



Believe

JOHN

MESSAGE

STUDY GUIDE

GROUP MATERIAL

SONGS

Examining the text & our hearts:

Bible Reading: John 3:22-30 NET

Year 1: John the Witness, Jesus the Baptist

Bible Reading: John 3:22-30 NET

²² After this, Jesus & his disciples came into Judean territory, & there he spent time with them & was baptizing. ²³ John [the Baptist] was also baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because water was plentiful there, & people were coming to him & being baptized. ²⁴ (For John had not yet been thrown into prison.) ²⁵ Now a dispute came about between some of John's disciples & a certain Jew concerning ceremonial washing. ²⁶ So they came to John & said to him, "Rabbi, the one who was with you on the other side of the Jordan River, about whom you testified—see, he is baptizing, & everyone is flocking to him!" (3:22-26) ²⁷ John replied, "No one can receive anything unless it has been given to him from heaven. ²⁸ You yourselves can testify that I said, 'I am not the Christ,' but rather, 'I have been sent before him.' ²⁹ The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands by & listens for him, rejoices greatly when he hears the bridegroom's voice. This then is my joy, & it is complete. ³⁰ He must become more important while I become less important." (John 3:27-30 NET) "He must increase, but I must decrease." (3:30 CSB/ESV, etc.)

SUMMARY: The 4th Gospel depicts John & Jesus baptizing simultaneously—contradicting the other Gospels. Was Jesus really a Baptist? One solution notes that it's Jesus' earliest ministry—his 'Year of Obscurity'—which the Synoptics omit. In this period John isn't 'the Baptist,' he's 'John the Witness.' John's singular role is 'playing second fiddle' to Jesus—a task John embraces, playing it well & gladly. Let's ask the Lord: 'What's my role at this time?' John believed and confessed Jesus, succeeding where Nicodemus failed. John produced disciples; some turned out well (e.g. Andrew, etc.), others poorly. The latter envied Jesus' baptizing success; that's an 'earthly response.' When questioned,

John reiterated Jesus' superiority & his own subordinate status as Christ's 'best man,' declaring 'he must increase & I decrease.' Let's learn from John's exemplary example.

1. Year 1: Jesus' 'Year of Obscurity' (Jn. 3:24; Mt. 4:12, 17; Mk. 1:14)

a. **From Jesus' baptism to John's arrest** (Mt. 4:12, 17; Mk. 1:14) "John had *not yet been thrown into prison*" (Jn. 3:24) o "Through the centuries Christians have proposed a one-, two-, 3- or 4-year ministry for Christ. The most common...proposal ...has been a *3-year ministry*, give or take a few months. The relevant data come primarily from John since the Synoptics mention only one Passover. John explicitly mentions 3 Passovers (Jn. 2:13; 6:4; & 12:1) [Plus] Jn. 5:1 refers to an unnamed feast...[perhaps another] Passover...For those who see a *roughly 3-year period*, it's common to divide it into 3 stages:

- a. a '*year of obscurity*' (embracing all...the events *prior to Jesus' great Galilean ministry*);
- b. a '*year of popularity*' (up 'til the aftermath of the feeding of the 5,000...Jn. 6:66) &
- c. a '*year of rejection*' (...from feeding the 5,000 'til his death). [Craig L. Blomberg, *Jesus & the Gospels*, p. 224] o

b. Year 1: "Year of Obscurity" only in the 4th Gospel

- "The duration of Jesus' ministry has traditionally been thought to have been 3 years: [1.] a '*year of obscurity*,' [2.] a '*year of popularity*,' & [3.] a '*year of increasing rejection*.' ...The...Synoptic Gospels (Matt., Mark & Luke) largely omit discussing the *first, obscure year*, but it is recounted in John's Gospel (J 1-4).' [ESV Study Bible]
- "AT. Robertson calls the 1st year following Jesus 'baptism' '*the Year of Obscurity*.' It is recorded only in John's Gospel. The Synoptic gospels plunge Jesus immediately into His Galilean ministry." [H. H. Hobbs, *Life & Times of Jesus*, p. 41]

c. In 'Year 1' there's overlap—Jesus baptized simultaneously with John

- "Jesus & his disciples came into Judean territory, & there *he...was baptizing*.³ *John was also baptizing...*" (3:22-23)
 - "In the Synoptics, *Jesus' ministry does not begin until John's has come to an end*. It is only when the Baptizer has been imprisoned that Jesus comes into Galilee to proclaim the kingdom of God (Mk. 1:14 [etc]). Jesus comes after John in a temporal sense. It is different in the 4th Gospel... [in] 3:24 we are [told] 'John had not yet been imprisoned'...[Here] *Jesus & his disciples are carrying on a baptizing ministry simultaneously with John*...The 4th [Gospel reports] the *early period* [when] *the Baptizer & Jesus overlapped*." [J. Ramsey Michaels, *Servant & Son*, pp 18-20] [4G: window on Jesus' early min.]
- "*John strongly implies that Jesus was a Baptist*"—Moody Smith
 - "One suspects that [the author,] *John*...knows something, namely that *John the Baptist's ministry did not end before Jesus' began*, that they were for a while contemporaries, & that John would have appeared the originator & leader of a movement Jesus joined...[the author,] *John strongly implies that Jesus was a Baptist*, and I am inclined to agree!" [D. Moody Smith, *4th Gospel in 4 Dimensions*, p. 137]

