

## *The Prologue of St John's Gospel*

**C. K. Barrett**

*Professor of Divinity  
in the University of Durham*

**The Ethel M. Wood Lecture  
delivered before the University of London  
on 19 February 1970**

[p.3]

Most of my distinguished predecessors in this lectureship have chosen to speak on some great theme in or concerning the Bible. This is undoubtedly a proper course to adopt; I propose however to follow the alternative of directing your attention to one passage in the Bible, and attempting to make some contribution to our understanding of it. No one will complain that the passage, the first eighteen verses of the Fourth Gospel, is unworthy of concentrated study. From the time when, with what looks like an odd reluctance, the gospel emerged into public use in the second century these verses, more even than the rest of this much studied book, have been at the centre of exegetical and theological debate. Irenaeus of Lyons made substantial use of them in his polemic against the Gnostics, though he was well aware of the fact that the same Gnostics were able to use the same verses for their own purposes; and precisely the same situation is neatly illustrated by Clement of Alexandria's *Extracts from (the Gnostic) Theodotus*. Clement and the Valentinians alike draw heavily on the Prologue to establish their positions. Augustine in a very famous passage in the *Confessions* (7.9.1f.) puts his finger on the spot when he points out, perhaps not quite accurately, that much of the Prologue is to be found in Platonic writings, but adds, 'But that the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, I did not read there... those books do not have it'. Augustine has long been followed in finding in verse 14, The Word became flesh, the centre and climax of the Prologue; we shall see reason at least to question this view—it may be that Augustine was thinking as an

[p.4]

ex-Manichaeon. What is hardly open to question is the universal instinct of Christendom, which has found here the climax of New Testament Christology, itself the edge of the New Testament message.

If we are to follow Irenaeus, Clement, Augustine, and many another in Christian history, in seeing in John's Prologue a focal point of biblical theology and a foundation of Christian doctrine, we must also recognize that our age has studied the Prologue in a new way. Clement's Valentinians, for example, identified John's *Beginning* and *Only-begotten*; the Word was in the Beginning, in the Only-begotten, and as Word and Life could be identified with Christ: they brought with them their own conception of a *pleroma* of spiritual, celestial beings, and made

what identifications they could. Augustine took the Word in John to be the same Word he had encountered in 'certain books of the Platonists, translated from Greek into Latin'. Today we are humble enough to recognize that we too, as we approach Scripture, are not without presuppositions, but at least we are aware of the fact and do our best not to let them run away with us. If we cannot shake ourselves free of our own historical environment at least we do our best to concentrate on John's. This concentration naturally involves consideration of what John meant by the term Word and of the background whence he drew it: were its roots in the Old Testament or Greek philosophy? in gnosis or in Judaism? or in some combination of these? But it involves also the question: by what literary and theological processes did the Prologue come to be what we now read? Did John simply write it out as the thoughts occurred to him? Or was there some literary foundation on which he worked, a source he took over, remodelled, supplemented, glossed? This is a question that has been to some extent by—passed by recent English commentators, who have for the most part been content to take the Prologue—and the rest of the gospel, for that matter—as it stands and not to concern themselves with sources—often, indeed, to maintain that the gospel is so closely woven that it is impossible to

[p.5]

detect seams and joins in its texture. Hoskyns and Lightfoot, Dodd, Sanders, and Marsh: there is little of the analysis that we read in Bultmann, Käsemann, and Haenchen to be found here. This seems a pity. I am not saying that the non-analysts are wrong; we shall return to the question who is right and who is wrong at a later point; but I think they may have overlooked a useful tool. The purpose of analysis was laid down in classical terms by Bultmann:<sup>1</sup> 'Of course, exegesis has to explain the complete text, and the critical analysis exists in order to serve this explanation.' This vital definition has, I suspect, been sometimes forgotten, or overlooked, on both sides. The non-analysts have forgotten that analysis can serve their laudable intention of expounding the entire canonical text, and the analysts have forgotten that exegesis must in the end concern itself with this entire text and contented themselves with reconstructing a primitive form, an *Urprolog*, of which the canonical text is an inferior, bowdlerized version, which can be safely consigned to the historical museum.

I have spoken of analysis, and quoted the word from Bultmann. What does it mean? It turns upon those theological and literary questions I referred to a few moments ago. They apply to the whole gospel, but they are concentrated in the Prologue, and this will certainly provide us with problems enough. It is important to see that the theological and literary questions belong together. It is not enough to ask in general terms, What is the religious environment of the gospel? and to hunt out in Greek, Jewish, and Iranian literature the use of such terms as Word, Light, Life, Only-begotten. This is part of the task, but we must also trace out, so far as we can, the movement of John's thought from verse to verse, and from clause to clause, looking out for breaks or weak links in the argument, for joins and leaps. Purely literary questions of form must be considered too; we shall see in a moment that many recent students of the question believe the Prologue to have been written originally in verse,

---

<sup>1</sup> *Dar Evangelium des Johannes*, Göttingen, 1950, p. 4.

[p.6]

in which a few passages stand out as incongruous and inharmonious prose. If this observation is correct it provides a powerful analytical tool. We must ask also how the Prologue is related to the gospel as a whole. Some think of the Prologue as the staple Johannine proposition, illustrated at length in the narratives and discourses that follow; others think that the Prologue was written as an introductory summary, based on the main substance of the book. For myself, I suspect that this is a chicken-and-egg problem. The gospel was surely intended to be read many times—there is no other way to understand it; and after the first reading the process is a circular one. The next time I read the Prologue I shall read it in the light of my knowledge of the whole book; and when I go on to read the rest of the book, I shall read it in the light of my knowledge of the Prologue. Still, the question must be raised, and raised in an analytical, critical way. Does the Prologue really introduce the gospel as we know it? Could it have existed, did it at one time exist, independently of the gospel?

