



INCARNATION: A YALE BIBLE STUDY

Word Made Flesh The Divine Shell Game of Incarnation

with Dr. Allen Hilton

Do you like a mystery? Or are you more of a “just-the-facts” sort? In their own way, each of the first three Gospels presents a mystery.

- In Mark (the only Gospel we’re not reading closely together) almost no one Jesus meets “gets” his identity. They think he’s a prophet or a wonder-worker or a conquering king. Only God and the demons know his secret until he breathes his last breath on the cross, when a Gentile Roman soldier sees the way he dies and says, “Surely this was the Son of God!”
- In Matthew (as we’ve seen) many people thought Jesus would be a military political leader, and even John the Baptist misunderstood who he would be. In his disappointment he utters unsure words: “Are you the One who is to come? Or shall we keep on looking?”
- In Luke, people ask questions about Jesus at every turn. There, the incarnate one comes off in places as a sort of latter-day Socrates; in other places like one of the Hebrew prophets of old. Who is he? Resurrection clears things up and allows empty-tomb visitors and Emmaus Road walkers to “get it”.

Jesus is a mystery man, and his identity is not altogether obvious to anyone as he lives among them.

John doesn’t beat around the bush about Jesus’ identity. His claim that Jesus is God incarnate is obvious from his first chapter.

- Within the first five verses, we’ve heard that the Word is God;
- Nine verses later we hear that Jesus is the Word. (1.14)
- And if anyone is still confused, four verses later we learn that, while no one has ever seen God, Jesus makes him known. (1.18)

It also doesn't take long for the characters to discover what the reader knows.

- By chapter two, disciples are already believing in him when they see him change water to wine.
- By chapter four, Jesus himself has begun telling people who he is (the living water), a habit that will continue through the book as he says, "I am..." a lot!
- In the Garden of Gethsemane, arresting soldiers will ask Jesus if he is the Messiah and he will answer with words God speaks of Himself: "I am!" It's no wonder soldiers fall over backward.

In the Gospel of John, then, the narrator and Jesus himself take pains to reveal his identity to us early and often – a thing he really never does in Matthew, Mark, or Luke.

But for all that candor and obviousness, there is a mystery in the Gospel of John. It's just of a different sort. Here, as we wind our way through the world with Jesus, our author explores the mystery, not of incarnation, but of who will ever figure out which flesh God has chosen to enter – and how they will do it. After all, this "Word" is wearing a fleshy disguise. How will people know which skin is God's? Let's read on!

Prologue Power

One Christmas, my sons gave me a tea mug with all of the best and most memorable opening lines in literary history. "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times," wrote Charles Dickens in *A Tale of Two Cities*. Herman Melville claimed his space on the mug with "Call me Ishmael" from *Moby Dick*.

Conspicuously missing from this brilliant teacup, perhaps because it doesn't open a novel, was my favorite opening in the history of words – one that happens to be about a Word.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

This breathtaking beginning reaches its dramatic climax a few lines later, when John's prologue reaches its most majestic moments:

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth...No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.

If he were speaking these words to us in a sort of timeless rap battle with Dickens and Hawthorne and the others, John's proper next move would be fully entitled to fix his eyes defiantly on his competitors and drop the mic.

In the beginning...

Part of this prologue's power springs from its opening three-word channeling of the very first words of the Bible – or two words in the Greek Septuagint: EN ARCHE. "In the beginning" opens both Genesis and John. In Genesis, of course, the beginning featured God's making: "God made the heavens and the earth". Here in John, though, God's being is the first-order business: "In the beginning WAS the Word and the Word WAS with God and the Word WAS God".

Only after letting us in on that clarification of the cast will John pick up the making: "Through him all things were made..." and he'll begin with the very famous first thing God created in Genesis:

"And God said, 'Let there be light...and there was light.'"

God speaks and light happens. Maybe we shouldn't be surprised, then, that John starts with light, too. But this light shows up, not only in the cosmos, where God will let it reign over half of time; this light shows up in a life:

In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

This light shines even in the darkness – even at night. Nothing can put this light out.

The power of the prologue revolves, of course, around this Word. In Greek, the term is LOGOS, and it can simply mean an individual unit of speech. But in this august setting John's usage summons a meaning larger than participles and pronouns. To the Greeks, LOGOS was an ordering principle – even reason itself. LOGOS was the whole LOGIC of the cosmos.

All of this takes us back to the dramatic opening of scripture: "In the beginning...God said (THEOS EIPEN), 'Let there be light.'" God spoke words and words not only ordered creation, but also brought it into being in the first place. A chapter later, Genesis will picture God picking up clay and molding a man. But here, in these timeless opening words, there are no hands. There is no dust. There is simply the Word that makes and places everything that is.

