Bible Research > Interpretation > Logos

In the beginning was the λόγος ...

(John 1:1)

The word λόγος (logos) in the prologue of John's Gospel is a word with a very interesting history in ancient theological writings. It is translated 'Word' in English versions, but this translation does not express everything that the term would have suggested to ancient readers.

For the benefit of students, on this page I have reproduced discussions of the term λόγος by four New Testament scholars: Marvin Vincent, Frederic Godet, Hugh Mackintosh, and John Campbell. Vincent, whose explanation I think will be found most helpful, briefly explains what the word meant in the context of theological discourse in the milieu of Hellenistic Judaism (especially after Philo), and he argues that John "used the term Logos with an intent to facilitate the passage from the current theories of his time to the pure gospel which he proclaimed." Godet and Mackintosh are largely in agreement with Vincent, and Campbell also agrees, though he evidently does not share the others' high view of Scripture. After these excerpts I add Wilhelm Nestle’s more general discussion of the philosophy of Philo from his revision of Zeller’s Outlines of the History of Greek Philosophy.

My own opinion is that the contemporary Hellenistic understanding of logos in theological contexts (esp. in Philo) should not be discounted by those who wish to understand John's meaning. The contrasts between Philo and John, which the scholars here want to emphasize, should not obscure the fact that John is using a word which was already full of meaning for Jewish readers in his day. When he asserts that the logos became flesh he is indeed saying something that was never dreamt of by Philo or the Greek philosophers; but in all other respects it is their logos — the cosmic Mediator between God and the world, who is the personification of God's Truth and Wisdom — that John is referring to when he asserts that Christ is its incarnation.

M.D.M.

Vincent's discussion of λόγος

The following remarks on the word λόγος in John 1:1 are from Marvin R. Vincent, Word Studies in the New Testament, vol. 2 (New York: Scribners, 1887), pp. 25-33.

**This expression is the keynote and theme of the entire gospel. Λόγος is from the root λεγ, appearing in λεγω, the primitive meaning of which is to lay: then, to pick out, gather, pick up: hence to gather or put words together, and so, to speak. Hence λόγος is, first of all, a collecting or collection both of things in the mind, and of words by which they are expressed. It therefore signifies both the outward form by which the inward thought is expressed, and the inward thought itself, the Latin** oratio and ratio: compare the Italian ragionare, "to think" and "to speak."

As signifying the outward form it is never used in the merely grammatical sense, as simply the name of a thing or act (επος, ονομα, ρημα), but means a word as the thing referred to: the material, not the formal part: a word as embodying a conception or idea. See, for instance, Matthew 22:46; 1 Corinthians 14:9, 19. Hence it signifies a saying, of God, or of man (Matthew 19:21, 22; Mark 5:35, 36): a decree, a precept (Romans 9:28; Mark 7:13). The ten commandments are called in the Septuagint, οἱ δέκα λόγοι, "the ten words" (Exodus 34:28), and hence the familiar term decalogue. It is further used of discourse: either of the act of speaking (Acts 14:12), of skill and practice in speaking (Ephesians 6:19), or of continuous speaking (Luke 4:32, 36). Also of doctrine (Acts 18:15; 2 Timothy 4:15), specifically the doctrine of salvation through Christ (Matthew 13:20-23; Philippians 1:14); of narrative, both the relation and the thing related (Acts 1:1; John 21:23; Mark 1:45); of matter under discussion, an affair, a case in law (Acts 15:6; 19:38).

As signifying the inward thought, it denotes the faculty of thinking and reasoning (Hebrews 4:12); regard or consideration (Acts 20:24); reckoning, account (Philippians 4:15, 17; Hebrews 4:13); cause or reason (Acts 10:29).

John uses the word in a peculiar sense, here, and in ver. 14; and, in this sense, in these two passages only. The nearest approach to it is in Revelation 19:13, where the conqueror is called the Word of God; and it is recalled in the phrases Word of Life, and the Life was manifested (1 John 1:1, 2). Compare Hebrews 4:12. It was a familiar and current theological term when John wrote, and therefore he uses it without explanation.

OLD TESTAMENT USAGE OF THE TERM

The word here points directly to Genesis 1, where the act of creation is effected by God speaking (compare Psalms 33:6). The idea of God, who is in his own nature hidden, revealing himself in creation, is the root of the Logos-idea, in contrast with all materialistic or pantheistic conceptions of creation. This idea develops itself in the Old Testament on three lines:

(1) The Word, as embodying the divine will, is personified in Hebrew poetry. Consequently divine attributes are predicated of it as being the continuous revelation of God in law and prophecy (Psalms 3:4; Isaiah 40:8; Psalms 119:105). The Word is a healer in Psalms. 107:20; a messenger in Psalms 147:15; the agent of the divine decrees in Isaiah 55:11.

(2) The personified wisdom (Job 28:12 sq.; Proverbs 8, 9.). Here also is the idea of the revelation of that which is hidden. For wisdom is concealed from man: "he knoweth not the price thereof, neither is it found in the land of the living. The depth saith, It is not in me; and the sea saith, It is not with me. It cannot be gotten for gold, neither shall silver be weighed for the price thereof. It is hid from the eyes of all living, and kept close from the fowls of the air" (Job 28.). Even Death, which unlocks so many secrets, and the underworld, know it only as a rumor (ver. 22). It is only God who knows its way and its place (ver. 23). He made the world, made the winds and the waters, made a decree for the rain and a way for the lightning of the thunder (vv. 25, 26). He who possessed wisdom in the beginning of his way, before His works of old, before the earth with its depths and springs and mountains, with whom was wisdom as one brought up With Him (Proverbs 8:26-31), declared it. "It became, as it were, objective, so that He beheld it" (Job 28:27) and embodied it in His creative work. This personification, therefore, is based on the thought that wisdom is not shut up at rest in God, but is active and manifest in the world. "She standeth in the top of high places, by the way in the places of the paths. She crieth at the gates, at the entry of the city, at the coming in at the doors" (Proverbs 8:2, 3). She builds a palace and prepares a banquet, and issues a general invitation to the simple and to him that wanteth understanding (Proverbs 9:1-6). It is viewed as the one guide to salvation, comprehending all revelations of God, and as an attribute embracing and combining all His other attributes.

