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# Case Study: How the Apostle John Contextualized

## The Structure of the Prologue

Three aspects of the Prologue and its background in the Gospel of John make it clear that in the Bible God meets people where they are. He inspires ordinary human beings to write in the language, culture, and concepts that would be familiar to their original readers. First, John made use, for example, of an early Christian hymn to express his exalted insights into the nature and character of Jesus Christ. Second, he also structured the Prologue in ways that would make logical sense to a Jewish reader. Third, he gave Jesus a title (the Word) that was far better known in the pagan Gentile world than such Jewish titles such as Messiah or Son of Man. By these strategies John, under inspiration, created a Prologue that would speak powerfully to every reader of his day, whether Christian, Jewish, or pagan. These three strategies will be examined in greater depth.

Based on an Early Christian Hymn

First of all, there is considerable evidence that major parts of the Prologue to the Fourth Gospel were drawn from an early Christian hymn. John 1:1, 2, for example, although written in Greek, displays the poetic parallelism so common to Hebrew poetry and song:

In the beginning was the Word  
and was the Word with God  
and was the Word God  
In the beginning was this One with God

The hymn-like nature of the Prologue is further seen in the “stairstep parallelism” of verses 4 and 5.

In him was life  
and that life was the light of men  
and the light shone in the darkness  
and the darkness did not . . .

Verses 6 through 8, on the other hand, return to prose style, contrasting John the Baptist with Jesus. Although it is impossible to determine the exact boundaries of the hymn underlying the Prologue, verses 1-5, 9-11, 14, and 16-18 are clearly in poetic style, while the other verses seem designed to tie the hymn in with major themes of the Gospel such as the role of John the Baptist (1:6-8, 15, cf. 1:19-36; 3:22-30; 5:33-35) and the centrality of believing to Christian experience (1:12, 13, cf. 2:11; 3:16; 4:48, 53, for example). This is not the only hymn reflected in the New Testament. At least three others are probably the basis for the language in Phil 2:6-11, Col 1:15-20, and 1 Tim 3:16.

Discovering these NT hymns leads to a very practical application. Christians often feel isolated from Bible times, thinking that the people were different from us, and that God, therefore, worked in much different ways than He does now. The reality is, however, that early Christians had a lot in common with us. They too sang hymns and met for worship. They too struggled to understand God's will for their lives. John knew, therefore, that it would help them understand his message if he used the language of a familiar hymn.

### A Carefully-Constructed Unity

Regardless of the source from which John may have drawn his language, however, verses 1-18 as they now stand are a literary unity. The structure of the finished Prologue provides a second illustration of how God meets people where they are. The literary form common to Hebrew logic is called chiasm (from the Greek letter X [pronounced "key"]). A person produces a chiasm when they reason full-circle back to the beginning point of an argument. The first point parallels the last point. The second point parallels the next to last point, and so on.

The Prologue begins and ends with the Word in intimate relationship with the Father (God: 1, 18). Next comes a comparison and contrast between the role of the Word in the physical creation (v. 3) and his role in the re-creation that comes by grace and truth (v. 17). The role of John the Baptist is twice mentioned at the appropriate counterpoints (vv. 6-8, 15). When the entire Prologue is carefully analyzed, therefore, a chiastic structure like the following emerges:

- A. The Word with God (1:1, 2)
- B. His Role in Creation (1:3)
- C. The Gift of Life and Light (1:4, 5)
- D. The Witness of the Baptist (1:6-8)
- E. The Word Enters the World (1:9-11)
- F. BELIEVERS BECOME CHILDREN OF GOD (1:12,13)**
- E. The Word Becomes Flesh (1:14)
- D. The Witness of the Baptist (1:15)
- C. The Gift of Grace (1:16)
- B. His Role in Re-creation (1:17)
- A. The Word with the Father (1:18)

The arrow shape of the A-F-A outline above illustrates the “X”-shaped nature of chiasm. The direction of thought moves out from the beginning to the climax at the center, then returns in reverse sequence back to the beginning. The author of the Gospel, therefore, communicates naturally in the style of Hebrew logic familiar to him and many of his readers.

Since the key point of a chiasm usually comes at the center, it appears that the central theme of the Prologue is expressed in verses 12 and 13; those who receive the Word and believe in His name become “children of God.” Thus the focus of the Word’s coming into the world is a new creation, the creation of children of God. This theme is expressed in other terms in the Gospel’s statement of purpose; those who read the Gospel and believe in Jesus have life in his name (20:30, 31).

