



BIBLICAL RESOURCES

Isaiah 52:7-10; Psalm 98 (97); Hebrews 1:1-6; John 1:1-18

The Word became flesh and dwelled among us

John 1:1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being 4 in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. 8 He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. 9 The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

10 He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. 11 He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. 12 But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, 13 who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

14 And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. 15 (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") 16 From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. 17 The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. 18 No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

All four gospels open with a key to understanding of Jesus' deep identity before the story of the ministry proper

begins. Even Mark 1:1 fulfils this function: *the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God*. The writer of the Fourth Gospel takes up the challenge of the word "beginning" and fills it with deeper meaning for all those born again.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

Read Proverbs 8:22-31.

Divine wisdom had long served as one of the most important bridge concepts for a Judaism seeking to present itself intelligibly and appealingly within the context of the wider religious and philosophical thought of the time. Within Judaism itself, Wisdom (along with Spirit and Word) was one important way of speaking of God in his creative, revelatory, and redemptive imminence (Proverbs, Sirach, Wisdom, Philo of Alexandria). At the same time, the language was able to negotiate the "beyond" of God. Judaism's distinctive claim was that this wisdom was now embodied in the Torah (Sir 24:23; Bar 4:1). The language of "word" (*logos*) was used by the Stoic philosophers to express the presence of God penetrating all that is (cf. Act 17). Both the Hebrew and the Greek traditions were negotiating, so to speak, the transcendence and the imminence of God. Good examples of this kind of writing can be found in Prov 8 and Wis 7. Genesis 1:1-2:4a is also in the mind of the writer.

KIND OF WRITING

These verses adapt an early Jewish Christian hymn to Wisdom

1 In the beginning was Wisdom and Wisdom was with God and God (divine) was Wisdom [read: Wisdom was divine]

2 The same (she) was in the beginning with God

3a All things through her became

4 What became in her was life

And the life was the light of men

Thought for the day

The birth of any child is always a source of wonder, when we feel nearer the mystery of life and closer to God. In the birth of Jesus, we see our God made visible and so are caught up in love of the God we cannot see. The thrilling reality of the Word made flesh is both gift and call. In the words of the first letter of John, Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another (1 John 4:11). We are challenged to love the God we cannot see in the neighbour we can see. There can be no separation of these two realities: to love God is to love your neighbour and to love your neighbour is to love God.

Prayer

Today love itself became flesh like one of us, so that you, O God, might see and love in us what you see and love in him. May we might see you and love you in our brothers and sisters.

5And the light in the darkness shines
And the darkness did not extinguish it
10 In the world she was
and the world through her became
And the world did not know her.
11 Unto her own she came,
And her own did not receive her
12a But as many as received her,
12b She gave them authority
children of God to become
14a/b And Wisdom tabernacled among
us

It is likely that the final editor (i) changed the language from "wisdom" to "word" and (ii) inserted the prose additions putting John the Baptist firmly in his theological place (thus interrupting the poetry). (iii) Before that again, someone added elements in vv. 16-18 which have a Pauline feel to them. So, there is quite a bit of history behind the present text. The change from wisdom to word entailed the loss of the feminine imagery, alas. It brought with it the advantage that *logos* serves to unite important themes: creation (by word), prophecy (word), gospel (the word) and incarna-

tion in the person of Jesus (the word made flesh). It mirrors the shift from Jesus in his words proclaiming the kingdom to the early Christians proclaiming Jesus as the Word and as king, God's revelation in a human person.

Scholars have also found a concentric pattern across this carefully constructed text. D gives the benefits of faith in the Word made flesh.

- A. (1-5) God, creation, humans
- B. (6-8) John the Baptist
- C. (9-11) The light; his rejection
- D. (12-13) Faith in the Word
- C'. (14) The word; his rejection
- B'. (15) John the Baptist
- A'. (16-18) God, creation, humans.

Note the error in the JB version in the lectionary. In vv. 12-13, "who *was* born" ought to read "who *were* born."

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

New creation across the Fourth Gospel—beginning, finished, first day of the week (John 1; 20; 21). Cf. Gen 1:1-2:4a.

