

BIBLE BACKGROUND

John 1:1-14

Verses 1-5

In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him and nothing was made apart from him. In him was life and his life was the light of humankind. The light shone in the darkness and it did not overcome it.

These beautiful words describe the entire gospel of John. The apostle works backwards from the cross to the divinity of the Word. In common with Mark, John does not employ an infancy narrative but he does go back before creation to the beginning, using the language of Genesis 1:1-5. **In the beginning** ἀρχῆ refers to an eternity that was before creation when only God existed (Col 1:17). God did not employ a lesser being to create the universe, as the Mormons maintain. There are three parts. The first line is about the timeless existence of the Word in spirit. The next is about his relation to creation and source of its life and the third to his gift of eternal life to humanity, signified by light (5:26).

The Word ὁ λόγος is the second person of the Trinity identified as being **with God** and being God. The inversion of subject and object, literally, **God was the Word**, indicates that a god could not be the translation. Why choose a very Greek sounding term to describe the pre-existent Son? While λόγος would resonate with Greek hearers, it has a strong Hebrew connection. The next verse goes on to speak of creation and we know from Genesis 1 that God spoke creation into existence through his word. Before anything existed was the Word. That is the point. The Son of God is not a part of creation or one of the beings created by God. The word is the life-giving power of God, the representation of his being and person, and the mind of God. The Word is all that God is in a non-created expression of himself.

With regards to the universe, in common with the NT writings, God created the universe through his Son (1 Cor 8:6; Heb 1:2). Paul could even say that the universe was created by him (Col 1:16). That **all things came into being through** ὃν **him** indicates that creation came about as a Trinitarian activity. It also suggests that the destiny of the universe is the Word and that it has its present shape is determined by the structure of the Word himself, that is, something of his mind is imprinted on the universe and its goal and unity is found in him.

From existing before creation to the origin of the universe, John moves to the Word's presence in the world. The gospel of John describes **the life** that was in the Word and how it was **the light of human kind** (5:25,26, 8:12; 11:25; 14:6). Principally, life has to do with eternal life with the Father and light, the truth, the enlightenment that is apprehended by faith through the person and work of Christ (9:39).

The final section alludes to the sinfulness and hatred of the world as it responded to Christ and its willful desire to not acknowledge him but the Word's triumph through the resurrection.

Returning to the living word, Jesus Christ, Heb 1:2 indicates that the word stands for revelation and Jesus is both the ultimate revelation as well as the authoritative revealer of God (1:18 and Matt 11:27). Christ communicates God and therefore himself. He does not reveal an idea but his person and a living relationship with his Father. In Greek thinking, Logos can be the process of reasoned thinking or the transcendent concept itself. But for the early Christians, the Word was incarnated, it became flesh and therefore could never be considered an eternal idea. And the Word's connection to life is found in 5:24, where belief in Christ's word transplants a person into the eternal relationship with God and life of God (15:3).

Heraclitus in the 6th century BC proposed the term logos to describe a rational principle operating in the chaotic and changing universe to provide order. Stoics thought of God in a pantheistic way and

so logos was his mind penetrating all things. John is completely averse to the intellectual abstractions of Greek philosophy and lives in the world of the Old Testament, where God has a personality and relates to human beings through his powerful word, the word that reveals his will. In Jewish teaching, the word was essentially the law, where his wisdom was found. Indeed, Rabbis taught that the law was preexistent and the world made through it. But John clearly rejects this because Christ is the source of life, both for the universe and for each person's eternal life.

Verse 10-13

He was in the world and though the world came into being through him, it did not know him. He came to his own people but his own countrymen did not receive him. To such who received him, to those believing in his name, he gave them the right to become children of God, born not of blood, nor from the sex drive, nor from the dominant role of men but born of God.

The world of people **did not know him**, meaning it did not acknowledge him or love him, for **knowing** has that meaning. Specifically, the Jewish people would not accept him. Did not receive him refers to more than rejecting his teaching. They did not accept into their very own lives the one who was the author of the universe and responsible for their physical existence. They were denying the gift of life that came with the person. Faith is a full receiving of the person of Christ, the Word. **Believing** is also **receiving** for this life and light comes to us in a person, the Son of God.

