



# The Gospel of John

in the Early Christian Community  
First and Second Centuries

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Remember that history without Christ is barren and that the Lord of history cannot become a prisoner of history. The Incarnate Son of God shines in his body, the church, and in our human life. MSS and documents witness to Christ, but we hear the witness to receive the life which shines in our mortality.

We possess a good number of Papyri from about 90 A.D. onwards; among these is the P 52 which contains Jn 18:31-33, 37-38 and is kept at the John Rylands' Library, Manchester, UK.



The Gospel of John is cited well into the second half of the second century among the apostolic fathers:

Bishop Papias of Hierapolis—presumably in the period (130-140) wrote five books called “Exposition of the Sayings of the Lord”. The Church Historian Eusebius has quoted some passages from this work in his church history (H.E.). Of particular importance is the passage from the Prologue of Papias which is quoted in (H.E. Book 3.39.3). Here the Apostle John is mentioned: “And I shall not hesitate to append to the interpretations [the words of the Lord] all that I ever learnt well from the presbyters and remember well, for of their truth I am confident. For unlike most I did not rejoice in them who say much, but in them who teach the truth, nor in them who recount the commandments of others, but in them who repeated those given to the faith by the Lord and derived from the truth itself; but if ever anyone came who had followed the presbyters, I inquired into the words of the presbyters, what Andrew or Peter or Philip or Thomas or James or John or Matthew, or any other of the Lord’s disciples, had said, and what Aristion and the presbyter John, the Lord’s disciples, were saying.”

Papias (lived in the 1st half of the 2nd century) was one of the early leaders of the Christian church, and canonized as a saint. Eusebius of Caesarea calls him "Bishop of Hierapolis"

(modern **Pamukkale**, Turkey) which is 22km from Laodicea and near Colossae (see Col. 4:13), in the **Lycus** river valley in **Phrygia, Asia Minor**, not to be confused with the Hierapolis of Syria). We learn that there were “sayings of the Lord” which were in circulation among Christian communities.

Justin Martyr, who was born to pagan-Greek parents in Shechem (Flavia Neapolis - today it is Nablus in Israel), sought the truth in various philosophical schools (Stoics, Pythagoreans, Platonists) until he was finally converted to Christianity, above all by evidence that prophecies had been fulfilled. The Prefect Junius Rusticus had him beheaded on his second stay in Rome, presumably around 165 CE. Only the two so-called Apologies and the Dialogue with Trypho are preserved of his many writings. In the First Apology 61 .4f and in the Dialogue that Justin had made use of the Gospel of John 3:1-5, Justin writes: “Unless you are born again you will not enter into the Kingdom of heaven. Now it is clear to all that those who have once come into being cannot enter the wombs of those who bore them.” John is mentioned in Dial. 81.4, as the author of the Apocalypse. Justin’s doctrine of the sacraments (First Apol. 66.2) is reminiscent of John 6:34, 52.

Tatian (A second-century apologist about whose antecedents and early history nothing can be affirmed with certainty except that he was born in Assyria and that he was trained in Greek philosophy; while a young man he traveled extensively. Disgusted with the greed of the pagan philosophers with whom he came in contact, he conceived a profound contempt for their teachings. Repelled by the grossness and immorality of the pagans and attracted by the holiness of the Christian religion and the sublimity and simplicity of the Scriptures, he became a convert, probably about A.D. 150. He joined the Christian community in Rome, where he was a "hearer" of Justin. There is no reason to think he was converted by the latter. While Justin lived Tatian remained orthodox. Later (c. 172) he apostatized, became a Gnostic of the Encratite sect, and returned to the East).

Tatian, composed a harmony of the four gospels, of which Eusebius knew only that it was still being used by some and that it carried the title “Diatessaron;” it was widely disseminated in many versions and often translated down into the fifth century, but the whole text is lost; only a good portion survived in St. Ephrem’s commentary on the Diatessaron. A tiny fragment of it was found in Dura Europos in 1933. Bishops in the East exerted a great deal of effort in replacing this gospel harmony with separate gospels, (Carmel McCarthy, St. Ephrem’s Commentary, on the Diatessaron, 1993.) The Diatessaron survived in Arabic and it may be that when the Quran mentions the “Gospel” rather than the “Gospels” it means the Diatessaron, though we have no evidence that it was circulated among the Arabs. The Quran does not quote one single verse from the Canonical Gospels and all references in the Quran to Christ were taken from Apocryphal sources.

Tatian’s Diatessaron, was first collected in Syriac and then translated into many other languages. John 1:5 is quoted in Tatian’s Oratio ad Graecos 13.1 as scripture. This takes us approximately to the year 176 A.D and thus very close to the time of Irenaeus.

Muratorian Document, 2nd Century - The fragment of an index to the canon of the NT named for its discoverer and editor, Muratori, has this to say about the Gospel of John:

“The fourth of the Gospels, that of John, (one) of the disciples. When his fellow-disciples and bishops urged him, he said: Fast with me from today for three days, and what will be revealed to each one let us relate to one another. In the same night it was revealed to Andrew, one of the apostles, that, whilst all were to go over (it), John in his own name should write everything down.”

