

Remaining in Christ: Jesus' "I AM" Statements in the Gospel of John

Session I:

Notes on the Teaching

The Word Becomes Flesh (John 1:1-18)

- In the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), Jesus asks his disciples two pointed questions. After first asking them “Who do people say I am?” he follows with a question just for them: “But who do *you* say that I am?” Peter resolutely answers, “You are the Messiah.”
- The author of the Gospel of John, writing for a group of first-century, mostly Jewish followers of Jesus, provides us with his community’s prayerful, deeply reflected answer to that question (though Jesus never actually asks that question in John’s Gospel). In John, Jesus is the Jewish Messiah, but he is also much, much more. In this opening chapter, known as the Prologue, John identifies Jesus as a significant part of God’s inner life and central to the life of the whole world. In this Gospel, the *logos* of God – most often understood as the creative Word or divine Wisdom of God – comes down from heaven and takes up residence in a human being – Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus thus becomes the embodiment of God’s pre-existent, life-giving Word and Wisdom present with God at the creation of the world and everything in it.
- This opening passage becomes the interpretive key to John’s Gospel and the principal themes introduced in this passage will echo throughout the rest of John. The brief comments below focus our attention on some of the important theological implications that this characterization of Jesus creates for our daily lives, the universe we inhabit, and the rest of John’s Gospel story.
- **“In the beginning...”** John’s opening words bring to mind Genesis 1:1 and the story of creation. Right away, however, John turns in a different direction. “In the beginning was the *logos* and the *logos* was with God and the *logos* was God.” The Greek word *logos* most often translates as “word” or “speech.” Scholars debate whether the background of the *logos* in John is from the world of philosophy, where *logos* denotes the rational principle holding the universe together; from the biblical world, where *logos* refers to

the creative “speech” of God in the law and prophets (“God spoke” and something happens); or the more likely world of Jewish theological reflection on the figure of Wisdom (Greek: *Sophia*) as she is known in earlier Jewish scriptures.

- Sophia appears in the Old Testament books of Proverbs, Sirach, and the Wisdom of Solomon as a divine force already present at creation. Wisdom serves God’s creative power by seeking to find a home among mortals, to guide humans in the wisdom and ways of God so that they become “friends of God” (see Wisdom of Solomon 7:27). In these Jewish scriptures that predate John’s Gospel, the divine Wisdom of God participated in God’s creation of the world (Proverbs 8:1-36); took up residence in the world among human beings, including her presence in the Jewish Torah (Sirach 24:1-22); and she manifested God’s glory to the world (Wisdom of Solomon 7:21-8:1). These traditions demonstrate how Wisdom continued to seek a home among humans, but was always rejected and returned to heaven.
- **The *logos* is the divine agent for all creation.** “All things came into being through him [the *logos*], and without him [the *logos*] not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him [the *logos*] was life, and the life was the light of all people” (John 1:3-4). This *logos* shares the very nature of God and becomes God’s agent for creating every aspect of life in the world. According to John, it is the *logos* that first brought light and life into the world. According to biblical scholar Cynthia Kittredge, “the origin of the drama of this gospel is the kinship of the Logos with the creation of all things.” The pattern John outlines here closely parallels the Jewish understanding of the generative power of God’s Wisdom described above. Sadly, as with divine Wisdom, the world did not accept and receive the *logos*’ revelation of God’s ways for the world, which can lead people to become “children of God” born of the will of God (vv. 12-13).
- **The *logos* became flesh and “lived among us.”** In v. 14 the Gospel writer first mentions the human person, Jesus of Nazareth. The divine *logos* – God’s pre-existent, creative Word and divine Wisdom – came down from heaven and took up residence in human form and “lived among us.” The Greek verb translated as “lived” is much more graphic and points us further toward comprehending God’s divine intervention in the affairs of the world in the person of Jesus. The verb means literally “to pitch a tent” or “to tabernacle” on earth among humans. This verb depicts not only a temporary existence on earth for the *logos* embodied in Jesus, but also recalls the images of the tent or tabernacle in which God’s glory was present with the Israelites in their wilderness journey. The verb also echoes divine Wisdom pitching her tent on earth. John’s message is clear: Jesus is now the place where God’s glory is revealed to humans.

- **“...grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son...who has made him known.”** As one scholar puts it, in this Gospel Jesus is the “fleshed-out truth about God” and another suggests that this form of divine revelation speaks to humanity in a language it can understand. Jesus reveals to the world the God whom “no one has ever seen” by interpreting God and making God known in our earthly realm. One aspect of the Greek word translated as “truth” concerns “not forgetting.” John is surely telling us that the divine *logos* embodied in Jesus, living among us, helps us “not forget” the image of the divine Word through which we were all created and received our life from God. Jesus demonstrates for us how to live into that divine image in which, and through which, we were all created.
- This self-revelation of God is ongoing as Jesus remains/abides with the community and makes himself known through the mutual care and friendships they experience together. His forthcoming “I Am” sayings amplify different facets of God’s nature that enhance the quality of human life. Most of these “I Am” sayings explicitly draw on some characteristic of divine Wisdom depicted in earlier Jewish scriptures. Jesus also assures the community that after his death he will send another encourager – the Holy Spirit – to continue revealing the life and will of Jesus to his disciples and friends. With the Spirit’s help, they will not forget how to live into the divine image in and through which they were created and have abundant life.