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The Incarnate Dialogue: Re-reading The "Word Become Flesh" Through Philosophical Hermeneutics

[1]Author Babyson Terang [2]Author Latika Hazarika

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ABSTRACT

Reading the Johannine Prologue; John 1;1-18 (The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition) through a philosophical hermeneutics reveals that the eternal Logos is more than pros ton theon (1:1), agent of creation (1:3), incarnating as 'flesh' (1:14) to reveal glory and make God known (1:18). Guided by the three primary objectives, this research first critiques monological interpretation of Logos in John Prologue; John 1:1-18 (NRSVUE), arguing against the instrumental view of language in favour of Gadamer's ontological linguisticality, where Logos is understood as the self-presentation of God. Second, it analyses John 1:14 as a Buberian "I-Thou" through Gadamerian dialectic, demonstrating that the text functions as a Subject that interrogates the reader's pre-understandings through the risks of "genuine conversation." Third, it affirms the ontological necessity of "flesh," validating Gadamer's claim that truth must be historically situated to be intelligible. This paper bridges biblical theology and philosophical hermeneutics through a close reading of the primary text. The findings reveal that the "Word become flesh" is a hermeneutical paradigm that bridges the historical gap, transforming the believing community from a social entity into participants in the eternal pros (dialogue) with the trinity. This interdisciplinary approach challenges reductionist views of Scripture, offering a robust framework for ecclesial identity in religiously pluralistic context.

Keywords:

Incarnate Dialogue, Gadamerian Hermeneutics, Logos, I-Thou Dialectic, Fusion of Horizons, Situated Truth, Genuine Conversation.

[1] Corresponding Author : Assistant Professor cum Research Scholar, Lakhimpur Girls' College, Assam
[2] Author : Associate Professor & Head, Department of Philosophy, Madhabdev University, Assam
Email – babysonterang@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

The Johannine Prologue functions as theological overview that compress John's Christology, soteriology and ecclesiology into a hymn-like exposition of the Logos' pre-existence, creative agency, incarnation and community-constituting power. The central theme of the passage is John 1:14: "the Word became flesh and dwelt (eskēnōsen) among us" (John 1:14) evoking divine Shekinah while declaring unprecedented historical indwelling. Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, through the verbum interius, illuminates this as paradigmatic for understanding divine self-articulation that enters finite language, fusing eternal and temporal horizons.

John Arthos (2009) demonstrates Gadamer's dependence on Augustine and Aquinas, where the inner word proceeds consubstantially, modelling hermeneutical events where truth manifests without loss. This paper argues that the Prologue depicts "Incarnate Dialogue," grounding ecclesial community in Trinitarian Logos-life, addressing contemporary philosophical-theological discourse.

RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

Contemporary biblical scholarship emphasizes the Prologue's community theme yet lacks systematic integration with philosophical hermeneutics especially from the Indian community centric mindset. Gadamer's linguisticality; "Being that can be understood is language" offers tools to articulate how incarnation mediates divine-human communion, redefining community beyond anthropological relationality as participation in eternal pros (John 1:1-2).

Monological Logos readings objectify incarnation, ignoring its relational call (John 1:12-14). Gadamer's dialogical ontology resolves this objectification by aligning the Logos with pros-community and incarnation. This study in comparative philosophy, bridges the Indian-Western traditions, applying hermeneutics to sacred texts amid ecological

crisis where divine-human dialogue incarnates sustainability.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Primary Biblical Context:

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition (2021) National Council of the Churches of Christ, USA recorded John 1:1-18 that Logos is eternally (en archē ēn, 1:1) existed, relational (pros ton theon, 1:1) with God the Father, creatively (dia autou, 1:3) creating everything that existed in the universe, incarnationally (sarx egeneto, 1:14) taking the form of human and dwell with human and revelatorily (exēgeomai, 1:18) making known to the world that He is Divine-human and whoever come to Him participate in this relational for the glory of God.

