

A Masterpiece: The Prologue of John

I wonder how long it took. Surely it wasn't something that was written carelessly, without planning, without thought. He must have spent a good deal of time and energy on it. I refer to the prologue of John, the first eighteen verses of the Gospel that bears his name. Some people are a little uncomfortable with the idea of one of the writers of Scripture working hard on a particular passage, a special section. There are others that think the writers of the Bible must have gone into some kind of "trance" while being led by the Holy Spirit to speak God's truth. But such is not a truly biblical idea. These holy men indeed spoke from God, but that does not exclude at all the use of their highest efforts to present God's truth (2 Peter 1:20-21; 2 Timothy 3:16-17).

The prologue of John is a literary masterpiece. Its balance is almost unparalleled. It is a carefully crafted work of art, a revelation that has inspired believers for almost two thousand years. The brightest minds

have been fascinated by it and have always marveled at its beauty. It is an inexhaustible treasure.

Few passages of Scripture are more important to our study of the Trinity, and in particular, of the person of the Son, than the prologue of John. You see, John clearly intended this passage to function as a lens, a window of sorts, through which we are to read the rest of his Gospel. If we stumble here, we are in danger of missing so much of the richness that is to be found in the rest of the book. But if we work hard to grasp John's meaning here, many other passages will open up for us of their own accord, yielding tremendous insights into the heart of God's revelation of himself in Jesus Christ.

I live in Arizona, and we have a number of old abandoned mines out in the desert, including the famous, though not yet located, "Lost Dutchman Mine." Most of these mines required a *tremendous* amount of work to open and run. But the hoped-for reward, the precious commodity of gold, was worth the effort on the part of the miners. In the same way, the prologue of John calls us to do some work, to stretch ourselves beyond what might be our "comfort zone," but the reward is more than worth it.

As you scan through the next few pages you will see some Greek terms. Don't let them stop you. I will explain what each one means, and for the person who is intent upon reaching the goal and truly entering into the treasure John has placed in these verses for us, they are necessary. No one studies Shakespeare solely in German or French—the subtleties of Shakespeare's language, his turning of a phrase, his use of synonyms or double meanings, can be lost in translation. So it is with John. John didn't write the prologue in English, and the person who wishes to delve deeply into his meaning will seek to hear him speaking *as he once spoke* in the beautiful Greek language.

¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being. (John 1:1-3)

Here is the translation with the important Greek terms provided.

The Greek term *follows* the English term that translates it.

(John 1:1–3) In the beginning [ἐν ἀρχῇ] was [ἦν] the Word [ὁ λόγος], and the Word was with God [πρὸς τὸν θεόν], and the Word was God [θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος]. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through Him [πάντα δι' αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο], and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being.

Each of the terms provided above is very important, and as we work through the prologue, you will see how each word reinforces the truth of the Christian belief in the inspiration of the Scriptures as well as in the deity of Jesus Christ.

IN THE BEGINNING

“In the beginning” should sound somewhat familiar. Many see this as a purposeful reference to Genesis 1:1, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” Just as Genesis introduces God’s work of creation, so John 1:1 introduces God’s work of redeeming that people, and that work has been going on just as long as creation itself. Yet we do not need to focus solely upon the same point of origin in creation that is found in Genesis 1:1, for John is yet to give us some very important information about the time frame he has in mind.

THE WORD

We must keep foremost in our thinking the purpose of John’s prologue. It can be summed up rather simply: Who is the Word? From verse 1 through verse 18, John is telling us about the Word. We dare not take our “eye off the ball,” so to speak, and miss the fact that throughout this passage, the identity of the Word is at issue. Right at the start we must ask why John would use such a term as “the Word.” What is he attempting to communicate?

The Greek term translated “Word” in this passage is *logos*. It is certainly not an unusual term. It appears three hundred and thirty times as a noun in the Greek New Testament alone. It has a wide range of meanings, from the basic “word” to merely a “matter” or a “thing.”

So why would John choose such a word for such an important task?

