

Thru the Bible: Gospel of John [Prologue part 2]

Review: “In the beginning was the Word...” “In the other gospels, Jesus’ story takes place in the horizontal dimensions of the geography and history of Israel; John brings in the vertical – Jesus is above and beyond all that. His place is ‘with God’, his time is before the beginning of everything...John paints with stark contrasts – light and darkness, truth and falsehood, life and death, love and hate, belief and unbelief, all abound through his work. Like all good conductors, he brings out the key themes strongly in this opening fanfare.” **Richard Burridge, *Four Gospels, One Jesus?*, 133**

Theological Implications of John 1:1-5: From the very first verse of the gospel, we are thrown into a historical and theological maelstrom of debate and division over the relationship of the *Word* to God the Father and the proper understanding of the “two natures” of Christ. For a more modern example we can look at the translation and interpretation of John 1:1 in the *New World Translation* of the Watchtower Tract Society, which renders the third clause of Jn. 1:1 as “*and the Word was a god.*” In JW doctrine, Jesus was the first creation of Jehovah, a spirit creature who was “divine” but not to be equated with God.

*“In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God,
and the Word was a god.”*
New World Translation

1. Grammatical Considerations: The argument of the JW translators is that the word *theos* (God) doesn’t have a definite article in Greek, and so it should be translated “a god.” However, this is a misunderstanding of Greek grammar and the function of word order. The Greek text here is “*kai theos en ho logos*” – literally: “and God was the Word.” The best translation of the sense would be “What God was, the Word was” or in the Net Bible translation (Bible.org): “The Word was fully God.”

2. Contextual Evidence: If we want to test what a biblical writer might mean by a certain word or statement, then the first thing we would do is to explore the rest of his writing(s) to see if they might illuminate the context of a debated passage. What does John say or imply about the nature of Jesus in relation to God the Father in other parts of his gospel? A few examples:

- “But he was even calling God his own Father, *making himself equal (ison) with God*” **John 5:1**
- “I and the Father *are one*” **John 10:30**
- “I am coming to you Holy Father...protect them...so that they may be one as *we are one*” **John 17:11**
- “‘I tell you the truth...before Abraham was, *I am.*’ So they picked up stones to throw at him” **John 8:58-59**
- “Thomas answered him, ‘My Lord and *my God.*’” [literally, “**The** Lord of me and **the** God of me”] **John 20:28**

3. Theological Implications: Theologically, the second clause, “the Word was *with* God” distinguishes the **persons** of the Godhead, and the third clause emphasizes the unity of their **essence** or **nature**. It is their oneness of being or substance, and by implication their co-eternal nature that is at stake. The history of this Christological debate goes back to the 4th century A.D. with the widespread and pervasive influence of the priest and theologian Arius.

Arius on the Origin and Nature of Christ

God then himself is in essence ineffable to all.
He alone has neither equal nor like, none comparable in glory.
We call him *Unbegotten* because of the one in nature begotten;
We raise hymns to him as *unbegun* because of him who has a beginning;
We adore him as eternal because of the one born in time.
The *Unbegun* appointed the Son to be Beginning of things begotten...
He has nothing proper to God in his essential property,
for neither is he equal nor yet consubstantial with him.
[The Son as *homoi-ousios*]

Response of the Council of Nicea (325 AD)

But as for those who say, ‘There was when he was not’ and, Before he was begotten he was not,’ and pretend that the Son of God came to be out of nothing, or is from another *hypostasis* or substance (*ousia*), or is changeable or alterable, these the catholic and apostolic Church anathematizes.
[The Son as *homo-ousios*]

“Jesus is not a divine person who only seemed to be a man, and who did not really suffer death on the cross; he actually entered the darkness, was not overcome by it. The divine glory was seen in him...This glory kept breaking through in his human life, in the words and deeds which will form the substance of the narrative of the Gospel. In Christ, God was present in the midst of human life. The Prologue is a triumph of Christian exposition, written with complete mastery of the delicate issues handled. It is not surprising that it has been the foundation of the classic Christian formulations of the doctrine of Christ, and no future attempts at restatement can afford to neglect it.”

Barnabas Lindars, *The Gospel of John*, 79-80

The Witness of John the Baptist: In John’s gospel the Baptist has a special role as being the first in a series of “witnesses” to the identity of Jesus as the incarnated Word of God, about whom all people are called to make a choice or response - to believe or not believe. In 1:7 John is introduced as sent from God “*as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him.*” Along with that positive statement the author John feels compelled to immediately add the negative declaration that “He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light” (1:8). Later in the gospel, Jesus himself affirms John’s testimony, “*You sent messengers to John, and he testified to the truth*” (5:33).

