

Manifestation or Incarnation? Andrew Perry

Introduction

The title of this essay poses the question: Is Jesus a manifestation of God the Father or the incarnation of God the Son? To answer this question, we will need a clear view of our two principal terms and some easy point of contrast to evaluate. However, immediately we lay down this desirable first step, we come up against the limits of our language in talking about God.

If we ask the innocent question, ‘Where is the person of God?’, we might well answer that he is in heaven. We might go on and say that God is also everywhere by his Spirit, but despite the limits of our language, to say that God is in heaven is uncontroversial and understood. In Trinitarian doctrine, if we asked, ‘Where is the person of the Son?’ at any time during Jesus’ earthly life, then our answer would be that the person of the Son was Jesus: the Son was incarnate in Jesus. The Son was not in heaven but on earth in the person of Jesus Christ. It does not matter if we feel our language is breaking down in stating these things; whether we are being metaphorical or literal, the answer to our ‘Where?’ question is that the Son was incarnate in Jesus.

The concept of manifestation gives a different answer to the ‘Where?’ question. The Son is not incarnate in Jesus; rather, Jesus just *is* the Son. Further, Jesus manifests the Father, who remains in heaven, rather than any Son (a ‘heavenly’ Father, rather than a ‘heavenly’ Son). At all times, and in all ways, God is in heaven during Jesus’ life. A person may manifest *another* person, but not if they are that person. If there is a human body in the equation, then a person will not be manifested in another person if they are incarnate *as* that person. Of course, in Trinitarian terms, the Son could be incarnate in Jesus while at the same time manifesting the Father; hence, the notions of ‘incarnation’ and ‘manifestation’ are not logically opposed alternatives.

However, the concept of ‘sonship’ is connected to that of being an ‘image’ and ‘likeness’ and this is shown by the comment in Genesis that Adam ‘began [a son] in his own likeness, after his image’ (Gen 5:3).¹ The concepts of an ‘image’ and a ‘likeness’, however we understand them, are concepts akin to that of ‘manifestation’: an image and likeness *shows* that of which it is an image and likeness. We should expect therefore that the sonship of God is about showing forth God rather than being about the incarnation of God. Hence, when Philip asks Jesus, ‘Shew us the Father’, Jesus replies: ‘He that hath seen me hath seen the Father’ (John 14:8-9). Jesus understands that his identity as a son is one of manifesting that of which he is an image, namely, his Father.

The doctrine of the Trinity falsifies this doctrine. It proposes, by contrast, that the Son is not the pinnacle of God’s *creation*, the *purpose* of that creation, but rather the incarnation of an eternal (and already existent) person of the Godhead.² This negates the whole idea of the creation of an image of God, a person³ imaging God — a Son. It achieves this by simply proposing that the person of the Son is not a *created* image, but the eternally begotten second person of the Trinity incarnate — God the Son — come down to earth.

Here we are contrasting a doctrine that says there are three persons in the Godhead with a doctrine that proposes there is only one person. The first doctrine proposes that the second person of the Godhead became incarnate as Jesus Christ. The second doctrine proposes that the *only* person of the Godhead

¹ M. G. Kline, *Images of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 28. K. Borreson, ed., *The Image of God: Gender Models in Judaeo-Christian Tradition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991).

² For an introduction to the doctrine of the incarnation see S. T. Davis, D. Kendall and G. O’Collins, eds., *The Incarnation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

³ The term ‘person’ is a technical term in Trinitarian theology. The word is also used in our ordinary everyday understanding of each other. I use the word in these two ways: when talking of *incarnation* I use it in the Trinitarian sense, but when talking of the Biblical doctrine of Christ as a person, I use it in the *common* sense. This popular psychological sense is readily understood, but by juxtaposing this sense alongside the Trinitarian sense I am questioning whether the Trinitarian sense is intelligible.

created a person in the individual, Jesus Christ, who then manifested him as his ‘image’ (2 Cor 4:4; Col 1:15; Heb 1:3).

The Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation

In 1980, J. D. G. Dunn published a study into the origins of the doctrine of the incarnation called *Christology in the Making*.⁴ His first conclusion was that “we have found nothing in pre-Christian Judaism or the wider religious thought of the Hellenistic world which provides sufficient explanation of the origin of the doctrine of the incarnation, no way of speaking about God, the gods, or intermediary beings which so far as we can tell would have given birth to this doctrine apart from Christianity”.⁵

For the sake of our argument, we will agree with Dunn’s conclusion; what he seeks to do is establish the origin of the doctrine of the incarnation in the evidence of the NT, and so he downplays any ‘precedents’ in the culture of the times. Theorizing against a background which assumes that Johannine writings are later than Pauline ones, Dunn then locates the significant development in Christian thinking about an ‘incarnation’ in John’s prologue and avers, “as the first century of the Christian era drew to a close we find a concept of Christ’s real pre-existence beginning to emerge, but only with the Fourth Gospel can we speak of a full blown conception of Christ’s personal pre-existence and a clear doctrine of incarnation”.⁶

Dunn’s analysis is useful in that he opposes scholarship that locates the origin of the doctrine of the incarnation in other texts like Gal 4:4, Phil 2:5-7 or Heb 2:14. Rather than analyse these other texts, he allows us to choose the interpretation of John 1:1-18 as an example of how incarnation is argued for instead of manifestation. Of all the texts in the NT that might be pulled into such an argument, John 1:1-18 is undoubtedly the most important for the frequency of its use; it is the strongest text for such a doctrine.⁷ If the interpretation of John 1:1-18 proves to be in favour of manifestation, then this will be significant for our understanding of Jesus and show that modern day churches are wrong.

Our concern is not with the origins of the doctrine of the incarnation; the history of the first century church is outside our remit. For example, Dunn’s dating of the Johannine corpus can be challenged⁸ and the prologue of the Gospel can be brought before AD70. If we did this, we would completely overturn Dunn’s historical reconstruction. However, what is of interest to us is how the raw data should be interpreted—in this case John 1:1-18. If modern day churches interpret this text wrongly, any mistakes in dating merely compound the error.

Incarnation

If we were going to develop a doctrine of incarnation, we should note first of all, as a caution, that John’s prologue mentions the ‘incarnation’ of the Word (*logos*) rather than the Son (John 1:14). The passage has been much studied for its background, and different proposals have held their sway in the history of scholarship.⁹ Rather than discuss these contextualisation theories, we will put aside the question of the relationship of the prologue to its cultural environment for the moment and consider the intertextual links it has within the Bible. The pecking order of what is relevant to the interpretation of John 1 starts with the Johannine writings, then includes other NT writings, followed by those writings held to be authoritative Scripture (now the OT); only after this, should the cultural environment be included.

The use of Genesis 1 in John 1 is well known; ‘In the beginning’ is an obvious allusion, but the reference to ‘all things’, ‘the light’, and ‘darkness’ are confirming pointers to the reader that s/he should look for a

⁴ J. D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: An Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation* (London: SCM Press, 1980).

⁵ Dunn, *Christology in the Making*, 253.

⁶ Dunn, *Christology in the Making*, 258.

⁷ B. Lindars, *John* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), 74, “The crucial point in the Prologue is v. 14: ‘And the Word became flesh’. This is the first clear statement of the incarnation, which became a fundamental doctrine of Christianity”.

⁸ This is partly the goal of J. A. T. Robinson, *The Priority of John* (London: SCM Press, 1985).

⁹ C. A. Evans, *Word and Glory: On the Exegetical and Theological Background of John’s Prologue* (JSNTS 89; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993).

Genesis background to the Prologue. In our text, “And the Word was made flesh” (v. 14, KJV), we have the same past tense form of the verb ‘to become’ (ἐγένετο) that is used in the LXX for the ‘was’ statements of Genesis 1: ‘and there **was** light’ (v. 3); ‘**was** the evening’, ‘**was** the morning’ (vv. 5, 8, 11, 19, 23); ‘it **was** so’ (vv. 6, 9, 11, 14-15, 20, 24, 29-30). The LXX is giving a literal translation of the Perfect form of the Hebrew verb ‘to be/become’ and it is unexceptionable. The translation of John 1:14, however, is interpretative; and so some translations render the Greek as “And the Word **became** flesh” (NASB, RSV), rather than “And the Word **was made** flesh”, and this is better.

