

EARLY EVANGELISM AND IMAGE-RICH WITNESSING: JOHN'S TESTIMONY ABOUT JESUS IN JOHN 1:29-34

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JOHN 1:29-34 IN TRANSLATION

The next day, John saw Jesus coming towards him, and he exclaimed, “Look! The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.”¹ This is the one I was talking about when I said, “After me comes a man who outranks me,² for He existed first.³ And I did not know him,⁴ but the reason I came baptising in water was that He might be revealed to Israel.” And John testified saying,⁵ “I saw the Spirit come down like a dove out of heaven and remain on him. And

¹ Or, more literally, “Look, the Lamb of God, the One who is taking away the sin of the world”, or “Look, the Lamb of God, who will take away the sin of the world”. The literal translation could be replaced by a more-dynamic equivalent translation that reflects the warrior-deliverer interpretation of the lamb (see below); “Look, the Saviour of the world, who comes to take away its evil”.

² Or “A man, who comes after me is greater than me”, or “A man who comes after me has surpassed me” (NIV).

³ Or “for He was before me”, or “for He existed first”. The use of “after”, “outranks”, and “first”, in these two phrases translates the meaning of the sentence, but only slightly reflects the Greek text, which plays on two or three words: “After (ὀπίσω) me comes a man who ranks before (ἔμπροσθεν) (literally, ahead (of), before (of rank), i.e., ranks higher than) me, for He existed first (πρῶτος) (lit. first, earliest, or before me).” See below.

⁴ Or “recognise Him” (NASB).

⁵ Or “and John gave further evidence” (AMP), or “then John gave this testimony” (NIV).

I did not know Him, but the one who sent me to baptise in water told me, “The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is He who will baptise in the Holy Spirit.” And I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God.

INTRODUCTION

In these six verses of the first chapter of the fourth gospel, we read of John the Baptist’s functioning as a Christological spokesperson.⁶ John the Baptist’s testimony about Jesus is a witness to a number of Christological themes. The author’s aim in writing John is to show that Jesus is the Son of God, and, in 1:29-34, he is establishing this idea. The Lamb of God, the one who came first, the one on whom the Spirit came down, and, therefore, the one who will baptise in the Holy Spirit, and the Son of God, are the passage’s four identifying characteristics of Jesus.

AUTHOR AND BACKGROUND

Much scholarship has been devoted to questions of setting, dating, authorship, and their interconnections. The debate regarding authorship is whether the author was John, a follower of John, or another writer, unconnected with the Apostles.⁷ The assumption is that John would have written a mainly historical and Jewish gospel at an early date, whereas another writer may have written a theological and Hellenistic gospel at a later date. The setting is Jewish, and previous assumptions about John, as a Gentile gospel, have been overturned since orthodox Jew Dr Israel Abrahams said, in 1924: “To us Jews, the fourth gospel is the most Jewish of the four!”⁸ This paper assumes John the Evangelist wrote an historically-accurate fourth gospel around 70-80 AD (earlier than many datings). The situation is not entirely clear, though some suggest that it was written to be universally addressed to the world.

⁶ W. R. Farmer, “John the Baptist”, in *Freedman’s Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, Buttrick, et al, eds, New York NY: Abingdon Press, 1962.

⁷ Gary M. Burge, *Interpreting the Gospel of John*, Grand Rapids MI: Baker Books, 1992, pp. 37-54.

⁸ Stephen N. Neill, and Tom Wright, *The Interpretation of the New Testament 1861-1986*, New York NY: Oxford University Press, 1988, p. 338.

According to Dodd, the evangelist's prologue, treating the $\lambda\acute{o}\gamma\omicron\varsigma = \textit{logos}$, "word", first, addresses the Hellenistic world, yet the history that follows in the gospel is described in a manner that is grounded in Jewish tradition. It is too simplistic to argue John is meant for either the Gentile or Jewish world alone. It is, in fact, best described as the universal gospel.⁹

CONTEXT AND STRUCTURE

SYNOPTIC PARALLELS

John the Baptist's testimony about Jesus in John 1:29-34 refers to the Spirit coming down on Jesus, which we know from the synoptic gospels, occurred at His water baptism.¹⁰ The fourth gospel focuses on this aspect of His baptism, compared to the synoptics, which describe the event. What is more important to John the evangelist, apparently, is that act of God, which identified Jesus (v 33). The agenda is one of witness. The writer's interest is more in showing who Jesus is than describing all the events, in which He was involved. The things in the fourth gospel are written so that its readers might believe who Jesus is, and, thereby, have life (John 20:30-31).

