

# The Gospel of John

## **JOHN 1:1-18 THE PROLOGUE**

The Gospel of John is a portrait of Jesus Christ and his saving work. It focuses on the last three years of Jesus' life—and especially on his death and resurrection. The gospel was written so that people would believe that Jesus is the Son of God and by believing might have life in His name (Jn. 20:3-31). The prologue (1:1-18) is more than just an introduction; it is the directive on how the entire book should be read and understood (Beasley-Murray, 5).

### **“THE WORD”**

**1:1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.**

**1:14 And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.**

In John 1:1,14 “the Word” (In Greek, “the *logos*” - λόγος) is a title used of the pre-incarnate Christ (also see Rev. 19:13 for use after the incarnation). It is difficult to know why John chose to call Christ “the *Logos*,” but he needed a word that was free of the associations found in other titles. Had he said, “In the beginning was Jesus,” he would have confused Christ’s pre-incarnate and post-incarnate states since “Jesus” was the name given to the child after His birth (Mat. 1:20-21). Likewise, “Christ” was the title that referred to the long-awaited king of the Jews who would give victory to the people and bear the government of the world on his shoulders. Even though it may be odd for us to call Christ “the Word,” we can assume that since John saw no need to define it, its meaning was readily understood by his readers.

John was a Jew who lived in a Greek world. In Greek culture, the word *logos* was the inward thought and the expression of that thought. The following is a summary of Arthur Pink’s thoughts on the subject:

(a) A “word” is a medium of manifestation. I can have a thought in my mind, but others don’t know what it is. However, as soon as I put the thought into words it becomes knowable. This is precisely what the Lord Jesus has done. As the Word, Christ has made manifest the invisible God(see I Cor. 2:11).

(b) A “word” is a means of communication. By means of words I transmit information to others. By words I express myself, make known my will, and impart knowledge. So Christ, as the Word, is the Divine Transmitter, communicating to us the life and love of God.

(c) A “word” is a method of revelation. By his words a speaker exhibits both his intellectual caliber and his moral character. And Christ, as the Word, reveals the attributes and perfections of God. How fully has Christ revealed God! He displayed His power, He manifested

His wisdom, He exhibited His holiness, He made known His grace, He unveiled His heart. In Christ, and nowhere else, is God fully and finally told out.

Pink, Arthur W. (2012-06-18). The Gospel of John (Arthur Pink Collection) (Kindle Locations 296-300). Pribriary Publishing. Kindle Edition.

Even though this helps explain how the word “logos” is a good term to describe Christ in Greek culture, it is much more probable that John’s terminology is rooted more in Jewish thought than Greek.

In the OT, God’s word is more than just the communication of an inward thought; it is effective and was the agent for fulfilling God’s will. In other words, when God spoke, He wasn’t just expressing what He was thinking. As He spoke, His word actually accomplished what it was that he was saying. For example, in the creation account when God desired that light come into being, He simply said, “Let there be Light” (Ps. 33:6; Gen. 1:3 ff.), and light came into existence; no other subsequent action was required.

Though God’s word was not an entity separate from God, OT poetic language made it sound like it was. In Psalm 147:15 it says, “He (God) sends forth His command to the earth; His word runs very swiftly.” Words can’t literally be “sent” or “run” (cf. Ps. 107:20), but here they are spoken of as if they were living messengers being sent from God. In a similar way, in Isaiah 55:10-11, God’s word was sent to unerringly fulfill His commission. It says, “For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there without watering the earth and making it bear and sprout, and furnishing seed to the sower and bread to the eater; so will My word be which goes forth from My mouth; it will not return to Me empty, without accomplishing what I desire, and without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it.”

God’s word is closely related to His wisdom which was also spoken of as if it was a person. In Proverbs 8:22-26 God’s wisdom “speaks” of its existence and the role it played in creation:

“The LORD possessed me (*wisdom*) at the beginning of His way, before His works of old. From everlasting I was established, from the beginning, from the earliest times of the earth. When there were no depths I was brought forth, when there were no springs abounding with water. Before the mountains were settled, before the hills I was brought forth; while He had not yet made the earth and the fields, nor the first dust of the world.”

