

The Christology of John

The Sanctuary □ Daniel L. Segraves □ JULY 24, 2024

In the Beginning

The first verse of the Bible, Genesis 1:1, reads, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” The phrase “in the beginning” immediately reminds us of another place in the Bible where these same words appear. The Apostle John wrote, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God” (John 1:1-2). Not only does John twice use the phrase “in the beginning” – the same phrase that appears in the first verse of the Bible, but he is also discussing the same subject: creation. John wrote, “All things were made by Him, and without him was not anything made that was made” (John 1:3).

But this is not the only time John referred to the beginning. In his first letter, in the opening verses, just as in the Gospel of John 1:1-2, John wrote of the beginning: “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life—the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us . . .” The similarities between the Gospel of John 1:1-2 and the letter of I John 1:1-2 are remarkable. In both places, John refers to the beginning and to the Word. And there is a further connection between these two texts: In the Gospel of John 1:14, John wrote that “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.” This is, of course, a reference to Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. In his first letter, John discusses the same subject in similar words: “the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us” (I John 1:2). In his Gospel, John wrote that the Word became flesh; in his first letter, he wrote that the Word of life was manifested in such a way as to be seen and handled.

But we should note that there is yet another use of the phrase “in the beginning” in the New Testament with an apparent connection with Genesis 1:1. In Hebrews 1:10-12, we find a quote from the Old Testament that uses the phrase “in the beginning” in a reference to creation, just as in Genesis 1:1. It reads, “*And: You LORD, in the beginning laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of Your hands. They will perish, but You remain; and they will all grow old like a garment; like a cloak You will fold them up, and they will be changed. But You are the same, and Your years will not fail.*” This quote from Psalm 102:25-27 is quite interesting, because it is a reference in the New Testament to a Scripture in the Old Testament that is itself a reference to an earlier Scripture.

When we examine them carefully, we can see that the New Testament references to Genesis 1:1 serve to identify Jesus Christ as the God who created the heavens and the earth. The word translated “God” in Genesis 1:1 is the Hebrew *Elohim*. Although this word is plural in form, it is singular in reference. In the Hebrew language, plural words are used not only to indicate more than one of something, but also to indicate intensity or fullness of a singular referent. The way we determine whether the noun *Elohim* refers to a singular or plural referent is to note whether the verb used with this noun is singular or plural. In the Hebrew language, singular nouns must have singular verbs, and plural nouns must have plural verbs. But if a plural noun is

accompanied by a singular verb, the noun must be read as singular. That is the case with *Elohim* whenever it refers to the true God. In Genesis 1:1, the plural *Elohim*, translated “God,” has a singular verb, *bara’*, translated “created.” Therefore, we know that the God who created the heavens and the earth was one, singular God. This should be kept in mind when we read the references to Genesis 1:1 that are found in the New Testament. If the first mention to the work of creation in the beginning indicates that the God who did the creative work is one, we should expect further references to this event to agree with this idea. In other words, we should not expect to discover later in Scripture that more than one God was involved in the work of creation.

When we come, then, to John’s reference to the beginning and to creation in the Gospel of John, we seek to understand John in terms of Genesis 1:1. John wrote, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” The Greek word translated “word” is *logos*. What did John mean by “word” or *logos*? *Logos* was a term commonly used by ancient Greek philosophers. To them, *logos* referred to reason as the controlling principle of the universe. They did not, however, believe that *logos* or reason was God. Is this what John meant by his use of “word”? No, for John sees the Word as a reference to the God who created all things. It is much more likely that John was writing from the perspective of the Aramaic Targums than that he was writing from the perspective of Greek philosophy.

Aramaic is a cognate language with Hebrew. In the first century in Israel, Aramaic was the common conversational language. We know Jesus spoke Aramaic, for there are places in the gospels where his Aramaic words are recorded, then translated into Greek for non-Jewish readers who would not have been familiar with Aramaic. For example, in Mark 5:41, Jesus is quoted as saying, “Talitha cumi.” This is Aramaic for “little girl, arise.” Since Aramaic was the conversational language among the Jewish people of the first century, the Hebrew Scriptures were translated or paraphrased into Aramaic so they could be read. These translations are known as the Targums. John would have been familiar with them.

In the Targums, the Aramaic word *memra*, which means “word” is often used to designate God in activity. Bruce Metzger pointed out that “reverence for the God of Israel led the Targumist to employ surrogates for the Deity, such as ‘Word’ (*Memra*).”¹ For example, in Genesis 1:16-17, where the English translation reads, “Then God made two great lights,” one Targum reads, “The Word of the Lord created the two large luminaries,” and where Genesis 2:2 reads, “And on the seventh day God ended His work which He had done,” the Targum reads, “On the seventh day the Word of the Lord completed the work which he had created.”²

But it is not just the Targums that identify God with His Word. So do the Hebrew Scriptures. For example, Psalm 33:6 reads, “By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and all the host of them by the breath of His mouth.” The striking poetry of Psalm 29:3-5, 7 identifies God with His voice: “The voice of the LORD is over the waters; the God of glory thunders; the LORD is over many waters. The voice of the LORD is powerful; the voice of the LORD is full of majesty. The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars, Yes, the LORD splinters the cedars of Lebanon . . . The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness; the LORD shakes the Wilderness of Kadesh.” The parallelism of Hebrew poetry means that the voice of the LORD is none other than the LORD Himself. The voice of the LORD cannot be distinguished from the LORD Himself.

