

Thru the Bible: Gospel of John [Prologue 1]

Review and Questions: Introductory issues and Gospel authorship. See also the Bible Project introduction to the Gospel of John: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G-2e9mMf7E8&t=189s>

The Prologue: John's Testimony about the Word who became Flesh (1:1-18): This opening introduction to the Gospel of John can be compared to an overture to a symphony, where the orchestra plays short versions of themes which will be developed further in the larger orchestral setting. In these first 18 verses, John introduces us to some of the central characters and theological terminology of his story of Jesus, which he then unpacks and illustrates further in the stories and teaching that follows. The Prologue has been a significant influence in the history and development of Christian doctrine and theology, as well as a source of great inspiration for Christian art, music, poetry, etc.

"Word of the Father,
now in flesh appearing..."
O Come all Ye Faithful
"You were the Word at
the beginning; one with
God the Lord Most High"
What a Beautiful Name

A. The Word in the beginning (1:1-5): 🎵 "A very good place to start!" 🎵

1. **"In the beginning...":** What is John trying to say by deliberately echoing the very first words of the Genesis creation account? What are the wider biblical narrative implications of using words and themes like: God as *Word*, *light*, *darkness*, the creation of *all things*, *world* [Gr. *kosmos*], and finally, God becoming *human* [flesh]? At the very beginning of his story about Jesus, John is reminding us of the big picture, God as *Alpha* and *Omega*, and the important elements of the drama of redemption in between those two bookends. As N. T. Wright has said, "It is about the way in which the long story which began in Genesis reached the climax the Creator had always intended." (*John for Everyone*, p.3)

a. **Contrasts with the Synoptic Gospels:** From the very first sentence, John describes Jesus in terms not found in the other Gospels; they all start with either a genealogy, birth narrative or the baptism of Jesus. John takes us back before the incarnation to Jesus' preexistence with the Father and role in creation. They begin with his human ancestry and activity and John begins with his divine pedigree and agency in the creation of all things.

2. **"Was the Word...":** How are we to understand John's use of the Greek word *logos* to explain the relationship between God the Father and God the Son, and their shared role in creation? *Logos* is the noun of the common verb *lego* (to say, speak) and can be translated with a wide variety of terms, depending on the context, such as *utterance*, *report*, *command*, *discourse*, *reason*, or simply *word*. The background and influences of John's particular usage to apply to Jesus as "the Word" are debated, and fall into several categories:

a. **Greek Philosophy:** The Greek word *logos* has a long and varied history in the Greek philosophical tradition. In general, for the orator it designated a continuous stream of words or *discourse* (→); for the philosopher, it represented a *dialogue* between at least two parties (→←). In particular, for the Stoics, *logos* was the unifying principle of the cosmos, which held everything together.

- "The everlasting **Logos** of the eternal God is the strongest and most certain support of the universe" Philo, *Plant.* 8-9
Elsewhere, Philo calls the *logos* God's "firstborn son" and the "image of God."

b. **Jewish Wisdom Traditions:** In Jewish writings which come from the Hellenistic period between the testaments, *logos* is associated with "wisdom" – almost as a divine entity or partner of God in the creation process, assisting as an architect and artist in the design and formation of a rational and interdependent world. These texts are a logical development of the role of wisdom in creation presented in Prov. 8:22-31, "When he [Yahweh] established the heavens, I [wisdom] was there...When he marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside him, like a master craftsman" (8:27-30; cf. Jer. 51:15-16).

- "O God...who have made all things by your **word** [*logos*], and by your **wisdom** [*sophia*] have formed humankind" *Wisdom* 9:1-2

c. **Biblical Tradition (OT):** But while the previous two influences might be swirling around in the background, perhaps even more so for some of John's Gentile readers, the most important background for understanding Jesus as the *Word of God* would be the OT Scriptures. First, it is by the agency of God's spoken *word* that the cosmos and creation are brought into being. Second, the "word of the Lord" – translated as *logos kuriou* in the Greek translation (LXX) of the Hebrew Bible, occurs almost 200x, especially in the prophets, where the phrase, "the word of the Lord came to..." expresses the dynamic nature of divine revelation being channeled through human agents.

