

*THE PROLOGUE OF ST JOHN'S GOSPEL.*

## III.—THE TRUTH AND IMPORTANCE OF THE CONCEPTION OF THE PERSON OF JESUS CONTAINED IN THE PROLOGUE.

THE Prologue of John, then, teaches nothing new respecting the Person of Jesus. It merely recapitulates the testimony which Jesus gave concerning Himself, and formulates it in a striking expression which has profoundly impressed the mind of the Church. Consequently, nothing can be more erroneous than to exhibit the relation of the Christ of the Synoptics to the Christ of Paul and to the Christ of John, as a series of superadded creations which have appeared one after the other in the Church. The very highest conception, that which is richest and most complete, was also the first; it was the consciousness which Christ had of Himself. This consciousness has left its indelible impress on a number of testimonies that fell from his lips; and these testimonies have been collected and preserved more or less perfectly in the different documents which are said to exhibit opposite views, but which really supplement each other. The fact is, that the Church has never experienced the least difficulty in combining into one and the same view the Christ of the Synoptics and the Christ of Paul and of John, notwithstanding the shades of difference which distinguish them. There is contrast, doubtless, as there always is where there is richness; but the alleged contradictions exist only for scholars more intent upon displaying their own acuteness, though at the

expense of the subject of their studies, than upon giving it due prominence by ignoring themselves. Just as with the different pictures which photography produces of the same person, in which the eye of an acquaintance, notwithstanding their diversity, always recognizes his friend, so the different portraitures of the Christ of the Gospel all present to the eye of a simple faith the same fundamental type, and this type cannot apparently be any other than that which Jesus bore within Him, and which He has graven with a firm and courageous hand on the hearts of his disciples. We say courageous, because it was this testimony to his divinity which cost Him his life: He died—the Synoptics no less than St. John testify this—as a blasphemer, and because He made Himself not only Messiah,—there would have been no blasphemy in that,—but Son of God in the highest sense of the word; and the sole question, where Jesus Christ is concerned, will henceforth be that which every page of M. Rénan's work makes the real issue: Whether, in declaring Himself God, He affirmed the truth, or was only the first dupe of his own exaggerated enthusiasm and pride? Whether He is the Word made flesh, as is implied in all his discourses, from the Sermon on the Mount (comp. Matt. vii. 21–23) to his sacerdotal prayer, or merely, forsooth, a pious fool, whose only distinction from others like him is that his folly has made a greater noise?

Apart from the general question of the supernatural and miracles, which we cannot discuss here, three principal objections are made to the conception so clearly enunciated in the Prologue, and especially

to the notion of the pre-existence and eternity of the Logos.

1. An argument is based on certain alleged inconsistencies in John's views. Thus M. Reuss<sup>1</sup> sees a contradiction between the Prologue, which teaches, he says, the perfect equality of the Father and the Son, in accordance with the confession of ecclesiastical orthodoxy, and those numerous sayings of Jesus, in the Gospel of St. John himself, which contain the idea of the subordination of the Son to the Father. In the doctrine of equality and the words in which it is expressed, he finds evidence of the influence of the schools and of Philo; in the passages which teach the subordination he recognizes the statements which really emanated from Christ's lips. John must have failed to perceive the contradiction between these elements of opposite meaning and diverse origin.

2. Baur<sup>2</sup> lays great stress on the impossibility of reconciling the notion of the incarnation of the Word with the idea of the supernatural birth of Jesus, which is found in the Synoptics. According to the view of the latter, it is by this birth that the subject of the Gospel history begins to exist. From the point of view of the incarnation, on the contrary, this subject was in existence previous to his appearing, and can become nothing which He was not already. "It is absolutely impossible"—this is his conclusion—"to find a place for the birth in the series of facts indicated by the Prologue."

3. Another objection to the fact of the incarnation

<sup>1</sup> *Hist de la Théol. Chrét.*, t. ii. p. 350, et seq.

<sup>2</sup> *Theol. Jahrb.*, 1844, t. iii. p. 24, et seq.

is the alleged impossibility of reconciling it with the real humanity of the Saviour. This is the view taken by Lücke,<sup>1</sup> who, while recognizing the perilousness of denying the pre-existence, cannot, nevertheless, make up his mind to admit a fact which would establish a difference of essence between the Saviour and his brethren, and make it impossible to conceive of his being the Son of Man, or his accomplishing the work of redemption. The difficulties of Weizsäcker<sup>2</sup> proceed from the same point of view: Doubtless, the fellowship of the Son with the Father is not simply moral; He does not win his position as Son by his fidelity, it is pre-supposed in all that He did and said; his fidelity only preserves this original relation, it does not create it; it is the unacquired condition of the consciousness which He has of Himself. But, on the other hand, it must be admitted that the higher knowledge which Christ possessed cannot be the continuation of an anterior knowledge brought from above, otherwise it could not have had that progressive character, limited to the requirements of the moment, which we see in it, and which constitute it a truly human knowledge. And as to the moral task of Jesus, on this condition there would have been nothing human about it; for what room would there be for real moral conflict in the Son if He still retained that complete knowledge of the Divine plan which He had in eternity with the Father?<sup>3</sup> After being at much pains to eliminate the idea of

<sup>1</sup> T. i. p. 378.

