

The Biblical View of John's Prologue **By Dustin Smith**

For the vast majority of Christian believers, the key passage of their Christology is John 1:1-14. Many disputes have arisen over this passage of Scripture and how it should be interpreted. More has been written on the Gospel of John than any other book in the Bible, with the prologue receiving the primary focus by commentators and expositors. Yet ink was not the only thing to be spilled, for many have lost their lives from their interpretation of the Johannine prologue. Family members have turned against each other, believers have been denounced as heretics, churches have split, friendships broken, marriages torn apart. Was it God's intention for this passage of Scripture to disunite believers? What went wrong? Why are there so many conflicting views on the prologue? What exactly was the Apostle John trying to tell his readers? These points will be considered and discussed as the "The Biblical View of John's Prologue" is given the attention it surely deserves.

It is necessary to establish a biblical and historical foundation before we build our theology on the important interpretation of John 1. First and foremost, the author, the Apostle John, was a Jew. He went to synagogue every Sabbath growing up. This means that the verse pinned on his refrigerator would have been Deut. 6:4, the Shema of Israel.

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD.

From this verse we can clearly see that God is one, a unity, a single person. At synagogue every Sabbath, "there would be antiphonal recitations of the Shema (the "golden text" of Judaism)." ¹ Even today, every Jew repeats Deut. 6:4 twice a day, religiously. The Jews believed that God is one, and believed it with all their heart, mind and soul. John was also aware that the LORD (translated from "Yahweh" 6824 times) is described in the Hebrew Scriptures with 20,000 personal pronouns, strengthening the case for unitary monotheism. The LORD is the sole creator of the universe as shown in these passages:

Thus says the LORD, your Redeemer, and the one who formed you from the womb, "I, the LORD, am the maker of all things, stretching out the heavens by Myself and spreading out the earth all alone" (Isa. 44:24).

"I am the LORD, and there is no other, besides Me, there is no God" (Isa. 45:5).

"I am the LORD, that is My name; I will not give my glory to another" (Isa. 42:8).

In the Hebrew Scriptures the LORD is revealed to be one person, the only one who is God Almighty.

Something else to take into consideration is that Matthew and Luke clearly show in their birth narratives that they believe that Jesus was begotten in the womb of Mary. "Begotten" is translated from "*gennaō*", which is the causal form of *ginomai* = to come to

¹ Gundry, Robert. *A survey of the New Testament, 4th Ed.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003) 52

be, begin to exist.² Jesus was brought into being in the womb of Mary from the miracle birth, as Luke tells us: "and for that reason precisely, he will be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35). These authors, being Jews, were also monotheistic, and did not believe in the literal preexistence of the Messiah Jesus.

With these facts now established, we can move on to the text at hand. In most current translations, John 1:1 reads as follows:

In the beginning was the Word (John 1:1a)
and the Word was with God (John 1:1b)
and the Word was God (John 1:1c)

The defining question for everybody's Christology is "What is the Word (or *logos*)?" Trinitarians, who hold the popular view, think that the *logos* is a person, or more specifically, the Son, existing from eternity as the 2nd member of the triune Godhead. They will instinctively read: In the beginning was the Son, and the Son was with God.³ The biblical unitarians insist that the *logos* is not a person distinct from God, who is the Father. What we can conclude is that *if* the *logos* in John 1:1 is indeed a person, distinct from the Father, then Jesus literally preexisted his birth, according to the Apostle John, at least. If the *logos* is not a person, then the Trinitarians lose the biggest weapon in their arsenal to prove that Jesus is God, and risk being idolaters for worshipping someone as an equal to God. If we can prove that the *logos* is not a person, the Incarnation of the Son collapses. It is now a critical step to attempt to define the *logos* in the way that John would want the readers of his Gospel to understand it.

What background did John have to incorporate the *logos* into his prologue? A good start would be to see how the word "word" was used in history prior to the 1st century. For a hundred or more years before the birth of Jesus, Hebrew was a forgotten language. The Old Testament was written in Hebrew, but the Jews no longer knew Hebrew. The scribes knew it, but not the ordinary people. The ordinary people spoke a derived form of Hebrew called Aramaic.

