

The Prologue (John 1:1–18)

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Session 3

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Abstract

This session examines the prologue of the Gospel of John (John 1:1–18) as a masterfully designed "atrium" or "vestibule" that introduces the core theological themes of the entire Fourth Gospel. Dr. David Turner highlights the chiasmic literary structure of the passage, which centers on the reader's response to Jesus as the pre-existent Logos and eternal Creator. The session explores the background of the Logos in Greek philosophy, Hellenistic Judaism, and the Hebrew Bible, refutes the grammatical and theological views of the New World Translation, and compares Jesus' ultimate revelation of divine glory and grace to the partial revelation given to Moses in Exodus 33–34.

Outline

I. Introduction to John's Prologue (John 1:1–18)

A. Purpose and Scope of the Session

1. Third video in an 18-session series on the Gospel of John chapter-by-chapter.
2. Focuses exclusively on the prologue, which is one of the most unique and significant sections in the New Testament.

B. The Architectural Analogy

1. Compares John 1:1–18 to a beautifully designed vestibule or atrium of a fine home or building.
2. The entryway serves to beckon, welcome, and invite readers into the house as a whole.
3. Introduces major theological themes that are developed throughout the Gospel:
 - a. The pre-existence of Jesus (e.g., John 8:58: "Before Abraham was born, I am").
 - b. Jesus as the source of light and life (e.g., John 8:12: "I am the light of the world").
 - c. The ministry of John the Baptist (John 1:19ff, John 3, John 5).
 - d. Personal response to Jesus (the division between those who reject Him and those who receive Him).
 - e. The manifestation of God's glory (e.g., the first miracle in John 2, and Jesus' prayer in John 17).

II. Literary Structure of the Prologue

A. The Chiastic Structure (Chiasm)

1. Definition of a chiasm: A literary device that arranges phrases or words symmetrically to aid memorization and focus attention.
2. Symmetrical structure is visible in the vocabulary of John 1:1–2 in both Greek and English.

B. Structural Symmetry of the Prologue

1. Outer elements:
 - a. The Word as the transcendent Creator of the universe (verses 1–5) matches the Word as the ultimate revealer of God (verses 16–18).
 - b. The testimony of John the Baptist as a witness to the light (verses 6–8) matches John's testimony in verse 15.
 - c. The light coming into the world (verses 9–10) matches the Word becoming flesh in the incarnation (verse 14).
2. The structural center:
 - a. Located in the middle (verses 11–13).
 - b. Contrives the tragic rejection of the Word by His own creation.
 - c. Celebrates the receiving of the Word, which authorizes believers to become children of God.
 - d. Highlights the primary theological focus of the Gospel: how the reader responds to Jesus.

C. Alternative Structural Model: Transcendent Creator vs. Incarnate Revealer

1. Part 1 (verses 1–13): The Word is the transcendent Creator and giver of life and light.
2. Part 2 (verses 14–18): The Word is the incarnate revealer who is fully human and brings full grace and truth.
3. Contrasts Jesus with Moses as a key theological theme.

III. Background and Meaning of the Logos ("the Word")

A. Greek Philosophical Background

1. Logos in Stoic and Pythagorean philosophy.
2. Represents the impersonal principle of reason, logic, structure, or orderliness in the universe.
3. John's strategy: Jesus is the personal fulfillment of what the Greeks conceptualized as an impersonal order.

B. Hellenistic Jewish Background (Grecianized Diaspora)

1. Logos as the personification of Wisdom (Greek Sophia, Hebrew Hokmah).
2. Reference to Proverbs 8: Wisdom personified as a female entity present with God before creation, acting as a master workman.
3. Reference to apocryphal books like Sirach 1: Wisdom as a created attribute of the Lord.

4. John's corrective: Unlike Wisdom in Sirach 1 or Proverbs 8 (which can be interpreted as God's first creation), John emphasizes that Jesus is the eternal Creator, not a created being.

