

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JOHN - PART II

THE PROLOGUE (1:1-18)

I. The Prologue summarizes the themes of the Gospel in a combined poetic and prose fashion, showing Jesus (the Word, the Life, the Light, and the Son) as the creator of the old creation and the one through whom we enter a new glorified creation.

A The Prologue may well have been taken from an ancient Christian hymn (with possible additions, especially regarding John the Baptist.) It is very Jewish in its style, both because of its parallelism and because it builds upon the notion of creation through the Word and through Wisdom, but brings these insights to completion. See Genesis 1; Proverbs 8; Wisdom 7-10.

B. The parallelism frequently takes the form of a repeated theme in successive lines, or even twice in the same line. Sometimes, the repetition is climatic, building one idea upon another, and other times antithetical, contrasting two related points. In addition, the entire prologue seems to form a sort of chiasm, i.e., a procession of themes in one direction, a central point, and then a procession of related themes in reverse order.

1. In particular, the first part of the prologue describes in succession: (1) the Word as God; (2) the Word as the source of all creation; (3) the Light coming from the Word shining on in the darkness of the world; (4) the Baptist's testimony to the light, pointing to the source of light coming into the world; and (5) the Word, and the Light coming into the world that is His own, but also the rejection of Him by many in the world.

2. It then arrives at a climax with the adopted sonship of those who accept the Word and believe in Him, which is the source of the blessings for those who believe in Him.

3. Going back down the themes, the prologue describes: (1) the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us and the rewards for those who do accept Him; (2) the clear testimony of the Baptist regarding the Word; (3) the grace of Christ restoring the world in a way that even the former light of the old order could not; (4) the grace and truth of the Word, now clearly named Jesus Christ as the source of the grace and truth of the new creation; and (5) Jesus as the Son of God who alone can fully see Him and reveal Him.

II. Thus, the first verse refers to the Word, who is with God and is God. The prologue ends by referring in verse 18 to the Son, who

alone is at the Father's side and able to reveal Him. Part of the idea is that we express ourselves through our words. God created initially through words (e.g., God said, "Let there be light,") which expressed His creative goodness, but only partially. The Old Testament indicates the power of God's word, although never so plainly revealing the Word as being the source of all the creation. See Psalm 33:6, 107:20; Wis. 18:15; Is. 55:10-11 Jer. 4:1-11. The Son is the perfect expression of God's goodness, and in Jesus, the Son become Man, God reveals that goodness as much as we can receive it. See also Rev. 19:13. The Gospel will expand on this theme, as Jesus reveals Himself to be one with the Father. See John 8:58; 10:30, 14:10.

III.. By using the phrase "in the beginning" the first two verses also refer back to Genesis 1 and indicate that the world was created in the Word and that the same Word will bring about a new creation, higher than the old. Verse 3 then picks up on this theme by saying that all things came to be through the Word.

A. This theme builds especially on two visions of the Old Testament. First, there is the creative power of God's word, which does not only declare something to be true, but makes it so. See Psalm 33:6, 107:20; Wis. 18:15. Second, the Wisdom literature describes in poetic terms the Wisdom through whom God created all things. Proverbs 8; Wisdom 7-10. However, in both cases, the word of God and wisdom are created and distinct from God. The Prologue traces their source back to the Word who is God. The hymn in Colossians likewise describes Jesus as the source of all creation, old and new, the new creation being above all the Church. See Col. 1:15-20.

B. Part of the idea in saying that all things were created through the Word is that it is in the context of divine, creative love, the love that begot the Son, that all things were made. This view, implied in the Old Testament, stands in sharp contrast to the view that creation came about by chance (as materialist skeptics would say), by sin or conflict (as Gnostics and many mystery cults would maintain) or by God's need for servants (as pagan myths often said). God's creation and love go together.

C. Verse 17 then completes this idea with a notion of new creation in the Word, whom the prologue finally names, Jesus Christ. The Law, which means both God's commandments and the order of the universe was revealed through Moses. The law was both delightful because of its order, as the Psalmist so often declared, see, e.g., Psalms 19, 119, but also above us and in many ways frightening because we could never fulfill it and would thus always fall short. See Ex. 19:6-25. Jesus bridges this gap by giving the grace to enter into the full truth of God. See Romans 5, 7; 2 Cor. 3; Heb. 12:18-24.

D. The Gospel will take up this theme of a new creation, for example, by the seven day structure at the beginning, and through Jesus's miracles, which overcome the corruption of nature. He will also declare that, through Him, we are friends of God and can see God. See John 14:1-21; 15:11-17; 17:24-25

IV. Verses 4 and 5 then build upon this notion of creation by specifying the central themes of light and life and this light shining through darkness.

A. In Genesis 1, light was the first thing created, followed by the sky and sea, and then the land. Days 4 to 6 then added life to them, through the sun the moon and the stars on day 4, the birds and fish on day 5 and the animals and finally humans on day 6.

B. The verse implies the Fall by saying that the light shines on in the darkness, indicating that darkness covers the world, but that the light of God, which was there at the beginning, still shines through. See Ps. 27:1; 36:10; Isaiah 8:23-9:6. Part of the idea is that, despite all human sinfulness, God kept the light of truth and love alive, especially, through His covenant and that covenant will now be fulfilled.