Because of this close and miraculous connection, those who receive him undergo a change: they are **born of God**. 3:3-6 explains this further. This is both an adoption (Eph 1:5) and a real change in our nature of believers to be made visible at the resurrection (Rom 8:23). This birth is not of human origin: it is not a physical birth (**blood**), **nor from the sex drive**, and **nor from the dominant role of men**, literally, **from the will of men**. The encounter with the Word in the world leads to a non-worldly event in the life of the baptized believer. The event is **of God**. The believers' new existence is as **children of God**. This does not mean they are divinized but that an eternal relationship begins that orients the people to God and lifts believers beyond both the evil and the mortality of the world.

Verse 14

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only from the Father, full of grace and truth.

Verses four and five are now expanded. The eternal Word **became flesh** σαρξ, not evil flesh, but mortal flesh, a particular object of the created world. He **dwelt among us**, literally, camped or tented among us. This reminds us of the Lord who dwelt with the children of Israel as they moved through the wilderness and his presence within the holy of holies in the inner part of the tabernacle. The glory of God appeared and descended into the tabernacle. John makes clear that the glory of God is found in his Son, called the **One and Only** μονογενους. Often mistranslated as begotten, the verb in fact comes from generation or type, as in class of people.

Since the Word was with God, it is now clear that the Son came **from the Father** with the purpose to bring **grace and truth**. But the point here is that he full of grace and truth. Just as he is the light, or is the life, he is constituted by these powers that can save human beings and bring them a completely different experience of life, of grace, truth and rebirth as children of God.

Verses 15-18

Concerning him, John witnessed, crying out and saying, "This is the one of whom I spoke, that he who comes after me was before me because he is my superior." All of us have received from his fullness, grace upon grace. The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God but the unique and only God [Son] who was in the bosom of the Father, he has revealed him.

John has already spoken of the Baptist as someone who pointed to the incarnate Son as the **light** (7). The Baptist gave a further witness, and John indicates that this witness came from his actual preaching heard in the wilderness, and John even describes the Baptist's style, for he **cried out** κέκραγεν, almost shouting: **that he who comes after me was before me because he is my superior**. At first, the words after and before give us a strong impression of time, and indeed, the Son of God did arrive at the Jordan after the Baptist's activity and being eternal, clearly existed before the Baptist did. This being so, the expression naturally supports an understanding of **first** πρῶτος as meaning **superior**. The pre-existent Son followed John the Baptist's ministry but he was before him in time and rank (27,30; 3:31).

The divine nature of Christ is described as **his fullness** πληρώματος. **Light** was used a moment ago and then **glory** to describe the essence of Christ in his divine nature. In 3:34, the Spirit fills Christ **without limit**. The 'I am' sayings reflect this fullness in Christ, especially those that speak of life (11:25). Specifically, John speaks of the **grace** of God coming from this fullness. **Grace upon grace** beautifully describes an unlimited grace, the next issuing of grace adding to the last and continuing without end (14). John will later portray this grace through the cross and resurrection (3:14,15). Interestingly, John does not use this term again, except in v.16. Life in abundance (10:10) and the waters welling up within believers, which refer to eternal life and the Spirit (4:14), describe this grace.

John has a very Pauline understanding of the **law**. The Son is greater than **Moses**, not only in his essence as God, but also in bringing the law to an end as the way to God and offering grace through the truth of his word. Strong hints at the law's passing, being superseded by the Son and the preaching of his word, are given in 2:6; 2:19; 3:3; 4:23 etc.). Grace is the generous kindness and undeserved love of God that leads him to offer freely the gift of salvation for all and for the generations following the ministry of Christ, this gift comes through the word of the gospel, called the **truth** here.

Jesus Christ, the earthly Jesus, is the full revelation of God. God cannot be **seen** and even in Jesus, his divine essence is masked by flesh. But Jesus's ministry, his word, behaviour and the glory emanating from him through the signs he performed, particularly in his cross and resurrection, make clear the nature of God.

Only begotten is not a correct translation of μονογενής but **one and only** or **the unique one**. The root word means **type** not descendant or begotten one. Jesus is truly one of a kind! The Greek is unusual here μονογενής θεός, hence the alternative reading of **Son**. Having come from **the bosom of the Father**, being called God is absolutely correct but when the first two persons of the Trinity are identified as God, the text does not flow smoothly, especially when one would expect the Son to be **in the bosom of the Father**.