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*THE STRUCTURE OF THE PROLOGUE TO THE
FOURTH GOSPEL.*

I.

THE relation of the Prologue to the main body of the Fourth Gospel has been a matter of debate ever since Harnack wrote his famous article in the *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* in 1892. Harnack instituted a comparison between the theological ideas involved in the statements of the Prologue, and the theological ideas which underlie the rest of the book, and came to the conclusion that they were out of harmony. The conception of Christ as the incarnation of the pre-existent Logos is never found, so Harnack argues, except in the opening verses of the Gospel. The only conclusion which is possible, he suggests, is to suppose that the Prologue was not intended to express the author's own theological position, but was designed merely to produce a favourable impression upon the minds of educated readers.

The general opinion among recent scholars is that Harnack has not made out his case. The contradictions which he finds between the theology of the Prologue and that of the rest of the book are very largely due to his own methods of exegesis. There can be little doubt that Harnack weakened his position by exaggerating the differences. The solution too which he proposed is most unsatisfactory. To write a preface as an *ad captandum* appeal to culture and then contradict it in almost every subsequent chapter would have been foolish in intention and disastrous in effect. The writer could have selected no better method of defeating his own ends.

But though Harnack has been answered, the problem remains. We are bound to suppose that the writer intended the Prologue to be a summary of the fundamental theological

ideas which he was about to develop and illustrate in the narrative. Why is it that he introduces some conceptions, that of the Logos, for instance, which never reappear, and omits others which are " writ large " on almost every page ? The first half of the question admits of a simple answer. The Logos idea is the writer's own interpretation of Christ, and he has sufficient sense of historical possibility to know that that interpretation could never have been used by Christ Himself. That he attributes to Christ some utterances which He could never have spoken is, of course, beyond question ; but it is also beyond question that he imposes upon himself a certain limitation, and freely recognises that there are some ideas which it would be absolutely unhistorical for him to put into the mouth of the Master.

The second half of the question constitutes a much greater difficulty. No one can read the Prologue without being startled by its omissions. The things it leaves out are almost as striking as the things which it inserts. If, as is almost universally assumed, the Fourth Gospel is written by the author of the first Epistle of John, it is remarkable, to say the least, that a writer who laid such tremendous emphasis on the significance of the death of Christ in the Epistle should not have made the slightest reference to the subject in the theological statement which forms the Prologue to the Fourth Gospel. Could one who wrote with such intense feeling the words, " If any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous, and He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but for the sins of the whole world," have passed over in absolute silence so vital an element in his faith in what purports to be a theological exposition of the Person of Christ ? It is true, of course, that he describes Christ, in contrast to Moses, as the bringer of " grace and truth," yet though the term " truth " is explicated in verse 18, no exposition is given of

“grace.” The Christ of the Prologue, as we have it, is the Revealer, not the Saviour. Could the writer have stopped at this point, especially when later passages in the Gospel make it quite clear that Jesus was to him the Saviour of the world? Why should the Prologue end with the Incarnation, when the Incarnation was certainly not the last article in the writer’s creed? Moreover, there are other characteristic ideas of the Fourth Gospel which find no place in the preface. The conception of “eternal life,” for instance, which is so prominent in the Gospel and the first Epistle is entirely missing in the Prologue. It is no explanation of the omission to argue that no opportunity presented itself for its introduction. The writer made an opportunity to introduce his conception of the “new birth,” and he might quite easily have introduced the idea of “eternal life.” Another striking omission is the absence of any reference to the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit, which is so prominent a feature in the theology of the latter part of the Gospel.

The omissions in the Prologue constitute the real problem. How can the Prologue be a summary of the writer’s theological position or an adequate introduction to the Gospel, when so many of the essential elements in his faith are completely ignored?

II.

I venture to suggest that the true solution of the problem is to be found in the supposition that the Prologue, as we find it in the first chapter of the Fourth Gospel, is incomplete and does not represent the writer’s full theological statement, as it came from his pen. To find the remainder we have to turn to a later chapter. The second portion of the original Prologue seems to me to be contained in the paragraph in chapter iii. 13–21. To demonstrate the truth of this hypothesis it will be necessary to prove (a) that the

paragraph in question does not belong to the position which it at present occupies, (b) that it does fit on most aptly to the conclusion of the Prologue in the first chapter.

This section, as even the most conservative scholars admit, cannot possibly be part of Christ's address to Nicodemus. Even Westcott decides "from its secondary character apart from all other considerations that it contains the reflections of the Evangelist and is not a continuation of the words of the Lord." But are these "reflections of the Evangelist" appropriate in their present position? There is nothing in the conversation between Christ and Nicodemus to suggest them. They are not a commentary upon anything which has transpired during the incident. On the contrary, there seems to be an obvious contradiction between this paragraph and verse 12. The words "If I have told you earthly things and ye believe not, how will ye believe if I tell you heavenly things?" seem to be intended to break off the discussion with Nicodemus and not to lead up to the statement which follows.

