

Four Nights and One Day

John 1:1-18

- 1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.
- 2 He was in the beginning with God.
- 3 All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.
- 4 In him was life, and the life was the light of men.
- 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it [or “the darkness did not receive/comprehend it”].
- 6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John.
- 7 He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him.
- 8 He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.
- 9 The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.
- 10 He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him.
- 11 He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.
- 12 But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God,
- 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 and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.
- 15 (John bore witness about him, and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.'")
- 16 For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.

- ¹⁷ For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.
- ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.

AN EARLY JEWISH STORY

Listen to this early Jewish story that was told during the Passover celebrations long ago.¹

There are ... four nights that are written in the Book of Memories; the first night: When Y[ahweh] was revealed over the world to create it; the world was without form and void, and darkness was spread over the surface of the deep; and (through his [Word] Memra there was light and illumination)²; and he called it the first night. The second night: When Y[ahweh] was revealed over Abram; he was a hundred and Sarah his wife ninety years old, to fulfill what Scripture says: Behold, Abram, at a hundred years, will beget, and Sarah, at ninety years, will give birth. And Isaac was thirty-seven years old when he was

¹ This story is told in varying lengths in several Targums of Exodus 12:42. I take this story from Targum Neofiti as translated in Andrew Chester, *Divine Revelation and the Divine Titles in the Pentateuchal Targumim* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1986), 193-94.

² This section is taken from Daniel Boyarin, "The Gospel of the Memra: Jewish Binitarianism and the Prologue to John," *HTR* 94:3 (2001): 259.

offered up upon the altar; the heavens were bent low and descended; and Isaac saw their perfection, and his eyes were dimmed because of their perfection; and he called it the second night. The third night: When Y[ahweh] was revealed over the Egyptians in the middle of the night; his hand was slaying the firstborn of the Egyptians, and his right hand was protecting the firstborn of Israel; to fulfill what Scripture says: Israel is my firstborn son; and he called it the third night. The fourth night: When the world will reach its fixed time to be redeemed; the iron yokes will be broken, and the evil generations will be destroyed; and Moses will go up from the midst of the wilderness; this one will lead at the head of the flock, and that one will lead at the head of the flock; and his [Word] Memra will lead between both of them, and I and they will lead together. It is the night of the Passover to the name of Y[ahweh], a night observed and prepared for redemption for all Israel; for their generations.

This story gives a condensed history of Israel in four amazing nights, all found in the Bible. According to the Jews, the first three nights have already occurred. **The first night** is marked by that old—and later heretical—Jewish notion that **the Word of God** was an uncreated

person who created the world. **John 1:1** picks up on this by telling us that in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. John then tells us that the Word created everything that has been created and tells us that the Word is also the Life and Light of men.

The **second night** is the famous **story of Abraham** when he went to offer his son Isaac on the altar as a sacrifice to the LORD, until the LORD stopped him at the last minute. This night is introduced by telling us about Abraham and Sarah's extreme old age when the LORD came to them and promised that within a year, they would have a son. In Genesis, this promise was made earlier to Abraham, at a time when "**the Word of the LORD came to Abram in a [night] vision**" (**Gen 15:1**). Recall that words are not visible, but audible. Words are not seen, but heard. Yet, the Word of the LORD came to Abram *in a vision*. Just a few verses after this we have that famous verse used often by the Apostle Paul which tells us about Abram's faith, "**And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness**" (**Gen 15:6**).

The third night is marked by the original Passover meal, the night that the Destroying Angel came and killed the firstborn of Egypt, in order that he might redeem the firstborn son of God. This “firstborn son” of God is the title that is given to Israel in Exodus 4:22. This child was born, not in the normal way, but through the mighty promise given to Abraham, through that miraculous birth of Isaac and subsequently when Isaac had twins and the youngest of the two—for no reason other than that it pleased God—was chosen to be the son of the promise. His name was Jacob, and later God changed his name to Israel.

The fourth night, they say, has not yet occurred. It will take place, according to them, on a Passover in the future. It will be a night of ultimate redemption, when chosen leaders will lead the little sheep of Israel; and the Word of God, who was present at creation, will return and stand between them and lead them all together.³

³ As Boyarin says, “This text appears in various witnesses to the Palestinian Targum, so it cannot be taken as a later “Christianizing” interpolation into the text,” p. 126. In other words, this incredible anticipation is perfectly Jewish.

JOHN 1:1-18—THE JEWISH STORY FULFILLED

This is all very remarkable. These Jews knew the major themes of redemption past. They also understood the prophets telling them of a future Messiah who would come and lead them as a Shepherd. What the Jews missed, and for most of them are still missing, I want to tell you about today. John wanted to tell them, and also the whole world(!), that all of the longings and expectations of that great fourth night have been revealed now. They have come to pass in the coming of one out of heaven, one who became flesh and was made known for our sake.