If we weren't standing on the shoulders of 2,000 years of Christians who have read these words, our sense of awe inclines us to wonder where John's magical words are taking us. And, of course, the answer comes a couple paragraphs later: "The Word became flesh and lived among us." The very speech of God that birthed the universe, the extension of God's being into time and space, that one entered that time and space in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. And when he got here, he revealed the character of God.

Not to quibble, but can, “It was the best of times...” really hope to compete with this?!

The Baptist Interrupts

Years ago, the great biblical expositor, Rev. Earl Palmer, taught John’s prologue to eager college students at a California conference. To illustrate what comes next in the first chapter of John, Rev. Palmer likened John’s prologue to T.S. Eliot’s classic poem, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” (which he wrote while in college, by the way.)

Rev. Palmer quoted Eliot’s opening lines from memory:

Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherized upon a table;
Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,
The muttering retreats
Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:
Streets that follow like a tedious argument
Of insidious intent
To lead you to an overwhelming question ...
Oh, do not ask, “What is it?”
Let us go and make our visit.

“But just as the poem reaches a rhythm,” said the teacher, “just as the language catches us up, Eliot spits out a line that will become tedious interruption:

In the room the women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo.

Eliot will climb back into the heartbeat of his poem, building brilliant pictures into our minds, and we’ll just begin again to entrust ourselves to his care, when, CRASH:

In the room the women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo.

“John the Evangelist does something very much like Eliot.”

Where does one go from the majestic heights of John 1—5? That is the author’s challenge. He has just pronounced that a man whose words and deeds his audience has relished for years, a man who he himself knew well, WAS and IS the God of the universe. That’s a hard act for any words to follow. John doesn’t even try to keep up. John’s next words land like a slipped elevator

– the kind that makes you reach your floor with a jarring jolt. From the heights of the godhead and creation, John the author descends to a very prosaic footnote about John the Baptist.

There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

And then again, a few lines down...

(John testified concerning him. He cried out, saying, “This is the one I spoke about when I said, ‘He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’”)

Take out these mundane intrusions and bliss reigns from John 1.1 through 18. Why the interruptions?

If our author had literary aspirations, they were not nearly as important to him as his pastoral duties. In his group, as in many early Christian groups, it seems, some were confused about John the Baptist. During his lifetime, thousands wandered out to the Jordan to hear him and left spellbound by his words and his personal charisma. We learned in our time with Matthew that the fiery preacher from the wilderness was popular and powerful enough to threaten the status of King Herod. To rid himself of the competition, Josephus tells us, Herod felt the need to imprison and then execute the Baptist. We also learned that decades after John’s death, when Paul began preaching in Ephesus, he ran into people who still believed that the Baptism of John was the pinnacle of piety – even that John himself was the promised Messiah.

Some scholars place John the Evangelist, whose pen has given us these opening words, in the environs of Ephesus. Legend puts Mary’s house in Ephesus and the end of this Gospel will put John and Mary in one another’s care. It’s not unreasonable to imagine that these words of John 1 issued from a table in that bustling ancient city.

If John wrote from Ephesus, we gain a data point that helps us to understand the abrupt transition from the airy cosmos to the gritty sand around the Jordan: some in John’s audience were still confused about John the Baptist, and our author is pastor first.

The side-by-side of cosmic language about the Christ and clarifying language about the Baptist is not poetic, but it was very pertinent to John the Evangelist’s ancient audience.

Finding the Right Flesh

Have you ever gotten caught up in a shell game? A good friend of mine remembers the time, during his high school days, when his family took vacation in New York City. He ventured down from the hotel room with money his mom gave him to get snacks for the

family. He came back confused, with nothing in his pocket. “All you have to do is follow the pea” said the con man, as he laid the walnut shells on the sidewalk-side table. Ten minutes later, my friend was \$50 lighter and wracking his brain to imagine how he’d explain this to his mother.

The challenge of John’s Gospel comes after the prologue. Because, while his audience knows (and we know) that “the Word became flesh” in the form of Jesus of Nazareth, John’s story will take them back to a time when no one yet had a clue – when God had put the bright light of the divine inside flesh and not provided seekers a map to find it. How do you decide which walnut shell holds the pea? Or, to properly make God less duplicitous, picture thousands of heavy canvas camping tents on a broad field. One has the lamp in it, but the canvas doesn’t let the light through. How are you going to find that lamp?

John’s Gospel provides the key, through a handful of “signs” (pinpricks in the right tent) that “reveal his glory” and make God’s presence in this flesh known. John gives us a spectacular opening salvo: “The Word was God...and the Word became flesh and lived among us.” Then through the rest of the Gospel, Jesus performs these signs that become physical manifestations of God’s activity.

