

The Nativity of the Lord - Mass during the Day

John 1:1-18

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 to be through him, and without him nothing came to be. What came to be ⁴ through him was life, and this life was the light of the human race; ⁵ the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. ⁶ A man named John was sent from God. ⁷ He came for testimony, to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸ He was not the light, but 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 to be through him, but the world did not know him. ¹¹ He came to what was his own, but his own people did not accept him. ¹² But to those who did accept him he gave power to become children of God, to those who believe in his name, ¹³ who were born not by natural generation nor by human choice nor by a man's decision but of God. ¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, and we saw his glory, the glory as of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth. ¹⁵ John testified to him and cried out, saying, "This was he of whom I said, 'The one who is coming after me ranks ahead of me because he existed before me.'"¹⁶ From his fullness we have all received, grace in place of grace, ¹⁷ because while the law was given through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God. The only Son, God, who is at the Father's side, has revealed him.

Why this reading for Christmas?

At first blush this does not seem like a very "Christmas" reading. But one must remember that this is the last in a sequence of four Masses and Gospel readings that celebrate the Nativity of Jesus. The classic texts of Jesus in the manger, the heralding angels, the shepherds in the fields - all these accounts have already been proclaimed. Just the synoptic gospels tell the story in its details, the gospel of John is the one that explores the depth and meaning of the Jesus story. And so, John 1:1-18, known as the *Prologue of John*, is read during Christmas Mass in the morning because it beautifully captures the

profound theological meaning of the Incarnation—the central mystery celebrated at Christmas. Here are the essential reasons why this reading is used:

Focus on the Word Made Flesh: John 1:14 declares, "*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.*" This encapsulates the heart of the Christmas mystery: God becoming human in the person of Jesus Christ. It emphasizes both the divinity and humanity of Jesus, reinforcing the belief that He is the eternal Word (Logos) who has entered history.

Cosmic Perspective: Unlike the narratives of Matthew and Luke, which recount the historical and earthly details of Jesus' birth, John's prologue offers a cosmic and timeless perspective. It begins with "*In the beginning was the Word,*" echoing Genesis 1:1, thus linking the birth of Christ to the creation of the world and God's eternal plan of salvation.

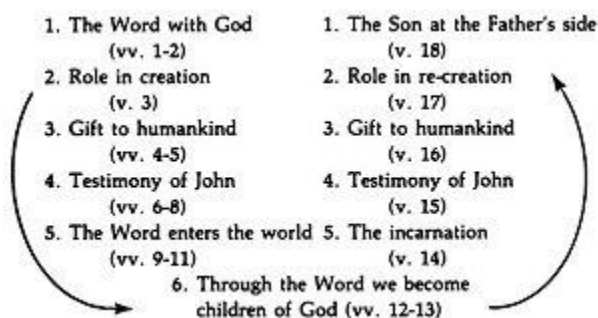
Light in Darkness: The prologue speaks of Jesus as the Light that shines in the darkness (John 1:5). This imagery aligns with the spiritual meaning of Christmas as the celebration of Christ's coming to dispel the darkness of sin and death with His divine light.

Theological Depth: John's prologue reflects on the mystery of Jesus' identity and mission in a way that invites deep meditation. It is fitting for Christmas morning, when the faithful gather not only to rejoice in the historical event of Christ's birth but also to contemplate its profound spiritual significance.

By selecting this passage, the Church shifts the focus from the narrative details of Jesus' birth to the theological reality that God has entered the world to bring salvation to all. It encourages believers to reflect on the divine mystery and respond with faith and awe.

The Prologue

This prologue of John's Gospel serves as an introduction to the context of the fourth gospel. In its short span of eighteen verses, it states briefly what the whole of the Gospel will spell out over twenty-one chapters. It has both structure and content. The *structure* has been partially determined by the presentation of "wisdom personified" in the Old Testament books. There, as in Wisdom 9:9–12 or Proverbs 8:22–36, Wisdom is first with God, then shares in creation, will come to earth, and there gift humankind. This same progression is found in our prologue. The other factor that has determined the structure is the Hebrew fondness for parallelism — notions being repeated in order — and for inverse parallelism, that is, repeated in inverse order. Visually, John's poetic prologue unfolds as follows.



from Fr. Raymond Brown

In *content*, these eighteen verses speak of God's revelation, of how he has explained himself to us. It is this that accounts for the extraordinary title that our author uses — "the Word." Its best equivalent is "revelation." As we humans reveal ourselves through what we say and, even more, by what we do (our body language), so God through the centuries has offered his own self-revelation through act and

speech. The prologue details this. God revealed himself through creation (vv. 2–5), but also through his Old Testament word (vv. 10–13), that is, through his covenants, the Mosaic writings, the prophets, and the wisdom literature. Those who opened their eyes and believed in this ancient revelation became “children of God ... born ... of God” (vv. 12–13). Finally God has revealed himself to the utmost through the incarnation of the Word, in whom God’s glory, his presence, stands revealed as a sign of his enduring love (v. 14). (The Greek text tells us that the Word “pitched his tent” among us, a striking reference to God’s Old Testament presence in the tent-tabernacle during Moses’ wanderings with Israel in the desert.) To this incarnate Word John the Baptist has given testimony, a testimony that initiated the historical manifestation of Jesus, in whom the Father stands completely revealed and in whose fullness we, the Christian community, have all shared. The prologue ends with the upstroke of the pendulum arm to the right, in parallel to the very beginning of the poem. The Word, whose name is Jesus Christ (v. 17), is the Son, the only Son, who is “at the Father’s side” (v. 18) and reveals him to those open to light and truth.