The Greeks had used the term *logos* in their philosophical explanations regarding the functioning of the world. The *logos* was for them an impersonal ordering force, that which gave harmony to the universe. The *logos* was not personal in their philosophy, but it was very important.

In the Old Testament there are dim reflections upon a similar concept. The "Word of the Lord" came to have deep significance to the Jewish people. Such passages as Psalm 33:6, "By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and by the breath of His mouth all their host," lent themselves to the idea that there was more to the "word" than one might see at first glance. During the few centuries prior to the coming of Christ, Jewish theologians and thinkers would see in such phrases as "word of the Lord" and in the "wisdom of God" references to a personal rather than an abstract concept.

But John went beyond everything that came before in his use of the term *logos*. In fact, as we proceed, we will see that it would be better to write *Logos* than *logos*, for John is using the word as a name, not merely a description. He fills the impersonal *logos* that came before him with personality and life, and presents to us the living and personal *Logos*, the Word who was in the beginning.

THE LITTLE WORD "WAS"

The English word "was" is about as bland a term as you can find. Yet in Greek, it is most expressive. The Greeks were quite concerned about being able to express subtleties in regard not only to *when* something happened, but *how* it happened as well. Our little word "was" is poorly suited to handle the depth of the Greek at this point. John's choice of words is deliberate and, quite honestly, beautiful.

Throughout the prologue of the Gospel of John, the author balances between two verbs. When speaking of the *Logos* as He existed in eternity past, John uses the Greek word ἦν, *en* (a form of *eimi*). The tense¹ of the word expresses *continuous action in the past*. Compare this with the verb he chooses to use when speaking of everything else—found, for example, in verse 3: "All things *came into being* through

Him," ἐγένετο, *egeneto*. This verb² contains the very element missing from the other: a point of origin. The term, when used in contexts of creation and origin, speaks of a time when something came into existence. The first verb, *en*, does not. John is *very* careful to use only the first verb of the *Logos* throughout the first thirteen verses, and the second verb, *egeneto*, he uses for everything else (including John the Baptist in verse 6). Finally, in verse 14, he breaks this pattern, for a very specific reason, as we shall see.

Why emphasize the tense of a little verb? Because it tells us a great deal. When we speak of the Word, the *Logos*, we must ask ourselves: how long has the *Logos* existed? Did the *Logos* come into being at a point in time? Is the *Logos* a creature? John is very concerned that we get the right answer to such questions, and he provides the answers by the careful selection of the words he uses.

Above we noted that John gave us some very important information about the time frame he has in mind when he says "in the beginning." That information is found in the tense of the verb *en*. You see, as far back as you wish to push "the beginning," the Word is already in existence. The Word does not come *into* existence at the "beginning," but is already *in* existence when the "beginning" takes place. If we take the beginning of John 1:1, the Word is already there. If we push it back further (if one can even do so!), say, a year, the Word is already there. A thousand years, the Word is there. A billion years, the Word is there.³ What is John's point? The Word is eternal. The Word has always existed. The Word is not a creation. The *New English Bible* puts it quite nicely: "When all things began, the Word already was."

Right from the start, then, John tells us something vital about the Word. Whatever else we will learn about the Word, the Word is *eternal*.⁴ With this John begins to lay the foundation for what will come.

WITH GOD

The next phrase of John 1:1 tells us something new about the Word. The Word is eternal, but the Word was not alone in eternity past. "The Word was with God (πρὸς τὸν θεόν)." Yes, it is the same word "was,"

again pointing us to an eternal truth. The Word has eternally been "with God." What does this mean?

Just as Greek verbs are often more expressive than their English counterparts, so too are Greek prepositions. Here John uses the preposition *πρός* (*pros*). The term has a wide range of meanings, depending on the context in which it is found. In this particular instance, the term speaks to a personal *relationship*, in fact, to *intimacy*. It is the same term the apostle Paul uses when he speaks of how we presently have a knowledge comparable to seeing in a dim mirror, but someday, in eternity, we will have a clearer knowledge, an intimate knowledge, for we shall see "face to (*pros*) face" (1 Corinthians 13:12). When you are face-to-face with someone, you have nowhere to hide. You have a relationship with that person, whether you like it or not.⁵

In John 1:1b, John says the Word was eternally face-to-face with God, that is, that the Word has eternally had a relationship with God. Immediately, questions about how this can be pop into our minds, but for the moment we must stick with the text and follow John's thought through to its conclusion. He will answer our question about the identity of "God" in due time. For now, we note it is the normal word for God, *θεόν* (*theon*).⁶ It is the word any monotheistic⁷ Jew would use to describe the Almighty God, Yahweh, the Creator of all things. Someone such as John would never think that there were *two* eternal beings. John will explain himself soon enough.

