

Chapter 3: The Call of Jesus

John 1:35–51

The secret is out. John the Baptist has testified that Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29), the one on whom the Spirit descended and remained (John 1:32), the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit (John 1:33), and even the Son of God (John 1:34). Jesus is a grown man who has lived his life with a concealed identity, so that not even John the Baptist, his own cousin, really knew who he was (John 1:31). But now that John's ministry has come to its fulfillment in the identification and revelation of Jesus, there is no going back to Jesus' former obscurity.

Even though his secret is out, Jesus is not interested in making a big splash in the wider religious community—at least, not yet. Instead, his first priority is to gather a core group of disciples who will follow him in varying degrees of closeness. For his closest inner circle, Jesus gathers men like Peter, and possibly John (if John is the unnamed second disciple with Andrew), and maybe even James (see comments below on “first...his own” from John 1:41). As other disciples who are part of the twelve, Jesus gathers Andrew and Philip, and possibly Nathanael, if Nathanael is another name for the disciple known as Bartholomew in the Synoptic Gospels. Otherwise, Nathanael is one of the many people who believe and follow Jesus through his life, even though not being a part of the formal group of the twelve.

But that's getting a bit ahead of ourselves. Let's open John 1:35–51 to read about the call of Jesus to discipleship which marks the beginning of Christ's church.

“Come and See” (John 1:35–42)

John 1:35 introduces us to another new day. On the first day, John the Baptist testified to the inquiring religious leaders about his own identity (John 1:19–28) and then, the second day, the Baptist testified that Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, on whom the Holy Spirit descended and remained (John 1:29–34). Now on the third day, “the next day again,” (John 1:35), the Baptist's ministry begins to come to an end. The purpose for which the Baptist was sent into the world was accomplished at the revelation of Jesus, so that there is nothing now for the Baptist to do except to “decrease” while Jesus continues to “increase” (John 3:30).¹

At this moment, John the Baptist, standing with his two disciples, sees Jesus walking by, and repeats an abbreviated form of his testimony from the previous day: “Behold, the Lamb of God!” (John 1:36). While the Evangelist's narration of this event does not tell us explicitly that John the Baptist intended or expected his own disciples to begin following Jesus, “it is reasonable to assume that at least some of his disciples, those perhaps who understood him best, discerned that their master was constantly pointing beyond himself to another.”² That is, the Baptist repeats his proclamation concerning Christ (“Behold, the Lamb of God!”) in order to urge his disciples to leave

him and to begin following Jesus.

Identifying and exalting Jesus was everything the Baptist had lived to do. He knew that he was not worthy to untie the strap of Jesus' sandal (John 1:27), since his ministry of baptizing with water had only served to symbolize the ministry of the coming one who would baptize with the Holy Spirit (John 1:33). John had testified that this Jesus was the Son of God (John 1:34), and he truly believed his own testimony. Once Jesus had been revealed, John immediately pointed his own disciples in Jesus' direction. This isn't the last that we will read about the Baptist's self-sacrificial decrease for the sake of Christ's exaltation (John 3:22–36), but this is an important moment in the Baptist's life as he hands off his life's ministry to Jesus.

Would you and I have the same restraint as John the Baptist, or, when Jesus actually arrived, would we have lobbied to preserve our own ministries, influence, and authority?

“What are you seeking?”

For their part, John the Evangelist records that the two disciples acted right away on the Baptist's prompting by following Jesus (John 1:37). When Jesus discovers the two of them behind him, he turns and asks a simple, but searching question: “What are you seeking?” (John 1:38). This word for “seeking” is an important word in the Gospel of John, capturing various desires ranging from the desires of people who seek to know or benefit from Jesus (John 1:38; 6:24, 26; 8:21; 13:33; 16:19; 20:15), to the religious leaders who seek to kill Jesus (John 5:16, 18; 7:1, 11, 19, 20, 25, 30, 34, 36; 8:37, 40; 10:39; 11:8, 56; 18:4, 7, 8), to the mission that Jesus himself seeks to accomplish (John 4:27; 5:30; 7:4, 18; 8:50, as well as a couple of other uses (John 4:23; 19:12).³ In John's Gospel, people's motivations, desires, and intentions are of the utmost importance, since the Evangelist wants to draw our attention to the spiritual condition of the human heart—gauged by what the heart *seeks*—rather than merely the outward appearance of their actions.

But on another level, “What do you seek?” (or, we might translate this, “What do you want?”) is a natural inquiry that anyone might ask after discovering that someone is following him.⁴ Jesus' tone does not sound harsh, as though Jesus were afraid that the men intended to do him harm, but Jesus instead extends here a “kind and gracious invitation,” encouraging them to express their desire to know Jesus better.⁵ Jesus is not so much demanding that these two men give a justification for following as he is providing them an opportunity to speak with him—and not only to speak with him, but to unburden the deepest desires of their seeking souls to him.

“Where are you staying?”

