

The Prologue of the Gospel of John

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Introduction: This is a skillfully crafted opening for the book. One may wonder how much time the apostle spent arranging this material. Now we must pay careful attention to what he said and to how he has presented it. One way John shows his emphasis is by the arrangement of his material. See below Appendix 1A: The A^{BB}A Structure of the Prologue.

The Structure

- A. The Word's early activity in creation with the Father (1:1-3)
- B. What is received from the Word, His life is the light of men (1:4,5)
 - C. John's witness concerning the light (1:6-8)
 - D. The incarnation of the Word and the privilege of becoming God's children (1:9-14). See detail below.
 - C. John's witness concerning the Word's preeminence (1:15)
- B. What is received from the Word; grace and truth (1:16,17)
- A. The Word's recent activity in the new creation revealing the Father (1:18)

Concerning the two C's: The obvious thing to see is that John the Baptist is mentioned twice. In Western writing, we have a strong tendency to pull together similar material, but the apostle does not. That means he has packaged what he emphasizes most between two sets of material about the Baptist.¹ All four Gospels have Christ introduced by John the Baptist.

Concerning the two A's: Three features stand out.

- a.) The Son is *with the Father* in v.1 and *in the Father's bosom* in v. 18. This closeness is the second item in v.1 and the second last in v.18. That is not an accident; it is a way of framing the prologue.
- b) The Word is God in v.1 and the Only-begotten God in v.18. These statements appear as the third from the beginning and the third from the end. There are not as many explicit statements that Jesus is God in the NT as we might expect, therefore the appearance of two of them in the same prologue must make us notice that this is the starting point in this Gospel. The two A's are parallel.
- c) What is done is *through* the Word in v. 3 and *through* Jesus Christ in v. 17.

Concerning the two C's: The outside frame (the two A's) is: Who Christ is, and what is accomplished through Him. The two C's speak of the ministry of John the Baptist. That arrangement gives the inside section special emphasis. This does NOT mean it is more important or more true. This Gospel begins with the foundation and eternal truth of the life of God! The Word was in the beginning; He is eternal; He was with His Father. The gospel message is not merely to inform of the facts of God. This Gospel is written to urge people to believe in Christ. John is very focused in pursuing that goal.

Concerning D above (vv.9-14): This section also has an A^{BB}A structure, which is evidence that it was very carefully constructed.

- D. Coming into the world, yet not known by it (1:9,10)
 - E. He is rejected by His own (1:11)
 - F. Receiving Him (1:12)
 - G. The benefit: the right to be children of God (1:12)
 - F. Believing in His Name (1:12)
 - E. What caused the opposite of rejection, becoming a child of God by a birth produced by God (1:13)
- D. Coming here in flesh to dwell among us (1:14)

The prologue sends a strong signal that John will follow the themes of Christ coming here (sent by the Father), His being rejected and accepted, and why it is that some do believe and others do not. John will speak of believing almost 100 times, three times more than the other Gospels combined! Though he speaks often of eternal life, here he begins by holding out the wonderful benefit of believing – that those who do are given by God the family rights of His children. First, they must become His children by receiving Christ. John does not announce that as covenant people, they are God's children already apart from conversion. This Gospel is a God-given message of evangelism. The first half of the book will

¹ In much writing now, the shorter way to distinguish between John the Baptist and John the Apostle is to refer to one as “the Baptist”, which simply means he was John the Baptizer. The other is often called simply the Evangelist.

say much about becoming God's children, while the latter part (except for the passion narratives) will be devoted to teaching God's children. The only time Jesus ever taught an audience that was not a mixture of believers and unbelievers was after Judas left in 13:30. That very brief time – comprised of one evening! – receives more than four chapters in John.

1:1,2 *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.*

1:1,2 The apostle opens with words that immediately bring to mind Genesis 1:1. His Jewish readers hearing “in the beginning” would expect *God* as the next word, but John says “the Word”! This is surely deliberate since some things that follow parallel creation in Genesis 1. In the first creation, light came first and gave life to things dependant on it, and darkness was separated from the light, and unable to prevent it.

To say that the Word was there in the beginning asserts His eternity – and thus His deity. There was no beginning in which He was not already there. The Father did not precede Him and create Him.² We are not left with only a clear implication, for it says plainly in this context that the Word was God. Before doing so, it connects Christ to His Father – Who is mentioned about 90 times in this Gospel. So before it announces that He is God, it states His closeness to God the Father. This is typical of the rest of this Gospel. Jesus spoke of His Father more than anything and in relation to everything. Jesus coming to save us is a wonderful truth, but the foundation of all He did was to please the Father Who sent Him (8:29). The word for *with* in Greek is not the more standard preposition *syn*, but *pros*, a word that carries a sense of specific relation to the Father.

