

2020

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Custom Citation

J. Lyle Story, "The Call of Nathanael: A New Recruit for the Jesus Movement (John 1:45–51)," *Spiritus: ORU Journal of Theology* 5, no. 1 (Spring, 2020), 25-41.

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THE CALL OF NATHANAEL

A NEW RECRUIT FOR THE JESUS
MOVEMENT (JOHN 1:45–51)

J. LYLE STORY

Spiritus 5.1 (2020) 25–41

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Keywords *fig tree, Jacob, Johannine christology, John 1:45-51, Nathanael, prophetic revelation*

Abstract

The call of Nathanael narrated in John 1:45–51 not only depicts the call of this disciple of Jesus, but also functions paradigmatically as an invitation for future generations of disciples to personal relationship with Jesus and participation in his messianic mission. The article argues that the horticultural metaphors of the fig tree in the Nathanael narrative and the vine in Jesus’ discourse in John 15 illustrate complementary aspects of discipleship, with the former emphasizing personal relationship with Jesus and the latter a relationship of abiding. It is through the work of the Holy Spirit that disciples, both original and future, are grafted into life in Christ and his mission in the world.

Introduction

The Evangelist John tells an inviting story about Jesus, who calls Nathanael to discipleship and in doing so, Jesus reveals where Nathanael was prior to Jesus’ call—under a fig tree. Jesus’ prophetic insight into Nathanael’s physical location then evokes a Messianic confession including Jesus’ divinity, then followed by Jesus’ own self-declaration, the Son of Man accompanied by angels ascending and descending—even upon the Son of Man. Several questions emerge.

What does this short story of Nathanael’s encounter with Jesus signify? What bearing does the immediate context of the Baptist’s declaration of Jesus as the Son of God who will baptize in the Holy Spirit imply for this short story? What does the Evangelist invite his readers to grasp from this narrative? How can Nathanael accord divinity and Messianic identity to Jesus as a result of Jesus’ prophetic revelation of

Nathanael, “being under the fig tree,” when Jesus was not present? Is there special nuance with the fig tree that the Evangelist intends that his readers perceive? What are readers to make of other allusions in the story, including the motif of an “Israelite in whom there is no guile” and the reference to Jacob’s vision of the angels ascending and descending upon the Son of Man, not a ladder? Are these motifs interrelated? Since John’s Gospel is replete with hidden meaning and veiled allusions to the Old Testament (e.g. John 3:14–15), it is important to ask if the Evangelist conveys more than topographical detail or local flavor.

Earlier, the Evangelist twice highlighted that Jesus is the one upon whom the Spirit descends and remains: the *descending and remaining of the Spirit* (τὸ πνεῦμα καταβαῖνον . . . ἔμεινεν ἐπ’ αὐτόν, John 1:32; τὸ πνεῦμα καταβαῖνον καὶ μένον ἐπ’ αὐτόν, John 1:33). Both the descent and remaining of the Spirit are central; these are the vital divine clues by which the Baptist knows that this is the one (Jesus) who will baptize in the Holy Spirit and whose identity is the Son of God (John 1:33, 34). The motif of ascending and descending of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus parallels the ascending and descending upon the Son of Man. Certainly, the role of the Holy Spirit is crucial for Jesus’ new companions.

Nathanael’s invitation is also preceded by a previous call narrative (John 1:35–42) in which the Baptist transfers two (one unnamed) of his disciples to Jesus. Their joyous witness is spontaneous and contagious, for Andrew leads Peter to Jesus, who calls him by name and renames him Cephas (Rock). The text also suggests that the unidentified disciple of the Baptist also finds another. Although Peter finds Jesus, he quickly discovers that Jesus knows and finds him.¹ Both call narratives demonstrate similar structure: a contagious witness (“come and see”), finding, being found and known, confession of Jesus’ identity, his affirmation, and a chronological marker in both stories, “the next day” (1:35, 43).

It is striking that in the call narratives of John 1 that the initial disciples “trust” in Jesus before the first sign at the wedding of Cana.² As Carson notes, the Evangelist “provides concrete examples”³ of those who did receive Jesus (John 1:11–12).

The story is climactic,⁴ for this call builds upon the various christological terms for Jesus (John 1) that others say about him, climaxed by Jesus’ own self-declaration of being the Son of Man. The story properly prefaces Jesus’ ministry of “signs” that begins in John 2. The story portrays the spontaneous and contagious assembling of Jesus’ companions. The Evangelist underscores the eschatological significance of Nathanael’s call, *under the fig tree*, by exercising prophetic insight and his allusions to the Old Testament. The Evangelist intends that his readers absorb the important pattern of seeking, finding, inviting, seeing, celebrating, confessing, and being known and found

by Jesus.⁵ The repeated invitation, “Come and see” (John 1:39, 46), extends not only to the original disciples, but also embraces the Evangelist’s readers.

It will be shown that through the Evangelist’s use of the Old Testament that Jesus’ call to Nathanael offers an invitation to personal relationship with Jesus and the community’s new identity, to a new and fruitful age, and to participate in Jesus’ Messianic mission as his companions. The immediate context implies that this new community will find its dynamic in the person and work of the Holy Spirit.