CONTEXT – THE FOURTH GOSPEL

The literary structure proposed by Dodd is adapted here.¹¹

⁹ C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1953, p. 296.

¹⁰ Matt 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:15-18.

¹¹ Dodd, *Interpretation*.

Table 1 – Structure of John

A.	Proem	1:1-51
	a. Prologue	1:18-18
	b. Testimony	1:19-51
B.	Book of signs	2:1-12:55
C.	Book of passion	13:1-20:31
D.	Epilogue	21:1-25

The prologue (1:1-18) introduces John the Baptist and Jesus. The Baptist is Jesus' witness. Jesus is the Word, and pre-existent one (1:1-2), the Creator (1:3-4), the true light (1:5-9), and God the Son (1:14, 18). These Christological themes are expanded in the Baptist's testimony, and throughout the book.

John's testimony of Jesus (1:29-34) forms part of the series of testimonies (1:19-51), which is seen by some to begin a seven-day scheme, describing Jesus creating a new community (1:19-2:11).¹² The first day (1:19-28), the Baptist begins to reply to a delegation of Jewish authorities, who ask who he is and why he baptises. He only gives his testimony in the negative – about who he, himself, is not. The Baptist is merely the forerunner to Jesus.¹³ On the second day, Jesus appears, and the Baptist then gives his testimony in the positive, telling who Jesus is, and describing his own role in terms of revealing Him (1:29-34). On the third and fourth days, people start to follow Jesus, including some of John's own disciples (1:35-42, 43-51). It is noteworthy, contributing to the witness theme of John, that, after Jesus calls Philip, He is seen immediately witnessing to Nathaniel (1:45).

Jesus' public ministry is shown in the book of signs (2:1-12:55), as a demonstration of His nature, described in the introduction and prologue. For

¹² J. Ramsey Michaels, *John*, New International Bible Commentary, Peabody MA: Hendrickson, 1989, p. 28; John A. T. Robinson, *The Priority of John*, London UK: SCM Press, 1985, pp. 161-163; Charles H. Talbert, *Reading John: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Fourth Gospel and the Johannine Epistles*, London UK: SPCK, 1992, p. 80.

¹³ Dodd, *Interpretation*, pp. 292-293.

example, on the final day of the seven-day scheme, begun with John's testimonies, Jesus, through whom all things were made (1:3), turns water into wine at a wedding (2:1-12). His passion and resurrection (13:1-20:31) climax His work on earth, fulfilling John's testimony that He was the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.

STRUCTURE

A witness is one who testifies to what they have seen, heard, or experienced. This passage is structured around John the Baptist's witness of Jesus.

Table 2 – Structure of John's testimony about Jesus (John 1:29-34)

Section 1

Introduction – John sees Jesus and:	(1:29a)
A. Proclaims Jesus as the Lamb of God	(1:29b)
B. Reports he had said Jesus is greater	(1:30)
C. Reports he came baptising to reveal Jesus	(1:31)

Section 2

Introduction – John gives testimony:	(1:32a)
A. He saw the Spirit come on Jesus	(1:32b)
B. God had told him this would show who would baptise in the Holy Spirit	(1:33)
C. He witnessed that Jesus is the Son of God	(1:34)

The evangelist fills this passage with the Baptist's testimony of Jesus. The whole passage is a monologue of witness.¹⁴ What John the Baptist has seen, said, come for, not yet recognised, and been told about, is Jesus; and he tells this to his audience. Jesus is the Lamb of God, the pre-existent one, the one who will baptise in the Holy Spirit, and the Son of God. Here, then, are contained four major Christological statements, around which the remainder of the paper will be based.

