

PAPER #5

Understanding John 1

In this paper, I will set forth a series of notes on John 1:1-5, 14, 18. Certain assertions in John 1 are often construed as incontrovertible evidence for something like a Trinitarian view of God. My contention is that any such alleged evidence is the result of these statements being read through Trinitarian lenses that are already firmly in place, not the result of careful reading to discover the author's intent.

Below are the relevant verses from the Greek text in the Nestle-Aland, 27th edition.

John 1:1 ¶ Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος, καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν, καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος.

John 1:2 οὗτος ἦν ἐν ἀρχῇ πρὸς τὸν θεόν.

John 1:3 πάντα δι' αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο, καὶ χωρὶς αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο οὐδὲ ἓν, ὃ γέγονεν

John 1:4 ἐν αὐτῷ ζωὴ ἦν, καὶ ἡ ζωὴ ἦν τὸ φῶς τῶν ἀνθρώπων·

John 1:5 καὶ τὸ φῶς ἐν τῇ σκοτίᾳ φαίνει, καὶ ἡ σκοτία αὐτὸ οὐ κατέλαβεν.

John 1:14 ¶ Καὶ ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο καὶ ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν, καὶ ἐθεασάμεθα τὴν δόξαν αὐτοῦ, δόξαν ὡς μονογενοῦς παρὰ πατρός, πλήρης χάριτος καὶ ἀληθείας.

John 1:15 Ἰωάννης μαρτυρεῖ περὶ αὐτοῦ καὶ κέκραγεν λέγων· οὗτος ἦν ὃν εἶπον· ὁ ὀπίσω μου ἐρχόμενος ἔμπροσθέν μου γέγονεν, ὅτι πρῶτός μου ἦν

John 1:16 ὅτι ἐκ τοῦ πληρώματος αὐτοῦ ἡμεῖς πάντες ἐλάβομεν καὶ χάριν ἀντὶ χάριτος·

John 1:17 ὅτι ὁ νόμος διὰ Μωϋσέως ἐδόθη, ἡ χάρις καὶ ἡ ἀλήθεια διὰ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ἐγένετο.

John 1:18 Θεὸν οὐδεὶς ἑώρακεν πώποτε· μονογενὴς θεὸς ὁ ὢν εἰς τὸν κόλπον τοῦ πατρὸς ἐκεῖνος ἐξηγήσατο.

The following is my current, working reconstruction of these same Greek texts:

1. ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν. 2•καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος. <1:1>
2. οὗτος ἦν ἐν ἀρχῇ πρὸς τὸν θεόν. 2•πάντα δι' αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο· καὶ χωρὶς αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο οὐδὲ ἓν ὃ γέγονεν. 3•ἐν αὐτῷ ζωὴ ἦν, καὶ ἡ ζωὴ ἦν τὸ φῶς τῶν ἀνθρώπων. <1:2-4>
3. καὶ τὸ φῶς ἐν τῇ σκοτίᾳ φαίνει. 2•καὶ ἡ σκοτία αὐτὸ οὐ κατέλαβεν. <1:5>
4. ...<1:6-10a>
5. ...<1:10b-13>
6. καὶ ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο καὶ ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν, καὶ ἐθεασάμεθα τὴν δόξαν αὐτοῦ, δόξαν ὡς μονογενοῦς παρὰ πατρός· πλήρης χάριτος καὶ ἀληθείας. 2•Ἰωάννης μαρτυρεῖ περὶ αὐτοῦ καὶ κέκραγεν λέγων· οὗτος ἦν ὃν εἶπον·ὁ ὀπίσω μου ἐρχόμενος ἔμπροσθέν μου γέγονεν, ὅτι πρῶτός μου ἦν. 3•καὶ ἐκ τοῦ πληρώματος αὐτοῦ ἡμεῖς πάντες ἐλάβομεν·καὶ χάριν ἀντὶ χάριτος. 4•ὅτι ὁ νόμος διὰ Μωϋσέως ἐδόθη· ἡ χάρις καὶ ἡ ἀλήθεια διὰ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ἐγένετο. 5•θεὸν οὐδεὶς ἑώρακεν πώποτε· ὁ μονογενὴς υἱός, ὁ ὢν εἰς τὸν κόλπον τοῦ πατρὸς, ἐκεῖνος ἐξηγήσατο. <1:14-18>

And here is my translation of the above texts:

1. In the beginning was the logos and this logos was present right there with God. 2•Indeed, God was the Logos. <1:1>
2. This logos was in the beginning right there with God. 2• All things came to be in line with it; and not one thing that has come into existence came into existence apart from it. 3• In it was Life, and this Life was the light of men.<1:2-4>
3. Now this light is shining in the darkness. 2• Indeed, the darkness did not extinguish it.<1:5>
4. ...<1:6-10a>
5. ...<1:10b-13>
6. Now the Logos became flesh and dwelt among us, and we observed his glory—glory as of the unique One beside the Father—full of grace and truth. 2•(John bore witness to him; indeed he spoke out and said, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me is before me; for he is of higher rank than I.’”) 3•Now from his fullness we have all received—grace replacing grace. 4•For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus the Christ. 5•No one has seen God at any time; the unique Son—the one who is at the bosom of the Father—he has translated him. <1:14-18>

Translation and Exegetical Notes on John 1:1–5

References to the biblical text throughout this paper are to be read as follows: the first number refers to the paragraph; the second number refers to the particular sentence within that paragraph; the letter refers to the particular note on that sentence; the final roman numeral refers to the particular point within that note. The paragraphs and sentences referred to by these reference numbers are the paragraphs and sentences in my own personal formatting of the Greek text printed above. Any reference of the form #.# (for example, 1.1) is a reference to the paragraph and sentence of my formatting of the Greek text. Any reference of the form note #.#. 1.# (for example, note 1.1.a.i) is a reference to that particular exegetical note in this paper below.

1.1.a ἐν ἀρχῇ
“in the beginning”

i) This denotes the absolute beginning of created reality as we know it; this is the same “beginning” referred to by Genesis 1:1.

1.1.b ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος
“in the beginning was the *logos*”

i) This states that the *logos* was an existing, active reality at the very beginning of created reality itself. Accordingly, the *logos* was relevant at the time of and in the act of creation. We know that this is John’s concern from the point he goes on to make in ¶2. The whole point of ¶2 is to drive home the fact that the *logos* was determinative in the creation of everything that has been created and come into being. Notice that this point does not entail the eternal existence of the *logos*. Certainly John could have its eternality in view, but he needn’t assume its eternality in order for his point to be true and valid. All John needs to maintain, in order to make his point, is that the *logos* existed prior to the creation of created reality and that the *logos* was relevant to and determinative of that creation coming into being.

ii) See below for a discussion of the meaning of *logos*.

1.1.c πρὸς τὸν θεόν
pros God (*theos*) “present right alongside God”

i) God (*theos*) denotes the transcendent being who created the entire created order, the one who is the source of all that is. God is the “Father” of the whole creation; that is, he is the one who gave being to it at the beginning as described in Genesis 1:1.

ii) For the significance of the *logos* being *pros* God, see notes 1.1.d.ii and 1.1.d.iii below.

1.1.d καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν.
“and the *logos* was *pros* God”

i) The *kai* connects the second sentence to the first. The two assertions are working together to make one point: to express the degree to which the *logos* has primacy and is relevantly active with respect to the created order. So, we have: in the beginning was the *logos* and this *logos* was *pros* God.

ii) The fundamental point here is that the *logos* mentioned in the first clause was *pros* God. John’s point seems to be to locate the priority of this *logos* relative to the created order in relation to the priority of God relative to the created order. That is, he is answering the question “How ultimate is the *logos*?” His answer is this: the *logos* is ultimate enough that, at the beginning of the created order, the *logos* was already there as an active and relevant reality right alongside God himself. This is what ‘*pros* God’ is intended to convey. The *logos* was *pros* God in the sense that, at the beginning of created reality, this *logos* was just as active and relevant as the transcendent creator himself.

iii) Is John’s underlying assumption that the *logos* is eternal just as God himself is eternal? Is John assuming that the *logos* was *pros* God long before the beginning—all the way back into eternity, perhaps—just as surely as he was *pros* God at the beginning itself? Certainly that could be John’s underlying assumption, but there would be no way to determine that from this text. John’s point in this text is to pinpoint the existence and relevance of the *logos* relative to the existence of the created order. The *logos* is prior to everything that exists and everything that has happened in the created order. Is the *logos* co-eternal with God himself? We can’t know that from this text. We would have to establish that from some other text. All John is saying here is this: at the beginning of created reality when God spoke his creation into existence, this *logos* was present right there with God, at work alongside the creator in determining everything that exists and everything that would occur.

