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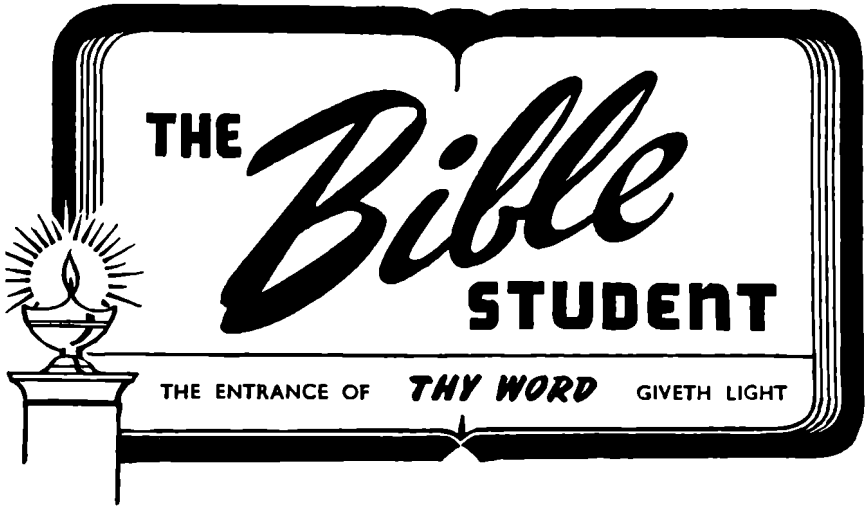
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NEW SERIES

OCTOBER 1953

VOL. XXIV No. 4

AN EXPOSITORY STUDY OF ST JOHN'S GOSPEL

By F. F. BRUCE, M.A.

(PROLOGUE, Ch. 1: 1-18 *cont.*)

v. 14.—*And the Word became Flesh*,—Augustine, in the seventh book of his *Confessions*, tells how shortly before his conversion he was introduced to a Latin translation of some Neoplatonic writings, and found in them much that echoed the teaching of the opening sentences of the Fourth Gospel, in the substance of their thought, if not in the same words. 'Again I read there that "God the Word was born not of flesh nor of blood, nor of the will of man nor of the will of the flesh, but of God." But that "the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us"—that I did not read there.' And so the differences between John and the Neoplatonists were more important than the resemblances (and even these were more superficial than Augustine realized). For this is the event to which all that has gone before in the Prologue has led: that 'the Word became flesh.' From John's Gospel and Epistles it is plain that by the end of the first century Christian thinking was infected by the opinion that matter was essentially evil whereas spirit was essentially pure. It followed that God could not come into direct contact with His material creation. In relation to the incarnation of the Son of God, this tendency found expression in the heresy known as Docetism, *i.e.*, the doctrine that there was something unreal about the Manhood of our Lord, since it was impossible that God could dwell in an ordinary human body. This sort of teaching propagated especially at this time by a heresiarch named Cerinthus—undermined the very foundations of the Gospel, and John made it his business to refute it as emphatically and effectively as possible. So here he makes the uncompromising affirmation that the Divine Word 'became flesh.' He might have

said that the Word took humanity or assumed a bodily form, but neither of these expressions would have been so unambiguous as the expression he actually uses.

In the fulness of time, the Eternal Word of God became incarnate as the Man Jesus of Nazareth. To His Godhead He now added Manhood, 'and so was, and continueth to be, God and man in two distinct natures, and one person, for ever' (*Westminster Shorter Catechism*, 21). His human nature was and remains as perfect as His divine nature, and yet it is *our* human nature (sin apart) and not some unique 'heavenly humanity' of quite a different order. Those who talk unguardedly about a 'heavenly humanity' are really opening the door to a new Docetism. 'Since then the children are sharers in flesh and blood, He also Himself in like manner partook of the same' (Heb. 2:14). 'A Saviour not quite God', said Bishop Moule, 'is a bridge broken at the farther end.' And it may be added with equal truth that a Saviour not quite man is a bridge broken at *our* end. (A Saviour neither quite God nor quite man, as envisaged by some ancient and modern heresies, is a bridge broken at both ends and hanging in mid-air—no bridge, no Saviour, at all!) The Incarnate Word, in whom we trust for salvation, is 'altogether God and altogether Man, of a reasonable soul and human flesh subsisting' (*Athanasian Creed*).