C. Verse 16 completes this idea of the light shining on in the darkness by describing that a new grace, is greater than the goodness at the beginning and more than the grace of the old covenants (symbolized by Moses in verse 17). Grace is not a typically Johannine term, instead much more common in the Pauline letters. It is very possible that St. John, knowing of this term, wished to connect the Pauline letters to his own by introducing it here, as the Book of Revelations does at the beginning and the end. See Rev. 1:4, 22:21. Grace is an active concept, which comes from the same source as the law but goes further, changing the recipient and allowing him to share in divine life. See, e.g., Eph. 1:1-14. It is not founded upon works, but must show itself in works. See Acts 4:33; Romans 11:1-10; 12:6-7; Eph. 4:7-16. This notion of sharing in divine life is certainly a strong theme of St. John, which is emphasized in the center of the prologue, i.e., verses 12 and 13. Part of the idea is that John uses the images of sonship and sharing in God's life, light and glory to express what St. Paul and others mean by grace. (St. Paul also uses such images in his writings. See, e.g., Gal. 4:1-7; Eph. 5:6-20.

D. The Gospel will then continue this theme of light and darkness, saying that Jesus is the light of the world and those who choose Him choose the light of knowledge, while rejection is based upon a desire for deception, a refusal to be enlightened by God. See, e.g., John 3:119-21, 8:12-20, 9, 12:27-36.

V. Verses 6-8 then describe the ministry of John the Baptist, although He is identified only as John.

A. This section describes the culmination of the light shining on in the darkness under the old order, and introduces the greater light and life of the new order.

B. There is a clear emphasis on both the goodness of the old order that witnessed to the light, and also on the superior new order where the light Himself comes into the world. The Gospel will continue this notion of replacement of the old order with the new especially through a series of references to the old Sabbath and the Jewish feasts.

C. John the Baptist is especially the witness (marturia) of the light. John the Baptist's witness to Christ will be an emphasis of the Gospel. See John 1:19-34; 3:22-30. Jesus says that he gave a certain level of light that delighted people, but that they were now called to a higher one. John 5:35.

D. Verse 15 makes this giving way of the old order to the new complete by explicitly quoting John the Baptist. John also calls to attention the divinity of Christ by saying, even though Jesus is introducing the new order "He existed before me." Jesus likewise later says, "Before Abraham was, I AM." John 8:58.

E. The verses that describe John the Baptist are in prose, in contrast to the poetry elsewhere. This style is not common, but is sometimes used by poets. The prophetic writings are generally in poetic form (except Ezekiel, Baruch, most of Daniel, and Zechariah) with some narrative prose often in between to give context. See, e.g., Isaiah 3, 6-8, 10:23-27, 36-39; Jeremiah 1:11-14, 3:6-10, 17-18, 7:1-8:3, 51:59-61:34; Amos 7; Haggai 1:1-4,, 12-15.

- Part of the idea in combining poetry and prose may be to represent the combination of divine and human. John the Baptist, representing human testimony, is described entirely in prose. The description of the Word begins in poetry, but switches to prose as the prologue goes on, representing the divine becoming human. Later on, in verse 12 and 13, His disciples who are to become children of God, are described in prose, but then their vision is described in poetic terms, alongside of the Incarnation, in verse 14. Part of the idea is likely to reflect the sharing in divine (poetic) life.

VI. Verses 9-11 then describes the creative light coming into the world, as well as the opposition and ignorance His presence would meet.

A. The verses play on the idea of the world and "His own." The world is presented as good and created by God, in opposition to Gnostic beliefs that the material world is evil. In this sense "the world" means the universe we can see. See also John 3:16. However, the same verse indicates there is evil in "the world" for the world does not its creator. In this sense "the world" is people and influences that do not rise above the world, but appreciate only the things they can see here and now. See John 15:18-25. In His high priestly prayer, Jesus will pray for the Apostles as they are sent out to restore a fallen world. See John 17:9-26.

B. Likewise, "His own" in the first part of verse 11 is in the neuter tense, and thus would imply an inheritance, which in the Jewish world would especially be land. However, the word for "His own" in the second part of the verse, describing those who did not accept Him, is in the masculine tense, and thus refers to "His own people." Again, there is the idea that the created realm is good and the rightful inheritance of the Son (the term used for Jesus in verse 13), but many of those in temporary charge of it refuse to acknowledge that right. There is a parallel with the parable of the landowner and the tenants. See Matt 21:33-46. In the Gospel, Jesus will restore the created realm, but still face the opposition of those in charge of it.

C. Verse 14 also describes the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us. It adds the title "only Son" to the Word, indicating that He is of the same nature and that everything belongs to Him. The phrase "only Son" distinguishes the Word from the adopted children described in verse 13. There is a subtle implication of the upcoming sacrifice of Jesus, as Isaac, the only Son of Abraham was sacrificed, and as Zechariah prophesied of a savior who would be mourned as though for an only begotten Son. See Gen. 22; Zech. 12:10. This verse also builds upon the Old Testament notion of God's dwelling (literally pitching a tent) with the people in the desert and then in the Temple, especially with reference to the Ark of the Covenant. It then describes the reward of accepting the Word and the Son, i.e. being able to see the glory of God, which the people of old could never see. See, e.g., Ex. 34:27-35.

VII. Verses 12-13 then describe those who, in contrast to the darkness of the world or people who do not accept Christ, receive Him and become children of God.

A. In the text, believing the Word, the Light, and accepting Him surround the gift of becoming children of God.

B. Anticipating Jesus' promises in chapters 3 (His dialogue with Nicodemus), chapter 12, verses 20-36 (His discourse on His death and its effects on humanity) and chapters 13 and 14 (His Last Supper discourse), these verses promise adopted sonship to

the true disciples of Christ.

C. Verse 13 indicates that this effect is first all from God, that is, from divine grace. The prologue is not denying that the human choice of whether to cooperate is irrelevant. Jesus' insistence that one must accept Him and do His will make clear the importance of cooperation. See, e.g., John 8:34; 14:10-1, 15:14, 1 John 2:29. Rather, the idea is that the invitation to life and light, as well as the ability to attain it comes from above, and cannot be gained by human decision alone. See, e.g., John 15:16.