The Divine Logos: The Christology of the Prologue of John

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Introduction

One of the main themes in the Gospel of John is its Christology. Of the four Gospels, it is John who speaks with the greatest amount of clarity on the nature of the person of Jesus Christ. This includes, for example, the most explicit statements on the incarnation and the divinity of Christ. This is especially true of John’s prologue. The significance of this prologue lies in the fact that John does not wait until the end to reveal the identity of the Person of Whom he writes. In Kruse’s terms: “The Prologue introduces this one to the readers before the story proper begins so that they will know the true identity of the central character.”¹ This eighteen verse introduction to the Gospel provides the window through which the rest of the Gospel is to be interpreted. Central to this prologue is the concept of the “Word” (Gk. λόγος), which is the term by which John describes the eternally begotten son of God. The prologue sets forth the nature, identity and activities of this Word, which then provides the background for the Christology of the rest of the Gospel of John. As D. A. Carson puts it in his commentary on John:

[T]he prologue summarizes how the ‘Word’ which was with God in the very beginning came into the sphere of time, history, tangibility – in other words, how the Son of God was sent into the world to become the Jesus of history, so that the glory and grace of God might be uniquely and perfectly disclosed. The rest of the book is nothing other than an expansion of this theme.²

The purpose of this essay is to expound upon the Logos Christology that is presented in the prologue of John, to show how this prologue reveals the character of the divine Word. It is this author’s contention that John’s usage of the “Word” encapsulates his understanding of its nature

and identity, as well as the roles that the Word plays in the world (those of Creator, Revelator and Saviour) and the importance of the incarnation. In this way, the prologue provides an important and helpful summary of John’s entire Christology. It is crucial for readers of the Bible to understand what John intends to communicate in these eighteen verses in order to have a proper understanding of Jesus. Without this understanding, our Christology will be woefully inadequate. It is also necessary to properly expound on this prologue in order to correct misconceptions of John’s teachings, and, by extension, the misconceptions of the prologue as a whole that have accrued over the centuries. To this end, alternate interpretations from the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ *Reasoning from the Scriptures* are provided and refuted. This article will properly clarify the prologue for those who desire to understand its significance.

**ORIGINS OF THE LOGOS DOCTRINE**

To begin, it is necessary to provide some information on the historical background of the concept of the Word, in order to demonstrate the richness of meaning that is contained in this term, how this teaching is found in embryonic form in the Old Testament, and how it is totally unique when compared against notions of the Word that have prevailed in Hellenistic philosophy.

The term “Word” did not originate with John. It has had a rich usage in Hellenistic literature, and its use in Philosophy dates as far back as Heraclitus (circa 500 B. C.).³ This term was later picked up by the Stoics, who used it to refer to the cosmic Reason that is immanent throughout all of reality, and of which human reason is a divine spark. Although this cosmic

Reason was divine, it was also impersonal.\textsuperscript{4} It was adopted from the Stoics by the Jewish philosopher Philo. In terms that are highly reminiscent of the New Testament, Philo referred to the Word as “Mediator” and “Image of God.” The Word was described as “neither unbegotten (like God) nor begotten (like a human),” putting it somewhere in between. It is also called the First-Born Son, the Chief born, and is both the Light and the very shadow of God.\textsuperscript{5} 

Because of Philo’s usage of the term “Word,” it had become very popular amongst philosophical and liberal theological circles during the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century, who claimed that John borrowed it from Philo. Although this theory has lost ground during the latter half of the century, it still comes up sporadically, especially amongst critics of Christianity who seek to undermine the uniqueness of the biblical testimony regarding the person of Christ. However, the flaw in this accusation is best explained by philosopher and theologian Gordon H. Clark, who wrote that “since the New Testament was written in Greek, it uses words found in pagan writings. ... But the point in question is not the use of words but the occurrence of ideas. ... One cannot forbid Christian writers to use common words on pain of becoming pagans.”\textsuperscript{6} The occurrence of the same word in different contexts does not mean that the same ideas are attached to these words.

