

The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part I

**COURSE SYLLABUS: John Part I**

<u>WEEK</u>	<u>TOPIC</u>	<u>WEEK</u>	<u>TOPIC</u>
1	<b>Introduction to the Theological Gospel</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Why a Fourth Gospel</li><li>▪ The Indispensable Gospel</li></ul>	9	▪
2	<b>The Source of John's Gospel</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Gnostic Speculation</li><li>▪ Hellenistic Philosophy</li><li>▪ Palestinian Judaism</li></ul>	10	•
3	<b>In the Beginning Was...</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Genesis Revisited</li><li>• The Deity of Jesus Christ</li></ul>	11	•
4	<b>Creation: the Indispensable Truth</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Objective Science?</li><li>▪ Creation In and By the Word</li></ul>	12	•
5	<b>There Came a Man Named John</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The Forerunner</li><li>• The Importance of Witness</li></ul>	13	•
6	<b>The Light Comes into the World</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The True Light that Enlightens</li><li>• The World and 'His Own'</li></ul>	14	•
7			•
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**Week 1: The Theological Gospel**

**Key Biblical Texts:** John 1:1-18; 20:30-31; I John 1:1-4

*“It is not faith that produced the story  
but the story that produced the faith.”*  
(Herman Ridderbos)

‘Sword Drills’ in children’s Sunday School class help teach young ones to memorize the book of the Bible. The New Testament litany begins with the Gospels – “Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John,” spoken so fast that it comes across as one book: Matthewmarklukeandjohn. But when one reads the Gospel, all four of them, it does not take more than one reading to realize that the annunciation should be “Matthew, Mark, Luke, and.....John.” So different is the fourth Gospel from the other three that it stands entirely alone, outside the ‘Synoptics,’ as a universally and perennially recognized



**Christoph Luthardt (1823-1902)**

anomaly within the gospel corpus. Often the question, ‘Why Four Gospels?’ has been the topic of essays and entire books. But more pertinent at least to this study, but really the better question is, ‘Why a Fourth Gospel?’ and specifically, ‘Why *this* Fourth Gospel?’ No reader or commentator on John’s Gospel has failed to immediately notice and remark upon the uniqueness of the book when compared, not only with the Synoptic Gospels, but to any

other book in the Bible. Christoph Luthardt subtitled his commentary on the book, “Described and Explained According to its Peculiar Character.” Benjamin Warfield writes, “Whenever we turn from one of the other Gospels to John’s we feel ourselves at once in a changed atmosphere.”<sup>1</sup>

Scholars, of course, are prone to beat to death the differences between John’s Gospel and the Synoptics, claiming contradictions between them, or a lack of historical interest in John that is paramount with the other three evangelists. Critical scholarship from the 19<sup>th</sup> Century on has relegated the Gospel of ‘John’ – for it is conventional wisdom among

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<sup>1</sup> Warfield, Benjamin “The Gospel of John”; *Selected Shorter Writings; Volume 2* Edited by John E. Meeter (Philipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company; 1973); 643.

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liberal theologians and commentators to deny authorship to the apostle – to an overly spiritualized rendition of Christ’s life, compiled by pietistic church members in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century. Such views have been largely debunked in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and have no place in this study, but to serve as an example of what a weak doctrine of inspiration will produce under the guise of biblical commentary. For the conservative scholar, however, the undeniable difference, both in tone and content, of the Fourth Gospel demands some attempt at explanation. Was John *supplementing* what he considered to be lacking in the three Synoptic Gospels – assuming, of course, that John employed the previous three works in the preparation and writing of his own. If that is not the case, then we should find John’s Gospel as an *independent witness* to the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, one that does not touch upon the same topics, events, and themes as the other three, but blazes a path of its own. These two options (and, of course, there are varying degrees of each as possible intermediate options) represent the two classical views concerning the Gospel of John: *Supplemental* or *Independent*.

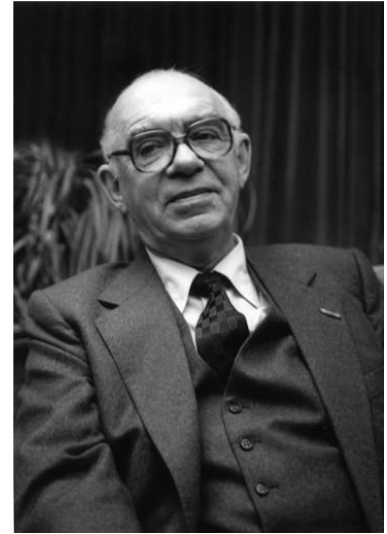
### **Supplemental Material**

Perhaps the Apostle John, having read the gospel accounts of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, perceived a gap in their presentation, something missing from their record that rendered them somehow incomplete. This, of course, would not necessarily render the Synoptic Gospels imperfect, much less in error, but would simply require an additional record to supplement the material they provide. A conservative view of inspiration must conclude that this was the perspective of the Holy Spirit, otherwise the Fourth Gospel would either have taken the same form and tone as the other three, or would not have been written at all. After all, John was a key apostle, reputed, as Paul says, to be a pillar of the Church. He was very close to Jesus, being by all traditional accounts the disciple who rested his head upon the Lord’s breast during the very somber and sobering Last Supper. It is widely believed that Peter’s perspective on the life of Jesus was mediated through Mark; why should John not have his own say in the matter?

Contributing to the ‘supplemental’ view of the Fourth Gospel is the apparent reliance made by its author on the material of the other Gospels. John does not give

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detailed accounts on the travels of Jesus during His earthly ministry, and leave off many of the events and teaching opportunities that are recorded in the Synoptics. John, of course, never denies that these events took place; rather he assumes them as the substratum of his own work. “One discovers over and over that he assumes among his readers – the ‘you’ of 20:31; 19:35 – a more than superficial knowledge of the tradition and that he proceeded from the premise that he no longer had to inform them of the general course of Jesus’ life. His narrative therefore often gives the impression that it is the woof woven in the warp of the existing and familiar tradition.”<sup>2</sup> The supplemental character of John’s Gospel is also manifest in the fact that



**Herman Ridderbos (1909-2007)**

his account focuses almost exclusively on Jesus’ ministry in and around Jerusalem, with little of the Galilean ministry recorded in the Synoptics. In addition, whereas the Synoptic authors present the ministry of Jesus for the most part in its final year or eighteen months, it is John’s Gospel that chronicles the entirety of Jesus’ ministry, from the initial transfer of disciples of the Baptist to Jesus, to the final trial, crucifixion, and resurrection. John uniquely frames his own chronology of the earthly ministry of Jesus along the lines of the main Jewish feasts, again bringing emphasis upon Jerusalem where those feasts were to be observed.

Ridderbos concludes that John’s contribution to the Gospel genre of the New Testament is supplemental, but not in the sense of providing more anecdotal historical data to that which has already been furnished by Matthew, Mark, and Luke. John’s contribution is deeper than that, so much so that he himself alludes to the “*many other things*” that Jesus had done and taught, things that John did not include in his Gospel. John, as it were, takes the reader *beyond* the historical, without at any time denying the historical, to show “that it is not faith that produced the story but the story that produced the faith.”<sup>3</sup> Thus John’s Gospel becomes the theological foundation for the other three

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<sup>2</sup> Ridderbos, Herman *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; 1997); 4.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*; 7.

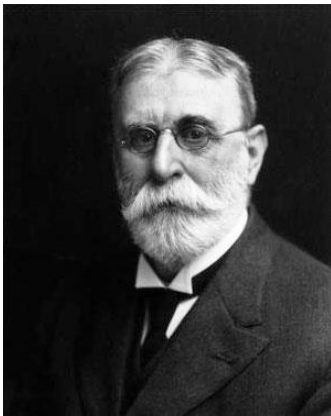
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Gospels, establishing in a way that they do not, that Jesus was more than Israel's Messiah, he was (and is) the eternal Logos of God. Ridderbos summarizes,

What distinguishes the Fourth Gospel is precisely the vast reduction that he as tradent applies to the "many other things" that he could have written in the interest of the *one* thing to which he directs all his attention and that of his readers, namely, *the person and identity of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, and faith in his name* (20:30, 31). For that reason we may perhaps say that the Fourth Gospel, in the manner and to the degree in which it effects this reduction and concentration, represents the gospel genre in a unique way, modifying it in a way that can be characterized as the concluding phase of the phenomenon called 'gospel.'<sup>4</sup>

### Independent Witness:

While it is quite reasonable to conclude that John's Gospel supplements the record of the Synoptics, the tone of the Fourth Gospel is so undeniably different from the earlier



**Benjamin Warfield (1851-1921)**

three works that it becomes obvious that the work could easily stand on its own. Warfield notes, "The very impression of the language is different. That of the other Gospels is sufficiently simple and direct. But John's is even more so. We seem here to look straight into the thought without the intermediation of words. Only, as we look, the sense of simplicity gives way to an ever increasing consciousness of profundity."<sup>5</sup> This last comment is perhaps the most concise statement of what countless thousands have experienced in the reading of John's Gospel – the simplicity of the language initially masking a deeply profound account of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Again Warfield, "All the evangelists tell us of the same Jesus. But each in his own way; and what John has to tell is that which, though spoken in words which a child can understand, yet passes all human understanding."<sup>6</sup>

John's is, therefore, more of an independent witness to the life and teachings – indeed, to the very eternal and temporal *person* – of the Lord Jesus Christ than it is a supplemental Gospel, rounding out the record provided by the Synoptics. John himself

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<sup>4</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>5</sup> Warfield, *op cit.*; 643.

<sup>6</sup> *Idem.*

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provides his own perspective, though he does so not within the Gospel itself but in his first epistle.

*That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life – the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us – that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.*  
(I John 1:1-3)

The intimate nature of John's account of Jesus' ministry clearly indicates the perspective of an insider, of someone who was indeed with Jesus – who had seen Him with their eyes, touched Him with their hands. Ridderbos writes that “the Fourth Evangelist often displays a detailed knowledge of the events he narrates, events that we do not know about from elsewhere in the known tradition.”<sup>7</sup> Indeed, scholars who try to tie John's Gospel with the other three by means of the (in)famous ‘harmony’ technique are often forced to leave huge gaps, or to develop tenuous connections between the Fourth Gospel and ‘similar’ passages in the Synoptics. Again Ridderbos, “the Fourth Gospel's unique structure and special material show a highly *untraditional* character and rather give the impression of having been composed with a free hand and a high degree of independence from ‘the’ tradition.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, even though John's Gospel is probably one of the last books to be written during the apostolic era, and thus most likely to be ‘bound’ by the tradition developed by the rest of the New Testament canon, its independence of thought remains the most powerful testimony to its independent witness of Jesus.

However, such independence of thought and witness does not imply a contradiction of tradition, for at no point in the Fourth Gospel do we encounter any other but the one Jesus to whom the Synoptic authors point in their works. There is undoubtedly a difference in emphasis between the Synoptics and the Gospel of John, even more than Warfield's somewhat formulaic, “They are predominantly Gospels of Christ's deeds: John's is the Gospel of Christ's words.”<sup>9</sup> Closer to the heart of the message of John's unique Gospel is the assessment of Edwyn Hoskyns, an Anglican theologian of the

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<sup>7</sup> Ridderbos; 4.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*; 5.

<sup>9</sup> Warfield; 643.

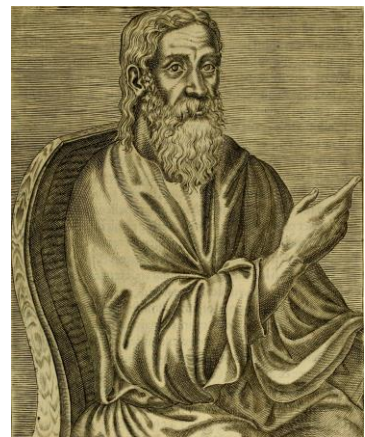
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last century. Hoskyns establishes quite incontrovertibly that the Gospel of John is really the indispensable Gospel, the Gospel that helps the other Gospels make complete sense. Hoskyns writes, “the theme of the Fourth Gospel is the non-historical that makes sense of history, the infinite that makes sense of time, God who makes sense of men and is therefore their Saviour.”<sup>10</sup> John’s Gospel does not simply add to the database of facts about Jesus, it fundamentally makes sense of the facts already given in the Synoptics. Furthermore, as Hoskyns points out, it is John’s Gospel that clarifies much of what we find later in the New Testament – in the book of Acts and the Pauline Epistles, as well as the Apocalypse also written by John. In analyzing the place the Fourth Gospel occupies in the New Testament canon – even at the risk of prioritizing books within that canon – we can hardly do better than the criteria Hoskyns sets forth in the introduction to his commentary.

The test that we must in the end apply to the Fourth Gospel, the test by which the Fourth Gospel stands or falls, is whether the Marcan narrative [on which the accounts of Matthew and Luke are largely believed to be based] becomes more intelligible after reading the Fourth Gospel, whether the Pauline Epistles become more transparent, or whether the whole material presented to us in the New Testament is breaking up into unrelated fragments...We must be prepared to find that the Fourth Gospel ought to be regarded as a necessary prolegomenon to the understanding, not only of the other books of the New Testament, but of the Old Testament as well.<sup>11</sup>

### The Theological Gospel

One common way that scholars over the past two millennia have tried to account for the difference in tone of John’s Gospel when compared to the Synoptics is to view the latter as more ‘historical’ and the former as ‘theological.’ This view was perhaps first popularized by Clement, a theologian and philosopher of the Alexandrians (Egypt) School in the late 2<sup>nd</sup> and early 3<sup>rd</sup> Centuries. Clement wrote a commentary on the Fourth



**Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-215)**

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<sup>10</sup> Hoskyns, Edwyn Clement *The Fourth Gospel* (London::Faber and Faber Limited; 1954); 129-130.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*; 133-134

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Gospel in which he described the difference between it and the Synoptic Gospels thus, “But, last of all, John – away that the outward facts had been set out in the gospels – was encouraged by his disciples and divinely motivated by the Spirit, composed **a spiritual gospel.**”<sup>12</sup> The author of the essay analyzing this statement by Clement notes that the original Greek of the phrase “*outward facts*” is literally ‘fleshly’ or ‘carnal.’ Clement, however, is not disparaging the Synoptic Gospels as less than inspired. Rather he is making a distinction, common in the Hellenistic thought of his day, between the ‘material’ emphasis of the Synoptic Gospels, on the one hand, and the more ‘spiritual’ or ‘psychical’ focus of the Fourth Gospel. Clement’s own propensity toward Platonism and his tendency to filter Christian doctrine through Greek philosophical thought – a characteristic of the Alexandrian School – would naturally cause him to find the Fourth Gospel more ‘important’ than the other three. But such an erroneous conclusion does not necessarily invalidate his observation concerning John’s Gospel.

Luthardt, hardly one to be accused of an overly allegorical or Platonic mindset, also sees a difference in emphasis between John’s Gospel and the Synoptics, and one that can be characterized as a difference between the material and the spiritual. Luthardt draws, however, a line of distinction between the historical and the eternal, though he does not deny either aspect to either John’s Gospel or to the Synoptics.

The synoptists take their stand in the historical foreground, and permit the reader thence rather to suspect than to behold the eternal background...John takes his position in the latter, and causes it to shine forth through the external history. If eternal life appeared in the flesh in Jesus, then his person and history must appropriate both sides. When, therefore, the fourth gospel emphasizes the eternal side, it is not less historical than the narrative of the synoptists; it is only in another sense historically true...In the synoptists also absolute importance is ascribed to [Jesus]. Only in them his importance is pressed more in its relation to the world; in John, more in relation to God.<sup>13</sup>

The ‘spiritual,’ or ‘theological’ or ‘eternal’ character of John’s Gospel has thus become a standard, and correct, perspective in almost all commentaries since Clement’s day. John’s emphasis on Jesus’ eternal being alongside His temporal becoming is apparent in the Prologue of the Gospel itself, the famous *Logos* poem of John 1:1-18. Ridderbos

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<sup>12</sup> <http://logosmadeflesh.com/2012/04/26/in-what-sense-is-john-the-spiritual-gospel/>. Accessed 03February2020.

<sup>13</sup> Luthardt; 236-237.



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correctly sees in this passage the establishment of the entire Gospel as a theological work of greatest significance. “Thus what is advanced as primary in the prologue is not only the theological starting point but also that which governs the arrangement of the gospel story and serves as the criterion for what the Evangelist deems necessary and sufficient to bring the readers to and to strengthen them in: faith that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.”<sup>14</sup> Warfield, in an essay titled ‘The Gospel of John,’ comments,

What is of prime moment is, that John busies himself little with the external side of truth, but reports chiefly those discourses which go to the heart of things, and is ever concerned with the central and fundamental truth of the gospel...All the Gospels are written out of devout adoration of the divine Savior, and portray our Lord as divine...They picture Christ as the divine Messiah, the divine Benefactor, the divine Savior, and are busied with his earthly relations. Matthew paints him in his relation to the past of God’s kingdom, Mark to its present, Luke to its future, as the Savior of the world. John is thinking of him as the infinite God, and paints him in his relation to eternity.<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps the starkest contrast between the Synoptic Gospels and the Fourth Gospel may be found by comparing the opening passages of the Gospel of Luke and the Gospel of John. While neither Matthew nor Mark are as explicit as to their purpose in writing as was Luke, the similarities between their three works shows a corresponding similarity in approach. Luke presents his work as one of research, with the goal of representing (literally, as in re-presenting) the life of Jesus Christ, the Messiah of Israel. He also seems to indicate that he was by no means the first in this attempt.

*Inasmuch as many have taken in hand to set in order a narrative of those things which have been fulfilled among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write to you an orderly account, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the certainty of those things in which you were instructed.* (Luke 1:1-4)

John opens his Gospel with one of the most beautiful prologues in any literature of any age, taking his readers to unimaginable heights of conception, and unfathomable depths of eternal truth. There is more theology, philosophy, and history in the opening

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<sup>14</sup> Ridderbos; 7-8.

<sup>15</sup> Warfield, *op cit*; 644.

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verses of the Fourth Gospel, than in all of the corresponding volumes written by men over the ages.

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.* (John 1:1-5)

In commenting on this contrast between the opening remarks of Luke's Gospel compared with John's, E. F. Scott highlights the difference in emphasis between the Synoptics, represented by Luke, and the Fourth Gospel.

The fundamental difference between the Fourth Gospel and the Synoptics is thus marked out explicitly by John himself. His statement may be contrasted with that of Luke in the address to Theophilus with which he prefaces his Gospel. The writer's design, as there indicated, is simply to record the facts, in a narrative more exact and orderly, more complete in detail, than those which were already in circulation. This fidelity to the historical tradition was undoubtedly the chief aim of the Synoptic writers...John, on the other hand, starts with a certain conception of the Person and life of Christ, and reads the facts in light of it.<sup>16</sup>

Without sacrificing Jesus' true human nature – it is John who records his Master as tired and hungry, as sorrowful, as angry, as so *human* – the Fourth Gospel nonetheless brings greater focus to the true and eternal divinity of Christ. Again, this is not to say that the Synoptic Gospels deny the deity of Christ, or that they ignore it – we do not find the account of the virgin birth in the Fourth Gospel at all – but rather that the eternality of the Messiah is of paramount importance to John's message. This may be explained in terms of the temporal setting of its authorship, believed to be within the last quarter of the first century. Most scholars place the authorship of the Fourth Gospel within the reign of the Emperor Domitian, who wore the purple from AD 81 until his death by assassination in AD 96. Domitian was infamous for demanding to be addressed as "Dominus et Deus," which was offensive to Romans since emperors were not deified until after death. To be called



**Emperor Domitian (r. AD 81–96)**

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<sup>16</sup> Scott, E. F. *The Fourth Gospel: Its Purpose and Theology* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark; 1951); 2.

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‘Lord and God’ during life was a claim that no emperor had made so boldly prior to Domitian, and Roman historians such as Suetonius noted this transgression with contempt. Though it cannot be proven, it stands to reason that the Apostle John, writing during the reign of such a megalomaniacal tyrant (who would banish John to the Isle of Patmos, where the apostle would receive the Revelation), would emphasize the deity of the Jewish Messiah *from eternity past* as well as during His earthly life, and onward from His resurrection to *eternity future*.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, John records the exclamation of ‘doubting’ Thomas after seeing his resurrected Master,

*And after eight days His disciples were again inside, and Thomas with them. Jesus came, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, “Peace to you!” Then He said to Thomas, “Reach your finger here, and look at My hands; and reach your hand here, and put it into My side. Do not be unbelieving, but believing.” And Thomas answered and said to Him, “My Lord and my God!”*

(John 20:26-28)

Except for the first person possessive form (and, of course, the fact that it was written in Greek and not Latin), the phrase is identical to the one commanded by Domitian



Andreas Köstenberger (b. 1957)

to be used of himself. Andreas Köstenberger notes that this formulation helps to place the date of writing for the Fourth Gospel sometime in Domitian’s reign, likely in the mid-80s of the first century. “Most fascinating is the fact that coins of that time period have been found that identify Domitian as *Dominus et Deus* (Lord and God), the precise Latin equivalent of Thomas’ confession of Jesus in the Greek of 20:28, ‘My Lord and My God.’”

Whether or not John had a specific intent to contrast Jesus Christ with the emperor, it is evident that the apostle took great pains to establish in his Gospel the absolute supremacy of Jesus over all earthly powers. This comes out, of course, in the Prologue, but also in the dialogue with the Roman procurator, Pilate, toward the end of the book. Jesus’ response to Pilate’s self-congratulatory statement of power took the Roman governor by surprise, and made him think twice about the man with whom he was dealing.

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<sup>17</sup> It is admitted that such phrases as ‘eternity past’ and ‘eternity future’ presuppose a definition of eternity as unending time; eternity is timelessness, but the phrases are of common use and simple comprehension.

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*Then Pilate said to Him, "Are You not speaking to me? Do You not know that I have power to crucify You, and power to release You?" Jesus answered, "You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you from above. Therefore the one who delivered Me to you has the greater sin." From then on Pilate sought to release Him, but the Jews cried out, saying, "If you let this Man go, you are not Caesar's friend. Whoever makes himself a king speaks against Caesar."*

(John 19:10-12)

Throughout the Fourth Gospel, therefore, we will find frequent allusions and statements that indicate the preexistent deity of Jesus the Messiah, standing alongside the equally firm witness to Jesus' true humanity. More so than the Synoptics, the Christology of John's Gospel is thorough and thoroughly orthodox. For this reason modern liberal scholars cannot believe that the Fourth Gospel was written by the Apostle John, but must rather reflect the more developed Christology of the church in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century. It should not be surprising, then, to find out that, of the four Gospels, John's record has the most and the earliest external witness within the writings of the post-apostolic Fathers, providing almost irrefutable evidence of the Gospel's early authorship by the *apostle* John.

