

The Biblical Unitarian Podcast - by Dustin Smith, PhD

Episode 121–The Origins of the Word Becoming Flesh (John 1:14)

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Introduction

This episode will begin looking closely at John 1:14, where the personified speech of God becomes flesh and pitches its tent among us. In particular, we are going to examine the origins of the word becoming flesh within its Jewish context. Did Judaism have a concept of God’s personified attributes becoming human? If so, what did this mean in regard to the understanding of these attributes? Does portraying human beings as the embodiment or incarnation of God’s attributes indicate that these human beings consciously preexisted their births? And how can depictions of Wisdom becoming flesh situate our readings of John 1:14 in its Jewish context?

Let’s find out on this week’s episode of the Biblical Unitarian Podcast!

1 – The Word Becoming Flesh in John 1:14

- *And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the unique one from the Father, full of grace and truth. (Joh 1:14)*
 - Often suggested that this is nowhere else exhibited in Judaism

- Word is synonymous with Wisdom
- Word is personification

2 – Wisdom Becoming Flesh in Proverbs

- Persian Period
- Lady Wisdom chs 1-9, Woman of Substance in 31:10-31, bookend the book
 - 1. Worth more than jewels 3:15 31:10
 - 2. Wisdom provides discernment in what is good 2:9-10 31:12
 - 3. She despises evil 8:13 31:12
 - 4. She is the most delightful pursuit 3:15 31:13
 - 5. Her profit is more than silver (merchant) 3:14 31:14
 - 6. She provides food and provisions 9:5 31:14
 - 7. She is in charge of the household 9:1 31:15
 - 8. She invests in young girls *servants 9:3 31:15
 - 9. She brings valuable fruit/profit 8:19 31:16
 - 10. She speaks publicly at the gates 1:21 31:23
 - 11. She laughs and rejoices 8:30-31 31:25
 - 12. “She keeps watch over her household” *tsofia* 31:27

The LORD by wisdom founded the earth (Pro 3:19)

3 – Wisdom Becoming Flesh in the Intertestamental Book of Sirach

- 180 BC, heavily influenced by Proverbs
- Ch 24 and ch 50
- 24:1-22
 - Wisdom praises herself, and tells of her glory in the midst of her people. In the assembly of the Most High she opens her mouth, and in the presence of his hosts she tells of her glory: "I came forth from the mouth of the Most High, and covered the earth like a mist. I dwelt in the highest heavens, and my throne was in a pillar of cloud. Alone I compassed the vault of heaven and traversed the depths of the abyss. Over waves of the sea, over all the earth, and over every people and nation, I have held sway. Among all these I sought a resting place; in whose territory should I abide? Then the Creator of all things gave me a command, and my Creator chose the place for my tent. He said, 'Make your dwelling in Jacob, and in Israel receive your inheritance.' Before the ages, in the beginning, he created

me, and for all the ages I shall not cease to be. In the holy tent I ministered before him, and so I was established in Zion. Thus in the beloved city he gave me a resting place, and in Jerusalem was my domain. I took root in an honored people, in the portion of the Lord, his heritage. I grew tall like a cedar in Lebanon, and like a cypress on the heights of Hermon. I grew tall like a palm tree in En-gedi, and like rosebushes in Jericho; like a fair olive tree in the field, and like a plane tree beside water I grew tall. Like cassia and camel's thorn I gave forth perfume, and like choice myrrh I spread my fragrance, like galbanum, onycha, and stacte, and like the odor of incense in the tent. Like a terebinth I spread out my branches, and my branches are glorious and graceful. Like the vine I bud forth delights, and my blossoms become glorious and abundant fruit. Come to me, you who desire me, and eat your fill of my fruits. For the memory of me is sweeter than honey, and the possession of me sweeter than the honeycomb. Those who eat of me will hunger for more, and those who drink of me will thirst for more. Whoever obeys me will not be put to shame, and those who work with me will not sin." (Sir 24:1-22 NRS)

- Simon in Sirach 50
 - 50:20 - Simon is the subject of glory = 24:1 wisdom is the subject of glory
 - 50:5 - he was glorified surrounded by the people = 24:12 same of Wisdom
 - 50:8 - like roses = 24:14 she grew tall like rose
 - 50:9 - like incense = 24:15 she is like the odor of incense
 - 50:10 - like an olive tree - 24:14 she grew tall like an olive tree
 - 50:10 - like a cypress - 24:13 she grew tall like a cypress
 - 50:12 - like a young cedar in Leb - 24:13 she is like a young cedar in Lebanon
 - 50:15 - Simon's offering makes a pleasing fragrance - 24:15 - she was like one who spreads fragrance

-Wisdom is personified as a woman, thoroughly

-Sirach portrays an actual human being, Simon, in terms of Lady Wisdom

-Sirach does not suggest that Simon preexisted his birth as a conscious being.