These generalities are perhaps not illuminating; it will be more useful to give specific examples of analysis. The present generation in this as in other matters stands on the shoulders of its predecessors, and the work of our predecessors is best represented by J. H. Bernard<sup>2</sup> and C. F. Burney.<sup>3</sup> I know no account of the matter clearer and more succinct than Bernard's, and it will in the end save time if I quote him at length.

‘The hymn is a philosophical rationale of the main thesis of the Gospel. It begins with the proclamation of the Word as Pre-existent and Divine (vv. 1, 2). Then appear the O.T. thoughts of the Word as creative of all (v. 3), life-giving (v. 4), light-giving (v. 5). But the whole universe (v. 10), including man (v. 11), was unconscious of His omnipresent

[p.7]

energy. He became Incarnate, not as a momentary Epiphany of the Divine, but as an abiding and visible exhibition of the Divine Glory, even as the Son exhibits the Father (v. 14). Thus does the Word as Incarnate reveal the Invisible God (v. 18).

‘Two parenthetical notes as to the witness of John the Baptist, to the coming Light (vv. 6-9), and His pre-existence (v. 15), are added. We have also two exegetical comments by the evangelist, at vv. 12, 13, to correct the idea which v. 11 might convey, that no one received or recognised the Word when He came; and again at vv. 16, 17, to illustrate the “grace and truth” of v. 14.

‘The great theme of a Divine Revealer of God is implicit in the first and last stanzas of the hymn (vv. 1, 18), the rest being concerned with the method of the revelation.

---

<sup>2</sup> *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to St. John*, Edinburgh, 1928. Quoted by permission of the publishers, T. & T. Clark.

<sup>3</sup> *The Aramaic Origin of the Fourth Gospel*, Oxford, 1922.

‘The Hebraic style of the hymn is plain. The repetition in the second line of a couplet of what has been said already in the first line (vv. 3, 5); the elucidation of the meaning of the first line by the emphatic word being repeated in the next (vv. 4) 5, 11, 14), which provides an illustration of what has been called “climatic parallelism” (cf. Ps. 29.5; 93.3); the threefold repetition in the first three lines of v. 14, all of which involve the bodily visibility of the Logos—sufficiently show that the model is not Greek but Hebrew poetry.

‘It will be noticed that the hymn moves in abstract regions of thought. The historical names—John, Moses, Jesus Christ—are no part of it: they are added in the explanatory notes of the evangelist. Nevertheless, v. 14 states an historical fact, and points to an event in time; but the history is told *sub specie aeternitatis*’ (op. cit., p. cxlv).

This produces a Prologue-source made up as follows: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 10, 11, 14, 18. John’s additions to it have to some extent changed its character. C. F. Burney’s reconstructed source ran in couplets as follows: 1a1b; 1c2a; 3a3b; 4a4b; 5a5b; 10b10c; 11a11b; 14a14b; 14c14d; 14e16a; 17a17b. This is similar to Bernard’s selection, but not identical with it. Both retain 1-5; both omit 6-9; Burney drops 10a, which

[p.8]

Bernard retains; both retain 11, but drop 12 and 13; both retain 14, and omit 15. Thereafter they diverge: Bernard omits 16, 17, but retains 18; Burney includes 16a, 17, but omits the rest. There is a further important difference, in that whereas Bernard is content to describe his source rather vaguely as ‘Hebraic’, Burney sets out to prove in detail that his was written originally in Aramaic couplets.

In the analysis of the Prologue no one has more subtly combined purely formal considerations with considerations based on content than R. Bultmann.<sup>4</sup> The end result does not differ widely from Bernard’s, but the argumentation is closer, and Bultmann sees in the source of the Prologue as he reconstructs it part of the *Offenbarungsreden* (Revelation discourses), the source which he believes to underlie the discourse material in the gospel as a whole. The ‘chain’ or ‘step’ form of parallelism carries one through the first five verses, where one line is linked with the next by the repetition of a word; for example,

In the beginning was the Word,  
And the Word was with God.

It is true that verse 2 is only doubtfully supported by this observation, and may not come from the source. Verse 9 (which neither Bernard nor Burney would have in his source) is linked with verse 10 by the word *world*; 11a and b are linked by *own*, 11 and 12 by *receive*, 14a and b by *glory*, 14b and 16 by *full—fullness*. Already it appears that verses 6, 7, 8, 13, 15 disturb the sequence. So much for formal, literary analysis. Study of the contents, of the line of thought, of the

---

<sup>4</sup> In addition to the Commentary (note 1) see especially ‘Der religionsgeschichtliche Hintergrund des Prologs zum Johannes-Evangelium’, ΕΥΧΑΡΙΣΤΗΡΙΟΝ, *Festschrift Hermann Gunkel*, Göttingen, 1923, 2.3-26.

Prologue leads to a similar conclusion. The turning-point of the Prologue is verse 14, which speaks of the incarnation of the Logos: the Word became flesh. Up to this point, therefore, we must have been dealing with the pre-existent Logos. In the first five verses this is clear enough; but what of verse

[p.9]

11 (he came to his own home) which appears to refer to the historical coming of Christ to Israel? But it is verses 6-8 that make verse 11 refer to a historical event, the ministry of Jesus ushered in by the testimony of the Baptist; leave out verses 6-8, and verse 11 will refer back to verses 3, 4, and in consequence take on a different meaning, no longer determined by the historical reference to John the Baptist but by the eternal being and properties of the Logos. By arguments such as these Bultmann arrives at a source constituted as follows: 1, (2), 3, 4, 5, 9, (10a), 10b c, 11, 12) 14, 16. He accepts Burney's theory of an Aramaic origin for the source as he reconstructs it, and uses it to save the poetic character of the material where it might otherwise disappear. Thus in verse 12, He gave them authority to become children of God, the word authority is superfluous to the rhythm; it was added, Bultmann thinks, when the Semitic idiom, 'He gave to become', that is, 'he caused to become', was turned into Greek. But what is specially to be noted in Bultmann's work is the combination of literary and theological analysis. This has been, on the whole, continued by those who have been critical of Bultmann's work.

