

JOHN'S PROLOGUE: A SUGGESTED INTERPRETATION

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The prologue of John's Gospel remains a perennial challenge to exegetical endeavour.¹ The reasons are not difficult to divine: the prologue is important and hard to understand.² The present study suggests an interpretation of the prologue. The study does not attempt a "proof" for what will be suggested; it will simply offer a number of indications which, to the present writer at least, commend themselves as plausible 1) by reason of the unified view of the prologue which they represent and, 2) by the reason of their agreement with various aspects of the rest of John's Gospel. That is to say, two suppositions of the present study are 1) that the prologue of John's Gospel is a unified whole and, 2), that it has a close relation to John's Gospel as a whole.³

The interpretation which will be offered here suggests that the unifying theme of the prologue of the Fourth Gospel is the becoming man of the eternal divine *Logos* who, incarnate as Jesus Christ, takes the place of the Mosaic Law to become himself the New Law of the Christian dispensation. Further, the interpretation

- 1 It seems appropriate to accept John the Apostle, the son of Zebedee, as author of the tradition behind the Fourth Gospel, despite the many controversies associated with this identification. Admittedly, absolute proof is impossible. But the attribution seems more probable than not, all things considered. Cf. R. Brown, *The Gospel according to John* (i-xii) (Anchor Bible; Garden City: Doubleday, 1966) c: "...we do not think it unscientific to maintain that John son of Zebedee was probably the source of the historical tradition behind the Fourth Gospel". The present article will attempt, among other things, to support Johannine authorship of the tradition behind the Fourth Gospel.
- 2 Cf. the following comment of M. Hooker: "The Johannine Prologue is not only one of the most important passages in the New Testament, but also one of the most controversial. There is disagreement regarding its character, its relationship to the rest of the gospel, and its integrity, as well as regarding detailed points of exegesis" (M. Hooker, "John the Baptist and the Johannine Prologue", *New Testament Studies* 16 [1969-1970] 354).
- 3 It would seem more plausible than not that a prologue for a work as carefully written as John's Gospel would be carefully written itself and that it would have a close relation to that of which it is the prologue, at least until the opposite is clearly shown. But in order clearly to show the opposite some sort of consensus has to be reached on what the prologue means. No such consensus exists. The present study begins with the supposition that the prologue to John's Gospel is truly a prologue to John's Gospel. And the present study ends with this supposition upheld, at least to the satisfaction of the author.

suggests that the prologue is written to be read as having two interrelated meanings, and that only through such a reading can the prologue be understood. Or, perhaps better, there are two aspects to be attended to in reading the prologue, like much else in John's Gospel: that which is deliberately explicit, and that which is deliberately implicit.⁴

The prologue will be understood as comprising verses 1-18 of chapter 1.⁵ V. 19 begins with a specific event connected with the earthly life of the divine *Logos* who has become man. This verse builds on what precedes, which has to do with generalizations about who this *Logos* is, and about his becoming man in the context of a people living under the Mosaic Law at the time of John.⁶

The following division of the prologue will be adopted here, based on what seem to be topic sentences at vv. 1, 6, 9, and 14:

1, 1-5: the *Logos* as God;

1, 6-8: John as witness;

1, 9-13: the *Logos* as light for those who believe in him;

1, 14-18: the *Logos* as *sarx*.

1, 1-15: The *Logos* as God

The words "in the beginning" (*en te arche*), along with the mention of "light"

- 4 "Anyone who studies St. John's gospel for long is likely to be impressed, not only by the extreme care with which it is written, a care extending to the smallest details, but also by the subtlety and elusiveness of the author. A passage which in itself and at first sight, may seem to have a plain and obvious meaning and no more, will perhaps be found, when studied more closely and brought into connection with other passages of the gospel and, above all, with the thought and teaching of the book as a whole, to take on, in addition to the plain and obvious sense, a meaning or meanings of a deeper sort, with religious implications which only gradually become apparent" (R.H. Lightfoot, *St. John's Gospel: A Commentary* (ed. C.F. Evans) [Clarendon Press; Oxford 1983] 349). The present writer is indebted to Fr. Anthony Therath for calling this quotation to his attention.
- 5 The prologue is commonly taken as comprising the opening verses of the first chapter and ending with v.18 because of the different tenor of the discourse beginning at v. 19. Cf. M. Theobald, *Die Fleischwerdung des Logos. Studien zum Verhältnis des Johannesprologs zum Corpus des Evangelium und zu 1 Joh* (Neutestamentliche Abhandlungen, N.F. 20; Aschendorff; Münster 1988) 169-197.
- 6 Verse 17 of the prologue is quite important because of its reference to the Mosaic Law. The only individuals explicitly referred to in the first eighteen verses are the divine *Logos* (who became incarnate in Jesus Christ), John, and Moses. The mention of Moses gives the historical background; the mention of John gives the immediate historical context; the divine *Logos* incarnate in Jesus Christ is what John's Gospel is all about.

