

Simon Ross Valentine

The Johannine Prologue—a Microcosm of the Gospel

Dr Valentine is both a minister in the Church of the Nazarene and Head of Religious Studies at Bradford Grammar School. He tackles here an important topic which, as he comments, has been surprisingly neglected in the available literature on the Gospel of John.

The Prologue: Post-script or Prelude?

Much academic ink has been used in recent years in discussing the relationship of the Prologue to the remainder of the Fourth Gospel. It has been asserted with some cogency that verses 1-18 of the first chapter of the gospel were a later addition used by the author so as to enhance the appeal of his work to a Hellenistic audience.¹ Harnack, mainly on the basis that the Logos idea is foreign to the rest of the gospel, similarly maintained the Prologue was not an organic part of the book, but was a post-script rather than a prelude.² It has been argued that the redactor responsible for the addition of chapter twenty-one may have also 'touched up chs. i-xx'.³ Lindars similarly posits the idea that the Prologue was an after-thought by John, added to the second edition of his work. Accordingly he suggests that it 'is probable that the Gospel did not originally include the Prologue' but 'as a result of reflection on his own completed work, John has felt it desirable to place Jesus in the cosmic setting of his relationship to the Father . . .'.⁴ However, although such theses are persuasive, as

¹ W. Baldensperger, 'Der Prolog des vierten Evangeliums, (1898) referred to by W. F. Howard, *The Fourth Gospel in Recent Criticism and Interpretation* (London, 1955), 57.

² A. Harnack, 'Über das Verhältnis des Prologs des Vierten Evangeliums' in *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*, 2, 1892, 213f and *The History of Dogma* Eng. trans., 1, 329.

³ A. H. McNeile, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (London, 1952), 273.

⁴ B. Lindars, *The Gospel of John* (London, 1972), 76. A similar view is held by J. A. T. Robinson, *NTS*, 9, 1962-3, 120ff.

one recent writer has remarked: 'the tightness of the connections between the Prologue and the Gospel render unlikely the view that the Prologue was composed by someone other than the Evangelist' and 'suggestions that the Prologue . . . was composed later than the rest of the book are realistic, but speculative'.⁵

Much debate has centred on the question relating to the sources that possibly lie behind the Prologue. In his seminal study, *The Gospels as Historical Documents*, Rendel Harris suggested that the Prologue was based on a hymn in honour of Wisdom, which in turn was based on the Wisdom pericope of the eighth chapter of Proverbs.⁶ C. F. Burney, in his equally influential work, *The Aramaic Origin of the Fourth Gospel*, maintained the Prologue was translated from an Aramaic original.⁷ According to Bultmann, although the Prologue can be accepted as being a part of the original gospel, the author took the Aramaic Gnostic source, termed as *Redenquelle*, containing the idea of the incarnation of the Revealer, and applied it to Christ.⁸ As such, according to the Bultmannian thesis, it is 'a piece of cultic-liturgical poetry, [possibly either a 'cultic community hymn' or, on the basis that John was a former disciple of the Baptist, a hymn of the Baptist community]⁹ oscillating between the language of revelation and confession.'¹⁰ Such suggestions are provocative and stimulating yet the issue concerning the possible sources behind the Johannine Prologue remains an open question.

John 1:1-18, the key to the Gospel

Despite the polemic nature of the issue concerning the relationship of the Prologue to the rest of the gospel, Baldensperger expressed the view held by most scholars when he stated that the first eighteen verses provide the key to the right understanding of

⁵ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Leicester, 1991), 111.

⁶ R. Harris, *The Origin of the Prologue to St. John's Gospel* (London, 1917), passim. For a survey of the views on the Logos hymn used by the Evangelist see R. E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (London, 1971), 1, 21f., and J. C. O'Neill, 'The Prologue to St. John's Gospel', *JTS*, 20, 1969, 41ff.

⁷ C. F. Burney, *The Aramaic Origin of the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford, 1922), 40. J. Jeremias, *The Central Message of the New Testament* (London, 1965), 71ff., suggests that the author uses a hymn with alterations and additions.