1. Jewish expectations of a “Forerunner”: The Jewish anticipation of a coming Messiah typically included the prior appearance of a messenger or prophetic figure to “prepare the way of the Lord” (Mk.1:3) This had its OT foundation in the promise of God to one day raise up a “prophet like Moses” (Deut. 18:15, 18; 34:10-12) or send an Elijah figure to precede a great revival in Israel (Mal.3:1, 4:5-6; Mt.11:11-14). In John 1:21 the Baptist is asked point-blank by the Jewish authorities whether he is Elijah or the Prophet, to which he tersely replies, ‘nope.’ However, this unexpected reappearance of a prophet in Israel, preaching and baptizing people in the wilderness regions was seen by many Jews as the inauguration of a new era for the nation and hope for renewal.

*We are given no miraculous signs; **no prophets are left**, and none of us knows how long this will be. Ps. 74:9
For we...are brought low this day because of our sins. In our day we have no ruler, **or prophet** or leader...
Pr. Az. 14-15*

2. John in relation to Jesus: Unlike Matthew, Mark and Luke, John’s gospel does not record the actual baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist, although it does include John’s eyewitness testimony of the Spirit “descending from heaven like a dove” and resting on Jesus (1:32). The emphasis in John is on the Baptist’s role as a “forerunner” to the Messiah and repeated denials that he himself is the expected Messiah. Note that John himself is addressed as “Rabbi” in 3:26.



- “He [John] himself was **not** the light; he came only as a witness to the light” John 1:8
- “He [John] did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, ‘I am **not** the Messiah’” John 1:20
- “You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, ‘I am **not** the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him’” John 3:28
- John testifies to the identity of Jesus with an amazing series of titles: “The Lord” (1:23); “The Lamb of God” (1:29, 36); “The one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit” (1:33); “The Son of God” (1:34); “The Bridegroom” (3:29). Add to this the testimony of others in the very first chapter of the Gospel, and you have the most complete collection of Christological titles in the whole NT: “Rabbi/Teacher” (1:38, 49); “Messiah” [Gr. *messias*] and “Anointed One” [Gr. *christos*] (1:41); “Son of God” (1:49); “King of Israel” (1:49); “Son of Man” (1:51).
- Finally, John’s last words in the gospel acknowledge the temporary and limited scope of his own vocation, and leave us with a challenging motto for our own personal walk of discipleship with Jesus: “He must increase, but I must decrease” 3:30

“Many came to him [Jesus], and they were saying, ‘John performed no sign, but everything that John said about this man was true’” Jn. 10:41

3. John’s legacy in Judaism and Beyond: While even Jesus acknowledges John’s greatness and role as the prophesied Elijah, it is not often recognized, that to some Jews, John was greater than Jesus and perhaps even the Messiah. In the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas Jesus says, “From Adam to John the Baptist there is none born of woman who is higher than John the Baptist” (46)

- a. John’s historical influence was prominent enough to get mentioned in Josephus’ monumental *History of the Jews* a half century later: “Now some of the Jews thought that the destruction of Herod’s army came from God as a just punishment of what Herod had done against John, who was called the Baptist. For Herod had killed this good man, who had commanded the Jews to exercise virtue, righteousness towards one another and piety towards God...Now *many people came in crowds* to him, for they were greatly moved by his words. Herod, who feared that *the great influence John had over the masses* might put them into his power and enable him to raise a rebellion (for they seemed ready to do anything he should advise), thought it best to put him to death” (Ant. 18.116-118)
- b. In Acts 19:1-7, the Apostle Paul meets 12 disciples of John the Baptist in Ephesus, almost thirty years after John’s death, and has to re-baptize them in the name of Jesus, since apparently, they never got the message about Jesus being greater. Paul has to inform them that John “told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus” (19:4).
- c. The influence of John continued from the first century on into the present through groups which still follow his teachings and example. The most well-known sect would be the Mandeans, who revere John the Baptist, see Jesus as a false Messiah and practice frequent baptisms and washings as rites of purification. There are an estimated 100,000 still today, mainly in Iraq and Iran, though many have fled persecution and sought refuge in Western nations.

Application: The story and example of John offers many lessons for us today. John’s ministry undercut the traditional roles of the Temple and Priesthood. Both John, and Jesus after him, were a genuine threat to the ministry of the Temple and its leaders. They were offering forgiveness, cleansing and a new relationship with God, which you would normally go to the Temple for. They worked outside the “proper channels” in rural and desert places without elaborate infrastructures or traditions. Even today we often have a tendency make judgements about where or how “God is working” – despising the “day of small things” (Zech. 4:10). What are some areas in our own lives where we need to “decrease” and Jesus needs to “increase”?

“The church, which is the true temple of God, does not consist of walls. Rather, it consists of the heart and faith of those who believe on him and are called faithful.” Lactantius