

THE PROLOGUE TO JOHN'S GOSPEL

by Ray Faircloth - from <http://focusonthekingdom.org/811.htm>

The following article goes in some depth into John's prologue. We think you will find it helpful in your explanation of what John really intended when he spoke of the word, not the "Word," as if the Word meant the Son in John 1:1. The Son is what the word became (v. 14), not one-to-one equivalent to the word. The Son came into existence when the word was made flesh. This will harmonize John beautifully with Matthew's and Luke's view of how the Son began to exist.

In recent decades a significant number of theologians have demonstrated that John 1:1 speaks of only one Person, namely the Father, and that "the Word" is not another Person, not Jesus Christ; but is, in fact, God's word that brought forth the Genesis creation as in Psalm 33:6: "By the word of Yahweh the heavens were made." The parallel between Genesis 1 and John 1 is obvious. God spoke the creation into existence by His word. The new creation was initiated in Jesus, the Son of God.

The Hebrew term for "word," *davar*, the Aramaic term *memra* and the Greek *logos* mean more than simply "word." They speak of God's self-revelation, His self-expression. The many lexicons show *logos* to mean: utterance, command, decree, plan, expression of mind, creative thought, purpose, promise, message, wisdom, or reason. "Word" is an inadequate translation of *logos* because *logos* encompasses "thought," "speech," and "action." So the phrases "God's creative thoughts expressed into activity," "God's expressed/decreed purpose or plan," "God's purposeful command" or similar phrases more adequately reflect the meaning of *logos*. So John, in typical *Jewish fashion*, spoke of God's Grand Design — His purpose and His mind, His immortality program.

A great help to our understanding is found in the prologue of John's *first letter* which provides a partial commentary on the prologue of his Gospel. From 1 John 1:1-3 we learn that "the word" is God's decreed purpose or *promise to give to humans eternal life* or "life of the coming age." So the impersonal promise, declared purpose or planned expressive activity is "what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen...*concerning* the word of life...and the life was manifested," becoming "visible" so that the disciples could see and touch it, that is when "the decreed purpose to bring about life of the coming age, became flesh." This is parallel to God's self-expressed actions which brought about the original creation.

John in his first letter says: "the Life of the Age to Come was with God" (1 John 1:2). With that explanation he tells us that it was the promise of life which was with God in the beginning, not yet the Son of God. The Son began to exist only when he was begotten in Mary.

The prologue shows no conversations between God and "the word." After Jesus was born John recorded lots of communication between God and Jesus. This further demonstrates that "the word," though personal, as coming from God, is not a separate Person from God until Jesus is born.

Our understanding of the prologue is further helped when we examine its internal details. These give us clues as to how to understand its various parts. For instance John's reference to "those who were born of God" (1:12, 13) shows that it is God's declared purpose to make a New Creation, as the rest of the NT also says. And verse 18 shows that "No one has seen [got to know] God" and therefore "God's salvation plan" is sent in the form of a man (v. 14) to "explain," reveal or declare Him (v. 18). According to verse 17 such revealing was only partially accomplished by the Law, but grace and truth and a fuller knowledge of God were realized through Jesus Christ.

Interestingly the prologue shows striking parallels with Proverbs 8:22-30 where Wisdom is personified, but never hypostatized, i.e. never a real person. There is also a certain similarity between John 1:1 and the introduction to the letter to the Hebrews.

The New American Bible displays the poetry and prose layout which makes up the prologue of John. A slightly different poetic form of the prologue is set out by Catholic theologian Raymond Brown as:

1st strophe, verses 1 and 2 3rd strophe verses 10 to 12b

2nd strophe, verses 3 to 5 4th strophe verses 14, 16

Because this poetic factor was not recognized in earlier times, the prologue was taken literally. This has resulted in *hypostatization of the word in verses 1-5* (that is, turning the word into a Person separate from God). This led to a misunderstanding of John's intent. When a literary piece is poetic in form it more naturally contains metaphorical language, which in this case is the figurative language of personification.

