

**24 December 2021
Christmas at Midnight**

Isaiah 52:7-10
Hebrews 1:1-4
John 1:1-14

“In the beginning ...” began John.

“Yes, I know this is to be the beginning,” replied Fotis with a sigh. “You’ve already told me that this is to be the prologue. But I can’t see why you’d want to attach a prologue – this Gospel thing of yours is quite a taxing read as it is!”

The two men had been at the task for weeks: John dictating his account of the words and deeds of Jesus; Fotis, his new secretary, manfully trying to keep up with the flow of words ... and the two at times having earnest discussions about the right way to put this or that aspect of it all. While he had certainly heard of Jesus before he took on the task, Fotis wasn’t sure that he quite understood the reason for John’s enthusiasm. True, he quite enjoyed some of the ensuing discussions, but it really was just as well the hourly rate was pretty respectable.

John chose not to respond to the younger man’s assessment of the work so far.

“I think the work warrants a prologue,” he said, so that what I have written can be understood: the big picture, the full significance of it all. I want to grab the reader’s attention. So, if you don’t mind, I’ll start again.”

He took a sip of water.

“In the beginning ...”. He frowned as Fotis looked at him expectantly, reed pen still poised above the papyrus scroll.

“What?” said Fotis.

“Why aren’t you writing this down?” demanded John.

“I’m waiting for you to begin.”

“That *is* the beginning. ‘In the beginning’ *is* the beginning, the beginning of my prologue.”

“Oh, I see.” Fotis began to write the words, but stopped almost as soon as he’d put down the first letter, epsilon preceded by a smooth breathing mark. “You can’t say that!” he exclaimed, “It sounds like the start of Genesis. Who do you think you are? Moses? You’ll have to find some other way of beginning.”

“This is not about who I think I am,” replied John quietly, “It is about who I believe Jesus to be, and the significance of all he said and did. And ‘In the beginning’ is exactly the right way to start if it makes you think of Genesis, because as far as I can see Jesus is God’s new creating activity, God’s work to restore all of creation from its present state of brokenness.”

“That’s a big claim”, remarked Fotis.

“Hold onto your hat, then, because I think I’ve got bigger claims to come,” said John, a wry smile on his face. “Shall we continue?”

“I can’t wait,” said Fotis, perhaps a little sarcastically.

John scratched his head. “In the beginning was the ... um ... ah”

Fotis, who had been faithfully writing this time, looked up. “What’s the problem? ‘In the beginning was the’ what?”

“That’s exactly the issue. I want to talk about Jesus, but in a way that reflects who he is in his essence, beyond his humanity. If I use his name at this stage, something of that essence and its impact will be lost. God’s Wisdom is a big part of it, and others have written before of the wisdom of God personified. But this is not just the Wisdom of God personified, presented as *if* it were a person. What I’m wanting to speak of is of the Wisdom and activity of God actually *present as a person*, as a human being like you and me.”

They sat musing for a while, Fotis using the shaft of his reed pen to scratch an itchy spot behind his ear, John gazing at the candle that helped light the gathering gloom of the room as evening drew closer.

“Alright,” said John eventually, “I think we’ll just have to go on and leave that for the moment. Just leave a blank for the missing word, and we’ll carry on. We’ll put in the missing word when I’ve thought of what it ought to be.”

Fotis readied his pen. “‘In the beginning was the blank.’ Right, what’s next?”

John drew a deep breath, and launched in. “In the beginning was the, um, blank, and the, ah, blank was with God, and the blank was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.”

“Hang on, hang on!” cried Fotis.

“Sorry: too fast for you?” inquired John.

“No. Too much!” exclaimed Fotis. “Those are extraordinary claims to make about this Jesus of yours!”

“Yes, they are,” said John quietly but firmly. There was a strange look of radiance about him as he said it. “I make those extraordinary claims, because I believe them to be true.”

“But you’re identifying this Jesus of yours with the activity of the one true God”, protested Fotis.

“That’s right,” affirmed John. “And if you read back over the rest of the scroll we’ve written, you’ll see that all that Jesus said and did doesn’t really make any sense unless it was in fact the activity of the one true God.”