In response, the two disciples ask Jesus a question: “‘Rabbi’ (which means Teacher), ‘where are you staying?’” (John 1:38). As with Jesus' question, “What do you seek?”, the question of these two disciples operates on a couple of levels. On the one hand, their question is natural in the context, a simple, polite inquiry to ascertain the direction and length that Jesus might be walking. This is a common question that people ask travelers even to this day, and the surface level meaning of this question is an important component of how John writes this whole narrative.

Of course, we cannot reasonably believe that these disciples are simply making small talk here. Their former teacher, John the Baptist, identified this man as the one on whom the Spirit of God descended and remained. This is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, and the Son of God. Their question to this new teacher holds great

significance. Perhaps, they feel that it would be rude to jump directly to the real questions they have for such a man.⁶ Likely, they pose this question in such a way as to reveal their desire to have a “private, undisturbed conversation with Jesus regarding the high thoughts and hopes which had begun to stir in their hearts.” Also, the word here for “staying” is the same word translated elsewhere in this Gospel as “remain” or “abide,” which transforms this small talk question into something much more deeply theological in the wider context of John’s Gospel.⁸ Their question is a request for a private invitation to spend more time with Jesus, and in this way, they entrust themselves vulnerably to Jesus to await his answer.

“Come, and you will see”

Jesus understands exactly what these disciples are asking, and he responds with the invitation they had sought: “Come, and you will see” (John 1:39). Accordingly, the disciples “came and saw where he saw staying, and they stayed with him that day, for it was about the tenth hour” (John 1:39). This verse contains the phrase “Come and see” twice, and we will see three other “Come and see” statements through the rest of the Gospel of John, with the second “Come and see” in John 1:46. Again, the significance of Jesus’ statement here extends far beyond any desire simply to show the disciples his lodgings. This is the only time that Jesus speaks these words, but every time this phrase shows up in the Gospel of John (John 1:39, 46; 4:29; 11:34), the speaker is always inviting someone else to come for the purpose of *seeing* a deeper spiritual reality.

Craig Keener explains that this phrase, “Come and see” was a common idiom that carried the general meaning, “Come reflect on,” and that the use of this phrase has deep roots in Judaism:

Jesus’ invitation, “Come and see” (1:39), was a sufficiently low-key invitation; the phrase appears in some analogous contexts and was probably already idiomatic in the LXX [the Septuagint; a Greek translation of the Old Testament]. John’s language may reflect his characteristic usage (11:34; cf. 21:12) but nevertheless is likely pregnant with theological nuances as well. Rabbinic literature, which because of its vast size provides the most instances of the idiom...applies the phrase to examples (“Come and see the humility of so-and-so,” “Come see how God loves Israel”), and especially to examples in Scripture. Rabbis employ the idiom often from Scripture (and other sources). The phrase means, “Come reflect on”; it is equivalent to another frequent rabbinic phrase in the Babylonian Talmud, “come and hear,” nearly always used for halakah.⁹

Indeed, when the disciples do come and see, they clearly reflect on the identity of Jesus so that they go away proclaiming “We have found the Messiah” (John 1:41). Later, when Philip invites Nathanael to “Come and see” Jesus (John 1:46), Nathanael ends up declaring, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” (John 1:49). This is an invitation not simply to discover Jesus’ address, but an invitation to see Jesus for who he is, leading to their confessing “unanimously...this remarkable and...overwhelming messianic confession of Jesus” which becomes, for John the Evangelist, “the foundation of his entire Gospel.”¹⁰ The prologue to the Gospel of John (John 1:1–18) laid one brick in the foundation of this Gospel’s proclamation of Jesus’ identity, and John the Baptist’s testimony laid another (John 1:29–34). Now, John the Evangelist uses the testimony of these first disciples to tell us who Jesus is before he lets us see Jesus much for ourselves.

Keener’s insight into the way that the phrase “Come and see” was used among the Jewish rabbis is helpful, since the rabbis applied it not to the following of a flesh-and-blood person (as these disciples could “Come and see” Jesus), but to the text of Scripture. The two disciples had a unique, unrepeatable privilege to stand in the presence of Jesus to talk with him, but that does not mean that their experience was the only way to “Come and see” Jesus. Indeed, as we study and reflect on the text of the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, that is exactly what we are doing—we are coming to God’s word to reflect on how God loves his people enough to send his only begotten Son into the world. Through the illumination of the Holy Spirit in the Scriptures, the barriers of time and place dissolve so that God, by grace, invites us to come and see Jesus in his word. Come and see!

This invitation to come and see is more than an offer, but a serious summons with consequences if we ignore this great privilege held out to us. John Calvin writes:

By this example we are taught that from the first, rudiments of the Church we ought to draw such a relish for Christ as will excite our desire to profit; and next, that we ought not to be satisfied with a mere passing look, but that we ought to seek his dwelling, that he may receive us as guests. For there are very many who smell the gospel at a distance only, and thus allow Christ suddenly to disappear, and all that they have learned concerning him to pass away. And though those two persons did not at that time become his ordinary disciples, yet there can be no doubt that, during that night, he instructed them more fully, so that they soon afterwards became entirely devoted to him.”

