The Introduction of the Concept of *Logos* in the Prologue of the Fourth Gospel

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Introduction

The concept of *logos* is richly presented in the Prologue of the Fourth Gospel. It is important to focus upon this majestic introduction with which this Gospel begins, and to discuss the place the significant title of the logos has in it. Sanday’s description is fitting here:

The Fourth Gospel is like one of those great Egyptian temples which we may see to this day at Dendera or Edfu or Karnak – and we remember that the Temple on Mount Zion itself was of the same general type – the sanctuary proper is approached through a pylon, a massive structure overtopping it in height and outflanking it on both sides. The pylon of the Fourth Gospel is of course the Prologue.1

The awesome nature of the Gospel of John takes its character not least for the way it starts. Matthew begins his gospel with a genealogy tracing the lineage of Jesus back to a human being – Abraham. Mark commences with a quotation from Isaiah and introduces John the Baptist while Luke outlines the divine pronouncement of the coming Messiah and circumstances into which John and Jesus were born in Palestine. John takes a different approach. He uses a cosmogony as the background for his message of salvation.

The reasons for John’s choice and manner in which he introduces his gospel have been matters of considerable debate. For some the Prologue is “a foyer to the rest of the Gospel, simultaneously drawing the reader in and introducing the major themes”,2 or “the key to the understanding of this gospel”.3 It can be maintained that in the message of the Prologue, we can find the message of salvation too, but in presenting of this message John use cosmogony as a background in a unique way. The Prologue, therefore, commences a presentation of the person of Christ, which is quite different from that of other Gospels. It is theological rather than biographical or historical in its approach. It asserts that Jesus, the historic personage known to man, is the Ultimate Fact of the universe.
The Length of the Prologue

General Opinion about the Length of the Prologue

It is generally accepted by scholars that the first eighteen verses of the Fourth Gospel constitute a division technically known as the Prologue. Here as in any other well-written introduction, the plan of the work is set out. The Logos doctrine is stated there because it supplies the key to right understanding of the history that follows. The Prologue divides naturally into the following sections:

1. Cosmological (vv. 1-5)
2. The Witness of John (vv. 6-8)
3. The Coming of the Light (vv. 9-13)
4. The Economy of Salvation (vv. 14-18)

These verses bring before us some of the great thoughts that will be developed as the narrative unfolds; the Excellency of Christ, who is the Word of God, the eternal strife between light and darkness, and the witness borne by the Baptist, the greatest of the sons of Israel. But the principal topic in these verses is the incarnation, together with its astounding sequel, the rejection of the Word by those who might have been expected to welcome Him.4

Smalley’s View

There is, however, another point of view that has been articulated by Smalley. He suggests that the whole of the first chapter of John ought to be considered an introduction to the Gospel. For Smalley “the first chapter of John as a whole, then, appears to be a microcosm of the Fourth Gospel as a whole and to summarize the entire sweep of salvation history with which it is concerned”.5 In fact Smalley’s suggestion is that the climax of the introduction ought to be considered the first of John’s Son of Man sayings: “Verily, verily, I say unto you, Ye shall see the heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man”.6

John 1 as a totality, it is being claimed, provides an important introduction to The Fourth Gospel; as a unity itself, this chapter is intimately related to the rest of John, and has a vital part to play in the Gospel’s careful over-all structuring. It summarizes and points forward to the theological material which will be treated in John 2-21: the revelation of the Word to the world (we notice the response foreshadowed in John 1:11), and the glorification of the Word for the world (see John 1:12).7

With respect to Smalley, his point of view regarding the length of the Prologue is not very widely accepted.
The Origins of the Prologue

The Prologue, the Result of the Redaction of Already Existing Material?

Some scholars have thought that the Prologue was originally separate, perhaps being composed by someone other than the Evangelist. They see it as having no real connection with the Gospel, but as adapted more or less successfully for its present position. In viewing the Prologue like this as the result of the redaction of already existing material, J. H. Bernard laid down the following criteria for this type of literary analysis. They were: (1) in accordance with the character of Semitic poetry the verse lines must be short, roughly the same length, and fall into parallel clauses; (2) as the unit hymn it must consist of statements; hence the argumentative verses (vv. 13, 17 and perhaps 18) are to be excluded; and (3) as it is an abstract statement, proper names (John, Moses, Jesus Christ) are to be excluded (i.e. vv. 6-8, 15, 17).

For Brown the Prologue was “An early Christian hymn, probably stemming from Johannine circles, which has been adapted to serve as an overture to the Gospel narrative of the career of the incarnate Word”. In discussing the formation of the Prologue, Brown asked some difficult questions concerning the particular verses from the Prologue which belong to the hymn and how was it joined to the Gospel.