Johannine Exegesis (Secondary):

Seok-Il Yoon (2008), in his "The Meaning of the Logos in John 1:1-18", systematically traces Logos from Greek philosophy (Heraclitus' cosmic law and proportion, Sophists' rational power, Plato's discourse to Ideas, Stoic's material reason, Philo's mediator) through Hebrew dābār (dynamic Creator and Revelator word) to Johannine exegesis.

Godibert K. Gharbin and Ernest van Eck's (2022) article "The Johannine Prologue: A Hermeneutical Key to the Community Theme." publish in Verbum et Ecclesia employs narratological analysis to demonstrate John 1:1-18 as hermeneutical key for the Johannine community theme. The researchers proposes five part structure: (1) divine community via pros ton theon eternal fellowship/unity (1:1-2); (2) collaborative creation (Father source, Logos agent, 1:3-5); (3) Baptist testimony (1:6-9, 15); (4) human response; rejection vs. reception to sonship "born of God"(1:10-13); (5) incarnation establishing human community (1:14-18). He challenges anthropological relationality and redefines community as ontological participation in Trinitarian life. He regarded Logos as exegete (1:18) that witnesses experience based.

Donald Arthur Carson's (1991) Commentary, "The Gospel According to John" (Pillar New Testament Commentary series) offers verse-by-verse exegesis with theological depth. The commentary addressed the prologue as "foyer" summarising Gospel themes that Logos pre-existence (2:1-2), creative agency (1:3), life/light (1:4-5), Baptist witness (1:6-8), incarnation (1:14), sonship (1:12). He also notes chiastic parallels (life/light in 5:26, glory in 12:41), pros ton theon intimate association, rejection/ recognition (1:10-12), glory as "only Son" (1:14), grace superseding law (1:17). It emphasizes participatory response over doctrinalism.

Andreas J. Köstenberger's (2004) commentary, "John (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament)" offers verse-by-verse exegesis emphasizing John's historical reliability, literary artistry, and theological mission. Prologue (1:1-18): pros ton theon personal fellowship, Logos as Creator-agent (1:3), reception yields sonship (1:12), incarnation reveals glory/grace (1:14), Son exegete Father (1:18). The commentary stressed eyewitness testimony, chiastic structure and participatory faith.

Gadamerian Hermeneutics (Secondary)

Hans-Georg Gadamer (2004) "Truth and Method" establishes philosophical hermeneutics as an ontological event where understanding emerges through linguisticality; "Being that can be understood is language" directly illuminate the "Incarnate Dialogue" framework for John 1:14. The eternal Logos (pros ton theon, 1:1-2) parallels divine self-articulation entering flesh as dialogical medium (1:14) fusing eternal horizon with human response (1:12). He argued that Pres-understanding risk doctrinal objectification while genuine conversation demands participatory openness to the incarnate (Thou) and effective-historical consciousness validate fleshy situated revelation (1:18). The prologue functions as a living address demanding transformation rather than a static proposition.

Ronald Gregor Smith's (1937) translated work of Martin Buber's I and Thou offers a

foundational framework for understanding textual dialogue. Buber explicitly talks about the I and Thou as a present relations. In his I and Thou poem, Though Buber has not directly dealt with Johanine prologue, can be implies through his great deal with the I and Thou relation. Buber's work will help in interpreting the Word not as a static doctrine, but as an ongoing, embodied relational event.

Integrative Studies (Secondary):

John Arthks' (2009) "The inner World in Gadamer's Hermeneutics" recovers the Augustinian verbum interius as Gadamer's unspoken hermeneutic core in Truth and Method. Tracing Logos from Philo/Stoic's through Aquinas/Hegel/Heidegger, Arthos shows language as speculative unity: inner word proceeds consubstantially, manifesting Being wiThout source-loss. Arthos parallels Gadamer's inner word with Logos of John 1:1-18. According to him, hermeneutic event mirrors Trinitarian procession that comes into language ontologically.

