THE RECEPTION OF GENESIS 1 IN THE JOHANNINE PROLOGUE AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR JOHN'S CHRISTOLOGY

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I. INTRODUCTION

For those with even a cursory knowledge of the Biblical languages, it is clear that the Fourth Gospel opens with a transparent allusion to the introductory phrase in LXX Gen 1:1. A close examination of the first chapter of Genesis alongside the Johannine Prologue (1:1–18) reveals other explicit *lexical connections* between the two texts, and this is to say nothing of the strong *conceptual links* drawn by the Fourth Evangelist.[1] Commentators on the Fourth Gospel have long acknowledged that Genesis is critically important to the Evangelist's overall literary and theological agendas, though there has been little agreement on how to understand John's unique reception of Gen 1, especially as it relates to the deployment of

[1] Some regard the use of the term "Evangelist" as a relic from a previous era of scholarship dominated by redaction criticism. While my exegesis here will consist of a historically-informed narratological approach to the text, I still find value in the term and use it here as a shorthand for the person(s) responsible for generating the final form of the text as it now stands.

λόγος terminology. Scholars have variously understood John's λόγος in light of Hellenistic philosophy,[2] Philonic exegesis,[3] Gnosticism,[4] and rabbinic mysticism,[5] among other ideological frameworks. For my part, I am persuaded that the Fourth Gospel and its λόγος terminology reflect a backdrop within first-century diaspora Judaism and that John's Prologue should be read primarily in light of Jewish (or perhaps Jewish-Christian) readings of the Torah.[6]

In what follows, I will attempt to explore the reception of Gen 1 in the Johannine Prologue with a view to deliberating on its implications for John's unfolding narrative christology. In particular, I aim to investigate how John incorporates major terms and concepts from LXX Gen 1, and how this impacts his presentation of Jesus's mission and identity. This examination will proceed in three parts: First, I will undertake an exegesis of John 1:1–18, with specific emphasis upon John's use of imagery and terminology from Gen 1. Second, I will consider critical elements of John's emerging christological presentation in the

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[2] For example, C.H. Dodd's two important volumes situated the Fourth Gospel primarily within a Hellenistic milieu. See C.H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953); Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963).

[3] On this, see, e.g., Thomas H. Tobin, "The Prologue of John and Hellenistic Jewish Speculation," *CBQ* 52 (1990): 252–69; Harold W. Attridge, "Philo and John: Two Riffs on One Logos," *Studia Philonica Annual* 17 (2005): 103–117. Though not concerned with the Johannine Prologue *per se*, another important work that puts John into dialogue with Philo is Peder Borgen's influential monograph, *Bread from Heaven: An Exegetical Study of the Concept of Manna in the Gospel of John and the Writings of Philo*, NovTSup 10 (Leiden: Brill, 1965).

[4] The most noteworthy example of this approach is Rudolf Bultmann's epoch-making commentary on John, which situated the Fourth Gospel against a Gnostic background. See Rudolf K. Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, trans. George R. Beasley-Murray, R.W.N. Hoare, and John K. Riches (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1971); Bultmann, "Die Bedeutung der neu erschlossenen mandäischen und manichäischen Quell für das Verständnis des Johannesevangeliums," *ZNW* 24 (1925): 100–46.

[5] See, e.g., Jey J. Kanagaraj, "Jesus the King, Merkabah Mysticism, and the Gospel of John," *TynBul* 47 (1996): 349–66; Kanagaraj, *Mysticism in the Gospel of John: An Inquiry into its Background*, JSNTSup 158 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998).

[6] See the detailed discussion of this background in Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003) 1:172–232.

Prologue and their connection to Gen 1, and discuss their implications. Third, I will conclude the essay with a synthesis of my findings regarding John's portrait of Jesus and the impact of Gen 1 therein.

II. RECEPTION OF GENESIS 1 IN THE JOHANNINE PROLOGUE

In order to interrogate John's use of imagery and terminology from the first chapter of Genesis, it will prove important to undertake an exegetical examination of the Johannine Prologue. Below, I follow other scholars by dividing John 1:1–18 into three discrete units: (a) vv. 1–5, (b) vv. 6–13, and (c) vv. 14–18. Each unit will be discussed in turn with specific emphasis on christology and the reception of Gen 1.

1. John 1:1–5: The Eternal λόγος—Agent of Creation and Light of the World

The Evangelist begins his narrative with the now famous words: ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος, καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν, καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος ("In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God, 1:1).[7] We must begin our considerations by identifying the most obvious lexical parallel between LXX Gen 1:1 and John 1:1, the opening prepositional phrase, ἐν ἀρχῇ. Anyone who has seriously engaged in Biblical translation is aware that there is no such thing as a one-to-one correspondence between one language and another. Attempting to match idiom for idiom in any translation can prove difficult, and this is true of both ancient and contemporary approaches to translation.[8] A larger question for our understanding of Gen 1:1 extends beyond the initial prepositional phrase to the *verbal description* of God's

[7] All translations of ancient texts in this essay are my own unless otherwise noted.

