

2. THE DEITY OF CHRIST (1:1-2)

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. Read John 1:1-18.
 - 1.1. What doctrinal truths about Jesus can you identify in these verses?
 - 1.2. How do these verses compare with the start of the other three gospels? (Tip: content, structure, what is missing, etc.)

THE PROLOGUE

The first 18 verses of John are technically referred to as the Prologue. This section provides the background and theological framework for interpreting the events that follow in the rest of the book.

A mechanical analysis of the Prologue divides it into two sections of unequal length that deal with the two people mentioned in them: the Word, and John the Baptist. The Word is the name given to Jesus who is the subject of the discussion. John the Baptist is discussed in relation to Jesus and is, therefore, of subordinate importance.

COMPARISON WITH THE SYNOPTICS

All four Gospels begin by placing Jesus within a historical setting, but the Gospel of John is unique in the way it opens.

- Matthew begins with the genealogy of Jesus that connects Him to David and Abraham.
- Mark begins with the preaching of John the Baptist.
- Luke begins with a dedication of his work to Theophilus that is followed by a prediction of John the Baptist's birth.
- John begins with a theological prologue (vv 1-18).

John does not provide any genealogies or tell us about the circumstances surrounding Jesus' birth. Rather, he begins with a most profound theological truth: *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ... The Word became flesh and dwelt among us"* (1:1, 14). For John, the theological truths he is presenting about Jesus are foundational to the narrative that follows. Without understanding who Jesus is, his readers will not understand everything else.³

For this reason, the Gospel of John is predominantly theological. Although all four Gospels present Jesus from a specific theological position, as previously discussed, John emphasises it most strongly. This is evident from his opening declaration in 1:1 that Jesus was no ordinary person, but the very incarnation of God.

The prologue contains many of the major themes of the Gospel that are later reintroduced and developed more fully. The key terms include life (v4), light (v4), darkness (v5), witness (v7), truth (v9),

³ Blum, E.A. 1985. *John*. In J.F. Walvoord & R.B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures, Vol. 2*. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books. (p. 271)

world (v9), Son (v14), Father (v14), and glory (v14). Two other key theological terms are “*the Word*” (v1) and grace (v14), but these words appear only in the prologue. “*Word*” (*Logos*) does occur elsewhere in the book but not as a Christological title.⁴

THE WORD

We first need to consider one particular term in this opening section a little more closely before we proceed, and that is the term – “*the Word*”. John uses the term three times in verse 1 alone.

What stands out as you read the prologue is that *the Word* is a person, because from verse 2 onwards John refers to *the Word* by the personal pronouns: He, Him and His. The fact that John is referring to a person becomes more obvious when you read verse 14, where John tells us that “*the Word became flesh*”. Who this person is becomes clear when John names him in verse 17 – He is none other than Jesus Christ.

But why does John use the term “*the Word*” to describe Jesus? The answer lies in the Old Testament use of a similar phrase, “*the Word of the Lord*”, and Hebrew and Greek thought.

Read the following verses: Exodus 24:1-4; 1 Samuel 3:1, 15:10; 1 Kings 13:1-9; and Zechariah 4:8.

Do some of those verses sound like something more than written words? In some cases they seem to refer to a person, or at the very least, something audible. How can one hear words without there being a voice declaring the words? And these are just a sampling of the 263 times the terms “*Word of the Lord*” or “*Words of the Lord*” are used in the Old Testament. This is certainly a term that was of great concern to the people of Israel. For the Jews, the Word refers not only to the very words of God spoken to the people through the various prophets (e.g. the law given through Moses, and all the predictions and teachings by the prophets through to the time of Malachi), but also the originator of those words. To the Hebrew mind, “*the Word*” (*Dabhar* in Hebrew) implies that the very one who is behind the words became flesh and that the giver of the Law and the one who provided the prophets with their declarations is from the beginning.

It also speaks to what we considered last time of the Jews seeking signs to accompany the words. They don’t just want to hear someone say that they are God, they also want Him to show that He is God. This is clearly seen in how John writes his Gospel, for scattered through it there are 66 references to seeing and 58 references to hearing.

To the Greek mind however, the Word (*Logos* in Greek), expresses the orderliness and reasonableness of the content. Again, it is not just the spoken words, but the thinking that is behind them. This is especially significant for the Greeks who considered knowledge as king. To them, philosophy was the order of the day as they tried to reason their way to God, as if He is able to be comprehended by the mind.

4 *Ibid.*

So what John is doing here is bringing the two mindsets together. He’s saying to both the Jews and Greeks that that which they consider to be the most important is actually manifested in the person of Jesus Christ. That the One who is behind the words and deeds that is part of the history of the Jewish nation, namely God, *Yahweh*, has stepped foot on earth. And that which the Greeks are attempting to reason themselves to is not just a philosophical or abstract idea, or an intellectual goal, but has become a real, living, breathing person here on earth.