A reader who is unaware of the nature of Hebrew poetry may be tempted to think that all the personal pronouns (“me” and “I”) refer to a living being distinct from God. It is not. “The purpose of this personification was to help man understand God by abstracting one of His attributes and endowing it with personality and consciousness. Through personification the author of Proverbs helped the reader understand that wisdom is eternally connected to God and is an extension of His dynamic being to mankind” (Bullock, An Intro. to the OT Prophetic Books, 158).

“In considering the *Logos* of John, the echoes of *logos* in first century culture should be born in mind. Still the Jewish background must be considered primary” (Schreiner, New Testament Theology, 257).

The OT concepts of God's "word" in revealing God and accomplishing His purposes made it a suitable title for God's ultimate self-disclosure in the person of His own Son. The Son, like the wisdom of God is the extension of God's very nature, He is the vehicle by which God reveals Himself to the world (1:14, 18), the One through whom the glory of God was uniquely and perfectly disclosed (Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:3).

This is the theme of the Book of John – God's self-disclosure through Christ.

## **THE WORD WAS GOD**

Though personification helps us see a parallel to the term *logos* in relation to Christ, the personifications in the OT had no real being (ontological distinction) as the Word (*logos* - λόγος) has in John's gospel (Bullock, *An Intro. to the OT Prophetic Books*, 158). In the OT "the word" of God was impersonal; it was the means by which God accomplished His will. John calls "the Word" God and shows that He is eternal, the Creator, the source of all life, and the Revealer of the Father to men.

### **1. The Word was in the beginning**

"In the beginning" immediately reminds anyone familiar with the OT of Genesis 1:1, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." Both there and here, "the beginning" refers to the creation of all things. The Word already "was" at the time created life began. That is, prior to God's first creative act the Word already existed (also see Jn. 8:58; Col. 1:16, 17).

Therefore, John begins his Gospel by locating the Son of God in relation to time. The Word didn't come into being, but existed before time began. Jude rejoices in this truth in Jude 1:25; "To the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, *before all time* and now and forever. Amen." Paul says in 2 Timothy 1:9 that God gave us grace in Christ Jesus "before the ages began." Colossians 1:16 says, "he was before all things and in Him all things exist." The Bible is clear that there was never a moment when the Word did not exist.

If the Word already "was" at the beginning of the creation of all things, and if apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being (Jn. 1:3), then He Himself is without beginning and uncreated. He therefore must be God, for God alone fits these categories.

### **2. The Word was with God and was God**

The Word was with God and was God. These words express both the *nature* of the Son and His *relationship* to the Father. He was *with* God (the Father) in the same way that two people can be in each other's presence (the preposition *πρός* is used that way in Mk. 9:19; Matt. 13:56; Gal. 1:18; II Jn. 12 etc.). This expression stresses the eternal fellowship that existed between the Father and the Son and, at the same time, demonstrates their distinctiveness.

John also says the Word *was* God. The essence and attributes of the Father also belonged to the Son. (see the notes on our website at [gracefellowshiphawaii.org](http://gracefellowshiphawaii.org) > study resources > topical studies > cults for comments on the Jehovah's Witnesses mistranslation "the Word as a god.")

In order to grasp the meaning of John 1:1, we need a basic understanding of the Greek language in which the gospel was originally written. Literally, John wrote, "In beginning was the Word, and the Word was with **the** God, and God was the Word." The key is in his use of the article. In English, the words "the," "a" and "an" are called articles. The word "the" makes a word definite, while "a" or "an" means the word is indefinite. For example, "*the* man" refers to a specific man, while "*a* man" is more general. In *English* this is easy to understand, *but in Greek, there were no indefinite articles* (no "a" or "an"); all they had was the definite article ("the") and it was used differently than in English. It was simply a pointer, not just a means of making a word definite. When the article appears, the word is certainly definite. When it is not present, the word may be definite or not (A.T. Robertson, *Grammar*, 756; BDF, 273). The lack of the article is also significant in Greek. When the article is not used, the author is placing stress on the qualitative aspect (the nature) of the noun rather than its specific identity (Dana - Mantey, 149). For example, in English if someone were to say, "Fred was with **the** man, and Fred was man," we would see that the word "man" has two different nuances of meaning. "Fred was with **the** man" means that Fred was with a *specific* individual who is a male. "Fred was man" places stress on the Fred's nature. It means that Fred was human, not an angel, a dog, a car, or anything else. This is the way John used the article in the first verse of his gospel. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with the God. [i.e. the Word was with the specific individual who is identified as God, namely, God the Father], and the Word was God [i.e. the Word had the nature of God. The essence and attributes of the Father also belong to the Son]. Had John said the word was with THE God and the Word was THE God He would have been contradicting Himself, however in one simple sentence John states that the Father and Son are distinct in person, yet identical in nature; the Word is "in substance and essence God" (Jamieson, Fausset, Brown; *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*).