John 1:1-5 is the story of the Word, the Life, and the Light personified. It is perfectly Jewish, or at least it was until the Rabbis of the second century declared it all official heresy. In fact, it is possible that John has actually taken a Jewish sermon (midrash) in these first five verses as his launching point for the gospel of Jesus Christ.⁴ **John 1:6-18** is the Christian interpretation of this Jewish story. It very much follows the pattern of the four nights of the

⁴ Ibid.

Book of Memories, which we refer to as the OT. Today I want to look at this Christian interpretation.

The Witness

Verses 6-8 introduce a new person to the story, but he is a person you have all heard about many times. He is John the Baptist. Before looking at him, perhaps *because* we are looking at him, I want to ask you a question. If John 1:6-18 is Christian commentary and a Christian interpretation on the first five verses of a well known Jewish story, does this mean it is only one possible interpretation among many? As one person suggests “... but one expression of a universalistic potential in Jewish monotheism?”⁵ This question is all important, especially today. Why?

We live in a climate that has been dubbed “The Heretical Imperative,”⁶ where the only heresy is orthodoxy.⁷ D.A. Carson sarcastically writes, “In the

⁵ Jack Miles blurb on the back cover of Daniel Boyarin’s, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

⁶ Peter L. Berger, *The Heretical Imperative* (New York, Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1979).

⁷ Andreas Kostenberger and Michael Kruger, *The Heresy of Orthodoxy* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010).

beginning was Diversity. And the Diversity was with God, and the Diversity was God. Without Diversity was nothing made that was made. And it came to pass that nasty old ‘orthodox’ people narrowed down diversity and finally squeezed it out, dismissing it as heresy. But in the fullness of time (which is of course our time), Diversity rose up and smote orthodoxy hip and thigh. Now, praise be, the only heresy is orthodoxy.”⁸

People believe there is no such thing as orthodoxy because truth is supposed to be a matter of opinion. Indeed, “heresy” comes from a word meaning “to choose.” Heresy is a matter of opinion and choice. It is the perfect democratic theology. That is what people think Christianity is too. We have turned the whole thing into how we feel about Jesus. Whatever you want him to be for you, that’s just fine. But *is Christianity just one man’s opinion vs. another’s?* Is it just a matter of choosing religion like we choose dinner at the Country Buffet?

Let’s look at what it says about John the Baptist. “*There was a man sent from God, whose name was John*” (*vs. 6*). What does this tell us about John? It tells us two

⁸ Carson, blurb on the back cover of *The Heresy of Orthodoxy*.

things. First, **John was a man**. This is in distinction from the Word which was God (**1:1**). The Evangelist obviously wants to clarify this more because in **vs. 8** he says the Baptist “**was not the light**.” John is distinct from the Word, the Life, and the Light. The distinction between John and this other figure in the first five verses makes it even more clear that the Word and Life and Light is no mere created being. John was a man and he is utterly different from the Word. Jesus calls him a lamp (**John 5:35**), but he calls himself the Light of the world.

Second, **John was sent by God**. This gets at my question a moment ago about Christian interpretation of the Jewish story. “Sent by God” is the language of OT prophets. **1 Chron 24:19**, “He sent prophets among them to bring them back to the LORD.” **Jeremiah 7:25**, “From the day that your fathers came out of the land of Egypt to this day, I have persistently sent all my servants the prophets to them, day after day.” **Ezek 2:3**, “Son of man, I send you to the people of Israel, to nations of rebels.” John the Baptist was a prophet. The crowds who followed him thought so (**Matt 21:26**) and Jesus thought so (“A prophet? Yes;” **Matt 11:9**).

This prophet was sent with a purpose. That purpose is to be a witness “about the light, that all might believe through him” (John 1:7). John was a witness. What is a witness? What do they do? In a court of law, witnesses are brought forward who have personally observed something relevant to the case at hand. Their testimony becomes credible evidence in a case. As we will see later in the chapter, John saw firsthand that the Father called out to Jesus from heaven and the Spirit anointed him at his baptism.

