The Long and the Short of John’s Prologue: Does It End at 1:18 or 1:14?

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I. Introduction

Brooke Foss Westcott rightly admitted the lack of evidence for the prologue ending at 1:18: “Though the narrative of St. John’s Gospel is not marked off by any very distinct line from the introductory verses, it has been generally acknowledged that 1.1–18 forms an introduction to the whole work.”¹ Two main options exist for the length of John’s prologue: John 1:1-18, the view held by almost everyone or John 1:1-14, a position championed by only a few.

The end of the prologue also marks the start of John’s narrative. That is, if the prologue were to close at 1:18, narration would begin at 1:19. Or, if the prologue is 1:1-14, 1:15 starts the narrative. This article will consider issues relating both to where the prologue ends and to where the narrative begins.

Points A–B (below) draw heavily upon writings by Zane Hodges, but point C relates to my own dissertation.² Point C focuses upon where the prologue ends (at 1:14, not at 1:18); Points B–C establish that John’s narrative begins at 1:15 (not at 1:19):

A. John 1:1 and 14 bookend the prologue: 1:1-14,
B. What did John the Baptist say (1:15 or 1:15-18)?
C. When did he say it (before or after Jesus was tempted)?

II. John 1:1 and 14 Bookend the Prologue: 1:1-14

John 1:1 and 14 are the only places in the Fourth Gospel that call Jesus the Word.³ Zane Hodges observes that (like bookends) these verses form an important inclusio:

It is fully appropriate that a book about eternal life should begin by introducing us to an eternal Person. That person is introduced to us as the Word. He is designated as the Word three times in John 1:1 and once in 1:14 and nowhere else in the book. The appearance of this title in the opening and closing statements of the Prologue serves to mark off 1:1-14 as a unit. The Prologue is a self-contained preamble to the entire Gospel.⁴

Hodges says more about the prologue in his introductory remarks to 1:15-51:

The Prologue has brought the reader to the incarnation of the Eternal Word. The reader is now to be introduced to the historical human Person that the Word has become. The Fourth Gospel does not ask its readers to believe in the “name” of Someone called the Word. That title is dropped after the Prologue ends.⁵

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² One aspect of my dissertation involved determining whether passages in two Gospels were true parallels or were distinct (though similar) events.
³ Contrary to popular opinion, 1 John 1:1 does not use word as a title for Jesus Christ. Zane C. Hodges, The Epistles of John: Walking in the Light of God’s Love (Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 1999), 48-49, argues correctly that word in 1 John 1:1 should not be capitalized. The proof that the phrase word of life means message about life is that 1:2 (a parenthetic verse) focuses on life, not on word. Thus, apart from John 1:1 and 14, the only other passage in John’s writings that uses Word as a title for Jesus is Rev 19:13.
⁴ Zane C. Hodges, Faith in His Name: Listening to the Gospel of John (Corinth, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2015), 17. Emphasis in original.
⁵ Hodges, Faith in His Name, 21.
Not only do the uses of the Word in 1:1 and 14 form an inclusio, but John’s Gospel never uses that title again. The author set off these verses as his prologue. When Westcott claims, “the narrative of St. John’s Gospel is not marked off by any very distinct line from the introductory verses,” he misses the inclusio, an important clue. So has most of the scholarly community, when they (usually with no argumentation) assume that the prologue ends at 1:18.

What Did John the Baptist Say (1:15 or 1:15-18)?

A side-by-side presentation differentiates the two views. The Faithful Majority Translation (FMT) by John H. Niemelä appears in both renderings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1:1-18 as the Prologue</th>
<th>1:1-14 as the Prologue</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>John the Baptist Said 1:15</strong></td>
<td><strong>John the Baptist Said 1:15-18</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 John testified about Him and cried out, saying, “This was the One about whom I said, ‘The One coming after me outranks me, because He was before me.’”*</td>
<td>15 John testified about Him and cried out, saying, “This was the One about whom I said, ‘The One coming after me outranks me, because He was before me.’”* 16 And from His fullness we have all received, even grace for grace. 17 For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth had come about through Jesus Christ. 18 No one has ever seen God. The One and Only Son, who is at the Father’s side—He has explained Him.”*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>John the Apostle Supplied 1:16-18 (No quotation marks)</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>16 And from His fullness we have all received, even grace for grace. 17 For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth had come about through Jesus Christ. 18 No one has ever seen God. The One and Only Son, who is at the Father’s side—He has explained Him.”*</td>
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</table>

The abrupt break between 1:15 and 16a creates a major difficulty with the view on the left. Nothing signals a switch between John the Baptist (1:15) and the apostle in 1:16-18. Around A.D. 230 Origen argued that attributing 1:15 to the Baptist and 1:16-18 to the apostle creates an unnatural break:

Now, we must show this exposition to be a forced one, and one which does violence to the context; it is rather a strong proceeding to suppose the speech of the Baptist to be so suddenly and, as it were, inopportunistely interrupted by that of the disciple, and it is quite apparent to any one who can judge, in whatever small degree, of a context, that the speech goes on continuously after the words, “This is He of whom I spoke, He that comes after me exists before me, for He was before me.”