While the *mashal* of the vine (John 15) portrays *the new relationship of abiding* in the post-resurrection period on the day of the Paraclete when Jesus will be “in them” (John 14:17–20), the call of Nathanael *under the fig tree* develops the idea of the *relationship to Jesus* in the initial Jesus movement. Intertextuality assists the Evangelist’s readers in grasping the story’s significance.

Structure and Interpretation

How does the Evangelist tell this unique story? What structural and thematic clues does the Evangelist provide that would lead his readers to understand his thrust? As a whole, the paragraph reveals a series of cause-effect relationships in that one comment leads to another response.

Invitation to Nathanael (John 1:45). John informs his readers that Philip invited a certain Nathanael⁶ to meet Jesus, the son of Joseph,⁷ the one promised by Moses and the prophets. The identification of Nathanael, coupled with Philip’s statements about Jesus’ identity, genealogy, and geographical origin, and the fulfillment of Jewish hope, is thoroughly Jewish. The Evangelist parallels this story with the previous narrative when Andrew (one of the two unnamed disciples of the Baptist, 1:37) identifies Jesus as “the Messiah” (τὸν Μεσσία), which the Evangelist then identifies as “the Christ” (Χριστός, 1:41). The narratives of Andrew’s witness to Peter and Philip’s witness to Nathanael are paired and both reveal a vibrant and compelling witness,⁸ joined with a Messianic identification.

Nathanael’s Skeptical Response (1:46a). In response to Philip’s contagious invitation, Nathanael is skeptical: “Can anything good come from Nazareth?” The Evangelist does not really provide the explanation for Nathanael’s sarcasm. Scholars suggest a local proverb reflecting jealousy between the two towns of Cana and Galilee,⁹ or because Nazareth is unknown in the Old Testament and Jewish literature generally.¹⁰ Current readers can only surmise but not argue with certainty.

Jesus’ Revelation (1:47). Although Nathanael is initially cynical, he nonetheless follows Philip’s call, “Come and see” (1:46b),¹¹ and sees Jesus. With prophetic insight,

Jesus then directly addresses him as “a true Israelite in whom there is no guile” (ἀληθῶς Ἰσραηλίτης ἐν ᾧ δόλος οὐκ ἔστιν, 1:47). Clearly, Jesus is “in the know” of Nathanael’s character through his prophetic revelation. Through intertextuality, the Evangelist’s readers note the transposition of the name change from “Jacob” to “Israel” (Gen 32:28).¹² The term “Israelite” (Ἰσραηλίτης) is positive (par. to Rom 9:6–8), and depicts Nathanael as a member of God’s chosen people by spiritual birth, rather than by heredity; the label, “Israelite,” contrasts with later pejorative statements, “Jew” (Ἰουδαῖος) and “sons of Cain” (John 8:44).¹³ The Baptist’s stated purpose concerning Jesus was “in order that he might be revealed to ‘Israel’” (ἵνα φανερωθῇ τῷ Ἰσραὴλ, 1:31), and since Nathanael is the last of the disciples (according to John 1) to be called an “Israelite,” he initially fulfills the Baptist’s stated goal.

Nathanael’s Question to Jesus’ Revelation (1:48a). In response to Jesus’ prophetic insight into his character, “without guile,” Nathanael is clearly disarmed, “How do you know me?” (πόθεν με γινώσκεις). He is unnerved; from his perspective, how could Jesus know something of his character when they have never met? Michaels states, “With a touch of humor, the Gospel writer highlights Nathanael’s candor as a way of confirming him as a man without deceit.”¹⁴ For the Evangelist, the key verb “I know” (γινώσκω, fifty-three occurrences) is central to his gospel. He links the verbal forms of “I know” (γινώσκω) with the Gospel’s core reality, “the eternal life” (ἡ αἰώνιος ζωῆ). Eternal life equates with the dual knowing the one true God and Jesus as “the sent one of God”: “that they might know you the only true God, and him whom you have sent, Jesus Christ” (ἵνα γινώσκωσιν σὲ τὸν ἀληθινὸν θεὸν καὶ ὃν ἀπέστειλας Ἰησοῦν Χριστόν, 17:3). From the Semitic perspective, such knowing accentuates a relational knowledge or experience. In Jesus’ “High-Priestly Prayer” (John 17), “knowledge of the one God is not theoretical speculation, which allows the one who has it to live according to his own caprice.”¹⁵ Such knowledge is deeply personal, reciprocal, and ongoing, noted by the use of the present subjunctive, “that they continue to know,” and is certainly appropriate since Jesus prays for those who are already disciples. However, they also need to mature in their understanding and relationship of the intimate bond between Father and Son, which must likewise deepen in their relational experience with Jesus.

The Evangelist claimed that the Logos was the agent of creation (“all things were created through him,” πάντα δι’ αὐτοῦ, 1:3; the world was created through him, ὁ κόσμος δι’ αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο, 1:10). Yet, tragically, the world/creation “did not know him” (ὁ κόσμος αὐτὸν οὐκ ἔγνω, 1:10) and “his own did not receive him” (οἱ ἴδιοι αὐτὸν οὐ παρέλαβεν, 1:11). In the next chapter, the Evangelist affirms Jesus’ interior knowledge twice: “because *he knew all people*” (διὰ τὸ αὐτὸν γινώσκειν πάντας, 2:24); “he (Jesus)

did not have need for anyone to witness to him about man, for *he himself knew what was in man*” (οὐ χρείαν εἶχεν ἵνα τις μαρτυρήσῃ περὶ τοῦ ἀνθρώπου. αὐτος ἐγίνωσκεν τί ἦν ἐν τῷ ἀνθρώπῳ, 2:25). The two remarks possess a certain “bite.” Jesus perceived the fickleness of the sign-seekers who seem to be present for “the show” but are not there for truly “knowing” Jesus.