1.1.e ὁ λόγος ... ὁ λόγος
“the preordained script of cosmic history...this preordained script of cosmic history”

i) The article preceding this second ‘*logos*’ is an article of previous reference, hence, “this *logos*.” This second reference to *logos* most certainly means the same thing as the first reference. The two instances of ‘*logos*’ must certainly denote the same thing. Whatever ‘*logos*’ denotes, it is something that is relevant to and determinative of the created order.

ii) My contention is that ‘*logos*’ here refers to something like the “script” or the “story” of all of created reality. I think it is difficult to capture what John means with a simple,

single-word translation of it. John, I would argue, is a divine determinist. (Note, therefore, that any biblical interpreter who has *a priori* ruled out the possibility of divine determinism will, of course, dismiss this interpretation of John 1 out of hand. But anyone who is open to the possibility of divine determinism can be open to this interpretation.) My contention is that John believes that everything that occurs is ultimately the outcome of the sovereign will of God. God determines all that will be and all that will occur. God does so in accordance with plans, purposes, decisions, and an order that he has determined in advance. God does not bring anything to pass as an afterthought. Everything that occurs is ordered according to and coherent with an overall rational structure that defines the shape of the reality that God wants to bring into existence. Put another way, God's creation (and especially the dynamic history of God's creation) has a narrative structure to it. When the sovereign author of that history brings anything to pass within that history, he does so in such a way that it is consistent with and rationally coherent with that narrative structure. Furthermore, exactly what he will bring to pass has been determined in advance. Indeed, it has been determined before "the beginning" of created reality itself. It is this detailed predetermination of the narrative structure of reality and of every detail of every event within that narrative structure that John denotes with the word '*logos*' here.

1.2.a καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος
"Indeed, God was the Logos"

i) It is *theos*, not *logos*, that serves as the subject of this sentence. This is consistent with the word order. According to the word order, John's assertion is "God was the logos," not "The logos was God." Granted, word order is not determinative in N.T. Greek, but it is not irrelevant. If the word order is reflective of a statement that makes perfectly good sense, then on what basis would one ignore the word order and construe it in some other way? Many traditional interpreters will appeal to alleged rules of Greek syntax (Colwell's rule, etc.). However, this is to misunderstand Greek and language in general. Language speakers do not form sentences by applying rules. Hence, meaning is never determined by syntax. Patterns of syntax may very well exist, but not because the syntax necessarily means something. It is not that there is some inherent semantic value to a syntactical pattern. Syntax means what the author intends it to mean. If an inviolable pattern exists, that is a contingent fact of usage; not the result of semantics being necessitated by syntax. Accordingly, it is unwarranted to suggest that 1.2 must mean X because some rule of syntax dictates that it has to mean X. This is what traditional interpreters are trying to suggest when they claim that, because of Colwell's rule, *logos* must be the subject of this sentence. What must ultimately determine the subject of 1.2 is what the author intended to be the subject, not some empirical rule of syntax. The author's intent must ultimately be understood by comprehending the meaning of the prologue as a whole. No appeal to an empirical, contingent rule that need not consistently hold can overturn what one must conclude from an exegesis of the larger context. (One suspects that the eager application of Colwell's rule to this statement is due to a motivation to defend a doctrinal position,

the Trinity, rather than a motivation to understand John’s point. If the statement is “God is the Logos,” this would create problems for the orthodox Trinitarian doctrine. God cannot be the second person of the Trinity; God is more than that. So, by taking it as “the Logos is God” and construing that in the sense of “the Logos is a part of what constitutes God” they have rendered the sentence compatible with orthodox Trinitarian doctrine. Little else seems to motivate this interpretive move.) For a fuller discussion of whether the syntax is determinative, see appendix A.

ii) In 1.1, *logos* denoted the detailed script or story of cosmic reality. In 1.2, ‘*logos*’ is used in a somewhat different sense. Here, ‘*logos*’ does not denote the script of cosmic history; rather, it denotes the rational mind behind that script. (I will indicate this second meaning of *logos* by translating it with a capital letter, ‘Logos’.) John’s affirmation, therefore, is not the nonsensical idea that God was the script of cosmic history; rather, it is the more meaningful claim that God was the author of that script. To be clear, this interpretation maintains that in 1.1 and 1.2, ‘*logos*’ is being used in two different, but inter-related, senses. In 1.1 ‘*logos*’ is used to denote the script of cosmic history. In 1.2 ‘*logos*’ is used to denote the ultimate, absolute mind who creates the script of cosmic history.

iii) The clue that *logos* means something different in 1.2 from 1.1 lies in this fact: 1.1 states that the *logos* was *pros* (right alongside working with) God; but 1.2 states that the *logos* was God. These are obviously compatible if *logos* means something different in the two statements (as I am suggesting). But if *logos* means the same thing in both sentences, then the challenge is to determine how both assertions can be true and significantly meaningful.

If *logos* means Logos, the divine mind who created everything, then it would be trivial to say that the *logos* is *pros* God. Of course he is *pros* God; he IS God. If *logos* means the predetermined script of cosmic history, then it makes no sense to state that God was, literally, the *logos*.

(This is because it makes no sense to identify or equate a person with a script. However, it could make sense taken figuratively. That is, if the claim being made is that God is, in some sense, the whole POINT of the *logos*, the script. If I say that Jonah is the story of *Jonah*, I am not saying that the person Jonah can be literally identified with the text and storyline of *Jonah*; rather, I am saying that the whole point and focus of the story of *Jonah* is the person of Jonah. While this is a significant possibility here—namely, that John is maintaining that the whole point and focus of the whole storyline of cosmic history is God—it is my judgment that this is not what John intends. Rather, John is intending to say that God is the Logos (author) of the predetermined script of cosmic history. So, in 6.1, when John states that the *logos* became flesh and lived among us, he is referring back to the Logos (the author) he has introduced here in 1.2. (Essentially, John is announcing here in 6.1 the incarnation of God, the fact that the divine mind behind everything came to be among us in the form of a man.) It is still possible that 6.1 is intended to suggest that “the story” (“the script”) became flesh and lived among us. But

that, again, would have to be figurative. Jesus is not literally the story; he can be “the story” only in a manner of speaking. Namely, he is the story in the sense that he is the whole point and focus of the story. So, it is possible that the statement in 6.1 is an allusion to the same point as in 1.2—perhaps hinting at the incarnation, but primarily insisting that Jesus shares with God the distinction of being the whole point of the story. While this is possible, it seems too complicated to be what John intended. The only obvious reason to entertain it would be to avoid taking John to be making a bald, explicit statement that Jesus is the incarnation of God. But in view of the fact that John would appear to make a rather explicit statement later, in 6.5, I see no need to think that John is not already explicitly acknowledging the incarnation here in 1.2)

I think the only way to have *logos* mean the same thing in 1.1 and 1.2 and still have the statements be meaningful is to take 1.1 and 1.2 in the manner that the traditional interpretation takes them: “In the beginning was a Logos and this Logos was with God (the Father?)—that is, as a co-eternal being, and this Logos was, in essence, actually God himself, a part of the godhead.” While, arguably this can render 1.1 and 1.2 both meaningful as declarations of theological fact—namely, as affirming the second person of the Trinity’s place in the godhead—it fails to render them meaningful as having any significant role to play in the rhetorical purpose of the prologue. “Now in the beginning was a second person of the Trinity, and this second person of the Trinity was God himself. Consequently, everything that was created was created by this Logos who is God.” How are these theological facts relevant to anything John wants to say? John’s point centers on the possibility of Life for man. Any explanation that does not lead to and support that point is not doing justice to the prologue. The only available answer is that these theological facts about the Logos are relevant because “in this Logos” was Life and John’s prologue is intended to declare the possibility of Life. But this does not make sense. In the first place, why would it matter to John that Life is “in” the *Logos*? Why not “in” *God*? Would that not suit his purposes just as well? Why the particular complexity of the second person of the Trinity when it plays no further role in the point he is making in the prologue. Furthermore, I fail to see how 2.2 is relevant if this is his point. John could have simply gone straight to 2.3: “In the beginning was the second person of the Trinity. In him was Life, etc.” On the whole, the traditional interpretation of these two sentences is highly unsatisfying. It does not clarify John’s intention; it distracts from and obscures it. One certainly suspects that the traditional interpretation is devised in order to create evidence for a theological dogma rather than to attain the meaning intended by John when he wrote his gospel.

iv) This statement in 1.2 does not contribute directly to the point of the statement in 1.1; rather, it adds another element as background. The fact that will become the basis of John’s point in the prologue as a whole is that everything that comes into existence comes into existence *dia* the *logos*. The fact that God (*theos*) is the *Logos* is an aside; it is not necessary to the point he wants to eventually make. What is immediately relevant is not who or what gave rise to the *logos*, but rather, the fact that there is a *logos* and that included in that *logos* was the possibility of Life (eternal Life) for human beings.