In his work on John, Brown has presented a cross section of scholarly opinion. All the scholars cited regarded vss. 6-8, and 15 as secondary additions; and many would add vss. 9, 12-13, 17-18. The only general agreement was on vss. 1-5, 10-11, and 14 as parts of the original poem.

Bernard accepts: 1-5 10-11 14 18
Bultmann accepts: 1-5 9-12b 14 16
De Ausejo accepts: 1-5 9-11 14 16 18
Gaechter accepts: 1-5 10-12 14 16 17
Green accepts: 1 3-5 10-11 14a-d 18
Haenchen accepts: 1-5 9-11 14 16 17
Kasemann accepts: 1 3-5 10-12
Schackenburg accepts: 1 3-4 9-11 14abc 16

The great diversity of the suggestions about how the “poem” hangs together confirms what classical scholars are quick to point out on other grounds: these verses do not reflect the structure and rhythm of Greek poetry. Some therefore propose that the poetical features of the Prologue be explained by appealing to the poetic characteristics of Hebrew or Aramaic, on the assumption that the Prologue is a Greek translation of an underlying Semitic work. But, for Carson, the characteristics in question – parallelism of various kinds, short clauses, frequent chiasms and the like – are found throughout the prose text of the entire Gospel.
The Prologue as It Stands Written by the Evangelist Himself

J. A. T. Robinson believes that the Prologue may have been written at a later date and added on but he has no doubt that it was written by the Evangelist. Barrett also rejects the idea of a hymn and concludes: “The Prologue is one piece of solid theological writing, and that is necessary to the Gospel, as the Gospel is necessary to the Prologue. The history explicates the theology, and the theology interprets the history”. Carson also in his commentary commences his study of the Prologue by listing all the phrases and themes from it which are used in the remainder of the gospel. He points out that there are twelve terms used which appear again in the main body of the Gospel and that the central thematic words of this Gospel are first introduced in verses 1-18. For Carson, “Suggestions that the Prologue, though written by the Evangelist, was composed later than the rest of the book (as the introduction of this commentary was written last!) are realistic, but speculative”. He does, however, concede that on certain occasions the use of the words in the Prologue sometimes have a slightly different emphasis from what follows. However, it is a difference in emphasis not a difference in use and is not significant enough to add to the theory that the two parts of the Gospel are loosely attached and somewhat different in thought and approach. I believe F. F. Bruce was right when he made this statement about the Prologue:

It is certainly the work of the Evangelist himself, if we may judge from the way in which it anticipates the various forms in which the main theme of the Gospel is presented in the chapters which follow. Several of the key-words of the Gospel – life, light, witness, glory (for example) – appear in the prologue.

Comparison with the Opening of Mark’s Gospel

Lightfoot and Hooker note certain general parallels between Mark 1:1-13 and John 1:1-18, and designates both as “Prologue”. In his commentary on John’s Gospel, Lightfoot himself refers to the small differences in their opening narratives (the Markan and Johannine Prologue) to illustrate an important truth.

The Markan approach to the doctrine of the Lord’s person is said to be “chiefly by way of the Jewish messianic hope, and hope implies an attitude towards the future”, whereas the Johannine approach is said to be “chiefly from the divine side”, with the Prologue emphasizing the eternity of the Logos, and His equality with God. Hooker in her approach notes a theological distinction throughout the respective Gospels and their Prologues. If the Markan Prologue is, like the rest of the Gospel, in narrative form, the Johannine Prologue offers us something much closer to a theological discourse.
The Content of the Prologue

Bultmann’s View

Perhaps the most debated view is the idea that the Prologue is a Christian hymn, which has been adapted for use as an introduction to the Gospel. The main proponent of this approach is Bultmann. As early as 1923, R. Bultmann put forward the thesis that the Logos-hymn was originally a Gnostic composition, from the Baptist circles, which the Fourth Evangelist appropriated to sing in praise of his Christ. The analysis Bultmann undertook was based on the work of J. H. Bernard whose suggestions about the character of Semitic poetry and the short verse lines have been noted.

The form of the Prologue is not loose or haphazard, but rigid and even minor details are governed by strict rules. The construction is similar to that of the Odes of Solomon; each couplet is made up of two short sentences. Sometimes both parts of the couplet express one thought (vv. 9, 12, 14b); sometimes the second completes and develops the first (vv. 1, 4, 14a, 16); sometimes the two parts stand together in parallelism (v. 3), or in antithesis (vv. 5, 10, 11).

Bultmann concludes that “the Evangelist has made a cultic community hymn the basis for the Prologue, and has developed it with his own comments. It is further clear that in vv. 1-5, 9-12 the source spoke of the pre-existent Logos”. Bultmann further insists that it is the polemical character of vv. 6-8, 15, which deny John the authority of Revealer.