And dwelt among us,—The verb *skēnoō* (here rendered 'dwell') is derived from *skēnē* ('tent'). In saying that the Incarnate Word 'pitched His tent' among men, John is thinking more especially of the wilderness tabernacle (*skēnē* in LXX), erected by the command of God that He might have His dwelling place in the midst of His people Israel. 'Let them make me a sanctuary', said God, 'that I may dwell among them' (Ex. 25:8). So, John implies, as God formerly manifested His abiding presence amid His people in the tent pitched by Moses, now in a fuller and more immediate sense He took up His dwelling on earth in the Word made flesh. The Incarnate Word is the ultimate reality to which the tabernacle pointed forward.

Not only so, but among Greek-speaking Jews in those days the Greek word *skēnē* was commonly associated with the Hebrew verb *shakan* ('to dwell') and its derivatives, such as the Biblical *mishkan* ('tabernacle') and the post-Biblical *shekinah*—a word which literally means 'residence' but was used more particularly

of the Divine Presence which inhabited the Mosaic tabernacle and Solomon's temple. When Moses finished the building of the tabernacle, 'the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle' (Ex. 40:34). Similarly, at the dedication of Solomon's temple, 'the cloud filled the house of the Lord . . . for the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord' (1 Kings 8:10 f.). Now, says John, when the Word became flesh, the Divine Presence was fully embodied in Him, for He is the true *shekinah* of God.

'And we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father,'—The glory of God which shone in the tabernacle and temple, veiled in the mysterious cloud, was but the foreglow of that excelling glory which shone in Christ, veiled indeed by His humanity from all save those who, like the Evangelist, had eyes to see. According to the Synoptic Gospels, His glory was fully revealed to Peter, James and John on the mount of transfiguration; but now John looks back and sees how the whole of Christ's life on earth, and especially His death on the cross, manifested the glory of God. 'We beheld His glory' might almost be the title of the Fourth Gospel; 'glory' is one of its chief keywords. And the glory which shone in Christ was glory such as a best-loved son receives from his father. The Greek adjective *monogenēs* (here translated 'only begotten') is one of the words used in LXX to render Heb. *yachid*. This Hebrew word, while primarily meaning 'only', had a further significance when used of a son or daughter which is expressed by another Greek word sometimes employed as its equivalent in LXX—*agapētos* ('beloved'). Thus Isaac, according to Gen. 22:2, was Abraham's 'only' son (his *yachid*), but in LXX the word used here is *agapētos*. Isaac was not in the literal sense Abraham's only begotten son, but he was his best-loved son, his 'unique' son, on whom he bestowed all that he had. How infinitely greater, then, is the glory bestowed by God upon His only Son, 'of the Father's love begotten, ere the worlds began to be'! Such, says John, was the glory that we beheld.

Full of grace and truth,—Which of the foregoing substantives is qualified by the adjective 'full'? The standard English versions make 'full' refer to 'the Word', and indicate this by putting the clause which immediately precedes 'full' within brackets, lest the reader should think that 'full' refers to 'glory'. The reason for this is that Gk. *plērēs* ('full') is nominative, agreeing with *logo*s

('Word') and not with the accusative *doxan* ('glory'). There is, however, sufficient evidence for believing that in Hellenistic Greek the form *plērēs* was used indeclinably, as capable of agreeing with a noun in any case. If that is so, 'full of grace and truth' may well be intended as a description of the glory that was seen in the Incarnate Word. This becomes still more probable when we recall the Old Testament background of these words.

Moses, in Ex. 33:18, asked a boon of the God of Israel: 'Shew me, I pray thee, thy glory.' The answer he received ran thus: 'I will make all my goodness pass before thee, and will proclaim the name of Jehovah before thee.' For the glory of God—the attribute which is surpassingly His—is His goodness. Accordingly, as we read in Ex. 34:5 f., 'Jehovah descended in the cloud, and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of Jehovah. And Jehovah passed by before him, and proclaimed, Jehovah, Jehovah, a God full of compassion and gracious, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy and truth.' These words describe the goodness which is the excelling glory of God. But when John uses the words 'full of grace and truth' in reference to the Word Incarnate, he is simply giving his own translation of the Hebrew words at the end of Ex. 34:6, which appear in our version as 'plenteous in mercy and truth.' The glory which John and his companions saw was the very glory of Jehovah which was revealed to Moses when the Divine Name was proclaimed in his ears. But now that glory was manifested on earth in a human life, 'full of grace and truth.'

v. 15.—*John beareth witness of Him, and crieth, saying, this was He of whom I said, He that cometh after me is become before me: For He was before me.*—This parenthetic verse constitutes the second prose passage dovetailed into the poetical Prologue,* the former such passage consisting of verses 6-8. In verses 6-8 we were told how John (the Baptist) was sent to bear witness to the true Light; now we are told some of the content of that witness. John was forerunner to the One who was to follow him; yet that Coming One had precedence over John, not simply because one whose way is being prepared is regularly superior in status to his precursor, but also because (paradoxically) the Coming One existed before John. 'He was