It is against this background that John writes, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God” (John 1:1-2). John does not mean that reason was in the beginning, that reason was with God, and that reason was God. Nor does John mean that reason created all things. Instead, he writes that all things

were made by the Word and that nothing that was made was made apart from the Word (John 1:3). It is quite clear, as John indicates in the first verse of his gospel, that the Word was God. But John 1 identifies the God who created all things as none other than the one we know as Jesus Christ! John writes, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

But the question immediately arises: If the Word is *with* God, as indicated in John 1:1, and if the Word is *the only begotten of the Father*, as seen in John 1:14, how can the Word at the same time *be* God? It is at precisely this point that the interpretation seen in John’s first epistle brings great clarity. Apparently John wrote his first letter at least in part as a response to Docetism, an early heresy that denied the genuineness of Christ’s humanity. The word Docetism comes from the Greek *dokē*, meaning “to seem.” Docetists claimed that Jesus merely seemed to be human; his humanity was like a mirage; it was merely an appearance of human existence. In their view, if you had attempted to pat Jesus on the back, your hand would have passed right through Him. Thus, His suffering and death on the cross were not real; He merely seemed to suffer and die. John resisted this false teaching with strong words. He wrote, “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world” (I John 4:1-3). To believe in the genuineness of Christ’s humanity is not an option; to deny it is to deny the Incarnation.

But John did not wait to confront Docetism until the fourth chapter of his letter. He exposed this error in the opening of the book. He wrote, “we have heard . . . we have seen with our eyes . . . we have looked upon, and our hands have handled . . . the Word of life” (I John 1:1). This Word of life was “from the beginning.” Jesus was no phantom; the apostles had not only seen Him, they had also touched Him with their hands. Here John’s subject was the same as in the Gospel of John: the beginning and the Word, or the *logos*. Here, however, John helps us understand what He meant by Word in his Gospel. He identifies the Word as the “Word of life.” Whereas in his Gospel John wrote that the Word became flesh, in his first letter he wrote that “the life was manifested.” And what life was this? It was, John says, “that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us” (I John 1:2). In his Gospel, John wrote that the Word was with God; in his first letter, he wrote that eternal life, which he previously identified as the Word of life, was with the Father. It was this eternal life, this Word of life, that was manifested to us in the person of Jesus Christ.

The Bible informs us that the God who created the heavens and the earth in the beginning is none other than the God we know in His manifestation in the flesh as Jesus Christ. He is not a God distinct from the Creator; He is the Creator Himself. He can no more be distinguished from the Creator than ones life can be distinguished from oneself. He is the eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us.

The final text relating to Genesis 1:1 underscores this idea. In Hebrews 1:10, we find these words: “And: *You LORD, in the beginning laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of Your hands.*” The first thing we notice about this Scripture, as we examine the context, is that these words are spoken to the Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Hebrews 1:8-9 read, “But to the Son He says: *“Your throne, O God, is forever and ever; a scepter of righteousness is the scepter of Your kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated lawlessness; therefore God, Your God, has anointed You with the oil of gladness more than Your companions.”*

Hebrews 1:10 begins with the word “and,” connecting the words to follow with the previous words, continuing with that which was spoken to the Son. Hebrews 1:8, which identifies the Son as God by means of a quote from Psalm 45:6, indicates the deity of Jesus; Hebrews 1:9, which identifies the Son as the Messiah by virtue of His anointing, indicates the humanity of Jesus. It is only in His humanity that Jesus has “companions,” or peers. But then, in Hebrews 1:10, the Son is identified as Yahweh, the covenant name by which God revealed Himself to Moses in Exodus 6:3. Most English translations indicate the Hebrew behind the English words used to represent the name of God by typographical conventions. Specifically, when the Hebrew word is Yahweh, most translations will represent this by the word LORD, with all capital letters. Some English translations expand this convention into the New Testament by capitalizing the word LORD when the New Testament quotes an Old Testament text where the word Yahweh appears. Such is the case with Hebrews 1:10, which is quoted from the Greek Septuagint translation of Psalm 102:25. Since it is Yahweh who is addressed in Psalm 102, as indicated in verse 1, the Septuagint translates verse 25 as, “In the beginning thou, O Lord, didst lay the foundation of the earth; and the heavens are the works of thine hands.” Thus, the writer of Hebrews identifies the Son as Yahweh, the Creator. By its connection with Psalm 102, and by the connection of Psalm 102 with Genesis 1:1, the Book of Hebrews, like the Gospel of John and the letter of First John, informs us that the singular God who created the heavens and the earth is none other than Jesus Christ. He is the Word, the Word of life, the very life of the Father, manifest in genuine, authentic human existence.

It would be impossible to describe the miraculous mystery of the Incarnation more fittingly than in Paul’s words in I Timothy 3:16: “And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God³ was manifested in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen by angels, preached among the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up in glory.”⁴ In knowing Jesus, we know the Creator Himself. This wondrous truth is rooted in the very first verse of the Bible.

¹ <https://www.bible-researcher.com/aramaic4.html>. Accessed April 2, 2007. See also Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, rev., The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 102-111.

² <https://www.bible-researcher.com/aramaic4.html>. Accessed July 24, 2024.

³ Instead of “God,” some English translations read “He,” “He Who,” “Who,” or “which.” This is because these translations follow a Greek variant that appears only in a few manuscripts. The great majority of Greek copies have “God,” which is seen in the KJV, NKJV, and other translations.

⁴ The Greek text of I Timothy 3:16 could be legitimately read as follows: “God was manifested in the flesh, [God was] justified in the Spirit, [God was] seen by angels, [God was preached (i.e., proclaimed)] among the Gentiles, [God was] believed on in the world, [God was] received up in glory.” This is because each of these verbs (i.e., manifest, justified, seen, preached, believed on, and received up) are in the aorist passive indicative form. “God” is the noun subject to which each of these verbs refers.