



Studying John: Approaches to the Fourth Gospel

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The Transformation of Wisdom

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter begins by asking two questions concerning the Prologue of John's Gospel. The literary question was raised by Bultmann in his seminal article for the Gunkel Festschrift in 1923: 'Up to what point is the pre-existent Logos the subject of the passage, and what point is he succeeded by the historical Jesus?' Bultmann's solution is to see the Prologue as a pre-Christian Gnostic hymn, stemming from Baptist circles and subsequently taken over by the evangelist and adapted to form the opening of the Gospel. The second question belongs to the history of religions. The last part of the chapter examines whether the Prologue is a myth, history, or theology.

Keywords: Bultmann, literary question, Prologue, Logos, history of religion, myth, theology, Gnostic hymn

There are two fundamental questions concerning the Prologue of John's Gospel, one literary, the other historical. The literary question was raised by Bultmann in his seminal article for the Gunkel Festschrift of 1923: 'Up to what point is the pre-existent Logos the subject of the passage, and at what point is he succeeded by the historical Jesus?'¹ The commentators, remarks Bultmann, disagree on the answer to this question, and this disagreement has persisted. For Bultmann the main difficulty arises from the fact that although v. 14 offers the first *explicit* statement of the Incarnation, the Christian reader cannot but take vv. 10f. as an allusion to the life of Jesus, and consequently also v. 5 (which is parallel to it) and probably v. 4 also. Bultmann's solution was to see the Prologue as a pre-Christian Gnostic hymn, stemming from Baptist circles and subsequently taken

over by the evangelist and adapted to form the opening of the Gospel. There have been many different answers since.²

The second question belongs to the history of religions. Bultmann expressed it in terms of myth, specifically the origin and function of the myth of pre-existence. This formulation was consistent with his belief that the origin of the Prologue was pre-Christian. I prefer to ask directly what a study of the Jewish wisdom tradition can tell us about the meaning of the Prologue.

These two questions are interdependent, and it might be thought best to begin, as Bultmann did, by offering a tentative solution to the literary question. I adopt the alternative course, in the belief that there is still something fresh to be learned from the wisdom literature about the way the Prologue is to be read. First, though, I think it advisable to summarize my own methodological assumptions:

- (p.6)** 1. Behind the Prologue there was a written text or *Vorlage*. This is commonly called a 'hymn', a term which I adopt without committing myself to any form-critical position it may suggest. This text was adapted to serve as the introduction of what we now know as the Fourth Gospel.
2. The adaptation was made by inserting vv. 6–8 and v. 15 into the text, and possibly making further additions and/or alterations as well, I make no assumptions about these; but I shall argue that v. 14 did belong to the *Vorlage*.
3. Any exegesis that depends upon a precisely accurate reconstruction of the *Vorlage* is open to suspicion. This is not because such a reconstruction would be unhelpful, but because it is virtually unattainable. Not one of the many different versions that have been proposed compels assent, and few are immune from the charge of special pleading.³ In general most of the purely stylistic arguments advanced in favour of one version or other of the hymn are too subjective to command a wide following.
4. The first place to look for the source of any particular element in the Fourth Gospel is in the Jewish Christianity where the Gospel took its rise. In this case the Jewish wisdom tradition that has long been acknowledged to have influenced, directly or indirectly, the author of the hymn, is still the best place to start.⁴
5. I do *not* assume that the hymn was composed before the body of the Gospel. Rather I think it likely that it was written at a time when the composition of the Gospel was well under way. But I shall not be arguing this point here.

1. The History-of-Religions Question

We do not need to ask from what source the author of the hymn derived his ideas, for both the general theme and the specific **(p.7)** details are abundantly illustrated in the wisdom tradition.⁵ Rather we have to ask what there was in the

tradition which could have stimulated his own imaginative response: what precisely did he take from it? (There is a further question that may be asked, in the wake of Martyn⁶ and Meeks,⁷ concerning the relevance of the tradition to the life of the Johannine community: this may be deferred till later.)

For our purposes the most important general feature of the tradition is the combination of two initially distinct types of wisdom, which I shall call the accessible and the remote. Bultmann saw in the Prologue a contradiction between what he called 'the Logos as an immanent cognitive power and as the bearer of revelation',⁸ adding that so far from being confined to the Prologue, this contradiction is a presupposition of all Jewish wisdom, literature. I am suspicious of the notion of wisdom as an immanent force, and feel that 'tension' is a more appropriate term than 'contradiction'. But that there is a constant tension or at least a contrast between the accessible and the remote seems beyond question.

It is unnecessary here to venture into the tangled thicket surrounding the question of the distant origins of Israel's wisdom tradition. Traces of the early association of חכמה with skills and crafts persist as late as Ben Sira, who says of the farmer as well as of the engraver, the smith, and the potter: ἑκαστος ἐέν τῷ ἔργῳ αὐτοῦ σοφίζεται 'each of them is skilled in his own craft' (38: 31). If one were to take I *Enoch* seriously even the skills of the smith and the beautician (not just sorcery and astronomy) would have to be numbered among 'the eternal secrets which were made in heaven' (9: 6); but at least in the canonical books the contrast between the available and the remote forms of wisdom is quite **(p. 8)** plain. Typical of available wisdom are the sensible observations of Prov, 25–9, a collection which opens by making the very point I wish to establish here: 'it is the glory of God to conceal things, but the glory of kings is to search things out' (Prov. 25: 2), The maxims that follow are no doubt to be seen as typical examples of the results of the king's (in the case, Solomon's) researches, the first of which, piquantly, concerns his own inscrutability.

The most outstanding account of remote wisdom conies in Job 28, a profound poem on the essential mysteriousness and inaccessibility of חכמה/בִּינָה conceived somehow as immanent in creation. Its conclusion is surprising: 'Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding' (v. 28). Commentators are surely right to see this final verse as a later addition: what was utterly beyond man's reach is suddenly transformed into something not just available but commendable, not just possible but necessary. There is, however, no real attempt here to reconcile the two conceptions: the poem is left untouched, with its mystery undiminished by the rather crude counter-assertion added at the end.

This assertion is certainly the orthodox answer to the question how to set about acquiring wisdom. This may be why an alternative (and no doubt earlier) answer is omitted by the LXX translator: 'The beginning of wisdom is this: Get (קִיָּה) wisdom; and whatever you get, get understanding' (Prov. 4: 7).⁹ But in both cases wisdom/understanding is portrayed as accessible, directly available to anyone who sets about obtaining it in the right way.

In one respect Job 28, with its unexpected ending, is typical of much of the literature as it has been transmitted; for the contrast between the accessible and the remote appears quite frequently, occasionally underlined, yet usually presented in such a way as to leave the resolution open. It occurs for instance even more startlingly in a passage in Proverbs where the same pair of terms, חכמה/חבונה is used on the one hand to proclaim, 'Happy the man who finds wisdom, and the man who gets understanding (3: 13), (p.9) and on the other to assert that 'the Lord by wisdom founded the earth; by understanding he established the heavens' (3; 19).¹⁰

In the last two chapters of the same collection (Pro. 8-9), wisdom/understanding is personified in two strangely contrasting ways. First, we recognize the brash, importunate teacher, first met in Prov. 1: 29 ff., who takes her stand on the heights beside the way and at the entrance of the gates (Prov. 8: 1-21), and then, without warning, as if the two figures were identical, we are confronted with the favourite of Yahweh,¹¹ whom he acquired or engendered¹² at the beginning of his dominion. The LXX translator shows his awareness of the abrupt switch by inserting a transitional verse of his own at this point: *ἐὰν ἀναγγείλω ὑμῖν τὰ καθ'*

ἡμέραν γινόμενα, μνημονεύσω τὰ ἐξ αἰῶνος ἀριθμῆσαι:

: 'If I explain everyday things to you, I will (also) remind you to reckon the things of eternity' (8; 21a). The contrast between the quotidian and the eternal is, equally a contrast between the accessible and the remote. One might observe that there is an eternal or at least a timeless quality about the quotidian as well: 'there is nothing new under the sun' (Qoh. 1: 9). Wisdom literature delves into the inexhaustible fund of human experience.

