

John 1:1-18 | John The movement from domestication to revelation

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I believe I was a high school sophomore when Joan Osborne's song One of us became a chart topping hit. In the song the composer, Eric Bazilian, tries to deal with various aspects of belief in God by asking questions and inviting the listener to consider how they might relate to God. The song's intro begins with a serious contemplative question that echoes the deepest yearnings that a lot of people had about what they would like to be set clear about God as the verse goes:

“If God had a name, what would it be
And would you call it to his face
If you were faced with him in all his glory¹”

That verse somehow got stuck to my head from that point on, in spite of the irony that it was also during that time that I started to undergo my local church's discipleship program. And it wasn't until a few years following my graduation from college, after years of staying away from my community of faith that I came to realize that the answer to the question posed in the song's verse is a unanimous: “yes,” because Scripture testifies that truth in the person of Jesus Christ.

I believe that I am not alone in becoming at a loss about the underlying centrality of Jesus Christ to my orientation of reality as I am now also meeting people who've undergone the same thing in their walk of faith in Christ. Interestingly as I converse with such people I often see a pattern emerge, that is that pattern of

¹ Bazilian Eric, One of Us, As performed by Joan Osborne in the album Relish (Mercury 1995)

perceiving Christ more as a doctrinal theme (although I honestly believe that such was the intent their Bible teachers), that needs to be articulated and upheld or at times even be defended from seeming and actual heretic threats; rather than an actual person upon whom we indeed see God, moreover Christ as a divine reality available in the here and now.

The need to deconstruct our domesticated perceptions of Christ

I concur with Jeffrey Pugh when he wrote that churches have made: “a domestication of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ².”

For Pugh domestication here implies that we Christians tend to view Jesus Christ in varying personas in such a way that we are somewhat creating graven images of Him in our minds.

To some He is viewed a celestial genie who’d give our hearts’ desire whenever we’d ask it in His name; to some He was no more than a revolutionary who rose up against the complacent status quo of His time; while to some He was a historical figure who claimed to be God; while to some He is indeed God but His deity and historicity needs to be constantly defended from those who dared to question that claim.

This domestication in a way gives as nothing more than a Jesus Christ that is tainted more by our biases and pre-understandings, that are defined mostly by the culture and traditions that permeates in our social realities. The reason why I think

² Pugh, Jeffrey. *The Matrix of Faith: Reclaiming a Christian Vision* (New York: Crossroad, 2001) p.183

this is important is because when we turn our attention to what type of Jesus persons in our culture worship, we do find Him as someone who is defined only by certain attributes³.

It is for this reason that I would like to put forward an appeal for biblical reorientation by giving a second look at the Gospel of John's first chapter following C.S. Lewis' train of thought when he wrote that: "every idea of Him we form, He must in mercy shatter"⁴

It is my prayer that perhaps the passage would help us reflect and at the same time make us understand that our most cherished image of God may have to undergo deconstruction so that divine reality may become manifest.

The Gospel According to John

In approaching the Gospels (*or any book of the Bible for that matter,*) Gordon Fee notes that: "the first task of exegesis is to have an awareness of the historical context. Not only from the historical context in general but also to form a tentative, but informed, reconstruction of the situation that the author is addressing."⁵ Thus saying that to approach the Gospel from this vantage point implies that to know the "historical context first of all has to do with Jesus himself and the culture and religion of that particular point in history where he taught; as well as to attempt to have a basic understanding of the gospel writers and their reason for writing"⁶. Consequently, this

³I have found Brian McLaren's discourse on the Seven Jesus' that he encountered in the different expressions of Christianity in North America, which can be read on his book *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004) as a good starting point in conversing about the domestication of Christ as well as Philip Yancey's *The Jesus I Never Knew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995)

⁴ Lewis, C.S. *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (New York: Mariner Books, 1966) p. 84

⁵ Fee, Gordon. *How to Read the Bible for All its Worth*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), p.130

⁶ *Ibid*

also means that: “each of the Gospel writers edited traditional sources about Jesus according to their own theological concern which arose from the situation of the community to which they belonged. In other words, the Gospels were historical and communal products of early Christians; when they met, heard, and remembered Jesus Christ⁷.

Having put those things into consideration we will now take a look at the authorship of the Gospel of John, traditionally the identity of this Gospel’s writer is attributed to John the Apostle.

