

John 1:1-18 Prologue

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Overview

(Historical note: we studied this section together at Christmas in 1999. This time, we will go over it in a bit more detail.)

This section sets the theme for the entire Gospel.

- It provides a spiritual parallel to the birth narratives in Matthew and Luke, thus illustrating Clement's claim that "John, last of all, conscious that the outward facts had been set forth in the Gospels, was urged on by his disciples, and divinely moved by the Spirit, composed a spiritual Gospel" (quoted in Eusebius, *H.E.* 6.14.7)¹
- It focuses our attention chiastically on 1:11-13, which is one of the two "prongs" of the gospel.
- It emphasizes our Lord's deity, which is a major theme of the book.

Key observation: the section is arranged as a chiasm, that starts and ends with the unity of Jesus and the Father, and descends to us in the middle. See the associated table.

- 1-4, 16-18 describe Christ's position and activities in heaven.
- 9-14 describe his work on earth.
- 6-8, 15 describe the work of John, the herald, announcing his coming from heaven to earth.

There are two important differences between the two halves.

- the first half focuses on the physical creation; the second, on spiritual creation (compare 3-4 with 16-17).
- The first half speaks of people in the third person: "men" (4), "all [people]" (7), "world" (9,10), "his own" (11).

Start at the top and work our way down.

1-5, 16-18, Christ in Heaven (Descending)

Three themes, also ordered chiastically, summarize his position and work in heaven. Each build on the previous one.

1. His intimate union with the Father (1-2, 18). By itself, this might be consistent with a hidden God, one who never intervenes, but the next point clarifies this:
2. His creative work (3, 17). In both the physical and spiritual realm, he intervenes in the lives of men. Again, there is an ambiguity: his intervention might be malicious, demonic. So we move to the third assertion:

¹Borchert, G. L. (2001, c1996). *Vol. 25A: John 1-11*. The New American Commentary. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

3. His blessings from afar (4, 16). His purposes toward us are life and grace, not death and cursing.

1-2, 18, His union with the Father

The point of these vv is to emphasize the intimate union between the Son and the Father. Note the metaphors and the explicit statements:

Metaphors

The purple line traces the two names for Christ that are used in this section.

1-2, The Word of God.—What could be more intimately related to someone than their word, the expression of their thought?

- This is clearly used here as a description of Christ; compare Rev 19:13.
- Draws on imagery in Prov. 8.
- Cf. Isa 55:11, God sends his word out to accomplish a task, and then it returns to him.

This title is eternally his, even before his incarnation.

18, The Only-begotten Son.—This title is emphasized in the second half of the passage, after it becomes clear that we are talking about Christ's entry into the world. In one sense, Luke 1:35 makes clear that "son of God" refers in a special sense to our Lord in his incarnate state, the Word become flesh (v.14).

"Only-begotten" is used of

- Isaac as Abraham's only son, Heb 11:17, even though he had Ishmael and other sons as well (Gen 25:6).
- The son of the widow of Nain, Luke 7:12
- Jairus' daughter, Luke 8:42
- The demoniac boy brought by his father to Jesus, Luke 9:38

All these cases emphasize how dear an only child is to a parent. He is the Father's "alter ego."

Statements

1-2.—The Word is stated both to be with God and to be God; expresses the mystery of the unity and plurality within the godhead.

18.—As the only son, he abides in the bosom of the Father, in the most intimate fellowship with him.

Application

We recognize the Lord Jesus as truly divine, and worship him as God.

3, 17, His Creative Work

This first lesson might be consistent with the notion of a *Deus absconditus* (Isa 45:15). The second level of the chiasm show that in fact he is involved in his world.

The two verses are much closer in Greek than in English. John is consciously imitating Genesis 1, describing God's new creation in Jesus, and both verses describe what "came to be" by Jesus.

3, the physical world.—Genesis 1 recounts how God spoke the world into existence. "God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light." So, John concludes, it is by the Word that God created the earth, and if Jesus is the Word, he is the means of creation.

17, the spiritual foundation.—In the OT, Moses laid the foundation for the nation's spiritual life in the law. Jesus as the Son of God, the second Moses, has established the new foundation, God's grace and truth. Both contrast with the law:

- grace as the principle of undeserved favor, where the law lays down requirements for divine approbation; Rom 6:14; compare Gal 3:5,12.
- truth as contrasted, not with falsehood, with shadow or type. Cf. Heb 9:24 and 8:2 for this usage: the earthly sanctuary was only a figure, a pattern, of the true sanctuary, which is heaven. Similarly, the law was not the real, final revelation, but only a token, an anticipation, of what would be made real with Christ.