(*phos*), "life" (*zoe*), and the idea "being made" (*ginomai*) evoke the opening chapter of Genesis.⁷ In this context a preliminary reading leads the reader to think initially of the *Logos* of the first verse as a personification of the figure of wisdom presented in the Old Testament in such texts as Wis 9, 1 and Ps 32[33], 6.⁸ The reader is then led on to the remaining verses of the section which describe the role of this *Logos* in creation (vv. 2-3) and his failure to be "mastered"⁹ by the darkness of the world. This is the aspect of discourse which characterizes a preliminary reading of 1 John 1, 1-7 as well.¹⁰ The presumed reader of the opening lines of the Fourth Gospel clearly is supported to have been informed that the Word became incarnate in Jesus Christ. The opening verses of the Gospel serve, according to the aspect of deliberately explicit discourse, as a means of rehearsing solemnly this truth. They are a stylized summary of the coming and rejection of the *Logos* in the world, a summary written for those who already have been informed about what the summary presents but who do not necessarily believe in what they have been informed.¹¹ The Gospel of John is primarily for meditation on information received, so that belief or deepening of belief may follow. The Gospel is for persons already in contact with a tradition.

But the verses in question seem also to be designed for perusal at a level even more profound, or according to another aspect which is only implied. The word "*Logos*" ("Word" is the conventional English rendering) used to describe the pre-existent Only Begotten (cf. 1, 14) would have had for the first Christians distinctively

- 7 Cf.: Theobald, 227-28; E. C. Hoskyns, *The Fourth Gospel* (ed. by F. N. Davey; Faber and Faber; London 21947) 140-41; C. A. Evans, *Word and Glory: On the Exegetical and Theological Background of John's Prologue* (Journal for the Study of the New Testament, Supplementary Series 89; JSOT Press; Sheffield 1993) 77-79.
- 8 On the Wisdom background of the Johannine prologue cf. Hoskyns, 154-56; Evans, 83-99.
- 9 The English word "master" seems suitable for rendering the twofold meaning of the Greek *katalambano* i.e., to "overcome" and to "understand". Cf. F. Zorell, *Lexicon graecum Novi Testamenti* (Cursus Scripturae Sacrae, Pars Prior, Libri introductorii, VII; P. Lethielleus; Paris 31961), col. 673 (1,b and 2).
- 10 On the relation to 1 John and the Fourth Gospel cf. Hoskyns, 48-57.
- 11 Cf. the use of the inchoative aorist involving the verb *pisteuo* at 1,7 and 20,31 to describe the purpose of the witness of the two Johns with regard to the hearers/readers of the witness: that "they/you may begin to believe". The plural should be noted: coming to belief or deepening of belief". The plural should be noted: coming to belief or deepening of belief has a communal aspect. On the way in which the prologue was designed to be received by its first intended hearers cf. Theobald, 264-265.

Christian connotations, along with its various Old Testament connections. John did not intend that the *Logos* of his prologue should be separated from the Old Testament; the allusions to Genesis and other parts of the Old Testament make this plain. And from what follows in his Gospel it is clear that he did not intend that the *Logos* of his prologue should be separated from the other uses of *logos* in early Christian tradition.¹² The users of *logos* in the Gospel of John are matched by the use of the Greek *logos* in the rest of the New Testament, where it can refer to the Gospel (the Synoptic Gospels and Acts¹³) or to the revelation which comes through Christ (the Apocalypse¹⁴) or even Christ himself (Apoc 19, 13).¹⁵

The most telling indication of the precise force of the *Logos* of the prologue is given implicitly by the words "life" and "light". In the literature in the biblical tradition these words are used to describe the effects of the obedience to God as expressed in the Mosaic Law.¹⁶ In the Old Testament the *logos* is above all the Law given to Israel by Moses.¹⁷ It is this background which leads the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews to refer to the Mosaic Law as the *logos*.¹⁸ In the opening verses of the Fourth Gospel the *Logos* who is Christ is being implicitly compared with the Mosaic Law. The imperfect tense of the verb *en*, together with the phrase *en te arche*, indicates that which lies beyond time.¹⁹ What is being alluded to is the

12 The meanings of the word *logos* in John's gospel are varied. C. H. Dodd (*The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* [University Press; Cambridge 1953] 265-268) distinguishes the following ways in which the word *logos* is used in the Fourth Gospel: 1) in the plural as ordinary "words" in a sense interchangeable with *rhemata* (265); 2) in the singular as "saying", "discourse", "statement", as in John 2,22 (ibid.); 3) in the singular as the "message" of Jesus, e.g., John 5,24 (ibid.); 4) in the singular as the "Word of God", as embodied in the Old Testament (e.g., John 10,35) but especially as embodied in the teaching of Jesus, which is the "truth" — *aletheia* — reality as revealed, e.g., John 17,17 (267). In the prologue, and only in the prologue — John 1,1.14 — is Christ said to *be* this divine *Logos*, though of course Christ identifies himself with this revealed truth in John 14,6.

13 Hoskyns, 159-60.

14 Ibid., 160.

15 Ibid., 160.

16 Ibid., 143: "In the later Jewish literature life and light emerge as the twin images adequate to describe the effects of obedience to the Wisdom of God revealed in the Mosaic Law (cf. 1 Bar. iv. 1; 2 Esdras XIV. 29, 30, Syriac Version, with Ps. cxix. 105; and 1 Bar. iv. 2, 3; 2 Bar. lix. 2, 1xxvii. 16; 2 Esdras xiv. 20,21, with Isa. ix. 2)".

17 Ibid., 156. Cf. the Septuagint at Ps 147,8 and Is 2,3.

18 Hoskyns, 162.

19 "The continuous tense [sc., *en*] ... indicates that by *arche* meant not the first point in a temporal sequence but that which lies beyond time" (C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text* [SPCK; London 21978 (third impression 1985) 152].

existence of the *Logos* as a sort of “metatext” for the interpretation of the Mosaic Law.²⁰ The “metatext” exists in the person of the *Logos* and the writing which follows – John’s Gospel – will detail the way this “metatext” functioned in life on earth. This, then, is the level of deliberately implied discourse which the first five verses of the prologue are designed to communicate to the reader prepared to receive the communication.