### 3. The Word was the Creator

***1:3 All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being.***

Verses 1 and 2 stress the relation of the Word to the Father; the relation of the Word to creation now comes into focus; John moves from the Word's essence to His works (Kostenberger, 28). This logically follows, for "the self-communication of God occurs first of all in creation" (Morris, 79). By saying that all things were made "through Him" (not "by Him"; see Jn. 1:10 also) John reaffirms the truth that the Father is the source of all that exists, but the Word is the medium through which God the Father expresses Himself in creation. The Bible maintains a careful distinction between the roles of the Father and the Son (I Cor. 8:6). Creation involves both the work of the Father and the Son.

Without the power and the presence of the Word, not a single thing however great or small throughout all the realms of time and space would exist. All things were created "by" Him and even "for" Him (Col.

1:16-17). Hebrews 1:2 says that through Him God made the world. The term translated as “world” is really plural, and means “ages.” It more specifically speaks of the sum of the periods of time including all that is manifested in them (Morris, 13). It is the whole created universe in space and time (Bruce, 47). To speak of Christ as the Creator is to set Him apart from every other being. In Revelation 3:14 He is the faithful and true witness, the *arche* (ἀρχή, - Originator? Beginning? Ruler?) of God’s creation.

In Hebrews 1:3 and Colossians 1:17 we learn that Jesus is also the Sustainer of the created world who upholds all things by the word of His power.

#### **4. The Word is the source of life**

##### ***1:4 In Him was life . . .***

The Word is also the source of the essence of life. All life, physical and spiritual, issues forth from Him. He is the Living One (Rev. 1:18), and He gives life to whomever He wishes (Jn. 5:21, 26; 6:57). He came that men might have life and have it more abundantly (Jn. 10:10). He had the power to lay down His life and take it again (10:18). He said He is the resurrection and the life (Jn. 11:25), the bread of life (Jn. 6:35), the way, the truth and the life (Jn. 14:6). Many see a parallelism to John 5:26: “For just as the Father has life in Himself, even so He gave to the Son also to have life in Himself.” Both John 1:5 and 5:26 insist that the Son has the self-existing life of God (Carson, 118).

This life was so dispensed by the Word at creation that it became light (i.e. revelation) to the human race (Carson, 119). It isn’t clear if the light is the internal revelation that man has within himself as a creature made in the image of God, or it is the light of the external creation, but in either case, the fact that life comes from God is the starting-point in receiving light. Life does not exist in its own right. It did not come into being by chance. Rather, the very existence of life reveals that there is an exalted God as its source (Ro. 1:19, 20).

#### **5. The Word as the Source of Light**

##### ***1:4 In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men.***

##### ***1:5 The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.***

In the creation account darkness covered the surface of the deep (Gen 1:2), and God called light into existence (Gen. 1:3). The light dispelled the darkness. Here, as in Genesis 1, light is closely tied to “the beginning” and to darkness as well. However, the darkness that is found in the book of John is not the mere absence of light; it is positive evil (cf. 3:19; 8:12; 12:35, 46; I Jn. 1:5, 6: 2:8, 9, 11).

Until now, John has used the past tense to describe the Word, but now he changes to the present, “the light shines in the darkness.” The light is continually shining.

The verb translated as “comprehend” is a difficult word in Greek to translate. It contains the idea of laying hold of something to make it its own (Morris, 85). It is translated as “attain” in I Corinthians 9:24, as in “attaining a prize.” It can also mean “comprehend” as the translation above indicates. But darkness is not usually thought of trying to understand (comprehend) light (Morris, 85-86). It is probably better to translate this verse “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” (ESV) The light triumphed over the darkness at creation, and will always triumph over it whether the darkness is physical or spiritual in nature.