Another citation of the Gospel occurs in Theophilus of Antioch Jn 1:1-3 in his letter to Autolycus 2.22 (c. A.D. 170).

Polycrates bishop of Ephesus (flourished c.130 - 196) - Polycrates championed the position of the church in Asia Minor, which held to the view of celebrating Easter on the 14th of Nisan, against Bishop Victor of Rome. While the church in Rome calls upon the tradition of Peter and Paul, Polycrates argues: “For indeed in Asia great luminaries have fallen asleep. . . . Philip, one of the twelve apostles, who has fallen asleep in Hierapolis, as have also his two daughters who grew old in virginity, and his other daughter who lived in the Holy Spirit and rests at Ephesus; and, moreover, [is] John too, he who leant back on the Lord’s breast, who was a priest wearing the priestly “petalon πετάλον” both martyr and teacher. He has fallen asleep at Ephesus.” (Eusebius, H.E. 5.24.2). This passage is among the early evidence that John, the son of Zebedee, and beloved disciple died and was buried in Ephesus.

Our Church historian, Eusebius himself, has provided us with the following information: “Moreover, there was still alive in Asia at the time of Trajan and directing the churches there, he whom Jesus loved, apostle alike and evangelist, even John, having returned from his exile on the island after the death of Domitian. And that he survived up to their day—this account is sufficiently accredited by two witnesses, who may be considered worthy of credit Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria. . . ; the latter mentions Ephesus as the place of John’s residence.”(HE Book, 3.23.1)

Irenaeus, who became bishop of Lyon in (177-178), came from Asia Minor and saw the old Polycarp when he was very young. This information is derived from his letter to Florinus, which Eusebius quotes. In this letter he says: “These opinions of the Gnostic Valentine are not in harmony with the Church. . . These opinions the elders before us, who also were disciples of the apostles, did not hand down to thee. For when I was a boy I saw thee in lower Asia (he means Smyrna) in the company of Polycarp, faring brilliantly in the imperial court and endeavoring to secure his favor. . . . I can tell the very place where the blessed Polycarp used to sit as he discoursed, . . . how he would tell of his intercourse with John and with the others who had seen the Lord, how he would relate from memory their words; and what the things were which he had heard from them concerning the Lord, His mighty works and His teaching, Polycarp, as having received them from the eyewitnesses of the life of the Word, would declare altogether in accordance with the Scriptures.”(HE, Book, 5.20.4)

Except for a few quotations from them, the letters of Irenaeus have been lost. Extant is his work, *Against Heresies*, in five books, and his shorter work, *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, which has been preserved only in an Armenian translation. In the preface to his work *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus apologizes for his imperfect Greek style: “You will not expect from me, a resident among the Celts, and most accustomed to a barbarous language, rhetorical skill, which I

have never learned, nor power in writing, I have not acquired, nor beauties of language and style, which I am not acquainted with.”(Against Heresies, Preface 3)

The Nag Hammadi Library, known for its collection of second- and third-century Gnostic texts such as the Gospel of Truth, Apocryphon of John, Gospel of Thomas, and the Gospel of Philip, contains copious allusions, references and quotes from the Gospel of John.

### **1. The first Commentary**

The first known commentary on any New Testament text is, in fact, a commentary on John written by Heracleon, a pupil of the Gnostic Valentinus, around A.D. 160 to 180. The subsequent popularity of this Gnostic commentary can be inferred from Ambrose, a converted Valentinian Gnostic, who commissioned his the great scholar of his time, Origen of Alexandria, to write a commentary exposing and refuting Heracleon’s error. Origen quotes Heracleon’s commentary extensively.

St. Irenaeus, who wrote, “Against Heresies” most likely sometime between A.D. 175 and 185, affirms its apostolic authorship on numerous occasions in this work and cites it more than sixty times in his polemical arguments against the very Gnostics who so widely used John. He tells us that John wrote the Gospel to put an end to such Gnostic doctrines as Corinthus and Valentinus held, affirming the divinity of Christ and establishing “the rule of truth in the church.”(The oldest name of the Creed)

### **2. Commentaries of the Third Century**

Two commentaries on John are known to have been written in the third century: the above-mentioned commentary of Origen and another written by Hippolytus of Rome, but it did not survive. Both commentaries were written to refute heretical distortions of the Gospel and to expound orthodoxy.

Hippolytus fought the heresy of the Alogoi while Origen dealt with Gnosticism and, more specifically, its undermining of the reality of the incarnation which is against the fundamental teaching of the church on salvation.

