

J O H N 1 : 1 - 1 8

THE PROLOGUE

AN ESSAY BY STUART MCGREGOR

© 2002

© 2002, Stuart McGregor.

All the material in this document belongs to Stuart McGregor unless otherwise stated. Any requests for publication of this document in any form can be made by e-mailing, stu.mcg@clear.net.nz. Any duplication of this document in any shape or form must be made with this copyright notice. I ask that you afford me the same courtesy that I have afforded the sources I have used. Please feel free to distribute this freely and contact me with any (sensible) questions or discussion points. Thanks.

I N T R O D U C T I O N

The pericope of John 1.1–18 is widely regarded as being the prologue to the John, the primary function of which is to provide the theological and philosophical backdrop to the Gospel. As it is read the reader is introduced to the principle themes that culminate as he or she reads and engages with the rest of the Gospel.¹ It is a summary of how the Word of God “came into the sphere of time, history and tangibility.”²

By audaciously echoing the first words of the Septuagint, the author immediately engages with any 1st century reader acquainted with the Jewish heritage and by the third sentence has said enough to remove any ambiguity the reader may have concerning the Gospel’s message. The Author is making an intelligent statement of belief³ and does so by appealing to the idioms particular to a significant cross-section of a 1st century community under the rule of the Roman Empire.

The primary concern is to direct the reader into accepting the authority of Jesus⁴ that is over and above subjective limitations,⁵ through reinterpreting imagery and language that was prominent in the minds of the audience he was addressing.

Most of the Johanine themes are evident in the prologue⁶ so it acts as a summary from which the rest of the Gospel should be understood. But it’s most important emphasis is consistent with the other Gospel introductions and that is to establish the authority of Jesus of Nazareth as being the Christ.⁷ It follows the traditions of the other three gospels in establishing the authority of Christ through origin. It differs, however, in that the Author goes back further in time than any of the other gospel writers, even before the creation account and introduces the *logos* who is only ever mentioned again in vs. 14. He begins by stating that the logos was pre-existent with God, the logos existed with God and, to the amazement of his readers, *was* God. The author sees

no need to look at the historical proof of Christ through genealogy, instead he states first and foremost that the central issue of this gospel is belief and almost to lead by example the prologue is a summary of the Author's own foundation of faith.

THE SETTING OF THE TEXT

Date of Writing There is not enough evidence to be absolutely accurate but the generally accepted time of writing has been suggested as between 80–90 AD.⁸ The impact of this date is significant for a number of reasons. Possibly the most important reason is that it strips the Gospel of being an essentially polemical document against Gnosticism which was still in its infancy. This does not discount it from containing anti-proto-Gnostic assertions, but they are by no means the main feature of the book. An earlier date also allows the Gospel to reflect a more mature Christology built upon at least 40 years of Christian thought and testimony, which indicates that at least some of the intention of the book was to consolidate this thought, especially in a climate of persecution.⁹

Purpose of the Prologue The prologue is widely regarded as being the theological framework from which the Gospel is written. Metaphors about it abound as demonstrated by Carson's much coined, but nevertheless poignant, observation that it is the "... foyer to the rest of the Gospel."¹⁰ Lightfoot sees it as a table reference for the reader¹¹ which is reinforced by Carson's table of the key themes reflected elsewhere in the Gospel.¹²

LITERARY CHARACTER OF THE TEXT

The actual genre and structure of the prologue is still under considerable debate. However, Culpepper seems to have made the most believable structural analysis where the entire pericope of 1–18 is seen as a chiasm where the apex is 12b "... gave them the right to become children of God." Carson admits that this is problematic, but enjoys that the emphasis lies where it does, and indeed whether the chiasm is artificial or not, there is a sense of balance around this verse. A. J. Kostenberger has a more generalised chiasm which again apexes at vs. 12. If the critical junction of the chiasm is seen in vs. 12 and if the prologue is the theological summary of the entire book, then the central theme of John is belief (which resonates with 20: 30–31).¹³

Also significant is the undeniable rhythm that culminates in a climax at vs. 18 where the truth is that now God is made known. This rhythm has lead some to try and locate some extra-Johanine source for a hymn in the prologue. Carson’s designation of simply “rhythmical prose”¹⁴ does not seem to do the text justice. The themes and structure, the mentions of John the Baptist which upset the flow, all seem to point to a hymnical structure. Ben Witherington suggests that it is based on Wisdom literature, though still not conclusively, and gives a plausible breakdown of the hymn into four strophes by taking out the references to John the Baptist.¹⁵ This approach, however, seems to undermine the significance of John the Baptist as being a witness essential in establishing the authority of Jesus.

