
Exegesis 12: True Light in the World

Simon Martin

An exegesis of John 1: 1-18, the prologue to John's Gospel, with special reference to vs 9-11 and Christian witness in today's pluralist context.

Religious pluralism, and its challenge, is as widespread now as at the time of the Church's birth. No longer is it an issue facing only foreign missions, for within our society are many people of other faiths. Often we feel threatened, largely because we don't understand them or their beliefs. But as Christians, we have a biblical calling to be witnesses to Jesus Christ. How should we approach other religions and their adherents?

Our answer may be determined by what we believe Scripture teaches of God's involvement in non-Christian religions; ie what measure of truth they contain, and the extent to which they might testify to aspects of God's self-revelation. These are matters of current missiological debate, and they *should* influence how we witness to those of other faiths.

Our present scope is more limited. Our concerns are twofold: Firstly, how John himself 'bears witness' against the pluralist backdrop of his 1st century environment, looking at John 1:1-18, *as a whole*. Secondly, what John says about *how* God has revealed himself to men, and *what* has been revealed - looking in detail at John 1:9-11.

The Context of the Prologue

There exist almost as many views on the background to John's Gospel as there are commentators! Debate concerns the author's identity; his knowledge, and use, of contemporary religious ideas; the environment out of which he wrote; his intended audience; the Gospel's date of composition and circulation; and its purpose. Our initial concern, however, is the intellectual and religious environment informing both author and audience. From where did John get his ideas? What would his first readers have understood by his statements? Any valid exegesis rests on such bedrock.

Numerous origins for John's ideas have been proposed¹, with varying degrees of credibility; almost as wide a range has been canvassed in identifying the audience targetted by the Evangelist. Largely, this variety is due to the many supposed parallels 'discovered' between the ideas and language of John's Prologue (1:1-18), and those of other literary and religious traditions believed to be current when the Gospel was composed and circulated. Primarily this involves *logos* ('Word') terminology; contrasted light/darkness; 'enlightenment'; equivalence of light/life; and the incomprehensibility of 'divine light'.

Some parallels are almost certainly genuine and intentional (eg allusions to OT concepts like 'the word of the LORD'). But for others, we must question what relationship, if any, exists between John and these other sources. Is John merely being unoriginally derivative? Or demonstrating wholesale approval of pagan worldviews? Or 'reloading' contemporary terminology with distinctly Christian meaning, in seeking to commend the Good News to unbelievers (pagans and Jews) in his audience?

The Prologue as a Unit

John 1:1-18 is a single unit, showing clear thematic development and movement of action, pointing to a highlighted climax. Numerous studies of these verses have seen it

as a complex poetic chiasm, with pairs of ideas balanced around a central, fulcrum text. However, they seldom agree on either its detailed structure, or the central text, often resorting to arbitrary editing of the Prologue to produce a neater, more poetic, form. Taken as it stands in Scripture, though, these verses are not poetry but a type of rhythmic prose.

Yet there is *some* purposeful structuring. Thematic development towards a climax is demonstrated by a series of steps, formed by the overlapping of certain key words or phrases (eg *ho logos/ho logos, theon/theos* in 1:1; *autou egneto/autou egneto* in 1:2; *zoe en/zoe en, to phos/to phos, te skotia/he skotia* in 1:4-5), and by the insistent, almost drum-like, repetition of others (eg *phos ..phos ..photos ..phos ..photos ..phos ..phos ..photizei* ['light'] in 1:4-9; *marturian ..marturese ..marturese* ['witness'] in 1:7-8; *kosmon ..kosmo ..kosmos ..kosmos* ['world'] in 1:9-10). These features are clear even in English.

Similarly, the action of the passage proceeds, with increasing specificity, towards an identifiable time and place in human history. The opening words of the Prologue (*en arche*) echo exactly (and deliberately?) the opening words of Genesis, focussing the reader's attention on four things:- The existence of *ho logos* ('The Word') prior to the acts of creation; the differentiation from, yet intimate communion with, God of *ho logos* ('was with God'); His equivalence with God ('the Word was God'); and His role in creation ('through Him all things were made'). The pre-existence of 'the Word' is stressed by the reiteration of *en arche* in 1:2. 1:5 again echoes the creation account, with the interaction of light with primeval chaos and darkness. However, at this stage, the author has not disclosed *when* this has happened. Was it 'before' time? Or did *ho logos* relate to *zoe* ('life') and *phos* ('light') within recorded time?

