

**Reading John in Bereshit Time:
Semitic Constructions of Creation Mysticism in the Early Syriac
Versions**

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Abstract:

A number of scholars have pointed out the possible influences of Thomas' interpretation of the practice of Bereshit mysticism on the community out of which the Gospel of John arose (Davies 1992, Kanajaraj 1998, Pagels 1999). While Thomas' approach to Christology and Protology seems to differ from that of John in a number of respects, for instance, Jesus' nature as Word/Wisdom, some Syriac versions of John (Old Syriac, Peshitta) evidence a Semitic interpretation of Jesus as Word-at-the-beginning that is more in harmony with that found in Thomas. A foray into this area has been made by Serge Ruzer (1997) in relation to John 1. This paper continues with an exploration of John 1 from readings of the Peshitta and Old Syriac versions and compares Syriac readings of Jesus sayings in John 3, 8 and 14 to Bereshit ideas in Thomas. Together these readings show that, in relation to Bereshit mysticism, the interpretations of Genesis 1 and Proverbs 8 by early Jewish Christians of the Thomas and John communities may have ranged along a continuum and been constructed in a more nuanced way than previously proposed. This would accord with, for instance, Boyarin's (1999) research on the hybrid construction of early Jewish and Christian identities in general. These readings also show how questions of Christology and Protology could have remained contested issues amongst Middle Eastern Christians up until the rise of Islam, which enshrined low Christological ideas of creation mysticism in the Quran (as discussed by Nasr 1968, Schimmel 1994).

A number of scholars have pointed out the possible influences of Thomas' interpretation of the practice of Bereshit mysticism on the community out of which the Gospel of John arose (Kanagaraj 1998, Pagels 1999, Davies 1992). Davies (1992) argues that both John and Thomas consider the divine kingdom more protologically than eschatologically in that they compare ordinary life in relation to the potential of one's divine image present at the cosmic beginning. Jey J. Kanagaraj (1998) pointed out the influence of both Merkabah and Bereshit mysticism on John as well as an intertwining of the two in his development of the Logos-concept. Elaine Pagels (1999) compared the patterns of Genesis 1 exegesis in Thomas and John and found two different approaches to the person of Jesus and to the Bereshit mysticism with which the communities of John and Thomas may have been familiar. In my own earlier paper for the SBL Thomas Section (2000), I attempted to show that the Bereshit mystical influences found in both Thomas and John could be illuminated phenomenologically by the nature of the Semitic substructure of the language and cosmology in which this mysticism was originally framed.

While Thomas' approach to Christology and Protology seems to differ from that of John in a number of respects, for instance, Jesus' nature as Word/Wisdom, some Syriac versions of John (Old Syriac, Peshitta) evidence a Semitic interpretation of Jesus as Word-at-the-beginning that is more in harmony with that found in Thomas. A foray into this area has been made by Serge Ruzer (1997) in relation to John 1. This paper continues with an exploration of John 1 from readings of the Peshitta and Old Syriac versions and compares Syriac readings of Jesus sayings in John 3, 8 and 14 to Bereshit ideas in Thomas. Like my previous work, this paper uses a midrashic hermeneutical method (see Douglas-Klotz, 1999a) to establish a

dialogue between the Semitic language substructure of the Genesis exegesis in both Thomas and John.

The State of Play: Christology vs Protology in John

Ruzer finds in the Curetonian version of the Old Syriac text of John 1 remnants of an “earlier, seemingly Semitic tradition...in which strong emphasis was placed on the concept of ‘first creation’ taking place within the Logos and the Logos being the archetype of the created order” (pp. 101-102). In Ruzer’s study, the crucial difference lies in the Old Syriac’s seeming emphasis on creation occurring “in” rather than “through” the Logos. However, Ruzer notes, the emphasis is ambiguous:

The fact that the Semitic prefix beth “b-“ may stand for both “in” and “by/through,” and that the midrashic discourse on Gen. 1:1 is partly built on this ambiguity (which is lost in Greek), may suggest that the tradition in question was a Semitic one (pp. 99-100).

