February 2003

The Hellenization of the Gospel: The Prologue of John and the Joseph Smith Translation

Nicholas Birch

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/studiaantiqua

Part of the Biblical Studies Commons, and the History Commons

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation


This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Studia Antiqua by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
The Hellenization of the Gospel: The Prologue of John and the Joseph Smith Translation

Nicholas Birch

The prologue of the Gospel of John is one of the most hotly debated sections of scripture. It is also one of the most beautifully poetic sections in the Bible. Many argue that the words, ideas, and writing styles of the prologue show that it was composed at a later date than the remainder of John. Other scholars argue that the poetry of the section can be used to date it to the period of the writing of John. Even with this evidence, there is serious question as to the source of the ideas presented in the prologue. Further examination of the prologue using the poetry of the section along with some additional tools provides interesting and surprising insights into the original message and purpose of the work.

Generally, an introduction serves to gently introduce a reader into material that may be new, foreign, or difficult. An introduction helps connect what the reader already knows with what the author is trying to present. However, one introduction that fails quite miserably on all these points is the prologue to the Gospel of John. This introduction has confused readers and done little more than create debate and disagreement for centuries.

The prologue, the first eighteen verses of John, has been called “... the most beautiful, the most profound, the most beloved passage in the Christian Scriptures.”¹ It has been used as a blessing

of newly baptized children and the final prayer of Roman Mass. The prologue is beautiful in its language. It uses profound imagery that has endeared the passage to Christians throughout time. However, the prologue is also one of the most confusing, most disagreed upon passages in scripture. Its ideas seem to be quite different from the teachings of the other Gospels, and even the remainder of Gospel of John, some appearing nowhere else in scripture. Raymond Brown said of it, “The prologue is written in a carefully constructed, interlocking poetic pattern found but rarely in the Gospel proper. Moreover, the prologue employs important theological terms not found elsewhere in the Gospel, for example, logos (“Word” personified), charis (“grace” or “covenant love”), pleroma (fullness).”

The debate over the prologue centers on the authorship of it and the rest of the gospel. The differences of both writing style and doctrine have lead many to declare that the prologue is the work of a different writer then the gospel proper. The disputed ideas also relate closely to ideas from Hellenistic philosophy of the time. This gives further ammunition to the detractors, and highlights the possibility of the prologue coming from a Greek thinker. Much of John has been subjected to similar questioning. H. M. Jackson says of the book,

Critical scholarship has long since concluded that, in the form in which we have it, the work is the end result of the labors of what may have been a long line of redactors and that it cannot, consequently, be regarded as having had an “author” in the sense of a single composer working, with whatever sort of prior material, in a single unit of time, however long.

---

3 Ibid, XXIV.
In answer to the problems raised over the prologue, some of its defenders have appealed to its poetry. A counter-argument that has been brought forward is that these verses may be a Christian hymn sung by early church members,⁵ which the author quoted as a poetic opening to his work. Unfortunately there is no external evidence for the existence of such a hymn outside John. Further, even if such evidence could be found, proof for the original inclusion of the hymn in the Gospel would still be lacking. The hymn could have been added in at any time in the long history of the Gospel. The ideas still would clash with the rest of the Gospel, and in fact, with all four Gospels and the rest of the books of the New Testament. Without a date for the hymn, it cannot even be firmly placed as a possible source for the author of the original work.

Using poetry to separate additions and changes in the scriptures has found use in other places. Duane Garrett has recently applied a similar method to the story of Noah in Genesis. Garrett points out that the entire narrative is written in chiasmic form and uses this to dispute the theory that the book was taken from multiple outside sources.⁶ William O. Walker, Jr. used a similar chiasmic-based argument to label 2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1 a latter addition to the scriptures.⁷ The prologue poem also seems to be broken and have non-poetic insertions, but these are incidental to the question at hand: is the prologue poem the insertion of a later hand?

The poetry in the prologue is of a very specific nature. It does not follow meter and rhyme such as modern poems use. The very particular manner of poetry the prologue follows gives insight into its origin. It suggests that the poem was at least available at the

---

⁵ Kirk, 12.


time of the penning of John. In support of this thesis, Howard M. Teeple pointed out that the first few verses of the Gospel carry characteristics of Hebrew poetry. He states his belief that the writer of the gospel used an early Christian hymn that was based on a Hebrew poem to open his work.\(^8\) If this were the case, the hymn must have circulated from early in the history of Christianity. At an early date, many of the Christian converts had a Hebrew background and were familiar with Hebrew literature; the hymn, part of their old religion, was easily adapted into the new. If the hymn were compiled then, the doctrines would be from those taught by the very earliest church fathers.