However, the only internal clue to the authorship the Apostle John to the Gospel can only be found on John 21:20-24, which ascribes the source of the account to ‘the Beloved Disciple’. This ‘Beloved Disciple’ is not named anywhere in the Gospel, but he is mentioned a few key times; he is beside Jesus at the last supper (John 13:22-25), is present at the crucifixion and is told to care for Jesus’ mother (John 19:25-27) and sees the empty tomb (John 20:1-8), thus proving that it is tricky to credit the Apostle John as the writer of this Gospel.

Pertaining to the identity of the Gospel’s author N.S. Fujita writes:

“Although the identity of the ‘beloved disciple,’ the ultimate source, is not known, it seems certain that the provenance of this Gospel can be traced back to the life and ministry of Jesus. This fact does not mean that the Gospel is a photographic record. Like the other Gospels, it is a confessional presentation of Jesus the Christ. In fact, John’s Gospel manifests a highly unique theology of its own; it is much more explicitly theological than the Synoptic Gospels.’ “

⁷ Fujita, Neil. *Introducing the Bible* (Ramsey: Paulist Press, 1981), p.118

It is for this reason I believe that rather than going through trouble of establishing the authorship through history we can profit by examining the literary context of the Gospel, as to some extent this context was probably already fixed by its original historical context, which may have been known to the author⁸.

Thus to start in this context is to define the structure of the Gospel of John on the basis of its poetic prologue its first chapter which announces Jesus Christ as the ultimate Revealer of God.

It is from these passages from the first chapter of the Gospel that we will examine who Jesus, in order to begin the process of deconstructing our domesticated versions of Christ in light of Him being the ‘Word that became flesh and made His dwelling among us’. (John 1:14).

A closer look at John 1:1-8

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. **John 1:1-4**
⁹
 (NIV)

In the beginning was the Word... The first clause, “In the beginning,” is a clear allusion to Genesis 1:1 as, it replicates in Greek what was the first Hebrew clause of the entire Bible. I believe that this is no coincidence. The author knew what he was doing when he began his Gospel in this manner. Since this implies that the author wants us to have in mind not the beginning of our lives, our church, or even of Jesus’

⁸ Op Cit. p.134

⁹ Note that all passages that will be quoted in the entirety of this paper will be taken from the Holy Bible New International Version. (1978, International Bible Society) unless stated otherwise

life on earth. Rather, the author wants us to think about the Word who was there at the beginning of all things.

...*the Word*...The passage begins with a pre-Christian hymn addressed to Logos that was used by the Gospel author. The Logos hymn is a song to the Logos as a principle of life through which all things are made, as divine in Christ¹⁰.

The term Logos is a term that became central as the church developed its theology, and two origins of the author's use here might be supposed. As some scholars think that the terms refers to the Old Testament concept and personification of Wisdom, which is central in the book of Proverbs. On this reading, Wisdom could be read as an Old Testament prefiguration of Jesus. While others think that this is an allusion to Greek philosophy, the Logos– that is the inner rationality that governs the order of the world.

However, neither of these views is central to what the author is doing, as for me it seems that the author is using, 'the Word' as a placeholder, an abstract symbol, for Jesus Christ, which becomes clear if we consider the rest of this chapter. As verse 6 introduces us to John – not the author, but John the Baptist – who is a witness, as verses 7 and 15 note, to this Word becoming human and living a human life, as it says in verse 14. Verses 19-28 tell us more about John the Baptist, about how he is not himself the Word but one who was sent ahead to prepare the world for his coming, and to point him out when he comes. This pointing out is what John does in verse 29 where ultimately the Word is given an identity in the person of Jesus Christ.

¹⁰ Soulen, Richard et al. Handbook of Biblical Criticism (Louisville: WJK, 2001) p.83

...and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The Word – which we have established earlier to be a reference to Jesus – was in the beginning with God. “With” here implies that there is one thing in proximity to another thing, so here we have the Word and God as distinct from each other. They are two. But, the text also tells us that the Word “was” God, positing an identity of these two terms. They are one. It seems now that we have the building blocks of the doctrine of the Trinity as this paradox of identity and difference is what lies at the heart of the affirmation that God is one being in three persons¹¹: Father, *Son or Word or Jesus*, and Holy Spirit.

All things...came into being. This reinforces what has thus far been seen. The Word – Jesus Christ – is a member of Trinity and was as such at the beginning of time. He was thus involved with the creation of the world, and there is no created thing that was created outside of his involvement. This goes not only for landmass, vegetation, and wildlife but for each and every one of us. Jesus had a hand in our creation. But, Jesus had a different sort of hand in our creation than he did in the creation of the rest of the created order. Genesis 1:27 says that human beings, male and female, are created “in the image of God.” Then, Colossians 1:15 convey us that Jesus Christ is the “image of the invisible God.” Thus to say that we are created in the image of God is to say that we are created in Jesus Christ. Our human existence finds its basis, origin, and form in Jesus. He is our prototype and fulfillment. Without Jesus Christ, humanity is nothing – not only from the standpoint of salvation, (which is a common theme explored in contemporary Evangelicalism), but from that of creation.

