



# The Relevance of John 1:1-18 for contemporary Christians

Kolawole Oladotun Paul  
Department of Theology  
ECWA Theological Seminary Igbaja, Nigeria  
E-mail: [Dotunpaul98@gmail.com](mailto:Dotunpaul98@gmail.com)  
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## Abstract

Often times, a written piece unfolds with a presentation which is somewhat introductory in nature. In this sphere, the preamble of the subject matter is unveiled and this tends to form the framework of the whole literature; in fact, a clear picture of the foreword helps the reader, audience or interpreter unravel the message of the piece because the prologue serves as a key to unlock several other parts of the book. This understanding seems inherent in the Gospel of John, one of the books that present the account of Jesus' ministry on earth. Although, the book of John has been widely controversial, its prologue (1:1-18) is an integral portion in the account and it has received a great deal of attention because of its wholeness and its importance to the book in its entirety. This study critically engages the prologue of the Johannine Gospel with the view of ascertaining its significance and importance to the Gospel account as a whole.

**Keywords:** Gospel, Jesus, John, *Logos*, Prologue

## Introduction

By 500 CE, all the Greek speaking Churches had accepted all books presently in the New Testament (Erickson, 1998), inclusive of John's gospel. There has been a growing perception that the Gospel writers were strongly influenced by the literary models and conventions of their day (Burridge, 1992; Awokoya & Kolawole, 2020). The prologues had a dramatic force in ancient writings which often set the mind of the audience (reader or listeners) ablaze and this is probably part of the reasons the portion of John's gospel has received a wide range of attention in contemporary times (Hooker, 2005). Some limit the opening of John's Gospel to the first five verses; Michael classifies the relatively small unit as a "preface or preamble" (Kolawole, 2020). But the majority of scholars place the decisive break at verse 18 (Michael, 2010). This study aligns with Michael's standpoint; in other words, John 1:1-18 is considered as the prologue. It is important to note that many scholars have attempted to engage this subject matter before now (Deeke; 1968; Bultmann, 1971; Barrett, 1978; Bruce; 1983; Brown, 2003). This study contributes to the body of knowledge by critically engaging the prologue of John's Gospel with implications for believers in contemporary times.

## The Word 'Prologue'

Beginnings of ancient books were important such that ancient writers did not trivialize narrative beginnings. Prologue means "before words" (Hooker, 2005: 184). Prologue can also mean introduction, preface, foreword, preamble or prelude. This section in John's Gospel has attracted the attention of Bible students with the resultant considerable influence on Christian theology (Barrett, 1972: 27).



In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. 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. (John 1:1-18)

Sequence and literary reading are the two basic approaches employed in engaging the Gospel by the scholars. The former follows a succession of ideas in a linear chronological manner; according to linear themes or a sequence of narrative (Barret, 1972; Burney, 2004). But the latter uses various literary models; parallelisms and chiasms (Culpepper, 1980; Ellis, 1984). Van Edmond (n.d.) asserts that:

John's presentation of the *Logos* who is Jesus Christ moves from God who is the Creator in the beginning, to God who reveals the Father because He knows the Father intimately. The way to sharing in this intimacy with the Father and becoming children of God (1:12) lies in believing (Gr. *pisteuein*). Throughout the Fourth Gospel, this belief (often to believe *in, eis*) is understood as an active commitment, one which "involves a willingness to respond to God's demands as they are presented in and by Jesus." This willingness to respond to Jesus is depicted here in the Prologue (1:12,13); repeated throughout the gospel (e.g. 2:11, 22; 3:16-18; 4:39, 53; 5:24; 7:31, 38 ; 8:30; 9:38, 10:42; 11:40; 12:42; 20:8), and reiterated in one of the two summary statements at the end of the book (20:30-31). For all its broad, cosmic scope, the Prologue presents a direct and personal question to readers of all times: will the one who reads believe, and share in the fullness of grace given by the One who has come from the Father to dwell alongside us?

### **The Relationship of the λόγος to God (1-2)**

The Greeks regarded *logos* 'as the principle of reason or order in the world' (Longman III, 2010: 360), therefore, λόγος in John's prologue has been argued extensively with the background in the Greek religious and philosophical cognition. Some scholars relate λόγος to the Old Testament (Proverbs 7:22–8:1) where God's wisdom attended the world's creation. αρχη means 'beginning' or 'origin' and the verb ἦν attached to ἀρχῇ engages λόγος (Word – later identified as "Christ" vs. 17) with an unusual attention; one who was present when creation took place. ἦν αρχη brings Genesis 1:1 to mind (Kolawole, 2020). John does not refer to the act of creating, but the time



before the creation, showing the Word's divine pre-existence (Haenchen, 1984:116). λόγος and θεός connotes an intimate personal relationship; though distinct in person λόγος and θεός are one; more like καὶ Θεός ἦν ὁ λόγος. In fact, πρὸς expression is repeated in the second verse; coupled with οὗτος it commencement reaffirming the truth of the first verse.