The particular past tense form of the verb ‘to become’ is variously translated. In John 1 we have it as “There **was** a man sent from God” (v. 6); this is like the Hebraic “And it came to pass” (e.g. Gen 6:1; 27:1; Jud 1:14; 2 Chron 34:19). We also have it in “**were made** by him” (v. 3); “**was made** by him” (v. 10); and “grace and truth **came** by Jesus Christ” (v. 17). We can see that the aorist form of the verb ‘to become’ is treated flexibly by translators. The normal Greek verbs for ‘to make’ (ποιέω) or ‘to come’ (έρχομαι) are not in vv. 3, 10 or 17; just the simple verb ‘to become’. It is our reading assumption as translators/interpreters if we render v. 14 as “And the Word **was made** flesh”; but it is better rendered as “And the Word **became** flesh”.

The use of the verb ‘to become’ in Genesis 1 is to state what has happened or come about—there has been a change. We noted above that there is an ‘it was so’ refrain in Genesis 1, and this is part of the pattern, “And God said...and it was so”. God spoke to the effect that such and such should happen or come about and it was so. Following this pattern, when we read that the Word became flesh, our assumption should be that the model for understanding the Word becoming flesh is, for example, “God said, ‘Let there be light’, and the word became light”. This is why the correct translation of the Greek verb in v. 14 is, “And the Word became flesh”.¹⁰

John 1:14 is not just positing that some *particular* words were spoken and they became flesh,¹¹ but this does not detract from the model being used in John 1:14, which is affirming that Jesus was begotten of God. A precedent for ‘the Word becoming flesh’ would be Gen 1:26, where we do have the creative words, ‘Let us make man in our image and after our likeness’, which do lead to a becoming flesh. Genesis presents God speaking and what he spoke coming into being, but the scope of ‘the Word’ is broader than a particular utterance.

When we use Genesis as a background for John 1:14, we do not get a doctrine of incarnation. To **say** that something should be thus and so and then for that to come about is not for something or someone to become incarnate. It would only be if there was something or someone pre-existent as ‘the Word’ that would we get a doctrine of incarnation with the statement, “And the Word became flesh”. If all we have as a model is speech (as in Genesis 1), we cannot infer incarnation.

The Word

Putting the first chapter of John to one side, the use of the word *logos* in the Gospel everywhere else is for what is said or spoken, a saying or a word (35x, e.g. John 2:22; 10:35).¹² There is no text in John’s Gospel which uses *logos* for something abstract, a personification or hypostatization, or for an individual. If we were to extend our word search to include all the occurrences of *logos* in the NT we would come to the same conclusion; the only individual anywhere called ‘the Word’ is Jesus.

Calling Jesus ‘the Word’ is rare in the NT;¹³ the phrases, ‘word of God’, ‘word of the Lord’ and ‘the word’ are most often used of the message delivered by OT prophets to the people (John 10:35; cf. Acts 17:13; 2

¹⁰ Similarly, it would be wrong to translate v. 14 as “And the Word **was** flesh”—a simple statement of fact, because this loses the sense of ‘becoming’ in the verb and fails to reflect Genesis.

¹¹ We do not know any from John but we do have the utterance of Luke 1:35.

¹² For a study of the thematic links between the prologue and the rest of John see S. R. Valentine, “The Johannine Prologue—A Microcosm of the Gospel” *EQ* 68:3 (1996): 291-304.

