

John 1:1

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.
(NIV)

1. It is imperative that the serious student of the Bible come to a basic understanding of *logos*, which is translated as “Word” in John 1:1. Most Trinitarians believe that the word *logos* refers directly to Jesus Christ, so in most versions of John *logos* is capitalized and translated “Word” (some versions even write “Jesus Christ” in John 1:1). However, a study of the Greek word *logos* shows that it occurs more than 300 times in the New Testament, and in both the NIV and the KJV it is capitalized only 7 times (and even those versions disagree on exactly *when* to capitalize it). When a word that occurs more than 300 times is capitalized fewer than 10 times, it is obvious that when to capitalize and when not to capitalize is a translators’ decision based on their particular understanding of Scripture.

As it is used throughout Scripture, *logos* has a very wide range of meanings along two basic lines of thought. One is the mind and products of the mind like “reason,” (thus “logic” is related to *logos*) and the other is the expression of that reason as a “word,” “saying,” “command” *etc.* The Bible itself demonstrates the wide range of meaning *logos* has, and some of the ways it is translated in Scripture are: account, appearance, book, command, conversation, eloquence, flattery, grievance, heard, instruction, matter, message, ministry, news, proposal, question, reason, reasonable, reply, report, rule, rumor, said, say, saying, sentence, speaker, speaking, speech, stories, story, talk, talking, teaching, testimony, thing, things, this, truths, what, why, word and words.

Any good Greek lexicon will also show this wide range of meaning (the words in italics are translated from *logos*):

- speaking; words you say (Rom. 15:18, “what I have *said* and done”).
- a statement you make (Luke 20:20 - (NASB), “they might catch him in some *statement*”).
- a question (Matt. 21:24, “I will also ask you one *question*”).
- preaching (1 Tim. 5:17, “especially those whose work is *preaching* and teaching).
- command (Gal. 5:14, “the entire law is summed up in a single *command*”).
- proverb; saying (John 4:37, “thus the *saying*, ‘One sows, and another reaps’”).
- message; instruction; proclamation (Luke 4:32, “his *message* had authority”).
- assertion; declaration; teaching (John 6:60, “this is a hard *teaching*”).
- the subject under discussion; matter (Acts 8:21, “you have no part or share in this *ministry*.” Acts 15:6 (NASB), “And the apostles... came together to look into this *matter*”).
- revelation from God (Matt. 15:6, “you nullify the *Word of God*”).
- God’s revelation spoken by His servants (Heb. 13:7, “leaders who spoke the *Word of God*”).
- a reckoning, an account (Matt. 12:36, “men will have to give *account*” on the day of judgment).

- an account or “matter” in a financial sense (Matt. 18:23, A king who wanted to settle “*accounts*” with his servants. Phil. 4:15, “the *matter* of giving and receiving”).
- a reason; motive (Acts 10:29 - *NASB*), “I ask *for what reason* you have sent for me”).¹

The above list is not exhaustive, but it does show that *logos* has a very wide range of meaning. With all the definitions and ways *logos* can be translated, how can we decide which meaning of *logos* to choose for any one verse? How can it be determined what the *logos* in John 1:1 is? Any occurrence of *logos* has to be carefully studied in its context in order to get the proper meaning. We assert that the *logos* in John 1:1 cannot be Jesus. Please notice that “Jesus Christ” is not a lexical definition of *logos*. This verse does not say, “In the beginning was Jesus.” “The Word” is not synonymous with Jesus, or even “the Messiah.” The word *logos* in John 1:1 refers to God’s creative self-expression—His reason, purposes and plans, especially as they are brought into action. It refers to God’s self-expression, or communication, of Himself. This has come to pass through His creation (Rom. 1:19 and 20), and especially the heavens (Ps. 19). It has come through the spoken word of the prophets and through Scripture, the written Word. Most notably and finally, it has come into being through His Son (Heb. 1:1 and 2).