To be sure, a large part of the testimony to the Fourth Gospel from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century is due to the affinity of the Gospel to early Gnostic sects within and without Christianity. Gnosticism "was not an orderly system of thought with well-defined borders, but (as one scholar has put it) 'a theosophical hotch-potch.'<sup>18</sup> Gnosticism was heavily dependent on Platonic and neo-platonic thought, and John's discussion of the *Logos* fit in well with the aberrant teachings of 2<sup>nd</sup> Century Gnostics. We will have more occasion to speak of this as we investigate John's use of that common Greek philosophical term, *Logos*. Suffice it to say at this point that even the erroneous and illegitimate use of John's Gospel and Epistles by Gnostics serve as an external witness to the early authorship of those books, well before the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century itself.

The testimony within the Church, however, is sufficient without any recourse to Gnostic heretical writings. The most famous witness to both the Apostle John and to his writings is Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, who was martyred in AD 156 at the age of 86. Polycarp claimed to have known John, a claim eminently possible considering the year of his birth (AD 70) and the estimated year of John's death c. AD 96. Polycarp's testimony, therefore, would be contemporary with the apostle himself. Unfortunately, however, we

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learn of Polycarp's witness to the authorship of the Fourth Gospel only secondhand, through Irenaeus (c. AD 125 – 202), who was himself a disciple of Polycarp. Irenaeus was quite verbal about his relationship to Polycarp and, more importantly, Polycarp's relationship to John. The intimacy across two generations comes out in Irenaeus' letter to Florinus,

For while I was still a boy I knew you in lower Asia in Polycarp's house when you were a man of rank in the royal hall and endeavoring to stand well with him. I remember the events of those days more clearly than those which happened recently, for what we learn as children grows up with the soul and is united to it, so that I can speak even of the place in which the blessed Polycarp sat and disputed, how he came in and went out, the character of his life, the appearance of his body, the discourses which he made to people, how he reported his intercourse with John and with the others who had seen the Lord, how he remembered their words, and what were the things concerning the Lord which he had heard from them, and about their miracles, and about their teaching, and how Polycarp had received them from the eyewitnesses of the word of life, and reported all things in agreement with the Scriptures. I listened eagerly even then to these things through the mercy of God which was given me, and made notes of them, not on paper but in my heart...<sup>19</sup>

Irenaeus elsewhere bears direct witness to the authorship of the Fourth Gospel by the Apostle John. Writing against the Gnostic heresies that sought to co-opt John to their cause, Irenaeus gives the Church an early summary of the authorship of the four Gospels, concluding with his affirmation that the authorship of the Fourth Gospel was none other than the Apostle John.

WE have learned from none others the plan of our salvation, than from those through whom the Gospel has come down to us, which they did at one time proclaim in public, and, at a later period, by the will of God, handed down to us in the Scriptures, to be the ground and pillar of our faith. For it is unlawful to assert that they preached before they possessed "perfect knowledge," as some do even venture to say, boasting themselves as improvers of the apostles. For, after our Lord rose from the dead, [the apostles] were invested with power from on high when the Holy Spirit came down [upon them], were filled from all [His gifts], and had perfect knowledge: they departed to the ends of the earth, preaching the glad tidings of the good things [sent] from God to us, and proclaiming the peace of heaven to men, who indeed do all equally and individually possess the Gospel of God. Matthew also issued a written Gospel among the Hebrews in their own dialect, while Peter

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<sup>18</sup> Carson, D. A. *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; 1991); 25.

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/irenaeus-eusebius.html>. Accessed 04February2020.

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and Paul were preaching at Rome, and laying the foundations of the Church. After their departure, Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, did also hand down to us in writing what had been preached by Peter. Luke also, the companion of Paul, recorded in a book the Gospel preached by him. **Afterwards, John, the disciple of the Lord, who also had leaned upon His breast, did himself publish a Gospel during his residence at Ephesus in Asia.**<sup>20</sup>

We have already seen the witness of Clement of Alexandria to the Johannean authorship of the Fourth Gospel. To this we may add Papias (c. AD 60 – 163), who Irenaeus asserts was also a disciple of John, and Tertullian (c. AD 160 – 220), the first great Latin theologian. Other Apostolic Fathers of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and early 3<sup>rd</sup> Centuries who either quoted from the Fourth Gospel or otherwise alluded to it as from the Apostle John, include Origen, Ignatius, Tatian, and Justin Martyr. The combined impact of these early writers is such that, even on the critical grounds employed by modern scholars, the authorship of the Fourth Gospel cannot reasonably be dated after the 1<sup>st</sup> Century, thus removing any necessity of denying its authorship to the Apostle John.

The internal evidence is even more convincing. Though the author nowhere indicates his own name, there are several places within the Gospel where he makes it clear that *someone* – and it is reasonable to conclude that it was the author himself – had a very close and intimate position to the events being related. Luthardt writes, “The author reveals that he is also an eye-witness and ear-witness, and desires to be accepted as such. Even the chronological clearness which rules in the account shows that the course of the history stands clearly before the soul of the narrator.”<sup>21</sup> Apparently the author was first a disciple of John the Baptist before becoming a disciple of Jesus, as the account of the transfer of allegiance from the forerunner to the Messiah, recorded in John 1, reads very much as a personal remembrance of the event. At the other end of the book, the reference to “*the disciple whom Jesus loved,*” and his alleged immortality once again reads as a personal reflection as opposed to a secondhand narrative.<sup>22</sup> This reference to the beloved disciple also occurs in chapter 19 with Jesus, dying on the cross, assigning the care of His mother, Mary, to “*the disciple whom He loved.*” These and other oblique references, along with the fact that John is not explicitly mentioned in the book, can only lead to the

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<sup>20</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies: Book III.1.1* <https://carm.org/irenaeus-heresies3-1-14>. Accessed 04February2020.

<sup>21</sup> Luthardt; 230.

<sup>22</sup> It is also a well-established testimony of the early Church that the Apostle John was the last of the apostles to die, late

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part I

conclusion that the author of the Fourth Gospel is none other than ‘the disciple whom Jesus loved,’ who is none other than the Apostle John. Luthardt asks the necessary question: if not the Apostle John, then who might have written the Fourth Gospel.

Who could have written it? The ‘great unknown one,’ who has been suggested, would have been too great to remain concealed. He would have stood out a head taller than all the great men of the second century. There is no room in the second century for such a mind. The literature of that century has an utterly different stamp from the fourth gospel. The writings of the apostolic fathers stand in dependence upon the apostolic literature.<sup>23</sup>

### **The Theological Gospel:**

Perhaps the most powerful internal witness to the authorship of John the apostle is the stated purpose of the Gospel itself. The Fourth Gospel did not set out to be a ‘Life of Christ,’ a biography of the Messiah, so to speak, but rather a theological defense of the faith of and in Jesus Christ. The author makes this clear at the close of what is widely considered the core of the Gospel, ending in Chapter 20.

*And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.* (John 20:30-31)

The Fourth Gospel sets out to firmly establish not merely the life of Jesus of Nazareth, nor even the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises of the Coming Messiah, but preeminently the *life* that is to be found in Jesus, the Messiah of Israel and Savior of the world. John makes the transition from the *humanity* of Jesus to the eternal *deity* of Christ, without sacrificing either to the other. In this the Evangelist is the first true theologian of the Trinity, over two hundred years before Athanasius made his spirited defense of Christ’s full humanity and full deity at the Council of Nicæa. This is the power of the Fourth Gospel, fully presenting the God-Man “not by transferring us into the realm of speculative philosophy or even of spiritual experience, not by passing from a moral Jesus to a metaphysical Son of God...but by confronting us with the precise and bodily history

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in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century.

<sup>23</sup> Luthardt; 231.



## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part I

of Jesus, from whose 'belly' flowed rivers of living water, who came not by water only, but by water and blood, by whose blood men are saved and whose flesh men must eat."<sup>24</sup>

John's Gospel puts to rest any thought that one can have a 'religious' or 'moral' relationship to Jesus Christ as one might have with a rabbi, or an imam, or a swami. All notions of Jesus as a great moral teacher, an exemplar of human goodness and love, shatter on the rock of the Fourth Gospel. For here we come face to face in the most powerful way, from the opening verse to the closing chapter, with the fact that this Jesus is



**Frederick Godet (1812-1900)**

not only the Messiah of Israel, He is the eternal Son of God; He is God Himself come in the flesh. "John's presentation of *who Jesus is* lies at the heart of all that is distinctive in this Gospel."<sup>25</sup> The advent of this eternal person into history, of God into humanity, immediately produced, and continues to produce, division within the human race. That division, according to John's Gospel, is nothing less than the irreconcilable separate of *faith* and *unbelief*. "And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness comprehends it not...He was in the world, and the world was made by Him, and the world did not know Him. He came unto His own, and His own received Him not..." Frederick Godet summarizes the thrust of the Fourth Gospel – its source and its goal – concisely.

The primordial and fundamental fact in this history, is the appearance and manifestation of the Word. On this permanent foundation the two secondary facts are presented to view alternately – unbelief and faith – the progressive manifestation of which determine the phases of the narrative.<sup>26</sup>

It will therefore be in keeping with John's own plan and purpose to conduct this study of the Fourth Gospel as a *theological* endeavor rather than simple a biblical commentary. All will flow from the Prologue, the blessed announcement the Logos of God has become flesh and has tabernacle among men.

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<sup>24</sup> Hoskyns; 18.

<sup>25</sup> Carson; 95.

<sup>26</sup> Godet, Frederick *Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House; 1969); 55.

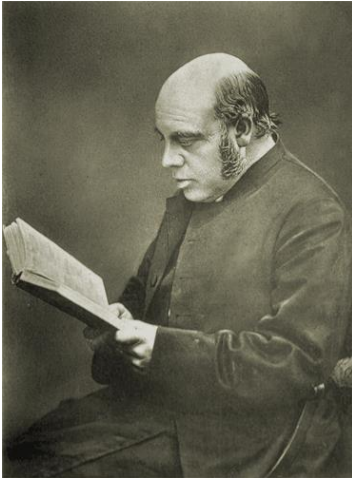


**Week 2: The Source of John's Gospel**

**Key Biblical Texts: I John 1:1-4**

*"The evangelist is not floating in the clouds of airy theological speculations, ...though with his eyes he peers into the mysteries of the unseen, his foot is planted on the solid ground of external fact..."*  
(J. B. Lightfoot, *Biblical Essays*)

It will be worth the time taken to firmly establish the authenticity of the Gospel of John, so that nagging doubts raised by incipient liberal scholarship might not rob the Fourth Gospel of its powerful impact on the believer's faith and comfort. Of course, the extended arguments in defense of Johannine authorship cannot be reproduced here; pages



**J. B. Lightfoot (1828-89)**

upon pages have been written by excellent scholars over the years, far too much to incorporate into this study verbatim. But two of those scholars furnished the modern evangelical student with excellent summaries of their findings – neatly outlined and powerfully defended. Both men lived in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, both were ordained within the Anglican Church, and each successively served as Bishop of Durham. The former bishop, J. B. Lightfoot, delivered three lectures on the topic of the authenticity and genuineness of the Gospel of

John in 1871, later submitting them to be published in his *Biblical Essays*. In the first of these essays, entitled "Internal Evidence for the Authenticity and Genuineness of St. John's Gospel, Lightfoot painstakingly sets forth four premises that lead inexorably to his conclusion that the author of the Fourth Gospel could be none other than John, the son of Zebedee, the apostle of Jesus Christ. Here is a brief summary of Lightfoot's argument.<sup>27</sup>

1. **The Author was a Jew** – Lightfoot investigates the writing style of the Fourth Gospel and concludes, "Tested by his style then, the writer was a Jew. Of all the New Testament writings the Fourth Gospel is the most distinctly Hebraic in this respect...If therefore we had no other evidence than the language, we might with confidence affirm that this gospel was not written either by a Gentile or by a

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<sup>27</sup> The full essay may be read online at <https://www.biblestudytools.com/history/joseph-barber-lightfoot-biblical-essays/internal-evidence-of-the-authenticity-and-genuineness-of-st-johns-gospel.html>.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part I

Hellenistic Christian, but by a Hebrew accustomed to speak the language of his fathers.<sup>28</sup>

2. **The Author was a 1<sup>st</sup> Century Jew** – Lightfoot highlights the author’s intimate and comprehensive understanding of the Messianic ideas and expectations of 1<sup>st</sup> Century Judaism, including nuances that would no longer be accessible to a Hellenistic Christian, or even a Diaspora Jew, of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century. Lightfoot writes, “The narrative and the discourses alike are thoroughly saturated with the Messianic ideas of the time.”<sup>29</sup> The dialogue between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well, the query put into the mouths of the scribes and the Pharisees as to whether John the Baptist or Jesus was ‘the Prophet,’ or even the allusion to the manna in the wilderness within the narrative of the miraculous feeding of the five thousand, all point to an understanding of 1<sup>st</sup> Century Messianic expectations far deeper than the ‘classic’ Messianic prophecies. “It is hardly conceivable to my mind that a Christian writer, living in or after the middle of the second century, calling on his imagination for facts, should have divested himself so absolutely of the Christian idea and fallen back on the Jewish.”<sup>30</sup>

The most powerful argument Lightfoot presents in this regard is from a statement that has no theological bearing on the Gospel message itself, when the Pharisees respond to Jesus’ enigmatic comment about ‘rebuilding the Temple in three days.’ “*It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you will rebuild it in three days?*” Lightfoot shows that getting this one fact right in the narrative fairly demands the perspective of a contemporary Jew, for the building program that was Herod’s Temple commenced in 18 BC and was not completed until AD 63/64, only to be completely destroyed by the Romans in AD 70. The chronology of the temple found in John 2 corresponds *exactly* with the chronology of Jesus’ baptism found in Luke’s Gospel, coordinating the year of this comment to AD 28. The coincidence of such knowledge is undoubtedly beyond the ability of a late, non-Jewish author.

3. **The Author was an Eye-witness** – Lightfoot points out that, while the Fourth Gospel omits most of the narrative events contained in the Synoptics, those that are included are so unique and so otherwise theologically insignificant as either to be complete fictional fabrications or the reminiscence of an eye-witness to the events. Lightfoot summarizes his extensive analysis, “I have shown hitherto that, whatever touchstone we apply, the Fourth Gospel vindicates itself as a trustworthy narrative, which could only have proceeded from a contemporary and an eye-witness.”<sup>31</sup>
4. **The Author was within the Inner Circle of Jesus’ Ministry** – Events recorded by the author of the Fourth Gospel were often quite private, with several of them being

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<sup>28</sup> Lightfoot, J. B. *Biblical Essays* (Grand Rapids: Hendrickson Publishers; 1994); 16, 21.

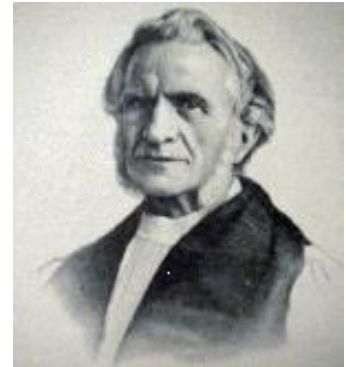
<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*; 23.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*; 25.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part I

elsewhere noted in the Synoptics as occurring only in the presence of Jesus' 'inner circle' of disciples – Peter, James, and John. To these three might be added Andrew, Peter's brother; but it remains the case that many of the events recorded in the Fourth Gospel – on testimony from the Synoptics – could only have been witnessed by this smaller group of disciples. As Andrew and Peter are both mentioned by name in the Fourth Gospel, and as James the son of Zebedee was martyred quite early in the history of the Church, Lightfoot reasonably concludes that the author of the Fourth Gospel could be none other than John, James' brother.<sup>32</sup>

Lightfoot's discourse may be 150 years old, but it has never been successfully refuted. His friend and successor to the bishopric at Durham, Brooke Foss Westcott, devoted a lengthy section of the introduction to his commentary on the Gospel of John to a defense of its authenticity and genuineness. Many of Westcott's points are similar to Lightfoot's, substituting *Palestinian Jew* for Lightfoot's *1<sup>st</sup> Century Jew*, and



**B. F. Westcott (1825-1901)**

*An Apostle* for Lightfoot's *Member of the Inner Circle*.<sup>33</sup> All in all, however, these two notable scholars of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century established the conservative position with regard to the authorship of the Fourth Gospel in a manner that has yet to be even reasonably refuted. Craig Blomberg, in his *The Historical Reliability of John's Gospel*, notes, "No full-scale refutation of Westcott has ever appeared, although important segments of his argument have been scrutinized. It would appear that his basic logic remains sound, even though each stage of the argument requires certain nuancing."<sup>34</sup>

Blomberg also addresses the modern propensity of scholars to propose other candidates as the 'real' author of the Fourth Gospel. These candidates range from unnamed Gnostic writers of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century, to devoted disciples of the Apostle John, to Apollos, and even to Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha. Blomberg notes, however, that "No orthodox writer [of the early Church] ever proposes any other alternative for the author of the Fourth Gospel [than the Apostle John] and the book is accepted in all of the early canonical lists, which is all the more significant given the frequent heterodox

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*; 39.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*; 41.

<sup>33</sup> Westcott's defense of the Johannine authorship of the Fourth Gospel may be read in full at <https://archive.org/details/gospelaccording13unkngoog/page/n10/mode/2up>.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part I

misinterpretation of it.”<sup>35</sup> Blomberg alludes to the fact that the Fourth Gospel was not only quoted often by *Christian* writers of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century, but even more frequently by *Gnostic* or heretical writers of the same time. In each and every case where an author is cited, that author is the Apostle John. Westcott writes, “Outside the Church the testimony to the general use of St. John’s Gospel is both early and decisive.”<sup>36</sup>

Modern readers of the Fourth Gospel may be reassured that no reasonable doubt, and certainly no *orthodox* doubt, existed regarding the authorship of the work until the Higher Criticism of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. With the Higher Critics the argument was not based on the same points by which Lightfoot and Westcott defend Johannine authorship, but rather on the theological content – indeed, the theological *power* – of the Fourth Gospel. It is essentially maintained that such theological depth and height could not have been attained by the early Church, that such a bold and unvarnished proclamation of the deity of Jesus Christ could not have originated in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century, but must be a product of the development of the ‘religion’ of Christianity at a later date. According to one commentator, this process of embellishing and exalting the person and life of the *man* Jesus began with the Apostle Paul and was brought to its fullest, *theological* extent by ‘John.’

Again, the glory which Paul ascribes to the exalted Christ is thrown back by John on the actual life on earth. When the Apostle [i.e., Paul] wrote, the historical figure of Jesus was still too near, too much entangled with petty realities, to disclose itself in its full majesty. It was difficult for those who had known Christ after the flesh to think of Him as a divine being, and Paul turned his eyes from the earthly appearance to the ascended Lord, whose glory had now become manifest. In the second century, however, the life of Jesus had receded into the past. The veil of trivial circumstance had fallen away, and the life could stand out in its true proportions, as an authentic revelation of God. It was now possible to reflect the ideal conception of Jesus on the facts of His earthly history...The Fourth Gospel is thus built on foundations which had already been laid by Paul.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Blomberg, Craig *The Historical Reliability of John’s Gospel* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press; 2001); 27.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*; 25.

<sup>36</sup> Westcott, Brooke Foss *The Gospel According to St. John* (London: John Murray; 1882); xxxii.

<sup>37</sup> Scott, E. F. *The Fourth Gospel: Its Purpose and Theology* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark; 1951); 51.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part I

The modern perspective on the Fourth Gospel has been heavily influenced by a school of scholarly output known as the 'History of Religion' school; in German, the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*. This school grew out of the dialectical teaching of Ferdinand

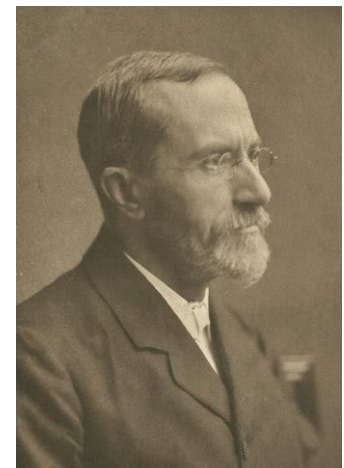


**F. C. Baur (1792-1860)**

Christian Baur, the founding theologian of the religious school at the University of Tübingen in Germany. Baur followed the philosophical teachings of Hegel, who believed that history followed a pattern of 'thesis - antithesis - synthesis.' Applying this to the development of Christian theology, Baur postulated that the theology of the Fourth Gospel was itself a result of early Jewish Christianity (thesis) battling against traditional, Palestinian Judaism (antithesis), finally resulting in the 'Logos' theology of John's Gospel (synthesis). The History of Religions School thus forwarded this synthetic view of 'Christian' theology as an amalgamation of Jewish Messianic hope and Greek Logos philosophy resulting in the deification of the *human* Messiah, Jesus to become the *Christ* of the Church, the Savior of the world. Raymond Brown summarizes this process in modern liberal theology,

the classic argument used to support a very late dating for John was the development of theology. F. C. Baur put the Synoptics, Paul, and John into the framework of Hegelian thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, with John representing a period that had gone far beyond Pauline theology.<sup>38</sup>

While it must be admitted that the language of the Fourth Gospel reflects an elevated Christology when compared to that of the Synoptics, it cannot be shown that anything said regarding Jesus Christ in the Fourth Gospel in any way contradicts what is presented in the Synoptics. Indeed, the Fourth Gospel provides the underlying cause and explanation for the wisdom and the teaching and the miracles recorded in the Synoptics, which in themselves do not *deny* the deity of Jesus Christ, though it is not as much in the forefront as it is in



**James Denney (1856-1917)**

<sup>38</sup> Brown, Raymond E. *The Gospel According to John* (New York: Doubleday & Company; 1966); LXXX.

the Fourth Gospel. James Denney sees a significant progression of revelation in the four gospels with regard to Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of both covenantal and creation history. Denney compares the opening passages in each gospel and writes,

[Mark] connects Jesus with John the Baptist, and by a single allusion to the prophecies of Isaiah and Malachi, which were fulfilled in the forerunner, leaves us to infer that in Jesus God's ancient purposes are being achieved. Matthew goes further. He introduces Jesus as the Christ, the son of David, son of Abraham. He is the key to the whole Jewish history: the one true religion, beginning with the father of the faithful, has its consummation in Him. Luke goes further still. He traces the genealogy of Jesus not to Abraham but to Adam. He is sensible that His significance is not national but universal, and that to appreciate His greatness we must understand His essential relation not only to Israel but to the whole human race. But for John none of these ways of representing the greatness and significance of Jesus is adequate. To exhibit the truth about Him, or rather to exhibit Him in the truth of His being, we must relate Him not to the Baptist merely, or to Abraham, or to the father of mankind, but to the eternal being of God. This is what the writer does by means of the Logos idea, and it is for this purpose alone that he makes use of the idea.<sup>39</sup>

Denney's mention here of the Logos strikes at the heart of the controversy and we will be turning to that concept shortly. He does, however, show a natural theological progression within the four gospels, one that need not be viewed in light of Hegelian dialectics rather than simply the multifaceted revelation of the purpose of God in and through His Son, Jesus Christ. What is remarkable about the liberal denial of the authorship of the Fourth Gospel to the Apostle John, and its dating within the 1<sup>st</sup> Century, is that this denial has persisted even after the discovery in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century of significant manuscript data that places the Fourth Gospel *at the latest* to within the turn of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century. Two significant discoveries – the Dead Sea Scrolls (1947) and the Rylands Papyrus (1935) have definitely established both the theological language of the Fourth Gospel as well as its early circulation well within the 1<sup>st</sup> Century. Brown concludes, “Thus, it may be said that, while most scholars still think of John as the latest of the four Gospels, it is very difficult to fix the date of the Gospel on the basis of a theory of

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<sup>39</sup> Denney, James *Jesus and the Gospel* (New York: A. C. Armstrong & Son; 1909); 80-81.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part I

theological development. There is nothing in the theology of John that would clearly rule out final composition in the 1<sup>st</sup> century.”<sup>40</sup>

The real argument comes down to whether the early Church – and indeed Jesus Himself – considered the Christ to be the Son of God; to be literally as prophetically, *God come in the flesh*. The Prologue of John’s Gospel makes this contention in no uncertain terms and whoever reads it is faced either with accepting the biblical claim as to the deity of Jesus Christ, or with taking serious evasive measures to avoid the most obvious conclusion of the text. One such evasion is to deny that the Prologue itself establishes the essential equivalence of divine being between the Logos and God; this is the methodology of the Jehovah’s Witnesses. This evasion lacks any and all support from the text as will be shown in our exegesis of the Prologue in a subsequent lesson. The more scholarly, and more pervasive, evasion still rests upon the use of the term ‘Logos,’ and concludes thereby that the Fourth Gospel is an example of philosophical synthesis between Greek and Jewish thought. Such syntheses were indeed common to the time, with the most famous synthesizer being the Jewish theologian Philo Judæus, who wrote in the early 1<sup>st</sup> Century from Alexandria, Egypt. By linking the Fourth Gospel to Philonic influences, modern scholars attempt to ‘prove’ that the equivalency between the Logos and God was not meant to be interpreted as essential or real, but rather philosophical and speculative. In the modern theological world, this evasion has become the most common and most pernicious.

