



# THE BEREIA PAGE

*“Examining . . . to see if these things are so” ~ Acts 17.11*

## John’s Great Declaration

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Unlike Matthew, Mark, and Luke, John begins his gospel with an extended statement of what the disciples ultimately came to believe about Jesus. The details of his elaboration are not without some difficulties, best summarized by Anselm’s famous phrase, “faith seeking understanding.” But whatever our views of the obscurities of his presentation, three truths about what he had concluded about Jesus of Nazareth are clear.

First, John said Jesus was “the Word” (ὁ λόγος, *ho logos*) (John 1.1). In the cultural environment of the world of the first century AD, the idea of the *logos* had been the subject of much philosophical speculation and debate. In John’s view, the *logos* was best explained in terms of Jesus. The Word, he said, was not a *what*, but *who*, not an abstract concept or idea, but a *person* to be experienced with the senses and interacted with just as we relate to any other person. This idea about him is all the more remarkable when we also read that “in the beginning . . . the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (v. 1). That is, he was an eternal being who was also involved in the act of creation (v. 3). Thus, he was the source of life who in turn “was the light of men” (v. 4). He is the light that shined into and challenged the darkness, which, despite trying hard to do so, could not “overcome” or “master” (NET) him (v. 5).

What exactly does it mean to say the darkness could not overcome Jesus? The word *overcome* (καταλαμβάνω, *katalambanō*) had four meanings at the time John wrote: (1) to make something one’s own; (2) to gain control of someone; (3) to come upon and be surprised by someone, or (4) to process, understand, or grasp information (Bauer 2000, 519–520). Each of these meanings represents a way different people throughout history have responded to the person of Jesus. It is possible John chose the word because it had multiple nuances, as a way to underscore the complexity involved in the person of Jesus and how we are to understand him. In the context of John’s gospel, however, I’m convinced that the idea of gaining control over Jesus, expressed by the translations “overcome” or “master” (ESV, NET) is most likely what John wanted to emphasize here.

The second truth John stressed in his prologue is that Jesus is “the one and only Son” (vv. 14, 18; NIV) who, because he was “himself God and . . . in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known” (v. 18; NIV). The word translated “one and only” in the NIV is μονογενής (*monogenēs*). Others have translated it “only begotten” (KJV, ASV, NASB) and “only” (ESV, NRSV). Bauer’s lexicon gives two meanings: (1) “pert[ains] to being the only one of its kind within a specific relationship, one and only, only”; or (2) “pert[ains] to being the only one of its kind or class, unique (in kind)” (Bauer 2000, 658). In other words, to say that a person was *monogenēs* was to say that he was in some way distinctive or unique. In addition to the verses where the word is used to refer to Jesus (cf. John 1.14, 18; 3.16, 18; cf. 1 John 4.9), it is used in the gospels to refer to the only son of the widow of Nain (Luke 7.12), the only daughter of Jairus (Luke 8.42), and the demon-possessed only son of a man who asked for healing (Luke 9.38). It is also used in Hebrews to refer to Isaac, the one-of-a-kind, but not only, son of Abraham (Heb 11.17; cf. Gen 16.15–16; 17.18–26;

25.1–4, 9).

In using *monogenēs* to describe him, John declared Jesus’s uniqueness in two important ways. First, he had a unique relationship with the Father. Jesus himself made this claim, using “my Father” several times in a way that implied his relationship with him was different from anyone else’s experience of the Father (cf. John 5.17; 6.32, 40; 8.32, 38, 49, 54; 10.18, 29, 37; 14.7, 20, 21, 23; 15.1, 8, 15, 23, 24; 20.17). Second, John’s use of *monogenēs* serves to emphasize that he understood Jesus to be the only one of his kind or class. Although it was possible for others to become “sons of light” (John 12.36), Jesus is God’s Son like no one else can ever be. He is unique.

But that is only part of what is so amazing in John’s statement about Jesus. This unique person, who had been with God in the beginning and had helped create the world, “became flesh and took up residence among us” (John 1.14 NET). In doing so, he “made [God] known” (v. 18) in a way no prophet, priest, or anyone else could.

The third truth John emphasized in his prologue is that, in “coming into the world,” Jesus became “the true light which gives light to everyone” (John 1.9). This statement makes two astounding claims. First, Jesus brought enlightenment to the world, illuminating the right direction for life in the midst of the world’s darkness. This darkness, which is the result of the devil’s influence, has kept people from realizing the potential God has always had in mind for us by tempting us to pursue evil desires and actions and thus deluding us with distractions and dead ends (cf. John 8.34–44). Jesus shined the light that exposed the darkness (3.19–21) and revealed the right way.

But can Jesus’s way really be trusted? Other teachers, philosophers, and holy men have promised enlightenment. What makes his way better than theirs? John’s affirmation of confidence in Jesus anticipates that question. He “was the real light ... that comes into the world and shines on all people (1.9 GNT). The adjective *real*, or *true* (ἀληθινός, *alēthinos*), as it is rendered in most translations, refers to what aligns with fact and therefore to what is trustworthy. It also refers “to being real, genuine, authentic” (Bauer 2000, 43). Significantly, John uses *alēthinos* nine of the ten times it appears in the gospels (cf. Luke 16.11) to refer to true worshipers (4.23); a true saying (4.37); the true bread from heaven (6.32); the true nature of the one who sent Jesus (7.28); Jesus’s true judgment (8.16); Jesus as the true vine (15.1); the true God who could be known (17.3); and the true testimony of the writer who reported the coming forth of blood and water when the spear pierced Jesus’s side (19.35). In each case, a translation using the words *authentic*, *real*, or *genuine* would fit in the passage without changing its meaning. Thus, it is apparent that in John 1.9, the writer was not merely saying that Jesus was a good light. He was declaring that he is the real, genuine, authentic light capable of enlightening all people.

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## Works Cited

Bauer, Walter. 2000. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. ed. Frederick W. Danker, 3rd ed. University of Chicago Press.

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