

# The Original Prologue to the Gospel of John

MARTINUS C. DE BOER

*Faculteit der Godgeleerdheid, Vrije Universiteit / Faculty of Theology, VU University, Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Correspondence address: Aart van der Neerweg 4, 1191EE Ouderkerk aan de Amstel, The Netherlands. Email: [mcdeb@planet.nl](mailto:mcdeb@planet.nl)*

**John 1.1–5 constitutes the original Prologue to the Fourth Gospel. This passage can still be read as functioning in this way.**

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## 1. Introduction

Half a century ago John A. T. Robinson observed that

the effect of reading too much on the Fourth Gospel is to make one feel either that everything has been said about it that could conceivably be said or that it really does not matter what one says, for one is just as likely to be right as anyone else. And both these feelings are particularly strong as one approaches the Prologue.<sup>1</sup>

Since a very great deal has been written about the Prologue (John 1.1–18) or its various elements in the last nineteen hundred years, it is most unlikely that anyone can in fact say anything really new about it. The main thesis of the present article – that the first five verses constitute the original Prologue to the Gospel – is also not really new. Indeed, its pedigree is ancient, as we shall see below. The present article attempts to provide a new argument for this view of the first five verses. On this basis, it will also mount an argument for regarding the first five verses as *the* Prologue to the Gospel of John in its present (final) form.

For the purposes of analysis, it will be useful first to present the text of John 1.1–5 together with a translation that attempts to stay as close to the Greek text as possible, also with respect to the sentence structure. As is customary, ‘the Word’ (ὁ λόγος) in v. 1 has been capitalised because it appears to involve a

<sup>1</sup> J. A. T. Robinson ‘The Relation of the Prologue to the Gospel of St John’, in id., *Twelve More New Testament Studies* (London: SCM, 1984) 65–76, at 65 (= *NTS* 9 (1962–3) 120–9, at 120; quotations have been taken from the reprint).

personification.<sup>2</sup> By the same token, the pronoun αὐτός, whose genitive and datives forms occur in prepositional phrases in both v. 3 (δι' αὐτοῦ, χωρὶς αὐτοῦ) and v. 4 (ἐν αὐτῷ) and whose antecedent in these verses is ὁ λόγος in v. 1, has been translated with 'him' (instead of with 'it').

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| <p><sup>1</sup>Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος,<br/>καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν,<br/>καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος.<br/><sup>2</sup>οὗτος ἦν ἐν ἀρχῇ πρὸς τὸν θεόν.<br/><sup>3</sup>πάντα δι' αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο,<br/>καὶ χωρὶς αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο οὐδὲ ἓν.<sup>3</sup><br/>ὃ γέγονεν ἔν αὐτῷ ζωὴ ἦν,<sup>4</sup><br/>καὶ ἡ ζωὴ ἦν τὸ φῶς τῶν ἀνθρώπων.<br/><sup>5</sup>καὶ τὸ φῶς ἐν τῇ σκοτίᾳ φαίνει,<br/>καὶ ἡ σκοτία αὐτὸ οὐ κατέλαβεν.</p> | <p><sup>1</sup>In the beginning was the Word,<br/>And the Word was with God,<br/>And God the Word was.<sup>5</sup><br/><sup>2</sup>This was in the beginning with God.<br/><sup>3</sup>All things through him came to be,<br/>And without him not one thing came to be;<br/>What has come to be <sup>4</sup>in him was life.<br/>And the life was the light of human beings,<br/><sup>5</sup>And the light shines in the darkness,<br/>And the darkness did not grasp it.<sup>6</sup></p> |
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Apart from v. 2, which looks back to v. 1 and summarises its import, there appear to be three strophes of three lines each. The three lines of the first strophe have roughly the same length, as do the lines of the second and the third strophes. The whole has a recognisably poetic or in any event 'rhythmic' character<sup>7</sup> (hence the use of the label 'strophe' to describe the three sub-units). The first five verses are characterised by what is commonly called 'staircase parallelism': an important word or concept at (or near) the end of a line is used again at the beginning of the following line.<sup>8</sup> This parallelism is especially recognisable in

2 This claim is an exegetical conclusion derived from considering the use of the term in its narrower and broader context. In v. 17, ὁ λόγος is explicitly identified as the person of 'Jesus Christ' and that identification already seems to be presupposed in v. 1. See further below.

3 V. 1: οὐδέν (p<sup>66</sup> s<sup>\*</sup> D *et al.*).

4 V. 1: ἐστίν (s D *et al.*).

5 I here follow the Greek word order (καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος), where the predicate θεὸς precedes the subject ὁ λόγος. This word order is obscured by the usual (and of course correct) translation 'the Word was God'.

6 Besides 'grasp' either in the sense of 'seize' in a hostile sense or 'understand' (cf. 1.10–11), other possibilities for the Greek verb κατέλαβεν discussed in critical commentaries include 'extinguish' (which makes excellent sense in the context), or 'overtake' in the sense of 'overcome', 'prevail over' or 'master', which is the meaning in the near parallel found in 12.35 ('walk while you have the light, lest the darkness overtake you'). See BDAG 519–20. A choice is difficult, but not crucial for the argument of the present article.

7 See C. S. Keener, *The Gospel according to John: A Commentary*, vol. 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003) 334.

8 See R. E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John (i–xii)* (Anchor Bible 29; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 6. Others think more of a chain or of keywords than of a staircase. See e.g. U. C. von Wahlde, *The Gospel and Letters of John*, vol. II: *A Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010) 18; T. Thatcher, 'The Riddle of John the Baptist and the Genesis of the Prologue: John 1.1–18 in Oral/Aural Media Culture', *The Fourth*

the first strophe and in the third, but with a certain amount of generosity also in the second strophe:

<sup>1</sup>In the beginning was the *Word*,  
And the *Word* was with *God*,  
And *God* the Word was.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>3</sup>All things through *him* came to be,  
And without *him* not one thing *came to be*;  
What *has come to be* <sup>4</sup>in him was *life*.

And the *life* was the *light* of human beings,  
<sup>5</sup>And the *light* shines in the *darkness*,  
And the *darkness* did not grasp it.

The punctuation of the third line of the second strophe has been debated for centuries.<sup>10</sup> Many English translations assume another punctuation, that of the Textus Receptus,<sup>11</sup> in which a period (full stop) is placed after v. 3 and a new sentence begins with v. 4 (cf. KJV, RSV, REB, NIV, NASB, NJB).<sup>12</sup> The oldest manuscripts (p<sup>66</sup> p<sup>75\*</sup> ⋈\* A B) do not contain any punctuation. I here follow the

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*Gospel in the First-Century Media Culture* (ed. A. Le Donne and T. Thatcher; London/New York: T&T Clark, 2011) 29–48, at 31 (*sortes*).