Jesus provides objective truth for men to see; John 1:9 says, “He is the true light which *enlightens every man.*” In John 8:12, Jesus encourages men to follow Him so that they “will not walk in the darkness, but will have the Light of life.” They are to walk in the light, so that darkness will not overtake them (Jn. 12:35 – same verb as is here). However, providing light does not guarantee that all will see it. People love darkness because their deeds are evil (Jn. 3:19), and when the light appears they hate it because it exposes their deeds (Jn. 3:20). Thus, not all associate life with its source. Even so, the light keeps shining.

## **THE WORD BECAME FLESH TO REVEAL GOD**

Earlier we have said that in the OT God’s word revealed God and accomplished His will. The next section of the prologue helps us to see this connection to Christ even more clearly.

### **1. God Is Invisible**

***John 1:18 No one has seen God at any time. . . .***

God is spirit (Jn. 4:24) and therefore, invisible to the eye. It is impossible, as far as human experience yet goes, to have direct knowledge of God as God. The visions of God that men had were partial; they could not reveal God’s essential being (Deut. 34:10; Ex. 33:20, 22 ff.; Num. 12:8; Isa. 6:1-6; Ezek. 1; Rev. 4, 5 etc.). Man can only know God in as far as God has made Himself known (1 Corinthians 2:11).

### **2. God Revealed Himself in the Law of Moses**

**John 1:17 For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ.**

The law revealed the character of the invisible God.

Verse 17 is not intending to say that there was no grace or truth in the Law of Moses. God did not need to make a provision to allow for sin to be atoned for, but He did; that is grace. No one would question that the Law was not truth; it was given by God! John 5:46 says, “If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote of me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?” Here, Moses is in harmony with Jesus and writing truth about Jesus and his grace. Rather, verse 17 is saying that the REALITY—the embodiment—of grace and truth came through Jesus, a WITNESS to that

reality came through the Law of Moses. Jesus was the fulfillment not the contradiction of the Law of Moses.

The Law was but a shadow of what God revealed in Christ. In John 6:32 Jesus says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven; my Father gives you the true bread from heaven." The bread that Moses gave was from God and provided real nourishment to meet physical needs. It was not "false" bread. However, a greater Bread was to come from heaven that would give eternal life. The bread spoken of in the Law of Moses was a witness to the grace to come. It was a foretaste of Christ.

### 3. God Became Human

**1:14 And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.**

Verse 14 marks the entrance of the Word into human history, and returns to the original thought begun in 1:1-5.

We, as men, can come to know God only through One who has both a human and divine nature and fellowship with God and man. Jesus alone meets that criterion. The incarnation of the Word is the supreme revelation of God to the world.

A second passage to the same effect is found in 1 John 1:1-3. It is there taught that what was in the beginning, what was with God, what was eternal, what was essentially life, appeared on earth, so as to be seen, heard, looked upon, and handled. Here again, a divine, invisible, eternal person, is said to have assumed our nature, a real body and a rational soul. He could be seen and touched as well as heard. This is the main idea of this epistle. The incarnation is declared to be the characteristic and essential doctrine of the gospel (Hodge Systematic Theology II, 385-386).

### 4. Jesus Reveals God

**1:14 And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.**

Jesus is uniquely suited to reveal God to man. In Christ, God dwelt among man (literally, "He pitched a tent," or "lived in a tent among us" - ἐσκήνωσεν). In the NT, only here and in Revelation is such an expression used (Rev. 7:15; 12:12; 13:6; 21:3). This is a clear allusion to the OT Tabernacle in Israel's wanderings where God dwelled among His people and revealed His glory.

The tabernacle was erected at God's command so that His dwelling place might be established among His people (Ex. 25:8; 40:34 & w/ the temple I Ki. 8:10f.). The tent was covered by a cloud and the glory of YHWH filled it providing a visible manifestation of His presence among the people (Ex. 40:34 ff.).