The renowned Trinitarian scholar, John Lightfoot, writes:

The word *logos* then, denoting both “reason” and “speech,” was a philosophical term adopted by Alexandrian Judaism before St. Paul wrote, to express the *manifestation* of the Unseen God in the creation and government of the World. It included all modes by which God makes Himself known to man. As His *reason*, it denoted His purpose or design; as His *speech*, it implied His revelation. **Christian teachers, when they adopted this term, exalted and fixed its meaning by attaching to it two precise and definite ideas: (1) “The Word is a Divine Person,” (2) “The Word became incarnate in Jesus Christ.”** It is obvious that these two propositions must have altered materially the significance of all the subordinate terms connected with the idea of the *logos*.²

It is important to note that it was “Christian teachers” who attached the idea of a “divine person” to the word *logos*. It is certainly true that when the word *logos* came to be understood as being Jesus Christ, the understanding of John 1:1 was altered substantially. Lightfoot correctly understands that the early meaning of *logos* concerned reason and speech, not “Jesus Christ.” Norton develops the concept of *logos* as “reason” and writes:

There is no word in English answering to the Greek word *logos*, as used here [in John 1:1]. It was employed to denote a mode of conception concerning the Deity, familiar at the time when St. John wrote and intimately blended with the philosophy of his age, but long since obsolete, and so foreign from our habits of thinking that it is not easy for us to conform our minds to its apprehension. The Greek word *logos*, in one of its primary senses, answered nearly to our word *Reason*. The *logos* of God

was regarded, not in its strictest sense, as merely the Reason of God; but, under certain aspects, as the Wisdom, the Mind, the Intellect of God (p. 307).

Norton postulates that perhaps “the power of God” would be a good translation for *logos* (p. 323). Buzzard sets forth “plan,” “purpose” or “promise” as three acceptable translations. Broughton and Southgate say “thoughts, plan or purpose of God, particularly in action.” Many scholars identify *logos* with God’s wisdom and reason.

The *logos* is the expression of God, and is His communication of Himself, just as a “word” is an outward expression of a person’s thoughts. This outward expression of God has now occurred through His Son, and thus it is perfectly understandable why Jesus is called the “Word.” Jesus is an outward expression of God’s reason, wisdom, purpose and plan. For the same reason, we call revelation “a word from God” and the Bible “the Word of God.”

If we understand that the *logos* is God’s expression—His plan, purposes, reason and wisdom, it is clear that they were indeed with Him “in the beginning.” Scripture says that God’s wisdom was “from the beginning” (Prov. 8:23). It was very common in Hebrew writing to personify a concept such as wisdom. No ancient Jew reading Proverbs would think that God’s wisdom was a separate person, even though it is portrayed as one in verses like Proverbs 8:29 and 30: “...when He marked out the foundations of the earth, I [wisdom] was the craftsman at His side.”

2. Most Jewish readers of the Gospel of John would have been familiar with the concept of God’s “word” being with God as He worked to bring His creation into existence. There is an obvious working of God’s power in Genesis 1 as He brings His plan into concretion by speaking things into being. The Targums are well known for describing the wisdom and action of God as His “word.” This is especially important to note because the Targums are the Aramaic translations and paraphrases of the Old Testament, and Aramaic was the spoken language of many Jews at the time of Christ. Remembering that a Targum is usually a paraphrase of what the Hebrew text says, note how the following examples attribute action to the word:

- And the word of the Lord was Joseph’s helper (Gen. 39:2).
- And Moses brought the people to meet the word of the Lord (Ex. 19:17).
- And the word of the Lord accepted the face of Job (Job 42:9).
- And the word of the Lord shall laugh them to scorn (Ps. 2:4).
- They believed in the name of His word (Ps. 106:12).³

The above examples demonstrate that the Jews were familiar with the idea of God’s Word referring to His wisdom and action. This is especially important to note because these Jews were fiercely monotheistic, and did not in any way believe in a “Triune God.” They were familiar with the idioms of their own language, and understood that the wisdom and power of God were being personified as “word.”

