

Christ the Word: John 1:1–18

Prologue: The Doctrine of the Word

The function of a prologue, in antiquity as today, was to define the plan and character of the whole work, and it is generally agreed that, whatever the provenance of vv. 1–18, they find a commentary in the miracles and discourses of the Gospel. Verse 3 prefigures the living water of chapters 4 and 7, vv. 4–5 the symbolic light of 8:12, 9:5 and 11:9, and v. 13 the new birth of chapter 3. The most debated term is *logos* – ‘word, discourse or reason’ – which is otherwise attested as a Christological title only at 1 John 5:7 and Rev 19:13. Functioning as the counterpart to ‘son of God’ in the prefaces to Mark and Matthew, it intimates no doubt that Christ is the bearer of the words of eternal life, as at 6:68, the consummation of the ‘word of God’ as at 10:35 (cf. Loisy 1903: 98 and

Suggitt 1984). Since, however, *logos* also signifies a text, it may be surmised that an understanding of the word when used of Christ will be the key to the author's purpose in his book.

Apologists of the early Church distinguished the primordial state of the Logos as God's 'reason' from his emanation as creative 'speech'. Their Gnostic adversaries personified both Life and Logos as hypostases in an evolving Godhead. Origen maintains against both that the appellations *logos*, life and light are accorded to a single being, the second person or hypostasis of the Trinity, in his character as pilot of the *logikoi*, or beings equipped with reason (*Commentary* 1.24ff). He added that this reason is the true sense of the Scriptures, every word of which, when rightly construed, bears witness to the one truth. Mystics of his time affirmed that God had framed the world from a cosmic alphabet (*Commentary* 1.34/31); neglected by the orthodox, this conceit survives in the Saxon *Heliand*, where the Evangelists intone the secret runes of the Creator-Word (1992: 3–6) and in the imagination of Celtic poets:

In the beginning was the word, the word
That from the solid bases of the light
Abstracted all the letters of the void
(D. Thomas 1952: 20)

To Catholics of the fourth century Psalm 44:2 implied that Christ was an utterance from the heart of God (Socrates, *Church History* 1.6; cf. *Gospel of Truth* 23–4 in J. A. Robinson 1988: 43). Hence a Greek hymn declares him 'Of the Father's heart begotten' (*NEH* 33), while for the alchemist Jacob Boehme Christ is at once the eternal Word and the heart of God (1945: 248). In the West, the Vulgate's choice of *verbum* (word) in preference to *sermo* (speech) as equivalent to *logos* reinforced the association with the written letter. For Kathleen Raine it makes the whole world a text:

Word that utters the world that turns the wind . . .
Word traced in water of lakes and light on water . . .
Grammar of five-fold rose and six-fold lily
(1956: 76)

Erasmus rightly protests that *sermo* better represents the Greek original (1535: 218–19), and Calvin, who concurs with him, decides that the Word is wisdom in relation to God himself, and in relation to men the expression of his purpose (1959: 7). Hutcheson, perceiving that in Jewish thought the Torah itself is not a static instrument, asserts that Christ himself is 'the promise made

and often repeated in the Old Testament' (1972: 10), though he does not go so far as to argue, with Servetus, that the ministry of the Word begins with Moses (Calvin 1959: 8). Karl Barth, the lodestar of Reformed theology in the twentieth century, states that the Word has a triple form as revelation, Scripture and preaching: in every case 'God's Word means that God speaks' (1975: 132, 136, 139).

