

Unit 5

The Johannine Prologue

The Gospel of John opens with a prologue of praise and celebration to the eternal Logos, the revelatory self-expression of God who becomes incarnate in the historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth. Christological assertions about Jesus' identity and significance play an integral role in the opening sections of each one of the four canonical gospels. Mark introduces Jesus from the outset as 'the Messiah, the Son of God' (Mk 1:1); for Matthew Jesus' genealogy proves that he is 'the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham' (Mt. 1:1), while Luke shapes his infancy narrative around the identity of Jesus as the Lord's Messiah (Lk. 2:26), the Son of the Most High (1:32). Readers/hearers of John's Gospel are not, however, guided to Bethlehem for an explanation of Jesus' origins or to Galilee for elucidation of the significance of his mission and authority, but to the heavenly heights and to the beginning of time.

Origin and Composition of the Prologue

While John's Gospel is dominated by exalted statements about Jesus' origins and identity, the Prologue's profound claims about him as the embodiment of the divine *logos* have, understandably, led to its assessment as the high point of John's narrative and theology. This assessment raises a whole myriad of questions about the significance of the Prologue as the opening section to John's Gospel, particularly with regard to its origin and composition. Was the Prologue already an integral part of, and a fitting introduction to, the Gospel at the time of its composition, or does it represent an addition made to the text at a later stage of redaction? And if the Gospel did originally open with the narrative section about the witness of John the Baptist (1:19-24), did the evangelist compose the Prologue and then insert it as the introduction to his gospel, or did he 'borrow' a composition already in independent circulation, one which he adapted for his own purposes?

Although the Prologue is more rhythmic than strictly poetic (note the staircase parallelism

with a keyword at the end of a line/clause repeated at the beginning of the next, particularly in vv. 1-5), many commentators have argued with some plausibility that John has taken over and adapted an already existing hymn, either a Jewish composition about the Logos or Sophia (wisdom) or a Christian hymn to Jesus as the *logos*. The rhythmic elements and patterns of this proposed hymn can be detected at various points in the text (vv. 1-5, 9-12, 14, 16-18), but they also stand in thematic and structural contrast to the other, more prose-like statements which seek to fasten the Prologue firmly to the story of Jesus, particularly the references to John the Baptist (vv. 6-8, 15). It should not, nevertheless, be overlooked that both the hymnic portions and the so-called prose insertions are equally Johannine in character (note the use of the language of light, darkness, life, world, witness, belief, children of God), making it likely that the passage was composed either by the Fourth Evangelist or by another member of the Johannine community. Whether this occurred before, during, or after the main body of the gospel was written is difficult to determine, but both the hymnic and prose declarations in the Prologue anticipate several of the gospel's most distinctive themes. Whatever its composition history, the Prologue - from both a literary and theological perspective - now 'controls' how readers are meant to understand the narrative.

The Pre-Existence of the Logos

To emphasize the transcendent status and origins of its central figure, the Prologue begins by declaring that the *logos* existed with God 'in the beginning' (*en archē*), thereby providing a more than coincidental allusion to the identically phrased opening of the Septuagint's (Greek Bible) translation of Genesis 1:1. In a particularly subtle way John also emphasizes that the *logos* does not exist in the same manner as other figures mentioned in the Prologue; created beings like John the Baptist 'are brought into existence' (*ginomai*) and appear on the historical stage at a specific point in time (v. 6: 'there was [*egeneto*] a man sent from God whose name was John'). The Logos, who existed from before creation, 'is' (*eimi*) from eternity (1:1-2). This contrast provides a clear link between the Prologue and the main body

of the Gospel; at the culmination of one of his fiercest debates with his Jewish opponents, Jesus expresses his true identity by sustaining the same contrast between these two modes of existence: 'Before Abraham was (*genesthai*), I am (*egō eimi*)' (8:58). Here, it is Jesus of Nazareth who makes a claim to pre-existence that provokes his opponents to raise stones to kill him (v. 59), thereby establishing continuity between his own claims (cf. 17:5) and what is declared about him in the Prologue (1:1-2).