The Jehovah's Witness argument: “But Jesus is just a god!” By such words JW's deny the Lord God of Israel! In Greek the words in 1:1 go like this: “the Word was with *the* God and God was the Word. He was in the beginning with *the* God.” The two times *theos* refers to God the Father, there is an article with it; the one time *theos* refers to Christ, there is not. So the JWs teach that this shows that only the Father is really God and Jesus is just “a god”.

Their confusion is enormous:

- a) Had the text said in reference to the Word, “the God was the Word” this would indicate that the Word (Christ) and the God (the Father) are the same person.
- b) Unlike English, Greek has no indefinite article. English can say “the”, “a,” or leave the article out. In Greek there are two choices only, the article is there or it isn't. So the original text did not call Jesus “a god”. It says God without the article.
- c) The word *theos* appears in this prologue with no article four more times (vv.6, 12, 13, & 18). Each time it refers to the Father, yet not once does the JW “Bible” translate a reference to God the Father as “a god”! They save this demotion for Christ. In 20:28 it uses “the” with *theos* in reference to Jesus! The JWs know Thomas said that when he saw Jesus, but they explain that text as Thomas being so surprised to see Him that he let out an exclamation similar to “O my God!”
- d) Since all things were made through Him with no exception allowed (1:3), Christ cannot be a part of creation. He must precede all of it as its Creator! (Colossians 1:16)
- e) The JW's have gained the great benefit of having a doctrine of God that they can fully comprehend. Having a god more on our level is always an attraction to the sinful mind. Christians have a God we cannot fully comprehend, thus such a deep mystery as the Trinity will eternally amaze us. They have a god of their own creation and understand him perfectly.

Jehovah's Witnesses take their name from Isaiah 43 & 44. They teach Jesus is “a god”, a created person. Isaiah 43:10 says, “Before me no god was formed, nor will there be one after me.” Isaiah 44:6 says “I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God,” 44:6. There is no other God beside Him, and no other Savior. “Was it not I, the LORD? And there is no God apart from me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none but me,” Isaiah 45:21. The Isaiah texts deny that there is “a god” apart from the Lord, and thus Isaiah prohibits the JW mistranslation of John 1:1!

² The idea that Jesus was the first thing created comes from some false teachers who misunderstand Colossians 1:15, “the firstborn of all creation”. There Jesus is said to be pre-eminent over creation as its Creator. *Firstborn* may indicate the position of the oldest or older son in Oriental society, but the emphasis can simply be on a person's position without reference to time. A son born after a sister was still called the firstborn even though he was not the first one born in that home. The double inheritance of the firstborn Reuben actually went to Jacob's favored son Joseph, who had two tribes of Israel from him (Manasseh and Ephraim) though Joseph was born after many of his brothers. In the case of Joseph's sons, his father Jacob gave the greater position to the second one, Ephraim, treating him as the firstborn. (Genesis 29,30,48 and especially 49:3,4,22-26)

“*The Word was God...*” This does not mean He was for a while, since no one can be God unless that one always was. The Lord is and was and is to come (Revelation 1:4). Other Scriptures call Christ God: Romans 9:5, Titus 2:13, Hebrews 1:8, as well as John 1:18. The term “Son of God” makes Him equal to the Father yet distinct from Him (5:18). The chief proof above all others of the deity of Christ is that He as Lord has the divine Name, as in Philippians 2:9-11 and John 8:58.

Word as a Title of Christ³

Only in this prologue does John use the word “Word” for Christ; after this introduction he spoke of Christ ordinarily as Jesus – 240 times! When he uses *Christ* it is usually “the Christ”, a word familiar to Jews. In Jewish custom when they avoided pronouncing YHVH, the Name of the Lord, they would use substitute words, such as “the Name”. In the time between the Old and New Testaments, they also used “Word” for the Lord in their Scripture readings. In John 1, *Word* does not refer to God without distinction of Persons, but God the Son.

John does not use *Word* the way the Greeks did. They never meant a person by it. One great benefit of using *Word* for the Greeks is that it carried a sense of something universal, something that supported everything. But for them *Word* was an impersonal abstraction. John is ready to take advantage of their sense of something beyond them to speak of the Transcendent Person Who was always at the Father’s side but came here to make Him known. He differs strongly from the Greeks’ concept of a detached Word, because he writes of the Word Who became flesh and for a while lived among us! John’s careful use of *Word* was similar yet very new to their meaning of the term.

