

John 1:1-18 (NRSV)
Embedded Outline

Prologue: The Dawn of God's New Covenant, Heralded by John the Baptist (1:1-18)

A. Logos as Creator God (1-5)

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being 4 in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

B. The Prophetic Ministry of John the Baptist Affirmed (6-8)

6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. 8 He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

C. Warning Against Rejecting the Logos (9-11)

9 The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. 10 He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. 11 He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.

D. Becoming God's New Covenant People (12-13)

12 But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, 13 who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

E. The New Tabernacle of God (14-17)

14 And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. 15 (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'")

F. The New Covenant through Jesus (16-17)

16 From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. 17 The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

G. The Full Disclosure of God in Jesus (18)

18 No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

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Introduction

The focus of John 1:1-18 centers on the dawn of the new covenant as inaugurated by Jesus Christ in the flesh, hinting at the significant implications of God's fulfilled covenant activity among humanity, heralded by John the Baptist. Such a central thrust would have not only provided a tightly argued overture for the longer Gospel narrative that was to follow, but established the author's original audience as they took up membership in their newly formed church communities. The question should be asked, why did John utilize symbolic and culturally nuanced language to communicate with his audience? And more, how would John's prologue have bolstered the faith of those who were shaken by the political and religious tumult in the late first century? From leading readers into confessions of Christ's divinity to outlining the covenant fulfillment of Jesus' incarnation, John readies a masterpiece that invites readers into the stunning story of God's apocalyptic work in Christ.

Historical Context

In interpreting John's prologue, arguably penned in the later part of the 1st century CE, it is important to remember that the author's primary audience likely endured the Jewish War (66-70 CE), almost certainly survived or had at least been touched by the fall of Jerusalem under the Roman Empire (70 CE), and suffered a sizable rejection from their various synagogues between 80-85 CE (John 9:22; 10:31-33; 16:2).¹ These monumental happenings, entailing the death of kin and friend

¹ D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John; The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 83-6.

alike as well as banishment from spiritual community, would have been devastating enough as individual events, but joined together as experiences endured within a few short years of one another would have proven arduous, if not unbearable. Thus, John's mention of anything having to do with the divinity and preexistence of Jesus, both threats to the monotheistic tenets of Judaism and imperial assertions of Roman rule under Caesar, would have been supremely encouraging, if not deeply emotional as the evangelist validated the very beliefs which had cost his readers so dearly.²

Literary Context

John's prologue as a whole was meant, in one fashion or another, to embark on the weighty task of summarizing the resulting twenty chapters in just eighteen verses,³ or as D.A. Carson calls it, to be the "foyer" to the rest of John's Gospel.⁴ The nature of its composition, therefore, necessitates a level of sharp condensing and use of provocative language which, in turn, provides an understanding of, as one example, the limited use of the word *logos* (λόγος), as it goes unused in the rest of the Gospel. It also opens the door for plenty of speculation as to possible insertions of texts after John's initial composition, such as the references to John the Baptist (vv. 6-8, 15),⁵ though each reference fits seamlessly into the prologue's greater *telos*.

Form, Structure, Movement

Because of its highly poetic structure, as well as the dynamic use of imagery, John's prologue

² For a wonderful exposition on the themes of the early church under the Roman Empire, see N.T. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press: 2005), 69; 106; 136.

³ C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1955, 1978), 151.

⁴ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 111.

⁵ Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 150-1.

is often thought to have been a hymn cultivated for the early church.⁶ With its tightly woven arguments combined with frequent parallelism, the text would make for verses easily set to music. As the pericope is bursting with theological and Christological claims, it would make sense for Christians of that and any era to sing these verses as points of declaration. Whether or not such a premise can be validated is most likely lost to time, yet the passage's use of epic language and sweeping prose stands on its own as a masterpiece. It opens by presenting the divinity and preexistence of the *Logos*, makes interjections for the Messiah's forerunner, John the Baptist, runs breathlessly to a full-out exposition on the personhood and mission of Jesus, and then climaxes with full disclosure of God the Son.