John is making a profound statement with this term that he builds on in the 18 verses of the prologue, and indeed throughout the whole gospel, as shown in the following table adapted from D.A. Carson, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Gospel According to John* (pp111):

	Prologue	Rest of the Gospel
The pre-existence of the Son	1:1-2	17:5
In Him was life	1:4	5:26
The Life is Light	1:4	8:12
Light rejected by darkness	1:5	3:19
Yet not quenched by it	1:5	12:35
Light coming into the world	1:9	3:19; 12:46
Christ not received by His own	1:11	4:44
Being born to God and not of flesh	1:13	3:6; 8:41-42
Seeing His glory	1:14	12:41
The “one and only” Son	1:14, 18	3:16
Truth in Jesus Christ	1:17	14:6
No-one has seen God except the One who comes from His side	1:18	6:46

Recognising Jesus Christ as the Son of God, is the core of Christian doctrine. His attributes are the attributes of God. His words are the words of God. His works are the works of God. He is God in the flesh who made His home with humanity as a man for over thirty years. He was fully human and fully God. This is a theological concept that we cannot fully comprehend or explain, yet we know that it is true.

THE DEITY OF CHRIST (1:1-2)

In the opening verses we see three doctrinal truths about Christ, and all three are concerned with His deity (i.e. that He is God). This is a very brave place for John to start because the deity of Christ is one of the most controversial topics in the history of Christianity. The deity of Christ, however, is one of the most crucial, as it lies at the heart of our faith as Christianity rests on Jesus actually being God in human flesh. All other doctrines that we cling to become meaningless if Jesus is not God.

Jesus is the Eternal Word.

We see this in the phrase, “*In the beginning was the Word*”. This is a purposeful reminder by John of the opening phrase of the Bible back in Genesis 1:1, “*In the beginning God created the heavens and the*

earth". John is connecting what his readers already know about God and the beginning of the world, with Jesus.

He's saying that when everything we know of this world and universe came into existence, before time, space and matter came into being, Christ was already there. This is a very important statement, because many false religions, cults, atheism, and modern scientific and philosophical schools of thought deny this fact. Some sceptics claim that this was not a position held by the original disciples, but that it was added to the original writings at the time of the council of Nicea in AD 325. But this claim is easily refuted. The oldest manuscripts discovered by archaeologists that mention the deity of Christ date back to between AD 175 and AD 200, over 100 years earlier, one of which is a handwritten copy of John 1:1.

According to logic the fact that the Word (God) has always existed, is not possible, and because it's not logically possible, they therefore consider this to be false. Because to say that Christ is eternal is to say that He has always existed and that He has no beginning. He did not come into existence sometime shortly before His birth as a human in Bethlehem or even sometime just before Creation, but that He has always been. This is a very important argument and is inseparable from His deity. Because if Jesus is not eternal, then He is a created being, and therefore can never be God.

Though many try to imply that Jesus did have a beginning based of Him being referred to as the "*Son of God*", this is not the case. But rather than being a description referring to heritage or descendancy, "*Son of God*" is a title that has a greater theological meaning. For people in Biblical times, son refers more to character than bloodlines. It means that the son is an exact representation of His father and bears in himself all the characteristics of His Father. Therefore, Jesus as the Son of God is exactly the same as the Father.

But as human beings bound by time, Jesus' eternal existence is a concept that our mortal, limited minds cannot truly grasp. For something or someone to just be, makes no sense to us. Atheists often ask the question of who made God? But that question assumes that someone or something greater than God exists, and becomes a never-ending question of cause and effect until one is able to determine the ultimate or primary cause.

But if Jesus is not eternal, it has some serious implications:

1. Jesus Himself stated that He is both God and eternal. But if Jesus is not eternal then this makes Him a liar and we therefore cannot trust anything else that He says. The promises He makes, the things He teaches, the facts He declares about the Father, sin, and salvation, cannot be believed.
2. Naturally flowing from the first implication, if Jesus is not eternal and a liar, then the Bible is also not true. Throughout Scripture we see verses stating both that Jesus is God and that He is eternal (cp. John 8:58; Col. 1:17; Heb. 7:3; Rev. 1:8, 17-18). But if Jesus is not eternal, then these verses are false, which makes Jesus a liar and the Bible false.
3. As a result of both of the above, if Jesus is a liar, and the Bible is a lie, then so is our faith (cp. 1 Cor. 15:13-19).

But Jesus truly is eternal. A fact that all the New Testament writers state and that Jesus Himself expresses many times, as is seen throughout John's Gospel, especially in His "*I Am*" statements.