- He turns water into wine at a Cana wedding. (John 2.1-11)
- He heals a royal official’s son. (John 4.46-54)
- He heals a paralytic. (5.1-18)
- He feeds 5,000 people (John 6.5-14)
- He walks on water (John 6.16-24)
- He heals a man who was born blind (John 9.1-7)
- He raises Lazarus from the dead. (John 11.1-45)

These signs wind their way through the book, with the last and most vividly identifying sign – the raising of a dead man – coming not long before Jesus begins his last supper with his disciples. They form John’s case for his own belief that Jesus is divine, that he is the long-awaited Messiah, the Son of God. They are the clues that help the reader solve the mystery of incarnation.

“That You Might Believe...”

Any time you and I pick up a book or an article, something in our brain starts asking, “Why did an author take the time to write this? What does she want to accomplish?” Sometimes, we do this in order to avoid being manipulated. “Is this person trying to sell me something?” Other times, we just want to understand the story or essay or information and how to read it. People usually pick up pen for a purpose.

John's Gospel waits to tell us why he took the time to write it. Jesus teaches and challenges and carries on his everyday Word-being life. He performs the probative signs that John has sprinkled through. He gathers his disciples for a farewell discourse. It all reads very biographically.

But then, after Jesus completes his mission in the cross and resurrection; after the resurrected Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene near the tomb; after Thomas doubts and Jesus answers his doubt – after the Gospel seems to have run its full course, the narrator tells us why this whole book happened in the first place:

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name. (John 20.30-31)

John writes his book so people will believe in Jesus. That's not so surprising, given the most famous verse in the book, John 3.16. That's the one people stand in NFL end zones holding signs about. A Pharisee named Nicodemus who came at night to compliment Jesus and ask some questions. Jesus cut through the small talk to the real issue: What are you doing with your life, Nicodemus? Can you start over with me? He said, "You need to be born again." And when it came time to encapsulate what that new birth looks like, he spoke those famous words, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that whoever believes in him may not perish but may have everlasting life."

So, you and I probably knew belief was important to this author. But it turns out that God didn't take flesh and walk earth simply for the exercise. Jesus didn't just do all those wondrous signs for the people he helped. It turns out he was partly doing them for John's audience, and all the other audiences after them, and for you and me. In fact, his last words to Doubting Thomas, which come in the sentence before our verses here, are these: "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." John's Gospel looks past the disciples to generations beyond them. The book is written for them and for us.

But what does he mean by belief? The Greek word John uses can mean either "come to believe," or "keep believing." When we imagined earlier the circumstances that gave rise to this Gospel, we pictured Jewish Christians who have staked a lot on their belief in Jesus. In fact, that belief has gotten them tossed from the synagogue and the center of the Jewish community where they live. In that setting, "keep believing" may be what John's audience hears. "You've gotten slapped around for believing these things. Never fear. Remember why you started to believe in Jesus in the first place and hold on!" Or there may be a new wave of people who have found their way to this community and are new to the message about Jesus. For this group, "come to believe" seems to fit better. John rightly chose a verb that could mean either one.

It can mean either one for us, too. Some of us have been Christians for longer than we can remember. Church-goers as children, can't really remember a time when we didn't believe that Jesus was the Messiah. We may have spent college and young adult years not going to church, but it wasn't because we stopped believing. At this stage in life "keep believing" may be the word for us. "Let this book bolster your faith!" But others of us aren't sure. Either we have intellectual doubt (see Thomas for a patron saint!) or we have moral doubt (Christians have done a lot of harm in my life and our time...) or we haven't ever really given it a thought (Religion hasn't ever really been a big deal for me.).

Not to sound too much like a tent-meeting evangelist, but John's purpose is to prompt you and me to a decision. "I've told this life as well as I can. I've shown Jesus from every angle – as teacher, as leader, as wonder-worker, as loving sufferer, as risen One. He's taught love, and he has lived love. He's washed his disciples' feet and he's called us into a company of foot-washers. In the Gospel, when Jesus does these wondrous things, people believe in him. So now it's time to make the call: Is this Jesus I've shown you a compelling way to spend your life?"

The Gospel of John is not meant to be informational. And it's certainly not meant to show off his considerable literary skill. John means to call us to decision. "These are written that you might believe..."

What's Next?

Our final session will gather our time with Matthew, Luke, and John and ask how we might get our head around their claims about Jesus' incarnation. Twenty centuries of faithful folk and theologians (the two groups are not mutually exclusive!) have tried their/our hand at describing what it means for Jesus to be God. The discipline is called "Christology" and, with the help of our Gospels and a few other early Christian voices, we'll put on that hat together next time. Your Prep Guide will provide the raw material.