1, 6-8: John as Witness

It is a feature peculiar to the Fourth Gospel that John the Baptist functions primarily as a witness to Jesus. His call to repentance so prominent in the other Gospels is only hinted at through mention of baptism;²¹ his imprisonment and death are barely noticed.²² The association of John the Baptist with the act of baptizing, used when he is introduced in the other Gospels (Matt 3, 1; Mark 1, 4; Luke 3, 2-3), is not mentioned when he is introduced in the Fourth Gospel, at 1,6. No title at all is assigned him. It is clear from the context of vv. 6-8 that John thinks of him there primarily as a witness: this function is mentioned three times. In the rest of the Gospel the Baptist is associated with witnessing in a variety of places: 1,15.32.34; 3,26; 5,33.36.

But this witness of John the Baptist in John’s Gospel limited. He witnesses to the pre-existence of the *Logos* (1,15), to the fact that the Spirit descended and remained on Jesus (1, 32), and that he is “Son of God” (1, 34). But he was obviously unable to witness to things after his own death. This lack seems to be made up for by John, the author of the Gospel, for at two key places – 19,35 where he witnesses to the issue of blood and water from the side of the dead Christ) and 21,24 (where he witnesses to the things about which he has written in his Gospel) – he is presented, like the Baptist, as a witness. Thus, in a sense, in John’s Gospel the two Johns seem

20 Theobald, 229.

21 Cf. John 1,25-26.28.33; 3, 23.25; 10,40. The texts are numerous, but they are never elaborated on in the direction of forgiveness of sins. Even the one passage which recounts the baptism of Jesus by John focusses on John’s witness.

22 Cf. John 3,24. The allusion to the baptizing and to the imprisonment in such a close compass gives the impression of being a nod to other aspects of John’s life which are known by the author but which are not regarded as germane to his purpose.

to be presented as complementary in their witness to Jesus:²³ the Baptist's function is deliberately shaded in the direction of a limited witness which is complemented by the witness of the author of the Gospel himself. It is this complementarity as witnesses which seems to warrant the suggestion that when "John" is explicitly mentioned in 1, 6-8 as being sent by God as witness, John the Evangelist and his witness to Christ is being deliberately implied. Where the Baptist is mentioned, the Evangelist is implied; if not, the witness to the *Logos* is incomplete.²⁴

The difficulty with assuming that John the Evangelist is being deliberately alluded to in 1,6-8, is that there is no evident reason why the Evangelist should resort to indirection to refer to himself by the name "John". The solution to this problem seems to lie into the various roles played by the John in the Gospel which he wrote, and in the way he chooses to identify himself with relation to these roles.

One main role of the John in the Gospel he wrote is that of the Believer. That he is symbol of the Believer seems indicated from his role at the foot of the cross, where Jesus gives him to his Mother, who, from being Daughter of Sion/Jerusalem (symbol of the Mother of Believers in the Old Dispensation) becomes Daughter of the Heavenly Jerusalem (symbol of the Mother of Believers in the New Dispensation).²⁵ In the same way, from being the symbol of the Believer in the Old Dispensation (as Son of the Daughter of Sion/Jerusalem), John (as Son of the Mother who has become Daughter of the Heavenly Jerusalem), becomes the Symbol of the Believer in the New Dispensation.²⁶ In his capacity as believer John refers to himself in his Gospel as "Son" or "the Beloved Disciple" (19,26), a term reserved for those who believe and put their belief into practice.²⁷ And this precisely where the explanation of John's silence with regard to his personal name seems to be found.

23 This point has already been made by F. Overbeck, *Das Johannesevangelium. Studien zur Kritik seiner Erforschung* (ed. C. A. Bernoulli) (J. C. B. Mohr; [Paul Siebeck], Tübingen 1911), 417, but in a somewhat different form. Overbeck seems to regard witness of the Baptist as extending to the death of Christ in the sense that his, the Baptist's, testimony was a summary of the entire preaching of Jesus. This seems an exaggerated view of the Baptist's witness.

24 M. Hengel (*Die johanneische Frage. Ein Lösungsversuch* [J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck); Tübingen 1993] 199) sees in John 21,24 the only reference to the "author" by the disciples. And, of course, even here this reference is debated. The implication is that the reference is too late and too little to be fully credible. If at all, why not earlier? If not earlier, why at all?

25 Cf. I. de la Potterie, "La Figlia di Sion. Lo sfondo biblico della mariologia dopo il Concilio Vaticano II", *Marianum* 49 (1987) 356-376, especially 372.

26 The words "mother" and "son" are to be taken here in their Semitic sense of sharing in likeness: the "son" is son because he shares in the faith of his (spiritual) "mother".

27 Cf. John 11,5.27; 13,1.23; 14,21; 20,2; 21,7.20. Cf. also Hengel, 213.

For just as in the Fourth Gospel the Mother of Jesus is never referred to by her personal name of "Mary", but always by the name "Mother",²⁸ so in the Fourth Gospel the spiritual Son of that Mother is never referred to by his proper name of "John". He is referred to by the titles which honour his being a symbol of belief: "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (sc., because of his faith) or "Son", just as Mary is referred to as "Mother". Where such a reference is deemed inappropriate, i.e., where there is no question of faith being involved, John uses other circumlocutions, such as "another disciple" (*allos mathetes* (18, 15)²⁹ or "sons [of] Zebedee" (*hoi tou Zebedaiou*).

