

# ***And the Word Became Flesh***

**John 1:1-18**

One of the many things that Pope Francis has done to shake up the Vatican since he took office occurred about a month ago. During the Sunday Mass on November 24, he presented in public the remains of the very first pope, St. Peter, the Apostle. According to an Associated Press report:

The nine pieces of bone sat nestled like rings in a jewel box inside a bronze display case on the side of the altar during a mass commemorating the end of the Vatican's year-long celebration of the Christian faith. It was the first time they had ever been exhibited in public. <sup>1</sup>

What the article went on to say explains why these particular bone fragments have never before been on public display:

No pope has ever definitively declared the fragments to belong to the apostle Peter, but Pope Paul VI in 1968 said fragments found in the necropolis under St. Peter's Basilica were "identified in a way that we can consider convincing".

Some archaeologists dispute the finding.

The relics were discovered during excavations begun under St. Peter's Basilica in the years following the death in 1939 of Pope Pius XI, who had asked to be buried in the grottoes where dozens of popes are buried, according to the 2012 book by veteran Vatican correspondent Bruno Bartoloni, *The Ears of the Vatican*.

During the excavations, archaeologists discovered a funerary monument with a casket built in honour of Peter and an engraving in Greek that read "Petros eni", or "Peter is here".

The scholar of Greek antiquities, Margherita Guarducci, who had deciphered the engraving, continued to investigate and learned that one of the basilica workers had been given the remains found inside the casket and stored them in a shoe box kept in a cupboard. She reported her

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<sup>1</sup> "Vatican Displays St. Peter's Bones for the First Time," *The Guardian*, November 24, 2013.

findings to Paul VI, who later proclaimed there was a convincing argument that the bones belonged to Peter. <sup>2</sup>

Really, a shoebox? Some basilica worker stored the human remains of St. Peter the Apostle in a shoe box and kept them in a cupboard? I don't mean to be skeptical, but shouldn't someone actually *test* them to make sure these bone fragments are *human*, and not from some pantry rat that got poisoned by some spoiled prosciutto?

It will be interesting to see what will happen, because even with a little bit of scientific analysis, it's possible to determine some odds of authenticity. The DNA findings alone could likely detect if the remains come from a male Jew of the Palestine region and carbon testing might date them from the first century. So then you'd have some basis for making such a religious claim. It would certainly seem prudent to do a little background check on what's now in this jeweled box before we find that the credibility of Christianity is undone by the remnants of a rodent!

Of course, I jest, but I do think the credibility of our faith is often put to the test by some of the audacious religious claims that are made. Depending on how fervent you are in your devotion, certain beliefs are presumed to be unequivocal facts, even if concrete evidence to support them is minimal at best. This doesn't just concern ancient relics and papal cupboards.

Let's take something more current. Just last week the Pew Research poll released its findings that at least a third of Americans don't believe in evolution, but assume human beings originated in the Garden of Eden at the beginning of time? Now I grant you, Darwin's

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

theory is just a theory, but there is at least ample evidence for it in various fields (geology, botany, paleontology, anthropology, etc.). What's the evidence for a belief in Creationism, aside from the first few pages of the Bible? Is it an empirical *fact*, just because it is found in Holy Writ? Even if we believe that God created all that exists, doesn't it make more sense to view the opening chapters of Genesis as a poetic declaration of the interdependence and relationship between all the living beings, rather than arguing that it's a scientific document outlining the process by which the world, and all that dwells within it, came into being? It's poetry, not process! Why do we have to confuse the two? Why do scientific theories and religious beliefs need to be rival, or even incompatible, truths?

Another example of where historical fact and faith appear to be in conflict relates to one of the central religious claims of Christianity, i.e., the doctrine of the divinity of Jesus Christ. For most Christians, this is an indisputable fact; for much of Christendom it has been the foundation of faith since the beginning. Virtually in all of our sense of religious orthodoxy (e.g., theology, liturgy, creeds, music, art, etc.) this is an incontrovertible claim; for many, the criterion for determining truth from heresy rides on the certainty of this belief: Jesus of Nazareth was completely, fully, and truly God, and as revealed by the risen Christ, he is *in fact* pre-existent, coterminous with God!

For Christians, Jesus Christ has always been and will always be a divine being; he is the second person of the holy Trinity making up the Godhead: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This is as universal a doctrine in Christianity as any we'll find, and it's been

articulated as a core belief since the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE. From then on, not to accept, embrace, and witness to this “orthodox truth” was to render yourself a heretic, a nonbeliever, and often rejected as reprobate—subject to the wrath of God for denying God’s very Word and existence!

Throughout the centuries, untold millions of lives have been terrorized, condemned, and martyred, not only for holding firm to this conviction, but also for denying it! Believers have experienced hell for embracing it and nonbelievers have been condemned to hell for rejecting it. When you think about it, the divinity of Christ has been one of the most controversial and consequential religious beliefs in all of human history. Yet, what is the basis for it, *in fact*, other than the religious confessions of those who penned the pages of Scripture?

I raise this point because the opening chapter of John’s Gospel, perhaps more than any other New Testament document, has served as the forensic “evidence” for this Christological doctrine. From the outset, John says, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” For believers, it doesn’t appear to get any more explicit than that, especially when he follows it with, “and the Word became flesh and lived among us...”—a reference leading up to the announcement that Jesus was the very Word of which he wrote. Even if there are no texts in the Scriptures stating categorically and directly, “Jesus is God!”, for most Christians, it’s just a matter of connecting the dots, which seem quite evident to those who believe.