2. 'John the Witness' –Not 'John the Baptist'—in the 4th Gospel

a. Phases in John the Baptist's Ministry

a. Before Jesus' baptism, *John the Baptist's* successful ministry of Baptism (Mk. 1:5; Matt. 3:5-6)

- "People from the whole Judean countryside & all of Jerusalem were going out to [John], & he was baptizing them in the Jordan River as they confessed their sins." (Mk. 1:5)
- "There can be no question that people flocked from all over Judea & from Galilee to seek John's baptism."—W. E. Abraham

b. *John the Witness*—4th Gospel doesn't report John's successful baptismal ministry, nor designate him 'John the Baptist'

- "The portrayal of John the Baptist in the 4th Gospel is problematic...due to the *differences between John's preaching as recorded in the 4th Gospel* compared to that recorded within the Synoptic Gospels." [Robert Webb, *John...Baptizer*, p 89]
- "Even a cursory reading of the 4th Gospel reveals *significant variations between its portrayal of John the Baptist* & that in the Synoptics. The Gospel of John...provides a distinct image of John..." [Brian C. Dennert, *John the Baptist...*, pp. 66-7]

- The 4th Gospel “significantly diverges from the Synoptic accounts. In the 4th Gospel, John is called simply that [‘John’]; he is *never given the title ‘Baptist,’ (or ‘Baptizer’).*” [C. Clifton Black, *Anatomy of the NT*, 136]
 - “Other than denoting John as a witness, *no...description about his diet or clothing* is stated—quite different from reports in the Synoptics....John’s witness is...‘so that all might believe through him’ [1:7].” [Willard M. Swartley, *John*,]
- c. John’s final role—‘*speaking truth to power*’—Herod & Herodias (Mark 6:17-29)
- “‘*Speaking truth to power*’...can...be a dangerous business. John...spoke God’s truth to the powerful Herod, telling him that it was against God’s Law for him to marry his brother, Philip’s wife.” [Martin Hogan, *My Words Will Not Pass Away*,]
 - This account “expresses a theological-social truth...John, Jesus & those who follow them will be persecuted by people in power...But John, Jesus [& Co.]...will not cave to persecution. Strengthened by faith and unafraid to die, they will *preach repentance to the political & religious leaders.*” [John Shea, *Spiritual Wisdom of Gospels*,]
- b. John –Not ‘John the Baptist’, but ‘John the Witness’ (Jn. 1:6-8, 15)
- “To summarize the *portrayal of John the Baptist in the 4th Gospel requires only one word—witness.*” – Robert Webb
 - “For the 4th Evangelist *he is not ‘John the Baptist,’ but ‘John the Witness.’*...He is never called ‘the Baptist’ in the 4th Gospel.”—Karoline Lewis
 - “The 4th Gospel *never uses the title ‘the Baptist’ or the descriptor ‘the baptizer’ for this John.*...[This] *opens the door for John to function differently in the 4th Gospel*—distinct from how he functions in the Synoptic Gospels...John’s baptizing...gather[s] a group of disciples around himself...Jesus later joins John as a baptizer & has his own...disciples. Jesus’ rising prominence... leads to conflict between the two groups of disciples...[This] may be judged as *probably historical.* Yet...[the] *focus of the 4th Gospel’s portrayal of John [is] ‘the testifier to Jesus...’* [Robert L. Webb, “*Jesus in Relation to John ‘the Testifier’ & Not ‘the Baptizer,’*” in P. N. Anderson (ed.) *John, Jesus, & History*, Vol. 3, p. 216]
 - “A man came, sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify about the light, so that everyone might believe through him. ⁸ He himself was not the light, but he came to testify about the light...John testified about [Jesus] and shouted out, “This one was the one about whom I said, ‘He who comes after me is greater than I am, because he existed before me’.” (Jn. 1:6-8, 15 NET)
 - a. John was not ‘the Light’
 - b. John came to bear witness to ‘the Light’
 - c. So that all might believe in ‘the Light’
 - d. John is subordinate to Jesus
 - “In all but the final scene...(10:40-42), *the language of ‘witnessing’ permeates* [John’s] description, either with...the verb [Gk.] *martureo* [to witness, testify] (1:7, 8 [etc]) or the noun *marturia* [witness, testimony] (1:7, 19 , [etc.]). *John’s role as witness* is...express[ed] not only through his own speech & actions, but also in what other characters (5:33-36 [Jesus]; 10:41 [many people]) as well as the narrator (1:6-8, 15 [etc.]) say about him...[John] *displays the single consistent trait of bearing witness to Jesus.*” [Katrin H. Williams, “*John (the Baptist),*” in S. Hunt (ed.) *Character Studies in...4th Gospel*, 47]
- c. John is a witness under interrogation (1:19-20)
- ¹⁹ Now this [is] John’s testimony when the Jewish leaders sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?” ²⁰ He confessed—he did not deny but confessed—“I am not the Christ!”...(Jn. 1:19-20 NET)
 - “John the Baptist *maintained a faithful testimony under interrogation*, & his basic stance towards Jesus —‘*He must increase, but I must decrease*’ (3:30)—remains *suggestive for future witnesses.*” [Andrew T. Lincoln, *Truth on Trial*, p 250]
 - John has a “three-stage testimony...his three-fold denial about his own significance (not Messiah, Elijah, or ‘the Prophet’) ‘parallels’ his three-part proclamation about Jesus’ identity (Lamb of God, Spirit-baptizer...Son of God).” [Katrin H.Williams, “*John (the Baptist),*” in S. Hunt (ed.) *Character Studies in the 4th Gospel*, p. 51]
- d. John is a witness in ‘legal proceedings’
- “John’s denials about himself [‘*I am not...I am not...*’ (1:19-20)] & his testimony on behalf of Jesus... [‘Lamb of God,’ ‘Son of God’ (1:29, 34)...serve] the 4th Gospel’s overarching plot...His denials are not

