

## **THE CONCEPT OF LIGHT IN THE FOURTH GOSPEL AND ITS APPLICABILITY TO THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH TODAY**

### **Abstract**

*The paper is an examination of the concept of light from the Fourth Gospel's perspective. With historical credence, light is examined from its origin down to its particular usage in the Fourth Gospel. Using library research methodology, the paper underscores the importance of light to God; the Old Testament understanding of light and the New Testament usage of same concept with particular emphasis on the Gospel of John. The paper discovers that Jesus is presented as the light of the world in the Fourth Gospel and His followers are urged to let their light shine so that men can see and give glory to God. This light which lights the world is presented as life and the creator of all things. Therefore, Christians are admonished to pattern their lives after Jesus' who is the ultimate light and in Him there is no darkness.*

**Key Words:** Light, Gospel, Jesus, God, John.

### **Introduction**

The Greek word φῶς or φωτός (*phōs or phōtos*) which is translated as light, radiance; fire or lamp occurs 73 times in the New Testament, 15 of which is in the Synoptic Gospels and 23 in the Gospel of John (Balz & Schneider, 1993:447). This word has its usage in the New Testament either in the literal sense or in the figurative sense. However, a great deal of the usage is in the figurative sense. Therefore, this paper is an attempt to examine the concept of φῶς (*phōs*) as used by Jesus in the Gospel according to John bearing in mind its theological meaning cum practical applicability to the contemporary Christian church.

### **Origin of Light**

The origin of light is traceable back to creation. The creation of light was the initial step in the creation of life. In Genesis 1:3 we read of the first word of God “Let there be light.” This was spoken after God’s creative Spirit ‘moved’ upon the primary material out of which He created the heavens and the earth, and which lay, until the utterance of that word, in the chaos of darkness and desolation. The ultimate focusing of light on the 4<sup>th</sup> day of creation (Gen. 1:14) in suns, stars, and moon brought the initial creative process of all organic life. Therefore, the origin of light finds its explanation in the purpose and very nature of God whom John defines as not only the Author of light but, in all – inclusive sense, as light itself (1 Jn. 1:5) (Biblestudytools.com, accessed 12/04/2017).

### **Light in the Old Testament**

The concept of light and darkness makes up one of the conspicuous dualisms that are found in the Gospel of John. The source of such dualism in John is not Gnosticism or Greek philosophy, but the concept of light and darkness in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament). Therefore, understanding John’s concept of light and darkness, requires the consideration of the Old Testament background to the idea of light (Coxhead, 2010:np).

In the Old Testament, light is a positive concept whereas darkness is primarily negative (Isa 5:20). In Genesis 1, darkness is associated with disorder and emptiness. The default state of the world is darkness, but the word of God brings light into the world (Gen. 1:3). God dwells in glorious light (Exod. 27:20; Ps 104:1-2; Ezek. 1:27-28). He is light of the righteous (Ps 27:1). His light gives light to the people (Ps 36:9). Light shines from his face (Ps 44:3; 89:15). To the righteous, his word “is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path” (Ps 119:105) (Coxhead, 2010:np).

In addition, Light in the Old Testament symbolizes the blessing of the Lord. Job said, “He uncovers the deeps out of darkness, and brings deep

darkness to light (Job 12:22). In his time of trouble Job recalled the days when God's "lamp shone upon my head, and by his light I walked through darkness" (Job 29:3). Similarly, Eliphaz pictured the happiness that would befall Job if he would take his advice: "You will decide on a matter, and it will be established for you, and light will shine on your ways" (Job 22:28) (Elwell & Beitzel, 1988:1342).

The Old Testament also sees God Himself as Light. If light represents goodness in antithesis to the evil associated with darkness, it is a natural step for the biblical authors to understand God, the ultimate good, as light. Light symbolizes the holy God. Light signifies God's presence and favour (Psalm 27:1; Isa 9:2) in contrast to God's judgment (Amos 5:18). All through the Old Testament light is constantly associated with God and his word, with salvation, with goodness, with truth, and with life (Biblestudytools.com, accessed 12/04/2017).