[8] The two approaches to biblical translation that sit on opposite ends of the spectrum are "formal equivalence," which is sometimes referred to as "word-for-word" (and erroneously referred to as a "literal" approach), and "dynamic equivalence," which is sometimes called, "thought-for-thought" approach. The preeminent Jesuit philologist, Francis T. Gignac, S.J. who taught for four decades at the Catholic University of America would often tell his students to aim for producing, "a translation for dignified proclamation," which included elements of both approaches.

creative activity. The Hebrew text of Gen 1:1 reads: בראשית ברא אלהים את השמים ואת הארץ, which is commonly translated: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth."[9] However, some Hebrew grammarians insist that the opening clause בראשית ברא אלהים is better rendered, "*when God began creating*." If we translate the initial clause in this way, it also makes better sense of the next phrase in Gen 1:2: והארץ היתה תהו ובהו ("now the earth was a formless void"),[10] which suggests that *when God began creating*, there was already *preexisting matter*.[11] Throughout the history of the Christian reception of Genesis—much of which is dependent upon the Septuagint—Gen 1:1 has been used as a pretext for establishing the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*,[12] a later

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[9] Cf. e.g., ESV, HCSB, KJV, NASB, NIV, and the NKJV, among others. The NABRE attempts to capture this syntax in its translation: "In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth." Making note of these syntactical concerns, the NRSV reads, "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth," and is followed by a footnote that reads, "Or *when God began to create* or *In the beginning God created*."

[10] Or possibly, "Now the earth was formless and void." With others, I have translated the phrase as a hendiadys.

[11] On this, Marc Zvi Brettler comments, "The opposite of structure is chaos, and it is thus appropriate that 1:1-2 describe primeval chaos—a world that is 'unformed and void,' containing darkness and a mysterious wind. This story does not describe creation out of nothing (Latin: *creatio ex nihilo*). Primeval stuff already exists in verses 1-2, and the text shows no concern for how it originated. Rather, it is a myth about how God alone structured primordial matter into a highly organized world. Only upon its completion is this structure 'very good'" (Marc Zvi Brettler, *How To Read the Jewish Bible* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007], 41).

[12] Nascent forms of the doctrine may have appeared as early as Irenaeus (130-202 CE), Theophilus of Antioch (d.183-185 CE), and Origen (184-253 CE), but Tertullian, a North African Christian theologian and priest, expresses it explicitly. In his treatise *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, he was primarily writing in opposition to views expressed by the heretic, Marcion. In chapter 11, when discussing the absurdity of material eternality, Tertullian writes, "Firmly believe, therefore, that he [God] produced it [the world] *entirely out of nothing*, and then you have found the knowledge of God, by believing that he possesses such mighty power. But some people are too weak to believe all this at first, owing to their views about matter. Like the philosophers, they would rather have it that in the beginning *the universe was made by God out of underlying matter*" (Tertullian, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. III: Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997], 553, emphasis added). The doctrine is later propagated by

theological formulation that moves beyond what is communicated both by the Hebrew syntax of 1:1a and by the assertion in 1:2 that there was preexisting matter.[13] It remains to be seen how well the Greek ἐν ἀρχῇ ἐποίησεν ὁ θεός in LXX Gen 1:1 captures the syntax of the Hebrew בראשית ברא אלהים. The Greek translation *could allow* for a later reception that understands the text as teaching *creatio ex nihilo* even if this is not the original sense of the Hebrew. Despite lingering questions about how the translators of the LXX understood the Hebrew בראשית, it seems clear that the Evangelist employs the LXX's ἐν ἀρχῇ here with the goal of emphasizing the *eternal existence* of the λόγος. This is a critically important element of John's developing portrait of Jesus.

Second, what are we to make of John's use of λόγος in 1:1? As stated above, this question has been the site of no little conversation and debate over the years. The reading advanced in this essay understands the λόγος in connection with God's primary mode of creative activity throughout Gen 1, where God speaks (λέγω) and things come into existence. In John's Prologue, Jesus is the eternal Word (λόγος) who serves as God's agent of creation (cf. John 1:3). The connection between the verb λέγω in LXX Gen 1 and its nominal form in John 1 should not be overlooked. For John, Jesus is "God's Word"—a metonymical expression that captures the revelatory and creative will of God. Within the Hebrew Bible there is a rich tradition of describing the activity and identity of YHWH with expressions related to speech. Various expressions include: דבר־אדני יהוה ("the word of the Lord YHWH"),[14] פי יהוה ("the mouth

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the likes of Augustine, Boethius, and John of Damascus, among others, and becomes a default view among many Jewish (e.g., Saadya Gaon, Maimonides), Christian (e.g., Thomas Aquinas), and Islamic (e.g., Al Farabi, Al Ghazali) philosophers in the medieval period.

[13] Despite the fact that we do not find the doctrine here in MT Gen 1–2, there are later Jewish Scriptural traditions that seem to insist on *creatio ex nihilo*. For instance, 2 Macc 7:28 reads, "I beg you, my child, to look at the heaven and the earth and see everything that is in them, and recognize *that God did not make them out of things that existed*. And in the same way the human race came into being" (NRSV, emphasis added). It is interesting that, for the italicized phrase above, the Vulgate reads *quia ex nihilo fecit illa Deus*.

[14] E.g., Ezek 6:3; 25:3; 36:4.

of YHWH"),[15] and אמרת יהוה (the utterances of YHWH"),[16] among others.[17] John's reception of Gen 1 fills in a gap that previous receptions of this text did not know existed: that is, he clarifies what exactly is meant by דבר.[18] John tells us that Jesus is God's Word and that he was the agent of God's creation who, as we will soon see, was responsible for generating all that came into being (cf. the discussion of John 1:3 below).

A third, much-discussed issue in John 1:1 is the final clause: καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος ("And the Word was God"). Two specific questions concern us here: (1) How should we understand the syntax of this phrase? and (2) What does this phrase communicate about the identity of Jesus vis-à-vis the God of Israel?

First, how should we understand the syntax and then translate καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος? This question has occupied Greek grammarians for centuries. A particular point of contention in previous decades was the question of how to understand the anarthrous θεὸς in this construction, especially since most English translations render the phrase, "And the Word was God."[19] In his well-known article, "A Definite Rule for the Use of the Article in the Greek New Testament," Ernst Cadman Colwell famously argued that, "A *definite predicate nominative* has the article when it follows the verb, it does not have the article when it precedes the verb."[20] Thus, according to Colwell, the anarthrous θεὸς is likely best understood as *definite* in this construction (viz. "the

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[15] E.g., Exod 17:1, Lev 24:12.