Modern commentators have been at pains to trace the history of a term which was evidently not employed by Christ with reference to himself. The most familiar trail leads back to Philo of Alexandria (died AD c.50), whose Logos is at times the eternal plan in the mind of God, and sometimes his agent, priest or Son (Dodd 1953a: 67–9). This is not Platonism, for Platonists did not confer the name 'Logos' on the second god or Demiurge to whom they ascribed the origin of the world. Nor is it Stoicism, for the Stoic Logos, though a deity, is not a transcendent being but a subtle element permeating the body of the world. Dodd (1953a: 264–5) and Ashton (1991: 292–329) rightly point to the allegorical figure of Wisdom in Solomonic literature, who is almost always speaking (Prov 8:22–30; Wis 7:25–6) and is once equated with the Law (Sir 24:18). Other Jewish precedents include the personification of the word or Memra in rabbinic teaching (G. F. Moore 1922) and an encomium on the deeds of the Word in a paraphrase or Targum on the opening chapter of Genesis (Malina and Rohrbaugh 1998: 36–9). Perhaps Wesley concludes too hastily from this 'Chaldee paraphrase', together with Psalm 33:6, that the term was not borrowed from Philo (*MCNT* at I.1), but he was right to add 'or any heathen writer'. The concept of the Logos is indigenous both to Jewish and to Christian thought, because it serves to reconcile God's changelessness with his acts in space in time: 'For in the divine Idea this Eternity is compleat & the Word / is a making many more' (Smart 1954: 93).

The Jewish antecedents thus corroborate the dictum of Matthew Henry that Christ is called the Word because he reveals the Father's mind (1991: 1915, cols 2–3). René Girard contrasts the universality of biblical discourse with the divisive rationality of Greek 'logic', which excludes what it cannot vanquish (1978: 484–9); notwithstanding 1:29 the Johannine Word is not the sacrificial beast or scapegoat of the man-made creeds, for these are merely pretexts for social violence, countermanded by his voluntary submission to the Cross. In Jürgen Moltmann's theology of hope the Creator knits himself to his suffering creation, in alogical but unanswerable defiance of the philosophies which purport to demonstrate the impassibility of God (1967). For Bultmann, on the other hand, the Word is itself divisive, as it forces an inexorable choice between flesh and spirit on the natural man who has hitherto acquiesced in his captivity to a universe defined by the natural sciences and the interests of the crowd. Revelation is the subject of the prologue and the leitmotif of the Gospel (1925),

but, because it countermands all human law, it is inconsistent with the Old Testament, and the otiose repetitions of the prologue are best explained if we postulate a Gnostic source (1957: 1ff). In one of the first of many replies, Lamarche (1964) contends that the message of the first nine verses, couched in the vocabulary of the Gentiles, is recapitulated in Semitic terms in vv. 14–18, as though to foreshadow the reconciliation of the blind Jew with the more discerning but untutored Greek.

The Word as Creator

1:1a. Cf. Gen 1:1, Matt 1:1. Although this verse was used as an incantation in medieval exorcisms (Kieckhefer 1998: 251), Goethe's *Faust*, protesting that a word is a feeble instrument, wished to substitute 'in the beginning was the Deed' (1962: 40). Even had he been ignorant of Heb 4:12, *Faust's* master Jacob Boehme should have taught him that the Word of the Father's edict is accompanied by a 'sharpness', the Holy Spirit, which ensures its execution (1656: 121). Eckhart opines that the Word is said to be **in**, not 'from' **the beginning**, because it does not leave the Father in issuing from him (1958: 241).

1:1b. Abbott takes the preposition **with** in the second clause to mean that the Logos is 'devoted to' the Father, rather than conversant with him, as in Marcan usage (1906: 275–6). To Eckhart it connotes parity of honour because it signifies neither 'above' nor 'below' (1958: 224).

1:1c. In the NEB the third clause is rendered, 'What God was, the Word was'. Eckhart understands the verb to mean that Christ has been and so always is born (1958: 246). The word *theos* is not preceded in this clause by the definite article, and comparison with the second clause, where *theos* with the article clearly designates God the Father, suggests that the omission has a purpose. Origen surmised that the Son is God by derivation from the Father, who is *autotheos*, the Godhead in its fulness (*Commentary* 2.2); opponents of 'metaphysical' Christologies may appeal to Ex 7:1 in the Septuagint, where God commissions Moses with the promise 'I shall make thee god to Pharaoh', using *theos* again without the article. Natalis Alexander replies, however, that since the Word does not receive the title god by any discrete commission, it must belong to him eternally and by nature (1840: 22).