Kysar (1976: 25) asserts that whether one believes it or not, the Johannine λόγος is a person. λόγος as used by John here is the embodiment of God's life, light, creative power, and glory, which is communicated to human beings (Beasley-Murray, 1987: 91-10).

For more than a thousand year, the Jewish people had awaited the Saviour's coming. Upon this event, they had rested their brightest hopes. In song and prophecy, in temple rite and household prayer, they had enshrined His name. And yet at His coming, they knew Him not. The Beloved of heaven was to them 'as a root out of a dry ground', he had no form or comeliness, and they saw in Him no beauty that they should desire Him (White, 2011: 27).

Instead of using the term 'Christ,' a familiar term that clearly conveyed God's dialogue from within, to the people of all religions and streams of philosophy.

### **The Relationship of the λόγος with creation (3-5)**

John revealed λόγος as the creative agent of God; this is possible since ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν ἐν ἀρχῇ. Creation exercise is not a partnership work (God co-creating with angels). παντα, a plural nominative adjective refers to creation in its entirety; this is made explicit in verse 3 and re-echoed in verse 10: καὶ ὁ κόσμος δι' αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο – 'and the world was made through him'

God was revealed in all works of creation; it was Christ that spread the heavens, and laid the foundations of the earth. It was his hand that hung to the worlds in space and fashioned the flowers of the field. It was He that filled the earth with beauty, and the air with song. And upon all things in earth, and air and sky, He wrote the message of the father's love (White, 2011: 21).

Not only that λόγος created the world; He has— life (the power of understanding moral and spiritual truth) and this life was the— light of men. The word Ανθρωπων is used in the generic sense "...the light of mankind." The life -ζωή was light - φως because He supplied the standards or principles, by which the human race might live; if not, the race would perish. ζωη functioning as φως is revealed as the light of salvation that points to God (3:19-21; 8:12) in contrast to darkness (vs. 5). Although man missed the mark, darkness has never conquered the Light; thus, it is still ever-available for man.

### **The Relationship of the λόγος to John the Baptist (6-8)**

The narrative flow moves to the particular events that preceded the entrance of the Word into the world; this has to do with a man John - Ἰωάννης sent from God to witness and prepare the way for the λόγος. John the Baptist appeared on the New Testament scene before the beginning of Jesus' ministry in order to break the prolonged silence years. The study tags the three verses in this order <sup>vs. 6</sup> John's divine commissioning and confirmation <sup>vs. 7</sup> John's job description is <sup>vs. 8</sup> What John's job description is not. Many scholars suggested that this part was inserted as needed to combat the pretensions of some Christians who exalted the Baptist unduly (Acts 18:25, 19:3). ἀπεσταλμένος παρὰ θεοῦ reveals that John and Jesus have a common origin. This affirms John's ministry as approved of God; this clearly answer the question of how a man gets to know the things beyond the physical.



The ministry of John wasn't situated in the synagogue or temple, not even in the strategic commercial locale of those days. John was the last prophet in the Bible who spoke about the coming Messiah. John was also a preacher who baptized people and denounced their sins. Jesus Christ was John's cousin, and John was born some years before Jesus was conceived. John was raised under the teachings of his father Zechariah. He learned about the Torah, Talmud and other important Jewish Holy Books and scripture. John was probably being groomed for the priesthood like his father, but the Spirit of God had led John out into the wilderness to live as a wild man who learned how to eat off of the land. John's basic message is one of repentance; a complete turning away from sin and return back to God (Kolawole, 2019: 37).

Far beyond his physical attachment with Jesus, John is a witness. The feature of the John's mission was to bear witness to the claims of the Word. Why did John the Baptist bear a witness? If John did not bear witness, it does not in any way affect or change the identity of λόγος because He did not need a man's witness to be validated (5:34), but this is for the sake and benefit of men; to get the information from their fellow human. The reason for John's witness is that all might believe through him. This means not only Israel, but all men (regardless of the race, color, gender or tribe among others).