The prologue is reminiscent of the first chapter of *Genesis* on a number of scores:

- The opening words are identical, “*In the beginning....*”
- There is a parallelism in the role of the Word. In *Genesis* God creates things through His word (“*And God said....*”); in the gospel we are told that they were made through the Word.
- In *Genesis*, God's creation reaches its peak when He creates man in His own image and likeness; in the gospel, the work of the Incarnate Word culminates when man is raised in a new creation to being a child of God.
- In *Genesis* God proclaims “*Let there be light....*”; in the gospel we are told that the Word is a “*A light to the world...*”.

Also the Prologue immediately presents one of St John's most common features - the double entendre; a word with two meanings. St John never chooses these words lightly. They always provide the careful reader with a deeper spiritual insight.

The opening phrase, “*In the beginning....*” presents the reader with a choice. The Greek beginning (*aiken*) and the Hebrew word (*bereshek*) are literally translated as “*In the first...*”. Does it refer to chronology/sequence or does it refer to rank? The casual reader probably only sees the chronology. In typically Johannine fashion it represents both. For St John, Jesus is the “first,” the one who creates and the only begotten Son of the Father.

The Word Made Flesh. Jesus was not born into a time of theological vacuum. Jewish theology was robust and with a history of succeeding and competing rabbinic schools. The followers of Jesus and the people of his time were Jews who were raised and lived this theology. It provided the framework for their daily lives and shaped their expectations about the Messiah, the Anointed One, who was to come. Among the gospels, John's is the writings whose work expresses the fulfillment of those expectations and provides the theology for those that would follow Jesus. The basis of the theology is evident from the opening:

John 1:1 "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and Word was God..."

The Greek word used for 'Word' is *logos*. Many commentaries on this topic discuss this passage in terms of *logos*, Greek for reason and speech. When this is viewed from a Greek philosophical point of view, it is explained that Jesus was by reason the very idea of God and by speech, the very expression of God. If this gospel is attributed to John the Apostle, the approach suffers from the fact John was a Jewish fisherman whose family had connections to the high priestly families of Jerusalem. He is more likely to have used his Jewish background as a basis for the philosophical opening.

This basic Jewish theology was important because it is by understanding the background that the fullest sense of the meaning of Jesus can be obtained. The introduction to John's gospel, when viewed from the existing Jewish theology, provides continuity from the Old Covenant to the New. It shows that the Messiah existed from before creation and sets the theological basis for the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy through Jesus, and the forming of a new creation.

The Targumins. A great deal of our understanding of the Jewish theological interpretation of the Old Testament comes from original writings of the Hebrew scholars. The Old Testament was originally recorded in Hebrew and then translated (with interpretative embellishment) in Aramaic - known as the *Targumin*. For example:

- *Isaiah 52:13 (Hebrew) "See, my servant shall prosper.."*
- *Isaiah 52:13 (Targumin) "See, my servant the Messiah shall prosper.."*

In fact most of the OT citations in *John* are taken, not from the Hebrew or Septuagint (Greek language) Scriptures, but from the *Targumins*. From study of the *Targumins* we can begin to understand the full nature of Jesus.

The Word. In Jewish theology, the *memra* – Aramaic for the *Word* (*dabar* in Hebrew) – had several characteristics. It means more than "spoken word"; it also means "thing", "affair", "event", and "action". Because it covers both word and deed, in Hebrew thought, *dabar* had a certain dynamic energy and power of its own. When connected to Yahweh it took on the divine. Its energy and power were from God. The Targuminic reflections on *memra* (*Targum Onkelos*) offers some insight into the meaning of the *Word* in Jewish theological thinking:

The *memra* was highly personified (e.g., *Isaiah 9:8, 45:23, 55:10; Psalm 147:15*)

When the word of God came to a particular prophet (*Hos 1:1; Joel 1:1*) it challenged the prophet to accept the word; when he accepted it it impelled him to go forth and give it to others and it became the word that judged men.

The *memra* was a means of making a covenant (e.g., *Genesis 15:1; Exodus 34:10*).

The word was is described in the OT as a light for men (*Ps 154:105, 103*)

The *memra* was life-giving (e.g., *Dt 32:46-47*)

For the Psalmist the *memra* has the power to heal people (e.g., *Ps 107:20*)

Salvation was by means of the *memra* (e.g., *Wis 16:26*)

The revelation of God to his people came through the *memra* as His agent (e.g., *Genesis 15:1; Ezekiel 1:3*)

The *memra* was an agent of creation (e.g., *Psalm 33:6; Is 55:10-11; Ws 9:1*). In *Is 40:11* God says, "So shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty. Rather it shall accomplish what I want and prosper in the things for which I sent it."

