother’s heel. Trying to trip him up, even in the womb. And the habit stuck. He tricked Esau out of his birthright, and out of his father’s blessing. Eventually the tables turned, and Esau tried to kill him. It was time for Jacob to leave in a hurry. You can read the story, fresh and vivid from millennia ago, in Genesis 25–28.

When Jacob was running away, with not a penny to his name and nothing but the clothes on his back, he had a dream. He saw a ladder with its foot on the ground and its top reaching to **heaven**. God’s angels were going up and down on it. The Lord himself stood beside him, and promised him that he would bring him back to his land in peace and prosperity.

It is this passage that Jesus seems to be referring to when he says to Nathanael that he and the other **disciples** (the ‘you’ in verse 51 is plural) will see heaven opened, with the angels of God going up and down upon – the **son of man**. This is a very strange picture, and to begin with it’s hard to see what Nathanael and the others might have made of it, what John thinks we should make of it, and indeed what Jesus might

have meant by it. Since it's obviously important within the **gospel**, concluding the first chapter, in which so many of the gospel's great themes have been introduced, we'd better look at it a bit more closely.

The point about Jacob's ladder was that it showed that God was there with him, in that place. Jacob called the place 'Bethel', that is, 'God's house'. After he had come back to the land, and when, much later, his descendants had been established in possession of it, Bethel became one of the great sanctuaries of Israel, one of the places where early Israelite worship was carried on. The tradition of Jacob's dream, of the angels going up and down on the ladder, would then be connected with the belief that when you worshipped God in his house, God was really present, with his angels coming and going to link heaven and earth.

This is probably the clue we're looking for. A great deal of John's gospel has to do with the way in which Jesus fulfils the promises made concerning the **Temple** – and also goes beyond them, pioneering the new way in which the living God will be present with his people. This was hinted at in the Prologue (1.14). When John says that the **Word** became flesh 'and lived among us', the word for 'lived' is a word associated with the presence of God 'tabernacling' or 'pitching his tent' in our midst. The thought of a tent in which God lived would send Jewish minds back to the tabernacle in the wilderness at the time of the **Exodus**, and from there to the Temple in Jerusalem where God's presence was promised.

Verse 51, then, seems to be a tight-packed and evocative way of saying: 'Don't think that all you will see is one or two remarkable acts of insight, such as you witnessed when I showed you that I knew about you before you even appeared. What you'll see from now on is the reality towards which Jacob's ladder, and even the Temple itself, was pointing like a signpost. If you follow me, you'll be watching what it looks like when heaven and earth are open to each other. You won't necessarily see the angels themselves, but you'll see things happening which show that they're there all right.'

The earlier part of the passage is meant, I think, to be funny, almost as comic light relief before the solemn and serious promise at the end. Nathanael, who comes from Cana (John tells us this in 21.2), can't believe that anything good would come out of the rival village, Nazareth, a short distance up the hill. A cryptic word from Jesus, and suddenly he not only believes it's possible, he gives Jesus the exalted title of **son of God!** Jesus seems as surprised, and amused, as we are in reading it.

We should, I think, continue to understand 'son of God' here as a messianic title, explained by 'king of Israel' which immediately follows it. John, as we know, means more than this, but I don't think

Nathanael yet does. Indeed, that's part of the point of the closing remark. Jesus may be 'the son of man'; though in what sense he, or John, intend that phrase remains for the moment uncertain. What matters is that something much greater than a mere **Messiah** is here. When you're with Jesus, it is as though you're in the house of God, the Temple itself, with God's angels coming and going, and God's own presence there beside you.

That promise, of course, remains as true today as it was then. That, as John explains much later (20.31), is why he's writing this book.

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