



UNIQUENESS OF THE PROLOGUE	8
JOHN 1:1-5	8
THE “WORD” OR “LOGOS”	8
THE WORD WAS GOD – JOHN 1:1C	9
IN HIM WAS LIFE – JOHN 1:1-4	9
THE LIGHT OF MEN SHINES IN DARKNESS – JOHN 1:4-5	9
JOHN 1:6-8 & 15	9
JOHN 1:9-13	9
JOHN 1:14-18	10
PERSONAL APPLICATION – JOHN 1:19-51	11

“If the prologue is comparable to a musical overture, the concluding verses provide a powerful theological crescendo.”

PURPOSE

Imagine yourself in a beautiful music hall awaiting an opera sung by famous soloists with the music provided by a great orchestra with a renowned director. The lights are lowered and you watch the director step to the podium. His baton is raised and music fills the air. Before the curtain goes up or any note is sung, that magnificent orchestra plays an overture introducing the musical themes of the evening. The overture previews the concert and alerts the listeners to the power, pathos, and beauty to follow. The artistic appetite is whetted.

The first eighteen verses of the Gospel of John are like a grand overture. Usually called the prologue, the verses introduce the Gospel by presenting major themes. But they do more than introduce ideas. They whet the theological appetite by raising profound theological questions. Where does the world come from? Who made it? Why are we alive? What is the origin of light? What does it mean that people receive or reject light? What is the importance of John the Baptist? How does John compare to Jesus? How does Jesus compare to Moses? What sort of person is Jesus? What is His relationship to God the Father? The prologue displays the mystery of God and the thoughtful reader wants to learn more.

BACKGROUND

Although the prologue is an excellent introduction to the Gospel, it also makes sense if studied alone. In fact, one major theme in the prologue, the “Word” or, to transliterate the Greek, the “Logos” theme, never appears elsewhere in the Gospel. The independence of the prologue and its careful organization have led many Biblical scholars to think the prologue was

a hymn sung in the early church. For example, the Jerusalem Bible prints the prologue in poetic form. If the scholarly conjecture is true, the Gospel begins with words familiar to the worshipping Christians. Like a pastor beginning a sermon by quoting words from a familiar hymn, the Gospel of John starts with words expressing the convictions of the people. The familiar words catch the attention of Christians and put them in a devotional frame of mind as they begin reading.

“John begins by shining the light of the Gospel on all time and history.”

UNIQUENESS OF THE PROLOGUE

Let us rapidly survey the Johannine Prologue by comparing it to the way the other Gospels begin. Unlike Mark, John displays no sense of urgency. Unlike Matthew, John does not begin explicitly in Jewish traditions. And unlike Luke, John does not argue for his own credibility. John starts the prologue as far back as the human mind can move (1:1) and ends with a revelation no mind can discover (1:18). The mysteries of creation and divine purpose come together in the unending struggle of light and darkness (good and evil), the witness of a man named John, human reception or rejection of the light and the fullness of grace coming in the Word made flesh. John begins by shining the light of the Gospel on all time and history. The prologue speaks to persecuted Christians, pious Jews, educated Greeks, noble Romans and indeed all people of every time and place.

“The mysterious Word is connected with God, and then creation is inextricably bound to both God and the Word.”

JOHN 1:1-5

I like to call the first five verses of John “staircase poetry.” The words build on each other moving the theological revelation forward. Note how the words weave together and interlock. The mysterious Word is connected with God, and then creation is inextricably bound to both God and the Word. Finally, the Word is the source of the life and light shining into darkness. Key words to consider in 1:1-5 are “In the beginning,” Word, life, light, and darkness.

“In the beginning” is a pregnant expression that challenges Greeks, Romans, and Jews to go back to the basics. What is primal? John challenges Greeks and Romans who consider “man the measure of all things” to rethink their priorities. How does God fit into the origins of their anthropocentric world view? The words also defy the wisdom of pagan philosophers who thought the world evolved from fire, water, earth, air, or some primal element. Jewish readers would find also echoes of Biblical truth. “In the beginning” is not only the first phrase of Genesis 1:1 but also translates the Hebrew name of Genesis. By alluding to “In the Beginning” (or ‘Genesis’) the first three words call Jews not only to think about elements of primal matter but also matters of primal faith.

THE “WORD” OR “LOGOS”

The Greek word “logos” taunts and torments interpreters because its full meaning cannot be captured in the translation “Word.” A United Bible Society study suggests a search for equivalents to “an expression with meaning, a message, a communication, a type of revelation.” (cf. Barclay M. Newman and Eugene A. Nida, *Translator’s Handbook on the Gospel of John*, p.7). To keep open a full range of meaning, sometimes it is helpful simply to speak the Greek word “logos.”

