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Summary

The Gospel now enters the realm of narrative. John the Baptizer again witnesses to Jesus, causing some of his disciples to begin following Jesus. Those disciples enlist others to “come and see.”

Jesus’ first sign is performed at a wedding in Cana. The scene then shifts from the north (Galilee) to the south (Jerusalem) where Jesus drives the animal sellers and money changers out of the temple.

Basic Bible References

John 1:19-2:25

Genesis 28:12, 17

Word List

Holy Spirit

The Jews

Sign

Pharisee

Priests

Levites



3

Come and See

John the Witness

Read **John 1:19-23**. The Gospel writer introduces what comes next as “the testimony of John.” In this Gospel, John the Baptizer’s entire role is to bear witness to Jesus. Verse 19 says that “the Jews” sent the priests and Levites (temple officials) to question John. Certainly the author does not mean that all the Jewish people did this. By “the Jews” the writer means the Jewish authorities, perhaps the Council of seventy religious leaders who were in charge of Israel. The term “the Jews” is most frequently used in the Fourth Gospel to designate the religious leaders, not all the Jewish people. The Gospel writer throughout the book seems to be in the midst of a hard-fought debate with the leaders of Judaism who do not believe in Jesus. Be careful as you read not to infer that the Gospel is speaking negatively about Jews in general.

John says of himself that he is neither the Jewish Messiah (here the Greek word “Christ” is used) nor Elijah, an Old Testament prophet who, it was popularly believed, would appear to announce Messiah’s coming. Nor (probably) was John “the prophet” a reference to the coming prophet from Deuteronomy 18:15, likewise thought to be a forerunner of Messiah. (It is interesting to note that in Matthew 11:14 and in Mark 9:13 Jesus says that John the Baptizer does fulfill the Elijah role.)

Who Are You?

The priests and the Levites ask John to answer the question that they will also ask of Jesus throughout the Gospel: “Who are you?” Read **1:24-33**. John replies by quoting Isaiah 40:3. He is a voice crying out to the people to prepare the way for God’s Messiah.

The Pharisees (religious leaders who were laymen) question John about why he is baptizing. His reply, “. . . among you stands one whom you do not know . . . ,” is reminiscent of John 1:10. The full answer to the Pharisees’ question does not come until the next day. John’s reason for baptizing was to alert people to the coming of Jesus (verse 31). John has not done this on his own. John is not proclaiming his own opinion. “[H]e who sent me to baptize with water” (verse 33) is clearly God. John is doing what he is doing because God has called him to bear witness to Jesus.

At the sight of Jesus (in verse 29), whom John does not know (verse 33), he cries out “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.” For John, Jesus is the sacrificial lamb of God who will die to wipe out the sin of the whole world. Notice that “sin” is in the singular; the world’s sin is its wilful ignorance of God. Jesus’ death will make God visible to all and accessible to all.

Significant Omissions

In the other Gospels the Spirit descends on Jesus at his baptism (see Matthew 3:13-16, Mark 1:9-10 and Luke 3:21-22). In John 1:32-33 John the Baptizer says that he has seen the Spirit descend on Jesus, but there is no mention at all of Jesus’ being baptized by John. Neither does the narrator put us on the scene when the Spirit descends on Jesus. We hear of it second hand from John. It may well be that the Gospel writer’s interest in keeping John in a subordinate position has caused him not to mention Jesus’ baptism at the hands of John.

There are other unusual omissions in John’s Gospel about Jesus’ life as well. There is no scene of the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness and there is no agonizing prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane immediately before Jesus’ arrest. It may be that John is concerned that the Gentile readers of his Gospel might find in these scenes signs of weakness that would not be acceptable or understandable to the Roman mind.

The Trinity

Read **1:33-34**. John the Gospel writer never uses the word trinity (it is a theological word, not a biblical one) but he includes all members of the Trinity in these verses. “[H]e who sent me,” “He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain,” and “the Holy Spirit.” In the Gospel of John there is a continual interplay among the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. The phrase, “the Father who sent me,” is used more than twenty times in John. Later in the book there will be large sections given over to discussions of the Holy Spirit. If you watch closely, you will see the three members of the Trinity meshing in John’s thinking into one powerful experience of the living God.