(3) The Angel of Jehovah. The messenger of God who serves as His agent in the world of sense, and is sometimes distinguished from Jehovah and sometimes identical with him (Genesis 16:7-13; 32:24-28; Hosea 12:4, 5; Exodus 23:20, 21; Malachi 3:l).

APOCRYPHAL USAGE

In the Apocryphal writings this mediative element is more distinctly apprehended, but with a tendency to pantheism. In the Wisdom of Solomon (at least 100 B.C.), where wisdom seems to be viewed as another name for the whole divine nature, while nowhere connected with the Messiah, it is described as a being of light, proceeding essentially from God; a true image of God, co-occupant of the divine throne; a real and independent principle, revealing God in the world and mediating between it and Him, after having created it as his organ — in association with a spirit which is called μονογενες, only begotten (7:22). "She is the breath of the power of God, and a pure influence flowing from the glory of the Almighty; therefore can no defiled thing fall into her. For she is the brightness of the everlasting light, the unspotted mirror of the power of God, and the image of his goodness" (see chapter 7, throughout). Again: "Wisdom reacheth from one end to another mightily, and sweetly doth she order all things. In that she is conversant with God, she magnifieth her nobility: yea, the Lord of all things Himself loved her. For she is privy to the mysteries of the knowledge of God, and a lover of His works. Moreover, by the means of her I shall obtain immortality, and leave behind me an everlasting memorial to them that come after me" (chapter 9.). In chapter 16:12, it is said, "Thy word, O Lord, healeth all things" (compare Psalms 107:20); and in chapter 18:15, 16, "Thine almighty word leaped from heaven out of thy royal throne, as a fierce man of war into the midst of a land of destruction, and brought thine unfeigned commandment as a sharp sword, and, standing up, filled all things with death; and it touched the heaven, but it stood upon the earth." See also Wisdom of Sirach, chapters 1, 24, and Baruch 3, 4:1-4.

LATER JEWISH USAGE

After the Babylonish captivity the Jewish doctors combined into one view the theophanies, prophetic revelations and manifestations of Jehovah generally, and united them in one single conception, that of a permanent agent of Jehovah in the sensible world, whom they designated by the name Memra (word, λόγος) of Jehovah. The learned Jews introduced the idea into the Targums, or Aramæan paraphrases of the Old Testament, which were publicly read in the synagogues, substituting the name the word of Jehovah for that of Jehovah, each time that God manifested himself. Thus in Genesis 39:91, they paraphrase, "The Memra was with Joseph in prison." In Psalms 110 Jehovah addresses the first verse to the Memra. The Memra is the angel that destroyed the first-born of Egypt, and it was the Memra that led the Israelites in the cloudy pillar.

USAGE IN THE JUDAEO-ALEXANDRINE PHILOSOPHY

From the time of Ptolemy I (323-285 B.C.), there were Jews in great numbers in Egypt. Philo (A.D. 50) estimates them at a million in his time. Alexandria was their headquarters. They had their own senate and magistrates, and possessed the same privileges as the Greeks. The Septuagint translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek (B.C. 280-150) was the beginning of a literary movement among them, the key-note of which was the reconciliation of Western culture and Judaism, the establishment of a connection between the Old Testament faith and the Greek philosophy. Hence they interpreted the facts of sacred history allegorically, and made them symbols of certain speculative principles, alleging that the Greek philosophers had borrowed their wisdom from Moses. Aristobulus (about 150 B.C.) asserted the existence of a previous and much older translation of the law, and dedicated to Ptolemy VI an allegorical exposition of the Pentateuch, in which he tried to show that the doctrines of the Peripatetic or Aristotelian school were derived from the Old Testament. Most of the schools of Greek philosophy were represented among the Alexandrian Jews, but the favorite one was the Platonic. The effort at reconciliation culminated in Philo, a contemporary of Christ. Philo was intimately acquainted with the Platonic philosophy, and made it the fundamental feature of his own doctrines, while availing himself likewise of ideas belonging to the Peripatetic and Stoic schools. Unable to discern the difference in the points of view from which these different doctrines severally proceeded, he jumbled together not merely discordant doctrines of the Greek schools, but also those of the East, regarding the wisdom of the Greeks as having originated in the legislation and writings of Moses. He gathered together from East and West every element that could help to shape his conception of a vicegerent of God, "a mediator between the eternal and the ephemeral. His Logos reflects light from countless facets."

According to Philo, God is the absolute Being. He calls God "that which is:" "the One and the All." God alone exists for himself, without multiplicity and without mixture. No name can properly be ascribed to Him: He simply is. Hence, in His nature, He is unknowable.

Outside of God there exists eternal matter, without form and void, and essentially evil; but the perfect Being could not come into direct contact with the senseless and corruptible; so that the world could not have been created by His direct agency. Hence the doctrine of a mediating principle between God and matter — the divine Reason, the Logos, in whom are comprised all the ideas of finite things, and who created the sensible world by causing these ideas to penetrate into matter.

The absolute God is surrounded by his powers (δυναμεις) as a king by his servants. These powers are, in Platonic language, ideas; in Jewish, angels; but all are essentially one, and their unity, as they exist in God, as they emanate from him, as they are disseminated in the world, is expressed by Logos. Hence the Logos appears under a twofold aspect: (1) As the immanent reason of God, containing within itself the world-ideal, which, while not outwardly existing, is like the immanent reason in man. This is styled Λόγος ἐνδιάθετος, i.e., the Logos conceived and residing in the mind. This was the aspect emphasized by the Alexandrians, and which tended to the recognition of a twofold personality in the divine essence.

(2) As the outspoken word, proceeding from God and manifest in the world. This, when it has issued from God in creating the world, is the Λόγος προφορικός, i.e., the Logos uttered, even as in man the spoken word is the manifestation of thought. This aspect prevailed in Palestine, where the Word appears like the angel of the Pentateuch, as the medium of the outward communication of God with men, and tends toward the recognition of a divine person subordinate to God. Under the former aspect, the Logos is, really, one with God's hidden being: the latter comprehends all the workings and revelations of God in the world; affords from itself the ideas and energies by which the world was framed and is upheld; and, filling all things with divine light and life, rules them in wisdom, love, and righteousness. It is the beginning of creation, not inaugurated, like God, nor made, like the world; but the eldest son of the eternal Father (the world being the younger); God's image; the mediator between God and the world; the highest angel; the second God.

