



THE BEREHA PAGE

“Examining . . . to see if these things are so” ~ Acts 17.11

A Fresh Look at John’s Prologue

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“The figure of Jesus as the embodiment of the glory of the Word of God controls the whole matter of the Christian religion.” ~ Edwyn Hoskyns

We [previously](#) noted statements that illustrate the difficulty many people in the modern West have in understanding the meaning of John’s reference to the “Word” (λόγος, *logos*). As stated by George Beasley-Murray, because “modern Western man . . . has lost the key to the idiom of the Word,” John’s prologue is “an enigma.” That was not true of the ancient world where “affirmations about the Word of God had been at home . . . for a millennium or more.” In support of that statement, Beasley-Murray surveys the use of *logos* by the Jews, Assyrians, Babylonians, Egyptians, Romans, Greeks, and others, and then writes, “This brief review suffices to show that the Word of God was an ancient and international concept, with connotations buried deep in the cultures of the Eastern and Western world” (Beasley-Murray 1989, 19, 22, 25).

John’s use of *logos* served as a gateway for him to help people across the ancient world understand the gospel. At the heart of his effort was his revelation that the *logos* those cultures had been groping for was to be found in the person of Jesus, the Messiah (cf. John 1.17). Beasley-Murray highlights two features of the Prologue to underscore this point.

First, he calls attention to its stand-alone nature and possible roots in an early Christian hymn. Unlike the introductions to the other Gospels, the Prologue to John stands as a complete composition which could conceivably be detached from the rest of the writing and function as a catechetical statement about Jesus’s identity. While there is no evidence that it ever circulated on its own, numerous scholars believe it was adapted from a hymn that was used by Christians prior to the writing of the Gospel, a thesis given some measure of support by the recognition of other texts that are hymnic in nature (e.g., Phil 2.6–11; Col 1.15–20; 1 Tim 3.16; and various texts in Revelation) (Beasley-Murray 1989, 19).

Notice the word *adapted*. While much of the Prologue has a poetic quality to it (see below), some statements are best understood as insertions, brief explanations or foreshadowings of themes or elements in the story John is introducing in this passage. For example, the statements about John the Baptist in verses 6–8 were, in Beasley-Murray’s view, probably inserted “because in his time there were followers of John who declared that he was the Light that brings salvation.” Verses 12b–13, 15, and 17 serve similar functions in John’s effort to bring about and/or strengthen belief in Jesus (John 20.30–31) (of interest is that the translators of the ESV and others set apart verse 15 in parentheses). “Verse 9 is uncertain; it would follow on verse 5 well, and closely link verses 1–5 to 10–12b; moreover, its thought of the Word as the light that illuminates every man continues that of verses 4–5” (Beasley-Murray 1989, 20).

Having noted the value of such insertions and the poetic possibilities of verses 1–5, 10–12b, 14, 16, 18, Beasley-Murray suggests that “the hymn of the Word of God may therefore have read as follows” [note that he includes verse 9 in this postulation]:

In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God.
This was in the beginning with God.
Everything came into existence through him,
and apart from him not a thing came into being.
What has come into being had its life in him,
and the life was the light of men;
and the light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness did not grasp it.
(This was the authentic light,
which enlightens every person by his coming into
the world.)
He was in the world,
and the world came into existence through him,
and the world did not know him.
He came to his own domain

and his own people did not accept him,
But to all who did accept him,
he gave authority to become God's children.
And the Word became flesh,
and pitched his tent among us,
and we gazed on his glory,
glory such as belongs to the only Son from the
Father,
full of grace and truth.
For a share of his fullness we all received,
even grace upon grace.
God no one has ever seen.
The only Son, by nature God, who is every close
to the Father's heart,
he has brought knowledge of him (Beasley-Murray,
1989, 20–21; his translation).

In response to those who would ask why John would have chosen to utilize a hymn in his introduction, Beasley-Murray responds, “the answer must be that it perfectly expressed his theology concerning Jesus. And indeed, not simply his own, but that of the churches he served.” I submit that taking a fresh look at this familiar passage in light of Beasley-Murray’s proposal serves to accentuate what makes John’s understanding of the *logos* stand out from all the others in his world. We may, for example, be more likely to notice the change from the third person pronouns in verses 1–5 and 10–12 to the first person plurals in verses 14 and 16, personal expressions that use “the language of confession” (Beasley-Murray 1989, 21). And that points us to the second, more important, feature of the Prologue that we should emphasize.

As Beasley-Murray notes later in his discussion, “there can be no doubt that the *entire* description of verses 1–13 would have made perfect sense to non-Christian people of all nationalities who knew about the Word.” What would not have made sense, and would have certainly roused their interest, was “the astonishing assertion [that] the Word *became* flesh” (Beasley-Murray, 25–26), had “pitched his tent among us” (Beasley-Murray’s translation), and brought the grace needed to provide and the truth needed to understand the enlightenment people in all cultures had been seeking. In the words of A. Loisy, “The theology of the incarnation is the key of the entire book, and it dominates it from the first line to the last” (Loisy 1903, 98; in Beasley-Murray 1989, 22).

To re-word the question with which I began the previous article on John’s Prologue, “We’ve read it and affirm it, but do we take its claim for granted?” If we do, perhaps the fresh look at the text we’ve undertaken here will enhance our appreciation of that claim. If that occurs, our effort will have been worth our time.

Works Cited

- Beasley-Murray, George R. 1989. *Word Biblical Themes: John*. ed. David A. Hubbard. Word Publishing.
Hoskyns, Edwin. 1943. *The Fourth Gospel*. Faber and Faber. In Beasley-Murray 1989.
Loisy, A. 1903. *Le quatrième Evangélie*. Paris. In Beasley-Murray, 1989.

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From the Essays, Papers, and Reviews page ([here](#)), “Will Our Children Have Faith?” ([here](#)) — This is a good question for several reasons; together they should serve to remind us of important aspects of child nurturing.

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