

Meditating with
Scripture
JOHN'S GOSPEL

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INTRODUCTION

How should we read the Gospel of John? There are so many ways. The one presented here is rooted in an experience that does not separate reason from faith or the intellect from the heart. It follows the method of *lectio divina*, proposes a prayerful listening to the word, and is moved by the invocation of the Spirit. We cannot fly on eagle's wings unless the Spirit lifts us.

It is no accident that Christian tradition symbolises the fourth evangelist with an eagle. John is someone who flies high. Like the eagle, he soars into the highest heavens and gazes upon the sun. In the immensity of silence, he hears the unutterable Word, the dazzling source of life, which illuminates every living being. This light is dramatically opposed but never overcome, as the present tense of the verb emphasises: the light continues to shine in the darkness (John 1:5). And so it does today, for every one of us.

The Word that John goes on to exalt at length is entirely oriented toward the One who pronounces it: it is the Word of life that continually expresses eternal love. 'There is one God, who manifested himself through Jesus Christ his son, who is *his Word proceeding from silence*, who in all respects was well-pleasing to him that sent him.'¹

So let us invoke the Holy Spirit so that we may enter into the dynamics of this Gospel written with a precise intention: '... so you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name' (John 20:31).

The Gospels are not neutral works. They were born from faith and are intended to lead their hearers to faith. They were written from a unique perspective, in the light of the crucified and risen Lord. This light illuminates the Gospels from start to finish. John makes this outlook his theme, the interpretive key of his entire

work.² He witnesses to the astonishment and the immense joy of those who have seen, heard, and touched ‘what was from the beginning... the word of life’ (1 John 1:1). He is the witness who recounts the indescribable experience opened to the believer’s gaze in the tremendous scene of Golgotha, an experience transfigured in the light of the risen Jesus, who at the high point of the Gospel story induces the doubting disciple to exclaim, ‘My Lord and my God!’ (John 20:28).

We are invited to enter into this story and to search actively for the One who reveals himself. Many titles describe him: he is the *Logos/Word*, the Only Begotten, the Son of God, the Lamb of God, the Son of Man, the Messiah, the Good Shepherd, the King of Israel. He is the Light, the Living Water, the Bread come down from heaven, the Sheep Gate. He is the Way, the Truth, the Life, the Resurrection. It is impossible to remain indifferent to him. Readers can see themselves in the various personalities who appear in the story and interact with Jesus: ‘representative individuals like Nicodemus, surprising individuals like the Samaritan woman and the adulterous woman, courageous witnesses like the man born blind. Then there are others who were closer to Jesus, like his mother, Mary Magdalene, Mary of Bethany, and Martha. Finally, there are his everyday companions, like Simon Peter, Thomas, Nathanael, the disciple whom Jesus loved, and even Judas, who was to betray him. Jesus’ encounters with these figures transmit a multi-faceted Christology narrative.’³

Tradition identifies John as the disciple who rested his head on Jesus’ chest at the Last Supper. He enjoyed a singular intimacy with the Master, but he does not covet his privileges. He desires, instead, to include us: ‘[W]hat we have seen and heard we also proclaim to you so you too may be in fellowship with us. Our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ, and we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete’ (1 John 1:3–4). This is the good news; this is the joy that overflows!

So now let us begin, with gratitude and joy, our journey through

the Gospel of John. This book is not an exhaustive commentary. It limits itself to offering a few notes for *lectio divina*, appropriate for personal use or in Bible study groups. The aim of this book is to soar on eagle's wings towards the contemplation of the Word made flesh—but beginning with the flesh, meaning the concrete structure of the text. The spiritual is not above or outside, but within, in all the depth and breadth of the word.

Our approach to *lectio divina* is inspired by the *Way, Truth, and Life* methodology proposed by Father James Alberione, the founder of the Pauline Family, a worldwide Christian community with particular dedication to following the example of St Paul in spreading the gospel by all means possible. So every chapter will be divided into three parts:

- Listening to the Word (Truth)
- Dialoguing with the Word (Way)
- Pause to ponder (Life)



Chapter 1

JOHN THE BAPTIST AND THE LAMB OF GOD

John the Baptist is a figure of unique importance among the personalities of the fourth Gospel, not only because he is the first to enter the scene, but also because of the quality of his testimony. The evangelist is so keenly aware of this that he includes his witness in the prologue, the meditation on the *Logos*/Word. If the Word is the light, then John, like a mirror, simply reflects the light from him:

There was a man sent by God named John.
He came as a witness to bear witness concerning the light,
so that all might believe through him.
He was not the light, but came to bear witness concerning the
light. (John 1:6–8)

John reflects the light, but he does not do this silently: he speaks. He is the ‘voice’ that cries out in the desert. The first testimony he gives is set in Bethany beyond the Jordan and takes place over the course of three days.

