

Unveiling the Double Narrative

Using Typology to understand Christology in John's Prologue

Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house, who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old. -Matthew 13:52

Main Body Word Count: 5704

Introduction

In all of scripture, no passage holds greater significance for understanding the nature of Jesus Christ and his relationship to God than the Prologue of the Gospel of John. Yet, this very passage eludes clear explanation, becoming a source of rival interpretations and debate.

Biblical Unitarians have approached the interpretation of the Prologue via two main methods.

The two methods disagree in two main ways: whether "the beginning"¹ carries the same meaning as mentioned in Genesis or signifies a new beginning initiated by Jesus, and whether the prologue is background to the gospel or a summary of the events in the gospel. This paper proposes an innovative approach that recognizes the partial truth in both methods. It posits that the Prologue is a masterfully interwoven double story, simultaneously narrating the work of the logos in the Old Testament while recounting the life of Jesus.

To substantiate this new perspective, this paper delves into the role of allegory and typology within the context surrounding the composition of the Gospel. Additionally, it draws upon recent scholarship on the subject to reinforce its argument. Through a comprehensive analysis, this paper aims to shed new light on the Prologue of John, offering a fresh, compelling, and historically justifiable Unitarian interpretation of this theologically significant text.

The "Genesis Beginning" Interpretation

The first traditional method primarily regards the Prologue as a backdrop and introduction to the Gospel. "The beginning" is understood to be the same as the opening words of Genesis, depicting a primordial context. The logos is a personified attribute of God, active in the events and history of the Old Testament, and it is only later associated with Jesus when "the word became flesh"². Creation language in the prologue is God's act of creating the universe through His powerful spoken word, akin to "let there be light"³ in the book of Genesis. The brief mentions of John the Baptist in verses 6-8 and verse 15 are considered foreshadowings of Jesus's ministry to come.

There is a gradual shift in focus, moving from the logos as an impersonal divine attribute, toward its dwelling with the human Jesus, culminating dramatically in "the word became flesh"².

¹ Genesis 1:1 ESV

² John 1:14 ESV

³ Genesis 1:3 ESV

Jesus's life is seen as the next sequential act of the logos itself, dwelling within Jesus, who, as a human, shares a unique and unprecedented relationship with the logos but is not identical to it.

However, this interpretation faces challenges such as the early appearance of John the Baptist (verse 6). John the Baptist testifies about the light, but John the Baptist would not have been present to testify about the logos and light from Genesis. Moreover, several references to the logos before verse 14 seem to pertain to Jesus's life, notably verses 12 and 13, which speak of a new generation of children of God.

Notwithstanding, this interpretation has garnered support from numerous Biblical Unitarian proponents, including 19th-century Harvard Professor Andrews Norton⁴. It has become especially common in the 20th and 21st centuries, with advocates such as Dale Tuggy⁵, Dustin Smith⁶, Anthony Buzzard⁷, and others lending their voices to this perspective.

The “New Beginning” Interpretation

The "New Beginning" interpretation contrasts sharply with the previous view, treating the Prologue as a comprehensive summary of Jesus's earthly life and ministry. "The beginning" is not that of Genesis but a new beginning initiated by Jesus.

The creation passages in the Prologue are not seen as referring to the primordial creation of the cosmos but rather to the new creation initiated through Jesus. When the logos comes to "his own," it refers to Jesus coming to the Jewish people. "The word became flesh⁸" is understood as a concise depiction of Jesus's life.

This perspective resolves some of the issues with the "Old Beginning" method. The introduction of John the Baptist fits seamlessly into the chronology, and references throughout the Prologue align coherently with events in Jesus's life. However, it may raise concerns about properly acknowledging strong references to the Old Testament. Additionally, the language used to describe the logos as a human person appears unprecedented in Jewish literature both within and beyond the Old Testament. Most significantly for Biblical Unitarians, if the logos is equated with Jesus from the first verse, how can we reconcile John 1:1c, where the logos is called "God"?

Historically, this interpretation traces its origins to the 16th-century Socinians⁹. Recently, proponents like Bill Schlegel¹⁰, Andrew Perry¹¹, and others have supported this approach.