For those who do “know” and “receive” Jesus, the *mashal* of the winsome shepherd emphasizes the mutual knowledge of the shepherd and sheep. Jesus says, “I know (γινώσκω) my own and my own know (γινώσκουσι) me even as the Father knows (γινώσκει) me and I know (γινώσκω) the Father” (10:14–15, 27). The truth that emerges is somewhat unique to the Fourth Gospel. Nathanael is amazed at Jesus’ discernment of him as an Israelite “in whom there is no guile” (1:49). But Jesus also knows the shallow faith of the Passover worshipers in Jerusalem (2:23–25). He knew the past and present life of the Samaritan woman (John 4), and how he would supply food for the hungry people in ch. 6. He also knows the evil intent in the heart of Judas (6:70; 13:27). What is exceptional in 10:14–15 is the affirmation of a reciprocal or mutual knowledge that binds Jesus to his disciples, “I know my own and my own know me.” The expression “to know (another)” is equated theologically with “to be in another,” in the language of mutual indwelling (14:20).

Jesus’ Further Prophetic Revelation (1:48b). Jesus then exercises further prophetic insight through his awareness of where Nathanael was prior to Philip’s invitation. He declares that before Philip had called him, “I saw you (being) under the fig tree” (ὄντα ὑπὸ τὴν συκῆν σε). Jesus’ prophetic *seeing* of Nathanael under the fig tree is comparable to other incidents in John’s Gospel where Jesus possessed “interior, prophetic, or second sight.”¹⁶

Later, the Evangelist tells the story of the Samaritan woman when Jesus reveals his prophetic insight of her past and present marital status (John 4:17–18). In both John 1 and 4, Jesus’ interior insight leads to a response of wonder and confession: the woman—“Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet” (4:19) leads to, “Come see a man who told me all the things that I have done. Can this be the Messiah?” (4:29, 37)¹⁷; Nathanael—“How do you know me?” (1:48) leads to, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God and you are the King of Israel!” (1:49). The sequence emerges in both stories: a) a person meets Jesus for the first time, b) prophetic insight, c) Messianic confession.

Telford minimizes such prophetic insight, since other individuals and groups possessed this power and because there was not enough evidence to equate prophetic insight with Messiahship.¹⁸ However, Telford fails to see the similar progression with the Samaritan episode and other instances in the Fourth Gospel of similar prophetic insight. Perhaps it is not clairvoyance *per se* that distinguishes Jesus from other

visionaries, but that he *as Messiah* knows what is in the heart of a person (John 2:24–25). Other Johannine texts reinforce Jesus’ prophetic insight (6:70–71; 13:26; 16:30), including the mutual knowledge of the shepherd and sheep (10:3–4).

Jesus’ prophetic status emerges from numerous references that link *prophet* with Jesus’ *interior knowledge* of people and circumstances. Jesus is made privy to what people are thinking or doing and he is *in the know* as to particular events that will unfold. What Jesus knows, does, and says are due to the empowerment of the Holy Spirit/Paraclete, not omniscience.¹⁹ Jesus’ prophetic insight is grounded by the descending and remaining Holy Spirit; this is the clue for the Baptist (τὸ πνεῦμα καταβαῖνον . . . ἔμεινεν ἐπ’ αὐτόν, John 1:32; τὸ πνεῦμα καταβαῖνον καὶ μένον ἐπ’ αὐτόν, 1:33).

This important pericope about Jesus and the Holy Spirit is central for the two call narratives for the initial Jesus movement. Jesus’ giftedness as a Spirit-empowered prophet enables him to “know” situations, motivations, problems, and what will immediately unfold in some narratives. Otto interprets this prophetic gift as “a gift of penetration . . . a capacity of second sight . . . characteristic of the primitive charismatic.”²⁰ This prophetic ability *to know* is not unique to Jesus, since there are instances of such prophetic knowledge in the Old²¹ and New Testaments.²² What is new is that *Jesus as Messiah knows his own*, whom he summons to companionship in his Messianic mission.

In addition, Jesus’ mention of the fig tree opens a window to numerous Old Testament allusions that bear upon the Nathanael’s call with respect to: a) the fig tree; b) Joshua’s companions in Zech 3:8–10; and c) Jacob in Gen 28:12. Intertextuality provides such support.

a) The fig tree metaphor is often linked with two other horticultural symbols of the vine/vineyard and olive tree in both testaments, and frequently designate the people of God, their call, history, blessing, judgment, necessary fruit, vocation, and God’s hope and expectation for them, as well as promise. One metaphor can be found with another symbol, for example, the barren fig tree in the vineyard (Luke 13:6–9) or within the full horticultural trio; they all are used in parabolic form, many of which depict the people of God.

