

## SERMON NOTES

New Sunday

Synaxis Gospel

John 1:1-17

### THE INCARNATE GOD

#### INTRODUCTION

This past week, after celebrating the Resurrection of our Lord, we entered the fifty-day period leading up to Pentecost. These fifty days recall the forty days of our Lord's time on earth after His Resurrection until His Ascension, plus ten more days. During the last ten days, about one hundred and twenty disciples waited, as Jesus directed, in Jerusalem for the gift of the Holy Spirit, Who would be sent to indwell and empower them.

During the forty days He remained on the earth, our Lord taught the disciples many things, which, before His Resurrection, they were not ready to understand. He taught them how the Scriptures (our Old Testament) spoke of Him and His salvation. In our reading for today, we see the results of our Lord's teaching. John begins his Gospel by describing Who Jesus Christ really is.

#### SYNAXIS READING

John 1:1-17

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.*

*All things came into being by Him and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being.*

*In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.*

*There came a man, sent from God, whose name was John. He came for a witness, that he might bear witness of the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came that he might bear witness of the light.*

*There was the true light, which, coming into the world, enlightens every man. He was in the world,*

*and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him.*

*He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him. 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, who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.*

*And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.*

*John bore witness of 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.' "*

*For of His fullness we have all received, and grace upon grace. For the Law was given through Moses, grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ.*

## NOTES

### In the beginning was the Word,

John begins His Gospel in the same way that Moses began Genesis: "In the beginning . . ." But whereas Moses continues with "God" John continues with "the Word" and affirms His eternal existence as God.

The Word is the English translation for the Greek term "Logos." It is **not** true that John's use of this term reflects a Greek philosophical idea. The Greek philosophers had developed a concept of an intermediary physical god between God and creation. This physical intermediary they styled "the Logos" who was actually the creative force and embodied reason and order. The Jewish philosopher Philo combined this idea with his idea that God must remain removed from contact with the physical. In the Greek view and apparently with Philo as well, the Logos was thus something of a demi-god. This Greek view was **not** John's as we shall see.

The Jews who read John's Gospel spoke Aramaic and would identify the Logos with an expression they heard often in the Targums—the Aramaic translations of the Hebrew Scriptures—read each Sabbath in their synagogues. This expression was "the Memra," or the Word. The Jews were reluctant to use the Name of God and used other terms instead. For theophanies, instances of the self-revelation of God, the Targums used the indirect term "the Memra" in place of directly referring to God.<sup>1</sup> Thus in Genesis 1:3, where it is written, "And God said" the Targum reads, "And the Memra of H'<sup>2</sup> said." They really meant God's revelation of Himself said. In Genesis 3:8

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<sup>1</sup> It is a noun form of the verb 'amar or say.

<sup>2</sup> H' indicates the Tetragrammaton, YHWH, the NAME of God.

and following, we read in the Targum: “And they heard the voice of the Memra of H’ . . . And the Memra of H’ called out to the Man.”<sup>3</sup>

and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.

The translation “with” for the Greek preposition *προς* gives the idea of ‘another.’ However the preposition could be translated *in reference to* or *in accordance with*.<sup>4</sup> The Word was in conformity to God. It could also be rendered *on behalf of*. In other words the Word was an expression or manifestation of God for Himself. Moreover, the Word expressed the Mind of God. Jesus stated over and over that He was from God. John is emphasizing the unity that exists between God and His Word.

John underscores that the Word is God Himself.

In the beginning, this Word was. *The beginning* here is probably the beginning of creation. The Word already was because God already was. God has no beginning.

All things came into being by Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being.

Again, referring to the first chapter of Genesis in which all things came into being by God saying, “Let there be . . .” It was God’s Divine Word, His own Self Expression, that wrought all in creation.

In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shined in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.

God is the source of life, and He is life. He is the living God. In Genesis, the first thing God commanded was “Let there be light.” It is understood there that the light was a physical light, but it was created before any physical source of light such as the sun or stars.

