

Word or God's word?

By Anthony Buzzard

There is no need to capitalize “word” in John 1:1, forcing readers to suppose that a second Person has existed as God from eternity, thus shattering the first principle of sound theology that God is one Person, not two or three, as Jesus said so clearly in John 17:3. - AB

Less obvious than the attempt to avoid the word “beget” was the intrusive capital “W” put on the word “word” in John 1:1, creating the impression that there are two Persons in the Godhead. But John did not write “in the beginning was *the Son*,” and it is proper to render John 1:3 as “all things were made through *it*,” the word.¹ In addition, and in the interests of “pushing” the text in favor of the traditional Jesus, the NIV seemed determined to leave the reader with the wrong impression when it made Jesus say he was “returning” or “going back” to God (John 13:3; 16:28; 20:17). What in fact Jesus said was that he was *going* to God, not going *back* or *returning* to Him. He could not be returning since he had not yet been in heaven with the Father. He achieved this only at the ascension. Readers of the NIV, NAB and NLT are made to think that Jesus went *back* to the Father. This, however, is not what the Greek says.

The Jesus of John is the new Moses. Only by putting a capital “W” on the word “word” in John 1:1 is any difficulty produced. When a second preexisting Person is forced into John, the testimony of Matthew and Luke about the real beginning of Jesus is contradicted. John begins by referring to the creative activity of the One God. His word or wisdom is His divine intention and mind. God’s plans and purposes are in Jewish thinking said to be “with God.” John later wrote in his epistle (1 John 1:1-2), in clarification of the opening of his gospel, that “life was *with* the Father.”² Jesus is that life become flesh, the divine program for immortality unveiled to us. The mind of God is uniquely expressed in the man Jesus. Jesus is “walking wisdom.” Paul calls him “the wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:24).

Jews like Philo could speak of Moses as “according to God’s forethought the logical and animated Law.”³ When the word became flesh in Jesus, this was equivalent, as John writes, to “grace and truth” coming by Jesus (John 1:17). Jesus is the embodiment of God’s gracious purpose, just as Moses was earlier the embodiment of the Law (Torah). In neither case is it necessary to suppose that these pillars of God’s plan were alive before their birth, creating a complexity which led to centuries of unresolved dispute.⁴

The concept of a preexisting purpose is well understood by some leading scholars. C.B. Caird in his “The Development of Christ in the New Testament” reflects on the Jewish background to John 1: “The Jews had believed only in the preexistence of a personification, either of a divine attribute or of a divine

¹All eight English versions before the KJV, starting with Tyndale’s translation, read “all things were made through it.” In the KJV this was altered to “by him.” Many translations in other languages read “the word” as “purpose” or “intention” and thus describe it as “it,” not “him”. John speaks of the neuter “light” as “him” in 1:10, and he is thinking of the Son as then in existence, but not before his birth. Jesus is what the word/wisdom *became*, not one-to-one equivalent to “the word,” which never in the Hebrew Bible means “spokesman.” “The word” did not *assume* flesh, as in orthodoxy; it became flesh, a human person. God’s wisdom was expressed in a perfect human being whose origin was carefully described in Matthew and Luke and whom John recognized as “uniquely begotten,” *monogenes*. The root of that word is *ginomai* which means to become or come into existence. See further our article “John 1:1: *Caveat Lector* (Reader Beware)” at www.restorationfellowship.org.

²“The word was with [*pros*] God” just as “life was with [*pros*] the Father” in 1 John 1:2. See Job 10:13 and 23:14 for God’s intent being “with” Him.

³*Life of Moses* 1:28.

⁴Jewish writings spoke of Moses as foreknown, that is, planned in God’s purpose.

purpose, but never a person.”⁵ It is quite unnecessary to turn the purpose of God into a second Person existing from eternity. The Son is the human being promised as the descendant of David, and as such he is the covenant-bound purpose of God “foreknown...and then manifested” (1 Pet. 1:20). There is no eternal Son who “assumes” or “puts on” flesh. Rather the word “comes into existence, flesh,”⁶ a human person begotten in Mary as “the uniquely begotten Son full of grace and truth” (John 1:14), a man who perfectly expresses God’s will for us all.

At Qumran contemporaries of John were using almost the same language as John to describe God’s eternal purpose. John shares the thought-world of the Dead Sea Scrolls documents. “All things came into being through it [the *logos*, word], and apart from it nothing came into being that has come into being” writes John (1:3). Compare with this verse the statement in 1 QS xi 11: “By His knowledge everything has been brought into being, and everything that is He established by His purpose, and apart from Him nothing is done.” John and the Qumran writers worked out of a common Hebrew heritage, John of course telling us that God’s great purpose had been “with” Him (John 1:1) from the beginning, and it became concrete reality in the man Messiah Jesus (John 1:14). Job had spoken of God’s plans and purposes as being “with” Him, meaning that they were concealed in His heart: “These things You have concealed in Your heart; I know that this is *with* You” (Job 10:13). “He performs what is appointed for me, and many such decrees are *with* Him” (Job 23:14). “*With* Him are wisdom and might; to Him belong counsel and understanding...With Him are strength and sound wisdom” (Job 12:13, 16).

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John 1 introduces the word or wisdom of God as His self-expression and His creative activity. The Genesis account is recalled, and provides John with a way of introducing the *new* creation in Jesus. God’s word is full of life and light and the darkness “did not overpower it” (not “him,” v. 5). John then describes the historical event of the coming of John the Baptist who was “sent from God” (v. 6). He was a witness to the true light which when it comes into the world (v. 9) was the Son. John 1, from verse 6, describes the appearing of John and Jesus, the Son of God. The light coming into the world is now described as “him” (*auton*, v. 10), rather than “it” (*auto*, v. 5). Verse 14 resumes the description of the historical Son and introduces for the first time the title “uniquely begotten Son from the Father” (just as John was also “from God,” v. 6). Verse 13 recalls the virginal begetting of the Son, probably, by comparing it with Christian rebirth. John has not overthrown the clear accounts of Matthew and Luke about the *genesis* (Matt. 1:1, 18) of the Son.

Excerpt from: Jesus was not a Trinitarian, John Chapter 1 (pp. 273 – 275)

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⁵*Christ for Us Today*, SCM Press, 1968, 66-80.

⁶*Egeneto*, became, come to exist, in John 1:14. The same word describes the appearance of John the Baptist.