Philo's conception of the Logos, therefore, is: the sum-total and free exercise of the divine energies; so that God, so far as he reveals himself, is called Logos; while the Logos, so far as he reveals God, is called God.

John's doctrine and terms are colored by these preceding influences. During his residence at Ephesus he must have become familiar with the forms and terms of the Alexandrian theology. Nor is it improbable that he used the term Logos with an intent to facilitate the passage from the current theories of his time to the pure gospel which he proclaimed. "To those Hellenists and Hellenistic Jews, on the one hand, who were vainly philosophizing on the relations of the finite and infinite; to those investigators of the letter of the Scriptures, on the other, who speculated about the theocratic revelations, John said, by giving this name Logos to Jesus: 'The unknown Mediator between God and the world, the knowledge of whom you are striving after, we have seen, heard, and touched. Your philosophical speculations and your scriptural subtleties will never raise you to Him. Believe as we do in Jesus, and you will possess in Him that divine Revealer who engages your thoughts'" (Godet).

But John's doctrine is not Philo's, and does not depend upon it. The differences between the two are pronounced. Though both use the term Logos, they use it with utterly different meanings. In John it signifies word, as in Holy Scripture generally; in Philo, reason; and that so distinctly that when Philo wishes to give it the meaning of word, he adds to it by way of explanation, the term ρημα, word.

The nature of the being described by Logos is conceived by each in an entirely different spirit. John's Logos is a person, with a consciousness of personal distinction; Philo's is impersonal. His notion is indeterminate and fluctuating, shaped by the influence which happens to be operating at the time. Under the influence of Jewish documents he styles the Logos an "archangel;" under the influence of Plato, "the Idea of Ideas;" of the Stoics, "the impersonal Reason." It is doubtful whether Philo ever meant to represent the Logos formally as a person. All the titles he gives it may be explained by supposing it to mean the ideal world on which the actual is modeled.

In Philo, moreover, the function of the Logos is confined to the creation and preservation of the universe. He does not identify or connect him with the Messiah. His doctrine was, to a great degree, a philosophical substitute for Messianic hopes. He may have conceived of the Word as acting through the Messiah, but not as one with him. He is a universal principle. In John the Messiah is the Logos himself, uniting himself with humanity, and clothing himself with a body in order to save the world.

The two notions differ as to origin. The impersonal God of Philo cannot pass to the finite creation without contamination of his divine essence. Hence an inferior agent must be interposed. John's God, on the other hand, is personal, and a loving personality. He is a Father (1:18); His essence is love (3:16; 1 John 4:8, 16). He is in direct relation with the world which He desires to save, and the Logos is He Himself, manifest in the flesh. According to Philo, the Logos is not coexistent with the eternal God. Eternal matter is before him in time. According to John, the Logos is essentially with the Father from all eternity (1:2), and it is He who creates all things, matter included (1:3).

Philo misses the moral energy of the Hebrew religion as expressed in its emphasis upon the holiness of Jehovah, and therefore fails to perceive the necessity of a divine teacher and Savior. He forgets the wide distinction between God and the world, and declares that, were the universe to end, God would die of loneliness and inactivity.

THE MEANING OF LOGOS IN JOHN

As Logos has the double meaning of thought and speech, so Christ is related to God as the word to the idea, the word being not merely a name for the idea, but the idea itself expressed. The thought is the inward word (Dr. Schaff compares the Hebrew expression "I speak in my heart" for "I think").

The Logos of John is the real, personal God (1:1), the Word, who was originally before the creation with God, and was God, one in essence and nature, yet personally distinct (1:1, 18); the revealer and interpreter of the hidden being of God; the reflection and visible image of God, and the organ of all His manifestations to the world. Compare Hebrews 1:3. He made all things, proceeding personally from God for the accomplishment of the act of creation (1:3), and became man in the person of Jesus Christ, accomplishing the redemption of the world. Compare Philippians 2:6.

The following is from William Austin, "Meditation for Christmas Day," cited by Ford on John:

"The name Word is most excellently given to our Savior; for it expresses His nature in one, more than in any others. Therefore St. John, when he names the Person in the Trinity (1 John 5:7), chooses rather to call Him Word than Son; for word is a phrase more communicable than son. Son hath only reference to the Father that begot Him; but word may refer to him that conceives it; to him that speaks it; to that which is spoken by it; to the voice that it is clad in; and to the effects it raises in him that hears it. So Christ, as He is the Word, not only refers to His Father that begot Him, and from whom He comes forth, but to all the creatures that were made by Him; to the flesh that He took to clothe Him; and to the doctrine He brought and taught, and, which lives yet in the hearts of all them that obediently do hear it. He it is that is this Word; and any other, prophet or preacher, he is but a voice (Luke 3:4). Word is an inward conception of the mind; and voice is but a sign of intention. St. John was but a sign, a voice; not worthy to untie the shoe-latchet of this Word. Christ is the inner conception 'in the bosom of His Father;' and that is properly the Word. And yet the Word is the intention uttered forth, as well as conceived within; for Christ was no less the Word in the womb of the Virgin, or in the cradle of the manger, or on the altar of the cross, than he was in the beginning, 'in the bosom of his Father.' For as the intention departs not from the mind when the word is uttered, so Christ, proceeding from the Father by eternal generation, and after here by birth and incarnation, remains still in Him and with Him in essence; as the intention, which is conceived and born in the mind, remains still with it and in it, though the word be spoken. He is therefore rightly called the Word, both by His coming from, and yet remaining still in, the Father."

Godet's discussion of λόγος

The following is Frederic Godet's discussion of the word logos in the prologue of John's Gospel (quoted in part by Vincent in the above article) from the English translation of his commentary: Commentary on the Gospel of John, with an Historical and Critical Introduction by F. Godet, translated from the third French edition by Timothy Dwight, vol. 1 (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1886), pp. 286-291. I have inserted some of Godet's footnotes into the text in square brackets, have converted the Roman numerals to Arabic, and have corrected one Scripture reference. —M.D.M.

THE IDEA AND TERM LOGOS.

We have here to study three questions: 1. Whence did the evangelist derive the notion of the Logos? 2. What is the origin of this term? 3. What the reason of its use? Having discussed these questions in the Introduction (pp. 173-181), we will notice here only that which has a special relation to the exegetical study which we are about to undertake.

