BibleProject

Visual Commentary: John 1

Study Notes

Introduction

The Bible contains four accounts of Jesus' life, ministry, death, and resurrection that together are known as the Gospel. We are going to be looking at the first chapter of John's Gospel. John uses imagery from Genesis and Exodus to make a surprising claim about who Jesus is. And there's a lot to unpack. These study notes will take you deeper into the ideas explored in our video Visual Commentary: John 1.

Contents

Prologue to John

1:1-18: The Poetic Prologue

The prologue of John's Gospel, found in 1:1-18, is a tightly composed poetic essay. It's arranged in two parallel panels, which are indicated by keywords and repeated themes (adapted from Mary Coloe, *God Dwells with Us: Temple Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel*, 18-19).

Introduction				
[1] **In the beginning** *was* ***the Word*** *and* ***the Word*** *was* with God *and* ***the Word*** *was* God. [2] ***He*** *was* **in the beginning** with God. [3] *All things through* **him** *[=* ***the word****] ***came to be*** *and without him nothing has* **come to be** *which has* **come to be.**				
A	[4] *In him was* life *and the* life *was* the light[1] *of humanity* [5] *and* the light[2] *shines in the* **darkness** *and the* **darkness** *did not overcome it* [6] *There was a human sent from God. His name was* **John.** [7] *He* came *as a* ***witness***	[14] *and* ***the Word*** **came to be** *flesh and it* **tabernacled** with us, *and* we saw *his* **glory,** *the* **glory** *as of* the one and only *from* **the Father,** *full of grace and truth.* [15] **John** **bore witness** *about him and he cried out, saying: "This is the one of whom I said,*	**A″**	
B	*so that he could* ***bear witness*** about the light[3] *so that* all might believe *through him.* [8] *He was not* the light[4] *but so that he could* ***bear witness*** about the light[5]	*'The one who comes /* after */ me,'* **has been** */* in front of */ me, because he was /* prior to */ me."*	**B′**	
C	[9] *The light[6], the true one, which gives* light[7] *to all humanity, was* coming *into* the world. [10] *In* the world *he was, and* the world *through him* **came to be,** *and* the world *did not know him.* [11] *Unto* **his own** *he came and* **his own** *did not* **receive him.** [12] *But to those who did* **receive him** *he gave authority to* **become** **children of God** *to* those who believe *in his name,* [13] *those* not from *blood and* not from *the desire of the flesh and* not from *the desire of a man,* but from **God they were born.**	[16] *For from his* fullness *we all have* **received,** *even* grace *in place of* grace [17] *For* the Torah *was given* through Moses, *grace and truth came through Jesus Messiah.*	**C′**	
Conclusion				
[18] *No one has* **seen God,** *ever.* The one and only **God,** *who is in the bosom of* **the Father** *that one has* **revealed...**				

This literary design is an imitation of the literary pattern of Genesis 1:1-2:4, with an introduction and conclusion that wrap around a structure of two panels that are themselves matching triads.

Genesis Imagery	Exodus Imagery
1A - Creation by the Word Light and Life 1:3-5	2A - Incarnation of the Word Tabernacle and Glory 1:14
1B - The Witness of John 1:6-8	2B - The Witness of John 1:15
1C - The Word Was Rejected and Received by "Them" 1:9-13	2C - The Word Was Received by "Us" 1:16-17

Each inner panel tells the story of creation and incarnation of the divine word
in a way that sets the core themes for the narrative to follow:

- In 1A-1B-1C, the word is the agent of creation, through whom the entire cosmos came into being. The word is the source of life and light, to borrow imagery from Genesis 1:3-6. And that light, to which John bore witness, is rejected by some and accepted by others (1:3-13).
- In 2A-2B-2C, the word is the divine temple glory that becomes incarnate as a human to fulfill the meaning of the temple and Torah (1:14-17).

However, in contrast to Genesis 1, which culminates in the seventh day in Genesis 2:1-3, the conclusion in John 1:18 provides literary closure to the prologue. But it does not provide conceptual closure (1:18 ends in an incomplete sentence). The "seventh-day completeness" of Genesis 2:1-3 must wait for its parallel in the death and resurrection of Jesus in John 19-21 when Jesus will announce "it is finished" (τετελεσται, Jn. 19:30 // Gen. 2:1 "they were finished," συντελεσθησαν LXX).

