

# The Central Theme of John's Gospel and the Christian Community

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**Asia Pacific Journal of  
Academic Research in  
Social Sciences**  
Vol. 5, No. 1, 57-61  
ISSN 2545-904X (Print)  
ISSN 2704-4157 (Online)  
www.apjarss.org

*Date Received: March 31, 2020; Date Revised: May 9, 2020*

**Abstract** - *John's Gospel is considered a unique testimony concerning Jesus Christ, though different from the Synoptic. Modern scholarship discourse of John's gospel brings several issues (structure, authorship, recipient and many more) in to lime light. The focus of this discourse is the quest for the central theme of John's Gospel; which makes the prologue (1:1-18) and farewell discourse (14-17) the spotlight of this research. Many Johannine scholars have concentrated on the Prologue and have studied its themes, theologies and structure, with varying results. However, there have been limited attempts to contrast it with the farewell discourse; thus, this research employs a descriptive and analytical methodology to engage the highlighted sections with the aim of conveying a lucid understanding of the two sections "the central theme" of John's Gospel and it's applicability to the contemporary Christian community. The Christian Community is of great advantage having the same sections in one piece, to enrich and provide Christians with enough information concerning the account of Jesus Christ.*

**Keywords:** *Gospel, John, Jesus Christ, New Testament.*

## INTRODUCTION

The first chapter of John is an important part of the Gospel. Smalley argued that the whole chapter one should be taken as the prologue because it appears to be a microcosm of the whole Gospel and summarizes the entire sweep of salvation history with which it is concerned [1]. The opinion of scholars like Smalley have been discarded by the widely acceptance of John 1:1-18 as prologue by majority of scholars [2]. In addition, some Johannine scholars argue that gaining an understanding of the Prologue opens up a clearer understanding of the entire Gospel [3]. Brown argues that the Prologue is a summary of the theologies and entire content of John [4].

According to Carson, the Prologue simultaneously draw the reader and introduces the major themes.[5] To an extent, some scholars ultimately hold the 'Prologue' as the "KEY" for comprehending John's Gospel.[6] Modern critical studies of John have revealed the significance of the farewell discourse and its competing nature of importance against the prologue.[7] Therefore, this study engages the prologue of John (1:1-18) and farewell discourse (Jhn 14-17); with the aim of ascertaining the 'central theme' of John and its applicability to Christians [8].

## THE PROLOGUE (JOHN 1:1-18)

Prologue is from Greek πρό and λόγος, when combined means "before words" [9]. The beginnings of ancient books were important. Prologues had a uniquely dramatic force in ancient writings which often set the mind of the audience ablaze; meaning to arouse their interest [10]. Some scholars limit the opening of John's Gospel to the first five verses; while majority break it at verse 18.[11] Here, John 1:1-18 is the section for John's Prologue [12].

Approaches to the Prologue structure can be basically classified in two: 'sequence reading' and 'literary reading.' Sequence reading follows "a succession of ideas in a linear chronological manner," according to linear themes or a sequence of narrative.[13] On the other hand, the literary reading approaches the structure by using various literary models.[14] In this method, scholars used literary models such as parallelisms and chiasms; while some have proposed alternative or complementary literary models instead of parallelisms or chiasms [15]. The 'λόγος' - Word is emphasized as the heart of John's prologue [16]. The Prologue can be divided in this manner:

- i. The Relationship of the λόγος to God (1-2)
- ii. The Relationship of the λόγος with creation (3-5)
- iii. The Relationship of the λόγος to John the Baptist (6-8)

- iv. The Relationship of the λόγος to Man (9-13)
- v. The Relationship of the λόγος to Grace (14-18)

### **THE FAREWELL DISCOURSE (14 – 17)**

A discourse is a speech; but a 'farewell discourse' is a speech given during send-off. Farewell-speech is common in many parts of the world. It is not strange to the African and Asian context; such that when family heads sense their demise, they gather people and bid them well. In the recent time, portions in the gospel of John have been scholarly engaged and this exercise have brought John 13 – 17 into lime-light. There are numerous biblical examples of farewell speech of father to sons (Gen 47:29-49:33; Josh 23-24; I Sam 12) [17]. Recently, scholars observe the way John 13 - 17 imitates the conventions of ancient farewell discourses [18].