⁸ R. Bultmann, *The Gospel of John* (Eng. Trans., Philadelphia, 1971).

⁹ Bultmann, *op.cit.*, 14.

¹⁰ Bultmann, *ibid.*, 14, 18.

the entire book.¹¹ Similarly, Grill maintained that the themes set forth in the Prologue are to be found throughout the rest of the gospel.¹² Even if it is accepted that John has made use of a previously existing 'hymn', the author, as Sanders and Mastin suggest, 'has made of it an integral and organic part of his own work, which develops from it like an opera of Wagner's from its overture'.¹³ It is generally agreed that the first section of the Fourth Gospel contains a summation of the teaching of the entire book, teaching which is unfolded and expounded in the following chapters. With regard to one such aspect of this teaching it has been argued that 'the theology of the Incarnation is the key to the whole book, and it is that which dominates from the first line to the last'.¹⁴

The aim of this article is to show that the Prologue, if it can be reasonably assumed that the first eighteen verses of the Johannine Gospel, rather than being a later addition to the Work by an ecclesiastical redactor, or an introduction added later for pedagogic and didactic reasons, was in fact a preface used by the author as a part of the first edition of his work, the themes of which were then developed to form the core and substance of the gospel. Accordingly, the Prologue is nothing less than the theological matrix from which the themes of the gospel arise; the seed-bed of the gospel's teaching where, similar to the literary device of *sortes*, the author presents a chain of inter-locking ideas. As such the article will consist of a discussion of the salient themes of the Prologue and a consideration of how such themes are developed by the Evangelist in the remainder of the gospel.

1. The Logos

John makes it clear that he writes the Gospel so that the reader 'may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing' he 'may have life in his name' (20:31). He does this by introducing Jesus in the Prologue as the Logos and then, in a carefully selected series of signs or *semeia*, he reveals his divinity

¹¹ Baldensperger, *Der Prolog des Vierten Evangeliums* (1898).

¹² J. Grill, *Untersuchungen über die Entstehung des Vierten Evangeliums* 1, 1902.

¹³ J. N. Sanders & B. A. Mastin, *The Gospel According to St. John* (London, 1985), 67.

¹⁴ A. Loisy, *Le Quatrième Evangile* (1903), 98.

and power.¹⁵ Unlike the Synoptic gospels there is no Messianic secret and gradual awareness by Jesus of his divine nature in the Fourth Gospel. Instead there is, in the opening verses, an affirmation of the deity of Christ. With profound authority the author declares: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God' (1:1).

Although the term Logos is not used in a particular Christological sense elsewhere in the gospel, the idea of Jesus as the incarnate Word as expounded in the first section, is developed throughout the following chapters. This point is affirmed by C. K. Barrett who, in a tone of uncompromising directness argued that the author intends 'the whole of his gospel' to 'be read in the light' of verse one for 'the deeds and words of Jesus are the deeds and words of God; if this be not true the book is blasphemous'.¹⁶ The Baptist declares Jesus to be 'the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!' (1:29). Andrew, on first becoming a disciple, eagerly informs his brother: 'We have found the Messiah' (1:41). Nathanael, on realizing the perceptive insight of Jesus, confesses: 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!' (1:49). This series of confessional statements, which characterizes the first chapter of the gospel (1:29-51), then reaches a climax with the enigmatic statement of Jesus in which he implies his future exaltation as Son of Man (1:51).

Elsewhere in the gospel the divinity of the Logos is seen in Jesus' profession to be the 'only [*monogenes*] son' of God (3:16); in the declaration concerning Jesus that 'the Father loves the Son, and has given all things into his hand' (3:35); by Jesus' confession of Messiahship to the Samaritan woman (4:26); in the proclamation by the people of Sychar that Jesus is 'the Saviour of the world' (4:42) and in the fact that the Jewish authorities sought to kill him, because 'he not only broke the sabbath but also called God his own Father, making himself equal with God' (5:18).

