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978-1-107-68843-8 - The Origin of the Prologue to St John's Gospel

Rendel Harris

Excerpt

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THE ORIGIN OF THE PROLOGUE TO ST JOHN'S GOSPEL

I

In a recent number of the *Commonwealth*, Professor Scott Holland writes with enthusiasm in praise of the Poet Laureate's new book *The Spirit of Man*. But he says that he has one real regret and one only. He regrets that Dr Bridges was persuaded to give the opening passage of St John's Gospel as "In the beginning was mind." The criticism here made, which I quote from that excellent little paper, entitled *Public Opinion* (as I have no access to the *Commonwealth*), raises once more in our minds the question as to the real meaning and the actual genesis of the Prologue to the Fourth Gospel. Are we nearer to the actual sense of the words when we say with the Poet Laureate that "in the beginning was Mind," or, as some would say, "in the beginning was Thought," or are we to say with Professor Scott Holland that *Mind* is an inadequate term, and that the idea must have included "speech, expression, the rational word"?

It seems evident that there must be other questions to be resolved before we come to the hermeneutical and exegetical problems over which the Professor and the Poet are in danger of a collision. For instance, we want to know more about this Prologue, which is attributed commonly to St John, and which, in any case, contains theological statements of the highest importance, deserving, if any such statements necessarily deserve, an apostolical authority. Is this Prologue an intellectual Athena bursting forth suddenly from the brain of a mystical Zeus? or is it, like so many other surprising statements of poets, sages and saints which seem to defy evolution and to be as independent of ancestry as Melchizedek, a statement which carries about it, upon close examination, marks of an ancestry in stages and by steps, like most of the religious, intellectual and physical products with which we are acquainted?

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To put it another way. The Church is firmly persuaded, and not without strong supporting reasons, that these opening sentences of the Fourth Gospel are among the most inspired words in the whole of the Christian records. It is not merely that they have resonance, and apparent novelty, and depth of meaning, and unexpected views of the world *sub specie aeternitatis*. They are so unlike any other evangelical prologues: their *Beginning* is not the “Genesis of Jesus Christ” in Matthew, nor the *Beginning of the Gospel* in Mark; their glory of the Son of God is not the abrupt formula with which Mark opens, and which he uses his pictorial records to attest: the artistic fashion of them does not appear to be made on the lines of some previously successful literary artist, like the elegant Greek of the first verses of St Luke. Is it any wonder that direct and immediate inspiration has been claimed for these majestic sentences? Thus Jerome, in his prologue to Matthew, speaks of St John as *saturatus revelatione* when he wrote his opening words: and it is possible that the same sense of constraint is involved in the terms in which Jerome describes St John as setting pen to paper;

in illud proemium caelo veniens
eructavit In principio erat verbum:

but this ought not to be unduly pressed, since Jerome's *eructavit* is really borrowed from the opening of Psalm xlv.:

Eructavit cor meum *verbum* bonum,

where the language is taken to express the emission of the doctrine of the Logos by St John, and goes back to the Septuagint, ἐξηρέυξατο ἡ καρδία μου λόγον ἀγαθόν. However that may be, it is certain that the Prologue of St John is the high-water mark of inspiration for those who read the Scriptures reverently.

It is just at this point that the enquiring mind puts in a protest and asks whether it is not possible that, conceding the inspiration of the words, we might legitimately question the immediateness of the inspiration. Suppose then we go in search of any prior stages of thought that may underlie the famous Prologue. To begin with, there is the description of Christ as the Logos. Was that reached immediately, as soon as Philosophy and Religion looked one another fairly in the face in Ephesus or Palestine, or Alexandria? How soon did the term “Word of God” acquire a metaphysical sense? The question is, perhaps, easier

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asked than answered. In the Synoptic Gospels the term "Word of God" is always used of the utterance divine or the record of that utterance. It is that which the sower sows, that which the traditionalist makes void by his tradition, that which the multitudes throng round Jesus to hear. And the curious thing is that in the Fourth Gospel there is a similar usage, after one passes away from the Prologue and the doctrine of the Incarnation. Jesus Himself speaks of the readers of a certain Psalm as those to whom the Word of God came, and of His own message (rather than Himself) as the Word of the Father which He has communicated to His disciples. "I have given them thy word¹." The suggestion is natural that we should regard the philosophical use of Logos as the latest deposit upon the surface of the narration, a verbal usage which has displaced an earlier meaning and sense. It is the more curious that the Evangelist never reverts to the Logos with which he opens his narrative, in view of the fact that Christ speaks as "Light" and "Life" in various parts of the Gospel, and so identifies Himself (or is identified) with the metaphysic of the Prologue.

