

THE PROLOGUE OF ST. JOHN'S GOSPEL.¹

I.—THE DESIGN OF THE PROLOGUE.

IN order to form a just estimate of the general character of this Gospel we must first obtain a solution of the question,—What was the Evangelist's idea in placing this Introduction at the head of his narrative? Was his design speculative or practical?

The Prologue is summed up in three thoughts, which also determine its plan. They may be expressed in three words: THE LOGOS; the Logos *disowned*; the Logos *acknowledged* and regained. We may therefore say,—the Word, Unbelief, Faith. These three fundamental ideas correspond with the three principal aspects of the history as it is related in this Gospel: the revelation of the Logos, the unbelief of the Jewish people, the faith of the Disciples. Thus understood, the arrangement of this portion becomes clear. Between the first part (verses 1–5) and the second (verses 6–11) verse five forms a transition, as verses twelve and thirteen connect the second part

¹ A Dissertation from F. Godet's admirable "Commentary on the Gospel of St. John," translated by the Rev. E. W. Shalders, B.A.

To scholars, Godet needs no "letter of commendation." But I may be permitted, perhaps, to advise the unlearned readers of THE EXPOSITOR to read this brief series of papers, and read them again, till they have mastered them. They will find them well within their reach, if they do not suffer themselves to be repelled by the use of a few technical terms, or by a discussion of theories with which they are not familiar. And I believe that, if they will be at the pains of mastering this Dissertation on St. John's Prologue, they will possess themselves of a very clear, true, and helpful interpretation of the sublimest passage, but also one of the most profound and difficult passages, in the whole range of the New Testament Scriptures.—ED.

with the third (verses 12-18), which, in its turn, is in close connection with the first. The relation of this last part to the first, indicated by the similarity of thought and expression which may be observed between verse eighteen and verse one, may be expressed thus: The Person whom the Apostles beheld, who was proclaimed by John the Baptist, and in whom the Church believed (verses 12-18), is none other than He whose existence and supreme greatness have been indicated by the title Logos. The Church possesses, therefore, in its Redeemer the Creator of all things, the essential Light, the Principle of Life, God Himself. The original link between man and God, which sin had impaired (verse 5), and which unbelief completely broke (verse 11), is for the believer perfectly restored; and, by means of faith, the law of Paradise (verse 4) becomes once more the law of human history (verses 16-18). Thus the Prologue forms a compact organic whole, of which the germinal thought is this: by the Incarnation believers are restored to that communion with the Word and that living relation with God of which man had been deprived by sin.

In considering the question whether this Introduction has in view speculation or practice, knowledge or faith, we meet with three opinions: the first attributes to the author a purely speculative aim; the second maintains a practical aim complicated with metaphysical prepossessions; according to the third, the Author, in ascending to the first principles of Christian knowledge, has no other end in view than that which he declares he proposed to himself

in writing his Gospel: "*In order that ye might believe*" (xx. 31).

1. The Tübingen school is the ablest and most consistent exponent of the first view. According to this opinion, the Author sets forth in the Prologue the idea which is the *metaphysical basis* of the following narrative, which is even to a large extent its source. The Gnostic principles of an intermedium between the infinite God and the finite world, and of a primordial opposition in the universe between light and darkness, are placed by the Prologue at the base of the Gospel history; and the design of the latter is not to relate actual facts, but solely to illustrate these ideas. The Prologue is not subservient to the narrative; but the narrative subserves the speculative idea which finds its clearest expression in the Prologue.

This view of the Prologue cannot, however, be maintained. If exegesis yields any certain result, it is that the Author is not interested in the notion of the Logos for its own sake, but simply as serving to exhibit in all its grandeur the historical appearance of Jesus. The sentence, "*The Word was made flesh,*" was not written for the sake of, "*In the beginning was the Word;*" on the contrary, the latter leads up to the former. John never dreams of deriving from the life of Jesus Christ an argument in favour of the existence of a being called the Logos; so far from this, he only mentions the Logos that he may more clearly set forth what Jesus was and what He is for us. He is not inviting his readers to a metaphysical exploration of the depths of the Divine Essence, but simply persuading them

to put their whole trust in the historical Christ, that they may have access through Him to the riches of God. As to the dualist system,¹ so little does the Author concern himself with it, that the doctrine is not so much as mentioned in his teaching.

Nothing, perhaps, is better fitted to exhibit the complete opposition between the intention which Baur assigns to the Prologue and the real aim of the Evangelist than the forced explanation which this scholar has given of verse fourteen. This proposition, "*The Word was made flesh,*" in which the feeling of the Church has always recognized the central thought of the Prologue, occupies, according to Baur, quite a subordinate place in it. So far from denoting a leading fact, as the fact of the Incarnation would be, it only expresses the phenomenon of the *visibility* of the Word, a phenomenon which is historically insignificant and almost superfluous. Salvation therefore could in no way depend upon this fact. Its only object would be to give us a livelier *impression* of his condescension. This explanation, or, rather, this elimination of the salient passage of the Prologue, agrees no doubt very admirably with a system which makes the entire Gospel history a mere transparency adapted to glorify an *idea*. But it demonstrates, better than all proofs, the irreconcilable contradiction between the speculative idealism of the Tübingen theologian and the earnest healthy realism of the Evangelist.