Vine/Vineyard	Ps 80:8–19 (LXX Ps 79:8–19); Isa 5:1–7; 27:2–6; 28:24; Jer 2:21; Ezek 15:1–8; 17:1–24; 19:10–14; Mark 12:1–12 par; Matt 21:28–32; John 15:1–17
Fig Tree	Jer 24:1–10; 29:17; Amos 8:1–3; Mark 11:12–25 par; 13:28–31 par; John 1:45–51

Olive Tree	Zech 4:1–14; Rom 11:11–24; Rev 11:1–13
Vine/Vineyard & Fig Tree	Hos 2:12; 9:10, 16; Mic 4:4; 7:1; Jer 8:13; Joel 1:7, 12; 2:22; 1 Kgs 4:25; 2 Kgs 18:31; Isa 34:4; 36:16; Zech 3:10; Ps 105:33; Song 2:13; Neh 13:15; Luke 13:6–9; Matt 7:16 = Luke 6:44
Vine/Vineyard & Olive Tree	Job 15:33; Ps 128:3; Exod 23:11; Deut 6:11; 24:20–21; 28:39–40; Josh 24:13; 1 Sam 8:14; 2 Kgs 5:26; 1 Chron 27:27–28; Neh 5:11; 9:25; 2 Kgs 18:32; Hos 14:6–7; Mic 6:15
Vine/Vineyard & Fig Tree & Olive Tree	Judg 9:7–12; Hab 3:17; Jer 5:17 LXX; Hag 2:19 (with pomegranate); Jas 3:12; 2 Kgs 18:31–32; Amos 4:9; Deut 8:8

The use of this horticultural trio in both testaments is not incidental. Nathanael’s call “under the fig tree” should not be isolated from its connection within the full horticultural trio. A certain fluidity of symbolism²³ emerges in which a picture changes from the fruit of the vine to the whole vineyard, sometimes by a parallelism of members (Hos 9:10). The metaphors combine in an idiomatic expression of idyllic peace, “every man under his vine and under his fig tree” (2 Kgs 18:31 = Isa 36:16; 1 Kgs 4:25; Mic 4:4; Zech 3:10; 1 Macc 14:12). The texts associate the horticultural trio with the blessings of the Messianic age of fertility and promise (Gen 49:11–22). The language of the Bible (as canon) is replete with horticultural metaphors derived from human relationships, experience, history, and vocation, when the people of God encounter him in unique ways. Caird notes, “the metaphors derived from human relationships have a special interest and importance, because they lend themselves to a two-way traffic in ideas.”²⁴

Scholars have drawn attention to what Nathanael was *doing* under the fig tree, for example, praying²⁵ or studying the Torah.²⁶ Derrett aptly responded, “Those who study under the shade of a fig tree were often students of the Torah, but one can hardly say that to be under a fig tree is to be a Torah-student, for at that rate, sleepy Arab camel-drivers would be Torah-students.”²⁷ Some scholars have denied any significance to the fig tree and regard its presence as purely incidental.²⁸ However, investigation into *what Jesus meant* by seeing Nathanael under the fig tree is more fruitful, including reference to Zechariah.

b) Clearly, Zechariah intimates a Messianic era with Joshua’s companions. In the new age, God’s servant, the *branch*, will come forward, and the iniquity of the land will be removed in one day (Zech 3:8-9). The promise also affirms Joshua (LXX—Ἰησοῦς), the high priest along with *your companions* (οἱ πλησίον σου), are labeled as *men fit for a sign* (Zech 3:8); they will share in the events of the new age, blessed with the fruit of the

horticultural trio. “In that day, declares the Lord of Hosts, every one of you will invite *his companion* (τὸν πλησίον αὐτοῦ) to sit *under his vine* and *under his fig tree*” (Zech 3:10). The Messianic age will see no vine and no fig tree without fruit whatever the season.²⁹ Zechariah follows this promise with the vision of the golden lampstand flanked by two *olive trees* and depicts Joshua and Zerubbabel as *sons of oil* (Zech 4:14). It is also important to note that both the religious leader and civic leader must be: 1) purified (Zech 3:3–4); 2) clothed (Zech 3:5) and anointed (Zech 4:14); 3) their work is to be accomplished *by my Spirit* (4:4), not by worldly might. In Zech 6:11–13, Joshua is called the *Branch* who will work in concert with Zerubbabel. These companions of Joshua (Jesus) can be regarded as “a company assembling to see the Messiah’s work,”³⁰ in conscious dependence on the Holy Spirit.

The Nathanael story focuses upon this very assembling of Jesus’ companions,³¹ in an atmosphere, experience, and expression of spontaneous, contagious, and joyful witness. Derrett suggests that Jesus recognized a potential recruit from the signs of the new age approaching, a “companion of Jesus fitted for a sign in his connection with the Messiah.”³² Nathanael is later found in a missionary role in a post-resurrection appearance (John 21:2). Thus, the Evangelist may suggest the eschatological significance of Nathanael’s call, *under the fig tree*, as in Mic 4:4; 1 Kgs 4:25,³³ where “sitting under his vine and fig tree” is one of the blessings of the new age.

Nathanael’s Messianic Confession (1:49). Jesus’ further prophetic insight evokes Nathanael’s dual confession of Jesus as the Son of God and Israel’s King/Messiah (Παββί σὺ εἶ ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ, σὺ βασιλεὺς τοῦ Ἰσραήλ), a paired confession that accords with the stated purpose of John’s Gospel (20:30–31). The emphatic pronoun “you” (σὺ) in both affirmations underscores Jesus’ identity in Nathanael’s spontaneous witness. He echoes the Baptist’s pronouncement of Jesus’ identity as Son of God (1:34), and implicitly, Jesus, the one who will baptize in the Holy Spirit (1:33).

