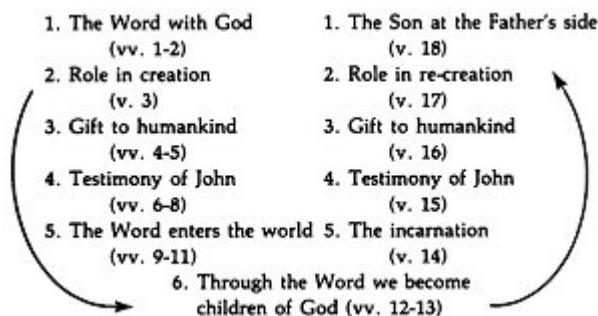


John 1:6-8, 19-28

⁶ A man named John was sent from God.⁷ He came for testimony, to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him.⁸ He was not the light, but came to testify to the light....¹⁹ And this is the testimony of John. When the Jews from Jerusalem sent priests and Levites (to him) to ask him, “Who are you?”²⁰ he admitted and did not deny it, but admitted, “I am not the Messiah.”²¹ So they asked him, “What are you then? Are you Elijah?” And he said, “I am not.” “Are you the Prophet?” He answered, “No.”²² So they said to him, “Who are you, so we can give an answer to those who sent us? What do you have to say for yourself?”²³ He said: “I am ‘the voice of one crying out in the desert, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’” as Isaiah the prophet said.”²⁴ Some Pharisees were also sent.²⁵ They asked him, “Why then do you baptize if you are not the Messiah or Elijah or the Prophet?”²⁶ John answered them, “I baptize with water; but there is one among you whom you do not recognize,²⁷ the one who is coming after me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to untie.”²⁸ This happened in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing. (John 1:6-8, 19–28)

Introduction. This prologue of John’s Gospel serves as an introduction to the context of the fourth gospel. In its short span of eighteen verses, it states briefly what the whole of the Gospel will spell out over twenty-one chapters. It has both structure and content. The *structure* has been partially determined by the presentation of “wisdom personified” in the Old Testament books. There, as in Wisdom 9:9–12 or Proverbs 8:22–36, Wisdom is first with God, then shares in creation, will come to earth, and there be a gift to humankind. This same progression is found in our prologue. The other factor that has determined the structure is the Hebrew fondness for parallelism — notions being repeated in order — and for inverse parallelism, that is, repeated in inverse order. Visually, John’s poetic prologue unfolds as follows.



But on this 3rd Sunday of Advent, the Church extracts the “testimony of John” (vv.6-8) and couples it to the scene at the River Jordan during which the priests and Levites are questioning John, his role, his ministry, and asking if he is the Messiah.

At first glance it might strike one as odd that John the Baptist appears in the sweeping verses of the prologue. It is not odd that he appears in the narrative sections, but it is certainly perplexing to find him in this brief introduction to the Gospel as a whole. But, John the Baptist remained a prominent figure as noted Apollos is first introduced as one who “*knew only the baptism of John*” (Acts 18:25). Perhaps the author of the 4th Gospel wants to make sure that John’s role is important as herald, but one of the aims of this Gospel was to show how clearly and consistently John had pointed people to Jesus.

Commentary

⁶ A man named John was sent from God.⁷ He came for testimony, to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him.⁸ He was not the light, but came to testify to the light....

Verse 6 can also be translated as “*There came a man, who was sent from God; his name was John*” – not overly critical for understanding, but the repeated use of “came” nicely points to a contrast between Jesus and John. Jesus “was” in the beginning; John came into existence and his role was is clear: he is to testify.

The contrast is continued when John is described as “a man,” for Jesus has already been spoken of as “the Word.” But though John’s place was subordinate, it was an important one. While the Evangelist is concerned that John should not be accorded the place that belongs to Jesus he is also concerned that John’s true greatness should be seen. John was “sent from God” (cf. v. 33; 3:28). His mission was not of human but of divine origin.

Witness is one of the key concepts of this Gospel – John uses this word more than all the other gospel writers combined – and it is important that John the Baptist is characterized in terms of witness. The Baptist is cited as a witness often – and only as a witness. In the Synoptic Gospels, John the Baptist’s preaching of repentance and his practice are pointed out. But, in the Fourth Gospel, the Baptist’s one role is to bear witness to Jesus. It is of note that this Gospel has no mention of Jesus’ baptism. There are however repeated references to his witness (John 1:7, 8, 15, 19, 32, 34; 3:26, 5:33). The witness of the Baptist is what matters. It was for witness that John came, and nothing else that he did can be compared in importance to this.

