

The Incarnate Word

John 1:1-14 *John 1:1 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 nothing was made that was made. ⁴ In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. ⁵ And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it. ⁶ There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷ This man came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all through him might believe. ⁸ He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light. ⁹ That was the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world. 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 His own did not receive Him. ¹² But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, 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 and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.*

If a visitor from another planet landed on Earth on or around December 25th, he would discover all kinds of celebrations and decorations, and parties. Upon investigating, he might find out that all this feasting and partying and making merry, is actually the celebration of someone's birthday.

If he would then try to figure out whose birthday, he would become massively confused. He would suspect that this person must be very important, for these celebrations occur all over the globe. He would suspect that this person is no longer here, because there is no single place to which everyone goes. But beyond that, he would be utterly confused as to who this person was, or is, what he or she did and why he or she is remembered. Because as this extra-terrestrial surveyed all the Christmas parties, music, decorations, shopping, gift-giving, it would seem to be chaotic, unrelated and haphazard. One place celebrates the birthday with wild drunken parties; another celebrates the birthday with a solemn midnight service. One celebrates the birthday with lavish parties; another celebrates the birthday by serving the poor. One celebrates the party with raucous rock; another celebrates with quiet carols. One celebrates with worship; another celebrates with immorality? How could all this be true of one person?

The answer of course, is that it can't. If the alien visitor were lucky enough to be in a place where genuine and appropriate worship of Jesus Christ was taking place, he might understand what it means to celebrate the human birth of the Lord Jesus Christ. But the chances are, he would land in a place which would give him the impression that the person being celebrated was a deceased rock star, a trillionnaire who had given everyone money, or fat Scandinavian man who mostly wore a red suit.

Why is there such confusion over what this day should be? The confusion results from allowing the wider culture to tell us what it means, instead of the original documents that record the event. If we go to those documents and study the event, we will certainly come much closer to understanding what this day originally was, and how we ought to respond.

John was a man who was an eyewitness of the historical Jesus. He lived with Jesus for around 3 years. Many years later, he put pen to paper and recorded his eyewitness testimony and wrote the book we find in the New Testament named after him. If we listen to him, we may understand what this day is supposed to be.

In the opening verses, John introduces the book with some strange words. He talks about someone called *the Word*. Some Greek philosophers had spoken of an unknown mediator between God and the world. They had called this Mediator, the Logos. John takes this idea that was already present

in his culture, and turns it to Christian use. He says that this unknown mediator actually became a man, and was known as the man Jesus Christ.

John 1:14-18 ¹⁴ *And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.* ¹⁵ *John bore witness of Him and cried out, saying, "This was He of whom I said, 'He who comes after me is preferred before me, for He was before me.' "* ¹⁶ *And of His fullness we have all received, and grace for grace.* ¹⁷ *For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.* ¹⁸ *No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him.*

This Word became flesh, which is to say, the Word became human. He dwelt among us. Literally, he tabernacled among us. We saw him, He was the only begotten Son of the Father; John the Baptist testified of him, and his name is Jesus Christ.

Everyone knows, broadly speaking, that Christmas is supposed to be celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ. But the confusion of what is an appropriate response to that event comes because people have not taken this portion of John and understood it.

To understand it, we need to take verse 14 and read it in light of verse 1. Like two slides which must be overlaid to see the whole picture, we must take verse 14 which speaks His being made human, in light of verse 1 which tells us His essential nature, to understand the wonder and the glory of this event. Who exactly was it that became flesh and dwelt among us? As we look at verse 1, we will see three attributes of the One who was born among us as a human baby and rising from that, we will better understand what this day should be – at least in the lives of those who understand it.

I. The Enfleshed Word Was From Eternity

"In the beginning was the Word"

The first thing we learn about the Word that became flesh and dwelt among us, was that this Word was there in the beginning, "In the beginning was the Word".

When is the beginning? It simply means as early as human beings can imagine time. At the very start of the time-space universe. When timelessness and void became time and space, this was the beginning. And who was there at that moment? The Word.

But notice, the Bible does not say, in the beginning the Word *came into being*. It does not say, in the beginning, the Word *began*. It simply says, in the beginning **was** the Word.

In the original language, there is a simple Greek word, ἦν . It is in the imperfect tense. It means was and continued to be. If we wanted to very literally translate it, we might say, In the beginning was being the Word. In the beginning, existing was the Word.

According to the Bible this Word, who became flesh, was not part of the time-space creation. He was not one of the things God made. When time began, the Word had always been existing. He had already been existing for more lifetimes than we can fit into our finite minds. When time began, the Word had been alive for as long as we will live in heaven – for an eternity.

All of us have memories of early childhood. Perhaps there is still a memory you have of some scene or place from when you were still a toddler, at the age of two or three. But then the memories stop. We can't remember absolute infancy, or being born or being in the womb. Our memories only go as far back as when our life was two or three or four years old. The reason for that is we all had a beginning.

