

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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God: The Beginning of Beginnings!

"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)

It would be difficult to read these words and not think of Genesis 1:1, *"In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth."* (Genesis 1:1) However, the context of the two passages directs us in a significantly different direction. The Genesis record begins with God and moves into an orderly discussion of creation. The passage in John begins at the same time, but looks back—prior to God's creation of the material universe—not forward. In the beginning of God's creation the Word already existed, literally "face to face" with God the Father as His equal, and the Word was, literally existed as, *God*. With few exceptions "Word" is a unique term that John uses to refer to the Lord Jesus Christ. Arius, the fourth century originator of one of Christianity's most troublesome errors (almost identically taught today by Watch Tower Tract and Bible Society), used Proverbs 8:25, 30 and related passages to assert that "wisdom" in these verses refers to the Lord Jesus Christ, the Word of God, making the assertion that Jesus was not only subordinate to the Father, but that He was actually created by the Father, the first of the Father's creations, but nonetheless a created being. The errors in this interpretation of Proverbs 8 are manifold, but the primary error appears in the fact that throughout this section of Proverbs dealing with "wisdom," Solomon consistently refers to "wisdom" in the feminine gender. This literary reference to "wisdom" in the feminine gender is altogether natural if Solomon was referring literally to the trait or attribute of wisdom. However, if Solomon had intended to use the word as a symbolic reference to the Lord Jesus Christ, he should have used the masculine form of the word, not the feminine. Walter Elwell describes Arius, "Arius was a thoroughgoing Greek

rationalist."¹ Watch Tower Bibles rather consistently add the indefinite article to the first verse of John's gospel, creating the errant reading, "...The Word was a god...." The inference is that Jesus, the Word, was a noble being, but not in any way equal with "Jehovah" God. In his NICNT commentary on John's gospel Leon Morris deals with this question extensively and rejects both the error of Arianism and the error of modalism, denial of the doctrine of the Trinity. Morris' treatment of this passage is as clear and scholarly as anything I've ever seen on the passage.

In our last chapter we examined another rather unique word that John uses, the word that he used for love, especially when referring to God's love for His people, noting that the most succinct meaning of the word is "love in a social or moral sense."

Did God need to create a material universe, including humanity, in order to be God? Did the creation make Him any more God than He was "In the beginning"? No, He was fully God before the material creation. The creation of a material universe and man in it testifies to His "social" character trait, His gracious design to reveal Himself and to share His goodness with chosen members of His creation. Not the product of subsequent evolution or creation within the being of God, but from eternity, as immutable before the creation as after it, God existed. Within that divine existence John focuses on two of the three "Persons" or Persona that compose the whole of God's being, Father or "God" and Word.

In Genesis 1 God repeatedly refers to Himself with plural pronouns, "Let *us*..." Folks who reject the doctrine of the Trinity will explain this pronoun as "the plural of

¹ Elwell, Walter A., Editor, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1995), 74.

majesty.” We need not reject the majesty of God in the initial record of creation. However, neither can advocates of a non-Trinitarian view of God fully reject the literal plural of the passage. Greek rationalism and Christian theology are not necessarily good friends.

What does a literal reading of these two verses tell us about God? First there is within the being of God a “social” or communicative intent. Otherwise why would John have chosen such a unique term as “Word” for Him? The One who existed eternally, not subsequently created or existing as a lesser being than God, not only existed eternally “with” God, but was truly and fully God in His eternal existence. A. T. Robertson clearly defines the significance of the specific words and verb tenses that John used here.

“Three times in this sentence John uses this imperfect of εἶμι [*eimi*] to be which conveys no idea of origin for God or for the Logos, simply continuous existence. Quite a different verb (ἐγενετο [*egeneto*], became) appears in verse 14 for the beginning of the Incarnation of the Logos.”²

Notice Robertson’s emphatic point that the word choice and verb tense “...conveys *no idea of origin* for God or for the Logos, simply *continuous existence*” [emphasis mine].

At that simultaneous moment recorded both in Genesis 1:1 and John 1:1, when God initiated the creation of everything material, the “Word” already existed. Cleon Rogers develops the significance of the Greek word translated “with” in this passage.

“Here, “with,” showing accompaniment (“w. God”) or “toward God”; i.e., relationship (Brown). Θεον (#2536) God. The word occurs without the art. It is the predicate emphasizing quality: *‘the Word has the same nature as God’* [emphasis mine] (Phillip B. Harner, ‘Qualitative Anarthrous Predicate Nouns,’ JBL 92

²A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, Vol.V c1932, Vol.VI c1933 by Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention. (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), Jn 1:1.

[1973]: 75-78; DM, 139-40; GGBB, 266-69).”³

Rogers and other New Testament Greek scholars, including Morris, makes a compelling linguistic and theological case that John intentionally omitted the article in this sentence to emphasize his primary point. The Word existed in the beginning, and His existence was not that of an inferior and created being, but that He rather existed in the beginning, possessing the same nature as God. He existed as God no less than God the Father existed as God!

Even in this first moment of created time (no less created by God than the material universe) Jesus, the Word of God, not only existed as fully God, but He also existed in a way that expressed the divine intention of self-revelation. For this reason God created the material universe and then created man, the material universe’s only moral, rational, intelligent creature, “in God’s image” (Genesis 1: 27). By using “Word” in the first verse/sentence of his gospel John clearly sets a high priority in our expectation as we read his gospel that he will develop and affirm God’s “social” or “communicative” disposition to us through the “Word.” It was never God’s intent to keep Himself secret or unknown from His people. While Scripture refers to Jesus prior to the Incarnation as the “Word,” it also interestingly refers to Him over eight hundred years before the Incarnation as God’s “Son” (Proverbs 30:4). Rather than attempting to restrict either “Word” or “Son” to a unique time (as “Word” before the Incarnation and “Son” after the Incarnation), I believe Scripture more properly uses both terms before, during, and after the Incarnation. To be sure, the Incarnation, above all other divine acts, manifests and demonstrates God’s intent to reveal Himself, to make Himself known in a gracious and benevolent manner to His people. As we study the gospel of John, these opening words condition us immediately to expect that John will emphasize different truths regarding the Incarnation than the other gospel writers.

³ Rogers, Cleon, Jr. and Rogers, Cleon III, *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 175.

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