John does not say everything in one day because he respects the time needed for his hearers to assimilate and understand his message more deeply. But in the device of the ‘three days’, we can discover another aspect that transcends *krónos* (earthly time) and points instead to the biblical concept of *kairós*—the decisive moment, the eschatological time of salvation. In this sense, these first ‘three days’ foreshadow the culminating days of Christ’s

Passover, when the testimony of the Baptist—'behold the Lamb of God'—finds its complete fulfilment.

IN BETHANY BEYOND THE JORDAN: THE FIRST THREE DAYS

Read the text of John 1:19–39, observing John's testimony and the characters who appear during the three days covered by the account. The action all takes place in a single setting: Bethany beyond the Jordan. Day by day the light becomes increasingly clear.

(The first day)

And this was John's witness when the Jews of Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him, 'Who are you?'

He stated plainly and did not deny it, and he stated plainly, 'I am not the Messiah.'

'Then what are you?' they asked him. 'Are you Elijah?' 'I am not,' he said. 'Are you the Prophet?' 'No,' he answered.

So they said to him, 'Who are you? Give us an answer for those who sent us! What do you say about yourself?'

He said, '*I am the voice of one crying out in the desert, "Make straight the way of the Lord,"*' as Isaiah the prophet said.'

There were also some who had been sent from the Pharisees, and they asked him, 'Then why do you baptise if you are neither the Messiah nor Elijah nor the Prophet?'

John answered them by saying, 'I baptise with water; among you stands one you do not know, the one who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.'

These things took place at Bethany beyond the Jordan, where John was baptising.

The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and said, 'Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!'

‘This is the one of whom I said, “After me comes a man who is above me, because he was before me.”

‘I did not know him; instead, I came baptising with water for this reason—so he might be revealed to Israel.’

Then John bore witness and said, ‘I saw the Spirit descending like a dove from Heaven, and it remained upon him.

‘I did not know him, but He Who sent me to baptise with water, He said to me, “Whoever you see the Spirit descending upon and remaining upon, he is the one who baptises with the Holy Spirit.”

‘And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God.’

The next day John was again standing there, as well as two of his disciples, and, as Jesus walked by, John looked right at him and said, ‘Here is the Lamb of God.’

His two disciples heard him speaking and they followed Jesus.

When Jesus turned and saw them following him he said to them, ‘What are you looking for?’ So they said to him, ‘Rabbi’—which, translated, means ‘Teacher’—‘where are you staying?’

‘Come and you will see,’ he said to them. So they came and saw where he was staying, and they stayed with him that day; it was about four in the afternoon. (1:19–39)

The Baptist’s testimony is divided over three days:

- On the first day, John meets the delegation of religious leaders sent from Jerusalem, and denies that he is the Messiah. He identifies himself as a ‘voice’ in the perspective of the second part of Isaiah (Isaiah 40:3). As such he announces the one who is to come and who in fact is ‘among you’ (John 1:26). The Messiah is already present—he is in their midst—much as the risen Jesus will be described in John 20:19–22 and as the Lamb is presented in Revelation 5:6. The Messiah is present, but not recognised; he is present, but hidden.

- On the second day, the light grows more clear. The Baptist is the first to recognise the hidden Christ, and he points him out in symbolic, mysterious language: 'Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!' John, the 'voice', expresses himself at length during this second day. He says that Jesus 'was before me', that he 'baptises with the Holy Spirit'; he calls him 'the Son of God' (1:30, 33–34). And the reaction to this rich testimony is silence. No one speaks, no one objects. Silence falls upon the Hidden Christ revealed by John.
- On the third day, something new happens. John now sees Jesus passing by, but John seems to stop him with a look and a gesture, even before he says, 'Here is the Lamb of God' (1:36). What does this mean? John does not explain. But at least two of his disciples (Andrew and another whose name is not mentioned) must have intuited the meaning of this term because they immediately leave the Baptist to follow the Lamb—a new development on this third day. John's testimony, now condensed into a single striking phrase, sets in motion a new journey in the footsteps of Jesus.

The third day, therefore, marks a transition from the Baptist to the Lamb. The day continues with the disciples following Jesus, and it culminates in their staying and living together with him.