WAS GOD

The third clause of John 1:1 balances out the initial presentation John is making about the Word. We read, "and the Word was God (*θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος*)." Again, the eternal *en*. John avoids contradiction by telling us that the Word was *with* God, and the Word *was* God. If John were making this an equation, like this:

$$\text{All of the "Word"} = \text{All of "God"}$$

he would be contradicting himself. If the Word is "all" of God, and God is "all" of the Word, and the two terms are interchangeable, then how could the Word be "with" himself? Such would make no sense.

But John beautifully walks the fine line, balancing God's truth as he is "carried along" by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:21, NIV). John avoids equating the Word with all of God through his use of the little Greek article, the equivalent of our word "the" (ὁ).

It may seem "nit-picking" to talk about such a small thing as the Greek article, but as my friend Daniel Wallace points out, "One of the greatest gifts bequeathed by the Greeks to Western civilization was the article. European intellectual life was profoundly impacted by this gift of clarity."⁸ He also notes, "In the least, we cannot treat it lightly, for its presence or absence is the crucial element to unlocking the meaning of scores of passages in the NT."⁹ The writers of Scripture used the article to convey meaning, and we need to be very careful not to overlook the information they provide to us through the use, or nonuse, of the article.

The third clause of John 1:1 provides us with an example of what is known in grammar as a *predicate nominative* construction.¹⁰ That is, we have a noun, the subject of the clause, which is "the Word." We have an "equative" or "copulative" verb, "was," and we have another noun, in the same case or form as the subject, which is called the *nominative* case, that being "God." We need to realize that in Greek the order in which words appear is not nearly as important as it is in English. The Greeks had no problem putting the subject of a sentence, or its main verb, *way* down the line, so to speak. Just because one word comes *before* another in Greek does not *necessarily* have any significance. What does this have to do with John 1:1? Well, in English, the final phrase would be literally rendered, "God was the Word." But in English, we put the *subject* first, and the predicate nominative later. The Greeks used the article to communicate to us which word is the subject, and which is the predicate. If one of the two nouns has the article, it is the subject. In this case, "Word" has the article, even though it comes *after* "God," and hence is our subject. That is why the last phrase is translated "the Word was God" rather than "God was the Word."

Stay with me now, for there is another important point to be seen in the text. If both of the nouns in a predicate nominative construction

like this one have the article, or if both *lack* the article, this is significant as well. In that case, *the two nouns become interchangeable*. That is, if "Word" had the article, and "God" did, too, this would mean that John is saying that "God was the Word" and the "Word was God." Both would be the same thing. Or, if neither of them had the article, we would have the same idea: an equating of *all* of God with *all* of the Word. "God" and "Word" would be interchangeable and equal terms.

You see, much has been made, especially by Jehovah's Witnesses, of the fact that the word "God" in the last clause of John 1:1 is *anarthrous*, that is, without the article. You will notice that there is no form of the Greek article preceding the term θεός (*theos*). Because of this, they argue that we should translate it "a god." This completely misses the point of why the word *theos* does not have the article. If John had put the article before *theos*, he would have been teaching *modalism*, a belief we mentioned earlier that denies the existence of three divine persons, saying there is only one person who sometimes acts like the Father, sometimes like the Son, sometimes like the Spirit. We will discuss modalism (which is also often called "Sabellianism") later. For now, we see that if John had placed the article before *theos*, he would have been making "God" and the "Word" equal and interchangeable terms. As we will see, John is very careful to differentiate between these terms here, for He is careful to differentiate between the Father and the Son throughout the entire Gospel of John.¹¹