Come and see—and *do not delay*. Or, in the words of the prophet Isaiah, “Seek the Lord while he may be found” (Isa. 55:6). It is not that Christ will turn away any who seek him (“...whoever comes to me I will never cast out”; John 6:37), but rather that our hearts are easily deceived into procrastinating by hardening of our hearts, so that we are content to settle back into our unbelief. If you hear Christ’s voice inviting you to “Come and see,” do not hesitate even a moment to rise up to follow him by faith.

“First” and New Testament Textual Criticism

The meaning of the next few verses pose a small difficulty in understanding exactly what is happening, even while the general direction of the text is clear:

One of the two who heard John speak and followed Jesus was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother. He first found his own brother Simon and said to him, “We have found the Messiah” (which means Christ). He brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, “You are Simon the son of John. You shall be called Cephas” (which means Peter). (John 1:40–42)

The difficulty centers on the word “first” in John 1:41: “He *first* found his own brother Simon...” since some ancient manuscripts use an adverb form of the word “first” (so that “finding his own brother” was the first thing Andrew did), while other manuscripts use an adjective form of the word “first” (so that Andrew was the first to find his own brother, presumably in contrast with the other disciple, who afterward found *his* own brother). The difference between the two words is only one letter (adverb: πρῶτον (*prōton*); adjective: πρῶτος (*prōtos*)), but that one letter changes the meaning

of this narrative in a relatively significant way. This discrepancy among the ancient manuscripts, then, is a great opportunity to talk about New Testament textual criticism.

The New Testament boasts far *more* available copies that were made far *closer* to the writing of the original autographs than any other comparable ancient Greek or Latin literature. J. Harold Greenlee writes:

The plays of Aeschylus are known in some fifty MSS [manuscripts], the works of Sophocles in one hundred, the *Greek Anthology* and the *Annals* of Tacitus in one MS [manuscript] each, the poems of Catullus in three MSS of independent value, and there are a few hundred known MSS of works of Euripides, Cicero, Ovid, and Virgil. In the case of the NT [New Testament], in sharp contrast, there are some 5000 extant MSS in Greek, 8000 in Latin, and 1000 in other languages. As regards the time interval between the extant MSS and the autograph, the oldest known MSS of most of the Greek classical authors are dated a thousand years or more after the author's death. The time interval for the Latin authors is somewhat less, varying down to a minimum of three centuries in the case of Virgil. In the case of the NT, however, two of the most important MSS were written within 300 years after the NT was completed, and some virtually complete NT books as well as extensive fragmentary MSS of many parts of the NT date back to one century from the original writings.¹²

With so many surviving New Testament manuscripts, it is not surprising that errors creep into the texts at various points, since each of those was copied by hand. Given the number of manuscripts that we can examine, it isn't hard for someone like Bart Ehrman (Professor of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill) to portray the number of errors in dramatic ways, writing: "There are more variations among our manuscripts than there are words in the New Testament."¹³

While Ehrman's claim (which is true, so far as it goes) sounds at first like smoking-gun evidence to shatter our confidence in the reliability of the Bible, the statistic he uses is highly misleading. The response of Timothy Paul Jones is worth quoting in full:

Ehrman's estimate of 400,000 variants among the New Testament manuscripts may be numerically correct—but what Ehrman doesn't clearly communicate to his readers is *the insignificance of the vast majority of these variants*.

Most of these 400,000 variations stem from differences in spelling, word order, or the relationships between nouns and definite articles—variants that are easily recognizable and, in most cases, virtually unnoticeable in translations! For example, the Greek words for "we" (*hēmeis*) and the plural "you" (*hymeis*) look very similar, and copyists frequently confused them. But does it ultimately matter whether "you...are children of promise" or "we...are children of promise" (Galatians 4:28)?

In other cases, a text literally translated from Greek might have a definite article before the noun. In some manuscripts of John 3:3, for example, the verse—translated very literally—begins, "Answered, the Jesus and said to him..." In other Greek manuscripts of the same verse, the definite article is missing. But, since English never places *the* in front of a proper noun anyway, this difference isn't even observable in any English translation!

Regardless of the presence or absence of the article, the clause is translated into English as, “Jesus answered and said to him” or some similar wording. In the end, more than 99 percent of the 400,000 differences fall into this category of virtually unnoticeable variants.

Of the remaining 1 percent or so of variants, only a few have any significance for interpreting the biblical text. Most important, *none* of the differences affects any central element of the Christian faith.¹⁴

Our verse falls under that 1 percent of textual variants that makes a significant difference for interpreting the biblical text; however, as Jones points out, no significant doctrine of any kind hangs on either variation of this text. The question of whether “first” is an adverb or an adjective is important because of our view that the text of Scripture is inherently valuable, but our inability to decisively select the word that John the Evangelist wrote in his original autograph makes very little practical difference here.