With 1:6, though, the account moves on from this eternal, cosmic perspective, becoming increasingly grounded in identifiable human history. Initially it describes a *specific* man ('John'), his origin ('sent from God'), and his relationship to 'the light' (as 'witness'). Then we have a general overview of the interaction of this light with the world of men (1:11-13), concluding with the personalization of the testimony ('we have seen...' 1:14; 'we have all received...' 1:16). The focus of the action is the entry of the 'true light' into 'the world' (1:9-10) and the climax of the account is the explicit declaration of the Incarnation in 1:14.

Whatever is assumed as the intellectual background for this Gospel, nothing would adequately prepare the non-Christian reader for the shock of the divine 'Word' becoming 'flesh', the self-limitation of 'the light' within the bounds of concrete human existence. Such ideas ran contrary to popular expectation in every religious strand from which John has been held to have derived his ideas.

Logos terminology was a feature of almost all contemporary religions and philosophies of John's day, yet it is found nowhere else in John's Gospel outside 1:1-14. It is possible that its use solely in the Prologue demonstrates the subtlety of John's approach, rather than his unoriginality. Readers from many backgrounds might be caused to sit up and listen as the Prologue passes from familiar concepts into something decisively and uniquely Christian. The Prologue's purpose may well have been to encourage readers to go further, into the body of the Gospel, to discover more fully the radical message that disturbed the commonplaces of their worldview.

The detail of 1:9-11

Coming hard on the heels of the interlude concerning John the Baptist and his witness to the light, 1:9ff might almost be considered the Evangelist's summary of the *content* of the Baptist's testimony², as 1:9-11 cannot be removed from its context.

We see that 'the light' (always definite and specific, ie later occurrences recall its referent when introduced in 1:4) is found in three contexts:- before and outside of creation (1:1-

5); as the subject of the Baptist's testimony (1:6-8); and in 'the world' (1:9). Each new context involves recalling what was declared *previously* about this light.

In 1:4 we read - "In Him was life, and that life was the light of men." It is essential to recognise that 'the light' arises from 'the life', *not vice versa*. By tracing the pronouns back from 1:4, we find that it is *ho logos* ('the Word') in whom there is life.³ Life existed in 'the Word'; *this* constituted 'the light' of men. The disclosure here of 'life' in 'the Word' may well look towards the revelation of God in the real, human life of Christ Jesus, ie in 'the Word' become 'flesh'. 'Light' *only* came to men out of the real, human 'life' of 'the Word'; it was that 'life' which illuminated men.

The use of the present tense in 1:5 is also important; *phanei* ('shines' or 'is shining'), says something about the nature of the light. It did not *once* shine, but *has* shined and *continues* to shine; ie its time-relationship to the surrounding events remains undisclosed. From 1:5 alone, we cannot tell if the reference is to the non-temporal arena of 1:1-4, or to the human history of 1:6ff. It is also important to consider what is implied by 'darkness' and its inability to 'grasp the light'. ('Grasp' more literally, from *katelaben*, either in the sense of 'comprehend' or 'overcome'.)

[1:9] The Greek syntax alone cannot show whether 'coming into the world' refers to 'the light' (NIV) or 'every man' (NIV margin). Contemporary Jewish sayings are supposed to support the latter, but no true parallels are evident. In fact, "The true light...was coming into the world" makes sense in the context of the Prologue, with the theme of God's involvement in creation (through 'the Word'), and its disclosure through the Baptist's witness and the Word's enfleshment.

If, as argued earlier, the 'true light' refers back to the 'life in the Word' (1:4), then 1:9 is a clear reference to the entry of 'the Word' into the world. And if, as suggested, 1:9ff captures the Baptist's testimony, then it is certainly true that from *his* perspective, the 'true light' is *on the way*.

This light is 'true' (*alethinous*); not simply the opposite of 'untrue', but 'genuine' over against 'counterfeit', and even 'ultimate' by contrast with 'incomplete'. Significantly, it is here - with its entry into the world - that the 'light' is declared to be 'true', rather than at any point previously. Why is this so?

There are difficulties with the Greek word *kosmos*, here translated 'world'. In Greek it covers a broad semantic range, and we must ask, in each context, what is its intended meaning. It may mean the whole created order, or the world of men, or the stage on which events occur. Any of these might make sense here, especially the first one if this passage referred to God's general, extra-biblical revelation, and in view of the previously highlighted involvement of 'the Word' in creation. However, it can be argued that the Evangelist here maintains his almost universal use (elsewhere in both Gospel and Epistles) of *kosmos* as a negative reference to the created order (particularly the world of men) in rebellion against the Creator. If true, this would tie up two loose ends. Firstly, by explaining the emphasis on the 'genuineness' of 'the light' within this 'world', as stressed in 1:9. Secondly, in giving grounds for the ongoing 'shining' of 'the light' in 'the darkness' (1:5); 'the light' in 'the world' reveals and opposes the sin and rebellion that characterizes 'the world' (eg 3:19ff). Thus we should seriously assess the purpose for which the 'true light' was 'coming into the world'.