Ruzer notes that the tradition of Word/Wisdom as a protological archetype seems reaffirmed in Colossians 1:15-17, a passage in which the ambiguity about creation in and/or through God is repeated:

(15) Who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation (16) for in him (*en autq*) [or: with, by or to him] were all things created... visible and invisible... thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers; all things were created through him (*di' autou*) and for him [*eis auton*: or to, into]. (17) And his is before all things, and in him (*en autq*) [or: by, with or to him] all things consist (p. 99).

Ruzer further notes that the tradition of creation occurring “in God,” in so-called archetypal form, can also be found in Philo, but goes against later interpretations in which the divine mediates creation (as in both Tatian and the later Greek NT version of John 1). Ruzer uses the possibility of an earlier Semitic tradition of Wisdom-at-creation in the Old Syriac version to argue for the Old Syriac as an independent attempt to render the Gospels into Syriac:

Such an understanding of the textual transmission, i.e., involving an independent OS tradition with possible Semitic influences, may contribute to a better understanding of the process by which different Logos-oriented interpretations of Gen 1:1 were transmitted from Jewish to Christian exegesis (p. 102).

Reading his conclusions against Daniel Boyarin’s (1997, 1999) studies of hybrid identity formation in early Jewish and Christian communities, one could, on the basis of his research, argue equally for a range of understandings about the nature of creation and Wisdom-at-the-beginning that permeated the formative stages of Judaism and Christianity for several hundred years and that are reflected in various textual transmissions. In other words, one doctrine did not simply succeed another in either community in a “survival of the fittest” way, but existed side-by-side as both communities very gradually took on the identities we now see as “Christian” and “Jewish” over a period that lasted well into the 4th century CE.

In Midrash Genesis Rabbah, the earliest rabbinic commentary on Genesis, the position of Wisdom at the beginning, found in Proverbs 8, is equated with the Torah (Parashah I:I, Neusner (1985) trans., p. 1). The link between Wisdom and Torah seems mediated by the concept of “Word,” which occurs in Sirach. As has been noted previously, in Sirach Wisdom is

depicted as the “word” of God, sitting on a throne and participating in creation:

“I came out of the mouth of the most High, and covered the earth as a cloud. I dwelt in high places, and my throne is in a cloudy pillar. I alone compassed the circuit of heaven, and walked in the bottom of the deep. In the waves of the sea and in all the earth, and in every people and nation, I got a possession”(24:3-6).

The conversation about Wisdom-at-the-beginning in which the communities of John and Thomas may have engaged also then needs to include the community(ies) out of which Midrash Genesis Rabbah arose. So much for the state of play (albeit in vastly truncated form) for the possible sources of a pre-existing Word/Wisdom/Logos tradition that may have influenced John’s prologue.

What I am proposing here is that the same sort of ambiguity around Bereshit matters that Ruzer notes in the ambiguous translation of *beth* as “through,” “by” or “in” can be found in other Syriac texts, especially when viewed through the synchronic sense of time that Semitic languages display. In particular, the Peshitta version of various passages in John seems designed to keep the dialogue about Jesus’ nature as Word/Wisdom very open with regard to all of the above-mentioned interpretations. That it became the primary text of a sector of Christianity that distanced itself both from Tatian’s harmony as well as from early Christian creeds designed to, at least partially, coral some of these issues, cannot be an accident.

Part of the reason why this ambiguity has been overlooked may have to do with the fact that those of us doing the translating and interpreting of John have unconsciously added our own non-Semitic sense of time and

space to the translation or interpretation in question. This has set up the following polarity in a number of discussions of Thomas and John:

In Thomas, Jesus acts as an embodiment of Holy Wisdom and counsels his students toward experiences of knowing the self and experiencing creation for themselves. The community of John may also regard Jesus as an embodiment of Holy Wisdom, present as Logos in the beginning, but this is something to believe in rather than experience. For Kanagaraj (1998), for example, the John community may recognize that mystical “ascent” to the divine seat at creation’s beginning is possible, but that the only real ascent is through redemption by “Jesus-on-the-cross,” rather than through experiencing creation oneself (pp. 299-300). Everyone might not be able to undergo the rigorous disciplines involved in creation mysticism, but everyone could believe that Jesus had done it, and could love one another as Jesus had loved them.