Detailed Analysis

The opening segment 1:1-5 bursts forth with strong allusions to the creation narrative in Genesis, intrinsically connecting Jesus, though not yet mentioned by name, both to all things which come into "being" and as "light in darkness" personified. The evangelist also uses the word *Logos* to describe this pre-existent being, a move which served both the Gentile Christians and the Hellenistic Jews, but does not preclude a certain depth of meaning for the author's Jewish audience as well. Playing to Hellenistic and Stoic concepts of the word, Donald Guthrie argues that the author surely exploits *logos*' roots in Heraclitus' concept of a 'unifying principle,' Plato's postulating of 'god's first-born son' (*prōtogenus huios*) and its 'mediatorial function' of the divine to the human, and Philo of Alexandria's imagining of the creation of the world.⁷ As such, I agree with Eduard Keller's assertions that it would have been impossible for the Hellenistic Jews and

⁶ Dorothy Ann Lee, "John," *The New Interpreter's Bible: One Volume Commentary*, ed. Beverly Roberts Gaventa, David Petersen (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010), 712-3.

⁷ Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1981), 320-3.

believing Gentiles to be immune to the influence of Platonic theory, by way of Philo especially.⁸ This, therefore, means that the evangelist's use of the word *Logos*, a term brimming with cultural expectancy, assisted John's attempt to quickly bring his readers forward into a rich understanding of Jesus.

The firm connection with Jewish thought is less definitive though still plausible specifically in light of Judaism's Wisdom tradition. Paul Livermore points out the significance of the personification of Wisdom in Proverbs 8, the arresting distinction of Wisdom's embodiment-in-person versus embodiment-in-Torah in Ben Sira 24, and Wisdom seen as 'Spirit' in The Wisdom of Solomon 7.⁹ And it is precisely with Wisdom's presence 'in the beginning' that the author makes an appeal to Genesis' creation narrative, both building a connection with the *Logos*' being 'with God' before all things, and with the imagery of 'light.' Dorothy Ann Lee notes that John never distinguishes between figurative and literal 'light' either, as the *Logos* plays a supreme role in both natural creation and the illumination of the human soul.¹⁰ This resonates well with Richard B. Hays' analysis that such an instance "both echoes and transforms Genesis 1:1."¹¹ In the end, those discovering John's gospel from a Jewish perspective find meaningful traces of their past embedded into Wisdom personified, the *Logos* 'with God.'

In 1:6-8, the author (or possibly redactor, as Guthrie proposes¹²) introduces a secondary

⁸ Eduard Zeller, *Outlines of the History of Greek Philosophy*, 13th ed., rev. Dr. Wilhelm Nestle, trans. L.R. Palmer (London: Kegan Paul, 1931), 77.

⁹ Paul Livermore, "Lecture on John 1:1," *Northeastern Seminary*, (Rochester, November 17, 2016, 6:00 pm). See also Guthrie, *New Testament Theology*, 324.

¹⁰ Dorothy Ann Lee, "John," 712-3.

¹¹ Richard B. Hays, *Reading Backwards: Figural Christology and the Fourfold Gospel Witness* (Waco, Baylor University Press: 2014), 78.

¹² Guthrie, *New Testament Theology*, 712.

character, that of John the Baptist. Some scholars have argued that the lack of a direct Old Testament citation for the prophet, as in Matthew's quote of Isaiah 40:3 (Matt. 3:3), was an attempt to squelch an emphasis on John the Baptist over and above the person of Jesus.¹³ But I contend this could hardly be the case as the baptizer is prominently featured not once but twice in two key sections of the prologue; if the evangelist was trying to minimize John the Baptist's role, he failed by way of frequency. Instead, I lean toward Hay's assertions that John was far more of an artist seeking to create lasting, imaginative impressions, not a scribe relying on his proclivity for exact Old Testament citations.¹⁴ The author's inclusion of John the Baptist, then, would have constituted an important validation of the baptizer's prophetic ministry, thus ensuring the audience's confidence in: (1) the historical figure; (2) his proclamations; (3) the importance of baptism itself; and (4) an appreciation for God's use of humankind as a portent for the incarnation.