Origen completed the first five books of his commentary in Alexandria, and the rest of the work in Caesarea, where he transferred his activities in A.D. 231 due to conflicts with Bishop Demetrios of Alexandria. The text that has come down to us is not complete; it ends with book 32, bringing us only as far as John 13. Origen most likely never did complete what he called the “first fruits” of his exegetical works. His commentary also helps explain the subsequent emphasis placed on this Gospel in the church’s lectionary, liturgy, early Christian spirituality and doctrines. This commentary is now available in English: The Fathers of the Church published by the Catholic University, Vols, 80 and 89

### **3. Commentaries of the Fourth Century**

Four commentaries appear to have been written in the fourth century, but only one of them has survived in full form. These are the commentaries of Asterius the Sophist, Theodore of Heraclea, Didymus the Blind the head of the catechetical school of Alexandria, and John Chrysostom. Asterius the Sophist was an Arian, and the old practice among Jews and Christians was to destroy the works of those condemned as heretics; his commentary did not survive. Theodore of

Mopsuestia, a fifth-century biblical commentator, tells us in his introduction to his own commentary on the fourth Gospel that he was not envious of the sophist Asterius and that he would not imitate him; for indeed, through the work that he wrote on this Gospel, it seems that he looked more for self-glorification than edification. This volume, which he spread among people, only caused the reader to miss anything that was really useful for the comprehension of the Gospel, because he only lingers on those questions that are evident and fraudulently strives to expose his useless arguments with many words”(book 4:3,2)

Theodore of Heraclea (died c. 351-355), a semi-Arian who opposed St. Athanasius and was condemned at the synod of Sardica. His commentary on the Fourth Gospel no longer extant. Jerome, who reports on this commentary, praises Theodore of Heraclea for his “polished and clear style and for showing an excellent historical sense.”(Lives of the Illustrious Men 90) Fragments of the commentary of Theodore have survived in the catenae or the Golden Chain of the Greek fathers.

According to Jerome, Didymus the Blind (b. 310/313; d. 398), wrote “admirable works,” which included a commentary on the Gospel of John. This commentary is no longer extant either, but several extracts from it too have survived in the same Catenae

Palladius, (Born in Galatia, 368; died probably before 431). He is the author of the "Historia Lausiaca". Palladius wrote a life of St. John Chrysostom. Palladius was disciple of Evagrius of Pontus and an admirer of Origen; he became, when twenty years of age, a monk on the Mount of Olives. He left for us one of our important sources for Didymus's life and work; he says that Didymus “interpreted the Old and the New Testaments word for word and took care for the doctrines of the church expounding their meanings in a refined and most powerful way so that he excelled in knowledge among the ancients. (The Lausiac History book 1:4)

(The Catenae or the Golden Chain is an anthology of what the fathers said on each verse of the NT; it is not available in English).

John Chrysostom's commentary on the Gospel is a series of eighty-eight homilies delivered in the church in Antioch twice a week early in the morning. These homilies cover the entire Gospel with the exception of the incident with the adulterous woman described in John 7:53—8:11, which John did not mention.. We shall deal with this problem later.

In these homilies (A.D. 387-394),” Chrysostom's primary concern is to refute the extreme Arians, who denied the true Godhead of Christ. These homilies were delivered to instruct his audience about the Christian life that would make them equal to the angels if they would only follow his exhortation. His homilies bring the reader of the twenty-first century into the life of late-fourth-century Antioch with their frequent references to the theater, music and athletic spectacles that are in competition for the attention of his hearers. His Christology is very much in the tradition of Antioch in emphasizing the distinction of the two natures. Within that distinction Chrysostom often focuses on the condescension of the Son of God in his encounters with others and his servant-hood in ministering to the world by his life, death and resurrection. Chrysostom often comes across as the most pastoral of the commentators with his exhortations to his readers

to not only hear the word but do what it says in their daily lives. This commentary is available in English, the Fathers of the Church, Vols, 33 and 41

#### **4. Fifth-Century Commentaries**

Four commentaries on the Gospel according to John are reported in the fifth century: Theodore of Mopsuestia (c. 350-428); Augustine of Hippo (354-430), written in the first decade of the fifth century; Cyril of Alexandria (d. 444), composed during the period preceding the outbreak of the Nestorian controversy (428); and Ammonius the Alexandrian (fifth to sixth century), written in the second half of the fifth century. At this time the Gospel of John became the most decisive part of the NT in the Trinitarian and Christological debates with the heretics.

In the West, both Hilary's and Augustine's treatises on the Trinity draw heavily on the Gospel of John for sharp dogmatic arguments which were basically exegetical arguments.

In the East, earlier interpreters such as Athanasius, Basil and Didymus, used the Gospel extensively for defending the Orthodox teaching especially in their treatises on the Holy Spirit. Theodore of Mopsuestia composed his commentary within a certain type of approach or "intention." The focus of his comments, he says, are on those points that appear more difficult for readers to understand while not lingering on those questions which offer a single interpretation that is beyond dispute. And so, at various points Theodore's commentary is quite sparse with only a sentence or two of comment on a given passage, while at other points the discussion is much more extensive, such as his extended discussion of the Logos in the opening prologue. Some have seen in Theodore's Christology in general an early tendency toward Nestorianism, where the human and divine natures of Christ are sharply distinguished. However, this commentary, as well as Cyril's, was composed before that controversy erupted. In fact, a separation of the two natures is absent in most of the Greek fragments of Theodore's commentary that have survived. These Greek fragments which have survived are free from Nestorianism and were considered reliable. The Syriac edition attempts to highlight to the unbelieving Jews, where the struggle between the two communities were severe how one should perceive Christ's humanity in relationship to his divinity.

