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## THE GOVERNING IDEA OF THE FOURTH GOSPEL.

(JOHN I. 18; XIV. 8-9.)

OF these texts, the one sums up the meaning of the prologue, while the other expresses the moral of the history. The first states in warm and concrete terms ideas so majestic and impressive that thought has, in order that it may sanely reason concerning things so sublime, to disguise them in cold and abstract language; the second shows, by means of breathing and articulate men, how these ideas can, when suitably impersonated, satisfy the heart and solve its most obstinate questionings. The prologue, which the one text summarizes, may be described as a thesis; the history, which the other text condenses, may be termed its explication. Without the history the prologue would be but a speculative dream, singular neither in its metaphysics nor in its terminology; without the prologue the history would be but a fragment of biography with a beautiful personality for its centre, but incredible incidents for its circumference. The two points of view need to be combined before the Gospel will discourse to the soul a music it cannot choose but hear.

Yet to bring the two together is but a method of exegesis, which uses the prologue to construe the history, the history to illustrate the prologue. What is needed to complete the exposition is to test the joint result by an appeal to the soul it is intended to satisfy. We shall first, then, try to interpret the texts each through the other; and, secondly, we shall attempt to see what the heart and reason of man has to say to this interpretation.

## I.

1. The prologue is the most distinctive thing in John, which means that it has no parallel in the Synoptical Gospels. Mark, with what seems equal simplicity and courage, begins his history with the baptism of Jesus, saying nothing as to His birth and leaving His words and actions to tell their own tale. Matthew and Luke, writing for readers more curious and critical, seek to give coherence and credibility to their narratives by prefacing them with genealogies which describe His descent according to the flesh, and stories of His miraculous conception which describe His filiation according to the Spirit. The genealogy of Matthew begins with Abraham, that of Luke ends with Adam; the aim of the one Evangelist is to prove Jesus a Jew, sprung from the chosen people, the Child of the promise, born to fulfil the law and the prophets; the aim of the other Evangelist is to prove Him a man, the Child of humanity, able to speak to all because akin to all. The two aims are rather complementary than incompatible. Matthew's affirms that within our common manhood there is a special clanship; Luke's, that our nature comes from the race, though our peculiar character and customs are from the family and the tribe. The genealogies agree that the same law of descent requires, in the case of Jesus as in our own, that His ancestors, like ours, were not immaculate; and if sinful forefathers meant a guilty descendant, He could not have been innocent. They claimed for Him, whether as Son of Abraham or of Adam, no immunity from the common inheritance of feebleness and shame. As are the genealogies, such also are the birth-stories. Matthew's is, in all its accidents, incidents, local colouring and temporal conditions, Jewish, and prophecy is fulfilled in the very name He bears. He is called Jesus, "for He shall save His people from their sins." Luke's is ethnic, de-

scribes how Mary became "the handmaid of the Lord," and conceived "the Son of God," who came to establish an everlasting kingdom, to give glory to the highest God and create peace on earth. What is common to the two is the feeling that they are about to describe a person so compacted of Deity and humanity as to be inconceivable without their manifest concurrence as joint factors of His being. The genealogy shows His dependence upon man; His birth proves how He transcends him.

But John, though of all the Evangelists the man of the boldest and most speculative, if also the most tender and trustful, mind, feels as if he could not follow any of the synoptic methods. He could not, like Mark, write simply as a witness of events conceived to be supernatural, for was he not a disciple and a thinker as well as a witness? and how could he show us what he had seen or tell us what he had heard without giving us his own eyes to see with or his own mind to understand with? He could not, like Matthew and Luke, invoke the aid of a genealogy to authenticate the humanity of Jesus, for to him that humanity was too separate and singular to be explained through His ancestry; nor could he, like them, use a miraculous birth-story to define Christ's Deity and distinguish Him from man, for he conceived His transcendence as of a kind no sensuous process could symbolize or prove. The empirical questions as to the links and stages of His descent, or as to the mode of His conception and manner of His birth, which seemed so vital to the older Evangelists, had thus no interest and possibly no significance for John; but what was material to him was the person of the Redeemer, His essential nature as implying His essential relations, the ultimate cause of His appearance as defining the character and end of His work. "Find and determine these things," he seems to say, "and the whole truth as to God, nature, man and

history is found and determined." The cause is a sufficient reason for all the effects that follow from it. God as the sovereign source of all things is a transcendental but not a miraculous Being. If we conceive Him aright, we shall also conceive the Christ who is His Word; for to conceive either as an isolated or unordered miracle is to dwell in a universe that knows no God and to possess a nature that knows nothing of mind and spirit.

