

# That You May Continue to Believe...



AN  
EXPOSITION  
OF THE  
GOSPEL OF  
JOHN

## The Witness of John the Baptist John 1:19-51

The issue is focus. Sometimes it is possible to look at something so long and hard that we fail to see even the obvious. We might think we are looking carefully but the truth of the matter is that sometimes we become entrenched in a particular perspective that we fail to appreciate the real nature or beauty or perfection of a thing.

I remember vividly once when I was teaching school that the teachers got together at the beginning of the new school term for a time of fellowship but mostly so the faculty could meet everyone's spouses. I remember one brother after meeting my wife came up to me with the strangest look on his face. He said something like, **"I just met your wife and I have to tell you that she is too beautiful."** I was a little taken back by his forthrightness but I put it down to the fact that he was unmarried and was actively seeking someone, anyone to marry him. So I muttered something like, **"Yes, David I know she's beautiful. Thank you."** To which he responded, **"No you don't understand what I mean. I mean she's too beautiful for you."**

I have to admit that the rest of the night I looked at my wife in a completely different manner. I always knew that what he said was true, I just never realized everybody else realized it too.

And you know the same kind of thing can happen when we listen to the Scripture. Oftentimes we read the same old words, beloved words though they are, and we get into a routine that keeps us from hearing what is actually being said. When I was preparing this lesson I thought of the rather famous story of the New England deacon who often led his Puritan brothers and sisters in the singing of metrical Psalms. The practice of his church was that he would recite a line and then the choir would sing that line after him. However, one Sunday morning, because of poor lighting and because of his failing eyesight, the old deacon found difficulty in reading the first line of the Psalm and he apologized by observing: **“My eyes, indeed, are very blind.”** The choir thinking this the first line of a common-meter hymn immediately sang it; whereupon the deacon turned toward them and exclaimed: **“I cannot see at all.”** The choir responded enthusiastically by singing, **“I cannot see at all.”** Astonished at their apparent mockery of him, the deacon cried out: **“I really believe you are bewitched”** and the choir responded, **“I really believe you are bewitched,”** whereupon the deacon added, **“The mischief’s in you all,”** and after the choir had sung that line too, the deacon sat down in disgust.<sup>1</sup>

Now I tell that story, both because I love it and because I think it is germane to the text that lies before us this morning. We need to stay focused as we try to grapple with the truth of God’s Word. In our first two lessons, I put before you the idea that **John’s Gospel was written to encourage early Jewish Christians to continue to believe in Jesus in spite of the fact that they were under**

**tremendous pressure from both their communities and from the their synagogues to forsake Him** and to return to the very Judaism that had rejected Him.

One way John attempted to get his readers to remain faithful to Jesus is to have them consider the witness of others. In a sense, he is saying, **“Before you reject Him in favor of the synagogue, perhaps you would do well to remember what other eye-witnesses had to say about Him.”** In John 1:19-51, John encourages first century Christians to remain faithful to Christ, to continue to believe in Him because of the witness of those that met him. Now to accomplish that, John introduces to his readers seven witnesses. Those witnesses are, John the Baptist, The Father in Heaven, the Holy Spirit, Andrew, Philip, Nathanael and Jesus Himself.<sup>2</sup>

The first witness that John calls on is John the Baptist. Look at John chapter 1, verse 19.

<sup>NIV</sup> **John 1:19**...Now this was John's testimony when the Jews of Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was.

Of course, when we read that we are drawn back to the prologue where John is first referred as a witness of Jesus. You will remember I hope verses 6-8.

<sup>NIV</sup> **John 1:6-8**...There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light... He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

Now what I think is interesting here is that John had caught the attention of the Scribes and Pharisees. They knew he was something special but they didn't

know exactly what. So they sent a delegation to ask him who he was and he answered them straight out.

<sup>NIV</sup> **John 1:20**...He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, "I am not the Christ."

Now the particular arrangement of the phrases here in verse 20 is very emphatic and if you are reading the NIV like I am it is easy to miss the three phrases used. Those three phrases are "**confessed, he did not deny, confessed.**"<sup>3</sup>

Now I want you to think about that phrase, "did not deny" for a moment. Would you like to guess the next place that comes in John? In fact, would you like to guess the only other places it comes up in John? It occurs in John 13:38, John 18:25 and John 18:27. In all three instances, it is related to the denial of Peter.