While Yoon and Gharbin exegete Greek-relational dimensions and Gadamer revolutionizes hermeneutics, few integrate them for John 1:14. Monological critiques (e.g., propositional Christology) dominate while dialogical re-readings remain underexplored, especially in non-Western contexts. This study fills this gap through Incarnate Dialogue, incarnating Gadamer in biblical flesh.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To critique the monological interpretations of the Logos, proposing Incarnation as open-ended Divine-human dialogue.
2. To analyze John 1:14 as Gadamerian I-Thou through question-and-answer dialectic.
3. To demonstrate the ontological necessity of flesh for intelligibility, validating Gadamer's claim that situated truth must be historically dialogical.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

RQ1: How does Incarnate Dialogue resolve hermeneutical distance created by treating the text as a mere historical artifact?

RQ2: How does Gadamer's concept of "genuine conversation" (which requires risking one's Pres-understandings) illuminate the reader's encounter with the "Word become flesh"?

RQ3: To what extent does the "flesh" of the Logos validate the interpreter's own historical context as the legitimate site for divine revelation?

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Incarnate Dialogue: A hermeneutical framework proposed by this study where the "Word become flesh" is understood not as a static divine decree, but as an interactive, historical conversation between the Divine and the human. It synthesizes the theological concept of Incarnation (God entering history) with the philosophical concept of Dialogue (Truth emerging from conversation). It asserts that truth is only accessible when it enters the flesh of human language and history.

Genuine Conversation: Gadamer's dialogical yielding to Sache (subject-matter's truth), that risks Pres-understanding.

Pros-Relation: Greek pros ton theon (1:1) as eternal I-Thou fellowship.

Monological: Static propositional reading contrasting participatory.

Logos (The Word): In Christian Theology it is defined as the divine reason or the second person of the Trinity. In this study, it refers to the communicative event of Being, the fundamental principle of linguisticality.

Incarnation (Flesh/Sarx): Generally defined as the act of God becoming human in Jesus of Nazareth. Here, it refers to the "situatedness" of truth. It functions as the ontological paradigm where abstract truth (The Word) voluntarily enters historical limitations (Flesh). This study uses "Flesh" to represent the necessity of historical context for any hermeneutical understanding.

I-Thou Dialectic: Refers to the mode of reading where the text of John 1:1-18 is treated as a Subject that questions the reader, rather than an Object to be analysed. It signifies the shift from a monological critique to a dialogical encounter.

Philosophical Hermeneutics: The theory of interpretation developed by Hans-Georg Gadamer. A methodology that prioritised the event of understanding over the historical reconstruction. It is operationalized as the process of exposing the researcher's Pres-understanding to the "truth claim" of the Johannine text.

Fusion of Horizons (Horizontverschmelzung): The merging of the reader's perspective with the text's perspective. Here, it means the cognitive and spiritual event where the "horizon of the text" (First-Century Jewish-Hellenistic context) and the "horizon of the interpreter" (Twenty-First-Century Context) overlap. It is measured by the creation of new meaning that respects history but addresses the present.

Effective History (Wirkungsgeschichte): Refers to the accumulation of creeds, liturgical traditions and cultural interpretations of John 1 that shaped the modern reader. In this study, it is operationally defined not as a barrier to the original meaning, but as the bridge that make access to the Logos possible.

Prejudice (Vorurteil): Generally defined as bias or preconceived notion (usually negative). But here it refers to "Productive Pre-understanding." It is the set of doctrinal beliefs (e.g., Jesus is Lord) the researcher brings to the next. This study treats prejudice as the enabling condition (the fore-structure) that allows the interpretation to begin rather than an obstacle to be removed.

