

THE PROLOGUE OF JOHN'S GOSPEL Part 1 (1:1-18)



Carpet page for the Gospel of John from the Lindisfarne Gospels, 8th century, Holy Island, England, now in the British Library

Unlike the introductions in Matthew and Luke, the prologue of John does not begin with an account of the birth narratives. Rather, John begins with a theological hymn of the incarnation. This hymn climaxes with the statement:

No one has ever seen God, but God the only [Son],¹ who is at the Father's side, has made him known (1:18).

While Mark begins the story of Jesus with the preaching of John the Baptist, and Matthew and Luke begin with the story of Jesus' birth, John begins the story of Jesus in the bosom of God. Genealogically, Matthew traces Jesus' ancestry back to Abraham (Mt. 1:1), Luke traces it back to Adam (Lk. 3:38), but John traces it back to the Divine Nature before the creation of the universe.

Ironically, an element in the prologue which is not found later in the Fourth Gospel is the description of Jesus as the *Logos* (= the Word). John reserves this word to describe Jesus before his incarnation, presumably so that his readers would clearly understand that Jesus was pre-existent with the Father. After

Jesus is born into the world and later begins his ministry, however, John shifts his vocabulary from the *Logos* (Word) to the *Huïos* (Son). Jesus acts and speaks as the incarnate expression of God's speech. As word gives body to thought, so does Jesus give visible expression in the world to the invisible power and presence of God.

John does not leave his readers in any doubt as to his purpose in writing. He explicitly says,

Jesus did many other miraculous signs... But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name (20:30-31).

Jesus was the Messiah, God's Son. The prologue is John's first treatment of this theme.

The Meaning of the Logos

¹ While there are textual variations at this point between "God the only [Son]," "the only Son," "the only Son of God," and "the only [Son]," the early papyri of p66 and p75, along with the Codices Sinaiticus and Vaticanus, as well as other manuscripts, contain the earliest reading (ca. AD 200). Because these are the earliest versions of John, it justifies the rendering "God the only [Son]" (so NIV, ESV, NAB, NASB, NET, NIB, NLT, NRSV).

When John writes, "In the beginning was the *Logos* (= Word)," he is obviously not talking about mere language, for he speaks of the Word as personal. He declares that the Word was *pros ton Theon* (= with God), and this expression directly implies personality. The preposition *pros* (= with) expresses relationship, and it means to be near or in company with someone. John intends his readers to understand that the *Logos* was Someone, not just something.

The Preexistent Word (1:1-5)

It is no accident that John begins his Gospel with the same opening words as the first book in the Old Testament. However, instead of the familiar, "In the beginning God...," he writes, "In the beginning was the Word." This effectively sets up the entire prologue, and the parallelism is deliberate. Thus, when the universe began, the preexistent Word was already there. In his prayer on the night of his arrest, Jesus affirmed that he possessed divine glory with the Father before the world came into existence (Jn. 17:5), and further, that he was loved by the Father before the universe was created (Jn. 17:24).

John's language is simple, but his ideas are profound. The statement that the Word was *with* God and yet at the same time *was* God seem mutually exclusive. The paradox cannot be softened. It immediately requires that the Word shares the very nature of God, although the Word may be distinguished from God. The Word exists in the closest possible association with God, partaking of the very essence of God. There is both individuality (distinctness, separateness) and at the same time identity (oneness, sameness) between God and the Word.

THE PROLOGUE AND THEMES IN JOHN

*The entire prologue resonates with words and ideas which permeate the whole gospel, such as, **phos** (= **light**: 3:19-21; 8:12; 9:5; 12:35-36, 46); **zoe** (= **life**: 3:14-16, 36; 5:24, 26; 6:33, 40, 47-48, 68; 10:10, 27-28; 11:25; 17:2-3); **aletheia** (= **truth**: 3:21; 4:23-24; 8:31-32; 14:6; 17:17; 18:37); **erchomai** (= **coming** [into the world]: 3:19, 31; 4:24; 5:43; 6:14; 7:27-29; 8:14, 42; 11:27; 12:13; 15:22; 16:28; 18:37); and **Huios** (= **Son** [of God]: 1:34, 49; 3:16-18, 35; 5:19, 23, 26; 6:40; 10:34-36; 11:27; 19:7; 20:31).*

This tension between unity and distinction is evident throughout the Fourth Gospel. Some Jews believed Jesus to be blasphemous because he made himself God (Jn. 5:18; 10:33). Yet John does not flinch at having one of the apostles say to Jesus, "My Lord and my God" (Jn. 20:28). In fact, one of the earliest descriptions of Christian worship by an outsider (AD 112) was given by the Roman Pliny, who said that Christians "sang an anthem to Christ as God."²

From the preexistence of the *Logos* with God before the creation, John then addresses the act of the creation itself. The preexistent Word is the agent by which God made the universe. Nothing that exists came into being apart from his direction. Thus, John asserts both positively and negatively the role of the *Logos* as the agent of creation. He made everything that exists, and nothing exists that he did not make.

² Letters X.96.

In the Logos was the self-existent life which belongs to the Creator as opposed to the derived life of his creatures (cf. 5:26). Furthermore, the creation of living creatures, such as birds, fish, and animals, not to mention humans, all have their source of life in the Logos (Ge. 1:20-27).