1. First of all we establish a fact: namely, that the Prologue only sums up the thoughts contained in the testimony which Christ bears to Himself in the fourth Gospel. Weiss mentions two principal points in which the Prologue seems to him to go beyond the testimony of Christ: 1. The notion of the Word by which John expresses the pre-historic existence of Christ; 2. The function of creator which is ascribed to Him (ver. 3).

Let us for a moment lay aside the term Logos, to which we will return. The creative function is naturally connected with the fact of the eternal existence of the Logos in God. He who could say to God: “Thou didst love me before the creation of the world,” certainly did not remain a stranger to the act by which God brought the world out of nothing. How is it possible not to apply here the words of 5:17: “As the Father...I also work,” and 5:19, 20: “The Father showeth the Son all that he doeth...,” and: “Whatsoever things the Father doeth, these doeth the Son in like manner.” Add the words of Gen. 1:26: “Let us make man in our image,” to which John certainly alludes in the second clause of ver. 1 of the Prologue. All the other affirmations of this passage rest equally on the discourses and facts related in the Gospel; comp. ver. 4: “In Him was life ...,” with 5:26: “As the Father hath life in himself, so hath he given to the Son to have life in himself;” ver. 9: “There was the true light,” with 8:12 and 9:5: “I am the light of the world...He that followeth me shall have the light of life;” ver. 7: “John came to bear witness,” with 1:34: “And I have seen, and have borne witness that this is the Son of God,” and ver. 33: “Ye have sent unto John, and he hath borne witness to the truth;” what is said of the presence and activity of the Logos in the world in general (ver. 10), and in the theocracy in particular (to His home, His own, ver. 11), previous to His incarnation, with what Jesus declares in chap. 10 of the Shepherd's voice which is immediately recognized by His sheep, and this not only by those who are already in the fold of the Old Covenant (ver. 3), but also by those who are not of that fold (ver. 16), or what is said of the children of God scattered throughout the whole world (11:52); the opposition made in the Prologue (ver. 13) between the fleshly birth and the divine begetting, with the word of Jesus to Nicodemus (3:6): “That which is born of the flesh is flesh; that which is born of the Spirit is spirit;” the notion of Christ's real humanity, so earnestly affirmed in the Prologue (ver. 14), with the perfectly human character of the person and affections of the Saviour in the whole Johannean narrative; He is exhausted by fatigue (4:6); He thirsts (4:7); He weeps over a friend (11:35); He is moved, even troubled (11:33, 12:27); on the other hand, His glory, full of grace and truth, His character as Son who has come from the Father (vv. 14-18), with His complete dependence (6:38 f.), His absolute docility (v. 30, etc.), His perfect intimacy with the Father (v. 20), the divinity of the works which it was given Him to accomplish, such as: to give life, to judge (v. 21, 22); the perfect assurance of being heard, whatsoever He might ask for (11:41, 42); the adoration which He accepts (20:28); which He claims even as the equal of the Father (v. 23); the testimony of John the Baptist quoted in ver. 15, with the subsequent narrative (1:27, 30); the gift of the law, as a preparation for the Gospel (ver. 17), with what the Lord says of His relation to Moses and his writings (v. 46, 47); ver. 18, which closes the Prologue with the saying in 6:46: “Not that any one hath seen the Father, except He that is from the Father, He hath seen the Father;” the terms Son and only-begotten Son, finally, with the words of Jesus in 6:40: “This is the Father's will, that He who beholds the Son ...;” 3:16: “God so loved the world, that He gave His only- begotten Son,” and 3:18: “Because he hath not believed on the name of the only-begotten Son of God.” It is clear: the Prologue is an edifice which is constructed wholly out of materials furnished by the words and the facts of Jesus' history. It contains of what is peculiar to John only the idea and term Logos applied to His pre-existent state. It is certainly this term, used in the philosophical language of the time, which has led so many interpreters to transform the author of the Prologue into a disciple of Philo. We shall limit ourselves here to the mentioning of the essential differences which distinguish the God of Philo from the God of John, the Logos of the one from the Logos of the other. And it shall be judged whether the second was truly at the school of the first.

1. The word logos, in John, signifies, as in the whole Biblical text, word. In Philo, it signifies, as in the philosophical language of the Greeks, reason. This simple fact reveals a wholly different starting-point in the use which they make of the term.

2. In Philo, the existence of the Logos is a metaphysical theorem. God being conceived of as the absolutely indeterminate and impersonal being, there is an impassable gulf between Him and the material, finite, varied world which we behold. To fill this gulf, Philo needed an intermediate agent, a second God, brought nearer to the finite; this is the Logos, the half-personified divine reason. The existence of the Logos in John is not the result of such a metaphysical necessity. God is in John, as in all the Scriptures, Creator, Master, Father. He acts Himself in the world, He loves it, He gives His Son to it; we shall even see that it is He who serves as intermediate agent between men and the Son (6:37, 44), which is just the opposite of Philo's theory. In a word, in John everything in the relation of the Logos to God is a matter of liberty and of love, while with Philo everything is the result of a logical necessity. The one is the disciple of the Old Testament interpreted by means of Plato and Zeno; the other, of the same Old Testament explained by Jesus Christ.

3. The office of the Logos in Philo does not go beyond the divine facts of the creation and preservation of the world. He does not place this being in any relation with the Messiah and the Messianic kingdom. In John, on the contrary, the creating Logos is mentioned only in view of the redemption of which He is to be the agent; everything in the idea of this being tends towards His Messianic appearance.

4. To the view of Philo, as to that of Plato, the principle of evil is matter; the Jewish philosopher nowhere dreams, therefore, of making the Logos descend to earth, and that in a bodily form. In John, on the contrary, the supreme fact of history is this: “The Logos was made flesh,” and this is also the central word of the Prologue.

The two points of view, therefore, are entirely different, and are even in many respects the antipodes of each other. Nevertheless, we notice in Philo certain ideas, certain terms, which establish a relation between him and John. How are we to explain this fact?

