

**AN ESSAY ON THE
INTERPRETATION OF THE
PROEM TO JOHN'S GOSPEL,
WITH AN APPENDIX**

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APPENDIX.

BY WILLIAM JOHNS.

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P R E F A C E.

THE orthodox, or commonly received interpretation, of the introduction to the Gospel of John has descended to us through the channel of the Catholic Church, after having been wrought into its present consistency in the fourth and following centuries; and it constitutes a part of that Athanasian or Trinitarian system of Christianity, which exists now in the same state as in the darkest ages of the Church. Hence it derives all the aid that prescription and the association of ideas can possibly bestow.

It is a well-ascertained fact, that the orthodox interpretation is different from that which prevailed before the establishment of Athanasianism. This will be shewn in some measure in the commentary and notes, by extracts from the writers of the first and second centuries. The full discussion of the question would be here out of place; and it is rendered unnecessary by the concession of the most learned and competent judges.

The supporters of the received interpretation of this paragraph claim in its favour the literal and direct meaning of the words, and its perfect consistency with the general analogy and tenour of the scriptures. This assumed consistency, however, must be put to the test.

The orthodox interpretation assumes,

1. That *ἐν ἀρχῇ*, *in the beginning*, means from all eternity:
2. That *λογος*, *word*, is a proper name, as here used, or a personal denomination of Jesus Christ: also that it was his peculiar name as the second person of the Trinity, or as some say, in his pre-existent state:

3. That *πρὸς τοὺς Θεοὺς* means the same as *σὺν τῷ Θεῷ*, *with God*:

4. That the phraseology *ὁ λόγος σαρκὶ ἐγένετο*, *the word was flesh*, signifies, that the second person of the Trinity assumed human nature, and constituted in one person perfect God and perfect man: And,

5. That *ὁ λόγος*, *the word*, the second personal God,* “created the heaven and the earth.”

Reserving for the commentary and notes the development of the true meaning of the expressions in the text of John, I may here be allowed to shew in a brief manner, that the above assumptions, besides perhaps some others, are indefensible, and do not conduct the serious and impartial enquirer to a satisfactory and consistent interpretation.

1. It is difficult to perceive how “in the beginning” can mean “from all eternity.” The following is Dr. Macknight’s mode of reasoning on the subject: “The Word existed at the time of the creation, (see verses 3, 10.) consequently from all eternity.”† The consequence surely is not admissible; yet this is deemed a sufficient proof of the eternity of the *λόγος*, *Word*, the second personal God. It is evident that that, which has a period of beginning, is not eternity. See Beza’s note *apud Wallæum* in *Nov. Test.*

It is understood that the second person is here said to have been with the first person in the beginning. Why *in the beginning* more than at any other period? Is not God eternally the same, without change? What can be the object of a writer in affirming, that one personal God was with another

* The notion of the orthodox, expressed in their own terms, is, In the Godhead are three Divine persons, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost, having the same essence and attributes. This is in effect the same as that there is *one essential God*, and *three personal Gods*;—and for greater convenience, I shall sometimes use this phraseology.

† See Macknight’s *Harmon. and Paraph.*, I. 3., 4to. ed.

personal God? If both possessed the essential attribute of omnipresence, must they not be always with one another?

2. It no where appears that *λογος*, *Word*, is a personal name of Jesus Christ as God. If the phrase *the word*, or *the word of God*, according to the idiom of the language in which it originated, mean God himself in the act of manifesting his power or other attributes, the grounding of another personal existence upon a mere form of expression is wholly inadmissible; especially when such use of the expression is not specifically sanctioned by other instances of certain and evident application.* The doctrine of the pre-existence of Jesus Christ rests upon an insufficient foundation. It is no where proposed and formally laid down as a doctrine to be believed. It is inferred from a few occasional expressions, which admit of a different meaning; and those occasional expressions must be interpreted in the rigid literal sense, a sense, it is highly probable, not intended, before they give any support to the doctrine. If the whole of the New Testament were interpreted upon that principle,—that is, if the

* The evidence that *ὁ λογος* and *ὁ λογος του Θεου*, is used as a personal appellation of Christ, is mainly as follows:—The eighteenth acceptance of the word *λογος* in Schleusner, gives the meaning, *doctor, teacher*; and the references are the following:—Luke iv. 36. “And they were all amazed, and spake among themselves, saying, What a word is this?” John i. 1. “And the word was God.” John i. 14. “And the word was made flesh.” And 1 John v. 7, known to be an interpolation; to which he might have added, as a more plausible instance, Rev. xix. 13, “And his name shall be called, the word of God:” a Hebrew idiom for, “he shall be the word of God.” And Michaelis acknowledges, that only John, of all the writers of the Old and New Testament, uses the word *λογος* for a person.—See *Michael. Introd. by Marsh*, vol. iii. pt. i. p. 280.