1:2–4a. Orthodoxy considers Christ a 'person' from the beginning: 'He with his *Word* commanded *All* to be, / And *All* obey'd him, for that *Word* was he' (Cowley, *Davideis* 1.365–6 in 1881: 48). An older doctrine taught that the eternal reason of God became his Son when it issued forth for the creation (Athenagoras, *Embassy* 10). Origen takes a middle way: although the Logos

existed from the beginning, he was not light and life before the creation of humanity (*Commentary* 2.19/13). If, however, Logos in Wis 18 is no more than the personified plan of God (Ashton 1994: 22), can we be sure that the Logos of the prologue is a 'he' and not an 'it' at any point before verse 14? The verb *egeneto* is commonly rendered 'were made', but if we take it to mean 'were done', it appears that providence, rather than creation, is the subject of this verse (Ashton 1994: 19, citing IQS 11.11 in Vermes 1975: 93). Nor is it certain whether the verse should be punctuated: **without him not one thing has come into being. What has come into being in him was life;** or: **without him not one thing has come into being that has come into being. In him was life.** Because the second reading forestalls the inference that the Spirit belongs to the category of things that have been made or come into being, it was favoured by Catholics after the Nicene Council of 325; before that date all witnesses adopt the former reading (Metzger 1975: 196), though it allowed the Gnostic Heracleon to argue that the world is dead and hence not among the things that were made by Christ (Origen, *Commentary* 2.8). Nonnus adopts both readings, and his paraphrase at canto 1.9 suggests parallels with the philosopher-poets Cleanthes and Lucretius (2002: 86, 113). Medieval dualists, or Cathars, read 'without him was made the nothing', meaning by this the evil which they attributed to a power opposed to God (Nelli 1968: 193).

1:4b. Israel is styled a 'light to the Gentiles' at Isa 42:6 (cf. Luke 2:32); the mission of Christ implies that she has failed. Cyril of Alexandria expounds this verse in harmony with Acts 17:28, where being and motion are concomitants of life (1. 75, Pusey). This metaphor, in his view, is the nearest approach that human speech can make to the eternal nature of Christ; Theodore, however, held that the verse described him only in his economic function as illuminator of the human mind (Wiles 1960: 72). The phrase **light of all people** is wanting in the biblical personifications of wisdom, as in the parallel cited by Hanson (1991: 31) from a Jewish tragedy on the Exodus (Ezekiel, *Exagoge* 99 at 1983: 56). The author may be playing upon the fact that Greek possesses two words *phos*, one meaning 'light', the other 'man'. The man of light is, as Bultmann notes, a protagonist of both Mandaean and Manichaean myths, but the thanksgiving hymns of the Qumran sect, to which Lindars appeals, are older (1972: 87). The association of light with life in the theosophical writings called the *Hermetica* may betoken knowledge either of this Gospel or of its Jewish antecedents (Dodd 1935: 99–144); Sanday finds the 'ultimate source' in Ps 36:9 (1905: 195).

1:5. This verse, more congruent with 2 Cor 4:6 than with Gen 1:3, was quoted by the Gnostic Basilides (fl. 130) as a gloss upon his own parable in which Christ is the seed sown by the ineffable Father (Hippolytus, *Refutation* 7.10/22). Basilides was by repute a Zoroastrian, but Lindars finds a similar

'dualism' at Qumran (1972: 88). It is not clear whether the darkness has failed to capture or to comprehend the light. The first reading might be construed as an allusion to the pursuit of Jesus by the benighted Jews (Origen, *Commentary* 1.26), or to his emergence from the darkness of the tomb (Romanus, *Cantica* 27.5.3 at 1963: 203). In the allegorical cosmogony of the Manichees, the lord of darkness falls in love with the kingdom of light, and in trying to take possession of it ensnares the Primal Man (cf. Bultmann 1957: 26–8). In the alchemical scheme of Jacob Boehme, desire produces an involuntary contraction of the will, until the tension between centripetal and centrifugal forces erupts as the light of freedom, which 'governs within the darkness and is not comprehended by it' (1945: 92).

