

THE PROLOGUE OF JOHN'S GOSPEL: Part 2 (1:1-18)

The Logos in the World (1:10-14)

The cue for the next section of the prologue is taken from the final phrase in 1:9, the statement that the True Light was "coming into the world." Here the evangelist describes the nature of that coming, particularly in terms of the polarization among people who saw and heard him.

The Logos who was with God in the beginning and who was God, who created all things as God's agent of creation, who was both life and light, came into the world which he had made. Here, of course, John not only says that the Logos was in the world, but he was in the world that he himself had created. This seems to include the entire universe, though of course, it is the world of humankind that is especially in view.

THE WORLD

Some comment is in order on the Johannine concept of the world (= the kosmos), since in John this term is used much more frequently than in the synoptic gospels. In general, John uses the term kosmos to refer to the world of people, and in particular, the society which rejected him. His mission was to the world (3:16-19; 6:51; 8:12; 9:5; 12:47) though the world did not recognize him (3:19; 7:7; 14:17; 15:18; 16:20). Throughout the gospel, the world continues as the alien culture opposed to Jesus and his disciples.

"THE JEWS" IN JOHN'S GOSPEL

Frequently, one encounters a special Johannine category, "the Jews." This should not be construed as an anti-Semitism, for John was himself a Jew, as was Jesus and the other earliest disciples. In the Fourth Gospel, "the Jews" refers not to all Jews, but to the Jewish religious leaders and those who sided with them in rejecting Jesus.

Not only was the Logos rejected by the world, he was rejected by his own people. Still, if Jesus was rejected at large, he was accepted by a remnant of faith. As is typical of the Fourth Gospel, the critical factor is belief.¹ To all who received him and believed in his name he gave authority² to become children of God. In biblical and ancient Near Eastern thought, a name was not merely a label of identification but an expression of the essential nature of its bearer. Hence, to know the name of God is to know God as he has revealed himself (Ps. 9:10). The expression "to believe in the name" is found only in the Johannine literature, where it occurs five times (Jn. 1:12;

2:23; 3:18; 1 Jn. 3:23; 5:13). It is used synonymously with believing in Jesus himself (e.g., 3:18).

Those who received the Logos and believed in him were begotten of God. This birth, which John will later describe in more detail (chap. 3), is to be distinguished from natural birth. The one who

¹The verb *pisteuo* (= to believe) is extremely significant in the Fourth Gospel. With Jesus/God/gospel as its object, it occurs some 99 times in the Greek text.

²The word here is *exousia* (= authority, right, freedom to act, ability, power).

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is a child of God is begotten by God, that is, he/she is begotten through a spiritual action that can be performed by God alone. It is not a birth by natural procreation,³ and hence, it cannot come merely through the lineage of Abraham and Sarah. Those who are born of God are not products of sexual desire nor a husband's will. What John has in view here are two orders, one natural and the other spiritual, and in his later conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus will explain these two orders more thoroughly (3:3-8). The metaphor is also developed further in 1 John (1 Jn. 2:29; 3:9; 4:7; 5:1, 4, 18).

The statement of incarnation in 1:14 is perhaps the most explicit in the New Testament. It describes not a dwelling Christology, that is, a Christology in which God adopts a human being already existing in which he chooses to live, but it describes the Logos who *became* flesh. This is much more than simply saying that the Logos took on a body. John describes the Logos as both fully God and fully human, and "it is this scripture, more than anything else in the New Testament, that provided the foundation for the doctrine of the person of Christ formulated in the Creed of Nicaea (AD 325) and the Definition of Chalcedon (AD 451)."⁴

THE NICENE LANGUAGE

The Creed of Nicaea affirmed the full deity of Jesus Christ by declaring that he was "of the substance of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, true God of true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father..." The Definition of Chalcedon asserted that Jesus was "in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation; the distinction of natures being in no way annulled by the union, but rather the characteristics of each nature being preserved and coming together to form one person and subsistence, not as parted or separated into two persons, but one and the same Son and Only-begotten God the Word, Lord Jesus Christ..."

The Logos who became flesh lived an earthly life among humans. The temporary nature of his earthly appearance is stressed by the verb *skenoō* (= to pitch a tent) and could legitimately be rendered as "pitched his tent among us." Beyond the temporary nature of the earthly life of Jesus, there is almost certainly a deliberate allusion to the Tent in the Desert in which Yahweh lived among his people, enthroned between the cherubim (Ex. 25:8). In fact, the messianic age was described by the prophets as a time when God would make his dwelling in Zion (Eze. 43:7; J1. 3:17; Zec. 2:10). Just as Yahweh had formerly lived among his people in the Tabernacle and the Temple, so now in Jesus, as the Logos made flesh, he also lived among them.

Those who knew Jesus observed his glory, reminiscent of the *kavod* (= glory, heaviness) of Yahweh in the Most Holy Place of the ancient Tent of Meeting. It was the glory of the one and only Son who came from the Father. The coming of the Son from the Father into the world was characterized as being full of grace and truth, a characterization repeated in 1:17.

³Quite literally, the text reads *ouk ex haimation* (= not of bloods). This peculiar plural expression may refer to a theory of conception found in rabbinic circles in which the sperm of a man was believed to derive from his blood and mixes with the blood of the woman in order to produce a conception.

⁴H. Bettenson, *Documents of the Christian Church* (London: Oxford University, 1979) 25, 51-52.