The Greek-speaking Jews were also familiar with God's creative force being called "the word." J. H. Bernard writes, "When we turn from Palestine to Alexandria [Egypt], from Hebrew sapiential [wisdom] literature to that which was written in Greek, we find this creative wisdom identified with the Divine *logos*, Hebraism and Hellenism thus coming into contact."⁴ One example of this is in the Apocryphal book known as the Wisdom of Solomon, which says, "O God of my fathers and Lord of mercy who hast made all things by thy word (*logos*), and by thy wisdom hast formed man..." (9:1). In this verse, the "word" and "wisdom" are seen as the creative force of God, but without being a "person."

3. The *logos*, that is, the plan, purpose and wisdom of God, "became flesh" (came into concretion or physical existence) in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the "image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15) and His chief emissary, representative and agent. Because Jesus perfectly obeyed the Father, he represents everything that God could communicate about Himself in a human person. As such, Jesus could say, "If you have seen me, you have seen the Father" (John 14:9). The fact that the *logos* "became" flesh shows that it did not exist that way before. There is no pre-existence for Jesus in this verse other than his figurative "existence" as the plan, purpose or wisdom of God for the salvation of man. The same is true with the "word" in writing. It had no literal pre-existence as a "spirit-book" somewhere in eternity past, but it came into being as God gave the revelation to people and they wrote it down.

4. The last phrase in the verse, which most versions translate as "and the Word was God," should not be translated that way. The Greek language uses the word "God" (Greek = *theos*) to refer to the Father as well as to other authorities. These include the Devil (2 Cor. 4:4), lesser gods (1 Cor. 8:5) and men with great authority (John 10:34 and 35; Acts 12:22). At the time the New Testament was written, Greek manuscripts were written in all capital letters. The upper and lower case letters were not blended as we do today. Thus, the distinction that we today make between "God" and "god" could not be made, and the context became the judge in determining to whom "*THEOS*" referred.

Although context is the final arbiter, it is almost always the case in the New Testament that when "God" refers to the Father, the definite article appears in the Greek text (this article can be seen only in the Greek text, it is never translated into English). Translators are normally very sensitive to this (see John 10:33 below, point #4). The difference between *theos* with and without the article occurs in John 1:1: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with **the** *theos*," and the Word was "*theos*." Since the definite article is missing from the second occurrence of "*theos*" ("God,") the usual meaning would be "god" or "divine." The *New English Bible* gets the sense of this phrase by translating it, "What God was, the Word was." James Moffatt who was a professor of Greek and New Testament Exegesis at Mansfield College in Oxford, England, and author of the well-known *Moffatt Bible*, translated the phrase, "the *logos* was divine."

A very clear explanation of how to translate *theos* without the definite article can be found in *Jesus As They Knew Him*, by William Barclay, a professor at Trinity College in Glasgow:

In a case like this we cannot do other than go to the Greek, which is *theos en ho logos*. *Ho* is the definite article, *the*, and it can be seen that there is a definite article with *logos*, but not with *theos*. When in Greek two nouns are joined by the verb “to be,” and when both have the definite article, then the one is fully intended to be identified with the other; but when one of them is without the article, it becomes more an adjective than a noun, and describes rather the class or sphere to which the other belongs.

An illustration from English will make this clear. If I say, “The preacher is *the* man,” I use the definite article before both preacher and man, and I thereby identify the preacher with some quite definite individual man whom I have in mind. But, if I say, “The preacher is man,” I have omitted the definite article before man, and what I mean is that the preacher must be classified as a man, he is in the sphere of manhood, he is a human being.