2. The purpose then of the prologue, looked at from below, is to bind man and nature to Christ and Christ to God; or, looked at from above, it is so to conceive God as to make creation and providence, the incarnation and redemption, spring from the spontaneous evolution of the Godhead. In other words, John would not disconnect time from eternity, but would make time eternal; he would not isolate man from God, but would so interpret Christ through God as to make Him the symbol and means of God's constant and essential indwelling in man. The history he is about to write is brief, a mere fraction cut out of a fleeting moment, but he seeks to bind this fugitive fraction of an instant man can neither seize nor detain to the eternity man can neither measure nor occupy. Infinity at once magnifies and transfigures the history it thus holds and sustains. Once in the margin of the Bible, opposite its opening verse, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth," stood the date "4004 B.C." The short life thus assigned to the earth was reflected in the idea of its insignificance; it was but a single continent whose mountains were like huge links in the chain that held its scattered parts together, whose valleys were the deep furrows on its ancient face, wetted and washed by rains, fretted and worn by tempests, seared by fires within, scorched by the sun without, floating upon the mysterious and pathless seas which did not rise and drown the world though the rivers poured without ceasing floods of water into their bosom.

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In the heavens which formed its roof, the radiant sun rose daily, issued from the east like a bridegroom from his chamber, strode towards the west with the majesty of a god, and died amid incomparable glories of coloured and pillared clouds ; while the pale-faced moon shed madness from her beams as she slowly climbed the sky, and in the darkness the stars came out like lamps to light men to bed. But when geology had deciphered the hieroglyphs which the hand of man had not graven on the rocks, and read of a creation which ran through periods of time too illimitable for thought to define ; when astronomy had explored the azure roof above us, and found it to be space without bounds within which circled and shone systems and suns innumerable, then man, studying the little point he knew as the mirror and the epitome of the infinite whole he did not know, awoke to the mystery of being, and looked at it with other and clearer eyes. He did not feel as if the immensity and the eternity which he had just discovered had dwarfed into insignificance the minute house he inhabited ; on the contrary, his home grew but the richer and the more significant, for was it not an epitome of the whole, and did it not hold within it secrets the imagination might represent but the eye could not discern ? And this vision of a creation without beginning did not come alone to enhance the glory of the Creator, for the discoveries that revealed the majestic magnitude of the universe disclosed also the complexity yet simple perfection of all its parts. As the creative process lengthened behind us till time was lost in eternity, and as the sphere of the created widened around us till place expanded into immensity, so below us, in the leaf or the insect, the creative achievement was seen to be as careful and as perfect as in the man. Without the fixed point of earth the immensity of the universe and the perfection of its minutest parts could not have been known ; without the ideas of the infinite and the everlasting the meaning of earth could

never have been interpreted or its mystery revealed. In like manner, John in his prologue interprets all thing through God, and sees all in Him; he finds, in the terms Logos and Son, the ideas which turn Him from mere abstract existence into a Being concrete and living. He discovers in these the truths that breathe grandeur into his conception of Christ, and that through Him confer dignity on nature and man, as well as reality on redemption. And therefore we can say: the history of Jesus, read through this prologue, transfigures man and fills his actual history and possible destiny with the mind and life and majesty of God.

3. But besides the general ideas of the prologue, the first text emphasizes certain special ideas (i.) as to God, (ii.) as to the Son of God, and (iii.) as to His function in the scheme of things.