[16] E.g., 2 Sam 22:31; Ps 105:19.

[17] In the LXX, these Hebrew phrases are variously rendered: ῥῆμα κυρίου (Gen 15:1; Exod 17:1; 2 Sam 22:31) λόγος κυρίου (Ezek 6:3; 25:3, 36:4), προστάγματος κυρίου (Lev 24:12), and λόγιον κυρίου (Ps 105:19).

[18] I am being "tongue-in-cheek" here. I am not suggesting that the author of John is the *final word* on the subject (no pun intended), but simply pointing out that every reception of these ancient texts emphasizes and draws upon different elements.

[19] Cf. e.g., ESV, HCSB, KJV, NABRE, NASB, NIV, and the NKJV, among others. The New World Translation of the Scriptures, used by Jehovah's Witnesses, famously renders the phrase, "And the Word was *a god*." This translation is nearly unanimously rejected by scholars.

[20] E.C. Colwell, "A Definite Rule for the Use of the Article in the Greek New Testament," *JBL* 52 (1933): 12–21 (here 13), italics added. This formulation has come to be known as "Colwell's Rule."

Word was *the God,"* i.e. *the God of Israel*). Other scholars, however, have pointed out that Colwell *assumes rather than demonstrates* that θεὸς is definite in 1:1c.[21] More recently, grammarians have made a more robust case for understanding θεὸς as used in a qualitative rather than definite sense here (viz., "the Word was *divine*").[22] I am persuaded by this latter understanding of the anarthrous predicate nominative. This idea is captured well by the New English Bible's dynamic equivalence approach to translation: "What God was, the Word was."

Our second question on John 1:1c is related to what the assertion, "the Word is divine" actually means for John's christology. Deciding whether the Greek construction is definite or qualitative means little if it does not advance our understanding of what John is trying to communicate about Jesus. Scholars have often referred to John's presentation of Jesus here as a "divine identity Christology." However, despite such a strong identification, we should resist an understanding that equates the λόγος with God in a manner that corresponds to later creedal affirmations like those from the Councils of Nicaea (325 CE) and Chalcedon (451 CE).[23] Theologians and patristic writers deliberated for centuries on the identity of Jesus before arriving at these more fulsome expressions and they often inserted complex and sophisticated ideas drawn from Hellenistic philosophy.[24] We must remain more cautious and circumspect in outlining our

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[21] E.g., Maximillian Zerwick, S.J. *Biblical Greek: Illustrated by Examples*, trans. Joseph Smith, S.J. (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1994), 56; and Bruce M. Metzger, "On the Translation of John 1:1," *ExpTim* 63 (1952): 125–26.

[22] On this, see the helpful excursus in Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 1996), 269–70.

[23] This sort of error is on display in Andreas J. Köstenberger and Scott R. Swain, *Father, Son and Spirit: The Trinity and John's Gospel*, NSBT (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), where the authors assume a one-to-one correspondence between the Fourth Gospel and later theological formulations.

[24] Deliberations on and definitions of the terms οὐσία and ὑπόστασις derived from Neoplatonic philosophy and Aristotelian metaphysics were applied by Church Fathers to the members of the Trinitarian Godhead throughout the second, third, and fourth centuries CE. The Cappadocian Fathers, in particular, were influential in this way.

understanding of the λόγος from John, a first-century CE Jewish text. As I have written elsewhere, we should understand that John's λόγος is "the unique representation of the Father to humanity. In other words, *all the realities of Israel's God are fully and mysteriously present in him.*"[25] To say much more about the identity of Jesus in 1:1 is to risk saying too much.

Verse 2 reiterates the eternality of the λόγος: οὗτος ἦν ἐν ἀρχῇ πρὸς τὸν θεόν ("He was, in the beginning, with God"). One of the peculiar features of John's idiolect is the use of the demonstrative pronouns οὗτος and ἐκεῖνος as substitutes for third person singular pronouns.[26] Thus, I have translated οὗτος in this instance as "he" rather than, "this one."

In v. 3 we begin to see how the Word acts as the agent of creation: πάντα δι' αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο, καὶ χωρὶς αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο οὐδὲ ἕν ὃ γέγονεν ("Everything was made through him and apart from him nothing was made that has been made").[27] Throughout the remainder of LXX Gen 1, God speaks (καὶ εἶπεν ὁ θεός: 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26, 29) and whatever he wills comes into being (καὶ ἐγένετο: 1:3, 5, 8, 13, 15, 19, 23, 24, 30, 31). It should not escape our attention that LXX Gen 1 continually uses γίνομαι to describe the appearance of whatever God speaks into being and, while there were other Greek verbs to denote the act of creating, John sticks to the script of Gen 1 by also using γίνομαι. In addition to being eternal and divine, the λόγος was not just *an* agent of creation, but *the agent* of *all creation*. He was responsible for making everything (πάντα) and nothing (οὐδὲ ἕν, literally, "not one thing") came into being apart from his creative activity.

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[25] Christopher W. Skinner, *Reading John*, Cascade Companions (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2015), 16, emphasis added.

[26] Cf. e.g., οὗτος: 1:2, 7, 41; 3:2, 26; 4:47; 6:46, 52, 60, 71; 7:15, 18, 31; 15:5; ἐκεῖνος: 1:8, 18; 2:21; 4:25; 5:19, 35, 37, 38, 46; 6:29; 7:11; 8:44; 9:9, 11, 12, 25, 36; 10:1; 12:48; 13:25, 30; 14:26; 15:26; 16:8, 13, 14; 18:15, 17, 25; 19:21, 35; 21:7, 23.