The solution is easy: it is not difficult to find a common source. John and Philo were both Jews; both of them had been nourished by the Old Testament. Now three lines in that sacred book converge towards the notion of an intermediate being between God and the world. 1. The appearances of the Angel of the Lord (Maleach Jehovah), of that messenger of God, who acts as His agent in the sensible world, and who sometimes is distinguished from Jehovah, sometimes is identified with Him; comp. e.g., Gen. 16:7 with ver. 13; again, Gen. 32:28 with Hos. 12:4, 5. God says of this mysterious being, Exod. 23:21: “My name (my manifested essence) is in him.” According to the Old Testament (comp. particularly Zech. 12:10, and Mal. 3:1), this divine personage, after having been the agent of all the theophanies, is to consummate His office of mediator by fulfilling here on earth the function of Messiah. 2. The description of Wisdom, Prov. 8:22-31; undoubtedly this representation of Wisdom in Proverbs appears to be only a poetic personification, while the Angel of the Lord is presented as a real personality. 3. The active part ascribed to the Word of the Lord. This part begins with the creation and continues in the prophetic revelations; comp. Ps. 107:20; 147:15, and Isa. 55:11, where the works accomplished by this divine messenger are described.

From the time of the Babylonish captivity, the Jewish doctors united these three modes of divine manifestation and activity in a single conception, that of the permanent agent of Jehovah in the sensible world, whom they designated by the name of Memra (Word) of Jehovah (מימרא דיהוה). [Introd. pp. 177, 178. Along with this expression the terms Shekinah (habitation) and Jekara (splendor) are used in the Targums, or Chaldaic paraphrases of the O.T. The two oldest, those of Onkelos and Jonathan, were generally regarded as dating from the middle of the first century of our era. Recent works seem to bring the redaction of them down to the third or fourth century; but only the redaction. For a great number of points prove that the materials go back to the apostolic times. We have even proofs of the existence of redactions going back as far as the time of Joh Hyrcanus. With the Jews everything is a matter of tradition. The redaction in a case like this is only "the completion of the work of ages." Comp. Schürer, Lehrb. d. neutest. Zeitgesch. pp. 478, 479.] It cannot be certainly determined whether these Jewish learned men established a relation between this Word of the Lord and the person of the Messiah. [Perhaps in Palestine there was, from the early times, more inclination to blend together the notion of the Word and the Messianic idea, than at Alexandria. There is in the book of Enoch (of the last part of the second century before Jesus Christ) and in one of the very parts of it which are almost unanimously recognized as the oldest, a remarkable passage, which, if the form in which we have it is the exact reproduction of the original text, would allow no further doubt on this point. The Messiah is there represented (chap. 110:16-38) as a white bull, which, after having received the worship of all the animals of the earth, transforms all these races into white bulls like itself; after which the poet adds: And the first bull "was the Word, and this Word was a powerful animal which had great black horns on its head (the emblem of the divine omnipotence)" It is thus that Dillmann in his classic work on this book, translates these words. Comp. the remarkable article of M. Wabnitz, Rev. de Theolog. July, 1874. The Messianic application of this passage cannot be doubted (See Schürer, Lehrbuch der neutest. Zeitgesch., p. 568). There seems, then, clearly to be an indication here of the relation established in Palestine, from the time anterior to Jesus Christ, between the divine being called Memra or Word and the person of the Messiah. There is no doubt of the Palestinian origin of the Book of Enoch. The Book of Wisdom, which was composed at Alexandria a century before Jesus Christ, speaks of Wisdom, personifying it with great emphasis. But it is impossible to discover here (even in chap. 7) the notion of a real personality, or to recognize in the representation of the persecuted just man in chap. 2 the least allusion to the person of the Messiah.]

This idea of a divine being, organ of the works and the revelations of Jehovah in the sensible world could not, therefore, fail to have been known both by John and by Philo. This is the basis common to the two authors. But from this starting-point their paths diverge. John passing into the school of Jesus, the idea of the Word takes for him a historical significance, a concrete application. Hearing Jesus affirm that He is before Abraham; that the Father loved Him before the creation of the world, he applies to Him this idea of the Word which in so many different ways strikes its roots into the soil of the Old Testament, while Philo, living at Alexandria, becomes there the disciple of the Greek philosophers, and seeks to interpret by means of their speculations and their formulas the religious ideas of the Jewish religion. We thus easily understand both what these two authors have in common, and what distinguishes them and even puts them in opposition to each other.

II. With respect to the term Word, frequently used, as it already was, in the Old Testament, then employed in a more theological sense by the Jewish doctors, it must have presented itself to the mind of John as very appropriate to designate the divine being in the person of his Master. What confirms the Palestinian, and by no means Alexandrian, origin of this term, is that it is used in the same sense in the Apocalypse, which is certainly by no means a product of Alexandrian wisdom; comp. Rev. 19:13: “And his name was the Word of God.” Philo, as he laid hold of this Jewish term Logos, in order to apply it to the metaphysical notion which he had borrowed from Greek philosophy, could not do so without also modifying its meaning and making it signify reason instead of word. This is what he did in general with regard to all the Biblical terms which his Jewish education had rendered familiar to him, such as archangel, son, high-priest, which he transferred to speculative notions according to the method by which he applied the word angels to the ideas of Plato.

We see, therefore: it is the same religion of the Old Testament, which, developed on one side in the direction of Christian realism, on the other in that of Platonic idealism, produced these two conceptions of John and of Philo, who differ even more in the central idea than they resemble each other in that which envelops it.

In applying to Jesus the name Word, John did not dream, therefore, of introducing into the Church the Alexandrian speculative theorem which had for him no importance. He wished to describe Jesus Christ as the absolute revelation of God to the world, to bring back all divine revelations to Him as to their living centre, and to proclaim the matchless grandeur of His appearance in the midst of humanity.

III. But can the employment of this extraordinary term on his part have occurred without any allusion to the use which was made of it all about him in the regions where he composed his Gospel? It seems to me difficult to believe this. Asia Minor, particularly Ephesus, was then the centre of a syncretism in which all the religious and philosophical doctrines of Greece, Persia and Egypt met together. It has been proved that in all those systems the idea of an intermediate divine being between God and the world appears, the Oum of the Indians, the Hom of the Persians, the Logos of the Greeks, the Memra of the Jews. If such were the surroundings in the midst of which the fourth Gospel was composed, we easily understand what John wished to say to all those thinkers who were speculating on the relations between the infinite and the finite, namely: “That connecting link between God and man, which you are seeking in the region of the idea, we Christians possess in that of reality, in that of history; we have seen, heard, touched this celestial mediator. Listen and believe! And by receiving Him, you will possess, with us, grace upon grace.” In introducing this new term into the Christian language, therefore, John had the intention, as Neander thought, of opposing to the empty idealism on which the cultivated and unchristian persons around him were feeding, the life-giving realism of the Gospel history which he was proposing to set forth.

