



John 1:1-5

Notes by Jonathan Herron

OVERVIEW: THE EAGLE

The four gospels - Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John - are often represented symbolically by the figures of the four beasts found in Revelation 4:7. Matthew is represented by the lion, for he saw Jesus as the Messiah and the Lion from the tribe of Judah. Luke is represented by the ox, because it is an animal of service and sacrifice, wherein Luke saw Jesus as the great servant of men (“Son of Man”) and the universal sacrifice for all mankind. Mark is represented by a man, as it is the plainest and most straightforward of the Gospel accounts. Commonly, the eagle is used to represent John. This is because of all of the birds the eagle can fly higher and see farther. The eagle can look straight into the sun and not be dazzled. Of all the New Testament writers, John has the most penetrating gaze into eternal truths and beyond. It is as though he looked straight into the eyes of God who sent His beloved Son, Jesus Christ, into the world to redeem humankind.¹

Augustine once wrote that John “soars like an eagle above the clouds of human infirmity, and gazes upon the light of the unchangeable truth with those keenest and steadiest eyes of the heart.” Without a doubt, the Gospel of John (or Book of John, both titles are used interchangeably) is the most beloved of the four Gospel accounts. This Gospel shows how God made the disclosure of Himself to humankind. Clement of Alexandria, an early church father, referred to the Gospel of John as the spiritual gospel. Not only is the Holy Spirit promised in John’s Gospel, but also the work and ministry of the Holy Spirit with both Christ followers and the Church are outlined.

¹ Carter, James E. *Layman’s Bible Book Commentary: John, Volume 18*. (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1984). 13.

John's Gospel is written quite differently than the other three (known as the *Synoptic Gospels*, meaning they hold things in common). John's Gospel omits so many things that they include. For example, we do not see the birth of Jesus, His baptism, His temptations by the Enemy, the Last Supper, the Garden of Gethsemane, and we learn nothing of Jesus' Ascension into Heaven. It contains no accounts of Jesus healing the demon possessed and shares no parables which are a priceless part of the other three Gospels. In the first three Gospels, Jesus speaks in short, vivid, punchy sentences to keep His teachings simple. In the Gospel of John, we see Christ sharing long, chapter-length speeches that are often argumentative and extremely authoritative.

Far more surprising, John's Gospel offers three distinct facts that are different from the other three:

1. **John has a different account of the beginning of the ministry of Jesus.** While Jesus emerges as a teacher after the beheading of John the Baptist in the Synoptic Gospels (Mark 1:14; Luke 3:18-20; Matthew 4:12), herein we discover Jesus' and John's ministries overlapping (John 3:22-30 and 4:1-2).
2. **John offers a different account of where Jesus' ministry takes place.** In the other three Gospels the main scene of the ministry is Galilee and Jesus does not reach Jerusalem until the last week of His life. In the Gospel of John the main place of the ministry is Jerusalem and Judaea, with only occasional withdrawals into Galilee (John 2:1-13; 4:35-5:1; 6:1-7:14). According to ancient church father Eusebius, the earliest explanation for these varying accounts are: "John records the deeds of Christ which were performed before the Baptist was cast into prison, but the other three evangelists mention the events which happened after that time... The Gospel according to John contains the first acts of Christ, while the others give an account of the latter part of His life" (Eusebius, *The Ecclesiastical History* 5:24).²
3. **John has a different account of the duration of Jesus' ministry.** The other three gospels, on the face of it, imply that it lasted only one year. Within the ministry there is only one Passover Feast mentioned in Matthew, Mark and Luke. In John's Gospel there are three Passovers, one at

² Barclay, William. *The Gospel of John, Volume 1*. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975). 3.

the Cleansing of the Temple (John 2:13), one near the Feeding of the Five Thousand (John 6:4), and the final Passover at which Jesus went to the Cross. According to the Gospel of John, Jesus' ministry would take a minimum of two years, but more likely three years to cover its events. Of course, John is correct in his timing of events. If we read the other three gospels closely and carefully we can see that he is right. When the disciples plucked the ears of corn (Mark 2:23), it must have been spring-time. When the five thousand were fed, they sat down on green grass (Mark 6:39). Therefore it was another spring-time event, and there must have been one year in between the two events.³