Roger Haight, Jesuit scholar, explains: "Hypostatization means making an idea or a concept into a real thing...the symbols Wisdom, Word, and Spirit, which are found in the Jewish scriptures and refer to God, are not hypostatizations but personifications...A major development occurred when a personification became transformed into hypostatization."^[1]

That major development led to a twisting of John's intention and creating a Second Person in the Godhead. Monotheism was undermined. God was made into two Persons and that was a disaster.

Personification in John's prologue is appropriate because John's sources were Hebrew/Aramaic literature where personification was freely used. For instance, the Hebrew term *dabar* translated "word" is often personified in the Hebrew Scriptures ("With speed his word runs," Ps. 147:15). "Word" is treated as if it were a person, but it is not literally a person.

So a personified *logos* was not a new idea to John or his readers. The fact that *logos* is grammatically masculine in gender in Greek does not mean that it is sexually masculine when translated into English. So, for example, in French a table is feminine but not "she" in English! A word is an "it." "All things were made through it" (the word, v. 3).

The Greek word *logos* appears in the LXX (the Greek version of the OT) some 1500 times. It never describes a literal person. It also appears over 300 times in the Christian Scriptures and is

only capitalized (wrongly) as a person in John 1. The capital is an editorial addition of translators. (“Word” is legitimately capitalized in Rev. 19:13, where the returning Jesus, by then a Person, is the Word.) As Dr. Colin Brown of Fuller Seminary comments: “To read John 1:1 as if it means ‘In the beginning was the Son’ is patently wrong.”

Professor of Theology at Heidelberg H.H. Wendt says: “We should not argue from Philo’s meaning of ‘word’ as a...pre-existing personality.” In other words we do not have to follow the Jewish philosopher Philo and think of the word as a distinct personality.

Professor of Divinity James Dunn says, “In the earlier stages of the poem [John 1] we are still dealing with Wisdom...not as a *personal being*, but as the wise utterance of God personified.”

And again Roger Haight says: “One thing is certain, the Prologue of John does not represent direct descriptive knowledge of a divine *entity or being* called Word, who descended and became a human being. To read a metaphor as literal speech is misinterpretation.”

Our understanding was shared by some of the early church fathers. Origen’s commentary on John says: “*logos* — only in the sense of the utterance of the Father which came to expression in a Son when Jesus was conceived.” Tertullian (155-230) translates *logos* as “speech” and states: “It is the simple use of our people to say [of John 1] that the word of revelation was with God.” This view survived in Spain and southern Gaul until at least the 7th century.

Regarding translations prior to the 1611 KJV, seven major translations used a lower-case “w” for word and there are numerous translations since 1611 that reflect the fact that there is no second Person spoken about in John 1:1 (e.g. Concordant, Diaglott, the 1985 translation by the Jewish historian Hugh J. Schonfield and the 1993 translation by Robert W. Funk).

Modern English examples are:

“At the beginning God expressed Himself. That personal expression, that word, was with God and was God” (J.B. Philips).

“In the beginning was the purpose, the purpose in the mind of God, the purpose which was God’s own being...this purpose took human form in Jesus” (G.B. Caird, *New Testament Theology*).

“In the beginning there was the divine word and wisdom. The divine word and wisdom were there with God. It was there with God from the beginning. Everything came to be by means of it” (Robert Funk).

From the above it seems that an appropriate rendering of verse 1a could be: “In the beginning was the decreed purpose and the purpose was with God.”

Noteworthy is the fact that the poem is arranged in what is called “staircase parallelism” form, in which the last word of one phrase becomes the first word of the next finally rising to the climax.

Below are further translation comments on verse 1.

Verse 1b: “and the decreed purpose was characteristic of God”

Grammatically this can be translated “the word was god” or “the word was godlike” (of the very nature and character of God or “divine”). “Lack of a definite article signifies *predication rather than identification*” (NAB notes). This means that the word had the *quality* of God. It was not identical to God.

Philip Harner’s article entitled “Qualitative Anarthrous Predicate Nouns” states that “anarthrous predicate nouns preceding the verb [of which the second occurrence of *theos* in John 1:1 is an example] may function primarily to express the nature or character of the subject...The qualitative force of the predicate is so prominent that the noun cannot be regarded as definite.” Dana and Manty’s *Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* makes the same point, as does the UBS Handbook Series which says: “Since ‘God’ does not have the article preceding it, ‘God’ is clearly the predicate and ‘the Word’ is the subject. This means that ‘God’ here is the equivalent of an adjective, and this justifies the rendering ‘the Word was the same as God.’” The following translations reflect this grammatical point:

“The Word was with God and shared his nature” (The Translator’s Translation).

