Christ, the Divine Logos: A Socio-Theological Perspective

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Abstract

This paper aims to show that John, in the Prologue of his Gospel, chose to use the word *logos* (word, idea) as a title for Jesus Christ because this term has already been used by the surrounding Jewish and Greco-Roman cultures, and using the term would make his message contextually intelligible. For the Jewish audience, I would argue that John took into mind the idea of the Jewish *memra* (also translated as *word*), as we see it developed and used in the Aramaic Targums, when he used the word *logos*. This idea states that since God is so transcendent, there needs to be an intermediary if he is to communicate with man. This intermediary is the *memra*, an entity distinct from *YHWH*, and the means by which the transcendent *YHWH* reveals himself. John argues that this Word is the Christ, the Creator and medium whereby God is revealed, who is in one way distinct from God, yet in another way the same in essence with God. On the other hand, for the Greco-Roman world, the *logos* is known as the *arche* (beginning) of all things, the basic substance by which all things exist, and the universal reason that holds all things together, but they thought of the *logos* simply as an impersonal force. John seeks to reconstruct this idea and tells the Greeks that this *logos*, by which the universe exists, is distinct from creation, and is not an impersonal force, but a personal God who actually became man.

Keywords: *logos*, Word, Christ, *memra*, Jewish, Greco-Roman

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The Gospel of John is known as the book which, among the four Gospels, highlights the divinity of Jesus Christ. Bart Ehrman, an agnostic New Testament scholar, admits that John identifies Jesus as equal with God in a way that the other gospels do not (Ehrman, 1997, p. 133). John's purpose for writing his Gospel was plainly stated in John 20:31 (ESV), "but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." In other words, he wants to convince his readers to believe that Jesus is the promised Christ, the divine Messiah, the Son of God, and he also wants those who have already believed to continue believing, to "stir up or express" their faith in the Messiah (Brant, 2011, pp. 11-12). It was written to both a Jewish and an even wider Greco-Roman social context (Koester, 2008, pp. 5-6).

Considering these facts, we can see John arguing for the divinity of Christ right away in his prologue, which runs from John 1:1–18. The prologue serves as a foundation for the rest of the book, since it talks about who the subject of the entire book is: Jesus, the Word of God. Ehrman writes:

> Its subject is one who was with God in eternity past, who was himself divine, who created the universe, who was God's self-revelation to the world, who came to earth to bring light out of darkness and truth out of error. He is a divine being who became human to dwell here and reveal the truth about God. (Ehrman, 1997, p. 134)

John seeks to prove to both Jews and Greeks that Christ indeed is of divine origin, and to accomplish this, he uses a particular word, which is known to both Jewish and Greco-Roman contexts, to refer to Christ. The word he used was λογος (*logos*), which "was a widely known

concept and term in the Jewish and pagan cultures at the time" (Časni, 2015, p. 188). He did this to make his message more intelligible to the social context he was in, and therefore have a higher probability of having his message accepted. Let us examine the socio-theological background of the Jewish and the Greco-Roman world, particularly how the people understood the word *logos*, and how John reconstructs their ideas of the *logos* and redefines it to show them that this is the divine Christ.

The *Logos* and the Jewish World

To understand the connection of the *logos* with the Jews, we shall be looking at the word *memra* from the Aramaic Targums, and then we shall see how Philo develops his own idea of the *logos*, and their connections with John's *logos*.

Aramaic Targums. Targums are the Aramaic translations, paraphrases, or explanations of the Old Testament (Slick, 2017). These translations became necessary because after the Babylonian Exile (approx. 598-538 BC), the Jews began to use Aramaic as their language, and its influence was established during the 1st century AD to the point where Hebrew became the language of the learned, and Aramaic was the common tongue (Targum, 1998). The purpose of the Targums was "to help uneducated people understand the Scriptures" (Baker, 1992, p. 146). It was written to make the message of the Scripture intelligible to the Jewish laity. Every word must have been carefully chosen by those who put these Targums into writing. According to Baker, if the goal of the Targums is to make the message plain to the common man, "therefore any term which is found in them must have been one in common use, one which would have been immediately helpful to the hearers" (Baker, 1992). We shall be looking at a specific word that is related with the *logos*, the *memra* (Word) of the LORD.