In fact, it will not be an exaggeration to say that light is associated with anything positive in the Old Testament while darkness is associated with anything negative. All the attributes of God are synonymous to light in some occasions in the Old Testament. The Old Testament also attributes serving God to walking in the light (Isa. 2:5). His servant is a light to others (Isa. 42:6; 49:6; 60:3). Divine favour may be expressed as lifting up the light of God's countenance (Ps 4:6). Light is often used as a symbol of goodness, uprightness, or blessing (Ps 97:11) (Bromiley, 2002: 135).

Furthermore, the eschatological coming of God is seen in the Old Testament as the light of the glory of God that comes to push back and to overcome the darkness of this world. God will arise and his glory will shine upon Israel, and be a beacon that will attract the nations (Isa 60:1-3). Emmanuel (Isa 7:14), who is "Mighty God" (Isa 9:6), will come as a "great light" shining in "Galilee of the Gentiles" (Isa 9:1-2); and the Suffering Servant will be "a light for the Gentiles" (Isa 42:6). In this way, the day of salvation will bring light to the blind (Isa 29:18; 42:7); the prisoners will be released from darkness (Isa 49:9); and the

glory of God will become an everlasting light, so bright that the sun will be made redundant, its brilliance being eternally eclipsed by the utter magnificence of the glory of God (Isa 60:19-20) (Coxhead, 2010:np).

### **Light in the New Testament**

The symbols of light and darkness are not new in the New Testament; they are themes which are rooted in the Old Testament, and which are drawn upon and applied in the New. These symbols are prominent in the gospels and in the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ. In Pauline epistles, light and darkness are also pronounced themes; they are employed as well by Peter and John (Deffinbaugh, 2004:np).

Elwell & Beitzel (1988:1343) further observed that the New Testament references to light are mostly figurative. This assertion finds better meaning in the New Testament passages that present God as light. In 1 John 1:5 apostle John wrote that “God is light and in him is no darkness at all.” The apostle James also referred to God as “the Father of lights” (James 1:17). Jesus also went further to proclaim that He is the light of the world (John 8:12; 9:5) and He has come to the world as light that whoever believes in Him may not remain in darkness (John 12:46). Jesus also told his followers to believe in the light while it was with them (John 12:35). John the Baptist also came to bear witness to the light for the purpose of bringing people to believe (John 1:7). There are also instances where light is used to express the illumination that happens when people come to the knowledge of God and his salvation (Mt 4:16; Lk 2:32; Acts 13:47; 26:18).

Since Jesus is the light, it thus means that contact with the light influences one’s conduct. Paul explains that it is the gospel of Christ that brings people into the light (2 Cor. 4:4). The ascended Christ also commissioned Paul to bring the gospel to the Gentiles, “to open their eyes, that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God” (Acts 26:18). Apostle Peter also mentions that God has called believers “out of darkness into his marvelous light (1 Peter 2:9).

In fact, repenting which is the basic challenge of the gospel, means turning away from evil and trusting in Christ and this is often expressed in terms of coming to the light (Bromiley, 2002: 136).

Furthermore, Jesus called His followers in the New Testament, “the light of the world” (Mt. 5:14). The nature of light is to shine in the darkness. It is important that those who have been illuminated become illuminators and not simply keep to themselves the light they have received. It is in this light that Jesus said, “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your father who is in heaven” (Mt. 5:16). More so, apostle Paul described the Philippian Christians as “children of God...in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world” (Phil. 2:15). In the same vein, the Ephesians, who were once “darkness, but now...light in the Lord,” are encouraged to “Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true)” (Eph. 5:8ff). Likewise, Paul called on the Romans to “cast off the works of darkness and put on the armour of light” (Rom. 13:12). Because this challenge was addressed to believers, it was clearly not a call to become Christians; it was rather a reminder that believers wage a continual battle with the forces of darkness, and that they can win the victory only through the light they receive from Christ. Paul went ahead, in one of his teachings on light, to speak of the final victory as a sharing in “the inheritance of the saints in light” (Col. 1:12) (Bromiley, 2002: 136). Paul further asks, “What fellowship has light with darkness?” (2 Cor. 6:14). The believer is not to throw in his lot with darkness. He must be constantly on guard, for it is possible for Satan to disguise himself as an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:14) (Elwell & Beitzel, 1988:1344).