- 9 According to Thatcher ('Riddle', 32) οὐτος at the beginning of v. 2 has ὁ λόγος at the end of v. 1 as its antecedent. In his view v. 2 can then be regarded as the continuation of the staircase parallelism of v. 1.
- 10 For overviews, see especially I. de la Potterie, 'De punctuatie en de exegese van Joh 1,3,4 in de traditie', *Bijdragen* 16 (1955) 117–35 (= 'De interpunctione et interpretatione versuum Joh. i, 3,4', *Verbum Domini* 33 (1955) 193–208); K. Aland, 'Eine Untersuchung zu Joh. 1,3–4: Über die Bedeutung eines Punktes', *ZNW* 59 (1968) 174–209; E. L. Miller, *Salvation-History in the Prologue of John: The Significance of John 1:3/4* (Supplements to Novum Testamentum LX; Leiden: Brill, 1989) 17–44; H. Thyen, 'Ὁ γέγονεν: Satzende von 1,3 oder Satzeröffnung von 1,4?', *Studien zum Corpus Johanneum* (WUNT, 214; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007) 411–17.
- 11 See J. F. McHugh, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on John 1–4* (ICC; London/New York: T&T Clark International, 2009) 104–7. The Textus Receptus, which came into existence with the editions of the Elsevier brothers in Leiden in the first half of the seventeenth century, depends primarily here on the manuscripts of the Byzantine (Koine) tradition (the so-called 'Majority Text' of Nestle–Aland), just as the earlier editions of Erasmus, Stephanus and Beza do; these editions provided the basis for the Textus Receptus.
- 12 The same is true of many translations into other modern languages, e.g. the Dutch versions known as the Statenvertaling (1637), NBG (1951), Willibrord (1978), and NBV (2005). The usual versification, which was introduced by the Parisian printer Robert Estienne (Stephanus) in 1551 and subsequently achieved a fixed place in the Textus Receptus, assumes the correctness of this punctuation.

alternative punctuation (as do NRSV, NAB), which can be found in the last three editions of Nestle–Aland (26 to 28) and which is also more ancient than the punctuation found in the manuscripts that form the basis for the Textus Receptus.<sup>13</sup> The division of the text into three strophes with a recognisable poetic rhythm supports this decision for the alternative punctuation.<sup>14</sup>

The view that the first five verses form a recognisable literary unit is very old. In Papyrus 66, the oldest papyrus also containing the Prologue to John, that is already the case. There is an empty space after v. 5, indicating that the first five verses form an independent paragraph.<sup>15</sup> Another example is the St Cuthbert Gospel, a manuscript of the Gospel of John in Latin from the seventh century, in which it can clearly be seen that v. 6 is the beginning of a new paragraph.<sup>16</sup> In one of his sermons on John Augustine even calls the first five verses *capitulum primum* (the first chapter) of the Gospel.<sup>17</sup> Modern commentators and exegetes normally regard the first five verses as a discrete literary unit.<sup>18</sup> Michael Theobald has memorably characterised the first five verses as ‘der Prolog im Prolog’, the Prologue within the Prologue.<sup>19</sup> Just like other modern commentators and exegetes, however, Theobald assumes that the first eighteen verses and not

- 13 For discussion, see B. M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft/United Bible Societies, 1994<sup>2</sup>) 167–8. One can still toy with various translation possibilities of the Greek ὁ γέγονεν ἐν αὐτῷ ζωὴ ἦν (for an overview, see H. N. Ridderbos, *The Gospel according to John: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992) 37; McHugh, *John*, 14–15): (a) ‘What has come to be, in that was life’; (b) ‘What has come to be, in that he was life’; and (c) ‘What has come to be | in him was life’, i.e. ‘What has come to be was life in him.’ The most likely is (d): ‘What has come to be in him | was life’, where ‘in him’ is taken with what precedes rather than with what follows as in (c). The other translation possibilities arise from the inability to come up with a plausible or satisfying interpretation for this last possibility, which is the most natural (see e.g. Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 168 n. 2; de la Potterie, ‘De punctuatie’, 117; R. Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971) 39 n. 4).
- 14 See Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 167: ‘The punctuation adopted for the text is in accord with what a majority regarded as the rhythmical balance of the opening verses of the Prologue, where the climactic or “staircase” parallelism seems to demand that the end of one line should match the beginning of the next.’ Metzger himself pleads for the punctuation found in the Textus Receptus.
- 15 For an image, see <http://www.earlybible.com/manuscripts/p66.html>. The same applies to Papyrus 75 (ca. 225 CE), Vaticanus (B) and Sinaiticus (Ⲱ). See P. J. Williams, ‘Not the Prologue of John’, *JNT* 33.4 (2011) 375–86.
- 16 British Library, Add. Ms. 8900-0. For an image, see [http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Add\\_MS\\_89000](http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Add_MS_89000).
- 17 In *evangelium Joannis tractatus centum viginti quattuor*, Tractate 2.1 (from Williams, ‘Not the Prologue’, 379 n. 24).
- 18 Bultmann (*John*, 19, 45) represents a rare exception: for him vv. 1–4 and 5–13 form discrete sub-units of the Prologue. See n. 31 below.
- 19 M. Theobald, *Die Fleischwerdung des Logos: Studien zum Verhältnis des Johannesprologs zum Corpus des Evangeliums und zu 1 Joh.* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1988) 211.

the first five verses constitute the actual or full Prologue of the Fourth Gospel.<sup>20</sup> In an article published in 2011, Peter J. Williams, a textual critic, has called this assumption into question: the view that the first eighteen verses represent the Prologue is an invention of the nineteenth century.<sup>21</sup> That invention has in the meantime become an unexamined presupposition of exegetical probes of John even though its basis is in fact weak. On text-critical grounds alone, there is more to be said for the first five verses as a discrete literary unit.<sup>22</sup> In this article, I shall attempt to make an exegetical case for the first five verses as the *original* Prologue to the Gospel of John; I shall also argue that they still function very well as a prologue to the Gospel.<sup>23</sup>

Despite Williams' criticism of the practice, I shall for the sake of clarity and out of respect for the tradition of the past two centuries continue to refer in the following discussion to the first eighteen verses of the Fourth Gospel as 'the Prologue', even though the article seeks at the end to limit the designation to the first five verses of the Gospel.

20 A notable exception is now J. R. Michaels, *The Gospel of John* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010) 45. Michaels labels John 1.1–5 'the preamble' to the Gospel and declines to speak of the first eighteen verses as the Prologue, but he does so intuitively, without any real explanation or argument. See further n. 76 below.

21 Williams, 'Not the Prologue'. According to Williams, John 1.1–18 is regarded as an independent literary unit for the first time in the edition of the New Testament published by Griesbach in 1777 ('it has a slight space after 1.18'): 'John 1.1–18 has thus at last been regarded as a textual section. Thereafter it became practice in subsequent editions of the Greek New Testament to mark 1.1–18 as a section, even though other smaller divisions may have been marked too' (p. 381). Williams lists the editions of Scholz (1830), Tischendorf (1841, 1869) and Westcott and Hort (1881). 'Since the nineteenth century the view that 1.1–18 was a single section has become increasingly commonplace and [this passage] has been widely referred to as the Prologue [ever since]' (p. 382). McHugh (*John*, 5) claims that the title 'the Prologue' for the 'first 18 verses of the Gospel ... goes back at least to Jerome'. In support he refers to Jerome's *Praefatio in comm. in Matthaem*, as printed in K. Aland, *Synopsis Quattuor Evangeliorum* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1996<sup>15</sup>) 562. But Jerome seems to use the designation only for John 1.1–2: '... in illud prohemium caelo veniens eructavit "In principio erat verbum, et verbum erat apud deum, et deus erat hoc verbum: hoc erat in principio apud deum."'

22 Williams points out that 'the transition from 1.5 to 1.6 involves a more significant break than those that follow' (p. 383) in the manuscripts. This is reflected in the printed editions of the Greek New Testament surveyed by McHugh, *John*, 78. Williams concludes that it is probable that the archetype (the autograph) 'contained a division after 1.5' (p. 386). The archetype is no longer available and interpreters today can determine whether the first five verses were indeed intended to be an independent literary unit designed to serve as a prologue to the Gospel only on the basis of text-internal elements, i.e. on the basis of exegetical considerations.

23 As the title of his article indicates, Williams limits himself to a negative conclusion, namely that 1.1–18 is *not* the Prologue to John. My thesis is a positive one, namely that 1.1–5 is the *original* Prologue to the Gospel and, as a corollary, that this passage can still be regarded as the Prologue to the Gospel.