just simple denials; they are—to dramatize...—*sworn confessions*. His statements about Jesus are not just plain statements; they are *sworn testimony*. John is a *witness in a legal proceeding* related to Jesus, & he has clearly signed his affidavit.” [Steven A. Hunt, “*Jesus in Sharper Relief*,” in C. Williams (ed.) *John’s Transformation of Mark*, p. 131]

e. John’s self-understanding

- “John the Baptist’s self-understanding as revealed in Jn. 1:19-34 & 3:25-30...*John knows who he is*. He preaches with bold assurance & treats the [religious leaders’] messengers...brusquely...But he recognizes that he is ‘*playing 2nd fiddle*’ to Jesus, a *part that he plays gladly and well*. The only description John...accept[s]...was ‘a voice.’...A healthy selfimage...evaluates self with reference to and with the eyes of Jesus Christ.” [Lamar Williamson, *Preaching...John*, 16]
- **Note:** Do you know what ‘role/task’ the Lord wants you to ‘play’ at this time? Find out, then ‘play that role well’

f. Final Echo of John’s Witness (14:40-2)

- “The final verses of [John] chapter 10 close a giant *inclusio* structure, with Jesus’ ministry beginning and ending with the testimonies of John the Baptist (1:19-34 & 10:40-42).” [Paul Jaesuk Jr., *Introduction to the Literary Art of... John*, p. 82]
- After John was martyred, “Jesus went back across the Jordan River again to the place where John had been baptizing at an earlier time, & he stayed there. ⁴¹ Many came to [Jesus] & began to say, ‘*John performed no miraculous sign, but everything John said about this man was true!*’ ⁴² *And many believed in Jesus there.*” (Jn. 10:40-42 NET)
- “*To the end, John plays his role as witness*...John’s mission was to bear witness to Jesus...People come to faith through his enduring & reliable testimony. Jn. 10:40-42...offers ‘closure’ on John. *All the expectations* raised earlier about him *have been satisfactorily met*...Readers are themselves *encouraged to take up the witnessing role*...[But,] as far as John...is concerned, *there are no more loose ends, no gaps to be filled*; John has no further role to play in the text.” [Katrin H. Williams, “*John (the Baptist)*,” in S. Hunt (ed.) *Character Studies in the 4th Gospel*, p. 58]
- “John’s unique features...should...not be underestimated. No other ‘disciple’ in the Fourth Gospel reveals such a deep under-standing of Jesus’ true identity. He is the only human witness to declare Jesus’ pre-existence (1:15, 30) and to anticipate the significance of his earthly mission in its entirety, including what [Jesus] accomplishes through his death, as the Lamb of God & through his resurrection, as the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit (1:33, [etc])...John’s profound Christological insights stem from divine revelation. He is the only character other than Jesus & the Paraclete [Spirit] to be described as ‘sent’ by God. ...His status is clearly different from other Johannine ‘earthly’ characters.” [Katrin H. Williams, “*John (the Baptist)*,” in S. Hunt (ed.) *Character Studies in the 4th Gospel*, p. 60]
- In the 4th Gospel John (the Baptist) has the “*single consistent trait of bearing witness to Jesus*...[He has] personal qualities, such as loyalty & humility, although *he possesses one primary trait—[as a] witness*, under which all secondary traits are subsumed (baptizer, herald, teacher, best man, lamp).” [Catrin H. Williams, “*John (the Baptist)*,” in Hunt (ed.) *Character Studies in the Fourth Gospel*, p. 47]
- John “appears...as a witness. *Everything he does & says is not focused on himself, but on Jesus*. This is...illustrated...in the Baptist’s own words ‘*He must increase, but I must decrease*’ (3:30).” [Marco Rotman, *Call of the Wilderness*, p. 174]
- “John is...a connecting link—on the threshold—between the heavenly & the earthly, the eternal & the historical, the old & the new...Once Jesus public ministry is underway & the in-between stage is passing, John’s fate is to diminish & fade away...[So,] John’s witnessing role gradually retreats into the background.” [Marco Rotman, *Call of the Wilderness*, p. 174]
- “John came from God. God sent him to recognize the presence of the Spirit in Jesus & confess that Jesus is the Son of God... John represents *the first example of the fulfillment of Johannine Christology in a confessing believer. He has seen & believed & testified.*” [John F. O’Grady, *According to John*, p. 21]