God's Agent of Creation

John does not simply set forth the pre-existence of the *logos*, because the opening clauses of the Prologue set the stage for the *continued engagement* between the creator and his creation. Thus, the second clause ('and the Word was with God') prepares the way for the presentation of the *logos* as the agent of God's creative activity: 'all things came into being through him' (1:3). The christological affirmation of the cosmic significance of the *logos* is a feature of most explicit references to Jesus' pre-existence in other New Testament writings (e.g., Col. 1:16: 'for in him everything was created in heaven and on earth'; cf. Heb. 1:2), although the biblical background to this concept is more evident in the Prologue where it is associated with God's creative activity by means of his Word. Allusions to the Genesis story are not, therefore, confined to the opening clause: in the same way as God speaks and creates life and light, for John the *logos* is the creative agent of God in whom there is life and light (1:4). Creation through divine utterance or speech finds expression in the creation narrative, 'And God *said*, "Let there be light", and there was light' (1:3), which, together with the other similarly structured statements in Genesis 1-2, became known in later Jewish circles as 'the ten words of creation'.

The Relationship between the Logos and God

The initial three-clause declaration about the timeless existence of the *logos* with God stresses the close relationship between them: 'the *logos* was with God, and the *logos* was God' (Jn

1:1bc). The clause ‘and the *logos* was with God’ is certainly taken up in the second verse (‘he was in the beginning with God’), both of which assume that God and the *logos* are differentiated beings, despite the intimate communion that exists between them.

But what is the relationship between this clause and the one that follows, translated by the NRSV as ‘and the Word was God’? Much depends in this respect on how to interpret the subtleties of the underlying Greek text. What should be made of the fact that, in the clause ‘the Word was with God’, the noun *theos* is preceded by the definite article (*ton theon*), whereas in the other clause, ‘and the Word was God’ (*kai theos ēn ho logos*), the article is missing with *theos*? If the one clause, in which the definite article is present, indicates that the *logos* is with *the* God, the Almighty God described in the central sections of the Gospel as ‘the Father’, what is the force of the claim that follows?

Its significance is not fully conveyed by a rendering such as ‘the Word was divine’, for if that were the case the Fourth Evangelist could have used the Greek adjective *theios*. Certainly it is difficult to encapsulate the meaning of this clause with the aid of a literal translation, but an important clue is provided by Greek grammatical practice: the absence of the definite article with *theos* arises from the fact that predicate nouns preceding the verb (in this case *theos*) do not usually need a definite article.¹ If so, there is no difference in meaning between the use of the word *theos* in the two clauses. Nevertheless, when read in conjunction with the previous clause (‘the *logos* was with God’) it does imply that the *logos* can, to a certain degree, be distinguished from God (in that he possesses his own personal identity), and yet, at the same time, shares the same substance as God (New English Bible: ‘what God was, the Word was’). In this tightly formulated statement the Prologue opens with the profoundest of claims, one whose message lies at the heart of the Gospel’s Father-Son christology: the first verse of the Prologue distinguishes the *logos* from God, but also identifies the *logos* with God insofar as the *logos*, God’s self-expression, cannot be separated from God’s reality.

¹ For a further example, see I John 4:8: *hoti ho theos agapē estin* (God is love).

Why 'Word of God'?

Various attempts have been made to determine the intellectual milieu or conceptual background of the Johannine *logos*. The expression can be found in much of the religious literature of antiquity, from classical Greek writers to gnostic worldviews. In Stoicism, for example, the term *logos* was used for the cosmic reason - the mind at the centre of the universe - that gave form and structure to its activity. Biblical and post-biblical Jewish texts do, nevertheless, provide a more likely primary background to the image of the *logos* in the Johannine Prologue. According to the Jewish Scriptures God's word is an expression of his power and will, the divine word responsible for creation and for salvation (cf. Ps. 107:20: 'he sent out his word and healed them and saved them from destruction'; cf. Isa. 55:10-11). Since Israel comes to know God by means of his word, it is depicted as the vehicle of God's self-revelation, as his way of communicating with the world.