Of these, the only one whose work I can attempt even briefly to summarize is E. Käsemann.<sup>5</sup> On the literary side, Käsemann differs from Bultmann on two major points. He considers that the Aramaic origin of the material in the Prologue has not been demonstrated with sufficient cogency to justify the use which (as we have just seen) Bultmann makes of it. It cannot be used, for example, to save the poetic structure of verse 12; and the same is true of verse 9. This means that these two verses immediately fall under suspicion as supplements to the original poetical Prologue. And, secondly, Käsemann observes that the formal characteristics (especially step parallelism) that are so marked in verses 1-5 do not recur, at least to anything like the same extent, in verses 14-18. There is thus a *prima facie* literary case for

[p.10]

separating verses 14-18 from the earlier part of the Prologue and this observation will lead to Käsemann's most important theological dispute with Bultmann. Before we reach the theology, however, two further observations are called for. Verse 13 is to be excluded from the source on account of its prose style—it is a prose gloss on the meaning of regeneration; and verse 9 is an insertion designed to link the interpolated John the Baptist material (like Bernard, and most students, Käsemann regards verses 6-8 as no part of the original Prologue) with the main theme—by denying explicitly that the Baptist is the Light it becomes possible to return to the Logos who is the true Light. There is now not very much of the Prologue left. What remains may be divided into two strophes. The first consists of seven lines (or eight, if verse 2 is included): 1

---

<sup>5</sup> 'Aufbau and Anliegen des johanneischen Prologs' in *Exegetische Versuche and Besinnungen* II, Göttingen, 1964, pp. 155-80.

a, 1b, 1c, (2), 3a, 3b, 4a, 4b; and the second consists of seven lines: 5a, 5b, 10a, 10b, 10c, 11a, 11b. Of verse 12 Käsemann says that it may be regarded as the 'crown of the whole' (op. cit., p. 168). This comment is intended, I suppose, to be taken both formally—a couplet rounding off the two strophes—and theologically. The movement of thought is completed by the rebirth of believers as the children of God.

This analysis provides the key to the evangelist's intention and thus to the theological interpretation of the Prologue. The evangelist's most important editorial action is to provide the hymn as he found it with a postscript consisting of verses 14-18. From this observation two deductions are drawn. (1) Since the hymn—which Käsemann believes to have been already Christian before John edited it—was already complete with verse 12 there must have been before this point a reference to the incarnation, or rather to the entry of the Logos into the world; apart from the 'became flesh' of verse 14 there is no specific justification for speaking of this entry as incarnation. The entry is to be found in the second strophe, in verses 5, 10, 11. 'The verb in verse 5 is not timeless, but, as in the excellent parallel in 1 John 2.8, has the ring of the present' (op. cit., p. 166). (2) Since the

[p.11]

decisive entry of the Logos into the world has already been dealt with before verse 14 is reached, this entry cannot be the main theme of verse 14. Bultmann (and, *mutatis mutandis*, one could add the name of Augustine, and not a few others) therefore is wrong in laying so much stress upon the paradox and offence of 'the Word became flesh', of the assertion that the Revealer appeared in stark humanity. It was not John's intention to underline this paradox. The assertion that the Word became flesh does not mean the proposition—startling and paradoxical enough in a gnostic context—that the revelation was veiled under the cloak of human existence, but rather that the revelation found appropriate means of becoming visible, of communicating itself. The stress lies not here but on the next clause, We beheld his glory. The way is open, one may remark, for the Johannine docetism which Käsemann argues more fully in his book<sup>6</sup> on John 17.

Time forbids me to go into more detail, or to cast the net wider. Those who desire more detail must go to the books and articles, those who desire a wider sweep to the commentaries of R. E. Brown<sup>7</sup> and R. Schnackenburg.<sup>8</sup> These two authors, in addition to providing valuable summaries of the views of others, have their own reconstructions of the Prologue source. Brown, for example, envisages a source of four strophes

- |                |                                    |
|----------------|------------------------------------|
| 1. Verses 1, 2 | The Word with God                  |
| 2. 3-5         | The Word and creation              |
| 3. 10-12b      | The Word in the world              |
| 4. 14, 16      | The community's share in the Word. |

---

<sup>6</sup> *Jesu letzter Wille nach Johannes 17*, Tübingen, 1966.

<sup>7</sup> *The Gospel according to John (i-xii)*, New York, 1966.

<sup>8</sup> *The Gospel according to St John*, vol. 1, London etc., 1968.

The remaining pieces, supplements made at later stages, are the following:

1. Verses 12c-13 added to explain how men become God's children

[p.11]

2. Verses 17, 18 added to explain 'love in place of love' (*charin anti charitos*, verse 16)
3. 6-9, 15 material about John the Baptist, perhaps originally the opening verses of the gospel, displaced when the Prologue was added

Schnackenburg finds the original Prologue in verses 1, 3, 4, 9, 10, 11, 14, 16 (with the omission of a few words).

I have given so much detail (and wish I could have given more) partly as a point of departure for a somewhat different treatment, and partly because I believe (as I have said) that the work of such men as Bultmann, Käsemann, Haenchen,<sup>9</sup> and Schnackenburg has been neglected to the impoverishment of current English work on John. This does not mean that I think it should be blindly followed: far from it. We have much to learn from it, especially from the rigorous discussion of the line of thought that runs through the Prologue—with, or without, interruptions. But my next step is to challenge two widely held critical views about the background of the Prologue.