What then does John mean by the statement, "The life was the light of men?" Obviously, there is an allusion to the first creative act in which God said, "Let there be light," and light appeared (Ge. 1:3). Beyond this, however, John employs a technique which he will use throughout the remainder of his gospel, the technique of double entendre. Frequently in his gospel, John uses words and expressions that carry double meanings. Light is one of these words, and it can mean

DOUBLE MEANINGS AND TRANSLATION

Plays on words, such as double meanings, are difficult if not impossible to recapture in a second language. Hence, translators of the Bible are obliged to use one meaning or the other, or else, add an explanatory footnote to the text.

intellectual perception, faith and revelation from God (Jn. 5:35; 8:12; 12:35-36, 46), physical light and the ability to see (Jn. 9:5-7; 11:9-10), and moral perception (Jn. 3:19-21). Frequently, there is a play on such multiple meanings, such as, when Jesus says, "I am the light of the world," just before healing the man born blind (Jn. 9:3-5). Not only is he capable of restoring sight to the man so that he can see physical

light, he is the revelation of God in the world so that men and women may perceive God. As the Logos, he dispelled the physical darkness of chaos (Ge. 1:4-5), and as the Son he dispelled the spiritual darkness of sin, evil and ignorance through his coming into the world. It is in both these senses that John says, "The light shines in the darkness."

Once again, John employs a double entendre. The Greek verb *katalambano* is capable of two meanings, and John probably intends both. On the one hand, it may mean "to comprehend or to grasp," and it is due to this meaning that some translations read, "...and the darkness has not understood it" (so NIV, KJV, RV, NASB, ASV). On the other hand, it may mean "to master, overcome, or put out" (so NEB, RSV, JB, TEV, NAB, Phillips, Williams, Weymouth). In one sense, the powers of darkness could not understand the light, but in another, they were not able to quench the light. In the creation, the forces of chaos could not overpower the created light in a physical sense, but neither could they destroy the moral light despite the fall of Adam and Eve. Similarly, any efforts to thwart the ministry of Jesus would be defeated. Both meanings are important, and both fit into the larger scheme of John's Gospel.

John, the Witness (1:6-9)

The theological significance of John can only be appreciated against the fact that the living voice of prophecy was believed to have been quenched after the last of the writing prophets in the Old Testament canon. However, in the days of the Messiah, it was widely believed that the quenched Spirit would return. John was a fresh voice. The people considered him to be a prophet (Mt. 14:5; 21:26//Mk. 11:32//Lk. 20:6), and so also did Jesus (Mt. 11:9//Lk. 7:26). John's preaching, then, heralded the end of the so-called Silent Period. After a number of years in the desert, away from the population centers (Lk. 1:80), John heard God's call thrusting him into a prophetic role of public preaching (Lk. 3:2-3). "The law and the prophets were until John" (Lk. 16:16).

The primary significance of the Baptist in the Fourth Gospel is his testimony about Jesus. Just as the miracles of Jesus pointed beyond themselves to profound truths about Jesus' identity, so John the Baptist served as a living voice who pointed beyond himself toward Christ. His role was that of a witness (Jn. 3:26; 5:33, 36a), and he belongs to the larger theme of witnesses which pervade the entire gospel.

There is a pronounced emphasis in the Fourth Gospel that subordinates John to Jesus. The first of these subordinating statements is here in the prologue, where it says, "He himself was not the light," but this is followed throughout the gospel with other similar statements. Jesus existed before John and in fact surpassed him (Jn. 1:15, 30). John was not the Messiah nor was he the prophet who would come into the world (Jn. 1:19-24; 3:28).³ John was destined to become less while Jesus would become greater (Jn. 3:30). Unlike Jesus, who performed so many miracles that the books of the world could not contain them all (Jn. 21:25), John did not perform even one (Jn. 10:41).

The point of this explicit subordination of John to Jesus comes against the background of those disciples of John who did not follow Jesus and who, in fact, felt some antagonism toward those who did (Jn. 3:22-26). In later years, long after John was dead, some followers were still loyal (Ac. 18:25; 19:3), and there is some historical evidence that they survived well into the Christian era.⁴ The Fourth Gospel makes abundantly clear that John and Jesus must not be confused. Jesus was the true light; John was only a witness to the light. To be sure, he was a burning lamp insofar as his preparatory work for Jesus was concerned (Jn. 5:35), but he was not the Light of the World.

The preaching of John, then, was the unimpeachable testimony that the true Light was even then coming into the plane of human history. Jesus, of course, was already a young man by the time John began preaching, but he was still in the carpenter's shop at Nazareth and had not yet been inaugurated into his messianic ministry, nor would he be until his baptism by John in the Jordan River (Jn. 1:31-34). This image of the messiah as light coming into the world is especially to be found in the Book of Isaiah (Is. 9:2; 42:6; 60:1-3), though it also appears elsewhere (Mal. 4:2). What the prologue affirms, then, is the anticipation of what the Fourth Gospel will develop in more depth: Jesus is the Light of the World!

THE THEME OF WITNESS

Throughout the Fourth Gospel, the theme of witnesses is prominent, an implicit "trial" of Jesus' authenticity. These witnesses include the truth of God's revelation in Jesus given by the Father (Jn. 5:32, 37; 8:18b), the Son himself (Jn. 3:11, 32; 8:14, 18a; 18:37), and the Holy Spirit (Jn. 15:26), as well as the miracles of Jesus (Jn. 5:36; 10:25), the Old Testament Scriptures (5:39), and Jesus' disciples (Jn. 15:27; 19:35; 21:24).

³The expression "the prophet" derives from the promise in Torah of "another prophet like Moses" who would arise (Dt. 18:15-19). This promise was understood by the Jews to refer to a particular prophet who would arise in the end of time to exercise the full mediatorial functions of Moses. The Torah itself said that there had not yet arisen such a one (Dt. 34:10-12).

⁴*Recognitions of Clement*, I.54, 60. Here, the Baptist sectarians claimed that John, not Jesus, was the Messiah.