

EMERGENCE OF THE Gnostic CHALLENGE TO THE JOHANNINE LOGOS

The presentation of Jesus as the Logos (Word) become incarnate is an insight that is peculiar to the Johannine vision of the significance of the Christ-event. Among the New Testament authors it is in fact John alone who clearly states this (Jn 1 : 14). Although in the Gospel of John the word Logos is used to designate Jesus only in its Prologue (Jn 1 : 1-18), the perspective of Jesus as the incarnate Logos is amply reflected throughout this writing, and what is stated in the Prologue serves as an anticipation and summary of the Christological and soteriological statements that follow. This can be asserted without excluding the possibility that the Prologue as a hymn had an independent origin and it was added to the main body of the Gospel later as an overture.¹

Through the climactic declaration in the Prologue, "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (Jn 1 : 14), Jesus is proclaimed as the personal concretization of God's saving presence among men, the sublime coalescence of the divine and the human whereby the divine realm not only meets the human but elevates it. This is shown by indicating that the Logos, before becoming incarnate, had a pre-temporal existence and it was an existence shared with God in a dynamic relationship, and, consequently, "the Logos is God" (Jn 1 : 1). Incarnation of the divine Logos for John was not an abrupt intervention and a dislocated event, but the culmination of a long

1. In another Johannine writing also Jesus is designated as the Logos : the "Word of Life" in I Jn 1 : 1 apparently refers to Christ. Ideas analogous to John's are found elsewhere in the NT.

and gradual process of God's self-expression and self-giving. For it is through the same Logos that God created the universe and the Logos was present and active throughout history (Jn 1 : 3, 10). This self-giving of God through the Logos was in reality the communication of God's own life to the created realm (Jn 1 : 3-4). The incarnation of the Logos was the continuation and culmination of this communication of life to men (Jn 3 : 16; 10 : 10; 17 : 2). In other words, the incarnation was the completion and fulfilment of creation.

It is significant that in John the term Logos is used outside the Prologue to signify the word of Jesus, thereby indicating that there is a vital continuity between Jesus as the Word of God and his word. Christ is accessible through his word, and faith in him involves acceptance of his word.² It is by accepting Jesus, the word, through his word that one can participate in the life and the Spirit that he has as the Logos of God, which results in the divine filiation of the believer (Jn 1 : 12)—a transforming union with Jesus and a participation in his own union with the Father.

In the Johannine vision the saving action of the incarnation of the Logos reaches its culmination and full realization only with Jesus, death on the cross and resurrection, which together constitute his "glorification". By undergoing the experience of the full, even painful, reality of the *sarx* (*flesh*) and thereby raising and transforming it Jesus fulfils his mission. It is only after this that men can receive the life-giving Spirit (Jn 7 : 39) and become the children of God (Jn 3 : 14-15). The *sarx*, the humanness, of the incarnate Logos is not superfluous or irrelevant, it is an indispensable positive factor in the saving action of God through the Logos to the end.

What John has done through his Logos-theology is to interpret and articulate the Christ-event adopting a term and a concept that he inherited from his milieu. Logos was a concept familiar to the Hellenistic audience of John; but he invested it with a content derived to a large extent from the OT theology of the word of God and Jewish speculation on the divine wisdom and law. John has, however, gone much further in asserting that the pre-existent divine Logos has assumed *sarx* in the person of Jesus who is therefore identical with it. This idea of Logos becoming incarnate in a particular person should have sounded strange both to the Jews and to the Greeks. This Logos-

2. In John to believe in Christ and to believe in his word are equivalents: cf. Jn 4 : 21; 5 : 38, 46; 8 : 45-46; 10 : 37-38 with 2 : 22; 4 : 50; 5 : 47.

becoming-sarx was incompatible with the dualistic view of Gnosticism and the Johannine Logos was challenged on this count by the Gnostics.

A Gnostic Challenge to the Johannine Logos : the Revelation Discourse in the Acts of John

An appropriate example of this Gnostic challenge is the so-called Revelation Discourse (RD) in the Acts of John. In the apocryphal Acts of John³ where is a long revelation discourse (cc. 88–102) delivered by John, which incorporates a hymn (cc. 94–96), probably of cultic origin, and a discourse by Christ (cc. 97–101). This part of the Acts of John manifests the characteristics of a Gnostic Gospel and in its form it is close to the Johannine type⁴.

In the RD the term Logos is used several times for Christ (altogether no fewer than ten times : see cc. 94, 96, 98, 101). The hymn, which it contains, begins and ends with a trinitarian doxology which includes praise to the personal Logos. In the hymn which he sings with his disciples, Christ refers to himself as the Logos sent by the Father to men (c. 96) and in his discourse he speaks about “ the torment of the Logos, the piercing of the Logos, the blood of the Logos, the wounding of the Logos, the fastening of the Logos, the death of the Logos ” (c. 101). Knowledge of Christ is primarily the knowledge of the Logos (c. 101).