Since that was so, the Scriptures of the Old Testament had to be translated into something that the ordinary people would have understood; those translations were called *Targums*. The Targums were produced in a time when men were fascinated by the transcendence of God. That is to say, they were produced in a time when men thought about the distance and difference of God. Because of that, the men who made the translations called the Targums were afraid of attributing human emotions, thoughts, and actions to God. Yet the Old Testament speaks regularly of God in this way. A critical fact to establish for our study is that when the Old Testament speaks of God like this, the Targums would substitute *the word of God* for the name of God. Let us look at some examples:

Ex. 19:1 OT: Moses brought forth the people out of the camp to meet with **God**.

Ex. 19:17 Targum: Moses brought forth the people out of the camp to meet the **word** of God.

Ex. 31:13 OT: (God speaking about the Sabbath) "is a sign between **Me** and you throughout your generations."

² Brown, Colin, ed. *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Zondervan, 1986), Vol. 1, p.176.

³ Kuschel, Karl-Josef. *Born Before All Time: The Debate about the Origin of Christ*, (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1992) 381

Ex. 31:13 Targum: "is a sign between **My word** and you throughout your generations."

Deut. 9:3 OT: **God** is a consuming fire,
Deut. 9:3 Targum: The **word** of God is a consuming fire.

Isa. 48:13 OT: By **My hand** has laid the foundation of the earth.
Isa. 48:13 Targum: By **My word** I have founded the earth.

It is clear that the Jews of the time could use the "word of God" interchangeably with "God", and yet still hold on to the meaning of the word presented in the Hebrew Bible. The apostle John would have been fully aware of the Targums from his experience of the synagogue every Sabbath. As of this stage in the study, the "word" is not revealed to be a distinct person.

John, writing his Gospel from Ephesus, was addressing gentile readers. By A.D. 60 there must have been a majority of Greeks over Jews in the Church. The new difficulty facing John was relating key principles of Christianity to gentiles who did not understand the Hebraic roots. They had no idea what the "Messiah" meant. Their Greek mindset was not the same as the Jewish mindset of Jesus and his disciples. How could John get across the idea of this Messiah, the Son of God, to these Gentiles? Fortunately for him, there was a bridge that connected the Jews and the Gentiles in thought — something that both could relate to and both had a solid understanding of. That idea was the *logos*.

The origin of the *logos* in the Greek mind is found in the thoughts of an Ephesian philosopher named Heraclitus. Back in 560 B.C he believed that everything in this world is changing from moment to moment. His famous illustration was that it is impossible to step twice into the same river. If you step into a river once, you can never step into the same water again. To Heraclitus the world was in a state of constant flux. But if that be so, why is life not in complete chaos? The answer of Heraclitus was: all this change is not chaos, but it is controlled and ordered. That which controls the pattern is the *Logos*, the Word, the Reason of God. To Heraclitus, the *Logos*, the Word was the principle of order under which the universe continued to exist. But Heraclitus went further than that. He held that in all events of life there is a purpose, a plan, a scheme and a design. To Heraclitus the *Logos* was nothing less than the mind of God controlling the world; God's purpose.

As for the Hebrew mind, we can look at the Old Testament (or Hebrew Bible) to get the biblical background on the usage of the "word". The Greek word "*logos*" is translated from the Hebrew word "*dabar*", meaning "word." It appears 1440 times in the Hebrew Bible (the tenth most common noun in the OT). Yet, an astonishing fact is that after a careful reading of each occurrence, we find that none of the examples describes a person. Some of the uses of *dabar* (word) are as follows (emphasis added):

(Gen. 30:34) Laban said, "Good, let it be according to your **word**."

(Ex. 18:6) He sent **word** to Moses, "I, your father-in-law Jethro, am coming to you and your wife."

(Lev. 10:7) So they did according to the **word** of Moses.

(Num. 3:16) So Moses numbered them according to the **word** of the LORD, just as he has been **commanded**.

(Deut. 18:18) I will raise up a prophet among their countrymen like you, and I will put My **words** in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I **command** him.

(Josh. 1:13) Remember the **word** which Moses the servant of the LORD **commanded** you.