### The Background of Term “the Word”

The title of Jesus with which the Gospel opens is a third illustration of how God used John’s experience and background to meet his audience where they are. If John had approached his Greek readers by saying, “Let me tell you about Jesus the Messiah,” they would have said, “Jesus, the what?” and would have felt little interest in the information. If he had talked about Jesus the Son of Man, he would also have interested mainly the Jews. Instead, John chose a title for Jesus that would communicate with power to the Greek mind and to those Jews who were influenced by the ideas of Greek philosophy (and there were many). John called Jesus “the Word.”

In the Greek Old Testament the Word (Greek: *logos*) of God creates, but is not a person; “By the word of the Lord were the heavens made . . . he spoke and it came to be” (Ps 33:6, 9). The “word of the Lord” in this passage is to be taken literally as the powerful and creative expression of God’s speech, not as a person who assisted in creation.

In Prov 8:22-31, on the other hand, there is a person who stood at God's side from the beginning and was an active agent in creation, but that person is called Wisdom (Greek: *Sophia*—a female expression) not Word. So the Old Testament contains concepts that seem related to John's use of the Word but are not identical to it. We must look elsewhere for a more exact parallel.

It is in the realm of Greek philosophy that John's use of the Word finds its explanation. The great Greek philosopher Plato (400 BC) had a very exalted idea of God. But he also had a very negative view of reality as we know it. If the great God is pure mind, and matter is basically evil (as Plato taught) how could the great God "dirty his hands" in the process of creating and sustaining matter? Plato's solution was a personality he called the Word. Plato's Word was great enough to commune with God as an equal, yet humble enough to get involved in the messiness of material things. The Word served for Plato as an intermediate God between the great God and his creation. Later Greek philosophers like Heraclitus and the Stoics expanded on Plato's ideas by identifying the Word as eternal, the creator and sustainer of the universe, and the source of all human reason and intelligence. If all this sounds a whole lot like the New Testament concept of Jesus, we should not be surprised when Ellen White declares that the "spirit of inspiration" was imparted to some of these great Gentile thinkers (1940:33).

Around the time when Jesus walked on this earth, the great Jewish philosopher Philo sought to make Greek philosophy palatable to the Jews and the Old Testament palatable to the Greeks, so he functions as a bridge figure between Judaism and Greek philosophy. It was Philo who saw a parallel between the Jewish concept of Wisdom and the Greek concept of Word. The result was a Jewish Word-personality, which provided the essential background for John's use of the term Word.

For Philo the Word was a "second God," the High Priest in the heavenly sanctuary, an intercessor with God, the lawgiver, the mediator of creation, the mediator of revelation, the sustainer of the universe, and the God of the Old Testament. Philo also called him God's firstborn, his eldest son, the image of God, and the second Adam. Anyone who knows anything about the New Testament will immediately recognize that in Philo, God had prepared the human race for a personality just like Jesus. When John called Jesus "the Word," therefore, readers of the Gospel who had been influenced by Greek philosophy would have recognized the term as expressing everything they knew about Jesus.

I am not suggesting that Philo "influenced" John to rewrite the story of Jesus in the image of Plato. John, rather, was using a similar tactic to that of Paul on Mars Hill. In Acts 17:22-31 Paul tried to reach the philosophers

of Athens by presenting a sermon on the “unknown God which you worship” (17:23). John, in the Prologue to his Gospel, is saying something like, “This Word, whom you worship, is the subject of my book. Reading this book will help you understand him and serve him better.” By this method Greek readers would have been drawn to consider the Jesus of John’s Gospel. God meets people where they are. As a result, inspired writers have always been willing to adjust their expressions according to the needs of their audience. It is the content of the message that is inspired, not the form (White 1958:21, 22).

## Missiological Implications

What can we learn from John’s use of Word as a description of Jesus? We should not expect people to appreciate the gospel we preach unless we first make serious attempts to understand them and the way they think. Secular people have not usually rejected the gospel. In most cases they have never heard it, even though they live in the midst of churches, televangelists, and bumper stickers that say “honk if you love Jesus.” Secular people cannot appreciate the assertion “Jesus Is the Answer” when they have no idea what the question is! John’s “Word strategy” teaches us that we need to go the second mile if we wish to share the gospel with our secular neighbors and friends. In the words of Paul, it is only when we have “become all things to all men” that we can expect to “win as many as possible” (1 Cor 9:19, 22; see also Paulien 1993:17-42).

## Works Cited

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