In the Fourth Gospel there are a number of references to “seven” – e.g. the chronology of Jesus’ early ministry “the next day”, “the next day”, “third day” (John 1:35-2:1). Leon Morris¹ points out: “In this Gospel there are seven who bear witness to Jesus. Each of the three Persons of the Trinity does this—the Father (5:31–32, 34, 37; 8:18), Christ himself (8:14, 18; cf. 3:11, 32; 8:37), and the Spirit (15:26; cf. 16:14). The works of Jesus bear witness (5:36; 10:25; cf. 14:11; 15:24), as does sacred Scripture (5:39; cf. 5:45–46). A sixth witness is John the Baptist, while seventh is the variety of human witness consequent on the ministry of Jesus, that of the disciples (15:27; cf. 19:35; 21:24), the Samaritan woman (4:39), and the multitude (12:17). This emphasis on testimony should not be minimized. Testimony is a serious matter and the means of substantiating the truth of a matter; there is a legal air about it. It is clear that our author wants his readers to take what he writes as reliable. He is insistent that there is good evidence for the things he sets down. Witness establishes the truth.”

This bearing of witness was not an end in itself. Behind it was the purpose “*so that all might believe through him.*” The Baptist’s role was to be the means of bringing people to the place of faith. Interesting, “believe” is not in the continuous tense, and this is perhaps significant. John came to hand over the faith, but to bring people to the moment of decision whether to make the definitive act of faith in the person of Jesus.

John the Baptist and the Authorities of Jerusalem: *When the Jews from Jerusalem sent priests and Levites (to him)*

The other gospels do not mention authorities being sent out to interrogate the Baptist, but clearly he was attracting attention as Matthew mentions: “At that time Jerusalem, all Judea, and the whole region around the Jordan were going out to him” (Mt 3:5). We should not be surprised that religious authorities would want to understand the religious significance that was attractive to so many people. His baptizing could be seen as a Messianic act – and if John was such a claimant, he would not be the first. In the end all these possible messianic movements ended with Roman intervention. The inquiry was appropriate in their view and naturally asked: “*Who are you?*”

The text does not indicate that anyone in the delegation asked if he was the Messiah, but it was not too hard to infer their real question beneath the simple “who are you?” The response is a bit of linguistic train wreck: ²⁰ *he admitted and did not deny it, but admitted, “I am not the Messiah”* with expressions piling up on one another. It suggests that his following words were serious and emphatic. While his response does not tell the delegation who he is, it is clear he has no messianic ambitions – he was not the anointed one.

Messiah/Christ both have the meaning of one anointed. In the Old Testament various people were anointed, notably priests and kings. The rite was used to set men apart for special functions. In time, an expectation arose that one day God would send into the world an exceptionally great man, a mighty

deliverer, One who would represent him in a very special sense, this coming great One was thought of not as “an anointed one,” but as “*the* anointed one,” “the Messiah.”

Having cleared that up only partially, it still remained to know who they were speaking to. It is easy to imagine their inner thoughts: “Ok, if you are not the Messiah, then we have a list of other possibilities that have messianic implications.”²¹ *So they asked him, “What are you then? Are you Elijah?” And he said, “I am not.”* It had been foretold by the prophet Malachi that before “that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes” God would send Elijah the prophet (Mal. 3:23). This was understood to mean that Elijah would precede the Messiah.

And he said, “I am not.” That is a clear answer to the authorities, but a bit of a puzzle to us because Jesus explicitly asserted that “... *if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah, the one who is to come.*” (Matt. 11:14). There is a sense in which John was Elijah and a sense in which he was not. He fulfilled all the preliminary ministry that Malachi had foretold (cf. Luke 1:17), and thus in a very real sense Jesus could say that he was Elijah. But the Jews remembered that Elijah had left the earth in a chariot of fire without passing through death (2 Kings 2:11), and they expected that in due course the identical figure would reappear, so in that sense he was not Elijah. Or an even simpler answer is that the Baptist did not know he was the herald of the Messiah.