Key to understanding this is the Third Commandment (or the Second Commandment for Roman Catholics and Lutherans), which reads, "You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain" (Ex. 20:7 ESV cf. Deut. 5:11). The Jews highly revered the name of God, *YHWH*, that they would refuse to pronounce it, fearing that they might break God's commandment. Even in copying the text of Scripture, tradition would tell us that whenever the scribes wrote God's name, they either would wipe the pen clean or use another pen altogether, and they would even wash their whole bodies clean (Holland, 2000). It is also a common belief that they would replace *YHWH* with the more common *Adonai* to safeguard themselves from breaking God's instruction (Mundhenk, 2010). This substitution can also be seen in the Targums. Časni says that one of the terms used as a substitute to God's name was the *memra*, "which is used approximately 320 times in the Targum" (Časni, p. 195).

Whenever we see the word *memra* referring to God, it is as if the *memra* is God himself. McGrath observes, "the Word is frequently used for appearances of God in the Old Testament, and on the whole is more definitely identified as being none other than God himself." (McGrath, 1997, p. 105). For instance, if we look at Genesis 1:27 in the Jerusalem Targum of Jonathan ben Uzziel, it reads, "And the Word (*memra*) of the Lord created man in his likeness" (Etheridge, 1862). Another is in Deuteronomy 32:39. In the *Palestinian Targum*, it says: "When the *Word of the Lord* shall reveal Himself to redeem His people, He will say to all the nations: Behold now, that I am He who Am, and Was, and Will Be, and there is no other God beside Me: *I, in My Word,* kill and make alive; I smite the people of the Beth Israel, and I will heal them at the end of the

days; and there will be none who can deliver them from My hand, Gog and his armies whom I have permitted to make war against them" (Comparison of Pentateuch).

Another reason why they substituted the word *memra* for *YHWH* is their emphasis on the *transcendence* of God, that is, God is too holy to be with His creatures. In Exodus 33:20, we see the Lord tell Moses that "you cannot see my face, for man shall not see my face and live." They believed that an *intermediary* was needed through whom the Lord dealt with His creation. They believed that the *memra* was this intermediary by which the Lord converses with His people or accomplishes His work in the created world (Kohler, 1918, p. 198).

Craig Evans cites examples from the Targum where the *memra* acts as though it were an intermediary: first, it acts as an "independent agent", in that it administers judgment (Tar. Hab. 1:12); secondly, it has feelings because it is said to have loathed (Amos 4:11); and thirdly, it plays an intermediary role, as seen in Isaiah 65:1 where God is said to be entreated through his Word (Evans, 1993). He takes it further by linking it to Jesus and the Gospel of John (p. 128):

> The ideas of administration and intermediacy occur in the Fourth Gospel in reference to Jesus, the incarnate Word. Jesus will administer judgment: 'For not even the Father judges anyone, but he has given all judgment to the Son' (Jn 5.22; cf. 5.27; 8.16; 9.39). The Son also functions as an intermediary, through whom people must approach God (Jn 14.6: 'no one comes to the Father except through me') or in his Son's name (Jn 15.16: 'Whatever you ask the Father in my name he will give you'; cf. 14.16; 16.23).

Philo of Alexandria. If one wants to find a connection between the Greek idea of the word *logos* and the Jewish idea of it, and even the idea of the *memra*, one should look at Philo of Alexandria. Brant writes, "Philo of Alexandria provides an example of a Jewish contemporary of

Jesus who fuses [Neoplatonic] or Stoic notions of the *logos* and the Jewish vision of a world called into being by God's words and informed by God's wisdom, in which heavenly agents play a role" (Brant, p. 26). Evans says that Philo taught that the *logos* was "the true image of God, God's first-born son, who indeed could even be called [God]" (Evans, p. 103).

Connecting Philo's idea of the *logos* with the Targums, Baker lists eleven parallels between the *memra* and Philo's *logos* (Baker, pp. 146-147) such as: 1.) the *logos* and the *memra* being referred to as the "Name", 2.) man being made in the image of the *logos*, and the *memra* of *YHWH* making man in his likeness, 3.) the *logos* and the *memra* functioning as *viceroys* of a great King, 4.) the *logos* and the glory of the *memra* guiding Israel through the desert, 5.) both functioning as judges, 6.) mediators, and 7.) high priests, 8.) both as agents of creation, 9.) both referred to as the "Covenant", 10.) both speaking from above the cherubim, and 11.) even perhaps both as *Wisdom*, the chief power according to Jews.