Included in light’s meaning is the idea of revelation. Light reveals what is, physically. Spiritual light reveals the Truth and exposes sin.

In John 9:5, Jesus said, “As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” And in John 8:12 He said, “I am the **light of the world**: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.” The light—the Truth that gives life, whose source is the life of God, is provided to the followers of Christ.

Just as the first light, called forth by God in Genesis, was shining in the primordial darkness, and was not overcome by it, so the Light shining from the Word, in the dark world of sinful mankind, can neither be quenched, nor overcome by the darkness, nor understood by it. (The word translated ‘comprehend’ can also mean ‘to overtake’).

There came a man, sent from God, whose name was John. He came for a witness, that he might bear witness of the light, that all might believe through him.

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted from Daniel Boyarin, “The Gospel of the Memra: Jewish Binitarianism and the Prologue to John” in *The Harvard Theological Review* 94:3 (2001) 256. Other instances of this substitution can be found in the Targums translation of Genesis 18:1; 19:24; Exodus 17:21; Deuteronomy 32:39.

<sup>4</sup> It is used in this way in Ephesians 3:4. *In accordance with* means *in unanimous agreement with*. *Unanimous* comes from *unius* one + *animous* mind, spirit. By using *προς*, John was not emphasizing the distinctness of the Word, but the unity of God.

The *John* mentioned here is not the Gospel writer, but John the Baptist. The people recognized John the Baptist as a prophet.<sup>5</sup> He testified that God had shown him that Jesus was the One sent from God. All those who accepted the testimony of John the Baptist would believe in Christ. This is why Jesus asked the chief priests and elders, in Matthew. 21:25, “The baptism of **John**, whence was it, from heaven, or of men?”

And Matthew recounts the thoughts of the chief priests and elders. “If we shall say, from heaven; he will say unto us, ‘Why did you not then believe him?’ ”

Jesus told them, “For **John** came unto you in the way of righteousness, and you believed him not: but the publicans and the harlots believed him: and you, when you had seen it, repented not afterward, that you might believe him.”

### He was not the light, but came that he might bear witness of the light.

John the Baptist was asked if he were the Christ, but he denied it.<sup>6</sup> He said that the One coming after him was far greater than himself, and existed before him. Whereas John only baptized with water, the One he testified about would baptize with the Holy Spirit.<sup>7</sup> (It is obvious that only One Who is God can do this.)

### There was the true light, which, coming into the world, enlightens every man.

John only reflected the Light, as the moon does the sun; the real Light is Christ. The ability of man to reason comes from God, but here, spiritual illumination, in a world dark with sin, is probably meant. This only comes from Christ.<sup>8</sup>

There is some debate if the sentence should be translated: “That was the true Light, which, coming into the world, enlightens every man,” or “That was the true light, which, enlightens every man coming into the world.” However, the position of the participial phrase in the Greek, “coming into the world,” most naturally modifies *every man*. Therefore the second option may be best.

### He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him.

The Word was shining in the darkness—He was in the world shrouded in darkness—and the world was actually created by Him, but the world (of men) did not ‘know’ or recognize Him.

### He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him.

He came to His own place?—the Temple in Jerusalem? The priests and religious authorities did not receive Him.

Some hold that *His own* were the Jews, His chosen people. But the expression seems more inclusive. As recorded in Genesis, mankind was made in God’s image; they were thus His, in a very unique way over the rest of creation. The Word came to mankind, but mankind, in general, did not receive Him.

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew 21:26

<sup>6</sup> John 1:20

<sup>7</sup> John 1:26-27

<sup>8</sup> See F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel & Epistles of John* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1983) p.35.

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, who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.

“As many as received Him (or chose Him—He does not force Himself upon people)” He empowers them to become God’s children. Though the **choice** as an individual is theirs, they cannot empower themselves, or anyone else, to become God’s child. This authority comes only from God.