Mackintosh's discussion of λόγος

The following is from Hugh R. Mackintosh's discussion of the word logos in his book The Doctrine of the Person of Jesus Christ (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1912, reprinted New York: Chales Scribner's Sons, 1942), pp. 115-18.

We turn now to the special teaching of the prologue (1:1-18). It was convenient to defer the Christology of these introductory verses until the general thought of the Gospel had been examined, for after all the subject of the Gospel is not the Logos or Word, but the Divine person Jesus Christ. But with this general exposition in our minds, it is all but impossible to maintain that the prologue serves a speculative and not a practically religious purpose. The first paragraph, as Harnack puts it [ZTK. ii. 189-231], is a mere preface, not a philosophic programme. Its special ideas are not allowed to intrude upon the record, nor does Jesus ever name Himself "the Word." The prologue on the whole makes the impression of having been written last, in a current vocabulary and mode of thought fitted to make appeal to a quite specific constituency. "The writer desires to avail himself of a conception more congenial to the thought of his readers than to his own, in order to set forth in words familiar to his readers the doctrine he wishes to teach, viz. the uniqueness, finality, and all-sufficiency of the revelation of God made in the person of Jesus Christ." [Burton, Short Introduction to the Gospels, 132.] It is no a priori philosopheme, by assimilating which the mind was to be prepared to understand and estimate the facts about to be narrated.

To say that St. John derived the Logos-conception from Philo (who may have had it from the Stoics or even Heraclitus) is one of those tantalisingly ambiguous pronouncements which darken a subject almost as much as they enlighten. We cannot indeed hold that there is no mutual relation. But the influence of Philo appears to have acted in a twofold direction. First, by way of antagonism. The evangelist uses Philo's term to deny Philo's thought. In the Fourth Gospel "Logos" means word, not rational cosmic order; uttered revealing speech, not immanent reason; an agency or force dynamic or personal in nature, not static or vaguely ideal. There is nothing answering to this in Philo. It is not merely that in the earlier writer the Logos is probably impersonal; it is also carefully separated from God; as in the various Gnostic schools, it is inserted between God and the world to prevent their contact, even though in a philosophical point of view it may serve as an intermediary; and to crown all, the nature of the Logos is such as to make wholly inconceivable its entrance, by incarnation, upon the real processes of history. But in St. John the Word is personal, is Himself Divine, mediates in the creation of the world, and enters human life by becoming flesh in order that as Jesus Christ, the historic Messiah, He may live and die as man and reveal the very heart of God. Thus even were the evangelist's debt to Philo an ascertained fact, we should still have to acknowledge that the borrowed notion was submitted to changes so radical as virtually to transform it into its opposite.

In the second place, Philo's influence, or at least the influence of a general philosophical atmosphere typified by Philo, may well have decided which of the terms furnished by the Old Testament the evangelist should select for his purpose. Several such terms were open to him—Wisdom, the Spirit, the Angel of the Lord, the Word. In any case, too little allowance has been made for Old Testament associations. The action of the word of God in Genesis 1 may well have supplied the first suggestion of the Logos, and at various other points in the older Scriptures the creation and government of the world, as well as the progress of revelation, are traced to the Divine word going forth from God as the active organ of His will.

We hold then that what St. John required and sought for was a term worthy to express the absolute nature of Christ, in whom the eternal, self-revealing God was incarnate; and that this seemed to be furnished by the contemporary religious thought, in which the Logos-conception had become familiarly established. He perceived its extraordinary value for the expositor. More significantly than any other word it gave expression to that aspect of Christ's life and work which he regarded as supreme. In addition to its place in Old Testament thought, it had received from Hellenism a certain cosmic width of meaning, and thus furnished a point of contact—this every missionary must appreciate—between Christianity and current modes of religious speculation. He chose it therefore as peculiarly fitted to recommend the Light and Life which had appeared in Jesus; but in choosing it he took full precautions to ensure by his exposition that its Christian import should not be overshadowed by former associations.

Campbell's discussion of λόγος

The following is excerpted from John Y. Campbell's discussion of the word logos in A Theological Word Book of the Bible edited by Alan Richardson (New York: MacMillan, 1951), pp. 284-5.

In the Prologue of the Gospel of John (I.1,14) 'Word' is an inadequate and possibly misleading translation of logos, though it is difficult to find a better. Here the Logos is an eternal divine Person, through whom in the beginning everything was made, and he is identified with the eternal Son of God who became incarnate as Jesus Christ. The evangelist seems to assume that his readers are familiar with this conception of the personal, divine Logos, a conception which is of Greek origin. The word logos meant both "word" and the thought or reason which is expressed in words. Greek philosophers, believing that the universe is essentially rational, used the term logos to denote the rational principle by which it is sustained. Jewish thinkers (probably influenced by Greek philosophy) reached a very similar conception of the divine 'Wisdom,' cf. Proverbs 8, especially verses 22-31, where the personification of Wisdom is more than merely a literary device. Later, Jewish thinkers writing in Greek combined the two conceptions, using by preference the term logos. Paul calls Christ 'the wisdom of God' (1 Corinthians 1:24; cf. 1:30, Colossians 2:2f.) and 'the first-born of all creation,' in whom 'all things were created.' (Colossians 1:15ff.); it was therefore easy for the fourth evangelist to take the further step of identifying him with the Logos of contemporary Greek and Jewish thought. How far the evangelist's own conception of Christ was really determined by this identification is a much discussed question, to which there is no generally accepted answer. But it is certain that this special use of the term Logos is confined to the Prologue; in the rest of the Gospel the word is used in the ordinary senses, and in 10.35 'the word of God' means specifically the divine utterance in Psalm 82.6 which Jesus has just quoted. And there are good grounds for thinking that in the Prologue itself the evangelist has made use of an existing 'hymn' of the Logos, which may not have originally been Christian at all. [I strongly disagree with Campell's speculation that "in the Prologue itself the evangelist has made use of an existing 'hymn' of the Logos, which may not have originally been Christian at all." —M.D.M.] The probability, therefore, would seem to be that it was his Logos-conception which was determined by his previous thought of Christ, and not his conception of Christ which was determined by the Logos-conception.