## 2. Questions raised by John 1.1–18

In his commentary on John, Herman N. Ridderbos puts into words the still ruling consensus on the first eighteen verses: ‘The first part [of Chapter 1], the prologue, forms the introduction to the entire Gospel. V. 19 functions as a transition to the gospel *story*.’<sup>24</sup> Ridderbos therefore makes a distinction between the Prologue and the story line of the Gospel, which begins only in v. 19 (‘And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?”’).<sup>25</sup> The eighteen verses that precede this verse – the traditional Prologue for the past 200 years – are not part of the *story* – the narrative – as such.

The problem with this analysis is well known, and recognised by Ridderbos himself.<sup>26</sup> V. 6 of the Prologue already has a narrative character; that verse concerns John the Baptist, as do the two verses that follow (‘There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came for testimony, to bear witness to the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness to the light’). We come to one of the great puzzles of the Prologue: a narrative sentence concerning John the Baptist already occurs in v. 6 and thus not for the first time in v. 19. Vv. 7 and 8 are not narrative, it is true, but they do have a prosaic character that deviates from the poetic, rhythmic style of the first five verses of the Gospel. And there is also v. 15 in which John the Baptist is mentioned again: ‘John bore witness to him, and cried, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks before me, for he was before me.’”’ The witness of John the Baptist in this verse anticipates the words that are ascribed to him in 1.30. V. 15 also represents an interruption of a passage that is devoted to the incarnate Word. Verse 16 connects well with v. 14, not with v. 15, which the RSV understandably puts in parentheses (‘And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, *full* (πλήρης) of *grace* (χάριτος) and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father (v. 14) ... And from his *fulness* (πληρώματος) have we all received, *grace* (χάριν) upon *grace* (χάριτος)’ (v. 16)). The parts of the Prologue that are devoted to the Baptist, vv. 6–8 and 15, thus form a significant challenge for the exegete of the Prologue: what are these verses doing there? Given v. 19 (and v. 30), they seem out of place.

There are other verses of the Prologue that deviate, or seem to, from the characteristic style of the first five verses, especially vv. 9, 13, 17–18, which, just like the

24 Ridderbos, *John*, 17 (emphasis added). In the original Dutch version the emphasis is the author’s: *Het evangelie van Johannes: Proeve van een theologische exegese* (2 vols.; Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1987) 1.29.

25 Translations follow the RSV (with modifications to make the language inclusive) unless indicated otherwise.

26 Ridderbos, *John*, 19.

verses pertaining to John the Baptist (vv. 6-8, 15), exhibit a more prosaic style. The prose of these verses, furthermore, is arguably diverse: declarative in v. 9 ('The true light that enlightens everyone was coming into the world'), confessional in v. 13 ('who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man but of God'), didactic in v. 17 ('For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ'), and argumentative in v. 18 ('No one has even seen God: the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known'). At first sight the Prologue seems to be a stylistic unity but upon closer examination the Prologue appears to be a peculiar, even confusing, combination of poetic and prosaic elements.

Another frequently raised issue is relevant in this connection: where in the Prologue is the incarnate Word first mentioned?<sup>27</sup> At first sight the answer is obvious: in v. 14 of course – καὶ ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο, 'and the Word became flesh'! But then we can formulate the question in another way: where is the earthly career of the Word first mentioned, the Word which in v. 17 is explicitly identified with the person of 'Jesus Christ'? If we look back at the verses immediately preceding v. 14, beginning with v. 9, we can quickly determine together with many other readers that the earthly career of the Word is already mentioned in these verses. We read here that the Word was 'in the world' even though 'the world did not know him'<sup>28</sup> (v. 10), that he 'came to his own home' even though 'his own people received him not' (v. 11), and that 'to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God' (v. 12).<sup>29</sup> After vv. 6-8, which are devoted to the witness of John the Baptist, these verses seem surely to concern the public, earthly career of the Word, of Jesus Christ and the soteriological consequences for believers.

According to a number of commentators and exegetes we can probably discern a reference to the earthly career of the Word already in v. 5: 'the light [still] shines (φαίνει) in the darkness' because 'the darkness *did not grasp* (οὐ κατέλαβεν) it'. In the following verses, the light to which John the Baptist came to bear witness is undoubtedly Jesus (1.6-8; cf. 1.19-21, 27; 3.28). Elsewhere in the Fourth Gospel, Jesus claims that he is 'the light (φῶς) of the world' (8.12; cf. 12.46). He is that light especially during his earthly career (cf. 9.5; 12.35-6, 46), but also thereafter. The Gospel has been written from the conviction that 'the darkness' (conceptualised as a hostile and destructive force)

27 See esp. E. Käsemann, 'The Structure and Purpose of the Prologue to John's Gospel', *New Testament Questions of Today* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969) 138-67. Originally published as 'Aufbau und Anliegen des johanneischen Prologs', *Libertas Christiana: Festschrift für F. Delakat* (Munich: Kaiser 1957) 75-99.

28 Greek: ἀυτόν, grammatically masculine. The antecedent is presumably the personified λόγος in v. 1, identified in v. 17 as Ἰησοῦς Χριστός.

29 As v. 13 indicates, believers can be called 'children of God' because they 'were begotten (ἐγεννήθησαν) by God'; cf. John 3.5-8; 1 John 2.29; 3.9; 4.7; 5.1, 4, 18.

did not grasp, did not extinguish or overcome, the light which is Christ; it still shines.<sup>30</sup> The 'light' in 1.5 and elsewhere in the Gospel is not the natural light of the creation but the redemptive light of the revelation of Christ. 'Light' is here a symbol for salvation or in any case an aspect of it. V. 5 can thus be regarded as a concise summary of the salvific career of the Word on earth as narrated in the remainder of the Gospel (so e.g. Rudolf Bultmann and Ridderbos, among others).<sup>31</sup>

I have said enough to show that the Prologue appears to contain a number of discrepancies, perhaps even contradictions. How can these phenomena be explained?

### 3. Proposed Solutions

A frequently proposed solution, especially in the previous century, is the hypothesis that the evangelist made use of an already existing hymn,<sup>32</sup> a song of praise to the Word.<sup>33</sup> Given the evident stylistic, conceptual and verbal similarities between the Prologue and the rest of the Gospel, it is normally thought that the hymn originated in the same milieu as the Gospel and Epistles of John,<sup>34</sup> which is to say in the so-called Johannine Community.<sup>35</sup> This hymn of the

30 Cf. 1 John 2.8: 'the darkness is passing away and the true light [cf. John 1.9] is already shining'.

31 Bultmann, *John*, 45–8 (for this reason Bultmann places v. 5 with vv. 6–13); Ridderbos, *John*, 38–40. Also e.g. Käsemann, 'Prologue', 144; F. J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John* (Sacra Pagina 4; Collegeville: Liturgical, 1998) 36; Keener, *John*, 387; von Wahlde, *Commentary*, 5. Brown (*John*, 26) resists this interpretation because of 'the clearer reference' to the coming of the Word in vv. 10–11 and the introduction of John the Baptist in vv. 6–9.

32 For evidence of early Christian hymns, see Eph 5.19; Col 3.16; Pliny, *Epist.* 10.96.7: *carmenque Christo quasi deo dicere*. Cf. also 1 Cor 14.15; Jas 5.13.

33 Cf. Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 5.28.5: 'And all the psalms and hymns which were written by faithful Christians from the beginning sing of Christ as the Logos of God and treat him as God' (Loeb).

