

Title: Truth, John, and Ovid

Goal: Connect the themes of transformation, truth, suffering, and human dignity across the gospel of John and the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid.

Questions from Ovid

What is the background of Ovid? The theme of the *Metamorphoses*?

Is Arachne telling the “truth” about the gods? Why or why not?

Questions from John

Background of John? Theme of the Gospel of John?

John describes Jesus as the “Logos.” Let’s examine the implications of identifying a *person* with the idea of the *logos*, an abstract term that refers to a unifying principle governing the universe. Why does John use that term in particular to refer to Jesus?

Can Truth be a person? What does that even mean? Does it matter? Why or why not?

John and Ovid Questions

Compare and contrast the themes of transformation across Ovid and John.

The *Metamorphoses* of Ovid describes the capricious nature of the gods who inflict great suffering on mankind. How might the gospel of John “answer” some of the critiques and the points raised by Ovid concerning the unfair-nature of human existence?

Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Book 6: The Story of Arachne

Minerva had listened to every word, and approved of the Muses’s song, and their justified indignation that anyone would not regard Minerva as the wise and just, beautiful and gracious of all the gods above. Then Minerva said to herself, ‘To give praise is not enough! Let me be praised as well, for I will not allow my divine powers to be scorned without inflicting punishment.’ Her thoughts turned to **Arachne**, of Maeonia, whom she had heard would not give Minerva her due credit in the art of spinning and weaving. For this girl, Arachne, was not known for her place of birth, or family, but only for her skill. Her father, Idmon of Colophon, dyed the absorbent wool purple with the Phoenician

murex, a snail that yields a purple dye more costly than gold or jewels. While Arachne lived in a modest home, in little Hypaepa, she had gained a name for artistry, for her wondrous works upon the loom throughout the cities of Lydia.

Often the nymphs of Mount **Tmolus** deserted their vine-covered slopes, and the nymphs of the River **Pactolus** deserted their waves, to examine her wonderful workmanship. It was not only a joy to see the finished cloths, but also to watch them made, so much was the beauty of Arachne's art. Whether at first she was winding the rough yarn into a new ball, or working the stuff with her fingers, teasing out the clouds of wool, repeatedly, drawing them into long equal threads, twirling the slender spindle with her well-skilled thumb, or embroidering the works with her needle, you could see she was taught by Minerva, the goddess of weaving, of crafts, and of all the household arts.

Yet Arachne denied it, and took offense at the idea of having such a teacher, even a goddess like Minerva for her mentor. 'Contend with me' she challenged the goddess, 'I will not disagree at all if I am beaten'.

So herein Pallas Minerva took the shape of an old woman, adding grey hair to her temples and weakening her limbs, which she supported with a staff of gnarled wood.

Then she spoke, to the girl, as follows. 'Not everything old age has is to be shunned, for knowledge comes with advancing years. So, do not reject this advice. Seek great fame amongst mortals for your skill in weaving, but give way to the goddess, and ask Minerva for her forgiveness, you rash girl, with a humble voice. Kind Minerva would forgive you if you would ask.'

Arachne looked fiercely at her and left the work she was on, scarcely restraining her hands and seething with dark anger in her face. Pallas, disguised it is true, received this answer. 'Weak-minded and worn out by tedious old age, you come here, for having lived too long has destroyed your minds. Let your daughter-in-law if you have one, or perhaps a daughter of your own, listen to your voice. I have wisdom enough of my own. You think your advice is never heeded? Such is my feeling too. Why does she not come herself? Why does she avoid this contest?'

The goddess said 'She is here!' and, relinquishing the old woman's form, revealed Pallas Minerva. The nymphs and the Phrygian women worshipped Minerva in her glory. Arachne, a mortal girl, alone remained unafraid, yet she did blush, as the sky is accustomed to redden when **Aurora** first stirs, and, after a while, to whiten at the sun from the east. She is stubborn in her attempt, and rushes on to her fate, eager for a worthless prize.

Now, Jupiter's daughter does not refuse, and does not give warning, or delay the contest a moment. Immediately they both position themselves, in separate places, and stretch out the fine threads, for the warp, over twin frames. The frame is fastened to the cross-beam; the threads of the warp separated with the reed; the thread of the weft is inserted between, in the pointed shuttles that their fingers have

readied; and, drawn through the warp, the threads of the weft are beaten into place, struck by the comb's notched teeth.

