

Structure in Scripture
John 1:1-18
January 4, 2009

Today is the Sunday before Epiphany. January 6th, as you know, is the twelfth day of Christmas. The day the Magi, the Wise Men, completed their journey from the East and found baby Jesus in Bethlehem. The word “epiphany” means “something that has been hidden is now revealed.” In this case, the one who was born King was been revealed.

There are a lot of ways to discover things that are hidden. Some are purely accidental, but sometimes we intentionally seek the unknown. Sometimes we follow a star not knowing where it leads. In biblical studies, sometimes we follow clues in a text that lead us to previously unforeseen insights. Our lectionary gospel reading for today is the prologue of John’s gospel. Eighteen tersely worded verses packed with theological import. Someone has written that if John’s Gospel is the pearl of great price then the prologue is the pearl within the pearl.

There is no single section of the New Testament that is more highly structured than John’s prologue! I want to show you two different ways this text can lead us to new insight simply by the way it is organized. Rather than a sermon per se, this will be more of a bible study. Please, if you can, keep your Bible open to John 1 so you can follow what I will describe. The ways the prologue is structured will be the stars we follow.

The First Star

First of all, look at the way John is written. The Bibles in the pews are the New Revised Standard Version. They translate John’s prologue as prose. All eighteen verses are prose. My New International Version does the same thing. But when you read John in the New Jerusalem Bible the entire prologue—all eighteen verses—are poetry. So, which is it, prose or poetry? Well, the answer is both. The prologue of John is actually a combination of an early Christian poetic hymn with parenthetical prose references to John the Baptist. The poetry functions as an overture to what follows: it introduces themes that will be developed, it makes claims that will be established. The prose ties the prologue to the rest the rest of the story.

Ancient poems were often divided into strophes. This is true for John. What I am about to do is read to you the poetic part of the prologue, the hymn, while omitting the prose sections. So you can follow along, I am going to read verses 1-5, 10-12, 14, and 16. Listen to the rhythm and meter of each phrase. There are four strophes:

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

Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that have been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it. (3-5)

He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, He gave the right to become children of God. (10-12)

The Word became flesh and lived for a while among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, (14) who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another. (16)

It works, doesn't it? The rhythm, the pacing, the vocabulary. It is a marvelous early Christian hymn. Now, what about the prose sections of the prologue? Verses 6-9, 13, 15, and 17-18. Let's read them:

There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world. To all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God. John testifies concerning him. He cries out, saying, "This was he of whom I said, 'he who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'" For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God, but God the only Son, who is at the Father's side, has made him known.

It works, doesn't it? This artful blending of two different types of literature into the most profound articulation of early Christian theology is a wonderful example of structure in Scripture. But if you followed carefully, you probably saw the one, small problem with what I read. One tiny glitch. I read verse twelve both times: *Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.* Scholars like Raymond Brown are pretty sure 1-5, 10-11, and 14 are part of the original poem. Twelve is a problem.

The first star we've followed has taken us through the blending of two types of literature in John's prologue—and left us with a bit of a puzzle. What to do about verse twelve? Is it poetry? Is it prose? Or is it the creation of an author that needed a "connection" between poetry and prose in order to complete prologue in a way that made sense?

The Second Star

The way to follow the second star is to have a bit of fun with the words of the text. Do you know what a palindrome is? It is a word or phrase which reads the same in both directions. Like "eye" or "pop" or "deed." "Live evil" is a palindrome; so is "Madam, I'm Adam."

There are also "word-unit" palindromes, in which the words form the same sentence backwards and forwards. "Women understand men; few men understand women" reads the same way backwards! A smaller word-unit palindrome is "I did, did I?" How about this one: Says Mom, "What do you do?" – You do what Mom says.

Fun with palindromes sets the stage for what we have in John's prologue—after the poem and prose pieces have been combined. We have what is called a chiasm. The term chiasm comes from the Greek letter "chi" which is drawn like an "X." The shape of the left side of the X is the form a chiasm follows. A palindrome reads the same forward and

backward. A chiasm is a pattern down and back. Let me give you an example. Suppose I employed several people and had to lay off one of them. I might write a memo to him that reads something like this:

Dear John,

You're fired.

Sincerely, Paul

This memo has a pattern. A, B, A'. The first "A" (Dear John) and the last "A'" (Sincerely, Herb) are not the same, they do not even have the same theme, but they are related. They form the literary "frame" within which the point of the memo is made (You're fired).

Suppose I decide my memo is a bit too harsh. I want to soften the blow, so I add a layer to it. Now it reads this way:

Dear John,

Things are tough, we can't afford you anymore.

You're fired.

I'm really sorry I have to do this. It isn't my fault

Sincerely, Paul

Now the pattern is A, B, C, B', A'. There is an external frame; a frame within that larger frame; the point of the memo.

Ancient authors sometimes used chiasms to structure their writing. And when they used a chiasm the center line, the line without a parallel line, became the focus of the message. All the other elements of the letter existed to help deliver that message.

Have you ever heard Bob Dylan's original recording of *Blowing in the Wind*? He doesn't have a very good voice, you know that. But the way he sings it delivers his ultimate message. The whole thing is an anti-war song. Everything flows evenly until he gets to the words "too many people have died" which is where he stops singing and simply says these words. Then he begins to sing again. It is a bit jarring, but very effective. A chiasm is like that. Everything is neat and orderly, with parallels (on near parallels) until the point of the piece is reached, which—jarringly—stands alone.

The prologue of John is a chiasm. Ancient readers got it. Let's see if we do. Look at John chapter one. Let's read verses 1-2. *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.* Now verse

eighteen: *No one has ever seen God, but God the only Son, who is at the Father's side, has made him known.* The subjects of verses one and two are God and the Word; the subjects of verse eighteen are God and the Son. The themes of each are similar, too. Verses 1-2 are "A" while verse eighteen is "A'."

Let's look at verses three and seventeen: *Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.* Both of these verses are about "agency" about who through whom things came into existence.

Look how verse six begins: *There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John.* Verse fifteen begins: *John testifies concerning him.*

Verses nine and fourteen form the clearest thematic frame: *The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though world was made through him, the world did not recognize him,* verse nine; and, *The Word became flesh and lived for a while among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth,* verse fourteen.

As the chiasm of John's prologue narrows down, as it moves toward its climax, what verse do you suppose is at its heart? Verse twelve. Exactly. The same verse that our first star led to is the same verse that our second star leads to. And what does verse twelve say: *Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.* That's it. That's the point. That's the gospel. The pearl within the pearl within the pearl.

Charles H. Spurgeon, 1892.

- "That religion which leaves out the person of Christ, has left out the essential point. Thou art not saved by believing a doctrine, though it is well for thee to believe it if it be true. Thou art not saved by practising an ordinance, though thou shouldst practise it if thou art one of those to whom it belongs. Thou art not saved by any belief except this, believing on Christ's name, and receiving him."