“Double Narrative” Interpretation

The "Double Narrative" interpretation seeks to unite the strengths of both interpretations. The Prologue is understood as concurrently presenting two intertwined stories, functioning as

⁴ (Norton 2006, 307)

⁵ (Tuggy 2021)

⁶ (Smith 2018)

⁷ (Buzzard 2019)

⁸ John 1:14 ESV

⁹ (Rees 1818, 63)

¹⁰ (Schlegel 2020)

¹¹ (Perry 2023, #)

both a background and a summary. The phrase "In the beginning"¹² carries a dual significance: one layer refers to the Genesis beginning, while the other alludes to the commencement of Jesus's ministry.

This double structure serves a specific purpose, illustrating that Jesus constitutes a "second act" of the logos, echoing and reenacting the "first act" of the logos. Such typological argumentation, common in the Gospel's context, supports Jesus's messianic identity.

While this method could potentially reconcile the differences between the two schools of interpretation by showing their partial correctness, it must demonstrate that the added complexity of combining both methods is genuinely supported by the text and not a case of overfitting a complicated model to limited data. Additionally, this approach challenges common Protestant hermeneutical habits that reject multiple layers of meaning in a text.

In this paper, we will confront these challenges head-on and present the merits of the "Double Narrative" approach, aiming to offer a compelling and comprehensive interpretation of the Prologue of the Gospel of John.

Typology and Allegory in the Johannine Context

In Early Christianity

Melito of Sardis was a Jewish convert to Christianity who wrote a hymn about Easter near 190AD. Sardis is one of the Asian churches mentioned in Revelation¹³, the region where John is often thought to have written the Gospel. His work is clearly very influenced by the gospel of John and explains the nature of typology itself.

*When you construct the model you require it,
because in it you can see the image of what is to be.
You prepare the material before the model,
you require it because of what will come about from it.¹⁴*

His point here is that all ideas are first communicated with a rough example or sketch before the final version. He continues,

*just as with the provisional examples, so it is with eternal things;
as it is with things on earth, so it is with the things in heaven¹⁴*

His language directly reflects Jesus's language of earthly and heavenly things when talking with Nicodemus¹⁵. The models are of earth and the final versions are of heaven.

¹² Genesis 1:1

¹³ Revelation 3:1 ESV

¹⁴ (Stewart-Sykes 2001, 46)

¹⁵ John 3:13 ESV

*For indeed the Lord's salvation and his truth were prefigured in the people,
and the decrees of the Gospel were proclaimed in advance by the law.
Thus the people was a type, like a preliminary sketch,
and the law was the writing of an analogy.
The Gospel is the narrative and fulfillment of the law,
and the church is the repository of reality.¹⁶*

Melito's theory of typology has the type come first, followed by the final version. The first type is temporary while the final type endures forever. The first is of earth, the second is of heaven. This applies to Biblical interpretation with the events of the Old Testament serving as types revealed in the gospel, Jesus, and the church.

This understanding finds further support in the writings of Irenaeus of Lyon, who claimed to have learned from Polycarp, a direct acquaintance of the author of the Gospel of John. Irenaeus speaks of Christ recapitulating all things, waging war against the enemy, and defeating Satan, demonstrating that Jesus is the archetype of all types, pulling together all allusions from the Old Testament into his singular life, culminating in the victory over evil¹⁷.

Justin Martyr in his dialogue with a Jewish opponent named Trypho from approximately 155-160AD argues that Jesus is the messiah saying:

You know that what the prophets said and did they veiled by parables and types, as you admitted to us; so that it was not easy for all to understand the most of what they said, since they concealed the truth by these means, that those who are eager to find out and learn it might do so with much labour.¹⁸

Trypho and his companions respond "We admitted this."

Overall, these early Christian writings provide compelling evidence for the validity of the "Double Narrative" interpretation, demonstrating the common use of typology in early Christianity and even contemporary Judaism.

In Paul

Perhaps, late second-century church fathers' use of typology does not necessarily indicate that such allegory is contextually appropriate for the Gospel of John. To explore this further, we can examine typology and allegory in the writings of the Apostle Paul.

In Galatians 4, Paul uses typology to interpret the story of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar, symbolizing the old and new covenants. He explicitly states, "Now this may be interpreted allegorically: these women are two covenants."¹⁹ This early use of allegorical and typological methods in the book of Galatians supports the plausibility that John's Prologue might employ similar approaches.

¹⁶ (Stewart-Sykes 2001, 47)

¹⁷ (Roberts and Rambaut, n.d.)

¹⁸ (Dods and Reith, n.d.)