PAPER #5: Understanding John 1

Claiming that God (*theos*) is the *Logos* is a parenthetical aside with respect to the main argument of the prologue. (That is why in 1.3, in the statement that immediately follows 1.2, John literally repeats what he has already asserted in 1.1. The claim made in 1.1 and repeated exactly in 1.3 is what he wants the reader to keep in mind. That fact is what will serve as the foundation of the point he wants to make. In 1.2, John is supplying an important, additional fact to serve as background to that which is of immediate interest; but it is not directly necessary to the point of the prologue.

v) The function of *kai* here is more to create emphasis than it is to be a simple connective. John has just stated that the *logos* is *pros* God in order to stress its determinative role in creation. 1.2 is a parenthetical statement intended to emphasize how ultimate the *logos* is. John does so by emphasizing that God himself is the *Logos* who gave rise to the *logos*. That is a vitally important piece of background to John's point; but it is parenthetical to his immediate point.

2.1.a οὗτος
houtos "This"

i) Here, the antecedent of *houtos* is *logos* as it occurs in 1.1. It is not the *logos* of 1.2. (This is not even a question, of course, if *logos* denotes the same thing in both 1.1 and 1.2, but that is a reading I have rejected. See above.) In other words, John is making a claim about the script of cosmic history; he is not making a claim about the author of that script. It could be problematic to interpret *houtos* as referring back to a more distant antecedent (*logos* in 1.1) when there is readily available a nearer antecedent (*logos* in 1.2). However, John's purpose in 2.1 is very clearly to reiterate and reintroduce the very same facts that he has already stated in 1.1. He makes this clear by restating virtually verbatim what he has already said. Accordingly, the subject of the sentence in 2.1 is clearly intended to be the same subject as in 1.1. Hence, *houtos* (the subject of 2.1) must refer to 'logos' (script), the subject of the two statements in 1.1, as its antecedent.

2.1.b οὗτος ἦν ἐν ἀρχῇ πρὸς τὸν θεόν.
"This *logos* was in the beginning *pros* God."

i) The phrase *pros* God means exactly the same thing that it did in 1.1. This affirmation is intended to be a strict restatement of the affirmation in 1.1.

ii) The phrase "*in the beginning*" means exactly the same thing as it did in 1.1. This affirmation is intended to be a strict restatement of the affirmation in 1.1.

iii) The purpose of 2.1 is twofold: First, it reiterates exactly what John has already said in 1.1, thereby making it clear that this claim is the foundational fact that John wants to build upon. That is, the starting point for John's prologue is the fact that from the very beginning of creation, when God created the world, there was a *logos* in play. Second, it

has the effect of clarifying the subject for the reader and disambiguating what 2.2 is saying. In 1.1 the subject was the *logos* (the script of cosmic history). In 1.2 the subject was *Logos* (the author of that very script). If John had moved immediately on to 2.2, the most likely antecedent of the *autos* in 2.2 would have been the *Logos* (author). The reader would have been misled into thinking that John was saying, "All things came to be *dia* the *Logos* (author)." But John's actual intent is to say, "All things came to be *dia* the *logos* (script)." To avoid misleading his reader in this way, John reestablishes the subject of his focus to be the *logos* (script) by simply restating what he has already said with regard to it. Since it is an exact restatement, there can be no question what the subject is. It is the same subject as 1.1. Hence, he successfully turns the readers attention back on to the original subject (the *logos*) and off of the more recently introduced subject (the *Logos*). By just this device, John successfully disambiguates his next statement in 2.2. This reading of 2.1 has the virtue of explaining what is otherwise inexplicable. Namely, why does John make exactly the same assertion in 2.1 that he had just made two sentences earlier in 1.1. This does need explanation. Repetition is one thing. EXACT repetition two sentences later is another thing altogether. This interpretation offers a reasonable explanation of why John would do that. (If this is right, then we have in 2.1 clear evidence that *logos* is used in different senses in 1.1 and 1.2. If 1.1 and 1.2 use *logos* in exactly the same sense, then there is no ambiguity about what the subject of 2.2 is. Only if *logos* is used in different senses do we have the problem of ambiguity in 2.2. So, if the very purpose of 2.1 is to disambiguate the meaning of 2.2 and following, then it follows that John considered ambiguity a problem to be solved. The only way ambiguity could exist as a problem is if John has used *logos* equivocally in 1.1 and 1.2. Hence, the presence of 2.1 (under my interpretation) is proof that John was using *logos* equivocally in 1.1 and 1.2.

2.2.a πάντα δι' αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο
"all things came to be *dia* it (this *logos*)"

i) "All things" means literally everything that has actual existence in the created order. This can be seen from what John goes on to say in the next clause, "and not one single thing which has come into existence has come into existence apart from it (the *logos*)." So, "all things" refers to the scope of everything that has ever come into existence.

ii) Here γινομαι (to come to be) has the sense of coming into existence, of coming to be an actual part of the actual history and the actual cosmos. So, John is saying "all things came to have actual existence *dia* this *logos*."

iii) Here *autos* refers back to *logos* as it is used in 2.1 which refers back to how it is used in 1.1, namely, to denote the predetermined script of cosmic history. John is claiming that all things came into being *dia* the predetermined script of cosmic history.

2.2.b δι' αὐτοῦ

“through it (this *logos*)”

i) My study of the preposition *dia* suggests to me that the preposition *dia* followed by a substantive in the genitive case can be used in the following way: if I build a house following a particular set of blueprints, it could be said that I built the house *dia* the set of blueprints. If I sew a shirt from a pattern, it could be said that I sewed the shirt *dia* the pattern. If I evaluated a performance according to a certain set of standards, it could be said that I evaluated the performance *dia* that set of standards. If I acted out the part of a play according to the script, it could be said that I acted *dia* the script. This is the sense in which John is using *dia* here. From before the beginning of the cosmos itself, there was a script (a *logos*) that God had devised for the story of the cosmos that he intended to bring to pass. Accordingly, everything that is and everything that occurred—that is, literally everything that came into existence—came to be *dia* the script that he had devised. In other words, everything came into existence “from”, “in conformity to”, “guided by”, “in view of”, “with an eye to”, “in the light of”, “through the guidance of,” or even just “through” (or any number of other prepositions or phrases) the predetermined script of cosmic history. How one translates this into English is largely arbitrary. The point is that the *logos* served as a guide to the actual creation and providential determination of the created order. The significance of this to John, in this context, is that eternal Life, as the ultimate goal of human existence (which was contained in the *logos* that guided God’s bringing the cosmos and cosmic history into existence), was a purpose God had in view from the very beginning of creation itself. Therefore, so far as man is concerned, the goal of eternal Life is the very center and focus of the whole of cosmic history. Nothing is more central to why we are here than that.

ii) John’s point is reminiscent of—if not in fact inspired by—the Old Testament theme of God creating the world by wisdom. John may be using the word *logos* here in a manner analogous with (but not identical too) the word for wisdom in texts like Psalm 104:24 (“O Yahweh, how wonderful are your works! In wisdom, you have made them all. The earth is full of your possessions.”) Or, maybe not!

2.2.c καὶ χωρὶς αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο οὐδὲ ἓν ὃ γέγονεν

“and not one thing which has come into existence came into existence apart from it (this *logos*)”

i) John’s point here is to simply reiterate what he said in the clause before in different language. The language of this phrase emphasizes the extent to which cosmic history conforms to and is determined by the *logos* (the script). Namely, not a single thing that has ever come into existence has come into existence APART from it. In other words, nothing has ever occurred that has not been controlled and determined by the *logos* (the predetermined script). In the first clause he states that everything came into existence controlled and determined by the *logos*. Now he states the same thing using a double

negative: not a single thing has come into existence that has not been controlled and determined by the *logos*. This is for the sake of emphasis. Nothing that exists and nothing that occurs is outside the scope of God's purposes and control; nothing is outside the scope of God's *logos*.