<sup>2</sup> "Jahrb. für deutsche Theol.," t. vii., fourth ed., p. 655-664.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 639.

pre-existence from the words of Jesus quoted above, Weizsäcker nevertheless concludes that in the Fourth Gospel we have two Christs,—one truly human, exhibited in the teaching of Jesus and in the Synoptics, the other pre-existent, the Christ of John. We are thus brought back to the alleged inconsistencies which M. Reuss attributes to the Christology of the Fourth Gospel.

To reply to these objections : 1. We believe that the inherent contradiction with which the Gospel of John is charged by M. Reuss is only apparent, and arises from his attributing to the Apostle the so-called orthodox dogma formulated in the Nicene Creed, instead of permitting him to speak for himself. In fact, the Prologue teaches the subordination of the Son to the Father as positively as the rest of the Gospel. We have proved it by exegesis. The expression *was with God*, the reservation of the name of God as a substantive (*ὁ θεός*) to the Father, the idea of begetting contained in the word *μονογενής* (combined as it is in verse 14 with the word *πατήρ*), the very terms Father and Son and Word, the figure, *in the bosom of the Father*, the Father being set forth as the supreme object of knowledge, whilst the Son is only the organ of it—all these are so many indications which leave no doubt as to the opinion of the Author of the Prologue respecting the subordination, and they establish the most perfect agreement between this portion and the rest of the Gospel.

2. The objection of Baur, drawn from the disagreement of the notion of the incarnation with that of the miraculous birth, like the preceding objection of M. Reuss, proceeds from his not having kept

sufficiently close to the expressions of the Prologue. Setting out with the preconceived idea that the subject of the evangelical history, according to the Fourth Gospel, is the Word, purely and simply, and that these words, "*The Word became flesh*," signify solely that from being invisible the Word has become visible, it is very evident that Baur will not find room in the Prologue for the idea of a miraculous birth, or, we must add, for any birth at all, miraculous or natural. But however little weight is given to John's expression, *σὰρξ ἐγένετο*, it will be found that it cannot denote a simple appearance, and that the idea of a birth, and more particularly of a miraculous birth, is implied in it. How, in short, was access to be obtained to human nature in all its reality, otherwise than by that organic and gradual development which finds its starting-point in birth? And how, on the other hand, could Jesus have become man in such a way as to represent entire humanity, if his human existence had had exactly the same origin as our own? It is to the paternal activity in birth that the really individualizing element belongs. The concurrence of a human father would have made Jesus just an individual superadded to all the others,—*a* man. Through the absence of this factor, and by the fact that He owed his human existence solely to the maternal factor, which represents human nature in itself, He was able to be not only a man, but the Son of Man, and to become the representative and organ of the entire race,—the central man, the second Adam. This unique position was that held by Jesus in John's view as well as in that of the Synoptics; it is one effect of this position that

all our Lord's acts have not only an individual value, but possess a bearing wide as humanity. Whatever He does, it is humanity which does it in Him. Now this characteristic of the life of Jesus, so forcibly expressed by the formula *σὰρξ*—not *ἄνθρωπος* (a man)—*ἐγένετο*, implies and supposes the miraculous conception, recorded by the Synoptics, as its necessary condition.

3. In attempting, lastly, to reply to those who regard the pre-existence as irreconcilable with the real humanity of the Saviour, we are perfectly aware that we have to deal with the most difficult problem in theology. The views held by the two forms of Protestant theology, the Reformed and the Lutheran, are, in our judgment, incapable of solving the problem which the ancient orthodoxy, rather than Scripture, had bequeathed to them. For we confess that, on this point, the Church does not appear to us to have quite apprehended the thought of Scripture; and it will be our endeavour in the following paragraphs to shew, not the harmony of the orthodox doctrine of the two natures co-existent in Jesus Christ with Scripture, but rather the accord of Scripture with itself.

Does Scripture, in teaching the eternal existence of the Word, teach at the same time the presence of the Divine nature, that is to say, of its condition and attributes in Jesus Christ during the course of his earthly life? I do not think that the formula, John i. 14, is compatible with this idea. The expression, "*The Word was made flesh*," speaks, indeed, of a Divine subject reduced to a human condition; but not of two conditions, Divine and human, being

