

Three Interpretations of John 1:1

Introduction

There are a number of verses in Scripture that are frequently used, to try to substantiate the doctrine of the Trinity. Those verses are sometimes referred to as “proof texts”, because their proponents claim that those verses prove the existence of the Trinity.

From my experience, the verse that is *most* frequently used as a proof text is John 1:1.

Here is a common rendering of John 1:1, in English translations of the Bible. The ESV, NASB, NIV, and even the King James all translate John 1:1 as follows:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

When John 1:1 is used as a proof text, it is usually “paired up” with John 1:14. Here is the way the ESV renders John 1:14:

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

Certainly, John 1:1 and 1:14 are very important verses, from a theological standpoint. However, from what I have seen, most Christians are unaware that there are several different interpretations of what, *exactly*, those verses mean. Here are three such interpretations.

Interpretation 1: The Mainstream View

First, let’s take a look at the mainstream understanding. From what I have seen, most Christian denominations have the following type of interpretation, for John 1:1 and 1:14:

John 1:1 makes the following points:

- The Word *existed* at the beginning of time;
- The Word was present *with* God at the beginning of time;
- The Word, himself, IS Almighty God.

John 1:14 makes these points:

- The Word came down to earth, and *became* a human being;
- People saw the *glory* of the Word, when he was on the earth;
- The glory of the Word is the glory of God’s only *Son*.

So, from the above understanding, proponents of the “mainstream” interpretation draw these conclusions:

- John 1:14 shows us that the Word is Jesus.
- John 1:1 shows us that the Word was *with* God, and IS God.
- Therefore, Jesus, himself, is Almighty God - just like the Father is Almighty God.
- As a result, John 1:1 and 1:14 tell us that Jesus is actually Almighty God - as the second person of the Triune Godhead.

Interpretation 2: The Personal Pre-Existence View

Another interpretation of John 1:1 goes into more detail about two of the Greek words that are used in John 1:1. As noted above, the word “God” appears two separate times in John 1:1 - in “the Word was with God” and in “the Word was God”.

In the Greek, the first occurrence of the word God is written as “ton Theon” - or “the God”. The second reference to God, though, is rendered as “Theos” - that is, “God”, *without* the word “the” in front of it.

In technical terms, if a Greek noun does not have the *definite* article (the word “the”) preceding it, then that is called an “anarthrous” occurrence of that noun.

Another item to note is that ancient Greek does not have the *indefinite* article (the word “a”, or “an”) in it *at all*. So, for example, it is not possible to directly say “a horse” in Greek - but it is possible to say “the horse”.

As a result, translators have to *decide* where to place the indefinite article, when they encounter anarthrous Greek nouns. Of course, translators are imperfect human beings like the rest of us; so there is never any guarantee that translators make the *right* decisions in their work.

From the above information, proponents of the “personal pre-existence” interpretation make the following assertions about John 1:1 and 1:14:

- In the New Testament, whenever Almighty God is being referenced, the Greek always uses the phrase “**the** God” to refer to Him.
- The first reference to God in John 1:1 *does* use “**the** God” - but the second reference does *not* - i.e., the second reference is anarthrous.
- As a result, the second reference does **not** refer to Almighty God, but rather to “**a** god” - i.e., to a divine being, or spirit being.
- John 1:14 shows us that the Word is actually Jesus. That means that Jesus existed as a spirit being (or angel), *before* he was born on the earth.

Interpretation 3: The Ideal Pre-Existence View

A third interpretation goes into even *greater* detail, about the Greek vocabulary and grammar used in John 1:1.

To begin with, this interpretation also recognizes the anarthrous nature of the second occurrence of “God”, in John 1:1. As a result, this interpretation *also* holds that the second occurrence of God does *not* refer to Almighty God.

This interpretation also makes two *additional* points about the second occurrence of God. First, it is true that it is not possible to directly say “a god” in ancient Greek. However, it **is** possible to say “a **certain** god” in Greek, by the use of the Greek indefinite pronoun - “tis”. Basically, the Greek “tis” has the meaning of “any”, “a certain”, or even “a” in English.

Additional information about the indefinite pronoun “tis” can be found [here](#).

So, if the apostle John had wanted to state that the second occurrence of “God” refers to **a** god - but **not** to Almighty God - then John would presumably have rendered the second occurrence as “tis Theos”. Since John did *not* render it that way, that implies that John had a *different* meaning in mind.

Another item to note is that anarthrous Greek nouns often refer to the “character”, or “nature”, of the noun in question. Consider this definition of anarthrous nouns:

Anarthrous: Lacks the definite article (the); in the Greek language, emphasizes character or nature.

The definition above was taken from [this page](#) - and that page is actually part of a *Trinitarian* web site.

Anarthrous nouns *especially* emphasize “character” or “nature” when they are used in the “predicate nominative” form. This means that the noun in question is being used as a predicate; but that noun appears *before* the subject does. The second occurrence of “God” in John 1:1 is in the predicate nominative form - because the Greek actually reads as follows:

“In beginning was the word and the word was toward the God and **God was the word**“.

The second occurrence of “God” is used as a predicate - but it appears **before** the subject (which is “word”). As a result, that occurrence of God is in the “predicate nominative” form.