4-5, 16, His Blessings from Afar

A deity can be involved in his world in a malevolent way; as a demon that needs to be placated. The third layer reminds us that this is not the case with our Lord. Even before coming into the world and after leaving it, our Lord reaches down to bless his creatures.

This pair shows most strongly the two contrasts between the halves of the chiasm:

- first vs. second creation
- "them" vs. "us," distinguishing the world at large from believers.

4, in the first creation.—The Word's intrinsic life is the source of light.

- "Life in him" contrasts his life with ours. He has "life in himself" (5:26); our life is derivative, from outside. We live only because we are plugged into him; his life is self-contained. So in the original creation, people could live only because God breathed life into them.
- "The life was the light of men." The idea that God's life is the source of light goes back to the OT: Psa. 36:9, "with thee is the fountain of life; in thy light shall we see light." Commentators tend to see this as a figurative use of "light," but given the creation context, I think that John is claiming that the ultimate source of (physical) light in the world is the self-contained life of the Word of God.
- "Light in darkness" pictures God's sending light down onto the newly-created earth as a divine gift from on high. John presents this light, not as a purely physical process, but as the manifestation of the intrinsic life possessed by the Word of God.
- But the darkened world did not comprehend or understand it, does not recognize that it is a manifestation of the life of God. The fullest form of this rejection is seen in today's cosmology, which leaves no place for the intervention of a deity. This is the first intimation

of a theme that pervades the first panel (1-11), that of rejection of God's revelation. The theme is repeated in v.10 "knew him not" and 11 "received him not." (This parallel suggests that we should understand *katalambanw* here primarily as "understand" and not "overcome." However, the other two uses of the word in John, in 8:3 and 12:35, do have the sense of conflict, which thus cannot be ruled out.)

16, in the second creation.—Now from on high he pours out his fullness upon his people, as described in Col. 2:9,10: "For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily. And ye are complete in him, which is the head of all principality and power."

The parallel with 4-5 shows how we are to understand the gift of this fullness. The good things that happen to us here (analogous to light in the physical realm) are to be understood as the result of his deliberate, creative power. Compare James 1:17, "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning."

"Grace for [*anti*, in the place of] grace": each undeserved gift forms the foundation for the next. The blessings of his fullness are undeserved, and manifold.

Note the shift from the impersonal ("light of **men**") to the personal ("have all **we** received"), reflecting the difference between the two sides of the chiasm, the first dealing with his revelation to the world at large, the second to those who receive him. John will repeatedly face us up with this fundamental choice that we have to make. It is not enough to see the light, or to hear the teaching of the Lord Jesus. We must receive him, obey him, submit to him. The next major section of the chiasm, dealing with the preaching of John, gives us an example of what this means.

6-8, 15, The Preaching of John

Having seen Christ's position and work in heaven, and before witnessing his entrance into the world, we hear the voice of the herald proclaiming his approach, bearing witness to him, like the royal messengers who preceded the arrival of the king. 6-8 *describe* his witness, while 15 *quotes* it. Central to both paragraphs is the notion of "witness."

Witness.—This is distinctively John's word in the NT. His gospel has 43% of the NT instances of the verb, and 34% of the noun. (If we add in his epistles and Rev, he has 61% of the verb and 77% of the noun.) The word means "to make public what one knows personally." It has two critical components:

1. The foundation is not formal proof or logic, but personal experience. The witness must have personal knowledge of what he proclaims, either because he has seen and heard the physical event in question (1 John 1:1-2) or because God has given him a subjective assurance of the matter (1 John 5:10 "hath the witness in himself," Rom 8:16 "the Spirit beareth witness with our spirit," Gal 4:6 "God hath sent forth the spirit of his son into your hearts").
2. This knowledge must be made public, even at great cost to the one who proclaims it. In fact, the Greek word for the person bearing witness is the one from which we get our word "martyr," one who proclaims the truth that he knows even when it costs him his life.

Contrast John's approach to Paul's. Paul, the trained rabbi, argues logically, based on the Hebrew Scriptures as his axiom (Acts 9:22 "proving that this is very Christ"). John, the fisherman, simply reports what he knows from personal experience. The two are not inconsistent, but work together (John will quote Scripture to support his claims, and Paul's experience on the road to Damascus was central to his message).

6-8, Description.—Several things here bear notice.