co-existent. This notion is as contrary to exegesis as to logic. St. Paul expresses himself in exactly the same sense as St. John. According to Phil. ii. 6, 7, Christ, who was in the form of God, humbled (*ἐκένωσεν*,—literally, *emptied*) Himself by taking the form of a servant, and making Himself man; which can only signify one thing, that He laid aside his Divine condition in order to assume the human; He did not therefore combine them when He became incarnate, but He exchanged one for the other. In another passage (2 Cor. viii. 9) St. Paul declares that Christ, although He was rich, became poor, in order that we might be made rich through his poverty. This impoverishment can be nothing else than his renunciation of the Divine condition, a humiliation by which He identifies Himself with us, in order that He may subsequently raise us with Himself to the height of his original condition, even his Divine glory. The facts of the Gospel history are in harmony with these Apostolic declarations. Jesus on earth no longer possesses the attributes which constitute the Divine condition. He is not omniscient; for He asks questions, and we must allow that He does so sincerely, unless we would transform his life into a mere farce: "*Where have ye laid him?*" "*Who touched me?*" He says: "*No one knoweth, not even the Son.*" Omniscience does not admit of being divided as knowledge does; one either has it, or has not it. Now Jesus positively declares in the last of these passages that He has not it at the time He is speaking. When, therefore, He gives proof of possessing supernatural knowledge, as when He meets with Nathaniel or with the Samaritan woman, it is a



higher knowledge no doubt ; but it is not, it cannot be, omniscience. Neither does He possess omnipotence. It is not He who does the miracles ; it is his Father who does them for Him at his request : "*Father, I know that thou hearest me always.*" And for this reason He can speak of them as testimonies which his Father bears to Him (John v. 36) : "*The works which my Father giveth me to accomplish, the same bear witness of me.*" He is destitute of omnipresence. For He conveys Himself with his disciples from one place to another, and the energy which He sometimes exerts at a distance is still not omnipresence. The lives of the prophets present many incidents of this kind. His love even, perfect though it be, is nevertheless not Divine love. This is unchangeable, and can neither grow in extent or force. But who will maintain that Jesus in his cradle loved as at the age of twelve, or when He was twelve years old as on the cross ? Perfect, relatively to each given moment, his love increased day by day, both in the energy of its spontaneous self-devotion and in the expansiveness of its embrace. It was therefore a truly human love. "The grace of one *man*, Jesus Christ," says St. Paul (Rom. v. 15). "*For them I sanctify myself,*" says Jesus (John xvii. 19), "*in order that they also may be sanctified in truth.*" Although the purely human nature of this sanctification would not follow from the phrase, "*I sanctify myself,*" it is a necessary inference from the parallelism of these two expressions : "*I sanctify myself,*" and "*That they also may be sanctified.*" If the sanctification were not of the same nature in both cases, these words would have no

meaning. "And he that sanctifieth, and they that are sanctified, are all of one," says the Epistle to the Hebrews (ii. 11); "wherefore he is not ashamed to call them his brethren." And Hebrews v. 8, "Though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered; and being made perfect," &c. The holiness of Jesus is so far a human holiness that it is perfected at the cost of conflict, through the renunciation of legitimate enjoyment, and by a victory over the natural dread of pain. Had it been otherwise, there would have been no real temptation in his life. From all these facts we conclude that Jesus did not possess on earth those attributes which constitute the Divine condition; and hence we have no difficulty in comprehending the prayer with which He terminates his earthly career, wherein He asks for the glory which He had before his incarnation (John xvii. 5). This glory is the Divine condition with all its attributes; his *form of God*, according to the expression of St. Paul, which He laid aside when He became man.

But let us not lose sight of the other side of this truth. We cannot go so far as to say with Keim<sup>1</sup> that all the goodness contained in Christ's inner consciousness was the result of the moral conflicts of his life. There is, as Weizsäcker very properly observes, something in the consciousness of Christ which is not the result of his development, and which is expressed by the name *Son*. When Jesus says, John v. 20, "*The Father loveth the Son, and sheweth him all things that himself doeth*," the meaning of these words is not that Jesus feels Himself Son

<sup>1</sup> "Die menschliche Entwicklung Jesu," 1861.

because his Father shews Him all things, but that the Father shews Him all because He is Son.<sup>1</sup> We have found in the Synoptics, as well as in St. John, the proof that the foundation of the life of Jesus was the consciousness of an unique exclusive relation to God anterior to his earthly existence. This is a psychological indication either of insanity or of the real presence in Christ of a *Divine subject*. But how are these contradictory data to be harmonized? How are we to conceive of a Divine subject being born into, and developing itself within, a truly human condition?

F. GODET.

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THE FIRST CHAPTER OF  
THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS.

VERSES 8 AND 9.

JUST as there are planes of being on which the infinitely great and the infinitely little meet, so there are planes of relationship on which Jesus and God's angels touch one another and are kin. Do the angels minister to the Great Monarch of the universe? So does Jesus. Are they swift, ardent, devoted, and untiring in his service? So is Jesus. Do they fulfil behests for the benefit of men? So emphatically did Jesus. So does He still. He came to our earth, "not to be ministered unto, but to minister," even to the extent of "giving his life a ransom for multitudes." And now, when He is within the veil, he is ministrant still. He "ever liveth" to act as our great High Priest, making intercession for such as "come unto God by him."

<sup>1</sup> "Jahrb. fur deutsche Theol.," t. vii. p. 656.