<sup>NAS</sup> **John 18:25**...Now Simon Peter was standing and warming himself. They said therefore to him, "**You are not also one of His disciples, are you?**" **He denied it, and said, "I am not."**

But you get the point here, I think. John is not one to deny. Rather he is courageous and as one that is courageous, he confesses and confesses freely just as the author desires his readers to do. He is the model to follow. His confession, at first, concerns himself. In a moment or two, he'll turn to a confession about Jesus but for now he makes it clear who he is not.

Now this denial that he is the Christ is very important. You will remember later on in the New Testament that John's memory continued to engage the hearts of first century Jews long after his death. I am thinking, in particular, of the one encountered in the book of Acts.

<sup>NIV</sup> **Acts 19:1**...While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus. There he found some disciples <sup>2</sup> and asked them, **"Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?"** They answered, **"No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit."** <sup>3</sup> So Paul asked, **"Then what baptism did you receive?"** **"John's baptism,"** they replied.

But John the Beloved makes it very clear, the Baptist never claimed to be the Christ. Then the ones sent from Jerusalem ask him what has to seem like the strangest question imaginable.

<sup>NIV</sup> **John 1:21a**...They asked him, **"Then who are you? Are you Elijah?"** He said, **"I am not."**

They asked him if he was Elijah. Now doesn't that seem strange to you. I mean think about it, Elijah's ministry had been some 900 years earlier.<sup>4</sup> Still, there are number of reasons why they might have asked that question. First, of all, though we don't see it here in John, there is the manner in which John dressed.

<sup>NIV</sup> **Matthew 3:4**...John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey.

If you go back to the Old Testament, you find that is exactly the way Elijah dressed. Listen 2 Kings 1, where a group of soldiers describe someone they met for their sinful king.

<sup>NIV</sup> **2 Kings 1:6** ...**"A man came to meet us,"** they replied. **"And he said to us, 'Go back to the king who sent you...(and tell him, you)... will certainly die!'"** <sup>7</sup> The king asked them, **"What kind of man was it who came to meet you and told you this?"** <sup>8</sup> They replied, **"He was a man with a garment of hair and with a leather belt around his waist."** The king said, **"That was Elijah the Tishbite."**

So there is a sense in which it seems that John is trying to invoke the image of Elijah. He certainly would have been aware of the last two lines of Malachi.<sup>5</sup>

**NIV Malachi 4:5... "See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. <sup>6</sup> He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse."**

But John denied that he was Elijah. Later, of course, even Jesus Himself would say that John was the Elijah to come, not in the flesh, but in symbol and in purpose. He was the Elijah prophesied to by Malachi.

**NIV Matthew 11:14... "And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come."**

**NIV Matthew 17:12... "But I tell you, Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but have done to him everything they wished. In the same way the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands."** <sup>13</sup> Then the disciples understood that he was talking to them about John the Baptist.

C.F.D. Moule wrote this:

*'We have to ask by whom the identification is made, and by whom refused. The Synoptists represent Jesus as identifying, or comparing, the Baptist with Elijah, while John represents the Baptist as rejecting the identification when it is offered him by his interviewers. Now these two, so far from being incompatible, are psychologically complementary. The Baptist humbly rejects the exalted title, but Jesus, on the contrary, bestows it on him. Why should not the two both be correct?'*<sup>6</sup>

But here the Baptist wants to make sure that he is not a distraction and he answers, **"No, I am not Elijah."** So they ask him another question.

**NIV John 1:21b... "Are you the Prophet?"** He answered, **"No."**

Now, what prophet would they have been wondering about? I think the reference is to the prophet that Moses spoke about in Deuteronomy.

**<sup>NIV</sup> Deuteronomy 18:15...The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him.**

But John answers them, **"No, I'm not him either."**

Of course, that seems strange in light of the fact that when John was born his own father, Zechariah under the influence of the Holy Spirit, prophesied that he would be a great prophet.

**<sup>NIV</sup> Luke 1:76...And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him,**

And why wouldn't he say that? Do you remember the words of Gabriel the angel when he spoke to a terrified Zechariah telling him about the child his wife would bear?

