Lesson 1
Isaiah 61:1–3; Luke 3:4–11 (JST); John 1:1–14; John 20:31

Isaiah 61:1–3

Verse 1: In the clause “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me,” what does the preposition upon suggest that is different from the more familiar with?

Why does the next clause begin with because? What does this clause explain? Does it explain the first clause of the verse? If so, how?

What does it mean to be anointed to preach the gospel (“good tidings”)? In ancient Israel, who was anointed? Today, who receives that anointing? Is the word anointing being used metaphorically or literally here? In other words, is this an anointing with oil, or is the writer speaking of receiving the Spirit as an anointing? If the latter, how is the metaphor appropriate to the writer’s message?

Why are the good tidings to be preached to the meek? The Hebrew word translated meek literally means “poor people.” It can mean people in distress: the humble, the afflicted. Broken-hearted is often used in parallel with poor in the Psalms. Does that parallel help make sense of the meaning here? For what distress or broken-heartedness is the preaching of the Lord’s word good tidings?
“An opening of the prison” is an interpretive translation of a Hebrew phrase that is literally just “an opening.” What other openings could be meant by such a term? The opening of eyes or ears, for example? Given the context, why did the translators choose to translate the phrase as they did?

Another translation of “the acceptable year of the Lord” is “the year of the Lord’s favor.” To what might this refer? To whom will this favor be given?

“The day of vengeance of our God” and “the acceptable year of the Lord” are parallel. What does “God’s day of vengeance” mean? Why and when would God take vengeance? On whom?

Luke 3:4–11 (JST)

Compare the Joseph Smith Translation version of Luke 3:4–11 (pp. 805–6 of the LDS edition of the Bible) with Luke 3:4–5 in the King James Version. Then compare them both to Isaiah 40:3–5. What differences do you see? What do you make of those differences? What do you make of the fact that Joseph Smith made no changes to Isaiah in chapter 40 but added quite a bit here where John is quoting Isaiah 40?

The JST version gives us considerable insight into Jesus’s mission. How do you think people who heard John’s message would have understood what he was saying? What would they have expected Jesus to be like? Why? Look at each of the things that John says of him and identify how Jesus accomplished each thing. Which things still remain to be accomplished?
John 1:1–18

The assigned verses are part of a larger section that appears to be based on an early Christian hymn. For study purposes we will look at that hymn, verses 1–18.

Perhaps this hymn was written by John; perhaps John is quoting a hymn already familiar to the Christians for whom he is writing. Verses 1 and 2 form the first verse (strophe) of the hymn, verses 3 through 5 form the second strophe, verses 10 through 12 form the third strophe, verse 14 forms the fourth strophe, and verse 16 forms the final strophe. Verses 6 through 9, the end of 12 and all of 13, 15, 17, and 18 are probably commentary on the hymn.

Here is my translation of the hymn itself. The numbers to the left are the verse numbers in chapter 18.

I

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was in the presence of God, and the Word was God—

2 The same was in God’s presence in the beginning.

II

3 Through him all things came into being, and without him nothing came into being that came into being.

4 In him was life, and this life was people’s light.
5 And the light shines in darkness,
and the darkness did not overcome it.

10 He was in the world,
and the world was brought into being by him,
but the world did not know him;

11 he came to his own,
but his own did not receive him.

12 But to as many as did receive him, he gave authority
to become the children of God.

14 And the Word came into being as flesh
and dwelt among us.
And we have seen his glory,
a glory like that of a singular Son coming from
beside the Father,
filled with grace and truth.

16 And we have all received
from his fullness,
 grace for grace.
We will begin our discussion of these verses with the hymn itself (verses 1–5, 10–12, 14, and 16). Then we will discuss John’s commentary on the hymn.

**Verse 1:** Why does John begin his testimony of Christ’s ministry with the same words we find at the beginning of Genesis (Genesis 1:1), “In the beginning . . .”? Why does John begin his book by referring to the beginning rather than to the birth of Christ? Is he concerned with the creation itself or with something else? If the latter, what?