The next section, 1:9-11, bears striking thematic resemblance to Israel's rejection of YHWH when God said to Samuel, "For they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them" (1 Sam. 8:6-7; NRSV). The Psalter provides another telling overtone: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone" (Ps. 118:22; NRSV). Additionally, the text echoes The Book of Enoch where the author laments, "Wisdom went forth to dwell among the sons of men, but she obtained not a habitation" (1 Enoch 42:2).¹⁵ John's rejection themes, elegantly appealing to Israel's history as well as the Wisdom literature, serve as a warning to John's readers against rejecting the *Logos*, and, by inference, a blessing on those who accept him, as

¹³ *New Bible Commentary, 21st Century Edition*, ed. G.J. Wenham, J.A. Motyer, D.A. Carson, R.T. France (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 1026.

¹⁴ Hays, *Reading Backwards*, 78.

¹⁵ Pheme Perkins, "The Gospel According to John," *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, Roland E. Murphy (Englewood Cliffs, Prentice Hall: 1990), 951.

illustrated in the next segment.

In 1:12-13, the author asserts the *Logos*' inherent ability to make those who believe in him "children of God" by being "born of God." The text relies on well-known ideas synonymous with the terms of the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 12:1-3), thus signaling to readers that such divine activity is nothing short of God's promises fulfilled, the ultimate display of faithfulness to his covenant people.¹⁶ Where the fulfillment of the former covenant was initially left to "blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man" (1:13), an implicit ruling against its effectiveness, the interjection of the *Logos* brings about the covenant promise by rebirth through faith in him. It's presumable, then, that John implies that sons and daughters of God, his main audience, stand to inherit the benefits of being heirs of God, that is, to be a blessing to all nations (Gen. 1:3); such an inference would have moved the Johannine community forward in their missional activity as it was central to the meta-narrative of new creation and the Abrahamic Covenant fulfilled.

John builds toward his pending climax by using 1:14-17 as the preeminent point of heaven invading earth. Of particular note is John's phrase "lived among us" which makes use of the word 'tabernacled.'¹⁷ This turns the audience's attention to God's dwelling among the people in the wilderness, pointing to God's instructions to Moses when he said, "Have them make me a sanctuary, so that I may dwell among them" (Exo. 25:8; NRSV). This former mobile tent of skin, utilized for meeting with the Children of Israel in the dessert, now emerges from John the Baptist's dessert proclamations in the form of Jesus (1:15). The evangelist's use of the word 'flesh,' however, is not merely meant to assert a physical presence, though it does do just that, but, more

¹⁶ *New Bible Commentary, 21st Century Edition*, ed. G.J. Wenham, J.A. Motyer, D.A. Carson, R.T. France (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVaristy Press, 1994), 1026.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

importantly, in connotes the broader sense that Jesus immersed himself into “the full flow of human affairs.”¹⁸ The completed image, then, would have carried immense weight within the Johannine community as they arrive upon the 2nd century Spirit-filled church scene, seeing that, as N.T. Wright proposed, “the Spirit’s indwelling in those who belong to the Messiah constitutes in a quite new way the eschatological return of YHWH to Zion.”¹⁹ This allows for the reader to be thoroughly assured that God, in full force, has burst forth upon the whole of humanity.

