

Icebreaker: Share the best and worst experience of your week.

John 1:1–18 (ESV)

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

2 He was in the beginning with God.

3 All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. 4 In him was life, and the life was the light of men. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. 6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. 8 He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.

9 The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. 10 He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him.

11 He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. 12 But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, 13 who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

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. 15 (John bore witness about him, and cried out, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.’”) 16 For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. 17 For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. 18 No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known.

Prologue (John 1:1-18)

If you’ve ever seen the space shot where the camera begins at the far side of the moon and pans until the sun bursts into view with its bright lights, or if you’ve been entering into some cities where you exit a tunnel or come around a bend and the entire skyline of the city fills your view - that’s kind of the effect John 1 has. A bright and

glorious light bursting onto the seen.

If you've ever seen the reality TV show Undercover Boss, where the CEO of a company goes to work unrecognized in a front-line position and gets to interact with his employees and see how they work (or not work, as it may be). It's intriguing because the CEO gets a first-hand look at the hard-working and the slacking, the oppressive bosses and the oppressed employees. All the while, the audience knows from the beginning that the person is the CEO, while the other participants are still in the dark. The gospel of John is like this in the sense that he lets us in on the whole story right from the beginning, and then as we read we see all of the participants play their part in the drama, often unaware who it actually is they're engaging with, and the revelations and confrontations are quite dramatic.

In these verses, John touches the very core of Christian theology, giving us perhaps the clearest picture in all of scripture of Jesus as the divine Son of God, who is distinct from the Father, but of the same nature or essence. In the process, he also gives us an introduction to the entire Gospel, touching on themes that will be fleshed out in detail in the chapters to come.

- We see Jesus, the divine-human Son, revealing the glory of the Father
- His glory is made know by his own words and deeds, and testified to by other witnesses
- He brings the light of God into a dark and hostile world, a world which does not like the light and seeks to quench it, but it is unable to.
- The God of Israel, who walked with Adam in the garden, who called Abram out of Ur, the God of Isaac, and Jacob, and Joseph, who led Israel out of Egypt and through the wilderness, who gave them his law and dwelt among them in the tabernacle, and who brought them into the promised land, the God who called Israel his firstborn son - this God, this God came to his own people, whom he had made a treasure for himself, and they did not recognize him. Though he is among them and though he speaks, they do not know him or hear his voice but instead refuse him.
- And yet, somehow, some do hear his voice and believe in his name, and receive him for who he is - and these gain the right to become children of God, have been born of him.

This is, in a nutshell, the gospel of John minus the details. I once heard of a seminary professor who taught an exegesis class on the gospel of John, but never

made it past the Prologue - even so, he still managed to cover the entire book in the process. We won't be taking that approach with this study, but hopefully as we go through you can see some of these themes emerge.

In the Beginning...

What's the first thing that comes to mind when you first hear chapter 1 and the words "In the beginning...?"

These words, quite intentionally, force to mind the story of the Creation of the world. John is asking us to consider the story he's telling in terms of the original Creation, and to draw parallels with it.

In the original creation, the Word of God brought light into the darkness, so now the created world itself has become the darkness and the Word of God brings light into it.

In the original creation, the climax of the story is the arrival of a human onto the scene - the image of God incarnate, given authority over all creation, so now the climax of this Prologue is the arrival of a human onto the scene - God incarnate, who has authority over all creation.

Was the Word...