As the Word made flesh, Jesus spoke the words received from His Father and gave them to us. In this Gospel this theme is strongly emphasized. His words are God’s! (3:34). Abiding in Christ and abiding in His words mean the same thing (15:4,7,10). They bring authority in prayer (15:7), cleansing (15:3) and fruitfulness (15:7,8). Our great need is to believe (5:24) and keep them (17:6). By them we have eternal life (6:68). Those who will not hear His word are of the devil (8:44-47), and they will be judged by the word they have refused (12:44-50). Whether we love Christ is made clear by whether we keep His words (14:24). The Father’s word of truth by means of the Incarnate Word makes His people holy (17:17).

1:3 *All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.*

1:3 This text does not teach that Jesus is an independent Creator. Since all has been created *through* Him, this reveals that Another has been active in creation. What the Father does, He does through His Son, and what the Father and Son do, They do through Their Spirit. (See 5:19)

Since sin entered the world, the human mind is capable of terribly irrational thinking. One might say glibly that through Christ all things were made and then retain some exceptions. If He made all things, there are no exceptions. The Lord has seen fit in this verse to state a positive and then to follow with a crisp denial of any exception. Often the way to state something most clearly is to state it both ways. For example, we are justified by faith alone; we are *not* justified by any response other than faith. Here in v.3, we find affirmation and denial joined.

1:4,5 *In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.*

1:4,5 The literary structure is: life/life, light/light, and darkness/darkness. In the first creation light sustains life. But the light that Christ is is also moral and one that demands an obedient response. Darkness cannot overcome light; likewise Satan’s “*domain of darkness*” (Colossians 1:13) could not prevent Christ from delivering His own into “*the inheritance of the saints in light*” in the kingdom of God’s beloved Son (Colossians 1:13). The darkness loses; it could not overcome the light.

The intensity of the conflict is not yet fully evident in this prologue. There is a terrible conflict between darkness and light. Christ is the light that shines for all men, but John has not yet said that Jesus’ own people did not know Him (1:10), or receive Him (1:11), because men love darkness and hate the light (3:19-21). The fact that darkness did not overcome the light show that there resistance to it. The forces of darkness and all who side with Satan will

³ See Morris pp.102-111.

lose eternally (see Luke 11:17-23; John 8:21,24). The prologue introduces a number of themes briefly and early. These will be developed later. Darkness will overtake the one who refuses to believe in the light (12:35,36).

Christ is never presented in John as a light, a way, a truth or a life. He is exclusively the light above all others, and the only way to the Father. “*Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved,*” (Acts 4:12). Israel sang to the Lord as their light (Psalm 36:9). Christ the Lord is the light God has given, and men will find no other light which can take anyone to God (2 Corinthians 4:6). There is one eternal city with no need of sun or moon; there is no night there (Revelation 21: 22-27). In the Judgment Day those who reject Christ the Light will be cast into darkness (Matthew 8:12; 22:13; 25:30).

1:6-8 *There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.*

1:6-8 There came ⁴ a man from God named John. The Messiah did not show up without being properly introduced See Isaiah 40:3, and the final words of the OT: Malachi 3:1; 4:5,6. John had high credibility because of his courageous preaching, and the people were convinced that he was a prophet from God (Matthew 21:26). He was the first to identify Jesus as the Messiah (1:29,34). His testimony was a witness to Christ, and he baptized so that Jesus might be revealed to Israel (1:30). John said that Jesus is the Son of God. Later in John 1, a number left John to follow Jesus when all they had to direct them was John’s testimony. He was careful to make clear that he was not that light (1:20). John’s ministry was not centered in himself; no true servant of God commits such an abomination. (2 Corinthians 4:5). John came to witness to truth about Christ. No one can believe without something about Christ to define Him and serve as a reason to believe in Him.

1:9-11 (ESV) *The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.*

★**1:9 (NIV)** *The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.*

1:9-11 Looking back to the early days of John’s ministry, it makes perfect sense to say that the Light was coming; then soon Jesus did arrive on the public scene. The Light had come. Should the text be that all are enlightened? That would involve all accepting the Light when we are on the verge in John 1 of being told of the world’s rejection of Him. It is preferable to take this as meaning that the Light shines on all, is resisted by many, and accepted by some. This is what John was saying in 3:19-21. In 8:12 He said, “I am the Light of the world”; then He showed the benefit was only to those who follow Him. Those who refuse His light remain in darkness (12:35 & 46).

Christ was in the world made through Him. The world did not know Him. Now the Evangelist switches from the created things to God’s people by changing the gender of the word. First it is “His own” as in world, then “His own” as in people. Christ the Creator is the Lord God of Israel, and to His own He came. In spite of the clarity and power of John the Baptist’s fervent testimony, they rejected Him.