Interlude: The Baptist

The Tübingen scholars of the nineteenth century surmised that the Evangelist was engaged in a polemic against disciples of the Baptist, whose intrusion at v. 6 catches the reader by surprise (see Baldensperger 1898). This case was reinforced by the discovery of the Mandaeans, who traced their dualistic religion to the teachings of the Baptist. Rudolf Bultmann, noting many affinities between the Johannine prologue and the teachings of the early Christian sects that we call Gnostic, surmised that in these verses a Mandaean hymn has been clumsily adulterated by a Christian editor in the interests of his own creed (1925 and 1957: 5). Dodd in reply objected that the Mandaeans possessed no independent records of the Baptist, and that none of their writings antedates the ninth century (1953a: 115–30). After 1945, the gradual publication of a library of heterodox and esoteric texts from the Egyptian site of Nag Hammadi persuaded many scholars that if there had ever been such a thing as Gnosticism, its roots were in Judaism or at least in Jewish literature. Bultmann held that Primal Man, the archetype and redeemer of the spiritual elect in Gnostic myth, was also the literary ancestor of the Johannine Messiah; no variant of the myth, however, has yet been found to antedate John's prologue. Parallels to the imagery and vocabulary of the prologue are adduced from the Dead Sea Scrolls by modern commentators; Scobie, on the other hand, takes the absence of a heavenly redeemer in these documents as proof that the Mandaean myth did not originate in a Jewish cult (1964: 29–30).

Certainly the Evangelist subordinates John to the Christian Messiah, and to this end he denies us even the meagre information about the former that is vouchsafed in other Gospels. Why, then, are we allowed to mistake the Baptist temporarily for the subject of the eulogy? Ridderbos replies (1966) that he

marks the crisis which is entailed by the appearance of the light. Lamarche (1964) sees John as the hinge between the two halves of the prologue – the light of the world to the Gentiles, the representative of Israel to the Jews, but superseded in both capacities by Christ. Brodie (1993) divides the prologue into three phases: first the creation, then the Old Covenant (represented by the Baptist), and finally the New Covenant, inaugurated by the Word made flesh. John's origins, the meaning of his baptism, and the date of his death are topics not even raised, let alone resolved, by the subsequent narrative. We are merely given to know that before his imprisonment the Baptist yielded his own disciples to the true Messiah.

John Proclaims the Unseen Light

1:6–8. As at Matt 11:12–13 the appearance of the Baptist marks an epoch in the work of providence, bringing with it a style reminiscent (to Borgen) of historical narrative in the Old Testament (1972: 120). Augustine, likening John to Moses, adds that Christ was so truly man that he needed a great man as his herald (*Homily* 2.2–5). All rivalry between Christians and the Baptist's sect is laid to rest in the mystery play *John the Baptist*, where these words are spoken by the man himself (Happé 1975: 382).

1:9. Cf. 6:14. The mind, according to Origen (*Commentary* 1.24–6), has its own objects of vision, and the true light of the world is to be contrasted with the radiance that beguiles our outward senses. Eckhart takes the light of every man to be the essence or ideal logos implanted by the One Logos (1958: 227); other contemplatives of the Middle Ages held that only the mystic truly beholds this light (Richard of St Victor 1979: 192, 240). The sentence can be read to mean that the light **was coming into the world**, or else that it is **in the world and coming** to everyone (Borgen 1972: 123), or even, as Cyril of Alexandria supposed, that it lightens **everyone who comes into the world** (1.110 Pusey). Baur construes the verse as a rebuttal of Jewish pretensions to the peculiar favour of God (1878: 154).

1:10. Käsemann (1969) refers vv. 5–13 to the incarnate Christ, but Chrysostom points out that he appeared to the patriarchs, unknown to the world, before the nativity (*Homily* 8.1). Barrett points out that in Bible usage to **know** is to enjoy communion rather than to exercise 'observation and objectivity', as in the Greek of classical authors (1955: 136).

1:11. Cf. Mark 6:1–6, which also fails to name 'his own country'. Here again the Logos assumes the functions that a Jewish writing might ascribe to Wisdom or the Spirit. In the first clause the neuter form *ta idia* means 'his own prop-

erty', while in the second the masculine *hoi idioi* means 'his own people'. The Latin version, *sui non receperunt*, is said to have been felicitously misconstrued as 'swine did not receive him' (Chillingworth 1841: 342–3). The verse is as much a warning to petrified Christians as a pretext for invective against the Jews in the vein of Natalis Alexander (1840: 69–70).