But if this section is out of place in the third chapter, it seems to fit on most admirably to the conclusion of the Prologue in i. 18. The statement of i. 18, "No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son which is in the bosom of the Father, He hath declared Him" is taken up and repeated in the words of iii. 13, "And no man hath ascended into heaven, but he that descended out of heaven, even the Son of Man which is in heaven." The presence of the article at the beginning of the verse "*and* no man hath ascended," shows that these words were originally attached to a previous clause. No such attachment is to be found in the third chapter. The attachment with i. 18 is perfect.

There are many theological conceptions too in this section which seem to link on with the statements of the Prologue. The comparison between Christ and Moses in i. 17 is carried

on further in iii. 14. "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up." The phrase "only begotten Son" occurs twice in this paragraph, though it is found nowhere else in the gospel except in the Prologue i. 18 (assuming δ *μονογενής* *υἱός* to be the true reading in this passage). The contrast between light and darkness which is brought out so vividly in i. 4-5 is developed in greater detail in iii. 19, 20. A further interesting parallel is the occurrence of the phrase "believe on the name" in both sections. The fact that the parallels between the two passages are so remarkable, and that the second seems to work out, according to the usual Johannine method, the line of thought commenced in the first, while there is a perfect point of attachment between the two, makes it extremely probable that they originally formed a single whole, and that they have been artificially separated from each other owing to the methods adopted by the author of the Fourth Gospel.

III.

Was there a third section to the original Prologue? The answer must almost certainly be in the affirmative. A strong case can be made out, as is done by Mr. Warburton Lewis, in his suggestive essay on "Disarrangements in the Fourth Gospel" for supposing that the section iii. 22-30 is out of place in this particular setting, and that it has been transferred by accident or design from its original position after ii. 12. The geographical situation certainly favours the proposed rearrangement. In iii. 22 we are told, "After these things came Jesus and His disciples into the land of Judæa." This is not the expression that we expect after the previous paragraphs which describe the work of Jesus in Jerusalem. A movement from Jerusalem to Aenon can scarcely be described as an entrance "into the land of

Judæa." The language used by the writer of the paragraph would be much more appropriate if it followed ii. 12, and described a journey from Galilee to the south. It may seem at first sight perhaps that the opening words of verse 31, "He that cometh from above is before all; he that is of the earth is of the earth, and of the earth he speaketh," continue the contrast between Christ and John the Baptist, which is the theme of the preceding section; but it is scarcely likely that a writer who in i. 6 spoke of the Baptist as a "man sent from God" would here allude to him as "he that is of the earth." The similar words addressed by Jesus to His opponents in viii. 23, "Ye are from beneath, I am from above; ye are of this world, I am not of this world," clearly show that the phrase "he that is of the earth" cannot refer to an ally and a sympathiser like John the Baptist, but indicates rather the men who are described in verse 19 as "loving darkness rather than light, because their deeds are evil." The numerous parallels between the language and thought of the two sections in chapter iii. which are now separated by the foreign paragraph—v. 22–30—have been well worked out and set forth in Mr. Lewis's book, and there is no need to repeat them here.

The conclusion, therefore, which I venture to offer is that what may still be called the Prologue (though probably it was originally a kind of theological tract) consisted of (a) i. 1–18 (omitting *vv.* 6–8 and 15), (b) iii. 13–21, (c) iii. 31–36.

IV.

But how are we to explain the presence of the intervening passages? Is it conceivable that this theological tract could have been so completely dis severed and its component parts placed at such a distance from each other?

There are one or two recognised facts which may help us to find a solution of the problem. The interesting addition

of the *pericope adulteræ* at the commencement of the eighth chapter proves that historical narrative was sometimes introduced into the text to illustrate and point the moral of abstract statements. There can be no doubt that the passage is inserted as a commentary upon the words of Jesus, "Ye judge after the flesh; I judge no man."

A second fact which is gradually receiving recognition from scholars is the belief that there have been serious displacements in the arrangement of the Fourth Gospel. It is almost certain, for instance, that the sixth chapter originally preceded the fifth. A considerable number of critics, including Spitta and Moffatt, hold that the section in chapter vii. 15-24 has been transposed from its natural position at the end of chapter v.