¹¹ Sta. Maria, Daniel. *The Mystery of the Trinity in the Christian Life* (Manila: St. Paul, 1998), p.27

In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The author introduces here two important themes for this Gospel, namely, “light” and “life.” Both are ways of describing Jesus: as the author recounts Jesus saying later on, “I am the light of the world” and “I am the way and the truth and the life” (8:12 and 14:6).

The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it. There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world. **John 1:5-9**

Culturally, light and darkness traditionally symbolize the dichotomy of good and evil, as they are often metaphorically related to black and white and day and night. Using this prevalent thought in Hellenistic culture now suggest that just as the Word – Jesus Christ – is light, everything else is darkness. We are darkness. This, of course, means sin and, along with and perhaps even more importantly, the absence of truth or knowledge. It is for this reason that the person of John the witness testifies to the light so that darkness is revealed to be false thus should be illuminated with the light of the Word which shines in our darkness. Furthermore, our darkness – our sin and un-truth – does not overcome this light. This light reveals all and, as verse 9 tells us, it does so for everyone. There is nothing that this light does not reveal, and no one for whom this light is not available. And, to emphasize this availability, the author tells us that this light “was coming into the world.” Thus signalling that the God of promise, the God of hope: this God was now drawing near, so that the final goal of history was at hand in Jesus¹².

He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of

¹² Moltmann, Jürgen. *The Way of Jesus Christ* (London: SCM, 1990), p. 87

God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God. **John 1:10-13**

Not only was this light coming into the world; this He actually made it into the world. And yet, this world that He had been involved in making did not recognize Him. The group of people that He had gathered together and made His own – the ancient Israelites – did not accept Him. They were still blinded by their darkness. They were not yet able to call upon His light. But, those who do receive Him receive His light. We know Jesus' light because we have accepted Him as our light. We have trusted in His power to make us children of God. Still, we are no better than anyone else because this ability to receive Jesus, this ability to see the world as illuminated by His light, does not come from “the will of man, but [from] God.” Thus we find that as in all things even in the act of gathering His people God in Christ is pointing towards the fact that just as the need for help is universal, the offer of help in Jesus Christ is also universal¹³.

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. John testifies concerning him. He cries out, saying, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.' " From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

We are told that “the Word became flesh and lived among us.” We have already read that the Word is God, and was with God at the beginning, and was involved in creation. Now the author tells us that this selfsame Word – the one who made us out of nothing – became one of us. A concept to which Robert McAfee Brown writes:

¹³ Price, Daniel. Karl Barth's Anthropology in light of modern thought. (Grand Rapids: Eedermans, 2002) p.128n

“Became flesh” means, quite simply “became a man” like us. Here is the showing forth of God’s creativity and power, in a flesh-and-blood human life. God is not just pretending to be a human being. He has become one of us, in a man who was called Jesus Bar-Joseph, son of a Nazareth carpenter. When Jesus gets hungry, it is real hunger, and not just a pretense. When nails are driven into his hands, they hurt, and real blood flows from the wounds. And the thing which the New Testament dares to assert is that in the life and the teaching, the death and the resurrection, of this man God Himself was present in a unique way, so that if you want to see most clearly who God is and what He has done, you look at this same Jesus Bar-Joseph.¹⁴ “

The realization of this now puts us face to face with this mind-boggling truth: *The God of creation became part of that creation*, without ever ceasing to be God. In Jesus Christ we find not only a great human being, an insightful teacher, an inspiring spiritual guide; no, we find the God who created us living among us as one of us. However we get so used to this idea as Christians that we tend to forget how deep this means, that we simply shrug this truth off as a doctrinal proposition that needs to be stated in Sunday School lessons or kept in handy in the event that a cultist would attack our precious Jesus. However, there is more than meets the eye as far as this statement goes as Brown rightly asserts realizing that the Word became flesh that we encounter a good who addresses us in our situation not as pretense or in mere act of benevolent sympathy but rather one of loving empathy and solidarity with our plight.