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The Primacy of the Son (1:15-18)

The prologue concludes with a short section emphasizing the uniqueness and priority of the Son. He has primacy over John the Baptist, primacy over Moses, and in fact, he is the single, unique One who reveals the Father, proceeding from within the very Being of God.

Earlier in the prologue, the role of John the Baptist as the witness was introduced (1:6-8). John's preaching, as we know from the synoptic gospels, included a variety of subjects. He called for men and women to turn to God and to express this change of heart by being baptized with a view toward God's forgiveness (Mk. 1:4). His sermons carried ethical injunctions to his hearers, whether citizen (Lk. 3:10-11), tax collector (Lk. 3:12-13), or soldier (Lk. 3:14). John was no timid lecturer, but he boldly denounced sin all the way to the tetrarch himself (Lk. 3:19-20). But all of the synoptics agree with the Fourth Gospel that John's primary message was about someone who would follow him. As Mark succinctly says, "This was his message: 'After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie'" (Mk. 1:7). Twice John records a similar saying of the Baptist: "He who comes after me has surpassed me, because he was before me" (1:15, 30). The Greek text of this statement is especially emphatic. It is not merely that Jesus is before John chronologically, but the nuance of the phrase is that "he was first in respect of me" or "he had absolute primacy over me" or, as the NEB renders it, "Before I was born, he already was." We know from Luke's Gospel that John was born some six months prior to Jesus (Lk. 1:36), so the statement that Jesus was prior to John can only refer to his deity as the Logos from the beginning, being both God and with God (1:1-2). It is similar in kind to the statement later made by Jesus to the Jewish leaders, "Before Abraham was, I AM" (8:58).

From the testimony of the Baptist, the Fourth Evangelist turns to the fullness of grace and truth which Jesus brought (cf. 1:14). John certainly spoke words of grace and truth in his proclamation of the gospel, but the full level of grace and truth was resident in the One who came after John (1:16).

The author of the Fourth Gospel has deliberately led his readers to a climax in the prologue. He has postponed his introduction of the actual name "Jesus Christ" until now. The reader so far has been left with a series of implicit questions:

"Who is the Logos who was with God yet who was God?"

"Who is the one through whose agency God created the universe?"

"Who is the True Light who was coming into the world?"

"Who is the one who was rejected by most but received by the few?"

"Who is the one who through faith gives the authority to become the children of God?"

"Who is the one who became flesh and lived a while among men and women, displaying for them the fullness of grace and truth?"

"Who is the one and only Son who came from the Father?"

The answer is now given: **He is Jesus Christ!**

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Jesus is the full revelation of God! John asserts that no one has ever seen God in his purest form. This assertion is in keeping with the Old Testament dictum that no one could see God and survive (cf. Ex. 33:20). To be sure, God had revealed himself in limited ways, through theophanies and epiphanies. Moses himself caught a fleeting glimpse of God's glory (Ex. 33:23). Still, these appearances were always partial and occasional. Jesus, however, is not merely someone from the outside. Rather, he is God the only Son who is at the Father's side--the Son who is both with God and who is God. He, the Son, knows the Father intimately, and he has revealed God to us.

GOD THE ONLY SON

The translation "God the only [Son]" or "God the only begotten" has the strongest and earliest attestation in the manuscripts. This includes the two earliest extant manuscripts of the Fourth Gospel, p66 (about 200 A.D.) and p75 (early 3rd century), as well as the important codices Sinaiticus and Vaticanus (4th century). Hence, this reading is followed in most English translations, i.e., "God the only [Son]" (NIV), "the only begotten God" (NASB), "God the only Son" (NAB), "God, only begotten" (Montgomery), "the divine One, the only Son" (Moffat), "who is God" (Berkeley), "the only One, who is the same as God" (TEV), "God the only Son" (AB), "the unique one, he who is God" (Barclay). The translators of the KJV did not have available to them these earlier manuscripts, so it is not surprising that the most ancient reading is not followed there and in subsequent revisions of the KJV.

The preexistent intimacy of God, the Son, with God, the Father, is everywhere expressed in the Fourth Gospel. Jesus claimed a unique and complete knowledge of the Father (6:46; 8:55; 10:15; 17:25). A mutual love existed between the Father and the Son before the creation of the world (14:31; 15:9; 17:24). Jesus' words and works on earth were merely a reflection of what he had seen and heard in the Father's presence (5:19-20, 30; 8:26, 38). Their purpose was one (6:38-39; 10:30), their work was one (8:29; 10:37-38), their honor was one (5:23; 13:31-32; 17:1, 5), their witness was one (8:16-18), their ownership was one (17:10), and their teaching was one (7:16-17; 8:28; 12:49-50; 14:24). A unity of essence existed between the Father and the Son, so much so, that Jesus could say that to believe in the Son was to believe in the Father, to see the Son was to see the Father, and to know the Son was to know the Father (12:44-45; 14:7-13, 20). The declaration that the Son was "at the Father's side," literally "into the bosom of the Father," indicates that Jesus comes from the innermost being of God. Later, John will describe this intimacy as an interpenetration between the Father and the Son (14:10-11, 17:21).

This One, the Logos who was with God and who was God, who created the universe, who came into the world incarnate in flesh, who was greater than John or Moses, and who is the very fullness of grace and truth, this One--God the only Son--has made God known to us. This is the story of John's Gospel! Between the prologue and the epilogue, John's portrait of Jesus has the fundamental purpose of leading his readers to faith so that they might "believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing they might have life in his name" (20:31).