

## A Storytelling Commentary on John 1:10-18

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The prologue to the Gospel of John is spoken by John as the storyteller. It may have been a hymn, so he may have sung it. Whether it was sung or chanted or told in a more prosaic tone, it's an expression of great joy and wonder. So the introduction to the Gospel is this hymn of joy, praise, and thanksgiving at the wonder of the Logos.

The hymn is directly addressed to the listeners. It is not a theological proclamation. It is rather a description in poetic terms of what's going to follow later in the story. It's John's version of a birth story and it answers the question, When did Jesus become the son of God? The answer in Mark is that this happens at Jesus' baptism. In Matthew and Luke it occurs at his conception. In John Jesus becomes the son of God at the very beginning of creation. Jesus has always been the Son of God. The Logos has been eternally present as an integral part of God in all of creation.

This hymn establishes Jesus as a greater man than any of the other men of antiquity about whom there were birth stories; for instance, Augustus and Alexander and Plato. The stories of their births are also associated with a kind of virgin birth; that is, their mothers conceived without their fathers being involved. But in each case their mothers are wrapped around by a snake who was a representative of the god—in most instances Apollo, but also Zeus. The god was the source of the pregnancy. One of the things that's striking about these stories (they are available in the *Sources of the Gospels* book) is that they are not even remotely as good as the stories about Jesus. Jesus' stories are much more interesting; they're much more compelling and have had much greater impact in the history of civilization. The degree to which Jesus' mother, the Virgin Mary has been revered throughout history is in part a direct reflection of their impact.

In the prologue there is that same kind of delight on a cosmic scale in which John is describing the birth of Jesus in relation to the presence of the Logos from the very beginning of time. The interpretation and understanding of the Logos that is reflected in the Johannine hymn is a development of Jewish wisdom tradition, specifically the tradition of Sofia.

Another question: Who are "we" in this hymn? The storyteller says, "We have beheld his glory, glory as of the only begotten son. We have received grace upon grace." Who are "we"? It is an ambiguous pronoun. It refers, first of all, to the community of faith; that is, to those who have believed in Jesus. It means all those who have received Jesus and have then received his grace. "We" have perceived his glory. But it is also implicitly *all* people, everyone who recognizes who he is, all those who recognize that the Logos, the gift of the Son of God, is a gift to all of humanity and that we all have received, that is *all* human beings.

The hymn begins with the cosmic description of creation, a retelling of Genesis 1. The reference to the creation of life and light in the midst of the darkness of the world is a clear allusion to Genesis 1:1, of God's Spirit moving over the face of the chaos of the waters and creating light out of darkness, separating the light from the darkness. The next part of the hymn is the history of the Logos. It's introduced by a brief description of John the Baptist and his role. It is in that sense an anticipation of the structure of the story to follow.

The next part of the story refers to the rejection of the true light in the world by "his own." Then to those who did receive him, he gives the power to become children of God, to have a birth that comes from the spirit of God rather than human sexual intercourse. This is also an allusion to the birth stories where Jesus is born by the spirit rather than by the seed of a man.

This hymn is often taken to mean that the Jews rejected him and the Christians didn't. Christians then became the sons of God but Jews didn't. This is a serious misunderstanding and misinterpretation of John. The source of this interpretation is the phrase: "he came to his own and his own people did not receive him, but to all those who did receive him..." The question is: who are "all these who did receive him"? They are, first of all, all those of his own people, the Jews. The first meaning is therefore, that he gave the power to become children of God to all of the Jews who received him. But it also implies that everyone who believes in him, Jews and non-Jews, is given the power to become a child of God.

The next part of the hymn is a reference to the story of Nicodemus and of being born again from above—from the spirit. This is a summary of Jesus' life: the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, he made his tent among us, and showed his glory, which is an allusion to the Transfiguration stories in the synoptics. Interestingly, John does not have a transfiguration story. There's a sense in which the whole of the Gospel is a transfiguration story because all of the stories and all of Jesus' words are a sign of his glory.

The gifts of grace that have been received are an allusion to the gifts of grace that are received by those who hear this story. It is also a description of the gifts of grace that are given to all of humanity. The gift of Moses was the gift of the law; the gift of Jesus Christ is grace, truth, and in the conclusion of the story, peace. In each of the resurrection narratives Jesus says, "Peace. Peace I give to you." What is made known in Jesus is grace and truth and peace.

I hope that you will have joy in telling this marvelous hymn. I strongly recommend that you tell the *whole* hymn. Don't accept the bifurcation that is built into the lectionary. Just tell the whole thing because it's such a wonderful introduction to John's story.