Prov. 8: 22-31 is the earliest passage in the Bible to show a real affinity with the Johannine Prologue. But apart from the shared reference to 'the beginning' of Genesis, the affinity is easier to spot than to define. The poem is put in the mouth of Wisdom, a feminine presence never actually named. She begins by asserting, ambiguously, her close relationship with Yahweh, who has made her peculiarly his own. She has come into existence (begotten, not made?) before the world, witnesses its ordered making, and then, chosen by Yahweh as his regular companion (even playmate), concludes by expressing her delight in the human race. She resembles Puck, ready to 'put a girdle round about the earth', or Ariel, dancing attendance upon Prospero, and the commentators rarely do

justice to her elusive gaiety. Does she actually descend to **(p.10)** earth, to play in God's world? Or does v. 31 refer, as McKane thinks, to 'the delightful confidences and reminiscences which Wisdom can share with Yahweh, just because she saw the world coming into existence'?¹³ It is hard to be sure. Certainly the **יום יום** and **בכל-שעה** of v. 30 forbid us to pinpoint her activity. There is something quotidian as well as eternal about her. Her role is to illuminate the creative work of Yahweh, to tell the men to whom, she speaks, subtly and indirectly, of *his* attitudes; she reveals a mystery, but says no more *about* it than what is known already. To borrow a phrase of Bultmann, she reveals no more than that she is the revealer.

What is missing from all early personifications of wisdom is any sense of history. Neither the quotidian nor the eternal has a *career*, which is why it is probably a mistake to speak of the personified wisdom of Proverbs 8 in terms of myth. And as long as the two kinds of wisdom, accessible and remote, remain simply contiguous, the contrast between them felt but not discussed and not resolved, there will be no history. History belongs, though in different ways, not to wisdom but to the law and the prophets. How is the remote made accessible, and what happens when it is?

To answer this question it is helpful to put the contrast in a different way. Available wisdom, while it may be taught, is essentially a matter of *experience*. Remote wisdom, if it is to be brought within man's grasp, has to be *revealed*.

In post-exilic Judah the prevailing orthodoxy, that of the deuteronomists, which was to persist into Judaism, insisted that *the* object of revelation was the law, the Torah. Alternative revelations, like the one reprimanded (but none the less described) in the first section of I *Enoch*, were unacceptable to this school, which may be why there is so little reference to them in the canonical books. A practical wisdom is of course admissible. Solomon prays for a receptive mind (**לב שמע**) 'to discern between good and evil' (a tiny essay in demythologization); and his prayer is granted by the bestowal of a wise and understanding mind (**לב חכם ונבון**) (1 Kings 3: 9, 1.2). But there is no mystery here.

The threat to orthodoxy, as one may fairly put it, was felt to come from a remote wisdom irreducible to the kind of practical *φρόνησις* exhibited by Solomon. It is illustrated in a passage from Proverbs which opens with a verse of such obscurity that it has **(p.11)** left the commentators baffled ('hardly a glimmer of light', says McKane).¹⁴ There has clearly been, some tinkering with the text here, which continues, 'I have not learned wisdom, nor have I knowledge of the Holy Ones.'¹⁵ There follows a sardonic riddle:

Who has ascended to heaven and come down?
Who has gathered the wind in his fists?
Who has wrapped up the waters in a garment?
Who has established all the ends of the earth?

What is his name, and what is his son's name?

Surely you know!

(Prov. 30: 1–4)

‘Surely you know’ implies ‘of course you don’t know’, for here are mysteries beyond human ken, mysteries which exert a fascination that Deuteronomy, in what appears to be a subsequent insertion into an already late text, is anxious to dispel: ‘For this commandment which I command you this day is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say, “Who will go up for us to heaven, and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?” Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, “Who will go over the sea for us, and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?” But the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it’ (Deut. 30: 11–14).

The remote and inaccessible wisdom (though not named as such) is thus swallowed up by the law, rendered harmless by proximity, a procedure which nicely coheres with the direct identification (in Deut. 4: 6, another late passage) of ‘your’ wisdom with the law, and clearly foreshadows Baruch and Ben Sira.¹⁶

(p.12) Baruch, in a profound poem (3: 9–4: 4) with an obvious indebtedness to Job 28, goes a long way towards restoring the sense of mystery banished in Deuteronomy. He is deeply aware of the elusiveness of wisdom (*φρόνησις* used in synonymous parallelism with *σοφία*, *σύνεσις* and *ἐπιστήμη*) ‘Who has gone up to heaven, and taken her, and brought her down from the clouds? Who has gone over the sea, and found her, and will buy her for pure gold? No one knows the way to her or has given thought to her path’ (3: 29–31). Only God, who knows the entire universe (*τάπαντα*), is said to have found her by his understanding (*τῇ συνησεὶ αὐτοῦ*, v. 32) and again: *ἐξεύρεν πᾶσαν ὁδὸν ἐπιστήμης* (v. 36). Yet Israel at least had no need to set out on this search, having already been reproached for deserting ‘the fountain of wisdom’ (3: 12). Had she only walked in the way of God she could have dwelt in peace for ever (3: 13) Thus wisdom is at once mysterious and ready to hand. The author appears to chide Israel for failing to recognize the gift that was hers alone: for God ‘gave her to Jacob his servant and to Israel whom he loved—afterward she appeared upon earth and lived among men’ (3: 36f.). Then comes the explicit identification: *αὕτη ἡ βίβλος τῶν προσταγμάτων τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ ὁ νόμος ὁ ὑπάρχων εἰς αἰῶνα*: ‘she is the book of the commandments of God, and the law that endures for ever’ (4: 1). Wisdom now has a history, but she has also invested the law with her own eternity.

At the beginning of the poem wisdom (*φρόνησις*) is identified with the *ἐντολαὶ ζωῆς*; and this theme now reappears: all those who hold fast to her will live (4: 1), and Jacob is urged to ‘walk towards the shining of the light’ (4: 2).

Ben Sira opens his work with a phrase that strikingly anticipates the Prologue: 'All wisdom comes from Yahweh, and has been with him from all eternity' (1: 1).¹⁷ But in spite of his recognition that there are still unanswerable mysteries in the universe his book is full of a sense of the *availability* of wisdom. The mystery has been drained of all its challenge: man's inability to plumb the depths of wisdom no longer matters, since somehow or other wisdom, through the munificence of the creator, pervades the created **(p.13)** universe and in some unspecified way is made available to 'all flesh' (1: 10), but particularly to those who show due reverence and respect for their (and her) creator. The author asks, in the riddling manner of earlier sages, 'the root of wisdom, to whom has it been revealed?' (1: 6), but his own answer is all too easy: 'The root of wisdom is to fear the Lord' (1: 20). Indeed the fear of the Lord is not just the beginning of wisdom (1: 14) as it used to be, but its full measure (1: 16) and its crown (1: 18). If you want wisdom you must keep the commandments, 'and the Lord will supply it to you' (1: 26). From being a spontaneous outpouring (1: 9), the gift of wisdom comes to be seen as conditional upon right behaviour. There is nothing here a deuteronomist could quarrel with: 'For the fear of the Lord is wisdom and instruction, and he delights in fidelity and meekness' (1: 27). Furthermore, the unsearchable Wisdom of the opening paragraph is now pictured as owning (or perhaps simply identified with) a store of wise sayings (*παραβολαὶ ἐπιστήμης*: 1: 25), presumably of a kind familiar to any student of the law (cf. 39: 3). As Sira remarks later, 'Hidden wisdom and unseen treasure, what advantage is there in either of them?' (20: 30).

Of the two figures of wisdom, the mysterious and the available, it is then the latter who dominates this work (cf. 4: 11–19; 6: 18–31; 14: 20–15: 8).¹⁸ The former, the companion of God, vanishes after the first few verses, not to reappear until the great hymn of ch. 24, undoubtedly the high point of the book. Even so, the central figure of this grand poem, which owes much to Proverbs 8, is only a distant relative of Yahweh's playful darling. She speaks of her search for a resting-place on earth, wondering 'in whose territory (*κληρονομία*) I might lodge' (v. 7). (Smend thinks that ἀνλίζεσθαι possibly reflects an original Hebrew לָשׁוּב.) Then 'my creator assigned a place for my tent (*σκηνή*) and said, "Make your dwelling (*κατασκήνωσον*) in Jacob"' (v. 8). The next stanza opens with a reference to the portion (*μέρος*) and inheritance (*κληρονομία*) of God,¹⁹ which is when wisdom 'took root' (v. 12); and the fifth stanza, which is parallel to the third,²⁰ establishes the identity of 'all **(p.14)** these things' (i.e. the fruits of the tree of wisdom) with 'the book of the covenant of the Most High God, the law which Moses commanded us as an inheritance (*κληρονομία*) for the congregations of Jacob' (v. 23). The author is speaking in his own voice here, but though he reaffirms the unsearchability of wisdom, he is really talking about the law.²¹ For all the profundity of the thought and the beauty of the imagery it is hard to rid oneself of the impression that wisdom has been domesticated in this poem.

The Book of Wisdom, in which all the main themes of the tradition coalesce in a remarkable way, falls into two parts, 1:1–11: 1 and 11: 2–19; 22, of which the second takes up and extends the midrashic section with which the first part closes (10: 1–11: 1).