Is it possible, we ask next, that the Logos may have displaced an earlier metaphysical title as well as that employment of the word which we usually indicate by not writing it in capitals?

All through the rest of the New Testament the Word of God means the Evangelic message, except in one passage in the Apocalypse, where it is a title of the Messiah, and a doubtful place in Hebrews where the "quick and powerful" word of God appears to be explicable by Philonean parallels in a metaphysical sense.

We find, however, that there is occasionally another title given to Jesus Christ. He is called "*the Wisdom of God* and the Power of God," and is said to become the *Wisdom of his people*. "He has become to us Wisdom²." So the question arises whether Sophia may not be an alternative title to Logos and perhaps prior to it.

For instance, in the Gospel of Luke (xi. 49) the Wisdom of God is personified and speaks of sending prophets and wise men to be

¹ John xvii. 14. where the sense of λόγος is fixed by the alternative *ρήματα* of verse 8.

² I Cor. i. 30, where the use of the conjunctions makes it clear that the emphasis is on Wisdom, which should have a capital letter, and be explained by "righteousness, sanctification and redemption." See Moffatt *in loc.*

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rejected by the scribes and Pharisees. Apparently this is not meant for a Biblical quotation, and in that sense is not the Word of God; the “Wisdom” that speaks is not the title nor the contents of a book. In the corresponding passage of Matthew (I suppose we must refer the origin to the lost document Q) we have simply “Therefore, behold! I send unto you, etc.” So when Tatian made his Harmony, he naturally produced the sentence, “Behold! I, the Wisdom of God, send unto you, etc.,” which brings out clearly the involved, personified Wisdom—Christ; and inasmuch as God is personified and speaks through Sophia, when He sends His processional array of prophets and wise men, we have what in Greek looks like a feminine form of the Johannine Logos. The suggestion arises (at present in the form of a pure hypothesis) that *the way to Logos is through Sophia and that the latter is the ancestress of the former*. Now let us try if we can re-write the Johannine Prologue, substituting the word Sophia for the word Logos. It now runs as follows—

In the beginning was the Divine Wisdom,
and Wisdom was with God,
and Wisdom was God.

The same was in the beginning with God:

All things were made by her, and without her was nothing made that was made.

As soon as we have written down the sentences we are at once struck by their resemblance to the Old Testament: we could almost say that we were transcribing a famous passage in Proverbs:

Prov. viii. 22-30. “The Lord possessed me (Sophia) *in the beginning* of his way, before his works of old. I was set up from everlasting, *from the beginning* ...when he prepared the heavens *I was there*: when he set a compass upon the face of the deep...then *I was by him*.”

It seems clear that we have found the stratum of the Old Testament upon which the Prologue reposes. This is practically admitted by almost all persons who find Old Testament references in the New: they simply cannot ignore the eighth chapter of Proverbs. If this be so, and if the Logos is quoted as being and doing just what Sophia is said to be and to do in the Book of Proverbs, then the equation between Logos and Sophia is justified, and we may speak of Christ in the metaphysical sense as the Wisdom of God, and may write out the first draft of the doctrine of the Logos in the form which we have suggested above. In other words, we have

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in the Prologue not an immediate oracle, but a mediated one, in which separate stages can be marked out, and an original ground-form postulated. Now let us examine the Greek of the Prologue and compare it with the Greek of the Septuagint in Proverbs. We readily see the principal parallels consist in the collocation of—

{ ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος and
κύριος ἔκτισέν με ἀρχὴν ὁδῶν αὐτοῦ. . . . πρὸ τοῦ αἰῶνος ἐθεμελίωσέν με
ἐν ἀρχῇ (viii. 22)

{ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν and
ἦμην παρ' αὐτῷ (viii. 30)