¹⁹ Galatians 4:24 ESV

In 2 Corinthians, Paul again addresses the relationship between the two covenants. He parallels and contrasts their ministries, highlighting that both come with glory, but the first comes to an end while the second lasts forever²⁰. Paul refers to the new ministry as "permanent," akin to Melito of Sardis' explanation of typology, where the glory of the archetype overshadows and replaces the prior glory of the foretype. Moreover, Paul discusses the spiritual blindness of some Jews who read the old covenant without recognizing its true meaning, which can only be unveiled through Christ.

But their minds were hardened. For to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away.²¹

This notion aligns with Justin Martyr's explanation of the hidden meaning in the Old Testament, understood through typology and parable as referring to Jesus. This relationship between the two layers of the Prologue narrative mirrors the old covenant: retelling events and themes from the Old Testament while unveiling a new meaning in Christ, where the foretypes give way to the glory of the archetype—the life and accomplishments of Jesus. Allegory and typology are not a second century platonized development, but are within the New Testament itself.

In John

Typology finds support in both second-century Christian and Jewish contexts, as well as in the writings of the Apostle Paul, bolstering the argument for its contextual appropriateness in understanding the prologue. Furthermore, typological examples can be found within the Gospel of John beyond the prologue itself. For instance, in Jesus' dialogue with Nicodemus, he employs a typological comparison: "And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up"²². This "just as" argument clearly reflects typology and aligns with Justin Martyr's use of typology to argue the crucifixion of the Messiah to the Jews. Similarly, when John the Baptist first encounters Jesus, he exclaims, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"²³, employing an Old Testament symbol to make a profound theological statement about the identity and role of Jesus. These instances within the Gospel itself further support the notion that typology plays a significant role in conveying its theological messages.

The Theme of Misunderstanding

To gain a deeper understanding of the role and structure of typology in the Gospel of John, it is essential to explore the recurring theme of misunderstanding. Throughout the gospel, Jesus is often misunderstood by his audience, leading to confusion. Dustin Smith identifies the typical pattern in these occurrences: Jesus makes ambiguous statements, the conversation partners take him literally or respond inappropriately, and Jesus or the narrative clarifies the

²⁰ 2 Corinthians 3:11 ESV

²¹ 2 Corinthians 3:14 ESV

²² John 3:14 ESV

²³ John 1:29 ESV

intended meaning, which can still be misinterpreted²⁴. These scenes frequently involve Jesus using words or symbols with double meanings, where one level holds a literal, earthly, or Old Testament context, while the second level unveils a new spiritualized meaning centered on Christ through allegory.

For example, Jesus tells the Jews, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up"²⁵. He is misunderstood as referring to the stone temple in Jerusalem. However, the narrator explains that Jesus speaks allegorically, referring to his body as the archetypal temple.

Similarly, when Nicodemus comes to visit Jesus at night, Jesus tells him, "you must be born again/from above"²⁶. ἀνωθεν can mean "again" or "from above," with Nicodemus understanding the literal, earthly sense. Yet, Jesus is speaking about a new spiritual or heavenly birth. Jesus says "If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?"²⁷ matching the occurrences of the theme of misunderstanding. He speaks with divine knowledge, but his audience fails to grasp it, interpreting his words at an earthly level.

This theme also reveals Jesus's claim of greater importance for himself than the earthly symbol. When talking to the Samaritan woman, the earthly symbol is Jacob's well that provides physical water. Jesus uses it as an allegory for offering spiritual water. The woman questions if he is greater than their father Jacob.²⁸ Jesus responds, highlighting that the difference lies in duration: earthly water satisfies temporarily, while heavenly water satisfies eternally.

These misunderstandings exemplify the relationship between earthly foreshadows or foretypes from the Old Testament and the fuller heavenly archetype revealed in and through Christ, akin to the dual layers of meaning in the prologue. The earthly types provide helpful metaphors for understanding the heavenly truth unveiled in Jesus, but if comprehension of the earthly foretype does not lead to spiritual comprehension of the heaven knowledge, it is useless.