The Disciples

Read **1:35-42**. In John’s Gospel the first disciples seek Jesus instead of Jesus’ choosing them. The significance here may be that once again the movement is away from John the Baptizer (with his blessing) and toward Jesus.

One of the first two disciples remains unnamed; the second is Andrew. When Andrew is seen in the Gospels he is usually bringing someone to Jesus. His brother is introduced as “Simon Peter” even though Jesus has yet to give him the nickname “Peter.” Characters in John’s Gospel are often introduced as though the reader already knows them. In verse 42, Jesus names Simon “Cephas,” the Hebrew word for “rock.” “Peter” is the Greek word for rock. There is no reason given for this nickname as there is in Matthew (see Matthew 16:18). Paul calls Simon by the Hebrew “Cephas” in 1 Corinthians 15:5.

At this point in the narrative, John the Baptizer has, for the time being, faded away. In this Gospel people are often introduced in order to elicit some saying from Jesus and then they fade out of the picture. This will happen in chapter 3 with Nicodemus.

And More Disciples

Read **1:43-51**. Jesus is now clearly the center of the story. He begins to choose additional disciples. He issues the call to discipleship, “Follow me,” to Philip. “Follow me” means far more than merely “walk behind me.” It means, in the Christian’s vocabulary, “Go where I go and do what I do. Take your cues about life from me and me alone.”

Philip finds Nathanael. So far then, John the Baptizer has pointed two disciples to Jesus. One of those disciples (Andrew) brings Simon Peter. Jesus calls Philip and then Philip finds Nathanael. People come to Jesus by being called by him or by the witness of other disciples. This is the way the Church grows even today.

The disciples' witness about Jesus is that he is the Messiah; he is the one Moses and the prophets wrote about; he is the son of Joseph. He is, then, the one anointed with God's authority; he is the fulfillment of the Scriptures (Moses and the prophets was a term sometimes used to designate Israel's sacred writings), and he is a human being—the son of Joseph. There is no mention of a virgin birth in John.

One disciple, Nathanael, is not mentioned in the Synoptic Gospels and it is unclear if he is to be counted among the Twelve, since unlike the Synoptics, John never provides a list of the twelve disciples. The exchange between Jesus and Nathanael is very strange. Nathanael cannot believe that anything important can come from a backwater place like Nazareth until Jesus tells him that he saw him under a fig tree. Nathanael's reaction is, to say the least, startling. Nathanael proclaims Jesus to be: rabbi, Son of God, and King of Israel! These are all titles that tie Jesus firmly to Judaism. It would be interesting to know what Nathanael was doing or thinking under that fig tree, but that remains between Nathanael and Jesus.

Jesus does not deny any of the titles that Nathanael has given him. Jesus' reference to angels "ascending and descending" may be an allusion to the angels ascending and descending Jacob's ladder (read **Genesis 28:12, 17**). Jesus is the very gateway to God as he asserts in John 10:9; "I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture."

The Wedding at Cana

Read **John 2:1-12**. We now meet "the mother of Jesus" although if we had to rely on the Fourth Gospel we would never know her name. She is never named in this Gospel. In verse 3 it becomes apparent that Jesus' mother expects him to be able to solve problems that others cannot solve. Jesus replies in verse 4 that his "hour has not yet come." "Hour" is a technical term in John's Gospel. It means the time of Jesus' glorification, the revealing of what the Father is saying in and through him. As the Gospel progresses, the "hour" is more closely defined as Jesus' glorification through his death on the cross.

Jesus' reply to his mother has been considered by many to be rude, since Jesus addresses her as "Woman" (don't try that at home!) and rather shortly tells her that it's no business of theirs. Indeed, Jesus may be indicating to his mother—and John to his readers—that Jesus does not act on the orders of any human being, but that his actions are directed by God. (Note however, that when Jesus is on the cross and is concerned for his mother's care, he refers to her as "Woman.") At any rate, Mary, like most mothers, is not silenced: "Do whatever he tells you." This is not only an order to servants, but good advice to anyone who hears Jesus' words.

