

### Item #36 (The Prologue of 1 John)

(This item appeared in “James Swetnam’s Close Readings” as Entry #42. It is reproduced here with modifications of a minor nature.)

The opening verses of 1 John are as intriguing in their own way as the opening verses of John’s Gospel.

#### *Greek Text*

1 Ὁ ἦν ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς, ὃ ἀκηκόαμεν, ὃ ἐώρακάμεν τοῖς ὀφθαλμοῖς ἡμῶν, ὃ ἐθεασάμεθα καὶ αἱ χεῖρες ἡμῶν ἐψηλάφησαν, περὶ τοῦ λόγου τῆς ζωῆς, — 2 καὶ ἡ ζωὴ ἐφανερώθη, καὶ ἐώρακάμεν καὶ μαρτυροῦμεν καὶ ἀπαγγέλλομεν ὑμῖν τὴν ζωὴν τὴν αἰώνιον ἣτις ἦν πρὸς τὸν πατέρα καὶ ἐφανερώθη ἡμῖν, — 3 ὃ ἐώρακάμεν καὶ ἀκηκόαμεν, ἀπαγγέλλομεν καὶ ὑμῖν, ἵνα καὶ ὑμεῖς κοινωνίαν ἔχητε μεθ’ ἡμῶν. καὶ ἡ κοινωνία δὲ ἡ ἡμετέρα μετὰ τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ. 4 καὶ ταῦτα γράφομεν ἡμεῖς, ἵνα ἡ χαρὰ ἡμῶν ἧ πεπληρωμένη.<sup>1</sup>

#### *Preliminaries*

These opening verses give an impression of a unity and an immediacy that suggests a cultic setting.<sup>2</sup> This note will proceed on the assumption that a cultic setting is indeed in question. This setting seems to be alluded to rather than explicitly referred to because the author of 1 John knows that the addressees are in regular contact with it.

But before advancing in the quest of the cultic setting of 1 John 1,1-4 another matter must be addressed: the perspective peculiar to John as compared with Matthew, Mark and Luke. Matthew, Mark and Luke look on Jesus primarily as human, whereas John looks on Him primarily as divine. Of course Matthew, Mark and Luke believed Jesus was divine, and John believed He was human. It was a question of preferring one perspective over another to attempt to penetrate the

<sup>1</sup> Text after Merk (Roma, 1992), p. 772.

<sup>2</sup> “The original setting of this material seems to have been for initiation into the community” (P. Perkins, “The Johannine Epistles. 1 John” in R. E. Brown – J. A. Fitzmyer – R. E. Murphy (edd.), *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* [Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1990], §62.17 [p. 990]). Perkins goes on to evoke an entrance ceremony from Qumran as a possible parallel. But most commentators seem to prefer to speak in generalities and refrain from trying to posit a cultic setting.

richness of the mystery of Jesus Christ. For the Synoptics Jesus was one who was born, suffered death, and rose from the dead, and in so doing redeemed mankind and founded a Church: Christology from below. For John, on the other hand, Jesus entered the world as divine Wisdom and came primarily to introduce mankind to life with the Father in the Spirit: Christology from above. This distinction and this perspective proper to John and so prominent in his Gospel will be honored in this note.<sup>3</sup>

### *Verse 1*

The first four words in the Greek text provide a clue as to what follows: ὃ ἦν ἀπ' ἀρχῆς. A precise understanding is crucial. “What was from a beginning ...”. The ὃ is neuter. The ἦν is past time. The phrase ἀπ' ἀρχῆς is without the article.

The allusion to the opening verse of John's Gospel is evident. But there “a beginning” refers to the beginning of creation, “a beginning”, a willed event, when the Word already existed with God. This beginning is modeled on the willed event which was the beginning of creation, but it is not the same. It is another willed event parallel to the willed event which marks the beginning of the created world; it is comparable, but it is different.

