

J. C. RYLE'S NOTES ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN  
1:1-5

1. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2. The same was in the beginning with God. 3. All things were made by Him, and without Him was not anything made that was made. 4. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. 5. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness comprehended it not."

The following prefatory remarks on St. John's Gospel, may prove useful to some readers.

*Firstly.*--There is no doubt that this Gospel was written by John the Apostle, the son of Zebedee, and brother of James, once a fisherman on the sea of Galilee, and afterwards called to be a disciple of the Lord Jesus, an eye-witness of all Christ's ministry, and a pillar of the Church. John, be it remembered, is specially called "the disciple whom Jesus loved." He was one of the chosen three who alone saw the daughter of Jairus raised--were eye-witnesses of the transfiguration--and were bystanders during our Lord's agony in the garden. He was the one who leaned on Christ's breast at the last supper, and to whom our Lord committed the care of the Virgin Mary, when He was dying on the cross. It is an interesting fact, that he was the disciple who was specially inspired to write the deepest things concerning Christ.

*Secondly.*--There is little doubt that this Gospel was written at a much later date than the other three Gospels. How much later and at what precise time, we do not know. It is commonly supposed that it was written after the rise of heresies about the Person and natures of Christ, such as those attributed to Ebion and Cerinthus. It is not likely that it was written at so late a period as the destruction of Jerusalem. If this had been the case, John would hardly have spoken of the "sheep-market" at Jerusalem as still standing. (John v.2.)

*Thirdly.*--The substance of this Gospel is, for the most part, peculiar to itself. With the exception of the crucifixion, and a few other matters, the things which St. John was inspired to record concerning our Lord, are only found in his gospel. He says nothing about our Lord's birth and infancy,--His temptation,--the Sermon on the Mount,--the transfiguration,--the prophecy about Jerusalem, and the appointment of the Lord's Supper. He gives us very few miracles, and even fewer parables. But the things which John does relate are among the most precious treasures which Christians possess. The chapter about Nicodemus,--the woman of Samaria,--the raising of Lazarus, and our Lord's appearance to Peter after His resurrection at the sea of Galilee,--the public discourses of the fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth, and tenth chapters,--the private discourses of the thirteenth, fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth chapters,--and, above all, the prayer of the seventeenth chapter, are some of the most valuable portions of the Bible. All these chapters, be it remembered, we owe to St. John.

*Fourthly.*--The style of this Gospel is no less peculiar than its substance. There appears extraordinary simplicity in many of its statements, and yet there is a depth about them which no man can entirely fathom. It contains many expressions which are used in a profound and spiritual sense, such as "light," "darkness," "world," "life," "truth," "to abide," "to know." It contains two names of the second and third Persons of the Trinity not found in the other Gospels. These are, "the Word," as a name of our Lord, and "the Comforter," as a name of the Holy Ghost. It contains, from time to time, explanatory comments and remarks on our Lord's words. Moreover, it contains frequent short explanations of Jewish customs and terms, which serve to show that it was not written so much for Jewish readers as for the whole Church throughout the world. "Matthew" (says Gregory Nazianzen, quoted by Ford), "wrote for the Hebrews; Mark, for the Italians; Luke, for the Greeks; the great herald, John, for all."

*Lastly.*--The preface of this Gospel is one of the most striking peculiarities about the whole book. Under the term preface, I include the first eighteen verses of the first chapter. This preface forms the quintessence of the whole Book, and is composed of simple, short, condensed propositions. Nowhere in the Bible shall we find such clear and distinct statements about our Lord Jesus Christ's divine nature. Nowhere shall we find so many expressions, which for want of mental power, no mortal man can fully grasp or explain. In no portion of Scripture is it so deeply important to notice each word, and even each tense employed in each sentence. In no portion of Scripture do the perfect grammatical accuracy and verbal precision of an inspired composition shine out so brightly. It is not, perhaps, too much to say, that not a single word could be altered in the first five verses of St. John's Gospel, without opening the door to some heresy.

The first verse of St. John's Gospel, in particular, has always been allowed to be one of the sublimest verses in the Bible. The ancients used to say that it deserved to be written in golden letters in every Christian Church. It has well been said to be an opening worthy of him whom Jesus called "a son of thunder."

1.--[*In the beginning, &c.*] This wonderful verse contains three things. It tells us that our Lord Jesus Christ, here called the Word, is eternal,--that He is a distinct Person from God the Father, and yet most intimately united to Him,--and that He is God. The term "God," be it remembered, in the second clause, is to be taken personally for God the Father, and in the third to be taken essentially as signifying the Divine Being.

The expression, "In the beginning," means in the beginning of all creation. It is like the first verse of Genesis, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." (Gen. i.1.)

