

Lectures on the Prologue of the Gospel of John

© David H. Linden

This is a skillfully crafted opening for the book. One may wonder how much time the apostle spent arranging this material. Now we must pay careful attention to what he said and to how he has presented it. One way John shows his emphasis is by the arrangement of his material. See Appendix 1A: The ABBA Structure of the Prologue.

The Structure

- A. The Word's early activity in creation with the Father (1:1-5)
 - B. John's witness concerning the light (1:6-8)
 - C. The incarnation of the Word and becoming God's children (1:9-14)
 - B. John's witness concerning the Word's preeminence (1:15)
- A. The Word's recent activity in the new creation revealing the Father (1:16-18)¹

Concerning the two B's: The obvious thing to see is that there is a mention of John the Baptist twice. In the style of Western writing, we have a strong tendency to pull together similar material, but the apostle does not. That means he has packaged what he emphasizes between two sets of material about the Baptist.² His goal was to apply the promise to whoever believes, v.12.

Concerning the two A's: Three features stand out.

- a.) The Son is *with the Father* in v.1 and *in the Father's bosom* in v. 18. This closeness is the second item in v.1 and the second last in v.18. That is not an accident; it is a way of framing the prologue.
- b) The Word is God in v.1 and the Only-begotten God in v.18. These statements appear as the third from the beginning and the third from the end. There are not as many explicit statements that Jesus is God in the NT as we might expect, therefore the appearance of two of them in the same prologue must make us notice that this is the starting point in this Gospel. The two A's are parallel.
- c) What is done is *through* the Word in v. 3 and *through* Jesus Christ in v. 17.

Concerning the two B's: The outside frame (the two A's) is Who Christ is and what is accomplished through Him. The two B's speak of the ministry of John the Baptist. That arrangement gives the inside section special emphasis. This does NOT mean it is more important or more true. This Gospel begins with the foundation and eternal truth of the life of God! The Word was in the beginning; He is eternal; He was with His Father. The gospel message is not merely to inform of the facts of God. This Gospel is written to urge people to believe in Christ. John is very focused in pursuing that goal.

¹ Revised yet taken mostly from Köstenberger (p.21) who pays special attention to the ABBA structure of the book.

² In much writing now, the shorter way to distinguish between John the Baptist and John the Apostle is to refer to one as "the Baptist", which simply means he was John the Baptizer. The other is often called simply the Evangelist.

Concerning the C: This section also has an ABBA structure, which is evidence that it was very carefully constructed.

- D. Coming into the world, yet not known by it
 - E. He was rejected by His own
 - F. Receiving Him
 - G. The right to be children of God
 - F. Believing in Him
 - E. What caused the opposite of rejection – being born of God
- D. Coming in flesh to reveal the glory of God

The Prologue sends a strong signal that John will follow the themes of Christ coming here (sent by the Father), His being rejected and accepted, and why it is that some do believe and others do not. John will speak of believing almost 100 times, three times more than the other Gospels combined! Though he speaks often of eternal life, here he begins by holding out the wonderful benefit of believing – that those who do are given by God the family rights of His children. First, they must become His children by receiving Christ. John does not announce that as covenant people, that they are God’s children already *apart from conversion*.

This Gospel is a God-given message of evangelism. The first half of the book will say much about becoming God’s children, while the latter part (except for the passion narratives) will be devoted to teaching God’s children. The only time Jesus ever taught an audience that was not a mixture of believers and unbelievers was after Judas left in 13:30. That very brief time – comprised of one evening! – receives more than four chapters in John.

1:1,2 The apostle opens with words that immediately bring to mind Genesis 1:1. His Jewish readers hearing “in the beginning” would expect *God* as the next word, but John says “the Word”! This is surely deliberate since some things that follow parallel creation in Genesis 1. In the first creation, light came first and gave life to things dependant on it, and darkness was separated from the light, and unable to prevent it.