The arguments that support the prologue as being a later redaction essentially revolve around the use of three words that are not used anywhere else in the Gospel i.e. *charis*, *logos* and *pleros*.¹⁶ But this need not be seen as conclusive proof as it often seems that much source criticism is a little restrictive on the creative abilities allowed for the author under examination.

E X E G E S I S

1–2: The Cosmic Intrusion As well as its obvious connection to Genesis, the first line possibly builds on Mark’s opening verse “The beginning . . .”

Even though *logos* is only mentioned a few times in John, the importance of its philosophical texture is tantamount. *Logos* is a Greek word imbued with nuances from Genesis, Wisdom literature, Stoicism, Platonism and the Apostolic Christian tradition, making *logos* an ideal window through which many readers could see into the Gospel, hence the use of *logos* doesn’t imply that a Hellenistic audience is the primary target.¹⁷ Quite the contrary, the term was so idiomatic it actually had more universal appeal. Because John quotes from the OT so much, that is the place to begin looking for a more specific definition of *logos*. Possibly the most significant nuance is that of the Creation account¹⁸, where God *spoke* the world into being an obvious reference to Genesis 1.1. The close relation between God’s word and divine action is reflected elsewhere in scripture (Jer. 1.4; Is. 9.8; Ezek. 33.7; Am. 3.1, 8).¹⁹

Implications from this view are significant when considering the Christology that is presented here. Jesus is equated with *logos*, therefore Jesus is the incarnate divine action of God. John’s use of *logos* would have carried the most influence with Jews, but the significance of it would not have been

lost on the Gentile communities. Either way both are moved to redefine what they each respectively meant of *logos*.²⁰ Carson suggests that if John had used any other word here, it would have narrowed the perception of Jesus too much.²¹

Kostenberger shows that there is a synthetic parallelism in the original Greek of 1–2, where the strophe begins and ends with *en arche*.²²

3–4: Jesus Is The Source Of All Things Verse 3 both positively and negatively states the agent of creation to reinforce the creative ultimacy of Jesus²³ and also to reinforce the fullness of the truth being expressed.²⁴

Even though the Author uses the universal religious symbols of life and light of creation, they are not to be defined here in the same way as the rest of the Gospel in that they are not salvific.²⁵ At this point John is more interested in the *source* of the light and its *purpose* than its dispersal. “The self-existing life of the Word was so dispensed at *creation* that it became the light of the human race . . .”²⁶

The relationship between God and Word is identical to the relationship between Father and Son in the rest of the Gospel.

5: The Supremacy Of Christ This text is problematic in structure with a mixture of tenses and with ambiguity surrounding the word *katelaben*.

The meaning of *katelaben* can be translated as either ‘understood’ or ‘overcome’.²⁷ Kostenberger refers to the use of the word in 12.35 where the same word is used and concludes that ‘overcome’ is the correct rendering.²⁸ Tasker sees it as ‘overcome’ from a theological perspective. Jesus the true light shines on, because the darkness is simply unable to overcome it.²⁹ This interpretation anticipates the redemption theme of the Gospel, where faith is in the certainty of the triumph of the light.

However if it is rendered ‘understood’ it has all the nuance of the creation being redeemed through the incarnate Word.³⁰ This anticipates the Gospel’s photic duality where ‘the light’ is understood from within ‘the world’s darkness’, thus introducing a rejection theme as those who were in the darkness did not understand it vs. 10. Schnackenburg makes use of the active voice to render ‘grasp’, which seems to hold in tension the other two understandings.³¹

The issue of mixed tense is resolved by viewing 5b as a digression.³²

6–9: John The Baptist Witnesses To The Light The Author sees importance in John the Baptist building upon a story that has been going on before creation. His ‘testimony’ or witness is a reflection of the courtroom language that is used in these verses. Even though martyrdom would have been a characteristic of the Christian community who would have encountered the Gospel, it is not likely that *martureo* is used because of its epistemological similarity to the word ‘martyr’.³³

‘The Baptist’ is not used here to delineate between John son of Zebedee probably because the latter is responsible for this Gospel.