¹³ The exact form of words (ὁ λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ) are definitely applied to Jesus in Rev 19:13, but elsewhere (Heb 4:12 and 1 John 2:14) it is not certain that they refer to Christ. The shorter phrase ‘the Word’ may

Cor 4:2) or for the message being preached by Jesus and the apostles. Taking the OT as our background for John 1:14, both individual examples of prophecy (e.g. 1 Kgs 12:22; 1 Chron 17:3), and the whole message (enshrined in Scripture) of God to man is described as ‘the word’ (e.g. Ps 119:9, 105). Our conclusion therefore is that it was the **prophetic word about the messiah-deliverer that became flesh** in the person of Jesus.

Various OT prophecies about the messiah-deliverer could be cited as relevant, for instance, the virgin birth (Isa 7:14; Matt 1:23). This prophecy specifically predicts that the name of the child of sign will signify ‘God is with us’, which resonates with John 1. Or again, there is the word of prophecy that predicts ‘Unto us a child is born’ (Isa 9:6) which ascribes the title ‘The Mighty God’ to the Davidic king. Micah prophesies that the ruler of Israel would be born in Bethlehem (Mic 5:2; Matt 2:6), but he also records that ‘his goings forth had been of old’ which is a reference to the earlier foreshadowing of this king in Scriptural prophecy and narrative. This means, for example, that the various barren birth stories of the OT should be taken as prophetic of the birth of child of promise who would be the Son of God (e.g. Isaac; Joseph). And we could broaden our selection of prophecies to include those that predict a deliverer (Isa 11:1); a Suffering Servant (Isa 53:1-12); a Davidic king (Ps 2:7; 110:1); or a Melchizedek priest (Heb 5:6); *and so on*. Types, patterns and specific prophecies are ‘the Word’ that became flesh in Jesus Christ.

The Word becoming flesh is a natural enough idiom for a claim of fulfilled prophecy, especially if you want to emphasize that Jesus came *in the flesh* (1 John 4:2-3; 2 John v. 7). There is no ‘incarnation’ here; the word of prophecy remains the word in the Scriptures—we can see instead that it is manifested in the person and the life of Jesus. The Word that became flesh is made up of all the prophecies about Jesus. In a sense they detail the fact that the purpose of God revolves around Christ.

The Hebrew Scriptures do not know of a being called ‘the Word’. What we do have in these Scriptures is an *occasional* linguistic hypostatization of the Word of God:

He sent his word, and healed them, and delivered *them* from their destructions. Ps 107:20; cf. 147:15, 20 (KJV)

So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper *in the thing* whereto I sent it. Isa 55:11; cf. 9:8; 45:23 (KJV)¹⁴

Such hypostatization is rare; generally the Word of God or the Word of the Lord is that prophetic word that comes to a prophet (218x, e.g. 1 Kgs 12:22; Isa 38:4). We should follow this majority usage for our background and see in John 1:14 the simple statement that *this* Word (of prophecy) became flesh.

The Beginning

John 1:1 is usually read in chronological sequence along with v. 14, with both verses taken together as saying that in the beginning there was the Word and then the Word became flesh. It is inferred that whatever or whoever is the Word in v. 1 became flesh in v. 14. Our contrary proposal is that **the reverse sequence is the case**: v. 14 is about the birth of the Son of God but v. 1 is about the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. Our argument is a set of intertextual points.

1) This opening is *retrospective* (John is writing years after the beginning of the ministry), for in the rest of the Gospel he describes a beginning which is *at* the baptism and ministry of Christ (John 2:11; 6:64; 8:25; 15:27; 16:4).¹⁵

be applied to Christ in Luke 1:2. The title ‘the word of life’ (τοῦ λόγου τῆς ζωῆς) is used of Jesus in 1 John 1:2.

¹⁴ This text may underlie some of John’s language of Jesus being sent; see J. V. Dahms, “Isaiah 55:11 and the Gospel of John” *EQ* 53.2 (1981): 78-88.

¹⁵ The expression ‘the beginning’ does not refer to a particular day or week, but rather it is that undefined period of time which the apostles thought of as ‘the beginning’ of the Gospel. See H. A. Whittaker,

2) And so in the First Epistle of John we read,¹⁶

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life... 1 John 1:1; cf. 2:7, 3:11 (KJV)

This is the beginning, which is the beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. It involved the apostles and it contrasts with the Genesis beginning because, from this beginning, a man had been seen and heard—a man who was the Word of life.