The six strophes of John's prologue, like the six days of creation in Genesis 1, requires one final act to bring it to completion. This act begins in verse 19 as the Gospel narrative of God's final work that began with the incarnation will culminate in the life and death of Jesus. Until the story of this final work has been told, *there can be no "seventh day." But utilizing the structure of Genesis, but breaking from its pattern, the very design of the prologue asserts that there is still something more to come.*

Mary Coloe, God Dwells with Us: Temple
Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel, 23.

John 1:1-2 and 1:3-5

a
  b
  b'
a'
	¹ **In the beginning** was *the Word*
	and *the Word* was with God
	and *the Word* was God.
	² *He* was **in the beginning** with God,

a a'	³ All things through *him* [= *the word*] **came to be** and without him nothing has **come to be** which has **come to be,** ⁴ In him was *life,* and the *life* was the light[1] of humanity. ⁵ And the light[2] shines in the **darkness,** and the **darkness** did not overcome it.

The Word of God

The first line is an obvious repetition of Genesis 1:1.

John 1:1	Genesis 1:1
In the beginning was the Word.	In the beginning, God created the skies and the land.
Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος	Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἐποίησεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ τὴν γῆν.

By beginning the story this way, John not only makes a claim about the divine identity of Jesus but claims that the following narrative is of cosmic significance. The events recounted in the Gospel of John are set to a "cosmic key" so that Jesus' teachings, life, death, and resurrection are all portrayed as a continuation of God's creative ordering of the darkness in Genesis 1.

Why Is Jesus Called the "Word" of God?

Why does John introduce the pre-incarnate Jesus as the Word of God? There are at least three important streams of influence that have come together (and there are many more).

1. The Divine Word in Genesis

God's words have a prominent role in the creation narrative of Genesis 1:1-2:3. Each of the seven days is introduced by a new act of divine speech, and on the third and sixth days, there are three additional moments when God speaks, creating a total of ten words that generate the cosmos.

In the beginning, Elohim created the skies and the land.	*Elohim*
Now, the land was wild and waste and darkness was over the face of the deep abyss, and the spirit/wind of Elohim was over the face of the waters.	*Spirit/wind/breath of Elohim*
And Elohim said…	*The word of Elohim*

In Genesis 1:1-2, God's own person is closely identified with the following two ways of describing God's presence and activity: the spirit and the word.

2. The Divine Word in the Prophets and Writings

The images of the divine person from Genesis 1 are explored in greater depth in the rest of the TaNaK. The keywords and images of Genesis 1:1-3 are hyperlinked in multiple places in Proverbs and Psalms, and John seems to have crafted his language about the pre-incarnate Jesus in light of these passages.

In the beginning was the Word, and *the Word was with God* ... he was with God **in the beginning.** John 1:1-2	**In the beginning, Elohim** created the skies and the land ... the **spirit/ breath** of Elohim was hovering over the waters, and Elohim **said** ... Genesis 1:1-3 *Yahweh possessed me [wisdom]* **at the beginning** *of his way, before his works from old. From ancient times I was established,* **from the beginning** ... Proverbs 8:22-23 *There I was beside him, as a master workman.* Proverbs 8:30
All things came to exist through him, and apart from him not one thing came into existence which has come into existence. John 1:3	*And God* **said** ... Genesis 1:3, etc. (a total of 10x in Genesis 1) *By means of* **wisdom** *Yahweh founded* the land, by means of understanding he established the skies. Proverbs 3:19 *By means of* **the word of Yahweh** the skies were made, and by **the spirit/breath of his mouth** all their host. Psalm 33:6
In him was life, and the life was **the light** *of humanity. And the* **light** *was shining in darkness, and the darkness could not comprehend it.* John 1:4-5	*And God said, "Let there be* **light**,*" and there was* **light**. *God saw that the* **light** *was good, and God separated the* **light** *from the darkness*. Genesis 1:3-4

John 1:1-13 places Jesus in the role of creator of life and light as the divine word from Genesis 1:1 and the divine wisdom of Proverbs 8.