In addition, those who attempt to find parallels between John’s usage and Philo’s miss the fact that there are irreconcilable differences between the two. One of the most significant of these differences is the fact that Philo’s view of the Word was that of an abstract cosmic principle, postulated to solve various metaphysical and epistemological problems. For Philo, the Word was not personal, let alone a Messiah or saviour figure.\textsuperscript{7} Moreover, Philo believed in the Platonic view which elevated the immaterial soul far above the material body, and disparaged the body as 

\textsuperscript{4} Ibid., 59. 
\textsuperscript{5} Ronald H. Nash, \textit{The Word of God and the Mind of Man: The Crisis of Revealed Truth in Contemporary Theology} (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982), 64. 
\textsuperscript{7} Ronald H. Nash, \textit{The Word of God and the Mind of Man}, 64-65.
the prison house of the soul. Hence, the idea of the Word becoming incarnate, an essential element in the Word of John’s prologue, would have been anathema to Philo.

Thus, if John did not derive his Word doctrine from Philo, its origins must have been derived from the Old Testament, the source out of which Philo drew as well, although he made very different conclusions. It is in the Old Testament that we originally find the idea of God creating all things through His word. That is, at the very beginning of the Bible, in the oft-repeated phrase, “and God said, ‘Let there be ...’ and there was ...”, and it is picked up in the Psalms where it is stated: “For He spoke, and it came to be; He commanded, and it stood firm.” Furthermore, we find this same concept presented in the form of divine wisdom in Proverbs. In this passage, wisdom is presented as being “possessed” (not “created,” as some older versions mistakenly translate it) by the Father before the foundation of the world. Note that wisdom here is presented in personal terms. Regarding this passage, Grudem notes: “This is a legitimate sense and, if wisdom is understood as a real person, would mean only that God the Father began to direct and make use of the powerful creative work of God the Son at the time creation began.” That wisdom is presented as female in Proverbs is not a problem, given that the Word does not take on a gender until the incarnation. It is significant that in Proverbs 29-30, it states that “when He marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside Him, like a master workman.” This passage is echoed in the first three verses of the prologue of John, which states precisely the same truths in only slightly different terms.

Having presented the Old Testament origins of the Logos doctrine, the following sections of this essay will serve as an exposition of how this doctrine is developed by John in the

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9 Ps. 33:9.
10 Prov. 8:22-31.
prologue to his Gospel. There are various facets to John’s view of the Word, each of which will be presented in detail.

THE ETERNALITY OF THE LOGOS

The widely known opening verse of the fourth Gospel, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God,” is meant to parallel the beginning of the Old Testament: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” It is significant that according to this verse, in the beginning, the Word “was” (ἦν, the third person perfect tense form of the personal pronoun εἰμί). While minor grammatical aspects such as this may seem unimportant, there is a deliberate and careful choice of wording here. The word “was” is used throughout the prologue exclusively of the Word, and is contrasted with the word ἐγένετο, a term that indicates creation in time, and is used in reference to everything else (cf. verses 3, 6, 10, 14 and 17) to indicate that they have a point of origin. White notes the significance of this:

The Word does not come into existence at the ‘beginning,’ but is already in existence when the ‘beginning’ takes place. If we take the beginning of John 1:1, the Word is already there. If we push it back further (if one can even do so!), say, a year, the Word is already there. A thousand years, the Word is there. A billion years, the Word is there. What is John’s point? The Word is eternal. The Word is not a creation.

The point of this first clause is to indicate the eternality of the Word. Thus, the best interpretation of this verse is that which is captured by the New English Bible (NEB) when it renders the verse this way: “When all things began, the Word already was.”

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12 Jn. 1:1.
13 Gen. 1:1.
The subsequent clause states “that the Word was with God.” The preposition “with” (Gk. πρὸς) is literally translated as “towards,” and indicates a face-to-face relationship. This is similar to how it is used in Corinthians, where it is written that “for now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to [πρὸς] face.”\(^\text{15}\) To again quote White: “The term has a wide range of meanings, depending on the context in which it is found. In this particular instance, the term speaks to a personal relationship, in fact, to intimacy.”\(^\text{16}\) This is meant to highlight the eternal unity between the Father and the Word—a unity that nonetheless admits a distinction of persons, since the Word cannot be “with” God unless some kind of personal distinction existed within the Godhead.