In this passage, John calls Jesus "the Word" or the *Logos* (Grk.). He is God's speech, his perfect and complete self-revelation. The Word is described as having several astonishing characteristics (**What are some of the things John declares about the Logos?**):

- His pre-existence, existing "in the beginning" with God
- He is God - that is, whatever we can say about God, we must say about the Word
- He created all things, without exception
- He is the source of life and light, and he his light shines on everyone

It might be surprising to hear, but it's entirely possible that a 1st century reader would be able to track right along with this language and not necessarily object. Many were grappling with the question of how a God who is transcendent and holy and unchanging, could be present and active in the world. They often came to an answer using language very similar to John's. So what was the background of John's language? Several ideas have been floated:

1. **The OT Word of the Lord** - Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, the word of the Lord is presented in personified form or acting as the agency of God's work. Some examples:

- *“By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and by the breath of his mouth all their host.”* (Psalm 33:6, ESV)
- *“He sent out his word and healed them, and delivered them from their destruction.”* (Psalm 107:20, ESV)
- *““For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”* (Isaiah 55:10–11, ESV)

This last verse could be viewed as a description of Christ's work - he came down from heaven to do the will of his Father, he is the bread upon whom people must feed for life, and he will not return until he accomplishes his Father's will. If this is the background, John is declaring Jesus to be the true and living Word of God, spoken by the Father from eternity, revealing him and carrying out his will.

2. **Wisdom** - Many of the Jews in John's day had answered this question of God's action in the world in terms of his Wisdom (similar to how we see Wisdom personified in **Proverbs 8:22-31**). For example, a contemporary book, the Wisdom of Solomon, writes this:

“May God grant me to speak with judgment, and to have thoughts worthy of what I have received; for he is the guide even of wisdom and the corrector of the wise. For both we and our words are in his hand, as are all understanding and skill in crafts. For it is he who gave me unerring knowledge of what exists, to know the structure of the world and the activity of the elements; the beginning and end and middle of times, the alternations of the solstices and the changes of the seasons, the cycles of the year and the constellations of the stars, the natures of animals and the tempers of wild animals, the powers of spirits and the thoughts of human beings, the varieties of plants and the virtues of roots; I learned both what is secret and what is manifest, for wisdom, the fashioner of all things, taught me. There is in her a spirit that is intelligent, holy, unique, manifold, subtle, mobile, clear, unpolluted, distinct, invulnerable, loving the good, keen, irresistible, beneficent, humane, steadfast, sure, free from anxiety, all-powerful, overseeing all, and penetrating through all spirits that are intelligent, pure, and altogether subtle. For wisdom is more mobile than any motion; because of her pureness she pervades and penetrates all things. For she is a breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty; therefore nothing defiled gains entrance into her. For she is a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness. Although she is but one, she can do all things, and while remaining in herself, she renews all things; in every generation she passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God, and prophets; for God loves nothing so much as the person who lives with wisdom. She is more beautiful than the sun, and excels every constellation of the stars. Compared with the light she is found to be superior, for it is succeeded by the night, but against wisdom evil does

not prevail. She reaches mightily from one end of the earth to the other, and she orders all things well.” (Wisdom of Solomon 7:15–8:1, NRSV)

Another contemporary writing, the apocryphal book of Sirach, says this:

“Wisdom praises herself, and tells of her glory in the midst of her people. In the assembly of the Most High she opens her mouth, and in the presence of his hosts she tells of her glory: “I came forth from the mouth of the Most High, and covered the earth like a mist. I dwelt in the highest heavens, and my throne was in a pillar of cloud. Alone I compassed the vault of heaven and traversed the depths of the abyss. Over waves of the sea, over all the earth, and over every people and nation I have held sway. Among all these I sought a resting place; in whose territory should I abide? “Then the Creator of all things gave me a command, and my Creator chose the place for my tent. He said, ‘Make your dwelling in Jacob, and in Israel receive your inheritance.” (Sirach 24:1–8, NRSV)

As you can see, there are some strong verbal and conceptual parallels with John’s Prologue. If this is the background for John’s Logos language, then he is saying that Jesus is the living Wisdom of God, creating the world and bringing light to God’s people.

3. The Greek Logos Principle - In Platonic and neo-Platonic philosophy, the Greeks had developed this idea of a principle of rationality (called the *Logos*) that pervades the world and bring reason and order to all things. It served as the bridge between the ideal world of the forms and the world of things. The first century Alexandrian Jewish philosopher Philo, took many of these Platonic concepts and tried to blend them with Jewish Wisdom theology, often using language very similar to John’s. In this case, John would be saying that Jesus is the true principle of rationality in the universe, the one who holds all things together and brings order to creation.