2. M. Reuss has taken good care not to fall into such an exaggeration. He recognizes the essentially

¹ The system which assumes the existence of Good and Evil as rival and opposed powers.

practical tendency of the Prologue, and acknowledges that before everything John desires to bring his readers to the faith. But, driven out at the door, the speculative intention comes back through the window. John, while setting forth, with a view to faith, the object of faith, adds to it a speculative thesis. "Convinced, as were the other Apostles, of the superhuman nature of Jesus, John," says M. Reuss, "borrows from the schools the metaphysical theory which admits of the readiest adaptation to their belief, and furnishes the best explanation of it."¹ Simple religious faith, therefore, is not sufficient either for himself or for the Church. He wants to explain the matter of his belief philosophically, and the notion of the Logos is the means furnished him by contemporaneous philosophy for the attainment of his object. The invitation to faith thus becomes transformed under the very pen of the Evangelist into an initiation of his readers into the Christian Gnosis. Lücke's conscientious work leads also to the same result.

This view, while preserving on the one hand the apostolic and practical character of the Prologue, which Baur's opinion completely obliterates, succeeds on the other in accounting for the use of a term belonging to the language of speculation, that of Logos. Thus the problem appears solved. In the next section we shall seek the real source whence John has derived his conception of the Logos, and the reason why he has here made use of a term that seems so foreign to religious phraseology. Meanwhile, we offer the following observations on the opinion of M. Reuss.

¹ "Hist. de la Théol. Chrét.," t. ii. p. 346.

This explanation appears hardly compatible with the tone of the first propositions of the Prologue. John does not speak like a metaphysician searching for truth, but like a man who possesses and reveals it. If this oracular tone were employed solely in support of a common-place of contemporary metaphysics, would not the sublime simplicity of these opening sentences, which has charmed all ages, become simple charlatanism and mere bathos?

Another result of M. Reuss's view would be that John must have fused into an unique whole elements derived from the teaching of Jesus and those which he had borrowed from the metaphysics of Philo. Is it really conceivable that an apostle would have allowed himself to make such an admixture, and have thought himself at liberty to offer to the faith of the Church this bread made up of bran and flour? If John wanted to give permanence by writing to the theory of the Logos, which had been, as is alleged, of such eminent service to himself, in interpreting his own faith, could he not at least have done it in the epistolary form, with which he was well acquainted and which he actually employed? Was he at liberty to set to work and compose a gospel for such a purpose? Or would St. John, with M. Rénan, have regarded Philo as "the elder brother of Jesus?"¹

M. Reuss appears, it is true, to regard this procedure on the part of the Apostle as unconscious and innocent. Unconscious! That is psychologically impossible. Besides, we have an unanswerable proof to the contrary. Long ago it was ob-

¹ "Vie de Jesus," p. 9.

served that John never puts the term *Logos* into the mouth of his Master. He was, therefore, fully conscious of the difference between what he derived directly from his teaching and what proceeded from any other source. Innocent! Upon this point history has passed judgment, and its sentence is severe. History avers, in fact, that of all the books of the New Testament, it is the Gospel of John especially, and of all parts of that Gospel, the Prologue, which has prepared the way for *Jesusalatry*, and by this means kept Christianity for these eighteen centuries past in a state of modified paganism. Julian the Apostate spoke from experience, "It is John who declares that the Word was made flesh; . . . and he must be regarded as the source of all the mischief."¹ A very grave result of the innocent speculative attempts of John! The Apostle has thrown the leaven of idolatry with his own hand into the meal of the Gospel, and this has actually leavened the whole mass, falsified its doctrine, impaired its worship in spirit and truth, and wrought a disastrous change in the very sources of Christian life. It is only at the present day that the world, waking up from this vertigo, lays its hand upon the guilty Author of the mischief already pointed out by Julian. Of the Apostate and the Disciple whom Jesus loved, it is the former, therefore, that was in the right! But, then, what must we think of the latter? What must we think of the Master who had chosen and favoured him; of the Master who had placed the general teaching of his Apostles under

¹ Cyril, "Cont Julian." Cited by A. Nicolas, "Études Philosoph. le Christianisme," t. iv. p. 117.

the Divine guarantee,—“*He that heareth you, heareth me*” ?