Textual criticism scholars, then, do the hard work of sifting through every available manuscript to identify variations, to classify the kind of variations that they are, and then to give their best explanation as to how a particular variation might have arisen. In many cases, scribal copyists may have made changes by errors of sight, errors of hearing, errors of memory, or errors in judgment, or even for reasons like trying to harmonize one passage with what is written somewhere else.¹⁵ Although there are many techniques to try to ascertain the reason for a textual variation, one of the best tests is to see if the manuscripts with a variation are limited to a specific “family” of texts found in a single geographic area. The wider the range of manuscripts found containing one form of the text, the less likely it is that a single copyist introduced an error at some point early on, and then that error was spread as subsequent scribes copied and passed along that textual tradition.¹⁶

The United Bible Society Committee of textual scholars (a very reliable group) find “early and diversified support” in a broad range of manuscripts from a broad range of areas and traditions to support the adverb form of this word (πρῶτον).¹⁷ These scholars rank the certainty of their findings with a scale of A through D, with A being “certain,” down through D, which suggest that “the Committee had great difficulty in arriving at a decision.”¹⁸ In this case, the Committee ranks the certainty of the adverb form of the verb with a B, indicating that “the text is almost certain.”¹⁹

But, as mentioned earlier, while there is a small difficulty in knowing *exactly* what John has written, there is very little difference in understanding the general meaning of this passage. While we may not have every bit of information that we would like to have about the original autograph in this case (among others), what I hope that this explanation has accomplished is to demonstrate that your Bible is reliable, even in the face of people who try to argue otherwise, pointing out textual variations. This variation is one of the 1% of significant textual variations in the Bible, but it makes very little difference in the overall meaning of the text. In either case, Andrew was quick to find his brother Simon to inform him that “We have found the Messiah.”

Still, there is a possible difference in meaning that we should not overlook. If the word John the Evangelist originally wrote here were the adjective form (which is less likely), then the phrase, “He [Andrew] first found his own brother Simon” would suggest that Andrew found Simon before the other (unnamed) disciple found *his* own brother.²⁰ If that were the reading, then the Evangelist could be implying that this was the point at which he, John the son of Zebedee, found his brother, James, who also became one of the disciples and apostles of Jesus. On the other hand, the phrase “*his own*

brother” on its own, rather than the simpler and more natural, “*his* brother,” seems to communicate the idea that John also found *his* own brother. It does not seem necessary to get into a discussion of which of the first two disciples (Andrew or John) found his own brother first; however, we should remember John the Evangelist sometimes does focus on the precise sequence of important events at other points in the Gospel (e.g., John 20:4–8), so if the less likely reading of the text is, in fact, the original form, then that would also fit well with other parts of John’s Gospel.

On the whole, this textual question is a good illustration of the nature of the “errors” that skeptics of the Bible are quick to point out with sweeping generalizations that ignore the minor nature of textual variations. It is true that we do not have absolute certainty about what John the Evangelist wrote here; however, it is also true that no serious doctrine hangs on our ability to determine whether John the Evangelist wrote an adjective or an adverb. The text of Scripture is absolutely reliable, even if there are a few specific words that we aren’t entirely certain about.

In such cases, we take the same approach as we would if the text could be translated in a few different ways, or if the text made a reference to a historical or geographical artifact that we are ignorant about, or if the writer deliberately refrains from telling us everything that he might. In cases where the Scriptures do not answer every question we might have, we try to figure out the range of our interpretive options, and we refrain from making absolute claims about what the text might mean, trusting that if we needed further information for our salvation or our godliness, God would have certainly provided it to us (2 Pet. 1:3). The Bible you hold in your hands did not fall from the sky in its final format. Nevertheless, the text of your Bible is reliable, infallible, and inerrant, supported by an astonishing number of surviving manuscripts that contain eyewitness testimony written by people who lived during the lifetime of Jesus.

“We Have Found the Messiah!”

By going to find his brother Simon, Andrew begins what will become a pattern for him: every time Andrew is named in the Gospel of John, we see him bringing people to Jesus (cf. John 6:8; 12:22).²¹ Right away, Andrew recognizes Jesus for who he is, so he gets to work immediately by bringing other people to see for themselves the glory that he himself has recognized. In this way, with only two men (Andrew and the unnamed disciple), the church and kingdom of Jesus Christ begins to grow through spreading the news from person to person.²²

The message that Andrew preaches to his brother, Simon, is “We have found the Messiah” (John 1:41). The word “found” is important in this passage, used twice in John 1:41, and then again in John 1:43, 45 (x2). This word corresponds well with the phrase, “Come and see,” so that Andrew’s response after coming to see Jesus for himself was to *find* his brother to tell Simon the good news that they had *found* the Messiah—that is, the Anointed One. In the Old Testament, prophets, priests, and kings were anointed with oil as a part of being appointed and ordained to their respective offices, which symbolized the anointing presence of the Holy Spirit. The Messiah, then, was usually understood primarily as a reference to the Son of David who would be anointed to reign as King of Israel in the line of David, based on passages like Psalm 2: “Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and against his Anointed [*Messiah*], saying, ‘Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us’” (Ps. 2:1–3).