34 According to Bultmann (*John*), the hymn is pre-Christian, originally written in Aramaic, and derived from the circle around John the Baptist. The judgement of Käsemann ('Prologue', 150) over the peculiar views of Bultmann is still valid: 'The pre-Christian character of the hymn is more than problematical, the Aramaic original incredible, the alleged Baptist hymn a pure hypothesis.' Ever since the work of Ruckstuhl, the hypothesis that the Prologue might have a non-Johannine origin has lost ground (rightly in my view): E. Ruckstuhl, *Die literarische Einheit des Johannesevangeliums* (Freiburg: Paulus, 1951); id., 'Johannine Language and Style: The Question of their Unity', *L'Évangile de Jean: sources, rédaction, théologie* (ed. M. de Jonge; BETL XLIV; Gembloux/Leuven: Duculot/University Press, 1976) 125–47; E. Ruckstuhl and P. Dschulnigg, *Stilkritik und Verfassersfrage im Johannesevangelium: Die johanneischen Sprachmerkmale auf Hintergrund des Neuen Testaments und des zeitgenössischen hellenistischen Schrifttums* (NTOA 17; Freiburg/Göttingen: Universitätsverlag/Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991).

35 With the designation 'the Johannine Community' is meant a small group of churches for which and to which both the Gospel (cf. the second person plural 'you' in 19.35 and 20.31)



Johannine Community was supposedly edited and then in this edited form added to the Gospel in order to serve as the Prologue to it. Well-known and highly respected Johannine scholars are associated with this hypothesis of an edited hymn (e.g. J. H. Bernard,<sup>36</sup> Rudolf Bultmann,<sup>37</sup> Ernst Käsemann,<sup>38</sup> Ernst Haenchen,<sup>39</sup> Rudolf Schnackenburg,<sup>40</sup> Raymond E. Brown<sup>41</sup>). A review of thirty-seven proposals by Gérard Rochais in 1985<sup>42</sup> shows that there is (or was then) a consensus among the supporters of the hypothesis about vv. 1–5, 10–12, 14 and 16 as originating from the proposed hymn<sup>43</sup> – with some doubt about v. 2 ('This was in the beginning with God') and v. 12c ('to those who believe in his name').<sup>44</sup> Vv. 6–8 and 15 (containing the references to John the Baptist) are then to be regarded as 'interpolations' or 'interruptions' which have been

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and the Letters of John were written (these three letters confirm the picture of a larger community made up of several smaller house churches). The authors of these documents came forth from the Johannine Community as did the supposed hymn itself. See the classic work of R.E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist, 1979).

- 36 J. H. Bernard, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. John*. (2 vols.; ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1928) 1.cxxxviii–cxlvii.
- 37 Bultmann, *John*, 16–18. See n. 34 above.
- 38 Käsemann, 'Prologue', 151.
- 39 E. Haenchen, 'Probleme des johanneischen Prologs', *ZTK* 60 (1963) 305–34.
- 40 R. Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St John*, vol. 1 (New York: Crossroad, 1982) 224–9.
- 41 Brown, *John*, 21–3.
- 42 G. Rochais, 'La Formation du Prologue (Jn 1,1 –18 (i))', *Science et Esprit* 37 (1985) 5–44, at 7–9. Cf. Theobald, 'Fleischwerdung', 71 (a survey of fifteen proposals); Miller, *Prologue*, 6 (a survey of seventeen proposals). See also the overview provided by H. Thyen, 'Über die Versuche, ein Vorlage des Johannesprologs zu rekonstruieren', *Studien zum Corpus Iohanneum* (WUNT 214; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007) 372–411; Keener, *John*, 334–7; McHugh, *John*, 78–90; and K. Pfüff, *Die Einheit des Johannesprologs: Eine philologische Untersuchung* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2013) 9–12 (a survey of some recent German-language scholarship for which, according to Pfüff, the hypothesis of an incorporated hymn counts as the current *communis opinio*).
- 43 So also recently von Wahlde, *Commentary*, 19 n. 7. According to Ridderbos (*John*, 19), the consensus is limited to vv. 1, 3, 4, 10 and 11, but Rochais' survey does not support this claim. According to Brown (*John*, 21), the consensus consists of vv. 1–5, 10–11 and 14. In the survey of seventeen proposals by Miller (*Prologue*, 6), there are only seven which do not include v. 12 (or a good part of it) and only four which do not include v. 16. According to Käsemann ('Prologue'), the hymn contained only vv. 1, 3–5, 11–12. His proposal to limit the original hymn to these verses (whereby vv. 14–18 are attributed to the evangelist) has received occasional support (see Thyen, 'Versuche', 384–5). A new attempt to reconstruct the hymn may be found in the article by M. Gordley, 'The Johannine Prologue and Jewish Didactic Hymn Traditions: A New Case for Reading the Prologue as a Hymn', *JBL* 128 (2009) 781–802. Gordley argues that vv. 1–5, 9–14, 16–17 belonged to the original hymn.
- 44 See Rochais, 'Formation', 9–10, 20–1; id., 'La Formation du Prologue (Jn 1,1 –18 (ii))', *Science et Esprit* 37 (1985) 161–87, at 161–2. Rochais himself does not include v. 2 and v. 12c in his reconstruction.

caused by the editing work of the evangelist. The remaining verses (9, 13, 17–18) contain prose additions to the lines of the hymn.<sup>45</sup>

If one leaves the two proposed interpolations (insertions) and the prose additions aside and ponders the reconstructed hymn, the content of vv. 10–12 appears to concern the presence of the Word before its incarnation in Christ, i.e. in the history of Israel. Especially v. 11 invites this interpretation: ‘He came to his own home, and his own people received him not’.<sup>46</sup> If that is the case, v. 5 could (as part of the reconstructed hymn) concern the presence of the Word (in whatever form) in human history between the creation and the incarnation but then before the history of Israel began. According to Brown, for example, v. 5 concerns ‘the fall of man’ (Genesis 3).<sup>47</sup> For some commentators the verses mentioned must also be interpreted in this way as part of the Prologue in its present or final form.<sup>48</sup> Others are of the view that these verses obtained a completely different meaning when they became part of the Prologue to the Gospel: they now concern the career of the incarnate Word.<sup>49</sup> Others argue that this interpretation was probably already valid for the original form of the hymn.<sup>50</sup> In all of these interpretative possibilities the incarnation of the Word in v. 14 can be regarded as the culmination or high point of the Word’s presence in the world.

The hypothesis of an edited hymn also elicited considerable resistance. C. K. Barrett called into question the supposed distinction between poetic and prosaic

45 One could regard these as footnotes that have been taken up into the main text.

46 See Brown, *John*, 28–9. He lists in this connection the work of Westcott, Bernard, Boismard and Schnackenburg.

47 Brown, *John*, 27 (the fall was ‘an attempt by darkness to overcome the light’); cf. Aland, ‘Untersuchung’, 217. Some scholars interpret v. 5 along these lines even apart from the hypothesis of an incorporated Logos hymn. Westcott, for example, sees here ‘one aspect of all human history’: B. F. Westcott, *The Gospel according to St. John: The Greek Text with Introduction and Notes* (ed. A. Westcott; Thornapple Commentaries; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980; originally 1908) 9. Similarly, U. Busse discerns a concern ‘für die weitere Schöpfungsgeschichte’ in v. 5: ‘Theologie oder Christologie im Johannesprolog?’, *Studies in the Gospel of John and its Christology: Festschrift Gilbert Van Belle* (ed. J. Verheyden, G. Van Oyen, M. Labahn, R. Bieringer; BETL CCLXV; Leuven: Peeters, 2014) 1–36, at 10. So also in the same volume J. Painter, ‘The Prologue as an Hermeneutical Key to Reading the Fourth Gospel’, 37–60, at 48.

