
§1 *The Word of Life (John 1:1-18)*

The prologue is set apart from the rest of John's Gospel by its designation of Jesus Christ as **the Word** (Gr.: *logos*, vv. 1, 14) rather than "the Son." The term **One and Only** (implying sonship) is introduced, however, in verses 14 and 18 and sets the stage for the Gospel's characteristic emphasis on the Father-Son relationship between God and Jesus.

The prologue also stands somewhat apart from the rest of the Gospel stylistically. The repetition and linking of certain key words lend a special dignity and solemnity to the first twelve verses or so: for example (following the vocabulary and word order of the original Greek), in verse 1: "Word . . . Word . . . God . . . God . . . Word"; in verses 4-5: "life . . . life . . . light . . . light . . . darkness . . . darkness"; in verses 7-9: "for a testimony . . . to testify about the light . . . not the light . . . to testify about the light . . . the real light . . . the light that comes into the world"; in verses 10-12: "the world . . . the world . . . the world . . . his own . . . his own . . . receive . . . receive." In the middle of verse 12 the chainlike repetitions abruptly come to an end. The effect is a marked increase in pace and intensity, building to a small crescendo at the end of verse 13. The reader's eye rushes through the phrases describing what believers are *not* ("children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will") to settle triumphantly on what they *are* ("born of God").

Verse 14 brings a subtle change. The writer pauses to reflect on the impact of what he has just said. The message of the first thirteen verses is that **the Word became flesh**. At the same time the writer injects himself and his community into the story of the Word becoming human. The Word **made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory. . . . From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another** (vv. 14, 16).

The prologue can thus be divided into two parts: first, a capsule summary of the Gospel story, beginning in eternity and reaching as far as the present experience of Christian believers (vv. 1-13), and second, the confessional response of these believers to this revelation in history (vv. 14-18).

The distinct style and vocabulary of the prologue has led many scholars to the conclusion that the writer has incorporated into his Gospel, right at the beginning, an early Christian (or pre-Christian) hymn. Pliny, the Roman governor of Asia Minor early in the second century, wrote to the emperor Trajan that Christians “were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang in alternate verses a hymn to Christ, as to a god” (*Epistles* 10.96; trans. D. J. Theron, *Evidence of Tradition* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958], p. 15). Possible fragments of hymns that fit this description are known within the New Testament itself (e.g., Phil. 2:6-11; Col. 1:15-20), and it is also possible (though it cannot be proven) that parts of John 1:1-18 first took shape in the context of Christian worship. But there is no agreement among scholars as to which verses of the prologue belonged to this supposed hymn. Some have attempted to separate poetry from prose, so that when certain prose “insertions” about John the Baptist (vv. 6-8, 15) are removed the remainder can be regarded as the original hymn or poem. Others have proposed even subtler and more complex reconstructions. But the chainlike word repetitions that give the first part of the prologue its stylistic flavor run through the first so-called prose section (vv. 6-8) as well as through the supposed poetry. Though the prologue of John’s Gospel is haunting and in its way poetic, the NIV (like most English versions) prints all of it as prose. If there is an underlying hymn, no sure way has been found of reconstructing it. Whatever its sources, the prologue in its present form is just what it appears to be—the literary introduction to John’s Gospel.

If the introduction had begun at verse 6, there would have been no mistaking the story it intended to tell. Verse 6 begins where Mark’s Gospel begins (and where the narrative portion of John’s Gospel itself gets under way), with John the Baptist (cf. Mark 1:2-5; John 1:19-28). In the written Gospels and in early Christian preaching, his ministry serves to introduce the ministry

of Jesus (cf. Acts 10:37; 13:24-25). But the first five verses of the Gospel of John reach back to an earlier beginning, the same "beginning" spoken of in Genesis 1:1, when "God created the heavens and the earth." The refrain of Genesis ("And God *said* . . . and God *said* . . . ") finds its equivalent in the prologue's designation, **the Word** (cf. Ps. 33:6: "By the word of the LORD were the heavens made, their starry host by the breath of his mouth").