In the first half of ch. 6 the author is clearly appealing to the old tradition of Proverbs 1–9 whereby Wisdom goes out of her way to make herself accessible: ‘She hastens to make herself known to those who desire her. He who rises early to seek her will have no difficulty, for he will find her sitting at his gates (πάρεδρον τῶν πυλῶν αὐτοῦ)...because she goes about seeking those who are worthy of her and she graciously appears to them in their paths, and meets them in every thought’ (6; 13–16).

With another conscious reference to an old tradition, the author continues by speaking of the beginning of wisdom: ‘For the beginning of wisdom (ἀρχὴ γὰρ αὐτῆς) is the most genuine desire for instruction, and concern for instruction is love of her’ (6: 17; cf. Prov. 4: 7).

But then comes the strange promise: ‘I will tell you what wisdom is and how she came to be (πῶς ἐγένετο), and I will hide no secrets (μυστήρια) from you, but will trace her course from the beginning of creation (ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς γενέσεως). Here we have to do with a very different beginning and, one might think, with a very different kind of wisdom. [The author plays upon the term ἀρχὴ γενέσεως a little further on to refer to human conception and birth: ‘no king has had a different ἀρχὴ γενέσεως’ (from that of the rest of mankind): 7: 5.]

Having thus announced his intention to recount the genesis of wisdom, Greek Solomon tells instead how understanding and the **(p.15)** spirit of wisdom were bestowed upon him personally in answer to a prayer—but his version of the prayer (cf. 1 Kings 3: 6–9) is held over until ch. 9. Throughout these chapters, in fact, supplication alternates with description. No biblical writer comes as close as this author to seeing wisdom as divine; ‘she is a breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the almighty’ (7: 25). Yet we are never allowed to forget that she is in God’s gift; ‘give me the wisdom that sits by thy throne (τῶν σῶν θρόνων πάρεδρον)’ (9: 4). Nor can we any longer distinguish the intimate of God from the teacher of men. Seated by the throne of God or by the city gates (πάρεδρος is used in both cases) she is equally at home. The two figures of Proverbs 8 at last merge into one: ‘With thee is wisdom, who knows thy works and was present when thou didst make the world...Send her forth from the holy heavens...that she may be with me and toil, and that I may learn what is pleasing to thee’ (9: 9–10).

Nevertheless Greek Solomon’s most significant and original contribution to the concept of wisdom, from our point of view, lies in the succinct comment with which he concludes his prayer: ‘men were taught what pleases thee, *and were*

saved by wisdom' (9: 18). The following chapter is a series of brilliant vignettes wherein wisdom is shown to have watched over the great men of Genesis, from Adam to Joseph, and to have planned and executed the crossing of the Red Sea.

With this portrayal of wisdom as the active agent in salvation history (here if anywhere that overworked term receives a proper application), the stage is finally set for her transformation into the Johannine Logos.

There is, however, one more passage demanding consideration, one which seems to mirror the career of the Logos particularly closely: 'Wisdom went out in order to dwell among the sons of men, but did not find a dwelling; wisdom returned to her place and took her seat in the midst of the angels' (1 *Enoch* 42: 1-2).

Coming as it does bereft of any contextual clues in a part of the book (the Parables) that has been suspected of Christian interference, this passage is not easy to handle. It looks like a deliberate contradiction of Baruch and Sirach: it was not wisdom but iniquity, so the passage continues, who on leaving her chambers 'found those whom she did not seek...and dwelt among them...like dew on parched ground' (42: 3). In the preceding section (**p.16**) Enoch has offered a view of wisdom as a revelation of mysteries *outside the law*, indeed a revelation in which wisdom herself could be virtually identified with iniquity, since in so far as they were transmitted by heavenly beings in revolt against God, these secrets were themselves the cause of human corruption; 'See then what Azazel has done, how he has taught all iniquity on the earth and revealed the eternal secrets which were made in heaven' (9: 6). The true, pure wisdom, contrary to the official teaching of orthodox writers like Ben Sira, did *not* find a home among men, and remained in heaven 'In the midst of the angels': wisdom 'does not turn away *from your throne*, nor from your presence' (84: 3).

This fact is not without significance, for it indicates that the milieu in which the Prologue took its rise cannot be identified *tout court* with the scribal school of thought represented most ably by Ben Sira but foreshadowed as early as Deuteronomy and the spurious conclusion to Job's great hymn. There were alternative (and opposing) views about wisdom held by at least some Jewish thinkers, and these are closer in certain respects to the spirit of the Prologue which, while using terminology highly reminiscent of Ben Sira, resists any suggestion that the wisdom who finally found a home on earth was to be identified with the Torah. Even if 1 *Enoch* 42 were to prove to be a late reflection upon the Enochic tradition, it is the same *kind* of summary development that we find in the Prologue, where the Logos is not just a masculine surrogate of the feminine Wisdom but a conscious rival of the Law in his claim to be the unique vehicle of revelation and salvation. The writer of the Prologue, to be sure, unlike Enoch, takes a positive view of this alternative revelation: to disclose 'the eternal secrets which were made in heaven', far from being the work of a malign demon, was the proper function of Jesus Christ. What he disclosed or rather expounded

(ἐξηνήσατο) was God himself, something which he could not have done unless he had been not just *πρὸς τὸν θεόν* but actually identified with God in a way left undefined.

This means that although in some respects, as Rendel Harris argued, the Prologue is the natural successor of the wisdom tradition, it stems from a part of that tradition which exhibits no tendency to domesticate Wisdom and attenuate her mystery. Moreover, if the Logos *did* find a home among men, it was not where he might naturally have been expected to settle ('his own received him not'), and his eventual tabernacling is recorded by **(p.17)** the writer with some amazement. How the expression of this amazement is prepared and articulated will be discussed in the second part of this chapter.

This conclusion well accords with the dissociation between Christ and Torah at the end of the Prologue.²² Whether or not v. 17 was part of the original *Vorlage*, it seems likely that this dissociation marks a polemical attitude on the writer's part (though of course the Torah continues to be seen itself a *χάρις* a gift of God, and there is no hint of the kind of aggressiveness prominent in the third chapter of Galatians). If John has any real connection with *Enoch* (and how could this be shown?), he takes a stand against the pessimistic view of 1 *Enoch* 42 that it was only iniquity who found a dwelling-place on earth. Paradoxically, in spite of his opposition to deuteronomistic orthodoxy, the author of the Prologue is confident that the mysterious wisdom of the old tradition *did* become accessible to men, and that the mystery was revealed—but not encapsulated in a written law, and not remaining on earth for ever in a directly tangible form.

2. The Literary Question

Turning back to the literary problem, the *meaning* of the text, we find that once again, as so often, Bultmann has put his finger on the key question. At what point does the hymn begin to refer to Jesus? The striking differences of opinion among the commentators²³ reflect, I suggest, a fundamental ambiguity *in the text itself*, and I therefore propose to approach Bultmann's question by testing two hypotheses:

(a) In the Prologue, at least as far as v. 14 we are faced with nothing more or less than a late example, almost certainly Christian, of the traditional Jewish speculation on the theme of Wisdom. The Prologue originated, in other words, as a hymn in praise of Wisdom.

(b) The theme as well as the treatment is specifically Christian. From start to finish the Prologue is a hymn to the Incarnate **(p.18)** Word, properly and accurately summed up as 'the Word was made flesh'.

On the first hypothesis v. 14 represents a fresh and quite remarkable insight; on the second it is simply the final variant of the theme.

This approach has been anticipated to some extent by C. H. Dodd, who also attempts a double analysis, first from the perspective of what he calls ‘the cosmical Logos’, and secondly from that of ‘the Logos incarnate’.²⁴ He carries this programme through with characteristic care and insight, but he leans too heavily on Hellenistic parallels and his solution ultimately fails to convince. Nevertheless, it scarcely deserves the high-handed treatment it receives at the hands of Käsemann, who dismisses it summarily and without argument as ‘extremely dialectical’.²⁵ Barnabas Lindars follows Dodd in seeing in the paragraph leading up to the statement of the Incarnation ‘two levels of meaning running along parallel lines’.²⁶ But he fails to pursue the implications of this view.

(a) A Wisdom hymn?

Clearly the hypothesis that we are dealing with a Wisdom hymn depends upon the excision, or rather bracketing, of vv. 6–8. For there can be no doubt that with these verses included the Prologue is dealing with the Incarnate Word at least from v. 9 on. But provided that all reference to the Baptist is excluded, and the difficult ἐρχόμενον εἰς τὸν κόσμον of v. 9 either regarded as an editorial insertion or else taken with ἄνθρωπον,²⁷ then there is nothing which does not fit in admirably with the hypothesis that the hymn is a Christian version of a traditional Wisdom theme.

