

GO DEEPER INTO THE GOSPELS
WEEK 02 - WEDNESDAY, APRIL 22, 2020
Pastor Daniel Calcagno | Glad Tidings Church of God
SCRIPTURE: JOHN 1:1

THE LOGOS

Unlike the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), the gospel of John begins with an attention-grabbing prologue. John begins his gospel by bringing up the “word” of God. The Greek word “*logos*” (λόγος) simply means “word” or “saying.”¹ However, in the first century AD, the word “*logos*” had been used by both Greeks and Jews to refer to something much deeper. In Greek thought, the “*logos*” sometimes referred to “reasoned discourse” - the ability to transmit one’s argument from the mind to another mind via speech.² In Jewish thought, the “*logos*” (or “*memra*” in Aramaic) referred to the expression of God’s mind and was therefore associated with wisdom (Greek, “*sophia*”).³

What God says is wise and what God says (His “*logos*”) brings about the created order, as shown in the book of Genesis. Therefore, the writer of Proverbs says this:

“By wisdom the LORD laid the earth’s foundations, by understanding he set the heavens in place...” (Proverbs 3:19, NIV)

Interestingly, wisdom is then personified in the book of Proverbs:

“The LORD formed me [wisdom] from the beginning, before he created anything else. I was appointed in ages past, at the very first, before the earth began.” (Proverbs 8:22-23, NLT)

And in Isaiah, God’s word is depicted as an agent that does His bidding:

“The rain and snow come down from the heavens and stay on the ground to water the earth. They cause the grain to grow, producing seed for the farmer and bread for the hungry. It is the same with my word. I send it out, and it always produces fruit. It will accomplish all I want it to, and it will prosper everywhere I send it.” (Isaiah 55:10-11, NLT)

Again, what God says is wise and accomplishes His will, just as it did in creation. It is not surprising then, that the gospel message about Jesus and the kingdom of God is called the “[*logos*] of God” (Luke 8:11; cf. Matthew 13:19 which says “[*logos*] of the kingdom”). Just as the Creator brought order to the chaos in Genesis, through Jesus, God is bringing order to the chaos again by providing the solution to sin and death.

¹ “Logos” in Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels, eds. Joel B. Green, Jeannine K. Brown, Nicholas Perrin. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013.

² Rahe, Paul Anthony. Republics Ancient and Modern: The ancien régime in classical Greece. United Kingdom: University of North Carolina Press, 1994.

³ “Logos” in Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels, eds. Joel B. Green, Jeannine K. Brown, Nicholas Perrin. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013.

JOHN'S PURPOSE STATEMENT

As was explored last study, the writer John had a theological purpose in writing his gospel. John said directly: “...these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in his name.” (**John 20:31, NASB**). John was endeavouring to convince people that Jesus was the Messiah; that they should place their trust in him and be faithful to him. This is important to remember when exploring the prologue of the gospel of John since there are so many different theories as to its meaning, leading many to make conclusions John never intended. That being said, it is important to remember that every interpreter brings their own bias to the text. The best we can do is offer our interpretation with transparency, admitting our bias.

THE PROLOGUE OF JOHN

We are going to approach the prologue of the gospel of John with a few assumptions. Firstly, we are going to assume that John had a unitarian understanding of God; that God was only one person, the Father of Jesus (cf. John 17:3). Furthermore, we are going to assume that the “logos” referenced here is not an actual person, but John is using the concept of “logos” to poetically make the point that Jesus is the culmination and embodiment of God’s purposes and wisdom, specifically as it relates to being the Messiah and that eternal life can be found in him (cf. John 17:3; 20:31). Therefore, for the sake of convenience, we will be primarily using a translation of the text produced by those who share these assumptions.⁴ However, when appropriate, we will consider the Greek text and other English translations.

εν αρχῃ την ο λογος και ο λογος την προς τον θεον και θεος την ο λογος

“In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and what God was the word was.”
(John 1:1, REV)

The basic meaning of “word” (“logos”) helps us to unpack what John meant in this verse. As Reynolds succinctly said: “A ‘word’ is a means of communication, the expression of what is in one’s mind.”⁵ When we speak, we express our minds; we take our thoughts and present them to the world through our speech. Our speech has a powerful effect on the world and our lives; what we say can have a negative or positive effect on our surroundings. Furthermore, the speech of a person in a position of great power or influence has a greater effect on the world. Therefore, it can be reasoned that God’s speech has ultimate power and influence. Indeed, as was touched on above, it is in Genesis that God’s speech that brought about the created order, combating the chaos of the world as it was (which was “formless and void”).

As the Jewish people pondered this over the centuries, the idea of God’s “word” (“logos” or “memra”) took on a life of its own, so to speak. In Jewish thought, God is both transcendent and near to His creation. Therefore, when speaking of God interacting with and within His creation, it was said that God did so by His “word.” We see examples of this in the first century AD within paraphrases produced by the Jewish people of the Hebrew Bible in the common language of Aramaic; these paraphrases were each called a Targum, which simply means “translation” or “interpretation.” In these paraphrases, we find that when God acts, He does so through the agent of His word. Here are some examples:

⁴ The Revised English Version produced by Spirit & Truth Fellowship International (<https://www.revisedenglishversion.com/>).