3) Both John and Mark (Mark 1:1) start their Gospels with the word ‘beginning’. Both omit the birth stories, and focus directly on the beginning of the ministry of the Gospel. Both first describe the ministry of John and then the start of the ministry of Christ, which *began* when he was about thirty years old (Luke 3:23).¹⁷

4) Luke confirms the view of an end and a beginning at this time (Luke 16:16; cf. Acts 1:22), and is the Gospel writer who was concerned to stress that he had enquired of those ‘who from the *beginning* were eyewitnesses and ministers of the **word**’ (Luke 1:2).

5) The apostles clearly had a conviction that the preaching of the word began at a certain point in time (Acts 1:21-22; 10:36-37; Heb 2:3).

6) Jesus was the ‘beginner’ and finisher of the Christian faith (Heb 12:2, KJV mg.).

The evidence in (1)-(6) shows that this is the only beginning which is stressed sufficiently in the early church to make it *the beginning at that time*, and it is the beginning that best *fits* the main perspective of John 1:1-5 which is that of **the new creation**. The allusion to Gen 1:1 made by the phrase ‘In the beginning’ secures a comparison (not an identity) between the Genesis creation and what was now a new creation in Christ.

The time reference for John 1:14 is the birth of Christ, and the time reference for John 1:1 is the beginning of the ministry. The first indicator that v. 14 concerns the birth of Christ is the immediately following remark, ‘we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only *begotten* of the Father’. A second pointer is that v. 14 follows v. 13 which talks of being born of the will of God, and this connects to the thought of being begotten of the Father, so that those who are adopted sons are seen to be born upon the same principle as the Son of God—through the will of God the Father (Jms 1:18).

New Creation

The subject of John 1:3-4 is the new creation and this prevents our interpreting ‘the Word’ as the hypostatized agent of the Genesis Creation. The Revised Version gives the correct rendering of the Greek syntax of vv. 3-4:

...All things were made by him; and without him there was not anything made. That which hath been made (ὃ γέγονεν) was life in him; and the life was the light of men... John 1:3-4 (RV and RV mg.)

Studies in the Gospels (Cannock: Biblia, 1988), 45-49; A. Perry, *Before He Was Born* (3rd ed.; Sunderland: Willow Publications, 2010), 95-97.

¹⁶ For a discussion of the relation between 1 John and the Gospel see W. E. Sproston, “Witnesses to what was ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς: 1 John’s Contribution to our Knowledge of Tradition in the Fourth Gospel” in *The Johannine Writings* (ed. S. E. Porter & C. A. Evans; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 138-160 (especially 151).

¹⁷ C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St John* (London: SPCK, 1955), 127, regards a link between John 1:1 and Mark 1:1 as “probable”.

This translation clearly specifies that which hath been made was ‘life in him’, and hence 1 John 1:1 refers to Jesus as the ‘Word of life’ and elsewhere in John (6:3), eating and drinking of the flesh and blood of Jesus is a condition of having ‘life’.

The companion volume to the standard edition of the Greek New Testament observes that,

A majority of the committee was impressed by the consensus of ante-Nicene writers (orthodox and heretical alike) who took ὃ γέγονεν with what follows. When however in the fourth century Arians and the Macedonian heretics began to appeal to the passage to prove that the Holy Spirit is to be regarded as one of the created things, orthodox writers preferred to take ὃ γέγονεν with the preceding sentence, thus removing the possibility of heretical usage of the passage.¹⁸

Athanasius (4c.), Irenaeus (2c.), Clement of Alexandria (2c.), Origen (3c.), and Tertullian (2c.), all quote John 1:3 without the phrase “that which was made” at the end of the verse. The Byzantine manuscript tradition may have punctuated the Greek to consciously avoid this use of John, but the earliest manuscripts do not have any punctuation in these two verses.¹⁹

