

JOHN 1:18: "IN THE BOSOM OF" OR "TURNED TOWARDS" THE FATHER?

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To find one of your punch-lines cited by almost every undergraduate essay on the Johannine Prologue, and repeatedly appearing above a "please discuss" in final examination papers must be an interesting experience. There is a statement - made by Prof. Barrett in the 1970 Ethel Wood Lecture - which has had such a subsequent history:

"The Prologue is necessary to the Gospel, as the Gospel is necessary to the Prologue. The history explicates the theology, and the theology interprets the history".<sup>1</sup>

I would like to reflect briefly upon a passage from the Prologue which may confirm this view. John 1:18 argues:

18a: No one has ever seen God;

18b: the only Son (alternative reading: God) *ho ōn eis ton kolpon tou patros*

18c: he has made him known.

Prof. Barrett's commentary notes: "The Father and the Son enjoy the most intimate communion",<sup>2</sup> but I would like to ask: where and when? Rudolf Bultmann (as was his wont) has asked the question well:

"Does it refer to the pre-existent one, who was in the bosom of the Father, or to the post-existent one, who is now with the Father again?"<sup>3</sup>

A glance at a few of the major commentaries would show that there is a fair amount of disarray in attempts to answer that question, although most, like Schnackenburg and Brown, would claim that "it is of secondary importance",<sup>4</sup> or that "no conclusive decision ... seems possible".<sup>5</sup> Westcott and Lagrange argue that it refers to the timeless nature of the Son,<sup>6</sup> Bultmann opts for the post-existence,<sup>7</sup> while Schnackenburg and Lindars come down on the side of a reference to the historical Jesus:

"The revealer can speak with authority, because he is the only-begotten and remains most intimately united to his Father, even in his earthly life, at one with him in nature and action".<sup>8</sup>

Käsemann and Haenchen move easily from here to see it as a further indication of the naive docetism of the Evangelist, as Jesus is at the same time at one with God and appearing in

a human form among men.<sup>9</sup>

The commentators concentrate on the "state" of the Son, heavily influenced by the apparent inclusion between v.18 and the exalted claims about the *logos* in v.1. In fact, as v.18 is nowadays almost universally regarded as an addition to a pre-Johannine hymn, R.E. Brown can condescendingly comment:

"The editorial expansion of the hymn in vs.18 is not lacking in adroitness; the editor has managed to incorporate in it several inclusions with vs.1".<sup>10</sup>

Associating myself with an important study by Ignace de la Potterie - little noticed by English and German scholars - I would like to take this discussion in a slightly different direction.<sup>11</sup> In so doing, I would like to indicate that a further punch-line from Prof. Barrett needs more support:

"The Prologue is not a jig-saw puzzle, but one piece of solid theological writing."<sup>12</sup>

That wider discussion, however, will have to wait.

There are, obviously, three issues that need clarification in Jn 1:18b:

- a) The sense of the participle *ōn*
- b) The meaning and use of the preposition *eis*
- c) The meaning and use of *kolpos*.

These questions are usually studied in that order of logic and significance. I would like to reverse such a logic.

- a) The meaning and use of *kolpos*<sup>13</sup>

The Greek word *kolpos* is generally translated, in English, as "bosom". Such a translation shows the influence of the classical understanding of the passage. The Greek Fathers interpreted the passage as an indication of the "consubstantiality" of the Father and the Son. Augustine saw it as showing the intimacy created by perfect communion. These ideas are behind the Vulgate's: *in sinu Patris*, repeated down to our own days in a variety of modern European translations:

- *dans le sein du Père (Traduction Oecumenique de la Bible)*
- *nel seno del Padre (Bibbia di Gerusalemme)*
- *der an der Brust des Vaters ruht (Jerusalem Bibel)*
- *in the bosom of the Father (Revised Standard Version)*
- *nearest to the Father's heart (Jerusalem Bible)*

