3. Origin and background of the hymn to the Logos

As early as 1923 R. Bultmann put forward the thesis that the Logos-hymn was originally a Gnostic composition, from Baptist circles, which the fourth evangelist appropriated to sing the praises of his Christ. The basic notion of a Gnostic hymn was taken up by H. H. Schaedel, who

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19 The two δς. at the start of v. 16 and v. 17 do not prove that v. 17 must belong to the hymn as well as v. 16. On the contrary, they are a pointer to the work of the evangelist. The hymn contains no other particles but moves in parataxis joined by "ands". Possibly v. 16 also began with "and" originally (so many MSS), which the evangelist changed into δς. on account of the insertion of v. 15. As the continuation of v. 14 "and" is, at any rate, more suitable than δς. See the commentary. Haenchen, "Probleme des Prologs" takes a particularly personal view of v. 17 (pp. 323f.).

20 See "Der religionsgeschichtliche Hintergrund".
gave, however, a different reconstruction and interpretation of it. Following C. F. Burney, he affirmed that the original was in Aramaic, and suggested that it had been a hymn to Enosh (the god “Man”). The statement of v. 6a, according to Schaefer (“Enosh was sent by God”), was not merely part of the original hymn but the key to its interpretation. But this is the fatal weakness of the hypothesis, quite apart from the questionableness of the re-translation back into Aramaic. The statement can be understood of John the Baptist without any difficulty, and the secondary nature of vv. 6-8 can hardly be doubted. Bultmann’s thesis of a “hymn from Gnostic Baptist circles”, which he retained in his commentary on John, has remained influential. According to S. Schulz, “in the field of comparative religion, the origin of the constitutive elements of the prologue of John is to be sought in the Hellenistic Gnostic use of the term Logos, in the Wisdom tradition of late Hellenistic Judaism and in the Old Testament concept of theophany”. He follows Schaefer, Bultmann and Stauffer in maintaining that the hymn actually originated in a pre-Christian Baptist group.

But there are considerable difficulties against this view, above all the affirmation of the Incarnation in Jn 1:14, which can hardly be understood except as a strictly original Christian confession. This made Bultmann hesitate in his first work; he envisaged the possibility “that a source was used only in vv. 1–13 and the evangelist’s own work began in v. 14”, but decided in favour of the view that the whole prologue 1:1–18 (except the additions) was taken over from a Baptist composition. In fact, to excise the part beginning with v. 14 would be to deprive the hymn of its triumphant conclusion; but if it is part of the original Logos-hymn, it is much more probable that the whole originated in Christian circles. This consideration has impressed critical scholars like E. Haenchen and E. Käsemann, who writes: “The pre-Christian character of the hymn is more than problematical, an Aramaic original incredible, the supposed hymn to the Baptist a pure hypothesis.” Since it can be shown that

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21 “Der Mensch im Prolog”, with reconstruction of the hymn and translation back into Aramaic, pp. 333 ff.

22 Komposition und Herkunft, p. 51; cf. pp. 56 ff.

23 Ibid., pp. 66 ff.


25 “Probleme”, p. 334. He sees three stages of development; originally a pagan myth full of lament for this wayward world which has no place for Wisdom, then a Jewish hymn to the Torah or Wisdom, which found a resting-place in Israel, and finally a Christian hymn which gave the Logos (= Wisdom) a new goal: the Logos became man and found a community of believers.

26 “Aufbau und Anliegen”, p. 86. Surprisingly, he ends the basic hymn at v. 13 (or v. 12, since v. 13 is said to be a comment) and ascribes vv. 14–18 to the evangelist (p. 97); but he understands vv. 5–13 of the “historical epiphany of the revealer” (i.e. the incarnate Logos) and thinks that it was never meant to refer to anything else (p. 86).
similar hymns to Christ existed in the primitive Church (see above and cf. Eph 5:19), there is no real objection to the supposition of a genuinely Christian hymn to the Logos. On the other hand, it is problematical in the extreme that the disciples of John (in competition with Christians) should have applied the Gnostic myth of the heavenly envoy to their master at an early date, and have considered the son of Zechariah as the pre-existent revealer and redeemer who became flesh.\(^27\)

