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AN EXPOSITORY STUDY OF ST JOHN'S GOSPEL

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I. PROLOGUE (John 1: 1-18)

The Prologue to the Fourth Gospel sets forth the theme of the whole book. The Evangelist insists throughout his work that in the life and work of Jesus of Nazareth the glory of God was uniquely and perfectly revealed. The whole of this Gospel may in one sense be looked upon as a commentary on the words of Paul in 2 Cor. 4:6, 'Seeing it is God, that said, Light shall shine out of darkness, who shined in our hearts, to give the light of the

knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.' The same parallel between the work of God in the old creation and His work in the new creation is stressed in the Johannine Prologue.

Much of the Prologue is cast in poetical form. This fact has led some to regard it as an early Christian hymn (the inspired composition, no doubt, of the Evangelist himself), into which two prose sections have been dovetailed—verses 6–8, and 15–16, which record the beginning of the witness of John the Baptist. The dovetailing of the beginning of his prose narrative into his pre-fatory hymn accords well with one of the prime objects of the evangelist, who repeatedly emphasizes that the revelation of the glory of God on earth is no timeless, mystical experience, but something which took place at a particular period in world history. Unlike the Emperor Julian the Apostate, who said of the pagan mysteries of Attis, 'These things never happened, and yet they are eternally true', John would say of the supreme mystery of the Christian faith, 'These things really happened once for all, and therefore they are eternally true.'

Ch. I, v. 1—*In the beginning was the Word*, The Gospel of John begins with the same words as the book of Genesis, 'In the beginning.' These words in Genesis introduce the story of the old creation; in John they introduce the story of the new creation. In both these works of creation the Agent is the Word of God. The Greek word *logos*, here translated 'Word', was a familiar term in Greek philosophical schools, where it was used to denote the divine principle of reason or order immanent in the universe, the principle which imposes form upon the material world and constitutes the rational soul in man. It is not Greek philosophy, however, but Hebrew revelation, that forms the background of John's use of the term.* In the O.T. 'the Word of God' denotes God in action, especially in creation, revelation and redemption.

* But, because the term *logos* was already firmly established in Greek philosophical thought, John's use of it in his Prologue made it a bridge by which people brought up in Greek philosophy, like Justin Martyr in the second century, could find the way into Christianity. This, however, has nothing directly to do with the exposition of John's Gospel; and moreover, as the quotation from Augustine's *Confessions* given below in the note on v. 14 shows, even the most enlightened forms of the *logos* doctrine in Greek philosophy fell far short of John's unfolding of the mystery of the Divine Word.

As regards creation, the repeated words of Gen. 1, 'and God said', illustrate this aspect of the Word of God. So the Psalmist sums it up in Ps. 33:6, 9:

By the word of the Lord were the heavens made;
And all the host of them by the breath of his mouth. . .
For he spake, and it was done;
He commanded, and it stood fast.

As regards revelation, it is from the Word of God that law and prophecy alike originate. 'The word is very nigh unto thee', says Moses of the law which he communicated to Israel, 'in thy mouth, and in thy heart, that thou mayest do it' (Deut. 30:14). (It is instructive to observe how Paul in Rom. 10:6 ff. applies this statement to the 'word of faith' proclaimed in the Gospel.) And how frequently in the prophetic books do we find a divine oracle introduced by the expression 'The word of the Lord came unto me' (e.g. Jer. 1:4)!

As regards redemption, the Word of God is pictured as a messenger carrying God's salvation to those in urgent need of it. When men through their folly and sin find themselves at the gates of death, says another Psalm:

Then they cry unto the Lord in their trouble,
And he saveth them out of their distresses.
He sendeth his word, and healeth them,
And delivereth them from their destructions (Ps. 107: 19 f.).

How this conception was developed in the period between the Testaments may be seen from a passage in the book of Wisdom, where the Word of God is portrayed as the executor of His judgment upon Egypt on the Passover night, for the accomplishment of Israel's redemption:

For while peaceful silence enwrapped all things,
And night in her own swiftness was in mid course,
Thine all-powerful word leaped from heaven out of the royal throne,
A stern warrior, into the midst of the doomed land (*Wisdom* 18: 14 f.).

