The Prologue of John

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**Introduction:**

The prologue of the fourth gospel is one of the most profound pieces of literature ever produced. It’s claims are so radical, that anyone reading it is compelled to make a decision to accept or reject its claims. And this decision, according to the piece itself, will alter the reader’s status instantly, making that person a part of the realm of darkness or of light. It promises a new birth, a birth that is of God to those that believe its claims. These claims focus with laser like precision on the person of Jesus Christ. They declare that Jesus is God, was in the beginning with God, is and was the agent of the creation of all things and the source of life and light to all. They declare that this Jesus came in the flesh and lived among us displaying His glory. He is the one and only Son of the Father full of grace and truth. Those who receive and believe on Him have been given the authority to become children of God. Only He can reveal God to men.

The prologue is an encapsulated summary of the essence of the teachings of the fourth Gospel. It’s effect of Chrsitian theology has been profound and this effect continues to this day.

**The Structure of the Prologue**

The poetic structure of the prologue is readily observed even in translation and especially in the Greek.

It is easily divided into four sections with titles suggested by Beasley-Murray¹.

1. The Word and Creation (verses 1-5)
2. John the Baptist’s Witness to the Word (verses 6-9)

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3. Reactions to the Word in the World (verses 10-13)
4. Confession of the Word by the Church (verse 10-18)

C. F. Burney maintains that a retroversion of the passage into Aramaic reveals a repetitive poetic structure of couplets and triplets with explanations interspersed. According to Beasley-Murray this has been widely rejected, but the poetic hymnal quality of the passage is self evident. I have attempted to isolate the poetic sections from those which tend to be comments. If this is done the prologue reads as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Poetic Proclamation</th>
<th>Commentary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God; 3 all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. 4 In him was life, and the life was the light of men. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.</td>
<td>6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7 He came for testimony, to bear witness to the light, that all might believe through him. 8 He was not the light, but came to bear witness to the light. 9 The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world knew him not. 11 He came to his own home, and his own people received him not. 12 But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God; 13 who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father.</td>
<td>15 (John bore witness to him, and cried, &quot;This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks before me, for he was before me.'&quot;)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 And from his fullness have we all received, grace upon grace. 17 For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.</td>
<td>18 No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
From this breakout, it is evident that the poetic prologue functions as a proclamation testifying to Jesus Christ (perhaps an early creed) with an interspersed commentary on John the Baptist’s testimony to this proclamation. This lends credibility to the view that the author was specifically addressing the Gospel to followers of John the Baptist or at least to those who held him in high esteem. The prologue then leads into a more detailed testimony of John the Baptist (John 1:19-35). This structural analysis argues against the prologue being a later addition to the Gospel. The proclamatory, poetic structure interspersed with commentary sets up the next section of the gospel and lends evidence to it being one literary unit with the rest of the Gospel. Without the prologue, the gospel would start with “Now, this was John’s testimony, when the Jews of Jerusalem sent priests and Levites…..”, not much of a start for a gospel with such a powerful witness to who Jesus is.

The Function and Purpose of the Prologue

The prologue is a remarkable piece of literature for it introduces a person, Jesus Christ, and identifies this person with a concept, the Logos, which is fraught with philosophical, eschatological and cosmic implications for not only the Jewish and Greek mind, but for every culture. Because of this, the prologue is more than a preface, as in Luke’s Gospel, where he explains his purpose for writing (Luke 1:1-4). It is actually a microcosm of the Gospel itself, telling the essence of its message in a few short lines of poetic proclamation. The entire gospel message is contained in the crux of the prologue, verses 10-13. For this reason, the prologue is very much like the overture to an opera.\(^2\) It is designed to whet

\(^2\) ibid. p. 5
the appetite for what is to come, and to introduce themes that will be developed in the work itself. Its
function is to captivate and capture interest, to entice the hearer or reader to continue on. If the
prologue does not grab the reader, then the reader is not ready for the message of the gospel. It is then
as a pearl before swine. The prologue introduces profound concepts such as word, life, light, glory,
grace, truth and revelation. These concepts will captivate those looking for truth, but will bore those of
less noble pursuits. In this way, the prologue functions as a filter for those who would read this book. If
the prologue does not entice one, the one is not ready for it’s message. As Jesus said, “he who has an
ear, let him hear” (Rev:2:7).