3. The Divine Word in Jewish and Greek Philosophy

We know from Jewish literature that was written at the same time as John's Gospel that there was a serious conversation about the nature of Yahweh's identity in light of texts like these in the Hebrew Bible. Early messianic Judaism was not the only movement that came to the conclusion that Yahweh's identity was complex and unified and that Yahweh's attributes, like his word and spirit, could be considered distinct divine agents who were part of the divine identity.

- The early Aramaic Targum translations to Genesis 1:1:

[1]From the beginning, by wisdom, the son of Yahweh completed the heavens and the earth. *or* [1]From the beginning, by wisdom, the word of Yahweh created and completed the heavens and the earth. [2]And the earth was waste and unformed, desolate of man and beast, empty of plant cultivation and of trees, and darkness was spread over the face of the abyss; and a spirit of mercy from before the Lord was blowing over the surface of the waters. [3]**And the word of the Lord said:** "**Let there be light,**" and there was light **according to the decree of his word.** *The Aramaic Bible: Targum Neofiti 1: Genesis*, trans. Martin McNamara, vol. 1 (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992), Ge 1:1–3.	מלקדמין בחכמה ברא דייי[1] הוות תהיא שכלל ית שמיא וית ארעא: [2]וארעא ובהיא וצדי מן בר נש ומן בעיר וריקנא מן כל פלחן צמחין ומן תהומא ורוח דרחמין מן אילנין וחשוכא פריס על אפי קדם ייי הוה מנשבא על אפי מיא: ואמר (ממרא) דייי יהוי נהור והות[3] נהור כגזירת ממריה:

The Aramaic translators are capitalizing on a Hebrew/Aramaic wordplay here, as the Hebrew word for "create" (ברא/*bara'*) is exactly the same letters for the Aramaic word "the sons" (ברא/*bar'a*). But the wordplay itself is not sufficient to explain this interpretation. It depends on a network of similar hyperlinks within the Hebrew Bible that sees a common figure lying behind the multiple images of the divine word, spirit, and wisdom.

Philo of Alexandria was a 1st century Jewish philosopher who attempted a massive intellectual synthesis between Jewish biblical thought and Greek philosophy in the tradition of Plato.

In Greek philosophy, the word *logos* referred to an impersonal principle of order, the pattern of reason which is woven into the fabric of the cosmos (remember *kosmos* in Greek means "ordered realm").

For Philo, he saw the *logos* of John 1 as a personal creature, the chief of all of God's creation, and through this creature, God both created and now oversees the cosmos. Philo personalized the Greek *logos* idea and then combined it with the biblical portrayal of Yahweh's divine attributes that are both unified and distinct from God.

For Heraclitus the Logos is "the omnipresent wisdom by which all things are steered"; it is the divine word received by the prophet, which becomes almost equivalent to God (see J. Adam, The Religious Teachers of Ancient Greeks, 216–34). For the Stoics, the Logos is the common law of nature, immanent in the universe and maintaining its unity, the divine fire, the soul of the universe. Philo of Alexandria exploited the concept in a striking fashion. He saw the Logos as the agent of creation, distinguishing between the Logos as a thought in the mind of God, his eternal wisdom, and its expression in making formless matter a universe. The Logos is the medium of divine government of the world; it is "the captain and pilot of the universe." The Logos is the means by which man may know God, for God is unknowable by the mass of mankind; they can know him only in and through the Logos: "The Logos is the God of us imperfect men, but the primal God is the God of the wise and perfect."

George R. Beasley-Murray, John, vol. 36,
Word Biblical Commentary, p.6.

John's prologue is a feat of christological midrash on Gen 1:1, intentionally merged with scriptural witness to God's creative speech-acts, primitive confessions of the pre-existent Son of God, Jewish Hellenistic wisdom traditions, messianic discourse, and fashioned in such a way as to deliberately resource and resonate with tropes in Greco-Roman philosophy. In effect, John takes the Logos, a malleable yet popular concept in Greco-Roman philosophy for cosmic rationality, and he baptizes it in Jewish wisdom traditions and re-codes it with christological meaning.

Michael Bird, "Reflections on the Prologue of John,"
from December 19, 2020 Patheos Blog.

The Word Was With God, The Word Was God

John uses a classically Israelite mode of expressing a transcendent idea: he states the idea twice in different words that on a literal level appear logically impossible. But once we meditate on the contradiction, a deeper possibility opens up, one which defies our normal concepts of reality.