48 See the discussion of Brown, *John*, 27–9. Brown himself chooses this route with respect to v. 5 but not with respect to vv. 10–12. See previous note.

49 See Bultmann, *John*, 45–60: vv. 5, 9–12 concerned the pre-existent Word in the original hymn but in the Prologue they concern the career of the incarnate Word.

50 See Käsemann (‘Prologue’, 150): ‘There is absolutely no convincing argument for the view that vv. 5–13 ever referred to anything save the historical manifestation of the Revealer.’ He is followed in this judgement by Brown (*John*, 28–30) with respect to vv. 10–12: ‘most of the phrases found in 10–12 appear in the Gospel as a description of the ministry of Jesus’ (*John*, 29, with supporting argument). In addition to Käsemann, Brown also lists Büchsel, Bauer and Harnack in this connection.

language in the Prologue (and elsewhere in the Gospel).<sup>51</sup> According to him, the supposed difference between poetry and prose in John cannot be substantiated. The Prologue as a whole is simply ‘a prose introduction’.<sup>52</sup> On this basis it is then possible to emphasise the stylistic agreements between the Prologue and the rest of the Gospel in order to be able to conclude that all eighteen verses of the Prologue have been written by the evangelist himself, and that he worked in a very conscious and careful way. Barrett is followed by Ridderbos.<sup>53</sup> According to Ridderbos, ‘we are not dealing with a hymn adapted by the Evangelist but with a unit independently composed by him’.<sup>54</sup> The view that the Prologue is a compositional unity has in recent times found a considerable following with special interest for the supposed concentric or chiasmic structure of the Prologue.<sup>55</sup>

This solution is attractive but in my view not only trivialises the demonstrable inconsistencies in the Prologue (as surveyed in the previous section)<sup>56</sup> but also assumes a particular image of the evangelist and how the Gospel originated, namely, as the product of a solitary genius. This romantic, nineteenth-century view<sup>57</sup> of the author is not convincing.<sup>58</sup> The assessment of Wayne A. Meeks is still valid in my judgement: ‘it has become abundantly clear that the Johannine

51 C. K. Barrett, ‘The Prologue of St John’s Gospel’, *New Testament Essays* (London: SPCK, 1972) 27–48, and *The Gospel according to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978<sup>2</sup>). Cf. Haenchen, ‘Probleme’.

52 Barrett, *St John*, 151.

53 Ridderbos, *John*, 22. For others, see L. Devillers, ‘Le prologue du quatrième évangile, clé de voûte de la littérature johannique’, *NTS* 58 (2012) 317–30, at 320 n. 9.

54 Ridderbos, *John*, 22. See his earlier article ‘The Structure and the Scope of the Prologue to the Gospel of John’, *NovT* 8 (1966) 180–201.

55 See especially the influential work of R. A. Culpepper, ‘The Pivot of John’s Gospel’, *NTS* 27 (1980–1) 1–31. Cf. e.g. the discussion in McHugh, *John*, 78–85; Thatcher, ‘Riddle’, 33; A. J. Köstenberger, *John* (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004) 20–2. See now Pfluff, *Einheit*, who opposes the perception of putative ‘Ungereimtheiten’ in the Prologue among scholars writing in German.

56 A good recent example is the comment of Busse, ‘Theologie’, 1 n. 4: ‘Die häufig vorgetragene These, die Verse 6–8 und 15 seien als sekundäre Einfügungen auszuschneiden, da in ihnen von der Zeugen Johannes geredet werde, übersieht m.E. deren literarische wie inhaltlich-theologische Funktion im Gesamtgefüge des Textes’. But the fact that these verses have a literary and theological function in the present form of the text (of course they do!) does not as such undermine, much less disprove, the hypothesis of incorporated hymnic material or that of editorial activity.

57 See F. G. Downing, ‘Word-Processing in the Ancient World: The Social Production and Performance of Q’, *JSNT* 64 (1996) 29–48, at 34.

58 On the use and abuse of appeals to ‘the Evangelist’ in Johannine scholarship, see M. C. de Boer, *Johannine Perspectives on the Death of Jesus* (CBET 17; Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1996) 78–79, 81.

literature [the Gospel and the Letters of John] is the product not of a lone genius but of a community or group of communities with some consistent identity over a period of time'.<sup>59</sup> For this reason, Meeks continues, 'many of the elements of unity of style are probably not specific to a single author, but belong to the Johannine "school", for they are frequently found distributed between portions of the Gospel which, on other grounds, we would attribute to "source", "evangelist" and "redactor"'.<sup>60</sup> The notably 'loose structure'<sup>61</sup> of the Gospel and the discernible tensions within it can be satisfactorily explained by the hypothesis of a Johannine School<sup>62</sup> which over a number of years edited and reworked the Gospel in response to new circumstances<sup>63</sup> and as a result of new insights.<sup>64</sup> This process is also discernible in John 1.1-18.

With respect to the criticism of the supposed distinction between prose and poetry in the Gospel we can readily concede, with Ridderbos, that 'the pertinent parts of the prologue do not stand up to evaluation in light of the precise rhythmic and metrical criteria of the Greek verse form'.<sup>65</sup> And let us also concede with Ridderbos that 'the boundaries between poetry and prose ... are fluid in the prologue'.<sup>66</sup> There is nevertheless a noticeable difference in style between the first

59 W. A. Meeks, 'The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism', *JBL* 91 (1972) 44-72, at 49. On the plausibility of communal authorship generally in the ancient world, see R. Last, 'Communities That Write: Christ-Groups, Associations, and Gospel Communities', *NTS* (2012) 173-98. On the basis of the evidence of associations, Last contends that 'communities in antiquity wrote collaboratively, as a group in a manner that promoted self-reflexivity and self-interest and that made general readership an uninteresting and impractical goal' (p. 198). See also Downing, 'Word-Processing'.

60 Meeks, 'Man from Heaven', 48. The members of the Johannine School tinkered for a number of years, perhaps decades, on the Gospel, which seems to have gone through several editions. See the classic proposal of Brown, *John*, xxiv-xl, updated in R. E. Brown, *An Introduction to the Gospel of John* (ed. F. J. Moloney; New York: Doubleday, 2003) 40-89. For my views, see de Boer, *Johannine Perspectives*, 72-82.

61 M. de Jonge, *Johannes: Een praktische bijbelverklaring* (Kampen: Kok, 1996) 22. Or as Meeks observes: 'The major literary problem of John is its combination of remarkable stylistic unity and thematic coherence with glaringly bad transitions between episodes at many points' ('Man from Heaven', 48).

62 Cf. R. A. Culpepper, *The Johannine School* (SBLDS 26; Missoula: Scholars, 1975). The Johannine School is the group within the Johannine Community which considered itself responsible for the transmission and interpretation of the Johannine tradition concerning Jesus (cf. the use of 'we' in John 21.24-5; John 1.1-4).

63 Some of them possibly very traumatic (cf. 9.22; 12.42; 16.1-4a) according to J. L. Martyn's assessment of the evidence in his influential study *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003<sup>3</sup>). See also Brown, *Community*. For my views, see de Boer, *Johannine Perspectives*, 53-71.

64 See Brown, *John*, lxvii; *Introduction*, 151-3.

65 Ridderbos, *John*, 21.

66 Ridderbos, *John*, 22.

five verses of the Prologue and the remaining verses of the Prologue. The ‘staircase parallelism’ occurs only incidentally elsewhere in the Prologue or the Gospel.<sup>67</sup> In the judgement of Brown, ‘This parallelism ... never [elsewhere in the Gospel] attains the perfection illustrated in vv. 1–5 of the Prologue’.<sup>68</sup> The first five verses remain a special case.

