

Marriage and the Incarnation: The Spousal Nature of the Prologue to the Gospel of John

The Gospel of Mark begins with John the Baptist announcing the arrival of Jesus and the beginning of his public ministry. The Gospel of Matthew begins with a genealogy. He traces Jesus' lineage back to Abraham and thereby situates Jesus firmly in the story of Israel (Matthew 1:1). He is the fulfillment of the promises made to Abraham and David. Luke begins his gospel with the miraculous births of Jesus and his cousin John. His genealogy traces Jesus' ancestry back to Adam (Luke 3:38). Jesus is the one who has come to rescue all of humanity.

The Gospel of John begins in an altogether different place. He begins "in the beginning." This is clearly an echo of the opening of Genesis, but it is a beginning before the creation of time, before the creation of the world. John anchors the story in a relationship, a relationship that always existed. Before Jesus was conceived in Mary's womb, he was the Word of God, and "the Word was with God and the Word was God." This is a creation story, or more properly, a story about a NEW creation.

In Genesis, God did not make the world through manipulation, change, or violence, as the gods of the ancient world did. He simply spoke, and the world came into being. God said, "Let there be" . . . light, a dome, waters under the sky, etc., and there was . . . light, a dome, waters under the sky, etc. In the story of the new creation, God spoke again. This time, his Word was a person, his own Son.

We believe that God is not one being among others, as most of the ancient world believed. Rather, he is the cause of all being. We believe that there is only one God, not multiple gods. Still, the remarkable truth, nearly impossible to grasp, is that this one God is a community of three equal persons. It took the church several hundred years, much pain, and, in many cases, spilled blood to arrive at the articulation of this mystery in the form of the Nicene Creed.

At the time of Jesus, the people of Israel "were not just waiting for the kingdom of God, or the coming of the Messiah, or the restoration of the twelve tribes. Above all, they were waiting for the coming of the Bridegroom God of Israel, who [would] forgive their sins and unite them in an everlasting covenant."¹

With the words of Psalm 19:5 in mind, "like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy," St. Faustus of Riez said this about the Incarnation:

*"Like a bridegroom coming from his marriage chamber our God descended to earth in his Incarnation, in order to be united to his Church. . . . By Christ's action in Galilee, then, wine is made, that is, the law withdraws and grace takes its place; fleshly realities are coupled with spiritual, and the old covenant with its outward discipline is transformed into the new. For, as the Apostle says: The old order has passed away; now all is new! The water in the jars is not less than it was before, but now begins to be what it had not been; so too the law is not destroyed by Christ's coming, but is made better than it was."*²

The prologue of John's gospel is very rich. What follows is only an introduction to its treasures. In the prologue John introduces many of the central themes of his gospel: light, life, darkness, rejection of Jesus, the glory of God revealed, and the transformation of believers. We will spend three days

¹ Pitre, Brant, *Jesus the Bridegroom: The Greatest Love Story Ever Told*, Image, New York, 2018, p.27.

² *Sermon by Faustus of Riez (Sermo 5, de Epiphania 2: PLS 3, 560-562).*

reflecting on the first five verses of this magnificent poem. The first five verses hinge on two relationships: the first is the relationship of “the Word” to God, and the second is the relationship of “the Word” to creation. The third meditation on the first five verses will focus on the freedom of “the Word’s” self-gift. We will repeat those verses each day for three days, but on each successive day, we will highlight different phrases for our meditation.

We will conclude this unit of the Bible study with three meditations on selected verses of the prologue, one meditation on Jesus’ baptism (1:29–34), and a final meditation on John the Baptist’s role as the best man at a Jewish wedding (3:25–39).