The first five verses of John concern Jesus and his relationship to the things of the new creation. The RV chooses to translate the relevant Greek verb (γίνομαι) with ‘to make’, but the better choice is ‘to happen’ or ‘to come about’ giving,

All things have come about through him, and without him not even one thing has happened. That which came about in him was life, and the life was the light of men.
John 1:3-4 (RV revised)

This ‘life’ made through Jesus (the Word) is defined as ‘light’. The subject of life made from Adam is the topic of Genesis 2 — and this life was *Eve*. Indeed, the meaning of ‘Eve’ is life, and it is the same underlying Greek word (ζωή) in John that we find in the LXX of Genesis 2. Eve was ‘life’ because she was the mother of all living. Therefore, John is saying that that which has come about through Jesus ‘in him’ was Eve (cf. 1 John 4:9). The type of Eve here is a type of the church, the bride of Christ. This was a ‘light’, which was *then* shining in John’s day (the Greek tense has changed to Present), but the darkness has not comprehended the light (John 1:5). This darkness was the state of the world at the time that Jesus came into the world (John 1:9), and it had persisted after his ascension, for the believers subsequently shone as lights in the darkness.

Prologue

The extent of the prologue and its structure is debated.²⁰ The common reading of a progressive sequence from v. 1 to v. 14 (and 18) implicitly identifies vv. 1-14 as part of one prologue. The connection between v. 1 and v. 14 can lead commentators to regard vv. 2-13 as a parenthesis.²¹ However, this makes the prologue (vv. 1-18) unbalanced and it is a mistake; there is instead a threefold **parallel** paragraph structure to the prologue (vv. 1-5; 6-13; and 14-18).

The paragraphs (starting in v. 1, v. 6, and v. 14) are indicated by the fact that they introduce two different individuals — firstly, the Word (v. 1), then John the Baptist (v. 6), and then the Word again (v. 14). The two different subjects mark the beginning of their respective paragraphs, and each paragraph contains a

¹⁸ B. M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (London: United Bible Societies, 1971), 195, who cites in support the analysis of K. Aland “Eine Untersuchung zu Johannes 1, 3-4. Über die Bedeutung eines Punktes” *ZNW* 59 (1968): 174-209. Metzger demurred from the majority view.

¹⁹ P66, P75, ℵ, A, and B—see P. Comfort, *Early Manuscripts and Modern Translations* (Cambridge: Tyndale Press, 1990), 104-5.

²⁰ P. Lamarche, “The Prologue of John” in *The Interpretation of John* (ed. J. Ashton; 2nd ed.; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 47-65 (55-57). M. Coloe, “The Structure of the Johannine Prologue and Genesis 1” *Australian Biblical Review* 45 (1997): 40-55. We don’t intend to argue against alternative structural proposals (such as chiasmic or sequential structures); just present the case for a parallel structure.

²¹ J. Carter, *The Gospel of John* (Birmingham: CMPA, 1972), 14.

very different focus. The first paragraph (vv. 1-5) is concerned with the relationship between the Word and the new creation. The second paragraph (vv. 6-13) is a contrast between Jesus and John. The last paragraph (vv. 14-18) is about the fulness of Jesus in contrast to the Law. There are points in each paragraph which 'hold' each of them together as coherent wholes.

We can see the coherence of the third paragraph in the way that the apostle John has tied v. 14 to v. 18 with common expressions. He begins the paragraph using expressions such as 'only begotten' and 'of the Father'; and he rounds off the paragraph by repeating these expressions (v. 18). Over and above this, we can see that this third paragraph has a very tight focus upon the theme of fulness and grace in contrast to the Law, and this focus begins in v. 14.²²

The third paragraph begins with 'the Word' like v. 1, and then mentions John's witness again, like vv. 6-7,²³ i.e. the same sequence of thought is followed. This shows that the third paragraph is not continuing a temporal sequence of events from v. 1 but restating from a different perspective what has been stated in the previous two paragraphs. The contrast between Jesus and John is set out by the first two paragraphs and restated in a different way in the third paragraph.