Later in the gospel the full implications of the Logos Christology are emphasized in the cry of the crowd: 'This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world!' (6:14); in Peter's affirmation that Jesus is 'the Holy One of God' (6:69) and in the confession of Martha: 'Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ,

¹⁵ The author's selectivity is manifested by his affirmation that 'there are also many other things which Jesus did; were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written' (21:25). The Logos idea is also found in the Johannine epistles. See 1 Jn. 1:1-3, where the author uses 'Word of life' as a personal title for Jesus, and Rev. 19:13 where Jesus is presented as the Logos of God.

¹⁶ C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John* (London, 1955), 156.

the Son of God, he who is coming into the world' (11:27). Unwittingly, Pilate testifies to Christ's divine nature by authorising the placing on the cross of the title: 'Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews' (19:19). And Thomas, seeing for himself the risen Lord, and his doubts now removed, proclaimed: 'My Lord and my God' (20:28).

As well as referring to Christ's divinity, John uses the term *Logos* to emphasize the pre-existence of Jesus. In his discourse with 'the Jews' Jesus affirms this idea, and also his deity (*ego eimi* being one of the divine appellations in the Old Testament) in the confessional statement: 'Before Abraham was, I am' (8:58). Elsewhere Jesus teaches: 'I came from the Father and have come into the world; again, I am leaving the world and going to the Father' (16:28), while in the Consecration Prayer of the seventeenth chapter he refers to the 'glory which I had with thee before the world was made' (17:5).

The pinnacle of Johannine theology is seen in the declaration: 'And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us' (1:14). It is generally accepted that John presents this statement so as to refute the claims of the docetists who argued that Jesus only 'seemed' to be human. In the use of this anti-docetic polemic the author affirms to the philosophical Greek and the pious Jew that the impossible has occurred; God has taken on real human flesh. Throughout the gospel the author affirms Christ's true humanity. Jesus is presented as one who experiences genuine fatigue; thirst, sorrow and pain (4:6; 4:7; 11:35; 19:28). Therefore the erroneous reasoning of metaphysical Gnostic dualism, (that the perfect God could never come into contact with the imperfect material world), were denied. With John's use, and development, of the *Logos* idea he had proclaimed how the pagan, by faith, could have a place within the family of Israel, the covenanted People of God. The ancient barriers were down: the 'blessing' was for all nations.¹⁷ The cosmic kaleidoscope had been shaken: the former soteriological pattern had gone forever.

2. Jesus the source of eternal life

Another significant theme of the Prologue is that of life. The author, describing life in its cosmological setting, states in the Prologue how life was to be found in the *Logos* (1:4) and how this life was 'the light of men'. Throughout the Signs and

¹⁷ R. A. Edwards, *The Gospel According to St. John* (London, 1954), 30.

Discourse sources the emphasis shifts to a soteriological context and the term life becomes synonymous with eternal life. In terms of both realized and anticipated eschatology, and the already/not-yet dichotomy, eternal life is defined as a relationship between the believer and God: a union which begins, and can be enjoyed, at the moment of decision and acceptance, but is only known in its full abundance after death. 'And this is eternal life', states Jesus, 'that they know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou has sent' (17:3).

In the discourse with Nicodemus Jesus testifies that spiritual life will be granted to the one who makes the existential decision to believe. Such a believer will 'not perish but have eternal life' (3:15, 16). It is declared with urgency that the Father's will is that everyone who believes in the Son 'should have eternal life' (6:40; 12:50). In his proclamation of this salvific role of Jesus the Baptist similarly affirms how the person who believes in 'the Son has eternal life' while 'he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God rests upon him' (3:36). Adopting the symbolism of the Old Testament, the life that Jesus bestows is depicted as 'living water' which is 'a spring of water welling up to eternal life' and those who drink from it 'will never thirst' (4:7-15).

