

The Prologue of the Fourth Gospel

The Life & Light of the Divine Logos (Jn 1:1-18)

A. Introduction

B. The Prologue of John's Gospel

The Prologue of John's Gospel is a carefully crafted, closely knit composition. The Prologue is ancient poetry or perhaps even a hymn. The Prologue intentionally repeats the same or similar words over and over again. In this way, the Prologue emphasizes important themes, and the repetition of these themes with slight variation serve to clarify what the author wants to communicate.

The repetition creates parallels, and the parallels create what is called a *chiastic structure*, an "a-b-c-d-c-b-a" pattern:¹

- A** Relation of the Word to God, creation, humanity (1-5)
- B** Testimony of John the Baptist (6-8)
 - C** Coming of the Light/Word and rejection (9-11)
 - D** Receiving the Word & becoming children of God (12-13)
 - C'** Coming of the Word and reception (14)
- B'** Testimony of John the Baptist (15)
- A'** Relation of the Word to humanity, re-creation, God (16-18)

There are five themes or motifs I would like to focus on.

C. The Word (*Logos*)

The first theme is the Word (*Logos*).

¹In the beginning was the Word (*logos*), and the Word (*logos*) was with God, and the Word (*logos*) was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. (NRSV)

The Prologue begins with the phrase, "In the beginning was the Word." The opening recalls the first verse of the Bible: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen 1:1). John wants the readers to consider that his Gospel about Jesus Christ has as much significance as the very creation of the universe.

We are also introduced the Word (*logos*). For John, what is in the beginning is "the word," *logos* in the Greek. The Greek word, *logos*, has a number of meanings, but to Jews at that time it would have had two primary meanings: (a) the creative word of God and (b) the wisdom of God.

¹ R. A. Culpepper, "The Pivot of John's Prologue" *NTS* 27 (1981) 1-31.

1. The Creative Word (*memre*) of God

At that time, the Jews (rabbinic and targumic literature) tended to avoid using of the name of God and replaced it with the word *memre* (Aramaic), which means "the word." So, Targum Neofiti on Genesis has:

T. Neofiti on Gen 1:1. "From the beginning with wisdom the Word (*memre*) of the Lord created and perfected the skies and the earth"

In this way, the Prologue draws on the Aramaic versions of Genesis and is simply highlighting what most Jews at that time would agree about. The Word (*logos* or *memre*) took part in the creation of the universe. The "word" is a metaphor for the creative action of God.

2. The Wisdom (*Hokmah*) of God

The word *logos* would also call to mind the thought of God's wisdom (*hokmah*). The Hebrew Scriptures and literature often talk about Wisdom as the agent of creation. That is, the agent of creation is personified as *feminine* Wisdom (*hokmah* = hmkj ; *sophia* = sofia).

Prov 8:30 I [Wisdom] was beside him as a master workman.

3. The Word Preexisted

Notice that both the Word and Wisdom preexist. Before the beginning (*archē*) of Genesis 1:1, there was only God. However, John announces that the Word "was" (*ēn*). The imperfect use of the verb "to be"—*was* (*ēn*)—places the Word outside the limits of time and space—before anything, the Word was (already).

4. The Word was with God

Furthermore, the Word was "with God." The phrase is *pros ton theon*, literally "was toward the God," meaning "in a relationship with God." The preposition, *pros*, means it has the sense of motion toward the person; in this case toward God.

Moloney translates it as "The Word was *turned toward God*" (Moloney 35). The Word was "in active communion with God."² "The Logos is ... in personal fellowship with God, living in God and from God."³

5. The Word was (same quality as) God

"Although the traditional translation is 'and the word was God,' there is a danger of collapsing the Word and God into one"—that Word and God refer to the same One.⁴ But,

² Harris, *Jesus as God*, 57.

³ Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John*, Vol 1 (Crossroads: New York: Crossroads, 1990) 234.