“Logos” offers various meanings and allusions for different readers. The famous Greek philosopher, Heraclitus, writing (in Ephesus) about 600 years before John, thought that “logos” gave order to the universe. Pagan philosophers, like the stoics, considered “logos” the divine cause that determined individual and corporate fate. A Greek speaking Jew named Philo frequently used “Logos” to describe someone or something that connected God and matter and administered the divine plan for the world.

The term “logos” holds even richer allusions for readers familiar with the Hebrew Bible. Genesis 1 revealed that creation happens when God gives the word and the Psalmist (33:6) sang about that truth. The Law taught that the Word guided and even gave life (Deuteronomy 32:46-47; cf. Psalm 119, especially verse 105). We often incorrectly refer to God’s guidance as the “Ten Commandments” but the Hebrew Bible simply calls them the “Ten Words” (Exodus 34:28, Deuteronomy 4:13, 10:4). The word of the Lord made prophets see and proclaim

the truth (e.g. Jeremiah 1:4, Hosea 1:1, Joel 1:1, Jonah 1:1, Micah 1:1, Zephaniah 1:1, Haggai 1:1, Zechariah 1:1, Malachi 1:1). Furthermore, the Word had an inherent power which insured its effectiveness (Isaiah 55:11). Using a concordance you can find Old Testament allusions to the Word which filled the minds of readers of John 1:1. Finally, Christian readers may have thought of the Gospel itself (Mark 4:14-15 and Acts 8:25).

THE WORD WAS GOD – JOHN 1:1C

In the third phrase of John 1:1, people who deny the Trinity often point out that there is no definite article “the” before the word “God.” They argue the phrase means “The Word was a god.” They are wrong. There is a technical Greek grammatical interpretation, usually called Colwell’s Law, that proves that such translation is not required. The Greek is similar to English since the translation “The Word was God” implies, “the Word was *the* God.” Often in English (as in Greek), we need not use the word “the” to be specific. For example, we refer to the same God if we say “The God of love is good” or “God is love.” The Greek word for God appears without a definite article (no “the”) also in John 1:6, 12, 13, and 18.

.....
“Life is a major theme in the Gospel of John.”

IN HIM WAS LIFE – JOHN 1:1-4

Life is a major theme in the Gospel of John. In fact, enabling people to have life is the very purpose of the Gospel (20:30-31). Many people think so much about life in this world that they ignore the reality of death and avoid the question of existence after death. John has words of warning to such people (John 5:28). There is life after death. But some people, including Christians, think so much about life after death that they overlook the power and purpose of God in their lives now. John has a special concern to help such people using Jesus’ teaching about spiritual life before death (John 3:3, 5:25-26).

THE LIGHT OF MEN SHINES IN DARKNESS – JOHN 1:4-5

“Light” in John’s Gospel symbolizes revelation, truth, goodness or God’s love. The corresponding metaphor “darkness” symbolizes sin, human rebellion, ignorance or evil. Jesus’ claim to be the light of the world (e.g. 8:12) means that Jesus reveals the truth of God to people. In symbolic and literal ways, John’s Gospel refers again

and again to the revelation of God’s truth in Jesus. In the prologue itself, there are two more references. Symbolic language is used in verse 9 (“The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world”) but the truth stands explicit in verse 18. (“No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father’s side, has made him known”).

JOHN 1:6-8 & 15

The role of John (the Baptist) as witness dominates these verses. The theme has positive and negative intent. The verses, together with verse 15, show the importance of John but also carefully distinguishes primary (“being the light”) and secondary (“witnessing to the light”) responsibilities. Stress on the secondary nature of John (the Baptist) suggests that some Christians may have overemphasized his importance. Perhaps, like some Christians today, they loved him so much (as a saint?) that they thought more about him than they did about Jesus. The idea becomes more credible when we remember that some Christians in Ephesus, at the time of Paul’s third missionary journey (AD 53-57), knew only about John the Baptist’s baptism (Acts 19:1-5). The positive lesson for all of us, however, remains that we, like John, are witnesses to the light. Yet, negatively, God warns us that denominations, congregations, committees, clergy, individuals, and even Bible study groups are tempted to become self-important. All, like John, deserve mention only because they witness to the light.

JOHN 1:9-13

Here we read clearly of the tragedy of human sin and the necessity of God’s action. Rejection greets God’s light when it comes to the world He made and the people He calls His own. The verses build on 5 (“The light shines in darkness and the darkness has not overcome it”) by showing the astounding human preference of darkness rather than light, evil rather than good. That sad theme will be described repeatedly in the Gospel (e.g. 5:17-18, 6:66, 11:45-53, 19:38). The verses also introduce the call to believe (1:12). The power of God comes to people who believe and makes them God’s children.