JOHN'S PURPOSE IN WRITING

Augustine once said, "When Scripture speaks, God speaks." In John's Gospel, we find a relational God who breaks into human events through the Person and Works of His Son, Jesus. The purpose behind John's Gospel is found near the end of his writing in John 20:30-31 (ESV):

*"Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so **that you may believe** that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."*

We can summarize John's entire Gospel in one word: **believe**. He says, "I've written this book, including these particular accounts, so that you might believe." John witnessed nearly three years of stories, sermons, and conversations, but he didn't include them all: "*Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written*" (John 21:25). He selected certain ones — the ones that would help us believe.⁴ Thus, the tag-line of this teaching series: *That You May Believe*.

The traditional site of John's writing is Ephesus, the city second only to Jerusalem in named importance by New Testament writers. This traditional site goes back to Irenaeus who said, "Afterward, John, the disciple of the Lord, who also had leaned upon his breast, did himself publish a Gospel during his

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Carter, Matt & Wredberg, Josh. *Christ-Centered Exposition: Exalting Jesus in John*. (Nashville: Holman Reference, 2017).

residence at Ephesus in Asia.”⁵ It is important to note that Irenaeus was a disciple of Polycarp, who himself had been a direct disciple of John, the disciple of Jesus Christ.

This would match John’s intended purpose in writing his Gospel, as advancing the gospel in Ephesus, a sea port city that connected the East with the West, was of utmost strategic importance to Paul, Apollos, John, and other evangelists (see Acts 18:24-28; Acts 19; Acts 20:17-38; The Book of Ephesians; Revelation 1:9-11). We have the ancient Christian communities of Ephesus to thank in the ascription of the Gospel of John to generations ahead of it.

COMPOSITION

John’s Gospel is divided into two parts: the Book of Signs (chapters 1 - 12) and the Book of Passion or Glory (chapters 13 - 20). What the other Gospels identify as miracles, the writer of John’s Gospel called signs. A sign points beyond itself. The author carefully selected seven signs to point beyond themselves to God and to explain the character of Christ. These signs were often accompanied by longer sermons which spelled out more completely the significance of the sign. For instance, in John 6 Jesus multiplies the loaves and the fish to feed five thousand men, a miracle recorded by all four Gospels. Then in the discourse that followed He explained that He is the Bread of Life.⁶ The ultimate sign that culminates the first half of John’s Gospel is the raising of Lazarus in chapters 11-12.

The Book of Glory, John’s second half, opens with feet washing (chapter 13), Jesus’ farewell sermon (chapters 14-16), and His high priestly prayer (chapter 17). After the Cross, Jesus reinstates the disciples who have failed Him (chapters 18-20).

In short, John’s Gospel can be seen divided into distinct sections for the reader:

Chapter 1: Time Before Time and John the Baptist

Chapters 2-4: Jewish Traditions

Chapters 5-10: Jewish Festivals

⁵ Morris, Leon. *The Gospel According to John*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmanns Publishing Co., 1971). 59.

⁶ Carter, James E. *Layman’s Bible Book Commentary: John, Volume 18*. (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1984). 19.

Chapters 11-12: Foreshadowing

Chapter 13: Passover Meal

Chapters 14-17: Jesus' Farewell

Chapters 18-19: The Passion of the Christ

Chapter 20: Glorification

Chapter 21: Epilogue.⁷

Another interesting feature of John's Gospel is that he seems at times to be talking on two different levels. There is an immediate, obvious level but also a deeper, more spiritual meaning to the statement. Nicodemus, for example, took the statement of being "born again" in chapter 3 on the literal level while Jesus had reference to a deeper spiritual meaning, being born from above by faith.

