

Holy Textures

Meeting Jesus in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.
Short, easy to use, faith-provoking insights.

John 1:(1-9), 10-18

*"Just as in Genesis the Word was God's original self-revelation as Creator of all;
in the Gospel of John, the Son is the revelation of God's heart as Lover of all."*

[Holy Textures](#) is a resource on The Text This Week, www.textweek.com: Contemporary Commentary, Studies, and Exegesis for the Gospel reading.

Year A, B, C, Season of Christmas

Christmas 2

Sunday Between January 2 and January 5

January 2, 2011

Read the passage at the bottom of this post: [The Message](#) or [The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#).

Click [here](#) for an easy to print or email Adobe PDF version of this note.

Listen to or download an MP3 of this post:

[John 1:1-18](#)

Sermon by [The Rev. Dr. George Hermanson](#), "[Light Breaks In.](#)"

God bless the preacher who tries to say something sensible about this text in 20 minutes or less.

Perhaps the best approach is to read it; then prop the Bible open in a visible place; then lie face down in silent, abject humility before the text; then, after 20 minutes - or twenty years - stand up and say, "Amen."

But let's start with a direct quote from historian, Bruce Malina (See footnote below.):

These verses have caused both wonder and controversy throughout Christian history. ... When read as ordinary language, they are majestic and profound yet bristling with interpretive and theological difficulties. ... Our (the authors, Malina and Rohrbaugh) interest is in the way these verses introduce the cosmic Messiah and describe his mission on behalf of those who "believe into him."

Pages 29-30

In pre-literate societies, creating and memorizing poetry was highly esteemed and gave great honour to the subject of the poem. Thus, the form of John 1:1-14 as a majestic poem gives notice of the honour and glory with which the subject of this Gospel - Jesus - is to be received.

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The poem form also gives notice that John is **NOT** writing a biography or diary of Jesus - *What I Did With Jesus Today*. Indeed, as John himself says:

These (signs) 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 20:31

That is:

- John is **NOT** writing about **EVENTS**; he is writing about **SIGNS** that show who Jesus really was - the Messiah, the Son of God.
- He is writing so that **YOU**, the reader, might come to believe into Jesus. And.
- He is **NOT** writing simply so that **YOU**, the reader, might believe into Jesus; he is writing so that **YOU**, the reader, might have **LIFE** in Jesus' **NAME** - in Jesus' being, in Jesus' life, in Jesus' abiding in God.

This direct address to we, the readers, is unique to John, and ought to warn us to expect a form of writing that is intense and intended to draw us into a personal, direct, and immediate bonding with Jesus and his mission. John's goal is **NOT** to convey information about Jesus, or to propose ideas about Jesus for us to consider and agree or disagree. John wants us to **SEE** Jesus; to **KNOW** Jesus; to **BOND** with Jesus; to **ABIDE IN** Jesus - and to be loyal to Jesus and all those who are similarly bonded with Jesus.

The quality of the relationship that John is wanting us to have with Jesus is all-or-nothing. And so John is constantly setting up either-or alternatives: life or death; light or darkness; truth or falseness; bonding or betraying; receiving or denying; abiding or abandoning; inner circle or everyone else.

In John's day, the urgency for either being completely in or completely out of John's inner circle was heightened by the very real persecution of followers of Jesus by the Romans. In our day, while we may still want to stress the urgency of making a total commitment to Jesus; we should avoid the error of the past 2,000 years of persecuting those who are not part of our inner circle, especially "the Jews."

As Malina points out, the NRSV translation of "the Jews" would be more accurately translated as "the Judeans." That is, as those people of the nation Israel who came from one of its provinces, Judah - especially as contrasted with those people of the nation Israel came from another of its provinces, Galilee. Judeans - especially those from the capital city, Jerusalem, considered all Galileans to be ill-mannered, uneducated, hillbillies. Jesus was from Galilee. The Chief Priests, Scribes, and Pharisees were all Judean elites.

In a nutshell, the argument in John is not against Judaism and all Jews. It is a family fight within the people of Israel - the Galilean hill-billy Jesus and his peasant followers against Judean elites and those within Israel who

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do not **SEE** Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. A fight for sure, but a fight with those whom God has formed as sisters and brothers.

And one last comment before beginning.

Because John's purpose is that **YOU** might have **LIFE** in Jesus' **NAME**, John emphasizes certain key themes over and over again. For example, a simple Search of my online Bible gave the following results for the Gospel of John:

- **Light** or **See** occur 133 times in 110 verses;
- **Know** occurs 102 times in 82 verses;
- **Life** occurs 62 times in 48 verses;
- **Believe** occurs 59 times in 52 verses;
- **Witness** or **Testify** occurs 34 times in 26 verses;
- **Truth** occurs 26 times in 21 verses
- **Abide** or **Rest** occurs 23 times in 17 verses;
- **Glory** occurs 19 times in 15 verses.

These words or themes are all present in the first 14 verses of John. Memorize them now and the rest of the book will open itself to your gaze like ... well, you chose the image.