The Greek word translated *beginning* has a variety of meanings. For example, it can mean “first in time,” “ultimate principle,” “ruler,” or “norm.” Thus, a person who spoke Greek would hear not only the meaning we get in the translation (“In the beginning was the word”), but also the connotations created by these other meanings. Those connotations would have influenced how a person reading John when it was first written would understand the passage. The implication of those connotations would be that Christ is the ultimate principle, standard, or ruler, a ruler who has existed, in the presence of God, from the beginning. How does considering those additional meanings of *beginning* change your understanding of this verse?

Why is Christ called “the Word”? The Greek word translated *Word* is *logos*. It has two broad meanings: (1) the explanation or revelation of something (including meanings like “account,” “speech,” “proportion,” “relation,” “measure,” and “mind”), and (2) the most essential element of things, the thing that makes every other thing intelligible. (The latter broad meaning gives rise to specific meanings like
revelation,” “law,” “truth,” “knowledge,” “virtue,” “nature,” and “spirit.”) In what ways does the first of these meanings apply to Christ? In what way does the second apply?

The word *logos* comes from the verb *legein*, which means “to gather.” Does that provide any additional insight as to why this hymn might call Jesus the Word?

Though John writes in Greek and seems to be addressing a primarily Greek audience, he is probably also depending on the Old Testament use of the word *word*. For us, given the way English works, a word is a sign of a thing, a concept. But in the Old Testament, God’s word refers more to an event or a deed than it does to a concept. A word is what does something. As a result, in the Old Testament, *word* usually refers to prophetic revelation and, often, specifically to the Mosaic law. It refers specifically to the giving of the revelation rather than to its content. In line with this, *word* also can refer to the word spoken to create something, as in Genesis 1:1. (We can see this use of *word* in Ezekiel 37:4 and Jacob 4:9, and, by implication, in Isaiah 40:26.)

How is Christ the word of the Old Testament? What does it mean to say that he is?

Notice that the verse uses the word *was* three times and that each use is slightly different: “the Word was in the beginning” tells us that he existed, “the Word was in God’s presence” tells us of his relation to God, and “the Word was God” tells us of his attributes. If this verse is a statement of the thesis of the book of John, then the book of John will testify that Christ exists and that he comes from the pres-
ence of the Father, and it will testify of his attributes. As you read John’s testimony, watch for those testimonies.

The phrase “the Word was with God” can literally be translated “the Word was before [“in front of,” “in the presence of,” or even “toward”] God.” What does it mean to say that Christ was with the Father in the beginning? What does it mean to be in the presence of God? In what sense might Christ have been “toward” the Father? (Moses 4:1–2 seems relevant here.)

What is the hymn telling us when it tells us that “the Word was God”? Why is that important for us to know and recognize?

Verse 2: This verse repeats the content of verse 1: “The same [i.e., the God mentioned in the third part of verse 1] was in the beginning [compare the first part of verse 1] with [or “in the presence of”] God [repeating the second part of verse 1].” Why do you think the hymn repeats that content of verse 1 so specifically? Refer back to the translation of the hymn that I’ve made and notice that this is the end of the first strophe (verse) of the hymn. Does that explain the repetition?

What is this hymn about? How is it particularly appropriate that it introduce the book of John?

Perhaps this verse acts as a transition to the discussion of verse 3, taking us back to the mention of “the beginning.”

Verse 3: Verse 3 begins the second strophe of the hymn. What is this strophe (verses 3–5) about?

When the hymn says that “all things” were made by Christ, to what is it referring? Is it referring only to the world and the objects in the world?
Literally, verse 3 says, “Through him all things came into being and without him nothing came into being that had come into being.” Does that differ from saying that he made all things? How or how not? How do you understand the phrase “come into being”? How might someone else? Why do you think John speaks of coming into being rather than being made?

Why does the hymn repeat the first half of the verse in the second half of the verse, only putting it in the negative? Is this just for poetic effect, or is there a point to the repetition?

