

Tag Questions in John¹

| | |
|--------------|---|
| Introduction | Figurative language is used to emphasize and punch home truth that an author wants a reader to really get. John's use of a "tag question" in the Gospel of John is one such indicator of something really being emphasized. John uses this means of emphasizing frequently in the Gospel of John. A Bible student does well to catch the subtle nuances of these emphatic statements. |
| Definition | A <u>tag question</u> is a question, having a grammatical construction (signaled by a Grek particle, <i>me</i>), which is asked and which expects a negative answer and emphasizes that the person asking the question already knows something about the expected answer. The basic form is "you don't (<u>something</u>), do you?" |
| Comment | It is called a tag question, because the "do you" is tagged on to the statement to make it a question. At least it is in English. In the Koine Greek in which most of the New Testament is written it is indicated by the use of the negative <i>me</i> (SRN 3361). |
| Example | John 21:5 "Boys (a familiar term used with little boys—and with close buddies), You didn't catch any fish for food, did you?" This indicated to the fishermen that this person, on the shore at a distance from them, knew (word of knowledge kind of thing) that they had been fishing all night and hadn't caught a thing. Further, the command to throw the net on the right side then probably brought a flash back to another time when Jesus did that. All of this prompted recognition. And Peter responds wanting that intimacy with Jesus, the sent one from God, that in the previous incident (Lk 5:4-9) he has been so fearful of. He had gone through a major paradigm shift in understanding his acceptance by Jesus. Notice, it is John who discerns first that it is Jesus—John, the one for who intimacy with Jesus is foremost. |
| Example | John 3: 4 "How can an old human be reborn? No one can enter a second time in a mother's womb and be born again, can they?" |
| Example | John 4:12 Our ancestor Jacob gave us this well. He, his sons and livestock drank from it. You aren't claiming to be greater than Jacob, are you?" |
| Example | John 6:67 You won't leave me too, will you?" |

¹ I first learned of this particular idiom when reading the preface of Kenneth S. Wuest's, **The New Testament, An Expanded Translation**. Discovering this idiomatic usage was worth the price of the book. Here is what he said. "The force of the negative *me* is carried over into translation. In Greek questions, the use of *me* implies a negative answer. Thus Jesus' question to the Twelve becomes even more pointed: "And as for you, you are not desiring to be going away are you?" ' (John 6:67). This signaled me to read carefully Wuest's translation and to identify all the tag questions I could find.

Table 1 Tag Questions in the Gospel of John

| Where | My Interpretive Paraphrase of the Text | How Used |
|----------|---|--|
| 3:4 | 4 “How can an old human be reborn? No one can enter a second time in a mother’s womb and be born again, can they?” | Nicodemus is emphasizing that Jesus can’t be speaking of a physical birth, hence, what is he talking about. Nicodemus, a student of the Old Testament is confused about what Jesus is teaching about the Kingdom of God. |
| 4:12 | 12 Our ancestor Jacob gave us this well. He, his sons and livestock drank from it. You aren’t claiming to be greater than Jacob, are you?” | The woman at the well is trying to sidetrack Jesus into a religious discussing and away from a conversation which is going to bare her soul’s real need. |
| 4:33 | 33 This prompted the disciples to question one another, "No one has brought him something to eat, have they?" | Jesus is using hunger figuratively to point out the importance of doing the will of God, which is more satisfying than food. The disciples are thinking he may be referring to physical food. Has some one brought him physical food while they were gone. They have just gone on an errand to get physical food. |
| 6:67 | 67 You won’t leave me too, will you?” | The going has gotten rough. Folks who have heard Jesus teach figuratively claiming to be the source of life don’t like what he is claiming or don’t understand it; they are turning away from Jesus. Jesus challenges the disciples about this, while at the same time affirming his belief that they will follow him (a good example of Goodwin’s Expectation principle). |
| 7:15 | 15 How can he be so well educated? This man never studied formally, did he? | Jesus had evinced intelligence beyond what one would expect of a rural person without formal training. He has also shown a tremendous grasp of the Old Testament. These formally educated men listening to him are amazed. At the same time, they are also sort of sarcastically putting Jesus down. |
| 7:31 | 31 But many of the crowd believed in him and said, “The Christ who is to come, he won’t do more miracles than those which Jesus has done, will he?” | Has the Messiah come? These folks are questioning that. Jesus has performed miracles worthy of Messiah. They are emphasizing this with this tag question. |
| 7:35 | 35: He won’t go unto the Jewish diaspora among the Gentiles, will he? | These listeners can’t imagine a Jewish Rabbi, the role Jesus was filling, ever associating with Gentiles. So they are in a derogatory way downplaying Jesus claim that he is going away—to Him who sent me. They don’t understand what he is saying and certainly don’t believe it is God to whom he will go. So they belittle Jesus’ words by using the taunt about the Gentiles. |
| 7:41 | 41 Others said, This man is the Christ. But others said, The Christ won’t come from Galilee, will he? | The expectancy for Messiah did not involve him coming from Galilee. This statement emphasizes this widely held assumption. |
| 7:47, 48 | 47 You aren’t deceived too, are you? 48 None of the Pharisees have believed on him, have they? | This downplays the common person who heard Jesus by emphasizing their naivety. In a haughty manner, the educated Phraisees are putting down the common man’s willingness to believe and follow Jesus. You are naïve and uneducated and are mistaken. Look at us who know better. |
| 7:51,52 | 51 Our law doesn’t judge any man before it hears him and knows what he has done, does it? 52 You aren’t from Galilee also, are you? | The Jews (those opposed to Jesus) are putting down the claims that they should fairly judge Jesus based on evidence of what he has done and claimed. They taunt the hearers with the accusation that they too are rural and don’t know anything. You hillbillies, what do you know? |
| 8:53 | 53 You aren’t greater than our father Abraham, are you? | A derogatory statement indicating that Jesus is “too big for his breeches” (a current idiom capturing the emphasis of this taunt). |