Jesus’ Promise of Greater Revelation (1:50–51). This sequence of revelation-confession then serves as a further steppingstone for a greater revelation for *all the disciples* (plurals “to you,” ὑμῖν; “you will see,” ὄψεσθε), for Nathanael’s companions will see the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man (Gen 28:12)—upon a person, not a ladder. D. Moody Smith makes the cogent comment, “Jesus’ response sounds like, ‘You haven’t seen anything yet!’”³⁴

Nathanael’s confession is singular, and the initial promise is singular, “you will see *greater things than these* (μεῖζω τούτων),” but then the promise opens up to the full community, expressed in plural forms, “to you” (ὑμῖν) and “you will see” (ὄψεσθε). Nathanael’s companionship is superseded by the full community, with Jesus’ invitation to initial commitment and growing trust with the full assurance of heaven’s openness

and communication in a fully relational commitment. In Jesus' Upper Room Discourse, he promises that they will do *greater things than these* (μείζονα τούτων, John 14:12), a promise that is based upon Jesus' going to the Father, and their ensuing experience of the Holy Spirit when Jesus will be in them (John 14:17–20).

c) Through intertextuality, the other Old Testament allusion is found in Jacob's experience at Bethel, when "the angels of God were ascending and descending" (LXX: οἱ ἄγγελοι τοῦ θεοῦ ἀνέβαινον καὶ κατέβαινον, Gen 28:12) upon the heavenly ladder. When Jacob awakens from his revelatory dream, he senses the reality of God's presence: "Surely Yahweh is in this place" (Gen 28:16).

It seems clear that John knew and accepted the interpretation which understood Gen 28:12 to say that the angels of God ascended and descended upon Jacob, or Israel, and that for "Israel" he substituted "Son of Man" Jacob as the ancestor of the nation of Israel, summarizes in his person the ideal Israel *in posse* just as our Lord, at the other end of the line, summarizes it *in esse* as the Son of Man.³⁵

The Evangelist later expresses the ascent motif in connection with the Son of Man being lifted up (John 3:13; 12:32), namely, on a cross. Ashton surveys several conjectural interpretations of the transposition from Jacob to the Son of Man, and concludes, "It lies in the picture. It is simply that there is no other *route* between heaven and earth."³⁶ The present participles, "ascending" and "descending," convey continuous communication between heaven and earth, in which humans experience communication with the invisible God of glory.³⁷ This language also accords with the Baptist's language of the descending and remaining Spirit in John 1:32–33.

The Jacob story also emerges in Jesus' characterization of Nathanael as "a true *Israelite* in whom there is no *guile*" (δόλος, John 1:47). *Guile* had surely characterized Jacob's life, "with *guile* he took your blessing" (μετὰ δόλου ἔλαβεν τὴν εὐλογίαν σου, Gen 27:35–36; Gen 25:26).³⁸ Michaels suggests that a link can also be found in Hos 9:10: "Like grapes in the wilderness, I *found Israel*. Like the first fruit on *the fig tree* in its first season, I *saw* your fathers."³⁹ "The point would then be a comparison between finding the new Israel among the disciples of John, and God finding the old Israel in the days of the patriarchs."⁴⁰

Nathanael's spontaneous confession of Jesus as the Son of God and King of Israel well accords with the stated purpose of the Fourth Gospel that Jesus' signs lead to trust in Jesus the Messiah and Son of God (John 20:30–31), and will result in eternal life.⁴¹ Jesus then promises greater wonders that are in store for *all these disciples* who are and will be Jesus' companions, "You [pl. ὄψεσθε] will see the heavens opened and the

angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man” (1:51).⁴² Keener notes, “the Johannine principle that those who are genuinely ‘from God’ heed others who are from God” (3:20–21; 1 John 4:6).

The sequence of christological terms in John 1 is deeply rooted in the Old Testament, for the Evangelist consciously formulates a series of witnesses to Jesus. John intends that his readers embrace initial discipleship, which means an initial trust in Jesus’ real identity and their ongoing vibrant witness to him. The christological titles, voiced by others,⁴³ lead to Jesus’ own solemn and climactic claim about himself:

- The Word—John 1:1;
- Pre-existence—1:1, 2, 15, 30;
- Agent of creation—1:3, 10;
- The Shekinah—1:14;
- Contrast between Moses (Law) and Jesus (grace and truth)—1:16;
- Christ, Elijah, the Prophet—1:25 (the Baptist’s disavowal of these titles);
- The one who comes—1:25 (after me)⁴⁴;
- Lamb of God—1:29 (who takes away the sin of the world), 1:36;
- The one upon whom the Spirit descends and remains 1:32, 33;
- The one who baptizes in the Holy Spirit—1:33;
- Son of God—1:34;
- The Messiah (translated as Christ)—1:41;
- Son of God/King of Israel—1:49;
- Son of Man—1:51.