* In the April issue, p. 50, line 7, I defined the second prose passage, by error, as verses 15-16. It is restricted to verse 15 only.

first in regard of me,' John cried (such is the literal rendering of R.V. margin)—a remarkable phrase which, as Westcott says, 'expresses not only relative but (so to speak) absolute priority.' In His public ministry (as in His birth, according to Luke's narrative), He was later than John; but in His essential Being, He had eternal precedence over him (as over Abraham; cf. Ch. 8: 58); for He is the One 'whose going forth are from of old, from everlasting' (Micah 5: 2). This testimony of John is quoted here in detachment from its context, in which it reappears below in verse 30.

v. 16.—*For of His fulness we all received*,—The poem in praise of the Word is resumed; the 'fulness' from which John and his companions drew is that fulness of grace and truth which was the essence of the glory which they beheld. But when he says 'we all,' John probably includes his readers as well, and all those who share the blessing pronounced later in Ch. 20:29 upon those 'that have not seen, and yet have believed.' This plenitude of divine glory and goodness which resides in Christ is an ocean from which all His people may draw in abundance without ever diminishing its content. The thought is beautifully expressed in that stanza of Anne Ross Cousin's paraphrase of Samuel Rutherford's last words which begins:

O Christ! He is the fountain,
The deep, sweet well of love.

And grace for grace.—The preposition translated 'for' is *anti*, but no satisfactory sense can be got by pressing *anti* to mean 'instead of' here. What we draw from the well of divine fulness in Christ is grace upon grace, grace after grace; there is no limit or end to the supply which God has placed at our disposal in Him. John, like Paul, has proved the truth of the Lord's assurance: 'My grace is sufficient for thee' (2 Cor. 12:9).

v. 17.—*For the law was given by Moses; grace and truth came by Jesus Christ*,—Although God manifested Himself to Moses as 'plenteous in mercy and truth', the quality that chiefly characterizes the divine revelation through Moses is the quality of law. The grace and truth which constitute the divine glory, although included in the proclamation of the name of God to Moses, had to wait until the coming of Christ to be fully displayed among men. 'Grace and truth came by Jesus Christ': for the first time John gives a name to the Word made flesh, identifying Him with Jesus

of Nazareth, whom God anointed (*i.e.*, designated Messiah or Christ) with the Holy Spirit and power. John does not mean that the qualities of grace and truth were completely absent from the law, but that for the first time they were present in full reality in the person of Christ.

v. 18.—*No man hath seen God at any time*—The revelation made to Moses was but partial. When he asked that he might be shown the glory of God, he was told: 'Thou canst not see my face; for man shall not see me and live' (Ex. 33: 20). The consuming fire of divine majesty cannot be approached or viewed by sinful mortals. Moses was instructed to stand in a hollow in the rocky slope of Sinai while the glory of God passed by, and there, said God, I 'will cover thee with my hand until I have passed by: and I will take away mine hand, and thou shalt see my back: but my face shall not be seen' (Ex. 33: 22 f.). We should probably say, less anthropomorphically but equally metaphorically, that Moses 'saw, so to speak, the afterglow of the divine glory'. But what even Moses could not look upon has at last been displayed among men.

The only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, He hath declared him.—The perfect manifestation of God's glory was seen in Christ, 'the only begotten Son', or, as R.V. margin has it, following very many ancient and excellent authorities for the text, 'God only begotten' (*monogenēs theos* in place of *monogenēs huios*). He who begat is God, and He who was begotten is equally God. Clearly, then, there can be no revelation of God approaching in perfection that which has been given in the Only-begotten. For He is the One who has His being eternally in the Father's bosom, a phrase which expresses the mutual love and understanding of the Father and the Son, and at the same time the Son's dependence on the Father. Only He who so fully knows the Father can make Him fully known. As the aerolite from the Johannine heaven embedded in the Synoptic record puts it, 'neither doth any know the Father, save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son willeth to reveal him' (Matt. 11:27; cf. Luke 10:22). Or, as Paul expresses the same thought, 'it is God, that said, Light shall shine out of darkness, who shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ' (2 Cor. 4:6). And how that knowledge shone throughout Christ's earthly ministry, how He declared the unseen God to men, it is John's business to relate in the Gospel to which these eighteen verses form the preface.