

# New Testament Poems and Proclamations 4

## The Prologue to the Gospel of John (1:1-18)

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The Prologue to the Gospel of John begins by alluding to the beginning of Genesis with the words: 'In the beginning...'. The Prologue develops the creation theme of being and becoming with its contrasting use of 'was' (ἦν [*en*] in Greek) and 'became' (ἐγένετο: *egeneto*). In the Genesis creation story the first thing God creates is light: 'Let there be light' and John's Prologue also picks this up by developing the themes of light and life. Here is the text:

### The Poem's Shape

1. In the beginning was the Word and the Word was towards God, and the Word was God.
2. He was in the beginning towards God.
3. All things became through him, and nothing that has become became without him.
4. In him was life and the life was the light of humans.
5. And the light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not grasp it.
6. A man appeared sent from God, his name was John.
7. He came as a witness, to bear witness to the light, so that all might believe through him.
8. He was not the light but to bear witness to the light.
9. The true light, which lights everyone, was coming into the world.
10. He was in the world and the world came to be\* through him and the world did not know him.
11. He came to what was his own and his own people did not accept him.

12. But to those who accepted him he gave power to become God's children, those who believed in his name,  
13. who were not born of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man but of God.

14. And the Word became flesh and lived among us. And we saw his glory, glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

15. John witnessed to him and cried out: 'This was the one of whom I said: He who comes after me is ahead of me because he was before me.'

16. From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.

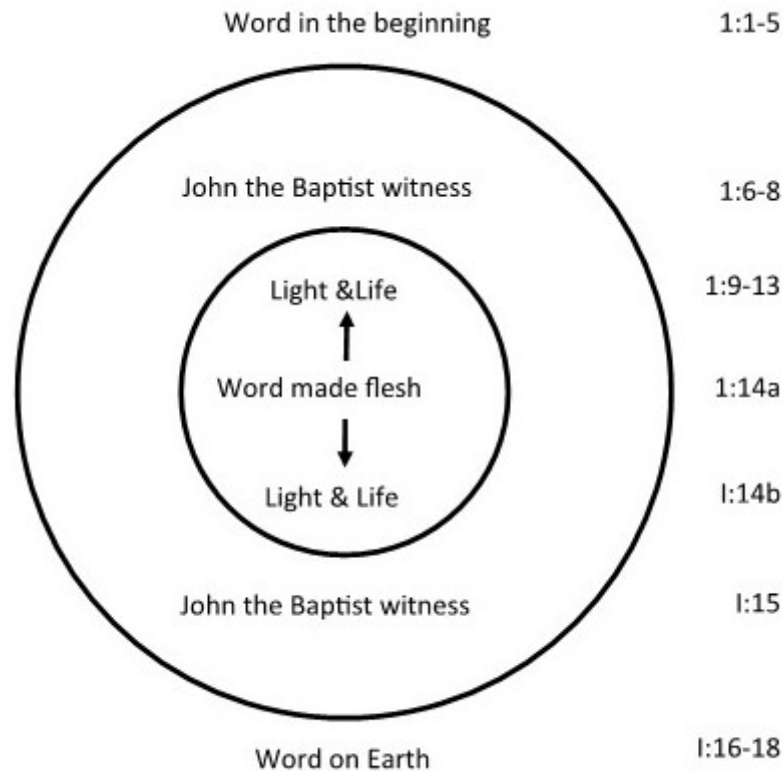
17. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

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

It is a highly structured, concentrated prose poem with a central assertion or crux in verse 14: 'The Word became flesh and lived among us', This crux or heart of the poem – 'the Word became flesh' – is like a candle throwing out concentric circles of light, first to the witness of John the Baptist on either side of this core statement, then back to the first line, 'in the beginning was the Word', in whom 'was light', and out to the end in 'fullness' and our enlightenment. The poem's shape shines as an expanding cosmic circle and the light that shines in the darkness early in the poem becomes glory at its heart when the Word becomes human, and enlightenment at the end. The facing page has a diagram of this shape:

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\*ἐγένετο [*egeneto*]



### Comments on the text

As well as alluding to the Genesis creation story, the first verse uses the term *logos*, meaning word or reason. The Hellenistic Jew Philo of Alexandria (30 BC -50 AD) used the term *logos* for the mediator or *demiurge* between the transcendent God and the world. It can be compared with the divine emanation Wisdom in the Old Testament books of Wisdom and Proverbs, but she is feminine and *logos* is masculine. Verse 1 of the Prologue states firmly that the Logos, Word, was ‘in the beginning’ and not merely an emanation but ‘was God’. Jehovah’s witnesses, among others, have translated the third clause of this verse as ‘The Word was a god’ but this is a misunderstanding of the Greek.