It is in realizing this that T.F. Torrance so eloquently writes:

“When the Word became flesh, he became all that we are in our opposition to God in our bondage under law – that is the amazing act of gracious condescension in the incarnation, that God the Son should assume our flesh.”¹⁵

Reflecting on this statement makes me stop to think about God. Like many I often tend to get the idea that I can never know anything about God. In my quiet time

¹⁴ Brown, Robert McAfee. *The Bible Speaks to You* (Louisville: WJK, 1955) pp 89-90

¹⁵ Torrance, Thomas. *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ* ed. Robert T. Walker (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2008) p.61

and in my studies where I spend a good chunk of time thinking about God, trying to figure God out, trying to describe what God does and how God does it, trying to explain what it means for us and our lives, I usually slam myself into a concrete mental wall and wonder if all this effort is even worth it, as God is so big and I am so small – how am I supposed to wrap my mind around God?

It in this passage that God in spite of such an enormity reminds us of Jesus, who is the Word who became flesh, thus putting to centerstage that the "initial point is that God himself wills to reveal Himself. He himself wills to attest His revelation. He Himself — not we — has done this and wills to do it."¹⁶ Thus wrapping our mind into the truth that human reason or intuition could never know these truths – they can only be revealed by God Himself thus the purpose for our existence, and the plan of God for our salvation, can only be known through divine revelation that was incarnated in the Word that became flesh.

No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known. **John 1:18**

Remember that the Word – Jesus Christ – is the light that drives away the darkness of our ignorance and untruth. Because he is God, as the first verse was so careful to explain. Here the author of the Gospel tells us that “no one has ever seen God” to which the author turns our attention to Christ, thus showing us the way towards the one Person who has seen God.

“God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart” has seen God. This now tells us that Jesus, as God, is with God and because Jesus is with God as God, He is

¹⁶ Barth, Karl Homiletics. Trans. Donald E. Daniels, Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Louisville: WJK, 1991) p. 50.

capable of revealing God to us. He is capable of showing God to us. And he has in fact done this. As the author says, Jesus “has made [God] known.” The Greek word, used, *exégeomai*¹⁷, that is translated as “made known” could be translated more literally by saying that Jesus has “explained” God to us.

Thus in Jesus we have a human being who is perfectly coordinate with God – because He is God, therefore when we see Jesus, we see God. When Jesus does something, God does something. When we look at Jesus’ life and see what He did for us and how He lived, we know not only what Jesus is like, but also what God is like because as the Word Jesus explains God to us.

This, then, is the basis of the firm and certain knowledge of God that defines our faith --Jesus Christ. Because Jesus was in the beginning with God, Jesus was involved in creating everything that exists. In fact, Jesus is God; the eternal Son of God and second member of the Trinity to be precise. And because this human being, Jesus of Nazareth, was born around 2000 years ago, we know God.

Conclusion: Deconstructing our domesticated image of Jesus

In the beginning of this paper we touched on the domesticated image of Christ that has been co-opted by the varying strands of the Christian Church. What is tragic about this is the fact that within the context of a universal church only certain attributes of Jesus are given light in turn weakening the Church’s witness in the sense that the universal confession of *Christ as the Word became flesh* is undermined.

¹⁷ ἐξηγέομαι according to Vine, William, et al. *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1996)

Moreover, it is in this domestication that we are distracted into ignoring the ethical implications of the ‘Word became flesh,’ for the church to which Gustavo Gutierrez remarks that in this sense: Christianity is used to “legitimize the established order¹⁸.”

Let us remember that “wisdom is vindicated by her deeds¹⁹,” thus this axiom calls the church to be aware of the immense implications of this mystery. To which Henri Nouwen, writes:

“Where is God? God is where the weak, vulnerable, small and dependent. God is where the poor, the hungry, the handicapped, the mentally ill, the elderly, the powerless. How can we know God when our focus is elsewhere...²⁰”

Furthermore Nouwen, relates it to:

“...the great movement from “you shall not” to “you may.” We may care for the poor, the sick and the dying, meet God there. Instead of a distant God, whom we must please by not doing evil things, Jesus reveals to us a God who is as close to us as the poorest person is²¹.”

Thus the concept of the Word became Flesh implies that Christians and the Church are also called to give flesh out or give life to Christ in both word and deed, hence, enlivening the Living Word that is at work in shedding light into this dark world. It is only after becoming conscious of this biblical truth and its behavioural implications that we can truly move from a domesticated picture of Christ towards an encounter with the God who is revealed in Christ.

¹⁸ Gutiérrez, Gustavo. *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation*, Trans. Caridad Ina, John Eagleson (London: SCM Press, 1988) p. 110

¹⁹ Matthew 11:19 ISV

²⁰ Nouwen, Henri. *Our Second Birth: Christian Reflections on Death and New Life* (New York: Crossroad, 199) p.72

²¹ Ibid p. 124

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