

Lesson 2: John's Gospel – Prologue Part I

Review: Themes/Items to Watch For

1. Cosmic, “Spiritual/Mystical” Gospel: Jesus is Sent from God, Bringing the Heavenly Down, and then Returns
2. The Heavenly is Salvation as Revelation of the Truth (7s – Signs, I Am statements, etc.)
3. Truth→Cosmic Trial – and Reversal: Jesus Vindicated, All Others Convicted
4. Salvation involves Individual Belief in Jesus the Truth and a Relationship of Love & Friendship with Jesus and One's Fellow Disciples
5. This Coming Down is the Descent of a Glory that Ultimately Includes the Cross
6. In this, Christ IS the Life of all AS the Way to God, Truth, Glory, and Love
7. The Life, Glory, and Love Jesus thus shares with Us is grounded in Life, Glory, and Love He Shares with the Father and the Spirit from Eternity (i.e., in the Triune Life itself)

Review: Structure of the Gospel

- **Revelation-Drama** (Jn 1-12)
 - **Prologue:** Jesus, the Word Made Flesh (Jn 1:1-18)
 - **Act 1:** Messiah's Signs and Rejection by “His Own” (Jn 1:12-12:50) – Sign-Drama
- **Love-Drama** (Jn 13-21)
 - **Act 2:** The Messiah's Passion and Preparation of “His Own” (Jn 13:1-20:31) – the Cross-and-Resurrection Drama
 - **Epilogue:** Final Resurrection Appearance and Commissioning of Peter and John

Prologue: Opening Notes (Weinrich, 83)

- Like the Overture to an Opera – not itself one narrative but highlights of what's ahead
- Augustine, *Confessions* – Prologue is a summary of the history of the divine Word
- But not just a summary→a “hermeneutic” – a key to reading and interpreting the Gospel as a whole (PC: back to music – it's the “key signature”)
- Also a *confession* – v. 14 “we have seen his glory”
- Three clear sections: 1-5, 6-13, 14-18
 - Same time: 1-5 and 14-18 have certain parallels we will tease out.
 - Key general point: this uses a common ancient rhetorical device that creates units and reinforces key points → “inclusio”: “bookends” or “parentheses” with similar content

Read the Prologue, Jn 1:1-18

John 1:1-5 – let's start sort of verse by verse, though we'll pull in some of vv.14-18 as we go

V.1-2 go together [RE-READ] – what key features jump out?

- In the beginning (Genesis) – Creation retold
- The Word – what key theme? [Revelation]
 - Links to, but differs from, Word in Creation – that Word was DOING things in the world. This Word is BEING something...what?
- With and Was God – what and how?

1. The Nature of God

- “WITH God, WAS God” – what do we learn here about the nature of God?
 - Something, someone DISTINCT (with) but also IDENTICAL (was). Intimation of Trinity. In fact, major verse for Athanasius and the Cappadocians against the Arians at Nicaea (325 AD): “God from God, Light from Light”
 - BUT, is it a full-fledged doctrine of the Trinity? (No – raises the necessity of figuring this out, but does yet tell us much that is needed, including how this relates to the ONENESS of God, and, that Father, Son, Spirit are definitive for the nature and naming of God)
- Where in the Prologue DO we get Father-Son angle? V. 14.
 - Effect of delay? FIRST focus is on Second Person *as Revelation proceeding outward from God*. This is the first theme John wants to focus on.
 - Remember the named purpose of the Gospel – that we might BELIEVE (Jn 20:31). Revelation is the pivotal necessity to know and trust.
- What does each pair, Father-Son and God-Word, add to our understanding of God?
 - Father-Son:
 - God's core nature IS relational and loving. John 1:18 – “at the father's side” (KJV a little closer to the Greek, “in the bosom of the Father” – John is invoking an image of intimacy, contact, closeness); so too, 2x in 1 John we will see him say simply: “God IS love”)
 - But it's also a particular kind of love – familial
 - Moreover, it is a familial love in which one is head (Father)
 - What does this tell us about “hierarchy”? Is it intrinsically bad? Does it intrinsically diminish the one in the lower position?