The first is the Aramaic origin of the Prologue (or of the original parts of it). This is indeed not a universally held opinion. We have seen that it was maintained by Burney and Bultmann. It was denied by Käsemann, who in this is joined by J. Jeremias.<sup>10</sup> Brown makes no attempt to settle the question; 'the evidence is not conclusive' (op. cit., p. 23). A lecture of this kind is hardly the place for detailed linguistic discussion, and a few observations must suffice. None of the alleged Semitisms is convincing; an equally convincing, or more convincing, explanation that does not resort to a hypothetical Aramaic original can be found in every case, and there are several sentences that are undoubtedly Greek rather than Semitic in conception. An outstanding example

[p.13]

of this is to be found in verse 11 (universally, I think, allowed to be part of the original Prologue), where the evangelist says that the Word came to his own home (*ta idia*, neuter plural), and his own people (*hoi idioi*, masculine plural) did not receive him. This variation in gender cannot be expressed in Aramaic (which can only use *dileh* in each case). It is worth noting that the Syriac New Testament quite fails to make John's point here. In the next verse commentators have been exercised by the statement that to believers the Word gave authority to become (*edoken exousian genesthai*) children of God. Bultmann (as we have seen) wished to excise 'authority', which he thinks spoils the rhythm, as a Greek addition to the Semitic idiom 'he gave to become', that is, 'he caused to become'; others have seen in *exousia* followed by the infinitive a Semitic turn of

---

<sup>9</sup> 'Probleme des johanneischen Prologs' in *Zeitschrift für Theologie and Kirche*, 60, 1963, pp. 305-34.

<sup>10</sup> *The Central Message of the New Testament*, London, 1965, p. 74: 'almost certainly composed in Greek'.

speech. It is in fact neatly paralleled by the plain Greek of *Corpus Hermeticum* 1.28: Having authority to partake (*exousian... metalabein*) of immortality. The use of periphrastic tenses, and of *casus pendens*, is by no means exclusively Semitic.

The Prologue as a whole is written in extremely simple Greek, Greek so simple that it seems almost naive. This has been regarded as a mark of Semitic origin, but it is not so. Greek is indeed capable of the utmost refinement and complication; but not every Greek was a Thucydides, and there is also very simple Greek. I have in mind not so much the personal letters of the papyri as that solemn, religious, hieratic Greek, to be found in some inscriptions, in religious and magical papyri, and in literature such as the Hermetica. The language of the Prologue belongs to this category; it is not necessarily Semitic because it is simple.

The second widely held view that I propose to query is that the Prologue, at least in its primitive form, was written in verse. This proposition has been so frequently repeated that it is almost universally accepted without question. It is true that Haenchen speaks of 'free rhythms', but without denying that verse of a kind is used, and when J. N. Sanders says that 'the Prologue is written in rhythmical prose,

[p.14]

though it does not seem possible to arrange it in any generally acceptable metrical scheme'<sup>11</sup> he does not develop the point in relation to critical reconstructions. It is a point well worth developing.

I had occasion long ago to point out<sup>12</sup> that Burney and J. Weiss give quite different reconstructions of the supposed poetical source. Käsemann has retorted (op. cit., p. 162) that an observation of this kind is not an adequate refutation of the general theory that such a source once existed. In this he is quite right, and I never supposed that merely to point out the disagreement was logically a disproof. It is possible that Burney was right and Weiss wrong; it is possible that Burney was wrong and Weiss right; it is possible that both were wrong, and yet that a poetic structure that escaped them both was in fact there. Logical refutation was not and is not the point; the point is that when scholars of such distinction as Burney and Weiss look at the same material, and one of them describes it as poetry and the other as prose, one begins to question their terms, their definitions, and the distinctions they are attempting to draw. This doubt is increased when one looks at the instructive table on p. 22 of Brown's Commentary, where the views of eight scholars (Bernard, Bultmann, De Aulsebrook, Gaechter, Green, Haenchen, Käsemann, Schnackenburg) are set out. If we combine their views a maximum of thirteen verses are ascribed to the poetic source (1-5, 9-12, 14, 16-18); the minimum figure, of verses which all are agreed in ascribing to the poetic source, is five (1, 3, 4, 10, 11). The list includes the names of some of the greatest living New Testament scholars; yet in this instance they do not appear to be much clearer about the distinction between prose and verse than Moliere's *Bourgeois Gentilhomme*.

---

<sup>11</sup> *The Gospel according to St John*, edited and completed by B. A. Mastin, London, 1968, p. 67.

<sup>12</sup> *In The Gospel according to St John*, London, 1955, p. 126.

What in fact is meant by verse in this context? In any other field of Greek literature we should know precisely what

[p.15]

was meant by verse. Greek verse is an art-form that follows very precise prosodical rules, which are based not upon stress but upon quantity; it consists, that is, of regular patterns of long and short syllables. It is immediately evident that there is no verse of this kind in John's Prologue, no regular configuration of quantity. When it is claimed that the Prologue is written in, or based on, verse, a different kind of verse is in mind—radically different, since, like the verse that recent generations of scholars have detected in the Old Testament, it is based not on quantity but on stress. But were the Greeks aware of the existence of this kind of verse? The answer to this question is, I think, No; not even Hellenistic Jews seem to have been aware of it. Josephus, for example, knew that according to the Torah Moses had uttered songs, but in order to give to Greek readers the right impression he was obliged to describe the songs of Ex. 15 and Deut. 32 as written in hexameters (*Antiquities* 2.346; 4.303); similarly he knew that David must be described as the composer of songs and hymns, and said that he wrote in various measures, sometimes trimeter, sometimes pentameter (*Antiquities* 7.305). Nothing could be further from the truth; but nothing else would have conveyed anything like the right idea to a Greek. We may compare Philo's account of the hymns of the Therapeutae; these, he says, were in all kinds of metres, 'hexameters and iambics, lyrics suitable for processions or in libations and at the altars, or for the chorus whilst standing or dancing, with careful metrical arrangements to fit the various evolutions' (*De Vita Contemplativa* 29, 80; F. H. Colson's translation).