Cyril of Alexandria's Commentary on the Gospel according to St. John is one of his earliest works. It is known in the original Greek as the dogmatic commentary on the Gospel of John. It was written most likely between the years 425 to 428. The commentary, divided into twelve books, is what might Cyril termed a dogmatic interpretation that presents a doctrinal and theological interpretation of John in order to refute the heresies of Arius, Eunomius, Aetius (these three are branches of Arianism) and their followers who are in error regarding the nature of the second and third persons of the Trinity. His looming conflict with Nestorius, which erupted in 428/429 and came to a head at the Council of Ephesus in 431, is not obvious in the commentary, although writing this commentary would have surely prepared him for that Christological controversy involving the two natures in the one person of Christ.

Cyril's "dogmatic exegesis" is scholarly commentary but there is his concerns are pastoral as they focus on the salvation of his hearers. Cyril maintained the incarnation of Christ as the heart and core of the Gospel of John. In the incarnation, Christ united himself with human nature, restoring and recalling it to immortality so that "when the flesh had become his own flesh it

should partake of his own immortality.” The incarnation is a “deep mystery” where the “element of humanity is summed up” in the person of Jesus Christ, who heals what he has assumed, The Spirit is the one who ensures that humanity receives what the humanity of the Son of God received in the incarnation.’ In this regard, Cyril follows very much in the theology of Athanasius. But Cyril also goes on to consider those aspects of Christ’s humanity that seem to imply an inferiority to the Father, arguing that such things as emotions and suffering, the Spirit’s work in him and the glory Jesus receives from the Father do not detract from his divinity but were an accommodation to life lived as a true human being because of Jesus fellowship with humanity and because of being the Second Adam. Cyril’s commentary provides the reader with a deeply theological reflection on this most deeply theological Gospel of John.

I would like to recommend acquiring the new English edition, published in 2006, by the Oriental Orthodox Library as the old English edition by Dr.P. E. Pusey has been out of print long ago.

Augustine of Hippo, *Tractates on the Gospel of John*’ is not so much a commentary but a series of 124 homilies, or tractates, on the Gospel of John delivered to his congregation in Hippo sometime after 416. Scholars have debated their precise dating and character, whether they were all delivered at the same time or in groups or whether extemporaneously or dictated. Tractates rather than homilies in keeping with earlier Latin usage where tractare (tractatus) denotes a certain type of sermon that included not only the original intention of the text but also an interpretation that brought out the wider implications of this meaning for various life situations—something Augustine often explored through his use of allegory. These tractates on John also address theological and polemical issues of the day in their refutation of such heretical opinions as the Manichaeans, Donatists, Arians and Pelagians as these affected the flock entrusted to his care, concerning that flock. A new English translation was published by John Rettig, in the collection, *The Fathers of the Church*, 1988-1995, vol 78, 88, 90, and paints the scene for the delivery of these tractates:

Ammonius of Alexandria commentary on John survived only in fragments. These fragments dated about 449 and even after as fragment 76 mentions the condemnation of Eutyches and used the terms of the Fourth Council of Chalcedon 451.

## **5. Modern Commentaries**

Barrett, C. K. *The Gospel according to St. John*. 2nd ed. London: S.P.C.K., 1978.

Bernard, J. H. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to St John*. 2 vols. ICC. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1928.

Brodie, Thomas L. *The Gospel According to John. A Literary and Theological Commentary*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.

Brown, Raymond E. *The Gospel According to John*. 2 vols.

Hoskyns, Edwyn C. *The Fourth Gospel*. Edited by F. N. Davey. London: Faber &Faber, 1947.

Lightfoot, R. H. *St. John Gospel*. Edited by C. F. Evans. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956.



Moloney, Francis J, *The Gospel of John*, Sacra Pagina, 1998, Vol 4, the liturgical Press.

If you are looking for a book which argues against modern Critical studies on John, *The Priority of John*, by John A. T. Robinson, re-published by Meyer Stone Books, ISBN 0 940 989 01 8

## **The Heart of the Gospel of John The Revelation of the Only Son of the Father and the Coming of the Comforter**

The gospel was written to reveal Jesus the Son of God through encounter and worship. The eighteen-verse prologue was written to highlight that the Son was and is God, and He became human and lived on earth. This fundamental aspect is that at the heart of Christian faith is Jesus' Presence which is the only reason for the Church worship. The Son came to us not only by speaking, but also by becoming one of us - a man. Thereafter, what follows in the rest of the chapter are several "witnesses": first involving John the Baptist and then others. The Gospel starts with the witness of John the Baptist and ends with a witness of John, the beloved disciple.

