

Introduction to the Gospel According to John
Lesson Two –
“The Word of God”
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This is intended as lesson two of a four-lesson course on the Gospel commonly known as the Gospel of John. The first lesson deals with the concepts, origins, and history of the text itself. The following lessons, including this one, deal with the text itself. The intention is that this lesson be undertaken in conjunction with reading the text, starting after you have finished the first lesson. So, hopefully you have started your reading and have encountered the early part of the Gospel.

The Gospel According to John

In the first lesson we discussed the text in general terms and looked at some of its broad outlines. Now we will deal with the text itself. It would be helpful if by this point you have read at least the first chapter. Because the first section is in many ways the densest theological discussion of the entire Bible, we will discuss this particular section in great detail. However, while the thoughts and comparisons of scholars are informative, nothing can replace your own reading of the text.

John starts off with the concept of the “Word of God” as a definitive description of Jesus. John uses this illustration as a way to show Jesus in context with the Creator, the universe, and mankind. In Greek, the verbal expression for God’s power was *logos*, translated most often as “word,” and Jesus is referred to by this term. Jesus is referred to as the Word of God made flesh. By way of example, in Genesis, God spoke the words “Let there be light,” and there was light. By New Testament times, Judaism itself had become Hellenized; that is, it had integrated with Greek modes of thought. In Hellenistic Judaism, “Word,” or *logos*, had become a synonym for Divine Wisdom, a concept that consisted of God’s self-communication, the act of creation, the providential governing of creation, and the calling of Israel to be God’s people. The modern author Luke Timothy Johnson, on page 535 of his book *The Writings of the New Testament*, restates this proposition as: “An element of the prologue not found in the FG narrative is the designation of

Jesus as the ‘Word’ (Logos). The prologue in this case gives explicit expression to the constant assumption behind the deeds and words of Jesus in this Gospel: He acts and speaks as the incarnate expression of God’s speech. As word gives body to thought, so does Jesus give visible expression in the world to the invisible power and presence of God.”

Much of what we now say about who and what Jesus is is based on this single sentence of the text. It is said that the Johannine prologue is the only fully explicit statement of the theme of incarnation in the New Testament. The rest of the Gospel of John shows in narrative form what the coming of the logos meant. This description of Jesus from the prologue of the Gospel is echoed in 1 John 1:1 (“the word of life”). The imagery of Revelation 19:13, where Christ, “the Word of God,” appears as a warrior, also echoes this description of Jesus. This concept is also consistent with the Old Testament, where the word of God is both creative (Genesis 1 and Isaiah 55:10–11) and commanding (Amos 3:1). These Old Testament concepts formed the background that contributed to the general usage of the term logos throughout the New Testament. In other New Testament writings the term “word” often signifies the Christian message (2 Corinthians 2:17; cf. 1 Corinthians 1:18). Jesus, then, is God manifested on the earth as a fully complete human being, who lived, died, and was resurrected in history at a set time and place.

The audience for John, as we discussed last week, is often associated by scholars with a Hellenistic Christian community connected with Ephesus. The issues they faced can be gleaned, at least in part, from writings attributed to the Johannine tradition, including the Epistles of John. These letters describe opponents who deny that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh. 2 John states at verse 7, “Many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh; any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist!” The question, of course, is “What is that all about?”

When Jesus was alive, after he died, and for 2,000 years since, people have been arguing about just what Jesus was—man, God, or what. The various positions in classical times were referred to as Docetism, Arianism, and Gnosticism. These same arguments reappear time and again even to this day, although often under other names. Each of these three positions, which are heresies and thus erroneous, has at different times been the cause of great problems in the Church. In fact, these three heresies and the conflicts that they produced are reflected in the Nicene Creed, which we recite each Sunday. The three concepts are Arianism, Docetism, and Gnosticism.

Arianism was a teaching that Jesus was of similar substance as God *but not the same*. The

implication was that Jesus was not fully divine. The concept was named for its proponent, Arius, a fourth-century presbyter at Alexandria. The catch phrase for this position is “There was a time when the Son was not.” The concern is that this waters down the nature of the sacrifice on the cross. This particular teaching caused immense disunity and controversy in the early Church. This position was rejected at the Council of Nicaea in AD 325 and remained a point of great contention until AD 381. In the Nicene Creed, the shadow of this debate remains in the form of the word included and finally agreed to be *homousios*, which means exactly the same substance in English and is translated in the creed we recite as “of One Being with the Father.”

Docetism, another issue in the early Church, is in some ways the opposite heresy. In this formulation, Jesus only seemed to assume the flesh. The word was *dokein*, meaning “to seem.” This means that it only looked as though Jesus was here, suffered, died, and was resurrected, as if by some religious special effect. The basis for this position was in the Greek understanding of the material world as “evil” and the spiritual world as “good,” so that the two could never truly be together—a sort of theological matter/anti-matter for the Trekkies among us.