⁴ Francis Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, 35.

based on the Greek grammar,⁵ "the author has gone to considerable trouble to indicate that an identification between the Word and God is to be avoided."⁶

In this verse, a correct understanding of the word "God" (*theos*) would emphasize the quality or essence of God, but it would not an identity with God.

NEB: "the Word was what God was"

P. B. Harner: "The Word had the very same nature as God"

Thus there is more to God than the Word, but the Word shares the divine nature. What a red ball is to redness, what a blue book is to blueness, Jesus is to God.

D. The Life (*Zōē*)

The second theme is the Divine Life (*Zōē*)

³ All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has (*and continues to*) come into being ⁴ in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. (NRSV)

Notice what is being said. Everything (*panta*) that exists—not just human beings, but the entire manifest universe—came into being through (*dia*) the Word/Logos. The Word/Logos was the instrument or agent or the cause of everything that exists.

In this way, everything that exists is connected in and through the Divine Word/Logos. You might think of the Word/Logos as the foundational energy that moves through everything.

Notice also the phrase, "What has (*and continues to*) come into being," uses the perfect tense. The perfect tense stresses that something has happened and continues to happen. So from John's perspective, the Word/Logos *continues* to creation into existence. It is an ongoing process.

The Word "has broken into and continues to break into" (perfect tense) the human story and has made life (*zōē*) an ongoing possibility.

E. The Light (*Phōs*)

The third theme is the Divine Light (*Phōs*)

a. The Light is invincible

What has (*and continues to*) come into being ⁴ in him was life, and the life was the light (*phōs*) of all people. ⁵ The light (*phōs*) shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it...

⁵ *Theos* without the definite article could be "a god." However, in this case, *theos* (a predicate nominative) functions as a *complement* to the (linking) verb "to be" and thereby qualifies *ho logos* (subject nominative). Rather, *ho logos* (the word) is the subject of the sentence and *theos* qualifies the *ho logos*. The author did not write: *kai logos ēn ho theos* = "God was the Word."

⁶ Moloney, 35.

Life originates with the Logos—"in him". But it does not stop with the Logos. Notice that *everything* has the Divine Life also. Every person. There are no exceptions.

But there is more. John connects the Life with the Divine Light. John says that "the life was the light of all people" (*tōn anthrōpōn*; genitive of possession). The Divine light belongs to all people. That Divine Life/Light resides in everyone. You can think of that Light as a Divine Spark within us (image of God).

That means, the *incarnation* of the Logos as Life and Light has been an ongoing reality since the beginning of the human race. Before Jesus Christ became the definitive incarnation of God, all human beings were (and continue to be) incarnations of the Divine Life and Light.

And this Divine Light—the Divine Spark within us—is never overcome by darkness. The phrase, "did not overcome it" (*ou katelaben*) is translated by the NIV as "did not understand it." *Katelaben* (from *lambano*) has the double meaning of

- To grasp with the *mind* and so to *comprehend*
- To grasp with the *hand* and so *overcome or destroy*

It could go either way. Either way, the point is that darkness does not understand and cannot defeat or overcome the Light. The light cannot be extinguished. It is "in" us and even we cannot put it out.

b. The Light enlightens everyone

⁹ The true light (*phōs*), which enlightens (*phōtidzei*) everyone, was coming into the world.

¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. (NRSV)

Notice that the Truth Light enlightens everyone. It does not say how it happens, but it simply says that everyone is enlightened by the Word/Light and there are no exceptions.

The Word is the *phōs* (photography, photosynthesis, etc) and *enlightens* (*phōtidzei*). The word *enlightens* (*phōtidzei*) can mean illuminate, light up, bring to light, or shine. It refers to the fact that God is made known to everyone. God is revealed to everyone. No exceptions.

Notice also that the Light "continues to come into the world." It never stops. The Light *continues* to enlighten everyone without exception.

However, verse 10—which says the world did not know him—seems to say that darkness prevailed over the light. How can the Word/Light enlighten everyone when the world is hostile to the Word?