It is granted that the rhetorical personification of the *λογος*, and of many other expressions, is usual enough in the Scripture writers; as, for instance, Ps. cxlvii. 15, “His word runneth very swiftly.” But this is a very different thing from using it as a personal appellation.

literal meaning and grammatical construction of every sentence were to be rigidly adhered to, without regard to the oriental character of the style and idiom, and in despite of those portions which are plain and literal—no small degree of confusion, contradiction and absurdity would ensue.

The indirect personification, in which the word *λογος* appears to be used, does not require it to be understood as a personal denomination, or proper name, of Christ in any way. Many other words are used with a similar application; for instance *φως*, *light*: John xii. 46. "I am come a light into the world." Who thinks of connecting with this phraseology the same kind of deductions as with the foregoing? Besides if *λογος*, *the word*, is to be considered as the representative of any personal existence, it is that of the Father. This is clear not only from John i. 1. "And the word was God," but from many other passages; for example, John xii. 48, 49. "*The word* that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the last day: for I have not spoken of MYSELF, but the FATHER which sent me, &c.;" and v. 50. "Whatsoever I speak therefore, even as the FATHER said unto me, so I speak." This clearly points to Jesus not as the originator, but the representative of the word: and if a personal existence is expressed in the term WORD, it is surely that of the Father.

The "word of God" in Heb. iv. 12. means God himself. For by a careful perusal of the chapter we discover, that from v. 1—10. is a parenthesis, inserted for confirming the thing said of old in respect to the Israelites, now applied by the Apostle to Christians, chap. iii. 15. "While it is said, To-day, if ye will hear his voice, &c." Therefore by joining v. 1. to 11 and 12., and referring it in its right application to what went before, we obtain the sense and connection in the following manner: "Let us therefore fear, lest a promise being left us of entering into his rest" (the promise, or thing

said, as stated already, is found in chap. iii. 15. as also 7—11.) “any of you should seem to come short of it..... Let us labour therefore to enter into that rest, lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief. For the word of God is quick and powerful, &c.” That is, it is sure to inflict the same punishment upon you as them, if you follow their example of unbelief.

Though according to the true notion of the Trinitarian doctrine it must be believed, that the three persons, or (more correctly speaking) the three personal Gods, are eternally coexistent, the assertion is again repeated in the second verse, that the *λογος*, meaning (as is asserted) God the Son was in the beginning (interpreted, *from all eternity*) with God the Father; but through the whole proem no mention is made of God the Holy Ghost, or the third personal God.

3 and 4. The expressions used in the original will scarcely admit of the meaning attached to them in the orthodox interpretation, as will be shewn in the commentary.

5. The orthodox interpretation of the third verse imports, that the visible universe was created by the *WORD*—the second personal deity. But it is difficult to acquiesce in any way of reconciling this with the frequent declarations which occur, ascribing the creation of “the heaven and the earth” to the essential God, the Father of all. It is true that the operation of God in the creation is said to have been effected by his *Word*, and by his *Spirit*, as if they were necessary instruments, without which the Almighty Creator could not operate. But it will be fully proved, that this way of speaking is a well known idiom of the Hebrew language; and if we interpret it literally, we must personify a considerable number of other instruments, of which God is said to have made use.

Not to notice minutely the various incongruities of the Trinitarian interpretation, and its unauthorized assumptions, in

this place, it is natural to ask—What is the coherence of such a proem? What object did the Evangelist propose to answer by such an obscure and mystical introduction to the life and ministry of Christ? For mystical and obscure it surely is, according to the orthodox interpretation. If he meant to commence his history with the assertion of the personal deity of God the Son, would he not have stated it more plainly, and maintained it through his whole account, uniformly and consistently, in *many* passages of which it is, in appearance at least, flatly contradicted? In the next paragraph, (ver. 19—34,) the manner of designating the person of the Messiah is very different from that which it is natural to expect from the Trinitarian exposition of the proem. John the baptist (ver. 20) says, “I am not the Christ.” Why should John disavow himself to be the second personal God? How was it possible for any one to entertain such a notion, that John the baptist was God the Son? Was it likely that John would caution men against an error, which it was exceedingly improbable they should ever entertain? In a subsequent passage, (ver. 27,) John acknowledges the much greater worthiness of a person then living unnoticed among the Jews, and coming [i. e. with a divine commission] after him. He designates that person (ver. 29) as “the Lamb of God.” He describes him (ver. 30) as a man coming after him, but having obtained the pre-eminence before him, because he was his superior in dignity.* Was such a comparison natural between John and the second person of the trinity? He says, (ver. 31,) “And I knew him not; but that he should be manifest to Israel, therefore am I come [by a divine commission] baptizing with water.” If Christ was in reality the

* This acceptance of the words *πρωτος μου ην*, in the common version, “he was before me,” will be proved to be correct in the commentary on verse 15.