

## Ere the Blue Heav'ns Were Stretch'd Abroad

Isaac Watts (1674–1748)

Ere the blue heav'ns were stretch'd abroad,  
From everlasting was the Word:  
With God he was, the Word was God,  
And must divinely be ador'd.

By his own pow'r were all things made,  
By him supported all things stand;  
He is the whole creation's head,  
And angels fly at his command.

Ere sin was born, or Satan fell,  
He led the host of morning stars;  
Thy generation who can tell,  
Or count the number of thy years?

But lo, he leaves those heav'nly forms,  
The Word descends and dwells in clay,  
That he may converse hold with worms,  
Dress'd in such feeble flesh as they.

Mortals with joy beheld his face,  
Th' eternal Father's only Son;  
How full of truth! how full of grace!  
When thro' his eyes the Godhead shone!

Archangels leave their high abode,  
To learn new myst'ries here and tell  
The love of our descending God,  
The glories of Immanuel.

## Τὸ ΧΡΟΝΟΝ ΚΑΙΡΟΥ

### *In the Nick of Time*

#### The Word Was With God

Kevin T. Bauder

The opening verses of John's Gospel tell us much about the relationship between God the Father and Jesus Christ. The opening clause posits that the Word was in the beginning—in any conceivable beginning. Before all beginnings, the Word already existed. He did not *begin*. He simply *was*, which is to say that the Word is eternal.

Before discussing the second clause of John 1:1, we should note that John 1:14 identifies the Word as the one who “became flesh.” That statement is loaded, and it will bear more lengthy examination at a later point. For now, this description identifies the Word as Jesus Christ. Virtually all students of the text acknowledge this identification. Even people who hold wrong views about the relationship of the Word to God the Father still recognize that the Word is Jesus. Therefore, the statements about the Word in John 1:1 are statements about the person of Jesus.

As we have noted, the first clause of John 1:1 implies that the Word is eternal. The Word existed before His appearance in the world as Jesus. Therefore, the Word is divine, which implies that Jesus is divine.

The next clause asserts, “And the Word was with God.” If we have already concluded that the Word is divine (He cannot be *Not God*), then this claim puzzles us. How can a divine person such as the Word or Jesus be “with God”?

Human analogies do not work. If we say that a Matilda (for example) is “by herself,” what we mean is that she is not really by or with anyone. She is alone. Yet John clearly does not intend to imply that before all beginnings the Word existed alone.

No, in some meaningful sense the Word was truly *with* God. But what could that claim mean? If the Word is God, then how can He be “with God”? Two points will help to answer this question.

The first point is that the word *with* in John 1:1 implies the closest possible relationship. The Koinē Greek in which John was writing offers several prepositions that can be translated by the English word *with*. The preposition *en* carries the idea of instrumentality, as in the sentence, “He hit the



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ball *with* a bat.” The preposition *sun* connotes general accompaniment. *Meta* hints at *with, but a step behind*. The preposition *para* is approximately *side by side with*.

To be sure, these words constantly overlap and substitute for one another in unexpected ways. They are not always meant to draw attention to such fine distinctions. A choice of one over the other does not always imply some unique significance. Nevertheless, each has its own flavor of “withness.”

The word that John chooses in John 1:1 is *pros*. This is the closest Greek preposition for “withness.” Roughly, it connotes *face to face with*. To the extent that John (or the Holy Spirit) chose the word deliberately, it implies the closest possible association between the Word and God. Before all ages, the Word was face to face with God.

One might infer that if the Word was *with* God, then the Word could not *be* God. That would be an incorrect conclusion. We have already seen that the Word was the Eternal One. The only Eternal One is God. For the Word to be eternal, He must be God—and John will state this truth flatly in the next clause.

But the Word was also *with God*. What could that mean? The right conclusion is this: there must be someone who is God who is not also the Word.

The Word is God. But the Word is not all that God is. Someone is God who is not the Word. God exists both as *The Word* and as *Not The Word*. These two (or three, though John does not here emphasize the third) stand in the closest possible relationship to each other. But they are not identical, though they are both God.

The New Testament speaks of the Father who is God. It also speaks of the Son who is God (Heb 1:8). They are both God. They are both *one* God, for no more than one God exists (Deut 6:4). But they are not the same person. The Father and the Son are not identical to each other. They stand forever face to face, beholding each other and loving each other (John 5:20; 14:31; 17:24).

God is never alone. Rather, God communes with Himself as one person to another. That is why Modalism is mistaken. Father, Son, and Spirit are not merely modes in which God presents Himself to His creatures. Instead, Father, Son, and Spirit are three persons in whom God subsists. John 1:1 is not viewing all three, but only God the Father and the Word. The Father and the Word are both God. They are both the *same* God. But they are not each other. All acknowledge that the Father is One who is God. But if John is correct, then the Word is also God. He is Another One who is God.

Note something else. Both the Father and the Word are divine. Either can be called God. Because God is truly one being, they are both the same God.

Either can rightly be called the only true God (John 17:3), as can the Holy Spirit.

But they are not the same person. John is here walking a theological tight-rope. He is balancing on a gossamer thread. He cannot make the Father and the Word into different Gods, for there is only one true God. Father, Son, and Spirit are the same God. But John cannot collapse God into a single person as Modalism does. The Father and the Word truly are distinct persons, though they share the same being—as does the Spirit.

If John falls off the rope in one direction, he will stray into polytheism. If John falls off the rope in the other direction, he will plunge into Modalism. But John does not fall off the rope. He teaches that the Word is the Eternal One, and he also teaches that the Word is Another One.

John’s mastery of the tightrope becomes especially clear in the third clause of John 1:1. But that clause involves another bout with Greek grammar. We shall examine it next.



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This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.

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