The prologue also functions, through the commentary on John the Baptist, as an introductory apologetic
for the true nature of the relation of John the Baptist and Jesus. The Baptist was not the Christ, and
testified accordingly. He testified that although Jesus came chronologically after him, He was in fact
before (prw/to,j) him (vs. 15). So the Baptist’s testimony confirms what the prologue proclaims: the
primacy, preexistence and deity of Christ. The fact that this apologetic commentary is intermingled with
the great truths of the poetic proclamation also shows the author’s intent, at least in part, to appeal to
those who might have followed or still follow John the Baptist.

**The Logos Concept**

In all likelihood, the Evangelist wrote this gospel around the turn of the first century, some sixty to
seventy years after the resurrection. He had all this time to reflect not only his time with Christ, but also
how the truth and glory of Christ had manifested itself in the church and in the lives of thousands of
Christians. He had the opportunity to step back and in a reflective way, under the guidance of the Holy
Spirit, to write a spiritual gospel, one that paints a portrait of Christ from the viewpoint of an eagle flying
high above, able to see the whole landscape. But The Evangelist also had a dilemma. While the early
church was birthed among the Jews, the majority of its members were now Greeks who knew little of
Jewish culture and history. The other Gospels, most noticeably Mathew, were written to Jews. The
long genealogies and the presentation of Christ as the son of David, the Hebrew Messiah, made little
sense to Greeks and would have been a stumbling block to Samaritans, who had a saw Christ as
universal savior (John 4:42). How could he communicate to his diverse community the incredible truths
of Christ in terms that they would understand?

It was with a stroke of divine brilliance that the Holy Spirit inspired him to write the first verse of his
gospel. "In the beginning was the WORD, and the word was with God and the WORD was God."
The Greek word for WORD is Logos. It was a word that for both Jews and Greeks carried a wealth
of meaning. To the Greeks Logos had a connotation that goes beyond word or to the reason, rationale
or concept represented by the word. The term came into Greek philosophy with Heraclitus of Ephesus
(c.a.500 B.C.) who speculated on the unity and diversity of the Cosmos, “a unity that is ever true,
though men are unable to understand it” ³ The Stoics and Platonists saw the Logos as the mind of
God. They believed that the world was in a continual state of change or flux. Everything was changing
from day to day and from moment to moment. Yet all this motion was ordered and controlled. To them, order implied a MIND. Without a rationale mind, there would be chaos. The very existence of order was due to what the Greeks called the Logos, the word or reason of God. It was this Logos that gave order not only to the universe but to the pattern of events and of life itself.

This Logos was also stamped or imprinted on all humanity. It gave us the ability to think rationally and to reason. This Logos permeated all things and was responsible for our innate view of right and wrong.

The Greeks believed that all things were controlled by the Logos of God, the creating and directing power of God, which had made the universe and kept it going.

To the Jews a Word (Hebrew – dabar) was much more than just a spoken sound conveying a concept. It actually had it's own existence, was dynamically alive and did things. Once spoken it could not be recanted, but took on a life of its own. When Isaac had been deceived into blessing Jacob instead of Esau, he could not take it back, but realized that He would indeed be blessed. (Gen. 27:33)

In the same way, Balaam, who was hired by Balak to curse Israel, could not but bless them instead and they would indeed be blessed. (Num 23:8)

Barclay recounts a story where Sir George Adam Smith was travelling in the dessert and came upon a group of Moslems who gave his party the customary greeting "Peace be upon you". Later on they realized that Smith was a Christian, and that they had inadvertently blessed an infidel. They actually

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came back to him and asked for the blessing back again. The words had gone out and could only be returned by the recipient.

To Hebrews, God's word was the means by which creation came about. God had spoken the world into existence 'God said: "Let there be light" and there was light.' God's word was the means by which He exercised his sovereignty and made things happen.

NIV Isaiah 55:11 “so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.”

