

The Gospel of John

Session Two – Logos



The Prologue

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The Prologue (John 1:1 – 18)

¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overtake it.

⁶There was a man sent from God whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ⁹The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

¹⁰He was in the world, and the world came into being through him, yet the world did not know him. ¹¹He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹²But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

¹⁴And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.¹⁵ (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.' ") ¹⁶From his fullness we have all received, grace upon

grace. ¹⁷ The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God. It is the only Son, himself God, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

Brief Early Christian History Outline

30*	Jesus' death on the cross
34*	Paul's experience on the road to Damascus
48 – 62*	Paul's ministry and writing
64*	Paul and Peter executed in Rome
66 – 73	First Jewish-Roman War
70	Destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem
70*	Writing of Mark's Gospel
80*	Writing of Matthew's Gospel
90*	Writing of Luke's Gospel
Late 90's*	Writing of John's Gospel
135	Jews were expelled from Judea (including Jerusalem)
150*	The Four Gospels were first identified as Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John

**These dates are approximations. Many scholars think Mark was written in the late sixties; others in the early seventies. There is greater variation in the dating of the other three Gospels. Some scholars think Luke was written in the eighties; others think it was written as late as 110.*

Structure of the Prologue

The prologue falls into three parts, divided roughly by the statements about John the Baptist (who is never called “the Baptist” in John) in 1:6 – 8 and 1:15. The first part presents the role of the Word in creation (1:1 – 5); the second the appearance of the Word in history (1:9 – 13); the third part the Incarnation and its benefits (1:14 – 18). The last part differs decisively in that the author and those who are united with him speak in the first-person plural, adding a note of personal confession to what has been said. As commentators have long noted, verse 14 is central theologically, in that it summarizes what is said in verses 9 – 13, but it also lays the basis for the statements about Jesus Christ in the remainder of the prologue. Yet verses 12-13 are pivotal because they state, albeit still in the third person, the effect of the Word's appearance on the historical plane, and thus they prepare for the confessional statement of verse 14. That statement is then elaborated with respect to the effect of Christ upon the Christian community (v. 16), his relation to Moses and the law, (v. 17) and finally his relationship to God the Father (v. 18).

The opening phrase, “in the beginning,” is reminiscent of Genesis 1:1, where God speaks, creating a world out of the formless chaos. That light and darkness figure prominently (vv. 4-5) also recalls the creation scene of Genesis, where God creates light over against the darkness, (Genesis 1:3-5). Moreover, the Gospel of Mark begins similarly: “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ. . .” (1:1). But John is actually much closer to Genesis, in that both John and Genesis are giving a narration about creation. Although in Genesis God speaks, there is and

ancient Targum (translation of the Hebrew Bible into Aramaic) in which God's speaking is personified, or reified, as his *Memra* or Word (Gen 1:13): "From the beginning with wisdom the Word of the Lord created and perfected the skies and the earth . . . And the Word of the Lord said: "Let there be light and there was light according to the decree of his Word." Interestingly enough, in the closely similar prologue of 1 John 1:1 – 3, "the beginning" is no longer the primordial beginning, but pretty clearly the beginning of the Christian story.

– D. Moody Smith (adapted from *John: Abingdon New Testament Commentaries*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1999)

Jesus as Lady Wisdom

John brilliantly presents Jesus as Lady Wisdom in a number of ways. As we read in numerous Septuagint (LXX) texts, Lady Wisdom is God's partner: she helps to create the world, she delights in the human race, she continually tries to help humans to get knowledge and flee from ignorance. She cries aloud incessantly. Unfortunately, the Old Testament tells us that she is often rejected, because fools hate knowledge and humans would rather wallow in ignorance, for the most part. This theme is played out mightily in John, as there is ongoing irony related to who "knows" what and what really counts as saving knowledge (the verb *oida*, "know," appears eighty-four times in John but only twenty-four times in Matthew, twenty-one in Mark, twenty-five times in Luke; the verb *ginosko*, another word for "know," appears fifty-seven times in John, twenty in Matthew, twelve in Mark, twenty-eight times in Luke). Read the Prologue alongside Proverbs 8:22 – 31; Sirach 24:1 – 9; and Proverbs 1:20 – 32. You will see that John casts Jesus in the mold of Lady Wisdom. Given this fact, the reader should not be surprised by the statement in John 1:11 that the Word/Wisdom/Jesus came unto his own and his own did not receive him.