Bultmann’s assertion that the Prologue is a hymn led him to exclude verses 6, 7, 8, 15 and 17 for the following reasons – proper names are not generally included in poetry (in this case John and Moses verses 6 and 17). Clauses which are argumentative in tone need also to be excluded because these bring to the text an apologetic emphasis that again was not in keeping with poetry. In the opinion of Bultmann, the evangelist utilized a Gnostic Baptist hymn, in which the cosmology of Gnosticism had already given way to an expression of belief in the Creator-God of the Old Testament. In a similar vein Bultmann excluded references to the law as being apologetic in nature and related more to the view that Paul had of the law than with John’s aim and message.

The influence of Bultmann’s type of analysis upon a whole range of scholars may be seen in the table printed by R. E. Brown in his commentary, where he gives the reconstructions of an original hymn made by J. H. Bernard, S. de Ausejo, P. Gaechter, H. C. Green, E. Haenchen, E. Käsemann and R. Schnakenburg.

But are the proper names – Moses, John and Jesus – integral to the text or are they insertions? What significance should be attached to the phrases and Christological titles used and the themes outlined in the Prologue?
Carson’s View

D. A. Carson does not share Bultmann’s view. “The term poem can be applied to the Prologue only with hesitation [...] The great diversity of the suggestions about how the poem hangs together confirms what classical scholars are quick to point out on other grounds: these verses do not reflect the structure and rhythm of Greek structure”. In his commentary he suggests that the Prologue is not only the work of the Evangelist, but that its themes are expanded in the rest of the book. Parallelism of various kinds, short clauses, frequent chiasms and the like are found throughout the prose text of the entire Gospel. Carson’s conclusion on this point “is that the frequency of such features in 1:1-18 enables us to speak of rhythmical prose”. Dodd falls into this group and expresses dissatisfaction with the term Prologue, preferring rather to write about a “proem” and a Prologue as a means of describing what John intended at the beginning.

The Unity of the Prologue with the Gospel

The German scholar Adolph Harnack denied that the Prologue was from the pen of John. He considered that because the term λόγος does not occur in the body of the Fourth Gospel; the Prologue could not really belong to it at all, but was added to it later.

It is true that when we pass beyond the Prologue the word λόγος is not repeated. The author nowhere puts it into the mouth of Jesus. But, all the same, the doctrine of the Prologue manifestly works right through the narrative from the beginning to the end. It is very noticeable that in 20:31 where the writer reveals the motive of his work, he really sums up the great ideas of the Prologue as he declares that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing the readers may have life through his name. Many scholars, however, accept the Prologue as organically part of the book, and this for the following reasons:

The Manuscript Evidence is Solidly for It

There is not a single complete manuscript of the Gospel in existence, which begins at verse 19; all include the Prologue. It is unthinkable that this should be so if verses 1-18 was added a century or even half a century after the Gospel had been published.

At all events, when the Fourth Gospel was published and received by the Church, the Prologue stood as an integral part of it. It is for us to interpret it as such, whatever its previous history may have been.
The Similarity of Diction and Style

The diction and style of the Prologue and the rest of the Gospel are admitted by many scholars to be identical, in fact also, for many, with the Johannine writings as a whole.

The stylistic unity of the book has been demonstrated again and again as concrete evidence against this or that source theory. Even the prologue (1:1-18) and the epilogue (chapter 21) exhibit a style remarkably attuned to the rest of the book.28

The Same Themes

The same topics of the Fourth Gospel are practically all embodied in the Prologue. The key words from the Prologue like life; light and love (with their opposite’s death, darkness and hate) are key words in the Fourth Gospel too. However, the most characteristic term in the Prologue, the term λόγος does not reappear in the body of the Gospel in the sense, which it bears in the Prologue. Nevertheless, in what it says about the λόγος, the Prologue shows us the perspective from which the Gospel as a whole is to be understood. All that is recorded shows how the eternal Word of God became flesh, that men and women might believe in him and live.