¹⁴ C. H. Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel*, Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1963, p. 251.

JOHN'S TESTIMONY ABOUT JESUS

1. THE LAMB OF GOD

What John the Baptist meant by "Lamb of God", and then what John the Evangelist was communicating, has been interpreted in numerous ways. Jesus, as the Lamb of God, has become so inextricably woven with Christianity, and, particularly, with the atonement, that it is difficult to view the concept outside these categories.¹⁵ Lamb of God may refer to an atoning sacrifice, or perhaps to the Servant of Is 53. Outside these categories of personal redemption, however, is a third option of the apocalyptic warrior lamb that developed in the second temple period.

The first option is that Jesus is described as an atoning lamb, specifically the paschal lamb, derived from Ex 12:1-11 (cf. Lev 16:7-10; Gen 22). Christ's death occurred during the Passover festival, and so, the early church connected the two events, in terms of God's deliverance and atonement (1 Cor 5:7). The Baptist's identification of "the Lamb of God [as He] who takes away the sin of the world" seems to support this interpretation. ἁμαρτίαν "sin", in the Jewish mind, deserved punishment, and was only eradicated by sacrifice. Jesus fills this role, being the one taking the sin upon Himself, and so carrying it away.¹⁶

A second interpretation, still allowing for the atonement, is that the Lamb of God is the suffering servant of Is 53.¹⁷ Isaiah describes the servant, in terms of a lamb, with clear atonement language. He "took up our infirmities", "was pierced for our transgressions", and "was led like a lamb to the slaughter" (Is 53). If John's Lamb, then, is to be considered as a sin offering, the servant interpretation is commendable. However, the synoptics suggest the Baptist was not thinking of Jesus in terms of a suffering servant. Like many other Jews of the day, he was probably hoping for the Messiah, who would set up an earthly reign, but, those hoping for such deliverance, were disappointed.

¹⁵ D. Brent Sandy, "John the Baptist's 'Lamb of God' affirmation in its canonical and apocalyptic milieu", in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 34-4 (1991).

¹⁶ 1 John 3:5; cf. Lev 17:11; Prov 16:6; Is 6:7; Rom 3:25; Heb 2:17.

¹⁷ Talbert, *Reading John*; cf. Acts 3:13; 8:32.

The Baptist became uncertain about Jesus' identity, such that, when he was arrested, he sent messengers to Jesus to ask Him if He was the one they were expecting (Matt 11:2). The suffering servant may have been a theme, adopted by the early church, in the light of Jesus' death, but there is little evidence that John the Baptist meant this.¹⁸

The final interpretation is of the apocalyptic Lamb.¹⁹ Sheep, in the ancient world, were symbols for a variety of things, including power, war, and conquest.²⁰ In the second temple period, a lamb commonly symbolised deliverer.²¹ The deliverer concept is still consistent with ὁ ἄμνος τοῦ Θεοῦ ὁ αἴρων τὴν ἁμαρτίαν τοῦ κόσμου, "the one taking away the sin of the world". This could mean bearing the penalty of sin, in atonement, and/or to "carry off, destroy, and sweep away" sin.²² Dodd argues that John's testimony refers to the latter sense of destroying and making an end of sin, describing a Messiah, who comes to make an end of sin.²³

¹⁸ Sandy, "Lamb of God", pp. 449, 457. Of course, as with the Lamb of God as an atoning lamb, John the Evangelist may have alluded to the Lamb of God, with suffering servant themes in mind. From a post-resurrection perspective, the Evangelist could tell Jesus' story with insight the Baptist could not have had. This is why this essay argues that John the Baptist spoke better than he knew about Jesus' identity. Compare the high priest's statement regarding Jesus' death in John 11:49-50, in which he did not speak on his own, but spoke prophetically (v 51).

¹⁹ T. Joseph 19:8; 1 Enoch 19:8; Rev 5:9; 7:17; 17:14; Dodd, *Interpretation*, p. 230; Sandy, "Lamb of God"; Talbert, *Reading John*, p. 81.