There is also much speculation about the *logos* in the writings of the Alexandrian Jewish philosopher Philo, especially as an expression of God's thought and his power active in the world. The *logos* is, for example, identified with God's image (Philo, *On the Confusion of Tongues* 97); he is God's mediator in the world, his chief messenger, eternal and uncreated. Philo also describes the *logos* as the agent of God's creative activity (*On the Cherubim* 127: 'Let us contemplate the greatest of our houses or cities, the universe. We shall see that its cause is God, by whom it has come into being, its material the four elements, from which it was compounded, its instrument the word of God').

However, the conceptual milieu most instrumental to the Johannine portrayal of the *logos* is Jewish wisdom literature, where personified Wisdom (Greek: *sophia*) is described as having dwelt with God from the beginning (note additional handout, on Moodle, with striking list of parallels). In Proverbs 8:22-31, one of the earliest extant Wisdom texts that bears significant resemblance to John's Prologue, *sophia* speaks in the first person declaring that God created her as the first of his acts before the beginning of the earth; she was at God's side 'like a master worker' when he established the heavens and created the sea and the earth. She

is the source of life (Prov. 8:35).

Another illuminating parallel between the Johannine *logos* and later Wisdom traditions is that *sophia* is described as possessing a role in history, as seeking a dwelling-place among humankind (Wisdom of Ben Sira 24:8 ‘Then the Creator of all things gave me a command, and my Creator chose the place for my tent (*skēnē*). He said, “Make your dwelling in Jacob, and in Israel receive your inheritance”). The Greek noun for dwelling-place (*skēnē*) and the compound verb (*kataskēnoō*) conjure up the image of wisdom pitching a tent, recalling the tabernacle as the dwelling-place of God’s presence. In this particular hymn (Ben Sira 24:23) *sophia* is identified with God’s Torah, whereas 2 Baruch 3:9-4:4 begins by chiding Israel for not recognizing wisdom, the gift that was hers alone. God gave her to Jacob his servant and to Israel whom he loved; this is followed, towards the end of the poem, by an explicit identification of wisdom: ‘She is the book of the commandments of God, and the law that endures for ever’ (4:1). Nevertheless, this identification of Wisdom with Torah is not characteristic of all the texts; I Enoch 42, for example, depicts wisdom as a revelation of mysteries outside the law. Indeed, like the *logos* in John 1:11, Wisdom in I Enoch 42:1-2 fails to find a resting place on earth: ‘Wisdom could not find a place where she might dwell.... Wisdom went forth to make her dwelling place among the children of human beings and found no dwelling place. Wisdom returned to her place and took her seat among the angels’. Wisdom returns to heaven, while sinfulness resides among humankind.

Despite such affinities, the Johannine Prologue does possess a number of distinctive features, not least its focus on the enfleshment of the *logos* (see further below). In Jewish sources Wisdom is always depicted as having been created by God rather than as existing before creation. The identification of Wisdom with the Torah (attested in many Jewish traditions) also sets these traditions apart from the Johannine Prologue, where Jesus’ superiority over the law is made explicit in its final statements. And although John, like I Enoch 42, states that the *logos* was not received by humankind (1:11), he immediately follows this statement by saying that those who did so were given authority to become children of

God (1:12-13). Nevertheless, resemblances between the Prologue and Jewish wisdom traditions are sufficiently striking to raise the question: why did John not choose the designation *sophia* instead of *logos* in the Prologue, and why is the noun *sophia* absent from the entire Gospel? Some argue that John deliberately avoided the noun *sophia* because Jesus was male and Wisdom was regularly personified as a feminine figure. However, it should be borne in mind that this did not prevent Paul from referring to Jesus as ‘the wisdom of God’ (I Cor. 1:24).