(1 Sa. 3:17) "What is the **word** that God **spoke** to you?"

(2 Sa. 7:25) "Now therefore, O LORD God, the **word** that You have **spoken** concerning Your servant and his house, confirm it forever, and do as you have **spoken**."

(2 Kg. 1:17) So Ahaziah died according to the **word** of the LORD which Elijah had spoken.

(1 Ch. 11:3) They anointed David king over Israel, according to the **word** of the LORD through Samuel.

(2 Ch. 6:10) Now the LORD has fulfilled His **word** which he **spoke**

(Neh. 1:8) "Remember the **word** which you **commanded** Your servant Moses."

(Ps. 33:6) By the **word** of the LORD the heavens were made. And by the **breath** of His mouth all their host.

(Ps. 119:43) And do not take the **word** of truth utterly out of my mouth, for I wait for Your **ordinances**.

(Pr. 13:13) The one who despises the **word** will be in debt to it, but the one who fears the **commandment** will be rewarded.

(Is. 1:10) Hear the **word** of the LORD, You rulers of Sodom; Give ear to the **instruction** of our God, You people of Gomorrah.

(Is. 44:26) Confirming the **word** of His servant and performing the **purpose** of His messengers

(Jer. 1:12) Then the LORD said to me, "You have seen well, for I am watching over My **word** to **perform** it."

(Ezek. 12:25) For I the LORD will speak, and whatever **word** I speak will be **performed**. It will no longer be delayed, for in your days, O rebellious house, I will speak the **word** and **perform** it, declares the Lord GOD.'

(Dan. 4:33) Immediately the **word** concerning Nebuchadnezzar was **fulfilled**.

(Joel 2:11) The LORD utters His **voice** before His army; surely His camp is very great, for strong is he who carries out His **word**.

It is clear from these few examples that *dabar* does not mean in the Old Testament a person or spokesman, but a message, promise or command or matter in every instance. No lexicon of the Hebrew Bible lists *dabar* as a person, God, angel, or man. Yet, Trinitarians still read John 1:1a as if it said, "In the beginning was the Son" or "In the beginning was Jesus." How can they equate the *logos* with a person, if *dabar* is never a person in the Hebrew Bible? Not only that: the Jewish wisdom literature agrees with the Old Testament evidence. James Dunn is correct to point out that "Nowhere either in the Bible or in extra-canonical literature of the Jews is the word of God a

personal agent or on the way to become such."⁴ For Trinitarians to make the *logos* in John 1:1 a literal person is to undermine the hermeneutical laws known to organized Bible study and interpretation. Within the context of the Hebrew Bible, they have absolutely no scriptural basis to interpret the *logos* in John 1:1 as a person. We rather have every reason to substitute the word "command" or "promise" in John 1:1, just as the Jews always understood *dabar* to mean from the Hebrew Bible.

Another important item to note is that our modern translations capitalize "word" as if it were God, showing the biased flavor of the translators. In the original Greek, there was no distinction between lowercase and capital letters. Thus, making the "w" into a "W" is a form of editorializing, which is not found in any of the manuscripts. If we examine all of the 8 English translations before the KJV, we can see that none of them capitalized the "word" in John 1:1. Here are just a couple:

In the beginnyng was the worde and the worde was with God: and the worde was God. (1534 Tyndale NT)

In the begynnyng was the worde, and the worde was with God: and that worde was God. (1595 Bishops NT)

Now that we have established that the *logos* is not a person, we have to ask "How can the word be *with* God" in John 1:1b? In the Hebrew mind, everything in the plan of God was planned out before the worlds were made. In essence, they believed that "all the benefits of the future would come down from above, from heaven...so too the Messiah, the perfect King of Israel."⁵ No one would suggest that Jesus was literally slain before the foundation of the world (Rev. 13:8). Clearly these plans are in the mind of God, and were in His promise from eternity. But let us see what scriptural evidence we have revealed to us about the word being "with" someone:

My son, if you will receive my **words** and treasure my **commandments within [with]** you (Prov. 2:1)

But if they are prophets, and if the **word** of the LORD is **with** them, let them now entreat the LORD of hosts (Jer. 27:18)

But the **word** is very **near** you, **in** your mouth, and **in** your heart, that you may observe it (Deut. 30:14)

Yet these things You have concealed **in Your heart**; I know that this is **within [with]** You (Job 10:13)

For He performs what is appointed for me, and many such **decrees** are **with** Him (Job 23:14).