One commentator has rightly noted regarding the prologue, "John is not trying to show who is God, but who is the Word."¹² The final phrase tells us about the *Word*, emphasizing the *nature* of the Word. F. F. Bruce's comments on this passage are valuable:

The structure of the third clause in verse 1, *theos en ho logos*, demands the translation "The Word was God." Since *logos* has the article preceding it, it is marked out as the subject. The fact that *theos* is the first word after the conjunction *kai* (and) shows that the main emphasis of the clause lies on it. Had *theos* as well as *logos* been preceded by the article the meaning would have been that the Word was completely identical with God, which is impossible if the Word was also "with God." What is meant is that the Word

shared the nature and being of God, or (to use a piece of modern jargon) was an extension of the personality of God. The NEB paraphrase "what God was, the Word was," brings out the meaning of the clause as successfully as a paraphrase can.¹³

In the same way, the *New Living Translation* renders John 1:1, "In the beginning the Word already existed. He was with God, and he was God."

INDEFINITE, DEFINITE, QUALITATIVE, OR WHAT?

Before leaving John 1:1, we need to wrestle with the controversy that surrounds how to translate the final phrase. We've touched a bit on it above, but it would be good to lay out the possibilities. Without going into all the issues,¹⁴ the possible *renderings* fall into three categories:

Indefinite: hence, "a god."

Definite: hence, "God."

Qualitative: hence, "in nature God."

Arguments abound about how to translate an "anarthrous pre-verbal predicate nominative," and most people get lost fairly quickly when you start throwing terms like *those* around. Basically, the question we have to ask is this: how does John intend us to take the word θεός in the last clause? Does he wish us to understand it as *indefinite*, so that no particular "god" is in mind, but instead, that Jesus is *a god*, one of at least two, or even more?¹⁵ Or is θεός definite, so that *the God* is in view? Or does the position of the word (before the verb, adding emphasis), coupled with the lack of the article, indicate that John is directing us to a *quality* when he says the Word is θεός? That is, is John describing the *nature* of the Word, saying the Word is deity?

In reference to the first possibility, we can dismiss it almost immediately. The reasons are as follows:

Monotheism in the Bible—certainly it cannot be argued that John would use the very word he always uses of the one true God, θεός, of one who is simply a "godlike" one or a lesser "god." The Scriptures do

not teach that there exists a whole host of intermediate beings that can truly be called "gods." That is gnosticism.

The anarthrous θεός—If one is to dogmatically assert that any anarthrous noun must be indefinite and translated with an indefinite article, one must be able to do the same with the 282 other times θεός appears anarthrously. For an example of the chaos that would create, try translating the anarthrous θεός at 2 Corinthians 5:19 (i.e., "a god was in Christ . . ."). What is more, θεός appears many times in the prologue of John anarthrously, yet no one argues that in these instances it should be translated "a god." Note verses 6, 12, 13, and 18. There is simply no warrant in the language to do this.¹⁶

No room for alternate understanding—It ignores a basic tenet of translation: if you are going to insist on a translation, you must be prepared to defend it in such a way so as to provide a way for the author to have expressed the alternate translation. In other words, if θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος is "the Word was a god," how could John have said "the Word was God?" We have already seen that if John had employed the article before θεός, he would have made the terms θεός and λόγος interchangeable, amounting to modalism.

Ignores the context—The translation tears the phrase from the immediately preceding context, leaving it alone and useless. Can He who is eternal (first clause) and who has always been with God (second clause), and who created all things (verse 3), be "a god"?

F. F. Bruce sums up the truth pretty well:

It is nowhere more sadly true than in the acquisition of Greek that "a little learning is a dangerous thing." The uses of the Greek article, the functions of Greek prepositions, and the fine distinctions between Greek tenses are confidently expounded in public at times by men who find considerable difficulty in using these parts of speech accurately in their native tongue.¹⁷

A footnote appears after the comment on the article, and it says:

Those people who emphasize that the true rendering of the last

clause of John 1.1 is "the word was a god," prove nothing thereby save their ignorance of Greek grammar.

