

Abstraction in john



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In the first 18 lines of John, the story of Jesus is introduced with a jarringly brief and emphatic summary of history from the beginning of time to the birth of Christ. This passage formalizes the concept, suggested more subtly in Genesis, that language precedes nature. Though in our everyday lives we consider words to be human intellectual inventions, John requires us to take a leap of faith and believe that the Word existed before the physical universe, that names of objects existed before the objects themselves. His assertion that “the Word was God” shows that at the center of his perception of religion lies the ultimate abstraction. The opening passage of John serves to distance God from nature. It creates a clear division between the abstract realm of the spirit and the physical world. Before beginning the story of Christ, John establishes that the realm of abstraction was the original state of the universe. When Jesus introduces the idea that it is with thoughts of this world that we should live our lives, his statement has already been legitimized by this assertion. John’s description of the birth of Christ is simply “And the Word became flesh” [1. 14]. Jesus is the incarnation of his own teachings, which existed before him. Later, Jesus’ teachings echo this theme: “It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life” [6. 63]. Instead of exalting himself as a man, he constantly focuses attention upon his words. He calls himself a messenger sent from God, whose function is to teach and spread the word of God. “You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you” [15. 3]. According to Jesus himself, it is his words that effect change in the hearts of his followers; his physical presence is irrelevant. Though his working of miracles provides proof for those of little faith, it is the otherworldly promise of his message that appeals to his disciples. Jesus

comes to them directly from that world of Word and spirit, offering a chance to follow him back into their most distant origins, already outlined by the opening of John. Jesus' personal rejection of the physical world is apparent throughout the text. He is not subject to the natural desires with which normal men live. At 4. 32, he claims, "I have food to eat that you do not know about." He can resist hunger because his nourishment comes from the world of the spirit. As well as ignoring the laws of the physical world by changing water into wine, healing the sick, he is untouched by many of the natural emotions that influence human behavior; both lust and the desire for vengeance are unknown to him. Most striking, however, is his ease in overcoming death, the unavoidable fate of all living things within nature. Within John, Jesus is the personification of his own teachings, not a man of flesh and blood like his disciples. He is a being of pure spirit that does not live by the rules of nature as did those among him. However, Jesus offers himself as a replacement for nature, saying, "...my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink" [6. 55]. Furthermore, he implies that even the most harmless and seemingly necessary parts of the physical world are somehow false. He wants his followers to trust that the world of the spirit is indeed the force that sustains life. He preaches to his followers: "no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.... You must be born from above" [2. 5-2. 7]. Their salvation lies in the rejection of nature and the emulation of an impossible ideal. Christ's preaching of spiritual rebirth is closely linked to his treatment of his mother. Within John, she is almost entirely ignored, but in her two brief appearances her son treats her with little familial warmth. At 2. 4, Jesus approaches unnecessary cruelty when he dismisses his mother's harmless comment about wine with the response, "

Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come” [2. 4]. Later, when Christ is on the cross, he breaks all ties with his mother, commanding her and his disciple to accept each other as mother and son. Tellingly, John describes the two as “ his mother and his disciple whom he loved” [19. 26], showing a clear preference for the follower who abides by Christ’s word than rather than the woman who brought him into the world. Jesus’ coldness towards his mother reveals his need to distance himself from the earthly circumstances of his birth, which run so contrary to his role as a messenger from heaven. In this respect, at least, he could theoretically empathize with the concerns of flesh and blood that naturally occupy his followers, but he chooses to ignore this bond between him and the physical world. Instead, he focuses on his relationship with his Father, constantly reminding his followers that he acts and speaks only according to his Father’s will. His Father, who has already been equated with the Word in John’s opening, is what gives him both his life and his purpose. Even after two thousand years of influence, Jesus’ words in John still seem counter-intuitive. They ask us to devalue all that seems to constitute reality and fix our thoughts on another realm that we cannot hope to see until after death. Realizing that Christ’s teachings were full of such difficulties and reversals of the established order, John wisely emphasizes the pre-eminence of the abstract world of the spirit, which offers us the hope for eternal life. While Matthew effectively grounds Jesus’ legitimacy in history, giving him roots in the Old Testament, John establishes his direct link with the realm of the spirit that existed before time.