Here we must briefly consider an important passage in the Dead **(p.19)** Sea Scrolls (IQS II: II) whose significance is generally over-looked. Cited by Bultmann without comment as a parallel to John 1: 3,²⁸ it is frequently quoted but seldom fruitfully. The first to draw attention to what I believe to be its real significance was T. E. Pollard,²⁹ who has been followed by P. Lamarche³⁰ and I. de la Potterie.³¹ Because of the importance of their suggestions I propose to summarize their strongest arguments here and to add one or two of my own.

Vermes translates the passage in question as follows:

All things came to pass (נָדָה) by His knowledge,
He establishes all things by His design
And without Him nothing is done (עָשָׂה).³²

As Pollard points out, the context of this passage in *The Manual of Discipline* ‘has no reference to creation, but rather to the doctrine prominent in the Scrolls, that God is in control of everything, and particularly of human destiny’.³³ Raymond Brown quotes the passage, but glosses the final ‘Is done’ with ‘is made’ in order to bring it in line with the traditional interpretation.³⁴ But at least the niph’al of נָדָה, as Pollard points out, is not naturally rendered by a verb expressing creation, an idea which in any case is foreign to the context.

More significantly, the verb γίνεσθαι, without contextual support such as it finds in Genesis I, does not naturally refer to creation either. Used regularly in the sense of ‘happen’ or ‘come to pass’, it is a verb that corresponds well to the niph’al of הִיָּח, which, as Pollard notes, is the form used by Delitzsch in his Hebrew translation of the Prologue. It is worth adding too that this is how the **(p.20)** early Syriac translators understood it.³⁵ Lamarche also refers to a passage from the Gospel of Truth: ‘Nothing happens without him (viz. the Logos), nor does anything happen without the Father's will’ (37: 21). In this passage the Coptic is variously rendered ‘happens’ or ‘comes into being’, but the majority of translators opt for the former alternative, which, it must be said, is favoured by the context.³⁶ The latter rendering has clearly been influenced by the standard interpretations of the Prologue, itself the starting-point of the Gnostic commentary.

What about πάντα? De la Potterie argues that in New Testament times the regular expression for the created universe was τὰ πάντα. This is true, not just of the NT, but also, overwhelmingly, of the LXX.³⁷ The anarthrous form is common in the Johannine writings, **(p.21)** but there is no parallel in the sense required by the traditional view. All of which suggests that the phrase from Col. 1: 16, ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ ἐκτίσθη τὰ πάντα (‘because the universe was created in him’), far from being a genuine parallel, has probably contributed towards a continuing misinterpretation.

To these arguments should be added the extraordinary difficulty, not to say impossibility, of finding a satisfactory sense for the following verse without resorting to the desperate expedient of putting the stop after ὃ γέγονεν, a punctuation which is grammatically very awkward and is attested by none of the early witnesses.³⁸ For if we read ὃ γέγονεν ἐν αὐτῷ ζωὴ ἦν, taking ὃ γέγονεν to refer to the created world, and ἐν αὐτῷ, as it surely must on this reading, to the Logos, then, as Schnackenburg so pertinently enquires, ‘what kind of life is that?’³⁹ The following sentence locates ζωὴ firmly in the realm of spiritual revelation (it is identified with φῶς); but v. 3 then remains utterly obscure. Bultmann's solution is certainly too Procrustean to be satisfactory.⁴⁰ Schnackenburg himself, like many of the earliest commentators, abandons the struggle and opts, somewhat gingerly, for the alternative punctuation.

For all these reasons it is necessary to reassess the role of the **(p.22)** Logos in the Prologue, possibly in the direction already indicated in the *Manual of Discipline*. As Lamarche says, ‘in this sentence—so close to John 1: 3—what takes the place of the Johannine Logos is the divine plan’ (מחשבה).⁴¹ Lamarche cites numerous examples of מחשבה in the sense of ‘the thoughts’ or ‘the plans’ of God.⁴² And he argues that they furnish us with a very close conceptual parallel to the idea of the Logos that pervades the Prologue. For although the word itself occurs only three times, the whole passage is filled with the sense of the divine

plan—which is in point of fact one of the meanings of the Hebrew דבר. And this is a meaning rendered more naturally by λόγος than by σοφία.

More important than any of the passages cited by Lamarche is the famous epilogue to the prophecy of Second Isaiah:

For as the heavens are higher than the earth
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts (מחשבות) than your thoughts

(Isa. 55: 8–9)

which is directly followed by the declaration concerning ‘every word (דבר) that goes forth from my mouth’, a declaration that harks back to the same author's prologue: ‘the word of the Lord abides for ever’ (Isa. 40: 8). The whole of the prophet's message is bracketed by these two statements concerning the word of God,⁴³ which may fairly be said therefore to signify the divine plan. Second Isaiah is anxious to promulgate, a plan which involves the super-imposition of creation upon history.

Much later, in Wisdom 18, the role of Sophia is taken over by the Logos. In this extended meditation upon the episode of the slaying of the first-born in Egypt, God's instrument is, instead of Sophia, his ‘all-powerful word’, which ‘leaped from the royal throne into the midst of the land which was doomed’ (Wisd. 18: 15).

All this supports the contention that λόγος in the Prologue is more than utterance (λόγος προφορικός) and more than thought (λόγος ἐνδιάθετος): it is the plan of God, in a meaning closely related to, if not identical with Col. 1: 25, where τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ stands in apposition to τὸ μυστήριον τὸ ἀποκρυμμένον ἀπὸ τῶν αἰώνων καὶ ἀπὸ τῶν γενεῶν (‘the mystery hidden for ages and generations’).

How then are the opening verses of the Prologue to be interpreted? **(p.23)**

From the very beginning God has his plan close to him, and his plan was a facet of his divinity. All human history, every single thing that has ever happened, took place through the mediation of the Logos, but what has come to pass *in* him (i.e. the special events of God's intervention on behalf of his people), this was life, a special life that was God's prerogative to bestow, a life that was also light—illumination and revelation. The contrast here is similar to that lying behind Sir. 1: 10: ‘She (wisdom) dwells with all flesh according to his gift, and he supplied her to those who love him.’ On this interpretation v. 4 alludes to the tradition most fully represented in Wisdom 10, which describes Wisdom's share in all the main events of Israel's history from Adam to the Exodus. The living history of this small nation, the history, that is, in which the Logos is most immediately involved (ἐν αὐτῷ), is at the same time a revelation for all mankind (cf. Isa. 49:

6). The Logos, guiding and controlling the destiny of Israel (this is after all God's true design) is present not just as its life but as the bearer of God's light. There is still something mysterious about the passage. Although the images are Johannine, they are articulated in a non-Johannine way. In the Gospel life is the reward and the consequence of welcoming the light. Here it is the other way round: life comes first and is identified with light. As Strack–Billerbeck observes, this is also the reverse of the regular rabbinical view that 'the light is the life of humankind'.⁴⁴

The following verse (5) speaks of the light of men that shines in all the God-directed events of history right up to the new dawn of Christianity. But here for the first time a choice is involved: human beings do not have to welcome the shining. for the most part, as Israel's history shows, they do not, and so there is a darkness, a night (*σκοτία*), and although the darkness does not succeed in mastering or overcoming the light, neither is the darkness entirely dispelled.

As the hymn continues, the *σκοτία* is defined more closely. (Bultmann and Käsemann both rightly insist upon the parallelism between v. 5 and vv. 10–11.) It is first of all identified as *ὁ κόσμος* and then, even more precisely, as *τὰ ἴδια*. There is no question of temporal succession here: the Greek is quite plain: *ἦν ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ* (p.24) —the Logos does not enter the world at this point, it is already there. The movement is one of greater precision, sharper focus.

But what is meant by *δι' αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο* (v. 10)? At first sight it may seem perverse to deny that here at any rate there is a direct reference to creation. But *κόσμος* in the Gospel (unless exceptionally in ch. 17) does not mean the cosmos, it means the world of men, and often enough of those men who, confronted with the light, stubbornly keep their eyes shut. Käsemann's insistence upon the cosmological slant at this point⁴⁵ (which he also reads into the Gospel as a whole) is supported by neither argument nor evidence. Lamarche suggests that the verse is treating 'of the world of men which has come about in history',⁴⁶ or even, adds de la Potterie, 'the group of men which has received the light of revelation through him'.⁴⁷ On the other hand, there is no justification for Baldensperger's view (In which he is followed by Lamarche) that *ὁ κόσμος* represents the Greek world, *τὰ ἴδια* the Jewish. The evangelist nowhere makes this distinction (indeed in ch. 15 at least, *ὁ κόσμος* must refer primarily to the Jews) and there is no need to assume that it is drawn here. Rather we have a typical example of Hebrew poetic parallelism. In its first two occurrences in v. 10, *κόσμος* clearly corresponds to *τὰ ἴδια*: it is the world as the realm of the revealing Word; in its third occurrence it corresponds to *οἱ ἴδιοι*: it is the world of those men who, in their sullen hebetude, refuse to see the light. It is important to recognize that *τὰ ἴδια* (the home of the Logos) is not outside the *κόσμος* but within it (Judaea, Jerusalem, or even the Temple).