To say that the Word was there in the beginning asserts His eternity – and thus His deity. There was no beginning in which He was not already there. The Father did not precede Him and create Him.³ We are not left with only a clear implication, for it says plainly in this context that the Word was God. Before doing so, it connects Christ to His Father – Who is mentioned about 90 times in this Gospel. So before it announces that He is God, it states His closeness to God the Father. This is typical of the rest of this Gospel. Jesus spoke of His Father more than anything and in relation to everything. Jesus coming to save us is a wonderful truth, but the foundation of

³ The idea that Jesus was the first thing created comes from some false teachers who misunderstand Colossians 1:15, “the firstborn of all creation”. There Jesus is said to be pre-eminent over creation as its Creator. *Firstborn* may indicate the position of the oldest or older son in Oriental society, but the emphasis can simply be on a person’s position without reference to time. A son born after a sister was still called the firstborn even though he was not the first one born in that home. The double inheritance of the firstborn Rueben actually went to Jacob’s favored son Joseph, who had two tribes of Israel from him (Manasseh and Ephraim) though Joseph was born after many of his brothers. In the case of Joseph’s sons, his father Jacob gave the greater position to the second one, Ephraim, treating him as the firstborn. (Genesis 29,30,48 and especially 49:3,4,22-26)

all He did was to please the Father Who sent Him (8:29). The word for *with* in Greek is not the more standard preposition *syn*, but *pros*, a word that carries a sense of specific relation to the Father.

“*The Word was God*” This does not mean He was for a while, since no one can be God unless that one always was. The Lord is and was and is to come (Revelation 1:4). Other Scriptures call Christ *God*: Romans 9:5, Titus 2:13, Hebrews 1:8, as well as John 1:18. The term “Son of God” makes Him equal to the Father yet distinct from Him (5:18). The chief proof above all others of the deity of Christ is that He as Lord has the divine Name, as in Philippians 2:9-11 and John 8:58.

The Jehovah’s Witness argument: “But Jesus is just a god!” By such words JW’s deny the Lord God of Israel! In Greek the words in 1:1 go like this: “the Word was with *the* God and God was the Word. He was in the beginning with *the* God.” The two times *theos* refers to God the Father, there is an article with it; the one time *theos* refers to Christ, there is not. So the JW’s teach that this shows that only the Father is really God and Jesus is just “a god”.

Their confusion is enormous:

- a) Had the text said in reference to the Word, “the God was the Word” this would establish that the Word (Christ) and the God (the Father) are the same person.
- b) Unlike English, Greek has no indefinite article. English can say “the”, “a,” or leave the article out. In Greek there are two choices only, the article is there or it isn’t. So the original text did not call Jesus “a god”. It says God without the article.
- c) The word *theos* appears in this prologue with no article four times (vv.6, 12, 13, & 18). Each time it refers to the Father, yet not once does the JW “Bible” translate a reference to God the Father as “a god”! They save this demotion for Christ. In 20:28 it uses “the” with *theos* in reference to Jesus! The JW’s know Thomas said that when he saw Jesus, but they explain that text as Thomas being so surprised to see Him that he let out an exclamation similar to “O my God!”
- d) Since all things were made through Him with no exception allowed (1:3), Christ cannot be a part of creation. He must precede all of it as its Creator! .
- e) The JW’s have gained the great benefit of having a doctrine of God that they can fully comprehend. Having a god more on our level is always an attraction to the sinful mind. Christians have a God we cannot fully comprehend, thus such a deep mystery as the Trinity will eternally amaze us. They have a god of their own creation and understand him perfectly.

Jehovah’s Witnesses take their name from Isaiah 43 & 44. They teach Jesus is “a god”, a created person. Isaiah 43:10 says, “Before me no god was formed, nor will there be one after me.” Isaiah 44:6 says “I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God,” 44:6. There is no other God beside Him, and no other Savior. “Was it not I, the LORD? And there is no God apart from me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none but me,” Isaiah 45:21. The Isaiah texts deny that there is “a god” apart from the Lord, and thus Isaiah prohibits the faulty JW translation of John 1:1!