### **The Johannine Concept of Light**

Light is one of the essential themes in John’s Gospel. The word is used 23 times, starting with the prologue (1:4). The prologue strikes the note of a bitter conflict between darkness and light (1:5). This conflict runs through the whole book. Darkness, a representation of the satanic world order, is said to be at war with Christ – the light. John the Baptist was

simply a witness to the “light” (1:6-8). The light is no one else but the Christ (1:15 – 18, 26 – 34; 3:25 – 30). Jesus Himself confirmed this identity in (8:12 and 9:5).

### **The Word (*Logos*) as Life and Light**

The Prologue portrayed the Word (*Logos*) and God as the foundations for life and light: “What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all” (1:4). The darkness threatens to “overcome” the light, but the light of God’s *Logos* (Word) keeps it at bay. Life and light frequently occur synonymously in the Fourth Gospel. This depicts the life-giving function of Jesus as the “true light” (Wilson, 2010:39-40). Quoting O’Day, Wilson (2010:40) further pointed out that John uses light and life as signs of the Word’s relationship with the world, and consequently, ways in which humanity experiences the Word incarnate.

Consequently, by locating the light of the *Logos* in the eternal opposition between light and darkness, John’s Prologue establishes itself as the lens through which all of Jesus’ statement and interactions can be viewed. The Gospel shows the light of the Word is the light of Jesus and the light of God, linking all that is good, true and divine, as associated with light, with Jesus (Wilson, 2010:40).

In addition, in the Prologue John appeals to the Jewish belief of God as the source for all light and life. The creation story emphasizes Jesus’ relationship to the God who created life itself. Verse 1 of the Prologue echoes the very first verse of the Hebrew Bible in Genesis, where “In the beginning” God created an originally dark and formless world (Genesis 1:1). For John, the light of Jesus is fundamentally tied to the physical light created and sustained by God, for without it “not one thing came into being” (Genesis 1:3). As the first creation, this light is what made all other life possible; when God created light, he saw that it was “good,” and then separated it from darkness, creating “Day” and “Night” (Genesis 1:4-5) (Wilson, 2010:40).

Similarly, the Word is described to be the source of light, which was not only present at the moment of creation but active in the act of creating as well. Just as God's words in the creation narrative brought life, so too is life found in the Word. The Word shines in the darkness in the same way God created the light to shine in the darkness in Genesis, illuminating the rest of creation so all might see God's glory. Like the physically and emotionally life-giving light of God, so too is life found in the *Logos* (John 1:4).

### **The Light and Judgement**

Chapter 3 demonstrates the light as something that exposes falsehood and illuminates sin. When Nicodemus approaches Jesus at night to ask him questions regarding his teachings, Jesus identifies himself as the "Son of Man," who must be "lifted up" so that "whoever believes in him may have eternal life" (3:14-5). Here, Jesus equates the light with belief and judgment, revealing truth and exposing evil:

And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does what is true comes to the light, that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been wrought in God. (Jn. 3:19-21)

By describing the present judgment, Jesus expresses a sort of realized eschatology consistent with the Jewish belief that associated the revealing and judgment of a person's works with an eschatological time (Wilson, 2010:45-46). Citing C.K. Barrett, Wilson (2010:46) maintained that the same light of Jesus that illuminates evil deeds simultaneously illuminates truth, affirming judgment to be an essential component of salvation. Though the light brings judgment, its purpose is to lead the way to truth: "Indeed God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him" (Jn. 3:17).

## **I Am the Light of the World**

This is one of the *eimi ego* (I am) sayings of the Fourth Gospel and it is found in chapter eight (8) of the Gospel. According to Wilson (2010:47), “Here John again describes Jesus in terms of light and life, this time linking the metaphors to an I am statement in order to demonstrate the imagery of light in connection with the Prologue, the light of God the Hebrew and also the existing images surrounding the time and place in John’s narrative.”