[27] There is a textual question here over how this verse is to be punctuated. Some critical texts include a period between οὐδὲ ἕν and ὃ γέγονεν, suggesting that the latter clause begins the next section of text in v. 4: ὃ γέγονεν ἐν αὐτῷ ζωὴ ἦν, ("What has been made in him was life"). I am persuaded that ὃ γέγονεν belongs with what proceeds it in v. 3 and have translated the verse accordingly.

John 1:4 goes on to reintroduce two of the most prominent ideas that appear in Gen 1—light and life: ἐν αὐτῷ ζωὴ ἦν, καὶ ἡ ζωὴ ἦν τὸ φῶς τῶν ἀνθρώπων ("In him was life and that life was the light of humanity").[28] Readers will recall that God's creative activity in Gen 1 began with the phrase, "let there be light" (γενηθήτω φῶς). Throughout the remainder of the first creation account, God goes on to create all living creatures in the sky, under the sea, and on the land. These living creatures are denoted by the phrases ψυχῶν ζωσῶν (1:20), ψυχὴν ζῴων (1:21), and ψυχὴν ζῶσαν (1:24). Here in v. 4, John uses the identical term for "light" (φῶς) and a nominal form of the term for "living beings" (ζωή) used throughout Gen 1.

A third important term appearing in 1:4 is ἄνθρωπος, which I have translated above as "humanity." This translation decision is not intentionally aimed at gender neutrality, since LXX Gen 1 introduces the term in a way that does not initially deliberate on concerns of gender. The formal distinction between *male and female* comes to the fore in the second creation account (Gen 2:2b–25). Here in Gen 1:26, God simply says ποιήσωμεν ἄνθρωπον κατ᾽ εἰκόνα ἡμετέραν καὶ καθ᾽ ὁμοίωσιν ("Let us make *humans* according to our image and our likeness"). Arguably, then, the high points of God's creative activity in Gen 1 include: (1) the initial creation of light, (2) the generation of all living creatures, and ultimately, (3) the creation of humans in his own image and likeness. In this one verse, John hits all of those high points with the repetition of Greek terms connected to life, light, and humanity.

As we close out the first section of the Prologue, we learn even more about the light of the λόγος and its relationship to darkness: καὶ τὸ φῶς ἐν τῇ σκοτίᾳ φαίνει, καὶ ἡ σκοτία αὐτὸ οὐ κατέλαβεν ("The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not comprehend/overcome it," v. 5).[29] The Evangelist's use of καταλαμβάνω ("to comprehend," or "to overcome") creates a *double*

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[28] I am treating the article in ἡ ζωή as an article of anaphoric reference, and have accordingly translated it as "that life" rather than "the life." For more on the anaphoric article, see Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 217–20.

[29] *Double entendre* is a common feature of John's distinctive idiolect. For more on this, see E. Richards, "Expressions of Double Meaning and their Function in the Gospel of John," *NTS* 31 (1985): 96–112.

entendre and serves as a proleptic announcement to prepare the reader for what is ahead in the narrative. In the same way God's light appeared in Gen 1 and drove out the darkness, Jesus, the purveyor of light and life, will consistently come into contact with a world shrouded in darkness, which is represented both by evil and by misunderstanding. As the narrative unfolds, specific figures will reveal their darkened perspective, and their inability *to understand the light*—one sense of the verb, καταλαμβάνω—and the forces of darkness will ultimately fail *to overcome the light*—a second sense of the verb—as Jesus's resurrection secures a victory over death.

Just as the first creation account in Genesis takes place "in the beginning" when God creates by speaking light, land, and all living creatures into existence, so these first verses of the Johannine Prologue picture the λόγος (= דבר יהוה) as the one through whom everything was created, the purveyor of life, and the light of humanity shining forth into the darkness, all concepts of obvious importance to Gen 1. Figure 1 provides a summary of the most important connections we have established between Gen 1 and John 1:1–5:

Figure 1: Lexical and Conceptual Parallels in Gen 1:1–31 and John 1:1–5

Genesis 1:1–31 **LXX**	**John 1:1–5** **Greek New Testament**
"In the beginning" and "God" 1:1: ἐν ἀρχῇ ἐποίησεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ τὴν γῆν	"In the beginning" and "God 1:1: ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν, καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος
God "speaking"/using words 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 25: εἶπεν* ὁ θεός * εἶπεν is the 2nd Aorist form of λέγω	God "speaking"/using words 1:1, 14: ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν, καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος...Καὶ ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο
The appearance of "light" 1:3–4: γενηθήτω φῶς· καὶ ἐγένετο φῶς. καὶ εἶδεν ὁ θεὸς τὸ φῶς, ὅτι καλόν	The appearance of "light" 1:4–5: καὶ ἡ ζωὴ ἦν τὸ φῶς τῶν ἀνθρώπων· καὶ τὸ φῶς ἐν τῇ σκοτίᾳ φαίνει, καὶ ἡ σκοτία αὐτὸ οὐ κατέλαβεν
Life and living creatures	Life and living creatures

1:20–24: Καὶ εἶπεν ὁ θεός· ἐξαγαγέτω τὰ ὕδατα ἑρπετὰ ψυχῶν ζωσῶν καὶ πετεινὰ πετόμενα ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς κατὰ τὸ στερέωμα τοῦ οὐρανοῦ. καὶ ἐγένετο οὕτως...καὶ ἐποίησεν ὁ θεὸς τὰ κήτη τὰ μεγάλα καὶ πᾶσαν ψυχὴν ζῴων ἑρπετῶν...Καὶ εἶπεν ὁ θεός· ἐξαγαγέτω ἡ γῆ ψυχὴν ζῶσαν κατὰ γένος	1:4: ἐν αὐτῷ ζωὴ ἦν, καὶ ἡ ζωὴ ἦν τὸ φῶς τῶν ἀνθρώπων·
Appearance of the term "man"/"human" 1:26–27 καὶ εἶπεν ὁ θεός· ποιήσωμεν ἄνθρωπον κατ᾽ εἰκόνα ἡμετέραν καὶ καθ᾽ ὁμοίωσιν. . . καὶ ἐποίησεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν ἄνθρωπον, κατ᾽ εἰκόνα θεοῦ ἐποίησεν αὐτόν	Appearance of the term "man"/"human" 1:4: τὸ φῶς τῶν ἀνθρώπων·