It may then be asked what Christian circles produced the Logos-hymn. They were certainly Christian “Hellenists”, as is shown by the use of the title “Logos” without any qualification (see excursus i). They may be identified more closely as converts from Hellenistic Judaism, since there are strong echoes of the O.T. and speculations on Wisdom and the Torah (the events of Sinai, see above) from the same source. It is difficult to decide whether the author of the hymn also knew the Gnostic doctrine of salvation and countered it with a profession of faith in the incarnate Saviour of Christianity. As regards the evangelist, we left this possibility open (see Introduction, ch. vii, 3); as regards the hymn which he incorporated, the question is whether the use of the title “Logos” (instead of ἡ σοφία) and the affirmation of the Incarnation (as an anti-Gnostic interpretation) are enough to justify this supposition. The preference for the theology of the “Word” instead of that of “Wisdom” could be due to the notion of revelation; the choice of σάρξ for the Incarnation is at first sight rather normal, in view of 1 Tim 3:16a; cf. Rom 1:3; Heb 5:7; 10:20; 1 Pet 3:18. Nonetheless, in the Logos-hymn the word has a special emphasis. It does not contrast the earthly mode of being with the later “pneumatic” one, as is done in the older σάρξ—πνεῦμα Christology. All the emphasis is on the entry of the Logos into the realm of earth and matter, and hence we are in the atmosphere of the anti-Gnostic confessional formulae of 1 Jn 4:2 (cf. 5:6b; 2 Jn 7) or of the anti-docetic teaching of the epistles of Ignatius (Smyrn., 3:1; 5:2; 7:1 etc.). One may suspect that the evangelist or the author of 1 John were not the first to have to challenge the perverted teaching of the Gnostics. The Christian community which produced the Logos-hymn may have already had to do so. But we cannot be certain.

The theological background of the hymn, however, is definitely determined by the Wisdom speculation of Hellenistic Judaism, though hardly to such an extent that the author drew directly on the model and structure supplied by the book of Sirach.\(^28\) But he was constantly influenced by these texts. This is clear from the list of parallels given by S. Schulz\(^29\) and will be demonstrated in the course of the commentary. This

\(^{27}\) See Schnackenburg, “Johannesjünger”.

\(^{28}\) So Spicq, “Le Siracide et la structure littéraire du Prologue de S. Jean”.

\(^{29}\) Komposition und Herkunft, pp. 32–34.
also confirms the supposition that an authentic hymn from the Christian liturgy was taken over, since the other primitive Christian hymns to Christ (especially Col 1:15–20; Heb 1:2f.) also display the same influence. But the revelation on Sinai and the tent of the sanctuary, which we must also invoke for the affirmations of Jn 1:14 (cf. 17), also occur frequently in early Christian theology—as the background of the eschatological revelation in Jesus Christ (cf. 2 Cor 3), of the new covenant (cf. Heb 8:5; 9:19ff.) and of the “dwelling” of God among his people (cf. Rev 21:3)—so that similar ideas, in a Christological dress, could also appear in a cultic hymn. By incorporating a community hymn, the fourth evangelist shows that he is tributary to the primitive Christian tradition, whose Christological insights he was to enrich and develop in his Gospel and his own theology.

1:1 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.

Three fundamental statements describe the pre-existing Logos (Word) in his eternal divine being. The phrase “in the beginning” contains no reflection on the concept and problem of time. It is chosen deliberately with reference to Gen 1:1, since the Logos proclaimed by the hymn is the “Word” by which God created all things (v. 2). But this “Word” is more than the “utterance” of God at the dawn of creation. It is the personal “Word” which became “flesh” at a given time of history, Jesus Christ, whose existence is here traced back to before the world, to the divine eternity. So too the words “in the beginning” mean more than in the account of creation. The phrase does not mark the coming into existence of the created world. It expresses the being of the Logos as it was before the world. That which already existed “in the beginning” has precedence over all creation. The rabbis also taught that seven things “were created before the world”; but the Logos was not created, he simply “was”, that is, he already existed, absolutely, timeless and eternal. It is a real, personal pre-existence (cf. 1 Jn 1:1; 2:13a), a thought only found with this clarity in the professions of faith in Christ pronounced by the Christian community (cf. excursus ii), of which the Johannine prologue is not the first instance, since there were earlier formulations of it in other hymns and Christological affirmations (Phil 2:6; Col 1:15; Heb 1:3).

30 Philo, De opif., 26, speaking of creation and time, says: “Time there was not before there was a world... It is either coeval with or born later than the world.”