The structure of the prologue is from the general to the particular. The opening verses are about what has come about in Christ and it takes its starting point as the beginning of the ministry; it consists of abstract general truths concerning life, light and darkness, modelled upon Genesis. The second paragraph changes the tempo and is a narrative beginning to the Gospel. The expression 'There was a man sent from God' is like the opening of the stories of Samuel and Job (1 Sam 1:1; Job 1:1). The paragraph is an abstract comparison between John the Baptist and Jesus who is 'the Light'.

The seeming repetition in John 1:2 could be a puzzle unless it is realised that it is a reference to the beginning of the ministry of Jesus rather than repeating an allusion to the beginning in Genesis. The language is designed to form a contrast with John 1:6 and John the Baptist. Linking v. 2 and v. 7 (and translating the Greek consistently) shows the purpose of this repetition:

The same was in the beginning with God. John 1:2 (KJV)

The same came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light... John 1:7 (KJV)

Both uses of 'the same' occur in the same *position* in the development of thought in each paragraph, and the purpose is to stress two different and contrasting roles:

'*This one* was in the beginning with God' v. 2.

'*This one* came for a witness' v. 7.

The understanding of John the Baptist as a witness is straightforward, but the understanding of Jesus as 'with God' is less obvious.

The statement, 'the Word was *with* God', uses a Greek expression for 'with God' (πρὸς τὸν θεόν) which indicates a person acting as an intermediary.²⁴ For example, the LXX translation of Exod 4:16 and 18:19 has,

And he shall speak for thee to the people, and he shall be thy mouth, and thou shalt be for him in things pertaining to God (πρὸς τὸν θεόν). Exod 4:16 (LXX)

²² Accordingly, we would not begin the third paragraph at v. 15 which is done by some scholars; see M. Coloe, "The Structure of the Johannine Prologue and Genesis 1", 43.

²³ M. Coloe, in "The Structure of the Johannine Prologue and Genesis 1", 41, notes that the "major problem" with the progressive sequential reading of the prologue is the double mention of the witness of John the Baptist.

²⁴ For an analysis of the dynamic nature of the relationship indicated by πρὸς see E. L. Miller, "The Logos was God" *EQ* 53.2 (1981): 65-77 (74).

Now then hearken to me, and I will advise thee, and God shall be with thee: be thou to the people in the things pertaining to God (πρὸς τὸν θεόν), and thou shalt bring their matters to God. Exod 18:19 (LXX)

We could translate the Greek as ‘towards God’ or ‘before God’ but ‘with God’ is the standard rendering. This is fine provided we do not lose sight of the fact that the overtone implied in the expression ‘with’ is one of an intermediary rather than, say, companionship. The example of Moses and Aaron is interesting insofar as each man is given a different role. It is this kind of difference that John is making between Jesus and John the Baptist.

The second paragraph begins with this contrast between John the Baptist and Jesus as ‘the Light’ and then it goes on to summarize his ministry in a different way to vv. 1-5. The first paragraph is wholly positive in stating what has come about with Jesus—a new creation; the second paragraph has a negative overtone because it notes that the world did not receive Jesus—only some followed him.

With the first two paragraphs being general overviews of Jesus’ ministry, the third is John’s birth ‘story’. Just as v. 1 is the beginning that was the ministry of Jesus, and v. 6 begins with the advent of John the Baptist, v. 14 is also resumptive and begins with the birth of Jesus. It is the foundation statement of the prologue because Jesus’ birth is when the Word becomes flesh, and this is why Jesus is then the Word from the beginning of his ministry as v. 1 stipulates.

Manifestation or Incarnation?