Witnesses set Christianity apart from all other religions. You see, when being confronted with Jesus, there are claims that are being made about him. He is God. He is creator of all things. Through him—and only through him—people can be saved. You have to deal with these claims. What do you say about them? This is where the witnesses in John’s Gospel come in. There are lots of witnesses in this gospel. Jesus and his works are a witness (3:11, 32; 5:36; 8:14, 18; 10:25, 32, 37–38; 15:24; 18:37), Moses and the Scriptures (5:39, 46), the Father (5:32, 36–37; 8:18), the Spirit (chs. 14–16, esp. 15:26), the disciples

(e.g., 15:27), John the writer (19:35; 21:24), and John the Baptist (John 1:7-8).⁹

“Let everything be heard on the testimony of two or three witnesses,” (Deut 17:6) the Law says. John is obeying the law and putting forth many witnesses who saw and heard and spoke with and marveled at Jesus Christ. John is not about to say something unfounded about Jesus and thus call God a liar! So he gives us witnesses.

John the Baptist is the first of these witnesses. The OT predicted him as the forerunner of the Messiah. “A voice cries: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God’” (Isa 40:3; cf. Matt 3:3; Mark 1:3; Luke 3:4; John 1:23). Another prophecy says, “Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple” (Mal 3:1; cf. Matt 11:10; Mark 1:2; Luke 7:27). John the Baptist was Jesus cousin through his mother Elizabeth and

⁹ Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, Baker exegetical commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2004), 33.

his Aunt Mary (Jesus' mother).¹⁰ His job was to go before Jesus, to baptize/ordain him, to testify about him, and to preach that the coming of long anticipated Messiah had arrived. He was the last great prophet of the OT era given this great Messianic task, but he was greater than the rest because he saw with his own eyes the one promised so long ago.

Now, if John is a witness to historical events and is making claims that this Jesus is God, then you are not permitted to sit there and procrastinate on handing the judge a verdict. You can, against all the evidence, call John and the others liars. But you cannot say this is all just a matter of opinion and each is free to decide what Jesus is for himself. You can make a wrong verdict, but that will not change the truth about him. I'm intentionally using this idea of **C.S. Lewis** that **God is in the Dock**, that is God is on trial here and we are the jury.

I'm not doing this because I think that somehow you choose God's fate or that you have any power to convict Jesus or set him free. You have no more power than Herod or Pilate did, who when they put him to death did

¹⁰ Mary and Elizabeth were not sisters, but cousins. Elizabeth was much older than Mary (Luke 1:36).

so because it was the decree of God and predestined plan from all the ages past. I give this analogy for two reasons. One, I want you to know that you cannot sit there making up stories about Jesus in your head that do not fit the facts. The facts are, there are witnesses and they say something very specific about Jesus. You have to deal with those and make a judgment. The Scripture will not let you say that this is all just a matter of personal opinion. You are free to think so, but it will not be because you are being honest with the things that the witnesses, including this Gospel, say about Jesus. But I also say it because of something that will come up shortly in **vv. 12-13** about who and how it is that Jesus is received by any particular individual. It is ironically the exact opposite of a jury coming to a decision on a defendant in the court of law.

THE LIGHT WAS IN THE WORLD

Before the Apostle John gets into the story of John the Baptist, he changes the subject, and returns to the opening verses. I told you that **vv. 6-18** are actually a commentary on **vv. 1-5**. You see that in the contrast between John the

man and the Word who was God (vs. 6). You also see it in how John bears witness about the Light (vv. 7-8). Now we will return to think about this Light some more.

Vv. 9-13 tell us something historical about the Light. Now, if you are like me until about a week or so ago, you will be guilty of reading into the passage that which is not yet there. The question to ask yourself at this point in the passage is, *has the Light incarnated at this point in John's story?* Has the Word become flesh yet? No. The Word becomes flesh in vs. 14. I suggest that what takes place in these five verses prior to vs. 14 come chronologically before the Word is made flesh. Otherwise, vs. 14 isn't really all that shocking (when in fact it might be the most shocking statement in the entire Bible!). When you read it like this, everything that is introduced through vs. 18 suddenly makes a whole lot of sense.

An example of something that seems quite out of place when you read vv. 9-13 as referring to events after the incarnation is *the introduction of Moses* in vs. 17. Look at this verse. “For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” Where does that come from? It seems like it just flies out of left field. Why

is he talking about the law all of the sudden? The answer is, *he has already talked about the law*, but you did not recognize it. Another example is **vs. 18**. “No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known.” This is the climax of the entire prologue. It is good theology, but when you understand that **vv. 9-13** are talking about historical events prior to the incarnation, now it also becomes good writing. The Father had not been made known in the best, fullest sense until Jesus came. John had told you this in **vv. 9-13**, if you were reading correctly.

OK, so we need to look at **vv. 9-13** to make sense of this. It starts, “The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.” This verse is a foreshadowing of **vs. 14** where the word becomes flesh. But **vs. 10** tells you that the light was already in the world prior to His becoming flesh! “He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him.” It is not telling you that the light was in the world after the incarnation, but *before* it! This in a clear verse telling you about “Christ in the OT.”