Hellenistic Jews, and Christians too, may well have used Greek metres on occasion; they probably also used prose. Antiquity in general found no difficulty in singing prose, and this is what early Christian hymns, from 'O gladsome Light' to the *Te Deum*, for the most part were. This means that the only way in which the poetic structure—in any serious sense of the adjective—of the Prologue can be saved is to maintain that it represents not Greek but Semitic verse, based not on

[p.16]

quantity but on stress; and five reasons make it very difficult to believe this. (1) The Hebrew verse of the Old Testament was 'discovered' by Robert Lowth in 1753 (the date of his *De Sacra Poesi Hebraeorum Praelectiones Academicæ*); most earlier users of Hebrew, for example in the New Testament period, do not seem to have been aware of it. Prose and verse, notably the Shema, the Eighteen Benedictions, and the Hallel Psalms, were all sung in the synagogue in the same way.<sup>13</sup> (2) As we have already seen, Josephus and Philo did not recognize what we call Hebrew verse as having a distinctive pattern and principle of its own. (3) Nor did the LXX translators, who 'seem to have no sense of rhythm',<sup>14</sup> recognize this. When, exceptionally, it was

---

<sup>13</sup> H. L. Strack and P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud and Midrasch*, Munich, 1922-61, vol. 4, p. 394.

<sup>14</sup> H. B. Swete, *An Introduction to the Old Testament in Greek*, revised by R. R. Ottley, Cambridge, 1914, p. 299.

recognized, apparently by the translators of Proverbs, and perhaps of Job, they showed their recognition not by reproducing the form of the Hebrew verse but by including rough hexameter and iambic lines.<sup>15</sup> (4.) Most important of all is the fact I have already mentioned though I have in this lecture no time to demonstrate it: that the case for a Semitic original of the Prologue will not stand. (5) Completing the inference to be drawn from this is the fact that we can see how from time to time Greek prose falls into a form which if it occurred in Scripture might easily be claimed as both poetic and Semitic. Of this I cite as an example the great hymn at the end of the Poimandres (*Corpus Hermeticum* 1-31f):

Holy is God, the Father of all things.  
Holy is God, whose will is performed by his own powers.  
Holy is God, who wills to be known, and is known to his own.  
Holy art thou, who by the Logos hast constituted what exists.

[p.17]

Holy art thou, of whom all nature has become the image.  
Holy art thou, whom nature did not form.  
Holy art thou, who art stronger than every power.  
Holy art thou, who art greater than all excellence.  
Holy art thou, who art better than praises.

This is not Semitic, and it is not verse; it is a prose hymn, whose short lines are determined by reasons of content rather than form.

With this I return to the Prologue. It is impossible to draw the kind of dividing line that might enable the reader to assign some verses to a source written in poetry, and others to a prose-writing evangelist. We may ask whether there are breaks in sense, which would lead us to suspect the activity of a more or less unintelligent editor; but this is a matter of exegesis. And we may inquire why in some passages the evangelist was moved to more lyrical expression than in others. The reason for this is not hard to find; and it leads me to the next point of development in this lecture.

A little while ago I referred to the considerable measure of disagreement manifested by the eight authors whose analyses of the Prologue are tabulated by R. E. Brown. All eight, however, are agreed in omitting verses 6-8, 15, which deal with the witness of the Baptist. These verses, says one author after another, are prose insertions in a poetical Prologue. But if I am right, this is an impossible distinction. In fact, these verses are more rhythmical than is often allowed, and can be set out in parallel couplets:

There came a man, sent from God,  
His name was John.  
He came to bear witness of the light,

---

<sup>15</sup> H. St. J. Thackeray, *The Septuagint and Jewish Worship*, London, 1921, p. 13; S. Jellicoe, *The Septuagint and Modern Study*, Oxford, 1968, p. 317.

That through him all men might believe.  
This John (*ekeinos*) was not the light;  
He came to bear witness of the light.

If they are less rhythmical than the rest, it is because they stand closer to the old tradition. This is especially true of verse 15. With these observations in mind, and in the hope of

[p.18]

throwing some fresh light on a disputed subject, I propose to begin with these references to John the Baptist. It has been almost universally supposed that they are interpolations, not belonging to the original form of the Prologue. Let us see how we fare if, instead of treating them as later supplements, looked at last of all (if looked at at all), we begin with them.

It is often said that John's handling of the traditional material about the Baptist was influenced by his desire to refute the beliefs of a Baptist sect, which made higher claims for their master than an orthodox Christian could accept. John, the sect alleged, was the Messiah; the gospel makes him affirm that he is not (1.20). Some who believe that the present Johannine Prologue was founded upon an earlier hymn believe that hymn to have originated in the Baptist sect, so that its present form represents an appropriation by a Christian of a hymn to John the Baptist as the Logos, in which verses 6-8(9), 15 were inserted in order to make it clear that the Baptist was now to be regarded not as the central but as a strictly subordinate figure. There may well be truth in the view that the evangelist had among his interests that of combating a Baptist group. It is true that the evidence for the existence of such a group is not quite so definite as has been thought;<sup>16</sup> Käsemann, for example, is probably right in seeing theological and ecclesiastical rather than simply historical motivation behind the reference in Acts 19.1-7 to a group of disciples in Ephesus who are said to have received only John's baptism, and to know nothing of the gift of the Spirit. Nevertheless, evidence for a persisting group of disciples of John does exist, and it is quite reasonable to suppose that John the Evangelist disagreed with them, and took the opportunity of writing a gospel to say so, though of course this in itself does not require a literary theory of prose interpolations into a primitive Prologue. This is, I say, a reasonable view, but it is scarcely adequate to