2.2.d πάντα δι' αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο· καὶ χωρὶς αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο οὐδὲ ἓν ὃ γέγονεν.
"All things came into existence *dia* it (logos); and not one thing that has ever come into existence has come into existence apart from it (logos)."

i) The crucial point that John wants to make in this entire prologue occurs in 2.3. However, in order to put his point there in proper perspective, John wants to emphasize how completely ordered, purposed, and planned is God's cosmos. There is nothing that exists and nothing that occurs that is outside the scope of God's predetermined script for the cosmos. Accordingly, nothing that exists or occurs is outside the scope of what God has purposed for and desired from his cosmos. Everything is according to a script devised by God to serve his own will and purposes. It is in this context that we must understand the statement that follows: "In it (this *logos*) was Life." Eternal Life, as the ultimate fulfillment and final goal of human existence, is not some sort of accidental possibility for human beings (as it is, for example, in the Gilgamesh Epic and polytheistic worldviews in general); it is the original purpose and *raison d'être* for God creating human beings in the first place. Man was made for eternal Life. Attaining Life is the rational and divinely-ordered purpose for man's existence.

2.3.a ἐν αὐτῷ ζωὴ ἦν
"in it (this *logos*) was Life (*zoe*)"

i) In keeping with how John uses the word *zoe* throughout his gospel and all his writings, John uses the word 'life' (*zoe*) to refer to the ultimate Life to come in the age of ages, that is, eternal Life.

ii) Here *autos*, once again, refers back to *logos* as it is used in 2.1, which refers back to how it is used in 1.1, namely, it refers to the predetermined script of cosmic history. John is stressing that included in this *logos* (script) was eternal Life.

iii) The phrase ἐν αὐτῷ means "in it" in the sense of "included in it." John's point is that eternal Life was included in the *logos* from the very beginning. Eternal Life for human beings was an integral part of the original purposes of God for the cosmos. It is not particularly problematic how an abstraction like eternal Life can be "included" in a script, plan, or purpose. We speak this way in English. (Eg., How to acquire startup money was included in his business plan.) John's point, quite simply, is that the possibility of eternal Life was taken into account and planned for by God when he established his purposes as a part of the original *logos* of the cosmos. This is the sense in which Life was in the *logos*. It is more problematic to understand how the traditional view interprets this.

Assuming the *logos* is the second person of the Trinity, they have to understand John to be saying that eternal Life was located in the second person of the Trinity. How are we supposed to understand that? What would that mean? In what sense could that be true? More importantly, how is that relevant to the point of the prologue? (Particularly vexing is the fact that, according to orthodox theology, what is true of one person of the Trinity is also true of all the other persons of the Trinity. So, even if it is true that Life (for man?) is located primarily in the second person of the Trinity, it is *ipso facto* the case that Life is located in every person of the Trinity. But if that is the case, why does John insist on locating Life in the second person of the Trinity, in particular, rather than locating it generally in God, or in the godhead? What conceivable difference would it make to John's point in the prologue that Life was "in" the second person of the Trinity in particular? A conceivable answer might be that it is the second person of the Trinity who incarnates as Jesus and it is "in" Jesus that man finds eternal Life. But, Life can be found "in" Jesus even if Life is located in the entire Godhead or just in God, the Father, or even in the Holy Spirit. The simple fact that a man finds Life in Jesus is not in any way clarified or altered by analyzing the intricacies of a triune godhead and specifically locating Life in the second person of the godhead (whatever that would mean). If that is what John is doing, why? I think this is a significant problem for the traditional interpretation of this sentence.)

2.3.b καὶ ἡ ζωὴ
"and this Life (*zoe*)"

i) The article preceding *zoe* is an article of previous reference: the aforementioned Life, or "this Life." Accordingly, it is the eternal Life that he was denoting in the clause preceding this one. Therefore, it could be translated, "and this eternal Life"

2.3.c τὸ φῶς τῶν ἀνθρώπων
"the light of men"

i) The concept of "light," as it is quite consistently used by John, is a metaphor for intellectual illumination. Physical light illuminates one's surroundings so that one might see to navigate those surroundings. An accurate understanding of reality is analogous to that; it "illuminates" reality in a manner of speaking, so that one might know how to navigate reality. Light, then, represents a true understanding of reality.

ii) The fact that John refers to the light, without further qualification, is indicative of the fact that John has in mind the most important understanding of all. "The light" is that accurate understanding of reality that is most significant, most valuable, and most needed.

iii) The fact that John calls it “the light of men” indicates that it is the most significant understanding of the truth about reality relative to human existence. It is the most valuable and needed knowledge that a human being could have.

2.3.d καὶ ἡ ζωὴ ἦν τὸ φῶς τῶν ἀνθρώπων
“and this Life was the light of men”

i) The most problematic aspect of this statement is how eternal Life can be “equated” with the most vital knowledge that a human being can have. The obvious solution is that “this Life” is being used metonomously. “This life” is being used to stand for “the way to achieve this Life”. If someone, in the context of describing a business plan, said, “Money is our problem,” they clearly do not mean that it is literally money that is the problem. What he would mean is that the acquisition of money is the problem. Money, then, is being used metonomously to stand for the acquisition of money. That is what John is doing here. Life (*zoe*) is being used metonomously to stand for the attainment of Life, or more accurately, for the knowledge of how to attain Life. This solves our problem. For clearly the knowledge of how to attain eternal Life can be equated with the knowledge that is most valuable for a human being to attain.

ii) John’s point in this clause can be paraphrased thus: “and the way to attain this eternal Life was the most important and valuable knowledge that a human being could acquire.”

3.1.a καὶ τὸ φῶς
“now this light”

i) The article preceding the word ‘light’ is an article of previous reference. Hence, it is translated “this light.” It is referring to the same knowledge of how to attain eternal Life that is being indicated in 2.3. So, to paraphrase: “and this knowledge of how to attain eternal Life...”

3.1.b ἐν τῇ σκοτίᾳ φαίνει
“is shining in the darkness”

i) The darkness John has in view is the metaphorical counterpart to light. If light is knowledge and understanding, darkness is ignorance and the foolish resistance to truth. In short, “darkness” represents ignorance of the truth about reality in conjunction with that moral stupor that leads to a lack of interest in the truth.

ii) This darkness (ignorance, moral stupor) is the prevailing state of the world. The world is shrouded in darkness. The vast majority of mankind is ignorant and uninterested in truth. Accordingly, any truth is at risk of being altogether ignored, forsaken, and ultimately lost. The most important truth of all—the truth about how to attain eternal Life—is especially at risk of being lost.

iii) For the light to “shine” in the darkness is a metaphorical way of describing the illuminating presence of whatever knowledge is represented by the light. In this case, John has in mind the light of the knowledge of how to attain eternal Life. For that knowledge to be “shining” in the darkness is tantamount to saying that it is present and accessible to mankind. It is available to people, who are otherwise sunk in darkness (ignorance and apathy), to illuminate the realities of their existence. The knowledge of how to attain eternal Life is still available to people, it is still enlightening them, even though they are surrounded by ignorance of what one must do to attain it.

3.1.c καὶ τὸ φῶς ἐν τῇ σκοτίᾳ φαίνει
“now this light is shining in the darkness”

i) This is the climax of the prologue. The entire prologue could be paraphrased like this: *From the very beginning God has brought to pass all that he had purposed from before the creation of the cosmos. An essential feature of God’s purposes was to bring about the reality of eternal Life for human beings. In fact, knowing what qualified one to attain eternal Life was the most important truth that any human being could acquire. The world is shrouded in darkness, ignorant of all that is valuable and important. But the truth about how to attain eternal Life has not been lost. It continues to shine in the midst of the darkness. The darkness was not able to extinguish it.*

3.2.a ἡ σκοτία
“the darkness”

i) Exactly the same meaning as in 3.1. See notes 3.1.b.i and 3.1.b.ii. It is the foolish ignorance of truth and the absence of knowledge and understanding endemic to the world.

3.2.b αὐτὸ οὐ κατέλαβεν.
“did not extinguish it”

i) The antecedent of *auto* here is the light mentioned in 3.1. The darkness did not extinguish the light.

ii) The verb *katalambano* (extinguish) is used to describe the grasping of the wick of a candle in order to extinguish it. Something like that is the sense in which John is using it here. The darkness did not “snuff out” the light of the knowledge of how to attain eternal Life.

3.2.c καὶ
“Indeed”

i) The conjunction *kai* is a connective here, but with heightened significance: it expresses the fact that this next statement is intended to lend emphasis to the truth embodied in the first assertion. “The light is shining in the darkness. INDEED, the darkness did not extinguish it.” It is a surprise and a delight that the light is shining in the darkness. It didn’t have to be so. It should have been drowned out and lost to the darkness a long time ago. But INDEED it wasn’t. The darkness did not put it out. The *kai* is carrying a note of pleasant surprise at the truth of the first affirmation as it introduces the second affirmation—which explains what exactly it is that is so surprising (namely, that the darkness did not snuff it out).