Finally, the third clause states that “the Word was God.” Although this clause can be clearly seen as a reference to the divinity of Christ, various groups have attempted to provide an alternate explanation of this characterization of the Word as divine. For example, the Jehovah’s Witnesses translate this clause as “the Word was a god” in their New World Translation. In *Reasoning from the Scriptures*, the following explanation is given as to why this clause cannot be referring to the deity of Christ:

The definite article (the) appears before the first occurrence of the·os’ (God) but not before the second. The articular (when the article) appears construction of the noun points to an identity, a personality, whereas a singular anarthrous (without the article) predicate noun before the verb (as the sentence is constructed in Greek) points to a quality about someone. So the text is not saying that the Word (Jesus) was the same as the God with whom he was but, rather, that the Word was godlike, divine, a god.\(^\text{17}\)

The problem with this argument is that it denotes a misunderstanding of the reason John does not place a definite article before “God” in the third clause. In actuality, he is seeking to avoid the

\(^{15}\) Cor. 1:12-13.


\(^{17}\) *Reasoning from the Scriptures* (Watch Tower Bible and tract Society of Pennsylvania, 1989), 212.
idea that all of the “Word” equals all of “God.” This equation would make the “Word” and “God” interchangeable, which would then eradicate the distinction of persons in the Godhead (thus leading to the error of Modalism), and would contradict the previous clause which states that the Word was “with” God (which is only possible if there are personal distinctions). 18

Aside from this, the Jehovah’s Witnesses commit two other errors in their reasoning. First is the claim that “God” is being used as a predicate in this clause, since both “God” and “Word” are in the nominative case (hence establishing a predicate nominative). More essential to the correct understanding of the passage, however, is the fact that “God” actually comes first before “Word;” the clause literally reads “*and God was the Word.*” This would make it more likely that “God” is, in fact, the subject rather than the predicate. Second is the fact that the argument based on “God” being anarthrous here is inconsistent; the word “God” also appears without the article in verses 6, 12, and 13. Yet it would be absurd to suggest that John was sent from “a god,” or that those who received Christ would become children of “a god,” or that they are born of the will of “a god.”

Having discredited these interpretations of the phrasing, the only way to properly understand this passage is to view it as stating that the Word is qualitatively divine. To use the language of Paul, the Word has “*all the fullness of Deity,*”19 where the word used is “θεότητος,” or literally, that which makes God Who He is. This is the only understanding that preserves the integrity of the text, as it maintains that there is only one God, while affirming that the Word is coeternal and personally distinct from God the Father.

One of the great ironies in the Gospel of John, however, is that although there is abundant support for the divinity of Jesus all throughout the narrative, those around Him constantly either

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19 Col. 2:9.
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fail to properly understand or refuse to understand Who He is. As Culpepper notes: “Although [Jesus’ identity] lies at the core of most of the ironic passages in the gospel, the identity of Jesus and the various ways it is manifested and announced are frequently the specific object of irony.”20 It is as is written in John: “He was in the world, and though the world was made through Him, the world did not recognize Him.”21 However, this identification is absolutely essential, since it was Jesus Himself who stated that “unless you believe that I am you will die in your sins.”22 It is part of Jesus’ nature to be easily misunderstood.

THE LOGOS AS CREATOR, REVELATOR AND SAVIOUR

Aside from the identity of the Word, the prologue of John also delves into the roles or functions that are played by the Word. Nash describes these three roles as “the cosmological Logos, the epistemological Logos, and the soteriological Logos.”23 For the sake of convenience, these roles will be spoken of in terms of Creator, Revelator and Saviour.

The Logos as Creator

Another line in John states that “All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.”24 As already illustrated, this passage echoes Old Testament teaching where God creates all things through His creative Word.25 This verse establishes two basic truths: First, that the Word is “over all creation.”26 In being the Creator of all things, He is

21 Jn. 1:10 NIV.
24 Jn. 1:3.
25 Gen. 1; Ps. 33:9;Prov. 8:22-31.
26 Col. 1:16 NIV.
set above the created order. Second is the fact that all of creation is contingent upon the Word. This does not simply mean that He brought them into existence, but also that their continued existence is dependent upon His sustaining power. This especially applies to life (particularly human life), since the fourth verse goes on to state that life is found exclusively in the Word. The apostle Paul said it best when he wrote: “He Himself existed before all things, and in Him all things consist (cohere, are held together).” As Nash puts it: “The cosmological Logos continues to act as the intermediary in God’s sustaining relationship to the world.”

