

## Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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### God: The Beginning of Beginnings!

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Dear Friends,

"As Scripture reveals God to His creation, specifically to His chosen people, His spiritual creation, it consistently reveals a God whose gracious nature designs to reveal, not conceal, Himself to us. It is highly likely that John wrote both his gospel letter and his smaller letters that appear later in the New Testament with a rather specific objective of rejecting the insidious errors of Gnosticism that attempted to legitimize itself by merging with Christianity. The Gnostic god is aloof, non-communicative, even to lesser Gnostic "demi-urges" or gods, and cannot be known by any. I find it ironic that a philosophy/religion that claimed exceptional inside knowledge regarding spiritual things built its foundation on the idea of a god who could not be approached or known by any. "John could have rejected Gnosticism by any number of logical strategies. In fact he employs several such strategies in all of his writings. Why would he embrace a Greek religious/philosophical word, "Logos," to refer to the Lord Jesus Christ? The Greek word logos defines a concrete idea, not merely words that attempt to communicate the idea. We may say many words so as to leave doubt in our hearers' minds. At times we may speak words that actually confuse our hearers. Such failed attempts at communication fall distinctly short of the idea that inherently resides in this word "logos." "Logos" refers to the idea itself. When you and I talk through a question, explore the various options and concepts related to it, and reach that delightful "Aha" moment when we clearly understand the concept together, we have touched the "logos" of the idea. "What is the significance of the obvious point that John, far more than any other Biblical writer, uses this term "Word" or "Logos" to refer to the Lord Jesus Christ? If John intended to expose the insidious errors of Gnosticism and to equip his early Christian audience against it, he could not have chosen a more specific word to teach that Gnosticism and Christianity are in fact mirror opposites, not compatible ideas. While the Gnostic deity is altogether mysterious and unknown, not to mention unknowable, the Christian God went out of His way to reveal—not conceal—Himself to His creation, especially to those whom He chose to be His special people. Inherently "Word" communicates. "John further emphasizes this truth in the opening verses of his gospel by adding words and ideas together to make his point indisputable. The Word existed in the beginning; the Word did not have a beginning. The word existed, literally "face to face" as an equal with, God. "Thus by an examination of two of the most repeated words in John's writings, "love" and "Word," John sets his message apart by a convincing and powerful affirmation of the character of God at His most intimate level. "The whole idea of Incarnation not only distinguished ancient Christianity from Gnosticism and other religions, but the same truth continues to distinguish Christianity from other religious today. Other historical religions build shrines to honor their dead founder. In its annual calendar of events Christianity distinctly enshrines a lowly stable where Jesus was born and an empty tomb that He borrowed for three short days. We do not enshrine a grave, but an empty tomb. There can be no doubt that Jesus' burial place was located in the immediate vicinity of Jerusalem. There can be little certainty as to its specific location. Tourism makes millions of dollars by its efforts to locate the specific burial site of Jesus, but we cannot prove that the site is the actual burial place of our Lord. Nor do we need to! Where ever He lay for three days, known or unknown, today it is an empty place! "Gnosticism shuddered—still does—at the idea of God becoming a literal man and taking onto Himself a literal human body. Thus in another specific point that John emphasizes more than any of the other New Testament writers (though none of them diminish the importance of the Incarnation!) the fact of the

Incarnation. It was God, not a confused underling "demiurge," who took onto Himself briefly a real human body. "These foundational truths are as essential to the character of Biblical Christianity today as when they were written in the first century. They are as rejected by errant philosophies and religions as intensely today as in the first century. Without them Christianity degenerates into a senseless and near-meaningless religion that becomes much like Shakespeare's "tale told by an idiot; full of sound and fury," meaning nothing. With this truth as the foundation of all other tenets of Christianity we witness a life-changing, world-changing truth that, despite all human efforts to destroy it, has survived and blessed humanity for twenty centuries. "May we never leave this glorious foundation. Joe Holder

### 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."*** ([Joh 1:1-2](#)) It would be difficult to read these words and not think of [Ge 1:1](#), "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth." ([Ge 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 [Pr 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 [Pr 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."<sup>[1]</sup> 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 [Ge 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 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. Roberston 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 e?μ? [eimi] to be which conveys no idea of origin for God or for the Logos, simply continuous existence. Quite a different verb (??e?et? [egeneto], became) appears in verse 14 for the beginning of the Incarnation of the Logos."<sup>[2]</sup> 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 [Ge 1:1](#) and [Joh 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). Te?? (#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 [1973]: 75-78; DM, 139-40; GGBB, 266-69)." <sup>[3]</sup> 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" ([Ge 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" ([Pr 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.

Elder Joe Holder

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

<sup>2</sup>A.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), [Joh 1:1](#).

<sup>3</sup>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.