Table 1 Tag Questions in the Gospel of John continued

| | | |
|-------|---|---|
| 9:27 | 27 I have told you already. You didn't listen then. You won't believe me and become a follower of me if I tell you again, will you? | Jesus is emphasizing. You know what I have said and claim. It has not affected you in the least. |
| 9:40 | 40 You don't think we are blind, do you? | The Jews are emphasizing that they are wise to spiritual truth and this "blind" man who has regained his physical sight knows nothing of spiritual things. |
| 10:21 | 21 These are not the words of one possessed by a demon. A demon can't open the eyes of a blind person, can it? | How can Jesus be accused of demonic involvement? These folks are saying, look at what he has done. |
| 11:26 | 26 And everyone living and believing in me shall never die! You believe this, don't you? | A beautiful and tender affirmation to the distraught Martha who is indicating that Jesus should have been there earlier and could have prevented this death. Jesus tells Martha that there is life after death and that he is the author of it and that he knows she can trust him for it. Here Martha gives evidence that she is as "spiritually minded" as Mary, who usually gets the most credit for that. |
| 11:37 | 37 And some of them said, This man who opened the eyes of the blind could have prevented this man from dying. You agree, don't you? | Again, an emphasis asserting that in Jesus could perform miracles. |
| 11:56 | 56 They were really looking for Jesus. They were saying, You don't expect him to come to the feast, do you? | It would be dangerous for Jesus to come to this public celebration since the Jews were wanting to kill him. So folks, who were hoping he would come, still doubted that he would show up. |
| 18:11 | 11 Then Jesus said. Put away the sword. The cup which my Father has given me. I will drink it. You see that, don't you? | Jesus is emphasizing that he must suffer and die. He uses figurative language to indicate this. And he wants the disciples to recognize that he is submitting to the will of God in this arrest and the things which will follow. |
| 18:17 | 17 Then said the young lady who was the doorkeeper to Peter. You aren't going to deny that you are one of his disciples, are you? | Points out the fulfillment of Jesus words about Peter and does it emphatically. Peter is really given a chance to assert that he follows Jesus. |
| 18:25 | 25 And Simon Peter stood and warned himself. They said therefore to him, You aren't going to deny that you are one of his disciples, are you? | Again an emphatic vignette showing Peter's denial. |
| 19:15 | 15 But they cried out, Away with him, away with him, crucify him. Pilate said to them, I shouldn't crucify your King. Should I? | Pilate sarcastically ridicules the crowd. He really has no intention of letting Jesus go. |
| 21:5 | 5 "Boys, You didn't catch any fish for food, did you?" | A word of knowledge indication that causes reflection back to a similar incident triggers in John's mind and belatedly in Peter's thinking, that this is one of those mysterious resurrection appearances of Jesus. The disciples, having employed a bit of escapism—going fishing—are a bit confused about their future and what must now happen. |