- NO. We know Jesus’s way is the way of humility. But what we glimpse already here in the Prologue, and will see further on throughout John: there is a hierarchy and humility already within the Godhead itself, and this in no way seems to diminish the full stature of the Son *as* God. Relatedly, perhaps this then helps us to see that when we are called to the “low position,” *that is not intrinsically a devaluation; to the contrary, it is an ELEVATION into the form and image the Son has ETERNALLY had.* Not just a result of His Cross and servant-life *here*.
- How might seeing this love to be the very nature of God affect the way you perceive and approach Him?
 - Perceive as a being who is fundamentally caring and fundamentally relational → admiration for who He is in Himself; raises an expectation of likely loving action and loving openness toward us (which rest of narrative confirms) → willing to trust, pray, obey
- God-Word – God’s *nature* is to want to reveal himself. It is in his nature to make himself known; he wants this with and for us
 - Even here, a hint of the relational – “with” God. In Greek, different prepositions you can use for different kinds of “with.” This one, “pros”: *turned toward*.

2. The Nature of the “Word” (Logos)

- What exactly is this Word – what is “Logos”?
 - Speech and address
 - But also, a thought – logos → logic, reason
 - Ancients: thought and speech intimately linked. Think in terms given by speech and language. Vice versa, before you speak, you first think what you’re going to say. Can even think of and maybe experience this as a conversation you have in your head with yourself before you have it outwardly.
 - Church Fathers on down, Logos suggests something similar going on in the Trinity. Here’s Luther’s version, from a sermon on John (Sermo 1, AE 22:9-10): “God, too, from all eternity has a Word, a speech, a thought, or a conversation with Himself in His divine heart, unknown to angels and men. This is called His Word. From eternity, He was within God’s paternal heart, and through Him God resolved to

create heaven and earth. But no man was aware of this until the Word became flesh and proclaimed this to us.”

- So Word – at once reason and speech, God’s inward mind and heart and his outward revelation, ultimately to us
- Is there a common Greco-Roman background and/or relevance to the Logos?
 - A big point of contention in scholarship on John.
 - Ostensible similarities: Platonism and Stoicism were two big schools of thought of the day that also had “popular forms” – in other words, there were academic philosophers who taught these things, but the basic beliefs were also in the water. And one of those beliefs, of both Platonism AND Stoicism, was that there WAS an Eternal Logos through which the world was created.
 - However, as others have more recently pointed out, there are also clear OT precursors that John seems to be using. Moreover, John himself repeatedly states in both his Gospels and his letters that his main “source” was the “eyewitness” of the apostles to Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection as such; it is also clear, as we will see in a moment, that this eyewitness causes John to give new meaning even to what seems to be inherited from the Old Testament and the Judaism of his day.
 - All this leads many contemporary scholars to mostly “dismiss” the Greco-Roman.
 - Right as SOURCE – Greek philosophy is not DEFINING anything here
 - But don’t lose – seems likely, almost certain, that John is also using his description of the Logos as *a missionary appeal* to the cultural understanding of the day – even if, like Paul in Acts 17, he appeals to the ideas almost entirely just to *correct* them.
 - Greco-Roman “logos” – an impersonal force. Stoicism – actually in the world *as* the root framework of nature; Platonism – stays “up” in God as his “mind” (nous). But in neither is a person; and certainly, in neither is it THIS person, the Son of God who becomes incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth.
 - John as major correction – your generic “power” or idea is not the truth about God, nor is it life, nor can it save you. Rather, only in the concrete, personal logos who IS Jesus Christ do you encounter the True God, life, and salvation.
 - This missionary force already was grasped by one of the very first Apologists (defenders of the faith), Justin Martyr, who lived and wrote in the early 100s. Don’t lose this missionary intent!