*Kolpos* is not well translated by *sinus* (*sein, seno*). These are expressions used by Latin and the Romance languages to refer to the female organs, both internal and external, of womb and breast. The same word refers to both realities. The Greek word refers only to the external part of the body, be it man (chest) or woman (chest - breast). There is no reference to some sort of inner space within which something or someone may dwell, be kept or held. The expression is used in the LXX to speak of a tender physical closeness of a woman to a man (Deut. 13:7; 28:54; II Kings 12:8; Sir. 9:1) or of a man to a woman (Deut. 28:56). It is also used to speak of an infant's nourishment "upon the breast" of its mother (I Sam. 3:20; Ruth 4:11; Is. 49:22). As is well known, it is used on one other occasion by our Evangelist to refer to a position of closeness and friendship accorded to the Beloved Disciple in Jn. 13:23.

We might suggest, therefore, that at the level of the *word itself*, there is no idea of some sort of divine indwelling, or a docetic "oneness" under the mere appearance of a human form.

#### b) The meaning and the use of *eis*<sup>14</sup>

Nearly all translators and commentators accept that the expression *eis ton kolpon* is to be translated "in the" bosom etc. However, as I have just mentioned, we have two uses of the word *kolpos* in the Fourth Gospel, and they are governed by two different prepositions:

13:23: *en tō kolpō*  
 1:18: *eis ton kolpon*.

I wonder why? It is almost always argued that in Hellenistic Greek the difference between *en* + dative and *eis* + accusative has been lost. Schnackenburg writes:

"As often in the Koine, *eis* with acc. is certainly the equivalent of *en* with the dative".<sup>15</sup>

The usual references are made to Funk, Mayser and Schlatter. However, a control of the New Testament references given in support of this argument reveals that *there is not one Johannine text cited*.<sup>16</sup> While such a weakening in the distinctive use of prepositions is certainly a feature of Hellenistic Greek, one must still allow each author his own originality. De la Potterie has established, some twenty years ago, that the Johannine use of *eis* followed by the accusative retains the dynamic sense of a movement towards a person or an object. He has also shown that such a usage is deliberate in the Fourth Gospel, and that it carries with it

important theological nuances.<sup>17</sup>

We may, therefore, further suggest that 1:18b has nothing to do with an "indwelling" or "consubstantiality" between Father and Son. It appears to deal, rather, with some sort of dynamic relationship which exists between two quite different entities: the only begotten Son and the Father.

Having introduced "titles", a further interesting factor emerges for the reader who is convinced that the Prologue is "one piece of solid theological writing". Within the Prologue itself there seems to be a carefully organised progression in the use of "titles".

- a) In vv. 1-5 the only titles given are *logos* and *theos*.
- b) The central section of the Prologue, vv. 6-14, continues with the same two terms, *logos* and *theos*, until such time as the hymn proclaims that "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (v.14a). In v.14c a further series of terms is introduced for the first time: Son and Father. These are *incarnational* terms, and will *dominate* the language of the "story" of the Gospel - especially in the discourses of the Johannine Jesus, when he speaks of his relationship with God.
- c) After the direct proclamation of the Baptist (who was only referred to in vv. 6-8) and the announcement that "we have all received", rooting the whole content of the Prologue within the historical experience of the Johannine community, the Father and Son language is continued in v.18. It is further clarified by the only appearance of the name "Jesus Christ" in v.17. We are, indeed, dealing with "one piece of solid theological writing",<sup>18</sup> no matter what the pre-history of the Prologue may have been.

#### The sense of the participle *ho ōn*<sup>19</sup>

In direct reference to this issue, Bultmann asked the question which I raised as I began this paper:

"Does it refer to the pre-existent one, who was in the bosom of the Father, or to the post-existent one who is now with the Father again?"<sup>20</sup>

Or does it refer to neither of these alternatives? Here we must return to the "story" of the Gospel, to see how it can help us to understand the "theology" of the Prologue.