Contemporary Scholarly Developments

Fr. John Behr

Fr. John Behr, a prominent Eastern Orthodox theologian known for his scholarship in Patristics and the Gospel of John, shares common ground with the "new beginnings" Unitarian interpretation, as he places significant emphasis on Jesus's earthly life. What sets him apart from many Trinitarians is his opposition to the notion of the pre-incarnate word as a conscious being. Behr rejects readings of the Prologue that portray the incarnation as merely "an episode in the biography of the word"²⁹ as Rowan Williams puts it. According to Behr's theology, the logos transcends time and embodies eternal truth. As witnesses of Jesus's apocalyptic

²⁴ (Smith 2021)

²⁵ John 2:19 ESV

²⁶ John 3:3 ESV

²⁷ John 3:12 ESV

²⁸ John 4:12 ESV

²⁹ (Williams 2002, 244)

revelation, we come to understand the logos manifesting as flesh. Emphasizing the crucifixion as the pivotal moment when the word becomes flesh, Behr suggests that the Gospel of John served a liturgical purpose within the Johannine community, particularly associated with the Easter celebration³⁰. His scholarly contributions bolster many of the arguments presented in this paper, potentially bridging the perspectives of Unitarians and Trinitarians in approaching this difficult text.

Troels Engberg-Pedersen

Dr. Troels Engberg-Pedersen, a Danish New Testament scholar, delves into the philosophical context and assumptions underpinning the gospels' writings. He focuses on Stoicism and its understanding of the logos and the pneuma (holy spirit) as a way to better understand the New Testament in its context. Engberg-Pedersen argues that the logos and the pneuma are interconnected, representing two sides of the same coin. He sees the pneuma as a quasi-material divine substance within the universe, serving as a focal point for God's activity and capable of dwelling within individuals³¹.

His interpretation of the prologue aligns closely with the "old beginning" Unitarian view, viewing the logos as a personified divine attribute that later resides within the human Jesus. This union occurs when the "word becomes flesh" at Jesus's baptism³², leading Jesus to become the Christ, anointed with the logos and pneuma. While Behr emphasizes the significance of Jesus's life, his understanding of the logos leans towards a dualist, platonic, abstract, and timeless conception. In contrast, Dr. Engberg-Pedersen's monistic portrayal of the logos helps elucidate its ability to creatively act within creation in the Old Testament and become focused within Jesus in the New Testament.

Interpreting the Prologue

Verse 1

"Beginning"

The prologue commences with "in the beginning," which is often assumed to be the same beginning as in Genesis. However, examining the word "beginning" (ἀρχή), we find six uses outside the Prologue in John. Four of these pertain to the beginning of Jesus's ministry, one to the beginning of His signs, and only once to Satan as "a murderer from the beginning." In Mark's Gospel, we encounter "The beginning (ἀρχή) of the gospel of Jesus Christ"³³, referring to

³⁰ (Behr 2019, 82)

³¹ (Tideman 2022)

³² (Engberg-Pedersen 2017, 32)

³³ Mark 1:1 ESV

the start of Jesus's ministry. Similarly, Luke's opening mentions "those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses."³⁴

This evidence supports the interpretation that "the beginning" in the Prologue may refer to Jesus's ministry at its spiritual level, while also carrying an earthly meaning, echoing back to Genesis. In this way, the term encompasses both temporal and divine aspects, reflecting the dual layers of understanding present in the Prologue narrative.

“Word”

The term "word" (λόγος) in John 1:1 has sparked extensive discussions, drawing from philosophy and wisdom literature for definitions. Engberg-Pederson's explanation stands out as compelling since it considers the gospel's use of "word" without attributing a unique meaning to it in the prologue. According to this view, the "word" represents a form of divine activity in the world, directly associated with God but not identical to Him. This concept correlates with the notion of "spirit" as two sides of the same coin with a quasi-physical behavior, invisible yet perceptible in its effects, much like the wind.

When defending himself from the accusation of blasphemy, Jesus helps us understand the nature of "the word of God".

*Is it not written in your Law, 'I said, you are gods'? If he called them gods to whom the word of God came—and Scripture cannot be broken— do you say of him whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world, 'You are blaspheming,' because I said, 'I am the Son of God'?*³⁵

Those to whom the "word of God" came could be prophets, judges, or even the covenant people as a whole. But Jesus talks about the word as something apart for himself. This clarification highlights that the "word" in John is not connected to any pre-incarnate Jesus.

Thus, the relationship between the "word" and Jesus cannot be a simple one-to-one identity. Instead, Jesus is a manifestation, bearer, or typological reenactor of the word. The prologue, understood as having two layers of meaning, does not imply a pre-incarnate Jesus acting in the Old Testament and an incarnate Jesus acting in the New Testament. Rather, there is a single "word of God" that functions in two distinct ways. In the Old Testament, the "word of God" or "spirit" dwells within individuals temporarily and participates in the world's creation. In the New Testament, the activities of the "word" are focused through Jesus, who is filled with the spirit without measure. Additionally, those who believe in Jesus receive the indwelling of the word and spirit.