### **The Cycles of Witnesses**

Chapters 2-4 is the "Cana Cycle," a series of "witnesses" concerning Jesus beginning in Cana at the marriage to reveal his glory and ending in Cana.

After this first cycle comes a group of seven chapters (chapters 5-11), where we encounter the "Festival Cycle." Where during the feasts of the Jews, Jesus replaces the Jewish worship calendar, by making himself the One who came to be at the heart of the new celebration. This is highlighted in Chapter 6, where Jesus declares that he is the Manna.

Chapter 12 is like a new beginning to the second half of the book and concerns the movement of Jesus to his appointed "hour," the hour of his glorification as the King of Israel.

The next five chapters (chapters 13-17) are the serious of events and discourses which have at their centre the "Paraclete." This cycle begins with a crucial part of our worship, the washing of the feet, and prepares the disciples for Jesus' departure, and then ends with an encompassing prayer of Ch 17.

The Gospel concludes with two sections, each two chapters long, involving first the death of the King (chapters 18-19) and then the marvelous resurrection manifestations (chapters 20-21).

Chapter 21 -22, Jesus restores the Spirit, the "breath of life" which bellows whenever it wills by breathing on the apostles; this recalls Gen 2:7.

## **Who Is Jesus? (1:1-18)**

### **The Tent of the Presence of the Logos-Word**

In the prologue (John 1:1-18), Jesus is the personification of the OT Wisdom; he is the very person of that Wisdom but is given a name acceptable to the Gentiles: the Logos-Word. In the light of the OT theology: “The Logos encamped among us” (Jn 1:14). John presented this in a hymn of four strophes.

#### *I*

*1:1 In the beginning was the Word,  
and the Word was in the presence of God or the Word was turned towards God, and the Word was God.*

*2 He was in the beginning in the presence of God.*

#### *II*

*3 All things came into being through him, and apart from him nothing came into being.*

*4 In him was life,  
and this life was the light of men.*

*5 The light shines in the darkness,*

#### *III*

*10 He was in the world,  
and through him the world came into being,  
but the world did not acknowledge him.*

*11 He came to his own,  
but his own did not receive him;*

*12 Yet all those who received him  
he empowered to become children of God.....*

#### *IV*

*14 And the Word became flesh, and he pitched his tent among us,*

*And we have seen his glory,  
the glory of an only son from father,  
full with grace and truth;*

*16 And from his fullness  
we have all received  
grace upon grace....*

We should simply observe that, although the hymn hails the incarnation of the Logos (vs. 14), it is the figure of Wisdom that is thus dominant in the key elements of the four strophes. The Logos is in the presence of “Yahweh” “from the beginning,” the masculine Logos was with God “in the beginning” (John 1:1). The Word was “in the presence of God” (verses 1 and 2).

Again, the divine Wisdom who found delights with the sons of men (Prov. 8:3-1). Likewise the Logos “became flesh and sojourned as in a tent among us” (John 1:14). The Logos found his delight to be man.

The phrase “*eskenosen en hemin*, “and he pitched his tent among us” or “he encamped among us,” unmistakably declares the full union of the divine with our humanity, an enduring quality which includes the historical ministry of Jesus during the years of his ministry. This mode of divine presence, the church emphasized in the decrees of the Ancient Councils 325-451.

The words of the prologue receive their full meaning in the Liturgy. The old name of the “sanctuary” is the “tent” which we have inherited from the OT. But now the risen and the living Lord comes to feed us with the Bread of Life. The indwelling Logos among us was promised by the prophet Zechariah: “*For behold I am coming to plant my tent in thy midst of you, O Zion*” (Zech. 2:14).

The prophet Joel had proclaimed: “*You will know that I am Yahweh your God who encamps in Zion, my holy mountain.*” (Joel 4:17, 21).

The wisdom books used the same terminology for describing the presence of Wisdom among men: “*Thus, the Creator of the universe has given me precepts: He who created me assigned a place for my tent, saying, Plant your tent in Jacob, and receive your inheritance in Israel! From eternity, in the beginning, he created me, and for eternity I shall not cease to be.*” (Sir. 24:8-10). Do not be troubled by the use of the verb, “created”. It is not creation out of nothing but the manifestation of whatever is other than God.

Jesus the Incarnate Son brings eternal communing and dwelling in the Father Jn 17:1ff

The Son does not just dwell in our humanity, but he comes to open the “Bosom” of the Father (1:18). The revelation reaches its climax in the words of Jesus who proved that first by the signs (miracles) and second by doing what the OT prophets could not do, such as the whole of Jn chapter 9, creating new eyes to the man born blind. Please notice that using mud recalls the story of creation in Gen 2:7 because Adam was not made of dry “dust” but from mud.

We shall deal with chapter 17 later but for the time being please notice:

The glory of chapter 1 is coming to its full revelation where the Father will glorify his Son because the Son glorified the Father (17:1)

The life that was the light of men, (1:4), is now not just the biological life but eternal life which is given by the Father to the Son as part of his divine authority.