The two facts seem to me to afford us a hint which may explain the dislocation of the Prologue. We have already seen that its second and third sections in chapter iii. have been separated by an interpolation which originally belonged to a different context. Can we go a step further and discover a reason for the insertion of the narrative portions of the first and second chapters? When we turn to the Prologue in chapter i. it seems quite obvious, as Wendt and other scholars have pointed out, that the allusions to John the Baptist in verses 6-8 and 15 have been inserted prematurely. It is difficult to suppose that the writer could have broken off his profound theological statement to make a passing allusion to John the Baptist, and then have returned to take up the thread of his argument just where he had left it, and that he should have done this twice over. It seems highly probable that these references to John the Baptist were originally, like the *pericope adulteræ*, marginal notes, introduced in furtherance of the polemical aims of the author of the Gospel and his desire to sharpen the antithesis between Jesus and John the Baptist. If this be so,

if the early allusions to the Baptist are simply historical comments added for the purpose of illustrating the theological statements of the Prologue, may not the remainder of the intervening narrative belong to the same category? The testimonies of the disciples, for instance, may very well be the historical proof of the statement, "We beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth." The writer relates how the disciples (himself included, for we are bound to assume that he is the unnamed disciple in i. 35-40) directly they came into contact with Jesus instinctively saw in Him "the glory as of the only begotten," and leapt at once to the conclusion that He was the "Son of God, the King of Israel." The same explanation accounts for the narrative of the miracle at Cana of Galilee, where the significant phrase is added, "This beginning of miracles did Jesus in Cana of Galilee and manifested forth His glory." The story of the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus is a most appropriate commentary on the words of the Prologue, "which were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, but of God." The section concerning John the Baptist i. 19-34 may be explained perhaps on the same lines as the narratives which recount the testimony of the disciples. Another hypothesis is, however, more probable. Assuming that the insertions in i. 6-8 and 15 were originally marginal notes, added for reasons already stated, we may suppose that the paragraphs which describe the preaching of the Baptist are the expansion and illustration of these statements. The introductory phrase "This is the witness of John" takes up and develops the previous statement in i. 15, "John beareth witness of Him." There is only one section which cannot be explained as a commentary on some statement in the Prologue, viz., the section which describes the cleansing of the temple. The difficulties connected with the presence of this section

at so early a date in the narrative are enormous on any theory of the structure of the Gospel. May we not suppose that we have here a further dislocation, and that the passage got into this particular context by a later accident ?

V.

The reconstructed Prologue (to keep the common name for it) reads now as follows :—

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by Him ; and without Him was not anything made that hath been made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in the darkness, and the darkness apprehended it not. He was the true light which lighteth every man coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made by Him, and the world knew Him not. He came unto His own, and they that were His own received Him not. But as many as received Him, to them gave He the right to become children of God, even to them that believe on His name, which were born not of blood nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. And the word became flesh and tabernacled among us (and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten of the Father), full of grace and truth. For of His fullness we all received, and grace for grace. For the law was given by Moses : grace and truth came by Jesus Christ. No man hath seen God at any time : the only begotten Son which is in the bosom of the Father, He hath declared Him. And no man hath ascended into heaven, but He that descended out of heaven, even the Son of Man which is in heaven. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up : that whosoever believeth may in Him have eternal life. For God so loved the world that

He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believeth on Him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God sent not His Son into the world to judge the world; but that the world should be saved through Him. He that believeth on Him is not judged; he that believeth not hath been judged already because He hath not believed on the name of the only begotten Son of God. And this is the judgement that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light because their works were evil. For every one that doeth ill hateth the light and cometh not to the light lest his works should be reprov'd. But he that doeth the truth cometh to the light that his works may be made manifest that they are wrought in God. He that cometh from above is above all; he that is of the earth is of the earth, and of the earth he speaketh; He that cometh from heaven is above all. What He hath seen and heard of that He beareth witness, and no man receiveth His witness. He that hath received His witness hath set His seal to this that God is true. For He whom God hath sent speaketh the words of God, for He giveth not the Spirit by measure. The Father loveth the Son, and hath given all things into His hand. He that believeth on the Son hath eternal life; but he that believeth not the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abideth on Him."

One or two conclusions may be deduced from this reconstruction:—

(1) The Prologue, as reconstructed, forms a harmonious statement of theological belief. The thought marches on without break or interruption. The ideas gradually unfold themselves and sweep on in majestic flow.

(2) It probably forms, as has already been suggested, a kind of theological tract which was drawn up in the first instance to meet the needs of the cultured Christians in Ephesus. An attempt is made to answer all the pressing

problems that confronted the mind of the Church in the early days, i.e., How is Christ related to God? What was the object of His mission to the world? What is the significance of the Incarnation and the death upon the Cross? Why is it that He was so widely rejected? We may regard the Prologue, therefore, as the earliest summary of Christian theology and the pioneer of the later theological treatise.

(3) Around this theological statement the Fourth Gospel—or at any rate the early chapters of it—gradually grew up. The historical narrative is for the most part a commentary on its main theses.

(4) The apparent discrepancy between the theology of the Prologue and the theology of the rest of the Gospel, to which Harnack drew attention, vanishes. The transition from the conception of the Logos to the conception of the Son of God is now actually made by the writer himself, and the startling omissions in the Prologue of the first chapter are found to be present in its later sections in the third chapter, which are now artificially separated from it.

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