

John 1:3-4
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Introduction

This paper answers a question raised by John 1:3-4: What was made by the Word? The KJV renders the relevant text as follows:

All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life; and the life was the light of men. John 1:3-4 (KJV)

The New American Bible (NAB) renders this as follows:

All things came to be through him, and without him nothing came to be. What came to be through him was life, and this life was the light of the human race. John 1:3-4 (NAB)

We can revise this to bring out the difference with the KJV as follows:

All things came to be through him, and without him nothing came to be. That which was made in him was life, and this life was the light of the human race. John 1:3-4 (NAB revised)

The two versions differ in that whereas the KJV has the Word creating “everything”, the NAB avers that “what came to be **through him** was life”. The difference is clearly one of punctuation but the issue affects doctrine. The KJV will allow someone to believe the Word created all things, the universe, but the NAB will not allow this belief to get started.

Punctuation

There is a punctuation issue here: Should the relative clause (ὃ γέγονεν, “that which was made”) go with v. 3 or v. 4? The earliest manuscripts have no punctuation (P^{66,75*} Ⳑ* A B Δ *et al*).¹ Many of the later manuscripts which do have punctuation place the clause before the predicate “was life” thus putting it with v. 4 (I^{75c} C D L W^s 050* *pc*). Nestle-Aland²⁵ placed the relative clause in v. 3 but Nestle-Aland²⁶ moved the words to the beginning of v. 4. In a detailed article, K. Aland defended the change.² He sought to prove that the placement of ὃ γέγονεν (“that which was made”) in v. 3 began in the 4th century C.E. in the eastern Greek church (see the Appendix). This development was engendered by the Arian Controversy and was intended as a safeguard for doctrine; the change was unknown in the West. Aland is probably correct in affirming that the clause was originally attached to v. 4; only when the Arians began to use the clause was it attached by the Eastern Church to v. 3. But this history does not rule out the possibility that, by moving the words from v. 4 to v. 3, one is restoring the original reading. Understanding the words as part of v. 3 is natural and adds to the emphasis which is built up there, while it also leaves a terse, forceful statement in v. 4. Accordingly, it can be argued that taking the phrase ὃ γέγονεν with v. 4 gives a complicated sentence. C. K. Barrett says that the two obvious ways of understanding v. 4 with ὃ γέγονεν included “are almost impossibly clumsy”:³

¹ B. M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament (2nd Edition)*, Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994).

² K. Aland, “Eine Untersuchung zu Johannes 1, 3-4. Über die Bedeutung eines Punktes” *ZNW* 59 (1968): 174-209.

³ C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John* (London: SPCK, 1958), 157.

That which came into being – in it the Word was life.
That which came into being – in the Word was its life.

ὃ γέγονεν ἐν αὐτῷ ζωὴ ἦν...

Barrett's rendering of this "clumsy" punctuation is not unequivocal or impartial. We might render his form of v. 4 more neutrally (but still following him) as,

That which came into being – in it/him (the Word) was life.

Barrett makes a number of points in support of taking ὃ γέγονεν with v. 3:

- (1) John frequently starts sentences with ἐν (*en*) and so such an opening word in v. 4 is normal for him.
- (2) John repeats himself frequently and so "nothing was created that has been created" is in keeping with his style.
- (3) The statements of John 5:26 and 6:53 both give a sense similar to v. 4 if it is understood without ὃ γέγονεν.
- (4) It makes far better Johannine sense to say that in the Word was life than to say that the created universe (that which was made, ὃ γέγονεν) was life in him.

So it is that Barrett takes the phrase with v. 3.

All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life; and the life was the light of men. John 1:3-4 (KJV)

And we might support this choice by referring to John 5:16,

For as the Father hath life in himself; so hath he given to the Son to have life in himself...
John 5:16 (KJV)

New Life in Christ

Barrett's view is wrong and he is misled by his reading of the clumsy alternatives as ones involving the notion of a created universe. It is rather the case, as the NAB has correctly discerned, that "new life" in Christ is the topic of v. 4 and this proposal is supported by John 6:3,

Then Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you. John 6:3 (KJV)

The NAB renders the Greek as "what came to be **through him** was life". The assumption is made that the "coming into being" is referring to the physical universe, but John 6:3 demonstrates that it is the believer who "comes into being" through Christ and therefore can be said to have life in him.

Although fourth century Arianism understood Jesus as divine, their doctrine taught that Jesus was a created being – therefore at some point in time he did not exist. As Aland shows, orthodox writers preferred to take ὃ γέγονεν with the preceding sentence, thus removing the possibility of heretical use of the passage to the effect that life was made in Christ at some point in time. The different emphasis on punctuation by orthodox writers was therefore influenced by their anti-Arianism. The KJV punctuation expresses the Nicene view that "In him was life", as

Jesus is thought to be co-eternal with God; Jesus himself could not therefore be a created being (but rather an incarnation of God); he had the life-principle “in himself” (eternally).

