

# JOHN 1

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## **1:1–5**

Unlike Mark, which begins with Jesus’s baptism, or Matthew and Luke, which begin with His birth, John reaches back to contextualize Jesus within a far grander scope. “In the beginning” borrows the opening phrase of Genesis 1:1. As careful readers of the Creation account may notice, the first thing that God created was not light or dark but the words with which He spoke them into existence. The Jewish philosopher Philo, a contemporary of Jesus, described God as taking an active role in the world through emanations, or intermediary beings. Chief among these was the *logos*, the same word translated here as “word.”

The latter part of verse 1 is somewhat ambiguous since it is unclear if the sense is “the Word was God” or “the Word was a god.” Latter-day Saints are prepared to handle either meaning, however. Continuing the Genesis theme, the Evangelist explains that Jesus was the necessary cause of all creation. Verses 4–5 introduce another key theme in the Gospel of John: light and dark. These polar opposites will appear throughout John’s Gospel. The Greek word *katalambanō*, translated here as “comprehended,” offers some difficulties. It can mean “to understand,” “to accept,” or “to overpower.” It is quite likely that more than one of these meanings is intended here—each is true in its own way.

## **1:6–13**

The John of these verses refers to John the Baptist, who will play an important role in the first chapters of the Gospel of John. This is not John the Evangelist (that is, the John who wrote the Gospel of John), who never refers to himself by name. Unlike the Synoptics (the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke), John emphasizes the Baptist’s role as a witness—another important theme in the fourth Gospel—rather than as a prophet and baptizer.

Modern revelation confirms that the “true Light” is Jesus Christ, who “lighteth every [person] that cometh into the world” (John 1:9; Doctrine and Covenants 88:6–13). John’s language of light and dark

seems to have inspired Joseph Smith; similar wording is found throughout the Doctrine and Covenants and the Prophet's teachings.

Verse 10 demonstrates a deep irony that permeates the Gospel of John: creation does not recognize its creator. Jesus was rejected by those who should have known Him best. But verse 12 gives an important caveat—those who *do* believe are reborn as “sons of God.” This is another theme and contrast that will appear again and again in the Gospel. Jesus offers believers another, spiritual birth that is fundamentally different from the mortal birth of the natural man and woman. This symbolic thread will culminate on the cross, demonstrating that Jesus paradoxically offers life through His death.

### **1:14–18**

Verse 14 is saturated with Old Testament themes. While “dwelt” is an acceptable translation for the Greek *skēneō*, the word more properly means “to pitch a tent.” In the Old Testament, the word is used of the wilderness tabernacle. “Glory,” too, is associated with the divine presence in the tabernacle, demonstrating that just as Jehovah had dwelt with His people in their tabernacle and temples, He now does so in the person of Jesus Christ. “Full of grace and truth” harks back to Exodus 34:6 (and many other Old Testament passages), where Jehovah self-describes as “abundant in goodness and truth.” “Goodness” (Hebrew *hesed*) could more accurately be rendered as “covenant love, loyalty, everlasting kindness, fidelity, or grace.” Through these allusions, the Evangelist (that is, the writer of the Gospel of John) is making one thing very clear: Jesus is the God of the Old Testament, now clothed in flesh.

John the Baptist's comment that Jesus “was before” him despite coming after him indicates Jesus's special status in premortality (John 1:15). Although He was not the first of God's children to walk the earth as a mortal, Jesus truly is the Firstborn of the Father (Doctrine and Covenants 93:21). His abundant righteousness, grace, and love are sufficient for us as we partake of his fullness, returning “grace for [or, better, in return for] grace” (John 1:16). Grace for grace and grace to grace seems to be the order of heaven (Doctrine and Covenants 93:12–13).

Verse 18 presents a problem when we consider the fact that numerous figures in the Old Testament and Book of Mormon saw God. However, the emphasis of this statement is not on God's invisibility but on the fact that He is revealed through His Son, Jesus Christ. Perhaps we should understand this peculiar claim to mean that we cannot see or commune with our Heavenly Father except through the intermediation of His Son.

### **1:19–28**

The main narrative of the Gospel of John begins in verse 19, although we may regard the entirety of the first chapter as an introduction to the Gospel. The questions posed to John the Baptist by the contingent from Jerusalem demonstrate some of the messianic expectations of the time. The Messiah was expected,

as were the return of Elijah and the coming of the prophet spoken of by Moses in Deuteronomy 18 (John 1:20–21). The extent to which these figures were seen as the same or distinct is unclear and probably varied among different Jewish groups or sects. John the Baptist rejected all these attributions and chose to identify himself rather with the prophecy of Isaiah 40:3 as a preparator for the LORD. He predicted that the one whose path he was preparing would soon arrive. The location of John the Baptist’s baptism is significant: *bet ‘abarā* is Hebrew for “the place of crossing,” indicating that he was baptizing in the location where the Israelites entered the promised land (see Joshua 3). Just as Israel passed through the waters of the Jordan to arrive at their destined home, so must we pass through the waters of baptism to return to our heavenly home. This is also one of the few places in the Gospel of John with clear synoptic parallels—that is, parallels to the writings found in Mark, Matthew, and Luke.

### **1:29–34**

In verse 29, John the Baptist gave Jesus one of His most famous titles: “the Lamb of God.” The Greek *amnos*, “lamb,” does not point toward any particular type of sacrifice but to the sacrificial system generally. This is also one of the few passages in the Gospels that speaks of the removal of sins. In the fourth Gospel, John the Baptist directly identified Jesus as the one who was to come after him. Unlike in the other Gospels (especially Mark) where the identity of Jesus is often kept secret and becomes known only gradually, in John it is revealed from the beginning that Jesus is the Son of God.

### **1:35–42**

Discipleship is the primary theme of the rest of chapter 1. Individuals are introduced to Jesus and then introduce others to Him. By the end of this chapter, five of the twelve apostles will be identified and chosen. Many readers of the Gospel of John have identified the unnamed disciple accompanying Andrew in verses 35–40 as John the Evangelist (who often seems to refer to himself anonymously), but it is impossible to determine if this is in fact the case. No matter his identity, we can admire the faith of this disciple and of Andrew, who trusted the Baptist’s testimony and immediately followed Jesus to learn more themselves.

### **1:43–51**

There is perhaps a note of irony in Jesus’s remark in verse 47. Nathanael was certainly a good man—one worthy of the apostleship that Jesus bestowed upon him—but his remark about Nazareth was less than charitable. The Greek *dolos* (“guile” in the King James Version) indicates duplicity, dishonesty, or a trick. Jesus was saying that Nathanael was an honest, straightforward man but that he also perhaps lacked

tact. Nathanael was *too* honest—even if we think that nothing good may come out of Nazareth, is that an opinion that we need to express?

This passage also introduces themes of seeing and believing, both of which are important in the Gospel of John. Seeing the miracles of Jesus and recognizing them for what they are is important, but only when that is accompanied by belief. Belief does not make sight unnecessary but rather allows us to understand what we see. This theme will reach its climax after the resurrection of Jesus in John 20:24–29.

The final verse of the chapter contains an important intertextual allusion to Genesis 28. As Jacob journeyed to Mesopotamia, he saw in a dream “a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven: and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it” (28:12). Jesus’s statement in John 1:51 equates Him with the ladder; He is the intermediary between heaven and earth, and if we, too, are to ascend to heaven, we must do so through Him.

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