No one expected that a single person would fulfill all the anointed offices of prophet, priest, and

king the way that Jesus did, but the incompleteness of Andrew's understanding should not stop us from sensing the wonder, awe, and joy in his voice as he proclaims, "We have found the Messiah!" Indeed, God's people from of old longed to find the Messiah, but never lived to see the day (John 8:56), but God, in his grace and faithfulness, has now brought his Word made flesh near to humankind that he might be found.²³ God's long-promised Messiah, the anointed One, has come into the world to save and to rule over his people. We have found him! When Andrew does bring his brother Simon to Jesus, Jesus renames him Cephas, or Peter, meaning "Rock," signifying something of what his role would become as an apostolic leader among Jesus' earliest followers.²⁴

"Follow me" (John 1:43–46)

In John 1:43, we come yet again to "the next day," the fourth day in the series since the religious leaders first came to inquire of John the Baptist (cf. John 1:29, 35). On this "next day," Jesus decides to go to Galilee, but before he does so, he finds Philip and says to him, "Follow me." (John 1:43). Notably, Philip is the only person whom Jesus directly instructs to follow him, since John the Baptist encouraged Andrew and the unnamed disciple to follow Jesus (John 1:36), Andrew brought Simon Peter (John 1:42), and Philip will soon bring Nathanael (John 1:45).²⁵ Where the emphasis on the "call" narratives in the Synoptic Gospels falls on Jesus' deliberate gathering of his disciples, John instead sheds light on the evangelistic nature of how the early disciples told one another the good news of Jesus' coming into the world.

Additionally, Philip's conversion story is less dramatic than that of the other disciples mentioned in John 1. Andrew and the unnamed disciple engage in the awkward initial conversation with Jesus before being invited to "Come and you will see" (John 1:39). With Simon, Jesus renamed him to Cephas, or Peter (John 1:42). Nathanael, as we will see, will have an extended dialogue with first Philip, and then Jesus, about whether Jesus could indeed be the Son of God and the King of Israel (John 1:45–51). For Philip, however, the conversion story is delightfully low-key. Jesus comes to Philip, instructs him to follow him, and that's that. Philip then immediately goes to work to find Nathanael (John 1:45). For those of us without dramatic conversion stories, either because we grew up in the church or because we believed quickly when we first heard the gospel of Jesus, Philip's story may serve as an encouragement to underscore the value of coming to Christ without much fanfare.

"We Have Found Him!"

Just as Jesus found Philip (John 1:43), so Philip, in turn, finds Nathanael (John 1:45). We do not know much about Nathanael, since he is only mentioned at one other time in the Gospel of John, but he might be either one of the apostles going by a different name (if so, probably Bartholomew), or simply a man called to follow Jesus who does not become one of the apostles (more likely).²⁶ And, as Andrew proclaimed the good news of finding Jesus to Simon Peter, so Philip proclaims this good news to Nathanael, but with a slightly different explanation: "We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph" (John 1:45). First, don't miss the word "found" that shows up for the second time in verse 45 in this proclamation. The early disciples rejoice at finding Jesus.

Second, notice that while Philip does not use the word "Messiah" here, he nevertheless

understands Jesus to be the one whom the Scriptures had foretold, both in the Law of Moses, and also in the writings of the prophets. “Moses in the Law” could refer to a great number of passages, but Philip is most likely specifically referring to “the Prophet” that Moses had prophesied in Deuteronomy 18:

The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen...And the LORD said to me, “...I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him.” (Deut. 18:15, 17–19)

Remember, the Jewish religious leaders had asked John the Baptist whether he was the Prophet (John 1:21), and the Baptist had said that he was not. Clearly, the people of Israel were waiting expectantly for God to raise up this Prophet in their midst, and Philip rightly rejoices when he realizes that Jesus is the one whom they have expected.

Identifying exactly what Philip might have in mind when he proclaims that Jesus is “him of whom...also the prophets wrote” is a bit more complicated, since the prophets wrote a lot about the Messiah who would come. Rather than trying to identify one specific passage, it is better to understand this reference as a summation of the whole breadth of the witness of the prophets, who testified from many angles to the glory, beauty, mission, and identity of God’s servant who would come to save his people.

“Can Anything Good Come out of Nazareth?”

Astonishingly, Philip says that all of these prophetic expectations of the one whom God would send to redeem his people converge on Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph. Now, after two thousand years of church history, the name of Jesus carries with it an inescapable sense of importance, so that it is difficult for us to hear Philip’s proclamation in the way that Nathanael does. Imagine, instead, that we read here something like, “We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Bob from Toledo, in the Johnson family.” If someone told you that, it is unlikely that your ears would perk up with anticipation, waiting to hear more about Bob. How could Bob Johnson from Toledo possibly be the one to fulfill all these prophetic expectations?

