

John

The Prologue to the Gospel

1:1 In the beginning¹ was the Word, and the Word was with God,² and the Word was fully God.³ **1:2** The Word⁴ was with God in

¹**sn** *In the beginning*. The search for the basic “stuff” out of which things are made was the earliest one in Greek philosophy. It was attended by the related question of “What is the process by which the secondary things came out of the primary one (or ones)?” or in Aristotelian terminology, “What is the ‘beginning’ (same Greek word as *beginning*, John 1:1) and what is the origin of the things that are made?” In the New Testament the word usually has a temporal sense, but even BAGD 112 s.v. ἀρχή 2 lists the second major category of meaning as “the first cause.” For John, the words “In the beginning” are most likely a conscious allusion to the opening words of Genesis—“In the beginning.” Other concepts which occur prominently in Gen 1 are also found in John’s prologue: “life” (1:4) “light” (1:4) and “darkness” (1:5). Gen 1 describes the first (physical) creation; John 1 describes the new (spiritual) creation. But this is not to play off a false dichotomy between “physical” and “spiritual”; the first creation was both physical and spiritual. The new creation is really a re-creation, of the spiritual (first) but also the physical. (In spite of the common understanding of John’s “spiritual” emphasis, the “physical” re-creation should not be overlooked; this occurs in John 2 with the changing of water into wine, in John 11 with the resurrection of Lazarus, and the emphasis of John 20-21 on the aftermath of Jesus’ own resurrection.)

²**tn** The preposition πρὸς (*pros*) implies not just proximity, but intimate personal relationship. M. Dods stated, “Πρὸς ... means more than μετὰ or παρὰ, and is regularly employed in expressing the presence of one person with another” (“The Gospel of St. John,” *The Expositor’s Greek Testament*, 1:684). See also Mark 6:3, Matt 13:56, Mark 9:19, Gal 1:18, 2 John 12.

³**tn** Or “and what God was the Word was.” Colwell’s Rule is often invoked to support the translation of θεός (*theos*) as definite (“God”) rather than indefinite (“a god”) here. However, Colwell’s Rule merely *permits*, but does not demand, that a predicate nominative ahead of an equative verb be translated as definite rather than indefinite. Furthermore, Colwell’s Rule did not deal with a third possibility, that the anarthrous predicate noun may have more of a qualitative nuance when placed ahead of the verb. A definite meaning for the term is reflected in the traditional rendering “the word was God.” From a technical standpoint, though, it is preferable to see a qualitative aspect to an anarthrous θεός in John 1:1c (D. B. Wallace, *Exegetical Syntax*, 266-69). Translations like the NEB, REB, and Moffatt are helpful in capturing the sense in John 1:1c, that the Word was fully deity in essence (just as much God as God the Father). However, in contemporary English “the Word was divine” (Moffatt) does not quite catch the meaning since “divine” as a descriptive term is not used in contemporary English exclusively of God. The translation “what God was the Word was” is perhaps the most nuanced rendering, conveying that everything God was in essence, the Word was too. This points to unity of essence between the Father and the Son without equating the persons. However, in surveying a number of native speakers of English, some of whom had formal theological training and some of whom did not, the editors concluded that the fine distinctions indicated by “what God was the Word was” would not be understood by many contemporary readers. Thus the

the beginning. **1:3** All things were created⁵ by him, and apart from him not one thing was created⁶ that has been created.⁷ **1:4** *In him was life*,⁸ and the life was the light of mankind.¹

translation “the Word was fully God” was chosen because it is more likely to convey the meaning to the average English reader that the *Logos* (which “became flesh and took up residence among us” in John 1:14 and is thereafter identified in the Fourth Gospel as Jesus) is one in essence with God the Father while distinct in person from God the Father.

sn *And the Word was fully God*. John’s theology consistently drives toward the conclusion that Jesus, the incarnate Word, is just as much God as God the Father. This can be seen, for example, in texts like John 10:30 (“The Father and I are one”), 17:11 (“so that they may be one just as we are one”), and 8:58 (“before Abraham came into existence, I am”). The construction in John 1:1c does not equate the Word with the *person* of God; rather it affirms that the Word and God are one in *essence*.

⁴**tn** Grk “He”; the referent (the Word) has been specified in the translation for clarity.

⁵**tn** Or “made”; Grk “came into existence.”

⁶**tn** Or “made”; Grk “nothing came into existence.”

⁷**tc** There is a major punctuation problem here: should this relative clause go with v. 3 or v. 4? The earliest MSS have no punctuation (ϩ66 ϩ75* ⚭* A B Δ). Many of the later MSS which do have punctuation place it before the phrase, thus putting it with v. 4 (ϩ75^c C D L Θ *al*). NA25 placed the phrase in v. 3; NA26 moved the words to the beginning of v. 4. In a detailed article K. Aland defended the change (“Eine Untersuchung zu Johannes 1, 3-4. Über die Bedeutung eines Punktes,” *ZNW* 59 [1968]: 174-209). He sought to prove that the attribution of ὁ γέγονεν (*hō gegonen*) to v. 3 began to be carried out in the 4th century in the Greek church. This came out of the Arian controversy, and was intended as a safeguard for doctrine. The change was unknown in the West. Aland is probably correct in affirming that the phrase was attached to v. 4 by the Gnostics and the Eastern Church; only when the Arians began to use them were they attached to v. 3. But this does not rule out the possibility that, by moving the words from v. 4 to v. 3, one is restoring the original reading. Understanding the words as part of v. 3 is natural and adds to the emphasis which is built up there; while it also gives a terse, forceful statement in v. 4. On the other hand, taking the phrase ὁ γέγονεν with v. 4 gives a complicated expression: C. K. Barrett says that both ways of understanding v. 4 with ὁ γέγονεν included ‘are almost impossibly clumsy’ (*St. John*, 157): “That which came into being—in it the Word was life”; “That which came into being—in the Word was its life.” The following stylistic points should be noted in the solution of this problem: (1) John frequently starts sentences with ἐν (*en*); (2) he repeats frequently (“nothing was created that has been created”); (3) 5:26 and 6:53 both give a sense similar to v. 4 if it is understood without the phrase; (4) it makes far better Johannine sense to say that in the Word was life than to say that the created universe (what was made, ὁ γέγονεν) was life in him. In conclusion: The phrase is best taken with v. 3. Schnackenburg, Barrett, Carson, Haenchen, Morris, KJV, and NIV concur (against Brown, Beasley-Murray, and NEB). The arguments of R. Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 1:239-40, are particularly persuasive.

⁸**tn** Or “made”; Grk “that has come into existence.”

⁸**tn** John uses ζωή (*zōē*) 37 times: 17 times it occurs with αἰώνιος (*aiōnios*), and in the remaining occurrences