**<sup>NIV</sup> Luke 1:17...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."**

And later on Jesus would say of him,

**<sup>NIV</sup> Matthew 11:9...(He was) more than a prophet. <sup>10</sup> (he was the) one about whom it is written: "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you." <sup>11</sup> I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist...**

Still, John simply answers, **"No, I'm not him."** You can sense their frustration in verse 22.

**<sup>NIV</sup> John 1:22...Finally they said, "Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" <sup>23</sup> John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one calling in the desert, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'"**

John is, of course, alluding to Isaiah 40.

<sup>NIV</sup> **Isaiah 40:1...**Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. <sup>2</sup> Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins. <sup>3</sup> A voice of one calling: **"In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God.** <sup>4</sup> **Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain.** <sup>5</sup> **And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."**

Now what is remarkable is that he applies the message of Isaiah to his own ministry. Now originally, the point being made in Isaiah 40 was that God would comfort His people by returning them to the land of Israel on a miraculous highway created by God Himself. But here John is saying, "He's coming. He will knock down the puffed-up, high and mighty and will build up the lowly and oppressed. You are the mountains and valleys that must be smoothed out to prepare His way. He is coming. He is what matters; I am nothing."

That's why John denied being Elijah. That is why he denied being the prophet. That is why he says, **"I am a voice. I am not even *the* voice. I am only *a* voice. But, He is coming. In fact, He is here."**

Of course, the Pharisees could not let it go. So they asked him another question. Here's the gist of their question, **"If you are only a voice, then why are you baptizing. You are obviously making a statement. What is it you mean by what you are doing?"**

Look how they say it in verse 24.

<sup>NIV</sup> **John 1:24...**Now some Pharisees who had been sent <sup>25</sup> questioned him, "**Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?**" <sup>26</sup> "**I baptize with water,**" John replied, "**but among you stands one you do not know.**" <sup>27</sup> **He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.**" <sup>28</sup> This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

Now what I want to point out in this passage is John's extraordinary confession. Only slaves were made to undo their master's sandals thongs. Disciples were not required to unloosen their master's sandals.<sup>7</sup> It was too demeaning. To undo someone's sandal straps, a person had to virtually prostrate himself before the one wearing the sandals. But notice what John says, "While a slave might be required to loosen their masters sandal thongs, at least they are considered good enough to do so. I am not worthy or fit to undo His sandals. Still, I have come to lead the way for Him and He is already here, right in your midst."

Of course, had a been one of the Pharisees or scribes, I think I would have asked, "Here's here? Where is He? Point Him out to us." And that is exactly what John does the very next day. Look at verse 29.

<sup>NIV</sup> **John 1:29...**The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "**Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!**" <sup>30</sup> **This is the one I meant when I said, 'A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'**

Now there are two things to look at in this passage. First, what does John mean by the "Lamb of God?" Second, what on earth does he mean by this strange and beautiful quote, "**A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me?**"

First lets look at what he might have meant by the **“Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”**

It could mean that Jesus was a sacrificial lamb or Passover lamb who death was substitutionary in nature. In that sense, it would mean that Jesus fulfilled the role of a lamb sacrificed in place of sinners bearing their sin. “Taking away sin” would then have the connotation of “bearing sin” or “atoning for sin.” Certainly, that seems to be the meaning that other New Testament writers attached to the idea of Jesus being the “Lamb of God.”

<sup>NIV</sup> **1 Corinthians 5:7**...Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast-- as you really are. For Christ, our **Passover lamb**, has been sacrificed.

<sup>NIV</sup> **1 Peter 1:18-19**...For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed...with the precious blood of Christ, a **lamb** without blemish or defect.

But in the first century there was another understanding of the Messiah as a lamb figure. He was the pure, undefiled Lamb King of God who would drive sin and sinners away in judgment. In this idea the words “taking away sin” would have the connotation of “judging sin” or “casting out sin.” And the word “take away” is used like that in John in several places.

<sup>NIV</sup> **John 11:48**...If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and **take away** both our place and our nation."

<sup>NIV</sup> **John 15:2**...He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he **prunes** so that it will be even more fruitful.

The reason the issue comes up at all is because many scholars find it hard to believe that John thought of Jesus as a lamb that would be slain for sinners. They get that from other passages like Luke 7:20.

<sup>NIV</sup> **Luke 7:20**...When the men came to Jesus, they said, "John the Baptist sent us to you to ask, 'Are you the **one who was to come**, or should we expect someone else?'"