3.1–3.2 καὶ τὸ φῶς ἐν τῇ σκοτίᾳ φαίνει. καὶ ἡ σκοτία αὐτὸ οὐ κατέλαβεν
“Now this light is shining in the darkness. Indeed, the darkness did not extinguish it.”

i) This is the climax of the prologue. The prologue could be paraphrased like this: *From the very beginning God has brought to pass all that he had purposed from before the creation of the cosmos. An essential feature of God’s purposes was to bring about the reality of eternal Life for human beings. In fact, knowing what qualified one to attain eternal Life was the most important truth that any human being could acquire. The world is shrouded in darkness, ignorant of all that is valuable and important. But the truth about how to attain eternal Life has not been lost. It continues to shine in the midst of the darkness. The darkness was not able to extinguish it.*

ii) Paragraphs 1–3 constitute a prologue to John’s gospel—that is, an introduction to the story of Jesus and what he did and taught—because they succinctly capture the importance and significance of what Jesus did and taught. Jesus came into the world to deliver to mankind the truth about how a man might attain eternal Life. It is because of Jesus that that knowledge is present and available to mankind, for all time. It is because of the work and deeds of Jesus that “the light” is still shining in the midst of the darkness. Reading between the lines of paragraphs 3 and 4: “... But the truth about how to attain eternal Life has not been lost. It continues to shine in the midst of the darkness. The darkness was not able to extinguish it. LET ME TELL YOU THE STORY OF HOW THAT LIGHT HAS COME TO BE SHINING BRIGHTLY: There came a man sent from God, whose name was John.”

iii) Interpreted in this way, this prologue is a literary masterpiece. It is succinct; and yet full of profound theological insights. At the same time, it is colorful, provocative, evocative, and compellingly poetic. At its climax, it is a masterful articulation of what is at the core of the joy and hope of the gospel. Its overall effect is spine-tingling.

Notes on Two Additional Assertions in John 1

6.1 » καὶ ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο καὶ ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν
6.5 » θεὸν οὐδεὶς ἑώρακεν πώποτε· ὁ μόνουγενὴς υἱός, ὁ ὢν εἰς τὸν κόλπον
τοῦ πατρὸς, ἐκεῖνος ἐξηγήσατο.

6.1.a σὰρξ ἐγένετο
“he became flesh”

i) John uses “flesh” here to denote human existence. In this case he has in mind a particular human individual. From the context of John’s gospel, it is clear who he has in mind—Jesus of Nazareth.

ii) John’s point is that the Logos took on the existence of a particular human individual who was the embodiment of the individual identity of the Logos himself.

6.1.b ὁ λόγος
“the Logos”

i) John has used *logos* in two different ways: to denote the pre-determined script of cosmic history; and to denote the transcendent creator who created the cosmos and authored the script of cosmic history. Which meaning does John have in mind here? Either meaning could make sense. It could be that the story became flesh—it took on the form of an individual human being—in the sense that the one whom the story is ultimately about became a human person. Or, it could be that the transcendent creator himself incarnated in the form of a particular individual human being. That is, the person of the transcendent creator God embodied himself in the person of a particular human being, Jesus. If there were a significant reason to question the latter, then the former is certainly meaningful and true. However, given that John explicitly indicates that Jesus is the incarnation of the transcendent creator God later in the chapter (see 6.5) and elsewhere in his gospel, it seems significantly more likely that that is what he is referring to in this statement.

6.1.c καὶ ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν
“and he dwelt among us”

i) There are two possible senses in which this statement could be construed. John could mean that the transcendent Creator became an individual human being and lived in the midst of human history. Or, he could mean that the transcendent Creator became an individual human being and lived in the midst of John and his contemporary Jews in Galilee in the first century A.D. I think that it is the latter that John actually has in mind.

PAPER #5: Understanding John 1

Part of John’s point is that “we (John and his fellow eyewitnesses) beheld his glory.” John is testifying to the fact that he saw the glory of the incarnate Logos and knew first hand who he proved himself to be. John is anticipating that theme here in this declaration: the transcendent Creator became an individual human being—Jesus of Nazareth—and *dwelt in the midst of us first century Jews. And we beheld his glory!*

ii) The verb *skenoo* is used only this one time in the New Testament. It means to “pitch one’s tent and live there,” or simply to “dwell in a tent.” It is difficult to resist the notion that John uses this relatively rare verb as an allusion to God’s relationship to the people of Israel during the events surrounding Mt. Sinai. God came and “pitched his tent” in the midst of his people Israel. He instructed Moses to build him a tabernacle (a tent) and then, upon its completion, he took up residence within that tent. He manifest his presence there in the Holy of Holies. I think John is trying to suggest that God has done that once again in human history. He has “pitched his tent” in the midst of his people and has become physically manifest to and present among them again. This time, he has “pitched his tent” with them by literally becoming one of them. God became flesh. And in the form of that flesh, he lived among his very own people. (I see a similar allusion to the same O.T. background in Hebrews 1:3. See Paper #6. There Jesus is described as “the Glory”—an allusion, I believe, to Yahweh’s physical manifestation in the Holy of Holies.)

6.5.a θεὸν οὐδεὶς ἑώρακεν πώποτε
“No one has seen God at any time”

i) It is highly unlikely that John is claiming that no one has ever seen God at any time in any sense. There are a number of instances in the Torah where God reveals himself to people in one form or another and people see God in that particular form. For example, he showed himself to Abraham in the form of a man, to Jacob in the form of a man who wrestled with him, and to Moses in the form of a burning bush. It seems likely that the point John is making is that no one has ever seen God as he is in himself, in his transcendence. Undoubtedly, the reason for this is that it would be logically impossible for a creature to “see” the Creator in his transcendence. A creature would have to transcend his creaturehood in order to do so—in which case God would cease to transcend that person. If this is right, then the significance of what John is saying is this: no one ever has—and no one ever will or could—see God as he is in his transcendent nature.

6.5.b ὁ μονογενῆς υἱός
“the unique Son”

i) Some manuscripts read θεός (God) rather than υἱός (Son) here. The majority of Greek manuscripts read υἱός (Son) here, and I see no reason to think that this reading is not original. A few old and much-favored-by-modern-textual-critics manuscripts have θεός

(God), but I think that their text is corrupt at this point. If one simply argues from internal evidence, that is, on the basis of what reading makes the most sense in this place, υἱός (Son) is clearly the more likely reading. The emphasis throughout the chapter is on the Son in relation to God, the Father. What could John possibly mean here by calling Jesus the “unique God”? Possibly, it could mean “the unique One, who is God,” but that does not seem likely in light of the fact that a straightforward reading is attested by a majority of manuscripts.

ii) ‘Son’ is a Messianic title. To refer to Jesus as the “Son” is to claim that he is the Messiah, the Christ, the Anointed One. The Anointed One is the promised King in the line of David who will establish and rule over the Kingdom of God.

iii) In many translations, the word *monogenes* is translated “only-begotten.” Most modern Greek scholars agree that such a translation is mistaken. It originates from an error of judgment by the translator, Jerome, when he translated the Latin Vulgate. *Monogenes* should be translated “unique” or “one-of-a-kind.” Jesus is the unique Son because—while there have been many sons of God, many messiahs, many christs down through history—none of them have brought to fruition all that God promised with respect to the Kingdom of God. But as the prophets made clear, there was One who was coming who would fulfill all God’s promises with respect to his Kingdom and his blessings. That one was the unique (*monogenes*) Son, the unique (*monogenes*) Messiah, the unique (*monogenes*) Anointed One, the unique (*monogenes*) King of kings.

6.5.c ὁ ὢν εἰς τὸν κόλπον τοῦ πατρὸς
“the one who is in the bosom of the Father”

i) It is not clear to me what the cultural background of this idiom is. Nor am I certain what it means. One distinct possibility is that it is an idiom that describes how precious and loved Jesus is by God, his Father. (Note: “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.”) To be “in the bosom of” a person could mean to be particularly loved by and dear to that person. If that is the case, then John is simply indicating here the priority that Jesus, the unique Son of God, has in the affections of the transcendent creator God. It is also possible that the cultural background here is as a “place of honor” at the triangular tables at which they dined in their culture. The person who was “at the bosom” of the host of the table was the honored guest. (cf. Luke 14:7 ff. Also note the scene at the last supper where John reclined at the bosom of Jesus. [John 13:23] And note that Lazarus was at Abraham’s bosom after he died. [Luke 16:22 ff.]) If this is the background, then the issue is not the affection of the Father for the Son, but rather the honor granted to the Son by the Father.