2. John 1:6–13: The True Light Coming into the World

The second unit of the Johannine Prologue departs briefly from its focus on the λόγος in order to introduce an authoritative witness: John the Baptist (vv. 6–8).[30] Much has been written about the role of John as a witness to Jesus in the Fourth Gospel, but since that material is not germane to the primary focus of this essay, I will not consider it in detail here.[31] For our purposes, it is important to note that John denies that he is the light. Rather, he has come to point others to the light, so that they might believe.

Verse 9 transitions from the atemporal discussion of the eternal light's origins (cf. vv. 1–2) to the emergence of the light in space and time: ἦν τὸ φῶς τὸ ἀληθινὸν ὃ φωτίζει πάντα ἄνθρωπον ἐρχόμενον εἰς τὸν κόσμον ("The true light, which enlightens all humanity, was coming into the world"). This emergence into the world, which we will formally read about in v. 14, is known as

[30] Though we are aware of John's title from other gospel traditions (cf. [ὁ] βαπτίζων, Mark 1:4; ὁ βαπτιστής, Matt 3:1), it is important to note that here he is simply identified as "John."

[31] The pronouncements of John the Baptist in 1:29, 34, 36 have been of particular interest to me. See Christopher W. Skinner, "Another Look at the Lamb of God," *BSac* 161 (2004): 189–204; Skinner, "'Son of God' or 'God's Chosen One'? A Text-Critical Problem and Its Narrative-Critical Solution (John 1:34)," *BBR* 25 (2015): 47–63.

the "incarnation"—the moment when the λόγος takes on human flesh.

We must consider vv. 10–11 together as they communicate similar ideas using two different, but related means of expression: 10 Ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ ἦν, καὶ ὁ κόσμος δι' αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο, καὶ ὁ κόσμος αὐτὸν οὐκ ἔγνω. 11 εἰς τὰ ἴδια ἦλθεν, καὶ οἱ ἴδιοι αὐτὸν οὐ παρέλαβον ("He was in the world, and world was made through him, but the world did not know him. He came to his own place and his own people did not receive him"). I have written about the connection between these two verses in several other publications and will rely upon my previous work here in this section.[32]

In 1:10 we read of the relationship between the λόγος and the κόσμος. In Hellenistic Greek, κόσμος is a complex and multi-layered term that carries a range of meanings, several of which are used in the Gospel of John.[33] The Evangelist employs κόσμος to refer to the material reality of the created order (e.g., 1:10b), the physical realm into which Jesus has entered (e.g., 1:9, 10a; 3:17, 19; 6:14), and the object of God's affection and salvific intentions (e.g., 1:29; 3:16, 17c; 4:42; 6:51). Also significant for John's theological presentation is the use of κόσμος as a symbol for wayward humanity. The assumption of a "fallen" humanity does appear to have some purchase within the wider story of Israel's God as told in Genesis, especially in chapter 3, thus revealing John's use of more Genesis material.[34] Understanding the various nuances in John's use of κόσμος help us to appreciate the sharp distinction between the ethos of the realm above—the place from which the λόγος has

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[32] See Christopher W. Skinner, "The World: Promise and Unfulfilled Hope," in *Character Studies in the Fourth Gospel: Narrative Approaches to Seventy Figures in John*, ed. Steve Hunt, D. Francois Tolmie, and Ruben Zimmermann, WUNT 314 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 61–70; also *Reading John*, 21–23.

[33] It is worth noting that LXX Gen 1 does not employ the term κόσμος, though the concept of the "world as created order" is present throughout the chapter.

[34] Against this interpretation, Peter Enns argues that the "fall of humanity" is a distinctly Christian conception rooted primarily in Paul's reception of Genesis and one that earlier Jewish understandings of Gen 3 would not accept. For earlier Jewish readers, he contends, the sin of Adam and Eve is not the marring of humanity and/or all creation. See Peter Enns, *The Evolution of Adam: What the Bible Does and Doesn't Say about Human Origins* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2012), esp. ch. 5.

come—and the realm below.[35] Wayne Meeks has noted that "The story of Jesus in the gospel is all played out on earth, despite the frequent indicators *that he really belongs elsewhere.*"[36]

In John, then, κόσμος is used of *a place*, *a people*, and *a general outlook of opposition to God*. It is incumbent upon us to pay close attention to the ways in which the term κόσμος is employed so as to distinguish between the nuances operative in a given context. According to v. 10, the λόγος has entered the κόσμος (a place) but the κόσμος (a people characterized by opposition to God) has not received him. This statement prepares us for the world's rejection of Jesus throughout the narrative and builds upon 1:5, where the Evangelist comments that "the darkness has not comprehended the light" (καὶ ἡ σκοτία αὐτὸ οὐ κατέλαβεν). Verse 11 then reiterates what v. 10 communicated: "He came *to his own place* and *his own people* did not receive him." Some English translations render this verse, "He came to *his own* and *his own* did not receive him," which lacks the necessary clarity.[37] The neuter plural use of ἴδιος in the first half of the verse is a reference to the world as the *physical realm into which the* λόγος *has entered*. The masculine plural use of ἴδιος in the second half of the verse refers to *humanity*. Together, these two verses function in a manner similar to the synthetic parallelism in poetic passages of the Hebrew Bible. Specifically, the second verse reiterates and clarifies the meaning of the first.[38] These two programmatic statements describe a future reality that will unfold throughout the narrative, especially in Jesus' interactions with human characters.

