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SHORT STUDIES

'IN THE BEGINNING': A CHRISTOLOGICAL TRANSPARENCY

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In an earlier article, 'The Johannine Origins of the Johannine Logos',[1] I proposed that the prevailing explanations of the background and origin of the celebrated Logos concept/title of the Gospel of John are misguided in their attempts to trace the title to some extraneous source. I argued, rather, that the development of the christological title Logos had a beginning, middle, and end, and that this may be demonstrated from the Gospel and First Epistle themselves. Crucial to my argument was the chronological ordering of the three documents: the Gospel of John 'proper' (John 1.19–20.31), the First Epistle, and then the substance of the Prologue (John 1.1–18). The thesis itself, more specifically, was that (1) λόγος and ῥῆμα were employed in the Gospel 'proper' with a demonstrably 'christological transparency', (2) λόγος was employed with a quasi-titular force in the first verses of 1 John, and (3) λόγος reflects a full-fledged christological title in the Prologue material, which was composed still later.[2] At the end of that article I suggested that a similar development could be traced in the case of the Johannine term ἀρχή – immediately related to λόγος in the very first line of the Gospel – and that, if so, this would surely enhance my argument concerning λόγος. Here I attempt to make the argument for a similar christological development of the Johannine ἀρχή. Even aside from its relevance for my thesis about λόγος, the prominent and recurring ἀρχή justifies the attention. And it does confront us, after all, with the majestic phrase with which the Gospel opens: 'In the beginning'.

Ἀρχή, usually rendered 'beginning',[3] also figures in the opening words of Mark (1.1) and Luke (1.2). But whereas these are clearly straightforward references to the temporal beginning of Jesus' ministry, the ἀρχή of John 1.1 immediately establishes for the Fourth Gospel (at least in its eventual form) a full-powered christological point of departure.

Long before its appearance in the Fourth Gospel, ἀρχή was already an

[1] Ed. L. Miller, 'The Johannine Origins of the Johannine Logos', *JBL* 112 (1993) 445–57.

[2] Ibid., 445–6. See also Ed. L. Miller, *Salvation-History in the Prologue of John: The Significance of John 1:3/4* (Leiden: Brill, 1989) 3–4.

[3] For general accounts: Gerhard Delling, 'ἀρχή', in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (ed. G. Kittel and G. Friedrich; Grands Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1964–76) 1.479–84; Dietrich Mueller, et al., 'Beginning, Origin, Rule, Ruler, Originator', in *Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (ed. Colin Brown; Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 1975–8) 1.164–9; Arnold Ehrhardt, *The Beginning: A Study in the Greek Philosophical Approach to the Concept of Creation from Anaximander to St. John* (Manchester: Manchester University, 1968).

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important concept for Greek philosophy. It appears to have been first employed philosophically by the pre-Socratic thinker Anaximander in designation of the ultimate 'origin' of all things.[4] In this metaphysical sense of 'first principle' it was used also by Aristotle, among others, who loosely identified it with αἰτία, 'cause',[5] and by Philo, whose Jewish theology was shaped by Platonic, Aristotelian, and Stoic elements, and who identified the metaphysical ἀρχή with the fundamental elements (στοιχεῖα), God, and Logos.[6] St Augustine thus reflects the influence of Greek (especially neo-Platonic) philosophical thought when, in his exposition of the first clause of John, ἐν ἀρχῇ, he interprets ἀρχή as the ultimate metaphysical principle of things and takes the preposition ἐν as local: the Logos was in (in the sense of 'within') the *principium*, the ultimate Principle or Cause of all things, that is, in God.[7]