²⁰ For sheep imagery of a war expedition, see Dan 8:3-22; of Babylonian destruction, see Jer 50:45; 51:40; and of Israel, see Ezek 34. 1 Enoch 85-90 labels David as a lamb, who became a ram as a ruler. Revelation shows Jesus as the Lamb, ruling the universe, defeating foes, and officiating at the banquet held in His honour. Sandy, "Lamb of God", pp. 451-454.

²¹ Sandy, "Lamb of God", p. 458.

²² H. Bachmann, and H. Slaby, *Computer-konkordanz zum Novum Testamentum Graece von Nestle-Aland 26 und zum Greek New Testament*, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1980; Walter Bauer, et al, *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature*, Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press, 1979, p. 24; Gerhard Kittel, and Friedrich Gerhard, eds, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1985, pp. 28-29.

²³ Dodd, *Interpretation*, p. 232.

John the Baptist often spoke better than he knew. His Lamb has both apocalyptic and atoning significance. The Lamb of God may have been seen as a deliverer, to the Baptist's audience. The readers of the gospel, moreover, had the hindsight of Jesus' death and resurrection, to see that it could apply to personal redemption, as well as deliverance.²⁴ That there was more than one possible interpretation of the Lamb of God in their minds is acceptable. Haenchen comments; "The various forms of the portrait of Jesus are kaleidoscopically reflected in verse 29, in which all the details, subconsciously, work together to form a new image in its own right."²⁵

2. PRE-EXISTENT ONE

The Baptist continued to bear witness to Jesus, reporting that Jesus was the one he said outranked him, because He existed first. ἔμπροσθέν, "before, in front of, before (of rank), i.e., of higher rank", is here taken to refer to rank.²⁶ The reason given that Jesus outranks the witness is that Jesus existed first. πρῶτος signifies "first" or "earliest" in time, number, or rank.²⁷ Christ is often described as πρῶτος (cf. Rev 1:17, 2:8). Here, it is taken as meaning first, in relation to time, i.e., pre-existence. In relation to John the Baptist, then, Jesus is before him (in rank), on the grounds that He existed before him (in time).

John did not intuitively know (ᾔδειν) that Jesus was the One, for whom they were looking.²⁸ However, the reason he came baptising in water was so that Jesus would be revealed to all Israel. Jews practised baptism for converted Gentiles (proselytes), but John's baptism went beyond this Jewish custom. His baptism was one of repentance, and ethics, and of eschatology (for the kingdom was near). Significantly, he also baptised Jews. Jewish tradition,

²⁴ Dodd, *Interpretation*, p. 232; Sandy, "Lamb of God", pp. 458-459.

²⁵ Quoted in Sandy, "Lamb of God", p. 457.

²⁶ Bachmann and Slaby, *Computer-konkordanz*, p. 446; Bauer, et al, *Greek-English Lexicon*, p. 257.

²⁷ Kittel and Gerhard, *TDONT*, pp. 965-966.

²⁸ Bachmann and Slaby, *Computer-konkordanz*, p. 494; Kittel and Gerhard, eds, *TDONT*, pp. 673-674.

according to John the Baptist, was not sufficient. A new day was coming, and Jews, and all peoples everywhere, needed to start afresh with God.²⁹ The basis, on which they could then meet with God, was through Jesus, who was the one who would administer a baptism greater than John's was – baptism in the Holy Spirit.

3. THE BAPTISER IN THE HOLY SPIRIT

Continuing to witness, the Baptist now declares that he has seen the Spirit come down on Jesus. Hence, according to what God has said, He must be the one who will baptise in the Holy Spirit. John had seen the Spirit with his physical eyes come down and remain on Jesus, but in such a way that he realised, by revelation, its supernatural significance.³⁰ Jesus had been set apart, in John's eyes, as the one who would baptise in the Holy Spirit. This section will discuss the manner of the Spirit's coming on Jesus, and its significance.