Another main role of John in the Gospel he wrote is, presumably, that of one of the "Twelve".³⁰ Unlike the other three Gospels, the Fourth Gospel does not portray the naming of the Twelve, who are referred to as "disciples" just as are the other followers of Jesus.³¹ Only one of the Twelve is formally given a title corresponding to his role as spokesman/head of the group: Peter (1, 42). Peter as such, i.e., with the explicit use of his name and hence with implicit reference to the Twelve, figures much more prominently in John's Gospel than does any of the others who are of the Twelve, (1,40.42.44; 6, 8.68; 13,6.8.9.24.36.37; 18,10.11.15.16[2x].17.18.25.26.27; 20,2.3.4.6; 21,2.3.7[2x].11.15.17.20.21), and in at least two of these texts Peter is regarded as the head and spokesman of the group (6,68; 21,15.16[2x].17), i.e., he is implicitly considered as one of the Twelve. When other members of the Twelve are mentioned, they are accordingly presumed not to be functioning precisely as members of the Twelve (e.g., Andrew [1,40.44; 6,8]; Philip

28 Cf. I. de la Pottiere, "La Mère de Jésus et la conception virginalle du Fils de Dieu. Étude de théologie johannique," *Marianum* 40 (1978) 42-43. De la Potterie maintains that the reason for this avoidance of the name "Mary" is to emphasize the role of Mary as Mother of Jesus. But this would seem to be only one, superficial reason. A second, more profound reason is to highlight the spiritual motherhood of Mary in the Gospel, a Gospel in which she is portrayed as the Mother of the Believers in the Old Dispensation and in the New. On the cross Jesus gives his Mother to the beloved disciple for safekeeping (first reason). But he also gives her to him as his spiritual Mother in her role as Mother of the Believers in the Old Dispensation who becomes the Mother of the Believers of the New (second reason).

29 Cf. the wording of 20,2; "...towards the other disciple whom Jesus loved" (*pros ton allon matheten hon ephilei ho Iesous*; cf. also 20,4.8). There may also be a reference to John at 1,35.37, where John may have avoided referring to himself by his proper name by using the word "disciple" (*mathetes*) to speak of himself and Andrew. Andrew is subsequently identified (1, 40) as one of the two, but the other of the two is not.

30 The presumption is based on a comparison between the Fourth Gospel and the other Gospels.

31 Cf. R. F. Collins, "The Twelve", *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 6 (ed. D. N. Freedman) Doubleday; New York 1992) 670-671.

1.43.44.45.46.48; 6,5.7; 12,21.22; 14,8.9]; Thomas [11,16;14,5;20,24.26.27.28; 21,2]; Judas [6,71; 13,2.26]). Apart from Peter, the “Twelve”, when they function, function anonymously as a group. For example, they are “sent”, but the idea of “sending” is conveyed by verbal forms (*apostello*—cf. 4, 38; *pempo*)—cf.20,21). In the Fourth Gospel the title “apostle” (*apostolos*) is never used. The idea of “apostle(s)” is taken over by the collective term “Twelve” (6,67.70.71;20,24). It seems probable from comparing such texts as 6, 71 with 12,4 that the term “apostle” has been deliberately avoided in favour of “disciple”. The conclusion to be drawn from this careful choice of terms in the Fourth Gospel is that there the Apostles are not intended to function as witnesses as part of the Twelve, witnessing being the main function of an Apostle precisely as one of the Twelve.³² Thus, because the Twelve are not explicitly given names as members of the Twelve, one can infer that John did not wish in his Gospel that he or his fellow members of the Twelve should give testimony precisely as the Twelve.³³ Hence one should not be surprised that he does not refer to himself by the name of “John” when he speaks about his individual witness as one of the Twelve.

Not that John is not a witness in his Gospel. In fact, the third main role of John in the Gospel he wrote is precisely that of witness. This role is clear from his words at two key points in his Gospel, immediately after the issuing of blood and water from the side of the dead Jesus (19,35), and the end of his work (21,25). Here he is

32 To have been a witness to the life of Jesus from his baptism to his ascension is what is adduced as the necessary criterion for the one who fills up the complement of the “Eleven” in Acts 1, 15-26. The witness value, then, of Thomas, for example, would seem to be intended to be as *mathetes*, one of the community of the disciples of Jesus, rather than as one of the Twelve, as he seems to be. (Cf. the beginning of 20,25: “The other disciples thereupon kept saying to him [sc., Thomas] —*elegon own auto hoi alloi mathetai.*) Judas’ role at 6, 70-71 is certainly placed in the context of the loyalty expected of the Twelve because it is placed there by none other than Jesus himself, but Jesus speaks of selecting the Twelve as a group, not as individuals (6,70). It is the author of the Gospel who comments that Judas was “one of the Twelve” (*heis ek ton dodeka*); it is the author of the Fourth Gospel who mentions the name of Judas, not Jesus; it is the author of the Fourth Gospel who puts the incident in the context of the “disciples” (cf. 6,66).