One possible response: John thinks everyone has access to the Word, the True Light. Everyone has that Light and has the potential for enlightenment, but not everyone responds. Not everyone believes and receives the Divine Logos.

F. The Children (*Tekna*) of God

The fourth theme concerns the children (*tekna*) of God.

¹² But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God. (NRSV)

This is the center of the poetic hymn, the center of the Prologue.

To believe in someone's name is to accept all that he stood for, to accept his authority, and to live as he lived. When people *believe* and *receive* the Logos, they *become* children of God (1:12).

So far in the Prologue, we have not been introduced to the person, Jesus of Nazareth. So, at this point, verse 12, John is still talking about receiving and believing in the Divine Logos, which is available to every person.

People need to respond to the Light they have, to believe and receive the Light which is constantly working within them, and if they do, they become children of God.

"To receive" (*lambanein*) and "to believe" (*pisteuein*) are placed in parallel. The right way to receive the Word is to believe" (Moloney 38).

G. The Word became flesh (*Sarx*)

The fifth and last theme is that the Word became flesh (*Sarx*).

¹⁴ And the Word (*logos*) became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (NRSV)

Now we are told that the Logos, which enlightens everyone everywhere, became embodied or incarnate in a particular person, at a particular time, and among particular people. Although Jesus name is not used in the Prologue, the rest of John's Gospel makes it clear that is whom we are speak of (Jn 1:14).

Verse 14 is one of the most important verses in the Bible. In Greek thought, there was an impassable gulf between the divine (*logos*) and the flesh (*sarx*). So the first phrase—"the Word (*logos*) became flesh (*sarx*)"—is shocking to the original readers. The Word is enfleshed or incarnated—impossible!

Sarx often has a negative connotation; it is that which is opposed to the spirit.

Gal 5:17. "For what the flesh (*sarx*) desires is opposed to the Spirit (*pneuma*), and what the Spirit (*pneuma*), desires is opposed to the flesh (*sarx*)."

It is as if the Word (*logos*) has come and is now occupying hostile territory (*sarx*)!

Notice the phrase—"lived among us"—is literally, "dwelt (*skēnoō*) among us and revealed his glory (*doxa*)."¹⁵ This is an allusion to God coming a dwelling with Israel in the desert of Sinai.

Moses and the Israelites built the tabernacle in Exod 25-40, and then God (Yahweh) came, God's glory (Heb *kāḏōd*) descended and He dwelled with them in Exod 40.

With verse 14, the activities of the Logos are inseparable from Jesus, but go beyond Jesus. The Logos operates in all human history, among all peoples, within all cultures, and, however shadowy or incomplete, through all religions. But, as the remainder of the Gospel of John shows, those who know and follow Jesus have more light than others.

H. Reflections

According to John:

1. The Logos/Word of God is a metaphor used to describe God's creative action in the universe.
2. The Logos/Word as creative action of God is the Source of human life and enlightenment.
3. The Logos/Word is universally available to every human being. It is the Spark of Life and Light for every person, whether they have heard of Jesus Christ or not.
4. The Logos/Word can be received, believed, yielded to by anyone anywhere—whether they have heard of Jesus Christ or not—because the Logos/Word has giving Life and Light to every human being.
5. The Logos/Word became uniquely and supreme identified with the person, Jesus of Nazareth, such that Jesus has become, from that point forward, the definitive incarnation of the Logos. Whatever does not measure up to Jesus Christ is not of God (some Scriptures). This means:
 - Accepting the life and teachings of Jesus is the norm for recognizing and nurturing the Divine Life and Light in us and others.
 - Looking for how much Divine Life and Light non-Christians and Christians have already and then trying to encourage them to walk the path of Christ and realize Christ within them.
 - Realizing God knows what it is like to be a human. God knows the limitations, sufferings, and joys that all humans share. We have no excuse. We cannot say that God does not know what it is like to suffer pain and temptation. We cannot say that God remains aloof and far away. God is so close that we need to take special efforts to "see" God.