"And his name
is called The
Word of God"
Rev. 19:13

- "Then God **said**, let there be light, and there was light" Gen. 1:3; "By the **word** of the LORD the heavens were made, and all their host by the **breath** [Heb. *ruach*] of his mouth" Ps. 33:6
- "The word of the LORD came to Jeremiah: See, I am the LORD, the god of all **flesh** [*sarx* LXX]" Jer. 32:26-27

"Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets,
but in these last days he has spoken to us by the Son" Heb. 1:1-2

3. “The Word was *with* God and the Word was God...”: So now the theological waters get deeper and we encounter statements about the *Word* which became the central battle ground for early Christian doctrine and various views of how to understand who Jesus was in relation to God the Father (Christology). What kinds of debates might ensue in the earliest Jewish community over the divine nature of Jesus in relation to a strict monotheistic faith? Where might polytheistic Gentiles place Jesus in their pantheon of gods? John doesn’t leave room for ambiguity as to the Word’s relationship to God, and reinforces it at the end of his gospel with the affirmation of Thomas, “My Lord and my God.” (John 20:28)



a. **The Word as a divine agent of creation:** Not only does the Word share in the *eternal* being of God (“was with God”), and the *relational* being of God (“was God”), but the Word also then by definition was an active participant in the foundational creative will and acts of God. As the author of Hebrews says: “God...has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed as heir of **all things**, through whom he created the worlds.” (Heb. 1:1-2)

b. **Creation of all things:** So, in a culture where a multiplicity of pagan gods and idols rule over various spheres of the world and underworld, each with their limited scope and authority, John makes a staggering and revolutionary claim that the eternal Word of God created “all things” [Greek *panta*]. Well, it goes without saying that there can only be **one** Creator of all things! Note the repeated emphasis in the Christ Hymn of Col. 1:15-20:

“For he [Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him **all things** [*panta*] were created; things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; **all things** were created by him and for him. He is before **all things**, and in him **all things** hold together...For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself **all things**, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.”

4. **The Word as life and light:** Like many of the pregnant theological terms in the Prologue, the relationship of the Word to *light* and *life* prepare us for the later stories and teaching of Jesus in the gospel which illustrate these themes in various situations and dialogues. The word *life* [*zoe*] is used almost 50x (in all but a few chapters), often in the phrase “eternal life” - and the word *light* [*phos*] is used about 24x, often in the sense of Jesus as “the light.” As in the original creation, “God saw that the light was good, and God separated the light from the darkness” (Gen. 1:4), the Word comes to embody God’s glory and light in the midst of the world’s darkness.

“We declare to you what was from the beginning...concerning the **word of life**”
1 Jn 1:1

- “I am the **light** of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in **darkness** but have the **light of life**” Jn 8:12
- “While I am in the world, I am the **light** of the world” Jn 9:5
- “I have come as **light** into the world, so that everyone who believes in me should not remain in the **darkness**” Jn 12:46

a. **Old Testament Foundations:** In a passage that sets up for Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, Matthew quotes from Isa. 9:1, “The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death, a light has dawned” (4:16). In the early church interpretation of Isaiah’s servant songs, Jesus takes up Israel’s vocation to be a “light to the nations” (Isa. 42:6; 49:6), who will manifest the “glory of the LORD” (Isa. 60:1-3, 19-20).

b. **Translation issue: John 1:5** “The darkness did not **overcome** it” versus “The darkness has not **understood** it”
[RSV – NRSV – NIV (2011) – ESV] [KJV – ASV – NASB – NIV (1984)]

While both translations are possible, the use of the same word later in John 12:35 in a similar context suggests that “overcome” is the more natural sense: “Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not **overtake** you.” And while it doesn’t use the same Greek word, John 16:33 has a similar sense of Christ’s victory over the world: “But take heart! I have overcome the world.” Note that at the crucifixion, “Darkness came over the whole land until the sixth hour” (Luke 23:44)

Application: While we may have a tendency to think of words like *light* and *life* and *truth* as abstract nouns which describe wonderful attributes of Jesus here, for John they have a much more specific and concrete application related to practical living as children of God in the family of God. Like Torah in Ps. 119:105 “Thy word is a lamp unto my feet” - Jesus as the Word of God shines a light on our path that leads to the care and service of our brothers and sisters. Note how John in his first letter ties the themes of light and darkness to how we treat others in the body of Christ:

“...the darkness is passing and the true light is already shining. Whoever says, ‘I am in the light,’ while hating his brother or sister, is still in the darkness. Whoever loves a brother or sister lives in the light, and in such a person there is no cause for stumbling. But whoever hates another believer is in the darkness and does not know the way to go, because the darkness has brought on blindness.” 1 John 2:8-11