- Statement 1: The Word *was with* God.

    - This literally means "toward" (Grk. pros / ϖρος) God. The word is as closely united to God as possible, yet it has a distinct identity in relationship to God. To be with another is to have some part of one's identity that makes one distinct, different.

- Statement 2: The Word *was* God.

    - The word is not other than God, but it is interior to God's own being and identity, and so the word *is* God in a way that challenges our very concepts of what it means to be a person.

Creation by Means of the Divine Word

By retelling the story of pre-creation and creation through the lens of the divine *logos*, John portrays Jesus as the uniquely divine agent of creation who stands as the one and only mediator between Heaven and Earth, between the divine and humans.

The opening words of the prologue intend a simple yet fundamental claim: God has an eternal Word, a Word that is interior to God and intrinsically God, and that which is true of God is also true of his Word. John sets forth neither bi-theism nor modalism, neither the epiphany of an angel nor the emanation of a lesser heavenly power…. The relationship of the Word with God is never expressed as creation, emanation, or adoption, but in terms of begotten-ness (1:14, 18; 3:16, 18), the genus of sonship, which makes explicable

the oneness and sent-ness (8:29; 10:36; 17:20-23) as well as one-ness and subordination (13:16-20; 14:28). The Word is neither a separate deity, nor a personified divine attribute, nor a mighty angel, but a personal agent within the one God, the divine Son.

Michael Bird, "Reflections on the Prologue of John," from December 19, 2020 Patheos Blog.

Notice how in 1:1-3 Jesus is the word, life, and light. All three are metaphorical ways of referring to the self-same personal being at the center of creation.

John 1:6-8 and 1:9-10

[6] There was a human sent from God;
his name was **John.**
[7] He came as a ***witness***
so that he could ***bear witness*** *about* the light[3]
so that all might believe through him.
[8] He was not the light[4]
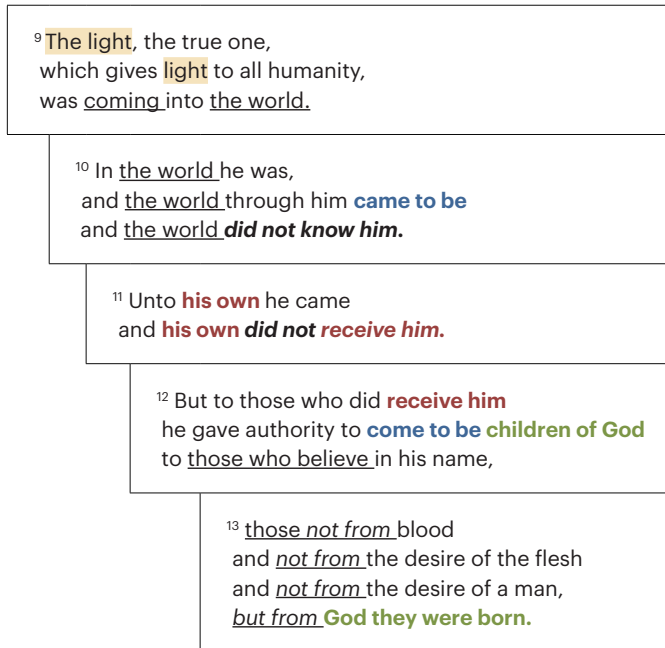but so that he could ***bear witness*** *about* the light.[5]

[9] The light[6], the true one,
which gives light[7] to all humanity,
was coming into the world.
[10] In the world he was,
and the world through him **came to be**
and the world did not know him.
[11] Unto **his own** he came,
and **his own** did not **receive him.**
[12] But to those who did **receive him**
he gave authority to **become children of God**
to those who believe in his name,
[13] those *not from* blood
and *not from* the desire of the flesh
and *not from* the desire of a man,
but from **God they were born.**

In 1:6-8, John the baptizer is introduced as the first witness to Jesus' true identity in the Gospel of John. This begins an important theme throughout the story of different characters, and even Jesus himself, acting as *witnesses* to God's revelation in and through Jesus.

Notice that even though John's introduction differs from the introductions found in Matthew (a genealogy), Mark (a quotation from Isaiah 40), and Luke (a long, dramatic story of Zechariah and Mary), all four accounts begin with a focus on John the baptizer.