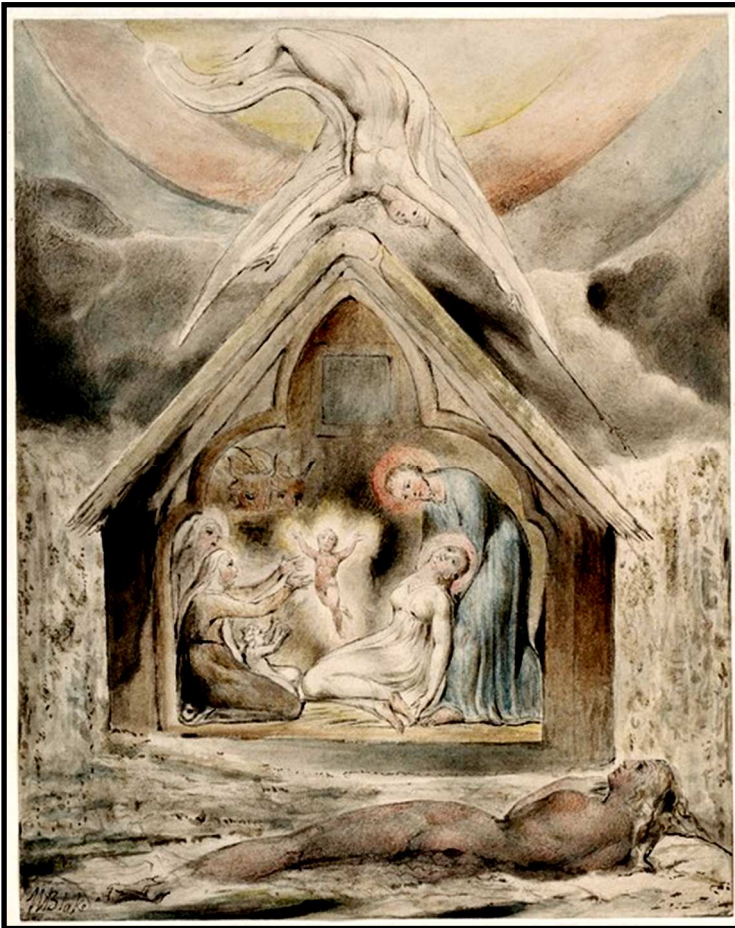
The second clause of verse 1 is usually translated ‘the Word was with God’. In the Greek that is *προς τον θεον* (*pros ton theon*) but a more common translation of the word *pros* is ‘towards’. So we could translate it as ‘the Word was towards God’. The background image is of reclining at table and leaning towards your friend sitting beside you (like the beloved disciple at the Last Supper). Or we could think of ‘towards’ in

the sense of ‘directed towards’, ‘concerning’ or ‘about God’, God’s total self-expression for which, as he told Moses in the story of the Burning Bush, his word is: I AM.

The word ‘was’ (*ην: en*) occurs three times in verse 1. In verse 3 the word ‘became’: (*εγενετο: egeneto*) occurs twice, plus once in the perfect form ‘has become’ (*γεγονεν: gegonen*); everything ‘became’ – was made – through the Word. In the Genesis creation story we have the repeated ‘God said...’ The Hebrew word *dabhar* can mean both word and deed: ‘He spoke and they were made’. In the Genesis story, light is the first thing God creates. ‘And God said “Let there be light”’.

The themes of light and life are also picked up in John’s Prologue. In a key metaphor (v. 5) the Word is the light shining in the darkness and the darkness cannot ‘grasp’ it (*κατελαβεν: katelaben*) with the double meaning of seize/overcome and understand.

Then we have John the Baptist, who has come as a witness to this Word who is light. John ‘was not the light, but to bear witness to the light,’



William Blake, *The Descent of Peace*. Illustration to John Milton's poem 'On the Morning of Christ's Nativity'. [en.wikipedia.org](https://en.wikipedia.org)

because 'the Word, the true light, was coming into the world'. His own people reject him but he enables those who accept him to become God's children, share the life that is in him.

At the crux of the poem (verse 14) the word ἐγένετο (*egeneto*: became) occurs again: 'The Word *became* flesh'. The Word, that was in the beginning, that was God, enters the world of becoming. He becomes Incarnate Word, the divine poem translated into human language. Now it is made clear that the Word is a person, he is 'a father's only son'. The Word became one of us, 'lived among us and we saw his glory' – shining light like the Hebrew *shekinah*, the glory of God. (Our word 'divine' derives from the Proto-Indo European *div/diu* meaning 'shining'.)

The personal pronoun now changes from third to first person: 'we saw his glory', because the Word has become visible as one of us. This is in sharp contrast to Philo's *logos* or demiurge, which, following the Platonic tradition, would never have become flesh with a material body. In

the Prologue the Word is not a *demiurge* intermediary but wholly God and becomes wholly human. That is a major impulse towards Christian humanism. The *whole* divine essence comes down to Earth, becomes human.

Then again comes John the Baptist, who thus appears on either side of the poem's crux and situates the Incarnate Word in a story of events on Earth.

In the last section of the poem, 'from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace', the Word spreads and fills 'us all'. And here at last we are given his name: 'Grace and truth came (ἐγένετο: *egeneto*) through Jesus Christ.' In verse 18 the poem concludes:

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

For the words translated 'close to the Father's heart' the original Greek has ὁ ὢν εἰς τον κολπον του πατρος [*ho on eis ton kolpon tou patros*]. Literally, this means 'the one being [leaning] onto the Father's breast', so the image of intimately reclining at table that we had at the beginning of the poem with the words 'towards God' recurs here.

Light and life are closely linked throughout the poem and enlightenment, 'fullness' of 'grace and truth', is not only receiving the Word by hearing it, but also sharing the divine life of 'God the only Son'. God becomes human and, as it were, spreads – disperses – through humanity.

The Prologue introduces the Gospel in which Jesus repeatedly claims for himself the divine 'I AM' and is also human. Everyone is invited to become 'incorporated' into this human form divine. The Prologue's theme of the divine dispersing through humanity, when they embody it, is also a prologue towards the Christian humanist insight that a supernatural God was always an imagined poetic vision – an idea (or an ideal). 'Oh, that he would rend the heavens and come down!' In this great opening poem to John's Gospel, he does.