

Gospel of John

Lesson 1

Introduction

John 1:1-3

- John's approach is front-loaded to the max
- "In the beginning" This is a clear allusion to Gen. 1:1. John's language matches the first phrase of Gen. 1:1 in the Greek version of the OT (Septuagint). Alluding to Gen. 1:1 is John's concise way of referring to when nothing existed. This is the first of many OT allusions in John. His use of OT allusions tells us that John accepts the OT as true, including its creation account. However strange John 1:1 might seem to first-century Jews, we will see that John not only claims the new truths he is sharing are consistent with the OT, John relies on the OT to make those arguments. John's use of OT allusions also tells us that John expected his audience to either know the OT already (almost all Jews would) or be willing to learn the OT (some gentiles, who had associated with synagogues or the church might know the OT, but even if they didn't, they could learn). Today, many Christians start learning about God by studying the NT and focus on the differences between the NT and OT. But to get the most out of John, it is critical to know the OT and understand that John is building on it.
- "was the Word" The first clause asserts that the Word existed "in the beginning." Verses 2-3 clarify John is using "in the beginning" to mean when the creator God described by the OT was the only thing that existed. John holds back the identity of the Word until John 1:14-18, where he clarifies that Jesus is the Word.
- If the "Word" means Jesus, why didn't John just say that "Jesus" was in the beginning? John does not answer this question, so it's a matter of speculation. My guess is that John wanted to emphasize that there was a point in time when God the Son became human. If John had said "Jesus was in the beginning" that could sow confusion concerning the incarnation as well as God the Son's pre-incarnate existence.

- Why did John choose “the Word” or “Logos” to refer to pre-incarnate God the Son? Again, John doesn’t spell this out, so we have to speculate. I agree with commentators who believe the best source of clues is the OT. Throughout the book, John refers to the OT and its images and terms to explain Jesus. (Ex., the Christ, Son of God, Son of Man, Lamb of God, and Rabbi.) In the OT context, the word of God is depicted as the Lord’s powerful agent or means of accomplishing the Lord’s will in creation, revelation, and salvation. (Gen Ch. 1; Psalm 33:6; Psalm 117:20; Isaiah 55:11; Eze. 1:3.) Perhaps John thought Jews were used to thinking of “the word of God” as something that was distinct from the Lord, yet also intimately and inseparably connected to the Lord. Genesis Ch. 1 depicts God speaking creation into the universe, so one could argue that Genesis 1 itself depicts “the word of God” as the agent of creation, making the assertion that it was present at creation a little less shocking.
- “the Word was with God” The Greek preposition for “with” is often used to link people who have some relationship with each other. “With” indicates that the Word is distinct from God in some sense. I don’t think John expects the reader to grasp the extent of the distinction at this point. The rest of the gospel will provide evidence that the distinction is strong enough to think of the Word/Jesus and God the Father as separate persons. For ex., Jesus can pray to God the Father; Jesus refers to things God the Father knows that he does not; Jesus attributes certain decisions such as passing judgment to God the Father instead of himself. Jesus is the only member of the trinity John portrays as laying down his life/dying.
- Despite this distinction, John claims “the Word was God.” This is the only phrase in John 1:1 that has some grammatical ambiguity. The translation “the Word was a god” is within the realm of grammatic possibility. But the rules of grammar frequently leave room for multiple meanings, so interpreting scripture is a combination of grammar and context. In my opinion, the traditional view “was God” clearly prevails based on context. Some important contextual items include
 - John 1:2-3. John says that the Word was with God “in the beginning” twice and all things were made through the Word and nothing has been created without the Word. The repetition of “in the beginning” and saying two different ways that the Word created everything else

clearly separates (1) God and the Word, which both existed and were together before anything was created, from (2) everything else in the universe, all of which was created by God and the Word and thus are creatures. Nothing in verses 2-3 supports putting the Word in the category of a creature. If John had meant to say that Jesus was merely “a god,” i.e., the first spiritual being or thing that God created, there were better ways to say it. For example, John could have said, “In the beginning, God made the word, and the word was a god. . . .” But John did not say God made the word. John said, “In the beginning, the word was,” just like God and unlike everything created.