Ἀρχή can also bear the meaning of 'power' or 'dominion'. The possibility of this meaning in John 1.1 may be argued from the following: (1) the absence of the definite article with ἀρχή; (2) this use of the word in the LXX (most notably, Dan [Theod.] 7.12, 14, 26, 27) and also in the NT (Luke 20.20; Titus 3.1); but especially (3) christological formulae found elsewhere in the NT, the most important of which for the present question occurs at Col 1.18 where Christ is called ἀρχή, along with other designations throughout vv. 15–19, but especially vv. 18–19, which point to his majesty and pre-eminence: image of the invisible God, creator, sustainer, consummation, head of the body of the church, fullness, etc. Also relevant is Christ's claim in Rev 22.13 to be the ἀρχή (cf. also 1.17 and 2.8), 'I am the Alpha and Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end', which identifies him with God, who says the same thing at Rev 1.8 and 21.6, this formula simply restating the OT and prophetic idea of the divine majesty as in Isa 44.6: 'I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no God.' It is clear, then, that in the NT ἀρχή is employed in a way suggestive of the divine power and exaltation, and as such is employed christologically. The appropriateness of such language in the context of the first lines of John should be evident: 'in' or 'with power was the Logos, and the Logos was with God, and the Logos was God'.

But that the proper interpretation of the ἀρχή of John 1.1 lies along the lines of one or the other (or both) of these two meanings strikes me, as it has nearly everyone else, as virtually impossible. Two considerations weigh decisively against such views: (1) the characteristic meaning with which John employs ἀρχή throughout the Gospel and Epistles, and (2) the obvious Genesis allusion involved in this particular instance. Commentators have suitably emphasized the latter, but it is surely the former that best explains the background of John's opening clause.

That we have here a deliberate echo of the first words of the OT can scarcely be denied. Not only would such an allusion be consistent with the Jewish tenor of the whole Fourth Gospel and, more immediately, of the

[4] Anaximander, Fragment 1, in *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* (ed. Hermann Diels and Walther Kranz; 6th edn, Berlin: Weidmann, 1951) 1.89. I am persuaded that the word ἀρχή belongs to the quoted material attributed by Simplicus to Anaximander (cf. Charles H. Kahn, *Anaximander and the Origins of Greek Cosmology* (New York: Columbia University, 1960), 30–2).

[5] For example, Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 981b 25–982a 5.

[6] Cf. Philo, *De Fuga et Inventione* 148; *De Decalogo* 52; *De Confusione Linguarum* 146.

[7] St Augustine, *In Ioannis Evangelium*, 1.8.

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Prologue itself,[8] but the expression ἐν ἀρχῇ is, in fact, identical with the LXX rendering of the בראשית of Gen 1.1.[9] That John deliberately seeks here to recall this passage is further evident inasmuch as the different prepositional phrases ἀπ' ἀρχῆς or ἐξ ἀρχῆς are usual throughout the Greek NT and are *always* employed in the Johannine literature with this one exception. The point is strengthened, moreover, by the subsequent references to creation in vv. 3 and 10,[10] though we must distinguish what is asserted in John 1.1 from those subsequent assertions: 'In the beginning was the Word' is not a statement about creation – as is v. 3 and v. 10 – but a statement about the pre-existence of the Word and his relation to God *prior* to creation. But, though the expression ἐν ἀρχῇ involves an echo of Gen 1.1, it involves considerably more. It is in fact an echo of the Fourth Gospel proper and First Epistle which, as I said at the start, I believe to have been composed in that order and prior to the Prologue material. There the prepositional phrases ἀπ' ἀρχῆς and ἐξ ἀρχῆς had already functioned in a quite special way, in connection with the Johannine interest in the pre-existence of the Son as explicitly expressed, say, in John 17.5. And it is here, as already said, that its most relevant background is to be found.