Jesus is the bestower of life for just as the Father 'raises the dead and gives them life' so Jesus 'gives life to whom he will' (5:21) and grants eternal life to those who hear 'my word and believes him who sent me . . .' (5:24). Adopting a typological methodology in which an analogy is drawn between the manna provided by God for his people in the wilderness (Ex. 16:1-36) and the spiritual food given by Jesus to all those who exercise faith (6:25-27), Jesus proclaims himself to be the 'bread of life', and those who go to him will not spiritually hunger and he who believes will never spiritually thirst (6:35). In words which, when interpreted literally, have provided the Roman Catholic Church with scriptural support for the doctrine of Transubstantiation, Jesus declared how his flesh is given for the life of the world and those who eat the flesh and drink the blood of the Son of Man, have life (6:51).

Just prior to the raising of Lazarus from the grave Jesus declares authoritatively: 'I am the resurrection and the life' (11:25). In an enigmatic manner, teasing his Jewish audience to consider both physical and spiritual existence, Jesus affirmed how 'he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die' (11:25). In another of the *ego eimi* statements Jesus presents himself as 'the

good shepherd' who, by laying 'down his life for the sheep' is able to grant them 'eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand' (10:11, 28). Throughout the Fourth Gospel the author emphasizes that Jesus is the source and fount of all spiritual life. This emphasis is most clearly revealed in Peter's confession to his lord: 'You have the words of eternal life' (6:68).

3. *Light enters the darkness*

In the Prologue the author uses Light as a symbol for the saving activity of Jesus in the process of Heilsgeschichte. Jesus, 'the true light that enlightens every man' had come into the world (1:9). With imagery similar to the metaphysical dualism of Hellenistic philosophy and Gnosticism, or the cosmic dualism of the Qumran literature, (in particular the imagery of conflict as seen in the War Scroll 1QM), the light is depicted as piercing the inky blackness of a fallen hostile world. However, although resembling contemporary usage of the Light/Darkness motif, John differs in that he presents a moral antithesis: the conflict not of a dualistic universe but of faith and unbelief.¹⁸ Despite the opposition of the cosmos to the light, the author declares triumphantly, 'the darkness has not overcome it' (1:5).¹⁹

In the discourse with Nicodemus Jesus is the light that has 'come into the world' (3:19). The rejection theme is emphasized as the author stresses that 'men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil' (3:19). The ontological difference between flesh/spirit; light/darkness or truth/falsity is highlighted as John explains the soteriological significance and the revelatory power of the light. 'Every one who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed' (3:20). In contrast however, 'he who does what is true comes to the light, that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been wrought in God' (3:21).

The reader of the gospel is left in no doubt as to the identity of the Light. Jesus stands before the crowds and proclaims: 'I am the light of the world' (8:12), those who follow him will not walk in the darkness, but 'will have the light of life.' On seeing a blind

¹⁸ G. H. C. Macgregor, *The Gospel of John* (London, 1928), 7.

¹⁹ John uses the term 'world' to refer to the political, social and economic world of men which is inherently opposed and hostile towards God. See R. V. G. Tasker, *John: An Introduction and Commentary* (Leicester, 1981), 46 and E. C. Hoskyns, *Cambridge Sermons* (Cambridge, 1938), 97-104.

man, and hearing the disciples reason among themselves as to the cause of this blindness, Jesus is recorded as saying: 'As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world' (9:5). Later in the gospel, on hearing of the illness of Lazarus, Jesus, on being warned by the disciples on the apparent foolishness of going to Judea, responds with the cryptic statement: 'If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of the world' (11:9). Possibly in reference to his own path of obedience to the cross, Jesus teaches his disciples that the person who walks according to God's will and purpose will not suffer unplanned harm while the one who does not obey God is exposed to every danger for he that walks 'in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him' (11:10).

There is a recurring note of triumph throughout the gospel as Jesus declares: 'I have come as light into the world, that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness' (12:46). Not only do believers escape the danger of life without God and gain the benefits of the eschatological gift of life, but, according to the Johannine gospel, those who believe in the light will themselves become 'sons of light' (12:36).