Genesis 1 presents God as speaking the world into existence. In that sense the spoken word of Gospel is the agent of creation. Israel’s wisdom literature also personifies Wisdom as an agent of creation. (Proverbs 8:22-31, Wisdom of Solomon 9:1-4, Wisdom of Jesus the Son of Sirach)⁵

The Old Testament scriptures also identify the Words of God as the law given to Moses, (Deut 4:10). The Word of God, the law, and Wisdom were concepts that to the Jewish mind were intimately linked. The Jews had also developed a concept where the Word of God became identical to God himself. Most Jews could not read the Hebrew scriptures as the language that they spoke was Aramaic, something of what modern English would be to Anglo-Saxon. In order to instruct them, Rabbis had produced translations called the Targums.⁶ In producing these, the translators could not bring themselves to attribute to God, human characteristics, so where The Hebrew read "Moses met with God", they translated it as "Moses met with the word of God". Thus the Jews of the time were

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⁵ Quast, Kevin, Reading the Gospel of John, Revised Ed. Paulist Press, Mahwah, New Jersey 1996  p. 12  
conditioned to think of the name of God and his word as one and the same. "The word was God and
was with God" would have made perfect sense to them.

The Jewish Philosopher Philo of Alexandria, synthesized the Jewish and Greek concept of the *Logos*.
He held that the *Logos* was the oldest thing in the world and the instrument by which the world was
made. It was the thought of God stamped upon the universe, and the tiller by which God steered all
things. It was the divine spark that was stamped upon every man and made him different from the
animals. It was the agent of creation, Wisdom, the divine law, fully in unity with God Himself.

So the Evangelist comes along with his gospel and declares:

“For centuries, you have been thinking and writing and dreaming about the *Logos*, the
power which made the world, the power which keeps order in the world, the power which
give men the ability to think and reason, the power by which men come into contact with
God. Now I declare to you that this *Logos* became flesh.”

Moreover, the Evangelist, goes beyond all this, and proclaims that this *Logos*, this eternal word of
God, this Wisdom, became flesh and blood, that he lived among us and He is none other than Jesus
Christ. He is the embodiment of the eternal *Logos*, the Mind of God. He is God.
The Teaching of the Prologue

The prologue summarizes the themes developed in the gospel:

1. Jesus is the preexistent agent of creation in unity with God, the Son of God who now sits at the Father’s side.
2. He is the Life and Light of the world.
3. He is rejected by His own people and unrecognized by the world.
4. Yet, as many as receive Him and believe in His name, He gives authority to become children of God, to see His glory and to receive blessings, grace and truth.
5. John the Baptist was not the Light, but gave testimony that Jesus was the Light.

The start of the prologue \(\text{\'En avrch\|h\# o\'logoj} \) (In the beginning was the word) recalls Gen 1:1 “In the beginning, God” and alerts the reader that something foundational is about to be communicated.

Whereas Genesis 1 presupposes the existence of God, the prologue identifies Him as being the Logos, being with God and being God. All things came into being through Him and without Him, nothing came into being. The Logos was the agent of the creation of everything. The richness of the meanings of Logos to various cultures has already been explored, and it’s use in this context is unprecedented.  

Whatever one understands by the concept of Logos, whether to the Greek mind or Hebrew mind as dabar, several things are clear. He existed in the beginning, He existed before creation, He created all

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things and He is with God and is God. The climax of the prologue identifies Him with the person Jesus Christ come in the flesh (vs.14 & 17). This is extraordinary. No other gospel goes this far in stating explicitly the complete unity of Jesus with God, His primacy and preexistence.

Not only is Christ the agent of creation, in unity with God, but He is the sustainer of life (ζωή). In fact “life” has its source “in Him”. He not only created all things, but is in Himself the one who keeps everything in existence. Life being “in Him” implies that without Him, life would cease, not only in the spiritual sense (re-creation) but in the physical sense as well, for all things (πάντα) includes the physical as well as the spiritual. As He is the source of physical life, so also he is the source of spiritual life. This life that is in Christ is the light of men. The Johannine gospel makes much use of contrasts such as light and darkness.

This life was the light of men (verse 4). Light is yet another recurring theme in the Johannine Gospel.

The light stands in sharp contrast to the darkness. Darkness represents the murky forces of evil, and the covering by which men lurk about and do deeds that they do not want seen. Darkness also represents ignorance. Those who walk in darkness walk in ignorance. They cannot see what they are doing, nor can they see they way out of the dungeon in which they live.

John 3: 19-20 : “This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed.”