3. Nicodemus vs. John—What’s Impossible for Nicodemus, is Possible for John

- “What is impossible for Nicodemus...is achieved through the testimony of the Baptist in both word & action”—Dorothy Lee

a. John & Nicodemus juxtaposed (Jn. 3)

- John 3 juxtaposes Nicodemus & John. Nicodemus is a ‘teacher of Israel’ (3:10); John is a ‘Rabbi’ to his disciples (3:26).
- “Unlike John the Baptist, who sees and testifies to the light [1:6-8], Nicodemus appears over-qualified yet remains in the dark, rejecting the testimony of Jesus and John. *Placed side by side*, [their] *common introductions* can be seen [as similar]...these two characters bear remarkable resemblances.” [Keith Vande Vrede, “*Contrast between Nicodemus & John the Baptist in...John*,” JETS, Vol. 57/4 (2014) p. 719]

b. Both are ‘teachers/rabbis’ (3:10, 26)

- A link “is given in the title ‘rabbi’ with which the Baptist’s disciples address him in 3:26. In John the Baptist we have another example of one who, like Nicodemus, is a ‘teacher of Israel.’ *A comparison is set up between Nicodemus and John*—both are teacher within Judaism, both men of power & influence, & both are challenged by the [arrival] of the Johannine Jesus. The contrast is personal &...symbolic: *what is impossible for Nicodemus in his story is achieved through the testimony of the Baptist* in both word (3:28-30) & action (3:23).” [Dorothy A. Lee, *Symbolic Narratives of the 4th Gospel*, p. 58]

c. John witnesses/confesses, Nicodemus does not

- “John is witness and disciple *par excellence* and Nicodemus is Pharisee and teacher of Israel *par excellence*...they lie on *polar opposites* in relation to Jesus...[Nicodemus’ & the Jewish leaders’] failure to openly confess Jesus as the Christ is the same as denying him, his origin, & his mission. Therefore, the Evangelist sets *John forth as testifier and confessor par excellence in order to persuade those like Nicodemus to imitate [John’s] public confession*.” [Keith Vande Vrede, “*Contrast between Nicodemus & John the Baptist in...John*,” JETS, Vol. 57/4 (2014) pp. 725-6]

d. The Baptist is a ‘Backup Witness’ due to Nicodemus’ silence

- In 1:35-2:25 “the reader...see[s] disciples bear witness [Andrew, Nathaniel, etc.] & offer significant confessions, [But, now the reader]...encounters Nicodemus...who...left in narrative silence [3:9]. In light of the *lack of witness on the part of Nicodemus*...the narrator returns to the testimony of John the Baptist [3:23-30]... Maybe...the author *reintroduces John the Baptist as a counterpoint to a failed witness* within Israel [since some] *have failed to come to faith (Nicodemus)*.” [Mark L.Trump, *First Thing Andrew Did’ (John 1:41)*, Marquette Univ. (2017) pp. 152-3]

e. John the Baptist succeeds, where Nicodemus failed

- *John’s “understanding & confession...takes the place of Nicodemus’ lack of understanding.* Nicodemus, who ought to make the confession, cannot move from a material [physical] understanding to a metaphorical understanding of birth [from above]; he neither accepts nor rejects. Indecision...hinders [Nicodemus’] story from reaching its final [resolution]; it’s not Nicodemus who’s...‘born from above,’ but John the Baptist” [Dorothy A Lee, *Symbolic Narratives in the 4th Gospel*, p 62]

4. Jesus the Baptizer (3:22, 26; 4:1)

- o ²² After this, Jesus & his disciples came into Judean territory, and there *he...was baptizing*. ²³ John [the Baptist] was also baptizing at Aenon near Salim...Some of John’s disciples...came to John & said, ‘Rabbi, *the one who was with you* on the other side of the Jordan River...*he is baptizing*, and everyone is flocking to him!... The Pharisees...heard that *he [Jesus] was winning and baptizing more disciples than John*.” (3:22-26; 4:1 NET)

a. Jesus had his own Baptizing Ministry

- Gospel of “John may well be right about some significant historical data...[which] differs from the Synoptics: *Jesus...himself conducted a baptizing ministry* for a period of time (3:22, 26; 4:1-2).” [D. M. Smith, Jr., *4th Gospel in 4 Dimensions*, p. 123] o

b. The Baptizing Ministries of Jesus & John Overlapped

a. No Overlap in the Synoptic Gospels (Mark 1;14; Mt. 4:12)