Word as a Title of Christ⁴ Only in this prologue does John use the word “Word” for Christ; after this introduction he spoke of Christ ordinarily as Jesus – 262 times! When he uses *Christ* it is usually “the Christ”, a word familiar to Jews. In Jewish custom when they avoided pronouncing YHVH, the Name of the Lord, they would use substitute words, such as “the Name”. In the time between the Old and New Testaments, they also used “Word” for the Lord in their Scripture readings. In John 1, *Word* does not refer to God without distinction of Persons, but God the Son.

John does not use *Word* the way the Greeks did. They never meant a person by it. One great benefit of using *Word* for the Greeks is that it carried a sense of something universal, something that supported everything. But for them *Word* was an impersonal and detached idea. John is ready to take advantage of their sense of something beyond them to speak of the Transcendent Person Who was always at the Father’s side but came here to make Him known. He differs strongly from their concept of a detached Word because he writes of the Word Who became flesh and for a while lived among us! John’s careful use of Word was very new to them.

As the Word made flesh, Jesus spoke the words received from His Father and gave them to us. In this Gospel this theme is strongly emphasized. His words are God’s! (3:34). Abiding in Christ and abiding in His words mean the same thing (15:4,7,10). They bring authority in prayer (15:7), cleansing (15:3) and fruitfulness (15:7,8). Our great need is to believe (5:24) and keep them (17:6). By them we have eternal life (6:68). Those who will not hear His word are of the devil (8:44-47), and they will be judged by the word they have refused (12:44-50). Whether we love Christ is made clear by whether we keep His words (14:24). That word of truth from the Incarnate Word makes His people holy (17:17).

1:3 This text does not teach that Jesus is an independent Creator. Since all has been created *through* Him, this reveals that Another has been active in creation. What the Father does, He does through His Son, and what the Father and Son do, They do through Their Spirit. (See 5:19) Thus we find the Holy Spirit as early as Genesis 1:2!

Since sin entered the world, the human mind is capable of terribly irrational thinking. One might say glibly that through Christ all things were made and then retain some exceptions. If He made all things, there are no exceptions. The Lord has seen fit in this verse to state a positive and then to follow with a crisp denial by a negative. Often the way to state something controversial most clearly is to state a matter from both angles. For example, we are justified by faith alone; we are *not* justified by works.) Here in v.3, we find affirmation and denial joined.

1:4,5 The literary structure is: life/life, light/light, darkness/darkness. In the first creation light sustains life. But the light that Christ is is also moral and one that demands an obedient response. Darkness cannot overcome light; likewise Satan’s “*domain of darkness*” (Colossians 1:13) could not prevent Christ from delivering His own into “*the inheritance of the saints in light*” in the kingdom of God’s beloved Son (Colossians 1:13). The darkness loses; it could not overcome the light.

It is not yet plain in these verses that there is a terrible conflict between darkness and light. Christ is the light that shines for all men, but John has not yet said that Jesus’ own people did not know Him (1:10), or receive Him (1:11), because men love darkness and hate the light (3:19-21). If the darkness did not overcome the light, this way of saying it indicates that there is resistance that does not succeed. The forces of darkness and all who side with Satan will lose eternally (see

⁴ See Morris pp.102-111.

Luke 11:17-23). It is the nature of this Prologue to introduce themes briefly to be developed later. In 12:35,36 the darkness overtakes the one who refuses to believe in the light and become a child of it!

Christ is never presented in John as a light, a way, a truth or a life. He is exclusively the light above all others, and the only way to the Father. “*Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved,*” (Acts 4:12). Israel sang to the Lord as their light (Psalm 36:9). Christ the Lord is the light God has given, and men will find no other light to take anyone to God. There is one eternal city with no need of sun or moon; there is no night there (Revelation 21: 22-27). In the Judgment Day those who reject Christ the Light will be cast into darkness (Matthew 8:12; 22:13; 25:30).