#### 4. The Original Prologue and its Function

There are still more indications that the first five verses are distinctive with respect to the remaining verses of the Prologue. First, others have already observed that the formulation of v. 6 shows remarkable similarities with the first verse of the book of 1 Samuel in the Septuagint:

**John 1.6** There was a man (ἄνθρωπος) sent from God, whose name was John (ὄνομα αὐτοῦ Ἰωάννης).

**1 Sam 1.1 LXX:** There was a man (ἄνθρωπος) of Armathaim Siphera, of mount Ephraim, and his name was Helkana (ὄνομα αὐτοῦ Ἑλκανά).<sup>69</sup>

On the basis of these similarities M. E. Boismard and Brown cautiously concluded that vv. 6–8 probably functioned as the beginning of a previous (probably the first) version of the Gospel.<sup>70</sup> V. 19 (‘And this is the testimony of John ...’) can be regarded as a continuation of the narrative begun in vv. 6–8 (‘There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came for testimony ...’).<sup>71</sup> If this

67 Only John 6.37; 8.32; 13.20; 14.21. The Prologue itself does not provide an unambiguous example besides vv. 1–5. A possibility is the end of v. 11 together with the beginning of v. 12 (‘his own people *received* him not. But to all who *received* him ...’). V. 12 as a whole is not poetry, however, but prose. V. 10ab (‘He was in the *world*, and the *world* was made through him’) and v. 11 (‘he came to his *own* home, and his *own* people received him not’) are poetic or rhythmic and seem to be instances of staircase parallelism but not in the Greek text where the second line repeats a word from *beginning* of the first line, not from the end of that line. The repetition of terms in the remaining verses (‘glory’ in v. 14; ‘full/fullness’ in vv. 14 and 16; ‘grace’ in vv. 16 and 17) have little in common with the staircase parallelism that is evident in vv. 1–5.

68 Brown, *John*, 19; cf. Miller, *Prologue*, 8–9, who refutes Barrett’s view that there is no poetry in the Prologue.

69 1 Sam 1.1 LXX begins with the words Ἄνθρωπος ἦν instead of Ἐγένετο ἄνθρωπος with which John 1.6 begins. The recension of Origen, however, reads: καὶ ἐγένετο ἄνθρωπος. Cf. Judges 13.2 LXX (Codex Alexandrinus: ἐγένετο ἀνὴρ; Codex Vaticanus: ἦν ἀνὴρ); 19.1 LXX (ἐγένετο ἀνὴρ). See Bultmann, *John*, 48 n. 3.

70 E. Boismard, *St John’s Prologue* (London: Blackfriars, 1957) 24–5; Brown, *John*, 27 (‘a normal opening for a historical narrative’). Robinson (‘Relation’, 71–2) comes to the same conclusion on the basis of a comparison of John 1.6 with Mark 1.4; Luke 1.5; 3.2. See also Miller, *Prologue*, 3–4; Devillers, ‘Le prologue’, 321.

71 V. 15 (‘John bore witness to him, and cried ...’) remains difficult to explain. According to Robinson (‘Relation’, 74), this verse was also part of the original opening of the Gospel.

hypothesis is correct, it is no longer possible to speak of a hymn that has been edited with interpolations (vv. 6–8, 15) and expansions (vv. 9–14, 17–18), as Brown also assumes. It is then only possible to speak of a hymn that has been assimilated into an already existing text, the opening verses of an earlier version of the Gospel. It follows that it is also no longer appropriate to speak of fragments devoted to John the Baptist that interrupt the text of the hymn, but exactly the reverse: pieces of the supposed hymn interrupt – and disrupt – the account of John the Baptist’s witness in vv. 6–8, 19–21. The passage about John the Baptist is then the primary text, the assimilated hymn the secondary one.<sup>72</sup>

If vv. 6–8 are indeed the opening verses of an earlier version of the Gospel, the five verses that now precede them have been added to this earlier edition of the Gospel in order to serve as the Prologue of a new, second edition. These five verses contain what evidently was an already existing communal hymn of three strophes.<sup>73</sup> It is theoretically possible that another strophe (or even two) of this hymn has been assimilated into vv. 9–18. I have my doubts about this,<sup>74</sup> but it makes little difference for my thesis. It would still be the case that three strophes of this hymn have been added to the beginning of

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Brown argues that there would then ‘be no apparent reason for the same statement in v. 30’ (*John*, 35). He suspects that ‘the final redactor, seeing that it might be useful here to emphasize the theme of pre-existence, copied into the Prologue the sentence from v. 30’ (*ibid.*).

72 Cf. R. T. Fortna, *The Gospel of Signs: A Reconstruction of the Narrative Source Underlying the Fourth Gospel* (SNTSMS 11; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970) 165: ‘John has not so much interrupted the hymn with an extraneous reference to the Baptist as added the *hymn* to the prose source; for the Baptist fragment here is not an isolated piece of tradition but the opening of an extended account of the Baptist and indeed the beginning of the narrative source as a whole. The prose account, not the hymn, is the fundamental literary stratum, for it is nothing less than the opening of the proto-gospel with which John starts’ (his emphasis). See also R. T. Fortna, *The Fourth Gospel and its Predecessor: From Narrative Source to Present Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) 22. Because Fortna limited himself in his 1970 monograph to the reconstruction of a *semeia*-source (a ‘Gospel of Signs’) and did not concern himself with the putative hymn, his insight has to my knowledge had no influence on this last question. See e.g. von Wahlde, *Commentary*, 17–24; Devillers, ‘Le prologue’, 327.

73 Note that this hymn has not been ‘reconstructed’ or ‘distilled’ from the existing text of John 1.1–5; the hymn *is* this text.

74 Why would a writer of the Gospel, or a school of writers, want to divide up an already existing and supposedly coherent hymn? More plausible in my view is that the first five verses formed a unity from the beginning independent of the remaining sections of the Prologue. The unparalleled staircase parallelism of the first five verses also points in this direction. See n. 67 above.

(an earlier version of) the Gospel and that these three strophes have been used to serve as the Prologue to a Gospel<sup>75</sup> whose narrative portion now begins with v. 6.<sup>76</sup>

But now the question arises: *can* these verses really serve as *the* Prologue to the Gospel? The following discussion seeks to show that an affirmative answer to this question is possible. Almost every commentator points out that the first five verses of John are reminiscent of the first five verses of Genesis, which concern the first day of the creation. The Septuagint also begins with the words ἐν ἀρχῇ: 'In the beginning (ἐν ἀρχῇ) God made (ἐποίησεν) the heaven and the earth' (Gen 1.1). There are other similarities: the use of the verb 'become' (γίνομαι)<sup>77</sup> and the vocabulary of light and darkness: 'And God said, "Let there be light" (γενηθήτω φῶς), and there was light (καὶ ἐγένετο φῶς). And God saw that the light was good. And God distinguished between the light (τὸ φῶς) and the darkness (τὸ σκότος)'<sup>78</sup> (Gen 1.3–4). That Gen 1.1–5 served as a source of inspiration for John 1.1–5 can scarcely be denied.<sup>79</sup> But the introduction of ὁ λόγος ('the Word') as a title for Jesus in 1.1 clearly indicates that the language taken from

75 Miller (*Prologue* 108) appears to be on the same track when he writes: 'John 1:1–5 contains hymnic materials and probably a complete Christological hymn [in vv. 1.1a–b, 3–5].' For Miller, however, vv. 1c and 2 constitute interpolations into the hymn whereas 'other short Johannine pieces and quotations (vv. 9–14, 16–18)' were subsequently added to make a new whole (i.e. John 1.1–18) which 'was eventually attached to the Fourth Gospel proper, and in time a sort of "splicing" occurred when the original opening of the Gospel appeared as vv. 1.6–8 and an overlapping with the Gospel occurred in v. 15' (*Prologue*, 3–4). I am arguing that vv. 1–5 constitute the hymn and that these verses were attached to the Gospel to serve as the Prologue. In light of this thesis, a fresh examination of the origin and function of vv. 9–18 is required. I hope to deal with this matter in a future study.