The writer of John was also fond of contrasts. Throughout the Gospel are found contrasts such as light and darkness, love and hate, life and death, belief and unbelief.⁸ People are faced with a choice throughout John's Gospel.

Chapter One: Prologue (vs. 1-18)

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him was not any thing made that was made (John 1:1-3).

"*In the beginning was the Word.*" There was never a time when Christ did not exist because the word "was" is in the Greek imperfect tense, which means "was continuing." In fact, the entire first verse bears this sense: "*In the beginning was continuing the Word, and the Word was continuing with God, and the Word was continually God.*" Jesus Christ is preexistent. He always was continuing.⁹

⁷ Schreiner, Patrick. *The Visual Word: Illustrated Outlines of the New Testament Books*. (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2021). 39.

⁸ Carter, James E. *Layman's Bible Book Commentary: John, Volume 18*. (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1984). 19.

⁹ Hughes, R. Kent. *John: That You May Believe*. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1999). 16.

We see this truth elsewhere in Scripture:

*“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that **though He was rich**, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you by His poverty might become rich”* (2 Corinthians 8:9, emphasis added).

*“Who, **though He was in the form of God**, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped...”* (Philippians 2:6, emphasis added).

*“And **He is before all things**, and in Him all things hold together”* (Colossians 1:17, emphasis added).

God’s Word is unmatched in power:

*“The heavens were made by the **word** of the LORD, and all the stars, by the breath of His mouth”* (Psalm 33:6; emphasis added).

*“The God **said**, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light”* (Genesis 1:3; emphasis added).

*“He sent His **word** and healed them; He rescued them from the Pit”* (Psalm 107:20; emphasis added).

Creation and salvation both came through the Word of God.

The Gospel of John begins with a phrase that sounds familiar. The first three words of this book echo the first three words of the Bible. Genesis 1:1 opens, *“**In the beginning** God created the heavens and the earth”* (emphasis added). John is connecting Jesus Christ with creation, claiming Jesus existed *before* creation. Jesus existed before the world began, before there was time. If we were to hit the rewind button on history, we could take it back to the very beginning, when God created the world out of nothing, and Jesus was there. In fact, we could go back *before* God began creation, and Jesus would have existed with Him. This was the testimony of Jesus Himself: *“Now, Father, glorify Me in Your presence with that glory I had with you **before the world existed**”* (John 17:5; emphasis added). Genesis 1:1 contains no hint

of the creation of God, and here in John 1:1 there is no hint of the creation of Jesus. This is what sets Jesus apart from any religious leaders — Jesus has always existed.¹⁰

Next the apostle adds, “*And the Word was with God.*” Literally, “*the Word was continually toward God.*” The Father and the Son were continually face-to-face. The preposition “with” bears the idea of nearness, along with a sense of movement toward God. That is to say, there has always existed the deepest equality and intimacy in the Holy Trinity.¹¹

Moreover, as the final phrase of verse 1 adds, “*And the Word was God.*” The exact meaning is that the Word was God in essence and character. He was God in every way, though He was a separate person from God the Father. The phrase perfectly preserves Jesus’ separate identity, while also stating that He is God. This was His continuing identity from all eternity. He was God constantly.¹²

Finally, Jesus is the Creator of the universe: “*All things were made through Him, and without Him was not any thing made that was made.*” This is a constant teaching of the New Testament:

“For by Him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities — all things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.” (Colossians 1:16-17)

“In these last days, (God) has spoken to us by His Son, whom He appointed the heir of all things, through Whom also He created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of His nature, and He upholds the universe by the word of His power.” (Hebrews 1:2-3)

“Worthy are You, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for You created all things, and by Your will they existed and were created.” (Revelation 4:11)

¹⁰ Carter, Matt & Wredberg, Josh. *Christ-Centered Exposition: Exalting Jesus in John*. (Nashville: Holman Reference, 2017). 10.

¹¹ Hughes, R. Kent. *John: That You May Believe*. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1999).