Gnosticism, the final of our three “isms,” was a loosely defined set of religious sects from about the time of Christianity. It included Greek myths, philosophy, and later some Jewish and Christian traditions. A Gnostic consistently regards salvation as deliverance from the material world, and this salvation would come through knowledge of “otherworldly things,” usually secret knowledge. This was based on some Christian traditions which held that the Gospels were not complete and that there was secret knowledge passed on to the inner circle. A Gnostic believed that this non-scriptural knowledge consisted of words or incantations which one could use to move from level to level in the afterlife. In pagan thought, the afterlife was a journey to a dark land on the other side of a river to be crossed by the dead. Those equipped with this secret information could conduct themselves any way they wished in this life and were assured entry into heaven because they would know the right words to recite. This was a persistent problem for the early Church, and these may be the people hinted at in the Epistles of John.

Thus the Gospel’s author had these questions in mind as he wrote, and the task was a difficult one. With all of these competing understandings of just who and what Jesus was, John set pen to paper in order to put these concepts to rest and to explain to believers the true nature of Jesus, God, and creation. The audience that he addressed did not live in a vacuum, but in the real world. As you read and consider the text, look for those parts that address these questions or

positions. The question then is, with these real-world controversies raging around him, why start with a hymn? A hymn?! The reason may be that John, unlike the Synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—which sought to link Jesus with history, goes beyond history in search of “reality.” The Gospel of Mark starts with the prophets, Matthew starts with Abraham, and Luke starts with Adam. All are historic figures intended to link Jesus with the past. In John, the Word is preexistent, which refers to a time before there was a material universe in which to exist—at a time when one existed either in the mind of God or in heaven.

But what about the hymn statement? Most commentators agree that the first section in John’s Gospel is a hymn to the Word—Gk. Logos. Beyond this agreement that the first section is a hymn, there is little else that is agreed upon. There is no general understanding as to the length or form of the hymn. The “hymn,” in poetic shorthand, foreshadows the themes to be developed later in the narrative parts of the Gospel. Christopher Bryan, Education for Ministry, Year Two: *Christian Testament*, 3rd ed., Sewanee, Tennessee, Chapter 54, sets out a system that divides the text into verses as follows:

First Verse

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 came into being through him,
and without him not one thing came into being.
4 What has come into being in him was life,
and the life was the light of all people.
5 The light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness did not overcome it.

FOOT NOTE

6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. 8 He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ¹

¹ Bryan, Christopher, Education for Ministry, Year Two, *Christian Testament*, 3rd Edition, Sewanee, Tennessee, Chapter 54, Page 256.

First Verse - Cont.

9 The true light,
which enlightens everyone,
was coming into the world ²

Second Verse

10 He was in the world,
and the world came into being through him;
yet the world did not know him.
11 He came to what was his own,
and his own people did not accept him.
12 But to all who received him, who believed
in his name, he gave power to become children
of God,
13 who were born,
not of blood
or of the will of the flesh
or of the will of man, but of God.³

Third Verse

14 And 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.

FOOTNOTE

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.' ") ⁴

² Bryan, Christopher, Education for Ministry, Year Two, *Christian Testament*, 3rd Edition, Sewanee, Tennessee, Chapter 54, Page 265.

³ Bryan, Christopher, Education for Ministry, Year Two, *Christian Testament*, 3rd Edition, Sewanee, Tennessee, Chapter 54, Page 256.

⁴Bryan, Christopher, Education for Ministry, Year Two, *Christian Testament*, 3rd Edition, Sewanee, Tennessee, Chapter 54, Page 256.

Third Verse -Cont.

16 From 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 God the only Son,
who is close to the Father's heart,
who has made him known. ⁵

Through the hymn, or introduction, the author of this Gospel has now told us, the readers, that Jesus is an entity who is very important and that the world was in fact made through him. Next in the text we are oriented as to where Jesus fits in the current world. The division of the hymn text as shown above indicates that John the Baptist must have been a major figure on the landscape of the times. Clearly, from the text of the Gospel one can infer that John the Baptist was an important and independent figure with a great following that at some point must have rivaled Jesus' own following. The apparent intention of the Gospel writer in the two prose interjections into the hymn was to show that while John was a man sent from God, he was nevertheless subordinate. [See Jn. 1:19 and 3:22–30; John the Baptist says, “He must increase, but I must decrease”; 4:1 relates that the Pharisees heard Jesus was baptizing more than John the Baptist.] The Jews or Judeans send representatives to ask John the Baptist—in this statement John makes explicit his subordination to Jesus. In addition, the author's purpose is further advanced by the fact that in the story as told by the author of John's Gospel, there is no mention of the baptism of Jesus, so there are no questions raised as in the Synoptic Gospels. One can also deduce from the Gospel of John and from the other Gospels that the message of John the Baptist fell on Israel like fire on stubble. The Gospels report that “all” went out to hear him (Mark 1:5; Matthew 3:5; Mark 11:32 par.; Luke 7:29; Acts 13:24). Josephus, a first-century Jewish historian writing in the late first century after the ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus, comments that John the Baptist was highly regarded by many among the Jewish people (Ant. 18.5.116–119). The crowds that attended him included tax collectors and prostitutes (Matthew 21:32; Luke 3:12; Luke 7:29). It should be noted that baptism, this simple act of immersion, unlike circumcision, made religious renewal accessible even to women. Scholars theorize that it was John the Baptist, not Jesus, who opened a way to God for those who before had

