

## **A Christmas Crossing John 1:1-18**

**Robert W. Bertram**

[Printed in Currents in Theology and Mission 8, No. 6  
(December, 1981): 335-343. Reprinted with permission.]

### **Diagnosis**

If the Gospel of John is a vast “cosmic trial”—as Theo Preis put it, and Paul Ricoeur after him—then I would think the first eighteen verses function not only as prologue to the main feature but more as opening testimony to the jury by an attorney for the defense or by one of the defense’s key witnesses, namely, the evangelist. In that case you and I, the readers, are, willingly or not, the jury, held accountable for returning a juridical verdict.

The One whose case we now have to adjudge as critics is a young Jewish male who has long since died but who claimed to have been “in the beginning with God,” indeed to be God. Our verdict of him, one way or the other, reflects our judgment on God, as of course everything we do does. “The absolute itself is on trial. ...The trial is unavoidable. ... Only a trial can decide between Yahweh and ‘idols of nothing.’” (Ricoeur) Yet in this Johannine trial the God-claim is so starkly different that any conventional judgments we have about God are sure to be at odds with this Jesus-as-God.

What remains the same, though, whether we rule for Jesus-as-God or some other god, is that our respective verdicts are themselves on trial, and we with them. Our critical responsibility in life not only is unavoidable, it is fateful. Especially in the case at hand, the Defendant not only is appealing for us to vindicate him but also claims authority to decide our fate accordingly. If the question to us is, “what is your judgment of him,” our answer affects not only him but also ourselves and our world. So then, also for our sakes, What *is* our decision about him? The Court waits, though not forever.

### **Initial Diagnosis: Reversed Priorities**

The evangelist testifies not only for Jesus but also against the opposition, also against us when we side with the opposition—as we chronically do. As the Johannine precedent shows, opposition to Jesus need not be head-on. It may actually appear as acceptance of him, at least as accommodating him, except for one subtle reservation: Jesus is not accorded absolute priority over other biblical authorities whom God has sent. Please understand, the opponents may hasten to assure us, that need not entail a demotion of Jesus. He may still enjoy the same lofty brand of authority which God’s other spokespersons (John the Baptist, Moses) have enjoyed and which is the authority of scripture itself, the authority of God’s “law” (1:17). His is the authority of being absolutely right, so that to the extent that we agree with it we are likewise right. Isn’t that what made Jesus authoritative?

Surely, the opposition reasons, Jesus cannot claim to be unprecedented, an utter original. Not only were Moses and John the Baptist his predecessors, they were his teachers. He came after them, and more than that, he had to build upon them. Deny that and you deny that he was a historical human being. Worse yet, if it is not their scriptural tradition which he continues, then you make him out to represent another god than theirs. And what other legitimate god could there be, the opponents demand, than the One whose scripture is our norm, whose every Word is our command? Isn't that what entitles us, and surely Jesus, to be God's family?

In rebutting the opposition, the evangelist does not deny (how could he?) that Jesus came later than his predecessors. On the contrary, the historical sequence from biblical precursors to a subsequent Jesus is now turned into a deft argument precisely for Jesus' superiority, by recasting the predecessors in the role of Jesus' advance-men, his foregoing "witnesses." Moreover, their "testimony" pointed forward to him in such a way as to deflect attention from themselves, implying that their own tradition of divine law was only preliminary and subordinate. Nor does the evangelist dispute the traditionalist assumption here that more-ancient implies more-authoritative. In fact, he capitalizes on that assumption by citing the one case where previous does mean preeminent, where chronological entails ontological priority: The Word who in Jesus "*became* flesh" already "*was* in the beginning," hence is dependent on no one but his Father and is himself depended upon by everyone else who came later.

