



## 9) Chapters 1 & 2

### The Christmas Gospel - (i)

We now come to the Prologue to the Gospel .. and here, as much as anywhere, looking at the original Greek helps us understand the writer's message more fully.

“In the **beginning** was the **Word**, and the Word was **with** God, and the Word was God.” [1.1]

Obviously the opening phrase echoes Genesis 1.1 (“In the beginning ..”), but the word translated ‘beginning’ – *archē* – refers to more than just a point in time. Like the ‘arch’ in ‘archangel’ or ‘archbishop’, it also speaks of priority in terms of importance, not just of time.

The word ‘Word’ has a depth of meaning easily lost in translation too. The Greek word *logos* is not just to do with speech, but rationality – like its English derivative, ‘logical’. Existence is not meaningless, but has order and purpose.

‘The Word was with God’ sounds very static – almost comfortably companionable. But it’s actually quite the opposite. The little word ‘with’ – *pros* in Greek – is in fact a preposition of motion .. literally, “the Word was towards God”. So even within God there is movement; there is relationship. God is not the ‘unmoved mover’ of classical philosophy, but is dynamic; what we call ‘God’ includes relationship. Putting it differently, as in other writings ascribed to John in the New Testament, “God is Love”.

#### If Jesus had been a girl ...

... (s)he’d have been called ‘Sophie’.

The Jews were so aware of the utter holiness of God that they couldn’t imagine sinful people having any connection with him. So they developed the idea of a personified Wisdom (*Sophia* in Greek), as a way of describing God at work in creation.

The philosopher Philo took the idea further using the term *Logos* – the ‘rational principle’ or ‘Word’.

So, to summarise the depths of the first verse of the Gospel which lie under the surface of our usual translation: “At the heart of all things there is meaning and purpose; and that meaning and purpose are found in the loving relationship that we call ‘God’, and in the loving relationship that humanity can have with God.” Not quite so poetic as the usual words – but what a wonderful truth!

The Jehovah’s Witnesses translate the end of the verse as “The Word was *a* god”. If you’re interested, we can discuss definite and indefinite nouns in Greek.

### The Christmas Gospel - (ii)

All that was in just one verse! There’s plenty more lying below the surface in the rest of this wonderful passage.

1) “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not **overcome** it..” [1.5]

The word ‘overcome’ (*katelaben*) is typical of John – a word with different overlapping meanings. It means to ‘overcome’ or to ‘understand’. Perhaps the English phrase “did not master it” expresses the ambiguity.

2) “To all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave **power** to become **children** of God” [1.12]

Another, even richer, double-meaning here. The Greek word *exousia* means both ‘ability’ and ‘authority’. Without Jesus we are both unable and unworthy to know God as our parent. The Bible nowhere says that we *are* God’s children (*tekna*) – we have to *become* God’s children. God has just one son (*huios*):

“... the glory as of a father’s **only son**,” “... It is God the **only Son**, who is close to the Father’s heart ..” [1.14, 18]

Do you remember our discussion about “only begotten” in Session 4? The King James version confuses *genos* and *gennaō* .. making it sound as though Jesus was some sort of biological offspring of God. The point is instead the

uniqueness of Jesus' relationship with God, and its closeness: he "climbs into his lap" is more literal than "is close to his heart" – it's another preposition of motion, as in verse 1.

3) "And the Word became **flesh** and **lived** among us" [1.14]

The dynamism of the passage continues with this image. 'Lived' is *eskēnōsen*, literally he 'pitched his tent'. *Skēnē* (similar to the English word 'skin') is a camel-skin tent. In the person of Jesus, God is a nomad, travelling with us through the journey of life.

Note how the Word became 'flesh' (*sarx*), not 'a person' (*anthrōpos*), still less 'a man' (*anēr*). What is the difference between these various possible ways it might have been expressed?

## Elsewhere in Chapter 1

Some of the subtleties that we've already looked at in previous sessions are first found here – the difference between transient human life and Jesus' eternal existence (*ginomai* and *eimi*) in verse 30; the idea of 'holy spirit' rather than 'the Holy Spirit' in verse 33; the phrase 'Son of Man' in verse 51. If you're interested, we can discuss 'staying' and 'remaining' in verse 39.

The sheer difficulty, sometimes, of translating can be found in verse 42:

"Jesus .. looked at him and said, 'You are Simon son of John. You are to be called **Cephas**' (which is translated **Peter**)." [1.42]

The Greek 'Peter', like the Aramaic 'Cephas', isn't a name at all; it's simply the word for a rock. (The French *pierre* and *Pierre* get close to it.) He's being given a nickname, 'Rocky'.

## The Wedding at Cana

There's a phrase in the story of the Wedding at Cana that has such a different 'feel' to it in the original Greek that it's worth noticing, even though there's no real theological significance in the passage:

"Jesus said to her, '**Woman, what concern is that to you and to me?** My hour has not yet come..' [2.4]

First, the word 'Woman' (which is the correct literal translation of the Greek *gunē*) has no real equivalent in modern English. Personally, I think of Robin in the film 'Prince of Thieves' addressing Marion as 'Lady' – there's both tenderness and respect in the word .. which Jesus also uses to his mother while he is dying (19.26). The following question is translated quite well in the NRSV above. The King James version translates it, dreadfully, as "What have I to do with thee?" It's an entirely innocuous Aramaic idiom, "What's that got to do with us?"

The 'hour' coming in the verse above is one of a large number of distinctive theological ideas in John that we meet first in chapters 1 & 2. "Signs" in verse 11 is another. But the Greek tells us no more than the English does – nothing is lost in translation – and so we aren't thinking about them in this session.

## Did Jesus rise from the dead .. or was he raised?

Our final verse has a fascinating little puzzle in it:

"After **he was raised** from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this" [2.22]

As in English, verbs in New Testament Greek have active and passive 'voices' – "He raised" and "He was raised". It also has a third, 'middle', voice with a more-or-less reflexive meaning – "He rose" (*ēgerthē*). Unhelpfully, here and in many of its uses, the middle voice is often identical in form to the passive..

So, to answer the question in this section's heading: we don't know, and we can't tell. Luckily, it doesn't matter very much theologically ... but there are some places in the New Testament where the fact that passive and middle voices look the same is really rather unhelpful.