6.5.d ἐκεῖνος ἐξηγήσατο
“that one has translated him”

i) The word ‘*ekeinos*’ (“that one”) is often used by John when he wants to denote Jesus—especially in his letter, 1 John. It is beyond doubt, in this context, that Jesus is the “that one” to whom John is referring.

ii) The verb John uses here describes the activity of interpreting, translating, and making understandable something that one is seeking to communicate. It would be a word one could use to describe “translating” a foreign language into one’s native tongue. It would be a word one could use to describe “interpreting” an ambiguous or abstruse statement in one’s own language. John’s point seems to be this: God, who is transcendent and unknowable in that form, can only be known (“seen”) by human beings if who he is in his transcendence is “translated” into a form that we can know and understand. Jesus is just such a translation. Jesus is the embodiment of all that the individual person of the transcendent creator is; he is that transcendent Creator translated into the form of a human being so that we can know him.

iii) The first statement in 6.5 is intimately connected to the last statement in 6.5. If we remove the intervening, explanatory assertions, the main assertion of 6.5 is this: No one has seen God at any time; but the man Jesus has translated him to us. That is, while we cannot see God as he is in his transcendence, that does not mean that we cannot know God. We can know God because God has seen fit to translate who he is into a form that we can see and know. If we want to know God, we simply need to come to know his Son, Jesus. He is the translation of God. (Note: undoubtedly John would acknowledge that some of what God is gets lost in translation. We can never know everything about God.)

OBJECTIONS TO THE ABOVE EXEGESIS AND MY RESPONSE:

Objection #1: The Church Fathers seem to have been aware of a divine-like being, distinct in some sense from God the Father, who they called the Logos. They seem clear among themselves that this is the one to whom John is referring here. Any interpretation that ignores their unified testimony to this effect cannot possibly be right.

My Answer:

Answer 1.1 > It is true that the early Church Fathers who formulated the doctrine of the Trinity (Athanasius, etc.) assumed the existence of a Logos who was both divine and yet not simply and identically God himself. The question, however, is from whence came such an assumption? Did it come from the apostles or did it come from Neo-Platonism? I would argue that it came from the latter. Neo-Platonism was a very powerful influence on the Christian thinkers of the third and fourth centuries. This is an undeniable fact to

anyone who would acquaint himself with the history of ideas in these early centuries A.D.

Answer 1.2 > To grant some sort of authority to the Church Fathers is fallacious. The Church Fathers were historically influential Christian thinkers, but they were nothing more than that—Christian thinkers. They have no advantage over any Christian thinker today except, possibly, proximity to the culture out of which the biblical writings themselves arose. But the advantage of their chronological proximity can be greatly exaggerated. The issue is not chronological proximity, but worldview proximity. In that regard, the Church Fathers—having been influenced by Neo-Platonism as much as they were—are no more proximate in worldview to that of the biblical authors than we are.

Answer 1.3 > In the light of 1.2 above, there is no significant difference in my mind between saying “the Church Fathers have authority” and “we must respect the Church Fathers to such a degree that we dare not depart from their views (in this matter).” Both are fallacious. The Church Fathers were immanently fallible human beings. (They demonstrated this repeatedly in other points of doctrine that we can clearly see conflict with the teaching of the Bible.) Hence, they are worthy of no more respect than I would grant any other student of the Bible who is attempting to come to terms with what it teaches. To the extent that their arguments and conclusions make sense, I should respect them and learn from them. To the extent that their arguments and conclusions do not make sense, I should reject what they teach.

Answer 1.4 > The only way the above objection could have any credence at all is on the assumption that there is a straightforward, extra-biblical tradition of teachings handed down faithfully from the apostles that augments what we can know from Scripture. That is, if Jesus taught the apostles orthodox Trinitarian theology and the apostles faithfully handed that down to their followers and so on down to the fourth century—and if that unwritten tradition included the fact that the Logos was the second person of a divine Trinity—then this objection would have some merit. But what possible evidence can one give that that is in fact what happened? Any evidence we do have is that the Church Fathers were continually departing from the gospel as recorded and written in the Scriptures. If the Church Fathers have not remained faithful to the apostolic teaching that has been written down (and is there for us to compare)—for example, their doctrines on faith, justification, atonement, ecclesiastical authority, the church, celibacy, etc.—what conceivable reason do we have for thinking there is some unwritten tradition that the Church Fathers are *accurately and faithfully* representing to us?

Answer 1.5 > Even if it were plausible to think that there was an understanding handed down from the apostles regarding the meaning of Logos in the opening verses of John, would not reading those opening verses in the light of that understanding thereby clarify and illuminate what John means, rather than confuse it and complicate it? Unless it can be demonstrated that a traditional Trinitarian reading of John 1:1–5 makes significantly

better sense than the interpretation I have proposed, it makes no sense to place confidence in an unwritten tradition of Trinitarian theology as the appropriate background for understanding John's prologue. I have never seen a coherent, compelling explication of John's prologue from the standpoint of the traditional reading.

Objection #2: When John says that all things were created *dia* him (the Logos), the preposition *dia* makes it clear that John is meaning to describe the Logos as the agent through whom God created the cosmos. Accordingly, you are being overly-creative and imaginative in your interpretation when you try to make *dia* mean something other than what it clearly and straightforwardly means: namely, to indicate personal agency.

[Personal agency is the concept of a person being the cause of something through their actions. Personal agency can be direct or mediated. If person A reports something to person O, then person A is the direct and immediate personal agency of the report. If person P reports something to person R on behalf of person U, then person P is the intermediate personal agency of the report and Person R is the ultimate agency, the one who ultimately purposed the report.]

Answer 2.1 > To maintain that it clearly and straightforwardly means personal agency here in John is simply NOT a reasonable interpretation of the usage of *dia*. See appendix D for a (still partial and incomplete) analysis of how *dia* followed by the genitive is used in the New Testament. There are many different ways in which *dia* [+gen] is used. Personal agency is only one possibility. So, on what basis can one argue that it *has to mean* personal agency here?

Answer 2.2 > Furthermore, it is a misunderstanding of the nature of prepositions to treat them as if they "mean" something in the first place. Prepositions are capable of meaning scores of different things. With prepositions, it is a matter of how and when they are used, not what they "mean" *per se*. See appendix C for a further discussion of this.

Answer 2.3 > The issue under discussion cannot be debated at the level of how one should translate *dia* [+gen] here. Even if we concede that *dia autou* (the *logos*) should be translated "through it/him" [the *logos*], that does not settle the issue of what the statement means. All things were created *through* the *logos* in what sense? The ways in which we use the English preposition are many and varied, defining many different sorts of relationships. See Appendix F. There is no reason to expect the Greek preposition *dia* to be any less varied in its uses—whether or not one feels convinced that it should be translated "through." Feeling free to translate it in some way other than "through" derives from two facts: (i) the Greek preposition *dia* will not have exactly the same set of uses as the English preposition "through", and (ii) many sentences employing the English preposition "through" are capable of being worded using some other preposition or phrase in place of "through" without altering the meaning of the statement.

PAPER #5: Understanding John 1

Answer 2.4 > To interpret these opening verses of John, one should not reason from what *dia* **must** mean to what the statement means. Rather, one must try to understand the statement in the context of the argument that John is attempting to make, and then determine how it is that *dia* is being used in order to suggest that. Is there any conceivable contribution to John's argument—to the point John is trying to make in his Prologue—by the claim that a distinct person from God the Father was the agent (or intermediate agent) who created the world? If not, then that is not likely to be what John intended. In the interpretation I have proposed, the fact that everything conforms to God's script—and, hence, his purposes—can be seen to contribute to the point John is making. Namely, it highlights the point that eternal Life is part of God's original purpose for mankind from before the beginning of the world. This is relevant to John's point because it dramatizes the central importance of the gospel message of how to attain Life. Nothing could be a more important truth to confront—nothing could be a more important truth for the Son to bring to mankind—than how a man can attain that which was purposed to be his ultimate destiny from the very beginning. To the extent that my interpretation renders this statement relevant to the main purpose of the prologue, while the traditional interpretation does not (so far as I can see), my interpretation has more likely captured John's intent.