You see while they are willing admit that he might not have understood all that he was saying; they prefer to think that he had some specific idea in mind. They prefer that John meant something when he called Jesus the Lamb of God. They prefer that even if it meant that he said better than he knew. Like when Caiaphas the high priest said...

<sup>NIV</sup> **John 11:50**...You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish."

You see Caiaphas thought Jesus' death would protect the nation for Rome. But the truth of the matter is that Jesus' death protects those that put their faith in Him from the wrath of God Almighty. Still, I think both ideas concerning Jesus as both Lamb of God slain on behalf of sinners and Jesus as the Lamb of God coming to judge sinners are true. I think John the Baptist would have been right to think of Jesus as the great conquering lamb of the Book of the Revelation who would purge the sin of the world, for He will indeed do that. But first, He has to redeem a people to Himself. In order, to do that He had to "bear their sins" in terms of suffer the penalty for their sins.

The other issue in the verse concerns this cryptic phrase, "**A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me?**"

The “after me” is fairly easy. It usually means “after” in terms of time or position. The exact phrase is used 15 times in the New Testament. Five of those times occur in phrases that include one particular idea.

<sup>NIV</sup> **Luke 9:23**...Then he said to them all: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.

Three times in used in the phrase...

<sup>NIV</sup> **Matthew 4:19**..."Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will make you fishers of men."

And five times it is used just as it is here in this passage. It carries the idea of following behind.

Secondly, there is the issue of the phrase “surpassed me.” I can mean that but it more often something like “right in front of me” as in “come before me.” That’s the way the phrase is used in...

<sup>NIV</sup> **John 12:37**...Even after Jesus had done all these miraculous signs in their presence, they still would not believe in him.

Sometimes the phrase is used to indicate leadership or supremacy of position as in...

<sup>NIV</sup> **John 10:4**...When he has brought out all his own, he goes on **ahead of them**, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice.

In this case, I think it means both, First Jesus is right there in front of Him and secondly, He is taking over the role of leadership that John had played. I think that is clearly in the idea, which occurs last. I think it is contained in the words, **“because he was before me.”**

Here the before me has to do with time like in the statement, "You take the high road and I'll take the low road and I'll get there before you." It is used in...

**NIV John 15:18...**"If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated **me first**.

So, here's what John is saying, "The one who follows me in time has come before me and has taken a more prominent position than what I have and that is right and proper because He existed before I did." Now the remarkable thing about that statement is that John the Baptist was six months older than Jesus. Now here's what it means. It means that John realized Jesus to be pre-existent.

Of course, he didn't know that because of any innate intelligence that he might have possessed. He didn't even know it because Jesus was his cousin. (Luke 1:36) No, he knew because God had revealed it to him. That's the point he makes in the next few verses.

**NIV John 1:31...**"I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel."<sup>32</sup> Then John gave this testimony: "I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. <sup>33</sup> 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.'

Notice what he says, "I myself did not know him." Now it seems really unlikely to me that John meant that he didn't know him at all. After all, Jesus was his cousin. I can't imagine that they had not seen each other in Jerusalem at one of the feasts they were required to attend. I think what John meant was, "I didn't know that He was the one for whom I was preparing the way.

Now at this point John also introduces two more witnesses. First look at verse 33.

**<sup>NIV</sup> John 1:33...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.'**

Now, who was it that told John to look for this remarkable sign of the Spirit's descent. It was the Father, of course. We know that from verse 6.

**<sup>NIV</sup> John 1:6...There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John.**

Secondly, John says that the Holy Spirit was also a witness to this one following Him. John says, **"I saw the Spirit witness to Him because it came down and remained upon Him."**

So, that means that so far there are three witnesses: John, the Father in heaven and the Holy Spirit. And what is John's conclusion to all that? Look at verse 34.

**<sup>NIV</sup> John 1:34...I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God."**

Now, in verse 35 we are introduced to another witness. Now, he is not identified until verse 40 but you notice even here in this first verse a phrase we have already seen.

**<sup>NIV</sup> John 1:35...The next day John was there again with two of his disciples. 36 When he saw Jesus passing by, he said, "Look, the Lamb of God!"**

Last week I spent a lot of time talking about chiasm and chiastic structure. I haven't really spent anytime this week yet doing that. But let me say this, "Whenever you see a repetition of a phrase that is so prominent, you should immediately expect a chiasm. When you see a phrase repeated so quickly, you should expect that you are very near the center of the chiasm and you will

remember I hope what I said about the center being the emphasis or central point of a passage.