- “In *direct contrast to the Synoptic witness*, Jn. 3:22-23 portrays the ministries of John the Baptist & Jesus overlapping, at least for a short time. *In the Synoptics John appears to be imprisoned*...very early in Jesus’ ministry, which would *make this overlap impossible*. The [4th] Gospel...recount[s]...John’s arrest only...in 3:24.” [Rhonda G. Crutcher, ...*He Might Be Revealed*, p. 73]
- In Mark’s “story line there’s a demarcation between the time of John the Baptist & that of Jesus, with no time left in between [for their interaction]...This is not the case in John’s Gospel...The call narratives of the 4th Gospel...presume Jesus’ presence... in the neighborhood of John the Baptist. *Even more surprising*

statements implying Jesus' relationship with John the Baptist appear in Jn. 3:33-4:2. *Jesus is now said to baptize* (3:22), as did John (3:23). [D. Moody Smith, "John: A Source for Jesus Research?" in Paul N. Anderson (ed.) *John, Jesus, & History*, Vol. 1, pp. 166-7]

b. Jesus & John Overlap in the 4th Gospel (Jn. 3:22, 26, cf. 4:1)

- "The 4th [Gospel] indicates that after [Jesus'] baptism & an initial period of following John the Baptist...Jesus soon started *his own...baptizing ministry* in Judea prior to the imprisonment of John [3:24]—*a period about which the Synoptics are silent*. In their overlapping ministries, certain frictions...developed." [Daniel S Dapaah, *Relationship...John...& Jesus*, 97]
- "John 3:22-30 [has] 2 references to Jesus baptizing (3:22, 26, cf. 4:1). This is an interesting case...unique...to the 4th Gospel... Scholars [view this] as an *authentic tradition about the early period in which the missions of John the Baptist and Jesus overlapped & Jesus for a while...[was] baptizing*...The notion of Jesus baptizing fits very awkwardly within the 4th Gospel's own perspective & therefore [it] is unlikely to have been created by the 4th Evangelist. After all...a Jesus who baptizes with water & not the Spirit appears out of place. What's more...it suggests that he simply continues the work of John." [Andrew Lincoln, "We Know that his Testimony is True," PN. Anderson (ed.) *John, Jesus, & History*, V. 1, pp. 188-9]

c. Jesus adopted John's 'baptism of repentance'

- "Continuity in the Ministries of John the Baptist & Jesus. John the Baptist affirms the *essential continuity* between his ministry & that of Jesus. This continuity is implied by the direct statement in 3:22-23 'Jesus spent some time there...& baptized. John also was baptizing'...The *baptizing ministry of Jesus symbolizes the continuation of John's...* work of God's renewal of the people through his chosen agent..." [R. A. Ramsaran, *Feasting on the Gospels—John*, Vol. 1, p. 77]
- "This is interesting since it is our only record that Jesus had a baptizing ministry. But we must remain clear that at this point *Jesus is conducting a baptism of repentance*, no doubt like that of John, since, a 7:37-39 says, the Spirit (a feature of Christian baptism) has not yet been given." [Gary M. Burge, *John*, p.] o "As far as we know at this point in the story, *Jesus is indeed 'baptizing in water' just as John had done earlier* (1:26, 31). John had said that Jesus, by contrast, would 'baptize in the Holy Spirit' (1:33), but the statement here that Jesus 'was baptizing' (without further qualification) *clearly implies water & not Spirit baptism*." [Ramsey Michaels, *John*, p. 202]
- "Jesus & John were baptizing in much the *same way & for the same reason*. John's earlier claim that '...I came baptizing in water...so [Jesus] might be revealed to Israel' (1:31) must now be qualified, for... Jesus has been 'revealed to Israel' and yet John continues to baptize. What's the common reason why both John & Jesus were baptizing?" [R. Michaels, *John*, p. 203]
- "The issue here is *not Christian baptism*, even when we're discussing what Jesus' followers were doing."— Ben Witherington

d. Concurrent baptizing by Jesus & John 'brings matters to a head'

- "The material about *Jesus as baptizer* [is of] primary interest...as a platform on which John can provide his final testimony. In the context of a comparison between John & Jesus, the latter's baptizing activity...indicat[es]...*popular attention is shifting from John to Jesus*, in order that John can then endorse this change of focus...[John can] state that his own task & joy are complete now that Jesus has appeared on the scene & that the bridegroom & not the bridegroom's friend is the significant figure, John has an unmistakable message for any of his [i.e., John's] later followers who are continuing to promote his superiority to the one he baptized [Christ] or the better credentials of John's baptism... [over] Christian baptism." [Andrew Lincoln, "We Know...his Testimony is True," Paul N. Anderson (ed.) *John, Jesus, & History*, V. 1, p. 196]
- Jesus & John baptizing in close proximity generates the potential for envy/rivalry/jealousy to be exposed

5. Jesus & John—Rivals or Friends?

- o John's disciples "came to John & said to him, 'Rabbi, the one who was with you on the other side of the Jordan River, about whom you testified—see, he is baptizing, & everyone is flocking to him!' ²⁷ John replied, "No one can receive anything unless it has been given to him from heaven. ²⁸ You yourselves can testify that I said, 'I am not the Christ,' but rather, 'I've been sent before him.' ²⁹ The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands by & listens for him, rejoices greatly when he hears the bridegroom's voice. This then is my joy, & it is complete. ³⁰ He must become more important while I become less important." (John 3:26-30 NET)

a. Are Jesus & John Rivals/Competitors?