1:6-8 There came ⁵ a man from God named John. The Messiah did not show up without being introduced. Quickly John had high credibility because of his courageous preaching, and the people were convinced that he was a prophet from God (Matthew 21:26). John was the first to identify Jesus as the Messiah (1:29,34). His testimony was a witness to Christ and he baptized so that Jesus might be revealed to Israel (1:30). John said that Jesus was the Son of God. Later in John 1, a number left John to follow Jesus when all they had to direct them was John’s witness. John the Baptist was careful to make clear that he was not that light (1:20). His ministry was not centered in himself (John 3:30); no true servant of God falls into this pit (2 Corinthians 4:5).

1:9-11 Looking back to the early days of John’s ministry, it makes perfect sense to say that the Light was coming; then soon Jesus arrived on the public scene. Christ was in the world made through Him. The world did not know Him. Now the Evangelist switches from the created things to God’s people by changing the gender of the word. First it is “His own” as in world, then “His own” as in people. Christ the Creator is the Lord God of Israel, and to His own He came. In spite of the clarity and power of John’s fervent testimony, they rejected Him.

It appears that the Apostle John was giving a record of failure. Christ is the Creator and the promised Messiah was properly introduced according to OT prophecies and the world did not know Him, nor did His own people (Isaiah 53:1-4). The Gentiles and the Jewish people would never receive a Messiah they did not want or understand. However, this pathetic response is followed by vv.12,13.

1:12 Some do believe (v.12). In v.12 the Evangelist does not say why, only that people receive Christ, the opposite of rejecting Him. Receive means believe. In a Gospel devoted to the benefit of believing, the Apostle loves to use a variety of words for faith.

Since believing to become a child of God is a matter of receiving, the text includes gift language, for God *gives* the right to become a child of God. The gospel truth is that sinners receive and God gives. This is essential to understand in becoming a child of God. Reversing this or changing it is destructive of the gospel. The Apostle Paul said, “... *The promise comes by faith,*

⁵ The verb in Greek is not the same as in vv1,2, where we find, “In the beginning *was* the Word.” When the ESV renders 1:6 as, “There *was* a man sent from God ...” it might make the reader think that these are parallel. The NIV makes a beneficial distinction by saying, “There *came* a man ...” Jesus always was, but John had a beginning and appeared as a prophet sent from God. The way Jesus was (eternally) and the way John was are not the same.

so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed ...” (Romans 4:16). We receive Christ to become children of God, which is fundamentally different from imitating Christ to become children of God, or by obeying the law. If the promise of God were acquired by anything other than faith alone, it could not be by grace but by our merit and accomplishment. As the structure of the entire prologue reveals, this is John’s most emphatic point. When sinners hope by receiving to be accepted by God into His family, the sinner’s faith contributes nothing. The believer simply receives as a gift the status of a child of God.

God gives the *right* to become children of God. By what authority may anyone call himself a child of God? It is God Who grants this right to whoever receives His Son. Our right to enter God’s family is that God has given it graciously for nothing we have done or ever will do. We received Christ, and as a result all the benefits that come from Christ and His ministry become the rightful possession of every believer. The Prologue makes “He gave the right to become children of God” the centerpiece of the entire section. See Appendix 1A below.

1:13 This prologue now addresses a question that must surely arise in our minds. If neither the world nor His people Israel knew or received Christ, how is it that anyone did? ⁶ The prologue has either created a contradiction or it approaches the matter from more than one angle. Of course it is the latter.

All children are born. Those who believe are given the right to become His children by a birth. The text affirms more than the right given; v.13 supplies the cause of the birth. In his classic manner, the Evangelist joins positive and negative. (He did a similar thing in vv. 3 & 8.) In a way designed to deny every possibility of a natural explanation of birth into God’s family, he tells how we are not born and how we are. These children are born of God! Not by the right bloodline, or the normal desire that results in children, or the zeal of a father (the word in Greek is masculine) to have children. Rather than all of this, these children are born *of God*.