**Verse 4:** What does it mean to say that life was in the Word? Physical life? Spiritual life?

When did the physical creation occur? When did the spiritual creation, the spiritual life, with which John is concerned occur? What is the connection of this verse to the previous verse? In other words, what does the meaning of this verse have to do with that of verse 3?

A more literal translation of the second half of the verse might be “and this life was the light of human beings.” To what does “this life” refer? What does the last half of the verse mean?

In the Old Testament, the word *light* usually refers to experienced brightness; it refers to experience rather than to a thing or a state. Therefore, in the Old Testament the word *light* also refers to salvation: our experience of being in the right relation with God or our experience of our relation with God made right. God is our light (Psalm 27:1): he enlightens us by making our salvation possible (Psalm 97:11). The contrast of light and dark is not as important to the Old
Testament (or to the bc part of the Book of Mormon) as it is to John, so in making that contrast John seems to introduce an essentially new element. What new teaching is he giving?

Notice that in the Gospel of John light stands at least for revelation (see John 12:36) and, therefore, also for the Revealer (John 1:5; 8:12; 9:5; and 12:46).

As you think about what this verse means, it may be helpful to remember that this strophe of the hymn is about the creation. Does verse 4 continue that theme in some way? In what way?

Verse 5: Like verse 3, this acts as a transition from the second strophe to the third (in verses 10 through 12). Notice that the verbs in verse 4 were in the past tense, but in this verse the first is in the present tense: verse 4—“In him was life; and the life was the light of men”; verse 5—“the light shines in darkness.” Why does the hymn shift from the past to the present and then back to the past?

What does it mean to say that the light shines in darkness? What does it mean to say that the darkness did not comprehend the light? To us, the word comprehend means, most often, “understand.” But that is misleading; it didn’t mean that to the King James translators, and the Greek word used here doesn’t mean “understand.” Instead, it means “to seize,” “to make one’s own,” “to overcome.” Perhaps a more understandable translation of the verse would be “And the light shines in darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” How does that fact about the meaning of comprehend change your understanding of this verse? Does it change your understanding of John’s teaching?
This strophe began as a discussion of creation (verse 3). What does verse 5 have to do with that topic?

**Verse 10:** Notice how this verse is related to the first two strophes: (1) verse 10 tells us that he was in the world, a contrast with strophe 1, where he was described as being in the presence of God; (2) it says that the world was made by him, repeating the topic of strophe 2. Verse 10 also introduces the subject of this strophe—“the world knew him not”—a topic suggested by the closing part of verse 5.

**Verse 11:** It might not be surprising that the world did not recognize him when he came to them, but even his own people did not recognize him. Are verses 10 and 11 parallel in meaning as well as grammar, or are they only grammatically parallel?

As you read this hymn, it may be helpful to remember that the word *him* refers to “the Word.” We know that “the Word” stands for Christ, but the direct reference is to the particular name mentioned in verse 1 and, therefore, to the things that name suggests. What does “the Word” and its meanings have to do with this verse and the previous verse?

**Verse 12:** The Greek word translated *receive* could also be translated *accept.* Though most did not receive him, he gave the power to be the children of God to those who did. If we are already the children of God, how can he give us the power to become his children? (See Mosiah 5, especially verse 7.) Is it significant that he gives them the power to become children rather than making them children?
The last part of the verse indicates that we receive him by believing on his name. What is entailed in believing on his name? (See Mosiah 4.)

Verse 14: How do you think that those of a Greek culture, including educated Jews, would have responded to this announcement: God was made flesh and dwelt among human beings? How would Greek and Roman intellectuals have responded?

What does it mean to say that Jesus is full of grace? That he is full of truth?

Notice that, structurally, this verse repeats verse 1. Like verse 1 it testifies of Christ’s existence, of his relation to the Father, and of his attributes: “the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us”—he exists; “we beheld his glory, the glory of the unique Son of the Father”—his relation to the Father; full of grace and truth—his attributes. What effect does the meaning of this verse have on the interpretation of verse 1?

Though “only begotten” is an accurate translation, I think that translation changes the emphasis of the original. The Greek emphasizes the uniqueness of the Son. Literally, this says “the glory of a singular Son coming from the Father.”