From a statistical standpoint it is already significant that of the fifty-five times ἀρχή occurs in the NT, eighteen, or one-third, of these are found in the Johannine writings. Clearly, this is a 'Johannine word'. More specifically, outside the Johannine Gospel and Epistles the expressions ἐν ἀρχῇ, ἀπ' ἀρχῆς, or ἐξ ἀρχῆς occur only eight times in the entire NT (counting Synoptic parallel passages once) and always with a straightforward temporal or chronological sense, as in Mark 13.19; Luke 1.2; Acts 11.15 and Phil 4.15.[11] In the Gospel and Epistles of John alone, on the other hand, these expressions occur sixteen times, and always with a meaning which – sometimes more, sometimes less – *resists* a simple and straightforward temporal, historical, or

[8] Aside from the question of the two instances of ἀρχή (vv. 1–2), specific Jewish and OT ideas in the Prologue are involved in the references to creation (vv. 3, 10), the Jews (v. 11), the shekinah glory (v. 14), the Mosaic Law (v. 17), and the hiddenness of God (v. 18); possibly also a suggestion of sacrificial flesh (v. 14), and a suggestion in the verb σκηνόω (which originally meant 'to pitch a tent') of the tabernacle in the wilderness (v. 14); not so likely, the life (v. 4) and the light (vv. 4–5, 7–9) motifs which, *contra* many, I take not as references to natural life and light (Gen 1) but to supernatural life and light made accessible in the incarnate Logos (see n. 9 below).

[9] Cf. also the identical expression in LXX Prov 8.23, which I take, like the Johannine expression, to be an echo of Gen 1. The absence of the definite article with ἀρχή in LXX Gen 1.1, and consequently also in John 1.1, is no doubt a reflection of the clarity or absoluteness of the term in these contexts, an explanation consistent with standard Greek usage. It is not necessary to appeal, as some do, to an adverbial usage of the expression.

[10] Most commentators are fond of seeing in the references to life (v. 4) and light (vv. 4–5, 7–9), and the dualism of light and darkness (v. 5), still further extensions of the Genesis echo of v. 1. Cf. M. E. Boismard who, appealing to Irenaeus and Tertullian, stresses the five same expressions which occur in the first three verses of LXX Genesis and the first five of John: ἐν ἀρχῃ, ἐγένετο, σκότος (σκοτία), φῶς, εἶπεν (λόγος) (*St. John's Prologue* [London: Blackfriars, 1957] 6 and n. 1). But this fails to reckon with the incarnational interpretation of vv. 3c–4a which properly construes ὃ γέγονεν with v. 4 and sees ζωή and φῶς as *salvific* gifts which have entered the world in the incarnate Logos (cf. Miller, *Salvation-History in the Prologue of John*, esp. ch. 2).

[11] 1 Thess 2.13 would be an exception, but the textual evidence favours ἀπαρχήν over ἀπ ἀρχῆς.

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chronological interpretation.[12] Not so obvious in this respect is John 6.64, 'Jesus knew from the beginning (ἐξ ἀρχῆς) there were some not believing'; 15.27, 'You are with me from the beginning (ἀπ' ἀρχῆς)'; and 16.4, 'I spoke these things to you from the beginning (ἐξ ἀρχῆς)'.

At first sight these appear to refer to the temporal beginnings of Jesus' ministry, his call of the disciples, etc. But in view of the evangelist's interest in the pre-existence of Christ, taken together with his taste for various literary devices such as symbolism, indirect communication and double-meanings, one should be alert to the fact that even these references to 'beginning' involve a certain *christological transparency*:[13] they include but at the same time point *beyond* the relative and historical circumstances of Jesus' ministry.