This is a foretaste of the subject of being “born again” in John 3. Salvation is the result of a supernatural birth. Does a birth generated by God obviate faith? Certainly not, for this text presents both together. It affirmed and meant all it said in v.12 and all it said in v.13. Believing is the conscious human response to Christ. Believing is what we do when we become children of God, yet being born of God is the unseen activity of God in us. It does not say how they are related. For now, we simply see that both have been affirmed without the slightest worry that anyone might say they cannot both be true. We do not choose between two truths; we simply accept both. We have as much role in bringing about our new birth as we have in causing our physical birth. To believe/receive is the command of the gospel that men are to obey (2 Thessalonians 1:8). To give sinners birth to spiritual life is the role of God alone. Only God can bring the dead to life.

1:14 The prologue returns to the Incarnation. Previously, it said that He was coming (v.9) and He was here in the world (v.10). Now for the first time we are told He became human. There is a great danger that someone might think He entered human life to some degree without actually becoming fully human. The Apostle John declared bluntly that the Word became flesh. No one

⁶ Later in these notes we shall have to see if John means each and every person when he uses the word *world*. Its use in v.10 ought to show that John does not use it to include every individual on earth.

has yet found a sharper way to say it in so few words. Incarnation means He became the kind of physical flesh that we are, with the same kind of muscle meat, hard bones, skin, teeth, eyes, hair and voice. He became flesh that people could see, hear and touch (1 John 1:1). The Creator became a creature, because the entire physical composition of Jesus was from material made through Him.

It does not say Christ simply lived among us. John's choice of a verb is significant. Jesus tabernacled⁷ among us. Just as God was in the tabernacle in the wilderness long ago, God as the Word entered a tabernacle of flesh. In Moses' day the people saw the glory of God over the tabernacle in the fire and the cloud. Later when people saw Christ, human beings were seeing the glory of God again. To say, "*We have seen His glory*" is a way of saying that Jesus Christ is God Who has appeared among us. (See also 1 Timothy 3:16.) The One Who became flesh is the Word Who was God in the beginning (1:1,2). Christ has always been the radiance of God's glory (Hebrews 1:3), but the Incarnation brought that glory into close, physical, human contact.

- The OT used the language of *tabernacle* to speak of the Lord residing among His people.
- People saw the glory of God above that tabernacle in the desert.
- Glory and tabernacle appear together in Exodus 40, "*The glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.*"

When the Lord entered the tabernacle Moses built, His glory was seen there. "*Then the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. Moses could not enter the Tent of Meeting because the cloud had settled upon it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle,*" Exodus 40:34,35. "*While Aaron was speaking to the whole Israelite community, they looked toward the desert, and there was the glory of the LORD appearing in the cloud,*" Exodus 16:40. "*... The glory of the LORD appeared at the Tent of Meeting ...*" Numbers 14:10.

Moses' Desire to See the Glory of God in Exodus 33,34 Moses' ancient request of the Lord, "Show me your glory" (Exodus 33:18) is now answered for all who will look to Christ, for in Him the glory of God was revealed. He was God dwelling among men who saw Him. That glory is revealed in His works or signs (2:11) and in all He did and said. Only this Gospel ties the glory of God to Jesus' sacrifice on the cross (13:31,32). In other words, what the Father and Son did through the cross shows the goodness and glory of God. He is the kind of God Who would do that. In Moses' time the Lord made His goodness pass before Moses, and God spoke to him of being gracious to whom He chose to be gracious (Exodus 33:19). All three – the Presence of God, His glory, and His grace – appear together in Exodus 33,34 just as they do in 1:14-18. Moses wanted to know God intimately, but here is the One from the bosom of the Father – Jesus not Moses – Who has known Him intimately and revealed Him to man. (See also Matthew 11:27). Moses occasionally met God in the Tent of Meeting or in a cloud on a mountain, but Christ is the only begotten Son, Who had always been *with God* (1:1).