- Contrast John's entrance with the Word's. In 1, the Word "was"—eternally, uncreated. Here, John "came," "sent from God." Now, Jesus is also said to have "come into the world" (9:39) and to be "sent from God" (3:17; 6:57). But he came as the incarnation of the Word (1:14); John came as a witness to it.
- It is remarkable that "light" should need a "witness," yet twice (7, 8) the writer insists on this, emphasizing the darkness that is in the world.

In 6-8, the witness is necessary because "the darkness comprehended ... not" the light. The recalcitrance of the world's blindness is all the more amazing because it is light itself that they cannot see.

15, Quotation.—The quotation makes explicit what we have already deduced from the description of the Baptist's coming into the world.

- Jesus "came after" the Baptist in two senses:
 - Jesus is six months younger than John (Luke 1:26)
 - The Baptist had already begun his ministry when Jesus came to him, asking to be baptized.
- Yet Jesus "was before" the Baptist, in his pre-existent state. The Evangelist has already documented this in 1:1, but apparently learned it from his teacher the Baptist (assuming that the Evangelist is the unnamed disciple in 1:37). (The Synoptics do not present this level of understanding on the part of the Baptist, but they were not among his disciples, while the Evangelist probably was.)
- Thus the Baptist acknowledges that Jesus must be "preferred" to himself. The Greek does not mean "to like one thing more than another," but "to become foremost," and corresponds to the etymological sense of the English verb, "to carry to the front," thus "to promote." The Baptist is saying the same thing here that he later says in 3:30, "He must increase, but I must decrease."

This quotation is crucial in two ways, one theological, the other very practical.

1. Theologically, it shows that the doctrine of our Lord's deity is not a late addition by the church, but something that was understood even by his forerunner, the Baptist.
2. Practically, John exemplifies an attitude toward Christ that we must all emulate. Once we realize the theological truth that "he was before" us, we must bow to him and permit him to become "preferred" to us. He must come to dominate our lives. Other friends must take second place to him; other loyalties fade before our loyalty to him. Jesus can never remain a secondary feature in the life of a true believer. The objective is "bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ," 2 Cor 10:5.

9-14, Christ on Earth

We behold

- his advent (9-10, 14),
- his unexpected rejection by his own (11, 13),
- and at the center, the focus of the chiasm, the new birth that he gives those who do receive him (12).

9-10, 14, His Advent

On both sides of the chiasm, we have the arrival of the Word into the World.

9, that was the true light.—“True” here has the same sense as in 17, contrasted with “pattern, illustration.” The light of physical creation, described in 4-5, is only superficial. The real light is the Lord himself.

Lighteth every man.—Just as physical light falls on everybody in the world, so the coming of the true light has an influence on everyone. People sin because they are blind to the light that falls on them, not because they have insufficient light. Compare Paul’s argument in Rom 1:18-20; 2:14-16. Just as the physical darkness does not comprehend the light that shines in it (v.4), so blind sinners do not understand the light of the gospel.

That cometh into the world.—Lit., “coming into the world.” The Greek is ambiguous. The clause could be adjectival, modifying “every man.” But the chiastic parallel with “was made flesh and dwelt among us” makes it more likely to be adverbial, modifying “lighteth.” Cf. also parallel with 3:19 and 4:46.

World.—This is the first occurrence in the book of an important word for John, “world.” John’s gospel contains more than 42% of the instances of this word in the NT, and 1 John is the second highest, at over 12%. It is important that we understand how John uses this term, the Greek word *kosmos*.

- The basic sense of the word has to do with orderly arrangement. From this sense we get “cosmetic.” It’s used in this sense in 1 Pet 3:3 “adorning.”
- It is used to describe the universe as a system, in which the ancients recognized order and regularity, in Acts 17:24.
- Then it comes to mean the physical earth, our planet, as in John 1:10, which he made, or 11:9, which refers to the sun as “the light of this world.”
- The distinctive thing about our world is that it is inhabited by people. Thus the term comes to mean the system of human existence. Because we are a fallen race, this system has an evil and ungodly character. This sense comes to dominate the term in the NT in general, and in John in particular.
 - It does not know the Father, 1 John 3:1, and cannot receive the Spirit of truth, 14:17.
 - It lies in wickedness, 1 J 5:19.

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- Its works are evil, and therefore it hates the Lord, 7:7, and his disciples, 15:18, 1 J 3:13, whom it will persecute, 16:33.
- It is under judgment, with its evil prince, Satan, 12:31, cf. 14:30; 16:8-11.
- It needs saving, 12:47; 1 J 4:14
- It is characterized by ungodly lust, with which the believer is to have nothing to do, 1 John 2:15-17.

This is the world into which our Savior came, and in which we live. Not surprisingly, “the world knew him not” (1:10).