### **The Relationship of the λόγος to Man (9-13)**

Addition of 'ἀληθινόν' -'real' or 'genuine' to φῶς in verse 9 means genuine Light. The need for this emphasis is on the author's awareness of 'fake lights' around man such as modern consumerism for example. John attached the activity of creation again to that genuine Light; signifying that the Light is a genuine Light which created the universe; the absolute revelation of God's truth (Christ). The first two appearances of κόσμος in verse ten takes the forms of the former (the universe), while the latter talks about the ungodly multitude; the whole mass of men alienated from God, and therefore hostile to the cause of Christ. καὶ ὁ κόσμος αὐτὸν οὐκ ἔγνω – 'yet, the world did not know Him' points to the world's ignorance of the Pre-Incarnate Word. The use of the aorist active indicative - ἔγνω indicates that the world missed this one opportunity to know the Word when the Word was in its very midst.

The term τὰ ἴδια (own people or possessions) indicates that Christ came to his territory and all that it contains the land of Israel (Exodus. 19:5; Psalms. 135:4, Isaiah. 14:24-25; Malachi. 3:1). The supreme discourtesy mean Israel "did not receive (welcome) him," or "receive him to their side with worshipful acknowledgment." σοιοδελαβοναυτον - those who received him and τοιςπιστευουσινεις τονομαιτου - those who believe in his name are in the same category. ελαβονand πιστευουσιν is geared towards the same goal of Christ acceptance; the demonstration of faith in Him; this is presented in contrast of those who have not received Him. The entitlement of those who believe and received Him is the right to become children of God. The identity of those who believed is reiterated explicitly.αϊμάτων and σαρκός are closely associated with ἀνδρὸς including the θελήματος (family relationships, national and racial association, denominational heritage) are not the source of the believer's identity; instead John breaks the contrast by stating the correct source of the believer's strength, enablement and power θεοῦ.

### **The Relationship of the λόγος to Grace (14-18)**

The σαρξ (the flesh) is a strong reference to human nature. The term γίνομαι—"to become" signifies something changed its features or began a new situation by becoming what it was not



beforehand. Jesus Christ entered into humanity in all its fullness and limitations (Yet without sin). This part of the prologue emphasize the humanity of Christ, it encapsulates the presentations of other gospel accounts in regards to Christ as an actual person who dwelt amongst humans on earth in response to the heresies of Docetism (Guthrie, 1981: 329). This is why the body of Jesus Christ was not found when he resurrected; it could not undergo decay because it is not composed of matter because His nature had undergone the process of “being transformed or became flesh” and was not made by flesh.

Not only did Jesus Christ became a man, He also dwelt among people; He was known and can be identified. Some have interpreted εθεασαμεθα – ‘we have seen his glory’ to mean the Evangelist’s reference to himself and early Christians; some, to humanity. Whichever way, the fact is it was witnessed that Jesus lived as a man on earth, in fact, people saw His glory. Though the glory of Christ could have been seen by all, it was unknown to many people because of their blindness; only a few, whose eyes the Holy Spirit had opened, saw this manifestation of glory. However, the majesty of God was not annihilated though it was clothed in flesh. It was indeed hidden under the lowliness of the flesh, but its glory was still seen. Reference is again made about John the Baptist in verse 15 ranking Jesus Christ far way higher than himself. Although, this has to do with establishing a correct understanding about John and Jesus’ ministry; the reiteration can be seen as a backing for verse 14. Therefore, the claim of Christ as explained in this narrative is validated through His existence among people on earth.

The “fullness of grace and truth” in verse 14 is now explained in verse 16 as that through which mankind receives και χαριν αντι χαριτος – both grace upon grace. In verse 17, this fullness is described in terms of its historic superiority comparisons to that of Moses, through whom the Law was given (Hebrews 3:5). The Law was of divine origin; but the Grace which stems from Christ who fulfills the Law. This contrast is heightened in verse 18 where Christ’s location is ‘the bosom of the father’. The restored union here depicts a resettlement with the satisfied Father, following the accomplishment of redemption.

### **John’s Prologue and Contemporary Christians**

Believers were parts of the John’s audience in the early times; people who were tremendously far-removed from this contemporary period. This is why the nature of John’s community is still debatable into the future. Nevertheless, the significance and relevance of this section of John does not exclude the contemporary believers. Here, the study gears the discourse towards a sphere of exploring the significance of John’s prologue as well as its implications for believers in the contemporary time. Although John’s community (which connotes the environs, readers or audience of his account) is improbable in this contemporary time, the study posits that a clear conception unveils the inherent significance of his prologue to contemporary believers.