All of these make strong cases for being the conceptual background for John’s language, both in the Prologue and throughout the Gospel of John. Likewise, given John’s context in Ephesus, with both a Jewish and Gentile audience, it’s entirely plausible that some people heard this text and made the connection to any one of these three. In each case, John would be taking things further and declaring that this Word, or this Wisdom, or this Logos was not just an abstract principle or function in the universe, but was a real person, present with the Father, sharing the same divine nature.

4. The Divine Title in the Targums - A fourth option, which seems to me the most likely source for John’s language, is the “the Word of the Lord” language in the Jewish Targums. The Targums were translations of portions of the Old Testament into Aramaic

that arose following the exile into Babylon in order to preserve the reading and understanding of Scripture even though many could no longer speak or understand Hebrew. The Targums were translations, but were often paraphrastic. There is an interesting phenomenon in these texts, that many places in the Hebrew Scriptures where God is shown acting directly in the world, the Targums would attribute that action to “the Word of the Lord” rather than to YHWH or the LORD. The number of texts are significant in this regard, and most significantly, all of the actions and characteristics John attributes to the Logos in John 1 (not to mention Jesus throughout the rest of the Gospel) are shown in the Targums to be done “the Word.” This language, which in the Targums functions as a divine title for YHWH when he interacts with his creation, John adapts and applies to Jesus as the Son of the Father who carries out the Father’s will in the world. For those steeped in the Targums (which much of John’s audience would be), this is significant. Jesus is the human Messiah, but he is more than that - he is YHWH, the God of Israel. The point of this Prologue is to draw this connection, which then gets played out in the rest of the Gospel.

As it turns out, this passage in John 1 is a plain case of contextualization - using the language and conceptual framework of his hearers to proclaim Jesus, while at the same time shaping and molding that very framework to make it fit the truth of God in Christ. He’s speaking their language but using it to turn their worldview upside down.

How do we do a similar thing in our day? What are some of the conceptual frameworks around us that require us to adapt our language when presenting Christ?

Understanding the Son of God

The burden of this passage is to declare that Jesus is not merely the human Messiah, teacher of wisdom, or a gifted miracle worker - he is God in the flesh, God descending to humanity. The revelation of God we get from Jesus is not that of an inspired prophet or messenger, but is the very voice of God himself. The redemption he accomplishes is a redemption initiated and carried out by God himself.

Further John declares to us that this God is accessible and has made himself known - the Word became Flesh and dwelt among us...he has revealed the Father to us. Our God is not shrouded in mystery and unknowable but has come down, that we might know him and be reconciled to him. In the midst of the cacophony of voices - if you’ve

ever seen the play *Godspell*, it provides a good picture of the teachers and philosophers of the world, telling us what is wrong and what we need to do to get things back on track - in the midst of this, a voice rises above them and speaks with the authority and the certainty of the one who created this world and who knows how it should be, of one who has come to make it right. This is the voice we should heed.

How does our understanding about God go awry when we try to think about him apart from Jesus?

The nature of the world

He came to his own, but his own rejected him. The world has rejected him, and not only the world but Israel too has revealed herself as a part of this world, rejecting him as well. In this passage, we see the true nature of the world - darkness, and not merely ignorance of the light but active hostility to the light. The world is not neutral, seeking salvation or hope. Rather, the world loves the darkness and wants to maintain the darkness. Whatever salvation it seeks, it seeks to have it in the darkness. **When the light comes and reveals the darkness for what it is, what is the response of the darkness? How do we see this response in our world today? In our own lives?**

The hope of the world

And yet, all is not lost - for John declares that as many as did receive him, to them he gave the right to become children of God. True transformation is possible, but it is not a work of human doing. Only God's initiative and activity can bring true transformation, and this the message of the Gospel - in Jesus, God has taken that initiative to transform people and ultimately the entire world. **How does believing in the name of Jesus transform us?** Those who receive him, who believe in his name, will be re-born as children of God, children of the light rather than darkness. The darkness opposes the light, but as John declares, it could not overcome it.