What is **with** the Almighty I will not conceal (Job 27:11).

Jehoshaphat said, "The **word** of the LORD is **with** him." (2 Ki. 3:12)

And **wisdom** was **with** thee; which knoweth thy works (Wisd. 9:9)

All **wisdom** cometh from the Lord, and is **with** him for ever. (Sirach 1:1)

⁴Dunn, James. *Christology in the Making*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980) 219

⁵ Schurer, *The Jewish People in the Time of Christ*, (vol. ii) 133

There seems to be substantial evidence to show that it was common for a Jew to think of God's word being with Him or right alongside Him. And because the word is not a person or a divine being, unitary monotheism is not shaken. There is still one God, one person. Clearly then the Hebraic concept of the word of God was the conviction that Yahweh revealed His will immediately and directly to His people through prophetic inspiration and vision. This belief was fundamental to the religion embodied in the OT writings.⁶

Now we come to John 1:1c: "and the Word was God." A simple reading of this text would make the average believer think that word = God. Yet, an examination of the Greek will show that *logos* and *theos* in John 1:1c are not one-to-one identical. A leading Trinitarian author honestly points out the fact that if John had employed the article before *theos*, he would have made the terms *theos* and *logos* interchangeable.⁷ The Greek reads as follows:

kai theos en o logos.

As you can see, there is no definite article before *theos*, as there is in John 1:1b. John 1:1b is referring to "the God" while 1:1c is absolutely not. "When in Greek two nouns are joined by the verb to be and when both have the definite article, then one is fully identified with the other; but when one of them is without the article, it becomes more of an adjective than a noun, and describes rather the class or the sphere in which the other belongs."⁸ Our Trinitarian author will again point out that a possible translation for *theos* without the article can be "in nature God".⁹ Let's look at an example. As a Christian, I try to live a godly life. Yet, by being godly, I am clearly not God. Thus, there is a clear difference in "the God" and "in nature God", as the Apostle John wanted his readers to recognize. Yet the vast majority of translations render the phrase "the Word was God." "Is this not a definite translation? Not necessarily,"¹⁰ our honest Trinitarian author kindly admits. The Moffat translation for example renders John 1:1c as "and the Word was divine."

So with all of this information, we can see that an honest translation of John 1:1 should run along these lines:

In the beginning was the promise (or purpose), and the promise was with God, and the promise was fully expressive of God.

This translation fits in well with the Jewish concept of the word and the honest translation of the Greek text. As for the Trinitarian rendering, once pressed, it does not even fit under their creed for the Trinity. Let's look at the two examples of how they impose their presuppositions on the *logos*:

In the beginning was the Son, and the Son was with the Father, and the Son was the Father.

Yet, their own Trinitarian creed tells us that that there are 3 distinct Persons, so the Son is not the Father. Let's look at the other rendering they provide:

⁶ Dunn *Christology* 217

⁷ White, James R. *The Forgotten Trinity* (Minneapolis, Bethany House Publishers, 1998) 56

⁸ Barclay, William, *Jesus as They Saw Him* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans Publishing, 1962) 235

⁹ White *The Forgotten Trinity* 55

¹⁰ White *The Forgotten Trinity* 57

In the beginning was the Son, and the Son was with God, and the Son was God.

So, the Son is with God and the Son is God? Doesn't that make two Gods? God was with God? If that does not disrupt the biblical monotheism, I do not know what does! The Bible many times tells us that there is only one God and that He is the Father (1 Tim 2:5, 1 Cor. 8:6, and John 17:3). We can see that even the Trinitarian interpretation does not do justice to the Scriptures and their own creeds.