When people hear or say “the word of God,” the first thing that comes to mind is the “Bible”, here John’s account reveals that Jesus is the λόγος of God in Person. The nature of Christ being the λόγος was explicitly revealed in the prologue; Christ’ divine existence before eternity - εν αρχη ην ο λογος and His relationship with the father - και ο λογος ην προς τον θεον και θεος ην ο λογος. Καὶ ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο— ‘and the word became flesh’ unravel the mystery behind the nature of θεος. Therefore, Christ is the λόγος who was with God θεος in eternity past; but He is called by the name “Jesus” when He appeared on earth, to be recognized in human history - Καὶ ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο.



None so emphatically declares the humanity and deity of Jesus Christ, as does John. There was a great purpose for John's Gospel in the day and time it was written. It was absolutely imperative that John wrote this book. It was not merely an historic document, but rather it was used often in the church community to maintain the accurate account of the truth and was written to a community that was being heavily influenced by the errant philosophies of the day. A critical conception of John's account here reveals that it was God who came to earth to die for the sins of mankind because of his love for the man and He actually created in his image (Genesis 1:26-28). Believers in the contemporary are to get the full grasp of John's plight in unraveling the mystery of the Gospel in view of God's being in person of  $\lambda\omicron\gamma\omicron\varsigma$  and  $\theta\epsilon\omicron\varsigma$ . Therefore, an attempt to interpret  $\lambda\omicron\gamma\omicron\varsigma$  as a god and  $\theta\epsilon\omicron\varsigma$  as the God simply superior to  $\lambda\omicron\gamma\omicron\varsigma$  is an error because  $\lambda\omicron\gamma\omicron\varsigma$  and  $\theta\epsilon\omicron\varsigma$  as John used it are one; because  $\omicron\lambda\omicron\gamma\omicron\varsigma$  is distinct persons separate from the father but has the same essence and nature as  $\theta\epsilon\omicron\varsigma$ .

Several scholars have argued John's usage of  $\lambda\omicron\gamma\omicron\varsigma$  as closely linked with the Greek and Jewish background (Genesis 1:3, Psalms 33:6). The study opines that regardless of whichever conceptual background (Stoic philosophy, Jewish or Christian); the usage of John is significant to contemporary believers in the sense that the Evangelist made use of the audiences' understanding to reach out to them. He began to explain the Good News using a familiar concept they understood by migrating to what they have little or no knowledge of; he coherently and eloquently presents the message that seems obscure. The charges of blasphemy which run throughout the account supports this identified idea (John 5:18; 8:58; 10:31-39; 17:5; 19:7) (Köstenberger, 2004). Jesus' deity and identity is understood by titles in the prologue as He is given (Son of God, Messiah, the Word, Lamb of God, true bread, life, resurrection, and vine; (John 6:35, 10:11, 14; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1). The known concept helped John to capture the attention of his audience in paying attention to his message; this is probably why the book of John has received enormous attention in recent times.

John's presentation of "the Word that became flesh" has shaken the world view of many and has drawn attention of several individuals beyond the shores of his original audience. The study notes that the magnificent language and imagery of the prologue do not detract the reader from grasping its functional significance for comprehending the Gospel. People have different backgrounds; it is not a crime to dispense the Good News using a comprehensible style just as John did. However, in the course of presenting the Good News explaining from the known to the unknown, contemporary believers should be cautious so as not to be trapped with the common usage, understanding and stigma of the known concept. The study recommends that in the course and even at the end, the simple truth must be spelt; "Jesus Christ is God!"

Nicolaidis (2019) asserts that:

The notion of God-man ( $\theta\epsilon\acute{\alpha}\nu\theta\rho\omega\pi\omicron\varsigma$ ) refers to the incarnation and the hypostatic union of Jesus Christ, which is Christianity's most widely acknowledged and respected christological doctrine. The first use of the term as a theological idea appears in the writing of the 3rd-century Early Church Father Origen (Origen, *De Principiis*) who says: "This substance of a soul, then, being intermediate between God and the flesh –it being impossible for the nature of God to intermingle with a body without an intermediate instrument –the God-man is born." (Origen, *De Principiis*).