- “The opening verses (3:22-23) contrast the baptizing of Jesus & John the Baptist. This leads to a dispute concerning Jesus’ rival baptism (3:25-26). Though the scene is set in terms *that suggest professional rivalry between the two, nothing is further from the case*. John the Baptist testifies to Jesus as the Christ (3:28), relegating his own role to that of second place (3:29-30).” [Dorothy A. Lee, *Symbolic Narratives of the 4th Gospel*, p. 41]

b. Inclusio of John the Baptist (1:19-34; 3:22-36)

- “The Gospel is showing the *symbiotic relationship between...John & of Jesus*. The narrative has created an *inclusio* in the 1st 3 chapters around the witness of John serving to highlight...Jesus’ ministry...It also...highlight[s] the Baptist & his unique role to Christ...This is a *symbiotic relationship that’s rooted in the same work of the same God*. While each has his own part to play, they are both significant...& both reflective of the unity of [God’s] work...done through Christ.” [Edward Klink, *John*, p. 216]

c. The issue is with John’s Disciples (1:35-40; 3:25-30)

a. Two Contrasting Groups

- “The disciples of John the Baptist make 2 appearances in the 4th Gospel. In the 1st scene (1:35-40), two... disciples of John [Andrew & co.] hear his declaration of Jesus as ‘the Lamb of God.’ They leave John, follow Jesus...The 2nd scene (3:25-30) also begins with unnamed disciples of John...[These] disciples complain...to John about Jesus’ success in baptizing disciples. John explains...that his role is to testify to Jesus; it is only appropriate that Jesus must increase, & John must decrease. Nothing further is recorded about these disciples...The reader is not informed of their response to John’s message or their future.” [Gary T. Manning, “*Disciples of John (Baptist)*,” in Hunt (ed.) *Character Studies in the 4th Gospel*, p. 127]
- “The two scenes involving John’s disciples...are placed on opposite sides...Clearly the first 2 [Andrew & another] become disciples of Jesus, while the 2nd group does not; but the *first two are also better disciples of John* because they listen to him (1:37). John *implicitly* praises them as those who possess the truth (3:33). In contrast, John *explicitly* rebukes the 2nd group for failing to listen (‘you yourselves witness that I said...’ 3:28)...The first group is oriented away from John...& toward Jesus... The 2nd group of disciples is oriented entirely toward John in their actions & dialogue; they...have no encounter with Jesus at all. They call John ‘Rabbi’...their question emphasizes John rather than Jesus; & they pointedly avoid mentioning Jesus’ name or giving him an adequate title (‘*the one* who was with you across the Jordan...’ 3:26).” [Gary T. Manning, “*Disciples of John (the Baptist)*,” in Hunt (ed.) *Character Studies in the 4th Gospel*, 128] 2. The Second Group have a Problem (3:25-30)
- “The narrative suggests that the real issue...[for John’s disciples] is the relative merits of the baptizing ministries of John & Jesus. Behind the question are echoes of *frustration, rivalry, & annoyance at Jesus’ success* in baptizing more people than John...[Recall, the passage describes] the earlier friendly relations that existed between the two figures [John & Jesus. Hence,] it’s probable that *Jesus baptized alongside John in Judea, & that the 4th Gospel offers a trustworthy account of the overlapping ministries of John & Jesus.*” [Daniel S. Dapaah, *Relationship Between John the Baptist & Jesus*, 99]
- “Jn. 3:25-30 suggests that these disciples [of John] had *understood nothing about Jesus...*”—Stephen S. Smalley o “The narrator crafts a sense of antipathy towards the 2nd set of disciples...They are involved in a discussion with a ‘Jew,’ which creates ambiguity, since ‘the Jews’ are often portrayed negatively...Their complaint to John, ‘all are coming to him [Jesus]’ allies them to the Pharisees, who warn that ‘all will believe in him’ (11:48, cf. 4:1)...[This] places them in direct contrast to positive witnesses to Jesus (Andrew, Philip, Samaritan woman) ...Their response to John’s correction is not recorded, suggesting they neither ‘receive his [John’s] testimony’ nor ‘obey the Son’ . *They have no future in John’s Gospel.*” [Gary T. Manning, “*Disciples of John (Baptist)*,” in Hunt (ed.) *Character Studies in the 4th Gospel*, pp. 129-30] o “The report to John here [3:26] indicates that *Jesus is a subject of gossip* [‘evaluative talk’]”—Johnson Thomaskutty
- John “3:31-32 affirms why Jesus must increase, & also rejects the concern of John’s disciples, who can be *included in those who belong ‘to the earth’ & speak about ‘earthly things.’*” [Sherri Brown, *Gift Upon Gift:....John*, p. 131]
- “The 2nd group...represent those who misunderstand John’s claims...John’s disciples seem to think John is ‘the light,’ rather than *a witness to the light* ([contrary to] the Prologue 1:8). Their failure to accept John’s testimony gives John an opportunity to correct them & clarify his role as the one who must decrease.” [Gary T. Manning, “*Disciples of John (the Baptist)*,” in Hunt (ed.) *Character Studies in the 4th Gospel*, p. 131]
- The problem isn’t John, but 2nd group of Disciples. They consider Jesus the problem—he should ‘decrease/John increase’!
- They ‘belong to the earth & think/view/speak from an earthly pt.-of-view. Do we see things ‘from above’ or ‘from below’?