4. *Faith and belief*

The importance of faith and of believing as prerequisites of the acquisition of life and salvation is a salient theme in the Fourth Gospel. Belief is depicted as being the key to salvation. While addressing Nicodemus Jesus explained how 'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life' (3:16). The author proclaims with alacrity how '... to all who received him [the Logos], who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God' (1:12). John informs us that many believed in the name of Jesus (a Jewish idiom for accepting what the name proclaims the person to be) on seeing the signs that he performed (2:23). However such faith is not true faith for the Jews are criticised in that unless they see 'signs and wonders [they] will not believe' (4:48). Jesus, not wishing to be accepted as a thaumaturgist or mystagogue, states that true faith is exercised by those 'who have not seen and yet believe' (20:29). Adopting the homiletic device of *inclusio* John ends his gospel by returning to his original point, that of belief and faith. With a directness that stuns, the author states that he wrote the gospel so that the

reader would 'believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing [they] may have life in his name' (20:31).

5. *Glory and glorification*

Possibly alluding to the Shekinah, the Targumic expression for the presence of God, the writer of the Prologue declares: 'We have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father' (1:14). In his attempt to stress to the readers of the gospel his belief that the divine glory has now been revealed in the person of Jesus, the author indirectly alludes to the Righteousness of God. The image is of the theophany of Yahweh in the wilderness when 'the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle' (Ex. 40:34).

Throughout the gospel the author frequently uses 'glory' with special reference to the cross, the supreme symbol of divine grace. When Judas quietly slips out from the assembled disciples in the upper room to betray Jesus, the Son of Man is glorified (13:31). The spirit is seen as the eschatological gift, only to be given to the disciples after Christ's death and exaltation 'because Jesus was not yet glorified' (7:39). The death of Lazarus was not final, it was 'for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified by means of it' (11:4). On arriving in Jerusalem, in the last week of his life, Jesus states to the disciples: 'The hour has come for the Son of man to be glorified' (12:23). The Johannine Christ emphasises that the Son will achieve such glorification only by dying for 'unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit' (12:24).

The cross is central to the divine plan of salvation. 'For this purpose', states Jesus, 'I have come to this hour' (12:27). And by this death, according to the Johannine perspective, not only is Jesus glorified, but also the name of God, for the sacrificial offering of Christ upon the cross is accepted as a fulfilment of Old Testament scripture and the completion of Christ's soteriological mission. 'Now is the judgment of this world', proclaimed Jesus, 'now shall the ruler of this world be cast out; and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself' (12:31, 32).

The Johannine Christ criticises the Jewish leaders for they seek glory from one another yet fail to 'seek the glory that comes from the only God' (5:44). While teaching in the Temple during the

²⁰ It is generally accepted that the end of chapter twenty marks the conclusion of the original gospel with chapter twenty-one added later as an appendix: see B. Lindars, *The Gospel of John*, 618.

festival of Tabernacles Jesus states how he does not speak on his own authority and therefore he does not seek his own glory. In contrast to the religious leaders, who 'loved the praise of men more than the praise of God' (12:43), Jesus affirms that he is true for he seeks the glory of the one who sent him (7:18) and consequently it is the Father that glorifies him (8:54) and not men (5:41).

In terms similar to the Pauline Kenosis Christology (Phil. 2:1-13), where the apostle states that Jesus 'emptied himself' for a time, but then was restored to his former glory following his death, resurrection and ascension, the Fourth Gospel emphasizes the mutual glorification of the Father and the Son. The author, in direct reference to the submissive role of Jesus, and indirectly to the believer's life of discipleship, hints at the connection between suffering and glorification. In the Consecration prayer Jesus prays: 'Father, the hour has come; glorify thy Son that the Son may glorify thee . . .' (17:1). The Son, by following a path of absolute obedience, glorifies the Father by accomplishing the work which God had given him to do on earth (17:4). The Father was to glorify the Son, in his presence, 'with the glory which I had with thee before the world was made' (17:5).