As, therefore, the Word of God is represented in the O.T. as Agent in creation, revelation and redemption, so when John wishes to display God in action in a new creation, a new revelation, and a new redemption, he does so by means of this same concept, the Word of God. It is noteworthy that the term *logos* in this sense is found only in the Prologue and not in the body of the Gospel, but exactly the same teaching as is conveyed in the Prologue by

the expression *logos*, is given, in elaborated form, in the rest of the Gospel in other terms. Many of the forms in which the Word of God came to men in O.T. times—the bread from heaven, the water from the rock, and so forth—are taken up by John in the later chapters of his Gospel and shown to point forward to the Incarnate Word and to find their fulfilment in Him.

The Word of God, then, existed 'in the beginning'. 'In the beginning', according to Gen. 1:1, something came into existence which had not existed before: 'God created the heaven and the earth.' But when the material universe first began to be, the Word of God already existed. No matter how far back we may try to push our imagination, it can never reach a time when the Divine Word was not. This opening clause of the Gospel declares the eternity of the Word.

And the Word was with God,—The second clause of the Gospel declares the personality of the Divine Word. The Greek preposition *pros*, here rendered 'with', has been thought by many to convey some special thought of mutual fellowship between the Word and God. The uniqueness of this divine fellowship, however, springs rather from the fact that it is fellowship between God and His Word than from the actual preposition used here. True, it is not a classical usage of *pros*, but it can be paralleled within the N.T. itself in the most common and everyday sense. When the Nazarenes in Mark 6:3 say of Jesus, 'and are not his sisters here with us?' the Greek word translated 'with' is *pros*.

'God' in the N.T. sometimes denotes the complete Godhead, sometimes God the Father, sometimes one of the other Persons of the Holy Trinity. In this clause the reference plainly is to God the Father. The terms 'Word' and 'God' are correlative to one another as are the terms 'Son' and 'Father'.

And the Word was God.—If the first clause declares the eternity of the Word and the second clause the distinct personality of the Word in unbroken fellowship with the Father, the third clause declares the deity of the Word. In this clause the emphatic word is 'God'. This is indicated by the inverted order of the words in Greek: *kai theos ēn ho logos*. This statement can by no means be rendered 'and God was the Word': that would in any case be untrue. In such a clause, according to an elementary rule of Greek grammar, the definite article (*ho*) marks out the subject (*logos*); the noun without

the article (*theos*) is the complement or predicate. Had the definite article *ho* been added before *theos* as well as before *logos*, the meaning would have been that the Word is the entire Godhead. The rendering 'the Word was a God' has a polytheistic implication, and ignores the Greek grammatical rule just referred to, in addition to the further point that in such an inverted construction the complement or object thus placed at the beginning of a clause tends in any case to lack the article. A statement that 'the Word was a God' would more probably appear in Greek as *ho logos en theos tis* or *ho logos en heis ton theon*. The translation 'the Word was divine' weakens the force of the statement; had the Evangelist intended to say that, he would have used the adjective *theios* and not the substantive *theos*. It is difficult to think of a more satisfactory rendering than that with which we are most familiar, 'the Word was God'. The fact that 'God' in the second clause is the Father, whereas in this third clause 'God' is predicated of the Word, causes no ambiguity, for the sense of the term in either clause is self-evident when the whole sentence is read as one.

V. 2.—*The same was in the beginning with God.*—This second sentence appears to repeat the essence of the first two clauses of the former sentence, but there is more than bare repetition here. This Divine Word of whom I have spoken, the Evangelist intends to say, is the One who was with God in the beginning; and when he says that, he refers back to another O.T. passage. Here, no doubt, is an allusion to the passage in Prov. 8:22 ff. which describes the Divine Wisdom as being in God's company as a master workman when He created the world:

The Lord possessed me in the beginning of his way,
 Before his works of old.
 I was set up from everlasting, from the beginning,
 Or ever the earth was. . .

The language of this passage in Proverbs has influenced some of the language of John's Prologue, as well as that of some other Christological places in the N.T., such as 1 Cor. 2:6 ff.; Col. 1:15 ff.; Heb. 1:1 ff.; Rev. 3:14. In this second verse John firmly identifies the O.T. characterizations of the Word of God and the Wisdom of God, and shows how both became incarnate in Jesus Christ.

(To be continued)