

John 1:1 – 18

^{1:1} In the beginning was the Word,¹ and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things came into being through him, and apart from him nothing came into being that has come into being. ⁴ In him was life, and the life was the light of men. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it. ⁶ There came a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness, to testify about the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸ He was not the light, but he came to testify about the light. ⁹ There was the true light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man. ¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world was made through him, and the world did not know him. ¹¹ He came to his own, and those who were his own did not receive him. ¹² But as many as received him, to them he gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in his name, ¹³ who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

¹⁴ And the Word became flesh,² and dwelt among us, and we saw his glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth. ¹⁵ John testified about him and cried out, saying, ‘This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me has a higher rank than I, for he existed before me.’’ ¹⁶ For of his fullness we have all received, and grace upon grace. ¹⁷ For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, he has explained Him.

¹ The ‘Word of God’ (Jn.1:1) was understood by Jews to be the perfect communication of God. By His word, God *spoke* everything into existence (Gen.1:1 – 2:3). By His word, God *spoke* promises to His people and then brought them to pass. God revealed what He would do through *His word* and then He acted. The Old Testament writers noticed this pattern: ‘The LORD God will do nothing except that which He reveals to His servants the prophets’ (Amos 3:7), since those people God informed beforehand were then called prophets. God’s *word* was God’s act. God acted through His word. He revealed Himself through His word. Thus for John to say this may not have been totally surprising to Jews. What would have been utterly surprising is that the Word became flesh; see below.

² ‘Flesh’ (Greek *sarx*, Jn.1:14) was a very negative term to describe humanity in Greco-Roman and Jewish contexts. For example, Paul wrote, ‘I know that no good dwells in me, that is in my **flesh**’ (Romans 7:18). The Hellenistic Jewish commentator Philo Judaeus wrote:

‘It is impossible for the Spirit of God to remain and to pass all its time, as the law-giver himself shows. “For,” says Moses, “the Lord said, My Spirit shall not remain among men forever, because they are **flesh**.” For, at times, it does remain; but it does not remain forever and ever among the greater part of us; for who is so destitute of reason or so lifeless as never, either voluntarily or involuntarily, to conceive a notion of the all good God. For, very often, even over the most polluted and accursed beings, there hovers a sudden appearance of the good, but they are unable to take firm hold of it and to keep it among them; for almost immediately, it quits its former place and departs, rejecting those inhabitants who come over to it, and who live in defiance of law and justice, to whom it never would have come if it had not been for the sake of convicting those who choose what is disgraceful instead of what is good.’ (Philo, *On the Giants*, Commentary on Genesis, V.19 – 21)

John chose the most negative way to say this. He could have said, ‘The Word became a body (Greek *soma*)’ or, ‘The Word became a man (Greek *anthropos*)’ but he does not use those other words. He chose the word that connotes the tainted ontological nature of humanity.

Session 2: Theme of Rejection; Who's at the Center of the Universe?