⁷ In the NT only the Apostle John uses this verb *dwell* (Greek: skēnoō). Apart from 1:14, all occurrences of this verb are in Revelation where Rev. 7:15; 12:12 & 13:6 refer to heaven. In the remaining one, Rev. 21:3, re. The New Jerusalem, it says: "*Behold the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them ...*" Thus in 1:14 we have established Jewish language for the dwelling of God with men used to describe the Presence of Jesus in flesh among us. The noun form in the NT appears more, and even there most references are to the tabernacle of God in heaven or on earth.

The Revelation of Glory Peter, James, and John were the three disciples permitted to be with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration in Matthew 17, Mark 9, and Luke 9. Peter did not write many pages of the NT, but he often speaks of glory and mentioned seeing Jesus' majesty on that mountain (2 Peter 1:16-18). When the Lord was transfigured before them and His face shone brighter than the sun, Peter spoke of building three *tabernacles*. In his Jewish background Peter knew that such glory was not to be fully exposed. Not sure what to say, and knowing how God dwelt in a tabernacle in the past, he suggested building tabernacles again.

John wrote that the tabernacle of God *will be* with men in Revelation 21, and that the tabernacle of God *has been* with men when Christ was in His flesh among us. The heavens showed the glory of God in ancient times (Psalm 19). Later the Son made God known in the fullest revelation yet. In the future when He comes, every eye will see Him (Revelation 1:7). At His glorious appearing (Titus 2:13) we shall see God (Matthew 5:8) in our resurrected flesh (Job 19: 25-27) in a redeemed creation (Romans 8:20-25) and He will dwell with man again (Revelation 21:3, 22-27).

A Comparison of Exodus 33,34 and John 1	
Exodus 33, 34	John 1
33:7 Now Moses used to take the tabernacle ... 33:9,10 The pillar of cloud (the Shekinah) ⁸ descended... All the people saw the pillar of cloud 33:11 Yahweh spoke to Moses face to face 33:20 You cannot see My face 33:23 You will see my back, but my face shall not be seen 34:6 abounding in love and faithfulness	v.14 The Word became flesh and tabernacled among us v.14 We beheld His glory v.17 The law was given through Moses v.18 No one has ever seen God v.18 The only begotten Son has made Him known v.14 full of grace and truth

For the translation of *only begotten* see Appendix B below. When it speaks of the glory of the Only Begotten, it is the observable glory of Christ that is specifically in view in v.14. The tabernacle motif implies nothing less than and nothing other than the glory of God. This is not the glory of the Father apart from the Son, but the glory of the Only Begotten Himself – the Word Who became flesh. Thus the Evangelist writer asserts that the glory of Christ *is* the glory of God – another way to affirm that the Word was God.

The Lord Jesus at no time in eternity past, during His days on earth, or since, has ever thought of Himself as detached from the Father. Except in His role as Father, the Son is what the Father is, and always spoke of Himself in relation to His Father. That is what it means for Him to have the Father as His own Father, and to be from the Father. To see Him is to see the Father and there is

⁸ “The Shekinah glory was nothing less than the visible manifestation of God,” Carson, p. 128.

nothing more to the Father than we have in the Son. Jesus said without exaggeration, *“Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father,”* John 14:9.

The Father is a God of grace and truth, and this quality is found fully in Christ. In fact, John was probably writing with Exodus 33/34 in mind. The same LORD Who abounds in love and faithfulness (Exodus 34:6) is shown here to be the Incarnate Lord, full of grace and truth. These two words are synonyms for the love and faithfulness mentioned in Exodus. The virtues of God are found in His holy angels and in godly men, but as creatures made in His image, they are mere reflections of God. No creature possesses God’s qualities to the full. But with Christ, it is different. *“For in him [Christ] the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily,”* Colossians 2:9. The Apostle Paul and the Apostle John are teaching the same view of Christ.