This is more obviously the case at 8.44, 'He [the devil] was a murderer from the beginning (ἀπ' ἀρχῆς)', though here it is not a christological but rather a *diabological* transparency that is involved. In this statement the phrase 'from the beginning' inevitably calls to mind, as most commentators emphasize, the Devil's complicity in the murder of Abel by Cain, or the Devil's deceptive (note the following references to his lying) plunging of the human race into mortality, or both. That the prepositional phrase, however, has reference also to the *nature* of the Devil is suggested by the lines immediately following: '. . . and [the devil] is alien to the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his nature, because he is a liar and the father of lies.' That these further claims involve primarily an interest in essence rather than history is evident from three considerations: (1) whether one opts for the imperfect ἔστηκεν, 'was standing' (from the late form στήκω) or the perfect ἕστηκεν, 'has stood' (from ἵστημι) – the MSS are divided – it would not be a simple past event but a persistent or continuing disposition to lie that is in view: The devil, as to his nature, 'is alien to the truth'; (2) I have rendered ἐκ τῶν ἰδίων (literally, 'from his own things') 'from his nature',[14] which is, strictly, an over-translation, but cannot be far wrong since something must be supplied in the translation, and what is supplied must be something that belongs properly to the Devil; (3) the image of the Devil as the 'father' of lies (not just the speaker of lies) suggests the source or origin of lies. Thus, notwithstanding its temporal allusions, the meaning of ἀπ' ἀρχῆς in John 8.44 is controlled largely by the immediately following claims about the nature of the Devil.[15] The notoriously difficult saying in 8.25 may also be relevant. Here Jesus is questioned as to his identity and responds, 'τὴν ἀρχὴν ὅτι καὶ λαλῶ ὑμῖν'. Though our prepositional phrase does not occur here it is

[12] At least, so it seems to me. Admittedly, there is something subjective in this judgement, and, beyond what is said below, it is hard to know how to demonstrate it. On the other hand, I think that most readers would grant. it, especially those with a sense for the subtlety of Johannine expression.

[13] As already indicated, I employed this expression in relation to λόγος in 'The Johannine Origin of the Johannine Logos'. I believe that in relation to ἀρχή, too, this is the exactly right expression.

[14] Cf. C. K. Barrett: 'εκ τῶν ἰδίων, of his own substance or characteristics. Lying is his nature' (*The Gospel According to St. John* [2nd edn London: SPCK, 1978] 349).

[15] Cf. also Raymond E. Brown: 'The stress on the devil's essential nature or what he was from the beginning pervades vs. 44' (*The Gospel According to St. John* [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966–70] 1.364).

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not impossible that τὴν ἀρχήν should be read as an adverbial accusative: '(the One) at the beginning, which is what I keep telling you'. If so, the saying is not only relevant but is the christologically most pregnant ἀρχή in John.[16]

In the Johannine Epistles too we encounter ἀρχή employed with a christological transparency. As in the Gospel, the expressions ἀπ' ἀρχῆς or ἐξ ἀρχῆς can hold a primarily historical reference while also pointing beyond the historical: 1 John 2.7, 'Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment which you had from the beginning (ἀπ' ἀρχῆς)'; 2.24, 'Let what you heard from the beginning (ἀπ' ἀρχῆς) remain in you. If what you heard from the beginning (ἀπ' ἀρχῆς) remains in you, then you will remain in the Son and in the Father'; 3.11, '. . . this is the message which you have heard from the beginning (ἀπ' ἀρχῆς), that we should love one another'; 2 John 5–6, '. . . now I beg you, lady, not as though I were writing you a new commandment, but the one we have had from the beginning (ἀπ' ἀρχῆς), that we love one another. And this is love, that we follow his commandments; this is the commandment, as you have heard from the beginning (ἀπ' ἀρχῆς), that you follow love.' Again, and somewhat paralleling the Gospel text of 8.44, we find ἀπ' ἀρχῆς used also with the non-historical meaning of 'by nature' in 1 John 3.8, 'The one doing sin is of the Devil, because the Devil sins from the beginning (ἀπ' ἀρχῆς).' The transcending and christological element is still more obvious in 1 John 1.1, 'What was from the beginning (ἀπ' ἀρχῆς), what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, regarding the word of life . . .', and is explicit in 1 John 2.13–14, 'I write to you, fathers, because you know him who was from the beginning (ἀπ' ἀρχῆς)' (repeated in v. 14).[17] In spite of the references to having heard and seen, 1 John 1.1 points beyond the beginning of Jesus' ministry. The passage is clearly related both literally and theologically to John 1.1;[18] there the pre-existence of the Logos is stated in full bloom, and an anticipation of it, at least, should not therefore be surprising in 1 John 1.1.[19] Also, it is significant that the historical–empirical references drop out entirely in 1 John 2.13–14, suggesting a more encompassing meaning of ἀπ' ἀρχῆς certainly here if not also for 1.1.