*“In the beginning was the Logos, and the Logos was with God, and the Logos was God...”*  
The English translation of this opening to John’s Gospel masks the underlying significance of what the apostle is writing with the translation ‘Word’ for ‘Logos.’ The translation itself is perfectly accurate, for *Logos* is most commonly translated by the English *Word*. But to the reader of the Gospel in the 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> Century, reading in the original Greek, the author’s terminology would call up a vast array of philosophical thought stretching back at least three centuries. Greek philosophy permeated the Eastern Mediterranean lands by the time of John, and there was perhaps no more significant word common to all branches of Hellenistic thought than the word *Logos*. “The Greek Logos...meant also thought and

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<sup>40</sup> Brown; LXXXI.



## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part I

reason, and during the Hellenistic age was the regular term by which the philosophical schools expressed the impersonal world-force which governed all things.”<sup>41</sup>

The formation of a Logos philosophy within Hellenistic thought began slowly, with the realization among the philosophers that the ancient pantheon of gods was patently



**Edwin Hatch (1835-99)**

contrary to both reason and experience. Edwin Hatch, a 19<sup>th</sup> Century English theologian, begins a chapter on Greek and Christian Theology thus, “Slowly there loomed through the midst of earlier Greek thought the consciousness of one God.”<sup>42</sup> Hatch goes on to point out the obvious, that the early Church had no need of such a development, believing as from its Jewish roots in one God,

the Creator of all things.<sup>43</sup> But the Greeks took a long time to come to that knowledge, though they were still centuries ahead of many other peoples in the discovery. However, reasoning to one supreme god does not result in a belief in the One True God, and the Greek philosophers quickly made shipwreck of their intellectual progress by denying that this supreme god was either known or knowable. He exists as the Supreme Spirit and as such could have no *direct* contact or communication with Matter – Creation and Man. *Indirect* contact was possible, however, and was mediated by ‘emanations’ from this god, the highest of these emanations being the *Logos* or ‘Word’ of god. In the history of Judaism this development of Greek thought finds its inroad into Jewish thought through the writings of Philo.

The wise man, longing to apprehend God, and travelling along the path of wisdom and knowledge, first of all meets with the divine Reasons, and with them abides as a guest; but when he resolves to pursue the further journey, he is compelled to abstain, for the eyes of his understanding being opened, he sees that the object of his quest is afar off and always receding, an infinite distance in advance of him. Wisdom leads him first into the antechamber of the Divine Reason, and when he is there he does not at once enter into the Divine Presence; but sees Him afar off, or rather not even afar off can he behold Him, but

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<sup>41</sup> Bentwich, Norman *Philo-Judæus of Alexandria* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America; 1910); 144-145.

<sup>42</sup> Hatch, Edwin *The Influence of Greek Ideas and Usages upon the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Hendrickson Publishers; 1995); 171.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*; 188.



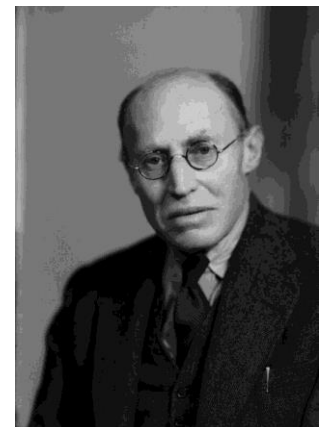
## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part I

only sees that the place where he stands is still infinitely far from the unnamed, unspeakable, and incomprehensible God.<sup>44</sup>

Thus the wise man, the philosopher, can only approximate the knowledge of God through the emanations that come from God – emanations which are not God himself, but rather rays of intellectual understanding, like the rays of light that emanate from the sun. The *Logos* was the highest and purest of these emanations. “The *Logos*, reflecting not only the Divine nature, but also the Divine will and the Divine goodness, become to men a messenger of help; like the angel to Hagar, it brings advice and encouragement.”<sup>45</sup>

Like a king, it announces by decree what men ought to do; like a teacher, it instructs its disciples in what will benefit them; like a counsellor, it suggests the wisest plans, and so greatly benefits those who do not of themselves know what is best; like a friend, it tells many secrets which it is not lawful for the uninitiated to hear.<sup>46</sup>

These few quotes from Philo’s pen, which could be multiplied by thousands, begin to show clearly a complete lack of any similarity between the Jewish philosopher’s conception of the *Logos* and the use of that term in the Prologue of the Fourth Gospel. What is eminently clear in Philo’s teaching is that the *Logos is not God*. Philo exalts the *Logos* above all other divine emanations, but never does the Philonic *Logos* become essential God. “The central thought of Philo’s system is that God is immanent in all his work; but it would seem to him sacrilegious to apply to the Godhead itself this universal, unceasing activity, and so he develops the *Logos* as the most ideal attribute of the Deity, and the sum of all His immanence and effluence.”<sup>47</sup> Indeed, one author argues that, for Philo, the emanations of the Divine Being, including the *Logos*, were not ‘real’ in any objective sense – a very far cry from the use of the term in John’s Prologue. Bentwich writes, “If we have understood correctly Philo’s theology, neither *Logos*, nor subordinate powers, nor angels, nor demons have an objective



**Norman Bentwich (1883-1971)**

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<sup>44</sup> Philo *De somn.* 1.11, quoted by Hatch; 247-248.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*; 248.

<sup>46</sup> Philo *De somn.* 1.15, quoted by Hatch; 248.

<sup>47</sup> Bentwich; 153.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part I

existence; they are mere imaginings of varying incompleteness which the limited minds of men, ‘moving in worlds not realized,’ make for themselves of the one and only true God.”<sup>48</sup>

It is of the essence of modern liberal scholarship to insist that ‘John’ (again, modern liberal scholars, as a rule, do not accept the actual Johannine authorship of the Fourth Gospel) leaned heavily upon Philo for his theology. In many circles this association between the Fourth Gospel and Philonic speculative theology is simply taken for granted, which is remarkable considering the fact that ‘Logos’ is only used in the Prologue of John’s Gospel, and occurs nowhere else in the book as a title for the Christ. Still, John’s usage of the term in the Prologue is admittedly significant, but does it equate to a dependence between him and Philo? The dissimilarities are far more striking than any similarities.

Having established from even a cursory review of Philo’s writings, that the Hellenistic Jewish philosopher-theologian did not at any time equate the dignity of the Logos with that of God Himself, we can quickly see from the Prologue of John’s Gospel that the Apostle made the connection quite clear, “*And the Logos was God.*” This statement alone is sufficient to show that John’s view of the *Logos* was of a totally different nature than was Philo’s, or that of Greek philosophy in general, for that matter. Reading of the *Logos* in the Prologue to the Fourth Gospel merely confirms the general use of a term that had become common currency in the Mediterranean world and need not indicate any Philonic or Platonic influence upon John, or any dependence of Johannine theology upon Greek philosophy. Brown notes that “the hymn which is the Prologue had its own history within Johannine circles, and it is risky to argue from terminological parallels in the Prologue to influence on the whole Gospel. Thus, there is not real reason to suppose that the Gospel was influenced by any more Greek philosophy than what was already present in the general thought and speech of Palestine.”<sup>49</sup>

Still, it cannot be denied that historically such an association was made from early in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century, and the Gospel of John became an unwitting support for a heretical teaching within the Church known as **Gnosticism**. Gnosticism itself was not actually a rigid set of beliefs or a doctrinal system, but was rather a broad philosophical paradigm

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*; 165.

<sup>49</sup> Brown; LVII.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part I

that had one uniting feature: *Dualism*.<sup>50</sup> This philosophical view maintains an impassible separation between ‘spirit’ and ‘matter,’ the former being inherently good and the latter inherently evil, or at least less good. The scope of Gnostic thought encompassed many concepts, with no particular form of Gnostic thought fully encompassing all of them. Brown writes,

All can recognize common patterns in developed Gnosticism: for example, ontological dualism; intermediary beings between God and man; the agency of those beings in producing the evil, material world; the soul as a divine spark imprisoned in matter; the necessity of knowledge gained through revelation in order to free the soul and lead it to light; the numerical limitation of those capable of receiving this revelation; the saving revealer. But which of these elements are essential for a movement to be truly called Gnostic?<sup>51</sup>

Notice the words used in the paragraph above: ‘*between God and man,*’ ‘*soul,*’ ‘*revelation,*’ and ‘*light.*’ The affinity of these words to the Fourth Gospel makes it quite understandable that, of the four gospels, this was the one most employed - indeed co-opted - by Gnostic writers in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century. Gnostic works of that era, such as the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Gospel of Truth*, contain terminological similarities with the Gospel of John, but the connections end there. The latter works are purely speculative, and in many places downright ridiculous. The Gnostic writers pulled from John, but they also pulled from many other sources, not least of which the many Greek philosophical schools prevalent in that period. “When Gnosticism appears in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D., it is an amalgamation of different strains of thought, and certain of those strains are truly ancient.”<sup>52</sup> But there are many points within the Fourth Gospel that individually prevent any connection between the Gospel and Gnostic thought of any type or era. One of these points is in the Prologue itself, and is a statement that no Gnostic could ever avow, “*And the Logos became flesh and tabernacled among us.*”

So what do we make of John’s *Logos* Christology? Was the Apostle somehow influenced by the writings of Philo or of other Greek philosophical schools? This is unlikely, if we accept the authorship of the Gospel by John, for we are told elsewhere that

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<sup>50</sup> Brown quotes Munck in defining Gnosticism as “a scientific terms that has no generally accepted scientific definition.”; LIII.

<sup>51</sup> *Idem*.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part I

he *'was unlettered.'*<sup>53</sup> This statement from Luke's account has often been interpreted to mean that John (and Peter) were illiterate men, but the term, *agrammatoi*, does not mean illiterate, but rather unschooled. The disciples were not trained in one of the rabbinic schools of the day, as we learn later the Apostle Paul was. We can reasonably conclude, however, that whatever synagogue education John had received probably did not extend to Greek philosophy or even the writings of Philo, which would have been contemporary with the Apostle's childhood.

Was the author, then, a closet Gnostic? Or perhaps a 'recovering' Gnostic? This was the view of Rudolf Bultmann, the 20<sup>th</sup> Century's leading proponent of the History of Religions school. Bultmann, of course, denied the Johannine authorship of the Fourth Gospel as well as its composition before the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century. We have seen that



**Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976)**

Both the internal and external evidence for the authorship of the Fourth Gospel by the Apostle John is practically overwhelming, and realize that Bultmann's objection is theological (indeed, Christological) and not really based on a critical analysis of the text. Still, if we grant Bultmann's premise we still cannot arrive at his conclusion, for there is no affinity between the disjointed and speculative writings of Gnosticism and the clear, concise, and powerful testimony of John's Gospel. Denney is far more correct than Bultmann when he writes,

There is not in the prologue [or, we may add, in the rest of the Gospel] a single word which betrays a purely speculative interest, such as we find, for example, in Philo. There is not a single technical term. The writer has no philosophical problems or conundrums for the solving of which he makes use of the category of the Logos. The one immeasurable reality which fills and hold his mind is Jesus...He does not arbitrarily assign to Jesus all or any of the functions assigned to the Logos in Heraclitus and the Stoics, or in the Alexandrian philosophy of Philo; in such things he has less than no interest. His heart is where his treasure is, with Jesus<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*; LV.

<sup>53</sup> Acts 4:13

<sup>54</sup> Denney; 80-81.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part I

In attempting to discern John's connection, if any, with the speculative ramblings of Philo, or the metaphysical worldview of the Stoics, or the disjointed pseudo-theology of the Gnostics – all on the basis of the Apostle's usage of the term *Logos* – we do well to remember that the term is only used in the Prologue as a designation for the Messiah, Jesus. From the standpoint of the powerful literature and theology that is the Prologue to the Gospel of John, one would never call it a 'molehill'; but from the incredible speculative mountains that have been built from John's brief use of one Greek term, the metaphor is appropriate. In truth, *Logos* was a common term in Palestinian rabbinic thought no less than in Hellenistic thought. It is not inconceivable that John may have heard quite a few sermons in the synagogue in which the term was used to speak of God's dealings with His people under the Old Covenant, perhaps in connection with the Angel of the Lord. How far this or that rabbi entered into Greek speculation is impossible to know, but there is no evidence from the Fourth Gospel that John did so. John borrowed a familiar term, but at no point became a slave to it or to any other philosophical system that employed it far more than he does. Denney concludes,

To set everything in relation to Christ, under this profound sense of His universal significance, is the purpose of the writer in the opening verses of his gospel. He does so in bold outlines, in a few brief sentences; and he borrows the conception of the *Logos* for a moment, because in the environment for which he wrote it facilitated the execution of his purpose. But though he borrows the conception, he does not borrow from it. He does not invest Jesus with an unreal greatness which belongs to this philosophical conception, and not to the Person. Jesus is too great for this, and too real; the writer knows Him too well, and his devotion to Him is too absolute...it may be said once more that he did not borrow this from the *Logos*; he borrowed the *Logos*, because it lent itself to the convenient and intelligible expression of this independent Christian conviction.<sup>55</sup>

The authorship and date of the Fourth Gospel is of great importance in the midst of the pervasive charge of Gnosticism and Hellenistic philosophy that have surrounded the Gospel in recent study. The powerful internal and external testimony to the Gospel as having come from the Apostle John, as well as the non-speculative and no-philosophical manner in which he writes, combine to establish the Fourth Gospel as fully Christian in its Christology and clear in its testimony to the deity of the Messiah Jesus.

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<sup>55</sup> Denney; 81-82.

**Week 3: In the Beginning Was the Word**

**Key Biblical Texts:** John 1:1-2; Colossians 1:15-17; Hebrews 1:1-3

*“He who appeared in time was eternal;  
He who appeared among us was with God;  
He who appears in the flesh was God by nature.”  
(Christoph Luthardt *St. John’s Gospel*)*

Perhaps the two most offensive claims made by the Christian faith – offensive to the world, that is – are the doctrine of the Resurrection and the Doctrine of the Deity of Christ. Of these two, it is the latter that becomes the single hinge point between faith and unbelief, for once the deity of Christ is granted, the resurrection ceases to be such a rational hurdle. Men and women throughout the past twenty centuries have been willing to grant Jesus of Nazareth some measure of exaltation among men – from a great moral teacher, to the perfect exemplar of human love, to ‘a’ god even. But unbelief shrinks in horror from the statement of the Apostle’s Creed, *deum verum de deo vero* – true God of true God. This particular point of contention should not surprise us, as the same apostle who wrote the Fourth Gospel also defined the spirit of Antichrist as *“every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh.”*<sup>56</sup>

The most pernicious manifestations of this unbelief have been from within the Church itself. Judaism, of course, largely rejected Jesus as the Messiah of Israel, and in His own life the Jews sought to stone Him on account of His claim of being equal with God. Islam grants a higher place to Jesus in its pecking order than does Judaism, listing Him as one of the seven great prophets (the last and greatest of which is, of course, Muhammed). But Islam flatly and vehemently denies that Jesus Christ was Incarnate God, claiming this to be a false and heretical teaching of the Church. Both Judaism and Islam claim opposition in the name of preserving strict monotheism, viewing the Christian doctrine of the Trinity to be nothing more than a philosophical shroud cloaking an underlying polytheism. The polytheists themselves, on the other hand, had no real problem with adopting another ‘god’ into their pantheon, and many pagans have incorporated Jesus into their native religions without a hiccup. Thus Jesus becomes a god as Zeus was a god, or

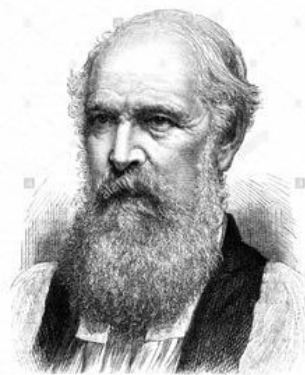
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<sup>56</sup> I John 4:3

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part I

even as a deceased Roman Emperor becomes a god. But the notion of there being only one God, and Jesus being that God having come literally in the flesh, was far too restrictive for pagan religious tastes. Thus the early preaching of the Gospel, and the early writings of the Church, were tantamount to a two-front war, with strict monotheism on the one side and loose polytheism on the other. At least the two sides were not themselves allies.

We have seen that the special opposition to the Johannine authorship of the Fourth Gospel stems from the modern unbelief concerning so developed a claim as to the deity of Jesus Christ, so early in the history of the Church. To the modern liberal scholar, Jesus *could not* have been ‘Emanuel, God with us,’ and therefore any biblical testimony to the effect that He was and is Incarnate God must have come from the more ‘developed’ Christianity of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century or later. If we have been successful in establishing both the Johannine authorship of the Fourth Gospel and, consequently, its time of composition firmly within the 1<sup>st</sup> Century, then we have done as much as establish the biblical veracity



**J. C. Ryle (1816-1900)**

of the *claim* that Jesus Christ is one with God; He is God. This fact stands out frequently through the Gospel of John, and one need not rely only on the Prologue to defend the claim. The Prologue, however, is the most poetic, the most beautiful, and the most powerfully succinct statement of the truth that then flows with ease throughout the rest of the Gospel. In three short clauses – one verse in our Bibles – the apostle says more than the combined writings of all the philosophers and theologians since time began. *“In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.”* J. C. Ryle, speaking of the first five verses of the Gospel of John, writes, *“The five verses now before us contain a statement of matchless sublimity concerning the divine nature of our Lord Jesus Christ.”*<sup>57</sup> This statement is true, and the five verses with which the Gospel opens are indeed a powerful statement of the entire Gospel as it is in one Person, the God-Man Jesus Christ. But within those first five verses, the first stands out as the most concise, and therefore most powerful, statement of the full deity of Jesus Christ as has ever been written. Ryle correctly summarizes the

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<sup>57</sup> Ryle, John Charles *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: St. John Volume I* (London: James Clarke & Co., Ltd; 1975); 2.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part I

teaching of the first verse when he says of Jesus, “He is nothing less than perfect God, - equal to the Father as touching his Godhead, - God of the substance of the Father, begotten before the worlds.”<sup>58</sup>

Reading these words from Ryle, however, one cannot help but hear the echoes of Athanasius, and of the debate at Nicæa, and the ‘final’ Chalcedonian settlement as to the full deity of Jesus Christ. This reminds us that, in spite of the power and sublimity of John’s opening salvo, the concept of a fully divine Messiah – a *man* who is in all things equal to *God* – was not completely or consistently accepted within the Church. From the earliest post-apostolic times teachers arose who denied the clear meaning of the first verse of the Fourth Gospel – and the clear meaning of many, many other verses in the same Gospel – and who attempted to formulate a different Christ. Most famous among these in the early years was **Arius** (AD256-336), successively a presbyter and a priest in the church at Alexandria, Egypt. Arius’ central point was that Jesus, though higher in rank by far than any man or angel, was subordinate in nature to God and had a beginning (thus Jesus was not eternal and therefore could not be considered *vere deo*, true God). Arius’ famous dictum, “There was a time when Christ was not” became the battle cry for centuries for those within the Church who refused to accept the Nicæan or Chalcedonian orthodoxy. Arius was defeated in debate by Athanasius, and the full and true deity of Jesus Christ was upheld by various councils of the Church. But Arianism never died out and was supported in turn by various emperors after Constantine had legalized Christianity throughout the empire.

Another persistent teaching in the early church, one that denied the unique deity of Jesus Christ, was propagated by **Sabellius**, a North African presbyter and priest who taught in Rome around AD 215. Sabellius was an early opponent of the nascent trinitarian orthodoxy that was to develop into full doctrine at the Council of Nicæa in AD 325. Sabellius’ accepted the real distinction between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit – he could hardly do otherwise as each are clearly mentioned in the Bible. But to Sabellius, the preservation of the unity of God demanded that these three ‘Persons’ be simply *forms* or *modes* of the divine being, different ‘faces,’ as it were, by which the one God presents

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<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*; 3.



## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part I

Himself to the world and to mankind. *Modalism*, the technical term for Sabellianism since the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century, has thus become a category of heretical teachings that deny the distinct personalities of the three Persons of the triune Godhead.

