

## **John 1:1 The Incredible Revelation**

### **Introduction**

One of the greatest journalists of the last generation, the late Bernard Levin, described how, when he was a small boy, a celebrity came to visit his school. The headmaster, thinking perhaps to impress his guest, called one of his brightest pupils, Bernard to the platform, in front of the whole school. The celebrity was not sure what to ask the young man, so he thought he would play safe and ask him what he had eaten for breakfast. Surely whatever answer the child gave would be the basis for a brief conversation or dialogue! Levin, extremely nervous at standing on the stage, was delighted to be asked such a simple question –it was so easy to answer, because like most of us he had a standard routine each morning. ‘Matzo Brei’, he replied. It is a typical central European Jewish dish, made of egg fried with matzo wafers, brown sugar and cinnamon; Levin’s immigrant mother had continued to make it even after years of living in London. It was to Levin a perfectly ordinary word for a perfectly ordinary meal in his home.

The celebrity, ignorant of such cuisine, thought he had misheard as the word uttered was not found in his vocabulary. So he asked the question again. Young Bernard, conscious of the pause in the conversation, was becoming a little anxious, but naturally repeated his answer- ‘Matzo Brei’. The celebrity now knew he had heard correctly the first time, but was none the wiser and started to glance at the head-teacher, not knowing what to do next. Surely the wise head-teacher would know what to say next and take over from the increasingly embarrassed guest. However, it appears that the head-teacher was equally unfamiliar with this term –so in a bold voice he took charge of the situation; for the third time the young boy is asked what did you have for breakfast? Once more he utters the now familiar word- ‘Matzo Brei’- he cannot say anything else as that is the truth. [picture on screen] Now two adults on the platform are both exchanging anxious glances at each other, unable to comprehend something that the little boy takes for granted as something the adults ought to have understood. The now terrified little boy is sent back to his place in the assembly hall quite unsure of what he has done wrong. The incident was never referred to again, but it stayed in Levin’s memory for the rest of his days [story found on many internet sites].

### **1. The Extraordinary Introduction to the Gospel (John 1:1-18)**

A person unfamiliar with the Christian faith, and previously unacquainted with the Bible, might have a similar reaction if presented with a copy of the text of John 1:1-18. I wonder how many other members of staff in that London school, let alone the other pupils, recognised what Bernard Levin had said. I suspect a tiny minority would have done so, if they had a similar Jewish background or maybe Jewish friends. Here in this opening section of John’s Gospel are eighteen verses that set the scene for the whole Gospel. They are an overview description of the life and significance of the One whose words and actions are centre stage throughout its twenty-one chapters. They will illustrate what it means when John declares in 1:14: *The Word became flesh and lived for a while among us*. The language of these opening verses about *the Word* is more familiar in some respects to the thought of certain philosophers in the wider Greek-cultural world who were struggling to express what God was like in His interaction with His created order. The imagery here of light and darkness, the battle

between good and evil resonates not only in the life of Jesus as revealed in many of the incidents John will describe in his Gospel, but also in the lives and social context of each of his readers. Although Jesus is never formally described or referred to again in this Gospel as *the Word* there are hinted references to this theme throughout the book. In John 6:60, following teaching in vivid pictorial language about being the true bread from heaven and the significance of His death on the cross and our identification with Him by faith, the disciples struggled to make sense of what He had been saying: *On hearing it, many of His disciples said, This is a hard teaching (literally ‘a hard word’). Who can accept it? After teaching about His origins with the Father in heaven in John 7, again there was incomprehension not on the part of the disciples this time, but other Jews less sympathetic to His claims: What did He mean [literally ‘what is this Word’] when He said, ‘You will look for Me, but you will not find Me,’ and ‘Where I am, you cannot come’? (John 7:36). In the midst of a heated exchange with unbelieving Jews, Jesus declared in John 8:37: I know you are Abraham’s descendants. Yet you are ready to kill Me, because you have no room for My word. In a powerful passage that makes reference to the Day of Judgement, Jesus reminded some Jews who were sceptical of His claims, of the significance of heed what he had said to them. As for the person who hears My words but does not keep them, I do not judge him. For I did not come to judge the world, but to save it. <sup>48</sup> There is a judge for the one who rejects Me and does not accept My words; that very word which I spoke will condemn him at the last day (John 12:47-48, although it is a different Greek word here translated as ‘word’ or ‘words’ –it means the same in this context, according to CK. Barrett, *The Gospel according to John*, p. 434). Towards the end of the Gospel when Jesus was on trial before Pilate, the Roman Governor is acutely aware that the issue at the heart of the accusation against Him is His claim to be the Son of God. John 19:8 states: *When Pilate heard this (literally Therefore, when Pilate heard the word), he was even more afraid...* The Governor, like many of his subjects had encountered the Word of God in person. The only point at issue was how would he respond to the challenge of the claims of Jesus? This man was officially the judge yet it was he who was being judged. He was put on the spot and was afraid because he sensed the significance of the moment of whether He accepted or rejected the claims of Jesus on His life. What about you? What is your response to Jesus?*