Answer 2.5 > Furthermore, the traditional claim that John (and other apostles) teach that the Logos, the second person of the Trinity, is the agent (or, more typically, the intermediate agent) of creation is itself problematic. How would they know that? Not from the creation accounts in Genesis. So far as I know, not from any Old Testament scripture. (Proverbs 8:22-31 treats "wisdom" in a manner directly analogous to how I have interpreted *logos* in John 1:1. Hence, Proverbs 8 is more likely evidence of my interpretation of *logos* as script, purpose, plan, or blueprint than it is of the Logos as the second person of the Trinity.) If one argues that the apostles knew this through direct revelation, then why do they not consistently speak of the Son as the creator? They are more typically content to describe God as the creator. If it is so important to be clear in John 1 that it was the second person of the godhead in particular that created the cosmos, then why are they content to omit that particular fact elsewhere? On my interpretation, they omit it elsewhere because they include it nowhere; they don't believe it. The traditionalist claim made by some that *dia* [+gen] is used to describe intermediate agency is particularly problematic; for *dia* [+gen] is explicitly used to describe God's (Yahweh's) relationship to his creation in Romans 11:36. If it is true that the Logos is the intermediate agent behind the creation of the cosmos, then it cannot be true that God, the creator in the Genesis account, is the intermediate agent of creation; he must be the ultimate agent. Yet Romans 11:36 does not seem to allow such a thing (if, as some traditionalists contend, *dia* [+gen] can only mean intermediate agency), for, on that assumption, it indicates that God is the intermediate agent.

Objection #3: John clearly and necessarily implies that the Logos is distinct from God when he writes that "the Logos was *pros* God." Then, he immediately identifies the Logos with God when he writes: "and the Logos was God." John is clearly seeking to indicate the simultaneous unity and plurality of divine being in these two statements. The Logos has unity with God ("the Logos was God") and yet the Logos is in some significant sense distinct at the same time ("the Logos was *pros* God"). The orthodox formulation of the Trinity does justice to this fact. Your [JAC's] interpretation obscures the evidence in two ways: (1) it fallaciously construes *logos* as having a different meaning in one sentence from what it means in the very next sentence; and (2) you fallaciously render the last assertion "God is the Logos" rather than its proper meaning, "the Logos is God."

Answer 3.1 > There is no necessary fallacy in making *logos* mean one thing in one sentence and something quite different in a sentence immediately following it. What if one read the following: "That book is his mind from beginning to end. He and he alone produced it. There was no one else. But that shouldn't surprise you. He has a brilliant mind."? It seems to me the meaning should be clear enough here. I don't think there should be any confusion. It is not ambiguous. And yet, the first use of 'mind' denotes something quite different (and yet related) to what the second use of 'mind' denotes. The second use of 'mind' denotes the literal thinking capacity of some man. The first use denotes a particular product of that man's thinking capacity—namely, what it is that is embodied in his book. Something very much like this is how I am understanding John 1:1. See appendix B for further data concerning this.

Answer 3.2 > It is not fallacious to read 1.2 as "God is the Logos" rather than "the Logos is God." I have discussed this to some extent in note 1.2.a.i. For a fuller discussion see appendix A.

Answer 3.3 > My interpretation is a more straightforward interpretation of the evidence than the traditional reading. On my reading, the fact that the *logos* (as script) is clearly distinct from God is not at all in conflict with the fact that the Logos (author of the script) is identical to God himself. Any tension between God and the *logos* being distinct and God and the *logos* being identical does not even arise. If any interpretation is problematic here, it is the traditional reading. If John were an orthodox Trinitarian, would he pen the words "and the Logos was with (*pros*) God"? Why? It would be understandable for him to say that the divine person of the Logos was WITH the divine person of God (the Father?) if he were a tri-theist. But orthodox Trinitarianism seeks to maintain a distinction of persons WITHOUT entailing that there are three distinct Gods. Would an orthodox Trinitarian really be inclined to talk about the Logos being WITH God at the beginning? On the Trinitarian view, was there any possibility of the Logos NOT being with God? He is God. How could he *not* be WITH him? And if he couldn't not be with him, then why did John find it worth saying? It is very difficult to find John's discussion at all helpful, clarifying, and illuminating if it is read as the traditional interpretation reads

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it. The traditional reading seems clearly calculated to find a proof text and evidence for a doctrinal position (Trinitarianism), not calculated to understand the mind of John in the text he wrote.

Objection #4: You have offered a clever interpretation of John's prologue, but your interest is in proving orthodox Trinitarianism wrong. Hence, your interpretation is forced and contrived. The natural reading of John's prologue is the traditional (Trinitarian) reading.

Answer 4.1 > My interest is not, and never has been, to prove Trinitarianism wrong. It is actually the other way around. In seeking to make sense out of John's prologue, I came to realize how fragmented, incoherent, contrived, and without substance the traditional reading was. Accordingly, it started me down the road of reconsidering Trinitarian theology itself.

Answer 4.2 > It should never be the goal of an interpreter to discover the "natural" meaning of a text. The goal of an interpreter should be to discover the reading that most likely captures what the author of that text intended. Those are not the same thing. What makes a reading natural is its conformity to the expectations I have, arising out of my pre-understanding and my pre-conceived notions of what is true, theologically. Therefore, if my theology is bad to start with, the readings which seem most "natural" will be far from true and far from what the biblical authors intended. To someone who is unshakably committed to orthodox Trinitarianism and its attendant readings of texts, certainly the traditional reading of John's prologue will seem more "natural". But that is not surprising. Neither is it relevant. The issue is whether the traditional view is likely to be what John intended; my answer to that is that it cannot be what John intended.

Objection #5: You translate *dia* [+gen] as "in line with" in John 1:3, but it can't mean that in John 1:10. John 1:10 is clearly talking about Jesus as "the true light" and makes the claim that the world was "made through (*dia* [+gen]) him," not "in line with" him. If John 1:3 tells us that all things came to be (*ginomai*) *dia* [+gen] him, and John 1:10 tells us that the world (*kosmos*) came to be (*ginomai*) *dia* [+gen] him, is it not clear that they mean exactly the same thing and, therefore, should be seen as mutually interpretive?

Answer 5.1 > I do take the *dia* [+gen] in John 1:3 to mean something like "in line with." I would take the *dia* [+gen] in John 1:10 to mean something like "with a view to" in roughly something like the sense of "for the sake of." For my defense of taking *dia* [+gen] to be used in this way see my paper on Colossians, my paper on Hebrews 1, and also appendix D. If one still objects that one cannot take *dia* to be used in two different ways in the same context, see answer 5.2 below.

Answer 5.2 > The objection does not take into account how various is our use of prepositions, even in exactly the same context or series of assertions. It would be a huge

mistake to think that, because the same preposition is used in different statements in the same context, that preposition must mean the same thing every time. Consider the following example in English: "I saw you *ON* TV. You were getting *ON* the bus *ON* the day after the hurricane. I think you were talking *ON* the phone." (I could probably go *ON* and *ON* with this example, but this is enough *ON* this point.)

Answer 5.3 > Imagine that a director of a movie was very conscious of staying faithful to the book on which his movie was based. In an interview he makes this point by saying that "he made the movie *dia* the script (*logos*) of the book." Then later in the same interview, making a different point—namely, that his goal in the movie was to draw attention to the character of the protagonist of the story—he says that "everything in the movie was made *dia* the main character." Now, these would be somewhat different uses of the word *dia*. However, there is no particular problem in understanding each of them. In the first instance the director is talking about a story-line or script. In the second instance he is talking about a person. It would never occur to me to equate the story-line with the person just because it is stated that everything in the movie was *dia* the script and everything in the movie was *dia* the protagonist. The intent of the author (the director) is clear enough, in context, that there should be no question but what *dia* is being used differently in the two different claims.

Answer 5.4 > If anything, John 1:10 is evidence against *dia* meaning agency (or intermediate agency). The object of the preposition *dia* in 1:10 denotes the man Jesus. He may be the incarnation of God, but Jesus is a man. He is God incarnate as Jesus of Nazareth, not the pre-incarnate God (or, second person of the Trinity). How then can John be claiming that the world was made through his agency in John 1:10? Is John really suggesting that Jesus of Nazareth, the man himself, was the intermediate agent of the creation of the world? That is highly unlikely. Therefore, it is highly unlikely that *dia* in John 1:10 is being used to indicate agency.

Objection #6: You translate *dia* [+gen] as "in line with" in John 1:3, but that can't be right! You are reading John as if he means to say that everything God created was created according to the script (*logos*). Anyone who has studied one year of N.T. Greek knows that "according to" is indicated by *kata* followed by the accusative (not *dia* followed by the genitive). So, in order for John to mean what you suggest, he would have written *κατα αὐτον* (*kata auton*), not *δια αὐτου* (*dia autou*). Since John did not use *kata* in 1:3, then it was not his intention to say that everything was created according to (*kata*) the script. Your interpretation is not possible.