Teeple bases his findings on a style of Semitic poetry called chain linkage. In chain-link poetry, words are repeated in pairs to tie together phrases and sentences. (“Hebrew poetry differs itself fundamentally from modern poetry in that it concerns itself not with sound rhymes but rather with rhymes of thought.”\(^9\)) Teeple divides the hymn into Semitic and Hellenist parts. In the former he puts; verse 1, most of verse 3, verses 4-5, and verse 11. His Hebrew poem reads like this:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things came to be through it, and without it nothing came to be. In it was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. It came to its own, and its own did not receive it.\(^{10}\)

---


\(^{10}\) Teeple, 135.
The Christian hymn addition consists of parts of verse 3, 9, and 12, as well as verses 13, 14, 16, and 18.11 The chain-link poetry style can be seen in the Hebrew poem as follows:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things came to be through it, and without it nothing came to be. In it was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not over come it. It came to its own, and its own did not receive it.

Important words—such as Word, God, and life—are repeated to give rhythm and unity to the piece. The portions that Teeple determines to be Greek additions do not show this pattern. This allows the separation of the pieces of the prologue from the Hebrew and Greek worlds. However, even with the evidence for an early origin of the hymn, Teeple states his belief that it is still a later addition to the scripture. He bases this on the differences of ideas and wording not found elsewhere in John.12

Most agree with Teeple, that the focus of this prologue seems to be distinctly Hellenistic. The opening verses deal with the “Word.” This is a translation of the Greek word logos. The Logos was referred to by many Greek philosophers around the time of Christ. The term was originally used by the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus, who used the word to name what he felt was the controlling “reason” behind the universe. This force was also the way that men came to know the truth.13 The Logos touched all men, but most chose not to respond to its teachings; “Although intimately connected to the Logos, men keep setting themselves against it.” 14

---

11 Ibid., 136.
12 Ibid., 135.
14 Ibid., 68.
Later, the idea was adopted and modified by a number of Greek thinkers. Around the time of Christ, some of the more influential of these were the Stoics and the Alexandrian Jewish philosopher Philo. The Stoics believed that God existed in everything in the physical universe through the Logos, “as honey does the honey comb.”\(^{15}\) Philo was a Jew who tried to harmonize Hebrew and Greek thinking. Philo used *logos* in a number of different ways, often similar to the Stoics’ concept of an omnipresent God.\(^{16}\) He also used the term much as Heraclitus did, speaking of the Logos as the unseen world that the physical world is patterned on, this unseen world stemming from God’s thinking of the perfect Forms.\(^{17}\) He also referred to it as the first-born son of uncreated Father, foremost of the angels, and in each human mind, though only in part.\(^{18}\) These ideas of the properties of the Greek Logos match almost exactly the properties of the Word presented in the prologue. Both are universal, the power behind creation, and the enlighteners of all men. Both are presented as god-like beings.

To answer these arguments, defenders refer to a number of ancient Hebrew sources. Among them are the Creation account in the book of Genesis and Proverbs 8. In Genesis, the word of the Lord is the power through which the cosmos is created (see also Psalm 33:6), similar to the creative powers of the word in the prologue of John. In Proverbs 8 and in many other surviving pieces of Hebrew literature collectively called the Wisdom literature, the idea of wisdom is personified. In Proverbs, wisdom is able to cry, dwell, and stand. The idea of personifying an abstract idea was not totally unfamiliar to the Hebrews. These arguments are used to

---


\(^{16}\) Ibid.


\(^{18}\) Ibid., 26.
point to the possibility of the Word of the prologue being a Hebrew construction. James Randal Harris (1917) felt the author used a “recast Hymn by substituting logos for sophia and attaching this ‘Logos-Hymn’ to the gospel as its preface.” Those making these arguments surmise that the author was using Hebrew concepts to teach the nature of God, particularly omnipresence and eternal existence.

Did the author intend to teach the ideas of a logos-god? Or were the characteristics of a universal, omnipresent god latter added to the words of the apostle by one seeking to validate his own doctrine? Teeple shows the original source was Hebrew, but we are unsure which, if any, additions to the poem the author of the prologue intended to include. Even with the Hebrew poetry in the prologue, Teeple still believes that the poem was not meant by the original author to be part of his work. We would need the original work of John in order to tell if the author used a Hebrew poem with the ideas already added in, or if he only used the poem and another hand added in the Hellenistic ideas later. Fortunately, we have an additional tool to separate the additions from the original text. In 1830, Joseph Smith was given revelations restoring the “plan and precious things” of the Bible. We find his corrections in the Pearl of Great Price and the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible. One of the passages of scripture on which he was eventually given revelation was the prologue of John. By looking at the Translation, we can gain insight into the original author’s words.