Here the world who did not know the Father or the Son (1:10), will now know the Father through the Son by this revelation (17:3) which is not just “knowledge” but the “knowledge” which comes from life.

The work of the Son was glorification of the Father; now it is the turn of the Father to reveal the glory of the Son which was with the Father before the creation of the world (17:5)

The Revelation of God as Father - The new element in this revelation is the name; it is no longer Yahweh but the Father (17:6). The word ‘God’ (*Theos*) in 1:1,2, 6,12, is no longer the only name

but from Jn 1:14-18, it is the Father. Then as God is the Father, then those who are born from God will dwell with the Son in the Father 17:9-26

## ***Praying the Gospel of John***

*Father you are the beginning of all  
In your love and mercy be my end*

*In the beginning was the Word,  
Jesus be the beginning of every word  
If you Lord become the beginning of all my deeds and words  
All shall rest in you*

*The Word was turned toward God,  
You created all by your Word  
A spark of your Word  
Remains in us  
We live, think and act by our words  
There are too many words  
But when like your Word we turn towards you  
All our words become word  
A spark of your word*

*The Word was God.  
How beautiful that you are the Word creator  
We are your earthly image  
We create out of what you have created  
To complete the course of creation.*

*He was in the beginning with God;  
all things were made through him,  
and without him was not anything made that was made.*

*Lost in the wonder of your divinity  
Each creature has your finger print  
All belongs to you  
For all, you have come to save.*

*(George Bebawi)*

In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. It is this verb, 'was', that puzzles me. Our life was in him, but it is still in him because darkness is the absence of light. But light shines in the darkness. We were never abandoned.

### **The Liturgy:**

“Master who loves mankind, we sinners also cry aloud and say: Holy you are in truth, and All-holy, and there is no measure to the majesty of your holiness; and you are holy in all your works,

because you have brought all things to pass for us in justice and true judgment. For you fashioned man by taking dust from the earth, and honored him, O God, with your own image. You placed him the Paradise of pleasure, and promised him immortal life and the enjoyment of eternal good things if he kept your commandments. But when he disobeyed you, the true God, who had created him, and when he had been led astray by the deception of the serpent and put to death by his own transgressions, you banished him by your just judgment, O God, from Paradise into this world, and returned him to the earth, from which he had been taken; while, in your Christ himself, you established for him the salvation which comes through rebirth. For you did not finally turn away from your creature, O Good One, nor forget the work of your hands, but you visited us in divers manners through your compassionate mercy. You sent Prophets, you performed deeds of power through your saints, who have been well-pleasing to you in every generation; you spoke to us through the mouth of your servants, the Prophets, announcing to us beforehand the salvation that was to come; you gave the law as a help; you appointed Angels as guardians. But when the fullness of time had come, you spoke to us through your Son himself, through whom you had also made the ages. He, who is the brightness of your glory and the express imprint of your substance, who bears all things by the word of his power, did not consider equality with you, God and Father, as a thing to be grasped; but, though he is God before the ages, he appeared on earth and lived among men; and taking flesh of a holy Virgin, he emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of the body of our humiliation, might make us in the likeness of the image of his glory. For since sin entered the world through a man, and through sin death, your only-begotten Son, who is in your bosom, God and Father, being born of a woman, the holy Mother of God and ever-virgin Mary, being born under the law, was well-pleased to condemn sin in his flesh, so that all those who die in Adam might be given life in your Christ himself. And when he had lived in this world, given us saving commandments, turned us from the error of idols, he brought us to the knowledge of you, the true God and Father, having acquired us for himself as a people of his own, a royal priesthood, a holy nation.”

### **The Word is Made Flesh**

Christianity is the only message, which in a unique way, has declared that since Jesus Christ is both God and Man, the mortal flesh is united to the divine life; this is something which has never been said before Jesus and never was given attention. This joining of the mortal flesh with the divine life is the only way of salvation. This unique message has troubled even Christians who still debate how and why God came to be in our flesh, how our mortal life is called to deification, how the Eucharistic body and blood can give life, how the mystical flesh (the Church) is one and many, and how the flesh will rise from the dead.

In the Incarnation, God has become, and remains, one flesh with us humans – a daring application to this subject is the very foundation of uniting husband and wife in marriage which is the human reflection of the wedding of Christ and the Church (Genesis 2.24; Matthew 19.5, and parallels; Ephesians 5.30-32) and also of the whole message of God’s salvation.

The word for “flesh” is *basar* in Hebrew and *sarx* in Greek; it is this flesh which the Word who was with God and was God has chosen to reveal every possible truth about all what we need to learn about God, love, eternal life, and the complete union of those, who are flesh, with God who

came to take our flesh to make that possible. The Gospel of John and the first letter of John make that daring declaration of this unique relationship.

Now the account of the creation in Genesis reaches its goal; being created in the image and likeness of God does not continue as an optimistic declaration only. Humans fell into death, and Sheol was almost the other side of the covenant.