Questions

1. Last time we looked at Jesus as God's way of restoring humanity (Session 1). Now we'll look at more of the practical and broader significance of that.
2. State: Just because we know certain words, doesn't mean we know the meaning. For that, we need context.
 - a. If I say, 'I'm jacked,' what do I mean?
 - i. I work out a lot and I'm in good shape?
 - ii. I've had too much caffeine?
 - iii. I was robbed?
 - b. If I say, 'I'm mad about my flat,' what do I mean?
 - i. I'm really happy about my apartment (if I'm British)?
 - ii. I'm really angry about the flat tire (if I'm American)?
 - c. SO WE MUST READ JOHN FROM THE CONTEXT OF THE ORIGINAL GRECO-ROMAN AND JEWISH AUDIENCE.
3. Who do you think would be more offended by this: Greek or Jewish readers? See cultural background notes, below.
 - a. Greek: smart people (philosophers) are at the center of the universe. We do actually believe this. This is why we pay so much money to be educated: to have influence, to gain credibility, to gain the right to participate in the things smart people do.
 - b. Jewish: our ethnic group is at the center of the universe. And at times we believe this as well.
4. Offense to Greco-Roman audience:
 - a. that the light has come into the cave, instead of remained outside it
 - b. that the truest reality, the divine logos, has become flesh, a person
 - c. that what the philosophers have wanted to know was unknown to them
 - d. that the reason why the philosophers thought they should be kings has now been messed up; that takes away from their political legitimacy because if Jesus is truly God and truly human, he should be king.
 - e. that the Roman Emperor claimed to be 'the son of a god' (his predecessor became a god when he died), but that's been messed up, because Jesus is THE Son of THE God; that takes away from the Emperor's political legitimacy because if Jesus is truly God and truly human, he should be king.
5. Offense to Jewish audience:
 - a. that the Messiah came, the new creation started, the new exodus started, and Israel missed it; they rejected Jesus
 - b. that the right to become children of God wasn't just given to Abraham's natural descendants, but also to Gentile enemies like the Romans
 - c. that Moses has been fulfilled and superseded by Jesus
6. This is very confrontational with Greco-Roman and Jewish views of reality. I'm not really sure who would have been more offended. That was just a question to get us engaged and thinking! But the lesson is the same in either case: *You are not at the center of the universe. Jesus is!!*
 - a. Illus: leader tell a personal story about how Jesus taught you this (e.g. my conversion story, involving repenting of my own pride and self-sufficiency, and not being at the center of the universe, or my own universe, any more). It's painful but good to recognize Jesus as the center of the universe.
 - b. APPLICATION: How do you put your family, your college and education, your fun, or just yourself at the center of the universe? Meaning, you think there is more action in those areas, more significance in those areas? Is getting a degree more important to you than seeing someone else come to Jesus?
 - c. APPLICATION: In what way do you need to give the center of your life to Jesus?
7. APPLICATION: John says that there are people who will not believe this. But this is reality, regardless of other people believe it or not. Are you okay with that? Is there any people-pleasing that you need to pray about? Are you really ready to join Jesus in what he's doing in the world?

Knowledge, Justice, and Power in Plato's Allegory of the Cave, from SparkNotes

'In Book I of the Republic, Thrasymachus sets up a challenge to justice. Thrasymachus is a Sophist, one of the teachers-for-hire who preached a creed of subjective morality to the wealthy sons of Athens. The Sophists did not believe in objective truth, including objective moral truth. They did not think, in other words, that anything was absolutely 'right' or 'wrong'; instead they viewed all actions as either advantageous or disadvantageous to the person performing them. If an action was advantageous then they thought you should engage in it, and if it was disadvantageous then they thought that you should refrain. Taking this belief to its logical conclusion, some of them went so far as to claim that law and morality are nothing but mere convention, and that one ought to try to get away with injustice and illegality whenever such action would be to one's advantage. Plato meant to combat this attitude in the Republic... The challenge to Socrates is: he must prove that justice is something good and desirable, that it is more than convention, that it is connected to objective standards of morality, and that it is in our interest to adhere to it. His attempt to meet this challenge occupies the rest of the Republic.'

'In the allegory of the cave, Plato asks us to imagine the following scenario: A group of people have lived in a deep cave since birth, never seeing any daylight at all. These people are bound in such a way that they cannot look to either side or behind them, but only straight ahead. Behind them is a fire, and behind the fire is a partial wall. On top of the wall are various statues, which are manipulated by another group of people, laying out of sight. Because of the fire, the statues cast shadows on the wall that the prisoners are facing. The prisoners watch the stories that these shadows play out, and because this is all they can ever see, they believe that these shadows are the most real things in the world. When they talk to one another about 'men,' 'women,' 'trees,' 'horses,' and so on, they refer only to these shadows. Now he asks us to imagine that one of these prisoners is freed from his bonds, and is able to look at the fire and at the statues themselves. After initial pain and disbelief, he eventually realizes that all these things are more real than the shadows he has always believed to be the most real things; he grasps how the fire and the statues together caused the shadows, which are copies of the real things. He now takes the statues and fire as the most real things in the world. Next this prisoner is dragged out of the cave into the world above. At first, he is so dazzled by the light in the open that he can only look at shadows, then he is able to look at reflections, then finally at the real objects—real trees, flowers, houses and other physical objects. He sees that these are even more real than the statues were, and that those objects were only copies of these. Finally, when the prisoner's eyes have fully adjusted to the brightness, he lifts his sights toward the heavens and looks at the sun. He understands that the sun is the cause of everything he sees around him—of the light, of his capacity for sight, of the existence of flowers, trees, and all other objects.'