C. Hebrew Bible Background (Tanakh)

1. God speaks the world into existence (Genesis 1:3: "Let there be light").
2. God's word is active, performative, and creative.
3. Psalm 33:6: "By the word of the Lord the heavens were made."
4. Isaiah 55:8–11: God's word behaves like precipitation, succeeding in the task for which it was sent.

D. Theological Synthesis of Logos Backgrounds

1. These backgrounds are not mutually exclusive.
2. The Hebrew Bible concept of the active Word of God is at the forefront.
3. John selected a rich term that would resonate with a diverse audience of Greeks, Hellenized Jews, and traditional Jews, while emphasizing that Jesus supersedes all previous concepts.

IV. Grammatical and Theological Controversies: John 1:1

A. New World Translation (NWT) Refutation

1. Watchtower Bible translation: "and the Word was a god."
2. NWT Grammatical Argument: Since the Greek text lacks the definite article (ho) before Theos in the final clause of John 1:1, they translate it with an indefinite article ("a god").
3. Grammatical corrections:
 - a. Greek grammar does not have a one-to-one correspondence with English indefinite articles.
 - b. The omission of the article does not imply a subordinate "a god" with a lowercase "g".
4. NWT Theological Position: Watchtower teaches that Jesus was God's first creation (identifying Him with the archangel Michael).
5. Refutation from John 1:3:
 - a. Verse 3 states: "through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made."
 - b. Under NWT's theology, verse 3 would have to say all things except Jesus were made, which contradicts the text.
 - c. Since nothing was made without Him, Jesus is the Creator and cannot be part of the creation.
6. Refutation of NWT John 1:18: Translating "only begotten god" with a lowercase "g" fails standard Greek grammar.

B. The Trinitarian Triangle

1. Latin formulation: Pater (Father), Filius (Son), and Spiritus Sanctus (Holy Spirit) are each Deus (God).

2. Distinction of Persons (non est): The Father is not the Son, and the Son is not the Spirit.
3. Unity of Essence (est): Each person of the Godhead is fully God.
4. John 1:1–2 application: "The Word was with God" shows distinction of persons; "The Word was God" shows unity of essence.

C. The concept of Perichoresis (Parachoresis)

1. Definition: The mutual indwelling and community relationship of the three persons of the Trinity.
2. Implications: What one person of the Trinity does, the other two are also involved in.
3. Rejects tri-theism (three independent gods) in favor of one God eternally existing in three persons who work together.

V. The Relationship of John's Prologue to Exodus 33-34

A. Context of Exodus 33–34

1. Moses meets with God in the Tent of Meeting, causing his face to glow from the divine presence.
2. Moses asks to see God's glory ("Show me your glory") to equip him for leadership.
3. God's response: Moses cannot see His face and live, but God permits him to catch a glimpse of His "back" from the cleft of a rock.
4. God proclaims His character in Exodus 34:6: "merciful and gracious, abounding in steadfast love (hesed) and faithfulness (emet)."

B. John's Use of Exodus Terminology

1. Greek translation: Hebrew hesed (steadfast love) and emet (faithfulness/truth) correspond to John's Greek terms charis (grace) and aletheia (truth).
2. Jesus is "full of grace and truth" (pleres charitos kai aletheias).
3. Theological fulfillment:
 - a. What Moses longed to see, believers have seen in Jesus ("We beheld his glory").
 - b. Jesus has shown us the face of God (John 14:9: "If you have seen me, you have seen the Father").
 - c. Jesus is in the "bosom of the Father" (closest intimate relationship), making Him known.

C. Jesus and Moses: Completion and Ultimate Revelation

1. John 1:17 comparison: "The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ."
2. Not a disparagement of Moses or the law (which was holy and good).
3. Rather, Moses provided a partial revelation, whereas Jesus provides the ultimate, complete revelation of God's character.
4. Clement of Alexandria: The other Gospels present the physical side (soma), while John presents the "spiritual" or "pneumatic" approach.

5. Saint Chrysostom: The Son of God condescended to become the Son of Man to raise humanity to unspeakable glory without diminishing His own divine nature.