The expression "was," means "existed, was existing." The whole sentence signifies that when the world was first called into being, however long ago that may be,--when matter was first formed, however many millions of ages

ago that may be,--at that period the Lord Jesus Christ was existing. He had no beginning. He was before all things. There never was the time when He was not. In short, the Lord Jesus Christ is an eternal Being.

Several of the Fathers dwell strongly on the immense importance of the word "was" in this sentence, and on the fact that it is four times repeated in the two first verses of this Gospel. It is not said, "the Word was made," but "the Word was." Basil says, "Those two terms, 'beginning' and 'was,' are like two anchors," which the ship of a man's soul may safely ride at, whatever storms of heresy may come.

The expression, "the Word," is a very difficult one, and is peculiar to St. John. I see no clear proof that it is used by any other New Testament writer. The texts, Acts xx.32, and Heb. iv.12, are, to say the least, doubtful proofs. That it here signifies a "person," and not a spoken word, and that it is applied to our Lord Jesus Christ, is clear from the after sentence, "The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us." That it was a term familiar to the Jews is undeniable. But why this particular name is used by St. John, both here and in his other writings, is a point on which commentators have differed greatly.

Some think, as Tertullian, Zwingle, Musculus, Bucer, and Calvin, that Christ is called "the Word" because He is the wisdom of God, and the "wisdom" of the Book of Proverbs. These would have the expression translated, "reason, wisdom, or counsel."

Some think, as some of the Fathers, that Christ is called "the Word," because He is the image and offspring of the Father's mind, "the express image of the Father's person," just as our words, if honest and sincere, are the image and representation of our minds.

Some think, as Cartwright and Tittman, that Christ is called "the Word," because He is the Person who is spoken of in all the Old Testament promises, and the subject of prophecy.

Some think, as Melancthon, Rollock, Gomarus, and Scott, that Christ is called "the Word," because He is the speaker, utterer, and interpreter of God the Father's will. It is written in this very chapter, that "the only begotten Son hath *declared* the Father." It is also written, that "God hath in these last days *spoken* unto us by His Son." (Heb. i.1.)

I think the last of these views the simplest and most satisfactory. All of them are at best only conjectures. There is probably something about the expression which has not yet been discovered.

It is thought by many that the expression "the Word," is used in several places of the Old Testament, concerning the Second Person in the Trinity. Such places are Psalm xxxiii.6; Psalm cvii.20, and 2 Sam. vii.21, compared with 1 Chron. xvii.19. The proof in all these cases is somewhat doubtful. Nevertheless the idea is strengthened by the fact that in Rabbinical writings the Messiah is often spoken of as "the Word." In the third of

Genesis, the Chaldee paraphrase says that Adam and Eve "heard the Word of the Lord walking in the garden."

Arrowsmith, in his admirable work on this chapter, suggests a probable reason why John did not say, "In the beginning was the Son of God," but "the Word."--"John would not at first alienate the hearts of his readers. He knew that neither Jews nor Gentiles would endure the term, the Son of God. They could not endure to hear of a sonship in the Deity and Godhead: but with this term 'Word,' applied to the Godhead, they were well acquainted." Poole observes that no term was so abhorred by the Jews as the term "Son of God." Ferus remarks, that by calling our Lord "the Word," St. John excludes all idea of a material, carnal relationship between the Father and the Son. This is also shown by Suicer to be the view of Chrysostom, Theodoret, Basil, Gregory Nyssen, and Theophylact.

Whatever difficulty we may feel about this expression, "the Word," in our times, there does not seem to have been the same difficulty felt about it, either by Jews or Gentiles, when St. John wrote his Gospel. To say, as some have done, that he borrowed the expression from the philosophers of his time, is dishonouring to inspiration. But we may safely say that he used an expression, of which the meaning was quite familiar to the first readers of his Gospel, as a name of the Second Person of the Trinity. With this we may be content. Those who wish more information, should consult Witsius' Dissertation on the word Logos, Suicer's Thesaurus, and Adam Clarke's Commentary.

[*The Word was with God.*] This sentence means that from all eternity there was a most intimate and ineffable union between the first and second Persons in the blessed Trinity,--between Christ the Word, and God the Father. And yet, though thus ineffably united, the Word and the Father were from all eternity two distinct Persons. "It was He," says Pearson, "to whom the Father said, Let us make man in our image." (Gen. i.26.)