[In the last clause of John 1:1] John has no article before *theos*, God. The *logos*, therefore, is not identified as God or with God; the word *theos* has become adjectival and describes the sphere to which the *logos* belongs. We would, therefore, have to say that this means that the *logos* belongs to the same sphere as God; without being identified with God, the *logos* has the same kind of life and being as God. Here the *NEB* [*New English Bible*] finds the perfect translation: “What God was, the Word was.”⁵

5. It is important to understand that the Bible was not written in a vacuum, but was recorded in the context of a culture and was understood by those who lived in that culture. Sometimes verses that seem superfluous or confusing to us were meaningful to the readers of the time because they were well aware of the culture and beliefs being propounded by those around them. In the first century, there were many competing beliefs in the world (and unfortunately, erroneous beliefs in Christendom) that were confusing believers about the identities of God and Christ. For centuries before Christ, and at the time the New Testament was written, the irrational beliefs about the gods of Greece had been handed down. This body of religious information was known by the word “*muthos*,” which we today call “myths” or “mythology.” This *muthos*, these myths, were often irrational, mystical and beyond understanding or explanation. The more familiar one is with the Greek myths, the better he will understand our emphasis on their irrationality. If one is unfamiliar with them, it would be valuable to read a little on the subject. Greek mythology is an important part of the cultural background of the New Testament.

The myths were often incomprehensible, but nevertheless, they had been widely accepted as the “revelation of the gods.” The pervasiveness of the *muthos* in the Greco-Roman world of the New Testament can be seen sticking up out of the New Testament like the tip of an iceberg above the water. When Paul and Barnabas healed a cripple in Lystra, the people assumed that the gods had come down in human form, and the priest of Zeus came to offer sacrifices to them. While Paul was in Athens, he became disturbed because of the large number of idols there that were statues to the various gods. In Ephesus,

Paul's teaching actually started a riot. When some of the locals realized that if his doctrine spread, "the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be discredited, and the goddess herself, who is worshiped throughout the province of Asia and the world, will be robbed of her divine majesty" (Acts 19:27). There are many other examples that show that there was a *muthos*, i.e., a body of religious knowledge that was in large part incomprehensible to the human mind, firmly established in the minds of some of the common people in New Testament times.

Starting several centuries before Christ, certain Greek philosophers worked to replace the *muthos* with what they called the *logos*, a reasonable and rational explanation of reality. It is appropriate that, in the writing of the New Testament, God used the word *logos*, not *muthos*, to describe His wisdom, reason and plan. God has not come to us in mystical experiences and irrational beliefs that cannot be understood; rather, He reveals Himself in ways that can be rationally understood and persuasively argued.

6. In addition to the cultural context that accepted the myths, at the time John was written, a belief system called Gnosticism was taking root in Christianity. Gnosticism had many ideas and words that are strange and confusing to us today, so, at the risk of oversimplifying, we will describe a few basic tenets of Gnosticism as simply as we can.

Gnosticism took many forms, but generally Gnostics taught that there was a supreme and unknowable Being, which they designated as the "Monad." The Monad produced various gods, who in turn produced other gods (these gods were called by different names, in part because of their power or position). One of these gods, called the "Demiurge," created the earth and then ruled over it as an angry, evil and jealous god. This evil god, Gnostics believed, was the god of the Old Testament, called *Elohim*. The Monad sent another god, "Christ," to bring special *gnosis* (knowledge) to mankind and free them from the influence of the evil *Elohim*. Thus, a Gnostic Christian would agree that *Elohim* created the heavens and earth, but he would not agree that He was the supreme God. Most Gnostics would also state that *Elohim* and Christ were at cross-purposes with each other. This is why it was so important for John 1:1 to say that the *logos* was *with* God, which at first glance seems to be a totally unnecessary statement.

The opening of the Gospel of John is a wonderful expression of God's love. God "wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:4). He authored the opening of John in such a way that it reveals the truth about Him and His plan for all of mankind and, at the same time, refutes Gnostic teaching. It says that from the beginning there was the *logos* (the reason, plan, power), which was with God. There was not another "god" existing with God, especially not a god opposed to God. Furthermore, God's plan was like God; it was divine. God's plan became flesh when God impregnated Mary.