It is clear that the Christian faith is built on the person of Jesus Christ, which entails His life and ministry. The prologue began with the  $\lambda\omicron\gamma\omicron\varsigma$  identified as Christ. John blatantly expressed the identity of Jesus Christ; thus, the rock of the Christian faith is firm on the pedestal of Christ's divine



existence. John's presentation began absolutely with Christ (λόγος; 1:17; 17:3; 20:28); in fact it all revolves around Christ. Believers in the contemporary time should note that the Gospel message becomes insignificant and inadequate when it is devoid of Christ. In other words, "Good News" in this sense becomes mere "news" (which is passed anyhow, anywhere, anytime on media; radio, television, social-media). The argument concerning the structure of John has the majority scholars viewing the λόγος as the crux of the prologue; this implies that the Gospel in the actual sense is the person of Christ and His claims. Without much ado; John presented the divine glory of Christ as the first and most distinctive quality (Elwell & Yarbrough, 2005). Therefore, believers in the contemporary time must be conscious of the fact that Christ is the Good News and anything else to supplement or support the 'identity of Christ' in course of presenting the Gospel swerves from the original course.

More so, the witness of John the Baptist (1:6-8; 15) gives credence to the ministry of Jesus Christ among the Jews. Of a truth, John the Baptist was recognized as a Prophet who preached the message of repentance; preparing the way, as the forerunner for the Messiah (1:19-28). John's ministry was clearly stated as though any believer or even minister in this contemporary time. The significance of John the Baptist's ministry did not debar him from ever witnessing to the people about the Messiah. Therefore, believers should note that having being reconciled to Christ and taking part in the ministry of reconciliation is basically by Grace; Believers in the contemporary time should not preach themselves in the name of preaching Christ. In other words, attention should be solely drawn ultimately towards Christ and no one else, because Christ is the revelation of the Father.

Nicolaides (2019: 2) further argues that:

Although the term Logos is not maintained as a title in John's Gospel outside of the preface, the entire gospel asserts the claim that as the Logos, Jesus is God in self-revelation and also in redemption. He is God to the degree that He can be extant and comprehensible to humanity. The Gospel of John chronicles Thomas' response to the resurrected Christ in John (20:28) "Thomas replied to him, 'My Lord and my God!'". Thus, the Logos is one and the same as God, and yet the two are unidentical but one essence or substance. The Logos is God who is dynamic in cosmic creation, in revelation of Himself, and also in redeeming fallen humanity.

John's prologue is significant in the sense that it presents a dynamically weaved eighteen verses to defend the Christian faith. The Evangelist's intention was not to discuss the ambiguity of man's intellectuality in interpreting the world he lives in and comprehending the mystery of the Gospel. His concern in the prologue even throughout the Gospel is that everyone reaches an encounter with the incarnate Word. The concern of John is set straight in line with a clear mindset of revealing the true person of Christ. In engaging people about Christ, contemporary believers should have the right concern. This assertion brings to mind the identity of wrong concerns. It is very possible that a believer sets out to proclaim the gospel with wrong concerns for example to gain members into their denomination, to debate or argue showing superiority of knowledge, to mock, ridicule or condemn which can lead to an unbeliever feeling being downcast. As seen, wrong concerns here can easily truncate the Good News making it insignificant, irrelevant and unwanted in contemporary society.

More so, John employed an apologetic approach in reaching out to unbelievers. Therefore, in the midst of contemporary religious and ideological pluralism, believers must present Jesus Christ and His claims clearly, intelligibly, and persuasively employing a method that is clearly grasped



by unbelievers, even if they subsequently reject them both. It is important for believers to note that it is Christ and the Good News that is been rejected and not a believer's personality or the method of proclamation employed.

## Conclusion

The prologue is a vital part of John's Gospel. The Synoptic Gospel writers traced Christ from a human point of view, but John gives the account from Christ's pre-existence and later switched to his humanity. The term λόγος was nowhere else found in the account outside 1:1-14. Thus, it is logical to say that the Prologue demonstrates the nicety of John's approach, rather than his unoriginality; such that the attention of readers from diverse backgrounds is caught as the Prologue moves through a familiar idea into something uniquely Christian. The transition of λόγος to σὰρξ (1:14) has a stern significance and inherently presents readers with information the Synoptics unleash. λόγος (Eternal Word) which is θεὸς became flesh; this is the love of God for mankind. The Prologue serves a cardinal purpose in the sense that it has the potency of encouraging readers to go further into the body of the Gospel; this piece is a deep divine revelation given to John for a purpose which is to give clear explanation of Jesus Christ; this understanding is applicable to the first audience and also more appropriate to contemporary believers. Here, believers are re-assured of their faith by explaining the divine-lineage of Christ in whom they believe. This is a radical message that troubles the commonplace believers of their worldview with the simple truth that indeed "Jesus Christ is God."

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