The purpose of the Gospel writer is to place the story of Jesus in a cosmic perspective. The light that came into the world in Jesus Christ is the same light that illumined every human creature from the beginning. The word that created all things, as well as the life that it created, now finds expression in a particular person and a particular life lived **among us**. The first few verses of John's Gospel lay claim to the past, briefly and decisively, on behalf of Jesus Christ. He is here the personification of God's creative word, just as he will later be seen as the personification of things that the word called into being—light, truth, life and resurrection, bread from heaven, and the vine that God planted. The one who gives life *is* the Life; the one who speaks truth *is* the Truth. Above all, Jesus is introduced in the prologue as the Revealer, the one through whom God spoke in the beginning and through whom he continues to speak. Elsewhere in John's Gospel, Jesus *speaks* the word, but in the prologue he *is* the Word, the personal embodiment of all that he proclaims.

The Epistle to the Hebrews introduces Jesus in a remarkably similar way: "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe" (Heb. 1:1-2). But if John's Gospel lays claim to the past in much the same way as Hebrews, its center of interest from the prologue on is almost entirely the present and future, not the past. Whatever their wider implications, the immediate function of the opening verses is simply to lay a basis for the irony of the Word's subsequent rejection in the world: "He was in the world, and *though the world was made through him*, the world did not recognize him" (v. 10). The past is not an end in itself. The main purpose of the opening paragraph about God's creative work through

the Word is to lead up to an affirmation about the present: **The light shines in the darkness**, and “the darkness has not overcome it” (v. 5, NIV margin). The writer boldly passes over the entire Old Testament period in silence. In one breath he speaks of light and life coming into existence at the creation, and in the next he proclaims that same light shining today, unquenched by the darkness around it. The rest of the Gospel makes clear that the reference is to the life and death of Jesus, who came into the world as a light (3:19; 8:12; 12:46) and confronted darkness in the hour of his death (9:4-5; 11:9-10; 12:35-36; 13:30). **The light shines in the darkness** *now*, because of Jesus and what he has done.

In verses 6-13 the writer goes back and describes in rapid summary fashion how this light came to shine so triumphantly in a dark world. The story begins in the customary way, with John the Baptist; what is unusual is the insistence that John the Baptist **was not the light** but merely **came . . . as a witness to the light** (v. 8). Like Jesus Christ he was **sent** as God’s messenger, but the similarity, says the Gospel writer, ends there. Why was such an explanation thought necessary? The most likely reason is that the writer knew of individuals or groups who actually believed that John, and not Jesus, was **the light**, that is, the decisive revealer of God. Such beliefs are known to have existed by the third century A.D. (see note on 1:8) and John’s Gospel gives evidence of countering them here and elsewhere (cf. 1:20-21; 3:27-30). But though John the Baptist’s role was simply to **witness to the light**, even as he spoke, **the true light** was coming into the world (v. 9). The light was **in the world** (v. 10) in the person of Jesus during John the Baptist’s ministry, even though John was at first unaware of it (cf. 1:31, 33).

If Jesus in the prologue is the personification of the Word, he is no less the personification of the light that the Word produces. The question whether the implied subject of verses 10-12 is the Word or the light is secondary to the observation that in either case it is Jesus. Whatever distinction can be made between the Word and the light has been transcended in him. *He* (not “it”) was in the world; the world was made through *him*; the world did not know *him*. The Gospel writer is not here recounting a myth or an allegory, in which abstract ideas take on a life of their

own, but genuine history, telescoped into a sentence or two but waiting to be developed and expanded in the remainder of the Gospel.

Jesus came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him (v. 11). In the immediate sense his own country was Israel and his own people the Jews. Israel and Judaism were the stage on which the drama of his public ministry was played out. Yet the prologue has just mentioned **the world** three times within two lines. The context strongly suggests that in a wider sense Jesus' own country is the world to which he was sent and his own people are human beings of every race or nation, all those on whom God's light shines (cf. vv. 4, 9). These wider implications will become apparent when Jesus comes to Jerusalem for the last time (cf. 12:19, 32) and when he confronts Pilate and the authority of Rome.

The story of the coming of the light ends with an account of the experience of the writer's own community. They have done what the rest of Jesus' **own** have not done. They have received him as God's messenger and put their faith in him. They have been given the status of God's children not by creation or natural descent but by a new and divine begetting. In the words of Jesus to Nicodemus, they have been "born again" (cf. 3:3).