8b is inserted to lay a pathway to vs. 9 and so is probably not written to refute a sect based around John the Baptist (Acts 19:1–7).³⁴

The word *kosmos* is a negative or neutral term for ‘the world’ in Johanine literature which gives the sense that God still desires to own even this fallen world.³⁵

The verb *photozei* is unlikely to mean ‘illuminate’ which implies either specific or general revelation of the Word to the world, rather ‘to shed light upon’ or ‘make visible’ thus exposing that which is anti-Jesus in the world. The light of God will divide humanity into those who hate the light and those who love it (3.19–21) a notion more consistent with the theme of the gospel the rest of the prologue.³⁶

10–13: Rejection And Redemption The Author gives no support for the duality where a principle of evil exists independent of the universe that God created, by highlighting the intimate involvement and evidently obvious connection that Jesus has with his entire creation and it still did not know him. The moral responsibility is thrust back onto creation.³⁷ The basic sin of the OT was disobedience whereas for the Author, the basic sin is the failure to know and believe in Jesus.³⁸

God ‘comes to his own’ in the sense of the Jews being His property. The usage is confirmed in 24.27 where Mary is taken to be the disciples own.³⁹ Ultimately the Messiah must be rejected by his own people.⁴⁰

The name here is more than just a label, it represents the character of the one whom is named. Belief in Jesus’ name constitutes the right to be reborn again and adopted into the family of God, preparing the reader for the discourse with Nicodemus in ch. 3 and culminates in Jesus’ assertion in John 8:54.⁴¹

14: The Miracle Unveiled The Logos reappears. The phrase ‘the word became flesh’ is unambiguous in meaning and so is probably at some level polemic against the Platonist and proto-Gnostic schools of thought.

There is a wonderful picture of God *tabernacling* in the midst of his people (Ex 25.8). This crystallises God’s intimate concern for His reconciliation with humanity. Jesus is the incarnate divine action, the temple has been usurped by the presence of Christ.

John introduces his theme of glory, as witnessed in Jesus’ signs and ultimately in his death and resurrection.⁴²

15: John The Baptist’s Witness To The Incarnation This, like vs. 6 is often seen as an interpolation into the hymn as it seems to interrupt the flow of thought.

John the Baptist is bearing witness not to the light but to the incarnation. There is a chronological flow-on from his original testimony and the scene is being set for the rest of his witness in vs. 19–34.

16–17: Usurpation Of The Law By Grace The phrase ‘grace upon grace’ offers difficulty. The word *anti* means ‘corresponds to’, ‘in return for’, ‘upon’ or ‘in addition to’. Carson’s interpretation ‘instead of’ derives from a theological interpretation of the context where ‘grace from Jesus *instead of* Grace from the Law’ is understood from analysis of vs. 17 and extrapolating on the Word becoming flesh.⁴³ These verses present the major theme of how law gives way to grace through Jesus.

18: Jesus The Revelation The Author draws on the allusions he has been making throughout to Ex 33–34 where Moses saw ‘a part of God’, thereby adding an interesting nuance to 14.9: “If anyone has seen me, he has seen the Father.” The intimacy of Christ with the Father is seen with Jesus being close to God’s bosom.

‘One and Only God’ is rendered as ‘One and only Son’ in some manuscripts, but the weight from earlier manuscripts supports the former.⁴⁴

The Author is also using the term *exegesato* to show ‘the narration of God to humanity’.⁴⁵

This verse also forms the end of the *inclusio* with vs. 1.

C O N C L U S I O N

The prologue is a beautifully constructed introduction to the Gospel of John. In just eighteen verses, the Author moves the reader from an infinite cosmic ethereality toward the temporally specific Incarnation thus exposing God's redemptive plan for humanity through Jesus. Whatever its origin is does not change its profound significance to Christian theology. The themes and theology, the use of idiom and the allusion to its contemporary philosophies cements it as fundamental to understanding the rest of the Gospel of John.