For a moment it appears that the Apostle John was reporting a failure in the mission of Christ. Christ is the Creator and the promised Messiah was properly introduced by John in a way foretold in OT prophecies. Yet the world did not know Him, nor did His own people (Isaiah 53:1-4). The Gentiles and the Jewish people would never receive a Messiah they did not want or understand. This pathetic response is followed by a proper one in vv.12,13.

1:12 (ESV) *But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God,*

⁴ The verb in Greek is not the same as in vv1,2, where we find, “In the beginning *was* the Word.” When the ESV renders 1:6 as, “There was a man sent from God ...” it might make the reader think that these are parallel. The NIV makes a beneficial distinction by saying, “There *came* a man ...” Jesus always was, but John had a beginning and appeared as a prophet sent from God. The way Jesus was (eternally) and the way John was are not the same.

1:12 (KJV) *But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name:*

1:12 Some do believe (v.12). In v.12 John the evangelist does not say why, only that people receive Christ, which is the opposite of rejecting Him. Receive means believe. In a Gospel devoted to the benefit of believing, the Apostle loves to use a variety of words for faith.

Since believing to become a child of God is a matter of receiving, the text includes gift language, for God *gives* the right to become a child of God. The gospel truth is that sinners receive and God gives. This is an essential matter to understand in becoming a child of God. Reversing this or changing it is destructive of the gospel. The Apostle Paul said, "... *The promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed ...*" (Romans 4:16). We receive Christ to become children of God, which is fundamentally different from imitating Christ to become children of God, or by obeying the law. If the promise of God were acquired by anything other than faith alone, it could not be by grace but by our merit and accomplishment. As the structure of the entire prologue reveals, this is John's most emphatic point. When sinners hope by receiving to be accepted by God into His family, the sinner's faith contributes nothing. The believer simply receives as a gift the status of a child of God.

God gives the *right* to become children of God. By what authority may anyone call himself a child of God? It is God Who grants this right to whoever receives His Son. Our right to enter God's family is that God has given it graciously for nothing we have done or ever will do. We received Christ, and as a result all the benefits that come from Christ and His ministry become the rightful possession of every believer. The prologue makes "He gave the right to become children of God" the centerpiece of the entire section. See Appendix 1A below.

1:13 *who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.*

1:13 This prologue now addresses a question that must surely arise in our minds. If neither the world nor His people Israel knew or received Christ, how is it that anyone did? ⁵ John 1:1-18 has either created a contradiction or it approaches the matter from more than one angle. Of course it is the latter.

All children are born. Those who believe are given the right to become His children by a birth. The text affirms more than the right given; v.13 supplies the cause of the birth. In his classic manner, the Evangelist joins positive and negative. (He did a similar thing in vv.3 & 8.) In a way designed to deny every possibility of a natural explanation of birth into God's family, he tells how we are not born and how we are. These children are born of God! Not by the right bloodline, or the normal desire that results in children, or the zeal of a father (the word in Greek means *male*) to have children. Rather than all of this, these children are born *of God*.

This is a foretaste of the subject of being "born again" in John 3. Salvation is the result of a supernatural birth. Does a birth generated by God obviate faith? Certainly not, for this text presents both together. It affirmed and meant all it said in v.12 and all it said in v.13. Believing is the conscious human response to Christ. Believing is what we do when we become children of God, yet being born of God is the unseen activity of God in us. It does not say how they are related. For now, we simply see that both have been affirmed without the slightest worry that anyone might say they cannot both be true. We do not choose between two truths; we simply accept both. We have as much role in bringing about our new birth as we have in causing our physical birth. To believe/receive is the command of the gospel that men are to obey (2 Thessalonians 1:8). To give sinners birth unto spiritual life is the role of God alone. God brings to life (Ephesians 2:1-5). Those who become children He has turned from rejecters into accepters.

1:14 *And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.*

⁵ Later in these notes we shall have to see if John means each and every person when he uses the word *world*. Its use in v.10 ought to show that John does not use it to include every individual on earth.

1:14 The prologue returns to the Incarnation. Previously, it said that He was coming (v.9) and He was here in the world (v.10). Now for the first time we are told He became human. There is a great danger that someone might think He entered human life to some degree without actually becoming fully human. The Apostle John declared bluntly that the Word became flesh. No one has yet found a sharper way to say it in so few words. Incarnation means He became the kind of physical flesh that we are, with the same kind of muscle meat, hard bones, skin, teeth, eyes, hair and voice. He became flesh that people could see, hear and touch (1 John 1:1). The Creator became a creature, because the entire physical composition of Jesus was from material made through Him.