The believing community is to share in the process of glorification, for, as Jesus stated, the Father is also glorified when the believer bears much fruit and so proves to be Jesus' disciple (15:8). The glory that God gave to the Son has been bestowed on the Church 'that they may be one even as we are one' (17:22). In reference to the experience of believers in the eschatological kingdom, when all will see the glory of the exalted lord, Jesus' desire is that those whom the Father has given to him may be with Jesus 'to behold my glory', glory which the Father granted 'before the foundation of the world' (17:24). The role of the Church is to have faith in, and to witness to, the Logos and thereby, as Jesus affirms, 'I am glorified in them' (17:10).

6. *Grace and truth*

One of the qualities attributed to the divine Logos is that he is full of grace and truth (1:14).²¹ The Son has revealed himself, not only physically, but also in moral terms. Similar to the divine revelations in the Old Testament theophanies, the Son has

²¹ Various scholars have suggested that John 1:14 is to be regarded as a later gloss. See J. C. O'Neill, 'The Prologue of St. John's Gospel', *JTS*, 20, 1969, 41-52.

revealed himself as being absolute truth and steadfast in character.²² The Baptist, being one who 'has borne witness to the truth' (5:33) proclaims that the testimony of the one 'who comes from heaven' is reliable for 'God is true' (3:33). Jesus' unique soteriological and eschatological role is emphasized in the self declaration: 'I am the way, and the truth and the life' (14:6). Although he is truth, Jesus reveals to the inquisitorial Pilate that he had come into the world 'to bear witness to the truth' (18:37).

The Johannine emphasis is on the liberating force of the truth. The promise is made to those who follow that, if they continue in Jesus' word, they will truly be his disciples, and they 'will know the truth, and the truth will make them free' (8:31, 32). Jesus, while addressing the Samaritan woman, describes the reverential attitude needed by any true believer, by stating: 'God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth' (4:24). Later in the gospel the reader is informed how only those who are 'of the truth' will hear the voice of Jesus (18:37). The spirit of God, the promised *Parakletos*, is the 'spirit of truth' (14:17; 15:26; 16:13) for, as Jesus taught the disciples, he 'will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you' (14:26). As well as having this didactic function we learn in the Supper Discourse that the spirit will guide the believer into 'all the truth; for he will not speak on his own authority' (16:13).

7. Israel's unbelief

The author of the gospel states how the divine Logos 'came to his own home, and his own people received him not' (1:11). This rejection motif, although not a dominant theme, emerges occasionally in the discourses of Jesus and the comments of John. The criticism is raised that, although Jesus had come in his Father's name, the Jews had not received him, but, as Jesus remarks, if another came, in his own name, they would accept him (5:43).

Similar to the Pauline argument contained in the epistle to the Romans (Rom. 11:7-10; 25-27) the author of the Fourth Gospel, by using the rabbinical literary device of midrash *peshet*, attempts to explain Jewish unbelief. Adopting *Porosis* apologetic, reference is made to Isaiah 6:10, and the words of the prophet are applied to the Jews of the first century AD. On this basis it is argued that the Jews failed to accept the Messianic claims of Jesus

²² 'Grace and truth' was a phrase used by God in his appearance to Moses on Sinai, see Ex. 34:6.

because God had blinded their eyes and 'hardened' their hearts (12:38-43). Therefore John, in language coloured by predestination, suggests that the spiritual blindness of the Jews was actually intended by God as part of his sovereign plan for the salvation of mankind.

8. *Inferiority of the Jewish Law*

In the Prologue the author makes the comparison: 'the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ' (1:17). In later chapters of the gospel John selects his material, and carefully arranges the order of events, so as to symbolize the inadequacy of Judaism in contrast to the fullness of Christianity.²³ In the marriage feast at Cana the writer clearly uses the old wine to represent the Jewish faith which only partially satisfies, while the new and better wine symbolises the new covenant of grace, the inner religion of the spirit, which fulfils and supersedes the law of Moses. Similar sentiments are depicted in the cleansing of the Temple, for Jesus, by his violent action, symbolised the radical break from Judaism and the commencement of a faith which needed not a Temple and its ritual, and where God could be worshipped in spirit and in truth (2:13-22). Jesus openly transgresses the sabbath day regulations and halakoth. With cogent logic he exposes the Jews' inconsistency concerning the application of the Torah by reminding them that they permit the circumcision of a man on the sabbath but yet are angry at him for making 'a man's whole body well' (7:21-24). As one writer has suggested, the author of the Fourth Gospel compels his readers to acknowledge that 'In Christ we have not symbol but substance, not the shadow of bliss but its reality'.²⁴