⁵ “Logos” in Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels, eds. Joel B. Green, Jeannine K. Brown, Nicholas Perrin. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013.

Genesis 1:27, NASB:

“God created man in His own image...”

Genesis 1:27, Targum Jonathan:

“...the Word of the LORD created man in His likeness...”

Genesis 3:8, NASB:

“..they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day...”

Genesis 3:8, Targum Jonathan:

“...they heard the voice of the Word of the LORD God walking in the garden in the repose of the day...”

In both cases, God acted through His word, as if His speech was His agent. Again, this is not dissimilar to what Isaiah said, that God’s word is sent forth and accomplishes His will. God’s word is a projection of Himself in the universe; God’s word takes God’s thoughts and plans and manifests them in the world.

“In the beginning...”

By beginning his gospel with the phrase “in the beginning,” John echoed the first line from the book of Genesis. In fact, the Hebrew name for the book of Genesis is *Breisheet*, which is translated as “in the beginning.” Therefore, it is very likely that John intended for us to think of the creation narrative in the first chapter of Genesis with God using His speech (His “*logos*”) to bring about the created order. Referring to John’s use of the phrase “in the beginning,” N.T. Wright beautifully said:

*“...no Bible reader could see that phrase and not think at once of the start of Genesis... Whatever else John is going to tell us, he wants us to see his book as the story of God and the world, not just the story of one character in one place and time. This book [the gospel of John] is about the creator God acting in a new way within his much-loved creation. It is about the way in which the long story which began in Genesis reached the climax the creator had always intended.”*⁶

Here in John 1:1, John is harkening back to the creation narrative, but as will be shown later (particularly when we get to John 1:14), his overall focus in this prologue is to look ahead to the creative work God will do through Jesus.

“...was the word...”

The “word” (“*logos*”) in the prologue of the gospel of John is God’s thoughts and plans about giving us salvation and eternal life, something which comes by believing in Jesus (cf. John 20:31). Biblical unitarian scholar, Anthony Buzzard, paraphrased this verse, saying: **“In the beginning there was God’s Grand Design, the declaration of His Intention and Purpose...”**⁷ This interpretation of “logos” is confirmed when John wrote this at the beginning of his first epistle: **“That which was from the beginning, that which we have heard, that which we have seen with our eyes, that which we looked at and our hands touched concerning the word of life...”** (1 John 1:1, REV). The “word” (“*logos*”) of life is God’s plan concerning salvation and eternal life, which was manifested in Jesus, the one the Apostles heard, saw, and touched (cf. John 1:14). God had a plan from the beginning - a good and wise plan for humanity. And though human sin derailed God’s plan, this was only temporary, for it is through Jesus the Messiah that God’s plan for humanity gets back on track.

⁶ Wright, N T. John for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-10. N.p.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004.

⁷ Buzzard, Anthony F.. The One God, the Father, One Man Messiah Translation: New Testament with Commentary. United States: Restoration Fellowship, 2015.

“...and the word was with God...”

John is speaking of the “word” (“*logos*”) in slightly personified terms, stating that the “*logos*” was “with God.” However, this is not unlike how today various modes of communication can be slightly personified. For example, giving instructions to others via email. If the sender expects the recipient to follow their instructions, they will usually ask the recipient: “Did you do what my email said?” On a literal level, what is actually meant is “Did you do what I said?” The email is spoken of as something separate from the sender, but it is actually a representation of the sender themselves. Similarly, in the Bible, attributes of God are sometimes said to be “with” Him, implying that they are separate from Him. For example, in the book of Job, it says of God: **“With [God] are wisdom and might... with Him are strength and sound wisdom...” (Job 12:13, 16, NASB)**. Furthermore, as noted above, in Proverbs, wisdom is personified and is even said to have been there with God when He created the universe: **“When [God] established the heavens, I [wisdom] was there...” (Proverbs 8:27, NASB)**. We are not supposed to take this language literally; it’s a poetic way of saying that when God acted He did so using those attributes. To say that wisdom was present with God during creation is to say that God was wise in how He brought about the created order. Similarly, to say that the “word” (“*logos*”) was with God “in the beginning,” is to say that God was intentional and mindful from the start. Again, as will be explored later in the prologue, what God was intentional about and mindful of was the salvation of humanity, something which is made possible by Jesus, who is the human manifestation of the “*logos*.”

“...and what God was the word was.”

This line is commonly translated as “...and the Word was God” (NASB). Since many Christians assume the “word” is an actual person, and because the doctrine of the Trinity is often read back into this verse, it is often assumed that this line is a declaration by John of the deity of Jesus. However, John was simply saying that the “word” (“*logos*”) - which he is slightly personifying - is an accurate representation of God. This is why the translators of the Revised English Version rendered this line as “...what God was the word was.” In this way, the word “God” is being used in a qualitative sense; “...the *logos* has the qualities of God; the noun *logos* is being used to function like an adjective...”⁸ The “*logos*” of God - again, being slightly personified by John - accurately represented God because His “*logos*” is a manifestation of His will. This “*logos*,” which was “with” God and perfectly represented God, is His wise plan for humanity’s salvation. And, as will be explored, this “*logos*” will become fully embodied in the person of Jesus the Messiah (cf. John 1:14, 18).

⁸ <https://www.revisedenglishversion.com/John/chapter1/1>