Is it possible to understand this participle, used among a series of aorist tenses, in terms of the ministry of Jesus, as it is reported in John? Grammatically, as "the only son *ho ōn eis ton kolpon* of the Father" is the subject of *exēgēsato*, the state described by *ōn* is closely related to the principal verb: the one who made God known is also "the one turned towards the Father".<sup>21</sup> He revealed God in his human existence, and thus his being "turned towards the Father" also refers to his human life. It is interesting to notice that this use of the verb "to be" is never found in John to refer to God or to the inner life of God. It is used on one occasion to speak of Jesus in a fashion similar to 1:18:

"Not that anyone has ever seen the Father  
except *ho ōn para tou theou*,  
he has seen the Father" (6:46).

There is, of course, John's widespread use of *egō eimi* to speak of Jesus' historical manifestation of God, and in 7:29 he speaks again of the historical Jesus in term of the verb "to be":

"I know him  
*hoti par'autou eimi*,  
and he sent me".

What is the significance of the present tense of the verb "to be", used in all these texts to speak of the historical Jesus in terms of his relationship with God? It could indicate a reality which is at the same time caught up in a concrete historical situation, yet permanently transcending time and space. This is certainly the case in 6:46; 7:29 and the use of *egō eimi* in 6:35, 8:12 and 14:6: he is seen, he is "at hand"...and yet there is more to Jesus than is immediately available. This is also the case with 1:18. The one "who is turned towards the Father" is the same Jesus whose glory has been contemplated by the disciples (1:14). He is - at the one time - radically and never-faillingly open to the Father, yet revealing the mystery of that Father through the events of history.

### Conclusion

Throughout the "story" of Jesus of Nazareth - as it is told in the Fourth Gospel - Jesus relates to God as "the Son" to "the Father" (*passim*, but see 3:11-21, 31-36; 5:19-30). He announces that his task is to make the Father known (see especially 17:1-5). There exists a union of love between the Father and the Son (see 3:35; 8:42; 10:17; 14:21,31; 15:9; 17:23-24), and the Son must reveal a God

who is love (I Jn. 4:8,16) who loved the world so much that he gave his only Son for its salvation (3:16-17). The Son reveals the Father "among us" (Jn. 1:14a); "we have all received," confesses the Johannine community (1:16). The Fourth Evangelist believed passionately that Jesus had done this in his presence among men and women, living out a life dominated and nourished by the will of the Father (see 4:34), yet a further indication of the relationship of love that existed between them. The supreme moment, the *telos*, in this revelation of love was the Cross, an eminently identifiable historical moment in the life of Jesus of Nazareth, no matter how it may have been reinterpreted as the tale was retold (see especially 4:34; 13:1; 15:13; 17:4; 19:30).

The Johannine Prologue tells us that the *logos* who had been turned in a loving union towards God before all time (vv.1-5), became flesh and established a unique moment of decision in the history of all men and women (vv. 6-14) because, as the Son, he revealed the Father to us through the historical experience of Jesus of Nazareth (vv. 15-18). V.18b refers *only* to the last stage of that sequence. The Evangelist informs his readers that Jesus of Nazareth, the only Son of the Father, lived a life which was always open to that Father in a never-failing relationship of love and obedience. To express this concept in a remarkably concise fashion, the Evangelist has chosen a word which was used regularly to speak of the closeness which results from a relationship of love, *ho kolpos*, and he insists that the whole of Jesus' life was marked by such a relationship: *ho ōn eis ton kolpon tou patros*. The experience of the historical Jesus throughout the "story" of the Gospel certainly explicates the theological implications of what is said in v.18b of the Prologue.

Such a conclusion could and should lead us further into the literary structure and unfolding theological argument of the Johannine Prologue. However, for the moment, I would like to conclude with my interpretation of Jn. 1:18:

- a) No one has ever seen God (in history - see Jn 5:37; 6:46; I Jn. 4:12-20).
- b) The only Son, who is turned towards the Father (in love and obedience throughout the whole of his *historical* presence among men and women).
- c) He has made him known (in the *historical* events of his life and death).