33 The witness value of the individual members of the Twelve is certainly presupposed at 6,66-71, just as it is with Thomas at 20,24. But the fact that it is only presupposed should indicate what the point of view of the author of the Gospel is. John the Apostle, the author of the Fourth Gospel, knows very well that the purpose of an Apostle as one of the Twelve is to witness to Jesus Christ, from his baptism to his resurrection-ascension. But for the purposes proper to his Gospel he does not wish to state this or to let this enter explicitly into the discourse.

giving witness not as "apostle", for reasons given above, but as "disciple" (*mathetes*), one of the community (cf. 21, 25): in his Gospel John has deliberately downgraded the witness value of the Apostles in order to emphasize the witness value of the disciples. But John is not just any member of the community, any "disciple". He is "the beloved disciple", one who stands out among the community for special faithfulness.³⁴ It is this special faithfulness which is recorded at 19,35, and it is this special faithfulness which makes possible the summary of witness at 21, 24. John wishes to be known above all as the Son who symbolizes the community of New Dispensation believers, and it is in this capacity that he stands behind the tradition of his Gospel. But he does not wish to use his name "John" because this would derogate from his role as unique witness, the beloved Disciple, one who reports as the Symbol of all Believers.

This desire to be known in his role as Symbol of Believers does not prevent John from giving an implicit communication of his name at 1,6, by associating himself with the other great witness to the *Logos*. This is the suggestion being made here. This implicit association thus links the two Johns into a common destiny³⁵: "*Nomen est omen*". And for John this association is of more importance as author of his Gospel than that of being named an "apostle" or as being explicitly named a member of the Twelve. For in his Gospel John gives witness to Jesus from a background of greater faith than any of the other Twelve, a faith recognized by Jesus as he was dying on the cross. Further, John's faith implies a witness of wider breadth than that of the Twelve, for John's Gospel takes in the pre-existence of the *Logos* (John 3, 31-36 and related passages). John the Baptist provided a unique witness to the *Logos*. By implicitly associating himself with the witness of John the Baptist, John the Evangelist provides the second witness needed for the requirements of the Mosaic Law to be fulfilled if the "metatext" of the *Logos* is to be formally

34 Cf. Collins, 671. Collins distinguishes between the "Twelve" and their head, Peter, who represent "apostolic Christianity", and the community of the author of the Fourth Gospel, whose hero is "the beloved disciple". This distinction seems unnecessary. There is only one community of believers in the Fourth Gospel, and Peter is the head of the institution of the Twelve which is part of the community. But the special faith hero of this community is the beloved disciple, presumably because Jesus knew that only he would be faithful even under the cross, just as Jesus knew that Peter would not (13,38).

35 It should be noted that the purpose of the witness of John the Baptizer —1,7: *hina pantes pisteusosin*—and that of John the Evangelist —20,31: *hina pisteusete*—coincide in that both are to lead others to faith. Again, the plurals merit attention.

received by those who lived under the Old Dispensation (John 8,17) in terms proper to that Dispensation.³⁶

1,9-13: The *Logos* as Light for Those Who Believe in Him

The title for this section of the prologue speaks about the light which, as it comes into the world, illumines every man (v.9).³⁷ With the word “man”—*anthropos*—the believers of the *Logos* are introduced into the prologue in a general way.

The expressions *eis ta idia* and *hoi idioi* of v. 11 lend themselves to two interpretations: 1) the macroworld of the *Logos* which depends on him as creator; 2) the microworld of Judea in which the *Logos* passed his earthly life.³⁸

In v. 11 the word *paralambano* is used: “his own received him not” *hoi idioi auton ou parelabon*). The word is best taken as being ambivalent, referring both to the reception one gives a guest or partner³⁹ and the reception one gives a doctrine, as at 1 Cor 15, 1.

Vv. 12-13 constitute a complex of cruces.⁴⁰ The most striking thing about the

36 The suggestion, that John the Evangelist implicitly associates himself by name with John in order to provide the twofold witness required by the Mosaic Law, may provide light on the classic problem of the unattributed passage of witness at John 3,31-36. If these verses are taken as expressing the witness of John the Evangelist they could possibly be interpreted as the Evangelist’s associating of his own explicit witness with the explicit witness of the Baptist but from the vantage point of one who sees the testimony of the Baptist in the context of the life of Jesus as whole. Thus 3,31-36 is a type of midrash on the final testimony of the Baptist, an actualization of the words of the John who was unable to see the fulfillment of the earthly life of the *Logos* by the John who was. For the background of John 3, 31-36 cf. J. Beutler, *Martyria. Traditionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zum Zeugnisthema bei Johannes* (Frankfurter Theologische Studien 10; Josef Knecht; Frankfurt am Main 1972) 313-316.

37 On the much discussed interpretation of v. 9 cf. Theobald, 191-195.

38 Cf. the discussion in Theobald, 232-237. Theobald finds it problematic to decide which of the two meanings is to be preferred, judging from the Gospel alone: “Methodisch bleibt es zunächst problematisch, semantische Ambivalenzen im Prolog vom Corpus des Evs her aufzulösen” (234). The present writer would say that the ambivalence was intended.