In other words, the evangelist makes a point of accepting the opponents' talk about precedent—who came first?—and turns their talk diametrically against them. Yes, he grants, the Mosaic precedent of the law does indeed speak for God, so does John the Baptist, so of course do the scriptures. But for us to assimilate Jesus to their kind of authority when they themselves used that authority to point away from themselves and to "bear witness" to Jesus who as "the Word" predated them all, is for us to incur their accusation. And accusation is a function they are authorized to perform. "Do not think that I shall accuse you to the Father," says the Johannine Jesus, "it is Moses who accuses you, on whom you set your hope. If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote of me." (5:45, 46) "You search the scriptures," Jesus tells them, "...and it is they that bear witness to me." (5:39) John the Baptist bore witness to him and cried, "...He who comes after me ranks before me, for he was before me." (1:15; 6-8; 19-36)

To subsume Jesus under the lesser authority of scripture and its law and prophets—to rank him simply within the history of God's self-revelation, even if at the climax of that history—is to lose not only Jesus, the prior One, but these lesser priorities as well. They then function in the "trial" not as our supporters but as our accusers, and all quite publicly—as publicly as any good biblical preaching of the law. "Did not Moses give you the law? Yet none of you keeps the law." (7:19) The trouble with legalists is not that, in downgrading the originality of Jesus, they are now left with only the law. They no longer have even the law—how could they manage it?—but instead are preoccupied with petty human legalities of manageable size, sabbaths and circumcisions, bylaws. "That is not from Moses," Jesus warns them, "but merely from the fathers." (7:22) There

is no bribing the authorities of scripture into supporting us by flattering them into first place. They know better and are uncorruptible. Overrating the biblical authorities alienates them all.

### **Advanced Diagnosis: Lightless, Lifeless**

It is bad enough that in this trial the biblical authorities whom we mistake for Jesus' paradigms and norms have to incriminate us for doing so. Besides, as the Defense now adds, in our looking to these authorities instead of the Light to which they testify, we stand to lose that Light and, losing it, lose Life itself. Again it is we the jury, not just the evangelist's historic opponents who are being warned, though now more ominously than before. At first, all that seemed to be at stake was our credibility within the biblical tradition, a condition which we might conceivably salvage by means of some change of attitude or belief. Now the stakes are raised to Light and Life, conditions not nearly as much within our control.

To lump Jesus with God's other revealers, no matter what superlatives we may still reserve for him, is to miss his—indeed, the Creator's own—unique “glory.” (1:14) The metaphor is more than optical, cognitive. It is, like the sun in photosynthesis, biological. Not to be brightened by Jesus-as-God is to be ultimately lifeless, yet without knowing so. John the Baptist (or whatever equivalent authority we prefer) “was not that Light, only a witness to that Light.” (1:8) But the Light to whom he bore witness brought “Life, and the Light was the Life of humankind” (1:4), “the true Light which enlightens every human being.” (1:9) Without that Light no one is truly humanly alive but is rather with the “darkness” (1:15) where nothing grows or survives.

This Johannine rhetoric is so extreme it is lulling, unreal. But then our sense of unreality may itself be a symptom of the “darkness.” Doesn't it seem overdrawn to brand this commonsensical, normal attitude of ours toward Jesus as mortal “darkness,” when all we mean to be doing really is to associate Jesus with the rest of God's other accredited revealers, as the greatest and last of them at that? *That* is shunning the Light? *That* is denying the Creator's Light? and life itself? Surely the evangelist must be overstating himself, probably just turning up the volume for effect.

Or is it rather that our numbness to this impassioned Christology only proves how thick the “darkness” is? So much so that even those on the jury like ourselves, who officially sympathize with the Defendant, find his evangelist's warnings alarmist. If even we, Christ's partisans, find the Johannine rhetoric too shrill, then that might well confirm how advanced is the darkness against which the attorney inveighs.

How else would we expect to experience darkness? As consciously, detectably dark? Surely not, for if the dark were recognizable, if our well intended normalizing of Jesus were as strange to us as felt darkness, we would not need to be warned against its false feel of plausibility. Those who are most in the dark do not know that they are, and cannot know apart from some alternative experience of light. Indeed, classifying Jesus within

the genus of all other God-revealers seems like anything but darkness; it seems like enlightenment.

For the evangelist to indict Jesus' domesticators as "darkness" is, of course, a value judgment which presupposes that he speaks from a vantage of light. If he does, as you and I also believe he does, then those who do not share his position can hardly be expected to perceive their own viewpoint as benighted. Yet the fact is they *cannot* see it that way, and that is a fact to which they would agree. Now might not that very fact be used to give them pause? For could it be that the reason why they cannot see their "enlightenment" as dark is that they are constitutionally and environmentally disabled from doing so? That much possibility they might still be able to envision, as a possibility. And that much might be sobering.