John testified, saying that he saw τὸ πνεῦμα, “the Spirit”, come down ἐξ οὐρανοῦ, “from heaven”. This suggests that the Spirit had divine nature and origin. τὸ πνεῦμα, in John 1:33, is the Holy Spirit of God. πνεῦμα is the “breath (life), spirit, soul, that which gives life to the body”. It appears, throughout the scriptures, attributed to God, and John faithfully reproduces this tradition. The place, from which the Spirit came down, furthermore, was οὐρανοῦ, “heaven”. In John's world, this had special significance, because of the way the world was perceived. Heaven was where God dwelt, above the sky, the sky, in turn, being above the earth.³¹ The Spirit of God came down

²⁹ Flemington, “Baptism”, in *Freedman's Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Buttrick, ed., New York NY: Abingdon Press, 1962, p. 349.

³⁰ When people θεάομαι = *theaomai* “see” Jesus in the fourth gospel, they commonly recognise His glory, and make a faith decision; cf. Bachmann and Slaby, *Computer-konkordanz*, p. 136; Bauer, *Greek-English Lexicon*; D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1991, p. 151.

³¹ Cf. Luke 8:23; Bachmann and Slaby, *Computer-konkordanz*, pp. 254-255; Bauer, *Greek-English Lexicon*, p. 408. Note that οὐρανός = *ouranos* sometimes refers to the sky, or those parts of the universe, apart from the earth, but here, more probably, refers to heaven in

from heaven onto Jesus at His baptism, just as the Son had come down from the Father onto the earth at the incarnation (cf. Matt 3:16; Mark 1:10; Acts 2).

The manner of the Spirit's appearance, furthermore, was καταβαίνον ὡς περιστέρων, "coming down like a dove". καταβαίνον, "coming down", can, perhaps, be pictured like rain falling, or a storm coming down. ὡς περιστέρων, "like a dove", does not suggest the coming was in the form of a dove, but, rather, in the manner of a dove.³² The language, furthermore, is not of tranquillity, but of flapping wings, and of power. Other literature, of which 1st-century readers may have been aware, described scenes such as people falling "upon their enemies like a dove".³³ The Spirit coming down on Jesus like a dove is, perhaps, not unlike the scene described in Acts 2, when the Holy Spirit comes down on the disciples, and the house is shaken.

The Spirit found a place to stay with Jesus, just as one stays at an inn. His baptism was not temporary, for the Spirit ἔμεινεν ἐπ' αὐτόν, "remained on him".³⁴ ἔμεινεν speaks of "dwelling, living, lodging, remaining, or abiding".³⁵ John witnessed that the Spirit had a permanent place in Jesus' person.

The significance of the Spirit coming on Jesus was that it identified Him as He who would baptise in the Holy Spirit. The Baptist confesses that he did not know who Jesus was, except that the One, who had . . . sent

its contemporary understanding, as the abode of the divine, or the dwelling of God. Bauer, *Greek-English Lexicon*, pp. 593-595.

³² Interestingly, the bird Noah sent out to see if the water had receded was a dove (Gen 8:1-12). The dove came on Jesus, as He came out of the water, just as the dove was sent out to find land by Noah, as the ark was coming out of the water.

³³ Rikk E. Watts, "Fourth gospel class notes", Melbourne Vic: Bible College of Victoria.

³⁴ Ross, "Holy Spirit", in *Freedman's Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Buttrick ed., New York NY: Abingdon Press, 1962, p. 630.

³⁵ Bauer, *Greek-English Lexicon*, p. 33; Kittel and Gerhard, *TDONT*, pp. 581-584.

(commissioned and appointed)³⁶ him, told him about this sign.³⁷ John testifies now about this thing that God had told him. He is supporting his own witness by appealing to the weightier emphasis of the Father, just as Jesus appeals later (John 5:36-37). John's testimony included God's word that the person, on whom the Holy Spirit came, was the One who would baptise in the Holy Spirit.

Although the Spirit had come on Jesus, the Spirit was not to come on His followers until Jesus returned to the Father in heaven. If He goes, Jesus said, He would send the Holy Spirit to His followers (John 16:7). In fact, Jesus instructed his disciples to wait for the Holy Spirit, implying this baptism in the Holy Spirit was to precede witnessing, and world evangelisation (Luke 24:46-49).