The Logos as Revelator

Moving on to the ninth verse, it is written that “the true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.” This light comes by virtue of the fact that (at least in some sense) the Logos indwells every man, believer and non-believer alike. Also, this light refers to the light of revelation, since it is in Christ that all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden (cf. Col. 2:2-3). To again quote Nash, “all human knowledge is possible because of the unique human participation in the eternal Logos of God, Jesus Christ.”

While these statements are true of all areas of knowledge, it is especially true in the moral realm. Although not all people in the world have access to special revelation (i.e. the Holy Scriptures), all people do have access to general revelation. This includes both the external created order and the internal moral compass that God has placed within every individual. These sources of general revelation point to the law of God, which convicts everyone of his or her sin.

These truths are taught in the following passages from Romans:

27 Col. 1:17 AMP.
29 Jn. 1:9.
30 Donald MacLeod, The Person of Christ (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998), 249.
For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.\(^{32}\)

For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.\(^{33}\)

Reformed theologian Louis Berkhof said it best when he wrote that “Divine thoughts are embodied in the phenomena of nature, in the human consciousness, and in the facts of experience or history.”\(^{34}\) To this, H. Chadwick states: “The Word and Wisdom of God, who is Christ, is also the Reason inherent in all things and especially in rational creation. All who have thought and acted rationally and rightly have participated in Christ the Universal Logos.”\(^{35}\) Thus, the Word not only creates and sustains, but also brings about knowledge (especially moral knowledge) in every human being. It is this moral knowledge that convicts men of their sin, and points to the need for a Redeemer. Thus, the role of the Word as revelatory is connected to His final role as Saviour, which is what will be expounded next.

The Logos as Saviour

Later in the prologue, it is written that “to all who did receive Him, who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.”\(^{36}\) The significance of these verses is that the

\(^{32}\) Rom. 1:19-20.

\(^{33}\) Rom. 2:14-16.


\(^{35}\) Ronald H. Nash, The Word of God and the Mind of Man, 68.

\(^{36}\) Jn. 1:12-13.
Word, Jesus, is the one who provides eternal life, as unpacked throughout the Gospel of John\textsuperscript{37} as well as in his epistles.\textsuperscript{38} He claims exclusivity in being the only way to life\textsuperscript{39} and states that all who are outside of Him are lost and without life.\textsuperscript{40} This is connected to His work of propitiation as well as to the fact that He is the great high priest and sole mediator for humanity with God the Father.\textsuperscript{41}

Most important to this soteriological work is the fact that the Word took on a human form to suffer and die for the sins of humanity. It is this final aspect of the Word (His incarnate humanity) that will be examined last.

**THE INCARNATE LOGOS**

The term “Word” is mentioned only four times in the prologue of John, and three of those four instances are in the first verse. The fourth and final instance is found in verse 14: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.” Arguably, this is the second most important verse in the prologue after verse one. What sets Christianity apart from the other Abrahamic religions (Judaism and Islam) is the fact that it affirms God in the person of the Son took on a human body and walked upon the very earth which He created. When it is said that He “dwelt” among us, the Greek word used is ἐσκήνωσεν, which is literally translated as “tabernacled.” This is an allusion to the Old Testament tabernacle where Israel would meet with God. MacLeod describes the profound significance of the incarnation thusly:

\textsuperscript{37} Jn. 3:16-18; 11:25-26.
\textsuperscript{38} 1 Jn. 2:1-2, 4:10, 5:11-12.
\textsuperscript{39} Jn. 14:6.
\textsuperscript{40} Jn. 3:36; 8:24.
\textsuperscript{41} 1 Jn. 4:10; 1 Tim 2:5.
He came into, and shared, our environment. ... He dwelt among us. This involved the most complete sharing of our experiences on the part of the Son of God, accentuated by the fact that he chose not simply to be born, but to be born in a low condition. Hence the ‘low estate’ of his mother (Lk. 1:48, KJV). Hence the manger. Hence the flight into Egypt. Hence Nazareth. Hence the homelessness (Mt. 8:20). Hence the penury which has no money to pay the temple tax (Mt. 17:24ff.) and no place to celebrate the Passover. Hence the reputed lack of learning and the scorn of the rulers (Jn. 7:48ff.) Hence the notoriety gained through friendship with publicans and sinners.  