Verse 1 is a clear reference to Genesis 1:1 The creation in Genesis 1:1 to 2:4a is all brought about through God speaking, through God's Word. In John's Gospel God's speaking is personified as the Word, the agency / means / agent through whom all things come into being.

Verse 4 establishes the pairing of life and light - "the life was the light."

Verse 5. At the time of Jesus, light and darkness were understood to be separate substances. Darkness was not simply the absence of light, it was something in itself. And so the light shines in the darkness. And in the struggle between light and darkness - the light does not end the darkness; nor does the darkness overcome the light. And for those of us who live in darkness, the coming of a light that the darkness cannot overcome is good enough news.

Verses 6 to 9. This is the first of several references to John the Baptist - all of which stress John's secondary role in relation to Jesus. However, they are also the first to stress the importance of being truthful witness to the light so that others might believe.

Verses 10 to 13 introduce the theme of inner circle - "those who received him" - and everyone else - "the world did not know him." We also hear for the first time what is at stake in our response to Jesus that John is about to show us:

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But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.

Becoming "children of God" means becoming members of a new family, and since family defined one's entire social reality in Jesus' time, "becoming children of God" also means having an entirely new way of being in the world - having life in Jesus' name. (See Verse 20:31 above.)

Verse 14 is a foundational text for linking Word-Son-Jesus:

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.

I say, "linking" because 2,000 years and 2,000 times that number of books have been written to describe the relationship between them. Let's just comment that:

- "glory" is God's "honour" / status / reputation;
- "lived among us" is the word for "pitched a tent" and alludes, perhaps, to the tent which housed the Ark of the Covenant before the Temple was built, and perhaps hints at the contest between Jesus and the Temple which is to follow;
- God's glory is "full of grace and truth" - graceful truth? truthful grace? - and not, say, anger and judgement.

Verse 15 is another comment on John the Baptist's role as one who testifies and points to Jesus. There is a running commentary throughout this Gospel about John the Baptist (Chapters 1, 3, 5, and 10) which explicitly state that Jesus is of higher status than John. This could be an honest statement of how each man - and their followers - understood their role in God's self-revelation. Some commentators - not me - speculate that this is also an implied lingering competition between Jesus and John's followers.

Verses 16 to 18. Verse 16 repeats Verse 12, but in a more general and ecstatic way:

*(But to all who received him,)
from his fullness
we have all received
grace upon grace.*

The blessing of the Law came through Moses; the blessing of grace and truth through Jesus.

Just as in Genesis the Word was God's original self-revelation as Creator of all; so, in the Gospel of John, the Son is the revelation of God's heart as Lover of all.

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And what a Lover God is! True, faithful, loyal, abiding, enduring, ever-lasting, unwavering, unhesitant, passionate, healing, forgiving, reconciling, joyful, totally committed to the good of all, holding nothing back.

I wonder what the world would be like if every Christian started at the same time to think and act as those who received grace upon grace? What would our congregations be like then?

Bonding with Jesus means loving whom God loves, the way God loves. May it be so.

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Note: Historical background information is primarily from Bruce Malina, et. al. (see link below), pages 29-42.

* [Link to Amazon.com Bibliography for Bruce Malina, et. al.](#), Social Science Commentary on ... The Synoptic Gospels; The Gospel of John; The Book of Acts; The Letters of Paul; The Book of Revelation; and others.

John 1:1-18 (NRSV)

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.

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John 1:1-18 (The Message)

¹ The Word was first,
the Word present to God,
God present to the Word.
The Word was God,
² in readiness for God from day one.

³ Everything was created through him;
nothing—not one thing!—
came into being without him.

⁴ What came into existence was Life,
and the Life was Light to live by.

⁵ The Life-Light blazed out of the darkness;
the darkness couldn't put it out.

⁶ There once was a man, his name John, sent by God ⁷ to point out the way to the Life-Light. He came to show everyone where to look, who to believe in. ⁸ John was not himself the Light; he was there to show the way to the Light.

⁹ The Life-Light was the real thing:
Every person entering Life
he brings into Light.

¹⁰ He was in the world,
the world was there through him,
and yet the world didn't even notice.

¹¹ He came to his own people,
but they didn't want him.

¹² But whoever did want him,
who believed he was who he claimed
and would do what he said,
He made to be their true selves,
their child-of-God selves.

¹³ These are the God-begotten,
not blood-begotten,
not flesh-begotten,
not sex-begotten.

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¹⁴ The Word became flesh and blood,
and moved into the neighborhood.
We saw the glory with our own eyes,
the one-of-a-kind glory,
like Father, like Son,
Generous inside and out,
true from start to finish.

¹⁵ John pointed him out and called, "This is the One! The One I told you was coming after me but in fact was ahead of me. He has always been ahead of me, has always had the first word."

¹⁶ We all live off his generous bounty,
gift after gift after gift.

¹⁷ We got the basics from Moses,
and then this exuberant giving and receiving,
This endless knowing and understanding—
all this came through Jesus, the Messiah.

¹⁸ No one has ever seen God,
not so much as a glimpse.
This one-of-a-kind God-Expression,
who exists at the very heart of the Father,
has made him plain as day.

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