The background of this chapter is very important for the understanding of this assertion, because it presents the Feast of the Tabernacles, as in the previous chapter. The festival background indicates the starting point for the understanding of the saying. This is affirmed by Newman and Nida (1993:263) who observed that almost all scholars agree that these verses originally came immediately after Chapter 7. There is clearly a close relationship between Chapters 7 and 8. The Festival of Shelters was more popularly known as “the Feast of Lights,” and in this chapter Jesus stands up and says *I am the light of the world*. Moreover, 7:10 states that Jesus went to the feast secretly, while 8:59 says that *Jesus hid himself and left the Temple*. There is also a connection between the theme of light mentioned in verse 12 and the healing of the blind man in Chapter 9. That is, the giving of sight to the blind man must be understood as a sign pointing to Jesus as the light of the world.

Accordingly, Wilson (2010:47) posited that this preliminary verse reemphasizes the connection between life and light, in contrast with darkness: “Again Jesus spoke to them ‘I am the light of the world; whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life’ (8:12). Most scholars consider this chapter to be a continuation of the discussion with the Pharisees at the Temple in Chapter 7, with both chapters constituting a narrative unit.

Water and light were essential for this feast. It is worthy to note the illumination provided by the great candelabrum (menorah), which was a crucial aspect of the festival. In the light of this event, Jesus’ assertion



is even more important. Through this, Jesus fulfilled the symbolism suggested by the ceremony of the lights as part of the Feast of the Tabernacles (Morris, 1989:436). However, its significance is deeper. Ball is of the opinion that Jesus' claim to be the light of the world resides in Isaiah's concept of the servant of the Lord, who is a light for the nations. Therefore, Jesus takes over a concept from the Old Testament and applies it to himself (Ball, 1996:217).

Therefore, it is needless to seek non-biblical sources to support this affirmation. It might be possible that, as the reference to the water in chapter 7 hints at the rock in the desert, the light should refer to the fire pillar seen at that time. Consequently, in three consecutive chapters, Jesus uses the wilderness imagery to reveal certain aspects of his work and his person (Morris, 1989:437). It is in the light of the above that Vereş (2008:118) quoted Murray as saying that Jesus asks people to "follow" the light, and not to receive it or to walk in it. The Jews did the same: they followed the light in the desert. Moreover, this image matches perfectly Jesus' appeal to the disciples, who are urged to follow him. Jesus sets light and darkness in sharp contrast. To believe in Christ is to be in the light. To refuse him is to be in great danger, to walk in darkness.

### **Practical Application of the Concept of Light to the Church Today**

By showing Jesus to be "the light of the world," John emphasizes that Jesus' saving message is intended for everyone, not just those believed to be God's chosen people like the Jews. Jesus' claim restates the universalizing effect of the light introduced in the Prologue, where Jesus is the "light of all," for "everyone" who accepts him (1:4, 9). Even though the Law was "given through Moses," and "salvation is from of Jews," Jesus is the "light of the world" (1:17, 3:22) (Wilson, 2010:47).

In line with the above, the church today must bear in mind the fact that Jesus is the only Messiah (Detzler, 1986:44) and faith in him the only way by which men can be saved from both their physical and spiritual blindness. Also, only those who recognize their poor spiritual status

and run to Christ for help will be saved because salvation is for both Jews and Gentiles that believe in Christ for He died for all (John 1:12; 3:16) (Reymond, 1998:739).

More than this, the church must also know that the light is the is life and without the light man is death. Finally, the church must remember that rejecting the light is tantamount to accepting eternal damnation. Therefore, the church must accept the light, live according to the standard of the light and in the light. The church must be the light of the world because that is the expectation of Jesus Christ.

### **Conclusion**

The Johannine concept of light as discussed above is both physical and spiritual. Physical in the sense that without light there cannot be life (physical life) because from creation God demonstrated the impossibility of life without light. Everything depends on light for survival. On the other hand, the light is spiritual as noted especially in the Chapter 9 of the Fourth Gospel at the healing of the man born blind. This miracle demonstrates to us that Jesus is the light of the world who is able to open the eyes of the spiritually blind so that they may receive the complete sight which constitutes life. Therefore, no life without the light whether physical or spiritual as such men must seek the light of Christ and live by it daily. Also, the church must endeavour to live and lead in according with this light found in Christ Jesus and let everything be done under the light because in God there is no darkness.

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