A statement in the Wisdom of Solomon 9:1-2 is also instructive in this respect, because its parallel structure demonstrates that God’s Word and Wisdom are very closely linked: ‘O God of my ancestors and Lord of my mercy who has made all things by your *word*, and by your *wisdom* has formed humankind’. Furthermore, the image of the *logos* was sufficiently broad to embrace other possible connotations. In the Jewish Scriptures, God’s word is depicted as his mode of communication with the world: it is used for his revelation to the prophets (Hos. 1:1: ‘the word of the Lord came to Hosea’), but it can also be used in parallel to ‘law’ or Torah (e.g., Ps. 119:17-18: ‘so that I may live and observe your word... that I may behold wondrous things out of your law’). Subsequently, in rabbinic Judaism the Torah was one of seven things created before the world: ‘Before the world was made Torah was written, and lay in God’s bosom’ (b. Pesahim 54a [the Babylonian Talmud]). The wide-ranging connotations of the term *logos* in Jewish tradition enable the Fourth Evangelist to proclaim that Wisdom or Logos, the vehicle of God’s creation, revelation and salvation, finds its dwelling-place in Jesus and not (as the Prologue proceeds to claim) in the Torah.

From Pre-Existence to Incarnation

What is undoubtedly unprecedented in Jewish and Greek sources is John’s distinctive claim about the embodiment of God’s Wisdom and Word in human flesh, succinctly expressed in John 1:14: ‘And the *logos* became flesh and dwelt among us’. The assertion closest to this in Jewish traditions is of Wisdom dwelling among humankind (as, for example, in the Wisdom

of Solomon 7:27, where she is said to pass into holy souls and make them friends of God). If, for the people of Israel, the most concrete expression of Wisdom's dwelling is the Torah itself, only the Prologue of John's Gospel goes so far as to state that the *logos* of God is made manifest within the concrete historical setting of a particular earthly human life.

However, is verse 14 the first reference in John 1:1-18 to the enfleshment of the *logos*? Rudolf Bultmann phrased the issue as follows in a 1923 article: '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?'. If the answer is verse 14, the Prologue should be read as encompassing salvation history from the perspective of Israel, a salvation history extending from before creation (1:1-3) through Israel's history (1:4-13) to the revelation of the *logos* incarnate in Israel in the figure of Jesus (1:14-18). In other words, past revelation led to the rejection of the Word as communicated by the Torah, the prophets and Wisdom (1:11), whereas the next statement indicates that there were already some in ancient Israel who believed in God's Word and consequently became children of God (1:12, Abraham and Isaiah in their midst; cf. John 8; 12:41). The difficulty with interpreting the Prologue along these lines is that it is also possible to detect an allusion to the incarnation already in 1:11, with its reference to the *logos* coming to and being rejected by 'his own' as a summary preview of the narrative of Jesus' earthly ministry. An even earlier allusion may be identified in 1:9: 'the true light which enlightens everyone was coming into the world'.

The earliest possible point, in fact, is 1:5 where 'the light' is said to shine (using the present tense of the verb) in the darkness and is not overcome by it; this dualistic conflict between light and darkness is a characteristic feature of the Johannine depiction of Jesus' earthly ministry (3:19), so that the stark contrast between those who believe in Jesus and those who reject him becomes none other than a dramatization of the plot already set out at the beginning of the Prologue. This proposal is strengthened by the references to John the Baptist that immediately follow (1:6-8). For whatever the origin of these references to the Baptist's testimony (1:6-8, 15), possibly as prose insertions to an already existing hymnic passage, it is

clear that the function of these references is to link the Prologue's metaphysical claims about the *logos* to the historical statements about Jesus of Nazareth. These references to the Baptist already point to the historical event of Jesus, and, as Morna Hooker has persuasively argued, are designed to confirm the truth of what has just been said: Jesus is the light shining in the darkness (vv. 1-5) and his glory as the incarnate *logos* has been seen (vv. 9-14). In other words, the *logos* who was eternally with God is the one to whom the Baptist has borne witness as the *logos* become flesh. The options, it seems, is to view the Prologue as one of sequential development (movement from the divine word revealed in creation and salvation, accepted and rejected by Israel, and then incarnate in Jesus) or to regard the historical appearance of Jesus as already anticipated by verses 5, 9 and 11, which act as pointers before the unequivocal proclamation of the incarnation in verse 14.