Klijn (1992) earlier maintained that it was a similar dichotomy of experience vs. faith that led various Egyptian streams of the early Jesus movement to develop from what he calls “esoteric groups or ‘schools’” (p.173ff), which based their membership on personal spiritual practice and experience, into more open “communions,” based on a common philosophy, and then into churches, based on more exact formulations of belief, but with no requirement of spiritual practice or experience.

If we look at the Peshitta and Old Syriac versions of John, we can see indications of a tradition that seems to straddle the extremes of sole reliance on either self-knowledge or faith. In this strand of tradition, Jesus seems to tell his students that a love- and faith-connection to him can help lead them to re-experience creation as he had.

The Prologue in the Peshitta and Old Syriac

In John 1:1, the Peshitta uses the Syriac phrase *brīšīta ʾitwa hewā melṭā* which can be rendered “In/with beginningness was existing the ongoing word [or conversation].”

The Syriac here can carry the same sense as the Hebrew of Genesis or the Coptic of Thomas: that creation is a continuing process in which one can participate. We can also see this expression related to the Hebrew concept of *dʾḥar*, the ongoing creative word by which the Holy One brought everything into being. As Boman (1970) has pointed out, this “word” is very different from the Greek concept of *logos*. In Greek thinking, the divine Logos is immutable, residing in a place or space beyond the line (or circle) of time. In ancient Hebrew thinking, the divine Dabhar continues to act, create and change. In Greek thinking, word is separate from action. In Hebrew, speaking the “word” is its action, just as the Holy One spoke creation into existence. One can only judge it good (“ripe”) or bad (“unripe”), depending upon whether it ultimately fulfils the purpose for which it was intended. The Syriac *melṭā* participates in the ancient Hebraic sense, in that the word or conversation is ongoing and connects the divine and human realms of existence. (This also relates to a saying of Jesus about his “word” or life’s expression continuing in the synoptic gospels in Matthew 24:35, Mark 13:31, and Luke 21:33).

Like the Old Syriac, the Peshitta also allows for the same ambiguity about creation through, by or in the Word in 1:3. Here the Syriac (*kul bʾidā hewa*) could be rendered as “all things were existing through/in him or through/in it (the Word)” or “through/in it (the Word) all things were coming into being by its own hand.” Throughout the Johannine hymn, the Peshitta also maintains the ambiguity about the question: Is it Jesus

personally that is meant or the original divine image of humanity that he represents as Word-Wisdom?

In relation to 1:5 (“And the light shineth in the darkness, and the darkness comprehended it not”), the Peshitta (and Old Syriac-Curetonian) uses the Syriac *hešukā* and *nuhra*, which correspond directly to the Hebrew ones used in Gen. 1:2 and 1:3 for darkness and light (*hōšek* and *‘or*). One could argue that in the context of the above ambiguity, the use of these terms would have been heard by a Semitic speaker as referring to the part of the original creation story just after light arose from divine breath and darkness (Gen. 1:3). As retold by John 1, the divine light-intelligence was not being understood or comprehended (*derak*) by the divine dark, the unilluminated aspect of being, but both are held together in the unity of the divine.

Again, as Boman has pointed out, ancient Semitic ideas about the co-existence of divine light and dark are very different from the Greek polarity, in which “divine darkness” is not a possibility in Greek symbols of deity. If we were, for instance, to hear this part of John’s prologue with Semitic ears, one version might be:

First Consciousness shined with Unconsciousness,
Light shines with the Darkness,
Knowing will shine with Unknowing,
and one has not and will not
overcome the other.

In this light, hearing John’s prologue again with Semitic ears brings us much closer to the cosmic creation story of Holy Wisdom in Proverbs, with Jesus re-enacting the story as her embodiment.

Being Born Again

In John 3, where Jesus advises Nicodemus to be “born again,” the Peshitta and Old Syriac (Sinaitic) render this phrase with the words *yiled men drīs*, which can mean to be regenerated from the first beginning or from the head or start of a process. The Syriac expression *drīs* recalls through its roots the Hebrew *b’rē’šīt*, so we could hear this with “Semitic ears” as:

Unless you are reborn
 from the First Beginning—
 the Bereshith moment of the cosmos—
 you will not be able to
 understand the realm of God.