B I B L I O G R A P H Y

- Barret, C. K., *The Gospel According to St. John*, (2nd ed.; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978).
- Brown, R. E., *The Gospel According to John, Vol. 1*, (Garden City: Double Day, 1966).
- Carson, D. A., *The Gospel According to John*, (Leicester, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991).
- Elwell, W. A., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1984).
- Kostenberger, A. J., *Encountering John: The Gospel in Historical, Literary and Theological Perspective*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999).
- Lightfoot, R. H., *St. John's Gospel: A Commentary*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1957).
- Marsh, J., *Saint John*, (Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd, 1968).
- Marshall, I. H., *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1992).
- Morris, L. L., *The Gospel According to John*, (rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).
- Schnackenburg, R., *The Gospel According to St. John, Vol. 1*, (New York: Crossroad, 1982).
- Tasker, R. V. G., *The Gospel According to St. John*, (London: The Tyndale Press, 1960).
- Westcott, B. F., *The Gospel According to St. John*, (London: James Clarke & Co., Ltd., 1958).
- Witherington, Ben III, *John's Wisdom*, (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995).

FOOTNOTES

¹ R. H. Lightfoot, *St. John's Gospel: A Commentary* (London: Oxford University Press, 1957), 11

² D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Leicester, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 111

³ His intelligence is exhibited throughout the prologue in the use of words and language that hold multiple philosophical and theological loadings consistent with first century Judaism. The Word, light and dark, life and death, life, knowing etc.

⁴ C. K. Barret, *The Gospel According to St. John* (2nd ed.; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978), 149

⁵ J. Marsh, *Saint John* (Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd, 1968), 94

⁶ See Carson's diagram on page 111.

⁷ Marsh, 94

⁸ Witherington, 27; Carson, 82, 85–87.

⁹ Kostenberger suggests that because it was written after the destruction of the temple that this could have been a primary motivator for John to reconfigure the Jewish understanding of the new relationship that we can enjoy with God, hence, tabernacling in vs. 14. — A. J. Kostenberger, *Encountering John: The Gospel in Historical, Literary and Theological Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 50.

¹⁰ Carson, 111

¹¹ Lightfoot, 94

¹² Carson, 111

¹³ Kostenberger, 57

¹⁴ Carson, 112

¹⁵ B. F. Westcott, *The Gospel According to St. John* (London: James Clarke & Co., Ltd., 1958), 47–48

¹⁶ Carson, 112

¹⁷ Some have posited that logos is best understood in the light of the philosophy of Philo where “the logos of God” is the Platonist archetype of this real world that we live in. In particular the logos can be the ideal man from which all empirical human beings derive from it, so it is impersonal and therefore does not itself become incarnate. Because of these Hellenistic influences some think logos is best interpreted

as Reason. However it is probably most appropriate to translate as word as long as people can move on to an understanding 'message'.

¹⁸ Carson, 114-115

¹⁹ Kostenberger, 50

²⁰ Carson, 116

²¹ Carson, 135

²² Kostenberger, 55

²³ Carson, 118

²⁴ Westcott, 4

²⁵ Carson, 119

²⁶ Carson, 118

²⁷ Carson, 119, Kostenberger, 55

²⁸ Kostenberger, 55

²⁹ R. V. G. Tasker, *The Gospel According to St. John* (London: The Tyndale Press, 1960), 45

³⁰ Carson, 120

³¹ R. Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John*, Vol. 1, (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 246

³² Schnackenburg, 245

³³ J. Marsh, *Saint John* (Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd, 1968), 105

³⁴ Carson, 120

³⁵ Carson, 122

³⁶ Carson, 121-124

³⁷ Carson, 124

³⁸ R. E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, Vol. 1 (Garden City: Double Day, 1966), 10

³⁹ Brown, 10

⁴⁰ Carson, 125

⁴¹ Carson, 125

⁴² Carson, 128

⁴³ Carson, 134

⁴⁴ Kostenberger, 58

⁴⁵ Carson, 134