Maybe. But only maybe. Meanwhile, the fact that the evangelist's warning of Christological "darkness" leave intelligent, sensitive people quite unmoved may well substantiate how involuntary their darkness is, how superhuman and systemic. But why speak of "their" and "them"? By now it is we whom the evangelist is warning against loss of Life, and we who in our lifelessness and dullness are tempted to find his warnings un-enlightened, thus corroborating his fears of a demonic hoodwink.

### **Final Diagnosis: Disinherited**

Comes now that abject depth of the opponents' problem (and ours?) which takes it far beneath any human ability to retrieve. To refuse to recognize Jesus as the Father's unique and "only" Son means not *being* recognized as the Father's other sons and daughters. To disown Jesus-as-God is to be disowned by Jesus' God. It is to lose all rights (1:12) to God, and losing those rights is not only a matter of *our* having waived them, as if by a new act of choice we could reassert them. That effective we are not. Our waiving "the right to become children of God," by waiving Christ's right to us as "his own," is in turn concurred in by the Creator, reluctantly but decisively. He insists that we should have our way. That effective we are. It is our problem, yes, but especially so because God is a reciprocal part of the problem, conceding his loss of his creatures. To whom? Elsewhere Jesus speaks of "the ruler of this world." (12:31; 14:30; 16:11)

Is there any theme in the whole biblical message which for us today is as embarrassing (and as suppressed) as this one, which makes the divine Parent so responsive to the historical decisions of his sinful children that he finalizes, makes official even their disowning of him and his Son. [sic] Not only have we no feel for this theme of godly disinheritance, we have almost no images for conceptualizing it, or even for acknowledging that the theme is there in the New Testament. That bankruptcy in modern theological imagination may be the fulfillment of a Johannine prediction, that our own John the Baptists have become for us incomprehensible.

How ironic that in the same generation when the biblical notion of divine disinheritance seems so nonsensical there is enormous nostalgia for our "roots," a tribalist yearning to recapture racial and national origins, to retrace bloodlines and cultural heredity and to go

flocking after leaders in church and state who promise to take us back whence we came. Not that it is unreasonable, especially after a “now” generation which had minimized its past, to recall the depth dimension of the human family. But the blindness of the current nostalgia, its sheer uncriticalness, betrays an illusion. Our ethnic and cultural descent is somehow assumed to assure us the hereditary right to feel at home in the Creator’s world. Not so.

To that illusion the Johannine rebuke comes as a shock, all the more because its biologism is so explicit. The Life which comes with the Light is not only like photosynthesis. It is also genetic Life, bearing offspring, spawning God’s new breed, with all the rights and privileges thereunto appertaining. But that “right to become the children of God” comes by being “born *not* out of human stock or the urge of the flesh or human planning.” (1:13)

### **Initial prognosis: Flesh as Glory**

So radical a diagnosis necessitates an equally radical prognosis. The truth is, we could venture such a seismic Johannine reading of the problem in the first place only because that already anticipated a comparably lavish solution. The problem, settling for a genetic Jesus, is the mark not only of human legalism, not only of demonic deception, but of ultimate disenfranchisement. But then that only reenforces how ambitious a case to the contrary the evangelist now enjoys making for the Defendant, Jesus. Because the problem at its worst lay beyond our control, that is where the solution takes up, beyond our control.

Jesus the Christ, it now turns out, is *our* Defendant, and he can expect no help from us, though it is we for whom he intervenes. He can expect only opposition, and not only from us. He mounts this apparently impossible defense of us “in the framework of a suit over rights.” (Preis) The rights in question are his own rights, to be sure, but what makes them questionable is that they are his rights to us—to biblically discredited, demonically darkened, disinherited us. The suit he wages is over custody of a creation already under judgment. And the judgment is not only from Moses and John the Baptist and scripture. His unlikely wards whom he is out to repossess are “the flesh,” “the world” which, though it “was made through him, ...knew him not.” (1:10) We might say he had his work cut out for him. Still, only because he did regain title to us as “his own” was our “right to become the children of God” his to “give” and ours to “receive.” (1:12) No less transcendent a Christology befits so transcendent a human need.