{ οὗτος ἦν ἐν ἀρχῇ πρὸς τὸν θεόν and
ἦν ἵνα ἡτοίμαζεν τὸν οὐρανόν, συμπαρήμην αὐτῷ (viii. 27)
cf. also ὁ θεὸς τῆ σοφία ἐθεμελίωσεν τὴν γῆν (iii. 19)

{ ἐν αὐτῷ ζωή ἦν and
αἱ γὰρ ἕξοδοί μου ἕξοδοι ζωῆς (viii. 35)
ἔϋλον ζωῆς ἐστι πᾶσι τοῖς ἀντεχομένοις αὐτῆς (iii. 18)

It is clear from the collocation that John uses *πρὸς τὸν θεόν* for *παρὰ τῷ θεῷ*, a usage which recurs in the first Epistle in the expression *παράκλητον ἔχομεν πρὸς τὸν πατέρα*.

This is not to be explained in a mystical manner, as though *πρὸς τὸν* conveyed some deeper sense than *παρὰ τῷ*, it means “with God,” as commonly translated: the change in grammatical form is due to the writer’s or the translator’s Greek, or if we prefer it, want of Greek¹, coupled with the fact of the relative paucity of the prepositions in Semitic, which causes the pleonastic representation of a Semitic pronoun by a variety of Greek pronouns, and to some extent the variations of the pronouns *inter se* for persons who do not know much Greek. It is not necessary to assume an actual reference back to the original Hebrew of Proverbs: the Septuagint text will probably be sufficient to explain the form of the Prologue. The restoration of Sophia into the place occupied by the Logos in the Prologue will help us to understand better the course of the argument. For example, the statement that “all

¹ Accordingly Euthymius Zigabenus says, *πρὸς τὸν θεόν, ἡγουν, παρὰ τῷ πατρί, ἵνα τε παραστήσῃ τὸ ἰδίαζον τῶν ὑποστάσεων καὶ ὅτι ἀχώριστοι πατήρ καὶ υἱός*. On the other hand Liddon, *Bampton Lectures* (p. 231), says: “He was not merely *παρὰ τῷ θεῷ* but *πρὸς τὸν θεόν*. This last preposition expresses beyond the fact of co-existence or immanence the more significant fact of perpetuated intercommunion. The Face of the Everlasting Word, if we dare so to express ourselves, was ever directed towards the Face of the Everlasting Father.”

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things were made by her” is a summary of the verses in Proverbs describing Wisdom’s activity at the Creation; while the repetition “and without her nothing was made,” shows that we have in the verse a reflection from another passage, where we are told that “in wisdom (or by wisdom) he hath made them *all*” (Ps. civ. 24).

The next step will be to see whether the proposed scheme of evolution for the Johannine Prologue will throw light on the remaining clauses of the argument contained in it. Perhaps, however, this will be sufficient for a first statement. So we will merely recapitulate our hypothesis, which is, that the Logos in the Prologue to John is a substitute for Sophia in a previously existing composition, and the language of the Prologue to the Gospel depends ultimately upon the eighth chapter of the Book of Proverbs.

If we are right, then Dr Bridges was right, at least as far as the basal document is concerned, in saying that “in the beginning was *Mind*”: for it is *Mind* that is the proper substitute for *Sophia*, and not any particular expression of the rational word, as suggested by Scott Holland in the passage to which we referred at the beginning of this paper.

* * * * *

Our hypothesis that the Logos of the Fourth Gospel is a substitute for a previously existing Sophia involves (or almost involves) the consequence that the Prologue is a hymn in honour of Sophia, and that it need not be in that sense due to the same authorship as the Gospel itself. The best way to test the hypothesis is to see where it will take us, and what further light it will shed upon the primitive Christian doctrine. Let us then retrace our steps for awhile and see whether the foundations of the argument are secure.