This verse introduces us to one of John's favorite words: **The World**. What is the "world" in this verse? Look at the context. It is "**the world that was made.**" So, it includes everything. That is what it says in **vs. 3**, "**All things were made through him.**" The verse is saying that **he was in the world that he had made.** This is a remarkable verse! It is not saying that he was shining upon the world that he made, like the sun shines from far away upon the earth. This is not God detached and aloof from the creation. It says that he was "in" (*en*) the world. In fact, the little preposition "*en*" begins the sentence. Literally it says, "**In the world he was.**"

But you ask, **how was he in the world before he came in the flesh?** This IS the question, isn't it? So many people have absolutely no idea. The people prior to his coming would have asked the very same question. "**You are telling me that the light is in the world now? No, the light shines upon us, but it is not here with us.**" That is what most of them would have said. Thus, **vs. 10** finishes, "**... yet the world did not know him.**" They did not recognize the Word, the Life, and the Light. It was too obscure. It was too philosophical. It was too abstract. It was not

concrete enough for them. So, the Greeks played around with the logos idea, but they depersonalized it, turning Him into an “it.” But it wasn’t just the Greeks who did not recognize him.

Vs. 11 says, “He came to his own, and *his own people did not receive him.*” This is not referring to the Jews and Pharisees that Jesus preached to. It is referring to all of the Jewish people *in the OT*. The Light came to his own, but they did not see him. The Word came to his own, but they did not listen to him. Listen to the sending of Ezekiel that I quoted earlier, “Son of man, I send you to the people of Israel, to nations of rebels, who have rebelled against him. They and their fathers have transgressed against me to this very day” (**Ezek 2:3**). The world did not perceive him. The Jews did not receive him.

How did he come to them? The book of Hebrews is all about answering that question. He came “*at many times and in many ways*” (**Heb 1:1**). He came *through the prophets*. He is the Word. He came through the law. He is the Word. He came through the Angel of the LORD. He is a person. He came through the types and shadows of

the ceremonial system. He is omniscient and knew the future.

The Pharisees focused mostly on the law. They thought God was with them through the law, but only in this abstract sense. Paul sarcastically says to the Jews in Rome, “You [think that in] the law [you have] the embodiment of knowledge and truth?” (Rom 2:20 NIV). Jesus tells the story of the rich man who dies and has this conversation with Abraham across a large impassible chasm. Abraham tells him, “They have Moses... let them listen to [him]. (Luke 16:29). In our own Gospel of John Jesus tells the Pharisees, “If you believed Moses, you would be me” (John 5:46).

These people had the law which spoke about Christ, but they didn't receive it, they did not believe it, they did not obey it. This is the reason why John later adds that comment about Moses in vs. 17 and contrasts Moses with Christ! They had the Word through the law, but did not receive Him. So the Word came in flesh.

But some did receive him. Some did believe in his name (John 1:12). These “he gave the right to become children of God.” I want to sit here on vs. 12 for a

moment and reflect upon it in light of the four nights in the book of memories. We've seen the first night already, as it is recalled in John 1:1-5. Recall now that the second night in Scripture (at least in this liturgical synagogal Passover Hymn of the Four Nights)¹¹ is about Abraham. Remember, Abraham saw the Word of the Lord in a vision and “Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness.” Now let me throw this into the mix. For Genesis 15:6, targums all say “he believed in the Memra [i.e. the Word/logos] of God.”¹² There's John's logos in the Abraham story as understood at the time of Jesus. Jesus himself talks about this very thing in **John 8:56** and says, “Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He *saw* it and was glad.” This second night is marked as a night of faith ... in Christ.

The point is, some did receive Him in the OT, and Abraham is one of them. The very moment the Scripture captures this for us is during this second night. How did Abraham receive the light? Through faith. John elaborates on this in his own unique way saying that God

¹¹ Boyarin calls it a “Paschal liturgy.” *Border Lines*, 125-27.

¹² Pseudo-Jonathan, “And he believed in the Lord, and had faith in the Memra of the Lord.” Onkelos Targum says, “And he believed in the Memra of the Lord.” Neofiti, “And Abraham believed in the name of the Memra of the Lord.”

gave him (and others like him) the right to become a “child of God.” This is **the language of the third night**. Recall that this night was the Passover night. The Passover was the night when the LORD took the **firstborn son** of Egypt as a ransom for killing the **firstborn sons** of Israel whom God called his own **firstborn son**. Israel was called the child of God.