“Not of blood or of the will of the flesh” refers to physical birth. Being born into a family of God’s children does not mean the individual child is a child of God. There is a choice the person must make before God gives him, or her, the power to become one of His. But when the child, or adult, chooses to receive Him, God promises here to give that individual the supernatural power to become His child.

And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.

John now identifies the Word; He became incarnate. We know this incarnate Word, Who is God, is Jesus Christ. Parenthetically, John recalls times when the disciples saw Christ’s glory. Surely one of these moments was on the Mount of Transfiguration, when Jesus was transfigured before them in bright light, and the Father told them to listen to His beloved Son.

To the Jews of that day, *only begotten* or *only son* would mean the preeminent one in the family. It would mean: the one who has been chosen to rule the family. This, in the early days of the patriarchs of the nation, had nothing to do with the order of birth or even singleness of birth. Isaac was called Abraham’s only son, yet he was the second of his children.<sup>9</sup> But Isaac was the one chosen to rule the family and pass on the blessing.

Here, *only begotten of the Father* has nothing to do with generation, but of appointment to be the ruler, the great king of God’s family. Similarly, the kings of Israel were entitled “Son of God,”<sup>10</sup> and God announced that He had begotten them on the day of their coronation. In fact, Adam, as the first king of the earth, was entitled “Son of God.”<sup>11</sup> Misunderstanding this point of Jewish culture has caused a great deal of confused theology.

“Full of Grace and Truth” can be understood to mean that Christ was overflowing with the love of God for His lost mankind. This had caused Him to lay aside His glorious crown in heaven and stoop to take on our human nature to die in our stead. Moreover, all that He said was absolutely true and dependable.

John bore witness of 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.’”

When he saw Jesus coming to be baptized in the Jordan River, John the Baptist testified, to all those present, that this man was the very One he, John, had been proclaiming would come.

God sent John first to announce the coming of Christ. But once Christ came, the Christ is the One Who should be seen as important. The reason He is more important is because of His pre-existent position in the past. Christ was always the important One.

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<sup>9</sup> Genesis 22:2, 12, and 16

<sup>10</sup> Psalm 2 was not only a Messianic psalm but also a coronation psalm recited at the crowning of each new king of Israel.

<sup>11</sup> Luke 3:38

For of his fullness we have all received, and grace upon grace.

This statement is by John, the Gospel writer. What does he mean? *His fullness* refers to completeness. It seems to refer back to John the Baptist's statement of the preeminence of Christ. As St. Paul tells us, "all the fullness of the Godhead bodily dwelt in Him." *We all* refers to His disciples, those who *received* Him. They have received the One in whom all this fullness dwells. God's Grace and Truth characterized this fullness.

The grace that Moses brought in the giving of the Law was replaced by the grace that fulfilled the Law on our behalf, as the next statement explains.

For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ.

The Law given by Moses was at the direction of God that we might understand God's righteous demands. St. Paul says the Law was our schoolmaster, to bring us to Christ.

But in Jesus Christ, we have a greater revelation of God. F.F. Bruce has rightly noticed that the glory of Himself, that God showed to Moses—but only from His back—this glory, the disciples of Christ beheld in His person. The glory of God's character, revealed in Jesus Christ, was proclaimed to Moses as "The LORD, The LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and **truth**."<sup>12</sup>

*The following verse is not included in our reading, but since John closes this section of chapter one with it, it seems good to review it here.*

No man has seen God at any time; the only begotten God, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained him.

This is a better manuscript reading than those which read "the only begotten Son."<sup>13</sup> The incarnate God has returned to the Father from Whom He came and has His being. When we see God, we will see His Incarnation there in the Father.

We know from our study that *the only begotten God* refers to Jesus Christ, God's Incarnation. This verse indicates that God's previous revelations of Himself, in the Old Testament theophanies, were this same only begotten God, before His incarnation.