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[35] The Fourth Gospel is characterized by a cosmological dualism in which the universe is divided into two realms that represent the opposing forces of good and evil. This is most clearly developed in the descent-ascent schema that appears throughout the gospel, especially in Jesus's teaching about his coming to earth and return to the Father (1:51; 3:13; 6:32–42; 13:1–2; 14:1–5).

[36] Wayne A. Meeks, "The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism," *JBL* 91 (1972): 44–72 (here 50), emphasis added.

[37] E.g. the original NIV has: "He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him"; the KJV has: "He came unto his own, and his own received him not"; and the NKJV has: "He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him."

[38] For more on Hebrew poetry, see Michael Patrick O'Connor, *Hebrew Verse Structure* (University Park, PA: Eisenbrauns, 1997).

As the agent of God's creation, the λόγος is the generative force behind everything that now exists. Thus, it is appropriate to refer to the world as "his own place" and all of humanity as "his own people." The λόγος has come into the world he created and that world presently suffers from a darkened perspective. Such darkness renders humans both unable to understand the λόγος and openly hostile toward his mission. Despite this existential reality, there are some who will recognize the λόγος for who he truly is, call upon his name, and become a part of God's newly constituted family: ὅσοι δὲ ἔλαβον αὐτόν, ἔδωκεν αὐτοῖς ἐξουσίαν τέκνα θεοῦ γενέσθαι, τοῖς πιστεύουσιν εἰς τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ ("But as many as received him, he gave the authority to become children of God, to those who believe in his name," v. 12). The importance of the concept "name" here should not be overlooked. We have not yet been told that the λόγος is Jesus Christ. That revelation will come in the next section of the Prologue (v. 17). Here, however, the λόγος is explicitly associated with the very name of God (viz., יהוה).[39] To believe in the name of the λόγος is to believe in the very name of Israel's God. We cannot ignore the christological import of this statement. In a manner keeping with the assertion in 1:1c (καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος), v. 12 doubles down on this divine identity christology. In some mysterious and ultimately unknowable way, to know or believe in the λόγος is to call upon the name of the Father. And in this context, the λόγος has been given the authority to appoint the children of God. Verse 13 emphasizes that this new family is built solely upon God's initiative: οἳ οὐκ ἐξ αἱμάτων οὐδὲ ἐκ θελήματος σαρκὸς οὐδὲ ἐκ θελήματος ἀνδρὸς ἀλλ' ἐκ θεοῦ ἐγεννήθησαν ("Those who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of a husband, but born of God").

The eternal, divine λόγος (vv. 1–5) will soon enter the world he created and be rejected by his people. However, those who overcome their unbelief or incomprehension can become children of God by believing in the name of the λόγος, who has been given the very name of God.

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[39] As a circumlocution for the divine name, the Hebrew term השם (Greek: τὸ ὄνομα) would likely have been an immediate signal to Jewish readers.

3. John 1:14–18: The Incarnation of the Eternal λόγος

In the third unit of the Prologue, the λόγος finally enters into the world he has created, takes on human flesh, and is hereafter known as Jesus Christ. Verse 14 provides the most important moment in the Prologue to this point: Καὶ ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο καὶ ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν, καὶ ἐθεασάμεθα τὴν δόξαν αὐτοῦ, δόξαν ὡς μονογενοῦς παρὰ πατρός, πλήρης χάριτος καὶ ἀληθείας ("And the Word became flesh and tabernacled among us. And we have beheld his glory, glory as of the unique one from the Father, full of grace and truth").[40]

Here the Evangelist sets up an intentional contrast between what the Word has *always been* (signaled by the verb εἰμί) and what the Word has now *become* (signaled by the verb γίνομαι). Up to this point, the λόγος has been described in terms of its existence. Never before has the λόγος *become* something. The λόγος has always simply been. But now, the λόγος has been transformed into a new mode of existence on behalf of his people. This change from εἰμί to γίνομαι underscores the theological significance of the incarnation. This pre-existing figure has now taken on human flesh and consented to a mission given him by the Father (cf. e.g., 20:21).[41]

These last few verses of the Prologue provide important details that will inform our understanding of the incarnate λόγος,

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[40] A previous generation of scholarship understood the term μονογενὴς as a compound of μόνος ("alone," "only," "single") and γεννάω ("to bear, beget, give birth to"), thus the reason for the common translation, "only begotten." However, more recent studies suggest that the term is a compound of μόνος and γένος ("kind," "type"). For this reason, I have translated the term as "unique one," rather than the more traditional, "only begotten."

[41] The Evangelist uses the verbs ἀποστέλλω and πέμπω interchangeably in reference to the Father's sending of the Son, which constitutes a significant theme throughout the gospel. Later Trinitarian formulations will explain this supposed hierarchy in the Godhead as a matter of "ontological equality" between Father and Son but a role of "functional subordination" on the part of the Son. As I mentioned above, these highly developed doctrines go beyond what would have been in the mind of a first-century Jewish writer. That said, it is important to realize that Nicene and Chalcedonian christologies are heavily indebted to the Gospel of John for their articulations of Jesus's nature. Theologians have often described the Fourth Gospel as a seedbed for later theological orthodoxies.

but in this unit the Evangelist shifts from material related to Gen 1 to ideas deriving more from the book of Exodus. We have a hint of this in v. 14 with the term δόξα, which is commonly used in the LXX to translate the Hebrew כבוד ("honor," "glory," "splendor"). כבוד is an important term in the Hebrew Bible and is used to denote the very presence of יהוה. Again, the Evangelist is emphasizing the unique, intimate, and mysterious connection between the incarnate λόγος and God, who is now signalled by the appellation, "the Father."