The answer to manifestation or incarnation depends on what background you bring to bear on John 1 and whether you read the prologue as a progressive sequence rather than as a series of resumptive paragraphs. The idea of incarnation is dependent on taking ‘the Word’ to be someone or something around in the Genesis beginning. As a ‘something’ it could be held to be the ‘thought’, the ‘reason’ or the ‘purpose’ of God; these are abstract ideas and could be supplemented with suggestions that he (or it) is the ‘plan’ or ‘principle’ of God. If these suggestions are chosen, then the language of John 1:1 is usually held to be either a linguistic or attributive hypostatization. It is not difficult to cite texts that speak of the *logos* as a divine agent in creation or history, perhaps the creative Word of God or the Wisdom of God.²⁵

These suggestions can be found in Greek philosophy, particularly Stoic philosophy, and also in Jewish literature of the inter-testamental period, of which the Jewish philosopher, Philo (c. 20 - 50 C.E.), is the main example. Whether the apostle John is indebted to philosophy, though, is doubtful, if only because in Greek and Jewish thought, the idea of the *logos* is part of a *system of thought*, whereas John’s Gospel only has two verses that mention ‘the Word’.

We could align John 1 with its cultural environment, but if we compare it with its Scriptural background, or with NT writings, a different interpretation results. Of these two backgrounds, the background of the Hebrew Scriptures is to be preferred because these are the framework of interpretation for salvation-history up to and including John the Baptist (Luke 16:16). The birth of Christ is the next step in this history and set against what has been predicted in the Scriptures by all the Gospel writers (especially Matthew). After the birth of Jesus, being the prophetic word become flesh, he is ‘the Word’ and this word is then preached by the apostles.

Reading ‘the Word became flesh’ as an idiom for fulfilled prophecy (including types and patterns) does not involve a notion of ‘incarnation’ because the relationship is one of ‘word and effect’; the Word of God remains recorded in Scripture and Jesus is the *enactment* of that Word. Instead, the idea of ‘manifestation’ is used in 1 John 1:2,

²⁵ This view is detailed in M. Scott, *Sophia and the Johannine Jesus* (JSNT 71; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992). Scott observes, 88, “It has long been recognised that the Gospel of John contains elements of a Wisdom Christology, even though no word of the σοφία/σοφός family appears in the text.”—a telling remark.

For the life was manifested (φανερώω), and we have seen it, and bear witness, and shew unto you that eternal life, which was with the Father, and was manifested (φανερώω) unto us... 1 John 1:2 (KJV)

Manifestation is about 'showing' something or someone:

And I knew him not: but that he should be made manifest (φανερώω) to Israel, therefore am I come baptizing with water. John 1:31; cf. 2:11, (KJV)

But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested (φανερώω), being witnessed by the law and the prophets... Rom 3:21 (KJV)

And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest (φανερώω) in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory. 1 Tim 3:16 (KJV)

For then must he often have suffered since the foundation of the world: but now once in the end of the world hath he appeared (φανερώω) to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. Heb 9:26 (KJV)

Who verily was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest (φανερώω) in these last times for you... 1 Pet 1:20 (KJV)

And ye know that he was manifested (φανερώω) to take away our sins; and in him is no sin...He that committeth sin is of the devil; for the devil sinneth from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was manifested (φανερώω), that he might destroy the works of the devil. 1 John 3:5, 8; cf. 4:5 (KJV)

What these texts show is that 'manifestation' is the leading idea in relation to Jesus, whether this be God the Father being manifested in Jesus or Jesus being foreordained in the Scriptures and then being manifested to Israel.

Conclusion

In this essay we have taken the strongest and most frequently used text for the incarnation of God the Son (John 1:14) and supplied an analysis that opposes that interpretation. We have argued that the Word that became flesh is the Word of prophecy in the Jewish Scriptures, whether in type, pattern or prediction; we have argued this on the grounds that the most common meaning of 'the Word' in those Scriptures is one that has to do with what God gives to his prophets to deliver to the people. We have thus placed to one side the few Scriptural hypostatizations of 'the Word' as of secondary relevance to the interpretation of John. In addition, rather than reading the prologue as a progressive sequence of events, we have held that the reverse is the case: the prologue is comprised of three paragraphs with the last (vv. 14-18) beginning with the earliest event (the birth of Jesus). Finally, we listed a series of texts that use the notion of manifestation in relation to Christ as a way of showing that the notion of 'incarnation' is not being used in John 1:14.

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