Shortly thereafter, Jesus tries to clarify for Nicodemus what he means by this in the passage about being born of water and spirit (John 3:5). Here the Peshitta and Old Syriac render “water” and “spirit” as *mayā* and *ruḥā*, words that would have alerted a Semitic listener to resonances with similar Hebrew words (*māyim*, *rūah*) used together in the cosmogenesis described by Genesis 1:2. In a Semitic sense, *māyim* indicates not simply “water,” but also primordial flow; *rūah* not only an ineffable “spirit” but also primordial breath. That is, a person listening to the story with Semitic ears could as easily have heard an experience as a belief being described.

Following this (John 3:6), Jesus speaks of a birth of breath (*ruḥā*) and a birth of flesh (*besrā*), and says that Nicodemus needs to learn to distinguish between the two. Just as *ruḥā*, as breath, wind and air, is also partly physical from Western cultural point of view, so also “flesh” is not wholly physical. Similar to the Hebrew *bāsār*, the word comes from a root meaning to relate or tell, a concept related to ongoing, creative divine Word (*d’ḥar*). In a Semitic sense, as Boman has pointed out, flesh can express the

divine image and would not be possible without it. Flesh is only considered a separate thing—a body or a corpse—when it no longer does so. Hence ancient Hebrew has a word for living flesh, that is, a substance, but lacks a word for what we would call “living body,” that is, a form in itself. As a Semitic gloss on this episode, we could say that, if Nicodemus were to return to his original divine image at the beginning-time, he would then understand both “languages” of existence, breath and flesh.

Before Abraham

Bereshit interpretations present in the Peshitta also illuminate a reported Jesus saying in John 8. The meaning of this saying again hinges on the fact that in a phenomenological experience of Bereshit, not only are all the prophets still alive and moving ahead of one, but so is the divine image reflected by Elohim through the First Human in Genesis 1:26.

In this episode, Jesus gets into a heated conversation with some Judean listeners about what it means to have Abraham as one’s father. Into this, Jesus inserts the statement that if a person did what he were advocating, that person would not “see death.” If, for instance, one’s *ruhā* were reconnected to the living divine image at the first beginning, the passing of the flesh would be inconsequential. His listeners get upset, saying:

Now we know that thou hast a devil. Abraham is dead, and the prophets; and thou sayest, If a man keep my saying, he shall never taste of death. Art thou greater than our father Abraham, which is dead? and the prophets are dead: whom makest thou thyself?
(KJV, John 8:52-3).

In the Peshitta, Jesus can be seen to reply with a Semitic sense of time, in which the past is ahead of one and moving forward, the future

behind and yet to come (see again Boman). He refers in this regard to the living connection that he has to his divine image at creation:

Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad. Then said the Jews unto him, Thou art not yet fifty years old, and hast thou seen Abraham? Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I am. Then took they up stones to cast at him (KJV, John 8:56-59)

In a Bereshit sense, the “day” (*yaumā*) Jesus refers to is the original cosmological moment in which the divine creates Adam, which in the synchronic sense of Semitic languages includes both the present and the future. The Peshitta and Old Syria texts’ use of verbs in the passage usually translated “before Abraham was, I am” (8:58: *‘adlā newā ’abrāhām ’ena ’it*) can indicate that the past is not over, but a continuing experience, for instance: “Before Abraham is existing, I am being.” Again in a Semitic sense we could hear any “I am” statement indicating the connection between the personal “I” to the only, divine “I Am.” Such an interpretation allowed various Eastern Christian communities to maintain a “low Christology” for much of its existence up until the rise of early Islam, which enshrined these ideas in the Quran (for instance, see Kung 1993)