John A. T. Robinson senses the awkwardness of such a break, calling it “the most rude interruption in the Prologue.” Raymond Brown spoke of this break “awkwardly breaking up verses 14 and 16.” Zane Hodges agrees with these assessments.

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6 Westcott, John, 2.
7 All Scripture translations (unless otherwise noted) are by the author. He has a registered copyright of his Faithful Majority Translation of the Gospel of John. That translation will appear in his in-process commentary on John’s Gospel. He also plans to produce a translation of the NT, based on the Majority Text.
8 Asterisks mark quotation-mark differences between the two views.
9 Origen, Commentary on John, 6.3.
Unfortunately, most English translations that utilize quotation marks\textsuperscript{13} err here. The following versions (\textit{English Standard Version}, \textit{Holman Christian Standard Bible}, \textit{New American Bible}, \textit{New American Standard Bible}, \textit{New International Version}, \textit{New Jerusalem Bible}, \textit{New King James Version}, \textit{New Revised Standard Version}, \textit{Revised Standard Version}, \textit{Young’s Literal Translation}, among others) imagine that John the Baptist only spoke 1:15, not 1:15-18. The vast majority of translations either have no quotation marks\textsuperscript{14} or misplace them in this passage. The author has only found one published translation that perceives John the Baptist as the speaker of 1:15-18. That is Art Farstad’s Logos 21 Version in the \textit{Living Water}.\textsuperscript{15}

Hodges gently suggests why so many deny that John the Baptist spoke 1:16-18—they downplay the role of God supernaturally revealing truth to the Baptist: “In the absence of compelling exegetical considerations, the content of verses 16–18 can easily be ascribed to John the Baptist if it is recognized that he genuinely possessed the faculty of a prophet.”\textsuperscript{16} [emphasis mine.] Indeed, John speaks of having received revelation from God (John 1:33: “He who sent me to baptize in water— He told me, ‘Upon whomever you see the Spirit coming down and remaining on Him— this is He who baptizes by the Holy Spirit.’”). Liberals attribute 1:16-18 to John the apostle late in the first century, because they cannot imagine the Baptist knowing such great Christological truths even before Jesus’ public ministry began.

The simplest reading of John 1:15-18 is that John the Baptist was the only speaker.

\textbf{IV. When Did John the Baptist Say 1:15-18 (before or after Jesus’ Temptation)?}


John 1:33 mentions baptism (of Israelites), but says nothing about John baptizing Jesus. Aland has done a great disservice by treating John 1:29-34 as the day that Jesus was baptized. The reader may ask, “How can one disprove this being the day of Jesus’ baptism?”

The answer is simple, but requires looking at both Mark and at John. Specifically, what do these two Gospels say about Jesus’ early itinerary?

\textbf{Jesus’ early itinerary in Mark’s Gospel.} Mark 1:9-11 is when John baptized Jesus; 1:12-13 is the temptation. Note the latter passage:

\begin{quote}
12 And immediately \textit[euthus] the Spirit expelled Him into the wilderness. 13 And He was there in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan, and He was with the wild beasts; and the angels were ministering to Him.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{13} Many translations (e.g., the King James Version) do not use quotation marks at all. Such translations take no stand on who said 1:16-18. Normally, it is preferable for a translation to give readers guidance. However, in this case no guidance is better than the misplaced quotation marks that are so common in modern translations.


\textsuperscript{15} Arthur L. Farstad, trans., Logos 21 Version in the \textit{Living Water} (Glide, OR: Living Water Project, 1996)

\textsuperscript{16} Hodges, “Grace,” 36.

\textsuperscript{17} // means is parallel to.

\textsuperscript{18} Kurt Aland, ed. \textit{Synopsis of the Four Gospels: Greek-English Edition of the “Synopsis Quattuor Evangeliorum,”} 15th ed. (Stuttgart, GER: German Bible Society, 2013), §18 (pages 16-17). Aland uses the same font for all four accounts, so he regards John 1:29-34 as a full parallel to the synoptic baptism accounts.
Mark says that immediately after His baptism, the Spirit expelled Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted. Immediately means immediately, not several days later. What does John’s Gospel reveal about this sequence of events.

**Jesus’ Early Itinerary in John’s Gospel.** John records a sequence of days in John 1:19–2:1. The opening words of 1:29, 35, 43; and 2:1 signal this, as the chart demonstrates:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day 1</th>
<th>Day 2</th>
<th>Day 3</th>
<th>Day 4</th>
<th>Day 5</th>
<th>Day 6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1:19-28</td>
<td>1:29-34</td>
<td>1:35-42&lt;sup&gt;19&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>1:43-51</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>2:1&lt;sup&gt;20&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On the next day</td>
<td>On the next day</td>
<td>On the next day</td>
<td>On the third day</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The Fourth Gospel says that Jesus stayed a few days in John the Baptist’s vicinity. On two sequential days (1:29 and 36) John called Jesus the Lamb of God. Then Jesus went to Galilee. That time is distinct from when He went to the wilderness to be tempted.