- In the rest of the gospel, John argues based on OT categories and references that Jesus is not just “a god” but rather is one with/equal in essence with the God revealed in the OT. Compare John 8:58-59 (before Abraham was born, I am) with Exodus 3:13-15; John 10:29-33 (I and the Father are one); John 14:9-11 (Jesus is in the Father and the Father is in Jesus); John 20:28-29 (Thomas confesses Jesus is God). The verses are not consistent with the idea that Jesus is a created being who does not have the same divine essence or nature as God the Father.
- The rest of the NT portrays the other apostles saying and doing things indicating Jesus is not just “a god” but shares a divine nature with God the Father and the Holy Spirit. Ex., Matthew 28:16-20; 2 Cor. 13:14; Col. 1:15-20. John was just the first one to spell out in one sentence that Jesus is God and yet is also with God.
- John undoubtedly knew that claiming Jesus is God and is with God defies logic and human experience. He had to know that it raises really hard questions, including: How can one being have three persons? How can three persons with distinct attributes share one divine nature? How can one of the three persons become human and even die without affecting the others? Why did God wait until after the OT was completed and the messiah appeared on earth to reveal this fundamental truth about Himself? Interestingly, I don’t think John tries to answer these questions. His strategy is to make the claim then set forth persuasive signs/evidence that the claim is true. He must know that some aspects or implications of the

claim have to be accepted rather than fully comprehended. Imagine meeting someone from a country where planes don't exist. How many of us could convince such a person that planes are real just by talking to them and trying to answer all their questions about how planes can fly? Wouldn't most of us find it easier just to take them on a plane ride? I think that John knows even he can't answer all the possible questions we could ask about Jesus and the trinity. So, he just shows them to us.

- Jesus having a fully divine nature provides persuasive answers to some difficult questions, including: How could Jesus's death satisfy the wrath of an infinite God and provide righteousness to millions of believers? How can Jesus fulfill his promise to be with his followers even after he went back to heaven? How could Jesus withstand Satan's temptations without sinning for his entire life? How is Jesus able to receive authority over humanity without abusing that authority or using it selfishly?

Comparing other views of John 1:1-3

How do people that do not believe that Jesus was fully divine but respect the Bible deal with John 1:1-3?

Arius

Arius was a priest in a church near Alexandria, Egypt, in the early fourth century. Arius agreed that Jesus should be worshipped, but interpreted John 1:1 to mean Jesus was divine, i.e., "a god," but not the same substance as God the Father. Instead, Jesus was the first thing God created, and then Jesus assisted with the creation of everything else. Opponents quote Arius as saying "there was once when he not" and "the Son of God is of another subsistence or substance" from God the Father. Arius used biblically-based arguments. He contended that viewing Jesus as the first created being was a stronger interpretation of scripture's depiction of the Lord as a single divine being who is immutable and transcendent. He could point to verses suggesting God the Father knows things Jesus does not or that Jesus submits to God the Father, (John 10: 18, 29), and to many verses referring to Jesus as the "Son of God."

Arius views gained enough traction to create a controversy. In A.D. 325, Emperor Constantine ordered church leaders to gather at Nicaea, in Turkey, to resolve the dispute. Over 300 bishops, mostly from the eastern half of the Roman empire,

attended the council. One popular theological argument against Arianism was that Jesus needed to be fully divine for his sacrificial death to satisfy the wrath of an infinitely holy and powerful God. Another was that, if Jesus does not share the same substance, i.e., is a completely separate being from God the Father, then worshipping him would be polytheism or idolatry. By the end of the conference, only 2 bishops still adhered to the Arian view. The conference adopted the following creed, intended to clearly reject Arianism:

We believe in one God, the Father All Governing, creator of all things visible and invisible, creator of all things visible and invisible;

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father as only begotten, that is from the essence of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God, **begotten not created, of the same essence as the Father**, through whom all things came into being in heaven and in earth; Who for us men and for our salvation came down and was incarnate, becoming human. He suffered and the third day he rose, and ascended into the heavens. And he will come to judge both the living and the dead.

And [we believe] in the Holy Spirit.

