

Wisdom and light

Is John 1 a midrash on the creation story and the song of creative Wisdom? If so, its writer has infused it with profoundest joy.

by [Marilynne Robinson](#) in the [April 18, 2012](#) issue



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I have been reading through the Jewish Annotated New Testament, published by Oxford in 2011. An NRSV with notes and commentary by Jewish scholars, it sets the New Testament in a context that is unquestionably appropriate to it, but which has been too little attended to, no doubt for reasons which come readily to mind. This context includes not only the Hebrew Bible, the Apocrypha and the penumbra of writings that surrounded these literatures at the time of the writing of the New

Testament, but also relevant rabbinical and Talmudic texts—an acknowledgment of literary and theological continuities that persisted in these literatures even after Judaism and Christianity had become divided.

Of course, after so many centuries any contribution can only be added to a great wealth of thought and insight. But this contribution is especially valuable at this time because it is more respectful of the New Testament as a text than is much recent Christian or secular criticism. For one thing, it is at ease with antiquity. It does not try to wring from these ancient texts the kind of forensic certainty in matters of belief that both zealots and debunkers claim to find in them. For another, in contextualizing them, the JANT brings new light to the question of the texts' meaning, turning for insight to the literatures of religious thought among which they arose rather than to the retrojected politics of religion or the posited syncretisms that make mere speculation of so much biblical scholarship.

Daniel Boyarin contributes an essay titled "Logos, a Jewish Word: John's Prologue as Midrash," which establishes a context for understanding Logos as "a Jewish Word" in both senses of the phrase. There is, he says, a tradition of interpretation that proceeds by integrating the language of two passages of scripture, in this case the creation narrative in Genesis with Proverbs 8:22–31, the song of creative Wisdom. The prologue and this passage in Proverbs are often compared. The song in Proverbs suggests that the Hebrew conception and contemplation of God yielded a vision of divine plenitude that was monotheistic and yet understood the divine to require a reach of language that could hint at this surpassing richness of being, even at the risk of appearing to transgress the limits monotheism would seem to impose.

The song in Proverbs is clearly itself an interpretation of Genesis 1 or, perhaps more precisely, an imaginative evocation of it. Boyarin notes other Wisdom passages that anticipate John's prologue in contexts associated with the Hebrew Bible. For example, the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria speaks of the words of God being "seen as light is seen . . . [as] the radiating splendor of virtue indistinguishable from a fountain of reason." Word and Wisdom are one thing, and they are not simply powerful or precious or even sacred. They are magnificent.

In the interpretation of this very great literature, it is usual to take no notice at all, so to speak, of its rising music, the moments in which the beauty of the text is its subject and achieves the affirmation, or transformation, of its apparent content. The majesty of the first creation narrative, the all-comprehending order of it, precludes

the expression of another element in this grand act—that is, the unspeakable joy of it. The Wisdom of Proverbs is like a brilliant child, exulting in the wonders of the Lord's creation as they are made manifest—"I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always" (Prov. 8:30). This ebullience emerges very often in psalms, and most amazingly in the voice from the whirlwind at the end of the book of Job, which silences all the grave theologizing that has preceded it by evoking the moment of creation "when the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy" (38:7, KJV).

For some reason a great deal of ink has been spent on the project of proving that the religious culture that produced the Hebrew Bible was not really monotheistic, perhaps in order to normalize it in anthropological terms. Passages like those quoted here are taken to prove the point. This kind of reading, which makes of them no more than lapses or intrusions, fragments of a nonbiblical mythos, deadens their most striking effect, which is to enrich the moment they interpret. They give the event of creation an imagined perceiver, celebrating the word good from a perspective that is almost human, almost divine. Wisdom is described as "rejoicing in [the Lord's] inhabited world and delighting in the sons of men" (RSV). It is in a sense an intermediary between God and humankind because those who seek Wisdom participate in the holy joy that formed the world. Even as the voice from the whirlwind asks, "Where were you?" it is opening to Job's understanding the astonishing spectacle of being, bringing him to the Wisdom beyond wisdom. He sees the word with his eyes, just as Philo says.

If the prologue is read as the kind of midrash Boyarin suggests it is, then, keeping within ancient conventions of biblical interpretation, its writer has infused its account of the event and presence of Christ with profoundest joy. The incarnation is rooted at the most fundamental level in the act of creation. The Word shines as a light in the darkness, and in the fullness of grace and truth it is an intermediary between God and humankind. And the thrill of awe that rises in the highest moments of Hebrew poetry is carried forward into the narrative of Christ's very human life and death—and life.

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