'The sun represents the ultimate Form, the Form of the Good. The Form of the Good is the cause of all other Forms, and is the source of all goodness, truth, and beauty in the world. It is the ultimate object of knowledge. Once the prisoner has grasped the Form of the Good, he has reached the highest stage of cognition: understanding. By reaching the Form of the Good, he hits on the first principle of philosophy which explains everything without the need of any assumptions or images. He can now use this understanding derived from comprehending the Form of the Good to transform all his previous thought into understanding—he can understand all of the Forms. Only the philosopher can reach this stage, and that is why only he is fit to rule. [*Significantly,*] Plato is unable to provide direct detail about the Form of the Good, and instead illustrates his idea by comparing it to the sun. Just as the sun provides light and visibility in the visible realm, the Form of the Good is the source of intelligibility. The sun makes sight possible, and, similarly, the Form of the Good is responsible for our capacity for knowledge. The sun causes things to come to be in the visible world; it regulates the seasons, makes flowers bloom, influences animals to give birth and so on. The Form of the Good is responsible for the existence of Forms, for their coming to be in the intelligible world.'

Hence, in Plato's Republic, the material, physical world only provides imperfect copies of more intelligible, eternal Forms. Those who cannot understand the conceptual world of philosophy and Forms are seeing only shadows and are unfit to rule. True reality is made up of perfect concepts of truth, beauty, and the ultimate Form of the Good. Contact with that conceptual world enables the philosopher-king to deduce justice for the material world. This story's purpose is to argue for why (in a sense) philosophers should rule the world.

The Hopes of Israel in Second Temple Judaism

The Jewish people were also interested in questions of truth, reality, and justice, but from a very different standpoint. After the Babylonian Exile (586 BC), Israel hoped to become God's *new humanity* again. They understood that God would have to bring it about in the form of a New Exodus (independence day) and New Creation (renewal) because the first Exodus was already thematically related to the first Creation, linked by the idea of *God restoring His true humanity to who they were created to be*.

| <i>Creation, Humanity</i> | <i>Exodus from Enemies Creation of Israel, New Humanity</i> | <i>New Exodus from Enemies New Creation, New Humanity</i> |
|---|---|---|
| God spoke 10 declarations. | God spoke 10 declarations on Egypt. | Israel hoped for God to speak His word again (Isa.40, 55). |
| God established boundaries between light and darkness, land and water, ruler and subordinate. | God relaxed boundaries between light and darkness, land and water to reflect Egypt's rejection of God's boundaries. | Israel hoped for God's new exodus deliverance (Isa.44) from – so it was believed – the Gentile enemies. |
| God created humanity in a garden land. | God brought Israel into a garden land to be His new humanity. | Israel hoped for God to bring them back to a new garden land to be His new humanity once again (Isa.54 – 55). |
| After human sin, God exiled humanity out of the garden land. | After Israel's sin, God exiled Israel out of the garden land. | |

Israel waited and suffered, as they were successively conquered by Babylon (586 BC), then Medo-Persia (540 BC), then Greece (~350 BC), then Rome (63 BC). Every Jewish revolt against the Romans had been crushed. Every would-be Messiah had been defeated, and hung on a Roman cross. When would the true Messiah (the anointed king from King David's family line) rise to deliver them and set them free? *Told from the standpoint of Jewish nationalism, this story's purpose was to argue for why (in a sense) Israel should rule the world.* But was this to right interpretation of the Old Testament story?