

# Background Resources

## John 1:19-28

Study-Bible footnotes and Bible commentaries are useful. But if used too soon in the study process, they can limit our thinking. Once we have read what J.I. Packer or John Stott (or even John Doe) has said about a passage, it may be difficult to think beyond their opinions. Those limitations can obscure what else the Holy Spirit might want to show us from the passage. Those resources offer helpful insights *after* our own diligent study.

On the other hand, some resources are helpful early in the study process. These are especially useful when we are trying to understand a culture very different from our own, or geographical details, or historical facts that were common knowledge to the original audience.

Here is a sample from *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1993), pages 265-266. Some of the questions in our twenty-first-century Gentile minds may find some help here about Judaism in first-century Palestine.

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### JOHN 1:12-21

ly present in the law (Ex 34:6), but their ultimate expression would come in the Word/law enfleshed.

**1:18.** Even Moses could see only part of God's glory (Ex 33:20), but in the person of Jesus God's whole heart is fleshed out for the world to see. "In the Father's bosom" (KJV, NASB; cf. "side"—NIV) means that Jesus was in the position of greatest possible intimacy (cf. Jn 13:23). Ancient writers often framed a narrative by beginning and ending it with the same phrase or statement; this framing device is called *inclusio*. In John 1:1 and (according to the most likely reading of the text) 1:18, John calls Jesus "God."

### 1:19-28 John's Witness to the Jewish Leaders

**1:19.** Although a few priests were \*Pharisees in Jesus' day, there was generally little cooperation between them (v. 24), and the Pharisees certainly had never had power to send priests on missions from Jerusalem. But by the time John writes, the Pharisees represent Palestinian Christians' main opposition. It was within the tradition of Jewish writing John follows to update the language, the way preachers often do today to bring home the point of the text. John thus focuses on the Pharisaic element of Jesus' opposition.

**1:20-21.** Elijah had been caught up to heaven alive, and Jewish people anticipated his return, which was predicted in Malachi 4:5. (The later \*rabbis thought of him as a master of Jewish law who would sometimes show up to settle rabbinic disputes or be sent on angelic errands to deliver rabbis in trouble. They expected him to settle legal issues when he returned; others expected him to perform great miracles or to introduce the \*Messiah.) "The Prophet" undoubtedly means the

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### JOHN 1:22-39

prophet like Moses (Deut 18:15-18). **1:22-23.** Applying Isaiah 40:3 to himself means that he is the herald of a new exodus, announcing that God is about to redeem his people from captivity, as he had in the days of Moses. This theme appears in many of the \*Old Testament prophets and was part of Jewish expectation in Jesus' day. Indeed, would-be prophetic leaders usually gained followings in the "wilderness."

**1:24-25.** Of the many kinds of ceremonial washings in Jesus' day, the most significant once-for-all kind of washing was \*proselyte \*baptism. \*Gentiles were usually baptized when they converted to Judaism; this was widely known and even mentioned by the Greek philosopher \*Epictetus. By reporting that John asks Jews to be baptized in an act of conversion, the Gospel writers declare that John treats Jews as if they are pagans, which was unheard-of (see comment on 3:3-5). The Fourth Gospel often contrasts water rituals and the \*Spirit (3:5; see comment on 4:7-26).

**1:26.** John employs the common ancient technique of irony: that they do not "know" the coming one speaks ill of them spiritually (1:10, 33-34).

**1:27.** Slaves carried their master's sandals; John claims that he is not worthy to be even Christ's slave. Prophets were often called God's servants in the Old Testament (e.g., 2 Kings 18:12; 19:34; 20:6; 24:2; Jer 35:15; 44:4).

**1:28.** "Beyond the Jordan" means Perea, one of the territories controlled by Herod Antipas. Because \*Josephus tells us that John was later imprisoned in the fortress Machaerus in the same region, it makes sense that this is where he ministers and is later arrested.

### 1:29-34 John's Witness to His Disciples

**1:29.** John's saying probably alludes

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