The first thing that needs to be emphasised is that we are obliged to take a different view of the Greek of the Fourth Gospel from that which is commonly taken by New Testament exegetes. They are in the habit of describing the Greek of the Gospel as simple, but correct, and of contrasting it in that respect with the Greek of the Apocalypse. Our position is that the very first verse of the Gospel ought to have undeceived them as to the linguistic accuracy of the writer, and to have marked him as a “barbarian” in the Greek sense. In other words, *ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν* is not Greek at all: and a Greek scholar ought to have felt this at

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the very first reading. The various subtleties which are read into the expression are self-condemned, in that they can neither be justified by the theological thought of the time when the book was composed, nor can they be made to harmonise with the assumed simplicity of the writer's diction. When Mr F. A. Paley, with the dew of Æschylean studies upon him, and in that sense very far removed from the possibility of understanding Hellenistic Greek, began to translate the oracular opening of the Gospel, he said:

In the beginning was the Logos, and the Logos was *in relation to God*, and the Logos was God,

and then added a note that "the usual translation 'the Word was with God' (from the Latin Vulgate) conveys no clearly intelligible idea." One wonders what was the clearly intelligible idea that was conveyed by the words "The Logos was in relation to God"!

If Jerome gave us the rendering "apud Deum," he was in any case following the primitive Latin tradition; when the Old Latin version was revised, the original "sermo" was changed to "verbum," but apparently no one thought of changing "apud" into some other preposition. What other word ought they to have used if the passage was to remain simple and intelligible? It will not do to lay the burden of unintelligible translation upon the Latin: for even if we assume that the Latin is obscure, we have in the Syriac the rendering—

ܐܠܗܐ ܠܗܘܐ (=₁wath Alaha)

which was, as any Syriac scholar will admit, the only possible rendering of *πρὸς τὸν θεόν*, and in itself capable of equation with *apud Deum*. It is this Syriac rendering that is the key to the understanding of the passage, for (i) it is the equivalent either of *πρὸς τὸν θεόν* or of *παρὰ τῷ θεῷ*, and (ii) if we take it in the second of the two senses, we have the exact parallel to the language of the Proverbs, where Wisdom is described as being "with God," in the sense of being seated by God and in attendance upon Him. If the language of the Gospel is to be taken as unintelligible, the language of the Book of Proverbs must be taken as unintelligible also.

Let us, then, leave Mr Paley, who in these matters counts for very little, and let us turn to Dr Westcott, who counts for a very great deal.

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The first thing that Westcott says is that “the phrase (*ἦν πρὸς*, Vulgate *erat apud*) is remarkable. It is found also in Matthew xiii. 56; Mark vi. 3; Mark ix. 19; Mark xiv. 49; Luke ix. 41; 1 John i. 2. The idea conveyed by it is not that of simple co-existence, as of two persons contemplated separately in company (*εἶναι μετά*, iii. 26, etc.) or united under a common conception (*εἶναι σύν*, Luke xxii. 56) or (so to speak) in local relation (*εἶναι παρὰ*, xvii. 5), but of being (in some sense) *directed towards* and regulated by that with which the relation is fixed (v. 19).”

The passage quoted is characteristically obscure, but we may try to unravel its meaning. Westcott wants to translate *πρὸς τὸν θεόν* as “in the direction of God”; so much was due to his pedagogic tradition; but this does not satisfy him, so he prefixes a parenthetic “in some sense” before the words “directed towards,” and leaves us to find out as best we may what the sense was in which the Logos was polarised *towards* God. When we come to examine the parallel passages by which the remarkable usage of *πρὸς* is to be justified, we notice that Matthew and Luke ought not to be quoted. Matthew xiii. 56 is from Mark vi. 3; and Luke ix. 41 is a repetition of Mark ix. 19. The usage is clearly Marcan; and we have therefore to enquire what Mark meant by saying:

His sisters are with us,

or

How long shall I be with you?

or

I was daily with you in the Temple:

surely the sense of these passages is clear enough: we should not improve the rendering by saying:

His sisters are (in some sense) directed towards us and regulated by that which fixes the relation between them and us.

The fact that the language is Marcan, taken with the known result of criticism, that Mark's language is, in part at least, Aramaic, encourages us to see how the texts look in the Old Syriac. The Syriac scholar will know without looking that the equivalent is ܠܘܬܢ (=ܠܘܬܢ) for *πρὸς ἡμᾶς* and ܠܘܬܢܐ (=ܠܘܬܢܐ) for *πρὸς ὑμᾶς*. The Greek then of Mark has carried over a mistranslation of the Syriac ܠܘܬܢ (ܠܘܬ) exactly similar to what occurs in the Prologue to John. We are dealing

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with what is called “Translation Greek” or “Semitic Greek.” The Marcan and Johannine uses are one and the same. This does not mean that they were incapable of translating the Syriac preposition. St John has the correct *παρὰ σεαυτῶ* and *παρὰ σοί* in xvii. 5, where the Syriac reader will note the occurrence of ܘܠܘܬܗܐ (l_wwathak) in the Peshito for both expressions (though the older Syriac has a rather cumbrous paraphrase).