They each work quickly, and, with their clothes gathered in tight around their frames, apply their skillful arms to the loom, their zeal not making it seem like work. There, shades of purple, dyed in **Tyrian** bronze vessels, are woven into the cloth, and also lighter colors, shading off gradually. The threads that touch seem the same, but the extremes are distant, as when, often, after a rainstorm, the expanse of the sky, struck by the sunlight, is stained by a rainbow in one vast arch, in which a thousand separate colors shine, but the eye itself still cannot see the transitions. There, are inserted lasting threads of gold, and an ancient tale is spun in the web.

Pallas Athene depicts the hill of Mars, and the court of the **Aeropagus**, in **Cecrops's** Athens, and the old dispute between Neptune and herself, as to who had the right to the city and its name. There the twelve gods sit in great majesty, on their high thrones, with Jupiter in the middle. She weaves the gods with their familiar attributes. There she portrays Neptune, standing and striking the rough stone with his long trident, and seawater flowing from the centre of the shattered rock as part of his gift to the great city of Athens. She gives herself a shield, a sharp pointed spear, and a helmet for her head, while the **aegis** protects her breast. She shows an olive-tree with its pale trunk overladen with olives, growing forth from the earth at a blow from her spear and, while all the gods marvel at Minerva's skill, Victory crowns the work.

Then she adds four scenes of contest in the four corners, each with miniature figures, in their own clear colors, so that her rival might learn, from the examples quoted, what prize she might expect, for her outrageous daring. One corner shows Thracian Mount Rhodope and Mount Haemus, which are now only icy peaks, but once were mortal beings who took the names of the highest gods to themselves. A second corner shows the miserable fate of the queen of the Pygmies: how Juno, having overcome her in a contest, ordered her to become a crane and make war on her own people. Also she pictures **Antigone**, whom Queen **Juno** turned into a bird for having dared to compete with Jupiter's great consort: neither her father Laomedon, nor her city Ilium were of any use to her, but taking wing as a white stork she applauds herself with clattering beak. The only corner left shows Cinyras, bereaved: and he is seen weeping as he clasps the stone steps of the temple that were once his daughters' limbs. Minerva surrounded the outer edges with the olive wreaths of peace (this was the last part) and so ended her work with the emblems of her own tree.

Then Arachne depicts **Europa** deceived by Jupiter, disguised in the form of a bull. You would have thought it a real bull and real waves! Arachne weaves Europa as she looks back to the distant shore, and calling to her companions, displaying fear at the touch of the surging water, and drawing up her shrinking feet. Also Arachne wove the image of **Asterie**, held by the eagle, struggling, and Leda lying beneath the swan's wings. She also added Jupiter and all the Greek maidens he deceived, Jupiter,

hidden in the form of a **satyr**, gave Antiope, the daughter of Nycteus, twin offspring; or Danaë, as a shower of gold; or Aegina, the daughter of Asopus, as a flame; or Mnemosyne, in the form of a shepherd; or Proserpine, Ceres's daughter, as a spotted snake.

She wove you, Neptune, also, changed to a fierce bull for Canace, Aeolus's daughter. Disguised as Enipeus, Neptune begot the Aloidae, and later deceived Theophane as a ram. Arachne wove Medusa, the snake-haired mother of the winged horse, who knew Neptune as a winged bird. Here is Phoebus like a countryman, and she shows him now with the wings of a hawk, and now in a lion's skin, and how as a shepherd he tricked Isse, Macareus's daughter. She showed how Bacchus ensnared Erigone with delusive grapes, and how Saturn as the very image of a horse begot Chiron. Lastly, outer edge of the web, surrounded by a narrow border, had flowers interwoven with entangled ivy.

Neither Pallas Minerva nor Envy itself could fault that work. The golden-haired warrior goddess was grieved by its success, and tore the tapestry, embroidered with the gods' crimes, and as she held her shuttle made of boxwood from Mount Cytorus, she struck Idmonian Arachne, three or four times, on the forehead.

Pallas Minerva, in pity, lifted her, and said these words, 'Live on then, and yet hang, condemned one, but, lest you are careless in future, this same condition is declared, in punishment, against your descendants, to the last generation!' Departing after saying this, she sprinkled her with the juice of Hecate's herb, and immediately at the touch of this dark poison, Arachne's hair fell out. With it went her nose and ears, her head shrank to the smallest size, and her whole body became tiny. Her slender fingers stuck to her sides as legs, the rest is belly, from which she still spins a thread, and, as a spider, weaves her ancient web.

The Prologue of John, John 1:1-18

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 was not any thing made that was made. 4 In him was life, and the life was the light of men. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. 8 He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.

9 The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. 10 He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. 11 He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. 12 But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave

the right to become children of God, 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 have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. 15 (John bore witness about him, and cried out, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.’”) 16 For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. 17 For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. 18 No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known.