Of course, Bob Johnson from Toledo (if such a man actually exists) was *not* the one of whom Moses wrote, but in the ears of Nathanael, the words of Philip must have sounded equally strange. The Prophet would arise from backwater Nazareth? Who on earth is Joseph? Sceptically, Nathanael asks, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” (John 1:46). Later in the Gospel of John, Jesus’ opponents will also object to Jesus on the basis that he comes from Galilee and not, they think, from Bethlehem (John 7:41–42, 52), so that Nathanael’s question is one that causes people to stumble in believing in Jesus throughout his entire life.²⁷

Wisely, Philip does not try to argue with Nathanael, or to trot out various apologetical proofs. Very likely, Philip does not know enough at this point to be able to answer Nathanael’s skepticism, but rather than attempting to do so, he simply replies, “Come and see” (John 1:46). As Herman Ridderbos writes, “Meeting Jesus himself would have to convince his friend.”²⁸ It has often been observed that no one comes to faith as a result of losing an argument about Jesus, and Philip provides

an alternative model. In humility, he simply encourages Nathanael to come and see Jesus for himself. This is still the warm invitation of the gospel, calling us sinners to come and see Jesus for ourselves in his word, where he meets us through his Spirit.²⁹ Come and see!

“You Will See Greater Things Than These” (John 1:47–51)

Up to this point in the entire Gospel of John, Jesus has said very little. He has asked a question (“What are you seeking?”; John 1:38) and extended an invitation (“Come and you will see”; John 1:39). He has given a new name to Simon (“You are Simon the son of John. You shall be called Cephas”; John 1:42) and instructed Philip to “Follow me” (John 1:43). Not only has Jesus spoken very few words, but everything he has spoken up to this point has been about the people to whom he has been speaking, not about himself. In the record that John the Evangelist has left for us, Jesus has so far said nothing about himself. Certainly, Jesus spoke to these first disciples if they came away proclaiming him the Messiah and the long-awaited promised one from the Scriptures, but the Evangelist does not want us to overhear the content of those conversations just yet. Instead, he will relay the message of Jesus through the rest of the Gospel.

At first, then, when Jesus speaks to Nathanael, Jesus continues this pattern of speaking about the other person in the conversation. So, to Nathanael, Jesus remarks, “Behold, an Israelite, indeed, in whom there is no deceit!” (John 1:47). William Hendriksen unfolds the significance of Jesus’ remark:

In the light of the entire context (see verse 51) it becomes apparent that throughout this account of his conversation with Nathaniel [sic], Christ is thinking of the patriarch Jacob. With reference to the latter, father Isaac had complained, speaking to his son Esau, “Thy brother came with guile, and has taken away thy blessing” (Gen. 27:35; see also the following verse). The employment of trickery for selfish advantage characterized not only Jacob himself (see also Gen. 30:37–43) but also his descendants (cf. Gen. 34). A really honest and sincere Israelite, a Jew without duplicity, had become such an exception that at the approach of Nathaniel Jesus exclaimed, “Look, truly an Israelite in whom deceit does not exist.”³⁰

Jesus reveals the reason why Nathanael eventually believes in Jesus, even though he at first raises the same objection as the opponents of Jesus, who do not believe: Nathanael is an Israelite without deceit. His questions and concerns about the claims that Jesus could possibly be the long-awaited Messiah are genuine intellectual questions, as opposed to a hardness of heart masquerading as “intellectual honesty.” When people express skepticism about Jesus, we ought to deal patiently, gently, and honestly with them; however, we should always keep in mind people need more than the removal of intellectual hurdles before they can come to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.

Curious, Nathanael asks Jesus, “How do you know me?” to which Jesus responds, “Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you” (John 1:48). Clearly, this answer impressed Nathanael considerably, given his confession of faith in the next verse. For us, though, we do not have enough information to know *why* this answer impressed Nathanael. Many biblical scholars have offered suggestions, but all are speculative.³¹ The only thing we can know for sure from the text is that Jesus’ answer *did* impress Nathanael, which lines this narrative up with the encounters of the first

two disciples and of Philip—we know that Jesus spent time with these men, having some kind of conversation and interaction that led them to believe that Jesus was, indeed, the Messiah and the one foretold by Moses and the prophets, but the Evangelist hides those interactions so that we don't know what happened to create that impression. Perhaps the spiritual nature and power of the conversation could not be accurately captured in mere words, so rather than trying to describe it with a description that falls short of capturing the experience, the Evangelist leaves the details of these conversations to our imaginations, and gives us only the results.

In Nathanael's case, the results of this simple statement of Jesus are immediate and total. He answers Jesus, crying out, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" (John 1:49). Even though this interaction comes at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry, Nathanael's richly theological confession captures the nature of Jesus as the Son of God and the King (Messiah) of Israel. John the Evangelist does not even attempt to tell us how or why Nathanael made this intellectual leap; he simply records it for us. Clearly, the Spirit of God who has remained on Jesus (John 1:32) is at work, transforming in a moment the skeptical heart of Nathanael into worship by only a handful of words from the mouth of Jesus.

Even Jesus comments on the drastic nature of Nathanael's conversion by such a simple phrase. Jesus says, "Because I said to you, 'I saw you under the fig tree,' do you believe? You will see greater things than these.' And he said to him, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man'" (John 1:50–51). Importantly, we should observe that Jesus does not discount or downplay Nathanael's conversion. Instead, he simply puts his statement about the fig tree in context, telling Nathanael that such a statement was relatively easy, and that Nathanael could expect that Jesus would back up Nathanael's initial possible impression through even greater things that Nathanael himself would witness.