What would it be, to be a Person, who has memories that go back not decades, not centuries, not millennia, but aeons – years beyond counting? And that there is no stopping point for the memories because there was no beginning. A memory like a bottomless well, no end, no limit, because there was no beginning.

But I said we must overlay these truths of verses 1 and 14. It was this Word, this Person who had always existed that became flesh - He was born. The One who had no beginning was now united to a human nature that had a birthday. The One who had lived for ages uncountable was now given an age. He was two, he was fifteen, he was twenty-four. During one dispute with some religious leaders, they said to him, you are not yet fifty years old, and you claim to have seen Abraham. To which Jesus responded, Truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM.

He had seen galaxies form, but now, as the enfleshed Word, He was told He needed to turn twelve before He had come of age. He had watched civilisations rise and fall, but as the enfleshed Word, He was not old enough to join the Sanhedrin. He had taught Israel and prophets all they knew, but as the enfleshed Word, He now grew in wisdom and stature. He had watched every human being born, live and die, but now the enfleshed Word took His place as submissive to Mary and Joseph as to His 'elders'.

This is what the angels wondered at. This is what left prophets staggered and dumbfounded – that the one whose goings forth have been from everlasting, should now be born in Bethlehem – that the Mighty God should now be a child born. I ask you, what responses are appropriate? What has drunkenness to do with this event? What has mindless gluttony to do with this day? What has immorality and frivolousness to do with this event? Singing, yes; joy, yes; wonder, yes; but the singing, joy and wonder of people humbled by the wonder of the Incarnation.

The enfleshed Word was from eternity. Verse 1 tells us something else. I would like us to look at the third phrase in verse 1, and then we'll come back to the second one. The third phrase in John 1:1 teaches us that

II. The Enfleshed Word Was Deity

“...and the Word was God”..

The Word had always existed, and there is only one Being who has always existed, and that is God. The Word was God. Once again, it is the same word that was used to say He *was* in the beginning. He had always been existing in the beginning, and so in the same way, He had always been existing as God.

The enfleshed Word was Deity. The one who came to dwell among us and was seen by others and handled and heard; upon whom, John, this author, laid his head at the Last Supper – He had always been existing as God. Not less than God, not a kind of God, not an inferior small-g god, but God. The Word that united Himself with a true human nature had always been God.

If you meet a Jehovah's Witness who knows a little bit of Greek, he will tell you that this should not read, “and the Word was God.” He will tell you that in the Greek, there is no definite article before the word God. He will say, if it doesn't have the definite article, we should translate this as *a god*. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was *a god*. So goes the New World Translation.

What he won't tell you (besides there being no article in verse 6, 12, 13 or 18) is why there is no definite article. The reason is not because John wanted you to think that the Word was a kind of god, a little god. The reason is this: Greek is different to English and if in Greek, you want to stress the properties and qualities and nature of something, you leave off the article. John was writing, the Word was with God, and the Word had all the properties, qualities and attributes of God. The Word shared equally in the essence of God. The Word was fully and totally God in His being.

That means the Word was all-knowing. The Word was all-powerful. The Word was all-present. The Word was perfect, not changing for the better or the worse. The Word was self-existent and self-sufficient, not needing anyone or anything else for life. The Word was the Creator of all things as verse 3 tells us, and therefore the Sustainer of all things. He was the supreme Lord over all He had made.

Now once, again, let us place the slide of verse 14 over the slide of verse 1.

Here is God, self-existent and self-sufficient, deriving His life from no one, and existing because of Himself, now nursing as a helpless baby; now eating and drinking to keep alive. Still self-existent, but added to His deity a true human nature that needs sustenance.

Here is God, omnipotent and almighty, now experiencing weakness, tiredness, thirst, hunger.

Here is God, immutable, unchanging – now growing from babe to boy to man.

Here is God, infinite, without bounds, omnipresent, everywhere at the same time, now being in one place, walking to his destinations.

Here is God, majestic and the sum of all beauty, now appearing as a plain Hebrew man, that Isaiah said, “There is no form nor beauty in him that we should desire him”

Here is God, the name of all names, now experiencing slander, mockery, disgrace.

Here is God, the One who has had perfect joy and sovereignty, now experiencing suffering.

Charles Wesley put it this way:

Men stand amazed! It seems unjust!
The Lord of earth and skies
Is humbled now with bonds of dust,
And in a manger lies.

In heaven angels once adored
Their Maker and their King;
Now tidings of their humbled Lord
To mortals they must sing.

The God invisible appears,
But with His glories shorn,
To travel thro' this vale of tears
And die, our Lord is born.

The great eternal Son of God
Becomes the Son of Man;
As God dwells in an earthly clod
Redemption is His plan.

If you wanted to convince the extra-terrestrial that it was *this* birth that you were celebrating, how would you celebrate? What would you do? How would you not celebrate? What would you not do?