According to verse 14, the place of God's dwelling is the flesh of Jesus, and it's obvious by the following expression that the glory associated with the tabernacle was present in Him as well. The implication is that as God formerly manifested His presence among His people in the tent which Moses pitched, now, in a fuller sense, He has taken up residence in the man Jesus (Zech. 2:10, 11; Ezek. 37:27-28).

The manifested glory of the Word is the glory of the Father shared with His only Son. At times it referred to His pre-incarnate glory (Jn. 17:5, 22, 24; Matt. 17:2), and at times it was displayed in signs and events (as with the water turning to wine [Jn. 2:1-11], raising Lazarus from the dead [Jn. 11:4, 40], cleansing the temple [Jn. 2:23], and His death and exaltation [Jn. 7:39; 12:16, 23; 13:31-32]). By whatever means God's glory was revealed, those who looked patiently at Christ could see tokens of Divine revelation made through Him which demanded recognition of the Father who sent Him (Jn. 14:7-11).

Christ is now the Tabernacle of God where God's glory appears. Hebrews states that Jesus is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of His nature (Heb. 1:3). The word "representation" is difficult to define. It was used of the mark left by a stamp. For example, it was the imprint on a coin that was stamped by the die. As the imprint perfectly displays the shape of the die itself, so Christ perfectly displays the very essence of God. In a similar way, Colossians 1:15 calls Him the image of the invisible God. Jesus said, "He who has seen Me has seen the Father" (Jn. 14:9). He is the exact image and embodiment of the invisible God.

In Christ, "The Infinite became Finite. The Invisible became Tangible. The Transcendent became Imminent" (Pink).

### **1:16 For of His fullness we have all received, and grace upon grace.**

Verse 16 explains verse 14 and shows that God's grace comes from the "fullness" (πληρωμα) of Christ - a technical term referring to the divine attributes in Christ (Col. 1:19; 2:9).

We can know that Christ's character is full of grace and truth (v.14), because (or "for" - ὅτι - v.16) we have all experienced that grace. In fact, it is so abundant that John says we have received "grace upon grace." As wave follows wave upon the shore in endless succession, there is also an endless supply of new grace to take the place of the grace already bestowed.

Our experience of God's grace is from the fullness of God in Christ. This also points to the revelatory work of "the Word."

### **1:18 No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him.**

The Word is described as "the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father."

The word “only begotten” is not as much connected with begetting (Morris, 105) as it is with that which is completely unique and singular (Westcott, 23; Morris, 105). In this case, it refers to the unique eternal relationship of the Son to the Father (as in 1:14), rather than the incarnation (RWP, 13).

“In the bosom of the Father” is simply an expression that indicates an intimate relationship (also see Lk. 16:22; Jn. 13:23 for the same expression). It is comparable to saying the Word was “with God” in John 1:1.

The word translated from Greek into English as “explained” (exegeomai - ἐξηγέομαι) literally means “to lead out.” It is the root of our word “exegesis.” Exegesis is a critical explanation or interpretation of a text or portion of a text - especially of the Bible. Exegesis brings out the meaning of the text in a way that makes it more understandable. Perhaps “exegesis” is also a good way to describe the role the Son played in His relationship to the Father and man. Man cannot understand or easily relate to God, but Jesus brings out the “meaning” of God in a way that men can understand Him more readily. Jesus said, “He who has seen Me has seen the Father” (Jn. 14:9). That is the “exegetical” work of the Son (cf. Jn. 10:37-38).

APPLICATION: The desire of every believer is to know God more deeply, more intimately, and with greater understanding. John tells us how we can do this – we can know God through the person of Christ.

“Let this be our chief business, our great delight, to reverently scrutinize and meditate upon the divine excellencies of our Divine Savior as they are displayed upon the pages of Holy Writ, then, and only then, shall we increase in the knowledge of God (Col. 1:10). The light of the knowledge of the glory of God” is only seen in “the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 4:6).” (Arthur Pink)

Note: For those doing Bible study with me, it may interest you to see the chiasm in the Greek of John 1:1-2 (the following reflects the Greek word order):

A In the beginning  
 B was  
 C the Word  
 D and the Word  
 E was  
 F with God  
 F' and God  
 E' was  
 D' the Word.  
 C' He  
 B' was  
 A' in the beginning with God.