⁵ Bryan, Christopher, Education for Ministry, Year Two, *Christian Testament*, 3rd Edition, Sewanee, Tennessee, Chapter 54, Page 265.

felt themselves excluded from the religious community. By his dress and diet, and even by the metaphors he chose (a tree cutter, a thresher), John identified himself, and the one whom he awaited, with the lowly. Some believe that John the Baptist was at some point a member of, or influenced by, the Qumran community. However, in contrast to the Qumran community, his ministry did not call for separation from society and welcomed the poor and morally compromised. Even with these differences, John the Baptist may have at least been influenced by the thought and practice of Qumran prior to his public appearance. John was the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth. Zechariah was a priest of the Jerusalem Temple. Elizabeth was a kinswoman of the Virgin Mary. Elizabeth was believed to be barren until an angel told Zechariah that Elizabeth would be pregnant with a son. Zechariah responded with disbelief and was rendered unable to speak until John's birth. In the Gospel of Luke, the relative positions of Jesus and John are illustrated when a pregnant Mary encountered the pregnant Elizabeth and the baby John leaped in her womb (Luke 1:39–44). From Luke we also learn that on the eighth day after John's birth, Zechariah insisted that his name be John and uttered the hymn known as "Benedictus Dominus Deus" (Luke 1:68–79; BCP, pp. 92–93). The birth of John the Baptist is celebrated on June 24 in the Episcopal calendar.

Having placed Jesus and John the Baptist in context, the Fourth Gospel now establishes the rest of the cast: the disciples. The disciples are called one by one, and each introduction provides another link in a chain of acknowledgments of Jesus as the fulfillment of history. In the following quoted section, notice how the disciples are called: the first two are called, but only one is named, Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter. Also note that both were formerly followers of John the Baptist, which again shows John's subordination to Jesus. The first disciples of Jesus are introduced as follows:

"35 The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, 36 and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, 'Look, here is the Lamb of God!' 37 The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. 38 When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, 'What are you looking for?' They said to him, 'Rabbi' (which translated means Teacher), 'where are you staying?' 39 He said to them, 'Come and see.' They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. 40 One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. 41 He first found his brother Simon and said to him, 'We have found the Messiah' (which is translated Anointed). 42 He

brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, ‘You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas’ (which is translated Peter).”

There are three metaphors presented in this passage that need to be noted. First the title given here to Jesus as “Lamb of God.” While scholars differ as to what is meant by that title some of the possibilities are:

- a. The Passover lamb - Exod 12:21-27 43-47.
- b. The “tamid” lambs sacrificed daily in the temple. Exod 29:38-46
- c. The lamb God provided in place of Isaac Gen. 22 [This also hinted at JN 1:18 and JN 3:16]
- d. The apocalyptic Lamb, who represents the Messiah and who cleanses his people Rev 14:1
- e. The scape goat on the Day of Atonement Lev 16:21-22. [Please note that a lamb is not a goat even in theology.]

Jesus, in a passage shortly after the quoted section dealing with the call of Philip, refers to himself as the “Son of Man,” and the first chapter concludes: “And he said to him, ‘Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.’” This is another example of the rich symbolic layers of meaning in this Gospel. In the Fourth Gospel, as well as in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), “Son of Man” is the name by which Jesus refers to himself. By using the imagery of angels ascending and descending, the author looks back to Daniel 7 and to Genesis 28:10–17, where angels of God ascend and descend on Jacob’s ladder. In this final illustration, Jesus is presented as the meeting place between heaven and earth, the one through whom God is made known to humanity.

We have now spent a considerable part of our time on an introduction to the Fourth Gospel and the first chapter. With the principal themes now placed on the table for discussion, the rest of the Gospel should be more understandable as it relates the story. It would be helpful at this point for you to read, or continue reading, the balance of the Fourth Gospel.

Questions for reading

1. Which modern-day radio preachers currently espouse modern versions of Arianism, Docetism, and Gnosticism?
2. New words and concepts—What do you make of these terms?

Arianism

Docetism

Gnosticism

Logos

Hellenized

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