It is from this vantage point that the writer can say, **The light shines in the darkness**, and "the darkness has not overcome it" (v. 5, NIV margin), and it is from this perspective as well that he reviews how the light came to shine on him and his community. So it was that the Word **became flesh** and made his dwelling among us (v. 14a). The writer's community comes alive and begins to speak for itself: **We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father**. Like Isaiah in the temple (cf. 12:41) or like the three disciples at the Transfiguration (cf. Luke 9:32), the writer's community had seen the glory of God displayed in Jesus Christ. Yet it was not a matter of a particular incident or a single vision. They had seen Jesus' glory in a whole series of events, from his baptism and the wedding at Cana (cf. 2:11) to his death and resurrection.

The first to see it was John the Baptist, now introduced as the spokesman for the whole Christian community. First, John is identified by means of a quotation of what he once said about

Jesus: **He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me** (v. 15). Although these words reinforce the prologue's opening verses on the pre-existence of Jesus, their purpose in their immediate context is to introduce a *new* testimony from John the Baptist's lips, that is, that "from his fullness have we all received, grace upon grace," (v. 16 RSV). Here John speaks no longer as a solitary prophet but as part of the Christian community. He is numbered among those who have "received" Jesus (cf. v. 12). As the messenger through whom others will come to faith (cf. v. 7), he is the appropriate spokesman for them all. Verse 16 is therefore not a testimony that John uttered for himself on one particular occasion but a testimony common to all believers in Jesus. The **fullness** of Jesus Christ is an expression based on the conviction that Jesus himself was a man **full of grace and truth** (v. 14), a phrase recalling the description of Stephen in Acts 6:8 ("full of God's grace and power") and the more common expression "full of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 6:3, 5; cf. Luke 4:1; John 3:34). If the Spirit in Luke-Acts means "power" (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:8), the Spirit in the Johannine writings means "truth" (John 4:23-24; 14:17; 15:26; 16:13; 1 John 5:6). **Grace and truth** is therefore a circumlocution for the Holy Spirit. The Spirit that rested on Jesus after his baptism now belongs to all his followers, for Jesus is "he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit" (1:33).

The confession of the believing community probably does not extend beyond verse 16. The tone of verses 17-18 is again didactic and impersonal, like that of verses 1-13, as the writer undertakes to explain concretely the puzzling phrase "grace upon grace" (v. 16, RSV). God's gift of the Jewish law, he says, makes way for **grace and truth**, the gift of the Spirit through Jesus Christ. The distinction is not between law and grace as contrasting ways of salvation, but between *two* gifts of grace: the law and the Spirit (cf. Paul in 2 Cor. 3:7-18). When the writer adds that **no one has ever seen God**, he apparently has in mind Moses in particular, who was not allowed to see God's face (Exod. 33:20-23). In Jesus, the limitation imposed on Moses and the Israelites has been taken away (cf. 2 Cor. 3:18). To see the glory of Jesus is to see God's glory, for he is **the One and Only, who came from the Father** (v. 14). To see him is to see God (cf. 14:9), for he is **God the One and Only** (cf. v. 1).

The theme of the prologue has been revelation. Only God can reveal God, whether he is called **the Word** (v. 1) or **the One and Only** (v. 18). The deity of Jesus Christ is presupposed throughout, yet the message is not simply that Jesus is God. The message is that because he is God his ministry on earth has made God known to us, and that now **at the Father's side** he continues to make God known through the Spirit (cf. 17:26). Throughout this Gospel, we see and hear him doing just that.

Additional Notes §1

1:1 / Was God: The absence in Greek of the definite article with "God" has led some to assume it to be used as an adjective ("the Word was divine") or even to supply, with polytheistic implications, an indefinite article ("the Word was a god," the New World Translation of the Jehovah's Witnesses, 1961). But there are two reasons why **Word** has the definite article in Greek and **God** does not: (1) to indicate that **Word** is the subject of the clause, even though in Greek it follows the verb "to be" (i.e., "the Word was God" and not "God was the Word") and (2) to indicate that **Word** and **God** are not totally interchangeable terms. Though the Word is God, God is more than just the Word; God is also "the Father," while the Word is identified in v. 14 not as the Father but as the Father's "One and Only." In the terms of later debates about Christ, the Word has the very nature of God, but the Word and the Father are not the same person.