- Jewish background sources – and John’s modification of them
 - The Word of the Lord: Close OT precursors to Prologue
 - Word linked to Creation: Parallels to Genesis; Ps 33:6 translates the action descriptions of Gn 1 into the phraseology of Jn 1 – “By the word of the Lord the heavens were made.”
 - The Word of the Lord as That Which Descends
 - Many passages: “the Word of the Lord CAME” to Abraham, Moses, the Prophets, etc.
 - Isaiah 55:10-11 ““For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, ¹¹so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.” – Fathers: anticipates the descent and return of the Word in accomplishing salvation forecast in Prologue as a whole!
 - Everything Ps 119 says the Word Does, Jesus Does in John
 - Is Truth
 - Is the Way
 - Is the Source of Life
 - Is the Giver of Light
 - Calls to Keep its/His Commandments
 - Calls to Love for its/His Commandments
 - Teaches the Commandments
 - Is Permanent and Forever
 - Jewish Targums – (what’s a Targum?)
 - First language of God’s people, in which most of the Old Testament is written? [Hebrew]
 - After the Babylonian Exile, many Israelites began speaking the language of their occupiers. Anyone know what it was? [Aramaic – region of Aram]
 - Chunks of Daniel and Ezra are actually written in Aramaic
 - By the 1st Century AD, most of OT translated into Aramaic. These Aramaic texts are called Targums. Importantly, they were often read in the synagogue of Jesus’s day – as was the Septuagint, a Greek translation of the

OT from around 300 BC. So the Targums (and Septuagint [LXX]) would have been heard by John.

- In fact, when John and the writers of the NT quote the OT, most often they quote the Septuagint [LXX] – though we can also at times see them quoting from Hebrew or possibly some other version.
- To the present verses: how do the Targums inform our understanding of “the Word”?
 - As you know, because of the second commandment not to misuse the Name of the Lord, Jews standardly did not pronounce the proper Name of the Lord – which is what? [Yahweh, YHWH]
 - Instead they would substitute other things for it; first and foremost, Adonai, the word for Lord. That continues – in our translations, when you see LORD in all caps, that is denoting a substitution for YHWH
 - But in the Targums, they used a different substitute: “Word” or “Word of the Lord.” One key effect: by 1st century, Word already being seen as personal and divine, i.e. as God. Not quite trinity – rather just another way of naming God. But still, sets up an expectation and meaning for Word as divine.
 - Furthermore, some Targumic translations seem to anticipate the specific content of John 1. E.g.:
 - Targums of Isa 44, 45, 48 and Jer 27 all add “I the Lord, *by my Word*, created all things”
 - In a Targum of Genesis 17, God’s promise to Abraham is worded, “I will be to them *in my Word* a savior God.”
 - John – drawing out connections into definitive statement of the Word as God as the Second Person of the Trinity
- “Wisdom”
 - Would seem a natural connection because Christ is elsewhere directly called “the Wisdom of God” (e.g. 1 Cor 1). Furthermore, a personified Wisdom in the OT, in books from time between Testaments, and in the Rabbinical Tradition. But complicated.
 - Prov 8:12, 22-24, 29b-31 “I, wisdom, dwell with prudence, and I find knowledge and discretion...²² “The Lord possessed me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old.²³ Ages ago I was set up, at the

first, before the beginning of the earth. ²⁴When there were no depths I was brought forth, when there were no springs abounding with water... ^{29b} when he marked out the foundations of the earth, ³⁰ then I was beside him, like a master workman, and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, ³¹ rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the children of man.”