Staircase Parallelism

The balance in assessing the grammatical issue between both versions (KJV/NAB) is very fine, but the staircase parallelism in the text favours the NAB translation. Translations that are aligned with the NAB can employ “staircase parallelism” to justify their rendering of this passage. Staircase parallelism takes the rhythmic balance of John’s Prologue into account, where the end of one line matches the beginning of the next, resulting in a “staircase of parallelisms”—see diagrams below:

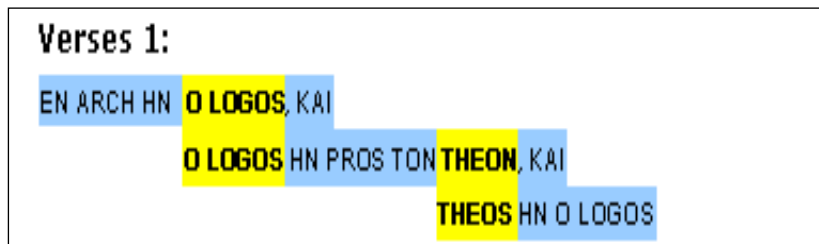


Diagram 1

In John 1:1 we have transliterated the Greek in a straightforward way so that we can see how the major term (coloured yellow) of the former clause is picked up in the next clause. Commentators have dubbed this a “staircase” which we have shown in Diagram 1. The same point can be made with regard to John 1:3-5, and we show this in Diagram 2 below.

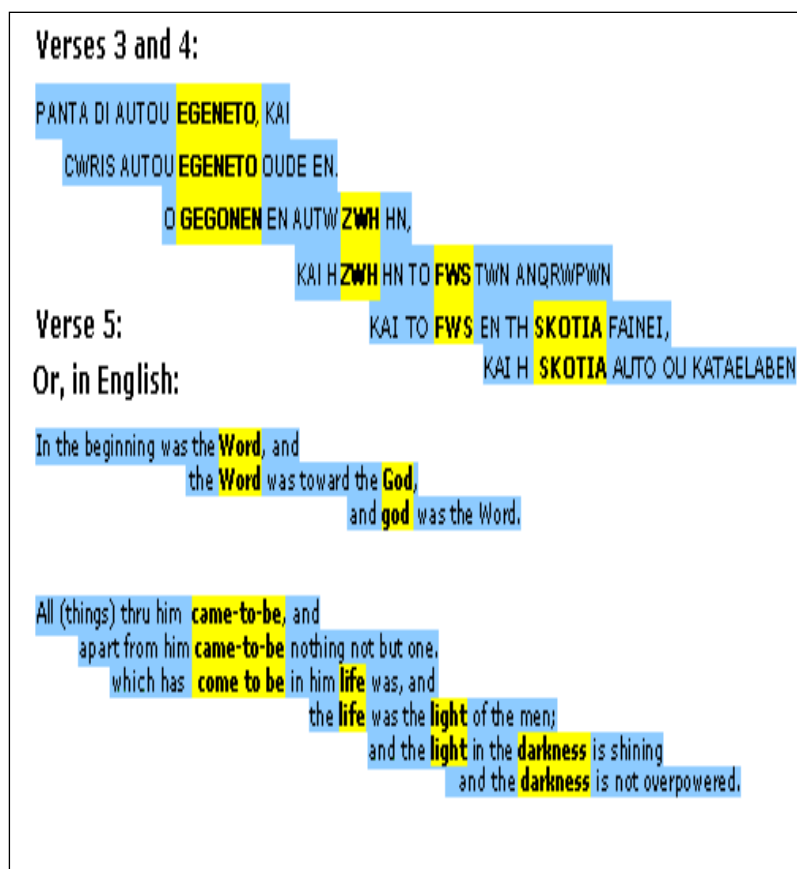


Diagram 2

In this diagram, we can see that the “staircase” can only be preserved if ὃ γέγονεν (O GEGONEN) is placed on the third line above and therefore as part of v.4. On this basis, we can argue that the correct punctuation of John 1:3-4 is that which is given in the NAB.

Conclusion

Translations are often biased; sometimes it is only a matter of emphasis or punctuation. The aim of this article is not to introduce an alternative translation, but to show why translations that follow the NAB are correct.

Appendix

Patristic usage (gathered from the Nestle Aland 27th edition) demonstrates a shift in translational emphasis for John 1:3-4 after Nicaea; see table below.

What came to be through him was life, and this life was the light of men. NAB	...and without Him nothing was made that was made. NKJV
Naassenes II/III	
Theodotus (ac. to Cl) II	
Valentinians(ac.to Ir) 160	
Diatessaron II	
Ptolemy II	
HeracleonII	
Theophilus 180	
Perateni III	
Irenaeus 200	
Clement 215	
Tertullian 220	
Hippolutus 235	
Origen 254	Adamantius 300
Eusebius 339	Alexander 373
Ambrosiaster IV	Ephraem 373
Hilary 367	Didymus 398
Athanasius 373	Epiphanius 403
Cyril (Jerusalem) 386	Chrysostom 420
Epiphanius 403	Jerome 420
	Nonnus 431