Just like the prologue, there have been debates concerning the structure of the farewell discourse, which has brought about the theory of disarrangement [20] and theory of multiple versions.[21] In fact, chapter 13 have been debated either to be taken as part of John's farewell discourse or not. Köstenberger and Swain viewed Chapter 13 - 17 as a larger and monolithic unit. In fact, some scholars argue for 13: 31-38 only as a part of the farewell [22].

Many scholars agree with John 14 to 17 as the farewell discourse. Barrett explained that the reason for this categorization lies in the number, kind of formal, thematic and rhetorical motifs shared by the chapters and certain literary compositions from antiquity that exemplify the discourse genre [23]. The farewell discourse proper began in chapter fourteen; but there is need to consider the preceding chapter which sets the background for the discourse.

- i. The Setting (13:1-38): This sets the background for the farewell discourse.
- ii. First discourse (14:1-31): The theme of this part is departure and return; Jesus states that he will be going to the Father, but will send the Comforter for the disciples.
- iii. Second discourse (15:1-17): This part is also called the Vine. It deals with Jesus' love and how Jesus is the source of life for the community.
- iv. Third discourse (15:18-16:33): This section deals with Jesus' love and the world's hatred.
- v. The Farewell Prayer (17:1-26): Jesus prays to God, pray for his immediate disciples and also prays for the Christian community.

### **THE CENTRAL THEME**

The nature of the farewell discourse is dialogical; the disciples around Jesus, asking questions with Jesus responding to them for clarity and better understanding. But the prologue is more like a monologue. Here, the study evaluates the prologue and farewell discourse side-by-side.

**Purpose and Location:** the purpose of any prologue as the term implies is to introduce the entire piece. The farewell discourse just as the term implies presents a scenario which is whole and embedded with certain important memo. The two sections distinctly key into the purpose of the Gospel in its entirety - "...that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name" (20:31). In this sense, this purpose is properly presented. The prologue which is located at the beginning of the Gospel suggests that it stand a chance to capture the attention of the audience. In fact, some audience (readers) having gone through this part of the text are satisfied and sometimes do not proceed further. This assertion is not in all cases; this part also fuels the passion to read the text further, yearning for more in the body of the text itself. The location of the farewell discourse is within the body of the text itself; only readers that patiently wait gets to this section (Jhn 13 – 17). The argument that readers will commence reading from the middle (where the farewell discourse is located) is narrow; thus, a rational start for reading a piece (such as John's Gospel) is often from the beginning.

**Presentation:** the prologue is presented with an emphasis on the person of Jesus Christ as one who existed before the creation of the world with the Evangelist's presentation of Jesus' complex genealogy. John's manner of presentation in the prologue astonishes any man into quest by the introduction of similar concept with Genesis "beginning". The word structure and arrangements is quickly noticed with keen attention. The prologue seems a bit like an opening sequence to a film, setting up lots of the ideas (light and darkness, God becoming flesh etc.) that are important later in the narrative. It's a way for the author to provide information to the reader that the characters in the story don't know yet. The presentation of the farewell discourse's beginning from the first verse of chapter fourteen reveals something mysterious just like 1:1; Jesus Christ affirming his divine relationship with God. The uniqueness of the farewell discourse stems from the fact that the themes are embedded in just a

conversation; though closely ended with the fact that Jesus' audience are his disciples. The two presentations are spectacular and unique in themselves; such that the farewell discourse looks like a drama while the prologue is in form of a monologue.

**Incarnation:** the ultimate truth that 'God became flesh' - Καὶ ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο, καὶ ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν is bluntly spelt in John's prologue (1:14). The nail is struck on the head and this makes the prologue balanced on the two sides, stating the divinity of Jesus and His humanity. In the same vein, incarnation concept is not struck like the prologue; however, it laid emphasis on Jesus Christ as being sent from the father (14:15-26; 16:4-15); one who possess divine origin and relationship with the father. The fact that Jesus is pictured among the disciples in the world though claimed not to be of the world is enough hint of the God in man concept in the farewell discourse. In fact, the ascension of Jesus in reunion with the father permeates the farewell discourse. Thus, the concept of incarnation is enveloped in just a verse of the prologue but scattered abroad in the farewell discourse.