With the double Amen-saying,⁴⁵ Jesus claims the climactic title “Son of Man” for his own self-designation, similar to the use in the Synoptic Gospels, as distinct from the post-resurrection titles given to Jesus. Barrett draws a parallel with the trial scene:

Nathanael has hailed Jesus as King of Israel (seemingly equaling “Messiah”); Jesus answers him by promising a vision of himself as the Son of Man. In Matt 26:64, when the high priest asks Jesus if he is the Messiah, Jesus answers him by promising a vision of the “Son of Man.” Clearly Jesus refers to Daniel’s apocalyptic Son of Man (Dan 7:13–14), which the high priest now recognizes, followed by the blasphemy charge and the tearing of his robe. “The Son of Man is both in heaven and on earth (3:13); He descends to give life to the world (6:27, 53); He ascends again to his glory (6:62), but this

ascent and glorification are by way of the cross (3:14; 8:28; 12:23, 34; 13:31).⁴⁶

The Johannine community now sees that the “house of God” (Bethel) is not a physical place or a ladder⁴⁷ (John 2:19–21; 4:21–24), but a person, the Son of Man, who links heaven and earth, who invites his people to be recruits of the new people of God. This new community will find its empowerment in the baptism in the Holy Spirit. In the *mashal* of the vine (John 15) with its powerful thrust upon mutual indwelling, the community is accorded privileged communication (15:15). The personal and communal atmosphere, experience, and expressions reveal a life of spontaneous and contagious witness, joy, and fruitfulness. Thus, the new community of companions assembles around this very person, not a place.

Implications

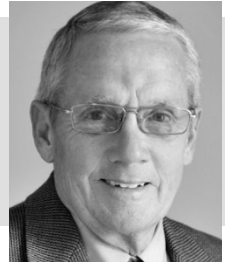
What are the inferences from this short call narrative and what bearing does this story have for Christian individuals and Christian faith communities? A few items stand out:

- The invitation to discipleship, joyous experience, and witness to the incredible person of Jesus, and to share as his companions in his Messianic mission remains constant over the centuries. The Evangelist does not intend that this story is simply to be read as a mere historical event, but a solid invitation to John’s readers then and now. The call to share as Jesus’ companion is not a somber “call to duty,” but a joyous participation in mission; membership in this community requires initial trust and receptivity in the wonder of eternal life. Such a call is an immense privilege that should grip John’s readers.
- Untold blessings lie in store for the people of God, both in the present and future. The story concludes with solid and communal promises that bear upon present experience as well as future hope (a trust, certainty, and emotion oriented to the future). The promises of fruitful blessings of the Messianic age can be counted on as trustworthy.
- Through the use of agrarian language and Old Testament allusions, the Evangelist intends that his readers sense the continuity between the old and the new. The new Messianic age does not negate the promises to Israel; indeed, the new people of God are squarely grounded in the Old Testament people of God. There is no hint of a replacement theology that “God has had it with Israel,” and now the new people of God are the only people that matter to God.

- While the Christian life originates in trust, the people of God need to understand that they are “in process,” and that they are very much in a discovery mode as to the real identity and purposes of Jesus as their lives unfold. The Evangelist would have his readers, then and now, ponder the choir of voices as they sing of his identity, meaning, and purposes for them. The call narrative concludes with an open-ended promise.
- The agrarian image of the fig tree joins together with the other agrarian image of the vine (John 15) as representative of the people of God. Yes, the first image of the fig tree affirms an invitation to participate in Jesus’ Messianic mission as a new recruit. However, the second image of the vine is an invitation to “abide” in Jesus in the post-resurrection period, when they are empowered by the Holy Spirit—a day when Jesus will “be in you,” on the day of the Paraclete (“in that day” ἐν ἐκείνῃ τῇ ἡμέρᾳ, 14:20). The experience of mutual indwelling incorporates Christians, Jesus, the Father, and the Holy Spirit. References to the Holy Spirit in the Upper Room Discourse correspond with the Baptist’s witness of the Holy Spirit, which descended and remained upon Jesus (John 1:32–33).
- The Nathanael story is also communal in nature, paired with the communal language of the *mashal* of the vine. The community of believers is central, for the invitation to “join up” is not simply private or personal in nature. The call to authentic community relationship and companionship stands against our Western proclivity to rugged individualism.
- The invitation to witness orients the community, then and now. The life of witness is fundamental for the Evangelist. He witnesses to the Logos in the opening prologue (John 1:1–18), followed by the witness of the Baptist (1:36), and two of the Baptist’s disciples leave him and follow Jesus (1:37–39). Witnessing continues with each of the two who finds (1:41) a brother and brings him to Jesus (1:41–52). Then the Evangelist states that Jesus finds Philip, and Philip finds Nathanael (1:43–45) and brings him to Jesus (1:47). The entire Nathanael story is natural and simple but also filled with nuance. The verbs “I find” (εὕρισκω, 1:41, 43, 45) and “I follow” (1:37, 38, 40, 43) are significant and their order varies in the narrative. The two disciples “follow” and “find” but Philip is “found” and then “follows.” In addition, the Evangelist also makes it clear that it is not simply a matter of finding, following, or knowing Jesus, but also an issue of being known by Jesus, just as Jesus knows Peter and knows Nathanael.

- In telling the story of the growing Jesus movement, the Evangelist directs his readers to embrace Jesus' identity and their unique companionship with him and to participate in the new and fruitful life of the Messianic age. The Evangelist intends that his readers experience both initial commitment and growing trust in the one who sees them before they see him and who finds them before they find him, and knows them before they know him. Jesus, with his recruits/companions, constitutes the new people of God, and they are recipients of promise, joy, and hope.⁴⁸

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Notes

¹ Andrew is one of two of the Baptist's disciples; the second disciple is unnamed.