So, from all of the above information, it appears that the second occurrence of God (Theos) does **not** refer to God, Himself - but rather to his *character*. In other words, it refers to the “godlike”, or “divine”, **nature** of Almighty God.

Another point that this interpretation makes has to do with the Greek word which is translated as “Word” in John 1:1. The Greek word in question is *logos*. Here are the definitions of *logos*, from the NAS and Strong’s concordances (emphasis added):

NAS definition of *logos*:

a word (**as embodying an idea**), a statement, a speech

Strong's definition of *logos*:

From [lego](#); something said (**including the thought**); by implication, a **topic** (subject of discourse), also **reasoning** (the mental faculty) or **motive**; by extension, a computation; specially, (with the article in John) the Divine Expression (i.e. Christ) — account, cause, communication, X concerning, doctrine, fame, X have to do, intent, matter, mouth, preaching, question, reason, + reckon, remove, say(-ing), shew, X speaker, speech, talk, thing, + none of these things move me, tidings, treatise, utterance, word, work.

As shown above, *logos* means much more than just a “word” - it has the implication of an *idea*, a *thought*, and even *reasoning*.

This makes sense, since the English word “logic”, and the suffix “-ology”, are derived from the Greek *logos*. Of course, the English word logic means “rational **thought**, or **reasoning**“, and the suffix -ology means the **study of** a subject (e.g., Biology is the *study of* life).

Another item to note is that the *logos* is referred to in John 1:3 and 1:4. In modern English translations, those verses use the pronoun “him” to refer to the logos - which implies that the translators of those versions consider the logos to be a *person*. Here is an example:

John 1:3-4 (ESV):

³ All things were made through **him**, and without **him** was not any thing made that was made. ⁴ In **him** was life, and the life was the light of men.

However, almost all of the English translations that were made *prior* to the King James version used the pronoun “it” to refer to the logos. For example, consider these renditions of John 1:3-4:

William Tyndale, 1534: All thinges were made **by it**, and **without it**, was made nothinge that was made. **In it** was lyfe, and the lyfe was the lyght of men,

Great Bible, 1539: All thinges were made **by it**, and **wythrough it**, was made nothyng that was made. **In it** was lyfe, and the lyfe was the lyght of men,

Geneva Bible, 1560: All things were made **by it**, and **without it** was made nothing that was made. **In it** was lif, and the lif was the light of men.

Bishop's Bible, 1568: All things were made **by it**, and **without it**, was made nothing that was made. **In it** was life, and the life was the light of men.

Even some of the translations that were made *after* the King James version use “it” to refer to the logos. For example, here is the translation from the Emphatic Diaglott, from 1864:

Through it every thing was done; and **without it** not even one thing was done, which has been done. **In it** was life; and the Life was the Light of Men.

As a result, the translators of all those versions consider the logos to be a **thing**, rather than a person. This makes sense, since the Greek word logos has the sense of an *idea*, or **plan**. For more information on this topic, see [this page](#).

In addition, note that *logos* is used in many *other* passages in the New Testament as well - and many of those other passages make it quite clear that the word *logos* refers to a plan, rather than to a person. For example, consider this passage:

Matthew 13:18-19 (ESV):

¹⁸ "Hear then the parable of the sower: ¹⁹When anyone hears the **word** of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path.

In the above passage, the Greek word which is translated as "word" is *logos* - i.e., the exact same word that is used in John 1:1! So, is the "word" of the kingdom a *person*? No, of course not - the "word" of the kingdom is the *idea*, or *plan*, of the kingdom - as demonstrated by the fact that people might not *understand* it. Similarly, in John 1:1, *logos* also refers to an idea, or plan.

So, from all of the above information, the word *logos* in John 1:1 has the implication of an idea, or **plan**, which is then *implemented*.

Overall, proponents of the "ideal pre-existence" interpretation make the following assertions about John 1:1 and 1:14:

- The second occurrence of "God" in John 1:1 is anarthrous - *and* it is in the predicate nominative form. As a result, that occurrence denotes the *character* of Almighty God - i.e., it refers to His "**divine**" nature.
- The Greek word *logos* refers to an idea, or **plan**, which is then *implemented*. In other words, the plan in question gets "brought into existence".
- As a result, John 1:1 should be translated this way: "In the beginning was the **plan**. The plan was with God, and the plan was **divine**."
- John 1:14 states that the *logos* "became flesh". This means that God caused Jesus to be born, so that His **plan** could be **fulfilled**. So, in a manner of speaking, Jesus is the "embodiment" of God's **plan**.
- To put it another way, God *implemented* his **plan**, by causing Mary to conceive. That is, God caused one of Mary's eggs to become fertilized, so that Jesus would be born - and that, in turn, would allow God's **plan of salvation** to be *accomplished*, through Jesus.
- Therefore, Jesus did **not personally** exist, *until* God caused Mary to conceive. However, God *knew* that He *would* create Jesus, even before the foundation of the world. (See 1 Peter 1:20.)

Conclusion

The three interpretations listed above are the three that I am *aware* of; but of course there may be other interpretations as well. In any case, I would encourage everyone to do *their own* research into what John 1:1 and 1:14 really mean; rather than just assuming that someone *else* has the correct interpretation. After all, remember the example of the Bereans, in Acts 17:11!