The Development of the Prologue’s Themes in the Corpus of the Gospel

The embryonic development, however, of these themes is the greatest proof of organic unity. What is patent in the Gospel is always latent in the Prologue; what the Prologue enfolds the Gospel unfolds. The following parallel29 between the Prologue and the rest of the Gospel makes clear that the Prologue harmonizes with the Gospel as a whole.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Prologue</th>
<th>Gospel</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The pre-existence of the Logos or Son</td>
<td>1:1-2</td>
<td>17:5</td>
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<tr>
<td>In him was life</td>
<td>1:4</td>
<td>5:26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life is light</td>
<td>1:4</td>
<td>8:12</td>
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<tr>
<td>Light rejected by darkness</td>
<td>1:5</td>
<td>3:19</td>
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<tr>
<td>Yet not quenched by it</td>
<td>1:5</td>
<td>12:35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Light coming into world</td>
<td>1:9</td>
<td>3:19; 12:46</td>
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<tr>
<td>Christ not received by his own</td>
<td>1:11</td>
<td>4:44</td>
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<tr>
<td>Being born to God and not to flesh</td>
<td>1:13</td>
<td>3:6; 8:41-42</td>
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<tr>
<td>Seeing his glory</td>
<td>1:14</td>
<td>12:41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The “one and only” Son</td>
<td>1:14, 18</td>
<td>3:16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Truth in Jesus Christ</td>
<td>1:17</td>
<td>14:6</td>
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<tr>
<td>No one has seen God, except the one who</td>
<td>1:18</td>
<td>6:46</td>
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<td>comes from God’s side</td>
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The Purpose of the Prologue

The noun \textit{pro\,logo}, derived from the verb \textit{pro\,legein} in the sense of “to announce beforehand”, means “the statement announced in advance”. It became a technical term of literary criticism and rhetoric, and would seem to have a long period of development.

In the sixth century BC, Thespis was concerned with the drama regularly presented in lyrical odes sung by a chorus of fifty dancing round the Dionysian altar, and he broke with tradition in introducing one more members into drama, who opened the presentation with a spoken prologue. The function of this prologue was to announce beforehand the plot to the audience, although the sacred tradition of Epic dramas was already thoroughly familiar to them. The Fourth Gospel commences with a Prologue, written apparently with the express intention of placing the reader\textsuperscript{30} at the point where he can understand the story that is to follow.

In the Fourth Gospel the Prologue is a verbal scenery, giving information about coming action, introducing the main characters, stating the subject of the whole and so preparing the recipients for a true understanding of the state of affairs, which is ordained from heaven, concerning the relationship of humankind to heaven.\textsuperscript{31}

Between the Synoptic records and that of the Fourth Evangelist, there is one broad difference, evident on the very surface. The earlier writers are concerned almost wholly with the life of Jesus in its outward expression, with the actions and sayings in which He revealed his spirit. They are content to set the life before us and leave it to produce its own effect, as it did on the disciples who first witnessed it. John, on the other hand, starts from the impression, which had been made on him by his knowledge of divine life. He assumes from the outset that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God, and construes the history in the light of this assumption. Reversing the method of the Synoptists, he does not reason from the outward actions to the person behind them, but judges the work from his theory of the person. This person is Jesus, whose life on earth is about to pass before us, as a divine Person. He was one with the Logos, who had been with God from the beginning, and through whom the world was made.

Introducing the term Logos in the Prologue, John presented to the Greeks the Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ of his experience in a two-fold sense. First, as infinite God, John uses a word, the Logos, familiar to all philosophers, as meaning (a) God who is alone, infinite, absolute yet (b) who acts as an intermediary or emanation and is immanent, in earth, and mediated to every man that comes into the world. Second, this term Logos is useful to express to Greeks a Lord Jesus who is absolute and infinite. Yet the word has certain serious limitations. While indicating infinity, it did not indicate personality. John however attributes to the Logos partnership with God, deity, co-equality and consubstantiality and co-eternity with God, co-creatorship with God, Light and Life.
It is the unique contribution of the Prologue of the Gospel of John, that it reveals the Word of God not merely as an attribute of God, but as a distinct Person within the Godhead, dwelling with the Creator before creation began, and acting as the divine agent in creation. The Prologue speaks not of “the word of God” but of “the Word who was with God, and was God”. The message of the Prologue became this: the Logos is God’s life that is imparted to all living creatures. But in men and women the life that is infused into them by the Word, is more than physical. In 1:4 we are informed, “The life was the light of men”.

Notes
6 John 1:14.
20 The motive for the insertion of vv. 6-8, 15 is clear from their polemical character. For their purpose is not only a positive one of proclaiming the Baptist as witness for Jesus; it is also polemical: to dispute the claim that the Baptist has the authority of Revealer. This authority must therefore have been attributed by the Baptist sect to their master; they saw in him the Logos and thus also the pre-existent Logos become flesh. This suggests that the source-text was a hymn of the Baptist-Community. R. Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, 17-18.
22 See the diversity of the suggestions in the previous point of this chapter, *The Origins of the Prologue*.
The Prologue is a directive to the reader how the entire Gospel should be read and understood. See G. R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (Waco: Word Books, 1987), 5.

E. Harris, *Prologue and Gospel*, 16.