In section 1:16-17, the audience is presented with an explicit reference to Moses and the giving of the Law. But instead of assuming any condemnation under the Law, PHEME PERKINS proposes that John’s use of “grace upon grace” (1:16) suggests that an ‘older grace’ was still a type of grace found under the former covenant.²⁰ In this, John commends his Jewish audience for any former allegiance to Judaism, and likewise esteems Moses (where, as Lee notes, some might have been inclined to demote him in light of Jesus),²¹ while simultaneously advancing readers into deeper revelation on the subject of grace revealed in the form of a new covenant; the author immediately asserts that a superior “grace and truth” (1:17), arguably some of the Law’s original *telos*, was supremely revealed in the now conspicuously-named person of Jesus Christ. Combined with the implications of the previous section, John’s readers would have not only seen ‘grace and truth’ as being non-negotiable elements of their new inheritance in Christ, but missional requirements for expression within their pagan environments.

The stunning climax of John’s prologue, 1:18, begins with an indirect assertion that Jesus is

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Wright, *Paul*, 46.

²⁰ PHEME PERKINS, *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 951-2.

²¹ Dorothy Ann Lee, “John,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, 713.

even greater than Moses (though never diminishing Moses' role), in that Jesus could see God, something for which Moses was not even allowed (Ex. 33:18-23).²² The evangelist points all the way back to the opening lines of the text, proclaiming that Jesus Christ, as both the Son and the *Logos* who was with God, is supremely "close to the Father's heart" (1:18). John's audience surely found tremendous assurance that 'God the Son,' now fully revealed, who discloses 'God the Father,' is none other than he who was "in the beginning with God" and has broken into the story of humanity "in the flesh." The prologue crescendos with the greatest apocalyptic news of all time: before, humanity could not see God, but here, today, we have seen him, and we can know him in the person of Jesus Christ. For the Johannine community, there could be no greater news in an epoch of uncertainty.

Synthesis/Conclusion

In trying to provide a comprehensive narrative from which to base the rest of his Gospel (as well as to assure the early church community of Jesus' identity and activity), the author asserts the divinity of Christ by citing Jesus' participation in the Genesis' creation narrative (1:1-5), Jesus' ability to include all people into God's family as children thus fulfilling the Abrahamic blessing (1:12-13), and Jesus being the perfection of the Law given through Moses which is now a new covenant (1:16-17). The evangelist also asserts the embodiment of the divine Son in which he not only took on the form of flesh but possessed an intrinsic ability to conquer the 'darkness' found in the human condition.²³ John's readers would have deduced that John the Baptist was the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy (1:6-9), both legitimizing John the Baptist's ministry in their eyes and placing Jesus as the centerpiece of the Old Testament's prophetic and apocalyptic claims.

²² *New Bible Commentary*, 1027.

²³ Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 158-9.

Reflection

Just as John's first-century audience was undoubtedly grappling with knowing and following Jesus of Nazareth, as well as wrestling with their role in being God's new version of humanity on earth, the church, my own congregation today needs to see God the Son breaking into our humanness and clarifying our missional activities as members of his church.

Hidden within the assertions of Jesus' preexistence, his participation in creation, his fulfillment of Abrahamic promise, and his creation of new covenant, is the adamant reminder of God's faithfulness to humanity especially in the midst of 'darkness'—doubt, fear, worry, and duress. His light shines in our darkness, and our darkness does not overcome him. And since he made all things, he desires to, in turn, make all things new, such is his divine power as expressed in a new covenant.

This activity-asserted, therefore, not only serves to transform our lives as individuals and congregations, but requires that we, as new creation, see to the transformative outworking of God's ministry in society. As inheritors of a new covenant, one that is intended to bring blessing to the nations, we, the church, are positioned to bring the Good News of the Gospel to those lost in darkness, those in need of being made new in Christ. This is not a day in which Caesar is Lord, but in which Jesus is.²⁴ Here and now, as in the evangelist's day, the Logos has become flesh and dwells in us for the present and future glory of his name. Whether principalities or powers, political agendas or pagan forces, nothing will glory in his presence nor stand against his unstoppable pursuit of new creation.

²⁴ Wright, *Paul*, 69. Wright delves into the implications of "Jesus is Lord, Caesar is not." See also Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said* (Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans: 1997), 39-62; and Scot McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan: 2011), Kindle loc 800.