

John 1:1-18

1. Introduction

Christological assertions are made in the opening sections of all the canonical gospels:

- Mark: the Messiah [the Son of God] (1:1).
- Matthew: the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham (1:1).
- Luke: the Son of the Most High (1:32), the Lord's Messiah (2:26).
- John: the pre-existent and incarnate Word (*logos*).

2. The Origin and Composition of the Prologue

Was the prologue already an integral part of John's Gospel at the time of its composition, or does it represent an addition to the text at a later stage of redaction? Did John himself compose the prologue or did he borrow and adapt a composition already in circulation?

Rhythmic elements and patterns are discernible in the text (vv. 1-5, 9-12, 14, 16-18), as well as prose-like statements such as the references to John the Baptist (vv. 6-8, 15). They are all Johannine in character and anticipate many of the Gospel's most distinctive themes:

- Pre-existence of the Logos-Jesus (1:1, 2; cf. 8:58; 17:5)
- Light in the world (1:4, 8; cf. 8:12; 9:5; 12:35)
- Opposition between darkness and light (1:5; cf. 3:19)
- Beholding the glory of Jesus (1:14; cf. 12:41)
- 'The only Son' (1:14; cf. 3:16)

3. Opening Declarations about the Word (1:1)

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God'. Only here and 1:14 is 'Word' (*logos*) used as a christological title.

3.1 The Pre-existence of the Word

The Word was 'in the beginning' before creation (1:1; *en archē*; cf. Gen. 1:1 LXX). Other figures are 'brought into existence' (cf. 1:6: 'there was (from the

Greek verb *ginomai*) a man sent from God, whose name was John'), but the Word exists (from the Greek verb *eimi*) from eternity (1:1, 2). Cf. 8:58: 'Before Abraham was, I am'.

3.2 The Word as the Agent of Creation

1:3: 'All things came into being through him' (cf. Col. 1:16: 'for in him everything was created in heaven and on the earth'; Heb. 1:2), linked to God's creative activity by his word (Gen. 1:3: 'And God *said*, "Let there be light", and there was light'.

Wisdom traditions also describe personified Wisdom as the agent of creation (Prov. 8:22-31); 'the fashioner of all things' (Wisdom of Solomon 7:21).

3.3 Relationship with God

1:1bc: 'The Word was with God, and the Word was God'. This clause depicts the Word as God's self-expression; it distinguishes the Word from God and yet identifies the Word with God. All the Word is, God is (cf. NEB rendering: 'what God was, the Word was').

4. Why 'Word of God'?

God's word as an expression of his power and will, responsible for creation (Ps. 33:6: 'By the word of the Lord the heavens were made') and salvation (Ps. 107:20: 'He sent out his word and healed them and saved them from destruction'). It is God's word that enables the prophets to convey their message (Hos. 1:1). This is the vehicle of God's self-revelation according to biblical traditions, his mode of communication with the world.

5. The Word becomes Flesh (1:14)

Only the Johannine Prologue states that the Word is made manifest in human flesh within a historical and earthly framework. An unbroken link exists between the past and present; the Word has 'dwelt (or 'tabernacled') in our midst' (v. 14a).

God's tabernacle is filled with glory (Exod. 40:34); the incarnate Word is the embodiment of God's glory – revealed in his signs (John 2:11; 11:40), seen by Isaiah (12:41), manifested in Jesus' death (cf. 12:28).

But the newness and superiority of the revelation of the incarnate Word is also stressed. 'No one has ever seen God' (1:18; 6:46), but the intimate and unique relationship between the Father and Son means that the Word-Son-Jesus mediates a direct and personal revelation of God to the world. He is the visible presence of God. The divine revelation is one of life (v. 4); light (vv. 4-5); grace (v. 14); truth (v. 14); glory (v. 14); God (v. 18).

Select Bibliography

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