John's use of the phrase "the Jewish rites of purification" seems to indicate that at least part of his audience is not Jewish. Jesus' instructions are carried out and the plain water meant to purify is changed into the robust wine of a party. Throughout the Synoptics, Jesus refers to the kingdom of God as a party of amazing abundance. Is this sign meant to announce the beginning of the real party—the abundant party of God? These jars are, after all, unusually large, holding one hundred fifty gallons. That's a lot of wine, especially for a party that is already half over.

This is no party trick. No one at the party except Jesus' mother, the disciples, and the servants knows that anything has happened. It is because this incident has happened secretly that the wine steward is confused. John refers to the changing of the water into wine as the first sign that Jesus did, a sign that caused Jesus' disciples to believe in him. It was a sign that "revealed his glory." John uses the term "sign" where others might use the word "miracle." A sign is an epiphany, a revelation, of the nature of God; not some magic trick to amaze the crowds. The signs that Jesus will perform announce the presence and the nature of almighty God: the God who inaugurates the feast, welcomes sinners, heals mental and physical illness, receives the lonely, and raises the dead. To watch Jesus at work is to see the nature and the will of God.

After the wedding, Jesus returns home to Capernaum with his family and the disciples. Matthew and Mark both refer to Capernaum as the place of Jesus' residence (see Matthew 4:13 and Mark 2:1). Capernaum is mentioned in all four Gospels. It was a town in the north, in Galilee.

Cleansing the Temple

The reader is now introduced to the first of three Passovers that are recorded in John. Read **2:13-25**. The Synoptic Gospels all speak of one visit of Jesus to Jerusalem, one Passover, and presumably one year of ministry. In John's Gospel the three different Passovers point to a three-year ministry with much activity in Jerusalem.

The Synoptics all place this incident in the Temple during Holy Week, the last week of Jesus' life. It is highly unlikely that a total unknown, making his first trip to Jerusalem, having only recently gathered disciples around him, would survive this kind of attack on the authority of the temple officials. Only the threat of a riot brought on by an attack on a well-known and beloved figure could have protected anyone who did what Jesus did on the temple grounds. But John has his own reasons for introducing Jesus' first visit to Jerusalem in this way.

In this scene, Jesus is the one with true authority over God's temple—his word is the true word. "The Jews" of verse 18, clearly the temple officials, demand a sign of Jesus' authority. They must know that Jesus has no such authority; at least none that the temple leaders would recognize. Jesus then proclaims that the sign will be his own resurrection. For John, this is the ultimate sign of the nature and will of God. The temple will no longer be the dwelling place of God. From now on, the dwelling place of God is in Jesus Christ.

Remember that when John wrote his Gospel the temple at Jerusalem had already been destroyed (70 AD). Thus the image of a temple destroyed and raised in three days would be a powerful one for John's readers. This is the only place in John's Gospel where Jesus refers to his coming passion. For John, the Old Testament promises and prophecies are being fulfilled in Jesus. The old rituals and celebrations are being replaced by God's presence in Jesus. Even the temple is no longer needed, for God is dwelling with his people in Jesus Christ.

For Further Study and Reflection

Memory Bank

1. Memorize Isaiah 40:1-5, which is associated in the Gospels with John the Baptizer.
2. Memorize John's words about Jesus in John 1:29-31.

Research

1. Using a concordance, look up several of the references to John the Baptizer, Gospel by Gospel. How would you say that each Gospel characterized him?
2. Find out what the roles of priests and Levites were in the first century A.D.

Reflection

1. Imagine yourself among the first disciples as some of them are standing in a small group. When Jesus says “Follow me” what might make you hesitate? What would be hard for you to leave behind?
2. On the few occasions that we see Andrew in the Gospels, he is bringing someone to Jesus. How do you and how does your church bring people to see Jesus?