That which began to be is comparable to the Word, but different. It is a reality expressed by the use of the neuter to convey the idea that it is not the Word, even though the solemnity of the phrasing suggests that it is comparable to the Word. The ἦν indicates past time. The willed event took place in the past as related to the time of writing.

For the author of this note these words convey in majestic, lapidary prose, the institution of the Eucharist presented in the perspective of John. They look on the Eucharist not as related to the death and resurrection of Jesus but as related to the Word and His role in the creation of the material world. By implication, just as all things came to be through Him, so the Eucharist came to be through Him.

The subsequent wording of the prologue is consistent with this interpretation.

The neuter ὃ is repeated three times in the first verse and again at the beginning of v. 3. The repetition conveys the unity and immediacy of a cultic setting. The perfect tense of ἀκηκόαμεν and ἑώρακάμεν convey the retention of the initial moment of experience indicated by the aorists of ἐθεασάμεθα and ἐψηλάφησαν. (The latter word, “[which our hands] touched” is appropriate for the Eucharistic presence of Christ, but hardly for His physical existence in an earthly body.) The phrase περὶ τοῦ λόγου τῆς ζωῆς used awkwardly with

---

<sup>3</sup> The goal of exegesis is to arrive at plausibility, not “proof”. “Proof” needs other credentials and other attributions to come about than human interpretation.

the object of “touching”—“which our hands touched with reference to the Word of life”—is appropriate for expressing the difference between touching the earthly body of Christ and the Eucharist body, even while conveying the truth of the divine presence in the latter. The word “life”—ζωή—is quintessential John in the context. Instead of viewing the Eucharist as the covenant resulting from the death of Jesus, it views the Eucharist as the entrance into the life of God.

### *Verse 2*

V. 2 constitutes a parenthesis introduced by an explanatory καί to elucidate this key word. At the institution of the Eucharist this life “appeared” (ἐφανερώθη, the aorist to express a terminated action in past time) and “we have seen” (ἐωράκαμεν, a perfect to indicate that the appearance was not momentary), followed by two presents, “and we give witness and we announce to you” (καὶ μαρτυροῦμεν καὶ ἀπαγγέλλομεν ὑμῖν).<sup>4</sup> The first person plural and the present tense of the paired verbs “witness” and “announce” indicate a group of persons with an official capacity who were present at the creation of the Eucharist.

The object of this seeing and witnessing and announcing is “the eternal life which is with the Father and [which] appeared to us” (τὴν ζωὴν τὴν αἰώνιον ἣτις ἦν πρὸς τὸν πατέρα<sup>5</sup> καὶ ἐφανερώθη ἡμῖν). The repetition of the word “appeared” (ἐφανερώθη) in the verse implies a contrast between being “with the Father” (ἣτις ἦν πρὸς τὸν πατέρα), i.e., belonging to the divine sphere of the unseen, and then becoming visible. The emphasis given the word states briefly and simply the Christian cultic belief in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, the basis for the “communion” which is the subject matter of v. 3. Christ is presented as “eternal life”, which anticipates the “communion” of the following verse: it is by the divine life which has appeared that communion is established between witnesses and those who receive the witness, and between those who receive the witness and the Father and Jesus Christ. The wording is simple in a very studied way: the cult act in question is as simple as it is profound.

### *Verse 3*

V. 3 resumes the thought of v. 1 by reasserting the role of the eyewitnesses (cf. v. 1) and listeners by the repetition of “announce” (ὁ

---

<sup>4</sup> The interplay of perfect, aorist and present suggest that the use of the tenses involves more than stylistic variation.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. the phrase πρὸς τὸν θεόν of the prologue of the Gospel (v. 2).