“And what God was, the Word was” (Revised English Bible).

“The nature of the Word was the same as the nature of God” (Barclay).

“The Word was divine” (Moffatt, also Smith and Goodspeed).

There is no justification for capitalizing “word” in the phrase “the Word was God” as if “word” meant a second *person*. A one-to-one identity with God is incorrect because it destroys the unitary monotheism (God is one Person) of the Scriptures. “For us there is but one God, the Father” (1 Cor. 8:6. Also John 17:1, 3 and I Tim. 2:5).

Also, the translation “a god” (the Jehovah’s Witness translation) is grammatically incorrect and fails to bring out the qualitative aspect of the phrase. “Such a rendering is a frightful mistranslation” (Bruce Metzger). It is also incorrect theologically because Deuteronomy 32:39 says: “there are no gods together with me.” If John had wanted to say “divine” he could have used the Greek word *theios*. Yet “divine” does express the meaning, though rather weakly.

John’s Intent

John writes his prologue to show that God has had a purpose from the beginning. John then shows the forward movement of this purpose until the climax when the purpose is enfleshed (John 1:14). The purpose became the man Jesus.

“The prologue intrinsically has a dynamic movement and determines its own focal point. It begins universally and ends in a concrete way” (Kuschel).

This forward movement seems to push toward verse 14 which is the climactic point of the prologue. So “the word” is portrayed at the beginning with only slight personification coming into play.

The personification strengthens through verses 10-12 as the poem drives toward the appearance of the actual person of Jesus in verse 14. It also steadily narrows its focus from universality: “In the beginning” (v. 1, 2, 3a) narrowing to “the human race...that did not know him” (v. 3b-5, 10), further narrowing to “his own people who did not accept him” (v. 11), narrowing again to “those who did accept him” (v. 12, 13). Finally the focus narrows onto “the word became flesh” (v. 14a). Verses 14b, 16 and 17 show the superiority of the final stage of God’s plan spoken into existence in the uniquely begotten Son. This stage is superior to the previous stage through Moses (the Torah). Verse 18 shows that only through this unique Son is God fully revealed. With this background we can now demonstrate our understanding of the prologue to the Gospel of John.

The Impersonal Word Is Personified

Verses 1 and 2: 1st Strophe of the Poem

“In the beginning was the decreed purpose, and the purpose was with God, and the purpose was characteristic of God. This was in the beginning with God.”

“In the beginning” refers not directly to the Genesis creation, but to a time prior to that creation when God formed a purpose to produce humans as potential candidates for immortality. “In the beginning” also has overtones of salvation in the New Creation (v. 13).

The phrase “was with God” means it (the word) originates with Him as in Job 27:11: “That [knowledge] which is with the Almighty I shall not hide.”

Verses 3-5: 2nd Strophe

“All things [the universe] came to be through it, and without it nothing came to be. What has come to be in it was life [of the coming age, immortality] and the life was the light of men. The light [truth of God’s purpose] shines in the darkness [lies from Satan beginning in Eden], and the darkness did not overpower it [Gen 3:15 and onward].”

Prior to the 1611 KJV^[2] and also in some modern translations *dia autou* in verses 3, 4 is translated “through *it*,” not “through *him*.” The use of the pronoun *it* for “the word” is appropriate because the poem moves forward with an ever strengthening personification. Finally the word becomes the person Jesus. In the 1st and 2nd strophes “the non-personal word” is a close synonym of “the light” which also takes the neuter pronoun *it*.

Note: Raymond Brown comments, “The Greek word *zoe* (life) never means natural life in John’s writings” and “The prologue is speaking of eternal life.” That is “life in the age to come,” life in the future Kingdom which can be tasted now through the spirit.

The First Prose Section

It may be that verses 6-9, 12c, 13 and 15, 17 and 18 are the original prose into which an already structured poem was inserted.