But, those who say, **Once he was not, or he was not before his generation, or he came out of nothing, or who assert that he, the Son of God, is of a different hypostasis or ousia, or that he is a creature, or changeable, or mutable, the Catholic and Apostolic Church anathematizes them.**

Nicaean Creed of A.D. 325. Even so, Arian ideas continued to circulate in the church for years and even prevailed in some synods between A.D. 341 to 360. In A.D. 381, however, 150 church fathers affirmed the Nicaean view of Jesus at the Council of Constantinople, and Jesus' full deity was also incorporated into the Definition of Chalcedon adopted in A.D. 451. Since those councils, being an "orthodox" Christian has meant acknowledging that Jesus is fully divine.

Comparison of translations, including Jehovah's Witness and LDS

A comparison of major English translations of John 1:1-3 shows how the doctrine of Jehovah's Witnesses and the LDS differs from churches that adhere to the view of the church fathers at Nicaea, Constantinople, and Chalcedon:

Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος, καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν, καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος. οὗτος ἦν ἐν ἀρχῇ πρὸς τὸν θεόν. πάντα δι' αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο, καὶ χωρὶς αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο οὐδὲ ἓν. ὃ γέγονεν John 1:1-3 (Greek NT)

ΕΝ ἀρχῇ ἐποίησεν ὁ Θεὸς τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ τὴν γῆν. Gen. 1:1 (Septuagint)

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. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made. John 1:1-3, King James Version

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. All things were made by him: and without him was made nothing that was made. John 1:1-3, Douay-Rheims 1899 American Edition (popular with American Roman Catholics)

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 were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. John 1:1-3, English Standard Version

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. John 1:1-3, New International Version

“The Word was in the beginning with God and was a god ([1:1, 2](#)) The Word was used by God to create all other things ([1:3a](#))” New World Translation (Jehovah's Witness).

“In the beginning was the gospel preached through the Son. And the gospel was the word, and the word was with the Son, and the Son was with God, and the Son was of God. The same was in the beginning with God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made which was made.” Joseph Smith Translation (Church of Latter Day Saints).

Brief Analysis of Jehovah’s Witness’ view

The Jehovah’s Witness translation assumes Jesus was the first created being and is unique compared to other created beings and things, but nevertheless in their view Jesus does not share the same essence or nature as God the Father and has not always existed. The Jehovah’s Witness view ends up being very similar to Arianism.

Problems with the Jehovah Witness translation

- Although the translation “a god” is within the realm of grammatic possibility, interpreting scripture is a combination of grammar and context. In my opinion, the traditional view “was God” clearly prevails based on context of John 1:1-3, the rest of John’s gospel, and other NT verses showing the early church viewed Jesus as fully divine and worthy of worship.
- I don’t think the Jehovah’s Witness translation of verses 2-3 does justice to those verses. They boil it down to: “The Word was used by God to create all other things.” But in Greek, John repeats that the Word was with God “in the beginning” and then says all things were made through the Word and nothing has been created without the Word. The Jehovah’s Witness translation departs significantly from the Greek. This language clearly separates (1) God and the Word, which both existed and were together before anything was created, from (2) everything else in the universe, which was created by God and the Word. Nothing in verses 2-3 supports putting the Word in the category of created things. If John had meant to say that Jesus was the first created being or thing, there are much better ways to say it.

- In addition to these translation issues, I believe the contextual and theological arguments for the traditional understanding of John 1:1-3 are powerful and persuasive. But comparing translations shows why it's hard for evangelicals and Jehovah's Witnesses to persuade each other. The Jehovah's Witness view of Jesus makes more sense if someone accepts the Watch Tower version of John.

Problems with the Joseph Smith translation

In contrast, the Joseph Smith translation of John 1:2-3 is fine, but its translation of John 1:1 does not fit Greek grammar, much less context. I don't know of any other reputable translation that concludes the "word" in John 1:1 refers to the gospel, or sees any reference to "preaching," or translates the last clause of John 1:1 as "of God." I have read some defenses by LDS scholars of their doctrine of the Godhead, but I don't know how they would defend this translation.

In a nutshell, the LDS teaches that Jesus is literally God the Father's son and there is a divine mother. Jesus and God the Father thus do not share the same essence or substance. The LDS says they are one in purpose or character. The LDS argue that the Fourth Century church councils erred in their interpretations of John by being overly influenced by Greek philosophical ideas. Rewording John 1:1 makes it easier to argue the LDS view of the relationship between God the Father and Jesus.