Specifically, Jesus tells Nathanael that he will see heaven opened, with angels ascending and descending on Jesus, the Son of Man. This statement is a clear reference to the story of Jacob's ladder in Genesis 28, where Jacob saw a similar vision, with angels ascending into and descending from heaven on a ladder reaching up from Bethel, the "house of God" and the "gate of heaven" (Gen. 28:17). Craig Keener clarifies an important point: "It is Nathanael, not Jesus, who is the new Jacob here (1:47; Jesus is greater than Jacob, 4:12); Jesus is Jacob's ladder (...the 'gate of heaven'), the way between God and the world (14:6)."³²

In other words, Jesus is claiming that *he* opens the gates of the kingdom of God, which has been closed against us because of the curse of sin.³³ Through his incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and ascension, Jesus provides access to heaven that only angels previously enjoyed. For all those who believe in his name, Jesus gives the right to become children of God (John 1:12). The call that Jesus extends to Andrew, the unnamed disciple, Philip, and Nathanael that we read about in this passage is not a story frozen in history; this is the same call to "Follow me" (John 1:43) that Jesus continues to extend today. It is not a call that he verifies with absolute intellectual certainty, or perfect assurances of what will come in the future. Jesus simply speaks, instructing us to come and see *him* in his glory through faith. Come and see. Find and follow. Jesus will show you greater things than these.

Notes

1. “36. *Behold the Lamb of God!* Hence appears more clearly what I have already stated, that when John perceived that he was approaching the end of his course, he laboured incessantly to resign his office to Christ.” (Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, 69. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.vii.viii.html>>)
2. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 154.
3. Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 469.
4. Carson, *the Gospel According to John*, 154–55.
5. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, 70. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.vii.viii.html>>
6. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 155.
7. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John’s Gospel*, 147.
8. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 155.
9. Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 471–72. “Halakah” is Jewish law that emerged from Rabbinic exegesis, concerned primarily with the *application* of the text of Scripture to “matters of behaviour and conduct.” (Gerald Bray, *Biblical Interpretation: Past & Present* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 50–51, 58–59.)
10. Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John*, 80.
11. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, 70–71. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.vii.viii.html>>
12. J. Harold Greenlee, *Introduction to New Testament Textual Criticism*, Rev. ed. (Peabody, MS: Hendricksen Publishers, 1995), 5–6.
13. Bart Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 90.
14. Timothy Paul Jones, *Misquoting Truth: A Guide to the Fallacies of Bart Ehrman’s “Misquoting Jesus”* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 43–44.
15. For a list of possible unintentional or intentional changes, see Greenlee, *Introduction to New Testament Textual Criticism*, 55–61.
16. For a list of procedures for dealing with both internal or external evidence among scholars of textual criticism, see Greenlee, *Introduction to New Testament Textual Criticism*, 111–31.
17. Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994), 172.
18. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 14.
19. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 14.
20. “This one as the first finds his own brother Simon and tells him, We have found the Messiah, which is, when interpreted, Christ. John reports this concerning Andrew and Simon after having drawn especial attention to the former in the previous verse. Nothing is said directly concerning himself and his brother James. And yet truth compelled John to intimate something concerning himself. The reading *πρῶτον*, which some prefer, should give way to *πρῶτος*. If we keep the adverb, an incongruity results, for Andrew is then said to ‘find first,’ as if he did something else next—yet nothing else is reported. If we use the adjective we learn that Andrew as the first of the two disciples mentioned finds his own brother, leading us to infer that John, as the second of the two, was a close second also in finding his own brother. And this is the actual story. Thus also the reading *πρῶτος* is generally preferred. It goes well with the additional touch that Andrew finds ‘his own’ brother, *τὸν ἴδιον*, instead of a simple *αὐτοῦ*, ‘his.’ It is all quite plain if we understand that John, too, ‘finds his own brother James.’ Yet we must note that John gives credit here, where he is personally concerned, to the other man, Andrew—he was the first in the matter of this finding.” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of John’s Gospel*, 152–53.)
21. Köstenberger, *John*, 77.

22. “Here we see also how small and low the beginning of the Church was. John, indeed, prepared disciples for Christ, but it is only now that Christ begins to collect a Church. He has no more than two men who are mean and unknown, but this even contributes to illustrate his glory, that within a short period, without human aid, and without a strong hand, he spreads his kingdom in a wonderful and incredible manner. We ought also to observe what is the chief object to which John directs the attention of men; it is, to find in Christ the forgiveness of sins.” (Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, 70. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.vii.viii.html>>)

23. “Mark the word “findeth.” It keeps recurring in a significant manner, twice in v. 41, and again in v. 43 and 45. So the man in the field “finds” the treasure, and the merchantman “finds” the pearl of great price. At best our seeking is only like a blind groping which would be useless if God in his mercy did not lay the great treasure so near us, direct our groping hands and blind eyes to it until, touching it at last, lo, we find it!” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 154.)

