

## John 1:1-5

I think it's easy to look at the prologue in the Gospel of John and dismiss it as highfalutin poetry or overly-specific technical jargon, or even to become desensitized to it and gloss over it—a true shame, considering that it makes up the opening words of one of the most important documents in history. But what does it mean? Why was it written? What is John talking about?

As we will soon see, John 1:1-5, and to a greater extent, verses 1-3, and even just simply verse 1, is an incredibly important piece of writing for all manner of audiences. One verse alone addresses Jewish theology, Greek philosophy, and Christian heresy all at once, each in a dramatic and thought-provoking way, so that Jews, Greeks, and Christians alike "may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing... may have life in his name" (John 20:31).

## To the Jews

"In the beginning..." Two words in its original Greek. Anyone familiar with the Bible—or even just Judeo-Christian thought in general—will already have ideas sparked in their mind at these words alone. The reader is instantly taken back to Genesis 1:1 where the same words are used to describe the creation of the universe itself. John immediately seizes the attention of the Jewish reader and promises, even after just those couple of words, to recontextualise and reframe the creation story forever.

"...was the Word..." The Word of God was also a phrase Jews were intimately familiar with. The Word of God was the Torah; The Law; the Scriptures. The Word of God was spoken by priests and prophets. The Word of God spoke truth and life and blessing to Israel. In fact, there are instances in some ancient translations where 'God' and 'The Word of God' were interchangeable! The Jewish reader at this time is perfectly comfortable with this idea so far. The Word of God—the promises, prophecies, law and commandments, even the Spirit of God himself—was there in the beginning, predating the world. After all, it was by God's word that he spoke the universe into being. "God said..." appears ten times in Genesis 1 alone.

"...and the Word was with God..." And then John says something radical. God was not alone. The Word was *with* God; alongside God; accompanying God. He goes on, in verse 14, to describe in greater detail that the Word was a person... Jesus Christ.

"...and the Word *was* God." One verse in, and John has already made the same statement about Jesus that Jesus himself was killed for making.

Verse 2 and 3: Jesus was there in the beginning with God. Jesus predated the creation of the universe. He didn't begin to exist with his conception in Mary: he was present for the foundation of the earth. And even moreso than that, Jesus was himself responsible *for* the foundation of the earth! "All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made."

While these things may all seem familiar and comfortable to us now, it is important to remember that Christianity was not always called Christianity. Before there was the Church, there was a radical sect of Judaism, and a group of Jews who met in the synagogues and spoke about the teachings of one radical Jewish rabbi called Jesus. A rabbi that John, one of his closest friends and disciples, called God; Creator of the Universe.

But besides the context of an ancient Jewish sect, John was also written in the midst of the Greco-Roman world—a completely different world to that of Israel, with its own set of mythologies and philosophies.

## To the Greeks

"In the beginning was the Word..." Funnily enough, these words were neither controversial nor surprising to the Greek readers of John. 'The Word of God' may have been a historic feature of Judaism, but 'The Word' itself was a historic feature of Greek philosophy.

In Greek, this word is **λόγος** (logos), where we derive "logic" and "logistics," ie. "reason; rationality; wisdom." Logos was more than a word for 'word,' it was an *idea*. In asking themselves what the purpose of life was, some ancient Greek philosophers found purpose in philosophy and discussion, seeing how they were separated from mere animals by their reasoning and logic; their wisdom and discourse. It was this idea; this concept of what it means to *understand* the world; to be capable of deriving understanding from the world through the use of rhetoric. What would come of greater understanding? How could one know all things? Could one be like the gods?

Heraclitus lived hundreds of years before Christ and the writing of John's Gospel, and yet spoke such words as "all things come to be in accordance with this *logos*." Over centuries, renowned philosophers such as Aristotle debated this idea, in terms of everything from an all-encompassing cosmic law to the very root of human nature, and everything in between.

John grabs hold of this idea of 'The Word' in the midst of Greco-Roman philosophy and attributes it to the God of the Jews, and subsequently, Jesus Christ. John provides a whole new meaning to 'The Word' and enters into a centuries-old debate surrounding human nature, the meaning of life, and the purpose of philosophy.

"In him was life, and the life was the light of men... the true light... he has made [God] known." John establishes Jesus as the speaker of truth and wisdom. One who illuminated mysteries and revealed God to humanity. The one who answered the question, "what is the purpose of life?"

But, ultimately, the Gospel was written by a Christian or Christians, and would be shared with other Christians and read by other Christians, and the opening prologue *also* speaks wisdom to the Christians at the time, and speaks timeless truths about Christian doctrine.

## To the Christians

'Who was Jesus?' That is ultimately the question that the Gospels seek to resolve, including John's. Was he God? Was he just a man? What is his relationship to God? Different ideas about the nature of both Jesus' divinity and humanity, as well as different ideas about the trinity or lack thereof, plagued Christianity for hundreds of years. Even to this day, there are still sects, cults, and heresies that get it wrong. No doubt such false ideas were already present during the writing of John's Gospel, especially given the fact that early Christians did not yet have John's Gospel, nor in fact a great deal of Christian scripture at all. John didn't just write his Gospel so that his readers might believe, but so that they would continue to believe and forever be in a state of believing. John knew who Jesus was, both from Jesus' teaching and from John's own personal first-hand experience with Jesus. In writing his Gospel, he proclaimed the truth so that all that would follow would know the truth.

The prologue of John is one of the earliest recorded Trinitarian statements about God, and its logic, pun intended, is crystal clear.

"In the beginning was the Word..." Jesus pre-existed creation, which means that the trinity has always existed and will always exist. Jesus did not come into being at his conception.

"and the Word was with God..." Jesus exists alongside God and is distinct from God. There is discourse between Jesus and God the Father.

"...and the Word was God..." Jesus is fully God, and all that can be said about God, including the fact that God is God, can also be said about Jesus.

"...and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." But Jesus is also human. He was flesh and blood, and he walked the earth. He was not an illusion, manifestation, or apparition—he was God incarnate; physically present on earth, born of a human woman.

To so profoundly and eloquently describe the complex paradox that is the Trinity, to correct misunderstanding and thwart heresies, and to lovingly teach the foundations of Christian doctrine, John's prologue is truly a masterpiece.

## A Masterpiece

Between Jewish mythos, Greek philosophy, and Christian doctrine, John captures the very essence of all three in only a handful of words and completely changed the way Jews and Gentiles alike would forever think about Jesus.

I hope that next time you read the prologue, it is as incredible, radical, and awe-inspiring for you as it was for its first-century readers.