The ancient world Greek philosophy, despite its greatness, did not consider the body to be anything, but at its best was considered beautiful; it finally ended in the tomb or prison or was regarded as a chain for the soul.

It is only when the Word of God unites his life and his glory with our flesh that our natural human life is drawn into the divine realm in order to be redeemed. The greatness of the new message of the gospel is not just the divine-human union or even its liberation from sin and death, but that the Logos makes our humanity his dwelling place for ever.

The “Word is made flesh” is not only what we today consider as God’s plan to save his needy world, but also to call us to share his glory. This does not come to pass by what we call the Incarnation alone but by the sacrificial Death of God the Word because of the love of God (John 3:16). This goes on to bring this divine love to its goal when the Logos offers his flesh and his blood for “the life of the World” (John 6 :51 ). Our historical debates, which centered on John chapter 6, have avoided the goal of the Logos taking our flesh, not to make it a tool but rather turn it to his eternal dwelling by raising our flesh from death. He made it his “tabernacle;” life becomes the “light” of humans.

The centrality of the flesh provides us with the realistic gospel message that what Jesus did for us remains true, because it is his life poured out to bring those who are walking or sitting in the darkness of sin and death, not just to knowledge, but also to eternal life and true fellowship with God. Our human life, all of it, is drawn to the divine life and to its glory. Life remains the key word that unlocks this new revelation which we “have heard” and “can see” and even “touch.” This is because it is no longer a message of words but of life, which is the Light of men – the Life of God (the capitalized terms of the Prologue of the gospel). The cross and the resurrection are the “signs” of that message.

It was not our misery that compelled the Son to become human but his own merciful love, because Christ does not act according to our agenda, but enables us to act for his. The ultimate foundation of the Incarnation is “the predestination of the Son to be the center of Life for the whole world.”

### **The Various Aspects of the Flesh-Taking Word:**

To contradict us by coming to us in the flesh and on his terms – not on our terms which the gospel says resulted in the fact that his own did not receive him. This rejection is also the rejection of the Light; the story of Nicodemus is given as a good example of how we want to receive this Light on our terms.



Even those who wanted their agenda from among the “disciples” abandoned Jesus after his declaration that he is the Manna, and did not continue to follow him.

Jesus did not surrender his revelation to what we want because we cannot have life without Jesus. The depth of the divine love is in God’s denial of what we want in order to have life, truth and resurrection as His gifts, and these three are impossible to have by our means.

The darkness of the world is its lack of life and its subjection to death. The Resurrection of the flesh of the Savior – the Word made flesh – was beyond all prediction. For here we have the ultimate goal of the mission of the Word to give life that can conquer our death; hence we hear, “I am the Resurrection and Life.”

Jesus announces the coming of another Paraclete (Holy Spirit). In the sphere of the Spirit the Advocate is given. Here, the Word-taking flesh takes this flesh to the sphere of the Paraclete, and changes the place of our human means (languages and words in particular), for now words will not bring life or even knowledge without the Paraclete. The language of life is that which the actions and sufferings of the Humanized Word communicate: God’s life. Here, images taken from the material and visible world like light, and material objects like water, bread, and blood, put our language in its new place.

Our language and words do not function at all by themselves - they have no life; and because the Word-taking flesh came to give life, we have to look for life as God’s given gift before we struggle with meanings of this and that word.

Our words are our basic tool for communication, but this tool cannot even help us to know true love. Love is manifested in taking our flesh. This new fact is more radical than ever. Peter confesses that he loves the Risen Lord, but this confession must become an action. Words without actions prove to us that we have also rejected the Humanized Word.

Christian debates across our history, which started with words, sparked by this or that concept, are basically our refusal to accept the Word-taking flesh, who does not debate this or that word. He gives us life which explains the meaning of words, not as we use them but to be like sign posts pointing to life.

## **Letter from Abba Philemon to George – January 6, 1967**

My dear friend and brother of the Word Incarnate, today we have celebrated the feast of the Incarnation of the Lord. Today, a new relationship has been created for all of us, and we have to come to take it as God's gift. This new relationship is not a product of this world nor did it come to us by any created means; the Word, who is with the Father, came to give us his life. The great news, my dear brother, is that we receive this life as a seed which grows inside our mortal and feeble life. When we celebrated the liturgy, I was thinking of how God the Word takes what we cultivate in this earth, I mean such seeds as wheat and gives it his life. This is how the cosmos is transformed from death to life.

Water is joined by the Holy Spirit to give us new birth in Baptism. This is totally impossible without the union of the divine and the human in Jesus. I pray that you may take this union and meditate on it so that you may see how our death is swallowed up into the life of the Incarnate Son of God. Please focus on three things:

His utter humility and love which allows him to give as a share in his son-ship by using water and by taking it into the realm of his life through the Holy Spirit.

