

INCARNATION AND COVENANT IN THE PROLOGUE TO THE FOURTH GOSPEL (JOHN 1:1-18)

Researcher: Wilson Paroschi
Faculty Adviser: Robert M. Johnston, Ph.D.
Date completed: September 2003

Most scholars would agree that the Prologue to the Fourth Gospel—as John 1:1-18 is usually called—introduces Jesus Christ as a divine, preexistent being, who at a certain point in time was made flesh and lived among humans. No agreement, however, exists on the point in the narrative at which the shift from one state to the other takes place. As John the Baptist is mentioned in vv. 6-8, many think that the following verses refer to the ministry of the incarnate Christ, while others, struck by the explicitness of v. 14, argue that this verse marks the transition from preexistence to incarnation. Some try to combine both views and argue that the central section of the Prologue (vss. 6-13) describes what they call the activity of the preincarnate Christ in OT times. There are also those who, not impressed either by vv. 6-8 or by v. 14, contend that it is only the first three verses of the Prologue that necessarily refer to the preexistent Christ. For a few interpreters the entire Prologue is about the incarnate Christ.

By making a detailed and comprehensive analysis of this issue and evaluating all differing views, the dissertation seeks to establish exactly at what point the Prologue begins to speak about the incarnate Christ. The analysis is based on the Prologue's present form and organization and presupposes its coherence and unity.

Three main chapters form the bulk of this study. These correspond to the natural divisions of the Prologue (vv. 1-5; vv. 6-13; vv. 14-18) and, to a certain extent, to the various views on the point of incarnation.

The first main chapter (chap. 2) considers the incarnation in vv. 1-5 and concludes that there is no evidence to support the claim that the transition from preexistence to incarnation occurs either in v. 4 or in v. 5, much less that the entire Prologue is about the incarnate Christ. The perspective of these verses is fundamentally cosmological and, as such, they refer to the preexistent Christ.

Chapter 3 addresses the question whether vv. 6-13 describe the ministry of the preincarnate Christ in the OT period. The conclusion is that they describe the historical ministry of Jesus Christ, whose coming into the world—the point of the incarnation—is mentioned in v. 9, although the modality of his coming is not spelled out until v. 14.

The last chapter establishes the meaning of v. 14 in view of an incarnational interpretation of vv. 6-13. This verse, together with vv. 15-18, is intended to announce not the incarnation proper, but its theological significance, which is based on the covenantal traditions of the exodus story and later prophetic expectations. It consists of a radical affirmation that the new eschatological era of salvation has been inaugurated with the incarnation of Jesus Christ.