1:15 The Prologue returns to John the Baptist. We might expect that v.16 would follow immediately after v.14. Both speak of fullness and grace. However, John has good reason to put the words of v.15 here: 1) it maintains the ABBA structure, and 2) what John the Baptist said fits in with God taking residence in human flesh. John meant that Jesus as a man was younger than he was, but as the eternal Lord, Jesus lived before him. Mentioning Jesus’ real humanity does not deny that He had lived forever before His incarnation. John made this statement in the form of an enigma which challenges us to ponder what it means. The Apostle John wanted us to think clearly about Christ and believe truthful propositions about Him.

The earlier words that John was a witness are abstract. Here for the first time in the Prologue, we have an element of historical narrative. (The Word becoming flesh is an historical event, but John chose to describe what Jesus became rather than refer to the birth event itself.) In v.19 the narrative will really begin, but in v.15 we have a sample of John’s witness in words he used. (Witnesses do not talk only of themselves as the content of their testimony; they must testify to something or someone other than themselves.) The Baptist spoke the words of v.15, but John the writer chose this specific testimony to support the truth that the eternal Word had become flesh.

John was not that light (v.8) so he spoke of One far beyond himself. (It is a tragic thing to listen to any sermon and find afterwards that the hearer has learned more of the speaker than he has of Christ.) John witnessed in a kind of conundrum or riddle. How can anyone be both before and after, or younger and yet older? The Word Who was God and Who took on our flesh is the Eternal God, though as a man, Jesus was younger than John, as Luke 1 makes clear. Since the Man Jesus is God, of course He should surpass John in attention, public position, authority and rank as a prophet of God, and in the worship John could only give to God.

Many centuries later we may find we do not sense how crucial the witness of John was. It was prophesied in Isaiah 40:3-5 and the Old Testament closes with a prediction of John the Baptist in Malachi 4:5,6. John was a lamp that gave light so others would recognize Christ (5:33-36). After his death, John’s witness continued to bear fruit (10: 40-42). Only two Gospels give a birth narrative of Christ, but all four include the ministry of John.

1:16 God proclaimed Himself as the Lord Who is full of grace⁹ in Exodus 34:5-7 – a major statement about God by God! Later, men saw Christ, but when Moses wanted to see God’s glory, he was allowed to see only His back. God limited Moses’ sight but proclaimed to his ears this famous description of Himself and His glory:

Then Moses said, "Now show me your glory." And the LORD said, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. But," he said, "you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live." Exodus 33:18 – 20.

Then the LORD came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the LORD. And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation." Exodus 34:5-7

"We have all received grace upon grace," ESV. We receive grace in the place of grace. For the NIV to translate this as "one blessing after another" is quite flat and loses some of its richness. John does not use the word *grace* often; when he does it should stand out to us. Grace is more specific than blessing. All grace and truth is fully present in God the Son. But His grace must affect someone. Grace cannot be grace if it never reaches out to save the undeserving. So John the Apostle, who was saved by the grace of God in Jesus, also testifies in his Prologue. In v.14 he says *we* have seen His glory, speaking only for those who had seen Jesus. Then John spoke for all of God’s people of all time; we have all received grace in Christ.

1:17 The expression "grace in the place of grace" in v.16 is unusual. V.17 elaborates on what v.16 means. God was very gracious to Israel (Deuteronomy 26:1-11). To have God as their covenant God was a privilege shown to so few. God had chosen Israel graciously. The law was a treasure as Psalm 119 and Deuteronomy 4:5-8 make clear. Yet all the compassion, mercy, patience and grace in the OT would be lack consistent application if our truthful God had made all these claims and then left His people in their sin. There was the climax of grace still to come. God would send a Savior, so that later grace would supercede earlier grace, when God in our flesh would die for the sinner’s sin. Because God is gracious, what He began in giving His good law through Moses would be finished in the grace of Christ. The previous grace and the grace that followed are complementary, yet they are also in contrast.