The temptation is to distrust this good news of an outside transaction as being too good to be safe, too precariously out of our hands. The more cautious alternative is to suppose that the only significant challenge to Jesus’ claim comes from human belief like ours. That way, it would be victory enough if Christ just succeeded in overcoming our doubt. As if he could regain custody of us by the mere act of our consent. Ah, but that misses all the fun, the “glory” (1:14) of the rescue he negotiates for us. That is the temptation of reactionary, revelationist Christologies. They underemploy Christ, they obviate him, by safely positing a God whose love of the world is not really contingent upon Jesus’

historic intervention. Presumably that would be too risky. Instead the divine love is prefixed, with or without Jesus, and is so timelessly unalterable that it is not even possible for historical sinners to negate it really. That leaves the incarnate Word with little more to do than to “reveal” to us skeptics an absolute love which has all along been true anyway, adding only the human complement of our obedience to that truth. As God-revealers go, even Moses and John the Baptist allowed people more substantive options than that.

True, it is also essential to Christ’s repossessing us that there should in turn be a subjective “receiving” on our part, a “beholding” by us, “that all might believe.” Indeed, but that skirts the prior question. What was it about Jesus that we, his recipients, “received *him*”? Why just “*his* glory” that we beheld? Believe, of course, but why “in his name”? (1:12, 14, 7) It will not do to evade such critical questions by immediately fleeing to his supernatural status as the Word who “was in the beginning with God.” For us earthlings such a confession comes only as a conclusion, after the fact, not as evidence for the conclusion. The interrogation persists, What was so perceivable in this earthly Jesus that even we in the darkness could empirically see his “glory as of the only Son from the Father?” (1:14) Grant the (benign) fact that “no one has ever seen God.” All the more reason to ask, What did Jesus do to compel the conclusion that he alone must be the Son who snuggles in the Father’s lap?

The question assumes, no doubt audaciously, that this trial, for all its high-flown claims, does acknowledge rules of evidence. These are rules by which we the jurors are bound—“bound” is right—and so, therefore, is our Defendant. Else his case is not made. Nor is his God’s. This forensic criterion is the transcendent, trans-subjective dimension in the trial. The Defendant submits to the Court’s highest “law,” which demands proof. In fact, he does so in such a self-risking way as to supersede that law (which only “was given through Moses”) with his own breathtaking alternative, “grace and truth.” (1:17)

Boldly Jesus takes on the old Hebrew legal requirement that there be testimony from two witnesses other than himself, and then goes it one better. (8:17, 18) First, he offers to disavow his own testimony if that is not first of all attested by God (5:30, 32) Talk about risky. For the second witness, he says, he could have cited John the Baptist but instead cites “these very works which I am doing.” Yet even for these works, as for the claims he makes for himself, God ultimately must be responsible. (5:33-37) Otherwise Jesus will not claim them as material evidence. That places an enormous burden of proof on Jesus’ “works”—especially his crucifixion and resurrection and sending of the Counselor—to cite them in contrast to God’s whose history of self-revelation and then to commit God himself as responsible for this new rashness. His laying his life on the line for his clients, at the risk not only of death but of blasphemy, poses the sort of evidence which finally God must either vindicate or not.

Especially in the darkened eyes of the beholders, the jurors, this highly vulnerable evidence for the Defense is bound to appear self-incriminating. That is also its beauty. The very fact that the Defendant risks his case to the same slavish law which binds his jurors, yet without ever surrendering to it as they have, and that he rather tweaks that law

as an in-family joke and then implicates the law's own God as his unseen Co-Defendant, his fond Father—that likewise strikes at least some of the jurors, these poor pent-up bastards, as uproarious and lasting delight. Who wouldn't welcome such daring evidence for our reinstatement as children of God! What is proof enough between this Boy and his snuggling Parent has got to be good enough for outsiders.