The third paragraph in 1:9-13 prowesses in a stair-step manner:

⁹ The light, the true one,
which gives light to all humanity,
was coming into the world.

¹⁰ In the world he was,
and the world through him **came to be**
and the world *did not know him.*

¹¹ Unto **his own** he came
and **his own** *did not receive him.*

¹² But to those who did **receive him**
he gave authority to **come to be children of God**
to those who believe in his name,

¹³ those *not from* blood
and *not from* the desire of the flesh
and *not from* the desire of a man,
but from **God they were born.**

The progression moves from the entrance of the light into the world (the incarnation) and the paradox that will become the focus of the story: Jesus came into a world that exists in and through him, yet he was not received or recognized for who he really was. This is a major motif in the story, as people constantly wrestle with Jesus' identity. Even more paradoxical is when Jesus comes to "his own," that is, to Israel, and is rejected. This is all set up as a contrast to "those who do receive him" and find themselves being "born from above," as Jesus will put it to one of Israel's teachers (John 3).

The final line in 1:13 defines the new identity of the "born from God" believers. They are not an ethnic group or tribal family ("from blood"), and their birth isn't the result of human desire for sex or a patriarch's desire to build a household as his own possession. This family's identity is not determined by human interests at all. Rather, they are "born from God."

- Note: The language of "desire" could be recalling Genesis 3:6-7.

The Incarnation From the Perspective of Exodus

John 1:14-18 claims that God's glorious temple presence (Exod. 33:18-23) and divine attributes (Exod. 34:6) are revealed in the humanity of Jesus.

And the Word became flesh and dwelt (Grk. ἐσκήνωσεν) among us, and we saw his glory (Grk. δόξα), glory as of the one and only from the Father ...

John 1:14a

***Full of grace and truth** (Grk. πλήρης χάριτος καὶ ἀληθείας)... For from his **fullness** we have all received, and **grace upon grace**. For the Torah was given through Moses; **grace and truth** were realized through Jesus Christ.*

John 1:14b, 16-17

And we saw his glory (Grk. δόξα), glory as of the one and only from the Father... No one has seen God at any time; the one and only God who is in the bosom of the Father, he has explained...

John 1:14b, 18

Have them make a sanctuary for me, that I may dwell (Heb. shakan) among them. According to all that I am going to show you, as the pattern of the tabernacle (Heb. miskhan // Grk. τῆς σκηνῆς) and the pattern of all its furniture, just so you shall construct it.

Exodus 25:8-9

I will make a covenant of peace with them. It will be an eternal covenant with them; and I will bless them and multiply them and will set my sanctuary among them forever. My dwelling place (Heb. mishkan // Grk. κατασκήνωσίς) will be with them and I will be their God and they will be my people.

Ezekiel 37:26-27

*Yahweh, Yahweh, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and **full of covenant love and truth**.*

Exodus 34:6-7

"But," he said, "you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live." Then the Lord said, "There is a place near me where you may stand on a rock. When my glory (Heb. kavod // Grk. δόξα) passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by."

Exodus 33:20-22

"The One and Only Son"

"The one and only God" = monogenes. Μονογενής, literally means "the only one of its kind," unique in its γένος, in the LXX frequently translates יחיד (yaḥîd), used of an only or beloved child (as in Judg 11:34, of Jephthah's only daughter). It is therefore parallel to ἀγαπητός, "beloved," an alternative rendering of יחיד in the LXX. Significantly, in Gen 22:2, 12, 16, ἀγαπητός in the LXX renders יחיד with reference to Isaac, Abraham's "only" son; Heb 11:17, alluding to the same passage, uses μονογενής of Isaac.

George R. Beasley-Murray, John, vol. 36, Word Biblical Commentary, p.14.

"Has Made Him Known"

The use of the verb "explain/make known" (Greek: exēgeomai) without an object as the very last word of the prologue has created considerable syntactic difficulty. The verb comes at the end of the sentence and thus at the end of the prologue. It leads the reader directly into the prose narrative of the life of Jesus through the kai that opens v. 19. The object of the verb ("him," referring back to "God") must be supplied by the reader from the context.

Francis J. Moloney, Belief in the Word: Reading the Fourth Gospel, John 1–4, p. 50.