This is reminiscent of the Carmen Christi, where it is written that “though He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made Himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men” (Phil. 2:6-7). Thus, His glory was temporarily veiled until after His death and resurrection, and it is only then that John and the other disciples are able to behold His glory. Even then, it is only a partial glimpse, since no sinful human being can withstand the fullness of God’s glory (cf. Exo. 33:20, 1 Tim. 6:16, etc.). Thus, Carson writes, “There is a hiddenness to the display of glory in the incarnate Word, a hiddenness penetrated by the Evangelist and the early witnesses who could say, We have seen his glory.” For this reason, verse 18 of the prologue states that “No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him” (NASB).

This is another verse that is often cited by non-Trinitarians during debates regarding the divinity of Christ, as it is often interpreted as excluding Jesus from the definition of divinity. Reasoning from the Scriptures provides the non-Trinitarian argument on the basis of this verse: “Had any human seen Jesus Christ, the Son? Of course! So, then, was John saying that Jesus was God? Obviously not.” And yet, we find that there are points in the Old Testament where the

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42 Donald MacLeod, The Person of Christ.
44 Reasoning from the Scriptures, 2130
patriarchs and prophets did in fact see Jehovah God. Abraham saw God in the oaks of Mamre; Moses saw God’s back; Isaiah saw God sitting on His throne.\(^{45}\) Is this a contradiction? Not at all, once it is established that “God” is often used as shorthand for the person of the Father (which is how it is used in the first clause of verse 18). On this basis, White argues that what the Old Testament saints saw was in fact the pre-Incarnate Christ. This is certainly a valid conclusion, as it makes sense of all the data. Furthermore, this explanation fits in quite nicely with the second clause of verse 18, which states that “the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him,” where the word for “explained” is ἐξηγῆσατο, from where the word “exegesis” is derived from.\(^{46}\) Thus, in a way, the Son quite literally “exegetes” the Father in the incarnation.

The significance of the incarnation, as far as the epistemological aspect of the Word goes, is that the incarnation becomes the decisive revelation of God. More important is the impact of the incarnation on Soteriology: The Word took on the likeness of sinful humanity (Rom 3:8) in order to bear the curse that is due upon us because of sin.\(^{47}\) It is necessary that Christ be in human form in order to act as the last Adam; our federal head,\(^{48}\) since the one who can bear the sins of humanity is another human, and the only One who can satisfy sin is God. Hence the Word taking on flesh to become both God and man at the same time, thereby becoming the mediator between both.

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\(^{45}\) Gen. 18:1ff; Ex. 33:23; Isa. 6: 1-3.
\(^{46}\) Jn. 1:18 NASB.
\(^{47}\) Gal. 3:13.
\(^{48}\) Cf. Rom. 5:12-19.
CONCLUSION

It is no exaggeration to say that the prologue of John “is a literary masterpiece. Its balance is almost unparalleled. It is a carefully crafted work of art, a revelation that has inspired believers for almost two thousand years. The brightest minds have been fascinated by it and have always marvelled at its beauty.”49 This eighteen verse passage contains what are undoubtedly the profoundest statements in the whole Bible on the person of Christ. And as has just been shown, the “Logos doctrine” that is presented therein beautifully weaves together the various biblical truths concerning the identity of Jesus. It also provides the framework by which the rest of the witness of the Gospel of John and even the whole New Testament, concerning the person of Christ, should be interpreted. For any student of scripture, it is worth further reading and studying this passage in order to be able to fully appreciate the breadth and depth of Christological truth that is contained therein.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