Verse 15 represents another insertion of material related to John the Baptist. Again, since this material is not immediately relevant to our foci in this essay, we will not consider it in detail. It is important to note that John again points to Jesus as the greater and more important figure, which is in keeping with the consistent portrayal of the Baptist in John 1 (cf. e.g., 1:26–28, 29, 34, 36).

Verse 17 again turns to material from Exodus: ὅτι ὁ νόμος διὰ Μωϋσέως ἐδόθη, ἡ χάρις καὶ ἡ ἀλήθεια διὰ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ἐγένετο ("For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ"). Despite a historical reception of this verse that leans in the direction of supersessionism (viz., Jesus > Moses; grace > law; new covenant > old covenant, etc.), I believe this contrast is primarily intended to emphasize the uniqueness of the incarnate λόγος rather than to dispense with Moses in some way. This reading is confirmed by v. 18: θεὸν οὐδεὶς ἑώρακεν πώποτε· μονογενὴς θεὸς ὁ ὢν εἰς τὸν κόλπον τοῦ πατρὸς ἐκεῖνος ἐξηγήσατο ("No one has seen God at any time. The unique one of God, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known"). Jewish readers of John will be aware that there is a rich tradition in the Hebrew Bible of Moses seeing God "face to face" (cf. e.g., Exod 33). So this statement is not necessarily denying that tradition but asserting that no one has *truly seen God* in the way experienced by the λόγος. The relationship shared by these two is characterized by an intimacy that not even Moses—*who has seen God face to face*—possessed in his relationship with God. The only one who has experienced him in this way is the λόγος, here further designated as (1) μονογενὴς θεός, and (2) ὁ ὢν εἰς τὸν κόλπον τοῦ πατρός. And because of this intimacy, the Son is the one

who reveals the Father to humanity. In other words, to look at the incarnate Son is to see what the Father is like. Rudolf Bultmann famously argued that this statement reveals the single most important function of the Son in the Fourth Gospel: to reveal the Father to humanity.[42]

III. GENESIS 1, JOHN'S PROLOGUE, AND JOHANNINE CHRISTOLOGY

Having examined the impact of Gen 1 on the Johannine Prologue, we are now in a position to draw out the most important elements from Genesis impacting John's emerging presentation of Jesus. I hope that some of what I write here will already be obvious from the extended exegetical discussion above. At least four elements of John's reception of Gen 1 contribute significantly to his emerging christological portrait and set the stage for the narrative christology that follows.

First, in emphasizing the eternality of Jesus, the Evangelist relies upon an allusion to Gen 1:1. In constructing his divine identity christology, the Evangelist feels it necessary to establish Jesus's divine credentials. Later in the Fourth Gospel, Jesus will claim, "I and the Father are one" (10:30). As far as the Evangelist is concerned, this oneness cannot exist unless Jesus's origins are eternal, like those of "the Father."[43] The eternality of the pre-incarnate λόγος is so important to the Evangelist that he emphasizes it twice in the first two verses: (1) Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος (1:1a); and (2) οὗτος ἦν ἐν ἀρχῇ πρὸς τὸν θεόν (1:2). Jesus, the God-man, is like God in all the most significant ways, including, most especially, his eternal origins. There may have been other ways to get there, but it seems clear that the Evangelist saw the use of Gen 1:1 as an expedient way to assert the eternality of the λόγος.

Second, Jesus is responsible for generating all creation (see 1:3). The foundational myth with which the Torah begins (Gen 1:1–2:2a) is that of God creating the earth by separating light from darkness, water from sky, and land from water, and then

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[42] See Bultmann's masterful treatment of the prologue in *Gospel of John*, 13–83.

[43] It is not entirely clear that other early Christian authors regarded this as a necessity, but the Fourth Evangelist clearly does.

filling each venue with the appropriate entities, including all living creatures. For the Evangelist, there is a lacuna in the Genesis text. When we read Genesis, we see that God created everything simply by speaking. For the Evangelist, however, there needs to be a specific accounting for that speech. The pre-incarnate λόγος—God's very Word—is responsible for generating all creation. In the person of Jesus Christ, the God who has created all that exists steps into *his own world* (John 1:10a) and interacts with *his own people* (John 1:10b). Against that backdrop, the continual rejection of Jesus by his own people, which is proleptically announced in vv. 10-11, is even more galling. The creator is rejected by his creation, though some will believe and become children of God (John 1:12–13).

Third, Jesus is the light of the world. As mentioned in the exegetical section above, the first creative words God speaks in Gen 1 are "let there be light." The Evangelist capitalizes upon this image and Jesus becomes the embodiment of this light. As such, he has the potential to enlighten all people, though we know that many will reject the light (John 1:5). Throughout the gospel, those who are shrouded in darkness will continually oppose Jesus and display an astounding level of incomprehension surrounding his message, mission, and identity. I have argued elsewhere that the most consistent trait displayed by characters in the Fourth Gospel is incomprehension.[44] Jesus has quite literally stepped out of the heavens to take on human flesh. He regularly speaks in a manner consistent with his eternal, heavenly existence and this is often the cause of misunderstanding or, as the Evangelist would have us think of it, *a darkened perspective* (cf. especially Nicodemus in 3:1–15). Again, while there may have been other ways to emphasize Jesus as the "light of the world," the Evangelist's employment of images and language from LXX Gen 1 are both expedient and effective.