It is an unforgettable day, the memory of which remains vivid years later. It begins a transforming experience, which cannot be guarded jealously but must be shared. As Mary Magdalene will later run to the apostles, Andrew runs to find his brother Simon and proclaims to him enthusiastically, 'We have found the Messiah!' (1:41). The wait has ended; he who was to come has now arrived.¹

WHAT KIND OF MESSIAH IS HE?

We should note that Andrew does not repeat the Baptist's exact words: he does not say to his brother, 'We have found the Lamb of God!' Only the Baptist uses this title. It is not found anywhere else in the Gospel except in an allusive way in the great scene of Golgotha, at the death of Jesus (see John 19:36).

Although Jesus loved to speak with images and presents himself as the Sheep Gate and as the Good Shepherd, he never says of himself, 'I am the Lamb of God.' Why not? Did he perhaps want to distance himself from the meaning the Baptist gave to this expression? This intriguing question deserves further study, but one thing seems clear: apart from the meaning that it might have had in the Baptist's mind, for the evangelist John the title 'Lamb of God' is a decisive hermeneutical key. He uses it for interpreting Christ's identity and mission, which is fully revealed at the very end, when he is lifted up on the cross and pierced through.

THE BIBLICAL BACKGROUND

Against the backdrop of the Jewish biblical tradition, the designation 'Lamb of God' may have held a variety of associations and connections for John the Baptist's audience. Here are five of them:

1. The lamb of the burnt offering. The expression 'Lamb of God' can be understood as the lamb that God himself provides, that belongs to him and is given by him. In the account of Genesis, Isaac asks, 'The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?' (22:7). Abraham does not have the heart to reveal to his son what is in store for him, and so he replies inconclusively, 'God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son' (v. 8). What follows shows that God truly does provide: 'And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a

thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son' (v. 13). According to the tradition of the Jewish *targumim*, or commentary on the Hebrew texts, the lamb/ram that is substituted for Isaac is a prefiguring of both the Passover lamb and the lamb of the *Tamid* (see point 3 below).

2. **The Passover lamb.** This lamb had to be not only without blemish, just like everything else that is offered to God, but also young, 'a year-old' (Exodus 12:5). The Passover lamb represents life in all its freshness and innocence and is associated with the great liberation, the Passover of the Lord, the exodus from Egypt (see Exodus 12:11).
3. **The lamb of the *Tamid*.** The lamb of the daily (*Tamid*) sacrifice also had to be without blemish and was burnt in the temple to pay for personal and communal sins. And the Baptist, identifying Jesus as the 'Lamb of God', makes explicit reference to sin: he is 'the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!' (John 1:29). The first letter of John also develops along the same perspective: Jesus 'appeared to take away sins' (3:5).
4. **The lamb as a symbol for the prophet/suffering servant.** In Jeremiah 11:19, the lamb is a metaphor for the prophet's conduct, utterly without guile or malice, in clear contrast with the treachery of his opponents: 'But I was like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter. And I did not know it was against me that they devised schemes...' This image is taken up again in the poem of the suffering servant: 'He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth' (Isaiah 53:7). According to the Lord's mysterious plan, the innocent servant-lamb bears upon himself the iniquities of others, and without rebelling he suffers their consequences. In this perspective, the lamb becomes a symbol of the meek and innocent Messiah who suffers violence and death. Is this how the Baptist thought about the reference?

The evangelist certainly held this perspective, together with that of the Passover lamb, but it may be too much to attribute it to the Baptist.

5. The apocalyptic lamb. The Baptist's preaching seems to correspond more closely to the figure of the lamb as seen in some apocalyptic texts, particularly in the Ethiopian Book of Enoch (a book accepted as part of scripture by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church) and in John's Revelation. There, the victorious lamb has 'seven horns', which expresses the fullness of divine power (Revelation 5:6). In this context the lamb is not simply meek. Instead, Revelation speaks paradoxically of 'the wrath of the Lamb' (6:16). This aspect may clarify the scene of the purification of the temple, where Jesus gives full expression to his disgust: '... making a whip out of rope, he drove them all out of the Temple, along with the sheep and the oxen. He poured out the moneychangers' coins and overturned their tables' (John 2:15).

When the Baptist sees this young man of about 30 walk by, a thrill of excitement runs through him: 'Here is the Lamb of God!' He is the man who was awaited, who was sought. 'This is the one of whom I spoke,' the Lord says to the prophet Samuel at Saul's arrival (1 Samuel 9:17). Similarly, when he sees Jesus, John cries out: 'Here is the Lamb of God!'