– Jamie Clark-Soles (*Reading John for Dear Life: A Spiritual Walk with the Fourth Gospel*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 2016)

Tracing the Roots of the Prologue

The prologue to John's gospel is strikingly different from the words with which any previous gospel has begun. John, the one who baptizes in the wilderness is introduced; yet this John is not the John the Baptist we have met in the earlier gospels. The idea of Jesus being pre-existent is also introduced in the prologue, and later developing Christian doctrine regarding the divinity of Jesus is significantly rooted in this idea. If the Fourth Gospel is a profoundly Jewish piece of writing, then why, we must ask, would its Jewish author write such a non-Jewish sounding prologue?

One answer counters the underlying assumption that the prologue sounds non-Jewish and asserts, to the contrary, that it is fully in keeping with Jewish tradition. The possibility is thus raised that over the centuries its words have been misread and misinterpreted by a Gentile, deeply anti-Semitic Christian church in a way that not only was ill-informed about Jewish thought, but was also deeply distorted by that very anti-Semitism. That is the conclusion to which my study has led me and the insight that ultimately helped me to engage this book as I have done.

My first step was and is to recognize that the concept of the “word” (logos) of God shaping and entering human life runs all through the various strands of the Jewish traditions. The Torah with which the Old Testament opens, starts with the words “In the beginning, God . . .” John’s prologue thus counters the first words of Genesis by saying, “In the beginning” – not just God, but the “word.” No one should miss this obvious and very Jewish contrast. John then goes on to give a radical and expanding definition of the “word,” describing it as being “with God” at the beginning. Through the “word,” he says, “all things were made,” and with the “word” nothing was made. The prologue then personalizes the “word” “in *him* was life” and this life “was the light” of human beings. It was this light that illumined darkness and the darkness could not extinguish it or overcome it.

Now read the creation story of Genesis 1 in its fullness. In a more modern idiom, this is what it says:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. At the beginning the heavens and the earth were without form and void, and darkness covered the face of the deep. The spirit then hovered over the water like a hen perched on a nest of eggs out of which life was to emerge. And God said, “Let there be light.”

In the beginning there was the oneness of God. Then out of God came God’s word, “Let there be light.” Now the singularity of God shared creation with a new power. The “word” of God came out of God and stood over against God. The “word” began to shape the world, separating light from darkness, creating a firmament to divide the waters above from the waters below, which had the effect of separating heaven from earth. The God spoke again and ordered the earthly waters to be gathered together so that dry land could appear. Next God spoke to create the sun and the moon – one to give light to the day, and the other, to the night. God then began to bring life out of the sea and to form birds to populate the air and finally creatures to populate the earth, “beasts of the field” and “everything that creeps upon the earth,” the creation story calls them. Finally late on the sixth day God spoke, and this time in response to the “word” of God life was born – male and female together and instantaneously. To this first couple was then given stewardship over all the earth.

The Jewish writers who wrote this creation story attributed to the “word” of God enormous creative power, seeing it as separate from God, but of God’s very essence.

The prologue to John's gospel makes this same Jewish claim as a prelude to this gospel's attempt to describe that which the followers of Jesus believed they had experienced in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. The Hebrew word for "word" was *dabar*. The Greek word for "word" was (as we have seen) *logos*. The Hebrew concept of *dabar* indicated that this "word" had power to shape the world, to reveal the presence of God, to call people to a heightened sense of selfhood, a heightened consciousness. So, much of that which we find in the Greek word *logos* was not as foreign to the meaning of *dabar* in Jewish thought as once was supposed.

– John Shelby Spong (adapted from *The Fourth Gospel: Tales of a Jewish Mystic*, Harper One, New York, 2013)

Primary Sources:

John: Abingdon New Testament Commentaries, by D. Moody Smith, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1999

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