It does not say Christ simply lived among us. John's choice of a verb is significant. Jesus tabernacled ⁶ among us. Just as God was in the tabernacle in the wilderness long ago, God as the Word entered a tabernacle of flesh. In Moses' day the people saw the glory of God over the tabernacle in the fire and the cloud. Later when people saw Christ, human beings were seeing the glory of God again. To say, "*We have seen His glory*" is a way of saying that Jesus Christ is God Who has appeared among us. (See also 1 Timothy 3:16.) The One Who became flesh is the Word Who was God in the beginning (1:1,2). Christ has always been the radiance of God's glory (Hebrews 1:3), but the Incarnation brought that glory into human contact and view.

- The OT used the language of *tabernacle* to speak of the Lord residing among His people.
- People saw the glory of God above that tabernacle in the desert.
- Glory and tabernacle appear together in Exodus 40, "*The glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.*"

When the Lord entered the tabernacle Moses built, His glory was seen there. "*Then the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. Moses could not enter the Tent of Meeting because the cloud had settled upon it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle*" (Exodus 40:34,35). "*While Aaron was speaking to the whole Israelite community, they looked toward the desert, and there was the glory of the LORD appearing in the cloud*" (Exodus 16:40). "... *The glory of the LORD appeared at the Tent of Meeting ...*" (Numbers 14:10).

Moses' Desire to See the Glory of God in Exodus 33,34 Moses' ancient request of the Lord, "Show me your glory" (Exodus 33:18) is now answered for all who will look to Christ, for in Him the glory of God was revealed. He was God dwelling among men who saw Him. That glory is revealed in His works or signs (2:11) and in all He did and said. Only this Gospel ties the glory of God to Jesus' sacrifice on the cross (13:31,32). In other words, what the Father and Son did through the cross shows the goodness and glory of God. He is the kind of God Who would do that. In Moses' time the Lord made His goodness pass before Moses, and God spoke to him of being gracious to whom He chose to be gracious (Exodus 33:19). All three – the Presence of God, His glory, and His grace – appear together in Exodus 33,34 just as they do in 1:14-18. Moses wanted to know God intimately, but here is the One from the bosom of the Father – Jesus not Moses – Who has known Him intimately and revealed Him to man. (See also Matthew 11:27). Moses occasionally met God in the Tent of Meeting or in a cloud on a mountain, but Christ is the only begotten Son, Who has always been *with God* (1:1).

The Revelation of Glory Peter, James, and John were the three disciples permitted to be with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration in Matthew 17, Mark 9 and Luke 9. Peter did not write many pages of the NT, but he often speaks of glory and mentioned seeing Jesus' majesty on that mountain (2 Peter 1:16-18). When the Lord was transfigured before them and His face shone brighter than the sun, Peter spoke of building three *tabernacles*. In his Jewish background Peter knew that such glory was not to be fully exposed. Not sure what to say, and knowing how God dwelt in a tabernacle in the past, he suggested building tabernacles again.

John wrote that the tabernacle of God *will be* with men in Revelation 21, and that the tabernacle of God *has been* with men when Christ was in His flesh among us. The heavens showed the glory of God in ancient times (Psalm 19). Later the Son made God known in the fullest revelation yet. In the future when He comes, every eye will see Him (Revelation 1:7). At His glorious appearing (Titus 2:13) we shall see God (Matthew 5:8) in our resurrected flesh (Job 19:25-27) in a redeemed creation (Romans 8:20-25) and He will dwell with man again (Revelation 21:3, 22-27).

⁶ In the NT only the Apostle John uses this verb *dwell* (Greek: skēnoō). Apart from 1:14, all occurrences of this word are in Revelation. Revelation 7:15; 12:12 & 13:6 all refer to heaven. About the New Jerusalem it says: "*Behold the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them ...*" (Revelation 21:3). Thus in 1:14 we have recognized Jewish language for the dwelling of God among men used to describe the Presence of Jesus in flesh among us.

Exodus 33, 34	John 1
<p>33:7 Now Moses used to take the tabernacle ...</p> <p>33:9,10 The pillar of cloud (the Shekinah) ⁷ descended... All the people saw the pillar of cloud</p> <p>33:11 Yahweh spoke to Moses face to face</p> <p>33:20 You cannot see My face</p> <p>33:23 You will see my back, but my face shall not be seen</p> <p>34:6 abounding in love and faithfulness</p>	<p>v.14 The Word became flesh and tabernacled among us</p> <p>v.14 We beheld His glory</p> <p>v.17 The law was given through Moses</p> <p>v.18 No one has ever seen God</p> <p>v.18 The only begotten God has made Him known</p> <p>v.14 full of grace and truth</p>

For the translation of *only begotten* see Appendix B below. When it speaks of the glory of the Only Begotten, it is the observable glory of Christ that is specifically in view in v.14. The tabernacle motif implies nothing less than and nothing other than the glory of God. This is not the glory of the Father apart from the Son, but the glory of the Only Begotten Himself – the Word Who became flesh. Thus the Evangelist writer asserts that the glory of Christ *is* the glory of God – another way to affirm that the Word was God.