But what about those who cannot connect the dots; is their skepticism not valid or their questions unworthy of consideration?

More to the point, does the Christian faith really hinge on whether or not people believe Jesus to be divine? I don't think so. In spite of the audacious claims that Christians make about Jesus, the texts we draw upon are ambiguous enough to allow for our supreme Trinitarian confessions, but also for interpretations that view Jesus as completely, though remarkably, human.

For one thing, what did the writer of John's Gospel actually claim and what did he mean? Though that may be impossible to know for certain, what must be taken into account is the context in which John was writing. The term he used was *logos*, which means "word," as "in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." What might that mean?

Scholars agree that it was intended to reflect, if not mimic, the poetry of Genesis 1 (the story of Creation) where everything that was created was through God's word: "And God said, let there be light..." and so forth. As much as we reference the creative hand of God, what we should be saying is the creative *word* of God, for the word itself was the creative *action* of God. God only had to declare that things would come to pass and they would. The Word was the expression of God's will; God was not required to actually fashion things into being like some cosmic artisan. So the Word, then, is God's action—the expression of God's will into being. It was God's Word through which all things came into being. It was God's Word that created life itself. It was through God's Word that God is revealed. That's what *logos* means: the self-expression of God and God's will. It doesn't refer to a specific person, but rather to what occurs whenever God acts.

That understanding of God's Word would explain much of Jewish history with their legacy of prophets—from Moses to Malachi. It's a fair reading of John's text to view it in this way: [the Word] was in the world, ...yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him." Was this only in reference to Jesus, or also in reference to the Word of God in prophets who preceded him, who sought to call the people of Israel back to their faith? Was it Jesus' divinity people didn't recognize, or was it God's presence and actions in various circumstances and people throughout the ages? It's not clear. But in the way it is expressed here in our text it's likely to have meant both.

Likewise, to whom was John referring when he wrote this: "But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God." Was it Jesus? Or again, was it the Word of God, communicated through earlier prophets and kingly reformers, who inspired the faithful remnant of Israel prior to Jesus? In other words, was it God's Spirit who communicated through various means to call the people back to faithfulness? That's a distinct (even likely?) possibility.

Why is this important? Because this would then lead to the first declaration about Jesus in verse 14: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." This offers a slightly different message from the traditional notion that from the beginning of this chapter, John was only referencing Jesus as the pre-existent one (where Jesus was co-existent with God from the beginning); instead

it's possible (maybe preferable?) to understand it as one where God's self-expression—God's own Spirit—God's Word was revealed through all of these ways until the divine will was later revealed in the person of Jesus.

In a sense, what John provided was a poetic “background check” on Jesus, as to how the same presence of God in Jesus was found in others before him, all the way back to the beginning. Considering the challenge before John and his community of lifting up a crucified man as representative of God, it may be too much to presume that they would have risked all their credibility trying to make the audacious and blasphemous claim (and rather pagan notion) that Jesus was, in fact, the fullness of God temporarily in the flesh! It's not to say some didn't believe that, but it would have been extremely difficult for devoutly monotheistic Jews to embrace it—to equate the physical form of Jesus with God—even if they could affirm that Jesus represented God's will and actions in human form. Perhaps for that very reason, John kept things ambiguous.

This may help to explain why a uniform Christological confession took a while to develop and emerge, and did so in a largely non-Jewish environment in the Roman world. What John may have left intentionally ambiguous, later generations defined in a precisely articulated creed, eliminating any ambiguity or alternative interpretation. However, in my opinion, I think we should not look to creeds to define our faith, but instead accept a text that leaves some wiggle room for varying interpretations, affirming only this: the pre-existent, eternal Word of God was revealed and fulfilled in the person and teachings of Jesus. So instead of this being a Gospel only about

the divine origin of Jesus, it would be a Gospel about the nature of God's revelation to humanity through Israel and ultimately fulfilled in Jesus, i.e., the Word made flesh. It was a revelation of the Word of God, who was personified and embodied in Jesus.

Was Jesus divine? That's a religious confession we make, but it's not an indisputable fact of history. Recognizing this understanding of God's Word may help many non-Christians to embrace Jesus as spiritually relevant and meaningful without having to affirm his divinity. It can also provide a wide embrace of Christians—those who have difficulty in subscribing to Trinitarian beliefs, while at the same time, allowing those who do believe firmly in the Trinity and pre-existence of Jesus to affirm theirs. The passage, as I've indicated, offers enough room and grace for all.

For me, that's perfectly fine; I can live with that. Faith is not meant to be something that exists apart from scrutiny or fact-testing. Faith is ultimately a trust in the Presence of what is divine in this life, in whomever and however we encounter God. The Word of God is made flesh in many different ways and in various figures of the present and of the past. As Christians, we lift up Jesus as the one who stands above all in leading us to an understanding of what is true about life, revealing the love, grace and truth of God. Regardless of the differences in how this becomes articulated, together we affirm God's presence in him that is both human and divine, in the present and for all of eternity. That is a faith that is credible, inclusive, and hospitable to all; and it's a truth the entire world can live with.

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