14, dwelt among us; we beheld.—These clauses are the counterpart of “coming into the world” and “the world knew him not,” respectively, in 9-10. In both cases, there is a contrast.

Dwelt among us.—Literally, “tabernacled among us.” This is a literal Greek translation (not the LXX) of Exod 25:8. The entry of the Word of God into a human body is compared with the dwelling of the Shekinah in the tabernacle. This is one of three places in the NT in which the Lord Jesus is compared to the tabernacle or its furniture.

- Here, he is compared to the tabernacle, housing the divine glory (compare 2 Cor 5:1ff for the notion of the body as a tabernacle).
- In Rom 3:25 (Greek, see NET Bible and my paper on Atonement in the NT), he is compared to the mercy seat.
- In Heb 10:20, he is compared to the veil.

Contrast the imagery in v.9. There, his advent is compared to the promiscuous coming of light into the world at large. Here, it is compared to the very private coming of God’s glory into Israel’s sanctuary.

We beheld.--Notice the contrast between the world and “us” (also present in “dwelt among us”). This is a seed from which grows 15:19, “ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world.” As long as we were part of the evil world system, we (like the rest of it) were blind to the light. What enables us to behold his glory? Only his intervention in our lives. Compare Paul’s teaching in 2 Cor 4:3-6,

If our gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost: 4 In whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them. 5 For we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake. 6 For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to *give* the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

The use of the first person to contrast believers with unbelievers is common throughout the NT. We might call it, the “first person of faith.” The Bible does not tell people, “God loves you, you believe, you are saved.” Far more often, a believing writer says, “God loves us, we believe, we are saved,” leaving the hearer to decide whether to join in that confession.

This verse ties together the two titles of our Lord from verses 1 and 18, “the word” and “the only begotten.”

11, 13, “His Own”

These verses continue the contrast between “us” and “the world.”

11 focuses on a subset of the world, called “his own.” The two occurrences of the term differ in a subtle but important way. The first is neuter in gender, while the second is masculine.

- The “his own” to which he came is neuter. The expression *eis ta idia* is used elsewhere to mean, “to one’s own home,” John 16:32; 19:37; Acts 21:6; Esther 5:10; 6:12. Here the reference is probably to the holy city. Messiah is David’s successor and heir (2 Sam 7; Rom 1), and David gained title to Jerusalem, a border city between Judah and Benjamin, by personal conquest (1 Chr 11:4ff), a city that until then had remained under Canaanite control. Compare Ezek 21:27 and the LXX reading of Gen 49:10. Israel was waiting for the coming of the prince to whom these things rightly belonged.
- The “his own” who did not receive him is masculine, and refers to his own people. These are the Jews, the ones referred to in v.13 as being born of the same blood, by the will of the flesh and the will of man (13). One would expect that when the Messiah came to his city, they would have welcomed him enthusiastically—but they do not.

This interplay between his own home and his own people explains two features of the gospel:

1. The constant movement into and out of Jerusalem, where the synoptics have only a single journey from Galilee to Jerusalem. This movement emphasizes his coming to his own place.
2. The personality studies of those who did and did not receive him.

Note the reference to those who did receive him as being “born.” This is the first instance in the NT of a pervasive metaphor, describing Christians as the result of a process of conception and birth (3:3, 5, 7; James 1:18; 1 Pet 1:3, 23; 1 John 2:29; 3:9; 5:1, 18). Paul does not generally use this language (the closest he comes is “new creature” in 2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15; his notion of our sonship focuses on adoption rather than birth), but focuses on the idea of resurrection (Eph 2:1-5; Col 2:13; Rom 5:4). Both images reflect our identification with Christ. John identifies us with the one who is born into a rejecting world. Paul identifies us with the one who rises from the dead.

It is important to note that in both metaphors, we are passive. A child takes no action in order to be born; a dead man takes no action in order to rise from the dead. Both actions require the external intervention—whether of parents or of a life-giving deity. We cannot save ourselves, but enter into new life only through the gracious action of God’s Holy Spirit. John emphasizes this in v.13 by saying that their birth is

- “not of blood,” not associated with any physical lineage. One cannot claim salvation because one is Jewish, or Irish, or Armenian.
- “nor of the will of the flesh,” that is, not from any physical or carnal interest. We are not attracted to salvation because it “feels good” (and we should be suspicious of any evangelistic methods that appeal to the flesh).
- “nor of the will of man,” that is, not from any deliberate desire of people to have offspring and descendants. No matter how much I may want you to become a believer, I cannot make that happen.

Salvation is only “of God,” a point that will be reinforced in the next verse.