The truth contained in this sentence, is one of the deepest and most mysterious in the whole range of Christian theology. The nature of this union between the Father and the Son we have no mental capacity to explain. Augustine draws illustrations from the sun and its rays, and from fire and the light of fire, which, though two distinct things, are yet inseparably united, so that where the one is the other is. But all illustrations on such subjects halt and fail. Here, at any rate, it is better to believe than to attempt to explain. Our Lord says distinctly, "I am in the Father and the Father in Me." "I and the Father are one." "He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father." (John xiv.9-11; John x.30.) Let us be fully persuaded that the Father and the Son are two distinct Persons in the Trinity, co-equal and co-eternal,--and yet that they are one in substance and inseparably united and undivided. Let us grasp firmly the words of the Athanasian Creed: "Neither confounding the Persons nor dividing the substance." But here let us stop.

Musculus remarks on this sentence, how carefully St. John writes that "the Word was with God," and not "God was with God." He would have us remember

that there are not two Gods, but one. And yet "the Word was with God, and was God."

[*The Word was God.*] This sentence means that the Lord Jesus Christ, the eternal Word, was in nature, essence and substance very God, and that "as the Father is God, so also the Son is God." It seems impossible to assert Christ's divinity more distinctly than it is here asserted. The sentence cannot possibly mean that the Father is God, since no one ever thought of disputing that. Nor yet can it possibly mean that the title of God was conferred on some being inferior to God and created, as the princes of this world are called "gods." He who is here called God, is the same who was uncreated and eternal. There is no inferiority in the Word to God the Father. The Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, is all one. To maintain in the face of such a text, as some so-called Christians do, that our Lord Jesus Christ was only a man, is a mournful proof of the perversity of the human heart.

The whole verse, honestly and impartially interpreted, is an unanswerable argument against three classes of heretics. It confutes the Arians, who regard Christ as a Being inferior to God. It confutes the Sabellians, who deny any distinction of Persons in the Trinity, and say that God sometimes manifested Himself as the Father, sometimes as the Son, and sometimes as the Spirit, and that the Father and the Spirit suffered on the cross! Above all it confutes the Socinians and Unitarians who say that Jesus Christ was not God but man, a most holy and perfect man, but only a man.

In leaving this verse, it is useless to deny that there are deep mysteries in it which man has no mind to comprehend, and no language to express. How there can be a plurality in unity, and a unity in plurality, three persons in the Trinity and One God in essence,--how Christ can be at the same time *in* the Father, as regards the unity of the essence, and *with* the Father, as regards the distinction of His Person,--these are matters far beyond our feeble understanding. Happy are we, if we can agree with Bernard's devout remark about the subject: "It is rashness to search too far into it. It is piety to believe it. It is life eternal to know it. And we can never have a full comprehension of it till we come to enjoy it."

2.--[*The same was in the beginning, etc.*] This verse contains an emphatic repetition of the second clause of the preceding verse. St. John anticipates the possible objection of some perverse mind, that perhaps there was a time when Christ, the Word, was not a distinct Person in the Trinity. In reply to this objection, he declares that the same Word who was eternal, and was God, was also from all eternity a Person in the Godhead distinct from God the Father, and yet with Him by a most intimate and ineffable union. In short, there never was a time when Christ was not "with God."

There are two passages in the Old Testament which throw strong light on the doctrine of this verse. The one is in the book of Proverbs viii.22-31. The other is in Zechariah xiii.7. The passage in Proverbs seems intended to explain the verse before us. The passage in Zechariah contains an

expression which is almost a parallel to the expression "with God."  
"Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, and against the man that is my fellow, saith the Lord." "The man that is my fellow," according to the best commentators, means the Messiah, Jesus Christ; and a reference to Poole's Synopsis will show that the words signify "the man that is near me, or joined to me."

Arrowsmith says, "Ask the sun, if ever it were without its beams. Ask the fountain, if ever it were without its streams. So God was never without His Son."

We must not suppose that the repetition of this second verse is useless or unmeaning. Arrowsmith remarks that "Repetitions have divers uses in Scripture. In *prayer* they argue affection. In *prophecy* they note celerity and certainty. In *threatenings* they note unavoidableness and suddenness. In *precepts* they note a necessity of performing them. In *truths*, like that before us, they serve to show the necessity of believing and knowing them.

3.--[*All things...made by Him.*] This sentence means that creation was the work of our Lord Jesus Christ, no less than of God the Father. "By Him were all things created." (Coloss. i.16.) "Thou Lord in the beginning hast laid the foundation of the earth." (Heb. i.10.) Now He that made all things must needs be God.

The expression, we must carefully remember, does not imply any inferiority of God the Son to God the Father, as if God the Son was only the agent and workman under another. Nor yet does it imply that creation was in no sense the work of God the Father, and that He is not the maker of heaven and earth. But it does imply that such is the dignity of the eternal Word, that in creation as well as in everything else, He cooperated with the Father. "What things soever the Father doeth, these also doeth the Son likewise." (John v.19.) "By whom also He made the worlds." (Heb. i.2.) When we read the expression "by Me kings reign" (Prov. viii.15), we do not for a moment suppose that kings are superior in dignity to Him by whom they reign.