1:4 / In him was life: There is a question of punctuation in the Greek text: Do the words *ho gegonen* (lit., "that which has been made") conclude the thought of v. 3, or begin v. 4? See B. M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (London and New York: United Bible Societies, 1971), pp. 195-96. The NIV, like most English versions, appears to presuppose the former by translating "without him nothing was made that has been made"). But the overwhelming evidence of ancient manuscripts and church fathers is that in the early centuries *ho gegonen* was read as the beginning of v. 4, not the conclusion of v. 3. The point is not that in the Word there was life, but that through the Word life came into being (lit., "what was made in him was life").

1:8 / He himself was not the light. Such a disclaimer about John the Baptist would have an especially pointed meaning over against the belief mentioned in the third-century Pseudo-Clementine *Recognitions* I, 54: "Some even of the disciples of John [the Baptist], who seemed to

be great ones, separated themselves from the people, and proclaimed their own master as the Christ" (ANF 8.92).

1:9 / Was coming into the world: The phrase in Greek can go either with **every man** or with **the . . . light**. The context strongly favors the latter. To speak of every human being who **was coming into the world** is wordy and out of keeping with the prologue's economy of language. To speak of the light coming into the world lays an intelligible basis for the statement in the next verse that Jesus "was in the world." If the second alternative is correct, it should be construed, with the NIV, as a periphrastic construction, joining the verb "was" to the participle "coming": **The true light—that gives light to every man—was coming into the world.**

1:13 / Not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will: lit., "not of bloods, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of the male"; i.e., not by ordinary sexual intercourse initiated by a husband's desire. They *are*, of course, born physically by those means, but this is not the birth referred to here.

1:14 / The One and Only, who came from the Father: The phrase is more than a metaphor. Jesus does not receive glory *as if* God were his Father and he the Father's **One and Only**, but because that is in fact the case. The language is reminiscent of the baptism of Jesus. The term **One and Only** (*monogenēs*) focuses not on birth (as the KJV translation, "only-begotten," suggests) but on being uniquely the object of a father's love. It is used in much the same way as "beloved" (*agapētos*) in the synoptic accounts of the voice from heaven at Jesus' baptism (Mark 1:11; Matt. 3:17; Luke 3:22). The author of John's Gospel speaks as if he and his community, like John the Baptist, were eyewitnesses to the baptism of Jesus (cf. "we saw" in v. 14 with "I saw" in v. 32).

1:15 / This was he of whom I said. An ancient text known to Origen in the third century (and probably to his Gnostic opponents even earlier) makes most of v. 15 a parenthesis identifying John the Baptist: "This was *the one who said*, 'He comes after me, but he is greater than I am, because he existed before I was born.' " The effect of this reading is to make v. 16 the actual message that John "speaks" and "has cried out" as a present testimony to the readers of the Gospel. John the Baptist who once *said*, **He . . . comes after me, etc.**, now *says*, **From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another, etc.** This variant reading was adopted by Westcott and Hort in their Greek New Testament of 1881 (New York: Harper & Brothers) but by no other Greek edition (It is preserved, however, in the New World Translation of 1961 [Brooklyn: Watchtower and Tract Society], and the 1979 translation by Richmond Lattimore, *The Four Gospels and the Revelation* [New York: Farrar Straus Giroux]). For a defense of this reading and the above translation of it, see J. R. Michaels, "Origen and the Text of John 1:15"

New Testament Textual Criticism: Its Significance for Exegesis. Essays in Honour of Bruce M. Metzger (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1981), pp. 87–104.

1:18 / God the One and Only: Some ancient manuscripts lack the identification of the **One and Only** as **God** (*monogenēs theos* in Greek), using *monogenēs* instead with *hyios*, the more common Greek word for “son” (i.e., *ho monogenēs hyios*, “the unique Son,” cf. 3:16; 1 John 4:9). But the reading presupposed by NIV is supported by better manuscripts and in all likelihood is correct. It is very improbable that scribes would have changed such a familiar Johannine expression as “the unique Son” to something so unusual and unfamiliar as **God the One and Only**.