In sharp contrast to the darkness is the light. Jesus himself declares in John 8:12 that He is the light of the world.
The Light also puts chaos to flight. When God created the world the world was formless and empty and darkness hovered over it. The command, "Let there be light" dispelled the darkness and separated it from the light. In the same was, Jesus, by His very presence dispels the darkness. Those who do evil will run from Him and will hate His name. If someone lives in a dark dungeon, even the smallest light sears the eyeballs in pain.

Light also reveals things as they really are. Those who came upon Jesus found one who could look into their very souls and see who they really were. The Samaritan woman was amazed because Jesus told her everything that she ever did. Those who come to Him are overcome by their guilt and shame. Yet His light is a cleansing light, for He came not to condemn the world, but to save the world. (John 3:17) To those who come to Him in humility and repentance, He brings not condemnation, but forgiveness.

Light also guides. Jesus is a guiding light to those who embrace Him. He directs their paths and illuminates the journey through life. Jesus as the incarnate word is the guiding light. “Your word is a lamp unto my feet and light to my path” (Psalm 119:105). In all of these senses, Jesus is the light of men as the prologue declares.

The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not understand it or overtake it (kateλaben). The sense is that the darkness was not able to master the light or to make it, its own. In this context perhaps “could not overtake it” might be the best translation. The tense on “shines” (fai̇nei) is the present
active indicating continuing action. The light (Jesus) continues to shine to this day and illuminates those looking for a way out of darkness.

It is ironic that while Jesus, the light that shines and dispels darkness for some, the world (\textit{kos\,mo\,j}) which was made by Him did not recognize Him (verse 10). Not only that, but He came into his own things (\textit{ta\,i\,d\,ia}) and his own people (\textit{oi\,i\,d\,ioi}) did not receive Him. His rejection by “The Jews” is certainly a major theme of the Johannine gospel and it appears right here in the prologue.

In juxtaposition to those who do not recognize Him or receive Him, are those (as many as) who do receive Him, who believe in His name (verse 12). To these He gave the authority (\textit{exousia\,n}) to become children of God. These are born “of God” and it is made clear that they are not born “of bloods” (\textit{a\,i\,ma\,t\,wn}) nor of “the will of the flesh” (\textit{qel\,hmato\,j sarkoj}) nor of the “will of a man” (\textit{qel\,hmato\,j andro\,j}). Thus the theme of the sovereignty of God in the regeneration of the children of God is established early in the gospel. This is developed later on in the gospel as Jesus says to the Jews “you do not believe, because you are not my sheep” (John 10:26) and also John 6:65 "This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled him.". The sovereignty of God is highly maintained in this gospel where the Father is the one who must draw the believer to Christ. Yet Jesus is portrayed arguing passionately to the Jews that they might turn and be saved “yet you refuse to come to me to have life” (John 5:40), implying that they have a free will choice in coming to Him. On the other hand, He may just be stating what already is and has been determined to be.
The theme of eternal life is not explicitly stated in the prologue although it is hinted at in the reference to those receiving Him and believing in His name becoming “children of God”. As God is eternal, so are His children. Also the reference to “life” is developed later in the gospel where “eternal life” is used sixteen times.

A major theme of the gospel is glory. The word occurs seventeen times. It is introduced in the prologue in verse 14. The author testifies that we have gazed on his glory, a reference to the children of God of verse 13. This glory is of like “the only one of its kind” (monogenou/) and could mean begotten by the Father alone (without need of a mother) or it could mean simply “an only son”. This phrase eventually became part of the creed of Nicea in 325 A.D. a testimony to the impact of the prologue on Christian Theology. The theme of glory continues in the gospel. Christ’s miracles reveal his glory. The disciples bring Him glory by bearing fruit. Jesus’ glory comes from the Father and the disciples enter into His glory. Jesus is glorified as He is lifted up. This glory comes from the Father, as Jesus comes from the Father “full of grace and truth” (verse 14).

In the prologue, grace (καρκαρί) occurs three times (14,16,17) , testifying to its importance in Johannine theology. Those who receive Him do so, not because of anything they themselves have done or deserved, but purely as an unmerited gift from God. Jesus came not to condemn, but to save. This theme rings throughout the Gospel and is introduced here.
Jesus is full of both grace and truth (αὐθεντία). The concept of truth is another major theme of the gospel, the word occurring 27 times. Here, as with Logos, Jewish and Greek concepts converge. To the Greeks αὐθεντία represents what really is, that is ultimate reality. The prologue describes Christ as full of truth. Jesus own words describe Him as the embodiment of truth “I am the way and the truth and the life” (John 14:6). In Him is life that is real. To the Jews, met represents firmness, stability, steadfastness and trustworthiness, all concepts which can be said to be true of the incarnate Logos.