Up to this point, although the material of the hymn is human history, the perspective adopted has been atemporal, or almost so. Thus ὁ γέγονεν ἐν αὐτῷ certainly marks an advance upon πάντα δι' αὐτοῦ; but the advance is one of greater intensity and closer definition, like a camera zooming in on a relatively restricted section of the large scene it has hitherto been surveying from afar. The **(p.25)** present tense of φαίνειν in v. 5 shows that the revelatory role of the Logos in human history involves one continuous uninterrupted activity. Similarly, if vv. 10–11 do not actually carry the action further, there is no need on that account to reject them (as W. Schmithals does)⁴⁸ as repetitious and redundant. For they too move in the direction of greater precision and intensity.

There is nothing that has been said of the Logos up to this point which could not equally have been asserted of Wisdom, even if, as I have tried to show, some of the overtones of the hymn are most suitably carried by the term λόγος. And this is equally true of the two following verses (12–13), for the grim record of Israel's rejection of the light is offset by the persistent tradition of the Remnant. Dodd has demonstrated how the 'children of God' theme of v. 12 can be matched in the Old Testament.⁴⁹

No doubt the language here echoes the thought-world of the Gospel. This is best explained if the author of the original hymn was a member of the Johannine community and familiar with the themes of light, life, world, child of God, and so on. But it is illuminating to regard his composition first of all from the perspective of Jewish wisdom.

Raymond Brown objects at this point: 'It seems incredible that in a hymn coming out of Johannine circles the ability to become a child of God would have been explained in another way than in terms of having been begotten from above by the Spirit of Jesus.'⁵⁰ But surely the real entrance to life in the Fourth Gospel is the acceptance of revelation in faith, which is precisely the point being made in v. 13. Moreover, if we understand the central theme of the hymn to be *revelation* and accept that it emanated from Johannine circles, then the revelation of Jesus must have been seen as the last and definitive manifestation of the shining of the light, a shining which has no end. Such a vision implies that the life and teaching of Jesus are the climax of the divine plan, but it does not yet identify the person of Jesus with the plan: in theory he could be no more than the last of the prophets sent out by Wisdom (cf. Luke **(p.26)** 11: 49),⁵¹ a representative of Wisdom in the same simple sense as all the prophets who had preceded him. Upon those who, unlike the majority, welcomed his message, God bestowed the right to become his children.

One can see how on this view v. 14 expresses an altogether novel insight, splendid in its implications: the plan of God has actually taken flesh and Wisdom has pitched her tent among men. Far from being a pale variant upon an already

established theme, as Käsemann suggests, the *καὶ ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο*, on this interpretation, rings out as a marvellously cogent conclusion to the hymn.

Nevertheless the objections against this hypothesis, if it is taken in isolation, are formidable. It is not just that the language is redolent of the preoccupations of the Johannine community: *φῶς, σκοτία, ζωή, κόσμος, πιστεύειν, τέκνα θεοῦ*. The theme too, the opposition of darkness and light seen in terms of the failure of the Logos (or the light) to receive a welcome from his own people—this theme is present throughout the whole Gospel. And surely no one from the Johannine circle, even someone coming across the hymn for the first time, would fail to make the identification, very early on, between the Logos that is light and the Christ that is truth. So we are led to a consideration of the alternative hypothesis, not however as an alternative, but as a dialectical enrichment.

(b) A hymn to the Incarnate Word?

The view of the Prologue as a hymn to the *incarnate* Word is most fully and effectively sustained by Lamarche. Taking both occurrences of *γίνεσθαι* in v. 3 as reference to history rather than to creation, he easily evades the kind of difficulty which, as we have seen, forced Schnackenburg to adopt the alternative punctuation. ‘The word of God,’ writes Lamarche, ‘before being the revelation of the mystery was actually an inner word, hidden mystery, divine plan.’⁵² So he is able to take *ὃ γέγονεν ἐν αὐτῷ* as ‘what came about in him’, and to find in these words an allusion to all that has been accomplished in Jesus: ‘his whole earthly life, especially his death, resurrection, and glorification’. The contrast between *δι’ αὐτοῦ* and *ἐν αὐτῷ* is fully explained: ‘Everything that has taken place (p.27) through his mediation (*δι’ αὐτοῦ*) has played its part in the realization of the divine plan, but it is only by the events that have taken place directly through and in him (*ἐν αὐτῷ*), that is to say in Jesus Christ, that the plan of salvation has been accomplished.’⁵³

For Lamarche (and it is difficult to deny the attractiveness or indeed the cogency of this interpretation) the whole hymn is concerned with revelation rather than with cosmology. The light specifically mentioned in v. 4 is already implied in what precedes, and the darkness that follows is easily and directly recognized as a symbol of the blindness of mankind to the light which, properly and rightfully, is their enlightenment. The rejection of the proffered revelation by the world in general (v. 10) and the Jews in particular (v. 11) is too well attested elsewhere to require further comment. Only the favoured few, those who by according their faith have received the right to become children of God, have slipped away out of the sinister domain John calls *ἡ σκοτία*. And so vv. 12–13 form an effective conclusion to the story.

But how, on this hypothesis, are we to account for v. 14? Lamarche, who proposes a chiasmic structure of the Prologue somewhat resembling that of Boismard,⁵⁴ displaces this verse from the centre: it corresponds, he believes, to

v. 9, which is another way of expressing the Incarnation (taking ἐρχόμενον with φῶς). But Lamarche's view depends upon an untenable exegesis of vv. 11–12,⁵⁵ and so we are obliged to confront the difficulties raised by this interpretation more directly.

In his 1923 article, Bultmann raised the question whether v. 14 belonged to the original version of the Prologue. Could it not, with what follows, have been added on later either by the evangelist himself or by an editor or redactor? Since he had already argued that the *Vorlage* was pre-Christian one might have expected him to ascribe v. 14, or at least the very Christian-sounding ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο to a later hand. On the contrary, it is precisely this phrase that he wishes to retain since, on his view, the group from which the original composition emanated certainly had 'the conception of the historical embodiment of the revealing deity in his emissary'.⁵⁶

(p.28) Once Bultmann's hypothetical source had been abandoned, this question was bound to be raised again; raised it was by Ernst Käsemann, and subsequently many scholars have followed him in excising this verse from the postulated original.

According to Käsemann, 14a adds nothing to what precedes: is 14a, he asks, 'anything more than the mere taking over of what has already been said in the hymn, a phrase of connection and transition which allows the evangelist to come now to what is really important to himself and to declare the purpose of quoting the hymn?'⁵⁷ Since Käsemann holds that 'There is absolutely no convincing argument for the view that vv. 5–13 ever referred to anything save the historical manifestation of the Revealer',⁵⁸ he fails to see how the following verse, or at least its opening phrase, could be said to add anything substantial to what has gone before. What is singular in Käsemann's view, apart from its blindness to the plausibility of the Wisdom-hymn hypothesis, is his conviction that the expression ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο in which many commentators have detected a markedly anti-docetic ring, remains in perfect accord with the picture of Christ which he himself discovered elsewhere in the Gospel—a divine being sojourning on earth ('der über die Erde schreitende Gott'). Georg Richter has argued that this interpretation cannot be sustained, on the grounds that γίνεσθαι followed by a predicative noun always implies a real change of state or status.⁵⁹ Whether this is so or not (and Klaus Berger has adduced some strong arguments against Richter's position),⁶⁰ the chief reasons for refusing to accept Käsemann's position are not properly speaking philological at all. The case rests primarily upon the clear identification of the pre-existent Logos with the Jesus of the Gospel, whose humanity, though seldom stressed, is consistently taken for granted.