**Reconciling Mark and John.** Only one way exists to reconcile Jesus going immediately to the temptation after His baptism (Mark 1:12) with John 1–2 and its sequence of days. That solution places the temptation before John calling Jesus the Lamb of God (1:29).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Matt</th>
<th>Mark</th>
<th>Luke</th>
<th>John</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>John the Baptist baptized Jesus</td>
<td>3:13-17</td>
<td>1:9-11</td>
<td>3:21-22</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Temptation (immediately after the baptism)</td>
<td>4:1-11</td>
<td>1:12-13</td>
<td>4:1-13</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Baptist said the HS came upon JC at His baptism</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1:15-18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jesus returned to John the Baptist</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1:29-34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A sequence of days ending with the Cana wedding</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1:35-2:1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If the fourth Gospel had mentioned Jesus’ baptism and temptation (it did not), those events would have preceded John 1:15. Lo and behold, John 1:15 is the first verse in John’s narrative; the prologue ends at 1:14.

**Supporting Evidence from John’s Gospel.** John the Baptist’s words in John 1:15 support the preceding chart’s timeline:

John testified about Him and cried out, saying, “This was [imperfect tense] the One about whom I said [aorist tense], ‘The One coming after me outranks me, because He was before me.’”

The Baptist did not say, “This IS the One about whom I AM SAYING…” Rather, he emphatically told his hearers, “This WAS the One about whom I SAID…” He was reflecting upon that he had said previously. That is, he refers to what he had said during the month and a half since baptizing Jesus.

Furthermore, in John 1:33, John the Baptist said:

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<sup>19</sup> Rainer Riesner, “Bethany beyond the Jordan (John 1:28) Topography, Theology and History in the Fourth Gospel,” *TynBul* 38 (1987): 45, argues that 1:39 might imply an additional day, making the passage a seven-day sequence (one full week).

<sup>20</sup> Two options exist for the phrase “on the third day:” Option 1. It could mean Tuesday, under the notion that Sunday is the first day, Monday is the second, Tuesday is the third, etc. Option 2. It could be the third day after the one discussed in 1:43-51.

Reisner, “Bethany,” 46-47, argues that this refers to the third day after the day mentioned in 1:43, not to a Tuesday. That is a context-based answer, since 1:29, 35, and 43 each say, “on the next day.” Contextually, “on the third day” in John 2:1 means “on the day after the next day.”
Yet I did not recognize Him [a month and a half ago, when I baptized Him], but— He who sent me to baptize in water— He told me, “Upon whomever you see the Spirit coming down and remaining on Him— this is He who baptizes by the Holy Spirit.”

John did not say that he did not recognize Jesus one day earlier [when he first called Jesus the Lamb of God; 1:29]. The time when God confirmed to John that Jesus is the Christ by the Holy Spirit descending as a dove was at His baptism (Matt 3:16; Mark 1:10; Luke 3:22).

**How Does This Chronology Account for John the Baptist’s Elevated Christology in 1:16-18?**

John the Baptist has had a month and a half to reflect upon the Messiah since the baptism. Furthermore, he had ample opportunity to receive clarification about Jesus. How so?

1. Jesus likely had a longer conversation with John at His baptism than the Synoptics record,
2. God may have given John further revelation during Jesus’ forty-day temptation.

An earlier citation from Zane Hodges is now pertinent: “In the absence of compelling exegetical considerations, the content of verses 16–18 can easily be ascribed to John the Baptist *if it is recognized that he genuinely possessed the faculty of a prophet.*”[^21] [emphasis mine.] Those with a high view of Scripture should rejoice that God had given John the wonderful truths he proclaimed in 1:15-18—before Jesus began His public ministry.

**Conclusion**

Zane Hodges argues persuasively that the references to Jesus as the Word (John 1:1, 14) create an inclusio. Thus, John signals where his prologue ends, despite Westcott imagining it to be unclear.

Perceiving John the Baptist as the sole speaker in 1:15-18 lets the text flow smoothly. No abrupt break occurs between 1:15 and 16. The writer gives no indication that someone other than John the Baptist spoke 1:16-18. Unfortunately, many English translations mistakenly mispunctuate 1:15-18, leaving readers with the impression that a break might actually exist between 1:15 and 16. They hide John the Baptist’s uninterrupted commentary concerning the Messiah. Readers have no idea that they have left the prologue and are at the start of the narrative.

Contrasting John 1–2’s seven-day sequence of events with Mark 1:12’s “immediately,” verifies that John the Baptist called Jesus the Lamb of God a month and a half after baptizing Him. John 1 records Jesus making a return visit to John the Baptist.

Thus, the long and short of John’s prologue is quite simple. The prologue covers 1:1-14. John’s narrative begins at 1:15. Most of the scholarly world is confused, because it fails to observe the text.