Now having said that what important phrase or issue lies between these two uses of the phrase **"the Lamb of God."** You can see that the main idea lying between the two uses of **"Lamb of God"** occurs in verse 34 where John bellows out the focus of his witness and insight and that idea is that...

**<sup>NIV</sup> John 1:34...I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God."**

Now prior to that the only chiasmic element was the witness of John where he denied being the Christ, Elijah or the prophet. The whole structure would have looked like this.

**Next we see that what happens when the two disciples hear John's claim. They decide to go and investigate for themselves.**

**<sup>NIV</sup> John 1:37...When the two disciples heard him say this, they followed Jesus. <sup>38</sup> Turning around, Jesus saw them following and asked, "What do you want?" They said, "Rabbi" (which means Teacher), "where are you staying?" <sup>39</sup> "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.**

The two disciples were following Jesus and Jesus turned to asked them what they wanted. They asked where He was staying and He invited them to come and see. Since the hour was late, about four PM, they probably spent the night with Him<sup>8</sup>. What is interesting is that spending just a few hours with Jesus convinced them that He was extraordinary.

**<sup>NIV</sup> John 1:40...Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, was one of the two who heard what John had said and who had followed Jesus. <sup>41</sup> The first thing Andrew did**

was to find his brother Simon and tell him, "**We have found the Messiah**" (that is, the Christ)<sup>9</sup>.<sup>42</sup> 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).

Now the word that should jump out at you is "**Messiah**" or "**Christ**." You will remember that that was the very question that the scribes and Pharisees has asked the Baptist back in verse 21. He denied he was the Messiah. But here Andrew is witnessing to his brother Peter that Jesus was, indeed, the Messiah.

Now, by my count that concludes the testimony of the fourth witness. Verses 43-46, introduce us to witnesses five and six.

<sup>NIV</sup> **John 1:43**...The next day Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. Finding Philip, he said to him, "**Follow me.**"<sup>44</sup> Philip, like Andrew and Peter, was from the town of Bethsaida.<sup>45</sup> 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.**"<sup>46</sup> "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" Nathanael asked. "**Come and see,**" said Philip.

Do you notice Philip's conclusion, "**We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote.**" Now do you realize the significance of that kind of assertion? He was, in effect, saying, "**We have found the one who is the very point of Scripture.**" Of course, Nathanael is skeptical, especially since Jesus was from Nazareth. Nazareth was only about 10 miles away from Cana where Nathanael lived (21:2). I don't know what caused him to have contempt for Nazareth. It is true it was a small town but it may just have been small town rivalry that caused him to think the way he did. Nevertheless, he acts as if it is proverbial. But notice Philip's response, "**Just come and see.**"<sup>10</sup>

Now comes my favorite part of the passage.

<sup>NIV</sup> **John 1:47**...When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, "**Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false.**"

Now what Jesus said was extremely interesting. The first place this word for "false" is ever used in the Bible occurs in Genesis 27:35.

<sup>NIV</sup> **Genesis 27:35**...But he said, "Your brother came deceitfully and took your blessing."

There it is used as a description of Jacob after he had tricked his brother Esau into giving away his birthright.

<sup>NIV</sup> **Genesis 27:36**...Esau said, "Isn't he rightly named Jacob? He has **deceived** me these two times: He took my birthright, and now he's taken my blessing!" Then he asked, "Haven't you reserved any blessing for me?"

Of course, later on Jacob's name is changed to Israel.

<sup>NIV</sup> **Genesis 32:28**...Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome."

Now what is funny about what Jesus says is that he puts the two together "falsehood" and "Israel." And his point is that Nathanael is an Israelite in whom, unlike Jacob, there is no trickery or deception.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>NIV</sup> **John 1:48**..."**How do you know me?**" Nathanael asked. Jesus answered, "**I saw you while you were still under the fig tree<sup>12</sup> before Philip called you.**"

Of course, Nathanael is curious how Jesus could make such an assessment since he had never met him. He doesn't deny that he is honest. But he wants to know how Jesus came to such a conclusion. Jesus' response is a simple, "**I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you.**"

It doesn't seem like much but notice Nathanael's response and his testimony.