Yet, John needs you to understand that the children he is talking about are “**born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.**” It is not biological Jews that are children here. That is what the Pharisees often think in this Gospel (cf. **John 8:39, 53, 56**). No, these are not the true children of God, not the children that will inherit the promises. Recall also that the third night is that promise of Isaac, which the story elaborates. Who was Isaac? Isaac was **a child born of the promise**, through the miracle. He was the chosen son, the “**only begotten**” son of Abraham (**Gen 22:2; Heb 11:17**), called through predestination and election. Romans 9 tells you all about how these kinds of children are born.

It is through God’s sovereign choice. He says, “[**Salvation**] **then depends not on human will or exertion,**

but on God, who has mercy” (Rom 9:16). Paul and John think alike. The children born in John 1:13 are born “not of the will of the flesh or of the will of man.” In John 3 Jesus will tell Nicodemus that he needs to be born “from above” “by the Spirit.” Later in the same chapter he will tell us that this is because men love darkness and run from the light. The Light has to come to us and enlighten us. The Spirit has to come into our hearts and give us new Life. We have to be born of God.

And yet, notice that here two things come together. Those that are born in this miraculous way, through predestination and not freewill, through effectual calling and not their own seeking, nevertheless these people “receive him.” “To those who did receive him.” And so no one is allowed to say that they are predestined if they do not first receive and trust in Christ. You have no right to think this way. Never look to election and the secret decrees for assurance. Only look to Christ. The hidden things belong to the LORD, but that which is revealed belongs to us. Christ is God revealed in the flesh. Look to Christ, and to nothing else. This is what Abraham did. Abraham believed God. Abraham received Christ. He

looked to Christ. Abraham saw his day. All the holy men and women of old who received him did this same thing, because beloved, **he was in the world and they knew him, because he revealed himself to them.**

THE WORD BECAME FLESH

Yet, it was because on the whole the world did not receive him that something new and amazing happened. Let me ask you another question. What is it that is unique about the Christian message? I have suggested that it is NOT **John 1:1-5**. The fact of the matter is, these verses were perfectly Jewish. What is unique is **John 1:14**, one of the most stunning astonishing subversive revolutionary sentences ever put down in writing. “**The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the father, full of grace and truth.**” **I’m going to spend the next sermon looking at this verse** (along with **15-18**) next week. There is so much to be gleaned from this. But its importance can be understood properly in the context of the whole passage without going into a lot of detail.

Here is the claim. At just the right time God sent his only begotten son into the world. He was born under law,

so that he might fulfill the law. He was born of a woman, so that he might fulfill the law as a man. Yet, he was eternally the Word and the Life and the Light. He was in the world, but he was not received; but then he incarnated in a form that everyone could see. He came in a form that confronts us at the most basic level. He came as one of us. The Creed, following the language of John's Gospel says he "came down out of heaven." The Word became flesh.

No more could people claim that the light was abstract or far away. No more could they say that that Word and Light was an "it" or a "thing." The claim is that the eternal Word took on a new nature and became a man and walked around here with us for 30 some years. The light was hidden in human flesh. God was with us. That never happened before, or since.

Recall now, the fourth night of the Jews. They anticipated this very thing, when the Word would walk between the leaders and lead them all like a Shepherd. It was said that it would take place on a future Passover. If there are three nights in the OT, there is one very dark night in the NT. It just so happens that it was also the Passover. That night, the Shepherd was betrayed, and the

sheep were scattered. This is exactly what Zechariah predicted (**Zech 13:7**) and Mark tells us occurred (**Mark 14:27**). On the night that our Lord took the bread of the Passover, and, calling himself the sacrificial lamb said, “This is my body which is broken for you, do this in remembrance of me” (**Luke 22:19**). This is the night that the Jews said “the world will reach its fixed time to be redeemed.” When the sky turned dark as night the next day, **Hebrews** says, “He entered once for all into the holy places” (the word “tabernacled” among us), not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing eternal redemption” (**9:12**). **Ephesians** says, “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses” (**1:7**).

After being put to death by the plan of the Father, he was then raised from the dead and presented himself before over 500 people before he went up to heaven in the sight of all who looked, where he now sits at the right hand of the Father ruling in his kingdom. This is the Christian message, our *kerygma*, our *evangel*, our good news. That all might believe in him through those that witnessed those amazing days so long ago. The word became flesh is the

“heresy” that turned Jewish heads side to side, turned the Rabbis inside out, and turned the world upside down.

Our own passage concludes today telling us, “From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.’ For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” The four nights have come and gone, and now we sit on the precipice of a new day. The light is shining out of the darkness our into our hearts. The prophetic word is more fully confirmed. He is the only God who has made the Father known. Therefore, love, worship, and obey him.