Another theologian of this era, **Nestorius** (c. AD 386-450), was the representative of a certain attempt to ‘solve’ the problem by finding in Jesus Christ an amalgamation of the divine and the human. Perhaps, thought some, the divine *Logos* took the place of the human soul of the man Jesus. Thus resulted from this line of Christology a Christ who was neither fully God nor fully Man, neither *vere deo* nor *vere homo*. Nestorius was himself a very influential man, having risen to the rank of archbishop of Constantinople, the capital of the Empire. Yet even he was deposed and excommunicated for his heretical views as to the nature of the divine and the human in Christ Jesus. These three men – Arius, Sabellius, and Nestorius – are merely presented here as representatives of a consistent conflict within professing Christendom with regard to the nature of Jesus Christ as truly God and truly Man. The various views have taken on different names through the ages, as different men rise up to espouse them. But at heart the opposition of each and every one of them is to what is contained in the first verse of John’s Gospel, and this first verse powerfully answers and refutes each and every opponent.<sup>59</sup>

So powerful and so sublime is the opening section of John’s Gospel, that one form of opposition to Johannine authorship is that no Galilean fisherman could have penned words so concentrated with philosophical and theological content. We have noted before that the designation of Peter and John as ‘unlettered’ men should not be interpreted as meaning the apostles were uneducated or illiterate. But is it reasonable to conclude that a fisherman – without doubt a non-scholarly occupation in the ancient world – could compose such a treatise as the Fourth Gospel, and such a Prologue as the opening verses of chapter 1? The objection itself is faulty on two counts, at least. First, it betrays a very low view of inspiration; indeed, all opposition to Johannine authorship has consistently come from those who view the biblical books as the products of human thought and human composition. Though we do not hold to a view of inspiration in which the human

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<sup>59</sup> A well-known modern version of the opposition is that of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, though this group is definitely outside the pale of the Christian Church. The JW interpretation of this verse will be dealt with within the exposition itself.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part I

author is so completely subsumed under the influence of the Spirit of God that the individuality of background and style is absent, we must allow for the elevation of thought that inspiration must certainly bring to the human mind and the human pen. This is that of which Peter speaks in reference to the Old Testament prophets, and it applies equally to the New Testament writers as well.

*And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts; knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.* (II Peter 1:19-21)

The second fallacy of the reasoning behind denying authorship to John on account of his pedestrian background is brought out in the very passage in which the apostle is called ‘an unlettered man.’

*Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated and untrained men, they marveled. And they realized that **they had been with Jesus.*** (Acts 4:13)

Not only do those who oppose Johannine authorship on the basis of John’s low education despise the work of the Holy Spirit, they also denigrate the incredible power of the presence of Jesus Christ. Godet counters, “How could a Galilean fisherman have attained *such profound wisdom* as that which shines forth in many parts of our Gospel? But, we will ask in our turn, how can we estimate what an intimate and prolonged contact with the Lord may have produced in an ardent and profound soul, such as John’s must have been?”<sup>60</sup> Godet then quotes another author with approbation.

If...the highest human wisdom has come from Christianity, must it not be allowed that, in proximity to a being like Jesus, a young man with a rich and profound soul may have been developed and, as it were, set on fire? A mind so powerful as that which, in any case, Jesus had, does not merely attach itself to a faithful and loyal heart, but also to a mind which has lofty aims and aspirations.<sup>61</sup>

This is nothing less than the apostle himself testifies in his first letter, the profound impact that being with Jesus had on both himself and the other apostles.

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<sup>60</sup> Godet; 173.

<sup>61</sup> *Idem.*

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part I

*That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life – the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us – that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. And these things we write to you that your joy may be full.* (I John 1:1-4)

Though none since the 1<sup>st</sup> Century would, or should, claim inspiration in his or her thoughts or writings, many would bear testimony to the elevating influence of fellowship with Jesus Christ upon both the heart and the mind. One might as well object to the sublime allegory *Pilgrim's Progress* having been written by the son of tinker, John Bunyan, as to object to John's authorship of the Fourth Gospel, except for the irrefutable contemporary evidence that Bunyan – who certainly qualified as an 'unlettered' man – did indeed write the work. Bunyan's work has stood the test of time and will probably be published and read long after the works of more educated men are consigned to the dust heap. It is said that the great Puritan theologian John Owen envied (no doubt in a good and wholesome way!) Bunyan's ability to preach. Similar words were spoken of Bunyan during his life as were said of John and Peter: *he had been with Jesus*. Thus there should be no concern that John, an intelligent though not formally educated man, should reach such heights of poetic inspiration in this Gospel. H. R. Mackintosh says of the Prologue what may just as correctly be said of the entire book, "In the prologue be but sums up the total impression left upon him by the personality of the Saviour."<sup>62</sup>



**John Bunyan (1628-88)**

***"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."* (1:1)**

The Fourth Gospel begins unlike the other three Gospels but very much like the first book of the Bible, Genesis. Indeed, the Greek translation of the Old Testament has the very same phrase at Genesis 1:1 as we read here in John 1:1, *en archae* (εν αρχη), and there can be no doubt that John intended the connection to be made by his readers. This is further verified by verse 3, in which the apostle speaks of all things having been created through the same Word that was *in the beginning*. This phrase corresponds to Paul's *before*

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part I

*the foundation of the earth* – it corresponds to the very beginning of the creative works of God. John desires his readers to understand that the beginning of God’s creative work and the beginning of God’s redemptive work were both simultaneous and centered in the same Being, the Word. Again, the Apostle Paul echoes the same thought though in different language, when he writes,

*For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.*

(II Corinthians 4:6)

Though the Word – literally, the *Logos* – is the theme of these opening verses of John’s Gospel, it is the phrase *en archae* that has priority of place at the beginning of the clause. Greek, which is not a syntactical language, uses word order in a sentence to indicate emphasis; thus by placing *in the beginning* at the start of the sentence John not only purposefully mimics Moses from Genesis 1:1 (or perhaps it is more accurate to say he mimics the *Greek translation* of Moses), he also takes his readers to the point in cosmic history when eternity became time. This is not speculative philosophy; it is rather the firm belief of the Judeo-Christian tradition that God created all things – including time itself – *ex nihilo*, ‘from nothing.’ Humanly-speaking, the moment in ‘time’ that existed before Creation was not ‘time’ in the created and sequential sense of the word, but rather the eternity of God himself. And it was at his point that the Word was. This immediately places the Logos outside the realm of time, though it may not immediately grant the Logos eternality. This latter fact will be established by the verb that John uses, but the initial phrase *in the beginning* does powerfully place the Logos outside of worldly and created time, as Luthardt notes.

It does not say that he was eternal in the exact sense, but only that he preceded all else, in so far as he was at the beginning, and therefore was the first thing that was...The first words say of Christ only that He stands at the beginning of all, thus in time preceding all other being out of God, and that he, therefore, is of the original beginning, and premundane.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Mackintosh, H. R. *The Doctrine of the Person of Jesus Christ* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons; 1915); 118.

<sup>63</sup> Luthardt; 264.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part I

The relationship of the Logos to the beginning is confirmed by a later statement of John in the Prologue, “*And the Word became flesh and tabernacled among us.*” The verb used there is *egeneto* (εγενετο), which is correctly translated here, ‘became.’ In other words, the Logos became what He was not before, namely, *flesh*. John does not use that verb in verse 1, because in the beginning the Logos did not *become*; He *was*. This again places an insurmountable divide between all that *became* from the creative work of God and the Logos who did not *become*, but *was* (and immediately in the second clause John tells us that He *was* with God).

Furthermore, the tense of the verb ‘was’ in the first clause (as well as in the second and third clauses of the first verse) is not the punctiliar, momentary aorist but rather the imperfect, which signifies continued action in the past. A common English example of the difference between the two tenses is the sentence, ‘It rained yesterday’ – a statement of past action with no indication of its impact or continuance, it simply rained yesterday. That represents the aorist tense. Now if we say, ‘It was raining yesterday,’ we immediately give the image of ongoing rain, though set in yesterday’s time. This is the sense of the imperfect tense, and the reader envisions the activity of raining rather than merely the fact of rain. This is what John intends his readers to envision by his use of the imperfect tense of ‘was’ in these three clauses: that the being of the Logos not only predates the Creation, but already existed in continuing being at the ‘time’ of Creation. *This* is eternity, as Godet properly notes.

The imperfect *ην*, *was*, must designate, according to the ordinary meaning of this tense, the simultaneousness of the act indicated by the verb with some other act. This simultaneousness is here that of the *existence* of the Word with the fact designated by the word *beginning*. ‘When everything which has begun began, the Word *was*.’ Alone then, it did not begin; the Word *was* already. Now that which did not begin with *things*, that it to say, with time, the form of the development of things, belongs to the eternal order.<sup>64</sup>

Opponents argue that the preexistence of the Logos at the beginning of Creation does not require the conclusion that the Logos was himself eternal. Technically this is true, but one must recognize that, *biblically-speaking*, the only being that existed before time began – the point of Creation, that is – is God. Human language does not have the capacity

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part I

to describe eternity except by using terminology that is itself linked with time. Westcott notes, “the verb *was* does not express a completed past, but rather a continuous state. The imperfect tense of the original suggests in this relation, as far as human language can do so, the notion of absolute, supra-temporal, existence.”<sup>65</sup> Indeed, ‘eternity’ is the only word we have in English that signifies eternity, and even then we find most definitions attempting to clarify the word by using some concept of ‘time.’ The biblical languages are no different, so that when the psalmist refers to the LORD as ‘*from everlasting to everlasting*,’ the reader correctly understands that God is eternal. It is interesting that the one psalm attributed to Moses, the author of Genesis, opens with these words.

*Lord, You have been our dwelling place in all generations.  
Before the mountains were brought forth,  
Or ever You had formed the earth and the world,  
Even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God.* (Psalm 90:1-2)

Westcott compares and contrasts the perspective of Moses in Genesis 1:1 with that of John in the opening verse of his gospel.

The phrase carries back the thoughts of the reader to Gen. 1:1, which necessarily fixes the sense of the *beginning*. Here, as there, ‘the beginning’ is the initial moment of time and creation; but there is this difference, that Moses dwells on that which starts from the point, and traces the record of divine action *from* the beginning, while St. John lifts our thoughts *beyond* the beginning and dwells on that which ‘was’ when time, and with time finite being, began its course. Already when ‘God created the heaven and the earth,’ ‘the Word *was*.’<sup>66</sup>

As we cannot posit anything ‘existing’ before the beginning except for God who is eternal, we have no basis – either in philosophy or in Scripture, to interpret this first clause of John 1:1 as indicating anything other than the eternality of the Logos. “The idea of this first proposition is, therefore, that of the *eternity* of the Logos.”<sup>67</sup> But who is the Logos? Up to this point we have assumed the conclusion: the Logos is the Christ, who is Jesus according to the flesh. This is, of course, a conclusion read back into the early verses of the chapter from what is stated later in the Prologue, for John does not initially identify the

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<sup>64</sup> Godet; 245.

<sup>65</sup> Westcott; 2.

<sup>66</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>67</sup> Godet; 245.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part I

Logos except as to his relationship to time and with God. The importance of the term *Logos* to both Greek and Jewish philosophy in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century is such that it is worth spending a little more time on the word to forestall any confusion.

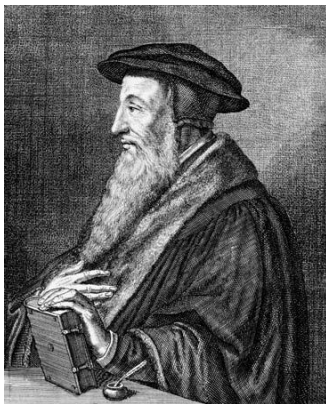
The Greek term *Logos* is usually translated ‘Word’ in the New Testament as well as in the Septuagint of the Old Testament. But the term also bears a strong sense of the ‘Reason’ that lies in the mind *before* its manifestation as the ‘Word.’ This sense, however, has more to do with the Greek philosophical usage of the term and less the biblical usage. Thus the emphasis in the Bible is more on the *spoken* Word as the manifestation of the Mind and Will of God (as both are always the same in God). Thus there is another connection between the first verses of John and of Genesis, as the former speaks of the Logos being at the beginning, the latter speaks of God *speaking* Creation into existence in the beginning.

### Genesis 1:1

*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form, and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. Then **God said**, “Let there be light”; and there was light.*

### John 1:1

*In the beginning **was the Word**, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.*



**John Calvin (1509-64)**

This connection between the two passages, in which the spoken Word of God brings forth the Creation which John declares was made through the Logos, prompted John Calvin to translate the first verse of John as “*In the beginning was the Speech, and the Speech was with God, and the Speech was God.*”<sup>68</sup> This sounds a bit jarring to those accustomed to the traditional English translation of Logos as ‘Word’ in John’s Prologue, but Calvin has good reason for this choice, that in the beginning God *spoke* Creation into being, thus emphasizing not the Idea of Creation in the Mind of God, but rather the Act of Creation through the spoken Word of God. “Now as God, in creating the

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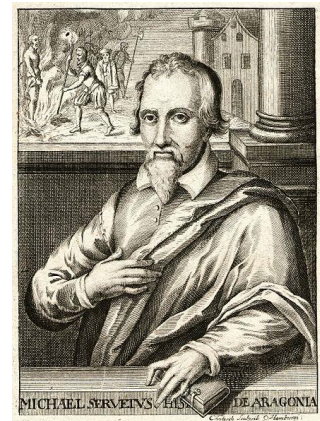
<sup>68</sup> Calvin, *John Commentary on the Holy Gospel of Jesus Christ According to John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House; 1993); 25.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part I

world, revealed himself by that *Speech*, so he formerly had him concealed with himself, so that there is a twofold relation; the former to God, and the latter to men.”<sup>69</sup> Calvin’s unusual translation, then, highlights the outward action of God’s speech in Creation, while also keeping the appropriate emphasis on the One – the *Logos* – through whom God made the worlds. The combination of Word and Speech seems to fit well with the classic opening lines from the Epistle to the Hebrews,

*God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds...* (Hebrews 1:1-2)

Again, opponents of the doctrine of the full deity of Jesus Christ claim that God’s Word need not be co-extensive in eternity with God himself. This was apparently one of the heretical teachings of Michael Servetus, whose clash with Calvin in Geneva led to Servetus’ execution there. Calvin devotes a fair amount of space in his commentary on the first verse of John refuting the claims of Servetus that “*the Speech cannot be admitted to have existed any earlier than when Moses introduces God as speaking.*”<sup>70</sup> This is to say that the *Logos* could not have existed before being manifested; the mind of God not being susceptible to knowledge as the Word of God is. Calvin explains,



**Servetus (1509/11–53)**

“As if he did not subsist in God, because he was not publicly <sup>71</sup>made known: that is, as if he did not exist *within*, until he began to appear *without*.” This is actually a classic argument that has been made throughout the history of the Church against the eternity of the Christ – that He did not exist at all until He began to exist in time. John deals with this contention in the second clause of verse 1, but it should be noted at this point that the contention is merely philosophical and not biblical, and as such is subject to doubt.

In the terms that Servetus puts the matter, we may ask even of the human mind whether a thought exists prior to its being put into words, or rather comes into existence only the moment it is put into words. The latter may be true of children and some few

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<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*; 26.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*; 27.

<sup>71</sup> *Idem.*



## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part I

individuals who seems to live a stream-of-consciousness life, but for the vast majority of the human race the thought is readily granted preexistence relative to the spoken word. Elevate this concept to the eternal God, in whom there is no shadow of changing, and it become ludicrous to conceive of a divine idea only coming into being at the point that it is made manifest to the created order. In terms of the presentation of the Logos by the Apostle John, “There can be no speculation about how the Word came to be, for the Word simply was.”<sup>72</sup> Cornelius a Lapide, a 16<sup>th</sup> Century Jesuit exegete, quotes the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century North African theologian Tertullian in summary of the concept of *in the beginning*.

God alone was Himself to Himself both universe and space and everything. But in this respect only was He alone, that He had nothing external to Himself, for not even then was He alone; for He had with Himself what he had in Himself, His Reason, or that which the Greeks call His *Logos*.<sup>73</sup>

Tertullian puts in many words what John puts in six, *kai ho logos pros ton theon* – “And the Word was with God.” Having established the eternity of the Logos, John proceeds to establish His independent personality vis-à-vis God himself. In this short phrase the apostle answers the false view of Sabellius, that the ‘persons’ of the Godhead are merely modes or forms of the one God, and firmly establishes the Christian (and biblical) doctrine of the Personality of Christ, the Second Person of the Trinity. Again the word choice is very important, as John does not use one of the regular Greek words most commonly translated ‘with’ in English – words that simply connote association in a static sense. In other words, John is not saying that the Logos was simply with God at the Creation, leaving open once again the possibility that the Logos was not *always* with God. Rather John uses a preposition of movement, *pros*, by which he indicates a continuous action coupled with a static verb, *was*. The preposition itself signifies movement *towards* something, often in the sense of ‘coming or going into’ some place. The combination of this preposition with the past tense of the verb *to be* is, actually, not good Greek; but it is good theology, and that is what matters most to the apostle. Godet thus concludes,

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<sup>72</sup> Brown; 4.

<sup>73</sup> A Lapide, Cornelius *The Gospel of St. John* (Veritatis Splendor Publications; 2012); 26

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part I

The form, apparently incorrect, by which John connects a preposition of motion (*towards*) with a verb of rest (*was*), signifies that this motion was His permanent state, that is to say, His essence...The idea of this second proposition is that of the *personality* of the Logos and of His intimate communion with God.<sup>74</sup>

Luthardt adds, "it designates not merely the intimacy of fellowship, but the internal union, the living, intercourse of fellowship."<sup>75</sup> And Westcott is even more elaborate in his exegesis,

The phrase (*ain pros*) is remarkable...The idea conveyed by it is not that of simple coexistence, as of two persons contemplated separately in company...but of being directed toward and regulated by that wit which the relation is fixed. The personal being of the Word was realized in active intercourse with and in perfect communion with God.<sup>76</sup>

These few words in the opening verse of the Gospel set the stage for frequent allusions by Jesus to the fact that He and the Father were both distinct Persons and yet One Being.

*For He whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God does not give the Spirit by measure. The Father loves the Son, and has given all things into His hand.* (3:34-35)

*Most assuredly, I say to you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in Himself, so He has granted the Son to have life in Himself, and has given Him authority to execute judgment also, because He is the Son of Man.* (5:25-27)

*It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught by God.' Therefore everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to Me. Not that anyone has seen the Father, except He who is from God; He has seen the Father.* (6:45-46)

*My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father's hand. I and My Father are one.* (10:29-30)

The unique Personality of the Logos was a major point in the Christological debate of the early Church, that led to the formulation of the Trinitarian Doctrine of Christianity. Berkouwer writes, "At this point we encounter the confession of Christ's pre-existence, one of the most embattled parts of Holy Scripture, and no wonder since the pre-existence

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<sup>74</sup> Godet; 245.

<sup>75</sup> Luthardt; 264.

<sup>76</sup> Westcott; 3.

of Christ is bound up closely with his trinitarian life.”<sup>77</sup> It should never be forgotten that *Christology* and *Trinitarianism* were hand-in-hand at the beginning and remain so in orthodox doctrine to this day. Later theologians struggled against the various heretical strains of invading thought, each of which attacked some integral part of the testimony that Christ Jesus was *vere deus* and not merely a divinely-blessed man, or the true God in the form or phantasm of a man, etc. Orthodox theologians such as Athanasius were forced by their (common) human inability to fully grasp and define the eternal and unchangeable oneness of God existing in the trinity of Persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Thus were introduced into the orthodoxy of Christianity such philosophical (and non-biblical) terms as Hypostases or Substances or Persons, when all that the Church has ever truly sought to speak to the world is the brief and powerful testimony of John here in the first verse of his Gospel, “*And the Word was with God.*” This testimony was not a mere academic exercise for its orthodox defenders in the early centuries, for they all had the same devotional worship as Gregory Nazianzen when he said, “I cannot think of the One without having the Three shining around me.”<sup>78</sup>

John is building to a crescendo here in the very first verse of his work, and brings the whole to a glorious climax with the third clause, “*and the Word was God.*” As simply as any statement can be made, the apostle declares the full deity of Jesus Christ, the Logos. “That there may be no remaining doubt as to Christ’s divine essence, the Evangelist distinctly asserts that *he is God*. Now since there is but one God, it follows that Christ is of the same essence with the Father, and yet that, in some respect, he is distinct from the Father.”<sup>79</sup> No one who approaches this statement of John without prejudice can misinterpret what he is saying: the Logos is God. “The idea contained in the third proposition is thus that of the essential *divinity* of the Word.”<sup>80</sup> However, John is not simply saying that the Logos is divine, in the popular sense that the word had in the ancient world for any highly exalted being (for there is another Greek word - *theios* that John might have employed if divinity was all he meant); rather the Logos is *deity*, for John uses the singular Greek word for God, *theos*. The power of this statement is also seen in its

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<sup>77</sup> Berkouwer, G. C. *The Person of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; 1969); 163.

<sup>78</sup> Quoted by Calvin; 29.

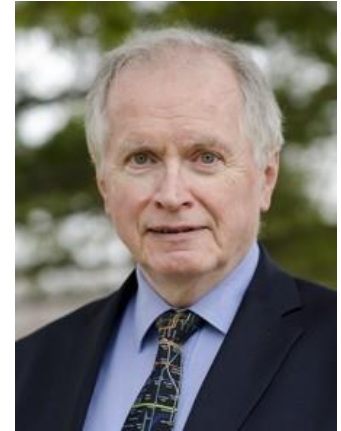
<sup>79</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>80</sup> Godet; 246.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part I

simplicity and complete lack of any background speculation. “He does not intend to give a philosophy of religion. He wishes to say of Christ, of the Word which has appeared in time, that he was with God before time, and even was God by nature.”<sup>81</sup>

Yet this simple statement of deity ascribed to the Logos, to Christ Jesus, has come under immense attack from all quarters of unbelief. The most familiar to 21<sup>st</sup> American evangelicals is the claim of the Jehovah’s Witnesses that what John really meant was that the Logos was a god, for the Greek text does not have an article in front of the *theos*. The simple reason for this is the construction of the clause as a subject-predicate combination. This is the sentence structure of any form of the verb ‘to be’ in which one thing is being said ‘to be’ another. Such statements are not necessarily reciprocal, and thus it important to be able to tell which of the nouns is the *subject*, the leading thought of the clause, and which is the *predicate*, that which is being posited of the subject. In Greek this is invariably done by placing the definite article in front of



D. A. Carson (b. 1946)

the subject, but not in front of the predicate. Thus John is accurately stating, *The Word was God* while also avoiding the confusion and error that would arise with the reciprocal: *God was the Word*. D. A. Carson writes, “In fact, if John had included the article, he would have been saying something quite untrue. He would have been so identifying the Word with God that no divine being could exist apart from the Word.”<sup>82</sup> The combination of the second and third clauses of the first verse prevents any such erroneous and heretical conclusion. Westcott therefore writes,

On the other hand it will be noticed that ‘the Word’ is placed in personal relation to ‘God’ (*ho theos*, i.e., with the article) spoken of absolutely in the second clause; while in the third clause ‘the Word’ is declared to be ‘God,’ and so included in the unity of the Godhead. Thus we are led to conceive that the divine nature is essentially in the Son, and at the same time that the Son can be regarded, according to that which is His peculiar characteristic, in relation to God as God. He is ‘the image of God’ and not simply of the Father.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Luthardt; 265.