Wilhelm Nestle’s description of the “Jewish-Greek Philosophy” of Philo

The following description of the religious philosophy of Philo of Alexandria is taken from Outlines of the History of Greek Philosophy by Eduard Zeller, thirteenth edition, revised by Dr. Wilhelm Nestle, and translated by L.R. Palmer (London: Kegan Paul, 1931), § 77.

The jewish-Greek philosophy as represented by Philo and his predecessors exhibits a thorough·going eclecticism combined with a religious syncretism and a transition to mysticism. The Jews, despite their peculiar exclusiveness, did not remain unaffected by the fusion of the Greek and oriental worlds which took place in the Hellenistic period. We find many traces of mutual influence. On the Greek side religious monstrosities such as the cult of “the Highest” or “the Lord” in Asia Minor, in which the Phrygian Sabazius and the Jewish “Lord Zebaoth” conflicted, while to many Greeks the Jewish religion with its image-free worship of God appeared as a religion of philosophic enlightenment. The Jewish “diaspora” extended to most of the great cities and this enabled Greeks and Romans to make their acquaintance with Jewish belief and customs. On the other hand the Jews who had settled in the middle of the Hellenistic world could not escape its influence. Thus the book Koheleth of the so-called Preacher Solomon, written about 200 B.C., clearly betrays the influence of Stoic philosophy, while the Book of Wisdom also attributed to Solomon and written about 30 B.C. contains unmistakable Pythagorean and Platonic elements in its idea of the pre-existence of the soul and its imprisonment in the body, its assumption of a primary matter and its hypostatising of divine wisdom. But the strongest proof of the Hellenisation of the Jews in the “diaspora” is afforded by the fact that in their greatest community, that in Alexandria, they had so completely forgotten the native Hebrew language that they needed a Greek translation of their Sacred writings, the so-called Septuagint, which was probably begun under Ptolemaeus II, Philadelphus (285-247 B.C.). The mythical creation of this book through the agency of 70 (or 72) interpreters is depicted in the Epistle of Aristeas, written about 100 B.C. This is the work of a Jewish writer who puts on the mask of a pagan and delights in the tropes of the Stoic philosophy. Its allegorical methods, in which it anticipates Philo, are applied to the interpretation of the law-code of the Old Testament. Rather earlier is the Jewish so-called Peripatetic Philobulus who dedicated to the king Ptolemaeus Philometor his commentary on the Pentateuch. In the fragments preserved in Eusebius he attempted to trace the doctrines of Greek philosophers such as Pythagoras, Socrates and Plato to the Mosaic writings, partly by allegorical interpretation of these writings and partly by falsifying the Greek texts, as can be seen in a large Orphic fragment the text of which has been preserved elsewhere. Another Jewish forgery of the first cent. A.D. is the poem of the Pseudo-Phocylides, a collection of moral aphorisms which were attributed to the old gnomic poet of the 6th cent. B.C. There remains to mention two religious seers which in their views and customs present a remarkable mixture of Jewish belief and Jewish piety with Greek, and in particular Orphic-Pythagorean, speculations and precepts. The one is the sect of the Therapeutes which had its origin In Egypt. It was a society of ascetics who lived a life of extreme piety, and engaged in allegorical interpretation and theological speculation. Their principles were described by Philo in his works on The Contemplative Life. The other is the far more important religious society of the Essees (or Essenes) which grew up on the soil of Palestine and is menrioned by Josephus together with the Pharisees and the Sadducees as having flourished about 160 B.C. They lived as a sort of religious order with strict discipline and hierarchical division of authority. They had secret doctrines which were based on the interpretation of sacred writings. They practised communism of goods and in the higher grades celibacy, while marriage for the lower grades was subject to severe restrictions. They disapproved of blood-offerings, consumption of flesh and wine and maintained a sharply defined dualism which formed the basis of their asceticism. They believed in the pre-existence of the soul and its survival after death and assumed that the opposition of good and evil pervades the whole world. They worshipped the light of the sun and the elements as manifestations of God and attributed great importance to the belief in angels. The power of prophecy was regarded as the highest reward of piety and asceticism and many of them were supposed to have possessed this gift. It was inevitable that this close contact of Jews and Greeks should provoke reactions. Antiochus Epiphanes in his attempt to Hellenise the Jews in Palestine by force could rely on a numerous party which favoured the Greeks, while the growing number and importance of the Jews in Greek cities provoked strong anti-Semitic movements. This whole development reached its culmination in the life and works of Philo of Alexandria.

Philo’s birth falls between 20-30 B.C., his death not long after A.D. 40. He was a true son of his people, filled with the deepest reverence for their sacred writings and especially for Moses. He held that these writings were literally inspired not only in the original text but also in the Greek translation. But he was at the same time the pupil and admirer of the Greek philosophers Plato, Pythagoras, Parrnenides, Empedocles, Zeno and Cleanthes. He was convinced that one and the same truth is to be found in both; this is, of course, pure and perfect only in the Jewish revelations. He justified this belief by the traditional methods; on the one hand he assumed that the Hellenic sages used the Old Testament writings and on the other he pushed to its furthest limits the allegorical interpretation of these writings so that he could discover any meaning he chose in any passage whatsoever. Hence although he desired to be nothing more than an interpreter of the Holy Scripture and expounded his view almost solely in this form—for the knowledge of God in his revelation is the “Royal road” as distinguished from all merely human thought—his system is in reality a combination of Greek philosophy with Jewish theology, the scientific parts of which are derived predominantly from the former. The philosophy which he followed belonged completely to the form of Platonism which had been developing for more than a century, especially at Alexandria, and was named sometimes after Plato and sometimes after Pythagoras, although Stoicism, especially in Philo, contributed largely to it.

The idea of God forms the starting point of Philo’s system. It is here, however, that the various tendencies from which Philo’s speculation emerged cross. He had so lofty a conception of the elevation of God above all that is finite that he thought that no idea and no word could correspond to his greatness. God appears as more perfect than all perfection, better than the good, without name or quality, inconceivable; we can, as Plato says, only know that he is, not what he is; only the name of the Being (Jehovah) can be applied to him. Furthermore God must include all being and all perfection in himself; for the finite can derive these qualities only from him and it is only to avoid approaching too closely to his perfection that no finite predicate is to be attributed to him. Above all he must be thought of as the final cause of everything; we must ascribe to him an unceasing activity, and all perfection in created things must be derived from him. It was self-evident for the Platonists and the Jewish monotheists that this activity can only be directed to the best ends, and that of the two basic qualities of God— power and goodness—the second expresses his nature more directly than the first.