“With”

The translation "with God" for the Greek phrase "πρὸς τὸν Θεόν" is somewhat inadequate. According to Behr, when used with an accusative, its primary meaning denotes "motion or direction towards an object"³⁶. In his dynamic translation of the prologue, Behr

³⁴ Luke 1:2 ESV

³⁵ John 10:34-36 ESV

³⁶ (Behr 2019, 257)

renders 1:1b as "the word was and is going towards God"³⁷. This same phrase appears multiple times in the gospel, such as "going to the Father"³⁸.

Considering the repetition of "going to the Father" in the gospel, it is plausible to envision a similar dynamic mission in John 1:1b. While the Old Testament layer implies the word being "with" God as God creates, at a heavenly level, Jesus is portrayed as being on a mission directed towards God.

"God"

All uses of the word "God" in the Gospel refer to the Father with a few exceptions. The Jews accuse Jesus of blasphemy saying "because you, being a man, make yourself God." It's possible "God" refers to the Father with Jesus being accused of making himself the one God of Israel, but it could also mean making himself "a god". Jesus defends himself by pointing out that Psalm 82 calls men "gods" which is another exceptional use of the word in the gospel. The last and most important is where Thomas declares "My Lord and my God"³⁹ to Jesus. I agree with others that John 1:1c is to be understood as strongly connected with Thomas's declaration. Jesus is being called "God" here but it is in a rather delicate and intricate sense. "God" still refers here to God the Father, not God the Son or some other figure. God the Father can be addressed in and through Jesus. This is because Thomas finally understands "If you had known me, you would have known my Father also"⁴⁰ and

Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else believe on account of the works themselves.⁴¹

God the Father is present in Jesus through the indwelling of the spirit and the logos. Jesus's speech is God's speech and Jesus's actions are God's actions. Jesus is a fully cooperative agent of God in the world to the point of spiritual or even mystical unity between God and Jesus. This is why Thomas can address God "in" Jesus. In the same way John 1:1c calls Jesus "God" at the spiritual level of meaning when it says "the word was God". This is not a collapse of identity or distinction, but a strong statement about the fullness of their unity.

Verses 2-5

In verse 2, we see a rephrasing of 1:1a, possibly serving to close a chiasm – a common form of poetry at the time with parallelism between lines. John 1:1-1:2 can thus be seen as a summary within a summary, a prologue within the prologue.

³⁷ (Behr 2019, 260)

³⁸ John 14:12 ESV

³⁹ John 20:28 ESV

⁴⁰ John 14:7 ESV

⁴¹ John 14:9 ESV

Regarding verse 3, there is a debate about the placement of the phrase "what was made". I side with those who argue it fits better at the beginning of verse 4 than at the end of verse 3. In this double-layered sentence, the primary interpretation suggests that everything was made by God's word in the Genesis creation, echoing the Psalms' statement, "By the word of the Lord the heavens were made."

However, an important detail noted by Behr is the use of the word ἐγένετο ('to come to pass', 'to happen') in verse 3 instead of κτίσῃ (to 'create'). This allows for a broader range of interpretative options beyond the exclusive focus on Genesis "creating." It opens the possibility of a spiritual interpretation, suggesting that apart from Jesus and his ministry, nothing "came to be" in a new creation or a new action by God through His word in Jesus. Paul also references this idea of a new creation in Christ, as seen in the phrase, "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation."

John employs typology here, drawing a parallel between the Genesis creation by God's speaking power, the logos, and a new creation through the logos indwelling in Christ. Just as "beginning" had dual meanings, so does "came to pass." The exclusivity expressed in "without him nothing was made" also introduces a recurring Johannine theme of the exclusivity of Jesus Christ.

Verses 4 and 5 follow a pattern seen again in verse 12, where John breaks out of the double meaning narrative to elaborate on the spiritual significance of what he just said. The new creation brought about by Jesus is characterized by "life" and "the light of men." In John, "life" holds a profound meaning, signifying eternal life newly accessible through Jesus, as exemplified in His own resurrection.