Our particular focus today is on the first verse of this Gospel: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.* In John 1:1 God has given us something incredible to contemplate. This verse, the NT equivalent of Genesis 1:1, goes back before the creation of the world and makes a bold declaration: *‘In the beginning was the Word’.* Genesis 1:1 opens the Bible with these words: *‘In the beginning God’* and then goes on to say *‘created (bara – out of nothing)) the heavens and the earth.’* It is not a tentative offering of an opinion, rather the declaration of a revelation from Almighty God about how this world came into being and the context in which it received its birth. Mark began with the ministry of Jesus, Matthew began with the birth of Jesus in a Jewish context fulfilling OT prophecy, Luke again describing his miraculous birth places it in human history from Adam the first human being, but John takes an even greater revelatory step in his gospel. Very briefly there are three amazing claims made concerning Jesus in this verse:

## **2. The Eternity of Jesus *In the beginning was the Word.***

The link to Genesis was as clear to the first readers / hearers as it is to us, but it was declared in a context in which there were people who said that Jesus was a created being – the first created being. They were called Arians, the forerunners of Jehovah’s

Witnesses today, who misuse a phrase in the glorious hymn of praise to the Lord Jesus, in Colossians 1:15, *firstborn over all creation*. In context it is a statement of honour in Jewish thought, not a biological description of his origins. In the Old Testament this title of honour of being ‘the first born’ was used first of the whole Jewish nation in Exodus 4:22-23, where Pharaoh is told in no uncertain terms what the significance is of such a claim: *Then say to Pharaoh, ‘This is what the Lord says: Israel is My firstborn son,’<sup>23</sup> and I told you, Let My son go, so that he may worship Me. But you refused to let him go; so I will kill your firstborn son.*’ Later, in Hosea 11:1 (Matthew 2:15), this same title is used of both the nation of Israel and Jesus, but in later years used exclusively of Jesus: *When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called My son.* Who is Jesus is a determinative question and it always has been in the identity of the Christian church. It is not a secondary matter of importance, but the top question that we have to answer. Only if He is as He claimed to be - God with us, identified with the Father (*I and My Father are One* (John 10:30). One who has always existed at the side of the Father in absolute and perfect harmony with Him. In case anyone misses the point in v2 John states: *He was in the beginning with God.* Yet to our ears John uses a strange term to describe Jesus - the *Word*. Yet was not really surprising as there is a clear link back to the Old Testament; Psalm 33:6 states: *By the Word of the Lord the heavens were made.* Genesis 1 reveals that creation came into being as God spoke the word – only in Genesis chapter two verse seven is there reference to God making something from pre-existent materials and forming it into something special (Adam). Here is a picture of the authority of God. Isaiah 55:11 declares: *‘My Word...will accomplish all I want it to’* (NLV) – sometimes in blessing and sometimes in judgement. Politicians speak of ‘a week being a long time in politics’, what is eternity in the context of the long-term plans of God. The one who created time and space for His world –something we cannot live without is not tied to His creation, is not controlled by time, has forever been here. Listen to the words of Psalm 90. *Before the mountains were created, before You made the earth and the world, You are God, without beginning or end.* (NLV) or as the NKJV puts it: *even from everlasting to everlasting You are God.* We rush from pillar to post- or most of us do- trying to find a few minutes of time here and there, remember God knows what He has planned and will carry it out. Your life is precious to Him. He knows what this New Year shortly to arrive has in store for us – He has gone before you. He is not taken by surprise, He loves you and wants the very best for you as His child – to reflect on this attribute of God in Christ- helps us to take a step back from our lives to remember God’s purposes and His plans and to have confidence to go forward with our lives in the security of the love of such an amazing God who has always been there. But what else do we know about the Word? John tells us more:

### **3. The Personality of Jesus and the Word was with God.**

There are some people who will stand out in any crowd. Either they are very ‘loud’ or their dress sense is ‘original’, to put it kindly! Or in some way or other they are larger than life characters. Of more recent politicians Peter Mandelson and Martin Bell are two of those interesting individuals whose lives at times seem much more interesting than anything they ever achieved in parliament. There are sporting figures and the catch all class of ‘celebrities’ who pop up too frequently in our newspapers and appear on ‘I’m a celebrity –get me out of here’ or ‘Strictly Come Dancing’ and similar format shows. Yet in each area of life there will be many men and women who focus on the job in hand who achieve much more yet are comparatively

anonymous. In the New Testament there is a constant emphasis on keeping focussed on what God would have us do. Paul told Timothy in II Tim. 2:4: *as Christ's soldier, do not let yourself become tied up in the affairs of this life, for then you cannot satisfy the one who has enlisted you in His army.*' (NLV) Our model is Jesus. In Mark 10:45 Jesus gave a version of His purpose statement: *For even I, the Son of Man, came here not to be served but to serve others, and to give my life as a ransom for many.* (NLV)