6. John's Exemplary Response (3:27-30)

- o ²⁷ John replied, "No one can receive anything unless it has been given to him from heaven. ²⁸ You yourselves can testify that I said, 'I am not the Christ,' but rather, 'I have been sent before him.' ²⁹ The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands by & listens for him, rejoices greatly when he hears the bridegroom's voice. This then is my joy, & it is complete. ³⁰ He must become more important while I become less important." (John 3:27-30 NET)

a. John reiterates his earlier witness—"I said, 'I'm not the Christ...'" (3:28)

- a. "The audience of the 4th Gospel has been carefully prepared...to assess remarks...of John's disciples...3 times John announced Jesus' superiority to himself, indicating that he & Jesus are not in competition but that John's career is precisely to herald Jesus...John...has already declared his position on the success of Jesus; he himself does not see the situation in terms of limited good, nor will he engage in envy.
- b. However John steps apart from this typical game of envy by making several critical remarks.
- c. First, he declares that Jesus has not achieved anything on his own. No one, including Jesus, has anything but 'what is given him from above' (3:27). Thus in the jargon of honor & shame, the honor Jesus enjoys is honor ascribed by God with which mortals may not disagree (Acts 5:39). In this way John states that he himself does not share his disciples' perception of a controversy since it is God who gives Jesus' status & fame.
- d. Second, he reminds his disciples of his own earlier testimony to Jesus (3:28; see 1:19-23), indicating that his major role has been to herald & acknowledge Jesus' honorable precedence & status before all. John has always promoted Jesus; it is his mission to see Jesus increase.
- e. Third, he describes his relationship to Jesus as the 'friend' ([Gk.] *philos*) who stands close by & 'rejoices greatly at the groom's voice' (3:29).⁷ Surely groom & 'friend' are not rivals; nor does the 'friend' lose anything if the groom is happy. In fact, as John says, 'this joy of mine is now full,' that is, in no way has it diminished because of Jesus' success. Thus John disputes his own disciples' interpretation of the situation. Whereas they see only loss in Jesus' growing success, John sees 'fullness of joy' at Jesus' fame, just as the *philos* revels in the voice of the groom.
- f. Finally, *John makes one of the most counter-cultural statements in the NT*: 'He [Jesus] must increase, but I must decrease' (3:30). Why 'counter-cultural'? What is taking place between the characters of the story?...To answer this we must borrow from cultural anthropology a model for assessing... gain & loss in honor-shame (agonistic) societies." [Jerome H. Neyrey, R. L. Rohrbaugh, "'He must increase, I must decrease' (Jn. 3:30)": A Cultural & Social Interpretation," CBQ (2001) pp.]

b. John's Metaphor—the Bride, Bridegroom, & Friend (3:29)

- "In John, the bridegroom metaphor serves to describe the Messiah because the title is used explicitly in John 3..."[Zimmerman, "*Jesus—Divine Bridegroom*," B. Reynolds (ed.) *Reading...John's Christology as Jewish Messianism*, p. 381]
- "The central focus is on the quest for the Christ...In the parable of the bridegroom & his friend (John 3:29–30)...Jesus is confirmed as the [Bridegroom—the central focus]..." [S. Hunt (ed.) *Character Studies in the Fourth Gospel*, 458]
- In the case of John the Baptist, "The witness is also a friend"—David F. Ford, *John*, 103]
- "John was pleased that Jesus succeeded, even if it meant 'loss' of two of his own disciples...By way of the metaphor of a wedding party John totally denies any rivalry between himself & Jesus. John, the *philos* [friend] of Jesus the bridegroom, listens to the bridegroom's voice & 'rejoices with joy' at it (3:29a). No pain at Jesus' good fortune here! No distress at his success! 'My joy is now filled' (3:29b). If there's no perception of 'limited good,' then there's likewise no sense of pain or distress, nor is any envy aroused...John, then, completely contradicts his disciples' perception of the situation." [Jerome H. Neyrey, R. L. Rohrbaugh, "'He must increase, I must decrease' (Jn. 3:30)," CBQ (2001) p.]
- "John 3:22–30 opens with John the Baptist's disciples informing John that many were leaving him for Jesus. *Implied in their statement is that Jesus was gaining popularity at the expense of John*. Normally such a statement would result in a response of envy, & one would expect John to seek to reclaim what he had lost. However, *John broke this cycle by acknowledging that Jesus' increase did not harm him*. *Rather, John was happy about the increase of Jesus' popularity*. In no way was John's honor affected (thereby in some way negating 'limited good'). *The interpretive insight* gleaned from knowing this background makes John's statement more than a praise of Jesus or an acknowledgment of God's will ('Jesus must...John must') [Divine 'must' (Gk. *dei*) reflecting God's sovereignty]. Instead it is a counter-cultural statement that went against the grain of society's expectations."— Joseph Fantin review of Jerome Neyrey, *Gospel of John in Cultural & Rhetorical Perspective* (2009)