Verses 6-8

This passage further emphasizes the theme of light, providing strong indications that the prologue is, at least on one level, focused on the life and ministry of Jesus. John the Baptist did not witness the light created in Genesis 1. Instead, the light he bears witness to is Jesus. The Prologue clarifies that John the Baptist is not the Messiah, likely combating claims from sects that believed in him, as mentioned in Acts 19.

If "the light" is the human Jesus in verse 7, then it is also the human Jesus in verse 5. Consequently, the human Jesus is also "the life" in verse 4, and the one through whom all things come to be in verse 3. Then the human Jesus must also be the logos in verses 1 and 2. This logical progression challenges those who view the prologue exclusively as a reference to the Old Testament, whether Unitarians with a personified attribute reading, or Trinitarians who believe it is about the pre-incarnate Christ.

Similarly, if the prologue is seen as exclusively focused on the primordial past, John the Baptist's appearance in verse 6 becomes an almost incomprehensible disruption of the sequence. Some scholars have proposed that the prologue is a reworking of a preexisting "logos hymn" with added sections about John the Baptist⁴². My interpretation offers a more parsimonious explanation.

⁴² (John 1998, 5-35)

Verses 9-13

Verse 9 Jesus introduces the significant term "world" (κόσμον) which carries multiple meanings here, including the created material order, human civilization, the attention of the masses, and the wicked Satanic rule. John cleverly exploits this ambiguity for theological purposes. There is a dispute about the proper interpretation of grammatical syntax as to whether or not "the true light" comes into the world or whether light is given to "everyone coming into the world". This ambiguity does not significantly affect our overall interpretative framework.

Notably, "the light" is mentioned five times in the prologue, while "the word" is mentioned only four times, showcasing the diverse titles and images used to understand Jesus's identity. This complexity challenges interpretations that exclusively view the prologue as referring to the pre-human career of "the logos." Instead, the prologue employs various designations such as "the logos," "the light," "the true light," "the life," and "the only begotten son," for Jesus.

At the spiritual level, verse 10 illustrates how these themes apply to Jesus. He is sent into the world, and though the new people of God come into being through him, the masses, especially those in Jerusalem, do not recognize who he truly is.

Verse 11 echoes similar themes from verse 10, continuing the dual narrative. On the old covenant level, the word of God came to the people of Israel but was rejected. This mirrors the new covenant level, where Jesus, a Jew, comes to Judea but is rejected by his own people. This parallelism offers reassurance to the audience that the Jewish rejection of Jesus as the Messiah was foreshadowed in the Old Testament.

Verse 12 and 13 serve as an explanation of the spiritual meaning in verses 10 and 11, akin to how verse 5 clarified verses 3 and 4. Those who believe in Jesus, though outsiders from the norm of "the world," are granted a new form of childhood. The old covenant childhood was tied to biological descent from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, this new spiritual childhood involves being born directly "of God," as being "born from above" Jesus explained to Nicodemus⁴³. This signifies a new covenant and new world creation of God through Jesus, entrusted to the Christian community through baptism and the reception of the Holy Spirit. Verses 12-13 challenge interpretations that view verses 10 and 11 as about a personified attribute or pre-incarnate logos in the Old Testament, as 12-13 clarify that the subject is the new children of God.

Verse 14

Verse 14 marks the first mention of "logos" since verse 1. Traditionally, this verse has been understood as referring to the incarnation, the moment when the pre-incarnate logos became a human being. However, the text does not mention conception or birth, nor any relevant details like Mary or Bethlehem. The immediately preceding verses have been discussing the accomplishments of the adult Jesus and John the Baptist.

The word "became" (ἐγένετο) in verse 14 has a broad range of meanings, similar to verse 3, and it could simply be translated as "was," as it is in other occurrences in the prologue. Thus, verse 14 might be best understood as a summary of what has been discussed before.

⁴³ John 3:3 ESV

The author may also be countering a theological tendency of his time to view Jesus as a purely spiritual being without flesh, just as 1 John explicitly condemns such a perspective and emphasizes that “every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God.” ⁴⁴

The language of “dwelling” echoes language from the intertestamental wisdom literature:

*Then the Creator of all things gave me a command, and my Creator pitched my tent.
He said, ‘Encamp in Jacob, and in Israel receive your inheritance.’*
-Sirach 24:8-11

This passage contains wisdom dwelling within Israel, in the holy tent, and within Zion. However, wisdom here is not within a particular person the way the prologue connects logos with Jesus.