'The true light... gives light to (*photizei*) every man'. This might also be given a continuous sense - 'is giving...'. Again, it is not immediately obvious to what time-frame this refers; whether it is timeless, so implying that all men have always been given this light, or whether it is tied to the occasion of its 'coming into the world'. Further, it is not clear in what sense all men are 'given light', *photizei* can have the sense of 'enlighten' (ie an inner illumination), often taken as referring to God's general revelation. Such is

the customary interpretation; yet the present tense causes us to ask when this illumination occurs. Seen from one angle, the 'true light' has been illuminating since before the historical moment of Incarnation, and continues to do so through and after that event. Alternatively, illumination is only now here because at a specific time the 'true light' entered human history.

But *photizei* may also have the sense of 'shedding light on' (ie an external illumination). If such were its meaning here, there would be no reference to God's general self-revelation through creation and conscience; rather we should be seeing the specific event of the Incarnation as it sheds *its* 'true light'. This clearly corresponds with the stress of 1:4, that it was the *life* of 'the Word' that 'was the light of men'. The result of this 'light' of the Incarnation would be to cause 'all men' to choose between 'the Word' and 'the world', between light and darkness. This is a major emphasis elsewhere in John's Gospel; that the entry of the man Christ Jesus into the world produces an absolute division of this sort (eg 3:17ff). The Incarnation obliges men to *choose*.

But who chooses? We must ask to whom 'every man' refers. Again, the whole Gospel supports the view that 'every man' refers not to all people without exception, but to all without distinction, ie every *kind* of man. This, too, supports the idea that 'giving light' is something *other* than a universal general revelation of God through the pre-incarnate 'Word'.

[1:10] Although now 'in the world' 'the Word' remained unrecognised.⁴ Despite having been created through Him, 'the world' has neither recognised nor benefitted from the light that stems from 'life in the Word' (1:4). John's Gospel stresses the fact that those who believe, ie 'children of God' (1:12), no longer belong to 'the world' while still remaining in 'the world'. Yet to have become 'children of God' they must have been drawn towards 'the Word' *within 'the world'*.

[1:11] Not only was 'the Word' in 'the world', but he went specifically to 'his own' (*ta idia* - literally 'his own place'...his rightful property), yet 'his own' refused him (this time *hoi idioi* - 'his own people', ie the Jews). 'The Word' clearly and specifically went first to those, above all others, who should have recognised and received Him. On them, just as on all men, the 'true light' shone, yet with little apparent effect. The whole Gospel records how the Jews as a body attempted to eliminate 'the Word'. This echoes, then, the stress of 1:5, where darkness (in opposition to the 'true light') neither understands nor overcomes the light.

If we are to see 'the Word' and the 'true light', discussed in these verses, as indicators of God's general, non-salvific self-disclosure, then we must conclude that they are singularly ineffective, since not even those most 'in the know' (the Jews) recognised or accepted what was provided. On all the grounds discussed above, it seems far more likely that John's Prologue is considering the radical impact of the man Christ Jesus on all to whom He is revealed.

Conclusion

This brief exegesis of John's Prologue cannot give a full picture of the nature of God's involvement with non-Christian religions and ideologies. Passages such as Romans 1-2 and Acts 17:22ff must also be considered. Yet our study has highlighted some problems with commonly-held views on what John's Prologue does teach about God's self-revelation.

There are good grounds for thinking that John 1:1-18 *does not* disclose much about the truth-content of non-Christian faiths. Few would maintain that non-Christian ideologies bear witness to God's special (salvific) revelation; but our closer, contextual, reading of John 1:9-11 leads us to feel that greater numbers are guilty of over-interpreting this passage.

Viewing the Prologue as John's apologetic 'taster' for his Gospel, we see here God's self-revelation is strictly limited to the 'light' shed through the actual life of 'the Word'. Illumination has come, in John's terms of reference, only with the incarnation of 'the Word' in the life of the man Christ Jesus as testified to by the Baptist, and expounded throughout the Gospel.

The Evangelist's concern is not general revelation, nor the role of natural theology in Christian apologetic, nor even the ability of man's conscience to interpret the world in which he lives. His concern, both here and throughout the Gospel, is the decision-point, the 'Rubicon', that every person reaches in their encounter with the incarnate 'Word' - whether in the flesh, in the pages of Scripture, or in Spirit-endowed evangelism. Confrontation with Jesus presents every man with a decision; a decision which they will make whether consciously or otherwise.