There is a sense, however, in which these two options are not necessarily exclusive of each other, but somehow coalesce and are telescoped together. The starting-point of the Prologue's reflection is not a Wisdom myth or some theological speculation about God's revelation to the world, but rather the issue of how to articulate the conviction held by the community of believers that Jesus of Nazareth has been sent forth by God to communicate revelation and salvation to the world. Jesus' pre-existent significance and status is the corollary of his role as the one who uniquely accomplishes God's eschatological plan. His power to mediate life forges a link, as is typical of Jewish and Christian apocalyptic, between the first and final things; his creative, life-giving work applies as much to his earthly ministry as it does to his pre-existent activity. For this reason the connection between the *logos* and Jesus must be presupposed from the outset even though he is not mentioned by name until the final verses of the Prologue.

As the remainder of the Prologue makes clear, God communicates with the world in the historical manifestation of Jesus. There is, in this respect, a connection between the use of *logos* as a christological title (restricted to the Prologue) and the numerous occurrences within the Gospel narrative where Jesus refers to his message and mission as 'the word' (e.g., 4:41;

5:24; 8:31; 15:3). The message of the Gospel and its Prologue in particular is that Jesus is the definitive mode and content of God's self-revelation in the world.

The Dwelling Place of God: Flesh and Glory, Grace and Truth

To interpret Jesus, rather than speculation about the *logos*, as the focal point of the Prologue becomes evident as soon as the incarnation is explicitly pronounced in verse 14. Here a shift can be detected in the Prologue's style from the use of the third person in 1:1-13 to the first person plural ('we') in 1:14 and 16 to express the community's own experience of Jesus as the *logos*: 'The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and *we* beheld his glory....full of grace and truth....and from his fullness *we* have all received, grace upon grace'. These 'we' statements demand closer scrutiny since they provide important clues about the Johannine understanding of Jesus' mission, and, in particular, how they relate to the christological claims made in the main body of the Gospel.

First of all, the wording of verse 14 suggests that an unbroken line exists between the past and present, a view expressed, at least in part, by the claim that the *logos* 'dwelt among us'. The Greek verb translated here as 'dwell' (or 'live' in the NRSV) is *skēnoō* and its cognate noun is *skēnē* already encountered in connection with the dwelling place of Wisdom, but also used in the Septuagint version of Exodus to translate 'tent' or 'tabernacle', the locus of God's presence (Exod. 25:8-9). The message of this terminological link is that the Prologue depicts Jesus as the one in whom God makes his dwelling place.

This leads to a second consideration. According to Exodus 40:34 the tabernacle is filled with God's glory ('and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle'), whereas the Prologue in 1:14 declares that the glory of God is embodied in Jesus, the incarnate *logos*. The word 'glory' (*kabod* in Hebrew, *doxa* in Greek) can possess a wide range of meanings, from the visible manifestation of God's splendour, his saving actions, to the essence of God's character. But what the Prologue intends, when it claims that the community has 'beheld the glory' of the *logos* incarnate, has been the subject of much debate, particularly between Rudolf Bultmann

and Ernst Käsemann. Where does the emphasis lie in verse 14: is it on flesh (the humanity of Jesus) or his glory (his divinity)?² The emphasis rather is on both, since John's profound message is that it is precisely in his earthly mission, with all its physical and temporal limitations, that Jesus reveals the glory of God. In the course of the Gospel narrative, Jesus' difference will be stressed (particularly in terms of his origins, mission and knowledge), and yet, at the same time, there is no question about the reality of his human identity. While Jesus discloses God's glory during his ministry, particularly in his signs (2:11; 11:40) and declares that he has been given God's glory before the foundation of the world (17:5), 'glory' in John's Gospel is not simply about splendour or majesty; it is also about Jesus' obedience to God and about seeking his honour, a glory supremely manifested in Jesus' death on the cross. For this reason, both affirmations together (he became flesh, we beheld his glory) encapsulate the identity of the one who is the central subject of this Gospel. Jesus, for John, is the specific embodiment and historical manifestation of divine glory.