Although this idea of Christ as the Logos is one shared with the Gospel of John, the concept of incarnation found in the RD is considerably different. Not only that we do not find here anything comparable to the Johannine statements “ the Word became flesh ” and dwelt among us ”, but there is a clear attempt to weaken the full impact of the reality of the incarnation. The materiality and humanness of Christ as the incarnate Logos are unreal and inconsequential. This is graphically indicated through a long description of the disciples’ experience of the earthly Christ as a varying, unstable and even

3. The translation of the text of Acts of John is taken from E. Hennecke, *New Testament Apocrypha*, Vol. 2 (ed. by W. Schneemelcher; Eng. transl. ed. by McL. Wilson), London (SCM) 1974. The Acts of John was probably composed in Asia Minor in the 3rd century; but the esoteric traditions elaborated in the RD appear already in the previous century (see *Ibid.*, pp. 214 f). That is why Duncan Greenlees has included it in the anthology *The Gospel of the Gnostics* (The World Gospel Series, Vol. 13), Adayar, Madras, 1958 (pp. 91–113).

immaterial phenomenon. Christ appears alternately as a child, young man or bearded old man; he is sometimes ugly, at other times handsome; his body feels solid as well as "immaterial and incorporeal, and as if it did not exist at all"; and his footprints are never seen (cc. 87-93).

The logical consequence of this view was to deny the reality of Christ's suffering and death. While Christ is being crucified in Jerusalem, he appears to John and explains the significance of, rather, the non-significance of this event in unmistakable terms: "I am not the (man) who is on the Cross...I was taken to be what I am not... what they will say of me is mean and unworthy of me... I have suffered none of those things which they will say of me" (cc. 99-011). Without in fact undergoing suffering and death that he appeared to do so is a "mystery" (c. 101). The meaning of it is "that the Lord had performed everything as a symbol and a dispensation for the conversion and salvation of man" (c. 102). This is a knowledge reserved for the enlightened. The proper and perfect knowledge of the Logos and his nature will be granted only when he goes forth: "Who I am, you shall know when I go forth. What I now am seen to be, that I am not" (c. 96). However, the enlightened are invited to see themselves in the Logos as in a mirror and after seeing they should keep silence about his mysteries (c. 96). Thus it is a knowledge reserved for a few; "ignore the many and despise those who are outside the mystery" is the injunction given to them by Christ (c. 100).

The esoteric self-knowledge obtained from the Logos included also a lesson on how to suffer. The suffering of the Logos is that of men and it is also a model for them how to suffer. Since the suffering of the Logos was only an appearance, the wisdom imparted by him concerns how they can suffer without in fact suffering and that their suffering is also unreal:

"...yours is
This passion of Man
which I am to suffer.
For you could by no means
have understood what you suffer
Unless to you as Logos
I had been sent by the Father.

...

If you knew how to suffer
you would be able not to suffer.

Learn how to suffer
 and you shall be able not to suffer.
 What you do not know
 I myself will teach you " (c. 96).

It is therefore not through his death on the Cross that Christ saves men. The wooden cross on which Christ appeared to die remains without any value. Instead, a Cross of Light is revealed which stands as a symbol of Christ and which is called, among others, Logos. Salvation means introduction into a cosmic process of unification which fulfils itself in and through the Cross of Light, which, consequently, has also the function of separating and removing what is transitory and inferior (cc. 98-100).

Through the acceptance of the revelation of Christ one is enabled to transcend the present state and be united with the Logos, becoming similar to him. This union and transformation of those who receive the revelation results in Christ becoming 'as he was' (c. 100). The real "suffering" of Christ (c. 101 : "You hear that I suffered, yet I suffered not; and that I suffered not, yet I did suffer.") seems to consist in his effort to accomplish this.

Conclusion

There are some similarities and considerable differences between John and the RD in the Acts of John in their view of the Logos and his salvific role. For both Christ as the Logos is the revealer and mediator of salvation and acceptance of the revelation leads to union with him and unity between men. The crucial difference is, as we have seen concerning the incarnation of the Logos, which for John is real whereas for the author of the RD it is only an appearance. While according to the RD Christ's death on the cross is only an appearance, and therefore without any intrinsic value, for John it is through his death on the cross, which is as real as the incarnation, that the revelation and salvific action of Christ reach their culmination and Christ effects the union of men with him (see Jn 10 : 10-11, 15-16; 12 : 23-24; 12 : 32-33). And whereas the RD presents Christ as teaching how to suffer without in fact suffering, according to Johannine Christ salvation can be obtained only by following his example of self-sacrificing love (Jn 12 : 25-26; 15 : 12-14).

In RD what we find is an attempt to reinterpret the Johannine Logos, that has been conditioned by the Gnostic ideology regarding

what is material. Since Gnosticism systematically discounted the material and earthly in favour of the spiritual and divine, it was only logical that instead of a religion that took the total man seriously, it should have gone for a "pure religion". This Gnostic reinterpretation shows also an endeavour to tackle the perennial problem of how to understand and express the mystery of God entering into the human milieu in order to save man. The Gnostics could not conceive in realistic terms, of God granting salvation to men through the medium of matter by becoming one among them. The Gnostic challenge to the Johannine Logos, however, stimulated theologizing among the early Christian thinkers which led to a deeper reflective understanding of the Christ-event and its relevance for man. Here we have a concrete expression of the dialectics of religious consciousness, an example of religion in re-making.