DELIMITATION OF THE STUDY

Analysis is confined to John 1:1-18, Gadamer's linguisticality/verbum interius. It excludes Synoptic parallels, full Gospel development, non-Arthos-Gadamer-Buber interpreters, and patristic reception beyond contextualisation.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative textual-hermeneutical analysis, a close reading of John's Prologue (The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition, John 1:1-18) through Gadamerian categories (linguisticality, prejudice, fusion of horizon, genuine conversation, etc.) and Buberian I-Thou. To meet the research objectives, the study reviewed secondary sources in the form of books, commentaries, dictionaries and journal articles.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Re-reading John 1:1-18 through Gadamerian Hermeneutic reveals that the Logos is eternal, eternal pros with God, created everything in the universe, source of all knowledge, took the form of human bring to give sonship to those who received Him that they may participate in the divine-human encounter. The reading also reflects that neither the Logos in the process of incarnation lose neither anything nor the source. The incarnation is not just an abstract concept but a historical event though which many have seen the glory of the one and only who incarnated.

Critiquing the Monologue: From Instrumental Signs to Ontological Linguisticality

The modern view that language is 'instrumental' which has dominated the Enlightenment may be regarded as the obstacle to understanding the Logos of John (Gadamer, 2004). It views words as merely arbitrary signs (labels) used by a subject to designate pre-existing objects (Nielsen, 2022). If applied to Theology, the Logos becomes a label attached to the Second Person of the Trinity; a tool through which God uses to convey information. This reduces the Prologue to a monologue, where God speaks at the world from a position of detached transcendence.

Hans-Georg Gadamer decisively breaks with this model. In Truth and Method, he argues for the "ontological linguisticality" of understanding, famously stating that "Being that can be understood in language" (Gadamer, 2004). According to Gadamer,

language is not a tool we pick up and put down; it is the medium in which reality presents itself.

The Inner Word (Verbum Interius)

To articulate this, Gadamer uses the scholastic concept of the Verbum Interius (inner word) of Augustine. He notes that in the Christian doctrine of the Trinity the generation of the Son (the Word) from the Father is not a physical process of the division but an intellectual emanation. Just as a Thought is expressed in a word wiThout the mind losing the Thought, the Father expresses Himself in the Logos wiThout diminution (Gadamer, 2004, p. 421).

John Arthos explains that Gadamer uses this Trinitarian analogy to show that "the word belongs to the thing essentially rather than accidentally" (Arthos 2009, p.279). Applying this to John 1:1, we see that the Logos is not a separate sign pointing to God; it is God in the mode of self-presentation ("and the Word was God," 1:1). The Logos is the speculative unity of Being and Speech. Therefore, the Prologue is not a report about God; it is the voice of God. It is an Incarnate Dialogue where Divine nature is revealed as inherently communicative. God is not a silent monad; God is by nature conversational (pros ton theon).

The Word as Thou: The Incarnation as I-Thou Dialectic

If the Logos is the active self-presentation of God, then reading of the Prologue requires a shift in the interpreter's perspective. Buber distinguishes between an "I-It" relationship (where a subject studies and object, like a scientist studies a rock) and "I-Thou" relationship (where a subject encounters another person). (Buber, 1923/1937).

In an "I-It" reading of John 1, the scholar controls the text, while in an "I-Thou" reading, the text is acknowledged as a Subject that speaks back. The Incarnation phrase, "And the Word become flesh" (John 1:14) is the ultimate "I-Thou" event. It transforms the hermeneutical situation from an analysis into an encounter.

Rejection and Reception: The Clash of Horizons

The Prologue shows this dialectic through the reaction of the world to the Logos. John

1:10-11 states, "He was in the world, … yet the world did not know Him. He came to what was His own, and His own people did not accept Him" (The Holy Bible).

From a Gadamerian perspective, this "rejection" represents a closed horizon. The world attempted to fit the Logos into its pre-existing categories, and when the Logos did not fit, the world rejected it. This is the failure of the "I-It" mode, refusing to let the Other challenge one's own worldview. Conversely, "reception" (John 1:12) functions as a Fusion of Horizons (Horizontverschmelzung). To "receive" the Word is to allow the horizon of the interpreter to merge with the horizon of the text. It is a surrender of control. As Gadamer writes, in a genuine conversation, "we do not know what will come out" (Gadamer, 2004, p.383). The believer who "receives" the Logos allows their identity to be rewritten by the text, resulting in the power to become "children of God" (John 1:12). This new birth is the result of a dialectical exchange where the human question is answered by the Divine Word.