Sons of God

1:12. The language may be intended to discriminate between Christ as Son of God and the 'children' (*tekna*) who enter the kingdom of God as his disciples. The Johannine writer addresses his congregation by a similar term at 1 John 5:21. Calvin, to refute the 'Papist' heresy of free will, translates the word *exousia* (generally rendered **power**) to mean "distinction" (1959: 17).

1:13. The reading **who were born** is better attested than the alternative, **who was born**, which would refer to Christ and therefore be a testimony to the Virgin Birth. Metzger notes that a number of ancient witnesses preferred the latter reading (1975: 198), and Henry More relates that it was usurped by the seventeenth-century fanatic David George (1662: 25).

1:14a. Augustine found the substance of the prologue in the writings of the Platonists, until he reached this verse (*Confessions* 7.9). Orthodox dogmatics, following Cyril of Alexandria, insists that the flesh which Christ assumes at 1:14 is the whole of human nature, and the Nicene Creed says 'he became man', not 'he became a man' – though no Church Father went so far as to hold with Swedenborg that 'God is man and man God' in the light of the Incarnation (1933: 134–5). Many theologians today doubt that any one man can be a compendium of humanity; and certainly the exclamation of Hopkins – 'I am all at once what Christ is, since he was what I am' (1970: 106) – is a more literal, if more egocentric, paraphrase of vv. 13–14 than the maxim of Athanasius, 'God became man that man might become God' (*On the Incarnation* 54.3).

1:14b. The Greek verb *eskênôsen* (**lived**, or properly 'tabernacled') was already applied to Wisdom at Wis 9:7, Sir 24:8, etc., and alludes, in both the Johannine and the Solomonic passages, to Yahweh's sojourn among his wandering people on their way to the promised land. Anna Wickham's couplet, 'God is woven in the mesh / Of my eternal flesh' (1984: 348), combines this verse with its predecessor. Erasmus notes that some took the words **among us** to mean 'within a body', others to mean 'in the company of men' (1535: 225).

1:14c. This is the first claim by the author to be a witness of the events that he describes. Knowing that his contemporaries referred it to the Transfiguration (of which John, son of Zebedee, was a witness), Erasmus replies that the

glory of Christ consists in his life and teaching (1535: 225). Yet 12:28–33 supports Chrysostom's opinion that the glory is exhibited in his suffering – and in ours (*Homily* 12.3). As Temple observes (1961: 13), this glory was hidden from Caiaphas and Pilate. The word *monogenês* can signify 'only-begotten' or merely 'unique', and even after the Council of Nicaea in 325 had defined it to mean 'from the essence (*ousia*) of the Father', it was permissible to render it into Latin as *unicus* rather than *unigenitus* (Kelly 1972: 172–81). See v. 18.

1:15. Harvey demonstrates (1976: 23) that the verb *krazein* is associated in classical Greek with forensic testimony, and compares the phrase 'crying mysteries' (*mustêria kraugês*) in Ignatius, *Ephesians* 18. Origen (*Commentary* 2.35/29) enumerates six occasions on which John the Baptist witnesses to the mission and authority of Christ, in the following verses: 1:15–18, 1:19–23, 1:26, 1:29ff, 1:32ff, 1:35ff.

1:16. The word *pleroma* can designate the fulness of the Godhead (Col 2:9), of the ages (Gal 4:4), and of Christ in the Church (Eph 2:23). Among Valentinians of the second century, the emptiness of God becomes a *pleroma* for the purpose of creation, and Christ becomes its first-fruits on the Cross (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.1–2). Calvin, though uncertain whether the **all** who receive include the 'godly under the law', accepts in his exegesis of the following lines that God appeared in Christ to the patriarchs (1959: 23–5). Elsley takes **grace upon grace** to mean that the Gospel is given in place of the Law of Moses (1844: 411), while to Henry it signifies the communication of 'gracious habits for gracious acts' (1991: 1918, col. 3).

1:17. Is there an allusion to Ex 34:6, which follows the encounter of God and Moses? Hanson (1976–7) gives an affirmative reply, against the objection of De la Potterie (1975) that grace and revelation are not synonymous in Exodus. To Henry these verses illustrate the sufficiency of the Gospel and the bounty of Christ in sending it abroad (1991: 1919, cols 1–2).