So our decision, then, must be between the *definite* understanding of the word and the *qualitative*. If we take θεός as *definite*, we are hard-pressed to avoid the same conclusion that we would reach if the word had the article; that is, if we wish to say *the God* in the same way as if the word had the article, we are making θεός and λόγος interchangeable. Yet the vast majority of translations render the phrase "the Word was God." Is this not the definite translation? Not necessarily.

The last clause of John 1:1 tells us *about the nature* of the Word. The translation should be *qualitative*. We have already seen in the words of F. F. Bruce that John is telling us that the Word "shared the nature and being of God."¹⁸ The *New English Bible* renders the phrase "what God was, the Word was." Kenneth Wuest puts it, "And the Word was as to His essence absolute deity."¹⁹ Yet Daniel Wallace is quite right when he notes:

Although I believe that θεός in 1:1c is qualitative, I think the simplest and most straightforward translation is, "and the Word was God." It may be better to clearly affirm the NT teaching of the deity of Christ and then explain that he is *not* the Father, than to *sound* ambiguous on his deity and explain that he is God but is not the Father.²⁰

Here we encounter another instance where the English translation is not quite up to the Greek original. We must go beyond a basic translation and ask what John himself meant.

In summary, then, what do we find in John 1:1? In a matter of only seventeen short Greek words, John communicates the following truths:

The Word is eternal—He has always existed and did not come into existence at a point in time.

The Word is personal—He is not a force, but a person, and that eternally. He has always been in communion with the Father.

The Word is deity—The Word is God as to His nature.

We would all do well to communicate so much in so few words! But

he did not stop at verse 1. This is but the first verse of an entire composition. We move on to examine the rest.

MORE ON THE ETERNAL WORD, THE CREATOR

In verses 2 and 3, John continues his work of introducing us to the *Logos*, the Word. He reemphasizes the startling statement of verse 1 by insisting that "He was in the beginning with God." Again the English is not quite as expressive as the Greek, for John puts the Greek word translated "He" at the beginning of the phrase so that we could very well understand him to be saying, "*This One*" was in the beginning, or "*This is the One*" who has eternally existed in personal relationship with God (the Father, as we shall see in verse 18, and as John himself says in 1 John 1:2).

Verse 3 then introduces another evidence of the deity of the *Logos*: His role in creation. "All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being." Here is a phrase that can *only be used of the one true God*. Creation is always *God's work*. If the *Logos* created all things, then the *Logos* is divine—fully.²¹ John is very careful. He doesn't say "most things," or "some things," but *all things* came into being, were made, by the *Logos*. Creation took place *through* Him, by His power. Apart or separately from Him, *nothing was made which has been made*.²² This is clearly an *exhaustive* assertion. Just as Paul in Colossians 1:16–17 uses the entirety of the Greek language to express the unlimited extent of Christ's creative activity, so, too, John makes sure that we do not leave room for *anything* that is not made by the *Logos*. If it exists, it does so because it was created by the *Logos*.

John continues his work of introducing us to the Word by stating that in Him was life, and that life was the light of men. He goes on to speak of the preparation for the coming of the *Logos* into the world through the ministry of John (vv. 6–8). He then turns to the matter of the rejection, by some, of the *Logos*, and the acceptance by others, resulting in regeneration and salvation (vv. 10–13). In these verses John speaks to us about what the *Logos* does by coming into the world. But

starting in verse 14 John returns to the subject of *who* the *Logos* is. And what he says is as amazing as what we saw in the first few verses.

ETERNITY INVADES TIME

Throughout the first thirteen verses of the gospel of John, our author has carefully distinguished the eternal *Logos* from that which is made by Him through the use of the verbs *en* and *egeneto*. But in verse 14 he communicates a deep truth to us by changing his pattern, and that for a clear reason. He writes:

And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.

"And the Word *became* flesh." Here John uses *egeneto*, a verb that refers to an action in time. And the reason is clear: the Word entered into human existence, "became flesh," at a particular point in time. The *Logos* was not eternally flesh. He existed in a nonfleshly manner in eternity past. But at a blessed point in time, at the Incarnation, the *Logos* became flesh. The Eternal experienced time.