4 – Wisdom Becoming Flesh in the Works of Philo

- *God being his father, who is also the father of all things, and wisdom being his mother, by means of whom the universe arrived at creation (FUG 1:109) on flight and finding*

- *For if Isaac, being interpreted, means laughter, and if it be God who is the cause of laughter according to the true testimony of Sarah, then he may be most properly said to be the father of Isaac. And he also gives a share to Abraham of his own proper appellation, to whom, when he eradicated pain from wisdom, he gave rejoicing as an offspring. (Pot 1:124 PHE) the worse is wont to attack the better*
- *Do you not see that wisdom when dominant, which is Sarah, says, "For whosoever shall hear it shall rejoice with me." (Leg 2:82 PHE) allegorical words*
- *"For Sarah," says Moses, "said unto Abraham, Behold, the Lord has closed me up, so that I may not bear children. Go in unto my handmaiden, that thou mayest have children by her." Now, we must take out of the present discussion those conjunctions and connections of body with body which have pleasure for their end. For this is the connection of the mind with virtue, which is desirous to have children by her, and which, if it cannot do so at once, is at all events taught to espouse her handmaid, namely, intermediate instruction. And here it is worth while to admire wisdom (Cong 1:12-13 PHE) on mating with the preliminary studies*

-Lady Wisdom is likened unto a woman

-God created the world through the instrument of his personified lady wisdom

-Lady Wisdom is identified with Sarah

In conclusion, we have observed that:

The Prologue of the Gospel of John continues to show evidence of having been deeply influenced by Jewish Wisdom speculation, specifically, Jewish portrayals of God's Wisdom as a personified attribute. We noted that the Prologue portrays God's personified Word as becoming a human being--becoming the fleshly man Jesus. Having observed throughout the Prologue that the Word sounds a lot like what previous Jewish sources said about God's Wisdom, we felt that it was worth exploring how the phrase "the word became flesh" might have been understood by those familiar with the relevant Jewish Wisdom texts.

Second, we observed that the book of Proverbs portrays God's Wisdom as a personification that became flesh in Jewish women of the Persian period. This same personified Wisdom was depicted in Proverbs as being the instrument through which Yahweh acted as the creator. The same themes appear in the Prologue. God's personified Word became flesh in the human Jesus, and this personified Word was the instrument through which God acted as the creator.

Third, we observed in the intertestamental book of Sirach, which was deeply indebted to the influence of Proverbs, that Lady Wisdom continued to be heavily personified, especially in Sirach ch 24. Moreover, we saw that Sirach ch 50 depicted an actual human being from history, the High Priest Simon. In Sirach's portrayal of Simon, it used multiple descriptions formerly used of Lady Wisdom in Sirach 24, thus painting Simon as Wisdom who became flesh.

However, there was absolutely no evidence that Sirach wanted its readers to conclude that Simon consciously preexisted his birth as Wisdom. Again, we can see similar themes in the Prologue of the Fourth Gospel. God's attribute, his Word, is personified heavily, and the Word becomes flesh in the human Jesus. Just as Sirach stated that Wisdom made her tent among God's people, John 1:14 says that the Word made his tent among God's people. Throughout the Gospel of John, this man Jesus is depicted with dozens of phrases and words formerly used of Lady Wisdom.

Lastly, we observed that Philo, the first-century Jewish philosopher, showed evidence that the understanding of God's Wisdom as a personified female was held deeply in the decades prior to the writing of the Fourth Gospel. For Philo, Wisdom was a female figure, through whom God created all things. Philo also regarded Wisdom as having become flesh in Sarah, the wife of the famous Patriarch Abraham. However, Sarah is never portrayed in Philo as consciously preexisting her birth. The same themes appear in the Prologue of John's Gospel. God created the world through his personified attribute, his Word, and this personified Word became flesh into a human being, Jesus. In fact, the human Jesus continues to act as God's Word throughout the Gospel of John.

In sum, John 1:14 must be read in light of its Jewish context, especially the context where God's personified wisdom becomes embodied into faithful human beings. For the Gospel of John, God's wisdom or his word are now to be definitively found in the man Jesus.

Join us next week as we continue to progress through John 1:14, where the Logos becomes flesh.

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