

## A Storytelling Commentary on John 1:1-20

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The inclusion of John the Baptist in the prologue of John was probably an editorial decision by the composer of John in its present form. The probability is that an earlier version of the *logos* hymn had nothing about John the Baptist. The editors of the lectionary have selected the John the Baptist episodes from the prologue as if they were an independent tradition. In a sense they have undone the editorial work of the composer of the present prologue as we have it. This creates unnecessary confusion and the need to explain why these elements were taken out of their context in the prologue. I would recommend that you tell the whole of the prologue along with the story of the dialogue of the Pharisees with John the Baptist. It makes a longish story but it is more interesting. You might introduce it in something like these words: “Friends in Christ, I am going to tell you the whole of the prologue to the gospel of John as an introduction to the story of John the Baptist. But pay attention to the sections about John the Baptist.”

The conclusion of many commentators is that the motive for the introduction of John the Baptist in the prologue was to make it clear that he was subordinate to Jesus. This was in response to claims from the Baptist sect at the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century about the superiority and/or Messianic status of John the Baptist. My own conclusion is somewhat different than that. While the motif of John’s supporting role in relation to the Messiah is reiterated several times (1.8, 15, 20, 27; 3.28-30) the impact of the notices about John is to give him prominence and to include the John the Baptist movement and its traditions in the story of Jesus. The purpose of this was to include the followers of John the Baptist in the late 1<sup>st</sup> century in the audience of those who are addressed by the gospel. The Johannine storyteller, who we can call John, included in the audience of his story all of the major groups of ecumenical Judaism in the late first century. What is happening then in the formation of the prologue and the inclusion of these elements about John the Baptist is to honor John as an integral part of the story of the Messiah and thereby to include John’s followers in the Gospel’s audience.

These stories of John also contribute to the credibility of the introduction of Jesus as the Messiah at the beginning of the Gospel. The expectation of Jews in the first century was that a herald would precede the Messiah, a prophet who would prepare his way. This is clearly prophesied in Malachi 4.5: “Lo I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes.” Elijah is identified as the one who will precede the Messiah. The prophecies of Malachi were the background of these stories about John the Baptist. This helps to clarify the concerning him and cried out “This is he of whom I said. The one who comes after me, ranks before me, for he was before me.” This means that John the Baptist recognized and affirmed the preexistence of Jesus as the *logos*, the word of God. That is why he ranks ahead of him, even though he was younger and came after him. The Word existed before John the Baptist. Thus, John affirms the assertion with which the prologue begins: the Word was in the beginning with God, from the beginning

of creation. His announcement of Jesus' greatness is in continuity with this picture of Jesus as the logos who was present from the beginning of time.

Perhaps the most striking thing about this story is John's self-subordination to Jesus. This happens in the following stories of John's dialogue with the priests and Levites about his own identity and of his sending his disciples after Jesus. John the Baptist says "Look! There's the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world," and two of his disciples follow Jesus and stay with him all day. Andrew is one of John's disciples who followed Jesus on that first day and Andrew went and told his brother Simon Peter and brought him to Jesus. This portrayal of John the Baptist is truly remarkable because of his spirituality. He is one who with true humility subordinates himself to the one who is coming after him, to the messiah, and affirms Jesus role as the one who has come to save the world.

But the characterization of John the Baptist is also an affirmation of his own role as the predecessor, the herald, and the one who prepared the Messiah's way. In the presentation of John the Baptist, I would suggest that you focus on his character and what a remarkable person he was. John the Baptist is to Jesus as Ed McMahon was to Johnny Carson. John says, "Here's Jesus, the Lamb of God!" That's the spirit of these stories. John is not ponderous or judgmental, but hopeful and joyful. Jesus, like Andrew and Philip, may have been a follower of John the Baptist at some point in his life. But unlike most students of great teachers, he appears to have been regarded by John as having more authority and power than he did. And in these stories, John is happy about that. This portrayal of John the Baptist in John is at the core of this prologue (he is the only one who is quoted in the prologue) and of the audience's introduction to Jesus. It's a magnificent section of the story, and it fits with the major theme of Advent, waiting and looking for the coming of the messiah. This is John's version of that spirit of looking forward to and celebrating the coming of the Messiah: "Here is the Lamb of God!"