It must be acknowledged, however, that such arguments do nothing to establish the *originality* of the verse in question. Richter himself in fact agrees on this point with Käsemann: 'the incarnation is to be understood as real, but the sentence does not come from the evangelist: it is secondary'.⁶¹ Specifically, he ascribes it to **(p.29)** the anti-docetic redactor who was also responsible, he thinks, for other insertions of a similar tendency (especially 6: 51b-58; 13: 12-17; chs. 15-16; 5: 28f.).⁶²

It must be conceded, I think, that Käsemann and Richter are right to argue that the Gospel is more concerned to proclaim the divinity of Jesus than his humanity (though surely this is not so much denied as taken for granted). Moreover, the hushed reverence we associate with the *incarnatus est* of the Mass, the glad amazement that God has *condescended* to take on a human form, both belong to a later age. Bultmann may be guilty of some overinterpretation here: 'the Revealer is nothing but a man...It is in his sheer humanity that he is the Revealer.'⁶³ (There is something paradoxical about Bultmann's own position here; for having laboriously pared down the humanity of Jesus to the ultimate essence of the Word, he is left with a man who is actually no more human than Käsemann's 'über die Erde schreitender Gott'.)

But of course the fact that the Gospel places no stress upon incarnation as such is no reason for not ascribing v. 14 to the *Vorlage* of the Prologue. This argument would work only if Gospel and Prologue were shown to have been conceived with the same end in view. And this is precisely the point at issue.

The hymn, resonating as it does upon two registers, is asserting throughout, but subtly and implicitly, the identity of the Logos and the Revealer. But until v. 14 there is no explicit statement to that effect. It is of course true, as Richter points out, that **(p.30)** Christian hymns do exist which contain no direct mention of the Incarnation. But the Prologue is surely incomplete without such a reference. That a Jewish Christian, reflecting on the history of God's revelation as expressed in the wisdom tradition, should have composed a hymn seeing the life and work of Jesus as the final triumphant expression of this revelation—this is conceivable. But to have composed the hymn in such a way that it could also be read as referring *directly* to the Incarnate Word who came into the world and was rejected by his own people, without including any explicit affirmation of the identity of these two figures—this is a suggestion which places too great a strain upon our credulity.

Again, while the $\sigma\alpha\rho\chi\ \acute{\epsilon}\gamma\acute{\epsilon}\nu\epsilon\tau\omicron$, taken in isolation, might conceivably be thought to be protesting against a docetic interpretation of the Gospel, much in the manner of the opening of 1 John, it is hard to deny that the second half of the verse rounds off the Wisdom theme with a deliberate allusion (in the use of $\sigma\kappa\eta\nu\omicron\upsilon\nu$) to Sirach 24.

There is a further reason for continuing to see v. 14 as part of the original hymn. This reason, involving an appeal to literary sensitivity, is certainly more subjective than the first two and will carry more weight with some than with others. Bultmann's comparison with the *incarnatus est* of the Mass, rejected so scornfully by Käsemann, touches the truth, it seems to me, in one important respect. For it acknowledges the sudden change of mood, the climactic coda, where the ultimate destiny of the Logos is announced, glowingly, for the first time. Shorn of this climax, the hymn is very much a case of Hamlet without the Prince. And the remainder of the verse ('and dwelt amongst us, and we have seen his glory...'), which focuses attention for the first time upon the community who are the recipients of the revelation, fits in admirably with all that precedes. I have compared the movement of the hymn to that of a camera, gradually zooming in upon the focus of interest; this is now defined even more closely as the revelation—in the flesh—to the group itself: *ἐν ἡμῖν, ἐθεασάμεθα*.

Richter emphasizes how different the perspective of v. 14 is from that of the Gospel as a whole, which tends to ignore the properly incarnational aspect of the coming of Jesus. But the difficulty is more apparent than real. The reason for the author's excitement here is that the divine plan he has been outlining, God's revelation to mankind, has actually been embodied in the very man who **(p.31)** founded the community to which he himself belongs and is proclaimed by it as the Son sent by the Father: 'and we have seen his glory'. This is the natural outcome of the hymn, not a later insertion. If it does not put the stress exactly where the Gospel puts it, this is not because there is any conflict between the two but because their starting-points are different. The meditation of the Prologue begins in heaven with the Logos at the side of God; that of the Gospel begins with Jesus. They reach the same point from opposite ends. It is *because* they reach the same point that the evangelist (or, if Lindars is right, whoever was responsible for the second edition) is prepared to incorporate the hymn into his work. Had it been felt as incompatible he could easily have omitted it altogether. In short there is every reason for asserting that v. 14 formed the climax of the original hymn.

In my view there can be no satisfactory interpretation of the Prologue that fails to recognize the author's double interest: it is a meditation on wisdom offering a variation on a traditional theme; it is also a hymn to the Incarnate Word. And the juxtaposition or rather intermingling of these themes prepares the way for the climactic utterance of v. 14. The writer's central insight is summed up here—the identification of Jesus Christ, revered and worshipped by Christians alone, with the figure of Wisdom. This stems from the realization, expressed throughout the hymn, that the history of Wisdom has been re-enacted by Christ: the divine plan seen at work throughout the history of Israel has actually taken flesh in him.

The commentator who approaches closest to this view is C. H. Dodd. But he is mistaken, I believe, in envisaging ‘a reader in the Hellenistic world for whom this Prologue is the first introduction to the Christian faith’.⁶⁴ Such a reader, thinks Dodd, would naturally take the passage to refer to the pre-Incarnate Logos, a concept readily intelligible to him because of his background in Hellenistic Judaism. Only the Christian reader, already acquainted with the Incarnate Logos, could grasp the whole message. But the double register on which the Prologue plays is not to be explained simply on the hypothesis of a double readership. Rather it is the key to the whole understanding of the passage, justifying its movement and opening the way to the climactic affirmation, ‘the Word was made flesh’.

(p.32) 3. Myth, History, or Theology?

Most of the problems concerning the meaning of the Prologue are to be resolved, explicitly or implicitly, by formal exegesis. But what is possibly the most crucial question of all is the hardest to answer with any assurance. It is this: what exactly is being affirmed in the opening of v. 14: *ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο*. Later theology would have few doubts about the nature of this claim: with the Word identified with the Son as one of the three partners in the stately dance of the Trinity, the ontological force of the affirmation is as unmistakable as it is mysterious. And given the clear affirmations of pre-existence in the body of the Gospel (one of them inserted into the Prologue itself: v. 15), the question might appear superfluous. But of a Prologue detached from the Gospel and its own later accretion it still makes sense to ask how strong an identity is being asserted between the *λόγος* and the *σὰρξ*, between Wisdom and Jesus Christ.

The verb *γίνεσθαι*, as I have argued, is properly used of an event or happening. But there is no possibility of viewing incarnation (or resurrection for that matter) as an event like any other, in principle observable and open to the scrutiny of the historian. Are we dealing with a metaphor, of the kind Paul used when he spoke of the Church as the ‘body’ of Christ? This seems too weak a category to cover the claim that is being made here. So if neither history nor metaphor really fit, what of myth? Is this familiar term too vague to be counted any more satisfactory than the other two? It is certainly elusive and probably misleading, unless buttressed by argument and explanation.

Conscious then of the rather slippery nature of the word ‘myth’ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, following a hint of Hans Conzelmann,⁶⁵ has suggested as an alternative the term ‘reflective mythology’. This, as she understands it, ‘is not a living myth but is rather a form of theology appropriating mythical language, material, and patterns from different myths, and it uses these patterns, motifs and configurations for its own theological concerns. Such a theology is not interested in reproducing the myth itself or the mythic materials as they stand,

but rather in taking up and adapting the various mythical elements to its own theological goal and theoretical concerns.’⁶⁶

(p.33) In so far as it draws attention to the ambiguity of the term ‘myth’, often employed emotively as well as vaguely, this is a useful suggestion. But the expression ‘reflective mythology’ (like ‘theology’) seems to imply a deliberate distancing from the religious experience, and however appropriate to Philo—or Plato—it fails to do justice to the properly religious involvement of the Prologue or the other christological hymns to which Fiorenza wishes to apply it. I believe that the term ‘myth’, provided it be carefully enough defined, still gives us the right category of understanding.

‘Myth’, then, I take to mean the expression in story-form of a deeply held *religious* conviction concerning man's relation to the deity, the cosmos (or part of it), or human institutions. (In this sense the narrative of the Fall in Genesis 2–3 is a myth, but the account of creation in Genesis 1 is not: it is rather an anti-myth, the rejection of a Babylonian-type cosmogony.) The myth offers an explanation of how some feature of human life arose, and at the same time furnishes a model, frequently ritualistic, of human behaviour. In general it helps human beings to locate themselves, to know where they belong *vis-à-vis* God, the universe, and their fellow human beings. It operates symbolically rather than literally and in so far as it speaks of the divine this is unavoidable. Any rigorous programme of demythologization, if designed to eliminate symbolic thinking altogether, must end in silence. (Even theology, however far removed it may be from, myth, is ultimately rooted in symbol or metaphor.)