**NIV John 1:49...**Then Nathanael declared, "**Rabbi, you are the Son of God;<sup>13</sup> you are the King of Israel.**"

Now that seems a little excessive don't you think? Let me explain what I think was going on there. In first century Israel, the "fig tree" was often referred to as a place of private devotion and study. Some people even referred to the study of the Torah as the "fig tree." It can be figurative meaning that something like a "prayer closet" or it can be understood literally as a place of private study and devotion.<sup>14</sup> That's what I think, Nathanael was doing. I think he was doing his devotions. In fact, I think he may have been studying that part of the book of Genesis that described Jacob and his deceptiveness.<sup>15</sup>

If I am right, and I am not the first to notice this in the text, what Jesus would have been doing is perceiving the thoughts of his mind and heart. In effect, what Jesus would have been doing is saying, "I saw you under the fig tree when you were meditating on Jacob. No you are not like him. You are honest and straightforward without duplicity. But I saw you. I was there with you."

Of course, you might be thinking, that seems like a lot to see in the text. I and would have to agree. Nevertheless, you still have to explain why such a simple statement would evoke such an extraordinary response and why verses 50-51 conclude the way they do. There you find Jesus ending His conversation with Nathanael and bearing His own testimony as the seventh and final witness in this section.<sup>16</sup>

**NIV John 1:50...**Jesus said, "**You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You shall see greater things than that.**" <sup>51</sup> 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."**

Now clearly Jesus is alluding to that passage that every good Jew knew by heart. It was the passage where Jacob or Israel has the dream and sees the angels of God ascending and descending on a ladder between heaven and earth.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>NIV</sup> **Genesis 28:12**...He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.

Now this passage concerning the ladder and the passage where his brother describes Jacob as a deceiver are only 23 verses apart. Which makes me think all the more that Jesus is still speaking about what Nathanael had read.

But even more remarkably, Jesus goes on to tell Nathanael is not only that he would see such a thing himself but that he was looking at the very moment at the actual ladder or bridge between heaven and earth. You will remember last week that discovered the point that John declared Jesus bridged the two realms between "was" and "becoming." Here we see it again. For the fellowship that exists between heaven and earth must be mediated and it is mediated in the one representative of man that can stand before a Holy God, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now brothers and sisters, what do you think? Are seven witnesses enough to keep you hanging in there? But you know we need to be reminded from time to time when things are going south, when we are hurting either physically or emotionally that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and has come into to the world to cover bridge the vast expanse of our sin that separated us from the love of God. And not only do we need to be reminded of that, we need to be reminded that

Christ Himself sees us and brings things and events into our lives to strengthen our faith and give us endurance. He is a worthy Savior, worthy of our love and affection and worthy of our continuing trust and faith.

I can tell you He's a beautiful Savior. Of course, He's too beautiful for us but He is ours just the same.

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<sup>1</sup> William Warren Sweet, *The Story of Religion in America* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1950), 57-8. Also quoted in *Yankee Doodle Went to Church* by James Adams, pg. 63. (I edited this for my own purpose,)

<sup>2</sup> George R., Beasley-Murray, *Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 36: John*, (Dallas, Texas: Word Books, Publisher) 1998. "The witness of John in chapter I gives way to that of the early disciples. Here is a series of enthusiastic testimonies to Jesus, covering a wide spectrum of the contemporary Church's witness to its Lord. The "Rabbi" is confessed as the Messiah, as the One who fulfills the Law and the Prophets, as the Son of God and the King of Israel. All these are valid confessions of faith, and they are especially pertinent for the Church's witness to the synagogue."

<sup>3</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971), 87-88. "The cumbrous introduction to the Baptist's answer (v. 20) corresponds to its preparation in v. 19; it has the full weight of the solemn testimony. Of a witness in a trial."

<sup>4</sup> Edwin R. Theile, *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 87. Thiele dates Ahab 874-869 BC. Obviously Elijah overlapped.