How this union of the divine and the human has changed everything in our life. Now we have to consider everything as not just human or not only divine, but united as divine-human. If it is only human it has no place in redemption unless it is called to be united to the Word Incarnate. If it cannot be united then it is separated and will not share the glory of Christ.

Our human life must be measured by the Incarnation. I refuse to say how old I am because after the Incarnation truth is measured by its affiliation to God Incarnate, which has filled and directed our life not by numbers or dates, but by our renewal from above. I am young or old in my love and renewal; in love no one is old, but always as our Lord said, "unless you become like children you will not enter the kingdom of heaven." I do not want the mind of Nicodemus who asks how, but the mind of Jesus who listens to the Spirit; He does not speak but acts, and then his actions become words.

Pray for me to be the child of God always, like His child, our Lord Jesus Christ.

## Praying With and In the Incarnate Son Of God

The Beginning: Jesus our Lord, as God's Son and before becoming human like me, You were in eternal bliss with the Father and the Holy Spirit. This was the beginning which is beyond our perception but You came to reveal to us this beginning.

You revealed to us that our biological birth is the beginning of our mortality; so You replaced this with a new beginning, with the birth from the Father, from above, from the Spirit, and assured us of this new birth by adding water to meet our perception which can not perceive what is spiritual without signs.

This beginning in God the Father made us His children, and converted us from mortality to immortality. This conversion is hidden deep in our being till the whole cosmos is renewed. This could not happen till You took our nature and made it one with your divinity to train our nature in the Father's school of love. You trained our soul to see what our soul by itself could not see – the divine love which is in your divinity but is totally unknown to our humanity. We love what we see, touch, and handle; your Incarnation made that superior love to be seen, touched and embraced when our nature was united to your divinity and remained totally human. By keeping the differences of the human and the divine in You, you fixed the boundaries of love. These are not boundaries where limits are fixed by distances because there are no distances in the divine love; distance is a distinction between the Creator and the creature.

You taught yourself human love and taught your humanity divine love not by mediation but by living fully our human life with all its weaknesses, longings, ignorance and inclinations, in order to stand for us and to be in us, fully knowing what we are by being like us in all things and in every circumstance without sin. It is this word "sin" which is the hallmark of our mortality, where the boundary which is fixed between You and us is by death. Death has the power to erode not only our bodies, but also our achievements. This death of ours is alien to your divine life, yet it was assumed to change it and to re-direct its power to its source and its real mother, "sin." Thus the new boundary is new life in death -- new life which devours, by love and by our co-operation with you, our mortality. What is this mortality of ours? It is our desire and our motivations to live like God without God. It is our autonomy which allows us to fix the boundaries of good and evil according to our lusts. It is our false perception that real and true happiness lie in what we possess.

The Word Took Our Flesh and Tabernacled Among Us: Some of us say that you took our nature before the fall, others disagree and say that You took out nature after the fall. The gospel does not tell us except that You became flesh. You could not have died on the cross unless You took our nature which is liable to death. You lived our death by being like us. You raised the dead to show us how You, the Life, shine in our death. You changed water to wine to prove that You are the same God who promised the blessing of wine to the patriarchs. You show your power and our weakness; when you are weak, your divinity accepts this weakness and lives it.

O Son of God, who by his resurrection assured us of your love for our humanity, you gave us your life, and trained us in the school of your incarnation to heal us from death and from the plight of theological controversies which blinded us and deprived us from the love of God your

Father. You came to redeem us from death and its old hidden disease, which is our desire to reach immortality without you. This enslaves us more to the power of corruption and to sin. These two, sin and death, are the twins who work together and cannot function without each other, but you Lord came to sever them and use one against the other. Lord Jesus Christ, you came to destroy sin by destroying its throne, and that is death. When the throne of sin was destroyed sin became unable to pay us its wages, and lost its hidden power -- the fear of death; the fear that enslaves us to all forms of evil as we attempt to escape from our mortality seeking to create our own false immortality which leads us to death.

Lord you came to give us life which is immortal, but it became a matter of controversy. Our people are asking us to give an orthodox account of our faith in the One Incarnate Lord our savior Jesus Christ.

We speak of two natures in the One Lord, one that is from above, and the second that is from below, and is ours. The divine became Incarnate for our sake. The human was defined in the school of divine love, also for our sake, without an alteration in its substance (*ousia*), save that which in Christ, our substance, and is transformed from mortality to immortality. Let the love of the Lord, whose nature is love, and thus united the two and made them One Incarnate Person, both divine and human, unite and maintain the distinction of the two, but made them one for our sake. One Incarnate Person possessing two natures, life in death, love dwelling in a nature which never had love, but also was in the form of enmity, ignorance and disobedience. Our nature sank in its self-love to the extent that sacrificing animals under the Old Covenant brought us escape from the power of guilt, but never cured our sins.

It is no longer our words but your love Lord; the same love which you share with the Father and the Holy Spirit. The same love which dwells in your Person not as an attribute but as life, as gift, as power; this is a unique relationship which you have had with the Father and you came to open this closed relationship for us.