Grace and truth are then set in juxtaposition to the law which comes from Moses, whereas the former come through Christ (verse 17). Here we have an insight into another major theme, which is the superiority of Christ to the Old Order of the Jewish law. This is amply illustrated in the first sign, which Jesus performs, turning water into wine. The entire episode shows on a symbolic level, the superiority of what Jesus produces: wine instead of water, in exceeding quality and quantity. The Evangelist does not comment on the law at this point in the prologue other that to imply that the law does not bring grace and truth which come through Christ.

Immediately after this comes the last sentence of the prologue: “No one has ever seen God, but God the only Son, who is at the Father’s side has made Him known.” (verse 18). The reference to Moses just made, again brings to mind Moses’ meetings with God, yet we recall that Moses’ request to see God’s

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9 ibid. p. 15
full glory was denied, he saw only the backside (Ex. 33:18-29). The prologue ends with the statement that no one has ever seen God, implying that no one ever will, except that the Son reveals (ἐξήγειρεν) Him. The word for “reveal” has the same root as exegesis and is used of how the Jewish rabbis would interpret the scriptures. Jesus is also declared to be “at the Father’s side”. Thus the prologue ends with a direct reference to the resurrection and to the exact place that Christ now holds. The readers will by the end of the Gospel have seen Jesus crucified and raised. Jesus’ own many statements of returning to the Father (John 13:1, 20:17) will confirm what the Evangelist now declares. Jesus sits at the side of the Father, and reveals the Father to those who believe in Him.

Finally, the prologue through the interspersed commentary, teaches the true role and identity of John the Baptist. His was to be a witness to the light, and not the light. His purpose was that “all men might believe” (verse 7). He also testifies to the preexistence of Christ in that, even though He came chronologically after John, He was before John (verse 15). These themes are developed early on in the gospel staring at the very next verse (19).

**Unique Contributions to Christian Theology**

The prologue’s contribution to Christian theology is profound. The use of the Logos to describe the supremacy, preexistence and creative agency of Christ put Christianity’s claims into the framework of philosophy and transcended it. No human philosophy can promise what Christianity offers, unity with God through an only begotten Son come in the flesh. It’s high Christology was unprecedented in the first century and made claims for Christ that the other gospels only hinted at. His preexistence, his unity
with the Father and His place at the Father’s side as a revealer of God to men all come loud and clear from its proclamation. The highest order of creation, Life itself is in Him. Eternal Life is offered through Him alone. Christ is not just a Jewish Messiah fulfilling Jewish hopes and dreams, but the Life and light of all men, available freely to all. And this life is not something one has to wait for, but is available now. This fully realized eschatology is the heartbeat of Christianity and it pulses vibrate through the pages of this gospel just as this proclamation rings through the prologue. The theology of salvation by faith alone, which is so much a part of the Apostle Paul’s theology sounds forth load and clear in verse 12 “Yet to all who received Him… He gave the authority to become children of God..” It also was a driving force behind the protestant reformation which had it as one of its major banners. Evangelistic theology owes much to the Johannine gospel for it’s essential message is encapsulated by John 3:16 “For God so loved the world…” and this same message rings out in the prologue in verse 12. Jesus is not only in perfect union with God, but is the revealer of God to men. The doctrine of the Trinity also owes much to the Johannine gospel and especially to the prologue, for there we see the Word with God, who is God and was sent from God, who reveals God, who made all things and hold life together. He is identified as the only begotten Son. Even the Holy Spirit is there as the light that is in Him, that shines through Him, and yet is Him, the light that reveals truth, dispels darkness and gives life to men. This light emerges through the gospel as the Paraclete, the comforter, counselor that continue to illuminate men to this day. It is only through this light, the Word incarnate, made flesh who reveals the Father, who is in the Father that men are given the authority, the right to become children of God. And all this is through faith in the name of Jesus, as this remarkable prologue still declares today. To those who receive Him and believe
in His name, he has given the right to become children of God. There is no greater gift. There is no greater Giver.

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Bibliography