<sup>5</sup> B.F. Westcott, *The Gospel According to St. John* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1954), 18. The construction of the original words adopted in A. V. is not found elsewhere in St John, though it occurs in St Paul (Rom. vi. 15, ix. 7). The words can also be rendered, What then (not Who) art thou? What is the function which thou hast to discharge? Art thou Elias?...In a spiritual sense John was Elias (comp. Luke i. 17), yet not so as the Jews literally understood the promise. Thus the denial of the Baptist is directed to the Jewish expectation of the bodily return of Elijah, of which Lightfoot has collected interesting notices on Matt. xvii. 10. And at the same time the mission of the Baptist did not exhaust the promise of the coming of Elijah; beyond that coming there was yet another...See Chrysostom on the passage). Comp. Luke ix. 30. The abruptness of the form of the question in the original is remarkable (The prophet art thou?). The reference is probably to Deut. xviii. 15, interpreted not of the Christ (Acts iii. 22, vii. 37), but in some lower sense.

<sup>6</sup> C. F. D. Moule, *The Phenomenon of the New Testament* (London, 1967), 70. (Quoted in Harris' commentary below)

<sup>7</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *Gospel of John V.29* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 44. . A slave's task.

Bernard, I, p. 41, cites a rabbinic axiom that a disciple might offer to do any service for his teacher which a slave did for his master, except that of unfastening his sandals.

<sup>8</sup> W. Hall Harris, *The Gospel of John*. Commentary is available over the Internet at NetBible.com. It is also available at the BSF webpage. It's free. I had Harris as a prof. In seminary and his commentary is cogent and careful. I like especially his comment here, There is a significant problem in verse 39 with the phrase "the tenth hour"—what system of time is the author using? Westcott thought John, unlike the Synoptics, was using Roman time, which starts at midnight.<sup>8</sup> This would make the time 10 a.m., which fits here. But later in the Gospel's Passover account (19:42, where the 6th hour is on the "eve of the Passover") it seems clear the author is using Jewish reckoning, which began at 6 a.m. This would make the time in 1:39 to be 4 p.m. This may be significant: if the hour was late, Andrew and the unnamed disciple probably spent the night in the same house where Jesus was staying, and the events of 1:41-42 took place on the next day (the 4th day of the "week").

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, "Apparently, no uniform Jewish expectation of a single eschatological figure existed. A majority expected the Messiah. But some apocryphal books describe God's intervention without mentioning the anointed Davidic king; in parts of Enoch the figure of the Son of Man, not the Messiah, embodies the expectations of the author. Essenes at Qumran seem to have expected *three* figures: a prophet, a priestly messiah, and a royal messiah."

<sup>10</sup> Beasley-Murray, "Nathanael's expostulation at the idea that the Messiah could come from Nazareth is comprehensible, for Nazareth was utterly insignificant; it has no mention in the OT, the Talmud or Midrash, or in any contemporary pagan writings (Str-B cite one reference to Nazareth from a Jewish writer ca. A.D. 800). The residence of Jesus in Nazareth is akin to his birth in a stable; it is part of the offense of the incarnation. Philip therefore can only reply, "Come and see"; the answer to the offense of the incarnation is Jesus himself."

<sup>11</sup> C.K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to John: An Introduction with Notes and Commentary on the Greek Text*, (London: S.P.C.K, 1967), 154. "The true Israelite is further described. In view of the use in v. 5 of Gen. 28.52 it seems probable that there is here a reference to the cunning of Jacob (later called Israel) in robbing Esau of his blessing (cf. Gen. 27.35). Alternatively we may suppose that the reference to *δολος* simply expands *αληθως*: you are truly an Israelite, with no pretence, scheming or dissimulation."

<sup>12</sup> Brown, 83. John underlines Jesus' ability to know things beyond the normal human range. The impression that Jesus' statement makes on Nathanael, however, has led commentators to speculate about what Nathanael was doing under the tree. Sometimes rabbis taught or studied under a fig tree (Midrash Rabbah on Eccles v 11) and even compared the Law to the fig tree (TalBab *Erubin* 54a); thus there arose a tradition that Nathanael was a scribe or rabbi. The mention of the Law in vs. 45 has been used to support this; and it is on the basis that Nathanael was learned that Augustine excludes him from the Twelve! Jeremias, *art. cit.*, thinks of the symbolism of the tree of knowledge in Paradise. He suggests that perhaps Nathanael was confessing his sins to God under the tree and that Jesus is assuring him that his sins have been forgiven by God (see Ps xxxii 5). C. F. D. Moule, *art. cit.*, recalls the Susanna story (deuterocanonical Dan xiii) where the witnesses are tested by questions concerning the tree under which the adultery took place. He cites Talmudic evidence for the formula, "Under which tree?",