[Before leaving the linguistic alley into which we have wandered it will not be waste of time or space to remind readers of New Testament Greek to be on the look-out for usages and misunderstandings similar to the series to which we have been drawing attention. For example, the Aramaic idiom for “he went away” is

ܘܠܘܬܗܐ ܘܠܘܬܗܐ (ezal leh),

answering very nearly to the Old English “he went *him* away”; the second pronoun in the English and the expletive ܘܠܘܬܗܐ (= leh, him *or* to him) in Syriac being without an equivalent and untranslatable in modern English. The early translators of the New Testament documents, however, were at pains to find nothing untranslatable and to leave nothing untranslated. For example, in the interpolated passage Luke xxiv. 12, we are told that Peter went away from the tomb in amazement at what had occurred; in Greek it is

ἀπῆλθεν πρὸς αὐτόν

or πρὸς ἑαυτόν,

which evidently stands for a simple Aramaic statement that “Peter went away,” and in the first rendering was

ἀπῆλθεν [πρὸς αὐτόν],

where we add brackets to show the redundancy of the translator.

Now we see what happens. The Greek passage goes back into Syriac; the translator does not see that it is a case of his conventional idiom, and laboriously replaces the redundant word by ܘܠܘܬܗܐ (l_wwatheh), and so loses the idiom altogether. As we have pointed out, the words *πρὸς αὐτόν* ought not to have been translated in the first instance, in turning Aramaic discourse into Greek, nor rendered again in the second, in turning a Greek sentence into Syriac.

The whole incident is either derived from the fourth Gospel (John xx. 3–10) or from some closely related document. In the Fourth Gospel, however, we have two disciples visiting the tomb, and not merely Peter: but whether the original story was told of one person or two, it ends up significantly in John with the remark that the two disciples went away *πρὸς αὐτούς*. This time the Lewis Syriac restores the idiom correctly, ܘܠܘܬܗܐ ܘܠܘܬܗܐ (ezālu l_wwhōn), “they went them away.” The Peshito, however, tries to bring more out of the Greek than is really in it, and presents us with “they went away to their ‘own’ places.”]

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Now let us return to Sophia. Our supposition that the Logos of the Gospel is a substitute for a primitive Sophia will be confirmed if we can show

(i) that there is any literature, devotional or otherwise, connected with the praises of Sophia:

(ii) if we find that Jesus, who is equated with the Logos, is also equated with the Wisdom of God:

(iii) if the praises of Sophia are as notably derived from the Book of Proverbs, as we have seen the Prologue of the Gospel to be; and

(iv) if the conjunction of Logos and Sophia is intellectually sufficiently close to allow one of them to be interchanged with the other.

With regard to the first and third points, we hardly need to remind ourselves that there is a whole series of Sapiential books, of which the principal representatives, the so-called Wisdom of Solomon, and the Wisdom of Jesus the Son of Sirach, are seen by a very superficial criticism to be pendants to the great hymn in the eighth chapter of Proverbs. If, for example, the Book of Proverbs represents Wisdom as saying,

I was by Him as one brought up with Him,

this Attendant-Wisdom or Assessor-Wisdom appears in the prayer of Solomon "Give me Wisdom that sits by Thy throne" (Sap. Sol. ix. 4) and is said to have been:

With thee and aware of thy works, and present with thee at the world's making (Sap. Sol. ix. 9);

and a further prayer as follows:

Despatch her from the Holy Heaven,
Send her from the Throne of Thy Glory
(Sap. Sol. ix. 10);

in all of which passages Wisdom is conceived, as we said before, as the Co-Assessor and Attendant of the Creator. The motive for all these rhythms is in the eighth chapter of Proverbs. The ninth chapter of the Wisdom of Solomon is, in fact, a pendant to the eighth of the Proverbs of Solomon: it occupies an intermediate position between Proverbs and John. More than this, it furnishes