(i.) "No man hath seen God at any time." The inability to see God is absolute; the finite can perceive only the finite; the perfect vision of the Infinite is what man, whether embodied or disembodied, can never attain. What is seen occurs at a given moment, occupies a given space, stands before the eye defined, outlined, shaped, beset by all the conditions of finitude. The Infinite can alone behold the Infinite, the mind that does not fill immensity and has not lived from eternity is without the eye that can see the Unbounded, the thought that can perceive the Eternal. But not to see and not to know are things not simply distinct, but dissimilar. We may know all the better that we do not see. John, for example, repeats this aphorism in his first Epistle,<sup>1</sup> yet with a most significant difference. It occurs in the midst of a most rapturous discussion on love: love is absolute, for it constitutes the essence of God;<sup>2</sup> love is sovereign, for it determined His greatest and most characteristic act, the mission of His Son;<sup>3</sup> love is creative, for God's love is the cause of all the love in us;<sup>4</sup> love is

<sup>1</sup> iv. 12.<sup>2</sup> 8.<sup>3</sup> 9-10<sup>4</sup> 16

universal, for, since God loved us, "we ought to love one another";<sup>1</sup> love is reciprocal, for "we love Him because He first loved us";<sup>2</sup> love is the evidence of His presence and the energy of His Spirit, for "if we love one another, God abideth in us and His love is perfected in us."<sup>3</sup> The argument at every point is but an expansion of the principle from which it started: "every one that loveth is begotten of God, and knoweth God";<sup>4</sup> and the clause, "No man hath seen God at any time," is introduced to contrast outward vision, which is not knowledge, with the inner experience or affection, which is. The vision may deceive in a thousand ways, but love is truth, and cannot bear to deceive or be deceived. We may for years pass a man on the street, know his gait, his figure, his stature, his complexion, his voice, all that constitutes his outer form and being, and yet not know the man. We may be able to describe or caricature him to an acquaintance without revealing his identity to a friend. To know him we must find the way into the house where lives the woman he loves, who loves him, and the children he and she love together. We must watch him there, not as he is made up to meet the eyes of men in the street, at business, or on the exchange, but as he is, where the nature that is stronger than will can have its way, in his moods of exultation or in his hours of shame, when he rejoices in his strength or moans in his weakness, laughs in his joy or cries in his sorrow, speaks in his meanness or boasts in his pride. Sense may play upon us many a fantastic trick, but experience has the awful power of forcing us to face reality, and in the very process of getting to know to make ourselves known. So we are grateful that "no man hath seen God at any time," for a visible were no God but a spectre of man's own making; but where sight is impossible knowledge may be real, for he who loveth knoweth the God who is love.

<sup>1</sup> 11.<sup>2</sup> 19.<sup>3</sup> 12.<sup>4</sup> 7.



(ii.) "The only begotten Son who is in the bosom of the Father." Now there are in this clause one or two notable things. There is a strict correlation between the terms "Son" and "Father." Where the one is the other must be; where either is not neither can be. If the Sonship is not essential to Deity, there can be no essential Fatherhood. The terms then signify that God is, if we may so speak, not an abstract Simplicity, but a concrete Society; His eternal perfection is not an inaccessible solitude, but a beatitude which must be social in order to be. But besides their correlative necessity, the terms bring out the meaning of the phrase "God is love"; without them there could be no argument, but with this phrase as its premiss the conclusion inevitably follows. For if God were an eternal Solitary He could not be essential love. An object is as necessary to love as a subject; a person to be loved as a person to love. To say, then, "God is love," is to say He is social; for without personal distinctions in the Godhead, how could love have a realm for its being, and a field for its exercise? And this truth receives in the prologue characteristic, if unconscious, expression. The Johannean ideas associated with the Logos are two, "Life" and "Light": "in Him was life," and therefore He created; and, once the creation had happened, the "Life" became "the Light of men." But the moment the terms "only Begotten" appear, two other Johannean ideas, which in importance far transcend the two former, at once emerge, "Grace and Truth." For these the concrete and personal name is "Son": "Grace and Truth came by Jesus Christ."<sup>1</sup> What this means is obvious: if we think of God as Father we think of Him through the Son, and these terms in correlation signify communicated and reciprocated love. The phrases therefore are interchangeable, and express the same fundamental ideas. When in the Gospel John says "the

<sup>1</sup> i. 17.

only begotten Son which is in the bosom of the Father," and in his first Epistle, "God is love," he simply says the same thing.