“Are you the Prophet?” He answered, “No.” The Jews appear to have expected all sorts of prophets to appear before the coming of the Messiah (cf. Matt. 16:14; Mark 6:15; Luke 9:19). More particularly they thought of the prophet like Moses (Deut. 18:15–19). That being said, it had been a long time (hundreds of years) since a recognized prophet had appeared in the land. But at this point, the delegation has no clear answer to the question of his identify and his mission. One can imagine, patience at an end, they finally ask the open-ended question:²² *So they said to him, “Who are you, so we can give an answer to those who sent us? What do you have to say for yourself?”*

The Baptist answers citing words from Isaiah 40:3:²³ *He said: “I am ‘the voice of one crying out in the desert, “Make straight the way of the Lord,”’ as Isaiah the prophet said.* Keeping the focus off himself, the Baptist makes no claim other than he is a voice – one with a single message: a call to be prepared because the coming of the Messiah is at hand, a clarion call to the covenant people.

It is simply noted that in addition to Levites and scribes, Pharisees were also present (v.24). It seems (the Greek is not clear) they have their own questions:²⁵ *They asked him, “Why then do you baptize if you are not the Messiah or Elijah or the Prophet?”* Baptism was not a new practice in Judaism but was typically a ritual used when a gentile converted to Judaism denoting conversation and a ceremonial removal of all that was carried in from the Gentile world that would be considered unclean. Was John’s baptism offering the same meaning: conversion and cleansing? But that only raises the question of conversion to what? And cleansing from what?

The answer was likely not satisfying for those seeking specific answers:²⁶ *John answered them, “I baptize with water; but there is one among you whom you do not recognize,²⁷ the one who is coming after me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to untie.”* It was though he responds, “its only water” but there is another coming – and at that point the whole action of baptism disappears from the conversation. A sidestep to their concern? Perhaps. But more likely it was the Baptist’s consistent response of pointing to the Messiah, the One to come. The one, who by comparison is great – and is already among you.

Morris points out: “Loosing the sandal was the task of a slave; a disciple could not be expected to perform it. To get the full impact of this we must bear in mind that disciples did do many services for their teachers. Teachers in ancient Palestine were not paid (it would be a terrible thing to ask for money for teaching Scripture!). But in partial compensation disciples were in the habit of performing small services for their rabbis instead. But they had to draw the line somewhere, and menial tasks like loosing the sandal thong came under this heading. There is a rabbinic saying (in its present form dating from c. A.D. 250, but probably much older): “Every service which a slave performs for his master shall a disciple do for his

teacher except the loosing of his sandal-thong.” John selects the very task that the rabbinic saying stresses as too menial for any disciple, and declares himself unworthy to perform it. He is unworthy of the most menial of tasks for the one who was to come after him. Humility could scarcely take a lower place.” (*op.cit.*)

The passage closes: ²⁸ *This happened in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing.*

Advent

The theme of readings and teachings during Advent is often to prepare for the Second Coming, while also commemorating the First Coming of Christ at Christmas. With the view of directing the thoughts of Christians to the first coming of Jesus Christ as Savior, and to his second coming as Judge, special readings are prescribed for each of the four Sundays in Advent. The readings of Advent ([1st](#) and [2nd](#) Sundays) always carry a dual understanding of conversion and preparation. A deeper understanding of the sense of the readings can also be understood in considering the prayers of the Mass (Collect, Prayer Over the Gifts, and Prayer After Communion). You can find them on the USCCB website [here](#).

Each of the four Sundays of Advent has its own special readings and characteristics:

- First Sunday of Advent - The readings look forward to the "End Times" and the coming of the "Day of the Lord" or the "Messianic Age"; the Gospel is an excerpt from the Apocalyptic Discourse of Jesus in one of the Synoptic Gospels.
- Second Sunday of Advent - The Gospel readings focus on the preaching and ministry of John the Baptist as the forerunner of Jesus, the one who came to "Prepare the Way of the Lord."
- Third Sunday of Advent - The Gospel readings continue to focus on John the Baptist, while the first and second readings convey the joy that Christians feel with the increasing closeness of the incarnation and the world's salvation.
- Fourth Sunday of Advent - The Gospels tell of the events that immediately preceded the birth of Jesus, including the dreams and visions of Joseph and Mary of Nazareth.

ⁱ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995). 77-82.