The procedure which M. Reuss attributes to the Apostle becomes wholly inadmissible when we study its bearing in the light of the text of the Prologue. According to this scholar, it would seem that the theory of the Logos was only an accidental superfluity, having to do simply with the rational form, without any root in the religious faith of John. It is easy to convince oneself of the contrary. This alleged theory is not a simple accessory in the Prologue, it constitutes its substance, and represents, not the philosophy of John, but his faith with all that is most essential and vital to it. FOR JOHN, JESUS IS THE LOGOS, OR HE IS NOTHING. If the unbelief of the Jews is something monstrous in his eyes, it is because in rejecting Jesus they have rejected the Logos. If faith regenerates and saves, it is because it restores us, through Jesus, to communion with the Logos. What is affirmed in this case is, that the form, if form there be, takes away the substance. And we must conclude that a metaphysical formula so completely absorbs the living object of faith in the heart of John, the Jesus whom he had known, that the latter would be nothing in his eyes without it! We must infer that he, the witness of this Life, the intimate friend of this Master, in his speculative dream, has come to think of the quickening power of the Gospel as no longer residing in his person, but in a philosophical conception of Him which he has invented! To this there is but one reply: it is morally impossible.

Fortunately the text of the Prologue, rightly

understood, will not justify, nay, altogether excludes, the point of view of which these disastrous consequences are the logical result. The employment of the term Logos, although having reference doubtless to certain contemporary speculations, was not suggested to John by any speculative intension; perhaps we shall even find that its use was dictated by an intention the very reverse of speculative. Either way, the text clearly shows that, when he speaks of the Logos, John has no thought of himself giving a revelation concerning the Divine essence; his object is to lead the reader to receive in unquestioning faith the revelation which God gave us by Jesus Christ, and which is preserved in this Gospel; it is with this aim that he designates Jesus as the Logos, that is, as the perfect, the absolute Revealer. The true application, therefore, of this title is not, "Rise with me to the conception of the second Person of the Trinity!" but, "Believe in Him who has given us, in his word and in his life, the perfect manifestation of the Divine Being!"

3. Exegesis, therefore, finds no trace of any speculative intention, either dominant or accessory, in this Prologue. Everything in it bends to a practical aim. All John concerns himself about is faith. If Jesus is called Logos, it is not to lead us to speculate upon the Logos, but to believe in Jesus, by receiving Him as the perfect Mediator between God and man, the Principle of Life, the incomparable Revealer. All these attributes are comprehended under the name Logos; and this title, by its intrinsic richness and very strangeness, yields satisfaction to faith. It remains to ascertain more

precisely what was John's idea in placing this magnificent inscription on the front of the edifice raised by his hands.

Upon this question, the connection which we have pointed out between the fundamental ideas of the Prologue and the essential elements of the subsequent narrative, does not permit us to be in doubt. The Prologue is intended to be the key to the Gospel. It initiates the reader into the true meaning of the facts narrated ; it reveals to him their august character, unexampled greatness, and vital importance. The Prologue resembles the technical sign placed at the beginning of a piece of music to indicate to the player the manner in which it should be executed. To raise the mind of the reader to the real height of the drama which is to be unfolded to his view ; to make him feel that this is a history which must not be confounded with other histories, which, when read, are cast aside ; that it contains the secret of the life of humanity and of his own ; that the words he is about to read are nothing less than beams of truth radiating from the absolute Word ; that, accepted, they will be his salvation ; rejected, his death ; that unbelief is the denial of God ; faith, God accepted and enjoyed : this is the true aim and sole thought of the Prologue. It is just a commentary on the title, *Gospel*, God's grandest message to the world, given first in the Gospel history and then in the books which contain it. From the very first line of the subsequent narrative the reader finds himself transported into that Divine sphere to which this history belongs, and which, in a certain sense, it never leaves ; and the

reading of this book brings him into immediate contact with the Divine Being who still reveals Himself in it at the present hour, just as He manifested Himself in the actual history.

Such is the result to which we are led by an impartial and accurate exegesis of the Prologue. We see that John, in writing it, never for one moment departed from his function as an apostle. His book is, indeed, from the first word to the last, a Gospel, neither more nor less,—an appeal to faith. It only remains, in order to remove the last ground of doubt respecting it, to give an explanation of the notion and of the term Logos, and to prove that while the Apostle is accused of borrowing from contemporary metaphysics, it is in reality his accusers who have forced these loans upon him.

THE FIRST EPISTLE TO TIMOTHY.

CHAPTER I. VERSES 1-8.

ST. PAUL, when addressing individuals as well as Churches, was accustomed to describe himself as an "*Apostle of Christ Jesus.*" The only exception to the rule was in the private letter to *Philemon*. Timothy was placed in difficult circumstances; and, though he was an intimate friend, he was being called to discharge functions which needed moral and official support. We need not be surprised, therefore, to find that Paul at the outset claimed the title which gave all its significance to his own life-work. He fortified the claim by declaring that he was an "*apostle according to the commandment of God.*"