The last one mentioned from Baker's list above, the relationship between the *Word* and *Wisdom*, is a significant one. O'Collins notes that for the Jews, Wisdom and the Word had similar characteristics and functions, in that, they were both "with God from the beginning (Gen. 1:1; John 1:1), powerfully creative (Gen. 1:1–2: 4; Isa. 55:10–11; Ps. 33:6, 9; 107:20; Judith 16:14) and God's personified self-expression (Wis. 18:14–16)"; both also express "God's active power and self-revelation in the created world" (O'Collins, 2009, p. 39). Daniel Boyarin supports O'Collins' observation: "The idea that the *Logos/Sophia*…was the site of God's presence in the world—indeed of God's Word or Wisdom as a mediator figure—was a very widespread one in the thought-world of first-century and even second-century Judaism" (Boyarin, 2001, p. 248).

Seeing these evidences, it would be hard to deny that there were influences from the Aramaic community when Philo framed his ideas on the *logos*, and it would be impossible to reject that notion that John had an idea of both the Aramaic understanding of the *memra* and Philo's framing of the *logos*. It could be argued that John used this specific word because Jews who are acquainted with Philo's *logos* and the *memra* already had an idea of the *logos* as a divine intermediary. But John goes further and emphasizes that this *logos* is God (Jn. 1:1c); that this *logos* made himself known and visible by becoming flesh (Jn. 1:14), and the *logos* refers to Jesus of Nazareth whom they put to death by crucifixion on a Roman cross; the Son of God in whom they must believe if they want to have eternal life (Jn. 20:31).

The *Logos* and the Greco-Roman World

The idea of the *logos* was known throughout the Greco-Roman world, since it was and is a concept used in Greek philosophy. It is imperative for us, therefore, to look at the socio-theological context in which the word was used among Greeks, which is Greek philosophy.

It is said that Greek philosophy began with the Milesian philosophers (from Miletus, Ionia), who were known for "stressing an *arche* or material source from which the cosmos and all things in it were generated" (Audi, 1999, p. 567). They wanted to find the *arche* (beginning), or the 'first principle' of all things. According to Fouyas, "The object of the natural philosopher's quest is the notion of the [*arche*] of all things," that is, quoting Rudolf Bultmann, "they sought to reduce the multiplicity of the universe to an ultimate unity" (Fouyas, 1969, p. 304). They wanted to answer the question of 'the one and the many.' What is left when all things are broken down into a single thing? What is the substance that is common to all things?

Thales believed it was water, Anaximander believed it was the *apeiron*, Anaximenes believed it was air (Graham, 2006). For Heraclitus, however, it was the fiery *logos*, "the universal law immanent in all things, binding all things into a unity and determining the constant change in the universe according to universal law" (Copleston, 1946/1993, p. 43). He was known as the first philosopher to use *logos* as a concept in philosophy, and believed that this "*Logos* always existed and that everything happens in accordance with the *Logos*" (Časni, p. 193). Since then, the Greek philosophers began to further develop and formulate the idea of the *logos*. Common to them all was that the *logos* was a thing which expresses "reason, order, and harmonic unity" (Časni, p. 192). Most known to develop this idea were the Stoics. According to Anthony Preus, Stoics believed that the *logos* was "the immanent ordering principle of the universe, an idea that they traced to Heraclitus," and that it permeated the whole universe through the *logoi spermatikoi*, or the seeds of the *logos* (Preus, 2007, p. 160).

To sum it up, for the Greeks, the *logos* was known as an immaterial, impersonal force (Heraclitus likens it to fire), the *arche* of all things, the first principle by which everything exists, and the universal reason that holds the universe together. Heraclitus even went as far as saying that the *logos* is god, since the nature and function of the *logos* is akin to what a god would be (Copleston, 1946/1993). For these philosophers, though, the *logos* was just an abstract thought, an impersonal force, an immaterial power that held all things together. For John, then, reconstructing the idea of the *logos* would be strategic, since they already had some notion that the l*ogos* had divine qualities.

John began his Gospel by saying, "In the beginning was the Word" (Jn. 1:1 ESV). In Greek, it reads, "*En arche en ho logos*." We see the word *arche*, which implies that John alludes to the

ultimate question of Greek philosophy: what is the first principle of the universe? John writes that it was the *logos*. The Greeks might have thought that John probably followed the philosophy of Heraclitus, or that of the Stoics. But John formulates his idea of *logos* as the *arche* in a different way.