The Word became flesh...

In all of the options for the background of John's use of the Logos, the one piece that would be a shock to all of them is the notion that "the Word became flesh." **This is foolishness to the Greeks. Why would this be so controversial?** All of the intellectual might was put towards escaping the flesh, with its inherent defilement. The Word did not just appear in human form, but actually became human. So we have the person of God the Son, who is fully God, taking on a full human nature without

relinquishing his deity. In the same way we must say Jesus is God, and what is true of God is true of Jesus, we also must say that Jesus is man, and what is true of man is true of Jesus. In the 5th century, after much debate and dispute, the church settled on this definition of the natures of Christ:

We, then, following the holy Fathers, all with one consent, teach men to confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in Godhead and also perfect in manhood; truly God and truly man, of a reasonable [rational] soul and body; consubstantial [co-essential] with the Father according to the Godhead, and consubstantial with us according to the Manhood; in all things like unto us, without sin; begotten before all ages of the Father according to the Godhead, and in these latter days, for us and for our salvation, born of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, according to the Manhood; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, only begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures, inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably; the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved, and concurring in one Person and one Subsistence, not parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son, and only begotten, God the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ; as the prophets from the beginning [have declared] concerning Him, and the Lord Jesus Christ Himself has taught us, and the Creed of the holy Fathers has handed down to us. (Chalcedonian Creed, 451)

And dwelt among us...

The language used here is shared with that used in the Pentateuch for describing the the dwelling of YHWH among the people of Israel, and more specifically, for his glory taking up residence in and filling the tabernacle. Likewise, similar language is again used when the Temple arrives in Solomon's day. As with the tabernacle, the Temple is described as the dwelling place of YHWH and at the dedication, the glory of the LORD takes up residence and fills it. Via these parallels, the reader is directed to see the human body of Jesus as the dwelling place of God and the visible manifestation of his glory in the same way that it was for the tabernacle and the temple.

As one writer¹ puts it, "Solomon's temple was destroyed for the sins of the house of David, but the life of Jesus, also from the house of David, is one of perfect obedience. This temple will be destroyed for the sins of others, that is, his people, then raised again (rebuilt) on the third day."

What's the significance of this for the way we approach God?

Where else do you see this theme explored in the NT?

1. What's the first thing that comes to mind when you first hear chapter 1 and the words "In the beginning...?" Why does John start this way?

2. What does this passage teach us about "the Word"?

3. What are some possible backgrounds for John's language in this Chapter? What would John's first readers have connected it with?

3.a. _____ -

3.b. _____ -

3.c. _____ -

3.d. _____ -

5. How does our understanding about God go awry when we try to think about him apart from Jesus?

6. When the light comes and reveals the darkness for what it is, what is the response of the darkness? How do we see this response in our world today? In our own lives?

7. How does believing in the name of Jesus transform us?

8. What is so controversial about the Incarnation? How does this affect the way we approach God?

We, then, following the holy Fathers, all with one consent, teach men to confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in Godhead and also perfect in manhood; truly God and truly man, of a reasonable [rational] soul and body; consubstantial [co-essential] with the Father according to the Godhead, and consubstantial with us according to the Manhood; in all things like unto us, without sin; begotten before all ages of the Father according to the Godhead, and in these latter days, for us and for our salvation, born of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, according to the Manhood; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, only begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures, inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably; the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved, and concurring in one Person and one Subsistence, not parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son, and only begotten, God the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ; as the prophets from the beginning [have declared] concerning Him, and the Lord Jesus Christ Himself has taught us, and the Creed of the holy Fathers has handed down to us. (Chalcedonian Creed, AD 451)

¹ Ronning, *The Jewish Targums and John's Logos Theology*, 50