² See Craig R. Koester, *The Word of Life* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008), 165.

³ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1991), 169.

⁴ "Surprisingly, Simon Peter, the foremost disciple in the Synoptic tradition, is passed over swiftly in order to highlight the otherwise unattested Nathanael." Andrew T. Lincoln, *The Gospel According to Saint John* (London: Hendrickson Publishers, 2005), 124.

⁵ Similar comments to Lincoln, *The Gospel According to Saint John*, 124.

⁶ Suggestions identify Nathanael with Bartholomew or Matthew. Cheyne surveys and critiques these attempts. T. K. Cheyne, "Nathanael," *Encyclopaedia Biblica* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1899–1903), 3:3338–39.

⁷ Stauffer notes that the designation, "son of Joseph," may serve to counter an insinuation of illegitimacy. Ethelbert Stauffer, *Jesus and His Story*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974), 15–18.

⁸ Ashton argues for the dominant ideas of witness, revelation, and faith. John Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 254.

⁹ M. E. Boismard, *Dû Baptême à Cana* (Paris: Cerfaux Press, 1956), 5–42. Similar reservation emerges in John 7:52 about the Messiah coming from Galilee: "Is not the awaited one to come from Bethlehem according to Mic 5:2?" See Thomas Barrosse, "The Seven Days of Creation in St. John's Gospel," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 21 (1959), 513.

Michaels suggests, "A stubborn provincialism in reverse that refuses to see anything great or

glorious in that which is familiar or close to home.” J. Ramsey Michaels, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010), 129.

¹⁰ “[T]he offence of the Messiah’s coming from Nazareth belongs as the Evangelist understands it, to the offence of the incarnation of the Logos.” Rudolph Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, trans. G. R. Beasley Murray (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1971), 104. See Keener for a full and nuanced discussion on Nathanael’s initial response. Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003), 483–85.

¹¹ The language, “come and see,” is issued to the first pair of disciples (John 1:39).

¹² Michaels, *The Gospel of John*, 129.

¹³ Emmanuel Hirsch, *Das Vierte Evangelium* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1936), 116–17. Pancaro argues for the positive sense of Israelite: “Nathanael is called a ‘true’ Israelite as a representative figure of discipleship and by virtue of his confession of faith.” Severino Pancaro, *The Law in the Fourth Gospel* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1975), 290–95. See Smith for a full and nuanced discussion on Nathanael’s initial response. D. Moody Smith, *Johannine Christianity* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1984), 200–2.

¹⁴ Michaels, *The Gospel of John*, 130.

¹⁵ R. Bultmann, “γινώσκω,” *TDNT* 1:709.

¹⁶ John 2:24–25; 4:17–19; 6:61, 64, 71; 13:1, 11, 27–28; 16:19, 30; 18:4.

¹⁷ See J. Ramsey Michaels, “Nathanael Under the Fig tree,” *Expository Times*, 78 (1966–67), 182–83. Lightfoot supports the clairvoyant thrust. J. Lightfoot, *Horae Hebraicae et Talmudicae* (Oxford: University Press, 1859), 3:246–47. In particular, Moule provides strong evidence that the phrase, “under the fig tree,” indicates “accurate knowledge of a person’s whereabouts and movements.” C. F. D. Moule, “A Note on ‘Under the Fig Tree,’” *Journal of Theological Studies* 48 (1954), 182–83. In the *History of Susana*, when Daniel cross examines the two wicked elders who are giving false evidence about Susana, he asks them separately under what tree and in what part of the garden they had seen the alleged offence take place. They gave contradictory answers: one says, ὑπὸ σκῆνον (RV “a mastic tree”), the other ὑπὸ πρῖνον (RV “a palm tree”), and so their lie was detected. Supposing then that “under the tree” was a stock question—a proverbial expression, meaning, “Can you tell me all about it?”—the Johannine phrase might mean quite simply that Jesus knew all about Nathanael, as though he had watched his every movement as the heart of Elisha watched Gehazi in 2 Kgs 5:26. For further references to prophetic insight in the Mishnah, see Ferdinand Hahn, “Die Zusammgehörigkeit des ‘Wissens’ Jesu über den Menschen mit dem Bekenntnis des Menschen zu ihm ist für den Evangelisten konstitutiv,” in *Neues Testament und Kirche*, ed. Joachim Gnilka (Freiburg: Herder, 1974), 180. Schnackenburg however sees the power to read hearts as recalling the Hellenistic demigods (θεῖοι ἄνδρες). Rudolf Schnackenburg, *Das Johannesevangelium* (Freiburg: Herder, 1965), 316. However, the Fourth Gospel is more concerned with Jesus’ intimate union with the Father.

¹⁸ Telford appeals to Josephus, *Wars of the Jews*, 2:159; 1:78–80; *Antiquities* 14:451; 17:41–43. William Telford, *The Barren Temple and the Withered Tree* (Sheffield: Redwood Burn, Ltd. 1980), 78–80. Keener regards Jesus’ prophetic insight as “divine knowledge,” *The Gospel of John*, 486.