<sup>82</sup> Carson, D. A. *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; 1991); 117.

<sup>83</sup> Westcott; 3.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part I

There is another, less grammatical and more poetic justification for the order of the words in the third clause, an order that places the *Logos* before God. The whole verse consists of three propositions, each utilizing the imperfect past tense of the verb ‘to be’ – *was*. This is the linking verb in each clause and the symmetry between the three. But they are also set forth in a parallelism that reminds the reader of the Hebrew origins of the author. The order, however, also reinforces the imperative that John *not* use the article in front of the word ‘God,’ lest he be misunderstood as Carson has pointed out.

In the beginning was *the Logos*  
and *the Logos* was with *Theos*  
and *Theos* was *the Logos*.

The poetry of the whole sentence is found in the fact that the last word of each clause becomes the beginning word of the subsequent clause. This structure, along with the overall form of the Prologue through verse 18, has led many modern liberal scholars to conclude that the Prologue was an ancient Christian hymn that the author or editor of the Fourth Gospel attached to the main body of the book after it was written. There is no manuscript evidence of this theory, and we have seen that the vast preponderance of the evidence favors authorship by the Apostle John, the son of Zebedee. No, this poetic form is John’s and reflects the devotional heart of the matter just as much as it contains the theological and rational truth of the matter. The *Logos* is eternal; the *Logos* is a distinct Person; the *Logos* is God. “The Word was *with* God, God’s eternal Fellow; the Word *was* God, God’s own Self.”<sup>84</sup>

***He was in the beginning with God.*** **(1:2)**

The parallelism continues with verse 2, as the apostle retraces his steps somewhat in reverse from the progression of verse 1. “Now John works backward, saying in effect: ‘This Word who is God, is the very one of whom I have also said that he was in the beginning, and that he was with God.’”<sup>85</sup> If repetition is the essence of learning, then this is a lesson that the apostle wants his readers to learn. Indeed, it may be said that these two verses are the Prologue of the Prologue. Carson refers to the Prologue as the “foyer to the

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<sup>84</sup> Edmund Clowney, quoted by Carson; 117.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part I

rest of the Fourth Gospel...simultaneously drawing the reader in and introducing the major themes.”<sup>86</sup> If the Prologue is the foyer, then the first two verses comprise the door. John Pryor, in his book *John: Evangelist of the Covenant People*, states that “Each of the canonical evangelists begins his account of the ministry of Jesus with some kind of introduction which sets the ministry in a certain framework.”<sup>87</sup> Of the Forth Gospel Pryor writes,

The same is no less true of John’s Gospel and its prologue. But with John the backdrop is not history but eternity. The evangelist is wanting to declare at the very outset that the story of Jesus in the succeeding chapters can only be understood if we realise [*sic*] from the start that he about whom we read is the incarnation of the eternal, divine Word. As C. k. Barrett says of v. 1, ‘John intends that the whole of his gospel shall be read in the light of this verse. The deeds and words of Jesus are the deeds and words of God; if this be not true the book is blasphemous.’<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*; 111.

<sup>87</sup> Pryor, John W. *John: Evangelist of the Covenant People* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press; 1992); 7.

<sup>88</sup> *Idem*.

**Week 4: Creation: The Indispensable Truth**

**Key Biblical Texts:** John 1:3-5; Colossians 1:16; Hebrews 1:1-3

*“How do you begin to explain that which in the end must be accepted as the beginning of all explanation?”  
(Lesslie Newbigin *The Light Has Come*)*

“In the beginning was Matter, and Matter was without God, and Matter was God. Matter was in the beginning with itself. And Matter suddenly Expanded, without Aid or Impetus, and Created the Universe.” Thus would read the Prologue to the Gospel of Evolution, the Gospel of the Big Bang, the Gospel of God-less Creation. There are, of course, many nuances to the ‘Big Bang Theory,’ but all views share important points in common, the first and foremost being, philosophically-speaking, the ‘eternality of Matter.’ Matter has no beginning and so it perhaps is not quite correct to call the above ‘creation,’ for it is not creation in the true sense of the word. It is reorganization, but a reorganization that occurs entirely without a re-organizer. The theory is pure conjecture, as one scientist admits, “Because current instruments don’t allow astronomers to peer back at the universe’s birth, much of what we understand about the Big Bang Theory comes from mathematical formulas and models.”<sup>89</sup> Mathematical models – which, by the way, are programmed by the scientist and the data is input by the scientists, though certainly not to provide the results sought after by the scientist – have brought the vast majority of the scientific community to the belief in the ‘original singularity of Matter’ that ‘exploded’ – hence the ‘Big Bang.’

The Big Bang Theory is the leading explanation about how the universe began. At its simplest, it says the universe as we know it started with a small singularity, then inflated over the next 13.8 billion years to the cosmos that we know today...In the first second after the universe began, the surrounding temperature was about 10 billion degrees Fahrenheit (5.5 billion Celsius), according to NASA. The cosmos contained a vast array of fundamental particles such as neutrons, electrons and protons. These decayed or combined as the universe got cooler.<sup>90</sup>

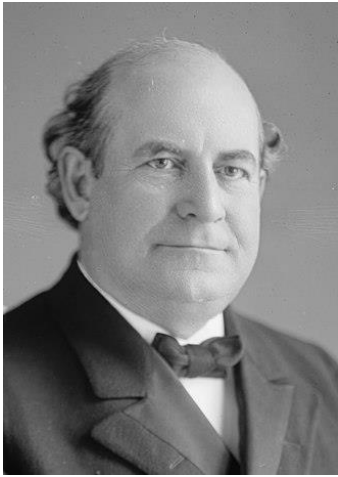
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<sup>89</sup> <https://www.space.com/25126-big-bang-theory.html>. Note the caveat, ‘current instruments’; evolutionary astronomers consistently claim that future technology will prove their theories to be fact, though they insist that they be treated as fact today.

<sup>90</sup> *Idem.*

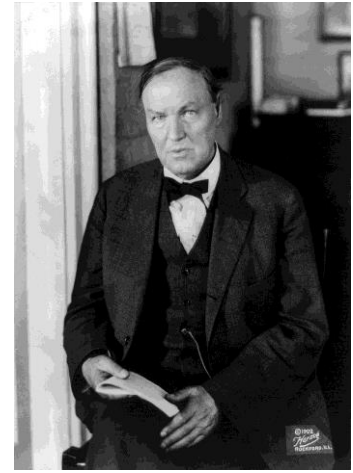
## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part I

This 'science' is what is taught now in the public school systems and universities, with 'creation' relegated to an article of faith, inadmissible as scientific material to be taught in the schools. A century ago this conflict was heated, and formed front page news



**Bryan (1860-1925)**

material across the country. The famous (or infamous, depending on your perspective) 1925 Scopes Monkey Trial ostensibly put the debate on the public stage, with two of the most famous orators of the time defending each side. Three-time presidential candidate



**Darrow (1857-1938)**

William Jennings Bryan defended

the Tennessee law that forbade the teaching of evolution in the public schools, while equally famous trial attorney Clarence Darrow defended John T. Scopes, the teacher accused of violating the law by teaching evolution as 'science.' The trial was entirely staged as an attempt to bring the debate to a public forum and 'settle' once and for all the truth of one side - the 'Fundamentalists' - or the other - the 'Modernists.' Scopes was found guilty and fined \$100.00, but the verdict was promptly overturned on a technicality. Thus 'Fundamentalism' won, but did it really? Modern Science continued to preach the gospel of a godless universe and, ultimately, overwhelmed all opposition so that today, less than a century after the trial, it is *creation* that is banned from the public educational arena.

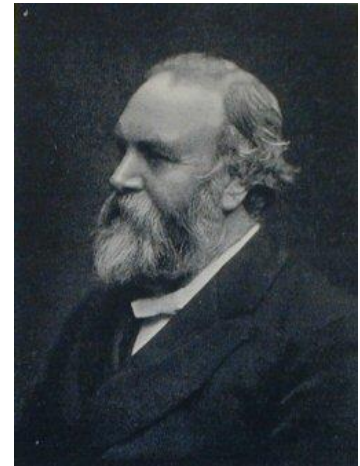
The Scopes Trial is a quaint historical memory, but the substance of the debate is anything but. It is interesting, however, to note how evangelicals first reacted to the advent of evolutionary teaching, and of a purely materialistic origin of the universe. Burned by the stigma of the Church's official rejection of the Copernican system, evangelicals in the mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> Century seemed over-eager to show themselves cosmopolitan and 'scientific.' Quick to point out that the Bible never claims to be a science textbook, evangelicals tried to be 'open-minded' about the purported discoveries of



## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part I

modern science, and to claim that the findings of true Science would never truly diminish the testimony of Scripture. They were whistling in the dark.

One of the most influential of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century evangelicals was James Orr, a Scottish Presbyterian minister and professor of Church History and Theology. Orr was a prolific writer, and his works are still published today and are well worth reading. However, his treatise on *The Faith of a Modern Christian*, published in 1910, illustrates the dilemma evangelicals found themselves in with the rising tide of atheistic science threatening to overwhelm them. Orr dedicates one chapter to ‘Christianity and Modern Science,’ where he somewhat naively denies the threat altogether.



**James Orr (1844-1913)**

The idea prevails in many quarters that the immense advances in the natural sciences since inductive inquiry began have led to an altered view of the world and man, which takes the foundations from Christian beliefs on these subjects, and renders the whole Christian scheme of things untenable.<sup>91</sup>

Orr denies this impact, claiming (as most of his evangelical contemporaries did) that the Bible is not only *not* a science textbook, but that the teachings of the Bible can always be meshed with the discoveries of modern science. While acknowledging the great ‘advances’ of modern science, Orr writes, “we are a long way still from the conclusion that the foundations of Christianity are overturned, or that there is any necessary *conflict* between science and the facts and doctrines of revelation.”<sup>92</sup> Again, in typical fashion, Orr gives up the game by claiming unequivocally that the Bible really does not speak to ‘science’ at all.

The purpose of the Bible was different – to set things in their right relation to God, the first Cause of all; to show what God is, and what are His purposes and will for man. In this, its proper sphere, there is no conflict with science.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Orr, James *The Faith of a Modern Christian* (London: Hodder & Stoughton; 1910); 203.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*; 205.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*; 208.

However, what Orr naively fails to realize about the ‘science’ of his day is that modern natural science was *purposely* setting out to prove that God was *not* ‘the first cause of all.’ 19<sup>th</sup> Century evangelicals too often viewed science as purely objective, scientists as men who merely and only sought the truth about the natural world and its laws, with no underlying philosophical presupposition, and certainly no religious ‘ax to grind.’ Science to this day presents itself as the objective arbiter of truth in society – just the objective, scientific *facts*, without ethical or moral judgment. But scientists are *men*, and men are never without ulterior motives and underlying philosophical presuppositions. At the heart of the insidious attack on biblical truth is the scientific search for an ‘origin’ of the universe – and of man – other than God. The ‘faith of a modern Christian’ must never lose sight of that fact, or risk being lulled into sleep by the confident presentation of ‘scientific fact.’

Origin is the key issue: where did everything *come from*? The Big Bang, which is simply a more technical explanation for what has been propounded by pagans for millennia, derives from the philosophy of Materialism. This school of thought teaches that only Matter exists; there is no ‘spirit’ or non-physical, non-material world. Matter is eternal – it was Matter that was there at the beginning – and no attempt is made to explain just matter came to be. Thus Matter is accorded the divine attribute of eternity, though it continues to lack the attributes of Personality and Knowledge: it is must unthinking, unplanning Matter, but it has always been here. Thus the modern scientist evades the question of origin by denying it altogether: as the Christian sees no necessity is determining the origin of God, so the materialist scientist has no interest in discovering the origin of Matter. That is the impasse. “The one thing evolution cannot do is to explain *origins*. The first origin of things; the origin of life and sentiency; the origin of rational intelligence – these remain for it insoluble problems.”<sup>94</sup> Only they do not remain problems for the evolutionist; they are simply ignored.

This is because James Orr is right in the sense that evolutionary theory – including the cosmology of the Big Bang – cannot answer the question of origins, because the answer must always be the one thing they cannot accept – an intelligent, all-powerful – yes, divine

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<sup>94</sup> Orr; 216.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part I

Being that must lie behind all that is. There is a limitation to nature call ‘laws,’ and the scientist will be the last person to deny or ignore these laws as they are the ‘scripture’ of their worldview. One such law – the 2<sup>nd</sup> Law of Thermodynamics – is a special problem for the Big Bang Theory, because it states that all matter and energy are tending toward a state of greater *disorder*. But the Big Bang tells us that the universe is an order that came about *naturally* from complete chaos. The materialist scientist remarkably uses the word *cosmos*, though the term has reference to ‘order’ and the laws of nature teach us that order cannot simply happen, it must be superimposed upon nature itself.

James Henley Thornwell, a Southern American Presbyterian who lived before the revolutionary development in evolutionary science, nonetheless displayed a clear understanding of the workings of nature and of nature’s laws. Henley writes, “All finite



**Thornwell (1812-62)**

power is limited to obedience to the laws of nature. It is conditioned by the properties and attributes of the substances upon which it operates. These substances must be given as a pre-existing material, and the creature can then work within the limits of the capabilities of the subject. This limitation to the properties and laws of existing substances seems to be the characteristic distinction of finite agency. Hence, all that it achieves is to arrange, combine, change, modify...Beyond these conditions it can never pass. Hence, creation as an unconditioned exercise of power; as requiring neither material, instrument, nor laws; as transcending change, modifications, or adjustments of existing things, is the sole prerogative of God.”<sup>95</sup> If his conscience is not entirely seared, the modern scientist, deep down, knows this to be true. Man makes; God creates. “It may, therefore, be taken as the universal faith of mankind that creation cannot be the work of a creature. It is the prerogative of God, and of God alone.”<sup>96</sup>

The history of both evangelicalism and modern science in the century since the Scopes Trial has been one of steady defeat for the former and triumph for the latter. Modern

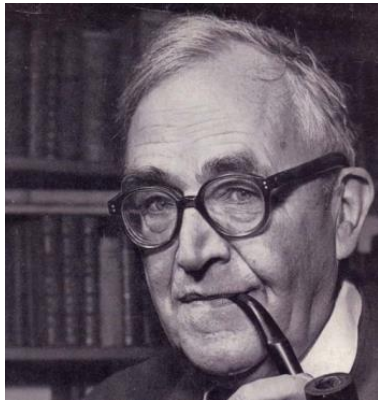
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<sup>95</sup> Thornwell, James Henley *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell: Volume 1* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth; 1974); 221.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*; 222.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part I

western society has relegated Creation to an article of faith, which in reality it is, though that does not make it less true historically (and scientifically). Sadly, however, too many



**Karl Barth (1886-1968)**

in the Church have considered the doctrine of Creation to be expendable and have compromised and negotiated with 'science' in order to retain intellectual dignity in the world's eyes. Barth laments the Church's equivocation on the doctrine, especially in the face of the confident assertions of modern science. He describes, "the whole history of theology as a continuous fighting retreat in face of the irresistible advance of a rational and empirical science which on the very different grounds of a triumphant human self-conceit is quite sure of its subject."<sup>97</sup>

Creation is an article of faith, as the writer of Hebrews clearly states, "*By faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that the things which are seen were not made of things which are visible.*"<sup>98</sup> But too many modern evangelicals have bought into the rationalist, Enlightenment perspective that where 'knowledge' advances, faith must recede. The evolutionary astronomer admits that modern instrumentation cannot measure the events of the beginning of the universe; what he or she refuses to admit is that *they never will*. It is not the battle between modern, unbelieving science and the ancient faith of the true religion – both Judaism and its heir, Christianity – that matters, but rather the centrality of the doctrine of Creation to the entire belief system of the Church. "Our first emphasis is on this final point [i.e., the credal phrase, *Maker of heaven and earth*] that the doctrine of the creation no less than the whole remaining content of Christian confession is an article of faith, i.e., the rendering of knowledge which no man has procured for himself or ever will."<sup>99</sup> The mediating options offered by the Church during the past century – Theistic Evolution and Progressive Creationism – fail at the crucial point of theology, that the creation of heaven and earth, and most importantly of Man, forms the irreplaceable foundation of the faith; if it in any way damaged or removed, the whole structure will crumble. It has often been asked, 'Do I have to believe in Creation to be a

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<sup>97</sup> Barth, Karl *Church Dogmatics: Volume III The Doctrine of Creation; Part I* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark; 1970); 6.

<sup>98</sup> Hebrews 11:3

<sup>99</sup> Barth; 3.

Christian?’ The answer might be ‘no,’ for salvation is by grace through faith, and not by intellect, but the ‘Christianity’ that is founded on anything other than the momentous creative act of God “*in the beginning*” cannot be called biblical Christianity.

*All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made.* (1:3)

The Apostle John was well aware of the importance of the biblical doctrine of Creation, the ‘Genesis Account’ as it often called, to the entire system of faith he held to be true. He ties together his own Prologue with Mosaic account by repeating the opening words of Genesis 1:1 as his own opening clause, “*In the beginning...*” In this verse he inexorably links the doctrines of creation and salvation, showing that the only being capable of redeeming fallen creation is the Creator Himself, and that being is the *Logos*. “The mediator of salvation is the mediator of being, and that of all being.”<sup>100</sup> There is no room in biblical theology, least of all in the Gospel of John, for a different ‘creator’ whose corruptible work needs to be ‘redeemed’ and set free by a higher order of being. This was the false teaching of the Manichæans, a 3<sup>rd</sup> Century Gnostic sect that adopted Greek dualism, viewing the universe as a cosmic struggle between light and darkness. For the Manichæans the idea that the one true God would sully Himself with the creation of the material universe was unthinkable, so they posited the *Demiurge*, a divine emanation somewhat correlative to the biblical Satan, who they taught was the actual creator of the material worlds. The *Logos*, pure Spirit, was then sent as an emanation of Light to rescue the souls trapped within the material world. The emphasis within John’s Gospel on Light and Darkness made this book attractive to the Manichæan philosophy, and it was largely adopted, out of context to be sure, by the Gnostic sect. The error infiltrated high into the Church of the 4<sup>th</sup> Century, for a time even ensnaring Augustine in its heresy. But John forestalls any such error with these simple words in the Prologue, “*All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that has been made.*”

John is as emphatic as he can be, stating the principle in both the positive and negative perspective and thus forever denying the Arian claim that the *Logos* was Himself a creature, however exalted. First the positive statement, “*All things were made through Him...*” ‘All things,’ says Luthardt, “is the all as the sum of all single things, therefore all

without exception.”<sup>101</sup> But elsewhere the same Greek word *panta* – ‘all’ – clearly cannot mean all without exception, so John clarifies with the negative view: “...and without Him nothing was made that was made.” This last clause excludes any exception from the first clause, and confirms that ‘all things’ must, in this instance, mean each and every thing that has come into being. The second clause also excludes the *Logos* from being considered in any way a ‘creation,’ for if all things without exception came into being through Him, certainly He could not have come into being through Himself. Indeed, John is even more emphatic, as the second clause literally states “not even one thing.” As Ryle notes, “This sentence appears added to show the utter impossibility of our Lord Jesus Christ being no more than a created being. If not even the slightest thing was created without Him, it is plain that He cannot possibly be a creature Himself.”<sup>102</sup>

The comparison with the opening passages of Genesis continues. John here uses the verb ‘become’ as in ‘come into being,’ in order to emphasize the fact that all that has been made did not exist before ‘the beginning.’ Here John contrasts a verb of *becoming*, in verse 3, with a verb of *being*, in verses 1 and 2. “The term *ginesthai*, to become, forms a contrast with *einai*, to be, in vv. 1,2; it indicates the passage from nothing to existence, as opposed to eternal existence.”<sup>103</sup> The eternity of Matter does not mesh with the testimony of Scripture. In this John’s cosmology is in line with Moses’, who also uses a unique verb in Genesis 1 to denote the powerful creative act of God, *ex nihilo* – from nothing. The Hebrew word employed in Genesis 1 is *bara* and is in a form only used in relation to the action of God; in other words, with God as the subject. “The word is used in the Qal only of God’s activity and is thus a purely theological term. This distinctive use of the word is especially appropriate to the concept of creation by divine fiat.”<sup>104</sup> As we saw earlier, this is the testimony of the author of Hebrews in Chapter 11, “By faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that the things which are seen were not made of things which are visible.” This sentiment echoes the psalmist in Psalm 33:6, “By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and all the host of them by the breath of His mouth.”

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<sup>100</sup> Luthardt; 266.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid*; 265.

<sup>102</sup> Ryle, J. C. *Expository Notes*; 11.

<sup>103</sup> Godet; 249.

<sup>104</sup> Harris, R. Laird, *et al Theological Workbook of the Old Testament: Volume 1* (Chicago: Moody Press; 1980); 127.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part I

That God was the One who created all things is a central and recurring theme in the Old Testament, and frequently God Himself makes reference to this fact in order to show the Israelites that He alone is the one true God.

*Why do you say, O Jacob,  
And speak, O Israel: "My way is hidden from the LORD,  
And my just claim is passed over by my God"?  
Have you not known? Have you not heard?  
The everlasting God, the LORD, The Creator of the ends of the earth,  
Neither faints nor is weary. His understanding is unsearchable.* (Isaiah 40:27-28)

*Thus you shall say to them: "The gods that have not made the heavens and the earth shall perish  
from the earth and from under these heavens."  
He has made the earth by His power, He has established the world by His wisdom,  
and has stretched out the heavens at His discretion.* (Jeremiah 10:11-12)

Thus what John is claiming here for the Logos is quite phenomenal, though it is merely a continuation of what he has already established. In the first verse he sets forth the individual personality of the Logos, while in the same verse declaring the Logos to be Himself God. In this verse He credits the Logos with being the agent of creation for all that has come into being – thus excepting Himself from being a creature – while attributing to Him that which the Old Testament frequently and only attributes to God: *Creation*. Thus Matthew Henry correctly notes that the Logos was the Creator of all things, "By him, not as a subordinate instrument, but as a co-ordinate agent."<sup>105</sup> John could hardly establish the full deity of the Logos, the Lord Jesus Christ, than he has done in these first three verses of his Prologue. This view is, of course, essential to biblical Christianity, and we see not only here but elsewhere, that the relation of Christ Jesus to Creation is a non-negotiable tenet of that faith. Paul, for instance, echoes John in his epistle to the Colossians.