If all we had was the law, we would have direction, a standard, a righteous guide, and God’s requirements for obedience, but sinners derive no power from the law (Romans 3:19,20). Since we have broken it, the law can only condemn us. It can never give sinners a favorable

⁹ For Roman Catholics to pray to Mary is an evil in itself; prayer should be offered to God alone. In such prayers, to say of Mary that she is "full of grace" is to speak of her with a description true only of God. Such a proclamation as Exodus 34:5-7 is a matter of God showing and gaining glory for Himself. This glory He will not share with others (Isaiah 48:11). Only God is full of grace.

ruling that we are righteous. We need the forgiveness of sin found only in the grace of Christ dying for us. We need the obedience of Christ (Romans 5:19,20). We need the sanctifying power of the Spirit of Christ (Romans 8:9-11). In Jesus, all this grace has arrived on earth. The grace of drawing more and more people to Christ continues (2 Corinthians 4:15). So truth has arrived in the sense that God has been true to – or faithful to – His commitment to bring salvation. In the majesty of grace beyond our understanding, the Word became flesh. The law was given through Moses, but it is not enough; we need the grace and truth that came through Christ.

We may be puzzled why things are said in such a cryptic form such as “grace for grace.” It is the nature of this prologue to give brief *undeveloped* elements that John will enlarge on later.

1:18 There are differences of opinion here on: 1) what the proper text is for this verse, and 2) what a certain word in Greek means.

1) Should it be “the only begotten God” or “the only begotten Son”? Some translations simply say “the only Son” or “the only God” or “God the One and Only” (NIV). I think it should be “the only begotten God”. Centuries ago when scribes were making copies of the NT by hand, they were more likely to be surprised at words like the only begotten *God* (how can God ever be begotten!!) and they would be more tempted to write instead the only-begotten *Son*. To use *Son* would be more familiar language, as in 3:16. (The rule is that the more difficult text is likely to be the correct one.)

2) Should the Greek word *monogenes* be translated as *one and only* or as *only begotten*? This is a major decision in translation with more recent versions opting for “one and only.” I think the older decision was the right one. For this see Appendix 1B below.

The Apostle ended his well-designed prologue with strong statements of Christ, which is also the way he opened it. Christ is the Word Who was with the Father. Now at the end (v.17) the Name of Jesus appears with a repetition that He is God and has come from the bosom of the Father (or the Father’s side). No one could be more qualified to make God known. In His prayer at the end of His earthly ministry, He spoke of eternal life as simply knowing the Father and knowing the Son (17:2,3). He manifested the Father’s name to His own (17:6). That prayer shows how 1:18 has been fulfilled. The Lord Jesus did make the Father known.

Moses wanted to see the Lord, but no man can see God and live (Exodus 33:18-23). The Only-Begotten God Who at the Father’s side has always seen Him. By sending Christ – One more qualified than Moses, the giver of the early written revelation – God has sent God the Son as the ultimate revelation. The Lord Jesus always spoke and acted with the sense of mission that the Father had sent Him, and that He was not here to draw attention to Himself but to make the Father known. Peter came to understand this and stated as the purpose of Christ’s death “*that He might bring us to God*” (1 Peter 3:18). Finally, the One Who has seen God has made Him known to us who cannot see God and live. To turn away from Christ is to give up the only way we can ever come to know, see, and be with God (Matthew 5:8; Revelation 21:3).

Appendix 1A: The A B B A Structure of John 1:1-18

A

¹ 1st In the beginning was the Word, ^{2nd} and the Word was with God, and ^{3rd} the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.

B

⁴ In him was life, and the life was the light of men. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

C

⁶ There came a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. ⁸ He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.

D

⁹ The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world. ¹⁰ He was in the world,

E

and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. ¹¹ He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. *Negative*

F

¹² But to all who did receive him,

G

he gave the right to become children of God.

F

to those who believed in his name.

E

¹³ who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. *Positive response*

D

¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

C

¹⁵ (John bore witness about him, and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.'")

B

¹⁶ And from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷ For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

A

¹⁸ No one has ever seen God; ^{3rd} God the only Begotten, ^{2nd} who is at the Father's side, ^{1st} he has made him known.