Jansenius remarks that this verse completely overthrows the heretical notion entertained by the Manichees, that the material world was formed by an evil spirit, as well as the notion of the Platonic school, that some part of creation was made by angels and demons.

[*Without Him was not anything made, etc.*] This sentence appears added to show the utter impossibility of our Lord Jesus Christ being no more than a created being. If not even the slightest thing was created without Him, it is plain that He cannot possibly be a creature Himself.

The Fathers raised curious speculations about the origin of evil from the expression now before us. "If nothing was made without Christ," they argued, "from whence came sin?" The simplest answer to this question is, that sin was not among the things which were originally created at the beginning. It came in afterwards, at the fall. "By one man sin *entered*

into the world." (Rom. v.12.) That it could not have entered without Divine permission, and that its entrance has been overruled to the display of Divine mercy in redemption, are undeniable truths. But we have no right to say that sin was among the "all things," which were "made by Christ."

4.--[*In Him was life.*] This sentence means that in the eternal counsels of the Trinity, Christ was appointed to be the source, fountain, origin and cause of life. From Him all life was to flow. As to the kind of "life" which is here meant, there is much difference of opinion among commentators.

Some think, as Cyril, Theophylact, Chemnitius and Calvin, that the expression refers specially to the continued preservation of all created things by Christ's providence. Having created all things, He keeps all alive and in order.

Some think, as Zwingle, Cartwright, Arrowsmith, Poole, Alford, and most modern commentators, that the expression includes all sorts of life, both vegetable, animal and spiritual. "Thou sendest forth Thy spirit, and they are created." (Psa. civ.30.) "In Him we live, and move, and have our being." (Acts xvii.28.)

Some think, as Luther, Melancthon, Brentius, Flacius, Lightfoot, Lampe, and Pearce, that the expression applies solely to spiritual life, and that it is meant to declare that Christ alone is the source of all life to the souls of men, whether in time or eternity. He was the creator of all things, and He also was the author of new creation. To this opinion I decidedly incline. For one thing, natural life seems already included in the preceding verse about creation. For another thing, it is the view which seems to agree best with the conclusion of the verse, and to be in harmony with the words, "With Thee is the fountain of life: in Thy light we shall see light." "God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in His Son." (Psalm xxxvi.9; 1 John v.11.)

[*The life was the light of men.*] This sentence means that the life which was in Christ was intended before the fall to be the guide of man's soul to heaven, and the supply of man's heart and conscience, and that since the fall of man it has been the salvation and the comfort of all who have been saved. It is those and those only who have followed Christ as their light, who have lived before God and reached heaven. There has never been any spiritual life or light enjoyed by men, excepting from Christ.

5.--[*The light shines in darkness.*] This sentence means that the spiritual light which Christ, the source of life, offers to man, has always been neglected since the fall, and is still neglected by unregenerate men. It has been like a candle shining in a dark place, a light in the middle of a world of darkness, making the darkness more visible. Unregenerate men are darkness itself about spiritual things. "Ye were darkness." (Eph. v.8.)

Arrowsmith remarks on this sentence, "Christ hath shined in all ages in the works of creation and providence. He left not Himself without witness.

Every creature is a kind of professor that readeth man a lecture concerning God, of His wisdom, and power, and goodness."

[*The darkness comprehended it not.*] This sentence means that the natural heart of man has always been so dark since the fall, that the great majority of mankind have neither understood, nor received, nor laid hold upon the light offered to them by Christ.

The difference in the tenses of the two verbs used in this verse is very remarkable. About the "light" the present tense is used: "It shineth now as it has always shone; it is still shining." About the "darkness" the past tense is used: "It has not comprehended the light; it never has comprehended it from the first, and does not comprehend it at the present day."

The Greek word which we render "comprehended," is the same that is used in Ephes. iii.18. In Acts iv.14, it is translated "perceived,"--in Rom. ix.30, "attained,"--in Phil. iii.13, "apprehend,"--in John viii.3, "taken,"--and in 1 Thess. v.4, "overtake."

At this point, the remark of Bengel upon the whole passage deserves attention. "In the first and second verses of this chapter, mention is made of a state before the creation of the world; in the third verse, the world's creation; in the fourth, the time of man's uprightness; in the fifth, the time of man's decline and fall."

I cannot close these notes on the opening verses of St. John's Gospel without expressing my deep sense of the utter inability of any human commentator to enter fully into the vast and sublime truths which the passage contains. I have laboured to throw a little light on the passage, and have not hesitated to exceed the average length of these notes on account of the immense importance of this part of Scripture. But after saying all that I have said, I feel as if I had only faintly touched the surface of the passage. There is something here which nothing but the light of eternity will ever fully reveal.