[p.19]

explain what the evangelist says. For example, it does not explain why the evangelist makes John deny not only that he is the Messiah but also that he is Elijah (1.21), an identification made in the earlier tradition—in so many words in Matthew (17.13), and by very clear implication in Mark (9.13) and Luke (1.17). Nor does it explain why the evangelist lays so much stress on the testimony of John, who not only repeats the synoptic saying about the One who comes after him (1.27, 30), but also bears witness to Jesus as the Lamb of God (1.29, 36), and as the one who

---

<sup>16</sup> I may refer here to an unpublished Durham thesis (*Disciples of John the Baptist: an examination of the evidence of their existence, and an estimate of their significance for the study of the Fourth Gospel*) by J. H. Hughes.

baptizes with the Holy Spirit (1.33), and is as much superior to the Baptist as the bridegroom to the groomsman (3.29).

We should at this stage recall that if there existed a Baptist sect, which (from the Christian point of view) overrated John, there was also in the second century an opposite tendency. The anti-Baptist movement has far stronger historical attestation, and must have been more numerous, than the pro-Baptist. Marcion was one of its leaders. He appears to have taken Luke 7.23 (Blessed is he who is not offended in me) to mean that John the Baptist was offended by Jesus: Tertullian writes (*Adversus Marcionem* 4.18), John is offended when he hears of the miracles of Christ, as if they were those of a strange god (*Scandalizatur Johannes auditis virtutibus Christi ut alterius*). Anti-Marcionite writers insist, against both the literary and the theological criticism of Marcion, that John the Baptist belongs to the beginning of the Gospel (and incidentally to its completion too). The anti-Marcionite prologue to Luke includes the words: We have received therefore as most essential, right at the beginning, the birth of John, who is the beginning of the Gospel. He was the Lord's forerunner and partner both in the perfection of the Gospel and in the experience of baptism and in the fellowship of the Spirit. The Muratorian Canon reflects the same concern, though less emphatically: (Luke) begins to write from the birth of John. Evidently in the latter half of the second century orthodox writers over against Marcion had to insist on John the Baptist's place in the Gospel, a place

[p.20]

that was typified for them by his appearance 'in the beginning' of Luke's gospel—the record of his conception and birth interlocking with that of Jesus, his ministry immediately preceding and linked, through baptism and the Spirit, with that of Jesus.

The Fourth Evangelist has been seen by some as standing on, though not far along, the same road as Marcion. Harnack, in a passage that strikingly anticipates Käsemann's 'Johannine docetism', writes: 'In the conversation of Jesus with the Samaritan woman, John, going far beyond Paul, sets both Jewish and heathen worship over against the new worship in Spirit and in truth as essentially similar and equally false; like Marcion, he can make Jesus say that all that came before him were robbers and murderers; like Marcion, he excludes the proclamation of grace and truth from the Old Testament—all Moses proclaimed was the law. But further: we are on the road to Marcion when John (although Matthew and Luke had already written their gospels) considers it superfluous to speak of the birth of Christ, when he moreover depresses the significance of the baptism of Christ to a sign which is supposed to have been given to the Baptist, and when, though he does indeed proclaim the message, "The Word became flesh", he yet treats the human element in Christ as a shadowy apparition'.<sup>17</sup> Cullmann sets the evangelist on a somewhat different line of development: 'Only the *Preaching of Peter*, which has preserved the gnostic ideas in their purest form, and, in this respect, is even more closely connected with baptism than the Gospel of John, takes the final step. It attacks the person of John himself. While in the Synoptic Gospels John is

---

<sup>17</sup> *Marcion: das Evangelium vom fremden Gott*, Leipzig, 1921, p. 238.

still a prophet, and in the Fourth Gospel this title is refused him, in the Preaching of Peter he becomes a false prophet'.<sup>18</sup>

Both Harnack and Cullmann have, I think, drawn attention to interesting phenomena, and have placed the Fourth

[p.21]

Evangelist's handling of John the Baptist in illuminating contexts; they have not however got the picture in true perspective and focus. It is true that in the Fourth Gospel John denies that he is the Christ; but no Christian ever believed that he was, since by definition the Christian knew that the role of Messiah was filled by Jesus and no other. Here John the Evangelist stands on precisely the same ground as Matthew, Mark, and Luke; there is no progressive denigration of the Baptist in this. It is also true that in the Fourth Gospel John is made to deny that he is Elijah, and here this gospel is in contradiction with the others. This however is not to say that the figure of the Baptist is being lowered in estimation; it may be that the evangelist's intention is the reverse of this. When the Baptist denies that he is Elijah (1.21) he goes on to claim (1.23), in the words of Isa. 40.3, that he is 'the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord'. This comes near to saying that the Baptist is himself the voice of the Old Testament, the witness to salvation (4.22; cf. 5.46), the agency responsible for making the unique coming of the Lord intelligible (cf. 1.7, That through him all men might believe). The parallel between John the Baptist and the Old Testament is closest in 5-35, 39 (especially if A. T. Hanson<sup>19</sup> is right in thinking that the imagery of 5.35 is based on Ps. 132, and that John is being described, in terms of that Psalm, as a 'lamp for my anointed', a witness to the true light). The Jews drew religious delight from John's ministry, as they also enjoyed searching the Scriptures; yet they would not pay attention to him to whom both John and the Scriptures pointed them.