We need to stop and consider this truth for just a moment. Sometimes Christians who have known God's truth for a long time become somewhat hardened to the impact such a declaration was meant to carry. The Word, the Creator of all things, the Eternal One, *became flesh*. Maybe we think so highly of ourselves that we are not properly struck by such a statement. We need to be amazed by the assertion, "The Word became flesh." How can the unlimited enter into limitation? John does not tell us. The mechanics of *how* are not revealed to us, for God is under no obligation to answer every prying question. We are simply told that the eternal Word became flesh. Faith rests in God's revelation.

The Word *became* flesh. He did not simply *appear* to be flesh. He was not "faking it," to use modern terminology. Jesus was not simply some phantom or spirit masquerading as a real human being. He *became flesh*. John uses a term that was easily understandable in his day. It's not an unusual word. At times it refers solely to *flesh*, as in the

material stuff of our bodies. At other times it refers to the whole human nature. In any case, its meaning could not be missed. The *Logos* entered into the physical realm. He became a human being, a real, living, breathing human being.

John is so concerned that his readers understand that he points out that He "dwelt among us, and we saw His glory." John is not reporting a second- or third-hand story. He is giving an eyewitness account. Jesus dwelt among us. He lived His life in the middle of the mass of humanity. He rubbed shoulders with sinners and saints. He walked dusty roads, thirsted for water on hot days, and reclined at the table with friends, and even with enemies. He really existed, He really lived.

Why is John so concerned about this? We note that he repeats this emphasis in 1 John 1:1-5, and then goes so far as to say that anyone who denies that Jesus Christ came in the flesh is the antichrist (1 John 4:2-3)! The reason is found in the fact that even while the apostles lived on earth, false teachers were entering into the church. Specifically, there were men teaching a system that would eventually become known as "Gnosticism." This belief system teaches that everything that is spirit is good, and everything that is material (including flesh) is evil. This is known as the belief in "dualism." Spirit is good, matter is evil.

What, then, does a person do who believes in dualism but wants to make some room for the message of Jesus? He has to get around the plain fact that Jesus Christ came *in the flesh*. So these teachers, known to the early church by the term *Docetics*,²³ denied that Jesus truly had a physical body so that they could keep the idea that He was good and pure and holy. They even spread stories about disciples walking with Jesus along the beach, and when one of the disciples turned around, he saw only one set of footprints, because, of course, Jesus doesn't leave footprints! John is *tremendously* concerned that his beloved readers do not fall for this kind of teaching, so he strongly emphasizes the reality of Christ's physical nature. He leaves no stone unturned in his quest to make sure we understand: the eternal *Logos*, fully deity by nature, eternal Creator, the very source of life itself, *became a human being*. This is the only way to understand his words.

John insists that he and his companions observed the glory of the

"only begotten from the Father." It would be good to stop for a moment and make sure we have a firm understanding of what "only begotten" means. Huge misunderstandings have arisen about the use of this term. For those interested in the in-depth story, an extended note is attached to this chapter. To summarize that information for our purposes here, the Greek term used is μονογενής (*monogenes*). The term does not refer to *begetting*, but to *uniqueness*. While the traditional translation is "only-begotten," a better translation would be "unique" or "one of a kind."

In verse 14, John uses the term as a title, "the glory of the One and Only" (NIV). Immediately we see that the term *monogenes* has special meaning for John, for he speaks of the One and Only having "glory." The One and Only comes "from the Father." This is the first time John has specifically identified the Father by name in this Gospel. He differentiates the Father from the *Logos*, the "One and Only," clearly directing us to two *persons*, the one coming *from* the other. Yet the *Logos* is seen to have glory, to have a divine origin with the Father, and is said to be "full of grace and truth."

John moves on to again make note of John's testimony to Jesus in verse 15, and finally makes it plain that he is speaking of Jesus Christ by using that phrase for the first time in verse 17. But before he closes his prologue, John uses what is often called the "bookends" technique. He provides a closing statement that sums up and repeats, in a different form, what he said in his introduction. And this is found in the final verse of the prologue, verse 18.