Fotis drew breath as if about to argue. But he took a cup of water instead, sipping slowly.

Eventually, he sighed, picked up his pen again, and looked expectantly at John.

John went on with his dictation: “In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”

Fotis gave a little suppressed chuckle.

“What?” demanded John.

“Light’. *Fos*.¹ The root which gives the meaning of my name. It’s nice to think I’m somehow included in what I write about.”

John smiled at him. “Ah, my friend. You are most certainly included in this, and perhaps you are not as far away from the light as you may think!”

¹ Φως

And so they laboured on into the evening, the candle having to be drawn nearer the page to enable Fotis to see his words clearly.

There was a bit of discussion when it became necessary for John to clarify that the John he went on to talk about was not his good self, but was rather the John known as 'the baptist'. Fotis was rather surprised, but relieved – he felt self-referential and self-congratulatory works were rather too common.

As they continued, John thought it helpful to underscore his point about inclusion a while later when he dictated, "The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognise him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God – children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God."

He explained that 'that which was his own' who 'did not receive him' referred to the countrymen and women of Jesus who might have thought they had a guaranteed place with God through Birthright. Instead, he said, God's invitation is much wider – *all* who receive Jesus are drawn into the worldwide family of God.

"I think we're getting near the end now," said John reassuringly, as Fotis suppressed a yawn. "This is the climax; this is what this gospel of mine is all about. Here goes: 'The blank became flesh and made his dwelling among us.'"

There was a sharp inhalation of breath as Fotis's pen skidded across the scroll. He coughed, and huffed, as he tried to gather his thoughts as they skittered through the possible implications of what John had dictated. Eventually, he pulled himself together, and said, "So this is why it is the climax to your prologue, because you believe that in Jesus something of very being of our Creator God was present, living among us, as one of us. God in human flesh. Making his dwelling among us, like the ark of the covenant placed in the tabernacle during the exodus wanderings and then placed in the Holy of Holies in the temple. That really does set up for reading

this gospel of yours in a particular way, seeing in Jesus the signs and wonders and teaching, the *presence*, of Almighty God.”

He carefully wrote down John’s words, ‘The blank became flesh and made his dwelling among us.’ He sat back, and rubbed his eyes, and reflected for a bit, shaking his head over the words on the page in front of him. When he spoke again it was with some intensity. “But what then becomes of what we’ve known since our childhood, of God being revealed through his glorious presence in his sanctuary and through the law, of the importance of the temple and the covenant’s code? What are you saying about these things – that because of Jesus they’re no longer needed? That in effect Jesus does what temple and law were intended to do?”

“Again I say, dear Fotis, you are closer to the light than you think! I am indeed saying these things. So write this, and I think you’ll see how it rounds off my prologue nicely: ‘We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.’”

Fotis scratched down the words carefully, and then there was silence as each reflected on the gravity of what was being asserted.

Suddenly, John burst out: “I’ve got it, the word!”

“What word? The missing word?”

“Ah, but the very present word!” returned John, cryptically.

Exasperated, Fotis complained, “Well, what is this word then? I’ve got so many blanks to fill in.”

John replied with quiet conviction, and then the words tumbled out of him, “The word is ‘Word’, *logos*. ‘In the beginning was the Word.’ It conveys all we’ve been talking about. What God says, happens; what God speaks into being is created and formed and given life and purpose and meaning. And in the midst of all the other words thought and spoken that speak of the brokenness of the world, the deep dysfunction within humankind and its systems, all the words of darkness and hate and hurt and disaffection and confusion and disappointment..., the Word of God, the love-speech of God, the Spirit-filled breath and Word of God that brought creation into being is

what the world needs now to bring about new creation. And in Jesus, God has done just that. 'In the beginning was the Word.... The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.'"

Sources:

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- George R Beasley-Murray, *John*, [Word Biblical Commentary], Thomas Nelson, 1999
- Michael Card, *The Parable of Joy: Reflections on the wisdom of the book of John*, 1995