9. *Anti-Baptist polemic*

Certain groups within first-century Judaism believed John the Baptist to be either Elijah Redivivus or the promised Messiah.²⁵ A small but apparently significant Baptist group flourished for

²³ The author of the Fourth Gospel states indirectly what the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews states directly: see Heb. 3:1-13; 3:14-5:14; 10:1-18.

²⁴ G. H. C. Macgregor, *The Gospel of John*, 21.

²⁵ Apollon of Alexandria was possibly a disciple of the Baptist. The third-century *Clementine Recognitions* cites the Baptist sect as one of several groups opposing the early Church. Reitzenstein argues for a strong Baptist movement in Syria. See J. A. T. Robinson, 'Elijah, John and Jesus', *Twelve New Testament Studies* (London, 1962), 49.

example at Ephesus (Acts 19:1–11). It is possible that John, in an attempt to refute such claims, deliberately presents anti-Baptist polemic, especially in the first few chapters of the gospel. In the Prologue it is clear that John is keen to emphasize that the Baptist ‘was not the light, but [he] came to bear witness to the light’ (1:8). The Baptist testifies himself of Jesus: ‘“He who comes after me ranks before me, for he was before me”’ (1:15) and later states directly: ‘“I am not the Christ”’ (1:20). This subordinate role of the Baptizer is further highlighted in the dialogue which he had with the deputation sent by the religious authorities. When pressed for an answer as to his identity the Baptist replied with a cryptic quotation from the prophecy of Isaiah. When further pressed the Baptist informs his interrogators that one is coming ‘the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie’ (1:27). Prior to the act of baptising Jesus, the Baptist makes the supreme confessional statement in which he declares Jesus to be ‘the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world’, and then again states his inferiority with the words: ‘After me comes a man who ranks before me . . .’ (1:30). Later on, in a discussion with ‘a Jew over purifying’ John reaffirms that ‘I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him’ (3:28). The Johannine affirmation of Jesus as Messiah, and the emphasis of the Baptizer’s subordinate role, is placed beyond all doubt in the Baptist’s declaration: ‘He must increase, but I must decrease’ (3:30). The mouths of any would-be critics are silenced forever, for Jesus, although recognizing John as ‘a burning and shining lamp’, states that ‘the testimony which I have is greater than that of John’ (5:36).

Conclusion

Just as the first rays of sunlight at dawn pierce the sky, anticipating the brightness of the mid-day sun, so the Prologue puts forward certain themes which are later developed throughout the gospel. To use an image taken from the modern videoculture, the Prologue serves as a trailer, the preview, whetting the viewers interest [in this case the readers interest] as to the contents of the film [or as in this case the book]. As this brief survey indicates there is sufficient internal evidence to show the importance of the Prologue as the curtainraiser for the original gospel. As such, it is the author’s opinion, that to accept the Prologue as a mere after-thought, a post-script, fails to do justice to the theological structure and content of the gospel as a whole.

Abstract

The aim of this article has been to provide an appraisal of the nature of the Johannine Prologue. It is the writer's belief that the first eighteen verses of the Fourth Gospel were not only a part of the original gospel, but that they provide the exegetical key to the right understanding of the entire book. Accordingly it is suggested that the Prologue is a summation of John's theological stance, containing in embryonic form, the main themes, which gradually unfold and develop in the following chapters. The Prologue is therefore a microcosm of the gospel which adumbrates and anticipates the Johannine presentation of God's salvific scheme, the incarnation of the Son and the redemption of the world, providing eternal life for all those who believe.

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