THE ONLY SON, WHO IS GOD

When you are speaking to someone, it is usually the last thing you say that will be remembered. That's what we are taught in classes on "How to Make a Great Presentation." John seemed to understand that concept, because in John 1:18 he provides us with a summary statement, the second bookend, so to speak, for his prologue. Here's what he wrote:

No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who

is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him. (NASB)

Let's note a couple of other translations:

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

No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known. (NRSV)

Yet if you have a KJV or NKJV, your translation reads differently at a very key point. Note the NKJV translation:

No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared *Him*.

The KJV and NKJV follow a later, less primitive text in reading "the only begotten Son" rather than "the only begotten God" (NASB). We have here a textual variant, pitting the earliest, oldest manuscripts of the gospel of John against the later bulk of manuscripts. Without going into a lot of detail,²⁴ there is every reason to accept the reading of the earliest manuscripts, and to see the later emendation as a natural mistake made by scribes who were accustomed to the phraseology "only begotten son."

But even once we have established the proper reading of the text, how do we translate it? The phrase in question is *μονογενὴς θεός* (*monogenes theos*). The renderings given above provide a wide range of translation, from the very literal "the only begotten God" (NASB) through the NIV's "God the One and Only" to the NRSV's "God the only Son." There are excellent summaries of the issue available,²⁵ so we won't go into the technicalities here. Suffice it to say that I find the NRSV's translation to be the best, "God the only Son." If we wanted something a little more literal, I would suggest, "the only Son, *who is* God." This preserves the word order that John uses, placing *monogenes* as a title immediately preceding *theos* (God).

What is John telling us by using such an unusual phrase? One thing is for certain: he is *not* telling us that Jesus Christ was "created" at some

time in the past. He is *not* denying everything he said in the previous seventeen verses and turning Jesus into a creation! Such ideas flow from wrong thinking about what *monogenes* means. Remember that the term means "unique" or "one of a kind." In light of this, John's meaning is clear. In fact, I would submit that outside of a Trinitarian understanding of this passage, John is making no sense at all! What do I mean?

John tells us that no one has seen God at any time. Is this true? Are there not many instances of men seeing God in the Old Testament? Did not Isaiah say that he saw the Lord sitting upon His throne in the temple (Isaiah 6:1-3)? So what is John saying? How can we understand his words?

The key is found in the final phrases of verse 18, specifically, "who is at the Father's side." When John says "no one has seen God at any time," he is referring to the *Father*. No man has seen the *Father* at any time. So how do we have knowledge of the Father? The *μονογενής* has "made Him known" or "explained Him."²⁶ The *unique One* has made the Father known. Or, in light of the use of the term Father, the *Only Son* has revealed the Father. But this is not merely a dim reflection, a partial revelation, provided by the Only Son. This is the *monogenes theos*, the Only Son *who is God*. The divine nature of the *μονογενής* is again plainly asserted, just as it was in verse 1. This is what forms the "bookend," the assertion in verse 1 that the *Logos* is divine, repeated and reaffirmed here in verse 18 with the statement that the Only Son is *God*.²⁷

Another important fact to note from this verse is that if indeed no one has seen *the Father*, then what does this tell us of the Son? Who did Isaiah see in Isaiah 6? Who walked with Abraham by the oaks of Mamre (Genesis 18:1)? None other than the preincarnate Jesus Christ, the eternal *Logos*. John will develop this thought later in his Gospel, as we shall see when we examine those passages that identify Jesus as Yahweh.

With the great truths proclaimed in the prologue in mind, I would strongly encourage you to take the time to *read the entire gospel of John*. It's barely an evening's reading, and with the prologue acting as a

"lens," giving you the proper perspective of who Jesus Christ truly is, you will find passages leaping from the page, all of which confirm and substantiate the proclamation of John 1:1-18: Jesus Christ is God in human flesh, the eternal Creator of all things, "the Only Son, *who is* God!"