12, *The Children of God*

Throughout the passage, we have seen the tension developing between the rejecters and the receivers (traced by gray lines on the chart, between vv. 5/16, 10/14, and 11/13). If we read the passage in linear order, it is at the center that we are introduced for the first time to the receivers.

Received, Believe.—These terms are the final pair of the chiasm, and like the others, merit both comparison and contrast. The word “even” is not in the Greek; the two terms are directly in parallel with each other.

- Comparison: both terms indicate an openness to the coming Messiah.
 - “Receive” refers to the welcome that his own people should have offered him, recognizing him as the promised deliverer and giving him the honor that he deserved.
 - “Believe on his name” refers not to mental acknowledgement of facts, but to trusting his person.
 - A person’s “name,” in OT usage, is indicative of the person’s true character. Thus renamings (Abram to Abraham, Jacob to Israel) mark important spiritual transitions.
 - The names assigned to the Messiah reflect his divine character (“mighty God,” “everlasting Father,” “Immanuel”), and his role as deliverer (“Jesus,” “prince of Peace”).
 - Thus “believe on the name” thus means to place one’s trust in God who has come among us to save us from our sin and enable us throughout our pilgrimage.
- Contrast: the strongest contrast is in the tense of the verbs.
 - “Received” is past tense, describing the historical reaction of the few who did recognize him as the promised Messiah (John the Baptist, the disciples, Nicodemus, the woman at the well, the nobleman at Capernaum).
 - “Believe” is present tense, describing their ongoing trust in him.

Throughout John, salvation is promised, not to those who “believed” (once, in the past) in Jesus, but to those who “believe” (continuously, ongoing, now). Salvation is not achieved by signing a pledge card or raising the hand in a meeting or walking down a church aisle. It is an ongoing work of God in the life of his elect, which manifests itself in a persistent faith and increasing Christlikeness.

Power.—This is John’s version of Matt 3:19. The Jews (“his own”) thought that their lineage guaranteed them salvation (“born ... of blood”), even as it excluded others. But it was God who sovereignly established Abraham as the father of the faithful, and he is sovereignly able to raise up spiritual children to Abraham, as Paul points out in Rom 4.

Sons of God.—Actually, “children.” The point is not our legal position as heirs, but the result of the process of birth described in v.13. John never calls believers “sons.” For him, the “son of God” is Jesus of Nazareth, and we are all “little children.”

This is the focal point of the chiasm, the main purpose of the incarnation. Why did Jesus come as a child? To make us children. His physical birth was the means to our spiritual birth. The world, who knows nothing of this spiritual birth, can hardly be expected to understand his birth. But for those of us who know new life in Christ, our rebirth is precisely the reason we treasure the remembrance of his coming into the world to save sinners.

Notes

Light of Men

Consider other references to “light of x,” where “x” designates a person or group of people.

A person as the light

^{KJV} **2 Samuel 21:17** But Abishai the son of Zeruah succoured him, and smote the Philistine, and killed him. Then the men of David swore unto him, saying, Thou shalt go no more out with us to battle, that thou quench not the light of Israel.

^{KJV} **Matthew 5:14** Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid.

^{KJV} **John 8:12** Then spake Jesus again unto them, saying, I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life. Cf. 9:5; 11:9

^{KJV} **Romans 2:19** And art confident that thou thyself art a guide of the blind, a light of them which are in darkness,

Specifically, God

^{KJV} **Isaiah 10:17** And the light of Israel shall be for a fire, and his Holy One for a flame: and it shall burn and devour his thorns and his briers in one day;

^{KJV} **Isaiah 42:6** I the LORD have called thee in righteousness, and will hold thine hand, and will keep thee, and give thee for a covenant of the people, for a light of the Gentiles; = Acts 13:47

Light as a person's life

^{KJV} **Job 18:5** Yea, the light of the wicked shall be put out, and the spark of his fire shall not shine.

^{KJV} **Job 33:29** Lo, all these *things* worketh God oftentimes with man,³⁰ To bring back his soul from the pit, to be enlightened with the light of the living.

^{KJV} **Psalms 56:13** For thou hast delivered my soul from death: *wilt not thou deliver* my feet from falling, that I may walk before God in the light of the living?

Spirit, soul

^{KJV} **Proverbs 13:9** The light of the righteous rejoiceth: but the lamp of the wicked shall be put out.

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God's judgment

^{KJV} **Isaiah 51:4** Hearken unto me, my people; and give ear unto me, O my nation: for a law shall proceed from me, and I will make my judgment to rest for a light of the people.