The “glory as of the only Son from the Father” could sound like an exclusively private, child-to-parent kind of glory, like the rarefied Wholly Otherness of the eternal Word “in the beginning.” Such glory, like timeless truth, is what it is whether you and I lay eyes on it or not and indeed might be better—for us, at least—unseen. By contrast, the glory which in the trial before us wins the case for the Defendant Jesus is a glory which we, the jurors, “did behold.” In fact, that *is* his glory, that “the Word became flesh.” And it isn't that his flesh serves merely as some audio-visual, revelational medium for reducing his glory to visible proportions, so that we on the receiving end get a scaled-down version of the original. This is *his* glory, not just a means for revealing it. His glory is the depth to which he came to be for us “grace and truth”—“full of grace and truth.” (1:17, 14) Simply, “he dwelt among us.” (1:14) *That* glory, in that graciously fleshly form, did not exist prior to Jesus. Unlike the Word he embodied, Jesus had not been “in the beginning.” There was a time when Jesus was not. The Father's love of the world was only a “promise” until it *came* true when and where the Word “came to his own home.” (1:11)

That is the same place, remember, where “his own received him not.” But what a feat of parental love, then, that the Creator-Word, in being rebuffed, was not one bit scaled down or reduced by that. “The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” (1:15) It simply cannot be said of God's law what is here said of his Son, “we have all received grace upon grace from his *fullness*.” (1:16) For his fullness is not diminished but is rather filled full by his enfleshment with us. That is the way of grace, not of law. In this trial the true test, the “glory” of an only child is the length to which he goes to share his Parent with the disinherited.

### **Advanced Prognosis: Believing as Living**

It is hard to imagine that the verdict gets better, but that is a strain we have to bear. Now that the Defendant, our Defendant, can claim the Creator as Co-Defendant, he invokes for himself that prerogative of deity, the role of Judge, starting immediately. Judgments of condemnation, about which he is ambivalent (8:15, 16), he may be willing to postpone until The Last Analysis or even leave to other agents. But judgments of affirmation cannot wait. The fascination which the Johannine Jesus shows with those jurors who believe him, the disproportionate prominence he accords their believing, could easily give the impression that this response of theirs recasts them in the role of active cooperators with himself—that is, as full persons—not only as patients for whom he intervenes. That of course, is the whole idea.

Maybe the believers' response is in one sense passive. They “receive,” he gives. They “behold,” he dazzles. But then it is all the more remarkable, when seen from the

generous perspective of this Judge, that mere believing enjoys the value he imputes to it. As if believing were not only being convinced but being put in possession of ... “grace,” “truth,” “Life,” finally of the incarnate Word himself. All of which is exactly what the Judge declares their believing to be, long before their faith could ever turn to sight.

The Judge’s compliments to his believers are declaratory verdicts, I suppose, calling things as he sees them. But how he sees them and calls them is also what they become. His verdicts are simultaneously “Let there be’s...” In our government’s separation of powers we may keep the judiciary apart from the legislative and executive branches. But with the biblical God we do poorly to separate his judicial from his creative and governing activities, as we do, for instance, when we contrast his two aeons as “creation” and “redemption” (or “justification”). They are both creation, one “old” and one “new,” and the Creator’s characteristic way of governing his creatures, certainly human creatures, is to adjudge them as he does. If the Judge in this case declares that so passive a thing as faith (“this gossamer thread of faith”) is nothing less than our participating in the Life of God, then we must in all modesty admit that we have his Word for it, yes, but also at times some suspiciously vivid experience of our own—cruciform, like his, and likewise glorious.

#### Final Prognosis: Life as Witness

At its best, the trial comes full circle. Those who began as witnesses against us, we now join on the stand as fellow witnesses to the prior One. In the initial diagnosis, the biblical God-revealers with whom we were wont to categorize Jesus, rose to contradict us for that and accused us of biblicism. Assuming their accusation does not go to waste but readies us to receive a God in the dock, where we defendants sit, we who do receive him also live to tell of him. The telling is anything but passive. It is revolutionary, this “testimony” of ours. It may come off sounding innocent enough as an unpretentious account of our experience, “We beheld his glory.” But the One whose glory we beheld has been known to use such deceptively simple testimony to turn courtrooms upside down, also lives and whole histories. We the receivers, now the doers? The Word who antecedes all creation and whose giving is always prior to our receiving, is at the same time so gracious as to allow his beneficiaries the dignity of reciprocating—in their own flesh, as on thronelike crosses, full gloriously. John the Baptist caught the point. So might we.