To depict John the Baptist as a summary, a crystallization of the Old Testament, and, if we may follow Hanson so far, of the Jewish cultus too, is certainly not to yield to the claims of a Baptist sect which regarded John as himself the Messiah, the true light; yet at the same time it yields to neither Marcionite nor Jewish Christian denigration of John, but rather maintains the synoptic position that outside the

[p.22]

kingdom of God, apart, that is, from all that came into the world in and through Jesus, there is none greater than John, but that anything that falls within the area of fulfilment is necessarily greater than that which is being fulfilled (Matt. 11.11; Luke 7.28). Having gone so far we can take a further step. The Old Testament, and still more clearly the Jews, stand in a curiously ambiguous position in the Fourth Gospel. On the one hand, the Scripture cannot be broken (10.35), and salvation is of the Jews (4.22). Yet the Jews are the enemies of Jesus, and they have made of their law one that decrees that he ought to die (19.7). This, in the evangelist's view, is

---

<sup>18</sup> *Le Problème littéraire et historique du Roman Pseudo-Clémentin*, Paris, 1930, p.240.

<sup>19</sup> *Studies in the Pastoral Epistles*, London, 1968, pp. 12ff.

what happens when the people of God choose to regard themselves and their sacred writings as complete in themselves, so that, in their own estimation, they are free, they have light and can see, they have life. When this happens, it is not the fault of the Old Testament; it is the fault of those who misuse it. In the same way, if John the Baptist is regarded as himself the true and primary light, the fault is not his. When not misused, the Old Testament and John have positive and abiding value; yet, despite themselves, they can be, have been, and are misused, and it is therefore necessary to fence them about with some strict negatives.

This happens in the course of the gospel—every time, perhaps, that John is mentioned. In chapter 1 he denies that he is the Christ, Elijah, or the prophet, and affirms his unworthiness over against the Coming One; in chapter 3 he describes himself as the groomsman, not the bridegroom; in chapter 4 he makes and baptizes fewer disciples than Jesus; in chapter 5 he is the secondary, derivative light. It happens also in the Prologue, to which, with this observation, we may return.

What the Prologue says about John the Baptist is a summary of the extended narrative treatment in chapters 1, 3, 4. In 1.15 later material is actually quoted in an awkward manner which evidently presupposes that the reader of the Prologue must be familiar with the narrative that follows

[p.23]

This is he of whom I said, He who comes after me has come to be before me, for he was before me. John bears witness, he points away from himself, he points to Christ. This however is done, in the Prologue, not in narrative but in theological terms. The narrative is indeed presupposed, and the words of the Prologue would—even in verses 6-8—make little sense to one who did not know it; but the Prologue itself contains (to borrow a phrase) only the ‘that’ and not the ‘what’ or the ‘how’ of the historical narrative. There appeared on the plane of history a man sent from God; his name was John. This is history, but it is also part of the theology, for that God sends a man, a unique, particular man, who has a name, into the world is a theological before it is a historical proposition. It means that God, who, with his Logos, is eternally what he is, and is beyond definition, enters the world of time and space (and definition); first through a messenger, but secondly also in his own person. After this opening, which asserts the action of God in time, the language is entirely theological: witness, light, believe. The words of verse 15 may be intended to convey the hint that Jesus before his public ministry had once been a follower of John, but they are so chosen as to express the subsequent emergence in time of one whose being spanned eternity before and after John. Briefly, what the Prologue contains (in the verses to which we are at present confining our attention) is a theological evaluation of the historical figure of the Baptist; it places the narrative that is to follow in the setting in which it can be understood. This means that the ‘Baptist’ verses were not an afterthought, thrown in to injure the rival Baptist group, but part of a serious, connected, thought—out, theological purpose. I repeat: there is good, though not overwhelming, reason to think that such a Baptist group did form part of the environment within which John wrote, just as ‘the Jews’, as he comprehensively termed them, formed another part. But as John takes and uses as an instrument of his theological evaluation of Jesus the paradoxical twofold relationship, of filiation and opposition, between Christians

[p.24]

and Jews, so he employs in the same overall theological task the similar relationship between the Baptist and Jesus. John was not engaging in a pamphlet war, either with Judaism or with the disciples of John the Baptist, but writing theology in a book that was to be a possession for ever. In this theology, both the Jews and their book, and John the Baptist, had essential parts to play as witnesses to the central character, true and valid precisely so long as they were not overvalued, and confused with that to which their testimony was directed.

If this is the origin and the meaning of the 'Baptist' verses in the Prologue it is reasonable to suppose that this will also be the origin and meaning of the rest; that is, that, as these verses were designed to bring out the theological significance of the story of the Baptist, so the Prologue as a whole was designed to bring out the theological significance of the history of Jesus; in fact, however, this theology is necessarily set out in what may be called not merely a historical but a chronological framework. Thus the Prologue cannot begin with John the Baptist. The evangelist knows that however indispensable the figure of the Baptist may be (and he by no means dispenses with him) he is not the beginning of the Gospel. Mark and Luke may have said this, and the Anti-Marcionite Prologue writer underlined it, but they exaggerated, for the true *beginning* lies not merely at (as Gen. 1.1 suggests) but before the creation, before time itself. There and then (if in such a setting the words are meaningful) God's self-disclosure was implicit in the being of God himself. 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.' God was never without self-expression (*logos*), and the self-expression was itself God. God in revelation is God in himself, not a secondary form of deity. Hence creation, the first form of divine self-expression: 'All things came into being through him, and apart from him there came into being not one thing that has come into being.' Hence, further, life and light, the primary forms in which self-expression in creation becomes communicable; and if you say light, you must be prepared to say darkness