## APPLICATION

Luke recorded in his Gospel that after the Resurrection, Jesus appeared to two of his followers. As they walked along towards the village of Emmaus, He taught them from the Old Testament; "beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself." Not knowing that it was Jesus Who walked with them, they were amazed and later asked each other "Did not our hearts burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the scriptures?"<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Bruce, p. 44.

<sup>13</sup> See the Apparatus for this verse in the *Nestle-Aland Greek New Testament*. Thus, the Armenian Bible reading in Grapar, "the only begotten Son," does not have the best manuscript support to date.

<sup>14</sup> Luke 24:32

Continuing in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, Luke reported that Jesus remained on earth forty days. Jesus continued to teach them until He was taken up, “speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God.”<sup>15</sup> Now, the disciples were ready to hear these teachings, because they now knew that God had raised Him from the dead. They knew that everything He said was from God. They had not understood, before, that He had to die. Now they were ready to understand why He had to suffer these things. They were ready to understand exactly Who He really is.

John’s Gospel is devoted to these questions. He passes on to us those great teachings of our risen Lord. What did the answers mean to the disciples and what do they mean to us today? The Armenian Church has reserved these fifty days until Pentecost to listen again to these wonderful teachings, and to ponder deeply our response.

First of all, John tells us that Jesus is really God the Creator, who became a man like us, and that in Him is life and light for our understanding. It is only through Him that we can know God. Everything that God is can be seen in Jesus Christ. The glory of God’s love, faithfulness and truth can be seen in our Lord.

We are told that John the Baptist was the one appointed by God to prepare His people to receive the Incarnate God. In the next chapter, John tells that this preparation to receive God is by repentance from our sins. Those who do repent and receive this Incarnate God, Jesus Christ, are given a great gift. They are given the authority, the supernatural power, to become the children of God.

The rest of John’s Gospel will answer the rest of the questions. In his third chapter, we will discover that it was because God loves us that He sent Jesus Christ to die on the Cross in our place. Again, we only have to accept this. It is in believing, in trusting that this is true, that we are born again spiritually—we become the children of God.

What did this knowledge mean for the first disciples? They were changed from the fearful people they had been immediately after the Crucifixion—hiding from arrest and execution. They were changed from the self-centered people that they had been before the Resurrection—thinking only of their own welfare and nursing their disappointment. After receiving the power of the Holy Spirit, they turned their world upside down, spreading the truth of the love of God that had been manifested to them in the person of their Lord and Savior. They braved every danger and persecution. They would not stop telling the wonderful news.

The message was simple: the love of the God of creation had impelled Him to lay aside His heavenly crown, to take on human form—as one of us—in order to rescue our souls. Later, St. Paul would explain that our sins separated us from God. Those sins could only be removed by the death of our Lord in our place. And so He died. But when the sins were paid for, He rose victorious from the dead, and now He sits in Heaven once more in the bosom of the Father, in the seat of all authority, over every created thing, visible and

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<sup>15</sup> Acts 1:1-3

invisible, His glorious crown upon His head. If this One is for us, who can stand against us!

This knowledge changed the first disciples. Will it change us who claim to worship Him? Will we see our life, our existence upon this earth differently? When we see the beautiful flowers of springtime, or gaze at the endless starry sky, the beauty and the majesty of His creation, will we think how their Creator loved us, and gave Himself for us? Dare we ignore this Power, and take lightly this great love, living our lives as if He did not exist or matter? Most of us do just that. And if we continue, tragically, we will lose all that He suffered to give us. For us, He will have died in vain.

John tells us that we must receive this wonderful Guest. It is our choice. God desires passionately to save us from eternal death, but He won't force us to accept Him, and His work on our behalf. He gave His life for us, are we grateful enough to give our lives for Him? It has been said, that it is harder to live for Him than to die for Him. But He will come and live with us, and help us. He has promised never to leave us, or forsake those of us who do receive Him. Just think of it! How glorious is that!