Life—the Lazarus story—I am the Resurrection and the Life (John 11)

Light—the Blind Man—I am the Light of the world (John 9)

The Baptist—important early on the Gospel (John 1-3)

Not know him—the rejection by most Jews (John 5 and 18-19).

Children and being born – Nicodemus (John 3).

Flesh—cf. Thomas and Tiberias (John 20-21)

Glory—throughout this Gospel, glory and glorification are used to refer to the revelation of God's deep self in the single event of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Father's only Son—see the long discourses in John 13-17 which express and "unpack" the relationship.

Truth—Pilate and often elsewhere; I am the truth (John 19)

"He was before me"—Before Abraham was, I am (John 8:58 – but throughout in the well-known I am pronouncements in this Gospel).

Made him known—revealed through actions and speech, seen especially in the long meditations in the Fourth Gospel (most likely not the words of the historical Jesus, but late first-century meditations).

ST PAUL

For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of

Jesus Christ. (2Corinthians 4:6)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 1 The context is the original creation and the new creation in Christ; the Word expresses and articulates the deep being of God.

Verse 2 The New Testament writers slowly became aware of Jesus' identity with God. This is one of strongest statements.

Verse 3 Cf. Col 1:15-20 and Eph 1:3-14.

Verse 4 The images of light and life recur throughout this Gospel.

Verse 5 The writers states the victory of Jesus' over death before coming to the tragic rejection by the Word by God's first chosen people.

Verse 6-9 Anxiety about John makes the writer clarify the relationship with Jesus. This is most likely on account of the continued existence of disciples of John the Baptist, who might claim a certain superiority.

Verses 10-11 Paradoxical and tragic.

Verse 12-13 The literary and theological centre of the effect of incarnation.

Verse 14 An echo of both wisdom and God's presence (*shekinah*) in the ark of the covenant; at the time, highly paradoxical because of the juxtaposition of word (*logos*) and flesh (*sarx*). Grace and truth = love and faithfulness, God's covenant qualities in the Old Testament, coming to personal expression in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

Verse 15 Prose interruption again to "locate" John the Baptist.

Verse 16 God's prodigal gift of love in the Son.

Verse 17 The contrast of Law and grace sounds Pauline at this point.

Verse 18 Cf. 1 John 4:12. "Made him known" = lit. to relate in detail, to expound or, perhaps, to tell the story.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. "In the beginning" takes me back to my own new creation in Christ—back to significant moments—perhaps even to a single moment which stands out as the beginning of my own belonging in Christ. Praise.

2. Life—what makes me alive, taking hold of my imagination and energy?

How is my life in Christ? Prayer of gratitude.

3. Light—a fabulous imagery. It may be that some particular land or seascape stands out in my memory as having an especially beautiful light. Prayer of enlightenment.

4. The dark side of refusal and rejection—in my life I probably have said both yes and no to grace. Where am I now in my life? Prayer of pilgrimage.

5. Wisdom was God's presence—a feminine presence, because (to use Biblical language) just as a man is "incomplete" without the love and companionship of a woman, the human person needs to be complemented by God's wisdom.

6. The power of language in my experience as an entry point to appreciating the Word made flesh. What word am I hearing especially today?

PRAYER

We praise you, gracious God, for the glad tidings of peace, the good news of salvation: your Word became flesh and we have seen his glory. Let the radiance of that glory enlighten the lives of those who celebrate his birth.

Reveal to all the world the light no darkness can extinguish, our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, in the splendour of eternal light, God for ever and ever. Amen.

FIRST READING

Isaiah 52:7-10

This thrilling reading portrays not only the gift of God but the joy we should/could have as believers. Here is a really good reason to celebrate!

SECOND READING

Hebrew 1:1-6

This is not an easy reading, but it does day astonishing things about the preacher from Galilee whose birth we mark. It does "put it up" to us: what do we really believe today?

GOSPEL

John 1:1-18

We speak all the time, but perhaps we don't often reflect on the fact of being able to communicate and the power of words. The right word at the right time is truly creative...this is the kind of experience which may help us enter into the opening words of John's Gospel.