7. There are elements of John 1:1 and other phrases in the introduction of John that not only refer back in time to God's work in the original creation, but also foreshadow the work of Christ in the new administration and the new creation. Noted Bible commentator F.F. Bruce argues for this interpretation:

It is not by accident that the Gospel begins with the same phrase as the book of Genesis. In Genesis 1:1, 'In the beginning' introduces the story of the old creation; here it introduces the story of the new creation. In both works of creation the agent is the Word of God.⁶

The *Racovian Catechism*, one of the great doctrinal works of the Unitarian movement of the 14th and 15th centuries, states that the word "beginning" in John 1:1 refers to the beginning of the new dispensation and thus is similar to Mark 1:1, which starts, "The beginning of the Gospel about Jesus Christ."

In the cited passage (John 1:1) wherein the Word is said to have been in the beginning, there is no reference to an antecedent eternity, without commencement; because mention is made here of a *beginning*, which is opposed to that eternity. But the word *beginning*, used absolutely, is to be understood of the subject matter under consideration. Thus, Daniel 8:1, "In the third year of the reign of king Belshazzar a vision appeared to me, even unto me Daniel, after that which appeared unto me AT THE FIRST." John 15:27, "And ye also shall bear witness because ye have been with me FROM *the beginning*." John 16:4, "These things I said not unto you AT *the beginning* because I was with you. And Acts 11:15, "And as I began to speak the Holy Spirit fell on them, as on us AT *the beginning*." As then the matter of which John is treating is the Gospel, or the things transacted under the Gospel, nothing else ought to be understood here beside the beginning of the Gospel; a matter clearly known to the Christians whom he addressed, namely, the advent and preaching of John the Baptist, according to the testimony of all the evangelists [*i.e.*, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John], each of whom begins his history with the coming and preaching of the Baptist. Mark indeed (Chapter 1:1) expressly states that this was the beginning of the Gospel. In like manner, John himself employs the word beginning, placed thus absolutely, in the introduction to his First Epistle, at which beginning he uses the same term (*logos*) Word, as if he meant to be his own interpreter ["That which is from the beginning...concerning the Word (*logos*) of life." 1 John 1:1].⁷

While we do not agree with the *Catechism* that the only meaning of beginning in John 1:1 is the beginning of the new creation, we certainly see how the word beginning is a double entendre. In the context of the new creation, then, "the Word" is the plan or purpose according to which God is restoring His creation.

8. To fully understand any passage of Scripture, it is imperative to study the context. To fully understand John 1:1, the rest of the chapter needs to be understood as well, and the rest of the chapter adds more understanding to John 1:1. We believe that these notes on John 1:1, read together with the rest of John 1 and our notes on John 1:3,10,14,15, and 18 will help make the entire first chapter of John more understandable.

Broughton and Southgate, pp. 238-248,
Buzzard, pp. 111-119,
Morgridge, pp. 107-109,
Norton, pp. 307-374,
Robinson, *Honest to God*, p. 71,

Endnotes:

1. Arndt and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (University of Chicago Press, 1979).
2. J. B. Lightfoot, *St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and Philemon* (Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, MA, 1993), pp. 143 and 144. Bold emphasis ours, italics his.
3. Dr. John Lightfoot, *A Commentary on the New Testament from the Talmud and Hebraica* (Hendrickson Pub., Peabody, MA), Vol. 3, p. 238.
4. *The International Critical Commentary: St. John*. Vol. 1, p. cxxxix.
5. William Barclay, *Jesus as They Knew Him* (Harper and Row, N.Y., 1962), pp. 21 and 22.
6. F.F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (William B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1983) pp. 28 and 29.
7. *The Racovian Catechism* (Reprinted by CES, Indianapolis, IN, 1994) pp. 63 and 64.

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