as an examination of evidence; and he thinks that it is possible that Jesus is showing that he has accurate knowledge about Nathanael. Because of the reference to Nathanael as an Israelite (Israel= Jacob) still others suggest that he was reading the stories of Jacob from Genesis. Others remind us that in Mic iv 4 and Zech iii 10 “sitting under the fig tree” is a symbol for messianic peace and plenty. We are far from exhausting the suggestions, all of which are pure speculation. See also. Carson, D.A. *Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 161. Carson mentions in particular Strack & Bilerbeck and their commentary noting parallels in the Talmud and Misnah.

<sup>13</sup> C.H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 88. “No parallel is cited from Rabbinic sources, but the phrase is a natural expression for the fundamental meaning of ‘Messiah’. It is noteworthy that ‘King of Israel’ is found in the other gospel’s only in Matt. 28.42. and Mark 15.32, where it is used in mockery, John puts it in the mouth not only of the crowd at the Triumphal Entry, hut of Nathanael when he confesses Christ (1.49).”

<sup>14</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John (Rvd.)* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1995), 146. He writes: “Jesus’ reply was evidently convincing to his questioner, but it is not at all clear to us. He said that he had seen Nathanael before ever Philip called him, and the time is specified as “while you were still under the fig tree.” There is no further explanation and no other reference to the incident. We are left to conjecture. The fig tree was almost a symbol of home (cf. Isa. 36:16; Mic. 4:4; Zech. 3:10). Its shade was certainly at a later time used as a place for prayer and meditation and study, and there is no reason for thinking that the practice does not go back as far as this. It seems probable that Nathanael had had some outstanding experience of communion with God in the privacy of his own home, and that it is this to which Jesus refers. Whatever it was, Nathanael was able to recognize the allusion. It is difficult to explain Jesus’ knowledge of the incident on the level of merely human knowledge. Nathanael had never met him before this moment. We are required to understand that Jesus had some knowledge not generally available to the human race (cf. 2:24-25).”

<sup>15</sup> William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953-1954), vol. 1, 110. “In the light of the entire context (see verse 51) it becomes apparent that throughout this account of his conversation with Nathaniel. Christ is thinking of the patriarch Jacob. With reference to the latter, father Isaac had complained speaking to his son Esau, Thy brother came with guile, and has taken away thy blessing” (Gen. 27:35; see also the following verse). The employment of trickery for selfish advantage characterized not only Jacob himself (see also Gen. 30:37-43) but also his descendants (cf. Gen. 34). A really honest and sincere Israelite, a Jew without duplicity, had become such an exception that at the approach of Nathaniel Jesus exclaimed, “Look, truly an Israelite in whom deceit does not exist.”

<sup>16</sup> F.F. Bruce, *The Gospel & Epistles of John* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1983), 61. “Whatever doubts Nathanael may have had vanished instantaneously. The one who manifested such intimate knowledge of his movements and his thoughts was certainly the one to whom the ancient scriptures pointed forward. He addresses Jesus by the courtesy title Rabbi (‘Teacher’), but proceeds to give him far loftier designations than that. In effect he acclaims him as Messiah, using two messianic titles conjoined in the second psalm where God says to the anointed King of Israel, enthroned on the holy hill of Zion, ‘You are my Son; today I have

begotten you' (Ps. 2:6 f.). To the Evangelist as he wrote, 'the Son of God' had a much greater depth of meaning than this, but we need not suppose that, at such an early stage in his career as a disciple, Nathanael meant much more by it than he meant by 'King of Israel'; they were alternative ways of denoting the Messiah."

<sup>17</sup> Edwyn Clement Hoskyns, *The Fourth Gospel V.1* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1942), 189-190. "Jesus is the place of revelation, the place over which the heaven has been opened (Matt. 3.16; Rev. 19.11) Jacob's vision and his perception that the place known normally as Luz is in fact Bethel, the House of God mid the gate of heaven (Gen. 28.10-17), provide the analogy by means of which the promised insight of the disciples is made known. The point of the comparison is not so much that 'What the patriarch saw but in a dream, the disciples will behold in reality' (Holtzmann), as that the place of the stone in the ancient story is now taken by the flesh and the blood of Jesus the Son of man."