What is surprising is that the words of the Joseph Smith Translation fit as well, if not better, then the text Teeple uses to show Hebraisms in the prologue. Assuming the Joseph Smith Translation to reflect a more original text, this gives evidence that the original intent of the author was to at least to use Hebrew poem as source, if not a Greek/Hebrew hymn. The poetry in the

19 Teeple, 127–8.
Joseph Smith translation is underlined in the following:

In the beginning was the Gospel preached through the Son. And the gospel was the word, and the word was with the Son, and the Son was with God, and the Son was of God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was the gospel, and the gospel was the life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in the world, and the world perceiveth it not. (Verse 11 reads the same in both versions.)

The patterns show the Semitic origins of Joseph Smith's restored text. The changes Joseph Smith made show the forms of chain-linkage, and not just where words were replaced. Entirely new passages link to each other and to the old passages in the chains. The Hebrew style is maintained, but the ideas that so many feel are added to the gospel from Greek philosophy are not found. Further, there is no longer a need for a mixture of Greek and Hebrew in a hymn. The ideas are not Hellenistic in nature. The logos-god is conspicuously absent. Instead of the Word, we find the word. This word is equivalent to the gospel. The word of the Lord is used in the Old Testament for His commandments and gospel (see Num. 15:31, 1 Chron. 16:15). Also, early Christians used the word as a name for the Gospel.20

The Greek logos can also mean a saying. Using this meaning, the poem tells us that the gospel was what was said (taught), and it was with the Son. In addition, to the Greek philosophers, reason, also logos, was the supreme truth. To the Greek mind—Greek most likely being the language John wrote in—the text conveys that the gospel, from the beginning, is logos, reason and truth. This gospel was preached through the Son, who has reason and

---

20 Brown, 519.
truth, who has *logos*. The author writes to an audience raised in a culture where *logos* is truth, and explains to them where this truth comes from.

We can also see the author’s insertions into the Hebrew poetry. The two lines that do not fit the chain-link style are “In the beginning was the Gospel preached through the Son,” and “The same was in the beginning with God.” Though perhaps part of a hymn, they also could be the additions of the evangelist himself. His reason for adding these lines may have been to make the poem more suitable for use as his introduction. These lines are much like the beginning of Genesis, where the writer starts at the beginning. This is not a new idea, a new philosophy of a radical sect. It is what has been from the beginning. Neither is the Son new, but has been guiding the search for truth *from the beginning*. This same Son was also in the beginning with God. The same is the creator of all things.

The gospel being a life and a light is also a Hebrew concept. Many times in the Old Testament, following God’s commands is referred to as the way of life. In Psalm 119:105, the word of the Lord is called a lamp and a light. To the Jews, the gospel was a way of life. The laws set down by Moses by the word of the Lord lead them, lighted their paths, in a way that kept them alive spiritually.

In his book on the use of poetry in the Old Testament, Sanford Calvin Yoder explores the use of poems in biblical texts. It was quite common for biblical authors to quote outside poems to present ideas in their work. Many of the poems that we find in the Old Testament are from sources that are lost to us now.21 It is not surprising therefore to see the author of John to be following the same course in quoting a poem to open his work. The poem may also have been familiar to the audience he wrote to, connecting ideas they knew to those he was trying to teach them. The

---

21 Yoder, 6.
availability of Hebrew poems to an Aramaic-speaking author at the turn of the era should not be surprising. Hebrew was used as the language of the Jewish synagogues at this time, and would be familiar to the author.22

The overall message of this restored passage is quite different from the message of the Word. Here, we see a Son who has led men down the path of truth from the beginning. He is the Creator and the Lawgiver. It is a basic introduction to the premortal Christ. It connects the Hellenistic ideas of reason seeking truth with the Hebrew ideas of revealed truths, by explaining where truth, logos, comes from.

Further, the ideas of Christ’s words and his light are common throughout the rest of the gospel of John. Both occur more in the gospel of John, even without the prologue, than in of the Synoptic gospels. This is quite different than the prologue as it survives today, where certain words are found only in the prologue. The alien ideas there are what set it apart from the rest of the Gospel. In this Hebrew poem, the evangelist found ideas similar to those he wanted to present about the life of Christ and therefore used the poem to open his work. The rest of the prologue simply furthers the introduction to Christ, bringing in the opening of the Christian experience with John the Baptist. It does not need the addition of a Greek hymn mixed with the Hebrew poem. Teeple gives no evidence that the rest of the prologue (what he considers the Greek portion of the hymn) is lyrical rather than prosaic. The direct use of a Hebrew poem by the original author of the Gospel eliminates the need to postulate the existence of another author.

In contrast to how the Joseph Smith version of the prologue simplifies and unifies the rest of the Gospel, the version as it has been passed through the ages has the opposite effect. The Word version of the passage focuses on equating the truth with a God.

22 Brown, CXXIX.
As Teeple points out, “The author has converted the Logos from the abstract Word of God in the poem to a definite being, a god.” Based on the Joseph Smith Translation, this was most likely not the intent of the original author of the prologue.

---

23 Teeple, 137.