24. While the Roman Catholic Church overstates what Jesus says to Peter by suggesting that Peter is here established as Christ's representative on earth (unlikely in the context of Jesus' promise to send another Comforter in John 14–16), and that this papal primacy extends beyond Peter to every subsequent pope (which Jesus nowhere even hints). Still, we should not overcorrect these errors by denying that Peter had any significance at all. Indeed, Peter was an immensely important apostle in the early church, even in the way that he has left us two letters that we read as Scripture.

25. Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John*: 79.

26. “Nothing is recorded of Nathanael other than this incident and his presence among the fishermen in 21:2 (which adds the information that he came from Cana). The name means ‘God has given’ (and is thus equivalent to our Theodore). This has led to the conjecture that the passage is allegorical and that an ideal disciple is meant (one ‘given by God’), but there is little to be said for this. While the name is not a common one among the Jews, it is found. There is no reason for doubting that a real person is meant. The incident reads like the record of an actual happening rather than a pious fiction. Others think that Nathanael is another name for Matthew, since the two names are of similar meaning. Others again suggest that Nathanael is to be identified with Bartholomew, an apostle who is never mentioned (at least by this name) in John, just as Nathanael is never mentioned in the Synoptists. Bartholomew is coupled with Philip in all three Synoptists (Matt. 10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:14), and another link is found in that he is mentioned immediately after Thomas in Acts 1:13 while Nathanael is in the same position in John 21:2. Moreover, Bartholomew is not really a personal name, but a patronymic meaning ‘son of Tolmai’ (cf. Barjona = ‘son of Jona’); the man who bore it almost certainly had another name. The other disciples mentioned in this chapter all become apostles, and it is suggested that Nathanael is likely to have done so too. If he is identified with one of the apostles, Bartholomew is probably our man. But why should we identify him with an apostle? Jesus had many disciples outside the Twelve, and there seems no reason for holding that Nathanael was anything other than one of them. It is certain that John wants us to think of him as attaching himself firmly to Jesus, but this does not make him an apostle.” (Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 143–44.)

27. Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 485.

28. Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John*, 89.

29. “Philip gives the finest kind of an answer, one that recalls the word of Jesus himself to John and Andrew, ‘Come and see!’ The present imperative ἐρχου is combined with the aorist imperative ἴδε, thus differing from v. 39. This is excellent Greek, the first tense moving the action along until the action of the second tense brings it to a proper stop. To regard these two imperatives as equivalent to a condition, ‘If you come, you shall see,’ is to change the thought and to weaken its expression....The answer was probably far better than Philip himself realized, for the only way to learn aright who Jesus is, is not to argue about him, about Nazareth, or about any other point that doubt may try to raise, but to come directly to Jesus himself

(now in his Word, where he stands ready to meet us) and thus to see. This is the way Jesus led all his disciples, and they came, they saw, they were satisfied to the uttermost.” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of John’s Gospel*, 166.)

30. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, 110.

31. “Nathanael, feeling that Jesus ‘sees through’ him and knows him, asks in perplexity how that can be. Jesus informs Nathanael further about this precognition: Before Philip called Nathanael, Jesus already saw him sitting under the fig tree. Did Nathanael’s sitting under the fig tree occasion Jesus’ favorable opinion of Nathanael? A long list of explanations have been advanced. All of them either (1) assume some special event under the fig tree not mentioned here but known to Jesus and Nathanael, (2) attribute a certain symbolic meaning to sitting under a fig tree (cf. Mi. 4:4; Zc. 3:10; Ho. 9:10), or (3) think of the fig tree as a place where a rabbi might study and teach. But all this is highly uncertain. The important thing is that by mentioning this concrete situation, one that Nathanael could verify, Jesus gave evidence of knowing Nathanael in advance. The phrase ‘before Philip called you’ may mean that Jesus did not receive his knowledge from Philip. It seems more likely, however, that Jesus wants to convey that the calling of Nathanael was not just an act of Philip but that Jesus understood himself to be involved in Philip going to Nathanael (cf. 2 Ch. 5:26), who was thus one whose heart was upright before God, one of the ‘true worshipers’ known and sought by God (cf. 4:24; 6:37, 45; 10:14, 27b).” (Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John*, 90.)

32. Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 490.

33. “They are greatly mistaken, in my opinion, who anxiously inquire into the place where, and the time when, Nathanael and others saw heaven opened; for he rather points out something perpetual which was always to exist in his kingdom. I acknowledge indeed, that the disciples sometimes saw angels, who are not seen in the present day; and I acknowledge also that the manifestation of the heavenly glory, when Christ ascended to heaven, was different from what we now behold. But if we duly consider what took place at that time, it is of perpetual duration; for the kingdom of God, which was formerly closed against us, is actually opened in Christ. A visible instance of this was shown to Stephen, (Acts 7:55,) to the three disciples on the mountain, (Matthew 17:5,) and to the other disciples at Christ’s ascension, (Luke 24:51; Acts 1:9.) But all the signs by which God shows himself present with us depend on this opening of heaven, more especially when God communicates himself to us to be our life.” (Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, 80. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.vii.xi.html>>)