**Volume:** The prologue is the weaving of eighteen verses in the first chapter (1:1-18); this could easily be taken by audience and grasp within a minute period of time. The prologue portion is not so burdensome in the sense that the volume gives the audience information within a jiffy. Nevertheless, the farewell discourse entails the composition of about four chapters comprising of more than hundred verses; though well connected and articulated; the study posits that its volume might toss an impatient reader off; this is established from the fact that one character (Jesus Christ) among others do the major talking.

**Holy Spirit:** Although some scholars have argued that the Holy Spirit is not present in the prologue; a keen view of John 1:1-3 with specific attention to the creation account in Genesis affirms the presence of the Holy Spirit with the Word. In the farewell discourse there are several references (14:6, 16-17, 26; 15:26, 16:17-11) to the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of Truth. His person is made known and his mission is made clear; "...He is the Comforter who will succeed Jesus Christ and guide to all truth". Aside from the creation representation in connection with the Word in the prologue, the person of the Holy Spirit can be said to be represented with Truth which came through Jesus Christ (1:17) in the prologue. The third person of Trinity is implicit in the prologue but He is explicit in the farewell discourse; in fact, Jesus Christ took his

time to explain things concerning the Holy Spirit to the disciples; declaring He has to ascend so that the Holy Spirit can descend and continue the work of the father.

#### **APPLICATION TO THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY**

The importance of the Gospel of John can scarcely be overestimated. The genius of the gospel lies in the way in which John conceives of the relationship between the human and the divine. This relationship has always been a problem that has puzzled people. How can God, who is conceived as an eternal, omniscient, and omnipotent being, have any direct contact with that which is temporal, changing, and limited by the conditions of space and time? In other words, how can divinity ever be united with humanity unless one thereby becomes involved in a contradiction of terms? John's answer to this question is explicitly situated in the prologue and farewell discourse, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us." The Logos is identified with God and is the spirit that dwelt in the human being [24].

The main theme in the Bible book of John is to prove conclusively that Jesus is the Son of God and that all who believe in Him will have eternal life [25]. This purpose was one that John had in common with the men who wrote the Synoptic Gospels, but his method for achieving it distinguishes his gospel from the earlier ones. The central theme in the Synoptic Gospels is the coming of the kingdom of God, and it was in relation to this event that the accounts were given of the life and teachings of Jesus. The messianic character of Jesus' mission was described in terms of the miracles that he performed, his kindly attitude toward the poor and the oppressed, his power to cast out demons and to heal the sick, and his instructions concerning the way people should live in view of the imminence of the coming kingdom [24].

The key verse of the book of John is John 20:30-31 says "Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. In every chapter, Jesus deity is clear, His identity is understood as the Word, the only Son, Lamb of God, true bread, life, resurrection, and many more. The prologue and farewell discourse makes it clear that Jesus is not just a man; He is the eternal son of God. Because Jesus is God's Son, Christians can perfectly trust what He

says. By trusting Him, Christians can gain an open mind to understand God's message and fulfil His purpose in life.

## CONCLUSION

The prologue is a beautiful and captivating introduction which summarizes the divine existence of Christ in heaven first then on earth; while the farewell discourse is the elaborate manuscript of the summarized introductory piece recorded to have been a product of Jesus' interaction with His disciples. Although, this stance is debatable, the research submits that an engagement with the prologue at first is capable of unfolding a clear insight to the whole Gospel; however, this does not intrinsically establish the fact that without the prologue, the whole Gospel cannot be adequately understood. The conclusion here refutes the opinion that prologue is the "KEY" to John's gospel and relegating other parts, which includes the farewell discourse.

The fact that the prologue and farewell discourse of John's Gospel share similar features cannot be denied. The outcome of the study applies greatly to the Christian community in the sense that the focal point of the two examined sections of John is the redemption of mankind through the saviour, Jesus Christ. This is explicit through emphasis placed on the identity of Jesus Christ (λόγος) and His relationship with man while in the flesh. The prologue and farewell discourse ultimately reveals Jesus Christ as the most significant and influential person of human history to the Christian community.

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