The Lord Jesus at no time in eternity past, during His days on earth or since, has ever thought of Himself as detached from the Father. Except in the Father’s role as Father, the Son is what the Father is, and always spoke of Himself in relation to His Father. That is what it means for Him to have the Father as His own Father, and to be from the Father. To see Him is to see the Father and there is nothing more to the Father than we have in the Son. Jesus said without exaggeration, “*Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father*” (14:9). This will become a major issue in John 5. It is one today, because many speak of a vague God apart from Christ. The Father and the Son are one (10:30).

The Father is a God of grace and truth, and this quality is found fully in Christ. In fact, John was probably still writing with Exodus 33/34 in mind. The same LORD Who abounds in love and faithfulness (Exodus 34:6) is shown here to be the Incarnate Lord, full of grace and truth. These two words are synonyms for the love and faithfulness mentioned in Exodus. The virtues of God are found in His holy angels and in godly men, but as creatures made in His image, they are mere reflections of God. No creature possesses God’s qualities to the full. But with Christ, it is different. “*For in him [Christ] the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily*” (Colossians 2:9). The Apostle Paul and the Apostle John are teaching the same view of Christ.

1:15 (*John bore witness about him, and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.'"*)

1:15 The prologue returns to John the Baptist. We might expect that v.16 would follow immediately after v.14, since both speak of fullness. However, the apostle has good reason to put it here: 1) it maintains the A^{BB}A structure, and 2), what John the Baptist said fits in with God taking residence in human flesh. John meant that Jesus as a man was younger than he was, but as the eternal Lord, Jesus lived before him. Mentioning Jesus’ recently acquired humanity does not deny that He had lived forever before His incarnation. John made this statement in the form of an enigma which challenges us to ponder what it means. The Apostle John wanted us to think clearly about Christ and believe essential propositions about Him.

⁷ “The Shekinah glory was nothing less than the visible manifestation of God,” Carson, p.128.

The earlier words of John as a witness were abstract. Here for the first time in the prologue, we have an element of historical narrative. The Word becoming flesh is an historical event, but John chose to describe what Jesus became rather than refer to the birth event recorded in Matthew and Luke. In v.19 the narrative will really begin, but in v.15 we have a sample of John the Baptist's witness. (Witnesses do not talk only of themselves as the content of their testimony; they must testify to something or someone other than themselves.) The Baptist spoke the words of v.15, then John the writer chose his testimony to support the truth that the eternal Word had become flesh.

John was not that light (v.8) so he spoke of One far beyond himself. (It is a tragic thing to listen to any sermon and find afterwards that the hearer has learned more of the speaker than he has of Christ.) John used a kind of conundrum or riddle. How can anyone be both before and after, or younger and yet older? The Word Who was God and Who took on our flesh is the Eternal God, though as a man Jesus was younger than John, as Luke 1 makes clear. Since the Man Jesus is God, of course He should surpass John in attention, public recognition, authority and rank as the prophet of God, and in the worship we must give only to God.

Centuries later we may not sense how crucial the witness of John was. It was prophesied in Isaiah 40:3-5 and the Old Testament closes with a prediction of John the Baptist in Malachi 4:5,6. John was a lamp that gave light so others would recognize Christ (5:33-36). (See also Matthew 11:7-15; and 21:25-32.) After his death, John's witness continued to bear fruit (10:40-42). Two Gospels give a birth narrative of Jesus, but all four include the ministry of John.

1:16 *And from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.*

1:16 God proclaimed Himself as the Lord Who is full of grace⁸ in Exodus 34:5-7 – a major statement about God by God! Later, men saw Christ, but when Moses wanted to see God's glory, he was allowed to see only His back (or wake). God limited Moses' sight but proclaimed to his ears this famous description of Himself and His glory:

Then Moses said, "Now show me your glory." And the LORD said, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. But," he said, "you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live." Exodus 33:18 – 20.

Then the LORD came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the LORD. And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation." Exodus 34:5-7

"We have all received grace upon grace," ESV. We receive grace in the place of grace. For the NIV to translate this as "one blessing after another" is quite flat and loses some of its richness. John does not use the word *grace* often; when he does it should stand out to us. Grace is more specific than blessing. All grace and truth is fully present in God the Son. But His grace must affect someone. Grace cannot be grace if it never reaches out to save. So John the Apostle, who was saved by the grace of God in Jesus, testifies personally in his prologue. In v.14 he says *we* have seen His glory, speaking only for those who had seen Jesus. Then John spoke for all of God's people of all time; we have all received grace in Christ.