The prologue might use logos instead of sophia because logos is grammatically masculine whereas sophia is feminine. Using masculine pronouns that could refer to either Jesus or the logos is thereby less confusing and the narrative isn’t interrupted by grammatical gender switches.

Verse 14 also introduces “glory” which is another important theme. Consistently, Jesus’s glorification is paradoxically his crucifixion. The author includes himself as an eye witness of this event.

Verse 15

Verse 15 echoes the themes found in verses 6-8 but has John the Baptist state that Jesus is “before” himself. While sometimes interpreted as evidence for preexistence, the theme of misunderstanding in the Gospel offers an alternative explanation. In a physical and literal sense, Jesus came after John the Baptist. However, at a spiritual level, Jesus comes first. John portrays the spiritual level, often misunderstood by its hearers, as referring to the kingdom of heaven, eternity, new life, new creation, and the new world order established by Jesus. From this heavenly perspective, Jesus is baptized with the Holy Spirit and born from above before John the Baptist. Thus, Jesus outranks John according to the logic of the kingdom of God, aligning with Paul’s statement on Christ’s preeminence in Colossians, where “he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead”. This heavenly logic also helps explain Jesus’s famous statement about Abraham (“before Abraham comes to be, I am he”⁴⁵).

Verses 16-17

In verse 16, Jesus is presented as the source of grace, a term found only in the Prologue. Verse 17 becomes a key support for my interpretation with the two layers explicitly split apart, paralleled, and contrasted. The law has come through Moses. The law here represents the commands, but also the pentateuch as scripture. The prologue does not condemn the writings of Moses or the Law; they are seen as good. However, their glory and relevance is surpassed by Jesus’s ministry, through which “grace and truth” are revealed. This

⁴⁴ 1 John 4:2 ESV

⁴⁵ John 8:58 ESV

spiritual or heavenly layer has been the underlying message of the prologue all along. Later in the Gospel, it is emphasized that the purpose of the Scriptures is to testify about Jesus, who brings eternal life, contrasting the temporal life brought about in the original creation.

Verse 18

Verse 18 is a heavily disputed verse in terms of its original content. Different manuscript traditions exist, each with their own supporters among contemporary translations. I find "only begotten son" more convincing than "only begotten god". Some argue the latter reading is more difficult, and therefore more likely to be original. However, in the 2nd century, especially in Alexandria, the scholarly Christians believed in a second "begotten god" which might have motivated scribes.

Throughout the Gospel, the invisibility of God is emphasized multiple times. This suggests that Jesus is not "God" in any direct or univocal sense. However, seeing Jesus is to see the Father, as Jesus, through his words and actions, reveals the character of God in human form. After ascending to the bosom of the Father, Jesus continued to make God known to the Christians through the Spirit, with revelatory experiences and spiritually guided insight. This verse concludes the prologue, bringing the narrative to the present moment.

Conclusion

The prologue of the Gospel of John intricately weaves together two narratives, providing a profound backdrop and summary of Jesus's life, which forms the primary focus of the gospel. Its purpose is to invite readers to delve into the Jewish tradition and scriptures with fresh eyes, perceiving them as signposts and parables through which the Spirit can illuminate the true identity and significance of Jesus. Moreover, the prologue serves a polemic function, offering typological arguments to establish Jesus as the Messiah. The parallel actions of God's word in the past and its manifestation in Jesus now highlight his divine mission. Symbols and titles such as "word," "light," "life," and "only begotten Son" provide multiple perspectives, revealing the grandeur of Jesus's mission. Through Jesus's work, a new creation emerges, marked by eternal life and spiritual union with God. While many characters in the gospel are stuck looking to Old Testament authorities for truth and failing to recognize Jesus's identity, John's readers are privileged to receive an eyewitness account, illuminating the profound new insights into the Old Testament unveiled now in the light of Christ.

This interpretation emphasizes that Jesus is not God himself, nor a member of the godhead, nor the incarnation of a pre-existent spirit being. Instead, Jesus is the uniquely and divinely empowered human agent, servant, and Son of the invisible God, accomplishing his work through the indwelling of God's own spirit and logos without measure. Through absolute submission and cooperation, Jesus achieves a mystical union with the invisible God, making this God visible in Jesus's own person.

The hope of offering this interpretation is to give Unitarians a bridge to come together in their interpretations of this passage by demonstrating that there is both an old and new beginning at work. The highest hope of this paper is to better understand the word of God.

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