ἐώρακαμεν καὶ ἀκηκόαμεν<sup>6</sup>, ἀπαγγέλλομεν καὶ ὑμῖν). The second half of v. 3 gives the purpose of the announcing of that which had been seen and heard: the establishing of “communion” (κοινωνία) with those making the announcement and with the Father and with the Son (ἵνα καὶ ὑμεῖς κοινωνίαν ἔχητε μεθ’ ἡμῶν, καὶ ἡ κοίωvιαν δὲ ἡ ἡμετέρα μετὰ τοῦ πατρὸς καὶ μετὰ τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ<sup>7</sup>). In the context the meaning of κοινωνία (“communion”) would best be taken in the Eucharistic sense as in 1 Cor 10,16.

#### Verse 4

This final verse of the prologue introduces two new ideas: “writing” and “joy fulfilled”. The emphasis given to the possession of what has been “seen” and “heard” in vv. 1 and 3 (perfect tense) of that which is being “announced” (present tense), contrasts with the introduction of the new idea of “writing”. The latter idea is presented in a way to indicate an authoritative repetition of what has preceded (“And we write these things that our joy may be fulfilled”—καὶ ταῦτα γράφομεν ἡμεῖς, ἵνα ἡ χαρὰ ἡμῶν ἡ πεπληρωμένη). The studied contrast suggests that vv. 1-3 speak about an authoritative oral tradition, whereas v. 4 introduces the idea of an authoritative written communication.<sup>8</sup>

An authoritative oral tradition underlying vv. 1-3 squares well with a Eucharistic interpretation. (The Eucharist is a reality handed on by word-of-mouth, not by writing: there was never a time when the word-of-mouth tradition handing on the Eucharist and the Church to which It gave rise did not exist, but there was a time when the written text about this Eucharist did not exist.) An authoritative written presentation underlying vv. 1-3 squares well with the introduction of “joy”, for in the Gospel of John Jesus repeatedly promises “joy” (χαρά) (John 16:20.22.24). And not any “joy”, but the “joy” of Jesus (John 15,11; 17,13). In the context of 1 John 1,1-3 this “joy” can only be the result of “communion with the Father and His Son Jesus Christ” (v. 3). In the Apocalypse this seems to be expressed in terms of the “supper” (3,20).

---

<sup>6</sup> The reversal of the order found in v. 1 (there, “hearing” – “seeing”, here “seeing” – “hearing”) but with all four instances in the perfect fits in well with witnessing Jesus saying the words of consecration and considering that witness in the context of a mission. The καί before ὑμῖν would seem to imply that the witnesses were also the beneficiaries of what had seen and heard, which is borne out by the establishing of communion between the two groups in what immediately follows.

<sup>7</sup> The use of the full title “Jesus Christ” would seem to favor an interpretation of the prologue in a sense other than communion with the earthly Jesus.

<sup>8</sup> The expression of authority seems to be behind the frequent use of “write” (γράφω) in 1 John (2,1.7.8.12.13(2x).14(3x),21,26;5,13).

*Summary and Reflections*

A possible translation of 1 John would seem to run as follows:

**1** What was from a beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have gazed on and our hands have touched as regards the Word of life—**2** that is, the life appeared and we have seen and we give witness and we proclaim to you the life eternal which was with the Father and appeared to us—, **3** what we have seen and have heard we announce also to you so that you also may have communion with us and our communion may be with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. **4** And these things we write to so that our joy may be fulfilled.

This note has argued that the above four verses, the prologue of 1 John, are intended to match the opening eighteen verses of the Gospel of John. The prologue of the Gospel of John, it is argued in Item #4, is about the Word's appearing among men first as the Light of Wisdom (vv. 1-13), and then as the flesh from heaven, i.e., the Eucharist, which is the real Divine Presence accompanying God's People as the fulfillment of the symbolic divine presence accompanying God's People in the Mosaic Law of the First Exodus. The prologue of 1 John is an introduction to the communion of those who receive the announcement of eternal life from those who witnessed how and when it began in the words of the institution of the Eucharist. This Eucharist communion is the basis of the participation in the Divine Life of all those who accept this witness. **(31 December 2011; modified slightly 14 January and 21 February 2019)**