4. THE SON OF GOD

In verse 34, most manuscripts read ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ, "the Son of God", and this has substantial and diverse manuscript support. It is consistent with both the context and the terminology of the fourth gospel. The textual variants are ὁ ἐκλεκτός τοῦ θεοῦ, "the Chosen one of God", ὁ ἐκλεκτός υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ, "the Chosen Son of God", or ὁ μονογενῆς τοῦ θεοῦ, "the unique one of God". Several commentators argue that the text was more likely altered from ἐκλεκτός to the better known υἱός, and that a change in reverse is difficult to imagine. However, other unfamiliar titles have been left, including "God the only one" (1:18), and "Holy One of God" (6:69). ἐκλεκτός does have textual support, but it is not widely distributed.³⁸ Furthermore, ἐκλεκτός appears 22

³⁶ πέμψας "sent" is a common Johannine theme (the word appears 32 times in the gospel). Jesus and the Holy Spirit are both sent by the Father, as is John the Baptist. The idea of moving geographically is not as important as the meanings of being instructed, commissioned, and appointed. Bauer, *Greek-English Lexicon*, p. 642.

³⁷ Is 11:1-2; 42:1; Beasley-Murray, *Gospel of Life: Theology in the Fourth Gospel*, Peabody MA: Hendrickson, 1991, pp. 63-64.

³⁸ Carson, *John*, p. 152; Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, London UK: United Bible Societies, 1971; Michaels, *John*, p. 36.

times in the New Testament, but nowhere in the fourth gospel.³⁹ υἱός, on the other hand, is used throughout John, and has the largest and widest textual evidence.

Jesus is described as ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ Θεοῦ, “the Son of God”, throughout the fourth gospel, though it was not a regular messianic title (cf. Ps 2:7). In John, Jesus calls God “Father” 107 times, and God calls Jesus υἱός 17 times. He is the Son, in the sense that He has His origin in God, and He has been sent to save the world (John 3:16). Similar to the Old Testament prophets, ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ Θεοῦ is sent by, and is dependent on, the Father (John 8:28-29). The Son of God has a unity with the Father, which He has come to bring all, who will believe in His name, to be a part of as well.⁴⁰

The Baptist’s κἀγὼ ἑώρακα καὶ μεμαρτύρηκα, “and I have seen and I have testified” (both verbs in the perfect, suggesting finality), emphasise the witness motif. These two requirements of a witness (seeing and testifying) have been met by the Baptist throughout the pericope, and are summarised at its end. They underscore how the sight of the Spirit, coming down and remaining on Jesus, was transforming. It was the Father’s sign or seal on the Son. Seeing this, enabled the Baptist to point to Jesus, and climax his testimony testifying about Jesus that this is ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ Θεοῦ.⁴¹

CONCLUSION

John the Baptist comes before Jesus, to witness to Him. Rather than receiving glory for himself, he points to the One who is greater than he, the One who will take away sin, and baptise in the Holy Spirit. This is the Son of God. The passage is thoroughly one of Christological witness, with images that are rich in meaning. The Baptist told people about the things he saw and knew of Christ. He did not know who Jesus was, until he saw the Spirit come on Him, but he also probably did not realise the ramifications of his testimony. He

³⁹ Ἐκλεκτός is, however, used by John in his epistles (2 John 1:13), but he still does not use it to refer to Jesus; cf. Luke 23:35.

⁴⁰ John 17; Dodd, *Interpretation*, p. 254.

⁴¹ Carson, *John*, p. 152.

makes Christological statements in this passage, for example, identifying Jesus with the Lamb of God, whose ramifications may not have been understood until after the resurrection. John the Baptist may have spoken better than he knew, but John the Evangelist capitalised on this, and wrote what he knew:

Jesus did many miraculous signs, in the presence of His disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that, by believing, you may have life in His name (John 20:30-31).

This passage of early evangelism, and image-rich witnessing, is a model for spicing our conversation with witness, and for using images that are rich in meaning for those with whom we talk.