76 See now also Michaels (*John*, 45) for whom v. 6 is the beginning of the story line of the Gospel (John 1.9–18 is regarded as an excursus concerning Jesus that interrupts the story of John the Baptist). As pointed out n. 20 above, Michaels (*John*, 31–32) labels the first five verses 'the preamble' to the Fourth Gospel and declines to refer to the first eighteen verses as the Prologue. In Michaels's view, however, the whole Gospel, including 1.1–18, has been written by one and the same master evangelist, making the notion of an incorporation of an already existing communal hymn and that of a Johannine School superfluous.

77 The verb occurs twenty-five times in Gen 1.1–2.4 LXX.

78 John prefers σκοτία (1.5; 6.17; 8.12; 12.35, 46; 20.1; also 1 John 1.5; 2.8, 9, 11) but σκότος is used in 3.19. There is no discernible difference in meaning.

79 M. J. J. Menken, 'Genesis in John's Gospel and 1 John' (ed. M. J. J. Menken and S. Moyise; Library of New Testament Studies 466; London: Bloomsbury, 2012) 83–98, at 88–9; J. Painter, 'Prologue', 39–40.

Genesis has been brought into the service of Christology (in 1.1–2)<sup>80</sup> and soteriology (in 1.3–5).<sup>81</sup>

The first readers of the Gospel, the Johannine Community, naturally already knew who the Word was to which their own hymn, now serving as the Prologue, referred. They did not need to wait until vv. 14–18, or some other point in the Gospel, to realise that the Word was and is the Christ, the Son of God.<sup>82</sup> The first strophe (of which v. 2 is an appendage) emphasises the origin of the Word, i.e. of Christ, the Son of God (cf. 1.17–18; 20.30–1), with God and therefore his divine identity and stature. And that is arguably *the* central Christological claim of the entire Gospel in its present form.<sup>83</sup>

The following two strophes (1.3–5) probably have a soteriological import.<sup>84</sup> As I indicated earlier, there are commentators and exegetes who plead for an implicit reference to the earthly sojourn of the Word already in v. 5. The ‘light’ of which this verse speaks is not natural light but, as elsewhere in the Gospel, the light of revelation, the light that enlightens and saves, the light that the hostile darkness could not grasp, could not extinguish. This saving light is for the Gospel identical with Jesus himself.

There are also commentators and exegetes who, contrary to the consensus, plead for a reference to the earthly sojourn of the Word in the two preceding verses.<sup>85</sup> One can find the germ of their interpretation already in the work of

80 Cf. M. de Jong, ‘De proloog van Johannes in de Bijbel in Gewone Taal’, *Met andere woorden* 31 (2012) 27–41, at 30: in Genesis 1 God’s speaking is put into words exclusively with verbs (‘God said ...’) whereas in the Prologue the λόγος is presented as an independent entity that ‘was’ (ἦν) in the beginning. The λόγος existed and was present, and therefore cannot be simply equated with the speaking of God in Gen 1.

81 The inseparability of Johannine Christology and soteriology is evident from the (self-)designations of Jesus as ‘the light (of the world)’ (1.7–8; 8.12; 9.5; 12.35–6) and as ‘the life’ (11.25; 14.6).

82 So also, correctly, de Jong, ‘De proloog’, 31–2: the readers are not holding their breath until v. 17 (or at least until v. 14) asking: ‘Who could the λόγος be?’ Rather, the text wants from the start to emphasise the divine identity and origin of Jesus Christ. See already E. Hennecke, ‘Jean 1,3–4 et l’enchaînement du Prologue’, *Congrès d’histoire du christianisme: Jubilé A. Loisy* (ed. P.-L. Couchoud; Annales d’histoire du christianisme 1; Paris: Rieder, 1928) 207–19 (summarised by Thyen, ‘Versuche’, 385); and S. De Aulsebrook, ‘Es un himno a Christo el prologo de San Juan?’, *Estudios Biblicos* 15 (1956) 223–77, 381–427 (summarised by Brown, *John*, 23). Space prevents treatment of the origin, background and significance of the use of λόγος as an appellation for Christ.

83 Cf. 3.13, 31–6; 5.17–47; 6.36–40; etc.

84 The function of v. 2 then becomes clear: it serves to close off the first strophe (whose subject matter is Christology) and thus at the same time to separate it from the two that follow (whose subject matter is soteriology). The second strophe is joined to the third by the soteriological term ‘life’ at the end of the second strophe and the beginning of the third.

85 T. E. Pollard, ‘Cosmology and the Prologue of the Fourth Gospel’, *Vigiliae Christianae* 12 (1958) 147–53; id., *Johannine Christology and the Early Church* (SNTSMS 13; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970) 14; P. Lamarche, ‘The Prologue of John’, *The Interpretation of John* (ed. J. Ashton; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997) 47–66; I. de la Potterie, *La Verité dans Saint Jean* (2 vols.; Analecta Biblica 73; Rome: Biblical Institute, 1977)



Origen, Hilary and Ambrose.<sup>86</sup> For these exegetes vv. 3–4 just as v. 5 (i.e. the second as well as the third couplet) are to be given not a cosmological but a consistent soteriological interpretation.<sup>87</sup> In other words, these verses are not about the creation (cosmology) but about salvation (soteriology).<sup>88</sup> In support of this interpretation is the fact that the role of Christ in creating the world is not a theme of any significance in the remainder of the Gospel.<sup>89</sup> Moreover, the concept ‘life’ elsewhere in the Gospel always has a soteriological import (35 instances), just as the concept ‘light’ in v. 5 does.<sup>90</sup> The issue here is salvation, new life, not natural life or ordinary human existence. That is true for both the second and the third strophes.

It will be clear that the alternative punctuation of the third line of the second strophe, through which v. 4 is divided over the two strophes, supports this interpretation. If one follows the punctuation (and thus also the versification) of the Textus Receptus, with a period after v. 3, the topic of v. 3 can be construed as the creation (‘All things came to be through him, and without him not one thing came to be of what has come to be’), in contrast to vv. 4–5, where the topic is salvation (‘In him was life, and the life was the light of human beings,

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1.161–5 (he changed his mind about the objections he had in 1955); Theobald, *Fleischwerdung*, 224–7; McHugh, *John*, 11–20. The certainty with which they plead for this view varies.

86 See de la Potterie, ‘De punctuatie’, 118, 123–4.

87 It is noteworthy, and probably significant, that the verb ποιέω (‘to make’), used in Gen 1.1 with the meaning ‘to create’, is avoided in John 1.1–5. As the varied usage of the middle verb γίνομαι in both Gen 1 and John 1 bears out, this latter verb does not intrinsically mean ‘to create’ or ‘to make’, but ‘to happen’, ‘to take place’, ‘to become’, ‘to come into being’ and the like (BDAG 197 is misleading on this point). See n. 93 below.

88 One could also say: they concern not the old creation but the new creation. See the acute comment of E. C. Hoskyns, *The Fourth Gospel* (ed. F. N. Davey; London: Faber and Faber, 1947) 140: ‘Since the gospel is the record of the new creation, of the bringing into being of the sons of God, the opening verses of the prologue echo the style, vocabulary, syntax, and general sense of the opening verses of ... Genesis.’ Also Boismard, *Prologue*, 109: ‘In the Prologue as in the rest of the Gospel, St. John, then, presents the work of the Messiah [sic] as a new creation.’ My argument is that this is already the case in 1.1–5 and not merely subsequently.

89 The only real possibility is to be found in 1.10b, at least when read in isolation: ‘the world came to be through him’. But this interpretation presents difficulties in view of what precedes in 1.10a (‘he was in the world’) and what follows in 1.10c (‘the world did not know him’). At issue is the referent of ‘the world’ (ὁ κόσμος) in the three parts of this verse. See the discussion of Barrett, *John*, 161–3.

90 For a detailed discussion of the two terms as soteriological (or eschatological), see Miller, *Prologue*, 63–9. For natural life John uses ψυχή (10.11, 15, 17; 12.25; 13.37–8; 15.13; 1 John 3.16). For the juxtaposition of light and life, found in 1.4a (‘the life is the light of human beings’), see John 8.12, where Jesus says: ‘I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life (τὸ φῶς τῆς ζωῆς)’.

and the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not grasp it'). But as pointed out in the Introduction, this punctuation disturbs the staircase parallelism of these verses. With the alternative punctuation this parallelism remains intact:

<sup>3</sup>All things through him came to be,  
And without him not one thing came to be;  
What has come to be <sup>4</sup>in him was life.

And the life was the light of human beings,  
<sup>5</sup>And the light shines in the darkness,  
And the darkness did not grasp it.

The alternative punctuation also has much better support. Before the fourth century CE this punctuation was uncontested by both 'orthodox' and 'heretics'. Both sides assumed the correctness of the alternative punctuation.<sup>91</sup> With this punctuation the second strophe as a whole can be interpreted soteriologically, just like the third strophe. In my view, there is actually no other way to interpret it (despite the frequently elaborate and forced attempts to show the opposite even by those adopting the alternative punctuation).<sup>92</sup> The line 'All things through him came to be' in v. 3a is then not about the role of the Word in creation but about the salvation that has been effected through him.<sup>93</sup> 'All things (πάντα)', especially

91 De la Potterie, 'De punctuatie'; Aland, 'Untersuchung'.

92 See e.g. Boismard (*Prologue*, 17–18), who ascribes two different meanings to the term ζωή in v. 4a (natural life) and vv. 4b and 5 (new/eternal life). As Miller (*Prologue*, 72) writes: 'the assumption that lies behind most attempts to make sense of John 1:4 [with the alternative punctuation] ... – ancient and modern, heretical and orthodox – is that ὁ γέγονεν [in v. 3c] must refer in some way or other to something created' while that reading is impossible for vv. 4–5 (emphasis added). This 'assumption' finds its basis in another unexamined assumption, namely that the topic of v. 3ab must be creation. This is also true for Miller, whose own solution is equally forced: he regards the use of the perfect (γέγονεν) in v. 3c instead of an aorist (ἐγένετο) as in v. 3a as extremely significant; on this slender basis, he comes to the conclusion that v. 3a is cosmological and v. 3c soteriological (*Prologue*, 79). So also Moloney, *John*, 36. In my view, the perfect can be taken to point to the continuing reality of the salvation brought by Christ. The variant reading in John 1.4a (ἔστιν for ἦν) indicates that some scribes understood the last line of the second strophe to refer to present salvation: 'What has come to be in him is life.' The imperfect is probably original, however, and consistent with the past tenses used in the first two lines of the strophe where the focus lies on what came to be (salvation) through the Word in his historical manifestation.

93 See McHugh, *John*, 13: 'the verb γίνεσθαι occurs three times in this verse, each time with an indeterminate and neuter subject ... Whenever this construction is found elsewhere in John, γίνεσθαι always applies to an historical event, which either happened, took place (1.28; 3.9; 13.19 [x2]; 14.22. 29 [x2]; 19.36) or which will come to pass (15.7). Verse 3, so interpreted, would then mean that every single event in the story of salvation which is about to unfold takes place only through the Logos, and that not one thing happens independently of him' (emphasis removed). See also Pollard, 'Cosmology'; de la Potterie, *Verité*, 162–4.

life and light,<sup>94</sup> two soteriological concepts that permeate the whole Gospel, ‘through (διό) him came to be (ἐγένετο)’, just as – according to v. 17 – ‘grace and truth through (διό) Jesus Christ came to be (ἐγένετο)’.<sup>95</sup> Indeed, ‘without him’, i.e., ‘apart from him’ (χωρὶς αὐτοῦ), ‘not one thing came to be (ἐγένετο)’ (1.3b) – no saving events took place (cf. 14.6). ‘What has come to be (γέγονεν) in him was life’ (1.3c–4a) – the new life of salvation. *The language of creation from Genesis is being used to present the salvific work of Christ as a new creation.*<sup>96</sup>

In short, if the first strophe emphasises the heavenly origin and divine identity of the Word, the second and third strophes emphasise his comprehensive work of salvation, which has brought into being a new creation, a new world, whose characteristic marks are ‘light’ and ‘life’. In this way, the first five verses function very well as the Prologue, as the introduction or overture,<sup>97</sup> to the Fourth Gospel, also in its present form.

## 5. Conclusion

The first five verses of the Gospel of John form the original Prologue to the Gospel. These verses arguably still have this function. This brief Prologue has adopted and adapted the language of creation found in Gen 1.1–5 to serve exclusively Christological (vv. 1–2) and soteriological (vv. 3–5) ends. The controlling themes of these verses, which are developed and emphasised in the remainder

94 Elsewhere in the Gospel the term ‘all things’ (πάντα) is used to point to what has come to be through Christ (cf. 3.35–6; 5.20; 13.3; 16.15; 17.7, 10; 19.28) and never to the universe as is commonly assumed here (McHugh, *John*, 13). Then one would normally expect τὰ πάντα (vgl. Wis 1.14; 9.1; 11.24; 1 Cor 8.6; Eph 3.9; 4.10; Col 1.16; Heb 2.10; Rev 4.11; see de la Potterie, *Verité*, 162–3; Pollard, ‘Cosmology’; Lamarche, ‘Prologue’) but this formulation never occurs in the Johannine writings. It is always simply πάντα without a definite article. And the latter is always brought into connection with the saving work of Christ. See e.g. John 3.35–6: ‘the Father loves the Son, and has given all things (πάντα) into his hand. He who believes in the Son has eternal life.’

95 See McHugh, *John*, 13: ‘Everywhere else in John διό with the genitive [as in John 1.3, 17], when used of Christ, refers to his mediatory role in the work of salvation (see especially 3.17; 10.9; 14.6; 1 Jn 4.9 ...)’.

96 Cf. John 20.22 (‘And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit”) with Gen 2.7 (‘then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man become a living being’).

97 Cf. Bultmann, *John*, 13: ‘the Prologue is an introduction – in the sense of being an overture, leading the reader out of the commonplace into a strange and new world of sounds and figures, and singling out particular motifs from the action that is now to be unfolded’. The image has also been adopted by other interpreters of the Gospel.

of the Gospel, are the divine stature of Jesus and his origin with God (vv. 1-2), and the salvation ('light' and 'life') that 'came to be' for human beings 'through him' or 'in him' (vv. 3-5).<sup>98</sup>

98 An earlier Dutch version of this article served as my farewell address to the Faculty of Theology of VU University Amsterdam on 15 February 2013: "Alle dingen zijn door Hem geworden": de oorspronkelijke proloog van het evangelie van Johannes'. The text is available at <http://hdl.handle.net/1871/41343>.