(iii.) "He hath declared *Him*." This clause, which brings the other two together, follows from both and completes both. "No man hath seen God at any time," but where sight has failed love has succeeded. "The only begotten Son who is in the bosom of the Father," who therefore knew God as God, from within and by experience, and not merely from without and by vision—"He hath declared *Him*." And this assumes, and indeed affirms, a philosophical principle of primary importance. Men argue as if our ignorance of God was solely a matter of our own incompetence, the insufficiency of human faculty, or of man's inability to reach and to know God. But the argument to be valid must mean much more than this, viz., that God suffers from a deeper incapability than man, for if man cannot know Him it must be because He is unable to make Himself known. Human impotence is here, but the negative pole of a current whose positive is the want of power or of will in Deity. If men cannot know Him, it follows that He cannot speak or show Himself to man. Now, John's argument inverts this principle. Men cannot see God, therefore God must declare Himself; whatever happens He will not leave us in ignorance, with eyes searching for a light they cannot find. He who made the light shine in the darkness will cause a higher and purer light to shine in our hearts. And the function of the Son is to be the symbol of the love which cannot be spoken, yet which will not be silent. Nature may be the visible garment of Deity, yet we may see and touch the robe He wears without seeing and touching Himself. But what Nature could not perform the Son has accomplished; He has spoken of the Father as one who has lived in His bosom, who knows God as God knows Himself, and who can therefore enable man to look at his Maker and His

ways with the eye and experience of Deity. To do this the Son came, the only-Begotten who is in the bosom of the Father. He hath made visible and vocal the God no man can see.

## II.

But now let us pass to the second text, which, by a series of distinct and personified incidents, brings out the meaning of the first. A person is to John no mere moving figure, but an embodied idea. The biography he writes is the history of the universe in miniature. In it light struggles with darkness, and now the darkness is hostile to the light, and now men who love the light walk in darkness and struggle to escape out of its hands. The incident we are about to study is all the more real that it is a parable of the soul perplexed by the half-withdrawn darkness and groping towards the true light.

1. A calm and comforting hour has come to Jesus and His disciples. It stands just after the storms of the later ministry and just before the agony and the horror of Gethsemane; its beneficent sunshine bathes His soul, and its gracious calm breathes serenity into their spirit. He and they are like travellers who have climbed a lofty mountain with the dense mist so clinging to its steep sides as to impede their progress, hide their path, and create the appalling fear of being lost, or the horror lest a step onward should be an irrevocable step to destruction. But at last and suddenly they have struggled on to the summit and into the sunshine, whence they could watch the lean and ragged fingers of the mist begin to relax their hold on shoulder and peak, making the dark gorges visible; and as the cloud draws out of the valleys and lifts from the plains they could see the vine-clad slopes, the white homesteads, the distant villages and towns lying fair and beautiful in the sunlight. Nor did the scene below alone appeal to the eye; above

the great mountains raised into the silent but glorious heaven their uncapped heads crowned with perennial snow, made all the more radiant by the eternal azure which seemed to embosom them, and the purple hues which played upon their brows. But as the Master and the disciples stood there, wearied by their toil, yet exhilarated by the scene and the sunshine, new clouds began to gather, thunders to mutter, the sound of a coming tempest filled the air, and a darkness blacker than night descended to blot out the radiant day. Yet between the natural scene and the spiritual experience there is this difference: here the Master alone feels the shadow of the approaching passion, and the one thing the disciples know is the joy of the rest and the sunlight.