**Matthew Henry (1662-1714)**

*For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible,  
whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and  
for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist.* (Colossians 1:16-17)

<sup>105</sup> Henry, *Matthew Commentary on the Whole Bible: Volume 5* (Grand Rapids: Hendrickson Publishers; 1996); 684.

And we will often have recourse to the opening passage of the letter to the Hebrews in relation to John's claims in his Gospel.

*God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, **through whom also He made the worlds**; who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power...* (Hebrews 1:1-3a)

The theology of this fact ties in with Paul's description of Jesus as the Second Adam, or the last Adam (*cp.* Romans 5; I Corinthians 15). The Redeemer of mankind is not only the Creator of Mankind but is Himself the image in which Man was made. When God said, "Let us make Man in Our image" He had in mind, so to speak, the eventual incarnation of Himself, God Himself "taking the form of a man." Evolutionary biology strikes at the very heart of this truth, as Man becomes nothing more than an advanced state of animal development and loses his stature as the Image-Bearer of God and, we might add, of the *Logos* of God. Even such compromising views as Evolutionary Theism or Progressive Creationism fail to understand the crucial importance of the Genesis account of man's creation to the eternally-ordained coming of the Son of Woman. Christ did not merely 'pop in' to humanity to rescue it from its own sin; He created humanity in His very image so that He might step into that image as the God-Man. This intimate relationship between the eternal *Logos* and created Man is where John's thoughts immediately turn in the next verse.

*In Him was life, and the life was the light of men.* (1:4)

This verse has caused a great deal of speculation among the commentators and is perhaps the most philosophical in all of the Gospel of John. The division of verses 3 and 4 is a matter of some dispute, with many commentators both from the ancient church and the modern era placing the first clause, "In Him was life," with verse 3. There is no definitive answer to the Greek syntax, but the usual rendering of most English Bibles, as above, seems to make the most sense within the overall context and thrust of John's logic. Having established that the *Logos* was the agent of all creation – all that has being in the



## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part I

sense of existing versus not existing – John now addresses the massive conundrum for all materialists: the *origin of Life*.

Scientists attempt to explain where and when life *began*, but life cannot begin – life cannot come from non-life. This is the clearly apparent folly of ancient mythological cosmologies, that Life simply began. Scientists like to speak of ‘simple’ life and ‘complex’ life; all life is complex and there is and can be no scientific explanation as to why life is as opposed to the complete absence of life. Life is pure energy, but an energy wholly unlike that which is studied by physicists and chemists. Life is *being*, and the one question philosophy has never been able to answer is, “Why is there Something rather than Nothing?” Why is there *being*? The options are two: either being came from non-being, which is a concept more inexplicable than the original, or being came from Being, an Eternal Being who had no beginning, no ‘coming into being.’ This is why John speaks of the Life as being *in the Logos: in Him was Life*. Elsewhere John quotes Jesus speaking along the same lines,

*For as the Father has life in Himself, so He has granted the Son to have life in Himself...* (5:26)

Of course, a passage like this one in John’s Prologue immediately raises the question, ‘What is Life?’ Or, from a hermeneutical perspective, ‘What does the text mean by *Life*?’ Many commentators, linking the phrase mainly to verse 3, view the reference to *physical* life – the animating force that sets living beings apart from inanimate creation. The latter part of verse 4, however, speaks of a higher conception of Life, that of *Light*. Thus many other commentators view the reference to *spiritual* life, the life of salvation. As with many such issues, there seems no reason to choose between the two. Rather it appears that John is making a transition from verse 3 – all of creation coming into being, with a part of that creation also possessing *life* – to the most important aspect of derived life, that of Man. The Logos, Jesus Christ, is the One in whom *all* life exists, whether physical and non-rational, or spiritual and rational. There is no distinction necessary, except to realize the unique relation that the Logos stands to Man: not only the *Life* but also the *Light*.

John is making a definite progression in verse 3 and 4, moving from the created universe in total, to that which has Life, to that which can comprehend (or refuses to

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comprehend) the Light. All creatures that have life has life in the Logos, but not all creatures are capable of receiving the Light of the Logos, and many who are capable remain rebelliously unwilling. The first principle is what the Apostle Paul recognized that even the pagan philosophers understood, “*for in Him we live and move and have our being.*”<sup>106</sup> The second principle the unaided mind of fallen man could not grasp, “*and the Life was the Light of men.*” This phrase essentially singles out humanity as the object of the Incarnation, the redemption of the unique image-bearer of God who alone is capable of receiving the Light of the divine nature within his heart. “Here is the explanation of the objective phrase: *of men*; for men alone, as intelligent and free beings, as moral agents, are capable of the enjoyment of such light.”<sup>107</sup>

In preparation for the rest of the Gospel, John here in the Prologue links two crucial words: *Life* and *Light*. These form one side of an antithesis that permeates the Gospel, as well as the whole Bible: *Life* and *Light* set against *Death* and *Darkness*. There is no compromise between the former set and the latter. “The relation of darkness to light is one of essential antagonism”<sup>108</sup> Certainly the same can be said of *Death* and *Life*. In writing that the Logos was *the Light of men*, John is speaking volumes as to the inherent dignity of human nature – a dignity that cannot be developed or supported by theories of evolution. This dignity was possessed, and abdicated, by the first Man, Adam; it is restored in the second Adam, the God-Man Jesus Christ. Whatever light mankind has displayed over the millennia since Eden, it has been by gracious gift from the One who is the Light of men, the Logos, the eternal Son of God, the pre-incarnate Christ. “All the rays of the sentiment of the beautiful, the true and the just which have illuminated and which ennoble humanity, justify the expression of John.”<sup>109</sup>

But the Light reflected in men through marvelous works of art, music, statescraft, or construction was just that, merely a gracious reflection. The light of life had gone out of man when Adam fell, and death and darkness became human nature. The continuing reflection of the Light in mankind during this era was both a divine act of common grace

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<sup>106</sup> Acts 17:28

<sup>107</sup> Godet; 252.

<sup>108</sup> Westcott; 5.

<sup>109</sup> Godet; 253.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part I

and an object of faith to those who believed, and who looked forward to the time when the Light would again shine in the darkness.

*And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.* (1:5)

“It is of the essence of light to invade the realm of darkness.”<sup>110</sup> With this verse the Apostle moves from the history of creation to the history of salvation, though it would be a mistake to separate the two as if they were distinct timelines in the eternal plan of God. Luthardt writes, “Darkness is the expression for the wicked and lost condition of a state of being which is separated from God. Light is the expression for the opposite condition of salvation.”<sup>111</sup> The history of creation is itself a pattern for the history of salvation, the former a living parable of the latter. John pulls this out by continuing his allusion to the opening chapter of Genesis, where we read, “*and darkness was on the face of the deep...and God said, ‘Let there be Light.’*”<sup>112</sup> “Light, already associated with life in the narrative of the Creation, is that by which men are enabled to recognize the operation of God in the world. Light presupposes life, just as death means darkness. In the later Jewish literature life and light emerge as the twin images adequate to describe the effects of obedience to the Wisdom of God revealed in the Mosaic Law...In the New Testament both are transferred to describe, not obedience to the Law, but the grace of God that has been made known in Jesus Christ...As the Life of the World Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead; as the Light of the World, He heals the man born blind.”<sup>113</sup>

Again, this same connection between creation and salvation history is made by the Apostle Paul in a passage we have already had occasion to consider, a passage where Paul expounds upon both Moses and John, as it were (though Paul most likely wrote before John),

*For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.* (II Corinthians 4:6)

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<sup>110</sup> Westcott; 5.

<sup>111</sup> Luthardt; 270.

<sup>112</sup> Genesis 1:2-3

<sup>113</sup> Hoskyns; 143.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part I

Life and Light thus become the motif of salvation for the Gospel of John. They are coordinate principles; they are inseparable. "Lie betokens the being; light, the manner of being."<sup>114</sup> Life and Light are therefore the essential components of regenerative life, eternal life, brought to mankind in and through Jesus Christ, the Logos who has Life in Himself and who is the Light of men. But just as the darkness once rejected the light in Eden, so even with the coming of the Logos-Light into the world in the Person of Jesus Christ, "*the darkness comprehended it not.*" This phrase sets up another major theme in the Gospel of John, that of the rejection of Jesus Christ by those to whom He came. Verse 5 is therefore parallel to verse 11, "*He came unto His own, and His own did not receive Him.*" However, verse 5 views the matter from the perspective of underlying cause, and thus expands the application to all of mankind. The rejection of Jesus by Israel is but a microcosm of the rejection of the Light by the darkness, the rejection of God by all mankind. "The darkness of which the evangelist speaks is the subjection to sin and falsehood in which humanity lives in consequence of the fact of the fall...As the Logos was the principle of life and light for the world, moral obscurity invaded it, as soon as humanity had ceased to live *in Him*; there was *darkness.*"<sup>115</sup>

John's chosen word to describe the reaction of the darkness to the Light, translated 'comprehend' by the New King James version, but translated 'overcome' by other English Bibles, is a difficult word to clearly understand. D. A. Carson says of this verse that it is "a masterpiece of planned ambiguity."<sup>116</sup> The ambiguity will be dispelled as the reader progresses through the Prologue, and then through the Gospel itself. But here John seems to purposefully use a word that has a dual meaning: one perfectly acceptable meaning is 'to grasp, as to understand,' whereas another perfectly acceptable translation is 'to overcome or destroy.' The key concept is that of grasping, either the metaphorical grasping of the intellect – hence, to *comprehend* – of the physical grasping of an enemy – hence, to *overcome*. Commentators (and translators) feel the need to decide between the two options, though there is nothing in the text to clue them in on which to choose. Hoskyns is probably correct to say that the choice need not be made, or rather that *both*

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<sup>114</sup> Luthardt; 270.

<sup>115</sup> Godet; 253..

<sup>116</sup> Carson; 119.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part I

meanings should be chosen. “The double significance of the Greek verb – *to grasp with the mind* and so *to comprehend*, and *to grasp with the hand* and so *to overcome* or *destroy* - must be given full weight in the interpretation.”<sup>117</sup>

Thus on the one hand we can see that the darkness did not grasp or comprehend what God was doing by sending the Light of the world, the Logos, into the world. Paul simply states that if the rulers of this world had understood the wisdom of God in the person of Jesus Christ, “*they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.*”<sup>118</sup> He then loosely quotes from Isaiah,

*Eye has not seen, nor ear heard,  
Nor have entered into the heart of man  
The things which God has prepared for those who love Him.* (I Corinthians 2:9)

But the dual meaning of the term, however, illustrates the fact that mankind in darkness cannot simply ‘not comprehend’ the Light, it must react in opposition to it and seek to smother it. This opposition of darkness to the Light was mediated through the Jewish nation, but the whole world was represented in that violence. Not realizing this fact is the fundamental error of anti-Semitism: it was not the Jews who killed Christ; rather it was mankind, represented in the Jewish people. It was darkness that tried to snuff out the light, just as Ebenezer Scrooge tried to hide the light of the Ghost of Christmas Past under the conical hat in Dickens’ novella. In a much grander way, the Light of men was not hidden or snuffed out by the enmity of men. “The opposition of the Jews which effected the death of Jesus was rooted in their failure to apprehend Him or His teaching. The Light is, however, unconquerable. The victory of the Jews was, in fact, their defeat, for Jesus overcame the world.”<sup>119</sup> In this victory over the animosity of His own people, Jesus also overcame the enmity of the very principle of darkness that held the world and mankind in its thrall for four thousand years. This victory is what the Logos came to secure, and the success of this mission is the theme of the Gospel of John.

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<sup>117</sup> Hoskyns; 143.

<sup>118</sup> I Corinthians 2:8

<sup>119</sup> Hoskyns; 143.

**Week 5: There Came a Man Names John**

**Key Biblical Texts:** John 1:6-8; 19-23; 3:22-30

*“The office of the prophet in the fullest sense  
is to make known Another.”  
(Brooke Foss Westcott)*

In a sense, John the Baptist was everything that Jesus was not, and in a more significant sense, Jesus was all that the Baptist was not. John was what a prophet was *supposed* to be like – he lived in the wilderness, ate locusts and honey, and wore a camelhair tunic. He was the quintessential prophet, and having waited four hundred years for a prophet, Israel initially basked in the ministry of John.

*Now John himself was clothed in camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him...*  
(Matthew 3:4-5)

John preached, it seemed, the standard prophetic hellfire and brimstone message to those multitudes who came to hear him by the Jordan, and his altar call drew thousands to the water to be baptized. The people must have especially loved John’s diatribes against the religious elite of the land,

*But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, “Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not think to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”*  
(Matthew 3:7-10)

John had the added benefit of being of the priestly caste; as his father Zacharias was a priest, so also John was a priest, though we have no evidence that the latter ever ministered in the Temple as the former had. Still, this pedigree must have given John a certain *gravitas* that Jesus – a carpenter from Nazareth, no less – lacked, at least in the eyes of the official religious establishment. To John the Sanhedrin sends an official embassy; to Jesus they send a traitor. Even John’s demise served to embellish the luster of his ministry; being murdered by Herod only made John a martyr, and even Herod – when confronted

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part I

with the ministry of Jesus – thought that Jesus was John come back from the grave to torment him. All this to say that John might have mounted a rival ministry campaign to that of Jesus, and it appears from some historical references that, though John never even considered such a path, some of his followers did.

We know from the biblical record itself that the people wondered whether John was the Promised One, the Messiah. The dearth of the prophetic word for four centuries, the sense of messianic expectation that permeated Second Temple Judaea, and John's appearance and preaching style, all contributed to the masses surmising that this rough-hewn, fiery preacher just might be the Messiah "*Now as the people were in expectation, and all reasoned in their hearts about John, whether he was the Christ or not...*"<sup>120</sup> Thus we see in the Fourth Gospel, in the Prologue, the embassy sent from the religious rulers to John to try to find out who and what he was. Later there would be disputes between John's disciples and Jesus', and no small measure of bitterness and envy on the part of John's disciples.

*Then there arose a dispute between some of John's disciples and the Jews about purification. And they came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, He who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you have testified – behold, He is baptizing, and all are coming to Him!"* (John 3:25-26)

Much later the Apostle Paul would encounter disciples in Ephesus who knew nothing of Jesus or of the Holy Spirit, having only been baptized into the baptism of John.<sup>121</sup> Even the mighty orator Apollos was at first aware only of the baptism of John, and had to be further instructed in the truth by Aquilla and Priscilla.<sup>122</sup> What is remarkable about Apollos was that he was a Jew of Alexandria, and not of Palestine, yet he was deeply aware of the teachings and baptism of John. We can surmise that John's influence was spread much wider than the immediate region of the Jordan River where he baptized. There is even a favorable mention of him in Josephus,

Now some of the Jews thought that the destruction of Herod's army came from God, and that very justly, as a punishment of what he did against **John, that was called the Baptist:** for Herod slew him, who was a good man, and commanded the Jews to exercise virtue, both as to righteousness towards one another, and piety towards God, and so to come to

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<sup>120</sup> Luke 3:15

<sup>121</sup> Acts 19:1-4

<sup>122</sup> Acts 18:24-25

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part I

baptism; for that the washing [with water] would be acceptable to him, if they made use of it, not in order to the putting away [or the remission] of some sins [only], but for the purification of the body; supposing still that the soul was thoroughly purified beforehand by righteousness. Now when [many] others came in crowds about him, for they were very greatly moved [or pleased] by hearing his words, Herod, who feared lest the great influence John had over the people might put it into his power and inclination to raise a rebellion, (for they seemed ready to do any thing he should advise,) thought it best, by putting him to death, to prevent any mischief he might cause, and not bring himself into difficulties, by sparing a man who might make him repent of it when it would be too late. Accordingly he was sent a prisoner, out of Herod's suspicious temper, to Macherus, the castle I before mentioned, and was there put to death. Now the Jews had an opinion that the destruction of this army was sent as a punishment upon Herod, and a mark of God's displeasure to him.<sup>123</sup>

The highest praise of John, of course, comes from the One for whom the Baptist came as a forerunner and herald, Jesus Christ. Jesus referred to John as the greatest of the Old Testament prophets, though at the same time He notes the even greater value of being a child of the kingdom of God.

*Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist; but he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.* (Matthew 11:11)

John's popularity did not come from the wonderful miracles that he performed, for as far as we can tell from the record, he did none. His fame did not derive from the food that he gave the multitudes, or the vintage wine he produced from water for wedding guests. No, John's fame stemmed, we may surmise, from a combination of his appearance and style, on the one hand, and the intense expectation of his age for an end to the prophetic drought. But what is truly remarkable about John is that none of this ever went to his head; not for a moment did he consider himself a rival of Jesus; not for a moment did he envy the Promised One to whom the entirety of his own ministry was directed. John was not simply a preacher of repentance and righteousness – as he is noted by Josephus. Rather his own self-attestation was as *'a voice crying in the wilderness, 'Make straight paths for the LORD.'*" Matthew Henry writes of John, "He was a star, like that which guided the wise men to Christ, a morning star; but he was not the Sun; not the

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<sup>123</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*; XVII.5.2.



Bridegroom, but a friend of the Bridegroom; not the Prince, but his harbinger...He was great as the prophet of the Highest, but not the Highest himself."<sup>124</sup>

*There was a man sent from God, whose name was John.* (1:6)

It is interesting that nowhere does the author of the Fourth Gospel refer to John as 'the Baptist,' the standard descriptive title in the Synoptics. Liberal scholars attempt to use this fact to show that the author was not a Palestinian Jew, though the prior reference to Apollos, an Alexandrian Jew, proves that John's fame spread much farther than just Judæa. Two reasons may be postulated for the difference in titles between the Synoptics and the Fourth Gospel. The first is one of emphasis: in the Gospel of John the emphasis in the narratives about John (the Baptist) is on his *witness*, though the fact of his baptizing of many Jews does not escape the notice of the fourth evangelist. In the Synoptics the emphasis seems rather on the *preaching* of John – the preaching of repentance – which was, in fact, the manner by which the Jewish nation was to *prepare the way* for the Lord. John's baptism was integral with his preaching, as it was a baptism of repentance. Hence the Synoptics refer to John by the title he soon came to wear: 'the Baptist.' Brown notes, "The Fourth Gospel stresses more the role of John the Baptist as a witness than as a baptizer."<sup>125</sup> Pryor notes this distinction between the Fourth Gospel and the Synoptics,

Mention of John as baptizer is kept to an absolute minimum (1:26a), and his calling as a preacher of national repentance is referred to only in the quoting of Isa. 40:3 (1:23). Now the presence of those verses suggests that while the evangelist is quite aware of the gospel traditions of the Baptist's work, they form no part of his concerns. Instead John concentrates almost exclusively on a presentation of the Baptist as one who bears witness to Christ.<sup>126</sup>

A second reason for the absence of the descriptive phrase in the Fourth Gospel may reasonably be considered as the intimacy of the author with the subject. It will become apparent within the first chapter that the author was himself a disciple of John until he heeded his first master's admonition, and attached himself to the greater Master, Jesus. This familiarity essentially proves that the author knew of John otherwise than through

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<sup>124</sup> Henry; 686.

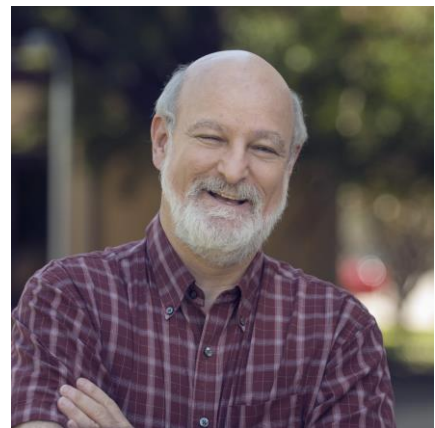
<sup>125</sup> Brown; 9.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part I

the tradition of the church; he knew of him as a disciple knows his rabbi. “If he had really known him before the public voice had given him this title, it was very natural that he should designate him simply by his name.”<sup>127</sup>

The author (the term will be used in this lesson to differentiate between two Johns – the author of the Gospel, and the Baptist) again utilizes verbs significantly in this passage, as he has done thus far in the Prologue. The man of whom he speaks in verse 6 *became* – the Greek *egeneto*; the Man to whom this man bears witness, *was*. “His ‘becoming’ is contrasted with the ‘being’ of the Word.”<sup>128</sup> This person, who ‘became’ or ‘arose’ was distinctly a man, *anthropos*; nothing supernatural may be considered of him. Indeed, in this one verse the author is simply summarizing the Synoptic accounts of the birth of John to Elizabeth and Zacharias, a conception and birth that was itself miraculous but not divine. If the general opinion of the day exalted John above his station (and above his own self-attestation), the author aims to correct that error.

But why mention John at all? Again, liberal scholars believe verses 6-8 to be an interpolation made by a ‘redactor,’ but why? It could just as well be argued that such an addition not only adds nothing to the Prologue, it positively disrupts the flow of thought, thus far focused upon the Logos, to whom the Prologue will quickly return. One reason for this brief interjection by the author is to prepare for later, more thorough discussions regarding John – the Prologue is, after all, an introduction to the entire Gospel. But there is amore significant reason for the insertion, and for its location where we find it, in verses 6-8. With this verse the author continues his transition from transcendent heaven to immanent earth – from the Logos who was with God in the beginning and was God, to the Logos “*who was in the world*” (v. 10) and who “*became flesh and tabernacled among us*” (v. 14). Verse 6 is a verse that illustrates the fact that the Fourth Gospel is eminently *theological* as it is accurately *historical*. We have already noted the heightened sense of expectation



**Darrell Bock (b. 1953)**

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<sup>126</sup> Pryor; 12.

<sup>127</sup> Godet; 257.

<sup>128</sup> Westcott; 5.

within Second Temple Israel for the coming of Messiah. But the Promised One was not going to just drop out of the clouds; He *would be announced*. Darrell Bock highlights the transition from the lofty, *Logos* poem of the first verses to this more mundane section of the Prologue. “Following that high and most heavenly note, John returns to the story on earth, beginning with a witness, John the Baptist, whose role it was to point to that now-incarnate light.”<sup>129</sup>

The Jewish people of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century were indeed expectant with regard to the coming of Messiah, though there were wide variations among them as to what his appearance would mean for the nation. Some gave little thought to the manner of Messiah’s coming, but others knew the Scriptures, and knew that there would be a forerunner – *Elijah* – who would be sent to herald the advent of the Promised One. Malachi, the final prophetic word of the Old Covenant era, speaks of this person.

*Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet  
Before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD.  
And he will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children,  
And the hearts of the children to their fathers,  
Lest I come and strike the earth with a curse.* (Malachi 4:5-6)

This prophecy will factor into the evangelist’s summary of John’s life and ministry later in Chapter 1. But in light of the apparent tendency in some circles to exalt John above his station, and in light of the authors own experience concerning both John and Jesus, it was of utmost importance to him to signify John’s ultimate purpose and ministry: *to bear witness of the Christ*. As we shall see throughout the Fourth Gospel, *bearing witness* is a common and important theme.

**This man came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all through him might believe.** (1:7)

Even the phrasing of the first clause of this verse indicates John’s fundamental *raison d’être*. The author does not say that John came *to bear witness* – though of course that is what he did. Rather the author says that John came *to be witness* – all his ministry,

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<sup>129</sup>Bock, Darrell L. *Jesus According to Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic; 2002); 410.

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according to the Fourth Gospel, is that of *witness* to the coming Christ. John is thus the first in a long line of those who will bear witness to Jesus as the Christ. C. K. Barrett writes, “‘Witness’ holds an important place in the thought of the gospel.”<sup>130</sup> Barrett then provides a summary list of the various witnesses we will encounter in the Fourth Gospel:

- The Baptist (1:7f, 15, 32, 34; 3:26; 5:33)
- The Samaritan Woman (4:39)
- The Works of Jesus Himself (5:36; 10:25)
- The Old Testament (5:39)
- The Multitude (12:17)
- The Holy Spirit and the Apostles (15:26f)
- God the Father Himself (5:37)

All witness in the Fourth Gospel has but one object, Jesus Christ, and but one purpose, “*that all through him might believe.*” ‘Him,’ that is, the one bearing witness. To this group the author includes himself, as the closing verse of the cohesive section of the Gospel clearly shows,

*And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.* (20:30-31)

It is not too much to say, as many commentators do, that the function of *bearing witness* with the goal that *all might believe* is the privilege and the responsibility of all who preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ. What Westcott says of the prophet – which John most certainly was – is true of all ministers of God’s word, “The office of the prophet in the fullest sense is to make known Another.”<sup>131</sup> It is significant that the Greek word translated ‘witness’ is *marturian*, from which we get the English *martyr*, the ultimate form of witness. Thus this witness primarily takes the form of speech and, providentially in the form of martyrdom, which form it eventually took for John. Of this verse Ryle comments, “It is one of those texts which show the immense importance of the ministerial office. It is a means

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<sup>130</sup> Barrett, C. K. *The Gospel According to St. John* (New York: The MacMillan Company; 1957); 133.

<sup>131</sup> Westcott; 6.

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and instrument through which the Holy Spirit is pleased to produce faith in man's heart."<sup>132</sup>

The subject of John's witness was the same Light that has been introduced to both the reader (and the world) as the *Logos*. Thus the author transitions smoothly from the first five verse, which deal exclusively with the identity of the *Logos*, to this three-verse segment, which brings the reader back to earth, the earth in stygian darkness into which the Light is shining (v. 5). Matthew Henry reminds us that the Logos-Light did not need a witness, for "Light is a thing which witnesses for itself, and carries its own evidence along with it."<sup>133</sup> Yet even the Light of the world required witness, for it is established in the Law that every matter be settled on the testimony of two or three witnesses. Therefore Jesus Himself will speak, on the one hand, of the *need* for another to bear witness, though in another place He testifies that His own self-witness is valid and true, even if it were alone, which it is not.

*You have sent to John, and he has borne witness to the truth. Yet I do not receive testimony from man, but I say these things that you may be saved. He was the burning and shining lamp, and you were willing for a time to rejoice in his light. But I have a greater witness than John's; for the works which the Father has given Me to finish – the very works that I do – bear witness of Me, that the Father has sent Me. And the Father Himself, who sent Me, has testified of Me. You have neither heard His voice at any time, nor seen His form.* (John 5:33-37)

*The Pharisees therefore said to Him, "You bear witness of Yourself; Your witness is not true." Jesus answered and said to them, "Even if I bear witness of Myself, My witness is true, for I know where I came from and where I am going; but you do not know where I come from and where I am going. You judge according to the flesh; I judge no one. And yet if I do judge, My judgment is true; for I am not alone, but I am with the Father who sent Me. It is also written in your law that the testimony of two men is true. I am One who bears witness of Myself, and the Father who sent Me bears witness of Me."* (John 8:14-18)

Thus the witness that John bore was not *for* Jesus, it was *of* Jesus. John's testimony did not 'confirm' Jesus in His Messianic role, nor did John's witness first inform Jesus of His calling – both views erroneously put forward by those who want to find a 'point in time' when Jesus became aware of His vocation. No, Christ was the Light that needed no witness in and of itself. Witness was given – and copious witness was given – so that the

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<sup>132</sup> Ryle; 18.

<sup>133</sup> Henry; 685.

glory of Christ might be seen to be in keeping with the Law. “Christ’s light needs not man’s testimony, but the world’s darkness does.”<sup>134</sup> Godet adds,

Certainly, if the Word had appeared here below in the glory which belongs to Him, the sending of a witness would not have been necessary. But He was obliged to appear enveloped in a thick veil (*the flesh*, ver. 14); and, in the condition of blindness into which sin had plunged man, he could not recognize Him except with the help of a testimony.<sup>135</sup>

*He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light.* (1:8)

The author circles around to the opening verse of this short segment: *There was a man sent from God...to reiterate the fact, this man was not the Light, but rather bore witness to that Light.* Luthardt notes, “The Baptist’s vocation was to witness to the light. That absorbs his whole importance. It designates both his difference from Christ and his relation to him.”<sup>136</sup> There is no room for John to be on par with Jesus, as John himself will testify of himself shortly. Still, the author wants to make it absolutely clear that, noble and honorable as John was, he was not the Promised One, he was not the *Light which coming into the world enlightens every man.* He was a witness of that Light, and therefore his sole function was to *bear witness* to that Light. Henry applies this lesson to ministers in general, and to their congregations.

We must take heed of over-valuing ministers, as well as under-valuing them; they are not our lords, nor have they dominion over our faith, but ministers by whom we believe, stewards of our Lord’s house. We must not give up ourselves by an implicit faith to their conduct, for they are not that light ;but we must attend to, and receive, their testimony; for they are sent to bear witness of that light.<sup>137</sup>

It has been objected that John is later called “*the burning and shining light*” by none other than Jesus himself (5:35). This is no contradiction, but rather a lesson on the nature of light – spiritual light – as differentiated between the underived *source* and the derived *witness*. Ryle notes that the word in chapter 5, verse 35 that is translated ‘light’ is not the same as the word used here in the Prologue. The word in chapter 5 is *luxos*, also translatable as ‘candle,’ whereas the word here in the Prologue (throughout) is *phōs*,

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<sup>134</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>135</sup> Godet; 257.

<sup>136</sup> Luthardt; 274.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part I

universally translated as ‘light.’ It is not the case that *luxos* is used in all instances referring other than to Jesus, for in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus calls His disciples, “*the light of the world*” and uses the word, *phōs*. Still, the example of John the Baptist illustrates a truth that applies to all disciples no less than to John. Only Jesus, the *Logos*, is Light unto Himself – Light Himself. All other ‘light’ is derivative, as a candle derives its light from the source of flame. “John the Baptist was a ‘candle,’ but not the Light itself. Believers are called ‘the light of the world,’ but only as members of Christ the Light, and borrowing from Him. Christ alone is the great sun and fountain of all light, the Light itself.”<sup>138</sup>

For whatever other purpose it serves, verse 8 brings our focus back to the Light, returning us to the Tale of the Logos which is resumed in verse 9. But before returning to that, the author’s major theme, it might be of use to connect this short introductory passage – verses 6-8 – to John, with John’s own testimony regarding himself under examination, verses 19-23.

*Now this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?”* (1:19)

The Prologue of the Fourth Gospel is generally considered to end with verse 18, and the author begins the narrative portion of the Gospel by returning to John the Baptist. Having introduced John as one “*sent from God for a witness*,” verse 19 seamlessly transitions with “*And this is the witness (testimony) of John...*” The words are identical between verse 7 – *marturian* – and verse 19 – *marturia*, though the New King James translates the first as ‘witness’ and the second as ‘testimony.’ Not an unacceptable translation, really, considering that a witness *is* a testimony. However, it seems best to leave the same words in Greek translated by the same words in English; a bit less confusion, one would think.

John’s witness becomes explicit when a deputation of priests and Levites is sent, most likely on behalf of the Sanhedrin, the highest religious assembly in Second Temple Israel. We learn at the end of this short narrative that these men were also numbered among the Pharisees, a sect with Judaism famous for its devotion to Torah, the Law of

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<sup>137</sup> Henry; 686.

<sup>138</sup> Ryle; 18.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part I

Moses. Thus the author presents us with a representative embassy of Second Temple Judaism itself, come to interrogate John as to his identity and the purpose of his ministry.

The Sanhedrin as an assembly dates back most likely to the time of Ezra the priest, in the years after the return of the exiles from Babylon, though some have traced its origins as far back as the seventy-two elders appointed by Moses to serve as his counsel. In the time of John the Sanhedrin had reached its final, formal size of seventy-one – one less than Moses' seventy-two so that there could be no tie vote. Under Roman rule the High Priests were instruments of the imperial power and served at the pleasure of the Emperor, so the Sanhedrin was largely viewed as the judicial branch of what little autonomous government Judæa possessed; it was an assembly of the wise men of Israel, those who were skilled and experienced in the Law. Thus the coming of one who is evidently a prophet – or at least the people are taking him to be a prophet – after so many years without the prophetic word or ministry, fairly demanded the investigation of this religious body. “But when the Sanhedrim sends to the Baptist, it does so because it has to represent the people, and because John had come forth with a demand and proclamation which was meant for Israel as an entire nation. Thus the Sanhedrim meets him in the name of the people, and as its representative.”<sup>139</sup>

The simple question, ‘Who are you?’ is really a much deeper theological inquiry than a simple request for identification. The pronoun is emphatic: *You...are who?* You, who preach repentance and baptism and proclaim the coming of Another; what is your *bona fides?* Who are *you* to come upon this age in this manner? As to the actual identity of John, many of the men in the deputation would already know that matter, for John's father was a priest and thus John was part of the priestly caste. This was certainly not a ‘What's your name?’ interrogation; rather it was a seeking to find out to whom from the prophetic Old Covenant does this new prophet correspond. It was widely believed that the prophetic drought must be brought to an end by a famous personage whose coming was already foretold in the Scriptures. *John*, are you one of these people?

John, it would seem, knew what was coming and preempted their thoughts by an even more emphatic statement – his self *witness* – as to who he was not. His list of denials

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<sup>139</sup> Luthardt; 301.



## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part I

has caused not a little difficulty among commentators, given what the New Testament says elsewhere concerning him.

*He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ."*

*And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not."*

*"Are you the Prophet?" And he answered, "No."*

(1:20-21)

John starts at the top, with the greatest of Israel's hope and expectation: Messiah. And with respect this supreme personage John gives his most emphatic denial of the interchange. The wording of verse 20 is quite remarkable, *"He confessed...he did not deny...but rather he confessed, 'I am not the Christ.'"* Indeed, in the content of his denial John



C. K. Barrett (1917-2011)

utilizes the first person personal pronoun, emphasizing the 'I' that would otherwise be implied by the conjugation of the verb. This is similar to the 'I am' statements spoken by Jesus, and recorded in this Gospel, with the important exception of the strong negation. Jesus may truthfully state, *"I am!"*, but John must truthfully claim, *"I am NOT!"* It is noteworthy that we do not have any record of the deputation actually asking John if he was the Christ, before we have John's emphatic denial. It is as if John anticipated them, for the expectation of Messiah was rife

throughout Second Temple Israel. C. K. Barrett writes, "The sending of messengers, and the form of this negative statement, suggest that the possibility had been considered, perhaps even urged, that John was the Messiah. This John denies categorically."<sup>140</sup>

John's interview with the Sanhedrin embassy then steps down to the next level of exalted personages, the anticipated coming of Elijah as prophesied by Malachi. This John also denies, though with less vehemence than the former, as Elijah was far less a personage than the Christ. Here John omits the personal pronoun and simply states a common, unemphatic, *I am not*. Finally, the priest and Levites settle on the third expected person from the Old Testament Scriptures, *Are you the prophet?*, to which John even more

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<sup>140</sup> Barrett; 144.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part I

simply states, *No*. Thus we have in a nutshell the expectation of the Jews in the days of Daniel's Seventieth Week: the Christ, Elijah who is to come, and the Prophet.

The first of these needs no explanation to any believer even slightly aware of the prophecies of the Old Testament concerning the coming of the Messiah. The second one, Elijah, is only mentioned once as to his coming again, but the manner of his non-death left the majority of the Jewish nation believing that the great prophet would come again in literal, bodily form. It is odd that the deputation asked this of John, whose heritage they certainly knew, his father being one of their number. The third was a more mercurial prophetic prediction – without name and without firm definition as to his heritage, identity, and mission. The expectation of the Prophet comes from Moses' own prediction in Deuteronomy 18.

*The LORD your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your midst, from your brethren. Him you shall hear, according to all you desired of the LORD your God in Horeb in the day of the assembly, saying, 'Let me not hear again the voice of the LORD my God, nor let me see this great fire anymore, lest I die.' And the LORD said to me: 'What they have spoken is good. I will raise up for them a Prophet like you from among their brethren, and will put My words in His mouth, and He shall speak to them all that I command Him. And it shall be that whoever will not hear My words, which He speaks in My name, I will require it of him.* (Deuteronomy 18:17-19)

In a general sense this prophecy spoke directly to the prophetic ministry that arose in Israel and through which God did speak to His people and tell them what He required of them. Their continued rejection of the prophetic message did also lead to their chastisement, their punishment, their destruction and their exile. But throughout the centuries the expectation of *one* prophet – a prophet like Moses who would also be a ruler in Israel – persisted, and it is this anticipation that undergirds the question, "*Are you the Prophet?*" But again, John denies this title as well. He leaves the embassy at a loss and with nothing with which to return to those who sent them. "John's denial is complete. He corresponds to no known character within the framework of Jewish religion."<sup>141</sup>

The issue of John's denial that he was Elijah has raised concern and consternation among both readers of the New Testament and commentators of the Gospels. This is

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<sup>141</sup> Barrett; 144.

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because it seems to contradict Jesus' testimony with respect to John, in which He clearly denominates the Baptist as Elijah.

*Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist; but he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force. For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to receive it, he is Elijah who is to come. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!* (Matthew 11:11-15)

*And they asked Him, saying, "Why do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?" Then He answered and told them, "Indeed, Elijah is coming first and restores all things. And how is it written concerning the Son of Man, that He must suffer many things and be treated with contempt? But I say to you that Elijah has also come, and they did to him whatever they wished, as it is written of him."* (Mark 9:9-13)

In each of these passages Jesus alludes to John as Elijah, but in neither does he explicitly state that John was the bodily return of the ancient prophet. In the first there is the caveat, "And if you are willing to receive it," and in the second an even more oblique, "But I say to you that Elijah has also come." John was not wrong to say that he was not Elijah, for as the nation was expecting the physical return of the 'non-dead' prophet, it would have been a lie for John to claim to be that person, for he most certainly was not. Indeed, the very expectation of Elijah returning from heaven was mistaken (and remains mistaken, for those, like J. C. Ryle, who look for Elijah's literal return before the Parousia of our Lord). That is what Jesus is teaching here – Yes, Elijah has come, but not as you were expecting – he has come in the person of John, who was imbued with the spirit of Elijah. This was nothing more than the angelic prophesy concerning John's life and ministry.

*But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth. For he will be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. **He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah,** 'to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children,' and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."* (Luke 1:13-17)

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Thus, “In a spiritual sense John was Elias, yet not so as the Jews literally understood the promise.”<sup>142</sup> One can sense the exasperation of the delegation at this point, “*Give us an answer, so that we may report back to those who sent us!*” And so John does. And this answer is the heart of the author’s narrative concerning John, being even more warning than it is answer.

*He said: “I am ‘The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Make straight the way of the LORD,’ as the prophet Isaiah said.”* (1:23)

So much does John recede into the background of the glory of the One who was to follow him, that in his own self-witness he is no more than ‘a voice.’ But of course he is not just any voice, not even just any *prophetic* voice. He is the voice who proclaims the coming of the LORD, as the prophet Isaiah had foretold. The allusion comes from Isaiah 40, which begins “the great proclamation of salvation” to Israel.<sup>143</sup> All that Isaiah prophesied in the context is referenced, contained, and no doubt understood by the short phrase that John quotes.

*Comfort, yes, comfort My people!” Says your God.  
“Speak <sup>in</sup>comfort to Jerusalem, and cry out to her,  
That her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned;  
For she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins.”*

***The voice of one crying in the wilderness:***

*“Prepare the way of the LORD;  
Make straight <sup>in</sup>the desert a highway for our God.  
Every valley shall be exalted and every mountain and hill brought low;  
The crooked places shall be made <sup>in</sup>straight and the rough places smooth;  
The glory of the LORD shall be revealed,  
And all flesh shall see it together;  
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”* (Isaiah 40:1-5)

As in the East, before the arrival of the sovereign, the roads are straightened and leveled, so Israel is to prepare for its divine King a reception worthy of Him; and the function of the mysterious voice is to engage her in carrying out this work of preparation, lest the signal grace of which she is to be the object may turn into judgment.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Westcott; 18.

<sup>143</sup> Luthardt; 303.

<sup>144</sup> Godet; 304.

**Week 6: The Light Comes into the World**

**Key Biblical Texts:** John 1:9-13; Romans 1:18-32

*“Though human unbelief, viewed in the light of the creation of humanity by God,  
may be a riddle,  
faith is, in the light of human estrangement from God,  
a miracle.”*  
(Herman Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John*)

Scripture everywhere offers an unmistakable indictment of the world as it stands after Adam’s sin. The common and recurrent notion of the world becoming a better place, of mankind attaining peace and unity and together ushering in a utopian existence on this planet are sheer fantasies, and the record of human history confirms the biblical judgment. The world is in darkness, but that is perhaps not its most serious predicament. More serious than the darkness is the fact that the world *prefers* the darkness to the Light (1:5). Barrett writes, “It is not true that all men have a natural affinity with the light.”<sup>145</sup> This perspective is a vital and integral part of the Gospel: there is no *good* news without the attendant *bad* news. What was true of Israel under the Old Covenant – and frequently brought to Israel’s attention by the prophets – was but a microcosm of the plight of the whole world, and both the Prologue and the fulness of John’s Gospel does not stray from the prophetic diagnosis concerning the world.

This goes far beyond the superficial doctrine which makes man a morally indifferent being, in whose choice it lies at each moment to be either good or bad. The Bible understands sin as a principle which has penetrated to the centre, and from thence corrupts the whole circuit of life.<sup>146</sup>

Christians are often accused of being misanthropic on account of this negative view of the world as it stands outside of Christ. The irony is that the Christian doctrine of salvation is built on verses like the famous John 3:16, “*For God so loved the world...*” While it is true that Christianity has not always (and perhaps not often) clearly reflected God’s love to the world, that sad fact does not negate the reality that the love of God in Jesus Christ has extended to all parts of the world – to *every tongue, tribe, and nation*. But the

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<sup>145</sup> Barrett; 134.

<sup>146</sup> Laidlaw, John *The Bible Doctrine of Man* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark; 1895); 225.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part I

content of the Christian Gospel is completed eviscerated if the Church abandons the biblical perspective regarding the world as it now is, and has been since the Fall of Man, and will be until the Parousia. It was the will and purpose of God to display the brightness of His mercy and grace, the fullness of His glory, set against the darkest of backdrops – the deep and dark corruption of this world because of human sin. For John, as for Paul, the only remedy for darkness is Light. But a darkness that wishes to remain, a world that refuses to come to the Light, can only be saved through a gracious divine act of salvation power – and that is the message of the New Covenant in Jesus Christ.

This negative indictment of mankind is presented in poetic form in the Prologue of the Fourth Gospel, but it is laid out in no uncertain terms in a parallel passage from Paul's Epistle to the Romans.

*For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man – and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things. Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves, who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen... And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting; being filled with all unrighteousness, sexual immorality, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, evil-mindedness; they are whisperers, backbiters, haters of God, violent, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, undiscerning, untrustworthy, unloving, unforgiving, unmerciful; who, knowing the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things are deserving of death, not only do the same but also approve of those who practice them.*

(Romans 1:18-32)

By uniquely and correctly diagnosing the human condition, the Gospel of Jesus Christ offers the only sure remedy. The cure for darkness is light; the solution to death is life. Thus the Prologue to John's Gospel presents us with Him in whom is Life, and who is the Light of men. "There is nothing in the universe – nothing in nature, in history, in all

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part I

that has ever been known as religion or revelation – that can truly be understood except in this light.”<sup>147</sup>

It should be noted well that the message of the Fourth Gospel is also uniquely directed *to the world*. This does not make the Gospel of Jesus Christ less Jewish (for it is in John’s Gospel that we read of Jesus telling the Samaritan women, “*salvation is from the Jews*.”). Nonetheless, the emphasis upon the ramifications of the Gospel to the whole world is most profoundly seen in the Fourth Gospel as compared to the Synoptics, though it is by no means lacking entirely there. In the passage before us in this less, for instance,



**N. T. Wright (b. 1948)**

verses 10 & 11 move seamlessly from the world to Israel, uniting them in one larger set of unbelief – the world being the fullest set, Israel the subset. That Christianity has since been divided into a religion of *part* of the world, with the other part – Israel – still waiting the final revelation of her salvation, is a travesty of biblical teaching and does great injustice to John’s writings. As N. T. Wright notes, Christianity is more than just a religion, it is a complete worldview, one that is in conflict with all other worldviews, and one that challenges all of those worldviews in

public arena. “It is ironic that many people in the modern world have regarded Christianity as a private worldview, a set of private stories. Some Christians have actually played into this trap. But in principle the whole point of Christianity is that it offers a story which is the story of the whole world. It is public truth. Otherwise it collapses into some version of Gnosticism.”<sup>148</sup>

John’s Gospel puts the lie to any view that separates the world and Israel into separate ‘plans’ of God. Israel was in darkness no less than the world, though the covenant grace of God provided her with far more sources of enlightenment than the world received. Yet as Paul explains in Romans 1, the world had sufficient light shining upon it through Creation itself so that it is without excuse for its love of the darkness. The world is in darkness, yet the Light of the Logos of God has shined forth so brightly in Creation, as well as in the rational capacity of Man, created in the image of God, that it

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<sup>147</sup> Denney; *Jesus and the Gospel*; 81.