The *memra* was bearer of the judgment of God (*Wis 18:15; Hab 3:5*)

The *memra* was the agent of the theophany, or visible manifestations of God's presence (*Gen 3:2*). John uses this thought (*Jn 1:14*) in the use of the term "dwelling", which loses something in the translation. The Greek literally reads "pitched his tent/tabernacle", describing the place of God's presence among His chosen people. The Greek word for dwelling uses the same/near equivalent consonance sounds as the Aramaic work, *Shekinah*, meaning theophany .

The Fulfillment of Covenants. From the opening Prologue we see the portrait of Jesus as the fulfillment of all of these Targumic themes. Jesus is personified (vv. 1-2), the agent of God and creation (v.3), the life-giver (v.4), the source of life and knowledge (vv.4-5), the maker of covenants (v.12), the means of salvation (v.16), the same as God and different (God and human natures), and the visible presence of God on earth. *John 1:14* says:

"And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, and we saw his glory, the glory as of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth"

The Prologue also presents Jesus as “*grace and truth*” - two Old Testament words describing Yahweh in covenant with Israel, thus the Word made flesh (Jesus) establishes a new covenant with his people. Thus is borne out in *John 1:17* “...while the law was given through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. But more importantly in v.12 we are told “*But to all who receive him, who believe in his name, he gave the power to become children of God.*” In the OT, covenant is seen as the means of extending family bonds. Thus Jesus as the maker of covenants becomes the means by which membership in the Divine Family is extended to us. St Athanasius explains:

“The Son of God became man in order that the sons of men, the sons of Adam might become sons of God....He is the Son of God by nature; we by grace” (*De Incarnatione contra arrianos*)

This covenant theme becomes a principal component of St John's gospel message.

The relation of the Word in Old Testament theology sets the stage for John's telling of the story:

- The Word came,
- The world did not recognize/know the Word,
- The Jewish people did not recognize the Word, and
- Those that did recognize the Word became the children of God
- The Word continues to be the agent of salvation

The relation of the Word to Old Testament theology also establishes the framework of this Scripture study and is the story that we will attempt to understand: The Word was made flesh and is the ultimate agent of salvation. Only by recognizing the Word may we become the children of God and thus obtain salvation.

As mentioned before, John's prologue reflects on the mystery of Jesus' identity and mission in a way that invites deep meditation. It is fitting for Christmas morning, when the faithful gather not only to rejoice in the historical event of Christ's birth but also to contemplate its profound spiritual significance.

Notes

1:1 In the beginning: also the first words of the Old Testament (Genesis 1:1).

was: this verb is used three times with different meanings in this verse: existence, relationship, and predication.

the Word: (Greek *logos*) this term combines God's dynamic, creative word (Genesis), personified preexistent Wisdom as the instrument of God's creative activity (Proverbs), and the ultimate intelligibility of reality (Hellenistic philosophy). As noted in the commentary rabbinic and targumic texts often avoided the use of the name and presence of God by replacing it with the Aramaic *memra* – “the word.”

with God: the Greek preposition here connotes communication with another.

was God: lack of a definite article with "God" in Greek signifies predication rather than identification.

1:4-5 *life was the light...the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it*: Just as the expression “the Word” (*ho logos*) the important Johannine symbols of “life” and “light” are present in the opening verses. Verse 4 announces that the Word is light in the world and the latter portion proclaims that light continues to be present despite the hostile reception given to it.

1:6 *A man named John was sent from God*: John was sent just as Jesus was "sent" (John 4:34) in divine mission. Other references to John the Baptist in this gospel emphasize the differences between them and John's subordinate role.

1:7 *He came for testimony*: The testimony theme of John is introduced, which portrays Jesus as if on trial throughout his ministry. All testify to Jesus: John the Baptist, the Samaritan woman, scripture, his works, the crowds, the Spirit, and his disciples.

1:9 *true light*: the expression

1:11 *What was his own . . . his own people*: literally, "his own property/possession" (probably = Israel), then a masculine, "his own people" (the Israelites).

1:12-13 *to those who believe in his name, ¹³ who were born not by natural generation nor by human choice nor by a man's decision but of God*: Believers in Jesus become children of God not through any of the three natural causes mentioned but through God who is the immediate cause of the new spiritual life.

1:14 *flesh*: the whole person, used probably against docetic tendencies (cf 1 John 4:2; 1:7).

made his dwelling: literally, "pitched his tent/tabernacle." Cf the tabernacle or tent of meeting that was the place of God's presence among his people (Exodus 25:8-9). The incarnate Word is the new mode of God's presence among his people. The Greek verb has the same consonants as the Aramaic word for God's presence (*Shekinah*).

glory: God's visible manifestation of majesty in power, which once filled the tabernacle (Exodus 40:34) and the temple (1 Kings 8:10-11, 27), is now centered in Jesus.

only Son: Greek, *monogenes*, but see the note on John 1:18. Grace and truth: these words may represent two Old Testament terms describing Yahweh in covenant relationship with Israel (cf Exodus 34:6), thus God's "love" and "fidelity." The Word shares Yahweh's covenant qualities.