Jesus' use of the "*I Am*" is a direct reference to Exodus 3 when God calls Moses from the burning bush and commands him to go back to Egypt to free God's people from slavery. To make sure he knows how to answer the Israelites should they question who sent him (and probably for his own faith) Moses asks God who it is that is sending him. In short, Moses asks God, "Who are you?"

God's answer is simple, "*Tell them I Am sent you*" ("*I Am*" means "to be"). So God's answer to Moses can be expressed as, "Tell them the One who exists sent you". God is declaring that He exists. That He is not a wooden, lifeless idol somewhere, but that He is the living God. He also reveals His name to Moses – *Yahweh* – which is best translated as "*I Am who I Am*".

So in using the title "*I Am*" (see also John 8:58) Jesus is making a radical, controversial, and antagonistic statement as He declares that He is indeed God. This is seen as blasphemy by the Jews, leading them to hate Jesus, and is a contributing factor to wanting Him crucified.

But John's argument in 1:1 is further strengthened by his use of a short, simple word that we tend to overlook in the English language – the word, "*was*". So often in modern usage, "*was*" refers to a time in the past that has come and gone. For example, "I was in Pretoria on Monday". Here it denotes a past event that has a fixed start and end point in time. It would mean the same thing if I had said, "I was in Pretoria on Monday, but I am not any more".

However, the word that John uses here is in the imperfect tense. In other words, it is a verb that is continuously active – a verb that has no end. You could translate it into English as "*was and continues to be*". Used this way, John is declaring that Jesus has always existed but He will also always continue to exist. At no point in time has He ever, or will He ever, cease to exist (cp. Rev. 1:8). Christ is eternal. To say otherwise renounces His deity, calls God a liar, and denies that Scripture is the Word of God.

Jesus is the Distinct Word

We see this in the little phrase, "*with God*". This little phrase is a perfect example of why understanding prepositions is important, especially when it comes to Bible interpretation.

By using the preposition "*with*", John is showing that Jesus is not the same being as the Father, but is distinct from Him. It affirms two members of the Trinity – the Father and the Son – and that they are distinct from one another.

This is a clear statement that goes against the teaching of modalism (also known as *Sabellianism* after the 3rd century theologian, Sabellius, who promoted the idea). Modalism teaches that throughout time, God appeared to man in three forms (or modes) – He appeared to the Old Testament saints as God the Father, to the New Testament saints as the Son, and to us in the modern church as the Spirit. This is a

false teaching that was declared a heresy at the Council of Antioch in AD 268, but is still taught in many Pentecostal churches today and by modern false teachers, such as T.D. Jakes.

The phrase, “*with God*”, also proves that Jesus did not emanate or come from the Father. He was not born, but has always existed with the Father. John is making it clear that although Jesus was and is in the presence of God the Father, He was and is also separate from Him, while at the same time not inferior to the Father. This refutes claims made by some cults that Jesus as a human is the result of God having physical relations with Mary.

Another thing worth noting here is the way that John uses the word “*with*”, as in the Greek it is a word that can be used several ways.

- To express being together with or in the presence of, someone else (e.g. you are at church with your family explaining that you are not alone). Used this way John would be saying that Jesus was in the presence of the Father, or in the same place as the Father.
- To express the relationship between a person or thing with someone or something (e.g. you are at church with your family explaining your relationship to those with you). Likewise John would be saying that Jesus was related to the Father in one way or another.
- Although both of these uses are correct and indeed implied here, John goes one step further in that the form of the Greek word that he uses is rather unique and does not appear anywhere else in Scripture. A meaning that is best defined as being “*towards*”, or as A.T. Robertson suggests, “*face-to-face*”. John uses the word in a way implies an intimate relationship.

So not only was Jesus in the presence of the Father and related to Him in terms of both being God, He was also face-to-face with the Father. But note the use of the word “*was*” connected to the phrase, “*He was with God*”. This word is used in the same way as above, in the imperfect tense. Therefore, this is an ongoing face-to-face relationship that Jesus and the Father are having with each other.

John repeats this same truth in verse 2, “*He was with God in the beginning*”. This writing style is typical in all of John’s writings. I like to picture his style as a spiral staircase – he states or teaches something, then progresses to other subjects, but then comes back round to repeat or build on what he has already stated on a subject, just in a slightly different way. Only to move on to other subjects again, and then return to a subject later, and so the spiral continues. However, whenever you see things repeated in Scripture like this, it also means it is something important. So this is clearly something John wants you to pay attention to.

Jesus is the Divine Word.

We see this in the phrase, “*the Word was God*”.