In this way, it is possible to discern both in the Fourth Gospel proper and in the Epistles a clearly christological employment of ἀπ' ἀρχῆς or ἐξ ἀρχῆς. A sort of struggle to transcend the ordinary historical meaning is suggested in the transparent sayings and achieved in 1 John 2.13–14 (if not also in 1.1).

[16] I have argued this possible interpretation in 'The Christology of John 8:25', *TZ* 36 (1980) 257–65. Cf. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 343: 'I am from the beginning what I tell you'; Brown, *The Gospel according to John*, 1.347–48: 'What I have been telling you from the beginning'; Rudolf Schnackenburg, *Das Johannesevangelium* (Freiburg/Breisgau: Herder, 1965–75), 2.254–5: 'Was rede ich überhaupt noch zu euch?' or 'Dass ich überhaupt noch zu euch rede!'.

[17] '. . . ἐγνώκατε τὸν ἀπ' ἀρχῆς'. 'Who was' must be supplied because to say that they knew him from the beginning would require αὐτόν rather than τόν, and 'who *was*' (rather than 'is') in light of the ἐν of John 1.1.

[18] Cf. my comments in 'The Johannine Origin of the Johannine Logos', 452–5.

[19] Indeed, 'anticipation' may be too weak. Certainly it is possible that the meaning of 1 John 1.1 is: 'What existed from the beginning has entered our world with the result that we have seen and touched, etc.' In this case the passage is more *directly* related to the movement of the Johannine Prologue (he was in the beginning [v. 1] and has now become flesh and we beheld [v. 14]). Also relevant here is the expression 'Jesus Christ has come in the flesh' in 1 John 4.2 and 2 John 7.

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The christological appropriateness of ἀρχή must have proved itself in time, and finally it shows up, clothed in Genesis language, as ἐν ἀρχῇ at the opening of the Johannine hymn which now introduces the final form of the Fourth Gospel.[20] Mark identifies 'the beginning of the Gospel (ἀρχὴ τοῦ εὐαγγελίου)' with the historical appearance of John the Baptist and the baptism of Jesus (vv. lff), and Matthew and Luke reach back chronologically to the ancestry and birth of Jesus. But John's ἐν ἀρχῇ is the ultimate expression of his desire everywhere to point his readers to the ground of salvation-history in the pre-existent Logos, one of the themes of his Gospel: '. . . and now, Father, glorify me with your glory which I had with you before the world was made' (John 17.5); '. . . before Abraham was, I am' (8.58). It establishes (to use Barrett's apt phrase) an 'absolute theological framework'.[21]

[20] For my view on the composition of the Logos hymn and the composition of the Prologue of John (John 1.1–18) generally, see my *Salvation-History in the Prologue of John*, 2–12 and *passim*.

[21] Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John*, 149. With Barrett we may raise, as a bare possibility, whether the Johannine Christ/ἀρχή connection combats adoptionist Christologies according to which Jesus of Nazareth was selected by God and appointed to a divine task, presumably at his baptism, and whether the Prologue in specific is intended to correct the adoptionistic-sounding opening of Mark (p. 149). Barrett suggests further that the absence of the virgin birth narrative in John may be an attempt not to play into the hands of pagan mythology (p. 149). But how likely is it, given John's high Christology and interest in the pre-existence of the Logos and his unity with God, that had John known about the virgin birth tradition we should find in his Gospel not the slightest trace of it?

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