2. At this hour and in these men, then, humanity surrounds Jesus; the twelve are an epitome of man, yet of man with eyes the Lord has opened. Their eyes are so unaccustomed to the light, that distance they cannot measure or proportion judge, and they see men as trees walking. New instincts and hopes mingle in their imaginations with ancient faiths and facts, and they feel themselves to be men of bewildered and troubled minds. He, on the other hand, has the lucid soul from which nothing is hid. He knows their perplexity and He foresees His own passion; yet though, to foresee is to forefeel, He forgets His own sorrow in the desire to strengthen them against theirs. And this He does by interpreting and so resolving the perplexities they feel but cannot explain. "Let not your heart be troubled," He begins. There is, indeed, trouble enough in life; some real, more made, a creation of art rather than of Nature and Providence; but, more curious than the making of trouble, is the comfort many find in foretelling it. There are people who cannot see a child at play, or a youth strenuous in the pursuit of some high ideal, or a bride standing in winsome grace beside her bridegroom, or a man struggling

under some great enterprise which promises to increase human happiness, without saying, "Ah, wait awhile; this fair hour of promise and of hope will soon pass, and disillusion, disappointment, sorrow, will inevitably come. In the very moment of joy it is well to have the heart troubled with the anticipation of evil." But that is only the language of embittered impotence, of a spirit that cannot bear another's happiness because it has never deserved or earned its own. The true note of magnanimity is not to pour hopeless and imbecile melancholy upon a glad heart, but to shed sunshine and hope upon the hearts that sit fearful in the darkness. Here is Jesus, feeling, all unknown to His disciples, the shadow of the Cross and the burden of the world's sin; and He does not seek to sadden them by the foreknowledge of His passion, but rather to increase their joy that they may be the better able to bear the coming loneliness and desolation: "Let not your heart be troubled; ye believe in God." The man who believes in God believes in a universe the devil has not made and does not rule. If beneficent goodness governs, what permanent harm can come to the good? If man looks to his soul's state God will look to its happiness. "Believe also in Me." That was to be a harder task and a higher duty. Belief was easy while He still lived, but would be difficult when they saw Him die upon the Cross, forsaken of God, abhorred of man. Yet how, apart from their belief, could faith in Him continue? And so He binds together faith in the God who could not be seen and faith in Himself who, though still visible, was so soon to be visible no more. The union was too natural to be dissoluble. If God alone is holy, could the holy Jesus owe His existence to any other Being? If God be absolutely just, could He forsake the righteous and perfect man simply because evil men had hated Him and had by craft compassed His death? If He had been so forsaken faith in God would have perished of the act. "In My Father's

house are many mansions." Where God is heaven is, and His home is the universe. But heaven is a place of "many mansions," where every soul will find a house suitable to its capacity, its stage of culture, or whatever we may term the nature or quality which demands a special and adapted environment. "I go to prepare a place for you." He has a function in eternity as well as in time; there as here He knows every man, and for each He makes ready a place that shall be a home indeed.

3. "And whither I go, ye know the way." Here the significant dialogue begins; man is by John so impersonated in the disciples that each person is a type, represents a distinct species of the genus man. Thomas is man prosaic, sensuous, positive as to the reality of things seen, very doubtful as to the existence or truth of the unseen. He is often described as the "unbelieving Thomas," but he would be better named the "misbelieving." Sceptics are of two classes, those who so believe their reason that they will not trust their senses, and those who so trust their senses that they will not believe their reason. The former are intellectually subtle, and argue themselves into disbelief not only of the senses, but of the processes and products of the very reason which they must trust to be rational; the latter are intellectually simple, and argue themselves into disbelief of the reason because its judgments and inferences contradict the testimony of the senses or impugn their veracity. To the one class the philosophical sceptics belong, the men who doubt because they think and whose doubt, as it is the product of reason, only reason can overcome; the other class comprehends the slaves of habit, the children of custom and convention, who walk by sight, speak of seeing as believing, and who are so credulous as to trust only what the hands have handled and the fingers have touched. Now it is to this class that Thomas belongs, an honest man, strong and courageous where he can see