For me, Psalm 2:11 comes to mind: rejoice with trembling.

The enfleshed Word was from eternity. The enfleshed Word was full deity. But John 1:1 teaches us a third truth about the Word.

III. The Enfleshed Word Was One of a Trinity

“...and the Word was with God”

The next phrase in John 1:1 increases the mystery and the wonder of this person. It simply says, the Word was with God. Verse 2 makes it abundantly clear. This one, this same one *was* (same word as verse 1) existing in the beginning with God. Before the beginning, the Word had been eternally existing alongside God. The word for “with” can literally mean *facing*. The Word had been facing God, beholding Him, in a reciprocal relationship of love and fellowship.

But something almost appears contradictory. The end of verse 1 tells us that the Word was God. Verse 3 and verse 10 tell us that He was the Creator. So how can the Word be God, the Creator, but also be with God, alongside God?

It is only possible if there is a way that the Word is God and a way that He is not. He is God, but yet He is with God. Verse 18 solves it for us. Within God there is more than one person. There is the Person revealed as the Father. He is the one meant in verse 1 and 2 when it says the Word was with God. But then, there is also the Son. Some versions even have the *only begotten God*. There is the Person who is known as the Son. But because He was with the Father in the beginning, He was never made or born the way sons are born to fathers in the human realm. Instead, they have always related as Father and Son from eternity.

This is another reason John didn't use that article when he says 'the Word was God'. That would confuse us into thinking that the Word was identical to God as seen in the second phrase. When John says that Word was with God, He uses the article, to identify God the Father. But then John leaves it off so that no one will think that the Word is the same Person as the Father. The Word partakes fully of all it is to be God, but the Word is a distinct Person from the Father.

And we don't have to go much further in John to find out that there is another Person who has always been there, from eternity – the Spirit.

John 1:32 ³² *And John bore witness, saying, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and He remained upon Him.*

Now no illustration in all of creation could help us understand what it means for God to be a three-personal Being. C.S. Lewis told us it is like a straight line trying to imagine a two-dimensional square. Or then a two-dimensional square trying to imagine a three-dimensional cube. Though lines make up squares and squares make up cubes, two dimensional beings could never picture three dimensional beings. So we, who live as one being and one person, cannot begin to imagine what it is to be three persons and one being. But we do get hints of it as Jesus lived among us. The way He speaks of His Father speaks of the highest possible intimacy.

Matthew 11:27 ²⁷ *"All things have been delivered to Me by My Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father. Nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and the one to whom the Son wills to reveal Him.*

The enfleshed Word had intimate fellowship with God. But here is the greatest wonder of all. The

Word, who had always been with the Father, became man, so that He could bring man back into fellowship with Himself; so that sinful man could enjoy the kind of fellowship the Father and the Son had. But to do that, the Son had to die as a sin-bearer. And for that time in which He became a sin-bearer, the Father treated Him not as a Son, but as a sinner. For the first and only time in eternity, the closest love relationship in the universe was severed, broken, and the Son was derelict on the cross. He looked up, not to see Abba, Father, but God in His raw holy, justice. And as the guilt of every sin was poured on the infinite person of the Word, God made Him the object of His infinite anger.

The enfleshed Word, who was Life, becomes dead. The Light is eclipsed in darkness. The Word goes into a black hole of desertion from God beyond our imagining. He faces the unmitigated horror of being made a curse, from the Beloved Son in whom the Father was well-pleased. He is forsaken by the Father. There is no grace for Him, no help, no mercy, no deliverance. He faces this, so that we, the Ones God loved, may have mercy, grace and deliverance.

Why would God the Father, God the Son, God the Spirit choose to go through with this plan to save people far inferior to them?

We can barely get our minds around this:

'Tis mystery all: th'Immortal dies:
Who can explore His strange design?
In vain the firstborn seraph tries
To sound the depths of love divine.
'Tis mercy all! Let earth adore,
Let angel minds inquire no more.

He died so that men might live. That's what verses 10-13 tell us.

John 1:10-13 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 His own did not receive Him. ¹² But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, 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.

The Word was from eternity, true deity of the Trinity, become a man, so that we could become children of God. All who receive Him, as the true Son of God who saves us from our sins and brings us to His Father, receive a new birth.

That's the real message of Christmas – God became a man to die for our sins and become our living Mediator. Yes, we celebrate His birth, because it was His entrance into our world but He was born to die, so that we can live. The real message of Christmas confronts you with a decision – what will you do with Jesus?

If you are not a Christian, then that is the single most important thing you can do on this day – make that decision. Turn from living for yourself, and recognise that your Creator became a man to die for your sins and bring you to God. Believe it, receive it.

If you are a Christian, and our extra-terrestrial visitor came to your local church, or perhaps to your home – would he be able to piece together whose birthday was being celebrated? Would he get some sense of John 1:1-14 by your actions?