¹² *Ibid.*

“Yet for us there is one God, the Father, from Whom all things and for Whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through Whom are all things and through Whom we exist.”

(1 Corinthians 8:6)

At this point one should be beginning to grasp the greatness of Christ. He is the Creator of the macrocosm of the universe but also of the microcosm in the inner universe of the atom. The text in Colossians explains that He holds the atom and its inner and outer universe together (“In Him all things hold together”).

From the beginning of John’s Gospel, John argues that Christ is not one of many gods but is God Himself. John MacArthur writes,

“Confusion about the deity of Christ is inexcusable, because the biblical teaching regarding it is clear and unmistakable. Jesus Christ is the preexistent Word, who enjoys full face-to-face communion and divine life with the Father, and is Himself God.”¹³

John pivots now to the greatness of Christ’s love for us, uniquely and personally:

“In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.

The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, yet the world did not know Him. He came to His own,

¹³ Carter, Matt & Wredberg, Josh. *Christ-Centered Exposition: Exalting Jesus in John*. (Nashville: Holman Reference, 2017). 11.

and His own people did not receive Him. But to all who did receive Him, who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.”

In clearest terms, Christ is described as light. There is ample Scriptural evidence that Christ is light in a physical sense, for He appears as such in glory (see Matthew 17:2; Mark 9:2-3; John 17:5). But the emphasis here is on His being spiritual, life-giving light to a dark world.¹⁴ When John writes that, “*The light shines in the darkness,*” he is literally meaning that it shines continually in the darkness, meaning that Christ is continually bombarding every corner of our hearts of darkness through the work of His Holy Spirit in nature (Romans 1), conscience (Romans 2), and the Scriptures (Romans 3).

Sadly, the majority of mankind rejected the light. Verse 5 concludes, “*And the darkness has not overcome it.*” Other translations read that the darkness did not “overpower” it. The light met with tremendous resistance. Verses 10 and 11 round out the description in this way: “*He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, yet the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and His own people did not receive Him.*” Think of it! The One who said, “Let there be light,” was rejected. Yet today He is still light and continues to seek to pry His way into hostile hearts. Amazing love! And though many reject Him, some respond.¹⁵

The gospel is the good news that you no longer have to wander about in the darkness and despair of sin, but you can enjoy the light of righteousness through Jesus Christ. John is not suggesting we need more religion. Jesus came into a very religious world — a world where the religious leaders had memorized lengthy portions of the Bible. Yet these men were in the darkness of sin. They stumbled about, attempting to please God through their own self-righteousness. Jesus offers light and life.¹⁶

John goes to great lengths establishing that Jesus is uniquely different from everything and everyone else: “That lights shines in the darkness, and yet the darkness did not overcome it” (1:5). Look

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Carter, Matt & Wredberg, Josh. *Christ-Centered Exposition: Exalting Jesus in John*. (Nashville: Holman Reference, 2017). 13.

at these two verbs. John says “that lights shines.” Shines is in the present tense. He’s saying, “The light is still shining in the darkness.” Now look at the next phrase: “The darkness did not overcome it.” Here John uses a verb that signifies a completed action: The darkness has done everything it could: it schemed and plotted, but it ran out of ideas. No matter what the darkness does, the light will still shine; it will not be overcome. What an awesome truth! Jesus Christ is still shining in this dark world. The light can still be seen.¹⁷

Reflect & Discuss

1. Who is Jesus?
2. Why are God’s words powerful? What Scriptures show the power of God’s Word?
3. Why does John call Jesus “the Word?” What does this title tell us about Jesus?
4. What does John want us to believe about Jesus from this passage?
5. Describe the connection between Genesis 1:1 and John 1:1. How does this connection show a distinction between Jesus and creation?
6. Why did Jesus come into the world?
7. What would the world look like if Jesus had not brought the light of the gospel?
8. What does it mean to be a Christ follower? What changes have taken place in your life as a result?
9. What is the good news of the gospel? If someone took an inventory of your life, what would they think is your good news?

¹⁷ *Ibid.*