John says that this *logos* was "with God" (*pros ton theon*). John F. McHugh declares that the word *pros* does not convey the *logos*' relationship with God simply in a "local or spatial relationship in a material sense," but that it "is taken to stress the close 'metaphysical' relationship between the *Logos* and God" (McHugh, 2009, p. 9). This *logos*, then, must be of divine essence or substance as well, the same in essence and substance with God. John even further states that the *logos* "was God." There is a progression in John's phrasing of the first verse. McHugh comments, "the first clause (1a) asserts the pre-existence of the *logos*, the second (1b) affirms that he was in a certain relationship with God, and the third (1c) states that he is in some sense to be identified with God" (McHugh, 2009, p. 10). Simply put, John contrasts the *logos* of Heraclitus and the Stoics by saying that this *logos* was eternally divine; the *logos* was God.

To even give a greater contradistinction between his *logos* and that of the Greeks, he says in verse 3: "All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made" (Jn. 1:3 ESV). He declares that the *logos* is not one with creation, as the Greeks would have it, but is the agent of creation, and by him the universe came into existence, which implies that the *logos* is distinct from creation. This *logos* is the *arche* that is distinct from creation, since he is the God who created all things that exist, and, according to Hebrews 1:3, this Christ, identified by John as the *logos*, sustains the whole universe. David MacLeod says it simply: "Jesus Christ is God, and He has created all things" (MacLeod, 2003).

Verse 14 puts the dividing line between John's *logos* and the Greek philosophical idea of the *logos*. Blake Adams writes, "For the first four verses of the first chapter of his Gospel, John says nothing with which a Stoic philosopher would disagree. But he pushes the term forward until his Hellenic philosophy breaks down into a declaration of revelation: 'And the [*logos*] became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory'" (Adams, 2017, p. 7). Greeks believed in an ethereal *logos*, an immaterial force, an impersonal god; John contends that this eternal, divine *logos* became man. The *logos* condescended and became tangible and comprehensible to man. Jesus is *logos*, and when he became man, the *logos* became man; the fullness of the *logos* was in that human flesh. A. G. Murphy says that "the incarnation is not a mere reflection of the *Logos*, but the eternal *Logos* himself come in the flesh" (Murphy, 2005, p. 321).

In summary, we have seen that John rejects the Greek philosophical idea of the *logos*, which they believed was simply a force permeating the universe, and an immaterial, impersonal reason that holds all things together. John argues that the *logos* is eternal, was in a special kind of relationship with God, and is God. He contends that the *logos* created all things and is distinct from the material universe, yet this *logos* is a personal God, since he became man and lived among humans. Časni writes, "John adamantly opposes the ancient Greek philosophical concepts…and going a step further John presents Him as a personal, pre-existing, incarnated *Logos*" (Časni, p. 194).

Conclusion

It is important for us to see that John communicates Christ as divine to the social context he was speaking to by contextualizing his message through using a term familiar to both the Jewish

and the Greco-Roman world. He was not arguing in a vacuum, nor creating a new idea of his own, but he was reconstructing an already existing idea; he saw the *logos* through the lens of Jesus.

This prologue, no doubt, enabled John and other Christians to engage with both Jews and Greeks and present Christ to them in a meaningful way. O'Collins rightly opines:

> John's *Logos* Christology opened the way for Christians not only to recognize the influence of the *Logos* outside Christianity but also to dialogue with non-Christian thinkers. Those who endorsed Jewish, Platonic, and Stoic strands of thought about the *Logos* could find a measure of common ground with Christians, who, nevertheless, remained distinctive with their claim that 'the *logos* was made flesh'. (O'Collins, 2009, p. 41)

We could see that what motivated John to make his message easy to understand was the conviction that life is found in Christ alone. He himself explicitly says that he wrote his Gospel so that people might place their faith in Christ, the divine *logos*, the Son of God in the flesh, in order that they might have life (Jn. 20:31). He wanted his message to be as familiar as possible to the people he was speaking to, so that his message would be easier to receive, and, if received by his hearers, he believed that they would become children of God (Jn. 1:12), and then would not perish, but have everlasting life (Jn. 3:16).

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