39 Cf. Theobald, 233, n. 126.

40 Cf. the discussion in Theobald, 238-247. The interpretation in the present paper repeats the substance of a lecture given first at the Fifth Study Week on the Precious Blood on the theme “Blood and Anthropology: Rites and Cult” at the Precious Blood Centre Rome on November 29, 1984, and subsequently published in *Sangue e antropologia nella Liturgia II*, (ed. F. Vattioni; Atti della V Settimana; Edizioni Pia Unione Preziosissimo Sangue; Roma 1987)697-702.

verses is the odd string of negatives in v. 13: "...those not born from bloods nor from the will of flesh, nor from the will of man, but from God".⁴¹ The use of the plural for "blood" – "bloods" (*haimata*)—is also noteworthy: It sounds as odd in Greek as in English. The word "born", *egennethesan*, has been the occasion of a long-standing debate between those who defend the reading "born" in the plural, and those who defend the reading *egenethe*, "born", in the singular. The latter group of scholars, relying on a textual reading found mainly in the Fathers, think that the verse refers to the birth of Jesus Christ,⁴² whereas those who defend the reading of the majority of Greek manuscripts of the New Testament say that the verse refers to the spiritual birth of Christians.⁴³ The present interpretation will, of course, defend both interpretations, but basing itself on the plural reading and the primary meaning as referring to the spiritual birth of Christians, with the physical birth of Christ being deliberately alluded to.

The expression "not from bloods" (*ouk ex haimataton*) stands in implicit contrast with the singular, "blood" (*haima*) 19,34, where the blood of Christ is pictured as coming from the side of Christ. There can be no spiritual birth of Christians without the effect of Christ's expiatory death on the cross.⁴⁴

The words "nor from will of flesh" (*oude ex thelematos sarkos*) are to be understood with reference to 3,6, where birth from the flesh is contrasted with birth from the Spirit. The immediately preceding verse, 3,5, speaks of "water and the Spirit", and thus there is another allusion to 19,34.⁴⁵

41 "The process of the birth of a child according to the ordinary course of nature by the will of its parents, and especially of the father, is a parable of the birth of the children of God; but it is only a parable. In order to avoid confusion between the two, the divine generation must be expressed in a series of strong negatives" (Hoskyns, 146).

42 Cf.: Theobald, 172-173; J. Galot, "Être né de Dieu". *Jean 1,13* (Analecta Biblica 37; Rome 1969); I. de la Potterie, "La Mère de Jésus et la conception virginale du Fils de Dieu. Étude de théologie johannique", *Marianum* 40 (1978) 59-90.

43 Cf.: Hoskyns, 163-166; M. F. Wiles, *The Spiritual Gospel. The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel in the Early Church* (University Press; Cambridge 1960) 106.

44 "The Evangelist cannot write that the Christians were not born of blood (singular), because their birth does in fact depend upon a death which later he describes as involving the outpouring of blood (xix. 34)" (Hoskyns, 146-147).

45 Cf. I. de la Pottiere, "Jesus et Nicodemus: de necessitate generationis ex Spiritu (Jo 3,1-10)", *Verbum Domini* (47 (1969) 209-210; B. F. Westcott, *The Gospel according to St. John* (reprint Eerdmans; Grand Rapids 1981) 50-51; Hoskyns, 213-215.

The words “nor from the will of man but of God” (*oude ek thelematos andros all'ek theou*) refer again to 19,34. At 19,25-27 the Christians are symbolized by the Disciple “whom Jesus loved” and are consigned to the care of the Mother of Jesus.⁴⁶ This giving of the Disciple to the Mother is done without any purely human intervention but because of the will of the Father who guides all the actions of Jesus.⁴⁷

The clustering of these allusions around the death of Christ suggests that the basic act where the Christians are born spiritually is there, and that they are born as a body of believers symbolized by the Disciple.⁴⁸ On the cross Christ gives “those who receive him” the “power” or “right” (*exousia*)⁴⁹ to “become children of God”, that is to say, “those who believe in his name” (1,12). The “becoming” refers to the act of baptism by which believers exercise their right or power.

But this explanation is not sufficient to explain the text adequately, for it does not explain how v.14 seems to presume v.13. Nor does it explain adequately the early and widespread tradition which saw in v.13 a description to the birth of Christ.⁵⁰ Hence it seems appropriate to see in v.13 a series of allusions which refer to the birth of Christ: “Not from bloods” alludes to the fact that the *Logos* had only one human parent.⁵¹ “Nor from the flesh” alludes to the role of the Spirit in the birth of Jesus.⁵² “Nor from the will of man [husband] but of God” alludes to the virgin birth of Jesus.⁵³

46 Cf. the discussion above in connection with 1,6-8.

47 “Il est frappant de constater qu'en dehors du prologue, le terme ‘volonté’ est toujours employé par Jean pour désigner la volonté de Dieu, la volonté du Père (4,34; 5,30; 6,38.39.40; 7,17; 9,31; 1 Jn 2,17; 5,14). Il ya deux exceptions, mais qui confirment la règle, en montrant la signification profonde de cet usage du mot ‘volonté’, là où Jésus déclare que ce n'est pas sa volonté qu'il cherche et accomplit, mais la volonté de celui qui l'a envoyé (5,30; 6,38). La volonté par excellence, c'est celle du Père; toute la vie humaine de Jésus est commandé par elle, et non par sa propre volonté humaine” (Galot, 119).

48 Cf. Hoskyns, 432.

49 On the meanings “power” or “right” for *exousia* cf. Zorell, cols. 458-460. Perhaps the distinction is inappropriate.

50 Cf. Hoskyns, 166: “...the singular **was born** is a corruption of the text, but a corruption that is neither unnatural nor unintelligent”.

51 Cf. A. Tosato, “Processo generativo e sangue nell'antichità (saggio di ermeneutica biblica)”, *Sangue e antropologia nella letteratura cristiana, II* (ed. F. Vattioni; Atti della (III) Settimana; Edizioni Pia Unione Preziosissima Sangue; Roma 1983) 643-696, especially 661-676.