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[44] See Christopher W. Skinner, *John and Thomas: Gospels in Conflict? Johannine Characterization and the Thomas Question*, PTMS 115 (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2009); Skinner, "Misunderstanding, Christology, and Johannine Characterization: Reading John's Characters Through the Lens of the Prologue," in Christopher W. Skinner, ed., *Characters and Characterization in the Gospel of John*, LNTS 449 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013), 111–27.

Fourth and finally, Jesus is the giver of life. While this emphasis is clearly connected to his role as the agent of creation discussed above, I think we can go further than the explicit language of "life" (ζωή) outlined in our exegesis of John 1:1–5. One element not mentioned in our above exegesis derives from LXX Gen 1:2: καὶ πνεῦμα θεοῦ ἐπεφέρετο ἐπάνω τοῦ ὕδατος ("And the spirit of God was hovering over the water"). It is not altogether clear how we should understand πνεῦμα θεοῦ here. Hebrew scholars have noted that the corresponding phrase in the MT, ורוח אלהים, could variously be rendered (1) the spirit of God, (2) the breath of/from God, or (3) a wind from God. The Greek πνεῦμα allows for similar ambiguity. Again, as above, we may not have clarity about how the LXX understands the term, but the Evangelist clearly uses πνεῦμα to describe another coming one, also known as the παράκλητος.[45] The reader will not learn of the Spirit-Paraclete until John 6 (and its later promise in John 14), but we should not overlook the importance of the Spirit as a life-giving entity—which is connected to Gen 1:2. This element of Gen 1 is not present in the Johannine Prologue, but it would be imprudent to overlook its presence elsewhere in John, especially since we have spent so much space in this essay examining LXX Gen 1.

In John 6:63 we read: τὸ πνεῦμά ἐστιν τὸ ζῳοποιοῦν, ἡ σὰρξ οὐκ ὠφελεῖ οὐδέν· τὰ ῥήματα ἃ ἐγὼ λελάληκα ὑμῖν πνεῦμά ἐστιν καὶ ζωή ἐστιν ("The spirit gives life, but the flesh counts for nothing. The words which I have spoken to you are spirit and life"). Note the connection between the Spirit and the giving of life. But if we are talking about the Spirit, are we not drifting into the territory of pneumatology rather than christology? This is where things become a bit more complicated and we have to be very careful not to overlay later Trinitarian ideas onto the Fourth Gospel. Because of its emphasis on the intimacy between ὁ θεὸς and ὁ λόγος, the Prologue points the way toward later confessional claims about the Father and Son being co-equal and co-eternal. (It is safe to say that John's Gospel is embedded with the questions that are

[45] While John also uses the language of πνεῦμα, his preferred term is παράκλητος ("advocate," "comforter," "intercessor").

taken up in later councils and creeds.) Later in the narrative, when the Johannine Jesus is promising the gift of the Spirit-Paraclete from the Father, he refers to him as "*another* advocate" (ἄλλον παράκλητον). The use of ἄλλος here should not be overlooked. The earlier distinction in Attic Greek between ἄλλος ("another one of the same kind") and ἕτερος ("another of a different kind") does not always remain in writings of the Hellenistic period. The two are occasionally used synonymously without their original nuance. However, it seems here that the Evangelist is using ἄλλος in a way that suggests the Spirit-Paraclete is *another of the same kind* as both the Father and Son. This would make sense of the consistent emphasis upon the shared features of the Father and Son.

We do not have space in this article to deliberate on the implications these texts have for the later development of Trinitarian theology, but suffice it to say that the Church Fathers would not have been able to arrive at the Nicene Creed without the Fourth Gospel. And, in turn, the Fourth Gospel would not have been able to arrive at its presentation of both Jesus and the Spirit-Paraclete apart from the first chapter of Genesis.

IV. CONCLUSION

The twofold goal of this essay has been admittedly narrow: (1) to examine John's use of material from Gen 1 in constructing his Prologue, and (2) to deliberate on the implications of John's use of Gen 1 for his portrait of Jesus. Our examination has revealed a number of important contributions from Genesis (and Exodus) on the Johannine Prologue. It would not be hyperbolic to assert that Gen 1 is foundational to John's cosmological and christological views. By incorporating elements of the synoptic portraits of Jesus and relying heavily upon material from the Torah, John's portrait of Jesus followed the long and complex christological explorations that preceded it to emphasize the divine identity of Jesus.[46] We have seen here that this divine identity christology

[46] In recent years, scholars have been returning to the idea that John was familiar with the synoptic portraits of Jesus, and I am personally persuaded by this. On this view, see the excellent collection of essays in Eve-Marie Becker, Helen Bond,

would not have been possible without critical material from Gen 1. The Fourth Gospel goes on to become one of the most important early Christian texts for establishing what becomes "orthodoxy," and practically, this means that its reception of Gen 1 also becomes critical to the establishment of orthodox christology.[47]

AFTERWORD

I offer this essay in honor of my colleague and friend, Dr. Robert A. Di Vito. I have had the privilege of serving alongside Bob in the Theology Department at Loyola University Chicago for the past decade. In addition to being supportive of me in many areas of my vocational life, Bob also placed a great deal of trust in me in 2019 by asking me to serve as our department's Graduate Program Director, a position I held for six years. As a professor and department chair, Bob has modeled what it means to be committed to his colleagues, his students, and to the life of the mind. I hope my meager offering here communicates to Bob even a fraction of the appreciation I have for him and for all he has done for me.

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and Catrin Williams, eds., *John's Transformation of Mark* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2021). See also James Barker, *John's Use of Matthew*, Emerging Scholars (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2015); Barker, *Writing and Rewriting the Gospels: John and the Synoptics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2025), among others.

[47] I want to offer thanks to Dr. James Barker and Dr. Sam Won, both of whom read and commented on an earlier draft of this essay. Their suggestions have improved the article. Any remaining deficiencies are solely my own.