This 'here is' will return in the fourth Gospel at its most dramatic point. When Jesus comes before Pilate, scourged and crowned with thorns, Pilate will present him to the crowds with these words: 'Look at the man! ... Here is your king!' (John 19:5, 14). This man, mocked and humiliated for his messianic claims, appears as the silent Lamb of whom Isaiah speaks (53:7).

Later, in the great scene of Golgotha, the image of Christ as the Passover lamb emerges. Jesus is condemned to death while the lambs are being killed in the temple for the feast of Passover. In the evangelist's eyes, Jesus appears as the true Passover lamb, of which 'not a bone... shall be broken' (Exodus 12:46; John 19:36). In

the end, what the Baptist was saying from the beginning becomes completely clear: 'Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!' (John 1:29).

The Gospel of John is therefore embraced by a twofold testimony: at the beginning, that of the Baptist; and at the end, that of the evangelist himself. He vouches personally for the authenticity of all the things he has recounted: 'And the one who saw it has borne witness and his witness is true, and he knows that he is speaking the truth so you, too, may believe' (John 19:35). Behold the Shepherd who lays down his life (see John 10:11), or rather, the Shepherd who becomes a Lamb! From his pierced heart issue blood and water—water that alludes to the Spirit, the source of life (see Zechariah 14:8; Ezekiel 47:1–12). All men and women of all time will look to him, irresistibly drawn by his love: 'And when I am lifted up from the earth I will draw all men to myself' (John 12:32).

DIALOGUING WITH THE WORD

Let us imagine ourselves in Bethany on the banks of the Jordan, among the people listening to the Baptist. He is 'the voice of one crying out in the desert', who invites his listeners to prepare the way of the Lord. What kind of room does his voice find within us, within the desert of our lives? Does it echo hollowly within us, or do we know how to listen to it?



John does not draw attention to himself. He is entirely focused upon the awaited Messiah, the Lamb. Later, when Jesus also begins baptising, prompting suspicion among the Baptist's disciples, he calms them:

'A man can receive nothing unless it's given to him from Heaven. You yourselves can bear witness to me that I said "I am

not the Messiah,” but instead said, “I am the one sent before him.” The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and listens to him, rejoices with joy at the bridegroom’s voice. So in this my joy has been fulfilled. He must increase while I must decrease.’ (John 3:27–30)

The great baptiser is not jealous; on the contrary, he is happy to have his disciples follow Jesus. In this sense, he is happy to ‘decrease’ so that Jesus may increase. The Bride, a symbol of the people of God, belongs to the Bridegroom, meaning Jesus. And John has no intention of violating that belonging. His joy, instead, lies in being the ‘friend’ of the Bridegroom, and of taking delight in his voice. Is our love for Jesus as free and as pure as this? How do we bear witness to him? Do we point him out so that others may follow him?



The two disciples accompanying the Baptist quickly welcome his testimony and immediately follow Jesus. They understand their teacher’s instruction, and without hesitating they leave him to follow the Lamb of God. They want to stay with him, where he lives. And they are not disappointed. In fact, they will never forget that first meeting, and will even remember what time of day it was. Their readiness challenges the disciples of every generation, and challenges us, too, to take up the journey behind the Lamb of God, following in his footsteps.



How do we welcome the testimony of the Baptist? It resounds in every eucharistic celebration, appearing in the Gloria, the hymn of praise that precedes the proclamation of the word of God. In the Gloria, we say, ‘Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world, have mercy on us.’ And before approaching the Eucharist, we invoke the Lamb of God again, as the one who takes away the sins of the world, our sins. What does it mean to follow Christ the Lamb in the context of a society that is often violent and oppressive?



PAUSE TO PONDER

Let's allow ourselves to be drawn to the Lamb whom God especially loves and carries in his bosom (Isaiah 40:11; John 1:1–2). Let us thank him that he loved us to the point of shedding his blood and giving us the supreme gift of his life. Let us purify ourselves in his innocent blood. And let us sing to him, from the depths of our hearts, the hymn of praise from John's Revelation:

Worthy are you to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
because you were slain and by your blood
redeemed for God
a multitude from every tribe and tongue,
every people and nation.
You have made them a Kingdom, priests for our God,
and they shall rule over the earth. . .
Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive
power, wealth, wisdom, and might,
honour, glory, and blessing! (5:9–12)