This does not deny the role of general revelation within a New Testament apologetic, but we cannot squeeze it from John's Prologue. **John's objective was to bring people into encounter with Christ.**

Considering our other goal, we can assess how John achieves this with his audience. Like the best of preachers, he has something for almost everyone. His inclusive use of widely-appreciated concepts and terminology is a clear example of effective apologetic. Many, even beyond his original intended audience, would have been drawn to consider the Gospel's detailed claims for Jesus of Nazareth by the subtle use of the familiar alongside a shocking reversal of expectations (the 'earthing' of the divine, 'the Word' becoming 'flesh'!). People's cherished world - views would have been shaken.

We may learn from John on two counts.

Firstly, in his method. We may employ his apologetic approach in attracting the non-Christian faithful to consider the Good News. Yet we must be as well-versed in their world views as John was. This means friendships, interest, and understanding, not hit-and-run 'evangelism' employing utterly alien concepts and language. It will be hard work, since we must see that the Good News is communicated within a framework that they can understand. Like the 'Word' Himself, our communication must be 'incarnated'.

Secondly, in matters of central importance. We need to appreciate how God communicates knowledge of Himself to the people He has created; but this must be part of our ongoing desire to present the challenge of Jesus Christ clearly, intelligibly, and persuasively. In the midst of contemporary religious and ideological pluralism, we must ensure that both Christ and His claims are clearly grasped by those to whom we speak, even if they subsequently reject them both. **Let us be sure it is Christ and the Good News they are rejecting, and not us or our presentation of them.**

References

- 1 Origins proposed for the ideas behind John's Prologue have been:- Jewish (Old Testament, Palestinian & Hellenic Judaism); Greek (Philo of Alexandria, Stoics & traditions, both canonical & otherwise).
- 2 John's Gospel is noted for the difficulty of determining with certainty where 'report' ends and the Evangelist's 'commentary' begins (eg the point at which Jesus' own words stop in 3:16ff).
- 3 The use of verbs in the Greek here is significant. Here (1:4) *en* is the word translated 'was', rather than *egneto*, as elsewhere. The root verbs are not synonymous; *en* stresses existence not creation.
- 4 The pronoun *autou* in 'did not recognise him' is masculine, thus it agrees not with *phos* ('light'), which is neuter, but all the way back with *ho logos* ('the Word'), which is masculine.

Sources

1 Commentaries

- CK Barrett, THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ST. JOHN, SPCK, 1978, 2nd Edition
G R Beasley-Murray, JOHN, Word, 1987
F F Bruce, THE GOSPEL OF JOHN, Pickering & Inglis, 1983
D A Carson, THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JOHN, IVP/Eerdmans, 1991
C H Dodd, THE INTERPRETATION OF THE FOURTH GOSPEL, Cambridge University Press, 1953
B A Lindars, THE GOSPEL OF JOHN, Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1981
L Morris, THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JOHN, Eerdmans, 1971
L Newbigin, THE LIGHT HAS COME, Eerdmans, 1992

2 General

- J N D Anderson, CHRISTIANITY & WORLD RELIGIONS, IVP, 1984, Revised Edition
P Cotterell, MISSION & MEANINGLESSNESS, SPCK, 1990
B A Demarest, GENERAL REVELATION, Zondervan, 1982
M Goldsmith, WHAT ABOUT OTHER FAITHS?, Hodders, 1989
L Newbigin, THE OPEN SECRET, Eerdmans, 1978
C J H Wright, WHAT'S SO UNIQUE ABOUT JESUS?, MARC/Monarch, 1990

Simon Martin, BSc, MPhil, is a missionary from Uganda at Moorlands Bible College, doing an MA in OT studies before returning to Africa.

There is something which I want to make plain to you. We honour and respect evangelicals who disagree with us. We do not criticize them as individuals. We do not impute wrong motives to them. We grant that they are as sincere as we are and as honest as we are, and that they believe the gospel as we believe it. What, then, causes the difference? Well, the difference arises at this point. We interpret what they and we are agreed about as indicating that we should take a definite stand against the World Council of Churches and its teaching, and that for the following simple reason: we believe that the World Council and the great world church that is hoping to form is going to be the greatest hindrance of all to the preaching of this gospel and the salvation of the souls of men and women.

Let us be clear about this. We are concerned about principles, and personalities therefore should not enter in. We, in the British Evangelical Council, hold the view that not only can we do nothing to further the work of the World Council of Churches, but that we are called upon to oppose and resist it with all the might and strength and power that God gives us. This evening, I want to justify that position to you and I am going to do so by means of a well-known statement of the apostle Paul, found in the first epistle to the Corinthians, chapter 14 and verse 8: 'If the trumpet gives an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle?'

Dr D M Lloyd-Jones, Unity in the Truth, p 67, the recently published addresses at BEC Conferences, introduced and edited by Hywel R Jones.