1:18a. The author of 1 John 4:12 deduces that we must love our neighbour to prove our love of God. The Muslim *Gospel of Barnabas* quotes a cognate saying to prove that Christ, being visible, was not divine (1907: 63). The Fathers flung this verse at the Anthropomorphites, who reputedly held that God had a human shape before the Nativity. Their answer was that the Godhead may be partially visible to us, as at Ex 33:23, Matt 18:10 and 1 Cor 13:12 (Epiphanius, *Panarion* 70.8). Lodowick Muggleton held that the Father is visible to one who 'is of God' (Underwood 1999: 256); the Cathars, by contrast (see v. 30), inferred that the God who revealed himself to Israel was not the father of Christ (*Two Principles* 56 in Nelli 1968: 151). The Neminians, who worshipped Nemo (no one) because he had seen God, are most probably fictitious. More naturally construed, this verse explains the prohibition of image-worship in the Decalogue. Greek iconoclasm and Reformation logic deny that the human

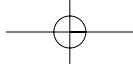
form of Christ can represent his deity; 'iconodules' reply that the man is not a discrete accomplice of the Word, but the Word enfleshed (Meyendorff 1975: 61–90).

1:18b. Only (-begotten) god or son? Fennema (1985), observing that the consensus of ancient witnesses favours *theos*, takes the phrase to mean 'the only-begotten, who is God'. Metzger (1975: 198) explains the alternative (*huios*, 'son') as the result of assimilation to John 3:16 and 18. Since **god** is the reading uniformly accepted by heretical authors, Burgon (1998: 96–7) concludes that **son** supplanted it only in texts designed to prove the orthodox claim that the Son on earth is the same eternal being as the Word. In the Septuagint the word *monogenês* is used of Wisdom (Wis 7:22); Temple (1961: 16) contrasts the 'aesthetic satisfaction' that it expressed when Plato applied it to the generated cosmos at *Timaeus* 92c.

1:18c. The assertion in the *Gospel of Truth* that the bosom is the Holy Spirit rests on the author's previous identification of the Spirit with Wisdom (24 in J. A. Robinson 1988: 43). Prudentius says explicitly that he who was once the wisdom of the Father has now descended from his lips (*Cathemerinon* 11.17–20). Yet Spenser meant one thing when he wrote of Heavenly Love that 'Out of the bosome of eternall blisse . . . He downe descended' (1970: 594), and another when he wrote of Heavenly Beauty, 'There in his bosome *Sapience* doth sit' (1970: 598).

Epilogue: The Silencing of the Word

Ignatius of Antioch caught only half the spirit of the Fourth Gospel when he spoke of the incarnate Christ as the Word who proceeds from silence (*Magnesian* 8.3). Origen seems to have understood it better when he argued that the flesh of the Incarnation has been retranslated into the word of Scripture (*Against Celsus* 4.15). But what becomes of the Logos if we lose our faith in Scripture? In the twentieth century, D. H. Lawrence's poem 'St John' is a sustained lampoon on the doctrine of the Logos (1972: 219–21), while Eliot's Gerontion, musing on 'the Word within a word, unable to speak a word', hints that the text has silenced Christ (1974: 39). No written sign is identical with the object that it signifies; but if our only access to the signified is through the signifier, what do we know except the sign? In Schoenberg's oratorio *Moses und Aaron*, the words are given to one man and the idea to another; while for Robert Graves the spoken word is the antonym of 'God' (1986: 220). Parodying 1:14, the clergyman R. S. Thomas complains that 'flesh is too heavy to wear' the God whose 'poetry dries on the rocks' (1993: 228, 224); and an elegant couplet by



another Anglican – ‘*Christ is the language which we speak to God / And also God, so that we speak in truth*’ (Sisson 1990: 67) – is marooned by the italics and the antiquated metre. For a world that has abandoned both the versification and the Christ of Milton, Hughes invents the anti-hero Crow, who, seeing Adam and Eve asleep and God distracted, ‘bit the Word, God’s only Son, / Into two writhing halves’ (1972: 19).