Following from the previous two statements this seems to be a logical conclusion because if Jesus is eternal and only God is eternal, logically Jesus has to be God. However, although in the Greek this is the shortest phrase of the three, it is the one that tends to cause the greatest debate. A debate that goes

back to early in the fourth century AD to a man named Arius and was picked up again in more recent times by the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Jehovah's Witnesses believe that Jesus was not God in the flesh, but rather was the archangel Michael who came to earth as a man. Based on this theology they have changed John 1:1 in their New World Translation to read, "the word was a god". Although they claim that this is the correct translation of the Greek, they are misled. In fact, no Greek expert will ever support their claim. We will not go into the technicalities of the Greek here, but rest assured that the correct Greek translation is "*The Word was God*". If you're ever confronted by a Jehovah's Witnesses on this issue, it is not worth entering into a debate with them as they do not have any understanding of the Greek and are simply regurgitating what they have been taught at the Kingdom Halls

There are, however, other ways to explain why their interpretation and translation is incorrect.

1. The Bible teaches strict monotheism – the existence of only one God. To say that Jesus is "a god" is to suggest that there is another God other than the one revealed to us in Scripture as *Yahweh*.

But the Jehovah's Witnesses have an answer to this. They say that Jesus is not the Almighty God, but rather a lesser god. Here they use Isaiah 9:6 as proof: "*He will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God*". Although they acknowledge that this verse is talking about Jesus, they claim that it calls Him "*Mighty God*", and not Almighty God, implying that He is a lesser god. But the problem with this interpretation is that this same God, *Yahweh*, is later also referred to as Mighty God and not Almighty God (see Isa. 20:21 and Jer. 32:18). This means then that both the Son and the Father are referred to as Mighty God and that there is no greater or lesser god.

2. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 8:5-6, "*For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords"), yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live*". What Paul is saying is that there are not really any other gods, only those that have falsely been called gods. There is only one real God. Furthermore, Paul describes both the Father and the Son in these verses as being responsible for creation, implying that they are equally God. So if Jesus is merely "a god" as the Jehovah's Witnesses claim, that was "with God" in the beginning, then is Jesus a true god or a false god? Based on 1 Corinthians 8, He would be a false god.

But the Jehovah's Witnesses have an answer to this too – they claim that Jesus is a god in the sense that Moses was called a god. But was Moses actually called a god? No! The closest phrase that may lead one to this incorrect conclusion is in Exodus 4:16 that refers to Moses being "*as God*" to Pharaoh. In other words, he went with the authority and power of God, to perform miracles and to be God's representative or ambassador to Pharaoh. This was the closest that Pharaoh would ever come to experience or know the true God for himself. So Moses was not a god, but instead was like God to Pharaoh in terms of his role.

3. John was a strict Jew. For the Jehovah's Witnesses to claim that John wrote that the Word was "a god" would mean that he believed in a plurality of gods. Being raised as a Jew he would never have believed, let alone suggest or teach, that more than one God exists. John himself nullifies their claim in 20:28 when Thomas said of the risen Christ when he saw Him for himself, "*My Lord and my God*". If Jesus wasn't God, wouldn't Jesus have corrected Thomas by saying something to the effect of, "No Thomas, I am not God, I am only a god"? However, Jesus does not correct Thomas but instead affirms what Thomas says.

But, yet again, the Jehovah's Witnesses have an answer for this. They say that Thomas is so stunned by Jesus being alive that he swears, or rather, blasphemes in front of Jesus, who is also a Jew, and in a room full of other Jews. But this is unthinkable and extremely unlikely. And even if this was the case, he was subject to Jewish Law and would have been stoned to death..

4. Two final verses that should leave no doubt in your mind that John did not write "a god". They are found in Paul's great treatise on the sufficiency of Christ, the book of Colossians. In describing the person and work of Christ, Paul writes the following in chapter 1:19, "*For God was pleased to have all His fullness dwell in Him*", and later in 2:9, "*For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form*". The word "*dwell*" is a picture of being permanently at home somewhere. So God's fullness, His being, is at home in Christ. It is part of who He is.

NOTE: The Jehovah's Witnesses also claim that God's real name is *Jehovah*, however, the name *Jehovah* does not appear in the Bible at all – it is a human construct of combining two Hebrew names for God – *Yahweh* (translated as LORD) and *Adonai* (translated as Lord). Historically, the name *Yahweh* was never verbalised, but was replaced with the name *Adonai*, or *Ha Shem* (translated as "the name"). During the Middle Ages, the *Masorettes*, in order to make the name pronounceable, took the consonants from *Yahweh* (יהוה) and added the vowel symbols (known as pointings) from *Adonai*, to make the name *Yahowah/Jehovah*. This is another example of poor understanding of languages by the Jehovah's Witnesses.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. "All other doctrines that we cling to become meaningless if Jesus is not God". Give examples of what doctrines and the ways they can become meaningless.
2. What do these two tremendous opening verses imply for how you approach Jesus in your (a) prayer, (b) worship, and (c) church life?