1:17 *For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.*

1:17 The expression "grace in the place of grace" in v.16 is unusual. V.17 elaborates on what v.16 means. God was very gracious to Israel (Deuteronomy 26:1-11). To have God as their covenant God was a privilege shown to so few. God had chosen Israel graciously. The law was a treasure, as Psalm 119 and Deuteronomy

⁸ For Roman Catholics to pray to Mary is an evil in itself; prayer should be offered to God alone. In such prayers, to say of Mary that she is "full of grace" is to speak of her with a description true only of God. Such a proclamation as Exodus 34:5-7 is a matter of God showing and gaining glory for Himself. This glory He will not share with others (Isaiah 48:11). Only God is full of grace.

4:5-8 make clear. Yet all the compassion, mercy, patience and grace in the OT would be inconsistent if our truthful God had made all these claims and then left His people in their sin. There was the climax of grace still to come. God would send a Savior so that later grace would supercede earlier grace, when God in our flesh would die for the sinner's sin. Because God is gracious, what He began in giving His law through Moses would be finished in the grace of Christ. The previous grace and the grace that followed are complementary, yet they are also in contrast.

If all we had was the law, we would have direction, a standard, a righteous guide, and God's requirements for obedience, but sinners derive no power from the law (Romans 3:19,20). Since we have broken it, the law can only condemn us. It can never give sinners a favorable ruling that we are righteous. We need the forgiveness of sin found only in the grace of Christ dying for us. We need the obedience of Christ (Romans 5:19,20). We need the sanctifying power of the Spirit of Christ (Romans 8:9-11). In Jesus, all this grace has arrived on earth. The grace of drawing more and more to Christ continues on earth daily. So truth has arrived in the sense that God has been true to – or faithful to – His commitment to bring salvation. In the majesty of grace beyond our understanding, the Word became flesh. The law was given though Moses, but it is not enough; we need the grace and truth that came through Jesus Christ.

We may be puzzled why things are said in such a cryptic form such as “grace for grace.” It is the nature of this prologue to give brief *undeveloped* elements that John will enlarge on later.

1:18 (ESV) *No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.*

1:18 (NIV) *No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known.*

1:18 (KJV) *No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him.*

1:18 There are differences of opinion here on: 1) what the proper text is for this verse, and 2) what a certain word in Greek means.

1) Should it be “the only begotten God” or “the only begotten Son”? Some translations simply say “the only Son” or “the only God” or “God the One and Only” (NIV). I think it should be “the only begotten God”. Centuries ago when scribes were making copies of the NT by hand, they were more likely to be surprised at words like the only begotten *God* (how can God ever be begotten!!) and they would be more tempted to write instead the only begotten *Son*. To use *Son* would be more familiar language, as in 3:16. (The rule is that the more difficult reading is likely to be the correct text.)

2) Should the Greek word *monogenes* be translated as *one and only* or as *only begotten*? This is a major decision in translation with most recent versions opting for “one and only” or something similar. I think the older decision to retain the word *begotten* was the right one. For this see Appendix 1B below.

The Apostle ended his well-designed prologue as he began with strong statements of Christ. Christ is the Word Who was with the Father. Now at the end (v.17) the Name of Jesus appears with a repetition that He is God and has come from the bosom of the Father (or the Father's side). No one could be more qualified to make God known. In His prayer at the end of His earthly ministry, He spoke of eternal life as simply knowing God and knowing Him (17:2,3). He manifested the Father's name to His own (17:6). That prayer shows how 1:18 has been fulfilled. He did make the Father known.

Moses wanted to see the Lord, but no man can see God and live (Exodus 33:18-23). The Only-Begotten God Who is at the Father's side has always seen Him. By sending Christ – One more qualified than Moses, the giver of the early written revelation – God has sent God the Son as the ultimate revelation of God. The Lord Jesus always spoke and acted with the sense of mission that the Father had sent Him, and that He was not here to draw attention to Himself but to make the Father known. Peter came to understand this and stated the purpose of Christ's death “*that He might bring us to God*” (1 Peter 3:18). Finally, the One Who has seen God has made Him known to us who cannot see God and live. To turn away from Christ is to give up the only way we can ever come to know, see, and be with God (Matthew 5:8; Revelation 21:3).

Appendix 1A: The **A B B A** Structure of John 1:1-18

A

1 1st In the beginning was the Word, **2nd and the Word was with God**, and **3rd the Word was God**. **2** 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.