Preparing A Place

A Semitic sense of time in relation to the protological “beginning time” is also evidenced in the Peshitta and Old Syriac versions of John 14:2-4 (“In my father’s house are many mansions.... I go to prepare a place for you.”). Both versions use the word *‘atrā* for “place,” a word which can indicate a level or mode of being. For instance, in the Peshitta version of the vision of Ezekiel (3:12) the same word is used to translate the Hebrew word *meqōm*, referring to the glory emanating of the Holy One from its

primordial “place.” To the Semitic mind this place is not a “space” out of time, but a mode of existence. It was another word for the “seat” of the divine at the protological moment of *bʾrēʿšīt*. Likewise, neither the “house” (from *baitā*) nor the “rooms” or “mansions” (from *ʾawānā*) indicate Western cultural constructions of fixed material, spatial realities. Both can be seen as easily as cosmological and phenomenological (using Western terms that bridge the linguistic gulf between experience and what is experienced).

As a midrashic gloss on this passage, the mode of being that Jesus would prepare by his passing was the same kind of living resonance that he experienced in his connection to the *ruhā* of Abraham and the prophets. Through the same phenomenological connection, his students could connect to him at any moment. Each person’s individual divine image (the “room” or experienced “accommodation”) would have a place in the one, original and all-inclusive divine image of humanity (the dynamic “house”) present at the first beginning. Jesus’ pre-existent and continuing presence, connected to the first “I am” and the divine image, becomes then a source of guidance for his individual disciples.

Because his disciples were so attached to his outer form and literal words, Jesus predicted that they would better be able to contact his living essence and experience when he was not longer enfleshed among them. He also adds that they “already know the way” (14:4) he is going. When they try to deny that they know the way, he first tells them that the “I am” (*ʿenā ʿenā*, literally, I-I)--that is, the original divine image of humanity that reflects the only and divine “I Am”-- exists as the “way, the truth and life” (14:6). In the Peshitta and Old Syriac versions, these three words are rendered by *ʾurhā* (the path), *šerārā* (the sense of right direction) and *hayē* (the energy to travel it). He also reminds them of their own divine image, present from creation, which is what they have seen and loved in him,

mirroring it back to them. When they have really seen and experienced this image in him, they have also seen the image of the parent of all creation, the “father,” as it is usually translated (14:9: “he that hath seen me hath seen the Father; and how sayest thou then, shew us the Father?”).

Two things are striking here: The layers of meaning the Peshitta and Old Syriac versions allow here in a midrashic sense clearly straddle the notions of faith and self-knowledge or experience. Second, in this light the Jesus of John comes much closer to the Jesus of Thomas.

Towards the end of this farewell speech in John 14, we return to the ambiguity over the prepositional *beth* mentioned by Ruzer in his work. In John 14:12, the Peshitta allows the words usually rendered “whoever believes in me” to also be heard as “whoever believes through or like me.” It is such persons, however understood, who will accomplish the “greater works” Jesus mentions.

The Trajectory into Islam

As Christian scholars like Kung (1993) and Islamic scholars (Khalidi 2001, Nasr 1997 and Schimmel, 1975,1994) have shown, Islam enshrines low Christological notions of Jesus as well as protological ideas of creation, with which Muhammad came into contact through Eastern Christians. Some of these protological ideas appear in the Quran and parallel the statements made by the Jesus of Thomas (and in its Semitic sense, of John). These include the idea of return to original creation and divine image held within the bowels of the first human (the so-called “day of Alastu” found in Sura 7:172) as well as a primordial cloak of light that spreads from the first beginning throughout created existence (Sura 2). Elsewhere the Quran describes the human journey as a return to this original condition of the divine image found at creation (See Suras 7:172, 33:72-73 and 41:9-12).

Here the notion of Word/Wisdom at the beginning evolves into the concept of the *nur-i-muhammad*. In a hadith, Muhammad echoes Jesus' "Before Abraham was..." saying with his own equivalent: "Adam and the prophets follow my banner."

Using the preliminary study presented here, along with the ideas of hybrid identity formation in early proto-Judaism and Christianity, we may begin to map out a trajectory for Bereshit ideas, stories and practices that includes early Islam as well. If nothing else this trajectory shows that Semitic protological ideas of time and space carried power and authority for hundreds of years in the Middle East, a power that on a personal level, to its individual practitioners, translated as "Genesis Now!"

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