¹⁹ Contra scholars such as Green who interpret this phenomenon as “an omniscience that surfaces repeatedly in the Lukan narrative.” Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1968), 216. See also Wilhelm Michaelis, “προφήτης κτλ.” *TDNT* 6:781–864. Michaelis cites Greek sayings from Strack-Billerbeck, vol. 2, which reflect the omniscience of a true prophet: “A prophet of truth is the one who always knows everything, on the one hand, the things that have happened as they occurred, the things which are occurring as they occur and the things which will be as they will be” (H. L. Strack and P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch* [München: C. H. Beck, 1922–28], 2:133, translation mine); “A prophet of truth is the one who always knows everything and has insight into everything” (Ps.-Clem., *Hom.* 2.6.1, translation mine); and “wherefore having confidence he set forth concerning the things which will be, for he is a prophet, without stumbling” (*Hom.* 3.11.2, translation mine).

²⁰ Rudolf Otto, *The Kingdom of God and the Son of Man*, trans. Floyd V. Filson (London: Lutterworth, 1951), 353–54.

²¹ E.g., Elisha knows of Gehazi’s greed with respect to Naaman’s gifts (2 Kgs 5:26); “Elisha the prophet, who is in Israel, tells the king of Israel the words that you speak in your bedroom” (2 Kgs 6:12).

²² E.g., Peter “knows” the hypocrisy of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:3–4: 9); Paul also knows the Satanic origin of Elymas, the magician (Acts 13:9–10).

²³ H. J. Holtzmann, *Die Synoptiker* (Freiburg: J. C. B. Mohr, 1889), 1:223.

²⁴ G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1980), 19.

²⁵ Lightfoot was sure that Nathanael had retired there, “either for prayer, meditation, reading, or some other religious performance,” *Horae Hebraicae et Talmudicae*, 247; Cheyne suggests the same, “Nathanael,” 3:3338–39.

²⁶ Jeremias states that Nathanael was sitting under the tree that represented the knowledge of God and his word. Joachim Jeremias, “Die Berufung des Nathanael,” *Angelos* 3 (1930), 27. See Strack and Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch*, 2:371, for Rabbinic references.

²⁷ J. D. Duncan Derrett, “Fig Trees in the New Testament,” *Heythrop Journal* 14:3 (1973), 262.

²⁸ Claus-Hunno Hunzinger, “συκῆ,” *TDNT* 7:753. See Gustaf Dalman, “Under the Fig Tree,” *Expository Times* 32 (1920–21), 252–53. Dalman notes that the fig tree was the favorite shadow tree and no other explanation is needed. C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St.*

John (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1978), 154. Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, trans. G. R. Beasley-Murray et al. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971), 104.

²⁹ Derrett, “Fig Trees in the New Testament,” 262.

³⁰ Derrett, “Fig Trees in the New Testament,” 263.

³¹ Lincoln draws out the points of contrast between the Johannine call narratives and the Synoptic call narratives. Lincoln, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 123–24.

³² Derrett, “Fig Trees in the New Testament,” 264.

³³ Smith merely interprets the fig tree mention, “while you were still at home,” *Johannine Christianity*, 76.

³⁴ D. Moody Smith, *John* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999), 77.

³⁵ C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1952), 245–46. He also notes the link of “the descent of the angels upon Jacob,” or Israel, with the prophecy of Isa 49:3, δοῦλός μου εἶ σύ, Ἰσραήλ, καὶ ἐν σοὶ ἐνδοξασθήσομαι.

³⁶ John Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 347.

³⁷ See Michaels, “Nathanael Under the Fig Tree,” 137.

³⁸ Boisnard, *Du Baptême*, 98–103. Michaelis has called into question the relationship of John 1:51 to Gen 28:12, but his argument is unconvincing, since there are so many parallels: angels ascending-descending, Jacob-Israel, guile-no guile, Wilhelm Michaelis, “Joh. 1, 51 Gen. 28:12 und das Menschensohn-Problem,” *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 85 (1960), 461–78.

³⁹ Michaels, “Nathanael Under the Fig Tree,” 183. See Jer 8:13; Mic 7:1. Keener fails to connect the fig tree imagery with the people of God, *The Gospel of John*, 486.

⁴⁰ Michaels, *The Gospel of John*, 131.

⁴¹ For the double Amen-saying, see Michaels, *The Gospel of John*, 334–35.

⁴² Windisch interprets this angel motif as a reference to postresurrection angelic appearance, since these are lacking in John’s account. Hans Windisch, “Angelophanien um den Menschensohn auf Erden,” *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 31 (1932), 199–204. Lincoln argues that mention of angels points to realized eschatology, while angels in the apocalyptic discourse point to the Parousia, *The Gospel According to Saint John*, 122.

⁴³ For full discussion of the titles, see Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel*, 255–62.

⁴⁴ Ashton cogently argues that this is a Messianic title (Matt 11:3; John 6:14; 11:27), *Understanding the Fourth Gospel*, 254.

⁴⁵ See Keener for full discussion on the double Amen-saying and the term “greater,” and its use in John’s gospel, *The Gospel of John*, 488–89.

⁴⁶ Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 187.

⁴⁷ See Keener for a full discussion of the ladder in Judaism, *The Gospel of John*, 489–90. The verb “I abide” (μένω) is very important for the Fourth Gospel (forty occurrences). In the

Synoptic Gospels, the uses of the verb surface in texts that merely mean to stay in a geographical location. For the Fourth Gospel, the verb emerges predominately in dealing with mutual indwelling (twelve occurrences of the verb in the *mashal* of the vine—John 15).

⁴⁸ Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 187.