- John the Baptist “stand[s] in a *unique & intimate relationship to the Johannine Jesus*...John...is the ‘friend’ of the bridegroom (3:29)...Represented figuratively as the ‘best man’ at the wedding, John the Baptist yields his place to the bridegroom who has absolute priority (3:29). After his first appearance on the Prologue & opening scene, where he bears witness before his disciples (1:35-36) *John the Baptist diminishes in narrative* import and presence. His witness fades away, although there are... retro-spective references to him...which affirm the *Baptist’s entirely successful role* in pointing to, & communicating the truth of, the Johannine Jesus (5:33; 10:40). *He acts...as a true witness*, yielding willingly to something he recognizes as infinitely greater than himself: ‘*he must increase, I must diminish*’ (3:30).” [Dorothy A. Lee, “...John the Baptist & the Beloved Disciple,” in *Creation, Matter & the Image of God: Essays on John*, pp.]

c. “**He (Christ) must increase...**” **It’s Not an Allegory about the Church!**

- “The picture indicates John’s selfless joy in...the people of God flocking to Jesus. While *no allegory is in mind*, the Evangelist [author] & his readers will be conscious of...the picture in the OT of Israel as the bride of God (Is. 62:4-5, [etc.]) & in the NT of the Church as the bride of Christ (Eph. 5:25-27, [etc.]).” [G. Beasley-Murray, *John*, p. 53] **Note:** “*no allegory is in mind*” means the point is John’s relationship to Jesus (as ‘friend’); the point is *not* the bride.’ The author *never* says “the bride is the ‘increase’ so the Church is Christ’s ‘increase,’ therefore the church should grow/increase.”—allegorizing!
- “John compares himself with a ‘friend of the bride who attends the bridegroom.’ The groom alone has the bride, & the friend rejoices. Jesus frequently used such analogies & *later in the NT, the bride is described as the church* (Rev. 18: [etc.]). *But this is not the present text’s interest & should not be allegorized.*” [Gary M. Burge, *John*, p.] It is Not about the Church!
- For those who “have *denied any allegory* about Jesus & his bride in this verse, this...*solve[s] the problem of identifying ‘the bride’* in the sentence. [The ‘bride’ doesn’t represent anyone].” [Sebastian R. Smolarz, *Metaphor of Divine Marriage*, 175] o

d. “**He must increase, but I must decrease**” (3:30)—John’s final words

- “This dialogue contains the *climactic pronouncement of John the Baptist*...The report to John here [3:26] indicates that Jesus is a subject of *gossip*...The dialogue is introduced to bring forth *the climactic pronouncement of John*, which has elements of a defense, testimony, and confession...[So,] Jn. 3:22-31 has a form of a report & defense dialogue followed by a narrative commentary.” [Johnson Thomaskutty, *Dialogue in the Book of Signs*, p. 130]
- “John gives an implicit call to his disciples to turn to Jesus. His utterances such as ‘I’m not the Messiah,’ ‘I’ve been sent ahead of him,’ ‘He who has the bride is the bridegroom,’ and ‘He must increase, but I must decrease,’ are *words of complete surrender*. The dialogue between John & his disciples ends the mission of the Baptist’s movement strategically...*John’s surrender...put[s] an end to the existing juxtaposition between Jesus & John*.” [Johnson Thomaskutty, *Dialogue in the Book of Signs*, pp. 132-3]

7. John’s ‘Graceful Exit followed his Eloquent Farewell’

a. John makes his own ‘graceful exit’

- “Instead of having John forcibly removed from the scene by Herod’s soldiers [& imprisoned, the author] will *allow [John] to make his own exit voluntarily and say his own eloquent farewell* (3:27-30).” [Ramsey Michaels, *John*, p. 204]

b. Nothing derogatory said about John

- “Note [that] there are *no derogatory things said about John*...There is *no polemic against the Baptist here*; to the contrary he is co-opted & given a very positive role in the Jesus story.” [Ben Witherington, *John’s Wisdom...the 4th Gospel*, p. 110]

c. Contrary to some expositors’ Comments

- “After John...referred to Christ as the Bridegroom, he went on..., ‘He must increase, but I must decrease’ (3:30)... *Although John spoke a clear word regarding this, he was not willing to practice it. This was the reason that God allowed him to be imprisoned & later beheaded*. Eventually, John the Baptist received nothing.” [Witness Lee, *Life-Study of Ephesians*, p. 451]
- **Note:** John’s Gospel does *not* say this! As in the previous point: “there are *no derogatory things said about John*”

d. No ongoing problem with John’s Disciples

- Here “the 4th Gospel reflects...something of its past. There is no polemic; there is *no pressing problem* with a [John the] Baptist community in the present [i.e., when the 4th Gospel was composed]. The

Baptist's disciples have followed the witness of their original leader [John] and have found the light [Jesus]." [Charles H. Talbert, *Reading John*, p. 116]