What does it mean for a person to have grace? What are the possibilities, and how might they apply to saying that God has grace? What does it mean to say that a person is “full of truth”? Can you think of any circumstances in which we might say that (or something much like that) of a human being? What does it mean to say it of God?
The word translated *grace* could also be translated *mercy*. The phrase “grace and truth” seems to imitate a pair of characteristics used to describe God in the Old Testament: his loving-kindness (*hesed*) and his faithfulness in keeping his covenants (*emet*). Exodus 34:6 is representative of many Old Testament scriptures that mention these attributes of God, probably the most important of the divine attributes discussed in the Old Testament: “And the Lord passed by before him, and proclaimed, The Lord, The Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth.” (See also Psalms 25:10; 61:7; 86:15; and Proverbs 20:28.) This early hymn explicitly identifies Christ with the God of the Old Testament. So what? Why is that important to John’s message?

The word translated *truth* means “truth,” but it originally meant “what is unconcealed” or “what is revealed” (though by the time of Christ that origin had probably long been forgotten). Nevertheless, does thinking about the word *truth* in that way add any meaning to your understanding of the phrase “grace and truth”?

**Verse 16:** The Savior gives us of the fullness that he receives, grace for grace—literally “grace in place of grace.” What does “grace for grace” mean? Does it mean “one kind of grace replacing another,” perhaps the expression of divine mercy (*hesed*, loving-kindness) in the Mosaic covenant replaced by its expression in the new covenant? Does it mean that “grace is piled upon grace,” indicting an abundance of fullness? Or does it mean “grace in return for grace”? Look at the other places where this phrase occurs in scripture and see whether those help you understand better the meaning of the phrase.
(Helaman 12:24; D&C 93:12, 20). Does Doctrine and Covenants 84:38 teach the same thing that is taught here?

Having looked at the hymn that John is quoting, let’s look now at what he says about that hymn:

**Verses 6–9:** Why does John think that it is important to respond to verses 1 through 5 by talking about John the Baptist? Can you explain what in the first five verses might have prompted him to interject this discussion of John the Baptist? Why was/is the testimony of verses 8–9 important?

**Verse 13:** What does this verse tell us about how we come to have the power to become the children of God?

What does it mean to say that those who believe on God are not born of blood? That they are not born of the will of the flesh? That they are not born of the will of man? What does it mean to be born of God?

In the Old Testament *flesh* often refers to human weakness, as in Isaiah 40:6. *Blood* in the Old Testament is usually associated with death. Might John have those associations in mind? If so, how does that help us understand this verse?

Some have suggested that *blood* means “natural generation,” that the word *flesh* means “natural desires, such as the desire to have children,” and that “the will of man” means “the human ability to choose.” Does that add insight into a possible meaning of this verse?

**Verse 15:** Just as John began his commentary on this hymn by talking about John the Baptist, he ends by talking about John the Baptist. Why? Why was John the Baptist so important to explaining the mission of Jesus? (Compare Mark 1:7 and Matthew 3:11.)
**Verse 17:** What is the contrast between the law, on the one hand, and grace and truth, on the other? How have we received the fullness, and what is the fullness mentioned in verse 16?

How does this verse suggest that we should understand “grace for grace” in verse 16?

**Verse 18:** How did Joseph Smith clarify the meaning of this verse? How does it help us understand the meaning of the hymn as a whole? Specifically, how does it help us understand verse 16?

**John 20:31**

In context, the word *these* in the first phrase refers to the seven miracles that John has just told about. How do those miracles testify of Jesus? Does this verse help us understand John’s purpose?

What does he mean when he says that he has written these things “that ye might believe”? How can stories about miracles help our belief? Whose belief will it help? In other words, was John writing for other Christians or to convert those who were not yet Christians?

How does a book whose purpose is to bring us to believe that Jesus is the Anointed One (the meaning of the word *Christ*), the Son of God who can give us life, differ from a standard history? In other words, how does testimony differ from history? Does that tell us anything about how we should read the Gospels? Does it say anything about how we should *not* read them?