B

4 In him was life, and the life was the light of men. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

C

6 There came a man sent from God, whose name was John. **7** He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. **8** He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.

D

9 The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world. **10** He was in the world,

E

and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. **11** He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. *Negative*

F

12 But to all who did receive him,

G

he gave the right to become children of God.

F

to those who believed in his name,

E

13 who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. *Positive response*

D

14 And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

C

15 (John bore witness about him, and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.'")

B

16 And from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. 17 For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

A

18 No one has ever seen God; **3rd God the only Begotten**, **2nd who is at the Father's side**, **1st he has made him known**.

Appendix 1B: The Meaning of *Only Begotten*

The translation and meaning of the Greek word *monogenes* (*μονογενής*) does not have universal agreement. In generations following, people who had Greek as their native language seemed to understand it as “only begotten”. That Christ was begotten of the Father was a common affirmation in the early church. The translation *only begotten* continued for centuries – as in “His only begotten Son” from John 3:16 in the KJV. However, many recent scholars of NT Greek think *monogenes* really means *one of a kind* or *unique*. It is not a problem that these scholars are seeking to distort what the Bible is saying. This is an honest difference of opinion. I think the old understanding is probably correct, but my readers should know that men of high integrity and scholarship disagree with me, and they may be right.

One argument for translating this word as *unique* is to get beyond the notion of, say, *an only child*. How could Isaac be ever called *only begotten* in Hebrews 11:17 when Abraham was also the father of Ishmael? Isaac was unique but obviously not the *only* one generated from the body of Abraham, so the word cannot be governed by the concept of mere generation. It seems the scholars (maybe even a majority of evangelical scholars) have won the argument, yet the Greek-speaking teachers in the centuries were surely aware of that word in Hebrews 11.

Unique does not clearly connote the sense of majesty. A family may have a retarded child and with much love they may call him “unique”, but they do not mean majestic; they mean special. The point being made in John 1:14 & 18, is not the unusual uniqueness in the sense that no one compares with Christ, but rather the fullness of His deity. We should not lose that sense in this important word. I think John is speaking of the glory of the Only Begotten not only in contrast to others but that Christ has no contrast to the Father! He speaks not only of the glory of the Monogenes in a comparative sense, but of His glory as the Monogenes from the Father in a derived sense. The term *unique* tends to say that Christ is something in Himself, whereas *begotten* accounts for the nature of Christ by emphasizing His source in the Father. That means His source in the Father has no beginning. Some call this an eternal generation that never took place because it always was! I think John used this word in 1:14 and 1:18 because Jesus is qualified to reveal the Father, not because He is superior to others, but because He is the eternal expression of the essence of God.

Some argue that *monogenes* does not come from *gennaō*, the Greek verb to beget or to generate. It has two n’s. They point to one n in *monogenes*, yet the verb *to beget* does have in older Greek a derivative form of that word with only one n. The early Greek theologians were aware of this single n when they understood it as “only begotten”. All languages have such quirks. We want to avoid the horrible error that Jesus was created, so we may be inclined for theological safety to avoid language of the generation of the Son by the Father. The verb *gennaō* is used of Christ in Hebrews 1:5, “*Today I have begotten you,*” (ESV) translated in the NIV as “*Today I have become your Father.*” The NIV may give a safe meaning, but a word that means generating was still used in Hebrews 1:5 of the Father and the Son. Of course, we want to avoid the error of saying there was an event or a time when Jesus was generated. That is a very wise stance, but we should not miss that the Lord Jesus proceeds (and always has) from the Father as the Father’s full, complete and exact likeness. We never reverse this to speak of the Father proceeding from the Son or as One in the image of the Son. We are not speaking of mere similarity but of the Son’s absolute sharing of the full essence of what it is to be God, including the Father’s eternal existence. When the Father wanted to show Himself in the way above all others, He sent the Son Who is His Only Begotten Son. There is no attribute or quality about the Father that is not just as true of Christ. We might say that in the Incarnation, God represented Himself fully in another Person. Jesus reveals the Father as God because He is God the Only Begotten of God the Father. To speak of Christ as the “one and only” fails (in my opinion) to communicate the full majesty of the term as used by John. Jesus’ intimacy with the Father – as one from the Father’s bosom – is not that He is vastly different from others, but that He is the full image of and from the Father. (See Hebrews 1:3.) To say “one and only” does not indicate in what specific sense Christ is unique, but “only begotten” does! “One and only” distances Christ from creation (a needed perspective), but “only begotten” views Christ in relation to the Father.

When we follow the intentional ABB_A structure of John 1:1-18, we see that the third phrase from the beginning “... *the Word was God*” lines up exactly with the third from the end “... *God the Only Begotten*”.