Verse 6: “There came a man sent from God whose name was John”

Verse 8: “He was not the Light, but he came to testify about the Light”

Verse 9: “There was the true light [God’s self-revelation through Jesus] which is enlightening every man coming into the world” (a common phrase among Jews according to the *Word Biblical Commentary*).

The Personification of the Word Becomes Stronger

3rd Strophe

Verse 10: “He [the word, God’s purpose personified] was in the world [of mankind, *kosmos*], and the world came to be through him, but the world did not know him.”

Verse 11: “He [God’s purpose personified, but the enfleshed ‘purpose’ is now coming into view] came [through the Law] to what was his own [Israel], but his own people did not accept him.”

The poem moves to another stage toward this climax by further strengthening the personification with the revelation that God’s purpose in the form of the Torah was previously rejected by Israel. However, because of his introduction of “the true light” in verse 9 it may well be John’s intention to show that Jesus, as God’s enfleshed purpose, came to Israel and was not accepted. John is thereby preparing us for the climactic announcement in verse 14.

Verse 12 a, b: “But to those [enlightened men], who did accept him [by keeping the Torah which was their tutor leading to Messiah] he [God’s purpose personified] gave power [so that they would accept the Messiah] to become children of God.”

The Second Prose Section

Verse 12c: “to those who believe in his name” (meaning to believe in him, the enfleshed “purpose”)

Verse 13: “who were born not by natural generation nor by human choice nor by a man’s decision but of God” (“born from above,” NAB).

“It is only with verse 14 that we can speak of the *personal* Logos. Prior to verse 14 we are in the same realm as pre-Christian talk of Wisdom and Logos...dealing with personifications rather than persons, personified actions of God rather than an individual divine being as such.”^[3]

Kuschel agrees: “Only from verse 10 on may one speak of the Logos *ensarkos* [i.e. the human being, Jesus]. But it is verse 14 which first makes unmistakably clear in ‘Christian’ terms that ‘the word became flesh’ and thus identifies the Logos *asarkos* with a *specific person*.”

The Climactic Statement about the Enfleshed Word

4th and Final Strophe

Verse 14: “And God’s decreed purpose became mortal man and tabernacled [as the new mode of God’s presence among His people] among us, and we saw his [God’s purpose now enfleshed] glory, glory as of an only-begotten from a father, full of grace and truth.”

Verse 16: “From his fullness we have all received, grace [verse 17 shows this to be truth through Jesus leading to the New Covenant] in place of grace [the Torah which fades after it is fulfilled]” (or NIV has “one blessing after another” or NJB has “one gift replacing another”).

The Final Prose Section

Verse 17, 18: “because while the law was given through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen [revealed] God. The unique Son, who is close to the Father’s heart [NJB and NRSV] has explained Him.”

In Summary

Perhaps the most helpful points are the understanding that the term “word” is inadequate to express the meaning of *logos* and that the larger part of the prologue is poetry which indicates a strong likelihood of metaphorical meaning for “word,” as in the parallel passage, Proverbs 8 (“wisdom”). Also, as Kuschel says, “The prologue intrinsically has a dynamic movement and determines its own focal point. It begins universally and ends in a concrete way.” This really makes it difficult to jump back to any earlier stage of the prologue. Such forward movement in the poem strongly indicates that *Jesus is what the word became only from verse 14* and, in our opinion, no earlier than verse 11 — making it impossible for there to have been a pre-existent Person in John 1:1. A second Person who is actually God would contradict the whole of the rest of Scripture and contradict Jesus in John 17:3 “You, Father, are *the only one who is truly God.*”

Distinguished professor of NT T.W. Manson makes our point beautifully: “I very much doubt whether John thought of the *Logos* as a personality. The only personality on the scene is Jesus the son of Joseph from Nazareth. That personality embodies the *Logos* so completely that Jesus becomes a complete revelation of God. But in what sense are we using the word ‘embodies’?...For John every word of Jesus is a word of the Lord.” [\[4\]](#)

Recommended reading:

Christology in the Making, James D. G. Dunn

Born Before All Time? Karl-Josef Kuschel

Jesus: Symbol of God, Roger Haight