

## Monday Evening Bible Reading Group: St John's Gospel: Some notes for 18/ix/2017

It wouldn't be difficult to spend a year looking at John Chapter 1. Tom Wright gives it 19 pages; Richard Burridge 15 pages; Floyd Filson 10 pages; and William Barclay 82 pages. With only 90 minutes or so, maybe reading slowly, pausing to reflect, discussion of some points, and accepting that we are only dipping our toes into the sea, is as much as we can expect.

You can see why this is Christmas Eve material, because Christmas Eve is when Christians sign up to the most extraordinary claim in history: The Maker of the stars and sea became a child on earth for me. The Creator and Sustainer of the universe joined us in the same way that each of us and all of us entered the world. It doesn't get any more Wow! than that.... at least not until we reach the Crucifixion. Though there is an important caveat. John says very powerful and very striking things about the divinity of Jesus, but, although he is writing long before the Creed writers struggled to spell out the doctrine of the Trinity (to capture the reality of God in a few words), John is very careful not to say that Jehovah and Jesus are identical.

Building on the Old Testament use of the concept of God doing things through His Word, on the Aramaic of Jesus' time which tended to substitute "God's Word" for more apparently physical descriptions of God in action, and on the (not all that different) Greek concept of Logos (word, reality, meaning) of God in action, John talks about the Father acting through the Son. In contrast to all the ideas of God making use of Matter (matter being something already around). John talks of Father through Son creating matter. John uses words to describe the closest possible relationship between Father and Son (closer than any human relationship that might be used as a picture parallel); and in particular he says that if we want to know what God is like, we should look at Jesus. (A bit of this important distinction is hidden for us in the rather subtle point that Greek normally speaks of THE GOD. John describes Jesus as GOD – Divine if you like.)

I love the Barclay story of the young girl who heard all the Old Testament stories about God wanting to zap people (most people, given e.g. the Noah story, and the fact that only two Jews left Egypt and reached the Promised Land!), and said sagely "*Ah, but that was before God became a Christian*". We might over the centuries have changed our ideas about what God is like; but, if John is to be believed, God was and is and always will be "like Jesus"

There are also hints in Chapter 1 about the answer to what worries some of us about the next life. 50 Billion plus years doing even the things we currently most enjoy doing isn't all that attractive? John is hinting at a different quality of living, not indefinitely extension of the current good life. Also, John's vision is universal. The Jews didn't care much about the Gentiles. The Romans (and Greeks) didn't care much about the Barbarians. The John vision embraces all humanity.