NOTES

1. C.K. Barrett, "The Prologue of St John's Gospel", in *New Testament Essays* (London, SPCK, 1972) p.48.
2. C.K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St John* (London, SPCK, 1978<sup>2</sup>) p.170.
3. R. Bultmann, *The Gospel of John. A Commentary* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1971) p.170. The same question is asked by M.-J. Lagrange, *Evangile selon Saint Jean* (Paris, Gabalda, 1925) p.28.
4. R. Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St John* (London, Burns & Oates, 1968) Vol. I, p.281.
5. R.E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John (i-xii)* The Anchor Bible 29 (New York, Doubleday, 1966) p.17.
6. B.F. Westcott, *The Gospel According to St John* (London, John Murray, 1905) p.15; M.-J. Lagrange, *Saint Jean*, pp. 27-28.
7. R. Bultmann, *John*, pp. 82-83, note 6.
8. R. Schnackenburg, *St. John I*, p.280. See also B. Lindars, *The Gospel of John*, New Century Bible (London, Oliphants, 1972) p.99.
9. E. Käsemann, *The Testament of Jesus* (London, SCM Press, 1968) pp.11-13; 69-70; E. Haenchen, *Das Johannesevangelium. Ein Kommentar* (Tübingen, J.C.B. Mohr, 1980) pp.131-132.
10. R.E. Brown, *John*, p.36.
11. I. de la Potterie, *La Vérité dans Saint Jean*, *Analecta Biblica* 73-74 (Rome, Biblical Institute Press, 1977-78). For his study of Jn. 1:18, see Vol. I, pp.211-241.
12. C.K. Barrett, "The Prologue ...". p.48.
13. See I. de la Potterie, *La Vérité*, pp. 228-230.
14. See *ibid.*, pp. 230-235.

15. R. Schnackenburg, *St. John I*, p.281. See also p.234 for identical remarks on the use of *pros* + accusative in 1:1. His list of "proof texts" for this phenomenon in Hellenistic Greek is given in note 34 of that page.
16. It is interesting to read the various grammars of New Testament Greek on this issue. They all sense the use of *eis* + accusative in Jn 1:18 must be dealt with sanely, and look to the confusion between *eis* and *en* to do so. As M. Zerwick, *Biblical Greek* (Rome, Biblical Institute Press, 1963) p.33 wrote: "It would be an exaggeration to ascribe to the evangelist the intention of expressing by the use of *eis* the trinitarian relation of "esse ad" whereby the second divine Person is said to be constituted". Similar remarks are made by J.H. Moulton - N. Turner, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*, Vol. III: Syntax (Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1963) p.254 and C.F.D. Moule, *An Idiom Book of New Testament Greek* (Cambridge, University Press, 1959<sup>2</sup>) p.69. Yet, they all point to the fact that normally the Fourth Evangelist is able to distinguish between the two prepositions, and to use them with skill. See M. Zerwick, *op. cit.*, pp.33-34; J.H. Moulton - N. Turner, *op. cit.*, p.254: "There is therefore nothing very profound here concerning mutual motion between Father and Son; nevertheless John ... does not usually blur the distinction between *eis* and *en*, and except for Mt he has fewer exx. of *eis* = *en* than any NT author." C.F.D. Moule, *op. cit.*, p.69; F. Blass - A. Debrunner - R.W. Funk, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1961), p.111. I am suggesting here that their dilemma might be solved if they were to take a closer look at the possibilities of the noun *kolpos*, and allow the evangelist to be consistent in his use of *eis* + accusative.
17. I. de la Potterie, "L'emploi dynamique de *eis* dans *S. Jean et ses incidences théologiques*", *Biblica* 43 (1962) 366-387.
18. See above, note 12.
19. See I. De la Potterie *La Vérité*, pp.235-239.
20. See above, note 3.



21. See I. de la Potterie, *La Vérité*, p.236. *monogenēs huios ho ōn ktl* étant le sujet de *exēgēsato*, l'état décrit par *ōn* doit être simultané avec l'action du verbe principal; celui qui 'révèle' est celui-là même qui 'est tourné vers (*ho ōn eis*) le sein du Père".