Now the place of myth in a historically based religion like Judaism or Christianity is often hard to determine, since history and myth are alternative modes of explanation which cannot be held together with any comfort. But historical events, or alleged historical events, may either be partly mythologized (like the crossing of the Sea of Reeds in Exodus 14) or made to function as myths by being drawn in to explain the origin of a particular custom or institution. However, in such cases the need to maintain some historical plausibility limits the possibilities to a degree which will vary from one culture to another. There are unlikely, for instance, to be any talking animals in such narratives, whereas in pure myth these abound.

What distinguishes Christianity from all other religions is that specifically Christian myths are all constructed round the person of **(p.34)** Christ or some aspect of his achievement or experience, which is believed to be somehow reproduced or re-enacted by the faithful. Thus they make sense of *their* experience by appealing to his. Paul's most astonishing speculative feat was his existentialization, as it were, of the events of the first Easter. More simply, in the Synoptic Gospels, one can see how the Christian community justified and

explained its own experience of persecution by seeing it as endured in Christ's name and for his sake.

Nowhere is this kind of explanation stronger than in the Fourth Gospel, one of whose aims, quite clearly, is to try and make sense of the community's rejection by the Jews. An all-pervasive theme in the body of the Gospel, it also helps us to understand the attraction of the tradition of personified wisdom for the author of the Prologue, especially the version according to which Wisdom failed to find a home among her own people. For this was also the experience of Jesus *and of the community*. Once the two communities, Jewish and Jewish-Christian, had parted, the conviction that the history of revelation had been re-enacted by Christ must have helped to sustain the Christians' sense that they too were reliving the rejection undergone by the Revealer. Here is a good example of what Wayne Meeks calls the 'continual, harmonic reinforcement between social experience and ideology'.⁶⁷

The theme of Wisdom in her role as God's agent in revelation is thus taken over, adapted, and made to function as a myth. The author is much more interested in the revelational aspect of this tradition than in the cosmological, for he belongs to a community that sees its founder as the Revealer and is proud of its own mission to further his revelation. The story element of the ancient tradition, though compressed and refined, remains recognizable, and still involves the career of a heavenly being determining the fate of mankind. What is more, it enables the members of the circle from which it emanates to locate themselves *vis-à-vis* the world as a whole and the Jewish community (which in some respects they identified with 'the world') in particular. But the myth is now purely Christian. The identification of the heavenly figure with a historical individual marks the triumphant outcome of a long and complex midrashic development. The Jewish ancestry of the Prologue is evident, and it shares with Judaism the characteristic **(p.35)** which singles out both religions and distinguishes them from all others, including Gnosticism, that make no claim to a contingently historical revelation.

Notes:

(1) 'Background', p. 19.

(2) Cf. R. A. Culpepper, 'Pivot', who remarks that 'recent commentators are fairly evenly divided on the question of whether the work of the Word in vv. 9-12 is *asarkos* or *ensarkos*' (p. 13). And he adds a long note summarizing the various positions.

(3) See e.g. W. Schmithals, 'Prolog'. Of his own highly speculative and disputable reconstruction he makes the astonishing assertion: 'There can be no doubt about the correctness of the restored hymn and the reconstruction' (p. 33).

(4) The publication of the so-called Trimorphic Protennoia in 1974 has revived speculation about possible Gnostic sources of the Prologue. Like all the other suggested Gnostic sources it is too late to have been a direct influence, and in spite of certain verbal resemblances is too far away in spirit to be regarded as anything but a thin rivulet whose origins are perhaps to be sought in the same broad stream of wisdom speculation from which the Prologue also took its rise. Cf. C. Colpe, 'Überlieferung'.

(5) As far as I am aware this debt has not actually been questioned since Rendel Harris's series of articles in the *Expositor* of 1916. This began and ended with a version of the Prologue substituting the word *Sophia* for the word *Logos*, which was backed up with an array of texts from the Jewish wisdom literature that have been cited regularly ever since. In a book of the same title published the following year, Harris expanded his thesis, though he failed to add Baruch 3 to his list of references. Beside Bultmann's 'Background', Harris's treatment seems oddly superficial.

(6) J. L. Martyn, *History and Theology; The Gospel of John*, Martyn has promised an extended study of the Prologue based on the literary seam Käsemann claimed to have discerned after v. 13; cf. 'Source Criticism'.

(7) W. A. Meeks, 'Man from Heaven'.

(8) 'Background', 30.

(9) I do not agree with W. McKane, *Proverbs*, 305, that this is 'a weaker sense' than the alternative: 'Wisdom comes first, [therefore] get wisdom.' On the contrary, it suggests to me a profound understanding of the hermeneutical circle, not too far from Horace's dictum (part of which Kant adopted as his motto); 'dimidium facti qui coepit habet: sapere aude: Incipe,' McKane now thinks, he informs me, that in the second half of Prov. 4: 7 בְּכֹל קִינֹךְ is best seen as a *both pretii*: 'sell all your possessions to get בִּינָה'.

(10) Cf. G. von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, 151 n. 4.

(11) The Interpretation favoured by the Rabbis, 'master-workman' (foreperson?), reading מֵסֵב does not really fit the context.

(12) The LXX rendering (ἐκτίσεν), which caused such trouble to subsequent Christian commentators, may simply be wrong. Bruce Vawter has argued that 'in no single instance in the OT or in relevant cognate literature are we compelled by the evidence to ascribe to the verb קִי in any of its forms the sense "create":' *JBL* 99 (1980), 205-16.

(13) *Proverbs*, 358.

(14) *Ibid.* 644.

(15) Margaret Barker, in an unpublished paper to which I am greatly indebted, challenges the widespread assumption that קרשים is to be read as a *pluralis maiestatis*. Why should it not have a plural reference (as it must in Job 5: 2; Zech. 14:5; Ps. 89: 6, 8)? Barker believes that there was a 'deliberate process of mystification here', and compares the textual confusion surrounding Deut. 32: 8, (Perhaps קרשים was allowed to stand because it *can* have a singular reference, as in Hos, 12: 1, if the text is right.) Prov. 9: 10 is more doubtful.

(16) 'Keep them and do them [statutes and ordinances]; for that will be your wisdom and understanding in the sight of the peoples.' Barker sees in this passage an acknowledgement on the writer's part that wisdom is too important and traditional a category for him to exclude altogether (though no doubt he would dearly have liked to have done so). In subsuming wisdom under the law he was adopting the next best solution by harnessing this wayward and unpredictable animal to his own wagon. See also Deut. 29: 28, where 'the secret things' (הַסְּתֵמִים) are declared be God's exclusive preserve: 'the revealed things' (הַגִּלּוּת), which belong to Israel, consist simply of 'all the words of this law'. Also Ezra 7: 11-26 (the letter of commission), where the law (v. 14), whatever its precise content, is clearly the same as wisdom (v. 25).

(17) R. Smend is surely right to prefer the Syriac ܡܠܟܐ to the Greek at this point; *Weisheit*, 6.

(18) I cannot agree with von Rad, who discusses such texts as these under the general rubric 'Die Selbstoffenbarung der Schöpfung', *Weisheit* 189-228. It is doubtful if this expression is strictly applicable even to such passages as Job 28 and Sirach 24.

(19) Alluding to LXX Deut. 32: 9, where both terms occur.

(20) Following Smend's division of the poem into 6 stanzas, beginning respectively VV. 1, 7, 12, 16, 23, 30.

(21) Cf. 4 Ezra 13: 54f., which adapts a phrase from Prov, 7: 4 alluding to wisdom and understanding, and applies it to the study of the law.

(22) Whether the expression ἡ χάρις καὶ ἡ ἀλήθεια is a deliberate allusion to Exod. 34: 6 is another matter, and need not be settled here. Many commentators (e.g. Brown, Lindars) simply assume that it is. They may well be right, but it is hard to be sure because חסד is regularly translated by ἔλεος in the LXX.

(23) Cf. n. 2.

(24) *Interpretation*, 263-85. See also 'Prologue', 9-22.

(25) 'Structure', 144.

mystery to be') compares CD 2. 10; 13. 8; 1QS 3: 15; 10: 5; 11: 3-4, 18; *JBL* 71 (1952), 19-32.

(36) Contrast 18: 34: 'the one who made the all'; cf. 19: 7.