Thirdly, the Prologue proceeds by declaring that the community of believers has, in Jesus, encountered the essential qualities of God, his 'grace and truth' (1:14, 17). If biblical language has contributed to the shaping of the Prologue's claims about the role of the *logos* in creation and salvation, the same applies here, for the phrase 'grace and truth' contains a probable allusion to Exodus 33-34. When Moses asks to see God's glory, he is told that he cannot see God's face and live, but that he will be allowed to see his back (33:23). Moses catches a glimpse of the reflection of God's glory. Furthermore, when God passes by he tells Moses that he is compassionate and gracious, faithful and true (34:6: *hesed we'emet*), giving him an insight into the character of God. In the case of the Prologue, the 'we' speakers (vv. 14 and 16) claim that by seeing Jesus they have seen the glory, the essential character, of God himself (the fullness of his revelation). Despite the emphasis in the Prologue on the continuity between the past and present, at this point it emphasizes that the manifestation of the divine

² E. Käsemann referred to John's Gospel as embracing a 'naïve docetism' in which Jesus is said to be human but does not really appear to be a human being.

logos in flesh is superior to revelations belonging to the past. What has been received from Jesus is ‘grace instead of grace’ (1:16). The phrase *charis anti charitos* is often rendered as ‘grace upon grace’ and taken to refer to the series of blessings received from Jesus; Greek usage of the preposition *anti* indicates that it is more correctly rendered as ‘instead of’ rather than ‘upon’. If so, John is saying that ‘the grace and truth’ coming through Jesus takes the place previously occupied by God’s gracious gift of the Law, his mode of revelation through Moses. The statement in 1:17 then expresses this antithesis between the Law on the one hand and grace and truth on the other. At the same time, the phrase ‘grace and truth’ constitutes a clear allusion to God’s revelation to Moses on Sinai so that, in Johannine terms at least, the function of the Law is to bear testimony on behalf of Jesus as the personification of God’s grace and truth.

The reason for this contrast (as expressed in 1:16-17) is set out explicitly and emphatically in the final verse of the Prologue. Moses was told what God was like, and he was able to catch a fleeting glimpse as he passed by; only Jesus, however, has ‘ever seen God’ (1:18), the result of their unique and intimate relationship; only he is able to make God truly known. This verse then shifts to offer a more positive claim, although how the conviction that Jesus is the exclusive revealer is expressed here is a much debated textual issue: is the unique relationship between Jesus and God due to the fact that he is ‘the only-begotten (or only) Son’ (cf. NRSV), or, as attested in some important manuscripts, ‘the only begotten one, God’ (*monogenēs theos*)? The first, which reads ‘Son’, is certainly characteristic of Johannine christology (cf. 3:16, 18) and correlates with the description of Jesus as being in the bosom of the Father in the same verse. And yet, the principle usually adopted in textual criticism is that scribes have offered secondary clarification of what is the more difficult and original reading (in this case, ‘the only-begotten, God’). Furthermore, the reading with *theos* forms a connecting link (*inclusio*) not only with the beginning of the Prologue, where the *logos* is described as ‘God’ (‘and the Word was God’), but also with one of the final narratives of the Gospel where Thomas confesses, upon seeing the risen Jesus, ‘My Lord and my God’

(20:28). Jesus' designation as 'the only-begotten one, God' thus draws the Prologue towards its conclusion with the message with which it begun – Jesus, as *logos*, is the definitive revelation of God.

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