Now that the *logos* is clearly established as the "promise" and not a person, we can move through the prologue with much greater ease. 1:2 is translated in 2 different ways in our translations popular today:

He was in the beginning with God (NIV, NASB, NKJV)

This one was in the beginning with God (KJV, NASB footnote)

Outos can be translated either he, she, or it. It depends on what you have established as the identity of the *logos*. If it is a person, the translators will render *outos* as "He", while if it is the plan or promise of God, a neuter translation will suffice, such as "This one" from the KJV. No difficulty is found with the promise being in the beginning with God, since we already confirmed that in 1:1b.

Verse 3 is rendered in every modern translation as "All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him, nothing came into being that has come into being." As with verse 2, *autos* can be either he, she, or it, depending on the bias. To keep the flow going, we will again use "it" as do many of the early English translations. Here are a few examples:

All things were made by it, and without it was made nothing that was made. (1599 GNV)

All thynges were made by it: and without it, was made nothyng that was made. (1595 Bishops Bible)

All thinges were made by it and with out it was made nothinge that was made. (1534 Tyndale Bible)

All thinges were made by it, and wythout it, was made nothyng that was made. (1539 Great Bible)

All things were made by it, and without it was made nothing that was made. (1560 Geneva Bible)

We also see a rather striking resemblance of this translation throughout the wisdom literature of the Jews:

(Ps. 33:6) By the **word** of the LORD the heavens were made. And by the **breath** of His mouth all their host.

(Prov. 3:19-20) The LORD by **wisdom** founded the earth, by **understanding** He established the heavens. By His **knowledge** the deeps were broken up.

(Prov. 24:3-4) By **wisdom** a house is built, and by **understanding** it is established; and by **knowledge** the rooms are filled.

(1QS 11:11) By his **knowledge** everything has been brought into being, and everything that is, he established by his **purpose**, and apart from him nothing is done.

(Sirach 36:8) By the **knowledge** of the Lord they are distinguished: and he altered seasons and feasts.

(Wisdom 9:1) O God of my fathers, and Lord of mercy, who hast made all things with thy **word**.

It doesn't take an army of theologians to decipher the facts revealing that the massive evidence points to the *logos* being the plan/promise of God. The Trinitarian need not resort to "Mystery." The creeds of orthodoxy should be able to produce at least one occurrence of the word God meaning "the Triune God" in the Bible. There is no such verse and Jesus agreed with the Jewish scribe about who God is (Mark 12:28ff).

John 1:14 says: "And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us..."

God's plan (or promise) became flesh. This is the point where the *logos* becomes a person, and not a verse before. The Apostle John would never have thought that God became a man, because the LORD does not change (Mal. 3:6). Verse 14 reveals to us the incarnation of the *logos*, not the Incarnation of the preexistent Son. The text, context, and background all point to the *logos* being the divine plan or promise, which was with God from the beginning. It is never spoken of as a person. Even the Greeks would understand this in light of their culture and background. If the *logos* was the reason of God, then Jesus is "walking reason." Jesus revealed to us that "The words I speak are spirit and life" (John 6:63). Jesus is the way we know the mind and heart of God.

Arius was correct in preaching that "Before Christ, God was not yet a Father."¹¹ Although his view was not fully on track, we can clearly see that God became a literal Father when Jesus was begotten (brought into existence) in the womb of Mary (Matt. 1:18, 20; Luke 1:35). The prologue of John's Gospel, when analyzed, shows no literal preexistence of Jesus. Thus we remove the key text supposed to prove the Incarnation of the Son. The lesson to be learned is that presuppositions are highly dangerous. Eisegesis rather than exegesis currently dominates popular reading of John 1. If eternal life is knowing the only true God, *and Jesus Christ who was sent* (John 17:3), then believers ought to give serious thought to the matter of defining God properly. Jesus warned us that "many will say to me in that day, 'Lord Lord,'" only to be told, "I never knew you, depart from me." We should strive to know who God is in relationship to Jesus if we are to love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength. By accepting that God is one, we are told by Jesus that we "are not far from the Kingdom of God" (Mark 12:34), and potentially closer to winning Muslims and Jews.

¹¹ Rubenstein, Richard E. *When Jesus Became God* (Orlando: Harcourt, 1999) 54