[p.25]

too, though not a darkness that stands on equal terms with the light. 'The light shines (simply because it is light—we are not yet, in verse 5, dealing with the incarnation) in the darkness, and the darkness has never quenched it.' All this occupies the first five verses, which describe the stage on which men must live, and God means to intervene. They do not yet describe the historical coming of the Word into the world, but state the factors—God, Word, light, life, darkness—that will be involved in his coming. We are however ready for history, and immediately it comes, though it is not the coming of the Word, the history of Jesus. 'There was a man sent from God—his name, John.' His appearance was a divine act, but it was not the coming of the true light, who is the Logos, who is God. It was the indispensable testimony to this coming, without which men could not understand what was happening, and therefore could not believe. The mission of John was that men might believe not in but through him, and it is after but in immediate connection with his coming that the coming of the Word takes place. Even so, when the true light shone in the person of Jesus (cf. 8.12; 9.5; 12.35, 46), men did not believe; he came

to his home, and his own people did not receive him. This however is not a universal negative; there were those who did receive him, and to them he gave the power to become children of God, by supernatural birth. This exception (verse 12) to the rejection is not an interpolated afterthought, but is necessary if the evangelist is not to cut his own throat; no church (unless perhaps in the twentieth century) ever sang a hymn to celebrate its own unbelief. Verse 13 is not a gloss, but an allusion to the Virgin Birth; the Prologue reaches its climax in the assertion that Christians share the miraculous origin of their Lord.

This takes us up to verse 13, and gives a complete theological account of the pre-existence of the Word and the work of the Baptist, of the coming of the Word and the ministry of Jesus, which resulted in the supernatural birth of the children of God. One might well ask why, after this climax, the Prologue continues, and though, for reasons some of which I

[p.26]

have given, I cannot accept Käsemann's view that the original form of the Prologue came to an end at verse 12, it is his great service that he has brought this question into relief. So far from being the climax of the Prologue, verse 14 (The Word became flesh) appears at first sight to be a mere appendage. Käsemann sets the question in terms of source criticism, and gives a corresponding answer: verses 14-18 are a supplement to the original Prologue; in view of the fact that our analysis of the Prologue began from John the Baptist we may put the question in the form, 'Why does John divide his Baptist material into two parts? That is, why is verse 15 separated from verses 6-8(9)?' To put the question thus with reference to John the Baptist will enable us to answer the total problem with reference to verses 14-18 as a whole.

The two passages, verses 6-8 and 15, must serve different purposes. The earlier reference to the Baptist (verses 6-8) provides his witness to the pre-existent light and its coming into the world; verse 15 (John bears witness of him, and cried, saying: This is he of whom I spoke; he who comes after me has taken his place in front of me, for he was before me) refers primarily not (as Bernard said) to the pre-existence of the Word, which John has already dealt with, but to his glorification. True, this rests upon his pre-existence: For he was before me (cf. 17.5); but what is said in this verse is that he who first appeared as a successor, perhaps as a follower, of the Baptist has now taken rank in front of him. This gives us the clue that we need. Of the Prologue, verses 1-13 have told us in theological terms how the pre-existent Logos or light came to the world that he had created, and was rejected in it, though rejected in such a way that those who did receive him found in the rejected one their own true life, and regeneration as the children of God. But this is not the end of the story. Rejection is not the last word, nor even is regeneration. The humble follower of John was exalted to a position of pre-eminence beyond the greatest of men. This is the old tradition—the story of the resurrection and *parusia* of the

[p.27]

Son of man, the exaltation to lordship of the humble servant who was obedient even unto death. The evangelist however (as we well know, having read the rest of the gospel) has more to say

than this. Humble, sacrificial love is glory, and there is none more exalted. Hence the next stage in the Prologue.

‘The Word became flesh’—Käsemann is right; this is not where the stress lies. It merely resumes what has been said in verses 9-11, but it resumes it in the most paradoxical terms possible—and in this Bultmann is right too. The manifestation of which we are to hear in a moment was not automatic, nor was it assessable by ordinary measures; it was accessible only to faith. But John continues: ‘He dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory.’ This is the point. When did we behold his glory? Not at the last day, for John uses the past tense, We beheld; it was in the ministry, the loving service and sacrifice of Jesus, that we beheld his glory. For what is glory? It is to be ‘full of grace and truth’. The exaltation the Baptist predicted has taken place, in the fruit of Jesus’ work, ‘for of his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace’. And what is grace? John can define it only as Paul defined it, in contrast with law. ‘The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.’ But grace is matched with truth, and the coming of grace and truth is the revelation of God. So the wheel turns full circle, and the Prologue ends where it began, with the revelation of God implicit in the being of God himself—‘the Only-begotten, who is in the bosom of the Father’. God himself is self-disclosing, self-imparting love, and the revelation is the glory of love, which is light and life.

The Prologue is not a jig-saw puzzle but one piece of solid theological writing. The evangelist wrote it all, recalling as he did so who knows what pieces of wisdom and logos speculation, and it sums up the meaning he had seen in the story of Jesus. If the relation of Prologue to gospel is to be summed up in a word I should take up again language I used specifically of the place in it of John the Baptist. It

[p.28]

is even more apt to the place of Jesus, the Word. Prologue and gospel together are the supreme example of the coinherence of the ‘that’ and the ‘what’ of the story of Jesus. The Prologue assumes simply that the light shone in the darkness, that he came to his own, that the Word became flesh, and analyses the theological significance of the bare fact expressed in the ‘that’. The gospel will tell how he came to his own, what happened when the Word became flesh. And the Prologue is necessary to the gospel, as the gospel is necessary to the Prologue. The history explicates the theology, and the theology interprets the history.

---

© 1971 C.K. Barrett. All reasonable efforts have been made to contact the current copyright holder of the lecture without success. If you hold the copyright, please contact me.

Prepared for the Web in August 2006 by Robert I. Bradshaw.

<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>

---