and feel, resolved not to go one step farther than his senses show him to be safe, yet ready to trust them whatever they may say or wherever they may lead. So when Jesus proposes to go to the dead Lazarus, "to the intent ye may believe," Thomas, with the courage of a man who could follow and the obstinacy of a man who could not believe what his senses did not certify, said, "Let us also go that we may die with Him."<sup>1</sup> And so, too, when he heard the other disciples discoursing with ecstasy on the appearances of the risen Lord he dourly said, "Except I shall see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe."<sup>2</sup> The man wanted to believe, but he could not, his conscience would not allow him till his senses were satisfied. So with characteristic bluntness and no less characteristic blindness where things of the Spirit were at issue, he said, "Lord, we know not whither Thou goest; how know we the way?" Jesus answers in a fashion that must have bewildered Thomas still more: "I am the way, the truth, and the life," i.e. the path that conducts to the goal, the light that illumines the path, and the goal to which it conducts. In other words, He is all in all, everywhere and for every one sufficient, as solitary and pre-eminent in His person and functions as is the Deity. And then, in the familiar Johannean method translating the abstract into the concrete, He adds: "No one cometh unto the Father but by Me: he who has known Me has known Him; in Me He has become visible."

4. And now while Thomas is silently pondering the mysterious answer he has received, the change in the mode of speech calls up another interlocutor. Philip is a man little known, but the little we do know is suggestive. He is neither sent by the Baptist nor brought by another, but "found" by Jesus Himself.<sup>3</sup> They were attracted to each

<sup>1</sup> John xi. 16.

<sup>2</sup> John xx. 25.

<sup>3</sup> John i. 43.

other by affinities of spirit. And two things indicate the kind of man he was: (*a*) his special friend, the man he could claim as convert and companion, was Nathanael, the guileless Israelite,<sup>1</sup> and (*β*) the Greeks who wanted to see Jesus come first to Philip, and were brought to the Master by him.<sup>2</sup> He was evidently a meditative man, drawn by the gentleness of God giving light by seeking it, touched by the quest of men for the humanities of Deity. So the reference to the Father appealed to his deepest need and woke the desire that most consumed him. "Lord! shew us the Father, and it sufficeth us." Jesus starts like one smitten with sudden pain, though it is pain that has a heart of pleasure, and asks: "Have I been so long time with you, and dost thou not know Me, Philip?" Did you ever try to teach men, and had you ever a loved pupil of high promise over whom you have spent brooding nights and toilsome days in the hope that all his promise might yet be realized? And have you never found in some ecstatic moment of thought and discussion this same pupil put a question which showed that he had never seen into the heart of your teaching, or even so much as guessed that it had a heart? You may then be inclined to blame your own blundering or your fatal inability to be articulate where the deepest beliefs are concerned, and to forget that what you have won by agony of thought and experience cannot be understood by those who have never been cradled by suffering into thought. If that has been your experience, then you will be able to understand the mood and mind of Jesus, His pain at having a disciple who had not learned, His joy at discovering the disciple to be still a learner whose ignorance was richer than any knowledge. For in Philip Jesus heard the voice of collective man confess his deepest need, "Shew us the Father"; heard, too, men speak that word of infinite promise, "and it sufficeth us." The fact that "no man

<sup>1</sup> John i. 45-47.

<sup>2</sup> xii. 20-22.



hath seen God at any time," and that he must yet see Him or die, begets the prayer, "Lord, shew us the Father"; and the answer, which assures peace, is, "He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father." "The only begotten, who is in the bosom of the Father, He hath interpreted the invisible God." Jesus as the revelation of the God who cannot be seen, is the governing idea of John's Gospel; and the man who sees Him is satisfied. He loves, and therefore he knows the God who is love.

A. M. FAIRBAIRN.

*SHALL WE HEAR EVIDENCE OR NOT?*

THE work and personality of one who has influenced human history so profoundly as St. Paul must be studied afresh by every age. The character which revolutionizes one age is not fully comprehended by that age, for it is too immense in its sweep. It transcends the limits of time and speaks to all ages. The words of Paul will be differently understood in different ages, for every age finds that they respond to its peculiar questions. Hence every age must write afresh for itself—one might almost say, every man must write for himself—the life of St. Paul; and the words in which he strove to make his thoughts comprehensible to the raw converts, who needed to be trained in power of thinking as well as in the elementary principles of morality and conduct, must be rendered into the form which will be more easily understood in present circumstances. The attempts to do this must always be imperfect and inadequate, and yet they may make it easier to penetrate to the heart which beats in all his writings. But the aim of the historian should always be to induce the reader to study for himself the writings and work of St. Paul.

In venturing to lay before the readers a study of that