52 Cf. Hoskyns, 164, who cites Tertullian, *De carne Cristi*, xviii: “Now this description is even more applicable to Him [Jesus] than it is to those who believe on Him”.

53 Cf. Hoskyns, 164-165. The connotation “husband” seems appropriate for the implied meaning in 1,13. John was well aware of this meaning for the word *aner*: cf. 4,16.17.18.

This secondary meaning suggests that there is an intrinsic nexus between the spiritual birth of Christians and the temporal birth of the *Logos*. The Christians are born spiritually analogously to the way that the *Logos* was born physically. In both of these births the Mother of Jesus, the Spirit, and the Father have essential roles. This is a subtle understanding of the verses, and could scarcely be achieved by anyone who was not previously in contact with the tradition embodying these truths. But this is in accord with the observation made at the beginning of this paper, that John's Gospel seems to have been written not to inform but to bring to belief or to deepen belief.

1,14-18: The *Logos* as *Sarx*

The final section of the prologue, vv. 14-18, must be understood in the context of Ex 33-34 and Sir 24.⁵⁴ Both Old Testament texts have to do with the Mosaic Law. With regard to Exodus, this relation is especially evident because of v.17, with its contrast between Moses and Jesus Christ, the Law being given through Moses and "grace and truth" through Jesus Christ. But it is also to be inferred from the reference to glory at Ex 33,18 (v.14). The remark at v.18 that no one has ever seen God can be traced to Ex 33,20. In contrast to Moses, who saw only God's "back", the *Logos* existed "with" (pros) God. And the expression "grace and truth" in v.14 possibly alludes to the "love and faithfulness" of Ex 34,6 (Hebrew).⁵⁵ With regard to the relation between the prologue and Sir 24, there are a number of verbal parallels or allusions, but perhaps the most striking is the use of the word *skene* and *kataskenoo* at Sir 8 and Jn 1,14.

This contrast between the *Logos* of v.14 and the Mosaic Law thus repeats the contrast between *Logos* and Law which characterized the implied meaning at vv. 1-5. In this connection it is useful to note the close connection which the prologue wishes to establish between the coming of the *Logos* who "became flesh" (*egeneto*) and the coming of "grace and truth" through Jesus Christ (*egeneto*).⁵⁶ In fact, the two main points of vv.14-18 seem to be: 1) to identify the eternal *Logos* with Jesus (v.14), and 2) to identify this *Logos* with the new Law replacing the Mosaic Law

54 Cf. Evans, 79-86.

55 For other Old Testament which may have relevance as background for John 1,14-18 cf. Evans, 86-99.

56 This connection has been noted by I. de la Potterie, *La vérité dans saint Jean*. Tome I. *La Christ et la vérité*, [(Analecta Biblica 73; Biblical Institute Press; Rome 1977) 165 cited by Theobald, 257, n. 243].

(v.17): Jesus is not a conveyer of the “grace and truth” of which v.14 speaks, he is “grace and truth” itself.⁵⁷

The pairing of *charis* and *aletheia* in v.14 may well correspond, in the context of the prologue, to the *phos* and *zoe* of v.4.⁵⁸

Again the Baptist appears as “witnessing”, at v.15. Here his message is cited as consisting of the words “This was he of whom I said, ‘The one coming after me ranks before me because he existed before me’”. He is presented with the words: “he witnesses and cries out”. The word “cries out” (*kegragen*) seems to reflect a present usage, paralleling the present tense of “witnesses” (*marturei*).⁵⁹

The deeper meaning of vv.14-18 can be sensed beginning with the word *sarx* in v.14. There is a certain tension between the word as it is used in v.14 and as it is used in v.13.⁶⁰ This tension indicates that the Evangelist was playing on nuances of the word. There is an even sharper contrast between the word as it is used in v.13 and the way it is used in chapter 6 of the Gospel, where it refers to the eucharistic body of Christ (vv.51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56).⁶¹ In 1,14 the word *sarx* refers to the identification which took place between the *Logos* and the human.⁶² The deeper meaning of vv.14-18 refers to the *Logos*’ becoming the eucharistic flesh. Just as the *Logos* becomes Jesus, and just as this *Logos* incarnate in Jesus becomes the new Law, replacing the Mosaic Law, so this new Law, concretely, is the eucharistic body of Christ.

The use of the verb with the most *sken*-in v.14 may also be susceptible to a eucharistic allusion, for in the Epistle to the Hebrews a eucharistic connotation for

57 Cf. Theobald, 256-258. “...der Mensch Jesus *ist* der Logos in Person” (Theobald, 248): “Nicht Mittler ist Jesus, der von dem, was er vermittelt, unterschieden werden kann, sondern Mittler und Gabe ist er ineins (Joh 14, 6)” (ibid., 258).

58 Cf. Theobald, 254-255. He points out that v.9 speaks of the “true light” *phos to alethinon*, and that the “abundance” (*perisson*) of life mentioned in Jn 10,10 is illumined by 1,16, “grace in place of grace” (*charis anti charitos*).