Observe how the Gospel carefully describes the Christian relationship to God differently than Jesus’ relationship. The Gospel of John calls Jesus a “son” of God and never a “child”

The Word became flesh, but in the humanity was seen the glory of the One and Only (only begotten) who came from the Father.

of God. (The Greek word for “children” refers to people but the word “son” points to Jesus). The distinction is part of the Gospel’s careful teaching about the uniqueness of Jesus.

JOHN 1:14-18

If the prologue is comparable to a musical overture, the concluding verses provide a powerful theological crescendo. Verse 14 presents the agony and ecstasy of Christology. The Word became flesh, but in the humanity was seen the glory of the One and Only (only begotten) who came from the Father. The word emphasizes the uniqueness of Jesus. The same word is used in Hebrews 11:17 to show the uniqueness of Isaac. The translation “only begotten” became popular after St. Jerome’s (incorrect) translation, because it fought the heresy which claimed that Jesus was “made” by the Father rather than “begotten.”

Verses 15-17 show the greatness of Jesus. He is greater than John the Baptist according to John’s own testimony. Good chronological history would argue that Jesus is John’s successor but sound theology gives priority to Jesus. Verse 16 calls for elimination of historical competition and celebration of the many blessings received by grace. Verse 17 reminds us that God certainly

blessed His people by giving the Law through Moses, but that blessing pales in comparison to grace and truth which came through Jesus Christ.

Truth is a major concern in John’s book, but the meaning is more profound than our own. We, like the Greeks, consider truth an intellectual issue. Something is true or it is false, right or wrong. John usually uses the Hebrew concept of truth. Truth becomes a moral issue. It means trustworthy, faithful, reliable, or honest. Unlike the writings of Paul, the word, grace, never again appears in the Gospel of John. Its usage with truth, in 1:14 and 18, recalls the Old Testament description of God. Psalm 25:10 describes God’s ways as “loving and faithful.” In Exodus 34:6 and Psalm 86:15, God appears as compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness. That Old Testament description of God, John applies to Jesus Christ.

The final verse of the prologue (1:18), summarizes its theological message. Knowledge about God comes not from human experience but from Christ’s revelation. With that majestic note, the prologue ends and we stand eager to learn more about the revelation by reading the words and deeds of Jesus.

PERSONAL APPLICATION – JOHN 1:19-51

Read prayerfully John 1:19-51 and ask the Lord to bless your study of this powerful Gospel.

1. What are the questions which people ask John the Baptist regarding his ministry? (1:19-22)

2. How does John describe his own ministry?

3. Did people expect (or want) more than John's ministry offers? Or, do you think people were pleased that John is not Christ, Elijah, or the prophet? Give reasons for your answer.

4. Do we have false demands or expectations of the church or fellow Christians? List ways in which we may want people, like John the Baptist, to solve our problems.

5. People question not what John was doing as much as his right to do it (1:25). In what ways might we discredit other people's service to God by asking questions?

6. John the Baptist never explains why he baptizes. Instead, how does he answer the question? (1:26-27)

7. Think of questions or circumstances that are best answered by pointing to Jesus rather than by making a personal defense.

8. What is John's emphatic message concerning Jesus? (1:26-27, 29-34, 36)

9. Why would John the Baptist describe Jesus as the "Lamb of God"? (Exodus 12:5; Isaiah 53)

What meaning might John's listeners give the title?

10. In an urban setting today, where some people understand neither lambs nor the Old Testament symbolism involved, what title might be used to point people to Jesus. (Example: Behold the "green beret!") See: Acts 10:42; 1 John 2:1; Hebrews 7:27, 9:12, 10:10.

11. Two disciples of John the Baptist tell Jesus that they want to know where he is staying. (1:38) Do you think their statement completely presents their interest or are there some unspoken reasons? Why?

12. What is Jesus' response to the disciples' question and what is the result of His response? (1:39-42)

Can the narrative be used as a model for evangelism? If so, how?

13. What is the first thing Jesus does to Simon? (vs. 42)

14. Consider the significance of being people with a "new name." Is it possible to understand life in Christ and even our baptism as (like Peter) receiving a new name? (Romans 6:4; 2 Corinthians 5:17; James 2: 17; 1 Peter 4:14-16; John 10:3)

15. How does Jesus call Philip? (1:43)

What is the full meaning of the words "follow me?" (John 8:12, 10:4-5, 12:26; Matthew 16:24)

16. Why does Nathanael respond so enthusiastically to Jesus? (1:49)

What do the titles mean?

Could the "King of Israel" indicate an incorrect faith? (6:15)

17. How does Jesus expand Nathanael's faith?

Can extraordinary "signs and wonders" sometimes hinder faith? (John 4:48, 20:29; 1 Corinthians 1:22-31)

18. In v. 50-51 what do you think are the greater things that Jesus promises Nathanael?

19. How has this chapter increased your interest in the life of Jesus?