- What similarities to John 1 do you hear?
 - BEFORE Creation – pre-existence
 - MASTER WORKMAN – all things created through Wisdom
- Relatedly, more direct connections to John in Intertestamental literature:
 - Wisdom of Solomon 7:25, 9:11 & Sirach 14:27 – Glory is a key attribute of Wisdom, just as glory is attrib of Christ in Jn 1:14-18
 - Wisdom of Solomon 7:22 says that the spirit of wisdom is “monogeneis” – i.e., “only-begotten,” the same word used of Christ in Jn 1:14.
 - Baruch 3:36-37: “(God) found the whole way to knowledge, and gave her to his servant Jacob and to Israel, whom he loved. Afterward she appeared on earth and lived with humankind.” = Word as Scripture to Israel and then Incarnation?
- Leads to the Rabbinical
 - Drawing all these claims together, the Rabbis began to look at “Torah” (often translated law but really, Scripture as such, pre-eminently in the Books of Moses), as this Personal reality and Wisdom through whom all things ultimately are made. So, Word as a “Person” has some precedent pre-John.
- But, there are some differences and tensions on all these levels
 - One question: all the OT and Intertestamental references refer to Wisdom as SHE.
 - Is this necessarily a problem? As the early Fathers already saw and stated: God as Spirit is neither male nor female; yet both male and female *image* something of Who God is (Gen 1), and God and Jesus specifically are not shy of using female images to represent God – e.g. Isa 66:13, God describes himself as a mother nursing Israel as his child; in Mt 23:37, Jesus says he is

a “mother hen” who wanted to gather humanity as his chicks, but we weren’t willing.

- Bigger issue: is Wisdom fully GOD, or a CREATURE – which could not be the Eternal Son of Jn 1?
 - Prv 8
 - Before creation – leans to God
 - But God “possessed me,” and God “set me up” – are those the same thing as being personally “begotten,” God from God?
 - LXX
 - Translates the verb in v.24 AS “begotten”!
 - But the verb in v.21 translated “possessed” in our version gets translated “created”—seeming to make Wisdom a creature not the Creator – and thus not the Son of Jn 1.
 - “Created” also appears in other intertestamental passages on Wisdom like Sirach 24:4-8.
 - Evaluation
 - There’s a particular verb used in Hebrew every time God creates (bara), and that is NOT the verb used here in Prv 8:21. So maybe the LXX just blew the translation.
 - But interestingly, the verb that IS used there, qanah, is the same verb that Eve uses in Genesis 4:1 for “I have brought forth a man” (Cain – ie from qanah!).
 - Intriguingly, here the meaning is closer to begetting than it is to “creating” proper, i.e. the fundamental constitution of a creature AS creature.
 - Still, there’s ambiguity. And certainly the rabbis, once they tie Wisdom to Scripture, naturally saw it as a CREATURE, not the Creator.
 - So how IS John relating to all this? Two options:
 - 1) Interestingly, neither John’s Gospel nor his letters ever use the word Wisdom. So maybe he is not appealing to the Wisdom tradition at all but just the Word elements in the OT

- 2) He is actually trying to sort out the ambiguity in the Wisdom tradition and make clear: God’s Wisdom is the Second Person of the Trinity and therefore the Creator, NOT a secondary “creature”
- Takeaways:
 - There are a number of precursors in both the Greco-Roman world and Israelite Scripture and Tradition.
 - John is clearly taking up the heart of the Old Testament tradition of the Word as God from God, sharpening and clarifying it and *attaching it specifically to the Incarnate Word*.
 - He is then also using this DEFINITIVE revelation to *connect with* but also *correct* other similar but ultimately flawed ideas in the culture of both the Jews and the wider world.
- Tells us much about Christ Himself. But what might John’s overall approach tell us about the way we should approach our mission in conversation with others?
 - A model
 - We too should draw on and address the questions and frameworks of others. Enables us to put the Christian message in terms and questions they understand and care about.
 - At the same time, we must be careful not to let the ideas and convictions and questions of the world, *which are loaded into their definitions of the terms*, creep in to our understanding and definition. The truth is to be found in Christ in a way that *shatters and revises* every other idea or practice, even when it seems to be somewhat similar on the surface.
 - In particular, there is no generic “word” or “wisdom” that is to be found in ideas humanity develops simply from its own perceptions.
 - Rather, as from Abraham through the prophets to Christ, the Truth comes *from above to below*, displacing all our partial and ultimately malformed ideas with a truth we could never “deduce” or imagine for ourselves, from our own resources or observations.