59 Cf. Zorell, col. 732.

60 Cf. Brown, I, 32.

61 The usage at 6,63 seems deliberately designed to highlight this contrast.

62 “Es [*sarx egeneto*] besagt, daß Gott als der sich offenbarende die Gestalt des Menschen annahm und sie nicht etwas bloß als Verkleidung trug, sondern mit ihr identisch wurde, damit die aus Gott Geborenen die *doxa* des Vaters erblickten, in den krassen und doch mißverständlichen Wunden wie im Gehorsam Jesu bis aus Kreuz” (E. Schweizer, “*sarx*”, *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, VII (Kohlhammer; Stuttgart 1964) 140).

a word with the same root has been suggested.⁶³ The tabernacle imagery connected with this root, and the fact that this root is also used to express the idea of the tabernacle of the human body, make it an appropriate means of expressing the idea of the “tabernacling” of the *Logos* among men.⁶⁴ In Hebrews it would seem that the root is used to convey the idea of the “tabernacling” of the risen body of Jesus among men.

The argument for the implied presence of John the Evangelist used for vv.6-8 can be applied also in v.15. But in v.15 the argument is even more compelling, for the contrast between the scope of the Baptist's testimony, that which was before him and not that which was after him, is explicit: the presence of the Evangelist as witness is again felt, for the reality of the incarnation as well as for the reality of the eucharist.⁶⁵ Further, the use of the first person plural is introduced into the prologue (v.14—*etheasametha*: v.16—*elabomen*) precisely when the Baptist's witness becomes specified. Here the Evangelist is identifying himself with the community of which he is a member and joining in the witness given by the Baptist. In according with the implied meaning given to v.14, the suggestion here is that the Evangelist's witness, and that of his community,⁶⁶ through the writing of the Gospel, resumes the Baptist's witness and takes in all that is subsequent to it, including the eucharistic teaching of Jesus given in chapter 6.⁶⁷

The prologue thus ends, at vv.16-18, with the implied affirmation that Jesus Christ, the *Logos* incarnate, in his eucharistic flesh, is “grace instead of grace”, the new “grace and truth” replacing the Mosaic Law. The various identifications of the surface meaning now find their fulfillment in the eucharist, the “body and blood” of Jesus. It is the command to consume this “body and blood” (*sarx kai haima*)

63 Cf. J. Swetnam, “Christology and the Eucharist in the Epistle to the Hebrews”, *Biblica* 70 (1989) 79-82.

64 Cf. Evans, 82.

65 “...Die Augenzeugen, zu denen der Lieblingsjünger wie auch die Täufer... zu rechnen sind, bezeugen die Identität des fleischgewordenen Logos” (Theobald, 372).

66 The phrase “and we know that his witness is true” at Jn 21, 24 seems to imply that the community of the Evangelist had a hand in the final redaction of the Gospel, for John gives witness as “the disciple, but this witness is confirmed (“and we know that his witness is true”—*kai oidamen hoti alethes autou marturia estin*).

67 It is instructive to note that the same ambiguity attendant on the transition between the testimony of the Baptist in Jn 3,27-30 and the testimony to Jesus given in Jn 3,31 seems to be reproduced in the transition between 1,15 and 1,16. (Cf. the discussion in Theobald, 178-181.) The present paper argues that the Evangelist is speaking not only in 1,16-18, but also in 3,31-36.

which is to cause such scandal to the disciples of Jesus in chapter 6. The Christian eucharist is the true “metatext” of the Mosaic Law.

Summary

The present study has tried to present a unified interpretation of the prologue of John’s Gospel. If the methodology employed can perhaps be characterized as being “*sui generis*” the reason may be that the subject matter is “*sui generis*”. There is no question of proceeding bit by bit, “proof by proof”. The present study suggests an interpretation of the entire prologue. The study does not attempt a “proof” for what has been suggested; it has simply offered a number of indications which, to the present writer at least, command themselves as plausible 1) by reason of the unified view of the prologue which they represent and, 2) by the reason of their agreement with various aspects of the rest of John’s Gospel. One can only interpret the prologue as a whole on the presumption that it was written to make sense as a whole, and that the individual parts contribute to that sense. And since that presumption has been that John 1,1-18 is precisely a “prologue” the rest of the Gospel was consulted to elucidate obscurities.

Many of the aspects of the prologue indicated above have already been published elsewhere. Others are original contributions, as far as the present writer is aware: 1) the analysis of the reason why John the Evangelist does not want to be mentioned anywhere in the Gospel by his personal name “John” because he wishes to safeguard the priority he prefers for his role as “the beloved disciple”, symbol of the New Dispensation Believer; 2) the relation of John the Baptist to John the Evangelist in the prologue; 3) the allusion to the eucharist in 1,14; 4) the analysis of the relation between the spiritual birth of Christians and the physical birth of Christ in 1,12-13; but above all, 5) the systematic application of the idea that the prologue should be viewed as having at least two different but related meanings.

The study is obviously not intended to be a detailed exegesis of the prologue. But it is designed to be a framework within which such an exegesis can be made. This framework and the meanings it conveys cannot be assumed to be valid unless they are viewed as having been written and having been communicated against the background of a strong contemporary oral tradition about the basic truths of Christianity. And so the prologue remains to this day. It is a writing of marvelous depth and engaging simplicity, and it is designed to renew and deepen one’s faith

in the *Logos* and what he and his followers have achieved in this world, whether that world be of the first century or of the twentieth.

The present writer does not think it either impossible or unlikely that a fisherman like John, the son of Zebedee, is responsible for a Gospel noted for its depth and simplicity. Galilean fishermen, though presumably universally uneducated, were also presumably not universally unintelligent. With such material, the Spirit of the *Logos* could easily have produced an author of as subtle and as moving a work as the Gospel of John.

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