In order to unite this absolute activity of God in the world with his absolute transcendence Philo had recourse to the assumption which was familiar to other thinkers of that time (cf. pp. 200, 269, 307), but which no one before Plotinus worked out so systematically as he. This was the assumption of intermediate beings. In defining the nature of these beings, besides the belief in angels and demons and Plato’s statements on the world-soul and the ideas, it was above all the Stoic doctrine of the effluences of God that permeate the world that served him as a model. He called these intermediate beings forces and described them on the one hand as qualities of the Deity, as ideas or thoughts of God, as parts of the general force and reason that prevails in the world; on the other hand as servants, ambassadors and satellites of God, or the executors of his will, souls, angels and demons. He found it impossible to harmonise these two modes of exposition and to give a clear answer to the question of the personality of these forces. All these forces are comprehended in one, the Logos. The Logos is the most universal intermediary between God and the world, the wisdom and reason of God, the idea which comprises all ideas, the power that comprises all powers, the representative and ambassador of God, the instrument of the creation and government of the world, the highest of the angels, the first-born son of God, the second God. He is the original pattern of the world and the force which creates everything in it, the soul which is clothed with the body of the world as with a garment. In a word he has all the qualities of the Stoic Logos (p. 234), in so far as this is thought of as distinguished from God as such and free from the characteristics which were the result of the Stoic materialism. His personality is, however, as uncertain as that of the “powers” generally. This must be the case; for only so long as the concept of the Logos hovers between that of a personal being distinct from God and that of an impersonal divine force or quality can it provide even an apparent solution of the insoluble problem for which it is required —to make it comprehensible how God can be present in the world and all its parts with his force and activity, when he is by his very nature completely external to it and would be defiled by any contact with it. The constitution of the world can be however only partly understood from the divine force operating in it. In order to explain the evil and defects of finite existence, but especially the evil which adheres to the soul on account of its connection with the body, we must postulate a second principle which Philo, like Plato, can only find in matter. In his detailed description of matter, too, he follows Plato except that he regards it, in the usual way as occupying space and thus calls it variously not-being (like Plato) and real being (like the Stoics). God formed the world out of the chaotic mixture of matter through the agency of the Logos; hence the world has a beginning but no end. Like the Stoics Philo considered the world as entirely supported by the force of God operating in it; this is manifested in its most glorious form in the stars, which are visible gods. He defended their perfection on the lines of the Stoic theodicy, but he does not omit to give expression to the thought that everything is arranged according to numbers by the frequent application of the Pythagorean numerical symbolism. In his anthropology, the part of physics to which he attached most importance, he adhered to the Platonic and Pythagorean fall of the soul, the corporeal survival of the purified souls after death, the migration of those in need of purification, the relationship of the human mind with God, the divisions of the soul and the freedom of the will. But what was most important for him was the sharp contrast between reason and the sensual. The body is the tomb of soul, the source of all the evils under which it sighs. Through the combination of the soul with the body every man has innate in him the inclination to sin, from which no one can free himself from birth until death. Hence the greatest possible emancipation from the sensual is one of the basic requirements of the Philonian ethics; like the Stoics he demanded apathy, a complete eradication of all passions, looked up to virtue as the only good, rejected sensual pleasure and professed Cynic simplicity; he adapted the Cynic and Stoic doctrine of the virtues and the emotions, their description of the wise man, their distinction of the wise and the proficient and their cosmopolitanism. But in his philosophy trust in oneself was replaced by trust in God. All good in us is the work of God alone. He alone can implant virtue in us; only he who does good for his sake is truly good; from faith alone is that wisdom derived on which all virtue rests. But even in this virtue Philo places less value on conduct than on knowledge or more correctly on the inner life of the pious soul. For not only does active (“political”) life repel him, because it involves us in external things and distracts us from ourselves, but even science is in his eyes only valuable as an aid to piety. Even religious perfection, however, has grades. Thus “ascetic” virtue, that is virtue based on practice (that of Jacob), is lower than that which is founded on instruction (that of Abraham); both are lower than that which proceeds directly from a divinely-favoured nature (that of Isaac). The last and highest aim of virtue is God, to which we approximate more and more as we come more immediately into contact with it. Hence however indispensable science may be, we can only attain the highest when we pass beyond all mediacy, even the Logos, and in the state of unconsciousness, in ecstasy, receive the higher illumination into ourselves and thus behold God in his pure unity and allow it to work upon us.

This illumination is effected by the influx of the invisible divine spirit into man, of the cosmic force that proceeds from God. The “unmixed wisdom” thus revealed in ecstasy has nothing to do with human knowledge that can be learned. It is heavenly wisdom, in short that which is elsewhere called “Gnosis,” an expression which Philo himself avoided.

With such views Philo, despite his dependence on Plato, Xenocrates, the Stoa and especially Posidonius, passes beyond the bounds of philosophy into mysticism. His ideas are completely different from those of Greek philosophy. In the latter we have the principle of the autonomy of reason and the bold search after human knowledge; in the former, the contempt of reason and science and faith in the revelation of sacred books; in the latter, the close connection of God and the world, generally in the form of immanence; in the former, the complete transcendence of God, the most pronounced dualism between God and the world which makes necessary the introduction of intermediate beings to connect the two; in the latter, the recognition of the sensual and at the same time the moral power of man for its control; in the former the oriental and ascetic conception of the corporeal as the source of evil and a belief in the innate corruption of human nature; in the latter, the goal of mental endeavour is insight into the nature of the world and moral perfection, both attained by our own efforts, in the former the contemplation of God in ecstasy, which as an act of divine mercy signifies liberation from the bonds of the flesh; finally in the latter, the wise man as the highest type of man, in the former, the priest and the prophet. Thus Philo’s sytem appears more as Jewish theology mixed with Greek mysticism than as real philosophy. Nevertheless he was soon forgotten by his Jewish compatriots and fellow-worshipers, while on the other hand he became the precursor of neo-Platonism and exerted considerable influence in the elaboration of the dogmas of the Chrrstian church.

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