

Group Study – The Word January 26, 2025

The divine characteristics of transcendence and immanence may seem diametrically opposed. But holding them together creates a place in the middle, a space in which we might all, in John’s words, be enlightened (1:9) and come to believe (20:31).

How do you hold God the Cosmic Creator together with the Word who Dwells Among Us?

In what ways do you experience God as infinitely other, or God as intimately close?

How do you find ways to embrace both images of God?

Good Faith Bible Studies Podcast Transcript

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"The Word"

John 1:1-18

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Our Bible study this week follows John's dance between cosmic creation and the “Word become flesh.” In this podcast, I'd like for us to look more closely at the literary structure of these first 18 verses of John's gospel. Commonly, these verses are called the prologue. How is that passage structured? And what can that structure tell us about the main point of the passage?

These verses come at the beginning of a gospel. And so we naturally expect for the main idea to be Jesus, and more specifically, the incarnation. The prologue does build to the climax of verse 14, “and the Word became flesh,” and certainly verse

17, when Jesus Christ is finally named as the Word and the true light. But the structure of these verses suggests that John is doing more here than just naming the incarnation, as miraculous as that is. From the very beginning of the gospel, John presents his audience with a choice: Some will reject the light, and some will receive, will welcome the light. And those who welcome the light will be given the power to become children of God.

So how can a literary structure accomplish this? Well, many scholars agree that the prologue is composed in the form of a “chiasm.” A chiasm is a literary structure that is made up of a sequence of ideas that are then repeated, but in reverse order. You might think of this as a kind of reverse parallelism. When there's one idea found at the center of this pattern, that idea is often thought to be the main point of the text.

Now, often it's easier to see a chiasm rather than simply hear it described. So if you have a pencil and paper handy, I'd like for you to draw the English letter X. The Greek letter *chi* looks a lot like our English X. So draw an X and then cover up the right half of the X. You should see something that looks like an arrow pointing to the right. What you can see here on the left is an image that represents the reverse parallel structure of a chiasm. So keep your pencil and paper handy, or maybe, if you'd like, grab a keyboard, and let's outline John's prologue as a chiasm.

First, draw the left half of the X again, but this time, make it large enough so that it extends down seven lines of your paper. Next, you're going to create bullet points for your outline following the pattern of the chiasm, or that left half of the X: one bullet point for each of the seven lines on your paper. Now if you've done this correctly, you should see that the bullet points on lines one and seven align with each other. The bullet points on lines two and six should align with each other, etc. The only bullet point that should stand alone is the right-most bullet point on line four.

Now the last step is to label each bullet point with a letter. Label the dot on line one with a capital A, the dot on line two with a capital B, the dot on line three with a capital C, and the dot on line four with a capital D. Now the dot on line five should be labeled C-Prime. You can indicate this with a capital C, followed by an apostrophe. That apostrophe or tick mark indicates that this is the second C element in our pattern.

The dot on line six should be labeled B-Prime, and the dot on line seven should be labeled A-Prime. Now stick with me: This is going to make more sense as we outline the verses of the passage itself. So as we move through the passage, you'll be adding the verse numbers to each element, as well as a summary of the verses. Feel free to pause the podcast whenever you need to, to give yourself enough time to write.

Element A on line one is going to be verses 1-5. In these verses, John discusses the *Logos*, or the Word, as it relates to God, creation and humans. On your second line, you should have element B. This is verses 6-8. In it, John, for the first time, describes John the Baptist's witness. The third line should be element C. This will be verses 9-11. Here, John talks about the coming of the light, or the *Logos*, and the rejection that is experienced. The fourth line is element D. This is verses 12 and 13. Here, John talks about becoming children of God, the benefit to receiving or welcoming or believing in the light, or the Word. The fifth line is C-Prime, which is verse 14. Here, John talks again about the coming of the light, or the *Logos*, but this time the reception or the welcoming of the light. Line six should be B-Prime, which is represented by verse 15. Again, John returns to discuss John the Baptist's witness. And then lastly, line seven is A-Prime. This is verses 16-18. Here, John talks about the *Logos* or the Word, but this time as it relates to humans, re-creation, and to God.

Now what you should see on your page is an outline of John's prologue in the shape of the left half of the letter X, or the Greek letter *chi*, which is, of course, where the chiasm pattern gets its name. For those of us raised in a text-based culture, it feels pretty cumbersome for us to plot out this chiastic structure. But

the chiasmic structure was quite common in the ancient world. This structure made it easier for a speaker to remember the order of the elements of a speech, and it also made it easier for listeners to follow a complex performance.

Turning back to our outline of the prologue, we can now easily identify that central pivot-point. This passage reaches its sharpest point when John speaks of the power to become children of God, and this is the invitation that John extends to his audience. Whether they become children of God hinges on the rejection or the reception or belief in the Word, who has become flesh.

Now, the reception or the belief in the word is no easy thing. John's statement that the Word became flesh does point to the incarnation. But in John's gospel, the word for flesh, which is *sarx*, refers to what is bound by earth. When Jesus is talking to Nicodemus in John 36, he says that what is born of the flesh is flesh, in contrast to what is born of the spirit, which is spirit. Jesus contrasts again the flesh and the spirit in John 6:63 when his disciples complain that Jesus's teaching is difficult to accept.

So in the prologue, when John says that the Word became flesh, not only is the Word coming into the world, but the Word takes on the fragility and the temporal nature of creation. The claim that Jesus actually became flesh is repeated by John several times. He wants to be sure that his audience is clear on this point. We see the Johannine epistles emphasize again that Jesus has come in the flesh. In 1 John 4:2, John writes to a community that he loves, telling them that if a spirit confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh, they can be confident that that spirit is from God. In 2 John 7, John identifies the deceivers who have gone out into the world as those who did not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh. In fact, in the same verse, John calls those deceivers anti-Christ.

Now, perhaps John is writing against the teachings of the docetists. This was a group who believed that Jesus only seemed to come in the flesh. The fourth-century debates between the followers of Arius and Athanasius at the Nicene Council will again highlight the impact of the belief that Jesus actually

became flesh. Athanasius will argue that Jesus didn't take on flesh as a disguise, but that Jesus came into the flesh. And around the same time, the theologian and translator Jerome will write that the Word became flesh and did not cease to be what he was before.

So just as the creation stories in Genesis 1 and 2 ask us to hold together the image of the transcendent God who creates with the power of a word, and the imminent God who is intimately involved with creation, John asks us to do the same thing as he begins to tell the story of Jesus. John reveals to us the light that has come into the world, and he invites us to believe that what he says is true. Jesus is the Word, the Word that was with God, the Word that is God – and Jesus is the Word made flesh. As we believe, John says, we receive the power to become children of God.