(37) The form τὰ πάντα does not occur in the Pentateuch except for two highly significant instances in Genesis: Gen. 1: 31 ('God saw everything that he had made'), and Gen. 9: 3, where in making God give τὰ πάντα to Noah and his sons the translator is no doubt deliberately echoing the conclusion of Chapter 1: after chaos, in the form of the flood, has been reconquered, the restored universe is handed back to mankind in the person of Noah. Apart from 3 Macc. 2: 3 (ὁ κτίσας τὰ πάντα), the few instances in the historical books (LXX 2 Kings 19: 30; 24: 23; 3 Kings 14: 26; 2 Macc. 10: 23) scarcely count. Nor do the relatively numerous instances in Ecclesiastes, since it is clear that we have to do here with an idiosyncratic translator (Aquila?) oblivious to the solemn overtones of the term discernible elsewhere in the wisdom literature: Job 8: 3; 11: 10; 28: 25 (?); Wisd. 1: 7, 14; 7: 27; 8: 1, 5; 9: 1; 11: 24; 12: 15; 18: 14, 16; Ecclus. 18: 1; 23: 20. To these may be added LXX Jer. 10: 16; 28: 19. (Wisd. 7: 27, where πάντα and τὰ πάντα occur in close proximity, constitutes in itself a strong argument for a felt difference between the two uses: wisdom is omnipotent—πάντα δύναται—and she renews the whole universe—τὰ πάντα καίνιζει.) Against this formidable list there are only two instances in the wisdom literature (not counting Ecclesiastes) where τὰ πάντα refers to something other than the created universe: Job 13: 9 and Wisd. 1: 10. Bar. 3: 32, where the phrase ὁ εἰδὼς τὰ πάντα is balanced by ὁ κατασκεύασας τὴν γῆν, is not, I would contend, a counter-example. For further instances see e.g. *T. Asher* 5: 2; Josephus, *Contra Ap.* 2. 190 (τὰ σύμπαντα); Justin, *Dial.* 56. 11; *Did.* 10.3.

On the other side, among the innumerable instances of the plain πάντα in LXX there are only 6 which might be interpreted as referring to the universe. Elsewhere, especially in the Stoic tradition studied by E. Norden, *Agnostos Theos*, 240-50, there is less uniformity, as is illustrated by a hymn to Selene (cited p. 250); ἐκ σέο γὰρ πάντ' ἐστὶ καὶ εἰς σέ τὰ πάντα τελευτᾷ. We should leave out of account examples with πάντων (Wisd 8: 3; Ecclus. 1: 4; 2 Macc 1: 24) and ἀπάντων (Ecclus. 24: 8), since the genitive plural is always found in the anarthrous form in the LXX (though not elsewhere, as is shown by a number of examples cited by Norden, *Ibid.* 164f.; 245; 247). In Ecclus. 39: 21 the Greek reads πάντα γὰρ εἰς χρείας αὐτῶν ἔκτισται. But here the πάντα has a distributive rather than an inclusive force. In Judith 8: 14 the reading is uncertain, as it is in Isa. 44: 24. This leaves only 3 clear counter-examples: Ps. 8: 17; 103: 24; Ecclus. 43: 33. Of these the first is particularly interesting, since it is actually *corrected* into τὰ πάντα when quoted in the New Testament (Heb. 2: 8 and 1 Cor. 15: 27).

The NT parallels cited by Bultmann (*Gospel*, 37 n. 1) all have τὰ πάντα. Bultmann (p. 19) is aware of the difference, but attempts to explain it away. H. Thyen, referring to John 1: 3 in another context, actually misquotes it, arguing that ‘τὰ πάντα [sic!] should not simply be identified with “mankind”’ (*‘Heil’*, 171 n. 35).

(38) The evidence is most fully set out by K. Aland, ‘Untersuchung’. Aland's conclusions are contested by E. Haenchen, who argues: ‘One misconstrues the facts when one connects ὁ γέγονεν to verse 4 by invoking the oldest manuscripts, to say nothing of the fact that one does not thereby achieve a meaningful text’ (*Johannesevangelium*, 122). But this is precisely one of the strengths of Lamarche's case, with which Haenchen was evidently unacquainted.

(39) ‘Was ist das für eine ζωή?’, *Johannesevangelium*, i, 216.

(40) ‘What has come to be—in him (the Logos) was the life (for it)’; or: ‘What has come to be—in it he (the Logos) was the life’ (*Gospel*, 39).

(41) ‘Prologue’, 42

(42) Jer. 29: 11; 51: 29; Mic. 4: 12; Ps. 33: 10f.

(43) Cf. C. Westermann, *Das Buch Jesaja: Kapitel 40–66* (Göttingen, 1966), 38.

(44) *Kommentar*, ii. 358. There is perhaps some light to be shed on this passage, as M. McNamara suggests, from the Palestinian Targum on Exod. 12; 42; *Targum*, 103–4.

(45) ‘Structure’, 144. John 17: 5, 24 are the only instances in which κόσμος bears the meaning Käsemann assigns to it. Even where Jesus is spoken of as entering or leaving the world it is the world of men that is meant.

(46) ‘Prologue’, 40.

(47) *Vérité*, 164. The idea is certainly present in the *Testament of Moses*, though the corrupt state of the text impedes a clear vision; ‘omnes gentes quae sunt in orbe terrarum deus creavit ut [et?] nos [,] praevidit illos et nos ab initio creaturae ad exitum saeculi, et nihil est ab eo neglectum usque ad pusillum, sed omnia praevidit et provovit cum eis [promovit cuncta?]’ (12: 4–5). Cf. 1QH 1: 14f., etc; 4 Ezra 6: 6; *Apoc. Abr.* 22; *Odes Sol.* 16: 9: ‘the worlds are by his word’.

(48) ‘Prolog’, 23–6.

(49) *Interpretation*, 281 f. Bultmann (‘Background’, 28) points out the parallel with Luke 7: 35: καὶ ἐδικαιώθη ἡ σοφία ἀπὸ τῶν τέκνων αὐτῆς. R. A. Culpepper, in what seems to me the most valuable section of his article (‘Pivot’), gives a very full

discussion of the background to the term τέκνα θεοῦ in the Johannine writings. It is hard to be sure whether these verses (12–13) belonged to the original hymn or not. Either way, it makes little difference to my own argument.

(50) Gospel, 29.

(51) ἡ σοφία τοῦ θεοῦ εἶπεν ἀποστελῶ εἰς αὐτοὺς προφήτας καὶ ἀποστόλους. Matt. 23: 34 puts this saying into the mouth of Jesus, and transposes the Wisdom who sends into sages who are sent; cf. Sir. 24: 33f.

(52) 'Prologue', 42.

(53) Ibid. 48.

(54) 'Prologue', 37.

(55) Namely, the distinction between Israel and 'the pagan world'. Lamarche offers no argument for this view, but contents himself with the assertion that the Prologue is written from the same perspective as the Letter to the Ephesians ('Prologue', 47).

(56) 'Background', 32.

(57) 'Structure', 155.

(58) Ibid. 150.

(59) 'Fleischwerdung', 87–8.

(60) "'Das Wort ward Fleisch".'

(61) 'Fleischwerdung', 92.

(62) To maintain this, Richter has to show that there is nothing in the remainder of the verse either which would imply divinity; for an 'anti-docetic' redactor would naturally be anxious to guard against misunderstanding at this point. Accordingly he argues (1) that σκηνοῦν means simply 'dwell' ('seinen (dauernden) Wohnsitz nehmen'); (2) that in the context it is no more than 3 synonym for incarnation; (3) that it is best understood from Paul's use of σκηνώμα in 2 Cor. 5: 1, 4 and from the use of σκήνωμα in 2 Pet. 1: 13 f. Against this, it must be said that (1) though Richter refers to Moulton-Milligan, he omits to mention a papyrus cited there *Syll.* 177) in which 'the thought of temporary dwelling is well brought out', *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* (London, 1930), s.v. 578; (2) he ignores what, in the context, is a scarcely mistakable allusion to Sir. 24: 8, 10; (3) the word δόξα itself, even without σκηνοῦν, would be enough to suggest a divine epiphany, and is certainly a highly unlikely term for the so-called anti-docetic redactor to pick on.

Richter suggests three different ways of understanding v. 14a: (a) 'die Fleischwerdung ist nicht real zu verstehen'; (b) 'die Fleischwerdung ist zwar real zu verstehen, aber der Ton liegt nicht auf sarx, sondern auf Logos'; (c) 'die Fleischwerdung ist real zu verstehen, und der Hauptakzent liegt auf sarx' (p. 86). But the verse maintains the *identity* of λόγος and σάρξ; so it is a fatal mistake to follow Bultmann and Käsemann in looking for a *Hauptakzent* in the first place.

(63) *Gospel* 62–3.

(64) *Interpretations*, 283.

(65) 'The Mother of Wisdom', 230–43.

(66) 'Wisdom Mythology', 29.

(67) 'Man from Heaven', 164.