The Central of the Prologue

Structural analysis supports this dialectical focus. Culpepper argues that John 1:12 (gave power to become children of God) serves as the Central idea or chiasmic center of the entire Prologue (Culpepper 1981, p.13). This places the emphasis not on the abstract definition of the Logos, but on the interaction between the Logos and humanity. The text is structured to lead the readers into this "I-Thou" decision: Will you reject the Light (maintain your own horizon) or receive the Light (fuse with the Divine horizon)? (Culpepper, 1981).

The Necessity of Flesh: Situated Truth and Historical Validity

The climax of the Prologue is the assertion that "the Word became flesh (sarx) and lived among us" (John 1:14). For the Gnostics and many Greek philosophers, "flesh" was a barrier to truth; a prison of the soul. However, Gadamer's hermeneutics provides a powerful philosophical defense of the "flesh."

Gadamer argues against the Enlightenment ideal of "objective knowledge" that tries to escape history. Gadamer asserts that human understanding is always historically

affected (Wirkungsgeschichtlich). Humans are finite brings, situated in time to time and culture. Therefore, abstract truth is inaccessible to us. If Truth is to be understood, it must become "situated" (embedded in historical, cultural, and linguistic finitude).

Anti-Gnostic Hermeneutics

The incarnation is the theological validation of this philosophical insight. By becoming sarx, the Logos accepted the limitations of history, culture and language. Seok-Il Yoon notes that the "life and light" of the Logos are not ethereal concepts but are communicated through the specific historical person of Jesus (Yoon 2008, p 2). God did not remain an "inner word" but became an "outer word" that is visible, audible, and touchable.

This affirms that the "flesh" of history, including the specific Jewish context of the First Century is not an obstacle to understanding God, but the necessary condition for it. As Gadamer suggests, we cannot strip away tradition to find a "pure" meaning; we must read through the tradition (Gadamer 2004, p.269-274). The "flesh" of the text (its specific language and history) is the medium of revelation (Kumar, 2016, p.6).

Community as the Site of Truth

Finally, the "flesh" implies a shared reality. The Prologue shifts from the cosmic "He" (v.1) to the communal "We" in verse 14: "We have seen His glory." Gharbin and van Eck argue that this shift indicates that the Logos creates a new community defined not by blood, but by participation in Divine life (Gharbin and van Eck 2022, p.5).

Hermeneutically, this validates the role of the community (the Church) in interpretation. The "fusion of Horizons" does not happen in a vacuum; it happens within the "effective history" of a community that has carried the witness of the "flesh" through centuries. The "grace upon grace" (John 1:16) that we receive is the accumulation of this ongoing dialogue, the continuous interpretation of the Incarnate Word by the community of faith (Gharbin and van Eck 2022).

CONCLUSION

The Prologue of John, re-reading through Gadamer perspective reveals incarnation as hermeneutical event (Incarnate Dialogue) in which the verbum inteius enfleshed fuses Divine-human horizons, constituting community as ongoing Divine dialogue.

The application of Gadamerian hermeneutics to John 1:1-18 offers a revitalized understanding of the Logos. By moving beyond the monological critique of historical criticism, the study rediscovers the text as an "Incarnate Dialogue." The findings and analysis reveals that the Logos is not an instrumental sign but the ontological self-presentation of God ("Being as Language"), the Incarnation functions aa an "I-Thou" event, challenging the reader to risk their closed horizon in a fusion with the Divine claim and the "Word became flesh" validates history and community as the legitimate sites of truth. To read the Prologue hermeneutically is to participate in the eternal pros (fellowship) of the Father and Son. It is to accept that Truth (Divine) has pitched its tent in the flesh of human language, inviting human not merely to analyse the tent but to enter it.

This bridges theology and philosophy, challenging individualistic ecclesiology and validating Scripture's hermeneutic depth. Future research may be undertaken towards ecological applications in Indian Philosophy.

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