<sup>148</sup> Wright, N. T. *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press; 1992); 41-42.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part I

remains the most tragic of stories that the world refuses to recognize and adore the God that made it. Lenski writes in his commentary on this passage, “The fact is that no real explanation is possible; for the rejection of its Creator by the world is an unreasonable act, and no reasonable explanation can be offered for an act, the very essence of which is unreason.”<sup>149</sup>

Thus the world is a co-conspirator with Israel in rebellion against God. The world against God as its Creator; Israel against God as her covenant Lord. As with the Synoptic Gospels, the Fourth Gospel will focus primarily upon Israel, for that is the scene of the Logos’ *becoming flesh and tabernacling among us*. But the message of the kingdom of God, the announcement of the Logos-Light that appeared in Israel as her Messiah, was always intended for the whole world, and the Prologue reminds us of that fact. The two entities do not stand distinct from one another; rather Israel



R. C. H. Lenski (1864-1936)

serves as a focus group within the larger set of the world. “The coming of Jesus was fraught with ultimate all-embracing universalism, for in Him was manifested the light of the creative Word of God on whom all men depend for their very existence.”<sup>150</sup> Hoskyns refers to a universalism of *extent* and not of *application*. The Light of the Logos came into the world through Israel, but that very Logos is Life in Himself, and that Life is the Light of men. “Christ doth dispense to every one light sufficient to leave him without excuse. But Christ doth not dispense to every one converting light sufficient to bring him to salvation.”<sup>151</sup>

*That was the true Light, which gives light to every man, coming into the world.* (1:9)

This verse has a technical exegetical matter that must be addressed before the meaning can be deduced. There is a participial phrase here, *coming into the world*, the antecedent of which is grammatically indeterminate. In other words, John could be speaking of *the true Light* coming into the world or he could be speaking of *every man*

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<sup>149</sup> Lenski, R. C. H. *The Interpretation of St. John’s Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House; 1961); 55.

<sup>150</sup> Hoskyns, 145.



coming into the world. The problem arises from the syntax, though in Greek syntax is not the deciding factor and either option presented would be grammatically acceptable. Ryle notes, “The construction of the whole verse in the original Greek, is such that either rendering is grammatical and correct.”<sup>152</sup> Yet the manner in which John presents this sentence seems to attach the participial clause, *coming into the world* with the nearest antecedent, *every man*. If this were the intent of the author, then the commas in the verse above would be removed:

*That was the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world.*

In support of this rendering, Barrett notes that the phrase ‘coming into the world’ is a relatively common rabbinic euphemism for man. He quotes the Leviticus *Rabbah* [31:6], “Thou enlightenest those who are on high and those who are beneath and all who come into the world.”<sup>153</sup> The meaning of the verse, then, would be that the Logos-Light, the *true* Light, enlightens all men without exception, or at least that whatever light any man has, he has it from the Logos. This, in essence, is the Logos-teaching of the Stoic philosophy and is not without some merit. “Whatever light any man has, he is indebted to Christ for it, whether it be natural or supernatural.”<sup>154</sup> Westcott adds, “No man is wholly destitute of the illumination of ‘the Light.’ In nature, and life, and conscience it makes itself felt in various degrees to all.”<sup>155</sup> Though this may be a truth, as far as it goes, there is good reason to conclude that it is not the truth being taught in John 1:9.

In the first and most obvious place, there is the frequency with which John speaks of Jesus *coming into the world* in this Gospel. One passage in particular also indicates the benighted condition of mankind rather than according him any inner light, even if from the Logos.

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<sup>151</sup> Ryle; 20.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*; 19.

<sup>153</sup> Barrett; 134.

<sup>154</sup> Henry; 686.

<sup>155</sup> Westcott; 7.

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*He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. And this is the condemnation, that **the light has come into the world**, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed.* (3:18-20)

In another place Jesus strongly indicates that the coming of the Light into the world was inexorably bound up with His being in the world,

*I must work the works of Him who sent Me while it is day; the night is coming when no one can work. **As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.*** (9:4-5)

Later in the same chapter Jesus ties His coming into the world with the illumination that only He can bring, “And Jesus said, “For judgment I have come into this world, that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may be made blind.” (9:39) Finally, though there are more references, here again is Jesus saying Himself what John says about Him in 1:9,

*And he who sees Me sees Him who sent Me. **I have come as a light into the world**, that whoever believes in Me should not abide in darkness. And if anyone hears My words and does not believe, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world but to save the world.* (12:45-47)

The final decision regarding the proper interpretation of this phrase must rest on its usage within the Gospel itself, and not upon extraneous rabbinic sources. Lenski writes, “Hebrew originals have been cited for regarding ‘coming into the world’ in the sense of ‘being born’ and thus as equivalent to ‘an inhabitant of the world.’ But the New Testament never uses the expression in this sense. As far as men are concerned, they never were outside of the world and thus cannot come into the world by means of birth.”<sup>156</sup> This interpretation – that *coming into the world* has reference to *the true Light* – is strengthened when we observe once again the poetic parallelism that John uses, which explains why the troublesome participial clause is located where it is in the syntax. As John *ends* verse 9 with *into the world*, so he *begins* verse 10 with *in the world*. As syntax does not matter in the Greek, John is doing again what we saw in verse 1 – beginning a clause with the last word of the preceding clause. This is the arrangement of verses 9 & 10 in the Greek original:

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<sup>156</sup> Lenski; 53.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part I

*This was the true Light which enlightens every man,  
coming **into the world.**  
**in the world** He was, and the world...*

Into this world, then, came the True Light. It is most likely that John is here referring obliquely to the Incarnation, an event he will speak of explicitly in verse 14. The transition from eternity to time, from heaven to earth, continues in the Prologue. Note that John's reference to the Logos as the *true* Light does not imply that John the Baptist was a false light, only that he was a lesser and derivative light. Godet comments, "the word *alaethinon*, veritable, appears here for the first time. It is one of the characteristic terms of John's style. Of twenty-eight passages in which we meet with it in the N. T., twenty-three belong to John...It designates the fact as the adequate realization of the idea. It contrasts, therefore, not the true with the false, but the normal appearance with the imperfect realization."<sup>157</sup> Lenski adds, "The adjective *alaethinon* means real, genuine, the reality corresponding to the idea."<sup>158</sup> This is the Light that shines in the darkness; this is the Light that comes into the world; this is the Light that *enlightens every man*.

One may attempt to find universal salvation in this phrase, *enlightens every man*, for there is indeed no distinction among men made here. *Panta anthropon* indicates each and every man rather than mankind collectively. The full force of this universality must be accepted: the true Light which comes into the world is, as we have already read, the *Light of the world*, and therefore it is the Light by which every man is enlightened. "This light is genuine because it is universal; every man, all men, the entire world of men, are wholly dependent on this one divine light."<sup>159</sup> But universal enlightenment leading to salvation is not taught in the Bible, and certainly not in the Gospel of John. Thus it is probably best to interpret what John writes as stating that there is no other Light by which men must be, or will be enlightened, which is, of course, true.

When John writes, 'which enlighteneth every man,' he fears no misunderstanding on our part as though we might think that he means that every single human being is actually enlightened by the Logos, for both before and after making this statement he speaks of men rejecting this light and remaining in darkness. Luther has caught John's meaning, 'There is

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<sup>157</sup> Godet; 259.

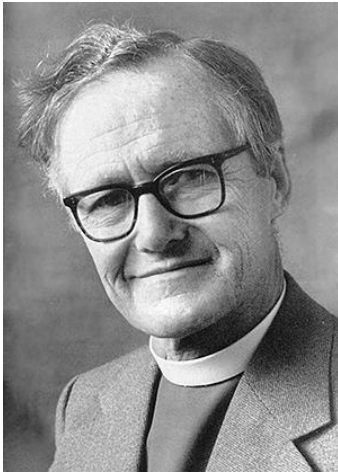
<sup>158</sup> Lenski; 52.

<sup>159</sup> *Idem*.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part I

only one light that lighteth all men, and no man comes into the world who can possibly be illumined by any other light.’<sup>160</sup>

The distinction John has already made, and will immediately make, between belief and unbelief, between coming to the Light and remaining in darkness, assures us that no



**Lesslie Newbigin (1909-98)**

doctrine can be biblical or Christian that (1) finds an inner light within man that somehow responds to this true Light, or (2) that the Logos-Light will eventually enlighten all men unto salvation. Lesslie Newbigin highlights that the coming of this Light into the world not only brings light to some, but also judgment to those who remain in darkness. Newbigin writes, “There is a long tradition which understands this enlightenment as the inner illumination of reason and conscience, thus bringing it into line with Stoic ideas about the *Logos* as something which indwells every human being, a seed within each one capable of developing into full understanding. More strangely still, it has often been assumed that this inner illumination is to be identified with the various religions of mankind. Nothing in the text suggests this...The presupposition of all this is that in fact Jesus is ‘the true light’ and therefore the light which shines on every human being. There is no other light. There are not different varieties of light. There is only one light, namely, that which enables us to see things as they really are. And things really are as they are shown to be in the light of Jesus, because he is the word through whom they all came to be.”<sup>161</sup>

*He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him.*  
**(1:10)**

The staccato rhythm of this verse is quite powerful, combining the Hebraistic connection *and* with three distinct mentions of *the world*. John could have used pronouns in the second and third clauses (as any English grammar and writing teacher would instruct her students to do), but he wants to emphasize the relationship of the world to the Light, who is the Logos through whom the world came into being. Thus the reminder, *and the*

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<sup>160</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>161</sup> Newbigin, Lesslie *The Light Has Come* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; 1982); 6.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part I

*world was made through Him, leading to the incredible result, and the world did not know Him.* It is as if the author wants this thought to sink into our minds: *this was the world that He made...and this is the world that did not know Him when He came into it.* Godet writes, “The Logos when coming into the world did not arrive there as a stranger. By profound and intimate relations with humanity, He had prepared for His advent here on earth, and seemed to be assured of a favorable reception.”<sup>162</sup> Proverbs 8 speaks of the personification of Wisdom, widely interpreted to refer to the Christ, as not only being the divine partner in Creation, but as being delighted in that work and especially in Man.

*Then I was beside Him as a master craftsman;  
And I was daily His delight, rejoicing always before Him,  
Rejoicing in His inhabited world, and my delight was with the sons of men.*

(Proverbs 8:30-31)

There is no room for the Deist’s ‘divine clockmaker’ in Scripture, the God who created the universe and then wound it up with nature’s laws and left it to run on its own. No, God is not only the Creator of all, He delights in the works of His hands and takes especial joy in His crowning creation, Man.

The world was His work, bearing the stamp of His intelligence, as the master-piece bears the stamp of the genius of the artist who has conceived and executed it; He was filling it with His invisible presence, and especially with the moral light with which He was enlightening the human soul...and behold, when He appears, this world created and enlightened by Him did not recognize Him!<sup>163</sup>

This is, again, no less than what the Apostle Paul states in Romans 1, cited above, “...although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened.” Within the world, however, there was a nation and a people who should not only recognize Him – *know* Him – but should rejoice exceedingly at His coming. A nation that was uniquely His own possession from among all the nations of the world: Israel. But John moves from the inexplicable to the tragic: the world that came into being through Him failed to know Him; the nation that He chose from among all the nations, refused to receive Him.

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<sup>162</sup> Godet; 259.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*; 260.

*He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him.*

**(1:11)**

There can be no doubt that John speaks here of Israel, a nation and people uniquely God's own possession out of His sovereign ownership of the whole of Creation. In the Mishnah is recorded, "Five possessions had the Holy One, blessed be He, in this world, and these are they: Torah, one possession; Heaven and earth, one possession; Abraham, one possession; **Israel, one possession**; the Sanctuary, one possession."<sup>164</sup> Israel is spoken of in Isaiah as a people whom God formed for Himself (43:20), elsewhere as a 'holy nation' and a 'peculiar people.' Just before the first announcement of the Ten Commandments, God speaks to Israel,

*And Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain, saying, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the children of Israel: 'You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then **you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people**; for all the earth is Mine. And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words which you shall speak to the children of Israel."* (Exodus 19:3-6)

Israel was chosen by God not because it was the most populous or powerful nation, for it was not either, but rather because of his love for Israel, a love unmerited and itself sovereign.

*For you are a holy people to the LORD your God; the LORD your **God has chosen you to be a people for Himself**, a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth. The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were the least of all peoples; but because the LORD loves you, and because He would keep the oath which He swore to your fathers, the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.*

(Deuteronomy 7:6-8)

From a redemptive historical perspective, the selection of Israel from among the nations was also, so to speak, as an incubator for the eventually coming of Messiah, the Seed of Abraham and of Woman. "Before coming to the earth, the Logos prepared for Himself there a dwelling-place which peculiarly belonged to Him, and which should have

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<sup>164</sup> Mishnah Aboth vi.10; <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/tractate-avot-chapter-6>; accessed 18March2020.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part I

served Him as a door of entrance to the rest of the world.”<sup>165</sup> Of course, it was prophesied long before the advent of the Logos in the flesh that this nation and this people would reject the Promised One, and it is of that rejection that John speaks in verse 11. The wider circle of the whole world *did not know* the Logos-Light when He came; the smaller subset of His own peculiar people *did not receive Him*. “When speaking of ‘the world’ and considering the Logos its Creator, this is tragic enough. But within this greater tragic circle lies a lesser one in which the tragedy is much greater.”<sup>166</sup> Hoskyns adds, “The world failed to recognize Him; but the tenants of the Household of God openly rejected Him.”<sup>167</sup>

The intensity of verses 10 & 11 concentrates from the larger group to the smaller, but at the same time from the lesser sin to the greater. The world, as Paul would charge later, *worships in ignorance*; but Israel *sinned with knowledge*. Newbigin does well in summarizing John’s thought in these verses.

This light shines in the darkness. He came into the world, and John was the herald of his coming. The world – not the created universe (‘all things’) of verse 3, but the whole human race which ought to have recognized the light by which alone it lives – did not acknowledge him. And the darkness becomes still deeper when we remember that although all the world belongs to him who is its creator, yet one people had been chosen from among all the peoples to be his special possession and one place on earth had been chosen to be his special heritage. The one true light came not merely ‘into the world,’ but to this place and this people specially chosen to be his own home and his own people. In this place and by this people he was rejected.<sup>168</sup>

Rejection will be a major theme in the Gospel of John – rejection of the Christ by the Jews, and rejection of the King of the Jews by the Romans. Even within the inner circle of Christ’s disciples there will be the betrayal of Judas Iscariot, the scattering of the others, and the denial of Jesus by Peter. Thus again the Prologue is a foretaste of what is to come in the body of the Gospel. But as Newbigin comments, “Rejection is not the last word....Darkness cannot have the last word because it is God who has said ‘Let there be light’ and has put the darkness behind him.”<sup>169</sup> The first twelve chapters of the Fourth Gospel will, to be sure, deal almost entirely with the rejection of Christ by ‘His own.’ But

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<sup>165</sup> Godet; 261.

<sup>166</sup> Lenski; 55.

<sup>167</sup> Hoskyns; 146.

<sup>168</sup> Newbigin; 6-7.

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chapters 13 – 17 will focus the reader’s attention upon Jesus largely alone with those who have come to the Light, those from His own people who did not reject Him but *received* Him.

The appearance of the Word, therefore, did not succeed in scattering the darkness of mankind and overcoming the resistance of Israel as a nation. Nevertheless, His mission could not fail. At the moment when the people which He had prepared for Himself turns away from Him, a family of believers, divinely begotten, appears and clusters about Him.<sup>170</sup>

*But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.* (1:12-13)

This is one of the more difficult passages in the Gospel of John, and undoubtedly the most difficult passage in the Prologue. Uncertainty regarding the meaning of the negations in verse 13 has led to many, many speculations; no two commentators seem to agree completely on what John is saying. Even the word translated ‘right’ in verse 12 seems to open the door for a cooperative effort between the sinner and God – that the sinner can ‘exercise’ that right, or not. As with all difficult passages in Scripture, this one must not be interpreted in a vacuum. Rather it must be explicated along with the rest of John’s Gospel and the rest of Scripture. We therefore begin our investigation into these two difficult verses with a summary statement, “Rebirth is the operation of the grace of God, not a reward for obedience to the law.”<sup>171</sup>

Verse 12 begins with *osoi* – ‘whoever.’ This is an individuating word, indicating members of a larger set viewed as individual components. It would be a mistake to limit the larger set to that of verse 11 – Israel – and fail to see that Israel herself was merely a subgroup of the entire set – ‘the world.’ John will forestall the temptation to limit the salvation wrought by Christ to Israel in the famous 3:16, “*For God so loved the world...*” It is true that the first believers were primarily called from those who were God’s peculiar people, Israel; but even within the Gospel account there will be Gentiles who come seeking Jesus (12:20-21). The universality of the message of John’s Gospel – which is the Gospel of Jesus Christ – is found not in the salvation of each and every human being on earth, but

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<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*; 7.

<sup>170</sup> Godet; 263.

<sup>171</sup> Hoskyns; 146.



## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part I

the extension of salvation from the Jewish nation out to the whole world. From Israel, and from the world, there will be ‘whoever receives’ Him until the end of the age.

To these, John says, Christ gave ‘the right’ to become children of God. As an interesting side note, here, John never speaks of believers as the *sons* of God but rather as the *children* of God. The designation ‘sons’ is reserved solely for Jesus. This, of course, is not to say that believers are not sons (and daughters) of God, but they are so by adoption, whereas Jesus is the Son of God by eternal generation. The term that John uses for believers - *teknoi*, ‘children’ - lays emphasis on regeneration, or, as Jesus Himself will put it to Nicodemus in chapter 3, being ‘born again.’

But the challenge in this verse is the word translated ‘right.’ The word is *exousia* and it is most commonly translated ‘authority.’ The ‘Authorized Version’ translates the word as ‘power,’ and this is both an improper and a misleading translation. The Greek word signifying ‘power’ or ‘ability’ is *dunamis*, not *exousia*, and the latter word contains nothing with regard to ability, only to authority. Vincent comments in his dictionary, “Here, therefore, *exousia* is not merely *possibility* or *ability*, but legitimate *right* derived from a competent source – The Word.”<sup>172</sup>

The concept behind this word has been hotly debated, and various soteriological schools will adhere to one interpretation or another. For instance, the Arminian will focus on the ‘ability’ as well as the ‘right,’ and state that the sinner who comes to an awareness of Christ must then exercise this ability and believe so that he may be saved. The Catholic, on the other hand, recognizes that the ‘right’ spoken of here is not a quality inherent within man but is itself a gift of God. The one so gifted, however, must then *cooperate* with God in order to finally attain salvation. Even an Anglican ministry such as Westcott shows signs of this syncretism.

As far as we can conceive of this right to become children, it lies in the potential union with the Son, whereby those who receive Him are enable to realise their divine fellowship. They are adopted – placed, if we may so speak, in the position of sons – so that they may become children...The initial act is at once a ‘begetting’ and a ‘reception.’ The growth follows from the use of the gift. The issue is complete on the part of God, but man must bring it to pass by continuous exertion.<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> Vincent; 49.

<sup>173</sup> Westcott; 9.

Westcott introduces adoption into a passage that does not speak of adoption, and in order to serve a particular soteriology, emphasizes the ‘power’ of the ‘right,’ rather than the reality of it. *Exousia* is authority granted by one who has the power to do so; that authority is proportional to the power that grants it. The granting power is the Logos, and there can be no higher power for His is absolute power. Thus the authority granted is itself *absolute* authority. This fact is confirmed by the use of the aorist verb tense *He gave* – meaning a full and finished act in time, not a progressive and evolving process. Still, the use of the word *exousia* is something other than John simply saying that the Logos-Light *made* them to be children of God. And this is what has generated so much debate.

Luthardt offers what may be the best and most biblical interpretation of the phrase and the verse. He conjectures that, as John was speaking of the Logos-Light coming into the world, the emphasis is upon that which happened to a sinner when he or she believed in Jesus, but before the death and resurrection of the Lord, and particularly before the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost.

The thing in hand is only the title to sonship, not sonship itself, because the evangelist thought of the period of Christ’s earthly life, and of belief during that. This, however, did not yet transfer men to the sonship. Sonship had the Spirit of the new birth as its presupposition, and the imparting of this only came after that period of the earthly life of Christ.<sup>174</sup>

This is an interesting theory and, if correct, would also shed light on the age-old question concerning how Old Testament saints were saved. The ‘title’ of which Luthardt speaks is the *exousia* of John 1:12. It is issued by Almighty God in the person of the Logos, Jesus Christ; it cannot be invalidated though it must be confirmed. Pentecost confirmed that title, registered it, as it were, in the deed book. This interpretation is somewhat unique, but it has the distinct benefit of maintaining the sole power of salvation to God and not sharing that power with man. It also emphasizes the gift nature of the *exousia* along with the firm knowledge that the One who granted this authority, this right, is Himself of unimpeachable character. The right, once given, will not be taken away. Finally, Luthardt’s interpretation partially answers a nagging question concerning the

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part I

transitional period between the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ and the promised ministry of the Holy Spirit, and goes far to explain why – in this very Gospel -Jesus will maintain that it was better for His disciples that He depart, so that He might send the Holy Spirit.

Be that as it may, John then goes on in verse 13 to put the matter of human ability in salvation beyond all argument. Again, the phrasing is unusual and probably impossible to fully and firmly define. Three negations are given concerning the birth of believers as children of God : *not of bloods, neither of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man*. These are followed by the one important positive statement – the statement that must shine forth clearly from the more opaque negations – *but from God they are born*. The verb *born*, or *generated*, is, in fact, the last word of the sentence so that in English the verse looks like this in a literal rendering,

*...who - not from bloods, nor from the will of the flesh, nor from the will of man,  
but from God - were born*

There is no consensus among commentators as to the meaning of the individual negations, and it would be tedious to recite the various theories as each seems quite forced. Again, the emphasis is on the fact that this new birth comes from God – the positive – and not from natural human generation. “All three expressions therefore name that which is natural according to its different relations. God stands in contrast to all three relations. The birth from God is of such a kind. Then, too, the life which is given with this will be different from the life which begins with the other birth.”<sup>175</sup> It will be a truly *new* birth, “*Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.*”<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> Luthardt; 274.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid*; 281.

<sup>176</sup> II Corinthians 5: