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Catholic Theological College
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“Possibly only Brendan Byrne could have written this remarkable book, with its serious and attentive scholarship, lightly worn as always; the author shows once more his immense gift of drawing the reader’s attention to unsuspected depths in John’s Gospel. Again and again the reader will find themselves brought up short by a fresh insight, coming from a deep grasp of the text and its Old Testament background. We are also given happy glimpses of the author’s own inner journey, which greatly help our reading of the Fourth Gospel. At the end of each short chapter there are carefully chosen questions for reflection which gently help the reader into a contemplative grasp of the text of the gospel.”

— Nicholas King, SJ, *Campion Hall, Oxford*

“Byrne’s invitation to ‘come to the light’ plays out in fresh, informative, and enlightening readings of John’s infinitely rich and beloved gospel. Highly recommended for personal or parish Bible study.”

— Bonnie Thurston, author of *Belonging to Borders: A Sojourn in the Celtic Tradition*

Come to the Light

Reflections on the Gospel of John

Brendan Byrne, SJ



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Contents

Preface vii

- 1 Prologue 1: John 1:1-13 1
- 2 Prologue 2: John 1:14-18 6
- 3 Call of the Disciples: John 1:37-51 11
- 4 The Wedding at Cana: John 2:1-11 19
- 5 Nicodemus Comes to the Light: John 3:1-21 24
- 6 Jesus and the Woman of Samaria: John 4:5-42 31
- 7 The Royal Official: John 4:46-54 40
- 8 The Bread of Life: John 6:1-71 44
- 9 Jesus and the Accused Woman: John 8:1-11 54
- 10 The Man Born Blind: John 9:1-41 58
- 11 The Raising of Lazarus: John 11:1-44 66
- 12 Jesus Washes His Disciples' Feet: John 13:1-17 73
- 13 The Prayer of Jesus: John 17:1-26 79
- 14 Jesus on Trial: John 18:28-19:16 83
- 15 Jesus Crucified: John 19:17-42 89
- 16 At the Empty Tomb: John 20:1-18 96
- 17 The Risen Lord in Jerusalem: John 20:19-31 102
- 18 The Risen Lord in Galilee: John 21:1-25 106

Literature Cited and Further Reading 112

Scripture Index 113

Subject Index 117

Preface

This work has its origins in talks given in preached retreats based on the Gospel of John to clergy, religious, and parish groups. It draws upon my earlier and more technical commentary on the Fourth Gospel, *Life Abounding: A Reading of John's Gospel*, published by Liturgical Press in 2014. I am grateful to the Liturgical Press for accepting this follow-up work designed for the more inspirational reading that a retreat context in particular provides.

Unlike a commentary, this work does not address the entire text of the gospel. I have focused on material of a narrative nature, leaving aside long passages in chapters 5, 7, 8, 10, 12, 14–16, where Jesus is engaged in controversy with the Jewish authorities or in extended conversation with the disciples. If I have chosen to focus on narrative, this is not just because such material tends to be more attractive. Narrative scenes engage readers more readily, inviting readers to “enter” into them imaginatively and so become part of the “story” and experience its transforming effects. Such imaginative engagement not only reflects the aim of the gospels themselves but is particularly associated with the “contemplations” featured in the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius Loyola. In this respect the work reflects the Ignatian tradition to which I belong.

In an exception to the plan to focus on narrative material, I do devote two talks to the Prologue that stands at the head of the gospel (1:1-18). It is impossible to do justice to the gospel at any level without taking account of the information given to the reader in this richly theological overture. I have also chosen to address the prayer of Jesus that concludes the Last Supper (17:1-26), often considered the place where the gospel arrives at its most sublime point. At the end of each talk, I have added a few questions to serve as a starting point for the reader's personal reflection.

To keep the work within reasonable size, I have not set out a full translation of the particular passages of the gospel being discussed. The presumption is that readers will have access to a translation and keep it at hand as they move through the talks. The translation I would recommend for this purpose is the New Revised Standard Version, which I regularly cite by placing “NRSV” in parentheses after the quoted text. Where this indication is lacking, the translation is my own. These reflections stem from many years of studying and teaching the Fourth Gospel. I hope they may help a wider audience appreciate more deeply the treasures that it contains for the life of the world.

Brendan Byrne, SJ
Melbourne, Australia,
October 2020

1

Prologue 1: John 1:1-13

“In the Beginning Was the Word”

The Fourth Gospel wants us to be very clear about the identity and status of Jesus from the start. To this end, it begins with a richly theological statement known as the Prologue. Rather like an overture to an opera or musical production, the Prologue put us in the mood, so to speak, for what we are about to learn. It also airs several themes that will become prominent as the story progresses. But its central statement concerns the Incarnation: Jesus is God’s Beloved Son, who has become human for our salvation. Unlike all other human beings, he had a “before”—a “preexistence”—with God prior to his human life. So the Prologue begins:

¹In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. (NRSV)

This lets us know that everything Jesus will say and do in his human life he will do as the one sent into the world by the Father on a divine errand of love.

Whole books could—and have—been written on the Prologue alone. I cannot in this work deal with all that it contains. I have to pick and choose among its riches, hoping to bring them to life for you. One thing that greatly helps in that task is to call attention to the many ways in which it evokes and makes allusions to key texts from the Old Testament, presenting Jesus as the fulfillment of all that is promised there.

“In the Beginning . . .”

This process gets under way at the very start. With its opening phrase, “In the beginning,” the Prologue takes us to the first words of the Bible, evoking the divine act of creation. Let us go there for a moment:

¹In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth,
²the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, and a spirit of God hovered over the waters. ³Then God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. ⁴And God saw that the light was good and God separated the light from darkness. (NRSV slightly altered)

These words tell us that what is there before God begins to create is not “nothing” but formlessness and darkness. Hovering over the dark waters of the deep is what is described in Hebrew as *ruakh elohim*. This phrase has been variously translated. *Ruakh* is the Hebrew word for breath, wind, or spirit. *Elohim* normally means “God” or “gods,” but it can also be used as an adjective describing strength. Hence the translation “a mighty wind” in recent versions (NRSV; NABRE). I find this rendering rather banal. Gentle breezes might be thought to hover, but not “mighty winds.” So I think it’s best to keep the more traditional translation of “a spirit of God.”

In the Old Testament generally, there is reference to the spirit when it is a question of God intervening in the world in a new and powerful way: for example, by raising up or empowering a prophet. The spirit is the instrument God uses to get things done, so to speak. From a Christian perspective, it is tempting to see a reference here to the Holy Spirit and translate “the Spirit of God” (ESV). But I think that would be getting a bit ahead of things at this point. It is better to think in terms of the Old Testament notion of the divine spirit as God’s instrument. So the sense would be that a divine spirit is hovering there, ready to carry out God’s command to banish the darkness with the creation of light.

In the English translation, God’s creative command has to begin with three words, “Let there be.” It is important to note, however, that “Let there be” is just a single word in Hebrew: *Yehi*. This is also the case in the Greek translation (the Septuagint) that lies behind most references to Old Testament texts in the New Testament:

Genēthētō. The fact that creation came about with a single word of command made it easier for the Fourth Gospel, following a Jewish tradition, to personalize God's creative Word and in fact identify it as the Son of God who became human in the person of Jesus Christ (1:14). The identification tells that whenever Jesus speaks or acts in the gospel story to follow, it is God saying, "Let there be life," "Let there be light." The Fourth Gospel is reclaiming the creation story for the life and ministry of Jesus, whom it will go on to describe as "the Light of the world" (8:12; 9:5). The conquest of darkness is not something that simply happened "back there" at the beginning of creation. It continues as the Spirit "hovers" over hearts and minds today.

Light and Darkness

By recalling that God's creative work began with the creation of light, the gospel introduces a "light/darkness" conflict that will run throughout the story. The world has been brought into being by God's creative Word (v. 3), and yet, as far as human beings are concerned, the darkness has not entirely been banished by the light. God created us free. Only as free beings can we enter into the personal relationship with God that God wants, a relationship of love that would be an extension into the world of the divine communion of love between Father and Son. But in creating us free, God took the risk that human beings would respond with rejection rather than love.

Throughout the gospel, then, darkness functions as the symbol of human rejection. John is very concerned to explore the reasons for this rejection, the rebuff of the divine outreach in love that culminates in the condemnation and execution of Jesus. Why it is that human beings prefer to remain in darkness rather than to come to the Light? So the whole public ministry of Jesus will play out as an ongoing conflict between light and darkness. That is why we read at the end of the first paragraph in the Prologue: "And the light shines on in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (v. 5). The light "shines on" (*phainei*) in the sense that the conquest of light over darkness was not over and done with in the original act of creation. It will continue in the ministry of Jesus—and indeed, though the power of the Spirit, in our own hearts today. But, in the continuing conflict, the darkness has not and will not gain the upper hand. Here the

gospel hints at the ultimate victory of light that, paradoxically, will be displayed when Jesus dies upon the cross. But, for the present, the Prologue is preparing us to see the ministry of Jesus as a conflict between light and darkness, as the continuation of God's act of creation through the divine Word: "Let there be light."

"He Came to His Own"

After some words about John the Baptist,¹ we arrive at the center of the Prologue as it describes, first negatively and then positively, human reaction to the appearance of the light in the person of Jesus (vv. 9-14). The true light that enlightens every human being was coming into the world, and was, in fact, in the world, but the world did not "know" him (vv. 9-10). This first comment on the life and ministry of Jesus introduces us to the understanding of "world" (*kosmos*) distinctive to the gospel of John. "World" refers to human beings rather than to the world as a whole, and it refers to them especially as prone to reject God's invitation to love, as preferring in fact to remain in the darkness rather than to come to the Light. In due course, the gospel will explore reasons for this failure to come to the light. For the present it just asserts the fact and goes on to note one particular area where the rejection was especially poignant: "He came unto to his own and his own did not receive him" (v. 11).

"His own" refers of course to his own people, Israel. All the first disciples of Jesus and foundational figures of the church were Jews. However, the Jewish people as a whole did not accept Jesus as their long-awaited Messiah. In fact, with just a few exceptions, the phrase "the Jews" in the gospel refers to that part of "the world"—the Jewish world—that proved hostile to Jesus from the start and, in the end, played a significant role in bringing him to condemnation and death. Correctly handling the gospel's designation of this opposition as "the

¹ One area that I will leave aside are the two places where reference is made to John the Baptist: vv. 6-8, v. 15. While the references may seem rather intrusive to us, they were important for early Christians, who had to sort out the relationship between Jesus and John. The Prologue makes clear that, though younger in age, Jesus had a "before" with God that gave him a much higher status than John—as John himself acknowledges (v. 15).

Jews” is at once the most delicate and the most necessary issue in the interpretation and use of the Fourth Gospel. It is so easy for the phrase, left without comment, to reinforce the Christian anti-Jewish and anti-Semitic prejudice that has been responsible for so much suffering down through the ages.

Of course, the original nucleus of the group that *did* receive Jesus and come to believe in him were Jews. As the Prologue moves from rejection to speak of acceptance, it notes, in a rather cumbersome sentence (v. 13), that those who accepted him came into a privilege long reserved for Israel and now activated more widely and more deeply with the coming of Jesus: the privilege of having a filial or familial relationship with God, of being “children of God.” Although this privilege is mentioned only three times in the Fourth Gospel—here and in 11:52 and 20:17—it is very significant. When Mary Magdalene has the distinction of being the first disciple to meet the risen Lord, she is commissioned by him to tell the good news to the male disciples with these words: “Go, tell my brothers that I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God” (20:17). As a result of what Jesus has achieved upon the cross, the community of believers is now to know that they share the familial intimacy with God that they have seen and heard from him. “Begotten by God,” they are God’s beloved sons and daughters, “brothers and sisters” of Jesus.

Reflection:

1. Do I think of creation as something that happened “back there,” without any relevance to my present life? Or, on the contrary, can I find traces of God’s creative power continually at work?
2. Are there aspects of darkness in my life—areas where I need to hear God say, “Let there be light”?
3. What are the implications of belonging to the “family” of God?