Answer 6.1 > This objection makes a fallacious assumption: that there is one and only one way to say something in a language. This is clearly not true in English, why would we assume that it is true in Greek. Just because *kata* plus accusative is a frequent and typical way of saying "according to," what makes us think that it is the *only* way to say it? Consider the following examples in English: (i) I am *over* the city now. I am *above* the

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city now. (ii) Your move was *according to* the rules. Your move was *by* the rules. (iii) He made me a promise *according to* certain conditions. He made me a promise *with* certain conditions. Clearly, we can use a variety of different prepositions to express exactly, or substantially, the same thing in English. We have every reason to expect that the same thing is true in Greek. We are simply naïve about language itself if we think otherwise.

Answer 6.2 > There could very well be a subtle difference in nuance between *kata* [+acc] and *dia* [+gen] in New Testament Greek. The difference could simply be a matter of convention (what sounds right); or it could be a subtle difference in meaning. Either way, the difference may be so subtle that we would be unable to discern it, since we are not native speakers. So, when a modern student of N.T. Greek (who is not a native speaker) concludes from his rather limited experience with the language what an author writing in that language can and cannot do, it seems rather presumptuous. Our task as biblical interpreters is to teach ourselves the language—that is, to teach ourselves what “can” and “cannot” be done with the language—at the same time that we discover the meaning of the biblical texts. It is backwards to decide, in advance of my interpretation of a particular text, what the language of the New Testament can and cannot say. How will I know what it can and cannot say until I have decided how it is being used in the particular text I am studying? If I foreclose on certain possibilities prematurely, then I will be blocked from understanding that particular text. The author didn’t know to shape his language choices around my ideas about what can and cannot be done in the Greek language. Here, once again, we meet the dreaded *hermeneutical circle*.

Objection #7: Your understanding of “light” in John 1:4–5 as the knowledge of how to attain eternal Life cannot be right. In John 1:7–9, it is clear that the “light” is a person, the very person of Jesus himself. If it is the person of Jesus in 1:7–9, it must also be the person of Jesus in 1:4–5. In particular, is it not problematic to take “light” as an abstraction in the first instance (knowledge of how to attain Life) and as a concrete individual in the next instance (Jesus)?

Answer 7.1 > John is using ‘light’ equivocally, but in ways that are closely related. In the first place he uses ‘light’ to indicate the KNOWLEDGE of how to attain eternal Life; in the second case he uses ‘light’ to indicate the SOURCE OF THAT KNOWLEDGE of how to attain eternal Life. We equivocate in our use of “light” in exactly the same way. I point to the ceiling and say (with regard to some light fixture), “Could you turn that light on?” Or, “Is that light broken?” Clearly, by “light” I mean to denote a source of light (a source of that illuminating energy by which we can see). At other times, I use “light” to denote the light itself, that is, to denote the illuminating energy by which we can see. Here in his gospel, John is speaking altogether metaphorically. In no way does he mean either physical light (energy) or the source of physical light. But he does mean metaphorical LIGHT (knowledge, understanding, and wisdom with respect to an important issue of human existence, namely, how one attains eternal Life) in two different senses. In the first he means, metaphorically, that KNOWLEDGE itself. In the second he means the SOURCE of

that metaphorical light (the source of that knowledge): Jesus, who came to teach us this knowledge. Tim O’Nan has indicated to me the following helpful points: (i) Jesus is said to be the “light” (that is, the source of knowledge) in John 1:7–9 in much the same way that he says of himself in John 14:6 that he is the “truth” (that is, the source of truth.) (ii) Throughout his gospel, John records Jesus using “light” in both of the ways under consideration here. It is arguable that in 3:19–21 he uses “light” as a metaphor for knowledge. Then again, in 8:12 and 9:5 he calls himself (a person) the “light of the world.”

Answer 7.2 > It is difficult to know what John 1:4–5 would mean if the “light” denoted the man Jesus. Without a plausible proposal, it is not possible to interact with this seriously.

Objection #8: Orthodox Trinitarianism theology can make sense out of John 1:14, Transcendent Monotheism cannot. [Transcendent Monotheism is defined in Paper #1.] In 1:14, John is saying that the Logos came down from his heavenly abode and dwelt as a man. That is not a problem for the Orthodox Trinitarian view. The second person of the Trinity has left his heavenly abode, but the first person of the Trinity (and the third person?) remains in the heavenly abode. Hence, God has not left his abode in heaven. In the Transcendent Monotheistic view, the Logos is God himself, all there is to him. Hence, on this view God himself has left his heavenly abode and come down to earth. No God remains in heaven on this view. Surely that cannot be right.

Answer 8.1 > The problem with this objection is the underlying premise that in order to become man, God had to “leave his heavenly abode.” Perhaps I am mistaken, but I don’t believe that even thoughtful Orthodox Trinitarian theologians believe that the Logos ceased to be the second person of the Trinity in heaven, communing with the other person’s of the godhead, when he became man. I think they would argue that he is an active member of the transcendent godhead and man simultaneously. (Granted, folk Christians may have a conception that the Logos ceased to be transcendent during the time that he was Jesus. But that is not thoughtful theology.) In any case, here is what I would maintain: when the Logos (author)—the transcendent creator God—“became flesh,” he did not thereby cease to be transcendent. He was both simultaneously. He was the transcendent God in the transcendent realm at the same time that he was a created human being living among men who was the very embodiment of who he, God, is.

CONCLUSION: DOES JOHN 1 HELP US CHOOSE BETWEEN OUR CONTENDING VIEWPOINTS?

If the above interpretation of John 1 is correct, then we can draw the following conclusion with regard to God, Jesus, and the relationship between the two from John 1:

The transcendent creator of the cosmos, God, is the Logos (the author of cosmic history), who is the one who "became flesh" in the form of Jesus, who is the "translation" of the invisible, unknowable God into the form of a knowable human being, who is the unique Son of God (Messiah) that the prophets foretold.

Further, we could summarize the distinctive elements in the teaching of John 1 this way:

1. Jesus is the Messiah.
2. God and the Logos are one and the same divine person.
3. Jesus is the incarnation of God (=Logos).
4. As the incarnation, Jesus is the translation into a human being of the very identity of God. That is, he is the visible, knowable interpretation of the invisible, unknowable God, being a human embodiment of the divine being.

Do these four distinctive aspects of John's teaching tend to support Transcendent Monotheism or Trinitarianism?

1. The claim that Jesus is the Messiah is embraced in common by both Trinitarianism and Transcendent Monotheism. John's teaching here would not lend support for either view over the other.
2. To the extent that Trinitarianism is committed to the idea that the Logos is the second person of the triune God, John's teaching is inconsistent with Trinitarianism. Clearly, the perspective John is writing from is simply that the one God of the Jews, Yahweh, is one and the same person and being as the Logos. John does not see the Logos as a distinct person from Yahweh. They are straightforwardly identified with one another by John.
3. Both Transcendent Monotheism and Trinitarianism acknowledge that Jesus is God incarnate. However, there is a significant difference in the way that they understand who was incarnated. Trinitarianism understands Jesus to be the incarnation of the Logos, who is understood to be the second person of the Trinity. This does not seem to be at all compatible with what John is thinking. John simply describes Jesus as the incarnation of the Logos, who is Yahweh himself. For John, Jesus is more than the incarnation of a second-person within a triune godhead; rather, he is the incarnation of the one and only personal, transcendent God that there is—he is the incarnation of all that God is, of the "fullness" of God.

4. John uses the language of “translation” or “interpretation” to explain who Jesus is in relation to God. This is exactly that understanding of God and Jesus that Transcendent Monotheism is seeking to articulate. This is a problematic way of speaking for Trinitarianism. John’s statements are not clearly and easily compatible with Trinitarianism. Trinitarianism holds that God (or, more accurately, the second person of the Trinity) dwells within the person of Jesus in some sense. For most Trinitarians (at least popularly understood), Jesus is not the “translation” or “interpretation” of God; rather, Jesus is simply a human receptacle that contains somehow within his human person the divine nature and person of the Logos (the second person of the Trinity). In that sense, he does not “interpret” God to man; he literally IS God among men. So, as I have interpreted John’s views, they are not compatible with orthodox Trinitarianism. (In all likelihood, Trinitarians would insist on a different interpretation of John’s text at 1:18—most likely, that Jesus “explained God” to us by means of his teaching.)

To sum it up, Transcendent Monotheism is completely compatible with everything John asserts about God, Jesus, and the inter-relationship between the two. Trinitarianism, on the other hand, is not completely compatible with what John asserts. If we were to judge on the basis of the teaching of John 1 alone, we would have to conclude that Transcendent Monotheism can make a defensible claim that it is the biblical view, while Trinitarianism cannot make this claim.