In John's Gospel Jesus indicates just how close He is to the Father. A literal translation of this part of John 1:1 could be: *and the Word was face to face with God.* It speaks of the closest possible fellowship in which both take absolute delight. Jesus' prayer in John 17:5 included these words: *Now Father glorify Me together with Yourself with the glory which I had, with You, before the world existed.* In John 8:28 Jesus said: *I do nothing on My own [authority], but speak just what the Father has taught Me.* To Philip in John 14:9 Jesus declared: *Anyone who has seen Me has seen the Father.* In our relationships with other people we can sometimes have fun watching someone display family characteristics or mannerisms. Isn't he like his dad? Or isn't she like her mother? There are many situations in which we can have a laugh or smile at this behaviour – quite innocently. Yet it is a fair question to ask: how much do you / I reflect something of the character of our heavenly Father? Jesus perfectly resembled His father. Hebrews 1:3 states: *The Son reflects God's own glory, and everything about Him represents God exactly.* (NLV) Colossians 1:15 describes Jesus as *the visible image of the invisible God.* (NLV) What test can we use to examine how we are becoming like Jesus? Paul's benchmarks are described as the 'fruit of the Spirit', character qualities which he lists in Galatians 5:22-23: *But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.* Am I seeking to develop these character qualities – do other people see something of what is described in Galatians 5:22-23 in me? Paul declared that: *Those who belong to Christ Jesus have nailed the passions and desires of their sinful nature to His cross and crucified them there. If we are living now by the Holy Spirit, let us follow the Holy Spirit's leading in every part of our lives.* (Gal.5:24-25 NLV). Oh that people may see more of a resemblance of Jesus in each one of us as we go about our everyday lives. John has more to say and his concluding phrase is the most extraordinary one of all, explaining why he had written this Gospel, having recognised this truth!

#### **4. The Deity of Jesus and God was the Word.**

"That's not fair, you are twisting what I am saying to mean something quite different." – Have you ever made such an accusation against anyone? All of us will at sometime or other have uttered such words. The press are superb at mincing up quotations from people and presenting a person's viewpoint in a way that may be unrecognisable. We had a great example in our local paper a few weeks ago with the article about the Street Pastors 'coming to Dundee'. All the information was accurate, but related to an earlier period of time and thus in 2011 conveyed the wrong impression to potential readers. It has always puzzled me why this kind of poor journalism is found in the more respectable parts of the press. However, so consistently does this kind of thing happen that whenever anything controversial is reported in the media, if there are difficulties, the allegedly injured party will nearly always insist that they had been misquoted or misrepresented. Some times it is nearly impossible to find out with clarity who said what, and in what context. It is no different with God's Word as there have been many sects or cults down the centuries

who have twisted it to mean something it can never have meant. Yet there are still people today who will knock your door and who will twist these words in John 1:1 to mean something that grammatically John would never have meant. The *New World Translation*, the Jehovah's Witnesses' version renders this part of v1: *and the Word was a god*, on the grounds that John omitted the definite article in the original Greek here. They do this because they fail to understand the precision of John's words, had he written the definite article in the text he would have been stating that Jesus alone and exclusively was God in opposition to the Father. Instead John is declaring that Jesus is God in exactly the same way as the Father is God –and later reference will also be made to the Holy Spirit. The same grammatical style without the definite article is used elsewhere in this gospel. For example John 1:49: *You are the king of Israel* (not 'a king of Israel'). Or in I John 4:8 where we read these very familiar words: *God is Love* (not God is a love!) (excellent discussion on this point in Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 234). The four gospels are very clear about the humanity of Jesus, recording that He was hungry, tired, cried at a graveside, joined in celebrations, but the uniqueness of Jesus was not His humanity, but His deity – that God had come down to live in our world in human form.

What does this incredible revelation communicate to us? First of all, the extent of God's love to show His care for us, that He was willing to accept the limitations of human existence to demonstrate that love to us in a life of obedience to the Father. Then in Romans 5:8 it is written: *God showed His great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners*. It ought to give us confidence in our prayer life to know that the One who goes to such lengths to provide our salvation, will also have our best interests at heart in the other matters that we bring to Him. There are many times when as ordinary people we feel powerless to change all kinds of situations, but in Jesus we come to a person who is able to plead on our behalf to the Father and through His Holy Spirit equip us for all the work we have to do - to the praise of His glory Amen.